

OVERTURE

WHAT ELSE COULD I DO? I was six years old, going-on-seven, and I'd never given any thought at all to my future. At six, the future meant lunch, and the distant future meant Sunday when Aunt Regina was coming over. My birthday is September 23rd, after the start of the school term, but Mom had gone to see Mr. Dickler, the principal of PS 139 in our district of Flatbush, Brooklyn, New York, and got him to let me sneak in past the deadline. You were supposed to start Kindergarten after your fifth birthday, but I got to go just before mine. So by the time the summer of 1934 rolled around, I'd already finished first grade at six, going-on-seven.

I knew something was up around the first of June when the school term was nearly over. The depression was on, but I didn't know much about that. We had food, clothes, and a roof over our heads and everyone we knew was in the same boat we were, and I got a lot of lectures about the value of a dollar, and the first proverb I remember is "waste not, want not." Now and then I'd hear: "You must eat your spinach. Children are starving in China." I said I wouldn't mind sending the spinach over to China, or the asparagus or the Brussels sprouts, if that would help. That sort of thing might bring a laugh to the table, from my sister Carol and Mom. Pop was not a laugher. The four of us gathered nightly at six o'clock, the only time of the day when we were together. Pop returned each evening to Brooklyn on the BMT Subway from Manhattan, where he earned us our money by selling buckles and buttons to the men's clothing industry. Carol and I went to the same school, but on slightly different schedules so I didn't see her till evening. Mom? I have no idea where she spent her days. I do know she was rarely home when I returned from school for lunch; I had lunch with Marie from Barbados, who was a

combination cleaning lady, baby sitter, primitive but profound philosopher, listening to “The O’Neills,” a radio soap to which we were both addicted. I really don’t know where Mom was, probably at some class or other. Mom always wanted to keep up with the times.

Kids have a way of noticing things, and as our windows opened wide to let in June and its splendid sounds and smells, there was activity of a sort new to me in Apartment 5F on Ocean Avenue. A different kind of underpants were being bought for me at Woolworth’s, and tags with my name on them were being sewn inside. White socks and a pair of sneakers showed up. Older cousins Jules and Lad and Chester contributed used, but usable sweaters and a raincoat one of them had outgrown. One day a trunk, bought on sale at Kresge’s 5 and 10 Department Store, appeared. I wasn’t told a thing. In previous summers we had gone to a cabin in the Catskills near the grand house my Uncle Aaron owned in Haines Falls, New York. Aaron was the family star, a New York State Supreme Court Justice, Mom’s oldest brother, and the rest of the family tramped along as satellites to be near him in the mountains. Everyone showed up in the Catskills in 1932 and 1933, which is the beginning of my memory chart. The women and children were there for the summer, the men would come up on the train on Fridays. Mom rented the cottage for the four of us plus Marie from Barbados and Miss Josephine, a college girl she convinced to take room and board in exchange for keeping an eye on Carol and me, but somehow there were often ten or twelve of us living there. The sound of that train’s whistle happily haunts me still. To me it meant “Pop’s coming! I can hear him coming!” I wasn’t of much use in the country. I liked the look of the mountain villages, I loved the earthy smells, but frogs and minnows and garter snakes didn’t do it for me. I’d sit in the babbling brook daydreaming while the other kids went fishing, played baseball, climbed trees, did the things most kids do when they’re taken out of the brick, glass and steel world in which they live.

But the Catskills were to be no more. One day in late June of 1934, Mom told me I was going away, alone, for the whole summer to a place where all my clothes had to have name tags in them. I was to be put on a train with a lot of other kids, most of whom went to PS 139 with me, for Mr. Dickler ran a summer camp for boys in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and I was signed up as a Midget even though the camp accepted no one under seven. Once again she’d conned him into letting me in early. She explained to me it would be good for me to learn all about country ways—how to ride a horse and build a fire and swim and play sports and make belts and wallets in Arts and Crafts. She said it was time

I learned to spot poison ivy so I could avoid it the rest of my life. She went on to say my new school friend Mervyn Mendel would be going too, and that she would come up to visit me some time during the 8 weeks I'd be away. I made it clear I wanted no part of this.

"Mervyn is not my friend," I said. "He's never been to the movies. Not once." I had been taken to my first movie that winter—Shirley Temple in "Little Miss Marker," and I was hooked. My final thrust: "'We don't have poison ivy in Brooklyn so who cares what it looks like?" I was happy in Brooklyn. It never occurred to me that I would ever leave it, willingly.

But at almost-seven, I didn't pull much weight, and on July 1, both Mom and Pop escorted me via the BMT subway, to Grand Central Station, where I was introduced to 18 or 19 other miserable looking little kids, and maybe 30 older ones, who seemed thrilled to be leaving home. Mervyn was there too, wearing a baseball cap, carrying cleats.

My parents looked nervous, but put a brave face on it. I was busy giving them the silent treatment for I was not a happy camper. Eventually a whistle blew, and "Uncle Dick" (Mr. Dickler's summer name) marched us off to the train to Springfield, Mass, where we'd be met by a bus to take us to Camp Iroquois for Boys just across the New Hampshire border. My trunk had been sent on ahead, so all I had to carry was my copy of *Modern Screen* and the latest issue of *Variety*. I could barely read, but one of mom's best friends, who worked for the editor, had me on a list of free subscribers, and she'd already taught me how to check the grosses of the current movies. I never looked back but I could feel Mom and Pop waving me off, wondering if they'd done the right thing. I felt betrayed and abandoned, but I was determined not to show them. I didn't cry till we'd passed 125th Street. Then I had a good wail, which wasn't embarrassing because at least two other kids were bawling too, and it took Uncle Dick, and two other "Uncles," Counsellors Cy and Normie, to calm us down by telling us all about the good stuff that was awaiting us at good old Green and Gray (the colors of Camp Iroquois) up there in the valley below Mount Monadnock. By the time we'd hit the Massachusetts border north of Connecticut, and been fed some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, I was feeling better. All I had to do was adjust to being an orphan, and I'd be OK.

In the weeks that followed, I learned a lot. Uncle Hank, who was the counselor in Bunk 2, where I was placed with 4 other Midgets, showed me how to fold a sweater so it looked great in the cubby hole above my bed where our clothes were stored. He taught me how to make a bed with hospital corners at

the bottom for that smart military look. I learned how to stick a potato and a marshmallow on a stick and roast them over an open fire at the Tuesday outdoor roasts. I moved from the shallow end of the wooden pool to the deeper end as I learned to swim. I learned that I was hopeless in the sports department in everything that involved a team—swimming was OK, and I began to learn tennis, and I could stay on a horse. Mom loved horses and had signed me up for the riding program. I was the youngest by far, so when Uncle Stan decided the boys needed a run, he'd shout "trot," and then "canter," and off they'd go, leaving me behind on old Dobbin. It felt very creepy there on that leafy road with only the sound of the crickets in my ears. But as the weeks went on, and I got to know the old horse, I'd be glad to get rid of the others, leaving me to fantasize about being in a movie. I could hear the music playing in the background and I could feel the camera panning as it passed me on the horse. I'd seen how they did that in my Modern Screen, and it all seemed very mysterious and magical. Uncle Stan was OK—he always did come back for me once he and the older boys had had their run. I would just have to learn how to ride, and one day I'd be invited to join them. But mostly I was a flop at anything sportsy.

Oh, they tried. They put me on the Midget softball team, in left field because no one ever hit the ball that far. I didn't mind because it gave me a chance to sing and pick daisies when the other team was up at bat. But one day, one of them connected, and the ball actually went up in the air—and I heard everyone yell "Dickie, Dickie, it's yours!" so I looked up and there it was—a baseball zooming down on me. So I stuck my glove, which was a loanout and miles too big on me, up in the air, hoping for a miracle. But the ball sailed right past the glove and smack into the middle of my nose. You never heard such screaming and yelling. Everyone rushed out to left field, and I was carted off to the infirmary with blood pouring out of me, thus ending my career in baseball.

Basketball was even worse. At 4 feet flat, I not only could never get a basket, I couldn't even reach the rim. And my dribbling was a disaster. I'd dribble twice, then the ball would go rolling down the court, usually right into the waiting hands of the other team. Mervyn Mendel tried to help. He took me under his wing—but all I ended up as was sort of his water boy—getting him drinks when I wasn't sitting on the sidelines watching.

Soccer was no good either. I kept getting kicked in the shins; it was really quite pitiful. I once kicked the ball with great power, but as I hadn't a clue what the rules were, I kicked it straight into the wrong goal, and there was a giant brou-ha-ha as to whether or not the points should be counted for the other team.

I don't remember the outcome, because to tell the truth, though I wanted people to like me, I didn't give a damn who won.

Archery was a little better. But when I almost took out Alan Silver's eye by losing control of the bow just as I let fly the arrow, they benched me yet again. I was a washout, no sense in beating around the bush about that. And so it went, week after week, until we hit the middle of August. By then, I wasn't hating camp all that much, now that they'd given up on me as a team player, and were leaving me alone with my books, magazines, tennis racket, riding clothes, bathing suit. And every Monday night, they took us to town to the Gem Theatre in Peterborough to see a movie! Errol Flynn in *Captain Blood*, Irene Dunne and Cary Grant in *The Awful Truth*, William Powell and Carole Lombard in *My Man Godfrey*, Rogers and Astaire in *Swing Time*, and I was in heaven. New Hampshire in the 30s was just about 100% Protestant, and I remember Uncle Cy giving us a pep talk in the bus on the way to the movie.

"Think of it like you're going to a party in a stranger's house, so you have to be very polite. They think we're strange, and we want them to know we're no stranger than they are, and nothing to be afraid of."

That was because Flatbush in Brooklyn was about 90% Jewish at the time, so most of the kids in PS 139 were too, and most of the *Our Town* crowd (that play was written in Peterborough, and clearly resembles it) had never seen a Jew before. So, though today that whole episode would be called totally politically incorrect, I don't remember being specially traumatized by it. I just thought: "this is going to be fun. An adventure! With real live Protestants!" We didn't have many of those in Flatbush, which up till then had been my whole world.

So you can tell that by mid-August I was fitting in, having a reasonably good time, knowing that soon I could go home, having done my time. But I'd forgotten about Green and Gray, the Color War that always ended the season at Camp Iroquois. For a week, the two teams, chosen boy by boy by the counselors, went into battle for the points that added up to victory or defeat. Baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, swimming events, bunk inspection, archery, each game or event was assigned points for first place, second, third. Each camper was only allowed to compete in three events, otherwise the Mervyn Mendels, who excelled at everything, would keep little losers like me out of the whole week of war. Frankly, I'd have preferred that, but the rules wanted to be fair, so they further stated that every camper had to be involved in at least two events. One day, before the war started, I was wandering down to the lake, and I overheard

three counselors in an empty bunk, talking with great urgency. They had listed the campers they wanted on their team, and were down to the bottom of the barrel, which was me.

“But what can he do?” one of them asked. “He’s got to be in two events, and he can’t DO anything.”

“We could put him in the diving contest.,” one of them answered. “We’ve run out of athletes. We have to submit three divers to match their three. I saw him dive once. He’s no good, but at least he won’t hurt himself: And he’ll supply us with the third contestant we need.”

I wished I could tell him: “It’s all right! I don’t mind watching from the sidelines.” But then the third one piped up:

“Wait a minute,” he said. “What about the play?”

“What about it?” they answered.

“It ends the war, it’s the last event, and it gets 100 points. I’ll bet he could do something in that.”

They still didn’t get it.

“I know,” said the third counselor. “He’s probably never acted before. But I have a hunch. I mean he’s always telling stories, and that’s acting of a sort. Let’s pick him.”

“For the play???” one of them asked, incredulously.

“For the play,” said the other.

And then I could hear them moving about, so I zipped on down to the lake.

I didn’t know what a play was. All I knew was that one of them wanted me for the team and that made me feel good. When Green and Gray came, and the events played themselves out, the teams were so evenly matched that, as we entered the final day, my Greens were only 47 points behind the Grays. And I’d won three of those points for my team! In the diving contest, with six contestants, I’d jumped off the low board thinking of everything Uncle Geoffrey had taught me, and after the six of us completed three dives each, they read out the scores. They work backwards, from third place to first, so the first words I heard were:

“In third place, with three points, is Dickie Siff.”

A great cheer went up, more of a roar. For I’d only been put in the event to satisfy the quota of two necessary events. No one expected me to WIN anything. It was a seminal event in my life. I felt now I could retire from competitive sports, at the peak of my career. Little six year old, going-on-seven, Dickie Siff had won three precious points for the Greens, against formidable odds.



Top: Several years after my diving triumph at six in color war at Camp Iroquois, I am still practicing. The top half of me is OK, the bottom clearly still needs work.

Bottom: At tennis I was nothing, if not determined. You can't say I'm not trying. (Photos: Author's Collection)

So I sailed into this thing called “the play” with great confidence. I was a member of the team now, a contributing member. Even Herbie Mandelbaum, a fellow Green, looked at me with a new respect. So I did exactly as Uncle Ivan told me to do. I took my “sides,” and worked with him privately (he was the play’s director) to learn them, and to get them just right. The final night of the War came, and after dinner, both teams, and all the guests and counselors piled into the Social Hall for this final event, this World Series of the Green and Gray Wars. I of course, was backstage, a new word to me. We were all together in one room, down two steps from the stage, and the play was sort of a combination of *The Drunkard* and *The Tavern*, turned into an original 45 minute one-acter, written by, directed by and starring Uncle Ivan (who happened to be a Green, like me). If it failed to beat out the Gray play, which was a musical review (one of their seniors played the piano by ear) called “Monadnock Madness,” all would be lost, and we would go home in defeat. My diving triumph had given me a burst of team spirit; as a result I was excited and nervous and drymouthed as curtain time neared. We were allowed to sit out front to see the musical; they had to go first, as they were ahead in points at the start of the evening. That was the rule. We, as the underdogs, got to go last. Their show wasn’t too bad actually. I tried not to, but I had to laugh when Mervyn Mendel, in a blonde wig and wearing high heels, sang an original number called “I Wish I Could Throw A Ball,” at which the kids laughed at some lines, and the adults at others. There was a funny sketch about what it was like to be a snake in New Hampshire when all the kids were making snakeskin wallets. And the head counselor of the Grays, their equivalent of our Uncle Ivan, played a comic version of Uncle Dick, complete with bald wig with white fringe. I never forgot his last words, in the finale.

“So boys,” he said, in that speechy way of Uncle Dick’s, “if you had a good time this summer at camp, it was your fault. And if you didn’t have a good time, it was your fault too. Now in the future, if you keep your mouths shut, and your bowels open, I promise everything will come out all right in the end.”

That one got a huge laugh, and the show ended to lots of applause and hoots and hollers. I was shocked. Someone said “bowels” on stage. I was still reeling from this when I was pulled backstage to prepare for our show. The rest is hazy, but I do know I had nothing to do in the first part of the play. I could hear Ivan and the others out there through the beaverboard set. Everything seemed to be going well. There was a fight with a knife in the play, and I could hear the audience shriek with delight. Near the end, I headed out to my place backstage, and waited in the dark for my cue. Just in case I forgot it, Uncle Ivan had given me a personal prompter, but I didn’t need him. When I heard the line I was waiting for, I opened the door, and stepped out into the light. Right

away, something happened. We'd had a rehearsal earlier in the day, but not with lights or sound, and certainly not with an audience. This was different. This was new and different. This was warm, it was friendly, it was comfortable. I started to speak when my cue came.

"Father, dear father, come home with me now, the clock in the steeple's struck one."

I was about to go on, but there was a ripple from out front. It got louder, turned into a murmur, then a laugh. I was thunderstruck. I looked at Uncle Ivan. His eyes said "Wait," and I waited. When he felt it was time to go on, he nodded, so imperceptibly no one could see but me. We were in our own world, he and I, no one could enter. I went on.

"And Mother has sent me to fetch you back home, for she's ill and is almost undone."

The laugh from the other side of the footlights turned to a roar. I had no idea why. I looked at Uncle Ivan, with terror, but he smiled back warmly as if to say, "No, that's good." If there was more to my role, I don't remember it. I think I helped Uncle Ivan (my "father") to his unsteady feet, and we walked off together as the curtains came together, signifying the end. Ivan carried me to the center, to stand next to him, though in the rehearsal I'd been way over on the end, where a bit player belonged. As we took our curtain calls, he leaned down and whispered, "You stole the whole show, kid. You're a trouper."

The Greens got 100 points, and we won the war. So, what else could I do? I had to spend the rest of my life in the theatre, as any fool could see. You didn't have to have all the lines, you could come in late, do your thing, help out, have some fun, shake things up, contribute. I was so relieved. After a lifetime, six long years, of being outside looking in, I'd finally found a home.