

# C H E S S B O A R D

E M M Y L I

IT WAS SITTING IN THE CORNER OF THE ROOM, covered in a fine layer of dust and perched on a stool.

Careful not to knock down any of the precariously-stacked cardboard boxes in the attic, I made my way slowly across the attic, arriving at last at the chessboard.

The colors were muted, the pieces blocky and large. Yellow and brown squares criss-crossed their way across the board, meeting the solid dark-brown border at the edges. A row of pawns sat neatly in front, save for one. The pawn in front of the white king had been moved two spaces up.

As a child, I had always loved chess. I used to challenge anyone who came near the chessboard set up neatly on the desk in my room. The adults that came would sit down with me and play a few moves, then pretend to give up and hurry on their way. Although I always enjoyed winning, there were times when I'd get frustrated at their lack of interest.

There was one person that would always play round after round with me, though. Grandfather never tired of playing chess with me; he and I would sit outside on a sunny afternoon, under the shade of the giant oak tree in our backyard, and play game after game. I never won a single one.

Without realizing it, I'd made a move on the board in front of me. I only realized once my hand was off the piece—another pawn on the board moved, and it was again white's turn. I stared at it for a second; then, realizing what a childish idea I had been entertaining, chuckled and shook my head. *I'll save this for last*, I told myself. *For old times' sake*.

The next day, I came back to that dusty, cobweb-filled attic. The ladder creaked as I made my way up slowly.

I tried to focus on cleaning it; by the end of the afternoon, I'd finished sorting all of the odds and ends scattered on the floor, and labeled the boxes that were now neatly stacked against the wall. But time and time again, I'd find my eyes wandering to that corner where the chessboard lay, and there would be an overwhelming urge to go look. But I'd never been one to be easily distracted by the task at hand, and so I held out until lunch break to go.

Even before I saw it, I already knew. The feeling that had been creeping up on me all morning had been confirmed. A piece had been moved on the board. All other pieces seemed to be untouched—all except for the knight, which was now on the third row.

I just stood there, staring at it. All logical explanations ran through my mind and were discarded, as were the illogical ones. Feeling faint-hearted, I leaned against the wall as the room spun beneath me.

It was a while before I gained the confidence to stand upright again. It was another while before I approached the chessboard, which was still perched atop that stool covered in scratches and with peeling paint. It was even more time until I dared, with a shaking hand, to push a piece forward. And just like that, I was put under a spell.

I was obsessed. Convinced that this was a sign, I wasted away my time on the couch, immersed in chess books and lost in my own pretty world. Every day, I'd go back to that attic, spending hours at a time sitting near the board and basking in the nostalgia of it all.

It was a startling moment when I finally saw it. The sequence that would give me the victory. All at the same time, it hit me. The overwhelming feeling of relief, happiness, sadness, loneliness, grief. I looked sadly at the board, where the pieces looked back at me with empty expressions.

The last few days went by in a blur. I delayed making moves as long as I could, sometimes avoiding the attic for days on end. Eventually, though, I'd always find myself climbing the steps of the ladder, and mindlessly moving the pieces that would eventually win me the game.

One day, it happened. The familiar sight of the board greeted me once again, but it was different. The memories had left, and so had the warmth that the chessboard had always granted me. So when I saw the white king lying in the middle of the board, unmoving, I wept. I cried until I couldn't cry anymore. He had resigned, he had given up. Finally, after more than a decade, I had managed to win.

A gentle hand on my shoulder jolted me out of my anguish. It was my mom, dressed in all black, looking at me with an expression of both immense sorrow and of a vast resilience. “It’s time to go,” she said softly. Wordlessly, I followed her.

As I closed the door, I looked back at the chessboard one more time.

*Thank you, Grandfather, for one last memory.*