

# ***Mindgames***

By

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The 5,000 headed and 10,000 arm-pitted beast surged in an aural and olfactory cacophony. It shouted, screamed, sweated, and stank. From out of its thousands of mouths came babble in many tongues. Curses, cheers, and more than a little spit. The noisy and reeking mass encircled Jerry, and while he was not blind, deaf, or anosmatic, he didn't notice a thing.

He didn't see the gargantuan screens that would magnify him and his adversary to colossal proportions for the thrill of those same salivating spectators, the inevitable tight close-ups transforming the embarrassing wart on his chin into a small boulder. He was unaware of the many cameras surrounding the small table on which the battle would be waged, bringing the spectacle to millions worldwide, many of whom were recording the event for posterity and might see the wart over and over again. His eyes closed, he was aware of nothing but his breath slowly and deeply taken in and released.

His mind was a razor, honed for the cerebral battle that was about to unfold. Soon the crowd's roar would ebb and the arena would become a silent sea of almost unbearable tension as these warriors locked into mental combat before the eyes of the world.

For only one could be the champion of Rock, Scissors, Paper.

He was drawn to the game like tomato sauce to an expensive white shirt. He read all the books. He knew the opening patterns. He studied the old masters. He'd clawed his way up through the ranks of lesser players for this shot at stardom, his talented digits carrying him to one victory after another. The game pervaded every aspect of his life and his thought. Every night, as he slipped into sleep, he dreamed of palms and fists and fingers.

He'd analyzed his opponent in excruciating depth and detail. She was a demon, a hell-spawned beast of grinning malevolence. Her eyes should have been registered weapons. They pierced unblinkingly, looking into another's soul while admitting no access to her own. Her smile was a terrifying vision of perfect teeth that might just as well have been venomous fangs. Collette DuPont, champion of the world.

It was whispered that she possessed mystical powers, that she could read another's thoughts or even make an opponent change his mind at the last instant, throwing down an open palm where a closed fist was intended. Many who had been defeated by her had given up the game forever, their egos

crushed into a fine powder, scattered to the four corners of the Earth by the slightest of zephyrs.

Jerry looked up from the table. The champion had not yet seated herself, and time was drawing close. She was standing off to the side, casually chatting with a colleague. Her conversation appeared to be about matters far removed from RSP. Her hands made no shapes remotely resembling a pair of scissors. Occasionally she made a gesture representing, Jerry guessed, a rolling pin in action, and he was certain there were no variant games that used this, so she was probably spending the tense moments before defending her title discussing baking. She would not cut off her conversation and bring herself to the table until the very last minute. All part of her style, and like everything about her, intimidating as hell.

Jerry took in the chaotically surging crowd with a slow wide sweep, then closed his eyes again. Collette strolled over with a slow and deliberate champion's gait and the crowd roared anew. He tried to focus his thoughts, on the game and not the opponent, a basic principle of RSP honored by generations of champions, and ignored by leagues of losers. Still, her very presence overwhelmed him, and Jerry could think of nothing but her.

She had been a prodigy. Born the sixth of seven children to a destitute family in the slums of Paris, Collette seemed destined to a life of drudgery, peddling long pieces of bread as her family had for generations. When she was scarcely four years old, her father taught her the game as a means of both free entertainment, and as a way of settling disputes with her siblings over who would get the last remaining piece of cheese. When she began to reek of cheddar, her father knew he had a gold mine.

He took her to the Parisian parks where RSP players whiled away the afternoons and exchanged francs. Cocky, seasoned veterans scorned the challenges of such a small girl, stinking of fermented dairy to boot, and expected no resistance. They were stunned by her performances, and Collette soon collected enough from these matches to keep her entire family fed with Roquefort, if they so desired.

By the age of eleven, she was the French champion, her name was known throughout the world. She was the *wunderkind* of RSP. An obscure sport with a small but devoted following around the globe blossomed into a serious pastime for millions. The game grew so quickly that several magazines devoted to it sprang up almost overnight, most notably, the highly respected *RSP Record*, the rather avante garde, *Scissors!*, and the quirky *RSvP*.

She captured the world crown at 17, stunning the international RSP community by defeating an opponent a full 40 years her senior, a mysterious Romanian known only by the single name Soltza. The gypsy disappeared after his defeat, and the world never asked where he went. Some rumors claim his mind was so shattered that he has taken up tic-tac-toe, convinced he can work out a way to guarantee a win. The mighty had fallen hard.

Collette held on to the crown for the next eight years, trouncing all challengers mercilessly.

Jerry was not intimidated. He could not afford to be. A nervous RSP player might just as well throw down his hands completely at random, such was the importance of intense concentration. Zen, he thought. Balance. Find the center. Be like Charlie Parker. Play perfectly, without a thought.

The arena was still abuzz, but it was quickly dying down to a crowd of whispers as the time for the match to begin fell to just under thirty seconds. Jerry looked up at his opponent for the first time. A terrifying beauty, her thin eyebrows, pencilled dark to match her jet black, sharply cropped hair. A smile stole across her face. It was a smile that said, "I am going to eat you up and spit you out and pick bits of you from between these teeth for hours afterward," though that is only a rough translation. Jerry smiled back, masking the slight intimidation he was already struggling to overcome. Unbeknownst to the audience, the match had really already begun.

The referee nodded to both of them to assume the ready position. The crowd's lingering murmurs were instantly curtailed and the silence of the arena hung in the air like thick sticky August fog. The referee raised his hand high and began the three count,

"1"

Jerry's mind flashed through all the opening theory he knew. Would she go for the traditional and safe Rock opening? Nothing so mundane would suit the dramatic flair of the champion, but that might be part of her plan to take him by surprise, waylay him with the unconventional tactic of playing something perfectly conventional. Tournament players shunned the daring Paper opening, but Collette might just do it. That was the sort of brazen and bold play that turned her opponents into terrified mounds of quivering jelly.

"2"

No, he decided, she would never go for Rock. It was too obvious. *Look into her eyes!* he shrieked silently to himself; *Be on both sides of the table! If you were Collette DuPont, Champion of the world, what would you throw?*

"3!"

The referee shouted and both contenders threw down their hands. Jerry snapped out of the slow motion of the throw into the real-time of reckoning, the first initial surge of adrenaline coursing through his flesh, a now-useless vestige of evolution, offering no assistance. He envied his ancient ancestors who could have used that shot of speed and faced only the fangs of saber-toothed tigers. He looked down as if to see what he himself had thrown, but he knew that at the last moment he had decided to throw down Rock. He did not bother to look up to meet Collette's deadly smile, for looking down he saw her palm extended flat and triumphant.

A discordant noise disrupted the music in his head. He'd sounded a sour note that Bird would never have played, even were he pursued by large and hungry cats.

*Why? he chastised himself. Why? The one thing you were sure of is that she wouldn't throw the rock, so you should have thrown scissors. It would have beaten paper and tied scissors. Play the odds, damn it! Play the odds!*

He had little time for self-rebuke before the referee had his hand up again. Jerry readied himself for the next throw.

"1"

*Steady on, old boy, don't lose your cool, he thought. Two papers in a row is pretty unlikely, so you should throw rock. It'll tie rock and beat scissors. But I just threw rock, he thought, and she knows that I have a reputation for double-rocking. . . Damn it! Damn it! . . . Balance. Balance.*

"2"

*Maybe she will double paper, especially if she expects me to double-rock, but that would be so obvious. Does she really think me that transparent? No time! Throw something!*

"3!"

Two hands slammed the table and both formed the same "V" pattern with their fingertips.

A long low "ooooohhhh!" rippled through the arena and then respectfully died away.

That was close, thought Jerry. Then he realized that his first instinct had been to go for the rock, which would have won, and were it not for the millions watching, he would have slapped himself. *Damn it, stop second guessing!* he reproached himself. *Go with your gut!*

"1"

This time he looked her right in the eye, trying to beat her at her own game, but she didn't flinch. The tied scissors hadn't rattled her in the least. She exuded not a pinch of anxiety, but only a palpable self-confidence that would have sent a grizzly scampering.

"2"

She was as unreadable as a text in Swahili in the dark. Jerry could glean nothing from her. Her eyes held no secrets. They were weapons and nothing else.

“3!”

Why Jerry threw Scissors again, he couldn't say. It went against basic RSP principles. But it was a triumph of the visceral over the cerebral. His guts had served him well. Collette had again thrown what had been so successful in the opening throw and had established her great psychological advantage, but this time, Jerry's scissors vanquished her paper. Jerry looked up, hoping to catch some betrayal of her feelings in her face, but she afforded him no such pleasure. Her relaxed smile was unwavering and she simply raised her hand into the ready position and prepared for the next throw.

Though he had just won his first throw of the match, it was Jerry who was shaken by it. He breathed in again, precious few seconds to focus his thoughts, find that center. The referee began to count, and when the hands came down, again they tied, this time with rock. Jerry wiped the sweat from his brow, now beading up as fast as he could remove it. Collette was as cool as a cryogenically suspended cucumber.

She bested him on the next throw, smashing his scissors with her rock. Her vicious grin lengthened ever so slightly, such a subtle and calculated maneuver that Jerry shuddered in its wake.

Four throws followed in rapid succession. Collette won two of them. One was a paper tie. Jerry managed to win one.

The referee called a brief recess, as per standard RSP tournament rules after nine throws. The score stood at 4 and 2. Championship matches were always decided when one player reached 5 points. Jerry collapsed in his chair. Collette casually got up from her own. She nodded politely to Jerry. “Pardonez moi,” she said before sauntering over to her team of advisors and her entourage.

Jerry made no such move, though his own people waited for his consultation. There was nothing they could tell him, he knew. It had to come from within. This is a game of will, a will to win. Without it, all the strategy in the world would avail one naught.

He stood up and stretched, as if that would help. Tic-tac-toe was now more appealing than it had ever been before. He watched her talking with her advisors, trying to read their lips, but then realized he couldn't speak French. Truth be told, he couldn't read lips either, so the entire effort was pointless.

Again he cleared his mind of all thoughts. He took a long breath inward, and as he released it, he exhaled all his intimidation and fear with the carbon dioxide. As he breathed in again, he filled with confidence as his lungs inflated with air. He searched deep within his soul for his fabled zen, and then in a miraculous instant, he let the struggle go. Enlightenment came over him, like that mystic moment he'd read about in all the tales after the master has smacked the student with a stick and said something utterly

imponderable. For the first time in his life, those stories made sense. Every koan he'd pretended to understand before now resonated with meaning. He could hear one hand clapping in his mind's ear. He understood the dog's Buddha nature. The scales fell from his eyes.

Collette strolled back to the table, as lightly and carelessly as if she were strolling down the Champs Elysees on a spring afternoon. She was unaware of the sea change in her opponent, but he greeted her with a grin worthy of her own. It was offered so unreservedly and confidently that even she was moved. It was only the slightest twitch, but Jerry noticed it. Her own smile wavered for just a moment. He had her! Silently, Jerry cheered to himself.

The referee made the signal for the ready position and the susurrations of the crowd ceased as the combatants prepared for the next throw.

Jerry maintained eye contact throughout the count and threw down his closed fist without a moment's hesitation. His expression did not change as he saw her smashed scissors on the table, useless.

Up went their hands and on the count of three they came down again. It was an exact repeat. Collette's scissors were again vanquished by Jerry's indomitable rock. The crowd could not resist a sustained "ooohhh," followed by scattered whispered commentary that ceased only after a stern look from the referee and repeated flashings of neon "Quiet!" signs.

Now Collette was starting to sweat a little. Jerry was thrilled. He was riding a wave of adrenaline that could have awakened an alcoholic hippo early on the morning of New Year's Day.

The tension in the arena reached a fever pitch. The count stood at four each. One more decisive throw and it was all over. The ref went through the count, and the crowd oooohhed once more, the longest and deepest "oooohh" to ripple through the energized arena. Collette had thrown down rock, as had Jerry yet again! Three rocks in a row he had thrown! It was almost unheard of. For a championship match it was pure insanity. Collette trembled visibly, as commentators accompanying the live satellite feeds around the world noted in 18 languages that the champion had never looked so flustered. This man was breaking all the rules! He had thrown conventional wisdom out the window, and hadn't had the consideration to lift the pane first.

Scattered cheers, shrieks and last second wagering shattered the silent tension for a few moments until the disruption was quelled under stern admonishment from the referee, neon signs, and a few ushers.

The crowd was tearing itself apart, ready to explode. The television cameras zoomed in. The whole world was watching and waiting. It felt as if everything were in slow motion, and the ref probably did move a little slower. Who could blame him? This was his chance to be a part of history. Why shouldn't he make it last? With great ceremony, he raised his hand.

"1!"

Would Jerry throw a fourth rock? This was truly unheard of, in fact. Such a thing only happened with novices. No championship match, or even upper-level tournament had ever seen a quadruple throw of any kind.

"2!"

But even a triple had never been seen in a world championship match before, and this from a player noted for double rocking! He was a madman! Anything could happen!

The crowd tensed. This was a moment of truth, every fraction of a second its own tiny eon. Jerry and Collette's eyes were locked into one another's. Yes! He would do it! The lunatic! He would throw a fourth rock, even if it spelled his doom, just to go out in a blaze of glory and be remembered forever. Collette grinned as she threw down her hand. . .

"3!"

And there, for all the world to witness were Jerry's middle and index finger extended in what was an appropriate victory sign, for Collette's hand was extended flat, much as it was on the first throw of the match, which seemed an eternity ago. Jerry reached across the table and made a little "snip-snip" gesture, which was not actually against the rules but wasn't considered very polite.

The arena became a circus. An absolute riot. The crowd poured from the stands and swept Jerry off his feet in defiance of the security police who may as well have instructed a tsunami to heed their toothless authority.

For days on end, the news was filled with stories of the upset of the century and Jerry was assured of his immortality. Membership in RSP clubs swelled throughout the world, its second great renaissance an even more significant growth than the one following Collette's ascension.

The next year, a computer defeated Jerry and no one was ever able to beat it. Within a few years, people stopped playing it as a competitive sport at all. The magic was gone.

Children still settled disputes with it. It was still good for that.

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