

## Thursday's Game

Charlie Fritz, seventy-two, was sitting on the edge of his bed. In his left hand he held a chess piece, hand-carved from marble, lacquered and polished to a high gloss. While his thoughts drifted to his friend Dean, Charlie absent-mindedly rubbed the small, heavy piece as if it were a magical genie that would grant him his every wish.

Perhaps it would.

Smiling at the thought of his friend of sixty years and the anticipation of seeing him later that afternoon, as he did every Thursday, Charlie Fritz slowly stood, listening to the groans of relief from the tired bedsprings. The sound of the springs played in unison with the creak in his bones.

Six months ago his only daughter, Jessica, had been offered a position in Kyoto, Japan. After much trepidation, she had decided to accept the offer. "It will be good for my career, Dad," she had told him with tears in her eyes.

"What about Eric?" Charlie had asked.

"It will be good for him, too. What a great education for a seven-year-old...he gets to see the world, learn about a different culture, it will be wonderful for him."

Charlie was silent. He stared at the floor and nodded.

"Dad, I know how much he means to you. But it's not forever and we'll visit. Promise."

"What about your husband? What does Wes think about the move?" he'd asked half-heartedly. "He thinks it's a good thing, too. Wes has always been behind my career, you know that," she'd replied. And then she had kissed him on the cheek and hugged him for a long time, not wanting to let go. But of course she had too. Eventually.

So his daughter, son-in-law and grandson were halfway around the world, while he waited out the rest of his days in a retirement home in Portland, Oregon. Oh, the place was nice - no question about that - yet opulence was never very high on Charlie's priority list.

He looked at the clock: 2:45 p.m. Every Thursday, without fail, Charlie met Dean in the downstairs library at three for a game or two of chess. It was not only the highlight of Charlie's day, it was also the climax of his week. Charlie Fritz and Dean Greer had been playing chess together since high school, back in the thirties.

Charlie carefully laid the handmade chess piece in the velvet-lined case with the rest of his collection. When Mabel, Charlie's wife of forty years, had passed away ten years ago, Dean had the expensive set handmade for his lifelong friend.

Charlie changed into a nice pair of dark slacks, a short-sleeved solid blue shirt and a comfortable pair of loafers. He slicked back what little hair he had left and splashed on some Old Spice – not for Dean, but for Gretchen at the front desk. Even though she was in her fifties and way too young for him, Charlie liked to smell good for her.

He folded up the chessboard, which was as beautifully made as the chess pieces themselves, and tucked it under his left arm. In his right, he held the expensive carrying case with the marble pieces tucked safely inside. Charlie locked up the small, two-bedroom apartment and rode the elevator down to the main floor.

He departed the elevator with his collection dangling from both arms. He looked like a salesman going out to peddle his samples.

Charlie sauntered up to the front desk. Setting down his goods, he placed his elbows on the counter, dropped his chin into his upturned palms and leaned forward, almost close enough to kiss the large woman who sat on the other side.

“Charlie Fritz, if I didn’t know better, I’d thought you is gonna kiss me,” the woman said with a southern drawl. Although Gretchen was a very large woman – at least two hundred pounds, fifty of which were in her chest – Charlie found her to be an irresistible tease. She was funny, kind and loving, but most of all she was *patient*. You had to be to deal with all the old folks here.

“Well, I was really thinkin’ about it, Gretch, but I am afraid you might haul off and hit me one. And these ole’ bones are brittle now and I don’t think they can stand the punch of some large African woman.”

Gretchen laughed and said, “I’m not African, you crazy old man, I was born ‘n raised in Alabama!”

Charlie looked to his left. Dean was sitting at a large table across the way, past the fireplace and sitting area, next to a wall that was lined with books of all genres. The library, they called it, though it boasted only a small selection of reading material.

Dean waved; Charlie returned the gesture.

“Gotta go and exercise my brain. What little is left anyway,” Charlie said, picking up his chess set and heading towards his friend.

“Uh-huh,” Gretchen replied, shaking her head.

When Charlie approached, Dean stood and gave his friend a pat on the back and a huge smile.

“I’m going to kick your ass today, my good friend,” Dean said with a twinkle in his eye.

“Well, we’ll just see about that, you old fool,” Charlie responded, setting the game on the large table and sitting across from his friend.

Dean rubbed his hands together like a man getting ready to enjoy a good cut of meat after a month long diet of nothing but fruit and vegetables.

He smiled and made his opening move.

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Eight-year-old Marty wished he were anywhere other than here. He was with his mother at Winter Falls Retirement home where, for the past four years, he had come to visit his grandfather twice a month, sometimes more.

Most old people were boring and just no fun. No fun at all. But not Grandpa Ralph. Grandpa Ralph always had stuff for him to do whenever he came to visit: new toys, trips to the zoo, trips to the aquarium and the best sci-fi books ever - Grandpa knew how much Charlie loved science fiction. And Grandpa always kept up on the latest movie releases and had the best collection of video games for eight-year-old boys on the planet!

But now he was gone.

Forever.

Last week, at the age of eighty-six, Grandpa Ralph had passed away. And now, on this bleary Thursday in April, Marty was here with his mother because there wasn't any school today - teacher's workshop or something - and Winter Falls needed to rent out the place, so they had to work on clearing out Grandpa's things. Winter Falls had a waiting list with hundreds of names - seems they had people *dying* to get in. Marty used to think that was funny; it would crack him up whenever he would tell people that, but today it wasn't funny. Not one little bit.

Marty's mother, Erica, was in the second bedroom of the two-bedroom apartment, which had served as Grandpa's den, packing up her father's belongings. With an armload of books, she turned to her son with tears in her eyes. Her lips trembled, as if any moment now she would break down and the flood would come. Over the past week, Marty had listened to his mother's anguish through the walls of his bedroom. He, too, had cried himself to sleep on more than one evening.

"Almost finished here," his mother said as she packed the handful of books in an open box that sat on the now-empty desk. Her voice was soft, barely audible, her face red and puffy.

"We'll come back and collect Dad's things this w-weekend when..."

Erica Parsons sat down on the floor, hard, dropping the handful of books at her feet. Marty went to his mother and put an arm around her. "It'll be okay, Mom," he said quietly, leaning his head against hers. Marty didn't want to be the man of the house, but he really didn't have much choice.

After a few minutes, Erica's bawling turned to muffled sobs. Marty helped his mother to her feet and then picked up the books she had dropped when she collapsed. Without a sound, Marty packed away the rest of the books while his mother watched through blurry eyes. With that done, he said, "Mom, we should get going."

"Yeah, okay. Just give me a minute, will you hon?"

"Sure, Mom."

From her purse, Erica withdrew a compact mirror and a pack of Kleenex. She blew her nose and cleaned up the mascara that had run down her cheeks in black gobs during her crying jag. But there wasn't much she could do about the redness or the puffiness in her face. She put the contents back in her purse and said, "I'm ready, let's go."

On the way down to the lobby, neither spoke. They shuffled to the front desk looking dejected and tired. While Erica signed out on the guest log and chatted with the lady behind the desk, Marty stared across the large room, his eyes landing on an old man that – he didn't know why – reminded him of his recently deceased Grandfather. The old guy was sitting in front of a chessboard, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, and staring at the pieces before him. Although he couldn't hear him from this far away, Marty could see the old guy's lips moving, as if he were talking to someone.

He tugged on his mom's pant leg. Erica turned to her son. "What? What's so important that you have to interrupt? Can't you see I'm talking with Gretchen? That's just rude, Marty!"

"I'll be right back, Mom, I just wanta go over and see what that old guy's doing," Marty replied, nodding in the direction of the man playing chess.

Erica looked over at the old man and felt another wave of sorrow shudder through her body as she was hit with reality once again, the reality that her father was gone.

"Okay, but just for a minute. I'll come get you after I chat with Gretchen for a bit. Don't go anywhere else and stay where I can see you." She watched her son walk over to the old man and then turned her attention back to Gretchen.

"He's nice enough, but the ole' guy is crazy...harmless but crazy," Gretchen said to Erica, tapping an index finger to her temple, emphasizing her point.

"Who? Who's crazy?"

"Charlie. Every Thursday around three or so he comes down here lugging that chess set under his arm as if it were worth a million dollars. And then he sits over there at that table for a couple of hours playing chess with his friend Dean."

"Well that's nice. Where's his friend now? In the bathroom?"

“Dean passed away over four years ago. That crazy old man plays chess with a figment of his imagination.” Gretchen tapped her head again.

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At first, Marty approached the old guy with apprehension, but when the man looked up from his chessboard and smiled, the apprehension melted away and Marty felt...*relieved*. He wasn't sure why.

“Come on, Dean, make your move. I swear I'm going to bring the timer for the next game if you don't move that wrinkled old ass of yours,” the man said to the empty chair across from him.

Charlie's mouth dropped open in alarm as he contemplated hurrying back to his mom. Before he could move though, the old guy thrust a hand at him and said, “Charlie, Charlie Fritz.”

“Huh?”

“My name is Charlie. And you are?”

“Oh, um, Marty. I'm here with my mom.” He pointed to the front desk and the two women, feeling a little safer knowing they were at least within yelling distance.

“I see, nice to meet you young Mr. Marty,” Charlie said leaning over the chessboard and moving his opponent's pawn.

*His non-existent opponent.*

The old man rubbed the gray stubble on his chin, and then looked at the empty chair. “Nice move.”

Marty began to backpedal away from the old guy, wishing he'd stayed with his mother and Gretchen after all.

“Wait,” Charlie said, “please.”

Marty stopped and looked at the man quizzically, noticing the uncanny resemblance to his dead grandfather. “There ain’t anyone in that chair, mister. It’s empty. You’re playing a game with nobody.”

“I know.”

That answer took Marty by surprise; he didn’t know what to say.

“Don’t you play with imaginary friends?” the old man continued. “Like when you’re playing GI Joe or Cowboys and Indians, stuff like that?”

Marty thought for a moment. Of course he did, all the time in fact. “Uh, yeah. But I don’t play Cowboys and Indians. More like The Avengers and X-Men, maybe Spiderman, Batman. And video games like Halo, Super Mario Brothers, those kind of things.”

“And so, because I’m an old man, I can’t do the same, have an imaginary friend? Perish the thought!” he laughed, flinging a wrinkled hand through the air for effect. Looking over at the front desk, Charlie noticed the two women watching him. “They think I’m crazy,” he said, nodding his head and rubbing his chin again. He looked back at the game on the table in front of him. “I’m not though,” he added quietly. “I just miss my friend...and my family.”

“My grandpa just died,” Marty blurted, his head down now, as if embarrassed.

“Oh, I’m sorry, son...truly sorry,” Charlie said, looking at the boy, thinking of his grandson Eric halfway around the globe, wondering if he was okay, wondering if he was happy. “Where’s your Dad?”

Looking up, tears shimmering in his young eyes, Marty said, “I don’t have a Dad.”

Charlie started to reply but quickly quashed the thought, knowing anything he said about the kid’s father might upset him more. And the boy seemed upset enough. There was an



interminable moment of silence and then Charlie said to the empty chair: "It's your move, you withered dried-up old prune!"

With that, Marty's lips twitched, heading in the upward direction of a slight smile. He wiped the back of his shirtsleeve across his snotty nose, sucking the runny mucus back up his nasal cavities with a snort. "Can...can you, uh, teach me how, well, um, to play? Chess, I mean?"

Charlie smiled and looked at the empty chair, then back at the young boy. "Sure can boy, but you'd better ask your mom. And I think that might be her now," Charlie said as Erica approached, a look of concern on her face.

"Time to go honey, we have things—"

"Mom, can't we stay for a little while longer?" Marty whined. "Charlie is goin' to teach me how to play chess."

Erica folded her arms across her chest and sighed, looking at her son and then back at the man sitting at the table. *The ole' guy's crazy...harmless, but crazy, Gretchen had said. He doesn't look crazy, but what does crazy look like? And maybe this would be good for Marty. And I'll be right here with them...Gretchen did say he was harmless, after all.*

"Okay, but only for a little bit," she finally said, sitting down at the end of the table, dropping her purse next to her feet and resting her chin on her hands.

"Yay! Thanks Mom...I'll be right back, I hafta go pee."

"Marty!"

"And blow my nose," Marty yelled over his shoulder on his way to the bathroom.

Erica looked skeptically at the empty chair. Charlie watched her, and noticed how sad and tired she looked. "Are you alright?" he asked.

“I...we just lost my dad, Marty’s grandfather. Marty came here every weekend to visit...” she paused. “I’m sorry, really sorry, I don’t mean to...to bring you into all this.”

Charlie cleared his throat and said, “It’s okay, I don’t mind. Really, I don’t.” *She looks to be Jessica’s age*, he thought as he reached over with one wrinkled hand and gently patted her arm, trying his best to console her.

Marty bounced back into the room then, excited to learn a new game. He’d always wanted to play chess, but no one he knew played, not even Grandpa Ralph.

“Wait!” Charlie said as Marty started to sit in the chair across from him.

“What?” Marty replied, startled.

“Aren’t you going to ask Dean there to move? Or are you going to sit on his lap during the whole game?”

With a look of concern, Marty looked at his mom and fidgeted. “Uhm—”

“Dean,” Charlie said to the empty chair, “I think you’ve been replaced by a much younger and obviously more enthusiastic person, so don’t you think its time to give up that seat? Besides, I need to have a little competition...I’m getting tired of winning all the time.” Charlie turned to Erica and the boy and said with a smile, “Dean will no longer be visiting on Thursdays as he has agreed to let this young man take over the weekly chess match. But that means young Marty here will have to come by every week for a few hours so we can play and I can teach. You can’t learn this game in one lesson, after all. And a good teacher *always* gets to know his student.” And then, as an afterthought, Charlie added, “And the student’s mother.”

Erica looked between her son and the eccentric old guy and thought: *At least Marty will have a man in his life*. Finally she said, “It’s up to Marty...if he wants to, I don’t mind driving

him here. It isn't that far, but we would have to do it on the weekend, what with school and work and all. What do you think Marty?"

"Awesome! That would be just awesome, I always wanted to learn chess and I could teach Charlie here how to play video games and I—"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down a little," Erica said. "Give the man a chance to teach you some chess and get to know you a little. Maybe he won't want to teach you after he gets to know you."

"Oh I doubt that, Miss, I doubt that very much."

"Erica...you can call me Erica. Besides, I'll be here with my son, so you're stuck with me, too, at least once a week anyway."

With a grin that encompassed his whole face, Marty sat down across from Charlie and watched the old man as he set up the chessboard.

With a glitter in his eye, Charlie looked at the young boy and said, "You know, son, to become really good at this game, it could take months, maybe longer, to teach you what you need to know. And maybe you could teach me some how to play some of those video games you were talking about."

Charlie turned and winked at Erica.

She smiled and winked back.