**The King, the Queen, and the Puny Pawns**

by Nina Schuyler

I first saw Madeline in my Dry Heat class. The master chef had begun his lecture on tender meat, and I’d opened my book, *Jean Paul’s Favorite Recipes*, when I became aware of a woman two rows up, sitting with straight-back poise. On her slender wrist was a charm bracelet made up of small silver chess pieces.

I tried to focus on thebaked roast projected on the screen, but my attention razored back to her charm bracelet. A chess player, no doubt. Why else the bracelet? Probably amateur, a wannabe hoping the bracelet’s charm would rub off. Compared to the other pieces, her queen was gigantic. Of course, thequeen is powerful, but this was overkill. Theking and all the other pieces looked normal. But the pawns were puny, as if they’d been smacked around by the enormous queen.

The woman was taking copious notes with her right hand. But her left, with the bracelet was absolutely still, as if it were resting up for its next chess match. Suddenly she stopped writing and looked longingly at her bracelet, as if it had just spoken to her. She had very pale skin, and with her jet-black hair and red lipstick, she was the most striking woman I’d ever seen. Now there was no way I could pay attention. Leaning over, she removed a Moleskine notebook from the outside pocket of her backpack and scribbled something in it. I imagined she’d just thought of a chess move and had to write it down before it disappeared among the accumulating facts about tenderizing and meat mallets. She must have felt me watching her, because she turned around and gave me a slow smile, revealing square white teeth. She grinds her teeth, I thought. On the overhead screen was a close-up of a lamb chop.

“Junko, maybe you can enlighten us about the best way to use a meat mallet.” The professor’s voice was sharp.

My face burned. The woman with the charm bracelet was still smiling. “Sorry, sir. I haven’t had much practice.”

“Well, maybe you need to make time to practice.”

“Yes, sir. Absolutely.” I wanted to do well in this class. Cooking was one of the few things in life that gave me pleasure. I could picture myself as a future culinary crusader, rewriting the rules of cuisine. My professor, Jean Paul, was well-known in San Francisco. With a glowing recommendation from him, I could go places, including moving out of my dad’s house.

I didn’t see her the next day—she wasn’t in class—and I found myself missing the riddle of her. Then I saw her later the same day, not in school but on Clement Street, at Wong’s Fish Market.

The floor was wet, and her stockings, in all likelihood, were getting soaked. They would probably carry the scent of the sea water sloshing on the floor from the tanks filling the room, tanks teeming with trout, catfish, crabs, lobsters, and crayfish. The place stunk of fish and the fishmongers shouted in Chinese, as if water clogged their ears. She was probably there for the same reason I was: homework. I had to bake a trout.

What should I do? Walk up to her? Would that be friendly or intrusive? Social etiquette wasn’t my strong suit. I studied her, her hair pulled back in a high ponytail, revealing all the striking angles of her face; her gray wool skirt, white blouse, red scarf around her neck, and black sandals. In the daylight, her bracelet jingled and shimmered every time she moved.

She came over with that slow smile before I could decide what to do. “Hi, I’m Madeline. You keep eyeing my bracelet. Either you play chess or you’re thinking of stealing it.” She had amused gray eyes.

“I used to be an avid chess player,” I said, “but I’ve taken a hiatus to focus on my studies.”

She laughed, making her ponytail shake. “I could never do that in a million years.” She said she played every day. “This,” she raised her hand, palm open to the sky, “is hardly enough.”

“Could have fooled me. You look pretty serious in class.”

“It may look that way, but I’m always thinking about chess. Even now.”

Suddenly the moment seemed to hold still, and I felt myself rise up and out of the fish market. I saw each chess piece on the board, shimmering and perfect, poised to begin play. At the possibility of holding a chess piece in my hand again, I felt myself stir with excitement. I told her my dad had given me a long lecture about the cost of tuition at the culinary academy, how he wouldn’t throw more money into that bottomless pit called education unless I came out with something, i.e., a job. Hence the self-imposed ban on chess playing. I knew myself. If chess were in my life, it would be the center around which all things revolved. I’d willingly and whole-heartedly give myself over to it. I loved it that much. My dad also thought I’d make a terrific chef, and if I was really good, I could earn six figures.“You’ve always loved to cook, and that means you’re more than halfway there,” he said with his faint Italian accent. “Success is 99 percent passion!”

There were times, and that was one of them, when I wished his formula were true. I could see it in his eyes, how much he believed it, how much he needed it to be true, and it pained me that he believed in such foolishness.

We paid for our trout and watched the fishmonger use a net to scoop them out from the big tank by the cash register. The trout thrashed on the counter, tails whipping back and forth, until the fishmonger wacked them twice on the head with a wooden stick. The trout lay limply, curled into half-C’s in their plastic bags. I sighed. For a student to do his homework, I thought, a trout must be beaten on the head.

Out on the street, it appeared we weren’t ready to part because we found ourselves stepping next door into the Sleeping Lady Cafe. The place was narrow, like a slit in the wall, and dark, the walls painted turquoise, as if we’d climbed into the sky. The girl behind the counter didn’t look up until she finished the sentence she was reading in a book. I admired that. Madeline surveyed the room. She looked like she’d be at ease anywhere, able to take control of any situation. Her clothes, upon closer inspection, were of expensive material.

It suddenly occurred to me to wonder what would happen if one of the members of the Socialists of America saw me with her. I already had a black mark associated with my name. I always arrived at our meetings smelling of gorgonzola cheese and sautéed garlic. And I was the only girl.

Over coffee, we talked about meat and poultry. She was far more worldly than I was, having traveled to Paris, New York, Tokyo, Shanghai, Barcelona, on and on, and eaten a diversity of cuisines.

We seemed to be saving the best for last.

“When did you start?” I asked quietly.

“I was six when my dad first taught me. I used to sleep with the chess pieces under my pillow.” She smiled at the memory, as if she found herself endearing. When they lived in Italy, chess was part of the school curriculum. “Can you imagine?”

I’d begun at age eight, I told her. My introduction was far less romantic, so I didn’t share it with her. Our neighbor got evicted, and in a fit of rage threw all his sorry stuff in the front yard: a ragged couch with the sickly yellow stuffing exposed, wobbly wooden chairs, and a chess board, which I dug out of the garbage. I also found the king and queen. I decided to use dimes for bishops, quarters for knights, nickels for rooks, pennies for pawns. From a library book, I taught myself and my best friend, Ernie Singh, how to play.

Madeline told me about the time she had attended the match between Kasparov vs. Topalov. I nodded, thinking, I won’t tell her I’m a Socialist. Maybe I was worried she’d end our discussion. Maybe I wanted to play chess with her to see if she was any good.

“Tell me one of your favorite chess moves.” My voice was strangely husky.

Her eyes lit up, and, grabbing hold of a strand of hair and wrapping it around her finger, she described the opening to the famous Anand vs. Lautier match: e4, exd5, Nc3, d4, Nf3, Bc4, Ne5, g4, h4. As she spoke, I imagined each piece moving on the board, and soon the play became so vivid and exact that the coffee shop and the sidewalk dotted with gray gum—the world of fish and tender meat, of oven temperatures and aprons—grew dim and disappeared. I could see the whole game; sometimes I was Anand and she was Lautier; other times I was Lautier and she Anand.

It took her nearly a half hour to describe the entire game. It was beautiful, the level of skill, the concentration, the strategies, the moves and countermoves, like a complex and intricate dance. Then with the grace of a ballet dancer, she rose. I saw she had a long neck. She’d look good in a turtleneck.

I stood, clutching my lifeless trout, as did she. It seemed natural when she invited me over to her house, her parent’s house, to complete our homework.

“You still live at home?”

“Well, there are a lot of perks. We have a big kitchen with all the utensils and appliances and several ovens.” But she didn’t want to talk about that. Her parents had given her a Nottingham 1936 chess set, the actual one used at the 2007 U.S. Chess Championship, for her 22nd birthday.

I didn’t tell her I, too, lived at home, and as far as I could tell, there were no perks. Except I couldn’t afford anything else. Dad was letting me stay rent-free. He said he was doing it because he believed in the dream: me, being a chef.

Madeline also had a pool, a Jacuzzi, and a live-in cook. She’d learned a lot from their cook, Gippido, she said in an offhanded way.

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At the last meeting of the Socialists, Gerhard, who was voted president because he understood German and therefore could read Marx’s *The Communist Manifesto* in the original, had announced a new strategy. Slamming his fist down on the table at the Laundromat, he’d said, “We are being bombarded by Lexuses and Camrys. Open a magazine, and you find 50 kinds of anti-aging cream.”

Seven dryers tumbled behind us. I spotted a purple bra. We held our meetings at Suds and Soap on Lake Street to avoid suspicion and prevent being overheard. We’d voted on this, and everyone thought Gerhard’s idea of the Laundromat was brilliant except me. In my opinion, nine guys and me hunched around a table for folding clothes, wearing rumpled, dirty pants, two in camouflage coats and knit hats, most in need of haircuts, were hardly avoiding suspicion. We’d be safer out in the open—say, at a café, with writers who rolled out of bed and, without a glance in the mirror, planted themselves at a corner table for hours. But I was voted down. The lone dissenter.

Increasingly, I found myself in this uncomfortable position. I wasn’t normally a troublemaker. An agreeable, straight-A student, I met my curfew and dutifully did the dishes after dinner. As an undergraduate, I’d joined the Young Socialists United for Freedom and Equality as an antidote to my dad’s nonstop, hyperbolic capitalistic drivel. “Even the poorest Joe can be a millionaire,” he’d been raving for as long as I could remember. For years, I’d watched him slave away 80, a hundred hours a week on some new idea—engraved tie-clips, butter-in-a-bottle, cheese-in-a-bottle, dog washhouses (“Like a carwash!”), on and on. The closest Dad came to success was when I was 12 and he opened a photocopy store on Webster Street. For two years, he eked out a small profit, until a big chain came along and blew him out of the water, undercutting his prices by half. He went bankrupt in two months.

Fifteen business startups, 15 closures, and he still believed all it took was hard work, passion, and a positive attitude. He still believed that someday he’d call himself a big shot, which to him meant a big house, big cars, and a surplus of stuff. Whenever I pointed out how unfair the system was, how the wealthy few owned and controlled everything, using and abusing the hard-working masses; that maybe, just maybe, the scales were tipped too much against him and he’d never succeed—not the way he wanted to—he accused me of being too cynical for my own good. Think about Bill Gates in his dusty garage, he’d say. Or the Little Caesars guy, how he started with one measly pizza joint in a strip mall in Garden City, Michigan, and now owns the fourth-largest pizza chain in the United States, plus a bunch of other stuff.

Around business failure #5—the butter-in-a-bottle year—chess became my obsession. For hours after school and on the weekends, I’d hole up in my room with Ernie Singh and, with the board on the floor between us, play. For all we knew, the world had spun wildly off course, Mom had lit our umpteenth tuna-noodle-casserole dinner on fire, Dad had sold everything we owned, and we were moving to an ashram in Northern India. I didn’t think about anything when I was playing—not Dad’s worries about raising capital or whether he could convince Grumble’s Market to carry his product, not Mom’s concern about how much tuna fish a growing girl should eat. When all the major and minor supermarkets refused to carry Dad’s butter because the big food manufacturers had already bought up the shelf space, I threw myself into mastering the art of pawn promotion, getting the pawn to the final row on the board so it becomes something else—a queen, knight, bishop, or rook.

But chess couldn’t block everything out. I could still hear my dad sobbing in his room late at night. And by then I had other reasons for finding my dad’s busted dreams a little too much to bear. He had gotten the biggest bum deal of all. Of all the miserable couples out there, I used to wonder, why couldn’t one of those spouses die, and not my mom? Because my parents had been happy together. They really loved each other, always laughing and talking and smooching in front of everyone. They argued, sure, but they knew how to make up and love each other again.After she died, our house filled with neighbors’ casseroles and the overwhelming odor of white flowers. I couldn’t eat any of it, and the flowers quickly died. The first year without her, I would wander upstairs into my parent’s bedroom; then their bathroom, where I’d pick up her tubes of lipstick, jars of lotions, and the brush matted with her dark hair; then down again into the kitchen, where I’d stare at the stove, as if she might appear, standing over a pot of boiling water, the steam curling her hair.

At my college meetings, I found an even better antidote than chess to my Dad’s blind acceptance of all things capitalistic. Meetings lasted for four, five hours, and they were loud and raucous, with everyone arguing every single point. But they were also jovial, and at the end everyone patted each other on the back in a good-humored way and called out into the night, “Have a good week,” “See you soon.” Like one big family.But for the six months I’d belonged to this chapter, when Gerhard made an announcement, everyone just rolled over like dutiful dogs and went along.

Gerard held up his iPhone. I stared out the barred window. If I squinted, it looked like a chessboard, and in my mind I began to play. Gerhard was telling us to take pictureswith our iPhones, documenting decadence, debauchery, and corruption. What he called the crimes of capitalism. Three months ago, he’d decided we all had to buy these phones. “Why not a regular cell phone?” I’d wanted to know. He’d mumbled something about me being a cheapo and our needing to think big. “The revolution needs to be associated with the leading smartphone,” he’d said. “Think about it: ‘revolution, ‘leading,’ ‘smart.’ We have to be savvy marketers. Not a bunch of Luddites with lousy clamshells.” Now he held his up—a picture of a 100-pound hamburger. “Look at the masses crowded around it, ecstatic, almost weeping, lunging for it, wanting one of their own.” Disgust filled his voice. Gerhard wanted to post pictures like this on our website. He’d add critical commentary and quotes from the original Marx. “It’s up to us to show them the way.”

Should I make a fuss? I raised my hand.

Gerhard sighed. “What is it now?”

Someone muttered, “The cuisine girl.”

“I don’t think we’ll raise money that way. We need to change people’s thinking, not just criticize what they love.”

We planned to raise $30,000 this year. Then we could run a candidate for a local office: Board of Supervisors, Board of Education, Assessor, Water Board, we didn’t care. So far, our six-month campaign had made $2.59. I was pretty sure it came from my dad’s friend Frank as a joke. Ever since my dad found my old T-shirt with the “-ism” missing from “Socialism,” they had taken to calling me Ms. Social.

Gerhard’s jaw tightened. A vein popped out on his shaved head. “Do you have a better idea? Because if you don’t, it’s just too easy to blow someone’s creativity out of the water. You try thinking of something for once.”

The group seemed to solidify into one as they looked at me. One of the oldest power tactics around—identify a common enemy to create loyalty among the ranks. But wasn’t this a power tactic of a dictator? A tyrant? As the silence stretched out, my throat tightened. I never did well under public pressure. It was something I needed to work on if I ever hoped to be president of this organization, which, I was coming to understand, was the only way to turn the group around.

Shuffling his papers, Gerhard put them neatly back into his folder. “Everyone brings in a picture or your membership will be revoked.”

He had to leave to write an article for *Hammer & Tongs*. The meeting was officially adjourned.

Outside on the front steps, I smoked a cigarette with Hugo. “Isn’t having a leader against Socialist principles? Don’t we advocate equality? Freedom?”

“Well, he is a go-getter.”

“He always wears thermal underwear underneath his shirt. What’s up with that?”

“To show solidarity with the workers of the world.”

I threw my cigarette on the ground. “Do you think workers in South America wear thermal underwear? In South Africa? Egypt?”

“Maybe he’s just thinking of the Northern countries.”

“Fucking elitist.”

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Madeline lived across town, and after we got out of the taxi and began walking, the houses grew larger and larger and the foliage became thicker, so you caught only a glimpse of a looming mansion, a part that suggested the whole. This is the excitement of owning one of these joints, I thought, not to see the whole. You’re left with a vacancy, a gap to fill in. The more you can’t see, the more you anticipate the possibilities.

Madeline pressed a code into the number pad, and the black gates slid open. Her house came into view as we went down her long driveway, first a wing, then another, and another, up and out, massive and sprawling. It seemed to be everywhere at once, stretching, rising here, then there, a huge pterodactyl landing for a moment before taking off again to attack something in the blue April sky.

I realized I was entering my dad’s dreamland. Capitalism’s grand prize. This monstrous bird of a house, a copse of pruned trees, a lawn like a golf course, sprinklers spraying huge rainbows, two small white dogs scampering over to us, barking. This was what he wanted. This was his idea of success. All the hours of work, the sweat, the debt—it was for this.

Lifo and Fifo, she called the dogs. Accounting terms, she explained. “My dad’s lame sense of humor.”

“Let’s play by the pool,” she said. “We’ll deal with the trout later.”

“What a place,” I said. I was thinking about Gerhard and the others, how the entire website could be devoted to this one house. Then I wasn’t thinking about them, because we walked around the side of the house and I saw the pool.

A deep blue rectangle. The surface was smooth, asking for someone to jump in and cause a ripple. I’d never seen a more perfect pool, I said. It seemed the very essence of poolness, like one of Plato’s forms. I told her I’d studied philosophy once. A distant memory now, underneath all the spicy seasonings and fluffy dough.

She smiled her lazy smile. “We are the choices we make,” she said, “Sartre, right? Or was that Donald Trump?”

A gazebo stood in the distance, white and circular as if made of icing. I’d seen only a handful of gazebos in my lifetime, but this, too, seemed a perfect instance of gazebohood. And so was the green green grass, the birch trees with their bright white and black bark, and the two little dogs prancing around our ankles. All built on the backs of others, I thought, watching three gardeners on their knees, grunting and sweating, pulling weeds from a flower bed.

Madeline had stepped inside while I was appreciating the view, and now she reappeared with her chess board. She carried it with both hands and set it gently on the round glass table. I stood beside her, and together we admired it. The white pieces were made of ivory and they radiated, as if lit from within. The black pieces were a deep black, like the heart of the night. The board was a polished maple.

Her mother came out, a tall, angular woman in Bermuda shorts and a white top, carrying a tray with a pitcher of ice tea, glasses, and stuffed red potatoes with shrimp. Her big smile flashed straight, perfect teeth. “You must be Junko,” she said. “I thought you’d be Japanese.”

I explained that my mother had gone through a Japanophile phase. After that, it was a Finlandophile phase.

“Should we put those trout in the fridge?” Madeline’s mother picked up Madeline’s trout from the ground.

I’d forgotten all about my fish. It was less silvery now, the pink along its side dull and mottled. I handed her my bag, and she said she’d tell Gippido to get the ovens ready. The pitcher sat in a circle of sunlight, and through the big windows I glimpsed the inside of her house. Tan couches and chairs, Oriental rugs, part of a huge painting. I couldn’t tell what it was. A chess board? A tablecloth?

Madeline moved her pawn, I moved mine, the earth turned, and the daylight became golden. We didn’t speak a word. No need. The whole point was the chess game, and the board connected us and erased everything but the playing.

I was surprised, frankly, that she played so well. Surprised and relieved. This is how the Grandmasters must feel, I thought, at the top of their game, minds completely and utterly absorbed. As the hours ticked by, I felt something else. My best self, my higher self, a self I caught glimpses of only when I played high-level chess.

Suddenly, Madeline had sacked her queen, then a rook, and made a silent knight move that brought her within a couple squares of my king.

I stood up and bowed. She giggled.

Someone was clearing his throat. A corpulent man with a white apron stood above us, his stomach nearly touching the board. He had dark skin, heavy jowls. Puffy eyelids concealed most of his liquid eyes.

“Miss Madeline,” he said, with an Italian accent. “Your trout?”

“Baked.” She kept her eyes on the board. “Can you?”

A grunt, and I was back in the game. An instant later, the sun was setting and our trout appeared on white round plates, beside asparagus in lemon sauce, a fennel and pomegranate salad, and, for dessert, a blueberry tart. We ate out by the pool. The trout was wonderfully seasoned. I was beginning to understand the importance of tender meat.

“Should we have let him do the cooking?” I said. “I mean, it was our homework.”

“Oh, he loves it. Cooking is Gippido’s passion.”

Despite Madeline’s win, I didn’t feel demoralized. Not at all. I felt content, utterly satisfied. I’d gotten to play against someone so good.

She walked me out to the black gate.

“So we violated your no-playing-chess rule,” she said.

“We did.”

“It wasn’t so bad, was it?” Her gray eyes still mocked me.

“No, not at all.” I realized I was smiling broadly.

She gave me a faint smile, punched in the code, her bracelet chiming.

“See you tomorrow,” I said, as the gates slid open.

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In the gloaming, the occasional streetlight sparked on, and I felt like I was coming out of a dream. The trees thinned and I began to hear the rush and squeal of cars, Muni trains, buses. People stood at bus stops, coat collars turned up. A harsh wind rushed right at me. A plastic bag flew by in it, then stuck on my leg. I reprimanded myself. Gippido, a hired servant, had done my homework. As if I believed wholeheartedly in private property.

My own house came into view. The chipped stucco, tiles missing from the roof, the weathered front door. Inside, the floorboards were warped and the black-and-white-checked linoleum on the kitchen floor was peeling up along the edges, as if it were vacating the place. “We have ourselves a lifetime project,” my dad had said with pride when he bought it. He liked work; the more, the merrier. It’s the way up and out—his words.What if he found out where I’d been? “You loved it!” he’d gloat. “So why not get your lazy ass in gear? Find your special spot and make something of yourself in this great country of ours.”

I wasn’t ready to go home. At the corner grocery store, I bought another trout. I was going to bake it, do my homework, but when I got home, the house smelled of burnt food and my grandfather and his woman were in the kitchen, wearing grass skirts and hula dancing, trying to teach my uncle how to move his hips.

“Come on, Junko, baby, dance with us.” Grandpa grabbed my hands and raised them above my head, my fish waving in the air. His girlfriend paired off with my uncle. We circled around the kitchen. My grandpop said something about wanting to learn the Knife Fire dance.

Our kitchen was small, only a suggestion of a kitchen. One sink, four burners caked with baked-on food, and a small stretch of ugly neon orange counter. Four people stuffed in a room three feet by five.

I begged off. “I’m tired,” I said. My brain hurt, I was out of chess-playing shape. I put my fish in the fridge. Then I went to bed and dreamt of playing endless chess with Madeline out by her pool.

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The next day in Dry Heat class, Madeline and I exchanged glances, and when I passed her in the hall, we traded pleasantries. But she made no mention of another chess game. I watched her bracelet retreat out the door.

In my afternoon classes, I began to worry. Had I bored her? Too amateur? She probably had millions of chess players online, a hundred times better than me. I wanted to corner her, ask her to give me another chance. Then I felt annoyed with myself. She was rich without apology. She ought to be asking me to give *her* another chance.

At the bookstore where I worked, I sold three books in four hours: a travel guide, a celebrity tell-all, and *Sculpt Your Butt Now!* When a fourth person asked for the celebrity tell-all, I told her we didn’t have it. And even if we did, I wouldn’t sell it to her. I handed her a used copy of *Moby-Dick* instead and stormed home.

My dad and his old business partner, Frank, were in the kitchen, huddled at the table, talking about their new business idea: a chain of cafés where people had to check in their laptops and handheld devices: iPhones, iPads, iWhatevers. Stripped bare and vulnerable, customers would be forced to make eye contact. Think of it: face-to-face conversation.

My dad’s shirt was untucked. Big dirt spots stood out on his jeans. “It’s good. It’s really good.” He was pacing the kitchen.

How many times had I heard this conversation? “What a great idea!” “We’ll make millions!” I remember just after the photocopy shop died, finding my dad in the garage, tinkering with a lawn mower. He was trying to figure out how to make it run on solar power and not only cut the grass but water it, too. “Efficiency, Junko. People will love it.” Day and night, hour after hour, he worked in the garage, with his baseball cap turned backward. I cooked dinner, brought it out to him. I’d sit, listen to him mutter, and watch his food get cold. He was seeing a woman by then. I think he wanted to create something to impress her. And to show he could provide. At that time, we were living in a rundown two-bedroom apartment near a housing project in Hayes Valley. If he could get this thing to work and show it to one of the big guys—GE or John Deere—they’d snap it up in an instant.

I didn’t know much about electronics, but I tried to help. I read manuals about electricity. Currents and wires and circuits and short circuits. I finally convinced him to just focus on the solar part. Six months later, he actually got the thing to work. He mowed the patch of weeds behind the apartment building and let me drink my first beer. He wrote letters, made phone calls, pleaded, begged, but all the big guys were too busy, and the woman, whatever her name was, disappeared.

Someone had shoved my fish to the far back, behind the milk, wine, moldy cheese, a stick of butter, and beer.

“It’s the speakeasy, without the illegal booze part.” Dad was talking fast. “We could put bowls in the center of each table, filled with slips of paper, you know, conversation starters, What’s your favorite color? If you could be a superhero, who would you be?”

“Yeah, I like it.” Frank scribbled numbers on a yellow legal pad.

I dug out my trout. Its eyes looked dull, as if it had found nothing interesting in the fridge and retreated far into itself. I sat at the table and opened my textbook to Fish.

Frank could get a cheap lease on a place on Webster Street. A guy named Art owed him big time. And he had other people he could shake down. In the meantime, he had a lead on a waiter job at a pizza joint, where he could earn some dough and network.

“Get business cards made up,” said my dad. “Leave them when you leave the check. I’m prepared for amazing things to happen.”

“We’ll make a killing.”

“Hardly.” I was staring at the Easy Baked Trout recipe.

They both looked up.

“Well, hello, Ms. Social,” said my father. “How’s the Communists doing these days? Living the good life?”

He asked about school, what I was learning, and said something about putting my heart and soul into it, and if I did, I was going to be great. A master, top-notch.

They went back to their list of who owed them money.

I tried to distract myself by cooking my trout.

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The trout came out slightly blackened. It tasted like ash. I was in a bad mood and needed to take it out on someone. I was also tired of listening to my dad and Frank laugh about bootstrapping and seed money and how we were all going to have to live on rice and beans for at least a year. It brought back bad memories of his last idea: engraved tie clips, thousands of them, stacked in our garage because he wouldn’t agree to the 40 percent commission that distributors demanded.

On my way to the Laundromat, I wondered who Madeline was playing chess with right now and how much better this opponent was than me. The other guys were already crowded around the table. No one had slept or showered in days. Gerhard’s bald head had a greasy shine; Bert’s hair looked like a tornado had hit it. B.O. was everywhere.

I pulled up a chair behind Bert. Beside me, an old man in a dirty black coat sat in front of a washer, watching the clothes tumble and blowing his nose into a gray hankie.

Gerhard had his laptop open on the table. *Capitalism Is a Crime* said our new website in red, with a photo of a baby-blue Rolls-Royce and, in the driver’s seat, a white-haired man with gold-framed glasses. A small poodle sat on his lap and peered out the window as the man smiled and waved. Under it Gerhard had written: *Doesn’t It Make You Want to Puke?*

“What happened to sayings from Marx?” I said.

“This is better. Like a punch to the stomach.” His long, dirty fingernails tapped the table. “The attention span of people today, to say nothing of their reading skills—”

Behind me, a portable radio was saying, *Highly paid construction engineer program, only a phone call away*. “That’s pretty patronizing,” I said.

One of the dryers squeaked.

Gerhard’s face tightened. “Marx knew the revolution needs leaders.”

It occurred to me that I should call Madeline and demand a rematch. “Yeah,” I said, standing. “Leaders, not imbeciles.”

“If you’re not with us, you’re against us.”

“Nice.” I moved toward the exit. “Now you’re quoting Disney’s *Beauty and the Beast*.”

Hugo stopped snickering when Gerhard glared at him. I tried to slam the door, but the stupid thing had one of those slow release springs.

#

The next day, Madeline invited me to her house after class. Strolling toward the thickness of foliage, toward the black gates that disappeared with the touch of a code, to the chess board hidden somewhere in the huge house, I felt my fingers start to twitch. It was so hot by the time we got to her house, we were both sweaty.

“Would you like a swim first?” She yawned and stretched out on a lounge chair. I’d find extra bathing suits in the changing room.

I went into the little building she’d pointed out, a house by the side of the pool. I hadn’t even noticed it on my last visit. Not that it was small. It was almost the size of our house. Inside, it was like stepping into another world, a world of concierge service and never touching cash, of the kind of people in ads for retirement funds. A salmon-colored couch stretched the length of a wall, accompanied by two matching chairs, a plush pale yellow rug, a bathroom with a huge round bathtub, big enough for three or four people, a shower, marble counters, a sizeable kitchen with a state-of-the-art oven, a chandelier. Music poured from small speakers. A bedroom down a short hallway had a queen-size bed. Maybe Gerhard was right: all this should be photographed for the world to see—the extravagance, the waste, the enormous consumption, the utter unfairness of it all.

I opened the armoire. Ten bathing suits on hangers, one-pieces, two-pieces, in all sizes and colors. My cell phone rang—I never did buy an iPhone. It cost too much.Dad, probably, with another great idea and wondering if I had any cash on me and would I loan it to him. I let the call go to my message box and ran around the room snapping photos, even the ivory figurine of a laughing monkey with surprisingly sharp teeth. Pulling on a one-piece suit, I rushed outside and dove in.

The water was lukewarm, and I swam furiously, the crawl, the breaststroke, the butterfly, the side crawl, feeling Madeline’s eyes on me. Was I trying to get warm? Yes. Was I trying to impress? Absolutely. She was sitting on the edge, her feet in the water. I wanted to look strong and muscular, and, at the same time, I wished I didn’t care how I looked. I got out, panting, and went for a big fluffy towel.

Meanwhile Madeline had swan-dived in, and I watched her go the full length underwater. She popped up at the far side of the pool and began to swim beautifully, gracefully, barely creating a ripple. What powerful lungs! Her charm bracelet sat by the edge of the concrete. I picked it up. It was surprisingly heavy, probably real silver. I tried to slip it on, but it was too small.

I went back into the changing house, put on the white bathrobe I’d seen hanging on a hook, and tucked my phone into my pocket. She swam back to this end of the pool, climbed out, and wrapped her own towel around her. Her hair slicked back, her dark amused eyes. I pulled out my camera and she smiled, a big winning smile, as if she’d created the world and, behold, it was good. Gippido came out, taking small, careful steps. I held my breath. He was carrying the chessboard.

For four hours, everything melted away again and it was just me, Madeline, and the board. Seeing a strategy I’d never envisioned before, I was suddenly two squares from her queen.

This time she stood and bowed to me. But in her flared jaw, the way she was grinding her teeth and searing the board with her eyes, I could see she didn’t take defeat well.

“Nice job,” she said.

Here I was, about to live a year on rice and beans, and I’d beaten her. The great leveler, the chess board. I loved chess for this very reason. The best person won, not because of an enormous bank account or tax loopholes or nepotism or paybacks for campaign contributions, but because of skill. Pure, unadulterated skill. Chess, the ultimate utopia, where fair and honest rules leveled the playing field. “Thank you,” I said, my voice giddy.

When she stepped inside the big house to put on another layer of clothing, I snapped a picture of the board, memorializing my first win. We strolled out to the gate, and right before she punched in the code, I found myself doing my dad’s little victory dance. A shuffle forward, one-two, then back, over and over, pumping my arms.

She laughed. “What are you doing?”

“I don’t know,” I said, laughing too. Then I reached out and touched her bracelet, which was winking at me.

#

After that, I began to visit Madeline’s house nearly every day after school, cutting back my work schedule at the bookstore to one day a week, missing Socialist meetings. She’d hand our homework assignment to Gippido, get the chess board, and we’d take our places out by the pool in the dazzle of warm light. Then we would play, barely speaking. On cloudy days, a heat lamp kept us warm. I knew nothing about how to bake a honey ham or cook veal scaloppini, only that I wanted this: the world to disappear, leaving only chess with Madeline.

One day, hunger broke me out of my trance. Madeline was intently studying the board, and I excused myself, stepping into the house to refill our plate of bruschetta. I’d never been inside. The high ceilings, the hugeness of the rooms filled with antiques I knew nothing about, made me quiet. Madeline had said her mother was probably at a luncheon or fundraiser, and her father was on a business trip. “He’s always on a business trip.” I wandered down hallways, finding bathrooms, bedrooms, breakfast nooks, pantries, a game parlor, living rooms, a movie room, an atrium. When I finally found the kitchen, the counters were crowded with glimmering appliances—an espresso machine, a German bread maker, a shiny splashback behind an enormous double oven.

Gippido sat slumped at the table, asleep, his head resting on his arms. He looked old, his face full of pouches and wrinkles, with wiry nose and ear hairs poking out. A half-plucked chicken was in the sink. And our homework in front of him.

Back outside, when Madeline asked where the food was, I told her I wasn’t really hungry.

“Let’s go out to dinner,” I said. “My treat.”

She knew exactly where we could go. And no, she wouldn’t let me pay.

“All right.” At least it gave Gippido a night off.

She knew everyone at the restaurant. Turned out her father was an investor. She and her family ate there for free. That night, as she climbed into a taxi, she said she had to hurry home.

“Why?”

“An online chess match with someone in Romania.” She smiled that lazy smile of hers. “Of course nothing can take the place of an opponent actually there in the flesh.”

I should increase my playing time, I thought. If I wanted to stay on equal footing. But we had such a slow Internet connection, one move of a pawn took so long to show up on the screen, you could finish your homework and shower before it finally appeared. And when it did, it quivered and shook.

She tapped each knuckle of my hand. “See you later.”

#

At the Socialists meeting, everyone pulled out iPhones to show what they’d shot so far. A Hummer; a big house with all the lights on; a $10,000 Rolex; a travel poster, showing a good-looking couple in bathing suits in Greece.

Gerhard loaded them onto the website. Under one, he wrote: “Crap” under another, “Crapola,” then “More Crapola!” He’d put a photo of himself on the site. Underneath he’d written “Leader of the Socialist Movement of Amercia, Northern California Chapter.”

“You spelled America wrong,” I said.

“Duh. I did it to point out there’s a lot wrong with this country. Well, what do you have?” he said. “Remember, your membership is at stake.”

I thought of my photos of the changing house. I imagined turning on my cell phone and parading before their hungry eyes the whole orgy of luxury. Suddenly I’d be king. And Gerhard would be reduced to the totalitarian thug he was. I’d run the organization the way it should be run, with everyone having an equal say; we’d rethink our strategy**.** I had ideas. We’d start by treating each other better. None of this power-tripping, chest-thumping stuff. We’d change our meeting location. We’d hold protests, rallies downtown, shout-outs about society’s inequities.

But then I thought about Madeline. Our chess games. If she ever found out what I’d done, she’d never want to see me again.

I stood up.

Gerhard smirked. “Thought so.”

I rode my bike straight to Madeline’s. I pressed the intercom button at the gates.

“It’s me,” I said, when I heard Madeline’s voice.

By the time the gates slid open, she was waiting in the driveway. She led me straight into the salmon-colored room, down the hall to the salmon-colored bed. She unfastened her skirt and let it plop to the ground. I’d raced over here thinking we were going to play chess, and now here I was unbuttoning my pants.

With shaky legs that sagged under me, I came up behind her. My arms tightened, froze, then relaxed, then stiffened all the way to my fingers. My shoulders trembled. I felt like each part of me was trying to decide what to do next. She sighed a little, and my hands reached up, undid her bra, and held each of her small breasts in my hands. She leaned back into me, moaning, and I gently lowered myself down to the bed, Madeline on my lap. I’d had sex before, but not like this, not with a woman. A stretch of pale, taut skin, scents of lilac and baby powder, soft moans, the heat of her body against mine.

I murmured in her ear, “Madeline.”

“Don’t talk. I don’t like to talk.”

Afterward, I thought the sex was all right, but it didn’t compare to playing chess.

#

I was failing all my classes. My fish was dry, my veal chewy, my steak tough as a rock. This had never happened before. But I assumed Madeline was failing, too. We’d go together to summer school, I decided. Sit through Dry Heat again. Then, after class, we’d head to her house, swim a few laps, play chess, maybe make love, maybe not.

I brought up the matter one day while we were playing.

Laughing, she clapped her hands together, and her bracelet rattled. “Sorry, but failure is unacceptable in this family. They sent me to the culinary academy so I’d have something to do besides play chess. Gippido teaches me all his tricks, so really I don’t even need to pay attention in class.” She laughed again, showing her short blunt teeth. “Why do you think they hired Gippido? Because of his cookbook.”

“His cookbook?” I tried to keep my voice steady.

“*The Way of Gourmet.*”

“So when do you do your homework?”

She reached up and pulled her hair into a high ponytail. Her bracelet glared at me. “I don’t.” She smiled lazily. “Gippido just shows me what he did. Playing so much chess gives me a good memory, I guess.”

She uses Gippido to pass her classes, I thought. And her maid does her laundry, cleans her room, washes her dishes. I’d seen the gardeners, the dog walker, the pool cleaner, the window washers, on and on. Her existence was built on the tired bent backs of low-paid workers. And what was that but pure capitalism. Was there anything she did for herself? Even one single thing?

Chess, I thought. Of course. A beautiful and perfect game, a game of such purity that it purified anyone who played it.

But that wasn’t quite right, was it? When I’d brought up what we did in the changing house, she’d just stared at the board, then mumbled something about needing to concentrate. The times I’d been a little off, not playing my best, she’d ignored me at school. Only when I challenged her, pushed her to a high level of playing, did she eagerly invite me over again. Not even waiting until the next day at school.

She was using me. She was using my skill to advance her skill. It was nothing but a transaction. A way to get ahead and take on the player in Romania and whoever else. I was just a means to an end. Like Gippido.

I picked up my backpack.

“Where are you going?”

“I’ve got something.”

Madeline looked at the board, then at me. “But we’re not done.”

She looked confused, her eyes darting back and forth from me to our unfinished game. Finally she pushed back her chair.

As we walked to the gate, neither one of us said a word. I was too angry to speak. She had sullied the game. Turned it into something ugly and impure and unfair and corrupt.

She punched in the code. As the gates silently slid open, she tossed me her bracelet. A gift? To thank me? To pay me off? To checkmate me? Before I could toss it back, the gate had shut and she was heading back to her house, becoming only a white blouse and white tennis shoes. If she turned around, I’d look like I was disappearing, too. But she didn’t.

#

I rode the bus home and stared at the cookbook open on my lap. My legs were trembling, making it difficult to read about roasted duck. The bus turned the corner onto my street. Soaring above me was a huge billboard, on it a blown-up version of Gerhard’s Rolls-Royce picture, his slogan in big red angry letters. They must have climbed up there in the night. No coincidence, I was sure of it. Gerhard knew where I lived, what bus route I took. The thing was, the pixels were off or the shot was blurry because the man’s smile looked bigger, happier, as if he were the happiest guy on earth. His white poodle looked pretty happy, too. The saying could have been: *Money: Get Some.*

My dad and Frank were sitting in the kitchen. The white squares of the linoleum were gray; the black ones, too. The air smelled stale, used up. They’d found a place to lease, bought seven tables, and were debating the idea of candlelight. My dad was talking big about franchise, taking the idea global. His eyes were wide, as if everything had already happened. It’s charming, I thought. Any other day I would have thought innocent, pathetic, delusional, or sad. But today, charming. He was up against the Madelines of the world, who didn’t stop at anything, no matter the cost, no matter who got hurt, and here he sat still believing.

I reached into my pocket and handed him the bracelet. “Go ahead. Sell it.”

Dad’s eyes got watery, and he did his little victory dance. Then started in again about the speakeasies, how it was one of his best ideas ever. He tossed the bracelet in the air and caught it—I was now a full-fledged investor.

He hugged me. “It’s going to be great, just great.”

“I hope so,” I said.

That night, after I finished my homework and baked my veal, when the house was still, the oven cold, I turned on my cell phone and flipped through the photos, past Madeline, until I found it, the sunlit Nottingham chess board. And my king two moves away from capturing her queen.

**About Nina Schuyler**



Nina Schulyer’s first novel, *The Painting* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 2004), was a finalist for the Northern California Book Award. It was also selected by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as one of the Best Books of 2004 and dubbed a “fearless debut” by MSNBC. It’s been translated into Chinese, Portuguese, and Serbian. Her second novel, *The Translator*, was published by Pegasus Books in 2013.