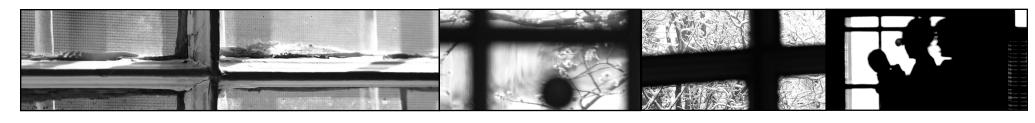
# the 2 ndhand



nashville, chicago, amherst, nyc ... | new writing

summer 2009

# A Game I Once Enjoyed

by Patrick Somerville

#### THE KID WAS TOO YOUNG

to be there. It was a bar stocked with local men late-thirties and up, and he thought he needed to get loud in his white cotton t-shirt to make it clear he was intimidated by neither cold nor the working class. He reminded me of something I hated. The fight happened outside. I don't remember the beginning, but I remember that he came at me, and we grappled. I felt the young strength in his arms when he had both hands on my shoulders, and soon I was looking at the snarl on his face and thinking about how I was about to lose. I was reminded, too, of how ugly people become when they try too hard.

Empty street, street lights, the front of the tavern, sidewalk, some ice, a few piles of snow, and two men struggling with one another, breasts afire with greatly misdirected passions. Surprisingly, I twisted free. He seemed surprised by it, too, so I cracked him in the nose.

He fell and I ran and for 15 minutes I felt as though it would be alright. It was only after I got home that I realized my hand was mangled.

On Wednesday, I didn't bother going to work at the supermarket, since I knew I couldn't bag and I couldn't stock and no one was interested in cutting me any slack, especially Kelly, Mr. Big Man. They all heard what happened to the hand, as this was not a big town, and there was some talk that this kid had found out where I worked. All of these reasons compelled me to call in and officially retire from my career as a grocer.

After lunch I drove to the hospital in Green Bay and showed them my lump of meat.

"Sooooo," said the doctor, nodding with respect, not bothering to touch it because I guess he knew what he needed to know, visually. "What happened here, then?"

"I had a fight," I told him. Best not to lie to doctors, ever. They know, anyway.

He ordered up X-rays and not long afterward he came back into the room and stuck a few into the wall of lights. He said, "OK, Mr-" Here he looked for my name on the corner of the X-ray.

"Mr. Herb, OK," he said. "See this?" He pointed to a knuckle with his pen. Where he pointed, my bones looked like a river delta. "You're going to need some pins," he said. "That also means surgery."

"What kind of pins?" "Small metal ones."

"I see."

The doctor shrugged. "It is what it is."

"I don't have insurance."

"Your hand doesn't care." I stared at him. "We'll work out a payment plan," he said.

I was angry at the news, but I liked this doctor and how bored he was. It made me think he was good. He explained to me what I could expect if I tried to ride it out and just let it heal on its own, which I had done once or twice with smaller things. In this case, though, this was my right hand, and it was pretty much a question of whether or not it would work again, and I'll just say the thought of meteoric debt is not frightening compared to being the guy using his hookhand to open beers at your birthday party.

Besides, I was tired of restarting my life. "OK," I told him. "Do your thing."

\$8,000, it turns out, is how much it costs to repair yourself after you punch someone you don't know for no reason, by the way.

#### ALTHOUGH PERHAPS THERE

were reasons after all. I lived in Kaukauna, Wis., I was 39 and alone, I was a felon forever, and this winter was already unbearable. In the summer the smell of Kaukauna is the smell of burnt shit mixed with ground-up cattle-lips—come see us some —but I would take that over a frozen Wisconsin January when things are not well with your soul. My girlfriend Jamie was gone, moved to St. Louis at the end of September, for a job. At least that's what she said. Her departure correlated exactly with me telling her I loved her for the first

I took it easy the night I got home. I did not think about the police arriving. I did not think about the consequences of another arrest, or the terror of going back to prison, or that truly, I would rather be dead. No lie. It was a casual night. I made supper, and I cleaned as best I could, did the dishes, made a vodka, and went to the couch to enjoy the Vicodin. Alcohol and Vicodin and a show called NCIS that I could not quite understand.

There were some good things to think about, though, and so I thought about them and leaned into my buzz. For example: I liked the feeling of my house tonight. My theory: in nearly a year I had not spent a night away, not one, so a long chain was broken, and being away had somehow bleached out the lasting memory of Jamie and I cohabitating.

It was also beautiful that I never had to go

Ball July 31, 2009, and Opium's attendant Literary Death Match, sort of the American Idol of indie lit (long as we're being crass—and who says we shouldn't be, considering the circumstances). Our 30th broadsheet's author Spencer Dew-Songs of Insurgency, Vagabond, 2008—will represent us in the mortal battle with the likes of Make mag, Ninth Letter, Switchback Books, the venerable ACM and others—surely loads of monstrous destruction await. Go Dew! Then watch for this issue's writer, Patrick Somerville, with Dew, contributor Greg Gerke (with the new *There's Something Wrong With Sven*) and the great **C.T. Ballentine** at Chicago's Quimby's, 1854 W. North Ave. in Wicker Park, Aug. 13 for the release reading, supported in part by a grant from an anonymous donor to Poets & Writers. In any case, this is Somerville's second broadsheet since the release of his short-story collection, Trouble, but the first since his novel, The Cradle, launched into the cultural imagination with coverage in the form of reviews in places as high as the New York Times Book Review. Don't let that turn you off, though, Somerville's work is as viscerally humorous and elegantly dramatic as the best out there, as evidenced in this epic story. He lives and writes in Chicago. \*\*BACK ISSUES are available as free pdf downloads at THE2NDHAND.com or for \$2 (or three

We're on our way north again, folks, for *Poetry* magazine's Chicago Printers

stamps) per issue to editor/publisher Todd Dills at the (note new) Nashville address below. If you like surprises, a sampler package of 5 issues is available for \$4, and lifetime subscriptions for donations of \$30 or more. We shall survive either fire, flood or earthquake, be assured (in the event of nuclear holocaust, all bets are off). Consider it (paypal todd@the2ndhand.com or send check by mail; info: THE2NDHAND.com). RSS: the2ndhand.com/rss/the2ndhand.xml.

\*\*WRITERS: send prose submissions (2,500 words or less Web, 5,000 print) to THE2NDHAND, c/o Todd Dills, 1430 Roberts Ave., Nashville, TN 37206 (todd@the2ndhand.com) or C.T. Ballentine (email only: ctballentine@gmail.com). THE2NDHAND is **editors** Todd Dills, C.T. Ballentine, **FAQ editor** Mickey Hess, and the janitor R. Beady. Literate (and soon-to-be-literate) apes unite.

back to work. The grocery was the job I'd had since the first week I moved to Kaukauna. My manager Kelly Dunn had a black belt in some self-defense bullshit and once, after he'd gotten comfortable with me and felt as though he knew me well, which he did not, he told me a story of going to Milwaukee for a date with a girl he'd gone to high school with who turned out to have become a hooker in the meantime, even though she tried for a lot of the night to cover it up. "Well, I figured it out," he said. (This guy always told stories with his arms crossed, pretty obviously to make his biceps look bigger.) "I could tell something was wrong with her. I said something about work and I started picking her story apart. She pretty much admitted she was a call-girl in the end and she cried and all that. Once I knew that I didn't give that lady the time of day and I drove straight home. Date over. No thank you."

"Was she nice?" I asked.

"Nice?" he said. "Are you not listening? She was a hooker." He said it all solemn and moral, like he'd taught her an important lesson by quitting the date, and he nodded gravely to encourage me to nod gravely as well. I found there to be something legitimately evil about Kelly from then on.

I watched a couple more shows, each a halfhour, and got up to get a new drink. I was aiming to be unconscious by 9:30. I was wobbly when I stood, but I just waited, staring at a crack in the wall to keep oriented until it passed. In the kitchen I pulled out ice and poured my drink. When I stirred, I looked out the window and strained to see the sky and see whether it looked like it would snow again. I prayed to the snow clouds to keep the cops from hearing whispers of my name. I asked them to send the kid back to his college, unhurt, with a story to tell his friends. I told them I was sorry.

When I looked down, my eye caught Mr. Kartalopolous, the next-door neighbor, framed in the window. He was sitting in his living room, right where he always sat, in his big brown recliner. I watched him. Jamie and I used to joke about him. We would invent stories about his perversions. Once, Jamie had this idea that at night, very late, Mr. Kartalopolous pressed a special button on his recliner that helped him perform fellatio on himself by folding into the perfect V shape with the perfect slopes. My joke was how he had granny porn on the TV all day, all night, because he was looking for the long-lost sweetheart who'd left him 65 years ago, not because he liked grannies. It was a lot easier to be serious without Jamie around. From this angle I couldn't see his televi-

sion, just his side, but I could see the lights from the TV on him. He was a real old guy. Must have been 85, with a good head of snow-white hair but a mouth that tended to hang open. He never left the house and he was a widower. Jamie and I went and said hello to him when we moved in. She made him some bad cookies. This was back when we were trying to be normal people. I shoveled for him when I could, toohe never asked, I never discussed it with him.

He had a chessboard on the coffee table in front of him. I always found that pretty interesting. Jamie had a joke about him occasionally putting the pieces up his ass, but for months and months I'd been waiting to see a game going, to see the pieces in different places—maybe a mail game? Maybe a friend who came by? But nothing ever moved. They were always home. And of course now, staring at him, all drugged up and in this newfound serious mode, the question seemed important: Who did he think he was playing against? Who would show up across that table? God? I had learned to play in prison and it had won me cigarettes and toast. I missed it.

I must have looked at him for five minutes, buzzed and floating, thinking that I'd catch him moving a piece now, tonight, and it would be like catching the tooth fairy. "You know what?" I said aloud. I put my pills in my pocket and took my half-bottle of vodka and stuck it under my arm and took my second tray of ice out of the freezer, and with just those things, no jacket or nothing, I went out into the cold, went to the sidewalk, walked 15 feet, turned, went up to his door, and rang the bell.

He opened up right before I turned to go back home.

"Who's that?" he asked, squinting up at me. "Is that Eric McMichael?" He had on his glasses and was wearing a big white cardigan thing. An odor flowed forth from the house. Pipe tobacco and cat piss.

"No," I said. "Not Eric." I had no idea who Eric McMichael was and I wondered if I should have said his last name, too.

"What can I do for you?"

"It's Herb from next door," I said, leaning down, sort of trying to meet him halfway, verticalwise. I swear he grew a little bit when I did that, too, like me leaning down stretched him.

There was some wind tonight. I probably looked like hell. I was talking too loud. A paranoid old person would have right around now begun to believe a robbery was afoot. I smiled at him with teeth. I next tried to stick my thumb out and jab toward my house, but it turned out to be the hand all wrapped up in the cast, and so it was more of a general gesture that fucking hurt so badly I wanted to cry when I made it.

"Herb?" he said. "From next door?" He squinted more and poked his head out of the door to look at my house. "You live there?" he asked. "That's your house?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "That's my house."

"Is it?" he said shrewdly.

"I rent," I said.

"I know you rent," he said. "I know your landlady. She used to live there but she moved to Kohler, didn't she?"

"You'd probably know better than me." We looked at the house together. "Me and my girlfriend Jamie lived there for most of the last year," I said. "We met you a couple times?"

"I remember," he said. "I remember the awful cookies."

"She wasn't much of a baker."

"I'm not senile," he said. "I remember what hap-

"So I--"



## JOIN THE COLUMBIA COLLEGE CHICAGO FICTION WRITING DEPARTMENT.

YOUR STORIES. YOUR FUTURE.

OFFERINGS: BA or BFA in Fiction Writing, with specializations in Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, Playwriting, Electronic Applications, Publishing, and Story Workshop Teaching . BA or BFA in Playwriting, interdisciplinary with the Theater Department · MFA in Creative Writing-Fiction, with specializations in Fiction, Creative Nonfiction, Playwriting, and Teaching . MA in the Teaching of Writing, featuring the Story Workshop approach · Combined MFA/MA Degrees

Columbia College Chicago admits students without regard to age, race, color, creed, sex, religion, hundicap, disability, sexual orientation, and national or ethnic origin

WWW.COLUM.EDU



COLLEGE CHICAGO

"You're the fellow who shovels for me once in awhile, then, too," he said. "I've seen it."

"That's right," I said.

"Come to collect?"

"Collect what?"

"Your payment." "Not at all," I said. "I did that for free."

"It'd be amusing if you turned out to be the grim reaper. 'Come to collect' might have had two meanings,' he said. "In that way I just used it. You missed that, didn't you? I was doing a pun."

"It was hilarious," I said. "I did miss it."

He stopped smiling. I felt a little bad, as though I'd offended him or hurt his feelings by not smiling when I called his joke hilarious, but the truth was I was now pretty much hypothermic and also far less keen on entering the house and getting involved in a couple hours of some Laurel and Hardy routine he'd been waiting ten years to unleash on somebody. The romanticism was completely out of me.

"Aren't you cold like that?" he asked. "Just in a white t-shirt? What're you trying to prove?"

"I came by to see if you wanted to have a drink," I

I twisted so he could see the bottle.

He appraised it. He said, "Well, that's something. That's good, actually."

It turned out I had the right password. The old man led me in and I pulled the door shut behind me. The smell now was even stronger, but I didn't see any cat. He had his heat on high, too, just blasting, a lot of lights as well. The place was carpeted everywhere, light brown, even right in the foyer. Big, thick carpet, brown. The walls were brown wood paneling, which I usually thought looked cheap, but in here it was OK if you added the smell of the pipe and the carpet and all the light. It seemed like he was a very tidy person, too, which I hadn't expected. Of course, there were the brownish liverspots on his face. Brown curtains. If there was a cat, and it was brown...

"What the hell happened to you?" he asked. He was walking away from me, heading back toward his living room, and he didn't turn around to speak. He kept moving and disappeared through the doorway.

I stared at where he'd been. "What's that?"

"What happened to your hand, Helen Keller?" "Oh," I said, looking at the cast. "I broke my

hand."

"Were you planning on standing in the foyer to have that drink?" he asked.

I was much, much too fucked up to be making social calls, I realized. I was way over the line. But I didn't want to walk out on him. There was still the idea of a game, but beyond that just being a good neighbor. So right here I kinda got my bearings and told myselfwhat I mean is that the stern and sober part you retain all the time spoke up and told me: Don't act like a jerk, Herb. Just be a regular guy. He's your neighbor, have a drink. Keep it together. This isn't a blind date.

I went into the living room. He was back in his chair already, facing the TV, totally still, the Kartalopolous I knew well but from the other side. And I could now actually see the TV, a standard Magnavox, maybe 35 inches. The Weather Channel was on. There was the coffee table and there was the chessboard. There was his empty couch. And there, through his window, was my window. Through that, my kitchen, which of course was

For a second I imagined the new picture on my own kitchen wall. Kartalopolous was in his chair, like normal, but there was a poorly-lit, off-balance Herb standing in the corner. "My kitchen's awful white," I

He turned and looked. "I guess you could say so,"

he said, then turned back to the TV. "Can't tell from in there."

"Why wouldn't you be able to tell the color from

inside it?"

"Don't know." "It's the same color either way. What? Does your paint change depending on your distance to it?"

"What?

"Do you have magic paint?" "No," I said. I nodded at him for too long, then moved my nod to be a nod at the door to his kitchen and said, "I'll make the drinks. I got vodka and ice. That's what I'm having."

"You bring anything to mix it with?"

"I guess I'm having vodka and ice as well. Or vodka and shoe polish."

I was on my way to the kitchen, but I stopped. Kartalopolous looked pretty satisfied with himself. "You like joking around," I said.

"Is that the question?"

"Yes."

"You're asking me if I like joking?"

"You tell a lot of jokes," I said.

"I like a good joke."

I went into the kitchen. I came back out. "Some of them I could do without," I said.

I went back to the kitchen and didn't stay to see his reaction. I found some glasses right where I thought his glasses were going to be, dumped in the ice, poured the vodka, and that was that. He had your standard kitchen. It reminded me of mine. I forgot what I was doing. I looked at my ice cubes and remembered. When I opened the freezer I saw that he had two whole ice trays full of ice cubes and realized it had been stupid to bring my ice cubes along.

## KARTALOPOLOUS WAS A

talker, or at the very least me being there didn't appear to alter him much. He chatted, left me to my grunts, talked about the weather. I told him the basics about Jamie leaving in about eight seconds and he nodded with his vodka in his hand and said, "That's tough, sure." A memory came into my head about a time I'd been at a country bar with her, right after we started dating, still back in Florida. I was at the bar itself and she was line-dancing on the open floor with only a couple other people, big smile on her face. At first glance she was too fat to be wearing a shirt as tight as she was wearing, but she was graceful, in her way, and confident, and she knew the dance, and I could tell the other men in the bar were befuddled by it, as though they thought they knew better than to find her attractive, but they did anyway. Jamie had something invisible and could do that. I didn't try to tell this story. I didn't know how, and it seemed to have no point.

Instead I told the story about the fight and he nodded at the right parts. Now and then he glanced at the television, but he was listening. I thought it was going to turn out that all the time, all day, every day, he was in here watching the Weather Channel. That was sort of his thing, I guessed. I thought we would watch the Weather Channel for a few hours now and I would turn into an honorary old person with him, and that would be the night. But he was just checking because a storm was coming in, and after we saw the radar he flipped over to a college football game on ESPN and set the remote on the table.

"I was just thinking you would stay on the Weather Channel."

"This is a good game," he said. "Florida." "Looks close." I couldn't see the numbers.

"You wouldn't think cold vodka in the winter would work right," he said, after another sip. "But it does. For a long time they thought you were un-American if you drank Stoli."

"Is that right?"

He looked down at his glass. "But this isn't Stoli, is it?"

"No. Gordon's."

"They mainly do gin," he said. "English."

I was now staring at the chessboard.

"I like that board, by the way," I said. "Can I ask you where you got that?"

"You sure can," he said. "It's a nice one, isn't it?" He was finally starting to seem less sour.

He leaned forward and set his glass down on the table beside it, then gave the board a push to angle it toward me. The pieces were always very blocky with these sets, all right angles with different faces and slightly different heights. I thought they were ugly. The bishops were pointed hats but the King's crown was flat. It was stupid.

"My daughter brought it back from Mexico for me about five years ago. She said they've got these everywhere down in the Yucatan, all marble. Tourists like to buy them. Don't ask me why."

"I used to see them in Florida, too."

"There's your team," he said, gesturing at the TV, smiling. "You're not rooting for them? It's the national championship.'

"I don't really watch football."

"You're in the wrong state, then. Why the hell'd you come up here from there? That girl?"

"You miss being warm?"

"It's nice seeing everything freeze over and die." I again found myself looking at the board. I didn't feel

the need to bother explaining. "So you play, then?" he said.

"I used to."

"I take it you want to."

"Sure," I said. "But I don't want to invite myself over to your house and challenge you to a game."

"Well," he said, looking at his watch. "What time is it, now? Ten? I think I got one in me. You got a little more Gordon's for me?"

I took his glass back to the kitchen and filled him up and brought him his drink. I went back and filled myself up. There was a chair folded up by the radiator, so I took my drink into the living room, set it down, and went back and got it.

"You can be white since you threw down the gauntlet." I unfolded the chair. He said, "You're not here to hustle me, now, are you?"

"Only if I'm about to hustle you out of zero dollars." We'll play for honor, then. That's what gentlemen do.

When it was time I moved what I always moved when I started on white: king's pawn forward one square. It was a cheap move that sometimes gave people the willies, as they tended to wonder why the hell I didn't just take the second square and be done with it. He brought out his queen's knight and I mirrored him. He brought out his other knight and I mirrored that, too.

"Well holy hell," he said, squinting at the board. "It's a stampede."

"It is."

"That's what I like about chess. Always a new combination. They got names, you know."

"I know they have names."

"I never remember the names," he said. "But I remember the combinations."

"Let's call this one the Stampede Opening. That's

what happens when you've got two players who like to use knights.'

He agreed with a grunt and studied the board. It was a stupid thing to have said.

Things slowed considerably after the first few moves, and neither he nor I got very aggressive. We were both content to build up defense, although I was a step ahead and passed on a couple of opportunities to throw a monkey wrench in his plans. Depending on the opponent, I sometimes would send a kamikaze bishop all the way down the line and go down a piece just to ruin any chance of a castle, but also to fool people into thinking I didn't know what I was doing. Both things are jail tricks, though, and more about making someone angry or overconfident. I didn't do it now because I thought it might be rude, like using the wrong spoon at a dinner party. I guessed things like that wouldn't work against normal players. Anger's a big part of the game in jail.

Early tests came up, but both of us passed on chances to trade pieces. We were both still playing conservative.

"Tell me a little more about that fight," he said, after I'd finally spilled some blood about a dozen moves in. "I was never a fighter. I've always wondered about fights."

"They're always more boring than you think." "Oh yeah?"

I nodded. "This is a lot more exciting," I said. We'd had two pawns staring one another right in the face for a good five moves and I was tired of waiting for him to jab in. I had my queen to cover after he took my pawn, but he had nothing else on the square, even though he'd had plenty of chances to firm it up.

"So what happened?"

"Just a fight," I said. "Outside of Staxx. A young guy. I was trying to go home and he was standing outside and wanted me to stay and talk to him while he smoked his cigarette. He seemed friendly at first."

"What'd he talk about?" "He asked me if I ever looked back and wished I'd been more adventuresome when I was his age. He was..." I trailed off, thinking about it. "He was doing

that thing when people pretend to be philosophers." Kartalopolous seemed to like this. He chuckled and the smile stayed on his face. I realized he was very drunk. He was past ten ounces of straight vodka. "Young people should never get too thoughtful," he was saying. "No matter what they say, if they look serious, it's going to come out as horseshit." I nodded. "There's something insulting about what he said to you." Kartalopolous nodded toward the wall. "There's a lack of respect there."

"Amen."

"Said the young one."

"Still, though."

"How old are you?" "39."

"You look about 50. 39? I'm twice that. You're nothing. So what'd you say back to him?" he asked. He finally took the pawn and I took his with my queen right away. He nodded at this move.

"I told him I didn't spend much time hanging out at Staxx when I was his age, then I told him not to talk to me about adventure."

"How'd he like that?"

"I don't think he understood what I meant."

"What did you mean?"

"I have no idea."

"Then why'd you even have the fight?"

"I attacked him after that, I guess."

I looked down. My hand was resting on my thigh. I tried to remember the moment and I couldn't remember much. I probably just sort of attacked him.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the Vicodin. Kartalopolous glanced at the bottle and watched me pop the cap. "What's that there?" he said. "Pain meds," I said. "For the hand."

"If you're sharing the vodka, you're sharing the pain meds."

"You serious?"

"Hell yes, I'm serious," he said, his voice lilting up high. "About as serious as winning this game. I like those pills."

"How about a half?" I said.

He considered this. "How strong are they?" he said. "Pretty strong," I said. "A whole one'll probably put your old ass to bed."

"OK. Half, then. I can tell you're sharper than you seem, Teddy. That's sorta your game, isn't it?"

"My name's Herb, Mr. Kartalopolous."

"Oh," he said. I gave him half of a pill and took a whole one

myself. We got back to it and I stared at the board, trying to focus and think up something a little more substantial than a move-at-a-time approach. It dawned on me that Kartalopolous had intentionally sucked my queen out with the pawn-trade.

I frowned, put my face in my hands, leaned down. Yes. He had. Or at the very least had been hoping to and waiting on it for that reason, betting on me being casual and sloppy instead of organizing better with the pawns because that was probably a good bet with someone like me.

Very soon, he had multiple attacks on her and she all at once didn't seem too powerful.

"OK," I said. "OK, I see."

There was a fork on his next turn-king and bishop-but I had to get my queen out of the way of the long diagonal he'd opened up in his last turn, another little something I had missed. He'd be up a piece,

whichever way I went to save my queen.

So be it, I thought. Been here before. I reached forward to move, but stopped. There was something I was missing on the board, but I couldn't see.

Kartalopolous pulled out his pipe and lit it. His eyes were slits as he meditated on the board and I didn't think he cared I was taking so long. The black and white of the marble had a cold beauty to it on its own, as did our pieces, but his smoke was hovering down on it, too, which added something like a fog around them, and on top of that I now saw much better just how coordinated his pieces were, just how deliberate his setup had been, just how advantageous of a position he'd gotten himself into. At least I could see it. That's one of your prettier invisible beauties, whether or not you or your opponent built it. He was the better player.

I played from further and further behind for about a half-hour. I was going to lose eventually, so long as he didn't make a mistake. I scored a couple of pawns on him and hatched a decent plan for a final little attack, but one move away from launching it he brought out his queen, and when she came out for the first time the trumpets blared and all that. Three moves and he had a rook. I felt like punching him, but for a microsecond, of course. He was classy in that he grew quiet as he got further ahead, but you sensed it was because his concentration was deepening, not because he was bored or satisfied by his superiority. There's some honor for you.

Not much later I had my king and queen and two pawns left on the board. He had six pawns, his queen, and both rooks, and his king was snug inside of his castle. Kartalopolous was finished with his pipe and his arms were crossed. We both looked down. I hadn't so much as knocked on his door. My head felt a little clearer. I sat and thought about a few of the moves he'd made and wondered whether there was a point in a game when everything changed. By that I mean one exact flash of time that's connected. I thought about the pawns facing each other early on. There was a mistake that snowballed. Holding out until I was ready or bringing in some reinforcements would have changed that flash. Kartalopolous liked all the combinations but I liked how many possibilities funneled down into just one. You started with two rows each and the math of it (or so it seemed) demanded a moment when the slope shifted. Wasn't that so? I wondered whether the math could be gotten around with the right perspective. I imagined me dancing a particular dance and avoiding the laws of the universe altogether. Of course there was no such thing, not in the game, and that was as it should have been. I looked at the pieces he'd taken there along the edge of the board. I'd made some mistakes but it didn't feel like there was a backbreaker. I laughed out loud when I thought that.

I retrieved one of my rooks from his row of captured pieces.

"You know anything about math?" I said, holding the rook close to my face.

It was a cool rectangle with a human face, heavy in my hand. Ninety degrees, I thought. I went back in my head to when he got it from me, then back further, to the fork, when I thought he'd get my queen. That was the real turning point.

I turned the rook upside down. The squat face stared back. "You think you can get these sets made with your own face in the pieces?" I said.

Kartalopolous was slumped in his recliner, his head back and mouth open. I was so drunk I saw three of him. "You dead?" I said.

He snorted and shifted his head.

"You won," I said. I moved the table and leaned his chair back so he could spend the night reclined. Jamie's old joke occurred to me, but I didn't laugh; it was stupid.

Blankets and pillows were in the closet. I put a blanket on him, what the hell, and thought about passing out right on his couch. I put the glasses in the sink and dropped the empty bottle in the can and retrieved my ice cube tray, and on my way by the board I tapped my king with the tip of my cast and the big rectangular piece clunked over.

The blizzard rolled in and I didn't sleep well. I woke up three or four times that night, convinced I heard knocking at the door. Cops knock a certain way, and that was the knock, swear to Christ, but each time I stumbled over to the window or downstairs to the peephole there was no one around, just blowing snow. Kaukauna was buried by dawn, and in the morning, early for me, I duct-taped the handle of my shovel to the cast and took care of my walkway, then Kartalopolous's. I gave him a little military salute when I was done; he was most likely still passed out.

I imagined him in his chair.

I gave his house the finger.

To the loser goes some honor as well, I thought, and I went home. The Earth's plans to doom me had gone momentarily haywire and the angels controlling the traps had fallen asleep at their stations, it appeared. Or I had just gotten lucky, and there was no plan to doom me. The point was the cops weren't coming, I had skated by. All day, I straightened up and tinkered, and I just kept thinking the same thing: OK. So now come on, Herbie. For once, take advantage.

Next up: Al Burian, September 2009

# HISTORY WAS ALWAYS A **DULL SUBJECT AT KENMORE** by Daniel Gallik

"What is it you want?" Linda said this to Bob, and then excused herself to wash clothes. Bob mosied on down to the garage to fix something. No kids for these two.

Across the street two other couples lived. This part of Kenmore was starting to be called "Childless Alley." None of the couples entertained each other. All had separate lives. Husbands did things. Wives did things. All were individuals doing their own things in their own ways during their own times. All had work. Linda was a barmaid at

Herm's Cafe. Bob was one of the last mechanics that worked at an actual gas station over in the downtown area. Mark sold computers. El was into working at the Chuckery at the University of Akron. Joseph was a prognosticator for the Akron Beacon Journal. (He called it the Jerkin Beanol.) And Les was a sous chef at Antoini's Ristorante. All productive, all important members of their communities in northeaster Ohio. In walks a married man to the neighborhood. Abby

Markins was separated from his lovely wife Lindal. Abby

liked to talk. He called up Linda and said, "I have a for-

mer wife with a name close to yours. She is nice. But she

is gone. Can we talk?" Well, of course, Linda was taken

aback, but said, "Sure." They would meet at the local B&W and chat over root beers. Very nice, very next-doorish. All four of the other couples saw them coming home from their jobs, saw them talking and sucking on straws. All four were aroused. Abby kept calling Linda. It got to be cute. Bob knew

nothing of this affair. Nothing. A year passed. Two years passed.

The four saw blatant kissing. Saw the two hug and walk home. Were titillated. Bob worked on his cars. And other projects. Finally, news appeared in the Beacon. Death In Kenmore. Murder. Mouths shut, eyes closed. No one knew what to think. Linda was buried. First there

was a service at Akron Baptist Temple. Linda was buried. Folks went home. And the hum of life after a few weeks continued in the neighborhood. Everyone doing what they did. Later, the next year, Bob started to call up one of the ladies, I think it was EI, and ask her to have a chili dog with him. El didn't think much of it. Things got going. And there was more to talk about in Kenmore. Much more. Things felt normal again. Things felt right. No one thought about history at all. Yeah, there was no need to watch TV.

Danial Gallik lives and writes in northern Ohio. His work has been pub-

lished widely. For more, visit the2ndhand.com or danielgallik.com.