

*On the Beach (Madeira)*

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I don't remember now how I found him. But somehow I did. The chess champion of Funchal, Madeira. It was a bustling little city of bougainvillea and palm trees and the birthplace of Christopher Columbus's wife. By stubborn questioning, I somehow unearthed a modest, poorly lit room that served as the local chess club and discovered the unassuming local champ, Ricardo. I had just arrived on a banana boat from Lisbon on a two week escape from family life. I was looking forward to some of the innocent pleasures of a renewed bachelorhood.

We played rewarding games for several days, before I went off to explore the island. The games were, as usual, a pleasure, but what remains most memorable for me are the naked mountains rising like a spine down the center of the small island and the system of *levadas*, stone flumes carrying water from the rocky heights to irrigate the widespread fields and vineyards of the terraced island domain. Alongside each of these quiet flumes of cold water is a narrow footpath and following these paths one can penetrate to all parts of the uninhabited interior. At one point, the *levada* led me through a low-ceiled tunnel, utterly black. I had no flashlight, of course. The only thing I could see was a tiny pinprick of light hovering like an optical illusion in the far distance. It took at least half an hour to traverse that unfathomable blackness, one hand held before me, to prevent cracking my skull on rocky projections from the vaulted ceiling. For what seemed like ages, nothing changed, as the tiny dot bobbed beyond the tunnel's ink. Finally, the dot began to grow a bit larger, and I knew I would finally rejoin a world of vineyards, forests, and the flowing water of the *levada* sparkling beneath the sun. Leaving the seemingly endless dark, I found myself on the other side of the island, terraced fields dropping below me to the distant sea. I spent the night at a forestry cabin, sharing a simple meal with the lone mountain warden stationed in that remote spot. He suffered from a congenital spinal problem, used two mountain stocks to get around, and seemed grateful for the temporary companionship. It was rare that visitors came, he said, and rarer still that anyone would spend the night, making use of the mountain club's bunk beds. The world felt clean and idyllic, as I tucked into my sleeping bag against the nighttime chill, listening to the embers on the hearth shift as they slowly crumbled to ash. I felt sorry to leave the guard to his solitude the following morning.

Before returning to the mainland, I stopped by the chess club to promise a return someday. We found time to play two or three last games and a young kid of twelve or so watched avidly. The local champ and I were evenly matched, we split our games, and all three of us were equally pleased.

Three years later, I made it back. But this time I decided to visit the neighboring island of Porto Santo and told the chess champ of my plans. His family had a small vacation house on the island, so he decided to come and join me in a few days, bringing along his side-kick, Pedro, now an awkward fifteen-year old. So I took the *Blue Pirate*, vomited shamefully from the rough passage, and embarked on the almost deserted neighboring island. I found a small hollow between two dunes and there I laid out my Army-Navy poncho ground sheet, spread my sleeping bag, and unpacked a modest dinner of canned sardines, some bread, and a carrot and tomato that I washed in the gentle surf fifty yards away. That was what I ate for the ensuing week and I was content. Sun, sand, sea, bodysurfing, swimming,

running kept me utterly happy and I seemed to have no desire for food. When I returned to the States, I had lost so much weight I had to go out and buy some tighter trousers.

For several days, then, I simply slept on the beach, swam in the sea, rode the waves, and pounded my five-mile standard run down the beach and back, along the flat, wet sand. I read some Graham Greene and watched a nun herding her brood of young schoolchildren, like a solicitous hen with her chicks. After a couple of days, Ricardo showed up, with gawky Pedro at his side. We settled down with my portable, magnetic, black and white folding chess set in the warm sand and began to play. It was like the good old days. Ricardo and I were still even and we happily split our games. Then came the revelation.

“Posso?” said the gangly sidekick, and Ricardo made room for him opposite me in the sand. I played my usual Ruy Lopez. His responses were swift and certain. I never got the open lines I hoped for, my pieces seemed to be stumbling sluggishly against each other, as if only half-awake. In a bit over half an hour, I watched helpless as my king was mated. I clapped the kid on the back and congratulated him. Three years ago he had just been an on-looker. Now he was a player.

Ricardo took my place, a Sicilian Dragon variation ensued, and in forty minutes Ricardo had to resign. Then I played young Pedro again and again he swiftly defeated me. Ricardo and I exchanged a rueful, but amused smile. Now it was Ricardo’s turn. And again he lost. At that point he revealed to me that young Pedro was now, in fact, the new chess champ of Madeira.

A changing of the guard had occurred. A teenager now ruled and we could confront him and do our best, but our best was no longer good enough. And so we lost all our games for the rest of the week. It was, after all, the way of the world.

And I remembered a National Geographic special following the fate of an old alpha lion, defeated by a young upstart and forced to leave the pride and wander the savannah alone. Unable to capture prey without group support, he appears in the last scene, emaciated, exhausted, barely able to stand up. And then he comes across his last chance, an equally exhausted buffalo, mired in a pit of viscous mud, unable to escape. Slowly he crawls through the muck toward the buffalo, bites him repeatedly on the back of the neck, but cannot penetrate the thick hide and thick muscles. The buffalo can do nothing to defend itself, but the lion cannot kill its prey. And so, totally depleted, they lie there dying together, defeated by time and the insidious, clinging, primordial mud. But we, after all, were only playing chess, and I was merely beginning to enter middle age and so, with genuine warmth, I was able to congratulate the adolescent Pedro on his new status as the alpha chess player of Madeira and Porto Santo.