Paul Eggers

# A Private Space

When Gary Martindale's dim and flabby older brother, Rick, left Tacoma for South Vietnam—he was going to be an infantryman in the Delta, a radio operator—Gary, nineteen, was given to understand that people from families such as his own invariably came to a mean and wasteful end. It was evening, and he was poring over chess books, preparing for the upcoming Washington State Chess Championship. Just that morning he had stood somberly alongside his mother and father at the bus station, saying good-bye to newly minted Lance Corporal Rick Martindale. But now, slightly stoned, still unnerved by what he had witnessed, he sprawled out comfortably on his bed, a magnetic pocket chess set on his pillow, a *Chess Informant #46* at his elbow, analyzing a brilliant innovation by Bobby Fischer, a move so profound it overturned in a single stroke decades of grandmasterly assumptions.

Stirred, perhaps, by Bobby's improbable victory over communal and ingrained ideas, he saw in his own dogged attention to the move an attempt to renounce the certain outcome of his brother's tour of duty, the certainty of which had struck him like a slap in the face that morning at the bus station. He began nodding. Out-

comes, he knew, toking thoughtfully, were echoes of their beginnings and middles. The trajectory could be traced, the trace illuminated, sources identified. If he was honest—and at such a moment, he acknowledged, how could he not be?—he had to admit that Rick's beginnings and middles under the family roof commingled with his own. Rick the sad sack, the lard ass, the twenty-one-year-old lump: that they were related hardly seemed possible, yet it was undeniably true. There was contamination involved, leaching, a hoary and involuntary exchange of cells and fluids, DNA. Once or twice Gary thumped his chess set for emphasis. He found himself suddenly teary. He stretched out his arms then, stiffly, as if for embrace, and by this act gave form to what he had always known but had never before confronted. At the core of their shared history, his and Rick's, were not the bedrock pillars of strength and affection that family life was intended to promote, but a vast and terrible nothing.

Incidental and, beginning in adolescence, of increasingly little influence in the family's affairs, Rick seemed to conduct his daily life just out of Gary's line of vision, like a TV flickering in the corner. Rick was, in effect, the *idea* of an older brother, not the older brother himself, and like most things one step removed, even the solidity of his physical mass seemed a gift from the minds of others, from those such as he, Gary, whose collective will constitutes the social and physical world. Like it or not, that was the nature of things. Right or wrong was not at issue.

Still, shaking his head, Gary now affirmed that he had never willfully obstructed Rick's forays into a wider, fuller existence. At the same time Gary could not help but admit that he had at times offered up Rick's life to unnamed deities in exchange for increasingly brutish rewards for himself, concluding during his junior and senior years with sincere prayers for a richly pornographic hour with Annie Hershberger, who lived in the Sorenson Trailer Park and wore hot pants like no one else. For such acts, no court of law could have or would have convicted him, true. There was, as well,

much to be said for asserting your rightful place in the world and for insisting upon the proper place of others. Winters, for example, Gary joined with neighbors Dan Bacha and Tim Underwood in grinding his brother's face into mounds of dirty snow. Summers, they jabbed Rick's fat gut with a rake handle until rosy welts bloomed on his skin in a lush, gardenlike patch. Once, making some point or other about weak chess players, Gary told some mocking Rick-story in front of Russ Rassmusson, the Tacoma Chess Club ratings-board leader and many-times Washington State Chess Champion. "You got your white sheep, you got your black sheep," said Rassmusson, shaking his head. "Then you just got sheep."

Gary could not have agreed more. Though his mother, Cindy, and father, Marion, had wondered aloud sometimes if the abuse Gary meted out was intended to punish the eldest boy for being unlovable, and though to Gary the word *unlovable* sounded foreign and hysterical, altogether inappropriate, he had never been able to restrain from noting, publicly and defiantly, a mewling lack in his older brother. This lack, this absence, was of concern not only to Gary but, he believed, to the entire community. By proximity and parasitic contact, Rick posed the threat of infection. He was a corruption, a distortion, a shrinkage, even, of the rigorous and unforgiving larger natural order.

Evidence: Rick was large-hipped, questionably muscled, possessed of soft pouty lips and luxurious brown hair; he wore thick, black horn-rims and blushed easily. When the sun slanted just so, flooding between pine branches, his cheeks sometimes turned so pink you had to wonder if he had applied a layer of rouge. He was no good with his fists, and he was grimly unresourceful—once, rather than figuring out he could go in the back yard behind a bush, he pissed his pants in the hallway when the bathroom doorknob broke and he couldn't get in. So when out of nowhere Rick would cry—and he cried all the time, a regular baby boo-hoo—Gary did not ask what was wrong. When they argued, Gary simply hit him, then watched in silence as Rick fell to the floor and spouted

outrage, too slow to fend off blows, too stupid to shut up. They shared nothing, not friends, bikes, smokes, ways to steal change from vending machines.

But now in Vietnam, Rick was going to get the top of his head blown off, and when he lay dying in the elephant grass he would think to himself how loud the flies were buzzing today and how muggy the air had grown and how dizzy he felt, and maybe even how the voices of his platoon buddies hovering overhead brought him comfort and joy. He would not think of Tacoma or his mother or father, and he would certainly not think of his younger brother, Gary, who, that night, after admiring Bobby Fischer's brilliant new move, found himself shocked at his own tears when recalling the morning's scene at the bus station, when all he could think to do was shake his brother's hand and say, "Take care of yourself."

At such moments young men sometimes feel their spirits push out against their skin, held in check only by welling goose bumps and electrified hairs. And, in fact, at that moment of good-bye inside the bus station, Gary had very nearly left his body. The station smelled of diesel and rank toilet water. The green paint of the pillars had been inscribed with racial epithets, and on the pavement lay a naked plastic doll, beheaded and dirty. Behind the Martindale family, a greasy man in a trench coat, some lunatic, kept up a feverish banging on a trash can, then lifted the lid by its broken handle and spun the lid around, as if to make it fly. Rick was already gone from them, his face a failed mask of warrior calm. Cindy and Marion bore the look of children receiving punishment for crimes they did not understand, stunned and distant, not up to acknowledging what had come to pass. A million thoughts went through Gary's head, and they all seemed to circle like bees, busy and confused, as if trucked through the night and presented in the bright morning with a new and uncharted field. Gary's hand went up, bye, then Rick's paunchy form boarded the idling bus and settled deeply into the crinkly brown seat.

That settling, viewed from below, outside, nearly caused Gary to

cry out in alarm. The window framed the image: Rick frowning and frizzy-haired in the heat; Rick's head suddenly sinking back—Gary swore he could hear the bus seat exhale—as if into the wrinkled palm of the Devil himself. The sight was so unexpected, so jolting, as to seem removed from normal space and time. It wasn't exactly a premonition that Gary experienced or even the moment of clarity he had heard visited those blessed with higher orders of intelligence and observation. It was a moment commonly experienced, yet little discussed, that lit-from-within passage of time in which you sense another you is present, another you that knows all the ways in which this moment is a beginning to some things and an end to others. Gary's other Gary knew, and thus Gary knew, that brother Rick, burying his head deeper into the seat, receding from sight bit by bit, was by this act meekly surrendering to a monstrous, hurrying machinery of which real machinery was but a part. The bus would race him to the airport, a plane would hurl him across the Pacific, then a shuddering chopper would dump him onto some flat, boring field—quick now, double quick!—so that someone, some hurrying alien stranger, could shear off the top of his head clean as an onion.

Surely Columbus, centuries ago, had experienced such a moment of awareness. Months of muscular, rude waves and empty, gaping horizons, enormous and mushrooming heavens. Sky above, water below. The cosmos growing, day by day. Then out of nowhere: a strip of island, a black smudge. *India*, Columbus reported wrongly, but that couldn't have been his most immediate or most significant thought. The smudge surely did not inspire in him the objective contemplation of his commercial and scientific idea, the verifiable end of a long train of inquisitive thought. The most immediate, and meaningful, response aboard his stinking and unhappy ship must surely have been of awe, of helpless, fearful praise in the presence of something strange and powerful. What that smudge actually was made little difference, at least at first. Any number of images would have sufficed: mermaids; a circle of jutting rocks; a

phalanx of futuristic skyscrapers; even fantastical apparitions, the guardians of the mystic Spanish universe. All would have burned into his mind with the intensity of a clapping, bubbling emotion, the unprovoked kiss of a girl you had just met, the curious, burrowing muzzle of an animal you didn't know was creeping up from behind. *I am small*, one thinks at such moments. *The story is in progress and cannot be stopped.*

That was how Gary felt on his way home. Shaken, vaguely embarrassed, he thought, If that's true . . . well, if that's how the world turns, then what difference does anything . . . what chance do I . . . ?

He threw himself into preparation for the state championship. His *Informants*, of course, but also *Chess Life*, *Schachmanty Bulletin*, *Modern Chess Openings* (5th edition), even *The Dynamic Caro-Kann Defense: A Monograph*—he searched their pages for blunders, traps, sacrifices, for secrets. He didn't want to think about Rick anymore. He didn't want to think about what was unfolding in front of his eyes.

The following week, Russ Rassmusson (Washington State Chess Champion, 1960, '62–'65, '67) phoned the Martindale household and invited Gary to be his training partner for the state championship, less than a month away. "I want you to be ready for some work," said Rassmusson. "No screwing around. Anything that's not chess, put on hold." Gary jumped at the chance.

Rassmusson appeared to be in his late thirties, compact and dark-haired, ruggedly handsome despite the small pits in his left cheek, pockmarks grown so smooth over the years they appeared to have been scooped by a tiny spoon. When he walked into the Tacoma Chess Club, heads turned, and when his fine-looking girlfriend (Rassmusson never revealed her name) strolled in occasionally to say hi, she sent electricity up everyone's spine. Regardless of the weather, Rassmusson always wore a long-sleeved, button-down shirt

and a brown sport coat, an attractive and even necessary wardrobe, Gary thought, if you spent weekends hunched over a chessboard, alongside rows of the grossly ugly and fearful and inept, who also, bafflingly and unexpectedly—they are nothing like *me*, one thinks, they are aberrations—filled those nearby rows of tables and chairs, and said hello to you, and made howlingly stupid moves with their chessmen. An instructor of English at the community college, Rassmusson smoked Dunhills from a small, narrow cardboard box and claimed not to understand that a *tenny runner* was what kids in Tacoma called a sneaker, all of which gave him an air of rigor and sophistication, especially when viewed in the context of his polite but distancing lack of interaction with the aforementioned patzers and woodpushers—"fish," in chess parlance, the bottom-dwellers blind to the tricks being played upon them by the strong players above.

The club itself was in a small building downtown. It smelled of pipe tobacco and urine, and its rows of chess sets were said to have been specially constructed by a Pakistani craftsman for the 1960 Seattle World's Fair. The club's plate glass window, notable for its professionally painted giant knight and pawn, suggested an earlier era, one in which men wore fedoras and women listened to Benny Goodman on the radio. So, too, did the giant ratings board, a green-felted expanse of plywood, bolted to the wall, on which members' names and chess ratings had been written on white cards, in Magic Marker, and affixed by thumbtacks in order of chess rating; so did the heavy chairs and tables, made of fine burnished dark wood, and the long line of framed black-and-white photos, along both walls, of deceased and still-living world chess champions. There were, as well, bulky onyx ashtrays, purchased and donated, the treasurer said, by retired master sergeant Jim "Ju-Ju" Bowen at an airbase in Guam, and a stainless-steel coffee urn that seemed forever to be percolating. The linoleum floor, installed for free by immediate past vice-president D. Dzironky ("I am Dee," he said, in thickly accented English), was a serendipitous and pleasing rust and cream chessboard pattern.

The club was a home away from home, lovingly tended by the city's small but committed cadre, and sometimes late in the evening, fresh from a victory, Gary would rub his thumb on the glass of the framed pictures, searching for resemblances between himself and the former champions, whose likenesses seemed to stare back with a severe and regal sympathy. There was inside the club an air of calm and order. On the giant ratings board you saw your name and rating, and everyone else did, too. There were no secrets, no withholdings, and you spent your evenings knowing all you needed to know about the fish sitting across from you, or about the fish grimacing by the coffee pot, or about the fish striking the plunger of the chess clock too hard.

Even a cursory glance at the giant ratings board told you something very clear and important. Russ Rassmusson had been at the top forever. His card, occupying the first spot on the board, had turned yellow with age, and it still had no creases, no thumbprints, as if never touched by human hands. Rassmusson had been profiled twice in the *Tribune*; he had once received a complimentary hand-written note from a visiting Latvian champion; he had been elected unanimously to the Washington State Chess Hall of Fame. Recently, though, not all the talk was of Rassmusson. As any visitor in the past six months would have clearly seen, the ratings board had begun to reveal something new, something equally clear and important: below Rassmusson, in the second spot but well above the depressingly but unsurprisingly vast ocean of fish ("The poor, sayeth Jesus, shall always be among you," said Rassmusson), was the bright, well-creased card of Gary Martindale, the whiz kid rising so fast some fish once asked him if he was getting the bends.

Now, Tuesday and Thursday evenings and on weekends, Gary trained with chess master Russ Rassmusson. They played five-minute chess for quarters. They reviewed mating attacks with bishop and knight versus king, contemplated rook and pawn endings, studied variations and subvariations of the King's Indian, the Sicilian, and the Ruy Lopez. "Pay attention," said Rassmusson, snapping his fin-

gers. "You've got to be *here*, not floating around." So Gary straightened in his chair. He watched Rassmusson take apart his Nimzo-Indian. Then he showed Rassmusson a gambit line in the French Defense; Rassmusson found a flaw immediately. They stayed until the buses stopped running.

Through it all, through the bitter coffee in Styrofoam cups Rassmusson brought along, Gary could not still his mind long enough to stop thinking about that awful morning at the bus station. He thought about it in roundabout ways. He thought, for example, about where the family lived. He had pulled a 3.0 GPA in high school without ever doing homework, and friends called him Brainiac (he had won the state high school chess championship his junior year), but he had no plans, and money was tight so he lived in his parents' attached garage, despite the wolf spiders in the shag rug by his bed and, especially during dry months, the bloated snakeflies that rose in the night to burrow into his mattress and deposit larvae. His parents' small home was in the south part of the city, at its farthest point, in unincorporated Tacoma. It stood on a rutted unpaved street where all the houses looked dark and in need of painting, and no one knew who was living next door.

Certainly the only time you saw couples at the threshold of their houses was when one was shoving the other out the door. Gary had witnessed such an event in the neighborhood three times. The man would be standing outside on the steps; the woman would be inside, half-exposed, grasping the knob, opening and closing the door quickly. *You give me nothing*, she'd yell, something like that. The man, silent and fuming, would turn and see Gary staring, then shout something equally loud toward the door, *bitch*, *cunt*, words to that effect, and walk quickly to the car and spray gravel into the sewage drain and go roaring down the road. The woman would then appear behind the living-room window, veins ballooning on her face, hands pressed white against the pane, shouting something Gary couldn't hear.

Why should such an event occur right in front of him three times? It defied statistics. How was it that, a few blocks down, in incorporated Tacoma, life proceeded along lines of generosity and fullness? It seemed a conspiracy of great natural forces, and, indeed, the city planners seemed to take great pains to reinforce the distinctions between incorporated and unincorporated Tacoma. Two blocks north of the Martindales, the vague and beaten unincorporated gravel road transformed into a glassy, thickly tarred street, marking entry into the incorporated sections of the city. There, a good rain made the houses shine, and the dew hung from shrubs like the sheer cloth you sometimes see on saintly women in religious paintings. The tucking in the brickwork was fresh, the windows clean, and the gutters were straight and cleared of birds' nests. Evenings, you could see middle-aged couples inspecting their marigolds and roses, bending plumply at the knees, their iced teas held at arm's length, like the tiny, pole-borne weights carried by high-wire walkers.

Invariably Cindy would say, "Look at all this." His mother would be cornering, turning the steering wheel of their rusting Buick by tiny increments, keeping her hands in a ten-and-two position. "Everything's so nice," she'd say, sharply. Then she'd stomp on the gas pedal and speed home dangerously, running stop signs sometimes, once driving a girl on a bike into the curb. Had she always acted so crazy? Gary wasn't sure. He listened intently now from the passenger seat. He analyzed. She worked in a dry cleaners and smelled of dyes and wet wool. Most of the time she spoke in the swallowed monotone of someone used to being ignored.

"All the little cornish hens nice in a row," she said, roaring down the incorporated street. "*Look* at these houses." She had a thing about cornish hens. For years she had prepared dinners of cornish hens, four whole birds on four plates, and even when the family stopped having dinners together, sometimes Gary saw her at the table, sawing with a plastic knife and fork through the carcass of a freshly cooked cornish hen. They were perfect, she'd always said:

complete, separate, an entire creature in miniature. And it was true, you felt important when you ate one, like a giant. In a few quick bites you could swallow everything, limbs and breasts and neck.

Maybe, really, that's what she wanted to do. Every day she had to drive home in the Buick, down Marigold Avenue, then onto 70th, past all that perfection. Maybe she wanted to stride down those sparkling blacktop streets and devour tree and shrub and house, and maybe the fact that she couldn't made her tempt the laws of statistics. Maybe, when he thought about it, she saw in the line between incorporated and unincorporated Tacoma evidence of a hurrying, hateful machinery. Quick now! As fast as you can go. Double quick, out, out! In old photographs Gary had seen, black-and-white shots with wavy edges, she looked pretty and dark-haired. Now she wore a clear plastic cap around her head. Her face and arms looked drained of blood. She hardly ever seemed to move her eyes.

Gary had been blessed with certain attributes, a fine head of blond hair, a pleasant face, and a profoundly compressed belly—the result of a medical condition, the intestines slowly strangling the stomach, which of course made it not a blessing, but which, in his vanity, he fancied a guarantee that he would never suffer imprisonment in sludgy layers of fat. Rick, who had not been blessed with certain attributes, had always been blubbery, even after basic training, as were so many of the fish at the chess club. The club was always full of stinky fat men, and they moved slow as dray animals. There were cripples, too, men in wheelchairs and quiet, doughy boys who didn't like the sun; and there were blotchy alcoholics and bearded men who apparently didn't bathe. Occasionally, unkempt souls in dirty pants wandered in and helped themselves to the restroom in back. Months ago, Gary had looked on with approval when Mr. Finnegan walked in, Mr. Finnegan looking like Burt Lancaster, tall and athletic, well groomed, Mr. Finnegan, who might as well have spit in

the coffee urn when he told Russ Rassmusson he was a machinist and out of work.

Now these men filled Gary with rage. Now he wanted them dead. "Quiet," he barked at a chatty newcomer. He picked up a pawn and cocked his arm, as if to hurl the chess piece at the offender's head.

"Oh, my," whispered Rassmusson. He reached into his pants pocket and much to Gary's surprise pulled out a folded Swiss army knife. "You'll be using this next if you're not careful." He quickly put the knife back into his pocket, then reached across the chessboard and placed a hand on Gary's arm. "Focus," he said, gently. "Just let them be. We all play the hand we're dealt."

Rassmusson's fingers seemed to burn into Gary's skin. He looked Rassmusson in the eye. What if, wondered Gary, the hand he had been dealt was in fact Rassmusson's hand? There were sources, traces, trajectories binding them together. He had known Rassmusson for more than a year. They were at the top, the lion and the cub. Rassmusson had *chosen* him, for Christ's sake. Rassmusson had the big talent, and maybe he did, too. In front of his friends Dan Bacha and Tim Underwood, Gary talked about all the money he had won in tournaments—local ones, to be sure, ones awarding twenty dollars for first, but officially sanctioned events, nonetheless. They called him a professional, and he never bothered to correct them. He had trophies on a bookshelf, checks to cash, and an inscribed certificate from the United States Chess Federation.

With Rassmusson as tutor, he might even win the state championship, might get his photo in the paper. At some distant point he might even *be* another Rassmusson, a man with a white-collar job, with neatly pressed clothes, a man with a presentable face and body, a fine-looking girlfriend, a sense of humor appreciated by others, a ready fund of knowledge about the world outside (coming in late one evening, Rassmusson had excused himself, saying he'd been working on the McGovern campaign). Once, Gary had smelled alcohol on Rassmusson's breath, but it had been late in the evening

and near Christmas. The man presented a wonderful picture, and that night Gary had a flying dream. In the morning, he swore he would cut back on weed and the occasional chaser of speed, and cease masturbating altogether, at least until after the state championship.

But other days, walking in the front yard, Gary passed through patches of tall wet grass and felt the heavy moisture clinging to the blades. Tropical, he concluded. He squatted and ran his fingers through the foliage. He stared long and hard into the tree line down the block. It would be scary, sure, but wouldn't it be something to walk up behind Rick in some rice paddy and stick out his hand and tap Rick on the shoulder and say Hey. Wouldn't it be something? *Hey*, he whispered, and he stuck out his hand, shoulder height, tapping air. Hey. Hey, Rick.

In the house, his father, Marion, was always watching TV. "One boy in Vietnam, one boy here," Marion would say, tipping back a Schlitz. "One fights a war, the other plays chess. What you gonna do, sir? What you gonna do?"

Marion had always done that, had always mumbled to himself like an actor memorizing a script, but his question—*what you gonna do?*—became a mantra, at least when Gary was around. The mantra was hypnotic and for that reason powerful, especially when intoned, increasingly now, in front of Gary's friend Tim Underwood, who tromped through the living room with a folding chessboard and plastic pieces, intent on finally beating Gary in an offhand game, before they went down to the Sorenson Trailer Park, where they'd drive around, smoke grass, maybe scare some kids, see if Annie Hershberger was in her hot pants and wanted a ride somewhere. "You win the state championship," said Tim Underwood, "Hershberger'll do it with you. I bet you she will. Win that title, Brainiac."

"Oh, I will," said Gary, capturing another of his friend's chess pieces. "I'm on a mission."

Marion calmly wheezed, talking loudly from a chair in the

kitchen. Cindy sat across the table, watching Walter Cronkite on their small black-and-white. "Sir, what you gonna do?" said Marion to no one in particular. "You sir, that's right, you." He stared glumly at some point on the wall.

Looking up from the chessboard (he was already up a queen and a rook), Gary saw in Marion's narrow, blinking eyes the strain of a man struggling to hold back something. A judgment, perhaps. A summing up. Marion's words took on a menacing aspect, grazing Gary's ear like scattershot. This man, his father, bunched on the chair, working swing shift at the West Coast Groceries warehouse, sleeping through the day: had he always looked so weary, so baffled?

Gary, capturing another of Tim's chessmen, shouted out to Marion. "If I ever saw a gook here," he said, "I wouldn't want to be in his shoes." Gary then shook his head for a long time, signaling what he'd do to the trespasser was too terrible to tell.

Marion, sighing, got up and walked toward the refrigerator.

"Are you getting another beer?" Cindy said, turning from the TV.

"Yes ma'am," Marion said. "I'm getting another beer."

She watched him pull out a Schlitz. "So be my guest," she said. She shook her head. "Drink yourself silly. Do whatever you want."

Marion walked back to his chair.

"You know what I'd do?" Gary said. He looked up from the chessboard at Marion, then at Cindy. "I'd beat the shit out of a gook, that's what I'd do."

Marion got up and opened the door to the utility room. He rolled the cold can across his forehead and proceeded down the stairs.

Cindy frowned. "Gary," she said, "no swear words in the house." She balled up a fist, raised her arm slightly, then splayed her fingers, as if discarding something.

There's no trash like white trash, Cindy was fond of saying. Of late, she had begun to let her tossing motion say the words for her.

When did Gary start to worry the strain was too great?

We soar, but admit to only the plainest of sins. The two parts of that sentence are as close to an answer as Gary would ever find. The airiness of the first part is forever shackled to the mutters of the second, *soar mutter, soar mutter, soar mutter,* over and over so fast and so hard the oppositions threaten to break the middle. Things began to happen quickly, and for Gary time took on a fantastical, herky-jerky quality, though one with a pattern, with a movement forward. Time became like swimming, the water thunking against you, your face shining and clean, and then you plunge, upside down, driven for reasons you cannot say toward the sea grasses and sand, down into a strong-arming current that bullies you along wherever it wants to go.

Lance Corporal Rick Martindale was killed in action October 12, 1969, outside the village of Quang Ngu, known locally for its excellent rice wine. Cindy and Marion did not weep, at least not in front of Gary or the neighbors, trying hard, Gary heard them say on the phone, to be strong for their boy still there. It was that language—*we're being strong for our boy here*—Gary remembered most clearly, that Gary understood as proof of what had happened, words tread-worn and wrong, and, because tread-worn and wrong, terrifying. Cindy brought home dinners of Kentucky Fried Chicken; Marion mowed the grass three days in a row. There was a shopping trip: a tie for Gary, dress-up black shoes for Marion. Then Gary sat quietly in the back of the Buick. Lots of cars were parked in front of the church. Marion addressed Ken or Mike, some barking kind of name, and let hands rest on his shoulder. "We lost one boy . . . ," Marion said, miserably, vaguely biblical. His face seemed to col-

lapse. "And we found the other." Cindy turned away and her shoulders began to tremble.

It was as though Marion had opened the wrong book, was quoting from the wrong pages. *What does that mean?* Gary wanted to ask, but didn't. *What are you saying?* In the car on the way back home, they all looked out the windows. Later, Cindy baked some cherry brownies—for the smell, she said; the smell always cheered her up—and Marion stood with her in the kitchen and put his arm around her waist whenever she was still.

That evening, Gary sat on his bed in the garage, stroking his new tie, which he declared to Cindy and Marion was his new favorite piece of clothing. The room had always been a mess, and now the mess and the poor light and the smell seemed an accusation. Behind the bed, on top of a dented ice cooler, were paper plates crusted with mustard and bits of pizza. Clothes lay in detergent boxes piled atop older, crushed boxes from which leaked glimpses of rags and garden gloves and mementos from his boyhood chest of drawers—a miniature stirrup, a plastic battleship, a Mickey Mouse clock, a baseball glove without webbing, objects whose original meanings, once affecting, had long ago faded away. His bookshelves, lines of planks and concrete blocks, had been stacked with dog-eared books and papers and journals with vaguely pornographic titles, *Der Schachspieler*, *64*, *The Blackmar-Deimer*, *Pawn Power*, *D'Echecs Europa #23*. In front of him was a Dutch Masters cigar box containing his chess notes and tournament games; on the cement floor, croutons, a dirty glass, a mysterious white button, a few tooth-marked plastic pens, stains of indeterminate origin and color spreading toward the door in wavy explosions, like a map of ocean patterns. His tournament chessboard lay at an angle in one corner. His polished-wood tournament chessmen, greasy and dull, were scattered in another.

So he walked from his bed to the garage-door pulley and yanked the heavy door all the way open. He wrestled the metal garbage can outside into his room. He swept up with a push broom. He

poured motor-oil cleanser onto a small space on the floor, the area in front of his bed, and he scrubbed the surface clean. He tightened the screws on a folded card table near the door and dragged it to the cleared space, then he wiped the table clean and placed his board and pieces in the exact center of the table. The board and pieces he wiped clean, too, rubbing until they gleamed, and on one corner of the table he carefully placed a new black pen, and on another he placed a new booklet of chess score sheets. He brought in a small wooden chair from the kitchen and aligned it in front of the table. The result was so perfect he found himself shy about touching the arrangement. When he finally sat down, straightening his tie, his heart was racing, and he nodded to himself, pleased at the bright, uniform chessmen and board, the clean surface of the table and floor. There was something comforting about it all, something quiet and powerful in the way the table and board and chessmen stood out from the rest of the room.

When he let his mother in—Cindy banged on the house-side door with a dinner tray of chicken—she handed him the tray and folded her arms. She nodded toward the table, toward the shiny chessmen and board. "It looks like a religious icon," she said, and Gary thought how strange it was to hear those words come from her—*religious icon*—words he had never heard her say before. Leaving, she brushed against his arm, and he nearly jumped. He hadn't felt his mother's skin in years. And more: she was of the womanly flesh he desired, though she herself did not possess that flesh. Her flesh disgusted him, and he was aware in a vague way of something he hadn't thought about in years: that he had wanted a sister, someone sexy and cooing, but also distant; a girl with breasts he wished to savor only from afar, a beautiful girl with long hair and bright lips, a narrow waist, long, slim fingers hanging a polka-dot dress from the shower rod.

Early the next day Cindy knocked on the house-side door and gave him a letter from a Pfc. Jerome Witte. "When you have a moment," she said, indicating the letter. She left for work. Pfc. Witte

had been in Rick's platoon. He painted a strange, hagiographic picture of Rick, called him a hero, let the Martindales know Rick had uttered brave and decisive final words.

*He said It don't mean nothing*, Pfc. Witte wrote. *He was as tough as they come. Then he was taken by the Lord. I loved him like a brother.* Gary imagined the scene, Rick in the tall grass, laid out flat, his glasses probably bent at some odd angle. He would have said those tough words because he would have heard them somewhere, from his buddies, or a movie or two. He wouldn't have known what was happening. *It don't mean nothing.* As if some kind of bartering had taken place. As if all reasonable offers had been considered.

Later, after Gary and Tim Underwood smoked a few joints, they drove in Tim's pickup to the Sorenson Trailer Park and slapped around some black kid until he got on his knees and said he was a nigger. They waved around their nickel bag, and they got Annie Hershberger to go for a ride, and on the bluff overlooking the Narrows Bridge, Gary tried to fuck her hard, before she was moist, and made her yell Stop it, stop it *now*. Then they all drove back to the trailer park in silence, and Gary and Tim dropped her off and waved and made plans with Annie to have a picnic together up at Snoqualmie Falls someday.

"Something wrong?" Rassmusson asked him at the club. Gary was losing every training game, and the state championship was in two days. He was missing simple combinations, easy threats.

"No," Gary said. He looked around the room, at all the patient, sweaty men, all their mulish failure. "Just tired, that's all."

"Things OK at home?"

Gary nodded. When Rassmusson had asked where the hell he had been the past week, Gary had shrugged and said Sorry. He didn't mention Rick. Rassmusson, smiling, had made a joke of it: "So buck up, grasshopper," he said. Gary smiled back.

Every moment now, it seemed, Gary thought of his brother lurching down booby-trapped jungle trails. A picture formed in his head, and the picture wouldn't go away. Rick would be lying flat on a muddy field, and Marines would be kneeling around him, saying soothing words. The top of Rick's head would be gone, only Rick wouldn't know it, and no matter how hard Gary tried to change the picture, he could see only loose meaty things bunched around his brother's skull, and not the spirits or inscriptions of a holy nature he knew must be etched onto his brother's bones.

When he played Rassmusson now, his fingers lingered over the wooden tops of the chessmen. He held up the chessmen to the light and looked closely, squinting like a jeweler.

The state championship, held over two consecutive weekends, was played in the back room of the Arby's on Pacific Avenue. It was an eight-man round robin, winner take all—the title, seventy-five dollars, and a two-foot high engraved trophy. Gary lost quickly in Round One. In Round Two, Lawrence Dorfner, the eighth seed and an awful player, beat him decisively. "Good game," Gary kept saying afterwards. "Good game." When Rassmusson walked up, inquiring, they chatted a while, then all three, Gary, Rassmusson, and Dorfner, moved the conversation to the tournament director's table and stood looking at the other game results, on large sheets taped to the wall. Rassmusson did some calculating, and Dorfner nodded and wondered aloud about who would make the best matchups for Round Three.

There was a pause. Gary said, "My brother just got killed in 'Nam. I couldn't concentrate."

Rassmusson and Dorfner looked at him blankly. Rassmusson then opened his mouth as if to speak, but only frowned. At the bus stop later, Gary saw two men in leather jackets and black pants. They were boisterous, swinging their arms expansively; one was swear-

ing. It was chilly and drizzling, and their hair was plastered like helmets to their skulls. The men seemed far away as the moon, and for a moment nothing made sense; there was no sound, no substance to the bench he was sitting on, no smell, and all Gary could do was rise and address them. *Motherfucking cocksuckers fuck off go fuck yourself buttfucks.* He said the words so loud he closed his eyes and felt the spit run down his chin, and he stuck out his face. One of the men punched him hard, then they pushed him around some before walking away.

By Sunday of the first weekend, the halfway point, Gary was 0-4, no wins and four losses. Rassmusson approached him. He stuck a Dunhill into his mouth.

"What'dya say?" said Rassmusson, lighting up. "Nasty bruise you got there."

"We still got next weekend," said Gary. "I'm just having trouble concentrating."

Rassmusson smiled. He talked about cabins up by Snoqualmie Falls, about how beautiful the scenery was, how relaxing the pines. It was all the rainfall in the woods, he said. The entire region was in what the botanists called a rainshadow. "Good for what ails you," he said, and he put his hand on Gary's shoulder. He told Gary he was going up there tomorrow night with his girlfriend. Just to look around, relax. There was a two-bedroom cabin. So if Gary was free . . .

Gary shrugged. "I should bone up on my rook and pawn endings."

"A trip to the Falls," said Rassmusson. "It's on me. All expenses paid. It'd do you good to get away for a while. There shouldn't be too much rain. Plus you'll get to meet my lady. What do you say?"

Gary stuck his hands in his pocket. "OK," he said, sounding less enthusiastic than he intended. He pictured himself throwing his arms around Rassmusson. Now, he wanted to say. Let's go now.

The next morning they left in Rassmusson's car, headed to the cabin near Snoqualmie Falls. Rassmusson's girlfriend introduced herself as Tina. She was a pretty brunette. Her voice was surprisingly loud; she had a tinkling laugh. She, too, was an instructor—"just artsy fartsy stuff," she said—at the community college.

The air turned cold almost immediately, and Tina, fiddling up front with the heater, said she felt like an Arctic explorer. Gary agreed. He pulled up the collar of his jean jacket. It had been a wet fall in Tacoma, and moss was growing thick as honeycomb, creeping in wide sheets under everyone's shingles. Even in incorporated Tacoma, the earth stuck to your shoes wherever you walked, and for weeks on end you'd track wet clumps onto the linoleum. The leaves were everywhere, cars left thin trails of mealy debris on the roadways, and sometimes drivers couldn't stop because their tire treads were clogged. The car was like an icebreaker, said Tina, and they were sluicing through the icecaps. The *H.M.S. Bullpucky*, said Rassmusson, and Tina punched him lightly on the shoulder.

But it was true, driving out of the city, ghostly Mount Rainier floating high in the sky, soggy branches and earth and leaves everywhere, giant pines around you, there was a sense of racing toward something, not away, and the more all the familiar objects and machines and landscape fell away, the more you felt like driving farther. Up they went, the radio on loud, Gary in the back seat munching on tuna sandwiches Tina had brought. They passed giant white puffballs splitting open along the roadside, spores floating in the wind. They smelled basswood, saw fields of white, glowing birches. They roared past moccasin flowers, a swarm of moths, stands of pine and bigtooth aspen, a sheet of drowned squirrel corn on the pavement.

At the Falls, they stared for a long time at the thin white thread of water plunging dramatically from the rock face. "Nice," Gary said,

happily. "Nice." The pines were straight and tall, and Gary shivered in the forest shade. Rassmusson pulled out a pocket flask and took a few swigs. Tina gave him a disapproving look. "My keeper," he said, and they giggled and hugged each other. At Tina's request, they all played cards on a visitors' center bench, then they each went for a long, solitary walk in the mushy woods. At the Falls Restaurant, they lingered in the souvenir shop. Rassmusson and Tina held hands. Rassmusson held up a postcard showing a dog smiling at a fire hydrant. "Now who would buy something like that?" he asked, and Gary said he didn't know, but it sure wouldn't be him. "Give me a blank card, any day," Rassmusson added. "Just a white sheet of paper."

That evening they drove to the town of Snoqualmie, where they ate cheeseburgers and fries, and on the way back Rassmusson made Tina squeal by claiming to close his eyes on the straightaways. Then Gary helped Rassmusson build a crackling fire in the living room fireplace. When Tina pulled out a bottle of red wine from her overnight bag, Rassmusson, laughing, excused himself and returned with two more bottles. "Russ," said Tina, darkly. "A jug o' wine, a loaf o' bread, and thou," said Rassmusson. They kissed.

It was warm by the fireplace, and Gary removed his jacket. "Aren't you hot?" he asked, noting Rassmusson's long-sleeved shirt. Rassmusson shook his head. "What's hot," he said, "is me beating you in speed chess." He ran back to the bedroom and returned with a chessboard and chess clock. Tina rolled her eyes and excused herself—she'd read in the bedroom, she said—so Rassmusson, winking, set up the chessmen and play began. He poured himself a glass of wine, to the rim, then a smaller one for Gary. Rassmusson was expansive, more solemn as well as funnier than Gary had ever seen him. He was talking nonstop and playing brilliant speed chess, all at the same time.

"You're going through a rough time," said Rassmusson, pouring them both another glass. "I won't lecture. I'll just say this. A little chess is like your own little world." He captured one of Gary's chessmen, then started chanting:

*Burzy Wurzy was a bear,*
*Burzy Wurzy had no hair.*
*Burzy Wurzy wasn't very burzy,*
*Wurzy?*

Gary frowned. "Those lyrics right?"

"It's just me and you here," said Rassmusson. "Who cares how all the fish want to sing it? Checkmate in three, by the way."

They started laughing, it was great fun, and the time passed agreeably, speed chess game after speed chess game, glass after glass. Rassmusson, calling himself a klutz, licked up some wine that had spilled onto his hand.

"Oh, my," Rassmusson said. Gary had launched an attack.

"Got you now," said Gary, sending his chessmen rampaging around Rassmusson's king.

Rassmusson shook his head. "I think you're painting your dick red and calling it a charlie pole."

What he said made Gary shift in his seat, but he laughed anyway. He was shaking a little, he felt so good.

"Chess and war," said Rassmusson. He opened another bottle. "Like two peas in a pod. Neither one makes a whole lot of sense. But I guess that's not news, is it?" He seemed about to say something more when Tina reappeared, looking spectacular in a red sweater and slacks.

"Russ," she said, "I forgot to tell you. I got a letter from a magazine last week. A rejection, but they said they wanted to see more stuff."

"She's a poet," said Rassmusson. He raised his hand over the chessboard, signaling they should stop the game.

"Don't make it sound so dramatic," she said. She turned to Gary. "I write poems and sometimes they get published. Sometimes not." She reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. "Here's my latest," she said, and she waved it near Rassmusson's lips.

"Let's hear," Rassmusson said. He poured himself another glass.

"I'm a little shy," she said, smiling at Gary.

"I like poetry," Gary lied. "I want to hear."

So she sat in a chair and cleared her throat. *My fingers are dark lies,* she read. Her voice was shaky.

"Sounds persnickety," said Rassmusson. He was drinking straight from the bottle. "Thumbs don't count?"

"Let me finish. You can't complain before the last line."

"I'm not complaining. I'm just pointing something out."

"Are you on the third bottle?" she asked.

"Depends. So what's the lie?"

"There are several of them."

"Several lies," he said, pleasantly. He turned to Gary. "Imagine that."

"Sweetie, I don't want to read the rest," she said, standing. She put the paper back into her pocket and sat down next to Rassmusson. "I'm interrupting your game." She draped her arm around his neck.

"The trouble is . . . ," Rassmusson said, pouring Tina a glass. "Well, here's the trouble. There are no actual lies in chess, and there's not the opposite, either. It's just a game, isn't it?" He took a swig from the bottle. "Now think about that. No actual content. That's really something to think about, isn't it?"

He pointed his finger at Gary and wagged it. "In real life," he said, "some facts are truer than others. Facts, my friend, are not all created equal. Some put a fist in your gut and set up shop right about here." He struck his chest, hard. "You know what I'm talking about, Gary? Well, I sure do. I got some facts for you."

"Sweetie," said Tina, quickly. Gary shook his head. He felt dizzy.

"OK," said Rassmusson. "OK. I'm just saying sometimes life treats you ugly, and sometimes you can just let it pass right through you. Like it's nothing."

"So what are you saying?" Gary asked. His voice was sharper than he had intended. "What are you talking about?"

Rassmusson stood, a bit unsteady, and, turning his free hand into a scythe, swept aside some chessmen on the board. The action seemed consciously theatrical, as if rehearsed, but Rassmusson's face was hard and red. Gary's shoulders tensed up. "I'm saying chess

don't mean shit," said Rassmusson, "I put in twenty years on a *game*, that's what I mean. You might as well go spit into the Grand Canyon. Doesn't make a goddamn bit of difference."

Gary looked away.

"Russ, please," said Tina. Gary wasn't sure what happened next. There was a thud. He heard Tina cry out, and when he looked up he saw Rassmusson had lost his balance and fallen against the coffee table. Rassmusson was on the floor, clutching his head and rocking.

Gary leaped up to get a towel from the bathroom. "No," Tina shouted. She pointed to the front door. "Go out to the car. There's a first-aid kit in the trunk." Gary grabbed the keys on the counter and ran out.

When he returned with the small, plastic box, Rassmusson and Tina were squatting in front of the fireplace. It was dark—the fire was barely flickering—but Gary, stepping quietly, saw a rumpled quilt next to them. Rassmusson's shirt had been removed. Tina was dabbing his face with a sleeve. "Here's the kit," Gary said. He saw dark lines on Rassmusson's arms, then on his chest and stomach. He squinted. Rassmusson's eyes were closed; he was still clutching his head. Rassmusson's body was nearly hairless, and on the man's chest Gary saw the outline of a knight, then a bishop. Tina was rubbing one of the knights, by his left nipple. There was the outline of a pawn on Rassmusson's shoulder. Gary saw two rooks on his right forearm. His shoulders and arms appeared to have the outlines of pawns and kings.

"Russ," said Tina. Rassmusson opened his eyes. She grabbed the quilt and placed it like a curtain in front of him.

"Skin etchings," said Rassmusson. There was a dark patch on his scalp. He looked straight at Gary. "Like tattoos, OK?" He sounded angry. "That OK with you? You ever see Michelangelo's men in stone? I guess you wouldn't have." He let the quilt drop, then pointed at the ragged dark lines crisscrossing his stomach. "See this stuff?" The top of one of the knights seemed to be bleeding. "A Rassmusson original. That's a whole lot of nothing trying to get *out*, my friend."

Tina walked over to Gary, a never-mind smile on her face. "Time to turn in," she said in a sing-songy voice. "Thank you for getting the kit. It's got some iodine in it." Drawing close, she whispered: "Sometimes he gets carried away." Gary handed her the box, and without a word walked to his room and closed the door. He stood a moment, listening, then quietly locked it. He heard noises all night—whispered conversations, some thumps, a scraping like sandpaper. A heavy bottle clinked against something metallic. In the morning, he heard snores coming from their room. Underwear lay bunched outside their door. Wine in a drying red pool covered part of the floor where Rassmusson had fallen.

On the drive back, Tina slept in the front seat, Gary in the back. They stopped for a quick breakfast at the Great Northwoods Café, eggs and toast, lots of coffee, but mostly they were quiet, pointing every now and then at drivers in cowboy hats, once passing a solitary cow in a field. The silence was unbearable for Gary. It was as though time ceased, as though everything remained in a perpetual present tense, until someone spoke. Rassmusson felt it, too, Gary thought, and Tina. Pulling up to the Martindale driveway, Rassmusson got out and helped Gary rummage through the trunk for his jacket. Gary thanked him for the trip.

"I hope I didn't scare you away," Rassmusson said.

"That's OK," Gary answered. Rassmusson surprised him by shaking his hand.

"I'm dropping out of the tournament," said Gary.

Rassmusson looked at the ground for a moment. "Well," he said. "I'm sorry to hear that. I really am." He knew what Gary was saying. He knew they probably wouldn't ever see each other again. Then he was back in the car, waving bye with Tina, and they were gone, turning left on Marigold, toward incorporated Tacoma.

Inside the garage, Gary heard Cindy and Marion in the living room, watching TV. It was almost noon. Through the wall he heard the hollow sound of Cindy placing a coffee cup on the table, the squeaks of the couch when Marion sat. He listened for a while,

then picked up the board and chessmen from the card table and shoved it on top of a case of soft drinks. Some of the pawns fell off, and he left them where they lay. He dragged the card table back to a dark corner, pushing it against the cleaning materials and air filters. He walked back to his bed, then heard *The Dick Van Dyke Show* come on. He stood, brushed off his pants, and walked through the door, past the kitchen, then into the living room, where Cindy and Marion looked up and smiled.

We are born in a caul of sin, and the world is a wicked place. But if you had said that to Gary then, he would have called you an asshole. The words were no revelation. They were not news. No clutter: that's what he was thinking. Back in his room, where the table and chessboard had been, was now a clear, empty space. It remained clear and empty that night, and the following night, and into the weekend and longer. Sometimes thin ropes of light streamed into the area from the top of the garage door or from the rafters, and sometimes he saw the dust illuminated—like floating planets, he'd think, like tiny aquatic life, and then he'd smother the thought, he'd shake his head at the fancy metaphors, the tricks. Still, he marked off the space from the rest of the room. He made sure it was swept clean. He assigned it secret names, Rickaroo, Rickereeni, Ricko-Micko, Ricky Ticky Tick-Tock, silly words he had never thought of saying before. Later, in a few weeks, he'd be a little high, nothing serious, and when he was ready, when it was quiet outside, he'd stick his hand into all that space, into a million miles of nothing, and he'd make a little tapping motion. He'd stick out his hand, shoulder high, into all that burning, wicked nothing, and he'd give a curt nod and say Hey. Hey, man. Hey.