

# Rittenhouse Square: excerpt from Ari Figue's Cat

*by* Jacob Russell

Rittenhouse Square:

Figue suddenly feels unnaturally warm. He stops to look at his reflection in the window--flushed, color drained from his cheeks, his face transparent in the glass. Barnes and Noble. Rows of bookshelves. A man in a dark blue shirt and white tie, magazine in hand, turns his way--sees through him to the shaded park beyond. Figue, transparent, entwined in a pointalistic tapestry of leaves, feels his forehead: cool, sweaty. A new form of cancer? He feels the tissues under his skin dissolving. Poisonous rays penetrating the vanishing veil of ozone--instantaneous metastatic sun-generated cancers, topiary tumors gape-jawed like gargoyles devouring him from within. His impulse is to race across the street, run for the cover of trees. Must restrain himself. Rapid movement can only serve to over stimulate, spread the toxins. The sky is blindingly bright--a few cirrus wisps in an unbroken stretch of blue. He trembles, waiting for traffic to clear, for the light to turn green.

Trunks of plane trees with parchment bark, their shaggy pillars bear a canopy of green like a great tent spread over the square of the park. Cool misting lawn sprinklers, their umbral spay--brick walks glisten in the mottled light. Fading blooms of rhododendron. Dodge the man with the two cell phones, one to each ear. Two young mothers, two carriages, two infants. The world is twofold: one, a sun-splayed screen of seeming, the other unseen, unseemly, spinning darkness out of light. Matter and antimatter. We are penetrated by its rays. Drilled through. Pierced like painted saints.

A woman in shorts licks a melting ice cream cone, slurry of sweet chocolate on her tongue. The lawns on either side (a blaze of green) are strewn with sunbathers. Women, shirts rolled up, bare midriffs. Shirtless men. A couple on the grass eating fries from a square of

shining foil--a quizzical Weimaraner follows their every move, hand to foil, hand to mouth, hand to foil. A young woman, sketch pad before her, clear plastic bottle of water at her side, draws what she sees: the semblance of a day in the park, time stopped at the end of a century, late June, mid-afternoon--shadows on the wall of the cave. Starlings. Sparrows. Pigeons glide through foliate passageways, search for scraps at the feet of three old women on a bench, two in black, one in flowers and dots. A terrier pulls at his leash. A fat man, bald, blue sunglasses and black goatee, leans back, legs crossed, looks up from his Inquirer to watch a woman in a red sweater, Philly's cap, motoring past on her tri-wheeled scooter decked with: water bottles, saddle bags, oxygen tank, large flashlight peering like an alien eye from a leather satchel tied athwart a rear fender, a gas mask a-dangle dancing from a bouncing strap.

Figue finds a bench in the shade. Dedication:

Samuel L. Gomez

June 6, 1960 - April 17, 1993

Only 33. Like Jesus. Did he die of AIDS--the bench paid for by his lover? An accident? Crossing Delaware Avenue after a night out, run down by a careening car at 3:00 AM? Was it the sun that killed him?

A bad omen.

Figue finds another bench. Does not read the memorial plaque. Better not to know. He unwraps a granola bar, closes his eyes: laughter behind him. Someone speaking Chinese--not Chinatown sing-song--Cantonese: *shoe show shoe shoe* he hears. Mandarin. Drone of traffic never stops. Rises and falls. Sparrows chirping.

Pardon?

He opens his eyes. Two matrons dressed in black have settled down beside him. Acknowledges them.

What day is this?

Figue has to think. Wednesday, he says. The woman closest to him smiles graciously, looks at her companion.

I *told* you, she says.

The truth is, says the other to Figue, the truth is, neither of us *knew* for certain.

Figue stands up. Blinks in the sun, a patch of it blinking through the trees. The granola bar seems to have helped. He moves on.

Two infants, naked, bronzed, holding over them... a globe? No, a sunflower. Petals encircling a sundial.

The Hour Passes Friendship Abides

Evelyn Taylor Price the sculptor. Back out of the sun, down the tree lined walk. It ruins the skin. Would she have carried a parasol in her day? Avoiding early wrinkles. Leathern face. Melanoma. Stop! Stop thinking--it only brings it on. Magnetism of negativity.

To the central square, past the giant frog where a replica of a 19th century guardhouse stands. To the side, a group of men are gathered around a pair of chess players. A heavy-set black man straddles the concrete bench, thighs and lower belly bulging. His opponent, white, chain smoking, thick black eyebrows, a mole on his forehead. They move rapidly. Lifting the pieces, setting them down sharply, slapping a clock with each move.

Click

Click

Click

The smoker misses a pin on his queen. Gives up a rook to save her, but it's not enough. The lion rends the serpent. *Game over*. They set up and start again. Above them. Liberty One, monument to the defeat of Edmond Bacon: a grid of pinnacles against the sky, glass-blue, ethereal, as though made of air. On another bench two younger men play. A black man in a red cap, hooded sweatshirt--despite the heat. His opponent, a boy--seventeen? Eighteen? No. Older. A baby face. Figue watches him unfold a long elegant combination. The man in the cap shrugs. Prostrates his king. Shakes hands, hands him a dollar and leaves.

One of his foster families: the father was a chess player--would drive to new Jersey once a month to play in rated quads. Never missed the tournaments that came three or four times a year to the Adams Mark on City Avenue. Didn't play in the open sections Mostly hung out in the kittles room taking on other lower rated players in

ten minute games. Figue would tag along--and proved to be a fast learner.

The foster father arranged for lessons with a Russian immigrant and International Master. Once they drove to New York where Figue played in the Manhattan Chess Club's Under-13 Saturday Swiss. Up the winding stairs (too long a wait for the tiny elevator): back entrance to Carnegie Hall, from rehearsal rooms, muted trumpets heard in passing, pianos sounded from darkened passageways. He won the first two games. Number three--a nine year old girl named Irina Krush. Crushed him. Sees her photo now in chess magazines, a Women's Grand Master, grown up and lovely. Dreams of her brown eyes.

It didn't last long. Before two years had passed, Figue was with another family, but he kept playing chess. It was one of the few things he could do without losing his concentration. Chess calmed him, stopped the internal static, the arguments, doubts, speculations, the endless verbal flood that inundated most of his waking life. When he sat down before a chess board, nothing else existed.

Serious study, however, was beyond him. He needed the challenge of competition. He would never master the game at its highest levels. Nonetheless, an excellent memory, a highly developed spatial intelligence and the savvy that comes from playing regularly and often made him a better than average amateur. On most days, he could spend an afternoon in the park playing blitz or ten minute games--a dollar a win, and come home with ten, fifteen bucks in the black.

The park regulars knew one another--knew each other's strengths, weaknesses. Sometimes he would spend a day challenging the best of them to keep his game sharp. If they played for money, he could only hope to break even. But it wasn't about the money. It was about the buzz.

He preyed on the lunchtime businessmen, but it was never a sure thing. There was always the down-at-the-heels IM, or the occasional Grand-Master to watch out for. One of these guys could come along,

and if you let your guard down, he'd lose a few to soften you up-- or let you get close enough to sucker you in and you'd go home broke.

This kid was new. Never seen him before. A slight accent, definitely Russian. Worrisome, but it had been a slow week. They were coming off a long spell of bad weather, rainy and cool; the business men were sitting in the grass with their shoes off taking in the sun, watching the pretty women. If he was good (the kid), that was okay: Figue needed the challenge to keep sharp. He hadn't lost for a while and he could feel his game going downhill.

Figue straddled the bench, picked up two pawns, black and white, switched them a couple times behind his back--stretched his arms straight out: a pawn in each fist. The kid slapped his right hand.

White. The advantage of the first move.

I haven't played for a long time, he said, setting up his pieces. I'm kind of rusty.

Sure you are, Figue said.

I mean, haven't' played anybody very good. By the way, my name is Max. Held out his hand.

Ari. Ari Figue. Your move.

The park was in shadow. The heat of the afternoon had lifted and Figue was beginning to feel chilled. He studied the board one last time. The game was lost. He'd won the first two, struggled for a draw in the third. The fourth game had been a long battle--down to a rook and pawn endgame. Max had found shelter for his king and with his rook holding Figue's king to his last two ranks, where it could neither help his own pawns nor aid in the attack-- free to march a pawn to the eighth rank for a queen and the win. Surrender.

The fifth and last game, fig had struggled from the opening. Forced to play defensively, he fought for a draw. It proved hopeless.

He reached out to shake hands.

You play pretty good, Max said. It's been a long time.

Yeah, that's what you told me. Figue, rolled his eyes.

We broke even, Max said. gathering up the pieces and dropping them in a leather bag. You didn't lose anything.

I didn't win anything.

You have some bad habits. But you're not bad. Play here often?

Depends.

There was a woman across the way, by the serpent and lion. Watching them. Seemed to be spying on Max, whose back was to her. Beginning to make Figue nervous. If Max looked up from the game, she would duck behind the lion. When Max stretched--looked as though he might be preparing to get up--she turned on her heels and vanished.

Figue looked into the trees, whistled through his teeth, swung his leg around the bench, hands to his head.

What's the matter? Max asked.

But Figue was already gone, staggering off in a slow motion corkscrew spiraling waltz down the walk and out of the park.

