

Stockton

The Park

It was a crummy little trailer covered with tar paper in a crummy crowded little trailer park on a dirt street in a crowded run-down neighborhood with lots of derelict cars.

Not a happy place to land after the ranch, but the post-war housing shortage was particularly acute in the Stockton area, and Mama didn't have time to be choosy.

In the trailer next to ours lived an older couple with an apparent drunkard of a son about twenty-five years old who came in late almost every night and got into a fight with his parents, who moaned and groaned and complained in loud agony about the sins of their wayward child. Every night they asked him to go away, and every night he threatened to leave them, but it continued on and on and on.

I was back in church school, and there were some good kids there. The other eighth graders were A. Dwight Smith, who liked to be called "Dwitty," Cloyd Garner, Barbara Ulm, and Adriane Abdullah. Down a grade or two were Cherie Eller and Clarence Ing, among others, including Dwight's younger brother Charles and sister Carrie. Clarence was a

short, chubby, jolly Chinese boy whose father was a respected doctor in the city, and Clarence was planning on a medical career himself. Cherie was a bright, happy small kid with a funny laugh and white-blond curls and freckles. Adriane was a quiet, pleasant girl with a narrow face and black almost straight hair and dark eyes and slightly olive skin. It was easy to imagine her as the sorrowing maiden in the song "Juanita." Barbara was a big girl with reddish blond hair and a funny round nose and forehead. Cloyd was a dark giant—tall, black wavy hair meticulously combed in DA style, very white skin, and piercing black eyes that flashed fire everywhere he looked, even when he was smiling. His sister was Arlea's age, a bright cheerful girl with short straight black hair, and they got to be good friends.

Dwitty quickly latched onto me as a buddy, and I was comfortable with him because he was from a poor family and didn't mind that we lived in a crummy little trailer park. I had tried to hide the fact from everybody else, but it was OK with him. He had chestnut eyes and wavy dark brown hair cut short like a bristle brush. His hair line came to point over the middle of the forehead like it was trying to build a little horn. One thing I especially liked about him was how he tried to sing. He couldn't tell one note from another, up or down, and his favorite song was, "My Bucket Has a Hole In It," which he sang over and over again for hours while we were walking around. I never could figure out what the melody was supposed to be until I heard someone else sing it.

Our teacher was Mr. Bergey. Right away I figured out there were lots of things he didn't know. I started correcting his mistakes in science class, but that caused some problems. Finally I just let him say any wrong thing he wanted. If I thought it was important, I would tell the other kids about it during recess. We were amused about his noisy stinky bowel movements. Any time he came into the bathroom when we were there, we prepared for a bomb out. He quit teaching after that year and went up to Pacific Union College near

Napa to manage the laundry. I thought that was a job better suited to his talents and personality than teaching.

Danny was going several times a week, after Mama got home from school in the afternoon, to work with a speech therapist at College of the Pacific. He took it seriously and worked hard at it, practicing his lessons with me at home when no one else was around, and gradually he started speaking so that people could understand him better.

I got sick with the mumps, and Mama said I was at a very dangerous age for that disease, that it could affect my future as a father and husband, so I stayed in bed for more than a week, with the sun beating down hard and hot on the black tar trailer roof, almost no air circulation, and wishing I could get free. When I could get up and walk around without danger, Mama took me back to the ranch to stay with Daddy until I got completely well. After a few days I went back to the River School and sat at my old desk. Everybody was surprised to see me, but I didn't tell them anything about why I went away or why I came back.

I wasn't there long. One Sunday I went back to Stockton with Mama and rejoined my class there the next morning. They were surprised to see me, especially Mr. Bergey. He had put away all my books and things and seemed slow to get them out again for me. But Dwight and the other kids were glad to have me back with them.

Driving back and forth weekends between Stockton and the ranch, we went through Ione, where there was a large reform school for delinquent boys. It was set back from the highway a distance, a tall ugly building with towers and turrets made of red brick, and windows glaring out like vacant eyes. I thought it was a horrid prison and how horrid it would be to have to live there.

Near the reform school a noisy conveyor carried buckets of clay from the pits to the refinery. It was a fine white clay fit for the finest porcelin. The buckets were about two feet square and a foot and a half deep, and they swayed back and

forth hanging down from the cable that dragged them from pole to pole until they went over the hill out of sight. I was always glad to see it because it meant we were about halfway home.

Downtown

Mama was finally able to get an apartment downtown. It was in the very top of a tall wood building next to a park. That part of Stockton was spotted with parks one block square that made a nice break from the downtown environment. There were always older people sitting around on the benches reading newspapers or feeding the pigeons or just jabbering. I watched them out my bedroom window and wondered what they were talking about.

The apartment was much larger than the trailer, and sometimes Daddy would come there on weekends instead of us driving up to the ranch. There was some problem with the building's foundations. Daddy looked at it and said he knew how to fix it, but nothing ever happened. I was afraid for him to be working under that building on the foundations. I could imagine the entire building falling down on top of him, and I wondered what would happen to us if the building toppled over while we were on the top floor.

There was no problem with the hot water. We could run as much as we wanted for washing dishes and baths without building a fire first. I started taking a bath each night before going to bed. Sometimes Danny with me. It was real luxury to lie in the hot water for a long time, and if the water started cooling down, we could simply run some more hot to bring the temperature up to comfortable again. But it was boring to just sit there and splash. One night I started sliding back and forth on my belly, and my peter got hard and started feeling funny. Then my whole groin exploded and pumped out some white stuff that floated to the top of the water. It felt good, and

I tried it again other nights, but I rubbed a raw spot on the bottom of it that made a scab, then a scar and a bump that stayed for years.

Part of the school curriculum was to build something in the woodshop. I chose to build a bird feeder. I designed it so that there would be room for lots of birds to feed at the same time and that it would turn with the wind so that the open side would always be to the lea. I stained it a dark red barn color. Mr. Bergey thought it was ugly, and at the end of the class it just got dumped. I never had a chance to see if the birds would like to eat there. Mama said she was sorry and could have intervened if she had known it was so important to me.

Graduation

I had always thought that graduation would be an important event. But for our eighth grade graduation we were invited to sit with the choir behind the pulpit, and before beginning his sermon the preacher turned around and pointed to us and said, "This is our graduating class." I thought that wasn't much of a graduation ceremony. Nothing of significance to mark my transistion to high school at Lodi Academy just twelve miles north.

But first another summer back home at the ranch.

Women

Daddy told me he had a talk with Leonard Knapp about his language, that as a Christian he shouldn't say things like "gee" and "golly" and "my goodness." He said Leonard thanked him and was trying to use better language all the time.

I went to visit with him and to help him gather eggs like in the older times, and he told me he had finally learned how to get along with women. He said all you have to do is agree

with everything they say and do everything they ask, then life is fine.

I went to see Rossi, but it was different from before. He was spending most of his time with Howard Miller and was short with me. He said Johnny had to drop out of college because of a nervous breakdown. I never saw him again. He just seemed to disappear out of everyone's life. Even Rossi didn't talk about him any more.

When we went to camp meeting back at Lodi, I tried to spend more time with Rossi, but he was more interested in spending time with girls than with me. I tried to be near him anyway, and one night when he was between some tents talking to a girl, I tried to sneak up close to the corner to listen in. I started to stick my head around to get a peak, when he came and thrust his hands out toward me. He must have seen my shadow. One of his fingers went deep into my right eye. It hurt a lot, and I couldn't see anything clearly out of it for several days afterward.

So I gave up and left Rossi to his girls while I joined one of the craft classes where a man was teaching kids how to use a machine spinning a small burr to make fancy designs inside blocks of clear plastic. Every piece he made was beautiful—glistening white roses, tall lacy fir trees, even bears and lions and other animals. I tried it, but I couldn't make anything that looked at all pretty. I touched my finger against one of the grinding wheels, and a small piece of metal shaped like a rounded arrowhead came off and lodged deep under the fingernail. That hurt even worse than Rossi's finger in my eye, and I gave up trying to do anything but just sat around and watched the other people. When the burr came out, it left a separation between my nail and the skin that didn't fill in for several months. Sometimes at noon I went over by the cafeteria to watch the fancy women going in to eat lunch. Mama said that cost too much money, and we ate cold things she fixed in the tent.

After campmeeting we continued going to church at Placerville. There was talk about the new doctor in town and his seventeen year old son, who had a reputation for chasing after the girls. He didn't come to church at first. We just heard stories about him. But one Sabbath he was there, and we were curious if the stories we heard about him were true. After the church service finished, several of us guys were standing by the parking lot watching when Arlene Eberhardt came over the lawn to us with a really weird look on her face. She wouldn't say anything at first. Then she blurted out, "He's going from one girl to the next asking for sex." We didn't see the guy at church after that, and a few weeks later we heard that his father had forced him to get married. I wondered what kind of husband he could be, how long he could stay married with that kind of attitude toward girls.

Mama made arrangements for me to pick pears for Mr. Al Thiele. I was excited to start. I thought I could do a man's job even though I was only twelve years old, but the ladders were heavy, and I had trouble getting them to go into the trees in a position to reach the pears properly. Sometimes they fell over while I was trying to position them. And the bags got heavy before they were half full. Sometimes when I came down from the ladder I would stagger and fall from the awkward weight before I got my feet squarely on the ground. I was getting paid by the box; every time I filled a box, I put my mark on it with a piece of colored chalk, but day by day there weren't very many boxes. Sometimes one of the men would have to help me raise my bag to empty it when the stack of boxes got higher. Finally I had to tell Mama I just wasn't up to it.

We did a small Blister Rust job and made some good money, then it was time to go to Lodi for school.