

## *Ace on the Hill*

Here's the first thing you should know about me: I was ill-tempered from the start. Sure, ear-splitting cries are par for the course with all kids. Some also kick, some thrash, and some ball up like little bugs. But in my case, the fits of rage almost always involved something being *thrown*.

Distances were never measured, but "clear across the room" was a description I'd hear later from various eyewitnesses. My late Uncle Sam (yes, that was his name) said I grazed his head with a strawberry in Ohio before I could even speak. At a Michigan daycare, I heaved my mini milk carton out a window because a new and obviously uninformed aide didn't serve my customary chocolate milk at snack time. A few months later, I stepped away from my 5<sup>th</sup> birthday party to hurl a half-dozen 45 records against our stone wall. The reason? I'd learned my best friend, Steven Elsbright, had turned five first.

My parents, Joel and Louise undoubtedly had their hands full. I could be a brat, there's no denying it. But there's another thing you should know. By the time I was eleven, my family had lived in six different homes. Granted, two of those were in the same town before I was out of a crib, but they still counted in my book. Moving became the bane of my existence. And, admittedly, when the news was broken, the reaction wasn't pretty. If I couldn't throw an object, I'd surely throw a fit.

My little sister, Justine, began to emulate my aggression almost as soon as she could talk. Instead of growing annoyed with this development, I welcomed it. Let's be honest: When it comes to a "cute" phase with kids, the shelf life for boys is a lot shorter than it is for girls. Sure, my grandmother Marjorie, loved to tussle my blonde hair and pinch my dimples, but Justine was like a little doll with her auburn hair, freckles, and big green eyes. When little sis piped up with her back straightened, I had a staunch ally.

At some point my parents began to insert synonyms for the dreaded "M" word, but their clever attempts to soften the blow only ratcheted up my frustration.

"Plant new roots?" I asked, with my arms crossed. "Can you explain?"

"Yeah," Justine said, crossing her arms. "Can you *eggs*-plain?"

"Well, we're going to pick up here and...relocate to Pennsylvania," Dad said.

"You mean, *move*?" I asked, completely exasperated.

When the response was confirmed, I blurted out a word I'd overheard a janitor say at school. Justine hollered "Dipship!" which I thought might cut the tension, but Dad hauled me out of the room, gave me three whacks with a ping pong paddle (we didn't own a ping pong table, for what it's worth) and then banished me to my bedroom without dinner.

An hour or so later, as I tossed and turned on my bed, the aroma of pot roast, carrots, and potatoes wafted upstairs. Dad and Justine bellowed "Hip-hip-hooray" which was customary when Mom had prepared a culinary feast. With my stomach growling, primal instincts took over.

I snuck downstairs, grabbed an egg from the refrigerator, and quietly tiptoed back up to my room. I plugged in my 'Creepy Crawler' cooking plate and once it was sufficiently hot, I cracked the egg. In seconds the yolk and white vulcanized to create something resembling a brown and yellow sponge. The taste of my rubbery entrée was almost as putrid as the caustic odor—which ultimately gave me away. This little stunt resulted in three more paddle whacks before bed.

All of that brings me to a brisk Pennsylvania evening in the winter of '75. By this time I was 11 and Justine was 8. In hindsight, I should've seen it coming. Coasters, coffee table books, and ashtrays—all part of the normal living room landscape—had been discreetly stowed away. This was not the result of post-holiday cleaning or spontaneous redecorating by my parents; it was a calculated defense strategy.

We were the picture of suburban comfort. Justine and I were playing Monopoly on the living room floor, right beside Mom who was curled up in a chair reading a book called *Atlas Shrugged*. Other than wondering why anyone would read (or write) about someone shrugging, I was in a pretty good mood. Dad was in his favorite chair perusing the Wall Street Journal as he typically did after dinner.

“Hey, gang, let’s have a little discussion,” he said, setting down the paper.

We responded to his gesture and took positions on the couch. Justine shot me an apprehensive look. I held up my hands. Part of me believed the impromptu chat could be some *good* news. Maybe we were going to be taking a family trip or adopting a pet. I mean, the odds had to be in our favor at some point, right? But then there was a familiar sign: Mom placing a reassuring hand on Dad’s shoulder. I should mention she had rheumatoid arthritis, and her knuckles were very swollen—especially when she tensed her hands. *Tensed* her hands?

“We’re moving!” I blurted, leaping to my feet.

“No!” Justine echoed, rising as well.

My parents turned to each other in disbelief.

“How could he possibly know?” Dad asked.

“I did *not* say a word,” Mom said.

I scanned the room for something to heave. Damn it! Where was everything?

“Maybe he saw you moving the ashtray,” Dad said.

“How could he? He was at school,” Mom replied.

“I don’t even know why you guys have ashtrays!” Justine exclaimed. “Neither one of you smokes!”

“All right...enough!” Dad hollered. “Justine, take a seat. Jayson, put that down and sit on your fanny. This is a family discussion, not a rebellion.”

I didn’t realize I’d raised a couch cushion over my head. I set it down and dropped to my spot once again. When Dad said fanny or other synonyms for butt—rear end, rump, duff, or *derriere*—the paddle wasn’t far behind, no pun intended.

Justine and I folded our arms in tandem.

“Yes, we’re moving. To Massachusetts,” Dad said.

“Like.... Boston?” I asked.

“Not far,” Dad said. “A suburb to the west.”

I sighed. Granted, it was one place we’d never lived, but he might as well have said Belgium—it felt that foreign. I pleaded for another location.

“Yeah, anywhere but there,” Justine added. I’m not sure she knew the difference between Boston and Brussels, but, as always, I was grateful for the support.

Dad went into his sales pitch. Boston was a historic city, just like Philadelphia. It had all the major sports teams. Mom chimed in that Massachusetts had beautiful beaches in summer and powdery ski slopes in the winter. What more could you ask for?

“It’s the way they talk,” I fired back. “I once had a substitute teacher from Boston...Mrs. McQueeny, A-K-A ‘Meany McQueeny.’ She’d say things like, ‘Let’s go ovah the ansahz heeya.’”

“What did you just say?!” Justine asked, her face scrunched in a knot.

I threw up my hands. “See?! We’re gonna flunk!”

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