

TEMPO

A comedy in 1 act

By Keaton Mitchell

The Players

NARRATOR	The narrator of the play, who controls the events of the story. This is a theatrical, sometimes pompous person often given to long, dry speeches. Pretends to understand everything, but rarely does. Often plays against THE MASTER.
THE MASTER	Old and plainly dressed. By far the best chess player in the story; wins against any human opponent. Rarely speaks, but when they do, their words are as incomprehensible as their chess moves. Often plays against DEATH and NARRATOR.
DEATH	A respectable figure in a deceptively fancy suit. Ageless and without gender. Rarely speaks, and seems to cheat at chess. Has supernatural power to never lose a game. Often plays against THE MASTER.
PLAYER 1	A chess novice, trying to improve. Chronically loses games, and infuriates opponents with bizarre moves. Often plays against PLAYER 2.
PLAYER 2	A more advanced chess player than PLAYER 1, although nowhere near the level of THE MASTER. A chess purist, believing in simple, effective play and winning games by any means necessary. Often plays against PLAYER 1.
ALEX	PLAYER 2's sibling. Always trying to leave dramatic situations, but rarely succeeding. A boring chess player. Plays against SID.
SID	ALEX's friend, trying to avoid PLAYER 2. A dramatic chess player. Plays against ALEX.
TARKLE	A silly person dressed in secondhand clothes. Wields a fake, harmless knife, and possesses the

script for their own life. Despises chess, and believes the entire world to be scripted. Disobeys the NARRATOR.

ANNOUNCER: An authoritative, disembodied voice beyond all question. Announces the acts.

Production note: All genders are ambiguous. Pronouns in the script should be changed to match the actor's gender.

Introduction

Setting:

The stage is empty except for a single chess table at the center. It will be used constantly throughout the play, although the actors needn't play real games of chess. Many games happen so fast that a few quick moves and a "checkmate" will suffice. Actors also needn't reset the board, perhaps they simply sweep pieces to each side of the board before a game.

At rise:

2 contestants, THE MASTER and NARRATOR, sit playing a game. THE MASTER makes a move.

THE MASTER

Checkmate.

*They stand and shake hands, and THE MASTER exits.
NARRATOR addresses the audience.*

NARRATOR

The master has, once again, changed my opinion about chess. Chess is an ancient military game, we know this, and it is very concerned with the size of one's army. For years I have held that any difference in the size of armies, even a single piece, would decide the battle. For years it has always been true. And yet, in this game, where I had an advantage of multiple pieces, I lost to the master. I shouldn't be surprised; I'm hardly the first to be vanquished in such fashion, but it begs, I think, a moment's thought. What could the master do with a lesser force that I could not with mine?

The answer comes 'round eventually to the zugzwang, but first: tempo. The beat to which the player moves their troops. The force advantage I did have could make no difference since I lacked that crucial tempo. I had so many pieces to look after,

scattered each this way or that, that every turn the master simply threatened one. Of course I had to protect, and of course, it cost one move. One turn. One tempo. Chess is a game that lives in strict rhythm, and when you lose the rhythm, you lose the game.

When I realized this I thought the secret to chess was not in brute martial force, but rather in this proverbial race against time. The point, I surmised, was to stay beyond the ticking of the clock. Tick, tick, tick, tick, checkmate. You see? Any opponent, against any defense, will eventually find that chink in the armor and break your board wide. So I said I must checkmate first, and I found out it's not true. It loses critically and invariably to a zugzwang.

In this game, it was that very commitment to speed that secured my loss. Had I been a half move slower, reached the position on the master's turn instead of mine, I'd have won. Hm. I make it sound easy. Chess is indeed a game of tempo, but specifically it is a game of matching tempo. At the risk of sounding daoist, chess is a game of being one with the tempo of the particular game you are playing right now, because it will be different in every subsequent match.

PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 enter. They sit down and play.
In order to demonstrate, here's a game where neither player has found tempo even remotely.

PLAYER 1

Aha! I take your rook.

PLAYER 2

Why?

PLAYER 1

Because then I'm up a rook.

PLAYER 2

But it's such a terrible move.

PLAYER 1

There are no terrible moves that put you up a rook.

NARRATOR

As established, not true.

PLAYER 2

Okay.

PLAYER 2 and PLAYER 1 make several moves in succession.

Check. Check. Check. Che- Aah!

PLAYER 1 laughs.

Can you not make one reasonable move?!

PLAYER 1

That was a fine move. I got out of check.

PLAYER 2

You did it in the worst possible way.

PLAYER 1

For you, maybe. Check.

PLAYER 2

I take your rook.

PLAYER 1

Fair enough.

PLAYER 2

I take your other rook too.

PLAYER 1

Oh! Oh, I didn't see that. Uh, what am I doing? Uh, check.

PLAYER 2

What are you doing?

PLAYER 1

I know, right? Your opponent can never know your plan if you never had one to begin with.

PLAYER 2

That's not how you win the game!

PLAYER 1

Listen, I'm trying my best.

PLAYER 2

Check. Check. Take the queen, check. En passant. Checkmate.
Thank god. Let's never play chess again.

PLAYER 1

Fine by me.

They exit

NARRATOR

This was a remarkably poor game for both sides, even down to the en passant at the end. Actually, what was she even- never mind. The point is-

ANNOUNCER

off

The thesis of the play.

NARRATOR

The girl's inability to adjust to the flow of that game cost a lot of emotional agony. Against a more skilled player, it would have cost the game.

So. We have the thesis, we have the introduction, and you're ready to see me off this stage. Alright: let the show commence!

blackout

ANNOUNCER

Act 1: Trial by Fire, or, The Inevitable Price of Refusing to Concede One's Lost Position.

Scene 1

THE MASTER and NARRATOR sit playing chess. THE MASTER makes a move.

THE MASTER

Checkmate.

Exits

NARRATOR

Getting up

I often think about deja vu playing these matches. The feeling that I've played this position before; what did I do then? What mistake did I make, and what did I -because I study these positions- what did I conclude was the right move? And of course, I never remember, or I do and it turns out to be wrong. So that line of thinking is never useful.

PLAYER 1 enters, muttering and reading a schedule.

PLAYER 1 sits at the table.

Nonetheless, I can't help but come back to this concept of deja vu. That I've done this before, and I've done it wrong, and I know how I messed up and I should be better than that. But of course, "should" is a misnomer, because no matter how much I "should" perform, the fact remains that I don't.

PLAYER 2 enters and approaches the table

PLAYER 2

In disgust

Oh. It's you.

NARRATOR

They've been scheduled together for the tournament.

Pause

PLAYER 2

God. Okay.

Sits. They begin play. Suddenly PLAYER 2 stands.

Can you not play one game with a normal opening?!

PLAYER 1

Advancing my queen on move 2 is fine.

PLAYER 2

Oh my- Alright. I'm gonna save both of us the trouble here. We're in a tournament, which means mental stamina is the most important thing. So here's what we'll do: you can resign now, and we'll both have time to nap before the next game. I'll even buy you a snack. We'll be reenergized for the next few games, and you can win those. You're not going to beat me anyway.

PLAYER 1

Looking up

Wait, what, you're trying to resign?

PLAYER 2

No, I'm trying to get you to resign.

PLAYER 1

laughing

Fat chance.

PLAYER 2

You're not going to win.

PLAYER 1

I know. You're a-

Turns to the audience. Completely deadpan:

You're a better chess player than I am.

PLAYER 2

To the audience, also deadpan:

Yes. This is a true fact.

NARRATOR

We're establishing it now so you don't forget.

PLAYER 1

To PLAYER 2

Nah, but I'm not gonna resign. It's not really a thing I do.

PLAYER 2

What, why? Like, I get not resigning a game before it starts, but-

PLAYER 1

That's just how I play. It's what I do. It's who I am. I don't know how else to get this inside your head.

PLAYER 2 says nothing

NARRATOR

Here the conversation gets awkward and the game gets bad. You've seen this before. Let's skip to the end of this game and watch the next beat.

PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 play the rest of their game in fast-forward, following the narrator's commands.

Alright, alright, a little more, stop! Go back! Stop!

They resume normal motion.

NARRATOR approaches the table. To PLAYER 1:
Here's your schedule for tomorrow.

PLAYER 1

After reading it

I am trying very hard not to curse right now.

PLAYER 2

What is it?

PLAYER 1

I'm up against the master.

PLAYER 2

Shit.

Exits

NARRATOR

And so we introduce conflict into the story. Can the novice defeat the master? How will it be done? And what dangers lie along the way?

PLAYER 1

I think I'll just resign.

NARRATOR

What?

PLAYER 1

Yeah, there's no way I beat the master.

Exits

NARRATOR

Deja vu. Deja vu. Deja vu. Everything always repeats.

Blackout

Scene 2

NARRATOR and THE MASTER sit playing a game. THE MASTER makes a move.

THE MASTER

Checkmate.

Exits

NARRATOR

Zugzwang. From the german "Zug," meaning "move," and "Zwang," meaning "compulsion." The compulsion to move. The compulsion to make a move. It refers not only to the phenomenon in life, but also situations in chess and advanced mathematics, although we won't get into those. Originally, when chess was first invented, there was no compulsion to move. No zugzwang. This meant that, if someone found themselves in a sticky position, they could just not move. They could pass. It made the game horribly boring. So a new rule was added: You must move. Always. Every turn. Sometimes it results in a zugzwang.

Imagine a position where to pass would be the best imaginable move. A position where you're winning now, and if it were only the opponent's turn you would. You would win. But you don't. You lose because you must move. And any move condemns your game. This is a zugzwang.

PLAYER 1 enters and sits at the table.

Let's look at a conversation the novice has this evening.

NARRATOR approaches, changing outfits.

PLAYER 1

To NARRATOR

Heyo.

NARRATOR

Sitting

How was the chess thing?

PLAYER 1

Fine, it was fine. Look at this position.

NARRATOR

You know I don't really get this whole "chess" nonsense. Do you like playing chess?

PLAYER 1

That's not important. My big opponent tomorrow, the master, uh, just the master, played this position today. It's a fine position, it's not that complicated; there's this little sequence where the master could have captured the enemy queen, which is almost like winning the game. But that's not what the master did.

NARRATOR

Wait. Show me how you took that queen again.

PLAYER 1

It's called a fork.

Getting up, addressing the audience:

Because chess only allows one move at a time, when a player threatens 2 pieces at once, only one can move away to safety. It's a choice with no good option.

NARRATOR

To audience:

Notably not a Zugzwang because passing doesn't help either.

PLAYER 1

Now here, the master has this beautiful fork and it's perfectly set up. The knight is exactly positioned so that in one move, it can capture an enemy pawn, simultaneously threatening the queen on the left and the king on the right. The king has to move, otherwise the game is lost, but since the queen remains stuck for that one crucial turn, the knight has a chance to capture her.

NARRATOR

Alright. Seems reasonable enough.

PLAYER 1

Going back to the table

But here's the catch: the master didn't do it! Instead, he went for this other tactic threatening some random bishop, which by the way, didn't work, and just let the queen sit there!

NARRATOR

Well, I don't know much about chess, but the way you talk about this master, he sounds pretty darn good. Don't take it too hard if ya lose. Well, I'm gonna go...

Mumbles something unintelligible

PLAYER 1 waves. NARRATOR exits.

PLAYER 1

To the audience

Does the master have a weakness? I can't imagine so. But maybe-maybe I can get him into a position where I know he's made the wrong move before, and get him to make that same move again. It's a long shot, but it just might work.

Sits at the table. NARRATOR reenters.

NARRATOR

The next day.

Sits at the table. PLAYER 1 and NARRATOR play rapidly.

PLAYER 1

Draw?

They shake hands. NARRATOR exits. PLAYER 1 addresses the audience.

That's one game down. I didn't lose this, actually, which bodes-I don't think it actually bodes well against the master. I'm barely even going to be playing chess for that match. I've memorized one position, and how to get to it, where I think the master messed up in a way I can exploit. Here's my next game.

NARRATOR enters in a different outfit. NARRATOR and PLAYER 1 rapidly play a match.

NARRATOR

Checkmate.

NARRATOR switches outfits. They play another match.

Checkmate.

NARRATOR exits.

PLAYER 1

One last game before the master. This time I'll test out my trap.

PLAYER 2 enters.

PLAYER 2

Oh no, not you again.

PLAYER 1

Haven't we done this already?

PLAYER 2

I'm not in charge of the timeline.

PLAYER 1

No you aren't. Aren't the matches supposed to change? Like, no repeats?

PLAYER 2

It is what it is. Let's play it out.

Sits down. They begin play.

Again opening with the queen. Again going for scholar's mate. You know I'm never going to fall for this, right?

PLAYER 1

It's more about the principle of the thing.

PLAYER 2

Yet you complain incessantly about repetition. Alright, I'll do something different.

Making a move

Here.

PLAYER 1

Huh.

PLAYER 2

Your move.

PLAYER 1

Makes a move. Aside:

Are these moves mine? Every one is predetermined.

PLAYER 2

Considering the next move:

Alright, uh- this goes here. You come in. Swap. Pow, pow, pow, and then I'm up a piece. And then... You're playing weird, what're you up to?

PLAYER 1

You've always thought I play weird.

PLAYER 2

Not like this.

NARRATOR

Stepping to the front

The novice is-

PLAYER 2

Whoa! Oh my god!

NARRATOR

The novice is trying-

PLAYER 2

What is this?!

PLAYER 1

Do you like it?

PLAYER 2

No!

NARRATOR

To PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2:

Will you be quiet for one second?

To audience:

The novice is trying out his plan to beat the master. Incredibly, it works.

PLAYER 2

Wow, that works. That's a good trap, you might beat me.

NARRATOR

No he won't.

PLAYER 2

Check. Check. Checkmate.

PLAYER 1

I walked right into that.

PLAYER 2

Mhm.

Gets up

What's your plan against the master?

PLAYER 1

That.

PLAYER 2

That?

PLAYER 1

With contingencies.

PLAYER 2

Studying the board

...Go here and you'll avoid checkmate.

Exits

NARRATOR

And so the novice received help from an unexpected ally,
granting the final push necessary to-

PLAYER 1

That move doesn't work. It's still checkmate a few turns later.

NARRATOR

And so the novice discovered an unexpected ally, which-

PLAYER 1

I think she was trying to sabotage me.

Pause. NARRATOR exits

PLAYER 1

This other move works, though.

I figure, before such a monumental game, I ought to give a rousing soliloquy. Therefore, here's the rundown. The master's going to come in here, I'm going to look him dead in the eye, give him a firm handshake, and then we're going to sit down to play, and I'm going to play the best game of my life and I'm still going to lose. Yeah. I'm not about to pretend that I stand any chance against the master, but I've been given the opportunity to play one game against this incredible human being, and I want to put up a good fight.

THE MASTER enters

All right. Here goes nothing.

PLAYER 1 and THE MASTER shake hands, then sit down to play. THE MASTER makes a single move.

THE MASTER

Checkmate.

Exits. NARRATOR enters.

PLAYER 1

He- he checkmated me in a single move.

NARRATOR

That's not possible.

PLAYER 1

I know! Look at the position.

NARRATOR

Yep, that's checkmate.

PLAYER 1

Wha-

NARRATOR

To the audience

It's a bit silly, I'll admit, but this match serves to illustrate a very serious point, which I'm going to tell you in a minute. But first, what went wrong? Why did the novice's trap give one superior player a run for her money and leave the other completely unfazed? I have sometimes heard "the expert fears the novice for neither knows what the novice will do," and one might expect this to have been such a situation. But it wasn't. That's the key. Nothing that this novice could have done would have surprised the master to any degree whatsoever.

It all comes back to this idea of tempo, of flow, of being within the flow of the game. The master has honed this technique to the extent of knowing precisely what the novice will do before the novice has any idea. The master can anticipate the novice's moves 8, 10, 12 turns in advance, far beyond what the novice himself has figured out, because the master is so at home with the tempo of that game. That is what it means to be a master.

Pause

Next scene, please?

Blackout

ANNOUNCER

Act 2: The Second Act.

Scene 3

PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 sit playing chess. NARRATOR watches. PLAYER 2 makes a move.

PLAYER 2

Checkmate. That was the position?

PLAYER 1

That was it. He ignored the fork for, like, 3 moves in a row.

PLAYER 2

Well, let's see what happens if we go for the fork.

PLAYER 1

Making a move

Alright. Check.

PLAYER 2

And now I move my king away-

PLAYER 1

And I take your queen-

PLAYER 2

And then... uh... hm. Can I move some pieces?

PLAYER 1

Yeah.

Gets up and whispers briefly to the narrator. PLAYER 2 rapidly moves pieces.

PLAYER 2

Boom. Pow. Take the pawn, check, checkmate. Uh, no. No, take the knight, boom, boom, boom, checkmate. Or we do this, go over here, horowitz traps the king, uh... nothing. Oh, but that leads to checkmate.

To PLAYER 1

I don't know. This position sucks. Seems like a move you would make.

PLAYER 1

I'm offended.

PLAYER 2

The master doesn't put himself in sticky positions; you've seen him play. He keeps making the most boring move, over and over, but his position gets better every time.

NARRATOR

I will address this in a moment.

PLAYER 2

You could do that! You could start making really boring moves, and I bet you would start winning!

PLAYER 1

Sorry. Not my style.

PLAYER 2

What does style have anything to do with it? Make good moves!

NARRATOR

Let's pause. The question is excellent: what does style have anything to do with it? Why can't players simply make the best move? Is it even possible not to have style? For that matter, is it possible to have style? And I would forsake simple answers here, because the master certainly plays with style. And from the few times I have had the pleasure to play others of his skill level, I have learned that all chess masters do this. What, then, separates them from the novice?

Pause

I would draw attention to Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, particularly his analogy of the apple. You see, in his model, an apple is divided into 6 layers...

NARRATOR fades out

ANNOUNCER

The narrator devolves into pedantic nonsense, and shall be muted for the duration. The scene shall resume.

NARRATOR remains at the front of the stage, silently giving the speech.

PLAYER 1

I'm not the master. I'll never be as good as the master, and I don't want to. I don't want to be so good I win every game. That's not why I play chess.

PLAYER 2

That's... really heartfelt, actually. Why do you play chess?

PLAYER 1

To infuriate people.

PLAYER 2

No!

PLAYER 1 laughs

Chess is a psychological dance. It is a game of tapping into the mind of your enemy, like a forest of black and white. You- you

go into these woods of paradox, where two plus two equals five and the way out is only wide enough for one.

PLAYER 1

Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the chin.

PLAYER 2

But chess is better than that! Chess should be better than that.

PLAYER 1

Maybe for you it is.

Exits. PLAYER 2 exits.

NARRATOR

Fades back in

...and that's why style only matters for true masters of the game. Oh, but look at the time. I need to stop talking.

ANNOUNCER

Next scene.

Fade to black

Scene 4

In this scene, PLAYER 1 cannot see the board. This can be achieved in various different ways. NARRATOR and THE MASTER sit playing chess. THE MASTER makes a move.

THE MASTER

Checkmate.

Exits

NARRATOR

It isn't uncommon to see persons with true mastery of their craft demonstrate this by performing with a handicap so severe as to render an average person's skills meaningless. And chess is no exception with the phenomenon of blindfold chess, i.e., the practice of playing entire games without once looking at a board. The technique is quite simple, memorize every move. All of them. All at once, as they occur. It's absurd. I cannot play at all like this, and the master plays at his regular level.

PLAYER 1
I can't see!

PLAYER 2
You'll be fine. Sit in this chair.

PLAYER 1
What is this?

PLAYER 2
Chess!

PLAYER 1
I can't see the board.

PLAYER 2
Exactly. e4.

PLAYER 1
Uh, e5.

PLAYER 2
Knight f3.

PLAYER 1
Knight c6.

PLAYER 2
b3.

PLAYER 1
I give up.

PLAYER 2
Why?

PLAYER 1
I've already forgotten the position. Like, two turns in and I've
already forgotten the position. Aah!
Falls

I fell over! There's a bag on the floor. You put a bag on the floor right next to where I couldn't see?

PLAYER 2 giggles

PLAYER 2

Give it a try. It's important to learn this.

PLAYER 1

No it's not, and I've already forgotten the position.

PLAYER 2

Very quickly

It's e4, e5, Knight f3, Knight c6, b3.

PLAYER 1

Say it again, slower this time, and let me see the board.

PLAYER 2

No. Pick a move.

PLAYER 1

Uh... Knight e5.

PLAYER 2

You picked the one illegal move. There was one illegal move and you picked it.

PLAYER 1

Castle.

PLAYER 2

You picked the other illegal move.

PLAYER 1

Castle queenside.

PLAYER 2

Stop.

PLAYER 1

Queen a1. King h4. Bishop captures d2. e3. j4.

PLAYER 2

J4 isn't a square on the board.

PLAYER 1

I can't see the board!

Blackout as PLAYER 1 says "board."

Scene 5

THE MASTER sits playing chess with DEATH. NARRATOR addresses the audience.

NARRATOR

Ladies and Gentlemen, Death.

DEATH acknowledges the audience

The master has been playing chess with death longer than he can remember. They play once every night, and it always ends in a draw.

THE MASTER

Quiet.

NARRATOR

The same volume

As you know, Death cannot be beaten in a game of chess. Perhaps some day it will be done and immortality will finally be within our reach, although I think that will never happen. It is my belief that Death simply cannot lose.

DEATH

Check.

NARRATOR

Death has, after much bargaining and pleading, allowed me to watch some of its games with the master. Therefore its invincibility as a chess player is as obvious to me as it is inconceivable to everyone else. "How could Death be unbeatable? Surely a good enough player could-" no. A good enough player cannot.

THE MASTER

Check.

NARRATOR

The first time I saw Death play, it delivered check on the very first move. I hadn't thought it was possible. I still don't know how it happened. That first game, every move blindsided me. I tried to think what moves Death might make, and it did something I hadn't considered at all. The master's moves are normal in these games. They make sense, they're obviously legal (which can't be said for Death), they have a clear purpose.

DEATH

Check.

NARRATOR

Despite Death making all these bizarre, seemingly poor moves, though, it never gets into a losing position. It's always just ahead, just barely winning, even when it isn't.

DEATH

Check.

NARRATOR

Watch:

DEATH

Check. Check. Check. Check.

THE MASTER

That's a draw.

THE MASTER and DEATH shake hands. DEATH exits. THE MASTER remains seated.

NARRATOR

The master forced a draw. He does it every night, and every night it's slightly more difficult.

NARRATOR goes to the table, silently greeting THE MASTER. They reset the board and begin to play. Fade to black.

ANNOUNCER

Act 3: Purpose, Integrity, all Slowly Tumbling Upward.

Scene 6

NARRATOR and THE MASTER sit playing chess. THE MASTER makes a move.

THE MASTER

Checkmate.

Gets up to exit.

NARRATOR

Wait!

THE MASTER stops.

How do you play against death? How do you force a draw?

THE MASTER whispers something into NARRATOR's ear.

Let's get on with the story.

PLAYER 2 enters, running. PLAYER 1 enters behind.

PLAYER 1

Wait! Where are you going?

PLAYER 2

Out.

PLAYER 1

When will you be back?

PLAYER 2

I don't know.

PLAYER 1

Did I do something wrong?

PLAYER 2

Yes!

PLAYER 1

What?

PLAYER 2 looks back and exits.

To NARRATOR:

What did I do wrong?

NARRATOR laughs. To THE MASTER:

I don't know what I did. Will someone tell me?

THE MASTER leads PLAYER 1 to the chessboard, then makes a move and indicates for PLAYER 1 to respond.

Uh, okay. Check.

PLAYER 1 moves. THE MASTER moves. They repeat this process.

Check. Check. I'm sorry; I don't know what you're trying to say.

THE MASTER flips the board around.

THE MASTER

Check, check, check.

PLAYER 1

Wow, this position sucks. Wait, is it a metaphor? A metaphor for, like, life?

THE MASTER indicates "no."

Okay, I have no clue.

THE MASTER exits. PLAYER 1 remains at the chessboard.

NARRATOR approaches.

NARRATOR

Pull yourself together. Checkmate.

They reset the board and play.

Checkmate.

They play again.

PLAYER 1

I haven't won a single game over the course of this play. One might extrapolate that I haven't won a game ever in my life.

NARRATOR

That's impossible. Surely you've won some games.

PLAYER 1

The master checkmating me in one move was impossible.

NARRATOR

Checkmate.

They play again.

PLAYER 1

I have won games before, but only unimportant ones. If anything's ever on the line, I lose the game.

NARRATOR

I.e. the master.

PLAYER 1

Indeed. I lose consistently enough I would bet money if that's the kind of thing I bet money on.

NARRATOR

Checkmate.

PLAYER 1

You ever get deja vu?

NARRATOR

Huh?

PLAYER 1

You know, the feeling that you've played a position before, and you did something wrong, and what was it you should've done? The feeling that you're just going in cycles, unable to change, unable to escape. The feeling that everything you do is just actions performed on a stage.

NARRATOR

It is. It is-

PLAYER 1

Hold that thought. I'm in a good position. And... that's the right move. You capture. I recapture. That's a trap. Oh my god, I could win this game.

NARRATOR

Your move.

PLAYER 1 sits still for a moment. Then, slowly, PLAYER 1 reaches out and moves a piece.

I can't win from this position. Good job.

NARRATOR goes to shake PLAYER 1's hand. They shake.
It's a draw, then.

PLAYER 1
What? I thought you resigned.

NARRATOR
No, silly. You tip your king to resign. Like this.
Lays the king down
Only that doesn't count because we already did the end-of-game handshake.

PLAYER 1
Can we have a ruling on this?

ANNOUNCER
It's a draw.

NARRATOR
Again.
They sit down to play

PLAYER 1
I resign.
Lays down the king

NARRATOR
Again.

PLAYER 1
I resign.
Lays down the king

NARRATOR
Again!

PLAYER 1
I resign. I resign. I resign. I resign. I resign!
Hurls the king across the stage. NARRATOR picks it up and takes a bite out of it. It is a cookie.

NARRATOR

Take caution, sir. You tread a dangerous path as it is, and any misstep now will break your board wide. Perhaps you've already made your misstep, and are already in a zugzwang, and all that's left now is to watch the ticking of the clock, and to see which move you make.

PLAYER 1

Oh my god. Uh-

Cut off by blackout

Scene 7

NARRATOR and THE MASTER play chess. THE MASTER makes a move.

THE MASTER

Checkmate.

Exits. PLAYER 1 enters, sits at the table. NARRATOR makes a move.

NARRATOR

Checkmate.

Stands. PLAYER 2 enters, sits at the table, and makes a move.

PLAYER 2

Checkmate.

PLAYER 1 stands. NARRATOR moves to sit.

No. We haven't played yet, and I aim to keep it that way.

NARRATOR

Scene, then?

PLAYER 2

Sure.

NARRATOR

To audience:

In this scene, a person with a knife walks in. Who will sacrifice themselves to save the other person?

TARKLE

Entering, with a knife.

Haha, look at me, I've got a knife!

PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2

Straight out

Oh, no!

TARKLE

I'm, uh...

Forgets the line, looks offstage

I'm going to stab one of you, likely due to emotional trauma.

PLAYER 2

Do we know you?

PLAYER 1

Hey, maybe we should-

NARRATOR

Tensions rise between the couple as it becomes clear the guy with the knife is completely serious.

PLAYER 2

Emotional trauma is a terrible reason to stab someone! Also, I am single.

NARRATOR

Tensions rise between the two single people as it-

PLAYER 1

Are you gonna stab us or not?

TARKLE

Yeah, yeah! I just, ya know, I, uh, look, stabbing someone isn't the simplest thing in the world. Ya know, it's like, uh, Pavlov's gun: I gotta, ya know, I gotta stab someone at some point, but, ya know, maybe I need to take a moment to do it, and that doesn't violate the rule. Also, uh, I'm only stabbing one of you.

PLAYER 1

Why?

PLAYER 2 shushes PLAYER 1

TARKLE

Okay, I'm ready. Who am I stabbing?

PLAYER 1

Her.

PLAYER 2

What?

TARKLE

Okay.

Tries to stab PLAYER 2 and misses.

NARRATOR

A hit!

PLAYER 2

That was not a hit.

Gets the knife.

NARRATOR

A miss!

PLAYER 2

This knife is fake, too.

NARRATOR

Yes, dear, it's theatre.

THE MASTER and DEATH enter behind the action and begin to play chess unseen.

PLAYER 1

To TARKLE:

Who are you? Where did you come from?

TARKLE

I am-

Clears throat and produces a script

"A quiet, mentally disturbed teenager wielding a sharp, deadly blade."

PLAYER 1

That's what it says?

TARKLE

Yeah, right here! By the way, do you like playing chess?

PLAYER 1

What?

PLAYER 2

Hey, it's Checkov's gun. Not- not Pavlov. I don't know where you got Pavlov; it's Checkov's gun.

TARKLE

When you're the guy with the knife, you don't need to know the name of the gun.

DEATH

Check.

Everyone sees death.

We'll finish later.

Exits

TARKLE

Who was that?

PLAYER 2

Death. I've seen it once before.

PLAYER 1

Looking at the chessboard

This position doesn't make any sense. It doesn't even look like a chess match.

PLAYER 2

I've heard Death cheats.

NARRATOR

Not exactly. Death plays by different rules.

PLAYER 1

How do you win a game against something like that?

NARRATOR and PLAYER 2

You don't.

NARRATOR and THE MASTER silently converse. PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 move away from the table.

PLAYER 1

That's what comes for us all?

PLAYER 2

Some people evade it for a while, but no one truly beats Death.

PLAYER 1

That makes me feel a lot better about hot dogs. Those hot dogs, you know, that they serve at Darry's? So good; so unhealthy. Now I'm thinking maybe that's alright. Say, why don't I get you one?

PLAYER 2

Oh, I have-

PLAYER 1

C'mon, it's a 2 minute walk; we'll get 'em to go.

PLAYER 2

Alright.

They exit

NARRATOR

You can't sleep here, not at the chessboard. Let me take you to your bed.

NARRATOR helps THE MASTER offstage. TARKLE is alone.

TARKLE

Lemme tell y'all about chess. Chess is this unfortunate game that a lotta people on this stage are constantly playing. Here's the thing they don't tell you: the outcome is fixed. It's not

about who the better player is; it's about who "ought" to win, narratively. We obey a script. All of us, not just the ones onstage, everyone. Everyone obeys a script. I just happen to have mine.

NARRATOR enters

NARRATOR

Hey!

TARKLE

Time to go.

Exits pursued by NARRATOR. Blackout.

ANNOUNCER

Act 4: Truth and Justice, or, Light Arcs Around a Heavy Object.

Interlude

ALEX is sitting. SID enters.

SID

Yooo! Aleeeex!

ALEX

Hey! It's Sid! I wasn't sure you'd make it.

SID

Neither was I. Let's find a table.

ALEX

Indicating the table

Got one here.

SID

Alex, this has a chessboard.

ALEX

Yeah.

SID

Ah, all right. It's been too long, hasn't it?

ALEX

It's been too long.

They sit and begin play

SID

We need to talk about your sister.

ALEX

That's a terrible idea.

SID

It is?

ALEX

No, in the game. You blundered a knight. Anyway, go on.

SID

She's a wonderful person. Very smart, very nice to be around, and, you know, I realize that she-

ALEX

Sid-

SID

She asked me to see a movie with her. The Marshal's Attack.

Pause

ALEX

Sid, I'm in check.

SID

Oh. Check.

ALEX

Well, all right. Is the movie good?

SID

Oh, it's great. I've seen it, but it's great. You'd hate it. You know, what're you gonna do.

ALEX

Good for you. You're watching a movie. What do you want from me?

SID

Look, here's the thing-

ALEX

Sid- check- I don't know what you're asking me to do. What do you want me to do?

SID

I want you to convince her that she doesn't want to watch this movie with me.

ALEX

That's impossible.

SID

Well, I can't-

ALEX

Yes you can.

Throws SID's captured knight offstage

Hey!

SID

No, wait-

PLAYER 2

Entering with the knight

Hey, you dropped a piece. Hey, Sid! You didn't tell me you were coming.

SID

Well, I don't really-

PLAYER 2

Movie tonight?

SID

Yeah, yeah.

PLAYER 2

Sweet.

Looks at the chessboard

Ooh, you're losing.

SID

What should I do?

PLAYER 2

Not that.

Exits

ALEX

Ooh, you're in a real pickle now. Really between the rock and the frying pan this time.

SID

This is serious! One movie's one thing, but the next thing you know she's taking me to more movies and then restaurants.

ALEX

What's wrong with restaurants?

SID

Alex...

ALEX

I'm serious! This is a restaurant and it's fine.

SID

It's not going to be this restaurant. It'll be some weird theatre establishment.

ALEX

Oh, is she still doing theatre?

SID

Oh my god. She's in a play right now.

ALEX

Oh?

SID

Some chess script, apparently. Says no one can understand it but her.

ALEX

What does that mean?

SID

What does anything she says mean?

Pause

Uh, your move.

ALEX

You know, I haven't done much in the chess match.

SID

I guess.

ALEX

You've made all these big, grandiose moves and I'm just sitting here, waiting for something to happen. You'd think I'd have lost by now with that strategy, but I'm actually doing pretty well for myself. I'm in this nice little position, I could sit here all day. Maybe I'll do something interesting eventually.

SID

Alex, this is pretty par for the course with you.

ALEX

What, playing the London? Sometimes I wish I was in London. Whole new life, whole new set of friends.

SID

There goes your pawn.

ALEX

Wouldn't have to deal with all this drama, you know. I could have a drama free life.

SID

You just lost another pawn. Alex, you can't live a drama free life.

ALEX

I know, but you come in here with a whole speech about my sister and Sid, I couldn't care less. Do what you want with my sister, but keep it away from me.

SID

Taking another pawn

You keep hanging pawns. There. We're at even pieces now, one knight for three pawns. You want me to leave; I'll leave. We'll call it a draw.

Offers a hand. ALEX considers it. After a beat:

ALEX

Who are you, Vladimir Kramnik? No, we're playing this game; we'll finish this game.

SID

Maybe we can play some interesting moves, too.

ALEX

Yeah, yeah, sure; that's not gonna happen. What did you want me to tell my sister?

SID

She doesn't need to be dating me, and I suspect that's what's going to happen.

ALEX

Wait-

PLAYER 2

Off

Sid! Sid!

Entering, waving a phone. Shows SID the phone screen.

Look at all these! We have that, and that, and ooh, I didn't notice this one.

ALEX

What is it?

PLAYER 2

It's secret.

SID

Why do I have to see?

PLAYER 2

We gotta watch them.

ALEX

Aside

It's movies.

SID

Trying to get ALEX's attention

Uh, well, um-

Gives up. It doesn't work.

Sorry, I'm focusing on the game right now.

PLAYER 2

Oh, okay. Wow, that's a heck of a game. I'd say you were winning, but, um...

SID

It's all right. You can say I'm losing.

PLAYER 2

That's an understatement.

Goes to exit.

Hey, maybe I'll catch you after the game.

SID

Maybe.

PLAYER 2

Exiting

Tell me when you're done!

SID

Like I was saying-

ALEX

I take your rook.

SID

Ah. Oh boy.

ALEX

And Sid, I'm going to give you this straight. My sister was just laid off her job. By email.

SID

Okay.

ALEX

Her boss couldn't even be bothered to let her go in person. Also it was because her co-workers were telling lies about her, apparently.

SID

Alex, lead with that!

ALEX

Laid off by email.

SID

It was because of the co-worker's lies. That's the real issue here.

ALEX

Nevertheless it's inexcusable.

SID

Lying about your co-workers is inexcusable!

To the audience:

Lying is bad.

To ALEX:

I take your queen.

ALEX

And that's stalemate, we draw. Good game. Look, I'm not supposed to interfere with who my sister dates. I'm not-

ALEX pauses, considers, then throws the captured queen offstage

PLAYER 2

What happened? Sid, are you okay?

ALEX

Sid's feeling sick.

PLAYER 2

Oh, no! Is it contagious?

SID

No, I can-

ALEX

Very contagious. Shouldn't go to the movies.

PLAYER 2

To SID

That's right. Don't go to any movies. -Wait, I've already bought the tickets. We have to see it.

SID

Can't they be refunded?

PLAYER 2

No!

Long pause

ALEX

...I'll watch it with you.

PLAYER 2

Okay. That might work.

Exits

SID

It's a good movie.

ALEX

I'm going to hate this, aren't I?

SID

I owe you one. Hey, thanks.

ALEX

Take care of yourself.

SID exits. ALEX sits at the table, and exits soon after. NARRATOR enters.

NARRATOR

Vladimir Kramnik. The king of draws. Could draw 80 games in a row and did. When he played the world championship, there were 15 full games because so many were draws. All forms of draws. Stalemate, which you just saw, 3-fold repetition, 50-move rule, all sorts of ways. Mostly, though, it was agreement. He offered a draw and got his opponent to agree. Truly a work of art.

Scene 8

PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 enter, playing blindfold chess. NARRATOR watches.

PLAYER 1

Uh, King g1?

PLAYER 2

Good. Rook d1 checkmate.

PLAYER 1

Don't I have a bishop there?

PLAYER 2

You moved it, like, 10 turns ago.

PLAYER 1

Where?

PLAYER 2

A5.

PLAYER 1

Ohhhh. No illegal moves, though.

PLAYER 2

No illegal moves!

They celebrate

You are now officially qualified to play blindfold chess.

PLAYER 1

And lose every game.

PLAYER 2

Come on, you've been getting better. You'll win a game eventually.

PLAYER 1

I don't think I will.

To audience:

I think I am doomed to lose every game forever. I think that's who I am as a character. I'm like a pawn in someone else's story, inserted for a specific purpose, used, then discarded. If I ever won a game I would lose my purpose.

To PLAYER 2:

Don't you see? I can't win. If I ever won I would be discarded.

PLAYER 2

That's not how the world works. You don't just get discarded.

PLAYER 1

It is, though. It's like a grand game of chess played by someone else, someone we can't see but is constantly there, watching us. We don't get to tell our own story. We just do what we're told and hope we aren't thrown away. And it's terrifying because there's always someone waiting to replace us.

PLAYER 2

What's gotten into you?

PLAYER 1

I don't want to play chess any more.

Pause. NARRATOR approaches PLAYER 1 and they whisper. DEATH enters. PLAYER 2 tries to speak and is lost for words.

I don't. I lose every game. This shouldn't be a big deal.

PLAYER 2

But you do. You do play chess.

NARRATOR

When have you been shown doing anything else?

PLAYER 1

I see what this is.

Goes to exit, and sees DEATH.

Sir.

Exits.

PLAYER 2

To DEATH

What did you do?

DEATH exits. To NARRATOR:

I don't understand.

NARRATOR

Our novice is caught in a zugzwang. He can't keep always losing because of him, his own pride. He can't ever win because of me. And he can't ever leave because of you.

PLAYER 2

That doesn't leave any options.

NARRATOR

You're smart.

Exits. After a moment, PLAYER 2 exits and PLAYER 1 enters from the other side.

PLAYER 1

That turned out better than expected. I didn't die, which, considering Death's presence, seems to have been a possibility. On the other hand, I may not be able to actually stop playing without some more drastic options. I suppose I should tell you

why I have played all this time, even if I never enjoyed it. The truth is, though, that I have no clue. I'm not a, uh, someone that studies emotions. Maybe I'm not anything. I dunno.

Exits. Blackout

ANNOUNCER

Act 5: Peace, War, Love, Anger, Beauty, Evil; The Past.

Scene 9

THE MASTER and DEATH sit playing chess. NARRATOR watches.

THE MASTER

I'm going to lose.

DEATH nods.

NARRATOR

What? Why?

THE MASTER

Twenty six moves ago, I made a mistake. Now I'm going to lose. I'm going to die.

NARRATOR

Surely there's some way to save the position.

THE MASTER

Nope. In six turns, I'll be put in a zugzwang. Both options lead to checkmate.

To DEATH:

May I?

DEATH nods. THE MASTER stands and addresses the audience.

Last night was the last night I will ever cheat Death. Perhaps your opinion of me is ruined. Let it be. I am nothing now but a mote of dust drifting in the breeze. My soul pulls. Perhaps I will enjoy what death presents. Perhaps I will cease to play. Cease to think. Cease to be. Perhaps I'm ready for something new. Perhaps I'm ready for another game.

To DEATH:

I've troubled you long enough.

To NARRATOR:

Goodbye.

DEATH and THE MASTER rapidly make several moves.

DEATH

Checkmate.

DEATH and THE MASTER exit together.

NARRATOR

I never once beat him at chess. Maybe I never would. The master is fallible. The master made a mistake. Why did that never occur to me before? How could it? I never once beat him at chess.

THE MASTER enters, and hands NARRATOR something. THE MASTER exits.

It's the white king. I don't understand.

Fade to black

Final Scene

PLAYER 1 and PLAYER 2 sit eating hot dogs. NARRATOR has not moved, and does not move for a large portion of the scene. THE MASTER's king is in NARRATOR's pocket.

PLAYER 2

You're right, these are really good.

PLAYER 1

Have you never had one before?

PLAYER 2

Um, they're, uh, too expensive.

PLAYER 1

You didn't know this place existed.

PLAYER 2

So you don't want to play chess anymore?

PLAYER 1

Has that scene happened yet? I don't think that scene's happened yet.

PLAYER 2

Whatever; I know, you know. Why aren't we playing chess?

PLAYER 1

I hate it. It makes me lose the will to live.

PLAYER 2

You didn't hate it before!

PLAYER 1

No, I always did. You just never realized. Maybe I just need a break.

PLAYER 2

Seems unlikely.

PLAYER 1

Maybe I'll come back.

PLAYER 2

Seems unlikely.

PLAYER 1

I've been playing long enough. Stands to reason that I'll play again.

PLAYER 2

Seems unlikely.

PLAYER 1

Yeah. I lose the will to live.

Finishes the hot dog

This singular hot dog shortened my life by three months.

PLAYER 2

That's just three more months you'll have to outrun Death.

PLAYER 1

I'm not the master. Why does Death's game have to be chess?

PLAYER 2

Here's what we can do. I'll leave, and then I'll come back in, and then we'll be doing a different scene.

PLAYER 1

Okay.

PLAYER 2 exits. PLAYER 1 sits at the table. PLAYER 2 enters.

PLAYER 2

Oh no, not you again.

PLAYER 1

Haven't we done this already?

PLAYER 2

I'm not in charge of the timeline.

PLAYER 1

Yes you are. Aren't the matches supposed to change? Like, no repeats?

PLAYER 2

It is what it is. Let's play it out.

Sits down. They begin play.

Again opening with the queen. Again going for scholar's mate. You know I'm never going to fall for this, right?

PLAYER 1

It's more about the principle of the thing.

PLAYER 2

Yet you complain incessantly about repetition. Alright, I'll do something different.

Making a move

Here.

PLAYER 1

Huh.

PLAYER 2

Your move.

PLAYER 1

Are these moves mine? Every one is predetermined.

PLAYER 2

Swap, pow, pow, pow, knight moves, queen takes, queen gets taken, pow, pow, pow, pow, boom, checkmate, checkmate, checkmate, checkmate, en-passant, you're playing weird.

PLAYER 1

You've always thought I play weird.

PLAYER 2

Whoa! Oh my god!

They look at NARRATOR. Pause. Prompting NARRATOR:

Woah!! Oh my god!!!

Pause

PLAYER 1

Do you like it?

PLAYER 2

Yes, it's a fine move. I can see why it didn't beat the master, though.

PLAYER 1

I didn't have a chance to make it. He checkmated me on move 1.

PLAYER 2

He did?

PLAYER 1

And then I lose the game.

PLAYER 2

Mhm.

DEATH enters unseen

PLAYER 1

You see? I lose the, um-

Sees DEATH

PLAYER 2

No wonder. You play to infuriate people. I'll, uh, see you around, I guess.

Gets up, turns around and sees DEATH.

Aaah! M'death.

DEATH

Excuse me.

PLAYER 2

Um, yeah, okay.

Crosses past PLAYER 1 and moves to exit another way.

PLAYER 1 watches. DEATH sits.

PLAYER 1

To PLAYER 2:

Wait! I don't play chess to infuriate people. That was a lie. I-I play chess to make people happy.

PLAYER 2

What people? Who?

PLAYER 1

You.

DEATH

Making a move.

Check.

PLAYER 1

I'll see you around, I guess.

PLAYER 1 looks back to the chessboard.

PLAYER 2

Yeah.

Crosses to NARRATOR, they whisper. Exits

NARRATOR

It took death; death, ladies and gentlemen; it took death itself to make our players care about each other. But by that point, it's always too late. Let this be a lesson: don't wait for death. Don't ignore your losing position. Don't wait for the zugzwang. Death will come, and death will take you before your time, just like the master was taken. What can our novice do against an opponent formidable to even the master?

PLAYER 1

To NARRATOR:

Quiet.

NARRATOR

Takes out THE MASTER's king. Blackout except a spotlight on NARRATOR.

I have a confession to make. I don't understand this story. I- I don't understand the story I myself am telling to you. It's a crime. What does the king mean? What- what is death? What is chess? And the tragedy is: I don't know. I should, I don't. The one story that is mine and I don't. I don't. I don't. I don't.

Tips over THE MASTER's king, then drops it. Falls down, exhausted.

PLAYER 1

In darkness

Checkmate.