Arts & Humanities

To Capture A King: A Short Story

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Ofelia stood behind the bar and made a face as she watched the chess players hunched over the tables. *El juego de ajedrez*. She had lived all her life in this remote village of Ibiza in the middle of the Mediterranean and had never heard of chess until Tomayo came back from Madrid three years ago. Then everything changed.

Ofelia had inherited the inn from her father when she was still a young woman. The inn had always been the center of activity in the little village on the Ibiza coast,

population 473. But how different it was before Tomayo went away. Then the men came to play cards or dice. They talked and drank wine and beer, and the inn made money. Now the men still came, but they hardly talked. They would sit for hours staring at that stupid board with the squares on it without saying a word to each other. Instead of wine and beer they drank coffee and Coca-Cola. When you play chess, they said, your mind must be clear. Ofelia's business suffered.

Ofelia looked for Tomayo, but he was not here tonight. Once the game caught on and the men learned to play by themselves without his help, he came less and less. She knew where he was. His bride didn't want him to come. Ofelia tried to shut out the picture that forced its way into her mind. She knew his bed well, knew how it creaked when the activity on the mattress became tempestuous. She remembered the morning three years ago when Tomayo sat up in bed after they made love, when, without warning, he announced that he was going off to a new job in Madrid. She was almost sixty then. A widow with no children. He was ten years younger and had never married.

What about *us*? she said.

What *about* us? he said.

Don't I count?

I'll be back, Tomayo said.

Before he boarded the boat to Valencia, he took her in his arms and said the same thing: I'll be back.

Ofelia almost answered, We don't have much time, but she bit her lip and said nothing. When the ship's horn blew, she expected him to kiss her, but he did not. She felt his long mustache brush her cheek. Tomayo returned to Ibiza three years later with two new things, both of which brought sorrow to Ofelia's heart.

First, he brought the game of chess, which he learned in Madrid. He taught it to all the young men in the village, and it caught on. Now it was their favorite pastime. The women, of course, never played. It was strictly a man's game. Second, and more devastating to Ofelia, was the young madrileña who came off the boat with her arm through his. The woman was more than twenty years younger than Tomayo. She had bleached blond hair and fair skin that made her stand out like an electric

light among the villagers. She spoke Madrid Spanish that was hard to understand for Tomayo's people. Their tongue was Ibicenco.

Suddenly a loud voice outside drew Ofelia to the window. In the courtyard she saw a young couple in khaki shorts straddling their bicycles. The woman glared at the man and spoke to him in a foreign voice.

Ofelia couldn't understand what they were saying, but they were arguing. They circled around, and he pointed at the inn hopefully, but she crossed her arms and shouted. Eventually, they parked their bikes, and he reached for the lady's hand, but she drew it away. "No," she said, and walked ahead.

The woman was exceptionally pretty, much prettier than Tomayo's bride. She was very young, hardly twenty-one, and a natural blond with bright blue eyes, a big chest, and long legs. Her hair curled around her shoulders, and she wore a man's white shirt, which was wet with sweat in the back from the bicycle ride in the sun. She stopped at the doorway, turned to the man, and spoke in an angry whisper, gesturing back toward their bicycles, but he opened the door anyway.

Ofelia guessed from the movies she had seen in the main village that they were Americans. When they entered the inn, the men sat up and stared. Television had not yet reached the island, and the only movie house was thirty miles away. Ofelia was sure that here in this remote corner of Ibiza the men had never seen anything like this woman.

"Kevin . . ." the woman said sharply as they approached Ofelia's counter, and tugged on his shirt sleeve.

"*Habla inglés?*" the man named Kevin asked Ofelia.

"*No*," she said.

The woman threw up her hands and rolled her eyes at Kevin. They fought for a few minutes more, and finally he sighed, conceding the battle to her. She crossed the room impatiently and went to wait for him by the door.

He turned to Ofelia. "*Tiene teléfono?*" He made a motion with his hand to his ear as if he were calling on the phone.

This time she understood. "*No*," Ofelia said. "*No teléfono*."

Kevin turned and went to leave too. But the woman's expression had changed. She held up her hand and nodded toward the men playing chess at the tables. She seemed pleased with what she saw.

The couple looked at each other. This time they were in agreement. They turned back to Ofelia. Kevin pulled a book from his backpack and referred to it as he spoke to Ofelia in broken Spanish. Yes, she had a room upstairs, she said, and led them out to the backyard behind the inn to show them the pump. She worked the handle up and down in the dim light until water came out. She filled a pitcher and handed it to Kevin.

"*El lavatorio*," she said, and pointed to the outhouse across the yard. It was an old shack with boards nailed to the side.

Back at the counter, the couple turned over their passports. Now Ofelia was sure they were Americans. Kevin looked at his book and said: "*Electricidad?*"

"*No*," Ofelia said. "*Lo siento*." She lit a kerosene lantern and handed it to Kevin, who looked at his bride and shook his head. He held the pitcher in one hand, the lantern in the other.

Ofelia showed her new lodgers the room upstairs, which was dark, even with the lantern. It consisted of a single bed and chair and smelled of insect spray. Ofelia came downstairs and examined the passports further. She had heard Kevin call the woman Skinch, but that was not the name on her passport, so Ofelia guessed it was her nickname. Besides that, all she could make out were the letters *USA*.

Half an hour later, Ofelia heard a rustling on the stair. She saw the men look up as the young woman descended alone. She was indeed a striking figure. This time she had on a skirt instead of the khaki shorts, and the white shirt had been replaced with a pink pullover sweater. Her long blond hair was freshly brushed and hung behind her shoulders. Her lips were brightened with lipstick. The men at the tables tried not to stare. They squirmed and coughed and looked at each other with their eyebrows raised and turned back to their games. Skinch stopped at one of the tables and stood watching the chess game. Her hair glistened in the flickering lantern light. The men tried to concentrate, but it was very difficult with Skinch there. Besides Ofelia, who stood behind the counter, Skinch was the only woman in the room. To the men, she was a creature from another world.

“*Muy bonita*,” Ofelia said aloud to herself.

Skinch moved to another table, where Alfonso and Quilvio had been playing for a long time. When she approached, they both looked up at her and smiled, and she smiled back. Only a few pieces were left on the board. For more than five minutes the two men stared at the table like statues, without moving or speaking. Skinch watched in silence. When Quilvio finally moved his rook, Skinch shook her head.



Josh George

Ofelia did not understand chess, although she knew the names of the pieces. She also knew the two words *jaque* and *jaque mate*. And she knew that when one of the players said *jaque mate*, it meant the game was over.

Soon Alfonso picked up his queen and with a little flourish held it above the board. Quilvio didn't see what was coming, and Alfonso was making the most of the little drama. Finally, he set the queen down next to Quilvio's king and said, "*Jaque mate*." Alfonso's queen was protected by his pawn. It took a moment before Quilvio recognized the painful fact of the matter. Then he laid his king down on its side and shook his opponent's hand.

When Quilvio stood up, Skinch took his chair and tried to speak to Alfonso. She pointed to him and to herself, then to the board. He did not respond. What was this woman trying to say to him? She continued to gesture, but he still did not understand. Finally, she sat down in the chair and again pointed to him and to herself. She picked up one of the pieces and waved it between them.

"*Comprende?*" she said. Eventually, it dawned on Alfonso. She wanted to play him. His face reddened. He had never played with a woman before.

"*Bueno?*" she asked.

"*Bueno*," Alfonso replied. What else could he do? Together they started to put the pieces in place.

At the counter, Ofelia gasped. How bold! Was this woman really going to play chess? Against a man? Against Alfonso? It was unthinkable. Never in Ofelia's inn had a woman done such a thing. Chess was a man's game. It was too intellectual for a woman.

As the game started, the men gathered round. Skinch looked up and smiled at them and showed her gleaming white teeth, and then hunched forward with her elbows on the table, her chin resting on her folded hands, and concentrated on the board.

Ofelia assessed the lady's chances. Alfonso was one of Tomayo's best pupils. But Ofelia also knew him for his gallantry toward the weaker sex. He would defeat the lady. He had to do that. But he would not embarrass her.

Meanwhile, Skinch's husband had come downstairs to join the social activity.

He did not approach his wife when he saw her engrossed in the game, but remained at the counter behind the circle that had formed around her, hidden from her view.

The game with Alfonso did not last long. From the outset Skinch took Alfonso by surprise with the way she attacked with her knights. After just a few moves, she said: “*Jaque*.” Alfonso looked trapped but he got out of it. “*Jaque*,” she said, again and again. Always in a quiet voice, almost a whisper. As if it meant nothing. He knew he was doomed. In desperation he moved his king one square to the right. She moved in with her rook and it was all over. She didn’t have to say it. He kindly said it for her: “*Jaque mate*.” He stood up and kissed her hand in the Continental way, without actually making contact. The men turned to each other and shook their heads. Can you believe it?

In the circle looking on was a young man named Esteban. As soon as Alfonso got up, Esteban sat in his chair and rolled up his sleeves. He nodded, Skinch nodded, and a new game began without a single word passing between them. This will be different, Ofelia thought. Esteban was the best after Tomayo. Once he had even beaten the master. He would not let himself be embarrassed by this foreigner.

Again a circle gathered around the players. Ofelia was busy with new orders for beer and wine. The men could drink now because they weren’t playing. Ofelia served the drinks, washed the glasses, and went outside to feed the chickens. When she came back, the game was still going and the circle around them had grown. Esteban did not look happy. Oh, no. Could he be in trouble too? Not Esteban. Ofelia stood at the counter hoping to hear Esteban say, “*Jaque mate*.” But he said nothing. He looked around at his friends as if to call for help. Skinch never changed her expression. She did not look at Esteban. Her attention was on one corner of the board. She put down her queen, and the game was over.

“*Ay*,” Esteban said, as if in pain. He laid the king down on its side.

“*Increíble*,” Ofelia said.

Suddenly a murmur traveled across the room. The voices came from all sides. Call Tomayo! Call Tomayo!

“*Dónde está Tomayo?*”

“*Llame a Tomayo!*”

Ofelia joined in the cries. “*Dígale a Tomayo que venga*,” she shouted. The slaughter had gone far enough. Someone had to stop it. Ofelia knew where Tomayo was. He

was in bed with his bride. The bride would not want him to leave her so late in the night. She would make a scene if he tried to go to the inn to play chess. No matter, Ofelia thought. Never mind her. This was important. Tomayo must come. This stranger is embarrassing our people.

Ofelia called for silence by banging a knife against an empty beer mug. “*Tomayo*,” Ofelia shouted. “*Tiene que venir*.” He must come.

But who would fetch the maestro? Who could persuade him to come at this hour? The men turned to Ofelia. She knew Tomayo best. He would respect her request. She would know what to say.

No, Ofelia said. I can’t do it.

Why not?

Please don’t ask me.

The men talked of honor. The honor of Ibiza.

Someone else must go, Ofelia said. Please understand.

The men nodded. They respected Ofelia. They understood. Something in the past. A woman’s pride. Of course. Someone else must go. So it was decided that the two losers, Alfonso and Esteban, would be the messengers. They could warn Tomayo about the woman’s clever maneuvers with the knight. They could explain why Tomayo had to come. They wouldn’t be afraid of Tomayo’s bride. Amid the cheers, Alfonso and Esteban put on their black caps and went out into the night.



Josh George

To the people at the inn, the wait felt like hours. But soon there was a shout from someone at the window. "*El viene!*" And Tomayo came in like an actor making his entrance. He wore a white shirt open at the neck, baring his hairy chest. The long black mustache almost reached his collar. Ofelia felt her heart jump. The old feeling. Would she ever be rid of it? The shirt was clean, but it was not ironed. Ofelia would have ironed it. Now that Tomayo was there, a sense of relief settled in the room. Now the intruder would be put in her place. It was near closing time, but everyone knew Ofelia would not close at the usual hour. The news was spreading through the village of the big game between the beautiful American *señora* and the village champion, Tomayo. Ofelia hoisted herself up on the counter to get a better view and announced that everyone present would be given one free drink.

Several men surrounded Tomayo, all talking at once, acting like his seconds in a prizefight. Tomayo listened and smiled. Then he came over to Skinch, bowed to her, and sat down to play.

"No speak *inglés*," he said. "*Lo siento*."

Skinch pointed to herself, said, "No speak *español*," and they both laughed.

For more than an hour, the battle wore on. It was one of those games where after a long time no one could say who was winning. Tomayo captured one of Skinch's pawns and a bishop. Skinch had one of his pawns and a knight.

Then Tomayo took her rook and a loud murmur ran through the crowd. Several of the men winked and grinned at each other. The maestro was not over the hill yet.

"*Qué pasa?*" Ofelia asked one of the men nearby.

"*Tomayo gana*," he said. Tomayo is winning.

Ofelia sighed. "*Bueno*," she said.

Skinch did not change her expression. She seemed unperturbed by the whispering behind her back. She remained hunched over the board, staring at the pieces. She brushed back strands of blond hair that were blocking her view.

Soon Ofelia heard Tomayo say, "*Jaque*." The men moved in closer. Ofelia thought: *Finish it, Tomayo. Finish her off. Do it, for heaven's sake. Then we can have time together before you go. We can have a late snack alone in the kitchen. I have bacon in the icebox. I will make the eggs the way you like them.*

Remember, Tomayo, how you liked my eggs? Perhaps ... but no ... she dared not imagine more. She waited to hear the word. She waited to hear him say, "*Jaque mate*."

Another hour passed with no conclusion. Now it was past midnight. Tomayo continued to hold the advantage gained by taking the rook, but he could not score the knockout. Skinch's king was tucked away behind two pawns, but it was about to be trapped. The men behind Tomayo held their breath. They sensed victory at last. One more move and Tomayo could finish her off.

But it was Skinch's move, and she didn't hesitate. She picked up her black knight, which was shining in the light from the oil lamps, and caressed it with her thumb and forefinger before she set it down and said, "*Jaque*." Tomayo looked at her. Then he looked at the board. He couldn't move his king. He couldn't take her knight. For the first time he realized he was in serious trouble. He stood up and started to walk around in a little circle. The men drew back to give him space. He came back and studied the board from a standing position. Five minutes went by. Skinch never moved. She just stared at the board also. Tomayo ran his fingers through his hair

and sat down again and examined the situation.

“*Jaque mate?*” he asked. He knew the answer.

Skinch nodded and watched him lay down the old king.

“*Ay*,” he said. “*Ya acabé*.” I am finished. “*Ay*,” said the men behind him.

Tomayo was a gentleman with good manners. He did not show anger or disgust. He got up and went over to Skinch, then bowed and lifted her hand close to his lips. When the men filed out, some of them stopped by Skinch’s table to pay their respects. A few bowed and said words she didn’t understand. Tomayo sat back in his chair, stared at the pieces on the board, and shook his head. Ofelia came over to Tomayo and put her hand on his shoulder. She could tell he was embarrassed. “*Es de nada*,” she said. But she was lying. It was a big thing. A king was dethroned.

Come in the kitchen, she said. I’ll fix the eggs the way you like.

I have to go, he said, and stood up.

Come, she said. She took his hand and held on tight when he tried to draw it away. He let her lead him across the room. He walked like a prisoner in surrender, head bowed. They went in the kitchen, and she closed the door. She tried to console him. She put her arms around him and caressed his neck with her fingers.

You’re still my Tomayo, she said.

He moved closer. “*Mi Ofelia*.”

She expected him to kiss her, but suddenly he dropped his arms and shook his head.

Don’t go, she said. The bride can wait. I never see you anymore. You come here. You play chess. Then you go. Now sit down. I’ll fix the eggs.

Please, he said. I can’t stay. He turned to leave.

She went up to him and placed his arms around her neck. She kissed him. He did not resist, but he did not respond either. His lips were closed.

Oh, she said. That is not the Tomayo who used to kiss me.

Again he drew back. I am going, he said.

You don’t love her. I can tell.

He opened the door. “*Lo siento*,” he said.

Ofelia stood at the door and watched him go. *Go home, Tomayo. Go home to your little bride. Tell her you lost the game. Tell her you lost to a woman. Tell her, Tomayo*.

Skinch was still sitting at the chess table. All the men were gone. Kevin went to her and sat in the chair. They sat for a while in silence, and then she held out her hand to him, and they went upstairs to the dark room with the narrow bed.

Norbert Ehrenfreund ’50GSAS is a retired judge. This is his first published fiction in more than fifty years.



Guide to school abbreviations

All categories >