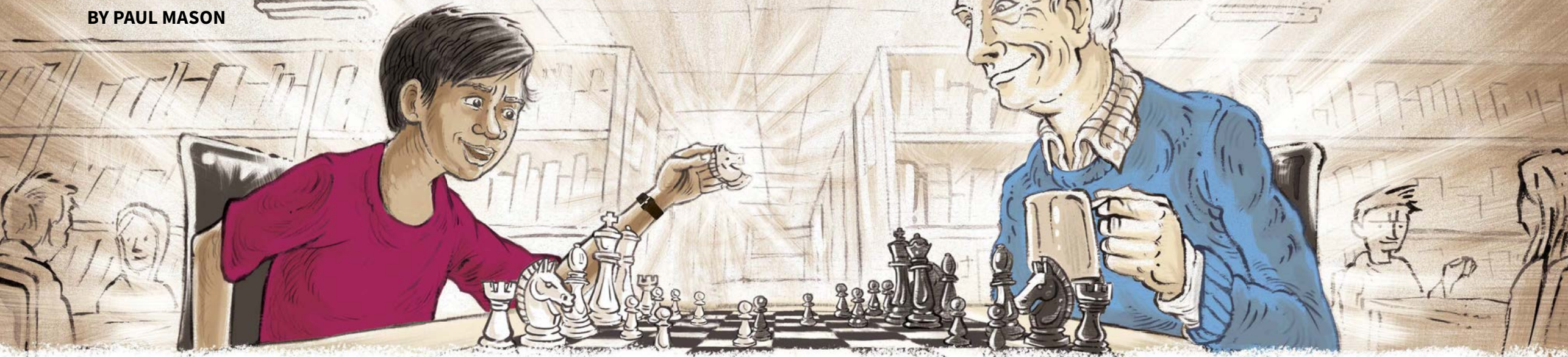


Checkmate

BY PAUL MASON



Liam charged with his knight, plunging the white rider and mount headfirst into enemy lines, then swiftly darted to the side. He let his fingertips rest on the horse's ears for a moment, feeling the points of wood press into his skin. Was it safe? He scanned the battlefield before lifting his hand.

"Check," Liam said.

The word burst into the quiet of the library. He loved that. Ch-e-c-k-k-k. Sharp, like the snap of a twig. He glanced round to see if the others had heard, but no one looked up.

Across the table, Mr Squires thought for a moment, one wiry eyebrow raised. Slowly, he brought his tea to his lips, the liquid sloshing a little from the shakes in his hand.

"You sure you want to do that?" Mr Squires asked.

Liam winced and frantically searched the board. Then he spotted the danger: a bishop, dark and scheming, hidden across the battlefield, hungry to strike. How had he missed him? The bishop would glide in and cut him down, guaranteed. His knight was stuffed.

"You can take it back if you want."

Liam shook his head. "My fingers left the piece."

Mr Squires tugged at his earlobe. "You're learning."

"You learn from mistakes, right?" Liam said, knowing what was coming.

"Fair enough." Mr Squires lifted his bishop. With a cruel swipe, Liam's knight was gone – dropped to the side like a corpse.

Mr Squires always lost the shakes when he went in for the kill. The rest of the time, the old man trembled all over – but not when he was collecting pieces. Two of Liam's pawns and a bishop already lay in the graveyard. He needed to read the board. Regroup. Hit back. Instead, Liam glanced at his watch. He was almost out of time. Dad was picking him up for rugby practice. No wonder he couldn't concentrate.

Liam dreaded practice. The drills, the tackles, the pressure of not mucking it up. Match days were worse – his stomach in a constant knot, the worry about letting down the team. The shouts from spectators on the sideline always filled his ears, and he could never think straight. The truth was he just wasn't much of an athlete. Not like his brother. Nick was a natural. He couldn't wait to get on the field – owned it, too.

Liam checked the time again.

“Focus,” said Mr Squires.

Liam nodded. He looked at the board. What were his options? There was his queen, towering over her subjects. Merciless. She could move in any direction, over any distance. Liam itched to get her into the attack.

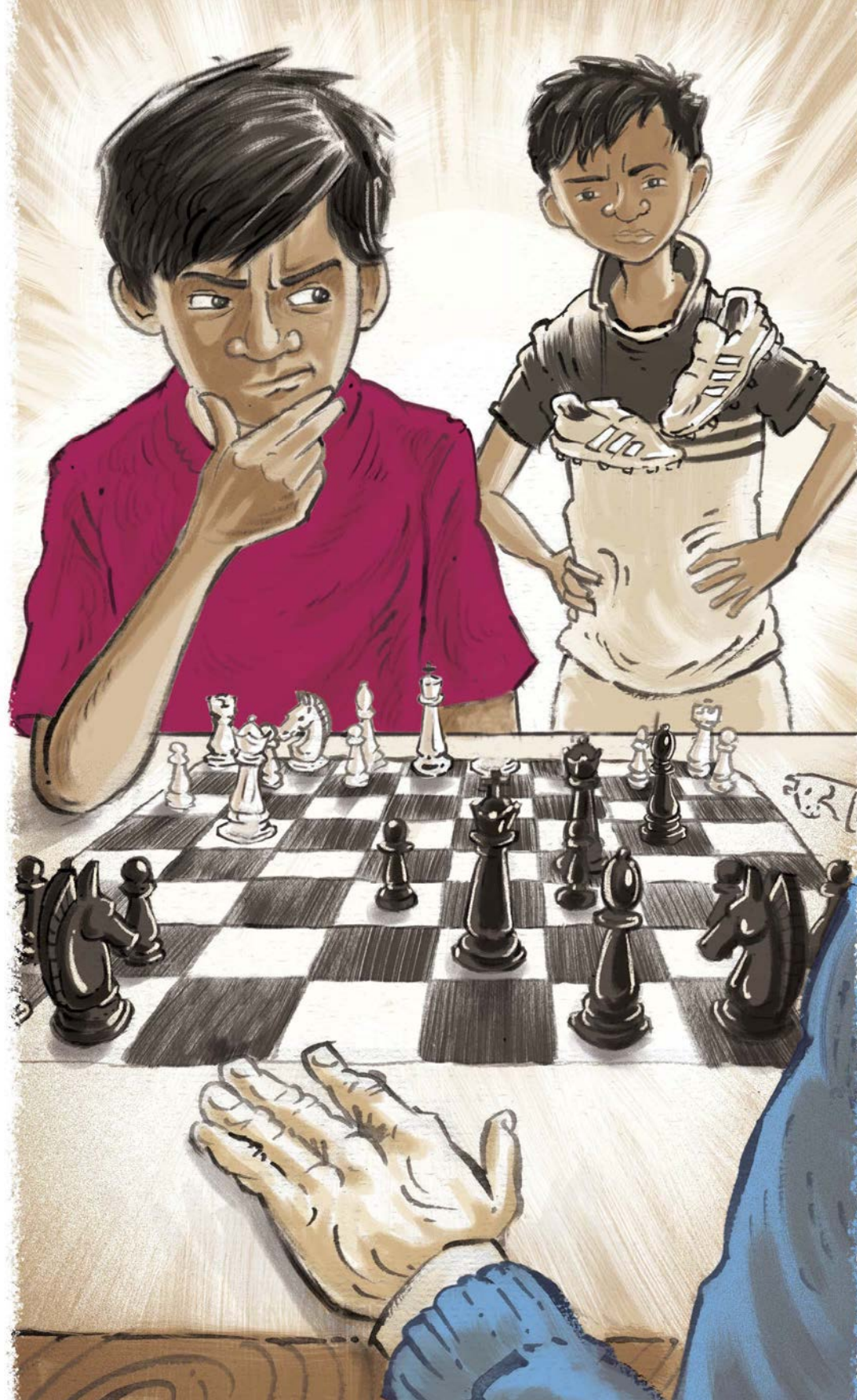
“Have a plan,” the old man reminded.

Liam liked that about chess – that you had to have a plan, a strategy. The moves had great names too: the Sicilian Defence, the Queen’s Gambit, the King’s Indian. And it was brutal sometimes – the way opponents hunted down his king, ripped through his pieces, dropping them to the side one by one. Chess was like life, Mr Squires said. It could be plenty tough.

Dad didn’t see it like that. “You don’t have time for chess club,” he’d said – just that morning. “Focus on your footie.” Dad had played on a rep team when he was a kid – a prop.

“I don’t even like rugby,” Liam answered back, only the words didn’t leave his mouth.

Now, holding his breath just a little, Liam took hold of his queen. He slid her out from her royal court, straight to the middle of the board. She would command the centre, seeking out weakness. Again, he left his finger on the piece, making sure it was safe before taking it away.



“Hmm, good move,” said Mr Squires. But if he was worried, he didn’t look it. The kids in the chess club called him the Ice Man. When Liam first started coming, he thought maybe it was some kind of joke name. A playful dig. Only it wasn’t like that. Mr Squires really was the Ice Man. He might’ve been old, but he didn’t hold back.

Mr Squires moved a pawn forward one space. Suspicious, Liam was trying to work out what he was up to when a shape appeared at his elbow.

“You done?” It was Nick, rugby shorts on, ready to go.

Liam shook his head. “Game’s not finished.”

“Dad said to hurry up. He’s waiting in the car. Practice starts in ten minutes, and you still need to change.”

“Can’t I just skip it?” Liam said.

“You better hurry,” said Nick, turning round and padding back through the library in his long green socks.

Liam shrugged apologetically. “Sorry, Mr Squires.” He reached over and toppled his king. It was one thing to lose, another to give up. He hated doing that.

The old man shrugged. “Next week?”

“For sure.”



In the back seat, Liam struggled into his rugby gear.

“It’s not OK to be late,” said Dad. “You’re letting down the whole team.”

“It’s just a practice.”

“That’s not the point. If you were on my team and you turned up late, I’d have you on extra laps.”

“Extra laps,” said Nick with a grin. He poked Liam in the ribs. Liam slapped his hand away.

The others were already at the sports ground, boots on, smiles smudged by mouthguards. Liam watched through the window as they churned up the field – more mud than grass this time of year – doing the first drills. Nick clambered out of the car and was gone, but Liam wasn’t ready. Avoiding his father’s impatient gaze, he finished lacing his boots. Then he searched his bag. Mouthguard, water bottle ... finally, he was ready.

“Have fun,” said Dad. He wasn’t even being funny.

Liam splashed through a puddle and ran onto the field.

“You’re late,” growled Shane, the coach. “Give me five laps.” He wasn’t really late – Nick had only just got there, too. But Liam was last, and Shane liked to make a point.

Liam didn’t bother to protest. He broke into a slow jog as the others lined up. Soon they’d be chasing the ball, flinging themselves into tackles. And his brother would easily be the best.

As Liam ran further from his team, the players began to vanish. All he could see were rooks and pawns, knights and their king. Attack and counter-attack. The pieces in his mind were clean, precise. They weren’t covered in mud – and right then, Liam decided. He would get through this one last practice, then chuck it in. No matter how much Nick hassled him. No matter what Dad said. Team sports weren’t his thing.

Already, Liam was thinking about next Thursday in the library. He’d take on Mr Squires, and this time, no one would interrupt their game.



illustrations by Kieran Rynhart



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by Paul Mason

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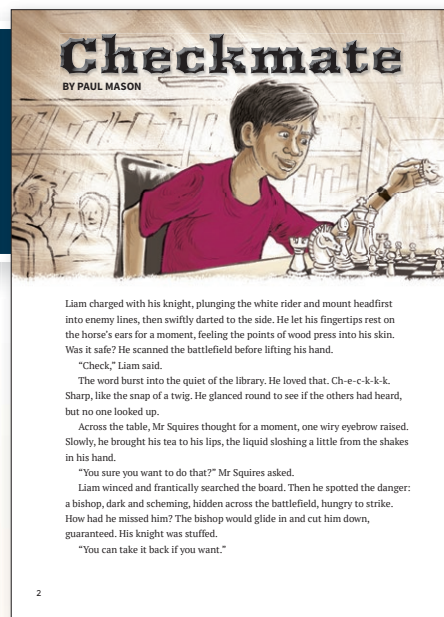
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