

Sicilian defense

The right to gamble: black to respond. White makes the first move. The Sicilian defense is an obvious reply. Used in seventy percent of games apparently, an attractive strategy aimed at giving black a long term advantage after praying for a sacrifice. A little too common maybe but he couldn't think of anything else. Her smile had blown him away. She smelled of autumn after a delightfully warm summer, a hint of refreshment after a sweaty haze. A new secretary just blew aside the cobwebs. Probably not enough to save the company but it would make its passing a lot easier.

You can't always attack from the left. The right wing can have a point. As she had. Those lips, golden bough beneath a thistle of maple, that smile burning, carefully shielded under an anorak hood as she got off her bike on a winter's morning, boots squelching in the rain, jeans tightening as muscles searched for release, a dash of heat between thighs burning to sit still, the flicker of wisdom searching for release, a hint of exposure hidden carefully behind a mound of paper, computer screens and a keyboard that wouldn't stop clicking, until she reached for her iphone, long limbs entwining excitingly. He could have reprimanded her. She knew he wouldn't. She had an MA in administration but, given the recession, she had to make do with being his secretary. Not a bad option in many ways. A good opening gambit. There were lots of opportunities. Who would know how the end game would play out. The boss's secretary always has potential: why else you would put up with him. Deep down he knows that. Knows everybody hates his guts; but his bank account keeps them at bay. Being the boss means of course you know exactly how your finances are resisting. Beaten black and blue sometimes made you see red. He was looking at the numbers right now and trying to work out how to keep them from the auditors, how to photoshop the figures into a pretty little picture, make them lie down and not attract attention, turn wolves into sheep before the farmer came out to herd. She was a diversion. Just in time.

Her eyes blinked quicker than her email refreshing itself over the internet. He'd always been a slow developer. She smiled.

Jane he said, practicing her name, savoring the syllables.

Lady Jane he thought was a little better, more impulsive, domineering, but he would keep that to himself. A whiff of perfume, or chewing gum. He wasn't sure which, lost in those lips reflecting a subtle tinge of dark purple to match her skirt, which he couldn't quite see but managed to imagine beneath the hooded frame of a cheap desk filled with drawers and useless empty spaces.

He needed to get his pieces in place before preparing an advance; how you move them initially defines your line of attack. That was what worried him: too much early development with no long term strategy. He scratched his balls, put his dick into place. She smiled.

He'd waited three years to ask that girl in college out. Check mate. She'd lost interest. She called foul. He'd missed the middle game. All strategy and no moves. Lacking well supported columns, his rooks were out on a limb, trying to square while moving in circles. Diagonals quite strong however. But a bishop ending can be the most difficult. Knights were more his style, that beating around the bush, but good grief, they left you with an incredibly complicated finish: in fact it was almost impossible to mate on that basis. He glanced at the phone messages and the incoming emails. They could wait. He'd be just as snookered tomorrow: rapid replies wouldn't sort the game play overnight.

He headed to his office without looking back, hoping she was slyly following his steps. He could imagine her gaze, dark eyelids flipping over the screen as she watched his suit slide through the doorframe. Discretion, the better part of shyness.

Hi honey.

Hey you.

They sparked as they had for years.

Sally left dinner.

Looks good.

Your daughter's upstairs.

Yes, doing who knows what.

Nothing we want her to.

Story of our lives.

Have a drink.

They gurgled in a pleasurable silence. He was thinking of his secretary and no doubt his wife had her own fantasies. That was what marriage was all about if you wanted to keep it together. Lady Jane.

He played black, out on a limb. He ignored her completely. Plenty of time to develop their pieces before attaching the centre, maybe even offering up a pawn along the way to open up those columns, power down that cleared street until she had no option but surrender. Did it all the time in business. Seemed normal. But in real life he shied back and struggled defensively. Lady Jane smiled. He played his knight: interested but unavailable. The centre was all hers for the moment.

Good morning

Good morning

The banalities of an opening defense.

You're looking well today.

Good weekend?

Yes thank you. And you?

She flicked the mouse. Blinked busy. He leaned forward approving as he picked up the mail to the left of a gentle wrist, aching attractively over the keyboard. The office strip lightening didn't help. They both smiled in a vaguely promiscuous way, circling ambition and desire across the unseen lines of a recently waxed floor. He avoided leaving skid marks as he slipped through his office door and closed it without a shake. He risked a smile and busied himself quickly into the security of a low class prison, the prism that was his office. Open plan was ok for everybody else but it was his company and he avoided it when he could.

Looking well. Can you say that? Is it offensive to a secretary with an MA? Hard work being a boss he comforted himself. Lady Jane. Dear Lady Jane. He straightened his tie.

He didn't ask her out. That gambit would have been far too risky but he had maneuvered to leave with her on a number of occasions. The lift was their first love almost. That shared space of mutual entanglement. She smelled nice. Full of quiver like the best TV ads, her life, her hairs all over his shoulder as they bounced together when the doors slid open.

She'd suggested a quick drink

It was a Friday. A safe challenge. Everybody was doing the same. Wine bars were full of people avoiding their homes or trying to make one.

Yes, she's fine. Great daughter. He smiled in case there was any doubt. Being a good father was always a pull, a safe bet, a sure pair of hands around your waist, strolling up and down, uncovering new veins as they soothed skin and plucked the right muscles. He could sense a line of attack.

She smiled. Lips curved around the tip of a wine glass searching for sensuous flavors. The alcohol tingled his senses, brought back France, the bitterness of summer olives and a dense sunlight smothering his breath.

He presumed she hadn't got her own kid but couldn't get the courage to ask directly. No rings at least. He twisted his own anxiously and bit into the wine. She was far too young for that type of nonsense. Too ambitious. Too smart to get laid up with charges she couldn't afford. Which was a shame because by the time she had achieved it all, the kids might just not come.

Doesn't take long to down an expensive wine and a handful of peanuts. The jabbering all around keeps you moving as if you were still at work, all anxious to finish and get home in case it all went wrong suddenly and you are left with nothing. Chat seemed to fade behind the wall of excessive noise, endless glitter. They didn't have much more to say: it is difficult to play office gossip with your boss.

Clink. Drink. Fantasize. Another Friday evening rush, crushed ice tingling through colored alcohol fizz.

Well take care than and have a good one.

The weekend ached open like a headache without the excuse of a drinking binge or a toothache when the nerve just surrenders to the throbbing agony of boredom. The metro stank of stale sweat, ale and hyperactive perfumes out for a stroll, the hope of getting fucked senseless.

She wasn't that young he reasoned. An MA and was close to a PhD so not his daughter at least. And what were they going to do with her. Pregnant at 16 was a challenge: and she wanted to keep the little brat. Obviously no idea what that involved. Like taking over a company without being sure the books were genuine. He'd fallen for that trap once. An expensive lesson. Had to fire three secretaries and various accountants as a result: they were paid to tell him what he was doing and had failed. No guilt. He wished his wife were as

straightforward. Her tactics were more complicated. She didn't have to answer to him, and he wished she would refrain from answering back so frequently. They were still locked into a middle game, still developing after all those years, looking for a pawn to attack, building up defenses until the walls appeared unbreakable. Neither would ever win but they fought on in the hope of an end game with bishops or at least an advanced pawn in search of a title. If you repeat the same position three times it is automatically a draw but they were, of course, too skilled for that outcome. They had been playing for far too long to be trapped in a kids game. Drawn and quartered, only his daughter could decide the next move.

The train slid into a grove. He found the car. Wipers blurred rain into the birdshit carelessly deposited in mid-flight. The windscreen screeched. He parked on the drive. The house haunted overhead, garden neatly clipped, paint carefully peeled. The front door slipped in silently beneath his key. He sighed. There was a smell of roast. Sally had done her job. His wife would be upstairs avoiding their daughter who in turn would be avoiding her studies and feeling her rounding stomach and who knows what else. He could still afford it all but not for much longer. They had no idea how hard the recession had hit.

Hi Honey I'm home.

Great darling. Sally has left the dinner.

He hung up his coat.

Your daughter is upstairs.

Another lost cause. Like all those bad accounts.

He really did need to be more assertive, move beyond the opening, develop those pieces with an endgame in mind. She wanted to keep her job. Move up the ladder. Can't stay a secretary all your life with an MA and proposed PhD in Confucian economics. Not sure what it would do for the firm but young blood

always lent hope. Like recrowning the queen you lost stupidly on e4 but regained by a valiant pawn flushing down the right hand column taking advantage of a momentary absence as white thought they were in charge and had nothing to fear.

Routine becomes a habit, nuns understand the rules; the game of chess is based around attempting to break patterns into something new and avoid ending up in a draw. They shared a lift. She was there every morning when he arrived, perky, charming, elegantly dressed to keep his suitors at bay. She timed her entrances perfectly. Coincidence presumably, but they managed to enter the building at more or less the same time. She was always just one step ahead, ready to turn around, flash a smile and wait for him to catch up, perfume glittering through the air like a hound dog in heat.

Daddy, can I have a pony?

Well he didn't see why not but knew he shouldn't give in immediately.

Let's think about it.

Can I have a pony now? A couple of minutes had passed. The barbecue spat, smelled divinely of hamburgers roasting and potatoes curling beneath the coals.

I'll have to talk to your mother.

But I already have.

What did she say?

Talk to you.

Nobody got through her fence. If you wanted to meet the boss you dealt with Lady Jane first. She made that clear. He appreciated the effort. It was the

security of castling early: he felt safe and sound, safely tucked away behind a line of expendable pawns. Above all, she had to keep the accountants out. They just didn't know how to bring good news.

A pony.

Mmm.

He moved the steaks, turned them over to gain time. Paddy was finishing the lawn. The smell of freshly cut grass filled the spring air with a tinge of hope, that winter might turn into summer, that all may turn out for the best. One of the sausages had burned. Another slipped between the grill, off the rails, into the coals, burning in hell. He fished it out and threw it in the bin. An acrid whiff stifled his nostrils, unfocused his thoughts.

It as only a week since she had told them. Pregnant. They'd had a brief discussion but neither wanted to be a grandparent: the disillusionment of having failed as parents weighted too hard. She'd have to abort. They just weren't sure how to tell her. How to ask her. Whether or not she knew what the fuck she was playing at.

Wants a pony. Wasn't really attempting to put two and two together, was she? Should look for a job in accounts. She'd been taken for a ride and if she didn't resolve the consequences she wouldn't be fit to mount a horse for years. She didn't see that. The advantages of being spoilt.

Glasses clinked. Neighbours wandered around their lawn. Everybody happy, fearlessly convivial and well behaved for the first barbecue of spring. An endless chattering filled the air, swarming out the birds, whistling through the leaves with an incessant buzz of good will, aimlessness.

What did you say you wanted?

A horse.

Thought it was a pony.

They're the same.

She gave him one of those smiles that reminded him of her mother on a good day, a daffodil springing into life, conquering all in sight with a breath of teen spirit hinting at grown love. He leaned over to kiss her on the head, rub her shoulder. So innocent behind all that eyeliner. He tussled her nose and turned back to the barbecue. The heat seared his eyebrows and blew away a tear.

Not the same price wise he mused. And where would they keep it. Presumably there were solutions to all these problems.

If he could keep the firm alive a few more months.

We'll see.

Is that a yes.

Probably.

He really should make an advance if not a proposal. Lady Jane must be desperate for a future and he could create it for her. Why all the foreplay when the end game was secure. Sometimes people just resign but of course there are occasions when you can hang in there and still score a draw. They were playing against the clock though: you always debate the early moves and then have to rush when the ticking closes in. Pension funds collapse as time runs out, people age: medicine had a lot to answer for. He really needed a quick fuck.

Where's mummy?

Upstairs.

Go tell her we are nearly ready.

For what.

To eat. God she could be dumb. Suppose all kids were like that. But he'd have to leave her a decent inheritance just in case. How could his baby be with child. Who was being the infant here. Good grief, were there any adults left. Could nobody put two and two together. The company would have to go.

The Sicilian defense works. He closed his eyes as he came, in case Lady Jane hadn't and he had to watch her disappointment. A stained dress between them, silky, ruffled, sticky as he pulled up his trousers. Her eyes avoided his as they struggled back to formality. She rushed to the loo. She'd brought a change of clothes he realised. Just in time. Just in case. She'd done her calculations after all. If only his daughter had been as smart.

All doors were sealed the next day, firm closed, jobs gone. That dress was probably still hanging there behind the locked toilet door.

He was glad she wouldn't have to catch his eyes afterwards. Nice legs though. Firmer than they had appeared from beneath ever decreasing hem lines. He was rather pleased he had lasted so long. But it was closing time. He'd got the last order in. He was rather proud of himself.

How is she doing?

Who?

Had he missed something? Was his daughter about to drop?

The Barenhoiums girl.

Who?

Martha.

He was caught off balance. He didn't like not knowing. And he still had to announce the closure, the accountants, the failed audit. Meanwhile, his wife

was flapping the newspaper, soothing her wine and pretending to watch the TV over his left shoulder.

Marta. That new secretary of yours.

She clarified gently, teaching an old dog new tricks.

You know you said you would do a favour to the Barenhoiums and take her on. We've known them for years.

Hope it's all working out well. Wouldn't like to feel I had got you into any trouble. Or her for that matter but I am sure she is up to it. Always a very sensible family.

His wife chirped on. He was beginning to feel a bit like his own daughter, fucked, fucked up, completely dependent on others, not realising, or giving a fuck. Only thing was he couldn't have an abortion. He'd never learned to ride a horse either.

Another round. Another move. He still preferred the knights but had a sensation he was being held under check. The clock was ticking. He needed time to think and they were slowing him down. Bobby Fischer would have approved, not of the overall strategy maybe, not even the game plan, but of the space he kept to himself, the moves nobody could predict or defend against, in that private corner of your mind where nothing makes sense except your own thoughts and how you mangle them into a human being. The Sicilian defense is always a gamble. The accounts department would know that. Damn it. Jane was called Martha. He'd been avoiding the obvious.

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