

Style Invitational: What went wrong? God only knows. This week, unique chic

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TONY KORNHEISER



## A Real Knee-Slapper

You've heard how life imitates art. We're way past that now. Now, life is imitating a Lite Beer commercial.

Picture a group of people gathered around a television set, watching ladies' figure skating. "The Waltz of the Sugar Plum Fairies" is playing in the background. The lovely Nancy Kerrigan is skating languidly.

"I'm sick of figure skating," some guy yells out. "I want to see mob hit men!"

"No, there's too much violence," answers one of the women.

"Figure skating!"

"Mob hit men!"

One of the guys gets up and shouts, "We can watch both!"

He slams his Lite Beer on top of the TV, and suddenly you see Nancy Kerrigan being chased all over the ice by Tonya Harding's sumo bodyguard, whacking at her kneecaps with a tire iron.

Everybody cheers as Kerrigan skates furiously for the exit—leaping and twirling, trying to avoid the blows.

An announcer is heard saying, "... and there goes Nancy, skating for her life! Watch closely now as she attempts a difficult combination, a triple Axel into a sit-spin, and—oh my!—she's landed badly as Tonya Harding's husband catches her flush on the ankle with his baseball bat. And now they're descending on her like a baby seal! This could get ugly!"

The people sit there, transfixed.

"Great beer," one says in admiration.

I know we live in a violent world. And I don't want to be hopelessly naive, but I honestly thought that the last place on Earth you'd find a hired hit man was in ladies' figure skating.

What's next, full-contact chess?

"The wily challenger, Anatoly Karpov, has just stunned the champion, Kasparov, with a deft Ruy Lopez gambit, and the champion appears to be... yes, he's REACHING FOR A GRAPPLING HOOK..."

This is how you make the Olympic team—by kneecapping your competition? That's some prize catch of a husband, or ex-husband, or quasi-husband, she's got, the mellifluously named Jeffrey Gillooly. What music is Tonya going to

See TONY KORNHEISER, F4, Col. 1



Noted With

FITTING CONTEMPT

## The First Name In Footwear

By Sandra B. Fleishman

Special to The Washington Post

It was the middle of the day in a crowded section of Nordstrom and I was looking for Sylvia.

I'd never seen her in person before, but I had her picture in my hand. Along with portraits of "Gretta," "Bree" and "Angelique." We're all on a first-name basis.

Each of these is a shoe. You've seen their pictures in the newspaper ads and department store fliers every week.

Why does the footwear industry believe women want to call their shoes by perky sorority names—like "Skippy" or "Wendy"? Or by vampy names—like "Alexis"? Or even by regular names—like "Bonnie"?

Why names?

Men do not buy shoes this way. They do not

See NOTED WITH, F4, Col. 4

## Art Buchwald's Childhood Was No Laughing Matter. Sometimes It's Funny How Things Turn Out ...

Humorist Art Buchwald never met his mother, though she lived until he was in his thirties. Afflicted with depression, she spent most of her life in mental institutions. "When I was a child, they did not let me visit her. When I was an adult, I did not want to," Buchwald writes in his poignant new memoir, "Leaving Home." "I preferred the mother I had invented to the one I would find in the hospital. The denial has been a very heavy burden to carry around all these years, and to this day I still haven't figured it all out."

With his older sisters, Alice, Edith and Doris, Buchwald spent his childhood in New York orphanages and foster homes. He was placed there by his father, a drapery installer too destitute during the Depression to care for the children.

The following is excerpted from "Leaving Home," G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1993.

By Art Buchwald



I am not certain how Pop found the Hebrew Orphan Asylum. Gaining admission was harder than getting into Princeton. They didn't take just anybody. My father had to appear before a judge with us, since it was required that we be declared neglected children by the court before we would be remanded to the home. This was a bad rap for him, because we weren't neglected. But before the judge would sign us in, he had to have evidence that my father was a lousy parent.

I know all of this because, several years ago, the Jewish Welfare Board of New York contacted me and asked me to speak at the 150th Anniversary of the HOA. I said that I'd do it, but there was a fee involved.

They were surprised that I would charge and asked me what the fee was.

I said that I wanted my records. I knew that they had kept complete records of me, because a social worker visited us every month from the time we entered the HOA in 1931 when I was 6 to the time I left at 15. For most of that time we were in foster homes.

The man was horrified. "I can't do that," he said. "The records are sealed."

"Unseal them," I told him. A few days later, the story of my childhood as written by a dozen or so social workers was delivered. It's an interesting document, particularly if you are the person they are writing about. How many people in this world have had complete strangers keeping track of their childhoods? The records reveal that at the court hearing, the judge asked my father, "How much can you afford to pay weekly or monthly for your children's support?"

My father told him, "When business is good, I make twenty dollars a week. But business is bad now and I only make six or seven dollars. The reason I want to put my children in the Hebrew Asylum is that I live in one room and I don't have any place for them. Up until now I have been paying to keep the

children in private homes, but I can't afford it anymore. I would like to have them committed to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, but I do not want them put up for adoption. When my business gets better, I'll take them back."

The judge asked, "What about your relatives? Can't they take them?"

My father replied, "They won't unless I pay them."

The judge accepted Pop's petition and recommended we be placed in the HOA.

The records continued, "After the hearing, Judge Young committed Alice, Edith, Doris, and Art—See BUCHWALD, F6, Col. 1

Art Buchwald shortly before he was sent to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum; right, the author today.



PHOTO AT RIGHT BY DIANA WALKER



# 'My Father Had Left Me in a Warehouse'

BUCHWALD, From F1

thru to the Hebrew Orphan Asylum and placed my father under an order to pay \$2.50 a week for each child."

But things were so bad for Pop during the Depression that he couldn't make the \$2.50 payments. Here is a page from the HOA records some time after we were placed in the home:

"Mr. Buchwald was queried as to when he would pay what he owed to the Institution. . . . He said that due to conditions in the upholstery business, he had been making \$5 and \$6 a week. He is self-employed and hopes that when the season begins at the end of August he might earn \$25 or \$30 weekly. He said that things should get better when the World's Fair came to New York."

I guess you could say that report sums up my father's business affairs in the Thirties. It appears that during the Depression not too many New Yorkers were putting their money into drapes and curtains.

Pop prospered for a few years making blackout curtains for businesses and the government during the Second World War. But after the war, he lived on the edge. In the Fifties, when I came to New York on home leave from Paris, I asked him how much money he owed. He mumbled a figure I couldn't hear. I then asked him how he kept going, and he said he borrowed from the loan sharks on Sixth Avenue. Then he repaid them at enormous interest. I was shocked but he just said, "Everyone in New York does it. The *momzers* leave me alone because I always pay them back."

With all his problems, Pop was a devoted father. If he didn't care about us, and if he hadn't made an effort to see that we were okay, he would have had a much easier life. I've thought back on his years and wondered if he had many days of peace before his death in 1972 at 79.

The only good side of his economic woes was that his firm, the Aetna Curtain Co., was not worth passing on to the next generation. If it had been, I would have wound up in the curtain business. I cringe when I imagine a sign on a window—Aetna & Son. The son would have been me.

Pop's was one of the millions of hard-luck stories of the Thirties. He was responsible for four kids, at the mercy of the Jewish Social Service, and flat broke. If he was depressed, he hid it. He had a smile on his face almost all the time, so no one knew what was going on inside. The same has always been true with me, so the smile must be in the genes.

He never yelled nor did he lay a finger on any of us. I never heard him getting into a fight, and I never saw him violent. My sisters do remember one time Pop's sewing machine broke down and he threw it across the length of his loft.

He ate most of his meals in dairy restaurants, and God knows what he ordered, because he went to the doctor once, and the doctor said he was suffering from malnutrition.

All the time we were in foster homes, we met Pop every Sunday in Jamaica, Queens, the most convenient place for him to see the four of us.

As far as I can remember, he always kept the date. Doris and I were living together and invariably arrived first and stood in front of the Merrick Theater at 3 o'clock.

This was when I had the most contact with my father. I accepted the fact that he was my father, but I wasn't too sure exactly what that meant. He took me to movies and bought me ice cream, I knew that by 7 o'clock I would get on a bus, wave, and not see him again for another week. Our relationship was so different from those of my friends and their fathers.

I only became introspective about what was going on when I was writing this book. On the occasions that I saw him, I remember that he was extremely quiet. He didn't have much choice, because the four of us saved all of our feuds with one another for the moment we saw him.

I might tell Pop, "Doris took my school bag and she won't give it back."

"It wasn't your school bag—it was mine—yours had mustard all over it."

"I hate her," I would say. "I wish you would find a different foster home for her."

Pop's response usually was, "You don't fight."

As I look back, it's remarkable how protective we all were of him. We knew that times were tough, so the four of us made a pact. We would either attend a first-run movie in Jamaica, of which there were three or four, and not eat much afterward, or we would go to a third-run film and gorge ourselves in the cafeteria. For all our fighting and arguing, everyone kept this part of the bargain.

Over the years, the girls continued to be protective. I was told not to bother him with bad news. His daughters were loving and caring, but they never shared any important aspect of their lives with him in case it would "disturb" him. He, in turn, kept his own counsel.

He didn't drink, except for one schnapps before he went to bed. When it came to customer relations, he had a sharp tongue. If someone complained about the order, he told the lady to take her business to his competitor, which he said was Macy's.

He not only provided curtains but listened to his customers' problems. People considered him part of the family, and many times his customers

would invite him to join them for dinner. He was a storyteller and had many good tales to relate. When my column became successful, he talked about me. To make sure no one missed my columns, he carried them around in his coat pocket.

The only thing that kept Pop from being more social was that he owed everybody money. He was in debt to all our relatives, particularly the ones on my mother's side of the family. He owed the various orphanages and hospitals, and he never could get even with business acquaintances. He was constantly evading the people from whom he borrowed.

Pop battled the city every day. Once he told me he was held up on the street at midnight in front of his loft, and he said to the robber, "This is not a good thing for you to do. I don't have any money and if you get caught you will have to go to jail. If you want money, stick up someone on Park Avenue." The man shook his head and walked away.

Whenever he had to deliver an order, it meant using the subway. He had to carry the drapes and slipcovers on and off the trains and then hang them in the customers' homes. He felt that he was in a constant war with the subways. He once told me, "There are two kinds of people who ride the subway—those who push and those who get pushed. People who push get to live a lot longer than those who get pushed."

This sage advice has stayed with me through all the years.

Whenever I take the New York subway, which is rare, I observe the passengers—the ones who shove and the ones who are shoved—and I don't have to know any more about them.

My father didn't present me with golden nuggets of advice every day. We never said a lot to each other over the years. I avoided telling him too much, because he thought that all my ideas were weird, and he said so. Since I got no encouragement from him, I just clammed up. In going over the relationship, I don't think I ever knew him well. There was no intimacy.

The subject we never, ever discussed was my mother. Not once did her whereabouts come up. He may have purposely tried to keep the shame of the illness from me. I never asked any questions. The girls brought up the fact that they knew where she was and they speculated on how well she was. But between my father and me, it was as if she never existed.

When I refused to be bar mitzvahed, it hurt him terribly. It's impossible for a Jewish father to explain to friends and relatives why his son isn't bar mitzvahed.

"Why not?" he demanded angrily.

"Because I don't want to go to Hebrew school at 3 when I finish my regular school. I never get a chance to play."

"It's for a short while. You learn some Hebrew, you make a nice speech, and everyone gives you a present. It's no big deal."

"I don't want to do it."

He was stumped. What could he do? He couldn't even cut off my allowance, because I wasn't getting one.

He said more in sadness than bitterness, "So don't get bar mitzvahed."

At this point, a good Jewish son would have said, "Okay, I've changed my mind."

I didn't. I'm not sure how he handled the explanation with his friends. I heard him tell my sisters that I went into a synagogue in New York with him and was bar mitzvahed by a rabbi, because I didn't want all the pomp and ceremony that went with the usual celebration.

My father keeps popping up in strange places. Recently, I was in Bergdorf Goodman and asked a matronly lady for change to make a telephone call. She said, "I'm going to give it to you, not because you're a big shot, but because your father made my drapes for me. They're still hanging in the bedroom."

I guess the weirdest thing that happened to me after my father died was when I was lecturing in Long Beach, California. After I finished my talk, I went back to the hotel and found a telephone message asking me to call a certain number. I did, and the woman who answered told me that she was the daughter of my father's girlfriend. This knocked me for a loop. She wasn't lying. She described him in detail and told me how he used to talk about us all the time. He carried my clippings in his pocket and showed them to her and her mother. She told me he was a father to her, too.

I had mixed feelings about the call. Part of me was happy that Pop had had a lady friend to share his life with—the other part of me felt a sense of betrayal. He was our father, so why was he devoting any of his time to someone else?

I also tried to picture him as a visitor in someone else's home. For all our differences, the thought bothered me that I had shared him with people I didn't know.

I asked the caller if we could meet, but she said no. She just wanted to touch base.

After hanging up, I thought about the conversation. The liaison meant that my father had more of a life than just working and sleeping in one room in a Bronx apartment. It also meant that someone besides us had cared for him.

That night, although it was 3 in the morning in the East, I called my three sisters and told them the news. They claimed that they'd known he had someone, but they didn't know who she was.

The Hebrew Orphan Asylum was founded in April 1860 by Jewish charities in New York City. Over the years, it moved several times, and finally established itself at 135th Street and



Above: Edith, Doris, Pop, Art and Alice. Right: The four kids in Jamaica, Queens. Buchwald was 13, living in a foster home.

Amsterdam Avenue across from the Lewisohn Stadium at the City College of New York. It was an institution in the true sense of the word—its outward appearance was forbidding-looking and not too hospitable when approached by a 6-year-old for the first time. It housed boys and girls who stayed there until they were 17 or 18. Few children qualified as real orphans—most had either a mother or a father or both. They were there either because they had been abandoned or because someone could not take care of them. In addition to the children actually living in the institution, a segment of the population was boarded out in foster homes. I don't know what the test was to remain in the HOA versus being a foster child.

I can't say which was better, since most of my youth was spent as a foster child. Some of the homes were good and some weren't too hot, as the foster parents were more interested in the money they received from the HOA than in the children. The HOA kids hated the words "orphan asylum," so they referred to the home as "The Academy."

The head of it was an imposing figure named Lionel Simmons, who ruled from 1919 to 1941, and under him the home produced a number of solid as well as distinguished citizens. Among the alumni were teachers, athletes, scientists, lawyers, doctors, war heroes, and many who made fortunes in business. One of the reasons the alumni record was so good was that the home had a team of volunteer psychiatrists and paid social workers to help those who might be in trouble. Except for the shame of being in an "orphanage," the home could have been considered a very proper prep school. The girls and boys leaned on each other in a world that was very confusing to most of them. Some married others who had been in the home.

There is even an alumni society, but it is fast disappearing since the HOA closed its doors in 1941. The HOA building was torn down during World War II to make room for a public school. During its existence, it is estimated, 35,000 children passed through the institution.

Many times I have run into the children of people who were in the HOA and, knowing that I was there, they want details. Sometimes their parents have spoken of the place, other times they have remained silent. For these children of HOA alumni, the asylum is very much part of their roots. They are searching for its secrets in order to help them better understand their parents.

Even though my stay in the brick building was not very long, it left its mark on me—along with the ones I acquired when I went to my foster homes.

The worst part of being placed in the HOA was that Doris and I didn't know we were going there. My other sisters said that our Uncle Oscar told them they were being put into the home. But Pop said nothing to the two of us.

There is a subway station at 137th Street and Broadway, and after coming out onto the street with my three sisters, I started the long, steep climb up the hill to Amsterdam Avenue. Pop was holding on to Doris and me, and we were pulling and tugging in the opposite direction. Uncle Oscar was holding on to Alice and Edith.

I was crying and so were my sisters.

The Hebrew Orphan Asylum looked like a giant castle out of medieval times. All it lacked was a moat. It loomed above us, and there was no doubt in our minds that it would suck us up, and we would never be heard from again.

Every child's arrival at the HOA was different. My cousin Eddie Lampner, his brother, Arthur, and sister, Rosalind, were brought to the home at different times. I once asked Eddie if the HOA didn't scare the hell out of him when he first saw it. He said that it might have, but he had had a previous experience with another orphanage, so this one looked like a piece of cake.

Eddie told me, "I was 4 years old. My mother had just died and my father had put my brother and me on a Long Island Rail Road train in Brook-



lyn. My father said, 'Sit here, I'll be right back.' Meanwhile, he went to talk to the conductor and then disappeared. He didn't return. The train left the station, and I was screaming and crying and beating on the glass. We went all the way to Far Rockaway before the conductor put us off and some people from an orphanage picked us up. They tell me that I didn't speak for four months."

Our arrival at the HOA wasn't that bad, but my sisters and I were dragged kicking and screaming through the front door. Pop and Oscar took us into a large reception hall, where they left us to be processed. They kissed us, and then they left. The four of us were very confused. We heard bells, and voices in offices. The halls were long and the ceilings high. Doris and I clung tightly to each other. After we sat on a bench for a short period, a stern woman separated me from my sisters. I was to go into the boys' isolation section and they were to go into the girls' dormitory. The last thing Edith said to me was, "Don't sit on the toilet seats."

That made me yell my head off. Without intending to, my father had left me in a warehouse.

I was inspected for lice and a doctor checked every orifice in my body. After the physical, they took me to another office for a battery of psychological tests. I was so afraid I would flunk them that I kept looking at the lady before I put the blocks in the holes. In the boys' quarantine section there were bunk beds, and I was told to remove all my clothes. These were replaced with the HOA issue—itchy woolen uniforms and nightgowns. For some reason I recall that the pajama shirts reached down to my ankles.

The only good thing I remember about the day was that someone gave me jelly sandwiches and hot chocolate.

The first night was the toughest. My father was gone, my sisters had disappeared. They told me I spent late afternoon looking out the window hoping Pop and Oscar would return.

I was told to get ready for bed by 8 o'clock. I recall hearing a bell ringing. I jumped into bed, and I was shaking.

When the lights went out, the counselor came in with a flashlight and said, "Who is awake?" I didn't say anything. Then he asked, "Who is asleep?" and I raised my hand. He yelled, "Dummy," and kicked the side of my bunk as hard as he could. The lesson stayed with me for the rest of my life. I have never raised my hand to tell anyone I was asleep again.

The HOA was an institution of bells. They rang to get us up—they tolled for our meals and when to say our prayers and when to go to sleep.

My father visited us every other day, which made things easier. My sisters visited me in the boys' wing as much as they could. They were concerned about me because I had become very quiet and had lost my energy. I wouldn't say anything about what was bothering me. I didn't understand why I had to be quarantined, because I hadn't done anything. In quarantine I watched from my window at the children playing in the yard. Most of them were older than me and I was very frightened about how I would fit in with the group. From what I could see of them, they were constantly wrestling with each other and kicking one another in the bottom. The future for me did not look good.

After two weeks, I was released and placed in the main boys' dormitory.

"Who are you?" one would ask.

"Arthur," I responded.

"Do you pee in your bed?"

"No," I responded.

"Everybody named Arthur pees in his bed."

"Don't either."

"Do too. You want to fight?"

"No. I don't want to fight."

"Are you really a girl?"

That's the way the dialogue went. I wasn't welcomed into the group, and I wasn't permitted to say anything, so I shut up. After a while I was left alone. I felt locked up. I couldn't relate to anyone there, and I saw less and less of my sisters.

One day recently, Alice remarked, "You never showed any anger about the situation."

From what I can remember, I think

that I was more puzzled than angry. I had no inkling of what I was doing in this building and I had no idea how long I would stay here.

My mind was whizzing along. I realized that I had to adjust to the place, at least until I was old enough to run away.

I had been in the HOA for two months and one day when I was called into a receiving room with my three sisters. They scrubbed us up so we would look better, in case someone wanted to take us home. I sat on the wooden bench, just happy to be with my sisters.

A middle-aged woman with glasses and wearing a large-brimmed hat and a double-breasted suit came in with a young man in his twenties. She was very businesslike and examined us as she would a Friday night chicken. She was smiling, though I had no idea what she had to do with me. Finally, she said, "How would you like to live with me?"

I replied, "I don't eat meat and I don't eat fish."

She said, "Well, we'll soon change that." Instead of protesting, I just looked down at my shoes.

As far as I was concerned, this woman was one more stranger asking me dumb questions. But she was also possibly my only ticket out of the HOA. I thought that it wouldn't hurt to be nice to her, just in case she had something to do with my freedom.

Her name was Stella Morais, and then she talked to my sisters, who were thinking the same thing as I was. If this lady wanted to take us out of the HOA, she was welcome to do it.

She said to me, "You're going to be my foster child."

I just smiled and nodded my head.

Her son Harold said, "I'll teach you how to play baseball and stickball." He was a dapper, good-looking man.

"I'd like that," I assured him. "But I don't have a glove."

"I'll buy you one," he told me.

I was ready to leave with him immediately.

Apparently all the paperwork had been done, because we were told to get our things. Except for the HOA clothes, we had no more luggage than when we arrived.

We took the subway to Penn Station and got on the Long Island Rail Road—an hour's journey to Hollis, in Queens.

The lady told us to call her Aunt Stella and the man said we could call him Harold.

On the train, she said, "I expect you children in bed by 4 o'clock." This was such a weird statement that I recently checked with my sister Edith and asked if she remembered Aunt Stella telling us that.

"Yes," she told me. "I also remember me saying to her, 'Morning or afternoon?' and she said, 'I'll tell you later.'"

It wasn't until years later that I discovered people took foster children into their homes to supplement their incomes. We were worth twenty-five dollars a month per child, and for many foster parents that paid the rent or the mortgage.

Once they realized that, foster children became very suspicious about why they had been placed in a particular home. We felt that if we were there for the support of their families, there was no sense becoming too friendly. But the Depression made people desperate. I never experienced any cruelty from the people I lived with, except when I was unhappy and invented it. So even if people were in it for the money, they were never unkind.

When we arrived in Hollis we were escorted into the living room, where Aunt Stella and Uncle Cyril's children were waiting for us. There was Harold, who had come with us; Ray, who had the best job in the family, selling fabrics to Broadway shows; Ira, who was a press agent; and Caroline, a secretary. They were all dressed nicely and greeted us warmly. No problem here, I thought to myself.

We lucked out when we were sent to Hollis, because it was a very comfortable middle-class community. The streets were safe, and even people with little money kept up their lawns and gardens.

The Depression was all-consuming and many of the most affluent home owners were policemen, firemen and civil servants because they all had safe jobs. People didn't bother to lock their doors. Yet times were tough for almost everybody. I remember banks closed and people standing out front hoping to get their money. Meat was served once a week in its original form, and then as meat loaf or hash.

Everything cost pennies, nickels and dimes. For many families, paper money was a rare commodity. Aunt Stella's husband, Cyril, sold printed signs from store to store which said things like "No Checks Cashed," "No Food Inside," "No Credit," "No Loitering."

Heads of households tried to make a living in any way they could. We would wait until evening to see how well Uncle Cyril had done during the day. If he was smiling, we knew he had sold some signs. If he had a pained expression on his face, we were aware that he had struck out. He had far more bad days than good days. People just couldn't afford signs.

According to the HOA's records, Uncle Cyril liked me very much, and I slept in Aunt Stella and Uncle Cyril's bedroom until the social worker told them to make other arrangements.

See BUCHWALD, F7, Col. 1



# 'I Vowed I Would Never Ask for Anything Again'

BUCHWALD, From F6

I was moved upstairs to the attic and shared a room with the Irish maid named Celeste. It turned out to be a very important event in my life.

Because I shared a room with the maid, I had an opportunity to observe her in all her glory. When she undressed or dressed, I always had one eye peeping over the cover. Her skin was the color of a light peach with freckles on it, and although I didn't have anything to compare them with, I somehow knew that she had the greatest breasts in the world.

The exact location of my bed was strategic for what went on very late at night. Harold used to come tiptoeing into the room and get on top of Celeste. At the time I thought Harold was hurting her because Celeste kept moaning and groaning. Later on, as a freshman in high school, I found out that when a man and woman wrestled and moaned and grunted a lot, it did not necessarily mean they were mad at each other. I would watch them in wonder while they thrashed around, legs and hair flying, no more than five feet away—possibly closer.

Harold was my role model, and Celeste was the first woman I ever saw completely unclothed. Whatever they were doing had a lasting effect on me—the scene has stayed with me for many, many years, and I still seem to be attracted to women who look like Celeste.

When I told my sisters this story, after I started working on the book, Edith pursed her lips and said, "She was always a slut."

Alice agreed, and said, "Harold was never choosy."

Doris said, "You should have told the social worker."

I had no idea what she wanted me to tell her.

My real youth started in the Morais home. I lived there for about two years. It was a nice place and everyone treated me kindly. After a while, I

just observed the family and absorbed everything that they said and did. Adults are very strange around children. They say and do things as if children don't exist, or have no eyes or ears. I became the invisible man.

It was also at this stage that I learned how to get people to like me. I found out that if I smiled at the person to whom I was talking, he became relaxed. I also learned that I could get what I wanted if I only showed enthusiasm.

During my stay at the Morais home, a boy named Michael Dolowitz came to live with us. He was from the HOA and he was what could be called a problem child. At 9 or 10, Michael enjoyed setting fire to things, like the house. He got no pleasure from the blaze itself, but enjoyed seeing all the fire engines wheel up after he had pulled the alarm, and watching all the firemen go to work.

One day, my tonsils swelled up, and I was in agony. While Aunt Stella was trying to deal with this problem, Michael pulled the fire alarm in front of the house, and three large fire trucks arrived on the scene. Aunt Stella alternated between talking to the fire chief and rushing upstairs to attend to me. The doctor finally arrived and swabbed my throat. I would not have remembered this incident if it hadn't coincided with the false alarm. I once asked Michael why he was always pulling the fire alarm, and he told me, "I like to get people mad." It made sense to me.

It wasn't long before they took Michael back to the HOA. I never heard what happened to him, though he is still a household word in our family. Maybe the asylum straightened him out. I sincerely hope so.

The one critical incident in my childhood that I have never forgotten took place on Red Brick Hill in Hollis on a bright, clear winter night. The ground was covered with snow and all the kids were laughing and shouting as they rode their sleds down the hill.



Buchwald's mother, institutionalized for depression for most of her life.

I must have been 7 or 8. I still remember how wonderful it all felt. The snow made everything glisten. I was feeling happy. I did not own a sled of my own, so I said to two boys standing next to me, "Can I borrow your sled?" One of them answered, "No." The other boy told him, "Let him have it. He doesn't have a mother."

Tears rolled down my cheeks as I rode down the hill on that borrowed sled. Those words have never left me. I wanted to yell that I did have a mother, but only a few people knew where she was and I was in no position to tell them. Sniffing quietly, I dragged the sled up the hill and gave it back.

I'm certain it was on that night on that hill that I vowed I would never ask anybody for anything again.

To this day, I'm just not very good at accepting gifts. Whenever I am given something, I become very embarrassed and uncomfortable. By the same token, I enjoy giving presents to other people. It's tough on everyone because no one can ever catch up with me.

Citizen Kane had his "Rosebud," and

I had my "Red Brick Hill." I finally did give that speech at the lunch celebrating the 150th anniversary of the HOA. Among the trophies now hanging on my wall, none compares with the plaque they gave me that day. It marks the scene of one of my greatest revenges.

The room was filled with New York's Jewish elite—the Our Crowd types, including the Lehmans, Guggenheims, Salomons and Strausses. There were members of the Jewish Welfare Board, and those associated with the HOA before it closed. There were even social workers:

I felt the way General MacArthur must have felt when he came back to West Point. Of all the speeches I have given in my life, this was the most meaningful.

I told them how, somewhere in the dim past, when I was a foster child around 10 years old, and I was fighting for my life, I dreamed that I would be the guest of honor at just such an affair. I didn't know the event would take place at the Pierre Hotel—I had never heard of the Pierre Hotel—but in my fantasy I saw myself on a podium such as this talking about the struggles of my childhood and how I had overcome them. In my fantasy, I even gave myself a standing ovation.

I then proceeded to set everyone straight on exactly where I fit into the Jewish child-care picture. It isn't easy to be a foster child, I said. You are in some sort of no man's land. If you lived in the HOA, you had the security of numbers. A foster home is something else again. The child knows instinctively that there is nothing permanent about the setup. At any time he or she can be swooped up and placed in another home.

The foster parents have a problem, as well. If they get too attached, they can be wounded if the child is suddenly taken away.

I must have been 6 or 7 years old and terribly lonely and confused, when I said something like, "This stinks. I'm going to become a humorist."

From then on, I had one goal in mind and that was to make people laugh. I adopted the role of class clown. I made fun of authority figures, from the principal of the public school to the social worker who visited me every month. It was a dangerous profession I had chosen, because no one likes a funny kid. In fact, adults are scared silly of them and tend to warn children who act out that they are going to wind up in prison or worse.

It is only when you grow up that they pay you vast sums of money to make them laugh.

Performing for laughs was my salvation. The other thing that helped me escape the reality of our lives was to concoct mysterious stories about myself. I invented a mother and father and I made myself the only child. I had the usual dreams about being a great sports figure, one day Joe DiMaggio and Lou Gehrig the next. I dreamed that I was a movie star like Mickey Rooney, and a writer like Booth Tarkington. The lonelier I became, the more interesting I managed to make my dream world.

The best story I made up was that I was really the son of a Rothschild—a name that was revered in my foster home because they were so rich and so Jewish. I worked it out that I had been kidnapped by my nurse when I was 6 months old and sold to a couple named Buchwald who were going to America.

The Rothschilds had hired France's most famous detective to find me, and it was only a matter of time before he showed up on my doorstep in Hollis. Once my true identity was established, I would prevail on my real Rothschild father not to prosecute the people involved with my kidnapping.

But I did intend to disinherit Doris the next time she was mean to me.

And then I told the audience a true story.

One evening, I attended a fancy dinner at the Tour d'Argent, the great temple of three-star dining in Paris. I was seated next to Doris Warner Le-

roy, the daughter of Harry Warner, one of the Warner Brothers.

We were chatting about this and that, and I turned to her and said, "Doris, you and I have something in common."

"What's that?" she asked.

"I was once in the Hebrew Orphan Asylum, and your father was one of its biggest supporters. He built the Warners' Gym, and we saw Warner Brothers films for free."

Doris went white. "Oh my God—one has mentioned that place to me for 20 years. Oh my God."

"Well," I said, "don't get that shaken up by it. It had nothing to do with you."

Then she told me her story. It seems her father decided to show Doris how much better off she was than other children. So every Hanukkah he made her get dressed in her fanciest outfit and go to the HOA and hand out gifts to the kids. They in turn spat on her.

She said, "I lived in dread of the HOA and it took me 20 years of analysis to forget it. Now we are in Paris and you have to bring that damn place up to me."

It was bizarre. Here we were, two people dining at the Tour d'Argent—both scarred by the same institution. She because she had to hand out presents, and I because I had to accept them.

I ended my speech by saying, "As I look back on it, I owe a great debt to the HOA, and to people such as yourselves who cared for the Jewish kids of New York City."

"I also want to thank you today for helping fulfill one of my best fantasies. I feel I had a unique experience as a child. Every once in a while, someone asks, 'How do you become a humorist?' I always reply, 'Well, first you have to become a foster child.'"

I got my standing ovation.

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