

## Kings and Pawns

Katherine Miller

The old man sat frowning at the porch. The June heat was oppressive. It seemed to sit on his chest and weigh his whole being down, not just his face. If he let himself, he could convince himself that being old was worse than death. He couldn't hear or see as well as he used to. His hands, though now retired, were permanently callused and no good for feeling anything. His sense of taste and smell were still good, but on his restrictive diet what good were taste and smell when there was nothing worth eating? He was left to notice the smell of sun-baked peeling paint on the porch rail and sweat on his white cotton T-shirt.

But there were other things to ponder today. Things that caused his brows to furrow just as much as thinking about being old. His son, Josef, had called this morning and said he might drop by on his way through town.

The word "might" had caused the crevice in Lou's forehead to deepen if only slightly. Might, might not. It simply left Lou to wait and wonder why his son chose to come around today and not yesterday or the day before.

Lou dozed for a while letting the heat beat on him without any resistance. The sun was so bright he could see splotches of white and yellow on the backs of his eyelids. Out of the splotches, Cora's face appeared. Not as he had last seen her, but as he remembered her from countless summer days sitting next to him on the porch fanning herself with a fake Japanese fan, the sun making her face look as pure as new fallen snow and her hair like a halo.

"Papa? Wake up!"

Lou squinted open his eyes to look at his son. There was an urgency in Josef's voice. "What?" growled Lou. "Did you think your poor father died right here on the porch without you to attend to him?"

"No, Papa," said Josef, "you just shouldn't fall asleep out here on the porch like that. It's not safe."

"I wasn't asleep, just resting my eyes," Lou muttered, "I just can't hear as well as I used to. Didn't hear you drive up."

Lou hoisted himself out of the rusty cast iron patio chair, waving away his son's attempt to help him. "And I don't know what could be safer

than a man's own front porch. It's not like I live in the ghetto, ya know."

Lou chuckled at his own rhyme. He shuffled to the screen door and went inside without waiting for Josef to follow.

"Well, aren't you coming in?" His son stood in the middle of the porch looking slightly dumbfounded. "I thought I'd make us lunch if you don't have to rush off."

"Of course, Papa." Josef smiled a little and followed. "I have a little time to visit."

Lou shuffled on to the kitchen. He heard Josef pull out a chair at the kitchen table behind him.

"Papa, why don't you turn on the air conditioning? It's stuffy in here."

"I can't afford the bill, Josef. I'm retired, remember? Besides, why cool an entire two stories for one person?"

Lou watched his son out of the corner of his eye. Josef sat at the table, staring at the "flower" arrangement of red and yellow leaves and pumpkin gourds. The autumn centerpiece was still on the table collecting dust even though now it was mid-June. Lou hadn't moved or removed anything from the house since Cora had passed away. All the knickknacks still sat on all the doilies on all the end-tables. Lou had religiously dusted them the first couple of months, but gave it up after he broke one of the

porcelain birds off its branch. Lou hadn't bothered to replant the garden either. He couldn't find the strength. But he kept the clocks wound, the dishes neat, and the bushes trimmed. All her other things were still in her closet and drawers.

Lou glanced at his son as he got two cans of Spaghetti-Os from the cupboard, medical diet be damned. A little extra sodium after a morning of sweating wouldn't kill him. It would just be tricky getting the cans open without Josef noticing that his hands no longer liked to work the stubborn opener. Lou carefully lined up the cutting edge along the lip of the can, all the while deflecting his son's line of sight with his back. Just as he was about to turn the opener's key, the whole thing slipped and banged loudly on the counter.

"Can I help with that?" Josef was at his shoulder before Lou had the chance to protest. The can opener seemed to cooperate with his long-fingered hands, and Josef handed both cans back to his father.

"Thank you," Lou muttered. Josef dismissed himself back to his chair.

"So," Lou took a breath, "how's your business? It seems to take up a lot of your time."

"Yes. Yes, it does. It's been doing very well though. We made three major sales this week alone." Josef's voice seemed to fade around the middle of the sentence, going from over-enthusiastic to a near whisper.

"Humf." Lou crossed the kitchen to put the pasta on the stove. "And," he tried to sound conversational and not disapproving, "how's that girl you've been living with?"

"Jenny's fine," Josef answered quickly, "and I'm not living with her, Papa. We're just roommates."

"Whatever you want to call it these days." Lou crossed back to the refrigerator to collect fixings for sandwiches. "I'm just glad your mother didn't have to be around to see this."

"Mother understood me," Lou made out at the edge of his hearing. He spun around quickly enough to lose his balance, catching himself on the back of the chair across from Josef.

"You know nothing about your mother." It would have been a shout if Lou could have found the breath, but instead it came out like a quiet rumble.

"How can you say that?" Josef didn't raise his voice. He sounded surprised at the accusation. "I knew Mother as well as anyone."

"How can you say that!" Lou spit back the words. "You weren't there when she died! You don't know anyone until you've seen them--" Lou, wheezing and over-excited, couldn't finish.

"Is that what this is about again? Papa, I told you; I couldn't get away, and Mother died so suddenly."

That was true. Cora had been fine all day. She had even talked to Josef on the phone. Lou remembered her half of the conversation, "No, honey, don't worry about it...I know work keeps you busy...We'll have dinner together next Sunday..." standing at the immobile hallway wall phone in a green, dirt-stained jumper and one of his old ball-caps, a wisp of white hair escaping. She smiled and shook her head as she hung up.

Cora had been in the garden picking what was left of the summer vegetables when she collapsed. The hospital stay wasn't very long, under forty-eight hours. Lou had tried to call his son, but Josef was away on business, and Lou couldn't get a hold of him. Lou vaguely remembered Josef at the funeral; he remembered Josef standing in a gray suit talking to some distantly related, very old woman, and Lou guiltily remembered thinking the woman should be dead instead of Cora. Honestly, the only thing Lou truly remembered after taking Cora to the hospital was coming back home to an empty house.

"Her face was gray, Josef." Lou pulled out the chair he was leaning on and sank down on to it. "You don't know anyone until you've seen them die."

"Papa, that's not fair."

"No, it's not."

Josef retreated to the counter where Lou had left the bread and cold cuts. Lou watched him carefully construct several sandwiches and dish up the Spaghetti-Os. It was hard to believe sometimes that his son had grown up. He was long and tall like his mother. The only place Lou could really see himself in Josef was Josef's dark hair, and even that wasn't a trait they shared anymore. And he was so much like Cora in his movements. Quick, efficient, careful not to drip on the stovetop with his mixing spoon. But sometimes, Lou just didn't know what to expect out of his son.

The two sat down to lunch without saying a word. Lou noticed that Josef ate without looking up, avoiding his father's glance. It reminded Lou of when Josef was young, when Lou first taught him to play chess. He could still see Josef across from him; Josef kneeling on the kitchen chair so he could get a nearly aerial view of the old wooden chess set between them. Cora pattered in the background, pretending not to be interested in the game, but keeping tabs on who had lost the most pieces. Lou would watch Josef's

big brown eyes dart across the board. They were always a give away to any strategy he was planning.

Eventually, in those early days, Lou would exclaim, "Check mate!" and Josef would answer with a disappointed "Papa!" His disappointment never lasted more than a few seconds, he would start setting up the polished men again and beg for another game.

"Don't you two think you've had enough?" Cora would ask. "Besides it's nearly dinner time." But Lou and Josef always managed to sneak in one more game before they had to set the table. It seemed like so long ago...

Lou got up from the table in the middle of lunch without any explanation.

"Papa? Where are you going?" he heard Josef call from the kitchen, but Lou had already crossed the front room, daring his legs to keep up with where his mind was taking him.

The front room closet was the catchall of the house. Sometimes Cora complained that Lou never let her throw anything away, but those were usually the moments when she couldn't find anything in the closet. At other times, when she had dug up some forgotten treasure, she praised his ingenuity. The closet wasn't just a storage room. It was a masterpiece.



Self-styled shelves and bins filled it from floor to ceiling, everything had its place. The only problem now would be to find the chessboard's place.

"Papa? Aren't you going to finish lunch?" he heard behind him.

"No, right now I'm looking for something," was Lou's answer.

"What Papa? Maybe I can help?"

"No, I want it to be a surprise."

Lou rummaged through a bin of Cora's needlepoint and crochet doilies, sure the board was at the bottom. When it wasn't there, he was equally sure it had found its way to the top of the stack of old children's books. No, well, perhaps it was behind those leftover canning jars or hiding under the shoe boxes filled with twenty years worth of Polaroids. Yes, there it was, the lacquered board that doubled as a case for its own pieces, just out of reach...

"Papa, I've got to go now," Josef said quietly. He had followed his father to the front room closet. "I have an appointment at two o'clock."

Lou dug his way out of the closet with a groan--his joints just didn't take to bending and stretching anymore--and shut the door. His son gave him a small nervous smile. "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"No," Lou looked his son in the eye and lied, "It wasn't there. Maybe your mother threw it away."

© 1996 Katherine Miller

originally published in *Lincoln Review*, Inaugural Issue 1997

This document was created with Win2PDF available at <http://www.win2pdf.com>.  
The unregistered version of Win2PDF is for evaluation or non-commercial use only.