

## PING PONG

SOMETIMES I PICTURE US sitting at our desks as pieces on a chess board. Pawns up front, sycophants, raising hands, eager to answer each question. I'm on the side a few rows in, a knight holding onto an outdated chivalric code, looking at Lena, three seats behind, two rows over, making occasional eye contact and wishing she was mine. In the back are the privileged kids, royalty, listening lumps, smoking pot and getting drunk on the weekends, a few screwing but getting away with it, and because of rich parents, heading to Ivy League schools after graduation. Before the lesson, however, we're democratic: twenty-four ping pong paddles, shooting gossip back and forth so rapidly we can hardly keep track of who did what to whom the previous weekend. Betrayals. First love. Who puked on their friend's front lawn. Lena's part of that crew, but I've never been brave enough to attend their parties. It isn't like the movies where popular kids ban the ones who aren't. I'd be welcome wherever they hang out. Hell, I've been invited, but I never know what to say and I resent their social ease. A knight has no business consorting with a queen, but any paddle can hit the ball to another, and someday, I plan to aim at her.

(I need to stop mixing metaphors and stick with one...)

I glance in her direction but turn away when she looks toward me.

Is this cat-and-mouse a subtle method to convey my feelings for her? Are there subtle moves in ping pong, ways to spin the ball and fool your opponent?

Chess is all about subtlety. Lead your adversary in one direction and attack from another. That's how you win there, but I'm not sure it's going to prove effective here. In fact, I'm certain it's the most ineffective technique possible, but she has what in pop songs they call doe eyes, and I can't concentrate when I stare at them. I'd like to live a pop song with her, but she has a boyfriend, a bad boy, one she chose among the rogues, one whose advance across the board has no structure or pattern, and I don't stand a chance in his shadow. Eleventh grade with a goatee, blue bandana on his head, and a slouching I-don't-give-a-shit-about-anything posture? I should give up. He's outside the rules of the game, too cool for me to contend with, and she seems relatively content, which with my chivalry should be all that matters, but I hate his guts and imagine running him through with a lance. *If he hurts her!* I think, but don't finish, finding it repugnant to entertain the notion of her getting dumped so I can play hero.

What kind of person does that make me?

I watch her again, unworthy, but she's not aware I'm on her periphery. Instead, she stares nervously across the room at her twin sister Rachel, who's talking with David Schneider, and though I hate to bring pinball into this, I can't help noticing the animosity that bounds and rebounds between them, and it makes me worried. My eyes dart between them to intercept their telepathic bond. No wait, that's a grotesquerie. We learned this in English: my gaze darts, not my eyes. But now I'm joking, exercising a propensity for game allusions to avoid what's happening to Lena. I can tell it's serious. She's close to tears—the skin around her sockets scrunched, her face red. Maybe she's just squinting to read Rachel's lips, but I doubt it. I've seen Lena stomp her foot in frustration while talking to Mr. Soul Patch in the lunchroom.

Maybe they broke up?

But that's not it. And though I suspect what it really is, I won't let myself consider that possibility yet. The bell rings, and Mr. Cooper strides into the class. Last chance conversation, Rachel calls across the room, "Can I tell him?" nodding at David.

Her question hangs in the empty space between our aisles, a rubber ball above the net, spinning in slow motion, the match's most pivotal point. I almost blurt out, "Tell him what?" before Lena cries,

"It's none of your business!" and stands and runs into the hall.

I'm suddenly so nauseous I also want to flee. My stomach swells, acid surging into my limbs, pins-and-needles, fire infecting me. I never spoke, never told her I cared, never put myself out there as an option. If she had *me* to choose from...

But who am I kidding?

I don't understand the first thing about chess or ping pong, let alone the more advanced sport she engaged in. I glance back at the royalty, then up at the pawns, and then at the empty desk to my left before I start copying notes from the blackboard. As the lesson begins, I decide that poker might be a better game for me. Although it requires a strategy similar to chess, I've mastered the primary strength of any self-respecting cardsharp, and it serves me well now. I straighten my spine and face forward, pen pointed at the page, ready to work. Even when I'm most vulnerable, I can hide my hand and turn my face to stone along with the best of them. I hope that means I have the talent to play. □

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