The Departure Lounge
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Stories and a Novella

PAUL EGGERS

THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS • COLUMBUS
For Ellen,
as always
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EARLY VERSIONS of these stories appear in the following periodicals: “This Way, Uncle, into the Palace” in *The Missouri Review*; “Monsieur le Genius” in *Agni*; “Won’t You Stay, Please?” in *Prairie Schooner*; “Hey” in *The Santa Monica Review*; and “What’s Yours, What’s Mine” in *New England Review*.
THE JOKE was that Bujumbura’s only supermarket, the Supermarché de Liberté, ran on the Potemkin Village model: the shelves were full, but only because the rest of the city got the bare bones. In actual fact you could walk through the most desolate neighborhoods and still find vegetable hawkers setting up shop in the alleyways, and lines of gleaming white Mercedes streamed into the interior, even far up Route 1, which emptied into a scrubland valley in neighboring Rwanda. Yet at the American Club the joke persisted. We were all heady, I think, from living in a country at the end of the earth. Airgrams from home asked, “Now where in Africa did you say Burundi was?” and denuding the place over beers helped us maintain equilibrium: the bleaker the country, the brighter our prospects. We were, in our public capacities, like old-fashioned gift bearers, emissaries from a rich and distant realm. We wanted our gifts to be taken.

I had no official embassy or relief-agency connections, but what I had to give was certainly the rarest gift. I was the only chess master, past or present, ever to set foot in Burundi, a fact I used to spread the game’s dry magic across the entire country. Chess was about making connections, about seeing patterns; it was about turning disadvantages into advantages—all
things the country was eager to learn. My business cards, which I ordered from a Belgian print shop near the national stadium, read “Monsieur le Genius, Grandmaster.” It was a ridiculous and even infantile title. I was no genius and no grandmaster, though my recently acquired national master’s rating was enough to force grandmasters into long, deep thinks. I regularly played in tournaments back in Seattle, and, thanks to a particularly good performance in the 1992 Washington State Championship, I had finally seen my name mentioned in Inside Chess. The issue appeared days before I left for Africa for some relief. My marriage had just fallen apart. My stultifying computer job had dried up and vanished.

But I could perform a dazzling parlor trick. I could play an entire game of chess blindfolded, calling out my moves without sight of the board. Though the same could be said of at least a dozen other chess addicts back in Seattle, my blindfold games had within weeks of my arrival in Burundi created a stir among the locals. They had never seen anything like it. Africans in general cannot read white people, and to the inhabitants of Deepest Darkest—our private term for all the French-speaking massacre countries—a muzungu such as myself, an Anglophone at that, was a blank page from a very mysterious book indeed. So I filled in the page for them. The locals took my title seriously, and since none of them could play chess worth a damn, I was for all practical purposes what I claimed. On the street, strangers sometimes greeted me with a solemn “Ça va, Monseur le Genius.” In reply, I’d make a cage with my fingers and put the cage to the sides of my head, like a seer receiving a vision.

My chess sponsor, my patron, was Jacques Ntroyomewa, the Tutsi proprietor of a mail-expediting service. His hooded eyes gave him a sleepy aspect, and he possessed perfect African ears, two small seashells cupping a round, close-cropped skull. He was sharp, and, more important, he was a great fan of chess. He had been schooled in Nigeria, which boasted several players on the international chess circuit, and he often remarked to me, in my capacity as chess genius, how glorious it would be if tiny Burundi could produce its own international-caliber players. “Glor-eus,” he’d say, making the word sound bloody, and when he did I encouraged his enthusiasm. Glor-eus. That was how it felt. The locals called to me out of bus windows. The ambassador to Ghana invited me to dinner. Once, a woman in a tight purple dress knocked on my door and had me sleep with her.

So Jacques and I struck a bargain that served us both well, at least at first. He provided me with a modest salary to coach promising players and conduct chess clinics and exhibitions throughout the country. In
return, I was to help him put Burundi on the map. I was to help him give the country something to be proud of. “Especially now,” he added solemnly. I knew what he meant. It was 1993, and the airwaves were once again electric with Hutu Power speeches; convoys of Tutsi troops had been trucking into the Hutu countryside for weeks.

It was a tidy and beneficial arrangement until Jacques finally concluded I was not a true chess genius. He began to scrutinize my results. In less than a month I had blundered away an easily won game to some functionary smoking a corn cob pipe, and a Russian mechanical engineer at the university had held me to a draw in an offhand game of speed chess. “How is this possible?” Jacques asked. “Bobby, are you ill?” I said I was. I claimed that I hadn’t slept well for days, that I had been vomiting. But then, on a miserable rainy evening, I missed a simple checkmate against Jacques. I still beat him handily, but afterward he had me reconstruct our game move for move until we came to my mistake. “I have a stomach ailment,” I said, putting a hand to my gut and scowling. “I’m not at my best.”

Jacques shook his head. He looked heartbroken. I had been his Michelangelo of the chessboard, his artist touched by God, his hope. When we first met, he even thought I might be Bobby Fischer traveling incognito. I did not discourage his error. Fischer had just defeated Spassky in their rematch in Yugoslavia, and his whereabouts were unknown. Photos from the match showed Fischer rumpled and balding; he had high cheekbones and, set back deep under a thick brow, a pair of gunsliet eyes, which lent to his expression a certain leonine aspect. We could have been twins. “My name’s Robert Wender,” I told Jacques, but I let him call me Bobby.

Jacques now drained his bottle of Primus and looked at the ceiling. He may have sighed. “We are bereft,” he said at last. His statement alarmed me. I had always thought of his voice as African, spittle-soaked, vaguely promiscuous, but “bereft” seemed to rise from his gut, parched and ashen.

“No, we’re not,” I said. “We’re good. You and me, we’re a team.” He made no response. He continued to stare at the ceiling.

“I got the big talent, Jacques,” I said. “If you’re questioning that, I mean.” I tapped my forehead. “Do you want me to play you blindfolded again?”

He leaned back in his chair and rested his hands on his paunch. “We are bereft,” he said quietly. “We Tutsi. We Hutu. Not you mzungus. The future is not so much a question for you, is it?”

I couldn’t argue the point, but I was happy to see the conversa-
tion head in a different direction. The rest of the evening we finished off three more big bottles of Primus and ate Laughing Cow cheese on saltines. The next morning I stopped by his storefront business to make arrangements for an upcoming chess exhibition. I heard him talking loudly on the phone in his office. “Yes,” he shouted, in English. The words carried through the thin walls. “That is whom I wish to employ. Yes. A master of chess. Do you understand? Someone who knows. A genius of chess. Someone extraordinary. Not like this imposter here.”

I left the building as quietly as possible, my head spinning, but Jacques spotted me exiting by the front door. He waved me up to his office, where we spent a few minutes chit-chatting before the conversation turned. He declared that we had some business to discuss. There had to be a safety net, he said, in case I fell sick again, in case my ailments returned. He had to imagine a future without me. “So I have made a decision,” Jacques said. “I am flying in an understudy for you shortly. An understudy. You can train this person. You understand? In case your sickness returns. Do you understand?”

I understood: he meant to abandon me. The question was, could he? No grandmaster would leave the tournament circuit to work for peanuts in Central Africa. And African masters were heroes in their own countries. Where would he find one to live in Burundi?


“Understudy,” Jacques said. “I know what word I am using.”

He looked at me hard, narrowing his eyes—the glare he reserved for underlings. He had never used that expression on me before. With the sun streaking in through the window slats behind him, his whole body seemed to glow. I tried to summon the peculiar sense of transport I sometimes felt in his presence—as if, lost in our own thoughts, we mimicked a tableau from another century: the African stroking the trinkets placed at his feet, the Crown’s minister solemn and watchful, nearby. But I could not summon the image now. My thoughts grew dark, a chorus of taunts. What if he had truly found someone? I had burned too many bridges in the U.S. I would have nothing—no money, no employment documentation. Nothing. I would be bereft.

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A few days later I was sitting at an empty desk in Jacques’s business when Gerard sidled up. Despite Gerard’s advanced age—his stubble came up gray and pebbly—he worked as Jacques’s “boy,” a term that lost its haughtiness when Africans used it (he slept in a bayerie, a small out-
building attached to the storeroom). Gerard was a refugee and a cripple. He had crossed the border from Zaire, he once told me, after President Mobutu taxed his left arm and took the right as payment. In its place was a clacking prosthetic, a ghastly salmon-colored reject made in Belgium. Every now and then I caught him whittling old Zaireois political slogans into the plastic forearm.

“Mr. Jacques is calling for you,” he said in passable English. I didn’t look up. First I had been “Monsieur le Genius” to Gerard, then a clipped “Monsieur,” and recently, no doubt echoing Jacques’s displeasure, a contemptuous “you.” But until now I’d had no desire to abuse Gerard. He hovered, then slowly raised his bad arm and pointed his finger-hook to the top of the stairs, toward Jacques’s office. He could not bend the elbow, so the arm stuck straight out in a rude gesture of banishment: the white man ordered from his chair.

I jabbed a finger into my documents. “I’ll be up in two shakes,” I said, then went back to scheduling my chess-exhibition tour dates: a day in Kayanza, perhaps another day in Ngozi, then north up Route 1. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Gerard stare dumbly at my finger. He gave no indication of understanding. The Americanism was unfair, but I wanted him to imagine returning empty-handed up the stairs to his employer’s office. I let him stand there, frowning and confused, until he lowered his limb.

“Okay,” I said, “Monsieur le Genius will see Mr. Jacques now.” Gerard’s expression brightened. I slammed my tour book closed, and together we climbed the narrow stairs, Gerard, my herald, scraping his arm along the banister with every step.

The building was dim and poorly ventilated. The second floor, in particular, smelled of the straw mixed into the brick exterior, and after heavy rains the walls turned sweet and pungent. Jacques’s office, down the hallway, always smelled wet, though it was brightly lit by columns of sunlight.

I prepared myself for bad news, for an argument I couldn’t win. If Jacques had truly found a powerful chess master, I had no way of forcing an eleventh-hour stay of dismissal. For days, I had been reviewing all I knew about Jacques, but nothing suggested itself as a fact I could use. He was buttoned down, presenting himself as a businessman of simple and agreeable tastes. He kept his gray safari suits immaculate, open at the collar, and he used Florida Blackening Cream to cover up the pinkish irritation left on his neck by his necklace’s metal amulet. He favored Marlboro over Galoise, local Primus beer over Johnnie Walker, and ’70s disco over dance tunes from Zaire; he thought turbaned Sikhs screamingly funny, and he distrusted the national bank, preferring to bind rolls
of bills with rubber bands and stuff them into his socks. He led a life of inconsequence and routine. Once a month he treated his family to dinner at the Cirque Nautique, where Belgian tourists slathered mayonnaise onto their French fries and watched the hippos yawn out in the mudflats. Every day, he smoked two Legionnaire cigars and watched a bland hour of Channel 1 TV.

Even his rebellions seemed a form of sighing. In the dry season he’d chase off his gardener and strip down to the waist, happily filling plastic buckets with tiny green plantains from his enormous back yard. Invigorated, he’d announce to his wife and children that they were oppressing him, then drive down to the Novotel and pick up a prostitute. All the wealthy Burundians I knew had depressingly similar lapses in public behavior. I think the invisibility of the country—it was only a pinprick in my atlas—lent itself to loud and resentful trumpeting. Even fellow Africans, mostly businessmen stopping over on flights to Europe, stared quizzically at the large Bienvenu à Bujumbura sign at the airport.

But thinking along such lines got me nowhere. Jacques’s ambitions for the chess future of the country were an extension of his private ambitions. He wished to be taken seriously. He wished to walk down the grand avenues of New York or Paris or London and have it known that he was from Burundi. He wanted to be the man who made a colossus out of a pinprick, and if someone else could assist him better, then my presence was of no importance. I might as well have been Gerard.

Jacques sat frowning at his desk, and after I knocked he motioned for me to sit. He waved Gerard away, then returned to his oversized ledger book, letting his fingers dawdle on a calculator pad. Despite the high ceilings his office seemed cramped. Its walls had been painted hospital green, and streamers of dust and hair rode the rough plaster, trembling at regular intervals from the churning ceiling fan. Over the water-closet door hung a length of butcher paper strung with colored cardboard letters, “J. Notroyemawa, Burundi Import/Export Express,” a childish whisper of the imposing wooden sign hanging over the double doors of the streetside entrance.

He looked at me. “I have a task for you, Bobby,” he said. “A trip to the airport. Your understudy is due to arrive.”

“Can’t someone else pick him up?” I asked. But I knew there was no one else. It was understood that Gerard could not be trusted to ferry a new arrival to the office. He would cough messily or clank his arm, a bad first impression.

Jacques cleared his throat. “He is actually a she,” he said. “In point of fact.”
My surprise must have been evident, for Jacques smiled broadly and leaned forward. “A movie-star American girl,” he said, which meant nothing, since he called all American women movie stars. He pulled an index card from his shirt pocket, studied it, then announced her name—Annie Polgar. “Ah-nee,” he said, as if she were Chinese. “I have been told she is a beautiful brunette,” he said. Then he paused dramatically. “A beautiful woman chess master. I have never witnessed such a thing! Can you imagine?”

I looked stupidly around the room. “Well,” I said, “this Annie Polgar is coming at a bad time.”

Jacques drew himself up in his chair and looked at me crossly. “There is no better time,” he said. “Some Hutu students”—he waved his hand vaguely in the direction of the university, miles down the road—“all good chess players—”

“Right. I heard the police questioned them.”

He regarded me coolly. “Maybe police. Maybe security. It is impossible to say.”

“But nothing happened, right? That’s what I heard.”

Jacques showed exasperation by clucking. “Do you think such things are chronic with us?” he asked. He shook his head. “This is not normal. There is a beginning to troubles, and there is an end. I do not know which this is.”

“I apologize,” I said. I raised my hands and showed Jacques two palms, a conciliatory gesture. “I didn’t mean to imply anything. I just thought . . . .” I shrugged and stopped talking. The truth was that I did think such things were chronic.

“So time may be important,” he said.

“I understand,” I said, nodding vigorously. “But I’m making out my exhibition schedule now. Really, I’m swamped.”

Jacques smiled. “How long, oh genius, to figure out an exhibition schedule?”

“I’ve had lots of cancellations,” I said. “The Catholic school only scrounged up twenty players.”

He laughed. “Bobby, I will buy you twenty players. Just go pick her up.”

I laughed as well, louder than the joking warranted, but I didn’t want Jacques to think me mulish. I was in fact turning something over in my mind. I had never heard of an Annie Polgar. For that matter, I had never heard of a white female chess master in all of Africa. It didn’t seem possible.

“Hey,” I said then. “Buy me twenty players and I’ll drive her around
all day.” That settled things. We showed teeth and nodded. Jacques looked me up and down, then reached into his desk and tossed me the keys to his old orange Citroën.

“Watch for militia,” he said. “And for God’s sake,” he added, “chat up the place. Make her feel welcome.”

So I drove out of the city. Route 5, heading north toward the airport, is a scenic journey, and in the spaces between palm and plantain trees one can catch glimpses of enormous Lake Tanganyika. The road descends quickly, and through some confluence of the rolling hills and haze, the lake appears to tilt toward the viewer, as if the entire body of water is about to be upended. I refused to look at it. I veered to the center of the road, narrowly avoiding bicyclists ferrying loads of firewood; I startled two women carrying cisterns on their heads, honking my horn and whistling at them; I passed a Primus beer truck crawling around a curve; I feathered the accelerator, then closed my eyes on a straightaway and floored it for five exhilarating seconds, in total darkness. I began to feel powerful again.

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A good game of chess is hard to find, but there is no end to the number of bad ones. Nowadays most of the world has access to Staunton-design tournament sets with weighted pieces, and even in the dark, beer-stained shophouses of Kinshasa one can find tournament-quality vinyl roll-up chessboards with green and buff teacup-sized squares; equipment no longer provides a visual clue to the strength of your opponent. For the real player—the aficionado, the master, the addict—games against casual players are not even worth recording. They are dead time, their patterns a form of travel: brief and dizzy arrivals, abrupt leave-takings.

Minutes into the game, even seconds, you see your opponent stare at the queenside when he should be looking at the kingside. Or he clutches his king by its cross and not its stem (there is etiquette involved, after all). Or, doggedly, he lets his gaze linger on a certain square, his eyes no longer mobile or wary. He becomes agitated. He’s sure he has you by the fourth move. He thinks he sees something, even when the important pieces are still at slumber and only the faintest outline of the decisive moment has been suggested. You realize that he has not considered the possibilities or, worse, that he thinks he has considered all of them.

For the real player such games are more ritual than struggle, and with each bad game the ritual grows meaner, more like dumb show, tedious and empty. You politely checkmate your opponent, without fanfare or
contempt, but you’re already miles away. Perhaps tomorrow, you think: perhaps in some near future you will find another real player, an echo of yourself, a necessary someone. You picture your hand circling the board, your fingers coiled and questioning; you picture your opponent’s mirroring hand, and together your hands, yours and its mirror, grasp what chessmen they should, and when they should, and precisely. They move a knight or a bishop to exactly the right square, even when time is short, when the flag on the chess clock is teetering, and together your hands swoop down, faster and faster, falling back in release, hovering, then landing again on exactly the right square. One after the other, your hands dive and pause. Together they create a ferocious rhythm, a dizzying and beautiful dance, and sometimes your hands, your own and their mirror, seem no longer to belong to either of you, and at such moments the entire world, all its dark channels of fact, its deep and watery patterns, seem to open themselves to your touch.

I wish I could say this is how I ended up in Burundi. I wish I could say I was the wandering minstrel, the poet-of-the-road seeking glimpses of angels. At one time, years ago, I thought I might be such a person. I carried thousands of chess moves in my head, and I carried them with such care I could not forget them, even decades later. Certain sequences of moves retained the power to thrill me. Certain sequences of moves still made my hands tremble, and sometimes, unbidden, I felt my entire body shaking, eager and burning, as if I were waiting on a wedding bed.

That excitement never left me, not even when I arrived in Bujumbura hung over and slick with sweat. I first set foot in the capital by stumbling out the back of a crowded tourist truck. We had crossed over that morning from Zaire; the truck had canvas webbing behind the cab and wooden benches along the sides, like a troop carrier, and my Belgian truck mates all wore matching shorts and hiking boots. We were stopping for lunch in the city center. I was in bad shape. My throat was swollen, and my loafers were splitting open and lumpy with pebbles. I carried an alligator-hide briefcase covered with chess stickers. Pressed deep into my pockets was enough hashish to last a couple of months. I was feverish, I think, not really sure what country we were in, and all but broke. It wasn’t until we began lurching down Bujumbura’s main boulevard that I became aware we were in a city.

Early that morning, before the sun burned off the mist, I had been drifting in and out of sleep, and each time I opened my eyes I was startled to find myself in darkness, surrounded by impassive faces. We had just passed a checkpoint near the border. We were on a dirt road
in the middle of nowhere, and I had no sense of time. Behind me, the
day seemed unnaturally bright. I looked out the back, through what I
saw as an enormous, arching hole, and watched a swirling pinkish light
drift up and away. It was red dust kicked up from the tires, mountains of
it—I think I knew this, I think I understood—but when the pinkish light
rose to the top of a line of trees and mingled with leaves and branches,
all I could think was that an alien light was blooming. I thought this. I
thought exactly this, but at the back of my mind I posed a question. I
wondered if what I was seeing was joyous or not. It was such a simple
question, yet I could not answer it. I began to cry.

My truck mates all stared past me, and once we reached Bujumbura
they began carrying on respectful conversations among themselves.
When we finally stopped for good they stared at the floor bed, waiting
for the African driver to pull down the latch in back. “Where are we?”
I said to no one. “Can you tell me, please?”

The Belgians quietly piled out. They stepped over my legs and excused
themselves, and when I was alone I heard the driver speak. “Mister,” he
said to me. “Oh mister. Mister, please.” He climbed aboard and put my
briefcase into my hand and folded my fingers around the handle. He
lifted me by the armpits and helped me out of the truck. There was a
Greek restaurant across the street; tables had been set up on an outside
deck. The driver helped me to a table. The menu was all in French, but
I recognized moussaka, which I had eaten before. I got hold of myself.
I waved the driver off and began to feel at ease again. I smelled diesel;
a motorcycle roared past. I was once again properly situated: the table
had a crisp white tablecloth, and a plastic flower stuck out the top of a
decorative bottle. A black waiter gave me his full attention.

I lifted my briefcase onto the table and made a loud show of snapping
it open. When I held up my roll-up tournament chessboard, cinched with
rubber bands, its green and buff squares announced my presence. Within
minutes I heard a voice two tables down: “Are you a chess player?” This
was my introduction to Jacques. When he ate he speared his food with
sharp thrusts, then jerked his head down to snatch it from the tines.
He reminded me of a monstrous pecking bird, and I was weighing my
options, wondering whether I should change tables, move closer to some
Europeans, when he said, “I love chess. It is my passion.”

I withdrew a wooden Jerger chess clock, a flashy, old-fashioned one
with two clock faces like the twin portholes of a tiny ship. He nodded in
appreciation. “How long are you here?” he asked.

“Depends what there is to stay for,” I said. It sounded tough yet sen-
timental, and therefore reassuring.
He considered this, then took a sip of coffee. “Are you good? A professional?” He nodded toward my chess clock.

I gave him a devastatingly modest smile. “Well,” I said, “I better be if I’m going to carry a chess clock around. I better be really good.”

He stood and brought his plate over. We played a few quick games, and I defeated him easily. He seemed pleased. Then he asked me what I was hoping to hear.

“Only if you’re absolutely sure,” I said. “Only if it’s convenient. I’d just need a few francs for expenses. But I’d be more than happy to tutor you. Really.” We shook on it. A few weeks later Jacques proposed our arrangement.

At the airport, I had little to go on. I knew only that her name was Annie Polgar and that Jacques had pronounced her dark-haired and pretty. I carried a vague desire that she might reveal herself to be incompetent, exhibiting a kind of drunkenness: the chess addict awkward and bumbling away from the chessboard. I could not help trying to imagine her, even as I heaped abuse on what I imagined.

I waited outside the gate, next to the noisy skycaps, mostly opportunists who wore dirty orange overalls to lend them an official air. The airport terminal smelled of warm beer. It was cramped and musty, and the blue carpeting inside had long ago given way to generations of explosive, wavy stains, like a map of ocean patterns. A line of arrivals from the noon flight filed through the cramped Immigration Hallway. I immediately recognized them as arrivals because they were the only types that ever flew into the country: the continent’s businessmen, narrow-shouldered Africans in shiny blue suits, each with a reinforced briefcase and expensive cufflinks; students returning from the Soviet Union or Cuba, bashful in their new eyewear and loose foreign shirts (African tailors insist on a tighter cut); aid workers, mostly agriculturists, hunched and polite, wearing jeans made baggy by months of fever and stomach ailments; Shell engineers blandly ridiculous in all-cotton white outfits with shoulder epaulets and buttons big as sewing bobbins; a few olive-skinned European couples, impatient and haggard, sporting thin watches and aerated shoes with brass eyelets.

That was how, finally, I recognized Annie Polgar. She looked like no one else. I watched her. Her hair was straight and dark, fashionably shoulder length, and she was very pale, which in the African sun made one’s skin appear unfinished and creamy, as if the pigment were still
wet. Her blue dress, decorated with tiny red and white flowers, accented her paleness. She was young and very thin, boyish even, and her hair hung in damp ropes down the back of her neck. Her body excited me. A motorized trolley cart wheeled the heaped luggage into the waiting area. The air-con wasn’t working. I watched her fan herself with her passport, then wander over to where the trolley man was heaving his cargo onto the cement floor. She had the druggy, stunned amble of the newly arrived. The thumping bags echoed rudely, and the skycaps sprinted to the baggage area, where they began yelling pointlessly and lifting suitcases onto their heads like mutinous porters in a Tarzan movie. There weren’t enough bags for all the men, and some pushing broke out.

The chaos was intentional, a thuggish ploy to ensure enormous tips from the unwary. She seemed to blanch. She brought one hand protectively to her neck, her fingers resting lightly on her skin. Only then did I rush forward. Waving, I asked her which bags were hers. She pointed dumbly to four green suitcases, and I addressed the porters loudly, shooing away all but four of them, one to a bag. “Monsieur le Genius,” one mumbled, loud enough for her to hear. The dismissed skycaps looked at me keenly, then quickly dispersed. I almost shouted from happiness. “You have to be Robert,” she said. Her lips stretched into a wide smile, but her shoulders were still bunched against her collarbone. We exchanged greetings and started toward the exit, followed by our four skycaps, each with a piece of luggage on his head. I didn’t like the silence, so I turned to her. “Were you expecting Jacques?”

“No. You. Jacques told me you’d be my welcoming party.” Her way of speaking seemed to me peculiar to American women overseas: a small, flat voice more exhaled than spoken, as if one’s words simply lay in wait just behind the tongue. We talked a bit more, chitchat about the flight, and when we passed through the terminal doors we heard sunbirds screeching across the road. The sky was so bright the gravel seemed to smolder. All around us, shouting passengers piled into cars and sped off.

I looked slyly at her face, evaluating, excited in a mildly erotic way to be walking a white woman to my car. A thought occurred to me, and I touched her arm. “Just wondering,” I said. “How do you know what Robert looks like?” I leaned in close. “I could be anyone.”

She shrugged. “Oh, you just look like a chess genius.”

I searched her expression for mockery, but she turned abruptly away and began inspecting her luggage. The strap on one of her bags had broken off, and someone had bludgeoned the small combination lock on the zipper.
“Comes with the territory,” I said, indicating the lock. “We’re over here.” I pointed to the car. “So what about you? You going for the killer waif look?” I adopted a chummy tone. “Fresh-faced but still crushing everyone?”

“I’m playing as myself.”

It was the sort of awkward assertion that made me doubt her. She was not convincing, and even as I took a mental note to raise my suspicion with Jacques, I heard rattling. One of the skycaps, waiting his turn at the open car trunk, was jiggling his load: the sound was of chess pieces knocking together. She had filled an entire suitcase with chess equipment. It seemed an amateurish thing to do.

We drove off quickly, spewing gravel and dust. “This isn’t your car, is it?” Annie asked.

I asked her why she would say such a thing.

“Just being observant. You’ve got a sprig of mango root tied around the rearview mirror.” She tapped the mirror rod. I had never noticed it before, the tribal artifact. Its smell was supposed to keep travelers safe. “My guess,” she said, “is that you wouldn’t buy into that. In your official capacity, I mean.”

“Fair enough,” I said.

She slapped me lightly on the shoulder, an intimate gesture. “Just so you know,” she said. “I’m aware you’re going for a Bobby Fischer look.”

I detected a hint of impatience in her tone, the newcomer’s anxiety expressing itself as impertinence. She rolled down the window and rested her arm on the door ledge. She looked out at the scenery: rickety wooden tables laden with bundles of green vegetables; small, shaved-head girls walking single file; men on bicycles, carrying stacked columns of plastic buckets. The jungle started at the edge of the blacktop, an enormous wall, and plantain leaves and ferns leaned out over the roadway, nearly touching the car. You could see columns of smoke in the distance.

“You think so?” I asked.

“Robert Wender.” Her words came out in a rush. “Robert, as in Bobby? And Wender is Fischer’s mother’s maiden name. You look just like him.”

Her fact-mongering in itself did not alarm me. Yet it had been accompanied by a quavering tremolo, her voice insisting on the importance of her observation. She did not speak like a real player. To a real player, biographical research on grandmasters stank of musty scholarship. It was the province of the camp follower. I searched her face for a sign of
intent, but she was staring dully at her hand, wiping at a smudge.

“Well, you got me,” I said carefully. “Someone’s been doing her homework.”

“But that’s okay,” she added. She folded her arms and spoke with deliberate emphasis. “I think facts are overrated. So what if you aren’t using your real name? Show me a fact and I’ll show you something more interesting waiting to happen.”

I nodded, then shrugged agreeably. Tightening my grasp on the steering wheel, I squinted and hunched forward, exaggerating the danger of not concentrating on the road. We drove in silence for a mile or two, and she stuck her head out the window, a pretty sight. Her waist swiveled; the muscles in her calf contracted, drawing attention to her smooth legs.

I stared at her body until she tired of the wind and sat back in the seat. She turned to me suddenly. “So Jacques doesn’t expect an actual genius, right?”

I turned to see if she was joking. “What’s your background?” I asked.

She smoothed her hair. “In Uganda they called me the African Queen. I was coaching the university team. I guess Jacques knows the provost there.”

I didn’t press the issue. There was no need. I would have heard if a white female master was working in Uganda. So I fished a little. I told her that as long as she won, genius or not genius didn’t really matter. Her lips seemed to quiver at the ends when I said this—a forced smile—and she turned again to the passenger window. The city was coming into view. Up ahead, gray water sloshed against the harbor wall; a crowd was milling in front of a bakery. In the distance, on three sides, rumpled hills drifted up, smothered with jungle.

“Pawn to queen four,” I said.

She looked at me blankly.

“Pawn to queen four,” I said again. “Your move.”

“Sorry.”

“A little blindfold chess. Pawn to queen four. Your move now.”

She shook her head.

“Too tired, huh?”

“Yes.”

I said nothing for a while. Then I turned to her: “You think I’m testing you.”

“Aren’t you?” she asked.

“What would you think if I were?”
“I think it wouldn’t be very neighborly,” she said. This made me smile. I slowed the car down. “Just tell me what your chess rating is.”

“What’s yours?”

“First you say.”

“Why?” she asked. “Is it important?”

“Just curious.”

“What’s yours?” she asked again.

“I won’t bullshit you, all right? You’ll find out soon enough. I’m no genius. But I’m pretty good.” I paused. “Low master. Good enough.”

She thought about this. “And you’ve done okay for yourself here, haven’t you?”

“Let’s say I have,” I said gallantly. I noted she wasn’t telling me her rating.

“So there aren’t any sleepers here? No diamonds in the rough to watch out for?”

“Christ,” I said sharply. “Do you know where we are?” I waved my hand at the crumbling buildings around us and spoke with feeling. “It’s like playing against your dog here most of the time. The hard part is staying awake. Jesus. The hard part’s staying conscious.” The passion in my voice surprised me.

I wasn’t prepared for her reaction. She leaned back in the seat and her whole face seemed to relax. I backed off.

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Back at the office, Jacques held Annie’s hand as he talked. He offered her a chair, then hopped up onto his desktop, dangling his feet like a teenager. “You have come in on Air Zaire,” he said. “Ooooh, we call it Air Peut-Être here. Air Maybe. Do you understand?” he chuckled, then left his mouth open, and his thick pink tongue quivered. It reminded me of an aquarium slug. “Oooh,” he said, bounding down. He was playing Jovial Jack for her, fussing over the broken strap on her luggage. He stood in front of her, reciting the amenities she would find at the Novotel, where he had reserved her a suite for the night. “A swimming pool,” he said. “Air-con. Room service. Fresh pastry. Video. Everything a place should have.” As he spoke he showed her his palms. White women were excited by them, he had heard: the lighter pigmentation and soft creases reminded them of their own pudenda.

He suggested the three of us have dinner a bit later, after Annie had a chance to get settled in. “You need a good night’s sleep tonight,” he
said. “I have arranged a chess exhibition for the two of you tomorrow morning. In Muramvya. An hour’s drive.”

He nodded with great enthusiasm, then slapped his forehead. “Where are my manners?” he said theatrically, and guided us over to a wicker chair next to the water closet, where he had placed a plate of brie and crackers. He began cutting into the cheese as if it were cake, thick wedges that he arranged on a platform of crackers.

Gerard walked in, grinning, and Jacques made a show of shoving brie onto some crackers for him too. Then Jacques brought out the chessboard and pieces. He took a big bottle of warm Primus from the bottom drawer of his desk and poured each of us a glass, even Gerard, all the while setting the chessmen onto their initial squares.

“Oh, no chess,” said Annie. “I’m really tired.”

“Come, come,” Jacques said. “Our two geniuses. Let us see you play.” He saw we were reluctant, so he reached out and made the first move for me: pawn to king four.

“Oh please, new Annie upon whom so much rests,” he said. He gulped from his glass and set it down with a thud. She opened her mouth in protest, then laughed, a trilling, charming sound that made the rest of us laugh as well. She stuck out her hand and let it hover over the chessboard. She answered with the first move of a Sicilian defense.

Jacques sliced another piece of brie. “What brilliance is being played?” he asked, wiping his mouth with a piece of typing paper. We were in a mainline Richter-Rauzer Sicilian, all textbook for six moves. We moved quickly at first, then fell into short thinks. Jacques and Gerard were rapt, watching our hands dart back and forth.

“So?” said Jacques, noting our growing piles of captured chessmen. “Who is winning this battle of titans?”

“Hard to say,” I said. But it wasn’t. I had already established a strong attack. With each move, it became more and more clear: she could handle casual players, but was no better than middling as a real player. She was always a step behind.

Annie smiled at me, displaying two dazzling rows of teeth. She regarded me studiously. Her legs were crossed, and she was gently stroking her knee with her fingers. She then spoke with an exaggerated Southern accent: “Oh, suh, am ah to rely upon the kindness of strang-ers?” I had never heard anything sexier.

Jacques looked at her without comprehension.

“Frankly, mah dear,” I replied, “ah might give a damn and ah might not.”

“Oh, ah would be most grateful, suh,” she said. “Most grateful,
indeed."

“What are you saying?” Jacques asked. He glanced at Annie, then at me.

“Just chess talk,” I said. “Master to master.”


I told her I hated playing against it myself. I then directed my words to Jacques: even the great Spassky sometimes lost against it, I told him. Even Kasparov and Karpov. Every grandmaster on the planet had his hands full against it. Jacques frowned.

Someone outside started honking a horn. Gerard walked over to the window and banged his prosthetic against the ledge—a demonstration of courtesy, I think, to enforce quiet while a game was in progress. But Jacques scolded him loudly, and as he did, Annie straightened in her chair and exchanged a look with me. She quietly turned her king over, indicating resignation, and reached out to rest her fingers on my hand.

Jacques turned his gaze back toward the chessboard and stared for a long moment at Annie’s upturned king. He screwed up his face, then lifted his arm and sent the board and chessmen clattering onto the linoleum.

Annie let out a small cry. Jacques pointed an accusing finger at her; his finger remained erect a long time. He looked so angry I thought he was going to strike her. Instead, he shaped his fingers into a claw and pressed them, hard, to her forehead. “You muzungus,” he hissed. He opened his mouth as if to say more, then drew back his hand and walked quickly from the room.

“Don’t let him get to you,” I whispered, though my thoughts were elsewhere. I was thinking that Jacques would not leave me bereft now. He couldn’t. He’d never get a real chess master to come to Burundi. For thousands of miles, I was the closest thing to a future Jacques was going to find.

I put a reassuring hand on Annie’s shoulder, and in my mind’s eye I saw how things would play out. It was as though someone had handed me a series of photographs and all I had to do was flip through the pictures to learn whatever I wanted to know. I saw what would happen with perfect clarity. Annie would sleep with Jacques in exchange for staying on. And she’d sleep with me because I had the goods on her, because I could make her life hellish or pleasant. She’d sleep with us because that’s all she could offer. And more: she’d probably offered up the same thing in Uganda, coaching the university team. They must have tired of her eventually. She had no moorings. She was drifting and unstable, and she found her home in drifting, unstable places. She was
drawn to Deepest Darkest, and her white woman’s skin made a fine and delicious passport. She’d probably trafficked herself all across the continent.

That was the kind of woman who would come to Burundi at a time like this. A step up from a whore. What she had to offer was not so rare after all.

“Just be ready for tomorrow,” I said, and stood to go. “Gerard can walk you to the hotel.”

She looked at me anxiously. “Dinner?”

“Sorry,” I said, but gave her no explanation. I didn’t feel I had to.

The next morning Jacques drove his Citröen up to the Novotel, with me in the front and Gerard in the back keeping watch over a box of chess clocks and chess sets in drawstring pouches. Annie wore a baseball cap and loose clothing; she clutched a handbag to her stomach. Her expression was sullen and withdrawn, and after we exchanged greetings she sat in the back with Gerard, who kept rubbing his stump, complaining of chafing and tenderness. A small metallic faceplate on his prosthetic was slipping down; it pressed against his shirtsleeve like a shard of bone.

Jacques acted as if nothing had happened the previous day. Driving us to Muramvya, he was Jovial Jack again, shouting over the car’s roaring engine. He described the scenery to Annie as if he were a tour guide; he seemed not at all disturbed by her lack of response. He told her that in Bujumbura one could with a great deal of trouble catch a bus going upcountry and in forty minutes climb so high into the mountainous interior that the plantain trees and sorghum fields would give way to firs and barefoot men in Arctic parkas. He told her that the ascent to Muramvya was spectacular. It wasn’t—the jungly roadsides, I thought, were dull and claustrophobic—but Annie directed her gaze wherever he told her to look.

“See?” he shouted toward the back seat. “Down into the gorges.” He drew her attention to the fenced-in huts: they were called rugos, he said. Homesteads. The country was full of them, full of isolated homes, not villages. It was a country of individuals, he said. There were no Hutus and no Tutsis. There were only Burundians.

I raised my eyebrows at him.

He shouted some more. “However, today you will see mostly Tutsi. There are not so many Hutu in Muramvya.”

In fact the army had recently conducted a sweep of the town. I was
wondering if he would mention this. When he didn’t, I turned to him. “So,” I began.

“She is new,” he said. He spoke softly now, mumbling under the engine’s noise.

I didn’t answer.

“I have made a mistake with this girl,” he said. “Yes? Okay.”

I felt it unwise to press the point, so I shrugged. Jacques began to say something but stopped himself. He wagged his head a bit, as if mulling something over, then caught my eye. I leaned in close.

“Perhaps she can still be of use to us,” he said. “To our team. Is that how you phrase it? Team, yes? You and me. Our enterprise.” He leered at me and gave a hideous smile. “What is past is past. You and I must go forward.”

He was smiling so wide I thought he’d start giggling. He told me he had secured her stay for another few nights at the Novotel. We each had our functions, he said, our obligations, and right now his was to make Annie happy. If he did, then she could make us happy. Did I understand?

He told me he had talked last night to his friend in Uganda. She was okay with such things. She didn’t mind. She’d do anything to be thought special.

I nodded, then returned my gaze to the window.

But Jacques wouldn’t let it drop. He kept looking over at me, then back at the road. He told me he had seen the way I looked at her. He hoped, he said, that I understood how well he knew me.

“Yes,” I said. I wouldn’t look at him. “Yes to everything.”

“Oh ho, oh ho,” he sang. “Oh ho, oh ho.” He honked the horn, smiling, and I knew then that in revealing my mind to him I had just lost something very valuable.

The farther we drove up into the interior, the more the straining engine overwhelmed our ability to talk. We all fell silent. In Bujumbura the heat had palpable weight, and bloated flies would tumble into your beer; now, forty minutes away, we were all chilled to the bone. It was freezing. I checked the rearview mirror a few times, and once I saw Annie reach into her bag and pull out a plastic squirt bottle of skin cream, which she applied to her face and hands. The thin light was uninspiring, and every few hundred feet we saw small groups of women carrying bright plastic buckets and bulging cloth sacks. Still our car roared upward, past a row of adobe dwellings, and in a clearing by a lonely house, past its battered green door, a swath of frost rimed the ground.
“Burundi!” Jacques shouted to the back seat, for Annie’s benefit. “Did you know it is called the Mountains of the Moon? Because of the terrain, you see.” In the rearview mirror, I saw her nod in response. She seemed more interested in examining Gerard’s prosthetic arm. It was giving him trouble. When she touched it, close to his stump, he winced.

In Muramvya, Jacques pulled off the asphalt and stopped in front of a gray concrete building. The shophouses were all shuttered; across the street was a raised wooden walkway, but some of the planks were missing. Jacques called over a boy to guard the car. He then had Gerard place the box of chess equipment on his head and led us all down a footpath that wound past a long brick wall. The street behind us was empty, except for a man herding a line of bony dark cattle along the pavement. We passed through a stand of fir and eucalyptus trees, and after a few minutes we emerged at the gate of a walled school compound.

Pandemonium broke out. A small crowd had been awaiting our arrival. “Muzungu!” we heard. Most of the crowd looked to be coffee farmers, gangly men without shoes dressed in vaguely military clothes—stained brown slacks, dirty light work shirts—and circling around them were some fidgety boys, all wearing shorts several sizes too big. The school itself was little more than a long series of low-slung concrete rooms, shuttered on one side with frosted window slats, and out of the largest room—our chess venue, judging from the crowd inside—walked a man wearing a powder-blue safari suit. He began talking animatedly to Jacques, then said something to the crowd that I didn’t understand. It must have been about Annie and me because everyone exclaimed loudly and looked in our direction.

“I told him today we have two geniuses,” Jacques said to us. “Two inspirations. Monsieur le Genius they know. They can all play. They can all use chess clocks. So Annie . . . .” Jacques let his sentence trail off, but his meaning was clear: Annie, don’t let us down. She removed her baseball cap, then set it back on her head, a gesture of resolve.

Inside, Gerard had already dumped the contents of the box and busied himself emptying the drawstring pouches onto the tables and setting up the chessmen and roll-up boards. Someone had pushed six wooden banquet tables together, three along the window-slat side and three along the opposite wall. Our opponents were already seated in high-backed wooden chairs—ten opponents for each of us. It was to be a simultaneous exhibition: I’d play those along the window slats and
Annie would play those on the other side of the room. We’d each make a move, then go to the next player and make a move, and so on, until all the games were finished.

I took it upon myself to set up the chess clocks on my three tables, while Annie did the same on her side. From the doorway, you could see the compound gate and the dirt courtyard, empty except for a solitary eucalyptus tree in the center. Along the peeling back wall of the classroom stood a line of men and boys, mostly barefoot idlers. There were perhaps forty people inside; overhead, two fluorescent lights flickered, illuminating the chalk dust on the rough blackboard in front. The room smelled of mud, and already the cold was numbing my fingers.

At the doorway, the man in the safari suit raised his voice at a barefoot woman. She wore a coarse gray sweater and held a bundle in her arms. I didn’t recognize her, but she shouted to me: “Monsieur le Genius,” and continued in the local language. The man in the safari suit laid his hands on her shoulders and pushed her abruptly out the door. This seemed to agitate Annie. She walked up to Jacques, occupied with instructing Gerard on the proper positioning of chess pieces, and asked what was happening. Jacques had nothing to say, so I tried to help. “Don’t worry about it,” I told her. “Just a crazy woman. Remember, we’re with Jacques. We’re just playing chess.”

Annie exhaled loudly. “I’m not talking about us,” she said. Her tone seemed disrespectful, and I told her so. We were here to promote an enterprise, I said. We had an obligation, I told her, so if she didn’t mind, could she please conduct herself accordingly? She looked at the floor. Take a cue from Gerard, I almost said, but I knew that would have been a pointless escalation. Gerard had set up all the chess sets and clocks, and was now without complaint awaiting his next assignment. It came quickly. Jacques conferred with the man in the safari suit, who subsequently rifled through the teacher’s desk and withdrew a short straw broom looped together with wire. Gerard knew what to do. He took the broom with his good hand and walked straightaway to the courtyard, where he began hacking at the packed dirt, sweeping dust toward the eucalyptus tree. Jacques snapped his fingers at him—Gerard was sweeping too hard, bringing dust into the room—but after a brief exchange between the two, Gerard fell into an agreeably languorous rhythm, scraping the cold ground clean.

Jacques signaled to me: it was time. I stood in front of the room and steepled my fingers; Jacques stood to the side, calling for quiet. I smiled pleasantly at Annie, then raised my arms in a dramatic gesture of command. “Let us commence,” I said, and we did.
Our opponents straightened in their chairs; some centered their knights more securely on their initial squares. I walked to Board One and set my face with a severe expression: eyes narrowed, lips bunched and tight, a finger to my chin, which gave the appearance of contemplation. I moved the pawn in front of my king forward two squares, then worked my way down the line, making the same first move on all my other boards. Some of my opponents knew enough to reply by pushing their central pawns forward. Others made foolish first moves, pointless pawn pushes that marked them instantly as absolute beginners.

They all moved quickly, but I was even quicker. The cold was getting to me, so I didn’t want to stand in one spot for too long. I walked a straight line from one end of the tables to the other, then back again, never pausing more than a couple of seconds for each move. Soon I noticed that one of my opponents had turned away from his board and was staring out the window slats. I was floored: it was his move, and he was letting time tick off his clock. But I followed his gaze and saw two tall men in red berets standing outside, pressing their faces against the window slats. I quickly made out the rest of their outfits. Soldiers. They wore camouflage, and cinched around their waists were thick canvas belts. A black pistol holster hung at the side of the man closest to the entrance. The other carried an enormous automatic weapon, which he casually lowered at that moment, idly tapping the gun’s snout against the glass.

Jacques noticed them, too, and so did Annie. I think everyone noticed them. The bystanders continued to chat, and boys who had been milling around the courtyard now drew nearer to the doors of the other classrooms. “Back to business,” said Jacques behind me. He said it loudly so that Annie would hear too, and then I saw why: no sooner had the soldiers begun peering in than they drew back and sauntered away, apparently sharing a good joke. One picked up some pebbles and tossed them aimlessly into the courtyard, where Gerard had already swept.

On Board Three I called out “checkmate” and shook my opponent’s hand. Five minutes had gone by. After twenty minutes I had won every game. It was as easy as sleeping. Each time one of my opponents turned over his king, Jacques came up behind me and delivered his usual line. Chess, he’d say in the local language, was all about vision.

On her side of the room, Annie had dispatched all but one of her opponents, a plump, middle-aged man with a messy scar stretching from his right eye to his left ear. I pegged him as someone caught up in the ’72 massacres. He sat with his arms folded across his stomach.

Jacques motioned me outside. “Will she win?” he asked.
I wasn’t sure. She had the advantage, but her opponent was putting up a stout defense. He depressed the plunger of the chess clock with confident ease.

“Monsieur le Genius,” I heard then. It was the woman from the doorway. She held out her bundle, wrapped in a plain brown blanket. At the top of the bundle, a baby’s head stuck out, eyes staring dully at its mother. She stepped directly in front of me and said something with lots of hanging vowels that I couldn’t follow. I frowned. The baby had small scabs on its face; its breathing was labored, like an old man’s.

The woman searched my face, then turned her attention to Jacques, who exchanged a few words with her. “She wants you to bless her baby,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“What do you think I mean? I am telling you what she wants.” The woman raised her baby to my face. I saw now that her forehead was deeply creased, and I imagined her waiting for me outside all this time, worrying, whispering promises into her baby’s ears. She said something that sounded pleading, but Jacques snapped at her and she fell silent.

I lifted my right hand and spread my fingers wide.

“Oh, great bwana,” said Jacques to me. His voice was mocking. “Your first blessing.” The woman murmured something. She looked at her baby, then brought the bundle to her lips and kissed the baby’s forehead. She looked up at me and beamed. “Monsieur le Genius,” she said.

“Like Jesus among the lepers, hey, Bobby?” Jacques said. “Do you wish to claim this, too?”

I ignored him. I let my palm hover over the baby’s head and made three tight circles in the air. The woman moaned lightly. I then summoned my deepest, most holy voice: “Let this child be safe,” I said, and the woman responded with small, encouraging noises.

Jacques snorted. I looked over at him in protest, and for a moment our eyes locked. We stared hard at each other. Without warning, Jacques grabbed my hand and yanked it away from the baby, and when I felt his hand on my skin I reacted instantly, and we began to struggle. His fingers locked around my wrist, and I jerked my arm back and broke free. It took no more than a couple of seconds, but he was not finished. He started whispering rapidly to the woman, a harsh and explosive flurry that I understood to be about me. He held his mouth close to her ear, and then I saw the woman look at me in alarm and shift her baby to her other hip, shielding it with her body.

“Can you two show some decency?” I heard. It was Annie. She was standing in the doorway with her arms folded.
Jacques frowned, but he didn’t look at her. “You are the worst of humanity,” he said to me.

I wanted to strike him. I wanted to place my hand around his neck and drive him to the ground. But I didn’t. I was so furious that I turned from him and stuck my arm straight toward Annie: “Hey,” I said to her. I stabbed the air for emphasis. “You can show us something later, huh?”

She turned on her heels and went back inside, and I noticed something remarkable: her game was still in progress. She had walked away from her opponent—a breach of etiquette. The man with the scarred face leaned back in his chair, waving his arms around and complaining to some bystanders. And I noticed something else: the two soldiers had returned. They stood by the window slats, looking at Jacques and me expectantly, as if they had happened upon an impromptu piece of street theater. The one with the automatic weapon unbuttoned his fatigues and scratched lazily at his T-shirt. The other one looped his fingers around his canvas belt.

“I apologize,” Jacques said to me. He nodded pleasantly to the soldiers.

“I’m sorry, too,” I said, and straightened my shirt.

We stood a while, not saying anything. The soldiers didn’t move; behind them, Gerard began coughing noisily. “Bobby,” Jacques said, “let us think of our obligations.”

“I agree. Absolutely.”

“So let us comport ourselves,” said Jacques. “Please. Bobby, I am sorry.” He smiled to some boys watching us from the doorway. He made a show of patting me on the shoulder, and when he did, the soldiers and the boys smiled back.

I was about to point out that Annie had acted high-handed with her opponent, but Jacques was already walking back into the room. He spoke even before he reached her. “Do not leave the board, Annie,” he called out in English. “We have an obligation. Please finish,” he told her. Please, he said, smiling broadly: please remember why we are here.

The woman with the baby said something to me that sounded disapproving. I shook my head at her and growled, which set the two soldiers to laughing. I laughed along with them, and the woman stopped talking. I laughed like I had never heard anything funnier.

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Ten minutes later, Annie was still playing her last opponent. She had a winning rook-and-pawn ending, but he was hanging tough. Her
responses were taking longer and longer.

I had accepted a cigarette from a man in a crisp blue shirt and was beginning to drift off to sleep when Jacques motioned toward the door. “Just ignore,” he said in English. Outside, the soldier with the pistol had just barked something at Gerard. Even from where I stood, I could see Gerard’s face crinkle with worry. He dropped his broom and jogged over to them, stopping a respectful distance away, but the soldier waved him closer. The man seemed to be consulting with his colleague about something. He grabbed Gerard by his prosthetic and jerked him closer. Gerard yelped. The soldier shook Gerard’s bad arm, then twisted it hard; he seemed to be examining the political slogans carved into the plastic. He barked some more at Gerard and yanked again on the prosthetic. Something like a clamp tumbled out of Gerard’s sleeve. He cried out in pain.

“Pay no mind,” Jacques said to me.

The soldier held the prosthetic close to his face, reading the slogans. Gerard’s face contorted; one of his legs seemed to give, and his bad arm jerked for a moment away from the soldier. The soldier with the automatic weapon took a look, and together the two soldiers set out to work on Gerard’s bad arm. The one with the pistol read the plastic forearm while the other grasped Gerard by his stump and yanked the prosthetic the opposite way, as if to get a better angle. Gerard was wailing now. With his good arm he clutched the side of his head.

Jacques and I stepped outside for a better view. “They are looking for Hutu,” Jacques said. “Agitators. Gerard is only Zaireois.”

“Not the same, I know,” I said. “Just some push-and-shove, right?”

“Yes. It is not serious.”

“Do they have to do that here?”

Jacques didn’t answer.

Gerard would be okay—a little wear and tear, but he’d be fine in the morning. He had seen worse. But his wails were creating a disturbance in the room, and men began filing out to take a look. Annie was looking, too. She’d stare at the chessboard, then turn and frown in Gerard’s direction.

The two soldiers ran their hands along Gerard’s plastic arm and fell into a short tête-à-tête. The one with the pistol said something and smiled while the other pressed his thumb into Gerard’s stump. Gerard fell to his knees, and the soldiers called out, “Okay, okay,” to the growing crowd. There was murmuring; somebody began clucking loudly. The soldier with the pistol turned and pointed at the crowd. He straightened his beret, then said something that sounded like a caution.
Jacques responded to him, and some men in the crowd nodded. "I
told them everyone is calm," he said in English. A man in a green T-shirt
waved to the soldiers. A boy in a parka stuck his head into the open
doorway of the schoolroom and said something to Annie’s remaining
opponent, who was looking out the window, sliding the slats up and
down to get a better view. Their chess game was still in progress. I saw
Annie next to the board, rummaging through her handbag.

"It is over," Jacques said. “All is fine. It is over.” He nudged me. The
soldiers were headed out, walking toward the courtyard gate. The soldier
with the automatic weapon carried it like a garden tool, dragging the
stock along the dirt. Gerard had crawled to the eucalyptus tree. He lay
sprawled on the ground, resting his head against the trunk and moan-
ing.

Annie sidled past, clutching her handbag tight, and headed to the
tree. She jogged a bit, letting her hair bounce on her shoulders, and
when she got to Gerard she squatted down, reaching into the bag. She
was on her knees then. My heart started racing. She withdrew her bottle
of skin lotion and squirted thick lines of the cream onto her hands and
then onto his stump. She put her hands under his armpit and lifted the
stump into the air. It was blotchy and engorged, and together she and
Gerard fiddled with the prosthetic and let it fall to the ground. What I
pictured in my mind thrilled and revolted me: a sexual act, the mon-
strous stump erect and pulsing. Jacques, too, was looking, and when he
catched my eye he smiled, as if acknowledging what I was seeing—as if
he, too, saw it.

Annie stayed at Gerard’s stump, and her creamy palms made squish-
ing noises as they moved along. She was leaning into him. Some boys
joked and gestured, but they quickly quieted down when the man in the
safari suit snapped his fingers. Jacques motioned for me, and together we
walked across the courtyard. The closer we got, the more I could hear
Annie cooing to Gerard, whispering comfort into his ear. “You must go
back into the room,” Jacques said to Annie, pleasantly. She made no
move to stand. “We are not here for this,” he said. “You must finish your
game. You have an obligation.” He clapped his hands, and the sound
echoed through the courtyard. “Go back into the room,” he said, softly
now. “Please. We have an obligation.”

She looked up at us—not with anger, I thought, but with a frankness
that silenced Jacques and turned the image in my mind watery. She did
not budge, and I sensed that behind us the crowd was edging forward.
In the cold, our breaths rose like steam and seemed to hang in the air.
Annie kept on kneading Gerard’s stump, just below his shoulder, and
his mangled skin shone with cream. She rubbed so gently and with such precision that I could no longer sustain the picture in my mind. Gerard moaned softly, rocking his head back and forth against the tree trunk, in concert with her caresses. I saw then that her fingers were spotted with his blood. Still she continued. She cupped his stump with one hand and with the other lightly stroked, tracing delicate, glistening circles, and the image in my head dissolved.

Her fingers arched up, then fell, over and over, in a slow and deliberate rhythm. She would not stop. Jacques cleared his throat—a gurgle, I thought, a release—and still she rubbed, greasing Gerard’s stump until his face relaxed. What she was doing with her hands reminded me of something from long ago, something I had once known. I could not place it now. For a moment my mind went blank, and I looked without comprehension. I could make no sense of what I was seeing. It was as if I had no frame of reference anymore.

So I turned away, my face burning. I saw that Jacques, too, had turned away. He looked stricken. He lifted his hand as if to touch me, and there it remained, poised and still, for what seemed like forever.