"Well what do you want to do then?"
"I said that I am bored, I didn’t say I had a solution to the problem."
"We could play chess," I said.
"We could," he said, the cigarette in his mouth dancing up and down on his lips. "But I think – I think – that I’d rather rub glass into my eyes."
"Why?"
"We’ve been over this. Chess was invented by a society for which I have no time. It reinforces a hierarchical structure in which the ordinary pawn – worthless, thoughtless, hopeless – sacrifices his life in defence of a king upon whose existence, he is led to believe, his own being depends. The only carrot held before his eyes is the distant and usually futile hope that, by throwing himself headlong into this monarchical slaughter, he may one day become something worthwhile, a queen. His only hope for an end to his oppression is to become an oppressor."
"I don’t think that’s a real reason…"
"Added to this," he continued, talking louder and puffing dragon-smoke, "I find chess’s openings formulaic, its middle game restrictive, and its endgame ultimately a war of attrition. Its rules system, based as it is on cold logic, was conceived by medievals as a way to suppress the more human instincts and passions."
"You don’t like it because you lose," I said, as I furiously mashed at the buttons on the control pad in my hand. On the screen in front of us, an enormous breasted woman with a spear continued to do great violence to a muscle-bound, but apparently helpless, ninja.
"Ah, my friend, you have it all wrong. You like it because you win. It is a symptom of the poverty of your character that you are attracted to the game not because of its form, but because it provides a medium through which you may satisfy the baser requirements of an ego made weak by dreams long unfulfilled. I do you a great service in protecting you from yourself and enlivening the torpor of your moral lassitude."

As he said this, the buxom virtual combatant in front of us scored a mortal blow and drove her spear through the ninja’s chest. Using the spear as a lever and his pelvis as a fulcrum, she preceded to crack the ninja in half with a sound like a walnut shell splitting. He laughed and bared his brown teeth, running his hand through the thin strips of his hair.
"Deep rest and sweet, most like indeed to death’s own quietness," he said, rubbing his glasses with a thick finger. I did not ask what this meant. His victories were often punctuated by the recitations from the corpus of his classical education.
"What do you want to do then?" I said.
"Have you grown so weary of defeat?"
"I swear to you, I cannot play that game once more. Not again. What time is it?"
"You can consult the clock as well as I and know full well I possess no working timepiece of my own.” This much was true. The watch he wore around his wrist had stopped two weeks ago and, once taken apart, could not be induced to work again, or indeed to properly reassemble. Its hands now hung limp, moving as gravity commanded them. He said he preferred it that way. It made him master of his own time.
As he rolled another cigarette I stood and turned from the television. From my new position I could see the kitchen clock. 4:15pm. The light would be failing soon.

“Well we need to eat. I’m so hungry.”

“What you need are calories, and those are amply provided by liquid as well as solid sustenance,” he said, and licked his cigarette closed. “What have we?”

I moved through into the kitchen as I heard him grind the wheel of his lighter and then suck deeply, savouring with a little smack of his lips. The air was heavy with his exertions across the day, and a sheet of smoke hovered above him at about head height, like the house’s own greenhouse problem.

“There’s peanut butter,” I said, pleased to find half a tub of the stuff stood on the windowsill. I had thought we finished that last night. “That means we don’t have to cook.”

“It would mean that, if we had any bread,” he mused, and the television gave a little trill as he resumed playing on the console, now alone. “And I believe my question was to do with our liquid supplies.”

“There’s half a bottle of scotch.”

“And?”

“That’s it.”

“There’s wine in there, don’t say there’s not!” he said, rising from his chair and pointing at me with two fingers, between which his cigarette smouldered accusingly.

“We drank it,” I said.

“I’ll be damned if we did,” he pushed past me, blue smoke marking his progress through space. For several moments he pushed through the detritus of the kitchen until a pan, balanced on a pile of old newspapers, fell from its perch and crashed upon the floor with a sound like gong. He doubled over and drove his fingers into his temples, yelling at the top of his voice over the reverberating sound. I went back and sat down again in front of the TV.

“We’ll have to go out then,” he said, when he had calmed a little. He had the scotch in his hand as he pulled on his overcoat.

“Where?”

“To the shops of course. We need bread, don’t we?”

“Shall we drive?”

“Absolutely. I take it you’ve finally started pissing petrol, then?”

I hauled myself to my feet.

We followed the lane until it found the foot of Helick’s Rise, and then clambered through the bushes and over a sagging fence of barbed wire. It had begun to rain, in a half-hearted sort of way, and the carpet of rotting leaves, beneath the columns of the naked trees, rattled with the sound of the falling water. We cut across the fallow fields at the bottom of the valley, and skirted one newly turned for sowing as the thick red earth, made into heavy soup by the rain, heaved and sucked at our boots. Beyond the hills, the sky was flushed with green and red as everything else turned to deepening blue. Little orange points of light marked out the farmhouse, beyond the trees, and I thought of a warm fire, and a roast dinner with gravy, as I crammed my hands deep into my overcoat pockets. We passed the whiskey back and forth between us as we walked, and it mocked my throat with its painful imitation of warmth.

After about a mile and a half, our route led us up the side of an embankment, on the other side of which lay the train tracks and then, beyond them, the hard white light of the petrol station car park and the 24/7. There, there would inevitably be a scene. He had none of the ordinary human inclination to lower his voice or to speak more civilly in public spaces. We had counted our coins at the cottage and, though nothing was said, it was obvious that he would not want the bread. We would argue and he would rant until the shop owner told us to buy something or get out. If I was lucky, I would have him then, and I would get some food.
Either way, given the state of our finances, it would be the super strength lagers. My stomach balked at the thought. I just hoped he wouldn’t put any cans in his pocket. I didn’t like it when he did that. We had already lost the pub in the village last week, and we could not afford to be barred from the 24/7. There was not another shop that sold alcohol for miles.

At the top of the embankment we waited as a train made its way slowly through the little man-made defile in the land. The rails beneath it screeched plaintively and the rain sprang momentarily to life in the beam of its headlights, like sparks above a fire. I followed the train with my eyes as it passed beneath us.

“What was that?!” I said sharply.

“What was what?” he asked. His words were noticeably slurred already.

“Down by the track. I thought I saw something.” It had been only a moment, made real for an instant as the light passed over it. But the shape of a human body is a distinct one.

“I’m sure there are all manner of somethings down by the track,” he said. But he followed me as I scrambled my way down the bank and then, having achieved the ground, bore left, scrunching in the coarse gravel by the rails. My eyes roved about between the dark metal of the track and the brambles at the edge of the slope, and after thirty seconds or so I began to wonder if I had imagined it, when suddenly a shape appeared in the gloom before us, sprawled upon the floor. I drew a sharp breath and took his arm.

“There!” I whispered.

“An odd place to take one’s ease, I’ll grant,” he said at full volume. “Doubtless the spot was chosen for its seclusion. Let’s not ruin this ocean of tranquillity.” He turned as if to go but I held him fast.

“We can’t leave,” I said. “He could be hurt. Or she.”


“But where unbruised youth with unstuff’d brain Doth couch his limbs, there golden sleep doth reign,” he said, and lit a cigarette.

Unsure what else to do, I moved closer. The light was failing fast, but I was now no more than a few feet from the figure. I could see now it was a man, heavy set and in a dull suit. But he lay on his side facing away from me. He was very still. As I moved towards him, every horror film I had ever seen played itself out in my head. My skin prickled and I longed to turn back and run as fast as my legs would carry me, back up the slope towards light and the safety of walls.

“Can you hear me?” I said, trying not to let fear tell in my voice. Still no response.

I reached out my hand and quickly jabbed him in the back, retracting my arm with lightning swiftness. Still nothing.

Steeling myself, I took hold of his shoulder, and with a slow and purposeful movement, I rolled him over onto his back.

“Oh Jesus!” I cried, and my head swam away from my neck as the floor came up to find me. The whiskey in my throat burned with bile and I coughed heavily, fighting to hold down vomit.

The face was thick and swollen with death, its skin blotched and greying, its eyes sightless and filmy between puffed lids. There was too, I now realised, a heavy smell about it, like the caustic reek of a kitchen bin in need of changing. I had never seen a dead body before, and nothing could have prepared me for the sheer... lifelessness of it.

“Well look at that,” was all he said, leaning in towards the body and drawing heavily on his cigarette.

“What should we do?” I said, fighting to regain my composure. He simply stood above the body, smoking and looking into the blank eyes. “I said, what should we do?”
“What indeed?” he mumbled, transfixed. Then he said, “Find me a stick. I think I’d like to poke it with a stick.”
“What!?”
“To poke it with a stick.”
“You can’t.”
“I most certainly can.” He turned and rummaged about in the bushes for a moment, whilst I stood, rooted to the spot, still bubbling with whiskey and stomach acid. Then he found a suitable tool and returned. I watched in horror as he prodded the morbid flesh, stiff and unyielding, with the long green stick. First he prodded at the cheeks, and then drove the stick into the nose, pushing it in deep until it struck an impasse. I gagged.

“Then through the words wherein his spirit dwells/ The world may see his young impetuous face/ Unmarred by Time, with undiminished grace,” he muttered to himself.

“We need to call the police. We should go to the 24/7 and call the police.”

“And tell them what? That we, two penniless drunks with no alibi have stumbled upon a murdered man in the middle of nowhere?”

“Who said he was murdered?” I gasped, breathing the words out and fighting a rising sense of panic. “The train track… might have been an accident… might have family…”

He looked at me with a sharp gaze, and his eyes were white behind the grubby glass. There was an intensity in his face that was rarely evident, and I did not like it one bit. More than ever, I wanted to run, but it was all my legs could do to keep me standing. There was a rushing sound in my ears. I tried to remember when I had last eaten.

“You will stop that talk this instant, do you hear?” he said, pointing at me with his cigarette as he had done back at the cottage. “Because if you call the police, how exactly will you explain to them that 

Then, to my utter dismay, he pulled the stick from out of the nose of the corpse and set it against the side of its left eye. Hard and deliberate, he leaned his weight against it, forcing it down into the flesh, pressing against the dark, dead skin until suddenly, with a hideous sucking sound and the sharp crack of breaking wood, the stick sunk down into the socket and the eye, like some repulsive jack-in-the-box, leapt out and onto the dead cheek.

I lost all control at this, and as the rushing in my ears became a torrent, I felt to the ground and heaved up a thin and painfully sharp stew from within my stomach. I felt as if I were being ripped in two. Then, suddenly, his hand closed about my arm, fingers digging into my flesh, and he lifted me to my feet with a strength I did not know he possessed, marching me back the way we had come. His hand ever about my arm, he dragged me to the 24/7, where we bought lager, then he pushed me home. We did not speak once. He smoked constantly.

At home he set to the lagers with determination, sitting in his armchair and staring at his own reflection in the blackened glass of the back door. I drank half of one can, but could face no more, and quietly scooped peanut butter from the jar with a butter knife, letting sugar and salt slowly return some sort of strength to my body. For nearly two hours he sat in a focussed and intent silence, just watching himself, and burying the lagers in long swallows. I watched him too, and more than I have ever known, I wanted to be somewhere else.

When I stood, he turned his eye to me with that same intensity he had shown at the track. His gaze rooted me to the spot, and when I spoke my voice sounded far away.

“I think I’m going to go to bed,” I said. It was barely 8:30.

“Will you be taking that can?” was all he said. I shook my head and passed him the remnants.

Sleep would not come, and I lay in the dark with my eyes open, reliving again and again the moment when the eye had come loose. The luminous hands of my bedside clock read twelve past midnight when I finally heard his feet on the stairs. He took a long and noisy
piss, then the bathroom light clicked off and the gap underneath my bedroom door again became invisible. I heard his bedroom door close.

It was several minutes before I could work up the resolve to rise from my bed, but eventually I padded across the corridor and knocked softly upon his door. It took several such knocks to elicit a response.

“What is it?” he said.
“Can I come in?” I asked.
“You may not.”

I paused a moment, then went on.
“We have to tell someone about him,” I said.

Several seconds of silence passed before, to my surprise, he said, “Alright. But not tonight. I am too drunk to think. Sleep now, and we can discuss it in the morning.”

 Unsure, but perhaps a little settled, I made my way back to bed and finally found sleep.

At first I knew merely that something was amiss in the room. I rose slowly from sleep, my mouth thick and fat and my eyes dry. I was not quite sure whether I had my eyes open or closed until gradually, in the dark, the vague shapes of my room began to coalesce. But there was something out of place. And then I realised that he was stood at the foot of my bed.

I drew a sharp breath and it seemed to me as if the sound of my heart’s beating would shake the pictures from the walls. In the dark, I could not see if he were looking at me, or even if he had his eyes open. But I could hear him breathing softly. I stared at his dark silhouette for I do not know how long. No force of my own will could have moved me from that spot, or brought a voice into my mouth. It was he, therefore, who finally broke the spell.

“You mustn’t tell the police,” he said quietly.

“I…”

“You mustn’t.”

“I…”

“You want to do the right thing, and that’s laudable, but you must think objectively about this. Someone will find him, sooner or later, a proper person who can call the police on their mobile phone and say what they’ve seen. So it will all be ok. But we mustn’t get tangled up in it. We’re not well liked around here, remember. Think about what happened in the pub last week. People will remember that. We don’t want to give anyone stones to throw at us.”

“I…”

“You go to sleep now, and put what you saw from your mind. We should never speak of it again. It’s dangerous to get tangled up in such things. Forget you ever saw it. I don’t want to hear a word about it in the morning.”

I felt as much as I saw him leave the room. The door creaked and then I was alone again. I heard the stairs creak underneath him and then there was the sound of crockery down in the kitchen. A faint shift in the quality of the light behind my darkened curtain told me that he must now be in the lounge, spilling light out onto our little garden. I heard the sound of voices. The radio.

Time lost any meaning as I drifted in and out of a disturbed and erratic sleep that refused to truly settle on me. The sound of the distant radio tickled my uneasy dreams, and more than once I woke, slick with sweat, thinking of the eye. Occasionally I heard crockery tinkle in the kitchen below. Once I woke to feet on the stairs, and I shrank beneath my duvet, humiliated at the relief I felt when he simply went into the bathroom to urinate, then shuffled downstairs again. The radio continued its soft patter.

Only as the grey light of dawn began to frame my window did I find true sleep, when I finally grew too tired to continue stretching my ears down towards the ground floor, and endlessly replaying the same twenty seconds of my life over and over again in my mind. But
before that sleep found me I was sure that, though the radio never gave up its litany, I heard the front door click open and shut. Once. And then a second time, perhaps an hour later.

In the late morning, when I finally came downstairs, I found him playing the console, his eyes red rimmed, a cigarette hanging from his lips. The air was soup and he was drinking coffee as thick and dark as pitch. I asked him if he’d slept.

“You know full well that our lifestyle makes sleep something of an impossibility for me, most nights,” he said. “I have kept my lonely vigil with my caffeine and my nicotine. Perhaps I will sleep tonight. Is there anything to eat?”

“You know there isn’t.”

“There was peanut butter, I recall…”

“I ate that last night.”

“You are a selfish creature.”

While we had been talking I stood in the kitchen counting coins that I had gathered from a half a dozen trouser pockets. A little under two pounds. I could buy a half loaf and some butter. Maybe find the toaster.

“I’m going to the 24/7,” I said, trying to sound breezy.

He did not turn in his chair, but for the moment the constant, clicking refrain of his fingers on the buttons ceased. With every fibre of myself, I prayed he would not ask to come with me.

“Go via the road,” he said.

“Ok.”

I kept to the road and stayed with it up Helick’s Rise, staying on the cracked tarmac at the bend where the short-cut over the fields began. I walked fast and hard, trying to stamp some warmth into my frozen feet with every pace. I counted out the strides, and promised myself I would not look over my shoulder more than once every fifty paces. I made myself a liar several times.

By road the walk was three miles at least, and I was hot beneath my jacket when I came to the humped brick road bridge that crossed the train tracks, fifty feet or more below. Almost mid-stride, I angled my course towards the edge of the bridge and, with one final look back the way I had come, I clambered over the side. The bank below had a dangerously sharp camber, and was heavy with nettles and brambles. It took me nearly twenty minutes before I finally found myself on the flat again, standing on the gravel by the track. Turning right, I made my way towards where we had crossed the line the night before, and where we had found it.

I knew what I would find long before it came in view, but I only finally accepted it when I saw the broken stick on the ground at my feet, and knew for a fact that I stood now in the same spot as I had last night. I looked all about. No blood, no sign of a wild animal or a bird having been involved. No “caution – police” signs or evidence that another human being had been here since we had. And most important of all, no body to be seen anymore.

When I got back, he greeted me softly, his eyes still intent on the television.

“Did you go via the road?”

“Yes,” I said, the single syllable thick in my throat.

“Good,” he replied. He lit another cigarette.
Adrastos Omissi grew up in Jersey in the Channel Islands. He recently completed his PhD in Roman History at St John's College, Oxford, and now works for a social enterprise consultancy. In his spare time he writes stories, short and long, some of which see the light of day (most recently in BBC Radio 4’s programme ‘Opening Lines’). He also writes non fiction, much of which appears in his blog (www.the-diluvium.com). In August 2013 he became a father to a little boy who now seems intent on breaking the record for world’s fattest baby.