

Autobiography
of a
Maquoketa Boy

by
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**One must not always think so much about
what one should do, but rather what one should be.**

- Meister Eckhart



Dedicated to the heroes of my youth: William E. Wells, Jr., James Bittner, Ben Cooper, Erhard Ketelsen, Bill Hewlett, and Dave Packard

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I. Changing Times

The latter half of the twentieth century and the opening of the twenty-first was a time of many changes in America. The cultural, societal, and technological landscape today is so different from what it was in the 1950s that it can rightly be said a societal revolution has taken place. I suspect most younger people today would find incredible the degree and scope of these changes in what is, at least to those of us who are older than they, such a brief period of time. In the years to come no doubt many scholars of history, sociology, and political science will write numerous books and papers chronicling and commenting on this period. History is rarely written by those who lived it, and sociological context is usually viewed from a comfortable perspective made possible by knowledge of what followed later. They will study the archives and try to glean from the old records, news reels, newspapers, books, letters, and diaries what the time was like and what those living that time thought, felt, and did. Often these analyses will be insightful and accurate; sometimes they will not be. It can only help the efforts of these scholars-to-come to make available the eyewitness testimony of those who were present at the events, and this is the main purpose of these memoirs.

It can be said 20th century America saw not one but two societal revolutions, one before and one after the second world war. Much has already been written about the first. Its great defining events include: the rise of the labor unions, which came into being to counter what really was the amassing of undue and unjust power in the hands of a small number of ultra-wealthy industrialists; the technological innovations of the airplane, automobile, radio, the proper birth of electronics, and other scientific advances; the rise of gangland crime during the Prohibition era and the creation of federal law enforcement agencies to combat it; the immense hardships and dislocations of the Great Depression; and the emergence of strong federal bureaucracies to address, really for the first time, domestic issues of national importance. I and others of my generation were not witness to these events; they belong to the time of our parents and grandparents and we learned about them in school and elsewhere as we were growing up.

It is of the time of the second revolution I write. Were I a professional historian or sociologist I would probably be tempted to describe these times as a parade of dry facts, statistics, and sweeping trends. That is, at least, how most such records are written now and perhaps explains their general unpopularity among schoolchildren. But I am neither historian nor sociologist. It has been the accident of my life to have spent most of it as an engineer and a scientist. For me the second revolution has been what I lived, what I witnessed, and, so far as I am a member of my society, took some part in. I do not claim – nor, I think, can any other truthfully claim – to speak for an entire generation. Humanity is far too diverse to be boiled down into any one-size-fits-all stereotype. I do not even think one can speak truthfully of “the” American society or “the” American culture. In my life I have never found just one society or just one culture in the America I know. Instead there are many, and of all of them I can really only write with any degree of insight about the one I have lived. This one is middle class, white, and mostly small town and small city. Where I have come into contact with the other cultures I can relate anecdotes; but I leave it to better representatives of these cultures to record their viewpoints, mores, and folkways. I will share the impressions and judgments I formed about people I have known as they looked to my eyes, but I make no judgments about these cultures themselves. I am content to accept that the views their representatives hold are their true evaluations seen from their own perspectives, and if my own views and perspectives are different, at least these differences are honest ones. Perhaps some day scholars will find a way to reconcile differences and develop ways to teach reconciliations to all the generations to follow. If that can be done, it will be an accomplishment in which great pride can be taken. All I can offer is to contribute one of the many points of view to be taken into account in such a future synthesis.

I was born in rural small-town Iowa during the first year of the Eisenhower administration. Yes, this means what you might think: I am one of those called members of the “baby boom” generation, sometimes called “the ‘me’ generation.” It is an epithet that in many ways fits and in other ways does not fit myself and all those others born between 1946 and 1964. Perhaps there will be some who read this record and say, “You see? Wells is a textbook case of the ‘me’ generation; he only writes about himself.”

To this I answer, “Who would you have me write about? My own life is the only one I have lived, the only one I can report on directly, and the only one I know in a way impossible to know about anyone else.” I can and do write about the people I have known, our common experiences, and the nature of our associations and interactions; but I cannot get inside other people’s heads and neither can you. You might not like everything you read here. You might not like anything you read here. But, like it or not, this is the America I know, the America I have seen, and the only one I am competent to report. It is and can be only one small piece of post-war America. There are other pieces truthfully reported elsewhere, and all I can say is the sum-total of this and these others – contradictions included – makes up the overall true picture. America is not a monolithic abstraction as some people appear to believe. America is all of us, every person who lives within those borders drawn on the globe, taken in total with all the commonalities and differences that attend her.

In these memoirs I divide my story into different epochs marked by recollections of events and trends I have come to view as watershed. Scholars may – and likely will – affix different dates and different periods when they come to write the histories not yet written. I define these epochs on the basis of when I came to be aware of them as distinguishable and when in retrospect I could perceive their beginnings. I haven’t seen very many events that could rightfully be called clean breaks marking decisive turning points. Living history is lived, and that means one becomes aware of most changes and trends slowly and by degrees. What I have done is ask: What happened? I try to answer this as best I can and I try to do this in words that describe the events as they appeared and felt to me at the time. I try to bring you the little boy, the adolescent, the young man, the older man, and the old man. Others have had other experiences and would have seen things from other perspectives. The greater truths and the greater understandings must come from the collective witnesses and not just from any one person’s memories and feelings.

It is said a picture is worth a thousand words. In the narrative that follows I have included a number of old photographs taken at the times being described. I think this is a necessary part of the narrative because I doubt if any mere words can suffice to capture the flavor of the times or communicate the ordinary lives of the people who lived them. Greater history has a certain grandeur to it; living histories have a certain beauty. I think only a visual record can convey depth in this beauty and add understanding. These memoirs are mostly about people who are not and never will be famous, whose lives will inspire no great novels or movies. They are about places most people have never seen and will never see, or which no longer exist to be visited and seen as they were. By use of these old photographs, I hope to let you see who is talking to you at that point in time. I hope to present the past as a new kind of museum welcoming those who desire to know the feel and flavor of the times and some of the people in them.

II. The Eisenhower Years

I was born in September of 1953 at the Jackson County Public Hospital in Maquoketa, Iowa, the third child and second son of William Earle and Luella Wells. When I was a baby our family lived in a little farm house on about five acres of land just east of Maquoketa. Dad was forty years old when I was born, while Mom was thirty-six. Eleven years separated me from my brother Bill, Jr. (born November 13, 1942) and twelve years separated me from my older sister, Sherri Jo (born June 22, 1941 – the day Hitler invaded Russia). These age differences meant that for me my older sister and brother always seemed more like junior parents to me than sister and brother. They were both role models for me all the time I was growing up and no one could ask for better ones.

Five acres isn’t a farm. Dad had been a Ferguson tractor dealer in the small town of Emeline, where Grandpa Wells ran a general store. Dad’s side of the family are long-time Iowa residents. Dad was born in West Union, Iowa, and was a great-great grandson of the founder of the town (1849). He was the youngest of Harry and Mabel Wells’ four children. Like his father, Dad worked at a number of trades in his life, including baker, salesman, and mechanic. Of these, Dad liked being a baker the best. The family ran the Morning Glory Bakery in Maquoketa during the Great Depression from 1932 to 1946, although Dad left to join the Navy and Uncle Wayne left to build tanks when the war came to America.



Grandpa Harry and Grandma Mabel Wells

Mom was also an Iowa native, born in the tiny, tiny town of Fulton, Iowa, on August 18, 1917. She was the second daughter of Ernie and Iva Teters. Grandma and Grandpa Teters still lived in Fulton until near the end of the 1950s. To say Fulton was rustic is rather like saying the Rocky Mountains are scenic. Even into the early 1960s, Fulton's streets were dirt streets, and the house Grandma and Grandpa lived in did not have an indoor toilet. Instead there was an outhouse in the back yard. Mom grew up in Fulton, attended a one-room schoolhouse, and graduated valedictorian of her class.

Unlike Dad's side of the family, there was a bit more wanderlust on Mom's side. Grandpa Teters had lived for years in Oklahoma in what was at the time called the Indian Territory. He never told us kids any stories of those days, not even the name of the tribe he lived with. He could speak the language, although he never told us exactly which language, and when we used to beg him to "teach us how to speak Indian" he would always say it was a long time ago and he couldn't remember any of it. That little bit of fiction was exposed when an Indian baseball team came to town. Grandpa went up to one of them and they just started chatting in "Indian" – we still never learned which language it was – as if Grandpa had only moved away earlier that week. Rumor also had it that Grandpa knew the outlaw Frank James and didn't like him, but I never heard Grandpa talk about him.



Fulton school in 1928. The girl second from the left in the back row is my Mom. The blond-haired boy in the second row two over from the teacher is my Uncle Marvin, and the blond-haired boy fourth from the right in the front row is my Uncle Chet.



1890s picture of Grandpa Teters as a boy (far right) with his parents, brothers, and sister

In terms of personality, Grandpa Wells and Grandpa Teters were pretty much opposites. Grandpa Wells tended to be serious and business-like. One time I heard him tell one of my older cousins, "Don't stop looking for work after you find a job." Good advice, really. All four of his kids took after him in the serious department. Not that he or they were unfriendly or aloof (well, Aunt Mimi was a bit aloof, come to think of it). They were serious in a warm sort of way some people didn't quite know what to make of. Folks in Maquoketa even had a saying: "That's a Wells for you." I didn't realize how many friends Dad had until his funeral. I lost count of how many people came to the funeral home for the visitation after one hundred and fifty. It was a pretty good turnout for a town of six thousand.

Grandpa Teters, on the other hand, had a well-earned reputation of being a bit of a prankster and a first-rate teaser. When Aunt Sylvie (Mom's older sister) was sixteen, she brought a boyfriend

home to supper one night. Apparently the boy was a bit shy, and she had sternly warned Grandpa beforehand that he'd better be on his very best behavior. Somewhat to her surprise, supper went smoothly and afterwards Grandpa, Sylvie, and the boyfriend adjourned to the living room for some polite conversation. (That's the way it was done in those days, kids). Soon it was getting on in the evening and Grandpa got up, yawned, and said, "Well, I guess I'd best get off to bed so you young people can start sucking tongues and smelling armpits." *Boom!* Out of the room he went. Aunt Sylvie was so mad she was fit to be tied.

Mom issued a similar stern warning to Grandpa before she brought Dad home to supper the first time. Dad was doing his best to impress his future father in law and all was well until he asked someone to pass the meat for seconds. With a completely deadpan expression, Grandpa handed him the bread basket. "Eat some bread," he said gruffly. "It don't cost as much." Mom said Dad's jaw dropped open so far it almost bounced on the table. Then he realized Grandpa was kidding and laughed. The two of them got along great their whole lives.

Grandma Wells and Grandma Teters were also very different from one another, at least by the time I was old enough to know them. Grandma Teters was very quiet and stern looking. In the most vivid memory I have of her, she is sitting in a rocking chair in a black ankles-to-neck dress. She always seemed to me to be cold and distant and markedly different from the rest of Mom's side of the family, which, except for Uncle Bun, was gregarious and active. I was always a little bit scared of her. In later years I commented on this to Mom. It was then I learned Grandma Teters had a severe heart condition and she had been very different when she was younger. In those days there was no such thing as "routine" heart surgery and no such thing as an artificial heart or a heart transplant. She died when I was still a little boy.

Grandma Wells was a storybook grandmother, loving and cuddly and fun. When I was in grade school I would often walk or ride my bicycle over to her house just to visit. I never needed any prompting from anybody to pay Grandma a visit. She was the first person to teach me how to play cards, a pastime that was always popular in my family. "Sweet" was a word that definitely applied to Grandma. You wouldn't have thought the word "tough" would apply, but here there was more than met the eye. When Dad was a little boy he came home one day proudly carrying "a pretty worm that wants to play with me." It was a rattlesnake and it had bitten him. Grandma sucked the poison out and saved Dad's life. □



Mom and me in 1953 shortly after coming home from the hospital

I have no memory of living in the farmhouse, but Mom kept a photo album with a lot of pictures from those days. Most of what I know about those days I heard from my sister Sherri, although I don't always believe the stories she tells. At the time we had a little dog named Puddles (you can probably guess how that name came about). Mom never liked animals very much, so the very fact we had a dog says a lot about Sherri's abilities as a salesman. When Mom and Dad brought me home for the first time, Puddles lifted up on her hind legs and looked at me as I was lying in my crib. She gave me a sniff then laid down directly under the crib and stood guard. Puddles wouldn't let anyone who wasn't family or with a family member come near me when I was a baby.

My parents promised Sherri and my brother Bill that if I was a girl Sherri could name me and if I was a boy then Bill could name me. So it was that I was named after Bill's best friend (Richard) and the actor who played Hopalong Cassidy (Boyd). Because Bill was born in November, he was just shy of his eleventh birthday when he named me. When my younger sister, Melody Ann, came along two years later, Sherri named her. This was pretty characteristic of my parents. They hardly ever made any promises to us kids, but those they did make they always kept. We were all brought up the same way. In my family, a promise is never something to be made lightly, but once made it is to be kept no matter what. No matter

what. ‘Situational ethics’ didn’t exist in the 1950s. Not many Americans, including my parents, had ever heard of Immanuel Kant, the great 18th century philosopher, or his categorical imperative, but nonetheless the system of ethics we were brought up by were Kantian ethics. My parents never outsourced the responsibility for the moral upbringing of their children – not to the schools, not to the church, not to anyone. As I look around today, it seems to me that the people who beat the drum the hardest to try to get Sunday school moved into the public school system are the people with the least understanding of what morals and ethics are. Ethics are to live by, not to preach. You teach by example. □



Aunt Hazel and me in 1953

My sister Melody and I in a way really had two sets of parents: Mom and Dad, and Aunt Hazel and Uncle Wayne. Uncle Wayne was the third of Grandma’s and Grandpa’s children and was two years older than Dad. He and Hazel were married in 1939, about one year before Mom and Dad got married. Aunt Hazel was a Maquoketa native and after they were married Uncle Wayne went into business with his father in law in the plumbing and heating business. They had two children of their own, Bonnie (born in 1942) and Brent (born in 1945).

Aunt Hazel and Mom were best friends and when I was little I spent almost as much time at Wayne’s and Hazel’s house as I did at home. Aunt Hazel said many times that she considered Melody and me to be half hers. Her favorite story she liked to tell about me happened when I was two years old. I was at her house one day when she was painting the kitchen. That’s a lot of work for one person to do, and so you might imagine what it could be like to try to do it and keep an eye on a toddler at the same time. Her solution was to take advantage of the fact that I wanted to ‘help.’ She gave me an empty pail, a dry paint brush and an appointed place to stand. I stood in that one spot, ‘painting’ a single piece of wall, while jabbering away at her all day long. We had a delightful if somewhat one-sided conversation.



Uncle Wayne caught napping (mid-1980s)

I always thought, and still do, that Uncle Wayne had a gentle soul. For as long as I knew him, Uncle Wayne was bald. I used to sit on his lap and he would let me painstakingly inspect the top of his head looking for signs of hair. If I saw anything that could even remotely be taken as a sign of peach fuzz, I would tell him I could see hair growing there. This never failed to amuse and delight him, even though he knew it wasn’t true. He had a soft voice in the tenor range and when he laughed his laughter was a sort of prolonged chuckling

unlike anyone else’s laugh I’ve ever heard. It’s hard to describe the sound of it; it was as if the individual chuckles were somehow soft and rounded at the edges and flowed into one another like the whitecaps in a whitewater river. I loved to hear him laugh, and I always did pretty much anything I could think of to get him to laugh. Delightfully, this wasn’t too hard. Dad had a similar laugh only it was more staccato and when he laughed he always had a sort of look on his face as if laughter puzzled him.

If you are getting the idea Melody and I never suffered from want of attention as babies, you’re right. In the 1950s there were no daycare centers, no preschools, nor any other kind of modern day temporary orphanage kids now experience. Neither was television all that common in the early 1950s where we lived, and there were no electronic gadgets to take the place of baby-to-grownup interaction. With two older siblings and two sets of parents, I had plenty of interactions. The same was true for Melody except that she had three older siblings. One of these, it is true, wasn’t all that much older than her and our sister, Sherri, married and moved into a home of her own when Melody was still two.



Life is full of wonders. Me in 1953.

The Nintendo™ technology of the 1950s was called “Mommy.” For as far back as I can remember (and even before that according to what I’ve been told), Mom made it a constant practice to read to us. Melody or I or both of us would sit on Mom’s lap and she would read stories to us. The books I remember had pictures, so the whole experience was visual, tactile, and verbal as well as merely auditory. What the book said wasn’t important in and of itself to me, but the close contact and plain old sense of well-being were.

Dad giving me walking lessons in early 1954



With Dad the interactions were more physical. He wasn’t what you’d call a “bookish” man. He did finish high school, although from the rare stories of his boyhood he occasionally told us a person might easily wonder how. He was a powerful man with huge arms, and a lot of his sense of self came from what he could physically accomplish. I think that might be one reason he liked being a baker so much. In those days that was tough, physically-demanding work and involved a lot of long hours, most of it on your feet. As a young man he was a skilled boxer, though not a professional, and he saw to it Bill and I both knew how to box.

How was this man able to eat? Dad watching me play with his breakfast in 1953.



But he was also a cuddly man, particularly when we kids were very small. In the evenings after supper I think he liked nothing better than to watch TV with one of his little ones curled up in his lap. If the family went somewhere and didn’t get home until late (“late” meant after 9:30 in our family), it was Dad who would pick up the sleeping children from the back seat of the car, being careful not to wake us up, and carry us off to bed. After I was ten years old he didn’t do this any more. I think at that age he felt behaviors like this were embarrassing.

In those days men (and school-age little boys) didn’t display this kind of physical intimacy with anyone but very little kids and girlfriends and wives. With other men and with older boys, an arm around the shoulder or a pat on the back was as far as it went. Men didn’t slap other men on the rump the way football players today do either. On my high school football team the nearest equivalent to that was a good, hard open-hand slap to the side of the helmet with plenty of juice behind it. Numb skulls made for pretty good *esprit de corps* but were not always the best recipe for the correct execution of plays. Maybe that’s why my football coach used to (affectionately) call us defensive linemen, “you knuckleheads.”

Today we know from numerous scientific studies that this kind of intimate, one-on-one interaction with babies and toddlers, involving lots of physical contact and closeness, is extremely important for a child’s mental and emotional development. Dr. Stanley Greenspan, a clinical psychiatrist who was very well known for his work with autistic children in the 1970s, used precisely this kind of therapy to successfully treat a large number of cases of very severe autism. Babies do not reason; they *feel*. The work of Greenspan and others strongly suggests that interaction and physical contact with the primary caregivers are essential in getting a child to turn outward from being wrapped up in himself to engage in the kinds of experiences key to cognitive and intellectual development. In recent years there has been a growing level of concern in this country about whether cases of autism are on the rise. I don’t know whether that’s actually true or not, but if it is we’re probably looking in the wrong places for a cause.

Instead of buying your baby an electronic babysitter, try letting him splash your Wheaties all over the breakfast table. The table won't mind. Want your three-month-old to do well in school? Read to him. Today. Every day. Until he can read for himself. Little kids, both boys and girls, *love* to learn. You get to decide *what* they love to learn. Choose wisely. Then be a part of it. But I'm lecturing; sorry. I'll stop. □



A favorite summer pastime in 1955. Note the environmentally friendly clothes drier in the background.

The young men and women who are my students today have never known a world not powered and dominated by electricity. On the infrequent occasions I point out to them that there was a time when not everyone had electric washers and driers they mostly think I'm talking about the Civil War days. Since they're pretty sure I never knew Abraham Lincoln personally, they think I'm kidding if I tell them we didn't have these appliances when I was little. Out at the farmhouse, and even for a few years after that, Mom had an old fashioned washboard with two tubs and a hand cranked wringer. Our drier was an environmentally friendly appliance called a clothesline. I don't think in later years she ever missed them after affordable appliances came along.

Television was another thing that wasn't a familiar at our house until around 1958 or 59, although I'm pretty sure Aunt Hazel and Uncle Wayne had one before then. What we did have was a radio. One nice thing about a radio is you can do other things while you listen to it. Our radio picked up AM stations (ask your grandpa what AM is, kids). Radios brought the news and entertainment in the form of music. Every once in a great while President Eisenhower would give a radio address and everyone would listen to it. In the 1950s my favorite singer wasn't Elvis. It was a guy named Burl Ives. There were two songs of his in particular, "Goober Peas" and "Waltzing Matilda," that when either came on I'd stop whatever I was doing and sing along with him. Burl and I made a great duet. There was another musician I liked, too, a fellow named Hank Williams. Radio then lacked something it has now; it didn't pollute the air by broadcasting the rants of a bunch of opinionated big mouths. Yes, Virginia, there was a time when there was no talk radio.



Sherri, Bill, me, and Mom in the spring of 1954

Most of what I did in the 50s I did with and around other people. With two older siblings, two cousins from Wayne and Hazel (Bonnie and Brent), three from Dad's eldest brother, Uncle Foryst (Phylis, Dee, and Corky) plus an innumerable horde of cousins and second cousins large enough to rival the army of Genghis Khan from Mom's side of the family, it would have been pretty tough to ever get lonely. Corky, whose given name is Harold, probably doesn't count quite as much as the others. He was born in 1936 and by the time I came along he pretty much counted as one of the grownups. But he was a big influence on Bill and, through him, had an indirect influence on me.



My first engineering project (1955). Sherri tells me I was trying to take this toy apart.

When we had visitors at the house, I would usually play on the floor in whatever room the grownups were gathered in while listening to them talk. I liked the feeling of having them around, even if what I was doing didn't involve any of them at all. They were there and I was there in the thick of things, and that was how I liked it.

Usually the adults would just assume I was oblivious to their presence, but in this they were mistaken. Like with the radio, you can

listen and do something else at the same time. But that doesn't necessarily mean you get everything right, as grownups sometimes found out. Another of Aunt Hazel's favorite stories was when I was spending the day at her house and, as usual, chattering away nonstop. Abruptly I asked her, "Aunt Hazel, don't you have any brains?" She was a bit taken aback. "Well, I think I do. Why?" she replied. "My daddy says you don't have any brains," I announced. That night the folks had some explaining to do. It turns out I'd gotten two different conversations mixed up. Some guy my folks knew had done something or other that turned out to be pretty dumb and Dad had remarked, "Sometimes he just doesn't have any brains." I'd gotten this one crossed up with another one about Aunt Hazel. All that came from it in the end was an instruction from Mom to me not to repeat anything I heard them say about anyone and a story Aunt Hazel loved to tell for years and years afterwards.

I should probably mention that by 'instruction' just now, I really do mean 'instruction.' My parents never scolded me about anything. If I did something I shouldn't, Mom would just tell me I couldn't or shouldn't do that. "Okay," I'd say and that would be that. Scolding makes me combative, not penitent.



Melody Ann and me in spring 1956

Something new was added to the family the day after Christmas in 1955 and her name is Melody Ann. After two years of being the baby of the family, I now had a baby sister of my own.

The night Dad took Mom to the hospital to deliver Melody, he woke Sherri up and told her to watch me while he was gone. I still slept in a crib at the time, and Sherri went to sleep on the bed beside it. When Dad got back from the hospital, he laid down on the other side of the bed and went to sleep.

When Sherri, who was fourteen at the time, woke up and found out Dad had slept there, she had a conniption. Someone had told her that if you "slept with somebody" you got pregnant. She started yelling at Dad in full fury because now she was going to be pregnant. "Well Je-SUS Christ!" was Dad's response and explanation. When Mom got home, Sherri asked her how you knew if you were pregnant. Mom, greatly unsettled by the question, replied with "What have you been doing you shouldn't have been?"

Such was sex education in the 1950s. The folks never explained "the birds and the bees" to any of us.



Melody and me in the autumn of 1956

Melody started out as a pretty good sized baby to begin with, and she grew mighty fast. By the time I turned three, Melody, still not a year old, was only about a head shorter than me. She still wasn't walking under her own steam yet, but she started to not long after that. She's always been my little sister, but you could say she didn't spend a lot of time being my baby sister. It made it tough for me to be for her what Bill was for me, the wiser big brother.

1956 was the last year we lived in the farmhouse. Some time early in 57 we moved into town to a little house on Anderson Street. Aunt Hazel and Uncle Wayne lived one block over and you could walk across our back yard to theirs. There were no fences dividing the lots.

Or, if you had the skill, you could ride a bicycle between their house and ours. I couldn't ride one but Bill could. One day he lifted me onto the seat of his bicycle, stood on the pedals, and gave me a ride from our house to Aunt Hazel's. It was my first bike ride and, although it wasn't exactly the *Tour de France*, for me it was the greatest thrill in the world. I wrapped both arms around Bill's waist and we bumped our way through the dirt and grass to Aunt Hazel's back door. If you're wondering, bicycle helmets hadn't

been invented yet and the wind blew my hair back as we bounced along.



Melody and me in front of the Anderson St. house in 1957

Melody started walking that year, which was the occasion for the first profound shock of my life. I had a little three-wheeled car – basically a kind of tricycle with a metal body wrapped around it – which I spent a lot of time driving on the sidewalk in front of the house. Sidewalks were something towns had that farm houses didn't, and I thought it was pretty neat that they would build streets for little kids to drive on. It seemed natural to me that big streets were for grownups and little streets were for kids.

I was out there one bright, sunny day 'motoring' along when the shocking event happened: The door to our house opened and Melody came out *by herself*. The fact she was by herself was what was shocking. Melody had been outside plenty of times before, but someone had always been with her, either carrying her or holding her by the arms as she toddled along. In my universe at that time, Melody-by-herself was completely and totally an inside-the-house phenomenon. But here was Melody-by-herself *outside* the house. It violated the natural order of things. Life would never be the same again. This was something too big even for President Eisenhower. Mom would have to be told. I went running into the house yelling, "Mommy! Melody is outside!" Mom took it in stride. "Make sure she stays in the yard," she said.

Oh. Okay. I'm on it. I went running back outside and watched her like a hawk. After all, I *was* the big brother. This was my job. □

Another memorable event that year was called Sputnik. I had turned four about a month before and heard about it that night when we were over to Grandma Wells' house. The grownups were talking about it. I had no idea what a Sputnik was, but I gathered that it belonged to somebody named the Russians who lived a long way away, not even in Iowa. Maybe they lived near President Eisenhower's white house. I already knew President Eisenhower lived in a white house; that was where his radio was. Whatever a Sputnik was, it flew because somebody said it was going to fly overhead in a little while.

We all went outside to see it pass overhead. Dad pointed it out to me. It was a teeny little star moving across the sky. That was something special! Stars didn't move. "What is it, Daddy?" I asked. He told me it was a man-made moon. I looked from it to the regular moon and back again.

"It isn't very big," was all I said. Sputnik had turned out to be pretty much a disappointment. □

There was an incident at the Anderson Street house that passed into the annals of family folklore. Sherri was sixteen at the time and a senior in high school. The story, as she tells it, goes like this.

I walked past you (referring to me) and you kicked me. I decided to smack you and raised my hand to do it, but I decided that maybe I had better not. You bawled anyway. Mom turned around and yelled at me and told me to leave 'my sweet little baby brother alone.' You were doing a performance that would qualify for any Oscar, complete with big sobs and giant tears. When Mom turned around, you gave me this evil little grin. I banged the kitchen cupboard door in disgust and Dad came in and spanked me and sent me to my room.

There is a bit of a dispute in the family as to whether this is the way it really happened. The other side being, according to Mom and Dad, that she really did slap me. Both sides, though, agree on the spanking part. Sherri tells me this last spanking she ever got was a great indignity for a sixteen-year-old.

What is the truth of it? Senator, I have no recollection of that incident. □

I should probably mention – before the quack pop psychologists in the audience come unglued – that spankings were very, very rare in our family. I only remember getting one, when I was five, and I probably wouldn't have gotten that one if Mom hadn't been to the dentist that morning and gotten all her

teeth pulled out. Pain medication then wasn't what it is now and Mom was, to put it mildly, in a very bad mood that day. Like Sherri, I claim to be innocent of all charges. But I do remember the spanking quite well – three swift open-hand swats on the bottom. It didn't even hurt, but I was so surprised I cried anyway. The message was loud and clear; I'd done something so naughty it brought down the ultimate punishment. I'm still not sure exactly what I did; if ever I deserved a spanking it should have been for the time two of my little friends and I took an ax and chopped up all Dad's paint cans in the shed. Fortunately, Mom was wearing dentures by then. I don't think it was the abstract artwork all over the floor of the shed that impressed her (or Dad, for that matter). I don't think she ever got all the paint out of my shirt and pants. My feet were an interesting color for awhile after that too.

I'm not entirely sure Mom herself was convinced of the justness of the justice meted out. After the spanking and a long prison sentence (about 20 minutes confinement to bed in my room), Mom let me come back out and gave me a hug, a kiss, and an apology. I was happy to forgive her. □

The Anderson Street house was also where my personal, lifelong war with the wasps began. I woke up one peaceful, beautiful spring morning to the sound of birds singing and bright morning sunshine streaming through the window. Then I saw the terrorist invader. Perched on the nose of my teddy bear was the biggest, ugliest, yellowiest insect I'd ever seen. You could tell it was evil and up to no good just by looking at it. Teddy was in danger! I had to save him! Without hesitating, I delivered a death blow to that agent of evil with the palm of my mighty right hand.

That turned out not to be a very smart thing to do. It was the first time I had ever been stung, and my screaming brought Mom rushing to the rescue like the marines hitting the beach. With all the commotion I was making she must have thought the house was on fire or something. She cuddled and rocked me while I sobbed out the dreadful story of what had happened and showed her the ugly red wound. She said, "I'll kiss it and make it better." Strangely enough, that did make it better. Not a lot better, but a little. Enough at least for me to stop crying. Pain, it turns out, is a peculiar thing.

Teddy survived the incident unscathed. □

One big difference between living in the farm house and living in Maquoketa was this novel thing of having neighbors living only a few feet away. If the neighbors were Aunt Hazel, Uncle Wayne, and cousins Bonnie and Brent, this was very, very neat. Brent kept aquariums full of fish in the basement, which for me was better than television by miles and miles. He also had a ham radio set and could talk to people who lived far, far away. In this Brent was almost like President Eisenhower! On the other hand, our next door neighbor was an old biddy I didn't like very much. One day she snidely asked Mom how come all her children looked different. Mom coolly replied, "We lived in different neighborhoods." For some reason Sherri found this answer hilarious. Mom didn't take any lip from anybody.

We only lived on Anderson St. about a year. Early in 1958 we moved to a different house on North 5th St. It was called "the Regenwether house" after the man who owned it. It was the only house I've ever lived in that had a name of its own. I was four, Melody two, Bill fifteen, and Sherri sixteen when we moved there. It was a two-story house with a covered front porch, a big back yard with room for a garden, a separate shed (where some trouble-maker paint cans came to live), and was heated by a coal burning furnace. There was a big coal chute where they would deliver the coal for the furnace. The Regenwether house sat about two blocks from the Briggs Elementary School, which was shortly to enter my life.

Without a doubt the second biggest event that year (there are those who would say it was the biggest event) was Sherri's wedding. Sherri graduated from high school that spring and about ten or so days after she turned seventeen she married a handsome young man named Gary Hicks, her high school sweetheart. The wedding was held in the Regenwether house and, to the best of my recollection, this was the first time I met Gary. Grandma's and Grandpa's old custom of the suitor coming to supper had lapsed by then. I'm pretty sure Mom and Dad knew who he was, though. People kept calling him "the groom"; I didn't know exactly what a groom was, but whatever it was couldn't have been too good. I'd never seen anyone

sweat like he was sweating. Somebody should have followed him around with a mop and a bucket.

I had known for a couple of days that something was happening. There was a lot of bustling going on in the house. Sherri was edgy and kind of remote and kept dashing off here or there. Mom went on such a cleaning blitz you'd think President Eisenhower was coming. Melody developed some strange fixation and kept practicing singing the same song over and over again. Bill disappeared altogether. All the talk at the supper table was about strange and mysterious grownup things I couldn't begin to follow. Something was going on all right. It all had something to do with something called a "wedding" but I had no idea what that was. Everybody else seemed to know so I didn't want to ask. I would soon find out.

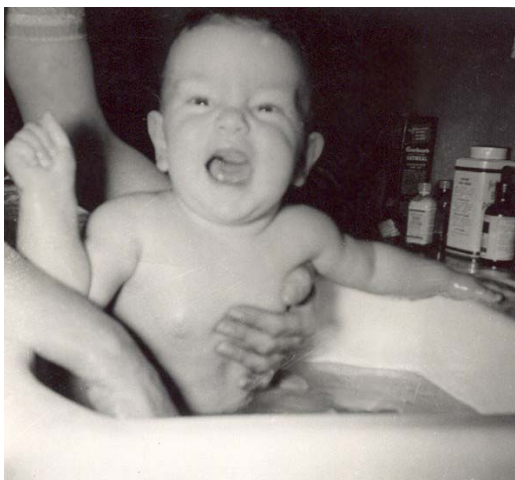
It turned out that a wedding is a kind of home invasion. An enormous mob of people descended on the house, both relatives and a lot of strangers. It was like going to Aunt Sylvie's house except that at Aunt Sylvie's house the great majority of people were kids – almost all of them older than me – but on the day of Sherri's wedding almost all the people were grownups Sherri's age and even older. Who were all these people and what were they doing here? When you only stand a little shy of belt buckle high, nobody thinks to properly introduce you to anyone. Oh, somebody might point at you and tell some stranger, "This is Sherri's little brother." That usually gets you either a compliment on how cute you look in your little suit or else a pinch on the cheek. (I don't know why they call it a 'pinch' instead of a 'pinch and shake'). But they never tell *you* who this suddenly-overly-familiar stranger is. Telling you, "This is Mrs. So-and-So" doesn't tell you who she *is*, just what to call her. In this regard I thought the old-time Indian names were better. You'd know to be extra careful around somebody named Crazy Horse. I'd have made it a point to get very chummy with somebody named Reads To Little Boys. It really wasn't fair. They knew who *I* was, but I didn't know who *they* were.

The only good part about it is they ignore you after a couple of seconds. I tried to become invisible and I hoped these people weren't going to stay forever. I could have really, really used a friend during all this. I don't think I said one word during the whole wedding thing. No, wait. That isn't true. Some gabby stranger did try to get me to talk but I didn't know what to say. Finally she asked, "What's the matter, dear? The cat got your tongue?" Huh? "We don't have a cat," I said.

Missing in all this bedlam was Sherri herself. She and cousin Bonnie were upstairs hiding from everyone. Finally somebody made everyone gather in the living room and everyone quieted down. Some kind of ceremony began. There was one guy standing up front – I guess he was some kind of minister – and they made poor Gary stand up there in front of him and everyone. A steady stream of water kept running off the end of his nose, which distracted the minister a lot. A deafening hush fell over the house and then Melody started singing that song of hers. "Here comes the bride. Here comes the bride . . ."

There was some thumping and bumping on the stairs and, sure enough, Sherri appeared with Bonnie right behind her. Sherri had a strange look on her face and she was all kind of stiff-like. I don't think she would have moved an inch but Bonnie was kind of pushing her along with one hand, a big grin on her face. Bonnie really knows how to grin. Sherri's eyes were wide open, but I'm not too sure she really saw anybody. Bonnie made her come all the way to the front and stand next to Gary. Melody stopped singing and the minister started talking. And talking. And talking. Water continued to pour off Gary.

After he'd talked for a long time the minister asked Gary something. It was a real long question and the gist of it seemed to be that he was asking if Gary had taken something. It must have been serious because he stood there as stiff as he could be. Whatever it was, he must have taken it because he said he did. Then he asked Sherri the same thing. Apparently she was in on it too. Then he made the two of them kiss in front of everybody. Yuck! I hid my eyes. Everybody started clapping and moving around again. I think Sherri was mad because she had a bunch of flowers she'd been holding and she threw them at some other girls. It took *forever* but finally this wedding thing was over. There was a big party right afterwards. We had a big cake with lots of icing on it and Sherri and Gary cut it up and served it. I got to have *two* pieces. That's when I decided this Gary guy, whoever he was, was okay. It was the best part of the whole day. □



Bath technology in late 1953 (left) and early 1958 (right)

There were a lot of signs I became aware of in the Regenwether house marking my new status as little boy instead of baby, but probably the biggest one was bathroom privacy. In those days, and for a long time after that still, most houses had only one bathroom containing a commode and a tub (tubs with showers built in weren't common yet. Neither had idea of having a second private bathroom off the master bedroom come to Maquoketa yet). But, although the bathroom had to be shared, when you had it, it was *yours*. Babies didn't get the use the bathroom. If you were a baby you had your baths in a small portable tub and it was anything but a private affair. As for the other hygiene function, babies had to use the portable potty and, again, it was anything but private. By these standards, Melody was still a baby.

I, on the other hand, was now the proud part owner of the bathroom. Mom initiated me into the Signs and Dialogues of bathroom use. If the door was open you could go on it, closing the door tightly behind you. When you were through, you left the door open. If the door was closed, you knocked and waited for the response, "It's busy." If the matter was urgent, you replied, "Please hurry up in there." You never, never went in while it was busy, even if you had to stand on one foot while you were waiting.

At least you weren't supposed to. I experienced two bathroom invasions during 1958 and both happened during bath time. Bath time had become a very fun thing. The bathtub was like our inflatable rubber swimming pool except that it was hard, didn't have to be inflated, and came with its own supply of water. Although its main purpose was to wash in, you also got to play in the water and you could do it year-round, not just in the summer. For me it was this second function that was the more important. I was happily engaged in it one day when all of a sudden the door flew open and there was Dad. He had a big grin on his face and was holding the camera in his hands. Yikes! I didn't have any clothes on so I tried to hide under the water to prevent the camera from seeing me. If ever you try this at home, here's an important tip: take a deep breath *before* you put your face into the water. I was outraged at this egregious violation of the sacred bathroom etiquette and refused to talk to Dad for almost an hour.

Mom committed the second invasion. Again, I was happily playing away, oblivious to the ominous rumblings of approaching thunder. Suddenly the door burst open and there was Mom. "Get out of the tub," she commanded. "There's a storm coming." I must not have moved fast enough because she grabbed me under the arms and lifted me out of the tub. There followed the fastest – and wettest – toweling off I've ever experienced and the hastiest dressing I've ever known. Mom took Melody and me down into the basement, where we waited until the storm passed. Luckily, it didn't develop into a twister and Mom had been more concerned about the bathroom being hit by lightning with me in the tub than about the tornado watch broadcast over the Maquoketa radio station.

People on the east and west coasts don't seem to know very much about tornados and tornado weather. In Iowa a tornado watch is a cause for apprehension and watchfulness but not fear. They happen all the

time every year during tornado season. A tornado watch (these days called a ‘severe storm watch’) generally takes in several counties and usually results in nothing more than higher-than-usual wind speeds and an awful lot of rain, thunder, and lightning. It was a normal part of growing up in eastern Iowa and most people do not bother to take shelter during a tornado watch. With two small children in the house, Mom tended to err on the side of caution when Dad wasn’t at home. After Melody and I were older we never bothered with this extra precaution when it was only a tornado watch.

A tornado *warning*, on the other hand, is a different matter. A warning means a twister has actually touched down somewhere nearby. Trailer parks seemed to be popular with tornados for some reason. People do take shelter during tornado warnings. Most houses in Maquoketa at that time had basements and these generally served as a storm shelter. Mostly it was only the farms that might have a separate storm cellar like you see in *The Wizard of Oz*. Years later when I was living in California, every once and awhile one of the natives would ask me if we weren’t afraid the tornado would make the house collapse into the basement. No, that isn’t what happens. A tornado doesn’t blow your house down; it makes it explode. That’s *why* you go down into the basement (if you have one). When I was a kid they would teach us all about tornados in grade school so we’d know what to do if one happened when we were by ourselves. What they *didn’t* teach was this “duck and cover” pabulum TV these days seems to think was ubiquitous in the 1950s. Parents and teachers both knew you couldn’t survive a direct hit by an atomic bomb so they never even brought it up. No point in scaring the kids about something you couldn’t do anything about if it happened. There were a few official fallout shelters in Maquoketa, but not one single bomb shelter. If the grownups were scared of the bomb I never knew it. I don’t think most people wasted much of any time worrying about it. Not in Maquoketa at any rate. Maybe they did in California. But California has always been known all my life as a place where a lot of silly, feckless things get started.

If you’re waiting for an adventure tale of that day down in the basement, sorry. Nothing memorable happened. Melody didn’t even know anything was going on. Because I wasn’t generally allowed to go down into the basement, for me it was just an opportunity to explore its many mysteries. Mom spent most of her time keeping me from playing with the dirty coal. She spent the rest of it keeping Melody from playing with the coal. Ah, nothing is as tempting as the forbidden fruit. Most of the time Mom was pretty careful to tell us what we *could* do instead of what we *couldn’t* do. For example, on Anderson St. I had been told I *could* ride my little car on the sidewalk. That’s what made it the street for little kids. She *didn’t* tell me I *couldn’t* ride it in the street, so I was never even tempted to. The grownups had their street and I had mine. But Dad had slipped up the first time I was ever allowed in the basement and had told me I *couldn’t* play with the coal. Fascinating stuff, coal. It’s a rock that burns and how neat is that? □

It was in the Regenwether house that first year when I suddenly knew myself. More accurately, what I became aware of was what the word ‘me’ really meant. One of my little pastimes was to go on great hiking adventures in the house. You could travel in a full circle from the living room into the dining room, turn left down the hallway toward the front door, turn left again into the room where the TV was, and turn left again back into the living room. I would march this route over and over, usually singing some little song or babbling nonsense poetry I’d make up just for the pure pleasure of finding words that rhymed. Lewis and Clark never had as much fun as I did on my little expeditions. I was doing this one day and just as I was entering the dining room I chanted something like “the *rock* and the *tree* they belong to *me!*” when suddenly I *felt* the word ‘me.’ I’d never felt a word before, and it stopped me dead in my tracks. I looked down at myself, having a pretty good view of my belly, legs and feet. What had just happened? I said the word, “*Me!*” and felt it again. There was something underneath my skin; I could feel it move when I said “me!” I started saying it over and over, “*Meee! . . . Meee! . . . Meee!*” Mom came in from the kitchen and gave me a puzzled look for a few seconds. I was way too busy to pay attention to her just then. You see, the universe had just changed. I wasn’t sure how it had changed, but for the first time I really *knew* it was made up of two parts, the part that was “*me!*” and the part that wasn’t. Metaphysically, it was a golden moment. I had found myself. □

I was slated to start kindergarten in the fall, and that made the late summer of 1958 vaccination time.

Our family doctor at the time was a general practitioner and surgeon named Dr. Swift. For reasons that will soon be apparent, he wasn't my favorite person in the world. Dr. Swift was a reasonably young looking man with dark hair and a bedside manner that was serious bordering on gloomy. He had delivered both myself and Melody. Doctors in those days made house calls. For those of you who can't remember anything before the mid-1960s, a house call was what the name implied. If you were sick, the doctor would come to your house to treat you. You had to be either in really, really bad shape or else giving birth to a baby to go to the hospital. (Why that system ever changed I don't actually know; I do know all the doctors quit making house calls at pretty much the same time. When companies act this way it's called 'conspiracy in restraint of trade' and, when the Republicans aren't in office, it's against the law).

But being sick is one thing; getting a vaccination shot is another. For shots you had to go to the doctor's office. Dr. Swift never seemed to talk very much, but Mom regarded every word he said as the absolute gospel truth. If the Hebrews had listened to Moses the way Mom listened to Dr. Swift, they wouldn't have had to spend all those years wandering in the desert. Dr. Swift said I needed vaccinations and so vaccinations it had to be.

Mom explained all this very carefully to me before the first visit to the office. It turns out there are tiny little things called germs that are so small you can't even see them. But they make little boys very, very sick so they don't feel good at all. To keep the bad germs from hurting little boys you had to have a very special kind of medicine called a 'vaccine.' This medicine is so special you can only get it at the doctor's office. It's even so special you can't swallow it. To get this good medicine to keep the bad germs away you had to go to the doctor and have something called a 'shot.'

"Okay, Mommy." I didn't know what a 'shot' was, and I didn't like the sound of it. But these germ things sounded pretty bad and if Mommy said getting a 'shot' would keep them away, then that's what it had to be.

The next day off we went in the car to Dr. Swift's office. I was still a little apprehensive over this 'shot' business but a little boy's got to do what a little boy's got to do. When we got there my first impressions of a doctor's office didn't exactly relax my mood. First of all, the place smelled funny. It didn't exactly stink, but it wasn't any flower bed either. Then you had to sit in a room – appropriately enough called 'the waiting room' – where, guess what, you waited. And waited. And waited. And waited. They make you wait there *forever*. While we were waiting, I could occasionally hear the sounds of little kids crying coming from the back. I started really not liking this place.

Finally a woman whose name was 'Nurse' came and said we could now go to 'the examination room.' The examination room was in the back. Where the little kids had been crying. If Mommy hadn't been there holding my hand, I would have turned tail and run right then. But Mommy was there, so I took a deep breath and, as bravely as I could, I marched on back there following Mrs. Nurse.

It turned out there were a lot of rooms back there. Mrs. Nurse led us to an empty one and ushered us in. It was a strange room, all shiny with a lot of metal things. There were picture frames hanging on the walls but they didn't have pictures in them. Instead they had paper showing a lot of weird things in them. Mrs. Nurse said to set me on 'the examination table.' It didn't look like a table. It looked more like a bed but it was too weird to be a bed. It was hard and it was cold. Mrs. Nurse asked Mom a lot of questions about me, strange sounding questions that didn't mean anything to me, and she wrote the answers down on a piece of paper attached to a clipboard. She put this in a thing by the door and said, "The doctor will see you shortly." Then she closed the door and she was gone. So we waited. And waited. And waited. And waited. They made us wait forever *again*. Nearby another little kid started crying. Mommy sat down next to me on the cold, hard bed thing that wasn't a bed and put her arms around me. I snuggled up as close as I could get and looked up into her eyes. "Germs are bad?" I asked in a little voice, just to be sure. She kissed my forehead and hugged me. Germs were bad. They made little boys sick.

Finally the door opened and Dr. Swift came in. Mommy stood up to greet him. "Good morning, Mrs.

Wells,” he said. “Good morning, Richard.” I nodded hello to him, but he had taken the clipboard from the wall thing and was looking at it. He asked Mom a couple more things then said, “Well, this won’t take long.” He got a tiny little bottle of something from a drawer and then pulled out a huge pointy thing. My mouth dropped open; my eyes must have been as wide as saucers. “What are you gonna do with that?” I squeaked.

He stuck the huge pointy thing into the little bottle and filled it with a liquid. “This is a hypodermic needle,” he said. “I’m going to give you a shot.” I think I whimpered because he said, “It’s just one tiny little prick on your bottom. You’ll hardly feel it.”

I’d seen the sewing needles Mom used in her sewing machine. And I’d seen what the sewing machine did. This thing was a million-million times bigger than a sewing needle. Wouldn’t feel it? Who did he think he was kidding? That thing was going to go all the way through me. And on my bottom? Nobody had said anything about having to take my pants off. Now I was scared *and* mad.

I clung with both arms around Mommy in a death grip and closed my eyes as tightly as I could while Dr. Swift slipped my pants down. Tempered steel isn’t as rigid as I was right then. He rubbed something cold, wet and smelly on a spot on my bottom. Then came the shot.

Oooooow! It hurt! It was worse than the wasp sting. It was worse than anything. I let out a howl and started crying, all the indignity of my exposed bare bottom suddenly of no importance. Dr. Swift swabbed something else on me right where it hurt. “My, my, Richard! You have *very* good red blood,” he said cheerfully.

Huh? “I do?” I squeaked in a very high pitched, teary voice.

“You have the best red blood I’ve ever seen,” he said. “No wonder you’re such a brave little boy.”

I sniffled. My face was all wet, but I stopped crying. Brave boys don’t cry, and I had been brave. Dr. Swift had just said so.

I strutted out of that office with my head held high. My bottom was very tender, but I was proud. I had the very best red blood there was. □



The kindergartener (age 5)

I turned five in early September and started kindergarten. There are very important things you have to know before you can start kindergarten. Mom taught them to me. You have to know how to write your name. Mom taught me what my name looked like and together we practiced writing it until I could do it all by myself. You have to know how to count to twelve. That is very important because you also have to know how to tell time. You can’t tell time if you can’t count to twelve. Mom taught me how to tell time by looking at the big clock on the wall in the dining room. I had wondered what that thing was. Telling time was easy. There is a big hand and a little hand. When the little hand is on ten and the big hand is on twelve it is exactly ten o’clock. When the little hand is on ten and the big hand is on six, it is half past ten. All the other times work the same way.

There are very important Rules, too. The most important Rule is you always have to listen to the teacher all the time. Another important Rule is you have to raise your hand before you talk. You raise your hand and wait for the teacher to call on you. Then you can talk. The third Rule is you can never ever get in a car with a stranger no matter what. Never ever. Those are the Rules for going to school.

The school was run by the PTA. The PTA was all the mommies and daddies and teachers. Together they decided what all the little kids were going to learn in school. PTA meetings were very big deals. Everybody dressed up in their church clothes to go to them. Just before school began in 1958 the PTA decided the mommies and daddies would all bring their little kids to the school building one night to meet

their teachers. We walked from our house to the school building. Dad carried Melody and I walked holding hands with Mom. It was a very big place. Mom told me it was named after the first Governor of Iowa, Mr. Briggs. The school building had a lot of very long hallways with rooms set at regular spaces. It was the biggest place I'd ever seen, and it was a little bit scary. There were no pictures on the walls.

Dad found my room. It was on the left at the very end of one of the hallways. The door was open, the room was brightly lit, and there were people inside. We went in and I met my teacher, Mrs. Weingard. Mrs. Weingard looked like a grandma and she was very nice. I liked her. While Mom and Dad and Mrs. Weingard talked about PTA things, I explored the room. There were big windows all along the back side. There were pictures and drawings and other things on all the walls. The room was full of little desks and chairs, and they were just the right size for little kids. I thought it would be alright to sit in one of them, so I did. Nobody minded. The desk had a flat top that opened up. It was empty inside, but there was plenty of room for my pencils and other things. Mom and I had gone uptown a few days earlier to buy school things; there were pencils and erasers and paper and lots of other neat things, and they all smelled brand new. There was only one grownup's desk and one grownup's chair in the room; they belonged to Mrs. Weingard.

There was another little boy in the room. He was the same size as me, and his name was Roger. He was going to kindergarten, too, in this very same room. Kindergarten was only a half day long, and Roger and I were both going to be going to the morning kindergarten. We very quickly became buddies.

When school started the first thing I learned was just how much I really, really didn't like big crowds of strangers. I had thought Mom's side of the family, with all those countless cousins, was big. That was nothing compared to the school yard the first day. I never knew there were that many kids in the whole world. Almost all of them were bigger than me and, except for Roger, I didn't know any of them.

Even the kindergarten class was big. Although there probably were less than thirty of us, when I walked into the classroom there might as well have been a thousand as far as my first impression was concerned. I didn't know how to count past twelve yet and there were a lot more than twelve. They were uncountable. Mrs. Weingard called out our names one by one and told each of us where to sit. Roger and I ended up on opposite sides of the room with a sea of strangers in between. The whole thing was just overwhelming and I felt absolutely miserable. I tried to ask Mrs. Weingard if I could please sit next to Roger, but I couldn't even force the words past my throat. She was very nice about it, but if you can't talk you can't ask. I stayed where I had been assigned. It was a long first morning.

Slowly, slowly, slowly as the days passed it got better. I recovered my voice the second day and one by one starting making a few friends. Roger turned out to be a popular boy who made friends easily, and my new friends were usually his friends first. In the meantime there was plenty to do. Kindergarten seemed to mostly be arts and crafts stuff. Learning how to draw things, listening to stories Mrs. Weingard would read to us, answering questions. Signing your name a lot. That sort of thing. Looking back much later, I came to think what kindergarten was about more than anything was learning to socialize with the other kids in a group and getting used to doing things in organized routines. At home I always knew what was expected of me. Thrown in with a big group of kids from all over town I didn't know, it wasn't at all clear what was expected. That was the most important thing I had to learn how to figure out. And I was a slow learner in that department. In comparison, the classroom lessons were easy.

Most disappointing to me was: Mrs. Weingard didn't teach us how to read. That's what I wanted more than anything. So, all in all, I didn't really like kindergarten very much. But it never occurred to me to hate school. School was very, very important. Mom and Dad both said so. I didn't see why any of this stuff was important, but that didn't matter. I had it from the very highest authority that it was important, and that was enough.

In the morning the kids would gather outside the school building on both the big asphalt plaza in front of the building and in the city park that immediately adjoined this plaza. When it was time to go in they

would ring a bell and there would be a mad stampede toward the doors. Since I didn't like kindergarten all that much, I usually walked rather than ran when that bell would ring. One morning a few weeks after the school year started, I was walking toward the door when one of the big girls ran by me at full speed. She bumped into my back as she went by and I went flying. I landed on my left knee right on the asphalt and it really stung. I got up and limped into the school building, muttering under my breath. She hadn't even slowed down long enough to apologize for knocking me down. Dad blasted strangers. (I'd learned that word from cousin Brent).

Everybody else was already in their seats by the time I limped through the classroom door. Mrs. Weingard took one look at the bloody stain oozing down my pant leg and rushed me to the nurse's office. I hadn't even realized I was bleeding. But when Mrs. School-nurse rolled up my pant leg there sure wasn't any doubt about it. I was shocked at the sight. This was definitely not good. It was strange, though, how something so bad looking could hurt so little. I was a bit concerned about all that blood but not really too worried about it. After all, it didn't hurt very much although it was a shame to waste my good blood.

While the nurse wrapped yards and yards of bandages around my knee, someone called Mom. In no time at all I found myself in the emergency room of the hospital. The doctor there wasn't Dr. Swift, which was alright with me. He made me take my pants off – again! – but he let me leave my underpants on so it wasn't quite as bad. I sat on another of those bed things that weren't beds – this one was covered with some strange kind of tissue paper – while he gently unwrapped all those bandages. He let out a whistle. “This is going to need stitches,” he said.

Uh-oh. I knew what stitches were. I'd seen the sewing machine sew them. *Now* I was worried.

The doctor turned and looked me right in the eyes. “Richard,” he said matter-of-factly, “I'm going to give you three shots of anesthetic and then I'm going to sew your knee back together.”

“Anna's what?” I said nervously. “I don't want any shots.”

He grinned. “Anesthetic. And yes you do. The shots make it so it doesn't hurt when I sew you up.”

“I don't want you to sew me!” I shouted. Both my fists were bunched up tight. Now I was really scared, for the first time since the whole thing started, and this guy was about to get a punch in the nose.

Mommy put her hand on my shoulder. “You have to do this, Richard,” she said in her no-nonsense voice. “It's the only way to heal the cut.”

I wanted to argue, but I knew that voice. There was to be no getting out of this. Scared and resigned to being sewed, I took a deep breath, laid down on my back, and stared at the ceiling. My whole body was as rigid as a tree. “Okay,” I squeaked. “Get it over with.”

The first shot was just as bad as Dr. Swift's and I howled with pain. Then came another one, even worse, and I howled again. I was all tense, waiting for the third. It didn't come and it didn't come and it didn't come. Waiting for it was worse than the shots themselves and I lost my temper. “*What are you waiting for!?!*” I screamed at him.

The doctor laughed out loud. “It's all done!” he said. I sat up in disbelief and looked at my knee. There they were: three stitches. I hadn't felt a thing. In fact my knee didn't even hurt any more. It was all over. I looked at the doctor in amazement, my mouth hanging open.

He laughed at me again. I didn't see what was so funny. I was just glad it was over, and I was still in awe about the magic of Anna's thing. It was too bad it didn't work the first time, though. The doctor didn't seem to care that he'd hadn't gotten it right the first time, but it mattered to me that he didn't.

Still, it was over now and it hadn't been that bad mostly. Mom was smiling, he was smiling, even I was smiling. Then he said to Mom, “Take him to Dr. Swift in about a week to have the stitches removed.”

Uh-oh. □



Christmas time

Christmas was always a big event at our house, but Christmas of 1958 was the biggest event of the year, no matter what Sherri might have thought. That was the Christmas Melody and I actually saw Santa Claus. For real. In person. In *our* house.

We always opened Christmas presents on Christmas Eve. Christmas Day was for playing with them and eating turkey with mashed potatoes and gravy. (It was for other stuff, too, like they taught us in Sunday School, but that, as far as I was concerned, was secondary). So when I heard Dad call my name from downstairs that Christmas Eve I knew it was time to open presents. I came dashing down the stairs, around the corners and into the living room where the tree was. Melody was already there, Bill and Mom and Dad were there – and *Santa was there!* I knew it was Santa right away. Red suit, red stocking cap, furry white beard, big belly like a bowlful of jelly – it was Santa all right. This was the biggest surprise since Dad had taken my picture in the bathtub. “Ho! Ho! Ho! Merrrry Christmas, Richard!” he said. I squealed with delight. Mom and Dad and Bill grinned at each other. I wasn’t surprised Santa knew me. Santa had a list of all the little kids and he checked it twice to find out who was naughty and who was nice. Everybody knew that. It was even in one of the Christmas songs Mrs. Weingard taught us.

Melody, who wouldn’t turn three until the day after Christmas, didn’t seem too impressed. She did accept her presents from Santa with polite grace and dignity, all the while staring at him intently. I, on the other hand, could barely restrain myself. After all, this was *Santa!* There were a million things I wanted to ask him. For instance, while we had a chimney it went straight down to the furnace. We didn’t have a fireplace. How had he gotten in? Where were the eight tiny reindeer? Did he need any helpers for the rest of tonight? But you don’t interrogate Santa. Besides, everybody knew Santa was magic. How else could he visit all the little kids all over the world in one night? I understood when Santa couldn’t stay too long.

The next Christmas Eve I was determined to camp out next to the Christmas tree until Santa showed up. I wanted to see how he got in without a fireplace. I wanted to see the sleigh land. I wanted to pet the reindeer. This year I’d be ready! About seven o’clock in the evening Mom said to me, “Come with me to Grandma’s house for a minute.” Grandma and Grandpa Teters had moved to Maquoketa and were living in the house right next door. I put on my coat and my boots and over to Grandma’s we went. We weren’t there very long, and nothing that went on seemed very important. I was impatient to get back to my post. Mom and I returned home and when we did Dad told us we’d just missed Santa. He had been there and gone while we were at Grandma’s house. It was a big disappointment.

I was determined that nothing would go wrong the Christmas after that. I decided to bring Melody in on the plan. One or the other of us would be next to that tree all night long if we had to be. I carefully explained the plan to her.

“That was Uncle Marvin,” she said.

Huh? Uncle Marvin was Mom’s brother. Melody was crazy. “That was Santa,” I told her.

“That was Uncle Marvin dressed up like Santa,” she repeated.

“It was not!”

She rolled her eyes at me. “*Honestly*, Richard!” she said contemptuously and stalked away.

Melody was never one to suffer fools. □

1958 turned into 1959. I learned how to ride a sled and throw snowballs and all the other pastimes that were usual when Iowa lay beneath the thick blankets of snow that came every winter in those days. Riding sleds was the only time I was allowed to play in the street. The sleds were made of wood with

steel runners. You would lie down on them and steer using a long wooden handle at the front. Just north of the Regenwether house 5th Street had a sharp downhill drop and this was where we'd hold our sled races. At the bottom of the hill you had to make a sharp right turn to avoid shooting across the street and into the big snow bank on the other side. It was never a good idea to go plowing full speed, head first into that snow bank. The snow there was as hard as a rock wall. Making this turn was also a good idea in case there was a car coming along the east-west street at the bottom. But cars almost never drove past 5th street down there in the winter and one of us was always at the bottom of the hill as a lookout. The snow on the streets was packed down, hard and shiny and you could go really fast on your sled. The sleds didn't have any brakes and they stopped when they stopped. We'd compete both for who could go the fastest and who could go the farthest. Usually whoever won the first also won the second.

That was also the winter Uncle Bun tried to give me a ride home from school. Uncle Bun was Mom's bashful brother. His real name was Len but no one ever called him that. Mom's other brothers, Marvin and Chet, were outgoing and boisterous, especially Uncle Chet. Uncle Marvin could be serious but Uncle Chet was always full of laughter and contagious joy that surrounded him like a cloud. The only problem with Uncle Chet was that whenever he'd see me he'd tickle me until I couldn't stand it anymore. It turns out there *can* be too much of a good thing.

Uncle Bun was as different as could be. Pretty much the only times I ever saw him were in Grandma and Grandpa Teters' house or in Aunt Sylvie's house. No matter how much bedlam might be going on, he would sit in a chair by himself and watch and smile and never talk. If you came over and talked to him, he'd just grin at you until you talked yourself out and went away. Uncle Bun was a real big listener.

School had just finished for the day and I had just started walking home when I heard somebody call my name. Parked on the street next to the sidewalk was a car and there was a man in it behind the driver's wheel asking me if I wanted a ride home. He *looked* like Uncle Bun, but something wasn't right here. This man wore a cap; Uncle Bun *never* wore a cap. This man wore a coat; Uncle Bun *never* wore a coat. This man was in a car; Uncle Bun *never* rode in cars. This man talked; Uncle Bun *never, never* talked. My house was only two blocks away; people *never* used a car to only go two blocks. Cars were only used to go a long way. I decided this man was a stranger. You can never ever get in a car with a stranger no matter what. Never ever. That was a Rule. I refused to speak to him and walked away.

I never told Mom about this. After all, you don't brag about following a Rule; you just followed them. But Uncle Bun must have told her about it because a few days later she told me it was okay to ride with Uncle Bun. But he never offered again. Besides, that man wasn't Uncle Bun. He was a stranger. □

That spring the tree next to our back door became infested with giant hideous worms. They were a pukey white color and made of ring-like segments bigger around than my fingers. They lived on the leaves of the tree but sometimes they would drop off and land in my hair. *Yich!!* They were the most disgusting things in the whole world. They looked like macaroni. I was never able to eat macaroni again. They were so disgusting that worms in general lost their appeal for me. I hated *every* kind of worm after that. They disgusted me so much I'd feel like my stomach was full of the slimy, squirmy things.

Worms became for me what pumpkin pie became for Uncle Wayne. Pumpkin pie is the best thing in the world and everybody liked it, especially Uncle Wayne. But Aunt Hazel would never eat pumpkin pie. We were at their house one time for supper and Uncle Wayne was eating his pumpkin pie with gusto. Aunt Hazel refused to have any and Uncle Wayne was riding her about it: This is good; you don't know what you're missing; why won't you try this? Aunt Hazel snapped back at him, "*Because it looks like baby poop.*" Uncle Wayne turned pale and had to run down the hall to the bathroom. He could never eat pumpkin pie after that.

Uncle Wayne knew how to make two things. One was just awful and the other was just wonderful. The awful thing was catfish bait. Everybody agreed Uncle Wayne's catfish bait was the best catfish bait there ever was. Everybody who went catfishing wanted to use Uncle Wayne's catfish bait. But Uncle

Wayne's catfish bait smelled really, really, really bad. Catfish loved it, but that only proves there's something basically wrong with catfish. I never smelled anything so awful until the time the teacher took us all down to see the cheese processing works at the Mississippi Valley Milk Producer's Association building. That smelled pretty bad, too. Catfish would probably like it.

The wonderful thing was this teeny, tiny popcorn. It would pop into the smallest pieces of popcorn you ever saw. But how good it was! There was never ever any other popcorn that could compare to it. It was the very best popcorn in the whole world. And the only place you could get it was at Aunt Hazel's and Uncle Wayne's house. □

That summer Dad made two changes to our back yard. The first was the swing set. Dad came home one day lugging a whole bunch of strange looking pipes into the back yard, where he started putting them together. The next thing I knew, there was a swing set with multiple swings. Melody and I were thrilled. We soon discovered that when all the swings were occupied and everyone swung in unison back and forth you could make the front legs of the swing set come off the ground. It wasn't much – just an inch or two – but there for awhile the contest was to see who could make them come up the highest. Two of the best swingers were my new friends, the Benhart sisters who lived just down the block and around the corner. It hadn't been explained to me by the other boys yet that girls couldn't be friends. When I did find out about that rule I thought it was pretty silly. Except for the obvious fact girls were girls – you could always tell because they wore dresses instead of pants – I didn't see anything the boys could do that the girls couldn't. Oh, there were differences. Boys could throw the ball better than girls and girls could do somersaults and tumbling and were more acrobatic on the monkey bars than the boys. And girls didn't fight fair; they would kick you, which every boy knew was against the rules. But that was about it. I always liked girls, but I had to keep that a secret from the other boys. Older girls had a similar rule about boys, so the Benhart sisters were the only friends who were girls I had for a long time. Rules are rules, but that rule just never made any sense to me.

The other change was the garden. Dad put in a small garden that summer and Melody and I helped. He showed us how to put the little seeds in the rows and cover them with *just* the right amount of dirt. In no time at all there was corn and peas and other things galore all grown up. When the peas were ready Dad showed me how they were hidden inside the pod. That might have been a mistake. I showed Melody and it didn't take us long to figure out that we could open the pods with our fingernails and eat the peas raw in the garden. Peas right out of the pod are great. To this day I like raw peas in the pod the best. I never understood why anyone would want to ruin good peas by cooking them. Not that Mom ever got much of a chance to cook them. It's the same with carrots except with carrots you have to wash the dirt off first. But it doesn't work that way with corn. □



The first grader (age 6)

Fall came and I started the first grade. First grade was different from kindergarten in many ways. I guess the PTA decided not to have a special night to meet the teacher because the first time I met Miss Young was on the first day of school. You had to go to an office first to find out where your room was. It was confusing and there was a lot of bedlam, but I did manage to find the room on time. There were some kids from my kindergarten class in first grade, but there were also a lot of kids I didn't know. They must have come from afternoon kindergarten. It wasn't quite as bad as the first day of kindergarten had been, but in first grade you had to go to school all day long. That took some getting used to.

But Miss Young made up for it by *teaching us to read!* Finally! We started off by learning the ABCs. Miss Young taught us a song to use to remember our ABCs and the whole class would sing it together. There might have been other things she taught us too, but as far as I was concerned learning to read was everything.

Miss Young *was* young so she had the right name. Not young next to us, of course. But she was young next to mommies and daddies and next to Mrs. Weingard. She was also pretty. Not as pretty as cousin Bonnie of course; nobody was as pretty as cousin Bonnie. But she was pretty. Miss Young was kind of serious like and sometimes she made me nervous because she didn't smile a whole lot. Cousin Bonnie smiled all the time; Bonnie made the sun come out.

After we learned our ABCs Miss Young gave us some little books to learn to read from. They were strange books. The stories in them were all stuff like

See Spot.
See Spot run.
Run Spot run.

See Tom.
See Tom run.
Run Tom run.

Nobody talks like this. I never did figure out why they were running or who they were running from.

But at least I was learning how reading worked. It turned out that words were made of put-together letters. If you knew how to say the letters you knew how to say the words. Words ended with spaces or sometimes with little black dots that didn't make a sound. Miss Young taught us that. Now when Mommy would read to me, I could put my finger under the words and follow along as she read. Pretty soon I figured out that when you came to one of the little black dots you pause just a teeny extra second before doing the next word. After awhile I could read all by myself, although for a long time I could only do it if I read out loud. It takes awhile to learn to hear words in your head without saying them out loud. The little black dots make a good place to breath.

Even after I had learned how to read I still had to go to school. That was because there were lots of important things you needed to know even after you learned how to read. Mommy said so. Bill said so, too. If you didn't go to school you didn't get to go to College. I didn't know where College was, but Corky had been there and both Bill and Bonnie were going to go there. So it must have been an important place to go to. But you didn't get to go there if you didn't go to school. Okay. If it was important enough for Corky and Bill and Bonnie to want to go there, I wanted to go there too some day.

Even though we had to go to first grade all day, there were a couple of times during the day when they would let us go outside and play for a little while. This was called recess time. We could go outside and slide on the slide or ride on the merry-go-round or just run around. Whatever we wanted to do. We had to come back in when the bell rang, though. In the first grade room there was a clock on the wall, and I got to where I could tell when it was almost recess time. But one day Miss Young told me I didn't get to go outside for recess that afternoon. I had to stay in the room that day. I don't know why. But she said I had to and we had to do what the teacher said. That was a Rule.

It was boring. She made me sit at a desk in the middle of the room and stay there. It wasn't even my desk. It didn't have my things in it. They left me all alone in the room while everybody else got to go outside and play. Even Miss Young got to go outside and play.

After awhile I opened the desk to see if there was anything inside it I could do something with. There wasn't much in there but I did find a crayon. That was promising. I looked around some more to see if there was some paper to draw on but there wasn't. The only paper thing in there was one of the little reading books and you couldn't draw in a book. You could only draw in coloring books, never real books. That was a Rule. Then I noticed something. The *top* of the desk was yellow and shiny and flat. It was a *perfect* place to draw. I got to work.

When the bell rang I could go back to my own desk so I put the crayon back where it was and sat down at my desk again. The other kids and Miss Young all came pouring back into the room and I got ready to pay attention again. That was one of Miss Young's rules. You had to pay attention. But then I

noticed something. One of the little girls – she was one of the ones I didn't know – sat down at the desk where Miss Young had made me sit. Uh-oh. It hadn't occurred to me that desk belonged to somebody else too. The girl saw my drawings on the desk top and she looked pretty upset. She didn't like it and that meant I needed to tell her I was sorry. But then she raised her hand urgently and Miss Young came over and looked at the desk top too. She turned around and looked straight at me. She was really, really mad.

Uh-oh. I realized right then that I'd done something naughty and it wasn't too tough to figure out what it was. It must be a Rule that you couldn't draw on desk tops. The ABC song Miss Young had taught us ended with

Now I've said my ABCs
Tell me what you think of me.

Miss Young didn't need to tell me what she thought of me. I could tell just by looking at her. Suddenly I felt just awful.

It got worse. She made me come up to the front of the room and stand there in front of everybody while she scolded me. The scolding went on and on and on and the longer it went on the worse I felt. I felt myself getting smaller and smaller, caving in like inside. It was *mortifying!* She kept asking me over and over why I'd done that but I felt so awful I couldn't say anything. All I could do was stare at my feet. I'd broken a Rule and you can never, ever break a Rule. There just wasn't anything to say and I couldn't have said anything even if there was. My voice wouldn't work anymore. Everything just got more and more awful. Finally Miss Young told me I had to stay after school and then made me go sit down again. I was so ashamed I couldn't look at anybody.

After school I had to wash all the drawing off the top of the desk. I scrubbed it and scrubbed it until it was all shiny again. Miss Young stood there and watched me while I scrubbed. I couldn't look at her. I couldn't talk to her. I didn't want her to look at me. I wanted to be invisible.

When Miss Young finally said I could go I had to run all the way home. I knew I was going to be late and that meant I was breaking another Rule. You had to come straight home from school right away every day. That was a Rule. I was late anyway but Mommy didn't seem to notice. So even though I broke that rule too, at least I wasn't being too naughty.

All the rest of first grade I stayed really, really quiet and kept out of Miss Young's way as much as possible because I knew she didn't like me anymore. I did everything she said we had to do. I never ever raised my hand. I only talked when she asked me a question and made me talk, and I talked real, real quiet. If we had to sing, I'd sing really, really softly. I just wanted first grade to be over.

I didn't want to do anything to make anybody mortify me ever, ever again. □

III. The Kennedy Years

1959 had turned into 1960 sometime during first grade and the new year brought new things with it. One of them was bowling night. Maquoketa had gotten two bowling alleys sometime near the end of the 1950s, the Hi Ho and the Town & Country Bowling Lanes, and something called 'bowling leagues' had been set up. Mom and Dad joined some of them – how many I was never sure – and the next thing I knew one night a week we had to go out to the Hi Ho for bowling night.

The Hi Ho was a big place and a little place all at the same time. In terms of sheer open size it was very big, or at least it looked that way to me. But most of the space was taken up by the bowling lanes. These were a long series of narrow hardwood lanes set side by side and separated by gutters with bowling pins at one end and pits where grownups sat at the other. People would take turns rolling huge black balls from the pit end. The idea was to knock down all the white pins at the other. I didn't know why the white things were called 'pins.' They didn't look like any pin I had ever seen. But since only the grownups got to bowl this was only a passing curiosity as far as I was concerned.

The place was small because there wasn't much room left after you took away the lanes. There was just a long half-hallway that ran between the wall and the lanes. I thought of it as a half-hallway because there was only one wall; the other side was bounded by racks of bowling balls and tables and little entry ways into the pits. Real hallways had two walls. With most of the grownups packed into the pits, the half-hallway was what was left for us kids to be in. Not that there were many kids there. Sometimes Melody and I were the only ones. Bowling was for grownups. After you wandered up and down that half-hallway a few times you'd seen pretty much all there was to see.

After watching what the grownups were doing for a little while, I strolled over to the racks where the extra bowling balls were kept to get a closer look at these things. They were black, smooth, and not as shiny as they looked from a distance. They all had the words 'Hi Ho' painted on them with numbers below. Different balls had different numbers. These things were way too big to hold like a baseball. Not even the grownups could get their fingers around these things. Instead they all had three holes drilled into them. I saw that the grownups would put their fingers into these holes – thumb in one of them and the two middle fingers into the others – so I tried that. The holes were far apart and I could barely get my fingertips into the holes all at once. The thing was *heavy*. I had to squeeze it with my fingers as hard as I could just to keep them from slipping out of the holes and then I had to lift with all my might just to pick the thing up. Actually swinging it underhanded like the grownups were doing was out of the question. I had to grip it so tight the ball actually hurt my fingers and I had to set it back down again. The prospects of having any fun with this thing looked pretty dim.

At one end of the Hi Ho was a big counter with a man standing behind it. After watching this for a little while I found out that this was where they kept special shoes. You had to put these shoes on or you weren't allowed to step onto the shiny hardwood floor down in the pits. This was also where the grownups paid the man for using the bowling lanes and where they picked up the huge score sheet paper. The grownups would write on these things every time somebody tried to knock down the pins and some kind of brightly lit, complicated gadget built into the scoring tables in each pit would project what was written onto big screens hanging over the pit so everybody could see what the scores were.

Bowling scores looked complicated and I spent a long while trying to figure out how that worked. If somebody knocked down all the pins on the first try, they'd get an 'X' in one of the little boxes. If it took them two tries, they'd get a number in one box and a '/' in the second. If they didn't get the rest of them on the second try, they'd get another number in the second box. It took awhile to figure out what the numbers in the boxes meant. My first guess was that it was the number of pins they'd knocked down on that try, but it was hard to make sure of this. I tried counting the number of bowling pins but this was tough to do. It was hard to see them all when they were all standing and they didn't stand there for long. A big thing would set them down all at once, so you couldn't count them one by one as they were being set up. Once they were set up, somebody would throw his ball at them and knock some of them down. If they didn't get them all on the first try it was still not easy to count how many were left. The big thing would come down again and there was a sweeper thing that swept the others away. Sometimes it was, though, but that wasn't the number on the score sheet. If they didn't get them all the second time either the sweeper thing would descend again and sweep them all back into a black hole at the end of the lane. It did it pretty fast and unless there were only a few left I couldn't count them fast enough before the thing took them all away.

After watching for a long time, I finally figured out that the pins were always set down in some kind of funny pattern. There were four rows with one pin in the front row and two pins in the second. It was hard to see how many were in the third row. But if the grownup didn't knock them all down on the first try, it was easy to see how many were left in the back row. Sometimes there was one, sometimes there were two. Sometimes the two would be left on one side. Sometimes they'd be on the other. Sometimes there would be one on each side; when that happened I noticed the other grownups would laugh and tease whoever threw the ball. Using my fingers to mark where the pins were left, I finally figured out there were only four in the back row. After that I found out that if I watched a *different* lane, so that I could see

in from the side, I could do the same trick to figure out how many there were in the third row. There were only three. Now I could count them using my fingers to keep track row by row. Fortunately, I didn't run out of fingers but it was a close call. There were ten bowling pins.

After that it was easy to figure out the numbers in the little boxes. Somebody would knock down some pins and I'd count how many were left, either before the big thing came down or after it set them down again. The big thing would come down and lift up all the remaining pins; then the sweeper thing would come down and brush away the ones that had been knocked down; then the big thing would set the others back down again. But as soon as this happened the grownup would throw another ball at them, so I had to count really fast. I found out the best way to do this was just to see how many were left in each row and then count these up. If there was only one or two in a row you could tell without actually counting, and then you could just count the patterns up with your fingers. So I'd count how many were left that way then look at the number in the box and count that number on top. It counted up to ten, so that was that. The numbers *were* the number of pins knocked down.

There was a third number they would write down in a big box below the little boxes, so I tried that one next. This one was strange. Sometimes they'd write it down right after the second throw. But sometimes they'd wait and not write it down until later. Sometimes they'd write it down in an earlier box after the first throw. Sometimes the number was more than ten. I couldn't see any pattern at all to that number so I had to give up. Sometimes grownups just do things and nobody understands why, and this was one of those things.

After figuring out the numbers in the little boxes, there wasn't much else to see. The only other thing that was interesting was the big thing that set down and picked up the bowling pins. The big balls rolling down the wood lanes would make a sound like thunder and when they hit the pins it would make a loud, strange *pow!* sound that seemed to echo. With all those grownups and all those lanes, the bowling alley was a very noisy place. As soon as the pins went *pow!* the big thing would come down to pick up the pins still standing up. Somehow it could hear them. The other interesting thing about it was when there were no pins left for it to pick up. When it couldn't find any pins to pick up, it would go back and get a whole new set of pins to put down. I didn't think it could actually see the pins because it didn't seem to know none were left when it first came down. So it must have been able to feel them. That was interesting. Clothes lines couldn't do that. I wanted to walk down there and get a closer look at the big thing, but I knew that was a bad idea. I didn't want grownups throwing those big bowling balls at *me* and, besides, it looked like the big thing was perfectly capable of squishing little boys if they got too close. On top of that, there was the sweeper thing; I didn't want it to sweep *me* back into the black hole in the back. I didn't know what went on back there, but with all those big bowling balls flying into it all the time I wasn't too keen on finding out. And since all those things could happen, I knew I'd get yelled at for even trying. So I gave up on the whole idea of going to look at the big thing up close.

I soon learned to bring along something from home to play with on bowling night. You could never count on there being other little kids at the bowling alley and even when there were there still really wasn't all that much to do there. Melody would be there, of course, but she had her own interests and we usually didn't stick together for very long once we got to the Hi Ho. The Hi Ho presented another special challenge to child's play, too. You couldn't really set up to play in the half-hallway. It was too often full of grownups moving in herds in one direction or the other. A little kid always had to watch out for getting run over.

Fortunately, there was a solution to that. The Hi Ho had a great big men's room that was almost always deserted while the grownups were bowling. Most of the room was a big open space with a long bench to sit on running around two sides in front of lockers that filled up the wall space. There were a few stalls with toilets in them, and a couple strange white things of unknown function, which I later learned were called 'urinals,' hanging on another wall next to the sink. The floor was tiled and always clean, and there were no herds of grownups to bother you. The back of the men's room was a perfect place to set up

my things and play.

That was where I first met Duane. He was a little boy who lived on a farm. He was even in my same grade at school, but we hadn't met there previously. One night I had my army men set up in the back of the men's room when the door opened and Duane walked in. I think he might have been as surprised to find me in there as I was to see him. Like I said, there usually weren't too many other little kids at the Hi Ho. Instinctively, we both knew we were in a territorial situation here. I thought of the men's room as my turf, which made this other little boy an intruder. Equally, Duane knew he had as much right to be there as anyone. The Hi Ho men's room was valuable territory and not to be conceded lightly. We were strangers to each other, so for the first few minutes we looked each other over like two stray dogs meeting in an alley.

"I'm Duane," he said after a minute or so.

"I'm Richard," I said. The silence returned as we continued to size each other up. I made the next move. "I bet I'm stronger than you," I said. That was obvious to me because my daddy was the strongest daddy in the world. Everybody could see that just from watching him bowl. When his ball reached the bowling pins there was always a tremendous *crash!* and pins exploded in all directions like a startled flock of birds. Since he was the world's strongest daddy, it stood to reason I was the world's strongest little boy.

Duane gave me the only possible answer one boy can give another. "No you're not," he said. The challenge had been thrown down and accepted and there was only one way to settle this: the manly art of wrestling. We were the same size but I knew I could take him easily.

Wrong. Duane was awfully strong, as is often the case when a boy lives on a farm. We gripped each other and strained, and maneuvered, each looking to take the other down. Duane got his arms around me and down I went. The contest continued on the floor for another few minutes and gradually, slowly, inexorably I felt him getting the upper hand. *Geez! he's strong!* I realized with a shock. Soon he had me on my back and I was pinned. It was a new and unsettling experience for me.

"Do you give?" he asked. I gave and he let me up at once. The question of who was the better boy having been settled quite decisively, we became pals from that night on. At school we would chum around a little during recess but not after school because Duane always had to ride the bus home. At school Duane, like me, tended to be one of the quiet boys. He never picked on anybody and you could always count on him. He was one of the good kids. We haven't been in touch for many, many years now, but I still like him and I still think about him sometimes. □

Bill finished his junior year of high school that spring and he had played on the varsity football team. 1960 was the year he taught me how to catch a football. There was always a gang of kids in the back yard at the Regenwether house and one Saturday Bill came out of the house with his football in his hands. He had lettered in football and the time had come to start his little brother following in his footsteps. It was one of those exciting little-boy-coming-of-age moments.

He had us line up in front of him and at the command, "Hut one! Hut two!" off we'd dash in all directions. He'd pick somebody and gently toss the ball to them.

Catching the football had always looked so easy at the high school games and on TV. I couldn't wait to do it for the first time. Off I went, running the pattern he had taught me then turning to catch the pass. My turn came and he threw me the ball. It got bigger and bigger in the sky, coming right at me and growing to gigantic proportions as it came. I closed my eyes. It bounced off my shoulder, knocking me down.

"Keep your eyes open!" Bill commanded.

Easier said than done. Especially when there's a hard, giant, growing oblong ball with pointy ends coming right at you. I closed my eyes a second time. Then a third. Then a fourth. The ball bounced off my

hands, my chest, the top of my head. Each time Bill repeated the command about keeping my eyes open. His patience wore a little thinner each time.

After the fifth time he gave me his Junior Father look. “Rick, stop being such a sissy,” he said sternly. “Keep your eyes open.”

Sissy? A sissy was the worst thing you could be! At school if one boy called another boy a sissy it always started a fight. I gritted my teeth. I wasn’t going to be any sissy. The sixth time I forced my eyes to stay open, even though they wanted to close by themselves. The giant spinning ball came right at me. I watched it all the way. I trapped it between my arms and my stomach and held on for dear life.

It is easier when you keep your eyes open. □

I don’t remember the TV set being on very much at our house in those days. There were cartoons on Saturday morning and every night we’d watch the News. Mom and Dad would, anyway. I’d stick around long enough to listen to the theme music but after that it didn’t hold much interest for me. If Dad wanted to let me sit in his lap while he gave me a back scratching that was one thing. I’d curl up and thoroughly enjoy that. Otherwise there were better things to do after supper than watch the dumb News.

But that year – I’m pretty sure it was that year – a new TV show came on after school. It was called The Three Stooges and I thought it was hilarious. I didn’t like Moe very much. He was bossy and mean and was always picking on people. He reminded me of some of the boys at school I didn’t like. But I liked Curly a lot. He was funny and nice, although he was awfully dumb and always getting into trouble. The other Stooge was Larry. He had weird hair. Him I could take or leave. Melody and I both became regular watchers of The Three Stooges.

One evening just after the show I was coming into the dining room for supper. Bill and Dad were in there and they were boxing. Bill used to challenge Dad to box a lot, although I couldn’t see much point in it. Dad would put those huge tree-trunk arms of his up and when he did there just wasn’t any way to touch him. You could barely even see him. A person might just as well try to box somebody who had one of those big shields the Romans had. He would just stand there crouched behind those arms grinning, sometimes chuckling, and every once in awhile throwing a short jab just to remind Bill it was there. He always was careful to pull his punches short.

Bill, on the other hand, was deadly serious about these matches. He’d bob and weave and advance and retreat and throw hard straight-ahead punches, just like Dad taught us, with everything he had. No pulling punches for him. They’d just bounce off Dad’s arms. Not a single one of his punches ever landed. I came walking up behind him, but he didn’t even notice me. His concentration was total.

Right beside and slightly behind him was a wooden stand on which was set a little bowl full of a bunch of different little knickknacks and things. Including one nice long sharp nail. I grinned. Here was an opportunity for some Three Stooges mischief. Instantly matching deed to thought, I picked up the nail and prodded Bill with it right on the bottom.

He gave a surprised yelp and jumped forward, arms thrown wide open just as Dad threw one of those little jabs. There was a *smack* and a *thump* and the next thing I knew there was Bill sitting on his bottom on the dining room floor. It was hilarious. He turned his head and looked at me, a small trickle of blood running from his nose and a surprised look on his face. Almost as surprised as the look on Dad’s face. “What did you stick me with?” he asked. Bashfully, I held it up. “I stuck you with this pin,” I said.

Bill just shook his head. “That’s a nail, Rick,” was all he said. Mom had a little more to say to me about it before we sat down to supper. Poking people in the bottom hurt them, she informed me. She also informed me that what the Three Stooges did on TV was faked, not real. They didn’t really hit each other or do any of those things. All those things were called ‘stunts’ and I mustn’t think anything I saw on TV shows was real. From now on there was a new Rule: No poking people in the bottom with anything.

Unfortunately, she forgot to tell Dr. Swift about this Rule. □

I don't think Bill had a lot of luck with his boxing. A lot of times he and I would box. When we did, he took Dad's role, protecting himself and just poking at me every once in awhile to remind me to keep my guard up. One day he was coming up the stairs just as I appeared at the top to go downstairs. Where he was standing we were just about the same height and face to face with each other. Right away he lifted his arms in the boxing position and we went at it. I was really letting my punches fly and he just blocked them, grinning and laughing at me. I started punching harder and faster.

Unfortunately for him, his arms weren't tree trunks and my little fists were small enough to fit in the gaps between them. One slipped through the crack before he could close up and caught him *whack!* right on the nose. Backwards down the stairs he went, all the way to the bottom.

I was horrified. I rushed down the stairs just as fast as I could go and got down there just as he sat up again. I was flooded with relief when I found out he was all right, except for another trickle of blood running from his nose.

"Nice punch," he said. □

Bill was usually pretty tolerant and patient with me and willing to overlook the things I occasionally did to him. With Melody it was a different story. A really different story. She was always more than a little precocious and by the summer of 1960 my role of wiser older brother was, shall we say, not without its points of dispute. Most of the time we got along quite well. But Melody had and still has a very independent spirit and a mind of her own. And a temper. Patrick Henry never defended liberty with more fire and skill than Melody defended her prerogative to be her own person, wise counsel from me notwithstanding. From time to time we would, as the saying goes, fight like cats and dogs with one difference. Our fights were almost never physical. Almost. Even though I wasn't physically that much bigger than her, I was still bigger, stronger, and a boy besides. Melody was far too smart to play on my home field. When we fought, our fights were verbal.

It turned out this was Melody's home field. I might have been two years older and a graduate of first grade – whereas Melody hadn't started kindergarten yet in the summer of '60 – but in any war of wits I usually found myself heavily outgunned. It was bows and arrows versus armored tank brigades. It wasn't too hard for me to make Melody mad; I had a knack for doing that without even knowing I was doing it. But this was pretty much always a mistake. My skill level in verbal combat was typical for little boys: *Is so! Is not! Is so! You're a dummy!* Melody played at a whole different level, even a whole different league. She could get me so mixed up that pretty soon I wouldn't even know what I was talking about, which never prevented me from doing it at the top of my lungs. That was when she knew she had me. If she put her mind to it, she could get me to argue that day is dark and night is light. After one of these fights I usually wouldn't even know what had happened; I'd only know that I'd lost.

Around noon one otherwise bright, sunny, warm summer's day we were both in the upstairs front room which, since Sherri had moved out, had become a kind of playroom. We were having a doozy of a fight – I have no idea what about – and, as usual, I was coming out on the losing side of it. With the skill of a marksman, Melody delivered a verbal shot to a particularly tender spot on my ego and I completely lost my temper. She had this gigantic doll – the thing was almost as big as she was – and I grabbed it and threw it at her. Melody ducked.

The doll flew straight as could be right at the window overlooking the front sidewalk below. Ever have one of those nightmares where you couldn't move? Ever have one while you were wide awake? I did right then. I could only watch helplessly while the huge doll flew right into the window. It bounced off without breaking the glass. *Whew!* I started to breath again.

The window, wood frame and all, began to tilt slowly outward.

I let out a squawk and leaped forward, racing to catch that window before it fell out completely. Too late. Just as I got there it dropped free and I had to catch myself on what was left of the window sill to

keep from following it down. With stately, slow motion grace it dropped to the sidewalk below and shattered into a million pieces.

Ten feet in front of Dad.

He was just coming home for his noon dinner when this unlooked-for aerial bomb exploded at his feet. He looked at it dumbfounded for a second. Then he looked up to see his youngest son hanging half out the hole where the window had been, staring down at him wide-eyed and open-mouthed. Our eyes met for long seconds. Then Dad squared his shoulders and strode forward, looking straight ahead, and in through the front door he went. Melody lit out for California.

I turned around and faced the door, my back to where the window had been, in complete misery. Dad's footsteps – *thump, thump, thump* – sounded on the stairs. This was a total disaster. I knew there was going to be a spanking. How could there not be? *I had broken the house!* I sure didn't need anyone to tell me there was a Rule against breaking the house. That was obvious to anyone. *Thump, thump, thump.* There just couldn't possibly be anything naughtier than breaking the house. I began trembling and couldn't stop. *Thump, thump, thump.*

Dad appeared in the doorway. He was as big as a mountain. I hung my head all the way down to my chest. I just couldn't look at him. I heard him say in a voice like thunder, "What the hell's going on up here?"

In a small almost tearful voice, I told him the whole story of what had happened. I could barely force the words from my throat. I didn't leave Melody out, of course. But she hadn't broken the house. I had. Me. Nobody else. I felt my cheeks getting wet.

"Look at me," Dad said. Slowly I looked up. His face was stern and set. He stared at me for a long time. Then he said, "Don't ever throw things at your sister again." I whispered, "Okay." He looked at me some more. I squirmed. Forever passed. Then he said, "Now go downstairs to dinner."

That night Dad fixed the window. Nobody ever brought it up again. Not even Melody. I never broke the house again. I never threw anything at Melody again. Well, nothing hard anyway. □



The second grader (age 7)

That year President Eisenhower decided he didn't want to be President any more. I thought that was surprising but I didn't think it was strange. He had always been President and I figured maybe he was just tired of it, the way I'd gotten tired of first grade. Whatever the reason, he wasn't going to do it anymore and people were looking for somebody else willing to take the job. The grownups decided they were going to take a vote and then whoever was picked had to take the job and move to President Eisenhower's white house.

One night we went down to Aunt Hazel's and Uncle Wayne's house and the four of them started talking about who would make the best President. Aunt Hazel and Uncle Wayne wanted somebody named Nixon to be President. From what they said I figured out that Mr. Nixon was President Eisenhower's assistant president in charge of vice. It sounded important. But Mom and Dad thought somebody named Kennedy would make a better President. Apparently Mr. Kennedy moved around a lot because Dad said he'd get the whole country moving again. I hoped that didn't mean *we'd* have to move and I'd have to ride the bus to school.

"I'm voting for Mr. Nixon," I announced. Aunt Hazel and Uncle Wayne chuckled.

"You only say that because *his* name is Richard," Mom snorted. Mom didn't like Mr. Nixon. She didn't like him a whole bunch and she never ever did.

"It is?" I asked in surprised delight. Well, that settled it. □

Second grade started every day with the Pledge of Allegiance. The teacher would have us all stand up and put our right hands over our hearts and repeat after her: *I pledge allegiance . . . to the flag . . . of the United States of America . . . and to the republic . . . for which it stands . . . one nation . . . under God . . . indivisible . . . with liberty and justice for all.* After that we could sit down and learn things. Most things about the Pledge of Allegiance I understood. I understood we weren't really promising anything to the flag. The flag never seemed to need anything. It just flew up on top of the flag pole outside the school building, right above the Iowa flag, except when it rained. It said right in the Pledge the flag only *stood for America*. The teacher had explained that 'republic' meant when you elected people to represent you and run the government for you and that the government made all the laws for everybody. Electing people to run the government was called 'democracy.' I liked democracy. Democracy meant there would be liberty and justice for everybody and that was a good thing. The Germans hadn't had democracy before the war. They had Nazis. Nazis tried to conquer the world and take away everybody's liberty and justice. They were why Daddy had had to join the navy and fight the Japanese. That was what *allegiance* meant. If anybody tried to take away somebody's liberty and justice, *everybody* had to go fight them and make them stop. That was more than a Rule. That was a Duty.

The part I didn't understand was the 'under God' part. In Sunday School they taught us that *everybody* was under God. Not just us. We weren't the only nation under God. God loved *everybody*. Even the bad people. God was always forgiving bad people if they stopped being bad. I didn't see why they put God in the Pledge of Allegiance. It made it sound like God only loved us and that wasn't true. Didn't the people who wrote the Pledge of Allegiance know that? They must not have gone to Sunday School.

I kind of liked Sunday School, mostly, but I didn't like church very much. In the first place, they made you sit in the pews and not do anything all morning, except when they made you stand up and sing hymns or put money in the collection plate. It was boring and pointless. The minister would talk and talk and talk and talk and talk. And it was always about the same thing, about how everybody was a sinner and had better beg God to forgive them. Sinners were people who did bad things on purpose. Mommy and Daddy weren't sinners. I knew *I* wasn't a sinner. Melody wasn't a sinner. Most of the time anyway. Sherri and Bill weren't sinners. Grandma and Grandpa Teters weren't sinners. Aunt Sylvie wasn't a sinner. I didn't like it when the minister told everybody we were all sinners. It was a lie. Telling lies was a bad thing and he was doing it on purpose and that made *him* a sinner. He needed to go to Sunday School. And you didn't have to *beg* God for forgiveness. God was everybody's Father and children never had to beg their daddies to forgive them for being bad. Daddies always forgave their kids without being asked, so long as they stopped being bad. That was what daddies did. Ministers didn't know very much about God. They needed to listen to Aunt Sylvie. She could explain it to them. □

When November came we all went down to the voting place to choose who was going to be President after President Eisenhower retired. There were lots of people at the voting place and it was noisy and exciting. There were lots of lines everywhere but they weren't very straight. I stood in line next to Daddy and Melody stood next to Mommy. The lines led up to these tables where lots of people were sitting. I thought that when you got to the table you voted but it didn't work that way. Instead you had to tell them your name and where you lived and then they looked in a book to find your name. Daddy told the lady at the table his name and she looked in her book. She looked at me and I stood up straight and said, "I'm Richard!" She smiled and said something nice, but I don't remember what.

After talking to the nice lady we had to wait our turn again. There were lots of big booths with black curtains around all the walls. Daddy said these were the voting machines. But the voting machines didn't really vote. They just counted votes. Daddy and I went into an empty one and he moved a handle that made the black curtain close. The voting machine was made of lots and lots of little bitty levers next to a lot of names. I asked what they were for and Daddy said you pushed the levers beside the names of the people you wanted to vote for. Mr. Nixon's and Mr. Kennedy's names were there. There were lots of other names, too. It turned out there were lots of government jobs that needed someone, not just President. There were people who needed to go to Washington D.C. to be Congress. There were people

who needed to go all the way to Des Moines to be Legislature. Some people would get to stay in Maquoketa to run the county or the city. Counties are like the country only smaller. Maquoketa was the Seat of Jackson county. It was like the capital of the county. There were people who made boards for the school. I guess they worked for the PTA. It turned out we needed a lot of representing.

There was one lever you could use to vote for something called a 'straight ticket.' Daddy told me if you used that lever you voted for all Democrats or all Republicans. But we didn't use that lever. "You vote for the best man," Daddy said, "not the party." The Democrats and the Republicans were parties. Daddy showed me who we were voting for and I pressed the levers. He had to lift me up to reach the ones near the top. After we had chosen all the best men Daddy pulled on a bigger lever and the black curtain opened again. It was really neat. "Can we do it again?" I asked. Daddy laughed and said no. You only get to vote just one time. Then you have to leave the booth so the next person could vote. I was feeling pretty proud and excited. Voting for all the best men was part of Allegiance too. While we waited for Mommy and Melody to come out of their booth I said to a man standing next to us, "*I voted!*" He looked kind of startled for a second. "Who did you vote for?" he asked me.

I stood up very straight and tall on my tiptoes. "The best men!" I said. □

Thanksgiving came soon after the election and 1960 was a special Thanksgiving because we had a real turkey. Grandpa Teters had gotten a real live turkey from somewhere. His name was Tom and he was going to be dinner. Daddy and I walked next door to Grandpa's house to see him.

Tom was *enormous!* He was the biggest bird I had ever seen. The teacher had told us turkeys say, "Gobble gobble gobble" but Tom didn't say that. Instead he said, "*Obble-obble-obble!*" really fast and he forgot to say the "g." He kind of strutted when he walked like he was in a parade. He would look at us kind of stern like, as if he didn't like us.

Grandpa said we were going to eat him tomorrow, which explained why he didn't like us. Looking at him, I had my doubts about the whole idea. "Do we have to eat the feathers?" I asked. If we had to eat the feathers I didn't want any part of it. But Grandpa laughed and said no, you pull the feathers out first. Oh, no. Not me! I wasn't about to pull Tom's feathers out. He looked mean and I was sure he wouldn't stand still for that. Somebody else could pull his feathers out.

There was a tree stump in the yard and Grandpa's ax was sitting on it. Grandpa got hold of Tom and carried him over to the tree stump. He put this metal ring thing over Tom's neck and kind of nailed it to the stump with the dull side of the ax so Tom couldn't run away. When he did that I had a pretty good idea about what was coming next. Tom wouldn't let people pull his feathers out so first you had to chop off his head. That made sense. Also, if you're going to be cooked it's better if your head is chopped off first. I'd hate to be cooked while I was alive.

Grandpa raised the ax and brought it down hard. Tom's head flew off and blood started spurting from the neck. *But then the rest of him started running around in the yard!* He ran around and around in circles with no head and the blood spurting everywhere. I was horrified. This was like Halloween for real. It was *creepy!* Tom was alive with no head on. But then he fell down and stopped running around. The blood stopped spurting.

I just stood still there in Grandpa's yard with my eyes and mouth wide open. Grandpa looked at me and put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry," he said. "Sometimes turkeys do that after you chop off their heads. It's all right." I felt a little reassured, but it was still creepy. I wasn't too sure I'd be able to eat dinner on Thanksgiving. But the next day Tom didn't look like Tom anymore. All the feathers were gone and he was cooked and looked like a regular turkey. He was pretty tasty. But I never watched another turkey get his head chopped off. Never ever.

After Thanksgiving I told the other boys at school about it. Some of them thought that was really something, but a couple of the boys called me a liar. I kind of bristled up at that and we might have had a

fight start right there. But before it went that far a couple of the boys who lived on farms said I was right and that really happens. They said chickens do it too. Then all the boys believed me so it turned out there was no fight. It also turned out that girls thought the story was super creepy and they'd make funny noises when we told them about it. So we had a lot of fun for awhile telling girls all about it. Most of the time we could get them to run away. It was hilarious. But telling the farm girls wasn't any fun. They just said we were stupid and walked away with their noses in the air. □

There was one girl in second grade named Cindy. She was the prettiest girl in second grade and, rule or no rule, I wanted to be friends with her. The rule against being friends with girls was just a boys' rule, not a grownup rule, and it was stupid anyway. But making friends with Cindy was going to be hard because the girls and the boys never mixed during recess and I would only talk in class when the teacher made me. Cindy didn't live near our house so the only times I ever saw her were at school. I needed to get some way to talk to her.

Somebody had told me that if a boy liked a girl and wanted to be friends the way he showed it was to give her a ring. I knew that was true because Gary had given Sherri a ring. Two rings, in fact. So if I was going to make friends with Cindy I knew I'd have to give her a ring. I talked with Mom about it and she smiled and the next day brought a ring home from the store for me to give to Cindy. I couldn't wait for the next day. At morning recess the next morning I found Cindy on the play ground and walked over to her. A little bashfully I held out the ring and said, "This is for you." Cindy's face lit up with joy. She grabbed the ring from my hand and put it on her finger. She squealed and jumped up and down. She showed it to her other friends standing there. They squealed and jumped up and down too. Everybody was all excited and happy and jumping up and down.

Then they all ran away.

Well, that hadn't gone the way I'd hoped. Not at all. I just stood there feeling kind of bewildered and kind of hurt and wondering just exactly what had gone wrong. Cindy hadn't said one word to me, not even 'thank you,' which was *very* rude. She'd liked her present alright; that was obvious. But I might just as well have been a tree in the playground. The bell rang and we had to go back to class. Thankfully none of the boys had seen what had happened, and I kept my mouth shut about it. But, to make matters worse, somehow or other Uncle Chet and Grandpa Teters found out I'd given a ring to a girl and they both teased me about it without mercy. In view of how things had turned out – or, more precisely, how it had not turned out – I didn't dare say one word to them about what had happened and could only stand there and take it all in red-faced silence. It was embarrassing and humiliating enough without me handing them even more stuff to tease me about. Thank goodness Melody never found out. I never told a single soul what had happened. I never even tried to talk to Cindy again. It was a long, long time before I would talk to *any* girl at school after that. The boys had been right. You couldn't have a friend who was a girl. □

1961 came and Mr. Kennedy became President Kennedy. There was a big doings in Washington, D.C. We watched it on television. All the people were dressed up in very fancy suits and wore stove pipe hats. The news man said President Kennedy was the thirty-fifth President of the United States. By then I knew there really had been other Presidents before President Eisenhower. They had told us in school about George Washington, who had been the first President and Father of His Country. They had told us about Abraham Lincoln, who had been the sixteenth President and had saved the country during the Civil War. And I had heard the grownups talk about President Roosevelt who became President during the Great Depression and saved the country and then had saved the world from the Nazis during World War II. It turned out that America was really, really old and somehow thirty five Presidents didn't seem like very many Presidents to have in all that time.

President Kennedy was young, next to President Eisenhower, and very handsome even though he talked funny. I liked him and was glad he had been elected to take over being President. He put his hand on a Bible and promised to do his best and made an oath – which is like a promise only bigger – to 'preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States of America.' I asked Bill what the

Constitution was. He told me it was the Supreme Law of the Land. I knew what that meant. That meant it was the Law that gave liberty and justice to everybody.

President Kennedy made a speech. "Let the word go forth from this time and place, to friend and foe alike," he said, "that the torch has been passed to a new generation of Americans born in this century." I didn't see any torches anywhere. *I* was born in this century but I didn't have it. I didn't know what he meant. I didn't understand a lot of what he said, but then he said something I did understand. He said, *Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.* I suddenly felt kind of chilly and tight inside when he said that, like there was something important inside me that was trying to get out. He was talking to *me*. "Okay," I whispered to the television set. It was a Promise. It still is. □

That year there was an after school night where the mommies and daddies came to the school to talk to the teachers, and after that there was a Book Fair in the school building. There were lots and lots of books there of all different kinds. Unlike the school books, you could *buy* these books and take them home with you. I never knew there were so many different books about so many different things. It was exciting. If it had been up to me, I'd have taken every single one of them home. But there was one in particular that I especially wanted. It was a book about outer space. Ever since Sputnik I'd heard a lot about outer space and rockets and space exploration. Now here was a whole book about it. I begged Mommy to buy that book and I didn't understand why she wouldn't. A few years later I understood. It was an expensive book and we couldn't afford it. Instead she bought a different, smaller book for me. It was about something I'd never heard of before: Dinosaurs.

We took that book home and I started reading it that very night. It was *fascinating*. It said that millions and millions of years ago there lived these giant reptiles. Many of them were bigger than a house and the ground used to tremble when they walked. Dinosaur meant 'terrible lizard' and the word came from a whole different language called Greek. All the dinosaurs died millions of years ago and we only knew about them because people had found and dug up their bones. The people who went out and found dinosaur bones and put them back together and figured them out were called 'paleontologists.'

To read about dinosaurs I had to learn how to read real long words. That was hard at first, but Daddy had told me you spelled words like they sounded and I figured that meant words sounded like they were spelled. That turned out to be true, mostly, and pretty soon I could understand the names of all the different dinosaurs. There were big, huge, four-legged dinosaurs called 'brontosaurus.' That meant 'thunder lizard.' They were so huge they had to have two brains, one in their heads and one in their bottoms, the same way fire trucks had to have two drivers, one in front and one in back. There were funny looking two-legged dinosaurs that had bills like a duck. They were called duck-billed dinosaurs, which made sense. There were four-legged dinosaurs whose backs were covered with huge plates and who had big spikes on the ends of their tails that they used to fight dinosaurs who tried to eat them. They were called 'stegosaurus,' which meant 'covered lizard.' I suppose they called them that because they were covered with those big plates. There were four-legged dinosaurs who had three huge horns coming out of their heads. The horns weren't curly like a bull's; they came out straight ahead and were used to stab other dinosaurs that tried to eat them. These were called 'triceratops,' which meant, sensibly enough, 'three horns in the head.' There were two-legged dinosaurs who ate other dinosaurs and they were called 'allosaurus,' which meant 'other lizard'; I thought that wasn't a very good name for a dinosaur because it didn't mean very much. There were four-legged dinosaurs who were covered in armor and had a big club for a tail. They were called 'ankylosaurus,' which seemed to mean 'stiff lizard.' With all that armor on, I could see why they were called that. There was one that looked like an ostrich and was called 'struthiomimus.' It was the silliest dinosaur. I didn't know what that name meant; it probably meant 'silly old thing.' There was the meanest dinosaur of all, 'tyrannosaurus rex,' the King of the tyrant lizards.

I read every book about dinosaurs I could get my hands on. I pestered Mom about it so much that one Saturday she took me to the library and I got to have my own library card. The library had books about dinosaurs in it and I read every single one. You could only take library books home for two weeks and

then you had to take them back, so I tried to memorize everything that was in them and remember every single picture. It turned out that millions of years ago the world wasn't at all the same as now. Iowa was once under the sea and there were volcanoes and lava and even the plants were different. Life itself had begun in the sea and there were little undersea creatures called 'trilobites.' The books had spectacular pictures in them of what the earth had looked like all that time ago. Mom and Aunt Hazel began giving me dinosaurs instead of army men for presents. I became Maquoketa's greatest living expert on dinosaurs. For Show and Tell at school I always talked about dinosaurs. When I finished second grade my teacher told my third grade teacher that if she wanted to win my respect she'd have to know all about dinosaurs. So she learned all about dinosaurs too. When I started third grade I was amazed that the teacher knew all about dinosaurs. I thought she was the best teacher in Briggs Elementary. The other boys thought I'd gone nuts, but I didn't care. When we'd go to Aunt Sylvie's and Grandpa and my uncles were there, Grandpa would have me spell the dinosaur names from memory and then he'd tease Uncle Marvin and Uncle Chet because they couldn't even pronounce the dinosaur names, much less spell them. They'd listen to me and shake their heads and say it was amazing.

I wished, more than anything I ever wished for, that I could be a paleontologist when I grew up. But everybody knew that when little boys grew up they had to get a job and earn a living unless you were rich. I knew – it was obvious – that nobody would pay you to find dinosaur bones. Being a paleontologist was like being able to play and have fun your whole life, and nobody would ever pay you for that. I figured paleontologists were all rich guys who had all the money they needed and could spend all their time with dinosaurs. We weren't rich so I knew I'd never be able to be a paleontologist. It made me sad but that was just the way things were. I never even told anybody I wanted to be a paleontologist because I *knew* it couldn't possibly happen and nobody could do anything about it. □

That year the greatest thing in the world happened. A man rode a rocket into outer space and flew around the world. His name was Yuri Gagarin and he was a hero and he was a Russian. Everybody felt ashamed that a Russian and not an American had been the first to dare to fly into outer space. Everybody heard about what he had done but the grownups didn't talk about it very much because they were so ashamed. There was a poem I had read for some reason called *High Flight* and it went *Oh! I have slipped the surly bonds of Earth and danced the skies on laughter-silvered wings. . . And, while with silent lifting mind I've trod the highest untrampled sanctity of space, put out my hand, and touched the face of God.* That was what Yuri Gagarin had done only he had danced above the sky on laughter-silvered wings. I wished I could have gone with him and touched the face of God too.

A few weeks later Alan Shepard, who was an American, rode a rocket into outer space too and everybody went wild and celebrated. The grownups hadn't talked very much about Yuri Gagarin but everybody was talking about Alan Shepard. Daddy said he was a Navy man and I felt happy that a Navy man had been the first American to go to outer space. Somebody wrote a song about him and they played it on the radio for awhile. I first heard it while I was at Aunt Hazel's house. It wasn't a very good song but the tune was happy and catchy and I'd go around singing it for awhile: *Count down to zero! There goes our hero! . . .*

It wasn't exactly *High Flight*.

We had astronauts – seven of them – and the Russians had cosmonauts. I was a little confused by that. Weren't they all going to the same place and doing the same things? I decided 'astronauts' and 'cosmonauts' must be kind of team names, like the Packers and the Bears. Walter Cronkite said we were in a 'space race' with the Russians and one of the boys at school said the Russians had bears, so it kind of fit. I wanted us to win the race because we were Americans and the Russians had Communists, who were against liberty and justice for everybody. Yuri Gagarin wasn't a Communist, though. He was a Soviet. I didn't know what being a 'Soviet' was exactly, but whatever it meant it had to be better than being a Communist. Anybody who is against liberty and justice for everybody is a bad guy and Yuri Gagarin was a hero. Bad guys can't be heroes. □

Somewhere right in here I suppose I should mention a little thing called the Bay of Pigs. I have read somewhere the Bay of Pigs is supposed to be one of the defining events of my generation. Sorry. Maybe it was for some folks, but it sure wasn't for me. I never even heard about it until years later. I never heard any grownup talk about it. No boys at school talked about it. Teachers didn't talk about it. I didn't see President Kennedy's television address about it. Unless the news was talking about the astronauts I didn't pay much attention to it; there were better things to do, like dinosaurs, than to watch the dumb news. The Bay of Pigs was absolutely zilch to me in 1961.

The Junior Fire Marshals, on the other hand, was a completely different matter altogether. One day a fireman came to our class and talked about what it was like to be a fireman. He was a real fireman and that was really neat! We all got little red fireman's hats to wear. They weren't real fireman's hats; they were made of very thin plastic and you had to be careful or you'd break your fireman's hat. He made all of us Junior Fire Marshals and we even had our own song, the Junior Fire Marshals' Song:

Junior Fire Marshals are we.
 We're as watchful as can be.
 Our goal is fire prevention
 And firemen all agree
 If we learn to do our part
 A fire will never start.
 So as we parade
 With the fire brigade
 We're as proud as proud can be.
 Junior Fire Marshals are we.

I liked being a Junior Fire Marshal even though we never did get to march in a parade with the fire brigade. But one Saturday that spring the house suddenly began to fill with smoke. Mom made Melody and me run outside into the back yard. As we stood out there, smoke began pouring out from the windows and all the neighbors came running over. The house was on fire! I was horrified. And all my dinosaur books were inside! I tried to run back in to save them but Mom wouldn't let me go get them. Then the firemen came with their big red fire truck. I relaxed just a little. The firemen would put out the fire. They would save my dinosaur books. And that's just what they did. They were heroes. It turned out the chimney had clogged up and all the smoke from the furnace came backing up into the house. I heard the Fire Chief himself explaining this to Mom. I was glad it wasn't a real fire, although I was worried they might still kick me out of the Junior Fire Marshals. But I was lucky and they didn't. □

Near the end of the school year President Kennedy went over to where Congress was to tell them something. They put it on TV and I watched. This time I understood everything he said, mostly, although it was more like feeling the words than hearing them the way they rolled one into another. Years later I had to look up his speech and it was just the way I remember feeling it. He said, *Now it is time to take longer strides – time for this nation to take a clearly leading role in space achievements which, in many ways, may hold the key to our future on earth. . . Recognizing the head start obtained by the Soviets with their large rocket engines, which gave them many months of lead time, and recognizing the likelihood that they will exploit this lead for some time to come, in still more impressive ways, we nevertheless are required to make new efforts of our own. For while we cannot guarantee that we shall one day be first, we can guarantee that any failure to make this effort will make us last. . . But this is not merely a race. Space is open to us now. And our eagerness to share its meaning is not governed by the efforts of others. We got into space because whatever mankind must undertake, free men must fully share. I therefore ask the Congress, above and beyond the increases I have earlier requested for space activity, to provide the funds which are needed to meet the following national goals: First, I believe this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.*

WE WERE GOING TO THE MOON!!!!

I felt stunned and elated and awed all at the same time, and so bursting with pride that tears came out of my eyes. *We were going to the moon!* We were Americans and we were going to the moon! All in one moment the universe had changed again forever and gotten bigger and somehow I just knew nothing would ever be just the same as it was ever again. We were going to the moon! □



The third grader (age 8)

For my birthday that year Bill gave me a model ship. He actually gave it to me a few weeks before my birthday because he was leaving for College, which I found out was in Iowa City at the State University of Iowa. He wouldn't be living at home again from now on.

It was the battleship U.S.S. Missouri. When I opened the box I was surprised and puzzled. Instead of what I was expecting, the box was full of millions of tiny little plastic pieces, a little tube of glue, and some instructions. It was the first time I'd ever seen a model ship. I looked at Bill and he must have seen how puzzled I was because he said, "You have to put it all together first."

I asked him to do it for me, but he shook his head and said no, *I* had to do it. He showed me the instructions and explained them to me a little bit but then he wouldn't do one more thing to help me. A bit tentatively, I got to work. The instructions turned out to be pretty easy to follow because there were pictures right along with the words showing you step by step what to do and what order to do it in. The glue was the hardest part. I had never used glue before – it wasn't like the paste we'd used to make things in school – and the instructions said not to put too much glue on and not to let the glue run outside the place where it was supposed to go. It was hard to figure out how much was enough but not too much. For the first little bit the glue kept oozing out from where it was supposed to stay. But I went and got a roll of toilet paper from the bathroom and that fixed that problem. The next thing that was hard was the drying part. The glue started out all wet and it took it a little while before it would hold the parts together. It got kind of boring holding the pieces together while the glue dried but I figured out I could sort of clamp the pieces in place by putting them in between the two parts of the box it had come in. Then while it was drying I could start figuring out what I was supposed to do next. It saved time.

The plastic pieces smelled different from anything else I knew about, but it was kind of a neat smell. The glue, on the other hand, was pretty stinky until it dried, and I found out that it tended to dry right in the spout so no more glue would come out. A pin from Mom's sewing machine basket fixed that. Mom had a lot of pins and I didn't figure she'd miss one of them too much. I put the waste excess glue in the cardboard box the ship had come in. I worked on it, right there in the middle of the living room floor, all day long and slowly, slowly a ship began to emerge from all those millions of pieces. When I came to the big guns the instructions said to glue the barrels into the turret and then glue the turret in place on the deck. The guns came in an assembly of three and I found out there was enough stick when you inserted them in the turret that you could elevate them up and down and they'd stay put by themselves without any glue. Then I found out the turrets, which fit into the deck using a little plastic dingus on the bottom of the turret, would stick in the hole well enough not to come out but still loosely enough you could turn the turrets. What was the use of turrets that couldn't turn or big guns that couldn't raise or lower? I decided not to glue these parts in. The little guns, though, were a different matter and I had to glue them in.

Melody came and watched me work for a little while, without talking or bothering me. After she'd watched for awhile she must have gotten bored because she left again. I figured she probably went off to play with her present. That was the way it was at our house. When either one of us had a birthday *we both* got a present. It was a good arrangement. At last all that was left were the decals. These were tricky, too. You had to moisten them with water and ever so very gently put them on the plastic. It turned out to be tough to do that without getting a lot of bubbles and bumps in the decal. My first few didn't look so good, but I eventually got the hang of it.

Finally it was done! I gently set the Missouri on her viewing stand and just sat there admiring her for the longest time. She was beautiful! I don't think Bill realized what he had started that day. From then until the time I started high school, I was a devoted model builder – when the dinosaurs could spare me that is. Over the years I built ships, rockets, airplanes, tanks, cars, the Mercury, Gemini, and Apollo space ships, the Lunar Excursion Module (as it was originally called), and even a great big Saturn V rocket that stood almost three feet tall. I even built a plastic man with transparent skin so you could see all the organs inside. You name it, I built it. I liked building them even more than playing with them. I loved the intricacies of the details, loved to see something taking form right there in front of me, loved seeing how all the little pieces fit together to make something that was somehow *more* than just all the parts added together. At the time I didn't have a clue how valuable this experience was going to be later. It was just something I loved to do. □

Melody started kindergarten that year and my teacher was Mrs. Lubbens. She was the one Mrs. Sutton had warned to learn about dinosaurs. All the kids said Mrs. Lubbens was mean so I was nervous about having her for a teacher. But the kids were wrong. Mrs. Lubbens turned out to be a great teacher. One of the things we learned about was how numbers worked and this was called 'arithmetic.' Mom told me to learn as much about it as I could because it was important. Arithmetic turned out to be a neat way to add things or take things away without using your fingers. There was a table called 'the addition table' you could use to look up the sum of two numbers. She showed us how to use it. We were supposed to learn the addition table by heart but there were an awful lot of numbers in it. It was impossible to remember them all. I was always forgetting them or getting them confused.

But I figured out you really didn't have to memorize the whole thing – you just had to memorize a little part of it – because there were patterns in it and if you could count backwards all you had to do was remember the pattern. I first noticed it with the nines. $9 + 9$ was 8 with a carry. $9 + 8$ was 7 with a carry. That was the way nines worked. If you added 9 to anything the answer was one less than that thing with a carry. Then I noticed eights had a similar pattern. $8 + 8$ was 6 with a carry. $8 + 7$ was 5 with a carry. Eights turned out to be like nines except the answer was two less with a carry until you got down to 1. $8 + 1$ was 9. But that was just counting up from eight by one. Then I saw something like this happened again with sevens. $7 + 8$ was 5 with a carry. $7 + 7$ was 4 with a carry. With sevens you took away three from the second number. That worked until you got to $7 + 2$, which was 9 without a carry. So not only were there patterns in the columns of the addition table; there was a pattern to the patterns. All you had to do was learn the rule for the pattern of the patterns and you didn't have to memorize anything except the ones that didn't have a carry. And those were just the ones where the pattern took away too much so you always knew it when you had one of those. That made things a lot easier and it was *neat*. It also turned out that the same pattern happened in the rows of the addition table. So you really only had to know less than half the things. If you couldn't remember $4 + 7$ all you had to do was remember the pattern for $7 + 4$ (1 with a carry). *That* was neat. Of all the numbers, six was the hardest because with six you had to take away four and that was starting to get hard again. But then it turned out that when you had a six all you had to do was use the seven pattern and then take away one from that. There was a pattern to the pattern of the patterns.

In the years to come, when arithmetic turned into math, it always turned out that there were patterns. There was always some new stuff you had to memorize, but I found out there were always patterns hiding in it somewhere. If you could find the patterns, it always turned out there was a pattern to the patterns. Math ended up being all about patterns. If you knew that then math was easy because you really didn't have to remember very much. All you had to do was learn how to use the patterns. It was neat *and* tidy.

It turned out there were patterns in spelling too, only they weren't tidy. Most of the time the rule that you spelled it like it sounded worked. But then there were exceptions like 'I before E except after C or when sounded like A as in neighbor and weigh.' And then there were exceptions to that, like 'weird.' That was why I was always irritated with spelling. You had to memorize a lot of little things and it wasn't neat and tidy like arithmetic. Compared to math, spelling was hard. □

Christmas eve that year a whole lot of people came to our house. There was Grandpa and Grandma Teters and Uncle Marvin and Uncle Chet and cousin Marilyn (she is Uncle Marvin's daughter) and Aunt Sylvie and Uncle Vern (her husband) and more cousins and I don't remember who all else. The house was stuffed with people like a turkey and it was all one big, noisy, happy, untidy Christmas Eve. Bill had come home from College for Christmas and that was great. It was always a great and happy thing when Bill came home. There were so many people everybody couldn't fit into one room. At supper time all the grownups ate at the table in the dining room and all the kids ate at card tables set up in the living room.

When it came time to open presents the grownups sat along all the walls and the older kids took charge of passing out Christmas presents. Wrapping paper flew everywhere and Aunt Sylvie made a brave attempt to gather it all together in one place, but that turned out to be pretty hopeless. Kids were running around in all directions and everybody was talking and the whole thing was, well, untidy. One of my presents was a little metal helicopter with a long wire attached to it that ran to a little box. I showed it to Uncle Chet and it turned out the thing *flew!* It actually, really *flew* just like it was a bird. I was agog. The helicopter instantly was a bit hit with the grownups, who flew it all over the place all night. It never came back into my hands all night long. I had lots of other presents, though, so it was okay with me if the grownups wanted to play with it, and I think every single one of them did. Between my other presents and cousin Marilyn, who was older than me and always liked me a lot even if she did tease me sometimes almost as bad as Uncle Chet did, I had plenty to keep busy with. I always had fun with cousin Marilyn even if I couldn't keep up with her all the time. I knew I'd get my turn with my helicopter on Christmas Day and every day after that. The grownups only had tonight to play with it.

The next day there were Christmas presents scattered around all over the place. All the company had gone home and it was just us in the house. Dad and Bill were watching TV and Mom was getting dinner ready. Melody was carefully collecting up all her presents and I was sitting in the middle of the living room on the floor playing with one of my presents, which had just happened to come to rest at that spot the night before and therefore was very conspicuous. Mom called in that dinner was ready and as Bill got up from his chair he accidentally put his foot down right on top of the little helicopter and crushed it. It made a terrible crunching noise as it died.

I was instantly shocked and heartbroken. There was *my* helicopter all crushed and mangled and I'd never even gotten to fly it. I ran over and gently picked it up and started to cry and took it to Daddy in tears. Bill felt just awful. I could see it in his face. I held the broken body of my helicopter out to Daddy and pleaded with him to fix it. I knew he could save it because Daddy could fix anything. He'd told me so himself. But he wouldn't even touch it. He just looked at it and said it was broken and couldn't be fixed. Now I felt even worse and I couldn't understand *why* he wouldn't even *try* to fix it. I *knew* he could if he tried. Then I had a mean thought. Maybe he just didn't *want* to fix it. That made things even worse still. I was inconsolable. My little helicopter was dead. It would never fly like a bird again. It would never fly for me. And nobody would help me.

I think Bill was inconsolable too, even though he didn't cry. He just looked really sad whenever he looked at me all the rest of that day. He was so sad he couldn't even tell me he was sorry. I understood. I knew he hadn't done it on purpose. I knew he was sorry. But Daddy just didn't seem to care.

And I couldn't understand why. It was the meanest thing he'd ever done. □

1961 turned into 1962. The space people, who were called NASA, had come up with a bigger rocket to use in Project Mercury. The first rockets, although they looked pretty big to me, were called Redstone rockets and this new rocket was much bigger. It was called the Atlas rocket. I found out it was named after a make-believe fairy tale guy who was so strong he could carry the whole world on his shoulders. Early that year the third astronaut, John Glenn, rode the Atlas rocket further into outer space than Alan Shepard and Gus Grissom had and became the first American to fly around the world. When you flew around the world it was called an 'orbit' and John Glenn flew three orbits around the world. Alan Shepard was a hero; Gus Grissom was a hero; now John Glenn was a hero too. Everybody was excited and happy

and proud, and everybody would go around telling everybody else about it even though everybody already knew about it.

Everybody already knew that Cape Canaveral in Florida was where the rockets took off. But now I began to hear more and more about the rocket scientists who built the rockets. It turned out the rocket scientists were very, very smart. I knew that because now whenever somebody did something stupid you could count on somebody else saying, "What did you expect? He's no rocket scientist." The smartest and most important rocket scientist was a man with a funny name, Dr. Wernher von Braun. I just knew Dr. Wernher von Braun was very, very, *very* smart if he was a doctor *and* a rocket scientist. It turned out that Dr. Wernher von Braun had a funny name because he originally came from Germany. That was where he had figured out how rockets work and after the war he became an American so he could build rockets for us so we could go to the moon. In his own way, Dr. Wernher von Braun was a hero too. Without him the astronauts couldn't be heroes. Without him America couldn't go to the moon. It wasn't easy to build rockets. Sometimes they blew up. I saw some blow up on television. It was awesome and terrible to see. Dr. Wernher von Braun wouldn't let astronauts ride any rocket until it stopped blowing up.

Whenever an astronaut was going to ride a rocket they would put it on television. The NASA would schedule the lift off for early in the morning so little kids could see it before they had to go to school. But something always seemed to go wrong and the rockets would never lift off when they were supposed to. I would make it a special point to get up early to see the lift off, and I began to really hate hearing the words, "T minus such-and-such and holding." When everything was okay they'd say, "T minus whatever and counting." But whenever anything went wrong they would say "and holding" and you always knew it wouldn't happen when it was supposed to. Whenever they would start holding some men had to figure out what was wrong and fix it. Walter Cronkite told us these men were called 'the engineers' and that they were very, very, very picky. Everything had to be just perfect or the engineers would make everybody wait. They almost always made everybody wait so long that little kids would have to leave for school before the rocket lifted off and then I'd have to watch reruns of it on the dumb news. □

Dad was in the implement business again and that spring there was a big doings of some kind at the Farm Bureau. Dad went to it and since the Farm Bureau Building wasn't too far from our house he took me with him. The inside of the Farm Bureau was full of grownups – all men I think – gathered for some kind of meeting or something. I had no idea what any of it was about and I didn't particularly care. It was boring so I went outside where all the kids were. There were a lot of kids out there. Not nearly as many as there were in school, of course, but a lot of them. They were pretty much all farm kids and I didn't know many of them. But farm kids are generally pretty friendly and in no time at all we were having a blast playing the running-around-in-circles game. This is the game where you form a big line and, as you might have guessed, run around in a big circle. Anybody can play it. The only rules are you have to stay in the circle and you have to follow whoever is in front of you. There isn't really even a leader when there are that many kids because pretty soon the line closes up in a circle and no one is in front and no one is behind. There isn't any winning or losing. It starts when it starts and it stopped when enough of us were too winded to keep running any longer. It's a great game.

The Farm Bureau had a great big front yard that was perfect for the running-around-in-circles game. It was all grass covered except for one bare patch of dirt at the west end of the yard. Because that was the only patch of dirt in the whole yard, it proved to be an irresistible magnet for the circle to pass over, and every time we came to the dirt patch we stomped on it with one foot like Mickey Mantle crossing home plate. We were all running and squealing and stomping and having a great old time.

I guess the hornets that lived under that dirt patch didn't like our game too much. Just as I was stomping on the dirt patch for the third time, out they came. All of them.

I went racing for the Farm Bureau Building screaming. Kids were scattering out of my way left and right, not so much from me as from the huge swarm of angry hornets buzzing all around me and stinging me over and over again. As I ran into the building men began waving their jackets and hitting me with

them trying to drive all those hornets away. Somehow the men made the hornets leave me alone and I ran on into the big hall, still screaming. I remember Daddy appearing in front of me and then I just dropped to my knees and fell over.

Dad took me straight to the hospital. I don't remember the drive at all or even whose car we rode in or anything that happened at the hospital. All I remember was being on fire from head to foot and moaning until I couldn't moan anymore. I don't remember being in the hospital, I don't remember coming home, I don't remember anything after I fell to my knees except the awful pain. I was a very sick little boy for quite a few days. My whole body was covered with ugly, red, throbbing stings. After that I never went near the Farm Bureau Building ever again. Ever. □

Summer came and now that Melody was old enough to go to school Mom decided we were both old enough that she could get a job. For awhile she worked at the Pastime Theater, which was neat because it meant we got to go to the movies for free. It was a perk that people who worked at the Pastime got. We hadn't gone to the movies very much before then, but we went a lot when Mom was working there. Then later she got a job as the bookkeeper working for Mr. Beatty at the Ben Franklin store. We pretty much stopped to going the movies again after that.

Because Mom was now working somebody had to keep Melody and me company during the days. This person is called a 'babysitter,' a term I was offended by because *I* wasn't a baby. But I put up with it stoically; life is full of lots of things you don't like and compared to hornets having a babysitter wasn't all that bad. Besides, our babysitters were lots of fun to be with.

We had two, although not at the same time, of course. The first was cousin Marilyn. I've already said how much I liked cousin Marilyn and how fun she was. For a Teters, cousin Marilyn was a bit on the serious side. That didn't mean she wasn't fun-loving and gregarious. There wasn't any such thing as a Teters who wasn't fun-loving and gregarious. Except for Uncle Bun. He was only fun-loving. He was too bashful to be gregarious. Uncle Vern, Aunt Sylvie's husband, wasn't fun-loving or gregarious; at least he never was any time I saw him. But he was a Said, not a Teters. So when I say cousin Marilyn was a bit serious for a Teters, what I mean is she wasn't as happy-go-lucky as the rest of them. But she was still fun and, like all the Teters, she really knew how to tease a person when she wanted to. She was the one who first started calling me 'little Ricky.' Now, in those days nobody ever called me anything but 'Richard' except for Bill, who called me 'Rick.' But Marilyn started calling me little Ricky. I didn't like being called Ricky, and I still don't, but Marilyn had a knack for doing it in a way that somehow I could not like it but not mind it all at the same time. Marilyn just had that kind of magic touch. I didn't like being teased – most of the time I hated it – but Marilyn could tease me in a way that not only I didn't mind but that was even kind of fun. She's the only person who could ever do that.

Melody, of course, picked up on this nickname right away and started using it all the time, except for when she wanted to let me know how dumb I was being, in which case I was 'Richard' again. Then Sherri picked it up, but she would usually only use it when she was teasing me or when she thought I was being childish. Of course, Sherri likes to tease me so she used it a lot. Neither of them had Marilyn's magic touch, so I didn't like it very much. But Melody had already taught me how futile it was to oppose a sister in anything so I resigned myself to it. Later on their kids, my nephews and niece, called me 'Uncle Ricky' and for some reason I never minded that at all. I even kind of liked it coming from them. To this day these are the only people who get to call me 'Ricky.' Nobody else gets to do it.

Our other babysitter was cousin Phyllis, who was Uncle Foryst's daughter. If Marilyn was an unusual Teters for being a bit serious, Phyllis was an unusual Wells for being extrovertedly happy and gregarious. Mostly the Wells', except for Phyllis and Sherri, tended to be pretty serious about everything. Certainly *I* was. So was Melody; so was Phyllis' sister, Dee; so was everybody else on that side of the family. With a Wells, nothing was ever so trivial and unimportant that it couldn't be inflated into a matter of the gravest concern.

But not cousin Phyllis. Joy and happiness followed her like sunshine. When she was sitting us there was always something fun to do, and if there wasn't she'd invent something. Phyllis had some fun records she would bring with her to play on the record player. My favorite was an album by a guy named Alan Sherman entitled "My Son, the Nut." For the younger folks out there who have never heard of him, Alan Sherman was kind of the Weird Al Yankovic of his day. He would take very popular songs and change the lyrics. He's probably best remembered for the Camp Granada song: *Hello Muddah. . . Hello Faddah. . . Here I am at . . . Camp Granada. . . Camp is very . . . entertaining . . . and they say we'll have some fun if it stops raining.* But my favorite was what he did to the classic song 'Fascination.' He turned this into 'Automation': *It was AUTOMA-TION I know . . . that was what was making . . . the fac-tor-y . . . go. . . I thought AUTOMA-TION was keen . . . 'til you were replaced by . . . a ten ton . . . machine, Dear.* Another one that was a big hit with me was "I See Bones" (kids, ask your grandparents what song this one was making fun of): *The doctor was looking at the x-ray . . . and I asked him . . . What do you see? And the doctor went on looking at the x-ray . . . as he replied in French to-oo-h-oo-h me . . . I see bones. . . I see gizzards and bones . . . and a few kidney stones . . . among the LOVE-LY bones.* Phyllis would play her funny records and we'd sing along until I started giggling so much I couldn't sing any more. Then Phyllis would start giggling too, then Melody, and soon we'd all be sitting there listening to the record and giggling like a flock of loons.

Music in general was changing, and for the better I thought. Those teeny-bopper songs of the 1950s were pretty much all gone now. A new kind of music, called folk songs, had taken their place. These weren't the old-time folk songs like they taught us in school. None of that *on the banks of the O-hi-o* kind of folk song. The new folk songs had messages and even when I didn't understand exactly what the message was, I'd still *feel* the message stirring around deep inside me. Sometimes they would make me feel melancholy because I just *felt* there was something I ought to be doing about things but there really wasn't very much a little boy *could* do about it. Sometimes they would make me feel uplifted, like my soul had grown wings. Whenever I heard a folk song playing, I'd stop doing whatever I was doing and pour all of myself into listening. Melody and I would sing the folk songs when we were riding in the back of the car. There were a lot of great folk singers, many of whose names I never learned, but absolutely the best were Peter, Paul and Mary.

I think each of us keeps a secret, tender place deep inside the heart and we protect it and very, very rarely let anyone reach in and touch it. Peter, Paul and Mary knew where my secret, tender place is, and they have always been able to reach in there and touch it whenever they wanted to. Nobody else has ever been able to do that. Other musicians, like Bob Dylan or Pete Seeger, might write the words to the songs, but Peter, Paul and Mary made those words *live*. When they would sing I knew what something that was right *felt like*, I knew what injustice *felt like*, I knew what duty *felt like*. To this very day, when I get a feeling like a feeling Peter, Paul and Mary gave me, I *know* what I have to do. They taught me that oftentimes the heart really does know better than the head. □

It was sometime in 1962 when I had to start wearing glasses. I don't remember exactly when that was; I think it was either late spring or sometime during the summer, but it was after the hornets. It was a surprise to me. The first hint that I had that something different was coming was one Sunday morning when Dad called me to come over by the living room window. He pointed out the window at a neighbor's house across the street and two doors down. "What letter is on their front door?" he asked me.

I looked and looked, and squinted, and looked some more. "I don't see any letter there," I said. I was puzzled. Why would Dad ask me about a letter that wasn't there? Dad didn't say anything, but he didn't look at all happy about it. Mom gave him her I-told-you-so look but didn't say anything. He didn't want me for anything else, so I went back to doing whatever I'd been doing and forgot about it.

Not long after that, Mom told me we were going to the eye doctor's to get me some glasses. This was another of those no-way-to-get-out-of-it situations, but I was secretly resolved that if the eye doctor tried to give me a shot in the eye he was going to get a shot in the nose first. I knew what glasses were, of

course. Mom wore them. Sherri wore them. Bill had worn them (now he wore something called ‘contact lenses’). Even Dad wore them sometimes when he read, although most of the time he’d just hold things out as far as his arms would reach to read them. He pretty much never read anything except the newspaper anyway, so I almost never saw him with his glasses on. But I knew he had them.

I didn’t have much in the way of enthusiasm for this whole glasses-and-eye-doctor business. As far as I was concerned, things were fine the way they were. In reality I was terribly near-sighted but I didn’t know that. I thought this was just the way things looked. Oh, I had worn glasses once. One time I had found a spare pair of Mom’s glasses lying around and I put them on to see what they were like. It was completely weird, like living inside a fun house. Everything was misshapen and tilted and so distorted it made me stagger and stumble when I tried to walk. After just a few minutes they started to make me sick to my stomach and I took them off again. I didn’t see why Mom would insist on getting a pair of those crazy things for *me*. I knew *I* wasn’t going to wear them.

We had to drive all the way to Davenport – some forty miles or so south of Maquoketa – to see the eye doctor. It wasn’t what I expected. First – and best – there were no shots of any kind involved. The eye doctor had a dark room with a big machine you looked through at some letters projected on the wall. He would flip something that changed the way things looked and ask me to read the letters in the different rows. Sometimes they were very clear, sometimes I couldn’t see them at all. We played this weird game for quite awhile and then that was that. Next Mom said we had to pick out frames for the glasses. She would ask me which ones I liked, and we looked at a lot of them. I thought they all looked pretty dorky but she said I had to choose one so I did. I thought once that was done they would put the glass in them, but that didn’t happen. It turned out we had to wait a couple of weeks for the lenses to be made and then make another trip back down there to pick them up. When we did, they made me put them on and I was pleasantly surprised. They didn’t at all make things look weird, the way Mom’s glasses had that one time. In fact, they made everything look better. I was amazed at the difference. I’d take them off and look at something, then put them on and look at that thing again. It always looked better with glasses on. So it turned out this glasses thing was a pretty good deal after all. With my glasses on I was a better boy.

Dad didn’t seem to think so. When we got home I was proudly wearing my new glasses and expecting him to say something nice about them. But he didn’t. Instead he just looked at me kind of disapproving. “The boys are going to call you ‘four eyes,’” he warned me. I couldn’t see why he’d say that. I didn’t have four eyes and there just wasn’t any reason for the boys to call me ‘four eyes.’ And if any of them did, I knew he wouldn’t do it more than once. Nobody likes to be called ‘black eyes’ after all. But it turned out that nobody ever called me ‘four eyes,’ just like I figured. Not many boys at school wore glasses, it was true, but a few did and nobody ever picked on them because of it.

Wearing glasses did make a social difference, though, right from the start. The boys had already figured me for being a little bit nuts after the dinosaur thing. Now my new glasses seemed to make them think I was even more ‘bookish’ than before. Wearing glasses pretty much meant you got picked near the end when we were choosing up teams because boys who didn’t wear glasses thought that boys who did were blind or something. Wearing glasses made them think you weren’t as tough or weren’t as skilled at running or throwing or catching. It took me awhile to understand that there *was* a new attitude towards me now. Nobody ever waved it in my face; it was a passive form of prejudice. I really hated and resented that once I figured out I was being treated differently now, but it never quite rose to the level where I felt justified in punching somebody over it. And I especially resented the fact that Dad seemed to share this attitude. But I just had to swallow it all and keep going. After awhile, though, something in me did change because of it. Now there was always a little bit of smoldering resentment going on inside. I think I became less friendly to people because of it. Not that I was ever a good-time-Charley before that; I’ve never felt comfortable among strangers. But now I wasn’t just uncomfortable; I was a little bit hostile. From then on I was a little harder to get to know. Okay, I was *a lot* harder to get to know. I became very slow to warm up to people. First I had to be sure they were going to treat me as *me*, not as some dork with glasses. It wasn’t a standard a lot of people could measure up to.

Some of the boys with glasses compensated in other ways. Some would never wear their glasses at all. Some became class clowns. Some became quick-tempered and got in a lot of fights. And some just changed who they were, at least on the outside, to fit in. I wouldn't do any of these things. I wouldn't change who I was because somebody thought I was somebody else. I wouldn't go around not able to see because somebody thought boys who wore glasses were dorks. My attitude became, *You don't like me? Well, screw you!* I didn't go around looking for trouble, and I'd avoid it if I could. But if it came after me anyway, all that smoldering anger inside me wouldn't let me back off one single step. *You don't like me? Well, screw you!* Picking on me became a really bad idea because I wouldn't get just a *little* bit mad.

I didn't analyze any of this, of course. After all, I wasn't even ten years old when all this started. It was all feelings, deep feelings. I couldn't have verbalized any of this even if someone had asked me to, and no one ever did. If I had known the F word, using it would have expressed my feelings perfectly. I didn't know the F word until many years later; Dad did use cuss words, but this one wasn't one of them. In retrospect, the very depth of these feelings combined with my lack of words for them probably prevented a lot of fights. The way boys usually started fights in those days began with a lot of posturing and name calling. From there it would go on to shoving, then to blows. There was a ritual to it everyone followed and nobody ever really got hurt beyond a few bruises and black eyes.

But I had that smoldering anger and it didn't take much to start turning it into rage, and the more angry I became the quieter I got. I'd just stand there glaring right into the other boy's eyes, not moving, not speaking, not retreating. Just waiting and all the while growing icier and icier inside. Well, that cut off the ritual right at the name-calling stage. I don't think other boys understood my reaction at all. But this didn't make them bolder or more aggressive. It unsettled them. I think they weren't sure what was going on, and I would see that uncertainty growing in their eyes. So it would end at the posturing stage and the other boy could back away pride intact and telling himself he'd won something. I didn't care if that's what he thought. To me it wasn't about who the alpha male was. It was about hurting him. Bad. Somewhere inside me was something ugly and frightening, and I was always glad afterward it hadn't developed into a fight. I was afraid of that icy rage I'd feel, and I was afraid of what I might do if I lost control of my temper. I knew what terrible, awful, horrible pain felt like; I didn't want to make anybody else suffer like the hornets had made me suffer. Not anybody. It would just be *evil*. That was why I was afraid of losing my temper. That was why I avoided trouble if I could. I was scared of *me*. □

But all this was still to come after the summer of 1962. Late in the summer Bill came home for a brief visit and, as always, that was a big event. By then I had learned that College wasn't just one place. I knew because on Saturdays in the fall there were college football games on TV and I had seen the Iowa Hawkeyes play against other college teams in a conference called the Big Ten. Bill was a Hawkeye now. I even knew there were more than ten colleges. Apparently every state had a college. Some had more than one. Somebody had given me a puzzle map of America where the individual states were the pieces and you had to put them all together to make America. Whenever I heard of a college from a different state, I would get my map puzzle out, put it together, and find the state where that college was. By the summer of '62 I was getting to know my U.S. geography pretty good, although the word 'geography' wasn't in my vocabulary yet.

Some of the states were interesting for things besides sports. Cape Canaveral was in a place called Florida and that turned out to be at the southeast corner of America next to the Atlantic Ocean. Space headquarters later came to be in a place called Houston and that turned out to be in the state of Texas next to a whole other country called Mexico. The other thing Texas had was a place called the Alamo where a small army of heroes had once fought for liberty and justice against a bad man who had a very big army. They lost and had all been killed, but then everybody else in Texas had gotten mad and came and defeated the bad man and his army and established liberty and justice for everybody in Texas.

The first night of his visit Bill up and announced that the next morning he and I were going to go uptown. I was thrilled. I had been uptown before, of course, but only with Mom to get groceries or with

Dad to go to the Pastime or with Mom to go to Sherri's and Gary's store. And, of course, I had seen uptown from the back seat of the car when we went someplace. But I had never really, truly *been* uptown. Now when morning came Bill and I were going to go explore uptown. We would be like Lewis and Clark. I couldn't wait for morning. I was so excited I had trouble getting to sleep that night.

The next morning I was up and raring to go long before Bill was awake. I knew it was still early, so I made myself wait for awhile so Bill could get a good night's sleep. I knew we didn't want to go uptown while it was still dark outside. But finally the sun came up and it was time. I went in to where Bill was sleeping and shook him on the shoulder. He almost jumped straight to the ceiling. I had to jump back to keep from getting knocked over. He looked at me kind of bleary-eyed and said, "What's the matter?"

"It's time to go uptown," I reminded him.

"What time is it?" he asked. "*Six-thirty*," I told him. I was starting to get impatient. He looked at me like he couldn't believe it. Then he said, "The stores don't open until eight, Rick." Well, he might have mentioned that the night before, I thought. So I had to wait some more. Bill went back to sleep and I prowled around the house trying to wish the clock into going faster. But instead it went slower. *Finally* Bill got up and we had breakfast and then we set off for uptown.

It was great. The morning was crisp and cool, the birds were singing, and it seemed like we had Maquoketa almost to ourselves. Uptown was a long walk away but not as far as I'd always thought it was. It turned out you didn't actually need the car to get there. We walked over to where the highway turned into Main Street and I was glad to see that the sidewalks were out already. I had heard Dad say on several occasions that at night they rolled up the sidewalks early in Maquoketa, although he didn't say why anybody would want to roll up the sidewalks. It didn't seem to me that anyone would want to steal them.

The sidewalks must not have been unrolled for very long because there weren't many people uptown yet. Some of the stores weren't even open. But that didn't stop us. We'd just go by the ones that weren't open yet, saving them for later. Bill showed me all over uptown and it turned out there were lots of neat places there. We stopped at one store where Bill bought me my very own Hawkeye sweat shirt. Now *I* was a Hawkeye too! That was great!

But the best was yet to come. We went to another store and to my astonished joy Bill bought me a *bicycle!* I'd never ridden on a bicycle except for that one time when Bill had given me a ride to Aunt Hazel's house. Now, all of a sudden, I had a bicycle of my own. It wasn't a very big bicycle as bicycles go, but next to me it was enormous. I wasn't sure how I was going to be able to climb all the way up there to the seat without the bicycle falling over. But later that day Bill started showing me how to ride a bicycle. It turned out that once you had it rolling it didn't want to fall down. That was amazing. Standing still, all a bicycle wanted to do was fall down. Once it was rolling it didn't want to fall down anymore. So the whole trick was in getting started and getting stopped without getting killed. It took awhile, but Bill showed me how to master this. He would hold the bicycle and me up until I finally got the hang of it, and then finally, after quite awhile, he said I was ready to solo. So I took my first solo bicycle ride. Mission Control, I am ready. What can I do for *you?*

It's easy to ride a bicycle, but it takes a lot of practice to really get *good* at it. The rest of the summer until school started again I practiced riding every day, gradually learning how to go faster and how to control the turns. I took a fall or two and got a little scratched up, but that was nothing. I was a bicycle astronaut now. Mounting and dismounting was kind of a trick with my short legs, but I got better and better at that, too. Mom took kind of a dim view of my bicycle riding – she didn't know how to ride a bicycle and didn't seem to have any interest in learning how – and she said I had to pass a test and get a bicycle license. So I learned about hand signals and traffic rules and stuff like that, and she took me to City Hall, which was uptown but off to the side, and I passed a test and got my bicycle license. Now I was a *licensed* bicycle astronaut. Best of all, Melody was jealous. She was still too short to ride a bike.

Being able to ride a bicycle brought a lot more of the world within my reach. Mom, of course, gave

me a lot of new rules I had to follow when riding my bicycle. Uptown I had to stay on the sidewalk. I always had to ride on the right hand side of the street and watch out for cars. She had a little mirror installed on the handle bars and I had to always look in that mirror before I turned or anything. And I couldn't ride it after dusk came. But this was all okay with me. Now I could more easily go over to my friends' houses whenever I wanted to. I could also go visit Grandma Wells now whenever I wanted. □

One of my friends was a little boy named Steve. His house was a few blocks away. We had met at school on the playground instead of in class because Steve was a year behind me in school. He was short for his age with fiery red hair and lots of freckles. Mom said that meant he had a fiery temperament and that was true. Like most boys, Steve didn't really know how to fight. When he got into a fight he'd throw haymakers. But he'd throw them hard and fast and when he got mad he'd just wade straight in and let fly like a whirling dervish. He was *tough* and even older boys didn't mess with him more than once. It's not the size of the dog in the fight; it's the size of the fight in the dog. You see, most boys that age didn't actually know how to fight, which means they didn't know how to defend themselves, and if your opponent doesn't know how to defend himself a haymaker is as good a punch as any. I never saw Steve lose a single fight. He and I were best pals and so we never fought each other.

Dad got to see Steve fight once. It was in the fall of that year, just after school began, and one Sunday afternoon he and I walked over to the playground. There were several boys there already and one of them was Steve. He was in some kind of argument with a bigger boy when we got there. I didn't know the bigger boy and I imagine that boy didn't know Steve. If he had he sure wouldn't have been picking on him. They were in the posturing and name-calling stage and Steve called him a something-or-other – I don't remember what exactly – and instead of shoving, the boy punched Steve in the mouth.

That was a mistake. Besides being a serious breach of the fight ritual, which meant it was dirty fighting, the punch *hurt*. Steve's face turned all bright red and his arms stiffened straight out to both sides and he started crying. Not because he was hurt but because he was *mad*. Steve charged straight in, both arms swinging, and *pow! pow! pow! pow!* Down went the other boy right on his bottom and Steve went for him some more. The bigger boy scrambled to his feet and ran away, Steve right behind him. But Steve's legs were kind of short, the other boy was quite a bit bigger, and he got away.

Later Dad wouldn't stop talking about it. I guess he was impressed. I wasn't all that impressed because I'd seen Steve in action before lots of times. But Dad kept talking about what a tough little guy he was and what a good fighter he was. Well, he had the tough part right. Everybody knew Steve was tough. But I didn't understand why he was telling *me* about it instead of telling Steve. It was Steve's fight. And I didn't understand why he was saying Steve was such a good fighter because Steve did all the things Dad and Bill had taught me *not* to do. That first punch, for instance. You could see it coming a long time before it landed. Steve didn't know how to block it and so it hit him right in the mouth. That kid would have never hit me because I knew what to do about it. I wouldn't have taken him out as fast as Steve had, true enough. I just wasn't as tough as Steve. But I wouldn't have had a puffy lip afterwards either. I had kind of a feeling Dad was trying to tell me something or compare me to Steve or something. I wasn't sure what he was driving at, but I didn't like the tone of the whole thing. □

I was in fourth grade now, in Mrs. Ellis' class, and the whole school thing was by now pretty routine. We were learning fractions and penmanship and division and stuff. Nothing too special. Fractions had patterns, too, so they were easy. Division was quotients and remainders and stuff. Nothing too tough there either. Later there would be something called 'long' division so I guess this must have been short division. It made sense they would teach short division first. The trick was to see that division and fractions were sort of related. In a way they were kind of like cousins. Penmanship was harder. They said you were supposed to move your arm and keep your wrist stiff, but when I tried that it just came out awful. So I used my fingers instead and nobody seemed to mind too much except Mom.

All things considered 1962 would have been a very good year except for a tragedy that came from out of nowhere. Uncle Chet died. He had a heart attack and he dropped right down dead on the spot. Uncle

Chet was Mom's youngest brother and he wasn't even forty years old when it happened.

It was the first time in my life someone I knew had died and I just didn't understand what had happened. Mom started to cry when they brought the news and that was new to me too. My feelings were a jumbled whirl that I can't even begin to describe. Words don't really cover it. All I know is I just couldn't take being there at home in the middle of all that sorrow. I ran out the door, got on my bicycle, and just rode as hard as I could for a long time. Nowhere in particular. I just rode.

The visitation – what many people call a wake – and the funeral were gloomy and unbearable. I saw Uncle Chet in his casket and I touched him. He was cold. After touching him I started to feel more awful than anything and I was very depressed for the next several days. Mom and Dad didn't make me go to funerals or visitations after that if I didn't want to, and I didn't want to. When Grandma Teters had a stroke and died I didn't go to her visitation or funeral. It was something I just couldn't stand. □

About a month or so before Thanksgiving there was some kind of trouble for awhile involving some place called Cuba. Apparently Cuba was somewhere out in the ocean south of Florida and there was something called a 'crisis' going on there. None of us boys knew what a 'crisis' was, although the word did sound like a bad word. None of the grownups were talking about it – at least not around us kids – and the teachers didn't bring it up either. One boy said he had heard the Navy had put a quarantine around this Cuba place so we figured there must be some kind of bad sickness there. But another boy said that wasn't right and the quarantine was to keep the Russians out of Cuba. So maybe the Russians were sick. Another boy said he'd heard Cuba was a prison, so maybe the Navy was keeping the Russians from helping all the crooks escape. That sounded like the kind of thing Communists would do because everybody knew crooks were against justice for everybody. But that didn't explain why the Navy would use a quarantine. Then another boy said his dad had told him that quarantine meant some kind of blockade so that made it sound like the Navy was blocking out the Russians. Everybody agreed that was what it was. Once we had it all figured out it didn't really sound all that important 'cause it was all going on in this whole other country way out in the ocean. That turned out to be right because the whole thing went away after a few days and nothing ever came of it. I didn't find out what had really happened until years later. □



Our house on Niagara Street

The *really big* event in 1962 was our new house. All our other houses hadn't really belonged to us. But *this* one was going to be *our* house and not anybody else's. It wasn't really a *new* house strictly speaking. Dad told me it had belonged to an old lady who had died. But it was new to *us*, you see, and that's what made it a new house. It was over on Niagara Street, which wasn't very far from the Regenwether house and was actually closer to the playground and Briggs Elementary School. It didn't have a name of its own. It was just *our* house.

Our house needed a lot of fixing before we could move in. Dad took Melody and me upstairs in it and told us to tear all the old wall paper off the walls. Now normally you don't get to do something like that, but we had permission to do our worst and Melody and I set to it with gusto. It was great fun. But, like I said, it's not something you normally get to do.

There were all kinds of things that had to be done. We put a new hardwood floor in the living room. There were all these old closets to tear out and new ones to put in. It seemed like there was something that had to be done in every room, even in the basement although there wasn't as much to do down there. When we started our house was very noisy. It would make all kinds of weird noises all by itself. Dad tried

to tell me it was haunted and I rather frostily told him I was too big for him to be telling me fairy tales. Everybody knew there wasn't really any such thing as a ghost. Who did he think he was trying to kid? After we finished fixing up our house it wasn't so noisy anymore and Dad tried to tell me it was because the old lady's ghost had moved out because we'd changed it so much. I snorted in disgust.

Melody and I had the two upstairs rooms. She had the room on the west side facing Niagara Street and I had the room on the east side facing the back yard and the gravel alley that ran between our yard and the back neighbor's yard. There wasn't a hallway upstairs and there wasn't a door between Melody's room and mine. She had to come through my room to go down the stairs or to come up the stairs to her room. This presented some problems with privacy but we worked out a solution. We each had a closet and the opening between our rooms ran right between them. When we'd put the closets in Dad had rigged them so you could pull your clothes out on this sliding rod thing. It turned out this made a pretty good way to make a door. When either of us needed privacy, like when we were undressing, we'd just pull the closet rod out and the clothes would block off the hole. That way we knew when not to go into each other's room. Especially mine. I think that was Melody's idea first and it worked just fine.

Our two rooms were about the same size but mine was better. My room had the little door in the wall that led into the attic. The attic was this really neat place, although you couldn't stand up in it. There was a little light bulb in there and we kept tons of neat stuff stored in it. The only thing was you had to be careful and stay on the wood beams. Otherwise you might fall through the floor into Mom's and Dad's bedroom downstairs and a person would get in big trouble for that.

My room also had this big window in the east wall just above my bed. I could crawl out this window and get onto the back roof of the house. From there it was only about ten feet to the ground – just a little too far to jump. But I would leave the ladder up in the back yard so I could crawl out my window, walk across the back roof then climb down the ladder. This wasn't mischief, either. Mom said it was a way to escape if our house ever caught fire and Melody and I couldn't get down the stairs. But our house never caught fire so mostly I'd go out on the back roof on summer nights and watch the lightning bugs play in our back yard. I could also see quite a ways from there and at dusk there would be these pretty blue lights that would come on at one of the shops across from the ball field. I could sit out there and look at all the beautiful things and just *think* and *feel*. It was my special place. Nobody else's. □

Bill came home for a visit not too long after we moved into our house. He brought along something new just for me. It was a game called 'chess.' It had lots of different kinds of pieces and at first it was kind of complicated. He taught me the rules and how all the pieces moved and what you had to do to win. At first he let me win by pointing out my mistakes and letting me take them back. After awhile I sort of caught on to all the rules and then we played for real. I couldn't beat him when we played for real. But he said to me, "If you can beat me before you're twenty-one, I'll give you twenty dollars."

Twenty dollars! That was a fortune. That was more money than I'd ever seen. We shook hands on it.

Bill had no idea what he'd started. I practiced playing chess every single day, first taking one side and then taking the other for each move. It's hard to beat yourself because you know what you're thinking. But if you really change sides with each move and look at the board real hard, you learn to spot a lot of mistakes. The library also had a lot of books on chess including complete annotated games played by chess Grand Masters at world tournaments. They would tell you every move these guys made and why and explain why they hadn't made other moves that looked to me like they would have been just as good. But they weren't because the other guy had countermoves against them. The books explained all this in detail. After awhile I began to see there were patterns in chess, too. They weren't the same ones that were in arithmetic, but they were still patterns. It turned out the right way to play was never just one move. Every move was part of a whole pattern of moves and what you tried to do was force the other guy to have to move in a particular way so things would just get worse and worse for him. If you could get ahead by even one pawn, the worst that could happen was a draw unless you made a mistake. And if you could get ahead by even one knight, you were going to win unless you made a mistake. But you had to watch

out for traps. There were traps you could lay so the other guy thought he was going to win a piece. But he wouldn't. Not for long. When you sprung the trap you'd not only get even but capture another piece and get ahead. You had to watch out for traps *very* carefully. But there were trap patterns, too.

I poured as much energy into chess as I had with the dinosaurs two years earlier. I was always looking for someone to play chess with. It didn't matter who. Other kids, teachers, grownups, anybody. It turned out a lot of people knew how to play chess. The problem was getting them to keep playing after I beat them. They'd just give up after awhile. Sherri became kind of an ally after she gave up playing with me. She and Gary had opened a TV and Appliance business in 1960 so she met a lot of people in their store every day. You have to be very careful bragging about anything to Sherri. She loves nothing better than to embarrass anybody who brags. There was this one guy who sold insurance or was a lawyer or something like that. He was in the store one day bragging about what a good chess player he was. "My brother plays chess," Sherri said. I can imagine the devilish little smile she must have had on when she said it. I've seen that smile. You don't want to. It means something embarrassing is about to happen to you.

I was at home and the phone rang. It was Sherri. "There's a man here who'd like to play chess with you," she said. Say no more. I hopped on my bike and was at the store just a few minutes later.

The man was surprised that I was just a kid. He apparently thought it was beneath his dignity to beat a little kid so he tried to back out. "Oh, he won't mind," Sherri said as I set up the chess set. "And he's not bad." So the man reluctantly sat down with me kind of condescending like.

I beat him in nine moves.

Well, that kind of got his attention. He wanted to play again. This time he said he'd really concentrate.

I beat him in twelve moves.

One more game. Okay. He really, really concentrated this time. His breathing got to sounding kind of funny. He sweated.

I beat him in fifteen moves. Sherri laughed at him out loud. He didn't want to play anymore. "Thanks for the games, Mister," I said.

That was what was waiting for Bill the next time he came home to visit. And nobody warned him. I knew it wouldn't be polite to want to play him just as soon as he got home. So he settled in a bit then we all had supper. As soon as Mom had cleared off the dining room table, I set up the chess set. Bill smiled and we sat down and started to play.

Bill was a pretty good chess player. A lot better than the man at Sherri's store. He concentrated and I concentrated and we both made our moves carefully and deliberately. The game went on a long time. Then he made a mistake and I pounced on it. Checkmate.

I held out my hand, palm up. "You owe me twenty dollars," I reminded him. Bill grinned at me. "Let's play again," he said. "Double or nothing and I'll play without my queen." The queen is the most powerful piece. You're going to lose if you play without your queen.

I was tempted. But, "No," I said. "We'll play again for fun and you keep your queen. But you owe me twenty dollars."

Well, a bet is a bet and Bill knew he'd lost this one. He got his wallet out and gave me twenty dollars. Then we played again. It started out another tough game, but he made a mistake early. I'd set one of those traps I'd learned from the Grand Masters and he walked right into it and got slaughtered.

He looked up at Mom, who had just walked into the dining room. In kind of a shocked voice he said, "Geez! And I was going to play him without my queen." Mom just smiled. I laughed at him. □

Living in a new neighborhood meant meeting new people, and on Niagara Street the most important new person was Jim. Jim lived across the street in a very nice, very big house. He was in seventh grade,

which made him very grown up next to me and very wise. They had a great big front yard that was perfect for playing football in and also perfect for playing tennis ball in. Tennis ball was a form of baseball only you used a tennis ball instead of a baseball and thin, itty bitty wood bats instead of a regular baseball bat. Jim's yard was a gathering place and it was where I met most of the other kids in our new neighborhood. The most important of these was a boy pretty close to my own age and size named Dave. Dave had one older brother, Billy, and one younger brother, Ronnie, as well as a younger sister, Bonnie, who was about the same age as Melody. Billy was a couple of years older and he was very skinny and very smart. He didn't chum around with us too much, although when he did he was fun to be with. Jim had a friend his own age named Tom. Jim and Tom were close chums the way Dave and I became close chums. Jim and Tom let Dave and me hang out with them a lot and the four of us were always doing one thing or another, mostly sports. Dad started referring to the four of us as 'the gang' and in a way I suppose we were, although 'gang' didn't mean then what it means today. It just meant a group of boys who hung out together most of the time and did things together most of the time. Jim was the undisputed leader of our gang. Whatever he wanted to do, that's what we did and it was always fun.

I don't know where Dave and his family came from originally, although I was pretty sure it wasn't Maquoketa. The reason I thought so was because all of them used some funny words nobody else in town ever used. The one they used most often was 'yoose,' which meant the same thing as 'you' as in "yoose want to play some ball?" Dave didn't use this word so much, but Billy used it all the time. Another thing that was unusual was that their dad didn't live with them. That was very unusual for Maquoketa at that time, and I thought it was very curious. But they didn't talk about their dad so I didn't ask. I had a hunch that if I did it would hurt their feelings and they were my friends and I didn't want to do that.

Their house was across the alley behind Jim's house. I've already mentioned that fences were a rarity in Maquoketa at that time. You could walk from Jim's yard to Dave's yard in no time at all. For some reason she never explained, Mom didn't like Dave's mom. She never said why. She just instructed Melody and me that we weren't to go over to their house. As I got to know Dave more and more, this prohibition just didn't make any sense at all to me and eventually I started to ignore this rule. It's true I thought Dave's mom was a bit odd for a mom. She was always very, very sad looking and didn't talk much. There was a lot about her that reminded me of Grandma Teters. But she certainly wasn't ever mean to me. Dave and Billy were good boys, they were my friends, and I just decided I wasn't going to treat them any different from anybody else for no reason at all. Not ever going to their house was the first rule I ever decided to break on purpose. Besides, I'd never agreed to it. When Mom told me I wasn't to go over there I asked, "Why?" She said, "Because I said so." I never said, "Okay."

There was another place we weren't allowed to go and, as it turned out, none of the kids were allowed to go there and none of us wanted to. Living down at the corner just across the street from the playground was a very strange man I'll call C. He was the only grownup I never heard anyone refer to as "Mr. C." They all just called him C. Every single kid was scared of C. Usually you never saw him, but sometimes you would see him walking down the middle of the street mumbling and talking to people who weren't there. Sometimes he'd sort of growl and wave his fists in the air like he was beating off a flock of birds or something. Today people would say C was mentally ill. We kids had a different term: C was crazy. All of us, even Jim, would hide from him whenever we saw him. Mom never said why we weren't to go near C either, but she didn't have to. Every one of us kids could see that for ourselves.

It was Jim who introduced me to Dave. Unlike me, Dave didn't wear glasses. Unlike most other boys who didn't wear glasses, Dave never treated me any differently because I did. That was one of the main reasons why I warmed up to him pretty quickly. He was a *pal* and I learned really fast I could trust him. He and I had something in common, too. During 1963 both of us started putting on extra weight. This was something I never understood. I certainly wasn't any less physically active than I'd been before. Dave didn't exactly lie around in a hammock all day either. We ran, played football and baseball, played basketball in the winter, and generally were just as active as every other kid. Neither of us was obese. But, to use a term that became fashionable many years later, we were Bubbas and there just didn't seem to be

any reason for it. Many, many years later when I was learning about human physiology, I learned that chronic stress might be an underlying cause of excessive weight gain. I certainly was experiencing a lot of stress in those days, both from the glasses thing and because Dad didn't seem to like to have fun with me anymore, and I often wonder if that might not have had a lot to do with the weight gain. I don't know if Dave was experiencing a lot of stress, but I did learn something years later that makes me think he might very well have been. I'm not going to tell you what that was. But in 1963 the word 'stress' wasn't in anybody's vocabulary in Maquoketa, and people who were impolite enough to bring up my weight generally had a different, mean-spirited theory about it that wasn't true. My you-can-count-on-it reaction to this? *Screw you!* It was a very touchy issue with me. My *friends* never ever brought it up.

Something else Dave and I had in common was he was one of the few boys who *knew* how to fight. I don't know when he learned or who taught him. But he knew how to defend himself and he knew the right way to hit. I don't think very many people knew this about him. Dave never picked on anybody, except his little brother Ronnie every once and awhile, and I never knew of him ever looking for trouble. In fact, I only know for certain about one fight he was ever in. That one was with me and he didn't start it. Believe you me, he *knew* how to fight. I started it; he finished it. I'll tell you about it later. □

It was in 1963 that I began hearing about some trouble that was happening down in the South and it was over something called 'desegregation.' I'd never heard of that word before and I didn't know what it meant. All I knew was there was some kind of trouble happening between white people and colored people, who white people at the time called Negroes. Well, most white people I knew called them that. Some called them another name that started with an 'n' but Mom told me that was a very bad word and I should never use it.

Not only did I not know what 'desegregation' was; I hadn't even known there *were* any colored people except for Indians and, so I had heard, Japanese. There weren't any colored people in Maquoketa, not a single one. And I had my doubts there really was any such thing as a colored person. People said that Indians had red skin, but I'd seen Indians and they didn't look like they had red skin to me. They looked like they had a good tan. The only person I knew who ever had skin that really was red sometimes was me; I had a tendency to sunburn easily at the swimming pool. *That* was red skin. A lot of people, including Dad, said Japanese people had yellow skin. I didn't believe that at all. The *sun* was yellow. *Raincoats* were yellow. People weren't yellow. I'd seen pictures of Japanese people in Life Magazine. They weren't yellow. They were pretty much the same color as me. If I was 'white' then so were they.

But it turned out there really were people who were colored. They showed pictures of colored people from Alabama on television. They had dark skin, much darker than any suntan I'd ever seen. I asked my teacher why some people had skin that was so dark. She explained that skin has something called 'pigmentation' – which didn't sound like a very nice word to me – and different people had different amounts of it. White people had the least, Negroes had the most. She explained that if your ancestors came from a place where the sun was very hot most of the time they developed more of this pigmentation stuff as a protection from too much sunlight. I could appreciate that. I wished I could have more of it when I went to the swimming pool. It sounded like a good thing to me. She said that this pigmentation stuff was inherited by children from their parents and how much you had could only change very, very slowly and it took many, many generations for it to change. She said Negroes' ancestors were from the continent of Africa where the sun was very, very bright and not enough generations had passed for Negroes living in America to have much pigmentation change yet. She said it took thousands and thousands of years for this stuff to change. Okay. That explained that.

Desegregation was something harder to understand. I tried to look that word up in the dictionary at the library but it wasn't in there. But I knew that sometimes 'de' was what was called a prefix and when you used it you meant doing the opposite of whatever the rest of the word was. So I looked up the word 'segregation.' The dictionary said it meant 'setting apart from others or from the main mass or group; to isolate.' So something was being set apart from everything else and 'desegregation' meant putting a stop

to it. But that still didn't help because I didn't know what was being set apart.

It turned out to be people.

I asked around and you know what? It turned out that in Alabama they made white people and Negroes live apart from each other. In everything. They couldn't go to the same schools. They couldn't ride on the bus together. They couldn't even use the same drinking fountains or the same bathrooms. Just because white people and colored people had different amounts of this pigmentation stuff. I couldn't understand why anybody would care about that. It wasn't anybody's fault how much pigmentation they had. I didn't choose to not have enough of it. Negroes didn't choose to have so much of it. And what difference did it make? I couldn't see that it made any important difference at all. Desegregation meant putting a stop to this evil foolishness. Why would anybody possibly be against that?

But some people were. The TV showed a man named George Wallace standing in a doorway at a college. It was the University of Alabama. He didn't want to let some Negroes go to school there. The University of Alabama was supposed to be the best college in Alabama. He didn't want to let people go to school there just because they had a lot of this pigmentation stuff? That just wasn't fair.

It wasn't *right*.

It was against liberty and justice for everybody.

George Wallace was a bad man. He was breaking the Pledge of Allegiance.

That wasn't the worst of it. Dad seemed to think what George Wallace was doing was right. At least he said things that sounded like he thought George Wallace was right. I couldn't believe my own ears. I was sitting on the floor a few feet away from the TV, like I usually did, and he was sitting in his chair. I turned around and looked at him, and I think my face must have looked distressed because I *felt* distressed. I looked at him and I pointed my finger at the TV and I exclaimed, "*Dad, that's wrong!*"

He looked startled and then surprised then he looked at me for what seemed like a long time. He didn't look mad. He looked uncomfortable. Then he said I was too young to understand and that I'd understand it better when I was older.

I felt uncertain. I did know I was only a little boy and I did know Dad knew more things than I did. But I also did know, way down deep inside, *this is wrong!* I knew this feeling very, very, very well. It was the same as I felt when the boys treated me differently because of my glasses. I didn't have a name for this feeling, but I knew this deep, smoldering resentment. I *knew* what the man on TV was doing was wrong. I looked at Mom, and she didn't say a word or do a thing. I understood that, too. Mom and Dad *never* disagreed with each other in front of us kids. If I was wrong, she'd have said so. She didn't.

I *was* old enough to understand. And Dad knew it.

That year there were terrible things on the news. I saw firemen turn their fire hoses on a big group of colored people who weren't doing anything bad. The news man said they were 'demonstrators.' They weren't doing anything bad and the firemen turned their hoses on and knocked them down. *The firemen!* Firemen were supposed to be heroes; firemen were supposed to be good guys. How could *firemen* do this? How could *firemen* break the Pledge of Allegiance?

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

This was the very, very first thing it said in the Bill of Rights, and the Bill of Rights is part of the Constitution, and the Constitution is the Supreme Law of the Land. Congress cannot do these things; the state of Alabama cannot do these things; *nobody* can do these things. Anybody who does is taking liberty away from somebody. Anybody who does is taking justice away from somebody. Anybody who does is

breaking the Pledge of Allegiance. Anybody who does is hurting America, hurting *all* of us.

How could *firemen* do this? I was just sick about it. □



The fifth grader (age 10)

That fall I started fifth grade and Melody started second grade. In many ways fifth grade was the top of the mountain at Briggs Elementary School. There wasn't enough room for the sixth graders at Briggs and so they attended school up at the junior high school building even though sixth grade wasn't actually a part of junior high. My fifth grade teacher was Mrs. Tavenner and she was another really, really neat teacher. In a way I had two fifth grade teachers because I also had Mrs. Frank for chorus. Mrs. Frank was very talented and she could write songs. She wrote *Willy Claus*, one of our Christmas songs. Mrs. Tavenner could always explain things no matter how complicated they were.

And she could keep order on the playground, too. As I said, fifth graders were the oldest kids at Briggs and sometimes, to put it baldly, we threw our weight around. But not too much because Mrs. Tavenner was always there in the background somewhere seeing to it things didn't get out of hand.

One of the things we studied was history. I had always liked history before we had to take it in school. The library had a lot of good history books and my favorites were about World War II and about the American Revolution. These were books that told you what had happened and what it led to and what it meant. They weren't like the history books in school. I don't know who wrote those things but whoever it was they had *boring* down to a real art and *meaningless* down to a real craft. All the way through they were stuffed with things like, 'In 1932 Congress passed the Whatsisname-Whozamacallit Tariff Act. In 1933 Congress passed the Whodunnit-Whathehey Tariff Act. In 1934 . . .' So what? Who cares? What difference did any of this crap make to anybody? Even Mrs. Tavenner couldn't rescue this stuff. This was *dead* history, irrelevant history, meaningless history. Not like the history I'd read about in the library.

Nobody knew it, but we were about to get a big jolt of history that nobody saw coming and nobody wanted. One afternoon in November the Principal, Mr. Lord, came on over the loudspeaker. He used to do this a lot and when he did he always said the same thing: "May I have your attention, please? May I have your attention, please." The first one was always asked as a question, the second one was always an order. Then he'd say whatever it was he had to announce.

But this day was different. "ATTENTION!" he shouted. It made me almost jump out of my seat. Then there was a long pause and finally he said, "May I have your attention, please." Then he told us. President Kennedy had just been shot in some place called Dallas. He was dead.

For a moment nobody moved. Nobody said anything. Everybody just stared at the loudspeaker. It was only a moment, but it was a moment that went on forever. Then we began to look at each other. Still nobody said anything. All the kids' faces looked just the same, all white-colored with mouths open. Some of the girls had big tears starting to run down their faces, but nobody made a sound. For awhile even Mrs. Tavenner was like she had turned to stone. All the faces had the same look, and the look is called horror.

I was hollow. I mean there was *nothing* inside me. No air, no bones, no blood, no feelings. *Nothing*. I was hollow for a long time. Maybe five minutes, maybe ten, maybe more. I don't know how long. Then my insides started to come back, but my feelings didn't come back until later. It hurts to be hollow.

I think Mrs. Tavenner talked to us about it. I don't really know. I don't remember. I think they might have sent us home early. I don't really know. I don't remember that either. All I do remember is walking across the playground toward Niagara Street and our house and wondering who did it. I didn't wonder why. There isn't any why for something like this. There's just what happened and who did it. There isn't any why. There can't be. So I was just walking by myself and wondering who did it and thinking it had to

be the Russians and they couldn't be allowed to get away with it. And I still had no feelings. No feelings at all. Not any kind. And I walked some more and then my feelings started to come back. They were ice.

They were rage.

That weekend felt heavy. The television brought the pictures into our house. Before that Friday was even over, they brought the news that a man had been caught. They said he was Lee Harvey Oswald. They said he had killed a policeman. They said he had killed President Kennedy. Eventually I saw his face on the television and I looked at him and I hated him. The television showed the President's airplane bring him back to Washington, D.C. and the ice grew colder and sadness came with it. The television showed his casket in the rotunda of the Congress and more sadness came.

On Sunday the television brought the pictures of the police station where Lee Harvey Oswald was. The man said they were taking him to another jail. Then there he was, surrounded by policemen. One of them had a big hat that looked like a cowboy hat. Lee Harvey Oswald was smirking at us. Lee Harvey Oswald looked proud. Then a man ran up to him and there was a gunshot and I saw Lee Harvey Oswald's face change when the bullet went into him and I knew he was going to die and I wanted him to die. Later came the news he was dead and then the iciness began to go away and the sadness grew. But not for Lee Harvey Oswald. Never for Lee Harvey Oswald. None for Lee Harvey Oswald. I felt nothing for Lee Harvey Oswald. I was sad for President Kennedy and sad for Mrs. Kennedy and sad for his little girl and sad for his little boy and sad for all of us and sad for me. After it got dark I went to my special place and I sat out there for a long time all by myself in the cold. I sat out there and I didn't make a sound and I let the tears come and I stayed there like that until they were all gone and I never moved. I stayed there a long time. I never told anyone. It was something just between me and God. It was a prayer. And it was a Lifetime Promise. It was the same Promise I made to President Kennedy the day he became President. □

IV. The Johnson Years

1963 turned into 1964. I didn't have any great expectations for that year and, as it turned out, that was just as well. Project Mercury had ended in mid-1963 with Gordon Cooper's long orbital flight, and the way it turned out no Project Gemini astronauts would go into space for all of 1964. There was only one space launch that whole year and that one was just an unmanned test of the new rocket, the Titan II, they needed to launch the bigger Gemini space craft. By the time the astronauts started flying again I was in sixth grade and had to leave for school much earlier because the junior high school, where sixth grade went, was on the other side of town and it was a much longer walk. So I never got to try to see very many space launches again. Instead I had to see the replays on the news and a lot of times the news wouldn't even show them. The only news man who liked the space program was Walter Cronkite. He was the only one who knew what was important.

Vice President Johnson was now President Johnson. He had been in charge, sort of, of the space program. I thought it was good that we still had a President who liked the space program because there were a lot of big people who were saying they didn't like it. Mostly these were Republicans and some peculiar kind of Democrats people called 'the liberals.' I didn't know what was the matter with these people. How could anybody *not* want to go to the moon? I didn't like either of them because they didn't want to go to the moon and, even more, because they didn't like President Kennedy. I knew they didn't like President Kennedy because they wanted people to stop asking what they could do for their country. Instead they both wanted to tell everybody what to do and then make them do it.

They wanted me to break my Promise.

In math at school we were learning about the number line and what they called 'real' numbers. I thought that was a very strange thing to call them. What kind of number could possibly not be real? It looked to me like they were just more numbers. Somehow they weren't supposed to be the same as the regular numbers, which they were now calling 'the integers,' and they weren't supposed to be the same as fractions. Some of them were supposed to be just as good as fractions and these were called the 'rational'

numbers because a fraction could be thought of as a ratio of two regular numbers. We figured out rational numbers using something called ‘long’ division. When you did long division you still got a quotient but now instead of a remainder what you got was a whole string of numbers to the right of something called a ‘decimal point.’ Another strange name for something. You could use a decimal point to write money all as one number. Instead of saying, “two dollars and fifteen cents” you could just write \$2.15 and everybody would know what you meant.

But there were more rational numbers than this. In fact, there wasn’t any limit to how many there could be. There wasn’t any rule that said ‘there are just this many and no more.’ So you couldn’t count how many rational numbers there were. Of course, everybody knew you couldn’t count how many regular numbers there were either because no matter how high you counted there was always another one. But with rational numbers you couldn’t even try to count them because there wasn’t any way you could use your fingers. With regular numbers you could always use your fingers if you had to so long as you were allowed to re-use your fingers. But there wasn’t any way to do that with rational numbers. Instead you had to pretend you were dividing up the number line and the way you did this was long division.

I suppose they called it ‘long’ division because it took longer than quotients and remainders. For some rational numbers, like the one just as good as the fraction $2 \div 5$ (which they said you wrote as $2:5$ when you wanted it to be a ratio instead of a fraction), long division didn’t take long. $2 \div 5$ equaled 0.4 with as many zeroes after the 4 as you felt like writing down. Mrs. Tavenner showed us a procedure for how you converted a fraction into a rational number. But most rational numbers kept going without ever stopping. The only way you knew what it is was to spot its pattern. The pattern was that some sequence of numbers would start repeating over and over again and never stop. For $1 \div 3$ you’d get 0.33333 . . . and the 3s would never end. So you couldn’t even write down most rational numbers. All you could do was spot the pattern. Mrs. Tavenner said when you saw the numbers repeating you just put a bar across the top and that would mean the pattern just kept repeating. Okay. It was a little strange – why not just use a fraction? – but it wasn’t hard so I didn’t mind too much.

What I did mind was that all this didn’t look like it was true. Not all the time anyway. You see, rational numbers were supposed to be just as good as fractions. The way you could tell they were just as good was to multiply them by the divisor (the number to the right in $1 \div 3$) and see that you got the dividend (the number to the left in $1 \div 3$). Mrs. Tavenner had taught us the procedure to multiply a real number and this procedure was also called ‘multiplication’ (although I thought it should have been called ‘long’ multiplication because it could get pretty long and it used regular multiplication inside it). Most of the time it worked and the rational number multiplied by the divisor did give you back the dividend.

But not always. When you applied this procedure to 0.33333 . . . you didn’t get 1. Instead you got another endless number, 0.99999 I might have only been a little boy, but even I knew 0.99999 . . . is not the same as 1. It looked to me like there was something basically wrong here and I didn’t like it. So I asked Mrs. Tavenner about it. She pointed out that 0.99999 . . . was basically the same as 1 since the difference was tinier than anything and $1 - 0.99999 \dots = 0.00000 \dots$. Uh-huh. I had to admit Mrs. Tavenner was right about it not making any practical difference, but I wasn’t completely sold. I decided this was something that was ‘alright’ but not ‘okay.’ It looked to me like if you just worked hard enough at it you could make any number equal any other number this way and that was obviously wrong. So I was very suspicious about this real number thing. But I figured maybe they’d explain it somehow in sixth grade. Every time you went up to the next grade they explained more stuff, so they’d probably explain this next year. (It turned out they didn’t explain it next year. Or the year after that. Or the year after that. I had to wait all the way to college before anybody explained it and it turned out you really couldn’t make any two old numbers equal each other. The moral of the story is: You never know enough math).

But rational numbers were a piece of cake compared to the other kind of real numbers, which were called ‘irrational’ numbers. The ‘irrational’ meant they couldn’t be gotten by dividing out fractions. But the word ‘irrational’ also means ‘nuts’ and I thought that was a pretty good way to look at them. At least

rational numbers were practical even if $0.99999 \dots$ wasn't the same as 1. You could always figure them out good enough for practical purposes because they'd eventually either end or start repeating in a pattern. But irrational numbers, Mrs. Tavenner said, were numbers that never repeated in a pattern. If that was true, I couldn't see any way a person could figure them out and if you couldn't figure them out then they weren't practical. If they weren't practical I couldn't see how a person could know they really even existed. I asked Mrs. Tavenner about that, too, and she said the old Greeks had come up with a way to do it but first you had to learn something called 'geometry' to understand how to do it. Okay. I'd wait. Maybe this 'geometry' thing would straighten out the goofy stuff in the rational numbers too. □

One of the things every kid had to do once a year was take these big tests called the Iowa Tests of Educational Development. Nobody ever called them that. They called them the 'I-T-E-D' but the name of the test was written right across the top of the answer sheet so I knew what 'I-T-E-D' stood for. There would be an exam book and the answer sheet had multiple choice answers you selected by filling in a little circle with a number 2 pencil. They'd announce a few days ahead of time what day the ITED was going to be and on that day you'd come in and just spend most of the day taking it. Some time later your test results would come back, printed out on this piece of paper that sort of looked like a graph but had numbers printed on it too, and you were supposed to take this home and give it to your mom and dad. No big deal.

Nobody ever explained to me why we had to take these tests but I didn't particularly care. It was just another school thing we did. I didn't even care what my test scores were although, of course, I'd always do my best on the tests. The scores were kind of weird anyway. The highest score you could get was a 99. I asked one time why the highest score wasn't 100 since the scores were called 'percentiles' and 100%, not 99%, should have meant 'perfect score.' But the teacher told me there wasn't a 100th percentile and 99 was as high as it went. Okay, fine. Whatever. I would look to see what my scores were when the ITED result came back, but mainly only because the scoring system was so weird. I always did okay on it. Most of my scores were always in the middle 90s give or take a point or two. Once in awhile a score might drop down into the high 80s. I never got a 99. Nobody ever told me that wasn't good enough or what my mistakes were so I didn't waste any time thinking about it.

Every once in awhile another kid, usually a girl, might ask me how hard I studied for the ITED. I was always surprised by this question because I never studied for it at all. How could I? They never told us what it was going to be about. Besides, there just wasn't any need. All I had to do was pay attention in class and do whatever the teacher said and the ITED took care of itself. But I did get some funny looks, usually not very friendly, when I said I didn't study for it at all. I just shrugged that off. I didn't think the ITED was important and I didn't see why anybody should think it was.

One person did, though. Melody. Mom always saved our scores sheets for some reason and Melody discovered where she kept them. She started digging out my old scores from her grade and insisting on showing them to me right next to her scores. Melody got 99s straight across the top except in math, where she only got a 96 or something. Her main point was that her scores were better than mine straight across the board. She seemed to think that was important for some reason, although I couldn't see it other than to point out something I already knew: Melody was smarter than me. She'd do this every year. She'd haul out my old score and insist on showing it and hers to me. It was always the same. She'd get 99 straight across the top except in math where she'd get a 96 give or take a point or two. I think just one time I outscored her in math by maybe one point. I used the occasion to point out she wasn't perfect. Being teased about it by her rankled me a little bit, but it didn't bother me that her scores always beat mine. They were *supposed* to. You see, my little sister is a genius. I'd known that for a long time.

Which doesn't mean I ever told *her* I knew that. Oh, no. She already had me outgunned enough. □

That spring I wandered over to the Briggs playground one Sunday afternoon to see if anything was going on. Maybe run into a few of the boys and get a ballgame together or something. But there wasn't anybody over there. I was about to leave when I saw a couple of boys I didn't know coming on to the

playground from the south side. They both looked like they were my age but I'd never seen them before. They must not have gone to Briggs or I'd have at least recognized their faces. But I didn't. They were strangers.

They both saw me and came walking toward me so I waited for them. You can never tell. Sometimes you make new friends this way, sometimes you don't. They stopped when they got to me and we eyeballed each other for a few minutes. One of them was my height, the other was taller than me. He was a little taller, I was a little heavier. Okay, I was *more* than a little heavier; I was a Bubba after all. Of the two of them the taller boy was obviously the leader. He stood right in front of me and the other boy stood a little off to one side. That's how you tell who the leader is. I didn't say anything, so he spoke first. "You live around here?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said, pointing with my thumb back over my shoulder. "I live just down there. You live around here?"

"No," he said. He didn't say anything else, so we all just stood there for another minute or so looking each other over. It was clearly a territorial thing. Finally he said, "I bet I'm tougher than you."

Well, there was only one thing a boy could say to that. "I bet you're not," I replied.

"You better watch out, kid," his buddy said. "He's the toughest kid on his block."

I appreciated the warning but still there was only one thing I could say to that, too. "Well," I replied, "this isn't his block."

We were all caught in the ritual and just ran it like it was supposed to go. "Oh, yeah?" – "Yeah!" then he shoves me and I shove him back.

He was the challenger and so it was his call which way it went next. If he dived at me and tried to grapple, it was a wrestling match. If he took a punch at me it was a fight. You almost never knew which one it was going to be until after the shoving. If it was going to be wrestling, I had the weight. But it would depend on whether he had the speed and the strength.

He took a swing at me. It was a fight.

I blocked it and he took another swing with his other arm. It was just another haymaker and I blocked it, too. This kid didn't know how to fight. He just kept swinging and I just kept blocking. He was leaving himself wide open with every swing and it would have been the easiest thing in the world for me to just punch him out. But I didn't want to. I wasn't mad; this was territory, not honor. And it was sure clear he wasn't going to be able to hurt me, so I didn't want to hurt him. I let him keep swinging and I kept blocking every one of them. As it went on, I saw his face starting to change little by little. He wasn't landing any punches, and that unsettled him. But I wasn't hitting him back and that confused him. He didn't know what was going on now.

Finally he took a step back and dropped his arms to his sides. "Let's call it a draw?" he offered. "Okay," I said. I lowered my arms. "It's a draw."

He took a step forward and presented his left side to me. "Hit me," he said. I didn't want to hit him. "I hit you," he said earnestly, "so you've *got* to hit me!" Ah, honor! I understood. I gave him a punch on his arm, not so light it would insult him but not really hard enough to hurt him. An honor tap. He nodded and put out his hand. "Good fight," he said. We shook hands and they turned around and left. I never saw either one of them again. It was too bad. We would have been good pals.

There wasn't anything else going on at the playground, so I walked back to our house. Dad was in the living room reading the paper. Normally you don't bother to talk about a fight unless somebody actually got hurt, but Dad had liked it when Steve had had his fight over at the playground, so I thought I'd mention it. "I was just in a fight," I said.

“You?” he grunted. He didn’t say anything else. It was like he thought I was just making it up.

That smoldering anger flooded all through me. I stood there for a second. Then I turned and walked away. □

I learned a new word that March. The word was cancer. Near the end of that month Grandpa Wells died of it. He had been sick for some time but I hadn’t known that, so when he died it seemed very sudden to me. Something changed inside me that day when they told me he had died. I felt that hollowness inside start again and somehow I was able to reach inside and stop it from growing before it could take all of me away. I stood there with this one big hollow place inside and I put Grandpa into that place and I put walls around it and I squeezed it to make it smaller. With Grandpa safe inside the hollow place I could keep all the hurt away from the rest of me so I wouldn’t have to cry. All I had to do was keep squeezing the hollow place in and I wouldn’t hurt the way I had when Uncle Chet and President Kennedy died. In time the hollow place grows small again and the pain inside it stays inside it. The hollow place doesn’t ever cease to exist. It’s always in there somewhere and death always makes it grow and its gateway reopen and when it does I put the dead person in there with Grandpa and all the others I’ve known who have died. The hollow place is the grim but hallowed ground in my soul. It is the cemetery crypt of my heart and it is where I lay the people I love to rest. Over the many years since that day, in times of sorrow, some people have thought I had no feelings because they can’t see them. They are wrong. Those feelings go with the person who has died into this sacred place and I carry the person and the feelings that belong to them in there where they are always with me and where my love never leaves them. □

Early that summer Dad said he wanted to go on vacation and visit his friend Carl Abbott and his family in Alabama. Mr. Abbott and Dad had served together on the destroyer U.S.S. Waller during the war and had become best friends. Dad had kept a diary during the war and I had read it. The entry for January 12, 1945, read:

G.Q. at 6:00 a.m. and again all hell broke loose. We fired 40 rounds from gun 5 again and others fired more per gun than we did. We shot down one plane with 40 mm. Gun 5 had a powder jam and we were repairing that while the last of the firing was going on. That was the 2nd G.Q. this a.m. so far and I just got back from breakfast. The 40 mm.’s shot 12,000+ rounds this a.m. We just heard some scuttlebutt we are going to refuel and head back to Manus today. Left Lengayen at 6:00 p.m. with large convoy of transports for Manus. Also a large convoy of L.S.T.’s left at same time. G.Q. but no air attacks.

Abbott wants to go home to Mildred. I want to go home too.

The four of us – Dad, Mom, Melody, and me – set off in the car for Alabama. Dad drove, Mom sat in front, and Melody and I sat in the backseat. The car was pretty crowded with all our suitcases. It was a long trip, and Mom always hated to take long trips with Dad because if anything went wrong or it looked like we’d taken a wrong turn someplace Dad would get mad and cuss. Mom disapproved of cussing. We drove south through Illinois then into the mountains through a piece of Kentucky and across Tennessee to get to Alabama. The mountains were very beautiful and they looked big, although many years later when I first saw the Rocky Mountains these mountains weren’t so big in comparison. But this was the first time I’d seen mountains and I liked them very much.

Carl Abbott and his family lived in a little town far away from Birmingham and Mobile and the other cities that had been in the news. I think the town was bigger than Maquoketa but it was hard to tell. They welcomed us very warmly. They didn’t have a very big house and it was very crowded with all of us there. Mr. Abbott had a son who was in high school and who insisted that Melody and I take his room to stay in while we were there. He slept on the floor in the living room, which I felt guilty about but he just wouldn’t hear of doing it any other way. I had just started playing in Little League that summer and he would play catch with me in their back yard. I liked him a lot.

The Abbotts talked differently from us and this was called a ‘southern accent.’ They used a word I had heard used once in awhile on TV and in the movies, but had never heard a real person use before. The

word was “y’all.” Contrary to what know-nothing TV and movie people seem to think, nobody in Iowa says ‘y’all’ but everybody we met in Alabama did. I asked Mrs. Abbott about that word and I think she might have thought at first that I was being critical. But she explained that they said ‘y’all’ to mean ‘all of you; you all.’ That made perfect sense to me so I started using it too. If it’s okay to say ‘can’t’ instead of ‘can not’ I didn’t see any reason not to say ‘y’all’ instead of ‘you all.’ Melody teased me about it but I got even by calling her ‘missy.’

Mr. Abbott owned a barber shop. He showed it to us and even gave me a haircut and wouldn’t accept any money from Dad for it. He had invented this really neat thing. It was kind of like a vacuum cleaner hose that attached to the hair cutter and kept the hair from falling on the floor. You might think it would have been uncomfortable for the person getting his hair cut, but it wasn’t at all. It was a little noisy but not too noisy and it didn’t yank my hair the way I learned the vacuum cleaner did later. He had it just right.

In the town there were signs of segregation. I did see public toilet rooms with ‘colored’ and ‘white’ signs above the doorways. But there were no ‘colored’ and ‘white’ signs in Mr. Abbott’s barber shop. Dad and Mr. Abbott talked a little bit about the trouble that had been going on in Birmingham and other places and Dad would listen to what Mr. Abbott had to say and didn’t offer any opinions of his own. I think Mr. Abbott and his family did not dislike colored people – and they called them ‘colored people’ and not Negroes – but clearly they didn’t like all the trouble that had been going on and they didn’t like the way the news people were portraying all the white people in Alabama. I think they thought there were a lot of troublemakers on both sides. Still, I also thought that while they didn’t dislike colored people they didn’t particularly like them either. They seemed to look at them pretty much the same way I looked at strangers – not overly friendly and kind of cautious. There were, Mr. Abbott said, good colored people and bad colored people just like there were good white people and bad white people.

He took Dad and me on a drive to see the town and on part of this drive we saw what Mr. Abbott said was a ‘colored neighborhood.’ I had heard the TV talking about ‘poverty’ but I’d never seen what it was until that day. The houses were all small and they weren’t painted and they looked very run down, like a lot of the houses in Fulton only much worse. I didn’t see any people in that neighborhood when we drove through it. It looked like everybody was gone somewhere. Probably they were at work somewhere, I figured. There weren’t even any kids around. There was one house that had a new-looking car parked in front of it. It had been washed and polished and was very shiny. I bet its owner was very proud of it. I would have been. It was the only nice thing I saw in that neighborhood and I was glad that person had at least one nice thing because all the rest of what I saw didn’t look nice at all. Our family wasn’t rich and our house wasn’t the nicest house in Maquoketa by a long ways, but it was a million times nicer than this neighborhood. I was glad we didn’t live in poverty and I felt sorry for these people who did. I thought to myself, *‘If it is segregation that makes it so people have to live like this, then segregation must never, never be allowed.’*

I don’t know how Mr. Abbott or his family felt about segregation. I didn’t hear them say anything in favor of it, I didn’t hear them say anything against it. I didn’t hear them use the word at all. I wanted to ask Mr. Abbott about it, but we were his guests and that wouldn’t have been polite. Mom always said when you were company or when you had company the two things you could never discuss were politics and religion. Religion is a private thing; it’s between you and God. Politics is a democracy thing; it is how you make America work. We didn’t come to Mr. Abbott’s house to make America work. We came to Mr. Abbott’s house to make new friends – except for Dad who was already Mr. Abbott’s friend.

I enjoyed our visit with the Abbotts and I liked them a lot. In no time visiting time was up and it was time to leave. But before we went back to Iowa there was one more thing Mom and Dad wanted to do. Florida wasn’t very far away, relatively speaking, and they wanted Melody and me to see the ocean. It was really the Gulf of Mexico but it looked like an ocean to me. We drove to Florida and went to a beach. The weather turned out not to be very nice; it was cloudy and windy and cold. But we did see the ocean and Dad let me wade out into it a little ways. I only made it out about waist deep because the waves

coming in kept knocking me down. The water was very salty and not at all like a lake or a river. When I stood out in it I could feel it pulling the sand away from my feet. But despite the fact that it was kind of cold and the weather was pretty disappointing, we had fun and Melody and I did collect some sea shells. There were little animals still in them, so Mom wasn't too thrilled about that. □

I played Little League on the team sponsored by Cassidy Sporting Goods. The neatest thing about playing on the Cassidy team was our uniforms. Being a sporting goods store, Mr. Cassidy didn't skimp at all on outfitting us. Our uniforms looked just like the big leaguers' only smaller. They were probably the best thing about our team because the New York Yankees we weren't. We'd win some games, lose some games, and generally just have fun. I didn't like losing, of course, but I did like the sportsmanship at the end of every game. The boys on the other team were your mortal enemies during the game, but right after the game everybody would line up in two lines, we'd slap hands (this didn't come to be called a 'high five' until many years later) and the winners would say, "Good game, good game," and we'd all be friends again – at least if we were friends to begin with. In those days people would say, "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game," and they really meant it. It was a *sport*.

How I played the game – well, let's just say I had my highlights and my lowlights. My particular highlight was fielding. Generally if I could touch the ball I'd catch it or scoop up the grounder or pull in the throw. My throwing arm was only fair, which sometimes was kind of a disadvantage because I usually played either left field or center field, although occasionally the coach would put me in at second base. If a fly ball really went deep – back near the fence – my throw to the cutoff man might or might not come somewhere close to him depending on how much adrenalin was pumping through me. If I'd been the coach, I would have put me at first base because I really could catch the ball. The coach tended to put the tallest boy on the team at first base, and the way our infielders threw I guess I could see why.

I could run the bases pretty good. The problem was getting on base in the first place. I was the absolutely worst batter who ever played Little League. That ball comes at you awfully fast and by the time I figured out whether or not it was going to be in the strike zone it was generally too late. If I got wood on it at all, it was usually on its way straight to the other team's first baseman. I was a little better at bunting, but not a whole lot better. The plain fact was my best chance to get on base was to get hit by a pitch. It didn't take long for everybody in Little League to know that, either. Once in awhile, in a clutch game-on-the-line situation where I was coming up to bat, my teammates would yell encouragement. "Okay, Rick!" they'd yell, "Tough batter! Get hit!" Not 'get a hit'; 'get hit.' The umpire would usually give me a funny look when they yelled that. I'd crowd the plate and try my best, but pitchers hardly ever threw inside to me. They never worried I might take them downtown on an outside pitch. I could have been the poster boy for the designated hitter rule if there'd been one in those days.

It was always frustrating for me that I couldn't figure out how to be a better batter, but I still loved to play baseball. Games were played starting in the evening and there were usually two games a night. The teams playing the second game played under the lights and some boys never did quite get the hang of that. The lights didn't bother me so far as fielding went – and nothing could have possibly hurt my batting; there wasn't anything there to hurt. But some boys couldn't quite adjust to playing under the lights. One night I was in left field and an easy fly ball was hit to right field. The boy playing right field took a couple of steps, got under it, pounded his glove, got in perfect catching position, and *splat!* took it right in the face. That was the first and only time I've ever seen an outfielder do that. Fortunately, he wasn't hurt too bad; no broken nose, no broken cheek bone, no missing teeth. *Really* nice black eye. He had to come out of the game but he didn't leave the field and sat out the rest of the game in our dugout. I cheerfully reminded him when we came in to bat that getting hit by the ball was *my* job.

Another night we were up to bat and our guy hit a line drive right back at the pitcher. It really wasn't a very hard line drive and there was plenty of time to either catch it or get out of the way. But I guess the pitcher had trouble seeing it because he just stood there and *whump!* it hit him right in the jewels. We didn't wear cups in Little League and down he went in a heap. His mom came tearing out onto the field

and got to the mound even before the umpire could. Right there in front of the whole world she pulled down his pants to see if he was okay. All the parts were still there and still where they should have been. Boy, oh boy, was he ever mad at his mom for that. In our dugout we were screaming with laughter. For the next couple of months some of the boys, instead of saying ‘hi’ or ‘hello’ when they saw him, would yell, *Ding dong! Avon calling!* That always started a fight.

A lot of parents would come to watch the games, although they generally did more visiting with each other than actual watching of the game. If somebody did something really good, like make a great catch or get a good hit, they’d clap and give a nice, polite cheer. Otherwise they just let us play. I don’t remember anybody ever yelling at the umpire from the stands, although it wasn’t unknown for one of us to yell at the umpire. They didn’t harass the coaches, and they didn’t ever get down on any of the players. Baseball was a game, it’s only purpose was to have fun, and the parents all knew that. Dad came to a few of my games my first year of Little League but he stopped coming after that. I was never able to quite figure out if I was mad or glad about that. I suppose I was both. □

The atmosphere at home started changing in 1964 and I didn’t like it one bit. It started very abruptly one night after supper when Mom announced to Melody and me that from now on we were going to do the dishes after supper. Where did *that* come from? You see, always before when Mom would tell me I had to do something she always explained why first and even though I might sometimes whine about it a little, she was always able to get an “okay” from me. I felt like I had a say in it despite the fact that whatever it was I’d always end up doing it. This wasn’t that way. It felt like a punishment for something. *What did we do wrong? We didn’t do anything wrong!* I didn’t think either of us, Melody or me, had done anything to make Mom punish us.

We handled it with all the calm dignity you can expect from a ten-year-old and an eight-year-old. We bickered and fought with each other in the kitchen from first plate to last fork. Every night. We couldn’t take it out on Mom or Dad, so we took it out on each other. Model inmates of Sing Sing we were not. There was another consequence as well, and I don’t think this one was part of the plan. Until then, the whole family would always gather in the living room together to watch TV and, not infrequently, do a little cuddling. No more. At least not for me. Melody might still have done this after the dishes, but I didn’t. I was angry and resentful and I’d usually retreat to my room afterwards and do something I could do by myself. Build a model, read a book, practice chess. It was my way of telling the world to go to the infernal region and screw itself.

From there our domestic chores increased. Melody generally was relegated to cleaning duties. I got the lawn mowing detail and some other things I no longer remember. Again, it wasn’t something open to discussion although it was accompanied by the bribe of a fifty cents per week allowance. I think maybe Mom and Dad thought that was an incentive, but I saw it as something you gave the hired help, something that said I wasn’t part of the family anymore. I don’t know if Melody felt like the maid or not, but I felt like the gardener and not the son. I also was the sullen recipient of some lectures on how a boy had to ‘learn responsibility.’ Maybe if those speeches had come first I’d have felt differently – and then again maybe not – but the fact was I didn’t feel like I was or had ever been ‘irresponsible.’ I also was treated, usually once a week or so, to Dad’s lecture on how a boy needed to ‘learn the value of a dollar.’ I already knew the value of a dollar. It was twenty packs of chewing gum. It was ten bottles of soda pop. In the history books at the library about the American revolution I had read about how people would be brought to the colonies as indentured servants. That’s what all this made me feel like. I was an indentured servant for five bottles of pop a week plus room and board. And there was nothing I could do about it.

Now I didn’t know this at the time, but it was sometime right in here – probably a bit before – that Mom had had what apparently looked like a mild heart attack. It had scared Dad, and probably her too, right down to the core. I never found out about it until years later; this was just the sort of thing Mom and Dad would always keep from us kids. After I did I understood better what was happening right at this time. But, you see, *at the time* I didn’t know anything about it. All I knew was that suddenly the universe

had changed again from out of nowhere, and in this new universe it looked like Mommy and Daddy didn't like their little boy very much anymore. I felt very, very alone.

Dad delivered the final *coup de main* late one afternoon around the middle of the summer. I happened to be standing in the dining room when he came home and when he saw me a look I'd never seen before spread across his face. He pointed his finger right at me and in an angry voice he said, "You're ten years old! It's time you got a job and that's what you're going to do!" Then he stomped off into the living room.

He left me standing there with my mouth open. *What did I do wrong?* I always knew I had to get a job when I was old enough for high school. Bill had. I had expected I would, too. Why was Daddy mad at me? *I didn't do anything wrong!* The way he had looked at me and the way he had yelled and the way he'd stomped away from me suddenly became a magnet for every other hurtful memory – the way he felt about my glasses, the contempt in his voice I heard in that "You?" when I told him about the fight, every hurt I had felt going all the way back to that long-ago Christmas when my helicopter died. It all came crushing in on me in a single ugly mass and suddenly exploded in fury. I felt baffled, betrayed, icy cold, and so enraged I couldn't breath or speak or think. *I couldn't be here!* I had to get away from *him*, get away from *his* house, get away from everybody. I ran out the door in a red-rimmed fog, turned north to the ball field, and ran across it. I climbed over the levee, slid down its other side to the banks of the Maquoketa River. Then I just stood right there at the river's edge. I felt like a stone, blind and cold, until the sound of the chuckling water gradually brought me back. I found I could roll all the hurt and pain into a little ball and tie my rage like a cord around it and push it all into a deep hole in my chest. When I could make it stay there, not until then, I went back to the house. But I was different now. I was a grimmer, colder boy who had lost his Daddy. I came back as a stranger living in a stranger's house and it would be a long, long time before this new boy would or could let the father have the son back again.

I think he tried to take some of it back the next day. He sat down with me in the living room and told me stories about when he was a boy in his dad's bakery. He told me how when he was three years old he had to stand on a box at the sink and wash the bakery bowls and pans, and how he'd no sooner get through with them than they came back dirty and had to be washed again. He said how he wanted to play and would run out the back door and his dad would come get him and carry him back inside and set him on the box again. It was too late. He didn't know how wide the rift had opened between us the day before. I listened to the story in silence and thought, *You think I should have been working when I was three, just like you?* I was ready to understand everything he said in the meanest possible way. We were strangers now, but he didn't know it. He didn't know this was now *his* house and I was just the serf boy. I carried that ball of hurt and rage inside me from then on until it became just another part of me.

But he did mean it about the job. He handed me a catalog from a company that made lawn mowers and said I could make a lot of money going door to door selling lawn mowers. He didn't actually *say* I had to go sell lawn mowers. But he wouldn't have given me that blasted catalog if that wasn't what he wanted me to do. So that Saturday I went out with that blasted catalog under my arm and I tried to sell lawn mowers door to door. I didn't sell a single one. The last house I tried was where Steve lived. I talked to Steve's dad and he explained something to me. "These machines have Briggs & Stratton engines in them," he said. "I only buy machines that have Clinton engines in them." The Clinton Engines factory was Maquoketa's largest employer. 1200 people – one for every five people in town – worked at Clinton Engines. Gary had worked there before he and Sherri opened their store. Briggs & Stratton were the enemy for people whose paychecks depended on Clinton Engines. I might have only been ten years old, but that was plenty old enough to understand this situation. And once I did understand, I didn't *want* to sell those Briggs & Stratton machines. I wouldn't have *given* them away. I told Steve's dad I hadn't known what kind of engines these were, and I thanked him for telling me. I threw that blasted catalog in a trash can as hard as I could after I left.

That still left me having to find some kind of job. One of my friends had a paper route delivering the

Telegraph Herald newspaper, and he told me the manager was looking for a boy to take the delivery route that started at the west edge of town and ran outside the city limits past the Hi Ho Bowling Lanes. It turned out they were always having to find somebody to take that route because it ran way out of town, didn't have too many customers, and in the winter you had to walk or ride your bike in the dark on the highway on the way back into town. But it was a job and I didn't need a work permit to do it. I was ten years old. I knew they weren't about to give a ten-year-old a work permit. I talked to the manager, he showed me the route, and the following Monday I was a paperboy for the *Telegraph Herald*. I made \$1.35 per week. Three cents a customer. That plus my serfdom as gardener meant I was now valued at eighteen and one-half comic books a week. My favorites were *The Fantastic Four*, *Superman*, and *Classics Illustrated*. What I didn't spend on comic books and soda pop went to the five-and-dime store across the street from Beatty's Ben Franklin for models. Oh, yes. I knew the value of a dollar. Mom thought it would be a good idea for me to put my vast wealth in a savings account at the bank, so pretty soon I also owned a bank book. That made me cut back by two bottles of pop per week. The bank manager never did come running over when I'd go in to make my weekly twenty-five cents deposit.

The *Telegraph Herald* was an afternoon paper and I did enjoy biking out in the countryside on nice afternoons. Also, one of my edge-of-town customers was the house where Rocky, a school chum of mine, lived and every once in awhile the paper delivery ran a little late because of that. What I didn't enjoy so much was biking on the gravel shoulder at the edge of the highway. It was a harder push, especially when it was muddy. But I didn't dare ride on the highway itself. Cars would come zipping over the hills at seventy miles an hour and I didn't want to become somebody's hood ornament. Melody was now riding a bicycle too, and one afternoon she wanted to come with me on the route. We were out on the highway part of the route and I'd told her to ride on the shoulder instead of the pavement. She took that advice the same way she usually took my advice, which was not at all. I kept looking back over my shoulder because I was very nervous about her being on the pavement, even though she was right at the edge next to the gravel. We were maybe fifty yards or so past the crest of a hill when what I was afraid would happen did happen. A car came zooming over the hill full speed. I grabbed Melody's bike in my left hand and jerked her, bike and all, off the highway. The car missed her by inches and never slowed down. She fell off her seat onto the frame when I pulled her off the road and got a little banged up. Boy, she really let me have it for hurting her. Car? What car? I was a jerk. I wouldn't take her with me again after that.

Another less-than-my-favorite-part of that route was this black little psycho terrier one of my rural customers owned. Every day when I showed up with the paper this vicious little mutt would come charging at me, mouth open and fangs bared. I'd raise my hand like I had a rock in it and was going to throw it and he'd veer off in a big circle then take another run at me. But the rock trick always worked. Except once. Usually I'd just go to within throwing distance of their porch and let fly the paper. But once a week I had to go to the house to collect. One collecting day I showed up and there was no dog in sight. I looked all over the place very carefully, but I couldn't see him anywhere. I walked up to their porch, which was in blackness because the sun was setting right behind their house and back lighting everything. I couldn't see the black dog waiting for me in the black shadows of the porch. He let me get within about five feet and out he darted. He snapped his teeth into my leg but, fortunately for me, I was wearing fairly loose-fitting pants and he missed my skin. So here we were, me standing there with this snarling little psycho mutt ripping and tearing at my pant leg. I brained him with my collection bag, which was full of quarters, dimes, and nickels, and got the heck out of there fast.

Around late fall I was finding myself not very keen on doing that route in the winter. It would be a heck of a long walk once the snow came and almost all of it would be in pitch darkness. I heard about an opening with *The Des Moines Register* that was entirely in town and was a morning route, which meant that only most of it would be during the dark. I talked to that manager and next thing I knew I was working for *The Des Moines Register* making a whole \$1.85 per week. Now my net value was up to twenty-three and a half bottles of pop a week, almost a whole case. But, after all, I was eleven now. I'd start my route at six, finish by seven-thirty, bolt down a couple spoonfuls of Cheerios and head off for the

junior high school, which was about a half-hour walk from Dad's house. □

The November elections were coming up fast but there was never any doubt about who I thought the best man was. President Johnson was talking about a Great Society program. He had already gotten Congress to pass the Civil Rights Act that outlawed job discrimination and segregation, and that was something that was just plain *right*. He had announced a War on Poverty program too, but I was a little less sure about this one. Not about the goal. If there was a way to eliminate poverty I was all for it. Nobody should have to live in places like the one I'd seen in Alabama. I just wasn't too sure what he planned to do about it.

The Republicans, on the other hand, were backing a guy named Senator Barry Goldwater. I didn't like him and I didn't like the tone of what he said he'd do as President. He said he would undo all that President Kennedy had done. He didn't care about desegregation. And his backers all seemed to be the kind of Bible-thumping scolds who know *nothing* about God but are all raring to fire-and-brimstone the sinners like me into their place and make us all live the way *they* thought we should. And that way of living was a life without liberty or justice or morality or honor. I already had enough wardens of my own; I didn't want any more, especially these jerks. So when President Johnson was elected in a landslide I was jubilant – and it had been awhile since the last time I was.

Of course, I didn't get to vote in this one. Oh, I already knew I hadn't really voted in 1960 but at least I'd been there and I'd gotten to see the inside of the voting booth. But not this time. This time there was no going down to the polls with Mom and Dad on election day. Dad and I rarely went anywhere together anymore unless he told me I was coming along. And he hadn't told me that this time. There was no part for me to play at all this time. Unless delivering papers counted, there was nothing I could do for my country right now. I was fresh out of Briggs & Stratton catalogs to trash. □



The sixth grader (1965, age 11)

As 1964 faded into 1965 I was getting used to sixth grade. At Briggs we spent the day in one classroom with one teacher. In sixth grade we started having different rooms and different teachers for different subjects. That took a little getting used to. But I was learning to take whatever came my way with a fair degree of stoicism. Mostly, anyway. If I have given the impression that I'd become just a tad testy, well, yeah. I was. I was still attentive to my school work – that had just become part of my routine by now – but I had become even quieter and more reserved and a lot more independent in how I looked at things and what I thought about them. And I didn't give much of a hoot about what anybody thought of me or what *they* thought I should be doing. What *I* thought of these was what mattered to me.

I'd never been the most talkative kid in school, but now I was becoming pretty unapproachable. Oddly enough, at the same time and for reasons completely unknown to me, I was starting to become an object of attention from other kids. Maybe this had something to do with the fact that having different classrooms meant you also spent more time in hallways encountering more kids. The entire sixth grade was confined to the first floor of the junior high building, while the seventh through ninth grades occupied the upper two floors. Hallways aren't as big as playgrounds and we were thrown together in much closer contact than ever before. And for some reason I was getting noticed.

My first awareness of this came when I was accosted in the hallway by a boy named Randy. I'd known him – which is to say I knew who he was – ever since kindergarten but we had never been pals or even spoken very much to each other. The fact was I didn't like him, never had liked him, never was going to like him. He was a pretty good sized kid – he'd already been a Bubba in kindergarten – and I

considered him to be nothing more than a fat, obnoxious, stupid bully. I had never had any personal run-ins with him but I'd been watching him pick on smaller kids for years.

Now, for the first time since we'd been five years old, he confronted me in the hallway and demanded to know, "Do you get straight-A's?" Whatever that meant, I was sure it was none of his business. In point of fact, I really didn't know what he was asking. He meant grades of all A's, of course, but I honestly had no idea what my grades were. They would give us a report card to take home to have our parents sign, they'd sign it, I'd bring it back. I never even looked at it. I was just the mule. Nobody had ever said anything to me about grades so I never paid any attention to them. "What are straight-A's?" I replied.

Well, it won't surprise you when I say he acted pretty insulted by that answer. I'm sure he thought I was being a wise guy with him or something. I'm fairly sure anybody as dumb as this kid had probably found out what grades were somewhere around the second or third day of kindergarten. He treated me to a couple of words I'd never heard before – although whatever they meant I knew it wasn't a compliment – and repeated his demand for knowledge. "It's none of your business," I replied coldly. "Excuse me." I walked away and continued on to my next class.

That was a mistake. Not the 'none of your business' part but the 'excuse me' part. He thought I was afraid of him, politeness not being part of his universe. The next day he had a charming new name for me. I was 'Professor Inkenschlein.' I was fairly sure the dumbbell meant 'Einstein,' and he mispronounced 'professor,' but I got the drift anyway. That cold, smoldering anger started building up in me, but I just ignored him. Still, I was pretty sure he wasn't smart enough to leave well enough alone and we were going to have to settle a thing or two one day soon.

'Soon' turned out to be about five weeks. In the interim I'd been getting the 'Professor Inkenschlein' treatment on a fairly regular basis, and every time I would get a little angrier and a little angrier. But I always managed to keep my temper under control. About five weeks from the start of the whole thing the weather had warmed up enough for us to be outside for PE, running fifty yard dashes and doing other track things. I never was the fastest kid in school but I wasn't the slowest by a long shot. That distinction went to a fat puffing walrus who didn't know how to pronounce either 'professor' or 'Einstein.'

We had just finished and started back up the hill that ran from the track to the junior high. As I was walking I heard Randy and a couple of his coat holders behind me. He was making witty remarks – what passed as witty for him anyway – about 'Professor Inkenschlein' up there. My jaw started to clench but I ignored him and kept walking. Then I felt one of his fingers being poked up between my legs.

I whirled around to face him and just barely managed to stop myself from hitting him. "*Don't ever do that again!*" I warned him. Then I made myself turn around and start walking again. Behind me came a chorus of giggles and "ooh!"s.

He was too dumb to heed a warning. The second time he did it I whirled around and punched him just as hard as I could right in the belly. If my arm had been a sword I'd have run him through. As it was, my fist disappeared past the wrist in the folds of his fat that closed over it. It was only in there a fair fraction of a second before his body acted like a spring and ejected my hand, which conveniently re-cocked my fist for a second overhand punch to the face. It was on its way when I managed to catch it and stop it.

His face was ashen, his mouth was a wide, gaping hole, and he couldn't breathe. Both hands were over his stomach and he was completely helpless. Even though I was so furious I was seeing the world through a red haze, my mind screamed *stop right now!* I lowered my hands, both fists still clenched so tightly my fingernails were cutting into my palms, turned my back on him and walked away again.

I'd gone about thirty feet before he came back *again*. He'd found some more air and was trying to talk tough but I heard fear in his voice. "Are you ever going to hit me again?" he was saying. "Eh?" He punched me on the left arm. It was just an honor tap. I kept walking and didn't – couldn't – say anything.

I never had any problems with him ever again. □

After Randy and I had reached our little understanding I didn't get any guff from any other kids in sixth grade either. However, I was involved in one more fight that year and this one, strangely enough, was with my best pal Dave. Stranger still, although I threw the first punch, the kid indirectly responsible for it was my other best pal, Jim.

Jim, Tom, Dave, and I were all over at Tom's house one Saturday goofing around. I don't remember any more exactly what we were doing, just some kind of normal kid stuff. Dave and I were just getting to that age when boys tend to get a little lippy. Me more so than Dave in this case. Jim and Tom, being the older boys, were at that stage where they knew they didn't have to take any lip from smaller boys. There was always an easy solution they could use. It involved the use of certain wrestling holds accompanied by a healthy dose of harmless but humiliating torment applied by the bigger boy to the smaller.

This particular day I supplied the lip and Tom supplied the rest. Jim joined in the fun in a secondary way and I lost my temper. Normally these things end with some closing ceremony squabbling and then you patch things up and go on to something else. Sometimes, though, the bigger boy will overdo it a bit and that's what happened on this particular day. I was pretty mad at Tom and not inclined to leave Jim out of it either. The squabbling part of the ceremony ended with tempers heating up all around and I stormed out of the house after inviting both of them to go visit the infernal region. Dave was the innocent bystander in all of this.

Jim either figured Tom and he had overdone it or that I was overreacting or, most likely, both. Whatever the case might have been, he sent Dave after me to bring me back so all of us could patch things up. Dave happily obeyed and went trotting after me. He caught up with me less than a block from the house. Unfortunately, what neither he nor Jim could possibly know was just how much I *was* overreacting. As I've mentioned before, I was chronically in a pretty bad mood all the time in those days and right then I was really steaming. In an hour or two I almost certainly would have cooled off and come back to patch things up on my own. But I wasn't in the mood for it right at that moment. My buddy Dave couldn't know that.

I'd heard him calling my name from behind, telling me to wait up, but I wasn't paying any attention to that. So he did what anyone would do; he caught up to me and grabbed my left shoulder to make me stop and listen to him.

I turned around and punched him in the mouth.

Have you ever seen surprise, pain, then anger pass across someone's face all in about half a second? I have. Right there and then. On Dave's face. He punched back and just like that we were really going at each other. I mentioned earlier that Dave was one boy who really knew how to fight. The only reason I'd landed that first punch was because I'd taken him completely by surprise. I didn't land any more. His defense was up now. Of course, mine was too so for a few minutes neither one of us were landing any shots. Then Dave managed to get an upper cut under my arm and connect it right to the breadbasket. It was a really good punch and knocked the wind right out of me. He followed it up with four more, two from each hand, right to the same place all in the space of less than two seconds. It deflated me like a balloon and my knees buckled. Fight over. I was down and he turned around and stormed away sort of howling a little bit from anger and the sting of that first punch he'd taken in the mouth.

The next day Jim the Peacemaker patched things up between us. He talked to me alone using good natured kidding to overcome my bad mood. "Did you know Dave had a bloody lip?" he asked me. Jim was so good at this sort of thing he had me almost half believing I'd been the victor the day before. Total nonsense, of course. I hadn't been the one left standing at the end. My guess is that Jim also talked to Dave by himself, either earlier or not long after he talked to me. I'd really like to know what story he told Dave to calm him down. I bet it was a honey. Then Jim put Dave and me back together, acting the moderator all the while, and it ended up with Dave and me reluctantly shaking hands, then grinning at each other, then being best chums again. I'd swear Jim could negotiate peace in the Middle East. □

In March of '65 I watched as the television brought pictures of policemen in Selma, Alabama, attacking people with clubs and tear gas. Like those first pictures I'd seen from Birmingham, the people being attacked weren't doing anything wrong. The news man explained that these people were marching for the right to vote. They didn't have the right to vote? *Everybody* had the right to vote! Well, everybody who wasn't a kid, anyway. I'd already figured out kids didn't have any rights. But excepting kids, everybody *had* to have the right to vote or liberty and justice for everybody would be impossible. Yet here were policemen – the very men whose job it was to see to it liberty and justice were upheld – attacking people to prevent them from having the right to vote. I began to understand there was a lot more wrong going on than just segregation. I didn't know which I was most upset about: finding out there were Americans who weren't being allowed to vote or finding out that sometimes the police are the criminals. I knew where *I* stood on the matter. To me the issue was, if you'll pardon the expression, black and white. I tried and tried to figure out what *I* could do about it. But no matter how much I thought about it, I couldn't think of *anything* one boy in Iowa, who didn't have any rights himself, could do about it. All I could do was hope there was something President Johnson could do about it.

It turned out there was. Later that year, in August, something called the Voting Rights Act was passed. Nobody ever explained to me exactly what the Voting Rights Act did, but Walter Cronkite said it made what happened in Selma illegal. That didn't tell me much. As far as I was concerned, what happened in Selma was illegal when it happened. But apparently it hadn't been. I was very confused about the whole thing. Wasn't something that was injustice automatically illegal? Unless it involved a kid?

I was even more confused a few days later when the TV started bringing the pictures of what was going on in some place called Watts. I learned another new word, 'riot.' For six days there was a huge riot in Watts. What they were rioting about, I had no idea. Even more confusing, the people who were rioting looked to me like they were just hurting themselves. I mean, they were setting fire to the place where *they* lived and beating up the people who were *their own* neighbors. It was all very senseless, except for one thing. I knew to a certainty that what the rioters in Watts were doing was *wrong*. I was not on their side.

One thing I did find out during sixth grade that year was that I wasn't the only kid who was watching these things and feeling the same way about what was being done to liberty and justice. Almost all the teachers I ever had – and all of them up to this point – were good teachers but I learned there could be bad teachers, too. In sixth grade we had one. He was the man who taught social studies and he didn't like Indians. One day in class we were learning about something – I don't remember exactly what except that it involved Indians – and the teacher said that Indians were stupid. Not *this* Indian or *that* Indian. I wouldn't have had a problem with *this* Indian or *that* Indian being stupid. There *were* stupid people. Randy, for instance. But he was saying *all* Indians were stupid.

I was shocked to hear a teacher say that. But before I could say anything, one of the girls began yelling at him. Then another girl. Then a boy. Then *everybody*. Another new first. I'd *never* seen anybody yell at a teacher before; it just wasn't done, ever. But here we had the whole class yelling at the teacher. It was definitely a protest. We weren't marching, but it was still a protest. My first. He couldn't get us to settle down either. Luckily for him, he was saved by the bell. We didn't talk about Indians any more in sixth grade social studies after that.

Grownups were starting to talk more and more about the troubles too. Mostly it was talk about something called the 'Black Muslims' and somebody named Malcolm X. They said this Malcolm X guy had been the leader of the Black Muslims and that he hated all white people and said we were devils. Others said the Black Muslims were against police brutality – another new phrase. I was against police brutality, too. I had seen police in Selma being brutal on TV. But if the Black Muslims hated all white people then they were just as bad as George Wallace and the bad firemen in Birmingham and the bad policemen in Selma. So I decided these Black Muslim guys were bad guys, too. The troubles were getting worse and worse.

I started hearing another new word more and more in 1965, and this word was a place: Vietnam.

Vietnam was a country; I knew that. And they said it was in southeast Asia. That seemed pretty vague. And the grownups were talking about it because the Marines had gone there to fight somebody called the Viet Cong. I didn't know who the heck the Viet Cong were. The Congo was in Africa, not Asia. They said the Viet Cong were Communist guerillas, and that really had me confused because I thought they were saying they were Communist gorillas. A gorilla was an ape. It couldn't be a Communist. It couldn't be anything but a gorilla. Unless they meant these Viet Cong guys were just really big guys who were Communists. I knew that really big guys got called gorillas sometimes. So the Marines were fighting really big Communist guys? It had to be something like that. But then people were saying the Marines were there for a 'police action.' That didn't make sense either. Marines weren't policemen. They're supposed to get used when you have a war. And we didn't have a war. Congress has to declare a war before there can be a war. It says that right in the Constitution. And Congress hadn't declared war on anybody. I was *sure* I'd have heard about it if they did. If nothing else the boys would be talking about it and they weren't. None of it made sense. I decided the grownups didn't know what the heck was going on in this Vietnam place, wherever it was. □

That summer Dad told me we were going to some place called Red Lake on a fishing trip for vacation. It was going to be him, me, Gary, and Gary's dad, Darrel. Dad had taken me fishing a few times when I was little – back before I was serf – and I'd liked it a lot. But that was when I was his little boy. Why he'd want the serf to come with them now I didn't know. But it didn't sound like he was asking me if I wanted to go so I knew I was going whether I wanted to or not. It didn't seem to bother him that paperboys don't get vacations. I knew I was going to have to talk to the manager to see if he could arrange a substitute to take my route while I was gone. Hopefully I'd be able to get it back when we came back from Dad's vacation. But I knew all this was *my* problem and I was the one who had to handle it.

Fortunately, I happened to mention my problem to Dave and he immediately said he'd take my route for me while I was gone. I was really glad he'd do that for me. I hadn't been looking forward to talking to the manager about it because there was a good chance he'd see it as being the same as quitting. If that was how he looked at it, I'd lose my route. But with Dave substituting for me there wouldn't be any problem with the manager. After all, it said right on *The Des Moines Register's* advertisement blurbs that 'paper carriers' (some paperboys were girls) were 'independent businessmen.' That made it a good deal for *The Register*. First, subscribers liked boys better than big companies that live in Des Moines. Second, *The Register* got its money in full every week no matter what. The paperboy had to pay them for each paper no matter what. If a customer stiffed the paperboy, the paperboy still had to pay *The Register* in full for that paper. That meant the paperboy was the one who ended up eating the cost of a deadbeat customer. It took away his money from a bunch of other customers plus the deadbeat to pay the cost of one deadbeat. That's why when you stiff your paperboy you all of a sudden don't get a paper anymore. If he can, he finds a new customer and delivers your paper to him instead. Otherwise he tells the manager you canceled so he doesn't lose all his money the next week too. And he loses money if he has to cancel you.

The week before the fishing trip I took Dave with me on the route every morning so he'd know where all my customers were. I took him with me on collection day to introduce him to the customers, so they wouldn't be surprised when he showed up to collect instead of me. I split my money fifty-fifty with him since it wouldn't have been fair to ask him work the route for free that week. The money would all be his while I was gone. With Dave's help, I'd fixed my business problem Dad's vacation had caused.

Red Lake turned out to be in Canada, which is this whole other country. At first I'd thought it was in Minnesota, which has signs everywhere telling you it is the Land of Ten Thousand Lakes. That's a lot of lakes. I thought Minnesota was awfully flat looking, especially compared to Iowa which is very hilly. But I knew Minnesota had gotten squashed flat by glaciers during what was called the Ice Age. I figured the Ice Age was where all their lakes had come from and Red Lake would be one of them. But we drove all the way through Minnesota and that's how I found out Red Lake was in a foreign place. I was both excited and nervous when I learned that. Excited because of the idea that we weren't just leaving Iowa but the whole country. Nervous because I didn't have a passport so I wasn't sure they'd let me back in later.

Even after we got to Canada and they let us in there, it was still a *long* drive to Red Lake. I knew already that Canada was a big place, but Red Lake must have been at least 300 miles north of the border. All the way there I mostly kept looking out the windows and not saying much. Dad and Gary and Darrel were doing plenty of talking as it was and I wasn't keen to be noticed any sooner than necessary. I pretty much figured I was along so Dad could keep making a man out of me by picking on me. No sense doing anything to get that started before it absolutely had to. There was already enough talk in the car about how this was 'a man's vacation' and how great it was to 'get away from the women' for awhile and just do manly things and all that. They weren't looking at me yet while all this talk was going on, but I knew they'd get around to me eventually. It was going to be three against one when they did and I knew once three grownups started ganging up on me I didn't stand any chance at all. So I kept quiet.

Red Lake turned out to be *huge*. It was the biggest lake I'd ever seen. Not as big as the ocean had been, of course. You could see across Red Lake to the other side where the trees started again. You could look across the ocean and not see anything but the ocean. Here I knew I was seeing the trees on the other side, even though I couldn't really see the individual trees, because it was green over there. Red Lake was so huge we had to use a boat to go fishing. That was going to be a new experience. I'd never even been in a boat before, much less fished from one. And we had to wear life jackets because the lake was so deep. I knew how to swim, but I knew I couldn't swim even half way across Red Lake, so it was reassuring to know the life jacket wouldn't let me drown if I fell in the water no matter how long it took the others to come back with the boat and let me back in.

They gave us a cabin to use while we were there, and I was relieved about that because we hadn't brought a tent or sleeping bags with us. I was glad I wouldn't have to sleep on the ground at night while the bugs ate me. That wouldn't have been any fun at all. Red Lake was way inside this *huge* forest made of pine trees. I'd never seen a pine tree before and I was really surprised to find out how different the woods smelled out here. The air smelled *good*. Gary said that was because it was fresh and clean.

The whole place – the lake, the woods – was just beautiful. I'd never seen any place that was so beautiful and where the beauty went on and on without ending. I would have really loved to go exploring those woods, but I knew I didn't dare because I'd get lost and then the bugs would eat me alive. Darrel said this was God's country. I knew he was wrong about that because everywhere is God's country. But I thought maybe this place was God's special place. It was peaceful and quiet and just very, very good and there was no evil anywhere around. I hadn't known Paradise was in Canada.

The first night there I found out Canada wasn't just a special place. It was a strange place. It was a place where the sun didn't set when it was supposed to. It hung in the sky for hours and hours and hours. Bill had given me a watch for my birthday the year before and the sun was still up at 11:00 at night. That was weird. I'd heard people say there was a Land of the Midnight Sun but I'd figured that was just another story they told to fool little kids. Now I wasn't so sure. Maybe there really was a Land of the Midnight Sun. Whether there was or wasn't, Red Lake came mighty close and I was just thrilled. It was just so *neat* to have daytime at night even if nighttime daytime was really more like nighttime dusk time. The boys would never believe me if I told them about this. They'd call me a liar for sure.

We had to get up very early the next morning to start the fishing. All through breakfast I started to get ready for the inevitable. I figured the picking on me would start as soon as we started baiting the hooks. Ever since those awful mutant worms in the tree at the Regenwether house, worms had always just disgusted me and I hated to even touch one of the dirty, slimy things. The picking on me was going to start just as soon they made me shish kabob the first worm onto my hook.

We carried all the poles and fishing tackle boxes and bait cans down to the boat. Instead of baiting the hooks, though, we just put everything in the boat, started the outboard motor and headed out toward the middle of the lake. Oh, great. The picking on me was going to happen out in the middle of the lake where I couldn't get away. Suddenly having daytime all night long wasn't so neat. It was going to be a *really* long day. And there wasn't a single thing I could do about it.

To my surprise, when it finally was time to bait the hooks I found out we didn't have any worms. Not one single filthy, slimy, disgusting worm. "Where are the worms?" I asked Gary. He explained the fish in Red Lake were so big you couldn't use worms. The lake was full of 'walleyes' – what a weird name for a fish that is – and northern pikes. Apparently these kinds of fish didn't like worms. More Canadian magic. This really *did* have to be God's special place.

Instead we had a can full of minnows and, even better, the tackle boxes were full of all kinds of plastic or wooden fake fish. Dad told me these were 'fishing lures.' I took a chance and asked if I could use one of these fishing lures. I didn't mind shish kabobbing a minnow but it seemed mean even if the minnow was going to be eaten by a fish as soon as it got thrown in the water. Besides, the fishing lures were really neat. They had hooks all over them – so you had to be careful handling them – and some of them were made of two pieces with a screw holding them together so they could wiggle their tails. How neat was that! I expected Dad would make me shish kabob a minnow so they could start picking on me right away – and I wasn't about to give them the pleasure by letting them see I felt sorry for the minnow. But to my surprise Dad didn't seem to mind at all if I used a lure instead. He didn't even look disappointed that they'd have to wait awhile longer before they could start picking on me. I chose the neatest lure in the tackle box, one of the tail wigglers. Darrel said I'd picked a good lure. So far so good.

Even though I'd been fishing before when I was little, I'd never learned how to cast. The grownups would cast their lines and they'd go *way* out far away from the boat. I tried to do what they did, but it didn't work so good. My line only went a few feet before it splashed in the water. There was some kind of knack to it and I didn't know what it was. "Here," Dad said, "I'll show you how to do it." *Here it comes*, I thought. But to my surprise he explained it very carefully and didn't seem impatient when I didn't get it right away. He would just show me what I'd done wrong and how to do it right, and in no time at all I was starting to get the hang of it. I still couldn't cast as far as the men were doing, but, after all, I was just a boy. Boys couldn't throw a ball as far as men could, and so a boy couldn't be expected to cast a fishing line as far as a man could. Men were just so much bigger than boys. "Now you're getting it," Dad said approvingly. That took me by surprise, too. I was used to only hearing approval from teachers. I hadn't expected to hear any from these guys. They couldn't get their kicks by approving of me.

Gary got the first bite. He really had to work at reeling it in, too. Whatever was out there on the other end of the line *really* didn't want to be caught. Of course, catfish don't like to get caught either, but they're pretty little and there isn't much they can do about it. But whatever was out there, it looked like there was plenty it could do about it. Dad and Darrel reeled their lines in, and Dad told me to reel mine in, too, because we had to help Gary land his fish. When he finally got it reeled in close to the boat and it began flopping in and out of the water my eyes almost jumped out of my head. This thing wasn't a fish. *It was a sea monster!* It *looked* kind of like a fish, but it was *enormous* and its mouth was full of huge sharp teeth. Fish didn't have teeth, except for sharks and sharks lived in the ocean. And it was so *big!* "He's hooked a northern," said Darrel. "I wish we'd brought a grappling hook," said Dad. He readied a fish net with a long pole and started trying to net the sea monster to pull it into the boat.

When Gary and Dad finally got that thing into the boat it started thrashing and flopping around like crazy all over the place. Its business end, with all those millions of wicked sharp teeth, was pointed right at me. I started scrambling backwards in a big hurry before it could start eating me. I tripped and almost fell out of the boat. All of a sudden I realized there might be lots of sea monsters in Red Lake. And this one looked like it really *liked* to eat boys. I imagined myself in the water, being held afloat by my life jacket while sea monsters chewed me to pieces. Alive.

But Darrel reached down casually and put two fingers right over the sea monster's eyeballs and started squeezing. I watched in nauseated fascination – I could almost feel *my* eyeballs being squeezed into my head like Darrel was doing to the sea monster. The sea monster stopped thrashing around and was still.

"Is it dead?" I asked. I didn't mean for my voice to sound so squeaky and timid. That was just the sort of thing they could pick on me for. But Darrel didn't notice how timid I sounded. "No," he said. "This

just stuns them.” He skewered the sea monster onto the fishing stringer, so it couldn’t get away, and tied the stringer off to one of the stays in the boat and dropped the thing over the side into the water.

I cleared my throat carefully and made sure my voice was strong and steady. Nobody had noticed how I’d sounded before, and I wasn’t going to let them hear *that* voice again. No sir! “What is that?” I asked.

“It’s a northern,” Dad said. A northern pike. It really was a fish. “I never saw a fish with teeth before,” I said. They all three chuckled, but I didn’t feel like they were laughing at me. “These do,” said Gary. “You don’t want one of these to take a bite out of you.” No kidding. By now I was fully in control of myself again, and feeling pretty lucky that so far I’d dodged being picked on. But I just had to look over the side at that northern again. I was very, very impressed by it. It was awesome. These northerns were really quite the fish. There sure wasn’t anything like them in the Maquoketa River. Or even in the Mississippi River and the Mississippi River was the biggest river there was. I was quite sure about *that*. I’d have heard about it if there were sea monsters in the Mississippi.

We caught a bunch more northerns that day, although none as big as the one Gary had caught. I even caught a couple and I landed them all by myself, except for the netting at the very end, and I didn’t need any help from anybody. Boy, they really did fight. Even the little ones like mine. When I caught my first one and we got it in the boat they all kind of cheered and everybody was all smiles, and Gary gave me a big thumping pat on the back. “Now you’re a *real* fisherman,” he said happily. *Fisherman*. I liked the sound of that. They didn’t even try to make me squeeze the sea monster’s eyeballs in, which I was silently grateful for. Even though these things tried to eat you, squeezing something’s eyeballs in was just too creepy. Darrel showed me how to put my fish on the stringer and I started feeling kind of proud of myself. I was holding my own against three grownups out here in the middle of the lake surrounded by sea monsters.

Dad kept saying northerns were too bony and we needed to catch some walleyes or blue gills because they were better eating. But no matter what we did all we caught were northerns. We even tried something called ‘trolling’ and that didn’t work either. When we finally called it a day and went back to the cabin we had a lot of fish but they were all northerns. At the dock Dad had me stand there holding up *my* fish while they took my picture. I really was feeling very proud of myself and I stood up straight and tall while they took the picture of me and *my* fish. I’d been a fisherman all day and hadn’t been picked on once.

Gary said he’d take the first turn at cleaning the fish. I kind of blinked twice when he said that. The fish didn’t look dirty to me. But it had been a *good day* and I wasn’t going to chance spoiling it by asking any dumb questions at that point. Back at the cabin I watched him take the first fish and a big sharp knife and slice it open. All of a sudden I was horrified. *The inside of the fish was full of slimy, wormy things!* He scooped them out with his bare hand and tossed them into a pail. I felt sick to my stomach and had to run outside to keep from throwing up. Now I could see what ‘cleaning the fish’ meant. They were filthy and disgusting on the *inside*. I stood out there taking deep breaths of the clean Canada air until I didn’t feel sick anymore. When I felt better I clenched my teeth together in absolute resolution. No way was I going to reach in there and scoop out all that disgusting wormy filth and get it all over *my* hand. No sir. I just wasn’t going to do it. When they said it was my turn to clean the fish I’d tell them all where to go. I didn’t care how much they picked on me. I didn’t care if they took me out in the lake and held me over the side of the boat in the water and let the sea monsters eat my legs off. I wasn’t going to do it and they couldn’t make me do it no matter how much it hurt. I’d show *them* a thing or two.

It turned out they never even tried to make me clean the fish so I didn’t have to have my legs eaten off.

Northerns *are* really bony, but I thought they were mighty tasty just the same. Dad kept telling me to be really careful not to swallow a bone, so I was. I hadn’t thought anybody could eat all those fish, but it wasn’t any problem. The more fish the better. They were *mighty* tasty. As the days went by we did catch some kinds of fish that weren’t northerns, and they tasted pretty good too. But the northerns were my

favorite. They had teeth and they were *manly* fish. The ones without teeth were sissy fish. Melody could have caught them. I didn't want to catch anything but northerns. We'd fish most of the day and at night there was that beautiful, strange nighttime sun, and I was just living in *Paradise*.

I used my special wiggler lure every day. Then something terribly, terribly disappointing happened. It was the second to the last day and we were out on the lake and something really, really big took my line. It bent my rod so far I thought it would break, but it didn't. "He's got a big one! He's got a big one!" Dad exclaimed. He was really, really excited. Gary kept yelling to me, "Hang on tight! Don't let go!" They all reeled in and started moving the boat to help me bring it in. Nobody tried to take my pole away. They let me fight that fish all on my own. I was excited and scared and thrilled all at the same time.

It took a real long time to even get the thing anywhere close to the boat. I'd reel it in then it would run and the line would go screaming back out again. I fought it and I fought it. Dad kept saying, "That's the way! You're doing good, son! That's the way!" They were all encouraging me and telling me to keep it up, and that's what I did. It was man against fish.

When I finally got the thing up to the boat my eyes got bigger than baseballs. "Jesus!" Dad said. Darrel and Gary both whistled in amazement. It was a northern alright – we'd all figured on that early on – but it was the King of the sea monsters, a Tyranno-northern Rex. I mean, it was *gigantic*! "It's bigger than he is," Gary said softly. I got it up to the boat and Dad tried to net it. But as soon as it saw the net it turned and the line went screaming back out again. I fought it some more and some more while they all kept telling me to hang in there. Still nobody tried to take *my* fish away from me. I got it up to the boat again, but the same thing happened again. I fought and fought and finally got it back up to the boat again. Dad reached out for it with the net again. The King tossed its head.

Suddenly the line went slack and I fell over backwards off the seat into the bottom of the boat. Dad was holding my special wiggler lure and looking at it with an amazed look. He showed it to the rest of us. Only half of it was left. The whole bottom half was gone. The King of the sea monsters had pulled my special lure in two. "I've never seen that happen before," said Darrel.

I felt just heartbroken. I'd fought *so hard* and I'd done everything I could do and still I'd failed. Dad must have seen the heartbreak on my face because he put his arm around my shoulders. "That wasn't your fault, son," he said gently. "If we'd had a grappling hook you'd have caught him. It wasn't your fault." I tightened all my face muscles and squeezed myself on the inside real hard, and took a deep breath, and nodded. I hurt on the inside and my eyes felt a little wet, but I didn't cry. Everybody kept patting me on the back and saying it was bad luck and nobody could have done better than I did and sometimes they just got away and finally I felt alright again. Not good. But alright. I'd done my best. On the last day I picked a one piece lure and really, really hoped I'd get another chance at him. But the King of the sea monsters didn't come back. I caught three fish, but they were little ones.

When we got home it all felt different. Our house felt like it was *our* house again. I still felt like the gardener, but I also felt like this was my house again, too. I felt calmer inside than I had felt in a long, long, long time. I *had* had fun on vacation, despite losing to the King. Nobody had picked on me. Not at all. Nobody had lectured me or scolded me or hinted that I wasn't good enough. Nobody had treated me like I was different, except for cleaning the fish and that part was okay with me big time. Dad had talked to me like a *person* and like a *son* and I had even talked to him some. After we got home, I even cautiously started to rejoin the rest of us in the living room at night. Up there in Canada, up there in God's special place, a truce had happened. □

Fall of '65 brought my twelfth birthday and the start of junior high. Being a seventh grader started off a lot like being a sixth grader at first except for the fact that now we went to classes on the upper two floors of the building and we had to put up with eighth and ninth graders again. But after not too long a time a couple of differences became clear. Classes were different from the way they were in elementary school. There was less work done in the actual classroom and more to read. But they also had something

called 'study hall' and I found out I could get my work done there just as well as I had when we did it in class. The only difference was it took an extra day to find out what things I'd gotten wrong.

The other difference was football. We could go out for football in junior high. I'd been waiting my whole life for this.

In a way junior high football wasn't full blown football. We weren't in a conference and the only people we played were each other. It was kind of like training camp for real football, high school football. But we wore the pads and the helmets, started learning blocking and tackling, defense – all the good stuff. The junior high football team was just seventh and eighth graders. Ninth graders, even though they weren't actually in high school yet, got to play on the high school junior varsity team. But junior high football was still a lot of fun and I loved it no matter what position I was playing. At first they had each of us play each position for awhile to give us a chance to find out what we were good at. Except quarterback, that is. The quarterbacks were always eighth graders. After awhile our positions stabilized quite a bit and I found myself playing lineman. Of the two ways to play lineman, it didn't take me long to figure out I liked playing defense better than offense. It really is better to give than to receive. Especially when it involves hitting versus being hit. Of all the lineman positions, I decided the best one of all was linebacker. I not only got to hit but sometimes I would pick off a pass and then I was a runner. Maybe not the fastest runner on the field, but still a runner. Linebacker was the best of all possible worlds. Rookie linebacker Dick Butkus of the Chicago Bears soon became my hero. □

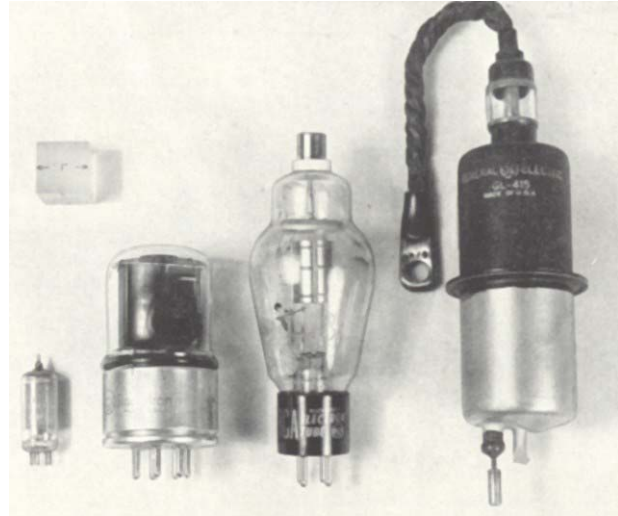
I was still lugging papers around for *The Register* and that fall the manager called all of us in for a meeting. They were having a big sales drive to sign up more subscribers and there were some nice prizes being put up for the guys who could sign up the most new customers. My own route was already pretty well covered, subscriber wise, but there was no rule that said I had to stay in my own territory. I went all over town door to door selling subscriptions and I ended up bringing back somewhere around seventy new subscriptions when we met again the next week. The next highest guy only got about twenty.

The manager was impressed. "Did you really sign all these up?" he asked me, not quite believing it. I was indignant. Did he think I'd lie? He was so happy about it he gave me the Sunday corner.

The Sunday corner was the best and most sought after route there was because it wasn't actually a route. It was just what the name said. Instead of lugging papers all over town every day, you set up at the corner of Main and Platt streets from 6:30 to noon on Sunday and sold the Sunday paper to everybody who went by. After noon if you had any papers left you put them in a paper stand, people could put their quarters in the slot, and the papers basically sold themselves. No more getting up so early every single day, no more lugging a big bag full of papers around all over the place in all weather, no more going around one afternoon a week collecting. And on a normal Sunday I could clear six bucks, more than three times what I made on my route. Suddenly I was on top of the paperboy mountain.

Of course, I *did* have to sell them. From the second the truck dropped them off, those were *my* papers and *The Register* always wanted its money each week. I accosted everybody in sight every Sunday to sell them a paper. People walking by, people walking across the street, people waiting in their cars at the stop light. Everybody. Of course there were my regular customers, people who always bought their Sunday paper at my corner. But there were a lot of people, too, for whom buying a paper was the last thing on their minds. I saw to it that it became the first thing on their minds. I almost never had any left over papers on a Sunday. I didn't keep one for us either. I had plenty of time to read the funnies or the headline stories if they were interesting. I'd look the front page stories over anyway so I could pitch the news to the non-regulars who went by. But take a paper home? Not if I could help it. Business is business. If Dad wanted to read the Sunday paper, he paid a quarter just like everybody else. □

One day early that fall I happened to stop by the store Sherri and Gary owned. I liked to do that once in awhile because I thought the back room shop where Gary fixed radios and televisions was pretty neat. I liked to watch him working on them every once in awhile, trying to understand what he was doing.



What vacuum tubes used to look like.

That particular day Gary asked me if I would be interested in making a little extra money. He had a job that needed doing and he didn't have time to get to it himself. Since the dime store wasn't in the habit of giving away its model kits and my taste in models was getting more expensive as time went by, I said sure, what did he have in mind?

In those days almost all TV sets were still made of nifty little gizmos called 'vacuum tubes.' Just a few years later vacuum tubes would become museum pieces as they were replaced by an even niftier gizmo called the 'transistor,' but in 1965 the vacuum tube was still the dying king of the TV world. One way to describe them is to say that they

looked like light bulbs from Mars. When operating, they would get hot enough to glow and, like regular light bulbs, every once in awhile one of them would burn out. When it did, the TV would stop working and if you lived in Maquoketa your TV would soon find its way to Gary's workshop.

One difference, though, between light bulbs and vacuum tubes is that when a vacuum tube burned out it didn't necessarily stop glowing, and that meant it usually wasn't obvious which one was the bad one. Because Gary had so many TVs to fix, the fastest way to find out if a tube was bad was to just pull it out and replace it with a new tube. If the TV started working again, he'd found the bad tube. If not, that wasn't it and he'd try another one. A lot of times he wouldn't bother to put the old working tube back in because that took more time and people were more interested in getting their TVs back than in paying an extra couple of dollars for a new tube they didn't really need. Basically, faster service costs more.

As a result of this practice, over time Gary had built up an inventory of a lot of tubes from old TV sets. His problem was that they were all mixed up and he didn't know which ones were still good and which ones were really bad. They had this small little room – basically a glorified walk-in closet – where he had box after box filled with vacuum tubes. He needed to have them sorted into good ones and bad ones, and that was the job he had in mind. He had an electronic gadget called a 'tube tester.' All I had to do was put the tubes, one at a time, into this tube tester and it would say if the tube was 'good' or 'marginal' or 'bad.' Then I would sort the 'good' tubes into one group and the 'marginal' and 'bad' tubes into another. We settled on a fee of fifty cents per hour for the job and the next Saturday I came in and got to work.

The job took pretty much all day. Gary had *a lot* of tubes that needed testing and even though it only took about fifteen or twenty seconds to test one of them, when there are hundreds and hundreds of tubes even that small amount of time per tube adds up. Finally, though, near the end of the afternoon I'd gotten through them all. On one side of the room was a huge pile of boxes full of 'bad' and 'marginal' tubes, and on the other side was a much smaller pile of 'good' tube boxes. I guess that meant Gary got it right the first time a lot more often than not when he was fixing TVs.

While I was doing the job, I started noticing how really exotic looking and even pretty most of these tubes were. They came in all different kinds of shapes and sizes and most of them were made from nice clear glass on the outside that the glass blowing process had given all kinds of interesting tips and curves. Better still, you could see the tiny little wires inside, which also came in a variety of neat looking patterns. That had given me an idea so after I'd finished I asked Gary, "What are you going to do with all those bad tubes?"

"Throw them away," he said. There was a note of deliberate patience in his voice, like he was thinking, *Geez, Richard, what did you think I was going to do with them?* I grinned because that was exactly what I'd thought he was going to do with them. "Can I have some of them?" I asked.

He looked kind of surprised at this question for a second but, after all, why not? He told me I could take as many as I wanted. I loaded up a box with as many of the prettiest and most exotic looking ones I could find and carted it home with me. For the next couple of weeks I'd take a couple shoe boxes of these tubes to the most public places I could find where there were a lot of kids around, and I'd play with these tubes out in plain sight for all the world to see. Sure enough, it attracted attention and lots of kids would come over and look at my tubes and ask me what those were. "They're spaceships!" I said. The kids would 'ooh!' and 'ah!' and generally think these were pretty neat spaceships. In no time word got around through the kids' grapevine.

I sold every single one of them I had for a nickel apiece. □

There was a small building called 'the annex' near the junior high where we'd go for assemblies and to eat lunch. That year they started something new called 'the hot lunch program.' It was one of the things that was coming out of President Johnson's Great Society program. The hot lunch program turned out to be very, very popular with the kids and most of them quickly started eating 'hot lunch' for lunch. I didn't much like the kinds of food they had, though, so I continued to bring a sack lunch to school. Besides, you had to pay for hot lunch and a sack lunch from home didn't cost me anything. Because I didn't have to stand in a long line waiting to get food, I'd finish my lunch earlier than most other kids and that left a little time for goofing around before class started again. I couldn't leave the grounds of the annex until everyone else did, and one day the junior high Principal came over to talk to me.

He had a big warm smile on his face, knew my name, and was very friendly. I wasn't quite as warm, not because I didn't like him but because he was the Principal, I didn't know him very well, and so he was about half-stranger as far as I was concerned. But this didn't seem to bother him and he told me he had a question he wanted to ask me. "Which takes longer? To run from first base to second, or from second base to third?"

I had to think about that one. I'd been playing baseball for a long time now, but this question had never entered my mind before. I thought very carefully. The question was a little ambiguous, it seemed to me, because it would depend on what the field situation was. I'd never hit a triple in my life, so I decided what the situation called for was a standing start from first base and trying to get to third on the next guy's hit. Because you were standing still at first base but already running when you got to second, the answer was obvious. "It takes longer to run from first to second," I answered.

His smile got even wider. "No," he said, "it takes longer to run from second to third."

I thought about that very carefully. I couldn't find anything wrong with my reasoning, so I asked him, "Why?"

"Because there's a shortstop in between," he answered, his smile even wider still.

Well, if that wasn't the dumbest thing I'd ever heard. "*What does that have to do with it?*" I almost shouted it at him.

The expression on his face became disappointed when I said that, and he said in a voice that was kind of sad and kind of full of pity, "You take life pretty seriously, don't you?" It took me three days before I realized he had been telling me a joke. □

The school had a small library located in the annex and when I found out about it I just had to go and explore it. They didn't have a whole lot of books, but I ran across one that immediately caught my attention. It was entitled *The War of the Worlds* and it was even written by a Wells, H.G. Wells in fact. Huh, I said to myself. I hadn't heard of this one. I checked it out and started reading it at home that night. This war, it said, had happened right at the end of the nineteenth century, which put it after the Civil War and before World War I. The other history books I'd read had never mentioned this war. Very odd.

It turned out I hadn't even begun to see odd yet. The book said that once the earth had been invaded by Martians. Not men from Mars, either; strange, weird octopus-like creatures the size of a bear. They had

giant machines that ran on three legs and used heat ray weapons and poisonous gas. They had conquered all of mankind and we'd only won because they caught a fatal disease from germs that their immune system just wasn't able to deal with.

Wait a minute.

Of course I knew that there were two kinds of books. One kind was make-believe, like comic books and little kid books. The other kind were books about things that were true. The Bible, naturally, was in a class by itself. It was a book of mostly make-believe, all kinds of ridiculous mistakes about God, and a lot of moral lessons about right and wrong that were good lessons even though the stories were made up. But *this* book, *The War of the Worlds*, had me buffaloed. It was in a *school* library, so it couldn't be a little kid book and therefore what was in it had to be true. But, on the other hand, it sure *sounded* like make-believe and I was sure that if mankind had ever been conquered by Martians I'd have heard about it a whole lot sooner and it would have been in *a lot* of history books. So had this ever really happened or not?

I didn't know what to do. I didn't dare ask *anyone* whether this stuff was true or not. If it wasn't true, I'd look like a total retard just for asking and it would be *very* mortifying. If it was true, I'd look like a total retard for not believing a school book and *that* would be just as mortifying. Either way, nobody would ever let me live it down. I was stumped. I had to know the truth about it, one way or the other, but it was just impossible to ask anyone for help. This was a problem I didn't know how to solve.

I had to think for a long time about how to find out the answer without making myself look like a complete retard to everybody in the process. Finally it occurred to me that the Maquoketa Library had a big collection of books called an *Encyclopedia*. The whole point of the *Encyclopedia* was to tell you the facts about anything you wanted to know about. I'd only looked up a few things every now and again in the *Encyclopedia* but I figured it was my best shot.

Things didn't start out too good. I tried to look up 'war of the worlds' but it wasn't in there. But in the book everything that was going on went on in England, so I looked up 'England.' There was some stuff about England in there, but it still didn't say anything about any Martians. I tried 'Martians' and while there was a little bit about Mars in there, there wasn't anything about Martians. Things weren't looking too bright and I was running out of ideas. Then I remembered that the *Encyclopedia* also has facts about famous people in it. I didn't know if H.G. Wells was a famous person, but it was fourth and ten, so to speak, and there wasn't anything to lose. I looked him up. Bingo! He *was* famous. He was a famous writer who wrote *novels*. I had to look that one up in the dictionary. Novels are story books of make-believe. Mr. Wells wrote novels of science *fiction*.

Science fiction. Huh. I knew what science was. I knew what fiction was. I never knew you could put the two of them together. Science is about finding out things that are true. Fiction is make-believe. Who would have ever thought you could put the two of them together? What did it even *mean* to put the two of them together? I tried looking that one up too, but I guess the *Encyclopedia* didn't know because it wasn't in there. It wasn't in the library's big dictionary either.

But 'What is science fiction?' *was* a question I could ask someone. It isn't dumb or retarded if a kid didn't know what 'science fiction' meant. Since she was at the desk right over there, I asked the Librarian and she explained it to me. It was when you make up one thing or maybe a few things science thinks probably isn't true or doesn't know if it could be true or not, and then you write a story in which everything else *could* happen if the things you'd made up *were* true. She also told me there was such a thing as 'science fantasy' in which you pretend one thing or a few things science knows are *completely* wrong and then you do the same thing as in science fiction. *Well how 'bout that!* I thought.

Since I was standing right there anyway, and since she didn't look too busy, and since I wasn't really all that clear on how the make-believe in novels was different from the make-believe in comic books and little kid books and the Bible, I asked her if she could tell me exactly what a novel is. She took me over to the sections of the library where the novels were and explained a lot about them. One thing I learned was

that some kinds of novels were far superior to other kinds because the stories they told had lessons in them that were important. They taught everybody important lessons about Courage or Duty or Overcoming Adversity and lots more important stuff like that. Their lessons, she said, were *ageless*, which means they never get old. These kinds of books, she told me, were called *Great Literature*. She showed me some of them. They were written by people with names like Dickens and Mark Twain and even guys who lived a super long time ago like Homer (who I knew about because I read *Classics Illustrated* comic books; I just hadn't known he wasn't a comic book writer) and Plato, who she said was a Great Philosopher. I didn't know what a Philosopher was, but my head was getting very full with all this neat new stuff she was telling me and I figured finding out what a Philosopher was could wait for another day.

When I finally left the library, I was thinking, *Wow!* There sure was a lot of important stuff I didn't know about yet. It was kind of intimidating to think about how much more I had to learn if I was going to do a good job of keeping my Promise. How can you ask what you can do for your country if you don't know what the important things are? Like poverty. How can you know what to do about poverty if you don't know what will work and what has been tried and didn't work and why it didn't work? I knew it wasn't enough to just want poverty to go away. You have to know what you can *do* to get rid of it. You have to be *practical*.

I never knew I was going to find out so much important stuff just from wanting to know if the War of the Worlds had ever really happened. And, in a way, that was the most surprising thing of all. □

That visit to the library was the catalyst one day when an encyclopedia salesman came to our house. He was selling *Colliers Encyclopedia* and I bugged Mom without mercy to buy a set. Melody joined in with the bugging – why I never found out, but I really wasn't surprised by it – and eventually we wore her down. The encyclopedia set was very expensive and Mom wouldn't have bought one all by herself. After it came and I started using it, I decided it wasn't as good as the one at the Maquoketa Library, but it was plenty adequate for most things. For the rest there was always the one in the Library. □

My work on the Sunday corner tended to alternate between times that were so hectic I could barely catch everybody to times that were completely dead and there wouldn't be a soul to be found except me. Just before the different church services started and just after they ended tended to be hectic, the time when the church services were in full swing tended to be dead. There was a Snow White Pharmacy right across the street from where my paper stand was set up, and I would normally pop over there at some point and pick up a comic book to have something to do when things were dead. They also had a paperback book stand there, but I hadn't paid much of any attention to it before. After my library expedition, though, I noticed that some of their paperbacks were science fiction stories. Some were little novels, some were collections of short stories. They cost about fifty cents, which was a bit pricey, but I started buying some every once and awhile to help pass the time when no customers were around. (Any person I saw was a customer; not all of them knew it, and a few didn't believe it, but they were). This was how I came to know names like Isaac Asimov, Robert Heinlein, and many others. I got to be pretty good at being able to tell which parts of the stories had to do with real science – computers, for instance – and which parts had to do with science make-believe – electronic brains and positronic brains, for instance.

That was why something Walter Cronkite said one day came as such a profound shock. It was during his coverage of one of the Gemini missions and they had been talking about the computers that controlled so much of the rocket and space capsule flights. Right in the middle of this, he referred to one of the computers as 'the electronic brain.'

Computers were electronic brains? Computers *were* electronic brains?!?

Wait a minute. How could that be? How could a *machine* think? That's what a brain did. If computers *were* electronic brains, didn't that mean they could think too? Walter Cronkite was always very careful to let you know when he wasn't sure about something. That was another reason he was the best. I knew I could always trust Walter Cronkite because he never, never lied and he never, never got anything wrong.

If he said computers were electronic brains, then by golly that's what they were. And if they were brains, they could think.

Then I heard Chet Huntley and David Brinkley, two other pretty good news guys, say the same thing. Huntley and Brinkley weren't as good and reliable as Walter Cronkite, of course. Nobody was better than Walter Cronkite. But if all three of them were saying that, well that clinched it.

I knew how important computers were to the space program, and to the Navy, and to the Air Force, and to the government. But I had no idea they were so important that they had to be able to think. I had thought they were just a kind of big calculator, like the mechanical calculator Mom had only faster and more powerful. And I knew that people were always trying to make them better and better – which could only mean they weren't smart *enough* yet. I also had seen, in the science fiction stories, some of what might be possible some day if electronic brains could just be made smart enough. If they could only be made smart enough, there just wasn't *any* problem they couldn't help us solve. Ending poverty, preventing wars, going to other planets – there just wasn't anything they couldn't help us do if only they could become smart enough. All of a sudden I knew what I could do to keep my Promise. I could learn how computers could be brains and then help figure out how to make them as smart as they could be. It was one of those oh-so-rare moments that changed my life forever.

I knew this wasn't going to be easy. I wasn't that naive. The space program had the smartest people in the country working for it – dumb people or even ordinary people couldn't get us to the moon – and I knew even *they* hadn't gotten it all figured out yet. So I knew it was going to be hard. It turned out that I had no idea just *how hard* it was going to be. Today, more than forty years later, I'm still working on it. But I'm still working on it for the very same reason I had when I was twelve. Walter Cronkite never knew what he'd started that day.

My resolution grew even stronger later that school year when a bunch of us seventh graders piled on a bus and headed for Chicago on a field trip to visit the Museum of Science and Industry. I was eager to see Chicago because I'd never actually been *in* a really big city before. I'd been to the quad cities – Davenport, Bettendorf, Rock Island, and Moline – and I'd seen the Twin Cities from a distance, but I'd never actually, in person, been in a really big city. Chicago is a really big city. Chicago was impressive and I thought it was really neat, but it was also in a strange way a little bit disappointing. It was kind of gray and even though so many people lived there it lacked something. There was something God's special place at Red Lake had that Chicago was missing. But even so, I was happy to see Chicago.

The Museum of Science and Industry was awesome. First, I never knew that any building could look so much bigger on the inside than it looked on the outside. Second, it was packed to the gills with all kinds of amazing things I'd never even imagined before. I had no idea that so many things were not only possible but also *practical*. It was very overwhelming; one day just isn't anywhere near enough to spend in the Museum of Science and Industry. One thing I did especially notice there was a little display about Robert Millikan. Millikan was a famous scientist who won the Nobel Prize in physics. A lot of people know that. What a lot of people don't know is that he grew up in Maquoketa and graduated from Maquoketa High School. *He* was one of *us*.

And then there was the tic-tac-toe machine. They actually had a machine there that could play tic-tac-toe. The sign said the machine had been built with 'artificial intelligence.' So here, right in front of me, *was* an electronic brain. They really *were* real. We were allowed to play the machine, so I did. I found out that I couldn't beat it. We played draw after draw. Then I tried deliberately making mistakes to see if it would spot them. It did. Whenever I made a mistake on purpose, it beat me. It knew its tic-tac-toe. I could tell, though, that it really wasn't *very* smart because it couldn't do anything *but* play tic-tac-toe. Yep, we still had a long way to go in making computers be as smart as possible. I didn't think they'd get it all done before I was old enough to help. □

1966 was shaping up to be a very busy year. The Gemini space missions continued to come one after

the other and with every flight it seemed the moon was getting closer and closer. The troubles continued and accelerated as well and for a time more rioting seemed to be becoming a disturbingly normal occurrence. Less was heard about the Black Muslims and more was heard about Black Power, the Black Panther Party, and somebody named Stokely Carmichael. Negroes started to be called Afro-Americans instead. What made it hard to figure out what was going on and what all this meant was it often wasn't clear, at least to me, whether the Black Panthers were just opposing the bad people where they lived or if they hated all white people. Sometimes it seemed one way, sometimes the other.

One thing that *was* clear was that the Vietnam thing was now 'the war in Vietnam.' There still hadn't been any declaration of war – which meant we shouldn't *be* at war – and no reason for the war was clear. America was at war in Vietnam to 'oppose the Communists.' What did that mean exactly? Nobody was explaining that. It bothered me that nobody even seemed to *want* to understand why we were at war.

Even President Johnson's Great Society was starting to be criticized by a lot of people. They weren't being critical that it wouldn't work; if it wasn't working *I'd* have been critical of it because when you do something you have to be able to make it work. But the grownups I heard criticizing it didn't seem to want the problems it was trying to fix to *be* fixed. And that was wrong. The people who didn't like it were starting to call it 'welfare' and seemed to think 'welfare' was a bad thing just *because* it was 'welfare.' I didn't understand how they could think that.

We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

There it was, the very first thing it said in the Constitution. Promoting the general welfare was what the government was *supposed* to do. 1966 was a bad year for domestic tranquility and promoting the general welfare. Justice didn't seem to be doing too good either.

Bill had graduated from college in 1965; we all went to Iowa City to watch his graduation. When he graduated he had been commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant in the Army and was now stationed at Fort Rucker in Alabama. Dad didn't talk about it, but I got the idea he was worried Bill might have to go fight in Vietnam. I heard him say a few times that America had no business being in Vietnam and we should mind our own business. Dad had fought in World War II. He knew what war really was. And he didn't like it at all. Because he knew all about it, what he thought about this war carried a lot of weight with me.

So, there were a lot of bad things going on in 1966. But there still wasn't anything *I* could do about any of them. So I went to school, did athletics, sold my papers, built my models, read a lot, and started trying to teach myself how computers worked. That last one was turning out to be very hard to do. There was a lot you had to learn before you could even *start* to try to understand computers. They were made of transistors, and I didn't know how those worked; I only found out that they operated as a 'switch' of some kind and computers worked using a different kind of arithmetic called 'binary arithmetic.' At least the binary arithmetic stuff wasn't too tough. Computers were made of 'logic circuits' which, in turn, were made out of transistors. The encyclopedia could have done a better job explaining about these logic circuit things. I wished there was a computer I could go look at up close, but that wasn't possible. Computers were pretty rare and very, very expensive in 1966. There wasn't a single one anywhere in Maquoketa, although the Jackson State Bank was talking about maybe getting one. I was finding it pretty slow going. I would have liked to have had some help and a teacher for it, but there just wasn't anybody in Maquoketa who could do that. □

One day the phone rang and it was Sherri. She told me there was some woman who was giving away kittens and did Melody and I want one? Mom was at work so Melody and I made a family decision. The vote was 2-0 in favor of a kitten and I headed for Sherri's store. I came back with a little yellow-striped kitten and we named him Cinnamon Bun. Bun was still a very little kitty and he was pretty scared about being taken away from his mom and brought to this strange place. As soon as I set him down in the

dining room he took off running and hid. I figured he needed to get used to our house and I had something else to do, so I left him on his own and went off for an hour or so. When I came back, Bun came running and wanted to be held. I guess he found this big, strange new place kind of scary and he got kind of lonely while I was gone. When I came back, he was so happy to not be alone that he became my kitty right then and there. I gave him some milk and petted him until he started to purr. In return, Bun gave me soothing and calming of my soul. He was a furry little ball of peace in a mean world.

When Mom came home from work she wasn't too thrilled about 'the kitty Sherri gave us.' It seemed kind of wise to not make the explanation any more complicated than it absolutely had to be, hence Bun was 'the kitty Sherri gave us.' But aside from making it very clear to me who was going to be responsible for cleaning up any cat poop, she didn't object too much. It turned out Bun wasn't that hard to housebreak anyway and I didn't have too many cleanup duties to do. Mom was even less thrilled when a week later *Dad* brought a kitten home. One of his farmer customers had given the kitten to Dad, and Dad thought it best to accept the gift rather than risk offending the farmer. This kitten was a little older than Bun and quite a bit bigger. He was a black and gray striped kitten and we named him Tommy.

The first meeting between Bun and Tommy was hilarious. Dad had left Tommy out in the closed-in front porch of our house and I brought Bun out there so they could meet each other. Bun, of course, regarded our house as *his* house and Tommy as an unwelcome intruder. Even though he was only half Tommy's size, Bun put on a great display with arched back, hairs all standing up, growling – the whole works. Tommy just watched him with a completely unconcerned attitude, like he was saying, "Oh, come on kid. Gimme a break." Bun stood way up on the toes of three of his feet, his fourth paw raised and poised menacingly to strike. He danced on his toes all the way across the porch hissing and spitting. Tommy just stood there calmly, waited for Bun to get in range, then *swish! swish! swish!* raked him three times across the nose. Confrontation over. Tommy was top cat from that day on.

People say you can't train a cat but that isn't true. I trained Bun and Tommy to come when I whistled. Our cats spent most of their time outside. When it was time to feed them, I'd put the cat food in their dishes and give a special little whistle that sort of went *tweet, tweet, tweet!* They learned very quickly that meant 'soup's on' and would come running. After a week they'd come when I whistled whether there was any food for them or not and they did that all their lives.

You couldn't really say Mom ever warmed up to Tommy and Bun, but I noticed she did thaw a bit after our mouse problem started to go away. We had been having some problems with mice in the house and if there were two things Mom disliked more than cats it was rats and mice. If a mouse showed up anywhere in the house Tommy would be on him, well, like a cat on a mouse. He was a great little mouser. I loved to hold Tommy and Bun in my lap and pet them until they purred like buzz saws. □

Although I no longer had to wash dishes, I still had gardener duty, the only difference being that I was no longer being paid for it. One day in the summer I had just finished up when a stranger boy came walking up the gravel alley behind our yard. He was coming up from the ball field and when he saw me he turned and casually walked right into our back yard. He was my age, slender, a couple inches taller than me, and he looked like he could handle himself in a fight. Who the heck is this kid? I wondered. I walked forward to confront the intruder.

But he just strolled up to me fresh as paint with a big easy grin on his face. "Hi, I'm Lyle," he said and put out his hand. "Who are you?"

More than a little surprised, I told him my name was Rick and I took his hand. He gave me a good, firm, friendly shake and just started talking like we'd known each other for years. Was this my house, what grade was I in, he was in that grade too; no, he lived on the other side of town a block down from the swimming pool, etc. He was about the friendliest kid I'd ever met. He had a nice, warm, equal-to-equal kind of friendliness about him that just evaporated that curtain of reserve I always put up around a stranger. To my bewilderment I found myself liking him instantly. We chatted about this and that for a

little while then he said, “Well, I gotta get going. See you around.” With that and a friendly wave he strolled off as easily as he had strolled in. I didn’t know it yet, but I’d just met the boy who would be my best friend and brother all the way through high school. Lyle was a charmer. A lot of people thought of him as a best friend. □

In August I suddenly developed some kind of strange ailment, and to this day no one knows what it was or what caused it. Every once in awhile I started having these strange spells where I would break out in a cold sweat, my heart would race a little, and my hands would start to tremble. It would last a few minutes and then stop as quickly as it started. The first time it happened it had me worried, but after the next few times I didn’t think too much of it. I never even bothered to tell anyone about it. I wasn’t trying to hide it; it just didn’t seem important. But one day Mom saw me having one and straight to the doctor’s office we went.

This guy wasn’t Dr. Swift. Dr. Swift had left town and this was our new doctor. I never even bothered to learn his name. He was just ‘the doctor.’ The doctor examined me, listened to my heart, gave me some more tests. I don’t think he had the faintest idea what was wrong with me but doctors almost never own up to that. He told Mom I had an ‘irregular heartbeat.’ Given the history of heart problems on Mom’s side of the family – including her own – that was probably the worst thing, for me, he could have said. He couldn’t figure out what it was, much less cure it, but there was one thing he could do. He could refuse to sign the form the school required before they’d let you play football. And he did refuse. I could do athletics with my friends on the playground, play baseball, bike all over town up and down the hills; I could do everything I’d always done except for one thing. I couldn’t participate in school sports. Mind you, I could still do PE right along with everybody else. But I wasn’t allowed to participate in organized team sports. Well, that was just a load of crap. I *loved* being on the football team and I pleaded with Mom and Dad trying to somehow get somebody to take another look at me and sign that blasted medical form. But no dice. Mom and Dad both sided with that idiot doctor and suddenly I was an athlete no longer. I took it pretty hard. □



The teenager (1966-67, age 13).

Eighth grade without sports seemed like it was going to be a year of letdowns. It started off that way at least. I couldn’t go down to the boys’ locker room for PE without always being reminded that I wasn’t in that locker room for football practice. I hadn’t told anyone about the doctor thing and some of my ex-teammates were a little unfriendly toward me because I wasn’t playing any more. There were some occasional exchanges of words and some shoving that resulted but none of it ever went all the way to a fight. In a locker room when two guys get to shoving each other around the other guys jump in and separate them before any punches can get thrown. A locker room is kind of a cathedral, despite what the movies like to depict them as, and fighting isn’t tolerated there as a general rule. Oh, there are some pranks and high jinks, of course; any place full of towels and naked boys taking showers has its temptations for the occasional towel snap to the hind end. But on the whole it is a very well-behaved place. Something about being mostly undressed most of the time you’re in there seems to promote that. There isn’t much of any ‘meet me after school and we’ll settle this’ stuff either, again despite what Hollywood likes to portray. The fact was that junior high boys got into fewer fights than elementary school boys did, and high school boys got into fewer ones than junior high boys did. It’s a case of more posturing and less punching. After all, we’d been going to school together for eight years – most of our lives – and any questions about the social hierarchy had long ago been settled. It was only the new boys who got tested in that regard. □

At its peak the Clinton Engines plant in Maquoketa employed two thousand people, one for every three people in Maquoketa. In October of ’66 a bombshell fell: The Clinton Engines plant closed and went in receivership. It came without any warning at all. The day the plant closed was a Friday, payday,

they hadn't been able to meet their payroll, and they locked the doors. Just like that, the town's biggest employer was gone and a whole lot of people were out of work. I'd never seen anything scare a whole town. But it happened. Later some new management took it over and temporarily people were able to go back to work there. But it was only temporary and the new owners gradually laid people off until only about 400 were left. Selling all my papers got a lot harder. Tough times had come to Maquoketa. □

My voice was starting to change and that led me to drop out of the little choir Mom's church group had formed for special occasions like caroling and Christmas events. I'd already stopped participating in the school chorus in seventh grade because of the music teacher, Mrs. Jetter. I didn't like her very much. She was a good music teacher but she was also energetically extroverted and basically a wisegal. Because I was still the Great Silent One at school, she seemed to think extra doses of teasing administered to me was just what the doctor ordered. My reaction was just the opposite of what she was probably looking for. One day during music class she had pestered me and my 'lovely soprano voice' to join the chorus and that clinched it. Sopranos were girls and I was a football player. The second she said that to me in front of all the guys, school chorus was out of the question for good.

Well, I started eighth grade without 'my lovely soprano voice.' I couldn't hit the same range as I'd always been able to and when I tried my voice would crack and sound just awful. It was embarrassing and so I dropped out of the church choir group too. Mrs. Jetter could probably have taught me how to make the transition to tenor, but music was optional for eighth graders and I wasn't having anything to do with 'Jitterbug Jetter,' as I called her.

I had long stopped going to church unless Mom made me. Every now and again she'd get it into her head for some reason that I should be made to go, but they were still preaching the same mistaken nonsense about God. My Sunday corner gave me a good excuse for not going. But Mom and Aunt Sylvie apparently figured I needed some saving so they had kind of pushed me into taking part in a church youth group with the unlikely name of 'the Zioneers.' That name seemed to me to be nine parts crap and one part water. We weren't Jewish, we weren't of middle east extraction, and we sure weren't the lost tribe of Israel. The Teters family was of German extract and the Wells family was of Norman – which is to say Viking – extract. But I kept my opinions to myself for the sake of peace and harmony. At least there wasn't much preachy stuff that went on in the Zioneers and occasionally what we did was sort of fun. I thought it was interesting that the Zioneers boys came closer to being juvenile delinquents than any other group of boys I knew. But mostly those Thursday night get-togethers were just another thing I had to do at somebody else's choosing so I tolerated it one night a week and forgot about it the rest of the time.

There was one kid, whose name is Bob, I was just starting to get to know. Bob's family was Catholic and one day he brought up some religion thing – I don't remember what exactly – and I remarked that I 'didn't believe in all that stuff.' What I meant was I didn't believe in all that Biblical make-believe stuff but Bob thought I meant I didn't believe in God. So he started calling me 'the atheist.' Interestingly, he seemed to think that was more exciting than censorious. Maybe I should have installed some Viking horns on my baseball cap or worn goat skin pants and gone shirtless. Whatever, I was a tolerated infidel and I did like Bob. He was smaller than a lot of the boys and very, very skinny. He called me 'the atheist' and I called him 'Bones' (short for 'Skeleton Bones') and we were pals. □

Eighth grade itself was mostly more of the same except for a couple of things. One of our classes was world geography where we had to learn about other countries and memorize stuff like where it was, what its capital was, how many people lived there, and what its main national product was. Where it was and what the name of its capital was I found interesting enough, but left to myself I couldn't have cared less about how many people lived there or whether they produced bananas or diamonds. However, the teacher had a pretty cool way of motivating us. She invented a game called 'geography baseball.' We'd choose up two teams and every time you got a question right you'd advance one base. If you missed the first question you were out. It started off with the easy questions and they got harder as you went. It was the only 'baseball team' I was ever on where I got picked first and 'batted cleanup.' Usually whatever team I

was on, Cindy was on the other team ‘batting cleanup’ for them. She was still the prettiest girl in eighth grade and I still wasn’t talking to her. I was still very sweet on her; basically I didn’t have eyes for any other girl. But we weren’t about to have any repetition of the infamous ring incident in any form. No sir.

The other thing that stood out was science class or, more precisely, Mr. Bittner. Mr. Bittner was young, for a grownup, and he was just a terrific science teacher. I hadn’t cared much for seventh grade science class. It was taught by Mr. Zirkelbach, who I thought was alright but nothing special. It had been about biology and botany and had involved a lot of worm dissecting – which I found disgusting, not because it was dissection but because it was worms – and looking at tiny paramecium in water drops under the microscope, which I thought was very cool. Botany I had no special interest in. One day he handed us a bunch of little booklets that were supposed to be good for classifying trees. Basically it was kind of a ‘twenty questions’ book – yes or no answers like a computer would use – and depending on how you answered one question it would direct you to another. At the end you were supposed to have correctly identified what kind of tree it was – genus and species and phylum and all that. He sent us out to classify the Dutch elm trees in the school yard and I positively identified mine as a type of tree found only in the Congo. So much for my career as a botanist. As it turned out, the Dutch elm disease was in the process of wiping out Maquoketa’s Dutch elm population at this time anyway and within about a year there weren’t really any Dutch elms left in ‘the Timber City’ (as Maquoketa was often called).

Mr. Bittner’s science class was a whole different matter altogether. It was a general science class and dealt with chemistry, physics, the atom, you name it. He had a real gift for explaining science in a way any kid could understand. Any kid but Randy that is. Never try to teach a pig to sing; it wastes your time and annoys the pig. Mr. Bittner made science fascinating and fun for me, and he’d let me come back after school and show me how to do a wide variety of chemistry experiments. He would explain and then step back and let me do the whole thing. Sometimes we’d stay until five o’clock doing science experiments. Then I’d have to really run for home, about a mile away, so I wouldn’t get chewed out too badly for being late for supper. ‘Irregular heartbeat’ my hind end!

Talk about the Sorcerer’s Apprentice! Did you know that if you burn a piece of steel wool pad in pure oxygen it reforms into a hollow little ball of metal and becomes very, very fragile? It does. You can check it out. Be sure to have somebody show you how to do it safely unless you happen to like the idea of setting your hair on fire with a blowtorch. Don’t have any pure oxygen? No problem. Get a beaker of water, a couple test tubes, some glass tubing, a pair of wires and a good battery. You’ll have some pure oxygen in no time at all. You’ll have some pure hydrogen, too. If you take it in mind to set fire to the hydrogen, do it from a long ways back with a long-handled stick and make sure you don’t point the test tube at yourself. Unless you happen to be a Vietnamese Buddhist monk who wants to set himself on fire, that is. Some of them did that you know. The right mix of chemicals, a test tube with a rubber stopper stuck in the end, and a Bunsen burner turns out to make a pretty good cannon, too. The rubber stopper part wasn’t sanctioned by Mr. Bittner, though, and I had to promise I wouldn’t do that again.

Chain reactions were super cool. We didn’t have any uranium in the chemical closet, but I thought of an experiment I could do that would be just as cool. I planned on doing this one at home on our dining room table. In retrospect, it might have been a good idea to run this one by Mr. Bittner first. I looked around for a good-sized piece of wood I could drill some holes in but we didn’t have a suitable one lying around the house anywhere. What we did have was a big block of paraffin wax Mom kept under the sink for reasons known only to Mom. Perfect! I drilled a hundred little holes in the wax on one inch square centers. For fuel I used wooden safety matches. I applied a lit match to just one of the matches in the corner of the paraffin block and the chain reaction was underway.

What I had expected was the heat from the first match would ignite the two matches nearest to it, they would ignite the ones nearest to them and so on. I was looking forward to seeing the ignitions ripple across the block from one end to the other in a lovely, stately progression. Turned out that wasn’t exactly the way it went. I lit off the corner match and *whoosh!* in the blink of an eye every one of those hundred

matches was ablaze like a forest fire. Wax began running all over the table.

Mom started to take kind of a dim view of my science experiments after that.

Mr. Bittner was just a great, great, great teacher. If every school in America had a teacher like him, our country wouldn't be the scientifically illiterate place it is. □

When fall passed into winter PE moved from outdoor activities – mainly touch football and cross country – to the three indoor activities: basketball, wrestling, and boxing. Basketball was a sport I wasn't genuinely keen on. It was okay enough but paled in comparison to football. I was one of the shorter kids, my shooting percentage both from the line and from the field was at best so-so, and, as more than one coach observed at one time or another, I played basketball like a football player. Still, basketball was the sport of sports compared to wrestling.

Iowa is a big wrestling state. Wrestling is to Iowa what football is to Nebraska or Texas. Ninth graders, who could play on the high school squad, would go through incredible feats of starvation just to lose that one or two pounds that would put them in the next lower weight class. I wasn't a terrible wrestler but there were just a *lot* of boys who were just flat-out better. In PE I was rarely pinned but I never did figure out either how to do or prevent the Houdini-like escape moves the really good wrestlers had mastered. As a consequence, I spent a lot of time being the one being ridden rather than the one doing the riding. It didn't take too long for me to get tired of having my face pushed around on the mat like a human mop. For me it was a kind of moral victory to lose on points rather than by being pinned.

Boxing, on the other hand, I liked just fine. We didn't get anything that resembled training or coaching for boxing; it wasn't a conference sport. We didn't even have a ring. Just a mat and the boys would sit forming a big square around the outside. These boys were the 'ropes.' Their job was to prevent either of the boxers from falling off the mat onto the wood floor. If one or the other boxers careened into them, they would catch him.

The two boxers would put on boxing gloves and a football helmet complete with face guard. The helmet was to prevent injuries. I was used to the helmet and there was something about the odor of real boxing gloves that I liked a lot. The way PE boxing worked was we'd get paired off, either by choice or by arbitrary assignment, and each match would consist of one three-minute round. Except for me, that is. For some reason the coach *always* left me in there more than just three minutes. I know. I checked the clock hanging on the wall. The shortest round he ever gave me was five minutes, the longest was eight. I never knew if that was because he didn't like me or because he didn't like the other kid, or because he just liked to watch me box. Since we got zero instruction on how to defend, how to punch, or how to anything in the ring, most of the boys boxed the same way they fought on the playground. Or they'd try to imitate the professional boxers they'd seen on TV. Either way, it was usually pathetic. The ones who tried to imitate pro boxers didn't know how to use the jab to set up the other guy for the real punch. They didn't know how to throw punches in sequence or move around from head to body and back with their punch sequences. They didn't know how to protect themselves by blocking punches or using counterpunches.

Unless my opponent actually knew what he was doing, I'd generally take it easy on him. Oh, he'd know we'd been in the 'ring' together. You can't really hurt somebody who's wearing a football helmet so I didn't pull my punches to the face. But I generally did pull them a little on body shots. This was exercise, not ego. I wasn't trying to knock anybody down, much less out. But I did once.

One of the boys in my class was a gentle giant named Stan. No nicer kid ever drew a breath. But Stan was big. Very big. Enormously big. He was tall, he was broad, he was overweight, he had huge arms, legs, and hands. And the most gentle disposition you've ever seen. He was very smart, not especially extroverted (although next to me he looked like the life of the party himself), and I'm pretty sure he just hated boxing. I never knew or heard of one single time when Stan had been in a schoolyard fight. He'd never start one and he was so big that even the most aggressive boys didn't want any part of a fight with Stan. In PE when it was Stan's turn to box the match was usually pretty boring. Stan's opponent typically

tried to hit him without standing within a mile of him. Those big arms of Stan's had a *long* reach.

Well, one day the coach decided to pair Stan up with me. I had no intention of hurting him, but I wasn't going to embarrass myself by not boxing with him. And, yeah, I thought I'd have a little harmless fun with him. Coach blew the whistle and our endless round began.

Stan was slow. I'd dart in, throw two punches – *bop! bop!* – into the face mask of his helmet, then dart back out of range of Stan's haymaker. *Whoosh!* it would fly by harmlessly in front of me, then I'd dart back in and we'd do it all over again. After a minute of this it actually started to get boring. Stan couldn't throw anything but haymakers – slow ones at that – and, feeling a bit cocky, I decided there was no reason not to go toe to toe with him and fire away. I knew I could block those slow motion haymakers.

Wrong. Big mistake. I stepped in and started firing off jabs into his face – one, two, three, four – and then it was time to block that haymaker.

Stan might have been slow, but there was plenty of power in that big arm of his. I put up my left for the block and Stan's arm drove right through mine. I actually hit myself in the face when my left arm collapsed. Stan's arm kept coming and hit the side of my head like a baseball bat. Everything went black. Later one of the other boys said my arms just dropped straight down to my sides. Somehow, though, my balance was still working and I didn't topple over. I just stood there like a statue. But I was out cold on my feet.

Why in heck the coach didn't stop it right there I don't know, but he didn't. The first thing I became aware of, even before my vision came back, was a sensation of my head bobbing gently back and forth, back and forth. As my vision started to come back I could see Stan through kind of a fog. He was standing right in front of me with a concerned look on his face and giving me these gentle little jabs to the face. About one every second. Bop . . . bop . . . bop. That was why my head was bobbing back and forth.

Sheer instinct took over. I went to duck under his next jab and my legs just buckled. I actually had to put my right glove on the mat to keep from falling over. Then at the next moment my legs were driving me straight up and that right glove came off the floor and up in a really vicious uppercut. It caught Stan on the chin, knocked his head all the way back, and drove him all the way up on his tiptoes. In slow motion he toppled over like a giant tree. The boys who were supposed to catch him scattered in all directions and he went down hard on the floor. I hadn't meant to do that; it was all pure reflex because my brain wasn't really working too good.

I pulled off my helmet and staggered over to him. I was starting to be able to think – not too fast or too clearly but at least my head was starting to work again – and I half knelt and half fell down to see if he was okay. Fortunately he was and I helped him get up as best I could. I don't remember ever hearing coach actually blow his whistle to stop the match. But it was over.

Thank goodness Stan was so gentle. I had been out cold on my feet and an aggressive kid might have killed me. The boys thought I'd won that match but they were wrong. Stan won. All the way. □

I kept having those strange cold-sweat spells off and on again and again. There was never any reason, no kind of trigger for them. One minute I'd feel fine and the next I wouldn't. They'd last a few minutes and then be over until the next time. I wouldn't tell anyone about them, but once in awhile one would happen when Mom was around to see it. Each time Mom found out, off to see the doctor we'd go again. Each time he was just as useless. I was annoyed about it, but I think Mom was getting more and more worried. I wasn't sure how Dad felt. I wouldn't talk about it, he wouldn't talk about it. There was a truce between us as far as I was concerned, but I did have a suspicion he felt the same way about these spells as he'd felt about my having to wear glasses. However he felt, he and I still didn't talk with each other all that much. I didn't have much to say to him and I guess he didn't have much to say to me. It was a truce, not a peace. □

One day when I came to school my homeroom teacher told me they had a test I had to take. "Okay," I

said. "What kind of test?" She told me it was an I.Q. test but I didn't need to be worried about it. I wasn't worried. I did know what 'I.Q.' stood for. We boys used it every once in awhile as a put down for insulting each other. I had to go down to a little room where a psychologist, a Mr. Something-or-other, had set up shop.

It was the dumbest test I'd ever taken. Can you put these different shaped things into the right holes? Well, duh. There just wasn't anything hard, challenging, or interesting about any of it. I couldn't see what the point of the whole thing was. After it was over I asked him, "Well, what's my I.Q.?"

"I can't tell you," he said.

I never did find out, which irritated me. I never even knew why they made me take it. But nobody tried to make me start wearing a bib when I ate lunch so I guess I did okay on it. □

I had been thinking about college a lot that spring and it had me kind of down because I figured I wasn't going to be able to go. Dad wasn't selling farm implements any more and was working as a salesman for U.S. Homes. Every so often he'd go off on one of his 'value of a dollar' kicks, usually when he saw how many models I had by now, so I knew we didn't have much money and college was expensive. I'd pretty much ignore him when he'd go on one of these rants because I knew my six bucks a week selling papers wasn't going to pay for college. I went on building models. But I had time to brood about college during art class while waiting for my pottery stuff to dry. I wasn't much of a potter. My pottery and ceramics stuff looked pretty terrible and I couldn't get the hang of how to do it right. About the only thing I was halfway good at in art class was sketching faces of cats or doing wood cuts of faces of cats. Melody would laugh scornfully at my art stuff. She could do anything that was art and whatever she did was just beautiful. And she hadn't even taken art yet. She just had the talent for it.

I was a little better, but not much, in shop class. All the boys were required to take shop and it was taught by a man with the appropriate sounding name of Mr. Fix. We were taught wood working, metal shop, and toward the end even how to do leather working. My stuff was passable but I didn't think any of my stuff was anything to be proud of. If I couldn't go to college, it looked like I'd be stuck for my whole life having to do unimportant things that I wasn't too good at and really weren't any fun and wouldn't do anything for my country. So this college problem really had me down.

There was a guidance counselor at school and he had information about colleges in his office I could borrow so long as I brought it back by the end of the day. I found out that if a kid could get appointed to one of the military academies he could go to college for free. That's what President Eisenhower had done when he was a kid. That looked promising to me and I knew I'd probably like having a career in the military. On top of that, I knew the military had the best computers so I'd probably be able to do something there to help make them smarter.

My first choice was the Air Force Academy. All the astronauts were pilots. Besides, when the time came when they sent me to go fight in Vietnam I'd rather do it from the cockpit of a fighter plane than from anywhere else. There just wasn't anything more glorious than being a fighter pilot. Except being an astronaut, of course. The guidance counselor had some stuff about the Air Force Academy and I took it to study hall to see what I'd have to do to get into the Air Force Academy. I finished doing my school stuff and then opened up the brochure. I got stopped cold right on page one. It said you had to have 20-20 vision to get into the Air Force Academy. Kids who wore glasses couldn't go. I was terribly disappointed by this. I was mad about it too, but the disappointment was a lot bigger than the mad.

So I turned to my second choice: The Naval Academy at Annapolis. The Navy had fighter pilots too plus I'd get to live on ships. If I couldn't go to the Air Force Academy, the Naval Academy was the next best thing. But, again, no dice. The Naval Academy required 20-20 vision too.

Lastly, and without much enthusiasm, I got the brochure for West Point. I was just being thorough with this because I really didn't want to join the Army. They didn't have any computers because they

didn't need any. In Vietnam they spent a lot of time wading around in rice paddies and getting shot. That was on the news all the time. There wasn't anything glorious about being shot in a rice paddy. It was brave, yes; but it wasn't glorious. The Green Berets were pretty cool and they were glorious. But everybody knew only the best of the best could be a Green Beret. I wasn't the best football player, I wasn't the best baseball player, and I sure as heck wasn't the best wrestler. So there was no way they'd let me be a Green Beret. The army had helicopters of course. The Air Cavalry. So maybe they'd let me fly helicopters. That's what they did at Fort Rucker where Bill was stationed. It wasn't glorious like being a fighter pilot, but it was better than being a foot soldier and almost as brave.

But there was another catch. To get into any of the military academies you had to be nominated by one of your Congressmen and I didn't know any of Iowa's Congressmen. Why would they nominate me when they didn't even know me? It was really looking like I wasn't going to get to go to college and that really depressed me. The guidance counselor had told me I should certainly go to college, but he didn't seem to have any good advice on how to make that possible. And if I couldn't go to college I couldn't keep my Promise. All I seemed to have to look forward to was some job I wasn't much good at or getting drafted, sent to Vietnam, and shot in a rice paddy. My future looked pretty bleak at that point. □

While I really liked Mr. Bittner's science class and even liked world geography, there was another class I didn't find interesting in the least: Civics. I didn't dislike it. I just thought the class was boring. I already knew about voting and the two houses of Congress and the President and the Supreme Court and the Constitution. The state government was just like the federal government only smaller and less important. I didn't give a hoot about the city or county governments. Maquoketa's City Manager lived right next door to us and it didn't look to me like what he did was anything special. It was the first and only time I found myself not bothering to pay attention to what the teacher was saying. I'd sit in the back of the room and read something else while he was talking.

At the end of one day as I was leaving the building, I was surprised to see Dad sitting in the car in front of the door. That had me puzzled. What's *he* doing here? Why isn't he at work? I walked down the steps and got into the front seat. He turned to me with a weird, pleased, happy look on his face. "Congratulations," he said. It wasn't phony congratulations, like when you use irony. He meant it. The next thing he said was, "You're not a bookworm like your mother."

Huh? I had no idea what he was talking about. Then he handed me a piece of paper. It was a notice the school had mailed to our house informing Mom and Dad that I had an F going in civics class. He seemed unaccountably pleased about it and I started to get irritated. *What a dumb thing to congratulate me for*, I thought. *What's the matter with him?* What? You *want* me to be dumb like Randy? But I didn't say any of these things. He drove us home and on the way he seemed happier to talk to me than I'd seen in months. I just kept my mouth shut and grew more and more irritated. Failure isn't something to be proud of. If I had to be a failure for him to like me, then he was just going to have to get used to not liking me. I wasn't going to let myself be a failure just to be liked. I'd go get shot in a rice paddy before I'd do that.

When we got home Mom sure didn't feel the same way Dad did. No congratulations from her. She didn't say much but she did give me that look she wore when she wanted me to know she was disappointed in me. I buckled down in civics class after that and started paying attention no matter how boring it was. In the end I must have passed because they didn't make me take it again or go to summer school. What grade did I end up with? I have no idea. □

When the school year finally ended they converted the annex where we had lunch into a Youth Center. Even though I lived clear on the other side of town, I'd bike over there in the evenings once in awhile because they had chess sets and I could find kids who wanted to play. One particular night I went over there and got into a chess game with a kid I didn't know very well. He wasn't a bad little player and we'd had a couple good close games. Then we decided to take a break long enough to get some soda pop. When we got back to our table two other boys were sitting there. One of them I didn't know at all, the other seemed to look familiar but I couldn't place him. He was the bigger of the two, about three inches

taller than me, and was obviously the leader.

“You’re sitting at our table,” I told him.

“So what?” he answered.

Things got noisy from there and soon we were facing off. But before the shoving started the guy that ran the place walked over. He kicked the kid and his friend out but he let me stay, which wasn’t according to what the boys’ code required. The code said we had to settle it between ourselves, so it wasn’t right.

That Thursday I had to go over to Fulton for the dumb Zionees group and there he was. He had looked familiar because he was one of the Zionees. After the meeting was over he accosted me out behind the church. It seemed he was still ticked off about the Youth Center incident. With his left hand he shoved me up against the wall of the church and with his right he pulled out a jackknife. He started waving it around in front of my face uttering threats about what he was going to do to me if I ever ‘ratted him out’ again.

All the while I was looking into his eyes. Bluster. He was trying to look menacing but the menace just wasn’t in there. I put my left hand on the dull side of the blade and pushed it closed. He had to move his fingers in a big hurry to get them out of the way. “Nice knife,” I said. “Now put it away.”

He looked sort of flabbergasted for a second. That hadn’t been in the script. Then he recovered, opened his knife again and again shoved me against the wall. This time he put the point of the blade on my cheek right under my left eye so he could make his threats uninterrupted. While he was enlightening me on how bad he could cut up my face with a ‘church key’ – I presume he meant a bottle opener – I became more and more angry. But with that knife blade right under my eye there wasn’t much of anything I could do right at that moment.

He finally finished his tirade and walked off into the night. I was still pretty angry but I stopped myself from going after him. If I did push him into a fight right there he might find out he could use that knife for more than a prop. I thought all his threats were empty, though. He just hadn’t had the toughness or meanness in his face a person would have if he really intended to use that knife. After I calmed down a bit, I could even sort of see things from his side. I’d been the instrument of his being embarrassed in public in front of his pal and the honor code hadn’t been followed. This was all honor posturing. A very dumb and extreme form of it, true, but honor posturing none the less. The odds were probably around five to three in favor that he’d soon be telling his pals how “terrified” I’d been.

I decided to let it go. He wasn’t going to follow through on any of that empty talk. Still, you can never be one hundred percent sure of these things, so after that I started carrying a pocket knife of my own for awhile. Just in case. If he and his pals did try anything, I wouldn’t be the only one bleeding. But he never did try anything and he never did try to get tough with me again so after awhile I put my knife back in the drawer where it belonged. The two of us never became friends, but two years later when we were both in Maquoketa High we got along well enough in the hallways. □

Around midsummer I decided I needed to make more money than the six bucks a week I was making hawking *The Des Moines Sunday Register*. My bike needed a new seat, the cost of models had gone up, and just generally life seemed to be getting more expensive. So I strolled down to the TV and Appliance store and talked to Sherri about the possibility of working for them in the store. I didn’t want to bag groceries – and besides, there was still that little problem of getting a work permit – and I figured working around Gary might give me a chance to learn a little more about electronics, which I needed to figure out this computer and electronic brain stuff. Sherri didn’t exactly jump at the chance to hire me right away, but I saw that ‘this is my little brother’ look in her eyes so I knew she’d talk herself into needing some kind of part time help. Janitor was what she came up with. She offered fifty cents an hour. I countered with a dollar an hour. We settled for seventy-five cents an hour and just like that I was a janitor.

In addition to routine sweeping up and washing the store windows, one of my duties was to clean

moldy refrigerators. The basement of the store was full of old refrigerators they'd taken in trade, most of them had had standing water in them from the day they'd been unplugged, and you can probably imagine how filthy they'd become on the inside. I was armed with a can of obnoxious cleaning spray they could have probably used to end the war in Vietnam and a generous supply of cloths so I got work.

There wasn't any such thing in 1967 as the practice of wearing some kind of mask when working with this kind of chemical. I'd spray this stuff inside the refrigerator, the gas would build up all nice and strong and putrid, and come boiling back out right in my face. Its smell combined with the mold was pretty awful. If any potential buyers had come by just then and gotten a whiff of the stink pouring out of those 'fridges, they sure would have thought long and hard before ever putting food in it or eating that food afterwards. But eventually I did get through them all. The Hicks' hazardous waste dump site became just an ordinary basement again.

When Gary found out Sherri had hired me he saw a silver lining right away. I might have been small but I was big enough to help him deliver heavy TVs and appliances. So, next thing I knew I was helping out there, too. All things considered, helping lug a ten ton refrigerator up an endless flight of steep stairs and then manhandling it through a doorway built for midgets beat cleaning moldy refrigerators in a walk. My hours piled up in a big hurry and eventually I didn't need my Sunday corner job anymore.

I had long ago marked Gary down as being quiet and bashful. He had been every time I'd ever seen him. Wrong again. The first time I climbed in the van with him to deliver a TV, closing the doors triggered the most amazing Jekyll and Hyde transformation I'd ever seen. The quiet bashful man disappeared and was replaced by a laughing, joke-telling, comedy cut-up lunatic. *Geez!* I thought in alarm, *the guy's gone nuts!* For a moment I considered opening that door and getting the heck away just as fast as I could run. But I didn't. I rode with the lunatic out to the customer's house, we opened the doors, and the quiet man came back. It took me a few days to get used to the fact my boss was crazy, but eventually I did. □

As the year wore on and I kept having those weird spells, Mom's patience with Dr. Duh finally started wearing thin. One day late in the summer she caught me having another one and hauled me off to see a chiropractor. He was an old gentleman about whom rumor had it that he'd once given Moses an adjustment. He put me on this little table covered with a black cushion-like thing and started working me over good. I'd never been to a chiropractor before and I can't say I wasn't nervous when he'd take hold of my head and make my neck start making these loud cracking noises. I was not having fun. It went on and on until he had given my whole body a really thorough thumping. At long last he finally said, "There. That ought to do it." He released me from his torture chamber and Mom and I went home.

I never had another of those spells. Not a single one. □



The Civil Air Patrol cadet

Despite the fact I was cured I was still made to suffer from an overabundance of Mom's caution. There would be no sports for me in ninth grade either and I had to find other ways to fill the gap. One of them was the Civil Air Patrol. A slightly older boy named Larry, who I knew slightly from the Zionees, told me about the CAP cadet program in Maquoketa. It didn't sound like it would be great barrels of fun but it did sound interesting so I joined. They didn't care that I wore glasses and I figured it might be good preparation for the Air Force after graduation if I didn't find a way to go to college. I knew the Air Force wouldn't let me be a pilot but maybe I could be a crewman on a bomber or something where at least I could be part of aviation. Larry, as it turned out, was the highest ranking cadet in Maquoketa.

I can best describe the CAP cadet program as 'Boy Scouts for the Air Force.' I had never cared for the regular Boy Scouts all the way back from the time when I was in elementary school. Despite all their

slogans about building character and moral fiber, the boys in the Maquoketa troop included Randy and his other disreputable pals, who I equally disliked. If those hoods were Boy Scout material, it was an organization I didn't want any part of. The boys in the Maquoketa flight of the CAP, on the other hand, were good kids and I was okay with being associated with them. There weren't very many of us but I've always preferred quality to quantity in everything, the sole exception being Christmas presents where it is, as they always said, the thought that counts.

The CAP cadet program is basically an education program. Naturally we also learned military drill and ceremonies and were expected to learn how to look sharp in our uniforms and practice military courtesy. But the main emphasis was on education. Each cadet moved through a series of assignments in which we learned about the history of general aviation and the aviation industry, the basics of the aircraft in flight and the general systems in an aircraft that made controlled flight possible, aircraft engines, airports and airways and the role of electronics in aviation, aircraft navigation and the effects of weather on flight, the problems of aerospace power in the military and civilian uses of aviation, and moral leadership. All in all, I thought the things we were learning in CAP cadet training were infinitely more important in preparing a boy to do something for his country than anything the Boy Scouts were learning to do. Each time you completed a tier in the training program and demonstrated your proficiency by passing a test you received a promotion and a ribbon for your uniform that signified what parts of the education program you had successfully completed. I suppose a boy's appearance and proficiency in drill and ceremonies counted too, as a condition for promotion, but since our flight never had any problems with slovenly appearance or with lack of proficiency in drill and ceremonies I never actually got to see what disciplinary action they take in such a case.

CAP headquarters for the Maquoketa flight was located in City Hall. The guy in overall charge was an adult who was both a member of the Civil Air Patrol proper and an Air Force reservist. He administered the various examinations we had to take and he'd watch our performance and appearance in drill and ceremony, but the actual instruction in drill and ceremony was carried out by our own cadet officers and noncoms. On joining the CAP one of the first things they had me do was outfit myself with the two different types of uniforms I would use. There was an inventory of Air Force surplus uniforms kept in the CAP room at City Hall and the first thing I learned about uniforms was they all came in the same size: Too Big. Larry hadn't bothered to mention to me that tailoring was one of the first things I'd be learning how to do. But Mom helped with that – which is to say she showed me how to do it – and in a fairly short time I was able to look presentable in my uniforms. I knew when I had reached that milestone because Larry stopped making rather blunt and unkind comments to me about how I looked during inspection and drill. □

I tried to get Lyle interested in the CAP but he passed on that. Lyle and I had slowly and steadily gotten to be better and better friends since that first time when he walked into our back yard. The junior high annex was right next to the Maquoketa swimming pool and right across the street from the house where Lyle lived, and so I'd run into him more and more often for that reason and we'd started doing more and more things together after school. Lyle had an older brother, Mike, who was in high school and two little brothers, Brian and Steve, who were a couple years younger. He also had a darling little baby sister named Bucky who was barely more than a toddler. Lyle and I shared a common passion for rockets. The little Fourth of July bottle rockets that are so common everywhere were very illegal in Maquoketa but Lyle and I never seemed to have much problem laying in a black market supply of them and we were always thinking of things we could do to add to their pizzazz. *Rocket Manual for Amateurs* by Capt. Bertrand R. Brinley of the Army Amateur Rocket Program became sort of our rocket bible. We talked about maybe setting up our own rocket range someplace, but the main problem was how to do this without getting busted by the cops. We both kind of got to wondering how the Viet Cong managed to do this sort of thing, which they seemed to be doing very well, but, of course, nobody knew how they did it. If they did, the VC wouldn't have been able to do it.

After Lyle and I had gotten pretty close, I learned something that surprised me. I had gotten curious

about what he'd been doing over on the north side of town that day we'd first met. He didn't usually wander all the way over there, as I found out after we started doing more stuff together. So what had he been doing there that day? He didn't play league baseball, which would have explained it. So why had he been down there? It turned out our first meeting hadn't been the accident I'd always assumed it was. He'd been there on a dare. Apparently his family must not have been in town all that long at the time – which explained why I hadn't known him; we *were* in the same grade – and some other boys had told him he wouldn't have the guts to just walk up and start talking to that Wells kid. Well, that surprised the heck out of me. I hadn't had any idea that I had the reputation among some kids of being some kind of ogre. After all, I never looked for fights and I never picked on anybody. If you left me alone, I left you alone. So I couldn't understand why anybody would think *I* was somebody so fearsome that a new boy wouldn't dare to talk to me. Lyle wouldn't tell me who the boys were behind the dare and I never found out.

But I wasn't surprised Lyle would take the dare. He was one of those boys who was fearless. *I* wasn't one of those kinds of kids. Oh, I could be brave enough if circumstances called for it – or maybe it was a case of just being too proud and stubborn to back down – but I didn't exactly go around looking for opportunities to be brave about something. Lyle, on the other hand, was a daredevil. Between us we shared that interesting kind of equality where Lyle usually decided what we were going to do and I was happy to do it with him. It's what they call 'leadership.' He was a born leader and one of those kinds of leaders who could talk you into thinking something had been *your* idea instead of his. Lao Tsu, who was one of the people we learned about in CAP moral leadership lessons, said, "As for the best leader, the people do not even know he exists." Lyle was the best kind of leader and it just came natural to him. I couldn't even tell you whether Lyle was a good fighter or not. He never *got* into fights. I don't mean he steered clear of them. I mean nobody ever even *wanted* to have a fight with him. He was one of those guys everybody just naturally liked *and* respected. You don't get to meet many people like that. □

Dad was doing okay selling U.S. Homes. U.S. Homes was a company that built new houses and Dad received an award for his work that he was pretty proud of. In the summer of 1967 we purchased an empty lot on Judson Street only a couple doors down from Lyle's house and we began to build a new house for ourselves. Dad did the design work for it and it started taking shape. In what seemed like no time at all the foundation was in, then the wood frame, quickly followed by outer walls. It was a small house having only three bedrooms – one for Mom and Dad, one for Melody, and one for me. It was a single story house with no basement and so was actually much smaller than our house on Niagara Street. But it was a *new* house and to Mom that was what really, really counted. It also had a detached garage, which we lacked at our Niagara Street house, and a driveway.

Not long before the sheet rocking was to begin, Dad came to me out of the blue one day and said he wanted me to take on the installation of the house's insulation. He told me what he was going to pay for the job and instructed me to form a crew. I was to be the foreman for the job. "Make sure you pay yourself more than you pay the workers," he said. "You're in charge of this." I recruited Lyle and a boy our age who lived next door to Lyle named Rusty. Rusty was soon to have the distinction of being the first person I ever came to regard as a personal enemy. Even today there are very, very few people I count as enemies – you can count them on the fingers of one hand and not run out of fingers – but Rusty was the first.

I met him through my friend Bob ("Bones"), although I don't remember the circumstances very well. Bob and Rusty were interested in forming a chemistry club and Bob wanted me to join as well. I thought it sounded fun so I agreed and that's how I got to know Rusty. The club never got off the ground. My idea of a chemistry club was we would get together and do some chemistry. Rusty had a bit different idea. He insisted at our first get-together that a club needed a set of by-laws, an officer organization, and some other things equally unnecessary to actually doing chemistry. Fine. I figured we would waste one get-together on this nonsense – there were only three of us; we needed a legal document to work together? – and after that we'd do some chemistry. After three such meetings we were still arguing about by-laws and I told Bob I was through with our little club. To the best of my knowledge, they never did get around to

actually doing any chemistry. The experience should have served as a warning, but it didn't.

The insulation was fiber glass insulation that came in great big rolls. What we did was unroll them, mount them, and staple them to the wood using a stapling gun. Nothing to it. The trick was keeping fiber glass from getting on our skin because it would dig its way in and itch like all get out. What Lyle and I did was first powder ourselves head to toe with corn starch before we started the day's work. The corn starch would keep the fiber glass off our skin and at the end of the day we would just wash the corn starch and fiber glass off with a hose. Worked like a champ but we did look like a pretty strange crew with all that corn starch on. Lyle's brother Mike would drop by once in awhile to make fun of the way we looked. One day he picked up an empty staple box cover, slid a finger in it, and dared Lyle to fire a staple into the box cover. Lyle was only too happy to oblige. I imagine Mike planned on the sharp staple passing harmlessly on either side of his finger. Wrong. Big mistake. Lyle shot the staple right into Mike's finger and he started hopping around and shaking his hand, trying to get the box cover and staple to fly off. Turns out it stays mighty put when it's stapled to a finger. Lyle and I were rolling on the floor laughing at him. Mike quit coming by after that.

The job was pretty far along when a dispute came up between Rusty and me over how much money I owed him. I honestly don't even remember anymore what the details were about – overtime or something like that I guess. The main point was Rusty thought I owed him some amount of money and I thought I didn't owe him that much. Had we talked it out we probably could have reached some kind of amicable compromise, but Rusty is one of those people with a way-overdeveloped self-righteous streak. It didn't surprise me years later when I heard he had become a preacher. He was just the type. His solution was to go get his dad, who came down and threatened me with a lien on the house. All over maybe five bucks or so. At the time I didn't even know what a 'lien' was, but I did know it was some kind of legalese.

Now, believe it or not there is – or at least there was in those days; I'd bet there still is – a kind of code that boys honored among ourselves. We settled things among ourselves kid to kid. I saw what Rusty had done as an unforgivable violation of this code and I was furious. Not over the money; that was the trivial part of it. I was outraged on the matter of personal honor and I took it as an insult too great to be borne. What I wanted to do was pound the two of them, father and son, into the ground right there on the spot but self control got the better of me. I paid Rusty his extortion money out of my own pocket, fired him on the spot with some colorful language, and Lyle and I finished the job.

I also went out of my way to make his life unpleasant every time I saw him after that. That's another distinction he has; he is the only person on earth I have ever picked on. I always made it a point after that to tell him what a dirty rotten so-and-so I thought he was. Yes, I guess I *was* always trying to egg him into a fight after that. I never did that to anyone else. He is the one blemish on my otherwise perfect record of not looking for trouble. Rusty, who was quite a bit taller than me, would try to reason with me. "Don't be stupid. I'm bigger than you and my arms are longer. I've got the reach advantage. You wouldn't stand a chance," he'd say. "You just put 'em up and we'll find out, you dirty gutless so-and-so," I'd reply. Rusty's theory was all abstract book learning about fighting; I was going with the time-tested maxim that its not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog.

But he wouldn't fight. To his credit, he didn't run away either. He'd walk, but he didn't run. I didn't chase him when he walked away. This was a duel, an affair of honor. You don't chase someone walking away from a duel so honor was never satisfied. We never reconciled, although Bones tried pretty hard to get us to make peace. Never happened, not to this very day. I'm pretty sure Rusty must have ended up eventually hating me as much as I hated him. Lyle, I will note in passing, stayed out of the whole fracas altogether with a diplomatic ease the State Department would envy.

The Judson house was still not finished when school began and we didn't move into it until later in the school year. After the move Dave and I began losing touch with each other, as did Jim and I. On the other hand, from that point on Lyle and I were in touch practically all the time. Proximity carries with it a certain formidable amount of power over what you do and who you do it with. Mom loved the new house.

I thought it was alright. But I did miss not having my special place anymore. □

In ninth grade they let us have some choice in what classes we took. There were some we all had to take, but there was opportunity to pick what you were going to learn and that was new to us. I got some advice from the guidance counselor over what to choose and pretty much ended up following his advice. I decided not to take any more shop; I liked Mr. Fix but I knew I wasn't much good at it and I wasn't going to be getting much better. Instead, and with no small amount of apprehension, I took something with the mysterious and somewhat evil-sounding name 'algebra.' That was the guidance counselor's idea. He said I'd need algebra if I went to college. The algebra teacher was a short man named Mr. Fleming. His real job was to be head coach of the high school basketball team but he was also the ninth grade algebra teacher. Mr. Fleming didn't smile very often and he wasn't very friendly, so I never liked him very much. But it turned out there were patterns in algebra, too, so it wasn't very hard after all. You learned a few tricks about how to manipulate the equations into a form you knew how to get the answer to and that was that.

Another class I chose was Latin. When I was about ten or eleven, Bill had given me a book and record called "German in Record Time" and I'd taught myself how to speak German. I found out it was kind of fun to know a whole other language, although not having anyone around to talk to with it made it very hard to keep it from being forgotten over time. Unfortunately, German wasn't available, either in junior high or in high school. Our only choices were Latin and French. Jim had taken French when he was in ninth grade. But America wasn't getting along too good with the French just then and on top of that I thought the French language sounded kind of snobbish and sissy. Latin, on the other hand, was the language of the Romans and how cool was that! For a long time it had also been the language of the Catholic church, but several years earlier they had stopped using it. I thought that was a mistake because now wouldn't they sound just like all the other ministers and preachers? I wasn't a Catholic – Bones was – but I'd always thought the Catholics were kind of special with their Latin and their priests and nuns and rituals and ceremonies. They didn't know very much about God either, but at least they'd been cool and most of the Catholic boys turned out to be really good kids I could trust. Now their church was more like all the rest of the different churches and not quite as cool anymore. I liked Latin.

The guidance counselor had told me I should keep taking science classes too, so I did. In ninth grade the science class was 'earth science.' Coming after Mr. Bittner's great science class, earth science was just D-U-L-L. This kind of rock is a such-and-such; this kind of rock is a so-and-so; this kind of rock . . . If the teacher had taught us about fossils along with the rocks I'd have really dug that class – so to speak – but he didn't so I just sat there day after day listening to him talk about rocks and dirt. The only thing interesting about earth science class was the blowguns.

You see, we all used Bic pens in junior high. They were made from a long tube with the pen tip and ink tube inserted in one end and a little plastic stopper in the other to keep the ink from running out and staining your shirt. (Turned out that stopper didn't really work too good for that anyway). One of the guys had figured out you could remove the tip and tube, pry that stopper out, and what you had left was a very, very fine blowgun. We'd take straight pins and shish kabob two little pieces of eraser on them, one in front and one in back, for stability. The pin goes in the tube and just like that you've got a working blowgun. With a little practice a guy could shoot one of those pins all the way across the room.

Once one of the boys had figured this out, the rest of us followed suit and within two days just about every boy in earth science had his own personal blowgun and a generous supply of ammunition. We'd be sitting in earth science listening to the teacher drone away. At least once a class, when his back was turned, somebody would quietly get out his blowgun and *puff!* a pin would go flying across the room and stick in some other boy's arm or in his back. A guy really had to watch his back in earth science class. The back row in front of the windows started to get real popular.

Blowguns gradually began to proliferate outside of earth science and pretty soon they were all over the junior high. Then you had to watch your back pretty much everywhere. But after a couple of weeks word

about our blowguns seeped up to the Principal's office and he took kind of a dim view of the matter. One day – I was sitting in earth science at the time – he came on the loudspeaker, really mad, and said that anyone caught in possession of a blowgun was going to be expelled. So just like that all the blowguns disappeared and earth science went back to being D-U-L-L.

Ninth grade was also the year I started writing little short stories. This wasn't part of any class I was taking. But I read all the time and had noticed some writers were a lot better than others at telling stories. Gradually I began to wonder whether or not *I* could write stories too. It didn't take long for me to realize that writing fiction involved a lot more than just making stuff up. If I knew what I wanted to say writing it wasn't very hard. The hard part was putting little pieces of story together to make a whole story. *Plot* was the problem. The stuff I was trying to write was science fiction action-adventure kind of stuff and my biggest problem was none of my stories really had a plot to them. I'd get an idea for one action scene, and I could write that pretty well. But because I was starting out from just one scene I usually had no real idea how to lead up to that scene or where to go with it afterward. As a result, those first stories weren't very good. But at least I had some idea *why* they weren't very good, and I started to see that the big difference between writers I thought were good writers – guys like Heinlein and Asimov – and writers I thought were not as good most often boiled down to whether or not they had good, well-integrated *plots*.

I started paying more attention after that to how writers put their stories together and, to my surprise, I started to see patterns in *that* too. Again, these patterns were very different from the patterns in mathematics. But they were patterns. I noticed, for example, that the good writers never wrote *anything* in the early parts of their stories that didn't come up again somehow *later* in the story. I noticed that a lot of times that early stuff would create some kind of *conflict* and that would lead to that conflict *developing* and that would lead to the hero trying to find ways to deal with the conflict and that would lead to a *climax* and that would lead to the end. Stories were built around this and that gave them a *theme*. (Theme was something I learned more about later in speech class because a speech had to have a theme). Well, I figured I could learn how to do that. It wasn't easy, but it was something I could practice and make mistakes at and, by understanding those mistakes, slowly learn how to do it better. Writing had patterns. □

I was still working at the TV & Appliance store after school and on Saturdays as a janitor and delivery helper. Gary let me try my hand at trying to fix some of the little transistor radios that would come in for repair. I had no idea what I was doing, though, so I wasn't very successful. Sherri was trying to learn how to do this too. In the spring some people from Iowa State University started offering a Saturday extension class for electronic technicians in Maquoketa. Sherri and I signed up for it and took it together. There was a little paperback book for the course, *Basic Electricity/Electronics A Programmed Learning Course*. The book talked about everything and it was set up so you could learn about things at your own pace. Each chapter had questions at the end you tried to answer and then gave the right answers so you could learn from your mistakes.

That extension course and that little book were gold mines. Everything was explained from basic electricity and electric circuits to how to measure electrical things, to different electronic devices like vacuum tubes and transistors to how telephones worked to how radios worked to how televisions worked. I was even able to concoct some experiments of my own like building a little electromagnetic telegraph and a little circuit that would ring a bell. Telephones had two bells in them and I didn't figure our phone would miss one of them. Mom didn't mind my telegraph but she wasn't as enthusiastic about my bell-ringer circuit. Suddenly my quest to understand electronic brains seemed to be taking a big leap forward.

Small, battery-powered transistor radios were still very new gizmos at that time. By today's standards they sounded tinny and the fidelity wasn't very good, but for the first time just anybody could buy a small portable radio they could take with them wherever they went. At home we always listened to Maquoketa's local radio station – KMAQ, Thirteen-twenty on your Dial! – but I bought one of those transistor radios and my favorite radio station quickly became WLS in Chicago. The more transistors your transistor radio had, the better it sounded. Radio manufacturers would brag about how many transistors

their radios had – ‘mine has three transistors’; ‘yeah? mine has four’; ‘oh, yeah? mine has five’. It became a kind of transistor arms race. □



The bluff where I fell in spring of '68

The woods around Maquoketa hide a lot of small caves and Lyle and I liked to hike out there and go exploring. So on one fine Sunday early in the spring the two of us set out on a spelunking expedition. We walked about four or five miles back into the woods looking for caves we hadn't discovered yet and generally having a good time. I mentioned before that Iowa is quite hilly. It is also sprinkled with numerous bluffs, some of which get quite high. At one point on the return leg of our expedition we found ourselves on top of one of these and, rather than walk all the way around it, Lyle wanted to take a shortcut by climbing down the bluff. I wasn't too wild about this idea because we were standing right at the edge of what was pretty much a sheer cliff face going almost straight down. Lyle, the daredevil, didn't hesitate a second. He started climbing down – no ropes or climbing gear, you understand – and called back up to me to not be a pussy. I still didn't think I could make that climb, but nonetheless I started following him down the cliff face.

It didn't take long before I was stuck. I was sitting on a little ledge outcropping looking around for anyplace I might be able to get handholds and footholds so I could continue to climb down. I didn't see any place I thought I could manage and I said to myself, 'Oh, screw this. I'm heading back up.'

At that very second the ledge gave way from beneath me.

I made a grab for the stalk of some kind of plant that was growing out from the side of the cliff, but it just slid through my fingers, depositing a few dozen thorns in them in the process. All the way down I didn't *think* anything. First the cliff wall was a kaleidoscopic blur in front of my eyes, then I began to rotate out backwards and I was seeing clean blue sky. Something hit me *thump!* in the small of my back and the blue sky became *two* blue skies seen as if through a tunnel of black rings. The blackness closed in from outside to inside.

Lyle told me what had happened to me later. I had fallen twenty feet and struck a small rock outcropping with the lower half of my body. I'd bounced like a basketball and continued to fall headfirst the remaining ten feet to the ground below. At the last possible second I'd flipped over and did a kind of spin and landed flat on my back in a gooseberry bush on a reclining slope, which cushioned the fall and turned me into a pin cushion as well. He said if I hadn't flipped over like that I'd have hit the ground head first and been killed for sure. I'd been knocked unconscious when my back struck that ledge, so I had nothing to do with that flip and spin. That had to be either an act of God or incredibly lucky sheer random chance.

I don't believe there is any such thing as sheer random chance.

When I regained consciousness I was lying flat on my back on top of what was left of the gooseberry bush looking straight up at the sky again. I'd just fallen thirty feet and I was still alive. My glasses were gone so the world looked pretty blurry, but I could see well enough to see an amazing sight. Lyle was racing down the side of the cliff in a series of controlled falls, waving his arms and yelling *Rick! Rick! Rick!* He landed right next to me and knelt down just as I tried to sit up. He put both hands on my shoulders and urgently said, "Don't move. Don't move." His face looked scared but not panicky.

It wasn't until then that I actually realized what had happened. I hadn't had a single thought in my mind all the way down and when I'd first opened my eyes the sight of Lyle and the way he was defying gravity had been so amazing I hadn't thought about anything else. I don't know how he managed to come down that cliff the way he had without getting killed himself.

But now I realized I'd fallen off the cliff and I started feeling myself to find out how badly I was hurt. My back was *very* sore and I had thorns sticking in me all over the place from that plant up above and the bush underneath me. My nose was bleeding in a river, but other than these things and feeling sore all over, I wasn't broken. It didn't fully hit me until much later how amazing that was.

"I'm alright," I said, "let me up." He let me sit up and stripped off his Tee shirt. He gave it to me to use to staunch the nose bleed. "I lost my glasses," I said. "We've got to find them."

Lyle shook his head in the negative. "I'll find them later," he said. "I've got to get you home." Lyle didn't wear glasses and I don't think he believed me when I'd said I was alright. His number one priority was getting me to a doctor before I died. He helped me to my feet, and when it turned out I was very unsteady on my legs he wrapped my right arm over his shoulder and held me by the wrist. He put his left arm around my back and under my left armpit and half carried me every step of the four miles we had to go to reach my house.

Well inside the first mile of that long walk back the nose bleed had stopped. By then Lyle's shirt was a sodden red mess. My body started to ache more and more as we went and by the time we got to my house I was exhausted. Lyle helped me sit down on our driveway and I rested my head on my knees as he ran to our door and stuck his head in the house. "Come out here quick!" he shouted. "Rick fell off a cliff!"

Well, that brought Mom and Dad running so fast they almost trampled Lyle as they came out the door. They both looked scared – a lot more scared than I ever was during the whole thing – and the next thing I knew I was laid across the back seat of our car and we were all on the way to the hospital.

By the time we got there I had gotten some of my strength back and insisted on walking into the emergency room on my own two feet, although Mom and Lyle insisted on helping me walk. Aside from feeling sore all over, being a pin cushion for thorns, and having a lump the size of a football on the small of my back, I really didn't feel all that bad. What bothered me most was not having my glasses and not being able to see anything clearly. So when the doctor said I had to stay in the hospital I didn't see any earthly reason why and I said so pretty bluntly. He explained to me that he wanted to be sure I hadn't ruptured my spleen during the fall because sometimes just falling is enough to do that. I didn't know what a spleen was but I didn't feel ruptured anywhere. He said that nevertheless I was staying in the hospital until they were really sure I was okay. I was out-voted everybody to one.

After the doctor had assured everyone I was going to be alright, Dad had Lyle take him to the place where the accident had happened. He must have taken our camera along because he took some pictures of the bluff and the Jackson County Sentinel printed one of them in the paper along with a brief story about the accident that week. While they were out there Lyle found my glasses for me and brought them to me in my hospital room. I didn't have to thank him with words; looks were enough. Lyle and I were brothers.

They made me stay in the hospital three more days and I hated almost every minute of it and almost everything about it. First there was that blasted hospital gown. It was open all down the back and the only thing that kept it from coming off were a couple lousy little strings. It always left my bare behind exposed for all the world to see and I really hated that. *What is it about doctors*, I thought to myself, *that they always do everything they can do to embarrass you and make you feel bad?* Doctors almost never treat you like a person.

Next, they wouldn't let me get out of bed. I had to stay in bed all the time and there was a nurse who came in a lot and made sure I stayed there. She was a big, tough-looking middle-aged woman and I didn't entertain any illusion that she couldn't take me in a wrestling match. But she was actually pretty nice in a tough way and she never failed to call me 'Mr. Wells.' Nobody had ever called me 'Mr.' before and I liked it. Between us we had a little standing joke. I kept telling her I was going to escape and she kept telling me I'd better not even try it if I knew what was good for me. But I was supposed to stay in that bed all the time, even when I had to go to the bathroom. I was supposed to use this bedpan they kept on a little table next to the bed. *Oh, screw that!* I thought to myself, and whenever I had to go I'd sneak out of bed

and use the bathroom that was there in the room. Nobody ever caught me doing it, either.

I had visitors part of every day, but for most of the day I'd be all by myself except when the nurse or the doctor came to look me over or take me someplace for x-rays or some kinds of tests. Soap operas were the only thing on TV and I couldn't stand them. I was going out of my mind with boredom at first, but there was a candy-striper who'd come by a couple times a day with a cart that had candy, magazines, and a few paperback books. I didn't care for the candy or the magazines, but I did buy a paperback book every day and passed the time reading it. I hated missing school, although not the earth science part of it. You see, all in all I *liked* school. I liked learning how to do things and I liked learning about things. Once when I was still a little boy – about third or fourth grade, I don't remember which – I'd gotten some kind of blood poisoning and the doctor had put my arm in this splint-like contraption and told Mom to make sure I kept my arm in this one particular position so the poison didn't spread up my arm to my heart. "How am I supposed to go to school with this thing on?" I'd demanded. The doctor had looked amazed and replied, "You're not!" Even after I got out of the splint thing I had to keep my right arm in a sling and for awhile at school I had to print everything left-handed. My penmanship wasn't the best even with my right hand; left-handed it was a real mess.

The absolutely worst thing of all about the hospital was having my temperature taken. At home whenever I was sick Mom would have me put the thermometer in my mouth under my tongue, so the first time the nurse came in and announced it was time to have my temperature taken I reached out my hand to take the thermometer. She wouldn't give it to me. "This kind of thermometer goes in your rectum," she said.

I couldn't believe she was serious. She was. "Couldn't I take it in my mouth?" I pleaded.

She brandished it. "If you want to put *this* in *your* mouth after where *it's* been," she said, "be my guest." Oh. She had a point there. So I reluctantly rolled over and she stuck that thing up my rectum. It doesn't hurt but there just isn't anything creepier than having something stuck up your behind like that. It was a twice-a-day indignity and I just had to suffer through it. It was far more irritating than when the night nurse would wake me up and tell me it was time to take my sleeping pill, which she did every night.

Finally one morning the doctor came in all cheerful and said all the tests were done and I was alright. I could go home. Well, I didn't waste any time after being told that. As he was leaving I jumped out of that bed and started putting my clothes on. I'd just finished zipping up my pants when the nurse came in.

"Mr. Wells!" she exclaimed, shocked. Then she started coming at me like a heavyweight wrestling champion.

I held up both hands defensively. "It's okay! It's okay!" I yelled. "The doctor said I could go home!" She looked at me kind of dubiously and said, "Stay right where you are." It wasn't a request; it was a warning. She went to go check and found out I really had been discharged and then she let me finish dressing. I couldn't get out of that blasted hospital fast enough to suit myself. □

Up through the end of 1967 the war in Vietnam was more and more in the news as America sent ever increasing numbers of soldiers there to fight. I still didn't know why we were fighting in Vietnam in the first place and I still was very uncomfortable with and confused about how we could be in a war when Congress had never declared a war. But nobody else I knew seemed to be very bothered by what was going on. The war only came to Maquoketa when somebody's son was drafted and sent to fight there. Nobody actually *liked* the war, but it looked like we were winning and most people just wanted to get it won and over with as soon as possible. For our family even the possibility that Bill might have to go there was now a thing of the past. He had finished his tour of active duty with the Army and was now working as a salesman for IBM. He was back in Iowa and living in Coralville, which is sort of a little bedroom community in Iowa City near what was now being called the University of Iowa (somebody had decided to drop the 'State' from the front of its name).

Bill had thought very seriously about re-enlisting and staying in the Army. I knew this because I

overheard him talking to Dad about it one time. Dad's position had been adamant: Bill was to do no such thing. Although Dad disapproved of the relatively few people who were already protesting the war, he disapproved of the war, too. He thought America had no business going to war for the sake of another nation and his attitude toward what was known as 'the domino theory' was: So what? Who cares? When Vietnam had first begun to be talked about, pretty much everybody had been saying the Russians were behind it. But by the start of 1968, most people were saying it was Red China that was mostly behind it. Dad wasn't convinced the Red Chinese were bad guys, though. He had been in China at the close of World War II and what he had seen there had made him hate Chiang Kai-shek and his old government. A lot of people knew he didn't like Chiang Kai-shek because Dad didn't mind saying so. Not that many people knew he thought the Communists in China were a big improvement over Chiang. That was something a person didn't talk about loosely.

But I knew he thought that, and I knew why he thought it. Dad had tried for awhile to write about his experiences in World War II and had been unable to interest anyone in publishing his stories. But *I* had read what he'd written:

Only a few of the sailors were interested in the living conditions and way of life of the Chinese people. I was one of those. I wandered the streets through a mass of millions who were milling around aimlessly, begging, stealing, and selling everything, even their daughters. Always that 'Here, Joe, you like?' . . . I wandered off an adjoining street and the farther I walked, the less crowded the streets. Little children, hungry-looking and neglected, were playing hopscotch. . .

On the third day one young shipmate, white as a sheet, returned from liberty right after he had left. I asked what was the matter. He replied, 'I just got on the beach and started up Nanking Road when I found a woman, screaming and moaning, lying on the sidewalk. I stopped, wondering what I should do, when right there before my eyes she gave birth to a baby. A passing Chinese picked up the baby and threw it into the Wangpoo River. I don't know whether or not it was dead. The mother got up and staggered weakly up the street. I had enough. I came back.'

Life is worthless in Shanghai. Children die by the thousands from starvation every day. If a cow dies on a farm, it isn't sent to a rendering works as in the U.S.A., but it is hauled into the city to be butchered and sold for food. Our garbage cans on the ship were a banquet to two Chinese men from an outcast sampan who scrubbed the floors and washed the dishes in our galley just for our leftovers. These outcast Chinese are not allowed to go ashore. They are marked with silver neck rings and live entirely in small boats the size of our row boats. They cook their meals, produce their babies, and live completely on these boats. They urinate over the side of their boat and dip their drinking water from the same river. . . All I have to do when I get to feeling sorry for myself is remember these sights.

But a lot of people started to feel different about Vietnam on the last day of January, 1968. The cause was something called the Tet offensive. Just a couple weeks before President Johnson had made a speech that sounded like he was saying the war was all but won and would be over soon. Those weren't the words he used, but that was what it sounded like he was saying. When Tet came it was such a big shock that people started to not trust President Johnson any more. Even Walter Cronkite said right on television about a month later that he thought we were not going to win in Vietnam.

But for me the final thing that settled it in my mind came a day or two after Tet started. I was watching a news show and the pictures were being taken in Saigon. They had a prisoner, some man they said was suspected of being a communist sympathizer. His hands were tied behind his back and a South Vietnamese general walked up to him, put a pistol to his head, and fired a bullet into his brain. The man collapsed with a big fountain of blood spurting from his head. It was cold blooded murder right there on television and it had been done by an important Vietnamese government man – a general! It made me feel sick. The people we were fighting for were doing the very things we should be fighting *against*. Even if I was only fourteen, I knew it was just plain *evil* and America was just plain wrong for being on their side. That was the moment I became one hundred percent against the war in Vietnam deep down in my soul.

Except for feelings and opinions, the terrible things that were happening in 1968 did not come home to Maquoketa. It seemed like the whole rest of the country was descending into chaos but I didn't see any of it on Main Street in Maquoketa. But terrible things were going on. At the end of March, President Johnson said he wasn't going to run for President again. He had given up. At least that's what I thought. He had given up on Vietnam. He had given up on the Great Society. I wanted us to get out of Vietnam and I wanted us to do it right now. But give up on the Great Society? That was just exactly what we *should not* give up on. The things it was trying to do were the *right* things we should be trying to do.

Then less than a week later the news came that Dr. Martin Luther King had been assassinated in Memphis. For a long time I hadn't known very much about Martin Luther King. I had known he was on the side of the people who were right during all the troubles in Alabama. But I also knew he was a preacher and in my mind that had always weighed against him because preachers were so often so completely wrong about most things, including the one thing they *should* have been careful to be most right about. But I had changed my mind about Martin Luther King when they showed us a movie in school one day. It was from 1963, the famous 'I Have a Dream' speech. I hadn't heard this speech in 1963. As those beautiful, powerful, soul-piercing, heart-penetrating words flooded over me, I had realized that this man really *was* one of the good guys, he *really did* stand for those *most-important* things that are *so fundamentally right* and were the very things we had *all* promised to be on the side of in the Pledge of Allegiance. And now he was martyred and cities all over America were going up in flames.

Then in June there was another shock. Bobby Kennedy had been shot in the head in California. All day at work the day I heard about it, I kept hoping he would pull through. But he didn't. I didn't feel the same way about Bobby Kennedy's murder as I had felt about President Kennedy's murder. I had liked Bobby Kennedy, but he had never reached inside me the way President Kennedy had. I was shocked and saddened when he died, and his brother Teddy's eulogy speech moved me very deeply. But I didn't feel the same awful, devastating grief I had when President Kennedy died. I knew Death by now and I felt seething anger, not the terrible icy rage and the awful, awful sadness I knew in 1963.

I wanted to do *something*. I really felt it was my *duty* to do *something*. But I couldn't think of one single thing I *could* do. I was a fourteen year old boy in a small little farming town that might just as well have been a million miles away from where all the troubles and terrible catastrophes were erupting one after another. I kept *asking* myself what *I* could do for my country *right now*.

But the answer kept coming back the same: Nothing. And I didn't like it one bit. □



Lyle's little brother Steve lifting weights in our back yard (summer, 1968)

I had started growing closer and closer to the rest of Lyle's family. I didn't know Mike all that well, but I really liked Lyle's mom and dad, his two younger brothers Brian and Steve, and his sweet baby sister Bucky. They were a happy, boisterous family and if they had any family problems *I* never saw them. I even started spending time at their house in the evenings every once in awhile, which was something *I never* did with anyone who wasn't family. I might not actually have been one of the clan, but they made me feel like at least a cousin.

I felt towards Brian and Steve just like they were my own little brothers. Brian was a year or so younger than me, Steve a year younger than him. They were great kids with infectious grins and they could both swim like they were fish. Of course, both Lyle and I occasionally sort of rough-housed them around a little, like older boys do to younger ones every now and again. But we wouldn't have let anyone else do that.