George Potter sighed at the cruel fate that compelled him to go through life burdened with a nocturnal affliction. Rays from the street-light, filtering through a gap in the curtain, caught the lampshade and threw a shadow on the ceiling. George stared at the shadow and tried to make it represent something new. But it refused to resemble anything except a black bear. While he watched, the black bear faded slowly into a dirty polar bear, then disappeared altogether as night tipped over into dawn.

He sighed again, a sigh that went unheard because of the jangle of the alarm. Ethel stopped in mid-breath, slapped the clock to silence, yawned, stretched, and jumped out of bed. She wrapped her short plump figure in a fuzzy pink garment. "Good morning, George. It's time to get up." Her blue eyes were clear and bright.

George moaned and rubbed his gritty, bloodshot, brown ones. Once he was up he had great difficulty with things like toothpaste and shoelaces. Later, at his office, he had trouble distinguishing the debits from the credits. In the drug store at noon he was yawning into his vegetable soup when Henry Williamson slid onto the stool next to him.

George didn't care much for Henry. Henry was a round-faced beaming man who still had all his hair even if it was gray. But today George was so demoralized that his troubles came spilling out. George admitted he had a severe problem.

He suffered from insomnia. All too often he stumbled to bed at 11:30 after fighting to keep awake until the end of the news, only to find that once in bed his heavy eyelids recoiled as though held by a tight spring and released a flurry of night thoughts like pigeons from a coop.

He tried everything from warm milk and hot baths to counting sheep and picturing the word sleep on a blackboard, written with each inhalation and erased with each exhalation. He tried taking his age, 55, and counting backward. He even doubled it and counted back from 110. He supposed he could count the gray hairs on his head, but as there were less of them each night that would be more depressing than somniferous.

Months ago he had learned that none of these devices produced the desired effect. Driven by the circumstances, he worked out a careful pattern. Night after night, feeling he was the only person awake in a world of the sleeping, he would get out of bed, don robe and slippers, and shuffle out to the kitchen leaving Ethel, breathing gently, alone in the bed. Ethel slept like the gold-mining stocks he had once bought from a friend.

He fixed himself a pot of hot chocolate and settled in his over-stuffed
chair in the living room. For exactly one hour he worked crossword puzzles in the stack of magazines on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. Then George moved on to the jigsaw puzzle and for precisely one hour he fitted pieces together. He studied the shape and color of each particular piece before picking it up. He prided himself on his ability to choose the correct piece before touching it with his fingers. A certain number of pieces fitted in this manner was a good omen. But if he made too many errors, if the pieces he chose didn't slip into the allotted spots, it meant sleep would be more elusive than ever that night.

Leaving the jigsaw puzzle, he moved back to his chair and selected a book from the row of current bestsellers on the second shelf of the bookcase. He read for exactly 30 minutes. Often this was a slow and gentle soporific, bringing on a yawn by the end of the first chapter and drowsiness by the end of the third.

The top shelf of the bookcase held his last and most desperate measure. Here he kept publications of the latest political activities, and he read these for 45 minutes.

He must follow this routine meticulously. If he deviated by so much as one minute, then all was lost. But if he followed his schedule exactly, then sometimes -- oh, sometimes! -- he was rewarded with a few hours of blessed sleep. Indeed sometimes, a certain number of pieces fitted in this manner was a good omen. But if he made too many errors, if the pieces he chose didn't slip into the allotted spots, it meant sleep would be more elusive than ever that night.

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Starts out Enid Star and ends up rats dine. But I always fall asleep before I get the middle part worked out."

George had no faith in anything Henry might suggest, but that same night when George had gone from the crossword puzzles to the politicians and was still awake at 4:30, he felt he had nothing to lose. He got level right off. A few minutes later he had snip pins, a revolutionary new sewing gadget. He was working on ten net when sleep swarmed over him.

The next night with something very near panic he abandoned his carefully worked-out schedule -- the crosswords, jigsaws, bestsellers, and politicians that had served him long if not faithfully. With nervous trepidation he hesitantly embraced this new endeavor. He reviewed the previous night's crop, then produced reel leer and devil lived and snap pans. The last one was a special kind of cookware, he thought, floating on clouds of sleep. From then on there was no stopping him.

He was ecstatic. He was getting six or seven hours of sleep where before he only got one or two, sometimes none. It wasn't long before he was doing sentences. Warts level straw was his first. After that came Pat repaid a diaper tap. He was rather proud of that one. No more single words -- grander creations were ahead.

In his delirium of joy there was something George failed to notice. Any addict could have pointed it out to him, but George went along happily building up his palindromic power without realizing that it was taking stronger and stronger doses each time before he drifted off to sleep. The night he finished Henry's Enid Star he was back to a mere two hours. But he couldn't wait to tell Henry what he had created. Enid Star lived ere devil rats dine.

One morning two months later, after no sleep at all, he sat down at the breakfast table and blurted out to Ethel, "Mort's war on time did emit no raw storm." He was too groggy from lack of sleep to catch the error in the first and last words.

Ethel stopped dishing out scrambled eggs to stare at him. "Well, there's this guy Mort," George said, "who was extremely angry about buying all these products on the time-payment plan, so he --"

"You're sick, George," she said, dumping eggs on his plate. "You better see a doctor."

"Rot cod?" George pooh-poohed that idea. He wasn't sick. Far from it. At work his mind seemed to clack away like a well-oiled computer. True, he felt a little tired now and then and his boss was becoming a mite unreasonable about George's nonchalance in the matter of debits and credits, but other than that, George never felt better.

His excitement with the game became so high that like all fanatics he wished to share the enchantment and bring in converts. He took to waking up Ethel when he had worked out a particularly intricate treasure.

The first time, Ethel responded with dam IT1ad and George soared to dizzying heights of happiness. He could see it all now -- he and Ethel lying side by side through endless nights of palindromes. She would be the Anna to his Otto, and edit to his tide, the loop to his pool, the -- -- -- -- -- -- -- --

But alas, this sweet dream did not come to pass, because when he woke her on a subsequent occasion she threw the pillow at him, yelling she had to go to work in the morning. Reluctantly he was forced to the conclusion that her first response represented the state of her mind and
that she had not grasped the delights of the game.

But George wasn't discouraged. Periodically he would wake her to share a new find and each time he hoped she would lovingly join him in palindroming through the long dark hours.

Not only was Ethel stupidly uninterested in the palindromes, but he noticed she was beginning to behave oddly. She seemed to get thinner, and there were black smudges under her eyes. Any unexpected noise sent her flying apart like a startled cat. Sometimes she stared blankly into space or just sat and whimpered. She definitely wasn't her usual self.

Perhaps it's her age, George thought. He renewed his efforts to arouse her interest in his game. Almost every night he would wake her to astound her with a new discovery. He would have been willing to do it more often but the time came when she refused to speak to him after being awakened.

One evening, six months after it all began, George felt he was ready. He intended to compose the greatest palindrome of all time. He was so eager to get started that he could hardly wait until the news was over before he rushed off to bed. He plumped his pillow, lay on his back staring at the black bear on the ceiling, and flexed his mental fingers. This was it. He was ready and confident. All his rigorous training had led up to this supreme moment.

While Ethel tossed around making herself comfortable he did a few warmup exercises. Civic. Sagas. Solos. By the time he completed these simple scales, Ethel was sleeping.

Midnight. Time to begin. Adrenalin coursed through his body and his heart jumped with the thrill of challenge, this greatest of all challenges.

George wiped his sweaty palms on the blanket and took a few deep breaths. With talent such as his there was no need to be nervous. In a very short time he had selected his beginning words. Pat. Let.

At one o'clock he could see that he'd have to make notes. His was the caliber of champions. This creation would be much too long to figure out without writing it down. He switched on the lamp and rummaged through the drawer of the bedside table to find pencil and paper.

Ethel opened one bleary blue eye and glared at him. "George, what are you doing?"

"It's okay," he said. "It's coming along fine."

She put the pillow over her head.

George scribbled hastily for moments at a time, then chewed on the end of the pencil while his brain worked at lightning speed. All went well until three o'clock. At three o'clock he was stuck. At 3:30 he was still stuck. He howled in frustration and pounded the bed with his fist.

Ethel reared straight up in bed, looking around in confusion. "What?"

"A little bit of a problem. But don't worry. I'm not going to quit."

Ethel mumbled something that sounded like never-get-any-sleep, but George was too involved in his words to hear clearly. She punched her pillow and turned her back on him.

A half hour later he was still stuck. He placed his hand on the mound next to him and shook it. "Ethel?"

"Mmm?"

"Ethel!"

She sat up and shook her head groggily. "What is it?"
"Ethel, tell me a word that ends in r-e-m."

"What? You woke me up at four o'clock in the morning to ask me for a word that ends in r-e-m? You're crazy, George. That's what you are. Crazy." Her face got dangerously red and she started to vibrate like a rocket about to take off.

George waited tensely, hoping the vibrations meant her mind was working on r-e-m. At first George was hurt, but then he understood. Of course. Ethel was quite right. He must solve the problem by himself. Otherwise it wouldn't count. He had almost ruined his night's work by asking for help. He sighed and rested briefly, letting relief at his narrow escape cool his sweaty brow.

Then he went back to it. It was, indeed a knotty problem. Theorem seemed to be the only word in the English language that ended in r-e-m. And that word was totally useless to him. He strained and suffered in agony while his brain toiled on. Then at last he had it. "Oh ho," he shouted, then repeated it backward, "Oh ho."

The mound under the blankets muttered.

"Harem," George told the mound joyfully.

He worked brilliantly and steadily until five o'clock when he began to get drowsy. He got up, not bothering with the robe and slippers, and made a pot of strong black coffee. He put this, along with a cup and saucer, on a tray and carried it back to the bedroom. The empty cup tended to rattle just a little.

As he was placing the tray on the bedside table, Ethel leaped out of bed, ripped off the blankets, and dragged them behind her out of the room. George stared in puzzlement until she disappeared into the dark of the living room. Then he poured a cup of coffee and went back to his creation.

At 6:30 he finished the pot of coffee and the last word at the same time.

"Masterful! He held the paper at arm's length and read it, then clasped it to his chest. Magnificent!"

"Ethel," he shouted jubilantly as he ran into the living room. "Ethel, I've done it! I'm finished!"

Ethel wrapped in blankets was lying on the couch. She grabbed her shoulder and jerked it back and forth. "I'm going to read it to you," she said. "But first let me explain that it's a note from this boss to his secretary. The boss is planning a lecture series for small towns and the secretary knows of several local men who want to give lectures. One wants to talk about a nomad. You understand? It starts out Pat. That's the name of the secretary. Pat, Let--"

"Red rum!" Ethel yelled, erupting from the blankets and racing to the kitchen.

George paled. No, no, he whispered. "On, on," Ethel replied, returning with a knife. Waving it above her head she ran toward him shrieking, "Bats! Bats! Bats!" and she plunged the knife into his chest.

"Enog esoog," George gasped as he crumpled to the floor. Ethel dropped the knife and staggered wearily to the bed.

In the afternoon when she got up she found the paper lying next to the body. It was covered with rusty brown spots, but she was still able to
read it.

Pat,

Let one rustic at a time hammer. "A hag, nomad, evil madam lived among a harem" may emit a tacit, sure note.

L. Tap

When she showed it to the psychiatrist he said it was definitely the product of a disturbed mind.

At her trial the judge was very sympathetic. He said that owing to the extreme provocation of the conditions leading up to this tragic event her action was understandable and under the circumstances was "no evil, Madam. Live on."

A DICTIONARY FOR BAD SPELLERS

Robert C. Gilboy’s Spell It Fast (Acropolis Books, 1981; paperback, $5.95) is based on the premise that even if you don’t know how to spell a word, you should know in what category it belongs — therefore, he supplies sixty lists of 50 to 700 words apiece which can be scanned relatively quickly for the word in question. A sampling of topics: animals (birds), architecture, building materials and construction, cities (foreign), drugs and remedies, flowers, foreign words and phrases, human body, islands, languages, music (composers), mythology, names (girls), occupations, politics and government, scientists and explorers, sports, statesmen, and violence. I doubt that many readers of Word Ways have much trouble with spelling, but some might find this book useful as a memory-jogger in solving National Puzzlers’ League puzzles and the like. This book is no substitute for such comprehensive (but out-of-print) category word lists as the 1951 Reversed Dictionary of Classified Categories, which gives all the words in Webster’s Second Edition for 34 different categories (including some as specialized as ‘worms’ and ‘saddlery and parts of harness’). A number of Gilboy’s categories are also found in dictionaries such as the New York Times Crossword Puzzle Dictionary by Pulliam and Grundman.