

Second Grade Was Worse the Second Time Around

By Johanna Garfield

To me, the term "traumatic experience" has only one meaning: that moment when, at age 7, I was told I would have to repeat the second grade. I've never gotten over it, and three psychiatrists, endless recountings to friends and years of bitter recriminations against my parents later, I still haven't.

I'd switched schools that year—from the homey Jewish Center in Far Rockaway, where I'd learned to read with ease, to the more formal Woodmere Academy. I didn't mind. My brother Frank already went there, and I wanted to join him.

The first day, Frank took me to class. The hall smelled of antiseptic and shellac, and was gloomy in comparison with the sunny rooms at the center, but I was happy as he led me to a door whose sign read: "Miss Geiger—Second Grade."

"This isn't my classroom," I said, sure my brother was mistaken or way playing some kind of joke. "I finished second grade last year."

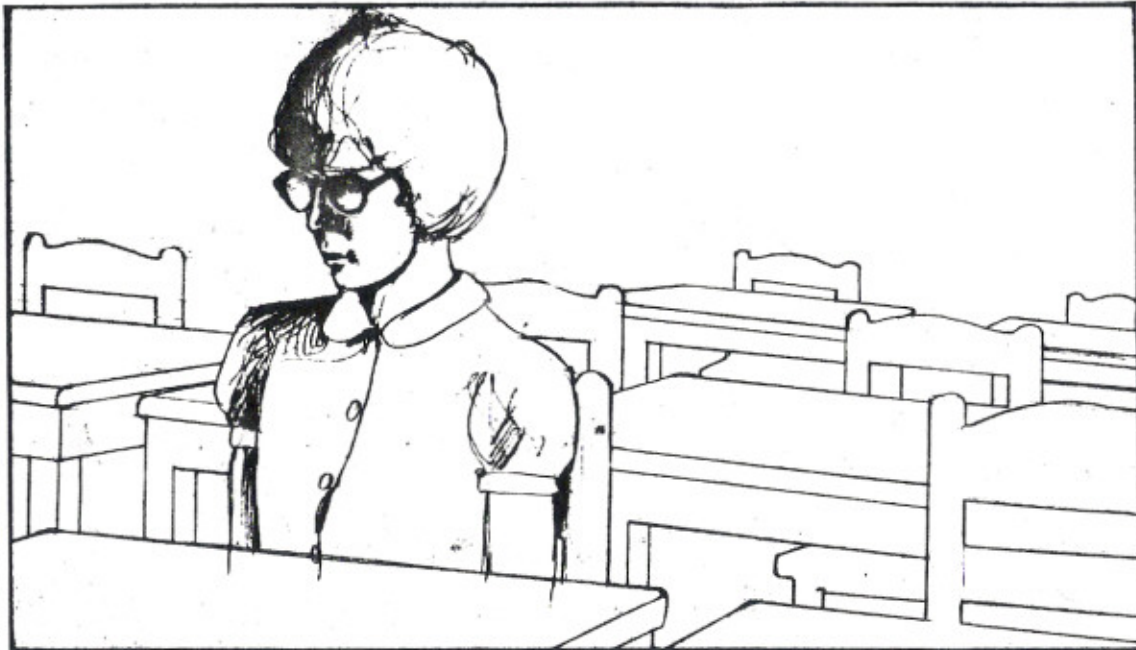
"This is where they told me to take you," he said impatiently, eager to join his friends. Frank was a "big boy," not to be challenged, and I walked in. Stunned, but convinced that some sort of easily rectified mistake had been made, I stayed all day, enduring the labored efforts of 15 struggling new readers as they "sounded out" the words in "The Cave Twins," an enjoyable little book I read from cover to cover in the first five minutes of reading class.

I tried to ignore the nasty snickering of what I disdainfully regarded as my temporary classmates as I contemptuously went beyond my sentence of "oral reading" and spat out a paragraph.

That afternoon, my mother called Miss Wing, who headed the academy's lower school.

"Well, Johanna's is a borderline birthday—December—and we always feel the child gains so much more confidence when he or she is that little bit older," she said. Reluctantly, she agreed to bring the matter before a faculty committee.

A week went by . . . two weeks



Newsday Illustration/Bob Newman

... three. No fool, I realized that the longer the delay, the harder it would be to catch up with the third-graders—a strangely constituted group of 11 boys and three girls, all of the latter named Carol: Carol Oberman, Carol Klein, Carol Barnett. How I longed to join that enchanted trio!

At last, I was summoned to Miss Wing's office—a comfortable place, though exuding the same dim gloominess as my classroom. Looking back, I find it hard to understand the darkness of those rooms, since they had big windows. Perhaps there were large shade trees outside, or perhaps I brought the gloom to my memories, or to those actual rooms.

Miss Wing, a birdlike creature, looked up and smiled. "Mother tells me you're not happy in Miss Geiger's class," she began sympathetically. My spirits rose. She was on my side; she understood. I nodded dumbly, not wanting to waste time till she spoke the magic words. "Now Johanna," she continued, and for a moment I was chilled by the temporizing *now*, "you know, there's a lot to be said for

being one of the oldest. You can excel, always be ahead."

I wasn't listening. My mind was racing ahead. Why put me through all this when she must know I could do the third-grade work, and didn't belong with those nincompoops in second? "So you see," she said brightly, "the committee has instituted a new policy: Nobody will graduate till they're 18, if we can help it." Noting my stricken face, she added softly, "I know you're disappointed, but believe me, you'll thank me for this later."

She stood up, but I remained rooted to the soft leather seat. This couldn't be happening. I couldn't have to stay where I was. I thought about the sunny rooms at the center, where my friends would now be a grade ahead of me, of day after day of "The Cave Twins," of the three Carols I'd never know as equals. As surely as I've known anything in my life, I knew I'd never thank her for her decision.

Though I couldn't have verbalized it then, I also knew that I'd be irrevocably altered by that moment,

when a slant of sun had struck Miss Wing's glasses with the explosive beauty associated with prophetic pronouncements as she calmly destroyed a part of me. It was then that I acquired my first sour realization that the world wasn't such a good place after all; that my parents were sometimes impotent in the face of bureaucracy, and, worst of all, that what I wanted, what I knew to be right for myself, was as nothing.

I never accepted my classmates, convinced that I was with them by mistake, and as a result, neither did they accept me. (Ironically, a few years later, the rule about not being 18 at graduation was casually dropped—a reversal noted bitterly by me alone among the students.) I grew aloof, remote, angry; was never, ever, the same. And though many years have passed, it seems I am fated to relive the events of that October day over and over, for as long as memory lasts. □

Johanna Garfield, who now lives in Manhattan, was born and grew up in Cedarhurst.