

# **Home of the**

a novelette in 6 parts

by Alan DeNiro

1.

Cleo was completely happy and devoid of hope. At night she dreamed of photocopiers left on in an office building overnight. On Sunday she'd walk to her church and pray outside of it, for those not inside. Bullet trains passed by. She always waved. They didn't stop. She contemplated what steps she would have to take to make the trains stop. By the time Erie's churches let out, she was back home, watching the minister on TV. No one called on her. Her house was red stucco, painted blue. Which defeated the purpose of stucco. Her mother had painted the house blue in her late middle ages. Her mother bequeathed the house to Cleo. Cleo relented. She was penitent without exactly knowing why. The house was on a cul de sac on the East Side, Dunn Boulevard, between Saint Anne's and the bay. Behind her lot was a cemetery, and across the street from her lot was the black cat factory. Of the two, the cemetery was by far the most interesting. For starters, she was conceived there, in the groundskeeper's shed, which didn't exist anymore. Her mother had an affair with the groundskeeper, who was from western Kansas. Nearly all care had abandoned the cemetery and the headstones inside. There were a few Revolutionary War veterans buried there. Cleo would have loved to celebrate this. Few people left flowers or wreaths. Obelisks tilted. People in general were leaving Erie at a fast clip. There were less dying people left. Faithful people often were left behind. The church, which had fed the cemetery for a century, burned to the ground a decade before. The congregation didn't reconvene, for lack of funds and municipal edicts. No one caught the arsonists. The members joined other churches, more theocratic churches, or turned their faces from God entirely, and took up drag races on Saturday nights and hunting on Sunday mornings. Or they died, which didn't have anything to do

with church. Even in winter, Cleo would visit the foundations, the ash square set in the ground jutting against the railroad tracks. There were no deer to hunt anymore, and few small mammals and birds. Generally there were only people left.

She was the only one left alive on her block, aside from the cats and the foreman, who didn't count. Her hair was black with a few gray strands. She resisted dyes. She resisted many things, including the need to smile or laugh at comedic movies at the theater. Movies were small hearted, and easy to coast through, like fog puffs. Movies ended with a public service announcement from a tribunal. Of some sort. A tribunal was a collection of citizens on the lookout for citizens' interests. They declared these interests, which usually involved enemies. Everybody always left right after the shiny heads stopped talking—cameras in the projection room watched the viewing—and right before the credits rolled. People were tired. But Cleo liked to stay and watch the references to gaffer, puppet master, and key grip. She thought that befriending a key grip might have been interesting fodder. She would take the bus to the failure mall downtown. She knew her worth. The bus had issues. Groaning escalators leading to empty shop fronts on the second floor. Abandoned kiosks with scotch tape half-torn off the counters. Huffer cans in the corners. The only open establishments, besides the dollar theater, were the adult bookstore, the tobacconist, and the store that sold nothing but pewter figurines. The store was called Pewter There. The last store made her sad. No one ever entered. She was like the train passing by a strange woman making waving motions. The proprietor wore a white, tight fitting mask and fretted with his hands. As noted previously, she didn't stop to inquire. She wasn't in the mood for small, pewter figurines of dragons and unicorns. Miniatures were not powerful. The house wouldn't have approved. The house was mindful, and resisted paraphernalia. Knickknacks that Cleo

bought would disappear shortly after acquisition. Paintings of burning barns she purchased from starving artists sales, a smiley-face clock she resuscitated from the break room, all gone. So she gave up. She didn't like giving up. She took the bus back. Its hood usually smoked.

On rain days, which came often in the summer, spring, and autumn, she liked to walk the East Side. Umbrellas could conceal cylindrical bombs and were thus frowned upon. Tribunals would warn against bomb-like people, who required eagle eyes at all times. Evil truly was wicked, and could quiver to life after any misstep. That was what her betters said. The dealers on the corner of Buffalo and Downing didn't bother her, nor the grovagues parading on 10th and Parade. She knew the hoarse ghosts of those boulevards were more terrifying than 16 year olds with post-heroin and .44s. Most sidewalks resembled narrow gravel roads from the despair. She wore beautiful galoshes. They were black with small fleur-de-Frenches along the upper trim. Her mother gave her the boots before she died. Before her mother died, not Cleo. After Cleo tried them on, her mother noted that she pulled them off a dead woman, a homeless woman with no hair in the bus station. Before Cleo could recoil, her mother said, no, sorry, I was only joking. It was a good story though, wasn't it? Cleo liked the boots anyways. They made her look taller. The litter and wind would collaborate on sculptures along chain link fences. Some of the plastic litter was positively antique. Rivulets roared into drains underneath. The drains emptied into sewer tunnels which coarsed toward the bay. The water carried delirium. Mercury could also be called quicksilver. Stray cats died underground. In chain-link fields, cranes built to hoist up rusted cars with magnetic forces rusted. Art was everywhere. It wasn't good art. The city was a non-museum. These were not stories in their entirety, but rather stories that a person would be reading out loud to friends in a

bar, and then the bartender would tap the reader's shoulder and say, your house is on fire. Your mother's dead. No one loves you, not really. One of those types of responses. No one read anymore, out loud or silently. Heliotropes flew overhead, shouting bulletins (all point) to precinct commadantes who might have been listening. Hand signals projected onto the cloudbanks. Heliotropes lived in milder climes. Cleo covered her ears. Once there was a boy who loved her, her age, but he fought in California and she never heard from him again. He had delicate fingers and ankles. He was an apostate, though neither of them really felt what that meant. She imagined him in prison—a converted gymnasium holding thousands of bunks, snipers in every nook, spies and assassins enforcing 2nd amendment zones, itching to penknife livers. Cleo wondered if it was better to home he was alive or dead. His emails were in a bankers box somewhere in the cellar, amidst a tangle of potato roots. She often wondered what his penmanship was like, but never had the chance to ask. She was 35 years of age in the thirteenth year of our Lord.

When it was sunny, and she didn't have to wear her containment mask (red, like the stucco underneath her blue house), she worked at Wal-Mart. There was one five blocks from her. People shopped indoors when it was sunny. This too was encouraged. Retractable roofs unless they were broken. Nearly everyone who worked worked in a Wal-Mart. Her Wal-Mart was a bowling alley. The greeter always snarled at her, even though they were on the same team. He'd lost his heart in one of the wars. Because her bowling alley was a Wal-Mart, it was a non-failure establishment. She cleaned the robots that cleaned the lanes and stocked the shoes. Her blue smock smelled like burnt hot dogs. Nearly everyone bowled in solitary fashion. Bowling in duos or trios wasn't banned, per se, but it was certainly frowned upon, and there was an extra tariff per head.

The robots usually didn't complain, but they belched silicates. They were already oldish. She loved them, in her fashion, even though she couldn't tell them apart. That happened a lot. They were both blonde. The TVs in the snack bar fixated on victories, which were hard to tell apart from failures. The greeter would tap his plastic chest, where his bonobo heart beat. Personalities tended to be unfortunate, even on sunny days. She worked hard. Her smock had one yellow smiling face and one red, white, and blue smiling face. The robots didn't like the buttons. It sounded crazy, even to her, but she could just sense this. Every month the regional hieresarch would visit and play a frame or two. The lanes had to be calibrated to ensure he bowled at least a 250. But he didn't want a 300 either, for that would have been hubris. Her mother hated bowling because the sport could not exist solely in one's mind. Those visits were horrible for Cleo. She would have nightmares in the days leading up to the inspection, involving her robots defecating on the well-oiled lanes, prompting her quick termination. After his frames there was usually bible study. Cleo would sit quietly through Corinthians, sipping luke warm tea. Revelations scared her. After shaking everyone's hand too firmly, he would depart for the damask domes of Cambridge Springs, where the wife would just be returning from the market with their children, Abercrombie and Fitch, and she would offer a towel to her demonstrative, balding husband, a God-shepherd, and he would wash his hands of the helots' stench. That was how she thought, at least. Once when he bowled a 248 he shook everyone's hand except Cleo's. She cried all that night, though she did not want to. On her ten minute lunch breaks, the sun would play on her face in the break room and the ether from above would settle on the vending machines in a fine film. The break room was a tent outside the bowling alley. She had to be alert to the possibility of white phosphorous falling, in which case there was a plastic tarp for extra protection. Enemy

man. Her shoulders didn't sag. No one would talk to her ever. She wanted to be an action gardener, garden in one of the sky fortresses. Peonies on the battlements. She heard about that job when watching the Sky Fortress Channel. There was one gardener for the entire fortress system. Let luck work! the public service announcements told her. On occasion she contemplated immigrating to India. She couldn't afford passage. She also wanted to keep an eye on the house and cemetery, and she didn't like traveling too far too often. Once in high school her class took a trip to Antarctica. At the south pole, they didn't stray out of the Super 8 much, except to look at the penguin wax museum. The vending machines down their hall had a brand of Burmese cola they'd never seen before. That local color excited her classmates. The south pole bored her, except for their flight away from it, when she saw two service workers make out behind the McDonalds on the Ross Ice Shelf—what was left of it—their mouths frozen to each other. She could see what the attraction was. Their fiberoptic mittens touched and no doubt they sent love mail to each other. No doubt. Cleo's plane kept flying, over glaciers, over floes. The lovers kept getting smaller. They flew over the greenhouses larger than Rhode Island. They harvested kelp and krill inside. When she returned she wanted nothing more than a kiss like that. A year later her mother died. Her graduation ceremony came in a box. College was out of the question. Her grades were Erie good but not actually good. Her few girlfriends saw marriage and conversion as a proper and just path. Her guidance counselor wanted her to become a Baptist. The complexes on upper Peach had excellent career placement networks. She declined. The guidance counselor never communicated with her again. The mayor was assistant pastor at Church of Christworld. He complied.

She wondered sometimes if the world was flammable.

Often she tried to think of her father's face. He loved crocuses and jumbo puzzle

variety books. Invisible ink puzzles. Her face was thin, like pictures of him. No one was perfect. He left for the moon with the furies when he found out about mother's affair with the gardener. He won the lottery. How lucky was that. Cleo hid underneath the garbage disposal to hear his teary farewell. It smelled like disposed garbage. She remembered her mother's burgundy silence. Her mother was a failed chess champion and didn't like to talk about it. Her father milled around the house to say goodbye to Cleo, looking without really looking, but gave up after five minutes or so. She didn't want to reveal her hiding place. He was wearing his fluffy skunk costume. Her parents had met when her mother called his number as a wrong one. Cleo imagined life in space. She would land on the station. She was in the deep for six months, orbiting Triton. She needed supplies or else!

What do you want, the general store manager on the station would ask her. He wore an old-time bowler hat.

A view of Earth, a great view of Earth, she said. The greatest demand she could think of.

You have it! Look portside! She looked portside, and it was there. She could see America underneath cumulus. She knew it was just a holograph of Earth, but she wasn't going to spoil her own illusions.

What else, the proprietor would ask.

Carrots, raisins straight from the vine, pumpkins.

We have those!

Great, said Cleo, lay them on me!

The fruits floated to her.

Eat these.

Okay, Cleo said. Wow, these are great!

They give superhuman strength and fertility.

Why do you think I need fertility. And where are you hiding my father.

Then she awoke from waking, a can of wrench spray in her hand. It was time to go home. The clock told her this. The clock worked; it smiled; it had a job. The robots brayed as they were shepherded into their pens. They, too, could see the futile machinations of the clock. To keep time. Clocks had agendas all right. On her way home the sun obscured itself. Winds began to stir from Presque Isle Bay, carrying danders and debris. The wind held her still for a few seconds in front of the black cat factory. The foreman steeped his tea in the tower office, as he tended to. He waved. He didn't live there. Cleo didn't wave back. The man turned back to his tea and shook his head. The wind let her go. She ran away from the manufacturing unit, as fast as she could. The sky turned teak. She passed the laughter inside the factory, the bull horns far away. Everything was far away. In her book, the less thought about the foreman, the better.

She entered the house and locked the door, to prevent October from entering. From the kitchen window she saw an entire copse of trees sway. A few of them were sick, but she didn't trust tree doctors. Talk about agendas. No one was hanging around or hanging there. On the To Do notepad on her Frigidaire she had written: I am proofing the book of the living against the book of the dead. They are concurrent, for the most part. Sort of. A few typos. Cleo used a permanent marker. The paper had butterflies. She hadn't seen a butterfly in thirteen years. The ukulele fixed to the wall fell down. Her mother had won the ukulele in a tournament. Her mother gave her an admonition: never touch the ukulele under any circumstances. She left it where it fell. In fact she really didn't want to look at it. Sirens and claxons rose a few blocks away. Which didn't really

mean anything.

She then drew a bath. She slept in the tub. She heard the cats opening their books across the street, though that couldn't be. She dreamed this time of the photocopier display reading: TONE LOW. A red light blinked, illuminating the entire copy room with emergency. Cleo cried and then floated through the rest of the dream without complications nor reproductions. The absences were pleasurable. She awoke at dawn in a cold sweat, still in the tub. There was a knock on the door. Cleo had no idea who she could be.

2.

Erie was founded in 1697 by French Cathars. Religious persecution was rampant at the time. Seven canoes launched from Quebec City in September, when water was most tumultuous. Lake Erie was the shallowest of the Great Lakes, and the one most likely to storm. The boats were: the Asphodel, the Asphaedel, the Asfodel, the Aesphadel, the Asfaedel, the Aesfodel, and the Asfaedel. They were named as such to confuse the shipwrights and dockmasters of New France. No one really noticed their departure; if anyone did, they probably would have been pleased. Yvain led them, but he was quiet for a long time. His wife Nicollette was also quiet. They landed on what would later become Beach 11, the swimmer killer. Sleeping under constellations, the 21 colonists all wondered what fateful wind brought them to those finely sanded beaches. There were no breakwalls to prevent beach erosion at that time. Clearly, their kingdom was at hand.

On the first morning, when the Cathars woke, they sacrificed a goat specifically brought for this purpose. They broke fast over organs. Gulls fought over the red sand. When they moved inland, to construct their city of black brass—the city that some of them, at least, wanted to construct—they found themselves at another body of water, a bay. They reasoned that a city either could be found or founded. Their landing place was actually part of a peninsula, an almost island, jutting out from the mainland like an ichor finger. They walked the presque isle, discovered several deadened marshes and ponds, tidepools, hardwood forests. A little of everything. On the peninsula, the world was a pocket sized encyclopedia, every step was a catalogue. They felt bountiful. They slew butterflies and foxes. They looked for caves and in which to consecrate themselves to God. To become perfect. Finding none, they decided to move inland and utilize the bay

as the natural harbor for a city. If there were no grottoes or caves, they would have to be built. They brought their boats through the channel and landed on what would later become the foot of East Avenue. They missed State Street, which was the center of the American town for many decades, by a good mile or two. They built huts using thatch and smooth antler-shaped driftwood. They dug sandy holes that filled with underwater after a few feet. So much for the caves. To pass the time, they wrote long letters to their compatriots around the globe: France, of course, and also England, Paraguay, Belgium, Guinea. There was no means of delivery, but few would have answered anyways. The letters were hard to read exhortations. They dreamed of panthers and leopards, which didn't make sense.

After fall's leaves dying, their first winter came. Snow so cold it felt hot against the skin. They caught rabbits. Some they kept as pets. They prayed, not only for food, but that the French would not find them. Particularly the Jesuits and Dominicans. The Cathars remembered what happened to their spiritual ancestors. In the first year a few children were born. None were sacrificed. Lost bears wandered to the lake shores, onto Presque Isle, wandered back. Frostbite clarified thought. In spring, construction began on a temple. French voyageurs were killed. The women lured them, hoisting high their dresses on the shores. The canoes slowed. The women had muskets tucked in their sleeves. They were not against eating human flesh, as a matter of principle, but they didn't feel that the times called for it. They realized this was against Cathar edicts, in a way, but in another way all flesh was abject, unworthy of long contemplation and self-entreaty. The women were skilled with guns. The Iroquois, who had exterminated the Eriez Indians a few decades before, left the colony alone for the most part. The Cathars cared not. Hearing what happened to their brethren, a few trappers asked to join in the

first summer. These trappers later were revealed to be a troupe of Russian jugglers who had lost favor with the Czarina. They were initiated and received perfection. A few in their ranks were born many times over. The Eriez were also known as the Cat People. For them, the cat was a skunk. 300 years before, 8,000 Cathars were slaughtered in one day by one of their former protectors. They actually didn't call themselves Cathars to begin with, which was a name designed by a mad German prince. Many Christians thought the Cathar initiation ceremony involved kissing a cat's ass. The branding and identity campaign against the Cathars, as evidenced by their near-extirpation, was a well-received success.

Berries came in summer, in thickets. They built a lookout tower on the tip of Presque Isle, where the Coast Guard station would later appear. Lashing logs together. They wanted to build a giant chain across the channel into the bay, as was done in Constantinople. That had protected the Byzantines for a time. They didn't have the funds or the smelting proficiency for such a project. They had a master woodworker and bone lather in their company. Babies ate magnanimous berries. Streets were laid, sloping up from the shore. Straight lines and grids. What was once a morass of bodies, undistinguishable from each other, began to take upon hierarchy. For a few months they felt they didn't have to have any single person deciding anything for the rest. That it lasted so long was remarkable. Yvain, before his expulsion from the University of Paris, took a class in classical geometry. He plumbed sight lines. He began courting allies. His wife Nicollette wasn't content with discretion and quietude. Everything they were taught in school turned out to be true: Yvain ended up leading because he financed the colony. Still, France seemed a long way away. The surf had no conch shells, no naiad bones. Zebra mussels would not be introduced into the ecosystem for almost 300 years.

They all except for Yvain came from the lower yeomanry. They were adrift from the small villages of their birth, always amongst wolves. They wanted to stumble to their own village, as one would from a tavern towards home late at night. The night was late in their minds. The wolves were at the door. Don't open the door! No court, nor mare liberum, could weave heraldics close enough to ensnare. Griffin, bull, bulldogs, kings—all mythologies, glad tidings on bloody ears. The summer wheat was not successful. Waterspouts touched down on the lake and they prayed to be spared. The berries turned black in soups and cremes. Yvain wanted to build a cathedral, of sorts, on Presque Isle, inside the dead marshes. A contemplative building made of local stone. At times, he really did seem peaceful. This in addition to the temple on the mainland. More converts came, this time from Saint Augustine. The irony was lost on no one. Yvain wanted the second temple in the marshes to demonstrate a mind as wide as thought. Nicollette disagreed. She was a kleptomaniac, which was a hard compulsion to honor on the edge of God's world. She played chess. She always beat Yvain. She always played white and Yvain black. Yvain took a few builders to the swamps in the center of Presque Isle and started to cut down cottonwood trees. To clear a space. Then he changed his mind and decided that wasn't an ideal location. They painted the stumps black. The bog didn't help. The temple's foundation kept sinking.

Actually Nicollette was quite beautiful. She had long black hair. She excelled at writing sestinas. No training or schooling could account for this. End words to the lines came to her with succinct ease. Most of the time they rhymed. She would rarely show her compositions to her husband. Paper was precious. She took to carving sestinas on trees. Yvain didn't approve of poetry or lending his knife. The summer heat came. The eldest colonist swore he saw, while scything hay, a giant panther charging from the south. The

panther had six eyes! And a tongue like a cat o' nine tails! And had constellation markings on its fur! And spoke Basque! This was collaborated by others, although the language was debated. Fissures crept into the colony. Centipede-slow spoilings of their bread stores occurred. They were hungry but not thirsty. They prayed together less. An English caravel wandered close to their lookout. The English were only in transit. The Union Jack shone. The Cathars wished they had cannons. Two weeks later, a French caravel landed on the point of the peninsula closest to the mainland. The thinnest land. Two Jesuits, several marines. The Cathars lost three and had five wounded. Yvain lost a pinky. But they gained many supplies and weapons. They dropped the weighted soldiers into the moors. The priests they kept with the rabbits. Nicollette slept with a settler less than half her age. No one remembered his name, not even Nicollette.

Yvain had a dream about this involving those pesky panthers. The panthers had some worthwhile pillow talk. They dragged him by the collar to their cave with their teeth. But they also had hands with opposable thumbs. Yvain was not afraid. Inside the cave was a glass box, human-sized, with a star inside of it. The star was too bright to look at; he asked them to cover it, and remarkably, they covered the box with a purple cloth. They told him everything. From inside the box—Yvain covered his eyes—the cats pulled out paintings of his wife's transgressions, in glades. They told him that God's work would emanate from him long after he died. When he woke, he didn't know how long he could keep up his façade, his scaffolding. It turned out to be approximately three days, when he killed the boy with his favorite knife and took the corpse, along with the captured priests and 10 colonists, to the peninsula. A splinter. Two colonies, two architectures. Nicollette wondered how the quickness happened so quickly. How she came to this. She reasoned that she was sacrificing the great for the greater good. Or

maybe it was the good for the greater great. It was hard to tell. She started drinking coffee, stolen from the French soldiers. Yvain began plans for a lighter-than-air craft as August and its skies came upon them. Skies arrived on the tips of her fingers. Most, including all of the Russians, stayed close to her. They guarded her sleep. In fact, Yvain and his cohorts did eat the young man who had slept with Nicollette. They saved his bones. Yvain realized at a young age that he was named after a famous epic, one important to French natural identity. The unit of French poetry is not the accent but the syllable. Yvain wasn't able to get the balloon off the ground, but they certainly tried. They tried the fumes of quicksilver, the smoke of burning foxes. They didn't possess profound amounts of scientific acumen. Except for geometry. And theology, which was considered a science in those days. As it would later be.

With Yvain on the peninsula, the city planning on the mainland floundered. Little huts became the norm again. Dreams died, thrown against the rocks and burned in firepits. The peninsula temple was completed as the fall colors turned. Nicollette didn't grieve. Yvain's temple was consecrated with a lacquer made of blackberries and Jesuit blood. One of the Russians, of his own accord, secreted to Presque Isle and humbly asked for a little of that blood. Just a dollop for the mainland village. Yvain told him that it didn't work like that. The Russian was allowed to return. These sudden kindnesses made Nicollette angry. She wasn't sure why she slept with the boy after all. Maybe it was a sense of sorrow. Love stories lay around in the furs next to the campfire. Belief that the world was ephemera necessitated a belief in God's permanence and justice, kind of. Most of the Cathars really didn't see it that way. However, the 200 French soldiers who pushed towards the settlement from the newly founded Fort LeBeouf did see it that way. Fort LeBeouf was about 20 miles south. It was on French Creek, which flowed into the

Allegheny, which flowed into the Ohio, which flowed into the Mississippi. A road from LeBeouf to Lake Erie would allow for powerful movements. The soldiers came across Nicollette bathing outside. The Cathars didn't expect trouble from the thicketed south. Nicollette regularly bathed with the other colonists. They were all naked. The wind was Indian summer. Yvain called his temple Usine de Chat Noirs. Nicollette and the others had a few minutes to flee. Everyone was rather startled. The Cathars crammed into boats. A few were killed. The dead were pushed overboard. The French horses buckled. The Jesuit in the soldiers' party forbade them from pursuit until the temple was destroyed and the ground reconsecrated. They did so. The smoke alerted an English sloop docking along the shore about 10 miles away. Yvain didn't welcome Nicollette and the others with open arms, exactly. But close enough. They gathered on the lookout tower and the temple roof with their arquebuses and muskets. They waited. The soldiers didn't come until vespers. The French had engaged in a tough firefight with the English sloop. The Jesuit was killed. The Jesuits couldn't seem to get any luck. The sloop burned eventually. Bayonets blazed. The hotter-than-air balloon wasn't invented until 150 years later.

The Cathars watched and prayed. This had similarities with the demise of many, if not most, other Cathars. They had kept quiet for centuries in Toulouse and its highlands, becoming perfect in secret. They saw the New World as their tabula rasa. Waiting, they played chess and cards. Yvain held Nicollette's hand. The French battalion came toward the temple slowly. They looked for traps, blinds, snipers, and feints. There were none. When they came upon the temple, arquebuses recoiled. The Cathars, with a sense of déjà vu, pounced down to end their history, rapt in dark curtains of gunfire.

When reinforcements came in the spring, there were no signs of a previous

human settlement. The French were confused, to say the least, but nevertheless began establishment of a fort at the tip of Presque Isle. Garrison commanders over time assumed that reports of a previous colony were fabricated. The year was 1699. Skunks found egg nests. Deer ate crops. There were absolutely no panther sightings. Cathars would not come to Erie for another 200 years. In a way they weren't even really Cathars. No one important ever came from Erie for the most part. Rainclouds were not considered people by most people. The peninsula shifted eastward every year by a few inches. At a few points in its history, the land bridge had flooded, making it an actual island and not an almost island. Burnt firmaments settled but did not rest. Before dawn, Yvain dug a hole in the sandy loam and placed the chess pieces in a moleskin bag. He filled the hole and smoothed it over. He hurried back to his tiny black temple, which was only wood painted black and mostly a dream. He could hear the French soldiers braying, approaching the heretics. No one could have pinpointed the exact moment when things started getting out of hand and small. It was better, Yvain reasoned, not to even try. Seeing him return, Nicollette thought: words about this ought to be put down, like strays.

3.

Then one day, the woman who always gawked and dawdled at his storefront came in. She wore a red mask and carried a burlap bag. She cradled it like someone else's child. At first she stayed near the vestibule, eyeing the crystal unicorns in their dusty case. Business could have used some work. The lease was rising. Some of his most loyal customers were in custody. Their collections were deemed terrorist threats. Mostly they collected books, with the occasional purchase of figurines "tied in" to those books. The woman had smooth, pale hands and wore tall black galoshes that didn't fit nor become her, in his opinion. But then again it was raining. She could have just thrown them on. She was agitated. The failure mall—he hated the term, which was written into his lien—was build on the site of the old Union Station. Once, he cracked open the plasterboard covering a door in the back of his establishment, revealing most of the station intact, albeit unused. He fell asleep in the old waiting room, on a hard bench, underneath a DEPARTURES sign. It reminded him of childhood. When he woke up he didn't know where he was. The next week the plasterboard was sealed again. An inside job. He never figured out how that came to pass.

Can I help you? he asked the woman.

She was sheepish. She didn't acknowledge that he said anything at first, but instead fingered a synthetic jade Buddha on a shelf in the middle of the store. On the bottom of the Buddha was a disclaimer from the mayor's office: the statuette should not be used or construed as an actual deity. Federal compliance. He waited with his arms behind his back. He was hungry. The nearest non-Wal-mart restaurant was two miles away. He had a hotplate behind the counter that was currently cold. Suddenly she

approached the counter, and took off her mask. Her eyes were blue and empirical.

Yes, she said, coming to, I'm wondering if you make purchases of collections.

It depends on the collection, he said. While he was thinking: I am wasting my time and dishonoring my lack of cash by even speaking to her. Is there a reason for this? Aside from the fact that she is the first person I've talked to today? Why are her eyes like that.

Well, I'll show you what I have then, she said. She set the burlap bag on the counter. Dust rabbits arose. She opened the bag, and with care she took out a chess board. And then each piece, the white pieces first.

The black queen is missing, she said. I apologize for that. I never had it. I inherited this from my mother. I'm sure the lack of a valuable piece will depreciate the entire ensemble.

He wanted to sit down from shock. Instead he said, let me look at this more closely.

Do you play, the woman said.

The man shook his head. Once, but... He swallowed. She was clearly disappointed. He opened a combination safe behind the counter and removed a magnifying glass, one he had used for his insect collection, before etymology had become obsolete. He took the white queen in his hand and peered at this queen. Her features were iconic but nuanced. A little pouty and come-hither. The piece was heavy, even though the material suggested lightness.

May I ask why you're selling this? he asked.

It's that—

She coughed.

The factory near my house is expanding operations. Claiming the rest of my block in a seizure. I need something for a bribe.

He knew she meant the black cat factory. No other factory was experiencing boom. He had visited it once as a teenager, when looking for a summer job, but didn't remember much about it. He fell into seeing the pieces. Sight made real things seem less realistic. The pieces were made of bone. The white pieces were a natural off-white. The black pieces were lacquered with a deep red stain. It might as well have been black. She raised her eyebrows at him when he didn't say anything for a long time. He hadn't played chess in years. Decades. Do you play, he asked her.

She shook her head. I never learned how. Other people learned around me. Her fingers twitched.

What's your name, he asked her.

Pepin, she said. He startled without exactly knowing why.

Well, Pepin, considering the craftsmanship, and the age of the pieces, I'm thinking that not only would this set make a handsome bribe, it might very well allow you to *buy* a factory.

She was breathless and said: Oh, I had hoped and hoped that this was the case!

However, I can't buy it myself.

She was crestfallen. Why not?

It's worth more than the entire store, Pepin. I can try to find a buyer for you, though. Out of the city, most likely.

She shuffled her feet. How do you know how old it is? And how old is it?

Early 18th century, late 17th. The pieces are in the French regency style. The flumes with the stylized heads at the top. They often used this style with ceramic. It was

rare that someone could lathe and carve bone in such fine detail.

It must have been quite rare, Pepin said, folding her hands and pursing her lips. She was offended so easily!

He took one of the pawns and squinted at it. He didn't want to fetishize dead bone. The pawns had tiny child heads. Their eyes were wide.

And there's the fact, he added, pressing his word-luck, that all of these faces look *so angry*.

Anger's an emotion, Pepin said. Her face grew red.

The man held out his hands. It was no criticism. I swear.

Pepin's shoulder's sagged. I apologize, she said. Of course. If you could find a buyer... She trailed off.

I can certainly try, he said, setting the pawn down. He had forgotten many of his favorite openings. Not the moves themselves, which were easy enough to memorize, but their temperments. I'd like to borrow the set overnight, he said. To take photographs for potential buyers. It's standard.

Her eyes grew dim. Out of the question, she said. Pepin scooped the pieces back into the bag. She left the board, since they both knew it was probably worthless.

Call on me if you find anyone. She gave her number and turned away. He was too stunned by her teeter totter moods to say anything, except: if you want a truer sale, then try to find the black queen. She didn't appear to hear him. The black queen might have been irretrievable. He locked the front door and retreated to the cot in the back room. He lay there for a few hours, saying Pepin, Pepin. He imagined her hovering over him. He couldn't make himself come all the same. Erotic satisfaction could not be achieved by looking at a blurry photocopy of a photograph of a naked woman. He rose eventually. He

unlocked the door again. Open for business. Not that it mattered. In a few hours, business hours were over. He could hear the cold drag races down on lower Sassafras. The drag races were free. The failure mall locked him in for the evening. He was supposed to have access codes for free passage, but the lords changed the codes with great ease and regularity. Even if he could leave, where could he go. He didn't have martial papers. He wondered what it must have been like to raise a family in the Assyrian Empire. Surely someone in the Assyrian empire felt love, it wasn't 24/7 beheadings. Maybe it was. Children had to work or die. What must have love been like when no one would remember you and no one would write about love. Because no one could read or write, practically. He used to be Catholic until the Church changed their mass back to Latin, and cosponsored the drag races with the Pentecostals, and founded the Benevolent Union of Saint Antonin. Any one of those changes pushed him. He didn't know any way to push back. Figurines never pushed.

Every other Thursday they would have an execution at the drag race. Or an excommunication. A killing one bird with two stones kind of deal. He remembered how youth used to be different. Races were different. There were no sensory cowls to follow the coverage and feel crashes. He went to a drag race with his uncle when he was 9 or 10. In some ways things were not much better then. His uncle had worked at Hammermill and had lost two fingers and a thumb in a paper cutter. The noise was noisy. Few had jobs. He, young, had bought a button of his favorite car, #8. A black car with red trim. He didn't know why this was his favorite. It made as much sense to him as driving so fast that one needed a parachute to slow down. His uncle died of a brain tumor ten years later, before everything started happening. That didn't make much sense either. He went to high school in the basement of Erie's cathedral. On the way to the cafeteria he could

pass by the dead bishop crypt. A windowless, pious room filled with minor diocesan relics. The school excelled at football and harboring pedophiles. Academics was a distant third. He wore his clip-on tie on the first day of school. His mother picked it out for him. Their family eschewed vacations so that they could earn enough indulgence for the cathedral school. That first day, the clouds from the paper mill took a wrong turn and the city smelled like brokendown fish. Within ten minutes of school a senior ripped off his tie. He joined the chess club, which provided him a small measure of exquisite carnage. Other castoffs would hide in the boiler room and play. No one was sure whether those victories meant anything, because at some point, they had to go home again, eat supper, and start homeroom in the morning.

As he slept that night, night slept next to him. He could hear the sound of worms eating books across the city. He ate usual ramen that night, which didn't sit well. He would have been old enough for Social Security, if there was such a thing as security for his non-winning ilk. He didn't know where the worms or the books came from. Before sleeping he encrypted a description of the chess set, through a Senegalese server. Precautions had to be made. In the morning, one prospect was insistent. He double checked his library and made sure there were no worms there. He called Pepin and arranged a meeting. She didn't want to meet at the store again. He entertained the thought that perhaps she was a spy. Ridiculous. But then again he was desperate for contact. She had to work that day. Presque Isle, she suggested. The last remaining public beach. All right. Tomorrow. Wonderful. See you then. See you. That night he dreamed of vomiting chess pieces. The tiny faces of the chess pieces also vomited out smaller chess pieces. And so on. At the appointed time, he met with Pepin at the appointed place. Old Lighthouse Beach. The lighthouse was uprooted some time ago. The hole was covered.

Tall walls separated this beach from the others, which were used for either private residential and/or military purposes. He wore a sky blue tie. She had no way of seeing the tie because of the containment suit, but it made him feel better. Egyptian peacekeepers landed here less than five years before. They didn't get far. The gun towers towered over them. They gleamed even though there was no sunlight. War kites soared above them. The winds lacerated. The beach was empty. Past the breakwalls, the flotillas held guard on the lake. People who wanted supreme protection lived there. One had to have means to live there, of course. The flotillas had no libraries. On the beach, Pepin was pensive. She said things to imply that he was pensive too.

For example, she said: Don't worry, the turrets can't hear us. On account of the wind.

And: Even if someone accosts us, and I'm not saying they will, we can pretend we're lovers. Having an affair. We might have to pay a fine, but we won't be stoned.

Wonderful, he replied. He tried not to think of their meeting as a date. He couldn't help it, though. He thought, maybe she's the black queen. Did you come here often before everything started happening? he asked, wanting his talk to be as small as doormice.

She laughed. That's complicated. I work at a Wal-Mart, she said.

Who doesn't, he said, suddenly sullen. It was hard, with the wind, smoke, and sand, to actually complete thoughts.

She grabbed his hand. No, what I mean is, I know how to cut corners, squirrel away, range free without persecution. But listen. At the bowling alley, I'm trying to teach one of the robots to play chess. How great is that. I have two robots but one is slightly newer and therefore smarter than the other. It has potential. I've taken it home.

He didn't know tedium and non-sequiturs could be so thrilling. He couldn't feel her skin on account of their mittens, which were retrofitted oven mitts.

Let me tell you about the potential buyer, he said. It's a woman not far from here. Cambridge Springs. 30 miles south of here.

He knew that the greatest tournament ever on American soil took place in Cambridge Springs. 1904. A long time ago. Many grandmasters played at that tournament. He didn't want to bore Pepin with the details. Cambridge Springs was halfway between New York and Chicago. A refueling stop for the bullet trains. None of the sulfuric springs were left. His handling fee would be worth the entire inventory of his store.

Who is this woman?

She is a collector of chess sets. I've dealt with her in the past. Incredibly reliable, A plus plus plus.

The woman in question—he wasn't really even sure whether she was a woman—demanded that he tell Pepin this.

How much will she offer?

Like I said, enough to buy a factory. Anything. Live in the flotilla if you want. A sky fortress. Health insurance. Fairy dust money.

Pepin moved towards the green surf. Salamander water danced along her galoshes. I worry about what's inside of me sometimes, she said. Whether I'm a dauschund in a world of giraffes. She then stopped and stared at a point in the sand. As if she wanted to turn it into glass. He stood next to her and wanted to kiss her. He leaned towards her, and smelled her perfume, which was a man's cologne.

Pepin?

No, she said, pressing her fists against her temples. I've changed my mind. I don't

want to lose you!

It wasn't entirely clear who she was speaking to. It clearly wasn't him, however. She ran up the beach head back to the road, towards his kidney bean car. A far cry from black #8. Town criers told him it was his own fault for not succeeding. She didn't have a car. Buses were infrequent. He'd still give her a lift if she wanted one. They could smooth over their differences. He could moor her, buy her coffee from a vending machine. He tried to follow. She was fast. He smelled cinder and powderkeg. At the road, she turned around to say: I'm sorry, but the chess set is not for sale.

What? Why? No, you can't leave— *You cannot leave me.*

I want to learn how to play, she said. That's all. I'm sorry. She hesitated, then told him that she lived on the peninsula once, and she needed to root around the old stomping ground, so she'd better be going.

She crossed the road and entered a trailhead opposite the beach shore that he hadn't noticed before. A thicket with a narrow sidewalk running through it. A straight line into the peninsula. He tried to remember the trail—he had lived in Erie his entire life—and couldn't for the life of him. He was about to follow her when he started laughing and said to himself, fuck it, she's a loon, she's a dauschund. He sat down on a mossy picnic table, shaking his head. He was a little sad at how softly and quickly—when his life was in danger of rupturing with change— everything turned back to the way it already was. He knew he would never talk to her again. He remembered watching videos in biology class about Africa. When a person in the rain forest had an infection, that person would let maggots crawl into the wound and eat the infected tissue. Then they would fly away once flies. She disappeared, towards marshes and miseries. The trees

were leafless and scarred with knives' marks and acid initials. Then he realized she never asked for his name, not once.

4.

Pepin's floating. He's floating about them. Their time is now, but his is not. He puts his finger into the marmalade sky and doesn't feel any wind. It's windy. He's a lighter-than-air aircraft. Of sorts. They're playing. They don't know the time. They don't know the proximity of adversaries. One chanced a glance at the other. Neither has touched the board. Which means it's white's turn. Soon they will meander. He's not sure what is sensory information and what is realism. On his farm, once, he milked cows and learned to like it. Hills were called mountains in his background. He hates chess even more, after what happened to him. He loves God! However, that is unimportant. His mother's name is Marguerite. She is still farming. She has farming stories that he will never hear. That is a long time ago. White moves finally. C4. The English Opening. White has made him laugh. Lieutenant Carve—that isn't his name, it has to be Carver—is close. Carver's floating, but in a boat. He will be woken. The English opening lends itself to positional play. Jockeying, and not swift tactics. At least at first. The English Opening can lead to brutal retributions eventually. Pepin sees Black's knife next to the board. Pepin's cold somehow. More than usual. To disavow knowledge of the game, he holds his breath. He came to New France because of a girl. The girl was sixteen. Somewhere she is. She died of smallpox on the Atlantic crossing. He can't hold his breath long enough to reach her. Holding breath is like holding court or serve. He's forgotten her face. They threw her into the Sargasso. Other women have resembled her all the same. He lets out his breath. A sulfur trace streaming over the peninsula. No one's living there. Time gives serve. Black king and white queen are dead. He didn't see their ashes deposited into Misery Bay. That's what the Commodore later calls it. But it fit. It fits. He's deposited too. Part of him. A safety deposit in a sand bank. He doesn't hate White

with all of his heart. Pepin knows he is young. She was not. The young are interruptible. After what has happened to White and Black and the others, he came away easy. He's floating, after all. He hasn't found anyone else floating. The French fort is ephemeral. They who think they are more than footnotes. So Pepin and the French military share the same language. Big deal. Everyone is a footnote. Entrapment isn't so bad. It nourishes broken things and makes them grow big and strong. He would like, at some point, to see one of his loves again. Unlikely. The French fort passes. LeBouf lasts a little longer, though he can't see that. The factory has slid into the marshes. It's hard to talk about in the open. No one can see this, as no one can directly see a black hole. For a long time it couldn't be considered a factory, as much as a place where corpses were burned. Pepin can only see the absences around the factory. There are tricky currents and tidepools within the peninsula's many nooks and moors. It's a good place to hide and hide things. The factory begins its production unbeknownst to the Pennsylvanians. Underneath the duckweed. The state buys the lake port when he inhales again. The state needs access. A safe harbor. He sees odd speculative bubbles. America has plans. America, he wants to say, you are one clumsy girl. You are so obvious about your schemes and flirtations. Winters remind him of past frostbite. He lost a pinky tip on the farm. He was a hard worker in Quebec. He gutted fish. They mixed the fish with potatoes and put it in tins. Meal alchemy. The Cathars, he realizes, weren't quite so fearsome as he had feared or even hoped. Even after all they did to him. They weren't even really Cathars. They enjoyed thought costumes. They paid a heavy price. America would have done them good. A declaration of independence and constitution. The city arrives, sloping to the bay. Burghers want to build a profit fleet. War with the English makes this possible. Pepin thinks of the English Opening again. There is no American Opening. There ought

to be. He's contemplated mating with clouds. Albino gulls dive. He has time for historiography. The American fleet sinks an English fleet. *Niagara* monster built in a cove. The remainders of the American fleet are sunk in Misery Bay. The landbridge floods. Recedes. He doesn't want to mewl over his predicament. The hardest part was when they opened his chest cavity. That's when he fled. That's when holding his breath became more than a way to conquer hiccups. Civil war brought actual factories. He had applied for a cabin boy position in Quebec city. He milled around the docks. He was hungry. He didn't know they only had canoes and no cabins for boys. He could read. He was the only applicant. He was on the canoe with the goat, who shit everywhere. No wonder they wanted to kill it when they landed. Once in awhile a chips wrapper swirls by, and that's it. He's grateful for litter and nutritional statements. Food pyramids printed on trash. Of course there is always the Eriez to consider. The skunk people. Maybe if they weren't eradicated by the Iroquois, things would have been different for him. Or a beheading on the spot, upon landing on the peninsula. Hard to say. Ironworks cast dies meanwhile. A long era when trains stopped in Erie. The depth's factory felt competition. This was no doubt natural. A kiss is a technology aimed to achieve a desired effect. A kiss is an opening. It's difficult to consider his belly button. He can't look. He first kissed the White Queen while gathering berries with her. Eventually she crushed the berries against her thighs. He kissed the berries off. The passage of their mutual seduction. She would wander through the nascent city nude. Poles, Germans, Irish homing pigeoned to the city. The gem city, it's called for awhile. No one finds gems limning the streets but at least there's work. Presque Isle is inaccessible except by boat. Mosquitoes show their displeasure to tourism. There is a lake-side lighthouse. A house is attached to it. Children live there. Coast guard. Pepin watches them get older. They build

a trail cutting across the peninsula to the bay side. Dead fish are a language. They gather near the docks as a grammarian's convention. A sidewalk trail arrows past the marshes. Oh they tore that up. But not for a long time. The children use the trail to go to school, to the bay on the other side. A ferry to Erie. The trail seems straight. The children die. The factory's migrating, underwater. Sledging on the bottom, upturning mercury boots and nonrefundable cola bottles on the bay's bottom. He imagines cats in diving bells hauling the factory underwater. Nearly departed souls resemble cats. They skulk and hiss. He observes pesticides and tourist arrivals and bathhouses and children drowning in undertows. Or straying off the sidewalk trail. Deer shy away. Ticks pounce. Grandmasters joust thirty miles away in a tourney. In the early history of chess, the queen used to be a limited piece and could not move far. Anonymous Europeans made technological enchantments to accelerate the game. The queen became the most powerful piece. Aside from the king. Even that was questionable. The King's power rested in his vulnerability. His bones tremble. Ticks with lime disease and zebra mussels are cousins and arrive at the same time. Trains stop stopping as much as they used to. He sees her at last—and what he would become, reawakened—in the eighties. She's building a sand castle next to her mother. For a few seconds of slowness, he hears Cheap Trick chords on the trans-am distend. Her mother stares at the sand. They're both on a beach towel. Her mother cocks her head and starts digging. He's unsure of her dowsing—not of its accuracy but whether he wants to be found. Then he thinks, of course I want to be found. Who doesn't. She puts her hand flat on the sand. She tells her daughter to wade. The sand castle's spires remind him of home. Rain ruins and wolves skirting the crop edges. He never understood Cathars and never would. Wade? the daughter says. A pigeon flies past, out of its habitat. Practice your doggy paddle, Cleo.

Don't swallow the water, it's filthy. Keep your chin up. This last command, even he can tell, is tactical advice and not encouragement. He enjoys the linear progression of time. Even though he knows it's kind of a farce. It turns out that the colonists on the Peninsula were kicked out of the Cathar establishment. Loose as it was. For violence and malfeasance. The White Queen told him this a few days before their separation. The girl is dutiful and splashes into the waves. The mother scoops up the bag. He mimics spitting sand out of his mouth. At that moment, the mother realizes she'll never play professional chess again. Her head's crowded. With the pieces in place above the sand, the factory comes ashore in a foggy night. Sets up shop in an abandoned warehouse, of which there are plenty. Close to the stucco house on the east side. Within striking distance. But the factory waits. Zebra mussels invade in its wake and win. In like fashion, Pepin floats above the stucco house and sees recalcitrant spires, gangplanks, chained vats inside the factory. He sees dimly. Tractor-sized photocopiers where the cats are penned. Inner ichors. The mother loses the Black Queen! Or rather, the Black Queen escapes. Maybe there isn't a Black Queen in the first place and never was. Hard to say what is true. He is over the house. A good view. The mother gives up chess in earnest after a legion of failures. Cleo senses she should never discuss this. House turned up top to bottom. Arguments over who lost the queen. Vast quarrels. It's useless, he hears. It's useless. I swear I *had* the queen, it was *in my grasp*. The remaining pieces are squirreled away in storage and the mother dies. And then everyone is filled with the Lord, and a few people design systems to save and consolidate other, less fortunate people. Much later, he whispers to the girl—now much older, and sadder—that he will give his breath and breadth, and that she will never have to be alone unless she wants to be, because her time is dire, because others want to ensure that. And it's not your fault, he continues, it's

mine. It's all mine. But I need you to breathe with me, so that it may be rectified. She opens her mouth in the bath and then he's inside of her. And then everything is different. She doesn't move to open the door when she hears knocking. That's the factory representative, he tells her in a cortex whisper. He's offering you an eviction notice. Don't read it. That's why I'm here for you now. I'm hearing you. I have a better way to protect you. She doesn't read it. The factory is getting desperate, reckless. It doesn't dare raid the house with his protection. I love you, she says. He sees through the foreman's window the knife. He can shift back, at any time, to feeling Black's knees on his chest and the first fluttering cut across the neck. He doesn't. He has a self. She's fragile and warm, he thinks. The churches sadden the streets in bright crosses. Migratory species are shot down with antiaircraft guns. Icarus solutions means losing track of extinctions. Satan is a better chess player than God. It doesn't mean he wins. But he has nothing to lose. Operators on a abandoned blocks on 18th try to contact like minded psyches through telepathy and ham radio. Signals bounce off him because they don't reach anyone else. Pepin doesn't correct her love. A love that her betters would call wicked only because of its suddenness. He coaxes her out of the tub. Now go find the rest of me, he says. I'm in the attic, in a banker's box. Your mother painted it blue.

5.

Once in town again, the foreman walked to the failure mall and killed the fence, which wasn't hard. The foreman was on a business trip. Every trip was a business trip. Several figurines shattered.

Where is it? it had asked in its woman voice, the one it used to establish the contact. I thought you and I had an arrangement.

The fence stammered. You don't understand. She didn't want to leave the pieces behind.

Everything, the foreman said, will be left behind.

Afterwards, it put the "security" system to sleep and rifled through the fence's possessions, looking for the pieces. Most of which were poor and worthless. It bit its fingernails in boredom until it found Cleo's dossier in the secret library. The library was in a compartment behind his desk. How original. It was heartless. The secret library was mostly 20th century porn and chess books. Bestiality and endgame strategy, mostly. Your boat is floated motherfucker, it said, standing on the fence's windpipe and providing a small benediction that it thought tender, though it was not. Chess was a way to convince itself not to self-destruct. Between two horse copulation magazines was a slender, stapled volume of anonymous sestinas. It smiled. It had once lent the book to the fence as collateral. The compartment smelled like gobstoppers and melancholy. It secreted the sestinas into its pouch and left the mall. It needed pieces. Crossing 13th, it started walking to the East Side, towards home.

The streets were empty except for police pretending to be homeless. But their ragged jackets were too clean and had too many iron-on sponsorships. The homeless had no sponsors. They didn't bother the foreman. They might have even winked. In the

failure mall, it had memorized the sestinas, poems about picking blackberries for the untenable Lord and effervescent failure.

Its cogs creaked. It truly had been in Cambridge Springs yesterday, surveying the ruins of the old grandmaster's hotel. For future development. At some point, no property would be too far away. However, it was not arrogant, and was more than compliant to admit its own shortcomings. It had thought that Cleo's proximity would corral any ambition or chance ecstasy she might have had. That she would merely confuse yearning with confusion, and let the tensions settle into her. And she did, for a long time. But people weren't solvable, unfortunately. Not that it didn't try. The old set had to be acquired. Her friendly takeover broke the deal. Her reluctance couldn't have been anything else. This made the foreman faux sad. Crossing State Street, it began whistling the old national anthem. Its favorite song. The 100 year old peanut and macadamia nut shop was closed. Most recently the store sold circus peanuts and only that. Circus peanuts were the undead of the candy world and were in a strong market position. It heard waves crashing over Dobbins Landing, half sunk and tilted. Upon reaching East and 10th, it crossed itself at Saint Anne's as a lark. Novenas were held there for a long time. The trick was: go to the church 9 days in a row and one would receive a plenary indulgence. One had to appreciate the psychosis needed to perpetuate that worldview. However inelegant an exchange of spiritual capital it was. Much simpler to declare Jesus as savior, enter a Christworld nexus, and invest your annuities in the war futures in paraclete funds. Or distill the bones in a temple into a system of material production, i.e., the factory.

It reached the outskirts factory. The lights were turned on at the silent gates but it kept walking, toward her house. It could hear the copiers caterwaul, the eyelashes

twitter. The eviction notice didn't move her in the ways it intended. It needed compliance. The house was empty and lightless. After letting itself in and finding no one, it sat on the elliptical couch. It appreciated, in a way, the venomous quirks of the mother. The gardener drowned himself. So easy to drown when living next to a lake! It heard patters from the baustrelaides of the factory. It saw the ukulele on the floor. It stood and took it. It started to pluck at it. A string broke. It smashed the ukulele against the television, shattering the instrument. Inside the ukulele was the skeleton of a small bird. A passenger pigeon. It laughed and plucked the bird out by the wingtip. It could tell the bird was a passenger pigeon by the bone structure and beak size. Poor bird, it said. Where are your children. Where is your flock. The last of your kind died in a zoo. It placed the bird in its pocket with the sestinas and went outside.

From the backyard it saw the robot, a classic Walbot, sitting in the cemetery behind the stucco house. The cemetery had a slope and an emptiness. The foreman opened the unhinged gate and walked towards the robot. The robot was nursing a small campfire. Campfires were illegal. The robot was male-like, with beach blond hair and a Wal-Bowl identification plate on its chest. Anyone with beach blonde, finely tuned hair in Erie could easily be recognized as an android. The robot didn't look up; it rubbed its hands. The foreman liked to brew tea from black cat blood.

What's your name, son, the foreman said, crouching on one knee.

Nicollette, the robot said. With a French accent.

The foreman smirked. It learned how to smirk at board meetings of the godly and unimpaired. Do you know you're trespassing on private property, Nicollette? Do you want me to cite code?

The robot shivered and crossed its arms. It knew not sadness in its face, its Ken

Zen eyes.

Cleo said I could live here, it said.

And where is Cleo?

Nicollette didn't respond at first. It stared into the fire and its features became blurry, somnambulant. Its physiognomy and identity confusion would have made a fine addition at the factory.

How about this, Nicollette said. I have an offer for you. A game of chess. I win, and you leave Cleo alone. You win, and I'll deliver her to you. And her possessions.

The foreman could not lose. It had many years of study for such a competition. It had once carried on a correspondence game with a Maori grandmaster, who had become a used car salesman in Wellington, for several years. Won handily.

I accept, it said.

The robot produced a board and pieces. The board and pieces. Not a cheap plastic set one would buy at Wal-Mart, cardboard board, plastic pieces light enough to float in water. The foreman was nearly struck dumb.

Play here? the foreman said.

The robot pointed to a revolutionary's tombstone that had been flattened by time. It placed the board there.

There's no black queen, Nicollette said.

Of course there is, the foreman said, cracking its knuckles. It's just not present.

What do you propose we do then, the robot said. Your call.

Pretend as if it's there.

Invisible, you mean.

Sure. Why not.

All right, the robot said. If I want to move her, then, I will indicate the proper square.

The foreman stiffened. Unacceptable, the foreman said. I always play black.

Black always moves second. It is not an advantageous addiction.

It is for me.

You misunderstand me. I always play white. The arrangement will ensure that neither one of us will trust our gift too much.

You're not Nicollette, the foreman said.

It doesn't matter, Nicollette said, turning the board so that the foreman was white. Move. The foreman looked up at the moon, spider-webbed with cities. It could call the tree doctors in any second. Or summon white phosphorous from the secret kites, down to end Nicollette. But it didn't.

It tried to contemplate an opening. Across the street, it tried to cue up its database of every chess game every played and recorded. There was a silence. It set its mind to dreaming solutions, but only found considerable terror. It wanted to step away, overturn the board. Move, Nicollette said.

The foreman—which wasn't really a foreman anymore, as much as a compilation of inert, powerful ideas trapped in a body—reluctantly moved F4. An oddity.

Bird's Opening? Nicollette said. My. Very brave of you. Very brave. It remembered her face as she was pulled from the temple roof, how she kept trying to laugh when the captain put a musket in her mouth. The captain refused to let her laugh when he pulled the trigger. He killed himself a few years later at LeBeouf.

Does chess have to be about winning and losing, though? the foreman asked,

trying to squirm. So single minded?

Nicollete squinted at the board. Well, there is the draw.

It became exasperated, and said: That's not what I mean.

Across the street, noises. It wanted to turn its head. Its memories were caught in a sphere akin to a soap bubble. The foreman never went to high school, never kissed anyone, never became moved by anything except other people's capital. Its existence led credence to the idea that children with medieval ideas of right and wrong ran the show. They grew up. They ran an economy or two. A fiefdom. They never died. They became imaginary. It heard cats escaping from the front gates. Thousands of them. The cats' brains were used as processing power. Which was not to be confused with process and power. It wanted to close the gates. It wanted to sleep. It could never sleep. Cleo must have let them go. Cleo could sleep. The cats scampered onto Dunn Boulevard. Some were as large as elephants, some were as small as field mice. Some had eight legs and some dragged themselves away with two. Some had cancer, some had bubonic plague, some had dementia, some had agoraphobia, but managed to escape somehow. Some could speak French, some could speak Mayan, some could speak Basque, some could think in every language but not speak any. Some could give lectures on industrialism and living wages, some could teach Go. Some had napalm tails, some had rope tails, some had switchblade tails. Some had diamond claws, some had lapis lazuli claws, some had hardened corn syrup claws, some had no claws. The only traits they shared was their catness. And in a way, they weren't even really cats; much as the first Cathars in Erie weren't really Cathars.

Whatever their state, the cats turned a hairpin turn and headed south, away from the bay, towards upper Peach, towards the mayoral domes and Christworld. They ran

away from their history, and yet, at the same time, into it. No one could say whether anyone lived in Erie or not after the cats were freed. It was likely, but inconclusive. The city became unimportant to most purposes. Lost in the footnotes of the sun's fog and the moon's fog. Even the fog's fog. It was not its story anymore. The story became smaller and smaller. Nicollette—the robot calling itself Nicollette—was lost, and the foreman was lost, and Cleo was certainly lost. They might have existed everafter, but they were still lost. Someone in the office turned off its photocopier and its story was no longer copied nor illuminated for others. Someone unauthorized in the factory entered the break room—which had a roof—and left the refrigerator door ajar. For the hell of it. A ghost left a body, fled the coop. The foreman was happy, in a way. As much as it could be. Happiness itself was a frail ghost. It closed its eyes and felt the passenger's proxy skeleton stir.

6.

So many stories are lost everyday without really anyone trying, and no one will be able to dredge them back. Lost or sacrificed, the pieces cannot do anything but fathom their obsolescence. Which is no small task. Because, at some point, white or black will checkmate the other and all of the armies will be cleared, and the board will be set again, like a wolftrap. There are no survivors. There are only winners and losers. And yet, the state does not concede anything, any soft intent. The state makes people happy despite themselves. The state ruins stolen kisses and love, and obeys the rules it makes. Which is a small task.

Desperately, people try to show others that their lives are not, in fact, desperate. That they aren't spoiled children. And to keep a straight, non-lachrymose face while doing so. This often involves touching amusements. Touching a unicorn figurine made in Antarctica. Touching a soldier boy's limbless arm. Touching the side of a lightless lighthouse. Touching a chess set missing the black queen—the Cathars had ran out of bone, in a way it was that simple—thinking of the mother who gave up what she loved without knowing exactly why.

When ruined, one has no choice but to reconstruct everything lost, as if blindfolded. To try, at least, even if the memories are gossamer thin, almost islands, shredded maps unrelated to any territory. Because at the end of every unremembered story, there are footsteps in the broken city, and the distant pluckings of ukeleles. At the end, thousands of passenger pigeons blanket the sky, obscuring the sun. At the end, the black queen weaves a path through the smoke's rubble, the rubble's edges, the incandescent anthem, looking for a way out and home.

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