

1992, Russia, the city of Orel. I am a 23-year-old student and I am fond of playing chess. My dream is to win the "Turgenev Prize", a round-robin tournament named after the famous writer. However, the 11 opponents I have to face don't care much about my dream.

In the 9th round, Semyon Mikhailovich sits at the table across from me. He is at least 50 years wiser than me. Having the advantage of playing white, he is a strong, but a good-natured and smiling opponent, despite the fact that some accident left him with only one eye.

The old man starts confidently, moving the d- and c-pawns forward. I very soon manage to attack one of them, but it's nothing dangerous yet. The most reasonable thing White can do now is to advance the e-pawn to e3. My plans to outnumber the opponent's army would shatter at that move, but to tell the truth I have not expected an easy victory.

But wait, what is happening? Semyon Mikhailovich's hand is reaching out to the f2 pawn just next to the right one and throwing it forward. They are so similar, these white pawns standing in a row. A moment later, the old man looks over the new position with his single eye and bursts out swearing.

"You wanted to play e3, but grabbed the wrong pawn, right?" I ask.

"Yes, of course...," the old man's shakes his head sadly.

"You can take it back," the words slip out of my mouth before I have time to think about what I am saying.

Every sport has its own rules. In football, for example, you are not allowed to use your hands and arms while playing unless you are a goalkeeper. In chess, there is this touch-and-move rule: if you grab a piece - accidentally or not - you have to move it. Rules are there to be followed. But sometimes they are not being followed at all. Sometimes one knocks out the opponent, breaks several more rules and gets a medal after scoring a goal with a hand. "The hand of God", they call it.

I don't know if it was the voice of God or my own sinful voice that sounded in our chess club that warm summer of 1992. For a minute there was dead silence. Semyon Mikhailovich froze, his wrinkled face turned to stone. His only eye stared right through me. I decided to take the initiative – I shoved his f-pawn back to its original place and moved its neighbor on the e-square instead. The game continued.

An hour later, a difficult, but promising for me position appeared on the chessboard. It did not last long though. To my horror, I made a move that turned out to be a really bad mistake. It was somewhat fatal. After an unforeseen move of the opponent's white knight, I frantically began to go through possible options in my mind. A couple of minutes was enough to understand – there was not much for me to do. Plan A would lead me to a defeat in 2 moves, Plan B in 3 moves, Plan C would make me lose my queen. In the best-case scenario I would have to sacrifice a rook.

That choice did not matter much. I had no chance to beat Semyon Mikhailovich. I bent my head over the chessboard. Accidental spectators might have thought that I was looking for a magic solution, but I knew it was too late. My thoughts already moved in another direction. The sun was shining brightly outside, the grass was green. Transparent clouds, that vaguely resembled angels, were moving over the blue sky, taking my hopes to get hold of the "Turgenev Prize" away.

Suddenly a thunder rolled, bringing myself back to reality. Not in the sky though, but right in front of me.

"I propose a draw," Semyon Mikhailovich said with considerable confidence.

Now it was my turn to freeze. My eyes ran across the chessboard. I had to give an answer.

"No, Semyon Mikhailovich. I do not agree. I resign."

"You certainly don't. What nonsense! That's definitely a draw."

My opponent quickly shoved his pieces to their initial position, took his score sheet and wrote "0,5" across both our names in the result column. For Russian chess players, "0,5" means a draw, well, unless they are in a restaurant speaking to a waiter, because it would mean half a liter vodka then. I had my score sheet in front of me too, so I took a pen and wrote "1-0" not doubting much, which meant "White won".

The arbiter came. It turned out that experienced arbiters could be easily confused too. He looked at the score sheets. Then he gazed at us. Then looked back at the sheets and stared back at us again.

"What's the result?" he asked beginning to get angry, although there was no reason for him to get angry, as it was not he who was losing any hope to win the main prize.

"It's a draw, naturally," Semyon Mikhailovich answered.

"I lost," I objected.

"Morons!" the arbiter concluded, leaving the column empty in his own protocol sheet, and turned away. He looked back though and threatened that the Chief Arbiter would come and write the result down himself. The Chief Arbiter was one of those people who just enjoyed their life – he showed up on the first day of the tournament and on the last one, but understood everything that happened in between in no time.

There were 2 days left until the end of the tournament. By a twist of fate or by chance I won both last games, and my main opponents did not. The unknown result of the infamous game with Semyon Mikhailovich did not to have any competitive importance any more, only a moral one. The Chief Arbiter didn't speculate long. At the closing ceremony he handed me the cherished "Turgenev Prize", announcing to the audience that the "morons" had had a draw in the Round 9. In some other, nicer words, of course.

Almost 30 years have passed since then. Semyon Mikhailovich lives in heaven, and I'm still here. We cannot sit down at a chess table together, look into each other's eyes, talk about the past. Was it a "fair play" then? Who were we? Players with no ambition, people with a clean conscience, or just real morons after all?...

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