

STALEMATE

By Derek Sonderfan

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SCENE I

House opens to MUSKRAT seated. On the table is a chessboard, set up. There is one vacant chair. After some time, MAN enters and sits in chair.

MAN

Sorry I'm late.

MUSKRAT

I don't know you.

MAN

Were you waiting for anyone in particular, or can I be your enemy?

MUSKRAT

No, have a seat.

MAN

Why should I have a seat if I can't be your enemy?

MUSKRAT

What are you...what?

MAN

Aren't first impressions fantastic?

MUSKRAT

We may not have time to finish a whole game. If you're even playing...

MAN

All right. Am I black or white?

MUSKRAT

I'm black.

MAN

I never knew.

MUSKRAT

Your move.

They play for a bit

MAN

Nice bishop.

MUSKRAT

What?

MAN

I said 'nice bishop'.

MUSKRAT

What do you mean by 'nice bishop'?

MAN

I am merely stating that you have a nice bishop. Very nice.

MUSKRAT

It's the same as yours.

MAN

No, your bishop is far nicer.

MUSKRAT

Aside from the color, there is *no* difference between my bishops and yours.

MAN

Sure there is.

MUSKRAT

Like what?

MAN

Spatial relation, molecular composition, wavelength...

MUSKRAT

Bishops don't have wavelength.

MAN

Yours does.

MUSKRAT

No it doesn't!

MAN

Your bishop has marvelous wavelength.

MUSKRAT

It's your move.

MAN

Oh, now I've upset you. *[pause]* Hey, my bishop has wavelength too. It's just that it really pales in comparison to your bishop's—

MUSKRAT

Can we *please* stop talking about my bishop?

A long pause

MAN

So, why won't we be able to finish this game?

MUSKRAT

I have a prior engagement.

MAN

So this game is futile?

MUSKRAT

What do you mean?

MAN

The moves I am making now, the brilliant scheme my rooks have, my Queen's master plan...they're all pointless unless I can do them immediately?

MUSKRAT

That's a negative way of looking at it.

MAN

But it's true.

MUSKRAT

Is there something wrong with wanting to play a game quickly?

MAN

Not at all. Which is why I suggest we play Inventive Chess.

MUSKRAT

Inventive Chess?

MAN

Is it still my move?

MUSKRAT

Yes.

MAN

King's rook to Queen's knight 4.

MUSKRAT

You can't do that!

MAN

Tell that to the rook!

MUSKRAT

Your rook can't leap over five pawns diagonally.

MAN

The rook begs to differ.

MUSKRAT

No, I mean he's not *allowed* to.

MAN

And people aren't allowed to steal but, to feed their family, they'll do it anyway.

MUSKRAT

All right, well I move my pawn forward three spaces! Ha!

MAN

Rebellious. King's rook climbs atop Queen's rook to form a rook totem.

MUSKRAT

A rook totem?

MAN

Chess is a game of strategy, not just quick thinking. My two right-most pawns move a space forward.

MUSKRAT

It's my turn.

MAN

Says who?

MUSKRAT

You moved last.

MAN

Yes I did. And then I moved again. With my two right-most pawns.

MUSKRAT

You can't do that.

MAN

You are a perfect example of what is wrong with everyone! People crave normality and order. The slightest hint of originality throws everything off its hinge. "Let's play chess," they say as they set up their perfectly square board with its sixty-four perfectly square boxes. They neatly arrange their homogenously-chiseled pieces in their appropriate squares and alternately move them in a grid. Isn't the simple premise that rules are imposed on our games enough to make you nauseous? I mean, games are an escape from life, where people dictate how we should live. And yet, people feel inclined, no obligated, to set rigid codes for their own leisure. What would happen otherwise? I'll tell you, chaos. But there is beauty in chaos! Even in chess. But no, in chess we need to adhere to the rules, the grid, the bloody hierarchy inherent in the game. Has anyone ever questioned the hierarchy of chess? The king is the most important but the queen is the most powerful. How ironic. Then comes the knight or the bishop depending on which affiliation is chosen between church and state. Then the rooks. And then the pawns. But what about these pawns? Maybe one of them wants to be a knight. Maybe one of them has the credentials to be a knight, but everyone sees the pawn garb and instinctively brands him a pawn. See, people assume that every pawn has the exact same abilities, that every queen has the same desires. Which is clearly not the case with our bishops. Yours is more skilled and intellectual than mine. One of my bishops was involved in a scandal involving a monkey and a jar of petroleum jelly. Your bishop, however, is pure. Can I touch it?

MUSKRAT

What?

MAN

Can I touch your bishop?

MUSKRAT

No!

MAN

I'll sacrifice my queen if you let me.

MUSKRAT

No! You can't touch my bishop!

MAN

I think you're repressing.

MUSKRAT

I am not repressing. That would mean that somewhere in my childhood I had a problem with a bishop.

MAN

Yeah?

MUSKRAT

I've never known any bishops! And if it's all the same to you, I'd really like a topic change. *[there is a bit of silence]* All right. My entire team pools together to rotate the board 45°. All squares are now diamonds, and my pawn captures your pawn.

MAN

An impressive opening move. For a narlick.

MUSKRAT

What's a narlick?

MAN

[pause] My queen prays very devoutly for her turn and, by the grace of God, the pawn comes back to life in his original place. *[he puts dead pawn back]* The ladies in waiting cheer for this happy turn of events.

MUSKRAT

You can't bring your pawn back to life!

MAN

Are you doubting God's power?

MUSKRAT

God doesn't even come into this. I took your pawn and that's that. That's a basic rule.

MAN

I can't believe that here, in a total absence of rules, you still struggle to impose a few last provisions.

MUSKRAT

But without rules...if pieces can rise from the dead... well who wins then?

MAN

It's subjective. Let's say I capture and kill your king, but secretly, your king has been unhappy in his marriage to your queen. He's planning suicide, but along comes my king and *wham*. Your king is dead, but his heirs are saved the shame of descending from a coward leader. While it may be a physical loss, it could ostensibly be considered a moral victory.

MUSKRAT

That is the single most absurd thing I've ever heard.

MAN

Look, uh...what is your name?

MUSKRAT

Muskrat.

MAN

A guy named Muskrat calls my logic absurd? I'd expect as much from a narlick, though.

MUSKRAT

What is a narlick?

MAN

[focuses attention back to game] My rook totem starts a vicious rumor about one of your pawns. *[a pause, then MAN knocks over one of MUSKRAT's pawns]* See, he has fallen, ridden with embarrassment.

MUSKRAT

He did not.

MAN

He appears fallen to me.

MUSKRAT

You knocked him over!

MAN

My rook totem passes out celebratory drinks.

MUSKRAT

How do you expect me to be cordial when you're spreading rumors about my pawns and drinking celebratory drinks?

MAN

There's no need to raise your voice.

MUSKRAT

I'm sorry. I'm a bit on edge.

MAN

It happens to even the best of narlicks.

MUSKRAT

What is a narlick?

MAN

Why are you on edge?

MUSKRAT

Why should I tell you?

MAN

Better you tell me than a tree. Hey, I'm just looking out for your public image. People who talk to trees – not very popular.

MUSKRAT

No, I mean, why should I tell anyone?

MAN

Because the need for human contact remains too strong to ignore?

MUSKRAT

But it doesn't.

MAN

Because I asked nicely?

MUSKRAT

I suppose by 'nice', you're using a different dictionary than I am.

MAN

Because I have dozens of these reasons and plan on using each one until you accept one of them?

MUSKRAT

I'm going to visit a friend in the hospital. Happy?

MAN

Your prior engagement?

MUSKRAT

Yes, which is why this game might be cut short. Especially at the rate we're playing. At the rate my patience is failing.

MAN

Look, I'll give you the game.

MUSKRAT

What?

MAN

I'll throw the entire game right now.

MUSKRAT

I don't want a gimme.

MAN

It's not a gimme. It's bartering.

MUSKRAT

You're a lunatic.

MAN

I'll give you the game if you let me touch your bishop.

MUSKRAT

I thought we went through this already.

MAN

All I'm asking is...whoa, you've got two of them.

MUSKRAT

Will you lay off my bishops? I'm serious.

MAN

You're sensitive.

MUSKRAT

I'm not sensitive.

MAN

Not that I'm criticizing. I consider sensitivity to be one of the most virtuous attributes a man can have.

MUSKRAT

I am *not* sensitive! You're being weird!

MAN

You don't know that. This could be normal for me.

MUSKRAT

King's bishop invents time travel and takes the space your dead pawn is now on. I get your pawn once and for all. And...check!

MAN

You're catching on. Aha. But you overlooked one thing.

MUSKRAT

What's that?

MAN

The implications of a bishop—a moral figurehead—conspiring to kill a king.

MUSKRAT

This is a game! There are no moral implications!

MAN

Oh really? Dodgeball: survival of the fittest. Tennis: starting at love, but ultimately, one person wins, one loses.

MUSKRAT

That's very cute.

MAN

You just never thought of it that way. Backgammon: blacks vs. whites in a territorial battle.

MUSKRAT

You're stretching now.

MAN

Disprove me.

MUSKRAT

Just...whose turn is it?

MAN

Eithers.

MUSKRAT

Oh yeah, I forgot.

They both sit motionless for a bit

MAN

I believe it was Coleridge who once said, "Chance may bring a thing to bear where art sits down in blank despair."

MUSKRAT

Okay. So?

MAN

Oh, you know, just train of thought.

MUSKRAT

You know, most people quote 'Friends'.

MAN

My queen seduces your bishop – by the way, your clergy is screwed up – and inserts poison into his ear, killing him instantly.

MUSKRAT

Damn.

MAN

I rephrase – your *bishop* is now in my possession.

MUSKRAT

You're a sicko, you know that?

MAN

So quick to accuse! You have no idea what I'm planning to do with him.

MUSKRAT

I happy for that. Wait! My queen prays until he is born again in *his* original spot!

MAN

Bishops are Catholic. Catholics don't believe in reincarnation.

MUSKRAT

What?

MAN

It's a religious conflict.

MUSKRAT

What if my bishop is Buddhist?

MAN

Oh, you're tempting higher powers now.

MUSKRAT

No, he is! He likes Zen and stuff. Squirrels...and, uh...balloons.

MAN

I call you out on religious grounds.

MUSKRAT

I didn't realize you had to be so well-versed to play chess.

MAN

Regular chess, no.

MUSKRAT

Which, by the way, I wouldn't object to playing right now. Would you *stop* fondling my bishop?

MAN

He might like it, you know. You never know what someone is like until you fondle them.

MUSKRAT

[laughing] Wow. Interesting theory.

MAN

You seem to agree with it.

MUSKRAT

I agree with.....people affect you more when you're close to them, yes.

MAN

Is this about your friend in the hospital? *[no response]* I'll take that unwieldy silence to mean yes. What does your friend have?

MUSKRAT

He doesn't have anything. He's in a coma.

MAN

My king takes a vacation to Maui. How long has it been? The coma.

MUSKRAT

Three days.

MAN

Is it serious?

MUSKRAT

I appreciate your apparent concern, but—

MAN

But you assume it isn't genuine.

MUSKRAT

I just met you ten minutes ago.

MAN

Since when is time the only constituent for a deep, emotional connection?

A silence settles in. The MAN gets out a newspaper and starts to read and he chuckles.

MUSKRAT

You're ... reading the funnies.

MAN

Mmhmm.

MUSKRAT

That is a, uh, an interesting strategy.

MAN

I'd say that your strategy – you know, that of actually playing – has a statistically better chance of winning.

MUSKRAT

Well, since you're.....not paying attention to the game at all, could you check my horoscope?

MAN

Ah, you're one of those.

MUSKRAT

Yes, I'm one of those people who likes to check their horoscope.

MAN

As if they are the true testament to the unalterable course of Fate.

MUSKRAT

No, just for entertainment value.

MAN

Right.

MUSKRAT

Just give it to me. Aquarius.

MAN

Luck abounds today. You will kill your father and sleep with your mother.

MUSKRAT

That's not my horoscope. That's what the oracle told Oedipus.

MAN

And you thought you weren't well-versed.

MUSKRAT

What does it say, really?

MAN

Today is three stars. Look for long-term results. A sacrifice today will pay off tomorrow. Expect promotions at work. My king returns from vacation, having successfully cloned himself. *[he puts MUSKRAT's dead bishop on the board next to MAN's king]* The experiment went a little awry – which explains the height. And the fact that he's kind of pudgy.

MUSKRAT

Hey, read Cancer for me.

MAN

For who?

MUSKRAT

For me.

MAN

But you're an Aquarius.

MUSKRAT

So?

MAN

So who is Cancer?

MUSKRAT

No one has cancer!

MAN

Oh, your friend in the hospital?

MUSKRAT

He doesn't have cancer! He's in a coma!

MAN

No. Is your friend horiscopically cancer?

MUSKRAT

Is that even a complete sentence?

MAN

Is he a crab?

MUSKRAT

What?

MAN

[in aggravation] Augh! Today is four stars. Your hard work and patience will finally garner the praise it deserves. Look for love in nearby places.

MUSKRAT

Well, that looks hopeful at least.

MAN

My entire team just watched a screening of Alfred Hitchcock's "Vertigo."

MUSKRAT

Ooooooooookay. Your traitor knight, fresh from watching Vertigo sneaks around the side of the board, around your defenses, and aims a sniper rifle at your king.

MAN

But suddenly, the very same knight becomes possessed by the devil and, using his hitherto-unmentioned razor-sharp fangs, begins to ravenously gnaw off his flesh.

MUSKRAT

That was graphic.

MAN

He falls down, a crumpled heap of bones and exposed muscle tissue.

MUSKRAT

Aha! My bishop—not the Buddhist one—performs an exorcism on your traitor knight, freeing him from his demonic possession.

MAN

Very good. I have the remains of a human body at my feet, but at least it's a *holy* clump of remains.

MUSKRAT

Very funny.

MAN

I didn't realize that the rapid disintegration of a man was funny.

MUSKRAT

Well, no type of death is funny.

MAN

Then why were those roadrunner cartoons so funny?

MUSKRAT

Nobody ever died.

MAN

So then near-fatal wounding is funny.

MUSKRAT

You are an odd bird.

MAN

Humor is arbitrary, anyway. Take the 17th century playwright Ben Johnson. He considered that a character was a conglomeration of 'humors'. For your sake, as you do seem pretty confused, those 'humors' included blood, black bile, and phlegm. So we can see that Ben Johnson had a strange sense of humor.

MUSKRAT

I feel left out that I'm not quoting anybody.

MAN

So quote somebody.

MUSKRAT

Okay. *[after a while of thought that produced nothing]* Wrex N' Effect once said, "All I want to do is zoom a zoom zoom zoom and a boom boom. Shake that rump."

MAN

I won't even dignify that with an insult.

MUSKRAT

Sue me.

MAN reaches into his briefcase and removes a sandwich. He puts it on the board. MUSKRAT bites his tongue not to say anything.

MAN

My kings order a moat to be constructed.

MUSKRAT

I've been very patient with your rook totems and your skipping turns, but you can't use props! Chess comes with thirty-two pieces and a board. Maybe one of those timers. That's it! No other props!

MAN

You used a sniper rifle.

MUSKRAT

But I didn't actually *have* a sniper rifle.

MAN

Well, I actually have a moat.

MUSKRAT

It's not a moat! Moats don't come in baggies.

MAN

The moat stays. My pawns fortify.

MUSKRAT

That's it. I quit.

MAN

You give up so soon?

MUSKRAT

Twenty minutes of punishment is enough for me, thank you.

MAN

Look, if I remove the moat, will you keep playing?

MUSKRAT

Call it what it is. Call it a bologna sandwich.

MAN

It's prosciutto.

MUSKRAT

I don't care what it is. It's in the middle of our chess game!

MAN

If I remove the prosciutto sandwich from the board, will you finish the game?

MUSKRAT

Will there ever be a finish?

MAN

Of course.

MUSKRAT

Fine. I'll play.

MAN

Nice bishop.

MUSKRAT

Okay, stop saying that! You're...you're really starting to freak me out. Now I don't know if this is some chess tactic you have or some bizarre fetish, but I've had enough. You already have one of my bishops. You're lucky. *[pause]* My team rotates the board back and I capture your rook totem with my rook.

MAN

The irony—to kill two rooks with one, well, rook.

MUSKRAT

I won't kill them. I'll...enslave them! Yeah. Rooks, entertain the king!

MUSKRAT moves them in a little dance

MAN

How dare you disgrace my rooks!

MUSKRAT

You put your right rook in, you put your right rook out—

MAN

My kings are outraged. They train my party rigorously and, in a magnificent ceremony, declare knighthood for all my pawns. I have a veritable army now of fighting knights.

MUSKRAT

Like that means shit? In your game, every piece is all-powerful as long as you're imaginative enough. What the hell does it matter if they're pawns or knights or fucking demi-gods?

MAN

Titular distinction.

MUSKRAT

Oh, very very clever.

MAN

What's that smell?

MUSKRAT

What smell?

MAN

Sarcasm. It's really strong over there by you.

MUSKRAT

You can't say *anything* normally, can you? I think Shakespeare said it best when he said...*[thinks hard for only a moment]* "We are such stuff as dreams are made on and our little life is rounded with a sleep." Huzzah!

There is a pause while this quote sort of lands. Finally, while both men are just eyeing up the chess board, MAN speaks.

MAN

You do realize it helps to quotes something with *some* relevance.

MUSKRAT

I know.

MAN

[slight pause] I mean, you could have used "though this be madness, yet there is method in't" if you were trying to –

MUSKRAT

Okay! Okay.

MAN

[about to concede, but then] Or even "what a piece of work is man." That would have—

MUSKRAT

[overlapping the previous line] I...yeah...I kno...shut up!

MAN

What's with the brace? Some sort of fashion statement?

MUSKRAT

Yes, and that statement is "I fractured my wrist"

MAN

That's a good statement. *[beat]* My head pawn – the pawn union leader – just got caught in an avalanche. Now who saw *that* coming? The funeral is planned for three moves from now.

MUSKRAT

You just killed one of *your* guys?

MAN

It's all part of the big picture, my friend. When do visiting hours begin?

MUSKRAT

What?

MAN

That's what you're waiting for, I'm guessing.

MUSKRAT

Wait. Okay, you've got to stick to one topic at a time. You leap around more than Frogger.

MAN

Frogger?

MUSKRAT

Oh, come on. You know Frogger. One of the greatest Atari games of all time.

MAN

Atari?

MUSKRAT

You've got to be kidding me. You mean to tell me you've never heard of Atari? *The* authority on video game systems? This is the big daddy that started them all. No fancy graphics, no complicated plot lines...just some of the greatest entertainment in the history of video games. Nowhere in your Gamecube or your Playstation 2 will you ever find action as fast as Kaboom. No game nowadays takes such demented concentration to master.

MAN

You still never answered my question.

MUSKRAT

Which one?

MAN

When do visiting hours begin in there?

MUSKRAT

They're open now.

MAN

Then why are you out here playing Inventive Chess?

MUSKRAT

Have I asked you about your personal life? *[pause]* No, I haven't.

MAN

Are you afraid he'll be dead when you get inside?

MUSKRAT

Screw you. I'm getting ready to see a friend *in the hospital* and you give me that?

MAN

Getting ready? You need to get in a mood to see an ailing friend?

MUSKRAT

To some degree, yes.

MAN

Why can't you be jumping up and down in glee right before visiting that friend?

MUSKRAT

Because that's just wrong.

MAN

No, it's just life. Do you think all bad things happen in a clump to allow for emotional adaptation? I don't think so. You're allowed to laugh during a funeral Muskrat. You won't explode.

MUSKRAT

That's sick.

MAN

I don't mean hold a comedy festival. But just one laugh...

MUSKRAT

You don't respect anyone, do you?

MAN

I respect many people, specifically myself. I am not going to deny myself a good laugh for the sake of forcing sadness upon myself.

MUSKRAT

I'm not *forcing* myself to be sad.

MAN

Are you sure?

MUSKRAT

If it matters, you're pissing me off.

MAN

Oh that's no good. You should be moping, remember? You're seeing an ailing friend. None of this mad stuff.

MUSKRAT

[gets up and starts to exit] Okay, that does it. I'm done. I've had more than enough of this conversation for one day.

MAN

The game isn't finished.

MUSKRAT walks to the board and lays down his king

MUSKRAT

I lose. Nice playing with you.

Blackout. It is a fairly long blackout for nothing actually changing on set. There is perhaps some very sad piano music playing.

SCENE II

The set is the same as Scene I, but an hour or two later. MUSKRAT enters, his eyes red and puffy. He is disheveled as, in a riveting scene nobody will ever see, his best friend has died. The MAN has been sitting at the table, quietly nibbling his sandwich while reading the newspaper.

MAN

Aha. You're back. And just in time. Your rooks were planning a mutiny.

MUSKRAT

I'm not playing anymore.

MAN

They were trying to lure the knights into their plot, but I don't think the horsey-men were going for it.

MUSKRAT

Perhaps you didn't hear me. I laid my king down over an hour ago. The game is finished.

MAN

Oh, that reminds me. While you were gone, your pawns noticed that your king had fallen. Nothing major...skinned knees and a cut lip. But, don't worry, they've talked him out of a premises lawsuit.

MUSKRAT

Are you deaf!?

MAN

Oh, and my queen discovered that my king was a bigamist and left him. It was heart-wrenching. I wouldn't bring it up if I were you.

MUSKRAT

I'm not playing right now! I'm packing up the game and going home.

MAN

You can't pack up the game.

MUSKRAT

Why not?

MAN

Well, I mean, *technically* you could. *Physically*, you could.

MUSKRAT

Give me one good reason I can't pack up *my* game.

MAN

Because your bishop is down my pants.

MUSKRAT

[sees that his bishop is missing] Give me back my bishop.

MAN

No.

MUSKRAT

Give me back my bishop!

MAN

In the treaty that our teams made, I got your bishop. I had to sacrifice two turns and access to the sauna, but I got it. You have to honor your part of the bargain.

MUSKRAT

My part of the bargain? I wasn't even here!

MAN

They say that when the Treaty of Versailles was signed, French representative Georges Clemenceau was actually drinking champagne in a cottage in the Andes.

MUSKRAT

Give me back my bishop.

MAN

I like to think of your bishop as the Georges Clemenceau of my pants.

MUSKRAT

[starting to chase him around the stage] Give me... Give me back my bishop.

MAN

Where's your invitation?

MUSKRAT

What do you mean, invitation? I want my bishop back.

MAN

There's a party in my pants and your bishop is the host. Won't you join me, Muskrat? *[MUSKRAT laughs. They both stop running.]* Aha! You laughed! You must have had a good meeting with your friend.

MUSKRAT

Not at all. You just made me laugh.

MAN

It's all right to laugh, isn't it?

MUSKRAT

I hate you. *[pause]* You've waited over an hour for me to come out here.

MAN

Don't flatter yourself. I was reading my newspaper.

MUSKRAT

Please tell me it wasn't just to play this game.

MAN

It wasn't just to play this game.

MUSKRAT

I don't believe you.

MAN

Okay, it was solely to play this game.

MUSKRAT

You are so weird! *[finds his way to his chair]*

MAN

My kings form an alliance with your queen. Nothing kinky – just professional.

MUSKRAT

I don't know how else to tell you this; I really don't want to play.

MAN

Okay, but there's a better probability you'll lose if you don't.

MUSKRAT

Do you think I give a rat's ass about this game? No. I don't have this bizarre obsession with winning this game of chess. That honor belongs to you. I just want to sit here by myself and reflect for a while. And while you're here, that's not possible. While you're here, nothing...is...gonna be right.

MAN

You know, the Marxist Revolution was founded on the—

MUSKRAT

I don't care. See? I don't care. Look, my king walks over to the edge of the board. Wow, that's a big drop there, isn't it king? Yes it is. Should you jump? I don't know. Should you? *[a pause sets in]* You're not going to stop me?

MAN

It's a cheap win, but I'll take them any way they come.

While MUSKRAT pushes his king closer to the edge, MAN sneaks into his briefcase and takes his newspaper out.

MUSKRAT

Hey look. A crowd of absolutely nobody came to watch this. He rules an entire land and not one civilian came to witness this. See, it doesn't matter. In the entire course of the universe, nothing will change if my king jumps except the outcome of this moronic game. Nobody will miss him. Nobody will look back on his life and fondly remember the good times. And do you know why? Because he's not real. He's a piece of plastic who lives in a world of wood squares. He doesn't have feelings, and despite what you may think, he doesn't have relationships with the other pieces on the board. He's totally meaningless in the grand scheme of things. Chances are, years from now *you* won't even remember this king and all his supposed glory. You may remember a kid named Muskrat, but I'll be damned if you will remember that his king committed suicide because he didn't want to be a part of the game anymore. He's totally meaningless. I doubt *I'll* remember him in a week or so. Because fake things don't die. Real things die. Real things deserve remembering. So, tired of not amounting to anything, my coward king decides to take his own life. "Goodbye cruel world. I'm leaving you today. Goodbye, goodbye...goodbye."

MUSKRAT pushes his piece over, and MAN quickly slides newspaper under table to catch it.

MAN

Fortunately, your speech allowed enough time for your court to prepare a safety net. An overwhelming sigh of relief emerged from every pair of lips. Except the rooks – they were definitely thinking mutiny. Everybody amounts to something. Just because nobody patted your king on the back doesn't mean nobody appreciated him.

MUSKRAT

I suppose you're going to say you appreciated him.

MAN

He's been trying to kill my kings all day. Quite frankly, I would have been the first person to applaud his totally pointless death. But somewhere, I'm sure there was a pawn who looked up to him.

MUSKRAT

Why won't you let me lose the game?

MAN

That's not how it ends.

MUSKRAT

I knew it wouldn't end. You're going to make me sit here for another five hours, arguing about time travel and stupid loopholes.

MAN

It ends in a stalemate. *[beat]* I had a distinct advantage going into this game. I've played before. You were a first timer, and I think some of your ideas were on the right track. I think I had some good retorts. But all in all, I don't know that anybody really had the tactical edge in the game. So, I declare a stalemate.

MUSKRAT

All this and no winner?

MAN

Life doesn't leave you with a happy or a sad ending, Muskrat. This can't be a new revelation I'm telling you here. There's indifference and ambiguity in the world. Why should our games be any different? Why should there be a definitive winner and loser? If anyone asks you who won today, you can truthfully answer whatever you want. Isn't that a wonderful luxury?

MUSKRAT

If anyone asks, I'm telling them I lost today. Not in this idiotic game, but in life. I lost.

MAN

[reaches in his wallet and takes out \$20] Here's \$20.

MUSKRAT

What?

MAN

I'm giving you \$20.

MUSKRAT

What's the catch?

MAN

You have to reach your hand out and physically take it from me.

MUSKRAT

I don't want it.

MAN

Suit yourself.

MUSKRAT

So I can't leave until you give me back my bishop. And you won't leave until – I don't even know what you want.

MAN

We seem to be in something of a ...uh.....dare I say stalemate?

MUSKRAT

You're unbelievable. Do you practice this stuff?

MAN

Is it not a stalemate?

MUSKRAT

It's not a stalemate.

There is a long pause. It's basically a stare-down. MUSKRAT doesn't want to admit it, but it is a physical stalemate. Finally, he breaks down and laughs, saying:

Fine, it's a fucking stalemate. Are you satisfied?

MAN

I believe this is yours.

He offers the bishop to MUSKRAT, who doesn't take it. MAN puts it down on the table. MUSKRAT just sits there and thinks for a minute.

MUSKRAT

So why'd you pick me? Out of the thousands of people around today, you pick me to annoy.

MAN

You looked like you needed it most.

MUSKRAT

I doubt I needed that. I needed *something*, but I highly doubt it was you.

MAN

What did you need?

MUSKRAT

A miracle. *[he pauses]*

MAN

Miracles are hard to come by nowadays. Back in the Old Testament, you couldn't turn around without tripping over one. You'd be sipping your clam chowder when all of the sudden, boom, wine. You just don't see that nowadays.

MUSKRAT

I'm sure that, out there in that world, there's someone who you amuse.

MAN

I'll tell you my theory – miracles stopped once camcorders were invented. I mean, nobody wants to see "Worlds Wildest Miracle Bloopers – Caught On Tape!" - See this Missouri man try to walk on water over this live hammerhead shark!"

MUSKRAT

I'd watch that.

MAN

Did I just amuse you? I guess you're my one guy.

MUSKRAT

[seeing newspaper] You know, you were actually right about one thing you've said today.

MAN

Was I? What do you know? What was it?

MUSKRAT

Horoscopes are crap. Three stars my ass.

MAN

Three stars out of...?

MUSKRAT

Five.

MAN

That seems about right, in all honesty. Maybe I was wrong about horoscopes.

MUSKRAT

Oh, I actually agree with you so you have to change your opinion?

MAN

Think about it - three out of five. It could be a good day or a bad day.

MUSKRAT

You're unbelievable. You just don't stop.

MAN

Am I wrong?

MUSKRAT

[uncharacteristically serious] I just...lost my best friend...in there.
Nothing...nothing you can say or do will make this a good day.

MAN

Maybe today's not supposed to be good. Didn't your fortune say something about a sacrifice today paying off tomorrow?

MUSKRAT

Is this just a big joke to you?

MAN

No, hear me out. Your answer *today* is that, yes, today was bad. But in a week, in five years, what if your answer becomes no, that day wasn't bad at all? I learned a lot that day.

MUSKRAT

You've got the entire course of human emotion pegged down there, don't you? Why bother going to school, learning? You've got it all figured out.

MAN

I never said this was the answer – just something to think about.

MUSKRAT

Whatever.

MAN

Can I ask a question?

MUSKRAT

Will me saying 'no' stop you?

MAN

Was it illness?

MUSKRAT

No. *[pause]* It's a long story.

MAN

My entire team sits down in neat little rows and stops throwing spitballs.

MUSKRAT

We always had this bet, Roman and I – that’s my best friend. Well, it was more like a long-running joke. Why do you even want to know?

MAN

You don’t have to if you don’t want to.

MUSKRAT

[beat] You know that death-defying climactic moment in a movie where the getaway car leaps in the air past train tracks, having the oncoming train miss him by inches and separate him from whoever’s chasing him? There’s a set of tracks by our house that doesn’t have a bar – thing must be eighty years old. Roman used to dodge the train in his *Mazda* all the time. I own a piece of crap, and I always said – well, threatened – to try the same stunt. And sure enough, a few days ago I got the opportunity. *[pause]* My, uh, alternator kicked it right as we were about to jump. His girlfriend and I were in the front seat, he was in the back. The thing just coasted onto the tracks. Almost made it past, too. He didn’t...uh...he didn’t get out...in time. I don’t know why I’m telling you this. I don’t know.....

MAN

Because I’m listening.

MUSKRAT

Yeah, maybe. It’s just so screwed up. What’s worse is that – in the last three days, everyone – his family, his girlfriend, his freakin’ grade school teachers – they’ve all been coming, hoping he’s going to pull out. Yet I’m the one who’s staring at him as he...ummm... He kinda said something to me before hebefore.....I kinda wish he hadn’t – or I hope he wasn’t awake or something. I wanted the last thing he saw to be a bright flash of light. You know? Fill the cliché. I don’t know, though.

MAN

What’d he say?

MUSKRAT

It doesn’t matter, it’s not important. It’s just...there’s...why is it there’s too much in this world that’s unfair, you know? Why does it always happen to fair people?

MAN

That’s what people say about Henry the Eighth.

MUSKRAT

Listen, I don’t...

MAN

Hold on. So he beheads his third wife, Catherine Howard. *[by now, he's picked the bishop back up]* Sweet woman, attractive, perhaps less than perfect in the faithfulness department but, hey, nobody's perfect. Overall, fair. Doesn't matter - beheaded. Unfair thing to a fair woman. But have you ever *seen* pictures of Henry VIII? I think they did her a *favor*.

MUSKRAT

I imagine you sitting at home, flipping through a Funk and Wagnall's encyclopedia – certainly not the internet – it's not, I don't know, doesn't have enough character for you – finding stupid facts about historical figures to throw into conversations at parties.

MAN

Napoleon only had one testicle. *[pause]* No, I made that one up. I had you going, though.

MUSKRAT

You are a strange, strange bird. *[they sit in a moment of silence]* You wanna, ummm, you wanna...play chess? Your chess?

MAN

What was that?

MUSKRAT

Do you...want to play a stupid game of Inventive Chess?

MAN

You're offering me to play a game that you thoroughly detest?

MUSKRAT

I could use the fresh air.

MAN

You need fresh air like I need lockjaw.

MUSKRAT

Fine, honestly, I have to call his girlfriend at work and I don't know what to say to her. So I'm going to take my mind off it for a few minutes, play your stupid game, and then call when I'm a little more collected.

MAN

That's very noble...procrastination. I might as well give you the company. And what better way than with a stupid game of Inventive Chess? Oh, but I'm holding your bishop hostage as a painful reminder of last game.

MUSKRAT

And it goes...right...into the pants. [*MAN does put it back there*] I just want you to know I have very good antibacterial soap at home.

MAN

I'm wounded by that insinuation.

MUSKRAT

You know what? I don't even care. I don't need my bishop. I think I can take you without it. You can't freak me out anymore. Nothing you do will throw me. And I'm not settling for a stalemate. I will play you, and I will win.

They begin setting up the board.

MAN

Am I still white?

MUSKRAT

Yes, you're still white. I want to be the one with the handicap.

MAN

You're handicapped because you're black?

MUSKRAT

What? No! I mean I'm handicapped because I have one less piece.

MAN

If you could be handicapped, what would you want to be?

MUSKRAT

I don't want to be handicapped! You're totally reading into that wrong.

MAN

Hypothetically speaking...

MUSKRAT

I'd probably want to be ...um...missing a finger. Is that considered a handicap?

MAN

I suppose if you're a pianist or a masseuse. C'mon, a serious handicap.

MUSKRAT

Fine. Ummm...maybe I'd want to be deaf.

MAN

Do you enjoy listening to music?

MUSKRAT

Well, yeah...I... Okay, missing an arm.

MAN

Just think, you'd never clap again.

MUSKRAT

Yeah...okay, well yeah. Ummm, I'd be a narcoleptic then.

MAN

I hope you don't like driving.

MUSKRAT

Why ask me an opinion question and then argue every one of my answers?

MAN

Opinions can be wrong.

MUSKRAT

No they can't!

MAN

Sure they can.

MUSKRAT

Oh please, enlighten me on how.

MAN

It is all based on which definition of 'wrong' you use, and I guess for that matter, which definition of 'opinion' you use.

MUSKRAT

Thank you for that clarity.

MAN

Clarity. I'll have to add that to my New Year's Resolution list.

MUSKRAT

List? Oh do tell.

MAN

Five years ago, I made the resolution not to follow my resolutions anymore, but the only way to follow that would be to not follow it. To fix this, four years ago, I resolved to make my resolution from the previous year work by resolving *not* to follow the previous years' resolution, because if I did do it, I wouldn't have done

it. Three years ago, I resolved to rescind the first resolution altogether, which didn't matter because I had inadvertently made the same resolution the second year by contradicting it. Two years ago, my resolution was to not contradict my old resolutions, which I had done the two years previous. But of course, I immediately didn't follow it because not following it made my old resolutions suddenly *uncontradicted*, therefore fulfilling the current resolution *by* contradicting it. Still not having been successful, last year my resolution became to contradict the resolution set the previous year, thus rendering all the resolutions I'd previously made active once again except the one from two years ago that was now defunct, and possibly the first one. Finally, to save myself aggravation, I figured it would be easier to just make up the past five years, which have all been failures, by making five new resolutions. The third one will be clarity.

MUSKRAT

I don't even *want* to know what the first two are.

MAN

Your sarcasm causes me pain. I begin by taking rigorous precautions in stabilizing my side's battlements.

MUSKRAT

What do your battlements consist of? A canned ham and some taffy? So, okay, check this out: my rooks and my bishops get it on and now all four have the abilities of a queen. See, diagonal *and* straight.

MAN

Smart, albeit linear, thinking. I commend you, narlick.

MUSKRAT

Are you going to tell me what a narlick is?

MAN

I continue to stabilize my battlements.

MUSKRAT

You've chosen an interesting strategy in that it doesn't particularly involve killing me.

MAN

Perhaps my goal isn't to win. Perhaps my goal is team cohesiveness. Perhaps I'm *striving* for a stalemate. Perhaps I have a team of hippies.

MUSKRAT

Too bad because my Bishop/Rook captures this hippie who was stabilizing your battlements. I immediately order him to cut his hair and listen to gangsta' rap.

MAN

What's this? *[he shakes the table]* It's an Earthquake! Oh my. Right down the center of the board. Unfortunately, in your unstable condition, five of your pawns and one of your queen-like Bishop/Rooks have succumbed to the huge chasm.

MUSKRAT

Crap. Fortify, fortify! *[he's having a good time]*

MAN

[very quickly] Another pawn gets sucked up by a black hole. *[pings his pawn off the table]* He asphyxiates in a matter of mere seconds. And I thought an avalanche was unexpected.

MUSKRAT

Oh yeah? The...plague of...frogs is coming! Thousands, nay millions of amphibians flying overhead - they're flying frogs apparently - millions of 'em, swooping down.

MAN

Thankfully, my knight here has developed immunities to all reptilian poisons known to man! Try what you will! Try what you will, your aerial frog platoon scares me not!

MUSKRAT

[he pauses, thinking of what to do] Suck tongue, knight! *[He picks up the MAN's knight and puts it in his mouth.]*

MAN

Take that out of your mouth.

MUSKRAT

No.

MAN

Fine. *[MAN takes one of MUSKRAT'S pieces and puts it in his mouth]*

MUSKRAT

Touche! *[puts another piece in.]*

MAN

Amateur. *[puts two pieces in]*

The men begin to stuff pieces into their mouths; as many as will comfortably fit. They are mumbling little insults and showy remarks during the process. MUSKRAT's cell phone rings, and he, without thinking, picks it up and answers it.

MUSKRAT

Hewwo...*[realizes it's someone important, spits out pieces]* Oh, hi Mrs. Martin. Sorry about.....have you, have you.....yeah, they said there were going to call you.....I'm, I'm here at the hospital.....I'm really, I'm just really sorry aboutno, don't worry about me.....I'll, you know, I'll be okay.....how's, uh.....I'm sorry, I don't know really what to say, I.....*[the man is picking up his newspaper and hat, but he hasn't left yet, he's just putting things away]*.....no, I'm not here alone.....*[looks at MAN, who smiles back, MUSKRAT turns back around, his back to MAN]*.....so they called you, huh?.....don't, don't, don't even worry about that, I'll call Cherry *[MAN sort of sneaks off stage, no goodbye or anything]*.....I just...need to figure out what to say first.....tonight?.....I think that would be nice.....yeah, I'll come over tonight.....I'll see if I have anything of his lying around.....you know, give it back.....Me? I'm okay, thanks. I'm actually better than I thought I'd be doing. I just...there's someone...someone's helping me out.....you know, I don't even know his name? I'll ask him.....but tonight.....yeah, if Cherry wants, I'll tell her to come too.....thanks, thanks Mrs. Martin. And I'm...I'm sorry.....right, you too. Bye. *[he hangs up phone, turns around to MAN, who isn't there]* Hey, I never caught your.....hello? Hello? *[runs around corner]* Hey, guy! I.....shit! Shit! *[he walks back to the table]* THANK YOU! *[he screams it, and it sounds funny, but he does mean it. He stares at the pieces on the table, and slowly starts to pack up]* Shit. Annoy me for an hour and you won't move but I finally want to talk to you and you're gone. *[he kinda just stares at the king. Picks it up and looks at it. Puts it in his bag. Slowly packs up his bag. People should probably think the play ends there, unresolved. Finally, the MAN comes back, extending the bishop.]*

MAN

Here, I forgot—

MUSKRAT

Hey! Hey, I'm glad you came back. I wanted to thank you.

MAN

And I wanted to you're welcome you, so that worked out nicely.

MUSKRAT

Don't you even want to know what for?

MAN

I already know.

MUSKRAT

You are so smug.

MAN

It's cute, isn't it? The ladies love it.

MUSKRAT

Don't get me wrong, half of what you say still comes out your ass.

MAN

Half? My fractions are getting bigger.

MUSKRAT

But seriously, thank you.

MAN

I wanted to thank you too.

MUSKRAT

Thank me? What for?

MAN

For the bishop. *[puts it on the table]*

MUSKRAT

Is that offer for the twenty dollars still open?

MAN

[amused] Sure.

MUSKRAT

I would like the twenty dollars please.

[MAN takes out his wallet and gives him a \$20]

MAN

Here ya go.

MUSKRAT

You wanna go out and grab a bite to eat? On me.

MAN

Sorry, but I really have to be leaving.

MUSKRAT

Why?

MAN

No reason.

MUSKRAT

No, why?

MAN

Literally. No reason.

MUSKRAT

Then why do you *have* to leave?

MAN

Someone else may need a game of Inventive Chess.

MUSKRAT

Is this some weird, demented hobby you have?

MAN

I suppose so.

MUSKRAT

I can't tell if you're sick in the head or really nice.

MAN

Take the twenty bucks, buy a new chess set. Mint flavored, please. Your queen tastes like a sock, no offense.

MUSKRAT

Maybe I'll just buy more soap.

MAN

Do you see what I mean, Muskrat? No winners, no losers.

MUSKRAT

Look, I see what you—*[cut off by his cell phone ringing]* I see what you mean. I just don't always...*[looks down at who it is]* Shit, it's Cherry. Look, don't go anywhere okay? This will just take a second. *[answers it]* Hi, uh, Cherry. What are you doing home now?oh wow, he didn't even give you off for Thanksgiving.....no, you know what, don't come here. Don't come, I mean, to the hospital.....I talked to the doctors...they uh, there's no.....you know what? *[at this point, the MAN scribbles a note on a piece of paper – MUSKRAT is engrossed in the conversation and has kinda turned away from MAN again]* Look, how about this.....I'm home, now. Well, I'm outside, but I'm home. Ummm...no, look, what if I come.....if I come to your place and we can both go to the hospital together – you know, surprise the hell out of him when he

wakes up? Yeah, I'll just, you know...swing by.....no, it's not out of the way. *[MUSKRAT covers the phone, moves it away from his mouth, and shakes – he really can't stand lying to her like this. He looks at the MAN, who has finished writing, and the MAN gives a sympathetic look. MUSKRAT goes back to the conversation, away from MAN. As soon as he's turned, MAN puts the paper on the table and exits away from MUSKRAT]* No, sure.....I'll get you, we'll go check out Roman..... but wait for me, okay?.....seriously, please?.....no, nothing's.....what do you mean? I'm fine.....I'm not acting strange – I mean, this whole thing is kinda.....*[to himself]* How am I dealing with all this? *[thinks pretty hard about this]* I'm either doing really well or really badly. The jury's still out. *[turns to look at MAN to get the joke. MAN is gone.]* Shit! Cherry, I gotta go. I'll be right over, okay?.....no, I'm fine, I'll be right over. Give me, like ten minutes. Okay. Okay, bye. *[hangs up, runs around corner for MAN. MAN is gone. He walks back onto the stage and picks up his bag of chess pieces. He sees the note, picks it up and reads it.]* "I liked the Pink Floyd reference. That, my friend, is how you properly quote somebody. Goodbye...Narlick." I hate you! *[crumples up the paper. Holds it for a second.]* But thank you.

He unfolds the slip of paper and puts it in the bag with the chess pieces. He takes a look back to the hospital, then to the board game, then to the newspaper. He rolls up the newspaper, throws it into the garbage can, and exits. A light stays on the garbage can and on the table for a few seconds, then fades.