

# The Kid Who Always Won at Checkers

*Robert Keaton Mac Donald*

“Is that your *best* move, Frankie?” He said it sort of nasty. I’d never heard that tone in Martin’s voice before— as if he were a different kid today. Like in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* where somebody nice turns into a pod person and becomes really cold and nasty. It was like that.

I nodded yes. It was my best move.

He studied the checkerboard for a couple of seconds, then moved one of his men, sliding it from one square to another on the warped, scuffed surface.

I looked over the pieces and made my move.

Martin asked it again. “Is that your *best* move?”

“Yes,” I said.

Then he slid another of his men forward one space.

Martin was a kid in a wheelchair. He was twelve, my age, but he couldn’t go to school because of his illness. He had a private teacher who came to his house. I didn’t know the name of his disease but he sat bent sideways in his chair, his hands twisted at the wrist, his body seeming to consist of strange, bulgy lumps. It’s why, when he wasn’t around, kids called him The Mushroom. His real name was Martin Doyle.

It was July of 1966. We were at the game tables in Francis Lewis Park, on the Queens side of the Bronx-Whitestone Bridge. I’d known Martin for over three years, ever since I was in the fourth grade at St. Lucy’s School. My teacher then was Sister Mary Raymond, called Death Ray behind her back. During that year Death Ray started a drive to have kids join the Legion of Mary, a society where you were supposed to say prayers every day and perform good works. My friends, Donald and Joey, and I knew that every June the Legion kids had their own bus trip to Rye Beach amusement park in Westchester. So we put our names on the dotted line.

As Legion members we had to sign up to do spiritual and corporal works of mercy on a regular basis. Death Ray showed us a list of different activities to choose from. Most were simple things like helping around the school or the church. Calling on Martin Doyle was also on the list.

We knew some older kids who had visited Martin for a while and they said that all he wanted to do was play board games. That didn’t sound so bad. So Donald, Joey, and I chose seeing Martin Doyle as our good deed for

the Legion of Mary and, once a week or so after school, we went over to his house. He lived on Powells Cove Avenue in Whitestone, close to the water.

Martin had a load of games in his room. And model trains and G.I. Joes. And a great comic book collection. So we played the games and read comics. Martin's mother would bring us Pepsi and potato chips and Nabisco chocolate chip cookies. Donald, Joey, and I decided that, as good deeds went, it wasn't a bad deal.

We tried to have Martin made an honorary member of our Cub Scout den. Not just our troop, but our own den. The thing was that at our weekly den meetings we were all supposed to be working on a particular project. There were themes assigned each month. All the finished projects were then shown at the monthly troop meeting and prizes were given to the dens that had the best results. But our den never won because we did too much fooling around at our meetings. We had constant food fights and wrestling matches. But Joey, Donald, and I figured that if we could bring Martin to the troop meeting and have him be part of our den, then when the judges saw our miserable projects they'd also see Martin sitting there, all bent over and lumpy in his wheelchair, and they'd feel sorry for our den and maybe give us a prize anyway. We figured it was worth a try. But Martin didn't have any interest in the idea. "You'll love the Scouts," we told him. "You'll really love it. You'll have a great time." But no matter what we said, we couldn't talk him into it.

We visited Martin for a couple of months. But when an older kid broke his arm I started filling in for him on his paper route. I was busy every afternoon. Donald and Joey still went to see Martin but they began to get a little bored. They talked two other kids who were Legion members into visiting Martin instead. Donald and Joey told Death Ray that they were changing their work of mercy. They were going to spend their time praying for foreign missionaries.

I still stopped in to see Martin every once in a while. We played games and talked about television programs. He watched a lot of TV and liked a lot of the same shows I did—*Voyage to the Bottom of the Sea*, *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* Things like that.

And horror movies. We talked a lot about horror movies. He liked them as much as I did. He didn't go to movie theaters too much. But he saw just about every horror movie that came on TV. He had a television in his bedroom, which made me very jealous. He stayed up watching movies like *Attack of the Giant Leeches* and *War of the Zombies*.

The summer of '66 I was between the seventh and eighth grades. I still delivered papers but also, during summer vacation, I did odd jobs like cutting

grass and trimming hedges. And I hung out with Donald and Joey. Usually we were down at Francis Lewis Park. We played handball or basketball or fooled around on the swings. Or sat on the benches or under one of the trees. Or played chess or checkers with the old guys. They were a bunch of retired men who played all day, every day, sitting at the game tables which sprouted on the walkway under a clump of trees, close to the sliver of sandy beach. The old guys were good. You had to know what you were doing when you sat across the board from one of them.

I'd stopped in to see Martin right at the beginning of the summer. We played one of his board games. I don't remember which one. While I was there I mentioned to him how Joey, Donald and I were hanging out a lot at Francis Lewis Park.

I don't know if it was because I said that or not, but Martin started showing up at the park. His mother would pull up in their maroon Oldsmobile station wagon. She'd haul the wheelchair out of the back and lift Martin out of the front seat and into the chair. Then she'd push him along the park path for a while. They'd wind up in different spots. Sometimes they'd be right outside the playground where the swings and monkeybars were. Or they'd be right outside the handball court. Or sometimes down by the water, close to where the old guys played chess and checkers.

Martin's mother would sit on one of the park benches reading the newspaper or a *Reader's Digest* condensed book. He sat next to her in his wheelchair. He never had a book or anything with him. Mostly he just sat looking at whatever was going on around him. It could be a little creepy at times. You're playing handball and someone in a wheelchair is sitting there watching you.

One sticky Tuesday afternoon I was down by the water watching a couple of the old guys play chess. Mrs. Doyle came along pushing Martin. I gave them a wave.

"Hi, Frankie," they both said.

Mrs. Doyle settled on one of the benches and opened her thick book. Martin, I realized, couldn't really see the game I was watching. I was going to offer to wheel him closer when I saw a checkerboard and pieces on a table next to me. Nobody was sitting there so I yelled over to Martin, "Wanna play checkers?"

"Sure," he said.

I wheeled him to the table. We flipped a coin to see who would have the first move. I lost the toss. He went first.

We hadn't been playing very long when I realized that Martin was a really crummy checkers player. With all the games at his house, we'd never played

checkers. His games were board games, things you didn't need any strategy for. You shook the dice and moved so many spaces. Or you picked a card and it told you what you had to do. Eventually somebody won. But it was just sort of luck.

Checkers demanded strategy. And Martin was really bad at it. He moved his men without any planning.

Martin wasn't the smartest kid I'd ever known. It wasn't like he was going to help the government send somebody to the moon. But he wasn't a stupid kid either. You could have some wild and funny conversations with him. When it came to checkers, however, he just didn't think.

When we played board games in Martin's bedroom he always got a kick out of winning. Not that he was a sore loser or anything. But you could tell he got a really big jolt out of winning a game, a bigger thrill than most kids would. Like King Kong beating his chest after he killed the giant snake that frightened Fay Wray. It was that kind of satisfaction.

On that Tuesday afternoon I purposely started to make mistakes so that Martin would win. It's not that I was such a saintly kid or anything. I liked beating the pants off somebody as much as anyone. But that day I looked at him all crumpled and knotted in his wheelchair and I just wanted Martin to win. So I let him. And when he did there was this gigantic smile on his face. "Let's play another game," he said.

So we set up the pieces and played again. Again I purposely started to make mistakes. And he was grinning all over the place when he won. I started telling him what a great checkers player he was. That's how it all began.

We played a whole series of checkers that afternoon. Martin won every time. Because I let him. Some of the old guys who played games in the park started watching. Walter and Fred, Stanley and Jack. Four of the regulars. They started saying to Martin, "Kid, you really can play checkers. You're really good."

Now these old guys positively knew chess and checkers. Those games were their life. And they'd played with me. I wasn't anywhere near as good as they were. But I didn't make a lot of stupid mistakes. Or, at least, not usually. They knew that. They could tell that I was letting Martin win. So they were lying to Martin when they said those things to him. Like me. We were all just big fat liars.

The next afternoon Martin was back in the park. I was making tracks from the basketball court as he came along the path, pushed by his mother. "Checkers, Frankie?" he asked.

I didn't really want to. But I couldn't think of an excuse fast enough. I said, "Okay."

As we went down toward the water I was half-hoping all the game tables would be full. But they weren't. The same table we'd used the day before was free. We started a checkers game.

I decided I wasn't going to let him win. It was crummy to do that, then lie to the guy about what a great checkers player he was. Just crummy.

So I began to win. First a single jump. Then a double. It was going to be a slaughter. Like in *It Came from Beneath the Sea* when the tentacle of the giant octopus comes down and squishes the policeman on the beach. It was going to be like that.

I saw this awful look on Martin's face. Suddenly there were beads of sweat on his forehead. So I started making mistakes so he could jump me and start doing better. Then he looked calmer. I let him win the game. And again I told him what a great checkers player he was.

We played a whole series of checkers that afternoon. Just like the day before. And Martin won every one. Because I let him. And the old regulars started to watch that afternoon also. And to tell Martin again what a great checkers player he was. You could dive into the b.s. and do a backstroke. It was that deep.

Martin was down at the park practically every afternoon. The old guys, those crusty and grumpy regulars, started playing checkers with Martin every day. And letting him win. "You're a world champion when it comes to checkers," Fred said, puffing on the fat cigar that was always in his mouth.

"Best I've ever seen," Stanley said and rubbed his bald head.

Martin just seemed to lap it up. I'd never seen him look so happy. It's why we all couldn't stop. He just looked so freaking happy.

I didn't know what Martin's mother thought of all this. She was a hard person to read. Mrs. Doyle was one of those people who always smiled and acted cheerful, like nothing bothered her. It could be a little creepy at times. She must have known what was going on. That everybody was letting Martin win. But I don't know what she thought of it. I guess she was happy that Martin was happy. That was enough.

This went on for over a week. Then along came Anthony Fanetti.

Anthony had been in my brother's class at St. Lucy's. So he was about seven years older than me. But he wasn't really one of my brother's friends. Anthony had started St. Brendan's High School with my brother but he was thrown out and finished up at Flushing High. Now he worked part time at his uncle's bakery on Horace Harding Boulevard. But mostly you saw Anthony just hanging around Francis Lewis Park. Sometimes he was with friends. Sometimes he was by himself. Smoking. Anthony smoked a lot. Viceroy

cigarettes. And he would sit on the back of benches with his feet on the seat part. It was the only way he knew how to sit on a bench.

Why he hadn't been drafted and sent to Vietnam, nobody knew. Every other guy his age, if he wasn't in college, he was in the Army. Like my brother. There was the rumor that when Anthony reached puberty his balls had never dropped into his scrotum the way other boys' did. That they were still up in his ass somewhere. But whether something like that would keep somebody out of the Army or not, I didn't know. Or even if the whole undropped balls story was true. I'd never seen Anthony Fanetti's scrotum. And I didn't want to.

Anthony Fanetti wasn't around the park for that week when Martin was treated like a checkers champion. I found out later he'd gotten a job at a Catholic Youth Organization camp in the Catskills. But he got fired. The story was that some woman at the camp yelled at him for smoking behind the dining hall. She was at a window and he couldn't see her too well. He thought she was one of the old cooks. And he mooned her. But she was a nun, the Mother Superior. So he was back in Queens.

Anthony sometimes played chess and checkers with the old guys. He wasn't a fanatic or anything about the games the way they were. But he was a pretty good player.

So on this Thursday afternoon all the regulars were bent over their boards, absorbed in their games. Anthony, just back from the Catskills, came down to the tables and started setting up one of the checker boards. But he didn't have anybody to play with. Along came Martin in his wheelchair, pushed by his mother.

By the time the regulars, one by one, looked over and noticed what was happening, it was too late to pull Anthony into the conspiracy. Anthony was slaughtering Martin on that checkerboard. It was a blood bath.

I came along right at the end of the game. On the checkerboard Anthony was all kings and Martin was down to three men. Anthony just wiped Martin off that board. It was like in *The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms* where the giant monster picks up a guy and swallows him in one gulp.

Anthony had a big grin. He enjoyed victory. He didn't seem aware that everybody around him was staring.

Martin looked upset. He said to Anthony, "Another game, okay?"

Anthony said, "All right" and started setting up the board.

Walt, one of the old guys, stood up from where he was playing chess just a little distance away. "Hey, Martin," he said. "Let *me* play checkers with you."

Martin looked at him hard. "No, Walt. I have a partner."

So another game started. Another wipeout.

The regulars weren't concentrating on their own games now. Everybody just watched the extermination. Anthony enforced the rule that you *had* to jump. If you failed to see a jump and didn't take it, you lost your man. Nobody had done that to Martin before. Now he was losing men left and right, up and down, backwards and forwards.

The game was over pretty quick. Again, other people asked to play checkers with Martin. "No, I have a partner," he repeated.

If Anthony was at all bored by not having a better opponent, he didn't show it. He seemed to be enjoying himself.

After the third defeat Mrs. Doyle looked concerned. She asked Martin if he wanted to go home.

"No," he said. "Not yet."

There were eight games that afternoon. Total ruins. Think Tokyo after Godzilla was there. It was Anthony who said he had to leave, that he was working at his uncle's bakery. "I'm gonna be late if I don't get outta here," he said.

Only then did Martin say to his mother that he wanted to go home.

As she gathered her things Martin looked at me and at the faces of all the old regulars. He peered at us as if we were liars and conspirators. And he was right.

Mrs. Doyle wheeled Martin past me. He stared at me again and said, "Tomorrow, Frankie. Checkers tomorrow." He said it with a hard expression on his face.

I nodded and said, "Okay."

His mother pushed him up the walk toward their car.

If I could have gone to Alaska that night and stayed for a while, I would have. Or Mongolia. Anywhere. Just so I wouldn't have to be in the park the next day and play checkers with Martin Doyle.

But I was there. Martin and his mother arrived at the park about one thirty. The regulars were all at their games, bent over their boards, but they watched Martin and me out of the corners of their eyes. Everybody was really quiet.

Martin hardly said anything as I set up the board. We started playing. When I made my first move he immediately said, "Is that your *best* move, Frankie?" He said it with an angry voice.

I nodded that it was.

He asked the same thing after almost every move.

And the moves *were* my best ones. I wasn't purposely doing anything wrong. I was trying to beat him, the same way I would try to beat anybody I played at checkers. And I won.

"Another game," he said.

So we set up the board and played again. And I won.

After the second game he stopped asking if the moves were my best. He could tell. I was trying to beat him. And I did.

We played six games. I won all six. Then I told him I had to do my paper route.

"Tomorrow," he said. "All right?" He didn't say it in the nasty voice he'd been using all afternoon. He said it like somebody asking a favor.

"All right. Tomorrow," I said.

So we started playing checkers just about every afternoon. Real checkers. I didn't do or not do anything I wouldn't have done playing with anybody. I kept on winning. But what also happened was that Martin started getting better. It was gradual. But, little by little, I realized it was getting harder and harder to beat him. He was thinking out his moves. He was plotting jumps. He wasn't leaving himself open to be decimated the way he did before.

It took two weeks. I don't know how many games of checkers we played. It felt like fourteen million. But then it was the third game we were playing on a Thursday afternoon. Right from the start Martin had me on the run. He made a king before I even jumped him once. He countered every move I made with something even better. Finally I was down to three men and blocked in every direction. I looked up from the board. Martin still stared down at his men.

"I can't move, Martin."

I thought he hadn't heard me because he didn't look up.

"You won," I said.

Then he finally looked at me. The smile that Martin had before, when he won those fake times, was nothing in comparison with the one that opened onto his face right then. You could have lit up the whole interior of Radio City Music Hall with that smile.

"Fair and square," I said. "You won."

And the old regulars, you should have seen them. They started jumping up and down and cheering. I thought they were all going to have strokes. Or Fred would swallow his cigar. Everybody was bouncing around and laughing.

Martin laughed most of all.

"Let's celebrate. We have to celebrate," Stan said.

So he hopped in his car, went to the store and brought back cupcakes and Twinkies and Cokes and orange sodas. We had a party. And we were one of the happiest bunches of people who were ever in that park. Even Mrs. Doyle, who usually had a stiff, sort of phony smile on her face. That day you could tell, she was really happy.

So that's how Martin became one of the regulars at Francis Lewis Park. He started referring to himself as "The Sitting Champ" and the name caught on. Nobody called him "The Mushroom" anymore, not even behind his back.

The old guys taught him chess and he became pretty good at that, too. But that's jumping a little bit ahead.

The day after Martin beat me at checkers Anthony Fanetti came down to the game tables. Martin and I were just finishing up a checkers game. I had won the game. But it had been really close.

As Anthony was walking by, Martin said, "Play me, Anthony."

Anthony shrugged and said, "Okay, sure."

So I stood up and Anthony sat down. The two of them started the game.

Anthony wasn't trying very hard at first. You could tell he wasn't putting too much thought into the game. Until he got double jumped. Then you should have seen the look on his face.

But that was nothing compared to what he looked like when Martin won the game, having zapped Anthony's men right off that board. It was like something tremendously big had fallen on Anthony Fanetti. Think *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers* when the spaceship slices into the Washington Monument and it starts crashing down on the crowd of people and they're all squashed underneath. The look on Anthony's face. It was like that. Really. It was just like that. ☸