Substitutes

(The Public Spectacle)

"My husband the refugee," Bridget said, and who could blame her? The way Owen was going on, you'd think Jesus Himself was playing chess up in Vancouver, not Bobby Fischer. "Robert James Fischer," Owen crowed. He looked at her sharply: "The grandmaster? The heir apparent?" "I *know*," she said, and spread out the road map onto the table. All you had to do was turn on the TV to know Bobby Fischer was in the Pacific Northwest. His quarterfinals match was taking place just across the Canadian border, in a hushed Vancouver auditorium. According to what she had overheard Owen say on the phone, the result of the match was a foregone conclusion. Bobby would win handily—his opponent, the Russian grandmaster and concert pianist Mark Taimanov, was possibly the weakest of the challengers—then advance into the semis and the finals, then battle the mighty Boris Spassky for the world chess crown.

"Bobby's going to kill him today," Owen said. Apparently he wasn't done upsetting her. The use of a stranger's first name, the brutal language: it was goading and even frightening.

"And now the ugliness truly starts," she said, smoothing the crinkled map with her hand. There. That shut him up. She heard

him say then in a nicer voice he was just clowning. She looked up at him crossly, half expecting to see his jaw set in defiance, but saw he had indeed regained his equilibrium. Just like that. The symptoms of his chess fever (the term, his invention, struck her now as evasive) had vanished, and in place of his stony mouth and narrowed, gun-slit eyes was the face of the Owen she had seen at breakfast, or rather glimpsed in passing as she ate alone, a face serene and open as a parasol.

"And were you clowning about being in Bobby's presence too?" She put bunny ears around "Bobby's presence," an inflammatory gesture, she knew—he was sensitive to mocking—but she had a right to let him know how much he had alarmed her with his outburst.

"No, I'm completely nuts."

"Please don't do that."

"Well then, what do you think? I was clowning."

"Well then, I'm glad," she said, thumping the map with her forefinger. She looked at the mileage chart. "Because according to the map, Tacoma, State of Washington, is exactly 240 highway miles from Vancouver."

"Uh-oh. Facts. Now you're going to tell me Puget Sound blows things out to sea, right?"

"Which means"—she held up her hand, calming herself as much as him—"which means," she continued, softly now, "that when you talk about Bobby's molecules you're talking science fiction."

"We'll see."

She folded her arms. "I thought you said you were clowning."

What had upset her was Owen's reference to Bobby Fischer's close proximity. Within a matter of days or perhaps of weeks, he said (he wasn't clear on this point), Bobby's physical flotsam—she imagined, from images she had seen of him on TV, Fischer's shallow exhalations, his flaking skin, the errant hairs combed off his scalp, the clear Canadian air pushing his voice out into the world—that flotsam, the testaments to one's daily presence, would drift in

attenuated form toward Tacoma and might on the microscopic or even cellular level mingle with the body of her husband.

What was she supposed to do with his statement? So Owen desired to be washed in another's debris. It seemed self-loathing somehow, not simply fanciful, and behind its whimsical surface she detected what she had in the past year come to acknowledge as his increasing remoteness. She pictured those cracks on Mount Rainier that ice-climbers were always talking about: the ragged lines were inviting as lips, but sometimes they opened with a roar and exposed a dark and giant chasm.

"Look," he said, closing his eyes, "would you get *off* it, already? I'm sorry I said anything."

"I just don't like it when you go on like that."

"Did I mention I was clowning?"

Did he even know what he actually thought? Or maybe she was at fault, reading too much into things, as he always claimed.

Really, who knew anymore?

Owen made a show of tapping his watch—he had to be at the Tacoma Chess Club by nine at the latest—then turned on his heel and grabbed the scuffed leather briefcase containing his chess paraphernalia (clock, board, chessmen, two pens, scoresheet booklet, M&Ms, aspirin, plastic coffee cup, spoon) and raised his hand on the way out the door. "See you," he said, not turning, and as he gingerly made his way down the steps, burdened with his clanking briefcase, his legs seemed to bow, and he rubbed the fingers of his free hand together vigorously, a sure sign he was still angry with her.

"Good luck," she called out, but she was dismayed at the pitch of her voice, higher and sharper than she had intended. She cleared her throat. From the back, he reminded her of a flightless bird, one of those giant storklike things she had seen in a high school text: a thin chest and wide, bony trunk; a balding dark head that in the morning light of summer—it was already steamy and bright, vaguely Asian in her estimation—looked wet in patches; wiry, firm legs and arms. There was something both heroic and ludicrous about Owen's

purposefulness, a small, quick man on his way to play in a local chess tournament not even mentioned in the *News Tribune* despite Owen's repeated calls to the City Desk.

Maybe she shouldn't have mentioned the paper's omission as she paged through the Sunday edition, spooning in her breakfast grapefruit and watching him hunt for his aspirin. Maybe then he wouldn't have felt the need to start blustering about Bobby's molecules passing through him. And maybe she wouldn't have felt the need to plant her spoon like a flag into her grapefruit and rummage around the tool drawer for the *Texaco Road Atlas*. But the irony of what he was doing that morning was so apparent, so obvious, he must have been thinking the same thing as she: on June 2, 1971, at approximately 8:30 a.m., up in Vancouver, B.C., grandmaster Bobby Fischer was preparing to leave the Hilton to play in a world championship qualifying match discussed nightly on Walter Cronkite. At the same time, Owen Greef, employee-manager of the Big Bear Car Wash on South Tacoma Way, was preparing to leave his tiny house to play stinky fat men at the Greater Tacoma Open.

Her mother, Shirley, had phoned the night before. Shirley was in declining health but remained admirably vigorous in her opinions. "Are you watching this?" Shirley said. "Bobby Fischer on Channel –?" There was a pause, and Bridget pictured her mother seated on the couch, unscrewing the cap to some bottle of bracing liquid the doctor had recommended. Bridget knew what was coming, and she could not help but agree: Bobby Fischer had the goods; Owen was simply embarrassing himself. Shirley coughed into the phone. "You could wipe your feet on him," she said, "and your shoe would go right through. There's a *world* out there, and the world expects things. Either you count or you don't." Bridget nodded. She swore she could smell her mother's medicine bubbling up through the receiver.

Bridget and Owen lived in the south part of Tacoma, at its farthest point, in unincorporated Pierce County, on a crumbling street where neighbors were set far apart, separated by mole mounds, patches of foxglove, and spindly firs that grew heavy with moisture

and sometimes dropped sodden branches onto cars. Even after two years of marriage, Bridget was not sure how, in a legal sense, the unincorporated part of the city differed from the incorporated part. She knew only that the houses around them were dark and peeling, and that everyone's yard was treacherously soft, rotting underfoot from the seepage of decaying septic tanks. It rained a lot, and in the aftermath of storms or drizzles, gray still pools appeared on the swayback roofs and out in the rough terrain of the street, and everything got muddy and smelled like forest. Late into the evening, after the air turned chilly, insects walked the water, their pinprick ripples the only movement, and you got the sense you were not in Tacoma at all, but in some place ancient and recurring, one full of drainwater and holes, like a stretch of battleground.

"What would you think about moving?" she said to him last night, but he was having none of it. "Not now," he had answered, and she saw he didn't mean no, not this season, but literally not *now*: he was studying an opening, preparing to trick some opponent at the Greater Tacoma Open. He had highlighted some symbols in his opening book. The chess pieces on the board in front of him seemed to be placed every which way, without pattern. And now this. How dare him. His wild talk about cellular mingling, his denials: it was like sitting on a bus with someone who refused to drop a coin into the pay box. You weren't completely sure what was behind the act, but none of the possibilities was acceptable. It seemed to her outrageously unfair that she should be expected to read Owen correctly all the time. He was a child, he really was, and this obsession with chess was like a child's imaginary friend. What kind of friend? She'd like to know. Beast or confidant? Wearing a mask or not?

Once, early in their marriage, Owen had leaned close, drunk, and told her with much feeling it was hard to reconcile the two, chess and real life. They were like two cars roaring down the same freeway, and every once in a while the drivers glanced at each other with puzzled, longing looks on their faces and thought they recognized someone they knew. It seemed like something out of a sci-fi

movie: space and time out of whack, two parallel universes keeping pace, each hinting of its existence to the other, each with something the other wanted. When she told Shirley what Owen had said, her mother had confronted her. Which car, Shirley asked, did she think he wanted to drive in? Look at the facts, dear, she said: look them right in the face. The facts, Bridget knew, were against her. Owen was the Tacoma Chess Club's rating leader and immediate past secretary of its advisory board. Most Thursday evenings he was away—he was the club's lock-up man four nights a month—and if you added in the occasional weekend tournament in Seattle or Ellensburg or Ocean Shores to the club's monthly weekender tournament, he was gone eight or nine evenings every month, with two or three overnighters.

But he was playing a *game* for God's sake, not going to cockfights or strip clubs or biker bars. Trust was not an issue, not in that sense. Always, he had been her little Odysseus, driving off to have his adventures, and he always came home. He was self-regulating. Dependable.

"You let him go out that much?" Shirley had said, alarmed. Lindsey, Bridget's friend since high school, didn't understand either. She had been calling for Owen's head from the beginning. "Who paid for his car?" she'd say. "How much of your paycheck went into it?" Lindsey had taken psychology courses at Tacoma Community College and wondered aloud if Owen had been autistic as a boy. At first Bridget laughed and told Shirley and Lindsey she was a chess widow, but she quickly stopped using the term because it suggested his time away was the issue, and because, as a title, it was so absurd she wasn't sure if her situation was actually worse, or better.

If someone had asked her in college what she thought about the game, she would have laughed. Chess was what geeky high school boys played, or cigar-puffing titans of industry. But now . . . she couldn't even mention Owen without picturing his roll-up vinyl board, the "tournament-ready" one with green and cream squares big as teacups. He did not put an alarm clock on the night stand. Instead, he

rose for work at the car wash to the ticking of his wooden Jerger, his big lumbering chess clock with two round clock faces looming over their bed like the portholes of a tiny ship. Sometimes he pinched his fingers together for no reason at all, and though he denied it, she suspected he was playing chess in his mind and clutching imaginary pieces. Once, the two of them sloshing around in the tub, she swore she felt the weighted bottom of a pawn on her naked back, where his hand was caressing; when faced with the material evidence, he claimed, unconvincingly, that his fingers had somehow scooped up the piece when it fell from his pocket into the bathwater.

No, the issue wasn't how much he was away. The issue was how he always seemed to be elsewhere. There was a difference. Perhaps, she wondered sometimes, perhaps she was making too much of his—what?—hobby? love? life's work? The words seemed inadequate and off-center. There was no room any more in the world, in her world, in *their* world, for what he did. Owen and his chess friends had their own laws and hierarchies, their own silly wordplays—"check, mate," they'd say, calling over a waiter—and they clammed up tight about chess in the presence of those they called civilians, or people who didn't play.

She couldn't blame them. Even now, Shirley would stare at Owen across the dinner table with a look of horrible expectancy, as if sure he was about to rise and give form to her unease—the way, at work, Bridget could sometimes spot returning marines by their rabbity comments about Vietnamese. Well, there you go, Shirley had said. Your mom's right, Lindsey had chimed in: there's something obscene, something lurid about grown men piling into cars and driving long distances to play a board game from morning to night, for hours on end, just sitting and staring at chessmen until the only people out on the streets were cops or drunks. It brought to people's minds the perverse, narrow band at either end of a bell curve. It seemed close to sin, somehow: Thou shalt consort with others. Thou shalt not flee.

The house was quiet now as a monk's cell, so quiet Bridget could hear the air churn; it made a small roaring in her ears. She filled

her coffee cup and watched the steam rise. Did she truly hate him? "He's my husband," she'd say in the early days, first to Lindsey, then to Shirley, and she'd throw her hands high into the air. But things were different now. Things hadn't been the same in ages.

Back then, during their first year—was it only a year ago?—he'd pull into the driveway at night, back from one of his weekend tournaments, and he'd be tired and sweaty and his mind would still be whirring, a sensation he compared to a car engine fan that wouldn't shut off even after you closed the garage door. Long before she began locking the doors around nine and curling up in bed with their dog, Alister, Bridget always had cold fried chicken waiting for him, Owen's favorite, and a nice macaroni salad with lots of sweet pickles and onions, and the trash would be emptied and the rug swept free of dog hair.

For a long time, she considered it important to make sure his returns were special. They'd eat with napkins instead of paper towels, and she took small, precise bites and made sure not to drop anything on the floor or swipe a finger across her plate to get at the mayonnaise and sodden chicken skin. They'd talk about her day, her long drive to Seattle to work, the proliferation of junk mail, Lindsey's new haircut, Shirley's latest doctor's report, and if the evening was clear they'd sit out on the patio and hold hands and look out into the darkening street, where distant trucks rumbled like surf and the pavement was straight and flat as a summer waterway. Sometimes they made love outside, discreetly and quietly, Owen taking care to cover them with a lawn-chair cushion, and sometimes they'd go inside and walk directly to bed and Owen would say, "Come here, come here, I want you to meet someone," and then she'd pull on the elastic band of his underwear and peer inside, and they'd roll around on the bed and squeal like children.

Lindsey said any dog could mate; all Owen's friskiness proved was he knew the difference between boys and girls. But that's not what her nights with Owen *felt* like, at least not at first. Every morning she dressed in uncomfortable pumps, a scratchy skirt, and a

stiff, crinkling blouse and drove an hour up to Seattle to her job at Boeing, where she filled in complicated schedules and checked technical reports for administrative compliance. She made good money, but all those stuffed shirts! All the bickering, the need to be right every time, what she called the cult of competence. All the dreary cleverness. The busyness. Every day, she shuttled between warring factions working on Boeing's proposed Skyhawk modifications, scheduling bossy Army colonels who wanted four rocket launcher pods into meetings with smug flight engineers who favored wider killing zones for the existing two pods.

It was godless, headache-inducing work, and though she could not fathom now how she possibly could have felt this way, being with Owen had calmed her sense of dread about what she was doing with her life. Crazy. She even began to suggest—how could she have? it seemed impossible now—she had even brought up to Owen the possibility of her working more overtime, so he could cut back at the car wash and devote more time to chess.

That they had gotten married at all was a source of confusion to everyone. At first it had seemed sweetly impetuous, a madcap romance, and she loved his shyness and quiet, odd passion. The attraction was hard to explain, but professors at Smith sometimes married truck drivers, and GIs married minor Vietnamese royalty, and movie stars married horse trainers, so who was to say? All she knew was she had come home upset from the dentist on a Tuesday, and phoned him up, and started to cry. "I think we ought to get married," she said, her voice breaking.

She remembered feeling calm, even as she pawed at her tears, as if she were reading from a script typed out days in advance and slipped under the door. Disinterest, that's what it was, like an actor observing her own performance. Her mind seemed to be thinking in all directions, very clearly. Boil the carrots when you hang up. Call the optometrist. Remember this, *this*, for our children someday, for us, this sense of rightness. This airy grace. And she filed away, too, the mysterious connection between what she was now saying to Owen and

what she had heard at the dentist's office. There, a white-smocked technician had told her that when archeologists examined excavated skulls, they always checked the teeth carefully, to help determine age: the more worn, the more *formerly there*—the technician's exact words—then the older the person at the time of death.

The idea had horrified her. There was an awful symmetry to finding a person's teeth worn down to the nub at the end of a long life. Body and spirit, both grinding down in perfect harmony into nothing, in cahoots with each other the whole time, grinding and grinding with exquisite timing, without error or deviation. That's why she and Owen were perfect. No symmetry. He was preposterous and uneven, and as they talked and cried and spoke softly into the mouthpiece to each other, she saw herself in the hall mirror and thrust out her arms and spread her hands wide, and everything about her posture—the taut line of her arms and hands, her arched back, the strain of her calf—spoke to her of the truth of her feeling.

Their first year, she sometimes accompanied him to tournaments. The playing halls seemed populated with the inhabitants of a fantastical island: swaying gluttons in overalls; smooth-faced, squeaking men who looked like women in suits; stumbling graybeards with piss stains the size of walnuts on their pants; stocky types with dark hairy arms and booming voices and a hacking, moist way of laughing; silent, staring college boys in brown lumberjack shirts who seemed to appear and disappear at will, like forest sprites; stumpy slow-walkers she suspected might have Down's syndrome; swearing, dull-eyed hoodlums whose faces were bright with acne. They all stared at her hungrily, and she felt their eyes roam her breasts and legs, and, once, in a crowded hotel elevator, someone briefly pushed his rolled-up plastic board up her skirt.

At the Rose Parade Open, down in Portland, she had sat by herself outside the playing area, inside the venerable old Oregon Hotel, which still attracted wedding parties because of its brass railings and ballroom and mossy blue carpeting. The hallway's high ceil-

ings and chandeliers were in stark contrast to the other depressing venues she had been to previously. The grandeur of the hotel suggested serious conversation and old-world courtesy, and she wondered, briefly, wildly, if she would see players in suits or perhaps even evening wear, their ties tucked neatly into vests, black shoes gleaming. She sat reading a paperback mystery and sipping coffee from a Styrofoam cup, and the sun was shining outside, gliding in on dusty columns. She heard *Für Elise* piping through the hall, and, pressing her ear to the giant closed door of the tournament room, she could make out the muted noises of Round One: sharp, barking coughs; the occasional thump of a weighted piece landing hard on the board; an orderly clacking, like someone knitting, the sound of players making their moves and depressing the plungers on the chess clocks. There was an air of dignity and artistic endeavor about sitting in a comfortable chair, listening to small sounds that were instantly recognizable, like breaking a code, stripping away a barrier and suddenly understanding, suddenly seeing the logic of a thing. She put the book on her lap and smiled at the ancient desk clerk. Perhaps she had been ungenerous in her attitudes, unfair to Owen and his dreams.

"You waiting for a master?" a voice said. A tall man stood over her. He had wavy red hair and spoke with a silky bedroom baritone. He smelled of sweat and cigarettes, and a chess scoresheet was peeking out of his brown shirt pocket.

Then the door to the tournament hall burst open and at first she could not tell what she was seeing, something rapid and blind, a blur of arms and legs—players, she realized, young boys waving boards and rattling chess boxes, all of them open-mouthed, in cutoffs and T-shirts, shouting now, their faces distorted with laughter, jerking with quick, small steps past her and down the hall. "Oh Mama," said one of the boys, directing a frank, leering gaze toward her, and out of the corner of her eye she saw the lips of the tall man stretch into a hideous smile.

It was too much.

"No." She smiled up at the man. "Just waiting for the halt and the lame. Am I on time?"

The encounter had seemed funny at first, but then the truth of it—its hopelessness, its finality—depressed her so much she could not go to work the following Monday. She told Owen that from here on in, he would have to drive to tournaments by himself. It was a hard thing to do, to admit the strain she felt, and though she berated herself for her betrayal, she would not back down, even in the face of his pleading.

Desperate, she sneered at him over her scotch and water. "You're not so special, you know. You're not one in a million. You don't need a groupie."

His face turned hard. "You don't want to be with me, fine," he said, and he stood and left the room.

She had a trick for dealing with what Owen called her inadequacies, and she used it during her first weekend alone, when Owen was playing up in Renton. The trick was to find substitutes for the reasons behind her misfortunes, and imagine those substitute reasons were true. If, for example, she woke up half an hour late, she told herself she hadn't overslept because she had drunk herself into a stupor the night before, she had overslept because she had to stay up with a suicidal friend. If she didn't talk to coworkers, it wasn't because they didn't like her; it was because an administrator had assigned her to work alone, in a small cubicle. If she didn't raise her voice to her mother or to Lindsey, it wasn't because the very idea of shouting them down turned her insides syrupy and quaking; it was because she was kind and gentle and mindful of the needs of others.

Lately almost everything seemed a substitute for something else. If they didn't have breakfast together anymore, that was the same as Owen getting longer hours at the car wash. If they hadn't made love for over a month, that was the same as one of them lying unconscious in the hospital. If Owen said he wanted to be washed in Bobby Fischer's molecules, why that was like . . . She thought hard.

Here came Alister bounding in from the outside, through the dog door. Bridget was frowning. Her coffee was still warm. She raised the cup to her lips with both hands, as if it were a tremendous weight. Why, for Owen to say that out loud was the same as him stripping off his clothes and walking outside and standing in the middle of the street for all the world to punish.

Alister started barking, nudging her legs, but she laid her hand on his head and stilled him. She stared hard at the door, furrowing her brow like a mentalist. She stared a long time, narrowing her eyes, the way she had seen Owen look at his chess positions. She pursed her lips the way she had seen Owen purse his, bulging and tense, whenever he was looking for the saving move. For the miracle, he said. The move that puts you *in* the position. She couldn't hear herself breathe, she couldn't feel the chair, but at last she pictured the door opening. It would be hot outside, sticky as jungle, and she would have to squint to make out the shapes: car, sky, street, a crowd circling him, hooting. Owen, she would say. Her voice would be urgent and clear. She would walk to the street and hiss at the crowd, she would raise her arms and bring her fists crashing down upon them, she would make them cower and weep, and they would fall to the ground. You're here, Owen would say. Me and you. Here.