

Chapter 11_War Surplus ...

In the chapter titled "WAR SURPLUS," the narrator reflects on the deaths of his parents, who passed away in their sixties, possibly from broken hearts. They did not disinherit him; instead, they left behind a considerable estate valued at forty-eight thousand dollars in 1945, which has since quadrupled, providing him with an annual income of seven thousand dollars. Despite his inheritance, the narrator lived frugally in Greenwich Village, surviving on about four dollars a day and using war surplus items for furniture and everyday life.

His belongings were remnants of the war, including a narrow bed, olive-drab blankets, and a portable phonograph. Even his library primarily consisted of books from recreation kits meant for soldiers. An interesting acquisition from a war-surplus first-aid kit was morphine, which tempted him briefly; however, he realized he was already under the influence of a different kind of narcotic: his undying love for Helga. This love consumed him, leading him to worship death since her presumed demise, cherishing rituals and toasts in her memory.

Then, one day in 1958, feeling inspired, he purchased a war-surplus wood-carving set. This purchase sparked enthusiasm, prompting him to create a chess set from a broom handle after hours of relentless carving. Seeking to share his creation, he unexpectedly knocked on his neighbor's door, which turned out to be George Kraft, a complex figure with other identities including Colonel Iona Potapov, a Russian agent.

Kraft's apartment revealed his true passion for painting, adorned with his artworks that garnered high acclaim. The initial conversation uncovered Kraft's fabricated backstory, presenting himself as a widower turned artist. The narrator's chess set becomes a bridge to forming a connection with Kraft, as they played chess regularly and developed a profound bond. Within their companionship, they tragically navigated the gray spaces of camaraderie and life, finding shared joy in simple things like food and wine, despite Kraft's battle with alcoholism and the underlying tensions of his espionage activities. As their friendship deepened, both men found solace in one another, oblivious to the impending complexities their connection would bring.