

Marble Game

Story and illustration by Ed Rau

Hey! Betcha I could get all your marbles!”

“Naw, I don’ wanna play.” Big Brother declined the game.

“Chicken! Puuuuck, puuuck, puck, puck, puck!” Dennis Colby hung over his front fence taunting us as we walked down Landrew St. toward Knight’s General Store for a jar of horse radish, a nearly forgotten detail to go with tomorrow’s roast beef supper.

“Puuuuuck, puuuck, puck, puck, puck, puck,” echoed from Dennis’s yard as we hurried along.

“He’s just a bully from school, fourth grade I think,” Big Brother whispered, who was in second.

It was a time when every school kid carried at least a dozen marbles in pockets and marble bags, and games were everywhere. There were clearies, puries, cat-eyes, dough-boys, steelies and many other prized designs. And everybody had a lucky shooter. Some kids played so often they had bruised their thumbnails into blackness, as if their thumbs had been slammed in a car door or hit with a hammer. The craze was intense!

At the store, Chet punched the cash register keys with stubby fingers and when the drawer opened with a ding, said, “Boys, that sun’s almost down. You’d best hurry home ‘fore dark.

We topped the hill above the store under broken rain clouds, a dazzle of orange, red and silver grey, but the February twilight would soon be upon us and my breath was smoke in the chill evening air. Big Brother and I each wore new powder-blue fitted denim jackets with navy-blue knit trim at the sleeves, collar and waist, belated Christmas gifts from Grama and Grampa that arrived in the middle of January. I had my jacket zipped up to my chin and the pocket linings were warm and soft on my hands as I fingered the few marbles that some of the

big kids had given me. I loved this jacket!

There were no sidewalks in town and the gravel and dirt paths had puddles and boggy holes here and there, minefields for young boys in new clothes. As we approached Dennis’ house, I noticed that he was now out in front of his fence. I had a bad feeling.

“Puuuuck, puuuck, puck, puck, puck, puck,” came his mocking as we approached. “Guess you can’t shoot worth a damn. Chicken pucky!” I’d never heard some of the words Dennis was saying, but somehow I knew they were bad words and I was afraid.

As strong-willed as he was, Big Brother was also fiercely competitive. To pass by these taunts twice was just too much.

In a matter of seconds, he and Dennis had a stick-drawn circle in the muddy dirt at the edge of the road. They scattered their marbles inside the circle and took turns shooting from beyond the marked edge. A clack of conquest signaled the winning shooter to retrieve the struck marble and shoot again. In short order, Big Brother had won more than half the marbles in the circle and his marble bag on the ground was filling up. The sun disappeared below the horizon and the evening air turned bitter cold.

All at once Dennis shouted, “You cheated,” and jumped on Big Brother with a hammer lock, leg wrestling him into the muddy marble circle.

Big Brother grunted, arched his back and croaked, “Let go!” as he twisted free of Dennis’ throat hold!

Then Dennis grabbed his bag of marbles and wouldn’t give it back.

I stood there bewildered, until Dennis charged and laid me out in the muck and weeds at the edge of the pavement. By the time Big Brother and I escaped, our fancy new jackets were stained with grass and mud. Our new pants

and shoes were too. A short distance from home, he tried to brush me off with pine boughs, but it was useless. Our new clothes were a filthy mess!

With trepidation we approached the little white gate that was within sight of the window by the kitchen table and saw Dad relaxing there reading the newspaper. He glanced up as we approached in the porch light, and then did a double-take of angered astonishment.

Big Brother handed over the jar of horseradish as we entered the house in tears and Dad demanded to know what we had done to our new clothes. Big Brother told the truth about the dares from Dennis, the marble game on the way back from the store, and how Dennis had jumped us both.

“You boys need to learn a lesson about taking dares,” Dad said, but both of us knew it was really about ruining our brand new clothes. “Bring me a stick of kindling from the wood shed.”

Now, part of the punishment of getting a whipping was to be sent to the woodshed to pick out the stick of kindling that would be used on our own backsides.

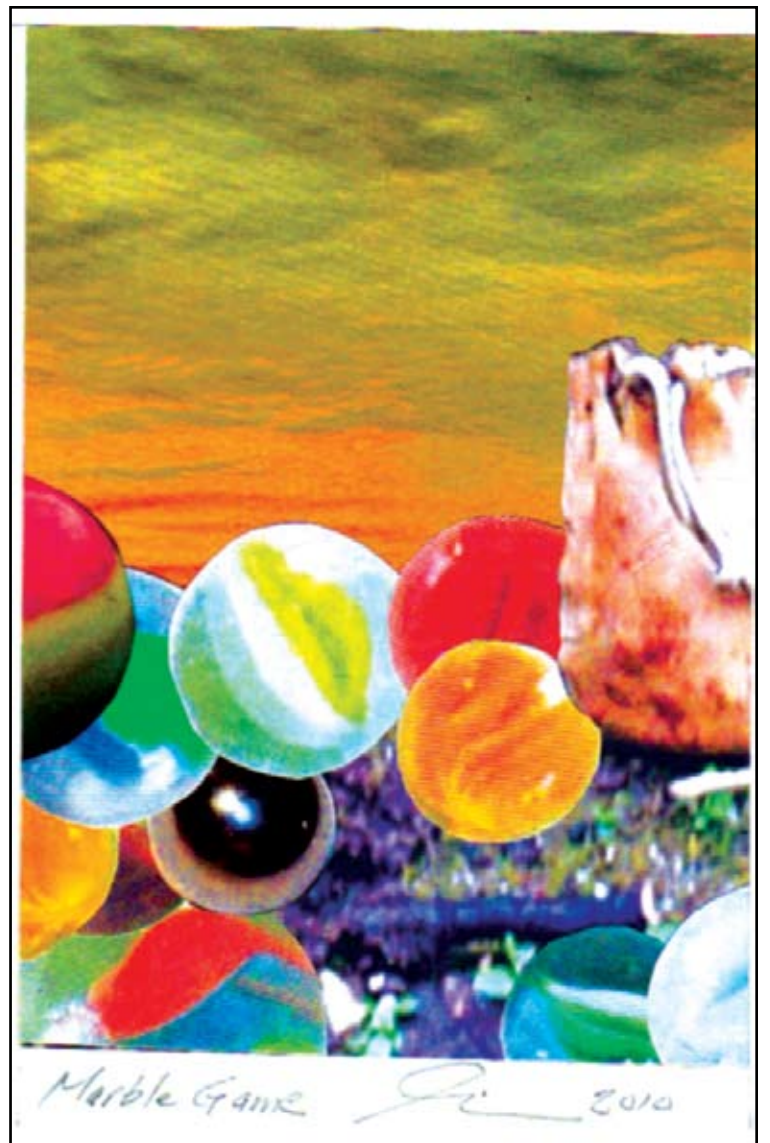
When we returned from the woodshed, Dad was nowhere to be seen and Mom said, “Get those clothes into the wash tub to soak right now! What a mess!”

“Where’s Dad?” asked Big Brother, trembling and still holding the stick of kindling.

“He went out for a walk to cool off.” Big Brother dropped the stick into the wood box by the stove. Mom hurried us through dinner and sent us to bed early. As I lay in my warm bed in the dark, I heard muffled voices in the kitchen after Dad came back home. I felt lucky about missing the spanking, but sad about my new clothes.

It was a weird thing, but Dennis Colby never bothered us again.

THE END



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