Paul Eggers

The Big Gift

The best news Owen Greef had heard all year was that Bobby Fischer would be flying to Iceland to play for the world chess championship. Bobby versus the Russian, Boris Spassky. Bobby the bad boy genius. What Bobby could do in a game of chess was what Mozart did with musical instruments, what Michelangelo did with brushes and paint. The whole country was in love with him, and he didn't even care he was loved, or why.

Since his divorce Owen had lived in the Commodore Apartments, just blocks from the Big Bear Car Wash, where he'd once been the manager. From his window he had a view of the gas tanks and faded tar-lined roofs of downtown. Below him were bars and secondhand shops and mysterious brick storefronts with boarded windows. Mornings, men slumped against the peeling doorways and talked about girls upstate who'd smoke you in broad daylight, right in your car. At night the empty streets echoed with shouts—a block away or six blocks away, it was so cavernous you couldn't really tell—and newsprint scudded across the pavement and blew rattling into your face.

It was astonishing to Owen that he now lived in the district. Facts

were facts, but he didn't have to resign himself to them. No way I'm staying here, he'd say. Just no way. The Commodore stank of ammonia, and the orange-capped fat man who came over once a month to tend the rhododendrons and drag a push broom across the linoleum never bothered to toss empties into the Dumpster. Down the hall a neighbor had posted a sign:

Call Hospital if you make Noise.

Because I will Kick your ass.

When Owen first heard the news about Bobby—at Sears one afternoon the screens on all the demo TV consoles crackled to life, revealing row upon row of revolving chessboards—he stuck his hands into his leather jacket, and in a show of surprise and happiness pounded his fists together. He hadn't known. Hadn't been keeping up since his wife left. Beside him, a crew-cut salesclerk, stopping for the broadcast, began shadowboxing the space over a sale lamp. "Go Bobby," the clerk said to the TV screens. This was shocking. The clerk looked the football and baseball type. Then other people stopped, too. Two boys in dirty jeans. A black man in a green suit.

Owen sensed then a charge of energy in the air, a slowing of time, like diving into a pool, leaving one element and entering another. A pink-cheeked man holding a pipe wrench caught his eye and winked, as if in confirmation. Then a doughy blond in a miniskirt folded her arms and unexpectedly hoisted herself up onto a console, sitting pretty. Overhead, the fluorescent lights began to buzz, bathing the whole length of Console and TV in a humming soft light. On the TV screens, something he believed he'd never see in a public place: dozens of the same powerful hand shoving dozens of the same gleaming chess piece resolutely forward. The crowd stood as if hypnotized. It was a wonderful sensation, sensing something he'd buried come alive again, and as he walked out, late for his Yellow Taxi shift, Owen couldn't help but notice the air had turned rich with a delicious metallic-tinged perfume.

Around nine, a greasy teenager in a T-shirt leaned forward men-

acingly from the back seat. "Take Seventh Avenue," the kid said. "Seventh, man. That meter goes over eight bucks, I ain't paying. Nuh-uh." Owen let the challenge pass. He was summoning an image, straining to keep it intact. Queen pawn up, king knight out, other pawn up, pawn again, queen knight out, bishop out. Then what? The pattern kept dissolving.

"You looking to score weed?" said the boy.

Owen considered. "Don't smoke," he lied. Rolled tight in his jeans pocket were the remnants of a dime bag—he smoked Colombian Gold and Thai stick, popped white capsules stored in a peppermint tin—but there was insinuation in the boy's voice. *I got your number.* Owen had been pegged like this a hundred times. Meter jumpers, trash girls going off to get pawed, recruits bawling their heads off outside the gates of the air force base, sullen old Filipinos counting out exact change: they were all so far down they wanted to pull you down with them. Not this time. Owen, replaying his lie in his mind, made an inspired vow to keep his head clear. Maybe he'd given up on tournaments too quickly, after all. He was only thirty-four.

Even in the dark you could tell Owen's skin was still ruddy, and though he was losing his hair, what remained rode his skull in tight waves. In his teens he had practiced an expression, and the look had never left him. His eyebrows were dramatic and arched, his nose hawkish, and he had a habit of tilting his head down, just slightly, so that his big, dark eyes seemed to glower when he concentrated. They glowered now and all through his shift, and even after he signed off his taxi and marched straight from the garage up the Fourteenth Street hill, six rolling blocks.

The chess club was housed in an ancient storefront, set back into a concrete lot between apartments where all the women had bruises on their legs. There was a large picture pane window to the left of the door, and when Owen looked through he saw the familiar straight-backed wooden chairs and long wooden tables, each laden with boards and chessmen. He was in time. A game was still

going. At the end of the back table, Wes Jackson played a shag-haired boy.

"If it isn't Owen Greef," said Jackson, turning at the sound of the door. Jackson was fleshy and wide mouthed, and when he spoke his tongue seemed to loll, spit-flecked and gray, like an aquarium slug. "Long time. I heard you quit."

"You heard wrong." Owen shrugged. "You playing much?"

"Here and there. My lady says I can't spend weekends on chess anymore."

Owen nodded sympathetically.

"Where you working these days?"

Owen shook his head. "Not the car wash, if that's what you're asking. You hear about Fischer?"

"Are you kidding? Who hasn't? You ought to start coming by again. Everyone's got Fischer fever now. We must've had—what?—forty people in here earlier."

"Well," said Owen, "the place looks the same." He looked around. The peeling support columns still hadn't been painted. The clock reading *Drink Sprite* still ran ten minutes slow. There was nothing on the walls, only the stubble of yellow painted concrete.

"We got about double our membership this month alone," said Jackson. "There's good days ahead, my friend."

There was nothing more to say, which saddened Owen and at the same time thrilled a part of him that had been dormant too long. He was in the arena, and when you were in the arena you focused. A cancerous spleen, a leaking spine, your hemorrhaging eight-year-old at the door: nobody cared. They were here to battle. It was a bracing proposition, and for a moment Owen was nearly moved to tears by the stern and simple beauty of his surroundings.

He rocked on the balls of his feet, studying the position. The shag hair was winning. Surprise. Jackson, though a clumsy tactician, had once battled a California master to a draw. All the boy had to do was slide his queen over. Queen and rook would mate in two moves. Snuff. Owen made a fist and grunted.

The boy picked up his queen and placed it right where Owen had imagined. Jackson, head in his hands, began a slow-motion fidget. "Oh, I've had it now. Can't do this. Can't do that." He waggled his finger at the crucial squares, as if stirring a drink. "Would you *look* at this kid? He's a player."

The shag hair, concentrating, didn't look up. He was long-limbed but slight, and despite his layers of clothing—jean jacket, flannel logger shirt, white T-shirt—his hunched way of sitting made him look mushroomy and soft. Owen took his measure. The boy's pale broad face revealed nothing, a bowl upon which small features had been laid. They looked as if they could shift at any time.

"Okay, I resign," said Jackson pleasantly. He carefully leaned his king over onto its side. "Let's see you two play. You better watch yourself, Owen. This kid's a killer."

The boy looked up. "Are you a master?"

"Near enough."

"He's an expert," said Jackson. "That's right below master."

"I know," the boy said.

Jackson began counting on his fingers. "You got unrated, then you got class rankings. Class E, lowest, then D, C, B, A. Then expert. Master's after that. You're talking better than ninety-nine percent of everyone else."

The boy nodded. Owen without hesitation pushed out his king's pawn. The boy answered in kind, and the game was on.

Jackson continued. "We got, what, like seven or eight masters in the whole state. Owen's *almost* special. And then you got your international categories—"

"Shut up," Owen said, and something sharp in the way he said it quieted Jackson down. The boy played quickly, matching Owen's speed, and not two minutes into the game Owen found himself staggered by a series of slashing, fearless moves. Unbelievable. Owen was rusty, but not that rusty. The boy avoided all his traps and kept the position unbalanced, opening files, baring Owen's king to danger. Now Owen fell into long thinks, balancing his chin on an out-

stretched thumb, the way the Russian grandmasters sat. On move, he began to crash his weighted chessmen down, loudly, onto their new squares. The intimidation didn't work. The boy shook the hair out of his eyes and crashed his own men down onto new squares. He fell into Owen's rhythm, pausing when Owen paused, responding quickly when Owen made instantaneous replies. It was like playing against a mirror.

And then the boy faltered, sliding his rook over one square too far. A stupid, silly error. Owen could land his knight between the boy's rook and king, winning big material. No sooner did the boy's fingers leave the rook than the boy let out a loud groan.

"Oh my," said Jackson. "I won't say a word."

"You're a player," Owen said forcefully, addressing the boy. "You're doing good." Owen feigned concentration, pretending to look for tricks inside the boy's error. There was no need to be dismissive, smashing the knight onto the killing square. The kid was no fly, no bug to simply swat and forget.

That's how it ended. Owen's hand hovering, the boy toppling his king.

The boy's name was Alex Jacobson. He had never been in a chess club before. His father, he said, had taught him the moves just a few years ago.

Owen stared at the ceiling. "Well, Alex," he said, shifting his gaze to the boy. He leaned forward. "I'll tell you something. You ought to play in some tournaments. I know what I'm talking about. I beat Rassmusson once." Owen paused. "Maybe you got the big gift. I'm thinking maybe you do."

Later, talking on the corner with Jackson and Lonnie, a woman Jackson introduced as his lady, Owen regretted not reviewing his openings before going to the club. After the first game, Jackson had brought out a chess clock from the storeroom, and the three of

them played five-minute chess—cutthroat, odd man out—until midnight. They both had crushed Jackson. No one kept count, but even with the kid's ignorance about the Sicilian Defense, especially the Richter-Rauzer line, Owen had been held even, loss for loss, win for win.

It was a moonlit fall night, the clouds tinted gray, thick as turned earth, and an oppressive dampness had settled in. Something small raced across the sidewalk and into the gutter. In the distance, down the hill, squealing tires echoed off the concrete walls. Lonnie was irritated. A friend had dropped her off nearly an hour ago, and she'd been looking at her watch ever since. She was pockmarked and boyishly thin, and she spoke in a deep, whisky-scratch voice that turned to coughing when she laughed.

"Why don't you phone up a cab?" she said sharply.

Jackson had been standing with his hands in his pockets a couple of minutes now. He shrugged. "One'll show up."

"Just phone. There's a phone booth down that way."

"They always show up," said Jackson. "Just a few more minutes."

"Just make sure you tip the driver good," said Owen.

Jackson looked at him. "I'm driving cab these days," said Owen.

"Shit," said Lonnie. She raised her hand as if to strike Jackson. "You play chess all night, then you walk out with a cabbie with no cab. What good are you?"

"No good, I guess," said Jackson.

"He guesses he's no good. Well, that's something anyway."

Jackson blinked. "Not here."

"What's wrong with here?" she said. "I've been standing here half the night, and you didn't seem to mind. I just want a cab." She craned her neck toward some approaching lights. "There's one." She pointed. "Go flag it down."

Jackson lumbered out from the line of parked cars, hands in his pocket, but the taxi sped on down the street.

Lonnie exhaled loudly. "Don't you know how to hail a cab?"

"He didn't see me."

"You didn't stick your arm out. You're supposed to stick your arm out and wave."

"I motioned."

"You did *not*. You just stood there like a lump. Jesus. All I want is a cab. I'm standing here all night and you can't even get me a cab."

"Okay. Calm down."

"I'm calm. That's the trouble. I let you get away with everything. Do you want me to spank your bottom? I think you do."

"Enough. Yes?"

She looked at Owen. "I am so sick of this. I really am. Last week some guy goes, 'Hey sugar, give me some.'" Her mouth turned hard, and she pumped an erect finger at Jackson's stomach. "And this lump just puts his head down."

"What do you want me to do? Get in a fistfight?"

"Yeah, that would be nice. Get in a fistfight. You just stand around and wait. Owen here wouldn't just stand there and wait, would you, Owen?"

"I'm just going home."

She closed her eyes for awhile, and when she opened them again, she was nodding. "Okay. Okay. You don't want to get messed up with a couple of losers. I apologize. I'm calm now. Is there something about chess players? Are you all weirdos? Can you tell me that? You don't look like a weirdo. Tell me you're not a weirdo."

It was suddenly important to Owen to convince her he wasn't a weirdo. There was nothing more important in the world to him right now. Her eyes roamed his face, evaluating, alert. She was looking for a sign, a suggestion, some phrase to assure her she hadn't made another terrible mistake in her life. He told her he'd taken classes at the community college. He read books, worked a job, liked ketchup on his steak, and if that made him weird, then guilty as charged. He spoke in a voice he believed to exude genial wisdom, and he could tell Lonnie was taken with his fresh manner. He said lots of people play chess. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, it crossed all lines. In the Soviet Union, chess was as popular as base-

ball. There was nothing weird about Russians, was there? People called chess players weird in the U.S., but that was because not many people here played chess. Soon everything was going to change, thanks to Bobby. Soon everyone would be playing chess, and no one would call chess players weird anymore because everyone would be a chess player. Did she see? Did she get it?

Owen paused for effect. Lonnie was listening fiercely. Her eyes focused on some distant point; she pursed her lips as if savoring some word, readying her mouth to repeat it.

Like that kid in the club, he continued. Maybe the kid didn't look like much to people, but really he was something. Maybe another Bobby in a few years. The kid had secret places in him. He was special, always had been probably, and when he became another Bobby everyone would finally know it. Did she see? The kid would *always* have been special, but no one knew.

"That's right." Jackson nodded enthusiastically. "The kid with the hair." He faltered. His hands came out of his pockets and thumped heavily against his pants. Owen could see Jackson wanted to help Lonnie arrive at the correct conclusion but was stuck for how to continue. "Owen here beat him," he said desperately. "He's not making this stuff up."

"Yeah?" she said. She reached into her purse and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. "What's the kid's name?"

"No one's heard of him yet," said Owen. "But he's got what it takes, believe me."

"And you beat him," she said brightly. She lit her cigarette with a tiny silver lighter and pointed the glowing ember toward Owen. "So that makes you pretty smart, doesn't it?"

"Oh, he is," said Jackson.

"I'm a hair's breath from master," Owen said. "I'm not bragging, but you asked."

"Well, here's to you," she said, raising her cigarette as if making a toast. "May you get what you want." There was something erotic in Lonnie's posture and speech, her arm suspended over her head,

face upturned, her voice full and throaty, and Owen was suddenly conscious of his quickening blood. Jackson seemed affected too: he looked as though he had just ponied up a turd. He put a big proprietary hand on Lonnie's shoulder. "May you make a pile of money," Lonnie continued. Then she turned to Jackson. "May everyone get to quit their shithole job. May we all get our heart's desire and see everyone's secret places."

"Hear, hear," Jackson said. He smiled.

"Just get me a cab," she said. She slipped her arm around Jackson's back and began stroking. "Okay? We'll walk down the street and you can phone up a cab. All right? That sounds reasonable, doesn't it? We'll just walk down and phone."

They talked awhile longer, just until Lonnie finished her cigarette, and then Owen watched them go and, waving goodbye, he started down the hill toward the district, toward the flaring, drunken shouts, and he was aware in a dim and dreamy way that something had started, a ripple in the water, the single flap of a bird's wing. Back in his room, pipes clanging overhead, Owen had some beers. He stacked the bottle caps on top of each other, shuffling them between his fingers as if they were poker chips. He acknowledged he may have magnified Alex Jacobson's talent. But that was okay. With a groan, he lay down heavily on the bed, ignoring the coughing out in the hall. He had exaggerated in order to go on believing. Not believing in himself, but believing in those secret parts of himself he had not yet discovered. They were still there. They had to be. Not so long ago he thought he would astonish everyone and tear through national tournaments, making a name for himself. He snorted now, cradling his bottle in the crook of one arm, then reached out stiffly with the other arm and formed his fingers into a kind of claw. Air chess. He moved quickly, snapping the invisible chessmen forward, slapping down the plunger of an airy chess clock. He could still make master. Sure. Afterwards . . . who knew?

He sighed. He'd have to start training again. He'd been treating each day as a perpetual present for so long, severing action from

consequence, yesterday from today, that training would be hard. He'd have to start tying his days together once more, start gauging his progress, drawing things together into patterns, start comparing, casting himself into a future. Unexpected patterns. New connections. That's what training meant. Finding those things. They were the secret parts of himself that had always been there, the holy places, wild and powerful, enormous, lying in wait like whole continents. But he had to find them. He knew this, had always known it, but the knowledge was so bitter he had chosen to discard what he knew.

He had met his wife at a church mixer, though he himself was not a believer. He was so lonely then there were certain sad songs he feared hearing in public, worried his chin would crinkle, but she was accepting and kind and loved the way his eyes teared up when they kissed in a slow dance. In her tight pink blouse and white nylons, she imprinted herself in his mind. He couldn't stop thinking about her. Winning games, taking home money, he was a proud husband, and he was glad to bring her along to local tournaments, sometimes driving fast up the interstate, or taking a lazy day to wend their way across the border. Her presence was electric. He'd be putting away some old man, some woodpusher, calculating, and she'd come up from behind and start rubbing his shoulders and the whole room would look his way in admiration and desire. He quickly climbed the ranks, class C, class B, class A, low expert, then high expert, right on the verge of master. He was going to quit working his car wash job if he made master. If. He said *if* to friends, but in his heart, whispering to her in bed, he meant *when*. He'd go pro, a man on his way, challenging Benko, Evans, Soltis, all the grandmasters whose photos he touched, day after day, in the pages of *Chess Life*. He'd be surrounded by exotic Germans and Czechs, by rich and powerful patrons, and he'd love her and touch her in ways extravagant and generous and strange.

The knowledge excited in him the sense he was blessed in some indefinable and secret way. He threw himself into studying, into

honing his game. He spent enormous sums of money flying or bussing to tournaments, to events held first in halls and schools, then in hotels with gleaming balustrades and chandeliers, events always bigger, always more grandiose, than the last. He took the Greyhound to New York and Philadelphia. He flew to Vegas, Boston, Chicago. But his rating didn't rise. That he wasn't ready to compete was pounded into him by some out-of-state master, some man with a burrcut and tattoos. Then in Seattle he lost four out of five games to men of no importance, terrible players. In Phoenix he could only draw class C players. He couldn't go to the next level, and his failure baffled him. He looked to her for a recognition, for some withheld acknowledgment of his secret gift. He waited for her to help him find it, as she had done early on, lending his play a kind of grace, an ease over the board that was spectacular. Waiting, he drank. He stuffed pills in his mouth, smoked weed in the alley by the car wash. He found other women he thought would help him, who could give him back his ease, but they could not help him find his gift either. She left him slowly, bit by bit, first cutting her bountiful red hair as short as a boy's, then withholding her secretary's checks, then going out on the town without him. The more she left, the more betrayed he felt. He blamed her for not supporting him, though he knew it wasn't true; he knew he was to blame, and at the same time he knew he couldn't get up in the morning without her. He was afraid and angry: he fought in bars, went through his money, showed up at the car wash so stoned he cracked someone's windshield with a tire brush. He had words with the regional manager. He lost his job, his car, and then he lost her for good. What a fool he'd been. Waiting, he'd stopped the sequence of moves; he'd stopped being interested in new connections, in unexpected patterns. That's how he lost her. That's how he lost everything. By standing around with his hands in his pockets, eyes fixed and blind, doggedly waiting.

Morning. Owen knew because of the shuffling out in the hall. Sunlight framed the blinds, and he felt hungry for eggs. He'd head

on down to the Bay Street Diner, get him some coffee and a three-egg omelet. The hall entryway was clean, the rust and cream chessboard-pattern squares scuffed and wet. The fat man with the orange cap—had it already been a month?—was shaking his push broom into the Dumpster. The man had swept up quite a pile; there was a mound just outside the open door. On top of the dirt lay someone's rippled copy of *Squat Job*, opened to the photo of a woman's grainy spread legs; there were dozens of exploded cigarette butts, two pint bottles of Mad Dog, a hypodermic needle, a crusted yellow bandage and gauze.

Owen, blinking in the light, found himself unable to walk by, to simply leave this terrible garbage in its dusty heap. He stuck out his foot and scooted the magazine and the needle just so, across the rust and cream squares of the entryway, to an approximation of king's four. Then he pushed a cigarette butt over with the sole of his shoe and dragged it over to king's five. The bandages and gauze served as knights; they attacked the king's pawns. He scooted them out to the board. The Mad Dogs became bishops; they attacked the knights. The game was on. King's knight, queen's bishop, pawn up, other pawn up. Owen paused, luxuriating in the small morning breeze, feeling reckless and strong. Big. Like he could live forever.

Out the corner of his eye he saw the janitor approach slowly, the push broom slung over his shoulder like a club. There were some weeds and plant stems on the sidewalk, roots and all. Rhododendrons, sure. Owen couldn't remember where the flowerpots were. The cars out on the interstate sounded like faraway ocean. There was a strong fragrance in the air, something vegetative and sweet. The sun was so bright Owen shielded his eyes. He started walking down the steps. Where is the garden? he asked. The janitor said, Back off motherfuck. The garden, said Owen. Can you tell me? Is the garden still here?