General Grant Wore a Pink Dress

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My father introduced me to the game of chess in 1979, shortly after my mother moved out of our house and filed for divorce. Given the demands of his job as a trauma surgeon, he had little energy to cultivate friendships, and for some time, I was his sole companion. I was his only partner in chess. He would have preferred a more capable adversary, namely, a son. This he made clear the evening he drew his worn plywood chessboard from the pantry—the same board upon which he'd battled his own father, a stolid German, for decades.

"I never thought I'd be playing chess with a girl. This should be interesting." Placing the board on our kitchen table, he paraphrased world chess champion Emanuel Lasker. "The game of chess, after all, is a contest between two brains in which intellect holds undivided sway."

By that time, my heart and mind had already been captured by the glitter pens, puffy stickers, and starter nail polish then au courant among fifth-grade girls. I considered the faceless Staunton-style pieces he arranged on the board.

"Do they have names?" I asked, examining two identical pawns.

"Don't get attached to them unless you can protect them." My father motioned for me to sit down.

Over the next hour, I memorized the starting positions of the 16 white and 16 black pieces facing each other from opposite ends of the board. I learned the movements allowed different pieces: squat pawns that plod forward one square at a time; crenulated castles that move along rows and columns; knights, or horses, that move in three-square L-shapes; bishops confined to diagonals;

a fairly sedentary king that moves one square at a time; and a queen—the most versatile piece—that can move along diagonals, rows, and columns.

"Before we play, you'll need to familiarize yourself with this," my father finally said. He pushed a tattered copy of the World Chess Federation's *Official Rules* across the table and left the room.

I leafed through the book, at first mesmerized by my grandfather's precise signature on its inside flap, and then overwhelmed by the contents of its grainy pages: elaborately annotated diagrams crowded with arrows, numerically encoded descriptions of move sequences, and lists of rules amended and qualified by countless subclauses. As it was, I'd grown distracted by the familiar sounds of machine-gun fire and shelling in our living room. My father had served in Vietnam, and perhaps to work through the horrors he had experienced as a field surgeon, he spent most of his free evenings watching war documentaries. My exposure to television was limited almost exclusively to programs about Civil War campaigns, the rise of air and submarine warfare, famous tank and U-boat commanders, and the crematoria at Auschwitz. While my friends waxed poetic about the dreaminess of Vinnie Barbarino on *Welcome Back, Kotter*, I wrestled with the trauma of trench and atomic warfare nightly presented in the black-and-white footage filling our television screen.

Chess, in that sense, provided a small measure of relief from Erwin Rommel's onslaughts, though it introduced its own horrors to my nine-year-old psyche. My father and I played our first game one evening, shortly after Cherbourg fell to a German Panzer division.

"Ready to lose?" My father took a seat and drew the white king from his box of pieces.

When he selected the white army, I didn't realize he had just gained, by simple virtue of tradition, a significant first-move advantage, yet I felt the intimations of the carnage and humiliation that would become par for the course, or in this case, our plywood battlefield.

He began, as many seasoned chess players, by advancing the pawns in front of his king and queen to facilitate the movements of his bishops—powerful offensive pieces central to most opening strategies. I pushed the pawns at either edge of the board one square forward, thinking it best not to expose my back row of officers. As my father moved his bishops into striking positions at the center of the board, I adopted the most defensive stance possible. Over

and over, I cautiously lifted a knight over my line of pawns, only to return the spooked horse to its original place at the next turn. In the parlance of chess aficionados, I failed to "develop the board."

"You're playing like a girl," my father said.

Pressed, I pushed one of my center pawns from the ranks of its fellow grunts. With a surgeon's precision, my father slid his bishop onto the square of my miserable conscript, and in one fluid motion, twisted his index and middle finger around the heads of our respective pieces and swept my slaughtered pawn from the board.

"That was stupid." My father leaned back. "You moved your pawn onto an unprotected square. You need to think."

I fidgeted. I bit my nails. I tugged at a loose thread in my sweater. I bided my time until my father started drumming his fingers on the table.

"You can't put off your next move forever."

"I'm thinking."

"It doesn't seem like it."

I hunched over and feigned concentration on the board, an impossible minefield already covered, in my mind, with red poppies. Then I pushed another pawn forward and launched another ill-fated campaign. Employing a variety of simple maneuvers, my father forced my pawns, one by one, from their trenches into No Man's Land, or more accurately, No Little Girl's Land.

"Over the top," I whispered, envisioning my terrified pawns climbing over barbed wire and into clouds of mustard gas, my imagination fueled by the cigarettes smoldering in my father's overflowing ashtray.

As most doctors of his generation, my father self-medicated with nicotine and alcohol. An obsessive-compulsive addicted to Marlboro Reds, he smoked two and a half packs a day in his waking hours alone. (It's not inconceivable that he smoked in his sleep, acting entirely on muscle memory.) Health aside, he used cigarettes to his great advantage. Each time I moved, he blew streams of smoke over the board to distract me. Asthmatic, or "pathetic," according to my dad's diagnosis, I spent our games coughing, wheezing, and imagining my pawns as quivering British infantrymen stumbling into the bloody jaws of the indomitable Hun at the Battle of the Somme. I tried to breathe through my mouth and ignore my dad's analyses of my "bubble-headed stratagems" (for some reason, my father preferred the word "stratagems" to "strategies"), only to lead my pawns and the inept officers of my beleaguered army to their

inglorious deaths. At one point, thinking the bloody tide had finally turned, I used one of my pawns to capture my father's bishop.

"Checkmate." My father indicated a newly opened line of attack between his castle and my cornered king. Then, in what became ritual, he ground a butt into his ashtray to celebrate victory. "You're a one-step chess player. Going for immediate gain. If you'd been thinking above the level of a baby chimp, you could have kept this game going for a few more moves."

He rose from the table and poured himself a gin and tonic.

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Over the next few months, I suffered through innumerable chess matches that differed little from the first in their tenor or outcome. If I slowly evolved from a one-step to a two- or three-step chess player, my father remained sorely disappointed by my inability to formulate elaborate stratagems. In response to my missteps, he would pull out his rabbit-eared copy of the World Chess Federation's *Official Rules* and invoke the international protocols of tournament play to bring our games to their miserable conclusion. Or he would open one of his chess manuals and point to a diagram illustrating an "offensive I might have launched if I'd been thinking at all," using a pen to underscore dense marginalia in his unmistakable handwriting. My young mind rarely grasped the meaning of scrawled notes such as "see Steinitz Defense & Counter-Gambit, White: P-QKt3" or "stratagem used to defeat K. Voskovitch, 9/3/72."

Overcome by smoke and chessoterica, I struggled to deploy stratagems outlined in my father's extensive collection of chess manuals. To my repeated failures, my father assigned the most dismal interpretations. He considered me a genuine idiot, congenitally doomed to intellectual deficiency thanks to a DNA debacle he openly attributed to my mother.

"The Gruenfeld Defense should have been an obvious choice," he once said, after my decidedly dark horse retreated from a white pawn. He pulled out Fred Reinfeld's 600-page *Complete Chess Course*, and with the aid of diagrams, explained how I should have utilized my bishops to dislodge his pawns from the board's center. "It would have been simple."

By this time, I'd developed an unfortunate habit of picking at my arms, and I must have been a miserable sight, staring at my scabs and wiping my cheeks with the back of my hand.

"Your mental midget of a mother likes to have hysterical breakdowns."

He downed the last of his gin and tonic. I rubbed my eyes and coughed, and he shook his head. "Typical girl. Too emotional to focus on anything."

While my father succumbed to mounting frustration with his intellectually stunted, hopelessly sniveling, and chronically coughing progeny, I steeped in humiliation. I withdrew into my mind. Every child raised by a man like my father develops, at a very young age, elaborate coping mechanisms (stratagems) for surviving under an authoritarian regime—ways of remaining inconspicuous, or a rich fantasy life to provide temporary relief from otherwise intolerable circumstances. I daydreamed about my elegant queen. My father's insults had fostered an identification with the only female in my army—the most powerful player, if not the most valued, despite her superiority over the lumbering kings protected by the self-sacrifice of subordinates.

My stately queen inspired tentative joy each time she swept across the board—granted, as my father's Inquisitorial bishops readied for her slaughter. In my imagination, she floated, not on clouds of mustard gas or over a splintered chessboard, but around the checkered marble floor of a grand ballroom. Her rigid base softened into a flowing gown of silken black folds. The tiny nubbins encircling her head became a golden crown studded with emeralds. The few times I moved her, I experienced the headiness and pleasure of unfettered flight, at least until my father swept her from the board and placed a white piece firmly in her stead. My queen was my one salve in the midst of seemingly endless slaughter.

Whatever satisfactions my father derived from easy victory, he must have desired a more competent chess partner. As weeks wore on, he checkmated my king with diminishing relish and began to show unmistakable symptoms of ennui: long sighs, unfocused stares, and an increasing familiarity with Ernest & Julio. For all I know, he bought the Civil War–themed set to alleviate the despair of playing chess with a hopelessly incompetent daughter, with faceless pieces marching aimlessly in the absence of a flag-bearer, manifesto, or anthem. The Civil War chess set added a new dimension to our matches. Freighted with historical baggage, it elevated the imagined stakes of our games by associating them with a bloody, fratricidal war.

My father bought the Civil War set on impulse during a commercial break from a World War I documentary. During an intermezzo between mustard gas attacks, an advertisement appeared for a Scarlett O'Hara doll with ringlets of human hair and a dress fashioned from antique lace.

"Half-wit harlot," my father muttered. "Can't believe they sell this sort of junk. Dolls for grownups."

A moment later, my father placed his glass of wine on a side table and leaned forward in his chair. On our television screen, red lacquered fingernails trailed along the edges of a blue and slate-gray chessboard and "thirty-two skillfully handcrafted and historically accurate" figures "straight from the annals of the Civil War."

My father snapped his fingers to rouse me from the couch. "Get the phone."

Skilled dictators like my father often cloud questions of guilt by making their victims complicit in their own oppression. I brought the kitchen phone into our living room. I dialed the 1-800 number on our television screen. I waited, on hold, for a switchboard operator while my father searched for his credit card. Two weeks later, a large box bearing a Virginia postmark appeared on our porch.

My father wasted no time slicing open its cardboard flaps and tearing through foam peanuts to uncover a slate chessboard and a slender wooden box fastened with faux leather straps and brass clasps. He was the proverbial kid in a candy store as he shredded plastic bags to liberate the members of two armies more obviously suited for battle than their dull predecessors: infantrymen standing at attention with rifles slung over their shoulders, eight in pale gray overcoats and eight in dark blue Union jackets; mounted cannons to stand in place of castles; four rearing horses carrying sword-bearing cavalrymen; replicas of General William Tecumseh Sherman and General Stonewall Jackson to act as bishops; and a Confederate flag and fluttering Stars and Bars to fly in the places of ancient kings.

"They don't look like chess pieces," I said.

"They're better than other chess pieces." My father lifted Stonewall Jackson from the wooden box and examined his painted face. "Look at the detail on this thing."

I trailed my fingers over the yellow buttons painted on a blue coat and poked my fingertip with the tip of an infantryman's tiny bayonet. "I wish they had moving parts."

My father narrowed his eyes. "These aren't dolls. Put it on the board before you break it."

I watched my father muster each army, befuddled by the strange figures assembled on the massive chessboard taking up our kitchen table. I couldn't

connect the mounted cannons to the crenulated medieval castles of yore. If I had bristled under the Inquisitorial menace of old bishops, I barely recognized Sherman or Jackson. I would have murdered my best friend for a real pony, but rearing red-eyed beasts bearing cavalrymen had no place in my equestrian fantasies. Our sexless pawns had been supplanted by whiskered soldiers. The kings had vanished behind the folds of lifeless flags. Worst of all, the queens had been banished from my imaginary kingdom and replaced by two bearded generals, Robert E. Lee and Ulysses S. Grant.

My father claimed the Confederate Army as his own—oddly, I thought, since he vaguely resembled Ulysses S. Grant. By default, I gained tepid command of the Union forces. I hardly complained. What little I knew about the history of slavery in the United States had already conditioned my affinity for the soldiers gathered to defend human dignity and national unity. It made my father's disdain for the North more than a bit perplexing.

"I'd hate to be the Union right now," my father said. "You're about to get creamed by a superior fighting force."

"I want to be the Union." I looked down at my arms. "They fought for slaves. And General Grant defended Chicago."

"He won't be defending Chicago this time." My father moved the pawn in front of General Lee and lit a cigarette. "Fort Sumter is about to burn."

"How come you get the first move? Is it because the South started the war?" I asked, trying to remember the sequence of battles described in various Civil War documentaries.

"You're oversimplifying. The North was meddling. They didn't respect the cultural institutions of others. They pushed the South into war."

"Then shouldn't I go first?"

"The Confederate States Army is white, and white always goes first."

I looked at the pale pink faces of soldiers dressed in blue. "My pieces are white, too. They just stayed friends with Abraham Lincoln."

My father tapped his cigarette over his ashtray. "This has nothing to do with friendship. General Lee was a true Southern gentleman. He defended his home in Virginia, despite his ambivalence about the war." He paused to drain a glass of Ernest & Julio. "In some ways, Lee was a Union man at heart. But he chose to be loyal to his family."

I shifted in my chair. "If he stayed with the South, did he believe in slavery?" I looked at the beads of wine clinging to my father's beard.

"That's not the point. The war was about states' rights," my father answered, suddenly drawing out his vowels in an entirely uncharacteristic fashion.

Perplexed, I leaned forward. "Rights to do what?"

My father ground out his cigarette and told me to make a move, foreclosing any discussion of the moral quandaries the CSA's most skilled general must have faced while weighing his attachments to home against the bondage of millions.

I pushed a pawn forward, and over the next 20 minutes, Confederate soldiers and cannon fire cut through my line of conscripts, and mounted cavalry officers eviscerated my paralyzed pawns. We played several games that night, each ending in another grim revision of history, with the Confederacy rising again and again to retrace Sherman's path in reverse and storm the Chicago suburbs.

Over the next few weeks, my father's diction steadily devolved into Southern cliché. He spoke of "gentlemen's honor" whenever he enforced a rule to his own disadvantage. He used phrases like "scurrilous cads" and "dirty scoundrels" and "the darkened and sullied rabble" to describe my pawns.

"Grant and Sherman were bloodthirsty maniacs with the unearned advantages of heavy industry, unduly requited for their misdeeds," my father drawled one night. "Lee was a far superior general. More intelligent in his overall stratagems."

My father seemed unaware, at times, that he had embraced a caricature. His expression remained unchanged whenever he slipped into speech patterns he associated with an imagined Southern plantocracy. Even at the age of nine, I found his verbal affectations somewhat bizarre. My father, after all, had grown up in Chicago as a third-generation "Yankee," with the clipped speech, swallowed r's, and flattened vowels endemic to the Windy City. I was not then accounting for the fact that my father had grown up on Chicago's segregated South Side, in a (there goes the) neighborhood where people obsessed about "crime and the coloreds" over Christmas dinner.

My father fought the Civil War with zeal, developing dozens of new stratagems to undermine my concentration. He drummed his fingers on the table in a galloping rhythm each time his horses bore down on my embattled soldiers. He whistled Dixie. He let two and sometimes three cigarettes at a time burn in his ashtray to evoke the chaos that reigned at Bull Run. If fireworks had been legal in Illinois, he would have tossed lit M-80s onto the board each time he moved a cannon.

In lieu of real firepower, my father relied on uninterrupted trash talk. Every time he checkmated my king, he talked about how I, a "Union stooge," had enjoyed every advantage and "still managed to lose the war." He pronounced on the outcomes of each battle with the heavy slurring that characterizes many armchair historians. My father had always been a heavy drinker, but during our matches, he distinguished himself by sipping Southern Comfort, and as time went on, mint juleps and aged bourbons "appropriate to his rank and station." He'd always slam his empty glass down on the table after he drained it.

"I can't think straight," I mumbled one evening. "It's not fair that you're whistling all the time. And smoking."

My father lit another cigarette, having forgotten the one smoldering in his ashtray. "Why the hell wouldn't it be fair?" He picked up the *Official Rules of Chess* and began reading index entries. "There's nothing about whistling or smoking." He tossed the book onto the table.

"What about Article 19? About player conduct," I whispered.

My father paused, realizing for the first time that I'd been studying the World Chess Federation's rulebook in my off-duty hours, waiting for an opportune moment to derail his off-board stratagems. "What about it?"

I opened the book to a page I'd dog-eared earlier that week. "*Article 19.1.c It is forbidden to distract or annoy the opponent in any manner whatsoever.* Your smoking and whistling are distracting me."

"If you're distracted, it's your problem." My father leaned back in his chair. "Do you want to penalize the clock for ticking?"

"Then they're annoying me."

"Annoying is subjective. Does the book spell out what's annoying?" He shook his head and grabbed the manual. "Read *Interpretation of Article 19.1.c.* There's no definition or example of annoying or distracting behaviors. All it says is that questions about what constitutes supposedly annoying behavior should be referred to an arbiter overseeing tournament play." He leaned over the board. "In the absence of an arbiter, let me ask some questions. Have you seen people smoking in other situations?"

I nodded.

"Do you know people, classmates, friends, or neighbors who whistle?"

I nodded again.

"It's normal behavior. If you find it annoying, you're atypical."

"It's not fair because I can't smoke."

My father again read from *The Official Rules*. "*The Commission shares*

the opinion that the result of a game of chess ought to depend exclusively on the strength of a player. You should be able to concentrate in the presence of normal behavior. Next, you'll be calling it chemical warfare." He drummed his fingers on the table and placed my king in check with his horse.

"You only whistle during our games. That's why it distracts me."

"Your bullshit legal claims are distracting. There's nothing strange about smoking and whistling."

If history is written by the victors, those in power interpret the laws, and at that moment, I began to apprehend the inner workings of *the system*. That night, I went to bed to the sound of renewed shelling in the living room, wondering if Paris had fallen, and sinking into a Marianas Trench of misery.

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The overthrow of my father's regime might never have happened independent of my miserable smoke-filled environment. I spent less time developing stratagems to defend my "spoiled" troops than blowing my nose in ragged tissues that collected in heaps, much like my Union casualties—dispatched figurines my father unceremoniously piled beside his ashtray. I never lost my moral compass, though, in the fog of war; I always dispatched my father's soldiers in a dignified manner, laying them on soft beds of tissue in the wooden box shipped from their Virginia homeland. Unmoved by charity, my father launched one chemical offensive after the next. My eyes grew puffy and my nostrils became inflamed. I started keeping Kleenex on my lap, (imagined) lace kerchiefs to filter out smoke and dry my face in the event of tears.

I suffered the mental and physical afflictions of an asthmatic sinking in the quagmire of an unwinnable war until the evening my father summoned me from the bathroom.

"What's taking so long? You can't hide forever," he yelled, as I pulled a fresh box of Kleenex reinforcements from beneath the sink. "Prepare for retreat."

He waited until I returned to the table and then, with a dramatic flourish, swept one of my horses from the board and tossed it into the mass grave beside his ashtray.

Even if my dead and beaten horse had been a raging stallion and its rider a colonel hell-bent on eviscerating everyone in his path, I had an incurably soft spot for any creature with a soft muzzle, a whinny that sounded like a giggle, and a mane that could, in a pinch, be braided with pink and green

ribbons. I had been raised on countless girl-and-her-horse stories of the *Misty of Chincoteague* variety, and the spit (or wad of chew) in the face was too much to bear. The noon shadow of war had grown too long. "My kingdom for a pony," my rebellious heart cried. My imagination ran riot. My moral compass found its Northern Star, my soul its singing voice, my heart its silken wings. My father rose from the table to fix a mint julep, and my hand found the box of Kleenex.

While my father mixed his drink at the living room bar, I raced to the kitchen desk and found a roll of clear tape. To the sound of ice cubes hitting glass, I quickly fashioned a full-length dress for General Grant, wrapping strips of pink tissue around his hips and cinching a waist with a piece of tape. I pulled a second tissue over his head to form a bodice and pinched loose material into puffed sleeves. I resurrected my horses and infantrymen from the ash heaps of the Confederacy and lined them up alongside the board to witness a solemn, if rushed, coronation ceremony. I whispered a magical charm, and in that moment, General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Union Army, became my hirsute queen.

By conventional standards, she wasn't gorgeous. She wasn't nearly as graceful as my Staunton-style queen. But she possessed an undeniable dignity in the circumstances, with the exigencies of war weighing upon her exposed shoulders, and skilled seamstresses in short supply. Even if her dress fit awkwardly, with its off-the-shoulder (off-the-epaulettes) cut and cumbersome train, my queen embodied my ideal of a valiant heroine at ready for masquerade ball or pitched battle. From the sidelines, my ponies neighed with joy. On the board, my infantrymen blushed and my cannons roared. The North rejoiced, and my heart sang.

When my father returned, it didn't take him long to notice my gender-bending queen.

"What the hell's Grant doing in a dress? We're in the middle of a game."

"She's Queen Ulysses," I answered, fighting a tremor in my leg.

"My question was why General Grant's wearing a pink dress."

"He became a lady so he could be a queen." I straightened Grant's ruffled sleeves to steady my hands. With the lives of so many ponies hanging in the balance, surrender no longer seemed an option. "She's my queen."

My father lit a cigarette and sat down. "He's a he. A general. A Civil War general and a man." He studied my face. I suspect he was trying to detect some

budding perversion in his sniveling daughter. "And it's against the rules," he added, before draining his glass in one long gulp and crushing a sizzling cigarette butt against an ice cube.

Like many dictators who have trampled the bones of the innocent, only to trip and fall in their blind arrogance, he had finally gone too far. He had referred carelessly, almost lazily, to the rules of engagement, assuming those rules would always serve his interests.

"What's against the rules?"

"Introducing non-regulation pieces," he said.

"It's not a piece. It's a dress. On a piece."

"It's not standard," he said. "And it's sure as hell distracting and annoying."

I took a deep breath, imagined an Exhibit A showcasing Barbies and bridal magazines, and launched my impromptu legal defense. "You see dresses all the time." My father bristled at the echo of his earlier arguments. "Wedding dresses. My school uniform skirt." Then I delivered the coup de grâce. "You made me wear a dress to my first communion."

My father tugged at his beard. "U.S. generals don't wear dresses. It's against the rules."

"What does the World Chess Federation say?" I asked.

As it turns out, *The Official Rules*' index didn't contain a single reference to "generals in drag" or "black pieces in pink dresses." In fact, its list of regulation chess pieces included queens, described as "Queens," but not "historic personages associated with the Civil War" or "CSA army officers." If anything, *The Official Rules* seemed to suggest that our all-male, nonregulation Civil War chess set constituted a travesty that only transvestites could refute.

"Fine, play your silly games." My father had the bewildered air of a white-collar criminal discovering he'd been pick-pocketed at his favorite martini bar. Suddenly, and for the first time, I saw the possibility of waging war within Geneva-like conventions, with ponies and panache.

"Wearing a dress is like smoking and whistling. Lots of people do it. It's normal," I said, deploying my most sophisticated argument. "It's legal in regulation chess."

My father seemed unable to focus on my face all of a sudden. "It's unnatural," he insisted. "A Civil War general, even Grant, in a pink dress. It's not right."

I shrugged, and my father grew a whiter shade of pale.

I wasted no time pressing my newfound advantages: my father's agitation

and his inability to focus on the game. The bubble writing was all over Stonewall. Confronted with the war's unconventional turn, my father started smoking more heavily.

"The dress isn't historically accurate." In his distraction, he placed Stonewall Jackson in General Sherman's line of fire.

"Neither was a Confederate victory at Shiloh or Gettysburg," I said.

My father massaged his temples and muttered about "perverts" and "so-called patriots."

As he came unraveled, he could no longer direct campaigns on multiple fronts. Simply, he couldn't take his eyes off General Grant—and what a general she was, pink with the blush/flush of success. With a fetching neckline and flamboyant sleeves, my queen was charming and dashing, and no less accomplished in the martial arts for embracing elegance. Fixated on my queen's creeping hemline (modesty is one of war's many casualties, and to my great consternation, bits of tape kept pulling to expose General Grant's boots), my father became a one-step chess player, knee-jerking in reaction to Grant as she stormed the board, pirouetting across blasted landscapes, waltzing through summer engagements, and skating figure eights around Robert E. Lee. Instead of protecting his pieces, he devoted his scattershot efforts entirely to capturing my "cross-dressing general" or my "hairy freak-show queen," as he alternately described the Belle of the Battle. I won a chess match for the first time that night.

"Checkmate," I declared, as Queen Ulysses, enveloped in billowing pink tissue, assumed position to strike my father's cornered king.

My father stared at the Union pieces surrounding his Confederate flag. "You relied on cheap distractions to win," he finally said, without looking up from the board.

"I won fair and square," I said, placing Queen Ulysses between her two black ponies.

"By making a mockery of the game." My father rose from the table and went into the living room to watch television.

I sometimes wonder why my father, an authoritarian at heart, did not order me to disrobe Queen Ulysses. Perhaps he would have considered such an order indecent, or somehow contrary to the protocols of war. She was, after all, an accomplished general. Perhaps his sense of the integrity befitting Southern gentlemen prevented him from violating the World Chess Federation's rules.

Maybe he just couldn't admit that a simple alteration to the Union's uniform had thrown his game. Whatever the case, he never forced the (t)issue.

I can't say I won the Civil War each time General Grant promenaded in a pink gown, but from the time I discovered my commanding officer's "unnatural" proclivities, my father suffered periodic defeats, all the more humiliating for being served up by his asthmatic chimpanzee of a daughter. As pink gowns gave way to blue tissue shawls, plastic garbage-bag skirts, and flapper dresses fashioned from squares of glued fabric, my investment in chess deepened. Checkmating my father became more common than shocking. I began to think of myself as a competent player seasoned by battle. As I neared my tenth birthday, I even started pestering my father for matches.

By that time, my father had begun to lose interest in our games. Our Civil Wars had reached their conclusion, not for lack of hostility or a softening of entrenched ideologies, not for an end to carnage or carcinogens, and not for hopes of reconciliation or reparation. The theater of operations had simply changed.

Though I didn't yet know it, my mother had informed my father of her impending return. My father, desperate to end his collapsing marriage, had begun a messy affair. During our last few matches, he let cigarettes slip from the edge of his ashtray and whistled Dixie without resolution. I attributed my father's waning interest to his disdain for my "ridiculous stratagems." When he waved me aside, I worried I'd pushed him too far, and then completely away—that I'd confirmed his worst estimates of me by employing cheap tactics to avoid real tests of intelligence. I worried, too, that I'd "acted like my crazy mother." Days before my tenth birthday, my father petitioned my mother for an annulment so he could marry a "rational" woman with two "well-behaved" daughters and a son who loved football. Then he moved out of our house.

He took the chessboards with him.

With his departure, my development as a chess player came to a grinding halt. For decades, I avoided chess, haunted by thoughts that my few victories had been undeserved flukes or the result of "bubble-headed shenanigans."

Recently, in an attempt to confront certain childhood demons, I started playing chess with my husband. I felt sick with anxiety the first time we set up the board, only to discover that we are evenly matched, and that I can again enjoy playing chess. We play with Staunton-style pieces, the abstract figures of my first, antebellum games. We flip a coin to determine which side will

enjoy the advantage of the first move. Color, in this sense, has no bearing on outcomes. I see the pieces as they are, as wooden figures lacking "secondary sex characteristics" of the sort that obsess the International Olympic Committee. I realize there was no reason to assume that my pawns were infantrymen rather than women in combat, that the generic horse heads were stallions instead of mares, or that my bishops weren't ordained clergywomen. The queen remains, though, a queen in my mind, for there are battles yet to be won, both on and off the board. That said, I'll always envision whiskers on her otherwise featureless face, and scuffed leather boots beneath her stiff pedestal—though her boots, as I imagine them, always look much like my own.