Every Sunday night, when they set up their chessboard, I ask for f7. They cannot hear me. I still plead, although I have a non-negotiable 87.5% probability of not being placed on f7. When the girl would play us black pieces, sometimes I wouldn’t end up on row 7 at all. She confuses us pawns with the bishops, who slide about in dizzy diagonals, parading their greater rank and their silly hats. Us bare-headed pawns, we trudge. We thump.

But the girl likes white better and the boy likes the girl better, so she’s white and he’s black. I have a 12.5% chance of ending up on f7, while some pitiable white infantryman has quite a weak chance at his favorite spot.

The pale wooden tan of the f7 square contrasts nicely with my ebony coloring. I’m a pawn, so my appearance isn’t much to fuss over. There’s an identical eight of us—an eight, a four-plus-four, a dozen minus a third. All identically dull. At least if I sit on a white square I’m visible, distinct, different from something.

A pair of hands, each hand belonging to a different person, fumbles about the box of chess pieces. A set of fingers couples me with a white rook—I wince at the distasteful encounter, but he merely smirks—and lifts me.

“Oh, Ethan,” the girl says, “I have one of yours.”

He rumbles thanks as their hands touch underneath me. It’s a rough transition from her cool palm to his sweaty one. My only consolation is that his fingers are streaked through with decision and don’t waver with nauseating uncertainty like hers do. He’s by far the better player. He observes us from on high, his sharp eyes spotting almost everything we spot. He plays the game almost as well as we could.

A clunk reverberates through my short, stumpy body as the boy positions me on f7. Ah! What were the odds? I exclaim, although I know exactly what the odds were. We pawns have so little to gloat over, one can hardly blame me for getting excited and pretending that getting my favorite spot was a miracle, rather than a probability.

I give into the weakness of joy and beam at the pawn stationed next to me, on e7. Poor fellow. Not only is he condemned to the monotony of a black square, but he has a middle spot. We’re both familiar with the playing strategies of the boy and the girl; chances are he’ll be the first black piece moved and the first out of the game.

Quite aware of his situation, he glowers like a fermenting rain-cloud. I know what a cloud looks like. Once I caught a glimpse of one through the window, when they forgot to shut the curtains. I was glad when they finally covered the window. No one likes to be reminded of the smallness of one’s world and the bigness of the chaos outside.
Your odds at f7 increased substantially, as you are late, my comrade on e7 mutters. By the time you showed up, your chances were 37.5%.

I was delayed, I say. I had a mix-up with the snobby rook.

a1?

Bitterly I thud assent. That particular rook ends up on a1 far more often than probability dictates. That’s what comes of being in the hands of that girl. She can’t play the game, and that throws off the whole system. It’s intolerably disrupting. She’s been the death of any amiable qualities the a1 rook might have possessed and her incompetence at chess makes the boy pity her. When pity consorts with the fingers that move us, discordant notes and idiotic moves sour the harmony of a fair game.

On the other side of the chessboard, the white pieces form a slipshod reflection of the precise alignment of us blacks. The girl’s face, consisting mostly of chin, bobs above them expectantly. “Let’s start!” she bubbles. She thinks she’ll win. Deluded human.

The boy nods.

No matter how illogically erratic her future moves will be, we can all predict her first. Surely enough, the e2 pawn is moved forward two spaces. We take the boy’s response for granted; the e7 pawn and I exchange monosyllabic farewells before he is plucked up and placed opposite the white pawn. The first six moves—routine—are frightfully unexciting, but at least they’re legitimate. Six moves are as far as the girl’s rational capabilities last. After that, her whims determine the course of the game, and 14.5% of the time her whims don’t conform with the rules.

Now it’s the fifth move.

The bishops remain intrigued throughout the game, peeking forward and stepping slightly out of their squares to better observe the action. I’ve always considered them to be hopeless optimists, but I suppose that’s what comes of moving unnatural directions and distances. Meanwhile, the rooks precisely center themselves in their squares, confident that when the dregs of the armies have been whittled away, they will be called upon to perform their browbeating exploits. Like I always say, it’s been the death of the a1 rook’s few amiable qualities.

The ninth move. So far the girl has made two tactical mistakes, but the boy hasn’t yet degraded himself by trying to even out the odds for her. I perk up and straighten my stumpy wooden body, allowing myself to hope against my better judgment. Perhaps black will win this time.

Oh, that dolt of a girl! She did it again. She just moved her pawn directly forward and captured one of the boy’s knights. Even a child knows that pawns march forward—one space—
and capture diagonally—one space. That girl’s skull is plastic, I’m sure of it. Plastic chess pieces have scarcely a scrap of dignity about them. And they’re hollow. If one is knocked over, it titters inanely. They’ve no solidity, no stability, nothing inside of them but empty air and echoes of themselves. I imagine the girl’s insides are like that.

“Pawns can’t capture pieces directly in front of them, only those at a diagonal.” The boy explains this brightly, as though this were the first time he’s corrected her. It isn’t.

“Botheration. I wanted your horse.”

The knight bellows his frustration: *His knight! I am his knight! And a “Sir” to you, obtuse menial human!*

Talking never does us any good. Their dull ears can only hear wood clanking as our bodies strike the board. That’s all we are to them—pieces—pawns in a game—in a game they haven’t the wits or the decency to play properly.

Still, they play it.

A peculiar sensation—déjà vu, is it called?—tickles my mind as I realize everything I think and say and do now is pretty much the substance of what I thought and said and did last Sunday, and the Sunday before that, and the Sunday before that. Monotonous existence defines my Sunday nights, even on the nights when my favorite square, f7, sits warmly and solidly beneath me and the square’s pale wood contrasts nicely with my ebony.

Behind me, the king’s heels click as he and a rook switch places. Among us chess pieces it’s common knowledge that the black king prefers to castle queenside, but the boy doesn’t know that. So the boy castles kingside instead, since that’s what he deems best. My king now stands behind me, to my left.

I shift to a slightly more comfortable position, preparing to guard him for the rest of the game. Chances are I won’t be moved, not from this position. If I am moved, there would be a gaping hole through which the white pieces could easily attack my king, who in turn would be stuck in a corner with no means of escape. For an instant I wonder what it would be like to be hounded, to be trapped in a corner every week, to be helpless against attackers and hopeless for a rescue from the ceaseless cycle of such an existence.

I don’t like the thought. I’m glad I’m not a king.

But I’m bored. I wait. My rotating thoughts process again. Never being a good judge of time, I can’t tell how much of it passes before the crash of a white knight nearby shocks me into consciousness.
The knight teeters apprehensively on g6. My modest range of attack extends to e6 and g6; by placing him on the latter, the girl drives him to suicide. What is she thinking? I ask the knight, You aren’t even a threat in that position.

He shrugs and twitches the little carved nostrils at the tip of his nose. Then he indicates the white bishop behind him on f5. I comprehend. If the girl moves the bishop a space to my right, he can capture me and expose my king. But in that case, my king would merely step forward, capture the bishop, and eliminate the threat. No worries there—this girl never thinks her strategies through—but still, I’ll be out of the game.

I sense the boy’s fingers approaching me. Will I get to capture the knight?! I toss the knight a grin that I hope resembles the one that the snobbish rook always has plastered on his face. I look up and see the snobbish rook in row h. The girl must’ve moved him there while I was dozing off—I mean to say, meditating.

I’m capturing the knight! If the girl has any remnants of intelligence, her bishop will capture me directly after my move—but I’ll have my move.

I am lifted up. Air fills the empty space between f7 and I. But instead of moving on a diagonal—one space—to capture the knight, I feel myself being moved forward—one space. That leaves f7 open; all the bishop will have to do is move around me to reach my king. With that knight and the snobbish rook back on row h blocking off the exits, my king will be checkmated.

The boy is letting her win.

Again.

My grain seethes at being gone against. No amount of sanding and polishing ever entirely rid me of perversity. The boy has forced me to make idiotic moves before, but now he wants me to make a game-deciding stroke through pity. The muscles and bones in his fingers make me do it.

The rook smirks.

No.

With a surging force of will, I place myself atop the point of the bishop’s mitre. The force of my landing makes him crumple beneath my base and topple sideways. He knocks over a white pawn who skitters across the board in bewilderment, in his flight taking with him the other white rook and two bystanding pawns.

“Ethan!” the girl shrieks, “Look at what you did!”
“You said pawns can only attack diagonally,” the girl says, “Not go two spaces straight forward and knock out my bishop.”

“I know,” says the boy. Yes, he knows.

He removes me, replaces the bishop, coated with a thin film of sweat from his palm, and tries to put me where he intended me to go.

No.

Again I knock over the bishop and set myself on f5.

“Stop it!” the girl pouts, “Are you up to some game? Aren’t there rules to chess?”

Vibrations shudder through me; gripping my head, the boy’s fingers quiver just barely. “Yeah, I know,” he says. He’s trying to figure out what’s going on.

He puts the bishop back and tries to make me do what he wants me to do. No. I clamp down on f5. Its pale wood contrasts with my blackness. I stand out—visible, distinct, different. Defiant.

“Can you stop it?” the girl whines, “It isn’t funny anymore. Let’s just play the game.”

I won’t play the game. He tries to make me, but I don’t. His fingers visibly shake with the effort. Continually breaking the rules of chess, resisting the strength of his will and his fingers—it strains me, but I stand firm. The sweat from his fingers drips onto me. I soak it up and swell from the moisture, and it feeds the power I’ve found within me.

“It’s not me,” the boy says, “It’s the pawn.”

The girl scoffs, but finally her patience wears thin. She snatches me, and the air shrieks around me as I speed towards the wall with the velocity of a bullet. With a resounding crack I ricochet off the wall and land on the ground, rolling into the tail ends of the curtains. I can see the whole room from here—it’s too big. Headache pounds through me. I must’ve hit the wall a bit too hard.

“We don’t need a pawn to play chess,” the girl says.

Yes, you do.

“Pawns don’t do anything, anyways.”
Yes, we do. At least, so I thought. As I lie here, immobile, I begin to doubt myself.

“And besides, chess is a stupid game. I don’t know why you make us play it,” says the girl, “Let’s play something exciting, like Balderdash.”

They leave the chessboard without bothering to upright the fallen bishop in his ludicrous hat.

On the floor I lie, hidden in the curtains.

I wonder what I’ll do now. I can’t do anything.

I am small.

I feel like plastic.