

BIG BRO



The arrival of my little sister Judy Ann made a quantum change in my infantile Id-Entity. Reflecting that change, Mama and Daddy started calling me Dick. Suddenly, the empty-headed little tyke was also a big brother! Into my world on Nowlin Road a strange new presence had come, a squishy, fuzzy-headed baby-sister. Fascinated, I hovered over the helpless infant, playing with it like a pet or toy.

Very soon, while changing Judy's diaper, Mama explained what made our baby a little girl—as opposed to what made me a little boy: the tiny cashew of my penis. For the first time, I understood that people came in different genders. My Id-Entity now had to expand to also include being a boy.

Speaking of cashews, I'd learned early along to refer to mine as my "part." That's what Mama called it, probably feeling that more genteel than calling my frontal appendage my "member." Equipment in the rear was dismissed as my "tail." Of course, Judy's tiny slit was also her part.

Mama taught that personal parts and tails were simply for excretion. We used our parts to "tinkle" and tails to "oomp." (That arcane terminology stayed with me for many years—until I encountered some less onomatopoetic slang expressions, probably in Junior High.)



At some point in 1947 the Nowlin Road world expanded to five with yet another presence, a white toy fox terrier that Daddy named Peppy. I loved horsing around with the playful Peppy, but baby Judy was my personal pet. (Nowadays I like to think of that little dog as a Mexican Pepé or a Pepi—as in Pharoah.)

In the summer of 1948, grandparents visited, and they took this slanted photo of our family all together on a bench in our back yard. I'm struck by Mama's dated hairstyle and prim way of sitting with feet together. While Judy shows her joy over the Peppy puppy, maybe I'm keeping my mischievous inclinations in check. Particularly, I note that even at the age of 32, Daddy's hairline was receding. In this snapshot his heavy Native American heritage seems also apparent in complexion and bone structure. Or maybe I'm just imagining stuff.

The year between these two pictures—when I was five—passed leaving no specific memories. Way back then, especially in the semi-rural environment of Nowlin Road, there was no such thing as a kindergarten to prepare kids for regular school. Childcare for me and Judy naturally fell entirely to Mama, who no doubt appreciated my constant attention to baby Judy as it left her freer to do housework, of which I'm sure there was a surfeit. Daddy would suddenly appear in the evenings and on weekends merely to eat with us and preside over the household, choosing which shows to watch on the television.

Looking back from this vast distance, I can't recall even a single instance of physical closeness, not even once that I sat on Mama's or Daddy's lap or snuggled. In the family picture above, I indeed cozied up to Mama and held her arm, a memory solely from this photograph. Perhaps that's a telling comment on our family's psychodynamics. Scanning over all the years since, I find that we never grew closer or more affectionate with each other. As the years passed, we moved farther apart, but that was largely due to environmental factors. More on that later.

As a matter of fact, I don't believe Mama nursed me or Judy. I have only a primordial image of rubber-nippled baby-bottles and the testing of formula temperature on wrists—the newest innovation at the time in feeding babies. If there had been any suckling, you can bet I'd remember something about seeing Mama's breasts (which she called "bosoms"). I won't worry about what damage may have been done to my tender psyche by being bottle-fed, but maybe that's why I've never had the slightest interest in female bazooms.

In the fall of 1948, at age six I started first grade in a tiny country school called Homestead on the far side of Cemetery Hill. I don't think Mama knew how to drive, and Daddy would take the old Ford to work, probably driving me there in the morning. I vaguely recall walking after school with a little girl and her mother, Mama's friend named Corrine, down the Hill to their house. But I distinctly recall that she wore such thick glasses that her eyes looked scarily huge. Corrine must have driven me down our lane the short way home because I can't imagine how Mama could have come for me, what with having a babe in arms.

First grade at Homestead might as well have been a kindergarten. Instruction mostly amounted to playing games and listening to stories. If I'm not mistaken, our focus was on counting, which I already knew a bit about, and simple addition, which I found easy and fun. Otherwise, there were lots of recesses for us kids to play outside. My clearest memory of the place was of a big pile of dirt beside the schoolyard with its swings and such. Covered with grass and probably six feet high, it was tall enough to look to us kiddies like a veritable mountain—and was great fun to climb and slide or roll down.

Knowing what I know now about the prehistory of that Ohio River area, I bet that pile of dirt was an ancient Indian mound, but as usual in that thoughtless time, it was ignored as a meaningless pile of dirt, great for kids to play on. Perhaps I remember it best because during that winter (when there was light snow on the ground), while playing on the mound, I suffered my first major trauma by losing one of my mittens! It was utterly gone, and I wept bitterly. I was tortured by that Mother Goose nursery rhyme: "The three little kittens, they lost their mittens, / And they began to cry... / What! Lost your mittens, you naughty kittens! / Then you shall have no pie." At an innocent six, I couldn't imagine a worse fate than having no pie.



As soon as my school was over, we took a trip to Baltimore to visit grandparents. They and various aunts had visited us before, so I had a confused concept of some people being called “relatives,” including Mama’s teenaged sister Aunt Jackie. On their earlier visit, Jackie had slept with me in my bed, and one night in my restless sleep, I kicked her out of the bed. She probably also remembered that incident for the rest of her life.

In Baltimore the biggest surprise was meeting a “cousin,” Aunt Dotsy’s little boy Johnnie, around the same age as Judy. My consternation in this snapshot with Peppy is understandable, considering the strange new place and crowd of new family members. Just like that, I had to recognize that the world was full of a lot more people and places other than little old Nowlin Road. My importance at home as a big brother was seriously diminished by this new, larger context.



When we got home to Indiana, I was confronted with yet another paradigm shift. For some reason, Mama volunteered to be Den Mother for the troop of Cub Scouts they’d enrolled me in. There were like eight of us little boys, all excited to have dark blue uniforms and scout caps. Lord knows what activities and games Mama supervised because I can’t remember diddle.

What I do recall, in painful clarity, was throwing conniption fits when the other Cubs wouldn’t do what I wanted. My first exercise in socialization revealed that Dick was a control freak. One might say a spoiled brat. A dick? Usually, I agree with Edith Piaf about regretting nothing but bitterly regret causing Mama such mortifying embarrassment. Finally, after a loud shouting/crying jag, she exiled me to the back porch where I could only watch their games and apparently learned my lesson about playing nice.

At the end of the summer, the Cub Scout stuff shifted into high gear, and we went on a three-day camping trip. Talk about a shock! Suddenly I found myself outside of the world of my family and simply another Cub in the company of uncooperative Cub-kids and bossy troop leaders. In the confusing new reality, I had no idea what was expected of me and meekly followed orders and camping rules to spread my sleeping bag in one of the tents and take my place on a log around a campfire to listen to strange stories.

The first night a ghost story scared the bejesus out of me and several other Cubs. After tooth-brushing, we were told to “pee” in the little outhouse thing, which I gathered meant tinkle, but with the strangeness of it all, I couldn’t manage. It was hard to fall asleep in the unfamiliar tent with five other little Cubs thrashing around and making noises. But morning came with the thrill of eating bacon and eggs cooked on a campfire. I still couldn’t make myself do it in the outhouse and snuck off into the woods to tinkle secretly behind a bush.

The problem was that I also needed to oomp but couldn't make myself squat over the hole in the outhouse. And not being a bear, I couldn't figure out how to do it in the woods. Instead, I spent the day of games and hiking around the woods in discomfort and tried not to eat very much. I told the troop leader I didn't feel good and opted out of the campfire stories, hiding in my sleeping bag and suffering. I even went once to the awful outhouse, but my bowels refused to dump. So, the night was restless misery, relieved only by the gentle patter of rain on the tent.

In the early misty morning, our troop leader sent me off with a little hatchet to chop some sticks for the campfire, and I hid in the bushes to tinkle again. I was tempted to squat over a log to oomp but too shy to pull down my uniform pants, even in the privacy of bushes. Nearby, I found a big fallen tree and attacked a little branch with my hatchet. The night's rain had made the log moist, and in my ineptitude, the hatchet slid down the wet branch and slammed into the thumb of my left hand.

A huge cut and blood all over the place. Not to mention shrieks of agony. The troop leaders came running and hurried me back to the campsite where they cleaned my wound and bandaged it up. They decided I should be taken home for medical attention, and some other discontented Cubs went back with us. At home, I raced off to our familiar toilet and deposited a huge load of oomp. Mama was horrified by my injury, but the doctor said it was minor and gave me a mere four stitches. That trauma convinced me that I wasn't interested in Cub Scouts anymore, and I think Mama was probably relieved to quit being a Den Mother.

This review of my first years of life has impressed me with the fact that my upbringing was essentially (and blessedly) "heathen." There was no mention of a larger or spiritual dimension of life. Nor did I know anything about churches, religions, or morality. The concepts of a supreme being or after-life never penetrated my infantile awareness. Even when Daddy got aggravated and said, "For Cries Ache!" I had no clue what that meant. Apparently, my behavior (like my Cub Scout conniptions) was only called good or bad depending on parental moods.

Many years later I learned that my father's family was traditionally Wisconsin-Catholic, and my mother's father George was raised French Catholic but converted to Lutheran to marry my grandmother Freda. Mama was raised (loosely) as Lutheran but as a teenager converted to Catholic—probably while working as an aide in a religious institution (insane asylum). When I was little, neither she nor Daddy ever intimated any religious opinions, and I don't recall them ever going to a church service. However, they baptized me and sister Judy Catholic (like when I had my own daughters christened in an Episcopalian church simply for form's sake.)

However, during the summer of 1949, it was probably Mama who experienced a revival of her faith, such as it may have been, and convinced Daddy that Dick should go to a Catholic school. Oh, dear... I don't recall that my parents started going to church, but I certainly did. Enrolled in the second grade at St. Lawrence Elementary, I had to attend Mass every weekday morning, Saturdays and Sundays much appreciated days off.

Attending Mass was one thing—paying attention to the interminable Latin garble another. And the priest's sermons/gospels might as well have also been in Latin for all they conveyed. What I most enjoyed was singing nonsense syllables like "tan tomb air go sack ramen tomb."

Then the black-robed nuns herded us kids to our classrooms, where I quickly discovered that I was seriously retarded. While I'd been playing games and losing mittens in the first grade at Homestead, these St. Lawrence first-graders had been learning the alphabet and how to read and spell words like cat and dog. All those letters posted over the blackboard looked to me like another kind of Latin garble, but I spent a few lunch periods deciphering and drawing them. Before our big nun really noticed, I'd functionally taught myself to sound them out in words, but the difference between "c," "k," and "s" confused me somewhat. Of course, "x" was a puzzle.

Besides pounding knowledge into our little heads with whacks of rulers on knuckles, the nuns naturally tried their damndest to instill in us reverence for and awe of Catholic mythology. I simply couldn't understand the riddle of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and Holy Mother Mary made a certain sense, but what about this fourth guy, the Holy Ghost who sounded like a cartoon character? Nor did they ever explain what "holy" meant, but everything was holy this and holy that. And what was that gruesome thing with a guy nailed up on boards? We were supposed to pray to it, but I also wasn't clear on what "pray" meant.

The big black nuns also urged us to be pious children, and so I dutifully went to the nearby religious store and bought some "holy" souvenirs: a small plastic figurine of a Cries Child holding a ball and stick—it glowed in the dark—and a pretty prayer card of the Holy Virgin with a heart on fire for Mama. The figurine languished a while on my dresser and then got blessedly lost forever. (Many decades later when my mother passed away at 94, I found the prayer card in her box of old costume jewelry—lots of cheap earrings, necklaces and bracelets I'd given her as a little kid—and threw them all out.)

That's how at the age of seven I became a more or less normal schoolchild without a care in the world, except having my little sister to mess with during the day. At school that year, I didn't make any friends—still unaware of there being anybody else in the world. Of course, the nuns were a stark reality—like furniture, but after school I was happy to get home to my familiar world and role as big brother.



In this picture from that fall of 1949 of Mama with Judy and me, I'm struck by Mama's air of calm, perhaps stunned, resignation: A young mother responsible for two kids, albeit well-behaved, hidden away out in rural Indiana without any friends other than Corinne. She often said, even then, how bitterly she missed her big city life and family in Baltimore.

What's more, I doubt her marriage to Daddy was particularly romantic anymore, if it ever was. I recall no affectionate gestures between them or anyone ever saying they loved somebody. The fact that they had only us two kids was telling—either good economic sense, effective Catholic birth control, or simple abstinence for one reason or another. Both paternal grandparents were from huge families (of 10 and 11 kids). My Trinité grandfather was one of about a dozen, and my aunt/uncle generation mostly had like a half-dozen each. I was well satisfied having just one little sister.



Oddly, I also have no recollection whatsoever of celebrating religious holidays—not the vaguest memory of Christmas festivities, decorated trees, presents, or even anything about Santa Claus. No doubt I saw some kind of creche scene at my school, but the background story never penetrated my childish awareness. Again, I give thanks for my heathen upbringing.

Instead, winter simply meant a season of cold and sometimes snow. Probably in early 1950, we had an enormous snowfall that turned Cemetery Hill into a huge white mountain. Daddy hitched up some horses to haul a big sleigh up the hill, and a whole bunch of us from the neighborhood climbed in for a wild slide down the long snowy slope.

The first part of the sleigh ride was exciting fun, but then about halfway down the hill, our vehicle slid onto a smooth stretch of snow that was in fact a deep gully full of brush. The sleigh dived into the gully taking our screaming crowd deep under the snow into the branches and brambles. It took quite a while for us to dig our way out, many with cuts and other injuries. Fortunately, I seemed to have survived unscathed.

However, later in the spring when we were back to shirtsleeves, Mama found a strange hard bump on my left elbow. They took me to a doctor who diagnosed a foreign object and removed a two-inch black thorn from my arm. I still recall that weird feeling of him pulling it out, and it grossed me out that the thing had been moving around inside my body ever since the sleighride.

By the end of the school year, everybody decided that it was time for devout little Dick to have his First Holy Communion. The nuns made me recite all kinds of catechism questions and answers that were just gibberish to memorize. Obviously, my doctrinal grounding for First Communion was pretty shaky.



Before they'd let me do the Communion thing (Did it have anything to do with the Communism thing everybody was talking about?), I was supposed to go to Confession. My catechism nun explained that I'd have to tell the priest any sins I'd committed. Her definition of "sin" was anything that offended God, and while I wracked my tiny, innocent brain over what I could possibly confess, she said not to worry, assuring me the priest would forgive me whatever.

Dressed up in my white suit, [By the way, I think that's the neighbors' old outhouse in the background.], I went that Sunday morning to church with my family for the first time ever. I lined up with some other Firsters at the

confessional, and kneeling in the curtained booth, I recited, “Bless me, Father...” Nothing else came out. The priest behind the grille said, “Yes, my son? Do you have a sin to confess?” I answered honestly, “No.” He chuckled and said, “Well, say five Our Fathers.”

The ritual of First Communion was so unremarkable that I have no memory of it and certainly wasn’t impressed by the papery white wafer. The famous metaphorical meaning of Communion was lost on me. (In school years afterwards, at our obligatory morning Masses I usually didn’t take Communion because you had to fast and not eat anything for breakfast before. I wasn’t about to skip breakfast for a little piece of tasteless cracker.)



Of the summer of 1950 when I was eight and out of school, I have no memories other than those evoked by this picture of my family on a rare swimming outing. Even without the picture, though, I’d vividly recall that day along a little river with a deep, dark pool beside the big cement columns supporting a little bridge.

In that pool Daddy taught me to “dog-paddle” back and forth between the column and the rocky shore. In the middle of one of my crossings, I was seized by cramps in my thighs and sank like a rock. Heroically, Daddy jumped in and pulled me safely out of the drink. One doesn’t easily forget one’s father saving one’s life. But I’m embarrassed to see my new chubbiness.



Already by the school year’s end, I’d “fleshed out” considerably as seen in this second-grade class picture. That wide grin was strategic. It hid the crookedness of my new teeth and almost gave me nice dimples. I really shouldn’t look hard at such old pictures and note all the changes in my looks in these seventy-five years. Like the cute blond hair gone dark (and only now going grey), that delicate nose twice broken and poorly reset, and especially those tiny ears that are now at least twice as big—and hairy! What strange childish thoughts were lurking behind those expressive eyes? Probably not many...

When I’d turned eight, I began to find the five years between Judy and me an obstacle. Neglecting my big-brother’s duties of caring for and playing with her, I’d run off to play somewhere by myself. That was probably my first step toward becoming a loner.

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