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Legacy

Marc Boucher

My young adversary sat in his chair wearing a general's mien – certain, even cocksure. His battlefield laid out before him on the roundtable of Evergreen Nursing Home's recreation hall, a place my beloved State of Georgia has leased me for the good part of six years. Lord Bryan, as he is fondly referred to by my fellow inmates, has played his rook in line with my dear queen in hopes that I might be distracted by the sheer number of black chessmen that are still in service to me. With his finger off the ill-fated worrier, he recoils slowly, as would the family dog with the yet to be cooked steak clenched freshly in his canines. His maneuver is not fatal but it will cause losses at every next move. I play on, my hand trembling at the touch of each piece. My mind, however, is keen like a child but with the kind of patience only time can nurture.

“You win again, Mr. Wilson.”

His avowal comes without a hint of begrudging, not one ounce of insecurity or resentment.

“Next Wednesday as always Mr. Wilson?”

I remind him of the appointment made weeks ago to see Dr. Winshaw, a fellow 40 years my junior who seems to take pride in the distance he can introduce foreign objects into my body without causing long term damage.

“But, Thursday will work fine for me Bryan, if your mom could see fit to drop you here after school.”

He assures me he will be there Thursday, 3:30 sharp and that I should prepare myself to taste the bitter fruit of defeat.

II

I peered out the door to my examination room down the long hallway to see if it had cleared from its earlier congestion. To my amazement, it had filled up to where I could no longer see the room where Dr. Winshaw sat waiting with the news of my expiration. Patients were being led by nurses, their johnnies opened to various degrees. Some struggled to keep the seam folded so as to keep their hallowed backside from being exposed; others gave up the cause though no one in the hall paid them any mind. There

were gurneys with the sick and injured lying about them and orderlies steering them threw the crowded hall making certain they adhered to traffic laws and proper hospital etiquette. Janitors stood sentry with their mops and buckets waiting for any blood spatter or stomach contents to land on the shiny tile causing a hazardous situation for commuters who hurried in the narrow corridors. Doctors walked with their eyes on clipboards, somehow avoiding collisions and mishaps. There were policeman, relatives, wheel chairs being pushed. Some had bottles with tubes leading to the arm of the person in the chair. The air was alive with moans, screams, voices that blended into a sonorous hum. There was joking and crying and people saying goodbye while others were being greeted.

I pulled the fold tight on the blue and white johnnie being careful not to press hard on the wounded orifice Dr. Winshaw had explored just two hours before. I yielded to a janitor on his way to a foot cart collision, then merged into the lane that seemed to be moving at the steadier pace. With an arm concentrating on the split gown, I held the other forward as though it were a battering ram, the strategy working so wonderfully I wondered why others had not thought of it.

Dr. Winshaw's office lay five doors ahead on the left. I was fortunate to see it in time to make my way against traffic, otherwise I would be forced to wait at the end of the hall and double back. He greeted me with a forced smile and a soft handshake. The framed accomplishments on his walls told me what he was about to report was to be more than a lucky guess. I sat in a soft vinyl chair feeling the cold plastic penetrate the wispy material of my hospital issue, the sensation making me long for the clothes I arrived in for I believe that in my healthiest state, the split johnnies would cause me to feel somewhat under the weather.

He was seated coolly across from me exuding all the confidence his profession affords him. He spoke of cells and growths, vital organs and age. He used cars as an analogy; high miles, lack of maintenance, years of neglect. He was matter of fact, showing no pity on my poor soul. But he was right – about the cigarettes and the booze, about the lack of exercise and doctors and indeed I was at least 34 in car years. He read the test results like an autobiography, digging deep into my past as if we were lifelong friends.

“There are ways to extend your life but they are highly invasive and given your age and how far the cancer has progressed, I don’t feel...”

“That it’s worth it?” I interrupted.

“There are other ways of saying it – but yes.”

“So how long?”

“A month. And that would be a gift.”

The proclamation wasn’t a surprise to me but the sting I felt was. I had just been told my death date, give or take a week; it was information I thought only God was privy to. Dr. Winshaw wasn’t the ultimate being, nor was he a saint or even a bishop, but he wielded enough divine authority to inform me my time on this earth was about to come to a conclusion.

“There will be medication for you to help with the pain. I’ll see to it that Evergreen is informed of your condition; they’ll make the transition as comfortable as possible I’m sure.”

Transition? He talks as if I’m starting a new job.

“Is there anything else I can do for you Mr. Wilson?”

His question was rhetorical I’m sure, like the clerk who just sold a \$500.00 watch.

I assured him he’s done quite enough and with my left hand clasping my gown, I shook the good doctor’s hand with my right and thanked him for his valuable time. He nodded, giving me an accomplished, sympathetic visage and wished me well.

I boarded the senior bus for what was probably my last look outside the opaque walls of Evergreen. The pain that gripped me these past few months appeared as if given the go ahead to finish the job; or in some way I didn’t mind, for it occupied my thoughts leaving little room for the subject of my mortality. As the bus entered the half circle drive, my mind did enquire as to what I might do in the next life. I thought of the weatherman who collects his pay, rain or shine; the doctor, life or death; I hope to find such a line of work next time around.

III

Bryan, as promised, was in the rec hall at 3:30, the chess board pieces at attention awaiting further orders. It was eight months since he first came to the nursing home along with seven other Boy Scouts. The residents were a project for the young, something I might have found offensive if I were a cripple or deformed in some way, but as an old man with no breathing kin, I could forgive their charity. Six of the boys did their obligatory visits receiving the appropriate patch for time served. Bryan, however, took a liking to chess and so continued coming to Evergreen; his intent had shifted from humanitarian to affable competitor.

The pain of my liver being consumed stalked me as I took my seat opposite the fifteen year old boy with his eyes following me until I was seated.

“You OK Mr. Wilson?”

My smile was not a convincing answer, but I decided to leave the question at that.

“Alright, if you feel up to it I’d like to move first. I studied a few sharpies on the web and they gave me some ideas.”

I agreed, and then spun the board so that the white chess pieces faced me, a ritual that had not been questioned by the young man until this day.

“Ya know, Mr. Wilson, we’ve been playing together since last October and each time the black chessmen face you, you spin the board so they’re facing me.”

I looked up at him with tired eyes and wait for a question.

“Ah, is there a special reason you do that or is it some sort of superstition? Maybe that’s the reason I can’t beat you!”

I had hoped that his curiosity would force the inquiry. Dr. Winshaw told me I would be dead by the next new moon and I had not a soul to share that with, nor did I, up until Bryan, have an ear through which to pass on a shred of legacy from the life of Theodore Wilson.

IV

“My daddy introduced me to the game of chess. He watched it bein’ played on the railroad cars where he worked as a porter.”

Bryan sat back in his chair when I began. He must have known an answer lurked in an old man’s memoirs and so was curious enough to indulge me.

“In God’s infallible wisdom he decided to make a black baby boy, put him in the Deep South, say around the early thirty’s, and have him be a prodigy to a game maybe twelve people in the whole State of Mississippi knew how to play and none of’em of the Negro persuasion I assure you. It be like you Bryan, havin’ the heavenly talent for playin’ the blues harp and singin’ slave songs, not much audience for either. But that didn’t matter to me.

Daddy taught me about the knight, the rook, the king and queen, the pawn - he showed me what each could do and what little strategy he learned watchin’ it bein’ played on the train. Once I learned what he could teach me, I started beatin’ him. It got so he’d sooner split and stack a cord of wood then get beat by me.

I started teachin’ his buddies when they would come over to our cottage to cook up whatever game they killed. That was OK for a short while. I was teachin’em and they seemed to like the idea of playin’ the new game; it was like they was gettin’ away with somethin’. I’d have three, four matches goin’ at once - they played and ate and I got to do about the only thing I was least bit good at – besides readin’. After a while though, they got to where they’d be drunk halfway through a game, laughin’ and not payin’ attention. I think they just got tired of losin’. Daddy told me I should try losin’ once in a while, maybe folks would want to play with me more, but that didn’t make such sense, losin’ on purpose.

The minister at our church heard about how I could play this new game and decided to make Wednesdays chess night at the downstairs hall. He said it be good for members to get involved for reasons other than choir practice and bitchin’ ‘bout things.

Our first night we made sixteen chess boards outta extra tin from Bo Andrew’s barn. I drew what all the pieces looked like and everyone got to do cutouts from

cardboard, some of the women even joked of makin' biscuits in the shape of'em and playin' on the kitchen table.

Reverend Johnathan was proud as a rooster for getting everyone together for a common cause, comparing himself to Yahweh uniting his flock and bringing'em to the Promised Land. He never let an opportunity slip by to put his name alongside some biblical figure. One time, at a catfish fry, he couldn't finish his plate so he gave his leftovers to my friends, Billy and Jimmy. Next Sunday, he compared his charity to Jesus and the loaves and fishes miracle. Nobody seem to mind much though 'cos he was a real good speaker.

Well – anyway, pretty soon I was playin' a whole bunch of matches, mostly teachin', but some of the members had me thinkin' about my next move. After a while, they was playin' each other and I would walk 'round the tables like a college *professor*, case someone needed help or had a question.

Word was spreadin' that a church full of blacks was learnin' chess and some even said I was teaching'em how to read, least the ones who couldn't. Well let me tell you mister, in the early South there were two things that made white people nervous; a black person with a brain and black person who knew how to use it.

Seems the town folks had a meetin' and sent a fella over to the church with a proposition. We weren't used to such a thing back then, so we figured it would be somethin' like - you niggers stop playin' this game of chess and whatever else you're learnin' or we'll torch your houses and hang a couple of ya for good measure. But this fella, with his pock-marked skin and peculiar tick that caused both his shoulders to thrust back as if he were called to attention, made no threat of any kind.

Outta this meeting came the idea of having a celebrated chess match with this thirteen year old cracker jack against the town's grand master with the stakes being our Wednesday night meetin' and that there be no more chess playin' or public game playin' of any sort. They was pretty high on the fella I was playin' 'cos there was no 'and if ya'll win' and we figured it be best if we didn't ask.

I wasn't scared one bit 'bout playin', but Reverend Johnathan thought he should give me a talk anyway tellin' me if I said no I'd be lettin' not only the church and all the black folks down, but I'd be lettin' God down. Now God was the last one I wanted mad

at me, even more than a bunch of jittery whites, so I assured him I'd do the good Lord's work and make him proud.

V

It was a much anticipated night for the confident townspeople as they filled the street in front of City Hall. The ladies was dressed in their best church clothes and the men were suited up as if they was about to see a race at the Kentucky Derby. They smoked cigars and wore smooth hats on their proud heads and they were as pleased as punch with their situation. A quartet played on the porch in front of Percy's Hardware and people sipped beer and drinks from stemmed glasses. Not much was happening in March so they played up our match like it was some unnamed holiday. A mahogany table was placed in the middle of the street, a chair with cushions bound in fine leather faced the board on one side and a simple metal stool faced it opposite. A third chair, somewhat more comfortable than mine, had sand timers for the official who just happened to be Pastor Burgess Flint of the First Congregational Church and a fair chess player in his own right, I was told.

I took my seat on the ridged stool surrounded by a hushed crowd, just staring like they never seen a black kid before. Back then when a whole town of white people was huddled around a black man it meant the jury had come to a decision. The feeling I had sitting there was an unpleasant one at best. Reverend Johnathan and the rest could go no further then the sidewalk, still it's about as close as I seen the two colors sharing the same air.

The man I was to play appeared from the tall wooden doors of City Hall to the delight of the crowd. He waved with both arms as he walked down the granite steps acting every bit like a heavy-weight champ. He wore a striped white shirt and suspenders to hold the gray pants around his belly, surely they would have landed to his ankles without their assistance.

When he reached the small dark table, the men sang out three 'hip-hip-hooray's' and the ladies politely clapped as their eyes gazed on the one who would show those

uppity niggers their rightful place. I stood from my stool offering my hand, the gesture causing a momentary hush - I pulled it back, but kept my eyes on him. He had a large round head and lacked hair except for his beard which was full and dark with a streak of white running down the center of his chin. His green eyes looked past me as he acknowledged his audience, his short heavy arms gesturing for applause before he filled the rich looking chair.

The chess pieces were finer than any others I had seen. They were carved in marble like figurines you'd display in an elegant wood cabinet. Even the pawns took on a personality from their ornate carving. It was quite a sight.

The stout man clasped his sausage like fingers together extending them till they cracked in unison, then his eyes narrowed to the chess board. Suddenly he rose up, like a float in a parade, finally turning his attention to me.

"Behold," he said, his right arm extending towards me.

"A nigger who commands a white army, what chance do they have with such a general? And me," his hand was thumping at his chest, "shall I take this nigger army into battle? What do you suppose the outcome would be?"

A low hum of confusion settled over the crowd 'til a voice rang out.

"A draw sir - you'll both lose."

"Yes my good man! A draw. How could an all nigger force protect their king and what would become of a white man's army with a nigger general to lead them?"

A roar blanketed the air as he sat again, his eyes piercing threw mine. He spun the heavy marble board and said to me over the raucous noise, "Ain't no nigger gonna beat a white man, always remember that boy. Don't ever forget your place in this world."

His face brightened as he addressed his people. "Now it's as it should be. Let's get on with it!"

My opponent must have thought those words were new to me. Hate for us came in all shapes and sizes. On this night I believed they came from someone who was looking for an edge, he couldn't lose. He had in some ways as much at stake as me.

That is what started me playing the black chessmen whenever possible. I had to prove, if only to myself, that what he told me that night wouldn't hold true. After that game, I made it my life's work to prove all of them wrong.

“Wow, Mr. Wilson, I had no idea.”

Bryan looked past me as if distracted by the poor artwork that wallpapered the rec room.

“I know I can’t beat you, but I never would have figured you for some sort of master, if there’s such a thing. And the chess game – what happened, or should I ask?”

“It took an hour and a half, includin’ the three breaks my opponent needed to relieve his bladder, for me to call check-mate.”

“You beat him? You actually beat an older guy in front of a hostile crowd?”

“Oh, they were hostile all right. It was like I just stole a kiss from the mayors’ daughter when I yelled check-mate. I pushed through the shocked mob and made my way to the sidewalk. Pastor Johnathan, sensing the uneasiness to the loss, caught up with me and whispered, ‘Maybe you should have let him beat you.’ As we made haste to our homes, with my back to them, I wondered the same thing.”

“How’d they take it – I mean the townspeople and what happened to the guy you beat?”

“That night our church burnt to the ground.”

“Oh my God, they burnt your church because of a chess game?”

“It never was about chess. It was a matter of showin’ us they was the top of the food chain. I lose, they take learnin’ from us. I win, they try and take our soul. And that ole boy I beat? He was on a train by mornin’ holdin’ only one suitcase. I heard he moved to Kansas City to work at his brother’s funeral home.”

“They rebuilt the church I hope?”

“No. Members found other churches. Reverend Johnathan went north to spread the Gospel like only he could. I was told he used his burnin’ church in his preachin’ relatin’ the experience to Nebuchadnezzar or some such thing.”

“So, did ya stop playing?”

“I always thought God gave me the knowledge to play like I can; like I was pulled from the assembly line. Figured it had to lead to somethin’ more than gettin’ white people so pissed they start burnin’ churches down. Einstein’s theories eventually led to a whole bunch of dead people but it didn’t stop him from comin’ up with new

theories. People couldn't get used to a black man bein' so good at a game we never heard of but that never mattered to me – so, no I never stopped playin'."

"Did ya figure it out?"

"What's that Lord Bryan?"

"Why you could play chess the way you can?"

"Can't say that it ever came to me."

An interruption from the double doors to the rec room appeared in the form of Nurse Grechen, a ripe little woman who worked her wing like a prison warden. She informed my company his mother was in the lobby and that I needed to start swallowing pills, compliments of Dr. Winshaw. I assured her Bryan would be along and she should take her ring of keys and start checking the other cells.

"Bryan!"

"Yes sir?"

"I'm told my body's gonna be taken a much needed rest - guess this is gonna be our last game; according to Doc Winshaw, it's a pretty good guess."

"Are you dying?"

"I look at it like checkin' into a place where I know more people and the halls don't smell like a rail car carryin' ammonia just derailed."

"I never had anyone die on me before, except for our German Shepherd Pickles. He was hit by a car. Dad cried the whole time he buried him."

The moist shine in his eyes was tempered by a young man's ego.

"You named a German Shepherd Pickles?"

"My parents own a deli, remember?"

"That poor animal mighta thrown himself under that car with a name like Pickles."

"It was mom's idea."

"Well, I don't want you cryin' over my sorry butt. I've lived a long time and found the experience to be quite educational, if not a bit tryin' at times."

"What happened to Mrs. Wilson?"

The question was asked in the way a policeman would wonder where I was last night around 10:00. My answer some months back was satisfactory, I thought, as it had

been to those who have inquired over the years. His inquisitive nature to chess, to those who pass time here at Evergreen to life from an old man's perspective makes me wonder why I'm surprised at the question he has posed to me once again.

"Life," I said, "the actual part of livin' on this great green earth is a gift. People, however, the ones we must share it with, can be cruel, downright monstrous at times."

"She didn't die in a car accident did she?"

"No son. I found her hung from a tree in our backyard. General consensus of the locals was suicide. Mrs. Wilson and I was deeply in love – was gonna start a family. I knew she wouldn't leave that for anythin'."

I struggled to swallow the dryness in my mouth.

"I'm – I'm sorry, Mr. Wilson."

His eyes didn't leave the floor as the rec room fell silent for us amongst the afternoon bustle.

"Federals re-opened her murder, some years later."

His head finally lifted to meet my yellow gaze.

"They find them, the ones who killed her?"

Our conversation is as far as I have traveled on the subject of my wife. I have limited my thoughts of her to memories of our courtship and the time we had before I found her. If God's plan for me was to have my heart ripped out so that I might dig deep in myself and find forgiveness, then I have failed. My hate has been put in proper perspective and I have decided to leave the pardon for him.

A minute passed or maybe it was two, as Bryan waited – tolerant of an old man's lapses.

"Mind if I give you some advice Bryan? Consider it a gift to a dyin' man."

"OK, Mr. Wilson."

"Ya got a kind heart spendin' time with some lonely old people."

"I've enjoyed it," his voice trailing off.

"I just want to say, don't ever be ashamed of who you are. You're a good lookin' white kid, that's like getting' twenty points on the spread. Use what the good Lord gave you and don't take it for granted. Basketball players are born to be tall, that don't make them good.

And son – don't ever let hate take control. I chewed on it for years and got real thirsty, wasted a lot of time.”

I raised and took the young man's soft grip.

“One more thing Bryan. When ya shake a man's hand, let them know ya mean it.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Ya been a real friend. Now if you don't mind your momma's waitin' and I need to take somethin' to lessen the hurt inside.”

Epilogue

“Congressman? The Speaker’s on line two.”

“Hello Bryan? Yeah, I just wanted to congratulate you. It was a fine bill and now we can call it law.”

“Thank you, Jeff. I think the country will be a better place for it.”

“Agreed Bryan, and again, congratulations.”

Bryan Stallworth stood from his desk and spun towards the wall where a framed letter given to him nineteen years ago at Theodore Wilson’s funeral hung by itself.

“Your life was relevant, Mr. Wilson.”

He spoke to his reflection in the glass and for a moment imagined his old friend smiling behind the words he had read so many times before.

October 5, 1965

Dear Mr. Wilson,

With congratulations and gratitude, I am humbled to honor someone who personifies the very embodiment of what it is to be an American.

Your fortitude and bravery against odds most people will never and could ever know, have put you on the summit of the chess world an accomplishment only a handful have achieved – and never by an American, I might add.

Before we can truly call ours a civilized nation, we must tear down those walls that separate whites and blacks. We will someday attain that goal by having outstanding people like you face prejudice with steadfast tenacity and not allow hatred to get in the way of equality.

Yours truly,
Lyndon B. Johnson
President of the United States