



HEARTSTOP

by **GEORGE ALEC EFFINGER**

ART: **WALT SIMONSON**

IN the nearby towns, places like Indian Bog and Leeper, they still talk about "the Gremmage murders". In the town of Gremmage itself, though, they don't talk about them at all. Those murders happened a long time ago and there are always new people and new things happening in Gremmage.

This is despite the fact that Gremmage has to be one of the most neglectable places in all of Pennsylvania, if not the country. There isn't even a good sized shopping center to drive around in. When a man wants to teach his daughter how to park her Mustang, he has to take her five, ten miles away just to find the right kind of yellow lines. And that's today. It was even worse fifteen years ago.

Now there's an interstate highway that skirts the town, there's an exit, but it's diabolically placed, about thirty yards on the far side of an overpass, so you can't see it coming. Between the overpass and the exit there is a small green sign that says *Gremmage* with an arrow. Of course, at interstate speeds, you have maybe a squint and a half from the time you leave the shade of the overpass until you're to the sign. If you read the thing before you finish the two syllables and pointer you've passed the exit. And there's a bush growing up in front of the green sign, and it doesn't look like the highway people are going to do anything about trimming it. So either you know where you're going and look for the exit, or you get off completely by accident

and stupidity. In either case, you deserve what you get.

But, again, that's today. Fifteen years ago, a traveler didn't even have that obscure green sign. A weary salesman could only stop along the narrow blacktop road and try to get information from a farmer. "Yeah," the farmer would say, "there's a town a ways from here, maybe seven or eight miles. I can never remember the name of it, though. You just go on here 'til you come to it." The farmer would pause, relishing the bewildered, unhappy look on the salesman's face. "You'll recognize the town," the farmer would say slowly. "There's a cannon on the square. These here farms don't have no cannons, nohow." The farmer wouldn't grin until the salesman had



climbed back into his dusty car and driven off toward Gremmage

At least the information was accurate. Fifteen years ago, Gremmage was about seven or eight miles from a lot of farms. And the salesman wouldn't have any trouble at all, once he located the town. Fifteen years ago, before the interstate, there weren't any motels, no Holidays Inn, no Qualities Court, no Howards Johnson. So the poor salesman would be little cheered by the sight of the meager row of shops along Ridge Street. Particularly if it was after six o'clock (three o'clock on Saturdays), then there wouldn't be a single store open where he could even find out about hotel rooms. Except the diner, of course Mrs Perkins diner was pretty dependable. So that's where the salesman ended up, out of desperation.

There was a slight haze of burnt grease in the diner, but otherwise it seemed like a pleasant enough place. Mrs Perkins didn't have the time to bother much with decorations. The result was an establishment that was plain without being sterile. The atmosphere was purely hick town (no, not rural. Really and truly hick). The salesman, after too many hours on the road found it nearly refreshing. Almost.

"Can I take your order, sir?" asked the waitress. The salesman looked up tiredly. The girl was young, high school age, probably working part-time in the diner to earn money for movie magazines.

"Can I see a menu?" asked the salesman. The girl nodded and reached past the salesman to pull the menu from its place behind the napkin container. There was nothing listed on it that could set Mrs Perkins' diner apart from any of several thousand like it anywhere in America. That was one of its charms. It was almost a reflex action for the salesman to order the baked meat loaf, mashed potatoes, green beans, and coffee. He always studied the menu, and he always ordered the same thing. His wife, back home in Stroudsburg, always ordered eggplant Parmesan. His son always ordered cheeseburgers. But there was some kind of exotic, wistful hope that someday someone would come up with something tremendously exciting on his menu. The salesman always wondered, if that were to happen, whether or not he'd order it.

SOME MINUTES later, the waitress brought the meat loaf dinner. The salesman muttered a thank you. The waitress did not go away. She stood by his booth, the salesman wondered what he had done wrong. "You're new in town, aren't

you?" she asked.

He just looked at her. He didn't say anything.

"The reason I say that, I know just about everybody in Gremmage," she said. "It's not that big of a town."

"No," said the salesman, chewing his food slowly, "no, it's not."

"Are you from New York?" she asked.

"Stroudsburg."

"Oh." She fidgeted nervously. The salesman was sure that she was going to ask him for something. She was pretty enough, he guessed, in a way that would be immature whatever her age. Her hair was a dull carrot color, tied into two short braids. Her face was so lacking in memorable features as to be indescribable. She spoke in a low, husky voice which the salesman found vaguely unpleasant. "Do you have business here in Gremmage?" she asked.

"No, none at all. I was just seeing the sights." The girl stared for a moment, then laughed. The salesman smiled. "I was wondering, though," he said, "if there was a hotel around here. I don't feel much like driving any more tonight."

"No," said the waitress. "No hotels. But if you go over to Aunt Rozji's, she'll probably have a guest room vacant. She usually does."

"Is she your aunt?"

The waitress shook her head. "We all call her that. She's old enough to be anybody's aunt."

"All right," said the salesman, "I'll try that. Can you give me directions? Maybe I can drop you somewhere."

"No, that's okay," said the girl.

"Thank you, I don't get off here for a while yet. But if you want to wait a few minutes, Old Man Durfee comes in every night about now. He could take you over there. Aunt Rozji doesn't like to rent her rooms to just anyone, you see. But if Old Man Durfee took you over there, and if you told her that I sent you, why, I guess it would be all right."

"Old Man Durfee, huh?"

"Yes," said the waitress. "Why don't you have a piece of pie while you're waiting?"

"A piece of pie, then," said the salesman, sighing. "While I'm waiting for Old Man Durfee. Who'll take me to Aunt Rozji. This is a very lolsy town you have here."

The waitress smiled. "Thank you. It's not very big, though."

"No," he muttered, "it's not very big." She went back behind the counter and brought him a piece of apple pie and some more coffee.

"Do you want your check now, Mr. uh, Mr—"

"Newby," said the salesman. "My name's Newby."

"Well," said the waitress, "my

name's Lauren. Do you want anything else?"

"Like Bacall, right?" asked Newby.

"Sort of," she said. "Only my last name's Kromberger." She put the check down by his plate and went away again, this time disappearing into the kitchen. Newby ate his dessert slowly, wondering if he could leave the diner and drive off without looking like a fool. He had gone through a complex set of arrangements with the girl, he would be too embarrassed now to tell her just to forget the whole thing. He sneered at his own idiocy. He would never see Lauren Kromberger again. What possible difference could it make, what she thought of him? He ought to pay his check and leave without a word. But, truthfully, he didn't feel like driving any more. He might as well wait for this Old Man Durfee. Anyway Newby was getting curious about him.

The salesman had finished his pie and just taking the last lukewarm gulp of coffee when the door swung open. An incredibly broken down man came into the diner. Newby had no doubt this was Old Man Durfee, he who would be Newby's guide through the shaded, crickety roads of Gremmage to the mysterious rooming house of Aunt Rozji. If the old man were any indication, Newby thought, maybe the weary traveler would be better advised to toss a brick through a plate glass window and accept a night's lodging from the county.

Old Man Durfee was probably not all that old. To Newby, he seemed to be in his early fifties. His hair was long, hanging in greasy curls behind his ears and over his collar. The man's face was lined deeply, and the growth of stubble and the cracked, swollen lips gave him an appearance which was at the same time both repellent and pitiable. His eyes were nearly closed by the heavy pouches which limited them, and he gazed at Newby briefly through red, watery slits. He wore a faded plaid shirt and a pair of ancient corduroy trousers which were much too short for him. He had no socks, and his sharp, filthy ankles hung between the torn cuffs of the pants and his decaying slippers. He carried a dirty blue towel. He looked at Newby again and mumbled something, then he took a seat at the counter. After a few seconds he stood and shuffled slowly to one of the booths. Newby watched him without emotion. Old Man Durfee sat in the booth, then rose one more time and moved around to the opposite seat.

"You know," said Newby, "if you sit in that other booth behind you, and I go to the counter, and you come

here, we'll have mate in three moves.

"I couldn't find the right place," said Old Man Durfee.

"A lot of us have that trouble," said Newby.

"I have a regular place. I come in every night, and sit in the same place. Sometimes I forget which it is, though."

"Well, good night," said Newby, getting up to go. Just then, Lauren the waitress returned.

"Do you play chess?" she asked. "I heard you speaking just now."

"Yeah," said Newby. "I carry a little magnetic board with me when I travel. There's nothing else to do." For some reason, Lauren giggled. Newby shrugged and headed for the door. "I'd like to play," said Old Man Durfee. Newby stopped suddenly, halfway to the door. The drunk's voice had been loud, clear, and authoritative. "I used to be pretty good."

Forgotton Rook. A real masterpiece.

"Were you there?" asked Newby. Old Man Durfee stared for a moment, his red eyes narrowing even more. He coughed, and the wet, thick sound disgusted Newby. "No," said the drunk. "I read about it. I just read about it, that's all."

"What difference does it make?" asked Lauren.

"I just want to know what I'm up against," said Newby. "I've heard about chess hustlers before, you know. I know how you small town types are always gunning for people like me."

"We don't get many people like you," said Old Man Durfee.

"This town isn't so big," said Lauren.

"No, it's not," said Newby. "I wish it was. Then we could all go bowling or something."

"They have bowling hustlers, too," said Lauren. The salesman just

later, the door of the diner opened again, and an old woman came in.

"Aunt Rozji!" cried Lauren. "What an incredible coincidence!"

Newby just snorted and turned to observe the woman. She was very old. Her steps were tiny and so obviously painful that Newby wondered why she didn't spend her days on a cranked up hospital bed. She was thin, gaunt, cracked leather shrunk on a frame of spun glass, mere purposeless tufts of white hair, erratic motions so bizarre that gestures could not be distinguished from involuntary spasms, a complex bed of wrinkles and lines that led the observer's eye away from hers—Newby knew that he might never learn the color of her irises, a black dress that drooped between knee and ankle, decorated with pink and green floral specks, and a pair of huge, square, black shoes. She moved slowly, bent over, squeezed closer to the moist earth every hour. She wouldn't



"I have to go," said Newby, not turning around.

"You had time for the pie," said Lauren. "You can stay for a game. Old Man Durfee just lives to play chess. I wish I knew how. Besides, he's going to take you over to Aunt Rozji's, isn't he?"

THE SALESMAN turned around and went back to his booth. "Okay," he said. "I suppose the fates are conspiring against me."

Lauren frowned slightly. "You don't have to, if you don't want to," she said. "I just think it would be nice."

"Daviolsokoff vs. Dreean," said Old Man Durfee. "Copenhagen, 1926. Remember the second game? The

nodded.

"I just like to read about chess," said Old Man Durfee. "I don't get to play very often. I read, though. I've read just about every word on chess there is in town."

"It's not a very big town," said Newby sarcastically.

"No, it's not," said Lauren.

There was an uncomfortable silence. Newby toyed with the dishes and objects on the table top. He was very aware of a low mechanical humming from the kitchen, and of a flickering tube in the fluorescent lights. "Well," he thought, "I'll just get up, say goodbye, and duck out. This is infantile. It's turning into a scene from *Marty*, for Pete's sake." He didn't leave, though. A minute

die for a while, though, like a battered wreck of a car, she wouldn't be worth trading in. While she could perform the slightest function in the world, she would be kept around.

"We were just talking about you, dear," said Old Man Durfee, rising from the booth and helping her to take a seat.

"Were you?" she said. Her voice was cracked, as dry as the old drunk's was saturated. She spoke in a heavy European accent, some strange Slavic influence. "I was thinking about you, too. I came down."

"She doesn't come in very often," said Lauren to Newby. "She's a little frail to be making the walk from her house."

"I'm amazed that she came at all,"

said Newby

"And surprised that she arrived just as we finished speaking of her, eh?" said Old Man Durfee. The drunk didn't wait for Newby's reaction. He turned back to Aunt Rozji. "This young man plays chess, dear."

"Chess?" said Aunt Rozji, turning to peer around the corner of her booth. "You play chess? Then you came to the right place. Young Durfee plays chess. Did he tell you?"

"Yes," said Newby, sighing, realizing that the final nail had been driven in place, the last brick cemented to wall him up for the night in Gremmage.

"He needs a place to stay tonight," said Lauren. "We've already set up a game for him with Old Man Durfee, but he has to be back on the road in the morning. I thought maybe you could rent him a guest room for the night."

"Rent?" said Aunt Rozji. "Shueblk, if he wants to play Young Durfee, I won't ask him to pay."

"That's very kind," said Newby. "But I'd be happy to."

"No, no, no," said Aunt Rozji. "You give me happiness by playing Young Durfee. It has been such a long time."

"I'm glad I drove through, then," said the salesman. "It sounds like you haven't had a chess-playing stranger in quite a while."

"That's true," said Lauren. "But the other travelers find something else to do."

"Gremmage has a lot to offer," said Old Man Durfee.

"For such a small town," said Lauren.

"No," said Aunt Rozji, "it's not a very big town. But it tailors itself, you will find. It fills your needs. Tonight, it is chess. Young Lauren, find us the board."

THE WAITRESS bent down behind the counter for a few seconds. Newby sipped some of the stale water from the glass by his dishes. He heard a rattling of silverware and the heavy sliding of bottles. He wondered what sort of an opponent Old Man Durfee would be. He didn't especially care.

"I found it!" said Lauren. She waved a flimsy cardboard chessboard, with squares colored black and orange. It had been a long time since Newby had seen a chessboard with orange squares.

"The pieces?" asked Aunt Rozji. "They're here, too," said Lauren. She held up a grease-stained paper sack.

"Fine," said Old Man Durfee. "Fine," said Newby. "Should you go get Mrs. Perkins? Maybe she'll want to watch this battle of the century."

"No," said Lauren. "She has to get ready for breakfast in the morning. She's a busy little bee."

"I wonder what she does for fun around here," said Newby idly.

"She takes mambo lessons," said the waitress. "Over at the Y." Newby winced.

"Well, then," said Old Man Durfee, as Lauren opened the cheap board on the counter and everyone else took seats. "I think you should have white."

"Thank you," said Newby. "Not at all," said the drunk. "I do have the home court advantage, so to speak."

"We're all rooting for Young Durfee," said Aunt Rozji. "It's nothing against you, you understand."

"Sure," said Newby. "He's the hometown boy." Old Man Durfee snickered.

The two men wordlessly arranged their pieces. Newby just wanted to get the game over with as quickly as possible. He drove Aunt Rozji back to her house, get a good night's sleep, and flee the entire town at first light. This was not his idea of the most entertaining way of spending an evening.

"Your move?" asked Old Man Durfee.

Newby exhaled heavily, reached out and moved his pawn to Queen Four.

Ah, the Queen's Gambit, an excellent choice, said the drunk. "A conservative opening. The king side openings lead to more spectacular games. You've taken the opportunity of seizing the center of the board, a good strategic idea, backing up your threat with immediate protection from your queen. You are trying to tempt me into surrendering a defensive position in exchange for the pawn which you shall move to Queen's Bishop Four. Shall I take it? Let us see!" The old man moved his own pawn to Queen Four, and smiled at Newby.

"Playing with Old Man Durfee is fun," said Lauren. "He knows so much about the game. I can learn a lot just from watching."

Newby only nodded. The drunk was a little strange, the salesman wondered just how much about chess Old Man Durfee really knew. Newby decided to move off the usual opening routines. He posted his knight at King's Bishop Three.

"Wonderful, wonderful!" cried Old Man Durfee. "You see Aunt Rozji, you see, Miss Kromberger, how his knight defends the original pawn move, while itself strains forward to the attack. A most practical move, and one I entirely expected. The pawn allurements I spoke of will no doubt have to be postponed through

this development. I can find no fault with Mr. Newby's play. I shall make it myself." Old Man Durfee moved his knight to King's Bishop Three.

An axis of symmetry forms through the middle of the board," whispered Lauren.

"Are you afraid, Young Durfee?" asked Aunt Rozji. "Is that why you mimic each of your opponent's moves? That cannot be wise. Do not forget that he has the advantage of the first play."

"Then watch," said Old Man Durfee, laughing gently.

"For Pete's sake," thought Newby. Without hesitation, he moved a pawn to King Three.

"Good God, man!" cried the drunk. "What have you done?"

"I've moved," said Newby. "Yes," said Old Man Durfee, "but are you sure?"

"Is something wrong?" asked Lauren.

"Terribly," said the drunk. "Our friend has blundered badly. He has as good as lost the game, here on the third move."

"Perhaps you should allow him to retract his move," said Aunt Rozji mildly.

"All right, then," said Old Man Durfee.

Newby smiled. "Can I have a coke?" he asked. Lauren nodded and went to fetch it. "My move will stand," he said. The drunk shrugged.

"I can see that Mr. Newby has bottled up one of his bishops," said Aunt Rozji. "That can't be a good idea."

"No, it isn't," said Old Man Durfee. "Besides, he has moved a pawn instead of developing a piece that will hurt him later on." He moved his own pawn to King Three.

"Now why in heaven's name did you do that, too?" asked Lauren.

"The drunk made a funny expression. 'Chanty,' he said. Aunt Rozji laughed.

NEWBY STILL said nothing. He was making the preparatory moves of the Colle system, and apparently the drunk didn't recognize them. Old Man Durfee would be in for a surprise. Newby quickly made his next play, bishop to Queen Three.

"All right, I suppose," said Old Man Durfee. "Now watch. I move a pawn to Queen's Bishop Four. See how it opens up my pieces? That's very important. Your men are all hemmed in."

"What did you say your name was?" asked Aunt Rozji.

"Newby," said the salesman. "Where did you say you were from?"

"Stroudsburg." Newby moved a pawn to Queen's Bishop Three.

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(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 20)

Old Man Durfee jumped to his feet and began wildly pacing about the diner. Newby wondered how such a dissipated, worn out person as had entered the place could have become so animated. "I give up!" shouted the drunk. "I try to help him a little. I don't take advantage of his stupidity. But does he learn? No. Does he do anything about the idiocy of his position? No. All right, Newby. You asked for it." Old Man Durfee sat down again. He considered the board for a minute, then made his play, the other knight to Bishop Three.

"Oho," said Lauren. "Things are beginning to pile up there in the middle."

"Ah. Young Newby," said Aunt Rozzi, "that lead pawn of yours is attracting a lot of attention."

"And it's not even such a big piece," said Lauren.

"No," said Newby, "no, it's not." He took his queen's knight and put it in front of his queen at Queen Two.

"That's stupid," said Aunt Rozzi. "I hope you don't mind me speaking frankly. You are not a fit opponent."

"I won't say anything," said Old Man Durfee. Newby smiled coldly. The drunk played his bishop to King Two.

"I castle king-side," said Newby. "It doesn't take much skill to do that," said Old Man Durfee scornful-

ly. "Observe how easily I remove your one threatening piece." He moved his pawn at Bishop Four ahead one square, attacking Newby's bishop.

"Retreat," said Newby. He moved the bishop back a square, until it stood in front of the other unmoved bishop.

"When is somebody going to kill another piece?" asked Lauren.

"Wait," said Aunt Rozzi. "All in good time."

"Pawn to Queen's Knight Four," said the drunk. "Notice now how I open up the bishop and threaten with an advance of my queen side pawns."

"I see," said Newby. He moved the pawn at King Three ahead to King Four. He swung around on the stool. This was the key move in the old system he was playing. Now, at last, Old Man Durfee must be seeing the trouble he was in. All the restrained force of the white position was now set loose. It was a simple, deceptive line of play, and one very familiar to experts in the 1920's and 30's. But it had lost favor since then. Newby had guessed correctly that Old Man Durfee lacked the sophistication to understand this line of attack.

"Ah, well," said the drunk. He gazed up at Newby, his eyes suddenly bleary again, his voice thick and barely intelligible. "I don't know,

now. Lemme see."

"Something wrong, Young Durfee?" asked Aunt Rozzi.

"I don't know, now." The drunk shook out his filthy blue towel and folded it up again.

"You can't let that pawn move forward again," said Lauren. "It would chase your knight away, cost you a turn, and ruin your center position."

"You don't have much choice," said Aunt Rozzi.

"Right, right, I know!" said Old Man Durfee. "Okay, you bastard. I'll take the pawn. I still don't see what it'll get you." He took the pawn with the queen's pawn.

"Ah," said Lauren, sighing. "First blood!"

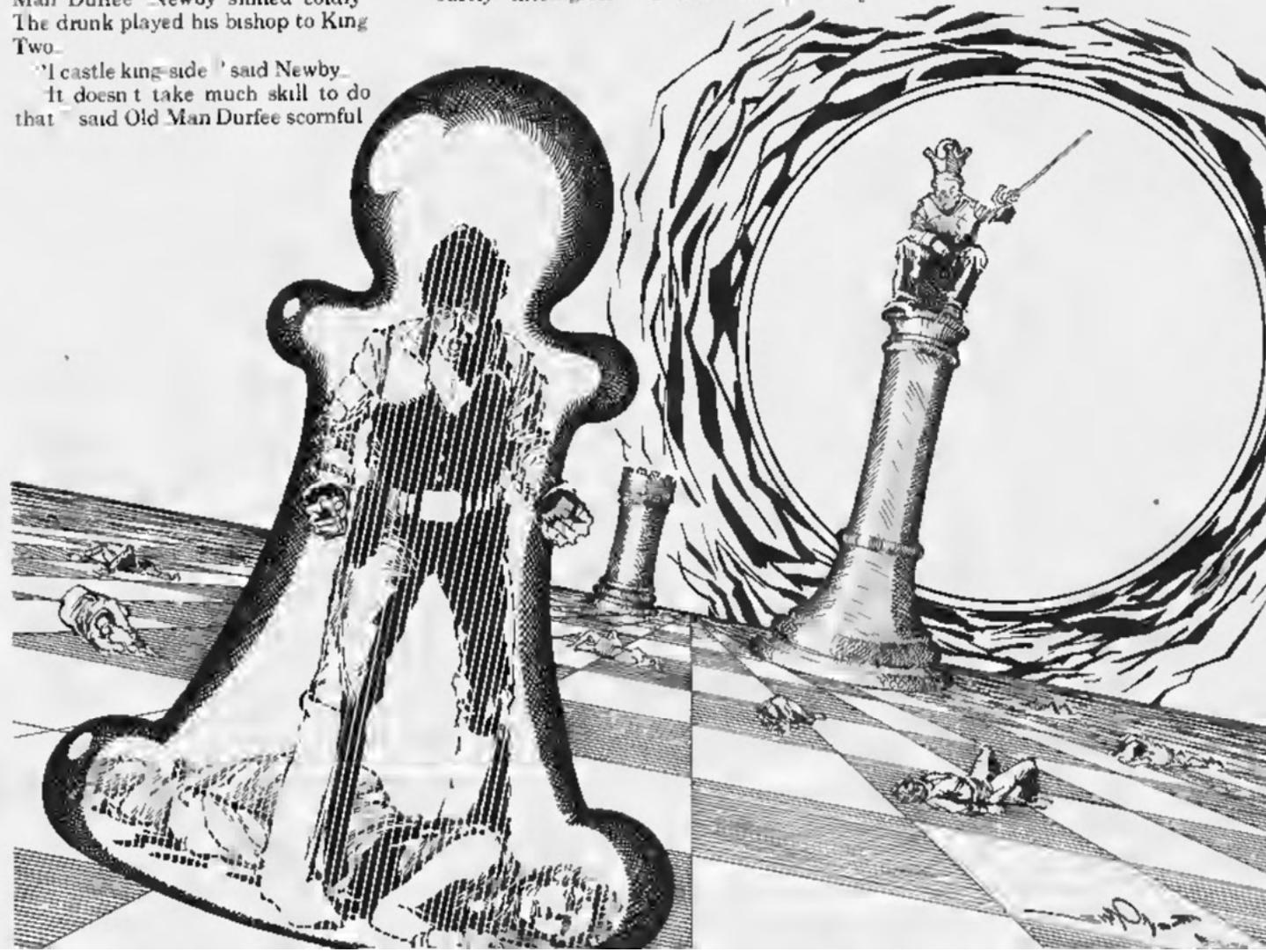
Newby recaptured the pawn with the knight from Queen Two. At once, Newby's pieces commanded the center of the board. His position, previously cramped and unpromising, was now obviously superior to black's.

"I castle," said Old Man Durfee. "Are you worried now?" asked Lauren.

"Everybody castles," said the drunk with some irritation.

"Don't worry, Young Durfee, we won't abandon you," said Aunt Rozzi.

"Queen to King Two," said Newby.



"DON'T RUSH," said Old Man Durfee. "We have all night." The drunk studied the board. "All right, now. Cautiously. You have me, and I let you get away with it. I see your plan. Is it not as follows: your knight takes mine, I take back with my bishop, then you move your queen forward to King Four? You'll checkmate me on the next move, taking my rook pawn with your queen. If I rush to do something about that threat, you win the isolated knight on the other side of the board. That's what you're after, isn't it? I protect that knight, ruining your scheme. I move bishop to Knight Two."

"Well done, Young Durfee!"

"We're with you," said Lauren.

"A partisan crowd," said Newby.

"We have to be," said Aunt Rozzi.

"There's little enough else to do," said Lauren.

"All right," said Newby, "the knight at Bishop Three up to Knight Five."

"I have to save the pawn," said Old Man Durfee, looking around helplessly. He moved the threatened pawn forward to King's Rook Three.

"We understand," said Aunt Rozzi.

"It's a cardinal rule, never to move those protective pawns in front of your king, unless you have to," said Lauren. "But as you say you'll lose it otherwise: knight takes knight, check. Bishop takes knight. Knight takes pawn. And you're also attacking that offensive knight, so I suppose it's the only move you have."

"How have you allowed yourself to get into this untenable defensive position?" asked Aunt Rozzi.

"Knight takes knight," said Newby. "Check."

"He proceeds anyway," said Lauren, astounded.

"As do I," said Old Man Durfee. "Bishop takes knight."

"Queen to King Four," said Newby.

"It's as you foresaw," said Lauren.

"If he slides his queen down, he'll have you mated on the next move. You saw it coming. Why didn't you plan a better defense?"

"My hands were tied," said Old Man Durfee. "I can only create an escape route." He moved the knight pawn to Knight Three.

"You're stalling," said Lauren.

"I think that's enough for tonight, don't you?" asked Aunt Rozzi. Newby realized that for some time, her words had been spoken without a trace of accent. Now, though, she sounded like a recent immigrant from Czechoslovakia.

"If you say so," said Old Man Durfee.

"Why don't we play on?" asked Newby. "The end can't be too far away."

Lauren looked irritated. "I think we need an official referee here," she said. "How about Aunt Rozzi?"

"She's not the most impartial judge I could ask for," said Newby.

"It's okay with me," said Old Man Durfee.

"I'll bet," said Newby. "All right, Aunt Rozzi, you can be referee."

The old woman smiled, a narrow, quivering expression. "Good, good. We stop, then. Tomorrow morning, we finish."

"We finish fast," said Newby. "I have to be on the road early."

"Nine o'clock, here," said Aunt Rozzi. Lauren, Newby, and Old Man Durfee nodded.

"Can I drive you anywhere?" asked Newby.

"No," said Lauren. "My daddy comes to meet me."

"I'll find my own way," said Old Man Durfee. "Do you have maybe a quarter, though? I need another quarter for a pint of Thunderbird."

"Here," said Newby, giving the old drunk the money. Newby shook his head as Old Man Durfee shuffled out of the diner. The salesman took Aunt Rozzi's arm and led her out to his car. The old woman said little as they drove to her house. The narrow, red brick paved streets were dark, slender wells of light beamed down from streetlamps, but otherwise there was only the occasional floating yellow from a porch light or a distant pair of rat eyes on the back end of a car. Trees grew dense and tall. The air was warm and moist, and pleasant smelling. Newby enjoyed the low thrumming sound of the tires on the street.

"Pull up here," said Aunt Rozzi at last. "I suppose you'll want to get right to sleep."

"Yes, I guess so. I have a little work to do first, but I can look forward to another day of driving tomorrow."

"After your tournament is completed, of course."

Newby pulled out the ignition key and shrugged. "Oh, yeah. Sure," he said. They went slowly up the flagstone walk to the huge, dim house. The front door was open. They went inside, the salesman was given an impression of old furnishings: polished dark wood paneling, hundreds of china figurines, fat chairs and sofas, final boredom. He carried his suitcase up the stairway, at the top of which Aunt Rozzi said he'd find his room and the bathroom. She was too old to climb the steps herself, and she apologized. Newby called down that the room was fine, said good night, and stretched out on the bed for a few minutes' rest. He was asleep instantly.

NEWBY DOZED fitfully, he had



planned to sort out the brightly colored cloth samples in his case before he went to sleep. The case rested at the foot of the bed. The salesman's legs were bent to avoid the samples which were stacked on the loided comforter with the suitcase tight behind his knees. He was cramped and uncomfortable, but he had not meant to fall asleep. He had only removed his shirt and tie, he had not even slipped out of his shoes.

After a few minutes he began to dream. They were strange visions, dreams of a kind he had never had before. He was used to sleeping in a different bed every night, awakening in odd, unknown towns that he might never see again. It wasn't that he was isolated and alone that caused his dreams. It was something else.

For a time he dreamed of shapes, just meaningless shapes. Great, looming blocks, towering cylinders, stacks of rectangular solids in unattractive olive greens and dark browns. Then the shapes began to be located to find a setting. Spaces formed among them and remained constant. The shapes were on a large plain. The shapes became buildings, trees, parked automobiles. It was still dark, midnight, no light but the dream light of Newby's tired imagination.

Newby became part of his dream. Before, he had only viewed the night marsh setting. Now he himself walked through it. The ominous shapes become buildings were vast, ancient houses, lined one after the other along a narrow, brick-paved street. Each house was set well back from the sidewalk. The front doors

sparkled with crystal, rainbow flickers, gleams reflected from an unreal source. The windows on the first floor were invariably dark, shaded, inviolable. Windows on the second story were drawn up tight, also, but lamps were lit behind the drapes. Shadows whipped along the vertical folds of the curtains, as furtive strangers rushed about the interior rooms on secret errands. Newby walked past each house, examining everyone as he strolled, feeling a peculiar sense of uneasiness. The insects chorused like massed rattlesnakes. A pair of night hawks swooped the star-glittered sky. Newby was frightened by the moon.

"Hi!" Immediately, with a shock of dream intensity, the scene became particular, real, a little more tangible and a little less lonely. The salesman looked down. He saw a young girl, perhaps ten or eleven years old. She was wearing a white blouse, a plaid blazer from a parochial school, and a grey felt skirt with rustling crinolines beneath. There was a pink poodle cut out and tixed to the skirt. "Hi," she said again.

"Hello," said Newby.

"You know why I'm out so late?" she asked.

"No. Of course not."

"My name is Theresa Muldower."

"Why are you out so late?" asked Newby.

"Because of the Russians." She looked up at Newby with a curious expression. "I hate the Russians, don't you?"

"Sure," said Newby.

"I hate the Russians so much, the only thing in the whole world I hate more is polio."

"Me, too."

"My daddy's finishing up the fallout shelter tonight. We're going to have a party in it. Only he thought he'd have it done by now. I'm usually sent to bed at nine or ten. Ten on Fridays and Saturdays. But we're all waiting for him to finish the fallout shelter. Mom says she can just see how the Russians are going to H-bomb us all tonight, and we won't get to have our party. Daddy says it's okay with him, as long as the fallout shelter's finished. Do you have a fallout shelter?"

"Not yet," said Newby.

"You don't have much time," said Theresa. "You ought to get one before the Russians H-bomb us."

"If I built a fallout shelter," said Newby, "and if the Russians H-bombed us, I'd be all alone in there and I'd get polio."

"From a rusty nail."

"Yes," said Newby. "From a rusty nail."

They walked past some more houses. After a while a voice

somewhere ahead of them called Theresa's name. "I have to go," she said.

"Is that your parents?"

"No," she said. "I don't know who it is." Newby watched her uninterestedly as she skipped away ahead of him. Somewhere down the block, in a black tangle of shadows, he saw someone gesture to her. He stopped on the sidewalk and watched. The person held out its hand, Theresa took it. The street was lit by fire. Orange sparks first, then ribbons of flame spat outward from the girl's body. Newby didn't want to move, but in the dream he was suddenly right there, beside her, watching, saying nothing, doing nothing, watching Aunt Rozzi and Old Man Durfee. The fiery light made gruesome, disgusting masks of their faces. They nodded silent greeting to him. Theresa looked wildly around her. She strained her arms toward Newby. The salesman could only observe. Fire spurted from her eyes and ears. Trickles of flame dribbled from her nostrils. She rolled on the ground in the pain of nightmares. When she tried to scream, only a fine gray ash came out of her mouth. She writhed. The flames from her eyes grew smaller. Her motions became convulsive, slowed, then stopped. Aunt Rozzi and Old Man Durfee each took one of Newby's hands. The three stepped over the unmarked corpse of Theresa Muldower and walked along the cavernous street, beneath the arching trees, past the ramparts of houses.



"AND YOU have come from the east?" said Aunt Rozzi, in a hollow, distant voice.

"Yes," said Newby.

"Knowledge in the east," said Old Man Durfee.

"And you travel into the west?" said Aunt Rozzi.

"Yes," said Newby.

"Death in the west," said Old Man Durfee.

"And you bring with you?" asked Aunt Rozzi.

"Fear," said Old Man Durfee.

"Pain. Desire for cleansing."

"Expiation," said Newby.

"There is no expiation short of death," said Old Man Durfee.

"And there is no death," said Aunt Rozzi. "No death, no death, three times, as the figures of art, as the candles, the scepters, the chalked arribles, the incense, the passes of hand, the laden words, as all these are used up, death is forgotten. Without death, there is no redemption."

"Without redemption," said Old Man Durfee, "there is fear."

"There is pain," said Aunt Rozzi.

The two old people still held Newby's hands, with their free hands they touched his head. Throbbing agony grew in his temples. He could not breathe. His body began to sweat and shake. His chest was crippled with stabbing pains. His legs would not hold him. He fell. He awoke.

The suitcase had fallen on the floor, perhaps it was that noise that had roused Newby. Whatever it had been, he was grateful. He still felt his heart beating rapidly. His hands were moist with the dampness of terror. 'That child!' He was afraid and repulsed to think that his own mind could invent such a hideous thing. He scooped up the cloth samples, intending to arrange them in their proper groups, instead, he quickly grew bored and shoved them all into the case. He undressed slowly, trying not to think about his nightmare. He went to the bathroom and brushed his teeth with the chlorophyll toothpaste his wife had bought. He remembered how much he hated to bring it with him. Everything in the world was being colored, scented, or flavored with chlorophyll these days. He didn't notice any difference. It was only an advertising fad. He hated to be conned by advertising. After his brief toilet, he returned to his room, pulled back the bedspread, and went back to sleep. He had no more unusual dreams that night.

In the morning he was awakened by Aunt Rozzi, calling up the stairs to him. "Good day, Young Newby," she said. "It is morning. Hava you rested?"

"Yes," he said, rubbing his eyes.

regretfully "More or less"

"Good, then," she said "It is time to renew your combat"

"Oh, yes. I was trying to forget."

"That is very gracious of you," she said "But do not worry about besting our local champion. We are good sportsmen in Gremmage"

Newby dressed quickly and came downstairs with his suitcase. Aunt Rozji was ready to go. She told the salesman that breakfast could be taken at the diner. Together they went out to his car.

It wasn't there. From Aunt Rozji's porch, Newby could see the place along the tree lawn where he had left it. An empty space, now, between a black Studebaker and a red and white Dodge. He felt an anger growing, an ugly feeling, a sickness in his stomach. "My car's gone," he said through clenched teeth.

"Your car?" asked Aunt Rozji.

"It's gone. damn it."

"Are you sure you left it here?"

"You know damn well where I left it," he said. "You were with me."

"Perhaps someone took it by mistake," she said. Newby didn't answer. "Well, I suppose you ought to tell the police."

"You have police in this idiotic town?" he asked.

"Yes," she said. "Even towns as small as this sometimes have crime."

"So what do I do now?"

"You must walk with me to the diner. The police department won't be open for another forty five minutes. We can have breakfast first. Perhaps the others will have something to suggest."

"What happens if you have an emergency after the police go home for the night?" asked Newby.

Aunt Rozji looked at him in surprise. "Why, we all chip in," she said.

"We all work together. That is how we shall find your car." A while later they arrived at the diner on Ridge Street. Newby was out of breath, but the old woman seemed in good shape.

"Good morning," said Lauren cheerfully.

"Young Newby's car has been stolen," said Aunt Rozji.

"Stolen?" said Old Man Durfee, already studying the final position of the chess game from the day before.

"You know," said Newby. "Unauthorized theft or something."

"I don't think I'm in as much difficulty as we believed last evening," said Old Man Durfee.

"That's certainly good news," said Lauren.

"I don't give a damn about that," said Newby. "I have work to do. I want my car."

"Sit down," said the waitress. "Have some coffee. Do you want a muffin? French toast?"

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"Don't you have to go to school?" asked Newby.

"No," she said. "This isn't such a big town."

"It really isn't," said Old Man Durfee.

"Whose move is it?" asked Aunt Rozji. "I forget."

"Mine," said Old Man Durfee.

"No," said Newby. "I think it's mine. You moved that pawn to Knight Three."

"Yes," said Old Man Durfee, "you're right. I'm sorry. What's your move?"

"IT'S OBVIOUS," said Newby. "I'm going to call the cops and see if they've recovered my car. Then I'm going to leave this nuthouse as fast as I can."

"Can I move for you?" asked Lauren.

"You don't know how to play, remember?" said Newby. "Here I'll take your king pawn with the knight. Now I'm attacking both your queen and the rook guarding your king."

"That's very true," said Old Man Durfee slowly.

"Don't be cruel, to a heart that's true," sang Lauren.

"Will you be quiet?" asked the drunk.

"Don't be cruel," she sang.

"All right," said Old Man Durfee, "before I take your knight, I wonder if you'd do something for me. I had these made up last night. Would you go through these two pages? It's sort of a little quiz. It won't take you very long. I think the results may surprise you. Maybe you ought to do it before you try talking with the police." The old man handed Newby two pages, covered with questions in blurry mimeograph ink.

"What is this?" asked the salesman.

"Here," said Lauren, "you can use my ballpoint."

Newby read the first multiple-choice question: *What is today's date?* The answers were a) March 8, 1956, b) September 12, 1954, c) June 26, 1959, d) August 30, 1957. Newby had some difficulty deciding which answer was appropriate. The trouble bothered him. He hesitated a few seconds, then checked a. The second question was *What was yesterday's date?* The possibilities were a) May 21, 1955, b) January 12, 1951, c) November 15, 1957, d) April 28, 1958. More confused, he checked c. There were a few more questions in a similar mode, requiring him to decide what the date of a week from Friday would be, and so on. He did the best he could.

The second page asked questions of a more concrete nature: *Where are you?* a) in a town in Colorado, b) in a

suburb of Dallas, c) in a European nation that has not existed since the end of the First World War, d) in the garment district. Newby checked b, hoping that it was the closest to the truth. He really wasn't certain. The next question asked him the same thing, and presented him with even more baffling choices. By the time he completed the two pages, he was very uncomfortable. He was beginning to feel a little unreal, a bit lightheaded, dreamlike.

"Do you feel like you've been pushed into a different world?" asked Lauren.

"Sort of," said Newby sadly. "What's going on?"

"You see," said Old Man Durfee with a kindly smile, "you really can't trust yourself any longer. You've lost a little of the real you. It's nothing important, but we thought you ought to know."

"It happens sometimes," said Aunt Rozji.

"You have to learn to relax," said Lauren. "Things that are important in a big town like Stroudsburg, just don't seem so vital here."

"This isn't such a big town," said Old Man Durfee.

"No," said Newby, "no, it's not."

"Now," said the drunk, "I suppose I have to take your other knight with the bishop pawn. I do so."

Newby glanced over the quiz sheets again. He wondered if he ought to change a few of his answers. *Who is President of the United States?* a) Harry S. Truman, b) Everett Durken, c) Dwight David Eisenhower, d) John F. Kennedy. He had originally checked Truman, but on second thought erased that and marked c. "I like Ike," he thought. "I really do." *Have the Russians orbited their first Sputnik yet?* That was no *Have the quiz show scandals been exposed?* No, but interesting. Maybe it was yes, come to think about it. He decided to leave that question and come back to it. *What kind of a day was it?* Newby marked *A day like all days, filled with those events which alter and illuminate our time.*

"None of this makes any sense at all," he said.

"What difference does that make?" asked Aunt Rozji. "What has reality ever done for you?"

"Good morning, everybody," said a newcomer.

"Morning, Bob," said Lauren. The waitress turned to Newby. "This is Bob Latcher, the shoe repairman. Bob, this is Mr. Newby, a visitor to our town."

"Morning, Mr. Newby," said Latcher. "Sad to have you here today, of all days. Have you heard the news?"

"About Mr. Newby's car?" asked

Old Man Durfee

"No," said Latcher. "About that Muldower girl." Newby started, then struggled to catch his breath.

"Theresa?" asked Lauren. "What about her?"

"They found her near her house," said Latcher. "She was done in all peculiar. She was all burnt up from the inside. She looked fine on the outside, excepting that she was dead. But when they touched her, her body all collapsed, like a puffed-up popover. Just powered into ashes."

"That's odd," said Lauren. Newby buried his head in his hands.

"Want breakfast, Bob?" asked the waitress.

"No," said Latcher. "I just came in to see if I could find Larry Muldower. I wanted to tell him how sorry I was about his daughter and all."

"He's probably in his new fallout shelter," said Newby in a strangled voice.

"Yeah, that's right," said Latcher. "Thanks." The man waved and left.

"SAD about the little girl, isn't it?" asked Old Man Durfee.

"It just goes to show you," said Aunt Rozji. "Some people just shouldn't go walking around late at night." She smiled at Newby.

"Like a puffed-up popover," said Lauren. "What a typically rural use of simile."

"Hick," said Newby, "not rural."

"I think we ought to try to make this chess match a little more interesting," said Aunt Rozji.

"I find it fascinating," said Newby.

"A little more interesting," said Old Man Durfee.

"Will you take a check?" asked Newby.

Aunt Rozji and the drunk laughed. "No," said the old woman. "I don't mean that way. The way I see it, Young Newby has made in no more than seven moves. Now, don't look so glum, Young Durfee. We can't always emerge victorious. But I wonder if our handsome visitor would be interested in giving you another chance in this game. A sort of handicap."

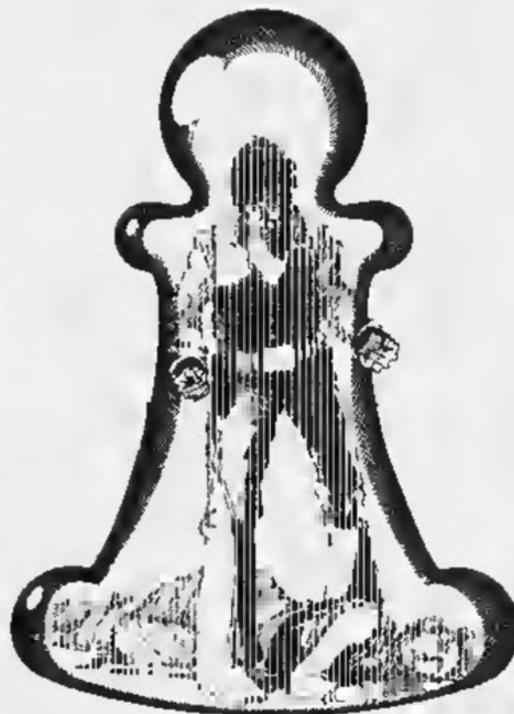
"I don't think so," said Newby. "I just want to get going."

"If it's your car that you're so worried about," said Lauren, "you might as well take it easy. I suppose the police are going to be occupied all day with old Theresa Popover."

"Don't be cruel, Young Lauren," said Aunt Rozji.

"Are you going to play, or aren't you?" asked the drunk.

"He has to," said the old woman. Newby nodded. "Well, then. Here is what I say, in my capacity as omnipotent referee. From now on, every time you take an opponent's piece, your own piece that did the cap-



turing will change to the type of the captured enemy. Including pawns. So if you take your opponent's queen with a pawn, you'll have two queens.

"That's ridiculous," said Newby. "You just can't change the rules of chess like that."

"She can," said Lauren. "You agreed to abide by her decisions."

"She's like the inscrutable forces of nature," said Old Man Durfee, evidently enjoying Newby's uneasiness.

The salesman shook his head, but said nothing more. He looked at the positions of the chess pieces. Aunt Rozji was correct; as things stood, he could finish off Old Man Durfee in just a few more moves. But now the situation had been changed. In a legitimate game, the thing for him to do would be queen takes knight pawn, check. Newby chewed his lip. If he were to do that, under Aunt Rozji's arbitrary rule change, he would capture the pawn, but his queen would be demoted to that level. He would lose his most potent weapon. The entire strategy of his game would have to be altered. The thing to do, apparently, was work with the pawns, promoting them by successfully capturing higher-ranking enemy pieces. The more he looked at the board, the more confused he became. "All right," he said at last. "I don't even care any more."

"You ought to," said Lauren. "This is an important game."

"How is it important?" asked Newby.

"It's very symbolic," said Aunt Rozji.

"It's the forces of simple life here in rural America against the snares and wiles of corporate industry," said Old Man Durfee.

Newby stared at them. They smiled back. "Do I look like a shift-eyed con man?"

"You are a salesman," said Aunt Rozji.

"You are from Stroudsburg," said Lauren.

"The big time," said Old Man Durfee.

Newby sighed. They were really out to get him. He laughed bitterly, and moved his queen bishop from its original square down to King's Rook Six, capturing the old drunk's pawn there.

"Why did you do that?" asked Lauren. "You lost your bishop, you know. It turned into a pawn, now."

"I know," said Newby. "Sometimes a pawn can be more useful than a piece. I'm going to beat you at your own game."

Aunt Rozji made a cackling sound. "I ought to warn you," she said. "I haven't decided yet whether I'll change the rule about normal pawn promotion. If you move that pawn ahead two squares, you may or may not get the queen you're after."

"I'll chance it," said Newby.

Old Man Durfee picked up the rook which guarded his castled king. "Here," he said. "This rook will stop you." He moved it forward a square, so that Newby's pawn couldn't advance without inviting capture.

Newby didn't hesitate. "I wasn't planning that at all," he said. He swept his queen down and captured the knight pawn. He turned the queen upside-down to indicate that it was now a pawn, standing on the square next to the bishop-turned-pawn of the previous move. Together the two pawns stared straight at the drunk's suddenly vulnerable king.

"The position isn't as bad as it looks," said Old Man Durfee.

"That's good," said Lauren. "It certainly looks bad."

"I've got this bishop tying him up," said the drunk.

Aunt Rozji stood up from her stool. "I think it's time we recessed for lunch."

"Lunch?" asked Newby. "It isn't even ten o'clock yet."

"LUNCH," said the old woman. "I think Young Durfee could use the opportunity to study the game, and you might find it comforting to report the theft of your car. Perhaps the police have solved the untidy mystery of little Miss Popover's death. I think that I am in need of a nap. In any event, Young Lauren will stay here guarding the game and making certain that no pieces are

inadvertently moved "

"I surely will, Aunt Rozji," said the waitress

Newby realized that argument was futile. He shrugged and stood up. "What time should I come back?" he asked.

"Oh," said the old woman lazily, "perhaps three o'clock."

"She does like her naps," said Old Man Durfee.

The day was sunny and warm. Newby felt a shock of heat as he left the diner, rippling waves floated in the air above the black asphalt of Ridge Street. The temperature would get even higher by afternoon. Newby had no idea what to do for the next five hours. He supposed that he ought to walk into the center of town to the police department. After that, he could kill time browsing through the poor collection of stores. Get a haircut. Sit on the square and read magazines. Find the library. Maybe just get on a bus and leave.

The town was much like many others he had seen in the last four years during which he had been a salesman for the Jennings Fabric Corporation. He knew without looking what sort of things would be in the windows of each shop: the laded cardboard signs of beautiful women with bright yellow poodle cuts in the beauty parlor, the brassy saxophones on stands in the display of the music store, the barbecue sets and the taped up sign—*Tulip Sundae 35¢*—in the five and dime. It made him feel better, somehow. The odd assortment of people in the diner didn't seem to be typical. The impulse to run away grew, he could easily give up his car as lost, take the insurance money, buy another. The company would give him a week off without pay. His suitcase was in the diner, now, but he could tell them the samples had been in the trunk of the Packard. He might even be reimbursed for his personal things. "No," he thought, "I'm letting that dream spook me. I won't let myself be manipulated like this. I just have to settle down."

He strolled past the store windows, bored, still a little sleepy. He came to the police department, the last building before the square. He went up the granite steps and opened the door. There didn't seem to be anyone inside. He sat on a bench under an old framed photograph of Eisenhower, wearing his army uniform. Newby waited. A clock on the wall moved past ten-thirty. Then to eleven o'clock. Finally, a police officer appeared from the back of the building. He nodded to Newby.

"I want to report a stolen car," said the salesman.

"In a minute, buddy," said the

policeman. "We have a real emergency today."

"The Muldower girl?"

The policeman stared at Newby for a moment. "Yeah," he said slowly. "What do you know about it?"

"Nothing. Just what the guy Latcher told me in the diner."

The other man nodded. "All right, then. Your car's going to have to wait."

Newby stood and stretched. "Do you know how she died?" he asked.

"Yeah," said the policeman. "The coroner said it was some kind of stroke. I ain't never seen nothing like that, though."

"It was magic," said Newby.

"You're nuts," said the other man.

"What time should I come in to check on the car?"

"We'll be tied up all day," said the officer. "Come in tomorrow mor-

ning." Newby nodded, but inside he was annoyed. Another night, another day in the town. He'd have to call his wife, have her get in touch with the Jennings people, have her send him some money.

The salesman left the police station and walked into the small parklike square. Narrow gravel paths ran straight as a surveyor's transit could make them, among huge elms and oaks diagonally from northeast to southwest, from northwest to southeast. At the center, where the paths intersected, there was the promised cannon and a pyramid of cannon balls. The end of the cannon's barrel was stuffed with paper cups and broken glass. There was a drinking fountain next to it, with a step for little children to use. A tiny trickle of water ran from the rusty fixture. No amount of handle turning could make the trickle run harder. The fountain was impossible to drink from. It made Newby very thirsty.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 50)



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HEARTSTOP

(CONTINUED FROM PAGE 40)

OLD MAN DURFEE walked toward him along a gravel path. The drunk didn't seem to notice Newby. The old man moved in wide, sweeping curves, stumbling, talking to himself. He still carried his filthy blue towel, looped through the binder's twine that served him as a belt. Old Man Durfee passed Newby by the drinking fountain and continued across the square. The salesman watched him several yards away. The drunk left the path and walked toward a broad, shady tree. Aunt Rozzi stepped out from behind it. The two grasped hands and sat down, slowly, painfully. Newby watched them curiously. The two old people chatted. The drunk no longer seemed as inebriated, the old woman no longer as decrepit.

After a few minutes a middle-aged homemaker passed by, pulling a two-wheeled shopping cart filled with

bags of groceries. Aunt Rozzi raised a hand and waved to the woman. Newby moved closer.

"Hello, Aunt Rozzi," said the woman pleasantly.

"Good morning, Mrs. Siebern," said the old woman. "How are you today?"

"Healthy, thank God," said Mrs. Siebern. "The last couple of days I haven't been so well."

"But today you feel fine?" asked Old Man Durfee.

Mrs. Siebern scowled at the drunk.

"Yes," she said, her tone more disappointing. She turned back to Aunt Rozzi. "How is your sister these days?"

"Fine," said Aunt Rozzi. "She doesn't complain. The dear Onyush is three years younger than I, you know. But she has such troubles with her back."

"Well," said Mrs. Siebern, "have a

good day. I have to get home. Eddie bought one of those power lawn mowers and he stayed home from work just to tinker with it. I want to get back before he cuts off both of his feet. The woman turned her back to the old people sitting on the ground. Aunt Rozzi gestured to Newby. The salesman was surprised that the old woman had been aware of his presence. Her motions indicated that she wanted Newby to engage Mrs. Siebern in conversation. He hurried to catch up to the woman.

"Excuse me," he said nervously. "I'm just passing through this town, and it looks like I'll have to stay here the night. I was wondering if you could tell me if there are any good hotels in the area?"

Mrs. Siebern shaded her eyes and looked at him for a few seconds.

Well, she said slowly. Aunt Rozzi has some nice rooms for travelers, but she's particular about her guests. You'd have to speak to her. Here, let me— She turned around to introduce Newby to Aunt Rozzi, but the old woman and the drunk had risen



and moved one to each side of Mrs Siebern. Now they took her arms and led her from the gravel path. Old Man Durfee looked back at Newby and winked. He signalled that the salesman should follow them. Newby did.

"Here," said Aunt Rozzi, "let's sit here under this mighty oak, eh?"

"I really have to get back to my Eddie," said Mrs Siebern.

"Oh, he's old enough to handle a grasscutter, dear," said Old Man Durfee.

"It's television's fault," said Aunt Rozzi. "All the husbands on those comedy shows look so stupid. All except Robert Young, and he's just fatuous. Your husband will be all right."

"Take this, Newby," said Old Man Durfee, handing the salesman an ancient, leather bound book. "Follow along. Read the part that's underlined."

"This oak, like all oaks, oak trees blended in universal commune," chanted Aunt Rozzi. "Pillar of sacred wood, leaf-secret bower, shelter us,

cloak us, hide us now!"

"This oak, our strength," said Old Man Durfee. "This oak, our weapon, this oak, our souls."

His oak, its roots to the very earth's heart delving—read Newby haltingly. Now its limbs, our hands delve this woman's spirit here.

Newby glanced up Mrs Siebern's face bore an expression of surprise, then her features slackened, twisted again, seemed to contort with utter agony. Like Theresa Muldower, she tried to shriek, tossing her head wildly, kicking and thrashing. Her voice was stopped from her mouth came only a blue, cold mist. Her eyes turned white, her lids drooped and were sealed shut with ice. Her blood froze where it ran down her chin. Old Man Durfee and Aunt Rozzi held the woman tightly as she shook in the last stages of her ice death. Her skin was tinged blue, her muscles chiseled in hard ridges beneath. The two old people eased the corpse gently to the ground, but even so, Mrs Siebern's frozen right foot snapped off with a

gentle tinkling sound. A blue-white powder lay about the stump, dusting the rich green grass with what had been flesh, bone, blood, all living.

"QUICK NOW, Young Newby," said Aunt Rozzi. "We must finish."

The salesman looked at the book. He had the next speech too. "Weakness, weariness, done to an end," he said. "Misery is now no longer, as acorn's shell is by the oaken shaft blasted."

As in the dream of the night before, the drunk grasped one of Newby's arms and the old woman took the other. They walked away from the corpse quickly, back the way Newby had come. When they arrived at the police station, he stopped. "I have to go in," he said. "I have to report my car."

"You've already done that," said Old Man Durfee. But neither of the old people tried to stop him. Newby ran up the steps and into the station. He woke up on the bench. The clock said it was almost two.

"Another dream," he thought. He was too unnerved, though, to do the proper thing; he didn't have any intention of walking through the square to see whether Mrs Siebern really rested there, cold, dead, and blue. Instead, Newby headed back toward the diner.

He met Lauren on the way. "Hello," he said. "I thought you were supposed to be guarding the chess pieces."

"Oh," she said, pouting, "I always get stuck with dumb jobs like that. Nobody would want to mess with the game, anyway. I wish one of these days they'd let me help in the bigger jobs."

"Like Theresa Muldower?" he asked. "Like Mrs Siebern?"

"Mrs Siebern?" said Lauren. "Well, they finally did it. I'm glad. Her husband teaches chemistry, you know. Gave me a C+ last year. You know you look a lot like Howard Keel."

"Howard Keel?"

"He's my second favorite actor."

Newby laughed. "I suppose I ought to be flattered. Who's first on the list?"

"James Dean, of course," she said. "I send him birthday cards and everything."

Newby took a deep breath. "He's dead, you know," he said finally.

Lauren shook her head. "I don't believe it. In New York, even Stroudsburg, you believe those things. Here you don't have to. It doesn't make any difference what happens here, and what happens out there doesn't have any effect on us. I can believe what I want. This isn't such a big town, you know."



"Yes, I know."

"Don't be cruel," she said.

"We should be getting back soon," said Newby. "It's almost three."

"You're not going to let that old nose-bleed wino and Madame Ooglepuss boss you around, are you?" asked Lauren.

Newby waved a hand. "I thought you were on their side."

"That was until I realized how much you look like Howard Keel. To a heart that's true."

"I always get Howard Keel mixed up with Phil Gatin," he said.

"They're nothing alike," she said.

"And neither am I."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said Lauren. They pushed open the door to the diner and stepped into the frigid blast of the air conditioning. Newby was stunned to see another Lauren Kromberger still sitting on one of the stools by the counter.

"What's going on?" screamed Newby.

The Lauren at the counter looked up and gasped. She went behind the counter and came back with a broken bottle, which she waved at the first Lauren menacingly. "It's just part of your dream," said the Lauren with the bottle. "Sometimes you have to

shake them off like this. They're like nightmare hangovers." The armed Lauren took a few steps toward the Lauren that stood next to Newby. The salesman watched, mystified. The girl he had come into the diner with shrugged and leered at him, then began to fade and waver. In a minute she was completely gone. The waitress put down the broken bottle and sighed. "Did they get somebody else?" she asked.

"Who?"

"I don't know," she said. "You were the one out there. I've just been sitting in here the whole time."

"I mean, did *who* get somebody else?"

"Aunt Rozzi and Old Man Durfee, of course. Wait a minute." She picked up the bottle and started moving toward Newby. "Maybe you're part of my dream." Newby didn't fade. Lauren smiled and sat down again, patting the stool next to hers. "Come on," she said. "They'll be back any minute."

"They got Mrs. Siebern," he said.

"Oh. That's all right, I guess."

"What importance does this chess game have?" he asked.

"None, really," she said. "I mean, it won't go into Chess Review or anything, if that's what you're

asking. I doubt if anyone else in town will even find out who won. You won't have any trouble finding other people to play you. You're really very good, you know."

"I don't want other people to play," he said impatiently. "I just want to go home already."

"**YOU'LL HAVE TO** learn how to relax," she said smiling. "You have a really neurotic thing about getting away."

"I've seen some strange things in the last day," he said.

"How do you know they're real?"

Newby was annoyed. "If they're not, then I must be pretty sick."

The waitress nodded. "That's right. But there's a good chance that what you've seen is real. In which case, you're certainly not reacting with the proper horror, the essential dismay."

"My emotions seem to have been blunted," said Newby. "I think it's Aunt Rozzi's doing. If she can perform her hideous tricks, she can just as easily hypnotize me into not running into the street screaming. Besides, they're only dreams."

"Old Mr. Latcher didn't think Theresa Popover was a dream," said Lauren. "And wait until they find

Mrs Siebern on the square "

Newby looked at her closely. "I never told you that's where they got her."

Lauren smiled once more. "See? It may all be a dream. But if it's not, then you have to worry. Your emotional reactions have been dulled. You admitted that yourself. Psychiatrists call that 'planned-down affect,' in their peculiar jargon. That, coupled with the difficulty you had on the little quiz this morning, would indicate that you're well into advanced schizophrenia."

"Then I am imagining all this?" he asked, not especially concerned.

"No," she said. "You're schizophrenic only if all this is real."

"Never mind," he said. "Can I have a coke?"

Lauren brought him the soft drink. He sipped it, trying to make sense of her words. What did he know about schizophrenia? Very little, actually. Just some things he'd picked up from watching television *Medic*. The business about the split personality. He thought his brother-in-law might be like that. But why would Newby's symptoms wait until just now, here, in the tiny village so far from anything before they became noticeable? If he were going insane, how could he just calmly discuss the matter with the waitress? How did she know so much about what he was feeling?

How much of what had happened had been only dreams? Might he still be asleep?

He swallowed some more of the coke and picked up one of the discarded chess pieces, his demoted bishop. It felt heavy in his hand, in a way that dream objects never do. "This is one sure way to get locked up," he thought. "All I have to do is ask a doctor if I'm just dreaming. They'll never see me in Stroudsburg again."

"Is there a phone I can use?" he asked.

"Over there," she said. "By the juke box."

He went to the phone, fished some change from his pocket, and dialed the operator. He got the number of the Green & Greene Bus Company, and gave them a call.

"Good afternoon, Green & Greene," said the girl who answered. "Can we help you?"

"Yes," said Newby. "I was wondering if you could tell me if there's a bus from Gremmage to Harrisburg?"

"No. I'm afraid not," said the girl. "You'd have to get the bus to Oil City, change there for Pittsburgh, and change again for Harrisburg."

"Fine," said Newby. "When is the next Oil City bus?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," she said, her voice conveying true concern and pity. "You just missed it this morning. They won't be another one for a while. They only run once a week."

"I see," said Newby. "What do people do if they have to go somewhere?"

"They drive, mostly," said the girl. "That's why there aren't more buses. It all works out, don't you see?"

"Yeah," he said. Then he hung up. It had been a long shot, anyway. He went back to the counter.

"Do you think you can beat Old Man Durfee?" asked Lauren.

"No," said Newby. "I don't think I want to."

"That's wise," she said. "There's a lot more to him than most people would suspect."

"Is he, uh, going steady with Aunt Rozji?"

Lauren giggled. "No," she said. "They're just good friends."

"She'd make December Bride look like cradle-robbing."

"They do some of that, too," said Lauren. "Only in the wintertime, though. Propitiating the frost nixies, and all that."

"Hello, hello!" cried Old Man Durfee. Newby turned around to see the drunk holding the door open for Aunt Rozji.

"Hello," said Newby.

"Talking about us, were you?" asked the old woman, as she hobbled across the floor to the counter.

"**MORE OR LESS,**" said Lauren.

"I don't know anyone else in town to talk about," said Newby.

"Small men talk about people," said Old Man Durfee. "Medium men talk about things. Big men talk about ideas."

"Well, we were discussing some ideas, too," said Lauren.

"That's all right, child," said Aunt Rozji. "Don't let that old wetbrain bother you. He doesn't talk about anything."

Old Man Durfee took his place on the stool. "Well," he said, "might as well get going with this again. Whose move was it? Mine?"

"Yes," said Newby, "it's yours. Fire away."

"That was last night," said Aunt Rozji. "Today is a day for ice." Newby only nodded.

"The old hooty owl hooty hoots to the dove," sang Lauren.

"Owls are birds of death to some folk," said Aunt Rozji, smiling. "And doves, well, you know. The soul, in some symbologies. So you have a specter of destruction tempting the immortal soul. It happens all the time."

"Tammy Tammy, Tammy's in love," sang Lauren.

Old Man Durfee looked up. "Yes, that's the way it always starts," he said.

"Are you ready to move yet?" asked Newby.

"Hooty hoot," said Lauren. "That's dumb."

"Hey, everybody," called a stranger.

"Hey, Ronnie," said Lauren. "That's Ronnie Glanowsky. He has a Shell station out on Logan Road."

"Hey," said Glanowsky, "have you heard about poor old Mrs. Siebern?"

"Aw, she wasn't so old," said Newby.

Glanowsky studied the salesman's face for a few seconds. "I don't believe we've met," he said.

"My name's Newby," said the salesman. "I'm just passing through."

"You know Mrs. Siebern?" asked Glanowsky.

"No," said Newby cautiously. "I was just being gallant."

Glanowsky shrugged. "Anyway, they found her lying in the square. She's dead. Just keeled right over." At the word "keel," Lauren jabbed Newby's arm, he looked at her, and she made a kissing sound. He blushed and turned away.

"What happened to her?" asked the drunk.

"They figure she had some kind of attack," said Glanowsky.

"Well, goodbye," said Aunt Rozji.

"Goodybye," said Glanowsky. He hurried out.

"Did he come in here just to tell us that?" asked Newby.

"Probably," said Old Man Durfee. "He does that a lot. Anyway, he knows we like to keep informed."

Newby shook his head. "I really thought it was all a dream."

"It was," said Aunt Rozji. "But that's no reason that it can't be real, too."

"Watch this," said Old Man Durfee. He removed Newby's queen pawn on the fourth rank and set down his knight. Then, according to Aunt Rozji's rule, he took the knight off the board and replaced it with a pawn.

"I don't understand," said Lauren.

"Well," said Old Man Durfee jovially, "I certainly won't explain it now."

"Another rule change!" cried Aunt Rozji. "Another rule change! This ought to liven up the match."

"I can hardly wait to hear," said the drunk.

"From now on," said the old woman slowly, "whenever you move a rook, the next piece on the rank or file along which the rook traveled will be destroyed. That goes whether the victim piece is friend or foe. So be careful!"

How about kings?" asked Newby. "Hmm," muttered Aunt Rozji. "You're right. Kings will be immune, but if there's a piece beyond the king, it will be taken off the board in stead."

"Terrific," said Newby. "It's your move," said the drunk. "I move the rook pawn to Rook Seven," said Newby. "Check!" "I take the pawn with my rook," said Old Man Durfee.

"The rook becomes a pawn," said Lauren. "That's right," said Newby. "What about the rook, though? Does it destroy anything on the line it just moved?"

"No, I don't think so," said Aunt Rozji. "That power stops at the end of the board. If this were a cylindrical board you were playing on, the ray would go all the way around and catch the other rook pawn."

"ALL RIGHT," said Newby. He was getting more and more annoyed, neither the game itself nor his opponent seemed to have much grounding in rationality. The referee served no purpose at all, other than to try to aid the drunken old man. The waitress winked at Newby every time he glanced at her. Now the pieces in the game were adopting odd powers. And every minute he felt more trapped.

"Why don't you just try to get away?" asked Lauren.

"I don't know," said Newby. "I honestly admit that I don't know."

"That's a sure sign of something," said Old Man Durfee. "You ought to be running scared by now. Maybe we're having more of an effect on you than you think."

"Maybe he has a crush on Young Lauren," said Aunt Rozji.

"It could be a real Liz Eddy-Debby case," said the waitress. "You could leave your plan but nice wife to have a mad affair with me. What does your wife do?"

Newby scowled. "She's what we call in Stroudsburg a homemaker."

"See?" said Lauren. "No," said Newby.

"All right," said the girl. "I was only kidding, anyway. I don't have any interest in you at all. You don't even look like Howard Keel."

"What was all the flirting for, then?" he asked.

"Part of the scheme," she said. "To make you stay here. We needed someone to—"

"Easy there, youngster," said Old Man Durfee. "You'd better watch your tongue, or you'll end up looking like a pail full of rising dough."

"I want to know what she means," said Newby.

"I guess it's all right to tell him," said Aunt Rozji. "We needed

someone in town to look suspicious for us. We have dark deeds planned."

"More?" asked the salesman. "What do you mean, 'more'?" asked Old Man Durfee. "We haven't done anything."

"Except the eleven-year-old pop-over and the middle-aged wifecycle," said Newby.

"We didn't have anything to do with them," said the old woman. "We've been too busy planning our job. We're going to knock over the Shell station. Ronnie Glanowsky's in on it, too. It's his station."

"All the rest has been my imagination?" asked Newby.

"Sure," said the old drunk. "But now we can't use you," said Aunt Rozji. "Now that your car's been stolen, and you'll be around for a while. You'll be too well known. We wanted a stranger to pin the rap on. We like you too much for that."

"I'm glad," said Newby. "Can we knock off this game, then?"

"For now, I suppose," said Old Man Durfee. "We can finish it in the morning."

"Yeah," said Newby. "Sure."

Old Man Durfee waved to Newby, Aunt Rozji smiled, and wiggled her fingers to indicate that the salesman should run along. He did so gratefully. The chess game, for all intents and purposes, was over. That marked some kind of turning point in the day's events. It meant that, for good or evil, the old people had taken their fill of him. Was he now expendable, in a way Theresa Muldower and Mrs. Stebern had been? Could he expect to find an unnatural death, now that they had moved on to other projects?

"That's not true, what they said about the gas station," said Lauren. She startled Newby. He had thought that he was walking alone, down Ridge Street toward Aunt Rozji's house.

"I'm glad to hear it," he said. "Two falling apart people like them are in no condition to heist a gas station."

"They know it, too," said Lauren. "That's why they had Ronnie Glanowsky in on it. But he wanted too big of a cut, for one thing. And, besides, they couldn't get together on where they'd run for their getaway. The old man wanted Jamaica, and Aunt Rozji wanted swinging Acapulco."

"There's a basic difference in attitudes, there," said Newby.

"I suppose." They walked along a little more, neither having much to say. They turned down Aunt Rozji's street. "Why are you going back?" she asked.

"I don't know," said Newby. "I don't have anywhere else to go. I'll call the police in the morning. If they don't have my car, I'll try hitching



out of town."

"Oh. Be careful."

"I'm usually careful," he said.

"You came into the diner, didn't you?"

"Yeah. That was a mistake. Look, do you think I'm in any danger from them? Now that my part is over with?"

Lauren grabbed his arm, they stopped beneath a peeling sycamore, and she looked up frightened. "Don't think your part is over," she whispered.

"WHAT?" he said. She had spoken too low for him to understand.

"I said, you're still in it. In fact, your big moment is still coming up." She saw his anxious expression and smiled. "Don't be too worried, though. You won't be hurt." She waved and started walking back in the direction they had come.

"That sounded more like the dream Lauren," he thought. "The one the real Lauren chased away with the broken bottle. I like the dream better, I think." He went up the stairs to Aunt Rozji's front door. It wasn't locked, and he went inside.

"Hello," said a man in a dark suit. "You must be Mr. Newby."

"That's right," said the salesman warily.

"Well," said the man, "my name is Greg Rembrick. I'm a Young Christians' Outdoor Health leader here in town. Me and the YCOH teens were hoping that you'd play an active part in our monthly group session this afternoon. Aunt Rozji told me that she thought you'd be happy to oblige, but I can under-



stand that this comes at awfully short notice. So if you'd like to back out, we can just get on with the meeting."

"You're holding a meeting here, now?" asked Newby.

"Yes," said Rembrick, smiling. "Aunt Rozzi has been so kind to us, ever since our community social center teen canteen burnt to the ground last year. A strange fire it was, too."

"The others?"

"Oh, they're all out now, gathering different sorts of local leaves for our scrapbook. They'll be back in, uh," he glanced at his watch, "about ten minutes."

"What sort of thing will I have to do?" asked Newby.

Rembrick indicated that they should sit. The salesman took a place on one of the old woman's sofas, facing the youth leader. "Nothing difficult," said Rembrick. "We just need to have an outside adult read a short speech during our devotional fellowship non-denominational brotherhood council prayer-circle union of love."

"I see," said Newby. "I guess that would be all right."

"Fine," said Rembrick, smiling and nodding eagerly. "Fine. Thank you very much. The teens will be so happy." The two men chatted briefly, and after a couple of minutes, the younger members of the group began joining them. Not long afterward, Mr. Rembrick announced that everyone was present. He had them all stand in a circle with himself in the center. They joined hands and sang a hymn, then closed their eyes and bowed their heads, while he

recited a short invocation.

"Just read those words now, if you please, Mr. Newby," said Rembrick.

"Those words?" asked the salesman. Newby saw the words written in the air in terrifying green flames. He heard no reply from the other man. Newby stood and walked slowly toward the fiery letters. He stopped a few feet from them, and began reading slowly. "As earth the father water holds," he said in a low voice, "so air may fire in its cool embrace retain. Here the yearning mind of man entails the pinnacle of knowledge, the pit of wisdom's horror." With a sudden flicker, the words changed. Newby glanced at Rembrick and the youth group, they had all fallen to their knees, their faces contorted in strange ecstasy. He continued. "Let the vast wheeling of the universe transform their knotted bowels. Let the great sky drama of blazing suns blast their hearts, shrivel lungs and steal breath, poach brains in boiling blood. Let heaven's yawning emptiness draw up their sensibilities, let the pendant mass of all the spheres and orbs crush their bones to sacrificial powder." Newby read the last of the flickering words, and they disappeared. Rembrick and his young charges were quite still upon the carpet of the parlor, their faces stretched in the extremities of suffering. As he watched, they screamed soundlessly. A blackness escaped their mouths and cloaked their heads, a dark fog in which Newby thought he could see the stark, unwinking stars of night. The blackness quickly vanished, and the salesman knew they were all grotes-

quely dead.

CHIMES RANG There was someone at Aunt Rozzi's door. Newby panicked for a moment, then fought for control. He knew that the authorities had not been able to find any element of criminal activity in the deaths of the Muldower girl or Mrs. Siebern. What could anyone say about the corpses on Aunt Rozzi's floor? It could only be some kind of poisoning. Perhaps it was something they had eaten together. Newby took a deep breath, then went to answer the door.

"Hi," said Lauren. "Are you done yet?"

Newby nodded. "Just finished up a few seconds before you rang. Now what?"

"What do you mean?" she said, walking past him into the parlor.

"Well, what do we do with the bodies?"

"We?"

"What do I do with the bodies?"

Lauren shook her head sadly. "Don't you learn anything? What happened to Miss Popover? What did they do with Mrs. Siebern? They just left them there. We'll just leave these here for the police to find."

"I don't know what I'd do without you," said Newby scornfully.

"Look, fella," she said angrily, "I'm really glad this thing is wrapping up to a close. It hasn't been so much fun, you know. You're not the neatest guy around. I did it because I have to. I can think of better ways of spending a lifetime."

"Like what?"

"Like bumming around," she said. "Trying on gloves at Sears. Anything."

"You don't have any junior murderers' league or something?"

"The sarc remark," she said. "The emblem of the stunted intellect."

"I'm doing my best," said Newby.

"How do you feel that you've changed?" asked Lauren. "You are no longer able to state with any assurance what the correct date is. You are frequently unable to recall where you are, geographically speaking. Your emotions are not appropriate to the situation. You are rapidly exhibiting signs of sociopathic behavior. Have you detected any further deviation in your outlook since this afternoon?"

"I don't know," he said.

"Well, I think you may soon discover that you are no longer able to discern right from wrong. How do you feel about what you just did to Mr. Rembrick and the kids?"

"Nothing," said Newby. "I don't feel anything at all."

"Do you think you would have felt nothing, say, a week ago?"

"I can't say," he muttered. He stared at the misshapen bodies. He still didn't feel anything.

"With Miss Popover, you were merely a witness. With Mrs. Siebern, you helped out. Here, you were on your own. Aunt Rozji and Old Man Durfee have managed to destroy the very last shred of your old self, without your even guessing what was happening. You don't know when you are, where you are, now you don't even know what or who you are. You've become a complete non-being, a blank, ready to be stamped with the first identity that is chosen for you."

"That's ridiculous," said Newby.

Lauren smiled; the expression frightened the salesman. "Do you know what?" she asked. "If Old Man Durfee gave you his quiz again, right now, you wouldn't even know how to hold the pencil."

"Sure, I would."

"You show typical ambivalent notions, common in even mild cases of schizophrenia. Sometimes you want to run away, but you never do. Sometimes you defend those two old monsters, but you know you hate them."

"What about you?" asked Newby.

"Do you mean, how do I feel about them?" she said. "Or how do you feel about me?"

"I don't know."

"Of course, you don't. You're not supposed to. That's the whole point. You've been worn down."

Newby collapsed on a sofa. He rubbed his eyes. He felt nothing. He was not afraid. He was not disgusted. He was not at all anxious to leave. He knew that it would be a tremendous effort to plan anything. "What happens now?" he asked.

"More of the same, I'm afraid," said Old Man Durfee. Newby looked up, the drunk and the old woman had come in.

"Why do you always seem to appear while I'm sitting with my eyes closed?" he asked.

"Why do you always seem to have your eyes closed when we arrive?" asked Aunt Rozji, busily examining the bodies on her floor. "Young Lauren, would you be so kind as to call the police?" Newby laughed.

"ARE YOU amused, Newby?" asked Old Man Durfee.

"No," said the salesman. "It just seems like you're going to try to use me as a scapegoat now."

"That's an idea," said Aunt Rozji, raising an eyebrow.

"Hooty hoot," said Lauren.

"The old owl of doom hooty-hoots to the dove!" She dialed the phone and spoke to the police officer who answered.

"Ask them about my car," said Newby.

"I have some interesting statistics," said Old Man Durfee. "I took the trouble of digging these up this afternoon. It seems that for every hundred thousand persons in the United States, there are some two hundred ninety people with schizophrenia of one form or another. Of course, 'schizophrenia' takes in a large number of different disorders. But of those nearly three hundred suffering souls, only half are being treated. That leaves another hundred fifty maniacs per hundred thousand running around loose."

"Should I turn myself in?" asked Newby skeptically.

"You already have," said Aunt Rozji. "We'll take care of you."

"You already have," said Newby to himself.

"If you went into a hospital," said Lauren, hanging up the telephone, "you'd probably be locked up for quite a while."

"Thirteen years is the average," said the drunk.

"Thirteen years," said Aunt Rozji gently. "Just think of it."

"Some murderers get out in less time," said Newby.

"We don't like to talk about that," said the old man.

Aunt Rozji sat down next to Newby, and took his hands in hers. Her old skin was rough, with sharp, hard points of callus that stabbed Newby's fingers. He felt a general anxiety, without specific cause. He wanted to stay and find a secure home, or go and discover his lost identity, or something, he wasn't sure. It was the uncertainty, rather than the unusual events and the piling up of dead persons that upset him. "You may well be the victim of simple schizophrenia," said the old woman. "It has taken these somewhat bizarre happenings to point it out to you. You thought you were well adjusted and normal. It must be quite a blow to your stability to find out that you're not."

"What happened to your accent?" he asked. "What happened to Old Man Durfee's drunken wino ways?"

"Most simple schizophrenics never realize they're ill," said Aunt Rozji. "They seem to be merely a bit anti-social. They become vagrants, like Young Durfee, although his case is quite a bit different. Perhaps your brain will turn ever stranger, leading to hebephrenia, characterized by inappropriate foolishness and giggling, or, at other times, unexplained weeping. What about hallucinations? Have you been troubled by them?"

"So far, they've been rather nice," said Newby. "I haven't actually been

convinced that I've had hallucinations, you see. I'm more or less taking the word of Lauren for that."

"She ought to know," said Old Man Durfee. "She's been a hallucination often enough herself."

"Thank God you're not paranoid," said the old woman. "You're not catatonic, either. You've a lot to be thankful for."

"I am," said Newby.

The chimes rang again. Lauren answered the door, it was the police. They came in and stood around the corpses on the carpet. Newby was surprised by their reaction. Many of the police officers gasped in horror, or ran back outside, sickened. The salesman had thought that a policeman would see many such sights in the course of his career. He was amazed that they would be so affected.

"Who found these individuals?" asked a sergeant.

"He did," said Old Man Durfee, pointing to Newby.

The sergeant nodded. "I suppose they couldn't go undiscovered for very long," he said. "This isn't such a big town."

"No, it isn't," said Old Man Durfee.

"There doesn't seem to be any indication of foul play," said the sergeant. "I won't have to question you, in that case. But the final word will have to come from the coroner."

"In just a few seconds," said a small, gray man who was busily prodding the dead bodies. "Ah. Their bones are shattered from within, as though they fell from an enormous height. But there are no outward signs at all. A most curious case."

"There have been a number of them of late," said the sergeant with a rueful smile.

"I judge that they all died from some manner of apoplexy," said the coroner.

"All?" asked Aunt Rozji. "At the same time? What a strange coincidence."

"There have been quite a few of those, too," said Old Man Durfee.

"Well," said the sergeant, "I want to thank you people for your help. We'll have somebody come by in the morning to collect these jokers. I'll just ask that you not move any of the individuals here in the meantime. We'll want to get plaster molds and things like that. Clues. You understand."

"CERTAINLY," said Old Man Durfee. The sergeant waved and followed the coroner to the door. After the police had gone, Lauren turned to Aunt Rozji.

"Why do they need clues, if they

all died of apoplexy?" she asked.

"To help find a cure for apoplexy, I guess," said Aunt Rozj. "The police department has become much more scientifically minded since I was a girl."

"Now we can relax," said the old drunk.

There was an immediate hush in the dim house. In the sudden silence, Newby wondered what he had been listening to in the minutes previously: clocks in the parlor ticking, electric hum of kitchen appliances, wood creaking in the humid heat, restless tapping of fingers and shoes, noise from the street, neighbors mowing lawns, airplanes, all these sounds died together. It was perfectly still, a waiting moment, an interval, a preparation.

"Ah," said Aunt Rozj, "you will be happy to learn that everything that concerns you is now in its absolute final stage."

"That cheers me up considerably," said Newby.

"I took the liberty of ending our little contest," said Old Man Durfee. "With Aunt Rozj's help, of course." The drunk smiled roguishly at her, and the old woman laughed.

"May I enquire as to the results?" asked Newby.

"I won," said Old Man Durfee. "The enmity between us is ended. Aunt Rozj took over your moves and, with the aid of a few more spontaneous alterations of the rules, I was able to checkmate your harried king in splendid style."

"Well," said Newby, somewhat bored, "let me congratulate you. How was this marvelous stratagem wrought?"

"First of all," said Aunt Rozj, "I added a condition that no piece could be moved unless the nearest pawn of the same color could make a congruent move at the same time, legally. So each player would then be moving two pieces per turn, his desired piece, plus the nearest pawn."

"As you can imagine," said Old Man Durfee, "this cuts down somewhat on the number of available moves each player has to choose from. As it developed, I was better able to visualize the situation."

"Better than Aunt Rozj, at least," said Newby.

"Well, we all agreed to bow to her judgments. Then, finally, I was given the weapon to break your position. Aunt Rozj declared that the queen was to be given a new power. She called it the 'H-bomb capability.'"

Lauren laughed. "For an immigrant, she certainly has a way with words," she said.

Old Man Durfee gave the girl a dis-

approving look. "In any event," he said, "at any one time during the game, the queen could be placed on any vacant square on the board. All pieces, friend and foe alike, on the eight adjacent squares are considered 'destroyed,' and removed from the game, except the kings. You can see what terrible havoc this piece can wreak on any well defended position. And, you may recall, you no longer had your queen. Well, given this instrument, it was no great trouble to bring your tattered army to its knees."

"It doesn't sound like you have much to be proud of," said Newby. "It didn't end up to be much like chess."

"The rules are always arbitrary,"

said Aunt Rozj. "It's just that you're used to them being arbitrary the same way each time."

"I'm sorry," said Newby.

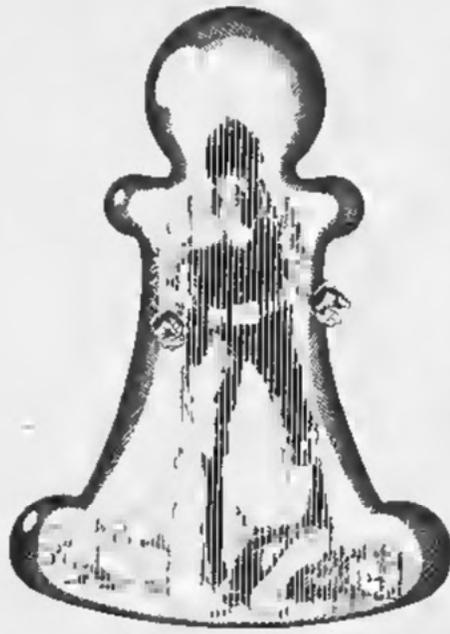
"That's all right," said Old Man Durfee.

"Well," said Aunt Rozj, standing and stretching her thin, spotted arms, "let's get going, Young Newby. Your epiphany awaits."

"What?" said Newby. "I thought it was all over. You said yourself that I was pretty much depersonalized. How can a diluted being like me have an epiphany?"

"You'll see," said Lauren, tugging at Newby's hand. "Come on." The four people walked to the door and out onto the porch. It was getting cooler outside, although the humidity





was still uncomfortable. A fresh breeze brushed through the dense leaves around Aunt Rozzi's house.

"Where are we going?" asked Newby. "Back to the diner?"

"You'll see," said Lauren.

"The diner's played its part," said Old Man Durfee. "It doesn't make any real difference where we go now. Just start walking."

Aunt Rozzi took the salesman's arm. With a shock, Newby waited for Old Man Durfee to take the other, that was how it began, both for Theresa Popover and Mrs. Sieber, Greg Rembrick and the YCOH teens had all joined hands before Newby had killed them. He was relieved to see that the old drunk had fallen back to speak softly with Lauren. He turned his attention to the doddering woman at his side.

"I WONDER if you've noticed this interesting fact," she said. "After each of the introductory interludes, you seemed to awaken as from a nap. The episodes seemed to you like dreams. To a large extent they were. To that same extent you are now."

"This is a dream?" asked Newby, not sure what she meant.

"Well, partly so," she said. "Can you think of any difference between the affair of the Young Christian Outdoor Health group and the earlier encounters?"

"Well," said Newby slowly. "I was on my own with the last one. I didn't see you or Old Man Durfee until the whole thing was over. In fact, I saw Lauren before you came in."

"That's true. And you ought to be congratulated. You handled the matter with precision, taste and dispatch. But now you're such a formless person. It is indeed a great waste. You have little effect on the world, you know."

Newby laughed sadly. "When have

I ever had any effect?"

"That's just it," said Aunt Rozzi. "We're trying to change that for you."

"I appreciate it."

"Now think again," she said. "What other differences can you find?"

"I give up," said Newby.

"Well, you've never roused from the Young Christian Outdoor Health dream. Everything's continued in an unbroken line since then."

"Yes," cried Newby. "That's true! I knew there was something wrong!"

Aunt Rozzi stopped on the sidewalk and stroked the salesman's arm. "Because we love you, Young Newby," she said, "and because Young Durfee conquered you at chess, we're going to help you. It is in our power to leave you as you are, a breathing cipher. We have done it before. But we have taken a special interest in you. We will push you that final step."

It was very dark. Newby couldn't decide whether night had swiftly fallen or if the blackness were some artificial trick of his dream. A round yellow moon hung in the sky, huge, far too big as if it were resting on the horizon instead of staring down from the summit of the sky. Newby glanced at the moon and felt an unpleasant chill. The cold yellow light seeped through his eyes into his veins. He had to look away.

He heard the ragged scraws of the evening's birds as they fought over insects. He heard the cicadas shrilling at him. There was no way that he could interpret their warning. He walked on. Aunt Rozzi and Old Man Durfee were silent. Lauren was humming. *Volare!* Newby walked past the sealed houses, each flashing tiny lights from the crystal faces mounted in windows and doors. The houses presented no threat tonight, though Newby could sense that they were merely curious observers. The solitary figures that glided within them were almost as powerless as he. They watched but they could be of no help either. The great buildings seemed to roll past one by one. Newby was aware that he was walking down a steep, shaded hill. The street was no longer paved with red brick, but instead was covered with a black material imbedded with diamond points of light. The minute beams from the blacktop tried to communicate but he would not understand.

He looked back at the houses, his only and impotent allies. They were gone. They had become massive abstract shapes, black solids blocking sharp edge swaths of the night sky. He walked past towering cubes and rectangular pyramids. The moon's

light colored them unpleasant shades of dark yellow green. The trees were gone too. The insects and birds were gone. All sound was gone. Lauren and the old people were gone.

"Hey!" cried Newby. He wanted to run. He wanted to escape, back across the plain, through the jumbled mountains of stone, until they became houses again, he wanted to run toward the single mighty tower and his silent image. He did neither. He stood and watched, as the other Newby fell to his knees and began to pray. The other Newby worshiped the terrible pillar of stone and the glowing letters carved in its side. The other Newby shrieked incoherent words, he waved his arms slowly above his head, then folded his hands in a submissive attitude of adoration.

"Don't put your hands together!" shouted Newby, horrified. It was too late. The other Newby jerked violently as though he were pulled about by invisible wires. The man's skin seemed to shatter and flake away. Newby stared as his double began to crumble, bits of formerly vibrant flesh falling to the ground and degenerating to powder. A gust of wind pulled the dust, all that remained of the other Newby, away in a misty cloud of gray.

"GOOD GOD, what's going on?" said Newby, his eyes filling with tears.

"You've molted yourself," said the voice of Aunt Rozzi. "You've left your dream self, like an insect abandons its dead, husky skin."

Newby turned to find her. The empty plain was gone. The towers of stone were gone. He was back in Aunt Rozzi's parlor. "I don't understand," he said.

"That's a very good sign," said Old Man Durfee. "If you *did* understand, we'd have more of a job to do. You're one of us, now, in a way. You're a real Gremmager. You're ready to find a job here, find a place to live, a new wife, perhaps. You're ready to help us whenever another stranger comes to visit."

"We'll let you know if we ever need you," said Aunt Rozzi.

"You're not schizo anymore," said Lauren, walking over to hug him. "You're just well, plain. You don't have to worry about anything ever again."

"Good," he said.

"It's not everyone that kill his own dream self," said Old Man Durfee. "Some of us don't even have one."

"Don't be pompous, Young Durfee," said the old woman. She turned again to Newby. "You're completely assimilated, now. You're very lucky. This town is very selective."

about whom it chooses.

"It can afford to be," said Old Man Durtee.

"Because it's not such a big town," said Lauren.

"Hootyhoot," said Newby.
"Hooty hoot."

Newby moved through a flat landscape the ground was hard beneath his feet level without rock or curb or root. The vast shapes dwindled in number as he passed, until at last he could see only one, far ahead of him on the moonlit plain. He hurried toward it. It was the only clue to where he was, how he might get out, who he might be. He ran, and he seemed to run for hours, but the black bulk in the distance did not come closer. After a time, the moon settled below the horizon, leaving Newby to the pale light of the stars.

The monstrous shape became a black patch on the black shade of night. He ran and he was amazed that he did not grow tired.

WHEN AT LAST he reached the gigantic green-black thing he saw that it was not a smooth facade, as the other shapes had been. Bits of starlight caught in grooves and pits on the object's face. Although the block rose hundreds of feet above his head, all the peculiar hollows were within easy reach. Newby stretched his hand out and felt one of the markings, his fingers traced a letter A. He explored further, all of the carvings proved to be letters. He could not read the entire inscription at once. He had to search out its meaning, letter by letter, word by word. He raised himself up and deciphered the first word, "This," he said aloud. The next word, "World," he said. He was able to read them more quickly, "This world," he said, "this island of stone. This trimmed and dressed block of marbled mud. This hanging ball in space, this single monument to me. I am alone. I, this block of stone. I, this captive world. I read these words. I become these words. I become this mighty pedestal of stone, whose function is to give form to these words. I become this reckless celestial sphere, whose function alone is to support this mighty pedestal of stone. I am here, alone and my function is to read these words." Newby paused, his voice becoming hoarse. He looked back at the letters he had already traced. Their indentations into the rock had filled with a spectral lumination. He could easily read them, now, the words yet ahead, though, were still hidden in the darkness.

He continued, "If any doubt my existence, let him doubt himself. If any question my purpose, let him

question himself.

Newby felt suddenly afraid. His throat felt dry, his blood rushed, roaring in his ears. He could not stop. As the words, the rock, the world careered through the empty night, let him who reads these words shake within himself like a long dead leaf rattles withered in the winter storm. Newby felt his mind coming loose, his personality falling

from its anchored place in the intangible secret place of his soul. There were no more words. Newby stepped back and stared at the steady radiation that outlined the letters. He took a few more paces away from the immense stone thing, he turned and saw himself still standing by the rock face, his hands plunged to the wrists in the cold white flames. □

