

Justin Bernbach, a thirty-eight-year-old airline lobbyist from Brooklyn, stood to Watson's left. He had pocketed \$155,000 while winning seven straight *Jeopardy* matches in 2009. Unlike Watson, Bernbach understood the sentence. He knew precisely who Moshe Dayan was as soon as he saw the clue, and he carried an image of the Israeli leader in his mind. He gripped the buzzer in his fist and frantically pressed it four or five times as the light came on.

But Watson had arrived first.

"Watson?" said Crain.

The computer's amiable male voice arranged the answer, as *Jeopardy* demands, in the form of a question: "What is eye patch?"

"Very good," Crain said. "An eye patch on his left eye. Choose again, Watson."

Bernbach slumped at his podium. This match with the machine wasn't going well.

It was going magnificently for David Ferrucci. As the chief scientist of the team developing the *Jeopardy* computer, Ferrucci was feeling vindicated. Only three years earlier, the suggestion that a computer might match wits and word skills with human champions in *Jeopardy* sparked opposition bordering on ridicule in the halls of IBM Research. And the final goal of the venture, a nationally televised match against two *Jeopardy* legends, Ken Jennings and Brad Rutter, seemed risky to some, a bit *déclassé* to others. *Jeopardy*, a television show, appeared to lack the timeless cachet of chess, which IBM computers had mastered a decade earlier.

Nonetheless, Ferrucci and his team went ahead and built their machine. Months earlier, it had fared well in a set of test matches. But the games revealed flaws in the machine's logic and game strategy. It was a good player, but to beat Jennings and Rutter, who would be jousting for a million-dollar top prize, it would have to be great. So they had worked long hours over the summer to revamp Watson. This September event was the coming-out party for Watson 2.0. It was the first of fifty-six test matches against a higher level of competitor: people, like Justin Bernbach, who had won enough matches to compete in *Jeopardy's* Tournament of Champions.

In these early matches, Watson was having its way with them. Ferrucci, monitoring the matches from a crowded observation booth, was all smiles. Keen to promote its *Jeopardy* phenom, IBM's advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather, had hired a film crew to follow Ferrucci's team and capture the drama of this opening round of championship matches. The observation room was packed with cameras. Microphones on long booms recorded the back-and-forth of engineers as they discussed algorithms and Watson's response time, known as latency. Ferrucci, wearing a mike on his lapel, gave a blow-by-blow commentary as Watson, on the other side of the glass, strutted its new and smarter self.

It was almost as if Watson, like a person giddy with hubris, was primed for a fall. The computer certainly had its weaknesses. Even when functioning smoothly, it would make its share of wacky mistakes. Right before the lunch break, one clue asked about "the inspiration for this title object in a novel and a 1957 movie [which] actually spanned the Mae Khlung." Now, it would be reasonable for a computer to miss "The Bridge over the River Kwai," especially since the actual river has a different name. Perhaps Watson had trouble understanding the sentence, which was convoluted at best. But how did the computer land on its outlandish response, "What is Kafka?" Ferrucci didn't know. Those things happened, and Watson still won the two morning matches.

It was after lunch that things deteriorated. Bernbach, so frustrated in the morning, started to beat Watson to the buzzer. Meanwhile, the computer was making risky bets and flubbing entire categories of clues. Defeat, which had seemed so remote in the morning, was now just one lost bet away. It came in the fourth match. Watson was winning by \$4,000 when it stumbled on this Final Jeopardy clue: "On Feb. 8, 2010, the headline in a major newspaper in this city read: 'Amen! After 43 years, our prayers are answered.'" Watson missed the reference to the previous day's Super Bowl, won by the New Orleans Saints. It bet \$23,000 on Chicago. Bernbach also botched the clue, guessing New York. But he bet less than Watson, which made him the first person to defeat the revamped machine. He pumped his fist.