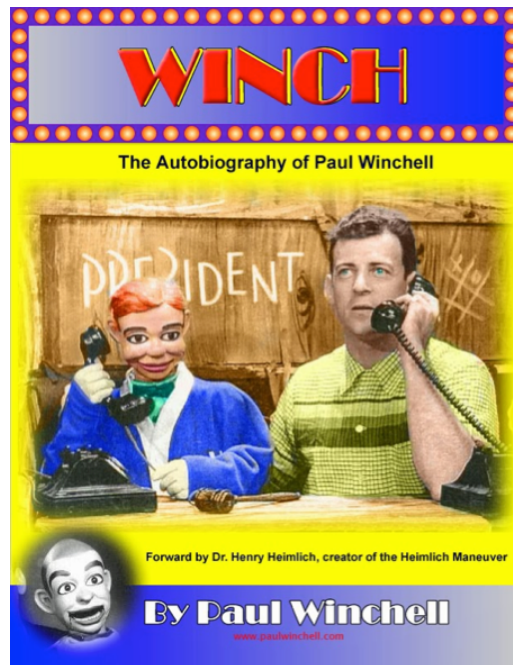


WINCH
A WRITING SAMPLE
from
Paul Winchell's Autobiography
Edited by Johnny Blue Star
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

FORWARD	BY DR. HENRY HEIMLICH, M. D.	
PREFACE	BY DR. PAUL WINCHELL	
CHAPTER 1	THE KID FROM CONEY ISLAND	pp. 9
CHAPTER 2	AN ORIGINAL AMATEUR	pp. 27

Forward

"Calling Dr. Winchell" **By Dr. Henry Heimlich**

Paul and I met over 50 years ago, after he had won a dance contest on a TV show called *The Arthur Murray Dance Party*. Arthur Murray, who later became my father-in-law, introduced us. Since that meeting Paul and I have been close friends. My wonderful wife of 52 years, the former Jane Murray, is an author. She is busy writing memoirs of her remarkable parents, Kathryn and Arthur Murray. Jane's forthcoming book will surely include our lifetime friendship with Winch.

When I first met Paul, a world-renowned entertainer and ventriloquist, I looked forward to hearing his stories about show biz. Instead, all he wanted to talk about was surgical operations and medical treatments. I was skeptical about his interest in medicine. But the more I got to know him, the more I realized that he knew a great deal about the subject.

One day, discussing a patient of mine who was undergoing chest surgery, Paul suggested to me that we use hypnosis to reduce or eliminate postoperative pain. Postoperative pain is usually controlled by medications that can have unpleasant, even dangerous, side effects. Paul's concept seemed logical, and furthermore, I knew that he was skilled at hypnosis. So I agreed to allow him to hypnotize my patient, even though I knew the doctors and nurses would think we were crazy. Paul stayed with me during the entire surgery, and then, before the patient recovered fully from the anesthesia, he administered hypnosis. He suggested to the patient that he would have no pain.

Hypnosis apparently worked. My patient never complained of pain and required no medication following the surgery. I was so impressed that I

arranged for Paul to lecture at the College of Surgeons at New Rochelle and teach them his technique.

Hypnosis was only one of Paul's many medical discoveries. His greatest accomplishment was his invention of the artificial heart. When he first told me about the device I was, as usual, skeptical. After all, the best medical minds had wrestled with the challenge of creating an artificial heart and had failed. But when he showed me detailed drawings of his concept, I was impressed and recommended that he obtain a patent as soon as possible. Sometime later, he informed me he had donated the patent to the University of Utah. Initially the doctors there gave him credit for having invented the artificial heart. This honeymoon was short-lived. As Paul relates in this book, after the doctors successfully inserted the device in a patient, they ignored his efforts to contact them, and his name was never mentioned in their reports to the press. In addition, he was excluded from further participation in the project.

This episode didn't stop Winch. He went on to other achievements—that's Winch—many of them reserved for a future book. For instance, he developed an Africa Tomorrow project, based on the harvesting of Tilapia, a tiny fish with the unique distinction that it can survive in brackish, undrinkable water. He actually created a pilot project based on the concept of an "Energy Farm," an entirely self-sufficient eco-system that utilized every step of the chain of life to create energy and provide sustenance. He used Tilapia as a food source. Soon, Winch and I wound up in Washington in front of a Congressional committee, pitching the Tilapia project, along with Richard Dreyfuss and Ed Asner. Although we didn't make much headway, Paul's creativity in this project matched his work with the heart. He went on to experiment with electric cars, working on developing hydrogen fuel cells, which now have even captured the President's imagination. He worked with developing wind turbines, unique and efficient electrical generators, and using wave power to hydrolyze the ocean. These ideas that were, as usual, very far ahead of their time.

Being ahead of his time was Paul's blessing and his curse. Right now a hospital is implanting artificial hearts, utilizing external batteries instead of air pressure from an external device—a wrinkle which was in his original design. Billions of dollars have been made from disposable razors, manufactured by large companies. Paul developed these devices and sold them in stores years before the disposable craze became a permanent part of our economy. He invented an invisible ladies' garter just prior to the launching of pantyhose. This is all to say he is a visionary as well as an entertainer. And beyond that, he is a man who does not believe in giving up.

This book will illustrate how truly rich and diverse a human life can be. It also tells how celebrity and wealth, in themselves, do not bring satisfaction, because

the ultimate goal of human life demands self-discovery and integrity. Despite his successes Paul had many obstacles, created by a difficult and disturbing childhood. This book is primarily about those challenges and how he overcame them through persistence and determination, and through the acquisition of powerful self-knowledge, even when his career and inner peace were compromised. And that tenacity, self-awareness and determination are what my very good friend, Paul Winchell, is all about.

Henry Heimlich, M. D.

Preface

My Life as a Parable By Dr. Paul Winchell

Sometimes there is an historic truth buried in myth—such as in stories about the Great Flood, Jason and the Argonauts, the Seven Cities of Gold, and so on. Sometimes historic, literal truth is sacrificed for a point, which the author, now long forgotten in the currents of time, has chosen to present on the world stage.

My reputation with the public rests largely on two items: my dummies—Jerry Mahoney and Knucklehead Smiff—who appeared with me on numerous television programs in the 50's and 60's, and the fact that I created and played the voice of Tigger in Disney's *Winnie the Pooh* films and TV for thirty years. Some may also know me as an inventor, particularly for being awarded the first United States patent for the artificial heart.

In general, I am blessed to be associated with entertaining children. There isn't a day that goes by that someone fails to recognize me as the ventriloquist or for my role as Tigger.

The story in this book will show that becoming internationally known as a children's entertainer was not my primary career objective—and that, if I was blessed with this achievement, it came by the hand of Fate and not by my own design. On the path to fame and fortune as an actor and prime time television star, I neglected to understand the lasting importance of what I was doing in creating programming for children. The irony of my life is that perhaps I made an even better contribution than I would have if things had gone in the direction I had planned.

Many people still comment on the wholesomeness of my shows and the joy it brought them as children, never realizing just how this project counteracted the terrible and tragic lessons of my own childhood, which was filled with

superstition and nightmare. Maybe I succeeded because I tried to create an environment that was the antithesis of my youth, which was filled with beatings, verbal abuse and deprecation of my goals and talents.

My life story is a testimony to the awful power of superstition, fear, undeserved punishment and ridicule that some parents unintentionally inflict upon their children. The damage can frequently last a lifetime. It is also the story of how one can overcome the challenges of an unhappy childhood and bring purpose and creativity back to a life that was almost sacrificed.

I have finally regained my balance and sanity after decades of swimming in psychotic turbulence brought on by the death of my mother and my early superstitious and fundamentalist religious upbringing, which have caused me immeasurable anguish.

Part of my problem in telling this story was the time it took me to finally become well, so I have compressed the timeframe for expediency. Another fact is that I have been very concerned that my story reaches many, many people and demonstrates how a flawed religious indoctrination can have such disastrous effects. I have therefore chosen to develop my story in a dramatic way. And to that extent, my life is a parable and not totally historical.

Furthermore, I have fictionalized a small portion to protect the identities of certain people and have shaped characters that may have no real counterpart in my life story.

There is mostly historical, biographical truth here, and if it is viewed as a parable of inner redemption from a lost childhood, I will be very satisfied.

Dr. Paul Winchell

CHAPTER 1

THE KID FROM CONEY ISLAND

My earliest memories were ones of terror.

I am five years old, sleeping by my window. I wake up in the middle of a howling storm. The branches banging on my window sound like sledgehammers, but I can't see them, and I'm too tired to raise my head. Maybe they are giants' fists. Maybe they are the fists of "The Golem," the horrible creature my mother—dear, sweet Clara—has made sure will haunt all my childhood dreams. I struggle to wake up, but my body seems paralyzed.

Finally, I pull myself up to the window. I see the tree branches, fiercely slamming into the glass, but out of the corner of my eye I also see something else, something on my wall—a dark shadow of something horrible beyond description. I'm afraid to look outside again, but I have to—I have to see it. All my worst imaginings now come true. Silhouetted against the roller coasters, parachute jumps and carousels of Coney Island is something more frightening than the *Beast from Twenty Thousand Fathoms*, a film I would see years later. It is a creature, half stop-action dinosaur and half science fiction ghoul from hell, with huge jaws and great pointed teeth—the Golem itself.

The hideous monster grabs me and rips my pajama tops with his nail-like claws. It is a mammoth being, twenty, thirty feet tall, whose talons pull me out the window, screaming like a banshee. I look back to see glass and blood everywhere. Mama will probably kill me for this horrible mess. But there is no time to think. A split second later I am in the midst of a reddish-brown haze. Vague forms like trees and buildings flash beside me.

I find myself in the middle of a forest, where the monster is looking at me quizzically. It opens its gargantuan jaws. I smell something foul beyond comprehension as I pass out into utter blackness.

I wake up in my usual cradle of sweat and urine-soaked bed sheets, but a hundred times warmer and more odorous. I was and would be a bed wetter for quite some time. But this was worse. It was like I was in the middle of a fiery steam room and couldn't move. I could hear my father, Sol, talking to Doctor Horowitz, our so-called family doctor, who came to our house infrequently because, no matter what the extent of the problem, he probably knew he wouldn't be paid for some time. I could hear my mother. She was breathing hard, which she did when she was irritated, annoyed or, more rarely, frightened. The doctor finally blurted out, "He has polio!"

My father was frightened. "Will he live?"

"I don't know. He could be crippled even if he lives."

"Bullshit!" Mama said. "You don't know that."

"Unfortunately I do, Clara. This is not the time to indulge in fantasy. You'll have to watch him day and night or he may not make it at all."

I was five years old, and I didn't know if I would even live.

Years of struggle came and went, and I survived. One leg was substantially shorter than the other. I could walk, but I did so with some difficulty, and with a decided limp. I grew up without a memory of childhood triumphs on the playgrounds of my school streets of Brooklyn, where we played stickball, tag or ring-o-levio.

When I was twelve, I remember sitting around the kitchen table with Papa. He was reading the sports page of the *Daily Mirror* while I was toying with my breakfast of Farina. Actually, Papa did not read the newspaper. He more or less looked at the pictures, which he generously shared with me. As I tried to eat, Papa was constantly shoving the newspaper in my face. And knowing how much he enjoyed this morning ritual, I tried to get excited, too. Mama had promised us Matzo Brie this morning—fried unleavened bread with eggs, which we all loved. She had just started the process when I felt her looking at me. She spoke to me sharply in her heavy Yiddish accent, "Paul, get me the Matzo!"

I tried to oblige her, but my polio-affected leg got tangled up with the stool and I fell over.

"You lame piece of shit!" she said.

Papa, who was essentially a kind person, looked at her sternly. "Our boy had polio."

"Shut up, you schwantz! You want him to be this way his whole life, tripping and stuttering?"

She ignored his misplaced compassion. She didn't even look at him. She focused completely on me.

"You're a lame piece of shit that trips over your own feet. I can tell you that because I'm your mother."

She was right. Not only was I lame, but I also stuttered. The polio had driven me to a kind of morbid shyness. I had numerous tics, and I stammered my way

through life. Mama practiced a kind of tough love long before it was fashionable. She thought that at the heart of cruelty was a well of healing. I just never seemed to be able to tap into the well.

A few months later, life would begin to change significantly for me. It began on another difficult morning when I awoke to bed sheets and pajamas soaked with the results of my bladder's nocturnal incontinence. This could have desperate consequences for my peace of mind and the wellness of my young body. I looked down at my pajamas.

"Oh, n-no. N-not a-again," I stuttered to myself. Then I limped over to my trunk, retrieving my old prayer book and prayer garments. I bound the phylacteries (tiny leather boxes with biblical parchment inside) to my forehead and arms, threw on a prayer shawl and adjusted my skullcap. I then began to pray in Hebrew, a language I did not understand a word of, moving in a silent dance to the words. My dance was the only part of this ritual that was truly my own. I had perfected it and developed it over many years. Only God knew the care I had put into it, and it was one of my few efforts that were solely between God and me. A loud banging on my door interrupted my devotions.

It was Mama. "Open the door, Paul!" she screamed. "What are you doing in there? Open it or I'll break it down!"

I unlocked it. She barged in, staring at me in my prayer garments, drenched in urine. "Pissing in bed again? You think prayers are gonna get you anywhere, when you do this?"

"Wh-Why n-not, Mama?" I asked innocently.

"Because God, my clever son, does not like disgusting things." She quietly removed my prayer garments and put them away. Then she took out the whip, which she always carried in her apron, a small, leather cat-o'-nine-tails.

"You know what this is?" she asked me.

"G-Grandma F-Frieda's m-medicine. I-I d-don't like it."

"What you like or dislike is not the point. That you have offended God is very much the point."

She threw me back into a corner and hit me three times with the whip. I tried to block her blows.

"Well, there is another part of Grandma's medicine that always works."

"It n-never w-works," I said quietly.

She grabbed the urine-soaked sheets and crammed them in my face. "I'm your mother. Don't talk back to me!" Her face was red. My gagging and spitting just made her angrier. I almost vomited.

"I sacrificed mine life for you, and what do I have to show for it? Three lousy, rotten kids. If they told me you were laying in the street bleeding, I wouldn't feel sorry for you. God should strike you dead."

She glared at me and abruptly left. I slowly peeled off my clothes, noticing an ugly welt on my arm. By the time she came marching back in, I was already in the tub.

"We're going to the butcher. You be sure and stay in your room. That's your punishment. Remember, God watches everything you do!"

So, smothering me with urine-soaked sheets and beating me with a cat-o'-nine-tails were only appetizers. Staying in my room was my real punishment. Why did I have to wet my bed?

Mama left. I got dressed. In the distance, I heard doors slamming. My family never closed doors. They always slammed them. I peeked out through a crack and walked towards the living room.

In the living room, on top of the fireplace, were two photographs set in ornate silver frames, my mother and my grandmother, Frieda Fuchs. Grandma Frieda invented these sweet varieties of medicinal punishment I have just described, of which my mother was the greatest advocate.

Ah, yes, dear Frieda—the pillar of righteousness my mother referred to whenever she needed to reinforce the will of God.

Frieda had been a midwife back in the small town in Austria from which she came. She also performed unsavory deeds for the local big shots when they required her "services." When a civic leader discovered that his paramour was with child, Frieda would eliminate the problem, tossing the dead fetus over the cemetery wall on her way home. Her benefactors showed their gratitude by offering her protection plus a number of other favors.

But one day, while "obliging" the Burgomaster, his mistress died during Frieda's ministrations. Her "loyal" pals turned on her, and she had to leave the country posthaste on a ship bound for America. It was either that or prison time, despite her "connections." She fled Austria without so much as a goodbye to her five children, vowing to send for them as soon as she was able.

Eventually Frieda did send for her kids, and after arriving on Ellis Island they headed straight to the Jewish ghetto on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where Yiddish was conveniently spoken. The kids' names were Alex, Louis, Zelig, Hanna and Clara. Clara was my mother.

I heard another noise. Frightened, I slithered towards the room from which the noise emanated. Mama and Papa had left the radio on by mistake. I ventured into the room just in time to hear, "And now, the Chase and Sanborn Hour with America's favorites, Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy..." This was followed by substantial applause.

Edgar Bergen jauntily began, "Charlie, guess who I met today? Your best friend, W. C. Fields."

"You're kind of stretching the word, 'friend,' aren't you, Bergen?" Charlie responded to Bergen.

"And I brought him with me today." There was more applause from the audience. This was the era of the sexy Mae West and W. C. Fields, whose comedic character reveled in chronic alcoholism and his hatred of dogs and children. He was also McCarthy's despised enemy.

"Watch it, Bergen, I'll clip you. So help me I'll mow you down. Him, too—where is he? Let me at him!"

"The first thing he said to me this morning, and very affectionately, I might add, was that—well, he called you a woodpecker's lunch, Charley."

"Let that old rum-pot say it to my face."

Now W. C. Fields began his beloved tirade: "I will, you pile of sawdust. I got HALF A MIND..."

"Yeah...that's all you've got!" Charlie retorted to thunderous laughter.

"Charley, behave!"

This was Edgar Bergen, the suave ventriloquist, who had performed the show business miracle of the century by capturing star billing as a ventriloquist on the radio. Yes, on the radio, a medium that was not exactly amenable to someone throwing his voice. I had no idea who or what Charlie was. I simply assumed he was a little boy like me.

I sat there on the floor in front of the radio, enraptured, never realizing my life was about to change.

My mother was raised so orthodox that she kept a separate set of dishes and cutlery for meat and one for dairy, never mixing the two in order to keep them "kosher." "Never mix the two," she cautioned, "or they won't be traifa and they won't be kosher no more." Apparently that was no great problem, because if you accidentally mixed them, she'd ram the knife or fork under the wall molding and leave it there a few days. Viola! It was kosher again.

Her life was filled with the trappings of Orthodox Judaism, but despite this very linear approach to religion, there was another side to her religiosity that uniquely characterized her Judaism, so much so that it substantially differed from what most people believed and practiced. Owing to my ignorance of my own religion, I never knew how individualized her beliefs really were.

Suffice to say, Clara indoctrinated me with her own personal brand of religion. Hebrew school, Sabbath prayers and Bar Mitzvahs may have left perplexing memories, but having to assimilate Clara's personal religion left lifetime scars. When she became angry, I had more than Clara's wrath to deal with. I had to negotiate with the most frightening duo that any youngster ever faced: "Mama and God."

For instance, I remember one Friday evening when Mama was lighting the candles. Papa was quietly waiting his turn in the weekly ritual, while Ruth and I watched. Baby Rita, oblivious of the portent of these lofty rituals, cooed in her high chair.

Mama always began with, "Baruch atah adonai elohaynu melech o'lom bere kidashono"—which quickly faded into a fast indistinct mumbling.

I had taken some Hebrew by now. I knew a few words, but the rest baffled me.

"Ma-Mama, w-what are ya-you d-doing?"

"Hush, I'm talking to God."

"Is th-that like t-talking to your s-sister?"

"I talk to my poor, dead sister every night when she comes and sits on my bed. I only talk to God on the Sabbath. You know what the Golem does to nosey, little boys who ask too many questions?"

Papa hated her ranting, "Clara!"

I knew I had to answer her. "H-he e-eats them?"

“Tears them apart first, then eats them while they're still alive. You hear that noise outside?”

A cold, harsh wind was blowing outside.

“I h-hear the wi-wind.”

“Wind, hah! You better stop talking, because I can tell from that so-called wind that the Golem is very hungry.”

“Clara, don't scare the boy!”

Pop had insulted Clara's core religious beliefs. “Shut up, you schtick dreck! When did you last set foot in a synagogue? Who are you to say anything?” How dare my father try to protect me from the fear, torture and death inherent in her schema of the universe? When she talked to God, she generally cried out at Him about her hard life. God was Clara's sole refuge in her miserable life.

My father was a simple man with no particular religious beliefs except for a strong inclination towards magic. He had even created "magical words" which he credited for my success and everything else that happened later on. But Mom was Old Testament all the way: *This* was a sin and *that* was a *sin*, and God would punish me if I didn't obey her. If I accidentally got hurt, she'd say, "See? God just punished you."

And one thing about Clara's God: cursing must have been all right, because how that woman could curse! "You shouldn't live to come home tonight. You should get run over by a taxi and bleed all over the street. You should get a cancer in your throat." By the way, these virulent curses lose a lot in their translation from Yiddish.

She loved to repeat the ghost stories that Grandma Frieda had told her about the Golem and the Dybbuk, two Jewish monsters that tore little children to shreds and ate them. She also had her *personal* ghost stories. "Paul, who will take care of you when I'm dead? Who will feed and dress you and put on your galoshes when it rains? Believe me, Paul, when I die, you'll be better off dead too. But remember, *if you ever need me, I'll come to you!*" That's what a grown woman told a little, frightened, helpless child.

I remember five Victorian Lady dolls sitting on Mama's bed, prized possessions that she didn't want us to touch. To safeguard these, she told us there was a bogeyman in her bedroom that also ate little children. Any curiosity I may have had about those dolls shriveled and died. I never entered that room again.

If I had truly been self-aware, I would have examined her claims more carefully. One afternoon, perhaps when I was nine or ten, she sent me in her bedroom to get her pocketbook.

"No, no," I cried, "the Bogeyman's in there."

"Don't be a schmendrik]. There isn't any Bogeyman."

"But you said there *was*."

"So, now I say there ain't."

One evening, Ruth and I escaped together to the Midway. I have wonderful memories of Ruth during that period of my life. We went everywhere together. She was my defender and teacher. She was eight years older than me, just as Rita, my baby sister, was eight years younger. I was just a kid from Coney Island.

Yes, only two blocks from our cold water flat lay a garish but spectacular environment for a little boy.

Mobs of revelers visited Luna Park and Steeplechase, the two great amusement parks of Coney Island. A bit further toward the beach were the Midways where barkers hawked "freak shows" and tourists visited the Wax Museum, while munching on Nathan's hot dogs and Chow Mein sandwiches and hot corn on the cob.

Coney Island flourished in the 1930's. Its sign said, "Welcome to the Playground of the World." And I was there, growing up right in the midst of its wondrous heyday. The beaches and Midway were packed. There were shooting galleries, carousels and the fabulous frightening Cyclone, the world's most famous roller coaster. You could ride on the Lost River and its fabulous waterfall, take the infamous Parachute jump, ride through the Tunnel of Laughs or go on a Dark Safari. The roving crowds tumbled in the barrels of fun, rolled around in human roulette at the Steeplechase, gazed horrified at the freak shows and laughed unendingly at the pig slides. Barkers, crowd noises, bells, children screaming, gunshots from the games and loud music created a wonderful cacophony of sound.

As we moved along, listening, seeing, smelling, we wished we could actually afford some Cracker Jacks or pink, puffy cotton candy. I picked up a half-eaten chocolate Popsicle that a tourist dropped behind us on the Boardwalk, but Ruth slapped it out of my hand. Finally, we came to "Lilly's World of Wax Museum." This was a place strictly forbidden to us. Signs outside promised a view of strange freaks of nature—gross, horrible murders and electrocutions, terrible monsters like Dracula and Frankenstein, the type of things kids like to

be scared by, plus some historical and artistic sculptures to appease the parents and the conscience of the more urbane visitor.

“Let's go in there,” Ruth said.

“I-I d-don't wa-want to,” I said, with visions of corporal punishment, of wide diversity and creativity, dancing in my head.

“M-Mama doesn't wa-want us t-to.”

“She just doesn't understand it. We'll take a look at it and tell her all about it, so she'll realize that there's nothing to be afraid of. Look, there's a side door.”

We snuck inside. We quickly passed by George Washington and Greta Garbo. I stared, mesmerized, at wax icons of Frankenstein and Dracula. As we turned a corner, I caught the strains of something familiar.

“That's Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy,” Ruth said. I believed her because I could hear the radio show playing in the background.

“Wh-which is wh-which?” I asked.

She pointed to the wax figures, “That's Edgar and that's Charlie.”

“Ch-Charlie d-doesn't l-look v-very real.” I thought he was a regular little guy like me, but this creature was all dolled up in a tux, a high hat and a monocle. What was worse, he didn't look human. He looked, in fact, like a doll. I was very disillusioned.

“That's because he's a dummy, dummy. He's made out of wood.”

“I-If he's wo-wood, how d-does he t-talk?”

Then, she said this marvelous thing. “Bergen throws his voice into the dummy—and he talks just like you and me. He's a ventriloquist!”

“Th-Throws h-his v-voice?” This was crazy.

“I once saw a ventriloquist live. That's exactly what they do!”

As we passed by a rack of candy and toys, I noticed a book also set on the display. The title seemed to leap out at me. It read, *Learn How to Throw Your Voice* by Edgar Bergen.

“Ca-can you b-buy me th-that, R-ruth?” I asked.

“That's ten cents. I really don't have it. You'll have to ask Mama,” she said.

I was terrified by the thought of asking her anything.

Clara was the oldest of Frieda's children. Like most of the denizens of the Lower East Side, she was not born with a silver spoon in her mouth. My two sisters and I were born in that ghetto, and the family eventually moved to Coney Island where I spent my formative years.

While still very young, Clara got a job in a sweatshop sewing buttons on garments. She caught the eye of young Sol Wilchin, the owner's son, who visited daily. Clara quietly thought the young man looked like a complete fool because he wore a moustache and derby just like Charlie Chaplin, but she was sensitive to her poverty and desperation and kept her mouth shut, a discipline which she was to lose later when she married him. At that time, she realized his dad was the Boss and someday this poor fool would inherit the business.

A wild, romantic scheme? Probably not, but Mama was not romantic in her schemes. And, for this ill-directed marriage, she paid a huge price, because not long afterwards the owner lost the factory and all his wealth in the jaws of the Great Depression. Like many schemers of her ilk, she became ensnared by her own scheme and found herself tied to a man she detested, my father. In her day, divorce was considered shameful and almost as bad as death itself, so there was no way out. She knew her chances at happiness were lost forever, and she became extremely embittered. Although it is hard for me to feel sorry for her now, back then her unhappiness wrenched much undeserved compassion from me. It was only later that I awakened to the reality of what she had become and the contempt she had unleashed on my father and her children.

The contempt was often focused on Papa because he was a favor-doer and she was a brickbat-thrower. When Mrs. Levine's kitchen sink began to leak, Pop grabbed his plumbing tools and rushed upstairs to fix the problem. If Mr. Goldberg's pants became too tight, Pop sat down at his sewing machine and let out the seam.

Mama would say, “Sol, you stupid joik, you don't help unless you get paid.” That was her philosophy, but it's a matter of values, isn't it? My dad enjoyed helping people. In fact, it was his passion. But because she didn't believe he should do things as favors, she belittled him unmercifully. And boy, when Clara threw a brickbat, sometimes she went back almost thirty years.

"I was sewing buttons on coats in your father's shop, and you were outside playing harmonica for those shiksas. My luck, I had to marry a big putz like you."

Mr. Cohen, one of Pop's cronies, dropped in with a jacket that didn't quite fit him anymore. In a jiffy, the sewing machine was uncovered—you know, the kind you worked with a foot treadle. My father worked his special brand of magic, and in no time the jacket fit like a glove. Cohen's gratitude was Pop's payoff.

"The whole world my stupid husband wants to help. Cohen can afford to pay you, but, no, my schmuck husband does it for free".

That evening, when we came back from Lilly's World of Wax, Papa greeted us warmly.

"Pa-papa, w-we went t-to the Wa-wax Mu-museum!"

Then Mama, overhearing this, came raging in. "Did you say a Wax Museum?"

"Y-Yes, M-mama—"

Faster than our eyes could grasp, she took her whip out of her apron, striking each of us.

"I'll 'wax museum' you! That's a dark and dirty place. There are horrible ghosts there!"

Ruth had decided to keep her promise to me and educate Mama about the Lilly's World of Wax. "You're wrong, Mama."

"Wrong, am I? Who asked for your two cents?" Refusing to become more enlightened about that magical place, she beat Ruth mercilessly, but Ruth, utilizing a well-practiced move, grabbed the whip handle. Mama slapped her face hard. Ruth paused strategically and slapped Mama back—harder!

I had been taught not to hit girls, and my mother was a girl. Ruth knew it, but still she pestered me. "Come on, Paul. Help me!"

"I ca-can't. She's my m-m-other."

That's how it was throughout my childhood. When Mama whipped us, I'd watch my sisters hit back. Blow for blow, punch for punch, they'd let her have it until she began to cry, curse them and wish us all dead. I wanted to join them, but "boys don't hit girls," Mama said, and of course I obeyed her.

Now Clara was on the floor again, out of breath. I looked at Papa, who shook his head and walked out of the room.

"Ma-Mama—"

“What do you want, Paul? Can't you see that I'm hurt? Papa, come back here! You schtick dreck!”

Papa came back in the room.

“Look at him! Again, he quits his job. Help me up, you idiot. You stand idly by while Ruthie beats up her mother.”

“You sicken me with that whip!” he said.

“Sicken you?” she retorted. “You sicken me—you lazy, jobless bastard.”

Papa just looked at her, but he knew there was very little he could do. If my father had been capable of balancing her anger, it certainly would have helped, but enlightened caretakers were not to be part of my heritage. Although my dad was first-generation American, he was not like a father to me, but more like one of the kids. He couldn't hold a job for more than a few weeks and would often come home with hurt feelings because the boss said something he didn't like, so he had just quit.

We never lived in one apartment for more than a year because when you signed a one-year lease, in those days you got *thirteen* months (one extra month concession). So we usually vacated the premises at the end of the lease and moved again. Still, I'm sure it was fun for little kids to have a dad who would lie down on the floor and play marbles with them, but it paled as I grew to realize that this was the best he could do. My pop was congenitally "slow" and it drove my mother wild. He was constantly barraged with her horrible brickbats.

I started to cry.

“M-Mama, p-p-lease don't t-talk to P-Papa that way.”

Ruth had no sympathy for Mama at this point in her life. “She has to, Paul. She's a goddamn bitch,” she said.

Clara looked at Ruth fiercely, holding up her whip. “That's how you talk to a mother, shtick tiniff?”

At that moment, perhaps through a thoughtful act of whatever deity there might be, Cleve, a young man in his early twenties and Ruth's new sweetheart, opened the door. Cleve had a polite but blunt way about him.

“I thought I heard screaming. Sorry I barged in.” He then noticed Clara, holding the whip.

You could see he was reluctant to say anything, but he had to. “Mrs. Wilchin, what are you doing?”

“You want to come around here anymore, Cleve? Then mind your own damn business. Are you working?”

Cleve did not like her answer. “I have a job. So what?”

“Money never hurts,” she said. “Can you believe I passed up marrying a rich man for this jobless putz? You better be good to my Ruthie. No one was ever good to me.”

You could see that Cleve had stumbled into something that wasn’t quite right, on a lot of different levels.

“I-I’ll t-take c-care of ya-you, Ma-Mama. I-I’ll always ha-have w-work. I s-swear,” I said.

Even in front of Cleve, she couldn’t hold anything back. Completely ignoring him, she told me, “God should strike you dead if you’re lying to me. You will burn in Hell and suffer. Wait my son, soon I’ll be dead then you’ll cry—oh why didn’t I appreciate her when I had her?”

The thought of her death was overwhelming. “Pl-please d-don’t d-die, Ma-Mama.”

“Mark mine words. And I know something else. When I do die, you won’t even say Kaddish for me.”

“W-what’s th-that, Ma-Mama?” I implored, knowing that it was very important, whatever it was.

“It’s a prayer for the dead, very holy. It’s a good prayer, but you’ll never say it.”

Then I said something that, for many years, became my emotional death warrant: “I’ll s-say it, I *w-will*, Ma-Mama. As G-God is my j-judge, I’ll s-say Ka-kaddish f-faithfully.”

Then, in a chilling voice, out of the mouth of someone who spoke to her dead sister every night, she said, “*If you don’t say Kaddish when I’m dead, I’ll know.*”

How could I doubt her? – I, who had been in the very clutches of the Golem and had been subjected to her supernaturalism since I was born. She probably saw the tangible fear in my eyes. She nonchalantly walked a few steps into the kitchen, which opened on to the living room. She lit the stove.

Now that I had made her such a wonderful promise, I felt I could ask her. “Ma-Mama, there's s-something I r-really want- that I saw today in C-Coney Island?” I paused for effect, “It's a b-book by Edgar B-Bergen.”

“Oh, now you want to be a ventriloquist?” she said scornfully.

“I j-just wa-want the b-book, Ma-Mama. It's only t-ten ce-cents. I wa-want to b-be like Edgar B-Bergen.”

“You think money grows on trees? First, we can't afford it. Second, I'd never give it to you for a stupid book like that. And third, look at my hand—” She held out her palm and pointed to it. “When hair grows *here*, that's when you'll be like Edgar Bergen. Bergen is talented. But you're not. If you make any money at all, I'll be surprised.”

She now left the room entirely. Ruth sat down next to Cleve.

“She beats you with a whip. Why do you even stay here?” he asked her. Before she could answer, he walked up to me. “You can be whatever you want. I'll put my money on it.” He opened my palm and put a dime into it.

As you can imagine, I could hardly wait to buy Bergen's book, and the next day I was begging Lilly to let me into her World of Wax, just so I could buy it. Somehow, I succeeded. I began practicing that afternoon. Lesson One taught the beginner to sit in front of a mirror and observe his tongue carefully as he ran through the alphabet. That was the first time I had ever paid close attention to how I articulated sounds. Besides my stuttering, I had another problem—how to choose an actual, distinctive voice and personality for the dummy. I couldn't decide what voice to use or how to actually do it.

That night, I stood in the backyard with Ruth. Ruth couldn't get over what had happened.

“You shouldn't listen to her. She's a sick woman.”

“Sh-she's still our mo-mother.”

Then, right in front of our eyes, we saw what seemed to be a shooting star, brilliant, but moving fairly slowly, arc over the amusement park. The object fell over the horizon.

“Quick, Paul, make a wish.”

I wished for the perfect, dummy voice and for a perfect knowledge of this magical art of throwing one's voice.

I slept well that night. Had I not seen a shooting star? As I slept, I vaguely heard the wind start up, and slowly the staccato-like drumming of small branches on my window pane turned to hard, relentless incursions of the larger branches, reminding my half-conscious mind of the Night of the Golem so many years ago. I opened my eyes to see a strange, metallic humanoid creature sitting around the corner of the bed. It had reddish hair. Its skin had a blue, metallic hue. It looked at me in a reassuring way. "You don't need to be afraid," it said.

I supposed it to be a dream, the intonation and texture of his voice echoing throughout the night. By the morning, my dreams were answered. I would use the red-haired creature's voice for the voice of the dummy. The voice was boyish and somewhat Brooklynese. Perfect for what I was looking for.

The next day was Sunday, and I spent half the day in front of a mirror, with Bergen's book in my hand. I knew that a ventriloquist has to be concerned not only with diction and character, but also with amplification. So I decided to practice as loudly as I could, thinking everyone had left the house.

I tried to speak clearly, using Bergen's consonants to replace the sounds that were difficult to pronounce, without moving the lips. "Glease tass the dutter," I read loudly from the book. "Think 'B.' Say 'G,' but think 'B,'" I read to myself. Then I really pumped up the volume. "GLEASE TASS THE DUTTER—"

Clara swung the door open, almost knocking me down. She had a cold compress wrapped around her head. "What is all this screeching and kvitching?"

"L-look at this, Ma," I proudly showed her, but my stuttering got control of me for the first time that day. "P-Peter P-Piper pi-picked a p-peck of p-pickled p-peppers."

She showed me her level of interest in my new hobby, "You're a stutterer. You weren't made for this. Do something useful."

She left without further comment. I looked sternly in the mirror.

"I-I'll show h-her she's w-wrong if it's the l-last thing I ever d-do," I stuttered.

Then my ventriloquist voice answered me, effortlessly. It almost seemed to speak without my volition. "Go on, kid, you'll show her, Paul. You'll show the bitch." The voice was as clear and diction-perfect as anyone could wish.

"D-Don't t-talk about m-my m-mother that w-way, or I'll p-put you in a t-trunk and n-never t-take you out," I stammered back at it.

One day, I found out that Bergen was in a film called *The Goldwyn Follies*, which was playing right there in Coney Island. I went with Ruth and Cleve. Sitting there in the dark, the most amazing thing occurred. The moment I saw Charlie sit up on the screen, I was completely entranced. Remember, I had heard him and I had seen him in wax, but I had never seen him actually be animated by Bergen. I nudged Ruth.

“That’s it, Ruth. That’s what I want to be.”

“We all know that, Paul.”

“I want to be a ventriloquist.”

“So, what’s new?”

“I want to make my living at it.”

“You’re almost fourteen. You’re too young to know what you want to do for a living.” She ignored me and watched the movie. I couldn’t help noticing that Cleve looked at her in a funny way. He was actually my first champion.

Sitting in that theater, I was filled with joy. Still, there was another element, something perhaps from the darker side of my mind. For me, there was an aliveness to the dummy that surpassed mere artifice. It was almost like a creature, resurrected by a reality from another side of life, an alternative dimension, or even the world of the dead. It was too much alive to be a device for scripted lines. I had, back then, encountered the world of archetypes, a world I would plunge into headlong in the far future. And that world, besides embodying the characters I created for my livelihood, also embodied a dark side that would challenge my happiness and, indeed my very existence, at another point in my life.

Months came and passed. I was obsessed with my new dreams. I practiced every day until my jaws hurt from tightly clamping my teeth together. The discipline made me focus on my lisp and stuttering. They were no longer just social impediments, but impediments to the dream I had chosen to manifest, to the very core of my world. I practiced diligently despite constant discouragement from my mother. I was now targeting my speech defects, not because of her constant nagging, or the occasional taunts of my fellow students, but because I wanted to catch the brass ring. I wanted to be like Bergen. I wanted to make money at it and free myself of her.

Sometimes I got hoarse and started to cough. But then I found resting it for a few days would improve it. One glorious summer evening, when I had attained a new plateau of skill and mapped out a prospective plan for my first serious efforts, I decided to join my family in the living room. You could hear crickets

outside. Tiny flares of light, called fireflies, circled outside. It was a very tranquil background for a strange incursion.

It started with a gruff, unfeeling voice.

“Let me in! Let me in!”

My mother was startled, “Where's that voice coming from, Sol?”

My father was calm. He didn't seem to care. “Maybe outside the window.”

“Get me the butcher knife. Go get it, Papa.” He frowned at her and went to get it.

The voice became threatening. “You better let me in—“

Mama took the knife. “You better leave here—or I'm gonna cut you into a million pieces.”

Suddenly, another gruffer and even deeper voice seemed to come from somewhere in the room. It spoke loudly. “WHAT MAKES YOU THINK WE'RE AFRAID OF YOU?”

My older sister was beside herself. “Oh, my God, there's more than one.”

“I think that's coming from the closet,” my father said, still somewhat detached and unafraid. I saw my father's quiet strength.

The three of them walked towards the closet together.

The first voice called out in a higher, more sinister key. “I told you to let me in.”

Mama now held the butcher knife high, while Ruth opened the closet. To their surprise, there was nothing there.

“What's going on here?” Mama said, puzzled and perhaps slightly less afraid.

“It's just me, Mama.” I said in the first voice, but mouthing the words audibly. “I told you to let me in.” She stared at me in disbelief.

Ruth was shocked. “Oh, my God. But how come the voice came from the closet and the window?”

“It's called ‘throwing your voice,’” I said quietly.

“Why, then, you know how to do it,” she said.

I sat there silently, smiling broadly at her.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mama's bright red face turn an even darker shade. I don't think I had ever seen her so angry. She took out her whip and was stroking its tails with her fingers.

"You think that was funny, Paul?" She raised the whip. "I'll show you what's funny." She began to beat me, mercilessly, with a passion I had never seen.

Before she could draw blood, Papa yanked the whip out of her hands. Looking at her with a resolution that I had also never seen before, and never saw afterward, he broke it over his knee. "So much for your goddamn whip!"

CHAPTER 2 AN ORIGINAL AMATEUR

I spent most of my summer vacation perfecting my skill, and when I returned to class in the fall, there was already a change in my demeanor.

At that point, I was attending The School of Industrial Art in Manhattan and preparing for a career in Commercial Art. This included studying processes and techniques in painting, sculpting, mold-making, lettering and puppetry. At one point, I asked Mr. Magon if I could earn credits in his class by constructing a ventriloquist dummy as an art project. After all, it would involve sculpting, casting and painting—all components essential to the study of commercial art. Mr. Magon, who actually liked his students, was happy to agree without any objection whatsoever. I began the project immediately and received lots of help from him.

When the clay head was done, I cast it with plaster of Paris to make the mold. Then I coated the inside with a thin layer of plastic wood and soaked the entire

unit under water to avoid shrinkage. When the head was ready, I installed the moving mouth and painted the dummy. What happened when the fully functional head was completed is the stuff that the *Rocky* stories are made of. That head was my first “set of gloves” to take on the rest of the world. All I did was pick it up and make it talk.

My classmates were astounded, watching in awe as I began to imitate Charlie McCarthy's voice. I hadn't made a body for the figure, so I hid the neck behind a book and wrapped the primitive, book-based body in a towel. Still, for what I needed—local fame and self-esteem—the illusion was sufficient. Everyone was excited about my new talent, and they gathered around me, asking all kinds of questions.

Mr. Magon recognized my transformation and wanted it to continue, so he sent me around to every classroom to show the kids what I had accomplished during the summer. In one classroom after another, I entertained them. Students that had nothing to do with me before now wanted to know me. I recall vividly when a pair of twin girls who decided to become my bodyguards began to act as though I were their property. Wherever I went, they followed to protect me.

When time came to choose student officers, the art classes painted posters of the dummy and me campaigning for the candidates and hung them in the halls. I began to feel like a new person, except when I got home and resumed my everyday journey to hell and back. Still, even that had improved, because it now became a whip-less hell.

There were hangovers from my past. For instance, one kid—call him Herbie—used to bother me a lot. One day, I heard a loud whistle from the locker area. It was Herbie. The little bastard used to make fun of my stuttering. “W-Where'd you g-get the d-dummy, Wi-winch?”

“I made it in Mr. Magon's class,” I replied, articulating each consonant perfectly. After all, this is what I had been doing for three months.

“So now you think you're Edgar Bergen and not some poor slob named Paul Wilchin.”

“Yeah, what do you know?” I said, laughed, and left.

One of my pals told me later that Herbie looked questioningly at Cynthia Carmen, who was captain of our miniscule cheerleading squad. I had just laughed at his comments and walked away—as a bully, it's no fun when you lose a victim. “Yeah, he doesn't stutter anymore, Herbie,” she said. “So what you did was stupid.”

"I thought you couldn't lose something like that, or if you did, it took years."

"Not for him. You're wasting your time. You know, Sally likes him."

"Bullshit. Wilchin's got nothing."

"Don't underestimate the competition, Bozo."

One afternoon, I noticed Dr. Gombarts, our Principal, standing nearby. He signaled for me to come to his office I had never been to the Principal's office before, and I was more than a little scared.

I watched as he settled into his big leather chair. "Relax, Paul," he said. I tried to smile. "You know, I just watched you entertain our students for almost fifteen minutes. I'm impressed. Let me see the puppet you made."

I handed him the head, which he carefully inspected and handed back to me. "Now, how about a demonstration?" he said. I hid the neck behind a book and began. He grinned broadly as he watched me and said, "That's very good, but your friend has no hair." He picked up the phone and called a rug company right next door. He asked them to send over a small piece of red chenille rug, which he deftly cut up and fashioned into a flaming red wig.

"Can you make a body for your puppet?" he asked. Before I could answer, he added, "I'll tell you why I'm asking. Have you heard of *The Major Bowes Amateur Hour*?"

"Who hasn't?" I said.

"Major Bowes happens to be a good friend of mine. And you know what? I'm going to ask him if he'll let you do an audition for his radio show. How would you feel about that?"

I was speechless, but quickly nodded yes.

I knew instinctively that I'd need some semblance of a routine for the audition. My mother still refused to fund my new career, so I conned another dime from Cleve and bought a magazine, *Ten Thousand Jokes*, from which I culled about a dozen schoolroom jokes and a few girlie-girlie gags.

My dad may have been childlike, but he was extremely handy with tools. A tailor by trade, he was a crackerjack on the sewing machine. Later that afternoon he took me to Orchard Street on the Lower East Side of Manhattan, where pushcarts abounded, rivaling the famous Petticoat Lane of London. Walking down rows of vendors selling an assortment of junk, we stopped in our

tracks when we spotted a badly broken, headless mannequin of a little boy. Pop bought it for fifteen cents. When we got home, he cut off the arms and legs and made stuffed canvas tubes on his sewing machine. Then he fastened the hands and shoes onto the tubes, and—voilà—the body was done. He also fashioned a lovely gray and green suit for the figure, and I was in business.

Several weeks later, Cleve brought me over to Major Bowes' office at the CBS Radio studio on Broadway and 53rd. I was scared as hell. There I met Bessie Mack, the Major's girl Friday. Thanking my lucky stars, I passed the audition and was scheduled to appear on the show in three weeks. I wanted Mama to know what was happening to me so I could rub her nose in it, but I was too scared of her to say anything.

Three weeks passed quickly. Then Cleve, who came from Cleveland (hence the nickname), took me to the radio station, where the program was scheduled to go live at eight o'clock that evening. I recall sitting in the wings with the puppet on my lap, frightened to death, as I watched Major Bowes introducing one amateur after the other.

Major Bowes had the original Gong Show. If the studio audience didn't think much of your talent, Bowes would give you the gong and you were through. The possibility of getting the gong only added to my fearful state of mind. As I sat waiting, I trembled so badly that you could hear the dummy's frame rattling. Suddenly, Major Bowes began to introduce me, and Bessie Mack had me ushered onto the stage in front of the studio audience.

The Major began by describing me as his "newest discovery, a lad from Cleveland, the amazingly young ventriloquist, Paul Winchell!"

"My name's Wilchin," I tried to protest.

"That's your name now, Sonny. You have to have a stage name, *capice?*"

This new name was thanks to Cleve, who had filled out my original application and made some changes. He didn't think Wilchin was a good name for an actor, so he chose Winchell instead. Apparently, the Major agreed. Cleve also used *his* hometown of Cleveland to inject some regional color into my background, despite the fact that he knew I was born in Manhattan.

"Tell me Paul, what are you going to do for us this evening?"

"Well, sir, I'm going to do my impersonation of Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy."

"Very well. Ladies and gentlemen, here's Paul Winchell giving his impression of Edgar Bergen and that celebrated clothespin in a high hat—Charlie McCarthy".

And so I began my very first real performance before an adult audience. Though I was nervous, I surprised everyone including myself with a joke I had picked from the magazine.

“You know, Winch, I was driving a car the other day and it suddenly began to speed. I was scared out of my wits,” Jerry said.

“I bet you were in a dilemma.”

“No, it was a DeSoto.”

The joke got a big laugh from the studio audience because DeSoto was the Major's sponsor—there was a banner in back of the studio that proclaimed "DODGE-DESOTO PRESENTS THE MAJOR BOWES ORIGINAL AMATEUR HOUR." When the laugh died down, I had Jerry ask, "How'm I doin' Major, how'm I doin'?"

The audience realized that I was adlibbing and broke into spontaneous applause. What a magical night! I'll never forget one moment of it! The rest of the act went over well, and I finished with a song that won me a rousing cheer. After the nervous wait for the end of the show, it was some triumph for me to find out who had won that night's contest.

That night the family was having dinner. According to Ruth, Papa was the first to mention that I was missing. “Where's our Paul?”

“I'll show you where your son is, Papa,” Ruth said, switching on the radio just in time to hear Major Bowes' announcement, “And tonight's winner is—Mr. Paul Winchell. Well, tell me, Paul, what are you going to do with that \$100? Can you believe this? He's blushing, folks. I believe he's going to give it to some young lady. And what do you have to say for yourself, Mr. Winchell?”

I became tongue-tied for a second, then decided to end the show in Jerry's voice with a jaunty announcement on behalf of my new patron, “See you next week, everyone—on *The Major Bowes Original Amateur Hour*.”