

THE POSITIONAL PLAYER

BY

JANET
SCHNEIDER

THE JOHN GARDNER MEMORIAL
PRIZE IN FICTION

Jamal and Keith were chasing geese down by the tidal lake when Jamal saw the Warbergs get out of the car. He stopped short, causing Keith to bump into him.

“Hey, man,” Keith said, grabbing Jamal’s arm preventing him from falling forward into a large pile of goose poop. “What did you do that for?”

Jamal had not seen Sue Warberg in four years. Was that really her? Her walnut skin the same as his. Her face looked the same — no noticeable wrinkles but her hair was cropped short. He watched her put on rounded dark-rimmed sunglasses. Dan Warberg, emerging from the driver’s side, was still mashed potato white but grayer and heavier.

“Nothing, bro,” Jamal said, slipping behind the gnarly trunk of an oak tree. His heart pounded so strongly his taut chest muscles stretched. No way could the Warbergs see him here. Not dressed like this. Not with Keith. “Thought I knew someone.”

“Who?” Keith looked around.

“You don’t know them,” Jamal said, grateful Keith stood with his back toward them.

“Then how come you do?” Keith said.

Jamal fixed his eyes on the five- or six-year-old boy who was now holding Mr. Warberg’s hand. Which move should he make? Advance or retreat?

“Don’t turn around,” Jamal said, his voice low, despite the increasing distance between him and the Warbergs as they walked toward Oakland’s Fairyland. “Remember when I was ten and Theresa and I lived with foster parents for nine months?”

“Yeah,” Keith said. “When your mom was in rehab.”

“Well, my—” Sorrow and resentment combined bubbled up in his throat. “Those are them. Walking away.”

“The black lady and the white guy?” Keith said, still facing away. “With the Mexican-looking kid?”

Keith was right that boy didn’t look like either of the Warbergs.

“What’s she doing with a white guy?” Keith asked. “You going to say something to them?”

“No.” Jamal pulled up his sweatshirt to wipe his forehead. “It’s been four years. They won’t recognize me.”

“Well, c’mon.” Keith moved away from Jamal. “You still want to go to Chinatown?”

Jamal watched the Warbergs approach the entrance to the amusement park.

“Let’s go,” Keith said, beckoning him. “You’re the one who’s starving.”

Had the Warbergs adopted that kid after they hadn’t been able to adopt Jamal and Theresa? Jamal clutched his abdomen as if an invisible fist had punched him.

“You ever been inside Fairyland?” Jamal asked.

“Nah,” Keith said. “Never had enough money.”

“Me neither,” Jamal said. “Let’s check it out.”

“Are you kidding?” Keith laughed and crossed his arms over his stomach. “That place is for babies.”

Jamal glared at Keith.

“You go, man.” Keith scowled. “I’m outta here.”

Keith shrugged and turned away. His long legs carried him in the opposite direction of the Warbergs.

Would they remember him, let alone recognize him? Jamal had been ten when he’d lived with Dan and Sue Warberg. He was now fourteen, 5’4”, with stubble on his upper lip. Thankfully, his long sleeves covered up his bicep tattoo of a knight chess piece. Although not the most powerful figure, definitely the most attractive one. Usually proud of it, he now felt silly.

He drifted toward Fairyland’s outskirts. He didn’t have enough money for an admission ticket. Should he hang out and “accidentally” bump into them when they leave? That could be hours.

He looked inside through the wrought-iron fence posts. Excited children climbed in and out of a giant shoe sculpture. Near its toe a ceramic old lady stood with her hands in the air, frozen with panic. A large sculpture of a dangling spider frightened a little girl. The teacup ride went round and round.

He kept walking around the park until he saw a giant chessboard with a life-size statue of a blonde girl standing on a square. He craned his neck to get a better view of the red knight and locate his queen and king. But the train station, with passengers loaded into the train, partially blocked his view of the board. He found the Warbergs settling themselves into a little open-air car, their arms holding that kid tight.

Chess, a game he learned from Mr. Warberg, had taught him to plan moves and think strategically. He had wanted Jamal to control his impulses. At first, all Jamal had done was attack, attack, attack. That was the code of the streets. But no matter how many of Mr. Warberg’s pieces Jamal wiped off the board, he always checkmated Jamal—until Jamal learned how to be a positional player. Over the nine months he lived with them, Jamal practiced tactics. He began to develop patience. He worked on increasing his patience all the time. “Once you touch the piece there’s no going back,” Mr. Warberg would say.

His stomach growled. He wasn’t feeling all that patient now. Damn, after four years of thinking about the Warbergs, how come they just showed up at the lake on same day and time as he? There was no way they thought about him as much as he thought about them. Could they possibly wish he still lived with them the way he did?

He needed a strategy. He’d use the library’s computer to look up their address. See if they lived in the same place. Then he had to figure out what he wanted.

After Googling “Dan Warberg, Oakland,” he found they still lived in the hills that overlooked the flatlanders. Only six miles from his crummy west Oakland neighborhood. But when he’d lived there it had seemed a world away. He had to see the house again, this place where he’d felt safe for the first time in his life.

The hills were steep. Neither he nor his three-gear bike were in the best shape. When he finally turned onto their street, he recognized the house. The two large bay windows. He stared at the house for a long while. Now he needed a way to say, “Hey, remember me?”

The Warbergs’ car wasn’t in the driveway. Nobody seen through

the windows. He would wait. He hid his bike behind some trees so he could squat in the neighbor's bushes. Jamal couldn't believe this was where he learned not only to play chess but also to ride a bike. Mrs. Warberg had even made sure Theresa and he finished their homework before they watched TV.

"Hey, kid," a male voice said. "What are you doing there?"

Blood rushed into Jamal's ears. It must look like he was up to no good. He wanted to say, "I used to live there" but his throat swelled shut. He stumbled as he stepped forward.

"Nothing, sir," Jamal croaked.

"Nothing?" The man held hedge trimmers. "Just sitting in my bushes?"

With trembling legs, Jamal grabbed his bike and moved toward the street. He avoided eye contact with the old geezer.

"How old are you, kid?" the man asked, pointing the closed blades at him like his grandmother did with her finger.

"Fourteen," Jamal whispered. How cowardly he sounded.

"Aren't you a little young to be staking out houses?" the man said, moving closer to him.

"I was biking," Jamal said, gaining some courage. "And needed to piss."

"So you picked my bushes?" The man stared at him, as if trying to figure out if Jamal was telling the truth. "Now, go on, get out of here." The man waved his hands at him, shooing. "If I see you again, I'm calling the police."

Jamal jumped on his bike and moved his legs up and down, barely able to keep his feet on the pedals.

"I have an alarm. It goes right to the police," the old geezer shouted from behind him. "So I wouldn't mess with my house."

Did the Warbergs have an alarm when he'd lived with them?

He raced down the hill. The sun was setting and the sparkling lights of the city twinkled. When he lived up there the view of the shimmering bay water and the two graceful bridges had made him feel that he lived on top of the world.

Maybe he should have said something when he first saw the Warbergs in the Fairyland parking lot. But he had been so shocked to run into them after all those years. And they had that new kid. No way to be cool with all that jealousy circulating through his body.

Jamal sat at a table near the counter watching Keith flip the pizza dough before he pressed it into the metal pan.

"You've been watching them for a whole year?" Keith's eyebrows formed a line. Jamal nodded his head.

"And they haven't seen you?" Keith reached for the tomato sauce. "And you've never been caught?"

"I've been lucky," Jamal said. "But it'd be easier if I could drive. Especially at night."

"You're a crazy man," Keith said. "Why you do that?"

How could he tell Keith that the Warbergs didn't draw the shades most nights so he watched them through their bay windows? The same big glass windows Theresa and he used to look out over everyone else. Over the year Jamal had discovered that Mrs. Warberg had been pregnant at Fairyland. He saw her grow bigger and finally one day he was hiding when she took the new baby, Kate, for a walk in the neighborhood.

Keith taught him to drive and let him borrow the car. Jamal drove up the hill. It was already dark. The fog had moved in, and the air had grown so misted that he was glad he could watch from inside the car. Mrs. Warberg placed cups next to Mr. Warberg and Charles (he had learned the kid's name), who were playing chess on the dining room table.

That should've been him! He wanted to drive right through that window, smash the glass, break the table in two, stop the game. Instead he careened down the hilly neighborhood's narrow streets. His car hit a pothole, flattening the front passenger-side tire. Jamal groaned. He needed to get out of there.

He had just finished fixing the flat when a police car passed him

again. The officer watched Jamal place the tire iron back in the trunk. Jamal, sopping wet, climbed back into the driver's seat. He shivered from the cold moist air. The cop followed him all the way down the hill and finally left him when he drove onto the freeway entrance back to his part of town.

It was nearly 9:00 p.m. when he got home. His mother wasn't around. Theresa sat on the couch watching TV and smoking a cigarette. The way Theresa leaned pulled the couch's denim slipcover off, revealing the faded flower cushions beneath her.

Her hair was pulled back and held down with a bright orange scarf. She wore it like that when she didn't straighten it. Theresa picked up the remote and began channel surfing. Without cable, they didn't have many choices. No baby Dominic with her. Must have already put him to bed.

"I can't get a clear picture tonight." Her frustration seemed equal to his. She clicked the TV off.

Jamal walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator.

"Want a cold beer?" Theresa called out. "I got them out here."

Jamal could use a beer after cutting it close with that cop. If he drank one with her, he could make sure she didn't drink enough to put Dominic in danger. Neither of them did drugs after seeing what it did to their mother.

"How about me teaching you how to play chess?" Jamal said, coming out of the kitchen. Theresa hadn't been interested when Mr. Warberg had wanted to teach her. Maybe without TV, she'd be willing.

"How come you love that game?" Theresa asked.

"I love the strategy," Jamal said. "Every move has purpose. I plan ahead. Keeps me out of trouble." He was good at chess. Mr. Warberg had said so. He was the first adult that told him he was good at something. "I don't just retaliate like my friends do. I've learned to slow down and consider my options."

"That game's too slow for me," Theresa said.

"It may look slow." Jamal threw his shoulders back, "but being

a positional player makes my brain go a million miles a minute. I'm always thinking three or four moves ahead."

"Well, my brain doesn't move so quick these days. That baby waking up at all kinds of crazy hours," Theresa said, the corners of her mouth turned down. "Besides, you're so much smarter than me."

When Jamal first learned to play chess he had wanted to play the game all the time. Nearly drove Mr. Warberg nuts. When he returned to his old school Jamal found a math teacher willing to play, but back then he was too resentful to concentrate. Recently, Jamal found some old guys down at the community center but he continued to beat them all. Mr. Warberg had taught him well.

"That's not true," Jamal said, sitting down next to her. "You're just out of practice since you stopped going to school."

A cry interrupted them.

"There's Dominic now." Theresa turned her head. "Both school and chess going to have to wait." Theresa rose from the couch.

Jamal reached out to clasp her hand but she moved too fast. His hand swiped at the air before coming to rest at his side.

"Theresa, you ever heard of Fairyland?" Jamal said, following her into her room.

"What about it?" She shrugged, lifting Dominic out of his crib.

"Looked fun. Might take Dominic someday," Jamal said. "Saw the Warbergs there."

"Seriously?" Theresa reached for her pack of cigarettes on the dresser. "What were you doing there?"

"Let me take Dominic," Jamal said, stretching out his arms. "Keith and I were chilling in the park."

She handed him the baby. He sat down on her bed, lay back against the wall, and cradled Dominic in his arms.

"You ever think about what our lives would be like if they had adopted us, like they wanted to?" Jamal said.

"No, not really. Ain't nothing to think about." She turned toward him with one hand on her hip.

"You don't wonder," Jamal said, looking away from Dominic, who

had fallen back to sleep. "What if we had stayed living up there and gone to Redwood High instead of crummy Montgomery High?"

"Why do you think about that life when that's not what went down?" Theresa asked, lighting a cigarette.

"I know." Jamal shifted his weight, trying not to wake the baby. "But what if it had?"

"I probably wouldn't have Dominic." She stood up and glanced around the room. "Jamal, have you seen my jean jacket? I wonder if Mom took it." She rifled through her closet.

"When the last time you saw Mom?" Jamal asked.

"Day before yesterday," Theresa said. "She said she was going to stay at Prince's house for a few days till the check comes." Theresa tapped the ashes of her burning cigarette and took a drag.

Their mom, so thin now, would swim in Theresa's jacket. But they did look alike. Seventeen years apart, just like Theresa and Dominic. Theresa used to be prettier before she got fat from the baby.

"How does this look?" Theresa was asking about the blouse she'd squeezed into.

"Where you going?" Jamal stared at her protruding belly. If she kept smoking and drinking beer she would look older than she was, like their mother did.

"That good, huh." Theresa frowned. "Okay, let me see if this top fits. Close your eyes."

Jamal pressed his lips onto Dominic's soft tummy while Theresa tried on another shirt. He thought about when they went to court so the Warbergs could become their legal guardians. They had both worn new clothes. Theresa had looked so pretty with red bows in her hair. His hair was real short and his shoes shined.

They had sat in the courtroom's first row, Mrs. Warberg between them. Mr. Warberg sat up at the table with the attorney. Jamal smiled, recalling how short his legs were back then, his heels making hollow sounds when they hit the wood panel that extended below the courtroom benches.

"There's Dad," Theresa squealed. "With Grandmamma." She

leaned over Mrs. Warberg and squeezed Jamal's thigh when their dad and grandmamma walked into the room. It had been two years since they last saw them. They were dressed up like they were going to church. The large bailiff blocked his dad from getting too close by stepping between them and the center aisle. Mrs. Warberg's frightened eyes looked at Mr. Warberg, who whispered to the lawyer. The judge seemed to stiffen and sniff the air as if she smelled trouble.

The proceedings began. Jamal had been bored and fidgety during all the talking. He didn't understand what the adults were saying when he heard his grandmamma's voice. Rising from her seat, pink church hat still on her head, she wagged her finger at the judge and declared, "No kids of my son going to be raised by an Oreo cookie and a white man." Someone had gasped. Both Theresa and Jamal had turned to Mrs. Warberg, who sat frozen.

"Look now, Jamal," Theresa said. She had on a longer but still too-tight shirt. "Why are you scrunching up your face like that?" Theresa put out her cigarette.

"Just thinking." Jamal stared at her. "Do you remember what you thought when you heard Dad say he wanted custody of us?"

"I remember the judge asking Dad to come forward," Theresa said. "When she asked him if he could take care of his kids, he said he could with his momma's help. And when the judge asked him where he had been the past few years, he told her he'd been in jail for drug dealing and looking for us ever since he got out." Theresa rolled her eyes and snorted through her nose. "Looking for us, yeah right."

Theresa bent over to collect all the clothes on the floor. She dumped the pile on her bed next to Jamal. She looked at Dominic.

"He asleep again, huh?" Theresa said. "Wanted to feed him before Tobias came by for him. I remember how I cried when the Warbergs brought over our stuff the next day. How they cried, too. I hated Dad for refusing to let them in to say goodbye. The neighbors staring at us hugging out on the front porch."

She wiped her eyes, grabbed her mascara, and started applying it. Jamal stared at Theresa's face in the mirror. Why doesn't she feel any

regret like he did?

“And that’s that, kiddo.” She turned to face him. “That was five years ago, and we are here and they are there. I got to get ready to go out.”

“Where are you going?” Jamal asked. He stood. He surrounded Dominic with pillows and a blanket.

“A party. Tobias going to watch him.” Theresa stepped past him and into the bathroom and shut the door.

“I know where the Warbergs live,” Jamal said through the door. “And they have new kids.”

Theresa opened the door, her eyebrows knitted together, her mouth open.

“New kids?” she asked. “Their kids or kids like us?”

“Charles is seven now and Kate, one. I think he was adopted and she’s theirs.” He scratched his head. “Sometimes I wonder how Charles likes that.”

“Jamal, how come you know so much?” Theresa asked.

“I watch them,” Jamal said.

“You what?” Theresa’s eyes grew wide.

“Have been for over a year.”

“And you never been caught?” Theresa narrowed her eyes.

“Once by a neighbor and almost when I got a flat in Keith’s car. But I’m careful.”

“Why?” Theresa lifted her shoulders. “What is the point of torturing yourself?”

“But that’s just it.” Jamal raised his voice. “They could’ve raised us but Grandmamma said no. She told the judge she and Dad would take care of us. And we haven’t seen Dad in two years and Grandmamma in over a year. And Mom’s practically living at Prince’s.”

“Well, Dad’s in jail for robbing those people and Grandma’s sick,” Theresa said. “It’s better that Mom be there than be here telling me to keep Dominic quiet and bumming cigarettes off me.”

“But why didn’t they want a better life for us?” Jamal’s eyes filled with tears.

Theresa placed her hand on Jamal’s shoulder.

“No one thinks somebody else can do better by their kids than they can.” Theresa pulled Jamal close to her.

They both knew that wasn’t always true.

“I really do have to go. Tobias will be here before I know it. And his time to watch him for two hours starts when he gets here, not when I leave.” She released him and shut the bathroom door. As Jamal walked away he heard her say, “Jamal, don’t go there anymore.”

Once the Warbergs were out of view, Jamal got out of the car and walked around their house. He pressed his face against the windowpane of his old room, cupping his hands to block the glare. The bed and the desk were the same. There was a new dresser and a bookcase. The window rattled, without a lock to hold it in place.

Jamal slid the window up and climbed in. His legs trembled as if he were on a tight wire. He looked around the room, sat on the bed and picked up a stuffed animal. Charles had so many toys he’d never seen before. These could have been his. He clenched both his jaw and his fists. His eyes landed on the chess set on Charles’ desk, set up and ready for play. That was the board he first learned to play on. He picked up a piece. When they were packing, Mr. Warberg had asked him if he wanted to take the set with him. He had said, “No. Keep it here.” Jamal hadn’t realized he’d never live in this house again.

Now looking back, he felt angry the hearing had just been a game to his father and Jamal had been played like a pawn. His dad hadn’t really wanted him. He just used his advantage to stop the Warbergs from raising him.

He took one last look around and climbed back out the window. Safe in his car he promised himself that he would never do that again. He had seen all that he needed to.

But he did return. He had seen the nanny hide the key and so he used it, walking from room to room to see what had changed. And each time he entered the house, he stayed longer and longer. Jamal told himself this was okay. He never took anything and put things back where

he found them.

The Warbergs placed suitcases in their trunk. The nanny and the kids waved goodbye. Jamal returned the next day, waited for the nanny to go to the gym, and entered the house. He assembled Charles' Magformer XLCruiser and left it lying on the rug. He climbed onto Charles' bed, leaned back against the pillows, and played solitaire on Charles' iPad. He heard a footstep. He listened for a moment, heard nothing else, and returned to the game. He heard footsteps again and saw a shadow on the hallway wall through the doorframe. *What the hell?* The iPad slipped from his moist hands. He scrambled to his feet. A police officer entered the room, a gun pulled from his holster.

"Put your hands on top of your head," the cop said, moving toward him.

Jamal raised his arms. The way his heart pounded he bet the damned cop could hear it. As the cop frisked him, sweat poured from Jamal's shaking body. Should he try to explain that this was once his room and he was just playing with the toys? He remained silent.

Within seconds, Jamal was handcuffed, and the cop radioed. "Caught a kid in the bedroom. Bringing him out."

Jamal's legs felt like they had liquefied. It took all his strength to walk and not form a puddle on the ground. A second police officer read him his Miranda rights before placing him into the back seat of the patrol car. He took deep breaths. His cheeks burned.

"I didn't take anything," Jamal said from the backseat.

"Tell it to the probation officer when we get to Juvenile Hall," the officer said.

As they drove away, Jamal glanced down the side street and could just make out the front of Keith's parked car sticking out from behind a white pickup truck. That's where he should be. Foot on the accelerator, hands on the wheel, heading for home.

In a small windowless room with a round table Jamal thought about the past year and how his obsession with the Warbergs had created

a magnet's pull he couldn't overcome. He had convinced himself that he had it together. The truth was he had been out of control. Like his mother, he was an addict, only he was addicted to a different drug.

"I'm Officer Vargas," the probation officer said, shutting the door. He was a fat white guy in a regular suit. He leaned so close, Jamal could smell his minty breath.

"So you used to live in the Warbergs' house?" Officer Vargas said.

"Yes, sir," Jamal said. "I was playing in my old bedroom."

"How did you get in?" Officer Vargas asked.

"I used a key." Jamal's eyes blinked rapidly.

"That's strange. If they knew you were coming, why was their alarm on?" The officer scratched his head. "Did you have their permission? Or were you breaking and entering?"

"Don't I get to call someone?" Jamal asked.

"Well, you're going to be spending some time with us until the Warbergs get back. They need to confirm your story and decide if they want to press charges. We're trying to reach them now." The officer leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "Besides kid, who can you call? The officer's eyes lit up.

He wasn't sure if Keith's phone was connected this week. And Theresa didn't even have a license. His mom would be of no help. Not really any choices.

"We've reached the Warbergs," another officer said, stepping into the room. "They are catching a red-eye and will be here first thing in the morning."

Jamal slouched. Morning? He breaths grew shallow at the thought of spending the night there and facing the Warbergs.

He would use the night to think strategically. Anticipate Mr. Warberg's moves. The Warbergs clearly had the advantage. He needed to mount a strong defense. He planned his moves: reassure them he meant no harm, make clear his desire, show remorse, try to gain their sympathy, apologize, convince them he'd never do it again. If all else failed, beg for mercy. Bile rose up his throat.

*

"The Warbergs are here," an unfamiliar officer said.

Jamal jumped from the sound of the male voice. There was drool on his cheek. He must have fallen asleep sitting up, leaning against the wall. His body tensed. At the sink he splashed cold water on his face. Since there was no towel, he wiped his face with his jacket. Without a mirror he didn't know what he looked like.

The officer unlocked the cell. He beckoned for Jamal to follow. He looked out the window of an open room. The sun hadn't even risen. The Warbergs must have come straight from the airport.

Dan and Sue Warberg sat on one side of a rectangular metal table. Mrs. Warberg's eyes were puffy. Mr. Warberg's skin was ashen, almost ghost-like. They both looked tired. If only he and Mr. Warberg were here to play chess. Their eyes grew wide at the sight of him. Mr. Warberg stood up. Mrs. Warberg jerked her neck back like a frightened horse. Jamal reminded himself that he had seen them over the past year but they had not seen him for five years. He was no longer that cute little boy. Jamal was practically a man, and probably scary to them.

"Hello, Jamal," Mr. Warberg said, extending his hand. The officer moved in close to prevent them from shaking hands.

"Hello, sir." Jamal noticed the lines on Mr. Warberg's face. Had they always been there or did they just form on the overnight plane ride?

"How's it worked out with your Dad?" Mr. Warberg said, locking eyes with him.

"It hasn't, sir," Jamal said, looking at one and then the other. "We're back with our mom." Both of the Warbergs' faces frowned.

"Sue and I hoped to see you again someday," Mr. Warberg said. "But never imagined it would be under these circumstances." With this opening banter Mr. Warberg had moved several pawns two squares forward.

So the Warbergs hadn't forgotten him. They had even wanted to see him. And Jamal, like a knight, leaped onto the board.

"I am sorry, sir," Jamal said. "About these circumstances." His

voice wobbled. "It wasn't like I was going to steal anything."

"Then, what were you planning?" Mr. Warberg asked. His unshaven face made him look mean.

"Just to see what I was missing," Jamal looked at Mrs. Warberg. Her head was down. He turned his head when he heard Mr. Warberg's voice.

"Had you been in the house before yesterday?" Mr. Warberg's face muscles stiffened, and he clenched his teeth. Like a rook, Mr. Warberg was straightforward and came at him at full speed.

"A few times, sir," Jamal said, his voice squeaky and high. "I know that was wrong. But I never took anything." He moved one square at a time.

Mr. Warberg slammed his fist on the table. Jamal jumped from the noise. Mrs. Warberg looked surprised as well. Jamal's Adam's apple throbbed. He felt defenseless.

"Were we ever home?" Mr. Warberg, looking scared, turned to his wife.

"No. Never," Jamal said. "I just wanted to look around. See the changes."

"So, you knew our schedule and entered when the house was empty?"

Jamal wasn't fending off these attacks very well. To stay in the game Jamal needed some offense. Could they understand his anger at being taken from them? They had been his chance at something better. Would they feel compassion?

"I would never hurt Mrs. Warberg, you, or the kids," Jamal said.

Mr. Warberg cringed at the mention of his kids. Like a bishop, no other could come to his defense.

"I am sorry if I scared you." Jamal couldn't bring his gaze to their faces. Sweat and chills alternated throughout his body. "I thought if I put everything back, there was no harm. I know that sounds stupid. I know I was stupid."

"Do you have any idea how we felt when the police called last night?" Mr. Warberg shouted. "We were across the country, away from