

Little Bits and Pieces of My Life

by

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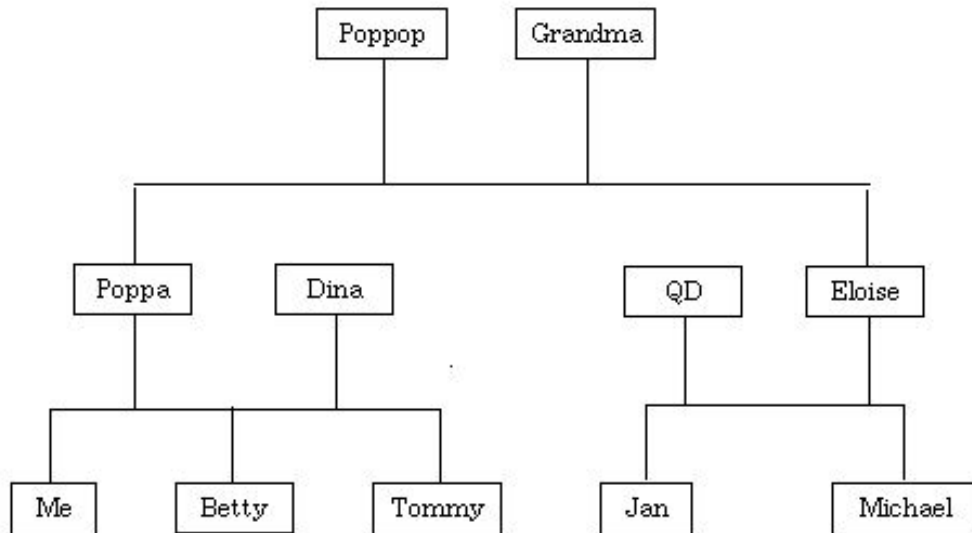
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caveat lector

Dramatis Personae
for this memoir only
Not a Complete Family Tree



Naturally, some of my earliest memories involve my mother. We called her Dina, instead of Mom or Mother. I don't have any idea why. That's just the way that it was.

My earliest memory is from a very early age. I couldn't have been more than a few months old. At the time, I didn't understand any of what was happening. Looking back on the memory, I can understand it. What I remember is being close to a big warm good. That was Dina, holding me. I was content with the situation except for some strange things in the near distance. I didn't understand what they were at the time but, in fact, they were three men in suits and hats. Most likely, they were family members who'd come to see the new baby. Dina was showing me to them, and handed me to one of them. I didn't understand it, but I remember being uneasy about the change in my situation. That's the end of that memory.

I remember, some time later, walking into my parents' bedroom. I didn't understand, then, about bedrooms and beds, but I remember walking in and asking Dina for something. They were doing something on the bed. Poppa muttered something like *fer chrisake!*. I suppose that I interrupted them.

I remember being chastised for some small error. It must have been "one of those days" for Dina, because that day I was very tired of getting spanked. She stood there in front of me, prepared to spank me again. I looked up at her, stomped my foot, pouted, and said, "Well, you can spank me if you want, but I'm not gonna cry this time!" She tried not to laugh.

I recall, from another incident, sitting at the coffee table in the living room. The rest of the story I recall only from hearing Dina telling about it later. She and I were about to have a snack. I was going to have a donut and milk. She was going to have a donut and coffee. She placed the donuts on the coffee table and went back to the kitchen for the coffee and the milk. When she returned, I'd already eaten one of the donuts, so she picked up the other one.

"Oh, Dina," I objected. "Don't eat my donut!"

"But this is my donut," she explained.

"No." I replied, "I already ate yours. That's mine!"

Laughing about it later, she said she felt a little like a heel, but she ate my donut anyway because she didn't want me get away with the scam.

I can still remember some of my process of learning about how to use the language, and Dina figured in some of the lessons. I recall sitting on her bed one day while she was ironing some clothes in the bedroom. At the time, I didn't understand what she was doing but, now, I understand that she was ironing clothes.

I asked her, "Dina, am I in your bed?"

"No," she replied, "You're **on** my bed."

Then I laid down and asked, "Now am I in your bed?"

"Yes," she replied, "Now you're in my bed."

Then I sat up. "Now am I on your bed?"

"Yes."

I laid back down. "Now am I in your bed?"

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“Yes.”

I sat back up. “Now am I on - “

“For chrissake, will you cut it out!” I suppose that there was more than one lesson there.

I recall investigating the concept of size. After Betty was born, I asked Dina if I had ever been that small, and she that I had been.

“Well, was I ever this small?” I asked, holding my hands apart.

“Yes, you were.”

“Well, was I ever **this** small?”

“Yes, you were that small, too.”

“Well, how small was I?”

“You were so small that nobody could even see you.”

“When was that?”

“That’s when you were still inside of me.”

Then she explained that people came from eggs, kind of like chickens, with which I was familiar. Only, she explained, with people the eggs hatch while they’re still inside the mother. You may laugh now, but it made sense to me then, and it’s a better explanation than storks.

At least once, probably repeatedly, I lay snug in bed and performed a mental inventory of my known body parts, and their functions as I understood them at the time. I knew about several of them and had some notion of their uses. My understanding of the purpose of my nose was wrong. In retrospect, I can see that the language played a trick on me. I wasn’t aware of my brain, and I believed that thinking happened in a person’s nose. That was probably because I’d heard my parents talking about some smart person. They’d commented that he “knows” a lot.

I recall another time when I was tricked by the language. I don’t have any idea what my parents were discussing, but I remember Dina saying “I don’t understand”. That was obvious to me. She was way too tall to stand under the table, where I was standing when I heard the comment.

There was a conversation that they were having about some people they knew. I don’t remember who the people were, but I remember Dina saying that they didn’t drink. I interrupted and asked her, “Don’t they ever get thirsty?” She explained that, when it was used that way, drinking referred only to drinking alcoholic drinks.

One day Poppa took me on a trip to see the new mixer that he’d bought as a surprise gift for Dina. He swore me to absolute secrecy. When we got home, the car had barely stopped when I hit the ground running. “Dina Dina!” I yelled. “Poppa showed me your new mixer! Poppa showed me your new mixer!” Poppa yelled for me to keep quiet, but to no avail. I was overcome by excitement and had to announce the wonderful gift. Dina always claimed that I was talking so fast that she couldn’t understand what I was saying, but Poppa was skeptical. He always suspected that the gift, when he finally gave it to her, wasn’t quite the surprise that he’d intended.

I remember learning about other things besides the language. At the end of a visit with my aunt Eloise, as we were leaving, Poppa was already out at the car. Dina was still inside, talking to Eloise. I went barreling out the door but I didn't head along the sidewalk, after Poppa. Instead, I charged across the front yard at an angle and headed for a slight gap in the hedge row along the front of the yard. As I approached the hedge, I got a brief glimpse of some sort of dark, ovoid thing, hanging from a little branch. No problem, I just bulldozed into it, head first. It turned out to be a hive of wasps. I don't remember the next few seconds of the incident but I do remember somebody telling the story later. Dina heard me screaming, ran out to see what was wrong, and started slapping wasps. Eloise came out the door and thought that Dina was beating me. They resolved that misunderstanding and got rid of the wasps. The next memory that I have of the incident is sitting on a tall stool in Eloise's kitchen while they dabbed baking soda paste on my stings. In the most gruff voice that I could manage, I said, "I wasn't scared!"

At an early age, I was given a tricycle. I'm told that, for many weeks, I wouldn't ride it but, instead, pushed it back and forth along the driveway. Eventually, I learned to ride it. I remember peddling it on the sidewalk in front of our house, watching the concrete go by under the front wheel. I was fascinated by the slight blurring effect if I focused my vision on the top of the wheel but paid attention to the concrete.

It seems that I spent a lot of the time that I was on the tricycle looking straight down. I recall one day pedaling along, watching the sidewalk in the vicinity of the front wheel, and seeing that drops of blood had started to drip into the concrete. My next memory is of sitting by the front door, leaning back against the house with my head tipped back, and sniffing. Dina, from inside, asked, "Is your nose bleeding again?" From her longsuffering tone of voice, I assume that nosebleeds must have been a regular occurrence.

Eventually, one of the rear wheels fell off of the tricycle and I discovered that I could stand it on edge, spin it, and watch it gradually run down until it stopped, laying flat on its side. I was fascinated by the motion, by the sound, and by the gradual change in speed as it ran down. I remember doing it over and over again until Dina, in exasperation, yelled, "Will you quit spinning that damn thing! You're driving me crazy!"

From somewhere, Dina obtained three jigsaw puzzles for me. They were in three big envelopes. I must have already played with jigsaw puzzles before because I understood the idea of putting the pieces together, I was very impatient to get started playing with the new ones. I don't know why she wanted to wait, but I nagged her until she agreed that I could go ahead and play with them. She told me to wait until she got back and then went to the kitchen for something. By the time that she got back, I had already dumped all three puzzles onto the floor. She was angry because she'd intended for us to do them one at a time. They were kids puzzles, so it couldn't have been much of a disaster, but I got scolded anyway.

Once, while I was out in the driveway, while Poppa was talking to some other man, we heard, through the window, Dina yell at Betty. I suppose that it was more of a screech than a yell. Poppa shrugged his shoulders, looked embarrassed, and said "I don't know why they have to be that way." The other man seemed to be sympathetic.

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We probably shouldn't be too critical of Dina. She grew up in Boston and I have the impression that, although her family wasn't rich, they were reasonably well off. Poppa grew up in the kind of situation that you see in the documentaries about struggling poor folks during the Great Depression, or the Dust Bowl years. Moving from Boston to southern Louisiana must have been a very difficult thing for Dina. After they arrived, and she started to understand the situation, she might have been very disappointed.

One day, I accompanied Poppa to a used car lot. I understood that he wanted to buy a car, and I paid attention to the conversation. He asked the salesman how much and the salesman said one fifty. I said that a dollar and fifty cents didn't seem like too much to pay for a car. They laughed. Poppa explained that he meant one hundred and fifty dollars.

One time, Poppa scared me with a sander. It was a big floor model machine that he was using to do some work on a hardwood floor in the house where we were living at the time. I don't actually remember the incident. I remember somebody telling the story later. Dina and I were standing, watching Poppa run the sander. He turned it in my direction, gave it a little push toward me, and said, "I'm gonna get you with this thing, son."

I suppose that he was just playing with me but, as the story goes, I screamed and bolted in whatever direction I happened to be facing at that moment, bounced off of a wall, screamed and ran, bounced off of a wall, and Dina caught up with me before I hit the next wall. According to the story, she was mad at him for weeks thereafter. Maybe there isn't any connection here, maybe this reaction is for a completely different reason, I don't know but, even today, if I'm out by the road and I hear a large engine approaching in the distance, I have an irrational panicky feeling, and a desire to hide behind something, and I always think about that sander.

One day, Dina decided that I was big enough to stop sleeping in a baby crib, and start using a actual bed that they had or me. That was a big day for me. I was graduating from a crib to a real bed. Maybe that's why I can still remember it. I watched eagerly while she tried to assemble the bed. I was probably making a royal nuisance of myself, getting in the way, but mothers can be patient when it suits them. She got the frame pieces attached to the head board and the foot board but she had some difficulty with the box springs. They kept falling between the frame pieces. She thought about it for a while and then recalled that there should be slats between the frame pieces. That was bad news. She couldn't find the slats. Much to my frustration, we had to wait for Poppa to get home from work. When she asked him about it, he looked sheepish and said, "Oh. So that's what those boards were." He took us out to the chicken lot. There were my slats, in a condition that probably rendered them unsuitable for use in a bed. He'd nailed them together into chicken feeders. I don't remember how the situation was eventually resolved. Many years later, when I was in my middle 40s, I built a bed for myself. I built it out of half-inch plywood, 4x4s, and 2x4s. It's glued together. Instead of slats, I used sheets of 3/4 inch plywood, cut to size, to support the box springs. Nobody's going to use pieces of that bed for a chicken feeder.

The arrival of a little sister brings with it a lot of questions. My first memory of Betty is of watching Dina change her diaper. During one such change, I noticed for the first time that Betty didn't have a penis. I suppose that, up until then, I'd assumed that

everybody had one, if I ever thought about it at all. I asked Dina about it and she replied that Betty did have one but you just couldn't see them on little girls, because they were inside instead of outside. Maybe that isn't exactly accurate, but it was a good answer to give to a two-year old boy.

I don't remember this incident but I remember somebody telling the story, later. Apparently, I liked Betty a lot, and I wanted to hold her. According to the story, I was pulling the sheet to get Betty over to the edge of the bed, where I could grab her. Of course, I wasn't big enough to actually carry her but I didn't yet know all of my limits. I'd have just pulled her off onto the floor if Dina hadn't walked into the room in time to stop me.

Having a father, I naturally had electric trains. I never hooked up the electricity, but was content to plug the track sections together and push the train cars around by hand. The most difficult part was getting all of the wheels on the track, all at the same time. It required considerable concentration during which I would lean down beside the car with the side of my face on the floor, tip the car away from me, so that I could see under it, and carefully align the wheels on the far side. Then I'd carefully lower the car to a level position, placing the wheels on my side onto the track. It was trickier than it might seem if you've never done it as a small child.

On one such occasion, I got more help from Betty than I wanted. She was sitting on the floor beside me, watching. Gender differences appear early and this was a good example. To me the boxcar was a mechanism. To Betty it was an organism. As soon as I had it on the track, she said, "Now it's asleep." She picked it up laid it over on its side. I was annoyed and said "Don't." I then painstakingly placed the boxcar back on the track. She said, "Now it's asleep," and laid it over on its side again. Annoyed, I said "Boxcars don't sleep!" and again placed it on the track. She said, "Now it's asleep," and laid it over on its side. I hit her. She started crying, I heard Dina coming to see what was wrong, so I started crying in self defense,. I don't think that Dina ever figured out what had happened.. I expect that there was a lot of weeping and wailing about boxcars, and sleeping, and that none of it made any sense to Dina.

I think that this next event happened while we were living in Austin, Texas, but I'm not sure. What happened was that I had a territorial confrontation with the little boy across the street. I recall that the street was unpaved, and not particularly wide. He and I had observed one another across the street from opposite sides of the street. It seems that we felt some sort of a mutual and primitive hostility. I don't have any idea why. We began, without introduction or preamble, to throw rocks at each other. We were both young and neither of us was particularly good shot with a rock, so the contest seemed destined to be inconclusive until I decided to end it conclusively. I picked up the biggest rock that I could find,. With all my strength, I heaved it toward him, failing in my single-minded concentration, to notice the approaching car. My rock bounced off of its fender. The driver stopped, backed up, reprimanded me through the window, and drove away. From inside the front door behind me, Poppa then said, "Well, son, what was that all about?" I hadn't even been aware that he was watching. I remember shuffling my feet, looking around for inspiration, and seeing the other little boy still waiting on the other side of the street. I blurted out, pointing to the other little boy, "He threw a rock and hit that car and they came back and told me to tell him to stop!" Poppa wisely went for a second opinion, and was told the truth by the other little boy. Strangely, I don't remember the spanking, but I do re-

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member waiting for it in the bathroom while he explained that it wasn't the rock, but the lie, that was the problem. The lesson hasn't always kept me from lying, but it has always made me try to resist the temptation.

One time Betty and I came running around the back of the house in great agitation and excitement calling for Poppa. "Poppa! Poppa! Come look! There's a huge spider in the front yard! A huge spider!" It turned out to be a tarantula. Poppa captured it and we took it down the street to a man who, as I recall, was known locally to handle them from time to time. I can still remember the tarantula scurrying back and forth across the man's front porch, and the man turning it back from escape, with his bare hands.

The house we lived in at the time had a kind of half basement under the rear, and one day I got a bit of a fright just as I started to step through the door, into the basement. I went running to Poppa and reported that I had seen a "weed walking". Allowing for my small size at the time, what I saw was probably about 12 inches tall, and looked like nothing except a long single strand of weed. It moved into view at the edge of the door, as if taking a step, touched the ground, and then quickly moved back out of sight. The only explanation that Poppa could give for the apparition was that it was a very large preying mantis, or maybe a "walking stick", common local insects. I don't know if they get that big.

One year, Betty and I both got toy rifles, as gifts. Our birthdays are both in the same month, so they were probably birthday gifts. They were both identical and we couldn't tell which rifle was hers and which rifle was mine. To solve the problem, Poppa engraved one of our names on one of the rifles. We waited expectantly for him to engrave the other name on the other rifle, but he refused. He explained that we didn't know how to read so, if he put names on both rifles, then we still wouldn't be able to tell them apart.

I remember watching as Poppa tried to collect eggs in the chicken coop. One old hen was always a fighter, and fiercely defended her nest. I stood in the door of the chicken coop watching, and one day Poppa got tired of dealing with that particular chicken and simply pulled her off the nest. Holding her by the legs, he handed her to me and said, "Here, son, take this ol' hen out there and throw her on the ground!" I was young, not yet skilled at interpreting Poppa's instructions. I wanted to help, to do just what he told me to do. Holding the chicken by her legs, as high above my head as I could reach, I threw her onto the ground as hard as I could. Later, I meekly asked Poppa if the hen might possibly be a nice young "fryer." "Hell no, son. We can't eat her. She's a tough old layin' hen."

Eventually, Tommy was born. I can still remember Dina carrying him in the door for the first time. Betty and I both wanted to know his name. Dina said, "His name is Thomas. We'll call him Tommy. When he gets big, they'll call him Tom." Unfortunately for him, Betty and I had already come to terms with each other and divided up everything between us. Everything was either mine or hers. Tommy was always a little bit left out.

Tommy first surprised me at an early age. I don't recall my age at the time, but I must have been somewhere around 10 years old, certainly not much older than that, which would have made Tommy about 5 years old. We three had committed some punishable offence. Poppa had us lined up, and asked which of us wanted to get

spanked first. I had then, as I do now, a dread of punishment, and I fully expected that Poppa would have to devise the order of punishment. I can still remember my surprise and grudging admiration when, after only a second or two of hesitation, Tommy stepped forward and said, gruffly, "Might as well get it over with."

In some ways, Tommy was quicker than I was. One example happened during one of the family trips, when we were traveling through some wooded countryside. I said that I sure would like to own 100 acres of that kind of land. Tommy immediately said that he'd rather own 1000 acres of it. It's just as easy, he continued, to wish for 1000 as to wish for 100.

During that part of my life, my immediate family lived in Louisiana, close to some of Poppa's family. Back then, long distance telephone calls were expensive. Also, we were at the end of a centuries-long practice of just showing up. We didn't call first, we just went for visits. When we traveled, we didn't stay at motels. We traveled from relative to relative, showed up unannounced, and the relatives put us up for the night. Parts of the family were scattered all over east Texas, Louisiana, Arkansas, and Oklahoma, including Poppa's parents, his siblings, their spouses, and whoever else there was.

I remember one overnight stay with a relative somewhere in east Texas. I didn't know who it was at the time but that's where we stayed. There were at least two cars full of us, Poppa, Dina, me, Betty, and Tommy, in one car, plus QD, Eloise, Jan, and Michael in another. The normal practice, then, was for adults to sleep wherever there was a bed, often doubling up with other adults. Kids always slept on pallets on the floor.

That particular night, I woke up during the night needing to visit the bathroom. It was absolutely dark. There wasn't any light from outside, no moon, no stars, nothing. There wasn't a night light inside. There wasn't anything with a lighted dial. People didn't leave things like radios turned on all night, back then. I stood up from my pallet and started groping for the wall. I stumbled over several sleeping kids, found the wall, and started feeling my way along it. We'd arrived late in the evening and I hadn't had time to familiarize myself with the house. I groped along the wall for a long time and I couldn't even find a door. Eventually, I gave up and headed back out into the middle of the room. I stumbled over some sleeping kids and finally found an empty pallet. I laid down and went back to sleep. Fortunately, my bladder was more resilient then than it is now.

I remember spending a lot of time with my paternal grandparents. They lived in a rural part of Louisiana, in the vicinity of a little town called DeRidder. I don't have any idea what circumstances determined the timing or the durations of my visits to them. Those kinds of family matters were completely outside of my awareness. But, I do have some memories of the visits.

My only memory of the town itself was when Poppop took me to a soda shop. It was a big event for me at the time. I remember sitting at a long counter on a tall stool that had a round top. The top would spin. Poppop bought me a vanilla malt. I remember that the man behind the counter made the malt in a large, silver-colored metal can. It made two glasses of malt. They were actual glass, not plastic, and they had moisture condensed on them. I expect that, at that age, I couldn't have consumed all of that malt. I suppose that Poppop drank the other half. Poppop called it

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a malted milk, and spent considerable time thereafter telling me how fast I would eat the next one that I got. So fast, he said, that I wouldn't even stop to taste it. I found out the next morning what he'd been working toward, but I wasn't fooled. We had Malto Meal for breakfast, and he tried to get me to eat my "malt" so fast I didn't even taste it. I knew the difference right away.

I remember another time that he tried to bamboozle me about food. I went with him one day on some job he had to do and, all day, he talked about how good those fried oysters were going to be at dinner that evening. I think he overdid it because I was already suspicious before I even got to the table.

On one expedition with him, we drove past a factory where they were treating lumber with creosote. Poppop laughed at my comment and repeated it to anybody who'd listen. When I smelled the creosote, I said, "I smell something good cookin'!"

Among my earliest memories of my grandparents are my awareness of their fighting. My childlike awareness of the situation was on a simple level, with little concern for issues, reasons, or consequences. I recall playing with the doors of a cabinet that they owned. The doors were built with overlaps where they came together, so that one had to be closed before the other, and the overlaps then hid the crack between them. If the wrong door was closed first, then the overlaps held the other door slightly ajar. I played with the doors by repeatedly opening and closing them, and varying at random the order in which they closed, so that sometimes the proper door closed first, and sometimes the other door closed first. What this has to do with my grandparents was that, in my little game, I'd associated one door with Grandma, and the other door with Poppop. Whenever I closed the doors, whichever door closed last won the argument. I remember chanting, as I worked the doors back and forth, "Poppop got Grandma, Grandma got Poppop, Poppop got Grandma," and so forth.

Once Poppop mentioned to me that Grandma spent a lot of time "bellyaching." I went and asked her what "bellyaching" meant. She wanted to know where I'd heard the word, so I told her what Poppop had said. In retrospect, I suppose that her response might be regarded as a good example of the behavior.

One day I was wandering around behind the house. I noticed that Poppop was very busy doing something, but the activity was a mystery to me. At that age, most things were mysteries to me.

Poppop yelled at me to go get Grandma and tell her that he needed some wet blankets. He yelled, "They's a for!"

I didn't understand the urgency of the situation. I wandered into the house and told Grandma that Poppop wanted her for something. She didn't seem interested and said that she was busy.

I wandered back outside, where Poppop, bare to the waist, was frantically beating a grass fire with his shirt. I told him that Grandma was busy. He yelled at me to get back in there and tell her they's a for.

I went back inside and told her "Poppop wants you." I didn't understand what a fire was.

She started to get annoyed, looked out the kitchen window, and took on a certain resemblance to that Tasmanian Devil character that they used to show on the Bugs

Bunny cartoons. She was zipping around quickly. I don't have any further memory of the incident but I suppose she and Poppop, with the help of some wet blankets, managed to extinguish the fire.

At that time and in that place, fires must have been a serious concern. I recall once when Poppop noticed a column of smoke in the distance and, in a worried tone of voice, commented that it was in the direction of the house that was owned by one of the neighboring farmers. He jumped in the car and drove away. He returned, later, and announced with evident relief that it was only a pile of brush burning.

Poppop took me with him to a place that he called the chemical plant. I don't know what they manufactured. Since it was a farming region, maybe it was some kind of fertilizer. While Poppop was talking to a man in some kind of a large space with a concrete floor, I discovered an air pressure hose. The attachment on the end of the hose had a little metal button that you could press, causing air to whiz out of the nozzle. The nozzle pointed at a right angle to the attachment, so that the air blew out past the button. I discovered that if I dropped the attachment onto the concrete, with the button down, then the impact would press the button and blow the attachment up a short distance from the floor. When the attachment fell back onto the floor, it would land on the button. That would press the button and blow the attachment back up again. It would keep bouncing itself up and down until you stopped it. Both Poppop and the man to whom he was talking were amused. The man said that he'd never have thought of that himself.

My grandparents had a well, a windmill, and an overhead water tank, made of wood. There was a handle, or a lever, or some such thing, that you pulled and hooked in place to turn on the windmill. You unhooked it to turn the windmill back off when the tank was full. I remember one day when Poppop returned home from somewhere and had a big argument with Grandma about the windmill. He yelled at her that she had to turn the thing off when the tank was full or she was going to pump the well dry. She yelled back that she just got busy and forgot, and left it pumping. I have the impression that it was a frequent argument.

They owned a cow, and kept her in a pasture near the front of the property, near the road. One day, Grandma ran into the room and told Poppop that the cow had escaped from the pasture again, and was in the garden. Poppop jumped up and ran for the door, declaring that he was gonna shoot tha damned cow. Grandma followed him, yelling that they'd paid a lot of money for that cow and that he'd damned well better not shoot her. I probably never knew how the situation ended but I do remember some discussion of putting a yoke on her..

The place where they lived was way out along a narrow dirt road. They had only one car. There weren't any neighbors within walking distance. They didn't have a telephone or a television. They didn't even have a radio. Grandma complained to me that, sometimes, Poppop would go away for days at a time. She never knew that he was going to leave until he left. She never knew how long he'd be gone. She said that she'd clean the house over and over again. There just wasn't anything to do. She said that the only sound was the wind whistling past the eaves. She was bored to tears. I can't even begin to imagine how lonely she must have been during those absences, or how important to her my occasional visits must have been.

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During the time that I spent with Grandma, I can recall only two times that she ever had anything kind to say about Poppop. The first was during the time that they lived on the farm, in DeRidder, which he insisted on calling a ranch. Grandma, apparently in a mood of reminiscence, comment mournfully to me that, "Poor old Sam always wanted to be a cowboy." The only other time I recall her speaking kindly of him was one of the few times I saw her after he died. I was surprised at her attitude. All of my life there had never been a kind word by either of them for the other. On many occasions, during their arguments, I'd heard her warn him about how sorry he'd be when she was dead and gone. Yet, after he died, all she had to say was "poor old Sam this and poor old Sam that." Amazing.

I took many trips with my grandparents, but my memories of the trips are scanty. I don't remember this for sure but I have the impression that the normal routine was for me and Grandma to ride in the back seat, while Poppop drove. She tried to keep me entertained during the trips. I remember on one such trip being very tired, and not wanting to miss anything. She tried to persuade me to just "take a little nap", and I eventually agreed to do it on the basis of two promises. First she promised that she would wake me up if we drove past anything interesting and, second, she promised that, when we got home, she'd wake me up and cook some extra long fried potatoes for me. My next memory is of waking up the next morning in bed, and confronting her with her failure to fix the fried potatoes for me. She begged forgiveness because, she said, when we got home she had checked and discovered that we were out of long potatoes.

I remember one brief bit of a trip when, again, I was in the back seat with Grandma, and there was a sudden change in the motion of the car. Poppop exclaimed "My God, there's been a wreck!" I jumped up and saw the bottom of a car on its side with the uppermost front wheel spinning. Grandma pulled me down, and wouldn't let me look at anything else. A few minutes later Poppop came back to the car and said "Thank God nobody got hurt!". I was surprised at how uncharacteristically happy he seemed to be.

Grandma had the ability to tell stories, making them up from scratch as she went along. I loved her stories, which often revolved around the ability of Ivory soap to float. To this day, I still use Ivory soap. By bedtime, I was full of energy and Grandma was exhausted. She'd get me to bed by laying there with me and telling me stories until I went to sleep. The problem was that she'd gradually drift off to sleep herself. Her stories would degenerate into muttering, then nothing, and then I'd start shaking her awake and excitedly telling her to wake up, you went to sleep, Grandma, finish the story! I suppose that it was difficult for her but I don't recall her ever fussing about it. She just kept telling stories until I went to sleep. I do remember Dina fussing and complaining, when I returned from vacations with Grandma, that I was so spoiled that nobody else could even stand me. Grandmothers are very important.

Grandma was the first person to notice my vision problem. We were on a trip somewhere. She and I were in the back seat. My parents were in the front seat. Grandma was pointing out to me various sights along the road and I recall that she couldn't get me to recognize things at a distance. Cows, for example. Later, she expressed the opinion that I couldn't see properly, and that I needed glasses. I often noticed that her opinions were sometimes received as just the prattle of a silly old woman. I believe, however, that she was right as often as not. She was sure of herself about my vision

problem, and the rejection of her opinion resulted in one of her rare, but not unheard of, crying tantrums. During those tantrums, she had the ability to fling teardrops around her like rain.

I don't remember my first day at the Boldtville School, but I do remember watching home movies of me leaving for school, on that first day. The movies include a series of video clips of me walking along the road toward the school. I kept thinking of reasons to come back home, and they kept sending me back to school again. From my first day of mandatory attendance, I was compelled to do things that I didn't want to do, be places that I didn't want to be, and associate with people and things that I didn't like. That continued during elementary school, junior high school, high school, junior college, and university. It also extended beyond that, into my later life, but that story is told in my memoir *Outward Bound*. There isn't any reason to tell that part of it again, here. See *Outward Bound*.

I remember, at the Boldtville School, sitting in a chair, surrounded by other kids who were standing. I was trying to observe some sort of display that the teacher had placed in front of me. I believe it was a portable blackboard on a stand, but I'm not sure. It's been a long time. There was something on the board, I think it was a word, and the teacher was trying to get me to recognize it. The other kids were all kibitzing and giving hints. I couldn't see what it was. I also remember sitting at my desk with my first grade reader open on the desk. The first grade reader had extra large print. I had one fist resting on the desk, my other fist resting on the first fist, and my forehead resting on the top fist. The teacher thought that I was asleep. Actually, I had to get my eyes that close to the book in order to see the extra large print. The arrangement with the fists was just to support my head.

A year or two later, it was discovered that I had terrible eyesight. Unfortunately, that didn't happen until I was in the third or fourth grade. By then, I was well behind my peers, academically. I doubt if anyone ever apologized to Grandma. When Poppa eventually took me to have my eyes examined, I remember his response when the optometrist told him the results. He said, "My God! Are the boy's eyes that bad? No wonder he can't see!" By then, I had absorbed the idea that I couldn't learn things as well as the other kids could. I suspect that I was viewed by the adults around me as a "slow learner." I viewed myself that way. It took me half a lifetime to recover from that attitude, assuming that I have recovered from it.

While I was in the second grade, at the Boldtville School, Poppa had to spend some time in the hospital. I suppose that it must have been a serious situation, because the length of time that he was expected to be there was sufficiently long to justify sending me to stay with my grandparents. By then, they'd moved away from DeRidder, and were living in Wharton, Texas. So, I was transferred to the school in Wharton.

On the second day of my attendance at the school in Wharton, I got lost on the way home. I know that it was the second day because, on the first day, Poppop walked with me along the entire route, from school to home, pointing out to me the landmarks along the way. It was only about three blocks, with one corner to turn, but I got lost anyway. I couldn't recognize any of the landmarks. Probably, I couldn't see them, or maybe I just wasn't paying attention. Emotional stress does that to me, and the stress of the move to the new school only added to the stress of being in school. Even

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today, stress inhibits my ability to function. Maybe that was as true then as it is now. Anyway, I was wandering up and down the street, lost and forlorn, when some woman who lived on the street finally got to wondering what I was doing. She took me in hand and got enough information from me to figure out where I lived. She took me home. Poppop was annoyed. Grandma was relieved. It resulted in another argument between them, but Poppop took me over the entire route again, and I tried harder. I suppose that, after that, I was able to find my way home. I don't have any further memories of getting lost.

I'd been doing poorly at the Boldtville School. I didn't like it at all. If the small country school at Boldtville had been difficult, I don't know how to describe my reaction to the "big city" school in the little town of Wharton. It was so large, compared to the Boldtville School, and so intensely regimented, that I became totally unmanageable. I don't have many memories of the place, but I do have a few. I recall, in a classroom, running and leaping across a table which was surrounded by quietly studying children. I remember being transferred to a different part of the building, and being placed with a different bunch of kids. The change only increased my stress. I remember being transferred yet again to a different part of the building, and again being placed with a different bunch of kids. The different groups of kids even had different playgrounds. Although I didn't realize it at the time, I'd been demoted from the second grade to the first grade.

Although I didn't realize that I'd been demoted, I suppose that the school must have notified Grandma. The next day she went with me to the school and, in the principle's office, she did her best to persuade him of the school's error in its evaluation of my abilities. Grandma had another crying tantrum but she man stood up to it, and I stayed in the first grade. It might have been one of those rare occasions when the school was right.

Grandma reminded me several times after that, over the years, that when I graduated from college, it had better be with "flyin' colors," because she was going to buy the entire front page of the local newspaper and advertise to one and all how wrong that school had been about me. By the time that I graduated from college, I doubt that she had much of a memory of the situation. It's probably just as well, because she certainly didn't have the resources to buy the front page of the newspaper.

My last memory of that school was being in the slow group of my first grade class, and whispering to a student in the fast group the answer to a question with which she was struggling. At the Boldtville School, classes weren't divided into fast groups and slow groups. We had two entire grades, in the same room. For me, the situation was an alien world, but I knew the answer to the question, so I whispered it. The teacher heard me and persuaded me to say it out loud. Then, I got credit for it, and was advanced to the fast group, but I was still in the first grade, and I was still at a school that filled me with stress, and I was still there against my will. It was with a great sense of relief that I returned to my little two room country school, later that year. Even so, I still wasn't happy, even at the Boldtville School.

During that extended visit with my grandparents, while Poppa was in the hospital, I had to have a cavity in a tooth filled. My grandparents didn't know if I was allergic to anesthetic, and I guess that nobody thought about that possibility until I was already in the dentist's chair. The dentist was afraid to use the anesthetic, and the result was

that he filled the cavity without any. To this day, I can remember Grandma holding my arms down, and the dentist, with his leg thrown over my waist in his chair, holding me down, drilling while I screamed. I don't remember how they got me to keep my mouth open. I remember feeling ashamed when everybody looked at me as I went out through the waiting room, because I knew that they'd all been listening to me scream.

It seems that some kind of profound change happened when I started school. Some indication of my traumatic reaction to the school system can be found by looking back at my tricycle days. I mentioned earlier the time that I was riding my tricycle and noticed some drops of blood on the concrete. I remember reclining against the front of the house, with my head leaned back, and sniffing. Dina, from inside the front room asked with slight annoyance, "Is your nose bleeding again?" "Yah." I replied, waiting patiently for it to stop. This is of interest because of the way we both handled the situation. I don't recall any panic, not even any fear. She was a little annoyed. I just sat, leaned back, and waited for my nose to stop bleeding.

Nosebleed was a recurring problem for me for several years but, after I entered the first grade, it evoked hysteria. The hysteria only aggravated the nosebleed. I recall one occurrence in the first grade, when I discovered that my nose was bleeding. I ran madly from the classroom screaming "My nose is bleeding! My nose is bleeding!" My response was exaggerated beyond all reason. On one occasion at home, my nose bled so severely that my parents ran out of clean towels to hold in front of it. Poppa even called a local hospital to ask for advice. I remember during a subsequent discussion of the incident, he commented to someone that he'd been a afraid that I might bleed to death

I believe that my susceptibility to panic was a consequence of my emotional reaction to school. I don't recall being that way prior to the first grade. I don't think that anybody ever suspected how much I hated school, or how adversely it effected me. To this day, I hate it. During the previous part of my life, prior to the first grade, I was reasonably aware of my surroundings and the situations around me. That all changed abruptly when they put me in the first grade at the Boldtville School. The best that I can recall, after that, I never seemed to be properly aware of things. I didn't deal with situations any more. I coped with them. After that first day at school, mostly, I wasn't happy. I'm always baffled by people who complain about how much they want to go to school. It doesn't make any sense to me. I hated it, from the first day.

Eventually, it was Grandma who gave me the remedy for my nosebleed problem. She told me that if I would take a little strip of paper and roll it into a small cylinder about 1/8 inch thick and one inch long, and place it as far up as possible between my upper lip and by upper gums, in the very front of my mouth, it would stop the nose from bleeding. I tried it, and it worked. Placebo effect or cure, I don't know, but it worked. I never had nosebleed problems after that. Sadly, the trick didn't resolve the emotional turmoil which I believe was the basis for the physical symptom.

I'll note in passing that, at about that time in my life, the relationship between me and Poppop changed. Prior to that, my memories suggest that I was "the apple of his eye". After that, most of my memories of him are of him being annoyed with me about one thing or another. I suspect that the change wasn't in him, but in me.

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Here's an example. Whenever there was a rain storm while we were visiting my grandparents in Wharton, Tommy and I would build a mud dam from the curb out into the street. That gave us a dandy lake in which to float our little boats, and so forth. Of course, it also flooded the parking space where Poppop parked his car when he got home. He always drove forward far enough to break our dam, but he was still annoyed by it. That was while I was still in elementary school. I recall another incident from when I was in high school. I was visiting my grandparents, in Wharton, and suddenly I remembered that band camp started the next day. How did I manage to forget such a thing? I don't know. I just did. So, I suddenly announced that I had to be back home that very evening. Poppop had to drop whatever he was doing and make what I recall as being a four-hour drive, one way, to take me home. Along the way, as I was sitting in the passenger seat, looking out at the puffy white clouds in the blue sky, and watching the fields go by, I suddenly got so sad, lonely, and depressed, that I started crying, right there in the car with Poppop. He was concerned but I didn't have any idea at all what was wrong with me. There wasn't anything that he could do except to keep driving. Looking back, I suspect that the end of my visit, and the return to school, was unbearable. I hated school.

I mentioned, earlier, that my grandparents didn't even have a radio while they were living in DeRidder. Later, after they had moved to Wharton, Texas, Poppop brought home a brand new radio. It was a little tabletop unit. He sat it on a little table in the living room and stretched its power cord a short distance across a corner of the room, to an electrical outlet. He had to go somewhere and demanded of Grandma that she not let that damned kid break his radio while he was gone. She fussed back that I wouldn't get anywhere near the radio. Here's the thing. The power cord was stretched past a corner, between the little table, with the radio on it, and the power outlet. Sitting in that very corner was a rocking chair. Later, I got into the rocking chair and started rocking it. I rocked it higher and higher. I rocked it so high that the back end of one of its curved rocker snagged the power cord. It yanked the radio onto the floor and shattered its plastic case into dozens of pieces. Grandma carefully taped it all back together again, but the radio was ruined. It wouldn't work at all. They had an argument about it, but I survived.

Some time during my childhood, my parents began to develop marital problems. I don't know when it started, or how. Such things usually remain hidden from children for a while. Grandma noticed it about a year before I did, and asked me about it during one of her visits. We were living in Boldtville by then, so her visits were rare. That day, she took me into the bathroom and asked me what was wrong with my parents. I didn't have the foggiest notion what she was talking about. She told me they were having some kind of a problem, and that I should pay attention. It didn't mean anything to me. She got upset and started crying. As far as I can tell, the only result of the discussion was to get us both upset.

For some period of time, along about then, prior to junior high school, my parents occasionally arranged for babysitters. I don't remember what changes in our circumstances caused the needs for babysitters. I just remember a few babysitters. I didn't like any of them. Probably, the least objectionable one, in my opinion, was Mrs. Williams, the next door neighbor just to our west. However, I recall one event with her that brings to mind the situation with Poppop, previously mention, on the trip back home for the band camp, although that event happened several years later, after I

was in high school. On this earlier occasion, with Mrs. Williams, she had taken me with her to meet somebody at one of the local military bases. I don't remember, and probably didn't know then, who she intended to meet, or why. I don't know where Betty and Tommy were at the time.

I recall that Mrs. Williams and I were standing beside a narrow paved road. There wasn't any curb, just a smooth transition from road to grass. There wasn't any ditch. Everything was flat. Lawns stretched off into the distance, surrounding identical little houses, in neat rows. There weren't any fences. I suppose that it was residential housing for military personnel. It was completely quiet. There we stood. Suddenly, the dreadful place seemed so bleak and lonely that I burst out crying. Mrs. Williams couldn't help me. I didn't have any idea what was wrong. I still don't know what caused it. I just couldn't tolerate the place. There must be some kind of a common cause between that experience and the later experience with Poppop, mentioned earlier, on the way back home for band camp. I was intensely unhappy.

It was at about that time that the situation at home began to deteriorate in certain ways. Some things weren't getting done that, previously, I had taken for granted. There came a day when I got a little desperate for clean clothes. There was a washing machine on the back porch but, for some reason that I don't remember, it wasn't connected. It had previously been connected but it wasn't connected when I developed the need for clean clothes.. So, I figured out how to connect it. Then, I collected all of my dirty clothes from my room and headed for the back porch. Dina was doing something in the kitchen and, as I walked through, she stopped me. She told me that, as long as I was going to do some laundry anyway, then I might as well do it for everybody. So, I got trapped into doing everybody's laundry. I got my clean clothes but I also got even more frustrated.

On the subject of staying clean, there's the old joke about taking a bath once a week, whether you need it or not. With us, that wasn't a joke. We didn't have a well or a public water supply. We depended entirely on rain, and it was a dry region. So, we got a bath once a week. It was even worse than that. We used only a couple of inches of water in the tub, and we all used the same water over again, one after the other. You hear stories of that kind of situation in medieval Europe but it was also the situation at our house, in the 1950s and 1960s. I didn't start getting regular showers until I began attendance San Antonio Jr. College, and signed up for classes involving physical activities. Then, I had access to the men's dressing room, and the showers. I'd never been popular at school. Maybe I smelled bad.

I was just as unhappy at the Harmony Elementary School as I had been at the Boldtville School but one significant event in my life happened at the Harmony Elementary School. When I was in about the fourth or fifth grade, and while I was nosing around in the back of the classroom one day, I came upon a little collection of books that had accumulated there. I shuffled through them and, for some reason, I picked up *Little Tejas*, by Olive McClintic Johnson and Mary Chute, and started to read it. I was so enchanted by the story that I read the book several times before I eventually put it back on the shelf for the last time. I liked the story so much that I asked the teacher if I could have the book. She wouldn't let me have it. I asked my parents to buy the book from the school for me. Dina asked someone at the school about buying the book but they wouldn't sell it. So, the book slipped away from me, seemingly lost forever.

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I remembered the book for all of the following years because it was such a turning point in my life. Before *Little Tejas*, I'd never bothered with books. After *Little Tejas*, I always had books around. Back in 2012, I happened to mention the book to Dina. She started looking for it and found a place to buy it. So, now I have it again, a small treasure that I lost all of those years ago.

I remember, from that period of time, that I also read comic books. One of the neighbors, Mr. Neubaur, saw me reading a comic book and commented scornfully to Poppa that it would ruin my mind if he let me keep reading such trash. Poppa replied that he didn't care what I read, just as long as I was reading. Later, he said, I'd find other things to read. The sad part of the story is that Mr. Neubaur was a prominent member of the school board. He probably banned anything that he didn't like.

I read a lot of different kinds of things after that, but Science Fiction and Fantasy eventually became my favorites. I can still remember the first Science Fiction story that I ever read. It was *Rocket to Luna*, by Richard Marsten. That was during my time at the Oak Crest Jr. High School. As with *Little Tejas*, the book got away from me. As with *Little Tejas*, I eventually acquired a copy of it. Now, both books occupy a place of honor in my collection, alongside of *The Once and Future King* and *The Book of Merlin*, both by T. H. White.

When I arrived at the Oak Crest Jr. High School, there were two schools that were being used by the district as junior high schools. The Oak Crest Jr. High School was a fairly new multiple room building. The other was a collection of old wooden buildings, called the Sayers School. The gloomy consensus among my peers was that the Sayers School should be avoided at all costs. Nobody knew why, it was just accepted in the way of such gloomy forebodings. The first day at the Oak Crest Jr. High School, we all went to our assigned rooms. My room was overcrowded. They were all overcrowded. The school principal randomly selected some kids to go to the Sayers School, and I was one of them.

I never gave the Sayers School a chance. That evening, I insisted that Dina get me transferred back to the Oak Crest Jr. High School. For some reason she agreed. The next day, we went to school together. At the time, I hadn't learned to recognize the significance of accents in people's speech, so I didn't expect the instant camaraderie that sprang up between Dina and the principal. However, as soon as the first words were spoken, they each recognized in the other a common background. They were both from Boston. They were instantly off on a discussion of places they'd both been, and I relaxed. There wouldn't be any trouble about which school I attended.

At the Oak Crest Jr. High School, I joined the marching band. About the time that I was moving from the Oak Crest Jr. High School to the East Central High School, Dina started getting involved in some of the band activities. So, she did occasional things with the band. I recall that one year she provided the piano accompaniment for our solo contests. Regrettably, she and Poppa also became drinking buddies with Mr. Zittleman, the first band director. That eventually lead to a brief affair between Dina and Mr. Zittleman. The affair was really of fairly small consequence, except that it was the first time that I was unavoidably aware of the problems that had been developing between my parents. I'd probably been sensing that something was wrong, as Grandma had. That affair, involving one of my teachers at school, added more stress to my situation.

It was also at about that time that my parents began to noticeably drink a lot. They started spending Saturday afternoons and evenings drinking with Fred and Lynne Peters at their remote house, or with Frank and June Conway at Jake's Place, out on Highway 87. I didn't like Fred and Lynne Peters. I didn't like spending time at their place, which somewhat resembled a prison. It was a remote, square, blank-walled building in the middle of miles and miles of empty landscape. There was absolutely nothing for me to do except hang around. My parents would get drunk, behave strangely, and then have a fight when we got home. The same thing was true for the drinking sessions at Jake's Place, with Frank and June Conway. Betty, Tommy, and I were trapped in those situations, at those locations, with not much to do to pass the time, and nowhere to go. For me, it was very bleak. I didn't like what was happening and I was afraid. I was also very bored. At Jake's Place, we had the company of Pat and Gary Conway, Frank and June's sons, but that didn't help any.

One pastime that we (me, Betty, Tommy, Pat and Gary) invented, at Jake's Place, was to see who could stuff the biggest bite of fudge bar into his mouth. I won. I gradually worked most of the bar into my mouth, with just the end of it sticking out. I had my mouth as wide open as I could possibly get it, and the fudge bar mashed in to fit the exact shape of the inside of my mouth. Unfortunately, that didn't leave me any space for chewing. I couldn't compress the mass of candy, I couldn't swallow it all in a lump, and it wouldn't fit back out between my teeth. I'd pushed it in with my fingers, but I couldn't push it out with my tongue. I had to wait quite a long time for it to dissolve enough for me to start chewing it. Of course, I had all afternoon and most of the evening available for me to wait.

Early one morning, after a rain storm during the night, Tommy and I went on a bicycle ride. We went west, toward San Antonio. We rode past Avery's Store, down the hill, across the bridge over the creek, which was temporarily full from the overnight rain storm, and started up the hill on the other side of the creek. Partway up the hill, I said something to Tommy. He didn't answer. I looked behind me and he wasn't there. I supposed that he'd decided to go back home and, for some reason, just turned around without saying anything. So, I rode a little further up the hill then turned around and headed back home. As I was crossing the creek, I heard a strange sound. It was a sort of hollow, distant, echoing sound. It sounded a lot like, "heeeeelp!" I got off of my bicycle and looked around. Nothing. I looked over the edge of the bridge. There was Tommy, clinging to the bridge post.

"What happened?" I asked.

"I fell in!" he exclaimed in exasperation. Okay, it was a stupid question. I reached down, we clasped hands, and I pulled him out.

"Where's your bicycle?" I asked.

"It's in the creek!", he exclaimed in exasperation. So, it was my special day for stupid questions.

We went home, found some rope, figured out something to use for a big hook, went back to the bridge, and fished his bicycle out the creek.

His last comment on the event was, "There were a lot of spiders down there."

Outside of school, my early life usually included experiences with farm animals or house pets. Even after I left home, I still had a few of them around, probably because

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I was accustomed to having them. Over the years, I gradually came to the conclusion that such animals aren't worth the trouble and, gradually, I stopped keeping them. Now, I avoid them, particularly house pets. People live in houses. Animals live in barns. However, in my youth I necessarily accepted things as they were, and tried to do what was expected of me. Consequently, I was usually involved with pets or farm animals in one way or another. I recall one experience that resulted from the supply of feed that we kept for all of those animals.

I'll digress briefly. At that time, we lived in an old house that was built of concrete blocks. Its walls, when viewed along their surfaces, could be seen to visibly lean and bend. No two surfaces in the place were parallel, and nothing was plum or level. We learned early that square corners and straight edges could not be used when repairing or modifying the place. Anything that was properly measured and sized looked crooked, alongside what was already there. That was part of the experience that led me, in later years, to write *The Craftsman's Lament*.

The Craftsman's Lament

I'd like to make it
Level, straight, and plumb, and square,
But I have to make it
Fit what's there.

The old timers in the community claimed that the man who'd built the house, and who'd lived in it for a while, had possessed only a hammer, a saw, and some good intentions. The house was somewhat of a standing joke, but its builder should not be overly criticized. When last I saw the place, in 1985, many years after we bought it, the house was as I remembered it from my childhood, and still standing. I understand that it was eventually demolished, a victim not of its own shortcomings but of the planning and zoning authorities, today's modern version of the authoritarian feudal lords of the past.

That old house was surrounded by a clutter of other structures, most of which Poppa had built. One such structure was a small building of cedar posts and corrugated sheet iron, with a dirt floor. We called it the shed. It housed an old car that would run if a few things were done to it, some old worn out clothes, some lost or forgotten tools, books, memories, dust, and so forth.

Regarding that collection of clutter, I'll jump ahead here, to 1969, after my marriage to my first wife, Elaine, and our graduations from Texas A&M University. After our graduations, we lived briefly in an otherwise empty house on the back part of the place at Boldtville. One day, we were trying to be useful, and were attempting to get rid of some of the more obviously useless junk that filled the shed. There were a couple of 55 gallon drums, standing on end, across which was a pile of boards. On the boards, was an old mattress. It was the kind that's filled with cotton batting, or some such material. It was old, dirty, and infested with little things that had found homes in it. Elaine and I had a little fire burning in the middle of the back yard, getting rid of stuff. We pulled the mattress down onto the ground and began dragging it toward the fire. Its fabric tended to pull apart and it was leaving a trail of wads of stuffing on the ground behind it. Poppa saw what we were doing and yelled, "Hey! What are you doing with my perfectly good mattress?!? Put it back!" We dragged it back to the shed,

lifted it back onto the boards, tried to collect as much as we could of the stray stuffing, and stuffed it back into the mattress.

Now, back to my story about the animals. For some period of time, my chores included feeding the table scraps to the chickens, every evening. The chicken lot was actually fairly large, as such things go, but not large enough for the number of chickens that lived in it. Consequently, the ground was hard-packed and bare. The only food that those chickens ever got was the grain that we fed to them, any grasshopper that blundered into their lot, and my table scraps. I remember Dina commenting, once, about how embarrassing it was, at the grocery store checkout counter, to buy eggs and chicken feed, both at the same time.

After disposing of the table scraps became one of my chores, I noticed that, when I walked up to the fence, the chickens would rush toward me in a frenzy. They were desperate for food. For a while, I just dumped the scraps over the fence and watched the chickens fight over them. Then, I realized that I could have more fun if I threw the scraps into the lot one at a time. The chickens would all dash toward the morsel. Whichever chicken got there first would grab it and run. The chicken had to stop before she could eat what she was carrying but if she stopped, then another chicken would grab the food from her mouth and run with it. Eventually, some lucky chicken, and I use the word lucky with reservations, would manage to swallow the bit of food. Then, they'd all run back to me for more. I'm sorrowful today for the torture that I inflicted on those poor hungry birds but, at the time, I was just a boy. It was just a game. I didn't realize, at the time, how badly I was treating them.

I was probably at about the same age when I observed, one winter during a rain storm, a small ledge of mud that was being eroded by a sheet of water flowing across our land. The water was gradually but surely removing a layer of soil about 1/4 inch thick. In retrospect, it was probably all that remained of the previous topsoil of that abused landscape. I felt an instinctive panic at what I perceived as something important being lost forever. I immediately set about trying to correct the situation.

Fortunately, the location of my discovery was out of sight of the house, behind the chicken lot. Few people ever went there. I grabbed a shovel and began throwing up a makeshift dam across the path of the water. Predictably, my barrier was quickly outflanked, so I extended it. After it was about 20 feet long, the water behind it got sufficiently deep that it began to overflow the dam at the starting point, near the center of its length, which was also the low point. I continued my battle. Before that winter was over, I'd constructed an earth dam which went entirely across the property at that location. I don't know how long the dam was, but Poppa owned 2 acres, and the dam spanned it across the narrow dimension. During the project, I had invented spillways, constructed of concrete blocks laid on their sides, and had developed the ability to place my spillways for maximum water storage consistent with preserving the integrity of the dam.

During the following years, I unobtrusively built a network of dams and reservoirs that controlled erosion over probably about one third of that 2 acre property. The only overt praise that I remember receiving was from Grandma, and that was coincidental. The summer after I built the first dam, Grandma was visiting, and we were wandering around looking at things. We wandered out behind the chicken lot and she pointed and exclaimed, "Well, lookie there at that!" "What?" I answered. "Lookit

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them weeds! They grow right up to there, and stop almost in a straight line! I wonder what caused that!” I looked for a few seconds, and realized that they were growing upstream from my dam. The water that I’d caught behind the dam, months earlier, was the reason. I remember feeling much greater pleasure at the weeds than at the unintended compliment.

My tendency to “play in the mud” wasn’t appreciated by most people around me, because I often came in covered with the stuff. I remember once at the Harmony Elementary School, the teacher complained of the mud on the floor under my desk. She announced in class that I would be required to stay inside during lunch, and sweep the floor. However, after the other kids had left, she released me, saying that she’d noticed that it wasn’t really that much worse under my desk than under the others. I thought that her first assessment had been more accurate, but I wasn’t one to look a gift horse in the mouth, so I left without further comment.

I’ll mention in passing that the location behind the chicken lot had one other use. We had, just back of the chicken lot fence, marked with the fragments of broken concrete blocks in a narrow row, the little graves of our deceased pets. I don’t think that we ever told our parents about it. We just buried our dead pets there, and marked their graves. One day, we heard a noise and looked in that direction. Mr. Williams, our neighbor just to the west of us, had decided to do Poppa a favor. He drove his farm tractor into that back lot and plowed the entire field, including our little pet cemetery.

There’s one other story associated with the location behind the chicken lot. One day, I wanted to build a device the name of which we’re no longer permitted to use. I will note that it isn’t a sling shot. A sling shot is two long strips of leather connected together in the middle, at a little pouch or cup. One puts a rock in the cup, swings the sling shot around in a circle, and releases one end, thus propelling the rock at a target. The device that I wanted to build, and which I’m no longer permitted to call by its previous name, consists of a forked stick with an elastic strip between the forks and, at the center of the elastic strip, a pouch for holding the rock. To use the device, place the rock in the pouch, pull it back, stretching the elastic strip, and release it. That launches the rock toward the target. I’ll note in passing that the racist attitude that’s revealed by the name of the device isn’t so much a consequence of the name of the device as it is of the intended use of the device that the name reveals. The name, shamefully, tells us who were the intended targets.

My problem in constructing the device was that I couldn’t find a piece of material from which to make the elastic strip. Usually, we would cut such strips out of an old inner tube. They don’t use inner tubes nowadays. Back then, before the advent of tubeless tires, inner tubes were used inside of car tires, to hold the air. I searched high and low, and couldn’t find an old inner tube. Eventually, I gave up. That night, I had a dream. I dreamed that I was wandering around the place, carrying an old inner tube. In the dream, I eventually wandered to the back of the chicken lot and pitched the inner tube as far as I could pitch it, out into the weeds. The next day, I went to that location and there, in the weeds, at the exact location that I’d seen in my dream, was an old inner tube. I did not have then, nor have I ever had since, any knowledge or memory of pitching an inner tube over the fence. The dream is a complete mystery to me.

Regardless of pet cemeteries and magical dreams, the main use of the location behind the chicken lot, in my opinion, was for my efforts at soil and water conservation.

Many years later, after I had long since moved away, Poppa had an old house moved onto that part of the property. I expect that my dams and reservoirs were completely unnoticed during the project, and were utterly destroyed.

Boldtville was several miles east of San Antonio, Texas. At the time, city people with unwanted pets viewed our vicinity as a convenient place to dump the pets. I suppose that they believed that country folks, having a natural love of animals and unlimited land, could take in all the rejects that they could give us. Among various debris and detritus in the shed was a steel box in which we stored the feed for our own animals. Since we usually had at least one dog, the steel box usually contained, among, its various other food, for various other animals, a sack of dog food. The dog food always came in paper sacks. Since the box was usually filled with food for whatever animals we happened to have at the time, the lid usually wouldn't close. For a while, an animal of unknown pedigree became a problem. I never saw it, because it came only at night. Whatever its pedigree, it tore into the paper sack and helped itself to a lot of dog food. The problem was intermittent. The culprit might have been an abandoned animal, dumped by the city folks, or it might have been something else. That deserves an explanation, so I'll digress again.

Along about that time, there were two known sightings of an animal that might have been the culprit. Poppa made one of the sightings, and told me the story. It was a story about a large doglike animal that he saw, sometime during the early 1960s. Late one night, he was sitting alone in the kitchen, doing nothing. He heard a noise out back, got up, picked up the BB gun, and walked out through the back porch and into the back yard. He said that, just as he stepped around the corner, behind the porch, he found himself face-to-face with what he described as a very large white dog. He said that it's back was at about the same level as his waist. Even if its perceived size was exaggerated somewhat by the dark of night, it was still a large animal. He said that he'd have been scared if he hadn't been so busy feeling stupid for walking out into the back yard to investigate a strange noise, in the dark, on crutches, with just a BB gun. The animal turned around and strolled away.

My brother Tommy saw the same animal, or a similar one. According to his best guess, when I asked him about it many years later, he was about 10 or 12 years old at the time, placing his story also in the early 1960s. Poppa had built a large storage box, against the wall, in the bedroom that Tommy and I shared at the time. The top surface of the box was large enough to sleep on, somewhat comparable in size to that of a folding cot. With the help of a foam mattress, Tommy was using the box as a bed. The top surface of the box was at the same level as the bottom of the window, so Tommy could easily see out the window, from the bed, without moving.

One night, Tommy was awakened by what appeared to be a large white dog, laying on the ground and chewing on a giant bone. It was quite noisy, with a lot of crunching. It was late at night, during the summer, so the window was open, with only the screen between Tommy and the animal. It was large enough that he could see it clearly in the starlight.

At first, Tommy thought that the animal was one of our dogs, that had gotten loose. Just as he took a breath to yell at it, the animal stood up. It was only a few feet away from him, with only a window screen between them. When it stood up, it's head and the bone that it held were as high as Tommy was, on the box. Since the floor level

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in the house was a little higher than ground level, outside, it was quite a large animal. After it stood up, it walked away across the front of the house, toward the driveway.

Tommy and I, alone or together, spent many hours hiking around on a large piece of land northeast of our home. In years gone by, it had been pasture, farmland, homesteads, and so forth. By the 1960s, it was, essentially, a kind of wilderness. It was bounded on one side by a country highway and on the other three sides by local roads. It was probably about 25 square miles in size, and was occupied only along the edges, at the roads. Outside of the boundaries of that piece of land, defined by the roads, there was more empty land, or sparsely populated land, for miles. There was plenty of space for a small, resident population of large white canids. During the years that Tommy and I hiked around on that piece of land, we never saw any wolves but, in retrospect, I suppose that the wolves might well have seen us, plenty of times.

Back to my story of the theft of our dog food. Unable to locate any other suitable and vandal proof container for the feed, and unwilling to allow the continued thefts, I decided that I would have to discourage the animal. As I usually did back then, I looked around the accumulation of junk, to see what resources I could find. We lived, as I've said, several miles away from town, and certain city services were not available to us. One of those unavailable services was garbage collection. We were thus left to our own devices for the disposal of all manner of refuse. So, there was an abundance of things to consider as resources. Most of the stuff at my disposal was either worthless, could scarcely be damaged beyond its existing condition, or probably wouldn't be missed for a year or so anyway, if ever. I reviewed my resources.

This story happened while I was in high school. By then, I had accumulated some experience at making use of junk. So, after a false start or two, my choice of materials for the project was simple. I used an empty pasteboard box, some string, and a bunch of empty cans and bottles. I cleared a space on a shelf over the food storage box, put the pasteboard box full of cans and bottles on the overhead shelf, and ran a trip string to where I expected the animal to slink for food. I then went about other business. Later that same day, I heard the unmistakable noise of falling cans and bottles. I was understandably puzzled. It was totally unexpected, because the thief should have come in the night, not in the middle of a Saturday afternoon.

I hadn't thought about it when I built the trap, but I wasn't the only member of our family with an interest in the nocturnal thief. Tommy had come along after I'd finished my trap, and observed it. With characteristic ingenuity, he improved upon it. He removed some more of Poppa's junk from the overhead shelves in the vicinity of the steel box and then, scouting far afield, he'd obtained empty pasteboard boxes whose existence I hadn't even suspected. He'd scrounged sufficient bottles and cans to fill all of them, and arranged them on the overhead shelves. He connected all his boxes to mine with string, one after the other, with the length of each piece of string carefully arranged so that the weight of each falling box would pull the next box after it.

Thus it was that the rain of cans and bottles continued long after the initial surge that I had arranged. At the time, Tommy and I were puttering around with something in the back yard. Neither of us had anything to say, as Poppa huddled under the seemingly endless rain of cans and bottles. Tommy shrugged his shoulders. His arrangement worked beautifully. Every box dumped its entire contents on Poppa, who

could only cringe and wait for the onslaught to end. Later, after the dust had cleared, we quietly returned Poppa's junk to its overhead shelves, and cleaned up the mess of cans and bottles. Poppa never chastised us for the incident. I suppose our intentions must have been transparently obvious.

As with some childhood events, there was a lesson in the can trap incident. I'm grateful now, as I was then, that I do not always learn everything the hard way. Eleanor Roosevelt commented that we should learn from the mistakes of others because we won't live long enough to make them all ourselves. I recognized it as good advice at the time, and I have always tried to follow it. The can trap was my second attempt to foil the thief. I had disassembled my first attempt less than a minute after completing it. One look at it, after I'd completed it, was enough to tell me that it was a stupid thing to do. I congratulate myself on having recognized my stupidity in time. I never told Poppa, or anyone else, about that first trap. As with the second one, I had used a trip string but, instead of a box filled with cans and bottles, I had secured my rifle to the overhead shelf, and run the string to its trigger.

Poppa gave that rifle to me, as a birthday gift, when I entered high school. Nowadays, they'd probably put him in prison for giving a gun to a high school student. Back then, we all had guns. Nobody gave it a second thought. It shouldn't be a surprise that one of our family activities was shooting. We didn't have to go anywhere to do it. Immediately to the northeast of us was that huge piece of unoccupied land, previously mentioned. Nothing lived on it except jackrabbits, snakes, and maybe a population of large white canids. So we could shoot in that direction without any concerns.

In our back yard, we had a specific location for shooting. We had a designated firing line, and rules. Nobody fired a gun unless everybody was behind the firing line. The only reason for going in front of the firing line was to set up a tin can. Anybody can hit a tin can on a post. We had a better way.

Firecrackers were easily available, back then, and we always had a plentiful supply of them on hand. I once used firecrackers, exploded one after the other, inside of my Boy Scout canteen, to expand it back to its proper shape after I'd accidentally crushed a big dent into it. Tommy and I used old pieces of water pipe, and firecrackers, to make toy bazookas, and shoot rocks across the yard. Firecrackers have many uses but our main use for them was to blow empty tin cans into the air. As I've noted, we didn't have access to any kind of garbage disposal service, so we had a large supply of empty tin cans. We'd punch a hole in the bottom of such a can, stuff a firecracker into the hole, and sit the can in a pan of water, open end down. Somebody would light the fuse and step back across the firing line. The firecracker would blow the tin can way up into the air. We shot mostly with rifles but, occasionally, we'd use a handgun. It's a lot more difficult to hit such a moving target with a handgun, but we all got so good with the rifles that a tin can didn't last long until it was so full of holes that it wouldn't go high enough into the air to make a good target.

One day, Poppa invited a friend from work to come over and shoot with us. The friend brought a handgun with him. While we were shooting, that day, Betty was inside doing some homework but, eventually, she strolled outside to see what was happening. Poppa's visitor was a young and handsome fellow, and Betty sort of watched him out of the corner of her eye. After a few minutes, she approached him and asked if she

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could see his handgun. He looked uncertainly at Poppa, who said, "Go ahead. She knows about guns". The man handed his gun to Betty. She examined it and asked if he'd mind if she took a shot. Again, he looked uncertainly at Poppa, who said, "Go ahead. She knows how to shoot" Somebody set up a tin can and lit the fuse. Pop! Bang! Twang!, a direct hit, and the tin can went spinning of in a new direction. Betty handed the gun back to him and said, "Nice gun." She went back inside, to her homework. As I recall, the man never tried to shoot at a tin can that day. I don't recall him ever coming back again.

Dina once made a famous shot with our CO₂ powered pellet pistol. We kept it on the countertop, near the back door. The main purpose of the pellet pistol was to chase away stray dogs that came around to steal the food that we put out for our dogs. One day, Dina was looking out the kitchen window and suddenly bolted for the back door. On the way past the end of the countertop, she grabbed the pellet pistol in her right hand, slapped the screen door open with the palm of her left hand, leaped out the door and, mid leap, took a shot over her left arm. Pop! Yip! She got the dog in it's flank just as it was disappearing around the corner of the garage. We bragged about that shot to all of our friends.

As long as I'm recounting stories of great shots, I'll tell this one. It happened several years earlier, when my cousin Michael was still just a little kid. That year, he got a BB pistol for Christmas. He and a little friend of his spent all morning going up and down the street, shooting at tadpoles in the puddles. His sister, Jan, tagged along, and wanted to take a shot. He didn't want to let a mere girl shoot his BB pistol but, eventually, he gave in to her incessant nagging. She took one shot at a tadpole, handed the pistol back to him, and went back home. Michael also went back home, crying. Eloise asked him what was wrong. He said, "I spent all mornin' shootin' at tadpoles and I never hit a one. Jan took one shot and shot a tadpole right in two!"

That piece of unoccupied land, previously mentioned, served as more than a backdrop for our shooting range. During my high school years, which might have been the time that I was the most unhappy, maybe not, I spent a lot of time hiking around on that land. It got me away from things. Sometimes, I took my dog with me. His father was a German Shepard. His mother was a Boxer. Thus, he was a fairly large dog. Having spent his life at the end of a chain, he was also a mean dog. However, he was mine. When we were out in that unoccupied land, he roamed far and wide, but he always kept track of my location, and ran past me often. He always came back home with me, except for the last time. I never knew what happened to him. One day, he just didn't come back.

Tommy sometimes went on those hikes with me. Maybe not real often because one of the benefits of the hikes was solitude. As just noted, it got away from the troubles in my life. Nevertheless, sometimes Tommy went with me. One time, we were exploring a large dry wash, almost big enough to be called a canyon. We discovered a cone-shaped rock, smoothly tapered. It was flat on the large end, the flat surface being perpendicular to the axis. The narrow end was smoothly rounded. We were sitting on the edge of a ledge of large rock, above an even larger rock surface below us. We were passing the cone-shaped rock back and forth, admiring it. Tommy fumbled it and dropped it onto the rock shelf below. It broke into two pieces. Tommy looked really unhappy. He said, "It took nature a million years to make it and it took me only a couple of minutes to break it."

On one of our hikes, Tommy and I went further into the region than we ever had before. We must have been very near to its center. We found an old, abandoned house. It looked like the small farm houses, or prospector's shacks, that you see on the western movies. It was falling apart from age. There were a few old, rusty farm implements sitting around. There was a pile of old lumber. For no particular reason, just exploring, Tommy and I crawled up onto the pile of lumber. We noticed a dark space between a couple of the boards and one of us reached out for a rock and dropped it through the space. It took a long time for the rock to hit the bottom. It was a long way down. We got off of the pile of lumber as quickly as we could. It was an old dug well. Nobody had the least idea where Tommy and I were. If that pile of boards had collapsed, then we'd probably have slowly died, at the bottom of the well, assuming that we'd survived the fall.

A good many years later, I graduated from college, but not with flying colors, as Grandma had demanded. I just graduated. Sadly, my discontent didn't end when I graduated. It continued as a so-called military obligation, forcing me into involuntary servitude in the Naval Reserve. It continued in the form of so-called job opportunities, luring me into the clutches of the government's corporate establishment. I spent that entire first part of my life trying to do what was expected of me. It wasn't until I was in my late 30s or my early 40s that I began to understand that I should have had other choices, and that I'd been deprived of them, in advance, without my knowledge or consent.

After that, I began to make other choices. As I mentioned earlier, that story is available in detail in my memoir *Outward Bound*. I don't need to tell it again here. However, I will mention one thing. That one thing is that my efforts to take control of my life served only to replace one kind of duress with a different kind of duress. That's how this particular police state works. If you don't submit to its illegitimate jurisdiction, then you're deprived of access to all of the things that you want or need, and over which the police state has usurped control. See my memoirs *Outward Bound* and *The Rise and Fall of Mere Keep*.

I eventually got myself into a situation, staying at least for a while on property that's owned by a family member. That situation is reasonably satisfactory. It isn't perfect but, admittedly, it's the best situation that I've had so far. I'm living alone. I like being alone. Mostly, I avoid contact with other people. I seldom leave the property. My biggest source of stress is the fear that some visitor, probably another member of the family, will show up and intrude into my work, tamper with my yard projects, meddle with my tools, or otherwise disrupt my solitude and my tranquility. That has already happened a time or two. I hope that my objections have reduced the likelihood that it will happen again, or at least not often. Nobody seems to like me much, and that probably helps to keep them away.

Things aren't quite as good now as they were for a while. There's a renter here who's a frequent annoyance. Almost everything that he says or does annoys me. I avoid him as much as possible. He imported a woman who lived with him for a while. The owner bought two little piece-of-shit dogs, so I have to put up with them. To her credit, she keeps them inside most of the time. Next, she allowed another family member to move into one of her spare rooms. How can I object? I'm living here, too. Sadly, he brought with him a girlfriend and two more little piece-of-shit dogs. One of the dogs is capable of barking all day, nonstop. The girlfriend had a baby. So, again, I

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have to put up with things that I don't like. I don't have much control, if any, over any of it but I suspect that this is the best situation that I'm ever going to find..

I won't say that I'm necessarily happy here. I doubt that I've ever been happy anywhere, at least not much, not for very long, not since that first day at the Boldtville School. Mostly, I'm reasonably content, as long as people, their girlfriends, and their piece-of-shit dogs will leave me alone. I have my yard work, my writing, and my solitude. I hope that my present situation will continue, and maybe even improve. However, it doesn't seem likely that any of the extra people here, or their dogs, or their girlfriends, are going to leave any time soon, but I can hope.

There's one last thing to mention. While I was attending Texas A&M University, one of my fondest thoughts was how good it would be when I looked at the place in the rear view mirror, as I drove away for the last time. When I drove away, I forgot to look.

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