

Bishops Over Knights

by Dylan James

Old man Raber was something else. Everybody in my neighborhood in Westlake, Ohio talked about him, and not in a good way. He never left his house. He never had visitors, except for food deliveries. His lawn was a dense, overgrown jungle that hadn't been mowed in years. In the quiet suburb of Cleveland, the man was an enigma.

The first time I saw Raber, I was walking my dog past his house. He stormed off his front porch and chased two runty boys who were throwing rocks. Raber screamed an obscenity, and with a furious scowl, bolted back into his house. Spotting him that day was like spotting a rare animal in the wild.

Not long after, for a fundraiser for my school's music department, I went from house to house in my neighborhood, knocking on doors with a catalog of candy assortments. Not many people answered their doors. I was a dopey third-grader standing on their front porches—a nuisance.

When I reached Raber's house and his jungle of a front yard, I didn't want to knock on the door, given his reputation. But I had nothing to lose, and I wanted to win that fundraiser. So I knocked. And he opened.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Hey, Mr. Raber! I'm Carter Bryant, and my school is having a fundraiser for our music program. We're selling boxes of candy. I have a catalog . . ."

"Get out of here!" he said. "Not interested!"

Another customer lost. I was just about done with the fundraiser at that point. My face fell, and I moped off the porch. As I walked away, Raber called after me.

"Hey, kid, hold on a second!"

I turned around.

"I'll give you some money for your school thing."

I perked up and retraced my steps

"Follow me." He turned in the gloomy hall.

I hesitated at the open door. From his raspy yells to his balding gray hair that stuck out in crazy spikes, the old man scared me. But I needed to make the sale.

Inside, I glimpsed a living room or library. Books

were everywhere, scattered across shelving and hardy oak furniture. Stacks of books littered the floor. As Raber rummaged through the room for money, he knocked a stack over.

"Should have some cash around here . . . somewhere."

Minus the mess of books, Raber's house was nice, not what I expected from the unkempt outside. Framed photographs hung on the walls. One showed a younger Raber standing next to a handsome man in a military uniform.

"Who's that?" I asked, pointing at the military man.

Raber turned around like a whip. "Oh, that's my son. Maybe the cash is in my desk."

"Where is he now? Your son."

"Jimmy passed in the Gulf War."

Embarrassed, I clammed up, as Raber continued to search. I almost told him to forget about the money. I hated seeing him agitated. In a photograph atop the fireplace mantle, he was very young, confident and handsome. Trophies and medals were on display. One large trophy bore a brass plaque:

JAMES RABER

1968 UNITED STATES CHESS CHAMPION

My mind raced. That was thirty-eight years ago. The photos scattered about the living room now made sense. He was playing chess in most of them. Half-hidden by a pile of sun-stained newspapers on the coffee table lay a chess board.

"Found it!" Raber shouted.

He walked over to me and handed me twenty dollars, a lot of money to a boy in 2006. Taken aback, I didn't know what to say.

"I hope this helps you out. With your fundraiser."

"Wow! Thank you, Mr. Raber." I fumbled with my catalog. "I've got plenty of candy you can choose from. I like the chocolate-covered pretzels."

"No! No! I don't want any chocolate. It makes me bloated and gassy. Consider the cash a donation."

Raber smiled at me. He actually smiled. Then he walked me back to the front door.

"You were a chess player?" I asked.

"I was once. A good one."

"I saw your trophies in there, and they're really cool. My dad bought me a chess set for Christmas, but he doesn't know how to play. I don't know how to play well, either."



"Is that so?"

"Hey—do you think you could teach me sometime?"

The newfound happiness drained from Raber's face. "Chess will only let you down, kid. Trust me on that."

"Alright. Thanks again for the donation. Have a good rest of your day!"

"You too, kid."

I took off and skipped down Raber's driveway, ecstatic with my twenty dollars. As I reached the sidewalk on route to another house, Raber stepped back outside and shouted from his porch.

"Hey, kid! Carter? I tell you what. I'm free this Saturday. If you get permission from your parents, I'll show you a thing or two about chess."

"Yes!" I jumped with joy, much to the amusement of Raber.

When I told my parents about the offer that night, they immediately shut it down.

"You will not be going over to that man's house." My dad shook his head, as he worked on paying bills at the kitchen table, where we sat after dinner.

"Are you serious, Carter?" My mom chimed in.

"That man is a creep."

"Just hear me out, okay?" I stood from my chair, emboldened by passion. "Raber's not a creep. I swear it! He used to have a family, and his son died in the Gulf War. Raber was a United States Chess Champion."

December 2022

My mom gave my dad a curious stare. She paged through the telephone directory. Under the R's, she found Raber's phone number. And she dialed.

"Hello, Mr. Raber?"

"Hello?" Raber talked terribly loud on the phone. "Who is this?"

"This is Melissa Bryant, Carter Bryant's mother."

"Who?"

"Melissa Bryant. My son Carter stopped by your house today."

"Oh, the kid with the fundraiser?"

"Yes," my mom looked over at me, "that's him."

"I gave him some money. I also told him that I'd gladly teach him some chess this Saturday, if he got permission from his parents."

"He told us about that. He also mentioned that you were a chess champion?"

"In 1968, I won the United States Chess Championship. My peak chess rating was 2729, if that means anything to you. I travelled the world playing chess, and I taught it for many years. I quit playing professionally once I got married and had a son. You know how it goes."

"That's rather impressive. Carter plays the clarinet in his school band. Now he wants to learn how to play chess. In fact, he's adamant about it."

"He seems like an astute young fellow."

Raber and my mom chatted some more, and I listened to it all on the edge of my seat. By the time the call ended, my mom seemed at ease. My dad did, too. Shrugging their shoulders, they both gave me permission.

On Saturday afternoon, I headed over to Raber's house. The living room was tidied up. The coffee table buried in newspapers was cleared. On it was the chess board, with the pieces set up. I sat down across from Raber, and we got right into things.

With much enthusiasm and detail, Raber reviewed the rules of play, how each piece moved, and the strengths and weaknesses of each—pawn, rook, knight, bishop, queen, and king. His knowledge of openings and endgames was vast. His patience and stamina were formidable. As was his ability to plot several moves in advance.

"Think ahead," he often said. "Strategy! What line of attack is open to you, and how will your opponent defend? Of all possible outcomes, which is

most likely?"

His chess set was marvelous. The pieces were delicate, carved of ebony and ivory. The board was made of fine wood, the squares inlaid in dark brown and mother-of-pearl, with an intricate border.

"Where did you get this?" I asked.

"It was a prize in a competition, donated by a sponsor. He said it came from Syria and was very old."

"And expensive?"

"Probably. I don't know."

Raber lived on a comfortable income, I came to understand, but he attached no importance to money and possessions. He was what my dad called an intellectual, a person who lives in the world of ideas. Once I had learned the basics, he gave specific advice.

"Stop giving up your bishops! Let them develop more. Two bishops are better than two knights, almost always."

"Why is that?"

"The knights are your warriors, your soldiers, tailored more for the short game. But your bishops, they will win you games in the long run. In open positions at the end of games, your bishops will work in your favor."

"Bishops over knights?"

"Oh, yes." Raber laughed. "Bishops over knights. Always!"

I soaked up Raber's words like a sponge. I enjoyed learning the game from him, and I liked his personality. We played chess together every Saturday. It became our ritual. He didn't charge for the lessons. He was happy to have the company.

"You play exactly like my son used to play," he said once. "Aggressive yet selective. You would've liked Jimmy. You two would have gotten along."

Over the course of six years, Raber and I grew close. He was like a second father to me. He became close with my parents, too. My mom invited him to Thanksgiving dinner one year. After that, he often stopped by to chat. My mom and dad loved hearing his stories as much as I did. He took better care of himself and his yard. Seeing the place trim again, the neighbors were less critical.

"The lawn is looking great, James," my mom said one day, when she picked me up from his house. "I really like the yellow flowers you've planted. Are

they Black-eyed Susans?"

"They are!" Raber smiled at her, youth glimmering in his eyes.

"And is that a new sweater?" she teased.

When freshman year of high school rolled around, I joined the school chess team. Mr. Hable, coach of the chess team and my biology teacher, was happy to have me on board. I started to compete at the lowest level and demolished my first opponents. When I told Mr. Hable and the team about my good friend James Raber, you should have seen the looks on their faces.

Invited by Mr. Hable, Raber started hanging out with the chess team. We met once a week after school to practice. He taught my friends the same way he taught me, and all concerned had a great time. Mr. Hable made a proposal.

"Mr. Raber, would you like to join the team as assistant coach? The school allows unpaid advisors for extracurricular activities. Several parents help with sports and music. Your expertise would be invaluable."

"I accept with pleasure."

From then on, Raber was an integral part of our chess team. He attended each practice and tournament. He deferred to Mr. Hable on points of organization, but when it came to analysis of the game, he was direct.

"Chess is a kind of battlefield or warfare. But it's also a training ground for how to behave."

Mr. Hable nodded in agreement.

"Be ruthless and polite, a steel fist in a kid glove."

During my sophomore year of high school, I was captain of the chess team, Raber drove me to play in a tournament in Indiana. Both of my parents were sick at the time, and he made the offer.

"I was telling Carter he's ready for the U.S. Junior Chess Championship. He'll need to qualify, of course, but I think he can."

His wheels turned out to be a 1976 Cadillac Mirage Pickup. As if that wasn't enough, jaws dropped when he entered the room. It was like they'd seen a ghost—James Raber himself. My team finished second in that tournament, thanks to him. Personally, I beat ranked opponents. I was intent on qualifying for the championship.

As my junior year of high school started, Raber

Rivanna Review

was absent. Our private lessons had ended, and I had not seen him all summer. His lawn became a jungle again. It was like he fell off the face of the earth. I phoned his house, but there was no answer. After inquiring about him, my parents finally told me.

"Mr. Raber has cancer, the same disease that took his wife."

Mr. Hable knew about Raber's sickness, but he too kept silent. Raber did not want me, the neighbors, or the chess team to know that he was struggling. He had declined chemotherapy, and hospice nurses were caring for him at home. With sadness, I accepted Raber's distance. It came as a shock when he called me up one day out of the blue to meet him at his house.

I walked there as fast as I could. A kind hospice nurse let me in. She led me upstairs to Raber's bedroom, where he lay in bed. He looked gaunt and withered, hanging on for dear life. But he was happy to see me.

"Carter! It's been a while. How have you been?"

"Pretty good, no complaints." I sat in the chair at his bedside.

"That's great to hear. I heard that you qualified for the U.S. Junior Chess Championship."

"I couldn't have done it without you, Mr. Raber. I wouldn't be where I am today if it wasn't for you."

Raber started coughing. It was a nasty fit that lasted a good while. When he found his breath again, he spoke.

"Let me tell you something, Carter. Years ago, when I first met you as a child, I could tell that you were sharp as a tack. Sure, I gave you some guidance with chess, but the accomplishment is yours. You've done all this yourself, and I am proud of you."

I didn't know what to say. Raber smiled indulgently, not his usual expression. He meant the world to me, more than he knew. He patted my knee. Slowly, he reached over to his nightstand to grab a picture of him and his wife. A picture that had been downstairs in the living room.

"That's a great photo," I said. I felt scared and confused, but I wanted to seem cheerful.

"It sure is. Not a day goes by where I don't think about Alice. She was the greatest thing that ever happened to me, and for that, I'm grateful."

December 2022

He put the picture back on his nightstand.

"How about a game?" he asked. He pointed over at his chess set that sat atop his dresser.

"Okay."

I set up the board and all the pieces on the over-bed table for his meals. As he used to do, I took a black and a white pawn, held them behind my back, and presented them in closed hands for him to choose. He chose white.

As shrewd as ever, Raber played the Ruy Lopez opening, attempting to spoil my pawn structure. But I worked my way out of it. We exchanged pieces left and right, opening up the board for further movement. In the end, after much back and forth, I checkmated him with my queen and bishop.

"Well, I'll be damned." Raber shook his head.

"Great game, Carter."

It was the last game we ever played.

When Raber passed away, he didn't have a funeral. His send-off was discreet and obscure, as he wanted it to be. His house went up for sale, and he left what money remained to a niece. One of his old friends in Arizona got his low-mileage vintage Cadillac Mirage.

I was heartbroken. Raber was gone, as if he'd never been there. He had been a huge part of my childhood, and the thought of never seeing him again was unbearable. But not all was lost.

A package addressed to Mr. Carter Bryant arrived on our doorstep from an attorney. My mom brought it in, and when I came home from school, she told me to check my mail. I opened the package and was awestruck by the contents. It was Raber's chess set, the one we had always played with. Tears came to my eyes.

"Look," my mom said, "there's also a note. Do you want to read it, or should I?"

I sniffled, swallowed hard, and picked up the piece of paper.

Dear Carter,

It has been an honor watching you grow up over the years, as it has been an honor being your friend. In leaving behind my chess set, you were the only person who came to mind. It's all yours now, kid. I'm eternally grateful.

Your friend,

James Raber

P.S. Bishops over knights!