

## THE END GAMBIT

CHIP BROWN

I did not know how far gone my father was until we were playing chess one night a year before he died. I was visiting my parent's "villa" in an assisted-living community in North Carolina. For decades they had lived in suburban Connecticut. Why they picked a place in North Carolina's "research triangle" to assist them in their final years they never really explained. It's possible they didn't want to crowd any of their four grown children who were scattered around the country far from the Carolinas; it's also possible they were just misinformed about the not-so-clement winters in the upper parts of the South.

Dad looked tired, but he'd perked up when I suggested chess. He'd taught me to play when I was in grade school; we'd been scrimmaging over chess boards for more than fifty years.

"Black or white," I said, shaking the ash-and-walnut pieces from a green felt bag.

"I'll take white," he said, sipping a vodka tonic he'd fixed himself. Mom brought out a bowl of pretzels.

We arranged our troops. Dad thrived on competition of any kind—touch football, tennis, croquet, golf, poker, gin rummy, Boggle, Trivial Pursuit, even Parcheesi: he'd bet on which raindrop would be the first to slide to the bottom of a train window. During family Scrabble sessions my mother would often become so exasperated by his interminable hunts for seven-letter words that she would stalk into the kitchen to fetch an egg-timer. It was Mom who best captured his love of games when someone once asked why her husband didn't like to dance. "Because nobody wins," she said.

Dad brought out his kingside knight and the match was underway. Experience had taught me to be wary of the havoc his knights could cause, galloping forward on aggressive attacks. He had a knack for springing knight forks, threatening two of my pieces at once. It was not in his nature to crow but when glee got the best of him, he would cry "The deadly fork!" and trumpet the fateful motif from the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony.

But that was a long time ago.

Now he pushed his king's pawn and launched his other knight. True to form, he was intent on one of his signature blitzes. But after a dozen moves I could see his knights were over-extended; his position was bad and getting worse. I found myself reluctant to press my advantage. I began making passive moves. I passed up captures. Left pieces unprotected. Didn't double rooks or anchor bishops. I played the way I used to play when I was trying to interest my son Oliver in chess and the goal was to keep the game going, not to win.

Dad didn't recognize the fix. He seemed glad to have what he thought were honest chances. His mood brightened when he plucked a pawn I'd more or less left out for him as you'd leave out a saucer of milk for a stray cat. But rather than park the pawn on the table with the other captured pieces, he stuck it in the bowl of pretzels. A few minutes later, when he reached for a pretzel, he grabbed the pawn. I watched with alarm as he lifted it to his mouth and started to bite down.

"Dad, that's not a pretzel..."

He pulled the pawn back from his mouth and examined it.

"Of course," he said, but he seemed perplexed.

"You can tell the difference, can't you?" I said, trying to mask my concern. "Between a pretzel and a pawn?"

"Sure," he said, putting it with the other pieces. "The pawns are unsalted."

I laughed—as much in nervous relief as for the flash of wit.

The match moved toward the end game. He had no real chance of winning but stubbornly fought on. His congenital optimism was always

anticipating a change of fortune or an eleventh-hour redemption. He stared at the board for ten minutes, seemingly engrossed in what chess players call a “deep think.”

“Dad, it’s your move,” I said gently.

His hand hovered over the pieces, and then suddenly swooped down on the black king— *my* king—and whisked it five spaces along a diagonal toward his enfeebled white knight. With a decisive swipe, he removed the knight—his own knight—and set my king down in its place.

I don’t know how long I spent staring in shock at that checkered forum, caught in all the years we had met over it. I knew his memory was getting worse. Not so long ago during the onset of what he called his “benign senescent forgetfulness,” we had joked that if we ever really needed to stump him during Trivial Pursuit, we could just ask him what his Fidelity password was; so many times he called the help line because he’d forgotten it that I thought the brokerage might beg him to move his IRA elsewhere. In recent months he seemed unable to remember what he’d just ordered in restaurants, or even that he was there to eat. But there’d never been confusion as conspicuous as this.

And as the depth of it engulfed me, games we’d played years ago came flooding back: daring rook sacrifices Dad in his heyday had orchestrated to break a deadlock; triumphant knight moves that bid him to sing out his little jingle from the Fifth, a jingle now resounding as much more than the herald of chessboard doom. I felt again the power of lines I had once read in an early review of the great Beethoven symphony: “We become aware of gigantic shadows... rocking back and forth [which] close in on us and destroy everything within us except the pain of endless longing.”

“Dad,” I said at last, when I dared look up. “You’re white.”

“Oh. Yes. That’s right,” he said. He seemed almost embarrassed, anxious to gloss over the breach. “Yes. Of course.”

Later, I wondered: Why did I just sit there like a forked pawn? Why didn’t I just go along with his mad gambit and change sides? Chess players often make an exercise of turning the board around and changing sides in the middle of the game. If only I’d been quicker, more attuned to

the moment. My father’s gift for being in the moment was one of the qualities I revered about him most. It was expressed in his ability to listen; in the timing and spontaneity of his humor. My mother knew how to milk the comedy of a story, but Dad could never be induced to repeat any funny thing he’d said, no matter how hilarious. When my son Oliver was six he had a gizmo called a “stomp rocket” that launched a missile on a burst of air. Oliver came running into the house one day having figured out how to send a rocket a hundred feet above the trees. “The stomp rocket works!” he cried.

“What?” Dad said.

“The stomp rocket works!”

“Oh,” Dad said. “I thought you said the stock market works. My hopes soared.”

I imagine my father understood life as an ongoing improvisation, and knew intuitively that it is a game with only one rule—you had to be there, which is to say here. Here. Now. Ready to embrace whatever is on offer. Ready to say yes. Yes, we will play the positions we find ourselves in even though we are, as Henry Miller once said, “fate’s pawns.” And why not? Why not try to make from the common nonsense of our time some uncommon sense? Why not subvert the dull order of everyday life with a touch of constructive dissociation? How blazingly vivid and fresh the world seems when you unlearn the habit of rote conjunctions and call everything by the wrong name! Wake up! Take a pretzel for a pawn!

But I am discounting the tenacity of chronic patterns. Perhaps it is not so easy to keep from sleeping through one’s life, numb to the wonder of it. Not for the first time I missed my chance in that other game. Soon medical personnel would be asking my father what month it was and could he name the president of the United States; soon my beamish hopes for adventure in the antics of a disordered mind would give way to pathos and to harbingers of the end.

Dad put my black king back on the square where it had been. Perhaps it took all he could muster to remember where that was. And he restored his white knight to its proper place as well. Tempted as I was to ask if

he could tell me his Fidelity password, I was lost for words. My father seemed to have sunk into himself, as if he'd become aware of gigantic shadows falling across the board. Fatigue stole back into his face. A few moves later, he resigned.