

ADVENTURES
IN
GROCERY SHOPPING

*And other short stories
from a cereal aisle aficionado.*

This book is a compilation of Facebook posts that I made over the past three or four years. I began posting short stories in late 2012 and the response was somewhat surprising, as people were clearly enjoying reading the little snippets of my daily life as well as reminiscences of my childhood that I was sharing with them. I was subsequently asked to read some of my stories at an Artist's Co-op in the Philly area. I accepted, and as an established singer-songwriter, also incorporated my songs into an evening of story reading. The first "Storytime with Dan May" occurred in March of 2013. Again, the positive response from the audience led to another performance in Ohio, and as I continued to post stories on regular basis, the requests that I put the stories in a book started coming in. And this, "Adventures In Grocery Shopping" is the result. The stories appear in the post format in which they originally appeared on Facebook, without indentations and left justified. I stayed true to this style because I wanted them to appear as much like the original postings as possible. There's a certain visual element that I thought was important to maintain and so I stuck with it.

Hey, if it works, don't fix it.

Dan May

July 2016



To Jim and Della. The greatest parents a child could ask for.

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PART ONE

THE EARLY YEARS

THAT DAD KID

My dad was a kid at heart. He loved games, sports, competition and he loved playing with his children. In the summertime, after dinner, he was the first one out the back door to start the kickball game, or four-square or whiffle-ball. He was the only dad in the neighborhood that would be outside playing games with the kids, and although part of the reason he was there was to make us happy, the main reason was because he enjoyed it. He absolutely loved it. He loved competition and he loved a good game.

We had a huge yard, almost an acre, and it was the gathering place for all the kids within a half mile radius. Sometimes twenty or more from our street and the surrounding neighborhoods would show up for the evening games. And I think some of those kids thought of my dad as just another kid. Yeah, you know, that kid with the five-o'clock shadow.

If he was working late and wasn't joining in the game, some of the kids who didn't know he was our dad, kids from a couple streets over, would ask, "Hey, where's that big kid? That "Dad" kid?"

And my dad loved to win. He wasn't one of those dads that let his children win. No way. No mercy wins just because you were a kid. But he was all about fair play, and competition and as a result, my siblings and I learned how to both win, and lose, gracefully.

On the holidays, and especially at Christmas, we would play board games and cards into the wee hours of the morning. I don't remember the presents I got, but I sure do remember those nights of game-playing. That was a tradition that lasted his whole life, and continues with his children's families and his grandchildren. It's his legacy.

When my four oldest siblings were in high school and junior high, they would be gone on Friday and Saturday evenings. Out doing some social event with their friends. That left my sister Susan and me at home, feeling a bit left out. So my dad, knowing how we felt, invented a game, like a treasure hunt, where he would hide some sort of treat, leave us clues, and we would find it. We would go upstairs while he hid the treat, but we could hear him downstairs, moving about the house, occasionally letting out a sly laugh at his own cleverness in writing the clues. That would only add to the anticipation. Until finally, he would call for us to come down and he would hand us a piece of paper with a clue written on it. That clue would lead us to a location in the house where we would find another clue, and so on, and so on until eventually we would compile the clues and they would lead us to the treat.

We loved that game, and sure, it required a little effort on his part, but that was alright with him. So what if he'd just put in 12 hours at the service station where he'd fixed cars and pumped gas all day? He was always up for a competition.

So after the treasure hunt was complete, we'd all sit down and watch TV or play a game and share the treat. Popcorn, chips, pretzels, soda, whatever. It always tasted better at the end of a treasure hunt. And it always tasted best sharing it with my dad.

So it's Saturday night and I miss my dad. I miss his smile

and I miss his laugh. Yes, something's definitely missing
and I know what it is. I miss that other kid.

That "Dad" kid.

THE BOOKMOBILE

When I was about 5 or 6, in the summertime, because we lived outside the city limits of our small town, the Bookmobile would stop on our street. For those of you who don't know what a Bookmobile is, it's like a mini-library on wheels. They would re-rig a bus with shelves covering the walls that were filled with books. The idea was to make books accessible to people in rural areas, those who might find it difficult to make a trip to the library. They would bring the library to you. It was a way to keep kids reading throughout the summer.

And it worked.

As the big green and cream-colored bus pulled onto Pipe St., all the kids in my neighborhood would run out of their houses, their books from the previous week tucked under their arms, anxious to trade them for some new reading material. You could get three books, and for me it was a simple question of what other two books I would get besides "Charley Yup and his Snip-Snap Boys."

"Charley Yup and his Snip-Snap Boys" was my favorite. It was about a magical boy who cut characters out of paper that would come to life and go on adventures with him. I loved it, and renewed it over and over again.

For two solid summers.

I would hand the librarian who drove the Bookmobile my

library card with my name on it. She would laugh and say, "Danny May, Charley Yup again, huh!" I would nod sheepishly, as a five-year-old, a little embarrassed by the attention. And for two summers, I fantasized that one fine day she would just let me keep that book, because she recognized that I loved it so much that it should be mine.

But of course, that never happened.

Cut to roughly 20 years later. My wife and I had returned to live in our hometown after my stint in the Air Force. At that time, renting video tapes was the new thing, and the local library was renting them for a dollar, so, young and poor, that was always our first choice for entertainment.

On one particular day, I walked into the basement of the library where they rented the tapes and the librarian in charge of videos waited on me. She looked familiar but I couldn't quite place her. Then it dawned on me. It was an older and grayer version of the Bookmobile driver. No doubt about it.

To rent tapes, you were required to present your library card, so I handed her mine. She adjusted the reading glasses that were attached to a chain around her neck and peered at my card intently. She looked at the card, looked at me, looked back at card and then back at me. I thought maybe the card had expired.

"Dan May?" she asked, more than a hint of suspicion in her voice.

"Yes?" I replied, expecting that perhaps I had not returned a book and owed a fine. She smiled, and handed the card back to me.

“Danny May. You must be here for Charley Yup and his Snip Snap Boys.”

Wow. Over twenty years later and she had still remembered.

Now there was a woman who loved her job.

BEDTIME STORIES

Before my dad, at age 35 and with seven kids, decided to go back to college and get his degree in education, he owned a gas station. He'd go in at 6 am and often times come home after I was in bed. On some of those nights when I was four or five, I'd be lying in bed awake and I'd hear him climbing the stairs to come up and tuck me in or say goodnight. He'd walk into my room and say "Hey Skeeter, are you still awake? And if I was, he'd come and sit on the side of my bed. And if he was especially beat, as he often was, I'd scoot over and he'd lay down next to me, the wonderful smell of Old Spice, cigarette smoke and motor oil letting me know that I was safe and sound, and the world was good.

On some nights, as he was lying next to me, I'd say, "Dad, tell me a story." He'd take a deep breath, as if it required every ounce of energy he had left to speak after a long day of physical labor. His stories always started out the same way. Something along the lines of...

"There was a guy, and his arms were stalks of celery, and his legs were carrots and his body was a pumpkin..." he'd begin. Then there would be a long pause, because he was drifting off to sleep

"And then what, Dad?" I'd ask.

"Oh," he'd continue, trying valiantly to stay awake. "His head was a cantaloupe and his ears were green beans and his eyes were grapes...." And then he'd trail off again.

“Then what? I’d say, shaking him by the arm.

He’d struggle to go on. “Oh, uh...his mouth was a strawberry, and his hair was cabbage...and...and he was...uh.. walking down the street.”

Then the words would stop and I’d hear the beginnings of a snore as my dad began to succumb to slumber.

“Dad, Dad, what happened to the guy then?” I’d ask, shaking him pleadingly. “What happened to him?” He’d pause and try to get his bearings and then he would wrap up the story in a nice neat little bow by saying three words.

“Somebody ate him.”

Yep. That’s right. Somebody ate him. That was my dad’s genius, make the characters in your stories edible and you always had a quick out, you could stop any story on a dime. No matter at what point in the story it is, once you get too tired to go on, somebody comes along and eats the main character.

Simple as that.

I’d lie my head down on my pillow and be thankful I didn’t live in that storybook world where people nonchalantly ate their neighbors without giving it a second thought. But I was happy, because my dad was there and I’d drift off to sleep with a smile on my face, the smell of Old Spice, cigarette smoke and motor oil telling me that all was well and I was safe and sound.

And the world was good.

CREAMED CORN

When I was about five years old, I had a fascination with creamed corn. I remember begging my mom over and over to get me creamed corn on her next visit to the grocery store. I'm not sure why, and I have no idea where I'd even heard of it, but the words "creamed corn" sounded so appealing to me. I had this idea in my tiny brain, that it was the Holy Grail of canned vegetables, even though I had never tried it or even seen it. I loved corn, and I loved creamy things, so I guess I thought the combination of the two must be absolutely incredible. My mom guaranteed that I would not like it, so she refused to buy it for me. With seven kids, my family was on a tight food budget and everything purchased had to be eaten. Waste not want not.

But I was persistent.

Week after week I would put in my request for creamed corn and week after week she would shoot it down. "You're not going to like it." she'd promise. But I knew better. I knew that I would love creamed corn. But for me, creamed corn would stay on that lofty pedestal, only to be yearned for from afar. Until one unexpected glorious day.

It happened.

Like every other Saturday afternoon, my parent's brought in the countless bags of groceries and I, as I did every week, would help them unload. It gave me a chance to scout out the

cookies and cereal that they had brought home. My taste in cereal was pretty broad, if it had lots of sugar, I was in. So I'd usually just request the one with the best toy inside. As I was unloading the bags that day, as usual, I'd go past the canned goods pretty quickly, nothing ever really interesting there. I'd read the labels, and quickly move on to the next, more interesting item.

Like cookies and cereal.

I remember reading that particular load of canned goods with little interest. "Bean with Bacon Soup. Chicken of the Sea Tuna, Tomato Soup, Whole Beets, Creamed Corn, Green Beans...."

Wait. What? Back up.

Creamed Corn?

I picked up the can. Holy crap. Yes. It was indeed Creamed Corn. "Mom!" I shouted. "Thank you!" I ran into the living room and jumped on the couch, still clutching the can. I examined the can, and the picture on the label of that delicious combination of cream and corn. "You can have it with dinner tonight," she said.

Oh, my goodness.

Waiting for dinner was going to be the longest four hours of my life. But finally, dinner arrived. And there was the dish with the creamed corn, next to a bigger dish of mixed vegetables for my 6 brothers and sisters who did not share my fascination with creamed corn. It didn't look quite as beautiful in the bowl as it had in the picture on the can. It was kind of grayish in color, but I spooned myself a big helping of the creamed corn and watched it separate and

glide across my plate like a ballerina, as it merged with the slice of ham and potatoes already there. It was beautiful. Like little corny lifeboats in an ocean of creamy corniness. And then I took my first glorious bite. And I remember the thought that came to my mind with that first bite.

Sweet Mother of God, what is this stuff?

I swallowed the first bite and felt for a moment that it might be coming back up, but thankfully it didn't. My mom, looked at me and said, "How do you like it?" I swallowed and forced a smile and said, "It's delicious." And I proceeded to eat all the creamed corn on my plate and requested another serving. Was I crazy, you ask? No. I was going to take one for the team. I was going to eat ALL that creamed corn if it killed me, which it nearly did. But it was the principle of the thing. I couldn't let my mom know that in actuality, I HATED creamed corn, just like she had promised.

Yep, moms are so very smart.

That night, as I was lying in bed, my mom came up to kiss me good night. "So, how did you like the creamed corn," she asked. "Oh, it was great, I said. I really liked it." I lied. "Do you want me to get another can next week?" She asked. I felt my whole body shudder at the thought. "Uh, no, you don't have to do that mom." I said. "Nobody else wanted any and it doesn't seem fair that you have to make two different vegetables. But thanks." She smiled her beautiful smile at me and winked.

She knew.

And I knew she knew and I loved her for it.

Because even at five, I realized she wasn't one to focus on

her children's mistakes, or our bad choices. She was all about positive reinforcement, and occasionally letting us learn our lessons the hard way. By making our own choices and living with the results. She wasn't an "I told you so" mom. She was an "I love you even when you make mistakes" mom. And I fell asleep that night knowing how lucky I was that she was MY mom.

That year, 1963, Gregory Peck won the Oscar for best Actor for his performance in the movie "To Kill a Mockingbird." But my mom and I always knew who had actually put in the best performance that year. It had been me, as I smiled and ate that entire bowl of slimy creamed corn.

Now THAT, my friends, was an Oscar-worthy performance.

HANDS

I remember sitting in church as a child and holding my dad's hand. But not just holding it, examining it. Studying it. Every crease. Every line. Every knuckle. And how, if I turned it over and scrunched it together slightly, the creases in the palm would form the letter "M." And how cool I thought that was, because our name began with the letter "M." And I would hold my open palm next to his and compare the little "m" that my 4-year-old hand made to the big "M" that his hand made and how I hoped I would grow up to be just like him one day.

And how much I loved him.

And he would look down at me and smile. And it made me feel like he was letting me know that, of all his six children, I was the special one. I was his favorite. And how good that made me feel. I know now, after talking to my siblings, that he made us ALL feel that way. That each one of us was the special kid, that each one of us was his favorite. And it was true. We were ALL his favorite.

And what a wonderful gift that is for a father to give a child.

And then I would go back to studying his hand. How the creases would stand out because they were stained with the black grease from the cars that he worked on all day at the service station he owned. How his finger nails were stained with the same black and how they were split and splintered from the work he did. Even after he left that business when

he was in his thirties to go back to college and become a teacher, it took many years for that black to wear off.

But until it did, he wore it like a badge of honor.

I remember being three or four, and holding his hand as I walked into the little grocery store down the street from our house. I remember spotting a basket filled with little toys at the store and releasing his hand to run over to examine them, although I knew exactly what was in that basket from the last time I was there. I recall sensing him next to me and reaching up and taking his hand, and then looking over and seeing him standing across the store and realizing that the hand I was holding wasn't his.

And I was mortified.

I stood there momentarily, frozen, then looked up and saw the stranger smiling down on me as if to say, "Nope, I'm not the guy you were looking for." And I released the stranger's hand and sheepishly walked over to my dad, and grabbed the familiar hand. And how embarrassed I was, but how good it felt to have my hand in that protective hand that I knew so well.

And how safe I was.

And I remember holding my dad's hand on the last day of his life. Sitting next to his bed and scrunching up his palm to make the letter "M" as he lay there, oblivious to my presence. The additional lines on his hand from the wrinkles of a long life made the letter less-pronounced, but the "M" was still there. The additional creases and wrinkles making it like an old river with so many tributaries branching off of it.

A river that had run its course.

And I'm sitting here at the moment and thinking about my dad's hand. And how I can close my eyes and still picture that hand in mine as I sat in church as a child. And how lucky I was to have him for a father. And how much I miss him.

And how I sure could use a hand today.

LITTLE SIR ECHO

I remember being about four years old and listening to my mom sing in church. She had a beautiful soprano voice and I would proudly stand next to her and gaze up in admiration. And she would look down at me and smile. I would turn around and face the people in the pew behind us, and nod towards my mom, as if to say, "Do you hear that? That's real singing. I don't know what it is that you're doing back there, but this is the way it's supposed to sound." And then I'd look at my mom, marveling at what, at the time, was the most beautiful thing I'd ever heard. When my mom sang about God, everyone within earshot believed.

And I was so proud.

And she'd sing to me at bedtime. Sitting at the foot of the stairs after a long day of housework. I think it was good for her. As if she were releasing all the stress and worry of the day, as she sang songs like "Little Sir Echo," or "Playmate" in such dulcet tones that I rarely stayed awake beyond the first chorus of the second song. But I think she continued singing, although she knew I was asleep. Because it made her feel good, made her feel young, and connected her with her mother, who had sung her to sleep when she was a child.

And then one day it was gone.

I remember sitting in church, I was probably about twelve, long after she had stopped singing me to sleep. It was truly a

moment in time that I won't forget. She began singing the hymns as usual, but an octave down, and at a lower volume. I thought to myself, "What's going on?" And I again looked at the people in the pew behind, but this time looking for them to maybe answer my question, but they just stared blankly ahead. I thought maybe it was just a cold, or a temporary laryngitis, but that was not the case. The next Sunday, and every following Sunday, it was the same. She would sing, but no longer in that soprano voice that had made my heart soar. For whatever reason, menopause or some vocal malady, my mom's days of singing were done, at least in the way she had sung in the past. And there was a sense of sadness and loss that I felt, and I'm sure she felt even more so.

She would have been 87 today. And if she were here, I would thank her for everything she gave me. But especially, the gift of song. It stayed with me, and I think I honor her when I sing. So I continue to sing. I'm lucky that way. And I'm lucky for the mother I had.

Thanks Mom. I can still hear you singing.

MEATLOAF

Sometimes a great meal is measured not by the food you eat, but by the company you keep. I was about five years old, and I remember waking up in the middle of the night and thinking that I was hungry. That usually didn't happen in my family, due to the fact that we kids typically ate nine bowls of cereal right before we went to bed. You know, to hold us over till the nine bowls of cereal we'd eat for breakfast.

My parents had seven children, and I now realize how many boxes of Sugar Pops, Sugar Smacks and Sugar Frosted Flakes we must have gone through at the time. Those cereals are now known as Corn Pops, Honey Smacks, and Frosted Flakes. It was the early 60's and "sugar" had not yet become a bad word.

So I woke up, and yep, I was definitely hungry. Looking back, I'm guessing it was probably around midnight, a good hour after everyone in my family had gone to bed. From the top of the stairs I could see a faint glow coming from the kitchen.

Someone was still up.

I grabbed the handrail and guided myself down the dark staircase. I looked through the dining room and saw my dad, cigarette burning, sitting at the kitchen table, doing some paper work. Probably either paying household bills or balancing the accounts of the service station he owned and

operated.

I crossed the dark dining room and stood in the doorway of the kitchen. It took a little while for my dad to notice me, but then he saw me out of the corner of his eye, turned and said, “Hey Skeeter, what are you doing up?”

“I’m hungry.” I said. He stopped his calculations and said, “Hungry?” Well, let’s see what we can do about that.” He picked me up and sat me in the chair across from where he had been sitting. Then he proceeded to open the fridge and scan the contents for an appropriate midnight snack for a 5-year-old. He settled on a plate of meatloaf, leftovers from dinner the night before. “This should do the trick,” he said. He pulled out a loaf of white bread, and made a couple of meatloaf sandwiches with ketchup, one for each of us. We both began to eat in earnest, and I’ve got to say, that sandwich was, without a doubt, the most delicious thing I’ve ever eaten, prior to or since that night.

As we ate, my dad looked at me across the table and winked, like this was our secret. Mine and his. I smiled, and even at five, I recognized how special that moment was.

We finished and my dad carried me upstairs and tucked me in. And as he was walking out my bedroom door, I called to him. “Dad?”

He ducked his head back in my room and said. “Yeah?” I paused.

I wanted to tell him how much it meant to me to spend that half an hour eating meatloaf with him, and how much I loved him, and how lucky I felt to be his son. I wanted to tell him all those things. But I was only five and I couldn’t find the words.

“Thanks for the meatloaf.” I said.

He smiled and winked at me again. “Sleep tight, Skeeter.” he whispered.

And I drifted off into a perfect dreamland, where dads and sons always eat meatloaf sandwiches together at midnight, and life is good and you’re little forever.

Sometimes, a great meal is measured not by the food you eat, but by the company you keep.

Indeed.