Word Count- 2,456

(Author's note: Names are changed to observe the anonymity rule of the contest.)

WORLD WAR II DID not provide an opportunity for many recreational activities but our family was fortunate that a small lake was just a short drive from our house. The 1934 Ford coupe sat in the driveway all week long but one Sunday my father decided to use some of the precious gasoline ration stamps for an excursion to the beach. It was a day when a different kind of conflict began, an undeclared and unacknowledged war between a father and a son.

What small boy has not experienced the unbridled thrill of being hoisted onto his father's shoulders to watch a ballgame or a parade? As I sat playing in the sand by the water's edge, my father approached and asked if I'd like to go in the water. I stood up, not quite ready to go. I hadn't yet learned to put my face in the water, let alone how to swim. With substantial trepidation on my part, I allowed my father to scoop me into his arms. He jogged directly into the lake. The water began licking at my feet, then the bottom dropped away sharply and soon we were in water which I knew would be well over my head. I gripped my father's neck tightly as apprehension settled over me. According to several of my aunts and uncles who witnessed this event, I started to protest when my father squatted down and the water swirled around me. He then decided to test his "sink or swim" theory and stood up, tossing me well away from him into deeper water. I sank below the surface, proving his theory to be a myth, as least in my case. Only a few of the physical details of that brief time in the water remain—the blackness, the suffocating water forcing its way up my nose and into my throat, the sensation of utter panic and dread. Several large gulps of water prevented me from breathing. Only someone who has

experienced a near drowning can appreciate the sensation. Despite being pulled up quickly, I was terrified. No words of reassurance could help.

"You're all right," and "wasn't that fun?" were supposed to reassure me but I was not "all right" and what happened to me not the least bit "fun."

The loss of trust and the sense of disillusionment felt by young children when they are subjected to a cruel adult joke can never be overestimated.

I was only about three years old, but that day began a war that would last a lifetime.

THE ABILITY TO INTIMIDATE fellow human beings is often looked upon as an admirable trait in business. It can also be an effective but not so commendable trait to possess when dealing with one's family. By the time I was three years old, I recognized that my father could make people cower before his powerful personality and bend their will to capitulate to his. I'm sure I couldn't verbalize it. Can memories of events that occur when a child is that young be resurrected? They can if they provide enough of the essence of hard lessons learned that make us who we are.

Just such a hard lesson followed soon after the sink or swim test.

OUR LIFE WITH MY mother's family in a big farmhouse during World War II was complicated in many ways, but finding litters of deformed kittens on a regular basis had a simple solution. On a sultry summer day, one of my uncles discovered a particularly ugly litter tucked into the corner of the barn. It was one which had no redeeming qualities; no kitten worth saving existed among the four or five fur balls with legs. Without the money to pay the fee for putting the pathetic

animals “to sleep,” that wonderful euphemism for killing, our household employed a technique guaranteed to deplete the cat population in an efficient manner.

A large bucket was filled with water. Someone would grab a kitten, submerge it with a short thrust, wait about ten seconds until the bubbles stopped, then raise the dripping carcass from the bucket. How the executioner was chosen remained a mystery to me until the time came for this litter to be eradicated.

My father, the oldest male in the house, announced that this time I would be the one to drown the kittens. My memory of that day includes the protests of other family members, who were quickly silenced with a withering stare as the intimidation factor kicked in. Even my mother’s plea of “he’s too young” was ignored. I’m certain he said something like “he’s got to grow up sometime” and “it’ll be good for him.”

He handed me the first kitten. “Do it,” he commanded.

I plunged the unfortunate kitty into the water so hard that my hand went all the way to the bottom, scraping the poor animal on the raised rust pockets lining the metal bucket. With my eyes closed, I waited to be told to bring it out. A lifetime of memories has not erased the image of that lifeless kitten staring up at me, eyes bulging and fur clumped together, looking like a Halloween cat that had been frightened to death. I dropped it and started crying.

That rite of passage may have made me mature a bit faster but it was one more block in the foundation of fear and intimidation. Block upon block was laid throughout my childhood until I reached adolescence, when a silent rebellion began.

FOURTEEN YEAR OLDS ARE not always the most self-disciplined of juveniles, especially when controls are removed. My flight from eight years in the rigid environment of Catholic school to the glorious freedom of a public high school proved costly in many respects. Despite almost daily propaganda speeches from the St. Rose priests and nuns about the incipient dangers to my soul were I to attend anything other than a Catholic high school, I and three of my classmates decided to accept the challenge to meet the devil head on at Haddon Heights High School. My parents put up a half-hearted battle for Camden Catholic, clinging to the hope that my determination would not crumble. Public school was free; Camden Catholic was definitely not. The resolve of a fledgling adolescent mixed with a mild childhood tantrum on the eve of our final discussion about the subject decided it. I was headed for a new set of friends and teachers whose dress didn't make them look like penguins.

MR. KEEGAN, MY FIRST homeroom teacher, began his roll call that opening day. There were several whose names he called before mine but my nerves, instead of settling as each name was announced, had my knees quivering and my fingers thrumming on the desk.

"(Smith, John)," he announced with the thunder that only a football coach can manage in a classroom setting.

Eight years of Catholic school training brought me to my feet, standing tall and answering in a strong voice.

"Here!" I said, in what was a shout to the others in the room.

When the giggling subsided, Mr. Keegan said in a soft voice, "You may sit down, (John). Thank you."

Jules Stens, who would become my best friend in the early years of high school, sat directly behind me.

"What the hell are you doing, (Smith)? You're not in Catholic school anymore," he whispered.

BASKETBALL AT HADDON HEIGHTS High School occupied an important place in the athletic scene and the social scene. To play basketball was to be accepted. The games were played in packed gymnasiums. The competition for a position on any of the teams, whether lowly freshmen, junior varsity, or varsity, was fierce.

At least thirty freshmen boys tried out for the ninth grade team. Mr. Giminello, the coach, announced at our first practice that only twelve candidates would be kept on the team, assuring us that he wished he could keep everyone but that was impossible. There were four or five cuts with the final one coming just before report cards came out for the second marking period which ended in November. Like most educators, the coach understood the psyche of young adolescents. His posted list named those who had made the team rather than those who did not. As each list went up over a period of two weeks of practice, some boys would rush to see it; others would creep up on it as if a surprise attack surely would make their name appear on it; a third group, the smallest and one of which I was a member, would hang back, waiting until everyone else had dispersed. Those lists created a gamut of emotions, from epic tragedy to giddy euphoria to resigned defeat. Remarkably, my experience in the lunchtime basketball games at St. Rose

provided me with enough skills to have made the final cut, even practicing most of the time as a starting guard. My name appeared on the final list. The system at Haddon Heights High School, as I've learned is true in most schools, was well-established. Those who made the freshmen team would have a definite advantage in any future competition for positions on the older teams. I had made that team and relished my success for two days.

THE SECOND OF SIX grading cycles ended with my report card showing two C's and two D's in major subjects. To compound the misery, each grade was prefaced with a "U" in the Effort column, indicating unsatisfactory effort. My efforts were directed more at having fun than applying Catholic school discipline to my classes.

Coach Giminello announced that we were to show him our grades after practice and his displeasure at mine was obvious, although he somehow couched his reaction in positive terms.

"At least you didn't flunk anything, (Smith). And get rid of those Unsatisfactories, please? Your teachers'll be all over me!."

"Yes, sir," I said, wondering what would happen when I got home.

AS USUAL, MY FATHER was late getting home from work. He assumed his habitual position in his recliner with the evening paper. Before putting his warmed-up dinner together, my mother showed him my report card. I was upstairs lying on my bed, staring at the unfinished ceiling above my head, waiting. His call came shortly afterward. I slunk down the stairs.

Without preamble, the pronouncement was made.

"On Monday, you tell the coach that you can't play anymore. Bring your grades up in the next marking period and maybe you can get back on the team," my father said, oblivious to how these things worked. Quitting a team after you had made the cut placed an invisible yet indelible black mark against your name. I imagined my picture hanging in the coach's office with "quitter" stamped across my forehead.

"But, Dad, you don't understand . . ." was as far as my protest went before it was silenced.

Later, sprawled across my bed, I wondered if I'd be able to stop crying by Monday. Fear and intimidation mixed with simmering anger and resentment that day. How humiliating it was to be fourteen years old, crying, and soon to be disgraced in my new school. The war had entered a new phase. Eight years later, I would finally engage him in a battle that I could win.

FOR SEVERAL YEARS PRIOR to that battle, I worked during the summer and the school year selling cars at the dealership. My father was a shrewd businessman and a determined entrepreneur. Despite a lack of formal education, he parlayed his incredible knowledge of automobiles and his driving ambition to succeed at all costs into the enviable position of owner of a medium-sized Ford dealership and a fleet leasing company. His formidable temper and a penchant for always getting what he wanted generally made things go his way.

I watched incident after incident where his bulldozing strategies put customers and employees on the defensive. With a strange mixture of grudging admiration and appalled abhorrence, I saw customers with legitimate grievances browbeaten into submission, their issues rejected or patently ignored.

Late one afternoon, a wholesale auto buyer paid in full for a used car, sold in "as is" condition, only to have the engine blow apart less than a mile up the road. He walked back to the

dealership and asked for a return of his check. An unpleasant scene ensued when my father refused, being within his rights legally, if not morally or ethically, due to the conditions of the sale. The last threat made as the buyer walked out the door was that he would stop payment of the check the next morning. My father was at the man's bank waiting when it opened, and cashed the check. As he was leaving, the wholesaler was entering to stop payment. He was too late.

The salesmen back at the dealership gathered around and had hearty laugh as their boss regaled them with the tale of the fifty-dollar sale. I cringed on the outside of a circle I would never join.

SO, WHAT'S IT GONNA be?" my father finally asked me toward the end of the delicious restaurant meal which featured the first cocktail I'd ever had, a potent VO Manhattan which was making my world a fuzzy but pleasant place to be.

I anticipated the question coming sometime during the celebratory dinner as my graduation from Villanova University approached. I was well-prepared to answer it. After all, I was a college graduate ready to enter the world of public education for which I had been so well prepared.

"What are you going to do?" he asked again. My well-rehearsed answer, so easy to repeat in my mind, caught in my throat like a sliver of bone in a piece of salmon. I hoped my voice wouldn't falter as it had so many times before, exposing yet again how intimidated I was by him.

"I want to teach, Dad. If I don't try it, I'll never know if I'd be any good at it." It was a watershed moment. If I had the courage to say what I was thinking, my firm answer to his simple yet loaded question would have had something like this as a minor addendum.

"I'm scared to death of you, Dad, and I really don't want to be like you."

Words alone are never a good cover for what is happening with the rest of the body. He said he understood but the tight, thin slit of his mouth with its turned down corners said it all. I knew he belonged to the "those who can, do, and those can't, teach" club. The heat of his disappointment that I didn't want to be a real vice-president of his small empire radiated across the table.

WHAT WAS IT GOING to be? It was going to be a teaching career and I had finally won a battle, if not the war.