

**John Lutz**

## **The Chess Players**

The sky beyond the old man and the boy playing chess was dark and occasionally fractured by lightning. Against that backdrop, neither of them noticed the dust of the car approaching on the dirt road from the county highway.

Both the old man — who was younger than he first appeared, with his white hair and beard — and the boy looked up when they heard the crunch of the tires and the soft thunking of rocks bouncing off the insides of the car's fenders. They remained seated beneath the branches of an elm, in the wooden kitchen chairs they'd dragged from the tiny farmhouse to place on either side of the small cedar table. On the table was a cheap chessboard and plastic pieces that were so light that from time to time the wind building up from the southwest tipped over the taller king, queen, or bishop. If the wind got much stronger, the pieces might blow from the board, but the old man and boy knew they wouldn't go far once they worked down in the coarse grass.

The boy, who was eight years old and named Andrew, looked at the old man, who was his grandfather. He was a thin, dark-haired boy with a narrow, symmetrical face and bright but sad blue eyes. The old man swiveled slightly in his chair to watch the car, and the boy's calm, intelligent gaze followed.

The grandfather, who was sixty-seven and whose name was Willis Sharp, watched the car brake to a halt next to the cottonwood tree near the barn. Beyond it, all around the farmhouse and barn, the cornfields spread for acres and acres so that only the water tower at Centerville, fifteen miles away, was visible from the house. Wavering in the heat, it looked like a drab gray lightbulb supported by a spindly framework. Andrew, who had quite an imagination, had once told Willis he'd dreamed the water tower was an alien spaceship that had landed so its occupants could learn chess.

The car was a dusty black Chrysler New Yorker with a rental decal on its front bumper. Both its front doors opened simultaneously, and

the two men inside climbed out. One was short and broad, the other tall and broad. The shorter one had on faded Levi's and an sleeveless red T-shirt. When the two men got closer, Willis saw that the T-shirt had one of those yellow smiley faces on it, only this one had a bullethole seeping blood in its forehead. The blood was the same red as the rest of the shirt.

"Whaddya know?" the short one said by way of greeting, when the two men were about ten feet from the old man and boy.

"Not much," Willis said.

"I don't doubt it," the tall one said in a voice that cut. He had pale eyes like diamond chips, thin, cruel features, and was beginning to go bald on top. The breeze whipped the long, sandy hair above his right ear out away from his head as he lifted a hand and smoothed it back with a look of irritation. "Kinda isolated out here in Dullsville, aren't you, old-timer?"

Willis thought he recognized his accent. "We like isolation."

"You didn't ask us what we know," the short one said with the same accent as his companion. He had greasy black hair slicked straight back, a coiled snake tattooed on one bulging bicep, and two glittering rings on each hand.

"You two don't need to be asked, being from New York."

The two glanced at each other, thrown off a bit by that.

The tall one grinned meanly, not sweating at all in the heat even in his dark suit, and said, "Wise guys, putting down the big city. Smart guys. Chess players." He aimed his predatory smile at Andrew, who was staring up at him without fear but with a trace of uneasiness.

"You're Andrew," the tall man said, "and you, old man, you're his grandfather, Willis."

"Who are you?" Andrew asked.

Without hesitation the tall man said, "I'm Freddy Clark. My friend here's called Zinc."

Willis didn't like it that they'd given their names so readily.

"They used to call me Snake," Zinc said, "then some yardbird that couldn't talk right made it sound like Zinc and I was stuck with it. Prison's like that."

In the corner of his vision Willis saw Andrew stiffen.

“What we know that you didn’t ask us about,” Freddy said, “is that Andrew here is staying a month at the farm till school starts, like he’s done the last two summers. You grow a little corn here, but you lease out most of this land to a big co-op. And except for Andrew’s visits, you live all alone in that dump of a house since your wife died six years ago.” Freddy and Zinc traded grins, proud of the fruits of their research. “Oh, and you weren’t home five years ago on July fifteenth.”

“That last I wouldn’t know about,” Willis said, wondering who these two were, but knowing they were the worst kind of trouble. When the trouble came, maybe there’d be some way to get Andrew clear of it.

“The important thing is, we know,” Zinc said. He popped a stick of gum in his mouth, tossing the wrapper to the breeze, and began chewing rapidly and grinning, now and then displaying the wad of gum on his tongue. He glanced around at the weathered old frame house, the leaning barn with only traces of red paint on it, the old green John Deere tractor sitting near the perfectly aligned rows of head-high cornstalks. “You about to plow or harvest with that thing?” Zinc asked, pointing at the tractor.

Freddy laughed at his friend’s ignorance and winked. “You gotta forgive us, old man. We’re city boys and don’t know country ways.”

“Yup, I could tell that right off.”

Freddy cocked his head to the side and seemed to consider whether he’d been insulted. Apparently he decided not to take offense. “We came here to get something,” he said.

“What I wish you’d get,” Willis said, “is to the point.” Not really so sure he wanted to hear the point, only that he wanted to know where he stood so he could formulate some kind of plan, even if it was a desperate one.

“Teaching the boy how to play chess?” Zinc asked. “He doesn’t need much teaching,” Willis said. “He’s always been the sort that thinks ahead.”

“Runs in the family, I’ll bet,” Freddy said with a sneer. “Sorta.”

“Nothin’ runs in my family but noses,” Zinc said.

“Wanna play a game?” Andrew asked hopefully, as if perhaps a friendly game of chess would somehow set things straight with these

intruders.

“No,” Freddy said, “but chess is a good game. It teaches you to think, like your grandpa said. Making plans, that’s what life’s all about. Thinking ahead is what separates winners from losers.”

“Right now,” Willis said, “let’s think back to when I wasn’t home five years ago on July fifteenth.”

“Okay,” Freddy said. “That’s when the money from the Hopkinstown Bank robbery was buried in your cornfield.”

“You guys the bank robbers?” Andrew blurted out in awe.

“Not us,” Zinc said. “That ain’t our game.”

“But we did get acquainted with certain people in a certain institution whose game it was,” Freddy said. “And under a kind of pressure, they told us where they hid the Hopkinstown Bank money when they were on the run after the robbery. They’re still in the institution, and will be for the next fifteen years, but here we are.”

“We came for the money,” Zinc said. “We been thinking and dreaming about it for a long time. We ain’t gonna leave without it.”

“Just in case somebody should happen to come by this godforsaken dump,” Freddy said, “we’re your nephews from the city, come for a visit. Got that, Uncle?”

“Sure.”

“What about you, kid?”

“I’ve got it, sir — cousin.”

Zinc stared at him curiously, flexing a bicep and scratching it simultaneously. “He got that right?” he asked Freddy.

“Once removed or something,” Freddy said. “Directions to the money say it’s buried fifty feet due north of a big tree, some hundred paces from the northeast corner of the house.” He glared at Willis. “The thing is, I don’t see any tree there. Nothing but corn.”

“Lightning struck the tree four years ago and killed it, and I cut down what was left.”

“A tree big as we were told, there must be a stump or something in there among that corn,” Freddy said.

“No, I pulled the stump out with the tractor. That ground’s been turned four times since then. I’d never be able to find exactly where that tree was now, even if I went looking for it.”

"If we were in the big city," Zinc said, "I'd start doing things to the boy, and you'd find where that tree was in a hurry."

"In a New York minute," Freddy said. "But we're here in the heart of America where hard work's what people worship, so what's gonna happen is this, old man: You, Bobby Fischer there, and me and Zinc are gonna to some digging in the cornfield. We're gonna dig until we find the money."

"Hey! Looka the size of that fly!" Zinc yelled, and swatted at a huge black fly that had set down on his forearm. He watched the fly drone away, then stared at Willis in astonishment. "There one of them nuclear plants around here?"

"It's only a horsefly," Andrew said.

Zinc looked around. "I don't see no horses."

"They hang around cows and such," Freddy said. "I learned about them on a *National Geographic* special on TV."

"No cows around here, either," Zinc said.

"The wind carried it here from the next farm," Willis said, "where there's livestock."

"Long way," Freddy said.

"It mighta flapped its wings some," Zinc offered. "Or soared like an eagle."

"Well, us being city boys," Freddy said, "we've got no calluses, so you two'll do most of the digging. There shovels in that barn?"

"Sure," Willis said. "A pick, too." He didn't see how it would hurt to feign cooperation. Maybe the city cousins would let down their guard and make a mistake.

Freddy drew an automatic pistol from beneath his suitcoat. He left the coat unbuttoned and it flapped in the breeze, flashing a blue silk lining.

"Let's go dig," Willis said to Andrew, who was staring wide-eyed at the gun.

"What's gonna happen after we find the money?" Andrew asked.

Freddy motioned at the chessboard with the gun barrel. "Me and Zinc'll finish the game."

"Kid's a thinker, ain't he?" Zinc said, amused.

"Thinks *toohard*, though," Freddy said. "He's liable to have chronic headaches when he grows up." He winked at Zinc.

Andrew sidled over to Willis and gripped his hand. Willis felt something in his throat swell as they trudged toward the barn, with Freddy walking slightly ahead and to the side, half turned to face them so he could keep the gun leveled at Andrew. Zinc was walking behind them. Willis figured he had a gun, too. The only weapon Willis had was a twelve-gauge Ithaca shotgun locked away inside the house.

Willis squinted into the wind as he noticed several barn swallows wheeling above the open loft door. They tried to enter the barn but the wind had picked up to the point where they couldn't control themselves on the currents of air and they were whisked from sight.

"I got something in my eye!" Zinc shouted. "I hate this damned part of the country!"

The dark clouds had moved in over the farm now and seemed very low. Suddenly torrents of rain began to fall. "What next?" Zinc yelled.

"Shut up!" Freddy shouted, using his free hand to turn up his collar.

"I'm getting friggin' soaked, Freddy!"

"Good! The rain'll make the ground softer so we can dig easier."

Then, just as suddenly, the rain stopped.

Hail began falling, not evenly like the rain, but erratically, so that it lay in heaps on the ground in golf-ball-size nuggets of ice.

Freddy had lowered his head, shielding his balding pate with his hand, all the while staring coldly at Willis over the barrel of the gun.

The hail stopped, and so did the wind.

"I never seen anything like that," Zinc said uneasily.

A pale, greenish light lay over everything, as if the dimmed sunlight was reflecting the green of the cornfields. The motionless air seemed thick enough to feel, like silk against flesh. There was no movement, no sound.

"Grampa!" Andrew cried, and pointed.

Willis saw a black funnel of swirling wind dip from the low clouds and sweep across the far edge of the cornfield. Dirt and cornstalks flew wildly as it touched down, skipped in a cloud of dust to the other side of the road, then back again. It was moving in their direction.

"What the hell's that?" Zinc screamed.

“Cyclone!” Freddy shouted.

“Tornado!” Willis corrected.

Zinc had shuffled around to face them, a silver revolver dangling at his side in his right hand. His thick features were knotted in confusion. “Whadda we do?”

“Let’s get in the barn!” Freddy yelled. Fear raised his voice an octave and glittered in his eyes.

“That’d be suicide,” Willis said.

The wind was with them again, pressing hard against them so they had to lean into it. As they watched, the tractor began to roll, then gained speed as if someone were driving it, and disappeared into the high corn. The big Chrysler the two men arrived in was broadside to the wind and began to rock violently on its soft suspension.

“There’s a storm shelter there by the house,” Willis said, holding Andrew tight to him, “but it’s only big enough for two!”

Andrew looked up at him, realizing what was going to happen. He began to scream.

Zinc bolted and ran for the raised, square wooden door set in concrete six inches above the ground. He flipped open the door and leaped inside, the door slamming behind him in the wind.

Andrew’s screams were like the wail of an emergency siren.

“Stay where you are!” Freddy yelled, waving the gun at them.

“You can’t leave us out here!” Willis pleaded.

“Just like a good ol’ boy to give shelter to his city cousins!” Freddy said, grinning like death in his terror as he held the gun on them and backed to the wooden door.

“For God’s sake, man! We’ll be blown into the next state!”

“He better not have locked this thing!” Freddy said with sudden panic, as he tugged the door up and open and flung himself inside out of the wind.

Immediately Willis scooped up Andrew, who’d become silent, and sprinted for the house.

Inside, he opened a window to equalize pressure in case the tornado hit, then ran to the door to the fruit cellar, opened it, and scrambled down into the small, musty space, shoving Andrew ahead of him.

The tornado ripped and roared above them, threatening to reach down with a finger of whirling destruction and pry them from their meager shelter.

They stayed there, huddled together, until the angry howl of the tornado had given way to silence.

When they emerged from the cellar and ventured back outside, Willis saw that the tornado had cut a wide swath across the south end of the cornfield, following almost exactly the same course as the one that had struck a few years ago. Usually when tornados blew through, they stayed on the other side of the highway; something about rising air from the river a mile to the west. Quite a few shingles had been blown off the house roof, and one of the barn doors was open and hanging crookedly on its remaining hinge. If the tractor was okay, that was the extent of the damage.

“What are we gonna do now, Grampa?” Andrew asked. He no longer seemed frightened.

“Phone lines’ll be down because of the tornado,” Willis said, “so we can’t call. Guess the thing to do is get the truck outa the barn and drive into town and fetch the sheriff, if he’s not too busy. Then we’ll drive back here, get what’s left of them two fellas outa the well, and try to find enough of the chess set so we can finish our game.”

Andrew said, “I think I remember where all the pieces were.”