

**ZUGZWANG**  
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# **ZUGZWANG**

## **CHARACTERS**

RAYMOND	Chessplayer, 60s, fastidiously dressed
STEVE	Raymond's nephew, 20s, casually dressed
BARNEY	Big and scary
BUTCH	Bigger and scarier

## **SETTING**

The action takes place in the dining room of a small, dank, dimly lit restaurant. There is an entrance on one side and a door leading to the kitchen in the other, and a storeroom door on the back wall. In the center of the room is a blackboard on an easel that reads B&B's BEASTRO across the top. The space beneath is divided into three columns and is full of misspelled words.

The first column reads: Weeklee Speshul is chick in pot pie, fruit cup, and lettice salad

The next column reads: Disserts we got are just, vanilla or choclut

The last column reads: Rude Custimers (underneath are eight hashmarks, a fiver and then three more)

## **TIME**

present day

(Raymond and Steve enter the restaurant and sit at a table at the front of the stage. They are the only customers. They are deep in conversation and do not notice or read the daily special blackboard.)

RAYMOND

... about the time I maneuvered Johannes Zuckertort into a classic zugzwang?

STEVE

Zugwang? What is that again?

RAYMOND

Here, here! Are you paying attention? Pay attention! Zugzwang occurs when you maneuver your opponent into a position of imminent peril. There is no move one can make without irrevocably moving into danger. Your opponent, in short, is *doomed*.

STEVE

Doomed.

RAYMOND

DOOMED.

STEVE

Doomed.

(looking around)

Isn't it a little dark in here? Did we take a right at the Parkway?

RAYMOND

So! It was queen's pawn to king's pawn four, and he idiotically took my rook. I then moved king's rook to queen's bishop five to capture the knight and forced him to take back!

STEVE

Shouldn't we have taken a *left* at the Parkway?

RAYMOND

Now! I've left his remaining knight without an arm or a leg or an eye and you KNOW that rooks eat knights for breakfast, and so I move my queen to king's rook three and VOILA!! ZUGZWANG!

STEVE

I think we were supposed to take a left at the Parkway.

RAYMOND

Ahhhh, Houston! I won my first tournament here as a young boy.

STEVE

And what is that smell?

RAYMOND

...the 1955 Region VI Scholastic Championship.

STEVE

Ammonia?

RAYMOND

(kitchen door opens, cigarette smoke wafts out,  
then Barney enters)

My family and I dined here at Au Cochon de Lait the evening before, so I  
always dine here when I play Houston tournaments.

STEVE

I think it's ammonia.

BARNEY

(as he walks up to their table)

Whaddle it be?

STEVE

Oh! Hello!

RAYMOND

(to Barney)

Ah, garçon! We need two waters with lime, no ice, in chilled glasses.

(to Steve)

The best French food in Texas, when one must eat French food in Texas. Did I  
ever tell you about the time I ate Dover Sole at Chez Casimir near Gare du  
Nord?

BARNEY

HEY! Whatcha havin'?

STEVE

(pulling a plastic menu from behind the napkin dispenser)

Please sir, I think we need another moment.

RAYMOND

(to Barney...just barely)

And this table needs wiping.

BARNEY

(calling toward kitchen)

BUTCH! Get out here and wipe down da table.

BUTCH

(kitchen door opens, more cigarette smoke wafts out...  
Butch enters wearing blood-spattered apron, cigarette  
dangling from his lips, and roughly wipes table.)

We're almost outta bleach. Used up two big jugs on the customers from last night.

RAYMOND

(to Barney)

We are rather rushed, if you DON'T mind!

STEVE

(as Butch and Barney exit to the kitchen)

We're fine, we're fine! No hurry!

(Alone again, Steve passes a second plastic menu to  
Raymond..)

Here, here. Hurry! Let's order.

(As they look at the menus, Butch opens the kitchen  
door—more cigarette smoke wafts out—quietly drags a  
body across the back of the restaurant, opens the door at  
the back wall, shoves the body in, and returns to the  
kitchen. Butch follows him out and walks up to the  
diners.)

BARNEY

(sets down two glasses of water)

Ok, so dis week's special is chicken pot pie, fruit cup, and some lettuce salad for six bu

STEVE  
(to Barney)

Thank you, sir.

RAYMOND  
(taking a drink of water)

My good man! This is not what I asked for!

STEVE

Oh, no, no, no...it's okay.

RAYMOND

Now please bring us two glasses of water in *chilled* glasses, *no* ice, with a twist of lime.

STEVE

It's fine...please don't trouble yourself!

BARNEY  
(yells to the kitchen)

HEY! BUTCH! We got any limes?!

BUTCH  
(from the kitchen)

LIMES?

RAYMOND

Limes.

BARNEY

LIMES!

BUTCH

(Poking his head from behind the kitchen door, cigarette  
smoke wafts out.)

Limes?

RAYMOND

LIMES. For our WATER. And these glasses are not chilled.

STEVE

It's fine. We're fine.

BARNEY

Whaddya mean not chilled??

STEVE

Definitely should have taken a left.

RAYMOND

I said NO ice. CHILLED glasses

STEVE

Please, sir...I'll have the special.

BARNEY

Peach cup or pineapple cup?



STEVE

Pineapple cup.

BARNEY

And whaddaya mean no ice? Ain't they cold with the ice in there?

STEVE

Yes. Absolutely!

(Butch opens the kitchen door (more cigarette smoke wafts out) and drags a second body across the back of the restaurant, opens the door at the back wall, shoves the body in, and goes back to the kitchen.)

RAYMOND

(putting down the plastic menu)

OH MY GOD! Never MIND! Just bring two coq au crème avec haricot vert et pêche melba pour le dessert.

BARNEY

Hunh?

RAYMOND

What I always have here! COQ au crème avec HARICOT vert and PÊCHE melba for dessert.

STEVE

He'll have the special. Two specials please. He'll have the pêche...PEACH cup.

RAYMOND

That's CREAMED chicken with GREEN beans and vanilla ice cream with PEACHES. What IS that *smell*?

BARNEY

Two chicken specials with lettuce salad and fruit cup. One pineapple cup. One peach cup. What kinda dressin'?

STEVE

Please sir, what kind do you have?

BARNEY

Got white dressin and green dressin.

STEVE

We'll both have the white dressin. Uh. Dressing.

RAYMOND

MY GOD MAN! Why are you just *standing* there?!

(Barney makes a face and scratches his head.)

STEVE

Thank you SO much, sir. Two specials.

(Wanders over to the kitchen door, stops, makes another face, scratches his head, opens the kitchen door...cigarette smoke wafts out.)

BARNEY

Hey...Heya BUTCH! Toteboard's light.

(During the following exchange between Raymond and Steve, Barney walks over to the blackboard and picks up a piece of chalk. He stands for a moment, scratches his head, and makes another hashmark under the “*Rude Custimers*” column. He steps back, pauses, tilts and scratches his head, gives a “what the hell” shrug, and crosses through the four marks to make a fiver. He steps into the kitchen and wheels out a bucket and mop, opens a gallon of ammonia, and pours it in the bucket. He walks over to the rear corner and picks up a shovel, opens the kitchen door (cigarette smoke wafts out), holds up three fingers, and mouths *TWO MORE*. Then on very light tippy toes, he slowly walks back to the table holding the shovel over his head in an about-to-strike pose.)

RAYMOND

Now, it’s 11:50. We ought to make it back to the convention center by 1:30, if traffic allows. Did I ever tell you about the time I played a game of speed chess with Donald Byrne in the Los Angeles airport?

STEVE

(hanging his head, neither man notices Barney)

Doom.

RAYMOND

He opened with the Danish Gambit, so of COURSE I surprised him with queen’s pawn to queen’s pawn four.

STEVE

Doom.

RAYMOND

Flummoxed as he was then, he *thought* he recovered by taking my king's rook with bishop to queen's knight six in the seventeenth move. But that was a BIG mistake.

STEVE

Doom.

RAYMOND

*Naturally*, I moved my queen to queen's bishop three and he *stupidly* countered with pawn to queen's bishop four, allowing me to brilliantly advance queen's rook to queen's bishop seven, pinning him in the sixth line against the king's rook and therefore ensuring his complete and utter DOOM!

STEVE

Imminent DOOM!

(Stage lights out as two clanging sounds are heard.)

**END OF PLAY**