

Top Hat's Race

© Alex Shternshain

The old tattered box was sitting on a shelf in the family room of the Hanson household. Not too high a shelf, mind you, since it was taken out every night. Well, almost every night; four times a week at the very least. And inside, amid stacks of fake money and carefully folded cardboard, lived five best friends. And almost every night, The Car, the Horse, the Dog, the Shoe and the Top Hat came out to play.

"Ok, who's in for a nice round of Monopoly?" they would hear Mr. Hanson calling out to his family.

"Me! Me too!" screamed Robbie and Josh Hanson, rambunctious children of undetermined age, eight years would probably be the best guess, as they raced to the table.

Their mother, Mrs. Hanson, never participated in the running and the shouting. She was a gentle woman, and preferred walking and speaking quietly. When her husband and kids sat at the table, and the lid was taken off the box, she would invariably attempt to tiptoe unnoticed to the TV room. But Mr. Hanson, an excellent tactician, always anticipated this maneuver.

"A nice round of Monopoly with the kids, honey?" he would ask, seconds before her fingers could get to grips with the remote.

"Oh well," Mrs. Hanson would do her best to feign dissatisfaction, "There's nothing good on anyway."

The Hanson family financial feuds were long, bloody, and went all the way to bedtime, and sometimes even a few minutes beyond it. Even though there were five playing pieces and only four players, the Hansons grabbed their pieces more or less at random, and none of the friends was left in the box too often. Shoe, of course, would always complain that he was getting less than his fair share of games, but the rest ignored his grumbling.

And all was well. Mr. and Mrs. Hanson always found the time to play Monopoly with their children, and the latter, while growing up, still enjoyed rolling dice and purchasing homes and hotels.

"You'll see," Shoe said, "They'll grow out of us."

"Neveerrrr!" the Dog growled, "It's us and the Hansons, foreveerrrr!"

"I doubt they'll ever give us up. Not after all we've been through," mused the Car.

"It's not a matter of if, but when," Shoe insisted.

"Oh, don't listen to him," Horse said, shaking his mane, "He's just trying to bring us down. Life is good, might as well enjoy it."

Top Hat usually didn't participate in those discussions. At night, his favorite pastime was to peek from a crack in the corner of the box, toward the other attractions in the family room. There were so many different toys and boxes! He wanted to know they were for and how to work them. The electric car with the remote, he was able to figure out. The magnetic darts were simple. But what really got him stumped was a game with some black and white pieces that used to occupy Mr. Hanson and Uncle Benny during the latter's infrequent visits to the Hansons. The pieces hopped back and forth and across the board, which was also black and white, obeying what

seemed like an irrationally complex set of rules. Or maybe there were no rules at all? Top Hat wished he could see this strange game from up close, but alas, on the days of Uncle Benny's visits the Monopoly box remained on its shelf.

Once, Top Hat worked up enough courage to approach Horse, who was considered the wisest among the group.

"Do you ever wonder," he asked, "If there are other toys and games out there? Other things for the Hansons to play with?"

"Don't be ridiculous," the Horse snapped. "We are the only game they have. Without us, the Hansons' lives would be miserable."

"Oh."

Horse turned to the other three, "Hey, gang, check this out. Top Hat thinks there are *other games!*"

After they all had a hearty laugh at his expense, Top Hat decided to stop sharing his observations with anyone.

One thing the Horse did have right: life was good. Except for Mrs. Hanson, that is. She was getting fatter by the day. So fat, in fact, that she was walking with great difficulty, and the chair creaked under her weight each time she sat down to play Monopoly. Theories were running rampant about the cause of this ballooning. Horse and Dog even took the liberty to develop a special diet for Mrs. Hanson, and were really excited about it, the only problem being their lack of ability to communicate it to her.

And then, during one evening game session that seemed not unlike any other, disaster struck. Top Hat, who was on the sidelines this time, saw Mrs. Hanson take the dice in her hand, but she didn't roll them. Instead, she stood heavily on her feet, moving her chair back, and said the fateful four words that irrevocably changed the lives of the five friends.

What she said was, "Honey, my water broke."

And that was the end of that game session. Mr. Hanson immediately began to fuss around his wife, the boys just stood there gaping-mouthed, and the Monopoly was forgotten. Soon the adults left for the hospital (a place where they will make Mrs. Hanson feel better, Horse explained), and the kids started cleaning up. Except that with all the excitement, their hands shook, and they didn't notice old Mr. Shoe rolling from the game table, across the carpet, and under the couch. The Dog tried to bark to get their attention, but it was too late. Shoe was gone. The other three were plopped back into the box, together with the dice and the miniature hotels.

"What are we going to do now?" Car asked.

Horse gave a deep sigh. "Nothing we can do. His absence will be noticed, and they'll find him sooner or later. Don't worry, we'll all play together yet."

The next day, the adult Hansons didn't come home. The children, shepherded by Uncle Benny, ate their supper in front of the TV. The Monopoly box was forgotten.

"I bet they'll be back tomorrow." Horse said. The rest nodded solemnly.

Horse was right, technically speaking, as the adults did return the next day, but that was not the kind of return the friends had wished for. Mrs. Hanson did become thinner – apparently the hospital did her good, but for some reason there was now more of her. This addition was a tiny creature, barely box-sized, with insatiable appetite and a voice loud enough to make drywall

shake.

“Please,” Horse begged, plugging his ears with his hooves, “Can anyone make it stop? Will this horrible noise ever go away?”

Car regarded the little girl with a critical eye. “She doesn’t look like a Monopoly player to me,” he finally concluded.

In fact, there wasn’t much Monopoly playing going on in the household now. Little Emily Hanson was a demanding infant, voicing her discomfort at any time of day or night. She was either hungry, or thirsty, or wet, or teething, or wanted to play – not Monopoly though. Sometimes she would just cry because she got used to the sound of her own voice and could not live without it. That last part was Robbie’s theory, to which his brother Josh didn’t quite subscribe. His hypothesis was that Emily was crying because she was evil.

Still, at night, when Emily’s blonde head lay safely on her little pillow, the adult Hansons (Robbie and Josh were promoted to adults overnight) did manage a game of Monopoly sometimes – about once a fortnight. No one was sidelined in those games, since there were only four pieces now, but once in a while the thought of old Shoe gathering dust under the couch did bring a tear to Top Hat’s eye.

The worst, however, was yet to come. Shoe’s prophecy did come true – the children grew out of them. It’s very difficult, you see, in today’s world, to remain attached to a single hobby for so long – especially one as archaic as Monopoly. Somewhere between the Xbox the twins got as a shared present for their birthday and the homework load of the fourth grade, the Monopoly was relocated to the uppermost shelf.

“An exile to the top shelf is worse than death,” the sad events caused Horse to discover his inner poet, “Only a Garage Sale will save us from this mess.”

“What’s a Garage Sail?” Top Hat asked. In his mind, he saw a double-car garage, bobbing up and down on the waves, sailing into the sunset.

“Trust me kid, you don’t want to know,” Horse lowered his head.

Glumly, days rolled on. From his crack in the box, Top Hat watched the twins as they blasted dragons and tanks on the screen. The Mr. and Mrs. were busy full-time with little Emily, and Emily was busy complaining. Top Hat prayed for a miracle, which came one day in a form most unexpected.

Young Robbie Hanson woke up one morning complaining of a headache. His ailment marked the beginning of Top Hat’s deliverance, as Mr. Hanson immediately decreed that no offspring of his shall play the Xbox longer than half-an-hour a day. Yes, even on weekends, thirty minutes tops, you got that, kids? For the rest of their spare time, the twins were ordered to do something not involving a screen. They tried a Super Soaker, but it was quickly banned indoors. And then, the four friends saw the sight they feared they would never live to behold – Josh Hanson turned to his brother, pointed at the top shelf, and said, “Boost me up.”

With joint efforts, the twins reached the top shelf. The friends were elated – Their suffering was over! And then, Robbie’s hands gave under his brother’s weight, and little Josh came crashing down on the carpet. As he fell, he managed to grab a box at random, and it fell down, spreading its content all over the carpet.

“What’s that?” Car asked Top Hat, who was as vigilant as ever at his crack.

“I think I see a white horse.” Top Hat said.

“Really?” Horse perked up.

“Are there any dogs?” Dog asked.

“No. But there’s another horse, this one’s a black one. And something that looks like a guy with a crown.”

“Monopoly for royalty, maybe?”

Top Hat watched in dismay as Mr. Hanson burst into the room. After making sure the boys were okay, he went on to examine their loot. Then, he gave a big speech, something about him being ‘quite a player back in my day’. He set up the pieces on the board, noted that there was one black pawn missing, quickly explained the rules to his children, and turned out to leave.

“But Dad, what about the black pawn?” Josh asked.

“Oh. Coming right up. ” And to the horror of the four friends, they were separated yet again. Mr. Hanson reached out into the Monopoly box, grabbed Top Hat and placed him on the chessboard, where the missing pawn should have been.

“Good luck, kids. Play nice.”

Never in his life had Top Hat felt so alone. The family room suddenly seemed so huge and the Monopoly box was so far away. He saw the twins move some pieces around him, but nobody got to him yet. He turned to look around. To his left, arranged in a neat row, were several of the smallest pieces. Smallest? They were actually taller than him by a head. He realized those must be the ‘pawns’, and he was filling in for one of their kind. To the front, separated by several empty squares, was the white army, consisting of different pieces of all shapes and sizes. To his right, there was nothing – just an empty void at the edge of the table. Top Hat turned to look behind him, and recoiled in fear. Directly at his rear was a menacing dark tower, with sharp and pointy teeth crowning his perimeter. It looked a bit like the tower of the Dark Wizard Zgorlak in that Xbox game that Top Hat once saw. The Tower frowned and growled deeply.

“Don’t be afraid. He may look scary, but he needs us to make room for him,” Top Hat heard a voice behind him. He turned some more, backward and left, and saw a ... Horse? Finally, a familiar sight, something he could relate to.

“Hello, Mr. Horse.”

“What?” the equine replied with indignation, “Are you a child or something? Only children call me Horse. I’m a Knight!”

“Oh, stuff it,” it was the pawn next to Top Hat who said it. “Everyone calls you Horse. Even Horsie, sometimes. Cut it out with the Knight stuff.”

The Horse apparently tried to think of an appropriate comeback, but at this very moment he became firmly wedged between the thumb and index finger of Robbie Hanson, and was carried away over the wall of pawns, to land on its other side. The would-be-Knight and the pawn kept arguing, but Top Hat wasn’t listening. His attention was focused at the great fight between the forces of light and the forces of darkness that was unfolding before him. Well, that and the menacing growling behind him.

“So, what’s going on here?” He asked his neighbor once the argument subsided, “What should we be doing? And why is the big fellow so mad at me?”

“This is Chess, my friend. The best game on earth. ” the pawn replied proudly, “And us, we are pawns, the soul of the game. And the Rook is mad at you because the pawn was his best

friend.”

“So he thinks I did that on purpose? Removed his friend to take his place?”

“Well, that, plus he’s highly resistant to change. Anyway, welcome to a7, pal!”

“a7?”

“Yep. You’re a7, I’m b7. It’s algebraic notation. You see, the rows are numbers, and the columns are letters, and...”

Top Hat’s new friend was forced to take a short break in his speech, quickly becoming the b6-pawn. Then he turned back and continued, “The pawns, that’s us, move only forward. The Horses can jump, and the Rooks...”

This was too much information for Top Hat. He shook his head sadly, wondering if he will ever get this new game. It all seemed so strange. Each piece strode, jumped or crawled its own way. Absent was the clarity of Monopoly, where, barring the occasional jail sentence, everything went clockwise. But, slowly, he began to extract some sense out of this mess. The Hanson brothers played their moves erratically, almost randomly in the beginning, but much to the surprise of the pieces, as well as their father, they soon became connoisseurs of the game. Their understanding grew with each game they played; chess books began to appear next to the board, and names such as “Tal”, “Karpov” and “Sicilian” were uttered on a daily basis. Pieces and pawns were no longer flying around haphazardly, but followed a plan, a design. Soon Top Hat’s new friends, the black pieces, could no longer follow the logic that guided their new masters. To them, two clear milestones marked the brothers’ advancement. The first was when the word ‘Horse’ left their lexicon and was replaced by the far more appropriate ‘Knight’, and the second was the purchase of a well-used chess clock with a large crack running across its left-side face. Now the brothers were real chess players.

Even their father, who was ‘quite a player in his day’, had soon to admit that his day was long gone. Neighboring kids who dared to venture into the Hanson household for a game or two were quickly vanquished. Uncle Bennie was forced to flee the field of battle with his tail between his legs. The only worthy opposition the brothers could find was each other.

Undaunted by the lack of understanding exhibited by the other pieces, Top Hat did his best to hold on to the thread of the game each time. Where others only saw ‘Bishop takes pawn’, he told his colleagues of an imaginative sacrifice, leading to a forced mate or win of a queen. Their respect for him grew. Soon enough, the other pieces deferred to his judgment as far as positional evaluations were concerned. Even the big menacing black rook grumbled in approval once as Top Hat suggested a Queenside Castling on move twenty-five – a maneuver completely overlooked by white, and leading to a large black advantage. The King and Queen still haven’t spoken to him though – they were out his league.

One night, when the young ones lay in bed, and Mr. and Mrs. Hanson took a break from their glazed-eyed routine in front of the TV. The conversation was as quiet as it was serious.

“We must encourage them,” Mr. Hanson said, waiving a white flyer in his hand.

“But what if they lose horribly?” his wife asked.

“Honey, there are no rewards without risks. Besides, it’s just a small club tournament. I don’t think a failure will scar them for life.”

Mrs. Hanson sighed. “Well, okay, I guess. Let me take another look at that. Hey, it says here to bring your own set.”

“We have a set.”

“We have *one* set. And two sons, in case you miscounted.”

“Right you are, honey. I’ll get on it right away.”

“Get two new sets, would you? Just so they won’t fight over who gets a new one, you know.”

“Good thinking. I will.”

The next morning, a pair of spiffy new Staunton chess set greeted the aspiring tournament players. The reaction, however, was not quite as expected. The boys took one look at the shiny boards and stout pieces, and declared that the new sets are very nice, thank a lot dad, we really appreciate it, but we would both prefer to play with the old set, if you don’t mind, dad.

“But it’s a very old set!” Mr. Hanson protested. “It’s even missing pieces!”

“Just one pawn, dad!” said Josh.

“Yeah, and you can’t even notice – that hat thingie looks just like a pawn.” Robbie supported his brother.

“Fine,” Mr. Hanson fumed, “Have it your way. These new sets cost good money, but one of you can play with the old one.”

Quickly, a drawing of lots was arranged. Robbie hid a white pawn in one hand and Top Hat in the other. Josh picked the Hat, and pumped his fist. “Yes! I got our set.”

“Whatever.” Robbie said.

The tournament day finally arrived. On a warm Saturday morning, Mr. Hanson drove the boys to the local library, where two long rows of tables were already set.

“Wow,” said Top Hat, as Josh began setting the pieces up. “So that’s what a tournament looks like.”

“I wonder if we’ll meet Tal! Or Karpov!” the black Knight said.

“I hope we meet Sicilian!” added the Rook.

“Sicilian is not a ...” Top Hat started, but then decided this was not the time to get into arguments. “Maybe.” he added.

A fat man with a rather large moustache explained the tournament rules and read the pairings for the first round. Josh was to play a much older kid, a teenager named Tyrone Burns. Josh, who had to play black in this game, set the pieces with Top Hat, as usual, at the right flank, on a7. After they shook hands, Josh mentioned it was his first tourney, and Tyrone sneered. Not a good sign, Top Hat thought. At least he found consolation in the fact that Josh had the black pieces. Being under the control of the nasty Tyrone, fighting against his own master, that would have been too much for Top Hat to handle on his first outing.

Josh glanced across the hall toward Robbie. The Staunton pieces were set to face a little girl, barely six years old. Oh, how he wished to trade places with his brother now! Maybe if he didn’t ask for the old set, *he* could be the one scoring an easy win today.

“Children,” the fat man was walking along the tables as he spoke, “Good luck, and you may begi... what’s this?”

Out of the blue, Top Hat saw a meaty finger pointed right at him.

“Uhm, it’s filling up for one of my pawns, sir.”

“It’s not a regulation set, boy. You can’t play with it.”

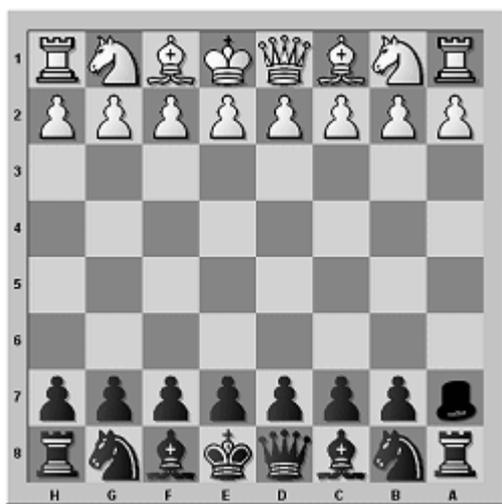
“Sir,” Mr. Hanson interfered, “I promise we’ll bring a new set for the next round. Meanwhile, can’t you allow this, just this time?”

“Daphne!” the fat man hollered to his assistant, “Do we have any spare sets?”

Daphne, a mousy-looking librarian, tiptoed around the hall, and then assured the manager that all sets were absolutely and positively tied up.

“Oh well,” the fat man said, “I’ll allow it this time. But tomorrow, bring a regulation set.”

“I promise we will,” Mr. Hanson said, and the games were finally allowed to begin.



With the confident look of a seasoned tournament player, Tyrone immediately pushed his king’s pawn forward two squares, **1. e4**. This elicited various reactions from the black camp. Pieces and pawns argued opening strategies, and what Josh should play next. The only one who didn’t participate in the lively discussion was the f7-pawn. He was wishing for a Dutch Defense, **1. d4 f5**, as Josh played against his brother last week, but his hopes were dashed on the very first move. Now, who knows when he’ll get to play, if at all?

As Josh did not respond at once, Tyrone scoffed at his opponent’s lack of experience. He exchanged glances with his pal two boards up, his smile clearly beaming with joy at finding an opponent who doesn’t even know what to do after e2-e4. He couldn’t have been more wrong. Josh knew all of black’s playable responses to the king’s pawn opening, and even some of the unplayable ones. As he was sitting there, eyes half-closed, he was merely preparing to the battle ahead. Like an actor who rehearsed his lines, Josh was playing out moves in his head. Finally, he decided he did enough rehearsing, and moved one of his own pawns two squares up.

“Sicilian!” Top Hat exclaimed.

“Where?” the Rook gasped.

After the moves **1...c5 2.Nf3 d6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4 Nf6 5.Nc3** Josh slowed down again. He really wanted to play the Dragon, but the memory of the 20-move defeat inflicted on him by Robbie two days ago weighted heavy on his memory, and finally he decided upon something more conservative. For the first time in the game, Top Hat got to play. It was a small move, just

one square ahead, but Top Hat was proud to contribute in any way. Now he was on the a6 square, closer to White's camp.

"What's he doing?" the b7-pawn asked in a loud whisper, "Why doesn't he develop a piece?"

"It's okay," Top Hat responded, "It's the Najdorf. White's knight cannot go to b5 now."

"I still think he should have developed something. Me, for example," the c8-Bishop snorted.

"Nah, he should develop me," the b8-Knight said, "Knights before Bishops, remember? And why would the white Knight want to go to b5 anyway? I know I wouldn't."

"Please, people," the Rook said in a heavy base, "Let us defer to our master's judgment, shall we?"

After **5...a6 6.Bg5 e6 7.f4** Josh surprised his opponent with the move **7...Qb6**. The Queen was a pompous lady, twice as tall as an average pawn and almost three times taller than Top Hat.



"Hello, your Majesty. Looks like it'll be a fine game. " He tried to make polite conversation, not expecting much in way of response. The Queen, however, seemed distraught. Maybe she didn't like being out so early.

"Is anything the matter, Milady?" Top Hat tried again.

"Can you tell me," the Queen asked, picking her words carefully, "What is the name of this opening?"

"I think it's called the Poisoned Pawn variation, Milady."

"A lovely name. And which pawn exactly is poisoned?"

"The one on b2, Milady."

The Queen gasped. "The one over there? The one directly in front of me?"

"That'd be it, Your Ma..."

"I knew it. I just knew it," Top Hat never saw the old lady so upset, "He's going to lose me for a pawn. That's what he's up to. I eat a poisoned pawn, and I'm gone. Such an embarrassment, and in my first tournament game."

"We will all mourn for you, Your Majesty," said the b7-pawn as he bowed his head.

“Thank you. You are a loyal subject. Give my regards to the king. Tell him I will always cherish...”

Top Hat saw white playing **8.Qd2**, and knew he must hurry. “Actually, Milady, it’s not so bad.”

“It’s not?”

“No. You see, once you capture b2, your path of retreat will be cut, but you are yet alive. In fact, you can stir up a lot of trouble for white.”

“I can? I can!” She dried up her tears as Josh’s fingers picked her up. “Goodbye, my friends! I shall prove a highly unpleasant prisoner for our enemy!”

After **8...Qxb2 9.Nb3** the queen’s way of retreat was indeed cut off. From afar, Top Hat could see the white pieces and pawns eyeing her expectantly. What was that? He could swear the a1-rook just licked his chops; that was way out of line! And then, Josh fulfilled the knight’s wish and developed him with **9...Nc6**. Tyrone grabbed his ears and plunged into thought.

What transpired then was a sequence of events that any chess player must have experienced dozens of times, on either side of it. Tyrone fell victim to his own superior experience. He, after all, was the seasoned tournament player, facing a complete newbie. The opening was just about over, so there must be a forced win for him somewhere, right? Spending over half-an-hour over the next four moves, all he could find was a series of threats that were very easy for Josh to repel. In fact, Josh’s lack of options played into his hands, as he was able to make his moves quickly and build up a large advantage on the clock.



After **10.Bxf6 gxf6 11.Na4 Qa3 12.Nb6** (the rook cringed slightly) **Rb8** (and breathed a sigh of relief) **13.Nc4 Qa4** Top Hat caught a glimpse of the Queen. She was tired from all the running, and beads of sweat glistened on her brow, but she still did her best to keep appearances.



“Way to go, Your Majesty!” Top Hat shouted, “You’re leading them on a wild goose chase!”

The Queen acknowledged his flattery with a slight nod. Anything more would be inappropriate under the circumstances.

“Psst,” Top Hat heard a voice to his right. It was the white pawn, recently captured on b2. “Why didn’t he play the Queen to b4? You know, to keep d6 protected...”

“Hey!” the b7-pawn interfered, “Don’t talk to him, he’s the enemy. Do not disclose any privileged information!”

“I’m no enemy,” the captive pawn protested, “I’m as much part of this set as you are. I want to know how we’re doing.”

“We?” Knight-c6 sneered, “Are you by any chance suffering from the Stockholm syndrome? You know, a hostage identifying himself with his captors.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Ah, denial. Don’t worry; it’s not just you. See the captured black pawn over there? See how amicably he’s chatting with the white Knights? A textbook case.”

“Actually,” the-pawn-formerly-known-as-b2 squinted his eyes, “He’s declaring his undying allegiance to the black Queen.”

“Oh. Right you are. My bad. Anyway, our master didn’t play Qb4 because, in his infinite wisdom he saw that ... uhm, Top Hat, a little help here!?”

“He saw that after 13...Qb4 14. c3 the Queen would have to go to a4 anyway. ” Top Hat explained, “Might as well go there at once.”

“Right. Just like I said, he went there at once.”

Tyrone paused some more before his next move, and Top Hat wondered what he might be thinking about. He expected 14. Nxd6+ Bxd6 15. Qxd6 Qxe4+ with a highly unclear position, but white had a small surprise in stock. Instead of taking the pawn he calmly moved his king – **14.Kf2**. A skeptic murmur washed through the crowd gathered near the a8-corner of the board. What could he mean by that? As usual, all eyes turned toward Top Hat, who did his best to supply an explanation.

“I figure,” he scratched his brim, “That after 14. Nxd6+ Bxd6 15. Qxd6 Qxe4+ white would have to move his king to f2 anyway. So he made this move now, hoping that black would play

something suboptimal like 14...Be7, which allows white to enter the same variation a tempo up.”

“Oh,” the pieces nodded in agreement, “How very clever.”

“Or,” Top Hat mused, “black could play 14...b5 or something like that.

“I don’t know,” said the b7-pawn, “I don’t like to be in harm’s way like that.”

“And I like you where you are, defending me,” the Knight added, “I think he should play the ... the first thing you said.”

Top Hat sighed. “Let’s wait and see.”

This was the first time during the game Josh had to actually think – so far, everything was either known theory or forced. His large advantage on time had disappeared almost entirely by the time he finally decided on a move, and his choice of **14...b5** didn’t gain him too many admirers on the queenside. The b-pawn completed his two-square march glumly, and the Knight looked around for any signs of danger, shivering with fear.



After **15.Nxd6+ Bxd6 16.Qxd6 Qxe4** was white’s turn to think again. Top Hat feared the white Rook, who could take one of the open central files, but Tyrone preferred to develop the Bishop, and after **17.Bd3 Qd5** realized he has no choice but to exchange Queens – **18.Qxd5 exd5**. The black Queen waved to her subjects as she was carried off the board, royal to the end. Being exchanged for her counterpart was of course infinitely better than being lost for a measly pawn.



By now Top Hat’s friends were really agitated. The words ‘endgame’ and ‘pawn-up’ were tossed around liberally. Apparently Tyrone also realized the weakness of his position, because he

played **19.Rhe1+** and offered a draw, as casually as was possible in the circumstances. Josh furrowed his little brow. A draw against such a seasoned competitor, almost an adult, would be an excellent result in his first tournament game, but an extra pawn ... he stood up and walked over to see how his brother was doing. The pieces were left in a state of excited chatter.

“I think he should move me,” the c8-Bishop said, “I can do a really good job interposing that check!”

“Not for long, you old fool,” said the Knight. “White plays f5 and you’re gone.”

Top Hat smiled. Apparently, a little chess knowledge did manage to rub on some of his friends.

“I never get to play,” the Bishop complained, but nobody paid any attention to him, because at that moment Josh returned to the board.

“Sorry,” he said to Tyrone, “My brother’s still playing, and it could take him a while. So I guess I’ll just continue here.”

He played **19...Kd7** and the Bishop moaned. “Oh no. Now he blocked me. I am completely blocked again. Will I ever get to play?”

Tyrone decided to double up on the e-file with **20.Re3 Kd6 21.Rae1** and Josh sent the Knight into a forward recon – **21...Nb4**. Tyrone followed suit with **22.Nd4**. Josh considered the captures on a2 and d3, but in the end figured that stopping a rook penetration to e7 is the top priority and played **22...Rb7**. Tyrone retreated with **23.Bf1** and Josh ignored the tasty, yet potentially dangerous a2 and moved the rook again, **23...Rc7**.



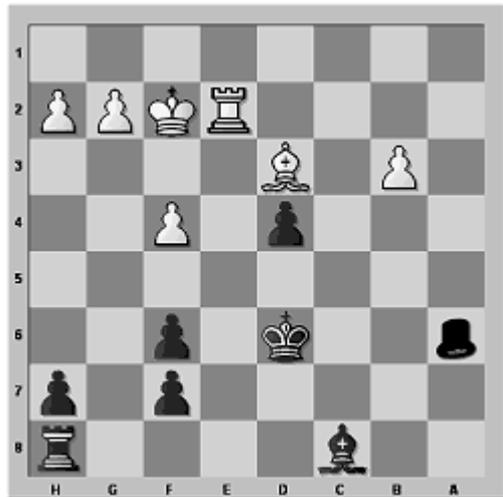
“See, the Rook moved three times already,” the Bishop grumbled, “and what about me? I know it’s ‘Knights before Bishops’, but shouldn’t Bishops come before Rooks?”

BAM! What had just happened? One moment Top Hat was exchanging bemused glances with the b-pawn over the old Bishop’s rant and the next his friend was gone from the board, joining the POW camp by Tyrone’s elbow.

“Gotcha,” Tyrone muttered under his breath as he banged out **24.Bxb5**.

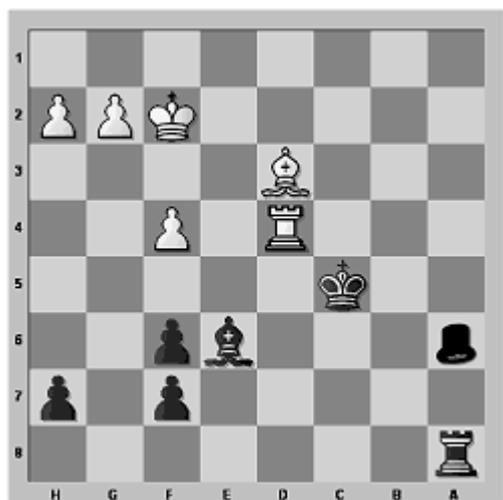
The pieces hushed up. They didn’t need Top Hat’s explanations to know that after **24...axb5 25.Nxb5+** white would have the upper hand. But Josh, calm as ever, came up with **24...Nxc2**, or maybe he had it prepared a few moves in advance, who was to know? After **25.Nxc2 Rxc2+** white had to bite the bullet and offer an exchange of rooks with **26.R1e2**, as **26. Be2** allowed the capture on a2. The peanut gallery was cheering up for the exchange, but instead Josh came up

with the cute **26...d4**, and then exchanged rooks on better terms after **27.Rb3 Rc3 28.Bd3 Rxb3 29.axb3**.



Sitting on an open file, and under the watchful eye of the white Bishop, Top Hat could not help wondering if his tenure on the board was coming to an end. At least he had the old grouchy Bishop as his backing. But, much to his chagrin, Josh chose this move as the perfect opportunity to finally develop his last light piece. With **29...Be6** he offered the indirect exchange of the queenside pawns. Top Hat felt chill crawling up his spine. It would not be the first time he is captured, of course, but still, it was a tournament game, and he wished so much to stay till the end.

Tyrone, having spent almost all his remaining time, decided the advanced d-pawn is more dangerous, and is the one he should get rid of. But after **30.Ra2 Ra8 31.Ra4 Bxb3 32.Rb4 Be6 33.Rxd4+ Kc5** it seemed that he had made a poor bargain. Top Hat now had a new rook behind him, the king to his side, and he was ready to go. He knew how important an outside passed pawn could be in those endgames – after all, he was always the a-pawn! Suddenly, he felt very significant.



Tyrone played **34.Ra4**, trying to block his path with a Rook, but Top Hat, undeterred, took a step forward – **34...a5**. The white Rook grinned evilly at him and stomped his feet, but Top Hat just glanced back toward a8. His own Rook gave him thumbs up.

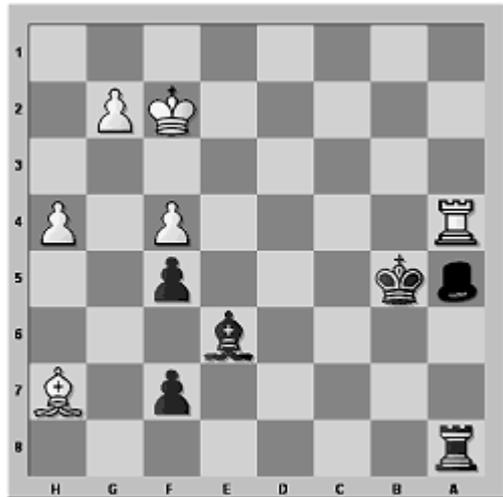
“You’re doing fine, kid!” he shouted.

Tyrone decided that if he is to lose this game, he should at least go on a full stomach and grabbed a pawn, but after **35.Bxh7 f5** his Bishop, although still on the board, became a

prisoner, just as those captured pieces Josh held hostage. The black Bishop on e6 grinned at the ineptitude of his white counterpart. An attempt to advance on the kingside – **36.h4**, was clearly too little and too late.

“Well, son, let’s get you moving.”

Top Hat could not believe his ears. Josh had just played **36...Kb5**, and his Monarch had actually spoken to him! Top Hat descended on his knees.

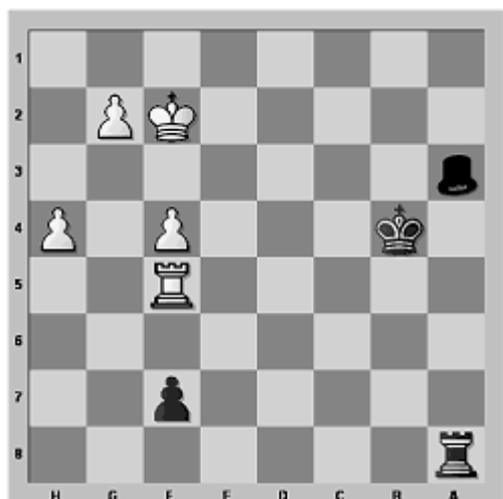


“Stand up, little one!” the King ordered. “Now we’re in this together, all the way to a1, so let’s make it a march worthy of a song.”

“Yes, your Majesty.”

“You know,” the King straightened his crown and lowered his voice to a conspiratory whisper, “I feel some discontent toward the way my Queen was taken prisoner. If you could release her from her detention, I would owe you a debt of gratitude.”

Top Hat contemplated the proper response, but there was no time. His way forward was now open, and he took another step – **37.Rd4 a4**, but Tyrone, the flag of his clock hanging, had one last trick up his sleeve. The trapped Bishop suddenly burst back into play, overpowering its captors – **38.Bxf5 Bxf5 39.Rd5+ Kb4 40.Rxf5**. Now *white* was a pawn up all of a sudden. Having lost two comrades in rapid succession, the remaining black pieces were dismayed. What treachery was that? What duplicity had turned this game around? The only one on the board not bothered by this turn of events was Top Hat. As he had fully expected, his master moved him yet another square forward – **40...a3**.



With forty moves completed by each side, the time trouble was over, and each player was given a full extra hour to complete the game. Tyrone spent almost half of his newly allotted time to convince himself that, yes, in spite of being a pawn up his situation was dire. As innocuously as possible under the dismal conditions, he played **41.Rd5** and offered a draw again, muttering something about having an extra pawn sheepishly. Josh just smiled and pushed Top Hat further yet, **41...a2**.

“Damn it, kid, you’re fast. ” The black King panted. “I’m getting too old for those high-speed pursuits. I guess you’re on your own now.”

The Rook was shouting something at him, but by now Top Hat was too far to hear him. Even the f7-pawn, who spent the entire game sulking, was jumping up and down and waving his hands at Top Hat, urging him to go on. After White played **42.Rd1**, Josh picked the little Monopoly piece up and placed it on a1, **42...a1=Q**. Leaning over the board, he allowed himself a smile as he retrieved the Queen from Tyrone’s camp. For a brief moment, as Her Majesty and Top Hat exchanged places, his brim rubbed against her long flowing robes. Normally that would be a gross breach of etiquette, but this time the Queen smiled.

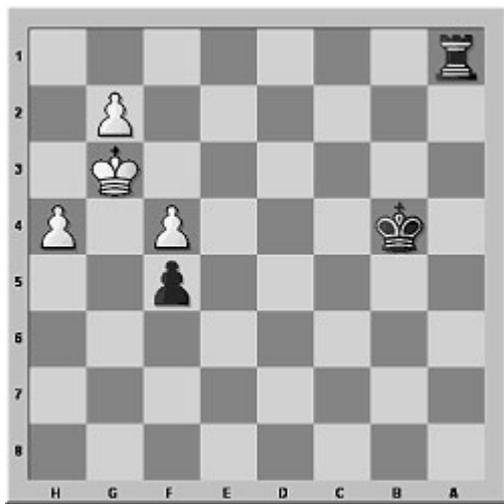
“Thank you,” she whispered.



Top Hat was never so happy to be placed in the prisoner’s camp. As the other pieces were congratulating him and patting him on the back, he saw the moves **43.Rxa1 Rxa1** being played. The Queen was taken off the board for the second time this game, but this time she went with a smile on her lips. Even the vanquished white rook, fresh from being captured on a1, came over to shake Top Hat’s hand.

“Good game,” he said, “Nice race to the finish.”

White, knowing the game was lost, still struggled with the acceptance of the inevitable, and played **44.Kg3** – and now came the finest hour of the f7-pawn. If he couldn’t have the first move of the game, he would have the last; after **44...f5** Tyrone resigned. He shook Josh’s hand half-heartedly and beat a hasty retreat toward the bicycle rack outside.



The drive home was a happy one. Robbie won as well, although the little girl wasn't as challenging an opponent as Tyrone, and he envied his brother slightly. Stories of battle were exchanged, told and retold again, and among them 'and-you-should-have-seen-the-look-on-his-face-when-I-promoted-the-Monopoly-piece' took a prime position.

"Wheel!" the black b-pawn said to the rest of the pieces as the car took a left turn and they all rolled over in the wooden box, "That sure was a fun game! And you know what's the best part? Round two is coming up tomorrow!"

"Don't be so sure," the Rook said, "Remember, it has to be a regulation set."

His words fell upon the pieces like a ton of bricks. Suddenly, the laughter and the cheering subsided. The pieces looked as if the air was sucked right out of them. They all tried hard not to look at each other, and mostly not to lock eyes with Top Hat.

"Right," the King finally broke the silence. "We've been shelved for extended periods of time before. We can all handle it, can we?"

"I... I am sorry..." Top Hat mumbled.

"Don't be, little one. It's not your fault." The Queen approached and placed a soft hand on his shoulder, "You did great."

But at home, fate had one more twist in store for them. As Mr. Hanson and his sons burst through the door with their tales of conquest, they were greeted by Mrs. Hanson, who had a story of her own to share.

"Emily had her first crawl today, honey!"

"She did? Oh, that's fantastic!"

"And guess where she was headed to? She crawled right under the couch! I practically had to drag her out of there forcibly. And look what she was holding in her little fists when I got her."

"Nice going, Emily! You found the missing pawn and the ... ugh, what's that other thing?"

"I think it's from the old Monopoly set."

The following events unfolded with breathtaking speed. Top Hat didn't even have a chance to say goodbye properly before he was extracted from the chess set and plopped back into the Monopoly box, together with the somewhat dusty Shoe. The black pawn, still in a state of shock, was put away with his friends of old.

Josh grinned. "I guess this means I can still play with the old set tomorrow."

"Oh no you won't," Robbie said. "Tomorrow is my turn."

No sooner than the lid was closed on the Monopoly box, old Shoe began enlightening his friends of his heroic exploits under the couch. He had grand tales of adventure involving dust storms, an occasional insect, and... and, well, that was actually it. Not too many interesting things happened under the couch, apparently.

"And how did you do, Top Hat?" Horse asked. "Got to see any interesting places? Maybe you even saw one of those *other games* you were raving about?"

"Well, I..." Top Hat started, but at this moment the lid was off the box again.

"Well, kids," Mr. Hanson said, "You've been playing chess all day long, and will play some more tomorrow, so how about relaxing with something different for a change?"

"Sure thing, dad," Josh said.

"Hey, mom," Robbie had an idea, "Maybe Emily can play too. We can take turns rolling the dice for her."

"Well, I don't know..."

"Come on honey," Mr. Hanson said as he began to set the game up, "It's time to officially make her part of the family."

The five friends were elated. It was such a great day! First, they were reunited again, and now, they were de-shelved, and playing a game; a game in which all five of them could participate, no less! Shoe repeatedly bemoaned the sand that got in his laces, cramping his style, and Car was so excited he tried moving counter-clockwise, until Dog's barking set him back on track.

"Well, Top Hat," Horse asked after the initial excitement subsided, "After having seen the world, do you still have any doubts that Monopoly is the best game ever, in fact the only game ever?"

Top Hat took a deep breath. He wanted to tell his friends of checks and gambits, of French and Sicilian openings, of rook endgames and kingside attacks, but something about their smiling faces told him that maybe he shouldn't. This was their first game in months, and who knows when the next one will come – might as well enjoy it while it lasts. Slowly, he exhaled.

"Yes." He said finally, his voice barely audible above the rumbling of the rolling dice, "Yes, it is. And you know, I'm just so happy to be here with you guys."

"Good to have you back, Top Hat."

"Oh, look," Mrs. Hanson exclaimed, "Emily landed on Boardwalk."

THE END



I was born in Ukraine, spent most of my life in Israel, and now reside in the Ottawa suburbs with my beautiful wife and two lovely children. A designer of electronic circuits by day, I transform into a typing fiend by night, producing scores of stories and screenplays. As any self-respecting amateur writer, I have approximately half-dozen novels in progress. Ah, but does he also have time to play chess, you may wonder... Well, let's just say that during my army service, I was court-martialed for playing chess on duty, and leave it at that.

And now, a word about the story you have just read [*You did read the story, right? Because jumping directly to the author's biography without reading his work is a bit strange; but, anyway, it's your choice. May I suggest you read the story anyway?*]. You may have thought it was about the triumph of the little guy, or about friendship, or somesuch, but it's not. It's not even about chess. You see, during my life, I had to move a lot and adapt to many different people and environments; in fact, I changed no less than 18 houses or flats in my 37 years. All those experiences of change and adaptation were channeled into the story. The story is really about change, and the kind of reactions people have to it. It's a story of those who say there's no place like home and try to avoid change at all cost; of those who embrace change and the opportunities it presents; and those who just go with the flow.

Anyway, I would like you to share your reactions and thoughts on the story with me by emailing shternshain (at) mail15 (dot) com. But don't expect a quick reply – I'm packing my computer tonight toward move #19.