

# **I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)**

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**Only Me**

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## Only Me

I was an only child until I reached five years, three months, and twelve days. Then my brother Dennis was born and I was thrilled. When he came home, the excitement quickly wore off as he became the rival for my mother's attention. Writing this word, attention, I realize I didn't use affection. I didn't think affection then and it wasn't the word I chose now. But it would be dishonest of me to say I didn't *feel* it. At least I was aware, then, of the attention, but I'm sure I also felt this attention as affection. I'm not trying to be disingenuous; I don't recall any specific details of lost affection, but I do remember the years before Dennis, filled with her teaching.

Although ostensibly *only* a homemaker, there was reading, writing, piano, and even Spanish. For over five years, I was my mother's sole occupation. Given the way the world was then this was not unusual, although it surely seems extraordinary in today's world. Am I recommending this for everyone? Is my experience a prescription for society? (Do rhetorical questions bother you?) I can only relate my experience. For you to benefit in the ways I did, you'd need to duplicate the time and place. And one more thing. You'd need my mother. Sorry.

By the time I was five, we were living in the only house in Newark I clearly remember. It was the first floor apartment in a two-story home on Thirteenth and Madison. Before this apartment we lived, I was told, two other places. The first was near Oraton Parkway, with my Uncle Mike and his Mexican bride, Mela. It was here I was the infant in these photos. My cousin Larry was also there, six months younger, also in diapers. (Oraton Parkway appears later as part of the recurring theme of Scouting.) The next home, also an apartment, I recall only dimly as play time in an attic with a large semicircular window. Our neighbor's son Danny was my first remembered playmate.



This picture is from this pre-Thirteenth Street era. Does it show either previous dwelling? I have no idea and I can't ask my father who is now legally blind. (Two failed cataract/glaucoma operations. What are the odds?) My mother, who was in charge of memories, died in '93. Truthfully, I don't care about the place, or even the time. What does interest me is the hairstyle, bangs. Bangs? Where did these come from? Were they Mom's idea? Perhaps, since they reappear. For me, they begin The Great Haircut Mystery.

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*There might be a simple solution to this mystery. Perhaps I adopted my desire for variety from my mother. Maybe. But her hairstyles varied no more than any other woman of her generation. My father's varied not at all. Even my brothers never mess with their hair. (Except for those few years Dennis temporarily played with a permanent.) Therefore, I still claim this as a legitimate mystery and a valid premise for this book.*

Those bangs are still there in the next photo, but I'm not sure they were my only hairstyle in those early years. There are, as I said, many other photos from that time, even the obligatory boy on a pony below. I recall seeing them in the many photo albums Mom assembled. But since they're out of reach now, as are my memories of both homes before we lived on Thirteenth Street, I can only assume this was how I appeared to the world when I lived in Newark.



I have many vague memories from this preschool period in Newark, but space (and proportion) confine me to two stories. My earliest memory from this period was being tossed high in the air by one of Dad's bosses, frightening me enough to generate nightmares for years

to come. In the second, I was the cause of the nightmares. This story requires a number of specific details for context.

First, I remember spending much time under the table (dining? kitchen? card?) as adults played games above. The tablecloth provided a secure hiding place. Especially, I can hear the sounds of Mah Jong tiles, and voices pronouncing their exotic names as my mother's women friends called out their moves. Were there other games? Yes, because I also recall my parents played Bridge. But it's the click and clack of the Mah Jong tiles and their mysterious names I recall best. "One bam. Two crack."

The second detail revolves around one specific toy, a dart gun. This potentially dangerous weapon was real metal and powerfully spring-loaded. Its darts had a wooden shaft and a rubber suction cup tip. Thankfully, toys like this are kept out of the hands of today's children. (Although some do have access to the even more dangerous lawn dart.) Without television, why was I enamored of guns? Television in our home was a decade away. The obvious answer is movies. Movies were why I played Cowboys and Indians with my peers.

Movies also delivered the final piece of this puzzle: The Three Stooges. I was too young to realize the Stooges were not real, merely a cartoon with humans. I thought anyone could perform their bizarre actions. The Movies, with a capital M, were still too real to the four-year old me. A four-year old who was about to learn his lesson.

*What makes us who we are? Sometimes it's the small things. I always wondered if I am who I am in part because my first third Stooge was Shemp and not Curly. Curly—also variously spelled Curley—was the best known of the many third Stooges. He also filled the position for the longest period and the most films. My earliest Stooge experiences had Shemp filling in for Curly, but I didn't*

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*know this was temporary. I thought Shemp was the original Stooge and Curly his replacement. I'm sure my defending this view placed me as the outsider in the world of Stooge fandom.*

My detailed plan began with me hiding under the table, dart gun in hand, waiting for the right opportunity. The idea was to duplicate one of the funniest Stooge tricks. A credulous four year old, I believed I had the necessary skill to shoot a dart and have it stick to the middle of someone's forehead. What could be funnier? My parent's friend Audrey was standing in the kitchen with her back to the sink talking to my mother. I aimed and fired. I missed, striking Audrey an inch below the left eye. Thankfully, it never affected her vision but she bears the scar to this day. I know this because we visited her a few years ago, a recent widow also living on Florida's West Coast, two hours away from my current home in Sarasota.

Today, the Stooges are still a part of my life. I have written a few times about "The Stooge Theory of Computing." I also have an outline for a book whose cover requires a picture of Moe in an artist's smock. The book is about the decline of civilization from the end of the eighteenth century to the present. It makes the point that from the 1790's onward, the advantages of advances in technology have been offset by increases in population. Think about it, more people today are without any particular technological marvel (radio, television, computer) than were without it before it was invented. The title? *From Mozart to Moe's Art.*

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