

ChessKeys

The Sad Bishop

By Rachel A. Schechter

"Why is the bishop so sad?" asked Elinor, my youngest, private student at five when I arrived at her residence for the lesson.

We were setting up the board and I recollected how the previous evening my own bishops were just plain *bad*—cost me the tie break. I shook it off—win, lose and learn—and smiled at Elinor. Originally from France (though her ancestors have had a lovely home here in Minnesota for decades) she's adorable, enthusiastic, strong-willed, sassy, and intelligent. She wanted to be an engineer like her dad and ergo started chess lessons at age four. And though she wasn't a chess prodigy, she spoke French and English, and was embarking upon Chinese. Plus, she liked math/chess puzzles. Feisty, fearless, and usually very funny, today *she* looked on-the-verge-of-tears-sad as she rolled a white bishop between her hands.

"I don't know," I said, looking closely at another bishop. "Why do you think it's sad, honey?"

"Because it had a *very bad dream*—a nightmare—about a *very bad bunny!*" she said crossly. "A *very bad bunny!*"

I looked through the glass doors to the yard where we frequently threw carrots to a delightful fluffle of rabbits. Kids, night terrors, all quite normal. She'd been with me for over a year, but this was the first time she'd ever shown fear or sadness. Both parents seemed great; mother a CEO for an entertainment firm, dad an environmental engineer, mega-cute little brother, nanny, gorgeous house on a lake, good health, the whole nine yards. I put my arm around her slim shoulders.

"What happened in the dream, Elinor? Tell Miss Rachel."

She snuggled against me:

"I was playing chess with my little brother Michel," she said anxiously. "We were in the back yard, we were both bishops, and everything was good." I nodded. Her little brother Michel was nearly three years old. "All of a sudden, a huge, big bunny with big teeth attacked me. Michel ran away but I tripped, and the bunny caught me. It was *terrible!*" She turned her tiny face into my neck. "He kept biting me and biting me—my hair, my face, my clothes. I was crying and bleeding." I hugged her. "Then my mom came and chased the bunny away. She carried me inside the house and sang to me and told me everything would be alright."

"That's right," I said soothingly. "What did your mom do then?"

"Well, she gave me a nice warm, bubble bath, and when I got out, she made me a nice new, bishop costume. Very colorful and happy. Then she kissed me and combed my hair and made me a smiling bishop hat. So, Michel and I could play chess again."

"That's so good!" I said, hugging her shoulders. Then I looked to the yard and drew a deep breath. "What about the bunny?" I

asked quietly.

"Oh," said Elinor, "the bunny is gone. My dad took that bunny and its family to a rabbit farm, so they could live with other bunnies and be happy."

I patted her head:

"That was a frightening nightmare you had, honey, but it wasn't real."

"It felt real," small voice.

"I know," I said. "Nightmares feel real. That's why I always sleep with a nightlight on in my bedroom. Then, if I have a bad dream and I wake up afraid, the light is on, and I feel better."

Elinor's big, blue eyes grew bigger:

"You sleep with a *nightlight*, Miss Rachel?!"

"Every night," I said, nodding. "Every night."

She ran to the stairs and called up to her nanny:

"Miss Rachel sleeps with a nightlight. Can I sleep with a nightlight too?"

"Yes, yes, of course, Elinor..." came the reply.

Elinor was smiling, semblance of her usual self—with that *je ne sais quoi* twinkle in her eyes—I felt warm around my heart.

"That's a good idea, Miss Rachel."

I picked up the four bishops:

"Remember," I said, "**the key is light.**" If you have fears or bad dreams in the dark, just turn on the light. That's the key." She nodded. "Now—what should we do about these bishops to make *them* look happy?"

Elinor thought for a minute:

"Turn them upside down? Then they'd look like they were smiling."

"Let's try it."

Naturally, they tipped over.

"Hmm," I said, "That doesn't work. Let's think of something else. Remember, *chess players solve problems, we don't create them.*"

Elinor thought hard:

"We could paint smiles on their faces—?"

"Okay, get your paints—we'll try it."

It was one of those ideas that sounds good in theory, but doesn't translate. The paints—even though they were from acrylic pens—were a bit messy and the smiles covered half the bishops' faces.

"That looks yucky," said Elinor.

"Very yucky," I agreed, looking at the chess board. "But there must be an answer to this problem. Let's clear all the pieces from the chess board and place the four bishops on their starting squares, okay?"

We cleared the board and set the bishops on c1, f1, c8, and f8.

"Now what?" asked Elinor.

I looked at the board, paced, sat down, looked back at the board.

"Alright, let's put smiles on the bishops' starting squares." Elinor liked that idea and spent some time making the smiley faces in a host of sparkling colors. The board was write-on cardboard, so it lent itself well to the project.

"That's very good," I nodded, "very creative. Now, how do the bishops move?"

I placed some pennies appropriately. "I forget how they move. Would you please show me, Elinor?"

It seemed Elinor might have forgotten as well; but a skill set—those sets, those moments teachers live for—clicked in—and little by little, bishop by bishop, she captured the pennies.

"Voilà!" I clapped my hands, "*C'est magnifique!*"

"And they're *happy!*" Elinor jumped up.

"How do you know that?" I laughed.

Elinor threw the bishops into the air:

"*Because they get to keep all the pennies!*"

We both laughed—collecting the bishops and their pennies. For the rest of our time, that afternoon, Elinor put smiley faces on ALL the remaining 60 chess squares. I helped her choose the colors.

"There," she said, upon finishing. "Now they're ALL happy. They're all lit up! ALL the chess pieces and all the squares."

"I like it," I said, taking a picture, "But how will we remember the starting squares for the bishops?"

Elinor frowned and yawned. We were closing in on an hour; it had been a difficult, yet rewarding lesson.

"I—I don't know," she said.

"Let me think..." I said, pacing, sitting, pacing, sitting. Then I snapped my fingers. "I know!"

"What? What is it?" asked Elinor.

"Well, what letter does b-b-b-bishop start with?"

"B!" said Elinor happily.

"That's right, so where should we put the letter B?"

"On the bishops' squares," Elinor said, suddenly excited, pulling out an unused color of acrylic paint. "On the Bs. All four Bs." And she proceeded to do just that. Large capital Bs.

I leaned back in my chair. Success rarely came easy with children, but when it did, it sure was sweet.

"And how do they have to move?" I asked.

"Always on the zigzag," said Elinor, "or else...or else..."

"Or else, what?" I asked.

She looked at me dead serious.

"Or else they get sad."

"That's right," I said, nodding, tears welling up, "always on the zigzag."

I heard movement upstairs, voices, laughter.

"Hey, I think your parents are home, let's go say hello."

Elinor took off for the stairs, then returned.

"What's wrong?" I asked, packing up.

Elinor turned on every light—there were at least six—even though it was bright afternoon.

"Never forget **the light**, Miss Rachel. **That's the key**. Then they'll never be sad or afraid." Then she scampered upstairs.

I smiled, shrugging off those dark 'bad bishops' that cost me the tiebreak. I mounted the stairs, greeting her parents—everyone smiling, laughing, silly faces. Elinor hugged me. No longer too sad or frightened. Ah, to be five again. I patted her head. With this petite, *princesse française*...I was.

