

MICHELLE, MA BELLE

by Jeff Ingber

At the turn of the twentieth century, pneumatic systems that used air pressure to propel metal cylinders through pipe networks were all the rage in Gotham. The city built a marathon-length system to deliver letters and packages, replacing horse-drawn carriages and carriers on foot.

Why do I mention this? Because in the summer of '73, when I was approaching eighteen, I worked as a book sorter and retriever at the New York Public Library, which maintained the City's most extensive remaining pneumatic tube system. A visitor to the library's ornate football-field-sized main reading room would perform research in the card catalog and then write a desired book's details on a slip of paper. The librarian on duty – or more likely her assistant – would fold the call slip into a tube and send it flying at thirty feet per second down into the central steel and cast iron bookstacks. Those "Stacks," encased within seven enormous underground floors, held about three million books, magazines, pamphlets, and the like. Once the tome was located by a grunt like me, it was delivered to the reading room on a vertical conveyor system resembling a giant Ferris wheel.

The pneumatic tube system, the main reading room, and the Stacks all were impressive. Works of beauty in their own right. But they paled in comparison to the lithe, winsome librarian assistant Michelle Palermo.

Michelle, a classmate at Queens College, and I had grown up in the same building in Elmhurst, Queens and been friends since elementary school. We once were close, honest and playful with each other in a manner that siblings might be. But my teenage personality grew distinctly different from hers. When it comes to the opposite sex, I tend to hang out with the shyest and most serious of girls, while she appears to be the favorite of the star athlete and rock guitarist types, hiding her smarts and love of reading.

One late July morning, on the most mundane of days, a silver tube pops out of a pipe I'm manning on the fifth underground floor. I jump out of my desk seat to grab it, startling red-haired, chubby Ken Mercury, who sits across from me. Ken, who's in charge of the floor, had shown me the ropes when I arrived a month earlier.

Instead of indicating the title of a book and its author, scrawled across the back of the slip in Michelle's flowing handwriting is, "Oh what a beautiful day for lunch outside."

I cleverly, albeit unnecessarily, write underneath, "Is this Michelle ma belle?" and send the slip on its pneumatic journey.

Within a minute, a cylinder comes flying back. "Like hell!" overlays my penmanship. The challenge is on.

"What rhymes with 'hell'?" I ask the scholarly Ken, on whose lap lies the incomprehensible *Ulysses*.

"Cell. Dell. Dwell. Knell. Sell. Spell. Yell –"

“Thanks!”

On the back of a fresh slip, I compose “I like your smell,” followed by “You’re sweet like caramel” on a second slip. I fold both slips and shove them into the return cylinder.

“If you don’t stop, you will repel. And it will be farewell!” is her reply.

After running through various possible retorting rhymes, I meekly respond, “Oh well.” Within minutes, my Venus appears before me. She wears a yellow and white floral mini sundress tastefully exposing breasts that would comfort the most colicky of babies. Or men. Her arms and legs are golden. Her silken brunette hair flows in waves around her neck and shoulders. I want to paint her on a canvas to be displayed in the Met for eternity.

“Ken,” I implore, “can I take the noon lunch break?” Ken’s pock-marked face studies Michelle luridly. He wistfully nods his consent. As we leave, he is whistling the opening bars of “She’s a Lady.”

Michelle and I traipse to Harry’s Deli on Sixth Avenue, which is not so much an old-fashioned Jewish delicatessen anymore as a bodega plus seating. We purchase tuna heroes, identical except for the condiments, plus eight-ounce plastic cups of potato salad and Cokes. All the tables are taken.

“Needle Park?” I suggest.

“You sure?”

“It’s okay this time of day.” I sneak in a palm touch of her shoulder. “And you have a manly man to protect you.” She girly giggles.

After checking for dog poop, we plop onto a strip of well-trodden grass amid fellow loungers. The sun is near overbearing. Sitting across from Michelle, I’m distracted by her thin-strapped leather sandals, which reveal curvy arches and long, straight toes painted in fuchsia.

As she crunches contemplatively on a pickle, flashing pearly white teeth, I gaze at her. “You pickle my fancy, Mademoiselle Michelle, with two l’s.”

She ignores my worshipful compliment, glancing up and observing, “The sun is so briny today.”

I gather my courage and ask plaintively, “So, what does it take for a guy to have Mademoiselle Michelle as his belle?”

“Shouldn’t you first be asking whether Mademoiselle Michelle is already the belle of someone swell?”

My heart sinks. “Okay, can you please tell me if Michelle fell for someone swell over whom she can kvell?”

“Kvell?”

“Swell. With pride.”

“Nope.” She continues coyly, “Michelle is still looking for the guy who can quell...her desires.”

“And what would that take?”

Her puffy lips, painted in hot pink, suck in the final morsel of pickle. “It would start with him impressing her.”

“Like getting into Cornell? Winning a Nobel?”

“That certainly would do it,” she declares with a touch of condescension.

“Although the bar needn’t be that high.”

As we finish our sandwiches, Michelle eyes a stone chess and checker table within earshot. There, oddly matched opponents sit on folding chairs. On the right is a middle-aged man in a frayed jacket, slacks, and painter’s beret, who occasionally mutters in Russian. The other player is a tall, lean African American teen with tinted glasses and an oversized ‘fro. He wears a T-shirt emblazoned with a photo of a mean-looking snake. They’re absorbed in a furious game of speed chess, fiercely banging on the buttons of a double-faced chess clock every few seconds to the point where I’m guessing its remaining life is quite limited. Several men stand around kibitzing in Russian.

“Bobby Fischer,” I announce while slurping my drink, “says that chess is life.”

“Bobby who?”

“Fischer. Only the greatest chess player ever.”

She downs a spoonful of potato salad. Her face wrinkles at its slightly bitter taste.

“Chess is life? What does that even mean? Isn’t chess just a game?”

“I suppose. A lot of guys at the club would disagree. They’d rather play chess than eat or sleep. And when they sleep, they dream chess.”

“What club?”

“The Flushing Chess Club. I go there every Friday night.” I pause, then grasp the moment. “Want to join me once?”

She grimaces. “I’m picturing a bunch of nerdy, unshaven men in mismatched clothes with bad breath sitting hunched over boards muttering to themselves.” Her eyelashes flutter. “No offense.”

“Well I am offended. I don’t have bad breath.” An alarm bell rings within me. “Do I?”

She pats my shoulder. “Of course not, Jeff, You’re the Adonis of the chess world.”

“You could be Aphrodite.”

“Nah, my being there would upset the karma.”

“Maybe,” I sulk. “The older guys probably believe what Bobby Fischer does. That women can’t play chess.” I quickly add, “Not me, of course.”

“I’m not liking this Fischer guy.”

I point to the teenager. “That’s the Black Racer.”

“The what?”

“He’s Nigerian. ‘Black Racer’ is his nickname. It comes from a snake.”

“If I had a snake nickname,” Michelle opines, “it would be ‘Viper.’” She flicks her tongue several times, which sends my heart aflutter.”

“Me,” I hiss out confidently, “I’d be ‘Python.’ Although ‘Black Racer’ is pretty catchy. He said it’s thin, fierce, and can move really fast. Eats rodents, birds, lizards. Stuff like that. Swallows them whole.”

Michelle narrows her eyes as she appears to consider the virtues of whole swallows. “Africa must have a lot of scary snakes.”

“Actually, there are black racers in Georgia. That’s where he grew up.”

She shakes her head. “God, this is so confusing.”

After several more moves, the Russian strokes his chin, sighs deeply, and gently knocks over his king with his index finger. Racer jumps up and hugs his opponent.

“Great match, Boris!”

Boris wags his finger and exclaims admiringly, “You are a *goniff*. But not so terrible a player.” Boris slaps a bill on the chess board. As he and his entourage leave, Racer resets the board. Michelle turns to me. “I bet you can beat him.”

“Are you kidding? He beat a guy who I’m guessing is probably a master with a rating over 2000. I’m barely over 1800.”

“I have no idea what that means, Jeff. But I do know that the game is in your blood. And, anyway, what do you have to lose?”

“Five bucks. And I’m a real *patzer* under time pressure. My mind doesn’t work that way.”

Her eyebrows rise and become curved. “What way does it work?”

“I like to ponder.”

“Hmmm. I think I prefer men of action.”

As I ponder her cutting statement, Michele flaps her elbows to mimic chicken wings. “Bock, bock, bock!” I acquiesce with a roll of my eyes.

By the time we toss out our paper bags and salad containers and approach Racer with sodas in hand, he’s absorbed in a familiar book – Fischer’s *My Sixty Memorable Games*. I wave shyly as he glances up and then smiles as if I’m a long-lost friend.

“Hey man,” he blurts out. “I remember you. You got game.”

“Actually, we’ve never played. I’ve just stood around and watched.”

“Yea, sure. Well, let’s do it. Only a fin. You look like a rich guy.” He eyes Michelle lasciviously. “Besides, you gotta show your fine lady how good you are.”

I snort. “I can’t play a five-minute game. I need more time.”

Michelle chimes in to the tune of “The Wanderer.” “Yeah, he’s the ponderer. He’s the ponderer...”

Racer stares at Michelle with a mixture of admiration and befuddlement, then quickly scans the landscape for prey.

“Ten minutes?” he offers. I waver.

“Fifteen?” he snaps. “Can’t do more than that. Can’t have too many customers waiting.”

Michelle whispers to me, “C’mon, do it.”

“Nah,” I retort, “I don’t think so.”

She leans in, her breath hot on my ear. Her chameleon tongue darts into my lobe, flicking delicately. Electricity surges through me. “If you win,” she whispers, “I’ll make it worth your while.”

I cautiously take a seat while Michelle settles onto a nearby shaded ledge, which causes her dress to rise up alluringly. Racer grabs a white pawn and a black pawn, shuffles them behind his back, and presents his fists. Before I can decide, Michelle points to his left hand. Racer opens it to reveal the black pawn.

“Thanks,” I snidely remark. She shrugs. Ain’t her five bucks.

Racer sets the clock timers to fifteen minutes each. As I take a deep breath, he slams his king pawn two spaces ahead and bangs on his clock button, stopping his timer and starting mine. I finger my king bishop pawn and slide it two spaces ahead.

“In your honor,” I proudly inform Michelle as I pound on my button, “I will play the Sicilian Defense, the most *beeyouteefull* of counters.” She chuckles. Racer thumbs up his approval, knowing that my choice of an aggressive defense, with its unbalanced pawn formation, provides him better opportunity to launch a quick attack.

His king’s knight leaps ahead, looking to take control of the center. One move later, Racer thrusts his queen pawn two spaces. Two pawns are murdered, opening up the position. Determined to show no hesitation in front of my gal, my king’s knight

charges ahead. All standard Sicilian Defense stuff. Only twenty seconds gone on my clock.

After smiling with cheeks puffed up, Racer unleashes his other knight. He peeks at Michelle and winks. I experience a momentary mental fog. What did she mean by, “I’ll make it worth your while”? I force myself to contemplate the checkered wilderness before me and then counter, flicking my queen’s rook’s pawn ahead one space.

“The Najdorf Variation,” I explain pedantically to Michelle. “Named after a great Argentinian grandmaster.”

“The ‘j’ is pronounced like an ‘i,’ Racer lectures without looking up.

Not to be outshone, I point to Racer’s book. “Fischer favors the Najdorf,” I counter lecture, this time pronouncing the name correctly, with emphasis on the ‘i’.

Chin in hand, Racer pulls out his queen’s bishop to attack my knight. I fly my other knight over a pawn and out into the middle board. He marches his queen ahead one space, positioning it to attack.

“Bringing out the heavy weapons early,” I observe, and then nonchalantly push my king pawn up. But only one space.

I decide to again enlighten Michelle, both to impress her and unnerve Racer. “This is the Scheveningen Variation,” I declare, although I’ve probably mispronounced this name also. “It sets up a solid protective pawn barrier.”

“You wish,” Racer snarls. We both advance our king’s bishops. I glance at the clock. Still thirteen precious minutes left.

Racer slides his queen's rook behind his queen, gathering his forces, then leans back in his chair, appearing unperturbed. I launch my queen diagonally to the queen side of the center. This move is chancy, which I need to be to have a chance. As the scholarly Ken Mercury once quoted to me from a book on executive management, "There's risk in not taking risk."

Racer makes a tsking noise and wags his finger at me. He calmly pulls back a bishop to avoid capture. I snag his knight with mine. His queen comes out to capture my knight, which he uses to bang his clock button. I castle, whisking my king out of harm's way behind a line of pawns. He castles.

"Safe, but boring," I taunt, suddenly feeling my oats. I move up my queen's bishop one space.

"Safe, but boring," he counters. We appear to be settling in for the long haul, to the extent that's possible in a speed match.

He slides his king, whose cross glistens in the sunlight, to the back corner. Ostensibly, this is a safe move that further shields his most precious piece. However, something in the back of my mind whispers that I might be able to turn this into a trap for him.

After several more moves, Racer has positioned his queen and his king's rook so they're both bearing down on my king. After pushing out his lips as if sucking on a lemon, he sacrifices a rook for a bishop and slams his king's bishop out to attack my queen, testing both my tactics and my nerves.

In a speed match, the most important element is positional control, and Racer's taken command of the center of the board. His sly grin, not at me but at Michelle, is that of a conqueror bearing the message – why are you with this knucklehead instead of me?

I feel sweat trickling down my back. And a thumping in my chest. I will lose five bucks. I will lose Michelle. I am a loser.

I drain my Coke with an unnecessarily loud slurp as I fidget in my seat. Precious minutes tick by. Racer glares at me tauntingly. I lean closer to the board, running through the consequences of every single move I can make. First the reasonable ones and then the risky ones. Suddenly, the epiphany strikes.

I hold my breath. Rather than moving my queen out of harm's way, I use my sweaty fingers to send the pawn directly in front of my king ahead two spaces. It's the type of move I've been advised never to attempt during the middle game, on the theory that the commander-in-chief needs all the protection it can obtain.

Racer snorts with glee, used to opponents making boo-boos caused by tension. An aspect of human nature he relies on for his livelihood. He raises his hand, about to make a savage move, then drops it.

As he studies the board further, eyes downcast, a concerned expression consumes his face. Racer returns to an upright position, wiping his brow with his shirt sleeve. He's realized that he can't safely recapture my pawn, which is attacking both his queen and his bishop. I have halted his attack and shifted the positional advantage.

I now understand Racer's vulnerability. He isn't a ponderer. He needs to rely on time pressure because he doesn't have the ability, or the patience, to fully assess complex positions. Or, it further occurs to me, the immense intricacies of a woman.

After running through various unappealing responses, Racer moves his queen out of harm's way and onto a direct vertical line with my king, which prevents me from taking his bishop. I immediately play a Racer move, pushing my king's rook pawn up to attack his queen while leaving my king rather defenseless. We engage in a flurry of swift piece captures that includes our queens. His bishop skewers a pawn and puts my king in check. I calmly move my monarch up to join the fray. Racer scowls, realizing that my king is active while his leader is crammed into a corner.

After more exchanges, we are back to being equivalent in pieces, but now mine are far more active and I have a dominating position on the queen side. My smile to Michelle is as broad as my face. She blows me a kiss using her delicate palm and fluttering fingers.

Racer refuses to lift his focus from the board. No matter. Several moves later, it's clear his position is hopeless. After glancing at my clock, which shows a touch over five minutes left, he takes an action that, for him, is akin to castration. With a heavy hand, Racer tips over his king.

Instead of a hand shake, he wags his finger at me. "You da man! Never saw that pawn move coming."

"Thanks."

Racer starts to re-set the board. "Double or nothing?" he urges.

“Sorry, gotta get back to work.”

Michelle scampers down from the ledge and hugs me. She reaches for my hand and laces her fingers into mine. I’m nearly breathless. As we start to walk away, I remember the five bucks I’m owed and turn back to see Racer making eye contact with a possible quarry. Michelle reads my mind.

“Let him keep his money. He needs it more than you do.” She glimpses the face of her wind-up, gold-banded Timex. “I’ve got some time. Let’s go to your floor.”

Back on Stack Five, Ken has the *Times* crossword laid out on the desk in front of him. Pencil in hand, he’s perturbed. “What’s a five letter word for ‘garlicky sauce’?” he grumbles out loud. “Begins with ‘a’.”

“Aioli,” Michelle immediately responds. Ken checks the puzzle, scribbles the answer, and then stares at her as if she were James Joyce.

“Ken, go take your lunch,” I offer.

Ken trudges off, pencil and newspaper in hand. Michelle leads me down a hall to a corner office where extra slips, cylinders, and other supplies are kept. “My first post was on this floor,” she explains. “I used to escape to this room to do my nails.”

We enter. She shuts the door. Daylight from a window streaked with grime ekes in. Michelle closes the distance between us. I stand before her with my heart pulsing like a trapped bird’s wings. Ready to bend to her every whim. Her breath in my face, she whispers, “Wanna play truth or dare?”

“Dare I say no?”

“Not if you're wise. So, the question is, what's your greatest fantasy? Something you wish for that you believe will never happen?”

“Hmmm. What's the dare?”

“You have to dance for a minute.”

“I'll answer the question. Me and you alone, living in a beach hut on a desert island. Food for a year, which we finish just as we're finally rescued. No other possessions except the clothes on our back. And a chess set, of course.”

She considers my response and then gently nods. “Okay, but you need to do the dare also. If I'm gonna be stuck on a desert island with you without anything to entertain us except a stupid chess set, I need to know that you can dance without music.”

“Why?”

“Because I may be soooooo happy one day that I'm moved to do so myself.”

“How do I dance without music?”

“Channel your inner voice.”

I am beginning to annoy her. Not smart. “Just for a minute?”

“Yep.” She taps her watch. “I'll time you.”

“Can I sing?”

“Even better.”

Desperate seconds tick away. An impatient Michelle tilts her head and puckers her lips. I rack my brain. What's a song that I can sing for a minute? One that will

compel me to boogie? Then inspiration hits me, like a brilliant chess move. Once again, my pal Ken Mercury has saved the day. I imagine myself as a combination of Tom Jones and Elvis. Head bobbing, shoulders swaying, and hips churning, I begin hesitantly, transmitting the beat from head to legs.

“Well she’s all you’d ever want. She’s the kind they’d like to flaunt and take to dinner.”

Michelle grins her approval. I close my eyes.

“Well she always knows her place. She’s got style, she’s got grace, she’s a winner. She’s a lady, whoa whoa whoa, she’s a lady. Talkin’ about that little lady. And the lady is mine.”

I pop open my eyes to discover Michelle beaming at me and rocking as well.

Not knowing the other words to the song, I repeat the last few lines while spontaneously busting out more moves that likely make me appear as if I'm being electrocuted. Having lost my self-consciousness, I'm actually a touch disappointed when Michelle claps and nods her head vigorously. “Bravo, Jeff. Bravo!”

I bow and then announce, “My turn!” This startles her. But it also pleases.

“Okay, game on.”

My smirk is wicked. “What's the most inappropriate thing you've ever done at work?”

She counter-smirks. “What's the dare?”

“In this case,” I retort, “the dare and the truth are the same.”

Michelle approaches. In an instant, there's no longer distance between us.
Whoa, whoa, whoa, she's a lady. One with style and grace. A winner. And she's mine!