



The game gives us a satisfaction that life denies us.
Emanuel Lasker

Weekend getaway

by Richard Sleboe

"Tea or coffee, Sir?"

"Coffee. Black. No sugar."

I'm on the phone with a market researcher. I try to picture a pretty girl at the other end of the line, but it isn't working. All I see in my mind's eye is an army of faceless goons in headsets, hunched over computer terminals in rows and rows of cubicles. I might just as well hang up. I wonder why I don't. Why do I keep answering the phone at all? Nothing good ever comes of it.

"Got it, Sir. Are you a cat person or a dog person, Sir?"

"A cat person. I hate dogs."

"Noted, Sir. And what do you prefer, paperbacks or hardbacks?"

"Except for Snoopy."

"Excuse me, Sir?"

"I don't hate Snoopy. He's cool."

"I see. Now, paperbacks or hardbacks, Sir?"

"Paperbacks. I like to keep it light. Who needs a hardback?"

"People who read the same book repeatedly, Sir?"

"Are you that kind of reader?"

The researcher clears her throat.

"This survey isn't about me, Sir. It's about you."

"Too bad. I'm not very interesting."

"Moving on, Sir. Where do you feel most at home? Town or country?"

"Town. Definitely town."

"Of course. You live in the city, don't you?"

"Listen, how long is this going to take?"

"Almost done, Sir. Only three questions left to go."

"Okay. But make it snappy."

"Sure will. Are you comfortable improvising? Or do you prefer to have a plan?"

"That depends."

"And on what does it depend, Sir?"

I sense some irritation at the other end of the line.

"On the circumstances."

"I'll mark this one as undecided."

"Meaning what?"

"That you have trouble deciding whether you are an improviser or a planner."

"I don't like the sound of that."

"I'll leave the question open then."

"That's better."

"Excellent. Chess or poker, Sir?"

"Chess."

"Chess it is."

"Who plays poker anyway?"

"I don't know, Sir. Poker players?"

She sounds bored. I can't blame her. It's a dreadful way to make a living. I try my best to spice it up for her, but I don't think I'm getting through to her.

"Gamblers. That's who plays poker. Poker is a game of chance. Now chess, that's a different story. There is no place for chance in chess."

"I'll have to take your word for it, Sir."

"You do that. Mark my words. Poker is for gamblers."

"Final question, Sir. Doctor John or Doctor Alban?"

"What?"

"Doctor John or Doctor Alban, Sir?"

"Who wrote that questionnaire?"

"I don't know, Sir. The survey is based on a standard set of questions. The order of the questions is randomized."

She sounds like she is reading from a popup window.

"What is this survey even for?"

"I can't tell you that, Sir. The approach we use only works as long as the respondents don't know what we are trying to find out."

"You're kidding."

"I wouldn't dream of it, Sir."

"Who pays for this?"

If you pay, you call the shots. Money is power. That's a known fact.

"I have no information about that, Sir."

"Can you check with your supervisor?"

"Sure. Hold on."

The line goes silent, but only for a second.

"Thank you for holding, Sir. I'm afraid I'm not at liberty to disclose information about our clients, Sir."

"Did you really check with your supervisor?"

"What makes you think I didn't, Sir?"

"Forget it. It doesn't matter."

"Okay, Sir. Doctor John or Doctor Alban, Sir?"

"Doctor John is an artist. Doctor Alban is a dentist."

"If you say so, Sir."

"What's the next question?"

"This is the last question, Sir."

I hang up. I am just about to make some coffee when the phone rings again. I take the call without looking at the number.

"Doctor Alban is a fucking dentist", I yell into the phone.

"I think you might be on to something", the caller says. It's not the market researcher. This is a male voice. It sounds familiar, but I can't place it.

"Who is this?"

"Leo."

"Leo?"

"Leo Wienroth."

Imagine that. I haven't heard from Leo in ages. We used to be close.

"Is that really you?"

"Define real."

"It is you."

"If you say so."

He laughs. There's no mistaking that laugh. It really is Leo.

"How did you get this number?"

"It was in the package."

"What package?"

"For the reunion?"

"Oh, that. I haven't even looked at that."

"But you are going."

"That's the plan."

"That's great. It'll be good to see you."

"So you're going too?"

"Yeah. I live near the venue."

"You're still in New Orleans?"

"Back again. I lived in Los Angeles for a while, but I couldn't handle the people there. And all that sun. It never rains. It gets to you. It got to me at least."

"I know what you mean. I feels unreal somehow. Like a movie set."

"I even tried New York."

"Oh yeah? How come you never looked me up?"

"I don't know. I wish I had. I'm sorry I didn't. I guess I was busy."

"Doing what?"

"I can barely remember. It feels like someone else's life when I think about it now. All I know is that it wasn't for me. I never felt at home there."

"New York can be a handful."

"New Orleans too. The poverty. The crime. The corruption. The racism. The hurricanes. The tourists. The roads. Nothing works the way you think it should."

"I think that's why I left. Too many unknown variables."

"No doubt about it. It's a mess, but it's my kind of mess."

"So you're doing okay?"

"Better than ever. When are you coming?"

"I think my flight is around noon on Saturday."

"Why don't you come on Friday? We could have a beer. Catch up on old times."

I have a flash vision of myself in a rocking chair on a balcony on Bourbon Street, watching the barflies buzz by below. Beads of perspiration are running down my back. That's how warm the night is. I have a can of cold beer in my hand. Beads of condensation are running down the side of the can. That's how cold the beer is.

"I like the sound of that."

"It's a date then."

"Let me check with airline and the hotel first."

"Don't worry about the hotel. You can stay at my place."

"Are you sure?"

"You'd be doing me a favor."

"Alright. I'll let you know about the flight."

"Great. See you soon."

Before the call, I had been of two minds about the trip to New Orleans. I'm not crazy about reunions. And I hate hotels. I stay in hotels all the time for work. But the prospect of spending the weekend at an old friend's place makes the whole idea more appealing. It'll do me good to get out of city for a few days. It usually does.

I brew a cup of coffee. I take it to the rooftop. The sky is beautiful, two thirds baby blue and one third puffy clouds. I take a sip of coffee. I light a cigarette. Life is good.

I go back inside. I call the airline. It turns out I have a flexible ticket. Changes are free of charge. I change my flight from Saturday to Friday. I forward the rebooking confirmation to Leo. He replies almost instantly. He says he'll pick me up at the airport. I call the hotel to cancel the room I have booked for Saturday. They tell me that my rate is not refundable. I cancel my reservation anyway. As soon as I have hung up, I wonder whether Leo's offer to stay at his place was for the whole weekend, or just for Friday night. I try to reach him, but the call goes straight to voicemail. I call the hotel again. I ask them whether they can re-instate my reservation for Saturday. They tell me that they can't. I'd have to make a new reservation. I decide against it. I don't think Leo will put me on the street.

The rest of the week is pretty busy. Work keeps me from thinking about the weekend. I don't know what to expect anyway. I haven't been to New Orleans since Katrina, and I don't think I've seen any of the people in my class since I graduated. Maybe that's a good thing. That way, I'll be able to approach the weekend with an open mind. When I think I know what's coming, I tend to miss out on the things that really matter.

The mid-day flight from New York to New Orleans is uneventful. Business travelers in crumpled suits hiding behind copies of the Wall Street Journal and USA Today. Jocks in shorts and flip flops planning bar crawls. Screaming kids. Bleary-eyed parents. Flight attendants in polyester uniforms. Crammed seats. Stale pretzels. Lukewarm coffee. Lukewarm coke. The pilot keeps making announcements nobody listens to. I wonder who gave him the idea that people care about the cruising altitude, or the speed of the plane, or the route it takes, or what they could see if they had a window seat. I put on my noise-canceling headphones to tune out of the misery, but it doesn't really work. My MP3 player is no match for plane's PA system.

I spend the rest of the flight worrying about my bag. Somehow, the airline manages to lose my luggage on every other flight. At Louis Armstrong Airport, I'm relieved when I spot my battered black holdall on the carousel. I take that as a good sign. I pick up the bag and step out onto the curb. The heat hits me like a hammer. I take off my jacket. I wipe my brow with my shirt sleeve. A wide-hipped woman pushing a cart piled high with luggage flashes me a smile as white as new snow and as big as a barn door.

"Welcome to New Orleans, honey."

I touch a finger to my sweaty forehead in salute.

"Thank you, mam. It's good to be here. Where are you headed?"

"Haiti."

"Good for you. Bon voyage!"

She nods and pushes her cart towards departures, swaying to a tune she alone can hear. I watch her disappear through the sliding doors. Just as I am about to switch on my phone to check whether Leo has texted me, he pulls up to the curb. He gets out of the car. He's wearing maroon cowboy boots, a cream suit, a pale pink shirt, and a pair of mirror shades pushed up onto his forehead. His hair is cropped close. Middle age looks good on him. Unlike me, Leo hasn't put on much weight, but the years have added something else. Something good. A touch of silver on his temples, but that's not it. A pattern of tiny wrinkles around the corners of his eyes, but that's not it either. It's hard to put a finger on it. Maybe it isn't any one thing. It's the way he carries himself. He looks like he's at home in his body. At peace with the world.

We hug. He smells good.

"It's good to see you", he says.

"You too. You look great."

Leo laughs. He takes my bag and puts it in the back seat of the car. It's the kind of car that has a roof edge, but no roof. Boxy. Practical. Like an urban buggy.

"Hop in", he says.

"I never thought I'd see you in this kind of car. I always imagined you in something smaller. British, or Italian. Low on the road. Stick shift. Wire wheels. The works."

"I know. I'd trade this thing for a roadster in a heartbeat, but a roadster wouldn't last a week on these mean streets. We have potholes that eat compact cars for breakfast."

Leo checks the mirror and pulls away from the curb. He navigates the labyrinth of pedestrian crossings, converging lanes, on-ramps, off-ramps, tunnels, and overpasses with effortless grace. Once we're on the highway, he pushes the shades down onto his nose, accelerates to 65, and puts the car in cruise control. I notice a low growling sound welling up from the guts of the car.

"Is something wrong with the engine?"

"I don't think so. It's a German car. Why?"

"Don't you hear that noise?"

Leo chuckles. He points to the back seat.

"That's Maurice."

I look over my shoulder. A chubby dog is chewing the handle of my holdall.

"That's an unusual name for a dog."

"I named him after Merleau-Ponty."

"Like the wine?"

"Like the philosopher. He looks gentle, but he has very strong opinions."

"I see", I say, although I don't.

We leave the highway just after City Park. We stop at a traffic light. Leo pushes the shades back up onto his forehead and turns his head to look at me.

"You look tired", he says.

"It's been a busy week."

"I think you work too much."

"It's not easy to make ends meet in the city. You know how it is."

"I do. It's a rat race, and it never stops. That's one of the reasons I didn't like it there. Life moves at a slower pace in New Orleans."

The traffic light turns green. Leo makes a left. I've never been to this part of town. When I was in college, I rarely left the Garden District. We drive through quiet, tree-lined streets. There is not much traffic. Every other car is a Buick or a Cadillac. Nobody is in a rush. Leo goes with the flow. His driving puts my mind at ease. I look up at the sky. The branches of the trees that stand on either side of the street meet in the middle, high above our heads, creating a natural canopy. The sunlight filters through the leaves and casts a pattern of living shadows onto the road ahead. When the wind rustles the leaves, the shadows move in sync. It's quite hypnotic.

"This is a nice neighborhood."

"I've always wanted to move here, but it took me a long time to find the kind of place I was looking for."

I drift off. When I wake up, we are driving straight towards a brick wall.

"Watch out", I yell, but Leo keeps driving.

Just when I think we are going to crash into the wall, the wall parts like a curtain, and we drive right through it. I turn my head. The wall slides shut behind us.

“What was that?”

“A little trick. I had the gate painted to blend in with the wall.”

“Why do you need such a massive wall at all?”

“To keep the scum out.”

We get to another gate. This time, Leo brings the car to a stop before we reach the gate. He enters a passcode on a keypad and places his right hand on a scanner. I notice he still wears his graduation ring, the one with the Jesuit seal, three letters, IHS, surrounded by stylized rays of light. The second gate slides open. Leo parks the car. The second gate slides shut behind us. We get out of the car. I want to take my bag, but the dog doesn't look like it's ready to give it up. Leo notices my hesitation.

“Drop it, Maurice”, Leo says, and the dog does, although reluctantly. It looks at me with a mixture of disgust and contempt. Leo opens the tailgate. The dog scrambles out of the car and trots off into the undergrowth of the magnolia trees that skirt the brick wall that runs around the property. Leo hands me the bag. The handle is well lubricated with the dog's saliva. I don't say anything. Dog owners have no sense of humor, at least not when it comes to their dogs. That's a known fact.

I follow Leo on a paved path that leads up to the house. It's quite a house. Whatever Leo does for a living, he must be very good at it. Or maybe he won the lottery. He unlocks the door and drops his keys into a ceramic bowl that sits on an antique table in the hallway. He takes off his shades and puts them on the table next to the bowl.

“I'll show you to the guest room”, Leo says.

I follow him through a double door, down the hallway, up a staircase, down another hallway, and up another staircase.

“You live here all by yourself?”

Leo doesn't answer the question. Maybe he hasn't heard me. He is a few steps ahead of me. He points to a door at the far end of the hallway.

“This is you. Take your time. I'll be in the big room”, he says.

The guest room is spacious, clean, and cool. It's decorated in shades of cream and caramel. An old-fashioned ceiling fan with polished wooden blades is whirring above my head. I take off my sweaty clothes to feel the breeze on my body. I take a shower, shave my face, and splash some cologne from a dark green bottle onto my cheeks. It smells of oranges. I put on a white linen shirt, a pair of cotton slacks, and a pair of moccasins. I roll the sleeves of the shirt up to just below my elbows. I help myself to a glass of water from a pitcher that sits on a small table by the window. I open the window. It has a view of a lush green garden and the bayou that lies beyond. It's still warm, but not as hot as before. Maybe it's my system that's adjusting to the humid heat. Or maybe it's the shirt. Linen has cooling properties. That's a known fact. I smoke a cigarette. I'm ready for the weekend to begin.

When I step out into the hallway, I have trouble remembering which way I came. I call out Leo's name, but he doesn't answer. I walk down the hallway, down a short flight of stairs, down a hallway, and around a corner. This house is a maze. Just when I am about to go back to my room to call Leo on his cell phone, I hear music playing somewhere downstairs. I follow the music, and that's how I find the big room. It's about the size of a basketball court. The ceiling is at least 30 feet high. The walls are a mix of exposed brick and patches of crumbling plaster. Half a dozen arched windows look out onto a little pond and a copse of willow trees.

A colorful assortment of rugs, couches, easy chairs, coffee tables, chests, and floor lamps is scattered across the room. There is plenty of empty space between the islands of furniture. An archipelago of a living room. The pieces don't really match in any traditional sense, but the vibrations are good. Harmonious. Sophisticated and understated at the same time. Not an easy combination to pull off.

Halfway up the walls, a gallery runs around the perimeter of the room. Upstairs, the walls are lined with books. A narrow spiral staircase leads up to the gallery from a corner in the open kitchen area. At the far end of the room, there is a vintage stereo setup. A record player. A tube amp. A pair of tall speakers with fabric front panels. Leo is standing by the stereo, studying a record sleeve.

"You weren't exaggerating."

Leo looks up from the record sleeve.

"What do you mean?"

"When you said big room."

He smiles.

Leo lets his eyes wander from wall to wall, from floor to ceiling, from one piece of furniture to the next. It's almost as if he's looking at the room for the first time, or with new eyes.

"I suppose you're right."

"It's huge!"

He shrugs and smiles.

"I have a soft spot for space", he says.

"What's that music?"

"The Blind Boys of Louisiana. Away From Home. It just came out."

"I like it."

"I thought that you might."

"I don't think I've heard it before, but it sounds familiar."

"I know what you mean. It's timeless in a way. The group has been around forever. It was established before the war."

"They must be ancient!"

"I don't think it's the same people who started the group. The voices change. The spirit stays."

"Like the ship in that story."

"What ship?"

"You know, the one on which they replace all the planks, one by one, until nothing is left of the original ship, and yet it's still the same ship?"

Leo's face lights up.

"Oh, that. The ship of Theseus."

"That's the one."

"I think I have a book on it."

He points up to the library.

"Do you want me to get it?"

"No, that's okay."

"How about a glass of champagne then?"

"I don't know. It's a little early for liquor, don't you think?"

"Champagne isn't liquor. It's an elixir. It'll help you get into the right frame of mind for tonight."

"What's tonight?"

"You'll see."

"You know I don't like surprises."

"That why you need a glass of champagne."

"Alright then."

Leo puts down the record sleeve and walks over to the kitchen area. He takes two long-stemmed glasses from a shelf above the kitchen counter. He rinses the glasses out with water and polishes them with a white cloth. He opens the fridge and takes out a bottle of champagne. It looks expensive. The label is shaped like a bat. Leo removes the little wire cage and the tinfoil cap. He wraps the white cloth around the neck of the bottle and pops the cork. He pours the champagne.

"To friendship."

"To friendship."

Leo brings out Italian bread sticks and roasted almonds. We end up drinking the whole bottle. Leo was right. It was just what I needed. I feel good. A little drowsy perhaps.

“Now how about a cup of coffee?”

“You read my mind.

“I just stick to the theory of humors.”

“Humors?”

“Liquids. It’s all about keeping the different liquids in your body in balance.”

“I see”, I say, although I’m not sure I do.

“That’s what life is all about. Balance.”

“Makes sense. Do you need help with the coffee?”

“I got it. Sit back. Relax.”

I flop down on the couch that faces the kitchen counter. Leo fires up the coffee machine. It’s a gleaming silver dragon, the kind that would look at home in an upscale espresso bar. It emits a hissing sound as it clears the nostrils of its steam spouts. Leo rinses out the water tank and fills it with fresh water. He turns to me.

“Espresso? Cappuccino? Flat white?”

“Espresso.”

He smiles and nods, as if I have passed a test. He grinds the beans. The smell of freshly ground coffee wafts over to the couch.

“I love that smell.”

“Me too.”

While he’s waiting for the boiler to heat up, Leo fills two small glasses with water and puts them on a lacquered wooden tray. He moves with efficiency, but without haste. He handles the equipment like a professional barista. Maybe he works in the hospitality industry. I could see him running a cocktail bar, or a fancy restaurant, or even a boutique hotel. Watching him go through the motions of making coffee has a soothing effect on me. It’s like watching a play I have seen before. A classic. I know what’s coming, but I can’t get enough of it. *The Good Life*, by Leo Wienroth. One act. No intermission. I would pay to see it.

“What’s your secret, Leo?”

“What do you mean?”

“You seem so serene.”

He laughs.

“Wow. Serene. That’s a big word. I don’t know. As I said, I’m all about balance. I try to balance the bitter with the sweet. The fast with the slow. The high with the low. Action with contemplation.”

“That’s what I mean. You have it figured out.”

“You give me too much credit. I get it all from Capablanca.”

“Who is that? A friend of yours?”

Leo smiles. I’m afraid I might have said something stupid, but Leo doesn’t seem to think so, or if he does, he doesn’t let on about it.

“I like to think so”, he says.

Leo draws two shots of espresso. He places the cups on the tray and carries the tray over to the coffee table in front of the couch. Just as he is about to sit down on a wooden stool across from me, his phone buzzes. He takes it from his pocket. He looks at the display. A frown forms on his forehead while he reads the message.

“What is it?”

“An emergency. I have to go. Make yourself at home. I won’t be long.”

“What kind of emergency?”, I ask him, but it’s too late. He has already left the room. I hear the front door slam. A few seconds later, I hear the engine of the car start up. I’m alone. What happened to Southern hospitality? First Leo lures me down here a day early, then he disappears without even telling me where he is going? So be it. I’m sure he has a good reason to leave so suddenly. I’ll make the best of it. I turn my attention to the coffee. It smells irresistible. I never get tired of the smell of coffee. The crema looks perfect. I take a sip. It’s very good. Strong as steel. Smooth as silk. Dark as a long-kept secret. I drink Leo’s as well. It would be a shame to let it go to waste, and I don’t think he will be back in time to drink it while it’s still hot. Now that Leo is gone, I feel his presence even more strongly than I did when he was here. I look at the parts, and I see the whole take shape. I look at the set, and I see the plot unfold. I look at the traces, and I see the man emerge. Everything is evidence. The house he lives in. The objects he surrounds himself with. The music he listens to. The coffee he has made. I feel the coffee pulsing through me like a magic potion. What I need now is something sweet. I never put sugar in my coffee, but I like to nibble something sweet on the side. A piece of chocolate. A candy bar. A peanut butter cup. I rummage through Leo’s kitchen cabinets. I find a cookie jar. It’s shaped like a human skull. I take off the cap. Strike. The skull is filled to the brim with cookies. They are shaped like crescent moons and speckled with black seeds. They smell fantastic. Cinnamon. Lemon. Ginger. Vanilla. A hint of caramel. But there’s something else. Nutmeg? Cardamom? Poppy? I’m not sure. Just as I am about to try one, the dog bursts into the kitchen through a flap in a side door that I hadn’t seen before. It must have smelled the cookies. Dogs have a sixth sense for treats. That’s a known fact. I dash up the spiral staircase, pressing the cookie jar to my chest.

The dog barks at me, but it doesn't follow me upstairs. Dogs don't like to climb stairs. That's a known fact. Also, I think this particular dog is too fat to make it up the stairs, even if it set its simple mind to it.

"Who's the top dog now?"

The dog growls. I ignore it. I settle into an easy chair in a nook between two bookcases. I try one of the cookies. It's better than good. Half cookie, half gingerbread. Crisp on the outside and chewy on the inside. I eat another one. I start wandering around the gallery, cookie jar in hand. Downstairs, the dog keeps growling, but I keep ignoring it. I eat cookie after cookie while I scan the shelves of Leo's library. Leo's interests seem to be wide and varied. There's plenty of philosophy. Philosophy was Leo's major. I tilt my head to read the names on the spines of the books. Lacan. Lachelier. Ladrière. Lagache. Lagneau. Landgrebe. Landsberg. Lautmann. Lavelle. Lefort. Léon-Dufour. Levinas. Lévi-Strauss. Leyvraz. Lichtheim. Locke. Löwith. Lyotard. Locke is the only name that sounds vaguely familiar, but that doesn't say much. I'm not big on philosophy. I'm not all that well read in general. It's not that I don't like books. I just don't have the time. I go to work to pay for my apartment. I go to the gym to stay in shape. I read the paper to stay up to date. Once in a blue moon, I go to the movies. I don't really have time for books.

I move from shelf to shelf. Fashion. Film studies. Urban planning. A few books on French colonial history and Cajun cooking. Half a shelf on the arts of growing, roasting, blending, and brewing coffee. Short fiction in English, Spanish, French, Italian, and Portuguese. An impressive selection of books on voodoo and black magic. Leo is full of surprises. There is also an entire bookcase on chess. Openings. Endings. Problems. Biographies of famous players of the game. Before I know it, I have eaten all the cookies. I put down the jar. Now what? I could use another espresso, but I don't think the dog will let me pass. I wouldn't know how to work the machine anyway. I pick up a book that's lying flat on its back on an empty shelf between the voodoo section and the chess section. A slim, cloth-bound volume. It has no jacket, no blurbs, nothing to recommend it but the fact that it's there. I open it. Dark brown lettering on smooth, ivory-colored paper. *The Devil's Gambit*, by Adam Schlesinger, PhD, published in 1969, by Loyola University Press. On the first page, there is a dedication: "I love the players. You love the game." I dive right in. It's pretty cryptic. I re-read the first paragraph three times and I'm still not sure what the book is about. The doorbell rings. I'm relieved. The bell gives me an excuse to get away from the book. I peer over the banister. The dog is gone. It guess it got bored. I put the book back on the shelf, pick up the empty cookie jar, and make my way down the spiral staircase. The doorbell rings again. In the dark hallway that leads from the big room to the front door, I take a passing glance at a mirror to check my face for cookie crumbs. I don't see any crumbs, but something is off. I am wearing a white shirt. The man in the mirror is wearing a black shirt. I turn to face the mirror.

I see Leo looking back at me. I drop the cookie jar. It shatters on the hardwood floor. I look at the mirror again. I realize it's not a mirror at all. It's a framed headshot of Leo behind a sheet of glass, made to look like a mirror and mounted at eye level. On the opposite wall of the hallway, there is a headshot of a beautiful Latina in a matching frame. I want to take a closer look at it, but the doorbell keeps ringing. It sounds urgent. I hurry to the front door. A dark shape is visible through the panel of frosted glass that is set into the top half of the door.

"Who is it?"

"Devil on your doorstep."

A female voice.

"Funny."

"I'm not joking."

"What do you want?"

"Your soul."

"What's in it for me?"

"Your life."

I'm intrigued. I open the door. I don't know what I expected, but I wasn't expecting this. It's the neighborhood ninja. A pale-faced girl with spiky black hair, clad in black from head to toe. Black tank top. Tight black pants. Black biker boots. Fingerless gloves. She looks lean and mean. There are two things that worry me about this girl. One thing worries me a little. The other thing worries me a lot. The thing that worries me a little is the big gun in the holster on her hip. But this is the South. Big guns are the norm here. It might not mean anything. What worries me a lot is the Doberman by her side. Like the girl, the dog looks lean and mean. Its fangs are bared. Drool is dripping from the corners of its muzzle. It doesn't growl. It doesn't have to. Dobermans are bred to kill. That's a known fact.

"Ready?", the girl asks.

"Ready for what?"

"You're Leo, right?"

"No. I'm Daniel."

"I don't think so."

"What do you want?"

"This is not about me. It's about you. You want to come with me."

"No, I don't. Maybe Leo does. But Leo is not here right now."

"Bullshit."

"You can come in and wait for him if you want to."

I don't know why I say that. I don't want her to come in.

"I don't want to come in. You want to come out", she says.

"What if I don't?"

"I'll set Alice on you."

She points to the Doberman.

"That's an unusual name for a dog."

"I named her after my favorite explorer."

"As in the children's book?"

"As in the video game. She remembers everything."

"I see", I say, although I don't.

"Enough with the chit chat. Time to go", she says.

She points to the car that's parked right where Leo's car was parked before. A black sedan with blacked-out windows.

"Do I have a choice?"

"No."

"That's what I thought."

"I like the way you think."

"Let me get my coat."

"Nice try. Not happening though."

I step out, pull the door closed behind me, and follow her to the car. She opens the back door of the car for me, the way cops open car doors for perps in TV shows.

"Watch your head."

I get into the back seat. She gets into the driver's seat. The Doberman rides shotgun. The girl starts the engine. The inner gate slides open. My mind is racing. How did she even get onto the property? Does she work for Leo? Or does Leo work for her? Does he owe her money? Is she the scum Leo was talking about? Is she playing a prank on Leo? Or is Leo playing a prank on me? The more I think about it, the more I realize how little I know about Leo's life. What he does for a living. Who he hangs out with. Where he gets his kicks. Maybe the girl is a prostitute? Has Leo hired her? But why would he bring a prostitute to his house when he knows I will be there? Had he planned a threesome, and the emergency, whatever it is, thwarted his plan? I don't have enough information. All I have to go on is what the girl has told me, and so far, she hasn't really told me anything.

We get to the outer gate. Like Leo, the girl doesn't slow down. The gate slides open.

"Who are you?"

"You can call me Lucy."

"Is that your real name?"

"No."

"What's your real name?"

"What's it to you?"

"I just breathe easier when I know who I am dealing with."

She snorts.

"Your name isn't Leo either, right?"

"No. My name is Daniel."

"So I'm not Lucy, and you're not Leo. Let's leave it at that."

She winks at me in the rearview mirror. What does that mean? Is she coming on to me? Is she crazy? She looks a little crazy. Or am I crazy? Maybe this really is a prank, the emergency was just a fib, we're on our way to a pre-reunion party, and I'll be the one looking stupid. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Where are we going?"

"Where do you want to go?"

"Does it matter what I want?"

"I didn't say that."

"Then why do you ask?"

"I'm just making conversation."

I consider my options. I could try to fight the girl, but I don't have a weapon. I could try calling for help, but I don't have my phone, and my guess is that the car is soundproofed. I could try to buy my way out of this, but I don't have my wallet. Even if I got out, I wouldn't know where to go. I don't know Leo's address, and I don't have the key. I really don't have anything. I wouldn't even make it past the first gate. But I'll have time to worry about that when I get out of the car. If I get out. I try the window switch, but it's disabled. When the car stops at a traffic light, I try to open the door, but it's locked. Of course it's locked. The girl chuckles.

"I like you. You're funny."

"Just let me out, okay? I won't press charges."

As soon as I say that, I regret it. The last thing I want to do is put her on the spot, but now I've done it. I clearly don't have enough experience with being hijacked.

“Sit back. Relax. Enjoy the ride.”

We’re on the highway now. Lucy is hard at work at the wheel. Her driving is very different from Leo’s. It involves a lot of swearing, honking the horn, changing lanes, accelerating abruptly, hitting the brakes hard. It looks very athletic. I can see the tendons tightening in her neck and the muscles bulging in her arms. She’s not just driving. She’s fighting. Every other driver is her enemy. But because she’s out of sync with the traffic, I don’t think we’re getting where we’re going any faster than we did if she just went with the flow. Not that I’m in a big rush. I have no idea what’s coming, but I have a feeling I won’t like it. After about twenty minutes, we leave the highway. We keep driving for another ten minutes or so. I don’t know where we are. Out in the sticks. There isn’t much traffic here. The buildings we pass are few and far between. Gas stations, warehouses, motels, and drive-through restaurants. Everything looks grim. But maybe that’s just the light. It’s getting dark. Night falls fast down here, much faster than it does in New York.

Eventually, we pull up to a single-story building that looks like a nightclub. There’s a banner above the entrance. It reads “CCC – One night only.”

“What’s CCC?”

“It’s what you’re here for.”

“But what does it stand for?”

“Chop chess championship.”

“Chop chess?”

She nods.

“I don’t like the sound of that.”

“Tough luck. You’re a contender.”

“I didn’t sign up for this.”

She shrugs.

“I’m just here to get you to the game.”

She kills the engine. Someone opens the door of the car from outside. The first thing I see is a crescent moon hovering near the horizon. A bald, barrel-chested man in a dark suit steps into the doorframe, blocking out the moon. The man is wearing an earpiece. A black wire snakes down from the earpiece into the gap between his shirt collar and his suit jacket. A bulge in the jacket indicates that he carries a gun as well.

“Welcome to the Black Maria.”

“Black Maria?”

“Yes.”

“And who are you?”

"I am the doctor."

He doesn't look like a doctor. He looks more like a bouncer.

"I think there's been a mistake."

"I don't think so. They're waiting for you."

He drags me from the back seat. The girl gets out of the car, gun in hand. She puts a leash on the Doberman and yanks it, pulling the dog from the passenger seat. They escort me to a room that looks like an execution chamber. Three of the four walls are bare. The fourth wall is covered by a heavy curtain. The floor is tiled. In the middle of the floor, there is a square table with two chairs. One of the chairs is taken by a beautiful Latina in a black dress. The table is set with a chessboard. A powerful ceiling lamp casts a circle of bright white light onto the table from above.

The Latina has the white pieces.

"Sit down", the doctor says.

"I don't want to."

The pale girl flicks the safety on her gun. I sit down across from the Latina. The pale girl retreats into the shadows, Doberman in tow.

"Open it", the doctor says to no-one in particular.

The curtain glides open, revealing several rows of stadium seating. But because that part of the room is in the dark, and the ceiling light above the table is so bright, it's hard to make out how many rows there are, and how many of the seats are taken.

"The rules are simple. Lose a piece, lose a finger. Lose the game, lose your life", the doctor says. It sounds practiced, as if he has said the same thing many times before.

"But there are sixteen pieces. What if lose more than ten?", I ask.

"Use your imagination."

The doctor turns to the audience.

"Place your bets."

The people in the audience start pressing buttons on small, hand-held devices that look like pocket calculators. I notice that a man in the front row is wearing a ring with a Jesuit seal. The ring looks just like Leo's. The face of the man is in the dark.

"Leo?", I ask, but there is no answer.

A display panel springs to life above the audience. It looks like a departure board at an airport or a train station, with a little split flap for every character. When the flaps finally stop rattling, the panel displays about two dozen rows of letters and numbers. All the rows start with the letter W, followed by two numbers.

"You're new to this, right?", the Latina whispers.

I nod.

“The letter is for the player they are betting on to win. W is for white. B is for black. The first number is the finger count to checkmate. The second number is the dollar amount they are betting.”

“They all are betting on you to beat me?”

She nods.

I study the panel. The numbers in the first column are depressingly low. The numbers in the second column are dizzyingly high. The averages at the bottom of the panel predict that I will lose five fingers before I lose the game.

“It’s because you’re new”, the Latina says.

“No talking”, the doctor snaps.

The Latina opens the game with the king’s pawn. E2 to E4. Not a very original move. I counter it. She deploys her knights. She’s better than I thought at first. Aggressive. She opens up her back rank almost all the way. I send my bishops after her rooks. She castles with the queenside rook. I set a trap for her queen. Just when I think she is about to walk into it, one of her rooks takes one of my bishops. Just like that.

“Put your left hand on the table”, the doctor says.

“No.”

He grabs my left wrist and pins it to the table. I try to break free, but he’s too strong. He reaches into an inside pocket of his suit jacket, takes out a butterfly knife, flips it open, and cuts off my left pinkie. Just like that. It doesn’t hurt as much as I thought it would. The knife must be very sharp. But there’s a lot of blood. There are more blood vessels in a finger than in any other part of the human body. That’s a known fact. Blood keeps gushing from the wound. I pass out. When I come to, I’m back at Leo’s place, stretched out on the couch. Maurice is licking my left hand. I look at it. There is no blood. My pinkie is still there. I wiggle it. It works just fine. I feel no pain. There’s not even a scar. Leo is sitting on the wooden stool across from me. He looks worried. He points to the cookie jar on the coffee table.

“Did you eat those cookies?”

“I’m not sure. I guess I did.”

“Oh boy. All of them?”

“I think so.”

“That must have been quite a trip.”

“Roger that.”

“Are you feeling okay?”

“I don’t know. A little dizzy.”

"I'm not surprised."

"What was in those cookies?"

"I have no idea."

"Where did you get them?"

"An organic candy shop, out on Magazine. I bought them mostly for the jar. I only ate one of them. I liked the taste, but it didn't like the effect it had on me."

"What happened?"

"I fell asleep. I had a dream."

"What kind of dream?"

"Weird. Blurry. It felt like I was a character in someone else's dream. Out of control. A pawn in a game."

"A game?"

"Yes. Like I was being played. Pushed around on a board by an unseen hand. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, I think I do."

"Like I was seeing only a tiny fraction of a much bigger picture. I knew it was there, but I couldn't see it because it was too big, and I was standing too close."

"Sounds scary."

"It was. When I woke up, I was all confused. I had trouble telling what was real from what wasn't real."

"How long did that last?"

"Not long. A day. Maybe two. Then everything went back to normal. But I never ate another one of those cookies."

"Why didn't you throw them out?"

"I don't know. I should have. I went back to the shop to ask them about the cookies, but when I got there, the shop was gone."

"Do you remember what the shop was called?"

"The Black Maria. Why?"

"No reason."

Cover art: Jean Metzinger (1883-1956), Soldat jouant aux échecs (soldier playing chess), 1915, oil on canvas, The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, Chicago, IL