

I Guess That's Me (A Reflection)

Lee Frank

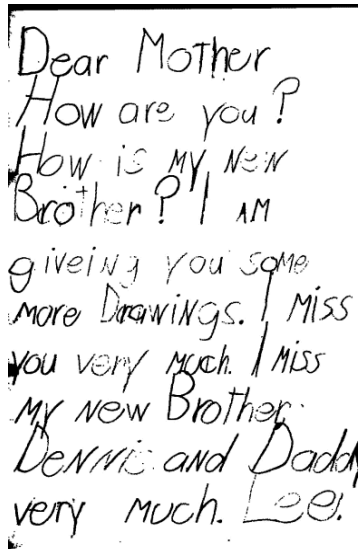
Schoolkid

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Schoolkid

At the age of five my life changed completely as two traumas arrived, one on top of the other. Although less of a shock than the loss of a limb or a loved one, they turned my world upside down. As I reached the age of five in February of 1942, I was sent to kindergarten. In May, my brother Dennis was born. I'm sure my mother prepared me well for both. Below is proof regarding the latter, a gushing letter sent before she came home with the new sibling.



Dear Mother
How are you?
How is my new
Brother? I am
giving you some
more Drawings. I miss
you very much. I miss
my new Brother
Dennis and Daddy
very much. Lee.

Schoolkid Me

I hated school immediately; Dennis took a few weeks. The onset of WWII a few months before was far less traumatic for me than either of these two events.

Starting school in February was still a problem a few years later when we moved to Union. The school system there was on a yearly calendar and my mid-year entrance put me out of sync. “Out of sync” is also a good phrase to describe my first days in kindergarten. My first school was the Madison Avenue School, seven or eight blocks from our home. I’m sure I didn’t last the first day. With Mom’s help, it probably took a few trips before I was willing to stay in school the whole day. These peers were not my cup of tea, nor was the authority figure of the (I’m sure totally benign) kindergarten teacher.

I suppose I had little playmates before school, but I don’t recall. I was also, as you recall, without sibling for my first five years. Did I never play with another child? Yes, I had two cousins close in age, born six months on either side of my birth. However, they lived miles away and few aunts or uncles drove automobiles. Without daily playmates, I eventually became socialized, but entering school made no sense to me. Was I not being taught better at home? Was I not given more attention? Was love no longer part of learning equation?

The affluence of the auto did not appear for our class—America’s middle—until a few years after the war. This period immediately before the war was the tail end of the depression. The appearance of the family car was the true signal the depression was over. The war years ended the depression, but everyone was too busy to notice. After the war, affordable cars appeared, first in showrooms, then on the streets, and finally in the family garage—until then, an empty reminder of pre-depression prosperity.

I had more questions of school, but I quickly learned to keep them to myself. I began keeping many things to

myself, things I could not express in school because of how my teachers and peers reacted when I spoke. The one thing Mom did not prepare me for, the one thing she did not teach me, was how to fit in when I was far ahead. At the age of five, I entered kindergarten knowing at least two of the three R's: reading and writing. It never occurred to me that other children couldn't do the same. Until kindergarten, I knew very little about other children.

I'm sure my mother explained to me why I had to go to school. I'm also sure she explained why she was so busy with my baby brother. I'm not sure I fully accepted either explanation although I suppose I saw the rationale, intellectually. What I felt, however, reason could not control. I continually tortured my parents with the question, "Why?" After all, were they not responsible for the universe?

"Why," I asked, "is the Red Army red?" I could read the headlines even if I had little interest in reading anything in the papers other than the comics. A red Army? Like the pieces in checkers? Dad tried to explain, but I doubt I fully understood the connection between Russian and Red. What I did understand was the technology. Planes were endlessly fascinating. WWII was, for me, Cowboys and Indians with lots more people and bigger and better guns. Everyday the technology was getting bigger and better.



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Am I going to wear these bangs forever? No, because soon I'll embark on the search for me. But is that me wearing a suit? I only had one job where suits were mandatory. There are very few (only four in this collection) photos of me in the obligatory important-occasion-requires-it suit. At this age, I equated suit with wool and itching. I still seem to be in good humor, though.

My own personal war trauma came during first grade. (Dad was ineligible for two reasons. His job, detailing steel, was essential to the war effort. He also had some physical aftereffects from a near-death experience with a power line) By 1943, schoolchildren were being asked to sacrifice our pennies: Support the war effort by buying War Stamps. Unlike War Bonds, our pennies did not become an investment. Each child had a little book wherein we pasted our purchased War Stamps. That was the whole payoff. Don't remember exactly or care to research—probably because of the following incident.

The classroom procedure for buying War Stamps had the children place the stamp booklet and money on on their desks and wait to be called up to the teacher's desk to make the purchase. Then, after returning to our desks, we added the stamps to our booklets. Being first graders, this was not without a small degree of chaos. Suddenly, one child says, "My money is gone!" The investigation begins. Everyone, with the possible exception of the culprit, watches in fascination. Remember, we're talking mostly nickels and dimes here. Occasionally there would be folding money and maybe one such gold mine attracted the thief. Suddenly one of students finds the money in the pocket of a coat in the coat closet. My coat.

Accusation. Denial. Inquisition. Parents called to school. The problem, as it's explained to them, is that I'd been caught red-handed and won't admit my wrong-doing. I argue I'd never even left my seat. Motion denied. Why was the money in my coat pocket? I had no explanation.

Without any evidence to support my innocence, my parents remain neutral. Punishment meted out: sentenced to stay after school for a month. Convicted and abandoned. Injustice becomes an emotional trigger expressed in the strangest times and places. I am now programmed, emotionally upset whenever I see someone (that could be me) wrongly accused. I cry at Abbott and Costello movies whenever Bud thinks Lou is lying to him. Lou is my compatriot in injustice.

For a full thirty years I have this response. No longer bursting into tears, I easily become upset for the better part of an hour or more. After all these years, I no longer recall what sets this off and have no control over my emotional response—until a strange incident in a New York apartment building hallway in the seventies.

In the middle of the afternoon, when most adults are away at work, I'm at home working on a project. I hear these noises in the hall. Kids are playing a form of soccer using a plastic bowling ball. The hollow ball is bouncing off the concrete walls and floor with this loud BWUNG. I try to ignore it for a while, thinking maybe they're on their way out to play. Nope. This appears to be the afternoon's indoor activity. I open the door, making it unmistakable I'm watching them, and finally point out the noise they're making and ask for a little quiet. They stop, look at me, wait for me to go back into my apartment, and then resume the game.

Why me? My automatic response wells up uncontrollably—only this time it's different. I recognize the emotion. I remember the exact feeling and the exact moment it first occurred. After thirty years, I remember it completely; every detail, every connection, falls into place: The original injustice, my response to being falsely accused, even my mother's comment on my crying at Abbott and Costello movies. I remember, and feel, all these incidents and my reactions at one and the same instant.

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And now, because I know what this feeling is and where it comes from, it goes away! The explicit recognition stopped it cold. I still react to injustice, but no longer with uncontrolled emotion. My mind is now free to respond. A minor miracle.

A few words about the other trauma, Dennis. As a child, he truly was Dennis the Menace. His behavior, I'm sure, was in part in response to how—and how often—I mistreated him. Until he was well into his teens, I treated him as my private punching bag. Purely, of course, within the context of play. For example, with our new boxing gloves, and under the pretext of teaching him, he received a few more blows than his instruction required. I was always, apparently, fair. How else could I keep him coming back for more? I was also deceiving myself that this was only brotherly horseplay and not really mild abuse.

Dennis, on his part, would run away. Or sneak out of the house sans clothing. At an early age—he was three when we left Newark—he expressed his lifelong interest in the movies. One day he was missing and we found him over six blocks away at the neighborhood movie theatre. It was the Roosevelt, which we kids thought was named for the soon-to-be deceased President. The movie was Blood On The Sun with James Cagney.

It took me over thirty years to free myself (through a fortunate accident) from this childhood ordeal. When encountered at the age of six, I wanted quicker results. Every day during that month-long punishment, I thought about the problem. I reran the events of that day over and over in my head. By the end of the month, I was convinced I knew who the culprit was. I recalled in movie detail his being in the cloakroom (there's a word I haven't heard in ages) right after the theft was discovered. I was sure he had both opportunity and motive. I made a plan.

It seems so incredible to me now, that a six-year could think and act like this. Yet the story is true, and in retrospect I can find no embellishments anywhere in it. What I did next was even more surprising. I made friends with this kid whom I had never liked (his motivation). I charmed him out of his suspicions, never mentioning the theft or my punishment. I invited him over to my house to play with me in my yard. At this point, I need to introduce one missing but important fact. As you will see in later pictures, I was always one of the smallest kids in every class (until my last two years of high school). This kid was much bigger than I was, but my six-year old mind was only capable of physical revenge. I'd seen enough movies to know—it was real to me—how to knock down a bigger man. I maneuvered him into a position where he was bending over and I, just like I'd seen in the movies, brought one up from the floor. It was the perfect uppercut. He went down. Supported by a clever six-year old's proof, I dumped my accusations on his head. He got up in tears, fearful and bewildered. He ran home. I felt great.

I'm less sure of what followed. I believe there was some repercussion from his parents, and possibly some admonition by mine. It rolled off my smug duck's back. I recall no further encounters with this kid. My recollection is this: After that day he never came back to school and his family moved out of the neighborhood, which to my six-year old mind was further proof of his guilt. Perhaps it was. Perhaps his parents knew they had a problem child. Seems unlikely that my single punch, a lucky punch from a much smaller, very non-physical child, caused his family to fear for his life. But then, looking back, who knows what he told them? Who knows if the whole family were thieves and he was merely doing what he was told? Doubtful, and I apologize (so belatedly as to be meaningless) for any unwarranted slander.

Schoolkid Me

Although my vengeance was most thoroughly satisfying at the time (I was the equal of my movie heroes), I transcended it. I know of no other thoughts of revenge for the rest of my life. Most certainly, I have occasionally been dealt less than my fair share, as have all of us. But after this one event, I've never planned, much less acted out, any retaliation. Perhaps I simply got it out of my system. Who knows?

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