

Word Play

David Sarkisian tugged the mask in frustration, but it only exposed more of his unruly black beard. He looked like he'd be stopped for additional screening at every airport security kiosk in the Western Hemisphere. On the other hand, he didn't mind hiding his prominent and crooked nose. He even liked the way his moist dark eyes peaked mysteriously over the mask, looking plaintive and vulnerable.

He had been told many years ago by one of his closest friends that in any group of people, he was going to be judged both the most and least attractive.

"You've got a distinctive look, Sark. Swarthy. You're never going to be accused of being average looking. No two women will ever have the same opinion of you. They'll think you're either ugly or gorgeous. Your task, my friend, is to find the tortured dreamers who will find your unusual Armenian features irresistible."

Sarkisian resented the comment more for its casual misogyny than anything it said about his looks. Justin Stanford wasn't exactly a lothario himself. Bright blue eyes framed his delicate face, but Stanford was always worrying over a weak chin. Sarkisian had once accused him of suffering from insecure vanity, to which Stanford had responded: "Is there any other kind?"

An involuntary sigh filled Sarkisian's mask with the memory of pastrami as he took a last look at his reflection in the hotel mirror. A second mask hung from the towel rack with the letters B-L-M inscribed in white against black cloth. It fit his face better, but he had already decided not to wear it. He wanted to be as inconspicuous as possible, avoid attention on the first day. Perhaps tomorrow. He closed his eyes and said a brief mantra. He had to remind himself to be more grateful, never mind that this sentiment was a hollow echo of a miserable week spent "gratitude training."

Sarkisian was indeed lucky the national Scrabble national championship was being played. For months, he had wallowed, not without some pleasure, in the certainty that the event would be cancelled during the one year he finally qualified for the top division. The organizers had actually discussed making the contest virtual but could find no reasonable way to prevent cheating. Sarkisian couldn't decide if the decision to hold the event as scheduled was a testament to human optimism or folly. Perhaps greed. The championship weekend was a surprisingly lucrative event, and Sarkisian had indemnified the organizers in writing for all manner of personal catastrophe.

The hotel bar was like the fever nightmare of a younger more radical version of Sarkisian: An army of business casual spilling into the lobby, animated Old Navy mannequins advancing to every corner in a perfect grid of pandemic-spaced tables, the thrum of their small talk made sinister by the anonymity of their masks. Two trips through the maze of beige accoutrements and ornamental glass failed to uncover Stanford. Sarkisian wasn't sure if he was truly on the verge of hyperventilating or the mask was just stuffy. He retreated outside and considered the wording of his text carefully.

"You here yet? Heading down to the hotel bar now."

Sarkisian had arranged to share a drink at the bar with Stanford specifically for the late entrance it would provide to the evening event, or, if he was being honest, so he could avoid standing awkwardly for an hour in a room full of strangers not knowing what to do with his hands. They also had a dinner reservation afterward, an excuse to leave early. Sarkisian knew he

would leave early either way, but with an actual reason, he could avoid berating himself for indulging in a growing aversion to social situations.

It had been a surprise that Stanford was coming at all. They hadn't seen each other in years, their correspondence reduced to pithy if infrequent text exchanges and overwrought emails. Still, when Sarkisian qualified, Stanford was the first person he thought to text. He had been shocked and then delighted when Stanford replied in under three minutes: "Just give me the time and place: See. You. There."

A fortification of tables with oversize Scrabble tiles directed traffic alphabetically toward the Ballroom. Sarkisian was disappointed not to receive an actual welcome packet. Everything was digital this year.

"We're trying to avoid physical contact wherever possible," said a tall woman whose masked face and angry bloodshot eyes didn't match the clinical cheer in her voice. She explained that there was a cash bar, but contestants should follow the guided walk-through of sponsor tables and exhibits about Scrabble, staying six feet away from others at all times.

It was clear that few people in the Ballroom were following instructions. Contestants clustered in small groups, laughing and joking. Sarkisian bargained with himself. He could leave after he had engaged in one social interaction of at least five minutes. Sarkisian eyed an African American man standing alone across the hall who looked promising, something about his posture and clothes, or the way his long dark fingers gracefully worked two straws like chopsticks, pulling a cherry by its stem from his glass and popping it into his mouth. Sarkisian approached warily.

"What are you drinking?" Sarkisian asked.

"Whiskey Sour," replied the man without meeting Sarkisian's eyes.

He was tall and lean with a colorful outfit punctuated by a polka dot bowtie and dark purple cowboy boots. His mask was pulled below his chin. His nametag said only "Reggie." Sarkisian had trouble gauging his age. His skin was unlined, but two inches of curly black hair faded to gray at the roots and a salt and pepper mustache dusted his upper lip.

"I read somewhere that Whiskey Sour sales tripled after Leonardo DiCaprio drank one in Once Upon a Time in Hollywood."

"Never saw it."

"Quentin Tarantino," Sarkisian said, starting to falter. "It reimagines the Manson family murder of Sharon Tate."

The only reply was a noncommittal grunt.

"So this is my first time at nationals," Sarkisian said. "Any advice for a rookie?"

"First time, eh?" Reggie asked. "What division do you play in?"

"Championship."

Reggie finally looked up, eyes flashing with interest. Sarkisian had stumbled upon the right lever, identifying himself at the top of a conference social hierarchy he hadn't known existed. Reggie revealed he had been competing in tournaments for ten years, reaching the championship division after his first three. He shared a clever anecdote involving a bad breakfast sausage and a malfunctioning timer. Sarkisian was immediately charmed.

Sarkisian loved that, like him, Reggie suffered a career that seemed less like a career and more like a collection of eclectic side jobs. Reggie mentioned tutoring kids in the Ukulele, working medieval festivals and colonial villages in costume,

leading ghost tours in Georgetown, delivering newspapers. Sarkisian himself had driven a taxi on Martha's Vineyard, monitored elections, worked two Censuses, done a lot of taxes, and burned through much of his inheritance.

"Wow, so how does someone like you get into competitive Scrabble?" Sarkisian asked.

"Excuse me?"

"You know, how does someone. . ." Sarkisian fumbled, now hearing himself. "I just mean. . .someone. . ."

"No, I don't know," Reggie said. "What do you mean?"

Sarkisian stared helplessly into Reggie's forehead.

"You mean, how is it that a black man is good at Scrabble?" Reggie asked quietly.

"No! No, that's not what I meant. I didn't mean that at all. I meant how does someone get interested in Scrabble. . .someone who is, you know, someone like. . ." Sarkisian had studied more than 100,000 words in the official Scrabble dictionary but now could not conjure a single adjective.

He wasn't sure what he had even meant. His eyes searched the room, and suddenly neither Reggie nor his outfit seemed very eccentric. For every bland stiff in Banana Republic who looked like Sarkisian's idea of a quintessential Scrabble player – a high school English teacher who did the New York Times crossword on Sundays – there was someone with an unusual haircut or a prominent tattoo, someone with a ridiculous belt buckle or outlandish jewelry. Would he have asked a white Reggie the same question? Sarkisian was on the verge of telling him about the BLM mask in his hotel room when they were interrupted.

"Reginald!" shouted another African American man, who reached out for a fist bump that stopped just short of physical contact.

He was trailed by a stocky white man who carried an unmistakable hint of marijuana and had Scrabble letters tattooed on his neck. "Reg! I promise I won't hug you, bro."

Without trying, Sarkisian found himself crowded out. His mind was already on the four hours of classic *Dr. Who* he would stream alone in his hotel room to cleanse himself of this moment when he spied Stanford across the room.

Stanford was at the center of a loose group, head thrown back in a guffaw, a mask around his neck. The nametag on his shirt pocket read "Gart Arfunkle" in block letters. Sarkisian was shocked by the extent of Stanford's retreating hairline, by his thick neck and his pudgy little hands, each wrapped around a separate drink.

"How's Saul Pimon?" asked a woman with barely contained glee as Sarkisian approached.

"Still jealous of my heavenly Alto and gorgeous head of hair," replied Stanford to titters. "Sark!" he exclaimed. "There you are! My conquering Armenian hero on the eve of glorious victory."

Introductions were made to Stanford's new acquaintances, but the group quickly melted away, perhaps infected by Sarkisian's quiet misery.

"Where were you? We were supposed to meet for a drink," Sarkisian said.

"Right here, my friend. Getting a drink," Stanford replied, smiling and gesturing at the drink in each hand.

Sarkisian sighed. "How did you even get in here? This is supposed to be for contestants."

"Charm? Good looks? Subterfuge?" Stanford said. "You know nothing could keep me away from you."

"Yeah, well, maybe if you were so desperate to see me, you could have at least returned my texts."

Sarkisian watched as Stanford tucked the drink from one hand under the other arm and fished his phone from his pocket with exaggerated clumsiness.

"Are you not wearing your wedding ring?"

"Hmm," Stanford replied. "Must have left it in the room after a nap. Ah, yes," he added, finally managing to get the phone screen in front of him. "Apologies my friend. I did not see these. I did not feel it vibrate. I can tell you are annoyed. Deservedly so. Let me make it up to you at dinner."

It was a gorgeous late summer evening, and the patio was recklessly crowded at the upscale eatery that Yelp had promised was organic farm-to-table. Sarkisian found himself racing through his harvest salad, everything about dinner irritating. Stanford was on his fifth Michelob Ultra by the time entrees arrived, joked with the waiter in a manner that was borderline inappropriate, and chewed all 16 ounces of his ribeye loudly.

"Low carb diet," he said, meat fat glistening on his cherry lips. "So, are we going to win this thing or what? Is there a shady Italian somewhere with greasy hair and thick hands taking side bets? I bet I can get great odds on you."

"Impressive to work so many racial stereotypes into a single sentence," Sarkisian said. "I don't expect to do much at my first nationals. This is just for the experience. I'd be happy to win a match or two."

"Sark!" Stanford said sharply. "Bite your tongue with that nonsense. What do these soft-headed word freaks have that you don't? What did you get on the college entrance exams for English?"

"Ha," Sarkisian replied without much enthusiasm. And then, when he saw Stanford was waiting for an answer: "A perfect score."

"Who won the freshman class chess tournament without even practicing? Who was undefeated at Trivia Night at Cityside?" Stanford was almost shouting. "Who studies harder than you? How many words are there in the official Scrabble dictionary?"

"100,000 give or take," Sarkisian said.

"And I bet you've filled hundreds of notebooks with them."

"Well, a spreadsheet."

"A spreadsheet!" Stanford exclaimed. "He's got a spreadsheet. Tell me ten words that start with Q that don't use the letter U. Tell me!"

"Qi, qa, qadi, qai. . ." Sarkisian began rattling off alphabetically. "Qaid, qanat, qindar, qindarka, qintar, qwerty."

"Listen to yourself," Stanford interrupted. "Is there any reason why you shouldn't win? Is there anyone out there who knows more words than you, who can unscramble letters in their head faster than you? Someone has to win. Why shouldn't it be you?"

Sarkisian leaned back and considered this question seriously. The thought was not without merit. He decided to order a glass of wine.

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Sarkisian woke to a racing heart. The boost in confidence offered by Stanford had other repercussions: It raised the stakes. He had felt little nervousness in the days prior, not expecting or hoping for much from himself in the first place. Stanford had rekindled his competitive spirit, and with it, nerves. Sarkisian spent hours pacing back and forth across his hotel room before his first match, pausing occasionally to make the Superwoman pose and trying to forget the schadenfreude he'd savored when Amy Cuddy's social "science" had been debunked.

His first opponent advertised herself as "Large Marge" on the nametag pinned to her cardigan. The nickname was clearly ironic. She was a tiny woman with thin gray hair pinned in a messy bun.

Sarkisian pulled a Z in his first draw and played "BEGAZE" to open the game, hitting a double letter score with the Z and taking a commanding 56-point lead. He pulled the Q and J on his next draw and leaned back confidently, waiting for this diminutive elderly woman to wilt.

Competitive Scrabble at elite levels can look very different than the living room game beloved by millions of devoted fans. Players still take turns drawing from a bag of 100 letter tiles, using the seven letters in their hand to spell words on a 15 by 15 board. But Sarkisian secretly believed that luck became more important as he climbed the competitive ladder. The two rarest letters, Z and Q, are worth an outsized 10 points and are only represented once in each game. In the upper levels of competition, where players are skilled enough to leverage double or triple letter scores consistently, drawing more of these letters in any one game offers a significant advantage. Sarkisian was bordering on giddy.

The great equalizer is the so-called "Bingo," a 50-point bonus for playing all seven letters, which Large Marge promptly earned by playing BLOCKAGE on his G, cleverly hitting the triple letter scores on the valuable letters K and B. Sarkisian remained largely undaunted. He could still outplay her. Everyone can make a play or two, after all.

He didn't really begin to panic until she Bingo-ed again two plays later.

She was hardly a vision of intimidation, but something about her sharp and certain movements unnerved him. She played quickly, snapping her tiles on the board, her body language betraying no satisfaction even on her strongest plays. He lost focus, began pressing, then played too defensively. Large Marge conceded only a curt nod in his direction after she won handily.

It was humbling, but, Sarkisian thought, just what he needed. He would not let overconfidence cloud his play again. He would not pre-judge any of his opponents.

Larry Guck tested this new maxim almost immediately. He was tall and thick and undeniably sloppy, with a wrinkled sweater fraying at the sleeves and an untucked shirt tail peeking out underneath. Sarkisian could forgive the explosion of curly hair attacking his square head: Haircuts were difficult in the midst of a pandemic. But the breath whistling through his nose hair unobstructed was outrageous.

"Can you pull your mask up over your nose, please?" Sarkisian asked before play began.

"Of course," Guck responded, adding a high-pitched chuckle. "Apologies, gets a little stuffy under there sometimes."

The game was tight early, Sarkisian trading POGROM for BIGOTRY and then each of them Bingo-ing on consecutive turns. Sarkisian settled in to concentrate on G-C-D-N-E-I-O. It was an excellent mix of letters on an open board, and he knew

there was another Bingo somewhere in them that would provide the fulcrum toward victory. With a rush of genuine inspiration, he summoned GENOCIDE, but his satisfaction was brief. He had been playing too slowly.

Tournament Scrabble is played with a chess clock. Each player gets only 25 minutes per game. Players tap a button after each turn to stop their own clock and start their opponent's. Sarkisian had been playing so slowly that Guck was using Sarkisian's time to study his own letters. This allowed Guck to play immediately, putting Sarkisian back on the clock almost as he was still drawing letters. It forced Sarkisian to burn his own time again, a pattern that quickly spiraled out of control.

Each time Guck hastily groped the clock with his meaty calloused hands, Sarkisian swallowed flaccid rage, imagining how Guck was slathering coronavirus germs across its surface. With barely half the letters played, Sarkisian was down to just over 3 minutes while Guck had almost 19. Sarkisian was forced to play short and basic words for embarrassingly low scores. Guck quickly overcame Sarkisian's lead and then shot ahead, finally winning by more than 200 points.

Sarkisian emerged from the morning session in a stupor, discovering himself at the very ass end of the leader board, having lost his two matches by nearly 400 points combined. He had 90 minutes before the misery resumed.

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Sarkisian found Stanford on the hotel patio hunched over three heaping orders of shrimp cocktail.

"Help yourself," Stanford said. "Sorry, no cocktail sauce. Too much sugar. Oh, and Sark, meet Debbie," he continued, nodding at a trim figure at the table well within his six-foot radius.

"So how did it goooo?" this Debbie trilled, nibbling on a crusty chicken finger. Her bronzed skin glowed in the noonday sun.

Sarkisian sat down, looked at the wine in front of both Stanford and Debbie and suppressed an immediate urge to get up and walk away.

"Are you playing?" he asked Debbie instead.

"Oh no, I'm like Justin here, moral support. My sister is playing. I was just desperate to get away. You have no idea how lonely the pandemic is for the recently divorced. Once I hit a bottle of chardonnay a day, I knew I was in trouble." She laughed as if she had made a joke.

"Sark, enough with the suspense, how did it go?" Stanford asked.

"Awful. I didn't just lose. I was humiliated. Twice. I don't know why I even came. This was stupid."

A shrimp disappeared into the puckered hole of Stanford's tiny mouth, and he gestured dismissively with the translucent tail in his chubby fingers. "Sark! Ever so melodramatic. You'll be fine. No one wins their first couple. And my God, who cares anyway? Look at these people. They live for this stuff. Cry themselves to sleep on their Scrabble-themed bed sheets. We are Renaissance men. Here to win life, not games. This weekend is a testament to our glorious reunion. The Scrabble is only a vehicle for our escapades. Use your letters to mock your opponents, screw the results, forget the score."

Sarkisian was not above the guilty pleasure offered by a Stanford pep talk, could plug his nose to the pandering contradictions while indulging in the mirage of superiority. But not with Debbie there as a witness. He heard it through her ears, how hollow it sounded, how feeble it made him seem.

"Everybody has a bad game or two," Debbie added. "Just keep trying, you'll be fine."

Sarkisian was suddenly furious at Stanford for putting his shame on display, subjecting him to platitudes from a stranger. He looked back and forth between the two of them, noting again the absence of a wedding ring on Stanford's finger.

"Enough about me," Sarkisian said. "We've barely had time to catch up, Stanford. I've been meaning to ask you about Anna and the kids. Everything good with your family?"

Debbie froze into the momentary silence, but Stanford merely cocked his head and replied after a moment: "Just fine, Sark, thanks for asking."

Sarkisian excused himself. He vowed not to look back, but couldn't help himself after a giggle exploded behind him. When he turned around, Debbie was leaning toward Stanford with one hand resting gently on his forearm. Stanford looked up, smiled through a mouth full of shrimp, and winked at him.

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Sarkisian hoped to avoid even looking at his first opponent of the afternoon, to concentrate only on the letters, to play for the pure enjoyment of the game. Once again, his resolve crumbled immediately. A furtive suggestion of marijuana beat his opponent to the table and Sarkisian looked up to find Reggie's tattooed friend across the table. His nametag said only "JD" and his mask advertised an online poker site. Sarkisian studied the blue eyes hiding under JD's drooping eyelids for any hint of recognition, any evidence that Reggie had pointed him out as the author of some kind of racist episode.

"Good luck, bro," was all JD said, barely even glancing at Sarkisian before immediately laying down a Bingo to open the game. He was a maddening opponent, whistling under his mask and pumping his fist after nearly every play. When JD Bingo-ed again on IGNOMINY, something delicate inside Sarkisian shattered.

Sarkisian was again down more than 100 points. Nearly assured of a historically inept run, he sank into a humiliation so thorough that he felt almost weightless. With the last shards of his own dignity swept away, there was nothing left for Sarkisian to protect. And as is so often the case, with hope extinguished, with the pressure off, with the result meaningless, the game was suddenly easy. He played BONDAGED off of JD's O for the 50-point bonus, and then proceeded to Bingo again on his next turn, then again on his next, this last earning a quiet exclamation from JD: "Damn, bro."

Sarkisian crushed him. He would spend years reliving what followed, smiling to himself in quiet moments on the subway, grinning in the shower, giggling as he lay in bed. Nothing that came later could poison it. It was as if the world began unfolding for Sarkisian alone. He drew the perfect letters at the most critical moments. The board opened up in improbable ways, his opponents always seeming to lay down the exact opening he needed. Sarkisian himself played with reckless creativity. He began to understand that at the elite level, maximizing points was everything. There was no room for playing defensively, he couldn't worry about opening up the board for counter-attack.

He won his last five matches to finish the day with five wins and two losses. It was good enough for third on the leaderboard. The next day he won six out of seven matches, earning himself a spot in the national championship match the next day.

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Sarkisian's interactions with Stanford had grown increasingly brittle despite the winning streak. Even Stanford's boundless cheer suffered under the weight of Sarkisian's disapproval. Still, Sarkisian was eager for Stanford's thoughts on the finals, perhaps even craving a boost in confidence. Stanford lounged on his bed in cargo shorts, one foot clad in a dirty sock and a low-carb alcoholic seltzer bleeding condensation onto his exposed belly. Sarkisian paced the room.

"Did you see who I'm playing tomorrow?" he asked.

"Oh, yeah, boy are you in for it," Stanford said. "You're going to be the least popular kid in high school tomorrow. You'll be the Generals to his Harlem Globetrotters. All anyone could talk about downstairs was how this guy Reggie would be the first black winner of the national championship."

"I actually met him at the evening event the first night. It was a weird interaction."

Sarkisian related the story. It wasn't necessarily an inaccurate telling. Sarkisian was even modestly self-deprecating. Yet he subtly and almost unconsciously shifted the events in small ways, ways that made him look a little better and made Reggie's reaction slightly unfair.

"Wow, so this guy is quick to pull the race card," Stanford said.

"Do you think I should wear the BLM mask?" Sarkisian asked.

"Ha! Yes, Sark, yes. Brilliant. Wear the BLM mask."

"Wait," Sarkisian responded. "Why do *you* think I should wear the mask?"

"I can't think of any better way to get inside this guy's head," Stanford said, tossing his empty can into the wall. "He won't know what to make of you."

"I meant, should I wear it for solidarity? To show what happened was a misunderstanding. You think I should troll him based on race to get him off his game? What's wrong with you?"

"Easy, Sark," Stanford responded. "I'm on the same side as you, but you don't owe this guy anything. He shouldn't have the trophy handed to him just because he's black. Make him earn it. Why shouldn't people be just as excited for the first Armenian winner?"

"I was born in Shrewsbury. I don't even speak a word of Armenian."

"You get the point," Stanford said.

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Sarkisian wore the BLM mask, but for his own reasons. Certainly not for anything Stanford had said.

Reggie came to the table flamboyant in dress but stoic in manner, nodding to Sarkisian and showing no sign of recognition and no reaction to the mask. Just as well, Sarkisian thought.

A camera hovered over the board, allowing the game to be streamed throughout the hotel and even to a few hardcore fans throughout the world. Scrabble aficionados would discuss the game for years afterwards, swearing that they watched it live.

The play was transcendent from the first word. Reggie was clearly gifted, and both players bent letters to their will in extraordinary ways. No word was safe. It could be repurposed at any moment. CHAT became CHATTEL. PART became APARTHEID. JUDICIAL became PREJUDICIAL. They stacked new words over and under and in the middle of other words,

scoring multiple ways in multiple directions on single plays. They Bingo-ed repeatedly. The lead was exchanged and then exchanged again, and then exchanged again.

As they neared the end of play, Sarkisian found himself down 81 points with no tiles left to draw. Despite the score, victory remained possible in the seven letters in his hand: N-G-G-R-S-E-I. He had been hoarding an S, valuable because it could be added to an existing word while making another word in the other direction. He could add the S to OZONE and then play all seven letters, hitting the triple letters scores on the G and the S. With the 50-point bonus, the play would give him 79 points. Out of letters, the game would end and the value of Reggie's last two letters would be subtracted from his score and added to Sarkisian's. Sarkisian would win by two points.

Sarkisian studied his letters again. Some players rearranged them physically. Not Sarkisian. No need. He looked up at Reggie. Surely a player of his skill could look at his own letters and the board, realize what Sarkisian was holding, understand the word that could give him victory. Could he play it? On this stage, with this opponent, wearing this mask? Reggie looked back at him, his fingers steepled before him, his dark velvet jacket regal. His face was unreadable, his eyes two inscrutable dollops of obsidian.

Sarkisian's clock wound down. He had to play. To win or not to win? It would be his last play no matter what he laid down. Reggie could go out on his next turn. As the final seconds ticked away, Sarkisian flipped two letters, slowly laid down the word GINGERS, missing the triple word score on his G and losing by one point. A delayed roar erupted from the lobby as the remote spectators tallied the score in their heads. Sarkisian offered his elbow for a bump, but Reggie had already turned away.

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Sarkisian allowed Stanford to lead him quickly out of the hotel to an outdoor bar still enjoying the kind of careful summer raucousness that would disappear when the virus reasserted itself come Fall. The background noise of Stanford's meandering chatter and three quick glasses of Merlot numbed Sarkisian considerably.

"You know, Sark," Stanford said after a Sarkisian began to emerge from his stupor. "This might be the last thing you want to hear, so feel free to tell me to shut the fuck up, but I think I saw a winning word in your last combination."

And just like that all the animosity built up over three days drained away. Finally some acknowledgement. Stanford of all people would understand his impossible dilemma, the depth of his sacrifice. He braced himself for the theatrical commiseration that would turn his self-pity into something more delicious, something that would perhaps develop into a lasting inside joke, a story to add to the legend of their friendship.

"Gearings!" Stanford exclaimed. "Right? A Bingo. A win. Don't worry, I didn't see it at the time either. Thought about it after."

The board flashed into Sarkisian's eyes. He tried to deny it to himself, but there it was, an A exposed in the bottom corner would have allowed the G in GEARINGS to hit a triple word score. A win. Definitely a win. What's worse, it was a word Sarkisian could remember playing in an online game last year. Yet he hadn't seen it. Couldn't hear it. Because a single word had echoed a foul mantra in his head, his inner voice whispering shrilly over and over: "NIGGERS. . .NIGGERS. . .NIGGERS."