

If White Loses His Queen

by Christian Carl

Two years ago I lost her. I feel like the walking dead. I really don't walk though, I float. At night, I float through the streets, hiding my ugly face in dark corners. I scare lonely walkers as I float from shadow to shadow, avoiding the white light.

I live in an apartment downtown. My only window faces a large brick building on the other side of the alley. Painted on the black brick of the building across from me, a large white dove hangs like a picture in my window. Underneath the dove in white letters, I see the reminder of my loneliness. The caption reads, "The only solution is love." If this is true, then I have no solution.

I can't keep my eyes off of this dove. As the sun sets each day, the dove becomes whiter and whiter with its descension. When it becomes dark, its black dotted eyes interrogate me. They drive me from my room. I float down the fire escape. I hurry—avoiding the dove's stare, but I swear his eyes move. I know they follow me.

I move past the sleeping homeless lined up in the alley. It's almost like I'm trying to find my way out of a graveyard and I have to step over tombstones. I try not to wake the dead. A mass of clothes hold the shaking sleepers. They are wrapped in rags. Their hands are in their pants to keep them warm. One of them is mumbling—she's moaning a "Hail Mary" as I walk by, and I feel the stare of the bird intensify on the back of my neck. I pick up my pace, hurdling the sleepers until I escape the alley and the dove. I float down the street, looking back at the white light that shines from the alleyway. I walk past small stone houses surrounded by small wire fences. Through the skinny streets lined with cars, I walk along the fences. The dogs in the neighborhood begin to bark and cry. I hear the breaking of glass and the screams of a hysterical woman in the distance. The dogs bark and cry and I walk faster and faster until I reach the end of the street.

At the end of the street, I spot the blinking neon sign. I see the word "Inferno" flashing red. I like the red flashing sign. It is my escape from the white light that penetrates my window. There's something powerful about that sign.

I had been coming to the Inferno for the last two years. I had never noticed the sign until I had lost her. I didn't even know the Inferno existed, until I lost her. I guess when you're alone, you

begin to notice things. Maybe that's why I never really noticed the dove before. Before I lost her, I slept at night. I didn't notice the dove until I spent my first night alone. I laid awake in my bed and stared back at the dove, but the white burned my eyes and his dotted black eyes became my pupils. With each night, the stare of the dove became more powerful. I tried shutting my blinds, but his outline burned through the black plastic.

I hated white. My walls were white. My refrigerator was white. My bed was white. I tried painting everything black, but the white dove covered my walls with whiteness. The nights became long and lonely. My eyes were burning red from the white light. It pained me to shut them. I knew I had to leave. I had to find someplace to go to escape the dove and its white, interrogating light.

The Inferno is my someplace. When I first entered the Inferno, I felt warm and comfortable. The bar was lit with a mysterious soft red light. The source of this light was hidden, but I didn't care where it came from, I was just happy that nothing was white. Absolutely nothing was white. I felt alive inside the Inferno. Every night for the last year and a half I made my journey from the white into the red comfort of the Inferno.

That night, like every night, I sat alone at the Inferno. Through the red light of the bar, I watched the people around me. Every night I saw the same people. I saw the same things. I watched the two lovers sit and talk at the table in front of me. The woman stirred her drink with her index finger as she listened to her lover's voice across the table. She watched his mouth. She watched his lips move and she swirled the ice with her finger and licked the liquid from her fleshy spoon. The ice had melted from her stirring, and through her glass, I saw the door of the Inferno.

I watched people walk in. I never saw anybody walk out. The same people walked in every night, but that night, I noticed some new visitors. I saw the loud guys walk in. They were regulars at the Inferno. The loud guys all looked alike. They all wore red rugby shirts and jeans and their hair was parted to the side. They're extremely loud. Over by the bar, I notice a tight-faced waitress preparing herself to wait on the loud guys. She walks over hesitantly, and one of the guys insults her. She ignores them and they roar with laughter.

As the waitress moves from table to table, I wait for the rest of the regulars to enter. The young woman should be next, I thought to myself, but instead, I saw a black-faced fat man walk in carrying a briefcase. He walked in, looked straight at me, and then headed for the stairs to his left. I had never noticed the stairs that descended down. Where did they come from? Where did he come from? Why did he look at me? He moved down the stairs and step by step, he slowly disappeared.

I called the waitress over and asked her about the black-faced fat man. She looked at me like I was crazy, and said that she had never seen any black-faced fat man carrying a briefcase. She also told me that the Inferno doesn't have a downstairs. "Are you gonna be okay," she said, and I asked her to bring me a Bloody Mary. I felt stupid. I've been coming here every night for a year and a half and I've never seen him before. I tried to pass it off as a dream—some type of hallucination as a result of bad liquor, but I couldn't shake the stare of the black-faced fatman and his black beady eyes. My thoughts were interrupted by the entry of the young woman. I had been expecting her. Her presence took my mind off of the dark stranger.

She walked in squinting at the brightness of the red light. She was dressed in a red leather outfit. Her lipstick matched the red light of the Inferno. Her eyes searched the room, looking for someone. I wanted that someone to be me, but every night she looked right through me, and tonight was no exception. She gave up her search and lit a cigarette. She desperately sucked on the cigarette, choking the filter with her lips as she moved toward the bar to order a drink.

As she moved to the bar, another regular entered the Inferno. He was a middle-aged man wearing blue pants, a white oxford, and a blue tie. His sleeves were rolled up and his hair was messed up from running his frustrated hands through it. I didn't know who he was, but he probably just finished crunching out some numbers in his tiny cubical on the 5th floor of some large downtown office building. I have a feeling that he's the last one to leave the office every night. He runs his hands through his hair. He finds a table and sits down. He rests his hands on his head, and he holds himself up with his elbows.

The door opened again. This time it was another stranger. His face was glowing white. He stood there in the doorway just looking at me. He wore a black three-piece polyester suit and cradled a thick black book in his left arm. He walked in, threw his arms up in the air, clutched the book in his left hand, mumbled something to the ceiling, and quickly moved toward the stairs.

The stairs were back again, and as he descended, he signaled to me. He wanted me to follow him downstairs.

I looked around for help. No one had noticed these strangers. No one heard my cries for help. No one paid attention to me, and I felt alone again. I felt myself drawn to this stairway. I floated across the bar towards the stairs. I was carried by my curiosity down the stairs. I came to a tall wooden door and just as I started to knock, the door opened.

I entered the room and the door quickly shut behind me. The two strangers sat in the black-lighted basement. The glowing white face of the man with the black book and the black-faced fat man studied me as I stood in front of them.

The black-faced fatman sat at the table. Set up in front of him was a Chess board. On his Chess board sat an array of Chess pieces. He had set up both sides, white versus black, and he patiently watched the board, never again looking up at me. In his left hand he also held a book—HOW TO WIN AT CHESS—and he studied each page.

The pale, glowing face spoke to me. "This is the Chessman," he said, "and I am Mr. Night, his assistant. Don't mind him, he never speaks, he never smiles, and he never looks up from the table once the game has begun. Each morning he leaves the Inferno. He will return at sundown to continue the game until he has won...or he has lost. When his game is over he leaves. I don't see him for weeks, maybe months.. It depends on how soon I can have his next case ready. When I have found someone worthy of his challenge, then I call for him and he comes."

I heard Mr. Night's words, but I didn't understand. Who was he playing against? Why was he playing, and what did I have to do with it? As questions filled my mind, Mr. Night informed me that I was the Chessman's next challenge. Why me? What happens if he wins? Mr. Night said that it was up to me to figure that out, and that I had better figure it out soon.

Not knowing what to do, I ran from the room, up the stairs and back to my apartment. It was day time and the sun turned the white of my apartment into a golden yellow and I could ignore the dove. I had forgot about the dove. The Chessman and Mr. Night had taken care of that. I laid on my bed thinking of what I could do. I tried to make sense out of what happened that night, but I couldn't. I dismissed it all as a bad dream.

As soon as the sun set, I returned to the Inferno. I crawled out of my back window and down the fire escape—never looking at the dove. I carefully stepped over the rows of homeless, and

then stumbled over a young woman. She looked up at me and smiled. Her smile was yellow and crooked. It wasn't white. I liked her smile. It reminded me of the yellow of the sun. I wasn't afraid of her. I apologized for stepping on her, and quickly made my way to the Inferno.

Afraid that maybe the Chessman wasn't a dream, I thought to myself...What if I have already lost? No. No. If I had lost, I would probably know by now. I hurried through the door of the Inferno and found my usual seat. I waited. The Chessman didn't walk through the door. I saw no sign of the stairwell. I waited. The regulars were making their way in and there was still no sign of the strangers.

Looking through the bottom of my glass as I finished my drink, I saw a large figure standing in the doorway. I set my drink down and the Chessman stood in front of me. His black, beady eyes stared at me as a black smile stretched across his face. I looked away in fear. When I looked back, he was gone. Just seconds after the Chessman had disappeared down the stairs, Mr. Night walked in. A look of disappointment covered his pale glowing face. Maybe I had lost? I didn't understand why he looked so disappointed. His face dropped, his arms dropped to their sides, he shook his head, and walked downstairs.

I quickly moved across the Inferno, through the red, down into the black of the basement. When I entered, I noticed that my Queen was gone, and some of the pawns, black and white, had been moved. The game had begun, and I had no idea how to play. I had no way of defending myself against the Chessman. If I couldn't be in charge of my own white pieces, how could I win? I asked Mr. Night how I was supposed to win if I couldn't even move my own damn pieces. He replied that I was in charge of my own pieces, and that with each day the game would progress. My actions determine my moves on the board. I was being played out on the Chess board—but my Queen was gone. I complained that I could never win without my Queen and that this game was unfair. Mr. Night told me that when I lost her, I lost my Queen. "So", he said, "I hope you understand that it is quite fair."

When I was in the basement of the Inferno, the pieces on the board never moved. I returned the next night to see the black smile on the Chessman's face, and the disappointing look of Mr. Night. Mr. Night was frustrated with me. He pulled me aside. He asked me what I was doing here. "Haven't you figured it out yet?," he said in disgust. "Do you want to lose? Do you want to just watch him suck the life from you? Do you want to become like me? Do you want to become

the walking dead? I lost her too! Don't you understand? I lost her too! I've spent a year and a half studying you. You lay around all day. You never eat. You never sleep. This is all because you lost her. You are the next candidate. Don't you understand? I spent my life hiding! I wanted to be alone. I found myself in this same room 2 years ago, and I lost! I sat in the same chair upstairs that you've been sitting in for the last year and a half. You've shown no motivation for self-improvement. You are a waste of space. You are the walking dead. Don't you understand? I've served my term! I've served my term! If he wins, then you take my place and I...I'm...I'm gone. Every two years the Chessman must attempt to find another assistant. If you don't lose, I can keep living. I'd rather be the walking dead than nothing at all. You must try to win. You must learn how to win at Chess. You can save yourself and you can save me. Please! I beg you!!"

I fled from the black of the basement, through the red of the Inferno and into the white of my apartment. It was daytime and I sat in my apartment thinking of how I could win. I was helpless. I thought about Mr. Night. I wanted to save him and myself, but how? I remembered that he said that I must learn how to win at Chess. I remembered the book that the Chessman held and I went to the bookstore. I bought a book on how to win at Chess. I studied the book and found the answer. Chapter 7—WHAT TO DO WHEN YOU LOSE YOUR QUEEN. The passage read:

If White loses his queen during the early stages of the game, he is found to be at a severe disadvantage. His only escape from Checkmate in this situation is to regain his Queen through patience and perseverance. In order to regain the Queen, White must cross from the White zone through the Red zone (the center of the board) and into the Black zone. If White reaches the edge of the Black zone, he regains his queen and is back in the game. White must be unafraid to take risks, but he mustn't avoid the obvious. In this situation, the most difficult moves are the smartest ones to make.

I sat and thought about this passage. I realized that at night, I found myself in the White light, I escaped into the red, and I ended up in the black. I must be close to the solution to my dilemma. I just didn't know what to do. Like the book said, you must move from the white to the red and then into the black and you can regain your Queen. As I sat on my bed thinking, the sun had gone down,

and I found myself in the white light. I stayed there this time. I wanted to see if I was missing something. The book said that sometimes the most difficult moves are the best moves. I sat in the white light. I hated the white light, but I had to stay there. I had to face the light and wait for something to happen. I moved towards the blinds and twisted the handle. The white light burst through the glass in slits and burned my eyes. I kept them open and in front of me the solution to my problem shined on the black brick wall. "The only solution is love" in bright white letters filled my eyes. My eyes read the letters and I spotted something below in the alley. The young homeless woman, that I had stumbled over, sat there against the black brick. She was wrapped in white blankets. She wore a white hat that sat on her head like a crown, and I had realized that she was my Queen. I had found my Queen!

I ran down the fire escape, staring back at the dove. The white no longer burned my eyes. The black dotted eyes of the dove were empty. I woke up the young woman. She was scared at first, but then smiled. I walked her up the fire escape and into my room. I told her that she was my Queen.

She said that she had watched me come down the fire escape every night. She had watched for my return every morning. She said that she had been worried because I didn't leave that night. She was afraid that something was wrong. I told her that everything was okay because I had found my Queen. We fell asleep that night, holding each other tightly with arms and legs. When I woke up, she was gone, and in the palm of my hand I held the White Queen. I ran to the window to look for her, but was struck by a burning white light. I looked up to face the dove, but it was gone. In its place a message was carved into the black brick with bright white letters:

*Welcome back and thank you.
Sincerely,*

Mr. Night

I smiled and set the Queen on the windowsill. I knew that I hadn't won yet, but at least I was back in the game.