WHEN MY older brother, Rick, left Tacoma for South Vietnam—he was going to be an infantryman in the Delta, a radio operator—I was at nineteen given to understand that people from families such as my own invariably came to a mean and wasteful end. It was January of 1969, a Thursday, and I was poring over chess books, in preparation for the upcoming Washington State Chess Championship. Just that morning I had stood somberly alongside my mother and father at the bus station downtown, saying goodbye to newly minted Pfc. Rick. By evening, joint in hand, I was slightly stoned, still trying to unwind from what I had witnessed earlier. I sat with a Chess Informant #46 at my elbow, analyzing on my magnetic pocket chess set a brilliant innovation by Bobby Fischer, a move so profound it overturned in a single stroke decades of grandmasterly assumptions.

Stirred, perhaps, by Bobby’s improbable victory over communal and ingrained ideas, I saw in my own dogged attention to the move an attempt to renounce the certain outcome of my older brother’s tour of duty, the certainty of which had been made clear to me that morning at the bus station. I began nodding. Outcomes, I knew even then, were echoes
of their beginnings and middles. The trajectory could be traced, the trace illuminated, sources identified.

It could not be denied that my brother’s beginnings and middles under the family roof commingled with my own. There was contamination involved, leaching, a hoary and involuntary exchange of cells and fluids, DNA. Once, maybe twice, I thumped my chess set for emphasis. I found myself suddenly teary. I stretched out my arms then, wriggling my hands around, and by this act gave form to what I had always known but had never before confronted: at the core of our shared history, mine and Rick’s, burned only a great empty nothing, a vast and terrible chasm excluding brother Rick from the fate-altering sources of strength and community that family life is intended to promote.

Fact: until he left that morning on the bus, Rick had seemed composed only occasionally of actual physical mass. My older brother’s conduct of daily life had occurred just out of my line of vision, like a TV flickering in the corner. Rick was, in effect, the idea of an older brother, not the older brother himself, and, like most things one step removed, Rick had always willingly and without complaint accepted temporary reclassification by others into being the thing itself, aware in some household-pet kind of way that his fortunes rose and fell at the whim of those, such as myself, whose collective will constitutes the social and physical world. That, like it or not, was the nature of things. Right or wrong was not the issue.

Still, I now affirmed that I had never willfully obstructed Rick’s forays into a wider, fuller existence; at the same time I could not help admitting in certain synapse-depleted regions of my unconscious mind that I had sometimes offered up Rick’s life to unnamed natural deities in exchange for increasingly brutish rewards, concluding during my junior and senior years with sincere prayers for a richly pornographic hour with Annie Hershberger, who lived in the Sorenson Trailer Park and wore hot pants like no one else. For such acts no court of law could have or would have convicted me, true. There was, as well, much to be said for standing up for yourself and for your place in the world. Winters, for example, I joined with neighbors Dan Bacha and Tim Underwood in grinding my brother’s face into mounds of dirty snow. Summers, we jabbed Rick’s fat gut with a rake handle until rosy welts bloomed on his skin in a lush, garden-like patch. Once, making some point or other about weak chess players, I told some mocking Rick-story in front of Russ Rasmussen, the Tacoma Chess Club ratings-ladder leader and many-times Washington State Chess Champion. “You got your white sheep, you got your black sheep,” said Rasmussen, shaking his head. “Then you just got sheep.”
I could not have agreed more. Though my mother, Cindy, and father, Marion, had wondered aloud sometimes if the abuse I meted out was intended to punish my dim and flabby elder brother for being unlovable, and though to me the word *unlovable* sounded foreign and hysterical, altogether inappropriate, I had never been able to restrain from noting, publicly and defiantly, a mewling lack in my older brother. This lack, this absence, was of concern not only to me but, I believed, to the entire community. By proximity and parasitic contact, Rick posed the threat of infection. He was a corruption, a distortion, a shrinkage, even, of the rigorous and unforgiving larger order.

There was much evidence. Rick was large-hipped, questionably muscled, possessed of soft pouty lips and luxurious brown hair; he wore thick, black horn-rims and blushed easily; when the sun slanted just so, flooding between pine branches, his cheeks sometimes turned so pink you had to wonder if had applied a layer of rouge. He couldn’t fight, and in personality he was grimly unimaginative, once pissing his pants in the hallway when the cylinder on the bathroom doorknob snapped, barring his entry, rather than risking discovery by relieving himself into a glass tumbler or a bucket from the garage. So when out of nowhere Rick would cry—and he cried all the time, a regular baby boo-hoo—I did not ask what was wrong. When we argued, I simply hit him, then watched in silence as Rick fell to the floor and spouted outrage, too slow to fend off blows, too stupid to shut up. We shared nothing, not friends, bikes, smokes, ways to steal change from vending machines.

But now in Vietnam Rick was going to get the top of his head blown off, and when he lay dying in the elephant grass he would think to himself how loud the flies were buzzing today and how muggy the air had grown and how dizzy he felt, and maybe even how the voices of his platoon buddies hovering overhead brought him comfort and joy. He would not think of Tacoma or his mother or father, and he would certainly not think of his younger brother, who, that night, pausing after Bobby Fischer’s brilliant new move, found himself weepy with shock and self-recrimination that all he could think to do at the bus station earlier was to shake his older brother’s hand and say, stupidly, “Take care of yourself.”

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

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

Surely Columbus, centuries ago, had experienced such a moment of awareness: months of muscular, rude waves and empty, gaping horizons, enormous and mushrooming heavens. Sky above, water below. The cosmos growing, day by day. Then out of nowhere: a strip of island, a black smudge. *India,* Columbus reported wrongly, but that couldn’t have been his most immediate or most significant thought. The smudge surely did not inspire in him the objective contemplation of his commercial and scientific idea, the verifiable end of a long train of inquisitive thought. The most immediate, and meaningful, response aboard his stinking and unhappy ship must surely have been of awe, of helpless, fearful praise in the presence of something strange and powerful. What that smudge
actually was made little difference, at least at first. Any number of images would have sufficed: mermaids, an orange and purple circle of jutting rocks, a phalanx of futuristic skyscrapers, even apparitions, the guardians of the mystic Spanish universe. All would have burned into his mind with the intensity of a clapping, bubbling emotion, the unprovoked kiss of a girl you just met, the curious, burrowing muzzle of an animal you didn’t know was creeping up from behind. *I am small*, one thinks at such moments. *The story is in progress and cannot be stopped.*

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

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

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

Rassmussen appeared to be in his late thirties, compact and dark-haired, with small pitted holes on one cheek that had grown so smooth over the years they appeared to have been scooped by a tiny spoon. When he walked into the club, heads turned, and when his fine-looking girlfriend (Rassmussen never revealed her name) strolled in occasionally to say hi, she sent electricity up everyone’s spine. Regardless of the weather, Rassmussen always wore a nice long-sleeved, button-down shirt and a brown sport coat, an attractive and even necessary wardrobe, I thought, if you spent weekends hunched over a chessboard, alongside rows of the grossly ugly and fearful and inept, who also, bafflingly and unexpectedly—they are nothing like *me*, one thinks, they are aberrations—filled those nearby rows of tables and chairs, and said hello to you and made howlingly stupid moves with their chessmen. An instructor of English at the community college, Rassmussen smoked Dunhills housed in a small, narrow cardboard box and claimed not to understand that
a *tenny runner* was what kids in Tacoma called a sneaker, all of which gave him an air of rigor and sophistication, especially when viewed in the context of his polite but distancing lack of interaction with the afore-mentioned patzers and woodpushers—"fish," in chess parlance, the bottom-dwellers blind to the tricks being played upon them by the strong players above.

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

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

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

Now, Tuesdays and Thursday evenings, and on weekends, I trained with chessmaster Russ Rassmussen. We played five-minute chess for quarters. We reviewed mating attacks with bishop and knight versus king, contemplated rook and pawn endings, studied variations and sub-variations of the King’s Indian, the Sicilian, and the Ruy Lopez. “Pay attention,” said Rassmussen, snapping his fingers. “You’ve got to be here, not floating around.” So I straightened in my chair. I watched Rassmussen take apart my Nimzo-Indian. Then I showed Rassmussen a gambit line in the French Defense; Rassmussen found a flaw immediately. We stayed until the buses stopped running.

Through it all, through the bitter coffee in Styrofoam cups that Rassmussen brought along, I could not still my mind long enough to stop thinking about that awful morning at the bus station. I thought about it in roundabout ways. I thought, for example, about our family’s living situation. We lived in a small, boxy house in the south part of the city, at its farthest point, in unincorporated Tacoma. The house stood on a crumbling unpaved street where neighbors were set far apart, separated by mole mounds, patches of foxglove, and spindly firs that grew heavy with moisture and sometimes dropped sodden branches onto cars. I had pulled a 3.0 GPA in high school without ever doing homework, and friends called me Brainiac (I had won the state high-school chess championship my junior year), but I had no plans, and money was tight so I lived in my parents’ attached garage, despite the wolf spiders in the shag rug by my bed and, especially during dry months, the bloated snakeflies that rose in the night to burrow into my mattress and deposit larvae.

I had never been sure how, in a legal sense, the unincorporated part of Tacoma differed from the incorporated part. I knew only that the houses around me were dark and peeling, and everyone’s yard was treacherously soft, rotting underfoot from the seepage of decaying septic tanks. It rained a lot in Tacoma, and in the aftermath of storms or drizzles, grey, still pools appeared on our swayback roof and out in the rough terrain of the unincorporated gravel road, and everything got muddy.
and smelled like moss. Late into the evening, after the air turned chilly, insects walked the water, their pinprick ripples the only movement, and you got the sense that you were not in Tacoma at all, but in some place ancient and recurring, one full of drain water and holes, like a stretch of battleground.

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

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

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

“All the little Cornish hens nice in a row,” she said, roaring down the incorporated street. “*Look* at these houses.” She had a thing about Cornish hens. For years she had prepared dinners of Cornish hens, four whole birds on four plates, and even when the family stopped having dinners together, sometimes I saw her at the table, sawing with a plastic knife and fork through the innards of a freshly cooked Cornish hen. They were perfect, she’d always said: complete, separate, an entire creature in miniature. And it was true, you felt important when you ate one, like a giant. In a few quick bites you could swallow everything, limbs and breasts and neck.

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

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I had been blessed with certain attributes—a fine head of blond hair, a pleasant face, a compressed stomach. Rick, who had not been blessed with certain attributes, had always been blubbery, even after basic training, as were so many of the fish at the chess club. The club was always full of stinky fat men, and they moved as slowly as dray animals. There were cripples, too, men in wheelchairs, and quiet, doughy boys who didn’t like the sun; and there were blotchy alcoholics and bearded men who apparently didn’t bathe. Occasionally, unkempt souls in dirty pants wandered in and helped themselves to coffee. Months ago, I had looked on with approval when Mr. Finnegan walked in, Mr. Finnegan looking like Burt Lancaster, tall and athletic, well-groomed, Mr. Finnegan, who might as well have punched me in the face when he told Russ Rasmussen he was a machinist and out of a job.

Now these men filled me with rage. Now I wanted them dead. “Quiet,” I barked at a chatty newcomer. I picked up a pawn and cocked my arm, as if to hurl it at the offender’s head.
“Oh, my,” whispered Rassmussen. He reached into his pants pocket and much to my surprise pulled out a folded Swiss army knife. “You’ll be using this next if you’re not careful.” He quickly put the knife back into his pocket, then reached across the chessboard and placed a hand on my arm. “Focus,” he said, gently. “Just let them be. We all play the hand we’re dealt.”

Rassmussen’s fingers weighed a ton. They seemed to burn into my skin. I looked Rassmussen in the eye. What if, I wondered, the hand I had been dealt was in fact Rassmussen’s hand? There were sources, traces, trajectories binding us together. I had known Rassmussen for more than a year. We were at the top, the lion and the cub. Rassmussen had chosen me, for Christ’s sake. Rassmussen had the big talent, and maybe I did, too. I told my friends Dan Bacha and Tim Underwood I won money in tournaments—local ones, to be sure, but officially sanctioned tournaments, nonetheless—and they called me a professional. I never bothered to correct them. I had cash in my pocket; I had trophies on a bookshelf and an inscribed certificate from the United States Chess Federation.

With Rassmussen as tutor, I thought I might even win the state championship, might get my photo in the paper. At some distant point I might even be another Rassmussen, a man with a white-collar job, with neatly pressed clothes, a man with a presentable face and body, a fine-looking girlfriend, a sense of humor appreciated by others, a ready fund of knowledge about the world outside (coming in late one evening, Rassmussen had excused himself, saying he’d been working on the McGovern campaign). Once, I had smelled alcohol on Rassmussen’s breath, but it had been late in the evening and near Christmas. The man presented a wonderful picture, and that night I had a flying dream. In the morning, I swore I would cut back on weed and the occasional chaser of speed, and cease masturbating altogether, at least until after the state championship.

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

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

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

“Oh, I will,” I said, capturing another of my friend’s chess pieces. “I’m on a mission.”

Marion calmly wheezed, talking loudly from a chair in the kitchen. Cindy sat across the table, watching Walter Cronkite on their small black-and-white TV. “Sir, what you gonna do?” said Marion to no one in particular. “You sir, that’s right, you.” He stared glumly at some point on the wall.

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

I captured another of Tim’s chessmen and shouted out to Marion: “If I ever saw a gook here, I wouldn’t want to be in his shoes.” I then shook my head for a long time, signaling that what I’d do to the trespasser was too terrible to tell.

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

“Do you want another beer?” Cindy said, turning from the TV.

“Yes ma’am,” Marion said. “I want another beer.”

She watched him pull out a Schlitz. “Well, you know where they are.”

Marion walked back to his chair.

“You know what I’d do?” I said. I looked up from the chessboard at Marion, then at Cindy. “I’d beat the shit out of the gook, that’s what I’d do.”
Marion got up and opened the door to the utility room. He rolled the cold can across his forehead and proceeded down the stairs.

Cindy shook her head and looked at me. “No swear words in the house,” she said. She balled up a fist, raised her arm slightly, then discarded something.

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

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We live implausibly but admit to only the plainest of sins. The two parts of that sentence are as close to making sense of my past I have ever found. The soaring of the first part is forever shackled to the mutters of the second: soar mutter, soar mutter, soar mutter, over and over so fast and so hard the oppositions threaten to break the middle. Things began to happen quickly, and for me time took on a fantastical, herky-jerky quality, though one with a pattern, with a movement forward, like when you’re swimming, the water thunking against you, your face shining and clean, and you suddenly plunge upside-down, driven for reasons you cannot say toward the sea grasses and sand, down into a strong-arming current that bullies you along wherever it wants to go.

Rick was killed in action October 12, 1969, outside the village of Quang Ngu, known locally for its excellent rice wine. Cindy and Marion did not weep, at least not in front of me or the neighbors, trying hard, I heard them say on the phone, to be strong for their boy still there. It was that language—we’re being strong for our boy here—that I remember most clearly, that I understood as proof of what had happened, words treadworn and wrong, and, because treadworn and wrong, terrifying. Cindy brought home dinners of Kentucky Fried Chicken; Marion mowed the grass three days in a row. There was a shopping trip: a new tie, dress-up black shoes. Then I sat quietly in the back of the Buick. Lots of cars were parked in front of the church. Marion addressed Ken or Mike, some barking kind of name, and let hands rest on his shoulder. “We lost one boy. . . .” Marion said, miserably, vaguely biblically. His face seemed to collapse. “And we found the other.” Cindy turned away and her shoulders began to tremble.

It was as though Marion had opened the wrong book, was quoting from the wrong pages. What does that mean? I wanted to ask, but didn’t. What are you saying? On the car ride back, we all looked out the windows. Cindy baked some cherry brownies—for the smell, she said; the smell always cheered her up—and Marion stood with her in the kitchen and put his hand around her waist whenever she was still.
Evening, I was still lying in my bed in the garage, stroking my new tie, which I declared to Cindy and Marion was my new favorite. My room had always been a mess, and now the mess and the poor light and the smell seemed an accusation. Behind my bed, on top of a dented ice cooler, were paper plates crusted with mustard and bits of pizza. Clothes lay in detergent boxes piled atop older, crushed boxes from which leaked glimpses of rags and garden gloves and oddly affecting objects—a miniature stirrup, a plastic battleship, a clock reading Sprite, a baseball glove without webbing. mementos I could no longer associate with the person who owned them. My bookshelves, lines of planks and concrete blocks, had been stacked with dog-eared books and papers and journals with vaguely thrilling titles, Der Schachspieler, 64, The Blackmar-Deimer, Pawn Power, D’Echecs Europa #23. In front of me was a Dutch Masters cigar box containing my chess notes and tournament games; on the cement floor, croutons, a dirty glass, a mysterious white button, a few tooth-marked plastic pens, and floor stains of indeterminate origin and color spreading toward the door. My chessboard lay at an angle in one corner; my chessmen, greasy and dull, were scattered in another.

So I rolled up the garage door. I walked to the end of the driveway and wrestled the metal garbage can into my room. I swept with a push broom. I poured motor-oil cleanser onto a small space on the floor, the area in front of my bed, and I scrubbed the surface clean. I tightened the screws on a folded card table near the door and dragged it to the cleared space, then I wiped the table clean and, with architectural precision, placed my board and pieces in the exact center of the table. The pieces and board I wiped clean, too, rubbing until they gleamed, and on one corner of the table I carefully placed a new black pen, and on the other I placed a new booklet of chess score sheets. I brought in a small wooden chair from the kitchen and aligned it in front of the table. The result was so perfect I found myself shy in touching the arrangement. When I finally sat down, straightening my tie, my heart was racing, and I nodded to myself, pleased at the bright, uniform chessmen and board, the clean surface of the table and floor. There was something comforting about it all, something quiet and powerful in the way the table and board and chessmen stood out from the rest of the room.

When Cindy saw what I had done she folded her arms. She nodded toward the table, toward the shiny chessmen and board. “It looks like a religious icon,” she said, and I thought how strange it was to hear those words come from her—religious icon—words she had never spoken before. Leaving, she brushed against my arm, and I nearly jumped. I hadn’t felt my mother’s skin in years. And more: she was of the womanly flesh I desired, though she herself did not possess that flesh. Her
flesh disgusted me, and I was aware in a vague way of something I hadn’t thought about in years: that I had wanted a sister, someone sexy and cooing, but also distant; a girl with breasts I could savor only from afar, a beautiful girl with long hair and bright lips, a narrow waist, long, slim fingers hanging a polka-dot dress from the shower rod.

Early the next day Cindy knocked on the garage door and gave me a letter from a Pfc. Jerome Witte. “When you have a moment,” she said, nodding toward the letter. She left for work. Pfc. Witte had been in Rick’s platoon. He painted a strange, hagiographic picture of Rick, called him a hero, let us know that Rick had uttered brave and decisive final words.

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

Later, after Tim Underwood and I smoked a few joints, we drove in Tim’s pickup to the Sorenson Trailer Park and slapped around some black kid until he got on his knees and confessed he was a nigger. We waved around our nickel bag, and we got Annie Hershberger to go for a ride, and later Tim tried to fuck her hard, before she was moist, and made her yell Stop it, stop it now. Then we all drove back to the trailer park in silence and dropped her off and waved and made plans to have a picnic together up at Snoqualmie Falls one of these days.

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“Something wrong?” Rassmussen asked me at the club. I was losing every training game, and the state championship was in two days. I was missing simple combinations, easy threats.

“No,” I said. I looked around the room, at all the patient, sweaty men, all their mulish failure. “Just tired, that’s all.”

“Things OK at home?”

I nodded. When Rassmussen had asked where the hell I had been the past week, I had shrugged and said sorry. I didn’t mention Rick. Rassmussen, smiling, had made a joke of it: “So buck up, boy,” he said. I smiled back.

Every moment now, it seemed, I thought of my brother lurching through booby-trapped jungle trails. A picture formed in my head, and
Hey

the picture wouldn’t go away. Rick would be lying flat on a muddy field, and Marines would be kneeling around him, saying soothing words. The top of Rick’s head would be gone, only Rick wouldn’t know it, and no matter how hard I tried to change the picture, I could see only loose meaty things bunched around my brother’s skull, and not the spirits or inscriptions of a holy nature I knew were etched onto his bones.

When I played Rassmussen now, my fingers lingered over the wooden tops of the chessmen. I held up the chessmen to the light and looked closely, squinting like a jeweler.

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The state championship, held over two consecutive weekends, was played in the back room of the Arby’s on Pacific Avenue. It was an eight-man round-robin. Rassmussen was the first seed; I was the eighth. I lost quickly in Round 1. In Round 2, Lawrence Dorfner, an awful player, a man of no consequence, beat me. “Good game,” I kept saying, afterwards. “Good game.” When Rassmussen walked up, inquiring, we all chatted a while, then we moved the conversation to the tournament director’s table and stood looking at the other game results, taped on large sheets onto the wall. Rassmussen did some calculating, and Dorfner nodded and wondered aloud about who would make the best matchups for Round 3.

There was a pause. Then I said, “My brother just got killed. I couldn’t concentrate, man.”

Rassmussen and Dorfner looked at me blankly. Rassmussen then opened his mouth as if to speak, but only frowned. At the bus stop later, I saw two men in leather jackets and black pants. They were boisterous, swinging their arms expansively; one was swearing. It was chilly and drizzling, and their hair was plastered like helmets to their skulls. The men seemed far away as the moon, and for a moment nothing made sense, there was no sound, no substance to the bench I was sitting on, no smell, and all I could do was rise and address them: motherfucking cocksuckers fuck off go fuck yourself buttfucks. I said the words so loud I closed my eyes and felt the spit run down my chin, and I stuck out my face. One of the men punched me hard, then they pushed me around some before walking away.

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By Sunday of the first weekend, the halfway point, I was 0–4, no wins
and four losses. Rassmussen approached me. He stuck a Dunhill in his mouth.

“What’dya say?” said Rassmussen, lighting up. “Nasty bruise.”

“We still got next weekend,” I said. “I’m just having trouble concentrating.”

Rassmussen smiled. He talked about cabins up by Snoqualmie Falls, about how beautiful the scenery was, how relaxing the pines. It was all the rainfall in the woods, he said. The entire Cascade Peninsula was in a rainshadow, or, as the botanists and ecologists termed it, a saanich. “Good for what ails you,” he said, and he put his hand on my shoulder. He told me he was going up there tomorrow night with his girlfriend. Just to look around, relax. There was a cabin with separate rooms. If I was free . . .

I shrugged. “I should bone up on my rook and pawn endings.”

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

I stuck my hands in my pocket. “OK,” I said, sounding less enthusiastic than I intended. I pictured myself throwing my arms around Rassmussen. Now, I wanted to say. Let’s go now.

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

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

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

“Nice,” I said, happily. “Nice.” There was much to look at. At the falls, we stared for a long time at the thin white thread of water plunging down dramatically from the rock face. Rasmussen pulled out a pocket flask and took a few swigs. Tina gave him a disapproving look. “My keeper,” he said, and they giggled and hugged each other. At Tina’s request, we all played cards on a visitors’ center bench, then we each went for a long, solitary walk in the mushy woods. At the Falls Restaurant, we lingered in the souvenir shop. Rasmussen and Tina held hands. Rasmussen held up a postcard showing a dog smiling at a fire hydrant. “Now who would buy something like that?” he asked, and I said I didn’t know, but it sure wouldn’t be me. “Give me a blank card, any day,” Rasmussen added. “Just a white sheet of paper.”

That evening we ate cheeseburgers and fries, and Rasmussen built a crackling fire in the brick fireplace. Tina pulled out a bottle of red wine from her travel bag, and Rasmussen, laughing, excused himself and returned with two more bottles. “Russ,” said Tina, darkly. “A jug o’ wine, a loaf o’ bread, and thou,” said Rasmussen. They kissed.

It was warm by the fireplace, and I removed my jacket. “Aren’t you hot?” I asked, noting Rasmussen’s long-sleeved shirt. Rasmussen shook his head. “What’s hot,” he said, “is me beating you in speed chess.” He then ran back to the bedroom and returned with a chessboard and chess clock. Tina rolled her eyes and excused herself—she’d read in the bedroom, she said—so Rasmussen, winking, set up the chessmen and play began. Rasmussen poured himself a glass of wine. He was expansive, more solemn as well as funnier than I had ever seen him; he was playing brilliant speed chess, all the while keeping up a stream of banter.

“You’re going through a rough time,” said Rasmussen, offering some wine. I declined. “I don’t want to intrude,” said Rasmussen. He captured one of my chessmen. “So I won’t. Chess is easy compared to the world.” But no sooner did he utter the words than he started clowning around. He sang:
Burzy Wurzy was a bear,
Burzy Wurzy had no hair.
Burzy Wurzy wasn’t very burzy.
Wurzy?

“Those lyrics right?” I asked.
“They’re as right as the other version, aren’t they?” said Rassmussen.
“Who makes the rules? Checkmate in three, by the way.”

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

“Oh, my,” Rassmussen said. I had launched an attack.
“Got you now,” I said, sending my chessmen rampaging around Rassmussen’s king.

Rassmussen shook his head. “I think you’re painting your dick red and calling it a charlie pole.”

It didn’t make any sense, but I laughed anyway. I was shaking a little, I felt so good.

“Chess is like war,” said Rassmussen. He opened another bottle. “But I guess you’ve heard that one. I guess that’s not news.” He seemed about to say something more when Tina reappeared, looking spectacular in a red sweater and slacks.

“Russ,” she said, “I forgot to tell you. I got a letter from a magazine last week. A rejection, but a good one.”

“She’s a poet,” said Rassmussen. He raised his hand over the chess-board, signaling we should stop.

“Don’t make it sound so dramatic,” she said, turning to me. “I write poems and sometimes they get published. Sometimes not.” She reached into her pocket and pulled out a folded piece of paper. “Here’s my latest,” she said, and she waved it near Rassmussen’s lips.

“Let’s hear,” Rassmussen said.
“I’m a little shy,” she said. She looked at me.
“I like poetry,” I said. “I want to hear.”

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

“Sounds persnickety,” said Rassmussen. He was drinking straight from the bottle. “Thumbs don’t count?”

“Let me finish. You can’t complain before the last line.”
“I’m not complaining. I’m just pointing something out.”
“Are you on the second bottle?” she asked.
“Depends. So what’s the lie about darkness?”
“There are eight of them.”
“Exactly eight lies about darkness,” he said, pleasantly. He turned to me. “Imagine that.”
“Sweetie, I don’t want to read the rest,” she said, standing. She put the paper back in her pocket and sat down next to Rasmussen. “I’m interrupting your game.” She draped her arm around his neck.

The trouble was, Rasmussen said, pouring Tina a glass, in chess all facts were equally true, or equally false or equally neutral, however you wanted to put it. There were no lies—not eight, not seven, not six—but there wasn’t any truth, either. Nothing about chess amounted to a hill of beans.

In real life, he said, taking a swig from the bottle, some facts were truer than others. Some facts burrowed deep into your chest and balled up tight as a fist and made you bolt upright in your bed in the middle of the night. Some facts passed right through you and some set up shop inside your chest.

So what was he saying? I asked. What facts?

Rasmussen stood, a bit unsteady, and, turning his free hand into a scythe, swept aside some chessmen on the board. The action seemed consciously theatrical, as if rehearsed, but Rasmussen’s face was hard and red. My shoulders tensed up. “I’m saying chess don’t mean shit,” said Rasmussen, “that’s what I mean. All those years . . . might as well go spit in the Grand Canyon. Doesn’t make a goddamn bit of difference.”

I looked away.

“Russ, please,” said Tina. I wasn’t sure what happened next. I heard Tina cry out, and when I looked up I saw that Rasmussen had lost his balance and fallen against the coffee table. There was a thud. Rasmussen was on the floor, clutching his head and rocking.

I leaped up to get a towel from the bathroom. “They’re all dirty,” Tina shouted. She told me to get some from the back of the car. I grabbed the keys on the counter and ran out.

When I returned, Rasmussen and Tina were squatting in front of the fireplace. It was dark—the fire was barely flickering—but I saw a rumpled quilt next to them. Rasmussen’s shirt had been removed; Tina was dabbing his face with her sleeve. “Here are some towels,” I said. I saw dark lines on Rasmussen’s arms, then on his chest and stomach. I squinted. Rasmussen’s eyes were closed; he was still clutching his head. Rasmussen’s body was nearly hairless, and on his chest, I saw the outline of a knight, then a bishop. Tina was rubbing one of the knights, by
his left nipple. There was the outline of a pawn on Rassmussen’s shoulder. I saw two rooks on his right forearm; his shoulders and arms had scars forming the outline of pawns and kings.

“Russ,” said Tina, in a warning voice. Rassmussen opened his eyes. She hurriedly grabbed the quilt and placed it like a curtain in front of him.

“Skin etchings,” said Rassmussen. There was a dark patch on his scalp. He looked straight at me. “Like tattoos, OK?” He sounded angry. “I do them myself. That OK with you? You ever see Michelangelo’s men in stone?” He let the quilt drop, then grabbed loose skin on his stomach. He pulled the skin taut. “See this stuff?” A network of jagged scars ran across his torso. The top of one of the knights seemed to be bleeding. “That’s a whole lot of nothing trying to get out, man. You hear me? Nothing, man.”

Tina walked over to me, a never-mind smile on her face. “Time to turn in,” she said in a sing-songy voice. “Thank you for the towels.” Her back was to Rassmussen. Drawing close, she caught my eye, then stuck out her forefinger and made a quick slicing motion across her breasts, then across her arms. She leaned in and whispered: “Sometimes he gets carried away. He cuts himself. You know?” I exhaled loudly, then turned and headed toward my room. I closed the door and quietly locked it. All night I heard noises—whispered conversations, some thumps, a scraping like sandpaper; a heavy bottle clinked against something metallic. In the morning, I heard snores coming from their room; underwear lay bunched outside their door. Wine in a drying red pool covered part of the floor.

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

“I hope I didn’t scare you away,” Rassmussen said.

“That’s OK,” I answered. I didn’t know what else to say.

Rassmussen surprised me by grabbing my hand and shaking it, as if we’d just met.

“I’m dropping out of the tournament,” I said then. Rassmussen looked at the ground for a moment. “Well,” he said. “I’m
He knew what I was saying. He knew it would be a long time, if ever, before we saw each other again. Then he was back in the car, waving bye with Tina, and they were gone, turning left on Marigold, toward incorporated Tacoma.

Inside the garage, I heard Cindy and Marion in the living room, watching TV. It was almost noon. Through the wall I heard the hollow sound of Cindy placing a coffee cup on the table, the squeaks of the couch when Marion sat. I wasn’t sure when, but after listening for a while, I picked up the board and chessmen from the card table and shoved it on top of a case of soft drinks. Some of the pawns fell off, and I left them there. I dragged the card table back to a dark corner, pushing it against the cleaning materials and air filters. I walked back to my bed, then heard *The Dick Van Dyke Show* come on. I stood, brushed off my pants, and walked through the door, past the kitchen, then into the living room, where Cindy and Marion sat listening to the theme song.

We are born in a caul of sin, and the world is a wicked place. But if you had said that to me then, I would have called you an asshole. The words were no revelation. They were not news. No clutter: that’s what I was thinking. Back in my room there was now a clear, empty space, and it remained that way. Sometimes thin ropes of light streamed into the area from the top of the garage door or from the rafters, and sometimes I saw the dust illuminated—like floating planets, I thought, like tiny aquatic life—and then I would vanquish the thought, I would dismiss the fancy metaphors, the tricks. Still, I marked off the space from the rest of the room. I made sure the space was swept clean. I assigned it secret names, my own coded language, Rickaroo, Rickereeni, Rickomicko, Ricky Ticky Tick-Tock, silly things, fluttering sounds I had never thought of saying before. Later, in a few weeks, I got a little high, nothing serious, and when I was ready, when it was quiet outside, I stuck my hand into all that space, into a million miles of nothing, and I made a little tapping motion. I stuck out my hand, shoulder-high, into all that burning, wicked nothing, and I made my tapping motion and nodded curtly, and I said Hey. Hey, man. Hey.