

ChessKeys

Deflection

By Rachel Schechter

My heart quickened. There she stood at the demo board illustrating the Queen's Gambit opening. She was Kate Thompson: a smart, fearless female who'd enrolled in my winter/spring chess at Franklin Elementary in Minneapolis. I'd been blessed to study with many fine young queens over the years. But this girl seemed to have the *whole* package—fierce, assertive, competitive—a bit of a tomboy—and surprisingly pleasant. An 11-year-old, fifth grade dynamo who might actually stay with the game when she reached 13. And this was only the first class. What would she do next? And she was the sole girl in a class of 14.

I imagined Katerina the Great, Katherine of Aragon, Catherine de'Medici, Katherine Hepburn...all reputed to have played chess. Powerful queens, power plays—commanding names for a demanding game. Now, Kate Thompson. God had smiled on me.

Or, so I thought.

For the first few classes, Kate truly was heaven-sent, learning, playing, and mentoring less experienced students. Then I caught a bad cold, missed two classes, and when I returned, she had, well...taken over...so to speak: barking orders, pairing students. At first, I was impressed—imitation being a sincere form of flattery—but after the first hour (these are 2-hour chess sessions) I realized, suppressing a smile, that *not only* was she trying to *be* me, but she was also trying to *beat* me. How would this play?

So...we were an hour into our Tuesday afternoon session. I sit down at a game between two students, good friends, Alan and Gene, and begin analyzing, as I do with all non-tournament games, i.e., studying positions, calculating, recommending candidate moves, correcting errors, and so forth. The boys are glad, considering, learning, trying new moves, re-playing, questioning, exchanging ideas, and suggesting alternative plans.

Suddenly, Kate—who'd just won her own game—pulled her chair beside us, forcing me to move to the side and began mimicking me. Quiet fell the room. She rambled on—confidently—moving pieces, confusing positions, confusing the players. Even me.

I looked at her quizzically and smiled:

"So, what's going on, Kate?"

"What do you mean?" she shot back.

"Uh, what are you doing? *This* game is between Alan and Gene."

She threw her hands into the air:

"I'm doing what *you* do!" she said acidly.

All eyes and ears were upon us. What an unkind, unexpected outburst. Must tread carefully. I cleared my throat, smiled again.

"Well, thank you for your insights, Kate, but if you want to *watch* this game or any other game, it's best to remain quiet and respectful."

She jumped to her feet:

"How is what *I'm* doing any different than what *you* do?"

Alan and Gene exchanged glances:

"Miss Rachel is the *teacher*," Alan said quietly.

"Yeah," echoed Gene, "She *knows* what she's talking about."

Kate narrowed her eyes, voice ice, body tense, standing intimidatingly over Gene:

"*Are you saying I don't know what I'm talking about?*"

I stood and smiled at the class:

"Okay, please finish up your games. We have about 30 minutes left. Work on Knight's Tours, 8 Queens Boards, ChessKid on your iPads, puzzles... Chess Art—Derrick and Mylo weren't you working on designing our club logo?" A new energy took hold. I turned to Kate:

"What would you like to work on, Kate?"

She snorted and walked away. Yet within minutes, she's laughing, fooling around, trying to best her previous Knight's Tour score, clearly enjoying herself. I think about this duality, and file it. Bit of a schizoid? Perhaps. I stayed close to the perimeters of the media center, nodding, commenting. Best not to overreact.

In the weeks that followed, Kate's behavior alternated between cooperation and belligerence. When paired with someone she liked, she played consistently, and displayed good sportsmanship regardless of the game outcome. When not, she worked solo on the computer, the chess club logo, or on an eight queens board. And while she smiled at me in a clearly good-natured fashion—one afternoon—out of the corner of my eye, I caught her.... How shall I say this? Mocking me when my back was turned. It was unnerving. And it continued. Little knives in the back. When and why did she start disliking me? From then on, I interacted with her face forward only. We became satellites circling one another, always on opposite sides. If I approached another student, she backed off and vice versa. When I used the demo board, she laughed, interrupted, and challenged me with nonsensical statements. There developed an inexplicable nastiness about her—behind her smile, beneath her laughter. I could not understand it.

I checked with Joan, the after-school coordinator. Any previous behavior issues? An Improvement Plan? Recent traumas? But there was nothing. Good grades, good athlete, vocal, well-liked...no indications of anything amiss. In fact, one day after class, her dad sought me out to tell me "Just how much Kate enjoyed chess class, and to thank me for being such a good teacher." I squirmed. It was... odd. Yes, an odd uncomfortable situation. Hairs up at the back of your neck.

Then she started acting out with three other fifth graders: jumping over small book tables as if they were low hurdles—ignoring my warnings— laughing, back-slapping, betting who could jump the highest. But eventually these students would settle into the game. Though worrisome, this kind of behavior within this age group at day's end is natural. And I must say, the students *did* produce some fine games. They became 'the fearsome foursome'. Played only with each other. Because we were nearing the end of the semester, I allowed it. As I said, their games were good. (As a disciplinarian, I was lax, casual; a posture which served me well for 30+ years.) Then Kate dropped two games in a row. I sensed her confidence falter and saw her blink back a few tears, so the following week I paired her with a lesser player to boost her confidence level. Rather than realizing an opportunity, she became irate, irrational:

"Why am I playing with Steven?" she asked loudly. "I want to play with Louis."

I sighed:

"Louis beat you twice last week, so I thought you might want to work with a less experienced player, *that's why*."

"But I *almost* won!" I shifted my weight, shaking my head. She *didn't win*. Louis had played her queen down and still won easily. I sighed again, frustrated, as she tried to recreate their last board *without fen, without notation*. Then she launched into an illogical explanation of the endgame. I nodded politely, tried another tactic:

"Do me a favor. Just play Steven. If you win, then you play Louis. That's fair, right?"

She stood quickly; I moved back a few steps.

"No—I want to play Louis now! You *want* to play me, don't you Louis?"

Louis—the young man in question—also of the fearsome foursome and perhaps a boyfriend (the kind 11-year-old kids have) —was clearly embarrassed, shrugging, eyes everywhere but on Kate. She turned to me, accusing, pugnacious:

"Why *can't* I play Louis? Why? Why?"

In truth, I snapped:

"*Because Louis is a better player than you. Because at your level you just can't beat him. You're unevenly matched.*" Again, all eyes and ears were upon us. I took a deep breath, counted to 10. "Listen, Kate, when you become more experienced, you two will have competitive games, but please, for now, play Steven."

Kate tossed her hair defiantly, sat across from Louis and moved pawn d4. Everyone else started playing. I looked at Steven, a shy, thin third grader trying to disappear into the bookcases:

"Come on Steven, set up the board, I'll play you."

Now, a no-nonsense teacher would have insisted she leave the class. But such I was not. As a disciplinarian, I was lax, casual; a posture which served me well for 30+ years. But now— in this instance, should I have been? Shoulda. Woulda. Coulda.

Half an hour later, Kate tapped the back of my shoulder. I was startled.

"Well, I'm losing to Louis again," she said, "Could you analyze our game? Help me out?"

I redirected Stephen to his chess puzzle text:

"Yes, I can help *both* of you."

I sat down and studied the board. Louis had a mate in 3, maybe 4, but both players were focused on the opposite end of the square. Knights and bishops could be exchanged, a pawn; but these small gains were irrelevant to the game, having little if anything to do with the inevitable mate. I pointed to the board and looked at Kate:

"Why are you concentrating your efforts *here* when you're in danger of being checkmated on h6?" I asked gently.

Kate studied the board; then lit up:

"I thought that if I *distracted* him, he might not see the checkmate possibility. You know, focus on this other stuff."

I sat up straight, nonplussed, errant chess pieces falling into place. **Distraction**, yes. *That's what she was about*. Sitting on the left side of the media room and chatting while a small fire burned on the right. A fire *she* might have started. **Deflection**. Asking me inappropriate questions about my personal life while I'm working with a discovered check on the demo. Add in confusion, derailment, and derision. That's who she was. And yes, while distraction and/or deflection are valuable tactics in chess and in life— **keys to a good defense**—Kate used them...destructively. She might gain a brief advantage... I imagined her in the cafeteria shouting: "Hey, look at the blue bear outside the window"—then moving to the front of the food line; but in the end, I knew it would cost her. In life. In chess. She was smart and slick...very slick. I felt sad at heart. It would cost her dearly.

"What should I *do*, Miss Rachel?" I gazed out the window. No blue bear. Just new spring flowers—hepatica, pasque. After all, she **was** only eleven years old, trying to learn a 2,000-year-old game. Reluctantly, I turned back to the board.

"Alright, Kate, Louis has a clear advantage, materially, positionally, but how about we remove a couple of his pieces and I show you how to win from a similar position? **If** Louis agrees." Louis rolled his eyes, nodding, relieved. I smiled and turned to Kate. "Okay, let's reposition this queen..."

We moved rather quickly, and Kate finished with a simple back rank mate. I reset a few pieces and illustrated a queen/bishop mate. More lessons learned. Louis stood, stretched, smiled, and thanked me. Kate hugged me tightly, impulsively:

"Thanks so much," she gushed.

I stiffened instinctively, stood, and moved back.

"Glad to help," I said, turning to another board. Jekyll/Hyde. Yes.

And so, it went. Three sessions left. Any hope I'd had of Kate emerging as a strong female chess player had long since vanished. On a personal level, she clearly disliked me. Why? I never did find out. Worst of all, she negatively affected my interaction with the other students whenever she could. Fortunately, she would graduate from Franklin Elementary school at term's end, and I'd never have to see her again. I couldn't wait.

Two weeks later, I sipped a cup of tea with Joan, the after-school coordinator. Joan had been intrinsic to helping me build a successful chess program at Franklin: creating flyers for a chess party, planning a build-your-own-board segment. Genuinely caring and supportive.

"Any issues with Kate Thompson?" she asked, recalling our previous conversation.

I shrugged, shook my head, and quelled the educator instinct inside me. One class left. Just let it go. You're just a chess teacher, I tell myself, not a psychologist. The girl is dualistic—maybe it's a personality conflict. Whatever. One class left. This, *I could deflect*.

"Well, I've had easier students, but no, not really. She plays a decent game."

Joan nodded, relieved. That's what the parents pay for so... the program worked. Everyone wanted to play chess. And I was getting excited about the last week, prizes, small awards, and the like. Bit of a party. Spring had *finally* sprung in Minnesota—yes indeed, a small celebration was in order.

I'd distributed my ChessKeys the previous semester, so I decided to award my favorite chess coins: The American Presidential Golden Dollars. Occasionally the banks threw in a handful of Golden Sacagawea Dollars as well. It was a good mix. I polished the coins until they sparkled, then velvet-pouched them.

I ended up with a total of 28 students that semester, 14 per class: ergo, 28 coined pouches. Assorted colors, assorted presidents, cluster of Sacagawea dollars.

Finally, the last Tuesday class. Even though it felt like the longest semester of my life, I still loved the game. I stood before the students, smiling mysteriously and produced "abracadabra" velvet pouches like a magician. Oohs and Aahs. I launched into my coins-value-knowledge spiel, presenting each student with a pouch, and spoke encouraging words specific to that student's chess playing abilities and character traits.



"Whoa—these coins are cool!"

"What kind are they?"

"Are they valuable?"

"Ah, now there's the **key**," I said, "**the Chesskey** connection. *What value hath knowledge?* Think of these coins as knowledge: the more you amass the more valuable becomes your storehouse; the more you learn, the greater your chances of success. In chess. In life. In whatever endeavor you choose."

The students compared coins.

"Are they all presidents?"

"Wait—mine is a native American woman with a child—?"

"Yes," I nodded. "Sacagawea. She was rather famous—a guide and interpreter for the 1804 Lewis and Clark expedition. Navigated thousands of miles, with her infant son."

The students talked among themselves.

"Say, can we trade them? Trade the coins?"

"Sure," I laughed, "we trade pieces, don't we?"

I switched from my usual classical piano venue to a light rock station and the atmosphere was suddenly festive. Another teacher popped in with lemonade. Kids trading coins, setting up floorboard chess, 4-way chess, laying the finishing touches to their chess art. Spirits were high. I circulated, listening, laughing... Then:

"Hey, Miss Rachel—"

I turned. Frowned. It was Kate. I was in the rear of the media center; she was in the front. An uncomfortable position for me—but I was caught up in the 'spirit' of the day.

"What's up, Kate?"

"I have a Sac coin, but no one wants to trade with me. What should I do?"

"Uh, all the coins for the Thursday class are in my briefcase. Swap it out for whichever one you like."

She nodded happily; I turned away. Happy ending. Good day.

Later, after dinner, I rummaged through my briefcase pre-

paring for Thursday's last class. The velvet pouches tumbled out. Out of habit, I counted them. Paused. Recounted. There were only 13. Impossible. I created 14. One for each student. I emptied the contents of the briefcase. No. Perhaps one fell out on my way home? I checked my car, retraced my steps, and checked through the house. Nada.

And then it dawned. A sad dawn. She took it. Kate Thompson took a coin—while my back was turned—when she went to exchange the coin she'd been awarded. I moved quietly to the kitchen, prepared a chamomile tea, silently considering other possibilities. I sipped my tea, looked through the living room window for at least an hour. No...she took it...every instinct I had supported this. So, what to do?

I called Patrick, a chess friend and colleague in Illinois. He teaches chess and special education—quite a combo—and is in fact working on a thesis proving how chess is greatly benefiting ADHD students. He's also a bit older, more experienced. I'd been talking with him about Kate all semester so...

"Of course, she took it," he said. "You *must* confront her. If she steals coins at 11 years old, she'll steal wallets at 15 years old. Then what? Phones? Netbooks? And then she's no longer a minor. The truth is, you're her *teacher*, you're *obligated* to confront her. It's what we *must* do as educators. Right path and all that. Unpleasant, but consider the alternatives."

I know he is right. Yet, the semester is *over*. It's my first year with this school; I'm just a chess teacher in an after-school program. Who *wants* this kind of issue?

"But I can't actually *prove* it," I said. "*I didn't see her take it*—and even if one of the other students did, kids usually band together at times like this."

"True, true," he agreed, "But you must call her out on this, Rachel. You must find a way. An obnoxious kid is one thing: but a con artist, a thief? Another story. Not a good one. She's a bad actor. Hell, in the long run you'll be doing her a favor."

"Will I?" I ask quietly. "Will I really?"

"You *know* you will. This is Teaching 101, my dear friend. Not reporting this is a disservice. And worst of all, *she's dishonored the game*."

"But it's my first year in Minnesota, my first year at this school—it's a *good* school, I've met some *super* people. This could turn into a nightmare."

There's a long pause, then:

"Rachel, she has **dishonored** the game."

We click off. Pajamas. Bedtime tea. I think of the game. What it teaches, what it yields, the incalculable benefits—and she dishonored it—and I knew I *had* to deal with it. If I approached her primary teacher, it would simply be adding another layer of educational bureaucracy. But how to approach her? If I were straightforward, she'd simply deny it. If I were hesitant, uncertain, she'd zero in, attack me, turn

it around: my fault the coin was lost.

Fortunately, I had a couple of days to think about it—and thought of little else. On Wednesday evening, while I polished and pouched another coin for the Thursday group—there came another dawning. An idea. A good one.

I arrived early at school on Thursday, checked with the front office, the lost and found, then briefly apprised my supervisor, Joan, of the situation. Worried, but supportive, she rubbed her brow—another headache.

"Sorry," I said, "I've been teaching since before you were born and I can't let it go."

"No, no, I agree," she said, "But what's *my* role? What exactly do you want *me* to do?"

"Just back me up as the onlooking, supervisory adult while I speak with her. You, me, and Kate. You don't have to say anything. Your presence will speak volumes. I'll handle the rest. Diplomatically. Don't worry. Can you pull her out of class 10 minutes early?" Joan nodded. "I'll wait for the two of you in the Media Room. We'll have the entire center to ourselves."

"No problem," said Joan, rising to action. "I'll get her now. Meet you in Media."

I stood at my desk in the media room, briefcase on the table. Pacing, deep breathing. A few minutes later, Joan walked in with a very puzzled, very worried Kate.

I smiled pleasantly:

"Kate—sorry to take you out of class, dear—but I'm hoping you can help us solve a problem..."

"A problem?" she said quietly, "What problem?"

"Well, I can't find one of those velvet-pouched coins. I had 14 for your class and 14 for today's class, 28 in total. But now I have only 13. So—since you were the last student to handle the coins—remember? —when you exchanged your Sacagawea? I thought you might have seen one roll under a bookcase or table—It could have fallen out of the bag. Or another student could have mistakenly walked off with the velvet pouch... So, did you see anything, Kate? Can you help us out here?"

The color drained from her face, but she did not hesitate:

"I have half a dozen of those Sacagawea Dollars at home," she said quickly. "Why don't I just bring one in?"

Joan and I exchanged glances, smiled.

"That's a great idea," I said.

"Yes," Joan added, "Leave it at the front desk. We'll reimburse you if you like."

"No, no, that's okay," she mumbled, "I have a bunch of them, so..."

I put my arm around her shoulder as we all walked to the door:

"Thanks Kate. You've no idea how much you've helped us

out—I'll never forget this."

She opened her mouth as if to say something, thought better of it, shot me a glance that would have chilled ice and left the Media Center with Joan. I returned to the demo board and sacrificed my queen, trapping the king, so that my knight delivered a smothered mate.

And that's game, I said to myself, rearranging the demo board, as my Thursday students filed in, "That's game, Kate Thompson. Live and learn.

"Finis?"

Perhaps it should've finished there, or I could slap on a happy Hollywood ending: arrogant young girl changes her ways, apologizes to her chess teacher, never steals again, goes on to become a teenage WIM...but it didn't. A few weeks later I learned that while Kate did indeed return the Sacagawea coin, she feigned 'hysteria', claiming I'd accused her of theft, enraging her parents, the other members of the fearsome foursome and a few of *their* parents. Complaints were filed.

Joan advised me to address these issues formally, Patrick vowed to drive to Minnesota and come to the school with me, in my defense. "You *have* to fight this, Rachel—it's *unethical*, it could cost you your job." A few other colleagues weighed in similarly. My attorney daughter read the fine print. "It's a one-year contract, mom. I'd challenge these accusations. They're untrue and unjust."

Untrue and unjust. Yes, yes. My daughter was right, my colleagues were right. Ten years ago, even five, I would have risen—unquestionably—to the occasion. But now...

I brewed a sweet cup of hibiscus tea, dashed it with elderberry, sprinkled it with ginger, soothed it with lemon, and stood in my yard, drifting into the sweet June air...lilies, violets, marigolds...the white oaks beckoned...the hares scampered, the deer sauntered—and felt the Universal Being flow through me, recalling Thoreau:

"I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived." Henry David Thoreau, from Walden: or, Life in the Woods

Henry may have packed a chessboard, but I did not. Two days later, I canceled a summer chess program, disconnected from all media, even my phone, headed up to Duluth, and ferried across the blues and greens of Lake Superior and Lake Michigan for a month. Refreshed. Renewed. Rediscovering...the 'real' of me.

When I returned home, I poured a cup of white oolong tea infused with lingonberries and perused the mail. There were three offers from nearby schools to teach chess in the fall, two requests for private lessons, and a brief note that Franklin Elementary had decided to drop chess from its afterschool program completely. I shook my head sadly. It was the youngsters who would suffer the loss. Fortu-

nately, kids are resilient. They'd reconnect to the royal game at another point in time. I refilled my bird feeders and finished my tea. Within minutes my grandchildren burst through my door:

"Where have you BEEN Nana?" said Logan.

"Mommy said you sailed to the *Arctic*. We thought we'd never see you again," said Cora, lower lip trembling.

"The Arctic Defense? Hmm..." I hugged them.

"We're going canoeing—" said Logan.

"Yeah—and barbecuing—hotdogs and everything!" grinned Cora.

"Then we're camping out in the woods," smiled my daughter Diana. "Wanna come?"

"Of course," I nodded.

"But let's play chess, before we go," said Logan.

As I watched my grandchildren reset the board—5-year old Cora insisting the knight ride with the queen while 8-year old Logan rolled his eyes, acquiescing, I suddenly realized—or shall I say *remembered*—that for every one person who dishonored the game and/or those who passed on its incalculable value, there were 100, 1000, an army, no, *armies* of folks who loved and honored the royal game—the core of it, the lore of it, the twists and turns, the swords in the dirt, the history, the mystery, the moat and the myth—the toppling of empires with a quick of the wrist—the genius, the art, the preparation, the celebration of a game well-played. And the millennia of goodwill in the quiet yet infamous chess handshake. And I smiled too.



"What's The Arctic Defense?" asked Logan. "Pretty cold, right?"

"Lots of polar bears?" said Cora.

"Hey—we could make the castles igloos!" yelled Logan.

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Yes, finis