THE LIVES OF GRANDMASTERS

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I do not know how old I was when I learned to play chess. I could not have been older than eight, because I still have a chessboard on whose side my father inscribed, with a soldering iron, "Saša Hemon 1972." I loved the board more than chess—it was one of the first things I owned. Its materiality was enchanting to me: the smell of burnt wood that lingered long after my father had branded it; the rattle of the thickly varnished pieces inside, the smacking sound they made when I put them down, the board's hollow wooden echo. I can even recall the taste—the queen's tip was pleasantly suckable; the pawns' round heads, not unlike nipples, were sweet. The board is still at our place in Sarajevo, and, even if I haven't played a game on it in decades, it is still my

most cherished possession, providing incontrovertible evidence that there once lived a boy who used to be me.

The branded board was the one Father and I always played on. It would be my job to set up the pieces, after he offered me the choice of one of his fists, enclosing a black or a white pawn. More often than not, I'd choose the hand with the black piece, whereupon Father would dismiss my attempt to negotiate. We'd play and I'd lose, each and every time. My mother objected to his never letting me win, as she believed that children needed to experience the joy of victory to succeed. Father, on the other hand, was ruthlessly firm in his conviction that everything in life had to be earned and that wanting victory always helped achieve it. As an engineer who had faith in unsentimental reasoning, he believed in the hard benefits of knowledge acquired by trying and failing—even if, as in my case, it was exclusively failing.

I would not have admitted it then, but I did crave his furtive encouragement; that is, I wanted Father to let me win, but I didn't want to know that. I was not capable of thinking more than one or two moves in advance (my preferred activities were always soccer and skiing, where you make decisions by improvising inside a vanishing moment). I regularly blundered, leaving my king hopelessly isolated or not spotting the imminent execution of the queen. I reliably fell into all of my father's traps and was much too quick to resign so as to spare myself further humiliation. But more of it was inevitable, as Father would force me to retrace all of the missteps leading to my demise. He prodded me to think about

chess in a focused manner—and, by extension, to think thoroughly about everything else: life, physics, family, homework. He gave me a chess textbook (by, of all people, Isidora's father) and, move by move, we analyzed the games played by the great grandmasters such as Lasker, Capablanca, Alekhine, Tal, Spassky, Fischer, et cetera. Patient though Father was with me, I could seldom see all the glorious possibilities of a wise opening or a clever sacrifice. He was trying to take me to a far-too-distant horizon, with all the mysterious comforts of chess architecture, as far as I was concerned, deferred into a dubious future. Going over the grandmasterly games felt too much like school—occasionally interesting, often straining my mind in unpleasant ways. Even so, when alone, I'd try to study chess, hoping that I could glean a simple trick or two before the next game and catch my father by surprise. Instead, I constantly and quickly hit the low ceiling of my abstract-thinking abilities. It didn't help that grandmasters such as Capablanca, Alekhine, and Fischer appeared to be obsessive hermits; I was not a writer yet and could not appreciate the devout artist producing painfully inapplicable art. And the world around me was nothing if not an infinity of distractions: cute girls, novels and comic books, my budding record collection, neighborhood boys whistling from the playground under my window, beckoning me to a soccer game.

Compared with the other kids my age, however, I was not all that bad at chess. The games I played with my friends mainly consisted of blunders and oversights, but I often

won them. We played chess the way we played all the other childhood games: heedlessly pursuing the rush of an arbitrary victory, already invested in the next thing to do. I much preferred winning to thinking and I didn't like losing at all. I'd managed to acquire a repertoire of standard openings and attack strategies and was thus capable of committing fewer blunders and outlasting my opponents. I sought opponents who eagerly fell into my textbook traps and subsequently submitted themselves to wholesale destruction. Trash-talking had far more value to me than the highfalutin beauty of brilliant combinations.

When I was in fourth grade, a teacher was assigned to organize an in-school tournament in order to assemble a chess team for an intraschool competition. I signed up. I wanted to challenge myself and go it all alone, but I foolishly told my father about it, so that when I went to play, one Saturday morning, he insisted on accompanying me. He coerced the teacher, who really did not care that much about chess, into letting him rearrange the desks, set up the boards, and design the score chart. Not only was he much too involved, he was the *only* parent involved. In the fourth-grade classroom, furnished with the little desks and chairs, he stood out like a giant. Everyone knew whose father he was.

It is highly possible that I would've done better in that tournament had my father's chess shadow not loomed over me as he watched at my shoulder. I kept staring at the board, envisioning all the errors and possibilities from his point of view, but I saw nothing. One's good fortune is often in

the failings of others, so I managed to win some games. It is likely that my father simply distracted the other kids more than me, intimidating them with his silent, coaching presence.

Whatever might have happened, I made it onto the chess team, and a couple of weeks later we took a bus to play against a blind children's team at their school in Nedžarići—a neighborhood so far off for me at that time it was practically a different city. I went as the fifth of eight boards, but it turned out that only four boards were needed, so I spent the day loitering in the depressing hallways of the ramshackle school for the blind and occasionally witnessing the blind kids tearing my teammates to humbled shreds. I had passionately wanted to play, but, watching the slaughter, I was glad to be spared. The blind kids frowned and shook their heads over the boards, clutching pieces with spikes on the underside, then palpating the squares for the holes to fit them in.

I tried to picture a mental space within which the game existed for them, an interiority where all the combinations, all the lines of advance and defensive positions, were—evidently—sharply outlined. But what I saw instead—and what, I thought, they had no way of seeing—was the banal solidity of nonnegotiable physical reality, the ineluctable modality of the visible, past which I could see nothing. A ten-year-old boy, I happily operated in exteriority, retreating inside only when I was reading. The world in all its hackneyed, stubborn concreteness could never be fully

suspended for me so that I could think inside the abstract space of the game. When I played with my father, for instance, his very corporeal presence was a terrible distraction. I could never separate the game from our relationship and everything surrounding it: his knee jumped at a rapid speed, jerked by his compulsive foot; his big hands with flat, wide thumbs moved the pieces with defeating confidence; he nodded as he discovered opportunities fully invisible to me; the smell of food floated from the kitchen; my mother lingered on the horizon, imploring my father, yet again, not to checkmate me. Whereupon he would checkmate me.

Naturally, I reached the point of always declining his invitation to play—I claimed I was still training, learning, getting ready. But when he played against čika-Žarko, his college friend, I'd kibitz and listen to their trash-talking. Somewhat guiltily, I'd root against my father. I wanted to witness his defeat, so that he could understand how I might have felt when we played. While he wanted to teach me what he knew, I wanted him to see what it all looked like for me—perhaps love is a process of finding a common vision of reality. I wanted us to share the sense that the number of wrong moves far exceeds the number of good moves, to share the frightening instability of the correct decision, to bond in being confounded. These days, of course, I remember neither his defeats nor his victories; nor do I remember enjoying his being humbled. On the screen of my memory, he is perpetually pouting over the pieces, jerking his foot at a speed commensurate with his difficult position on the board. He loves

being inside himself, I imagine; he loves solving problems in the laboratory of his engineering mind; he loves the space in which reason and logic rule. He loves me.

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In high school, I was in an advanced class. My classmates and I had about twelve hours a week of math and physics, all at the expense of the humanities and natural sciences. We pored over differential calculus and imaginary numbers, struggled with quantum physics and complex functions, while our equivalents in "normal" classes, who had a hard time grasping basic fractions, roamed the sunny, fertile fields of art, music, and biology, learning what all high school kids are good at learning—nothing in particular.

I'd decided to enroll in the math-major class because I'd developed a fascination with the theory of relativity. Having read a number of popular-science articles on Einstein's theory and its flabbergasting implications (space-time! black holes! dark matter!), I'd concluded that the work of a theoretical physicist consisted of staring at the stars and imagining alternative universes, which seemed to me like something I could do for a living. But soon after I'd started high school I was forced to recognize that all I could hope for in the domain of mathematical thinking was to wing it, and from thereon in I was winging it.

My class was a geek-rich environment, with a tragically