Part of the Game

By Dina Witter

Frank pushed the peas around on his plate. By now they were cold and hard-small, green bullets ready to be loaded onto the prongs of his waiting fork.

“Frank, will you please eat your peas?” His mother glared at him from across the table. “I know you don’t appreciate the fact that food costs money, but Ted worked hard to put lunch on your plate. What do you think he would say if he saw you playing with it that way? Huh?”

Her breath was wasted on Frank. He continued to slide the watery mashed potatoes and cold peas around on his plate until only a blue-green mass remained in the middle. Besides, he had eaten peas yesterday. Probably the day before, too. Much more fun to form a pile of ammunition atop the growing banks of snow.

His mother’s voice drifted from across the kitchen. “Frank, if you don’t eat your food, I’ll . . . “

Standing up, Frank raised his arm in a military salute in respect to the dignified figure before him. “Lieutenant Willis reporting for duty, sir!” He shifted his weight to his left foot and waited for the older man to reply.

“You’re a good man, Frank Willis. I can always count on you. Any day now you’ll be promoted to captain, you know.” The tall, swarthy man gazed steadily at Frank. One weathered hand reached up to smooth his gray mustache as the other hand grasped Frank’s in a firm grip. His crisp, military uniform, although worn, gave him the distinguished air of one in command.

“Bad news, Willis,” the major continued. “The enemy is closing in. Our only chance is to increase our troops on the left flank. Lieutenant Anderson was shot down this morning. I’m going to have to send you to the front line.” He paused, as if not sure he should continue. “I won’t lie to you, Willis. You may not be coming back.”

Frank responded without hesitation. “I’ll go, Major. I only hope I am worthy of the trust you have placed in me.” He lowered his head, staring down at the tips of his snow-encrusted boots.

“Best of luck, Willis. Now go!” Major Simms commanded, watching Frank as he strode into the distance.

As Frank climbed into the camouflaged jeep, he felt powerful, important. He drove purposefully, past the olive green tents and scattered tin army plates. He could see his breath, suspended in the air. The sound of gunfire drew closer and closer, shattering the silence of the winter morning.

Without waiting to stop the jeep, Frank rolled out the side and quick-
ly sprang up, running for cover. Shouting orders to his troops, he was sure he could see admiration shining in the eyes of the men under his command. They needed him. The thought spread a warm glow throughout his entire body. But no time for that now.

“Lie low!” he yelled over the din of battle. “Our best bet is to . . .” He never had a chance to complete the sentence. A sharp pain struck him squarely between the shoulder blades. Great shot, he thought, as he sank to the ground.

Slowly, Frank returned to the world around him, his eyes fuzzy. As he attempted to sit up, a hard corner of the kitchen chair dug into his back. Slumping backwards, his head lolled to one side, he tried to forget the dull ache in his shoulders.

“Frank, did you hear anything I said? And sit up in your chair, please!” his mother screeched, jolting him quickly back to reality. Her voice reminded him of a parrot, he decided, constantly chattering on in an annoying monotone. “Are you listening to me, Frank?” she persisted. “No, of course not. You’re always off in some dream world of your own. It’s unhealthy for an eight-year-old to have an imagination like that!” Her eyes were fixed on the wall behind him, as if she too were somewhere else.

Abruptly, she rose and looked around her. “Frank, the last time I was in your room, it was a mess. Ted is coming home for dinner tonight, and I want you to wear your blue sweater. Do you know where that sweater is?” When she received no response, she went on. “I didn’t think so. I’m coming back in thirty minutes and I want your room clean or . . .”

Or what? Frank wondered listlessly.

“Or else!” she replied in answer to his unsaid question. She bent to quickly kiss his head, and sighing, left the room.

Tiptoeing through piles of clothes and assorted toys, Frank made his way toward the closet. “I, Sir Frank, have begun my quest for the Holy Sweater. None shall deter me from my mission, none shall divert me from my task!”

The sunlight formed a dappled pattern on the forest floor as it shone through small openings in the dense treetops. One lone knight rode bravely down the narrow path, an immense iron gate looming before him. A grim realization dawned upon Frank. He must retrieve the Holy Sweater by the time the sun rose and the cock called. He held the fate of the entire kingdom in his hands. It was all up to him. The iron gate was upon him now, a very large barrier in the way of his quest.

He rapped his lance against the gate, calling, “I, Sir Frank, command thee to open this gate so that I may pass!” Slowly, the great door swung open, as if it had not been used in many years. Frank drove his steed through the doorway, warily glancing around. He relaxed as he continued to ride. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

Suddenly, the earth began to quake beneath his feet, throwing his horse off balance. Swinging around, Frank turned to face his unknown opponent. Before him loomed the largest monster he had ever seen. It reared its ugly head to look at Frank, eyes glowing fiercely red. Its muscles rippled underneath an armor of green scales. Opening a gaping mouth, it let out an angry bellow.

“I fear you not, loathsome creature!” Frank cried, drawing his sword. “I will defeat thee, O Dragon, with my bare hands if need be! My quest is the Holy Sweater; thou shalt not stand in my way!” Hoisting his lance high above his head, Frank charged.

The dragon’s fiery breath made it difficult for Frank to get close. He danced in and out, teasing the dragon with his fancy fencing. For a while, it seemed that Frank held the upper hand, but then the dragon appeared to recover his advantage. The dragon whipped around, his tail slicing through the air. Frank was knocked to the ground by the force of the blow, his head reeling, face stinging.

Dazed, Frank wandered into the kitchen and settled himself into a corner, out of the way of his mother, where he might be able to read a book.

Frank looked up briefly from his reading as Ted swaggered into the room and seated himself at the table. “What’s for dinner, Dinah?” Ted laughed as though he had said something extremely funny. “Fix me something good!” He began to sing a drunken chorus of “Someone’s in the Kitchen with Dinah,” stopping every now and then to belch or chuckle.

Frank’s mom watched him uneasily. “I think you’ve had a little too much to drink, Ted,” she said, backing up against the counter.
“Don’t you worry about me, Dinah. I can hold my liquor as well as any man. You just fix me some dinner now—that’s your job.” Ted glanced around the room, finally noticing Frank, curled up reading in a corner.

“Dinah, that kid reads too damn many books. King Arthur and all that junk. He should be out playing ball with the other boys. He’ll never grow into a man.”

Ted continued to speak, but Frank ceased to listen.

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**“Are you listening to me, Frank? No, of course not. You’re off in some dream world...”**

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He fixed his eyes on the pot of soup bubbling on the stove, blue flames gently licking the sides. Light blue tinged with violet and orange...

“Turn the hose to full strength!” Frank heard somebody yell. The roaring in his ears made it difficult to understand the command, but he caught the fire chief’s signal. Bracing himself against the gusting winds, he moved in closer with the hose, trying to keep it steady. He squinted at the house in front of him, his vision blurred with smoky tears. The entire two-story had gone up in flames, the fire apparently having started in the garage. Nothing would be left when Frank and his crew were finished, only charred rafters and twisted pieces of metal.

He gasped as he spotted a small, blond head bobbing in one of the upper story windows. A second look confirmed his first thought: a young girl was trapped inside the burning house! Signaling to the fireman behind him to take over his hose, he rushed the door, kicked it down, and dropped to the floor. Along the side of the hallway he crawled, choking as the smoke enveloped him in a thick, gray blanket. Following the sound of the child’s cries, he ascended the stairs.

The girl hovered near the window, looking like an eerie angel in the light of the flames surrounding her. Throwing one arm over his mouth and nose, Frank charged through the wall of fire and tied a rope around her tiny chest. Anxious firefighters and spectators waited below, cheering when he began lowering her to the ground. Her grateful parents greeted her, and later him, with hugs and kisses.

Frank let out a huge sigh of relief. The girl was all right, and he was sure to be a hero. But what was that strange...? Frank jerked his head back as the smell of smoldering flesh invaded his nostrils. He felt a burning sensation spread quickly as it made its way up his arm...

Sunday night and Monday morning flew by in a blur. Already it was almost time for the dismissal bell to ring. His teacher had been talking for quite some time, but Frank hadn’t heard a word.

“We’ll line up in single file and march down to the nurse’s office. She’ll check your hearing and sight and she’ll weigh you. There’s nothing to be afraid of!” the teacher’s voice droned on. Miss Paisley sounded a lot like his mother, Frank thought, although her voice was always kind and reassuring. His teacher was nice, but she asked too many questions, like how do you feel? are you getting enough to eat? and are you sleeping eight hours a night? It seemed like everyone was always asking him questions. He wondered why, because it seemed he never had the answers.

Frank filed in behind his classmates, shuffling dutifully along to the nurse’s office. He had never liked the annual visit there, especially since his name began with a W. He always had time to imagine the horrors that must go on in that office before it was his turn. Frank decided that this year would be different. He was a big boy now, nearly nine years old. He wouldn’t let that old nurse scare him anymore.

“Willis, Frank!” came the shrill voice of the nurse, as she poked her head around the door. Her hair was pulled back tightly in a bun, making her look like an angular shrew. Frank stood patiently as the nurse adjusted the various balances. They needed him for tonight’s game. He was the only one who could handle playing quarterback against the Bears. Frank stepped off the scale.

“That’s quite a nasty bruise on your cheek, Frank. How did you come by that?” Miss Paisley inquired, her kind gaze fixed on Frank.

“Playing football.”

“Now take your shirt off for me, Frank, and bend over,” said the nurse as she marked something down on her chart. Frank complied, lowering his head.
“Oh, my God!” Miss Paisley whispered in an urgent tone, staring at Frank’s back.

The nurse quickly circled around him, wincing as she gingerly touched the open welts. “He has a severe burn as well, Miss Paisley,” the nurse said, pointing at his arm.

Miss Paisley crouched down so she was at eye level with Frank, taking both of his hands into her own. “Frank, please, this is very important. I promise you that no one will hurt you or be angry with you. You must tell me who did this to you. Was it your mother? Your stepfather? Frank, how did this happen?” Tears were forming in the corners of her eyes.

Frank raised his head and looked her straight in the eye. “It all comes with the territory, miss,” he said, his voice expressionless. “You can’t be a professional football player without expecting some rough and tumble. It’s just part of the game.”

FROM THE AUTHOR: “Part of the Game” was one of those rare stories that practically wrote itself. Frank was patterned after a five-year-old girl whom I met in Minneapolis. I didn’t know the slightest thing about her, but her reclusive manner, the dreamy look in her eye, and the bruises and scars covering her small body led me to wonder what life at her house was like and what went on behind those gray eyes. Once I started writing, the pen scribbled continuously for an hour, without any help from me. I realize that not all cases of child abuse are as extreme as Frank’s, but I felt this was necessary in order to draw attention to a serious problem which needs to be dealt with.

—Dina Witter,
October 1989
If you say that something is all part of the game, you are telling someone not to be surprised or upset by something, because it is a normal part of the situation that they are in. For investors, risks are part of the game. See full dictionary entry for game. COBUILD Advanced English Dictionary. Copyright © HarperCollins Publishers. In the height of success he learns that his sister Janice (16) becomes hooked on Heroin. Plagued with the ability to maintain his business or help his sister in her most trying time, Robert must choose what is most important in his life. Filled with family rivalry and the quest to do the right thing, Robert may ...Â Share this Rating. Title: Part of the Game (2004). 6.9/10. Want to share IMDb's rating on your own site? Use the HTML below. You must be a registered user to use the IMDb rating plugin. Login. Show HTML View more styles.