

ONE

# HELLO, PARASITE



**A** parasite whispers to me, delivering a running commentary and haranguing me with nonstop advice. Attached to my cranium, it bypasses my ears and drills straight into my mind. It's mostly a nag and fearmonger, but now and again this bloodsucker calls me names. "Fraud." "Idiot." "Loser." I seldom notice it, so I don't really think it's there. But left to its own devices, the messages will cut through all the time, damaging my psyche day after day.

My wife calls hers The Governess. Mine's The Gremlin. You have one, too. Everybody does. It's your inner critic.

If you wake up confident and raring to go, by noon it has beaten your self-esteem to a pulp. It warns you of all your potential screw-ups – next week's and the one coming in ten seconds. It makes you feel miserable, or less-than, or unwanted, or doomed. It's your own personal, relentless, constant buzzkill.

If you've been a little frustrated in your on-again, off-again quest for satisfaction, ease, or consistent love, follow me. The path to personal

nirvana is routed through your inner critic. It isn't you; it's your own personal parasite that torments you with bad thoughts, pressures you to perform perfectly or not at all, sneers at your mistakes, separates you from your family, and keeps you relentlessly uncertain about yourself.

Freud discovered this parasite more than 100 years ago\*. Its scientific name in English is "superego." You've got one attached to you, I've got one, we've all got one. Freud believed that it was necessary in human development, and that its purpose was to override our impulses and keep us in line, socially and ethically. Another name for it is "conscience," which sounds good and helpful. It's a miniature storehouse of the social rules and conventions, personalized for you. Freud wouldn't have called it a parasite: He believed that it was fully embedded in a three-part human personality, nestled in as a part of the core self. He said the superego is you just as much as your survival and libido impulses – your instincts – are you.

I beg to differ. I've gotten to know my parasitic superego. It's a construction, a facsimile of a person, with its own distinct personality. It doesn't sit inside me. It hovers just outside, a whisperer. It's a humanoid creature. I have conversations with it. It's about as embedded and present as a four-year-old's imaginary friend.

The parasite and its foul mouth are the bad news. The good news is that I have quieted mine, and you can immobilize yours, too. It's pretty simple. If you long for a life of freedom, of peace of mind and satisfaction, I can show you how.

\*Freud's two masterpiece works on the id, superego, and their relationship to civilized life are 1923's *The Ego and the Id* (1960 English translation by James Strachey) and 1929's *Civilization and its Discontents* (1961 Strachey). His brief in *The Ego and the Id* on anxiety and its absolute reliance on the parental frown is startlingly fresh.

T W O

# FIRST GRADE: PARADISE LOST



**J**ade was dragging as she trudged home one Friday in early September. After three days of first grade, her head was spinning. Where were the learning-and-play stations of her kindergarten? Why no mat in the middle of the floor? What was this business of sitting in a chair for forty-five minutes without moving?

For the first five years of life, Jade had been immersed in a relatively seamless kid-world. One moment she was lying in the grass, the next playing house with her brother, the next making animal noises, the next running in for a snack, and on and on. Things appeared, started, ended, appeared, started, ended, over and over without rhyme or reason. There weren't a lot of rules. "No" was a word that appeared in the little girl's life more episodically than in a recognizable pattern, even if her parents thought otherwise. Ethics were unknown. A lack of concern about values or right and wrong worked because Jade, like most kids, was rigged to the good, and parents are by and large protective. When Jade was told she had done something bad, her first reaction typically was surprise: "What did I do?"

Even as parents with our own children, we might not notice how

innocent children are, and how lacking in pattern recognition and memory. But tell the truth. How many memories do you have before five years old? A few, sure, but memory is not a well-developed faculty yet. It doesn't need to be, so long as adults are constantly hovering, ready to scoop you out of harm's way. Are you sure you were a fully conscious, thoughtful being in those early years? Maybe you just went along with the world as it showed up to you. What need did you have for remembering what happened yesterday?

Memories are stored for pattern recognition, so a danger can be averted or a wish can be fulfilled. We think memories just happen, and store themselves, but it isn't like that. They're curated. And they're not particularly accurate. They're little fairy tales, each one of them. We store only that part of the experience that offers a useful cause-and-effect pattern. All the complexity is removed. What's left is something like this: When I was six and hit my little brother, I got sent to my room. When I smiled sweetly, I got a second scoop on my cone. Most of what's unrelated to the moral is forgotten. I can't even remember the taste of the second scoop, or who scooped it for me, just that I won it.

For all of us, as for Jade, memories start to multiply and things change at around six or seven. Whether Jade is raised in India or Senegal or America, it happens the same way. The outside culture decides it's time for Jade to grow up. Over the first few days of first grade, her whole world is turned topsy-turvy. No more self-directed play. No more cruising from station to station in the preschool or kindergarten classroom. No more tugging on the teacher's sleeve for help. Instead, it's time to learn to read – for everyone in the class at the same time, for forty-five minutes. Sit still for those forty-five minutes. Raise your hand if you have a question and wait until you're called on.

This is some weird stuff to the little kid first confronting it. No one is explaining the usefulness of the structure for maturation or apologizing for the abrupt end to the child's freedom. No one says, "Kid, it's time to grow up."

But after a few days or weeks, after being corrected for getting out of her seat before the forty-five minutes were up, or not raising her hand, or working on arithmetic during reading time, Jade figures it out. “My job is to grow up and become one of those giant adults who lead those peculiar lives above me, and in the meantime get them to approve of me.”

Jade might look around for a picture book with instructions, but there isn’t one. Her older brother is no help. He was never told that this is all about socializing and growing up to be a productive adult either. He just shrugs and tells her to go along with it and stay out of trouble.

Everywhere Jade looks, there’s a new expectation for her to obey a new rule. Everything has become deadly serious all of a sudden. Regimented and serious. Her life isn’t sad or happy so much as it is perplexing.

Jade is confused. Everybody is in the same boat in the first days of first grade. Everybody is confused.

As it slowly dawns on Jade that her job now is to grow up and become a giant adult, she is greatly troubled. How is that possible? She’s just a kid. She doesn’t know anything much. She has no idea how the adults implement and carry out all these rules. They’re not just hard to figure out, most of them seem invisible. In the most basic ways, she has no idea how the world works. She knows Mommy goes to work every day, but what is “work?” Where does she go? What does she do there? Is it like school? Is it the same as this thing they’re now talking about called “schoolwork?” When I was a child, I’m told, my belief was that my dad’s “work” was conducted on the bus I saw him step into at the end of our street. All those dads working away on those buses! Nobody told me otherwise. How was I to know better?

The stakes are confusing, too. Jade knows she is supposed to mature into an adult, but she isn’t told how, or when, or what will happen if she fails. She is never told that it’s one step at a time, and that she doesn’t have to figure it out overnight. She isn’t told that just about everyone succeeds, and that it’s not that big of a deal. All the big adults seem in on the game, and the expectations, but they seem to ignore that she’s just a kid. She

knows that her mother and father, or someone else big and important, have taken care of her up to now. They've invisibly filled in all the blanks. But now *all* the adults, even strangers, are demanding that she understand the new rules. Jade is overwhelmed, and she doesn't always have Mom or Dad to help her out.

One day early in first grade, just as Jade is resigned to failing her parents and being pawned off on a neighbor, a little voice shows up in her head, saying, "I've got this, kid."

If her newly emerging superego were inclined to explain itself, it might say this to Jade: "I'm going to help you out with the new rules, when your parents aren't around. Here's what we'll do. You know how your mom is more patient with you when you're acting quiet and what she calls 'ladylike'? Well, I'm going to remind you of that every time you're in a confusing situation with an adult woman. You know how your dad gets into a good mood when you joke around with him? Well, I'm going to remind you of that every time you're in a confusing situation with an adult man. And we'll see what happens. I think you'll be pleased."

Jade now has two strategies, one for women like her first-grade teacher and mom's friends, and one for men like her dad and grandpa and the male crossing guard on the way to school.

The strategies of the superego voice – "act ladylike" and "make him laugh" – aren't specific to any of the new rules. They are generic behaviors. But each time she remembers one, it buys Jade time. While she's projecting ladylike poise or goofy charm, she can figure out her next step based on the cues adults offer, as they nod approvingly and pay friendly attention to her. She has to learn the basic social restraints, and the superego is helping her along.

At first, that was all there was to it. The little voice in Jade's head gave her a way to move around adults when her parents weren't around, and it was enough. The rules piled on, and she slowly learned them and stored them away for future use.

If that's all the superego had delivered, Jade would forever cherish it for

having saved her life when she was a little kid. Unfortunately for Jade, and for all of us when we were her age, the superego had just gotten started.