

Before I Forget Again

By Paul Edward Johnson



Ankle deep in muddy muck I lose my right shoe.

Got to reach down. Pull it up from under my foot. Maybe carry it to that outhouse over yonder. And somehow put it back on.

I tug it up from under the muck. And take one more step forward.

There goes my other shoe. Sucked under this ankle-deep mud.

Shit. My brand-new Buster Brown shoes.

Mom bought me them. Saturday. Just before Labor Day. So I'd have new shoes to wear to this school today.

How can that outhouse surrounded by mud be my new school?
And why'd Mom say that it was?

And how I gonna get all this mud out of my new shoes? And get them wiped off?

Hope that outhouse has toilet paper.

The outhouse stands tall upon a corner of that tar-topped concrete platform.

The platform's about 80 feet long. Maybe 40 feet wide.

Raised two or maybe three feet above the mud.

Three wood stairs lead up to the outhouse door.

My cruddy new Buster Brown shoes hang by their shoe strings in my muddy left hand.

I open the outhouse door with my other muddy hand.

But look. It's not an outhouse. Just inside the door's a staircase.
Leading on down to a concrete basement floor.

At the bottom of the staircase a bare lighted light bulb hangs from the basement ceiling.

This basement stinks. Ripe. Sure smells like an outhouse.

A damp passageway along a wall of concrete blocks leads to a room filled with kids. Each kid seated in tiny wood desks.

Each desk with a fold-down wood seat.

An old woman scrawls something on her portable blackboard.

I spot an empty desk; plop my muddy shoes under the seat.

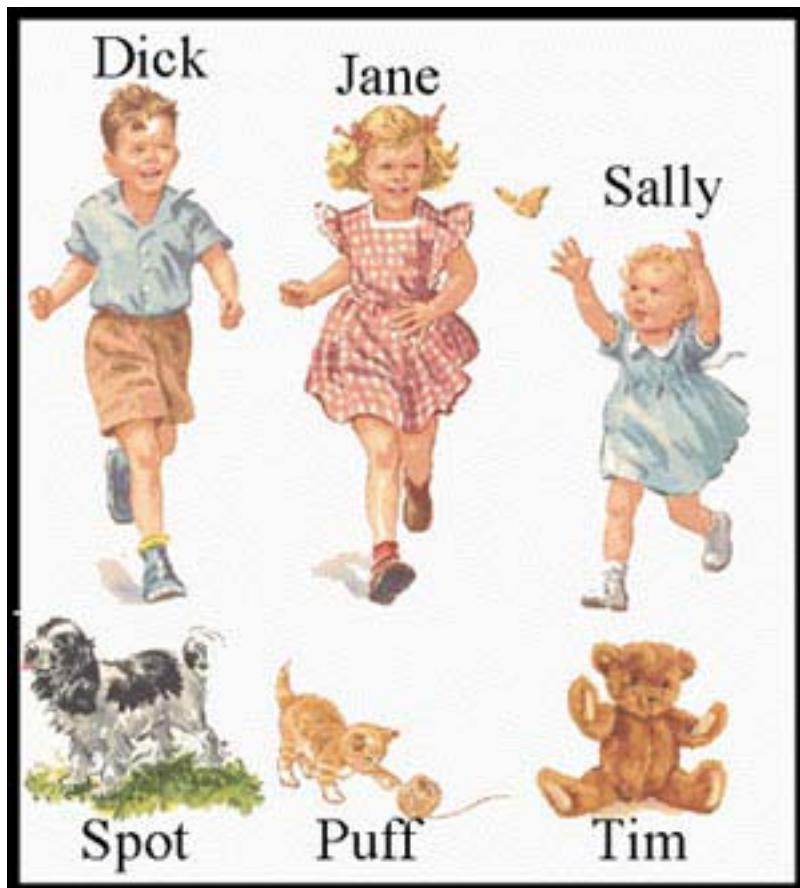
From where I'm sitting in the back row I can't make out what she's screeching on the blackboard with her splintering chalk.

She turns and wanders toward a table stacked with books, She hands the books to each kid who's sitting in a desk at the front of each row. Books pass backward down my row.

The boy whose straw hair sticks in front of my face swings his right wing and smacks a book upon my desk.

The old woman tells us to open the cover and write our name on the sticker pasted inside the cover. But I don't have a pencil.

She tells us to turn to the first story in the book. I press my eyes close to the words and try reading out loud with all the rest of kids.



It's Dick and Jane and Sally and Spot and Puff and Tim.

All back together again. Just like they all were last year. When I was in second grade in Detroit Michigan.

But this year I'm not in Detroit anymore.

Instead I'm in a place called Circle Pines. In Minnesota. About a half-hour drive from a city called Minneapolis. Where Mom and me got my new shoes on Saturday.

As I turn the page in the book, Dick and Jane are saying words I can't understand.

And Dick and Jane seem to be older now. More than a year older. Maybe two years older?

I'll just look at the pictures of Dick and Jane.

And their dog. Good old Spot.

The old lady must be the teacher.

She's saying it's now time for us to go outside for recess.

So all the kids pound up the staircase.

I carry my yucky shoes to a door near the staircase that has a sign on it: BOYS ROOM.

I scrub my mud-caked shoes in the Boys Room sink.

I squish up the wood stairs and open the door at the top of the staircase.

There's a pretty girl seated upon the step outside the door.

I sit down beside her and say, "Hi. I'm Paul."

She turns, looks down at my soiled shoes, and says nothing.

Her shoes shine. Spotless.

So I ask, "How you keep your shoes so clean?"

A shadow hovers over me.

"She walks on the board planks. We all do. 'Cept dumb you."

I look up over my left shoulder, at a big boy, twice my size. He wearing a coat I've only seen men like my father wear.

A gray coat that goes all the way down to his knees. The collar hoisted up to his ears. And a belt around the waist.

"Who you?" I ask.

"Harley. Get off that step. I sit next to Marilyn. Not you."

After school that afternoon, the mud's all dried up and the school yard now's just hard pocks and potholes of clay.

Harley approaches me; the straw-hair boy who sat in front of me close to Harley's side.

Straw Boy, he's grinning at me.

Harley's not grinning.

Harley, standing above me on the slope, shoves my shoulders and says, "Marilyn's my girlfriend. Find your own."

"You don't want to mess with Harley here," says smiling Straw Boy.

"Harley's got a TV set. And we watch the wrestling matches. And Harley and me? We know all the holds. The same holds Gorgeous George uses in the ring."

I trod down the crusty slope toward the building that's across the dirt road. The one-story building my brother Larry went in earlier that morning to become a first grader.

Larry stands outside the door, waiting. To walk him home.

"Sure you know the way?" Larry asks.

"Think so. The same way Mom told us to get here."

Larry points across the dirt road and asks, "That outhouse over there? That's really where you go to school?"

At our dinner table that night in our tiny kitchen, little baby sister Sylvia squirming in her high chair, little sister Sue sitting beside me, Larry sitting across the table from me, and Mom and Dad at both ends of the wobbly Formica table, Dad asks me a question:

"So what you learn your first day of school?"

"Some new stuff."

"What new stuff?"

"Vocabulary words."

Larry pipes up and declares, "I can say the whole alphabet now. Can you Paul?"

"Of course."

"So say it."

"A. B. C. D. E. F. G. H . . . I . . . J . . ."

"And? And? And what else Paul?"

"And all the rest of the letters. Dink."

"So? Say 'em."

Dad glares at me and asks, "You can't say all them?"

Larry waves his fork in front of my face.

And in less than ten seconds, like a machine gun, Larry spouts out all 26 letters. Plus his mouthful of peas.

Dinner done, we clear the Formica table, piling our dirty dishes and glasses and knives and forks and spoons on the kitchen counter.

Dad rolls up his white shirt sleeves and begins washing the milk stained glasses while Mom rinses them.

Larry and me grab dish towels and wipe. And Baby Sylvia kicks her pudgy little legs up and down in her high chair.

Dishes done, we all head into the living room, where there's the sofa on one end, two chairs near the front window, two more next the wall across from the sofa, and the piano up against the wall that separates our living room from the room that's Mom and Dad's bedroom.

Dad sits down on the chair in front of the piano and opens up the Fireside Book of Songs.

And with tiny Sylvia in Mom's arms, we gather round Dad, he singing a song about a girl named Clementine.

Clementine's shoes were herring boxes. Size nine. Without topses.

Every night after dinner we sing about Clementine.

She drove her ducklings to the water every morning at nine. And one morning she struck her foot against a splinter, and fell into the foaming brine.

Her ruby lips stayed above the water for a time. Blowing bubbles soft and fine. But the song's writer was no swimmer, and he lost his Clementine.

And we sing about some other gal who will be coming round the mountain.

And we sing about John Brown's body's molding in his grave.

And we sing about Shenandoah. And Red River Valley. And about old man river. And lots of other river songs. The river songs are my favorites.

I can't read the words upon the pages in the Fireside Book of Songs.

But that doesn't matter. All's I have to do is just flow along with the song as Dad sings it with his big voice.

Dad's a baritone who also sings bass. Which he does every Sunday in a big church he drives us to in Minneapolis.

Hate going there for Sunday School. Have to wear my itchy wool suit Mom got me. At the same store she got my new shoes.

Hate going to bed now, too. Always after we finish singing.

It's still light outside. And is only around eight.

The kids shouting outside are still playing on the dirt road in front of our house. And we have to be in bed?

Larry and me dump sand from our shoes. Toss our shirts and pants. And crawl under our covers.

Well at least Dad lets us listen to Bob Hope and Jack Benny on the radio that's on that table between our beds.

Tonight Bob and Jack are with Doris Day on the radio show.

Love how Doris sings her song about a sentimental journey.