

# FICTION

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## Chess

*"Chess was Malkin's ruin."* —Isadore Levy to his son, Myron.

THE RITUAL WAS THE SAME most Saturdays. An early supper for me—chicken or maybe meatloaf with rice and carrots and peas. There'd be chocolate pudding for dessert or strawberry Jello with banana slices suspended like space modules in the gelatinous red mass or the occasional slice of my *bobeh's* homemade marble cake.

While I was eating, my mother would start to get ready for the evening. She'd usually wear a simple black dress with a ruby red necklace and matching earrings and put her long black hair into a bun held together by an ornate tortoise shell comb. By the time I was finished eating supper, my mother would be sitting in front of the small mirror on her dressing table, a cigarette resting in the ashtray at her elbow. She'd lean forward and squint at her image through the gently curling smoke and carefully put on red lipstick, a bit of rouge and a dab of perfume behind each ear.

Sometimes, if she'd catch me watching, she'd smile at me in the mirror. And when she was done with her preparations, she'd give me a hug. It was a heady embrace of soft flesh and the pungent aroma of tobacco and perfume, but most of all it was an embrace that signalled the official if temporary halt to my mother's weeklong melancholy.

My father's mood would be almost buoyant in anticipation of the fleeting respite from the tension and gloom that generally hung over our household. There'd be a twinkle in his pale blue eyes as he buffed his well-shined shoes before changing to a fresh white shirt with a starched collar. He'd check to see that his tie was on straight and then he'd take a comb from the jacket pocket of his suit and carefully comb his long white hair back over his balding pate. That evening was no different. As usual, I tried not to show my impatience, but it was the moment when my father returned the comb to his pocket that I was waiting for.

“What’s this?” my father asked, a startled expression on his face as his hand felt around inside his pants pocket. “Feels like something’s burning a hole in my pocket.”

“It’s a dime! I have absolutely no idea of how it got there. You wouldn’t consider getting an ice cream cone for yourself, Myron?”

“Be careful crossing the street,” my mother said.

I clutched the dime tightly, mindful of the sewer grate that had once swallowed up a nickel that Hershel’s mother had given me. When the light changed, I crossed the cobblestones on Boston Road, careful to step over the trolley tracks, and skipped up the single step into Stan the Man’s candy store.

Stan himself was behind the counter, joking with a couple of guys who were sucking air along with the remnants of their malteds from tall soda fountain glasses. I climbed up on one of the red padded stools and, leaning on my elbows, peered over the grey Formica countertop at the array of containers recessed in their refrigerated cubbyholes.

“Is that pistachio?”

“Yeah. It sure is. Good too. Breyers.”

“Okay, I’ll have some of that. But wait. I don’t know what I should have on the bottom. Do you have any coffee?”

“Yeah. I’ve got that, right over here. I’ve also got some good strawberry.”

“No. I think I’d like the coffee on the bottom and the pistachio on top.”

“Are you sure about that?” Stan asked with a smile.

*I never saw Stan when he wasn’t smiling. He always seemed happy but then, for reasons that I never understood, he sold off his candy store and moved his family to Israel. Sometime later a neighbour told my mother that Stan was conscripted into the army and was killed during a skirmish. I don’t know if that is true or not.*

“I think the strawberry would go better with the pistachio or maybe the vanilla ....”

“That’s okay. I’m really sure.”

“Okay, my man,” Stan sighed. “Coming right up. But I think you’re making a big mistake.”

Stan piled the ice cream high, pushing it down with the back of his scoop until the sugar cone creaked in complaint. He wrapped a napkin around the cone and handed it to me. I passed him my dime.

“Thanks, my man. See you next week if not before.”

The evening air was oppressive, heavy with heat and humidity as I stepped out of the candy store. Black clouds moved slowly above the East Bronx apartment buildings. Two teenage boys disconnected a trolley aerial bringing it to a halt before jumping from its bumper. The conductor shook his fist at them as they ran off laughing.

I crossed the street slowly, concentrating on my cone. There was an art to eating a cone, especially in the summertime when the ice cream melted quickly. If you got it just right, carefully using lips and tongue, not a drop of ice cream would escape by the time you'd licked it into a rounded dome just below the level of the cone's rim. Then it would be possible to bite off the sugary edges of the cone along with the ice cream that remained inside.

I sat down on the stoop of our apartment building. I liked watching the older boys play slug or Johnny-on-the-pony while the girls played hopscotch or skipped rope.

That evening some of the guys were playing stickball in the street using the sewer as home plate. They had to move out of the way when Esther and Malkin pulled up in their black DeSoto. Malkin got out and Esther waved to me before driving down the block to look for a parking space.

Malkin sat down beside me and took his pipe and leather tobacco pouch from his jacket pocket.

"How's the ice cream, Myron *shainer*?"

"Delicious. Want some?"

Malkin grinned and leaned forward. Gently he bit off an edge of the sugar cone with his tobacco-stained teeth.

"You're right it is delicious. Thank you."

"How come Esther always drives your car?" I asked.

Malkin worked some tobacco into his pipe. "I don't know how to drive."

"Why not?"

"I guess I never wanted to learn. Besides, Esther's good at it."

"Good at what?"

It was Esther coming up the street, smiling. How different she was from my mother. She sat down on the stoop next to Malkin and took his hand in hers.

"I was just telling Myron what a good driver you are. But then you're good at most things that you do."

Esther laughed. "He's such a charmer, my Malkin."

“No really, Myron, it was a lucky break for me when I found Esther. Not only is she a good driver, she takes good care of me.”

“But he takes care of me too.”

“Oh bosh. What do I do? You go to work and I go to play chess in Washington Square Park or at Pinya Tamer’s if it’s rainy or cold.”

“You’re there for me, Malkin, that’s what you do. You’re there all the time. You make me laugh and you’re gentle and caring and kind. And your chess didn’t do so bad by us in Paris.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“Oh it’s just that we went to Paris on a lark. We probably had only enough money to stay for a month. But Malkin discovered quite by accident that some people liked to play chess for money. So he’d play chess in the cafés in the morning and then for the rest of the day, we’d explore Paris on his winnings.

“Oh, Myron, it was wonderful.”

“So why did you leave?”

“To tell you the truth, I met my match,” Malkin told me. “There was this one boy, a nice boy, who was just too good for me. Luckily, we had put away just enough money to pay for our passage back home.”

“But listen to us,” Esther said. “How we’re carrying on about the good old days. Let’s go inside. Are you coming Myron?”

Esther and Malkin were usually the first to arrive. And it was a good thing too. If there happened to be a lingering pall of despair or harsh remnants of iciness that characterized my parents’ relations during the week, Esther and Malkin would somehow manage to eradicate it before the rest of the company arrived.

“How good you look, Annette,” Esther exclaimed “and you too, Levy.”

*That was a peculiar convention of my parents’ circle, yet I only realize it now as I’m telling you this story. The women would all be called and call each other by their first names. But the men were referred to only by their last names. So you see, it’s just now that I realize that her name was really Esther Malkin but Malkin himself will remain to both me and you a man without a first name.*

Esther was not a pretty woman—she had an almost oval face, an aquiline nose, large green eyes surrounded by a network of laugh wrinkles, a wide mouth and a rather pointy chin. The whole resided under a vast array of tight, dark brown curls—but she was irresistible.

She hugged my mother and father in turn and Malkin shook my father’s hand.

“Look, Annette, I found some herring in sour cream when I was downtown yesterday, and here are some bagels and a pound cake that’s just fresh out of the oven.”

Soon after, the others started to trickle in. Like my parents and Esther and Malkin, they were all Jewish immigrants, mostly from Russia and Poland. Many of them, like Esther, worked in the needle trades. But Ostrowski, I know, taught history in a public high school and Sonja was a librarian. My father was the only physician in the group, Malkin the only man unemployed.

The women, in their long dresses and high-heeled shoes, would gravitate to the kitchen to gossip. The men in their suits and ties, except for Malkin who always wore the same open-necked shirt and brown jacket, would go into the living room to play chess and kibitz. I followed them and found my place on the red embroidered footstool in the corner of the room.

I was only allowed to stay up to greet the guests, but I learned that if I sat quietly out of the way my parents would often forget to send me to bed. The images of Malkin from that evening and that vantage point remain with me to this day.

His skin, thin and yellowed parchment, stretched tight on a narrow face with deep set brown eyes, a slightly hooked nose, and a friar’s fringe of grey hair. Ankles crossed, he leaned back in his chair and, from underneath drooping eyelids, surveyed the chessboard in an almost uninterested manner.

When it was his turn to move, he’d cant his body forward so that his face hovered inches above the board. He’d rest motionless, the curved pipe held securely in position by his clenched teeth. Now and then clouds of smoke would erupt from between his thin lips and cling to the fringe of hair around his baldpate before making their way toward the living room ceiling.

Suddenly his hand would snake forward and a piece, grasped between his fore and middle fingers, would be suspended in air before being plunged into place on the board below. Then Malkin would lean back again, smile and give me a conspiratorial wink.

“Myron, why aren’t you in your pyjamas?” It was my mother who caught sight of me as she came in with a tray of tea for the men. “Isn’t it just like my husband, too busy kibitzing to notice it’s way past his son’s bedtime.”

“Let the boy stay up, Annette, how else will he learn to play chess?”

"All you think about is chess, Malkin. Maybe you'd feel differently if you'd had children of your own."

"I'd be happy to take Myron off your hands," he said and winked at me again. "*Los im tsroch, Notchkie*, every boy wants to stay up later than his parents say he should."

My mother relented. "Okay, you can stay up a little longer but put your pyjamas on now."

That night, I got to stay up later than ever before. I ate some of the herring, and a bagel with cream cheese and lox and I washed it down with tea heavy with sugar. The women in the kitchen clucked over me and Esther hugged me goodnight.

"Go to bed now," my mother said.

"Okay, but I have to say goodnight to Malkin."

Malkin put his arm around my waist. "What do you think I should do, Myron, *shainer?*" he asked as we both surveyed the board.

I whispered in his ear.

"You know, I think that's exactly right," he told me.

"Goodnight, Malkin. See you next week."

"Goodnight, Myron. Next week it is."

The rain was beginning to spatter against the pavement as I climbed into bed. Thunder woke me in the middle of the night. And then the phone rang in my parents' bedroom. A patient no doubt—some sort of emergency.

There was whispered conversation. "Oh no." My mother's cry was somewhere between a shriek and a whimper. "Call me from the hospital."



The next week, I waited in vain for Esther and Malkin. Finally, I walked to the corner of Boston Road hoping to catch sight of the black DeSoto. My father was waiting for me, standing on the stoop, when I came back.

"Come inside, *zunny*. It's late. It's time to get ready for bed."

"But I'm waiting for Malkin."

"Malkin won't be here tonight," my father said with a sigh.

"Why not, Daddy?"

"He's sick, very sick."

Inside our apartment that evening, no one was playing chess. It was almost silent. The scene reminded me of D-Day, when almost the same

crowd sat listening to the news reports coming through the static from the massive radio console in the corner of the living room.

I passed by, silently. Afraid. My father was close on my heels. He sat down on the side of my bed while I changed into my pyjamas.

“Is he going to be all right?”

“No, Myron. He has cancer, bone cancer. There’s nothing to be done except wait for the end. It will be soon now.”

“No more chess?” I could hardly see my father through the tears.

“No, no more chess. It was his undoing. Chess was Malkin’s ruin. His big regret.”

I didn’t understand. But my father went on talking, more to himself than to me.

“Malkin was so talented but he wasted it all. He had big plans when he and Esther left for Paris. He’d study art, paint every day. But instead he spent the days playing chess in cafés. It became an addiction.

“Oh, Esther was no better. She could have made him paint, the way your mother pushed me into medicine. But she just encouraged him. She claimed that she loved their life together in Paris. Oh how she would talk about the romance of it, long walks, I can’t remember where, the cafés, the restaurants, on and on ....

“What a waste of a life. Two lives really ....”

Esther died soon after Malkin. The Saturday soirées continued but they were never quite the same.



As for me, I followed a steady course through school, Herman Ridder Junior High, the Bronx High School of Science and finally a scholarship to Brandeis University. There I majored in English and played first board on the university chess team.

Although my parents hoped that I would follow in my father’s footsteps, maybe even take over his practice one day, they were not displeased when I told them that I’d won a Fulbright scholarship to study comparative literature at the Sorbonne. My mother helped me pack a trunk and my father stuffed a wad of bills into my hand, “To tide you over till the scholarship kicks in.”

Paris. Esther and Malkin’s Paris at first, at least as I imagined it—the left bank, St-Germain-des-Prés, the Boulevard Raspail, the Jardin du Luxembourg—you get the picture. Then I started to claim it for myself.

From my temporary quarters in a youth hostel near the Jardin des Plantes, I systematically explored the city. I walked from the Bois de Boulogne to the Bois de Vincennes and from the Porte de Clignancourt to the Porte d'Orléans. I climbed the Eiffel Tower, visited Notre Dame, sauntered down the Champs-Élysées, lost myself among the warren of streets on the left bank, had espresso in small bistros on the Île St-Louis and stood on the Pont Neuf, watching, as heavily laden barges made their ponderous way along the Seine.

I drank pastis standing at the bar in out-of-the-way cafés and took my meals in restaurants seated elbow to elbow at long tables with the regulars. And I stood before the stone chessboard at Alekhine's gravesite in the cemetery at Montparnasse.



Ultimately, I found a tiny room to rent, a *chambre de bonne*, on the fifth floor of a seventeenth century building on the Rue Jacob. From the one small window carved out below the buildings eaves, I'm able to look across the sea of tiled roofs and chimney pots stretching all the way to Montmartre.

My classes, which started in September, were oversubscribed. Often I couldn't find a seat and saw no point in standing among the crowds in the backs of large lecture halls where it was difficult to hear and impossible to take notes. That was why I got into the habit of studying on my own at the Bibliothèque National. And that, in a way, is how I was overtaken by Malkin's passion.

One afternoon, I took a break from my studies and crossed the street from the library to a small café on the Rue de Richelieu. Uncharacteristically, I chose to take my espresso on the terrace and found myself seated next to two young men playing chess. I watched their game with some interest and a measure of excitement.

I was surprised when one of them asked me if I would like to play. In halting French, it always was at its worst when I was nervous or excited, still is for that matter, I said I'd love to, although I hadn't played in almost a year at the time.

I won the first game handily and the young man, Jacques he called himself, asked if I'd like to play another, for money. It didn't take long to understand I was being hustled. Unlike the first game, his opening was crisp and his subsequent moves well-considered. But there was nothing that I could not handle.



After that, I went about unearthing other cafés where people play chess for money—cafés that Malkin no doubt knew and frequented. And I developed a routine, a routine that I follow to this day.

I order an espresso or a pastis and have it brought to me on the terrace where I watch the games in progress with evident interest. When the invitation comes, which it invariably does, I somewhat reluctantly agree to play. Perhaps I stumble a little and hesitate when there is talk of money. Finally, I light my pipe and watch the board with hooded, almost indifferent, eyes until it's my turn to move.

That's when I consult with Malkin. I hear his whispers in my ear and feel his arm around my waist even as I slowly cant my body toward the board. We have our favourite openings, Malkin and I, and this time, I assure him, he won't have to go home.

