

# Sticks and Stones: An Exploration of the Embodiment of Social Classism

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*This article explores the ways in which childhood ontologies shape adult biases of the social world. Specifically, it focuses on the construction of social class and how even after sixty years, the author's earliest memories shape her interactions and anxieties.*

**Keywords:** *social class; memoir; embodiment; experimental writing*

## PREAMBLE

Willie Nelson came to the Ohio State Fair in 1987. He's late in arriving, though, and the crowd is getting noisy, agitated, and drunk. When the Democratic governor comes on stage, the crowd boos, hisses, and throws paper cups. As a flag is raised, the crowd rises to its collective feet and cheers. I don't know how to comport myself. I don't know when to stand, when to sit, when minding my own business is an insult, and when not minding it is an insult. The bathroom line is interminable. I don't know where to look or how to stand. I am afraid of the crowd, but I don't label it *crowd*, I label the people *working class*. I am afraid of the working class.

## I

My cousin Linda, ten years my senior, Uncle Jack's oldest daughter, was the first person I remember calling me "Baby-Laurel-Talking-Machine." We were kneeling by the asbestos gas fireplace in her family's four-room apartment, above the Ashland Avenue Tavern. It was Christmas time; my parents gave my three cousins matching outfits, my Aunt Mary cash, and my Uncle Jack Jack Daniels. How old could I have been? Three? Four?

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Author's Note: I thank Ernest Lockridge for his reading of this article.

Qualitative Inquiry, Volume 11 Number 4, 2005 485-491  
DOI: 10.1177/1077800405276807  
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Perhaps Linda meant the nickname endearingly, but it sounded mean to me. It was a lie, too. I did not talk much, and I didn't say much of what I was thinking. I couldn't talk loudly enough, anyway, to be heard over Uncle Jack's and Aunt Mary's shouting and yelling. What right had Linda to "name" me? To give me a name? Even today, when I hear young children talking in earnest with clipped, fast speech my heart goes to them. I breathe with them. I hope they are never abused, teased, never called "talking-machines." Stick and stones will break your bones, but names? Names will break your heart.

Disdainful monikers still bother me. Moniker? That's a word from my past; surprising to find it in my present. I remember exactly when I knew that word and when I learned that I might know some words that some grown-ups didn't. Mrs. Auntie Baldwin was the Sunday school teacher at the Presbyterian family camp my family went to for the month of August. She was casting a Bible play that depended on nicknames for its plot development. I was six.

"What's my moniker?" I asked her.

"Your what?" she said. Perhaps, thinking I had said something Jewish, she excused me from tryouts. Maybe though, it has just occurred to me, I wasn't very good, then, at acting or maybe I was just too young for any part in the play.

"Moniker . . . moniker," some fictive cousin repeated sotto voce as I left the stage.

I felt confused. How come the speech patterns that had won the favor of my father, my mother's family, and my schoolteachers earned me scorn, ridicule, and ostracism here at Olivet Camp? Surely, there was something I could do about it.

On Friday nights fathers drove up from Chicago to join their families ensconced in primitive cottages at Olivet Camp, Lake Geneva. Many of the fathers—but not mine—had built those cottages when they were juvenile delinquents enlisted by a charismatic city minister to build a camp, save their souls, grasp a future. Most of them became tradesmen—carpenters, electricians, plumbers, and painters. One became a numbers runner. That one, Uncle Jack, was my father's younger brother. After my father's mother became "incapacitated," her children were sent to different homes. My father went to live with his wealthy aunt and uncle, whereas Jack lived with a working-class family. Through Uncle Jack, we became camp regulars. My father was everyone's attorney.

"My father has purchased a new automobile," I bragged to my cousins and fictive cousins on a Friday afternoon in late August 1946. "And, it's capacious enough to take us all on excursions."

I was three years and more younger than the other children at camp. They swam better, tanned better, hiked better, ate better, but they didn't talk any better or faster than I did.

"My father has purchased a Studebaker," I continued at my breakneck speed. "It's a Champion four-door sedan."

"No, he hasn't," said Peg. "You're just talking."

"Oh, yes, he most definitely and certainly has procured a new Studebaker," I rejoined. "And it's streamlined, like the Superchief and Hiawatha railroad cars."

"Talking-machine," piped in Deedee.

"Talking-machine! Talking-machine! Talking-machine!" the others chanted.

"Stream-what?" asked Patsy.

"Stream-lied," laughed Dorothy, slapping her open palm to her mouth as she chanted "liar, liar, talker-liar. . ."

The other girls joined her, formed a circle, a powwow, closing me out.

"Streamlined!" I yelled, crossing the road to our cottage, Bluebird.

Of course, these were not the exact words spoken, but the text is emotionally and sociologically accurate. I can still see the girls, my "cousins," in a closed circle on the roadway, whooping it up; I feel my throat close, my eyes narrow, as they did then, willing myself not to cry; not to care.

My cousins were right, though, about the Studebaker: I was lying. The war had just ended; no one got new cars, not even my father, despite his underworld connections. I had made the whole thing up, obviously to me now, looking for acceptance from my cousins, trying to fit in. The Great Lie of a new Studebaker was, probably, in my mind, an ingenuous and obvious choice. The desire for new cars was all the uncles talked about in the evenings, while drinking beer, smoking Lucky Strikes; Father drinking scotch, straight, chain-smoking Parliaments.

Most desired was the postwar, quick, and handsome Studebaker. Car design had come to a near halt during World War II while in-house designers worked on (lucrative) defense contracts. Studebaker, though, continued its long-term external contracts with Raymond Loewy (Hupmobile and Coca-Cola bottle fame) Virgil Exner, and Roy Cole. Their designs were years ahead of the other carmakers.

In May 1946, Studebaker launched its 1947 Champion. Total 1947 production was 77,567. Streamlined, not boxy, it was a startlingly different design, a symbolic break with the war years. It looked futuristic: turret topped, wrap-around rear window, straight-through lines from front to rear, slab sided, hood and trunk of near equal lengths. No car was more talked about by my uncles than the facetiously nicknamed "coming or going" Studebaker.

Friday evening arrived. I was not sorry that I had lied. The afternoon's experience clarified for me that nothing I could say would gain me admittance into my cousins' world. Rather than remorse, I experienced relief: I would no longer seek their favor. I even looked forward to seeing my father drive up in our 1942 Buick Roadmaster; I might even talk to him about my lying.

After parking their 1930s Ford and Chevy coupes by their cottages, the uncles gathered, beers in hand, on Uncle Pete's porch, diagonally across the road from ours. Waiting for my father, I immersed myself in a new Nancy Drew mystery, *The Mystery of the Tolling Bell*, thinking how well she and I would get along because both our fathers were criminal attorneys, and because we were both smart.

Nancy drives a roadster, goes to country club dances, helps her widowed father with his law cases; she is courageous, independent, generous, talented, clever, helpful, resourceful, and an excellent swimmer. She's on vacation at a lake with her friends. They like and respect her. One friend says, "Nancy, you know your father is the best lawyer in the state! He could solve any problem." Another says, "He also has an equally clever daughter named Nancy." Nancy's world felt real enough and natural to me, a world that I might one day join. It was not the world I lived in, but closer than the one here at Lake Geneva. Father did not include me in on his cases like Nancy's father, but when I hid in the closet under the stairs I could hear his conversations with clients. I was taught how to answer the phone—"Richardson residence"—and how to take a message. Father instructed me to never repeat to anyone anything I ever heard. Talking would endanger me, so I had some sense of Nancy's excitement. And my training included those classes that would instill in me what Father called the "womanly graces"—Eastern equestrianism, white-gloves classes, elocution lessons.

But now it was getting late.

"Oh my! Oh, my goodness!" Mother exclaimed. "Oh, Tyrrell. Oh my!"

There was a commotion in front of our cottage. Uncles, aunts, cousins. Father had arrived. He was sitting behind the wheel of a 1947 four-door Studebaker Champion Deluxe. It was light green and shiny.

"Surprise, Rose!" he said. "Surprise! Do you like it?"

"Oh Tyrrell," Mother repeated.

"It's streamlined," I said, avoiding eye contact with the cousins. I perched on the trunk, then the hood, tracing the smooth fenders with my hand, patting the chrome hood ornament. I pulled back my shoulder puffing out my chest. Never ever again would I look at my cousins with any desire for attachment, inclusion in their world.

Mother got into the front seat, I climbed into the rear. If the car sticker was on the window, it would have said: Weight: 2,735; Cost: \$1,478. Nearly 50¢ a pound. I wonder, now, where my father had gotten that amount of cash. He bought nothing on credit and had no checking account. Perhaps he didn't actually buy the Studebaker. Perhaps it was a gift. From whom? One of the criminals he had successfully defended? Or maybe from someone further up in the Chicago underworld; they summered in Michigan, not far from the Studebaker plant. Or maybe it was a gift from one of the German immigrants for whom he had acquired false U.S. birth certificates.

"Can we go for a ride in it? Now?" I asked.

What seemed most important to me, then, was not how I came to know about the Studebaker but that my father had come through for me. I felt a kind of power and excitement. I thought that my lie might have created the reality. I didn't credit God with the intervention on my behalf; I credited my father. Somehow, he knew that he had to get the Studebaker that very day to save me from total shame and humiliation. Now, I wonder how I did know. No one else in my family did. Perhaps I overheard him telling the uncles; but that seems unlikely, for they could not be trusted with the secret. Perhaps I overheard Father negotiating a car from a client on the home phone in Chicago. Perhaps he had told Mother about the Studebaker but had not told her when it was coming, and I simply lucked out. Or perhaps I did know through less conventionally acknowledged means. My husband and I often have the same dream. Perhaps I was psychic.

Whatever the "how," it is clear that the experience—my knowing I was lying, my distancing from my cousins—would not have been etched into my brain if Father had not arrived with the Studebaker.

So much of my theoretical interest is about epistemology, how we know what we claim to know. Can that interest have been seeded back then, too? I know the sense of self—the ontology of one's being—is set at an early age. Was mine set then? And what else had I constructed? I think I know something awful—embarrassing—about my childhood vision of the world. Not embarrassing that I had that vision, but that it is still with me, *sub rosa*. I conflated social class and intelligence.

## II

My husband Ernest and I are at the breakfast table, talking on a February morning in 1999.

"Did you notice," he asked, "the newspaper article about the woman who protested her husband's smoking in bed? She left a lit cigarette on the bed and left the house. The house burnt down. She showed him, all right."

"Do you remember," I asked him, "when we use to smoke in bed?"

"Oh, yes."

"You know, I never thought we were in danger. I thought only poorer people would be in danger—because they weren't smart about their smoking or because they were drunk or maybe that their mattresses weren't as fire resistant as middle-class mattresses."

My eyes narrow, and I speak crossly to myself: Honestly, Laure! Listen to yourself! Listen to the stereotypes coming from your privileged mouth! Sociologically, of course, you know better, but the emotional fears and angers run wild; the ontology of childhood.

I tell Ernest about Luke.

Luke entered my "advanced-track" eighth-grade class about midyear. He sat in front of me. He was perhaps a year or two older than the rest of us, or physically mature for his age. He was handsome, in a James Dean kind of way. Judging from his clothing, he was poor. He acted tough, like he didn't care about school or grades or tests. I think he had been in juvenile detention, but I might be making that up.

During silent reading period, Luke, slumped in his seat, would fan through the pages. Finished, he would draw miniature fine-line pictures of imaginary cities. He never raised his hand to answer questions; my hand was always up. We traded papers for in-class grading. He'd finish his tests in a few minutes; they were always 100% right. He'd "correct" mine, by correcting any mistakes and giving me a "100." I let him do it; I didn't protest or "turn him in."

I was fascinated. Luke contradicted my sense of how the social world was organized: He was smarter than I was and definitely more artistically talented, yet he was poor, criminally inclined, academically unmotivated.

One day in April, the teacher told us that Luke would not be in our school any longer. We were not told why. I missed him. We had never talked in words, but we had communicated. As I think about him now, I see him as a messenger to whom I did not listen. He was a living exemplar of the limitedness of my childhood ontology. How different his life might have been, had he been middle class. Or am I just assuming the worst happened to him; just reinscribing in some more complicated way the fears, the classist bigotry of childhood.

The personal interactions of childhood, reified through convenient social and cultural categories, shape our adult perspective on the world. The sense we try to make of the world as children haunts us, haunts us adults.

### III

My four-year-old grandson Akiva, Ernest, and myself are at Jeepers, a kiddie park newly opened inside our newly opened mall, Easton. Akiva is climbing inside the "tubes," a massive vinyl structure, completely safe, enclosed with netting, yet tricky and challenging. Akiva is enthralled. Ernest and I rest on stools. Another boy enters the tubes through the rolling pillows. A small woman, a grandmother, too, who I think is in the working class, comes and stands next to me. She screams in my ear.

"Billy! Ya come back here. . . . Right now! Ya heah!"

At the bumper cars, this woman had yelled at Billy to "stand in line"; at the airplanes, she had pulled on his arm, told him "to stop acting up or he'd be sorry when they left." I am thinking, "Billy isn't allowed to enjoy himself, allowed to play."

I raise my hand to cover my ear; it hurts from the woman's screaming in it. The woman, seeing my hand gesture, looks at me with narrowed eyes and speaks directly into my ear in a measured monotone, "Don't even start with me."

I think, "It's too late, I already have."

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