

King's
GAMBIT

A Son, A Father, and the
World's Most Dangerous Game

Bestselling author of *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* and *Wings of Madness*

PAUL HOFFMAN

King's Gambit

A SON, A FATHER, AND THE WORLD'S MOST DANGEROUS GAME

Paul Hoffman



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“All I want to do, ever, is play chess.”

—BOBBY FISCHER

“No chess grandmaster is normal; they only differ in the extent of their madness.”

—VICTOR KORCHNOI

AFTER MY PARENTS SEPARATED IN 1968, WHEN I WAS TWELVE, I lived a kind of double life. Until I went to college, I usually spent weekdays with my mother in Westport, Connecticut, a quiet, Cheeveresque suburb an hour’s train ride from New York City, and weekends with my father in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village. My classmates in Westport were jealous of my regular trips to the city. Their dads were doctors and lawyers and advertising executives who came home every evening for dinner. My father was a James Joyce devotee who wrote celebrity profiles under female pseudonyms for movie magazines and never ate a single meal in his apartment. He was also a poker player, a billiards and Ping-Pong hustler, a three-card monte shill, and an erudite part-time literature professor at the New School for Social Research, whose specialty was what he proudly called “the grotesque and perverse” in twentieth-century American and Anglo-Irish fiction. He ate breakfast, lunch, and dinner in the Village Den, Joe’s Dinette, the White Horse and Cedar Taverns, and other watering holes that were central to bohemian culture in the late 1960s, and he took me along. A few of my dad’s friends smoked dope in front of their children and swapped wives. My high school buddies in Connecticut who didn’t know me well imagined that I was rocking out at the Bottom Line and getting high at poetry readings, but in truth I never saw a single band, did drugs, or heard Patti Smith speak verse. Instead I spent my weekends playing chess.

Although I had learned how to move the pieces when I was five, I only became fully immersed in the game when my parents’ marriage was falling apart: chess offered a tidy black-and-white sanctuary from the turmoil in the rest of my life. The Village was a chess mecca, with its many chess cafés and clubs, and my father lived only a ten-minute walk from its epicenter, Washington Square Park. My dad accompanied me to these places and, when he wasn’t watching me play, passed the time reading novels and preparing his New School lectures. In the southwest corner of the park stood nineteen stone chess tables; these were occupied by all breeds of chess addict, from complete beginners who set the queen up on the wrong square to world-class players eager to demonstrate their command of double-rook endings and the Nimzo-Indian Defense. In those days the park didn’t have a curfew, and people played chess at all hours. Cops on horseback gathered near the tables, and on slow nights, when they weren’t breaking up couples having sex or escorting acid freaks to St. Vincent’s Hospital, they’d look down from their high mounts and critique the moves on the boards—a time-honored tradition in chess known as *kibitzing*. When it was cold or raining, the park habitués retreated to three smoky chess

known as *riding*. When it was cold or raining, the park habitues retreated to three smoky chess parlors on Thompson and Sullivan, where they rented boards for pennies an hour to continue their games.

One autumn evening in the early 1970s, my dad and I ended up in the chess shop owned by Nicholas Rossolimo, a Russian émigré who had been the champion of France in 1948 and had gone on in the 1950s to compete successfully in the United States. Rossolimo was a grandmaster—an exalted ranking in chess that is exceeded only by the title of world champion. There were just ninety grandmasters in 1970, one-third of whom lived in the Soviet Union. Being a grandmaster in America was rare enough, but even within this exclusive club Rossolimo had the special distinction of being immortalized in the chess literature for the “Rossolimo Variation,” a particular sequence of moves characterized by an early light-squared bishop sortie by White.

Very few grandmasters are able to earn a living on the tournament circuit, though, and by 1970, when Rossolimo turned sixty, his championship days were long behind him. He drove a yellow cab, gave the occasional chess lesson, and babysat the woodpushers in his small chess salon. Rossolimo was also an old-school romantic whose pursuit of beauty at the chessboard sometimes blinded him to the impending brutality of his opponent’s provocations. He was like the dreamy architecture student who sprains his ankle in a huge pothole in the sidewalk because his gaze is fixed on the gargoyles and cornices above.

On the evening of our visit, my father and I were greeted by the smell of garlic. Rossolimo was steaming a large pot of mussels on a hot plate balanced atop a wooden chessboard. My father and I stepped over a broken bottle in the entranceway and took our places at another board. Rossolimo was happy to see us—we were the only people there. He motioned to our board with an expansive gesture and urged us to play. My father declined, explaining that I was too good. Rossolimo laughed.

We watched him uncork a bottle of white, pour three glasses, and place one in front of each of us. I was fourteen or fifteen, and no one had ever offered me this much wine before. Had he failed to notice, I wondered, that I was conspicuously underage? Perhaps serving liquor to minors was a European custom. My father, who avoided alcohol because it aggravated his stomach ulcers, pretended to drink. Rossolimo gulped down half of his glass. I raised mine, clinked it against my father’s, and sampled it cautiously. I announced that the wine was great. My father looked uneasy, but I knew he wouldn’t spoil our bonding moment with the grandmaster by objecting to my drinking.

Rossolimo told my father that I was a fine boy and he proposed playing me a game. My dad was afraid he was going to charge us, but Rossolimo waived his customary fee and told us we were his friends and drinking companions. He turned off the hot plate and scooped the mussels into a wooden salad bowl. They were shriveled and overcooked but he didn’t seem to notice.

I raised my glass to Rossolimo’s and offered a toast to the generosity of our host and the quality of the wine. My father watched helplessly as I took another sip. In fact, it tasted terrible, and I considered dumping a little out of my glass under the chess table so that it would look as if I’d consumed more than a tablespoon.

Rossolimo told me to take White and challenged me to show how good I was. After two moves apiece I found that we had stumbled into the precise position in which I could employ the Rossolimo Variation against *him*. Charmed by my youthful cheekiness in making him face his own patented weapon, the grandmaster complimented me on conving the best

As is typical in many lines of the Rossolimo Variation, I exchanged the light-squared bishop for a knight in a way that forced him to double his pawns, creating a structural weakness in which one of his foot soldiers blocked a comrade. Doubled pawns are not necessarily a great hindrance; if, however, the combat continues for many moves to the stage known as the endgame, in which most of the pieces have been exchanged, the immobility of the rear pawn can prove decisive—it's like being a pawn down. Rossolimo didn't seem perturbed. Mostly, he seemed to be moving reflexively as he entertained my father with a long boozy rant about Sartre and Nabokov. I was antsy because all of his chattering was making it hard to concentrate. I thought for a while whenever it was my turn to move—five minutes here, ten minutes there—but he always rattled me by responding instantly. Did he not need to think because he had seen this all before and had an ingenious grandmasterly plan to turn the game in his favor? Or was he truly being careless and was the endgame, in which the doubled pawns would put him at an increasing disadvantage, sneaking up on him? The latter proved to be the case.

When Rossolimo finally paused in his monologue about literature to look at the board, he immediately saw that he had a losing position: because of his formal, Soviet-style chess schooling, he knew the fine points of this kind of endgame infinitely better than I did. Rather than face the ignominy of a protracted defeat, he abruptly picked up his king and dropped it, crown first, into the bowl of garlicky broth. Mussel juice splattered across the table. Then he pushed the chess pieces into a heap in the center of the board before I had a chance to enjoy the final position. Glancing at his watch, he stood up, berated us for staying past the closing time, and ushered us out the door.

I was certainly pleased that I had defeated a chess legend, but I wasn't impudent about it. I don't think I even said a word to my dad. I knew that heavy drinking had impaired Rossolimo's play. I had never been close to drunk myself; indeed I had never taken more than the few sips of wine that I'd had that evening. But I had understood how disorienting alcohol could be from movies like *Dumbo*, in which the little elephant goes on a long hallucinatory bender, and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, a favorite of my mother's because it made her marriage seem comparatively happy.

Even though I knew that Rossolimo had effectively defeated himself, my father made sure that I knew: he informed me that Rossolimo had consumed five bottles of wine during the course of the evening. I argued that that was impossible, that he'd have been lying on the floor, that he'd had only two. My dad claimed that I had been too engrossed in the chessboard to notice what was happening. I found it unsettling that the game, which had started promisingly as a pleasant encounter over drinks, had degenerated into Rossolimo's kicking us out and my father's diminishing my victory.*

IN THE 1755 *DICTIONARY OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE*, SAMUEL JOHNSON defined chess as “a nice and abstruse game, in which two sets of puppets are moved in opposition to each other.” Had I known the words *abstruse* and *opposition* when I was small, I would have agreed with Johnson's naïve definition.¹ But as I plunged further into the New York chess scene as a teenager and encountered the likes of Rossolimo, I understood that the game was not an innocent recreation but rather a unique amalgam of art, science, and blood sport. I learned that passionate eruptions were common at the chessboard and hardly confined to alcoholic veterans. One of the mysteries of this ancient game is how mere puppets moving in opposition to each other have the capacity to stir up bizarre behavior in champions and amateurs alike.

DEFEAT IN CHESS IS ALWAYS PAINFUL. ROSSOLIMO WAS A SAINT COMPARED TO other wounded losers. William the Conqueror reportedly smashed a chessboard over the Prince of France. Pascal Charbonneau, the champion of Canada and my closest friend in the chess world, told me how a childhood contemporary broke all the furniture in a hotel room at a tournament and retired from chess.² The Spanish writer Fernando Arrabal once signaled his resignation with a theatricality that surpassed Rossolimo's. He grabbed his king, climbed up on the chess table, extended his arm horizontally, and dropped the king so that it bombed the board.³

When I was a spectator in 2003 at the annual chess tournament at the Foxwoods Casino, where 630 players were battling for a prize fund of \$93,500, I was nearly struck by a chess clock that an irate loser hurled in my direction. I'm sure I wasn't the intended target, but I had to duck, and the clock smashed into the wall behind my head and broke into pieces.

When a player gets violent, his wrath is often directed not at spectators or his opponent but at himself. One contemporary Russian grandmaster has been known to pick up the pointiest chess piece—usually the bishop or a knight with a particularly jagged mane, and stab his own head until it bleeds. Then he rushes out of the tournament hall only to return for the next round as if nothing untoward had happened. At one event, this grandmaster was among the tournament leaders who were playing on an elevated stage. When he lost a key game, he bloodied his face and then, in an extreme masochistic flourish, dove off the three-foot-high stage, belly-flopping onto the hard floor.

Such behavior is exceptional, but even stable personalities have trouble accepting defeat. Garry Kasparov, the thirteenth world champion, frequently storms off like a bull, shoving aside spectators who are in his path. Pascal can be withdrawn and sullen for hours. When I lose, I repeatedly remind myself that chess is only a game. Yet even that reminder doesn't stop me from replaying in my head not only the moves of the game where I went astray, but also all the other things in my life that have gone wrong.

Chess is apparently as hard on the body as it is on the mind. Researchers at Temple University found that a chess master expends as much energy at the board as a football player or a boxer and that blood pressure and breathing rates rise considerably during a game. "Chess is very unhealthy," explained Nigel Short, the top British player of the twentieth century, when I visited him in the Athenian apartment he shares with his Greek wife. Short was speaking from more than three decades of experience. During his world title bout with Kasparov in 1993, Short ate normally yet lost ten pounds—7.5 percent of his body weight—in just the first three games. "What could be more unnatural," Short said, "than sitting still for four or five hours while your heart is racing sometimes at 140 beats per minute? There's no outlet for all the stress. You can't punch the guy, kick a ball, or run laps." Illness during games is not uncommon. Even Kasparov himself, arguably the best player in the history of chess, has broken out with fever blisters in the heat of battle.

Most of the world's top players have strenuous exercise routines to balance their sedentary chess playing. Bobby Fischer worked out regularly long before it was fashionable, and Kasparov pumped iron, swam, and rowed as part of his chess training. "Your body has to be in top condition," Fischer said. "Your chess deteriorates as your body does. You can't separate mind from body."

~~YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE LOSING TO SUCCUMB TO THE TENSION OF THE~~ game. The pursuit of victory can also disturb your equilibrium. In March 2005, Pascal Charbonneau was playing a game in France against Petar Drenchev of Bulgaria. For more than a year the twenty-year-old Canadian champion had been in a slump, starting off strongly in tournaments and then faltering whenever he was close to earning the title of grandmaster. This game, he hoped, would be different. Pascal had White, which meant that he had the advantage of moving first. As he and Drenchev shook hands—the ritual that begins all chess encounters—and sat down at the board, Pascal sized up the twenty-seven-year-old Bulgarian. “I recall thinking,” he told me later, “he’s a sly little man. I’d better watch it.”

The beginning of a chess game is an elaborate dance, with each player contriving to steer the game into a situation that’s more familiar to him than to his opponent. White grabs Black’s arms and says, “Let’s tango!”

Black pulls away and says, “No, how about a waltz?”

“Too slow,” White says. “What about the foxtrot?”

“Too old,” counters Black. “I’ve forgotten the moves. How about something modern—like crunk?” Finally one of the players imposes his will on the other.

Pascal is known on the chess circuit as a wild, fast dancer, but against Drenchev he initially feigned interest in a slow waltz, the so-called Closed Sicilian, because he wanted to avoid the Bulgarian’s favorite Najdorf Sicilian. But on his fourth move the Canadian champion picked up the pace and started to transform the closed game into a wide-open frenetic mutual king hunt called the Dragon Sicilian—a not unwelcome development for Drenchev, who also liked the Dragon. (The opening is called the Sicilian because Black’s first move was originally favored by players on the island of Sicily, and it is a Dragon Sicilian because the chess masters who chose the name apparently convinced themselves, maybe after a few cocktails, that the Black pawn formation, which certainly had the potential to scorch the enemy, had the shape of a fabulous serpent as well.)

World-class players generally follow certain standard sequences of opening moves—like the Rossolimo Variation—until one of them forgets what has been previously played or purposefully varies with an intended improvement. In this encounter the two combatants quickly deviated from established play, although the position they reached had themes familiar to anyone who knew the Dragon. White responded with the so-called Yugoslav Attack and was pursuing Black’s monarch on the kingside, bombarding him with pawns and pieces, and Black was counterattacking on the queenside. The Black side of the Dragon is not for the timid; because Black moves second, he is often one tempo behind in the race for the king. To mix things up, Black sometimes employs a double-edged maneuver called an exchange sacrifice—giving up a rook for a knight. The rook is generally a much stronger piece than the knight, but Black initiates the trade in order to strip White’s king of a protective wall of pawns. Black is going for broke when he willingly parts with the powerful rook. He accepts a weaker army in return for an acceleration of his attack. If he doesn’t quickly checkmate White’s king, or restore the material balance by capturing a couple of loose pawns, the rook’s absence will eventually defeat him.

Pascal spent eight minutes on his fourteenth move trying to make sense of what would happen if Drenchev offered the exchange sacrifice. Caissa, the muse of chess, was kind that day, and the

Canadian had an inspiration seconds into his long think. He saw that he could respond with an unexpected sacrifice—or “sac” in chess lingo—of his own. He could boldly refuse to execute the offered rook, thereby giving up his own knight and effectively pardoning the rook for capturing it, and simply press ahead with his own all-out assault on Drenchev’s king. Pascal concluded that his attack would be so fast that he’d succeed in checkmating Drenchev long before his opponent could profit from the extra knight. To ignore the gift rook was a deliciously devilish idea, but there was an unfortunate problem: it was all fantasy unless the Bulgarian actually decided to sac the exchange. Pascal made a bishop move typical of the Dragon in the hope of enticing the sac, and then he sat back quietly, calmly, drawing on whatever acting ability he had to conceal his enthusiasm and deviousness. Two moves and less than half a minute later, Drenchev fell into the trap and grabbed the knight.

When Pascal refrained from immediately making the “obvious” rook capture, Drenchev looked uncomfortable. The Bulgarian knew from the hesitation that something was up. Pascal in fact was checking his analysis one last time before electing to spare the rook, and the longer he thought—albeit this happened in seconds, not minutes—the more Drenchev squirmed.

For Pascal’s part, he could not fully enjoy the success of his swindle because he was feeling increasingly queasy. “I had eaten a ton for breakfast,” he told me later. “I was completely stuffed.” He said that he hadn’t gotten much sleep because his girlfriend kept him up late playing Internet poker. And then he pointedly added: “My position in the game was much too exciting.”

As Pascal studied the chessboard, he became so nauseated that he had to stop thinking and just proceed as planned. He got up from the table. He knew he couldn’t make it to the restroom, so he rushed out a side door of the tournament hall and, with no one watching, vomited in the grass. Then he headed to the washroom, cleaned his face, and returned to the game. Fortunately his analysis was airtight. Drenchev also saw that checkmate was inevitable and testily resigned after only five more moves. The hour-long, twenty-two-move encounter was an exquisite miniature in a competition in which the games typically lasted four hours and at least forty moves. Drenchev dismissed the loss as a cheap trick and insisted he would have had the better position if he’d played differently at certain junctures. Pascal replayed the game on a chessboard in his mind. He tried the Bulgarian’s suggested improvements and saw immediately that they would have failed, but he kept the refutations to himself. “He was angry,” Pascal told me. “I didn’t want to antagonize him further.”

IN CHESS IT IS HARD TO HIDE FROM DEFEAT. WHEN YOUR CROQUET BALL mysteriously veers to one side, you can always look for pebbles in the grass. When his aces beat your kings, you can always blame the cards. But when your bishop is deflected, you cannot search for imperfections in the playing surface or lament the roll of the dice. Of course, there is a small element of luck in chess: I was lucky that Rossolimo was inebriated. I am fortunate if my opponent adopts the one opening I happened to cram the day before. But most players consider chess the consummate game of skill and therefore, rightly or wrongly, associate success at it with overall intelligence. That’s why losses are so hard. No good player ever readily admits to himself that he was defeated because of his opponent’s brilliance.

That may be why there is an enormous amount of rationalization among chess players. The loss of a chess game has been so often attributed to illness that more than one master has joked that he’s never defeated a healthy opponent.⁴ After an unwelcome defeat, the loser may blurt out an explanation: “I was too tired.” “The tournament hall was too hot.” “Camelovich’s cough was distracting.” —but

— I was too tired, — The tournament hall was too hot, — Camerovich's cough was distracting —but he is sane, he knows in his heart that this is just an excuse. Nothing can belie the annoying reality that even a truly clever tactical strike, to which there is no adequate response, could not have been launched if the loser had played differently at an earlier point. (Pascal's mating attack, for instance, would not have succeeded if Drenchev had restrained his rook from capturing Pascal's knight.) This knowledge is foremost in the loser's mind. He cannot rest until he discovers where he went awry. To this end, he goes over the game repeatedly, on the board or in his head, mulling over lost opportunities. Chess players live in an alternative world of what might have been.

There's also no way to disown the damage that you and your opponent deliberately do to each other. You cannot apologize when your bishop skewers his queen, and he offers no excuses when his pieces descend on your king. And when you announce "Checkmate!" any effort to sound soft and sweet goes unnoticed. He still detects malice and smugness in your voice—and most of the time it's not his imagination. Chess is a zero-sum game.

And yet I don't know of any pastime that is more addictive. Because chess is so hard on the ego and stressful on the body, it is surprising that players, particularly those who lose disproportionately, don't simply abandon it. A few of them do, but many more try to make up for their losses by immersing themselves further in its intricacies and lore—hoping, ultimately, to conquer the game. At various points in history, clerics of different faiths have banned chess because they believed it to be so consuming that men who took it up might neglect spiritual and family life. (The pope, cardinals, and bishops defied the prohibition by playing secretly among themselves.) More recently, Afghanistan under the Taliban and Iran under Ayatollah Khomeini outlawed chess for much the same reason.⁵

MANY PLAYERS CLAIM TO HAVE BEEN SEDUCED BY THE INHERENT BEAUTY of the game, and chess masters sometimes describe themselves as artists. They regard the chessboard as a painter views a blank canvas or a sculptor a lump of clay. Chess may be esoteric—you need to have extensive experience with it to appreciate it fully—but that doesn't make it any less of an art.⁶ There is mesmerizing splendor to a well-played game, and the aesthetic satisfaction is different depending upon the style of the player. For example, the games of Anatoly Karpov, Kasparov's archrival and predecessor as world champion, have a certain classic elegance. Karpov's graceful coordination of pieces and pawns is as pleasing to the eye as is the formal geometry of the Parthenon. Pascal's victory over Drenchev has a wittier, more contemporary form of beauty. Kasparov's games, in which he so decisively overpowers his opponents, have the terrifying appeal of a tornado or a tidal wave.

In practice the possibilities in chess are boundless, although theoretically it is a mathematically finite activity—there are, for example, 988 million positions that can be reached after four moves for White and four for Black. In any given position one move is undoubtedly best, although in most positions we as a species lack the mental resources (as well as, for the moment, the computer resources) to determine that move. If we knew with certainty the best move, there'd be no point in playing. The game would be as silly and mindless as tick-tack-toe.

Without being able to calculate the best move, you develop plans and strategies and play accordingly. That's the fun of the game. Every grandmaster agrees, for example, that it's important to control the central squares, but how to achieve this is a matter of long debate. Some players think it's best to immediately occupy the central squares with pawns. Others hold back the pawns and bring

best to immediately occupy the central squares with pawns. Queens hold back the pawns and bring bishops and knights to bear on those squares. The intellectual joy of chess is that you can have a considered opinion about which plan is best and stand behind that opinion by trying the plan in actual games.

Chess also endures: the moves of a good game from a top-level tournament are recorded for posterity and examined by future generations of players. Of all board and card games, only chess has this kind of immortality. Instructional bridge books often show hands played by famous champions, but the culture of bridge does not require all students of the game to know these particular hands. But every devoted chess player has studied the games of the 1972 World Championship, in which Bobby Fischer defeated Boris Spassky. And every conscientious chess student has played move by move through the nineteenth-century attacking masterpieces known as the Immortal Game and the Evergreen Game, whose very names capture their transcendent nature. The creation of lasting beauty makes those who have mastered the sixty-four squares believe that chess is more than a game. When grandmaster plays a game, he is doing much more than engaging in a cerebral battle with a human opponent. He is contributing to the evolution of chess technique.

And yet aesthetic considerations alone cannot explain why men and women become obsessed with chess. The thrill of competition, the euphoria of victory, is what really keeps players returning to the board. Its warlike struggle awakens the minds and bodies of people who may be anesthetized to other aspects of their worlds. "Chess is like life," Spassky once proclaimed. Fischer was more extreme: "Chess is life."

Perhaps unsurprisingly, chess has traditionally been a male domain. Only 3 percent of U.S. tournament competitors are female. A study described in the *Journal of Personality and Individual Differences*, which engendered much snickering in the popular press, found that the testosterone level of male masters (and 99 percent of all U.S. masters are male) rose in anticipation of playing a game and shot up again as they mated their opponents. The researchers measured depressed testosterone levels in men who were on the receiving end of a mating attack. I'm sure I'm not the only player who was disquieted by these findings. I delved further into the scientific literature and was relieved to learn that researchers also expected testosterone spikes in male medical students waiting in line at a graduation ceremony to receive their MD degrees, CEOs calling their brokers to cash in stock options and home run hitters rounding third base. It seems that those of us who are endowed with XY chromosomes are simple creatures. Anything that gives us pleasure and confirms our mastery of the world elevates our testosterone.

ALTHOUGH CHESS IS REGARDED AS A GAME OF GREAT INTELLIGENCE, AT THE same time it is often associated with insanity and obsession. Every chess club, it seems, has at least one resident who left his wife or job to play the game all day. The only two Americans to reach the pinnacle of chess, Paul Morphy and Bobby Fischer, suffered from paranoia. Morphy withdrew from tournament chess at the peak of his career, in 1859, and spent the next two decades worrying that relatives and friends wanted to kill him. Fischer, whose mother was Jewish,⁷ believed there was a worldwide Jewish conspiracy to destroy him and he praised 9/11 because of the number of Jews who were killed in the World Trade Center. He reportedly had the fillings in his teeth removed because he feared that they were capable of receiving radio messages beamed by his enemies.

In addition, an entire body of literature, psychoanalytic and fictional, from Ernest Jones's "The

Problem of Paul Morphy” to Stefan Zweig’s *Chess Story*⁸ and Vladimir Nabokov’s *The Defense*,⁹ depicts the game as an incubator for psychopathology. Of the fictional works, Nabokov’s 1930 novel is the most well-known portrayal of the chess player as madman. Nabokov’s story reached a wide audience in 2001 with the release of the film *The Luzhin Defense*, starring John Turturro as Luzhin and Emily Watson as his fiancée. Luzhin’s chess teacher, Valentinov, is thoroughly evil. He is the most important figure in the young player’s life, but leaves his protégé when he thinks Luzhin doesn’t have what it takes to become world champion. Years later, when Luzhin is playing against the Italian maestro Turati for the World Championship, Valentinov appears in the tournament hall to rattle his former pupil’s concentration and sabotage his chances. Luzhin has a breakdown at the board and abandons the game in the middle, but in his delirium sees how he can finish Turati off with an improbable rook move. Luzhin’s doctor tells his fiancée that he must never be allowed to resume the game or play any chess whatsoever. Valentinov then kidnaps Luzhin so that he can complete the game with Turati, but Luzhin escapes. He decides to make one final move in what he sees as the chess game of life, exiting the world by leaping from a high-story window.¹⁰

The movie engendered much fretting in the chess press. “Chess players once again have to come to terms with chess being depicted on screen as the mental equivalent of a dangerous drug,” *British Chess Magazine* opined. And yet the magazine decried the “alarming number” of real-life players who had killed themselves by jumping from windows or bridges: the Estonian grandmaster Lembit Oll, in 1999; the Latvian international master Alvis Vitolins, in 1997; the Armenian international master Karen Grigorian, in 1989; and the Russian international master Georgy Ilivitsky, that same year.

The first player to kill himself in this unusual manner was the German master Curt von Bardeleben, who had been on the receiving end of one of the most famous mating attacks in chess history, orchestrated by world champion Wilhelm Steinitz at Hastings in 1895. Von Bardeleben was sickened by the position of his exposed king that he disappeared from the tournament hall before Steinitz had a chance to finish him off with a beautiful checkmate in ten forced moves. Von Bardeleben’s suicide in 1924 undoubtedly influenced Nabokov, who—in the kind of coincidence that befell his fictional characters—rented an apartment from one of von Bardeleben’s relatives, a one-legged general “solely occupied in working out his family tree.”

Self-defenestration is now engrained in the mythology of chess. The latest fatality, in June 2006 was Oxford-bound Jessie Gilbert, a nineteen-year-old talent on the English women’s chess team whose father faced charges of sexually abusing her and other young women. During a tournament in Pardubice, Czech Republic, Gilbert plunged from the eighth-floor window of her hotel room.¹¹ (In December 2006, a jury acquitted Gilbert’s father of all charges.)

In a remarkable essay called “The Jump,” in the magazine *New in Chess*, Dutch grandmaster Genna Sosonko was forthright about the extent of psychosis and suicide in modern chess. “In no other type of sport,” he wrote,

does one encounter such a large number of peculiar people, engrossed in themselves and living in their own world.... Any chess game contains a wide range of emotions, with joys and vexations, great and small. This accompanies any type of creativity. But whereas in painting or literature, for example, it is possible to cross out, rewrite or change, in chess a movement of the fingers communicated by the mind is final: often it can be repaired only

movement of the fingers, communicated by the mind, is final. Once it can be repaired only by sweeping the wooden pieces off the board. Or you can castigate yourself, by hitting your head against a wall, or by rolling around on the floor, as one modern grandmaster does after losing a game.

Sosonko observed that it is the rare game in which a player steadily accumulates advantages and turns them into a full point. “But even in this case,” he wrote, “a player who is honest with himself knows what he was afraid of at a certain moment, what he was hoping for, and how he flinched after miscalculating in a variation.” More commonly a grandmaster game is a seesaw battle, proceeding often along the following lines: “slightly worse, clearly worse, a mistake by the opponent, joy, winning chances, time trouble, missed opportunities, draw.” The mood swings rattle a player’s “inner mental core...which can lead to difficult, far-reaching consequences, especially if this core is shaky or diseased.” Were people with “shaky unstable psyches” especially attracted to the game, Sosonko wondered, or was the game itself—what Nabokov called this “complex, delightful and useless art”—inherently destabilizing? In Luzhin’s case, the mental fatigue of tournament play may ultimately have broken him, but it was a childhood undermined by a harsh, disapproving, adulterous father and a withdrawn, suicidal mother that set the stage.

Sosonko noted that two of the jumpers, Alvis Vitolins and Karen Grigorian, were much better at speed chess than they were at long tournament games. “The time allotted for play allows one to sink into thought, generating doubts and uncertainty. And for them—with their sharp falls in mood and excitable nervous system—this served only as a stimulus for mistakes and oversights. Blitz [chess], however, demands instant reactions; psychology and self-reproach retreat into the background, and there remains only that which is obvious in them—great natural talent.”

Many chess professionals wish that Sosonko, and even Nabokov, had kept their thoughts about chess insanity to themselves. They fear that “The Jump” and *The Defense* harm the game by contributing to the stereotype of chess masters as eccentrics and social misfits. Most grandmasters, they argue, are just regular guys like Vladimir Kramnik, Kasparov’s successor as world champion, who is considered normal, bland, and unexceptional in every way except his chess (and even his chess seems a bit dull, with some pundits claiming that he beat Kasparov by boring him to death), and Boris Spassky, who went to the opera and the finest restaurants in Reykjavík between games during the 1978 championship while Bobby Fischer was closeted alone in his hotel room, huddled over a chessboard.

Nigel Short is one of the few grandmasters who, like Sosonko, has publicly acknowledged the extent of the insanity in their profession. In a review of *The Luzhin Defense*, called “Chess Can Seriously Damage Your Health,” Short wrote that he found the movie all too real:

The intermittently institutionalized Mexican champion Carlos Torre once described the strains of top-level chess as “maddening.” The ten time British champion, Dr. Jonathan Penrose (who is, fortunately, far from batty), collapsed during an Olympiad. And only a fortnight ago Vladimir Bagirov dropped dead, practically at the board.

Short also could not resist commenting on the otherworldliness of his fellow players. The review continued:

So awkward, clumsy, poorly dressed and inarticulate is our dear Luzhin that it is a wonder that any woman should find him attractive, and yet a romance of sorts, and even a marriage eventually occur.... I cannot help being reminded, wickered though that may be, of one or two of my colleagues, who against all odds somehow enter into matrimony. Literally being unable to knot a tie or tie a shoelace is apparently no impediment to conjoining with the fairer sex.

I believe that madness is rampant in championship chess, particularly in the tier of players just below the top. After all, to reach the pinnacle of chess requires a certain psychological stability. The world's top grandmasters are successful in part because they are able to recover from devastating losses.¹² Every player, even Garry Kasparov, collapses in the odd game, but he has the inner strength to pull himself together and not let defeat unduly interfere with his subsequent concentration and performance. A lack of confidence can stop players who are close to the summit from making the final ascent. They may devote even more time to the game than the champions (and therefore be more isolated from the rest of the world) because they think that an extra fifteenth hour of study a day will get them to the summit. On the other hand, if their self-worth depends solely on their chess results, they may not recover if they stumble and lose a random game.

But is the pastime bad for the players, or are certain players bad for the pastime? Former British champion Bill Hartston once observed, "Chess doesn't drive people mad. It keeps mad people sane." Morphy and Fischer's behavior became truly bizarre only after they retired from the game. Their fate should not stop anyone from playing chess any more than Van Gogh's hacking off his ear should deter people from becoming painters or Mark McGwire's alleged steroid use should discourage children from playing baseball.

Certainly, those who avoid chess are depriving themselves of something sublime. Siegbert Tarrasch, a nineteenth-century champion, famously put it this way: "I have always a slight feeling of pity for the man who has no knowledge of chess, just as I would pity the man who has remained ignorant of love. Chess, like love, like music, has the power to make men happy." Or, as Short said, "The most important thing for anyone close to me to understand is how much enjoyment I get from playing chess and not ever to think of it as some little game to make money at."

THE CHESS WORLD IS LIKE A HIERARCHICAL MEDIEVAL KINGDOM, WHERE TITLES and rank are all-important: as the British grandmaster Raymond Keene observed, when three chess players pass through a swinging door, they do so in descending order of rating. I'm not a professional chess player. I'm not even a master. I'm an amateur—affectionately if derisively known as a woodpusher—but for an amateur I'm not bad. Of the eighty thousand members of the United States Chess Federation, my numerical rating of 1915, based on my tournament results, puts me in the top 95 percent of all U.S. competitors. I am what's called a Class A player—the classes begin at J, which corresponds to a rating between 0 and 200—and after one particularly good tournament I was fortunate to have my rating cross the 2000 threshold into the Expert category.¹³

A rating of 2200 makes you a master. The title international master, or IM, is granted by FIDE (pronounced fee-day), the French acronym for Fédération Internationale des échecs, the international chess federation, and usually corresponds to a comparable rating of 2400 and a certain level of performance called a *norm* in three international tournaments. A grandmaster or GM generally has

performance, earned a norm, in three international tournaments. A grandmaster, or GM, generally has a rating above 2500 and has achieved three higher norms. There are just over one thousand grandmasters in the world. When Pascal Charbonneau and I became friends during the summer of 2004, he was rated 2474 and had the title international master and two-thirds of the norms required for the grandmaster title. Bobby Fischer, at his peak, was rated 2785. Garry Kasparov achieved the highest rating ever, 2851, in July 1999. God is said to be rated 3000.

This means that I'm like the guy at the karaoke club who everyone says has a good voice because professional musicians never visit. If you gathered five hundred random people off the street and organized a chess competition, I'd be victorious unless I was extremely unlucky and a serious player on a rare break from his chess studies happened to be walking down the avenue. And yet the difference between my command of the game as an A player and Kasparov's, or even Pascal's, is almost unfathomable. They can work magic on the chessboard while I'm still struggling to hold the wand, let alone wave it to make rabbits appear.

I BECAME DISILLUSIONED WITH CHESS IN HIGH SCHOOL AND STOPPED PLAYING altogether for two decades after college. But then in the year 2000, when I was forty-three, I experienced a series of personal and professional crises that were as bewildering and unnerving as my parents' separation had been three decades before. The crises strained my own marriage (after unsustainable rallies, Ann and I eventually split up, as I was writing this book) and precipitated a career change. But they also brought me unexpectedly back to chess.

After ten good years in the magazine business, first as the editor in chief of the science monthly *Discover* and then in various executive positions at the Walt Disney Company, I moved to Chicago in the summer of 1997 to become the publisher of Encyclopaedia Britannica. My charge was to reinvent the esteemed if crusty 229-year-old publication that was faltering in the Internet age. I was hired by Britannica's rumpled new owner, Jacqui Safra, a reputed gazillionaire in his fifties whose family, it was jokingly said, had invented banking during the Ottoman Empire. My interview with Safra was disconcertingly short. He looked over my résumé and asked only two questions. "You say you like mathematics," he said. "Then tell me, what is thirteen times thirteen?" Of course I immediately answered 169. "You say you like chess," he continued. "Well, what's the shortest possible mate?" Two moves, I said without hesitation, and I proceeded to describe the so-called Fool's Mate.¹⁴ The answers to these simple questions won me the complex job of managing hundreds of academics around the world who were revising and updating the forty-four million words in Britannica.

When I moved to Chicago with Ann, a children's book author, we both thought that Britannica might be the ideal job for me. I had spent my editing career making scientific ideas hip and accessible without robbing them of nuance and subtlety. I could now do that at Britannica with a much wider range of academic subjects. I am a bookworm at heart, and I enjoyed reading the entries in older editions of Britannica, in which Trotsky wrote about Lenin, and Houdini detailed the history of magic. I also liked to imagine the conversations between the world-famous authors and their anonymous schoolmarmish editors. Albert Einstein once wrote the entry on physics ("Professor Einstein, let me review when it is appropriate to use the pluperfect tense"), and Stephen Hawking also contributed to Britannica ("Splitting atoms may be possible, Dr. Hawking, but not splitting infinitives").

The Britannica offices were as fusty as the see-through Indian paper on which the old editions were printed, and the company clearly needed a new editorial and business model. Internet users of

Britannica expected current information, and the entries were conspicuously out of date; revisions had lagged because the company no longer enjoyed a strong revenue stream from the door-to-door salesmen who had convinced families that their children's ticket to success was a thirty-two-volume set of encyclopedias. Before Safra arrived with his checkbook, one editor might spend hours updating an obscure entry in mathematics while embarrassing howlers in a widely read entry on telecommunications ("Cable television is an experiment," I think it said) remained uncorrected.

Unfortunately, although Safra resembled the ideal boss—an absentee owner who paid me much more than *my Discover* salary—he did not leave me alone to supervise the staff and set a new direction. From locations in New York, Chicago, Paris, Switzerland, and the Napa Valley, he reversed my big decisions and micromanaged my small ones. Like the president's press secretary, I sometimes had to put a rosy spin on directives that I didn't agree with.

The job had its amusing moments, and Safra himself, who was Woody Allen's chief financial backer before their relationship ended in society-page litigation, was not uninteresting. He had small parts in three movies (under the pseudonym J. E. Beaucaire, the name of a character in a Bob Hope film). Safra was quirkily paternalistic: before letting me get into a cab alone, he'd eyeball the driver size up whether he looked like the sort who'd crash the car or otherwise do me harm. And then Safra would call me later to make sure that I had reached my destination unscathed. (Personal security was an issue in his family: his uncle Edmond famously died when a male nurse set fire to Edmond's home in Monaco.) And yet, despite Jacqui Safra's concern for me, I found him largely unavailable. Sometimes Safra established specific dates for us to get together but didn't reveal where we were going to meet. At the last moment I might end up walking a few blocks to see him in a Chicago hotel or racing to O'Hare to fly all the way to Switzerland to join him for breakfast. Once I was summoned to Paris on short notice, where Safra then left a terse message at the front desk of my five-star hotel announcing that pressing business prevented our meeting. I was subsequently awakened in my gold-gilded hotel room at 2:30 A.M. by the phone. It was Safra calling from somewhere nearby. For more than an hour, we reviewed the state of Britannica. The next day, without ever meeting him in person, returned, utterly exhausted, to Chicago.

Another time he scheduled a two-day retreat at his Napa vineyard (whose mansion was used in the soap opera *Falcon Crest*) with me and a man who ran many of his businesses; we were supposed to spend the weekend brainstorming about the role of the encyclopedia in the digital age. Again Safra did not show up, but he also did not cancel the chef he'd hired for the weekend. Instead of exploring Napa's epicurean restaurants, we were largely confined to the mansion, like newlyweds on a romantic getaway, eating truffle omelets and kumquat mousse.

My visits to Britannica's operations in Eastern Europe, London, Tokyo, and Rio de Janeiro were the best part of the job. I spent vodka-infused evenings in Budapest and Poznan, Poland, working with academics who were translating the encyclopedia into Hungarian and Polish. But, in the fall of 1998, I cut back on business travel because Ann, to our delight, was pregnant. The job in Chicago became increasingly grim, and I cloistered myself in my Michigan Avenue office, stymied in my attempts to make decisions.

That winter I became very sick for the first time in my life. On a frigid Chicago night, I ended up in the emergency room at Northwestern Hospital with a 104.5 degree fever and a hacking cough, waiting to see a doctor as a triage team tried to save the frostbitten toes of a California businessman who'd been walking around outside in sandals in sub-zero temperatures. The chief doctor sent me

who'd been walking around outside in sandals in sub-zero temperatures. The chief doctor sent me home at 3:00 A.M. with antibiotics and codeine cough syrup. I quarantined myself in one room of our apartment for two weeks while Ann, who was in her second trimester, slipped food and *The New York Times* around the door.

One morning I woke up to discover that half of my right hand, including my pinkie and ring finger, was numb and tingling. During the night, I had pinched the ulnar nerve in my elbow (the nerve is relatively unprotected and is responsible for the funny-bone sensation when you whack your elbow). Normally the discomfort would have caused me to straighten my arm in my sleep before the nerve was damaged, but I was apparently too disoriented by my fever to react. People who pass out in a drunken stupor with their arm bent often pinch their ulnar nerve. Hence the condition has been called Saturday Night Syndrome or Drunken Man's Elbow.

First I was given steroids for a few weeks to shrink the inflamed nerve, but I could only take so many of them before my immune system would be weakened and my whole body would puff up. The doctor switched me to megadoses of ibuprofen. Although I had taken ibuprofen many times in my life without side effects, this time I had a severe allergic reaction—my right cheek and particularly the right side of my upper lip blew up as if I had taken a hard punch. I also got hives on my chest and a half-dollar-size welt on my forearm. To top it off, I was nauseated. The doctor took me off the ibuprofen, and when my face recovered after more steroids, I tried another anti-inflammatory drug for my elbow called Relafen. Again my face inflated, a large welt appeared on my bicep, and I vomited. The last drug he tried was Naproxen, and I had the same adverse reaction. He discontinued all medications and I entered the medical Twilight Zone.

Every few weeks, my lip and cheek ballooned for no apparent reason. First I'd become slightly queasy, usually at about 4:00 A.M., and my cheek would feel taut. I'd take a super antihistamine and, I was fortunate, it would arrest the tautness. But if my cheek began to bulge and my lip tingled, I'd take a strong dose of steroids. If that didn't work, I'd race, EpiPen in hand, to the hospital so that the swelling could be monitored to make sure that it didn't extend to my throat or escalate into anaphylactic shock. I was warned to always stay within a few miles of an emergency room and not to fly.

A leading allergist at Northwestern took an interest in my condition because another patient of hers, a district attorney, had the same peculiar swellings, and it was inconvenient, to say the least, if his face blew up while addressing the jury. She pricked my skin with a standard panel of likely allergens—grasses, elm, oak, ragweed, cockroaches, dust mites, mold, mouse dander, and rat scat—and found that I tolerated everything. The diagnosis: *idiopathic angioedema*. At first I was relieved: if my condition had a name, maybe medical science had a cure. I soon learned, though, that *idiopathic* meant "of unknown cause." I didn't need a doctor to tell me that I had swollen skin (*angioedema*) of undetermined origin.

So now I had a deadened hand, a bloated face, unsightly hives, frequent nausea, and a chronic cough. I also developed cough-induced asthma, which meant that the mildest cold went straight to my chest, and I needed a steroid inhaler to breathe normally. I began to feel as though I were losing my mind. It wasn't simply that I felt so terrible; it was that the doctors had no idea what was responsible, which made *me* feel somehow responsible. In my darker moments, I thought that perhaps I should look for a hospice while I still had the mental faculties to judge the quality of care.

At work I stopped venturing out of my office for lunch, because I was afraid someone would corral me in the elevator and demand to know why he couldn't proceed with employing new people that I had given him permission to hire a month before. One of the benefits of my job was the private bathroom that came with my corner office. It was a good place to hide—and check on my hives.

It was during these lunch hours, barricaded in my office, that I began surfing the Web and discovered the Internet Chess Club, or ICC, where people with pseudonyms like Monster Pawn and Nerd Man played speed chess against each other online. At first I had trouble rapidly manipulating the mouse with my numb right hand, but soon I learned. I immediately rediscovered the game's magic. Not only did ICC offer an hour or two of welcome escape from my problems, but I could see myself improving from one day to the next. My chess victories were evidence, I told myself, that my mental faculties were not, in fact, deteriorating. I could call off the hospice search.

My early morning jog along Lake Michigan took me past a congregation of granite chess tables where people were always playing. I had gone by these tables dozens of times without pausing or slowing down. But a week after I discovered ICC, I stopped to watch. An elderly Russian challenged me, and after swindling him out of a rook—I had forgotten how fun it was to set a trap and snare someone—I was hooked again.

Ann gave birth to Alexander on May 20, 1999. Her timing was perfect: she went into labor two-thirds of the way through a marathon session of the *Godfather* trilogy, before we had to watch the disappointing finale. Alex, on the other hand, was three weeks late, and a big baby. His hands were so large that the pediatrician said that either he'd be a piano player or run the Teamsters. The arrival of this nine-pound-two-ounce squirmy little guy was an incredible bright spot in our lives: I called him ProSobee, after the only kind of formula he could digest, and Alexander the Greatest.

Unfortunately, everything else in our lives continued to be very difficult. Ann contracted childbirth fever, from an infection acquired during delivery, which killed women in the age before antibiotics. We returned to the hospital. I was scared. Ann had gone into convulsions and her lips had turned white. Fortunately the doctors were able to reduce her fever, but she then had an allergic reaction to the antibiotics they administered intravenously.

My job was now completely untenable: the fickleness of Britannica seemed unimportant compared to raising a child and recovering my health. I could no longer face meeting with my staff. I didn't want to contradict myself one more time and pretend that all the company's changes in direction were savvy. On the other hand, it was hardly a propitious moment to look for a new job: I had a tiny baby, a wife who was just regaining her strength, and a mysterious health condition that made my face look as if I'd been pummeled. Ann thought that I should just quit and become a full-time writer: my biography of the eccentric peripatetic mathematician Paul Erdős, called *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers*, had been published the year before and reached the number two spot on England's best-seller list, sandwiched between a pair of racy reminiscences of Princess Diana. Ann's idea was appealing, but I had reservations about breaking my contract with Britannica and derailing my career as a publishing executive. I hoped that one day Safra would wake up and see the wisdom of leaving me alone to rescue his company. I also wondered if his seemingly haphazard actions might be part of an arcane business strategy that somehow eluded me.

To Ann's chagrin, I started entering the occasional chess tournament in Chicago. She was bothered by the stories of how chess had absorbed me in my youth, and it was a game whose appeal

she did not understand. I needed to play chess to engage my mind, which was otherwise atrophying a Britannica. I wanted to see how long it would take me to recover my college playing strength, and of course I wanted to surpass it. I knew that my brain cells were too ossified for me to become a champion. I did not expect to earn a certain title or win a specific tournament. I just wanted to play a really great game against a formidable adversary. A tournament game can take five hours, and unless you are constantly vigilant, you can throw away a winning position that you've painstakingly built up over the afternoon with a single ill-considered move.

Most intellectual and professional pursuits—academics; my career in publishing, writing, and television; other games that I have taken up—have come easily to me. I was the valedictorian of Staples High School in Westport, a summa cum laude graduate of Harvard College, and the editor in chief of a national magazine at the age of thirty. I performed mathematical paper-folding tricks on *David Letterman*, and spent an entire hour on *Oprah* talking not about my dysfunctional childhood but about the future of consumer technology. (To give Oprah and her millions of viewers a glimpse of the future, I strapped her into a virtual hang glider while she claimed I was ogling her butt.) Chess—and Britannica—were the chief exceptions to this success; the finer points of the game eluded me in a way that nothing else had. I had learned the rules of chess as a youngster but wasn't able to master the game. If I couldn't make Britannica work, I was now determined to conquer chess.

IN LATE SPRING OF 2000, AROUND ALEX'S FIRST BIRTHDAY, I FINALLY ESCAPED from Britannica and moved my family halfway across the country to Woodstock, New York, into a two-centuries-old converted barn. *The Man Who Loved Only Numbers* had been published in fourteen languages, and I had a contract to write another book, *Wings of Madness*, the story of Alberto Santos-Dumont, a flamboyant Brazilian inventor who piloted a flimsy flying machine around the Eiffel Tower in 1901, two years before Kitty Hawk. A fringe benefit of my research in early aviation—and the consulting work I was now doing for magazines and Internet companies—was that it took me almost weekly to New York City, where I had greater access to the chess world.

I visited my old haunts around Washington Square Park and played in tournaments at the renowned Marshall Chess Club. I also picked up assignments to write about chess from *The New Yorker*, *Smithsonian*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*, which helped to justify my increased involvement in the game. Very few journalists covered chess in the mainstream press; my articles received attention, and I became the master of ceremonies for a few high-profile chess events in New York City and the color commentator on ESPN2 for seventeen tense hours of live chess between Kasparov and a computer. I even had the opportunity to face Kasparov in a game, and later I helped him prepare a speech—on achieving one's full potential in life—that he delivered to a group of Swiss bankers.

As I waded back into chess, I strove to separate my own chess playing from the overall insanity of the pastime. I tried to ignore my opponents' behavior and react solely to their moves on the board. In other words, I tried to play pure chess. Like so many goals I've had regarding the sixty-four squares, this one also proved to be elusive.

EARLY IN MY RETURN TO CHESS, I WENT BACK TO HARVARD TO PLAY IN A FOUR-ROUND tournament, on a wintry weekend when the Charles River that runs past the campus was freezing over. I had not spent

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