

## Sound and Fury by Dan Greenburg

*Dan Greenburg is a native of Chicago who holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the University of Illinois and a Master of Fine Arts from UCLA. A prolific writer, he has authored over 40 books, including such best sellers as How to be a Jewish Mother, How to Make Yourself Miserable, How to Avoid Love and Marriage, and a series of more than 24 children's books, The Zack Files, named for his son. His articles have appeared in a wide and diverse range of popular magazines and have been reprinted in many anthologies of humor and satire. He has been a guest on The Today Show, Larry King Live, Late Night with David Letterman, and many other major TV talk shows. In this selection, Greenburg relates a situation in which soft words defused a potentially explosive situation.*

We carry around a lot of free-floating anger. What we do with it is what fascinates me.

My friend Lee Frank is a stand-up comedian who works regularly in New York comedy clubs. Not long ago I accompanied him to one of those places, where he was to be the late-night emcee and where I myself had once done a stand-up act in a gentler era.

The crowd that night was a typical weekend bunch – enthusiastic, hostile and drunk. A large contingent of inebriated young men from Long Island had decided that a comic names Rusty who was currently on stage was the greatest thing since pop-top cans and began chanting his name after almost everything he said: “Rus-TEE! Rus-TEE!”

My friend Lee knew he had a tough act to follow.

Indeed, the moment Lee walked on stage, the inebriated young men from Long Island started chanting “Rus-TEE! Rus-TEE!” and didn’t give him a chance. Poor Lee, the flop sweat running into his eyes, tried every trick he knew to win them over, and finally gave up.

When he left the stage I joined him at the bar in the back of the club to commiserate.

“You did the best you could,” I told him.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I could have handled it better.”

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

As we spoke, the young men who’d given him such a tough time trickled into the bar area. One of them spotted Lee and observed to a companion that Lee might want to do something about the heckling.

Lee thought he heard the companion reply, “I’m down,” a casual acknowledgement that he was willing to have a fistfight. Lee repeated their remarks to me and indicated that he, too, was “down.”

Though slight of frame, Lee is a black belt in Tae Kwan Do, has had skirmishes with three-card monte con men in Times Square, and once even captured a robber-rapist. I am also slight of frame but have had no training in martial arts. I did have one fistfight in my adult life (with a movie producer), but as Lee’s best friend, I assumed that I was “down” as well.

Considering that there were more than a dozen of them and only two of us, the period of time that might elapse between our being “down” and our being down seemed exceedingly brief.

The young man who’d made the remark drifted toward Lee.

The eyes of everyone in the bar shifted slightly and locked onto the two men like heat-seeking missiles. Fight-or-flight adrenaline and testosterone spurted into dozens of male cardiovascular systems. Safeties snapped off figurative weapons. Red warning lights lit up dozens of DEFCON systems; warheads were armed and aimed. In a moment this bar area might very well resemble a saloon in a B grade western.

“How ya doing?” said Lee, his voice flat as unleavened bread, trying to make up his mind whether to be friendly or hostile.

“Okay,” said the guy, a pleasant-looking, clean-cut kid in his mid-20s.

I was fascinated by what was going on between the two of them, each feeling the other out in a neutral, unemotional, slightly bemused manner. I saw no hostility, no xenophobic loathing, just two young males jockeying for position, going through the motions, doing the dance, willing to engage at the slightest provocation. I had seen my cat do this many times when a stranger strayed onto his turf.

And then I had a sudden flash of clarity; these guys could either rip each other’s heads off now or they could share a beer, and both options would be equally acceptable to them.

I’d felt close to critical mass on many occasions myself. But here, feeling outside the action, I could see clearly that it had to do with the enormous reservoir of rage that we men carry around with us, rage that seethes just under the surface and is ready to be tapped in an instant, with or without just provocation.

“What’re you in town for?” asked Lee casually.

The guy was watching Lee carefully, making miniscule adjustments on his sensing and triggering equipment.

“It’s my birthday,” said the guy.

Lee mulled over this information for a moment, still considering all his options. Then he made his decision.

“Happy birthday,” Lee said, sticking out his hand. The guy studied Lee’s hand a moment. Then, deciding the gesture was sincere, he took the hand and shook it.

“Thanks,” he said, and walked back to his buddies.

All over the room you could hear safeties snapping on, warheads being unarmed. The incident was over, and in a moment it was as if it had never happened.

I felt I had just witnessed in microcosm the mechanism that triggers most acts of aggression, from gang fights to international conflagrations. It was so simple: a minor act of provocation. A decision on how to interpret it. Whether or not to escalate. And, in this particular case, a peaceful outcome. What struck me was how absolutely arbitrarily it had all been decided.