An Initiation
(There are no more Somedays . . .)

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I. Pawns

“Come on son, today’s the day we find the perfect piece of wood, strong, yet easy to carve—come on.”
Scott refocused his eyes on his father who stood over his bed.
“Come on son, let’s go.”
The brown haired blur moved again, and Scott, full of expectation, dressed quickly and hurried to the door.
The twelve year old boy followed his father out of their worn brick home, down the well-made but aged wooden stairs, and off to the forest a few hundred yards away. The day was still early, the remnants of morning dew darkly staining his brown suede shoes. The father limped slightly as the two walked, the boy taking great pains to regulate his stride so that he didn’t make his father hurry to keep up. The farther they walked, the more the limp turned into a drag, the right leg trailing the man.
“I wonder when the doctor will call and tell me the results of those tests. This leg is driving me crazy.”
“Mom said he’ll call this morning. Don’t worry Dad, it’s probably a muscle strain or something. You’ll just have to stop eating Mom’s desserts.”
The two laughed and continued walking. They came to a tree which was cracked and broken at its base, bleached white where the destructive lightning had hit it. Scott’s father examined the wood carefully, checking the grain, chipping away at the bark and searching for any signs of rot or decay. Then finally he gestured toward his son.
“Scott, this wood is perfect. Of all the trees we’ve looked at, I don’t think we could have found a better piece. It’s beautiful, and we can carve the chess board from this section by the base of the stump and all the pieces from this white wood here. This will be the most beautiful set ever made. I’m going home now that my leg is beginning to hurt, damn this dampness, but you stay and saw the pieces I told you.”

Scott’s father limped away, leaving the boy alone with the wood. Scott ran his hands over it, feeling the bark’s tiny rises and bumps, sticking his nose deep into the cracked whiteness, smelling the fresh wooden scent. It was perfect. He picked up his saw and patiently worked at the wood, while letting his mind ramble free—‘it will be beautiful . . . Mom will stand there and wonder how we could make something like that and she’ll probably cry a little and everyone will be embarrassed and then laugh and be happy together’—Scott picked up his cut pieces of wood and walked without seeing or hearing anything except the images inside himself, until he was suddenly standing in his basement, his father sitting on the metal stool in front of the workbench.

“O.K. Scott, we’ll get started. Today we’ll outline the pawns.”

Pawn: The pawn moves only in one direction, straight forward, one square at a time, except when first leaving its original position. If another piece is directly in the path of a pawn, it cannot move forward.

Scott and his father worked agonizingly slowly as they carefully carved the sixteen pawns from the white wood. The pawn’s heads were encased in helmets, hiding everything except their faces. Fine chain-mail was painstakingly carved to cover the bodies of the pawns, making them look cumbersome and immobile. In their right hands the pawns held swords; in their left, shields. They were stolid and immobile, capable only of slow, unwieldy movements.

The phone rang and Scott’s father answered.

“John, this is Bill.”

“Hello, Bill. Have you gotten the results of those tests yet?”

“John, you should come in and talk with me. You know with all these terms and tests, you can never be sure—”
“Give it to me straight, Bill.”
“Well John, some things are easier to say than others.”
“Bill, get to the point. What is it?”
“I’ll give it to you straight. John, the tests showed you have multiple sclerosis—”
“What—”
“That doesn’t mean you’ll be paralyzed or anything; they don’t know much about it yet. Listen, why don’t you come by and we can talk about it? I can’t explain it right over the phone . . .”

John slowly put the receiver back onto its cradle and limped back to Scott and the pawns.
“What’s wrong, Dad?”
“Nothing’s wrong.”
“Was that the doctor?”
“Damn it, I said nothing’s wrong! Where’s your mother?”
“Scott, John, why are you yelling?”
“Scott, sit down. You too, Ruth. I have to tell you something. I have multiple sclerosis, MS, the doctor just called and said I have MS. So I’m going to have to start taking things easy, not working like a maniac anymore, and you two will have to start bearing the load. You won’t be able to call ‘John’ or ‘Dad’ and expect me to come running. It won’t be like that anymore, understand—I’m not your serf anymore, everyone will have to pull their own weight for a change.”

“Settle down, John. You’re upset and we understand. Come on, let’s you and me go for a walk, and Scott can finish carving those pawns.”

Scott watched his parents walk out the door, his father walking down the stairs one step at a time, leaning slightly on his mother. He didn’t fully understand, and he returned to his work on the pawns.

II. Knights

Three weeks later the carving of the pawns was completed, and the sixteen soldiers stood firm and erect before Scott and his father. John’s anxiety had calmed, yet he felt a prevailing emotion of fear: how much longer would he be able to work, who would support his
family in the event of his death or incapacitation, would he, at the too young age of thirty-seven, die?

“Dad, what will we carve next?”

“I think we should decide on a design for carving the knights.”

Scott and John chose a classical model, a horse with an armored knight astride. In this design the knight is in complete control of his mount, reins held tightly in one hand, the knight hunched over in anxious expectation of the impending thud of his adversary’s lance.

The horses Scott carved seemed angry, their sinewy bodies primed for war. However, the knights appeared to be holding onto their horses by a string, their positions precarious atop their mounts. The knights seemed unsure of their position, caught up somehow in this situation, driven by the uncontrollable force beneath them. The horses charge, ungoverned, and the riders are forced along, helpless. These pieces were beautiful to look at, but later when the young children of the neighborhood families played war with the chessmen, they always left the knights behind.

Knight: The knight has a movement peculiar to itself, as it is the only piece that can jump over the heads of the other pieces, and always changes the color of the square upon which it stands. The nearer to the middle of the board the knight stands, the wider the range of its attack.

“Well, Bill, I finally got around to making it over to talk about those tests. I’m pretty confused now, scared, my goals are shot, my future so up in the air. I don’t know what to do.”

“MS isn’t the end of the world, John. Plenty of people have lived to a normal life expectancy after contracting it at an early age.”

“Sure, but I’m scared. I feel as if the supports of my life have been torn down, and I’m standing alone, unsure of anything. How can I plan for the future when I feel there may be none? I’m lost, leaping in different directions, without being sure of what I’m doing or why. My moods have changed so drastically, I know it’s driving my family crazy, but what can I do?”

“You’ve got to get hold of yourself, John. Get a bearing. This isn’t the end of the world. Get some hobbies; do something with your son. Come on, things will be better when you help to make them better, not before.”
“You’re right, I’ve got to assess the situation more carefully than I have. Scott and I are carving a chess set together, and it’s going to be the nicest thing you’ve seen. We’ve done the pawns and knights and are about ready to start the bishops.”

“You’ll have to bring it over and show me when you’re through. Take care, John, and get a grip on yourself.”

“Thanks, Bill, thanks a lot.”

III. Bishops

The process of carving the pieces became a ritual in the lives of Scott and John. Every morning John would awaken his son, and together they’d go to the workbench in the basement. The entire morning they would work, breathing the air filled with the fresh wooden scent, the fine particles of sawdust falling from their files and sandpaper. Slowly the wood evolved from small square blocks to intricately designed pieces, John supervising his neophyte-carver son with the more difficult carvings. As the work went on, John spent hours watching his son work, talking to him, discussing the family’s uncertain future.

“Dad, do you believe in God?”

“Yes, Scott, I do. You’re working on one of His finer creations, and one of your better brothers, right now.”

“Is God good, Dad? He does help people, doesn’t He?”

“That’s a pretty tough question. He is good, but I’m not sure how much of an active role he plays in our lives.”

“Well Dad, if He’s good and means well—at least He doesn’t intentionally try to hurt people—then why did He let you get sick?”

Bishop: The bishop can move any number of squares at a time, forward or backward; but it can never leave the color upon which it originally stood, so that all its movements are diagonal, not being allowed to jump over anything.

“Son, sometimes I can’t explain things to you very well, and this may be one of those times, but I’ll try. God created us, and He is good in character. But after God created us, He kind of stepped out of the picture, and now He only watches as things go by. He didn’t
have anything to do with my getting this disease, nor will He help me
cure it. In this world, Scott, living and helping yourself are pretty
much left up to you. God gives us freedom, but He also gives us a
heavy responsibility that goes with it. Does that make sense to you?”

“I think so, Dad. Could you help me carve the cross on this
bishop’s vestments?”

“Sure, son.”

As John limped over to where his son was standing, he felt
satisfied. ‘I’ve taught this boy to use his mind and he does . . . what
more could a father want from a son?’

IV. Towers

“I’ve called this family meeting so that we can evaluate our
changing financial position now that I’m sick.” John was in control
of himself, calm in his explanation to his family. The disease had
forced him to work only four days a week at his insurance agency in
town, and in the two months that passed since he became aware of his
affliction, he began to lose control of his right arm as well. Yet
inwardly, John solidified himself, and assessed his situation carefully.

“I figure that my income will drop about twenty per-cent this
year, but provided we don’t have any great amount of doctor bills, we
should have no trouble meeting all of our expenses. As for saving
anything, I don’t think we’ll have much left over. Scott, if you need
some extra money, you may have to get a part-time job in town. I
know you want to finish carving the chess set, so do I, so after we
complete that we’ll talk more about work. Any questions you’d like to
ask me?”

Scott and his mother remained silent, their attention concentrated
on spots on the floor.

“Well if my family isn’t going to say anything to me, I guess I’ll
just have to take them out and show them a night on the town. You
now have five minutes to get ready, and then we’re leaving.”

The family was happy that evening. Their collective life was full of
smiles and warmth that seemed to have been dormant for too long a
time. Their pre-sickness happiness had returned as they went to the
movies, played the pinball games, stopped for late night ice-cream
delights, and came laughing into their comforting home after midnight.
And the castles Scott and John carved were strong, thick, and upright, the top spire reaching for heaven. This evening was a needed respite in their tension-filled lives, with the family happily optimistic once again.

**Castle:** The castle can move any number of squares at a time, forward or backward, along any row or file that is open; but it cannot move diagonally nor jump over anything.

**V. Queens**

The progress in the carving of the chess set was down to the last four pieces, the two kings and queens. To carve these, the most important pieces in the game, an almost pure white block of wood was selected. John’s disease had spread even further in the last two months, and now he almost exclusively supervised Scott in the carving. Scott’s skill had improved vastly, and his steady, firm hands used the various carving knives deftly. John’s right hand and arm were almost useless to him, but with his left hand he’d point out the minor flaws in Scott’s work.

Somehow John kept up the business, making the trip to his office in town four days a week, operating the small agency efficiently. However, he found that the effort of dragging his unwilling legs made him tire quickly, and he took frequent naps in the afternoon.

John was also becoming very bored when he wasn’t working or sleeping. ‘I can’t use my hands anymore to carve nor can I take my old walks in the forest what can a cripple do with himself without becoming a burden to everyone... What does a man do when time is unwillingly thrown upon him—how can we fill up hours and hours of emptiness? I knew how to carve and I knew how to walk and live in the woods and now those things are denied me forever.’

And the queens began to take shape from the square lumps of pure white wood...

For John’s birthday Scott and Ruth pooled their meager resources and bought him a golden Labrador puppy. At first John wouldn’t accept it.

“How can I raise a beautiful dog like this in the condition I’m in?” But the puppy would wag his tail and push his wet nose deeper into John’s stroking hand.
“He likes you Dad. You have to take him.”

And John liked the dog. They named him Matthew, and the dog forced John outside of his home and back into the woods. The dog would bound ahead, John following slowly, admiring the animal’s natural grace. And the bond between John and Matthew grew, and they began to understand one another. The puppy grew into a dog quickly and learned to make John walk him at least twice daily but knew when to let John rest.

John’s empty hours became filled again, and his lonely emptiness became filled with a love for a strong, golden dog, full of muscle, life, and understanding.

The day Scott finished carving the second queen, he brought them upstairs to show John. To his surprise, he saw Matthew curled beside John’s feet in the bed. Scott smiled, put the queens on the night table, and went upstairs to tell his mother.

Queen: The queen combines the movements of the rook and bishop, as she can move any number of squares at a time, forward or backward, along any diagonal, row, or file; but she cannot jump over anything.

VI. Kings

King: The king is not a particularly strong piece in itself; it can move only one square at a time, in any direction. But in another, much more important sense, the king is the most vital piece on the whole chessboard.

Scott brought the completed chess set into the dining room and placed it directly before his father. John smiled, and for a short-long time no one said anything. Ruth smiled, John smiled, holding the black king in his one good hand.

“You know,” John began, “I’m a very lucky man. I have my family, and we’re all part of one another’s lives. My future is now, and I’m happy living my tomorrows today. I have my job, and I’m beginning to understand my body again. The other day Bill told me he thought the disease was beginning to localize, and if it does I know I can handle it. I have a good wife, a son who’s growing to be a good man and carver, this strong, dependable home, and even this dog. Let’s go for a walk—at least for a little while.”

And the family rose, and helping John down the stairs, walked slowly towards the woods, strangely contented.