

KATIE KORMANIK

Adventures of a Chess Girl

Into the Depths of the Chess World and Back Again



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This memoir reflects the author's memories and perspectives. Some names, identifying details, and event names have been changed to protect individuals' privacy. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

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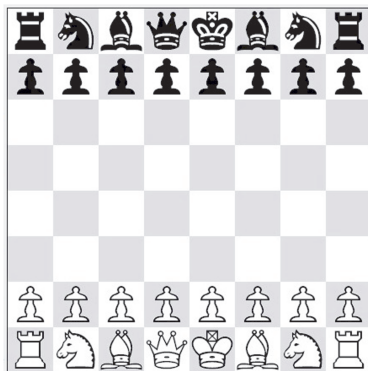
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The pieces sit still, waiting. Practically unlimited possibilities await—over a trillion times a trillion times a trillion. They wait for that first move, the one that will set the tone for the rest of the game. What kind of game do you want to play? A thriller, with plot twists, sacrifices, and brutal attacks? Or a slow and steady crescendo with a satisfying and straightforward denouement? What kind of game do you want to play, regardless of whether you're on the winning side?

It all comes down to the very first move.

Pan-Ams

December 26, 2009

The warm, humid air dissolved as the sliding glass doors of the Sheraton Hotel opened, and I stepped into the cool, brightly lit lobby. I had watched the sun set from the window of my plane as we landed at the Brownsville airport, and it was dark outside by the time I had crossed the bridge to South Padre Island.

My eyes landed on Maddie standing near some couches in the middle of the lobby. As usual, she dressed casually: flip-flops, old denim jeans, and a graphic tee, all of which she had gotten eons ago. She looked cool and hip, like a California beach girl. She had straightened her dark blonde hair with its natural highlights that I had always been envious of. Her hair fell just above her shoulders, sleek and sharp. Maddie's head turned, and we caught eyes—mine dark brown, hers bright honey. She smiled broadly.

"Hiii!" I called from across the lobby. In contrast to Maddie, I looked like I was about to go out to a lounge for some cocktails. I had curled my dark brown hair that morning, and the large curls bounced around my face and back. I wore a tight olive-green jacket over a sequined tank top and skinny jeans. I was twenty-one—old enough to have realized that there's so much more to learn about the world, and young enough to be filled with optimism that I could accomplish anything.

I pranced toward her in my cheap four-inch heels, lugging my bright pink suitcase behind me. Maddie and I gave each other a big bear hug, rocking back and forth.

“Who were they?” Maddie said as we broke apart, gesturing through the sliding glass doors at the elderly couple that had just dropped me off before driving away.

“Some lovely folks I hitchhiked with from the airport,” I said, grinning. When I had first exited the airport, I had asked various passengers getting picked up by friends and family if they were headed toward South Padre Island, and if so, could I hitch a ride? On the fourth attempt, I’d had success with a couple and their friend, all of whom looked to be at least eighty.

“Unfortunately, I couldn’t participate in any of their conversation topics, such as their grandchildren, or their doctors, or joint pains. I was just like, ‘Ohhh,’ and ‘Uh huh,’ and ‘I’m sorry to hear that.’” Twenty-one years old, I was lucky to still be nimble and pain-free.

“Oh my gosh,” Maddie said, giggling. “You would find someone to hitchhike with instead of paying for a taxi like a normal person.”

“Well yeah! Taxi fares are insane!”

It was the day after Christmas. Chess players from all over the country were flying into South Padre for the Pan-American Intercollegiate Chess Championships, or Pan-Ams. Maddie and I were representing the University of Utah, “the U,” along with two other students in the chess club.

I didn’t compete regularly anymore. My last tournament was last year’s Pan-Ams, and the one before that was several years back. I had a whole life outside of chess now. I was in my final year of college at the U, finishing a double major in economics and math. Economics because I wanted to have some sort of career in international development, and mathematics because, well, I just liked math. The semester that had just ended was the most demanding

of my entire academic career, with five graduate-level math courses. Having received my final grades of four A's and two A-'s (I would have preferred all A's, but was fine with the results), I was looking forward to letting loose with Maddie and having a good time at this tournament.

If it weren't for Ronnie, the University of Utah chess club advisor, I probably wouldn't have gotten back into chess at all. It was because of him that I had gone to Pan-Ams last year, and it was because I had such an awesome time that I wanted to go again this year. And now that Maddie had just started at the U for her master's, she could play on our team. It would be like old times!

It had been about seven years since I had consistently played in tournaments—as in, at least one every month or two. The extent of my chess-playing had mostly been dropping by the chess club once a month or so to play a few games. Ronnie knew me from my middle school heyday—when I was known throughout the state of Utah for being one of the best kids in chess—and tried to get me to come more often.

“Ya gonna come by fer chess club?” he would say in his Mississippi drawl, without a greeting, whenever he saw me in the student union cafeteria. Sometimes I would spot him before he could startle me: a thin, middle-aged man, wearing a T-shirt, baggy jeans, and old sneakers, with wispy, light-brown hair that was receding from his forehead, striding purposefully toward my table where I sat with my coffee, writing notes and reading from my textbook.

But one day during the fall semester of my junior year, when Ronnie yet again somehow managed to find me amongst the hundreds of students packed at the cafeteria tables, he looked panicked.

“Josh can’t go to the Pan-Ams.” Again, no greeting; just chatting as if we were already in the middle of a conversation. I liked it. No fluffy “Oh! How are you?”s without actually expecting or wanting an answer. A lot of chess players were blunt like that, me included. Social niceties required too much effort.

“What’s the Pan-Ams?”

“Ya don know? It’s the annual competition between university chess teams. It’s between Christmas and New Year’s. This year it’s in Dallas.” Ronnie put his hands on his hips and looked down at the floor.

“Don know what ta do. We need ta send four players ta have a full team. D’ya know someone who could go? We have the funds, so it would be paid for an’ ever’tin.” He glanced nervously at me.

My chess was quite rusty—I hadn’t been to a tournament in almost three years—but a free trip sounded awesome. Flying somewhere, staying in a hotel... I imagined sinking into a luxurious queen bed with huge fluffy pillows—a major upgrade to my twin bed in the dilapidated 600-square-foot unit I shared with two friends. I barely made enough money tutoring math each week to pay my monthly \$200 in rent plus other living expenses. I would never be able to afford a trip unless my mom paid for it, which wasn’t going to happen because she had her own residual money problems from the divorce and the fact that my dad hadn’t paid taxes for seven years leading up to it.

I never usually had exciting plans over the holidays anyway. I didn’t have family events to look forward to anymore—my parents had been divorced for six years, and they each had lives of their own that I didn’t really fit into. My dad and his...uh...I suppose “sugar mama” would be the best term for it—Marjorie—never did much over the holidays. The most we would do together would probably be lunch on Christmas Day. My mom, on the other hand, would be attending a plethora of holiday events with her husband Robert, his two daughters from his second marriage, and his enormous extended family, and she would

expect me to join her. They were all lovely, wonderful people who always did their best to make me feel welcome. But they never truly felt like family, just friendly acquaintances, and I never quite enjoyed myself.

I wouldn't have activities with friends to look forward to either; all my college friends would be doing their own family things over the holidays. I would probably snowboard a few days but certainly wasn't planning to go every day like I had the year before when I spent the entire time teaching myself to snowboard. For two weeks straight, I was on the slopes from 9 a.m. until 5 p.m. every day with a one-hour break for lunch. By the end of the season, after many epic falls and an arm fracture, I needed an oven mitt fit snugly over my cast to keep my hand warm. Despite this, I was pretty good and excited to snowboard again. But the season usually lasted until at least April, so I would have plenty of time. Besides, it would be cool to play some chess again.

"Uh, I could probably go," I said.

"Really?" Ronnie's face brightened as he broke into a huge smile.

"Sure! I don't really have plans." I shrugged and smiled.

"Wow, that's just great. Woo-hoo!" He turned and walked briskly away.

That same day, Ronnie purchased my round-trip flight and three nights at the Dallas Fort Worth Airport Marriott and emailed me the itinerary.

After arriving at the Marriott the day after Christmas for Pan-Ams 2008, I took the elevator to the fourth floor and made my way down the quiet hallway, pulling my bright pink suitcase behind me over the plush carpet. As I approached the room, I heard guys' voices talking and laughing on the other side. I tapped the key card to the lock and opened the door.

"Hey! You made it!" I recognized Jared's voice. He was seated at the edge of the nearest bed. He was tall and muscular, with a

buzzed head and lean, rosy face. His smile revealed dimples that stretched down his chin. I had first met him at a student government meeting a few months back. I was one of the officers who voted on student organization budget requests, and he had attended our monthly meeting to request funds for this tournament.

“Wassup!” I smiled at him in greeting. Two other guys were sitting on the floor playing blitz, in which each player has five minutes for the entire game. One was skinny, with black hair and pale skin. The other was more built, with olive skin.

“You must be Katie! I’m David,” the skinny guy said, flashing me a quick smile before turning back to the board. The other guy made his move and hit the clock before turning to me.

“Narek,” he said, nodding his head.

“Nice to meet you,” I said brightly. I waited to say more until they finished their game. There’s not much time to think during blitz. I watched them move and hit the clock. Move, bang, move, bang. After a few minutes, Narek won, and we resumed our introductions.

“I’ve never seen you guys at chess,” I said, wondering why they were the ones on the team rather than more regular members.

“Yeah, I’ve been, like, once this year,” David said. He chuckled. “I guess Ronnie couldn’t find anyone else.”

“Same,” said Narek, grinning.

“It’s great we got someone on the team who’s actually good,” David said, looking at me.

“Me? I’m not that good,” I said, shaking my head and waving off his comment. Everything was relative, and I wouldn’t consider someone with my rating “good.” Maybe “decent.” The descriptor “good” would be warranted at, let’s say, the eightieth percentile of rated players. At least seventieth. With my rating of 1456, I was at about fiftieth, so squarely average.

“Well, you’re rated way higher than the rest of us!” Jared said. Jared’s

was only around 700, David's 800, and Narek's 1300. Ronnie must have really scraped to find people to go, and this was the best he could get.

Jared pulled out a bottle of red wine.

"Let's celebrate! The U chess club is gonna kick ass!" We all laughed. We knew our team's average rating was probably the lowest in the tournament.

We realized we didn't have a bottle opener. I went downstairs to the lobby to ask for one, to no avail. When I returned to the room and let everyone know, Jared shrugged, walked to the bathroom, and smashed the neck of the bottle against the sink. We all laughed hysterically, then removed the thin wrapping from the plastic hotel cups and held them out while Jared poured from the razor-sharp opening. Once our glasses were full, we formed a small circle in the hallway outside the bathroom.

"To the U!" Jared said, holding up his cup.

"To the U!" we repeated as we all tapped our drinks together and took a sip, hoping no shards of glass had made their way into our cups.

Now, a year later, I thought about that team as Maddie walked with me to my room. I plopped my suitcase down in the hallway just inside the door and walked to the large window that made up most of the far wall. The ocean lay beyond, its waves soundless through the thick window. The vast expanse of ocean darkness was barely separated from the hotel's dimly lit pools by a strip of sandy beach. Palm trees sprinkled the grounds. Jared was on our team again this year, but David and Narek were doing other things. The fourth person was someone I had never met, but was rated a lot higher than Maddie and me. Even though it would have been fun to play with last year's team

again, I was stoked to be back at a tournament with Maddie.

This year would be even more fun because I would get to see my friend Matt in person for the first time since meeting at Supernationals eight years before. He lived in Indiana, and while we both had played in tournaments since then, we each stuck to our sides of the country. Even though we hadn't seen each other in person, we somehow kept in touch, first chatting on MSN Instant Messenger, then video calls on Skype, and now that we were adults and had our own cell phones, we could text and call all the time. Despite the long distance, I considered Matt one of my best friends.

When I told him I would be attending Pan-Ams this year, he excitedly told me he would be visiting with his friend Lucien. They wouldn't be playing but decided to vacation on South Padre Island since they both had chess friends in the tournament. Then they would return to Lucien's home near South Padre to celebrate New Year's. He asked if I would want to come. That sounded a lot more fun than the New Year's party with my stepfamily that I would have attended with my mom. When Matt asked Lucien if I could then join them after the tournament, Lucien happily agreed. I couldn't wait to finally see Matt again and meet Lucien, who sounded very nice.

Matt texted me the next day as soon as he arrived.

"904."

Maddie and I had spent the morning at the beach and hotel pool. Now we were sprawled out on the beds in her room as Maddie wrote in her diary and I worked on PhD applications, figuring that obtaining the highest possible degree was a noble pursuit.

I saved the admission essay I was typing on my computer, and speed-walked down the hall, Maddie following closely behind. I found room 904 and knocked. The door opened, and there was Matt, looking just like he did on Skype, just three-dimensional. He had buzzed hair, thin lips, and deep-set eyebrows that made him perpetually look like he

was thinking hard about something. I gave him a big hug and realized he was quite muscular. He could definitely pass as a bodyguard, I thought. He and Maddie also hugged. They had met once at a previous tournament after I had introduced them, though I hadn't been at that tournament.

"It's so crazy seeing you in person!" I said, studying his face.

"I know, right?" In contrast to my naturally animated voice, Matt's was completely monotone. Our body language matched our voices: while it was common for me to raise my eyebrows, nod my head, shrug my shoulders, and make a lot of hand motions while talking, Matt was stiff, like a slow-moving boulder. But I knew him well enough to know he was excited to be there and see me.

"Lucien's already at the welcome reception. Wanna head there?" Matt asked in his deadpan voice. The three of us went downstairs to the ballroom where the tournament would be held. Trays of small sandwiches, cookies, and bowls of salad lined a long table on the side of the room.

"Oooh, fancy!" I exclaimed as I made a beeline to get a plate. I loved free food.

"There's Lucien," Matt said.

A large man who looked to be in his late twenties walked gracefully toward us. He looked like he had come straight out of high tea at Harrods. He wore a long-sleeved, button-up shirt under a cashmere vest. His straight brown hair was neatly parted at the side, each side combed over a perfect ninety degrees. He smiled jovially as he glided toward us, carrying a plate with a few sandwiches and a cookie. I recognized him from Facebook; after he had welcomed me to spend New Year's with them, I added him as a friend and messaged him to say thanks and that I was looking forward to it.

"Nice to meet you in person," he said, smiling at me and extending his hand. His voice was soothing and higher-pitched than Matt's.

“You too!” I said as we shook hands while I held my half-filled plate. “Thanks again for having me for New Year’s!”

“My pleasure.” He pronounced the “I” very distinctly. He turned to Maddie. “Hi, I’m Lucien.” Again, a very pronounced “I.”

“Maddison,” she said as they shook hands. Maddie was always very formal and a bit awkward around people she didn’t know. She never introduced herself as Maddie, even though that’s what everyone eventually called her after they got to know her.

“You’re more than welcome to join us for New Year’s, too,” Lucien said.

“Aw, I already have plans, but thanks for the offer.”

“Hey, Lucien!” One of the other reception-goers patted Lucien on the back in greeting.

“Hey man, nice to see you.”

Others continued approaching Lucien to greet him; Lucien clearly had a lot of friends. That didn’t surprise me; he seemed so affable, given his invitation to both me and Maddie to join him for New Year’s despite not knowing us at all. I asked Lucien how he knew them.

“Oh, just the usual Texas chess crowd,” Lucien said. He motioned at a group sitting at a table close by. “They’re from UTD, and those guys are from Brownsville. I would see them all the time before I stopped playing.”

Matt, Maddie, and I loaded our plates and then sat down at a table with Lucien. He had been on his college’s chess team and had been quite good, with a rating of almost 2000, but stopped playing a couple of years before—no time to practice anymore. However, he maintained his connection to the chess team over the years and regularly visited tournaments, which was how he had gotten to know players from other Texas teams. He shared that UT Dallas and UT Brownsville had some of the best chess players in the nation, recruiting the best high school students from all over the world and giving them full-ride

scholarships.

“You know that UTD doesn’t even have a football team? The chess team is their main thing. They’re all ridiculously rated, like over 2500 in most cases,” Lucien said.

I raised my eyebrows in shock. 2500? I had never met anyone rated that high. Even that middle-aged man I took a few chess lessons from when I was twelve was only rated 2100. And he was one of the best players in Utah.

“Hey, hey, what’s up, what’s up?” I looked behind me and saw a tall guy standing behind my and Lucien’s chairs, one hand on the back of each. He had sun-kissed skin, a broad forehead, a strong jawline with a dimple in his chin, and golden blonde hair that fell into his light blue eyes. He wore an unbuttoned black blazer over a Hawaiian shirt and jeans. He smiled subtly, lips slightly parted as he made eye contact with Lucien and then glanced around to me, Maddie, and Matt.

“Hey, Damian!” Lucien said, standing up to shake his hand. “Damian, this is Katie, Maddie, and Matt.” Lucien turned to us. “Damian’s on one of the Texas teams here.”

“Hey, hey,” Damian said, extending his hand to each of us for a handshake. “So uh, where you guys from?” He had a slight accent that sounded European. His tone was good-natured and confident, but winded and rushed. He constantly moved, leaning on one foot and then the other, as if he had somewhere to be and was getting ready to dart out of there.

“Utah,” Maddie and I said at the same time, while Matt said, “Indiana.”

“Utah, Utah. And Indiana. Indiana. Great. Enjoy your games.” And just as quickly as he had appeared, Damian strode off, shaking hands with other players in greeting as he made his way to get himself some food.

“How good is Damian?” I asked Lucien.

“He’s a Grandmaster. I think his rating’s over 2600. One of the best

players in this whole tournament.”

Maddie and I caught eyes in wonder. Not only did that rating make Damian one of the best players at the tournament, but he was also one of the best in the world. And he was our age—a college kid! I felt a pang of envy. I wondered how good I could have gotten if I had consistently applied myself. But I had never seen chess as my endgame; it was and always had been just a hobby. There was a lot I would have had to give up to reach Damian’s level (if I could’ve gotten there at all), and so I was content with being an average player. Though I did somewhat miss the days when everyone at tournaments knew who I was.

Shortly before 6 p.m., a small crowd of players had gathered around two sheets of paper taped to one of the open ballroom doors. The pairings sheet listed all teams in the tournament and the board number at which they would be playing. I saw that our team would be on Board 35 and playing a much stronger team. My opponent was rated 2230, 755 points higher than me. I mentally accepted defeat, then shifted my focus to the standings sheet. It listed all 120 players in the tournament in order of rating. I scanned the names at the top of the sheet and found Damian’s name amongst them. Their ratings were all between 2500 and 2700—the highest in the world. All of them had either “GM” or “IM” next to their names: Grandmasters and International Masters. They would be able to crush me, a 1450, like a bug. I turned to Maddie, grimacing.

“Our opponents are rated over 2000.”

“Let’s do our hand clap!” Maddie said, smiling brightly.

“Okay! But we’re still going to lose.”

“I know.” We giggled. We had been doing this hand clap for the past eight years before almost every game as a sort of good luck ritual. It involved pretending to punch and slap each other in the face and making “Ow!” and “Pow!” sound effects.

We crossed the large hallway outside the ballroom and faced each other, clapped hands, and giggled again as we turned back toward the ballroom. A steady trickle of players was making their way to their assigned boards. We walked through rows of tables, arranged in groups to fit four boards side-by-side with a big, printed number taped to the end of each table. Each board had already been set up with its black and white pieces. Maddie and I found our tables and sat next to each other at the two center boards. Teams sat in order of rating, and since Maddie was rated slightly higher than me, she played second board.

Since I would be playing Black, I moved the clock to the right side of the board. To compensate for the advantage White gets for moving first, Black gets to choose which side the clock goes, usually the side of their dominant hand. Tournament rules are that players must make their move and hit the clock with the same hand, and being able to hit the clock even a few microseconds quicker can be a game-changer when there are seconds left in the game. I was going to lose my first game anyway, so the side the clock went on wouldn't make a difference, but I still preferred having it on my right.

I extracted a pen from my purse, then placed my purse on the ground under my chair. Two notation sheets, which included a yellow carbon copy, had already been placed at each board. Maddie reached over from her seat next to me. "Pan Ams 2009 Baby!" she wrote in her loopy handwriting in the "Event" field at the top. Then "Miss Bug + Miss House" at the bottom.

"Good luck Miss Bug!" I wrote on her sheet in my neat, almost computer-print handwriting. Those were nicknames we'd had for each other since our early teens, when we got really into bughouse, a funky type of team chess. We used to petition Javier, one of the local Salt Lake City chess tournament organizers, to host bughouse tournaments. The two of us made a fantastic bughouse team.

Writing messages on each other's notation pads was a favorite pastime. Maddie had started it. The first time she wrote on my notation sheet, I was shocked. It seemed a bit sacrilegious to sully the place where I kept meticulous track of each move, but eventually I warmed to the idea.

Soon, Jared and our other teammate took their seats, and we were all joined by the opposing team. I craned my neck over the sea of players assembling at the tables all around us and looked to see who was on the top boards. One of the teams on Board 1 was already seated. Like most of the others at the tournament, they wore T-shirts and jeans. They looked nervous. One leaned back with his arms crossed in front of him, huge headphones draped around his neck. Another was resting his forearms on the table, legs angled under his chair, toes anchored to the ground, jittering his right leg as he waited in anticipation for the round to begin. Two minutes to go.

I reached into my purse to check that my phone was on silent. As I looked back up, I noticed four men in jeans and black blazers walking confidently through the center of the room. The same logo was embroidered on each of their blazers:

The University of Texas, Dallas
CHESS TEAM

Anyone on a chess team with uniforms has gotta be good, I thought. As I scanned their faces, one of them caught my eye. He had straight, jet-black hair with a few strands falling over his broad, pale forehead. Like his teammates, his expression was serious. He moved with calm assurance, deliberate but unhurried. I found him quite handsome.

Suddenly, he looked at me and we caught eyes for a split second. His eyes were a light blue-gray. Embarrassed, I looked back down at my board. After they had moved past me, I watched as they took their

seats at Board 1.

“Welcome to the 55th Pan-Am!” The tournament director’s voice resonated through the loudspeakers over the dull chatter and sounds of people taking their seats. There was some modest clapping. I looked around the ballroom and saw him against one of the walls, microphone in hand. He had graying hair and wore a polo shirt tucked into khaki pants.

“This year, we have over 30 teams and 120 players from all over the country. We are excited to welcome y’all to Dallas!”

Some hoots and claps sounded around the room, probably from those who lived in Dallas.

“And now, you may shake hands and begin your first game. Good luck.”

Arms stretched across the boards throughout the room as opponents shook hands. The room filled with the murmur of players wishing each other good luck and the clicks of the chess clocks as everyone playing Black hit the button on their sides. As anticipated, Maddie still hadn’t shown up. Her opponent pressed the button on his side, and Maddie’s clock began to count down from 90 minutes.

My opponent and I flashed each other a quick smile as we shook hands. His handshake was firm.

“Good luck,” we said, looking each other in the eyes. I pressed the clock.

c4. He moved his queen-side bishop pawn forward two squares. I was already caught off guard; I didn’t know the best response to this opening.

e5. I countered by moving my king pawn forward two. Made sense to try to control the center. He moved immediately. Nc3. Clearly, he knew what he was doing. And I was just guessing, relying on my innate sense of what to play. That might be enough to win if I were a much stronger player than him, but, judging from his rating, he had

superior skill in addition to a solid, practiced opening strategy.

Even though I knew I would lose—and losing was never fun—it would still be interesting to watch the story unfold; how he would exploit the weaknesses in my position that I would fail to see. Maybe I would blunder and suffer a quick death. Or maybe I would be able to maintain a strong defense and my opponent would slowly but steadily gain an advantage through better-placed pieces. I would rather that be the case. Really, the game was a competition with myself—how well could I perform in this uphill battle? Not all zero points are created equal. The losses where I've performed my best are far more satisfying.

I moved my bishop, attacking his king side. He ignored it and moved his own bishop to my side of the board. Slowly and steadily, his other pieces slithered toward me. I sank my head into my hands as my eyes perused the battlefields across the board. One hour of playing turned into two.

“Good game,” I heard Maddie say, shaking me from my spell. I hadn't even noticed when she had arrived, and now her game was already over. I looked up as Maddie and her opponent shook hands and stood up. Maddie and I caught eyes. She shrugged. I shrugged back. As anticipated, the opposing team had finished off each of my teammates one by one. My opponent and I were now the only ones from our teams who remained. I was surprised and pleased with myself that I had lasted this long; we were deep in the middle game, and our game still had a lot of life left to live.

Upon returning my gaze to my board, I dove right back into the black and white universe, and everything else faded. I contemplated the threat his bishop posed as it aimed at the fragile pawns protecting my king; his knight, powerful and prominent in the center of the board; and his queen, which had advanced into my side. I still had just as many pieces as he did, but mine were restricted—blocked by my own pawns. Materially equal, but positionally worse. And I had no

plan.

My opponent continued his offensive. Instead of taking initiative, my moves became reactionary. Almost three hours in, there was nothing to do but defend as long as possible.

Why keep playing a losing battle? Why not just resign, allowing myself to get back to real life and margaritas by the beach? Because the joy of playing still holds, even when you're losing. When you're losing, it's a different kind of puzzle—is there a way out? It ain't over till it's over.

So I played on. Eventually, I lost. But it was a good game.

Losing is imperative to getting better at chess. You have to play people better than you, and usually that ends in a loss. But now that you're better, you can win against tougher opponents. And your losses are against even better players, and the cycle continues.

Besides regular play, there are powerful ways to catalyze your progress, and one of those ways is to set yourself up for success from your very first move. Create a strong foundation that opens the right doors and allows for the best opportunities. When I thought about it, each game was me navigating a jungle armed with nothing but my own street smarts that I had built through years of play. I could become better prepared. And then, how far could I get?

The spark had reignited.

Grandmaster Pyramid

Dad taught me how to play chess when I was four. I sat in a chair on the opposite side of his desk in the study room. In addition to the books crowding the shelves that covered the walls, piles of books were everywhere: on the desk, the floor, the windowsills. I watched as he pulled a thin box off some books on the top shelf and placed it on the desk between us. He unfolded a checkered board and then set up the white pieces on his side. As he did so, he told me to set mine up to mirror his. As he placed each piece, I pulled out the equivalent black piece and centered it on the opposite square: the two rooks in the corners, then the knights, bishops, the king, the queen on the square of her color, and eight small pawns on the adjacent row.

Dad was the stay-at-home parent. My childhood memories are filled with good times with Dad, but very few with Mom. Mom, a psychiatrist, was the breadwinner.

While in medical school in the Philippines, where she had grown up, she sang and played guitar at a local pub. One day, a friend asked her if she could provide entertainment for some Peace Corps volunteers who would be celebrating Thanksgiving at the resort owned by his family. She provided background music while the volunteers ate and made merry. Toward the end of the night, the volunteers pressured their leader into singing. A fit, handsome man with a mustache and a mop of thick, brown hair smiled in embarrassment, revealing a large

dimple and a small gap between his top front teeth. He made his way to the front amidst cheers from the crowd. As my mom accompanied him to an upbeat song, he forgot the words and looked at her for help. She mouthed them to him, and the rest is history.

My parents married in the Philippines and then moved to Ohio, where Dad was from and where Mom would complete her residency training. And as for Dad, well, he would never work again.

I guess you could say *I* was his work. Chess was just one of many things he exposed me to, starting before I even made my debut into the world, when he would put headphones playing classical music on my mom's belly. When I was a baby, he would place me on the keyboard of our stand-up piano and help me walk up and down it. By age five, I was an enthusiastic singer and piano player. Dad and I would play HORSE at the basketball hoop in our driveway, and canoe and fish in the lake outside our house in Indiana, where we moved when I was four. We would take long walks through the woods and find garden snakes several feet long curled up under rocks, pick them up, and wear them around our necks. I would accompany him to Home Depot to get the tools he needed for various projects. Once, he bought some balsa wood and string. Then, at home, we made a kite together with some wrapping paper and flew it outside.

We would have long conversations about politics, science, and the stock market. When we weren't hanging out, Dad was usually at his computer, with six monitors set up and desks on three sides of his office chair. If I was bored, I would crawl onto his lap, and he would happily show me what he was working on. He would point out charts of boxplots and their changes over time; scatter plots showing correlations; graphs of other variables and their moving averages. It looked so complicated. My dad was the smartest person I knew, and my best friend in the whole world.

He was also the tiger parent. When I was five, he installed a

math program onto the computer that would ask random arithmetic questions, which I had to answer before a time bar went to 0. That summer, he tasked me with practicing it for fifteen minutes a day. I also had to type a paragraph in my journal (saved in a document on the computer), read a news article, and practice singing and piano. I rarely complained; I grew accustomed to these tasks in the same way I had brushing my teeth every morning and night.

He didn't just make me work hard, he was critical of my work. "No, that doesn't sound right," he would call from his computer while I played the piano. "Try making that part a little faster." Even when I sang karaoke, a love of which my mom instilled in me, Dad would stand near the stage and make hand signals to try to get me to sing differently. Once, he pointed his finger upward while moving his arm rigorously up and down, signaling me to increase my volume and belt that part out. I was so mortified that everyone in the karaoke lounge could see him that I ran off the stage and cried.

When I was thirteen and had only scored in the 80th percentile on the reading comprehension portion of the SATs compared to the 99th percentile I had gotten in math, I lamented in my journal how my dad gave me a "big long lecture" about how I would never make it to Stanford with scores like these.

"You don't have much natural intelligence," he had said. "It's your outstanding educational background that has helped you get this far. I, on the other hand, have much natural intelligence. If I had gotten the education you got, I would've been way up there." Dad would always alternate between telling me I was the smartest person he knew and, basically, a dummy who sometimes just got lucky. "Who took your SATs?" was a common rhetorical question—implying that I was acting stupid and someone else must've gotten my high scores.

"I'm so depressed," I wrote. "I have to sort out my priorities and work hard." Dad always expected excellence and pointed out flaws with a

cutting ruthlessness that I internalized from an early age. Maybe it was because of this that I excelled academically. I was in English and math classes with kids three years older. In seventh grade, I had to start taking math at Skyline, the local high school. Each year, I won the State Science Fair for my grade. In second grade, I became my school's spelling bee champion. I won the state penmanship contest each year and then won the national penmanship contest in sixth grade. For this feat, an entire school assembly was held just for me in which I was recognized on stage and interviewed for the local newspaper.

Dad would not just push me to excel or push me out of my comfort zone; he would test the limits of my psyche. When I was eight, we took a road trip to California. As we were driving through Death Valley, Dad noticed that the road we were driving on was perfectly straight for miles, with barely any other cars in sight, and thought it was a great opportunity for me to learn to drive. He pulled over and made me sit in the driver's seat. I adjusted the seat as far forward as possible, then started driving, getting to 20 miles per hour.

"Faster," he said. I pushed the gas a little harder.

"Faster!" he said, more urgently. I went faster but started to panic.

"Faster!" he yelled. I got the car to 60 miles per hour and began to cry. He let me slow down and pull the car over. Shaking in fear, I continued crying for several minutes. My dad sat in silence, waiting for me to regain my composure.

While my dad was my challenger, my mom was my safe space. Since Mom was gone all day, she compensated by never failing to do our nightly ritual, which I called tickleback. After tucking me into bed, she would lightly scratch me all over my back while I gave directions: "Up. Down. More. Left. Up." Once the scratches felt satisfactory, I would say "Tickleback," the command to switch to tickling before kissing me goodnight.

Mom was my emotional support. I could relax with her and not

worry about being perfect. But always, eventually, I would wander back out, ready again for the thrill of being pushed into the scary and unknown. And before I entered my teens, I no longer needed my dad to push me. I pushed myself.

In my early childhood, there could not have been a better activity than chess to go head-to-head with Dad. Chess wasn't subject to his biases and preferences about how I should or shouldn't be. If I won, that would show him. He would have no grounds to critique and criticize. I could be the one doing that instead.

After I first learned how to play, Dad would beat me over and over again. Not only was he unforgiving if I made a mistake, he would rub it in my face.

"Ha ha ha!" he would jeer every time I blundered and gave him a free piece. I was determined to beat him and demanded to keep playing.

Chess became our go-to activity whenever we had some downtime. My dad and I would take road trips, often without my mom since she was always busy with work. On the way, we would stop for meals at Denny's or Burger King, sit at a booth, and set up the tournament-grade chess set with a fabric board and triple-weighted pieces that he had purchased for me after I had demonstrated my strong interest in the game. It came in a large, black, hard case with metal latches. The servers at the restaurants often asked what instrument I played as I carried it inside. "Chess!" I would say with a big grin. I loved the surprised look they would always show when they heard this. I felt different and special.