

'The Eyes of other People are the Eyes that ruin us. If all but myself were blind, I should want neither fine Clothes, fine Houses nor Fine Furniture.' Letter to Benjamin Vaughan, 1784.

Eleanor and the Chess Set

The attic was forbidden. Yet in the corridor below, young Eleanor paused. Its gaping mouth in the ceiling above her was tempting, a dark cavern yawning open to another world. She stilled, listening to the noises of the house. Her parents were downstairs, she could hear them talking, but someone had left the attic hatch open, and the rope to pull the ladder down swung lazily in the air above her. Hesitating only a moment, she pulled it, sending the ladder above creaking down towards her. Eleanor clambered up to the attic, ascending in a cloud of dust. There, in the gloom, she spotted a little wooden box. Small, flat, and otherwise unremarkable, but for how its latch glinted towards her like a wink in the darkness.

It rattled as she picked it up, curious, Eleanor undid the clasp to look inside. Suddenly, the world turned black, then white, then square. She was falling, tumbling down to land painfully on a lacquered floor. Looking around, Eleanor flinched at the sight before her. Confusion overtaking her at the sight of all the pieces of a chess set gathered around her. They towered over her, frowning, and leaning in to examine her. Eleanor froze in fear, she couldn't understand how she could have fallen into the chess set.

A wise looking King was the closest, staring down at her on the chequered floor. He was old and bearded, his brow wrinkled by time and the weight of his crown.

She said, "This can't be right. I was just in the attic! This -" she paused, looking around helplessly for an explanation, "- This must be a dream."

But the wise King spoke then, his voice low and grand.

"There'll be no awaking from this I'm afraid,
And now that you're here, the game must be played,
So come along child, take your place in our game,
You'll find when you leave, you won't be the same.
You want to return to where you began?
For that you must win, so make your game plan."

Young Eleanor nodded, accepting their game. Determined to win and return home as she looked around bravely at the black and white pieces. They marched to their places, but Eleanor remained on the square she had landed on. They regarded her strangely, awaiting her move. Until she exclaimed, “But, which place do I take?” To which the Knight said, “Mine would be no mistake.”

“Us great Knights, we’re brave and we’re bold,
We rush into danger, won’t do as we’re told,
Our adventurous tales win praise all around,
With feats of daring sure to astound,
You’ll see great lands, travel oceans blue,
You’ll conquer mountains, and demons too,
And when you’ve seen the world so wide,
You’ll return home with glory and pride”

Eleanor smiled, filled then with delight, thinking it wonderful to be called a Knight. A tale of bravery and adventure the reward for her victory. How jealous her brother would be when he heard, she thought smugly.

Swallowing her nerves, Eleanor crossed the board to take the place of a Knight. But she flinched when the game began, vicious and quick. This place didn’t suit her, and she played the game wrong. She tried to act brave but failed to pretend the Knight was where she belonged.

“Stop!” Cried the Bishop, “Can’t you see where this leads?,
It’s clear in the Knight’s role, she never succeeds,
The girl won’t be brave, she’ll be clever like me,
Listen child, it’s a Bishop you should be,
Us clever Bishops, we’re sharp and we’re quick,
There’s never a riddle our brains can’t unpick,
In youth we’re brilliant, in age we’re wise,
To be thought of as clever, there’s no greater prize,
The Knight’s charge forward, they don’t use their head,
But it’s steadfast logic that guides us instead,
And with great academics will come great success,
Your intelligence unbeatable in this game of chess.”

Eleanor paused, slowly thinking it through. She may not be truly brave, but perhaps she could win through intelligence. She did well at school, occasionally praised by teachers and passing her tests. Nodding in resolution, she moved to match the Bishop in his place. Watching carefully as the other pieces return to their starting positions.

A pawn moved forward, and the game began anew. But while young Eleanor played her new role with great care, she soon became stuck. Pinned on her square protecting the King while the game continued around her. As the pieces played on, she started to cry.

A stern looking Rook arrived to win with triumph. Eleanor had lost again and feared she could never win. She'd thought long and hard at each turn and still failed to spot the trick. Hearing her cry, the Rook turned to speak to her with an ill-concealed grin.

“How unfortunate it is, this truth often missed,
That choices put up walls which didn't use to exist,
And if you pick wrong, you'll find yourself lost,
Looking back in confusion to count up the cost,
You see us Rooks, we're often thought stern,
But put in the work and you'll see a return,
Sit long at your desk and you'll pass any test,
Hard work and ambition always get you the best,
Success you'll find brings much admiration,
When riches and wealth become your fixation.”

But Eleanor could only weep as the Rook spoke, “It's all hopeless, I just want to go home!”

She wasn't ambitious for wealth like the Rook, that much she knew. Despair filled her at the thought of having to play the game again. She'd landed on darkness, and she'd landed on light, but no matter how she tried she never seemed to play this game right.

She said, “I'm not brave or clever enough, or hardworking like a Rook. I can't win your game, so just let me go!”

The stern Rook sneered, but the Queen replied before he could, telling the Rook how he'd misunderstood.

“Don't blame the girl for rejecting your place,
When all you've offered is riches to chase,

Gold is cold, and finds false friends,
And happiness paid for quickly ends,
But us beauty Queens, we're praised and adored,
No one holds power like us on this board,
With coveted youth and grace as our tools,
We move as we please, we're not held back by rules."

Eleanor shook her head, she wasn't thought beautiful by others either, and she didn't care much to be. How scary it was to think she'd never win at this game, if she couldn't be brave, beautiful, clever, or ambitious enough. Still, she knew she had to succeed to return home, and reluctantly took the place of the Queen. Once more, the game began anew. But Eleanor moved wrong from the start. Too timid to venture far across the checkerboard stage, she was soon captured and sent to exile off the board.

The wise King, joining her on the side as the game ended, saw how she stood so forlornly. He sighed heavily, whispering towards her to offer a word of comfort.

"Careful my dear, it's not what it seems,
They've sold you stories and hand-me-down dreams,
These visions and tales of wealth and prestige,
They blind you to truth as you change to appease.
Then you'll find you're forced to surrender,
Those childhood dreams of love and adventure,
And in their place, you'll take goals never yours,
Of riches and fame on far away shores,
And then one day you'll wake, and you'll find,
Your dreams are long gone, they'll have all left your mind,
But your head won't be empty, instead you'll have greed,
Along with a painful new need to succeed.
You see little girl, that's the truth of our lot,
We all took on faces of things we were not,
And these places we've chosen in our game of chess,
We never did want them, I'm sad to confess."

Eleonor froze, fixed still with shock. These pieces she envied - the brave knight, the clever bishop, the stern rook, and the beauty queen - suddenly were hollow with insincerity.

They'd tried to convince her to emulate them, encouraged her envy with tales of prestige and wealth. But the eyes of others had ruined them, and now they turned their eyes to her. Trying to make her take places in this game she never wanted. Roles she would never fit enough to succeed.

Eleanor thought that if all the world were blind, she would want only to be herself. Whether that meant seeming great in her ambition, cleverness, bravery, or beauty to others or not, and with that, Eleanor knew how she would win.

“I'll take a pawn's place and play as myself.”