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PAWN PROMOTION

by

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Lewis Brett put the chessboard in his office because he wanted to be vice-president of marketing.

There were five senior salesmen who could reasonably be considered for the position when Ben Overman retired at the end of the year. Three were long shots. Only one, Mitchell Kloster, posed a serious threat to Lewis.

Kloster was the epitome of the old-time salesman. Loud voice. Loud ties. A hearty handshake and a slap on the back. He'd started selling on the road just after the Second World War, two years before Lewis had been born. Kloster delighted in telling people how his broom line had swept the country by 1952. How, Brett wondered, could anyone take a man like that seriously? But someone had.

Kloster was head of the company's southeast sales force. Brett only managed to squeak by when monthly totals were announced because his territory, the northeast, was

blessed with a demonstrably higher average income per household. But even so there were two months last year now best forgotten when Kloster had actually managed to top him in total sales.

Oh, yes. Kloster was his major competition. No question. But he was almost sixty and Lewis Brett had just turned thirty-one. In seven years Brett had soared like a rocket from the base earth of a tiny dealership in Utica to the starry firmament of sales director for seven states. He saw Ben Overman's job as just one step on his way to the presidency of the company itself. Christopher Lake, the current occupant of that position, was almost as old as Overman. But first things first.

The last few months Kloster's sales figures had crawled slowly, but steadily, up the charts towards Brett's. Brett had done all that was humanly possible to squeeze the last few pennies from his territory: promotions, contests, a media blitz coordinated with Jean Daniels in advertising that rivaled a presidential candidate's in an election year. It was a huge outlay of money, but Brett had been rewarded. His sales climbed to new record levels.

But somehow Kloster, with a smaller budget, sometimes hitting the road himself ("just like the good ole days"), managed to keep pace.

So it was that Brett looked to other ways of improving his position in the firm. The fact that Kloster's wife, Ellie, was an incredible cook, and Lake readily accepted invitations to dine every couple of months, infuriated Brett, who was unmarried, and had no culinary leanings whatsoever. Taking Lake and his wife to a restaurant was simply not a strong enough counter.

But there was a point in his self-image where Christopher Lake was vulnerable. He saw himself as an intellectual. He collected Bordeaux, and first editions of W.H. Auden. He composed haiku for the company newsletter.

Brett knew that here was a side of the man that his rival couldn't touch. Kloster's exuberant vulgarity yapped like a small dog at the ankles of Lake's pretensions to intellect. And if Lake ever forgot himself enough to be grouchy, it was when confronted by a lack of decorum, a breach of etiquette, or a failure to share with him a sense of where each thing had its place in an ordered and orderly universe. Brett could tell that Kloster's jokes, as much as the spots of Ellie's admittedly excellent gravy on his

shirts, annoyed Lake more than he would ever allow himself to admit.

Whether Brett and Lake were fellow compulsives under their tightly starched collars, or (as a med student acquaintance of Brett's had once angrily described him) anal retentives, here was a common ground that would be unknown territory indeed to Mitchell Kloster.

Brett already had an office that for neatness rivaled an operating room before major surgery, but he had it redecorated at his own expense, stressing stark simplicity, pattern and form.

He bribed the attendant in the executive washroom to read the labels on Lake's shirts, and then commissioned a dozen of his own, each quietly elegant. And Brett would allow neither stain nor wrinkle to foul them.

And he bought the chess set.

Brett had played chess in college with the aforementioned med student, and a loosely structured group of campus intellectuals who called themselves the Nimzo-Indians. There were those on campus who thought they were a theosophical offshoot of Hinduism or TM given to collective meditation at all hours of the night. Such was not the case. They contemplated not the infinite, but

sixty-four squares of alternating black and white, and the pieces resting so transitorily upon them.

It was always a source of amazement and consternation to the other Nimzo-Indians that the sole business administration major within their circle was also the best chess player. It did not help that Brett claimed to apply techniques of sales and advertising to his game, often commenting after a particularly decisive win that by his play he'd "sold" his opponent the notion that he was concentrating on a kingside attack, when in fact he's been out to trap that bishop all along. Needless to say the one course Brett had most trouble with was Business Ethics. For him false advertising was a contradiction in terms.

Lewis Brett spent the better part of two weeks deciding on which chess set to purchase for his office. He visited several stores, and even a fine collection in ivory and gold at a private museum. He settled on ultra-modern pieces of black and white jade. Pieces of substantial weight and size, the mere touch of which was a rich tactile pleasure. Their cool, smooth surfaces reflected for him the pure clarity of a game where nothing is hidden, nothing left to chance.

For the board he chose a modern glass-topped table supported by sleek, polished steel legs, its squares of a size which allowed the pieces to sit comfortably, not cramped by their neighbors, nor isolated from them.

The table sat beneath his black and white Mondrian print like an altar to the Gods of Order and Harmony.

Brett reasoned that even if Lake did not play, (a slim possibility -- what compulsive does not?), he would still be impressed by his sales director's command of a game that stressed those qualities Lake admired most in the world.

But Brett also knew that simply because Lake passed his office on the way out the door each night, there was no reason to suppose he would look in and see the stage Brett had so painstakingly set for him. So Lewis began a campaign to insure at least that Lake heard. He began challenging his co-workers to games. And with one notable exception he found ways of coercing them to play. Only Mitchell Kloster good-naturedly refused his challenge, saying his lunch hour could be more profitably spent at the Lion Inn with bourbon and a char-broiled steak. This irked Brett, but he consoled himself with the thought that it was very unlikely Kloster could give him much of a game anyway.

Soon a chess match at lunchtime because a familiar ritual, and often would attract a small group of onlookers, munching sandwiches or spooning yogurt in rapt silence. And one day Brett was gratified to discover standing next to an elderly man he recognized as the building's janitor: Stella Gardner, Lake's secretary. Word had penetrated the president's inner sanctum.

Unfortunately, while news of the board and its owner's prowess spread high and low like a rumor of merger, Brett found no one whose game seriously challenged him. He enjoyed the contest in its own right, and was disappointed by the lack of provocative competition. But, he told himself, boredom was a small price to pay for the ultimate goal he had set his sights on.

For some time Lewis Brett had taken to working late, occasionally not snapping off his light until well after ten. This was not because he had more work than he could handle during regular business hours. He did not. He did not believe that much work could exist. With the help of his secretary, Mary Rosen, (just the right combination of crisp efficiency, perky intelligence, and warm, open-hearted beauty), Brett had often found his desk cleared before five.

No, he stayed late because Christopher Lake stayed late. And he hoped that since he never missed a quota or deadline, Lake must have thought, when he strode past the closed door of Brett's office and saw that bright glow beneath the door, (provided by an artfully arranged spotlight ostensibly illuminating a brass Barrocal sculpture on its thin pedestal), that Brett was working on something new, a strategy that would put the company at the forefront of its field.

Actually Lewis spent these evenings reading modern poetry, or what he had learned from discrete espionage, Lake considered modern poetry. He hated it, but was forever on the lookout for opportunities to quote from Auden or Gertrude Stein or William Carlos Williams during staff meetings, those rare occasions when he came face to face with the president of the company. However such opportunities for literacy were few and far between amidst the clutter of statistics, forecasts, and industry trends.

After he purchased the chess set Brett returned to studying chess positions as he had in college, setting up one from the newspaper or a book, then studying it for hours at night. Sometimes he'd even leave a position until

morning to study it again, playing line after line until Mary brought in his mail.

One evening Lewis Brett was exhausted from a day long session with several of his district managers where much was said, but little decided. Even a particularly engaging middle-game position he'd reached the night before failed to hold his interest. He knew the president was still down the hall hard at work on something or other. What if tonight was the night Lake chose to look in to have a word with Brett, and found him asleep at his desk? Such a catastrophe could not be allowed to happen. So reluctantly he turned out his office light and went home.

The next morning Brett returned to his office, greeted Mary, and began to leaf through his mail. Another report from Hanziger in Vermont. Sales were lagging behind Brett's other states again. Hanziger would have to be replaced before he did any real damage to the yearly totals. But Brett's mind refused to focus on the problem. He pushed the mail away from him, and yawned. The late nights, the pressure, his campaign for the vice-presidency of marketing, all were taking their toll.

He rose from behind his desk and stretched. The staff meeting wasn't due to start for awhile yet. Maybe he could

lose himself in the chess game for a few minutes and restore his concentration.

He walked over to the board and looked down at it, again admiring the pieces, works of art yet also full of latent power just waiting to be released. He sat down and began to reacquaint himself with the position. He'd been playing both black and white. Black's Caro-Kann Defense had left several of his queenside pieces constricted. But he'd engineered a couple of exchanges and was on the verge of freeing both Black's Queen and Queen Bishop. It was starting to come back to him. He settled more comfortably in the chair. But then he frowned.

Something was wrong.

Last night when he'd left, it had been White's move. Brett had planned to develop White's Queen Bishop, attacking Black's advanced Knight, and clearing the way for a Kingside castle. But White's Queen Bishop Pawn was not where he remembered it. The Pawn had advanced one square to bishop five, threatening to constrict Black's position once more, and at the same time create a strong, unbroken pawn chain that could cause lots of mischief.

Brett was sure he had not moved the pawn. He'd been tired certainly, but was not tired enough to make such a dangerously aggressive move without proper study.

The conclusion was inescapable. Someone else had advanced the pawn. It was the first time anyone had touched his board in his absence, and his immediate reaction was anger. He summoned his secretary.

"Mary, did you touch any of the chess pieces this morning?"

Her gaze shifted from his face to the board and back again.

"No, Mr. Brett."

"Who's been in here then?"

"Since I arrived? No one. Why? Is there a piece missing?"

"No, no. Everything's here." He pursed his lips.
"Sorry I bothered you."

She glanced at her watch. "Staff meeting in twenty minutes."

"Thank you."

When she had gone, Brett returned to the table and stared down at the board.

At the staff meeting Brett caught Mitchell Kloster looking at him with an amused expression on his face. When Brett's eyes met his, Kloster raised his eyebrows and smiled. During this brief exchange Brett did not hear Lake compliment a presentation by a young accountant, and therefore missed a perfect opportunity for:

"Victor was only eighteen,
But his figures were neat and his margins
straight
And his cuffs were always clean"

Back in his own office Brett wrestled with the possibility that Kloster had moved the pawn as some sort of challenge, but rejected this finally. The man lacked the necessary subtlety of mind. It was something Brett himself might have considered to rattle an opponent, or test him, but never Kloster. And since Brett had obviously not done it, what about someone like him?

The president of the company had still been there when Brett had left the night before. He had the opportunity. Stella Gardner often worked late with him, but she was hardly the chess-playing type.

Mary managed to scrounge up a magnifying glass from somewhere for him, but the jade pawn had been carefully wiped free of fingerprints. Brett smiled to himself. If the piece had been moved from someone's idea of innocent fun, he or she would hardly have taken the time to remove their fingerprints. It was more than that. It was a challenge.

Brett cancelled his scheduled lunch hour chess game, and studied the position for most of the afternoon. Finally he settled on Black's response: Pawn to queen's knight three. Then for the second night in a row he did not stay late.

In the morning Brett went immediately to the chess board. White's Queen Knight Pawn had moved to knight four. He checked, then grinned. No fingerprints on any of the pieces.

It had to be Lake. And for whatever reason he'd done it, he had taken Brett's bait better than Brett could have dreamed. Here was the chance he'd been waiting for. Now, if the game continued, Lake could see first hand the intelligence, daring, and tactical brilliance that would make Lewis Brett the best vice-president of marketing the company had ever had.

Brett cancelled the day's lunch hour chess game, and all future games until further notice. He rushed through what work he had that couldn't wait, and again spent the rest of the afternoon at the chessboard. When Mary looked in to say goodnight he made his move: Pawn to queen's rook four.

By the end of the first week Brett had traded two Pawns, and his advanced Knight, but was slowly beginning to open up his position. White played him tough, tougher than anyone had in years, almost trapping him on two occasions. Neither as yet had an opportunity for a concerted attack.

The night before White had snatched up Brett's under-protected King's Pawn. Lewis was trying to decide whether to fortify his extremely vulnerable Queen's Pawn (the obvious move), or to go for something far more perilous when Mary interrupted him.

"Mr. Brett, you wanted to make the decision on Mr. Hanziger's replacement this week."

With an effort Brett tore himself away from the game and scowled up at her.

"Not now, Mary!"

She looked hurt at his tone of voice, and his face softened.

"The first of next week will be plenty of time. It's an important position, and I don't want to rush into anything."

Uncertain as to whether he was referring to Mr. Hanziger's job or the chess game, Mary nodded and left him.

By the end of the day Brett had decided to ignore White's threat to take the Queen Pawn. There was a trap there that could lose White his Queen, if he became too greedy. So, a Pawn down, Brett developed his remaining Knight to bishop three.

Lewis Brett returned to his practice of staying late in his office, but now he had a better reason. He wanted the extra time to study the position without fear of interruption from his secretary or anyone else. He realized happily that as late as he stayed, Lake always remained after him.

Three days later Brett forced White to retreat for the first time (Rook to bishop one), and had made it difficult for White to castle. The day after this he orchestrated an appearance in the hall timed to meet Lake when the president was on his way to lunch. He caught the president's eye and smiled. His smile was met with a

ferocious glance that sent him chuckling back to his office.

He sat grinning at his desk, savoring his success, ignoring the board. He'd earned a respite. But suddenly a chilling thought struck him. What if he beat Lake? And Lake resented it? He could be handing the vice-presidency to Mitchell Kloster on a platter.

That afternoon the game sat forgotten as Brett turned this new dilemma over and over again in his mind. Should he let Lake win? Had he proven himself enough so that a tightly fought loss would still gain him his promotion? Should he try for a draw? A foolhardy tactic when your opponent's a Pawn up and eyeing your jugular.

It was already growing dark, and Brett had not yet studied White's latest response in any detail, when he made his decision. He would do his best to win. Lake had shown himself to be an honorable, if hard-nosed, businessman. He would admit his defeat gracefully, if privately, and acknowledge Brett's superiority in that single game, because when Brett was vice-president they would be seeing a lot more of each other, and there would be opportunities for numerous rematches.

Brett returned to the board, and to the attack: Rook to rook four. With a passed Pawn now advanced to queen six, he was going after White's pesky Queen's Bishop Pawn, hoping to pull even in material again.

Several days later, with a backlog of work beginning, for the first time in Mary Rosen's memory, to pile up on his desk, Brett had regained the Pawn, exchanged Rooks, and overlooked a thrust aimed directly at the heart of his weakened castled position. And he was forced to face the unbelievable thought that his best might not be good enough.

Unless he re-grouped, retreated, and played a distastefully cautious game, White could in two moves press a devastating attack that would pluck his King from behind its barrier of Pawns, and leave his majesty naked and afraid in the middle of the board.

Brett stared in horror at White's Queen and Bishop poised like arrows at the ends of two long, unobstructed diagonals, tautly quivering, eager to puncture his defenses.

Suddenly his office felt small and close. Its furnishings sterile, comfortless. He had to get out, away

from that oppressive atmosphere, clear his head, approach his predicament from a new perspective.

He wandered the hallways and corridors of the building, head bent, hands clasped tightly behind him, all his possible responses examined, rejected, then examined again. He washed his hands in the executive washroom, walked down two flights of stairs, and washed them again in one of the restrooms for ordinary employees.

He roamed, oblivious to the speculative looks of his co-workers, not hearing their wary greetings, puzzled queries.

Mitchell Kloster stood at his favorite post by the coffee machine telling risqué stories to the western sales director and two secretaries. After Brett passed them, muttering to himself, an added comment from Kloster brought appreciative laughter from his audience. The laughter somehow managed to penetrate Brett's thoughts and he whirled, glaring at Kloster. Then he smirked when he saw the gravy stains on the man's tie, and hurried on. Let Kloster break his spine bouncing along rutted roads from one poor southern backwater to another. He, Brett, knew what Lake's final decision would be based on.

This distraction freed Brett's brain for a moment only, but in that brief span of time something jumped from synapse to synapse. An idea occurred to him. As he considered it he steered himself toward an elevator that would carry him back to his office, and the chess game that awaited him there.

Ignoring his secretary's question concerning some phone calls he was supposed to return, Brett entered his office and quietly closed the door behind him. He seated himself at the chess table.

The move that he considered, Queen to knight five, would virtually force a trade of Queens, and with them off the board his passed Pawn would loom larger and larger. But did White have an answer? If he refused to trade and shifted his Queen to another square along that same diagonal, what then?

At four pm Lewis Brett decided White would have to trade, and moved his Queen. He spent the next hour returning phone calls and dictating letters. He walked Mary Rosen to her car. They both had smiles on their faces.

The next morning Brett saw that White had taken his Queen. He retook with his Knight. The following morning White had moved his remaining Rook to knight one. On the

face of it, this was a strong play. Brett's Knight and the Bishop on the file behind it were both en prise, undefended. The Knight was in effect pinned, and Brett would have to waste a move defending a pinned piece.

He skipped the staff meeting, but he knew Lake would understand, and accept it as a compliment, a sign of how seriously Brett had received his move of the night before. He skipped lunch, but managed a cup of bouillon and some stale cookies for dinner.

And at nearly nine o'clock that night he saw it.

He could ignore White's attack on his Knight, exchange his Bishop for White's Knight, and then? Threat of a terrible Knight fork that would lose White a piece. While White squirmed to maneuver out of that he would have two moves in which to promote his Pawn. When it reached the eighth rank he would resurrect his Queen, and the game would be his.

After he'd made his move Brett tiptoed down the hall and listened at Lake's door. This was a dangerous risk, and he had avoided the temptation to spy on the president up until now for fear of being caught. But tonight the adrenaline flowed in him like wine. He heard a murmur of voices. Stella Gardner was working late, too. That

increased the risk and made it unacceptable. He would wait until morning for his triumph. Lewis Brett slipped silently down the darkened hallway and into the night.

Unable to sleep or eat much of a breakfast, Lewis still came to work in the morning with his suit neatly pressed and a spring in his walk. He joked with Mary, and paused at her desk to leaf through the mail. He decided Ray Price could ably fill Hanziger's shoes, and told Mary to draft appropriate letters to both. Unable to prolong it any further, he entered his office, and crossed to the board.

Nothing was changed. White had not moved.

It took Brett several moments to realize what he was seeing, but even then he did not understand it. For a brief, ecstatic second he thought White had resigned. But there was a universal sign in chess for resignation: the tipping over of the King as an animal bears its neck to a predator it can no longer outrun. But the King had not been moved. Brett got out the magnifying glass. His fingerprints were still clearly visible. The pieces had not been wiped clean.

He sank into the chair and let a steel-gray wave of suspicion was over him. Was Lake going to cheat him after all? Had he realized he was beaten, but not able to face

defeat at Brett's hands, was going to pretend it never happened?

The suspicion became anger, and the anger grew into rage. There was no other explanation. Lewis stormed out of his office and down the hallway. He pushed passed an indignant Stella Gardner, and entered Christopher Lake's private office.

Lake dismissed his secretary with a wave of his hand, and smiled at Brett.

"Well, Lewis, you are certainly agitated about something. What is it?"

"You know damn well what it is!"

"Yes," Lake sighed, "I suppose I do. I know you're disappointed -- "

"That does not come close to describing how I feel."

Irritated by this intrusion into his carefully chosen words, Lake continued.

"Let me tell you frankly, Lewis, that while Mitch Kloster may not exactly be my kind of people, he's shown me something. Under pressure, when the chips were down, he just worked harder. Despite his age the man's energy is incredible! I considered you very carefully for Ben

Overman's job, but in the last few weeks something has happened. You apparently couldn't face the competition."

He paused, startled by the look of fury that distorted Brett's features.

"Mitch was not supposed to tell anyone of my decision," Lake went on. "But since he has I can only say that you have many years ahead of you to discover the strengths necessary for the job. And someday I hope you can take over for Mitch."

You hypocrite!" Brett snarled.

Lake's eyes narrowed. "I must say, Lewis, I never expected you to be such a poor loser."

Luckily the roaring in Brett's ears prevented him from hearing this, or he might have throttled Lake where he sat. But at last the dam burst, and his words came flooding out.

"You know I deserve the vice-presidency! You know it! Why can't you admit I won! With courage, daring, brilliance!"

"But you didn't win -- "

"I did! I did! I did!" Brett screamed at him. "You had me! But I fought out of your trap! My Knight was threatening to fork your King and your Rook! I was going to promote my pawn!"

"Calm down!"

"You can't pretend you don't know what I'm talking about! It won't work! You know! You know about the chess game! Admit it! Admit it, damn you!"

Lake looked at the man shaking in front of him, and with an effort controlled himself.

"Of course I knew about it. What made you think I'd deny I did?"

This threw Brett. He listened in amazement.

"At first it impressed me. That's true. Stella told me your lunch hour matches were a nice change. And something about the game appeals to me. I've always envied those who could play. But you became preoccupied with it. It started to affect your work. Reports late, missing a staff meeting. In a way I'm grateful to you for putting the chess set in your office. It told me what I needed to know. It showed me you weren't handling the pressure well, and could hardly be expected to manage the position I was considering you for. I'm sorry."

He held out his hands. But a cold, crystalline quiet had settled over Lewis Brett.

"You're a cheat," he said softly, "A liar, and a coward. You can't admit it when you're wrong."

"Lewis, you're overwrought. Perhaps a short vacation
-- "

"Vacation! You think I could work for a man like you?
After this? I'll give you one last chance!"

Lake shook his head sadly.

"No, Lewis. You have it backwards. I just gave you
your last chance. Why you're throwing away such a promising
career, I'll never know. I'll expect your resignation in
one hour. Go clean out your desk."

Without another word Brett turned on his heel and
marched out. A moment later Stella Gardner appeared in the
doorway and looked inquiringly at Lake.

"You heard?" he asked. She nodded. "He just fell
apart. I don't understand it."

She smiled, closed the door, and walked slowly toward
the desk.

"Well," she said. "One good thing. We won't have to
skulk around here every night waiting for him to go home."

She lowered herself on to Lake's lap.

In the hallway Brett spotted an unusually subdued
Mitchell Kloster. He looked for the gravy on his tie.

But seeing a small stain there did not cheer him. A
fleeting thought struck Brett. Could Kloster have somehow

set it all up? Could he have engineered Brett's downfall? No. He'd been eight hundred miles away for several days last week. Hitting the road. It was physically, and Brett reminded himself, mentally impossible.

When Lewis Brett returned to his office, Mary Rosen was not at her desk. He sat at his, not glancing at the chess board, and began to open drawers. The rage had become a huge knot in the pit of his stomach. He felt feverish. The sooner he was out of there the better. He'd need some boxes. He heard his secretary in the outer office and buzzed her.

When Mary came in, he was surprised to see she had been crying. Then he nodded.

"So Kloster's already spread it all over the office. Or maybe it was the great Christopher Lake himself. Yeah, now that I know the man, it probably was him."

Mary saw what he was doing. "Why are you cleaning out your desk?"

"That's standard procedure when you've been fired, isn't it?"

He strode to the chessboard, and began to gather up the pieces. They were hard, ungainly things, not easy to hold. "One move," he continued. "Okay, so he was going to

promote Kloster. But there was no reason on earth why he couldn't have made one more move last night!"

He turned to discover her staring at him in shock.

"Mary? What's wrong?"

"You were fired?"

Brett frowned. "You didn't know?"

She shook her head.

"But then why were you crying?"

"It's old Mr. Neeley."

"Who?"

"The janitor."

"Well? What about him?"

"We just found out. He died yesterday."

THE END