

First Grade

Seven-year-old Frankie Scarmazino had a tummy ache. He didn't tell his mother or his brothers, but he'd had a stomach problem for weeks.

And he knew why. He was a thin little guy, tall for his age but not heavy. He'd never been in a fight before. He was with his brothers most of the time; if anyone tried to mess with little Frankie, they'd have to answer to his older brothers, especially Richie.

Richie was six years older than Frankie. At thirteen, Richard William Scarmazino was a big kid, big and tough. He was larger than his brothers, not just because he was older, but because he'd weighed fifteen pounds at birth.

He'd always been physically superior to kids his own age, and many who were older. Frankie adored Richie and always felt safe with him. He loved spending time with him.

But he'd never told Richie his problem. Or his mother. Or his dad. In fact, he'd been keeping it as his secret now for months, and his tummy aches were getting worse.

The source of his pain: Bert Serbachi, a kid in his first grade.

Bert was big for his age and towered over the other boys. Not only big, he was a bully. He was mean, and he was intimidating. Often he'd make Frankie fork over his lunch and any

lunch money he'd brought to school, leaving his victim without food and with a very big inferiority complex.

His first grade teacher never seemed to notice Bert's aggression; the few times Frankie'd told her about it, she'd just fluffed it off as 'roughhousing.' Every time it happened in the classroom or on the playground, Mrs. Kerr seemed to be looking the other way or reading her book, "How To Be A Better Teacher."

Frankie was fast; he could outrun Bert outside, but when they were in the hallway, the classroom, or the boys' room, Bert was there with his sneer, his smart remark, and his pushing and shoving. Several times he'd pushed Frankie so hard he'd fallen to the ground or hit the large iron heater in the classroom. This had occurred when Mrs. Kerr had stepped out of the room to get supplies from the storage room.

Frankie cried but always tried to hide the tears, because he felt ashamed.

One spring morning he was actually feeling light-hearted. He'd gotten the best score in his class on a math test and his teacher had praised a drawing he'd made showing an airplane in flight with a young boy holding on to the wing - something he'd dreamed about doing many times.

He'd come to school with brightness and an uplifted sense that all would be well that day. Then he'd met Bert in the hall.

His nemesis had stopped him from going into the classroom, demanded his money and lunch, and shoved him really hard - so hard his shoulder hurt the rest of the day.

After he'd walked home, he'd gone outside to the vacant lot next to their home where his brothers were playing touch football.

But today, Frankie didn't feel like playing. He was hungry. His mother never let the boys eat after school; they had to wait for dinner. His shoulder hurt, and he was deeply depressed.

Richie had noticed him sitting on the grass, not involved in the game, and came over.

"What's the matter, buddy?" Richie said.

Frankie said nothing and began to cry. Richie sat down beside him on the grass. "Hey! Come on, now. This is Richie, your brother, tell me what's eatin' ya'!"

In a few moments, Frankie began telling his brother, through sobs, the whole, horrible story of how Bert was beating up on him, stealing his lunch money, and ruining his school days.

When he finished, Richie stood up and yanked the seven-year-old to his feet. Richie towered over him. He looked down at his little brother and stuck his finger in his chest.

"Listen to me, buddy. I don't ever want to see you crying, moping around, feeling sorry for yourself, and being a victim again! You've gotta' beat the crap outta' that Bert! And I mean **BEAT THE CRAP OUTTA' HIM!** The next time he tries to mess with you, here's what you do: look him straight in the eye, then hit him in the face with everything you've got! I mean, everything! Start doing pushups now, I've got a punching bag in my room,. Use it, work with it, and every time you hit that damn bag, you see

Bert's face and smash it in! No regrets, no waiting, hit him as hard as you can. I guarantee, he'll never bother you again!"

Richie went back to the touch football game with his brothers leaving Frankie to ponder his brother's words.

And the first grader started using the punching bag and doing push-ups. He began practicing telling Bert off each time he was alone - shouting at him and telling him what a prick he was.

And it worked! His confidence returned.

Three days later, he was in the classroom when Mrs. Kerr left to go to the supply room. Bert came over and started hitting Frankie on the shoulder hard and calling him names.

Like Richie had told him, Frankie stood eye to eye with his attacker. And when Bert said, "Whatta' you lookin' at, wimp!" Frankie hit him so hard in the mouth, Bert fell against the large iron heating grill. Frankie ran over, grabbed his head, and started smashing it against the grill ... and then Mrs. Kerr came in and stopped him. She made Frankie clean up the heating grill spattered with blood.

Of course, the teacher blamed him for this 'unprovoked attack on Bert, sent Frankie to the principal's office, called Frankie's parents, and set up a meeting.

At the meeting the next day, the whole story came out. Frankie was expelled from school for three days, but when he came back, Bert gave him a wide berth, and never, ever, bullied him again.

So little Frankie Scarmazino learned his lesson: that evil, when left unchecked, only gets worse, but if you face it down and smack it in the face *really hard*, it disappears.
