

The Chessmaster

**A true story from [The Rocklore Files](#)
Of [Jamie Thompson](#)**

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I'm no good at chess. It's true. I don't play the game. I'm terrible at it! The thing about chess is, you gotta be able to plan your opponent's demise several steps in advance. There's a deviousness that's required of anyone who wants to excel at the game. I just don't have it. In fact, I don't want it! That kind of endeavor makes me sick to my stomach whenever I try to employ it.... I'm just no good at chess.

I was wandering aimlessly around the youth hostel in Provincetown , Massachusetts . It was August, 1970 and I was 11 going on 12 years old. Provincetown is a tiny little place way up on the very tip of Cape Cod . I was there because it was the last stop on a canned AYH (American Youth Hostels) bicycle trip that my mother fixed me up and sent me away on. It was the first time I was ever so far away from home without parents or siblings. It was a coming of age adventure in many ways but I'll stick to this little part of the story.

The youth hostel main building was a large sprawling rancher that offered a cafeteria, a kitchen, and many little areas for various activities: board games, card tables, pinball machines, socializing, etc.

The sleeping quarters were tiny little detached Cape Cod style bungalows that encircled the main building. There was only enough room in a bungalow to sleep and store a few things. Each one was crammed with 2 bunk beds and a single incandescent bulb hanging from the ceiling by a wire. Since the bungalows were so small, everyone found themselves wandering the big rancher looking for something to do...

I was wandering around with my hands in my pockets sort of peeking in on the various activities when suddenly I was attracted to a crowd of 30 or so kids that were huddled around a card table. Someone was speaking loudly about

something. The crowd was laughing and letting out choruses of “WHOOOO!!!.” I had to see what was up. Already 6 feet tall I was able to stand on the fringe and take in a birds’ eye view of the spectacle.... It was a chess game, already in progress.

“HA! What a STUPID move!!” shouted a kid who was facing me and sitting at one side of a chess board. He looked over the board thoughtfully for a few seconds and made his move with a smirk. His opponent took a minute or so to ponder. “C’mon man! What’s takin’ you so long??! You’re gunna lose anyway. Just move and get it over with!” the kid shouted.

“What’s going on?” I whispered to the kid next to me.

“This kid is unbeatable.” He replied. “He’s held the table all afternoon.”

“Is he a jerk, or what?” I asked.

“I guess he’s feelin’ a little cocky.”

The opponent made his move. “I can’t believe it!!” shouted the kid. “That was THE dumbest move I have EVER seen! Who taught you to play chess, your grandmother? OK, here it comes. CHECKMATE!” The kid made his move, folded his hands, laid his chin on interlaced fingers, and smiled wickedly.

The opponent looked over the board, scratched his head, and conceded, “You win.” He stood up with a sigh and vacated the seat that no one apparently had sat in for very long that afternoon.

It was about dinner time so the crowd dispersed but the chessmaster wasn’t ready to call it a day. “Who’s next?!” he shouted to the murmuring, shuffling

crowd. “Hey, where ya goin’?! C’mon, who’s gunna be my next victim?! HEY!!” Thinking that the action was over, I was distracted by a poster on the wall behind the chessmaster and didn’t realize that I was quickly becoming the only one left standing there. As the last few bodies passed by my thoughts about the poster were interrupted. “YOU!” shouted the chessmater. “Sit down and play!”

I blinked, looked behind me for a second – no one was there – and mouthed the words “Me? Noooo,” shaking my head and hands in the universally negative fashion.

“No, No. Siddown! It’s time to play one more game!”

“But, but... you don’t understand. I’m terrible at chess.” I stammered.

“I couldda guessed that! Siddown and play. I’ll take it easy on ya, I promise.”

“But I...”

“Siddown!!” He shouted ever louder. I obeyed. “All right then,” he said. We hastily arranged our respective chesspieces to their initial starting positions. I was black. “Shall we flip for the first move?” he asked, producing a penny from his shirt pocket.

“Uh,... sure!” I said with a weak smile.

“Heads or tails?”

“Heads.” He flipped the coin. “Heads it is!” I crowed throwing my hands up in victory.

His eyes narrowed into little slits. “For all the good it’ll do ya.” He said, dryly.

I opened the game with the standard pawn forward move that everyone makes. “Hmmm,” he said while countering with his pawn. I scanned the board. Then I looked up and met his eyes for a moment. He looked like a jackal, licking moistened lips, about to feast on a cornered rabbit. I made my move. “I can’t believe it!!” he shouted. “What a STUPID move!!” He laughed loudly. When he regained his composure he made his move with a condescending flourish and a smirk. Then he watched eagerly as I pondered the implications of this new set of circumstances. “C’mon! Hurry up! I haven’t got all day! You weren’t kidding. You really ARE a terrible chess player!” The back of my neck got hot. I made my move. “HAH!! I can’t believe my eyes!! Oh man, you’re a goner!!” He made his move without deliberation this time... a bad sign.

Ten minutes later...

My side of the board was riddled with casualties and his was unscathed. I looked longingly at the hoard of captured chess pieces on display in front of him: my queen, both of my knights, one bishop, one castle, and a rabble of pawns. Things were not going well. I made my next desperate move designed only to prolong the inevitable.

“You are the worst chess player on earth!!! That was THE stupidest move I’ve EVER seen!!” He waved his hand derisively and then, with no deliberation, made his next move.

And there it was... I looked... I saw it.... It was right there in front of me. I blinked to make sure it was really there... A long alley of open black board squares, corner to corner, in between my bishop - one of the last significant pieces I had left - and the chessmaster's queen. I just stared in amazement for a few seconds. My perspective of the chessboard seemed to flatten out and the alley to the kill shined like freshly polished marble in some kind of royal hall with his queen sitting at the far end like a fresh, crisp, juicy red pepper just waiting to be picked. Then time itself seemed to stand still. I couldn't hear anything as I looked up to see him – the chessmaster – all in slow motion, wringing his hands with perverse delight, his head thrown back and laughing a great belly laugh. Then I heard an echoey sound that reverberated off of the surrounding walls that corresponded with the movement of his big fat mouth. **“YOU STINK!!! STINK, STINK, STINK, STINK, STINK...”**

Sensing the energy of the moment the chessmaster, still laughing, looked at me. Our eyes locked for an instant. I broke away and made my move as he looked on... still sputtering. I scraped the bottom of the bishop on the chessboard's surface to show conclusively that there was nothing in its way. I knocked his queen over, picked her up and displayed her proudly in my very roomy prisoner of war area. The chessmaster stopped laughing.

“Hey, whaddya think you're doing?!” he yelled.

“I took your queen.” I said, flatly.

“You can't do that!” he said, his voice rising in pitch. His eyes wobbled back and forth as he scanned the board.

“Really? Well, I did it.” I said evenly.

“But... but...” He face flushed. "How did you do that?!"

“I used my bishop." I said in my best information-only tone. "I moved it diagonally right down that line of squares that you left open and took your queen.” I was showing no emotion outside but inside I was ready to bust!

“But... but...” His face contorted. Drops of perspiration formed on his brow and ran down his cheeks. He kept staring at the board, scanning the bishop’s path, hoping to find some way out of facing the terrible truth...

“The dumbest move you’ve ever seen, right?” I was poker-faced but I have to say that stifling that laugh was one of the hardest things I’ve ever done!

The chessmaster looked at me with a crazed expression. His eyes crossed, narrowing into little slits as he hung his head. Then he suddenly looked up.

“**YOU!!...**” he said in a gravelly voice usually reserved for demons. He fixed his eyes on me, shifting in his chair. He began to breathe heavily, shooting droplets of foamy white spittle out of flaring nostrils and tight lips.

“**YOU!!...**” He was turning purple! Suddenly he grabbed the card table on both sides and vaulted up shrieking,

“YOU CHEAT!!!”

I covered my face and skidded backwards in my chair! Chess pieces rained down on me as the side of the card tabletop hit the floor with a great crash! The chessboard flopped on the floor upside down by my feet while chesspieces

tinkled, scraped, rolled and spun around on the floor in an amazing display of order in chaos!

I uncovered my face just in time to see the chessmaster racing away, sputtering, cursing, shoving past startled people, and kicking over chairs that happened to be in his way.

I sat there for a long moment as the air cleared and all of the movement came to rest.

“Winner by default!” I shouted through cupped hands over my mouth. No one took notice. I sifted the debris for the red queen. I hugged her, kissed her, and said, “You and me babe. We did it!”

Reflecting back I can see now that this was one of the first of many encounters I've had over the years with abusive, power-hungry, controlling, people who will say and do absolutely anything to get power over others and to avoid taking responsibility for what they say and do... people who draw a sick satisfaction from serving others with intimidation, manipulation and humiliation... people who improvise lies as needed to protect their precious pride/reputation and to keep them from having to deal with reality. The funny thing is, in this case my taking the chessmaster's queen wouldn't have made any difference to the outcome of the game. He could've easily beaten me in just a few more moves without it. The bottom line for the chessmaster was, though, that he couldn't, under any circumstances, accept responsibility for his oversight. He had to shift the blame to me and bail out before he could be held accountable. He knew he couldn't make his claim that I cheated stick so he chose instead to smokescreen the whole situation with an outrageous outburst of anger, trash the whole game, and disappear.

Does all this sound in some way familiar to you?

I've played chess two, maybe three times since then. I'm still no good at chess... but I'm a lot better at spotting and dealing with "the chessmasters" of the world.

The End



Jamie Thompson is a writer, musician, songwriter, photographer, videographer, husband, and the full-time caretaker of two small children.

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