

MY BIG BROTHER AND ME

by GARRETT OPPENHEIM

OF ALL my relatives and friends, the one person I was really closest to throughout my growing years was my brother Ralph. He was a delicate-looking boy with wavy black hair, a handsome face, and a shy manner. His main ambition, at least most of the time, was to be a playwright. Though he was four years older than I, he always treated me as an equal, even when I was very little. While he understood my physical limitations, he was far more interested in my abilities, both physical and mental.

Together we wrote plays and stories, and invented gadgets that didn't work too well. In the old-fashioned boarding house in the Poconos, where our family usually spent the summer, there was a large "parlor," as they called it; here boarders and wandering entertainers could display their talents. Ralph and I liked to put on a variety show, for which we enlisted other children to dance and sing or take part in the playlets that Ralph and I (mostly Ralph) scripted.

The feature of the evening was always a magic show, performed by "Oppenheim the Great" before our very charitable audience. I was perhaps nine or ten years old at the time. Ralph and I would work out the script and the tricks together, injecting as much patter as we could to divert the audience's attention from my sleight of hand. A sad sample of our patter:

While traveling on business, two brothers named Timmy and Jimmy stopped at a hotel on a warm night. Before going to bed they tried to open the window to let in some air, but the window was stuck. Finally they went to bed anyway, but they couldn't sleep. They kept complaining to each other that the heat was more than they could stand.

Finally Timmy got an idea. "Let's throw one of your shoes at the window so we don't die of the heat."

Jimmy thought that was a great idea. He immediately picked up a heavy shoe and gave it to Timmy to throw. Timmy put all his might into the pitch. The brothers heard the glass shattering in the dark, and after a few moments they could feel the cool air flowing in.

"Ah, that feels good!" Jimmy said with a sigh of relief. Timmy agreed, and soon the brothers fell sound asleep.

Next morning Timmy was the first to wake up. "Jimmy!" he called out, "Take a look!"

The glass windowpane was intact, but a mirror on the wall beside it was shattered.

The laughter in the audience may have been rather forced, but at the time it sounded to me like an ovation. More important, this active anecdote constituted an important step for me: It was my first attempt to give expression to a principle I had already discovered by myself: namely, that mind can be more powerful than matter. It's the same principle that doctors recognized long ago when they gave out those little pink sugar pills. They called them placebos.

Bloated with success, I went back to school in the fall and offered to put on my magic show for the class. Miss Lee, our ever-permissive teacher, gave me the go-ahead. My classmates, however, were not as charitable as the adult audience where I premiered my show. The kids saw right through most of my tricks and had no hesitation in calling my bluffs on the spot.

The experience disillusioned me about the kudos I had gathered in my summer performance. It made me realize that all the applause and praise were motivated by a desire to make the little lame boy feel good.

RALPH and I were always giving each other ideas to bring glory or money to us. My unpredictable mother was surprisingly tolerant of some and surprisingly forbidding about others for reasons that we could never fathom. While we were in the Poconos, she allowed us to go into business with a children's photo-finishing set; it lasted about a week. When one of our first customers, a nice, elderly lady, showed us some commercial prints she'd had made, from the same negatives Ralph and I had processed for her, we had to acknowledge that our prints were pale by comparison. We sadly refunded her money and gave up the business. But that didn't stop us from trying; we never seemed to be without ideas.

Back in New York we acquired a hectograph, which is a tray filled with a kind of gelatinous stuff that can take the impression of a typed page. This can be used as a negative to make positive prints. The resultant copy was purple and fuzzy. We promptly got out a newspaper and went to Riverside Park to sell it for a nickel a copy.

Our first customer was a very pleasant man, who gave us a nickel for his paper and complimented us both on our enterprising spirit. But right at that point, our angry mother swooped down on us, demanding to know what was going on. When she found out that we had launched a business behind her back, she ordered us to give the nickel back to our customer.

That good man, seeing our embarrassment, said, "Why don't you let them make this one sale?" But Mom was adamant.

ONE DAY Ralph came home from attending a performance of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* with our mother. That evening he told me all about the trolls, repulsive underground creatures that you wouldn't want to meet on a moonless night. We decided that the word applied to many of the people we knew and that the world's population was divided into trolls and nontrolls.

We defined nontrolls as the spiritual people who feel that we are watched over by beings from another realm, people who express their feelings in poetry and fine fiction, in painting and sculpture and dancing, as well as in sensitive responses to other nontrolls. I am using terminology that we were not yet educated enough to utilize at the time; but we relied on our own judgment to distinguish the nontrolls from the far more numerous trolls.

In our opinion (and please remember that we presently grew out of this childish snobbery), trolls, basically, are materialistic. They build their lives around money and possessions instead of art, love, and spiritual development. If our definitions were applied today, they would include people who have no regard for the environment, who are more interested in profit than in the gifts our planet provides.

We soon added a special category of trolls: nice trolls. These were friendly, generous people who just were not in touch with the Higher Power. We decided that Daddy S. was a nice troll, while Daddy O. was definitely a nontroll. I don't think we ever got around to classifying our mother. Looking back from today's vantage point, I think we would have called her a stormy nontroll.

When either of us was away from home, we wrote long letters to each other, setting forth our theories and pigeonholing all the people we knew. Along with each letter we sent home, we'd be sure to enclose a "Mother letter," filled with all the banalities we could think of. This was for self-protection, so that we could always have a letter to show Mom. We kept the important letters in a secret file.

Ralph and I, of course, rated ourselves as way up in the higher echelons of nontrolls. In short, we were snobs, snobs of a special kind. We felt that our sense of connection with the Higher Power put us a cut above most of the people around us.

We had a secret meeting place, where we would converse with the spirits. In Riverside Park, near 83rd Street there is a huge rock in the shape of a mound. It's known as Mount Tom. It was not difficult for me to climb to the top, which was a good place for many kids, including us, to fly their kites.

Ralph and I had discovered a hidden entrance to a cave, deep down in the bowels of Mount Tom, and we would go

there at midnight, while our parents and brother Louis were sleeping. There we would call up the spirits and ask them for advice on such problems as how to handle ourselves when Mom was quarreling with Daddy S., or for ideas on our writing projects. In the morning, we would discuss whatever the spirits had told us.

Sometimes we would encounter frightening creatures in the cave. Then we had to hide in the crannies until we could make our escape. This lent a feeling of excitement and suspense to our visits, which were always top secret. We never told Mom or Daddy S., or even Daddy O. about these midnight adventures.

There is no cave in Mount Tom. At least that's what the trolls would tell you. Ralph and I made our midnight visits without our earthly bodies ever leaving our beds. It was all pretty real to us. And pretty nice. It expanded our egos to know that we had a secret territory that was all our own, to govern as we wished.

ANOTHER enticing road to the world of magic and even to the realm of metaphysics was the Ouija board, which enjoyed a brief craze among the people we knew. As soon as I heard about this promising way of communicating with the spirits, I knew I had to have a Ouija board.

If you are not familiar with the Ouija board, let me explain it. It's a smooth board, small enough to hold on your lap. In the upper corners are the words yes and no. The alphabet is stamped in an arc across the board. It comes with a small, triangular piece of wood or plastic, called a planchette, that has three little legs, each tipped with felt so that it glides easily across the smooth board.

The operator places his hand lightly on the planchette, asks the spirit a question and waits for the planchette to move around the board without any guidance from him. In this manner, the spirit can answer questions with yes or no, or can spell out answers by moving from letter to letter. That is the theory behind the board, and it seems that two persons facing each other are likely to get better results than a single operator.

Many individuals who have true psychic ability advise against the use of Ouija boards. They will tell you that the Ouija board can be extremely dangerous for anybody who has no expertise in dealing with spirits. For one thing, they say that you never know what spirits will respond to you. You may call in negative entities who give misleading information that can put you in harm's way. But these caveats had not reached me at that time.

I tried the Ouija board with many of my friends who were willing and watched them try it among themselves. The results I obtained by myself or with partners were highly questionable. The planchette would move hesitantly, going to letters that didn't spell anything. I had to strain my sense of plausibility to imagine I was in touch with the spirit world.

Finally I asked my brother Ralph to try it with me on the premise that the extraordinary spiritual affinity between us might produce a result.

We sat opposite each other in my bedroom with the Ouija board between us and called out, "Are you there?" Then we waited expectantly for the planchette to move. It did, eventually, but with hesitation and apparent lack of purpose. As usual, it went to letters that didn't spell anything we could fathom. We kept repeating, "Are you there?"

Suddenly the planchette took off, so fast that our hands had trouble keeping up with it. I looked at Ralph accusingly and said, "You did that!" He swore innocence and replied that he had the same feeling about me. So we addressed the presumed spirit:

"Who are you?"

The planchette swiftly spelled out "Bob Hatfield." By now it was clear that neither of us was influencing the movement of the planchette. So we pushed on with our questioning. Bob Hatfield volunteered, "I knew your father."

Further questioning established that he was referring to Daddy O., who had passed on by this time, and that Bob Hatfield was himself a poet, which made sense.

I asked him, "Have any of your poems been published?"

Instead of going to the Yes at an upper corner of the board, the planchette took a shortcut and landed on the letter S.

I said, "I haven't seen any of your poems. Have you ever published a book?"

"Do we have your book?"

There was a brief pause, and then, "S."

"Is it in this room?"

"S."

"Where is it?"

"Bookcase next to your bed," the planchette spelled out.

“Which shelf?” I asked.

“Second shelf. Green book on right side.”

I went over to the bookcase and pulled out a slender green book. Ralph still had his fingers on the planchette, so I asked, “This one?”

“S.”

I said, “This is a book of poetry by Stephen Spender. It’s not yours.”

There was another pause. Then the planchette spelled out, “Sorry, I thought it was.”

At this point we heard our mother calling us for dinner. Ralph said, “We have to go for supper now. Will you be here when we get back?”

“S.”

As soon as dinner was over, Ralph and I hurried back to the Ouija board. I asked, “Are you still there, Bob?”

“S,” the planchette responded without the slightest hesitation.

“Have you anything important to say to us?” I ventured, and the answer came right back:

“Seek your father in the gray land.”

Ralph and I looked at each other in utter bewilderment. For some reason I found myself associating the gray land with a phrase used by Carl Jung, the great Swiss psychiatrist whose personal influence had turned my father’s whole life around. More recently Daddy O. had written to him for help in a period of deep distress, and Jung had replied: “I advise you to look within.”

I had always looked on such advice, whether from psychics or psychiatrists or entities from the other side, as a strategy for putting the ball right back in the questioner’s court. Years later, when I became more familiar with the work of Edgar Cayce, the well-known psychic of the first half of the 20th century, and the metaphysical writings of such literary giants as William Blake, Plato, Aldous Huxley, William Budge Yeats, et al, I began to perceive the meaning of the “gray land” or “looking within.” Both phrases, as I understand them, refer to the inner mind, or what is commonly called the unconscious. In that gray land, I believe, is all the wisdom we need to take charge of our life. In one way or another, that is what I tell my patients today. I like to think of it as the inner mind.

At that time, however, neither Ralph nor I could make anything out of the message on the Ouija board. Perhaps our spirit guest sensed this. From there on we got very little, just the kind of jumbled responses I had experienced with my friends.

It certainly seemed to both Ralph and me that the planchette had moved without any direction from our hands. Was that an illusion? Was it some mischievous spirit playing games with us? Was it truly the spirit of Bob Hatfield? Or was it a kind of energy that grew out of my rapport with my brother? Why could we never find any book of poems by Bob Hatfield? Was this because they may have been privately printed?

In sum, our experiment escalated my resolve to pursue my quest, but without benefit of the Ouija board.