

1. LOSING

“Checkmate.”

The blond kid with the IZOD sweater smirked as he waved his delicate pink hand over the board, offering to shake.

“Better luck next time,” he added, twisting the knife.

Scholar’s mate. The oldest trick in the book. Four quick moves and you’re a dead baby joke. Worst part was, I knew how to counter it — had known since I was a little kid — but he’d gotten inside my head with his floppy rich-boy haircut and his black leather chess bag. They call it chess blindness. I was thinking three or four moves ahead, designing a devastating attack, when my brain shorted out. Played Nf6, flatlined.

Every patzer in the storied NYC Chess in the Schools program knows that trap, and the fact that he tried it on me at all was pure disrespect, a way of showing his contempt. Contempt for my neighborhood, my skills, my school. Contempt for me: Moses Middleton, freshman, fresh kid, and all-around mediocrity at Q722, the Phillips Exeter of northern Queens (joke).

Contempt, derision, scorn, and about a million other SAT vocab words that I’m going to need to get into a decent college — and which will probably be useful in the meantime for describing the humiliation I experience every day. Chess was supposed to be a way to make my mark at school, to stand out from the nobodies who get shoulder-checked in the hallways and trashed on social media. Instead, I’d been posterized. I sucked, and the proof was right there on the tournament scoreboard.

I slunk out of the cafeteria and slipped outside the school building to blow a cloud or three, palming my trusty mini-mod. I wasn’t alone. Dimly visible in the shadow of the school dumpster was my classmate P.D. Morales, wild-haired and olive-skinned, looking like Teenage Satan behind a swirling mist of vaporized Unicorn Milk. We bumped and commenced lurking.

“You rolled over for Barron Trump I hear. Nice. I am already composing

snarky tweets in my head.” He exhaled a monumental cloud. “Can’t help it: they come to me unbidden.”

P.D., undoubtedly the smartest kid in Q722, was a social pariah and a spectacular academic failure, majoring in underachievement with a minor in truancy. Nobody messed with him, though. The consequences were too dire. Supposedly in Middle School he’d bitten off a sizeable chunk of a classmate’s earlobe. The nickname stood for Personality Disorder.

“Thanks a lot, problem child,” I replied. “So what are you doing out here so soon? Round’s hardly started.”

“As you would know, loser. It happens that I drew one of those Galton Prep kids, just like you did. I figured I’d let 20 or 25 minutes run off the clock. Once he’s sure he has the game in the bag, I’m going back in and steamroller his sorry ass. Can’t wait to see him crumble. I give it three minutes.”

“Speaking of which” He glanced at his vintage Casio — a coveted classic, the one with Space Invaders pre-installed — and pocketed his mod. “It’s time to explode some smug preppy’s class prejudices. See you on the obverse side.”

P.D. was some kind of bona fide chess genius, and probably the New York City leader in disqualifications. He never studied, preferred to go online and play twisted chess variants like crazyhouse and atomic. Sometimes he could be persuaded to join the team for a random tournament, spotting us an automatic four points — provided he didn’t throw a tantrum and sweep someone’s pieces off the board, or just drift away and disappear in the middle of a match.

Me? I was “promising.” Or so I was told one day when I dropped into the Queens Chess Academy on a whim and played skittles with the coach, a woman grandmaster with a heavy accent and a global reputation. (The awesome thing about chess in New York is that *anybody* will give you a game, anywhere, anytime.)

Possibly because of my ambiguous skin color, I got a vibe that she expected me to play street chess — you know: all tactics, no strategy; traps, diversions, kamikaze queen attacks, that kind of crap. So when I played a meticulous Caro-Kann instead (*boring!*), she nodded her approval ... before wiping me out. I never signed up for lessons (too expensive), but her praise, and the chess-mad atmosphere of the place, was an inspiration. I volunteered to organize a chess club at school; first time I’d ever volunteered for anything. Managed to recruit a handful of classmates, leveraging the unexpected coolness that attached to the game after that TV show featuring the sexy, drug-addled chess genius.

Meanwhile, I began to study some on my own, learning openings from books and trying them out with 10-minute games online. Sometimes I’d hit the chess tables at Travers Park, where a motley crew of homeless dudes and hustlers sat around waiting for a mark. One of them, an old Russian guy

named Viktor, was rumored to be an international grandmaster who'd lost his marbles and run out of luck. I had never quite worked up the nerve to challenge him but promised myself I would, someday.

Eventually I got savvy enough to out-think a lot of high school players. But it never came easy for me. Only once or twice have I experienced any part of The Zone – that trippy *Black Mirror* place where the chess board is the universe, where everything's unconscious instinct and non-Euclidean geometry. Like what the TV chess babe sees on her ceiling after popping her pills.

P.D., like his hero Magnus Carlsen, *lives* in The Zone. Me, I'm stuck right here in Jackson Heights, Queens.

By the time I made it back to the cafeteria, the scorer was already recording P.D.'s victory, while his nattily attired opponent was staring at the final position, heels up and gasping. The stragglers were rolling up their boards and heading for the snack machine.

I checked the standings on the whiteboard. Q722 was 1-3, good for last place, while the fetal stockbroker squad from Galton was 3-1, leading the pack. Damn. Dead in the water. If I hadn't messed up, we might still be in the mix, or at least we could have been somewhere north of the cellar.

I sighed, taking in a deep lungful of that unmistakable cafeteria aroma: sour milk, stale apples, a hint of dirty sneaker. Shaking off my shame, I ambled over to greet my fellow losers at our table in the corner. Maggie was, as usual after a loss, sniffing quietly, her delicate features screwed up into a mask of tragedy behind a pair of big ugly nerd glasses. She was super sensitive. Surprising myself, I felt a sharp pang of sympathy, but I had to suppress an impulse to offer comfort: Not only would it be uncool, but worse, it would look like I was creeping her.

No chance of that with my other teammate, Esther, who would've kicked my ass at the first hint of commiseration; she just looked mad. And mean. She rolled her eyes and put on her best English accent, as absorbed from countless BBC period romances. I called it "Austening." Sometimes she would roll out an actual Jane Austen quote; sometimes it was just an improvisation in high-flown Britspeak.

"Thanks to your egregious performance, Moses, I surmise that we can look forward to yet another Saturday afternoon of pointless endeavor," she Austened.

Making a mental note of the vocab, I did my best to respond in kind.

"I beg you to expect my humblest apologies, milady, but I feel compelled to point out that you, too, experienced a crushing defeat."

"Right, Mose, but you're the one who's supposed to be taking this seriously." Back to her normal voice, best described as Token Minority Newscaster with a slight overlay of Haitian Creole. "I'm just here to hang with Maggie. I guess *you're* here to carry water for White Privilege Academy."

Whoa. She shot me the The Look and returned to whatever she was doing on her phone. Esther was an intimidating presence, tall, jet-black, and muscly, like those apparently superhuman physical specimens you see competing in Olympic track and field. She was, however, not a runner but a fencer. Not that she gave much of a damn about athletics – for her, it was all about music; everything else took a back seat to her precious violin.

“Very cold, Esther. Glacial. I’m humiliated enough as it is. Besides, didn’t you notice that Galton’s third board is a Black kid?”

“At Galton, *fam*,” — she gave the word withering emphasis — “even the black kids are white. Walking ads for *diversity and inclusion*. They started their LinkedIn pages when they were in kindergarten. They ‘curate’ blogs to build their personal brands. They run their own NGOs. Yale’s admissions office is already salivating.”

“You’re one to talk, Black Mozart.” (There’s a story behind that; I’ll get to it later.) “Playing chamber music in the public library isn’t exactly what you’d call keeping it real.”

“Doesn’t matter, Mose.” Suddenly serious. “My skin is, like, purple. I’m styling a no-brand hoodie with tatty tights from the discount store on 82nd Street. Single-parent household. Rice and beans for dinner. I don’t see myself in an eating club at Princeton, and no one else will either. SUNY-bound, if I’m lucky. I’m Q722 through and through. You know our motto: ‘So diverse it’s perverse.’”

I looked over at Maggie, who seemed to be done crying and was sliding a textbook out of her backpack. Caught her eye; desperately tried to think of something to say.

“Um, well, we’re all 0-1 except P.D., so at least we’ll be paired with patzers in the next round,” I stammered. “Good chance to steal a win.”

She nodded gravely and cracked open *Intermediate French*. So much for that conversational gambit. I won’t lie: I was seriously attracted to Maggie, pathological shyness, bad glasses, and all. I was kind of into Esther too. To be honest, I was half in love with pretty much any girl who’d talk to me. But Maggie, well, Maggie was special.

I heard an echoing rush of sneakered feet as the second-round pairings were posted at the scorer’s table, saving me from further awkwardness. I drew a guy I’d never heard of from Newtown High – a kid so obviously nerdy that he made me look gangsta by comparison – and somehow I knew I owned his ass from the moment I started the clock. He tried to play the Sicilian but didn’t seem to know the opening beyond the first couple of moves. I took control of the center, grabbed a bishop after a blunder, and then methodically traded down to an endgame that was a foregone conclusion. He did us both a favor and resigned.

Maggie and Esther won their games, too, while for P.D., who was facing a much stronger opponent this time, it took a full five minutes to force a

checkmate. Suddenly we were 5-3, and things didn't look quite so grim for Q722. Hell, I was beginning to feel a little optimistic.

Then Round Three hit us. Like a hypersonic missile. I drew a Russian kid from Elmhurst, played the Four Knights, found myself in a slow agonizing grind, always on the defensive, extricating myself from one complex positional nightmare after another. At last he offered a trade; I accepted gratefully. The dam burst. A dizzying cascade of exchanges left me a pawn down in the endgame. Didn't have the heart to play it out. Another big L.

P.D., needless to say, made short work of some arrogant little hotshot who came equipped with his own chess clock. But the girls both lost, so we finished the round at six and six, far from disgraced but definitely out of the running.

Now came the low point of any tournament, the part where you need to slog through one more game when there's no longer anything to play for. It's getting late, you're starting to get hungry, you feel the weekend slipping away from you. All you want to do is put it in the books and go home. The only thing left to look forward to was P.D.'s game. He'd be matched against some other kid with three points; barring a draw — and P.D. *never* drew — the winner would be taking home the individual trophy, a huge plastic monstrosity that could work as a lawn ornament, if any of us had lawns.

I was matched with a girl from Garden School, big and Irish-looking with a bad case of the sniffles. I guess that was her secret weapon. Waiting for her next gurgling gasp, knowing it was coming but not knowing when, was like Chinese water torture. Distracting as hell. Still I managed to stay focused enough to eke out a win. Out of stubbornness or spite, maybe just hoping for the stalemate, she refused to resign and I had to checkmate her with rook and king. Took forever.

I cruised over to the scorer's table for the results. Maggie won; Esther lost. But it was a kind of a shock seeing the "L" next to P.D.'s name. WTF? He'd been paired with Galton's best player; he would've relished taking the guy apart.

Maggie materialized at my shoulder and gravely told me the news.

"P.D. was disqualified again. He did one of his disappearing acts. Never showed up for Round Four."

Furious but not entirely surprised, I dropped an F-bomb that echoed in the halls, then quickly blurted an apology. Maggie hated swearing.

Esther joined us, shrugging on her jacket. She glanced at the scoreboard and rolled her eyes.

"Typical. We finish at .500, perfectly mediocre. And Galton kicked our ass again. Forgive me if I don't stay for the awards ceremony." She sighed theatrically. "Another Saturday wasted."

Well, I was hurt, and more than a little pissed off — which led me to say exactly the wrong thing.

“Hey, friend, nobody forced you to play. We chilled, played a few games, added something to the résumé. It’s not like you had anything better to do.”

Esther’s eyes flashed.

“You serious? I could’ve gone running. I could’ve been practicing scales. I could’ve been watching romcoms on Netflix. Hell, I could’ve been lying on my bed, smoking weed and staring out the window. Just about anything would’ve been better than spending all day in the school lunchroom with a bunch of chronic masturbators and acne casualties.”

I was speechless. Maggie threw me a bone. “Well, *I* enjoyed it very much, and I’m sure Mose did, too.”

“Girl, you were in tears half the time!” Esther snapped. “And the other half, you were studying French. Sometimes I think you just *pretend* to like these tournaments so you can drag me along and keep me out of trouble.”

Maggie looked stricken. “But I *like* chess.” After a pause, in a voice so quiet that it might as well have been a whisper: “And it’s better than being at home.”

That freaked me out a little bit, and I realized I knew nothing at all about Maggie’s home life. None of my business, I thought. Looking back on it now, I feel like a selfish dickhead, but right then I was too obsessed with my own bullshit to worry about anyone else, even the girl I liked most.

Maggie, whose Chinese first name was Meiling, had been friend-zoning me since Middle School, where we shared a lab bench in Physical Science class. Right away, 13-year-old me had feelings for her, and it was more than just hormones. I couldn’t even have told you why. She was painfully shy; I was awkward as hell — still am, I guess — and I tried to break the ice in a million ways, primarily dumb jokes. Nothing worked.

So I fished for shared interests. In high school you can begin to sort other kids out in the same way adults label people, by what they *do*: this one’s a basketball player, that one’s a Siemens scholar, this one’s a hardened criminal, and so on. In Middle School, kids’ identities haven’t really jelled, so you try to figure them out not by what they do, but what they *like*. At first there didn’t seem to be any common ground. She read poetry. Not my thing. She was into fanart — her notebooks were elaborately decorated with pencil sketches of Goku and various googly-eyed princesses — but I was not the *otaku* type. Although I loved certain genres of corny old movies, anime left me cold.

Then one day I happened to bring my chess bag to class and hit the jackpot. Turned out Maggie was a secret chess fiend. We exchanged our online chess handles and played a shedload of games after hours, bantering in the chat box. It didn’t lead to any kind of romance but at least we made a connection. For a while. Since high school started, I rarely found Maggie online, and as for real life, she and Esther were now besties and stuck together like Pritt. I saw her almost exclusively at club meetings and tournaments. No chess, no Maggie.

So I was shook when Esther turned to me as we were leaving and spoke confidentially, out of Maggie's hearing.

"Face it, Mose. The little chess club you organized is imploding. If Maggie wants to play, I guess I'll support her for a while. But I'm thinking it's time to accept that we're all mediocrities and go our separate ways."

I deflated like yesterday's birthday balloon. Maybe she was right. I'd put my heart and soul into organizing the club, but I'd probably do myself a favor by focusing more on academics and — *puke* — résumé-building. And I wouldn't have to ride herd on a small group of outsize personalities with problems even bigger than mine. Apart from the opportunity to see Maggie, why did I bother?

Outside the school, we saw the kids from Galton. Laughing, shoulder-punching, scrambling into a G-Class SUV. Cruising into a future of guaranteed success with sweaters draped elegantly around their shoulders. Rolling back to their tastefully appointed apartments where they'd be congratulated by their prosperous, coolly affectionate parents. None of them spared us a glance. I realized that we were invisible to the Galton kids, like the service workers who supported their friction-free lifestyles.

Me, I was invisible to everybody — except when I wasn't. Turned out, my already horrendous day was about to get worse.

I shrugged on my hoodie, stuffed my hands in my pockets, and motored homewards. To get there, I needed to slide through the schmancy quarter. The Jackson Heights Historic District was an oasis of green gardens and pre-war brick row houses, maybe the prettiest neighborhood in Queens. As my dad once explained to me, JH was a planned community built in the 1920s under what they called a restrictive covenant — meaning no Blacks; no Jews; wypipo only. Things loosened up after the war when openly racist contracts were struck down by the courts, and for a while even the Historic District was getting pretty diverse. Now, though, pale-faced gentrifiers were returning to the area in force, swaggering down the street toting Osprey backpacks and little plastic bags of dogshit, trailing high-priced coffee shops and artisanal liquor stores in their wake. Suddenly the homes were too expensive for regular families. These days I never felt comfortable in the territory of the young professionals and "knowledge workers." I only relaxed once I crossed the border, Roosevelt Avenue, where real people from places like Bangladesh and Colombia did business under the roaring, shuddering tracks of the elevated train.

I was still traversing the yuppie beachhead when I stopped by a bodega to grab a Coke. I found myself in line just behind a Jackson Heights hipster, a perfect specimen of the rude-ass interlopers who were now my neighbors. A big soft guy in cargo shorts with a shaggy blond beard and — get this — a fanny pack. (Why TF would you wear a fanny pack when you've got, like, 15 pockets in your pants?) The man was planting his feet and striking a pose,

hands on hips, obviously getting set to create some drama.

“What do you mean, you don’t support Apple Pay?” He was actually ridiculing the clerk’s accent (*you damn sopper’ Opple Pay*). Then, in his own adenoidal voice, he delivered a lecture, over-enunciating every word like he assumed the guy couldn’t understand English. He pulled his iPhone out, waving it around as he spoke.

“You *need* to support Apple Pay. If you want my business, *bro*, you’d better update your attitude and join the 21st Century.”

The clerk, who was probably well used to this kind of bullshit, calmly told him the business was cash-only. Whereupon the yuppie dude slammed his canned smoothie down on the counter and flounced out of the store, shouting “*Eff* you, man!” over his shoulder. (I’m going to try to avoid spelling out the eff-word in this, my magnum opus, but of course you know which swear is intended.)

Guys like him were everywhere these days, fuming at anyone who failed to defer to their whims. An occupying army of whining babies, scoring points in their own infantile video game: *Call of Doody*. I made sympathetic eye contact with the clerk as I paid for my soda.

I paused on the corner to check for texts. It was dark by now; my mom might be ringing in for a status check. Out of nowhere — *wham!* — I felt a smack on my shoulder, hard enough that I stumbled forward a couple of steps. I wheeled around and saw the hipster from the bodega, goggle-eyed and breathing hard; he was *rage*.

“You effing little *shit!* Give me my effing *phone!*” he yelled, his voice cracking. He threw up his little fists and actually executed an awkward bounce step, looking ridiculous and scary at the same time. Things were about to go critical.

I was briefly paralyzed with shock, which was probably a good thing. If I’d taken a defensive stance, some kind of fist fight was going to happen. Not that I couldn’t have taken this guy — well, okay, he had like 60 pounds on me so maybe not — but a street altercation was bound to attract the cops. And like my dad always warns me, I need to avoid *any* kind of interaction with NYPD. A brown kid in a hoodie is automatically the Bad Guy. Doesn’t matter if I’m the injured party; doesn’t matter if I’ve just discovered the cure for cancer. I could end up cuffed. Or tased. Or worse. So, hating myself, I just backed away, slowly.

“I don’t have your phone, man,” I said, as calmly as I could. “No idea what you’re talking about.”

He advanced, spluttering. “You were right next to me in the store. My phone is gone. I can see it right there in your dirty little hand. Give it back — *now!* — or I’m calling the police.”

Dirty little hand. He was *that* close to spitting out the N-word; you can always tell. I was dazed and furious, overcome by conflicting emotions. I

thought about running, but that would seem like an admission of guilt. The whole messed-up situation teetered on the knife-edge; I experienced a massive shot of adrenalin and it felt like the world snapped into sharp focus. Suddenly I could hear the background noise — indistinct voices, a barking dog, the rumble of traffic — in hi-res audio. It was like the movies: a beat of tension music; a fateful pause; an explosion of chaotic violence.

Then, thankfully, the cavalry rode in. The electronic chime on the bodega door sounded, and the clerk emerged with an iPhone in his hand.

“I think you left your phone, boss,” he deadpanned. I thought I detected an ironic stress on the word “boss,” but it was hard to be sure. He kept a perfectly straight face. Like me, this was a man who had to watch his step all the time.

The hipster snatched his phone back. No word of thanks to the clerk. And for me, no apology whatsoever, even though he’d literally assaulted me. Far from it: He was going to save face by blaming the situation on me.

“Maybe you shouldn’t be lurking on the corner in your hoodie, homes. You’re on *my* turf. You’d best be watching your back.”

I’d seen this before. People like him thought of themselves as the neighborhood aristocracy. They could never admit to being wrong, especially in front of the peasants. Ironically, I had absolutely no doubt that he was the type to attend rallies for justice, shouting woke slogans and calling out “systemic racism.” Probably had a closet full of BLM T-shirts. I bet he even has a couple of special friends “of color” that he invites to the coffee shop to massage his ego and make him feel righteous.

Here was my opportunity to call him out, to recapture my dignity, but I was still too freaked out to think of a cutting remark. He waddled off triumphantly toward the Historic Preservation District, his fanny pack swaying. He’d straight-up profiled me, but my silence would allow him to keep thinking of himself as a paragon of Wokeness.

Was this going to be my life? Swallowing humiliation in order to save my skin? Doing a perpetual model minority act, just so I could land a job in some firm where I’d be reporting to snide hipsters like him, or worse, Galton’s Masters of the Universe?

I brooded all the way home. Winning came so easy to all these bastards. The private school chess dilettantes, the imperial occupiers of my neighborhood, the smug CEO types who sometimes showed up at assemblies to lecture us about success.

No, I thought: This will not stand. Maybe I was channeling Lebowski, but the feeling was real, and very deep. I could do something to recapture my dignity. Maybe, just once, I could give those preening power jocks a taste of defeat. If not on the street, then over the board.