Dennis and the . . .

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Dedication

Note to Dennis: while this book is obviously about you and for you and of you and to you and with you and because of you and so you, the blame is entirely mine.

Note to self: try to blame Linda for everything . . . She suggested the title and urged me on every step of the way . . .

Note to anyone under 10: the pictures are for you.

Note to anyone over 10: the pictures are for you, too.

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Introduction

A typical day for me and the kids would begin, as with almost no other family in our neighborhood, at 5:00 a.m. Their mother, like a butterfly breaking free of its cocoon, would silently and without disturbing anyone or anything have already slipped out from between a tidy set of bed sheets and blankets and be gone. As careful as a mole, I'd not slip, but dig out of bed on my way to the floor—my back usually too stiff in the morning for just getting up.

I'd crawl onto the floor onto my back and stretch, then slowly rise and do some light exercise, get nearly sweaty, then shower, dress, smooth out the bed, then sit down at my computer to read the morning news on the Internet in my quiet ordinary way.

And by 6:00 a.m., I'd be ready to go back to bed—give myself at least another half hour before getting the kids up.

When their time came, I'd gently nudge them on the shoulder as they lay pretzel-like in their mounded clump of bedding and whisper a warm, "Five more minutes." The warning was merely an exercise in doing the right thing, for they slept without a care about how much on the clock or in what manner they spent their time in bed. They weren't afraid of stiffness or messes; they wouldn't be falling or sliding or digging or slipping out. They'd bound into waking when it was time. And my warning wasn't so much for them as for me. I was getting an extra five minutes.

When the time was up, I'd nudge them on the shoulder again, not so gently; and, like a flabby, co-opted siddha

whispering (they would say grumbling) slightly wise and slightly incoherent aphorisms like “a tree grows only as high as the sky will let it,” I’d strive to remind them that it was time to begin the day.

Actually, that’s a lie. I’d really say in a voice feigning alarm and command, “Rise and Shine!” And then, as if to speak for them, I would add, in my best Professor Fate voice, “Rise and Shine? You rise and you shine!” And that being their cue, they would naturally roll their eyes. They would also jump out of bed. So the routine did have some redeeming value.

I’d have breakfast on the table. They in their respective ways would humph themselves heavily into the room, where their choice of Cheerios, Cornflakes, and sometimes Lucky Charms, sometimes a Pop-Tart would await them. They’d eat—silently—as I would pepper their morning fare with the latest trivia, such as “Genghis Kahn’s real name was Temüjin.” Without speaking except through roving eyes intent on not meeting mine lest they give me the impression I had just commented on something worthwhile, they’d finish eating, repair to the bathroom, then get themselves dressed. Sometimes I’d help them pick out clothes. Usually, I merely assisted in making sure what they chose fit. Then, at last, we’d off to school.

We’d walk, which they hated. I’d sing to boost their spirits, which they also hated. They’d grimace. But when I’d say things after each verse like “Music hadn’t yet been invented,” the two of them giggled. Ally, while still in her kindergarten year, would usually cup her hand over her mouth pretending to contain an outburst. Adam, a third grader, would react by pulling Ally’s hand down to her side, and shouting “Stop it!”

I’d be singing the Big Bopper’s “Chantily Lace,” so I

know he couldn't mean me. But then Ally would say, "Tell us 'bout Dennis and the bear scare."

"Yeah!" Adam would add, no longer looking embarrassed or angry.

We had another 10 minutes before we'd reach school, and the bear scare story wasn't that long. It wasn't really a story either—just a moment of something that happened when Dennis and I were kids. So I'd embellish it a little—well, a lot. That way it lasted. It had also become one of their favorites—mine, too, now that it seemed to have some appeal for my captive audience.

So, if my children are a proper gauge, I would have to conclude that every family's older generation is funny and weird, and every kid loves to hear the stories that make it so. These are the stories of growing up in the old days, when the old folks were kids. And these stories better not be long or sad or even meaningful. They have to be as every child supposes his or her parents to be: worthy of a good laugh.

The stories have to be embarrassing, but only for their subjects, not their audience. They also have to be a little cruel and insensitive, the sort of stories that at least one member of the older generation does not want told—for obvious reasons. But, most of all, these stories have to be true. Why else would someone not want the whole world to know?

If the stories have value beyond these properties, that is merely coincidental. If they have reasons for their telling beyond what has already been suggested, that, too, is merely icing for the cake.

And the cake, which I propose to share, is Dennis. He's my twin, and I don't mean that metaphorically. Well, I do mean the cake part to be metaphorical, but he's literally my twin. The cake may get thrown in my face when Dennis discovers that I'm telling stories about him. So let me just say in the way of a disclaimer that these stories I'm going to tell are for the benefit of my children and are entirely for fun. I'm going to tell what it must have been like for Dennis to grow up repeatedly experiencing events and circumstances that, certainly and wholly in the inaccuracy of uncorroborated hindsight, are the funniest and the best experiences of my life. I love him more than I can tell, and these stories will definitely, although not incontrovertibly, bear that out.

Dennis and the Big Bear Scare

This is not a bear story full of fright, full of misery and spite, menace and cruelty, daring and deceit, full of that proverbial conflict between nature and boys—and the natural conflict between boys. It's a bear story of mostly four young lads out hunting for something to do in the waning hours of twilight one summer, probably more than one summer, on an unpaved country road many, many years ago. No one or anything dies, nobody is really hurt, not painfully, but someone does cry—actually, they all do in one way or another. Everyone and everything, it seems, gets dirty. All are slated for baths at the end. And everyone seems to know it. It's that kind of story. But it's also the kind of story that happens a few years after it all began.

In early 1954, soon after my twin brother Dennis and I were born, my family moved from the coastal Newport, Oregon, area to a little mountain community of Gunter on Smith River Road, which, as the name suggests, was on the Smith River. Counting Mom and Dad, his parents and what was then a passel of only six kids, that move to Gunter nearly doubled its population. Gunter was a wild place of bobcats, deer hunting, lots of minnows to catch in the babbling brooks we called rivers, lots of trees and rain everywhere. It was a civilized place of old, narrow, dirt logging roads where on the roadsides one could always find in the bushes and amongst the trees the not quite genteel, but quite common household discards of rusted appliances and battered cars.

We were gratified that our parents had selected to make

our home in such an awe-inspiring place as this. Nowhere else in nature could living be as grand or as colorful or as spotted with adventure and thrill. Eventually, two more of us were born to enjoy these desserts, making, if my arithmetic is correct, eight siblings in all. But I'm getting away from the story I had promised: the Dennis and the bear story.

It was a Saturday. Dinner was over. All of us helped clear the table, which meant that we got out of my Mom's way, in fact got clean out of the house. My three sisters would sometimes go with the boys for some after-dinner sport, but, on these bear story occasions, I recall that they all stayed close to the house. Perhaps they knew already what was in store and were not in as great a need for adventure. They, after all, had their dolls, sometimes puppies, and always our baby brother to baptize and raise as good Roman Catholics on the front stoop, which often doubled as an altar or entire church or nunnery depending on their needs. We older boys (baby brother had no choice) could sometimes be persuaded to join them as the priests and administer the communion wafers from the leftover bits of biscuit or cracker that had miraculously survived dinner. Usually, there weren't any miracles to hold us and we boys went our separate and secular, perhaps pagan, ways from the house or church or altar or whatever it was that kept the girls from joining us.

It was still not dark and the ground was not wet outside on these occasions, it being early September and no rain for a couple of days. We were likely having a dry spell. Dan, the oldest of the boys and all of seven years old, was already on the other side of the barn. He'd be standing in Summit Creek Road that led up the hill behind our property and into the woods. He was kicking up dust, looking for footprints, he said, when the rest of us caught up with him. That declaration got us all

thinking and acting like puppies with a whiff of the excitement we were all anticipating. We were quickly in the air and on top of one another and yelping, grabbing at the dust we were stirring and making contortions of all sorts as we twisted our bodies and heads and eyes in multiple directions so as to see the footprints in the road Dan had told us were there. We saw whatever he pointed out, and we hoped, as dogged explorers, for some sighting of the forest beasts who made the footprints we believed we saw.

We didn't really see anything except the dust, but in the spirit of joining our leader in another adventure, we didn't really care. Then like a shot, Dan let out for higher ground up the road. We, naturally, ran after him, shouting, "What'd ya see?"

Now, Dan has always been one of few words. Whether he saw anything or thought he did didn't matter. He wasn't telling, just running a good run to get most likely as much distance from us as he could and as quickly as he could. He knew we'd follow, and we did. When he figured he got far enough ahead, he'd stop.

Mark and I didn't call this play; it was far too serious for us that we keep up with our older brother. Dennis, on the other hand, grinned that slow I-can't-contain-myself grin. He wasn't chasing after anybody, just looking as though he were expecting to get something like food for his efforts. He was that kind of religious puppy—always the first to check for miracle wafers on the stoop. But Mark and I played it like a struggle, shouting at Dan to stop or tell us what we were after. We'd yell at the top of our lungs, and choke a little on the dust we were kicking up. Then we'd laugh a little that kind of spontaneous laugh kids get whenever there's just no explaining, just plain panic and greed for keeping the adventure going.

Dennis hurried like the rest of us in his loping stride,

always the last. He and I were both four years old that summer, but I was faster and slightly leaner. Not that I was stronger or quicker than Dennis, I was just more in a hurry in most matters and usually got ahead of him. Mark and I usually got to Dan long before Dennis would reach the spot where Dan had finally stopped. I often looked at Mark as a competitor for getting there first, which he always did, and competed with a deadly seriousness for besting my older brother, which I never did. Mark, I'm sure, was oblivious to my intent, maybe even my presence. He was just a year younger than Dan and his goal and obsession was to catch up with him.

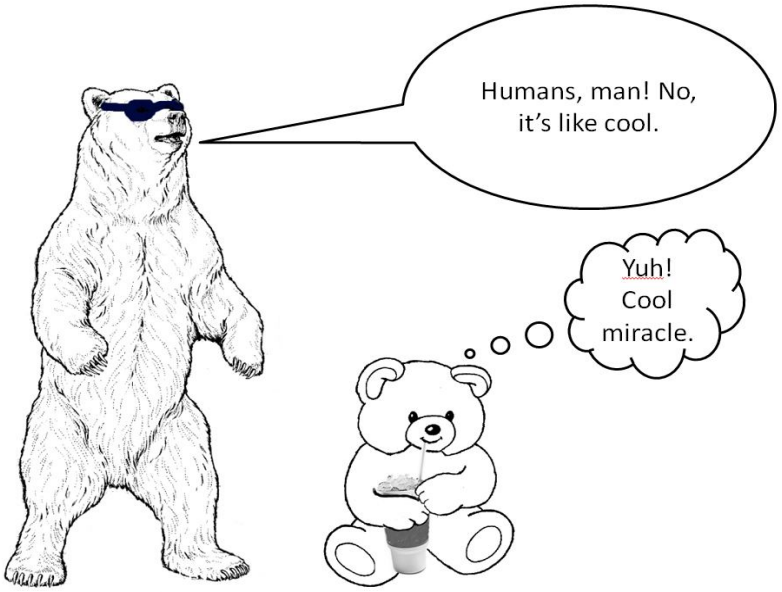
Eventually, Dennis and that big grin of his always managed to catch up with us, which was his undoing—catching up with us, I mean. As soon as he reached us, Dan would immediately shout "Bear!" and dash back down the road. Mark and I would follow suit, screeching out, "Bear! Bear!" as we raced downhill. Dennis would stand there frozen, wondering at first what had all of a sudden happened to fun, then just as quickly burst into tears blubbering, "Bear! Bear! Bear!"

His cries were louder, but not as clearly understood as ours. He was, after all, all alone up a dark road on a hill and only, remember, four, crushed by fear or very serious disappointment. But though his tears were genuine, he never faltered, slowly turning himself in an inaudible yet loud, bellowing way, and, like a locomotive that starts out slow, then gradually picks up speed, he'd begin his descent down the road toward the bottom of the hill where we'd be standing, laughing and pointing in the direction we all claimed to have seen a bear.

When Dennis at last put on the brakes and rumbled to a halt, the grin was gone, streaks of tears had formed in the dust on his face, and he'd deliberately bump into me as if to say, "That wasn't funny." I'd bump him right back with a "was too" bit of

the physical, but before there was too much more bumping between just the two of us, we'd all be bumping and laughing like puppies again scuffling for more of the same adventure (or food, depending on whose imagination and which one of us you're willing to believe).

We'd usually repeat the scare in exactly the same way three or four times before it became apparent that it was very dark. Dan would be the first to disappear toward the house; then Mark and I would head that way. Dennis would linger a little longer on the road, shouting "Bear!" to no one in particular until he finally came running in his locomotive way, grinning as though he'd seen something we hadn't. And we hadn't either.



Dennis and the Cow Bow Wow Bit

Dad had maybe five or six cows and occasionally a bull or two when we lived on Smith River Road. And every now and then there'd be a calf. He would give us turns naming each calf that came along. I named a black calf Blackie, but had to think about it a little while. No such hesitation for Dennis; he named his calf Dennis.

Dennis was the color of rust with a swath of white down the center of her face. And her nose was the color of rust, which always made it appear as though it had been bloodied. Maybe it was bloody. Maybe she had some fatal disease and drowned in the creek behind Grandpa's place, and maybe that is why she just seemed to be there one day and then not the next. Or maybe she just grew up. We would kind of lose track of things like that when we were four years old.

Before she disappeared, Dad had put up a corral and had put her in it. Dennis and I would often perch on the wooden rails of the corral to coax Dennis over to us so she could eat from our hands the tall grass we had plucked from a nearby ditch along the road.

That was in the spring and summer. Dennis was thriving and always ate right out of our hands. My Blackie, on the other hand, didn't do so well. She somehow ended up with worms and was put down and destroyed—something I was only made aware of when one evening I was looking for Dennis and saw him and a few others standing around a lump of fire on the other side of Dad's barn. The only sound was the pop and hiss that was spewing from the mass of flame they were all watching. I could have mistaken them for praying, which in a way I

suppose they were: heads bowed, hands in their pockets, not saying anything out loud, just looking down at the fire.

As I approached, I shouted out, "What's burning?"

Without lifting his head or turning to face me, without moving at all, Dennis shouted back, "Blackie."

With the coming of fall and winter, it was Dennis who was gone. In fact, all the cows disappeared. Well, we were really the ones who disappeared. It had become just too wet and cold to spend much time outside.

And Dad had put the cows in Grandpa's barn across the road. Dennis must have been among them. Before dinner, sometimes after dinner, Dad would take Fleck, our dog, and any of us that wanted to go, down to the barn for milking.

The cows didn't much care for Fleck because she was always trying to bite at one of their hooves and they'd usually swoosh at her with, first, their tails and then one of their hind legs. That was when Dad wasn't around. When he was there, Fleck would usually obey Dad and lie quietly and devoutly by the barn door, as if a plaster mold in a crèche. Eventually, she'd yawn and form that contented grin dogs make when they let their tongues hang out while they softly pant and look around for someone to pay attention to them. We were too busy standing around staring at Dad milking Dennis to oblige.

The cows were in their stalls, having gotten some hay to munch on and some kind of grain Dad had thrown in a manger at the front of the stall. Once they were in place and preoccupied with the feed, Dad would set down his stool and begin milking. We were still standing there watching as Dad pulled and squeezed those finger-like teats and squirted milk into a pale.

Then it got really interesting. For fun Dad'd squirt a little milk at us. He'd laugh and we'd stand and stare, but not entirely still. We'd form little mischievous smiles on

our faces as we played out in our minds how much fun it would be to squirt milk at each other.

And the cows didn't seem to mind us just standing there watching, unless Fleck came near. Well, it finally happened this one time that she took off running from stall to stall and barking. Dad was busy squeezing milk into the pale and, without looking up, called to us to take Fleck outside. I'm not sure why it was Dennis took off chasing Fleck—first, to the far end of the barn and then back toward where Dad was milking. Maybe it was because it was Dennis getting milked. And Dennis figured it was his cow, so it was his job to get Fleck. He was right behind Fleck and very close to catching up with her when the cow Dad was milking—I can't say for sure it was Dennis being milked, but I'm convinced it was—kicked its hind leg at that pesky dog and, hoping to strike a blow on behalf of every cow ever herded, hefted Dennis right up into the air by the jaw, tongue first.

Now, Dennis had a habit of sticking his tongue out whenever he ran and clamping it firmly between his teeth. He doesn't do that anymore. You might say this incident broke him of that habit—nearly broke his tongue in two.

Blood spirted everywhere; it was gushing. Dad leaped to grab him and constrain him. He was a powerful man and, in his haste to reach Dennis, kicked over the pale of milk, at which point, I think he said "shuck," but the words were kind of garbled for all the excitement.

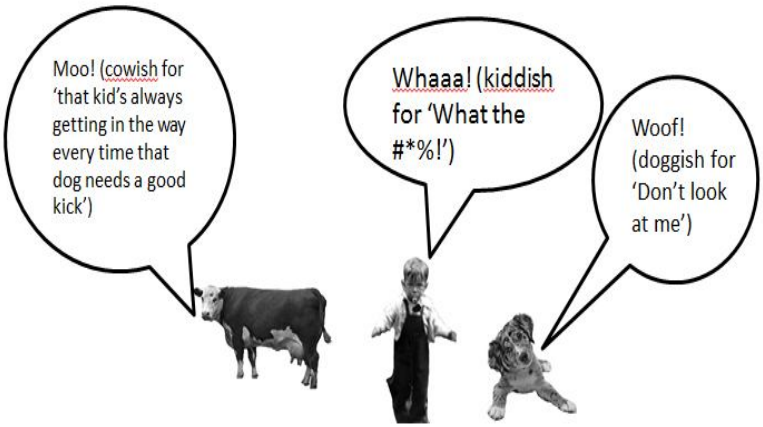
The whole scene played out like trying to put a cat in a box. Dennis was wailing and flailing as Dad was grabbing hold, swooping Dennis up into his arms. I stood and stared, hands in my pockets, and Fleck ran outside, still grinning and barking.

Finally, Dad managed to get Dennis, all of him, out into the darkness where they slowly became invisible. I couldn't see them, but, between Fleck's barking and Dennis' muffled sobs, I could hear them all the way up the

hill to the house where Dad deposited Dennis into Mom's waiting arms. She must have known they were coming, must have heard them on their way.

I stayed in the barn for a long time, watching Dennis munching on grain and hay as if nothing had happened. Dad eventually returned to the barn to finish milking and to shoo me up the hill to bed.

For a long time—I'd say years, but I don't really remember how long it was—Dennis sported a very interesting gash in the middle of his tongue. He'd grin the way Fleck did and dangle his tongue from his mouth. Then, like Fleck's wagging tail, he'd rock his head back and forth sideways, a little bit coy, a little bit proud, whenever anyone asked to see how his tongue was doing.



Dennis and the Holy Hotdog Heist

It went back to when Mom had decided to serve a breakfast of something other than oatmeal. It was the first full summer our family would spend in the desert. Dad was dead. Our rain in Gunter, Oregon, was the wettest. Our youngest was the sickest and needed the driest. So our best bet was Phoenix. Away we went, and that pretty much puts an end to the superlatives.

Dennis and I were six years old when we moved September 1960, and, by the next June, in addition to living in a very dry climate for almost a year (okay—I know—more superlatives), Mom decided we could all do with a change in diet, not to mention that hot oatmeal on a hot stove during a hellishly hot Arizona summer gave hot new meaning and intensity for us. Did I mention that we were Catholic—an Irish extract of the Roman Catholic form?

No matter. Every morning that first full summer, while the day was still below 100 degrees Celsius, all eight of us would get up and with the instinct of devoted clerics—certainly not casual in our devotion—step in line to the family room where we'd converge silently in our usual places side by side at the table, which was, conveniently, a picnic table.

One wooden bench that easily slid in and out from under the table lay on either side. Lay is perhaps not the correct word for Catholic clerics, but each bench was exactly the correct length to accommodate at least four skinny butts. So knowing well our arithmetic and Jesus, we'd sit four to a bench and say grace. The lone chair at the head of the table was reserved for Mom, but she rarely sat to breakfast with us. She instead busied herself with serving up the meal. On each of our plates (we used

plates that summer), she deposited one refrigerated hard-boiled egg, which she had cooked the night before when it was cooler, and one refrigerated, cold, stiff, slightly rectangular and slightly perspiring hotdog.

It was this hotdog that Dennis and I thought about whenever we thought about religion. I know I thought about religion in the way a seven-year-old imagines a sleepy, potbellied cherubim of hunger salivating with Jesus over breaking fast. Dennis must have thought about how he sometimes had gotten up during the night craving religion. Perhaps it wasn't hotdog he was after, just an overpowering urge to wake up from an otherwise peaceful slumber so that he could go looking for something, anything, to satisfy his craving for more. Perhaps he was dreaming that he was hungry. A cannibal would have smote religion and simply rolled over in bed and consumed his twin brother. But Dennis was no cannibal and had no such pagan desire to go back to sleep without ever getting out of bed for something. So he quietly rolled himself onto the floor and measured the night for its darkness and silence. When he heard nothing, saw nothing, he set out on his quest. And, by the way, did I mention that there were those cold, rectangular hotdogs Mom stored in the refrigerator.

Hotdog became an obsession. Maybe just one would do. He could suck on it as if it were a popsicle; he could extract its juices; it couldn't melt—as if it were a miracle. When he was ready to take a bite, it wouldn't crunch noisily; it would tear softly, easily, between his teeth, and he could chew on it the way he could a taffy to make it last a very long time before he'd have to swallow and take another bite—and endure another miracle. Or he could down it whole, as he'd seen a little dog do, and get it over with in a hurry should he hear someone stir from Mom's bedroom and find out the miracle within him. He could take it

back to bed and enjoy it there, lying comfortably between the sheets with his back to his twin so as not to disturb him or be disturbed—religiously, you know.

These were his thoughts as he pulled on the latch and opened the refrigerator door. Like the glow of a Magi's treasure, the light brushed effortlessly and warmly over him, and for a moment he stood motionless in the light, as if becoming a snapshot, forever a record of the miracle. He had closed his eyes until they adjusted to the flash. One would have thought he was praying, that is, giving thanks. Soon he was able to see what he was looking for, and snagged for himself the coveted hotdog. He took two and closed the door. Darkness overwhelmed him, but it was the clap of the latch snapping back into place that worried him.

There he stood listening for sounds of detection, having already consumed one of the hotdogs and about to start the other, when something from Mom's bedroom, strategically located next to the kitchen, signaled that the miracles were about to conclude. A light appeared from under her door.

Dennis needed another miracle to clear his way back to his bedroom. A divine intervention to escort him would have done the trick. But all he had was uncertain stealth, foreboding dread, and a hotdog. Into an also darkened living room he ran. Mom was already there. Like the good guardian angel mom that she was, she had two bedroom doors: one opened into the kitchen and the other opened at the far end of the living room, where Dennis was headed and she now stood looming and waiting for her prodigal to stumble into her reach. Dennis crouched and rolled in excellent groveling form to what he hoped would be a sanctuary behind the sofa. Never once did the hotdog touch the floor, which was the true miracle. Soon Mom was peering down at him, not like a guiding Seraph with parental

intervention in mind, but like the angel of death. And Dennis knew he could not hide. He could have used a prayer had he a prayer. He was after all on the floor on his hands and knees, looking up at doom and wishing he'd taken only one. He was wanting something to say, but unable to speak—his mouth and lips muted in their fateful, nay faithful, grip of the remaining hotdog.

It must have been quite a religious movement, an epiphany in the very bowels of one's soul. Perhaps I stirred, too, and had brought Dennis a Bible—thee Bible. Perhaps we drew a crowd that night. The entire family rouses and files toward us. First, the oldest scowling, then the baby cooing, then all our brothers and sisters settle in a hush on the sofa, the chairs, and available floor space. Dennis swallows; I lift his hands and eyes to the unknown. It is the beginning of indifference:

"Thou shall not get up in the middle of the night," I begin, "sneakest into the kitchen all by thyself, lest you be forever the only one, and clumsily open the refrigerator door, rustle through packages of food, and hastily retreat alone to the bedroom fully convincéd no one, especially thy lightest sleeper, wouldst find thee. For should thou doest such acts, Thouest mom shallest most emphatically and easiestly catchest Thou hiding in the living room behind the couch chewing in thy little mouth a big fat, cold—"

I pause. Mom fixes an icy stare. Not another word is spoken.

Dennis and the Hell Withal

Mom had discovered that someone had etched the word "Hell" into the bathroom wall and in direct line of sight for anyone sitting down in there. What happened next was a kind of James Cagney moment, the kind of moment he as captain in *Mr. Roberts* discovers that someone had thrown his prized palm tree overboard. Mom didn't exactly exclaim, "Who DID IT!?" with James Cagney's shrill roar over the loudspeaker, even though to this day I swear that's what I heard. I suspect Mom wasn't even visibly agitated. She coolly, I'm reminded by less wildly imaginative witnesses, summoned us around her, stonily pointed out the desecration, and then just as coolly ordered us to our bedrooms, where we were certain to stay forever or until the culprit confessed.

We did get out for meals and brief visits to the very bathroom that now had Hell in it. And this went on for nearly a week until Dennis finally confessed. Dan had an idea it was Dennis and offered him a boy scout knife if he'd own up to the deed.

Dennis hesitated. He had thought Marianne had done it, since she had first alerted everyone to the presence of Hell in the bathroom.

"Look! I've got 16¢ I'll give you," Dan pleaded, pushing his hand down into his pants pocket and pulling out several coins to show him.

Dennis grabbed the coins and said, "What'll I say?"

I smiled, giggled, in fact, relieved that the choice was made and Dennis was going to confess. I looked at him and

nodded happily, approvingly, knowing full well that Dennis was a generous, sharing soul and I'd eventually get half of everything he was getting except the trouble.

"Just tell Mom you did it," Dan coached Dennis. "She'll let us go and you'll probably have to say an extra Rosary."

We trusted in Dan. He wouldn't steer Dennis wrong unless he really had to.

"The worse that will happen," he continued, "is that you'll probably have to go to confession more for a little while," which, as we all knew, was probably going to happen anyway. Nobody, however, was going to press the point, because what Dan wasn't telling Dennis and I wasn't going to remind him to tell Dennis was that the worst that could happen was that big stick Mom had atop the kitchen cabinet for just such occasions as chastising a desecrator of her hallowed walls. It was best, we all instinctively knew, to nod in agreement with Dan's take on the outcome. And that's just what we did. Dennis nodded, too. I think he knew what the rest of us were really thinking, but I think the 16¢ meant a hell of lot more to him than any danger he might encounter along the way now that he had possession of Dan's offering.

So, if more Rosaries, extra confession time, and a big stick were all there was to it, off Dennis gleefully went—our redeemer—to find Mom and secure our release. We waited eagerly for the bedroom door to open and for Mom to announce that Dennis had confessed his sin, that he had been punished severely, and to redress the wrong we had suffered for his acts, she would be serving a very nice dessert after dinner tonight—except for Dennis, Mom would surely tell us as the perfect way to emphasize the severity of the wrong we had all suffered for that Hell on the wall. We waited eagerly for nearly an hour

until we noticed from our perch on the beds near the window that outside in the yard . . . well, there was Dennis—our redeemer—not grimacing on a cross, scourged within an inch of his life, but unscathed and grinning and jumping around with Frank and Marianne, who, it goes without saying, were judged too young to be transgressors of any evil and had been exempted all along from any kind of punishment. We looked at each other in disbelief and then did another take out the window to make sure what we were seeing was real. Dan said something like "shuck." Mark and I merely shook our heads and tried to figure out what had just happened to our salvation and that dessert.

Mom had set Dennis free. She had obviously doubted his story and for her distrust absolved him of any part in Hell. He must have seen us staring and stopped abruptly in his tracks. Like a dog noticing something good to eat, he let his tongue fall out, then bobbed his head up and down several times while his eyes grew wide, as if to nod and say, "Well, fellas, you were right." He was utterly giddy with our own disbelief and waved to us. We were too stunned to return the greeting. Then, that grin of his, a kind of puffed expression around the mouth and cheeks, as if he were holding his breath, replaced the puppy dog look. Finally, Dennis shrugged and ran off, confirming our suspicions that we would never see that 16¢ again.

Dennis and the Cocoa Fly

Mom always did her best. She would be the first to tell us if that weren't true. Not that we would believe her because we always knew better. Take breakfast, for instance. On most school days it was oatmeal watered down with Carnation canned milk, for cooling purposes—certainly not for taste. She'd cook the oatmeal on the stove in a big pot, then pour it steaming hot in equal portions into the eight bowls she'd set on the table. There would have been nine bowls, but I don't think Mom ever had any.

If we didn't sit down and eat it immediately—if we let it cool on its own without the Carnation, that is—it congealed into a solid, single, crusted mass that we could lift completely out of the bowl on our spoon. Sometimes we'd get to the table late, but there was no crying. We'd just have to pour on some Carnation, lift the contents of the bowl up and eat it like a popsicle.

Sunday was different. We'd still have to get up early and we'd have to go to mass and we'd have to wait until after church to eat because receiving communion was mandatory and, like the rule about not going in swimming after eating, receiving communion required an eternity between meals, at least three hours, which for a Sunday morning really meant more than 12 hours, unless, like Dennis, we wanted to get up in the middle of the night and have a hotdog and try not to get caught doing it.

Once Joann made the mistake of brushing her teeth before mass and swallowed a little of the toothpaste. She wasn't allowed to take communion on account of it. And everyone in the church stared at her when she had to remain kneeling in the pew while we all marched up to the

altar rail for our little wafers. Poor Joann—at least we got a little piece of bread out of the deal.

So breakfast on Sunday was always something extraordinarily special. We would get pancakes, bacon, and every once in a while hot cocoa.

Now, the pancakes came on a large platter about twice the size of any one of our plates. It was piled high, about twelve inches high or more, but only for as long as it would take Mom to remove her hands once she'd set the platter on the table. As soon as she was clear, the platter was, too—cleared, that is.

At this one particular momentous Sunday breakfast, we did have hot cocoa. Mom had used the oatmeal pot—it wasn't being used for oatmeal that morning—to heat up the milk and mix in the chocolate. There was enough for eight full glasses, which she had already poured out and put on the table where we sat waiting in our usual combative manner for the platter to arrive. Usually, we growled at each other, much as our stomachs growled and crowed. But I think this time we cooed a little bit at the sight of the hot cocoa and instantly our eyes filled with anticipation. And then we said grace, or there'd be no pancakes.

What with making and then serving cocoa, it took a little bit longer that morning to get the pancakes ready, but we didn't mind. We all sat at the table sipping and stirring our cocoa, making sure it would last long enough to enjoy it with the pancakes. When the platter did at last arrive, we each struck out for our portion, spearing our cakes and each other's forks in the clash and haste to get as much of a share as everyone else would allow. In all the confusion—well, it wasn't really confusion; like snarling raptors with our claws out, we knew exactly what was happening to Mom's platter of pancakes. But we had temporarily forgotten about the cocoa.

It wasn't until the platter was empty and we had hunched over our plates to begin the eating that someone—

I think it was Marianne; she notices everything—pointed out that a fly was floating in Dennis' cocoa. We all stopped what we were doing and gazed in amazement at the squirming black speck circling the spoon Dennis had been using for stirring. Dennis looked down at his drink just then, too. A countenance of joy for the plenty he had thus far received quickly yielded to fright, frustration, anger, disbelief, and, ultimately, profane thoughts. You could see the tears well up in his eyes as he let go of the spoon and then dropped his fork onto his plate and plopped his head downward catching it in his hands before it could hit the table.

He was stricken by the turning of events and what was obviously a cruel fate. Hadn't he properly given thanks? Perhaps it was the fly being punished.

The spoon stood at a slant in his glass of cocoa. The fly had finally stopped circling it and floated lifeless in the center of its chocolate pool.

But no one was really pondering causes and effects. Dennis was moaning at this point and someone—I think it was Joann; she was always speaking out for us for one thing or another—shouted into the kitchen at Mom:

"Dennis has a fly in his cocoa!"

Mom shouted right back, "I don't want to have to come in there!"

Message delivered and message received; it was time to get on with breakfast.

Dennis delicately and mournfully spooned up the fly from its chocolatey grave and set it reverently on the table beside his glass. Without looking up, he wiped away some his tears and took a bite of his pancakes, letting out a soft, muffled groan.

The rest of us drank our cocoa as quickly as possible and resumed eating, too. The fly lay in quiet repose throughout the remainder of the meal.


Buzz – Buss – Buzz – Blah!
(Flyish for 'I hate people and their blasted cocoa milk')

Dennis and the Indian Rocks on Indian School Road

When Dennis and I were still in first grade, Dan got himself a damn paper route. We weren't jealous or anything. And we weren't really angry that Dan pulled himself up from penury to affluence. Good show, Dan. Cheerio and Hip-Hip, we would say if we thought it would make things right.

It's just that all these years later, as Dennis and I reflect on this singular achievement by our older brother, it becomes quite clear what is to blame for that cursèd temptation that led Dennis astray and may even to this day tug at his moral compass.

The Scottsdale Progress, a local newspaper, had just transformed itself from a weekly to a daily and had hired Dan as part of its force of carriers to meet the new demand for expanded delivery. Every weekday afternoon and once on weekends (Saturday and Sunday were combined into one), he'd get on his paperboy special and set out for his route. On Friday evenings, he'd get on his bike and go collecting. Dennis was too young to have a paper route, but the idea of making money intrigued him. So, after several weeks of observing Dan going off on his route and the routine for collecting money and storing some of the profits on the top of our bedroom dresser, Dennis came up with a way of collecting money, too.

You see, the four of us older boys shared a bedroom and a dresser. What could be safer? We each got a drawer in the dresser for our clothes and any personal items. Dan was the tallest and the oldest and the biggest and the strongest and the meanest and the last one of us any of us

would say no to, so he also got the top of the dresser as his personal domain for any purpose he chose. And he chose to leave, and I really mean to leave his money lying around right there where we could all see how much he was making. We were to leave, and he also really meant to leave his booty alone if we knew what was good for us.

This is where the moral of the story takes over.

One day in the late afternoon on a Saturday Dennis comes back from a trek down the alley to the local convenience store with a 5¢ bag of M&Ms, the kind with peanuts in them. I'm lying in a dirt patch along the back fence when he comes moseying into the yard.

"Want some?" he asks me. He obviously notices I'm staring at what he has in his hand.

"How'd ya git that?" I ask, holding out my hand for a share of the goods.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out another bag, along with a Sugar Daddy and a Big Hunk. My eyes grow wide with amazement and excitement. He must have 20¢ worth of candy, a veritable fortune.

"I gave half my Indian rocks to Dennis Weatherly," he boasts, depositing the three remaining bits of candy in my outstretched hand. He giggles that "Well, EE-EE-EE" giggle that Dennis and I often exchange when we know we've done something either very stupid or very smart and most times both. He then reaches into his other pocket and pulls out a handful of jagged pebbles not much bigger than the M&Ms.

"Indian rocks?" I ask, even more amazed.

"I got 'em right there on Indian School Road by the U-Totem. Dennis gave me 50¢ for 'em."

He motions me to hold out my other hand, then pours his Indian rocks into it.

"50¢ for these?" My head isn't on straight or something. These are the kind of pebbles we find every day in the alley, the kind we chuck by the handful into the

canal that runs behind our house just to watch them splash in the water like bombs dropped from a flying fortress, just like in "High Noon"—I mean, "Twelve O'Clock High" or maybe it was "Combat." But it was great! Anyway . . .

"How come they're Indian Rocks?" I ask, skewing up my whole face to make myself look more intelligent than I think I am.

"Indians made 'em before Americans lived here." Now, there are many levels on which we could find fault with such a remark, but, bearing in mind that Dennis and I are only seven years old and quite obviously fixated on the candy, let's move on. Besides, as soon as he says it, Therese emerges from the house:

"Dennis! Mom wants you," she shouts.

Dennis shoves all of his candy into my hands, looking as though he's just been struck in the head with a cluster of his Indian rocks. I immediately feel his pain. Getting caught with a cache of candy, and it not even being Christmas, means for sure the big stick, and then a long time going without the possibility of dessert. But there is also something to be made of the point that having candy for the times there'd be no dessert—

I better move on, because it hurts to take it all in and properly process it in such a short time. So, just as immediately as he shoves the bundle into my hands, I push the candy back into his. He's going to have to do this without me.

"Mom wants you," Therese shouts again; and then strikes a second bolt of lightning: "And you, too, Pat!"

Together we slink our way into the house into the living room where Mom is sitting. Dan is standing beside her. He's got some coins in one of his hands that he's rolling and massaging with his fingers. He's also got a big scowl on his face that's directed right at us.

All I can think is "where's Mom's big stick?" Perhaps this time she's going to leave the pummeling to

Dan, freeing her from the need to make the effort. I'm pondering these developments and weighing in my mind the pros and cons of such an arrangement, as well as asking myself what am I doing here, when all of a sudden I hear:

"Where'd you get that?" Mom's not really asking a question as much as demanding an answer. She punctuates her statement by pointing her finger as if it were a gun putting a bead on the candy Dennis is still holding in his hands.

"U-Totem," he replies almost in a whisper. He's staring at the candy, expecting, I'm sure, the gun to go off at any moment.

"With what? Where'd you get the money?"

"I sold some rocks." He was still not speaking in much more than a whisper.

"What!?" There's no describing Mom's expression. Dan's scowl changes at precisely that moment to a smirk. I think he is almost proud of this display of ingenuity from his little brother.

"Some Indian rocks Dennis found," I throw out there, hoping that it's just about the money, not the candy. "He sold them to Dennis Weatherly. That's what he s—" my voice trails off and I freeze when Mom rises from her chair.

She walks over to Dennis and point blank shakes her finger directly at his candy.

"Is that what's left of the money?"

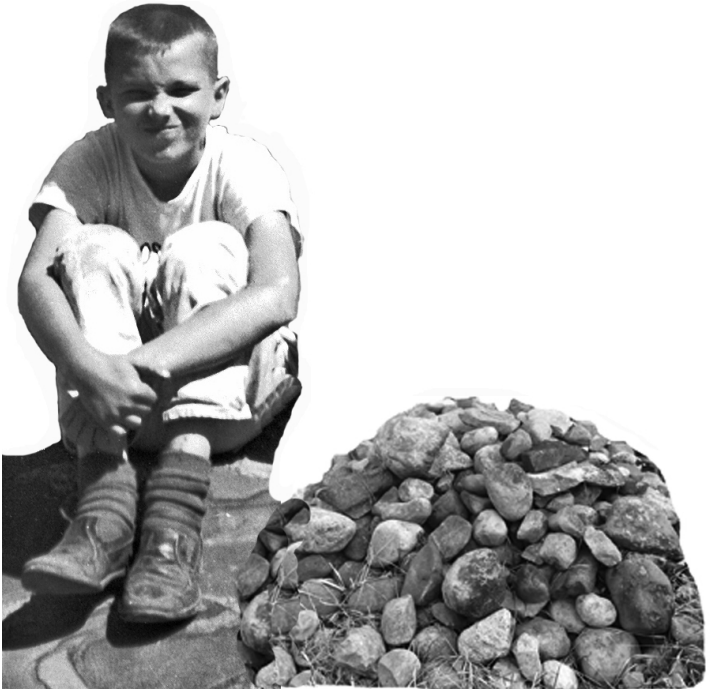
Dennis nods his head; tears are beginning to well up in his eyes. He can't talk anymore and is completely resigned to losing everything.

"You took three quarters off the top of Dan's dresser," she says, and finally there's no more mystery. I'm not really in trouble. Dennis is.

I look up at Mom and then at Dan, who's still smirking, and I almost raise an objection that it isn't Dan's

dresser, not really, but all the attention is right there on Dennis at that moment. So I decide to leave it that way.

I don't think Dan ever gets his three quarters back. I think I always knew no one is stupid enough to buy Indian rocks for 50¢ any more than Mom is to buy Dennis' story at any price. I don't know who gets the rest of the candy. All I know is that it wasn't me, and, according to the moral of the story, Dan doesn't leave his money lying around anymore and Dennis isn't to sell any more Indian rocks. He'd have to move on to bigger things.



Dennis and the Pop Bottle Crime Spree

I like to say that we were ants at a picnic, but truth be told I have to say that we were criminals. And I better add that a life of crime can have its setbacks. It requires more than just thinking ahead. There's that element of thinking back. And, when I think back to the time that Dennis told me he knew of a place where we could maybe get ourselves a bunch of empty pop bottles, I should have paid more attention to that 'maybe'. Then, maybe, I would have realized that we weren't destined for a life of crime, that our life was better suited to the daily grind of ants, pondering that eternal ant question: did we come first, or was the picnic already here?

You see, one of our neighborhood candy suppliers, a nearby 7-11, had cases of empty pop bottles stored in a kind of large cage that reached all the way to the roof of the back of the building and enclosed the backdoor to the store. And Dennis stumbled upon it just like an ant might find that proverbial picnic while riding around in the neighborhood on his bike and foraging in no particular direction for something of sustenance or word thereof to take back home. At 2¢ a bottle, his discovery of empties represented a veritable fortune to be spent most assuredly on much sought after and ample treats.

The only problem was that this cage was built with vertical wooden slats each about 2 inches apart and painted white, I guess, so that it wouldn't entirely resemble the bars of a jail cell. That guess, I'm also guessing, is the criminal mind at work. I'm only supposing the distance that separated the wooden slats because it was just wide enough to let us see what was on the other side and small enough to

keep a pop bottle from squeezing through. Not even a jail cell is made that impenetrable.

Well, this is where the criminal mind plays tricks on us. In his foraging, Dennis noticed that some other foraging types, with the same knack for realizing a picnic when they see one, had evidently broken off a piece of one of the wooden slats just low enough to the ground to allow for kneeling down outside the cage and reaching in and grabbing some of the empties.

And that's just what we did. And nobody was going to find out. And what was even better, the 7-11 paid the deposits on any empty pop bottles.

So after riding back home to tell me of his find, we two ants rode up on our bikes in the alley behind the store. Now, the alley wasn't paved and the bikes didn't have kickstands, so we just laid them down in the dirt and gravel. Then, to be fair, we took turns at snatching some empties. First Dennis reached through the hole in the cage and I followed. I remember thinking that it would have been the best of all possible worlds had the pop bottles not been empty. What happened next could have been prevented had either of us used anything more than our criminal minds in this caper.

After extracting our first load from this veritable smorgasbord, we decided to take our haul around front and into the store where we presented ourselves to the clerk, proudly handing him one empty pop bottle each. As we eagerly anticipated the 4¢ return on our investment, I found myself getting a little concerned when the clerk didn't smile or share in our anticipation. Instead, he held up the bottles, twisted them around in his hands, peered at them closely and for a long time.

"Where'd ya get these?" he at last asked.

"We found 'em," Dennis replied, with a little bit of hesitation in his voice.

The clerk then took a good look at us. Now, we weren't due for a bath until later that night, it being a Saturday. So I'm sure he noticed that we were a bit on the unkempt side. But he probably also noticed that the knees on our jeans were slightly more dirty than the rest of us. It must have been apparent to him that we had only just been kneeling down in the dirt and probably the dirt behind his store.

Well, if he didn't notice any of these things, I certainly did, and I was beginning to squirm a little and started to brush off the dirt from my knees, all the while hoping that he wouldn't also notice that.

He leaned over the counter, getting closer to us, and placed one of the bottles in front of our faces. We looked first at the bottle, then at him.

He was about as old as Mom with bushy eyebrows and little hairs coming out of his nose. His mouth formed a kind of unhappy smile, the kind you could see on a picture of George Washington, as he said triumphantly, "This one's chipped. See? Right there on top. Can't give ya any 2¢ for a chipped bottle."

He then stood back up and hit a key on the cash register. The drawer opened and he picked out just 2¢ and handed us just that much. He kept the two bottles and we took our 2¢ and headed out the door.

"Hey," Dennis said once outside, "let's get another."

"Okay," was all I could think to say, and like a good worker ant got in step behind Dennis as he marked his trail back to the hole in the cage.

He was just kneeling down to reach in for another bottle, when we heard the clerk shout from inside the cage:

"What're ya doing?"

Dennis stood up and meekly replied, "Nothing."

The clerk had just come out the back door when he spotted us. As soon as he spoke, he took two quick steps in

our direction before being blocked by a stack of cases full of empty pop bottles. Looking as though he might kick them out of his way, he instead deposited the two empties he was carrying into a couple of cardboard sleeves on top the stack. They were the two empties we had just given him.

"You want me to call your parents," he growled. "I will, too. You git out of here before I do. And don't you come back."

Dennis and I didn't bother to ask, "How do you know Mom?" We quickly pulled up our bikes from the ground and just like frightened children—not the hardened criminals I spoke of earlier or the ants willing to die for that picnic—ran our rides down the alley, forgetting in all the excitement that they were our rides.

Once we got far enough away and regained some of our criminal intent, we hopped on our bikes as if we'd just discovered them. Dennis looked behind us to make sure the police or the clerk or Mom, for that matter, wasn't following, then, with that bloated who-ate-the-cookie smile of his, looked over to me and said, "That must be where the guy keeps all the empties."

It dawned on me for the first time that day that Dennis wasn't the criminal element I thought him to be. He was just a little misguided, and there'd be no picnic for a couple of ants like us.

Dennis and the Donut Attack

I never saw the appeal to selling donuts door to door. Mom saw it as a way to build character, a way to instill an appreciation for the value of a hard-earned dollar (which was just about the sum total of everything I would earn from the entire enterprise). A way to get us out of the house and out of her hair for one extra day every week was more like it.

So every Saturday morning around 10 when Dennis and I were also around 10, an elderly, slightly stooped gentleman in his Goldwater glasses and butch haircut, whose name as far as I could tell was Mr. Crust O'Bread, would deliver to our house an assortment of freshly baked donuts neatly packaged by the half dozen in 12 white paper bags. The bags came divided up into two cardboard boxes cut down as makeshift cartons and snuggly arranged in three rows of two (or, depending on how you looked at them, two rows of three). They were folded at the top and stapled shut for quality control and, again depending on how you looked at them, appeared almost like furry white rabbit ears sticking up in an orderly bundle of some drooping and some not.

Like a couple of forklifts, arms outstretched, ready to transport the load of donuts to their ultimate destination, Dennis and I stood ready to receive delivery.

"Don't worry, boys, if you tip 'em," Mr. O'Bread would usually say, spitting and spraying "tip" across the packages, as he handed over the cartons. "The staple will keep 'em fresh and," he added with a laugh that I can only describe as a snarly sneer, "in the bag."

That was code and we knew it really meant that the contents better not fall prey to a 10-year-old door-to-door

salesperson's inclination to lighten the load by sampling a product that became more and more delicious with every step he took.

We nodded, sealing our agreement that each bag represented a 5¢ commission should our charm and eloquence convince someone in the neighborhood that 40¢ was not too much to pay for what we had to offer. Then, we headed off, each going in a different direction.

It wasn't a heavy load. We're talking about six bags of donuts after all. But gripping and clinging to the cardboard cartons proved a bit of a challenge with hands that were already perspiring profusely, thanks to the bright Arizona sunlight that, even in winter, managed to bathe us in its burning rays and quite a lot of our own perspiration. I'd say blood, sweat, and tears, but the blood was a bit of an exaggeration.

It wasn't enough that there were no grips or straps to make it easier. The dampness from our hands formed palm and finger prints that eventually wore down and softened the holds we had onto the carton until we found ourselves clutching soggy brown clumps of cardboard. By the end of the day, we usually returned home without much of a cardboard carton left. I could say the same about the bags, but only in the sense that the sun melted the donuts until their sugar and icing began to run and bleed through the bags, staining each of them with a shimmering translucent array of chocolate, maple, and plain glaze. In other words, there was still a lot left when it came to the bags of donuts. It was just that the donuts had morphed into something not quite the same as they had started out to be.

Well, I only really remember this happening one time because I only really remember trying to sell donuts door to door one time.

Dennis on the other hand set out multiple Saturdays in his quest to make that 5¢ a bag. One sad day, his last

day in door-to-door donut sales, he came back without any donuts at all. His pockets were also empty. Mom demanded to know what had happened to the money. Dennis proceeded to explain that he hadn't had any money; no one was buying, and upon heading for home he was robbed. One older boy on a bicycle had ambushed him down the alley behind our house. There could have been more, so he didn't stand a chance. This older kid grabbed the bags and rode off laughing. It so upset Dennis that he sat down right there in the middle of the alley thinking he'd better not go home. He knew he'd be in big trouble. So he sat there for a very long time, as long as it might take for a thief to eat six bags of donuts. Finally, he got up, removed the lid from a nearby garbage can, and shook out from the cardboard carton whatever was left of the heist. He then cradled in his arms the now-empty, slightly crumpled carton—the only thing the assailant had left behind—kicked at some of the gravel on the ground and began the long mosey home.

"Who was this boy? Do you know him? Can you pick him out?" Mom raged, shaking her hands dry over the kitchen sink where she'd been filling a soaker full of beans. We had all gathered to hear Dennis' story and could see in Mom's face and her abrupt hands that she already knew full well who was going to pay for all those donuts.

"I never saw 'm before," Dennis answered, adding that he wasn't even sure which way he went.

"Did he hit you with something?" Mom grabbed the top of Dennis' head and turned it like a lid on a jar one way then the other. "Your lip's been bleeding and something's gone and nicked your chin."

Dennis dabbed his lip with the tip of his tongue and cringed a little. Mom dabbed his wounds, too, with a wet dish rag; then, still holding on to his head, studied carefully the spots of blood she'd removed from his face. Still holding on to his head, her stare quickly returned to those

parts of his face that she had just wiped clean of the cuts and abrasions his attackers had inflicted.

We all looked on in silence, kind of like a bunch of deer frozen in this one single headlight.

“This isn’t blood,” she said incredulously—well, maybe not incredulously.

Dennis was speechless. He suddenly became the only deer that couldn’t get away.

Dennis and the Surfin' Summer of '68

In the summer of 1968, Dennis and I were 14. We had just graduated from 8th grade. Martin Luther King, Jr., had been murdered in the spring, and Robert Kennedy had just been shot. The Vietnam War was still nearly five years away from "Peace with honor." The Republican National Convention was about to nominate Richard Nixon for President. The Democratic National Convention was about to nominate Hubert Humphrey for President. Chicago was about to erupt into Richard Daley's bastion of law and order or, as Groucho Marx of *Duck Soup* and *Horse Feathers* fame described it, "a sad part of America." Gore Vidal was about to call William F. Buckley a "crypto-nazi" and Buckley was about to retaliate by calling Vidal a "queer."

And Dennis was about to evolve from the glory-child of a two-week fun-filled thrill-seeking adventure-driven visit to our Uncle Roger's coastal home in Newport, Oregon, into a fitful agonizing broken oblate of misery. How did it all happen? Well, let's start with Dennis.

After quite a history of spending time selling donuts door to door, running (literally, running) anything for Mr. and Mrs. Miller and their orchard, and pedaling newspapers around town, he had saved up about $13 and was ready to spend it on a much needed, long sought after, and very enviable get-away.

Not that home was like a prison, but it wasn't anywhere like where he was going. Mom, you see, had agreed to let him go all by himself to Newport.

Newport was like Mecca for us. It fulfilled us. We were all happy there. Even Mom enjoyed herself. Her mother had lived there. Her brother and two sisters lived there. Our cousins, 11 of them, lived there.

Mom would relax and laugh with her siblings. We would hang out with our cousins and do a lot of laughing, too, as we explored and played in the woods and on the beaches, then vied and postured for the breakfasts that included anything but oatmeal, the lunches that alternated between peanut butter, tuna fish, egg salad, even sugar sandwiches, and the desserts that came after just about every meal. Actually, it was like Christmas for us.

So Dennis put his $13 down and Mom put up the rest, and off he went to Newport, Oregon. On his first day, he got to ride in Uncle Roger's dune buggy down on the beach. On the second day, he got to drive the dune buggy. On the third day, he gladly helped dig a ditch for laying some water pipe in the trailer park Uncle Roger owned. Cousin Jim, Roger's 12-year-old son, was tapped for digging, too, until he grumbled that he'd rather be at the beach or anywhere besides where he was.

Uncle Roger, who had little patience for complaints or complainers, sighed and muttered under his breath, "You son of a bitch."

Dennis wasn't surprised to witness the clash between a parent and his child. He had witnessed and been the object of many a clash with his own parent. But this clash was a grave disappointment. His good time was being clouded by disharmony.

Adding to the disappointment, Jim immediately covered his mouth with the back of his hand, as if to shield a cough, and leaning toward Dennis, his eyes careful to note that his dad was not within range of hearing, whispered in a very conspiratorial tone: "If I'm a son of a bitch, he must be a bitch."

Now, Dennis worshipped Uncle Roger. And he hated to hear anyone speak ill of him. But he understood Jim's side of it. And that put Dennis in a kind of quandary—a seminal moment in the realization that a ditch could be a quandary. So he stood there, crouching over a

shovel laden with the weight of mud and clay and other bits of dirt it was his charge to scoop out and pile off to the side of the quandary or the ditch or whatever it was he was in. He rationalized that this charge was costing him very close to $13. He wasn't fully grasping the irony of this realization or of Jim's recrimination, but it did give him pause in his thinking as he strived to balance the money he had spent with the way he was spending his vacation.

He naturally smiled in response to Jim, a kind of bloated smile that could easily be mistaken for sympathy or indigestion. Uncle Roger had taken no notice; he had already walked away disgusted. Jim, however, quickly climbed out of the ditch encouraged by his dad's absence and his cousin's apparent disposition.

"Come on," he said. "Let's go to the beach."

Dennis dropped the shovel and any further analysis of these events. He climbed out of the ditch and gladly followed Jim.

At the beach, the two watched another cousin, Greg, waxing his board. Greg was in high school and was naturally a role model for his two younger cousins.

"Wanna try?" he said to Dennis, lifting up his board and balancing it in the sand.

The water was cold, but Dennis didn't care. Greg guided him into the surf and advised him on the proper way to paddle: crouched on his knees, arms extended into the water, and ready to spring to his feet.

"When you get out there, just let the waves bring you in."

Dennis took off several times, each time crashing into the surf and the sand below. It was fun, but finally he and Jim had to go. Greg invited them to come again the next day. And so, they did. And the next day, too. And the day after that. In fact, he and Jim spent part of every day at the beach that first week watching Greg and his buddies surfing and borrowing (I think he said the correct

term was leeching), whenever they could, Greg's board for their own attempts at surfing.

And each time Dennis spent about an hour in the water crashing into the surf and the sand below. A couple of times he hit a rock or what felt like a rock. He scraped his knees, his shins, too, and the tops of his toes, but he didn't care. He was having a bitchin' time.

The second week, not so bitchin'. His legs were beginning to hurt. The scrapes were oozing puss, and he couldn't put his jeans or shoes on without a lot of pain. Walking after dressing was next to impossible. Aunt Loretta, Jim's mom, got him some salve and told him he had to stay out of the water. He didn't mind. The thought of going back in made it hurt even more.

At the end of his second week, he was ready to go home. He limped off the plane and, as soon as he entered the house, crawled into Mom's recliner and lay there for another week.

Mom applied antibiotic salves to his wounds. He groaned with every instance of her touch. When she finished, she always retreated to the kitchen where she could wash her hands and shield herself from Dennis' imprecations, though completely muffled and badly rendered by his sobs.

I would walk by on my way to the kitchen or from the kitchen on my way to the bedroom. I didn't want to be in the room with Dennis. I didn't want to make eye contact. I did want to sigh. I admit to jealousy while Dennis was away in Oregon. But, now, the most appropriate response seemed to be in the way Uncle Roger had reacted to Jim's grumbling.

For in Dennis' eyes, as the rest of him wriggled in agony, I could see the real suffering he was enduring stemmed, to some extent, from the notion that his vacation could have ended on a happier, healthier, at least more comfortable note had he just finished digging that goddamn

ditch. I am convinced, however, that to a much greater extent his true suffering resulted from the quandary he was still in: how in the hell had he spent his entire $13 to be exactly where he was at that moment?

As for everything else that occurred in the summer of ’68, everything else that changed the world and stole our sense of innocence, Dennis’ decision that he would never surf again, his declaration that he would never surf again, his dedication to a life without surfing changed nothing—even though he did continue digging ditches and, I might add, quandaries.

Dennis and the Perfect Fly Swatter

Dennis was always doing things the hard way. At 10 he set out to make a killing selling donuts door to door, come heat of the day or more heat of the next day. He made $13 for the year and gave it up (selling donuts, that is, not the $13, which he spent on surfing and digging ditches.) only after the bakery where the donuts were made burned down. The heat it seemed overwhelmed the business, but not Dennis.

At 12 he got himself a job after school working in the shade of a citrus orchard for old man Chas Miller and his wife. Clearing brush, pruning trees, picking fruit, lugging it to the roadside for the occasional sale of a box full of the stuff, digging holes, watering plants, fighting bees, scorpions, the perennial stray dog, painting trim, planting flowers, and chasing that perennial dog away from the flowers comprised his regular duties around the place. The irregular duties he would never speak of.

At 13, he got a morning paper route for the Arizona Republic. Before daybreak every morning he was on his bike on his way to the paper drop where he folded 50 or more papers and stuffed them in the paper bags slung across his handlebars. Then like an overstuffed buffalo swaying in the oscillation of its haunches as the weight of the papers shifted one way then the other with each stroke of his pedaling, Dennis set off on his route. He returned home just in time to have some breakfast and get ready for school.

He finally had to give it up when it became apparent to Mom that he had not quite mastered the concept that the collections he received were designed to pay for the papers, not the daily purchase of sodas and chips and other treats Dennis was inclined to make with whatever cash he had

received from those paper customers who actually were forthcoming with their weekly payments.

It was that and his unshakable conviction that the sleep he was not getting for these early rises every morning could be had while his teacher was droning on and on about something—he wasn't sure what—in school. Mom put her foot down; the paper route had to go.

At first, so did the cigarettes she was beginning to notice he was hiding from her. Eventually, though, she sat him down and agreed that he could smoke, but had to do it at home. I suspect she didn't want him walking around in public with matches. I'm not sure whether she gave him the same talking to about lighters. And this is where this story really begins.

One day, about a year after he lost his paper route and not too long before he quit school altogether and, as he contemplated finding something more lucrative than part-time assistant pizza maker at Enrico's Pizza, a fourteen-going-on-fifteen Dennis was sitting in the living room at home smoking a cigarette—it must have been a Viceroy, you know, the "thinking man's" cigarette. There he easily spied a fly on Mom's snow white ceiling.

It was a hot day and all the windows were open to facilitate the efficiency of the swamp cooler, which was blowing full blast. Naturally, Dennis mused, flies, those pesky creatures, are always getting into the house and would naturally require swatting, but only if they alit in places that were naturally swattable.

"Hmmm," Dennis started the wheels turning and his brain blood flowing. He flicked his ashes into the empty soda can he was balancing on his thigh. Another two drags and, like the fluctuating red glow of tobacco at the tip of his cigarette, he suddenly lit up. It was the proverbial epiphany. His eyes grew wide as he exhaled a plume of smoke upward toward the fly.

How many more years was he going to continue to struggle just to make a little money? He could make a fortune right here. Another two drags, and, with his cigarette clamped securely between his index and middle finger, he pulled from his pocket his newly acquired Cricket disposable lighter with the adjustable flame.

With a quick snap of the spark wheel against the flint, a flame ignited. It was only about a half an inch high. Holding open the fuel valve to keep the flame burning, he dropped the remainder of his cigarette into the soda can and, with his now-free hand, pressed the finger nail on his thumb between the cogs of the fuel adjustment wheel and pushed it all the way forward, making the flame grow to nearly six inches. His eyes grew even wider.

"Hey, Pat," he called to me, "you wanna see what I invented."

I was in the kitchen making a peanut butter sandwich and didn't really want to see, but popped my head out around the doorway just the same. When I saw the flame, my curiosity was piqued. Still holding the jar of peanut butter in one hand and the spoon I was spreading it with in the other, I hurried to Dennis' side. He was standing now and smiling like someone had just handed him an award or something he couldn't describe because it was something you just had to see.

"Look," he said, and raised his eyes to the ceiling.

I followed his eyes with mine and, cocking my head back to get a good view, saw the fly that was still perched upside down on the snow white ceiling.

Dennis extinguished the flame on his lighter and said, "Watch. The perfect fly swatter."

Slowly, so as not to frighten the fly away, he lifted his lighter to within perhaps half a foot from where the fly was. Then he snapped the lighter into production and its flame shot straight up at the little pest. It didn't exactly

miss the spot, but the fly was quick and lit out before the flame could accomplish its intended purpose.

Dennis and I both watched the fly swirl around above our heads as it evidently looked for another, safer spot on the ceiling. Did I already say that it was a snow white ceiling?

Before long, the pest had found another, safer landing spot—or so it thought. Dennis and I moved slowly to its new perch and repeated the extermination process. Again, Dennis' new invention failed to meet our expectations.

The fly had again whisked itself away. And, instead of keeping our eyes on our target and following it to its next perch, which is what we should have done, we found ourselves like Lot's wife frozen into pillars of utterly unforeseen surprise, staring silently at what we should never have had to witness: a spot on Mom's snow white ceiling about the size a fist would make punching a hole if the hole were not a hole, but a splash of scorched black paint put there by the flame of the world's best fly swatter.

After what must have been about an hour or so, we unfroze and our eyes slowly followed a path to another similar patch of black in the spot Dennis had first attempted to demonstrate his new invention. Just as slowly, we lowered our heads until they were no longer tilted upward and until our eyes met. Dennis raised his eyebrows, smiled a little nervous smile, and directed his eyes again to the black spot above us. I followed suit. Then, with lips pursed and cheeks puffed just as if he'd put an entire tire in his mouth, he grew his smile even larger. I muttered something that sounded like and should have been 'duck', stretching out the vowel sound for maximum effect. Dennis, for his part, let out a gush of air, and soon the tire was flat.

"Well, EE–EE–EE," he sheepishly grinned, exposing all his teeth as we looked again and marveled at what progress had wrought.

"Maybe nobody will notice if they don't look up."

The black spots remained on Mom's snow white ceiling for what seems like years. So, apparently, no one did look up. Or they did, but discreetly. At least, no one ever let on, and, lo and behold, Dennis' invention never did catch on.

Dennis and the Cross Jesus, Thank God, Never Crossed

Religious instruction our freshman year at Gerard Catholic High School presented some baffling challenges to the dogma that had been inexorably forged by the previous eight years of austere—sometimes mercifully brutal—teachings from the Sisters of Charity. The most enduring challenges came that first year in high school from Father Miller. He taught us first period.

Whether it was his practice during early morning mass to consume a chalice or two of altar wine so that he might liberate himself from strict orthodoxy when it came to sharing his take on religion, I can't truly say. I only know that in a valiant effort not to slur his words, he often launched his first period class with a "what if" question.

"What if God created us only because he was lonely?" he would start.

We'd take it from there.

"What if God made men lonely, too?"

"What if women were never lonely?"

"What if the only reason to procreate was because somebody's lonely?"

"But what if, because women never get lonely, they couldn't get pregnant?"

"What if men could get pregnant and the pill became a sacrament?"

Well, okay. I'm lying.

I only threw in these starters because of all the "what ifs" I can remember we came up with in class, these seem to be closer to being truly Catholic. I mean they're strictly about sex and procreation—a very catholic thing. And, in our Catholic boys' 9th-grade religion class, we

weren't allowed to be that catholic. The "what ifs" we were permitted were always advisedly asexual, apolitical, certainly could be adolescent, and most assuredly devoid of anything heart-fluttering. Father Miller wasn't so drunk that he'd let our discussions get passionate.

So we pondered things like the Church calendar:

"What if Palm Sunday was the result of a mistake and the people of Jerusalem were really only trying to pick up the palm leaves and straw that were blown all over the road after a terrible wind storm the night before?" one of us would imagine.

Someone else would add, "And Jesus on his donkey heard the crowd shouting, 'Hallelujah! A better class of road', by which he was sure they meant 'Hallelujah! Behold the Messiah; let's cushion his load' when, in fact, they were really shouting, 'How you do? Ah . . . Can ye get your ass off the road?'"

Or we contemplated the impact of the generation gap:

"What if Jesus, a gifted carpenter and the son of God after all, was horribly miffed that his cross was made of such crappy wood and so poorly constructed that, against his father's orders, he almost didn't show up for his own resurrection?"

A collective "Wow!" would undulate among me and my peers. Spontaneous applause might even occur. Then, someone from the back of the room would complete the proposition:

"In fact, his father had to send a couple of angels to tell all God's children that Jesus would be along just as soon as—well, they weren't supposed to say why he wasn't there or how long everybody was supposed to wait."

After a few of those "what ifs," the discussion could go non-stop all period and Father Miller could delicately slide himself into a chair as if easing into a tub of warm bath water. He'd sit there and form a very complacent

smile on his face and make every effort not to fall asleep. And the beauty of Father Miller's challenges was that the discussions were never limited to the classroom. We could take them home.

One Saturday afternoon, I shared with older brother Dan the notion that Jesus would have insisted on a well-constructed cross. Dan disagreed. Dan and I were the theologians of the family, at least the two with the most impressive credentials in the pursuit of all things controversially Catholic—having both spent a week in June, my time following his by three years, attending summer seminary school. So it was natural we should disagree.

"The cross could be anything," Dan insisted. "I'll show you."

Dennis had joined us in the middle of the discussion, drawn, I'm sure, by the intensity of our debate. He perhaps just wanted to see Dan pummel me again when the debate goes from theological to shrill recriminations. But I'd matured since that last time Dan flattened me with two unforeseen and mistakenly unseen fists to my head for objecting when he insisted I make his bed. I was decidedly content this time just with the prospect of him showing me how the cross "could be anything and still be a very suitable cross."

So Dennis and I followed him to the back yard where he proceeded to pick through some old 2x4s that Mom had lying around in a little nook between the side of the house and the fence bordering the neighbor's back yard. He dragged out one board the length of one and a half of him and another just about my height. Plopping them on the ground and sliding the shorter one on top the taller until together they formed a lower-case 't', he pointed to our bikes and said, "Dennis, grab me that inner tube."

Upon starting high school, we had abandoned our bikes to decay and general disuse. Nobody in 9th grade

rode bikes. If you were going to get somewhere, you walked or hitch-hiked or got a ride from somebody's older brother; sometimes it had to be somebody's parents. One of our bikes, consequently, sat rusting in the weeds belly up, wheels frozen in place. It looked like the emaciated carcass of a dead animal, its limbs in a state of rigor mortis. Overall, it was skeletal. The tires had long ago disappeared from the rims, and a couple of worn out deflated inner tubes hung limply over the top of the upside down frame.

Dennis willingly obliged, and Dan was soon holding one of the tubes. Flicking it suddenly and violently and repeatedly onto the patio bricks as if it were a whip and the bricks in need of a good flogging, Dan managed to loosen some of the dust and dirt and other kinds of crud that covered much of the tube's surface. He then brushed it off with his hands.

"Yeah . . . we can use this," he said, getting down on his knees next to where the 2x4s crossed. "Jesus wouldn't care. He was a simple man," he added as he reached into his pants pocket and pulled out the buck knife he always carried with him.

"You mean God? Right?" I corrected him, flinching slightly while Dennis and I watched Dan unfold the blade and easily cut the tube in half.

"God, yeah," he said with a vague, preoccupied tone in his voice. "Hold this, Dennis."

He handed over what now looked like a long black snake and, with his hands free, folded up his knife and slid it back into his pocket.

"God didn't give a damn about the cross," he said, smiling, keeping the discussion very amicable.

"God the Father? the Son? or the Holy Ghost?" I asked.

He snatched the rubber tube out of Dennis' hand and began wrapping it crossways around the two boards.

"It had to be all three," he replied triumphantly and finished tying the two ends of the tube into a knot.

"Look," he grunted and let go of the tube, satisfied the knot was tight. "Dennis, lay down right here. I'm going to show you two that any goddamn cross will do. You don't have to be a carpenter to like it."

Dennis' mouth fell open and formed a kind of half-hearted grin. He looked at me and said, "What?"

"I wanna show Pat what it'll look like. Get down on the cross, we're going to crucify you."

"What?" Dennis repeated.

"It's okay. It won't take long," Dan assured him.

Chuckling nervously, Dennis voiced a little concern: "I dunno, Dan."

"It'll be fine, Dennis," I offered. "If you like it—I see the point. That'll mean Jesus would be okay with it."

"I didn't think Jesus was s'posed to like it," Dennis objected as he reluctantly rested his head on the knot of inner tube Dan had just finished tying. He crossed his legs at the ankle so as not to roll off the board, and he spread his arms out in typical crucifixion fashion.

"Well, that's what we're going to find out," I assured him.

Dan, in the meantime, had snatched the other inner tube from the bike, cut it into two pieces and began using them to wrap Dennis' wrists to the crossbeam.

"We don't have any nails strong enough," he said, "so we'll just tie you on with these."

"Well, that's nice," Dennis chuckled, beginning to relax and look as though this was fun.

"See?" Dan looked up at me—until now I was just standing there observing. "He's already liking it."

I bobbed my head back and forth in a dispassionate gesture of agreement, but then raised this concern. "What'll we use for a foot rest? It can't be a real cross without it."

Dennis, now firmly fastened in place, turned his head toward Dan and feigning incredulity said, "Yeah. A cross isn't a cross without somethin' for my feet."

Dan did one of his very long "Hmmms," then made a kind of clicking sound out the side of his mouth as if he were on a horse urging it onward. "Better use a couple of nails down there," he finally said.

"What?" Dennis squeaked, raising his eyebrows, this time feigning nothing.

His mouth and eyes were now wide open, as if he were ready to shout something when Dan interjected, "Well, not on you. Just under your feet so you'll have something to stand on."

Dennis looked relieved, but I was still clinging to my disbelief that he was truly enjoying himself.

It took a little bit of time to rummage through the coffee can mom kept in the storeroom by the carport. Mom tossed all kinds of discarded bolts and nuts and nails, even a few hairpins, into this can so they could be reused as needed. Though I can't say for certain, I don't believe crucifying her son on the cross was exactly what she had in mind when she tossed a handful of penny-weight nails into the can. But, when Dan found them and, as if experiencing an epiphany, quickly realized their true purpose, no one dared think to question Mom's intentions.

At last, Dennis, set as he was on the cross, was ready to be raised. Dan and I each took a hold of either side of the crossbeam and hefted the boards and Dennis into an upright position. Just then, Mom came out of the house to hang some towels on the clothes line.

"They're crucifying me, Mom," Dennis laughed, a bit embarrassed to be discovered on a cross.

Mom, at first frozen in disbelief at what she was seeing, eventually shook her head, rolled her eyes, and, with a very disinterested air, proceeded undeterred with the towels. Very likely she was inspired to invoke the Catholic

mantra that had served to pull her through many daily encounters with her children's enterprises: "Please, Jesus. Just put me on my own cross and be done with it."

She didn't say anything aloud and was soon right back in the house and out of sight—which meant that we were out of her sight, too.

Mounted as he was and a full half-length higher than we were, Dennis had a commanding view over the back fence and into the alley, which ran parallel to the old Hohokam irrigation canal and served as a kind of pathway for bicyclists and pedestrians on their way to or from the shopping center on Indian School Road. The view for Dan and me offered only the tops of people's heads bobbing along on the other side of the fence as they passed. And there always seemed to be somebody passing by. Even though we couldn't see their faces, Dennis saw them clearly and chuckled for each one as he rolled his head to follow them along their way. Ever the friendly sort, he naturally offered up to each one some kind of ice breaker:

"Yep," he'd say, sounding rather sage and homespun in an even, lazy voice, "just hangin' 'round on m' cross."

No one stopped to pay their respects or exchange amenities. In fact, I think a few even picked up their pace a bit.

We held Dennis aloft that way for about 10 minutes, then set him down. He was smiling and Dan had won the argument. Any cross would do.

Dennis and the Wrench What Saved Itself

For the big game between Borgade and Gerard high schools, our family lacked nothing in the spirit category, thanks to Dan's car. Borgade was the chief rival of Gerard in football, as well as every other aspect of life on this particular night, and Dan, a senior, was out to show an enthusiasm for our school—his school—that he'd never before shown and in the biggest way he could. He painted up his '58 Plymouth Savoy with every kind of spirited encouragement he could plaster across the doors, hoods, roof, and widows: "Crush 'Em Up and Run 'Em Over"; "Splat!!! Goes Borgade," and other such red and green rants against our rival covered the car's otherwise white paint job.

We naturally rode to the game with Dan, something that we did not usually get to do. And all across town we beamed with a pride that perhaps no one else in Phoenix who saw us passing could understand. For we set out knowing full well that we could not lose. But, alas, Gerard did—lose, that is.

Undeterred or perhaps all the more determined not to be a loser, Dan, like any sore loser, set out to make somebody pay. "Be True To Your School" should have meant a lot to him now, especially after having spent the whole day slopping up his car with what had been spirited witticisms about our impending victory and Borgade's necessary defeat. But after the game getting even meant even more.

He scowled in his typical fashion and, consulting no one—certainly not his two lame-o younger brothers riding for free in the back seat—decided to take a detour on the way home through what for us was undiscovered country near Borgade High.

Incidentally, his word for us was not 'lame-o'. I'm merely trying to give you some slight impression of his mindset. His word for us . . . well, suffice it to say Dennis and I involuntarily and simultaneously arched our eyebrows in surprise and disbelief and no little bit of terror. I instantly and quickly made a sign of the cross and peered out the car in any direction or for any passing sight that would constitute a

distraction and, by reason of a distraction, substitute for the proverbial sand I, as your typical ostrich (and that wasn't the word either) could stick my head in and pretend everything Dan was doing just went away.

But no amount of pretending prevented him from jerking the car off the main drag onto a residential street lined with parked cars.

Part way down the street, he pulled out of his glove box a very large wrench, the kind that a mechanic like Dan would probably use to beat a car with when nothing else works to get the car to do what it's supposed to do. This wrench must have been at least a foot long and had to have weighed at least ten pounds. Why it was in his glove box and how it even fit in there had to have been the result of Dan's boy scout days: always prepared in a very big way for any contingency. He brandished it like a sword in his right hand, then switched it over to his left, extending it outside his driver's side window.

"Stuck you, Borgade," I thought I heard him shout at that exact moment. But it is hard to say, the clang of the wrench against the parked car roiled the sound of his voice or maybe just my hearing so that the words or just my brain were quite muddled. Besides, I was still looking for distractions.

So let's back up.

If you remember, Dennis and I sat in the back seat, as was our station—Dan being the senior. And we, I'm sure you remember, were those lame-o freshmen. That he even allowed us in the car was probably due to his misapplication of school pride.

Dennis, as must have been Dan's design, sat directly behind Dan, and like Dan had his window rolled down. Being slightly braver than I, he watched in fascination as Dan swung the car close to the ones parked on the left side of the street, exacting a maneuver that gave Dan just enough room between his car and the line of parked cars to swing that wrench into a headlight and strike a blow against the real loser, which, I've always suspected, was too much school spirit.

He let go a blow for justice, but must have misjudged the impact and reach of justice and the trajectory of his swipe, because he hit the bumper or the grill or something other than the

headlight. Alas, like Gerard's football team, he did little if any damage that night to his chosen victim, but he did jar loose the wrench from his hand. It went flying and he quickly drew his arm back into the car, gripped the steering wheel and straightened the course the car was on to return it to the correct side of the street.

At that same instance, we all heard Dennis utter a muffled "Umpff." This sound, for all the distractions, I clearly understood. I looked over and Dennis was holding his hand to his mouth, the only place where the wrench had done some damage. In his lap, lay the ten pounds of justice. "So sayeth the Lord," Dennis must have been thinking as he massaged his lips and his jaw and, with his tongue, checked for missing teeth.

The wrench had bounced off the car, out of Dan's hand, and sailed through the open window where Dennis was sitting. Dan looked around and, to my great relieve, grinned for the first time that night.

"Man," he said, "I thought I'd lost it."

Dennis and the Flub of Intemperance

"He seems a wretch undone. All that he speaks
Is wild and incoherent. Now he calls
For wine, then in suppliant tones, entreats
For brandy, to assuage his raging thirst.
Deep draughts of water slake him not. His lips
Are parched by raging fire within, which seems
In lurid shapes to flit across his mind.
So strangely does his fancy conjure forms,
He sometimes gambols with the vacant air.
But grasping nought, convulsively he breaks
In laughter forth of horrid note."

John Blake White, *The Forgers* (Act V, Scene I)

It was Friday, February 14, 1969, and, as *The Forgers* surely notes in "horrid" detail, being cursèd drunk far outstrips anything temperance actually rails against—at least for Dennis. It was winter in Phoenix and Scottsdale and just about everywhere else in that part of the world. So it was cold.

Dennis and his friend Tom had chosen to warm up to the evening around the contents of Tom's parents' liquor cabinet. What 15-year-old intemperate wouldn't, given that it was Valentine's Day and Tom's parents were away celebrating—most likely around someone else's liquor cabinet?

The cabinet was a cupboard next to the refrigerator and under the kitchen counter. Its observable contents comprised a 5th of Smirnoff that had yet to be opened and a nearly half empty 5th of Seagram's, along with a nearly empty pint of schnapps and an similarly-sized odd oval-shaped bottle of what could be rum, probably imported and probably in there quite some time since what little remained of the label had long ago warped from age or heat or some other element of nature, making it impossible to know for certain what it was.

The unobservable contents were in a sealed cardboard box, the dimensions of which tightly filled the lower shelf. Tom's curiosity had moved him to probe the box for possible clues, but all to no avail.

"It's bottles of something. Dad's not talking," he explained.

They both laughed as they began pulling out the booty they could see. They uncapped each bottle, even the unopened vodka. Then, like scientists confidently mixing chemicals in a laboratory, they carefully poured the ingredients into two tall glasses in proportions they imagined would be enough to give them, shall we say, a buzz.

Before letting Dennis sample the concoction, Tom exercised more confidence in science and refilled the now more than slightly depleted bottle of vodka with some tap water and put it on the counter beside the other bottles. He also broke out into the sink some ice cubes from a tray he hastily snatched out of the refrigerator's freezer compartment and then plopped an equal number of cubes in each glass.

Dennis stirred the concoction, and, upon hearing the ice clink, lit up with a kid's excitement about something like magic or extra helpings of dessert. His eyes grew wide; his mouth transformed from a smile into a grin. He held out a glass for Tom while keeping close to his breast

the other. Soon they were sipping on their drinks with pinched faces.

They tacitly agreed the taste was awful. Tom again returned to the refrigerator, this time pulling out a jug of cranberry juice and a half-gallon carton of orange.

"Try these," he said, handing them to Dennis, who proceeded to open the containers and pour a measure of the cranberry into their glasses. Tom was still at the refrigerator riffling through the items on the shelves in the door in hopes of finding anything else that might make their drinks more palatable. Almost immediately he held up a plastic lemon as if it were the blood of Christ and he and Dennis about to receive their share from the Holy Grail.

"This otta work," he chimed and squirted lemon juice into his glass.

Dennis followed the lemon with his eyes, then followed the glass to Tom's lips. He eagerly awaited the verdict until he saw Tom again screw up his face.

"Let's try the orange juice," Dennis suggested.

Another sip and they were beginning to get used to it.

"Some lemon?" Tom offered.

Dennis consented, then sipped. They repeated the process until their glasses were nearly empty.

"Some more Seagram's," Tom insisted.

Dennis obeyed, pouring out a little more of the whiskey, not quite as scientifically done as when first they began. By this time they were on the kitchen floor, sitting cross-legged near the refrigerator, the door of which was still wide open. Their drinks were nearly finished.

Cautiously, Tom put his glass on the floor among the cache of juice and liquor they had taken off the counter and bunched together in front of them, swung the refrigerator door closed with one hand, and, with the agility of a running back breaking a tackle, reached out his other

hand toward the assortment of bottles and cartons. The manoeuver seemed to have worked, and he managed to keep his balance long enough to adequately recap and otherwise seal each container. Except for his glass, he then one by one stuffed juice and all into the cupboard. The Seagram's, nearly empty, fell over on its side as he pushed and bumped it against the rum or whatever it was. No matter, was the prevailing thought as he closed the cupboard door and raised his glass to his mouth, muffling a laugh in the process.

Soon Tom's glass was empty and he suggested that they go to meet with Helen and Mary, their girlfriends.

"Hell Mary, yeah!" Dennis concurred rather vigorously, punching Tom in the shoulder with his already empty glass.

They both laughed, and, taking the glass out of Dennis' hand, Tom placed it next to his own on the floor. Then out the kitchen door they rolled.

No, really. They rolled.

"Wanna go to Mary? or wanna do Helen?" Tom asked once they were outside and pulling each other up.

"What'f they're on . . . uh . . . not home?" Dennis managed to reply as he clung to Tom who, in turn, was clinging to him.

"When we get back, wi'll find out?"

They were both standing now and grinning for their accomplishment.

"Yeah!" Dennis said, letting go of Tom and turning and leaning a bit clumsily toward the gate they'd need to open in order to get into the driveway and onto the street.

Fortunately, neither Dennis nor Tom could drive. They weren't old enough. Tom was still only 14 and Dennis had just turned 15. But transportation was the least of their worries. Even though it was Valentine's Day, they hadn't coordinated with the girls. Getting into Tom's parent's liquor had taken precedence. And besides, they

weren't even sure where the girls were. Maybe they were on their way to visit them.

"Wi'll tell 'em t' meet us at school . . . first." Tom intoned that last word with righteous authority, grabbing Dennis by the sleeve and pulling him back into the kitchen where he could call Helen, who, he was sure, would want to know what he was going to do.

Undeterred by dialing a couple of wrong numbers, Tom finally got through. Helen's younger sister, Diane, answered, telling Tom that Helen was out with friends—this being Valentine's and all.

"Okay. Wi'll be at school when she calls," Tom enunciated slowly, conveying his message to Diane as clearly as he possibly could. Leaning face-first against the wall and holding the receiver to one's ear is not as easy as it looks. "And tell her Mary, too," he added after Diane had hung up.

Soon he and Dennis had stumbled their way to the corner of Granite Reef and Indian School and stood anxiously thumbing for a ride to Gerard Catholic High School, which was seven miles westerly on the corner of 44th and Oak.

"If you see the police, just maintain," Tom shouted over the noise of the street.

His back was to Dennis, glowing and flickering in the headlights of each passing car. Dennis nodded. He grew worried that they had perhaps made a mistake. Perhaps they should have stayed at Tom's and finished off that 5th of whatever—he couldn't remember— it was they were drinking. Tom, however, showed no signs of second thoughts, so Dennis scoured the approaching headlights for any signs of imminent danger.

Their collective memory did not record that it took them approximately 15 minutes to hitch a ride from an upper classman, who, as luck would have it, happened to turn the corner from Granite Reef onto Indian School Road

and saw them standing there. As they posed—arms extended, thumbs out—in an effort to look natural and to look seriously into the oncoming traffic, they were made to sway slightly by the amount, it is presumed, they had had to drink.

How like roadside shrubbery they must have seemed, their hair and the flaps of their coats like leaves and branches buffeted in the incessant blasts of air the whoosh of cars and trucks were making whenever one went by. How like heroes they must have felt for withstanding the onslaught and for remaining upright.

This upper classman knew they had been players on the freshman football squad, knew their team had done pretty well this year, knew Tom had stood out as an exceptional running back, and took pity. It was clearly evident to him that they had been drinking. So, in addition to a ride, he graciously offered them each a Budweiser to make the ride a continuing convivial feast.

Dennis and Tom's mood grew lighter and more hopeful now and they confidently shared with their driver stories of the exploits and conquests they anticipated once they get to where they are going. And after Dennis and Tom had downed a second can, the upper classman dropped them off on the shoulder of the road right in front of school.

"Don't know what's going on here?" he asked, noticing that the campus was dark and the parking lot empty.

"Don't know; we're s'posed to meet . . . uh, the girls," Tom replied, sounding and posturing himself, to his credit, he thought, a tad flummoxed.

But neither he nor Dennis hesitated, and climbed out of the car, each clumsily clutching an empty can of beer.

"Well, good luck with that," the upper classman laughed and sped away, his tires spraying a little of the

loose roadside onto the backs of his former passengers just before they tumbled into the shallow irrigation ditch that ran along the road. The ditch was dry and fortunately overgrown with grasses and weeds that cushioned their descent.

"Well, that sucks," Tom complained. He was resting on one knee and spitting and picking at his mouth to remove whatever he had chomped on in his fall.

But Tom had to laugh as he watched Dennis right himself onto his hands and knees and make several attempts to crawl up onto the tarmac of the school's parking lot, which bordered the ditch. Again and again his feet slipped and he slid back until Dennis finally collapsed and lay at the bottom like a turtle on its shell, unable or unwilling to unstrand himself. All he could bring himself to do was utter expletives while Tom continued laughing. Soon, however, Tom was standing and, still holding onto his empty can of beer, took hold of Dennis' hand and pulled him to his feet.

It's important to note here that Dennis had lost his empty can somewhere in the ditch. It's also important to note that Tom, though younger by a few months, was a few inches taller and possessed of more brawn than Dennis, who was by no means a slouch. Tom apparently could also lay claim to a stouter constitution where matters of holding one's liquor were concerned. For, again undeterred, this time by a few blades of grass and the effort it takes to scale a 12-inch high bank, he easily stepped out of the ditch and pulled Dennis with him.

Neither Helen nor Mary was anywhere to be seen as these two explorers weaved across the parking lot toward the main classroom building. So Tom and Dennis decided to go commando and that it was time to exercise a little stealth as they commenced to scout out other opportunities.

Gerard Catholic High School's main classroom building was a box-shaped, flat-roofed structure punctuated

by white concrete pillars protruding vertically every 20 feet or so from the walls and framing panels of row after row of student lockers. All in all, it measured about the size of a football field and stood two stories tall. On both levels, expansive concrete walkways like decks of a ship wrapped around the entire building. Your standard wrought iron railing, painted a kind of pale sandstone, completely hemmed in the upper level. The very nondescript ½-inch square balusters were spaced apart just about the width between Dennis' ears. And, if you're wondering why you need to know the dimensions of the railing or the distance between Dennis' ears, consider that it has to be obvious by now that demons have overtaken two fine, upright, wholesome teenagers as they embark upon the remainder of this evening.

Without any sight of the girls or anyone, for that matter, Tom and Dennis decided to steal all the numbers off the classroom doors. Tom would start with his homeroom upstairs. So up they stumbled, stopping in front of room 223.

The only tool at his disposal was the empty can of beer and, while he worked the rim of the can like a blade for turning the screws fastening the plastic number plate to the door, Dennis realized he had lost his own can. And suddenly he was depressed. But he reasoned that, with or without his beer can, he could be Tom's lookout and quietly got down on his knees and slunk his way to the railing. Not stopping there, he forced his head between the balusters and began the arduous but vital task of scouring the grounds below.

Now, the foregoing may not accurately represent the steps taken or the mental processes employed, but how else should I account for what happened next.

Tom had his back to Dennis and in frustration started to bang and scrape the can against the number plate.

"What the shit," he sighed, then through his clenched teeth grunted: "It's stuck."

He pressed harder, urging the process with as much whole-body strength as he could muster and squeezed out, as if powering through a fit of constipation, one simple, but desperate command: "Turn!"

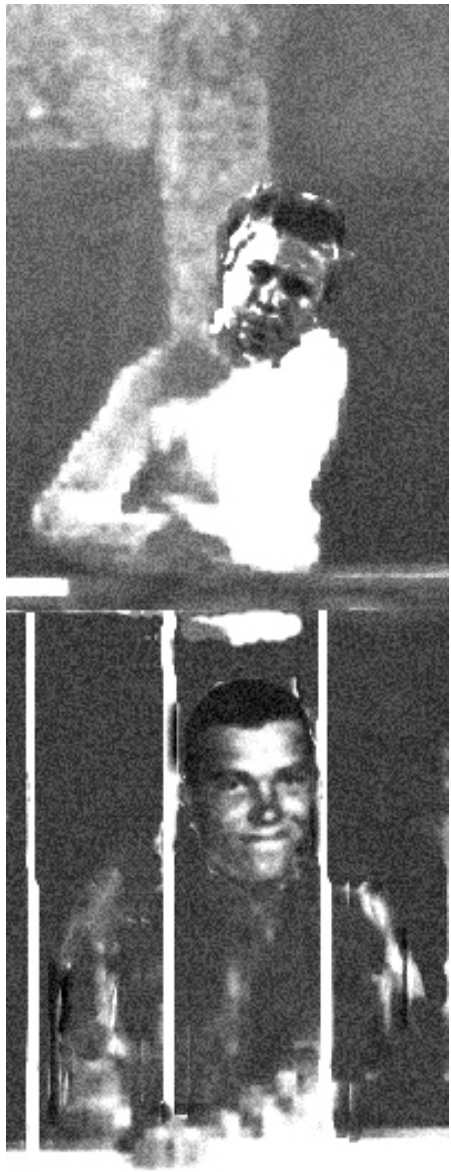
"Yeeeaaah." Dennis groaned so deplorably that Tom with cat-like reflexes—drunken cat-like reflexes—spun around. And, not without a wild display of violent intention, he cocked his shoulders and fists at the ready, bracing, he was sure, for the eventuality that he and Dennis had been caught. He was, to put it another way, startled at first, but quickly relaxed and began to laugh upon seeing that it was only Dennis who was caught, moaning and squirming on all fours.

Later in life, Dennis might imagine that he looked rather like a milk cow with its head in a stanchion. Or a tick or an arrow with it head embedded in some indifferent, unyielding target. He might even laugh a little about it. There are all kinds of possibilities. But such imaginings would have to wait that night while he pushed and pulled in vain to free his head.

"Gimme a sec," Tom at last assured his friend and returned to the door, this time to bang and scrape at the number plate. He eventually managed to break it in two and tear it from its screws and, if you must know the future, a few days later mounted the jagged parts like a trophy to his own bedroom door. But more importantly to the moment at hand, he beamed with pride as he held the pieces up much in the same way he showed off the plastic lemon he'd found in the refrigerator earlier that night. And after more than the second he'd promised Dennis, even after more than a few minutes, he placed his trophy in his coat pocket and without any hesitation clamped his two hands on Dennis' ears. With another great constipated-like

heave-ho, he managed to pop Dennis' head—bloodlessly, I might add—out from the rail.

Fortunately, no one was the wiser, except for Mary and Helen, who did miraculously show up a little later that night, finding the two lounging dreamily on the pitcher's mound in a field that doubled for soccer. The girls scolded the two boys for their drunkenness and vandalism and utter lack of restraint. Tom and Dennis naturally objected. They'd given up on the idea of stealing all the numbers. And Tom, in particular, was quick to point out that Dennis had been anything but unrestrained.



Dennis and the Salty Dogs

This is a kind of Jim Morrison and The Doors song—a kind of bluesy, a kind of glum, a kind of slow piece. It sounds a little like snoring with a smooth, deep, long drawn-out phrasing of the lyrics.

"Dennis," it goes "wishes Mary—Mary quite contrary—wishes she were home." Then he flubs a word or two, mumbles something. It must have been something Mary would understand. He gags a little bit and spits and gasps and blows a stringy mass into the grass again, then clumsily wipes his mouth with the back of his hand.

Tom, our friend, and I stand there quite literally in a stupor and nod. "Hey, man," Tom finally says, "you got it bad." And that's pretty much the end of the song. A few moments earlier, Dennis was throwing up.

It was a Friday night, about a week before Thanksgiving. Tom had invited us to his place to hang out for the evening and make some Salty Dogs. Dennis would have otherwise declined the invitation, not because he was shy about getting booze or resistant to the notion of hanging out with us, but because he would have otherwise preferred to hang out with Mary, his steady for over a year.

But on this particular Friday night Mary had convinced Dennis that in order to prove how much she loved him, prove it to herself as well as to Dennis, she had decided to go on a date with a boy she had only recently met, an older boy, a college student. Dennis had reluctantly agreed with Mary and, consequently, was free to join Tom and me.

On the way to Tom's, Dennis and I stopped at the El Rancho grocery store and bought a 32 oz. can of the El Rancho brand of grapefruit juice. Dennis said something in

the juice aisle about how Mary wasn't fooling him. He thought we should get some salt, too. I reminded him that Tom was getting the vodka from his mom's liquor cabinet, which was really a cupboard above her refrigerator. I then added that Tom could also borrow a thing of Morton salt. His mom wouldn't care.

We got to Tom's around 6:30 and followed him into a storeroom located in the middle of a kind of island of utility rooms separated from the rest of the house by a long, narrow corridor that led from the carport to the kitchen door. It was a room that Tom had set up as a make-do workshop or a clubhouse depending on the situation at hand. His mom wouldn't be bothering us, which was the beauty of the setup. Teenagers were not her specialty.

It wasn't exclusively Tom's room; he had four brothers and three sisters (the same number and proportions as our family) to compete with. But somehow he managed to put dibs on the room this particular Friday night. I suspect his mom knew what we were doing and had warned Tom's siblings, especially the younger ones, to stay clear away from Tom and his buddies.

So there we sat on milk crates and cinder blocks set in a circle around a half-empty bottle of vodka, a full can of grapefruit juice, some water in a bowl that looked as though it had been the property of the family dog at one time or another, and a paper plate holding a layer of salt. The bowl of water confused me until Tom explained it was for "dipping your glass, numb nuts."

"I'm not worried about that," I said and shrugged, a little embarrassed that Tom had misunderstood me.

We each took our glass (Tom's mom's glasses), dipped it upside down into the water; then pressed it, still upside down, onto the plate. Turning it upright, we had a glass with a rim ringed in salt. That was very cool. Our next step was to pour the equivalent of a couple shots of vodka into the glass without washing away the salt. We

didn't really know how much went into a shot, but we figured a couple fingers would do the trick.

"Hold your glass from the bottom up with just your two fingers; that way you'll know how much to pour," Tom suggested.

We credited Tom with knowing his stuff. He had this professorial manner of explaining things, and, besides, his sculpted good looks and tall slender physique resembled a kind of James Taylor, a kind of melody of fire and rain, at any rate. Who wouldn't believe him about Salty Dogs?

So we took his advice, then poured the grapefruit juice into the remainder of the glass—not quite to the brim. The first sip was sour; the salt was supposed to take care of that. Well, it didn't.

"Take the next one without salt; maybe that'll help."

It didn't seem to help, but at this point it didn't seem to matter. If I were to give a weather report on my condition, I could say that it was warm and sunny, kind of lit up—feeling numb and dizzy and fuzzy.

Then Ronnie popped his head into the room round about our third drink. He didn't go to our school. I'm not sure he went to school. He had this John Lennon look about him, but that was as far as the comparison could go. Otherwise, he was an ass, who thought he was a hard ass. Nobody much liked him, at least not for very long. So we weren't much thrilled that he showed up.

"Want one," someone graciously offered.

Ronnie laughed. "You guys are wasted."

"Have a drink or shut up," someone else said or maybe all of us.

"Nah. I'm going to go over to Brenda's."

"Blendra's?" Everyone but Ronnie laughed.

"Let's go," Dennis insisted, bobbing his head in an effort to point the way.

We had to see the girl that would let Ronnie pay a visit. Ronnie didn't say anything. He was still standing and turned to leave. So we all got up, and we all fell right back down onto our seats, nearly knocking each other onto the floor as our arms and legs flailed in a concerted effort to maintain some balance.

"Whoa," someone said.

Then we tried standing again. This time we made it. Ronnie was already half way down the driveway. The vodka was not all gone, but the can of juice was. At least, we believed so; we had knocked it over in our efforts to rise and not a bit of juice spilled.

"Whoa!" I think I said that.

"I gotta go," we heard Ronnie call back to us, convinced he was hurrying his pace.

We in turn spilled out of the storeroom and quickly caught up with him, not wanting to lose a chance to see who Blendra was. As it turned out, she lived just down the street and over one block. So we easily kept up.

Along the way, Dennis began explaining about Mary.

"She—she wants me, but damn—she wants me to know. . ."

"No, she's jus' sayin' 'no'. She's jus' sayin'—what?."

"She loves me, but hass—hass t' know."

"No, Dennis."

"Hey, man, you got it bad."

"Yeah. But don't you call her that at all."

"Hey, man."

We were talking over each other, and so the conversation went until we were standing in Blendra's front yard. Blendra must have been waiting, because she and Ronnie were already standing there in the drive way. Tom and I were standing in the grass next to Dennis, who was still explaining Mary.

Unfortunately, it was dark and we couldn't see Blendra very well. Fortunately, she couldn't see us very well either. We were just standing there and Dennis slumped and plopped cross-legged onto the ground, shoulders and head bowed like an empty pile of clothes or some other amorphous lump.

"I'm not—Mary's not—why's she got—" Dennis' jaw was now clenched as he flicked the words out in abrupt shots of air. "What's she with—with some—some guy."

"Is he all right?" Blendra asked, a bit startled when Dennis dropped to the ground and sounding very angry with all this talk about Mary.

Ronnie had turned his back to us, trying to have a nice visit despite our presence. "Oh yeah," he assured Blendra. "He's had a little."

"What's he doing on the ground?"

Ronnie turned and glared at all of us.

"Dennis, do you have to go or something?" he coaxed with a slightly raised voice.

Then he turned back to Blendra and smiled. "Yeah, he's all right."

By now, Dennis had flattened out on his stomach. Mary was still the topic of his soliloquy. Tom and I were swaying and poking at the air and, in between beats of a song that was beginning to swell and undulate within my stomach and head, tried to comfort Dennis out of his despair with sentiments such as: "Wow. You're—you really got it bad."

Blendra understood our concerns and stepped onto the grass to get closer to Dennis. She reached down to touch him.

"Hey," she said in a quite lovely and soothing voice.

But, just as soon as she had uttered the word, she screeched a quite emphatic and meaningful expletive and bolted a retreat to where Ronnie was still standing. She

wasn't fool enough to leap into Ronnie's arms, but did fire in his general direction a look of such pleading and disgust that even Ronnie took a step back.

Dennis had looked up to the angel, who was aglow and in a nocturnal blur and who was about to console him with her soft voice and touch. Just as her hand wavered momentarily above his head, he erupted, spewing about a half a quart of grapefruit juice, vodka and tiny chunks of other things into the grass between him and Blendra's driveway.

Even days later, still struggling to recover from the residual effects of his effusive outburst, Dennis couldn't say whether his behavior was technically the remains or the result of his Salty Dogs. There were just far too many contrasting views on the composition and cause of the mess he'd left in Blendra's front yard—especially in the years to come—for such a finish to lack at least a little controversy.

Dennis and the Sausage Pizza Band-Aid Made

Enrico's demise came without the high drama of a *Little Caesar*—you know, "Is this the end of Rico?" kind of thing. It was some time the early 70s, and, after 26 years of living with Fredo and untethered by marriage or, at last, affection, Mabel lit out. Got in her car and that was that. Fredo, the story goes, was angry and completely taken by surprise. He sat down at Enrico's bar the next morning—uncharacteristic for him, sitting down at the bar—poured a highball of gin, grabbed the gun from its holster opposite him and shot a spirt of tonic into the glass.

He repeated the process for the rest of the day and by evening had sent everyone home. Enrico's didn't open for dinner. A sign told everyone who came to enjoy fine Italian dining that the restaurant was closed. And that was it. Fredo got an offer he didn't want to refuse and sold the place. Whether he landed somewhere else for his gin and tonic is purely a matter for speculation. Neither he nor Mabel are ever heard from again.

At least, that's the story Dennis tells. He isn't about to suggest that perhaps Enrico's demise was the result of his Band-Aid.

My suspicions are aroused by the undisputable fact that, before Dennis worked there in early 1970, Enrico's had been on the corner of 2nd Street and Scottsdale Road for almost 25 successful years. Fredo and Mabel owned it jointly. Mabel pretty much ran the dining area and had a hand in running the kitchen, too, even though the kitchen was supposed to be Fredo's domain.

But everyone who worked at Enrico's knew that Mabel operated with a kind of General Patton efficiency and an uncompromising officiousness. And if ever anyone disputed her role in any part of the restaurant or countered

any of her directives or just plain did not do what she said, she would fix a stare that burned with laser intensity. And as the object of her stare burned, she would become quite satisfied with the situation.

Perhaps explaining her management style was a simple case of acknowledging that Mabel was turning 50 and was still only five feet tall and, even though sharing the same bed with Fredo for 26 years, didn't seem to like him much. It didn't help that she was 156 pounds and her ankles hurt and she could no longer wear heels unless she wanted her feet, even in thick socks, to swell and throb and become raw as her toes and a bunion on her right foot rubbed against the insides of her shoes. Nor did it help that her hair, fluffed into a nautilus spiral on either side of her head, a style she had maintained for at least the last 17 years, was increasingly turning lavender. It may have been the result of all the years with Fredo or all the time exposed to the steam and the heat and the invariable smoky, greasy air in the kitchen, but more than likely it was the abusive dye she insisted maintained the youthful appearance she had not only grown accustomed to, but had increasingly become the only one who could see it.

So every night she patrolled the restaurant calling attention to tables in need of clearing, customers in need of menus, soups, salads, and bread sticks in need of serving, orders in need of preparing, and needless prattle among the help, especially the sort that occurred behind her back, in need of never happening again.

Fredo, for his part, wanted no part of the fires Mabel was stoking. He was a tired pudgy man in his 50s and slightly gray. His jowls were sagging and he looked more out of place than he should, perhaps because he always dressed in the same worn-out blue industrial-style short-sleeve shirt, replete with pocket insert that always contained two or three freshly sharpened pencils. His pants were also a tired blue industrial-style.

And Mabel had made it one of her callings in life to tell him so. After all, she at least made an effort to wear a different dress each day or a skirt and color-coordinated blouse and a little make up—maybe a little too much eye shadow and an overly heavy rosy-red on her lips.

Perhaps Fredo looked out of place and otherwise discombobulated only because he didn't want to be in the place at all. Most everyone who knew him, except for Mabel, saw him as a bitter and frustrated man, who, after all those years with Mabel and nearly as many years with Enrico's, was still only just making a profit.

He had convinced himself that he was kept from extinction by the simple habit of taking the gin and tonic that he would get every night around 7:30 from the bar and waddle himself like a 1940s faded cartoon caricature through the dining area and kitchen out the back and across 2nd Street to his refuge behind his desk in his office, which was in the same building where the freezers and storage of dry goods and all the other accoutrements necessary for stocking the restaurant were also kept.

It was there that Dennis met him, introduced by one of Enrico's busboys—a friend who had told Dennis Fredo was hiring kitchen help.

"Can you make pizza?" Fredo asked, then quickly added, "Can you learn to make pizza?"

"Yeah," Dennis replied, not sure which question he had answered.

"I'll start you tonight if that's okay. You're okay with that, with making pizza?"

"Yeah," Dennis again replied, and this time Fredo was unsure which statement he was saying yes to.

But it didn't really matter; he had agreed; and so, he was hired, and Mabel would have to manage the rest.

Now, the job of making pizza required dough, sauce, and cheese. There was no variation on those principal ingredients. It also required toppings, which

could be anything. And, while that sounds vague and grossly open to interpretation, as Dennis would soon find out, it simply meant anything.

Manny and Consuela, sharing the job of chief chef, Bianco and Harvey and Connie, who worked the tables, Pat Marlow, who did pizza delivery, and Bruce, another pizza maker, Sally the Barkeep, even muscle-bound Greg, who riled Mabel something fierce with his constant banter and left-nut insinuation about his on-again, off-again girlfriends, welcomed Dennis into the fold.

They each had a warning and at least one suggestion about how to get up to speed as Enrico's newest pizza maker. Except for Greg, everyone cautioned Dennis to do what he could to stay on Mabel's good side or, if possible, stay out of her line of fire.

Connie also offered a consolation: "You won't be the newbie always."

She was about the same age as Mabel, a little taller, a little thinner, a platinum blonde with thick, neatly bobbed hair that she pinned back away from her face with pink barrettes. She winked at Dennis and smiled warmly with her advice. Dennis, in turn, let go a chuckle almost like a hiccup and volunteered a broad grin.

"That'll take the sting off," he said.

No one had cautioned him about using a knife, and, as if by destiny or unforeseen lack of proper angulation of the blade, he sliced into his thumb while cutting up the pizza dough into equal loaves. The wound was not deep and the bleeding soon stopped.

He at first considered flattening out the loaves he bled on and hiding the blood with red sauce; he regretted having to throw them away. But throw them away he did since there were no outstanding pizza orders right then and there. Fortunately, he was in that part of the kitchen that was strictly for making and prepping pizza dough. No one

else was around at the time and he could easily hide the results of the accident, if that is what it was.

After finding a Band-Aid in the first-aid box kept in the bathroom, he bandaged the cut and finished getting the loaves ready. Next, it was time to mix the sausage. The mixing involved using his bare hands for mashing and stirring and turning and rolling and squeezing a concoction of ground beef and pork and chicken, raw egg and various spices until all the parts congealed evenly and equally into one large mass in a very large bowl.

This aspect of food preparation came before the concept of wearing sanitary gloves had become a part of the culture at Enrico's. Actually, I don't think it ever did become a part. But that was okay by Dennis' standards. He enjoyed feeling the cool, soft, slippery wet ingredients between his fingers as he mixed the sausage.

Once the mixing was done, he then scoop it with a spoon and rolled it into individual little balls that would later be picked and plucked into bit-sized pieces to become topping on any sausage pizza orders. Soon, all the balls of sausage had been put on a tray and the tray stored into the nearby refrigerator.

It was time to slice some cheese, so Dennis wiped off his hands with his apron and naturally winced as he rubbed a little too aggressively the cut on his thumb. Looking at his hand, he noticed that the Band-Aid was no longer where he'd put it. It was also no longer where he could see it.

Hastily patting down his apron, looking around on the floor and the counter and into and under the empty mixing bowl, lifting it to eye level to check for anything stuck on the bottom that didn't belong there availed nothing but the realization that the Band-Aid must have come off in the sausage.

He was sure it would turn up, but he didn't have time to look any further. It was time to slice the cheese and

get going with making pizzas. Surely he'd find it while putting together an order for a sausage pizza.

That was a comforting thought, a confident thought. So Dennis put the bowl down, opened the refrigerator again, glanced at the tray of sausage and smiled one of his "Well, EE-EE-EEs"—a substitute for a sign of the cross—and proceeded to the slicer with a block of cheese.

He had to hurry; the first pizza order had been put on the order board. Instinctively—just the way Mabel would want it— Dennis flattened out one of the loaves into a perfect circle and spread a ladleful of red sauce. He covered the sauce with slices of mozzarella in overlapping fashion—not too thickly—leaving only the edges of the dough exposed. This was to be a pepperoni only, so Dennis daintily, but rapidly, placed individual slices on every available space he could. Then he slid the peel under the completed pie, and shuffled it into the oven, but not before he slipped on some padded asbestos gloves to protect his hands from the heat.

The night continued this way until closing. Dennis had made, he thought, perhaps 30 pizzas. And he was quite proud of his achievement. When Fredo had passed through the kitchen around 7:30, Dennis was busy making pizzas. He couldn't help but notice Fredo waddling right by Dennis' pizza-making station. And Fredo didn't say anything.

Mabel had been in the back several times and saw that Dennis was busy sliding pizzas in and out of the oven or getting a pizza ready for the oven. She had no complaints, either. She had to have seen that it was non-stop for most of the evening. It was glorious. He was becoming a grand pizza maker. Outstanding!

Dennis was enjoying his reverie while, between pizzas, he scraped and wiped the counter clean. Why, at closing, he boasted to himself that he even managed to use

up all of the saus—He froze in the middle of this paean to the great pizza maker.

Sausage! The Band-Aid was still in the sausage. Or it was. No. It was in one of the pizzas now. Or it was.

He furrowed his brow and looked around at the others in the kitchen, who were also busy cleaning up. No one was looking at him. Everything seemed quite normal. Maybe, he reasoned, there're lots of things in sausage that taste and chew the way a Band-Aid would. Dennis had never had a Band-Aid in a pizza. So how could anyone tell? It's probably a normal thing for Enrico's. He smiled and went back to his reverie, which could go on as long as Enrico's.

Not a bad night for a newbie.

Dennis and the Dart Right for the Head

Dennis felt that school was wrong for him, and he set out in his junior year to make it right. So he quit school and got himself a full-time job as a busboy in the café at Diamonds Department Store. Now, I can't say whether he regrets his decision. It's only been four or five decades since then; I can say, however, that learning doesn't stop just because you're no longer in school. And ever since he quit school, Dennis has learned a lot. In fact, he quickly learned that always pursuing what's right does not always pay off.

You see, he met and quickly became friends with one of the waiters at his new job, and almost as quickly was talking about moving out and moving into his new friend's place. The place was in Scottsdale in a small trailer park, which was owned by the friend's roommate's girlfriend's parents. It sounds complicated, but wait. It does get worse.

The trailer these two bachelors lived in was a two-bedroom, single bath, 10-foot wide. Dennis would make it three bachelors, so he'd have to share one of the bedrooms; still, he would get full run of the place. What was right about getting into a place like this was that there were no adults—responsible ones, that is—to tell him what to do. He could stay up as late as he wanted, go out whenever he felt like it, and get in any time of the day or night, even stay out all night if that's what he chose to do. The $120-a-month rent was reasonable, too. At least, it was affordable for a busboy making $1.10 an hour plus tips, especially considering that now the $120 would be split three ways.

For the first week or so, Dennis rode to work with his roommate, the waiter. They shared the same shift at the café. The entire setup couldn't have been more right as far as Dennis was concerned. He got along wonderfully with

both his roommates. He even brought them home as his guests for Mom's Thanksgiving dinner. They were perfect guests, telling Mom not only how great the food was, but how well Dennis had adapted to his new dwelling and how happy they were to have such an easygoing roommate. Mom was grateful and urged them to second helpings of pumpkin pie. Even Dennis got a second helping. He had indeed, everyone agreed, hit it right with this move.

But there was one little thing that was wrong. Actually, there were several little things wrong. Dennis' roommates were also pretty easygoing and well liked by many—to the extent that these many were often in the trailer at all times of the day and night drinking beer, smoking pot, sniffing glue, and partaking of assorted other activities that were, generally speaking, illegal. Most of the illicitness of their activities revolved around the fact that most of these many visitors to the trailer day and night were still just kids. The youngest was probably 12; the oldest might have been 18. There were two 14-year-olds who were run-aways and hiding out in the trailer; they were always there. And there was a whole family of siblings, three brothers and two sisters, all from the ages of 13 to 17, who frequented the place after school, sometimes even during school hours.

Now, with all of these goings-on you'd be right to ask where were the police and why weren't they at least investigating what was happening in this trailer. Years later, even Dennis would admit that these were the right questions to ask, but only if you lived somewhere else. No one in the trailer would even suggest such a thing.

But run-ins with the law were not altogether unknown by these trailerites. There was one particular incident that occurred when Dennis and one of his roommates, who was driving, and a few of the kids from the trailer, who were riding with them, were pulled over not far from the trailer park. The police officer explained that

he noticed the rear window was duck taped in a manner that could pose a visibility hazard to the driver, especially when the car was without any outside rearview mirrors. He also noticed that the rear license plate was slipping from its perch on the back bumper, which could be the result of the fact that the back bumper was apparently attached to only one side of the car and had begun to lose some of its horizontal integrity, hence tearing at the bolts holding the license plate in place. If nothing were done to attach it more firmly to the other side, the bumper would soon be vertical or gone forever, taking the license plate with it.

"Bummer. I'll get that fixed," Dennis' roommate said. He was alternately grinning and nodding with an expression of deep concern, hoping to mollify the officer who was not nearly finished with his report on the state of the car's disrepair.

He called attention to the swaths of rust and multiple dings and scrapes on every part of the body, the cracks in the window glass that had not yet been serviced with duct tape, the rumbling and smoking of the engine and the continuous shaking of the car as it sat idling, as though it were in the depths of a nicotine fit or, worse, a junkie's withdrawal.

He concluded his report to Dennis' roommate with this apology: "Excuse me for being blunt, but this car is a piece of shit."

The roommate and Dennis and all the kids in the car smiled. It must have worked. The officer simply settled on writing out a warning for the license plate and sent them on their way. For everything that was wrong, he obviously didn't feel right about detaining them any longer.

Well, like the saying goes: everything was right as rain, and when it rains it pours. A week or so later, Dennis, his roommates and their visitors were up late one night having fun smoking and drinking and, well, you know. Around about midnight, Dennis had decided it was right

that he go to bed; he had to get up early to be at work. His roommates had to be up early, too, but one of them, the waiter, had decided that that was wrong. The other decided to go along. They also reached a consensus that it'd be fun to play darts.

The trailer was laid out in a style that was typical trailer. The sitting room contained two wooden chairs, a table, and an L-shaped couch that backed up into the corner at the front of the trailer or what everyone called the front. Then came the door leading to the outside and across from it the kitchen. From the kitchen and all the way to the right side of the 10-foot wide, a narrow hallway led to the bathroom and the two bedrooms. On the wall to the left of the hallway entrance, facing the crowd sitting in the sitting room, Dennis' roommates had hung a dart board.

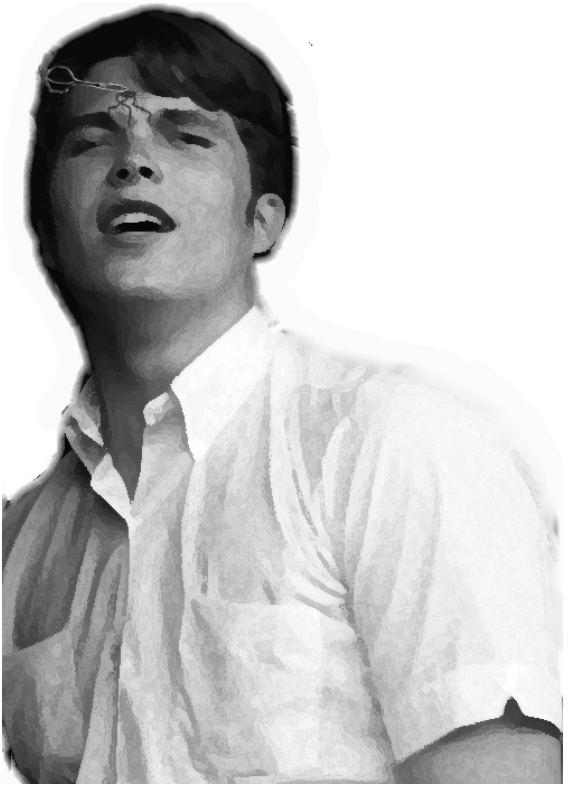
All around the circular board were the pockmarks of failed attempts at hitting the target. With each strike, whether a hit or a miss, the crowd roared with approval. In the meantime, Dennis was having trouble getting to sleep. He could hear all too well the whoops and hollers from the gamesters and the plunk of each dart as it either hit the wall or the board. He decided it would be well within his rights to speak to the group and ask them to quiet it down. So he got up, wearing only his white boxer shorts, and plodded slowly down the now very dark hallway. The light from the front room shown brightly into his eyes as he stepped out of the darkness and stood flush with the dart board on the wall. Before he could utter a word or even see who he might be speaking to, he heard one more thunk. This time he also felt it. It stopped him.

He clenched his fists as his arms swung down at his side. His eyes closed and his mouth dropped open, but made not a sound. There was a dart hanging from his forehead swinging like a pendulum over his right eye until it at last worked its way out of its mark just above his eyebrow and fell to the floor.

Someone shouted, “Bullseye!”

Then the crowd laughed and whooped it up even more loudly than before.

“Damn right,” Dennis muttered to himself; then muttering expletives of, shall we say, a more puissant and peculiar nature, turned around and headed back to bed. I’m not sure whether he got any sleep that night. By the next weekend he had moved back home.



Dennis and the Eyewear Framed

Dennis bought a motorcycle soon after he turned 17—a Yamaha 250. It had two rearview mirrors. It was red. And it shook and vibrated and whined its little single stroke engine all over Scottsdale. It shook and vibrated so much, in fact, that Dennis could never see anything clearly in his rearview mirrors. He was always needing to crane his neck as far as he could one way or the other in order to get a good look—well, maybe 'good' doesn't accurately describe the attitude he was taking—at whatever was behind him.

Once, while speeding in a 35 MPH zone in Scottsdale, a policeman in a squad car followed Dennis for well over a mile with lights flashing. But to no avail. Dennis didn't see him. It wasn't until Dennis was nearly at the city limits that the officer finally flipped on the siren. Its high-pitched wail competed with the whine of a tiny motorcycle revved to the max, but Dennis had no trouble hearing it or understanding its implication, and he immediately pulled over.

The ticket stated that he was doing 55 in a 35 MPH zone. In court, the judge looked at the ticket and asked his bailiff to check on the posted speed limit for the zone where Dennis was finally stopped. It turns out it was a 45 MPH zone. The police officer had erred in that one small, but costly technicality, and the case was dismissed.

Dennis beat it out of court assured of the fairness inherent in the criminal justice system. He seemed to be riding a lucky streak and confidently hopped back on his motorcycle assured of the wisdom in choosing this particular mode of transportation.

Now, Arizona didn't require helmets for motorcyclists, but Arizona wasn't Mom. Her requirements were a little more stringent. So Dennis was always careful

to have his helmet on or, at least, with him. He knew better than to try to invoke any technicalities with Mom.

The State's most far reaching safety restriction for the driver of a motorcycle—as far, that is, as Dennis was concerned—was a law requiring that proper protective eyewear must be worn at all times. Adherence to this restriction could be met with a simple pair of eyeglasses or, even more simply, a cool pair of sunglasses. Dennis opted for the sunglasses. The law also stipulated that the pair of lenses in the eyewear be an actual pair. In other words, both lenses must be used and intact simultaneously. On one particular occasion, this was an aspect of the law that Dennis was hoping no one (and by 'no one' he meant more than anyone Mom) would insist upon complete compliance.

For it came to pass, that Dennis had selected for his eyewear a pair of sunglasses not made in the USA. Now, had they been Christian Dior and been made in Italy and been really expensive, he probably wouldn't have worried about the country of origin. But the Christia Deor he sported while riding his motorcycle came from somewhere he couldn't even identify. All it said under the trademark was "made in"; the name was obviously to be filled in later. But even that wasn't his biggest worry. It was the stretch of endurance or lack thereof that concerned him most. The pair he had chosen to wear had suffered a little too much for all the shaking and vibrating, perhaps even the whining of the engine and the wind blowing in his face. The lenses kept falling out of their frames and Dennis found himself in constant need of snapping them back in place.

One morning, speeding his way to work, the left lens vibrated right out into the air. He tried to grab it, but if you know anything about motorcycles, you know that you need both hands to work the clutch, the accelerator, the brakes. Letting go with both hands to catch a "made in" somewhere wafer-thin piece of plastic about the size of a poker chip that's already flitting in the wind far behind

you—Well, just the amount of time he would have spent saying all that in hopes of making you understand his predicament takes more time than Dennis had to react when he noticed his eyewear had left his left eye unprotected.

So undeterred and certainly not unnerved, he kept on going. What else could he do? He had to get to work. Perhaps he could hold his hand up against the frame and cover the missing lens. But that all goes back to what he already knew about the need for both hands in the proper operation of a motorcycle. Quickly, he reasoned that as long as he had one good eye, he was, well, you know, he was good—just so long as Mom didn't see him. It's important to note that reason triumphed here. So long as nobody paid any attention to it, who could argue that his one remaining protected eye was not good enough?

Then he came to a stop at a red light, where, as luck would have it, he was in the left lane. Had his luck held out, the light would have quickly turned green and he and his one protected eye would have been on his way. Or traffic would have hemmed him in and provided some protection from what came next.

You see, a squad car (Dennis claims it wasn't driven by the same patrolman who had cited him earlier for speeding) rolled up right alongside in the right lane. The officer looked around, as police officers are wont to do, and naturally looked over to Dennis. At the same time, Dennis had seen the car out of the corner of his eye and instantly felt a chill unmistakably like the ones he was used to feeling whenever Mom cast her disapproving glare in his general direction.

Against all reason, he turned his head and peered into, first, the back seat, then, the front, certain he was going to see Mom. He saw instead a lone police officer, who fortunately wasn't Mom. Still, Dennis couldn't help but make eye contact—the unprotected eye, that is—with the officer, who in turn made one quick, simple gesture

with his hand, pointing to the side of the road. The message was clear; Dennis was going back to court.

Dennis and the Datura Stramonium Trip

Datura stramonium goes by many names. There's devil's snare, devil's trumpet, hell's bells, devil's cucumber, prickly burr, thorn apple, devil's apple and moon flower. It's what some call a nightshade. In Spanish, it's called Toloache, an Aztec term related to the concept of duck—the verb, not the animal. It's also called a weed: stink weed, loco weed, devil's weed. And then there's Gypsum weed because someone once believed it was a favorite of Gypsies as they supposedly went about poisoning everyone with nefarious concoctions made from the thing.

It's been called by many other names, most notably by a name that derives from the European inhabitants of an early 17th century settlement in Virginia. These settlers noticed an abundance of this interesting looking flower and sought advice from the Powhatans on its suitability as a source of nourishment, given that these settlers were in near famine conditions for most of the first several years of their attempt to show each other they could make a go of it while completely cut off from their native England.

The Powhatans, must have taken pity on them and pointed out that this weed was not suitable to eat and apparently pointed out that it was a suitable toxin. I blame the translator, whoever he or she was, for leaving out the words "not" and "toxin" and "weed" and standing by, probably with a big smirk on his or her face, while the settlers gorged themselves on what they understood to be an abundant supply of an indigenous and edible, if not entirely delectable, plant. They naturally ended up getting a load of bellyaches and strange dreams.

Perhaps they should have smoked it. After all, look what tobacco did for them. But I digress.

From then on, the Jamestown weed, as it came to be known, also assumed the diminutive label Jimson weed. And that puts us squarely where we belong: in the Grand Canyon on the day—actually, the evening—in mid-1972 that a couple of Havasupai Indians, like the Powhatans more than three and half centuries earlier, pointed out to some intrepid travelers—Dennis and his two camping buddies—the marvel of the infamous Jimson weed.

Dennis and Steve and Bob had been to the Grand Canyon a few times before and, as do most of the visitors to the Canyon, had always gone the way of Bright Angel Trail. This time they chose to explore the Canyon in an alternate way: on the Havasupai Trail.

It was June and it was hot.

"Spectacular!" Bob exclaimed numerous times on their descent. He was taller than his companions and resembled Art Garfunkel if only for the receding hairline and reddish coiffured frizz that swelled like a balloon from his head. He also sported a thin mustache, enhancing the two extra years in age he had over Dennis and Steve. Naturally, he mentored the group for all his mature amazement.

Each time Bob expressed himself accordingly, Dennis and Steve listed a little, invariably shifting their packs to redistribute the weight pressing on their backs and shoulders while they formed their best happy faces and willingly nodded in agreement. Occasionally, one of them would grunt and together they would wipe the sweat that was beading on their foreheads and streaming down into their eyes, which was the signal that they should stop to pass around the canteen.

Steve was about the same size as Dennis: under 6 feet and under 200 pounds, give or take an under or so. He was darker in complexion, but perhaps only appeared to be because his hair was so much thicker and darker. He liked to play music and think in practical terms. He was doing

neither on the trail, but didn't seem to mind. For Bob was thus far the truly inspirational one. And, whenever Bob spoke wistfully, he did it with a laugh. In that way, he made anything he said bearable. Thus he marked the progress they were making on the trail, laughing how now and then patches of grey alluvial slides had cascaded downward through layer after layer of changing colors in the rock, as if one floor of a building had shifted diagonally to the next.

Soon they would be realizing the promise of their hike, he assured Dennis and Steve. It'd be like a song you could not only listen to and a painting you could not only see, but something for all your senses. It was like a poem. Something you could actually do with your hands.

"Spectacular!" Bob would say again, almost charging ahead

Dennis and Steve would list and shift and pick up the pace.

They saw waterfalls and desert springs flowing like mistakes in the otherwise dry, almost scorched surfaces of the canyon walls and measuring several stories high, trickling sometimes under foot along the trail, as well as gushing under the footbridges they crossed. And that wasn't all. They thought a lot about the cool, clear natural pools like oases in an exotic, parched land. This would be an experience not soon forgotten. And so they'd pick up the pace all the more.

They made it in just about three hours. The sun was about to set, but that was just because they were in a canyon. Plenty of daylight was left and the shade was a welcomed perk for being where they were, especially as it was the end of the hike for the day. After pitching a tent and setting up camp, they sought to do some exploring.

"There's supposed to be a store just on the other side of this place," Bob said with much the same

excitement he had observed and punctuated all the spectacular sights along the trail.

Off they went to find it. There'd, of course, be no beer—not that any of them were old enough to buy it or even get it, this being an Indian reservation—but that didn't stop Bob from boasting about it with a spirit of the old college try or some such gusto, Bob never having been to college.

"Man, it'd be great to have some beer," he laughed as if to say hello to two lone members of the tribe standing outside the entrance of the store.

The two faced Bob with a disinterested, unexpressive manner. Their eyes, however, were closed to mere pencil lines, as if fixing their sights and putting a bead on the three campers approaching them. The taller of the two was wearing a white tank top and blue jeans, pointed-toe leather boots on his feet. The other was in cutoffs and a grey T-shirt that read "Hoot" in black letters across his chest. He was in sandals. They both sported jet-black, straight shoulder-length hair and looked about the same age as Dennis and Steve.

"No beer," the one in boots said stoically.

The other, however, smiled and asked, "Any pot?"

Their eyes opened fully, but remained fixed suspiciously on the three now standing in front of them. Dennis and Steve and Bob looked at each other with surprise, then smiled in unison.

It was as if they had been addressed in the ancient spirit of hospitality: "Welcome, strangers. You are our brothers. All that we have is yours."

"Came to see about munchies, Comrades," Bob replied, as if to acknowledge and reciprocate the hospitality.

"Got a little bit," Dennis offered.

The two Havasupai natives joined their three new friends in the store to watch them pick out party snacks.

"We're back over there," Bob explained once the purchases were made and all five were back outside. "The tent with the faded stars and stripes."

He pointed in the general direction of their campsite. "Glad to share with you what we got."

"Got some Jimson weed to give you," the shorter of the two, the one with "Hoot" on his shirt replied. His name was Sky. "Gotta git it first then meet you there."

When at last all five were back together standing around the campfire, rolling and passing joints and laughing at just about anything anyone said, Dennis sought to satisfy a curiosity and asked, as casually as scratching an itch, what exactly Jimson weed was. The question put a somber edge, like a course file against a guitar string, to the laughter. Soon everyone was quiet.

"Ever had peyote?" asked the taller of their new friends, who had earlier introduced himself as Dave Shorter, which he said was short for Short Eyes Coyote. Everyone nodded that they had.

"It's like that, but you gotta make tea with it."

Without any ceremony and a noticeable amount of haste, a pan of water was put on the fire and brought to a boil. Dave sprinkled a handful of crumpled leaves, flower petals and broken stems into it. Using a twig he found on the ground, he crouched over the pan and swished the concoction around. He then looked up at his new friends and slowly formed a smile on his face.

"Ready," he said.

Dennis and Bob and Steve looked down into the pan nervously, eagerly.

"Okay," Bob said, rubbing his hands together. "You sure it's okay?" he said to Dave, fixed solely on the steaming pan of Jimson weed tea while he asked the question.

Dave nodded his assurance and set the pan on the ground to let it cool. Steve offered to forgo drinking any.

"Oh, yeah . . . that's a good idea," Bob agreed in a very off-handed way, still fixed on the pan.

Then he picked up the pan and blew over it, breaking up the rising swaths of steam. After several minutes, he grimaced—said, "Here goes," and took his first taste.

"Not bad. Not much like tea, but not bad," he said, handing the pan to Dennis.

Dennis, too, blew over the pan, gave one of his "I dunno" quizzical smiles and took a sip. He looked at Dave and then Sky, who was not going to tell them his last name or whether he even had one. They, in turn, were looking gravely at Dennis, and he gave them one of his "Well, I've done it now" smiles.

He handed the pan back to Bob and together they took turns finishing the tea, being careful, as Dave and Sky had cautioned them, not to swallow any of the dregs. When they finished, Dave and Sky had disappeared. Steve had disappeared, too. And where was Bob, Dennis thought without really worrying about it?

It was getting dark, and Mark, his older brother, had just come walking down the side of the canyon to stand at his side.

"Hey!" He offered Dennis a cigarette, but Dennis was already smoking one.

Wanting desperately to take advantage of Mark's generosity, he flicked his smoke into the fire and reached out to accept the one Mark was holding out to him, but found he had already lit another and was still smoking it.

Some marshmallow boulders were set up like chairs just on the other side of the tent, and Dennis motioned to Mark, who wasn't being very talkative, that they head for them. Before he could get there, however, Steve appeared and touched Dennis on his shoulder. It sounded as though Steve had said, "Go." But on reflection it must have been "Gone" or "None," for Mark had disappeared.

Pat Marlow, a good friend from Dennis' Enrico Pizza days, was standing by the fence . . . no, floating over the fence Steve and Bob must have put up to keep the dogs, who were barking, from getting into the tent. He had another cigarette, and then another. Pat Marlow wasn't there anymore. The dogs weren't a problem anymore, obviously. Someone had taken the fence down.

Suddenly, the fire was raging, and Dennis had another cigarette, and another. He swayed and bobbed his head while he smoked to the constant rhythm and refrain of Savoy Brown's *pitch a wang dang doodle all night long*. He even murmured "All night long" over and over until Steve touched him on the shoulder again and the music went away.

This time Steve was touching him on both shoulders. Dennis was sure that Steve was grabbing something. He probably wanted his jacket, so Dennis took it off and handed it to Steve who must have been freezing in all the snow on the ground. Steve disappeared in the coat.

Bob was there. Where was the fire? What's he laughing at?

"You wanna lie down, Dennis?" he heard Steve ask.

"Let me finish this cigarette," he replied, then lifted another cigarette to his lips. Soon he was lying down and watching the sky and all the shooting stars.

"They're getting awfully close," he said to Steve, who was talking to someone Dennis couldn't see.

"Of cloudless climbs and starry skies," he mumbled. "That's Beatles. Moody Blues?" Dennis couldn't remember how it went or what tune went with it.

Mark and Jerry, Mark's buddy from high school, asked him to move over; they wanted to see the sky, too. Then Dennis drifted like the stars across an increasingly darker sky. He thought he was on his back, but, when he

opened his eyes, he couldn't see anything. Everything had disappeared; everything was black.

He heard some snoring, though, and rolled over in the direction it was coming from. Just then, the moonlight shone through the opening of the tent and he could see that he was in the tent with Bob and Steve, who were both fast asleep.

He reached in his pocket for a cigarette, but couldn't find any. He must have smoked them all. He lay back down and nodded off.

In the morning, he stumbled on hands and knees out of the tent, saw Steve stirring the fire with a stick and, climbing up to stand, asked him whether he had seen anyone in the night.

"I saw you talking to all kinds of people when nobody was there," Steve laughed.

“Gotta cigarette?” Dennis asked, grinning and slightly embarrassed. “I smoked all mine last night.”

“Is that what you were doing?” Steve laughed again. He put his index and middle fingers in the shape of a V up to his lips and pretended to take a long drag from a cigarette.

“You might try that,” he said finishing the demonstration. “That’s what you were doing last night.”

“Man . . . have we got any coffee?” Dennis sighed.

“Yeah, but Dave and Sky took our pan. We can’t boil any water.”

Steve was laughing again, this time with a little bit of a Hee Haw cracking in his voice. Then, he tossed the stick into the fire before adding, “I think that’s what they meant by ‘Any pot?’”

Dennis and the RC Gorman Fake Mistake

A long time ago, KTLX changed its call letters to KPHO-TV and, a few years later, went completely independent from major network programming. It remained that way for nearly 40 years until CBS resumed an affiliation with the TV station. The call letters did not change when CBS returned, but the channel, which was 5 on VHF, piggy-backed with channel 17 on UHF until the network opted to employ PSIP for digital delivery of all its programming, whereby channel 5 became virtual and channel 17 actual.

And if that wasn't confusing enough, what about the time RC Gorman was slated to appear on *The Rita Davenport Show*? No one at the studio had ever met RC Gorman. Didn't know quite what to expect. He was a world-renown painter and sculptor, but he lived in Taos, New Mexico, and was only visiting Phoenix to appear on Rita's show.

Rita had not even met the gentleman. Everyone had heard that he was a bit of a hippy—you know, long hair, maybe a bandana or a Texas straw hat on his head or both. He wore Levis probably with holes in the knees or something, grubby-looking tennis shoes or even sandals, maybe a pair of moccasins on his feet.

He might be in a T-shirt with something iconoclastic or politically principled written across the front or back or both; he might be wearing beads around his neck. Don't be surprised if one or both of his ears are pierced, that is if you can see his ears for all the long hair. He might have his hair pulled back in a ponytail, though. Not exactly sure how old he is. He's not ancient, but he

might have long, stringy slightly grey hair. But he'll definitely have long hair.

Don't know how big he is, so expect all sizes. He may be alone when he shows up; we're not aware of any entourage that will be with him. He's supposed to be a pretty simple kind of guy, a very basic sort—one of those earthy types. A lone wolf.

When he opens his mouth, look for a few broken or missing teeth. And, if he has all his teeth, they could be yellowed and chipped some. Personal hygiene is not going to be one of his specialties.

His speech is like as not inflected with some kind of southwestern drawl, maybe a little Indian sounding, you know, making very terse statements, not very talkative, jilted and elliptical, a "humph" now and then. He grew up on a reservation, after all. So he could be deliberately slow in his walk and movements; might have a look of wonder on his face when he comes through the doors. This place just not being anything he's ever been used to.

And he was just what they expected. Into the lobby came their RC Gorman. He happened to arrive just about the same time a troop of brownies, Troop 867 from Tavan Elementary, had walked into the station and were lining up in the lobby to be escorted into Studio B where they would join other audience members assembling for *The Wallace & Ladmo Show*.

They were well-behaved brownies as brownies go, bubbling over with excitement at the prospect of seeing Wallace and Ladmo in person and up close. Maybe even one of them would be lucky enough to get a Ladmo bag. All of them were looking every which way, wide-eyed, covering up their giggles with their hand in the way they'd been taught to suppress a cough.

At just about the same time your typical southwest business suit with bolo tie ornamented by a large, round, flat turquoise enters the building and brushes past the

brownies, smiling slightly and excusing himself politely and uneasily with a nod of the head as he navigates his way around what must be an awkward feeling of mingling, if only briefly, with some who-knows-what type of guy sporting this thick, wavy brown hair a little bit longer than shoulder length.

Man, this RC guy looked at the girls lining up beside him, then looked around as if to follow their eye as just about every one of them watched the business suit traverse the lobby on his way to the receptionist's desk. It was obviously an artist's tick for seeing the world through others' eyes. His clothes weren't too shabby, though.

He was in work boots and wearing Levis, and he had on a blue short-sleeve kind of shirt you see on the guy who works in a garage. It was clean, except for what could have been a small dark ink stain—could have been paint—just at the bottom of the chest pocket.

Above the pocket was a patch with the name Dennis on it. That kind of throws one off. What in the world would Dennis mean to RC Gorman? Of course!—some subversive devil-worship thing. DENNIS is SINNED spelled backwards. Only an artist like RC would have thought of that and had the balls to wear it, especially with kids all over the place.

So over goes the assistant producer to greet Rita's guest and, hopefully, avoid some kind of mishap.

"Mr. Gorman. Thank you for coming," he says very cordially, hand outstretched. "We'll be taping in Studio A, if you'll just follow me."

"Huh, well . . . Miss—I can't remember her name—but said it was in Studio B," Dennis replies, giving the assistant producer one of those ubiquitous Dennis smiles.

"No, no. That's our *Wallace & Ladmo Show*. Kids show. Rita's in A," the AP adds, giving Dennis a toothy attempt at a sincere smile.

"Yeah, Wallace and Ladmo. We're here for—my daughter and her—," Dennis insists, his brow now furrowed to emphasize the seriousness of his explanation. He points to the girls who are now in a very straight line, "—her school troop."

"You are Mr. RC Gorman?" Mr. AP asks almost in the way of demanding he confess.

"No, don't think so," Dennis chuckles. "Took off work to see Wall and Lad with the girls." He sounds a little embarrassed to have to defend his decision. "The name's Dennis."

He grabs the assistant producer's hand, which is still being offered to him, and they shake. The AP cocks his head slightly to one side, looking very puzzled and a little embarrassed himself.

Just then, the receptionist called over to him. "Frank, Mr. Gorman is here," she said as if to remind him of his official duties.

Turning and shading his eyes with his other hand like as not to peer across some great expanse of undiscovered country beckoning him forward and away from what's behind, Mr. AP sees the receptionist standing at her desk across the lobby with the man in the business suit. She's anxiously looking and pleading with her eyes, while she is none too discreetly pointing and jabbing at the air with her index finger as if she's ready to throw her entire hand in the general direction of the neatly attired blue suit standing with her.

Bolting from the gate, as it were, poor Frank quickly breaks and turns from Dennis, hastily adding without looking back, "Ah . . . yes . . . Dennis, Studio B."

Some parting thoughts . . .