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En Passant

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MICHAEL SHIRZADIAN

en passant

“I am the old artillerist. I tell of my fort’s bombardment. I am there again...”

Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*

Mary Queen of Scots hid a dog under her dress on the morning of February 8, 1587. After paying the executioner for precision, Mary climbed the steps of the scaffold and laid her head upon the wooden block. It took three blows. Moments after her eyes stopped seeing, the small dog sprinted out from under her dress and was lost in the city. The people cheered.

While covering the Second World War, my 11th-grade history teacher showed the class a particularly brutal scene from a particularly brutal war movie. I had seen the clip before, so, instead of the film, I watched the class. They chuckled at the dying soldiers. Laughed when one man caught fire. Mocked a maimed man as he searched hopelessly for his missing arm.

Why, I wondered, did we find such brutality so humorous? Perhaps because the battle is so distant. Perhaps because the scene is overdone. The most persuasive explanation, I concluded, stems from a desire to control. The scene put brutality on a DVD, subjecting it to theatrical criticism. I may not have experience in battle, but I have experience at the movie theatre. And if I choose to make these environments the same, then they are the same.

That’s why I started playing chess. Control. I was six when I watched, one Thanksgiving morning, as my father and uncle did combat on a chessboard. They moved marble pieces as they slapped an old wooden clock, exchanging time and soldiers. Bishop to A2. Queen to H7. Knight to C5. Pawn captures C5.

I attended my first tournament at age 16. I remember sitting before a checkered battleground, fiddling with the clock and waiting

for my opponent. Twenty-nine minutes apiece, I thought, pulling the old clock to my face to check for precision. One of us would prove superior in under an hour. Mr. Rose, my coach, assured me that I could beat him, but I wasn't listening. I couldn't listen. I could only watch the games unfolding around me. I listened as the mass of chess players pounded their boards, their pieces, their clocks. The black kid runs double fianchetto. Watch for rook snag from G2. Queenside castle would be the best defense, but break the pawn structure to avoid an unexpected checkmate. Do these kids play en passant? Mate in three. In two. My opponent had arrived.

Charles walked among the hackberry trees before his execution. Two hours past noon, English guards escorted the iconoclast from St. James Park to London's city square. Hundreds of Englishmen waited eagerly. After muttering a short prayer, a masked executioner placed the fallen king's head on the wooden block, raised his axe, and let fall the metal upon a frail neck. It took one blow. Spectators paid to dip their handkerchiefs in Charles' blood. A handkerchief stained with the blood of a king, after all, would cure the most potent disease.

Every game starts the same: White pawn to E4. Black pawn to E5. Kingside knight to C3. Queenside bishop to E4. Some say it's a game of strategy, and, of course, it certainly is. But it's far more than strategy. It's a game of war. Of brutality. A game of domination. Of superiority. The true chess player does everything in her power to defeat her enemy, no matter the brutality. Chess is dictated by greed, selfishness, lust. It's a game of control. We play to dip our handkerchiefs in another's blood. It is, more than anything else, a game of life.

The clocked ticked. My opponent sat across the battleground, smiling, waiting. I scanned the board, searching for some lost combination of moves to save my queen. If I pressure his king, perhaps I can work the board into a more advantageous position. Seven moves, at least. The clock kept ticking. He won't take the bait. He'll see it. He's far too good. Would he accept a draw? Is it okay to draw? Why should I play chess if I'm just going to offer a draw? The clock ticked.

My uncle beat the clock more fervently that Thanksgiving morning. He and my father were slapping every few seconds. Move. Slap. Move. Slap. Their pulse kept time. Father smiled as he advanced a pawn. Uncle smiled back, moving his black-squared bishop out from the periphery and slapping the old clock yet again. Father hesitated, smiled slightly, and threw his rook back to row eight. He knew it didn't matter. Uncle promoted the pawn, a pawn protected by his black-squared bishop, and slapped back. The pulsing stopped a moment later. "Shah Mat," said my uncle in Farsi, his native tongue. The king is dead. Checkmate.

"Would you teach me?" I asked. He smiled and reset the board.

Chatrang is the Persian word for chess. Literally translated, the word means Army of four divisions. Historically, chess has always been linked with violence. In CE 1061, Saint Peter Damian denounced the bishop of Florence for playing chess. It was an evil game, he said, and a clergyman had no business playing it. In CE 1254, Louis IX of France banned the game on account of its barbarity. And of course the game gained popularity.

I couldn't outplay my opponent. He was thinking at least eight moves ahead. He killed the queen and went to work on my pawn structure. He enjoyed ripping it apart.

Marie Antoinette married Louis XVI, the king of France, at age 15. History tells how she lived classily, ruled oppressively, and mocked the starving third class. The Jacobins tried Marie for sending money to Austria, plotting to kill the Duc d'Orleans, arranging the massacre of the Swiss Guards in 1792, orchestrating orgies at Versailles, and, most egregious of all, masturbating her son, Louis Charles. The Jacobins forced young Louis Charles to testify against his mother.

Found guilty of all chargers, Frenchmen escorted their queen to the guillotine and placed her head under the sharpened blade. She was lost.

Most of chess is show. Who cares if you beat your opponent when no one watches it happen? This kid knew it, too. Check. Check. Check. He chased my king around the chessboard. He'd beat me any

second, but he was passing up perfect opportunities to end the game. If I noticed them, he surely did. "I like to play with my food before I eat it." He smiled.

Pope Formosus died paralyzed. I wonder, though, if in his paralysis Formosus imagined Pope Stephen VI, his successor, ordering that his lifeless body be removed from its slumber and brought to the papal court for judgment.

I pitied my king as he jumped around the squares where his comrades once stood. "Will you just end the game?" I demanded. "Coach won't let me forfeit."

"I'm still playing," he said laconically. Sweetly. He smiled.

Did Formosus imagine that Pope Stephen would cut off his stiff benediction fingers, bury him in a graveyard for foreigners, and then re-exhume his body only to tie weights to his feet and cast him into the Tiber?

Queen to D2. King to E5. Rook to F8. Knight to A2. Bishop captures A2. The game stopped. I stared at the board. He stared at me, waiting for my move. I didn't move. I couldn't. My king stood alone, safe within his square but could move to no other. The clocked ticked.

"I think that's stalemate," I said. "We tie."

His eyes darted to the board. I extended my hand, but he didn't shake it. A look of horror spread across his face as he examined the board, then his notation sheet, then the board again. "Next time," I said, holding back a smile, "just eat your food."

Rumor circulated that Formosus's body, after washing up upon the shores of the Tiber, had begun performing miracles. Upon hearing the rumors, a superstitious populace removed Pope Stephen from the papacy and threw him in prison. Sleeping within the walls of his prison cell, an inmate strangled the ex-Pope to death.

And again the people cheered.