

FOOL'S MATE

There was this point where Brad's hero was Alexander Alekhine, the two-time world chess champion who was supposed to have peed on the board when a game had gone against him at a tournament. Things had not always been this extreme. There had been the days before chess, the days of Little League baseball, days when a chessboard hadn't been foremost in his mind, but rather the board he rode while his older brother played. Then there was the year he didn't make the team, the same year Ben won the playoff game with a two-on triple in the ninth that sent the team on to the state championship. Did it just seem that his father came home from work every night that year saying, "Where's Ben? Come on, Ben, it's time for practice. Ben! Brad, have you seen Ben?"

Chess was his mother's fault. Now he knew that she'd had no interest in sports, except that her sons played them; then he'd been convinced that she was crushed when he'd not made the team, that despite her outward calm she was probably emotionally overwrought when out of his sight. This vision of her wracked by despair because of his athletic mediocrity was what made him say to her one evening that he was sorry. He'd selected the time for this painful disclosure carefully, waited until she was reading a book and probably too wrapped up in it to hear. So he'd get this nagging realization of inferiority off his chest, but save himself the further mortification of it being responded to and just made worse. But she heard him.

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“Sorry about what?”

“You know, not making the team.”

“Different people are good at different things.”

“People look at me like I’m a loser.”

“Brad, what on earth are you talking about? Are all those A’s on your report cards forgeries?”

“Lots of people get good grades.”

“Ben would love to get the grades you do.”

“But Ben can play.”

That brought a pause. Finally, he thought, she was stumped by his logic. “Have you ever played chess?” she finally asked.

“Chess! Chess isn’t playing. Chess is . . . is like reading a book.”

She laughed.

“It’s more like two people making up a book as they go along. Collaborating in an outcome. And one of them wins. Just like in baseball.”

“Marvin Beckman plays it.”

“He the one who plays the cello? He seems like a nice boy.”

“He’s a dweeb.”

“You afraid he could beat you at chess?”

“Oh, Mom.”

“There’s a chess set in the cupboard in the den, you know. It belonged to your grandfather. He was quite a player.”

An old man’s game, he thought. Jeez!

The next thing he knew a chess book showed up in his room. He was disgusted. He looked at it anyway, at some of the openings and gambits. They were hard to follow on the printed page. It wouldn't hurt to set up the board and play some of them out, he supposed. Still, no one must know. Warily, as if sneaking contraband out from beneath the vigilant scrutiny of the guard in a police evidence room, he took the chess set from the cupboard and began secretly to play out some of the games in the book. He locked his bedroom door first, and carefully put the board and pieces back into the cupboard after each foray into chess. He led a secret life, like a spy. And that was kind of cool.

Ben went on to become a two-letter high-school athlete, dominating the headlines in the sports section of the local newspaper with such frequent bold-letter eruptions as ***Hendricks Scores Winning TD Over Monmouth***, or ***Hendricks Key in Central Victory***, or sometimes even such alliterative flights as ***Hendricks Homers Hammer Highsmith***. Meanwhile, Brad's chess became less secretive, then open and notorious. He beat many of the players at school working up to and then finally beating Marvin Beckman. Put that in your cello and play it, Beckman! He fanaticized the headlines that could accompany his emerging prowess as a chess master. ***Hendricks Baffles Rudman with Sicilian Gambit***, or ***Carlyle Crushed in Hendricks's Ruy Lopez***, or perhaps, even such alliterative flights as ***Brad Batters Beckman with Belligerent Bishops***.

Ben accepted a college football scholarship and played at the state university to the tune of more sports page headlines, then graduated and came back to town to join a local real estate firm. His grades had been mediocre, but his job search lasted no longer than it took him to pick up the phone and call the president of the firm and propose the addition of his name to the company letterhead. He was Ben Hendricks. He had instant

name recognition. Who were you going to buy a house from, some nobody or the guy that you'd watched catch passes and score touchdowns? It was a no-brainer.

Brad graduated with high honors from a small liberal arts college in a nearby state, then came back to town too, not because he'd been able to pick up the phone and have a job offer lobbed at him like a pooch pass, but because he was able to get an offer from the local bookstore through their long-term business relationship with his mother. Nothing else presented itself so he took it. Graduate school was his ultimate destination, but that was going to be a long time on what he earned at Beeswax Books. (He had never been able to figure out the name except that books honeycombed the walls from floor to ceiling.)

Occasionally Ben would call and invite him over to dinner. Usually he'd go, but he'd always ask himself why after the evening was over. Invariably Ben would have a decorative young woman there who would cook, clean up and cater to his whims as if to be permitted such servitude were an honor. It was all rather repetitive until one evening Ben announced that he was engaged to his companion of the evening and he wanted Brad to be the first to know. He hadn't even told their parents yet. Brad was flattered, he guessed, but also found himself somehow depressed. Ben's fiancé Annelise was yet another in the long sequence of attractive woman that Ben had dated. It didn't matter that her irrational enthusiasm for all things—she described everything as “great” or “awesome” or “super”—became increasingly annoying as the evening progressed. It also didn't matter that, quite frankly, Annelise seemed to be slow to a degree that her sweetness and beauty could not quite compensate for. What mattered was that Ben was on the verge of marrying an extremely attractive woman. And Brad only even dated

sporadically and, when he did, came out of the experience needing a lot of down time before he could muster the resolve to try it again.

Chess spun out through that down time in games played against the masters as recorded in books, games played against anyone he could find, games played on his computer against the computer, or against any faceless presence he could track down through the agency of that computer as it reached out into the cold void to attract chess players as unerringly as pheromones attracted moths. Then there were the chess sets, ordered from specialty catalogues and online, sets from Italy and England, sets with figures inspired by the Crusades, the American Civil War, the Roman campaigns against the barbarians, druids, figures from Greek mythology, even popular movies. His apartment became cluttered with them. And his graduate study became ever more distant as expensive chess sets ate up potential tuition money and left him adrift within Beeswax Books, captive and captivated by a game he had once said was for dweebs. Increasingly, he was depressed by the thought that it was.

That was where things stood when Sally came in the door. The first thing that struck him about her was that she looked like someone that Ben would have dated. All of Ben's dates, up to and including Annelise, had certain similarities despite their differences. These similarities all coalesced within Brad's general definition of feminine beauty, despite their differences in specific attributes. It was as if Ben dated one girl who donned different wigs and colors of contact lenses and shades of makeup but beneath it all was still the same basic package. Sally was the same basic package too, the blue-eyed blonde version to be precise, and there wasn't anything wrong with that.

There was no one in the store but George, the store owner, and him. George was in the back unpacking crates of newly arrived books. So he moved forward, energized by

necessity, but somehow wishing that George had been there to make the actual customer contact, and he could just hover.

“Looking for anything in particular?”

She said she'd heard they had a new games section.

George had recently started stocking games. He'd shaken his head ruefully when announcing the decision. “We can't depend on just books anymore, you know. Too many people are functionally illiterate.” At first Brad had been surprised by George's depression. What was wrong with chess sets and other board games? Then he saw what George had stocked. There were a few chess sets, and some of those nice sets from China in wooden boxes that included chess, checkers and backgammon, but mostly George had stocked those games you played on a TV or computer. Video games.

Neither he nor George knew anything about video games so George hired a 17-year-old high school student named Eddie Joyner part-time to man the games section and share his expertise about the new merchandise. Brad took to calling Eddie, “Fast Eddie.” The girls just hovered around him. Fast Eddie was rather skinny with a scraggly incipient beard that wasn't quite developed enough to need regular shaving, but too far along to be invisible. He dressed sort of like a homeless person in faded shirts and threadbare jeans with holes worn in the knees. What was it the girls saw in him? They came in whenever he was there, really attractive girls some of them, and he showed them the newest video games that had just come on the market and compared them with other games. He talked and struck poses and the girls laughed like he was some standup comic or something. What was it about him anyway? Was it the games?

Slowly, deliberately, Brad took Sally to the games section.

“We have some chess sets,” he said tentatively. “And some nice game boxes with a bunch of different board games.”

“Well,” she said, “I was sort of looking for a video game.”

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For as long as she could remember Sally had known that she was pretty. Not because anyone told her—at least anyone who mattered, as opposed to the doting grandparents and infatuated uncles who would tell you anything. In fact, her mother made a point of never making any comment that would have led Sally to have, as she put it, “a big head.” For a while Sally didn’t understand what this “big head” was all about, or how you went about assuring that you didn’t get one. Then, finally, she understood. But she didn’t get a big head. Because she didn’t want to be pretty. She wanted to be like her big sister Alice.

Alice set the pace, and it was a pace that Sally was never been able to match. Alice was just too smart. All through school she got better grades. The teachers all remembered her, even after three years. They’d look at Sally and say in tones of awe, “Are you Alice’s sister?” And Sally would say yes, and feel doomed by the enormous shadow of Alice that would hang over her for the whole year. Alice was valedictorian, then went off to college where she was *Phi Beta Kappa* her junior year, then graduated with a 3.9 average, passed the CPA exam the first time, and went with the premier accounting firm in town. She had the kind of crisp, no-nonsense looks that a professional woman should have, with her short brown hair and stylish glasses that looked as smart as she was. Sally felt betrayed by her looks. Men didn’t take her seriously. It didn’t matter what she said. Their minds wandered and their brains slipped cogs until the gears meshed in some atavistic mode that lurched forward in only one direction.

Sally got a degree in psychology at a different university from the one Alice had attended. She might or might not have been able to get in there, the state's premier institution, but she wanted no part of the possibility of professors asking her if she was related to the sainted Alice. After she graduated she found a job market ready to give her the opportunity to do word processing, answer telephones or bag groceries. Unable to find anything else, she took a job with a temporary employment agency that shuttled her to various offices where she did word processing, answered telephones and, mercifully, bagged no groceries. She wasn't particularly good at word processing, and loathed answering telephones. Was this what she had gone to college for? Then, as if to rub salt in the wound, her temporary service placed her in Alice's firm.

The office manager showed her to the desk where she would be filling in during the receptionist's vacation. Here, she found to her chagrin, she should expect that a significant portion of her time would be devoted to answering the telephone. She would also, the office manager informed her, be expected to pleasantly greet visitors to the office, inform the members of the firm when their appointments had arrived, and receive and direct any incoming hand deliveries to those same firm members. She was to be, the office manager concluded with a cheerful demeanor that Sally was convinced was substantially influenced by the fact that she herself would have no such brainless role, "the good will ambassador for the firm."

She didn't even see Alice until mid-morning when she emerged from her office with a file that she placed on the receptionist's desk to be picked up. She seemed so preoccupied that Sally wasn't sure she would even notice her. As she mulled over whether she would say anything if she didn't, Alice suddenly looked at her said, "What are you doing here?"

“I am the new good will ambassador for the firm. May I direct some good will in your general direction?”

Alice looked at her blankly and finally said, “Sal, what are you talking about?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m just filling in for your receptionist. I’ll be here two weeks.”

Unless I throw myself on my paper knife first, she thought.

Alice looked at her gravely.

“Well, why don’t you let me take you to lunch?”

She seemed to be saying it more because she couldn’t think of anything else to say than because she really wanted to do it, but it was the best offer she’d gotten.

“That sounds like a plan.”

They went to a restaurant around the corner that had taken the place of the old hot dog palace they had grown up with. The single page of frayed paper with chili dogs, kraut dogs, dogs with mustard and relish, slaw dogs, and every other kind of dog except the four-legged variety, all served of course with “the best shoestring potatoes in the world,” had given way to heavy menus of faux leather the laminated pages of which oozed *haute cuisine*. Sally wondered what the brothers Castanopolis who had presided over Hot Dog Heaven all those years would have made of it all.

They were no sooner seated than Alice asked her if she was enjoying working with the firm.

“Actually, Alice, this whole TopTemps thing has been a drag. I just get shuttled around from one place to another and never seem to be anywhere long enough to do any challenging work. And there’s always some guy who thinks he’s God’s gift to women.”

“Oh, really. Sorry, Sal.” There was a long pause as Alice peered through her glasses at the menu, then finally said, “Maybe you should go back to school.”

“I’ve thought of that. But you’ve made that pretty tough.”

“Me? What are you talking about?”

“I mean doing as well as you did.”

“Sal, what nonsense! I didn’t even go to graduate school. Anything you did would be beyond my achievements.”

The silence between them became oppressive. Alice seemed embarrassed and looked back at the menu as if she were trying to decipher it from Sanskrit. Finally, Sally broke the uncomfortable silence. “You really don’t understand.”

Alice put the menu down as if she’d never had any interest in it.

“Understand what?”

“You’ve always set the pace. First in school, then in your career. Look at me: I’m trapped in a revolving door that just keeps opening into different dumbass jobs. The only thing that changes is the color of the phones.”

Alice was suddenly very quiet. She stared across the table and pressed her lips firmly together.

“You’ve got to be kidding.”

Now Sally was puzzled. She shook her head emphatically and muttered no.

“Do you know how many times I would have traded places with you? From the time you were born nobody paid any attention to me. It was always that pretty little Sally. I went from being everything to being nothing. Everything I’ve done was to get attention back from you. You were born with everything. I had to create my world. And you envy *me*?”

“With all my heart.”

Alice shook her head.

“Shit,” she said.

That brought things to a crashing halt for a moment until Sally said, “Look, I seem to recall you have a birthday coming up. Why don’t you come over to my place for dinner? I can make lasagna and bake that coconut cake you like. I’ve got Mom’s recipe.”

“I’d love to.”

After lunch on the way back to the office, Sally asked Alice if she ever played chess. One of the guys on one of her temp assignments had played and lured her into playing over their lunch hours. He was gay and had no interest in her. It was refreshing to have that off the table. He had soundly trounced her every day within the allotted hour without any difficulty. The first time they’d played he had beaten her with the Fool’s Mate. Embarrassed, she’d bought a chess set, read up on the game, played out sacrifices and combinations from books she checked out from the library. She didn’t get good enough to beat her lunchtime companion during the time she was on that job, but she kept at it. Now she wondered if her smart sister maybe had discovered chess.

“You know,” Alice said, “I’ve never played chess. But these computer games, the ones you see advertised all over the place, I’ve found some of them to be quite relaxing. One of the guys in the firm loaned me one for a while and I’d play it at night. It’s so different from the sort of things I do during the day. I finally had to give it back to him. But it was fun. Ever play them?”

Sally said no. But she had an idea for a birthday gift.

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This would be Brad’s third date with Sally. She was coming to his apartment for the first time. For dinner. The dinner didn’t bother him. He could cook all right. It was

the rest of the evening that was cause for planning and concern. Clearly, all of his chess sets needed to be put out of sight. And, even though she hadn't mentioned video games since the day he'd met her and she'd bought one, it seemed to him the best plan was to have a video game or two on hand just in case. His hope was that the evening would evolve into things more interesting than such electronic diversions, but who could know what would happen? Things could go in directions that only something Sally enjoyed like a video game could salvage. A guy had to be prepared.

The problem was Fast Eddie had been ordered to quit Beeswax Books by his parents after getting a D in English. So he couldn't ask him about what to buy, and was clueless. So there was nothing for it but a trek to the Mecca of video game players—this, of course, according to Fast Eddie—Felix's Games fifty miles down the road in the state capital. There he would surely find what he was looking for. What he found was Felix himself, very unlike Fast Eddie in his middle-aged, balding expansiveness. Felix quickly sized him up as a complete neophyte despite his best efforts at exuding the cocky assurance of a long-time video game jockey. Of course he knew he needed a system. He knew you couldn't just play the game somehow on your television without a system. He hadn't sized up the different systems though, didn't know the pros and cons of each. Felix did. Oh, boy, did he ever! After a lot of technical jargon sort of bounced off him, Brad opted for the Sargon V System with Virtual Reality X. Felix nodded sagely. "Good choice," he said.

Felix then took him to the Sargon V games section, but cautioned him that he probably didn't want games without Virtual Reality X because, although his system would play them, he wouldn't get all the extra clarity and dynamite effects that the Virtual Reality X games would give him.

Brad nodded. He felt a headache coming on.

“Looking for one-player or two-player games?” Felix asked.

“Oh, two-player.”

Felix took him to a section and motioned toward a bank of boxes.

“What about this one?” Brad asked, grabbing a game called TOAD ROAD from the shelf.

“Good game, very popular. You hop your toad across a crowded highway, then move up through more difficult levels. There are bugs on the other side of the highway you eat. If you get hit by a car you’re smushed and have to start over. You get points for all this.”

“For eating bugs or getting smushed?”

Felix looked at him quizzically.

“For eating bugs, of course.”

Brad grabbed another box. “RUMDUM” it said.

“That’s a new one,” Felix said. “I’ve not played it yet myself. Some of my customers really like it, though. It’s a prohibition game. You have to get your trucks of illegal booze through a lot of obstacles, including rival gangs and federal agents. If you do you get rich.”

“And if you don’t they nail you for income tax evasion?”

“No, you get blown up or shot.”

“What else do you have?”

“Well, FATCAT is big now. You have to hit the right niches in the market with new products and inventions before the competition. If you do, you get rich.”

“And if you don’t you get blown up or shot?”

“No, they nail you for income tax evasion.”

Decisions, decisions. What if Sally didn't like TOAD ROAD or RUMDUM or FATCAT? The whole evening could hang in the balance here.

“Better let me have all of them.”

“Yes, sir.”

And so Brad emerged from Felix's Games with \$465.96 charged to his credit card and his graduate education sinking on the horizon like the *Pequod*. But he was ready for Sally.

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Sally pulled on her running shoes and ran out the door of her apartment into the warm spring rain. It felt good. Maybe, she thought, it would help her clear her mind. Things were just too confusing. The evening with Brad had been quite unlike any evening she had ever spent with a man. She'd thought she was drawing a bead on him from their previous times together: nice, smart, shy, kind of funny in a dry sort of way, a little weird but not way weird. At least she'd not thought so before that last date. He'd fixed a good dinner. She liked a guy who could cook. Then they'd sat down on the sofa and all of those hoverings and orbits that shy guys did started and that was to be expected. Then, finally, he got close and all of a sudden she felt a sneeze coming and backed away. The sneeze went away and so did he.

The next thing she knew he was back pushing a box in her face. It was some video game. DUMBHEAD or FARTFACE or something. His zeal to play it was almost scary. He seemed nearly crazed. She truthfully said she didn't know much about video games, thinking he'd back off with the box already! Instead, he said neither did he, but even as he was saying this he was putting the game into the machine. Which he almost

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couldn't figure out how to do. It was like those movies where a person with absolutely no knowledge has to land a plane or defuse a bomb or something. But this was a video game! It didn't have to be played. Couldn't it stay in the box? They fumbled through the game together, she trying to act interested because he was so obviously obsessed with it even though he wasn't very good at it. Funny, he hadn't acted gung ho on video games when she'd bought the game for Alice. He'd seemed indifferent, almost disappointed that he'd had to help her.

Then there were the chess sets. He had them in the strangest places. There was one in the closet on the shelf over the appliances where he'd gone to get a light bulb when a light had blown in the kitchen. When she commented on it, he laughed nervously and said somebody had given it to him. When she asked if he played he mumbled something unintelligible and then laughed maniacally. Then there was another chess set in the bathroom closet where she'd gone to see if he might have more facial tissues after she'd grabbed the last one out of the box next to the sink. She asked if that one had been given to him too. Actually, no, he said with a strained smile, he'd bought that one. At least she thought that was what he'd said, but his voice floated off into inaudibility and he might have said most anything. She'd not even asked about the chess pieces rolling around in the drawer of the table next to the sofa. It had been left cracked open and she couldn't stand drawers that were left cracked open so while he had been off fetching his game after her abortive sneeze she'd pushed it closed. When she heard things rolling about inside she'd opened it out of curiosity. And there they were: more chess pieces.

Even Marvin Beckman was better. She'd met him last summer when he'd worked in his father's law firm and she'd been placed there by TopTemps. She'd gone out with him a few times before he'd started law school last fall and left town. Recently

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home on spring break he'd called her and asked her out again. Marvin was one of those quiet, decent fellows who would never sweep anyone off her feet but who would make a good living. He was just so dull. That was sort the way of it for her lately. She had come a good way from falling for the Fool's Mate, but she couldn't seem to win either. As she ran along the street in the rain, her feet making slight hissing sounds with each contact with the wet pavement, she found herself thinking about such trivial nuances in her recent life as whether it would have made a difference if, rather than being a video game fanatic, Brad had actually played chess instead of just mindlessly collecting chess sets and sticking them in the closet.