

# **Knight to H3**

A Short Story

By Danae Echeverria

The scholarship applications were back in April and the results were announced in an auditorium. One by one, the Provost read out the list of scholars and when I didn't hear my number, my heart sank. I thought I had done well on my SATs, though unfortunately it seems it was not well enough to warrant much in the way of scholarships. But I needed this scholarship if I even wanted a chance to go to law school. I was originally going to major in pre-med because I knew money was the only way to improve my fortunes (I did not luck out in the financial department) and doctors make a lot of money. Initially I had thought with hard work I could overcome a fundamental distaste for the sciences, that perhaps with even harder work I could simulate something like a talent for it. But this was not the case. After my first year at a small college in my home town Dublin, I realized I absolutely hate anything science related. So I decided to switch to literature and work my way towards law school because as it turns out, lawyers also make a lot of money—if you're good enough.

I switched to English literature without telling my parents. They had made it very clear that I was expected to help my father run his business after high school; my father had agreed for my going to college under the impression that I'd be doing pre-med, a field that he had assured me was most profitable and would steer me clear from asking him for money for the rest of my life. But it's not like he had intention of giving me money. My father was mean and our house was ugly, and my mother didn't pay much attention to me ever since my two younger brothers were born so I didn't get many encouraging words from her either. They refused to complete the financial aid papers that I needed to go study abroad and so eventually, I stole them from my father's office and did them myself. I studied at the small college until I had saved enough money to just barely make it to New York to take some classes, transfer my credits, and finish my degree. I was such in an agony to escape my life and make something of myself. To this day I do not fully understand how I managed to find myself in the circumstances that brought me to the city, but here I am.

The month that followed the scholarship announcements was a solitary and surreal one. I have a habit of walking when I feel hopeless and that day I walked twenty kilometers. I felt lost. I had been planning to work in the city for the summer and cover rent with my wages, but a week before the announcements my boss told me they were cutting back my hours. I could just about make rent that way but I'd have nothing left to live on and now I probably wouldn't be able to save enough for next semester. The first week I was hired I had a feeling the restaurant was going to go out of business and so I was furious with myself for not applying anywhere else—I had thought about it constantly for weeks. Soon I developed a habit of wandering through the park by my apartment after classes, swaying through the paved pathways and observing people passing by. On one particular day, I spotted an old man sitting alone at a picnic table; he was setting up a chess board. I had never played a game of chess before. A board with 64 squares, 32 pieces on it and a set of rules about how each piece can move; it seemed pretty self-explanatory, just requires a bit of thinking. The old man took out a piece of cardboard that said: Play for \$5.

You had to pay to play a game with him? Why would anyone want to pay to play with some random old man who by the looks of it, was taking out a bottle of vodka and pouring himself a glass. I dug my hand in my pocket and found a crumpled up dollar bill. It wasn't so much that I wanted to play chess. To be honest, I thought it would be boring. But I was intrigued by the old man and his odd behaviour. He wore outdated Madras Shorts revealing a pair of spindly, hairless legs. The veins of his arms protruded like bluish snakes and his mouth was dry and lips cracked; he kept wetting his lips with his tongue and he had the occasional raspy inhale. I got the feeling he was not long for this earth. I felt old too, not in years but in worry. I was barely twenty-three and had nothing physically wrong with me. Part of me still hoped I could make it to law school, but my money was slowly dwindling and I was living off of instant ramen so the reality of that seemed to blur as time went on. But I couldn't even worry much about that because I had bigger problems: to say that being broke and homeless scared the hell out of me, would be a gross understatement. I walked up to the old man and he looked up at me.

"Finally! I've been here all week and no one has stopped to play," he said.

"It's probably because you're charging people to play chess with you. New York's an expensive city—the most expensive city in America. Most people rather save their dollars."

"I'm not charging people. They can play for five dollars. If you beat me, I'll give you five dollars. If I win, I keep my five dollars."

I didn't understand his logic—what was in it for him? But I could tell his English wasn't too good so I decided to avoid the questions. "I've never played before," I said.

"No problem— I teach you. What's your name boy?"

"Tom."

"Nice to meet you, Tom. I'm Benny."

I took a seat across the table from him and he took out an empty glass from his bag.

"Drink?"

"Not at twelve in the afternoon, no" I said. "But thank you."

"More for me," he said and poured more vodka into his own glass. He began by teaching me how to set up the board and then he walked me through the rules and how each piece moves.

"Opening pieces got no support, they are alone. Bad opening move is path to defeat but good opening move is a strong impression," he said.

Starting as white, he moved his hand toward the chessboard and moved one of his pawns two squares forward. Benny told me he was about six years old when he played his first game of chess. Two old men were playing at the local park and for two hours he watched them play until one man asked him if he wanted to play. Once the old men finished teaching him with a couple games, they told Benny to come back next weekend. It was followed by many more weekends spent learning the game. I lost to Benny five times that day and I was not even close to winning five dollars in any of the games. After that day, I decided to learn how to play it properly and so I did some research on openings and soon realized there is a whole lot more to chess than I originally thought.

The average game of chess usually ends in forty moves but somehow the old man always managed to beat me in twenty or less. I had started to quite enjoy playing chess with Benny. I hadn't made many friends in my classes and so this was the only social interaction I would have besides work. By the end of our games, I often found myself in zugzwang which is a German term Benny taught me when a player is in the position that no matter what move they make, it is a bad move. The word comes from German zug 'move' and zwang 'compulsion' so that zugzwang means "being forced to make a move." Any move I could make would probably lead me into a disadvantage; and the game we were playing now seemed to be one of those games. Benny had started off the game with the Sicilian Defense. It was a favourite of his. We were about thirty moves in (I lasted a lot longer this time) when I reached out my hand to lay down my king and surrender and suddenly, Benny told me to wait.

"Why are you giving up? You always give up. Don't you want your \$5?"

"I just blundered two critical pieces. I'm at a loss. I'm in zugzwang."

"Zugzwang... always giving up in zugzwang. Resign only if you are truly hopeless. Do you feel truly hopeless?" he asked.

"I'm not sure."

"Do your best. Then win, lose, or draw. You will have your self-respect and the respect of others," he said.

I retreated my hand from the king, looked at the board and spent more than ten minutes examining what piece I could move. Benny saw something that I didn't and I had to find out what it was. After a long think, I found a move I could make—but it would be expensive. I would have to give up a rook for only two pawns. That would but give me some breathing room but I'd still be at a disadvantage. I picked up the first of the pawns and replaced it with my rook. Benny smiled at the board. I snapped up the second pawn by moving my knight to H3, leaving my queen unprotected. He could just reach out and capture it with his king. Benny stared at the board for a minute and then looked up at me. He smiled.

“Wonderful! That was a great game,” he said extending his hand. I smiled and shook his hand. We looked at the pieces on the board and in my head I moved them, and I think Benny did too. He takes my sacrificial queen. Then my knight charges by checking his king which retreats to the only available square and my knight uncovers the bishop discovering check. His king must move. The only square available to him is the one that he had just vacated. The knight rushes back to check the embattled monarch, and the scene is repeated. It was a draw.

“You weren’t truly hopeless,” he said.

“I guess not. But I still didn’t win.”

“Sometimes you lose a piece and the game turns out harder than expected. Get over it, learn from it, and move forward. Zugzwang forces you to move forward even if you’re in a bad place—it is not always game over,” he said and moved the pieces to their starting positions. “Now, let’s play again.”