

# THE WISE AND THE WEAK

by  
PHILIP APONTE

---

Picture yourself in Phil's place, hanging from a thin iron bar, four  
floors from the pavement. . . .

---

I was new in the neighborhood. I had just moved from the Lower West to the Lower East Side. Not much of a change! They were both dumps. I hated moving from the place I was brought up in, the place where all my friends lived. I had to start all over again making new friends. Days passed and still I had no friends. Sure there were boys, but none would talk to me, and when I tried talking to them, they would just turn and walk away.

After about ten days of doing absolutely nothing, I decided to do something lest I go crazy. One evening after supper I went downstairs and ran across a guy sitting on the stoop. I walked up to him and said, "Hello."

"Hiya," was his reply. He started walking away. I grabbed him by his arm and asked, "Why are you walking away?" He looked at me, then at my hand on

his arm. With a wise grin on his face, he said, "You'd better get your hand off, Sonny. You're wrinkling the skin."

I released my grip. He looked at me sarcastically and said, "Better watch that, Son, or next time I might get rough with you."

I returned his sarcasm, answering, "Would you care to try?"

Flying fists, scratching fingernails, feet dancing on a human floor. I was getting the better of it. He went down. He got up. Down, up, down, up, like the continuous beat of a drum. I pushed him on his way, and he staggered down the street. A smile ran across my lips. I walked down to the candy store to celebrate by buying a soda.

It was getting dark. Since I had had enough excitement for one day, I decided to go home. I walked slowly at first. Then,

---

"The Wise and the Weak" by Philip Aponte. From *Literary Cavalcade* (January 1954). Copyright 1954 by Scholastic Magazines, Inc., and used with their permission.

realizing it was rapidly getting dark, I increased my speed. I wasn't taking any chances. I opened the door to the hallway and started climbing the stairs.

"Hey you, Sonny." I turned around. It was him again, the big would-be tough guy.

"What the heck do you want?" I asked.

"Nothing. I just wanted to meet you and make friends."

Friends. The word seemed to scare me. Yet I had to have some friends. I walked down. He extended his hand. It missed my hand but not my stomach.

Another hand, not to mine but to my face. This time I went down. I got up

determined to teach this "big wheel" a lesson. But now, instead of one, there were six. This time I was the one who was going up and down, and I didn't like it. It wasn't long before it was over—for me, anyway. My lips were swollen, my eye was shut, my nose was bleeding. I hesitated, feeling for other injuries, fearing they had relieved me of some of my valuables. A hand came down to help me up. I was still away from it all. I got up and was about to say thanks. Yeah, it was him again, the "big tough guy." But this time I was in no mood—or rather, no condition—to fight.

"Come on, let's you and me go down to Vito's," he said.

"Vito's?"

"Yeah, the candy store."

"Oh, yeah, sure. Let's go."

We walked down and sat in one of the booths and started talking. I told him my life history and he told me his. His name was Ron. Nice name for a

not-so-nice guy. He came to the point.

"Phil, how would you like to join our club?"

"Yeah, sure," I answered. "Why not?"

"First, you'll have to prove you're an able member. You'll have to prove that you're efficient, useful."

"Efficient? Useful? I landed you, didn't I?"

"Yes, but you'll have to do much more than that. Well?"

"Yeah. Okay, what's my assignment?"

"Meet me tomorrow, here at Vito's, at, let's say about seven."

I went back home, entered through the back door, fixed my battered profile, and went to sleep. Nobody was home when I woke up the next morning. The day went slowly. I hadn't seen Ron all day. I hoped he wasn't joking. At six I went up and got my supper. At seven I was at Vito's. Ron hadn't arrived yet. I kept wondering what I was to do. I ordered a small Coke and waited for Ron. Five after seven. Then ten after, fifteen, twenty after. He'll never come, I thought.

I finished drinking the Coke and was ready to leave when the door to Vito's opened. Ron came walking in, looked around, saw me. He walked over, sat down opposite me, lit a cigarette, inhaled, and let the smoke come slowly out of his



nose and mouth. He was mysterious, and I was jumpy. Maybe I've made a mistake, letting him think I'm bad and bold, I thought. I've never gotten in trouble before, and I wouldn't want to. I'd better go home before something really happens.

I stood up, and then Ron spoke,

"Well, Phil, ready? Ready to prove yourself?"

"Well, I, I—"

"Don't worry, Phil. It has nothing to do with defying the law." I was about to say "No," when I spotted Ron's ever loving friends outside.

"Okay, Ron, let's be on our way," I said.

"Good boy, Phil, you're a real trooper." He laughed. I shook with fright. I had gone beyond my own reach. We walked until we got to the building across the street from where I lived. "Let's go up, Phil," he said.

"Yeah, sure," I answered. That was all I could say, "Yeah, sure." Up the stairs, first, second, third, and then the final floor. I stopped.

"Where are we going, Ron?"

"To the roof. You're not afraid, are you, Phil?" I didn't answer but just kept climbing. We walked out to the roof.

"Well, what now, Ron?"

"Wait a minute, just a minute." The building next to this was about five feet away. In between the two buildings was a four-floor drop. I walked to the ledge,

looked over, and quickly jumped back. This I didn't like. The ledge was two feet high. Ron saw that I was jittery.

"No, let's just get on with the . . . the game."

Ron smiled. "Yeah, game." The door on the roof opened. Ron's friends emerged carrying a thick iron pipe a little over five feet long. They laid it from roof to roof. I turned to Ron.

"What's that for?"

"We're going to play Tarzan." Just then more of Ron's friends appeared on our roof.

"Tarzan. What do you mean?"

"Just what I said. You know how Tarzan swings on a rope. Well, this time it isn't going to be a rope but a bar."

"Who's going to be Tarzan?"

"I'll give you one guess."

"You're crazy, Ron. That's a four-floor drop."

"Nervous, Phil? Did I say it was going to be you?"

"No, I guess you didn't, but I have to admit you had me scared there for a minute."

"You should be, Phil, because it is going to be you."

I stood there, stunned, even though I had suspected it from the very beginning. If only someone would call me or come upstairs to the roof, I thought to myself. It suddenly became silent. It was the first time I had really noticed how quiet a city slum can be. All of Ron's friends bowed

politely, saying, "After you, Phil, after you." I took a few steps toward the iron bar, then stopped and turned, looking for a possible opening in their defense. The door to the roof was still open. My last chance, I thought. But Ron's thinking was faster than mine.

"You'll never make it, Phil. If you try and we catch you, we might—ah—accidentally on purpose throw you over." He smiled and bowed politely, saying, "After you, Phil." I walked over to the ledge.

"Look, Ron—"

"Get going, Phil." I grabbed the end of the bar. The other end was being held by a couple of other guys. One foot went over the side—I looked down—my hand grabbed on for dear life, and this time the expression really meant something. My other foot went over. I started on my way toward the other roof, hand over hand in agony, my feet dangling in the air. My muscles ached. My hands started sweating. A little more to go. I made it. Now to put my foot on the ledge. My foot reached the ledge. Then, suddenly, without warning, one of the boys pushed it off. "Sorry," he said, "but you're not welcome on this side."

I tried again to put my foot on the ledge, but again he pushed it off. My strength, or what was left of it, was going. I pleaded with Ron to let me get over. The answer I received was a loud burst of laughter. I started back to where I had

originally started. Halfway there, I felt myself slipping. I gripped tighter to the bar; I couldn't go on. Looking down, I could see nothing but darkness. I tried desperately to sit on the bar. Up I would go, then down I would slip.

I couldn't feel my hands any more. My neck muscles hurt me terribly. I tried once more, this time putting my foot on the bar, then swinging up on it. Slowly but surely I started my agonizing journey to the top. My foot was on the bar, my teeth grinding together. Up, up, up a little more. A long sigh of relief. I was sitting on the bar, drenched with sweat. It was silent again. A few seconds, minutes. A plane passed overhead, but I didn't dare look up. Why? I didn't know, nor did I care to think about it.

"Look, Ron, what now, please? Please let me go." A few tears slid down my face. I wasn't one of them. I guess I had known it from the beginning.

"Well, Ron, well?"

"Hey, Phil, you want a glass of water or something? You want to play cards? Come on." He laughed. They all laughed. But when you're in death's grasp, you don't laugh.

"Well, Phil, we're going."

"Wait, Ron. If you go, I'll never get out of here."

"Look, Phil, if you get out of this you're one of the boys. If you don't well—well, you can bet we'll be at the



funeral.” He smiled and left, his boys following.

If I swung to one end, the other end would become unbalanced and would be likely to slide off. Another puzzle to figure out. I thought of one solution, then another, and another. No good, no good. None of them were any good. I thought of every possible angle. The only thing to do was to hope the bar wouldn’t slide off the roof.

Again I hung from the center of the bar and inched up toward the ledge.

The bar started slipping. I reached for the ledge, grabbed it as the bar fell clanging below. The little pebbles of the ledge were cutting into my finger tips, but I was close. My arms extended high over my head. My body was close against the building. I lifted myself, scraping my

knees and my face. Home was so near, so near. My foot reached for the ledge. One last burst of energy, and over I went, flat on my back on the roof. I lay there, my eyes closed, my lips murmuring a prayer, my legs and arms dead to the world.

I stayed there for what seemed hours. Then slowly I went back home, making sure I wasn’t seen. Next day I told my mother the story. At first she didn’t believe it, but after I showed her the bruises and cuts, she stood there amazed. The only thought that entered her mind was to call the police. I quickly talked her out of it, telling her it was better to have a living son than a dead one. We moved back to the West Side. Not much of a change. Both dumps, but it was a change for me—plenty.

### Comment

1. If you had been in Phil’s position, what would you have done (a) to make friends in the new neighborhood; (b) when Ron walked away after you tried to make friends; (c) when you were invited to meet the gang; (d) when you were told by the gang to go to the roof.
2. Since Phil showed that he could “play Tarzan” and pass the test, do you think, if Phil and his family had remained in the neighborhood, the gang would have accepted him? Explain.
3. Put yourself in the position of Phil’s parents. Would you have let Phil talk you out of calling the police?