**Checkmate**
Curt Eriksen

*For Jesús*

Charly and I used to play a lot of chess, back when I was breaking up with my wife. Charly's opening wasn't much to get excited about, but he played a mean middle game and when it came to the end he was alarmingly efficient and he never showed any mercy at all.

After I'd get off work—I gutted chickens and placed their innards in a plastic bag and shoved them back up their ass again—I'd let the dog out and fix something to eat. Working in the factory put me off meat, so it'd usually be a vegetable stir fry or some salad and an apple and a chunk of cheese. That was one advantage, I suppose, of being sickened by what I did for a living: it kept me pretty trim.

Once I'd finished my beer I'd turn off the TV and crush the can in my fist. After Eileen left me with the mortgage payments and the dog I became more conscious of my own role in the rape of the planet and I had different trash barrels, one each for paper, plastic, aluminum and general garbage. I threw the organic waste in a hole I dug out back, where Sam used to hide his bones.

It was only a couple of blocks to the Thirst Slaker, where Charly and I always met, a small red brick building on the corner of Cross and Hope streets. Charly used to

lay bricks himself before a pair of slipped disks forced him to lease the bar. He hated the business, but there wasn't much else he could do any more.

"You know what I'd really like to do?" he used to say to me.

"No. What?"

"Absolutely nothing."

"Not even play chess?"

"Well, maybe that."

"Or read?"

"Hmm."

I thought I understood what he meant. It wasn't that Charly was lazy or afraid of working and pulling his weight. It was just that he didn't *believe* in it. He didn't believe that the reason we're here in the first place is to labor mindlessly like ants, with no real purpose beyond that of getting ahead of somebody else.

"What're you going to do?" he liked to speculate. "Take your resume up to heaven and stick it in God's face? You think He's going to be impressed by all the meaningless shit you've spent your whole life doing, just because somebody was willing to pay you to do it?"

Of course Charly understood that a man had to make a living. There was no disputing that. He just didn't buy all the work ethic crap.

"Work never made anybody happy," he would say, "not to mention *free*. Not really happy. Never once."

Charly wasn't irresponsible either. He raised a son and a daughter and he did a fine job of it too. Of course he had his wife, Ruth, helping him, both at home and in the

bar. They used to have some pretty nasty fights sometimes, and right there, behind the counter, but that's all over now. Ruth's problem was she got bored in the bar and the alcohol was within easy reach. But she finally got that one sorted out.

Charly was lucky, I guess, because he couldn't stomach the stuff. "Just the smell of the beer, when we're mopping it up the next morning, and all that stale tobacco, makes me feel like barfing." Instead Charly liked to smoke joints.

Despite the risks, Charly grew his own along the remains of a picket fence at the end of his backyard. He lived out of town, a couple of miles beyond the city limit, and that fence was just there, it didn't even separate the weeds on his side from those on the other side. You could just barely make out the fence from his kitchen window and when the marijuana was finally ready it was nothing but a green blur. But Charly didn't have any near neighbors, nothing but empty fields all around him, and he never had any trouble with the law.

I only went out to Charly's house once. That was right after his boy, Tim, got hit by a drunk driver while he was biking.

"Isn't life ironic?" Charly asked, as soon as he opened the front door for me. "Is this what they call karma?"

"Hell, I don't know."

When Charly was forced, at the age of twenty-nine, to set his trowel aside, he started reading books out of sheer boredom. As long as his short-term disability benefits lasted he spent most of his time in the public library. Since then his brain was always spilling over with exotic notions.

"I mean me, or someone just like me, tanked this bastard up and showed him out the door when they should have flushed his keys down the toilet and lashed him to a table."

One of Charly's customers suggested that he sue the guy who served the drinks under a law called dram shop liability. But Charly couldn't abide the sort of person who gets his tongue burnt at McDonald's and cries foul for having been stupid enough to drink the scalding hot coffee without sipping it first. He believed in full personal responsibility for *one's own* actions, and he deplored what he called "the lottery cult of the law suit."

And yet, now that he was self-employed, Charly didn't have any insurance worth mentioning. He assured me, though, with his habitual cynical resignation, that he would find a way to pay Tim's medical fees.

"Come on through and see him," he said, and he started to lead me down a narrow hallway with framed pictures of his wife and kids hanging on the walls, to the sunny living room where the boy was recovering on a tatty sofa, with a foot and leg that had been crushed and reconstructed and set in a hip-length cast. Halfway down the hall he stopped me by putting a hand on my chest and said, "Hey, wait, there's something else I want you to see." And we made a detour into the kitchen, where he led me to the window.

"That's where I hide it," he said, indicating with pride the green smear at the far end of his property. "Right in front of their nose, where anyone who wants to look can see it!"

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When it was warm Charly would leave the front and back doors of the bar open. "To create a draft and get rid of the stink," he said. I'd push the screen aside and walk into the bar, hearing it slam behind me while I stood there adjusting my eyes to the gloom. Charly placed a thirty-two inch TV on a shelf up in one corner of the room, but unless someone asked him to turn it on he never did. If he was alone he might be sitting on one of the high stools and listening to some music—either Arlo Guthrie, Bob Dylan or the Grateful Dead—while reading a book or the local newspaper, spread out in front of him on the counter. But if anyone was in there he'd probably be talking to them, and no matter what they'd say he'd always take the opposite point of view.

"I'm just trying to get these knuckleheads to use the grey stuff between their ears," he'd explain. "It's not easy for a Western mind to entertain too many ideas all at once, especially if they clash."

In fact he just liked to provoke people or, in his own words, "challenge them to really think for themselves."

Not that Charly was vain and thought he had it all figured out. "It was only when Confucius was an old man," he explained, "and didn't have long to live that he reckoned he could finally *begin* to understand a few things. I figure I'll be lucky if I can get to the grave with just one question less than I have now, and I don't even know which question that is."

But he was adamant when, after 9/11 for example, he insisted that somebody must have planted explosives inside the World Trade Center. "How else can you explain the way the towers fell? There's just no other rational explanation. It's never happened

before, not in the whole history of mankind. A fire's never brought down a building like that."

He lost some regulars over his refusal to put up a flag. "I'm not going to be bullied into false and ingratiating displays of patriotism. Hell," he said, and this was before the war had started, "if those people cared so much about this country they wouldn't support making such a mess of the world we all live in."

I think Charly might have grown fond of me not only because I often agreed with him, but because I could beat him at chess. Even if it was he that usually won.

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As soon as I'd walk through the front door of the bar he'd always say the exact same thing: "Hey, Bob. It's good to see you."

Depending on whether anyone was there or not I'd order a beer and sit at the counter and drink it, while Charly wrapped up another argument. If we were alone he'd pull a draft and give it to me before ushering me straight into the kitchen where he'd leave the door open just wide enough to see if anyone else came in.

Charly had built the chess board himself, by slicing and polishing two tones of brick into sixty-four one inch squares that he set with white cement in a shallow metal frame. A talented friend of his twisted the figures out of thin copper and nickel rods. These figures were modeled on illustrations of Saracen and Christian warriors in a second-hand book Charly'd found on the history of the Crusades.

A new game was always set up on a side table, and Charly had hung a lamp right above the table so that each piece cast four faint shadows. He installed an extraction fan above our heads, so that the smoke would be blown into the storage room. Once, a health

inspector asked Charly about the strange smell in that room and Charly said it was the lingering scent of his homeopathic rat poison. "It doesn't kill them," he told the man, "it just makes them blind and infertile. That way they can die a natural death without leaving any trouble behind."

Our games were often interrupted by people coming into the bar. But once we started Charly always insisted that we finish the game. No matter how long he had to stay away from the table he'd keep studying his next move in his head. If Ruth was in the bar and she could handle the crowd, Charly would sit in his chair and stare at the pieces on the board, silently moving his lips as he continually reconsidered his strategy.

He had another board that he kept in the bar, made of plywood, and he played against the other customers out there, but no one could beat him. Sometimes he even had two games going at the same time, one in the kitchen and one on the counter. At first I thought these distractions would provide me with an advantage, but that wasn't the case.

It was almost impossible to beat Charly, but I did it a few times. The first time it happened I came directly from a scrap with Eileen. My hand was still shaking when Charly offered both fists, one containing the white queen and the other containing the joint, a formality that he always insisted upon. I think my anger and frustration with Eileen flowed right into the tips of my fingers that night, empowering my pieces. I wasn't thinking about outsmarting Charly while I played, I was thinking instead about what Eileen had said about my having failed to make her happy.

"You just don't have it in you, Bob. Not enough spunk and ambition," she said.

When I suddenly pinned Charly's king with my bishop and the pair of knights he exclaimed, "Well I'll be damned." And then he stuck his hand right across the table and smiled. "Congratulations, Bob. You just won."

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Once my divorce was settled I followed a lead Charly had given me to another job in a town forty miles away. I started with the night shifts in a janitorial service, but now I'm managing the whole operation and I can sleep when it gets dark. I also met Silvia, and though neither of us was interested in getting married we were soon living together in the duplex I was renting.

At first I tried to get back to the Thirst Slaker as often as I could, but once Silvia was around and I'd sold the house she started complaining about the long drive home after drinking more than the legal limit. And anyway, she'd get restless and sullen if I disappeared into the kitchen to have a quick go at the chessboard.

So Charly and I lost touch with one another. And a few more years went by. I'm forty-nine now and Charly just turned fifty-six the other day. I always remember his birthday because it's the same day as mine, only a month earlier. I was eating a handful of baby carrots and looking at the calendar that hangs on my kitchen wall, thinking about hitting fifty, when the phone rang. I guess I was thinking about Charly's birthday too, because I wasn't surprised to hear Ruth's voice on the other end. She told me Charly was in the hospital and had been in there for the past three weeks. She just wanted to let me know.

After I hung up I kept staring at the calendar for a while. It was my day off and I didn't have anything else to do, so I stuck the rest of the carrots in my mouth and grabbed

a book I'd had on my shelf and never found the time to read as I headed out the front door. The book was an anniversary gift Eileen had given me right before we split-up, a book she used to help her quit smoking: Joseph Murphy's *The Power of Your Subconscious Mind*.

Charly wasn't in the room Ruth had told me he was supposed to be in when I got to the hospital, and I started wondering if I hadn't made it on time. Ruth told me they'd ruled out cancer, but by the time she found my new number and phoned me they'd decided to do some more tests, just to be sure.

I left the empty room and walked up and down the corridor for a while. Finally I worked up the nerve to ask at the nurse's station whether Charly was still around. The nurse on duty was just a young girl and Charly's name didn't ring a bell, but she finally found it on a roster of patients who were scheduled for biopsies that morning.

"They must have taken him downstairs," she said. "You can wait in his room if you like."

So I went back in there and sat down on a straight-backed chair and opened the book I had brought as a belated birthday present. I read at random:

*Do you know how to pray effectively? How long is it since you prayed as part of your everyday activities?*

I closed the book and stood up and went to the window where I stared at nothing for a while. Like me, Charly was the sort of guy who can't stand being restrained in any way and I wondered how he'd been getting along in the hospital. I had no intention of praying, but I did hope he'd been careful and bit his tongue when necessary, since he was in their hands now.

When they wheeled him back into the room I was still standing at the window. Charly was so happy to see me that his smile compensated for any misgivings I might have had concerning the time that had gone by since we had last seen each other.

I rushed over to him and reached out to shake his hand before I noticed what he was holding in his lap. It was a translucent pump about the size of a small briefcase and it was attached via a long tube to his right lung. The pump was filled with a bloody viscous fluid. When Charly saw me looking at the pump he explained that his pleura was seeping.

"But I'm confident," he said, standing up from the wheel chair and accepting my help with the pump. Once he sat down on the bed, where he allowed me to fluff the pillows behind his back, he carefully placed the pump on the bedside table and added, "I'm going to get a chance now to do what I've always wanted to do, Bob. Absolutely nothing." And he pointed to his bandaged chest. "This means permanent disability and early retirement." Then he frowned, and indicated the room with a jut of his chin. "Even if I don't know how I'm going to pay for all of this." But his eyes lit up again when he said, "Do you fancy a game?"

A few days later, when I talked to Ruth, she told me it was cancer after all. "It's somewhere in the lung," she said, "but they don't know if it's spread any further than that. They've got to run some more tests now."

During a lull in the supply room that served as my office I googled 'lung cancer' and found out it kills more than all the other cancers combined. And that it's not usually detected early, since there aren't any symptoms. In fact, that's what Charly had said, that

nothing bothered him other than the pressure of the fluid in the lung. So he had no idea how sick he was.

Despite Charly's optimism, I figured he was looking at the end of his life. And so I started driving over to the hospital every evening. We'd play one or two games of chess, depending upon how strong Charly was feeling. Once he found out that the cancer was in the lung as well as the pleura and had already metastasized he decided that he wouldn't undergo any chemo therapy. "What for?" he asked me, as if I might have an answer to that. "Ruth's going to owe them enough as it is." His sister had died a couple of years earlier and the chemo hadn't prolonged her life, it had only made the end expensive and regrettable.

"Each case is different," I argued.

"Sure," he said. "But each story ends in the same way, with the curtain coming down. And I want to be able to walk off the stage."

Ruth was doing everything she could to get him home again. Each night in the hospital cost them over six hundred dollars. She was already busy refinancing their mortgage. The problem was the leaking pleura. If it wouldn't have been for that they could have provided him with the pain killer and let him bide his time at home.

"It's a damn nuisance," he said. "Sometimes I feel like ripping this thing out of my chest. But I know I can't do that. And you know why, Bob?"

My king was going back and forth, hiding behind a pair of pawns, but it was only a matter of time.

"Why?"

"Because I still want to live. For as long as I can. Isn't that something?"

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Charly never walked out of the hospital. The surgeons tried to staple his pleura to the lung so that it would quit leaking and they could send him home, but that didn't work. Then they realized they'd made matters worse and they operated again in order to try free the pleura from the lung. But that caused a massive hemorrhage and the lung imploded. So they cut the lung out and got rid of it altogether. But by the time they sewed Charly up again the cancer had spread up his neck and into the back of his head, reducing him to an invalid.

When he was lucid Charly would tell me that all he wanted was to get the hell out of there. "You can't let me rot in here, Bob." He was too weak and too often out of it to play chess any more. Once, between doses of morphine, he offered the chess board and the hand-made pieces to me. I didn't want it, had no one else to play with, but I accepted the gift anyway. "It's best to humor him sometimes," Ruth said, realizing how morbid the generous gesture was.

I didn't agree with her, but who was I to make a stand? On the long drives home every evening, once Charly had fallen asleep with the remote control for the television in his hand, I considered our friendship and wondered why I kept making the effort. Of course it was only Silvia ragging inside my head, asking me why I kept going over there every day when Charly didn't even know I was in the room most of the time. "You think you're doing it for him," she said, "but you're really doing it for yourself. You're such a selfish bastard, you wouldn't even know how to give something you didn't want to somebody else."

It was obvious that she and I were finished but neither of us had the guts to break the tie that still bound us together, which was mostly sexual now. And that made me remember how much Charly had helped me get through my separation from Eileen. This was something I couldn't explain to anyone, not even Ruth, how deeply indebted I felt to Charly. Of course he would have scoffed at the idea of me owing him anything at all, but I knew it was true. In a very real sense Charly had saved my life, offering me his caustic yet cheery company when I felt so lonely and miserable.

That's why I decided to get him out of the hospital. It was the least I could do. But first I had to make sure that this was what he really wanted. So I started hanging around even longer than usual, encouraging Ruth to go for a walk when her head started bobbing on her chest, assuring her that I was happy to sit with Charly, in case he needed anything. And it was on one of those long days when both of his kids had come by and waited in vain for him to wake up that I got a chance to suggest the idea to Charly. Almost as soon as everyone else had gone, he finally came to and seemed coherent enough for me to put the question to him.

"Charly?" I said.

He rolled his head and looked at me. There was so little fight left in him that his eyes barely glowed. His dark hair was unwashed and greasy and it contrasted with the pallor of his skin. His arms and legs were emaciated and useless. He had no strength left in his legs and couldn't stand on them anymore.

"You can hear me, can't you, Charly? You can understand what I'm saying to you, can't you?"

Slowly he blinked his eyes.

I leaned closer to him and breathed in the sad sour odor of the sickbed invalid. I whispered, “I’ll get you out of here, Charly. If that’s what you really want, I’ll do it. You can count on me.”

For a long time he just stared at me with a listless and vacant expression. I could almost feel the weight in his paper-thin eyelids, the effort to keep them raised, and I feared he might slip away again. I looked around to make sure no one was behind me and I said it again.

“I’ll get you out of here, Charly. I promise. But I need to know if that’s what you really want.”

There was the slightest, most subtle glimmer of something like recognition in his eyes, and he went through the slow painful process of swallowing without any saliva, before he said, in a voice that was so faint and feeble that it seemed to come from somewhere other than his throat, “You’ll do that for me?”

I put my hand on the cold bones of his hand and said, “Of course I will, Charly. I’ll carry you right off the stage if you want.”

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I didn’t have a plan, in fact I didn’t want to think about it too much. But I was so absorbed with the idea of getting Charly out of the hospital that I didn’t even pay attention when Silvia tried to pick a fight. That led her to throw things at me, but it didn’t make any difference. The night I left the duplex determined to end Charly’s life—since that’s what getting him out of the hospital would amount to—Silvia told me that she wouldn’t be there when I got home again. But I didn’t even bother to respond to her empty threat.

I drove very slowly along the shortcut I had discovered, stretches of secondary roads I had come to know quite well during the past couple of months. It was late June and I drove with the windows down and the air streaming in, watching the gnats and other insects that swarmed above the warm asphalt fly into my headlights. The sun was setting beyond the trees that lined one side of the road, shafts of the last light blinking through the leaves, and a cool breath emanated from the darkening woods.

I had already arranged to relieve Ruth since she spent most of her nights in the hospital now. It was a Friday and with the weekend before us the staff had been reduced to a minimum. I knew all the nurses by name and was disconcerted to see that one of the men, a guy named Roger, was on duty. He was the one who had confessed to me once, when I suggested that it must be depressing to work with patients who are more likely to die than to live, that in his line of work you get hardened to the suffering of people whose deaths didn't really mean anything to you, once you've seen enough of it.

"I would think," I said, trying to control my anger, "that these people need all the compassion they can get. If you don't feel anything for them, why don't you do something else?"

"I've still got student loans to repay," he said. "And I didn't choose medicine in order to remain a pauper."

Charly didn't like him either, complaining, while he was still strong enough to complain, that Roger lacked delicacy and handled him roughly. Imagining a confrontation, my adrenaline spilled, but there was also a rush of pleasure at the thought that Charly would disappear on Roger's watch.

Charly was flat out when I walked into the room. I sat in the chair beside the bed and watched him breathe, though his breath was so slight that the sheet he lay under didn't rise or fall. In so many ways now he was already gone. But I remembered what he'd said to me about wanting to live as long as he could.

Charly was connected to a drip through a vein in his left wrist. The nurses administered the morphine and the other drugs and they fed him through that tube. It was his lifeline and I was the one who was going to cut it.

I wasn't pleased to assume this responsibility and while I waited for the moment I had chosen—between two and three o'clock in the morning, when the pair of nurses on duty usually finished a round and retired to a coffee room behind the desk—I wondered if I had made the right choice. I realized that if I were to do nothing at all, then I could walk away in the morning and my life would continue unchanged. Charly, on the other hand, would continue to languish in the hospital while the bills that Ruth would have to pay would continue to pile up.

But Silvia was probably right, and I was no doubt doing this for myself. Eileen had basically called me a coward and I knew that I wanted to prove her wrong. If only Charly would come to I could ask him again, and confirm my decision. But he didn't stir.

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I started getting nervous shortly after midnight. Even though it was completely unpredictable whether or not Charly would become conscious again I had anticipated, and counted on, a final conversation with him. Instead he just lay there, without making a sound.

At one thirty I couldn't stand being in the room any longer so I went into the corridor and saw Roger push a trolley loaded with bottles and gauzes and syringes into a room three doors away, where a twelve year old girl was struggling with leukemia. The hospital was a small regional hospital and there was no children's ward. I walked in the other direction, all the way to the emergency exit. I hadn't been able to figure out whether or not an alarm would sound when I went through that door, but the stairs outside led down two flights to a wide grassy lawn beyond which I had parked my car.

When Roger got to Charly's room I watched him change the bottle that hung above his bed.

"What's that?" I asked.

Roger looked at me and said, "Does it matter?"

I was so shocked I didn't know what to say.

"You look a little peaked yourself," he said, while he adapted the flow of whatever was in the bottle by turning a little plastic knob on the needle stuck into Charly's vein.

"You bastard."

"Takes one to know one," he scoffed.

I wanted to follow him out into the corridor and lay into him, smash his head against the wall and break it up like a pumpkin. But then I realized that he had just helped me. Now there was no turning back.

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It was almost two thirty when Roger and the other nurse on duty finished their rounds and disappeared into the coffee room. I walked up to the desk and stood there for

a while, straining to hear them talk. Their conversation was muffled by the closed door, but every once in a while Roger would erupt into raucous laughter. There seemed to be more bitterness than joy in his laughter, and it reminded me of the sound my dog used to make when he barfed up something he couldn't tolerate. But it also told me that Roger was completely oblivious to what was going on outside the coffee room, and all his attention would be focused on his colleague, a young black unmarried woman who was constantly rejecting his slimy advances.

Satisfied, I went back into Charly's room and turned the knob on the needle stuck in his vein until I had shut off the flow from the drip. After that I unplugged the tube and looped it over the bottle hanging above his bed.

The skin on the underside of Charly's forearms was pale and cool and soft as wet leaves late in the autumn when they've already begun to disintegrate. I folded his hands across his stomach and lifted him, very gently, slipping one arm behind his back and the other under his knees. The cancer had entered his bones and they were brittle and I was afraid I might crush them. But Charly was unconscious and dumb to the world and light as a big pillow. Once I had completely stood up I leaned back a little and held him so that his head could roll and rest against my chest. Then I quickly carried him out of the room and down the corridor.

When I kicked the emergency exit door open with my foot no alarm sounded, but the heavy metal door slammed against the wall. I panicked at the violent banging, which shattered the silence of the night. Stumbling down the steps I thought I might fall, but was able to regain my balance. Light as Charly was, I was afraid to hold him too tight, and yet I didn't want his head to bob. I was terrified of causing him pain. But I was also

worried that someone might look out a window and see the glow of his hospital gown. So I moved across the lawn as fast as I could without running.

My legs were churning but—just like in a dream—I didn't seem to be getting anywhere. I certainly wasn't getting any closer to my goal. I realized then that I didn't have a goal, that I had never really aspired to anything at all, and that Eileen was probably right: I didn't have much spunk or ambition either.

That's when Charly opened his eyes and looked up at me and said, "What's going on, Bob?"

I was stunned by the clarity and resonance in his voice and hearing him speak like that—as if we might once again have one of those long friendly arguments about anything and everything while sharing a joint and playing another game of chess—made me hesitate and loosen my grip on him.

"Where are you taking me, Bob?"

Although I was grateful for the unexpected lucidity, his interrogating me in such a firm and decisive voice, something I hadn't heard from him for so many weeks, made me unsure of what I had done. I stopped and looked back at the light over the emergency exit. I could feel the blood racing through my veins, the pulse of life, and on the breeze there was the scent of recently mowed grass. I felt like I'd been caught in a lie, so I looked straight into his eyes and I told him the truth.

"It's checkmate, Charly. I'm taking you home."

His gaze washed over my face and he looked past me and up at the sky where, despite the ground light, he could still see some of the stars.

"That's a nice move, Bob," he said, and his voice was as strong and sure as it had ever been. "I don't think I can beat that."

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