

The Player

By: Ulf Bengtsson ([GhostWolf69](#))

If you are reading this, I'm most likely gone. Don't bother looking for me. The risk that you will end up where I was 6 months ago is too high... or is it in six months from now? I still get confused sometimes.

I found it in the old part of town, where families had set up stands along the streets to sell of junk they'd found in their basements. Old comic books, some vinyl records, an armchair, clothes and toys of all sorts and yes some board games. Being something of a board game connoisseur my heart skipped a few beats at the prospect of going home with a real bargain. As irony would have it, I did, but not the kind I was looking for.

Most of the games were old junk, pieces missing, half-eaten by the dog or the kind that are so bad they are just barely worth the paper they're printed on. I was rummaging through a big carton box full of the stuff when I heard the rasping voice of an old crone right next to me. "Looking for something special?"

Startled I looked up to see an incredibly old woman standing there in front of me behind the table. I had not seen her before and was pretty sure the stall was run by the young man sitting on a chair just beside her. Maybe she was his grandmother? Great grandmother more like. She was positively ancient. "No not really. I mean I'm a collector of games so I'm just browsing to see if I find something unusual or a good price... you know." She raised an eyebrow at the word collector, and seemed to snort resentment when I mentioned price.

"A collector, eh?" Still that voice did something to my spine that was hard to describe. Trying to mask a cringe I said; "Yeah, I know. Grown man and all that. I should know better. But everyone needs a hobby, right?"

"Indeed..." and leaning forward she whispered, "is it though? A hobby?" I was stunned. She was seeing right through my façade of decency and into my childish soul. A soul that not only wanted new games to play with but at this point had come to depend on them, need them, crave them even. I realized that, though it was true, I had never admitted that, not even to myself. Her calling it out had sort of *made* it true. My voice was barely audible when I replied; "Maybe not..."

She chuckled, her old crone shoulders bobbing up and down in an uncanny fashion as she did. As if they were not really attached to her abdomen the way they should be under all that grey and black knitted wool. She gave me a sly look and my intestine froze inside me; "I have just the *game* for you my dear boy..." she said and handed me a black box. Without even thinking about it I reached out and touched the box. "How much is it?" I asked but my fingers had already grabbed it and I had a feeling they wouldn't let go no matter what the price. I didn't lift my eyes from the box when she said; "Take it, it's yours... it always was."

Suddenly someone punched me in the shoulder. "Hey! I'm talking to you! Are we done here?" I looked up and saw my wife, Maria, with a frown on her face. "Ow, What? We just got here." As I was talking I realized a couple of things. First of all, the old crone was gone. Second of all, the sun had started to set. What time was it? My wife looked confused, and she blamed me. Sometimes she gave me that look that told me I was the most stupid person on the planet. I hated that look. "What's

wrong with you? I went to the coffee shop with Gina and I've been gone for 3 hours! I figured you'd join us when you were done, but you're still here aren't you?" I was shocked. Three hours? What the hell had I been doing for three hours? Pocketing the cube, I stepped back from the table. Along the street people were packing up. Tables were folded and cartons packed with what had not been sold during the day. I shook my head to clear my thoughts. Maria took my hand; "You're such a nerd" she chided and we headed home.

I still think about that day. If there was a point somewhere where I could have chosen differently. I doubt it. That choice would have had to be made further back in history. Like all those times I prioritized my hobby over my career, over my studies, even over my friends. That day in particular... it was too late.

The weeks that follow are a blur... were a blur? Will be? Time is hard for me now. During that time I was consumed by the box. I studied it from every angle, my fingers tracing the patterns carved into the wood. It was made out of some dark almost black wood, maybe it was ebony? The patterns on each side were non-descript, abstract, and carried over the edges allowing the lines to continue to flow onto the next side. Clearly it was some sort of puzzle box and I found myself mesmerised trying to solve it. At some point my wife moved out to stay with her sister. I was starting to freak her out she said, yammering about me not listening or something, I don't know, I wasn't really paying attention. I stopped answering the phone too. That took a lot of pressure off listening to my boss screaming about my job not getting done and how I wouldn't have it for much longer unless I showed up. I guess he fired me, I wouldn't know because I'm not opening any of my mail either.

The first time the world falls apart is late one night in October, or maybe it will be November by the time it happened? It was Halloween and I was angry, frustrated and slammed my fist down on the cube that had so far only opened up a tiny corner and then not budged at all. I hurt my hand spilling drops of blood onto the thing. And suddenly there was a distinct "click" sound coming from within.

I pick it up and examine it closely. My blood has soaked into a set of fine hairline cracks that I didn't see before and as I trace the lines of these new clues with my fingertips I can feel a buzz, as if my flesh is moving through a strong magnetic field. There has to be some electrical source inside. Some sort of coil and a battery perhaps? That was unexpected. I had assumed it was wood through and through. How stupid I was, how little I knew... Then. Now. Tomorrow. It's all different, yet all the same. I know that now.

Somewhere outside in the dark hallowed eve a bell tolled a slow lonesome sound that seemed to stretch through eternity and seeping in through the cracks in my walls. I paid it no mind. I found the way. The gate and the key. I pushed hard and felt something give inside the cube and inside my mind. The same snap. And then it all breaks. Fragments of light falling like a cloud of glitter and I go away...

"Are you coming or not?"

I am ten years old sitting on a swing in a gloomy playground. Mother will probably open the balcony door and yell "Dinner's readdyyyyy!" any time now. In front of me was two boys, both older than me, not much, maybe a year or two, now it feels like a lifetime. I'm exhilarated and scared at the same time. They dare me to follow them up on the roof of one of the high-rises. They have a key they say... it opens the door, they say, clutching their hockey sticks till their knuckles go all white with pent up ... is it rage? I would never know. Knew... Then. I have to remind myself. "What's the matter little one? Chicken? You wanna run home to play scrabbles with your mommy?" I'm not a coward. I hate frickin' Scrabbles. I go with them. Up the stairwell of the high-rise they laugh and punch each other, but it

doesn't really sound like they are having fun. It sounds mean and brutal. They throw me awkward glances that fills me up with doubt. "We're going to show you a *real* game!" they say. They look excited, filled with anticipation. Hungry even. As if their meal is about to be served, and when the key turns in the lock on the 12th floor another portal opens in my mind and I go down. Somewhere in my fall I can hear them laugh, and laugh and laugh.

"What the hell is the matter with you?"

My wife standing in front of me. Tears running down her cheeks. She's angry, upset and sad in equal parts. Did I do this? What is it? Her look says it all. It's me. All me. Guilt roils in my gut sending muddy currents of shame around like thick cigar smoke. Did she come back? Did she leave? Now. Is this now? I realise I don't have a shirt on. My bare chest is sweaty and look dangerously thin, ribs poking out and clavicle looking absolutely ridiculous. "If you don't change, something's going to die here! Do you understand that. I'm trying to help you. Is this a game to you? If it is it is a really shitty game!" I don't understand. Where's the cube? If this is now, then where is it? I look down on my hands and my fingers are all keys. Different shapes and sizes. I try to stifle a laugh when the words Edward Keychain-hands come into my mind. "You hold the keys to your own health, love. I can help you but you have to want my help. Okay." I crack. Holding up my fingers in front of her despairing face I laugh hard, wiggle my fingers and say "It's got to be one of these..." I will tell her I love her. I will tell her it will all be fine. But this is now. "You've frickin' lost it, love... I'm calling the psych emergency ward right now." I can hear the call. But not from her. The door to our basement is locked, no more. It's down there. The game. The Cube. And when my foot falls on the first step I loose balance and tumble down into darkness. Something warm and breathing is waiting for me down there. The lock and key. And when my head cracks against the basement floor the last door is opened.

"How are you feeling to day Sir?"

The nurse leans over me to pull up the curtains. I like when she does that. Her white coat smells of bleach and something flowery. Makes me feel close to something. Someone. I don't know why that matters. The morning is regular routine after they loosen the straps and put me in my char, they strap me down again and wheel me out into the day room. The TV is on. Images moving about I've lost the ability to see anything I recognise in the stream of media that comes out. Everything. I recognise everything now. There is news and there is no news then there just is... An elderly couple is playing backgammon in a corner by the window. No. That's tomorrow. Tomorrow. Today three clients and an orderly are playing a Rummy game they won't finish. The deck is not full. I can feel it. Tomorrow the backgammon game will end with white winning in a classic full sweep. It's on the shelf now but the game is already played. Or will be. They roll me into the doctor's room for our regular chat. A few weeks ago he stopped trying to cure me and started these casual talks about baseball... horses all these sports... games. Didn't take long for me to figure out what he was doing. New watch on his wrist. New car in his lot outside. I get it. I just don't care. Tomorrow the old lady comes after lights out. It's like she never left my side. Maybe she didn't? She'll hold up her key and ask me to join her, and I will. I just have to write this down first. I lost track of the cube you see. It may be somewhere in my house still and if it is it will be dangerous. So I urge you, to burn down the whole fricking building. Burn it to the ground and pray the cube burns with it. I cannot see if you'll succeed because at that point I'm no longer here. At that point, I will be out of time.

Time to leave.