Old Photo, 1948 or so

by Jerry Ratch

I'm maybe only four. Not smoking cigarettes found in street gutters yet. That will come the next year, when I'm five. Maybe when I'm six, and Andy's five, my pal from across the street. That's my tricycle parked behind this pack of kids that look to be near my age, cousins probably. There's Barbara Jean, the only girl. Laurie, Leroy. Don't know who the hell the others are. Maybe one of them's Andy, could be. We're all still pretty small.

That's me looking at the camera over my shoulder with an odd, sort of defiant look. My body twisted to the right. My arms, both of them, still intact. No polio yet. That will come along soon enough and change the direction of my life. That will wipe that defiant look off my face.

My hair's still blond, it seems. That will turn brown soon.

That's probably my taller skinny brother in the background, bending over a wagon maybe. He is six years older, so about ten, and sprouting up like the proverbial beanpole. Only 45 years later he will be lying in a pool of blood in a downpour, in a grain field cul-de-sac near Chino, California. Murdered by a disgruntled Lebanese ex-business partner.

My father, no doubt, snapping this photo of us all, on his new Brownie camera. “Smile!” he would have said. And my mother chiming in, no doubt, “Oh, Jerry, quit frowning! Oh, honestly, Otto, I don't know!”

“He'll be all right, Babe, don't worry. Hey, Jer, look over here.”

What's that I'm holding in my hands? It looks like a damned turtle. And its neck is sticking way out, its feet struggling, looking for a way out of my grasp.

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