Threat of Genius

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Abstract

SUDDENLY and without warning, Mrs. Clifford R. Smith realized her son Roger really was different from other children. It was the day she investigated the little crumpled bits of paper she’d been noticing strewn about his room. With tight-lipped, motherly stoicism, she’d always swept them up and gone on with the daily struggle of making his bed and putting his clothes away...
“Ow, my neck. Harry, let me go.”

“I said LAY DOWN.” His hands were about her throat, squeezing, pushing her down. She twisted violently, and he squeezed harder.

“Lay down! Lay down!” His muscles ached from their unyielding grasp. His face was red, his teeth were clenched, his whole body shook. Her neck felt like soft clay in his hands. Suddenly he relaxed, and her body fell to the ground. Her crumpled form lay crazily twisted over the blue shawl. Harry touched her chin and moved her head from side to side. It followed his hand, limp.

Harry whirled and looked about him. There was nothing. Nothing but space with white blobs of light hung on an invisible backdrop. His ears strained for sound. But there was nothing. He stretched out his arms. There was nothing to feel. Nothing but cold emptiness. Nothing to see. Nothing to hear. Nothing but the vapors of a vacuum.

He ran. The white blobs of light on the invisible backdrop were cold. Infinity, with its complete silence, slept on. The cold emptiness grew crystalline with more cold. The vapors of the vacuum hung immobile. The silence, the cold, the void—all grew and grew, enveloping the universe. Until there was no more.

Threat of Genius

Bernice A. Fox

SUDDENLY and without warning, Mrs. Clifford R. Smith realized her son Roger really was different from other children. It was the day she investigated the little crumpled bits of paper she'd been noticing strewn about his room. With tight-lipped, motherly stoicism, she'd always swept them up and gone on with the daily struggle of making his bed and putting his clothes away. Then inevitably a day came when a particularly severe hangover snapped her patience. What the hell were these
nasty little wads of paper anyway? She bent over and reached
for one, halfway under the bed. She unwadded it and stood
gazing down at the writing on it—and promptly sank down on
the edge of the bed to recover.

"Guys all worry about what they're gonna be when they grow
up," she read, in Roger's untidy left-handed scrawl, "but I don't.
The object is to figure out an easy way to make a lot of money.
Also, how to make money without waiting 'til you're fifty years
old to spend it. So I'm gonna start being a writer. Look at how
much writers make. Sell just one book to Hollywood—there's
$50,000 right there. Pick a good title—somebody write a popular
song about it—another rake-off. Only need to work a couple
months out of the year. Spend the rest of the time traveling
around in a yacht. That's even a better deal than leading a dance
orchestra and gettin' $1,000 on one-night stands. Besides, look
at what dumb stories most of these best-sellers are. I figure it's
mostly a racket. I'm gonna begin watching how people act and
exactly how they talk. Then I'm gonna practice on stories describ-
ing real people and see what my English teacher has to say about
'em...

The paper was torn so that Mrs. Smith couldn't read further.
She sat staring at the words as if she'd been grazed by a sledge-
hammer. Slowly, she began directing whispered questions at
Roger's desk, as if it might supply some clues to these secret
activities of his mind.

"Is that what that precious pocket notebook is he's been carry-
ing around and writing in all the time . . . a diary? That little
devil! Imagine a child his age writing down such things as this.
Why, I never dreamed—do you suppose he actually had been
entertaining notions of becoming an orchestra leader? Good
heavens! That accounts for the sudden passion he had for Hoagy
Carmichael and that spasm of practicing his music lessons with-
out griping, but now this . . . this newest ambition to be a writer!"
Mrs. Smith shuddered. And it was only a couple days before, too,
that she'd remarked to Clifford so complacently—

"We're just awfully lucky—that Rog's so different from other
boys his age." Her husband had lifted mildly interested eyes from
the tie he was knotting. "I mean," Mrs. Smith went on smugly,
"the fact he doesn't seem interested in girls and—things."

Clifford had grunted and reminded her there was still plenty
of time for Roger to develop in that direction. His wife had
insisted, "Yes, but you'll have to admit, he is different. He hasn't given us a worry—not a single worry. And when I hear other women tell how much trouble they have with their boys, I realize how lucky we are that Rog's different. I was a little afraid he might be reading too much, but at least we always know what he's up to. . ."

Now, though, staring down at the damaging evidence in her hand, Mrs. Smith doubted that her son's 'difference' was quite along the docile lines she'd fondly supposed. She rose and tucked the scrap of paper in her apron pocket and went on wrestling with the tangled mass of bedclothes. Her hangover had disappeared. She'd have a serious talk with that young man. She'd confront him. She'd find out just what he was up to. But meal-time came and went and she never happened to think of it when Roger was around. Each morning, though, when she entered his room to straighten it, she searched about diligently for further stray bits of evidence. She'd get down on her hands and knees to peer under the bed; she'd casually ransack his desk drawers; she'd ruffle the pages of his school books lying about; she'd feel in all his pockets; and, finally fanatically, she'd process the contents of his wastebasket.

That's where she found the next link. This one, however, wasn't so rewarding. It was just a few brief comments beginning a new page in his notebook. An ink blot, apparently, had discouraged the development of the observations which began:

"People don't make sense. They do things deliberately and then swear they didn't mean to. Women are the worst. This is because . . ."

A deep frown disturbed the smoothness of Mrs. Smith's brow as she pondered these stinging statements. The little monkey! He was shrewder than she'd thought. And him only fourteen.

It was days later before further clues came to light. Mrs. Smith had now taken to examining the contents of the vacuum sweeper as a possible source of supply for her rising suspicions. And sure enough, there, nestled in a ball of rug-fuzz was another of the fearful crumpled wads of paper. She almost hated to smooth it out. This one was more difficult to read. It had been written hurriedly, and with a soft-lead pencil—probably a sudden seizure of inspiration.

"Mr. Jans called me in today about that theme I turned in last
Sketch

week. (Who is Mr. Jans? One of the teachers over at the high school obviously, and Mrs. Smith disliked him instinctively.) I knew ahead of time he'd say that character sketch I did of Aunt Hilda was exaggerated. I just let him rave on about how my character wasn't true to life—that nobody could be as mean and stingy and two-faced as that. Then I told him it was the God's fact—she's my aunt and I oughta know. I told him a lot of other stuff I saw her do last summer when I was visiting at her house. He changed my grade on the paper. Gave me an A. Now I know writing's gonna be a cinch. I got enough material right here in our family to write a dozen books. Wait'll I get started on Mom's side of the family. . ."

Mrs. Smith started to crumple the paper furiously, then thought better of it. With a deep, preoccupied frown she went on putting the vacuum cleaner back together. The scrap of paper she placed firmly on a handy cupboard shelf for ready reference.

"Cliff Smith," she raged at her absent and innocent accomplice in this dread monster they'd wrought, "you've simply got to do something with that boy. How can you be so indifferent? your own son Why, that child's imagination will ruin us! Next thing we know he'll be writing a character sketch of one of us and tell this—this Mr. Jans God knows what wild stories about how much worse we are than he's described us. All this time, when I kept insisting Rog was different, did you see it? No. He takes after you, that's what he does. Your side of the family always has been considered queer. Now it's coming out. You've got to speak to him. I can't do it. He looks at me like he's reading my mind. . ."

But Mrs. Smith forgot to mention the matter to Clifford. She continued to hoard the odd collection of scraps in a drawer in her dressing table. Meanwhile, the obsession grew—she must somehow get hold of that notebook Rog carried around in his hip pocket. Her appetite for the worst was not appeased by these occasional tastes of despair. Probably he slept with the thing under his pillow. She rehearsed possible playful ruses she might use. She might just snatch it out of his pocket sometime. Or, she might simply ask to see it. No. That would be too direct.

The dinner party for the Walters came up before she'd got
around to any course of action. She sent Roger next door to borrow extra ice cubes; she reminded him to carry in the case of gingerale from the car; she fluttered around the kitchen in her dressing gown, turning the oven indicator way down so the chow mein wouldn't get overdone in the two-hour interval she'd allowed for highballs. Roger hunched over the breakfast table noisily chewing a bread and butter sandwich and reading the evening sport page.

"Dear," Mrs. Smith deared him, and he straightened expecting another errand, "why don't you take a plateful of this goop and a glass of milk and have your dinner now—so I'll have that out of the way. It'll probably be late before we eat, and..."

Roger regarded her somberly for a moment, then shuffled obediently to the cupboard and got an everyday plate and allowed her to load it generously with the evil-looking mixture bubbling lazily in the oven.

"Why is it," he asked, "you always invite people for dinner at seven then they don't come 'til eight and then you don't eat until ten? I should think you'd be pret'near starved when you're used to eating at six. I should think that'd just about ruin your digestion."

Mrs. Smith shifted a startled look from her son's penetrating gaze. "Pooh," she dismissed him, in a tone he remembered since he was five, "When you're grown-up, you'll get used to those things. How does it taste, baby? Need any more salt?"

Roger shrugged and went on shoveling great forkfuls in his mouth. "Not bad tasting crap," he conceded, gulping and sloshing down a vast swallow of milk, "even if it doesn't look fit to eat. Why do you wanna waste good food, though? Why don't you just have crackers and cheese and easy stuff to serve—heck, by the time you ever get around to eating, everybody's half-tight anyway and wouldn't know the difference..."

Mrs. Smith gasped. He watched her, completely unaware how sensitive she'd become to his candor. Mrs. Smith hesitated. Now was the time. She was in exactly the proper frame of mind to have that serious talk with Roger she'd been threatening to. But the Walters would arrive any minute. They were never more than twenty minutes late. So all she said was, "Young man, you're getting entirely too smart. You hurry up and finish eating—and put your dishes in the sink out of the way, hear? Then you hike up to your room..."
She went out, feeling his reproachful eyes following her, imagining what thoughts were probably being composed for future scraps of paper: "Sure, when company comes for dinner, all parents think about is feeding their kids in the kitchen and making 'em hurry off out of sight. I suppose the Walters' kids hadda eat in the kitchen, too, and go to bed early just because their folks were going out to dinner. Gee whiz, how old do you have to be before you get to eat at the family table when there's company? Old enough to drink highballs?"

Upstairs as she finished dressing, while she heard Cliff rattling around down in the kitchen getting the ice cubes out, banging the doors of the liquor cabinet, taking the good glasses out of the cupboard, Mrs. Smith confined her thoughts to Roger’s latest impertinence. As she slumped down before her dressing table and swiped viciously with puffs and pads, applying lipstick and mascara, a strange new worry danced impishly about in her mind.

“What if he should really write a book about us someday!" She heard Roger’s plodding steps on the stair, heard the door of his room bang shut, heard the drawer of his desk creak open and shut. She wished he were a little older so he could be downstairs when the Walters arrived—old enough so it wouldn’t be embarrassing to have him around when they had their third highball.

“Maybe he actually will become a famous writer," she thought, tenderly, jerking open a drawer by mistake. There were all the tattered scraps of paper she’d been saving, hiding them among her cosmetics so Clifford wouldn’t find them and maybe throw them away. She snatched them up, studying them fiercely a moment, wondering why she was saving them.

From far off, she heard Cliff answering the doorbell; heard the high, expectant laughter of Mrs. Walters’ greeting and the gruff clipped comments of the men. She waited for Clifford’s voice to boom up at her. And still she sat staring at a handful of scribbling. An impulse to toss them all in her wastebasket came and went. They might be valuable some day—when Roger was famous. She might be glad she’d saved them. She put them back in the drawer and jumped up, gave her hair a final pat, and hurried past Roger’s lonely, listening room.

She wondered why she felt a distinctly guilty feeling going down the stairs.