

# A Game of Chess

by caterina verde

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driving down Fifth Avenue in Brooklyn in my Chevy hatchback “whatever,” it was the late eighties and I was on my way to check out a place in Park Slope that I’d seen in the New York Times classified ads. I’d just split up from my long-term relationship (a marriage actually) and decided to move out of the East Village to the gentle tranquility of Park Slope. *The Slope* hadn’t yet burst out into a full-blown bastion of the “baby stroller” brigade. Families yes, but not quite the upwardly mobile situation that it would later become. The Coop was already there though – organic extract from the seventies. Seventies theme word: alternative.

I was grateful for the tree-lined streets – my mind could go on pause for a bit – leaving some of the hard cement and variegated multi-coloured crack vials along the streets of my Williamsburg studio behind. I had a bit of cash to work with and decided to stretch my imagination of what was allowable for me to have. After years of being broke my ex was finally making money. I was hustling freelance gigs all over town and had kept a studio in various

places. When he didn’t get paid for a \$10 rehearsal for a gig with a band that was playing *Kenny’s Castaways* midweek, it was a serious disappointment. The ten bucks meant that we could have the burgers with the onion rings at the Sheraton Square diner. They were only \$2.35. No fries, that was extra. Once, when they forgot the onion rings, we were so disappointed. A tender moment. Dinner for 6 bucks it was – for the two of us. Later, he got some big tours but they didn’t pay much in the early days so it was somewhat ironic that periodically we’d be riding around in limousines but paying the rent was still an issue. Find ourselves at the Grammy’s and then back to fluorescent lit green walls of tenement living. That was pretty much standard fare for NYC in those days.

Finally, after years with the tap on dribble, the faucet was delivering some real water. Took a while to get used to but it felt good – though initially there was some guilt there. We got married and that seemed to mark the end of the relationship. It took me three years to decide that I could leave. Mostly because we’d grown up together and I loved him. I took a trip to the Pyrénées where I spent a month in an old house without plumbing – not talking to anyone. My strategy of silence was to set favorable concentration conditions for making my decision. I knew he had someone on the side so it was just a choice that I had to make for myself. When the split happened, it came quickly, as these things do. A game of chess. I knew nothing about the game but I knew strategy was involved.

My father played chess once a week with his friend, Doug MacLise. I’d come home from school, they were playing at the dinner table – right there as you walked in, so you couldn’t miss them. Screwdrivers in hand. The drink. Doug’s brother was Angus MacLise who lived out his life in Nepal; the original drummer for the *Velvet Underground*. Angus, later became a fetish object in his own right. Doug and Angus’s mother was living on Cyprus – the island. It was always an ordeal for her to travel as there was constant conflict going on there. She was British, an interesting person – I met her once or twice. Doug was a landscaper – tall, strapping, with sharp angular Scottish features who married a southern belle. You could imagine him standing tall on a heather-filled moor. He was my father’s best friend for many years until they weren’t. I’m not sure why. It might have had to do with my father’s multiple marriages that no one could keep up with.

Enter Claude. An East Coast Canadian. Long grey hair in a braid down his back. I seem to recall he had a hair lip vaguely covered by a moustache. Dad met him in a head shop in Greenwich Village after my mother died. We went to *Max’s*

*Kansas City* on that trip. *The New York Dolls* were playing. Claude came to live with us. They were just friends but Claude kept us in a steady supply of weed for the better part of the next year or so. Claude Cloud. Now these two were playing chess and Dad told me, “we’re having conversations on multiple levels.” I nodded and went upstairs to my room. Dad’s chess-playing days were not to last much longer. I never knew if he was any good but he liked the game – he was a restless guy – how he handled all that stationary positioning was mysterious.

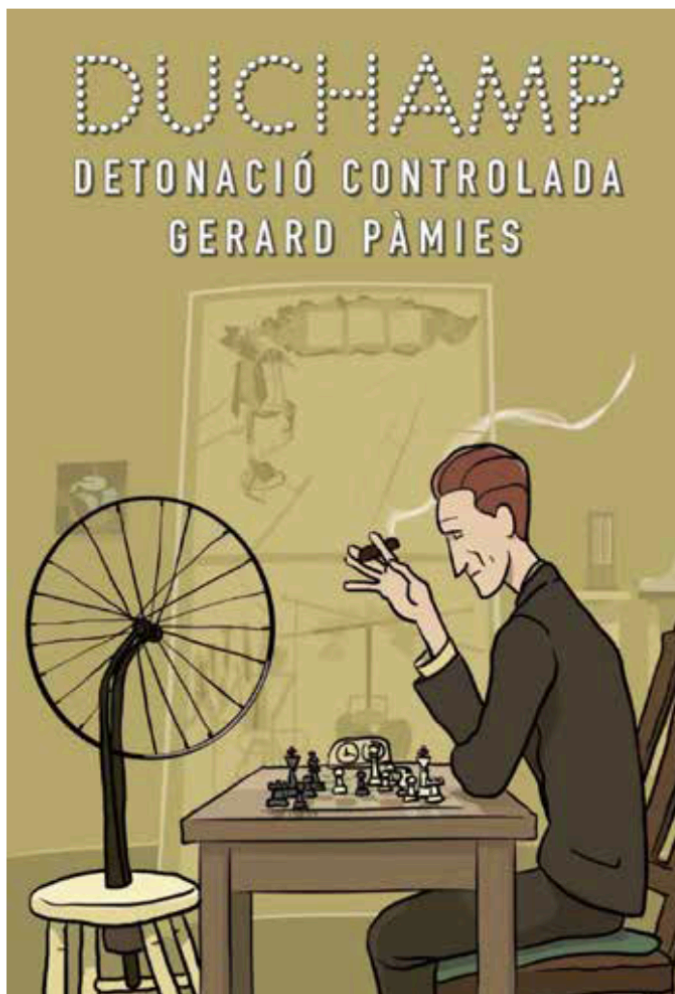
Got myself a duplex in an old brownstone on 9th Street between 6th and 7th avenues. The landlord was a dentist who lived in Soho. The back parlour floor had been the headquarters for the Republican party at some point. It had a stage. That’s where I put my computer gear so I could try a bunch of action stuff with my Amiga 2000 and the famous Toaster. It was the land of special effects of the early computer days where everybody was just trying everything out. It was a pretty good time. I wonder if some of my floppy disks can still be booted up. I never tried to play chess online.

I spent two and a half years in that apartment and made a lot of work. Had a place to do woodworking down in the basement; a place to store my art; a back guestroom where I did a lot of my animation stuff; the upstairs studio where I made paintings and light works while exploring the early world of video effects. Friends would come over and we would make stuff. It was the beginning of Web 1.0. But no one was really on the internet, yet, except for artists and scientists.

When I got a particularly vicious case of hives that wouldn’t go away – inhabiting all the hotspots – crotch, under arms, back of the knees, I took an appointment with a Chinese herbalist and was given a large bag of roots and twigs from a Chinatown dispensary. She told me to make a tea out of it, but drinking the tea didn’t seem to work. Out of sheer frustration, I threw every bit of it, all the used stuff too, twigs, roots leaf, murky slimy stuff and threw it in the tub. I soaked in it for

hours. It was like a dip in Yoda’s swamp. The hives left, never to return. Another strategy. Was this a pawn or rook type deal? Again, I don’t know anything about chess.

Up the block, on the corner of 7th Avenue and 9th Street was a



comic book store. I was not a big aficionado of comic books but the drawings were always great. One day, I spent a few hours there and found an incredible book that featured Duchamp playing chess. I thought I should buy this book – but nah, I thought, I’ll come back and get it sometime. Of course, I never did. Never could find this



book again – what a regret. The drawings were beautiful and, well, Duchampian.

A couple of years into my stint on *The Slope*, the faucet was back to a dribble. Well, I was good at making art but I was a little less eager to be out there pounding the pavement to sell stuff. Even though there were a bunch of artists in my family, “selling” was a bit of a dirty word. Unless of course you were already successful and then you were to be admired or despised for being so crass. You know the old double-edged sword. I got it from both sides of the family – not the best strategy for survival as an artist. Consequently, I was always dashing off to find other ways to make a living that would seem more palatable and acceptable. But inside I was always slightly disgusted, wondering when this torture was going to end. I was not strategizing well at all. In fact, I should have learned how to play chess early in life.

My friend, Ruth, told me she admired my strategic positioning. Really? I wondered. Did I have any? If I did, I seemed to be on perpetual restart. Problem is, I never knew what the rules were.

Duchamp’s strategy was much better than mine. He found himself a patron and allowed himself to play chess for most of the time, apart from those last 20 years when he was busy making his secret “Etant Donnés.” Duchamp got to pound his chest in a way that was subtle, perhaps wily. He was also a featured character in a comic book: a real chess playing superhero.

In the seventies, Eve Babitz played chess naked with Marcel Duchamp. She was 20, living in L.A. It was a strategic set-up by the photographer who understood the necessity of that shot. Of course, Duchamp cared about the game, and didn’t seem to really care that he was playing chess with a naked 20 year-old. Duchamp was married to a woman named Teeny. She was something of a celebrity herself. Did the game care about Marcel? I wonder.

Will I ever remember that tonight when I asked the owner of the my local wine shop how she was, she said, “I have my period” and continued playing with her dog. That’s a strategy. The conversation had taken a turn. A Saturn. Saturn the great limiter, constrictor. Saturn’s lessons are learned through friction. Good old pearl. Where is Saturn tonight?

On my walk home, I listened to some evangelical church singers. They play in obscured garage spaces. You wouldn’t know anyone was there except for hearing their voices.



That’s a chess game. How to get with God, sing to your soul and not have anyone notice that you’re there. The invisibility cloak trick. A good way to get through life. Many opt for that strategy.

I left *The Slope*. Steve Buscemi moved in. I think he eventually bought the building. I went to live in a tiny apartment back in the East Village – in the Christodora. Then I took a trip to Chiapas, where as circumstances would have it I ran into my landlord there. I went down to breakfast in an archeologist’s rancho in San Cristobal and there was my landlord - an Italian journalist for the REI with her husband in the middle of their Chiapas breakfast. What kind of move was that?

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