

Juhani Seppovaara

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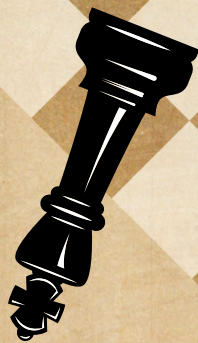
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Gallinarium

A Chess Master

A CHESS MASTER

Juhani Seppovaara

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Years ago, I imagined how my life would end, heralded by a premonition as with the monks of old. I go back once more to the island where I spent my childhood holidays. I sit on the rocky shore, watching the shimmering, eternal sea. I get up and chop some firewood for heating the sauna. The thickest log is so knotty that I am unable to split it. I use a metal wedge, but it gets stuck. I strike again and again, dripping with sweat, until my eyes grow dim and I am gasping for breath. Finally I hear the final crunch as the log gives way, my last flash of consciousness in this world.

The end will come some other way. I realize planning it is not in my power.

A mole had appeared on my back; I spotted it by chance in a fitting room mirror. It resembled the forewing of a dead-nettle beetle, glittering in the colours of the rainbow. I willed it to rise up on its wings, but it did not.

A dermatologist removed the mole and sent it off to be diagnosed. It turned out to be a melanoma, although it was not clear whether it had metastasized. A larger tissue sample was then removed.

I had no symptoms, aside from occasional bouts of helplessness and anxiety. Nothing new there, however. Calm down, I told myself. To no avail. The wait for the results deprived me of sleep, and I sank into apathy, barely coping with my daily chores.

I was referred to follow-up examinations. A little later, I saw an oncologist. She patted my shoulder and said I had an aggressive type of cancer, with metastatic tumours that had spread via the lymph system all over my body.

I crumpled up in my chair, speechless. In that instant I realized my life had taken a new turn.

I had previously worried about diseases I might contract, although I knew my fear might increase the risk. Now it seemed as if providence was mocking me: my concern had not been unwarranted.

Surgery was possible, but apparently the risk of recurrence was particularly high in my case. Advanced melanoma is incurable; all that can be done is to slow down the advance of the disease and alleviate the symptoms with medication.

I did not dare ask how much time I had left. Neither did I have any desire to find out how the disease would progress, let alone when painful symptoms would set in and when my mind would start to disintegrate. I decided to follow the example of humankind by approaching the precipice back first.

I staggered out into the rush-hour roar. People were returning home from their day's business. Somewhere in the distance, an ambulance siren howled. Everything was as before, although nothing was the same. A strange feeling.

The shadows of icicles glittering in the eaves showed up in sharp contrast against the pale wall, dripping slowly. Soon the icicles will collapse. The polar ice caps, too, will melt. My tumours will remain.

Instead of returning home, I wandered like a sleepwalker through Berlin's Prenzlauer Berg, along streets to which I had become attached. There was no reason to do so, but neither was there any reason not to do so.

Dusk began to fall. I plunked myself down on the terrace of

the Café Al Hamra, my regular haunt, picked up a blanket from the back of a chair, and wrapped it around my body. As usual, the waiter brought me a cappuccino without asking. She sensed my dejection and looked confused, but I said nothing.

If my friend Daniel had happened to come by, I would have been glad to play a game of chess. It would have given me something else to think about, a chance to shut off all other thoughts. I leafed through the *Berliner Zeitung* until I realized I had not retained anything that I had read.

One would like ageing to be a merciful time, meekly accepting the inevitable ebb of the river of life. But my illness had interrupted its normal course. Nothing could be done to stop its meanders. I had no faith in miracle cures. I realized how fragile life is when fate pointed its finger at me. Its decree could not be appealed.

The departure of my closest friend Ilpo had already prepared me for the idea of the end. I had been sitting on a park bench on Helmholtzplatz when my phone beeped. A text from Ilpo's former wife appeared on the screen: Ilpo had been found dead in his bed.

The message, in black letters on a grey background, blurred before my eyes. I had trouble understanding what it said. Later that evening, I deleted Ilpo's contact information, setting the final seal on his departure.

I used to think there is a purpose to everything, including suffering, and to believe that adversity might be an augur of better things to come. But what purpose is served by a deadly disease?

A child does not have to learn to be happy; even a fool can enjoy happiness as an adult. Perhaps that is what created the need to embrace suffering. One has to learn to accept life's inherent tragedy.

In one of the classic Russian novels, a dying man praises the joys of life. Reading the book, it struck me that this was not an observation someone who had succeeded in everything would make.

Joseph Brodsky wrote that he had felt solidarity with grief alone, but until his mouth was stuffed with clay, it would utter words of gratitude.

In Dostoevsky's novel *The Idiot*, a priest arrives at the scaffold without the eucharist. The condemned men ask him why they have been deprived of their right to the last confession and absolution. They are told that they have been pardoned. They take this as an insult; they had mustered all their courage to meet death with dignity, all in vain.

If I were to be told now that the hospital had mixed up my x-rays with someone else's and that my cancer had not metastasized, I would not feel insulted, let alone disappointed.

Art depends on despair and death, and flirts romantically with them. If this were not so, no such words would ever be written, no statues would be sculpted and no symphonies composed. The shelves of libraries sag under the weight of murders. Literature abounds with contradictory ideas about how to live with death lurking behind one's back. Someone said I'm not afraid of dying, I just don't want to be there when it happens.

It was reassuring to speak of sinking into an eternal sleep or shuffling off this mortal coil. In wars, the victims of bombings die, but heroes fall. People who die on the home front never earn the nimbus of a hero even if they have acted more altruistically than front-line soldiers. Death is a spectrum that reflects the many shades of life.

It is not likely that I can avoid self-pity, but I hope that it will not turn into bitterness. I do not wish to leave this life with fists clenched. Cynicism never saved anyone.

I realized the importance of basic security and the happiness brought by a stable everyday life when they ceased to exist. How should I use the time left to me? Whom should I tell about my illness, and how? Should I pretend to be strong and try to console

my confidant, even as black misery gnawed at my mind?

I spooned up the rest of the whipped cream from my cup and licked the spoon clean. The waiter brought glasses of white wine to the neighbouring table and asked me if all was well. I nodded and thought that's the only thing you could influence.

My next-door neighbour Marie appeared at my table. She pointed with her stick at the couple sipping white wine and said that we had also been young and beautiful once upon a time. I asked her if she missed those days. She smiled wanly and walked on.

Marie had once invited me to her flat for coffee and told me the story of her life. One morning in February 1942, her mother was arrested, and Marie had to go with her. The playground that she could see from her window was an *Umschlagplatz*, a collection point. A lorry crammed with the last Jews in the neighbourhood was waiting for them there.

At the gate to Birkenau concentration camp, Marie and her mother were dragged apart. They expected to be reunited later that day. Marie never heard from her mother again. Her father, a *Wehrmacht* officer, had been shot in Cracow one year earlier when he refused to execute a group of Polish officers taken as prisoners.

From Birkenau, Marie was taken to an educational institution for children at Sachsenhausen concentration camp. There she was trained as a nurse. After the war, she worked at the radiology department of Berlin-Buch Hospital. Following reunification, she was among the first batch of staff to be made redundant when Charité Hospital took over Berlin-Buch, which it saw as a rival. According to Marie, the age of the dictatorship of money had begun.

The red star in front of Al Hamra lit up. Returning home in the evenings, I could see it shining from a long way off. It made me feel at home. I could also see it from the windows of my flat. I had

recently become aware that there was no birch tree in front of my house. Since a self-respecting Finn must have one, I had dug up a birch seedling in the forest and planted it in a metal bucket on my balcony.

I had built up a fine circle of friends in Berlin. Meanwhile, my ties with Finland had weakened, and my contacts with family and friends there had petered off. Now was my last opportunity to fix things. I also had inheritance issues and other practical arrangements to sort out. The mere thought made my forehead break out in a cold sweat.

There were many metres of literary masterpieces on my bookshelf. Many of these I would probably never re-read, even if I had enough years left to do so, but they still showed where my thoughts had wandered over the years. They would keep gathering dust even when I myself had turned into an urnful of ashes.

For sentimental reasons, I had brought to Berlin the collected works of Goethe inherited from my great-grandfather. I knew I would not read them, if only because the *Fraktur* type was so hard to read. Some of my more militant fellow students kept the collected works of Lenin on their bookshelves. A few even pretended to have read them.

Goethe's last words are said to have been *Mehr Licht*, More light! Perhaps he saw, or hoped to see, a flash of light. Now I began to suspect that what he actually said was *Mehr nicht*, Nothing more. Chekhov is supposed to have said *Ich sterbe*, I'm dying. If my original intention were to come true, I could cry out: "And yet it splits!"

There was no trusting all these last words. They were often held to embody some crystallized wisdom that the speaker had never intended, even if he had spoken the words.

I began to take an interest in Sicily when I read that Goethe said that if you have not seen Sicily, you have not really seen Italy. When going to Sicily, he intended to visit Syracuse, but never did

so. I went there in his stead. Gazing at the shimmering Mediterranean from the terrace of a Baroque villa, I thought I could spend the twilight of my life there if something dramatic were to happen.

Perhaps a trip abroad might ease my distress now: no matter where to, but preferably somewhere near the sea. As a child, I had been given a globe. Spinning it, I immediately rejected all far-away lands. The globe showed the German Democratic Republic, a country to which no one can travel anymore.

On the Interrail trips of my youth, I gorged myself on new cities. In later years, I returned to those that brought back warm memories, highlights of my life. Now, however, my fond recollections of Paris or Prague might pale or turn painful if I went there. Perhaps my existence and its looming end could be viewed with fresh, untainted eyes in some place with which I had no ties.

I had drifted to East Berlin by chance. Now I paced back and forth in my flat and wondered what would happen to my cult artefacts from the GDR period and my large compass flag. They chronicled a turning point in my life. In the eyes of my heirs, they would probably be entertaining relics of a defunct state.

The clink of two light metal ice cream bowls against each other produced a bright sound. If you had never experienced it firsthand, it was just background noise. For my East Berlin friend Leo, a serving of pink yoghurt in a bowl like this brought back his childhood.

In early 1989, the beloved comrade Erich Honecker vowed that the Wall would stand for at least another hundred years. Even he must have realized that there is no Eternal City for us down here.

I had booked an appointment with my dentist for an implant after an infected tooth had had to be removed. I cancelled the appointment, as well as another appointment with a urologist. Even if I were to develop prostate cancer on top of everything else, I would not have time to die of it.

I could not postpone or forget everything, however. Death cleaning. The mere words brought a stab of pain. There were some horrors I would be spared. The ecosystem was about to collapse, but I would be gone before it happened. Perhaps living on the brink of disaster was a precondition for human life. I now looked at people, even young people, with this thought at the back of my mind.

I had shoeboxes full of photographs taken by my father and grandfather to sort. They recounted the lives of my parents and forefathers in the form of a happy string of pearls interspersed with war, disease and disasters. There were also thousands of my own photographs to catalogue and slides to scan. This task would enable me to relive my own years and the chain of generations that I would soon be taking leave of. But did I really wish to relive them?

In older years, I had come to think that life was too valuable to devote to topical matters. Now I had lost all residual interest in them. I still watched football, but this was by way of escape. Every match might be the last I could watch untroubled by symptoms and with senses intact.

Out in the wide world, wars were being fought, villages were being drowned by floods, fields were being devastated by drought, children were dying of hunger and disease. None of these tragic facts could match my death sentence. It was my last thought when I went to sleep and my first thought when I woke up.

I had had a brush with death once before, when I found myself in the eye of a storm in a small sailing boat. I had to tear down the sails. The raging waves threatened to smash my boat against the rocks. When the storm finally died down, I felt as though no earthly worry could ever touch me again. That feeling lasted a few months.

The long grey season of another Berlin winter was over. Spring, though long-awaited, still came as a surprise in the year 2021 of our Lord. The blackbird's melodious flute chirped in the park on Helmholtzplatz. Purple crocuses rose from the dead. In Finland, this was the season of crusty spring snow that I missed in Berlin.

The scent of bird cherry blossom used to intoxicate me in spring. Now I was afraid it would plunge me into instant melancholy.

At Al Hamra, a drab-looking man solved crossword puzzles, day after day. He was killing time. Life is so short that he will probably never tire of his meaningless task. I envied him. He seemed to have detached himself from the passage of time, and the repetitiveness of his days hardly bothered him; perhaps, indeed, it was a source of satisfaction.

What point was there in passion anymore? Or in seizing the day? Banal actions like filing one's tax returns had been time-consuming chores. If only one could concentrate on them without the shadow of a cancer diagnosis, and detect the halo over a cast-iron frying pan, for example.

I slept poorly, and was exhausted during the day. I imagined that my fatigue was due to illness rather than sleeplessness. Whenever I had a headache, I feared that the disease had reached my brain.

Facebook sent me an advertisement for a Finnish birch coffin with tasselled corners. Perhaps the undertakers had made a deal

with the oncologist. Deutsche Telekom sent me an e-mail offering a phone with an sos function. Someone wants what is best for you, right until the very end.

Before my diagnosis, I used to sit on the balcony, sipping classic Finnish vodka flavoured with my own plums, and thought I lacked for nothing. The flavour brought back memories of getting ready to go to a country dance. This sensation had freed me from the relentless yoke of time, producing an unthinking peace.

A plum tree grew by the cart path on the far shore of Lake Oberuckersee in Brandenburg. When I rowed back across the lake, drops of water glittered on the oars, and the squeaking oarlocks struck a childhood note. I thought of someone else rowing my boat when I would no longer be able to do so or would no longer be around.

Gusts of wind ruffled the lake surface, then the wind died down and the lake turned into a mirror of the sky. Deceits of lapwings were preparing to migrate. It was as though they were calling me to go south with them.

If you had to see some meaning in life, it was in moments like these. It was a good sign to have no need to seek such meaning. Useless speculation and the need to understand merely chipped away at the lyrical undercurrent of life. Aimlessness had induced some people to dream of a career as a philosopher, as if that could clarify anything. Wishing to see the world, I had rejected philosophy.

My serenity was gone. Since there was no escape from the end of the line, all I could do was confront and accept it. I tried to detect some unique lustre in my shrinking life. I had lived a long, good life, and was not far off from reaching the average lifespan. After a professional aberration, I had found a path to the source of my spiritual essence. In any case, the time to leave was drawing near.

The narrator discovers that he has advanced melanoma. To dispel his fear of death, he starts manically playing chess on the internet. On a chess website, he sees a photo of grandmaster Igors Rausis sitting in a toilet with a mobile phone in his hand. The photo was used as proof that Rausis had been illicitly consulting a computer chess program during a tournament game.

It's game over for Rausis, who toured the international chess circuit while also working as a coach in various countries for over forty years. The narrator becomes obsessed with an enigma: what was it that made this respected chess professional resort to cheating? He travels to Riga and eventually finds Rausis in a small shack on a building site where he is working as a nightwatchman.

It turns out that Rausis is also suffering from incurable cancer. The two men drink tea together late into the night, discussing chess, cheating, childhood, life choices, death and fate.

Their conversations shed light on the fascinating but merciless world of grandmaster chess, in which there are ultimately few winners.

Afterwards, a chance encounter in a café provides the narrator with a fresh perspective on what to do with whatever remains of his life.

A Chess Master is an elegiac gem, a deep dive into life's big questions as reflected in the battle of sixty-four squares.



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