

say anything. I just stared at the floor. Just between you and me, I thought his side was a little roomier, and the door was on his side too. But I didn't complain. What could I say? He was two years older, 20 pounds heavier, and made the meanest charley horses I had ever felt.

"Did you hear me?" he demanded. "No problem," I said, not looking up. I spun my basketball on my finger. He swatted it away and punched me in the arm. I screamed, then clapped my hand over my mouth so Dad wouldn't hear. Denny stood over me, fist clenched, daring me to fight back. I rubbed my arm and thought it over . . . carefully. After a while, I smiled.

"What's so funny?"

I pointed to the floor where his feet were at least 10 inches over the line. "You're on my side," I replied. He left the room.

grabbed an old issue of Denny's *Muscle & Fitness* magazine that he'd left on my side of the room. The cover had one of those pumping-iron babes in a flex pose. I went to work on her picture. I gave her a little mustache, then bit the end of my pen as I pondered my next stroke. I blackened a few teeth, chewed on my pen some more, then drew in glasses and bloodshot eyes.

I tapped the pen on the cover as I tried to decide between Spock ears and Eddie Munster hair. But the pen slipped out of my hand and flew end over end across the room. There was no way I could reach it without crossing the line.

And I should have left it there.

But Fannie Flextron was staring at me with those bloodshot eyes, as if to say "Come on. What's it gonna be? Spock ears or Eddie Munster hair?" I checked the door. No sign of Denny. The coast was clear. I crawled across the line into enemy territory, trying not to let the floor creak. I grabbed the pen and turned back.

Suddenly he was on me. "You had to test me, didn't you?" he snarled. He forearmed my face into the carpet. This time I squealed openly. He hit me on the right arm, then the left. He tweaked my nose so that when I cried out it sounded like a telephone operator. I endured it as best I could. But the big one hadn't come.

Then I went pale, for out of the corner of my eye I could see a hand held high—a fist slowly forming.

"AAAAH!" I yelled as the fist met my leg. Charley horse had arrived. I wiggled away and limped out the door. Tears flowed as I stumbled down the hall.

I found Dad in the kitchen. He was peeling a potato. Something was already cooking in the oven. "Dad," I said, sniffing, "Denny hit me."

Dad turned. He shook a half-peeled potato at me. "Nobody likes a tattletale," he said.

"But Dad, he—"

He held up his potato again. "I'm not always going to be around to fight your fights for you. Run along now; I'll call you when dinner's ready."

My shoulders drooped, and I left the kitchen. I went outside. Dad had always been kind of a tough guy. But ever since Mom had died, two years ago, he'd gotten even tougher.

I grabbed a basketball and shot a few free throws at the basket over the garage. My leg still hurt, so it was hard to get the proper knee bend. The shots weren't falling. I shot a few more from the foul line, then a few from the top of the key, then some from the baseline.

Sometimes when things got weird at home, I shot around while I sorted things out. Why did Dad have to be so tough on me all the time? I don't know . . . maybe I was feeling sorry for myself . . . or maybe I just missed Mom.

I shot a few more from the baseline, and slowly, as the knot in my thigh faded, I was able to hit a few jumpers. I was warming up. I banked a few, swished a few, then worked into layups. I head-faked, stutter-stepped, did a couple of reverses. I dribbled between my legs, around my back, worked some spin moves, and finger-rolled some off the front of the rim.

Sweat started to pour. After a while, I forgot about my sore leg or my dad's trying to make me into a man before my 13th birthday.

I splashed some water on my face before dinner. The house smelled good; Dad makes a mean roast and mashed potatoes. Everybody thinks that since we're a house full of guys, we survive on macaroni and cheese and fish sticks, but Dad can cook.

I sat across from Denny at the dinner table. Dad, sitting at the head of the table, to my right, said the blessing. We bowed our heads; I looked across the table. Denny's head was inches above his plate.

There it was, an easy 2 points

staring me in the face. It was like I was at the top of the key with an open lane to the hoop. I head-faked, then reached across the table and slammed my brother's face into his mashed potatoes and gravy: 2 points at the buzzer for the win!

Denny slowly raised his head. Some of his dinner sloshed over the side of his plate, but most of it clung to his face. He scooped away two holes so he could see out and scowled at me. His look could be interpreted only one way: Later on, my face had an appointment with his fist.

The room was quiet—too quiet. Either I had interrupted the prayer, or Dad had finished it. In any case, I could feel his eyes on me. I waited for the storm.

But when Dad spoke, it wasn't to me. "Denny, didn't I tell you to get washed up before dinner?"

Denny gasped. "What?"

"Go on," Dad said. "Get cleaned up, and don't let me ever see you come to dinner looking like that again."

"But Dad, didn't you see—"

"Go. We'll wait for you."

Denny left the room without another word.

Dad didn't look at me for a while. His eyes were on Denny's plate. He dabbed at the spilled gravy with his napkin.

Finally, he looked at me. "I don't want you to think I condone that sort of thing." He paused. "But if that wasn't the best move I ever saw, I don't know what was."

He handed me the plate. "Now go get your brother some more food." ■