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Upper management wanted to collect more data from our users. Who on the corporate chain made that decision I don't know, nor do I particularly care. I just know that they want me to integrate new data collection metrics into the backend for our web app. If that all sounds boring know that it is, and also incredibly tedious.

I work in the web development division for the local headquarters of a well-known apparel and “contemporary culture” company. What that means is that they used to just be a company that made shoes and clothes, but now, with the current trend of brand worship and general ostentatiousness of said brands and of the people who wear them, it also means they hire rich college undergraduates with nothing but time on their hands to write blog posts about how awesome the new “drop” is. If you aren't part of the current streetwear zeitgeist, a “drop” is a release of whatever the hell my company is deciding to release this week. In any case, the era of big data calls for more data to be mined from our users to later be sold to other companies in order to greater increase the profit margins, or so I presume. I don't actually know what happens to the data they collect.

The walls of my cubicle were stark white and devoid of decoration. I haven't fallen into

the trap of making my personal five foot by five foot open square of hell any more home-y than it deserves to be. In case you haven't been able to tell yet I have no passion for my work. I only learned how to program because my parents decided playing chess wasn't a desirable career path and I needed something to fall back on. I never particularly liked programming, but it came naturally to me. I was always good at math and the logic all came naturally to me, probably because I play chess. The only thing on my desk other than my keyboard and computer monitor was my phone running chess puzzles.

I started playing chess when I was six. My grandparents had an antique chess table, made from mahogany with ornate designs carved into the bevels. The pieces themselves weren't your modern more abstracted chess pieces; they were made with incredible detail: knight with sword in hand rearing on a battle-crazed warhorse, the king with stern face leaning on his sword in front of him, staring forward as his equal opposite on the other side of the battlefield. The set must have been custom made because I haven't found anything similar, and believe me I've looked. I miss that chessboard about as much as I miss my grandpa.

My grandpa taught me the rules. I remembered be enamored with the game. I always pictured the game board as a grand medieval battlefield and myself as the head commander of the prestigious military. Sometimes I would play with my grandpa. It only took a few years of playing every time I was over there to start beating him consistently, and my grandpa never let me win. He was very much of the opinion that you have to earn your victories, and he didn't

baby me one bit. In retrospect, he was not very good at chess. He was better than an uninformed six year old of course, and for years finally beating him was my Everest. I remember we would play game after game where I would formulate and try (probably very basic) strategies in an effort to finally topple his king and take the battle. I still remember the day I finally bested him. It was a fairly short match, we had only lost a few pieces each and I was scanning his pawn formation when I saw a blatant opening that would let my bishop through and immediately mate his king. I had looked up pouting with a furrowed brow.

“Grandpa I told you not to let me win.” I folded my arms and looked back at the board annoyed. He looked back at me, clearly confused.

“What do you mean? Have I ever let you win?” He looked back at the board, then his eyes widened and he smiled. He chuckled then looked back up at me, the corners of his mouth curling up around the edges of his moustache. I remember my eyes darting back and forth between his king, my bishop, and my grandpa’s eyes. Then I took my bishop and finally conquered my grandpa’s king.

“Checkmate!” I said proudly, and I jumped out of my chair grinning from ear to ear. I reached out my hand toward my grandpa who looked like he was about to cry tears of joy.

“Good game, sir!” I said. He laughed, shook my hand and said “Good game.” I was hooked from there.

I continued to play chess against my grandpa for years. Steadily I began to beat him more

and more often. By the time he was diagnosed with lung cancer and had to be transferred to the local oncology specialist I had been beating him pretty much every game. He still loved to play with me of course, and was so proud of me for learning the game to the point of competency. Was I sad about his death? Of course, how could I not have been. But it wasn't a tragic death, he lived a long life. He made it clear to us on his hospital bed. "I've been here long enough, I'm ready for whatever the hell comes next." I remember how he looked, pale and emaciated, but still with brightness in his eyes and a smile on his face.

I typed some lines of code then leaned over at the chess puzzle displayed on my phone. If you don't know, the concept of chess puzzles is that you're given a scenario, your pieces in an advantageous or disadvantageous position, and you have to win. Sometimes with additional conditions like a turn count or without losing your queen or something to that effect. This one just said "Win!" Significant piece advantage for my opponent, Though I had my queen, my knights, and one bishop. My opponent was deep in my territory, their queen and bishop threatening my king... I've seen this before. Oh, of course. The immortal game. Probably the most famous chess match of all time. Cute. Easy two moves, use my queen as bait to move the knight out of position, then force mate with the bishop. I sighed. This app was well made and had a great user interface but shit like this made me want to use something else. This isn't helping me get better, I know the immortal game. I turned back to my code.

I'm by no means amazing at chess. I'm just over 2000 elo, which is the complex chess ranking system. For reference, a grandmaster is 2600 and over, and a novice is under 1600 elo. So I'm somewhere in the middle, which is actually far above average since the majority fall into the 1600-1800 range. Not to mention a single sanctioned tournament where you do poorly can drop your rating a significant amount. I remember one weekend where I did particularly poorly lost me something like 100 rating. That wasn't a fun weekend. I sighed and checked the time. I was stuck in this hellhole for another few hours, and I was probably going to finish this code in the next thirty minutes.

I didn't end up going to college; I didn't see the point. In my junior year of high school I used my programming skills to make a pretty decent chess AI. All things equal, it probably wasn't nearly as good as deep blue or anything, but it worked and could beat me and my low ranked chess club friends. I used that and some basic website design I did for family members as a way to get hired with an entry level position as a software engineer at a small local company. From there I only got more experience and have gotten to the point where I'm making more at my age than I would have if I had spent four years in college. Of course, I don't care about what I do, but hey, it pays the bills and lets me support my mom. After my father blew all of his money on a foray into restaurant entrepreneurship, he then proceeded to run off to Virginia with some bitch he met on eharmony, so now the burden of making sure my mother has food is on me. I

don't mind of course, in fact I'm more than happy to help her. I love her with all my heart, and would sooner die than leave her without anyone. It does leave me feeling trapped in this shitty software engineering job though.

On my days off I go to the local chess shop, Chess Nuts. Cute name. The place is quiet except for the low mumble of chess enthusiasts talking about opening strategies or whatever they happen to be talking about. The smell of fresh wood fills the still air of the shop, all from the custom pieces and boards they sell. The place just feels homey in general. In the summer months the place is warm and has a yellowish glow that puts the whole store in a pleasing light. The staff ~~there~~ will occasionally just talk to you for hours about chess strategy or discuss recent matches in the professional scene. There are of course chess boards there so you could play some casual matches, and there are monthly sanctioned tournaments, which I always go to. I have never taken one, some serious players go to these tournaments, a couple chess masters in fact. Players come and go, some good, some bad, but all come for the love of the game. I just want to get better.

I had been staring at my computer monitor for some time when a voice jolted me out of my trance. "Ben! You with us, buddy?" I spun my chair and came to face my cubicle neighbor Travis. Travis was an idiot. He does frontend for the company and the only reason he got this job is because he went to some prestigious university. What company execs always fail to realize is that college is all bullshit and an undergrad degree doesn't actually mean anything. In any case,

Travis may be an idiot but he's also well-intentioned, and occasionally fun to be around. He won't shut up about getting me to drink though.

"Hey Travis, you heading out?" I said, feigning a yawn.

"In a bit, gotta finish up some UX stuff before I go. Did you push those juicy backend changes so that bossman can review and merge them?" Just the way he said things, with that air of glibness. It annoyed the hell out of me sometimes.

"Yeah I'm finishing up on them now, I'll give 'em a push before I leave today." I spun my chair back to my computer and erased some code then started to re-type the exact same thing to make it look like I was doing some work.

"Sounds like a plan to me." He shoved his hands in his pockets then took a few steps into my cubicle. "Y'know Ben, I think you could possibly make this space a little more depressing. Maybe hang up some pictures of war-torn villages, really drive it all home."

"Has anyone told you that you're hilarious, Travis? You should leave this place and do some standup." We often had these sardonic battles when Travis stopped by my cubicle. I never stopped by his.

"I've considered it, I'm too pretty and not depressed enough to be a standup comic." He ran his fingers through his hair. Asshole.

"Really? I always took you to be tortured and empty inside. One of those Robin Williams

types.” I maintained my dry tone, it was key to my humor.

“Too soon.” he said with an air of sarcasm. “So, finally Friday. What are your plans for the weekend? Gettin’ wasted?” What did I tell you.

“No, Travis. Chess Nuts is having their monthly on Saturday, so I’m gonna do some practice tonight and get a good night’s rest.”

“Ooh, big tournament. Kick some ass, Benny-boy.” I suppressed my urge to wheel my chair backwards into his sternum.

“Thanks Travis.” I finished typing the code I had erased, then tabbed to my terminal and typed “git push” before logging out. “All done, let ‘bossman’ know that I finished it up.” I made some exaggerated air quotes with his neologism.

“You aren’t going to do some tests?” He asked, slightly concerned sounding. “If this fucks up our backend that won’t be good.” I slung my bag over my shoulder, slipped on my vaguely formal shoes and started toward the elevator.

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about that!” And before I could hear whatever snarky reply he had I was out of there.

I walked through the parking lot toward my old red Toyota Camry. I don’t much care about cars, this thing gets me around and was super cheap so it’s good for me. But any enthusiast would scoff at me. Then again, I would scoff at whatever they had to say about chess, so I guess



we're even. I pulled out my car keys and looked at the keychain dangling from it. It was a Staunton chess knight fashioned into a lightweight keychain. My ex-girlfriend had given it to me on my birthday soon after we had started dating. All she knew about me at that point is that I loved chess. It was nothing to her, but not many people outside of my family had given me gifts at that point so it meant a lot to me. I try not to think of her often.

I shook myself out of my trance and started to drive back to my apartment. I wasn't lying to Travis about what my evening plans were. I needed to get back and work through some openings I had drafted up.