

*Chris McPherson*

## **The Game**

She was only seven when her mother died. Her father taught her the game in hopes that the abstraction of it might distract them both from their very real grief. She took to it like a calf to cow's milk, and within a month or two he couldn't beat her. Three months after that *he* died in an industrial accident.

The social workers judged her a cold, unfeeling child, because they did not know the grief that burns till it freezes. One of the workers fancied himself a good player, but it gave her no pleasure to reduce him to helplessness in scarcely a dozen moves.

Her school teachers judged her insolent and dull because she scorned their pity and was aware of their boredom with themselves. Her schoolwork showed occasional flashes of brilliance, but more often it was left undone, as she pondered the deeper mysteries of thirty-two pieces and sixty-four squares.

Even as a young child she found few opponents who could stand for long the devastating precision of her game. So she took both sides of the battle, and disdaining whole libraries of theory, reinvented the gamut of openings, and developed a grasp of the middle game which reduced most openings to irrelevance.

She moved through institutions, schools, foster homes, like a fish swimming through strange seas. Everything touched her, but nothing seemed to cling. Once, a concerned administrator, judging her preoccupation unhealthy, (particularly in a girl) forbade her the board. Even a tantrum would have gratified this pretentious individual, but she saw through him and declined his gambit. She easily fashioned a makeshift set from scraps of paper, and when even paper was forbidden her she made a set of exquisite beauty from the residue of her dreams, and fought her battles in the unassailable privacy of her mind. Years later she would credit this administrator with giving her the push she needed

to transcend the physical limitations of the board and move on to the vastly more rewarding realms of the pure mental game.

Her life was not exciting, but her dreams were rich and colorful and she was free in her own mind. And then one day she met a man. He was a teacher of mathematics. He was tall, he had a striking chin, and he played the game with confidence and imagination. He had heard of her interest in the game, and he took an interest in her, and badgered her to take him on. She resisted at first, as she admired his egotism and was impressed by his chin and did not wish to humiliate him. In the end he would not be refused.

It was an ugly game. For the first time in her life she tried to be polite across the board, but when he took her gentleness for weakness and became cruel, she could not help herself, and crushed him. Even when his cause was clearly lost he declined a graceful exit and hung on bitterly to the end.

She felt terrible, though of course she didn't show it. He was furious, though he laughed, and pretended to make light of it. but she knew there would be only one sop for his bruised ego, and she acquiesced when he seduced her. She sometimes thought afterward that only her guilt at beating him made a seduction of what was really a rape, so powerful was his need to compensate. He became her first lover, but the word is false. There was no love between them for the pattern was set as firmly as that between the black pieces and the white, and while the variations of the game are infinite, it is always a game of domination, never of tenderness.

It wasn't until much later that she recognized this, however. She was young, and hungry, and if he did not satisfy her hunger she was young enough to look for the lack in herself, not in him. And if every time she proved again her superiority over the pieces he felt it necessary to prove his more forcefully among the bedclothes, he *did* introduce her to the local club.

Here she created a sensation, and this was gratifying to him, though at times it was bitter gratification, and when he smiled grimly over her triumphs she could not help but comprehend his envy. Still, it was a pleasure to her to find competition at last.

It is true she swept them all before her, but with every victory there was another challenge, and sometimes she was tested. Soon she was representing the club in tournaments and visiting exciting cities. Her life was opening like a flower.

After several decisive triumphs in local events she received an invitation to compete in a famous city against players of real stature. The

famous river, the warm lights and the high rise hotel were at least as exciting to her as the names of her opponents, but her lover was in a state of great agitation, lecturing her at length upon the strengths and weaknesses of her adversaries, browbeating her with foolish admonitions till she wanted to weep. She didn't weep. She tried to calm him with her body, but he could sense that she was humoring him; his anger and resentment got the better of him. He found himself impotent in response to her advances, and this made him more angry than ever. Only when he raged and frightened her did his courage return.

It was an ugly scene. She cowered and he tore her clothes and struck her and forced her as she whimpered. Afterwards he begged her forgiveness and told her that he loved her. She found this as objectionable as anything, but she said nothing, and shed no tears. Next morning, in the taxi to the hall where she was to play her first round match, she handed him a note to say that if he ever touched her again she would kill him. In spite of his magnificent lack of sensitivity, and his monstrous ego, he knew when she was telling the truth. He stayed at the hall long enough to see her establish a position of overwhelming dominance over a man who had been a force in the game long before she was born. He caught the next flight home.

When she knew he was gone, from the hall and from her life, her smoldering anger burst into flames of inspiration and she played as she had never played before. By the second or third round she was the talk of the tournament. One of the famous masters present, a man renowned for tactical thoroughness and preparation, if not inspiration, managed, playing the white pieces, to force her to a lengthy and tedious draw. This was the only blemish on her record, and she returned home with a purse and a considerable notoriety.

Her life changed. The notoriety poured off her like spray off a whale, but, possessed for the first time in her life of an income as well as an occupation, she was good to herself. She rented a large, comfortable apartment and furnished it with the stark, the strange and the beautiful. She bought a stereo and many records. Many of the players she associated with were highbrow types, fond of classical music or modern jazz. Her late boyfriend had actually attempted to instill in her a love of Italian Opera. Free to indulge her own tastes, she stocked her record library with blues and country rock. Members of the local club, or visiting grand masters, who dropped in for a game and a drink, sometimes found it amusing to watch her ponder over the pieces with her headphones filling her ears with Howlin' Wolf or the Flying Burrito Brothers. There were jokes around the circuit about her taste

in music and her style of dress, which lately tended toward the casually punk, but none about her technique at the game, which became more inspired and devastating every day.

As her reputation grew the serious players in the field studied her games, searching for a weakness to exploit. But they shook their heads in frustration, for they could find no pattern to her play. Each game was a new adventure to her. Her approach was always fresh. Apparently erratic and inconsistent play, which in another would have seemed rash experimentation, under her hand seemed to lead always to new avenues of brilliance.

It is true she made mistakes, but she did not repeat them. She did lose, but rarely. Those who had known her longest (her late lover among them) had predicted that when, inevitably, she reached a level of play where she was no longer invincible, she would find defeat bitter and hard to swallow. But she seemed to take each rare defeat with the same detachment with which she had always enjoyed victory. Perhaps, having mastered the game by playing both sides against herself, she had learned the most important truth.

She always thanked the man who beat her, and then, as if to prove she meant it, put the lesson to good use and turned around and thrashed him, when they met again.

She lost some games, but she won most of her matches, and very soon her name was appearing in journals of the game as far afield as Moscow and Tokyo. One radical publication went so far as to tout her as the future first female World Champion, and she was interviewed and profiled in several women's magazines on the basis of this possibly rash prediction. She bought herself a flashy little car and drove it fast.

She never repeated a mistake across the board, but unfortunately she was not so wise in her personal affairs. She lived now in the world of the game, and she took up with men who played to win, and some of them, when they could not subdue her on the board, were determined to do so in other ways. Some were kind to her, but she saw the pattern emerging even with these: the American Jew who taught her to smoke and swear; the Hungarian prodigy who laughed with delight when she beat him, the first time, but learned to cry inside and hate and punish her as the others had done.

Once, having lost to one of the living legends of the game, in a battle that would be talked about for months over beer and board, she sought him in his hotel and threw herself at him. She hoped, I suppose, that a man who had humbled her could give her something real. But he was cold and frightened. He told her that sex put him off his game, and

besides, he preferred boys. In the deciding round of the tournament she disposed of him in a businesslike manner. She shut herself up inside her life, and would not play except for money, and would not love at all.

She gave up smoking, having never liked it anyway, but she swore often, to herself, and played her records at top volume, and when the neighbors complained she bought a house with no neighbors.

One day, as she pulled away from a red light, her little car made a terrifying noise, and grumbled to the curb. She had nowhere in particular that she wanted to go, but she still used all her swear words twice each, and then, with the careful deliberation of a shrewd tactician, she looked around and spotted a small garage three blocks away.

The mechanic was young and greasy, and busy. But he hauled himself out from under the old Chev pickup and grinned at her, told her how to make herself a cup of tea on his hotplate. He crawled back under the pickup and finished whatever he was doing, drank the cup of tea she had made for him, holding the cup with a clean rag so as not to get grease on it.

It was his opinion that she had thrown a rod, that the rings were gone, that the bastard who sold her the thing had lied through his teeth and should be shot at dawn. He used a chain and the pickup to tow her car onto his lot and offered to drive her home.

Why should I go there? she said.

So, he smeared himself with green jelly, and when he washed the grease was gone and he shone like a newborn baby. He closed the garage and took her for a drive in the pickup.

He asked her what she did and she hesitated.

I'm involved with the race relations board, she said. It was the American Jew who had called it that, observing that the game was just a primal struggle between black and white. She didn't know why she wanted to lie to him, but she laughed when he said,

Does that mean you only have relations with men of other races? I'm an Armenian, will that do?

Her absence from the weekly club functions was not remarked upon; she had been known before to disappear into herself for days or weeks at a time. But when she failed to show for an important international event, there was a flurry of concern. She didn't answer her phone; her house was apparently deserted. Someone noticed that she had stopped by to pick up her mail at least, and it was this fact, as well as the disinclination of these game oriented people to meddle too

deeply in affairs of the real world, which prevented anyone calling the police.

In the end one of her friends recognized her little car on the lot of the small garage, and then, with a start, realized that the slightly greasy rear end protruding from under the hood was hers as well.

When he questioned her she smiled and said that she had been busy fixing her car and had forgotten the match. And since he was standing there did he think he could hand her the nine millimetre socket from that red box. He succeeded in locating the wrench and handed it to her, but when he asked her about the even more important tournament, scheduled for the following weekend, she was noncommittal, and suggested that if she should be unable to make it he was welcome to fill in for her.

Heavens, he said. I'm not in that class. I'd be demolished.

Shit, she said, it's only a game, and disappeared once more under the hood.

When this strange encounter was reported at the club a delegation of the most forceful personalities in the group was elected to reason with her. There were three of them, all her ex-lovers, but the timing was poor.

She and her new Armenian friend had decided after some preliminary exploration that the only thing to do was to yank the engine out and replace it with a dandy little four cylinder job he had just finished rebuilding. Under his instruction she had finally disconnected everything from the dead motor, and the delegation came upon them as they had affixed the block and tackle and were painfully beginning the extraction from the maw of the heavily sedated vehicle.

Not one of the three ex-lovers offered to lend a hand. Two had their good clothes on and the third was just a lazy son of a bitch. She was short with them.

Listen, she said. If I play in this tournament, will I win?

Of course, said one.

I don't see why not, said the second.

If you don't then I'm a son of a bitch, said the lazy son of a bitch.

Then why should I play? If I lose you will all be disappointed in me, but if I win you won't be surprised, or any happier than you already are.

But you will be richer, pointed out the lazy one.

Ah, but you see, I am too rich already. And if you guys don't give us some room we are liable to drop this big black mother on somebody's little pink toes.

The Armenian mechanic found this scene hysterically funny. She hadn't kept her vocation a secret from him for long. By dawn there had been no secrets, except those we all keep even from ourselves. He had not been awed and she had been immeasurably relieved to learn that he did not play. He had a wife and daughter somewhere he hadn't seen in four years. They spent a lot of time working on her car, and a lot of time in bed. In the evenings he took her fishing. She had never been fishing, and she took to it as passionately as she had taken to the game so many years before, or as, more recently, she had taken to him.

I almost wish, she said wistfully one evening, when the mayflies were hatching and the brookies rising to pick them off, that my old man had taken me fishing instead of teaching me to play that game.

I don't, he said.

Why not?

Because you'd never have made a shitload of money, fishing, he said.

Ah ha. You *do* only love me for my money.

Naw. I just meant, if you hadn't had a shitload of bread you would never have been able to afford to buy that expensive clunker of a car. You'd have had to settle for something plebeian like an old Ford or Chev, and you'd have fixed it yourself if it broke down, which it wouldn't have, not like that fancy piece of European shit you drive, so I'd probably never have got to meet you. That's all I meant.

It was in bed on Sunday morning, after she had awakened from uneasy dreams, and found comfort in his easy lazy embrace, that he told her *his* theory about the game.

It's all sexual, he said. Black and white, Yin and Yang, the male and female principles. Look at the phallic nature of the pieces, at the way the game builds back and forth, the foreplay of the opening, the penetration of the middle game, the crescendo climax of the checkmate. The Queen is all over the board, using all her flexibility to surround and envelope the solid steadfast King. As for that gent he can only move back and forth in short swift motions till he is what? Killed? Captured? No, mated! Take it from me, when your old man taught you that game, after your mother died, he was only sublimating his natural incestuous yearnings.

You're quite the amateur psychologist, aren't you. So tell me, Doctor Freud, do I need a ring job?

When my divorce is final. In the meantime I recommend a lube job.

Okay, but you'll have to let me use your grease gun.

But later he brought the subject up again. I wonder, he said. When your Mom died, what you really needed from your Dad was a love big

enough to replace the one you'd lost. But he didn't know how to give it to you; he was too hurt himself, and maybe a little afraid of his feelings. So he gave you the game. And since that was all you had, particularly after he was dead too, it became your substitute for love.

And now I've got love, so fuck it.

Why? I don't see as you have to say fuck it. Maybe even saying fuck it gives it more importance than it deserves. Sure it's only a game. But what isn't?

And so, when she appeared at the next important event on the calendar, and won it in convincing style, her ex-lovers and erstwhile friends and enemies all surmised that she had got over her little aberrant fling and returned to the fold. They were wrong, of course. She continued to play the game, when it pleased her to do so, and always played it much better than any of them ever would. But she never did become the first female World Champion, and she never let it interfere with her fishing.