



THE CHAIR

For Dr. Stanley Palombo

New Fiction
By Barbara F. Lefcowitz

He knew the wounded old chair was in pain yet Dr. Z. could not bring himself to put it out of its misery. The eczema-like rash on its once shiny leatherette arms, the scars and pits created by the dug-in nails of generations of patients, the yellowed guts that poked through the tufted seat cushion, especially where its buttons had been torn loose: He knew the chair was suffering but still chose to keep it alive so after the last patient of the day left he could turn to it, at first to stare in wonder, then gently to ask questions. What dreams, what anguished secrets, what litanies of recollected childhood insults had been ab-

sorbed by this chair! What deep impressions had been left in its flesh!

Whom else could he ask, probing gently of course, the name of that stunning woman from the early days of his practice, the woman who had peeled off a strip of the chair's skin when telling the story of her rapacious uncles, a story so terrible it had made a lasting imprint on both his head and heart. What had happened to her, he wondered. Had his carefully chosen words helped her to live a satisfying life after she freed herself from his care, or was she still cowering somewhere in misery, her face beaten, her once lovely hair hanging in shanks? Only the chair could provide an answer and often it was reluctant to do so—not because of any moral compunctions but because given the great number of patients who had sat in its lap facing him as he listened intently from his own chair, his feet resting on its hassock so his patients could focus on the soles of his shoes if they wished to avoid his eyes, the chair sometimes became confused.

But even if the chair could not an-

swer, he continued to ask questions. The bearded man who threatened to kill the small boy his wife refused to let him see, the man he had to eject from his office under police guard: Was he behind bars or cheerfully tossing a frisbee to one of the neighborhood kids? The plump woman who thought no one in the world loved her, twisting one of the chair's buttons as she haltingly spoke: Had she at last found happiness?

And so it went on, though his present patients never ceased to complain when the chair's exposed nails or rough skin tore their sleeves, when the seat of their pants got stuck in one of the chair's great canyons. One woman even threatened to peel off what remained of the leatherette skin, thus exposing everything the chair contained, never mind previous patients' rights to privacy. Went on until one day the chair slumped over onto the worn oriental rug carrying Dr. Z. with it—though by the time the custodian came to clean the office that night it was impossible to tell that the doctor himself had actually been sitting in the chair at its penultimate moment. So many colleagues and former patients attended the chair's funeral that they spilled out onto the street in front of the chapel. Dr. Z. managed to get through the rites with dry eyes, but soon afterwards, having with much anguish replaced the late chair with the closest replication he could find, he decided to give up his practice.

His own young replacement ordered a jaunty modern chair from Finland, its frame painted with so many layers of bright yellow lacquer its back and arms could not absorb a single secret. And no matter how hard people tried, they could not leave so much as a scratch, at best a fingerprint the young replacement would quickly rub off with one deft stroke of a kleenex. Soon nobody even wanted to leave a mark. None remembered a dream or a catastrophic childhood moment. And certainly not a single patient stayed in treatment long enough to make an impression of any sort—assuming it was even remotely possible to impress steel.