

**Your main commentary should be focused on WH- items. Other topics may also be addressed**

Uncle Rod was a fragile and sickly infant, according to family reports, a boy the size of a sparrow, grandmother used to say; a boy as smart as a sparrow, grandfather used to say. (Note: this account will flatter no one.) He didn't like to eat, which may come as a surprise to those who knew him later in life when his appetite and its apparent lack of effect on his slim figure was a frequent topic of conversation, as was his gold initialed toothpick, which he carried everywhere and pulled out of his pockets at the end of gigantic Sunday meals to poke his gums with, and if he saw you watching, he'd show you the initials, even offer to let you use it. But in those early years he seemed suspicious of life around him, or at least of the life that was dangled in front of him before he was old enough to choose. There were not only the usual childhood aversions to shoelaces, and to vegetables cooked to a watery mush (still a tradition in our family), but also to nursery sayings like "Rex the Dog," who

*In the bog  
Ate a pied frog  
On a log:  
Rolled over and died*

Or any mention of the idea of heaven. This last left him fearful. A cloudless sky could unnerve him. He had been told that heaven was up there and someday, that was where he'd go, too. For ever and ever. "Up there?" he said, chewing his finger, gazing into the stratosphere. He shook his head, stamped his feet, rattled his untied laces. "No!" Adults found this amusing, and spoke to him of golden streets. Cherubim and heavenly host trailing many wings. His eyes grew bigger. He screamed. According to my father, his little brother cried every day for his first five years—even before he discovered heaven—which made him godawfully disagreeable to be around. My uncle's famous personal magnetism was in no way evident in the early days. Once, during a tense, dim lunch when they were trying to get him to eat a boiled carrot, according to my grandmother, or it was because a breeze had blown a curtain,

exposing a perfect azure sky, a wide-open vault, according to my father, Uncle Rod threw himself violently on the floor, picked himself up, and threw himself down again, picked himself up, and did it a third time before my grandfather could grab him, stop him and give him a whipping.

"Say you're sorry!"

The hand came down, the cry went up: "*I wish I was never born!*" He developed into a quiet boy with tender sinuses, fond of insects and throwing a baseball against a barn. He talked to his baseball, named it Carl. My father played with him, of course, but he was older, and interested in different amusements; Uncle Rod learned how to play alone, and actually seemed to prefer it. One day, as a prank, my father wedged a thick stick and left his little brother stranded atop the seesaw. He ran away, abandoned him up there for a long time. (Previously, he'd teased little Rod with angel sightings, fake birthdays, locking him outside in the sunshine—the usual childish penchant for torture.) But that day when my father returned to the seesaw, his brother was unperturbed on his perch, and appeared to have forgotten him. He was talking contentedly to himself. He hollered and hollered when my father let him down. Queerly independent! He was the same about baseball, determined to play on his own, though there was the time my father found him crying under a tree, wetting his mitt with tears and chewing on the laces. When my father asked what was wrong, Uncle Rod looked up with snot on his nose and said that he and Carl had had a fight. (The world was younger then, my father says; my mother, who shares no nostalgia for this side of the family, replies, No, the world was dumber then.) But the next day Uncle Rod and Carl were back together; he was winding up, hurling the ball with a bang! against the barn. In those days there were barns, right in the middle of town. Chicago seemed distant; no one anticipated being swallowed up by the city.

At school, Uncle Rod did not distinguish himself. Under his photograph in the 1942 Seymour High Yearbook, they forgot to write anything. But he stayed out of trouble and unlike his later days, stayed out of the newspapers.