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Checkmate

Kennedee Robinson

When my mother walked in, I had just finished washing my hair and assumed it was business as usual: unstack the dishes or take the dog for a walk. However, she had a look—a look that I had never seen before but had always feared—a mother’s guilty, ashamed, and sorrowful expression. “*Who could this be for?*” was all I could think as I dreaded this face like the plague. My damp hair was wrapped in a towel; another towel hugged my body. My mother was building up the courage to tell me the news that would affect me for the rest of my life.

I saw my mother speaking the words, but I didn’t hear a thing as I stood there naked, heart beating, and with tears already starting to form. “Your father died,” she said. My knees buckled, and I sagged to the ground.

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Only hours before, I had called my father to discuss our Christmas preparations. But

he insisted on doing Thanksgiving instead, which puzzled me because he typically enjoyed having us around for the holiday season. It appeared he wouldn’t live until then, almost as if he was aware of his approaching death. I accepted reluctantly and followed it up with, “See you in two weeks. I love you.” You never truly anticipate saying your final “I love you” to someone who perfectly exemplifies your idea of love.

A year earlier, I was preparing to leave for Washington D.C. to see him for Christmas. We were going to ride the bus that year. My brother and I crossed the Hudson to 23rd Street, where a big queue of travelers was forming on the sidewalk as people were getting ready to descend. I said goodbye to my mom and boarded the bus with my brother. Leaves in all shades of red, brown, yellow, and orange covered the highway, something we never really got to see heading south. The trees were shaken by the breeze, which al-

lowed the leaves to fall to the ground, becoming one with the pavement as cars would drive over them, imprinting them into the asphalt.

My father greeted us as we stepped off the train at Union Station. He was a little taller than my brother at six foot three. He was dressed in his vivid purple fleece, blue trousers with a patch on the right knee, his Timberland boots weathered-out from years of construction, and his fraternity necklace that he never took off. The brakes on the car screeched as we approached the stairs of Eastern Avenue. The home changed every year, as if it reflected my own maturation through time. The front steps' cracks became bigger every year, and the paint needed to be touched up. But every year, its beauty grew stronger.

The chess board was already set up when I walked in. However, the positions of the king and queen were incorrect. I always paid attention, but he wanted to check if I was on my

toes this time. When we unpacked, I always took the extra room, and my brother took the couch. A book titled *The Game of Chess* had been left in the room. Personally, I didn't believe I needed this book. I took that as a slight.

We took a seat to play our first game of the week. He defeated me in ten steps. "I imagine you have so much reading to do," he turned to me and said. I huffed before slamming the door behind me as I left furiously.

I made the choice that evening to quickly scan the book, but once I opened it, I couldn't put it down. I read until two in the morning. The next day, we began our second game. The match lasted more than an hour. Finally, one knight, three pawns, my queen, and, of course, my king were all I had. He possessed a rook, a bishop, two pawns, and a king. I had the stronger pieces, but I still didn't have this game in the bag. I lost my queen and was checkmated in two moves due to my overconfidence.

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My head was on my mother's lap as I sat on the floor wailing. I had the sensation that every vessel, vein, and organ in my body was being shot at in addition to the heart. Every muscle seemed to be repeatedly ripping and mending itself. The anguish I was experiencing was reflected in my mother's expression. Everything around me had stopped. My brother was just getting off work. My mother wanted to call him, but I said, "You can't tell him over the phone." Thirty minutes later, the garage door opened, and my mother went downstairs. I was still laying on the hardwood floor. Motionless. I finally got up to go downstairs to see my brother's head buried in my mother's shoulder. I dropped to my knees once more.

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Two months before my father died, my mother, brother, and I had traveled to Florida. I spoke with him daily. My father told me he was losing weight and wasn't eating, but I was unaware that he was giving me every symptom associated with his condition: esophageal cancer. We had intended to surprise him coming back from Florida for Father's Day, but we weren't supposed to because of COVID. But we decided to see him anyway. We took COVID tests to make sure that we wouldn't compromise his already weak immune system. This time facing the steps on Eastern Avenue brought anxiety and terror rather than excitement. When the door opened, I saw a tall, slender person that I didn't recognize at first. I did something I had never done: I put my hands around his waist. I had never been

able to reach my hands around his back, but now my hands encircled him.

A month later I traveled back to D.C. to spend some time with him. This visit would mark the last game we would ever play. It wasn't supposed to be a long game because I was heading back to Jersey the next day to start my senior year of high school, but it lasted a surprising five hours.

We placed the pieces in their proper places. The queen was placed last as the other pieces stared back at each other, preparing for battle. There was tension that was never there in previous games. It was as if the very pieces knew this would be the last game played on this board that had seen so many. The board had seen arguments, jokes, tears, and laughter. The board was covered in maroon and mahogany. Its brass pieces were sculpted to resemble the actual figures they portrayed and were heavier than regular chess pieces. I'd describe it as old, but to my father, it was a way of life, it was history, the history of a sport that had been mastered and studied for years and passed down through generations.

Hour one: After putting the pieces down in their little maroon and mahogany houses, he began to recount our first game—how I didn't know where each piece was supposed to be placed and what each of them represented.

"Now you can lay them down on the board with your eyes closed and give a TED Talk about the meaning of each of them," he said.

I laughed in agreement. I wasn't sure at first why he was acting in this way, remi-

niscing. I deviated from the topic and asked about the stack of papers on the kitchen table. He said he was contemplating publishing a book. He had never been much of a writer, nor a reader. To him, I think putting his life on paper would give it some form of meaning. It would be titled *The Life and Times of Tim Robinson*. I told him I liked the name. He said he would discuss his life's highs and lows, joyful and sad moments, as well as how he overcame the cancer that was destroying his body. I glanced at him with a slight grin and a tear running down the right side of my cheek. He was still holding on to something, which to me was clearly fading.

Hour two: Our specialty was banter. To us, trash-talking while playing was natural. We would frequently irritate one another. *I wouldn't have made that move. Who gives away their rook like that?* But this game was different. If a pin would have fallen, the entire house would have rung with the sound of it. We had never played a game this silent; it seemed we were trying to learn as much as we could about one another with the time we had left. Chess is a quiet game, but it screams, yells, and roars with the anticipation of the next move, the tension that vibrates through the board, and the unspoken communication between players. We were communicating through our moves rather than words. I moved my queen from D1 to G4, putting his knight at risk. He retreated to D6, and I promptly moved my bishop in to capture his knight. A cogent, astute, and lovely move—all communicated with no words.

Hour three: I always enjoyed playing black, and the puzzle of why other chess

players never seemed to desire it just made me want it more. My father admired my philosophy. However, I used the white pieces in this game. He wanted one more time to know what it felt like to not have control over the game from the first move, to start in second and finish first. Although I was confused by this, because every time he played white, he always won, I accepted. He used to play black with his father. But he didn't *choose* to play black with his father, something I didn't know until that day. He claimed he instantly saw I would make a brilliant player when I picked up the black instead of the white. "Choosing a setback over the advantage, then coming out victorious is what makes the best chess players," he said.

Hour four: Eleven pieces remained on the board—five for him and six for me. Play was still quiet. Both queens remained. A thing that was unusual for us. They squared up against one another in a face-off. He fiddled with his king as if he was going to move it. In that moment, I knew my level of play was equal to his; he had met his match. My queen would go to C2 if this were the final instance, whereas his queen would move to E3. We used to think about the queen's authority frequently. She loomed over the king and was the monarch of the board. In conflicts and wars, many queens have a reputation for being brutal. And when I played, that's how he perceived me—brutal. He didn't say anything. I thought about each move I would make and caught the slight smile that would emerge on his face whenever I sneered at him picking up a piece and then laying it back down. I could see that

he no longer saw me as a beginner but as a genuine chess player.

But he was an extraordinary player himself. He found a way to elevate each piece to the same status as the queen, who is unquestionably the most significant piece on the board. Every move he made seemed to make the pieces dance. They were performing, and there was a rhythm. Eventually, I would master this talent, but it was not something he could teach me, exactly; it was as though it had to be passed down from his father to him and now me. The board serves as the foundation for the pieces, and its four pillars exert an effort to keep it steady. But instead of the board or the pieces, it was always the players who created the game. The conflict between the two sets of pieces only justifies the conflict between competitors. But what was the conflict? I never welcomed it; it always just found its place on the board. We didn't envy each other's style of play, but I think about how much his style was becoming mine. He considered every play and move; he knew the game. This would soon belong to me, and I feel that worried him.

Hour five: With so few pieces on the board, we had never played a game of chess that lasted this long. The leather couch strained my back, and I moved to the ground with my back pressed against the front of the couch and my legs bent to my chest in front of the table. Sitting too long was uncomfortable for him. He moved from the couch to his recliner. He let out a sigh of relief as he turned his focus back to the game. Thirty minutes passed: This was

the most time he had ever taken to make a move. He glanced down at his watch. My self-assurance was exploding. He could feel it pulsing through him, and I knew it.

Through the hours-long silence he looked up and muttered the words, "Do you have any questions to ask me?"

I raised my eyes which were glued to the board. "No," I said, in a way so that he'd make his move, but of course I did have questions. I wanted to ask about his favorite memories; What was his biggest mistake? I wanted to know who, honestly, his favorite child was. But I didn't ask. It was as if chess was more important than these questions.

The options available to me in chess sometimes seemed unlimited. But every game has a conclusion; the effects of your actions become clear rather early. Even though I knew the game had to finish, I didn't want it to. I didn't want to accept the result of the game since I knew it would determine how the rest of his life was going to play out. The conclusion of the narrative we worked so hard to compose would come as soon as one of us said "Checkmate."

Because of how intriguing chess is, no two games will ever be the same, and for my father and me, this was certainly the case. Imagine if it were a given that each of our lives and fortunes would at some point be determined by whether we won or lost a game of chess. I often thought that I would have one more game with him. But life will always leave us wanting second chances that we can't always get.

"You play for the present," he would say. You plan your movements all the while

aware that it is impossible to foretell the outcome two moves in the future. You can never predict how your life will turn out. Being able to put what you've learned into practice is one of life's greatest challenges since it only takes a split second to give in to temptation, annoyance, or hardship. Some of the most important lessons I've learned were taught to me while playing chess with my father. "Nothing ever goes away until it teaches us what we need to know," he would always say. I would never really take it in when he was saying this, but now it makes sense. He didn't leave in vain. He didn't give up because he had no more fight in him; he left because it was his time. Of course, I didn't think it was, but he knew that he had taught me everything I needed to know. Still, why leave when I needed to be taught more than just chess?

My stepmother was doing compressions on his chest while on the phone with 911. She was frantic that she would feel his last heart beats, but the paramedics would arrive and take over. They would pronounce his death while he was laying on the carpet in the house on Eastern Avenue. It was a regular Wednesday, he was sitting in his favorite chair, the Cowboys were playing, and he was eating eggs and toast. And in the end, it wouldn't be the cancer that would kill him, after his seven-month battle with the disease and his battle with COVID that would almost take his life. It was upstaged by the thing that was supposed to heal him: a blood clot traveled to his throat, caused by the treatment he was receiving. It wasn't painful, they said. He didn't suffer.

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At 55, his life was just beginning. I look back now on the Father's Days I would no longer share with him, the Christmases we were so eager to plan, and his birthday. When I was younger, we used to share our birthdays being that they were five days apart. I would be so excited to be able to eat two cakes. We didn't celebrate them together as we got older, but he would call every year on mine, and I would on his. But now, the contact "papa dukes" on my phone no longer belongs to my father.

Since then, I have not picked up a chess piece. Laying the pieces down on the board has been made more difficult by the excruciating agony that comes with the weight of them in my hand. I didn't see the mahogany board, brass pieces, or the home on Eastern Avenue again after that game. Instead I would like to remember the game we played, and I would be comfortable with it even if it meant I would never again touch a chess board. My father, however, would not.

I often go back to me standing in my room, my still-wet hair wrapped in a towel that hugs my body and not knowing that my dad had just died. I think of the minutes before when I still loved the game of chess and thought of it as a form of expression shared between my father and me. Now chess is an empty void that expands ever more with the last game that plays in my head like a never-ending carousel. The world of chess that was my escape is now deserted and its only inhabitants are the mahogany board, brass chess pieces, and *The Game of Chess* on a desk in the house on Eastern Avenue buried in dust.