

## "A certain freedom"

**Write a personal essay about your understanding of freedom and why you think it is important**

I take my seat and look at the man opposite me. He's older than I am, maybe twice my age. A Caesar-cut of bleached blond hair frames a pair of thick-rimmed glasses. He's wearing an ill-fitting tweed jacket over a blue shirt. His hands drum idly on the table. *Clickedy click click*. That's going to get annoying during the game, I can tell. I wonder if it's worth drawing to the arbiter's attention, then decide against it. I notice that he's looking me over as well. I wonder what he thinks of the teen in front of him. I'm probably not giving the best impression: my tshirt of choice (I never wore anything more formal, not even for competitions) is the silhouette of two people embracing against a red-and-yellow brick wall surrounded by impossibly-blue flames. It's a copy of the album cover of Green Day's *21st Century Breakdown*. I smirk, the album's the ultimate rude-hand-gesture in the face of corporate America. A stuffy middle-aged man in a tweed jacket probably wouldn't approve. I resist the urge to crane my neck to see if the jacket has leather patches. The arbiter comes over to our table, and we both stop trying to examine each other to glance up at him. He's an officious looking man, older than both of us. Probably older than both of combined, I think, and struggle to stifle a smirk. The arbiter tells us that it's 11am, and I am to start white's clock. I lean over and push down the metal bar on the clock. A soft ticking begins as my opponent's two hours begin to slip away. The game, my dear reader, has begun.

As Marcel Duchamp observed, "chess is a sport. A violent sport". Anyone who ever tells you otherwise is tragically mistaken. Sitting hunched over the board, everything else ceases to matter. Every fibre of your being is concentrated on trying to decimate the enemy forces. Mind versus mind. White versus black. Every last wit against every last wit. There's **a certain freedom**

around chess. The room around you melts away. Anything on your mind vanishes, replaced with a steady esoteric stream of notation. *Qe7+, Nxe8?, fRa6 ... Bh2#!*. A hundred different variations play themselves out in your head. The game is wonderfully straightforward when you free yourself from distraction. When your only concern is laid out so clearly before you: 64 squares, they're the reason you know you exist. I'd always loved the freedom chess had given me. It was my distraction, my heaven, my hobby, my love and my soul. I grew to hate anything that took away time that could otherwise be spent playing chess. An Irish exam tomorrow? Okay, I'll study for it after studying the Sicilian for an hour or two. Where normal students might eat food or chat with friends at lunchtime, I could be found in a quiet corridor poring over chess problems. People like Copablanca, Kasparov, Spassky and Fischer were my friends. Admittedly, these people were all hugely flawed in their own way (Fischer in particular is said to have been driven mad by the game; holding incendiary anti-Semitic views even though he himself was Jewish), but they were all so wonderfully talented. It would not be remotely hyperbolic to say that I idolized them.

Now that the game -my game- has started, every fibre of my being is in the game. My opponent is a Russian by the name of Anatoly Sergievsky. He's playing white, which means he moves first. I'm not worried though. He's played the Ruy Lopez, a fairly amateur opening. I play the Steinitz Defense and manage to keep in the game. For the next hour, our pieces dance across the board. I always associate the middle-game with a medieval jousting tournament. The two opponents are circling each other, occasionally attempting to nick the other with his sword, but not going for the kill. Sergievsky and I make a couple of minor piece-swaps but nothing major tips the balance of power. I'm a pawn ahead but he has a bishop and a knight in my half of the board, smothering a lot of my possibilities. I glance up at my opponent. His brow is furrowed into a deep line. His head is in his hands, staring intently at the board. He's a good player, but I think I can beat him. He's the current World Chess Champion, and I am the contender for the title. We battle

for the title in the city of Bangkok, over a series of 24 games. I have to get 12.5 points to win the title, he has to get 12 points to keep his place as the best in the world. I've travelled for chess tournaments before, but I've never been to Asia. Sight-seeing isn't high on my list of priorities though. You see one crowded, polluted, stinking town, you've seen them all.

The arbiter stops our clock and announces that an hour-long recess has begun. Sergievsky stands immediately, looking relieved at the break in tension. I wonder how well he's handling it all. I debate whether to stay looking at the board or to get some air, and choose the latter. I know that if I leave by the front door, there'll be reporters waiting to get the low-down on the game, so instead I head for the roof. I'd noticed that a couple of staff-members used rocks to keep the emergency exit open so that they could nip out and have a smoke. I make my way up there and slip out onto the roof. Here's another type of freedom: when you're up on a roof in a major city, you feel like a ghost. Nobody knows you're here, and nobody can bother you. I lean against a water tower and stare out into the city. Forget New York, Bangkok is a city that never sleeps. The rush of traffic is still loud in my ears, twenty-something floors up. Again, I feel my mind wander to thoughts of chess.

You could well argue that chess does not provide me with a freedom at all. You could say that I am a slave to chess. It controls me. I can't stand on a roof, watching one of the most beautiful cities in the world exist around me without my thoughts drifting back to *Bxh7+, cxd4, Nf3?!.* Then again, I've been playing chess since I was two. One of my oldest memories is my dad teaching me how the bishop moves while I sucked on a rook. I guess you could say it's not really my fault. Chess is the one thing I'm truly passionate about. Dealing with people is something I've always found difficult, but the Arkhangelsk defense or the Marshall attack (with its added Kholmov variation) are simple in my eyes. I wonder what it's like to not having something to be so incredibly passionate about. If I woke up tomorrow and wasn't thinking of chess, I imagine I'd die of boredom

before noon. "Freedom from chess"? That's not freedom, that's torture.

Back on the board, things have gone downhill. I've played well, but the Russian has made up his material disadvantage and pushed his A pawn down to the sixth rank. Two more moves and I could be staring down the barrel of a queen. I may as well resign at that stage. I turn my attention to my knight on the F file. It's been dormant for the last ten moves or so, and I start moving it again. Just some simple checks to start off with. As I play Nc6+, a plan begins to formulate in my head. If I can trap his king in the lower left corner of the board, I might -just might- be able to fork his king and the errant pawn. My fears of losing the match cautiously turn to erstwhile ones. I glance up and notice the Russian is sweating. I think he's noticed the same thing I have. I push ahead, heartened by the glimmer of a plan before my eyes.

After 67 moves, it comes. I fork his king and renegade pawn. When he moves the king to diffuse the threat, I capture the pawn. It's now my knight, pawn and king against his king. My pawn is on the fifth rank at the other end of the board to his king. I have the game now. The game that will bring my score to 13 points against his 11. The game that will confer the title of World Chess Champion to me. I look up and notice Sergievsky staring at me. His face is contorted with rage. I arrange my own features into a neutral, almost plaintive, expression. He stands up, smacking the chess-clock stopped: the international chess signal for resignation. I stand too, offering my hand for him to shake. He ignores it and picks up my king, fondling it in his fingers. The room holds its breath. Without warning, Sergievsky flings my king across the room and stalks from the table. It makes a high *crack* as it hits the wall and rolls to the floor. As I watch his hunched form recede into the distance, I wonder if all chess players are slaves to the game. Then again, I muse, freedom from the game isn't something any chess player wants. Not when it's what you live for.