

Third Grade – Homestead School 1950-52

When I began school in Mill Valley I was entering a much more social life. This was a town with neighbors close by and kids hanging around at the centrally placed schoolyard when it wasn't in session. Everything accelerated for me in my friendships with boys and girls both. I had already had girlfriends in the rural schools but it had a fairy-tale quality of saying a few words every other day. But I had discovered about myself that I formed intense affections and idealized girls and chose prettiest or cutest or most fun. I don't really know if that was unusual. Maybe I have a 'romantic' nature or longing?

In third grade I was drawn to Sandy Christiansen. She was just *it*, nearly everyone agreed. She wore her brown hair in long twin braids which drew her hair back on her scalp and made her look streamlined and sculpted. Was she Danish? That was the kind of beauty she had. You could see her as Heidi, the mountain girl. But to go with it, Sandy was bright, witty, quick at teasing back. I just completely loved being around her. I hadn't really tried to be friends until maybe half way through the year. I had that embarrassing period getting acclimated, and then I was still shy for a while. But then Sandy started to be interested in me a little. There was a rival, though – Jack. Jack the wise guy, the smart guy, the handsome Jack. At this point I was, like most of us, rating everyone as against myself. The boys: who was biggest and where did I rank? Who was toughest? Who was smartest? Fastest? Best in sports? Handsomest? All those things could be *seen*, even smartness (the gold stars next to multiplication tables). Matt Simone was the biggest guy, no question. He was also the best hitter. But something about him wasn't 'tough', although no one ever wanted to tangle with Matt, and there was that myth that quiet big guys were only going to 'take so much'. Anyway, I was short, but I was a very good baseball player and one of the smartest kids. But Jack, damn him, he was taller, pretty good at everything, and he had *charm*. You could tell Sandy and other girls loved to hang out with him. There was a little Cary Grant there, someone who was sly and flattering and a little wicked. Damn that guy.

Somehow it didn't oppress me consciously that I was a year younger than all those kids. I just started adapting. The pain of it wasn't registered over in a box saying: "no fair, I'm a year behind." But an adult might say, *gee, that must be hard, being seven is a mile away from being eight*. In fact some adults did say it. My fifth grade teacher wrote it on my report card...but more on that in its place. I just felt I had an uphill battle with Jack. I couldn't see that some of his panache just came from being eight and having lived in town all his life. He knew everyone. I was a little hick!

I don't remember things with Sandy so much until we got into fourth grade. Jack had receded. I think she got irritated with him and then I began to see he was diminished in my eyes too. Something less confident about him, even pain. Hmm. I have no idea what it was – but when fourth grade began, the way was clear. Sandy and I walked around together, usually with Judy B as escort. Why did girls always do that? A best friend of lesser charms, confiding and mutually judging the boys who approach? I kind of liked it. It was like a court and I was a suitor.

One day on the ball field I had a serious argument with Ken Carnine. We were rivals in baseball for... second best? ...something like that. Probably equals in skill, but Kenny was a little bigger and had something intangible that made you worry about his fierceness. The fight turned into shoves, and

suddenly I realized I wasn't afraid of him. Something in the shove told me he was nervous too. So we jumped each other, wrestling wildly and falling into a heap, flailing and strangling. It was for real, the first fight I ever had like that, far from the classrooms and surrounded by cheering kids. Of course when you're in there, you don't hear anything, you're pounding away and avoiding a kick and so on. Finally a bell rang and sober heads prevailed, friends of each pulling us apart. We all walked back to the school building buzzing with it.

I was with my two best friends, and feeling pretty good. I wasn't hurt, and I knew I had gotten in some blows and had been 'on top' part of the time. My friends said I won...of course. I saw Sandy and Judy pulling up near and parallel, and could hear them talking about me. Sandy glanced over admiringly, and Judy said to her but loud enough for me to hear: "He did it for *you* Sandy, you *know* it's true!" I swear on my father's ancient pick-up truck, that's word for word exactly what she said. Can a boy feel any better than that? Any more vindicated, exalted, chosen? I doubt it. My friends looked at me shaking their heads, *wow*. Sandy was flushed and hurried ahead, but who cared? The deed was done, the greatest movie line in history had been spoken in real life. "He did it for *you* Sandy, You *know* it's true"

Had I done it for Sandy? That part started right in a few minutes later. Um, no, not really. I mean, I doubt Kenny is her *enemy*, nor was there a shred of evidence that his claim that he was safe at third was a veiled attempt to kidnap Sandy and hold her for ransom. But then, what *did* Judy mean? I did what for Sandy? Oh...was she saying, *why does a man fight? Why does he care at all?* It's true that I had glimpsed Sandy in the crowd of onlookers. I wonder if she had been watching 'in horror' as her boyfriend was in grave danger...and the fact that I had come through it 'manfully' with honor, made her think I did it for her. That is, if I *badn't*, she would have felt awful, even disgraced. "Your boyfriend got creamed!" kind of thing. So maybe I *had* come through for her. It certainly had been on my mind as they came up near, knowing that she had seen the fight and had heard me praised by other kids.

This state of affairs was untenable in some way. What could we do, elope? It just settled in to a typical fourth grade year. We strolled around school together at times, and we got each other best Valentines – but she lived beyond walking range so there weren't any visits. I did experience a swelled-head though.

One flavor of this manifested in the many fantasies I had in which I saved Sandy's life. I recall one as I walked home and came up from the woods to Janes Street. I imagined Sandy walking just ahead of me, then a car coming, then I would dive out there and push her off the road right as the car was inches away. Then the fantasy would slow into molasses as I negotiated my *own* fate. Would I get hit? It's impossible to be that close and headlong leaping like a bullet across the front of the car without getting hit. But how badly? I finally settled on a leg being run over. *Aaagh!* A broken leg! But I would stay silent and brave lying on the road bleeding as Sandy got up from the bushes and realized the immense scope of my deed of sacrifice. Then came the driver out of the car and being taken to the hospital with Sandy riding with me, and then newspaper stories of the hero, picture in the paper with Sandy. I probably stood there a half hour running these variations in my mind. *Bliss*.

Not long after that fight, I was more caught up with the list-making between boys and girls...I mean, I had come up on the lists of the girls and was provoked by some of them to make my own list.

Judy instigated it, as she sat right behind me. I still remember my top three. Sandy. Zoe Anne. And then Judy herself, whom I liked a lot and who was in fact very cute. Down the row from us was Karen, a perverse girl whose awkwardness came with a bitter tongue. She would irritate someone and then lash at them. There was a day when I heard her raise her voice at Judy. Then I heard Sandy who was further back, stand up for Judy and tell Karen to shut up. Karen then got really steamed, and Judy stood up in the aisle to go over to her and get in her face. I saw Sandy at the periphery and suddenly felt there was a question of honor and gallantry. Judy was number three, and she was about to get in a fight, and Sandy, *man, if anyone ever touched Sandy? Whew.* Everything inflated to a ridiculous extreme in my fantasy and I stood up suddenly and stepped between Judy and Karen, saying forcefully: “Just what seems to be the problem here?”

As soon as I voiced it, I wanted to die. I heard myself as if disembodied and knew it was way-over-the-top pompous grown-up bullshit. *Oh no, why did I do this?* And knew it instantly in the faces of all three girls. They didn’t need any boy to step in there at all. It *wasn’t* going to be a fight, and Judy didn’t like being interrupted. Sandy was looking embarrassed, but she was further away at least. Karen of course pounced: “It’s none of your beeswax!” And this completely took my sails down, because I knew she was right. *Oh, my head.* I sat down flustered and they just let it go. But I truly learned something for ever. What was it? I don’t remember... but I learned it.

There was another fight for me that year and it didn’t end with such glory. Fortunately only myself and my adversary saw it. Dennis was about my equal physically and we had been neighborhood friends during the year, but some little damn thing irritated us and we ended up yelling and shoving. One shove was too hard, so the other guy swung a fist. We were both angry so there was no backing off – we both were hitting and standing toe to toe. Punches were all to the stomach, and for some reason I felt it was boring. Neither of us was hurting much and we didn’t really hate each other. So after three apiece of those oofing blows, I had an inspiration coming from my comic book readings. *Duck!* I’d duck the next punch and come back with a flurry and he’d run away. My timing was perfect, I ducked as he swung...and his fist caught me right in the eye. AAAH! No! I knew something was wrong at the last second, too late.

Dennis was scared to have hurt me and backed away. I hated myself so much at that moment that I wanted to kill Dennis. The shame of having ducked a stomach punch, thus allowing an idiot to have the glory of punching me “right in the eye”, fired me up and I charged after him. He was terrified. I’d never had such a lethal anger towards a kid. I wanted it known that Dennis – despite the lucky punch – did not any way beat me. We ran all over the schoolyard, nip & tuck, but finally I gave up. He stood off a ways saying he didn’t mean it. So it was over. No one in fact did talk about it – maybe that was the point of my raging after Dennis, that he shouldn’t boast about it. Anyway, to him I had just stumbled or something, he didn’t know the depths of my stupidity.

I had another stupid moment that year, showing yet that I was still adapting to this village. Baseball in all its forms was obsessive for me, and I was getting good enough to feel like a know-it-all, a decision-maker. One game we played at recess, when there weren’t enough for two teams, was peggy-on-a-bounce. One kid was ‘up’ and fungoed the ball randomly to the fielders who tried to catch them either on the fly or first bounce. I forget our rules exactly, but the idea was to get points for replacing the batter. Bounces were half the score of flies. I had one more fly to go, and when I caught one, I

started into the plate saying I was up. The batter disputed it hotly, “you ain’t up yet, one of those was a two-bouncer!” “Liar, I’m up and I can prove it. I’ve got the ball!” For some reason a couple of other kids took his side. I’m *still* dead sure I was right, especially because some of those others weren’t really ballplayers. But they had the feeling I was too haughty about it. He wouldn’t give up the bat, and I stood out in the field holding the ball. Impasse. Finally I said, “if you won’t let me up I’m taking the ball. Game’s over then!” This led to a chorus of boos and yells from the rest of the kids. Uh-oh. Now I’ve laid down a gauntlet and nobody’s on my side. I started to walk away, and saw a girl yelling “cheater!” at me so loud it hurt. They all started in with it, “Cheater!” then came “Quitter!” I was angry at the same time that I knew I was dropping off a cliff socially, so I stomped away. Yelled back, “you’re the cheaters, you wouldn’t let me be up!” “Booo!” I went through with it, took the ball inside and glowered at kids the rest of the day. Somehow this wasn’t a permanent rift. Everybody just forgot it the next day and the game resumed. Maybe they knew secretly that I had been right, but then no one liked the way I had acted about it. Maybe I got the message too and was less autocratic about the rules.

Baseball took a big role in the year when the teachers announced that the annual third vs. fourth grade softball game would happen next day. We third graders had been playing in the yard with fourth graders all year and the best of us kind of knew we might have some better players. Matt Simone was definitely the strongest hitter in the school. Then there was Frank Brunini and Ray Massagli and Carnine and me. All really good. When the game started, I took the mound for third grade. I seemed to have an advanced sense of getting the ball over and changing speeds a little to get batters off balance. We had a great game, and I learned while pitching that I could control the mood of batters. My dad had taught me ways of pitching slow... while winding up as if pitching fast...and vice versa. It was cool to watch a big guy swing too soon and get upset, or dribble the ball right back to first. Then Matt took over at the plate, and we got clusters of hits...and beat them. It was, according to Mrs. Lewis, the only time in school *history* that such an upsetting of the natural order had happened. We walked off the field as heroes. The idea came to us that there was a record book somewhere, like in the major leagues, and that *this* year, *these* kids, *this* hallowed third grade in *this* little town, had risen up and knocked off the presumptive and perennial winners. Homestead Third Grade lives for ever!!

During that year there were times when I felt strange to myself. I mean precise times and definite feelings that disturbed me. The first occurrence was while I was playing tetherball in the yard. I felt that I wasn’t there. That I was hitting the ball correctly and answering when spoken to, but my essential self was floating and simply observing. Once I noticed this, it upset me. Not being sure where it *was* that I was upset...upset me further. At moments it felt like I was outside my body, but not in the graphic sense of having a pair of magical eyes that can see your body from a distance. More like...there *is* no body. Things are going on as usual but there’s someone in there that’s seeing it all as if he were at a show. It confused me enough that I quit the game and went off by myself. If that is me, then why is part of me worried? Maybe everyone is like this but they never tell...like the Emperor’s clothes?

Eventually the mood dissipated, but it came back to me many times in those years, so that I began to accept it as a kind of weather. When I reach back and remember the feeling, I am struck by how adult the disembodied soul was. It was dispassionate and mature, and leads me to also remember that: I had been in therapy for internalized fear; my parents always talked to me as an adult; my mother had taken a full-time job so I was alone when I got home from school; and my father had an awesome temper. Not to mention the move to a new town and school. A particular array of stresses, and a boy

who was accustomed to being addressed as a mental equal with adults. It was as if that little man inside me just popped loose of its sac. A homunculus. But it never had the quality of independent voicing or advice, like a bad spirit or second personality. It just observed. But that observing was ...intelligent. And disconcerting.

Our teacher in third grade was a Miss Reger. She was a fresh recruit from college that year, and her youth was a sensation for us. She was very pretty, rather like Jane Wyman in the movies. The boys all had varying degrees of awe or fascination with her. In my case, I would say...*crush*. She was not going to just be our big sister though, we had to work hard and pay attention. It was interesting to hear someone that young rebuke us in a stern voice. She was a *force*, we found that out early. But we understood the language of it and still loved her. She *had* to keep order, sure. But if you asked her a question, she was sweet and gentle, and really cared about us each. So, of course we asked her questions.

In the front of the room was a huge dictionary on a stand. Occasionally one of us would go up and check something. She encouraged it, and derailed quite a few of our questions by pointing to the dictionary. One day a few of the boys had been talking about dirty words and that all of them were in the giant dictionary. One guy claimed he had looked up 'shit' – and it was there all right. During recess this caught momentum as we thought up words and wondered if they would be in there. We dared each other to look up certain ones. Back in class, a couple of boys were going up and looking up words and then coming back winking and nodding. Someone jabbed me and said it was my turn. I didn't really want to but a dare is a dare. The word I looked up was 'rape' and I was standing there at the page when Miss Reger realized something was up. Somebody giggled and I looked like the reason. She came over to me and asked what was going on. I was so mortified that she knew right away I was hiding something, but I wouldn't answer her. So she took me with her out in the hall, and shut the door behind us. I was deeply ashamed. She said "what are you boys up to?"

I didn't want to snitch but this was too much, I couldn't lie to Miss-beautiful-Reger. I confessed: "We were looking up 'bad' words."

Here it took an unexpected turn. She asked me what the word was. I hesitated, but she said, "Come on Eric, I'm a grown-up, I've heard all the words."

So I told her 'rape'. There was a two-beat pause of shock from her. This was really too intimate. She gathered herself and asked me if I had gotten the definition? I said no. She said, "It means when a man forces himself on a woman, it's a crime."

Ob. How can I tell how embarrassed I was? Shame that I had been looking up such a savage word and shame that I was revealing myself as a boy who had perverse interests like that, in front of the woman I most wanted to impress in the world? I hated my friends for instigating this, but I knew I had to take the rap.

We stood there blinking a few moments and then Miss Reger revealed herself as a 'modern' woman. She said "Listen to me, the boys got worked up about something and you felt you had to go through with it, right? It's just nonsense. I'm not going to punish anyone but I want it to stop. And if you ever think of things like this on your own, and want to know what some 'bad' word really means,

you come to me and I'll explain it to you. All right? You are a wonderful kid Eric, I expect much better from you.”

We went back in the room and the boys were all subdued and worried about consequences. I was worried that I'd never be able to look Miss Reger in the eye again. For days afterward, I was in a cloud of humiliation. But one thing stayed in my mind that took a little off my admiration for her. It was a piercing sense that she had crossed a line with me. Had been *too* understanding at the end. It really made me uncomfortable that she offered to explain sex words to me. She may have been thinking we had a good bond, that I was like her little brother. Or that she was in fact a progressive who thought at that moment she had to leap over the expected punishing sternness of the marms and battle-axes. That's great, but I wished she hadn't offered. Because I *did* know the meaning of those words. We were looking up those words just for the thrill of seeing them on a printed page. The forbidden things, right there in that treasure chest. Open those mighty pages and see all the words, regardless of their ethnicity or body part. And I didn't want to hear about them from *her!* In a way, that *contretemps* in the hall was in itself so...seamy, that my brain couldn't handle it. She was bent right over me, maybe holding me. Especially that she closed with that last appeal to my goodness, that she *expected more of me*, that she had in fact singled me out in her heart, just as I had hoped for months. It was too much. And the word! If only it had been 'fart'.