

STORIES I TELL MYSELF

The Man Behind the Curtain

A Memoir

Dennis Cole



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GROWING UP YEARS

All American Hill

May 1942

“HEY, WAKE UP DENNIS,” came the whispering voice of my father. “You’re going with me today.”

I wrestled with the blankets that had twisted around me and rolled out of bed.

“Gosh, today I get to go with Dad.” I quickly pulled on my pants and dove into my tee shirt and my bare feet automatically started moving toward the kitchen.

Mom appeared in the hallway with a load of laundry in her arms, “Well aren’t you the early bird?”

“Dad and me going to work today.” I crouched down and scooted underneath the bundle and popped into the kitchen. I stared out the window. It was dark. I was puzzling: Is it still yesterday or was it today?

I heard a clacking sound and saw Dad scraping steaming oatmeal into two bowls, “Come on and eat your breakfast.

Grab the milk out of the fridge.” We sat at the table and ate in silence.

I started digging a milk canal around the edge of the bowl to form an oatmeal island with a brown sugar mountain in the center. I heard Mom holler,

“Walt, are you sure it’s safe to take Dennis on the bike?”

I hunched down trying to hide behind my oatmeal listening. Mom was always worrying about me, trying to keep me safe. Dad answered, “I’ll take it easy on the hill, he’ll be fine.” Then he sees me just sitting at the table and says, “Hey, hurry up and eat.”

Earlier in the week I’d watched Dad measure and cut wood to build a box. He mounted it over the rear tire of his bicycle. He told me he could carry tools and stuff in the box, even little kids. I was only two years old and had never ridden on a two wheel bicycle before.

Riding to the boatyard, being with my Dad all day meant I was growing up. For several days now there had been talk about my going to work with Dad. I didn’t understand all the reasons behind this plan, but I’d heard something about saving gas coupons and taking me to the boatyard would be better than me hanging around the house all day. Going with Dad meant I could know stuff and help out around the boatyard. I was ready to do whatever needed to be done.

Dad yelled from the garage, “Dennis, you almost ready?”

I shoveled up the last of my oatmeal, put my bowl in the sink and hurried out to the garage. He was putting things into a big canvas bag: measuring tape, ring of keys, note book, towels, a bag lunch, and some other stuff I didn’t know what it was .

“You better get a sweater it feels chilly this morning.” When I returned Dad had rolled his bike out into the front yard. He tied the canvas bag around the handle bars and with

his assistance, I popped into the wood box. There I sat with my knees up to my chest, my hands gripping the sides. I was ready to blast off.

Mom and my sister Nancy, still wearing her pajamas, came out on the front porch and waved goodbye as we rode down Aliso Street. The first thing I noticed was how fast we were moving. It was exciting to be riding along in the open air. I could smell the grass in the field and saw things like a gray cat sitting on the hood of a car and a tennis shoe in the middle of the road, looked like it had been run over. Dad kept talking to me over his shoulder, “you okay?”

“Yeah.” He couldn’t see me, but I was smiling like a jack-o’-lantern. We went three blocks, and turned on Cliff Drive, I could see the harbor down below and the gray, blue ocean beyond.

In a couple blocks Dad stopped. He told me in a very serious voice, “Now you hold on tight, we’re going down the All American hill.” I wasn’t sure why he was making such a fuss about the hill, but I did what he said. As soon as we started off the bike picked up speed a lot faster than before. I got low and held tight and soon we were going faster than I could think. I remember feeling the air singing in my ears, and making my eyes watery. The tires spit gravel and everything blurred and I let out a “yippy” and soon we were at bottom the hill, slowing down. The ride happened so fast I didn’t have time to be afraid or worry.

“Was that you making that noise?” Dad asked.

“I think so,” I exclaimed in a high pitched voice, I was just loving it. In ten minutes we got to the boatyard, and our work began. From then on whenever the shipyard didn’t need Dad I’d be riding in that wood box, flying down the All American hill, going to work with my Dad.



The Monster in the Bucket

June 1943

IT WAS AFTERNOON. I was helping with the move to our new house at the boat yard. The loft over the boat shop was turned into two rooms. Since Nanci was six years older, almost thirteen, she got the big room with a door. My room was open to the shop below and had one light bulb with a pull string. I had to hunch over to move around because of the sloping roof. There was only enough space for my bed and boxes of stuff.

Carrying clothes and bedding up the ladder pooped me out. I stretched out on my bed and noticed different shapes in the wood grain of the roof framing: a lion's head; wavy grass; a wood knot growled a warning. I tried to imitate the growl. I felt like a lion. The tarpaper roofing smell mixed with odors floating up from the shop: manila rope, oakum, copper paint and sawdust. I liked my room. It was cave-like.

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My dad built an addition to the boat shop: a kitchen and large bedroom. There was no running water and no toilet only a faucet outside the shop and out house across the yard behind the paint shed. I missed having a bathroom. Stumbling to the eight-foot ladder, in the dark, going down through the shop and out into the yard was scary.

I told Dad about it and he gave me a galvanized bucket, “Just need to empty it regular.” I took the bucket up to my cave and put it at the foot of the bed.

A few weeks later Mom asked about a smell coming from the loft area. ”Have you emptied that bucket lately?”

Caught off-guard I said, “Well. Yes, A while ago.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You need to take care of it right away.”

“Okay, I’ll do it.” I ran outside.

A few days later Mom asked if I’d emptied the bucket.

I looked down. “I forgot.”

“Well, you get up there right now and empty it, IT SMELLS TO HIGH HEAVEN!”

I went up to my cave, sat on the bed and looked at the bucket. The pee was about a half inch from the top. I didn’t think it smelled. It was just another boat shop smell. I kind of liked it. I tried to lift it, but only raised one side and caused a small wave to slop over the edge, roll down my leg and onto my foot.

The pee was cold. It stung my leg and smelled bad, like monster breath. I thought of the witch and that kettle of bubbling water I’d seen on Halloween. I looked at the knot in the roof sheathing and realized it wasn’t a scary growl, it was more like a terrible scream. I imagined a hand reaching out of the bucket in the middle of the night and grabbing my foot.

I heard Nanci bumping around in her room and knocked on her door. It opened an inch. “What do you want?”

“I need your help with something.”

“What is it?”

“I can’t empty my pee bucket. It’s too heavy.”

“I don’t want to look at your bucket, I can smell it from here.”

“Well, what should I do?”

She thought, then opened her door a little more. Why don’t you get the gallon paint can under the ladder and a tin can from the trash and take a little bit at a time out of the bucket until you can lift it.

It took a lot of trips down the ladder and out to the yard. My bailing caused a bad smell that made my stomach twitch. I found some bamboo that looked like it needed watering and poured out the stinky stuff.

“I’m never going to let this happen again,” I thought. From then on I kept a close watch on that bucket. I didn’t want a monster living in my cave.

A few weeks later I noticed the bamboo had turned brown and died.



The Disappearing Corks

June 1944

MOVING TO THE BOATYARD CHANGED THINGS. I stepped out of my sandbox and onto sandy beaches.

One morning I was digging in the sand to see how deep I could dig. I heard Dad calling my name. “Hey Dennis, come on we’re going with Demeo on his boat.”

I jumped up and followed him down to the dock, untied the lines and pushed off. It was my first boat ride. Standing on the bow looking ahead, I squinted into the morning sun that bounced off the water. The air was salty and fishy. Seagulls sitting on pilings flew off as we passed. It was like being in a movie.

Dad rented rowboats and kept them pulled up on the beach. I spent hours pretend rowing trying to figure it out. With the bow pulled up on the sand and the back end floating in the water, I practiced moving one oar, then the other, and finally both together. Once I got the oars dipping and pulling

through the water, the boat left the beach and the bow-line stretched tight. I stirred up whirlpools of gray sand until my four year-old arms pooped out.

I liked learning to row, but when Dad saw me moving into deep water, he told me, "From now on, if you're anywhere near the water, you need to wear a life jacket."

I didn't think that would be a problem until I found out it was stuffed with cotton and hotter than a Red Devil sucker. In the morning I started out wearing it, but when the sun came out I'd start sweating and scratching and off it came.

One day when I had one foot in my rowboat and the other on the dock the boat moved and I went into the drink. Luckily someone was nearby and yanked me out. Dad got mad.

"You lummoX, You don't think about what you're doing. Your mother and I have asked you a hundred times to wear your life jacket."

"That thing's too hot to wear. It's stinky."

The next day Dad surprised me when he said to follow him down to the dock. I wasn't wearing my life jacket. Without warning, he picked me up and threw me in the water. I landed on my back. "Hey, I can't swim." I thought. Then, "Oh, he's playing a trick on me. I get what he wants me to do. I won't even try. "I sank like a rock. I didn't feel afraid, or struggle." He threw me in, now he's going to have to come get me."

Sure enough Dad dove down, clothes and all, grabbed me and pulled me to the surface. For a moment he didn't say anything and I stood there wondering, "What the heck was that all about?"

He frowned, shook his head and walked away.

I had no interest in swimming. It made me cold and getting the kicking and paddling thing figured out was tricky. I'd rather be rowing a boat.

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A few days after my sink-or-swim test, Dad asked me to come into the boat shop.

He held up a bunch of ropes and fishing corks and said, "This is your new life jacket."

I looked it over, but it didn't make sense. He'd spliced ropes together with rows of fishing corks, front and back. There were holes for my arms to fit through and two brass spring hooks holding the jacket snug around me. "Your mom and I are going for a swim. Let's see if those corks' float you."

They went into the water right away, but I hesitated. I wasn't sure this rope-cork thing would hold me up. But, I hated my old jacket and inched my way into the water and when I was about chest deep, squatted down and pushed forward. Mom cheered as I bobbed around and said, "You're floating."

I paddled and kicked and managed to move.

I splashed my face, got salt water up my nose, but sputtered, with a grin, "I can swim! I can swim!"

From then on, I wore the cork life jacket every day. It felt cool to wear, even over my clothes. It gave me freedom to be on the docks and out on the bay. I liked going swimming with my family, especially when we swam across the channel. I dog-paddled like a swimming washing machine, splashing along, leaving a trail of foam.

At the end of my second summer wearing my cork vest, we were getting ready to go for a swim when Dad said, "Why don't you try swimming without your jacket?"

"Are you kidding? I'll sink."

"Yeah." Nanci said. "Try it Dennis." I'd never thought about getting wet without my vest on, but I tiptoed into the water, feeling like I was missing a part of me. I waded in until I was chest deep then paddled real hard and chugged along just like I always had. I heard everyone laughing, cheering

and shouting “Hurry!” I was laughing too, but it sounded like howling bubbles. That’s when they told me about the disappearing corks.

Dad had been cutting a cork off every so often without telling me. I’d noticed the vest seemed floppy around my chest, but thought it had just stretched out. Over the summers, Dad had cut off a bunch of corks. Everyone knew about the disappearing corks, that’s why they laughed and cheered.

I never wore my life jacket again. I’d been wearing it for so long my upper body looked funny. The open places where there were no corks were real tan, but the spots where the corks shaded me left my skin white. My friends said I looked like a giraffe. I didn’t mind though, cause I could swim like a fish.



Pirates Don't Cry

Summer 1944

There weren't any kids my age living around the boatyard so I was on my own most of the time.

When I was five Mom got a big stomach, went to the hospital and came home with baby brother Tommy. From then on she was always busy doing the books, taking care of Tommy or helping Nanci bake Girl Scout cookies.

Mom didn't like me hanging around. She'd say, "Dennis you need to go outside and see if you can help your dad."

I wanted to stay and see what they were doing. I liked the smell of cookies. Sometimes I'd sass Mom and she'd get mad and pop me on my butt with her hairbrush.

Sometimes Dad read me a story called *Treasure Island*. I imagined I was Long John Silver, the pirate. He was strong and unafraid. He made me feel strong and unafraid. I dreamed up pirate stories of buried treasure in secret places.

I never wore shoes because I liked how the sand felt. I named my boat the Albatross. I liked the way it sounded. I rigged a sail and the afternoon breeze pulled me down the bay. I was sailing like a pirate.

In first grade, I learned to play marbles. Dad talked about shooting marbles when he was a kid. He had a sack of bulls-eye agates. We got together after school, smoothed out the sand, drew a circle and each threw in four marbles. We took turns shooting. I really wanted one of those agates. On my first shot I missed and said, “Shhhhhhit.”

Dad straightened up and glared at me,

“What did you say?”

“I said Shhhhit.”

“I don’t want to hear that kinda talk outta you.”

“Oh. Okay.”

I guessed shhhhhhit was a bad word, but everyone at school said it.

Dad took his turn, knocked one of mine out of the circle and put it in his sack.

I lined up another shot, fired and missed and said, “Shhhhhhit.” It came out without me thinking, but he thought I was acting smart.

He stood up, grabbed my arm, whirled me around and popped me on the butt so hard, I fell over into the circle.

“I don’t ever want to hear you use that kind of language.” He picked up his marbles and walked off.

I sifted the sand looking for my marbles and hissing, “Shhhhhhhhhhh.”

When Dad got mad he wouldn’t talk to me for a few days so, I stayed out of his way.

June 1946

I made friends with the men working around the yard. Demeo, the mechanic taught me about tools. Carl, the fisherman, showed me how to bait a hook.

Squeaky worked with wood, wore puffy blue pants called bloomers with green tights. He looked like a pirate, said he was French, rode a bicycle and had a funny voice. That's why everyone called him Squeaky. He always had time to talk to me.

"Hello Denny. Catching any fishies lately?"

"Naw. Not today." I asked why he wore funny-looking hat. "Ya mean my beret?" He took it off and let me hold it. When I lived in the Alps it kept my head warm. I wear it now to keep the sun off.

"My wife knits 'em for me." His bald head looked like a big shiny apple. I said, "I like the way it flops to one side without falling off."

"Well I'll see if my wife can knit one up for you."

"Oh, gee, I'd like that." A week later he gave me a green and blue beret, same as his. The fit was snug and it kept my head warm. I even wore it to bed. Squeaky was my friend.

Nadine was the waitress at Norm's cafe next door. She had shiny red fingernails chewed gum and wore a green uniform. I'd go there in the afternoon before the day fisherman came in. She'd follow me over to the glass pie case that had a shelf for each kind of pie: cherry, chocolate, apple, coconut cream. I took my time choosing. Pie cost fifteen cents and I'd save up collecting pop bottles. I always ordered coconut cream. Nadine and I would talk about fishing and who was catching what.

When the cannery was running I went across the street to watch them unload the fish. Everyone was busy and never

seemed to worry about me walking around the conveyors and steam cookers. I'd visit the women cleaning fish. They were always happy to see me.

"Ola Rubio." They'd throw me kisses, giggling and talking in Spanish. I'd smile and wave and move along quickly: I didn't want to get close to the blood and fish guts.

Walking back to the boatyard, I went by the storage units. If the door was open on the end unit, Orlando would be playing his piano. Not wanting to interrupt, I'd ease into the doorway and lean against the wall. He played what he called a "grand piano." It looked as big as a car. He was from a place called Cuba and played at bars and parties for money. He told me how his music could make you move.

"This is a rumba. Can you hear how it feels?"

I'd listen and nod to the beat, "Yeah. I like it."

Then he'd say, "This is a tango," and he'd sway from side to side. His eyes opened wide and he'd nod his head. His fingers moved like little people running back and forth. Then he'd play slow skipping sounds like happy feet. It made me happy—and want to visit Cuba some day.

September 1947

I was out in the boat shop cradled in a big coil of rope that hammocked around me. The smell of hemp, wood shavings and paint thinner filled the air. There were a bunch of National Geographic magazines stacked in the corner. I liked the pictures of white sandy beaches with palm trees and half-naked woman fishing. That's where I saw the albatross, a big sea bird.

Mom hollered from the kitchen,

"Were going shopping. Your dad went to deliver a boat with DeMeo. He'll be right back. You be all right by yourself? I want you to empty the trash. Its got that broken mirror

sticking out, so be careful carrying it out. Okay? Dennis, did you hear me? Take out the trash.”

“Yes, okay. I heard, I heard.”

I finished looking at my magazine and went into the kitchen and got a glass of milk. I looked at the trash box with those slivers of broken mirror sticking out.

I could see myself in a piece of the mirror. I had a crooked mustache. I took another sip to even it up then wiped it off on the table cloth.

I picked up the trash box. It was heavy, but there were hand hole's on each side so I had a good grip on the box. I carried it over to the door, pressed the box against the wall with my knee and turned the doorknob. As the door began to open the box slipped. I grabbed for the hand hole, but a sliver of mirror speared my arm below my elbow. I jerked back. The box and I slid to the floor. I looked at my arm. There was a big gash with stuff bulging out and blood dripping off my elbow. I pressed my hand over the cut and squeezed tight. Every muscle in my body squeezed tight. It didn't hurt, but I worried. Should I find someone to help me? Who?

I'd never had such big a cut. I lifted my hand and took a peek. It really was a big cut. I put my hand back to stop the bleeding. It made my stomach sick. I sat on the floor holding my arm, waiting for someone to come.

The shadows moved up the fence outside the window. The room grew darker. Maybe I'll die, I thought. I'd seen dead animals and fish with their stuck-open eyes and stiff bodies. I wiggled my toes and blinked, trying to see in the dim light. I guessed I was still alive. The lights came on in the parking lot next door. I shivered, choking back the urge to cry. Tears ran down my face. Babies cry, I thought. Pirates don't cry. Tears are like the rain, they just happen.

I heard a car drive up. The door opened and banged into the trash box as Nanci and Mom came in carrying Tommy and the groceries.

“Why are you sitting on the floor?” Nanci asked.

“I got, ah, I got a cut on the glass on my arm.”

Mom handed Tommy to Nanci and knelt down, “Let me see, dear.” I lifted my hand and showed her the gash. It didn’t bleed but dried blood was on my arm and hand. As Mom washed the cut with salty water pirate strength made me strong.

“When did this happen?”

“Right after you left.” Saying those words I realized how long I’d been alone. “Dad never came back.”

Mom gathered up the tissue and bloody wash water, saying “I’ve got to start dinner.” She left me sitting on the couch. It felt good not being alone. Nanci came and sat next to me, “Does it hurt, Denny?”

“Naw.” I didn’t want her to think I was a whiner. I straightened up and hugged my arm to my side.

Nanci put her arm over my shoulder and said, “I’m so sorry you hurt yourself. You’ll be okay.”

I couldn’t think of what to say so I stared at the floor. I smelled onions cooking. I heard a seagull squawking down on the dock. Or maybe it was an albatross?



That Core-Pearl Incident

1946

I was excited about going to first grade. I'd be with kids my age and learn to play marbles and kickball. It was a big change from playing around the docks by myself all day. I was a beach kid; tan, barefoot and the fastest runner in our class. If another kid got pushy, I wasn't afraid to stand up for myself. Jack Buck hired me as his bodyguard when kids were picking on him. I earned 25 cents a week.

My first grade teacher, Mrs Kelly, was nice. She smelled good and had blue eyes like Mom. She'd see me drawing and say, "Dennis, we'll be drawing this afternoon. Please get out your workbook and turn to page five."

I'd drag it out and start thinking about being a pirate and doodling pirate faces. Mrs Kelly would help me get started so I didn't get behind. With her help, I started to learn to read and write letters and numbers.

The next year Miss Wilson was my teacher. She had short fuzzy gray hair, a wrinkly face and never smiled. She was strict. When we didn't pay attention she banged her ruler on the desk. A lot of the kids were ahead of me in their workbooks. There wasn't time for drawing pictures. Miss Wilson was too busy to help me. I wanted to be part of the class exercises, but kept bumbling the answers.

Letters and numbers didn't make sense. Why were "to" and the number "2" different? Or the letter "U" and the word "you" different? I spent so much time studying the differences, my thinking got jammed up, leaving me spinning like a dust devil. I got so tired of embarrassing myself that after two weeks I stopped trying. I didn't like sitting around writing squiggly things anyway. I started goofing around and being silly. It was more fun making kids laugh.

Miss Wilson asked us to spell words and she'd draw a picture on the board. "What sound does a duck make?"

I couldn't spell it, but flapped my arms and quacked. Everyone laughed. She walked back to where I sat. "Stand up, young man. Now repeat to the class what you said."

She wasn't much taller than I. I said,
"You quack like a duck."

Everyone laughed. I stood there smiling, thinking how funny I'd been.

Then she slapped my face real hard. In a flash I slapped her right back. There was a long silence. She adjusted her glasses, grabbed my arm, and dragged me out of the room and down to the office. She talked to a woman behind the counter. Then left me and went into another room.

A few minutes passed and Mr. Pickens, the principal, came out. He was tall, wore a suit and had mackerel eyes. He never blinked. "Dennis, come into the office."

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I sat across from Miss Wilson in an oak chair so big my feet hardly touched the floor.

“Miss Wilson tells me you slapped her and have been disrupting the class.”

“Yeah, but she....”

Mr Pickens raised his hand. “I’ve heard what happened. Your parents will be here shortly.”

“Oh, gosh.” I thought. “They’re not gonna like coming down here.”

The principal and Miss Wilson left the room. I sat kicking the air, hearing the recess bell and kids laughing and yelling on their way outside.

I sat alone and waited. That old crab! She shouldn’t slap people, I thought. It wasn’t right. If someone hits you, you hit back. I’d seen fighting on the dock. That’s what men did.

After a while the door opened and Mom and Dad and Mr. Pickens came in. He told them what had happened. “We suggest core-pearl punishment in situations like this.”

Mom and Dad nodded. Dad looked at me and said, “Dennis needs to learn to behave.”

Mr. Pickens stood up and asked my folks to wait in the front office. He opened a closet door and brought out a thing that looked like a small ironing board with holes in it.

I wasn’t sure how core-pearl punishment worked, but I guessed that ironing board thing was just a big version of Mom’s hair brush.

Mr. Pickens said, “Dennis, come over here and put your hands on the desk and look straight ahead.”

He smacked my behind so hard spit shot out of my mouth. I yanked in a breath, shivering as stings ran down my legs. I’d never felt such pain. There was no way to escape.

Mr. Pickens put the core-pearl thing back in the closet. “Hopefully this will teach you to behave. Do you understand?”

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I looked down, nodding. The room and Mr. Pickens blurred around me. I was shaking.

As we drove home, Dad said, “You’re going to have to learn some manners.”



I Want to Be Normal

September 1947

The day I got in trouble with my second grade teacher Mom and Dad lowered the boom on me. After dinner, Dad said, “Your mother and I are disappointed in you. We don’t like getting calls from the principal telling us you’ve been causing trouble. This is a small town and it makes us look bad. I don’t want people thinking we don’t respect the law. Do you understand?”

“I guess so.”

“Your mother is a Girl Scout leader and doesn’t want people to think you’re a troublemaker. You’ve got to learn to mind your manners.”

“But that teacher hit me.”

“That doesn’t matter. Mrs Wilson is the teacher and you do what she says.

“Is that clear?”

Mom didn't like shouting and getting mad. She left that to Dad. But, she had a way of pinching her lips together and squinting that told me she didn't like what I'd done. Dad made me sit next to him at dinner. I'd start eating and the next thing, BONK, he'd bounce his fork on my head and say, "Sit up and get your elbow off the table."

If I forgot to say please or thank you the fork flashed overhead. BONK.

In class, I moved to the back row and kept quiet. Newport Grammar School had long dark halls and every time I came in from recess it felt like I was being swallowed up. I didn't know why I had trouble learning to read and do math like other kids. When the teacher called on me, I got jittery, stuttering and mumbling things I'd heard, but didn't understand while the class stared at me. I hated looking like that. I wanted to be normal like other kids. I got lost when the teacher talked too fast: it made my insides tight.

Sometimes I felt like crying, but because I was seven I acted tough. I was a beach kid; grown up for my age and stronger than most. I rode my bike two miles to school and went barefoot. I could take care of myself, but when it came to schoolwork something was wrong with me. I watched and listened to the teacher, but couldn't connect what she said to the questions on the test. It was like falling in the dark and not having anything to hold onto. I kept falling over and over. I didn't like being a dumb kid. Being bonked at the dinner table and embarrassed in class made me sad and afraid and angry all at the same time. My feelings closed in on me one day sitting alone on the back porch and realized if I couldn't keep up in school I'd fall behind and die. It was my secret fear from then on.

I was determined to be like other kids. I was always first in from recess because nobody wants to be around a slow

kid. Always handed in my homework on time, even if it was wrong. When I could I'd copy other kids' answers on tests. I always raised my hand to be teacher's helper. I'd sit by the hall door to be first in line for lunch. During recess I was good at kickball. I liked being a winner.

Dad and I didn't do much together, but he always had a job for me. He pestered me about rules and doing things his way. "You left the light on in the garage again and you didn't put the flashlight back where I told you."

If I did something really bad he'd yell at me and then give me the cold shoulder for a couple of days. He'd only made it through tenth grade and didn't like helping me with my homework. Mom had gone to college and knew school was important. She always signed my report cards and when the teacher's comments said I was falling behind she'd set up special time after school for me to work with Mrs. Carlson. She was a retired school teacher. Her soft voice and gentle manner helped me figure out spelling and reading problems and she always had cookies and milk after my study time.

I was getting along okay remembering my manners and staying out of trouble, until one evening when I was late for dinner. Everyone was sitting around the table waiting for me. I slid into my chair and Dad asked, "Don't you know when it's dinner time?"

"Yes. Six o'clock."

"Where have you been?"

"I was over at Richard's Market looking at funnies."

"Didn't you see what time it was?"

"Yes, but I didn't know what the clock was telling me."

"You're eight years old and you can't tell when it's six o'clock?" He stared at me the way my teacher did when I didn't know the answer, and said, "You're not going anywhere

until you know how to tell time. That includes the matinee tomorrow.”

I sank into my seat and wanted to disappear. Gee. Not going to the matinee was worse than getting bonked. I had to know if Flash Gordon and Dr. Zarkoff rescued Dale. After dinner I went to my room and sat on my bed and looked at the clock. Nanci knocked and poked her head in.

“Denny, I can help you learn to tell time.”

“Oh. I don’t know. I get mixed up thinking about it.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not hard to do. I’m going over to Julies, but let’s get up early in the morning and I’ll help you.”

“Okay. Wake me up.” Nanci and I did secret things together like making sugar-cinnamon-butter toast and eating baking chocolate when Mom and Dad went out.

The next morning she brought her Big Ben windup clock to my room and changed the time back and forth explaining before the hour and after the hour and how to count quarter hours and then minutes. She’d repeat things over and over when I didn’t understand. I finally got the hang of it. Mom tested me and I got to go to the show that afternoon.

Mom had started working at the Newport Press selling advertising, so she wasn’t home much. I got bored hanging around the house and started doing stupid things. Some neighborhood kids and I messed up freshly poured concrete. They blamed it on me and Dad worked late into the night smoothing it out. I got caught smoking cigarettes and messed around with matches building a fire with pine needles. The wind spread the flames and burned up the tree at the entrance to the Lido Island bridge. The fire department came around asking questions.

After that I dropped a ten-pound dirt clod on the sun roof of the Balboa Ferry as it came out from under the bridge. I guess someone saw me do it because the police pulled in

the driveway afterward. I thought for sure I was going to jail. They talked to Dad and since he was a reserve policeman they were soon joking and laughing in the driveway. When they left Dad came in my room and said, "What were you thinking? You could have hurt someone. I want you to come home after school from now on. No more running around." But when I did come home Dad was busy working. That was when I got a paper route. I liked having a job and making money.

When I started junior high, Mom helped with my homework and I stopped going to Mrs. Carlson's. The classes were bigger and it became easier to get passing grades. I had two good friends, Roger and Roland. We sat together in the back row. Having good friends made me feel like a regular person.

In eighth grade, my teacher was Mrs. Mossteller. She had a relaxed, easy way of talking to me and helped me understand little things. "Dennis, remember there are three different words for THERE. When you say, 'Let's go there,' it's spelled t-h-e-r-e. When you refer to people, it's spelled t-h-e-i-r and when you're saying they're for they are, it's spelled t-h-e-y'-r-e. It's one of those tricky words we've talked about."

On my final eighth grade report card, Mrs. Mossteller wrote, "Dennis has made tremendous improvement this year and deserves to be congratulated." I read those words "deserves to be congratulated," over and over. I still sat in the back row, but I almost felt normal.