

## The Final Gambit

At the age of nine, living in Santa Fe, NM, my father taught me the basics of the game of chess. I instantly found joy in the art of thinking ahead. Never attached to a particular strategy or goal, I simply enjoyed playing. When winning, I would often choose unexpected moves just to produce the most interesting game. When losing, I enjoyed the challenge of being the underdog and could eek out an endgame to epic proportions. By staying calmly engaged, I often turned the tables on an opponent who had taken an early advantage. My eyes rarely left the board for what often turned into hours of play. For years after I had left the school, the beginning team had a chant: “Play slow like Karah Pino.”

My elementary school chess coach was the husband of my 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher. Their son Tyler was the player on our team who beat me most regularly. At meets, our most challenging competitors were usually the students from Los Alamos. Los Alamos drew top scientists from around the world to work, often in secret, at the National Laboratories. Their children usually dominated the top placings. Experiencing this environment as a girl, being underestimated was simply a fact of life. But as a player, being underestimated could come in very handy sometimes.

At the state championship in my 6<sup>th</sup> grade year, Tyler took first and I took sixth. I stopped playing competitively upon entering Junior High. I had grown weary of the social idiosyncrasy that began to follow each tournament game. When my male opponents claimed, “checkmate,” along with the word there escaped a deep relief in their voice. Their gratitude was from having avoided the crushing blow of being beaten by a g-i-r-l. And when it was I who spoke, they would feel especially humiliated. It was annoying. And as my training bra gave way to a B cup, the inequity became equally more pronounced.

One of my most valuable lessons from that time was the discovery that trained reflexes could create a weakness as detrimental as a complete lack of knowledge or skill. There was a certain incalculable advantage in maintaining a pure level of spontaneity. The joy was in riding the edge of the fractal equation in its shifts through sets of variables. The challenge was to pull back just as the pattern turned from Complexity into Chaos. In my graduate studies in Chinese Medicine I learned that this is also called “Following the Tao.”

After High School, I moved to Seattle and eventually ended up at the University of Washington to study physics. Within the first year, I realized that studying physics through academia involved wading through years of dreary and intentionally competitive coursework before getting to work in the lab. The fall of my sophomore year, I switched from physics to Art. Through the Art department, I still engaged conceptually in the complex interaction of variables in multidimensional equations. But the art building had big toys and I got to play with them right away. No one who met me after I abandoned my initial course of study would have guessed me a chess player at all.

By the end of my Junior year, my sister, still in Santa Fe, had gotten herself deeply enmeshed in a lifestyle of gangs and drugs. After one particularly destructive weekend, she realized the danger she was in and, scared, went home for help. Since I had raised her from the age of 6, I had always been the only one who could effectively talk her down. One night, I checked my answering machine and heard the message that my sister would be arriving in Seattle the next day. A band tightened around my chest.

When I opened my door, she was pale with dark circles under bloodshot eyes. By the end of the night she began shaking uncontrollably and couldn't hold down any food. I had no idea what to do. I made her tell our Aunt, a community health MD what was going on. Her advice was to pursue professional help. Our parents refused. Overwhelmed, my meager resources began to crumble. We were kicked out of my

apartment and bounced from couch to curb. I mostly slept in the Art Building until the end of my Spring term classes. Over the summer, I lived in a sheep shed on a farm 3 hours bus ride outside of Seattle, coming in for a blacksmithing class and work. I kept my weekend managerial position until the end of summer when I could no longer function. My sister made a different choice. She began to sell herself to make a living on the street.

By autumn, the hopelessness and lack of sleep took me near to a complete mental breakdown. I returned home, emotionally devastated, to wade through the wreckage of what I had known as “family”. While in Santa Fe, I furthered my work with steel at a small smithy started by a mathematician turned metalworker. The strain of the ordeal had set my adrenaline into perpetual overdrive. Only a physical exhaustion would subdue me. The mental demands of blacksmithing challenged my strategic mind and the raw physicality gave me a powerful vent for my roiling emotions.

Even though I was 800 miles away, I was connected to my sister by bonds I had no words to describe. It would take me nearly a decade to unravel why I could viscerally feel the moments when she was in trouble. One night the images that flashed through my mind every time I closed my eyes were so disturbing, I couldn't stand to be indoors. I drove around Santa Fe aimlessly, trying to convince myself I was crazy. The fact was that whether or not what I saw was true, there was nothing I could do about it. It was that winter night in 1997 that I would play my final game of chess.

It was past bar time and the streets were mostly empty. It had snowed a few inches during the day and the melt had frozen into an icy layer. I spun donuts in an empty parking lot until I saw a police car circle around a second time. I finally parked at one of the few 24-hour places in Santa Fe, Carrow's restaurant. It was a busy night and all of the booths were full. Looking around for a table, I noticed a chess game going on in the back room. I watched along with a small crowd until the end.

Playing black was a cone-head in his mid 30's with stringy hair and a scruffy beard to complete the stereotype. His opponent was an older Indian man who looked to be mildly inebriated. I guessed he was playing the white man mostly to humor him, the game also keeping him in the warmth of the restaurant. The cone-head had an aggressive offense and he quickly, ruthlessly over powered his opponent. As the crowd dispersed, the old Indian gestured to me. I stepped forward and bent down to hear him over the din.

"You play chess, don't you?" He said.

Startled, I replied with a shrug, "I used to play,"

"You should play him," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

I shrugged again and shook my head, "It's been a long time."

The other man glanced at me, sized me up and said patronizingly, "Yes, have a seat, it's always good to be refreshed."

"Come on," the Indian urged. "I'll protect you if he tries anything rude." He nodded assuringly, gesturing across the table to the man who was busily resetting the board. He winked, smiled a Coyote smile and patted the vinyl seat beside him.

Looking around once more, I saw there weren't any tables open in the back either. There also wasn't anyone familiar enough to jump into a booth with. I sighed and reluctantly took the seat next to the old Coyote. I looked at the board and recognized the once familiar checkered landscape. At least it would get me out of my

own head for a while. As my focus narrowed, the board expanded to consume my whole consciousness. Everything else faded into the distance. I had been given white and with it, the first move. I decided on a standard opening: QP4.

Turned out my opponent was a “Queen-man” and he aggressively pursued mine early in the game. Unperturbed by her loss, I switched instead to playing my knights. I kept my remaining forces loosely gathered in layers around my king in the castle. He set up direct offenses, attack after attack. By developing a Stonewall defense, I was able to continually deflect him. He invested so heavily on his offensive skills that he allowed his own defenses to wear thin. This allowed me to call “check” from safe distances. My indirect attacks forced him to spend a turn chasing me out. En route, I whittled away at his pawns and once there was room, began pushing mine across the board.

Two hours into the game we were down to 8 pieces each. I still had a white bishop, both rooks and one knight. One of my last three pawns was 1 space from being queened, blocked by his Rook. I danced my knight around protecting my remaining pieces. His focus was perpetually on his queen. She was poised to head triumphantly across the board to mate my King. If only I would stop distracting him with my advancing pawn and seemingly futile backhanded attacks. He had spent the past hour becoming increasingly agitated as his early lead slowly dwindled to only 3 points.

Coyote leaned over and whispered in my ear, something he had done less and less as the game progressed. His advice had generally been either in statements of the obvious or a loosely thought out strategy. This time he said, “If you check with your bishop, he will defend with his queen and you can take it.” It was a simple and obvious gambit. I didn’t think he would fall for it. I had nearly cleared paths for both my rooks. If he lost his Queen, my rook would have a clear shot across the board to force his rook to retreat and free up my pawn to be queened.

I studied the board awhile longer and decided on the play. Its success would require him to react without thinking. Even if he didn't fall for it, he would have to retreat his King into a corner or loosen his defenses further by moving one of his remaining pawns. Both possibilities would serve me well as I formulated an attack. I touched my bishop and cautiously moved it lingering longer than I usually did to make it appear I was uncertain about my choice. Coyote was right. "Genius Boy" reacted before I had even returned my hand to my lap. His breathing quickened, he thought he had the game. He pounced on my bishop and slammed down his queen. As quickly as he had moved, I hooked in the knight he had neglected to notice.

Coyote let out a cheer and there was murmuring from outside my tightly locked visual frame. My opponent was stunned. His face turned from delight to shock and finally, like a teakettle boiling, flushed with humiliation. He realized that he had just lost the game. I would corner his king in four moves. In a flash, the hand he had poised to set his offense into action swept across the board. The quick motion sent all the remaining pieces flying across the aisle. It was the most melodramatic resignation I'd ever seen.

I snapped into complete alertness. Only then did I notice that there were close to ten people leaning towards the board. The crowd hissed and clucked. The ones who understood what had transpired explained to those who were confused. Coyote, still seated next to me, guffawed, slapping his thigh and chuckling, "You thought you had an easy win and this little girl just beat you down. Now you are feeling so stupid!" He laughed gleefully his shoulders shaking. "I told her to do that, I told her you would fall for it! Didn't I?" He nudged me. I half-smiled accommodatingly, looking for a quick exit as the crowd began to disperse.

"It's ok..." my opponent replied, "I know... I do the same thing," he was shaking his head in disbelief.

I stood up and helped him pick up the pieces and once the board was rolled up, held out my hand and said the customary, "Good game."

"Wait, wait, sit down." He said earnestly. "I'm sorry I over-reacted."

He introduced himself and explained how he had come to Santa Fe. It was a familiar story. There are only a few strains of people attracted to the high desert ritual ground I grew up in. He looked at me very intently and said, "You're the woman I've been looking for. Someone who could beat me on the board and off."

Not wanting another public scene, I raised my eyebrows and looked interested. Inwardly, I rolled my eyes and clenched my jaw, wondering how long I would have to amuse him before I could escape. I answered his questions vaguely and was mostly sullen, trying to throw him off. He didn't seem to notice. I half-listened as he explained his economic theory about how a thousand people investing a \$1000 each could change the course of the stock market. Interesting theory, but improbable, in my experience it's difficult to get any number of people to agree to do anything together: The more people, the more improbable.

I noticed the sky turning gray. Morning was coming and I needed to get back before my parents woke up. I stood up again to leave. He asked for my number. I evaded saying that I was staying in Santa Fe only temporarily before heading back to Seattle. He gave me his number and some contact information of "people in Seattle that are important to know." I took the paper and smiled, promising to call before I left town. Turning quickly, I walked out of the restaurant.

It was another gambit. He had just lost the second game of the night. I had no need for a hyper-reactive, emotionally stunted intellectual in my life. I may have been

the woman of his dreams, but I didn't see that his dreams had anything to do with me. I had no words to explain my own feelings in a way he would be able to hear. His emotional attachment to crushing me as his opponent revealed his over dependence on the valuation of a deductive mind. I was seeking to participate in a world that weighed the value of the mind only by how well it was in service to an open heart.

Since that day, I seek to play only games that are set up for multiple and varying levels of success. These "non-zero sum" games allow for the development of true and sustainable winning situations. Once the win-win becomes the goal, there is no longer an advantage in a hierarchical ruling structure. Furthermore, when there is a common goal with no set rules, there become infinite ways to play. This flexibility of play allows varied skill sets to thrive equally. Creativity and adaptability become the most advantageous strategic skills. Once begun, these games become an endless dance. This is the deeper pattern of the game of life. And **this** is a worthy game to strive to win.