

# **CHECKMATE**

**A PLAY IN ONE ACT**

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and translated from the Turkish by Fred Stark

Note: As chess was invented, and still today in the East, the most powerful piece is called a vizier, not a queen. The rooks are castles, the knights horses, and the bishops elephants.

[A dimly lit stage, with its floor tilted toward the audience and a large chess board in the middle. This stage should be neither too small nor too close to the spectators. The large pieces on the board are arranged as in diagram 1. Previously captured pieces, some of them overturned, are scattered on either side of the board. Just behind the playing area there are bleachers, a simple affair made up of just a few rows of seats. At lower stage right the First Actor sits on an overturned pawn. An undistinguished piece of cloth seems not so much to clothe as to cover him as he gazes pensively at the board. He is spotlighted. In the background we hear a slow, romantic tune played by a clarinet, and the sound of this music gradually approaches till, at stage left, the Second Actor enters slowly, playing the clarinet and dressed exactly like the First Actor. He makes his way to the bleachers, sits, finishes his tune, and lays the clarinet down beside him. At no time has the First Actor taken any notice. The Second Actor rests his chin in his hands and looks at the board. He will remain in this attitude, speaking not a word, until the end of the play. After a rather long silence the First Actor looks up toward the Second Actor, as if expecting him to speak first. When no change is seen in the latter, the First Actor breaks the silence.

Do you know the game of chess?

No answer

Well, what's the difference? You'd be powerless anyway.

No answer

I mean, what can you do but sit there and watch? Ultimately you're just an observer. Isn't that awful?

No answer

To keep silent, sometimes, even when you see that it's all wrong, or knowing full well you could do better... To just be silent, think and not say a word.... But even this is part of the game, a rule. You have to watch and keep your mouth shut. Maybe you know the rules, and that's why you're silent. But as I said before, what's the difference?

No answer. He rises, takes a few steps, and leans up against a piece.

You know what? I don't think I'm doing you justice. Right now I spoke as if you didn't matter. I so to speak banished, obliterated you.... As if that were possible. But you ARE there, I know that. Even when you weren't, you were. I mean, without you there's no play either. Imagine yourself somewhere all alone, just you and your clarinet, let's say. Or it could be a cello, whichever you prefer. And there's not a

single listener. Think of it: play that music as you will, there's not another breathing soul. No breath, no ear, no feeling. Just blank space. You'd want it though, wouldn't you? Someone to enjoy the music, to applaud, sneer, fume, swear? Stay right there. This play is for you.

He rises and moves toward the center of the board.

Look, let's say you know nothing about this game. At first it may seem very complicated. But actually at bottom it's quite simple. Black versus White. That is to say, you and another. The goal, as in every game, is to defeat the other. Who is this other? The other color. And who are you, then? At times White, at times Black. Isn't that peculiar? You have no choice. If you've been given white the other's black, or if the opposite, you're the other and the other's you. But the rules are there from the outset; your task is simply to move your pieces accordingly and capture the other's tallest piece – this one.

He goes over to the Black king and lays a hand on it.

It's called the king. Why is this the tallest piece, and why is this the only piece that if you lose it the game ends, don't ask me. If you really want my opinion, this is the stupidest piece of all. None of the others that you see here is so lead-footed. Even these little pawns, and no piece is smaller, can jump two squares sometimes, but the king, never. He moves one at a time, slowly, haughtily and ponderously. Can't even manage to flee properly. Near the beginning he trades places with the rook, tucks himself away safely, and usually doesn't budge again till the game is over. He doesn't get involved unless it's absolutely necessary, he's selfish and lacks talent, but there you are, he's the king. You can't even ask why. Whether you win or lose, at game's end your king always stands stiffly erect on the board. He's never discarded like the others. Heedless of his responsibility for all the pieces wretchedly cast aside in weary defeat, he surrenders still standing. As if that were some great virtue! The only time he's overturned is when all hope is lost. Then you lay down your king, and it signifies resignation. So he can't even die fighting, but meekly lies down, all his splendour, pride and haughtiness a thing of the past, like his distinction. He spreads his great bulk out on the board. In other words, I don't much like this king. I can't tell you why he's called that, or why he's the tallest, but...them's the rules.

Slowly he makes his way over to the rook on g8.

Watch closely now.

He carries the rook to a8 (diagram 2).

How do you like that? Not a very showy move, but it will serve a purpose. And that's what befits a rook's personality. Plain, self-contained – but noble and effective. When the game first gets under way you don't see the rook strutting around much. And he's not such a nimble piece, he doesn't come too far out. But in the endgame! There he writes sheer poetry, paints glorious pictures you could gaze at for hours. Think of your school days, and your classmates. That kid who sat at the back, a little older than the rest of you, and bigger. Serious, he didn't laugh much, but even though he wasn't

specially bright no one made fun of him. Big and strong, but gentle, more childlike than the rest, soft-hearted, but terrible when he got mad... yet everyone liked him... That kid with a big head, poor but noble. I'm sure you remember, there's one like him in every class. Well the rook is that kid, sitting in the corner in the back row of the chess board. He doesn't get mixed up in everyday quarrels. He's too solid for that. But just let him start fighting.... Anyway, you'll see in a minute.

Suddenly shakes himself

Ah, he's moved.

Brings the Black bishop to f6 (diagram 3)

Doesn't signify much. Good. This means he's running out of resources. He's watching me. And you know what that means? He's waiting for me to make a mistake. So his hopes for success are based on my failure. Well, he'll have a long wait.

Silence

Actually, he plays very well. We've been at it for 39 moves; and believe it or not I've gotten so I can guess what he's going to do. Still, just when I think I've polished him off he finds the most amazing replies. It drives you crazy, makes you gnash your teeth.

A brief silence

No matter how he struggles, I'm going to win. I must win. I've worked so hard, wracked my brains – there's got to be some reward. You'll say he's striven too, that he too has delved deep, and still is, so he deserves victory as well. What nonsense! Such logic can only come from someone sitting in your place, merely observing without making any contribution. For you there's a winner and a loser. But for me? Think of the sand castles you made as a child. Did you ever make them simply to be knocked down? Don't just sit there staring, make an effort to understand. What I'm trying to say is that, just as he's not me, I'm not him either. But inevitably there's an I who wins. Either his I or mine. In which case I must win, because I am not his I.

Looks the Second Actor in the eye and waits a moment

You don't understand, do you? Definitely you don't understand. Well, whatever. Don't wear out your brains. I'm going to win, and that's that!

Once again he looks at the board, puts his foot on a pawn and remains silent for a time

It shouldn't have come to this. I should have finished him off long ago, for I've played well from the beginning, not really made any mistakes, been careful, punctilious – and made no moves which I wished I could take back. But no! I have no special advantage. He seems to be mocking me, and reading my mind. It makes things hard. Of course actually, it's worse to engage a poor or stupid player. Like reading a book

when you know the ending. It's strange. He shouldn't be better than you, he shouldn't be worse, and he shouldn't be you. And that's the real rub.

### Silence

What you really should have seen is the opening. That's that part I love. It's like a holiday out there, with every piece where it belongs, all dressed up in uniform and waiting eagerly for the first move. Like a taut bow straining to be released, and it's hard to hold them back. At the edges you see no equine carcasses, their glassy eyes piercing the heavens, nor any heaped-up pawns. As I said, everything's where it belongs. Of course they know what's going to happen to them, but they don't seem to mind. What pride they feel, wearing the thin armor of bravery that brings on their demise. These pawns, especially. They're the first to be pushed forward, and if something is going to be sacrificed, we think of them first. Sometimes they're offered as bait, asked to die in broad daylight. But they utter not a word, leaping into the heart of the blaze. They've never been known to ask why. Not once have they asked the king, the cowardly king hiding behind these three pawns all the time, why he shouldn't be the one to go. Even when it's a crazy, pointless move they never hesitate. No, they submit and attack, to die. Isn't that puzzling? So much self-sacrifice, and a great big nothing behind it. To accept as inexorable fate this meaningless, pointless annihilation – can you see any logic in it? Is virtue a name for it? But they have been taught that they serve a lofty goal, and that it's beyond their poor understanding. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying they're worthless. On the contrary, many games have been won thanks to them. What I find strange, as I said a moment ago, is their foolish eagerness at the start of the game. But for the rest, if this game is going to be played, pawns are absolutely necessary.

They call this game "life itself." Ridiculous! Ludicrous! Is life so pitiless? Reflect for a moment on what's missing from this game. Well? A woman! Which is to say warmth, refinement, feeling, love! So many different kinds of pieces: horses, elephants, castles... Only a woman is missing. This is an Oriental game, you know that. In the West, to make up this lack they've called the vizier a queen, so the game really could be like life itself. What's more, this woman is the most merciless, fiercest, most warlike piece on the board. There are chess sets with carved figurines for pieces, expensive sets usually found in the homes of those who can't play chess. They stand on special little tables, and only when they are dusted do the pieces move. Well in those sets the vizier is always a slender-waisted, tall, elegant lady. No longer a vizier, actually, but... a queen! I always feel the urge to dance with them on those black and white squares.

He bows to the white vizier at the side and grasps it in his right hand, and bringing

it to the board takes a couple of slow steps, as if dancing, then stops with the vizier leaning against him

Look here now! Isn't everything very different? Where are those squares reeking with blood and dust and gunpowder? Where is the fear and combat? For now she is a queen! But the game is radically altered.

He sets the vizier aside.

What I'm getting at is that the Orientals are more honest in this matter.

Silence

What else is missing from this game? Time. Yes, there is no time. Tell me, is it night here? Is this struggle taking place in the dark? Or is it morning? When did these pieces die? A few minutes ago? Or has it been months? And tell me this: when they resume their places on those little squares to start a new game, will time start all over for them? But in the new game they won't be the same. They won't live out the same moves, and perhaps will be left standing till the end game. Their roles, and the places they stand, will be different. But then what purpose will their actions in the present game have served? Will it be as if they had never happened? And in that case, why are they here now at all?

A brief silence

They are here because time is absent.

Silence

And what about us? Why do we play this game, if it's just to start all over? Or if, when the game starts over, we will not be that we.

Looks at the Second Actor and smiles

We play because there is no time.

Goes to the edge of the board and sits on a piece, pensively

All right then, suppose we create our own game. And say that all these pieces love each other. All mutually loyal and full of respect. We can name them, not king or bishop, but any syllables that strike our fancy. Lona, Meti, names like that. Let's say the tallest Black piece is married to the shortest White. And among them there are brothers, sisters, friends, lovers. We can insist that they be happy with little things, teach them to share and give. And suppose that one of them, whichever one, says to some one of the others – well, just something. Like “the evenings are cool around here, you'd better wear a sweater.” Or ask for his glasses from the top drawer of the bureau, while another is saying, “Lona, I could just kiss you.” You know what would happen? Or rather what wouldn't happen? There'd be no game. The one thing all games have in common is that there be a vanquisher. Even when you tell your own fortune, you're a party to the transaction, in a way taking sides against yourself. But why is this so? Since generally there's no use in winning, or knowing you've won.

Gazing at the pieces he has a long think

You'll find this silly, and tell me I'm back where I started from, but the fact is I MUST win. Once you're in this dance, it means you've agreed to its rules. And if the

rules demand a loser, that loser must not be me. Can you see that? Wait. Just watch what I do.

Moves the White rook to a7 (diagram 4)

How do you like that one? Look, he's non-plussed.

Pauses

He's moving again. Pretty quick!

Yelling

You think that's really smart, but it's stupid! You're just wasting a move.

Stamps over to the Black bishop and drags it to g7. Then, out of breath

It won't be enough. Smart as he is, it won't be enough. Anyway, there's nothing worse than playing an idiot. The important thing is to prove you're smarter. Because in this four-cornered universe there are only two guests, and in the end one of them is doomed to look stupid. I mean, you can only be a bright genius in proportion as the stupid one is a bright idiot. You get me?

Looks at the Second Actor, receives no answer, nonchalantly lowers his hands to his sides, walks over and again sits on the pawn

Intelligence! That's the whole point in this game, to prove your intelligence. What makes us human. Man, they say, is the animal that thinks. What pretention! The animal that thinks! Whereas animals think as well, and the true statement is that man, too, is an animal. And a very conceited one at that. To us, humankind is the upper limit of development. That's right! No other living creature can challenge a human at this game. A brain which weighs less than one-and-a-half kilograms is enough to make him master of this board. And he believes that he is terribly intelligent. That mass of nerves, less than one-and-a-half kilos, is actually a tremendous inheritance. But he can't manage to use it. Think about it. Man, who invented this game, who can weigh up the best solution among a countless number, solve the problem, apply what he has found, and bring things to a conclusion. Seems marvelous, doesn't it? If you know this game and its infinite creativity, you too may be struck with wonder. But reflect that it is also man who simply accepts his fate. That billions of human beings believe in charms, drink so-called medicinal water, make sacrificial offerings, spill blood, suffer and inflict suffering. The vast majority bow to the unknown rather than explore it...and kill each other, believing that they serve a higher cause – just like these pawns here. They all think their own faith is the holiest, the most undisputable; for they are not concerned to think or ask questions. Simply believing, especially if you can find a handful of people to share that belief, is enough to create a whole new game, one where you can write the rules. There's no need for a brain: your beliefs, urges, fears and penchants will do. Isn't that humankind, though? And now where is the most highly developed being in the universe? The creature who invented this game.

## Silence

That was a bit long-winded. In sum, man is an animal. But he's a long way from being a thinking animal.

Rises and contemplates the pieces for a time, motionless with hands on hips, before speaking slowly

Just look at this board. Examine it, look at the pieces, and ponder. What does it make you think of? Sense, intelligence, ambition, conflict, superiority, creativity, opportunism, ruthlessness, power, dominion... You can reel it off, and more: humanity, man's infatuation with himself, the power of mind over brute force, nobility, advanced development – yes. Yes! I agree with you. After all, I'm not an enemy of this game! I like it, otherwise would I play? It combines the most developed attributes of man with the most primitive. A miracle, truly. But did it make you think of a red flower, a setting sun, or a beloved arm touching yours? Or the smell of your beloved, or her eyes? Looking at this board, did your mind conjure up music? Worlds away, isn't it? And yet so near! Let's put our heads together on this. These wooden pieces with their various shapes – we call them warriors, whereas they can be anything we like, we're their masters. Close your eyes and think... Put violins in the hands of the pawns, and violas for some of them. Give winds to the knights, and percussion to the rooks. The queens can play cello, the kings double bass. Or whatever, you decide. Distribute the instruments at will, you're making the rules now. And then open your eyes!!

As the lights dim, in the background we hear the opening theme to Richard Strauss's Also Sprach Zarathustra (preferably Karl Böhm's rendition). The First

Actor slowly raises his hands, and moves them as if conducting the music.

Listen! Do you hear it? Now here it comes...

The double basses enter

Something's going to happen! Can you feel it? Now!!!

As the winds come in with the main theme, the First Actor has his arms spread apart in rapture. As the melody unfolds and is repeated, he slowly lifts his arms on high and throws back his head. When it is finished he slowly lowers his arms, as the second theme is momentarily withheld.

The composer calls it sunrise. But you can call it anything you like. Sunset, if that suits you. All that matters is that you feel something, that something stir within you. And wait. Look what's coming now!

The second theme enters, and the First Actor seems almost to whisper



Tell me! Is this love? Or perhaps death? Or nature awakening? Huh? Doesn't it make you want to do something? Dance, for instance...

As the strings take up their pizzicato he tiptoes among the pieces and comes to the queen, putting an arm around her to dance just as the strings introduce the romantic theme.

This, this is what makes man human!! Don't you feel like weeping? Or laughing, or shouting, or embracing someone, as I'm doing?

Shouting

Doesn't something stir within you? Tell me! Have you ever experienced such a feeling? Ever wanted to sob when you were so happy?

Quietly

Just be quiet and listen, that's best. Look, here's a human voice...

Seems almost to faint. Before the winds can introduce their theme the music fades and is gone, during which time the First Actor is on his knees embracing the queen. Very slowly he rises, and the light comes back to normal.

Wasn't that a much lovelier game? The pity is, it was only a dream. For in real games the kings look after serious matters. Like taking the offensive, and killing. So they don't understand music, read poetry, feel moved by the setting sun, or carve their beloved's name on a tree trunk. To drink and feel blue is unbecoming to a king, and never ever will you catch them weeping. The funny thing is, these pathetic pawns are full of admiration for all that sobriety!!

Once again sits down on a pawn

But you are there too. Controlling everything. Whatever you say goes, you can pick up the king and push him diagonally to the next square. So whatever the king is in the eyes of a pawn, that's what you are in the eyes of the king. That, I think, is the secret. It's all in your hands, dominion absolute. Who and however you wish to rule, here you have boundless authority. And the goal? There's only one – to win! And why win? Because losing is such a drag! While in fact losing is just losing, you don't really lose anything.... The worst part is, there are no excuses. Because luck plays no part in this game. That's what's so ruthless about it. What can you tell yourself? That you're not as intelligent as the opponent? Ha ha! I've yet to see the chess player who could say that. But after all, man is a creature who tries to deceive himself. Even if that's impossible. I mean, he'll lie, and seem to believe it though he knows all along it's a lie. But isn't that just what you *musn't* know in order to believe? In that case it's impossible for him to really believe that lie, but he'll try to make himself believe he believes. And the result of this game is not at all fair – it ends as he wishes, with him believing that he believes. Don't you see? For example, he says he couldn't concentrate. Or that he blundered – as if games were ever lost without a mistake. And it's his own error, mind you, but just because it's an error, well, he himself is not

responsible, some other self is. And he vents all his bile on that other self. HE would never make such mistakes, and that other he is expendable, replaceable. But the raw truth is that none of these lies helps a smidgen. And the horrible thing about defeat is that it's real.

Rises and begins slowly moving about

And if you win? What do you gain by it? Well, you've won! What more do you want? Why do people play this game? To win! There's an act, and a result. And if you attain the result, all you're left with is to have attained it. Your world, even if only for a time, is this board. And you suddenly realize that in this tiny world you are master. The fact that it's only a game doesn't alter the fact that you've won. Just think for a moment. Why do children ceaselessly play games, and scorn them the older they get? When you're little you can create whatever world you like. The possibilities are boundless. You can be lord of all, sail out on the ocean, glide through the air. Whenever and wherever you like. And not much is required to make you a glorious ruler – maybe a stick, or an old coat. Or maybe nothing but your imagination. You still have an imagination, but it's nothing like a child's. What a boy or girl imagines is so real! As you grow up, either those dreams lose their reality, or you lose those dreams. Actually, what happens is that as you grow up the games change, the board keeps expanding. It's still a game, though, and the rules, like the expectations, stay roughly the same. But remember, as the board grows you yourself shrink. That's why childhood is always a fond memory, because the board was so small.

Sits down again

And winning, coming out on top. It's so funny. All our life long we strive to win, and what we win in the end is death. It's like eating. When you're hungry you think of the most scrumptious dishes, whereas eating itself, whether a royal banquet or just bread and water, simply ends by being full. I mean, once you're full, it doesn't matter what you ate. And that's not all. You can wolf your food down, or savor it luxuriantly – the result is the same, you're full. Think of it! However you choose to act, there's only one result. So what good is choice, I ask you.

Spreads his arms briefly waiting for an answer

You're confused, aren't you? But the answer is very simple: When you're hungry you're hungry, and full when you're full.

Laughs loudly

You think I'm crazy, but it's true. The hungry you is not the full you. You are the you of the constantly changing moment. So at that moment making a good choice is your right, and in fact a duty. And remember, the choices are infinite.

A brief silence

Yes. The choices are infinite. As are the rules.

Turns toward the Second Actor and points to the board

How many squares do you see here?

Again sits down on the pawn, and placing hand on chin continues looking at the  
other

Don't bother counting. It's sixty-four. You can count them thousands of times, you  
can't change it, there are always sixty-four.

Gets up and walks towards the center of the board

But still, give it a think. How many squares are there?

Lays a hand on one of the pieces and waits for an answer

And please don't tell me sixty-four. Look at this bishop. Put yourself in his place and  
then tell me – how many squares?

Raises his voice

Tell me! You can't bring yourself to say thirty-two, can you?

Mockingly

For you are a poor light-square bishop. And the rules command you to wander over  
those light squares. You can't set foot on the dark ones, that's the dark-square  
bishop's right. And what if you were a pawn?

Laughs loudly

Seven!! That's right, this entire chess board for you would be just seven squares. And  
yet how many pawns actually set foot on seven squares? They're usually sacrificed at  
the third or fourth. There is one tiny consolation – they're told that if they do reach the  
final square they'll become a queen, and can then roam at will. And in the pursuit of  
this dream they cast themselves into the heat of battle. Whereas reaching the final  
square means the end of them – they're cast aside and REPLACED by that queen.

Stands on a vacant square in the center of the board, stiff and still like a chess  
piece

And us? How many squares are there for us?

Turns his head toward the Second Actor, spreading his arms as if in expectation  
of an answer

Tell me, if I want to step outside the four small lines that surround me, which way  
should I go? Here?

Sets his foot on a square diagonal to his, and immediately withdraws it

No! First I have to know what I am. If a rook, for instance, I can't do that. Yet it's right next to me, I can reach it in a flash. Yet so far away.... And then? The square beyond, and the one beyond that, and beyond that?

Cries out

Don't you see. There's no end to it!! There's no end to these squares. There are squares at the edge of the board, too. And you're sitting on one – points to the audience – and they're sitting on the little squares marked out for them, and every step we take is bound by rules.

Marches over to a knight

Look here!! My favorite piece. He's not like the others, for he can leap over obstacles. He's the freest in his movement...and yet

In a light, mocking voice he imitates the movement of a knight

Two forward, one to the side. Or one forward and two to the side. Ooor one backward and two to the side

Bellows

Does it befit a piece like this? His mane should flow, he should take the bit in his teeth and...

Seizes the knight by its head and flings it from the board

Leave this prison to tell us "In my game there are no squares!! In my game there is no bloodshed!!" And roam abroad, love the black bishop, roll on the sward with a pawn, embrace the queen...

Pauses

Do you think he's capable?

Having no alternative, he hauls the knight back to its place, muttering all the while

Well, he might be, but his actions wouldn't turn into rules. For rules are made by the majority, and the majority is, in most cases, a group of pathetic souls who have come together. Those pathetic souls are well aware of this, and that's why they group so easily. The only way not to be pathetic, you see, is to belong to a large group of the pathetic. And you can't find ten other knights.

Silence

Look here. Look at these pawns. They're all the same, aren't they. The same size and shape, the same height and width. Right down to the color, either black or white. Well, what if one of them, any of them at all, were different in some way? For example, if this little sphere at the top were missing. We'd immediately replace it, have a new one made, discard the old. For that would be a pawn with a difference, whereas being a pawn means being pawn-like. Even that little bit missing is unacceptable. The pawns wouldn't want him in their midst, either, one with the little sphere missing.

Asks the Second Actor

Do you think they're right?

Raising his voice

I mean, one pawn can't be less of a pawn than the others, right?

Laughs

Come on, now, that's a con.

Goes and gets a hat from the edge of the stage, and puts it on top of one pawn

And now what? Is this acceptable, do you think? Can one pawn be different from the rest? Of course not, we've got to get rid of the hat immediately, so that the pawn will be fit for the game. But what exactly is the problem? That pawn has nothing missing, in fact it's the opposite, he's got something extra, but it's still no good.

Laughs loudly

So one pawn can't be MORE of a pawn either.

Bellows

Long live the rule of the average!!!

Quasi-whispering

That's the whole problem. For centuries people have chased after various beliefs, policies and doctrines. But the lords of the earth are plain to see. The constant lords....

His voice rises steadily

They who make the rules and, in those rules, lose themselves. Those who are nothing to begin with. Those who reject shortfalls and put down any excess.

Crying out

Ordinary, average pawns. To hell with all of you!!!

Calms down

You know what's needed? Pawns that can jump three squares, rooks that can move diagonally, bishops that can go straight forward. Can you think how much richer the game would be? Ah, but then the board would be too small. We'd require a brand new one, maybe even without squares. There would be no little worlds to conquer, no tiny realms for dominion. There'd be no losers in that game, everyone would be on the winning side.

Hopelessly

That's why there are so many pawns.

Silence

But I feel we can be happy even within these squares.

Silence

Just think. A moment ago, together with that glorious music, we brought up the sun. And I said that if you wanted you could imagine it setting. It's always the same. To be moved, we wait for the sun to rise or set. Can you think of any songs or stirring lines written to the noon-day sun? Man is a strange creature, he never realizes the value of what he's got. He's moved by loss, or else what is newly acquired. At evening, when the sun, when life, when abundance slowly begin to slip from his grasp, it gives him a peculiar thrill. Something he's going to lose is now unattainable, and therefore has beauty. Reflect a moment: for mankind, happiness always belongs to the past. Or the future. It's the same story with sunrise – regaining what was lost, the start of a new day. So why not the end of the night? The answer is very simple: what they call night takes the world away from us. That lovely toy is removed from our perception. And all the beauty that's left is in the form of details which serve these two little globes, our eyes. Sometimes candlelight, sometimes the stars.

And yet we still don't much like the noon-day sun.

Rises

This game, too. Believe me, what you feel while actually playing is not happiness. Just the desire to win. That's what gets you excited, or angry, or intense. And all you hope for is a happy ending. Whereas all endings are the same – the pieces are set up again. And what you're left with, as I said not long ago, is merely the knowledge that you've won. There's something missing from this game. One should savor the play, not race toward the finish line. But how? We've been over that – rules! We need new rules. You know, the way we changed everything a while back. And it wasn't so hard, either. Look, let's try again. A bit differently this time, not so crowded. We'll all listen – you, me, the kings and rooks.... Have a modest piece play something for all of us,

something that will tell us we're alive and can love, that we have longings, that the moment belongs to us. Just once, all together, let's share what someone has.

Goes to a toppled bishop at the side and brings it to the middle of the board, where the spot comes up on it as the other lights darken. The First Actor turns his back to the king and sits down, while in the background is heard Traumerei from Schumann's Kinderszene (preferably Idil Biret's rendition). The First Actor speaks in a barely audible voice.

And thus we are alive again. This moment is now ours. No longer are we chasing after beauty that flees. For it turns out we possess it. Not so hard after all, hey? We wished, and it was so. There's such an abundance of beauty to be known. Right within our grasp! And one doesn't have to overturn all the rules, either. Notice what we've done. This time we didn't invent a new game. Nor have we played according to the rules of chess. No, just this once we've written our own rules. And we're alive!! Right here, feeling and sharing, soaking in these sounds. If you like we can close our eyes and imagine a loved one, or dream as we will – for the board has shrunk. Or we can weep together, it's up to you. For we are alive. You see it, don't you. The end is no longer a goal. On the contrary, we hope that this music will never end. We're not worried about winning or losing, being superior, crushing someone, getting the upper hand. We don't pant violently in a race toward the finish line. Because we are alive.

The music fades out, and the lights dim up again. The First Actor rises and carries the bishop back to where it was.

Don't fret because it's over. Remember, we were alive, and it ended.

Points to a pawn at the side.

What about them? Why didn't they experience that beauty? Why did they blindly, idiotically attack and die? Because they were alone and helpless. They did as they had been taught. On a tiny dot of a world in this vast universe, on a tiny speck of land with its miniscule chess board that can't even count as a dot, they were pathetic pawns. That's what they had been taught. They were details. Therefore they had to submit, for the universe has its rules. Whereas if they had known, thought for a single moment, that they were at the very center of that boundless universe. And that the whole infinitude, in all its splendour, was there to serve them....

Pauses and peers at the Second Actor as if to see whether he has understood.

You're like the rest of them. Lonely and helpless. But why? Just think, why are we acting this play, and why are you watching? In fact you're watching for our sake, and we're playing for yours. Or for the sake of others. Right now there are no others, but if they were here the three of us would be acting for them. Now just imagine. Imagine that hundreds of people are watching.

Points to the hall

Let this space be filled by hundreds of pairs of eyes. And let them all be watching us. All we'd have to do is work to please them. So they'd become our very reason for being. Whereas when we make the rules ourselves, we can change roles at will. Watch now...

Runs to the Second Actor's and sits in the stands. Then shouts

Lights!!!

And the lights are swung onto the audience. Now they see nothing but the bright spots, and can only hear the actor's voice.

You see what's happened? If there were thousands, or millions, instead of hundreds, they'd still be playing for us. Motionless, silent, their eyes fixed, they are playing the role of spectator. And playing it very well. They and those beyond them, everything living, everything inanimate, the coats, seats, trees and mountains, the star beyond and the emptiness of space, yes the whole universe suddenly is spread before us...in a twinkling...and just because we wished it.

The lights go back to normal, and the First Actor, moving slowly, advances to the center of the board again

You know what? I'm waiting for him to make a mistake. Just one mistake. And then? Then it will all have been worth it. Worth all the effort and excitement, worth even these pawns that lie here. No, don't think I despise them. They're my men, and they died for me. As I said before, their absolutely needed in this game. But it's funny, you feel a special bond with some pieces. And I'm not sure yet just how I feel about pawns. They have many good sides. For example, they're plain and simple. And well-behaved, they never cause trouble – and taken individually they're good-hearted. But they're primitive, you know what I mean? Primitive. They're the least talented of the bunch. Of all the pieces, they're the most numerous. Have you ever asked yourself why? For the primitive, there's strength only in numbers. By themselves they're worthless, they immediately get shoulder to shoulder. And generally, even when the game's over, there are more of them left on the board than any other piece. They're dangerous too, you know that? The primitive scares me.

Silence

Whereas that music just now, that too was for our sake. We were far from anything primitive. Our brains absorbed the creation of another person's brain. Yes, that music was written by a human being. Think for a moment: first he felt something inside, and then he transferred that feeling into dots and lines on white paper. Those dots and lines impinged on another person's eye, and that impingement was relayed to the brain, which from hundreds of thousands of previous tries had learned which finger to move when it saw which dot. So that brain moved the right fingers at the right time on the right keys. And to that movement of the fingers added candor, and feeling, and the composer, and you and me. And the keys put the little hammers in motion. They in turn hit the taut wires, which vibrated, so the air vibrated, and made a thin membrane vibrate in our ear, till tiny bones, acting through a fluid, stimulated nerve ends sending



these vibrations to the brain, and they were perceived as sound. So much you know, even little children know this. Very well, when these swelling, receding, high and low-pitched sounds of various length are heard, what happens then? Did they teach you that as well? How is it you can weep on perceiving those vibrations, or feel like crying out, is that in the books too?

A brief silence

Not only sounds, but colors too are at our service. Look at these pieces, they're all alike. Suppose we paint them, make them green, red, yellow, blue...

The lights flood the chess pieces in many colors, all of which are in constant motion. Laughing out loud, the First Actor cries

Say now! How's that for you?

Arms spread wide, he begins to run about among the pieces

Just look at them! They're full of life. Gone are those spiritless, tedious men! Hey-hey! I'm surrounded by colors, swimming in a pool of them. Look at yourself, you're a rainbow. Isn't it amazing how everything's changed? At one stroke.

Bellows

And that's the miracle! If we're alive, it's not just thanks to breathing, eating, drinking and gaining victory. We owe our life to this miracle, the miracle called art. And if we just add music now, or even read a few lines of verse...

He stops

It would be nice. But we're back where we started. Then it would be a new game.

The lights come back to normal, and there is a brief silence

And you, with that instrument in your hand, are part of this miracle. But remember, just as this play could not exist without you, without me that thing you're holding would be worthless. We've discussed this before.

A brief silence. He shakes himself

Wait!

After a rather long silence

Don't you dare speak!!

Silent and motionless, he regards the pieces

I think I've got him. At his weakest point.

With slow and thoughtful steps he drags the White bishop to e4, and spins the Black pawn off to the side (diagram 6)

Come on! I'm waiting.

Turns excitedly to the Second Actor

What do you think of the position? Will he take my bishop? And if he does, what then? A bishop down, will I lose? Huh?

Whispers

He's taking it. The fool!!

Takes the bishop on e4 with the rook on d4, then motions toward the Second Actor as if afraid he will move, and stands for a time statue-like. Then, in a hushed voice

If I'm not mistaken... No, I'm not

Cries out for joy

I'm right!! He's done for! Finished! Absolutely finished! I've beaten him!!! Ground him down!!! This is the moment the game was all for!!! Don't stare like that. You don't understand, do you? Of course not, you'd have to be a player like me to grasp it. Wait, I have to be sure.

Full of excitement, he scans the pieces

Yes, I've definitely got him. Look now, do you see this piece? This rook? All I have to do is exchange it for mine. And then it's over. Because if he doesn't recapture he'll be helpless against two rooks. And if he does? He's a bishop to the good, isn't he? Ahead! But then I'll just bring my rook down a square and give check. Then he can't give back his bishop, that's an easy pawn win, so he'll have no choice but to flee.

Indicates the h5 square

Here. And then?

Runs to the pawn on f2 and shouts

When I push this one square forward, it's over!

Peers at the Second Actor to see if he gets it

Because the next move is mate! When I push the pawn next to my king he'll be hog-tied, and there's absolutely nothing he can do to prevent it! Unless he wants to give up a whole rook.

Spreads his arms wide, exulting

Mate!! A stroke of genius, no? Admit it, this was genius! In a moment I'll just slowly go over to his rook, take hold of it and... you know the rest. He's still blissfully unaware. But just you wait till it happens! The whole sequence, every move, will pass before his eyes. And at each move he'll feel helpless. At first he won't believe it, no, he'll say, there's got to be a way out.

Laughs loudly

But no! In the end there'll be just one thing he can do. Dejected, seething but helpless, he'll lay his king down on its side.

Exuberant

This is triumph! There's no other way I can tell you. One has to live the feeling; win or lose, you have to go through it yourself and cry out. If you've won, it's cries of joy, singing at the top of your lungs. If you've lost you must bellow in anger, cursing the very game.

The thirty-two dancers (sixteen dressed in white and the other sixteen in black) who represent the chess pieces fill the stage while in the background is heard the aria "Es geschah" from Schnittke's Faust Cantata (Seid nüchtern und wachet). The choreography is built on a White victory and Black defeat, with the White vizier (queen) the center of the dance.

#### ALTERNATIVELY

The same scene can be played by just two dancers, one in white and the other in black, male or female as the choreographer decrees.

When the music ends

Wasn't it all worth it? All that effort, excitement, suspense and labor... Well worth it just to know this moment?

A brief silence

And now the last move. A single move. Deadly and alluring. One which has been there since the beginning, and is the whole point. The point of every preceding move, every distress, all helplessness and hope. A single, last move....

Gazes at the Second Actor as if to see whether he has understood, his smile gradually fading. Slowly he sits down on a pawn, and now there is anxiety in his

expression.

Yes, I have just one move. But is it really mine?

Silence

Well, what happens to me now?

Shouts at the Second Actor

Tell me!! Where do I fit in this game?? I've brought it this far, and it's plain what move is expected of me. I was so glad to find it, but just think, it's the rules that decree what I play from here on out. It's unthinkable to play anything else!! For a good chess player has only one choice. If he doesn't play it, and wins some other way, it's worthless. But then who am I now? If what I must play, and what he will do, are all mapped out, what's the point in my making that move, or holding back?

A brief silence

But this is no fair! It was my game, I brought it along this far. Suddenly I'm no better than one of these pawns, how can I possibly accept that?

Bellows at the top of his lungs

Tell me!! What do I do now? What am I SUPPOSED to do? Huh? Just because the rules demand it should I agree to be a nothing? No, no, there must be something. Still something left to do....

Slowly goes up to his king, pensive

Yes, there is...

Grabs his king and knocks it over

So once again the game is mine.

Turns and leaves the stage via the right, looking at the Second Actor as he goes

You get up too. The game, and the play, are over.

When the First Actor has left, the Second briefly maintains his immobility, then deliberately rises, takes his clarinet, and playing the same tune as at the beginning slowly walks off stage left. The lights go out.

