

Chess Keys:

The Backward Pawn

by Rachel A Schechter

Gangly, he is, all tall arms and sprawled legs, lip-twisted, limp-wristed, shy, unapplied, everywhere eyes. Peter Woodhouse. I look at his mother Janice.

"I'll pay you anything you want," she pleads, in a tight, tired voice, "If you can get my son to focus on the chessboard for an hour, even 30 minutes. *Anything.*"

I smile and pat her shoulder; she bursts into tears that seem long overdue.

"I—I'm sorry," she sniffs, "I've tried everything I know for Peter. Countless teachers. Social Workers. Psychologists. I—this is so embarrassing."

"Why don't you tell me about Peter?" I say kindly. "And please, sit down, my next class doesn't arrive for an hour."

She takes a chair, takes a deep breath:

"He's 13. Severe, well, yes, severe ADHD, that's what all the tests say. I've home-schooled him since Covid—but the isolation was terrible. I mean, his overall intelligence is good. Fifth, sixth grade levels. *He just can't focus, he just can't concentrate—on anything.* Plus, he's slightly autistic—can't bear to be touched. Do you think you can help him?"

I smile and nod, swallow a bit of skepticism. My experience with ADHD and Autism is very limited but the research indicates that chess can strengthen students' patience, focus, perseverance, action/consequence reasoning, and creative and analytical skills.

"Of course, we can help him, Janice. That's what we do here at Treasure Chess." I gesture to our slogan on a wall: "*We build confidence, character, and community...one student at a time.*" I leaf through his IEP. Math good, verbal good. "Is he violent with other kids?"

"He's a lamb," Janice smiles, "Covers his head, rocks, and cries if anyone yells."

"Food allergies?"

"None."

"What's this about his 'lack of control'?"

Janice clears her throat, assured Peter is out of earshot, and leans toward me:

"Whenever he gets a little nervous, he'll tell you he has to go to the bathroom."

"And how often is that?"

Her shoulders slump:

"Every ten minutes..."

"He urinates every ten minutes?"

"No, that's the thing. *He doesn't.* He just leaves the room, goes to the boys' room, washes his hands, and returns a few minutes later. Occasionally, he goes."

"That's odd..." I muse.

"*Is it too odd?*" Will that disqualify him?" Hands to her head.

"No, no," I say, always up for a challenge, "He can start with my fifth/sixth grade group."

"Thank you, Miss Rachel, thank you so much! What about the cost? Just name it."

I can hear my accountant: "Charge her double, triple, you have debts. You wonder why?!"

I study mother and son discreetly: clothes threadbare, disheveled hair, shoes cracked and torn, Peter oblivious and clearly forlorn, and Janice's eyes, worn, so worn. Quick hand to the top button of her coat.

"My husband lost his job during Covid, but things are better now, I ..."

I sigh. Covid devastated all of us. The entire world was still reeling. Fortunately, I'd been able to lock into a spacious storefront and set up shop. As the owner was a chess buff, the rent was negligible. Kids couldn't wait to get back onto the board. I had more students than chess pieces.

"Whatever you can afford, whatever you're comfortable with," I say, handing her a class brochure.

"Oh, but I want to—"

I open my hands:

"Look, we've all known hard times. You're *not* alone. Prices are in the brochure. And we also offer chess scholarships."

Janice composes herself. "Do you really think chess can help him?" I look to Peter again—he's curious and disinterested—touching the boards, the pieces, studying the ceiling, the floor. I smile, half-shrug.

"I promise I'll do everything I can. The game can work wonders."

"When can Peter—?"

"Tomorrow. 4:00. No equipment necessary."

Janice points to a large, gilded pirates' treasure chess on the floor:

"What's that?"

"Oh," I laugh, "Pirates, treasure, you know, we throw money into it and donate to local charities. Students select the charities."

"What a great idea—"

We shake hands.

"See you and Peter tomorrow, then."

.....

Treasure Chess is a multi-media chess workshop divided into three areas: board-building & chess art, film/books/computers

and, gameplay and instruction.

The chess space I chose for Peter was in the gameplay area. The less distraction, the better, I thought. If that didn't work, I could shift him about, experimenting until I found the right tactics, the best combination.

Shifting? Experimenting? Turned out to be non-issues.

Peter Woodhouse took a seat—the same seat—in the very back of the room and didn't budge from it (excepting several bathroom trips) for 3 weeks, 6 classes. There were 7 other students in this 8-week class. Though a few of them were friendly, inviting Peter to sit and play, he spoke to no one, looked away, shied away, squirmed. Sat alone in the back of the classroom, same seat, same desk, never altering his position. I was reminded of someone, something—but couldn't quite place it, latch onto it.

During the 4th week, toward the end of the class, two students, Miranda Wright and Lexie Dallas tugged on my sleeve:

"Peter smells bad, Miss Rachel. Can you do something?"

"Okay girls, why don't you move to the other side of the room? I'll handle it."

I force a smile and walk over to Peter. He rarely spoke to me either, just hello and goodbye. I stop short, look down. Oops. He hadn't made it to the bathroom—there was a small but smelly pool of urine under his chair. Two other students start snickering. Soon all the youngsters are laughing. My heart wrenches.

Peter looks down at the urine, then at me; our eyes meet for the first time.

"You know, Peter, it's no big deal, it's—"

He jumps to his feet—irate—and bangs his fist on the chess board in front of him.

"This f%\$*&^g game makes no f@#%\$^g sense!" he yells. "I was so busy trying to play these pawns, I didn't realize I had to go to the f\$%^#@g bathroom!?"

The class is non-plussed. It's the first time he's spoken. I look at the pieces on the board and nod. Progress. This is progress.

"Which pawns were you working with?" I ask casually.

He picks up the chess board and slaps it on the table, scattering the few remaining pieces. Parents begin to appear at the door.

"Time to regroup, clean-up, count the pieces," I say to the class. "You too, Peter."

"I—I'm not sure where they all go," he mumbles, dejected.

I hold out a box. He picks up the pieces, 7 of them—seems he was trying to solve a puzzle. 4 pawns, a knight, a rook, and a king. Likely a smothered mate.

"Is this all of them?" he asks.

"Uh, I don't know," I lie.

He waves his arms, agitated:

"There was a horse, a castle, a bunch of pawns and a King...I don't see the King—"

I smile and open my hand:

"Is this it?"

"Hey—yeah—that's it, that's the King."

I hand it to him while I chat with and wave to departing students and parents.

"Okay, time to close up shop," I tell Peter, "Put the King in the box."

Peter rolls the King from left hand to right.

"Are you sure?"

"Sure about what?"

"Um, about putting the King in with the other pieces? He should be separate. The King is royal, the King has the gold, the King is—"

I touch his shoulder; he doesn't flinch; we are nearly eye level.

"At the end of the day, the Pawn and King go into the same box," I tell him. "***This is a key concept in chess.***"

"Always?"

"Yes, always."

Slowly, deliberately, he places the king atop the box. I close the lid.

"But how can that *be*?" he moans. "The king is powerful—the pawn is just—what does it mean?"

I shrug, secretly delighted with turn of events, this conversation.

"What do *you* think it means?"

"I'll have to think about that," he nods. He lifts his hand to his mom who's waiting patiently at the door. "Well, see you next class."

.....

And so, he did. Peter Woodhouse. And the class after that. And so on. A new young man. Reborn. Becoming, yes, a chess student. No, he still didn't talk much with the other youngsters and still moved away if they got too close, but he was "present" at the board, listening, digesting, moving pieces, offering an occasional answer or insight. That he lost every game decisively didn't phase him.

Miranda smiles: "You know, Peter can be pretty nice sometimes, Miss Rachel."

I smile too, nodding, watching his play—then freeze. That's it! It's the *pawns*—his *pawns*. They're all backwards. They rarely advance from the 2nd or 7th rank. His opponents pick them off like pieces of popcorn. *The backward pawn*. Peter Woodhouse *is* the backward pawn. In every aspect. Off and on the board. I steady myself against a desk. Geez.

"Why don't you move your pawns, Peter?" asks his opponent, Grady Gomez, a sharp young chess player. "They're your foot soldiers, your infantry guys."

Peter sits back, digs his chin into his shoulder, shakes his head. Grady shrugs and proceeds to capture 3 of the backward pawns with his rook. Two moves later, checkmate. Grady extends his hand; Peter offers a thumbs up, then withdraws. Grady grins and

moves to another game. I sit across from Peter:

"You know," I say casually, "Grady's right. You *should* move your pawns—activate them, exchange them, get them into the game—you never know, you might even—"

Peter shakes his head:

"I can't move them—I—I don't want to," he mutters. Then: "What are the other kids writing down into those pads?"

"Uh, notation, chess notation. It's algebraic. They record their moves."

"Why?"

"So they can reset and replay their games—review them, determine what they did right and wrong, analyze, learn, improve. Would you like to learn it?" He nods. I look about, walk around. "Miranda—say, Miranda, have you finished your game with Oscar?" She and Oscar Varna are the top 2 players.

"Piece of cake," she yawns, grimacing at Oscar.

"Sportsmanship, Miranda, sportsmanship." I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Would you like to teach Peter algebraic notation?"

Miranda looks away from a computer screen, surprised, then looks at Peter, doubtful. "I was going to study a Kasparov-Polgar game," she says.

"Another time? He'd like to learn, and he seems to like you."

Miranda rolls her eyes, sighs:

"Okay, but—how do you suggest I teach him? Does he even understand the grid?"

"Just sit across from him. You play white, name the move, explain the abbreviations, how to record it, then he plays black... About 10 moves."

"But he doesn't move his pawns—"

"I know—just do the best you can, honey."

Miranda and Peter set to work together, I play skittles and blitz with the other students. Time passes quickly and slowly. This—one of the best inexplicable aspects of chess. Parents converse outside the classroom. Reluctantly, the students pull their eyes from their boards and ready to leave. I gently take Miranda aside:

"How'd Peter do with the notation?"

She nods, slipping into her jacket:

"Okay, he seemed to understand it. But he moved only two pawns—"

Again, I had that feeling of trying to latch onto something—something.

"Which pawns? Do you remember?"

She checks the notation:

"e7 and d7."

Latched! It's the Sicilian. One of the countless variations. Maybe the Sveshnikov? I wasn't certain.

"Thanks very much, Miranda."

I smile at Peter—he is always the last student to leave. First to arrive, last to leave.

"Did you enjoy learning chess notation?" I ask.

He nods yes, then dumps all the pieces into a chess bag but leaves both kings outside the pouch.

"What's that about?" I laugh.

"The Kings and pawns do not belong in the same box," he says decisively, brushing past me toward his anxious, waiting mother.

"You know, a pawn can promote and—"

He spins back around:

"A pawn *can never* become a King. *Never.*"

I reset his board. Two kings, starting position, pawns on the 2nd and 7th ranks:

"These pawns," I say gently, "when you don't advance them, they become 'backwards'—backward pawns—"

"So what?" he snarls. "What's wrong with being *backwards*? Not everybody is cool and smart, you know."

Heart to my throat.

"Yes, we're all a little weird," I say, moving the pawns forward, "but the backward pawns get captured a lot and feel very lonely." I could see the tears well in his eyes. "*But these pawns don't have to remain backwards, they can advance, do a lot of good things, join the rest of the pieces, join the rest of the world, make friends...*"

Nervous, shaking, Peter throws all the pawns into the chess bag then grabs the kings and places them on the highest bookshelf in the classroom. Turns to me, trembling, blinking back tears:

"The King and the pawn will *NEVER* belong in the same box," he says again.

I turn away quickly, feeling my own tears well, aching, yet afraid to hug this pained young soul. Then he is at my side.

"Miss Rachel—can I—can I leave those Kings on the top shelf? Just—just leave them there? I mean—you won't put them away, will you? You won't put them with the rest of the pieces?"

I swallow my tears and allow myself a brief hug; he doesn't resist.

"No son, never."

.....

It's mid-December, last class of the semester. Peter had vastly improved over the past few weeks, playing more games, smiling occasionally, making many fewer bathroom excursions. That he hadn't learned how to win didn't seem to discomfit him. And though he continued to retain his back row seat, he'd actually begun to advance a few pawns—none past the fifth rank—but I knew **this was key to developing his character, his future.**

I'd ordered pizza and vita-waters to mark the occasion of our last class, even though most of the students would return after

the winter break. Lexie switches on *Billboard Pop*. “Mozart goes just so far,” she laughs. We all laugh. A handful of students dance around. I calculate some final stats.

“By the by,” I lean into Miranda, “Although you tied in the W/L/D column, you topped Oscar by 2 points overall.”

“What? Are you sure?” she shrieks happily.

“Quite sure,” I nod. She turns to run toward him; I hold her arm. “But if you gloat over this young lady, I’ll deduct 3 points for poor sportsmanship, understand?”

“Yes, Miss Rachel, I understand.”

I watch her casually saunter over to Oscar then turn my attention to the final tallies. Because I promote an “I Win & I Learn” agenda, each student merits a chess achievement award. Best puzzle %, Best game analyses, High Knight’s Tour, Best Tournament Performance, blitz, rapid, artistic endeavors, whatever works for a particular group. I tap my pencil next to Peter’s name and sigh.

Suddenly—an outburst, a ruckus. I look up sharply. Oscar and Miranda are chin to chin, arguing against the bookshelves.

“Whaddya mean you won by 2 points?!” snaps Oscar. We went 8 and 8, no draws!”

“Miss Rachel said it was an *overall score*. And you know I gave you that last game, Oscar, you *know* it.”

Oscar is embarrassed:

“Please, keep your voice down.” Other students circle them. “You’re causing a scene.”

“*I’m causing a scene? I’m causing a scene!* We’re going to settle this right here and now, dude. Set up a board.”

“Fine by me!”

I clap my hands loudly:

“Oscar. Miranda. What’s the problem?”

They look at me innocently:

“No problem, Miss Rachel. Everything’s fine.”

I look back down at Peter’s numbers, keeping a wary eye on Oscar and Miranda. They’re setting game clocks. Most of the equipment was stored away. The other students look around. Grady finds a chess bag. They set the board. Another student, Kiernan Wang grabs a notation pad.

“Wait,” says Grady. “There aren’t any kings in this bag. Where are the kings?”

“Hey!” says Kiernan, “Look on top of the bookcase. The kings! There they are!”

Peter Woodhouse jumps to his feet. Oscar and Miranda scramble for chairs, lean them against the bookcase, climb up, and grab at the kings. But the bookcases are too tall, the kings too high, the youngsters too short, the chairs, wobbly.

“STOP!” I yell. “Stop grabbing at the kings—you might dislodge them, you—”

But it’s too late. The center bookcase teeters—in another minute it will tumble forward crashing onto the children. Miranda screams and covers her head. Oscar turns white. All the other students step back. I lunge forward but stumble. Disaster, I

think wildly, disaster—when suddenly, like a bat out of hell, Peter Woodhouse flies across the room, pushes Miranda and Oscar aside, and throws himself against the bookcase—holding it, pushing it backwards, steadying it, steady, steady... Done. Safe. Disaster averted.

A split second. An instant that changes lives. Nobody moved. Nobody breathed. Quietly, Peter holds out the kings. Miranda throws her arms about his neck: “Saved me, you *saved* me!” Oscar clasps his hand: “What can we say, dude? How can we *thank* you?” The other students surround them. Peter smiles, basking in the moment. I bask too. The Sveshnikov variation of the Sicilian. Damn. Talk about a dangerous defense.

Then: backslapping, acting out, more music, more pizza, laughter. Peter sits casually amid the desks, tapping his feet, smiling.

“What about your game?” I say to Oscar and Miranda.

They look away, abashed.

“Oh, we were going to play one last game for highest overall score,” says Oscar, “But actually, Miranda—”

“Actually,” Miranda smoothly intervenes, “I’d forgotten about the 3 points I lost for sportsmanship and Oscar topped me by 1 point. Congratulations, Oscar.”

Oscar blushes and smiles:

“Miranda—you don’t have to—”

But Miranda leads the applause. I post all the student chess achievement awards on the bulletin board. They surround the announcement.

“What about Peter?” asks Grady. “What did Peter win?”

“Yeah—what did Peter win?” chime the students.

I look at Peter—our eyes meet—and in that meeting we both know that what he’d won was *beyond* words, *beyond* the moment—that **it was the key to the concept that would carry him into the future**. And carry him well.

“I left that space blank,” I say to the class, “What do you think?”

This prompts a heated discussion.

“Oh—I know!” says Lexie, scrawling on a name tag sticker then affixing it to Peter’s shirt: TREASURE CHESS CLASS HERO. Peter blushes and tries to slip away but the class surrounds and applauds.

Parents appear at the doors bringing with them a light refreshing snow. The high-spirited mood is contagious. Several minutes later I’m alone with Peter in the classroom while his mom waits outside. He is shyly jubilant. I hold out my hands.

“Well, young man, or should I say *HERO*, what would you like to do with these kings?”

“At the end of the day, the Pawn and the King go into the same box,” he says. “I finally understand. A key concept in chess.”

“In life...” I muse.

Suddenly, he hugs me:

“I love you, Miss Rachel.”

I clear my throat:

“Don’t forget to show your mother your Chess Hero badge...”

He laughs, flashes the badge to his mother, and runs past her.

“Chess Hero?” Janice smiles, happy tears, “What—does it mean? What should we do?”

I open my palms, throw my hands to the skies.

“Sign him up for next term,” I laugh, “And have a great winter break.”

.....

Three days later I sit in the classroom, in my office, steeping tea. A knock on the door. I open it to an impeccably dressed, distinguished older man.

“May I help you?”

“Are you Miss Rachel?”

“Yes, I’m Rachel Schechter,” I smile, “please come in.”

He enters, doffs his hat and gloves, looks around, looks impressed.

“Please allow me to introduce myself,” he says warmly, “I’m Gerald Woodhouse, Peter’s grandfather.”

“Oh,” I say surprised, “Please sit down. Cup of tea?”

“If it’s no trouble.”

“No trouble at all. Just brewed a fresh pot.”

I pour the tea and set a plate of fresh ginger cookies and strawberries before him. A sudden thought alarms. I touch my throat:

“Is—is Peter alright?”

“Oh yes, he’s fine, sorry if I startled you, he...” Gerald Woodhouse straightens up; I sense a military bearing. “Peter is better than ever, frankly—better than any of us dared hope for. He’s my only grandson and before he took your class—during that awful time of Covid, we’d nearly given up on him. But now—” Gerald leans forward, “Well, my daughter Janice and I can’t believe it. He’s a different person, changed, in every sense for the better. *And we owe it all to you, Miss Rachel.*”

“Oh no, Peter did most of the work, he—”

“That’s not what I heard,” Gerald Woodhouse says quietly. “And that’s why I’m here. What did my daughter pay you for his sessions?”

“Um, I never disclose clients’ financial arrangements—”

“Of course, I understand.” He points to the Pirate’s Treasure Chest on the floor.

“And the money you collect in the treasure chest is used for charities?”

“—and scholarships and equipment, yes, various chess sundries.”

He takes out his checkbook, writes a check, and hands it to me. I whistle, could hear my accountant celebrating. “That’s a lot of zeroes,” I say, “You sure you want to do this?”

Gerald Woodhouse stands and nods.

“For what you did for my grandson Peter? I wish I could do more. In fact, I’m hoping you’ll accept yearly donations.”

I could see my accountant turning somersaults.

“That’s very kind and generous, Mr. Woodhouse.”

He drops the check into the Treasure Chest.

“I’m a military man, Miss Rachel—”

“I thought so—Navy?”

“Air Force. Anyway, it was Peter’s birthday yesterday and I decided to gift him with the military chess set my father gave me. It’s, well, it’s rather special—very expensive, hand-carved, we keep the pieces separate, each to its own berth, but Peter wouldn’t accept this practice, adamantly claiming that *at the end of the day the king and the pawn go into the same box*. Do you know what he’s talking about?

I sigh and smile.

“More tea, Mr. Woodhouse?”

Fin

.....

Caveat

*Yes, the bookcase could have fallen, the treasure chest could have been stolen, Peter Woodhouse could have regressed. But as Chess Educators we know that this remarkable game can bring out the best in us; and our children, our future, **are the best** in us.*

My Affiliate FB Treasure Chess photo

