



# stoooges

By C. B. Sikstrom

**M**oe takes two fingers of one hand and pokes Larry in the eyes. Larry doubles over in pain with both hands covering his face: “I can’t see! I can’t see!” he screams.

“Ahh shut up!” says Moe.

“Hey! You can’t do that to my friend,” says Curly.

“So I can’t, eh?” Moe’s mouth is screwed tight as he pokes two fingers at Curly’s eyes too, but Curly puts his hand up sideways to catch Moe’s hand between his fingers. “Yuck yuck yaw!” he says triumphantly.

Moe stomps on Curly’s foot. “Yeeow!” yells Curly. As he bends over, the bottom of Moe’s fist bonks him on the head. “Yeeow eeow eeow!” he yells and stands straight up again. Then Moe pokes him in the eyes.

Both Larry and Curly are now bent over moaning and holding hands over their eyes. Moe grabs Larry by the hair and Curly by the back of his jacket collar and marches both

of them out of the room. “C’mon. Let’s get out of here, you numbskulls.”

I clapped my hands appreciatively, and Larry, Curly and Moe came back into the room asking my brother Boris and me how we liked their skit.

“You’re pretty good,” we said.

Lots of practice and good timing were required to prevent any injuries and make the routine realistic. We marvelled that no one was hurt, the blows looked so real.

Today, there are newspaper articles by psychiatrists and know-nothing news reporters to explain what we did and for what reason. In front of me, a red manila folder holds eight ragged yellow articles from the Calgary Herald and The Globe and Mail. One expert even called us “angelic youths,” but how ridiculous. They are right to say that nightmares still haunt Moe’s parents, but they were wrong

to write “Gang of Boys All Followers in Beating of Homosexual.”

Most days, I think I know what happened but cannot make sense of it. Some days I don’t believe any of it—not Sundays or cloudy days, but sunny days in mid-August when evenings are muggy and students hold parties to celebrate the last free days before school starts again in September.

**T**he city grass was yellow brown on the North Hill, except where there had been grass fires the previous two weeks or so. Those small areas were charcoal black. There always seem to be west winds in Calgary, and small bits of paper and large clouds of dust blew across the goat path we usually took to Rosedale Junior High. We lived down by the Bow river, where there was less wind in winter and cool river air in summer. The piles of white cotton fluff from the poplar trees had blown away by August. The nights were cooler, and the swallows had fledged from the grey clay balls that hung from the concrete arches of the Louise Bridge.

With just one more week left before going to high school, we wanted to party. Most evenings all summer we had sat on the steps of our apartment waiting for something to happen. Someone would say, “Do ya wanna do somethin’?” On some nights, we would play tackle football on the boulevard beneath the street lamp or walk down to the river to throw rocks or climb trees. That summer seemed forever, yet we told each other we wished fall would never come.

On the last Friday night of August, Larry called. “Do ya wanna do somethin’?”

“Sure,” I said.

He suggested snooker downtown. I told my brother Boris, who called his best friend Curly. Morris was at Curly’s house, so he found out and came along too. We called him Moe, which was short for moron, but he wasn’t one.

Moe had red hair in a brush-cut, freckles and ears that stood out from both sides of his head. I first met him in

Grade 2. He came from Germany, and his family ran a butcher shop. One time I went to his apartment on Tenth Street at Christmas, and there were lit candles on the Christmas tree. Once, at recess, I blind-sided him into a steel fence during soccer. Mr. Schmidt gave me the strap three times on each hand for that. I remember the stinging curl of the strap over my palms, licking the back of my hands, welts clean-snapped on my skin.

By Grade 4, Moe would still not jump from the top of the monkey bars. I asked my dad why not and he replied, “Would you jump off Tenth Street bridge if Moe did? He’s got more sense than the lot of you.”

By Grade 7, Moe had a solid reputation as a suck. He never seemed to care what others thought or did. While we were all eager to form gangs, he was experimenting with Erlenmeyer flasks, Bunsen burners and a microscope in his basement on a bench his dad built for him. He won the 1965 Rosedale Scholarship award, a bronze cup about four inches high with a black plastic base and a sliding metal plaque on which his name was engraved. At school he carried an old leather briefcase monogrammed with his father’s initials.

“Look at Morris’s suck bag. Look at Morris’s suck bag. Look at Morris’s suck bag!”

Everyone else in school carried their books piled under one elbow or in a zippered vinyl binder case. In winter, we’d try to slide straight down the icy goat path on our shoes. Many of us ruined textbooks when we fell. Not Morris, though. He would hold his briefcase with both hands and step sideways down the edge of the path or move off into deep snow to keep his footing. Other kids would shove him, sliding by. Sometimes he would fall, but always got up quietly and continued down the hill with his turn-the-other-cheek look.

One day, two kids grabbed Moe’s briefcase, opened it and threw all the books down the side of the hill. My brother Boris and his friend Curly helped Moe pick up all the books. Moe

wouldn't leave Boris and Curly alone from that day on. That is how Morris came to be at Curly's house that Friday night in August.

Curly lived down the block from Boris and me in an old house owned by Mr. Leibowitz. Leibowitz was the biggest man I had ever seen—over 300 pounds. The rented house was clapboard, with a glassed-in porch and a couple of bedrooms on the main floor. Curly slept in the basement with his brother in a cardboard-partitioned room near an old style octopus furnace. The big pipes ran low and in various directions beneath the floor above them. Curly was a year and a half older than me but in the same grade. One night Curly woke up with his big brother hugging and kissing him and calling him Denise.

In summer, Boris and Curly would go fishing at the river. Boris would tie butcher string to his big toe and string it across the room and out our apartment window. Curly would pull on the string to wake Boris up. I slept in the bottom bunk. Some mornings Boris got up at 3:30 and woke me too.

"Why don't you tie the goddamned string to your dork," I said.

Boris and Curly would laze on the riverbank and catch trout. One day they caught seven rainbows. A record for them. Curly could throw a rock all the way across the river when no one else could.

Curly's dad disappeared about two months after Curly's family moved into their house. Curly's mom was nearly as big as Mr. Leibowitz and spoke with an English accent. They had moved into Calgary from near Bragg Creek in the foothills about 25 miles west of the city. She had Old Mike, a 90-year-old Stoney, living in the back stoop and 11 children of various complexions. The last two were twins, three years old.

The old house was condemned by the city about a year after Curly's family moved in, but Leibowitz made a few repairs and the condemnation was lifted. My mom and dad would always know when Boris and I had been to Curly's because our clothes would

smell of damp chesterfields and greasy walls. Some nights, we would go down into the basement, where we had thrown a couple of old mattresses on the floor. There we would practise Stooging, handsprings, or high boot kicks. Curly could flick his boots well above my head.

**O**n that Friday night in August, we left my folks' place around 8 o'clock and walked down our street past the park. A set of swings was there. We bragged, as we walked by, about the time we stole Old Man Foster's crab apples. We had sand pails full and drove screwdrivers through them in a frenzy of laughter and bravado. Swinging on the swings, we mashed the apples to sauce with our feet.

I remembered this as we walked toward the river. I felt better about the smashed apples when I saw a familiar rusted red pipe sticking out of the ground near a large cottonwood poplar tree. The pipe had been there for years and was the stump of an old STOP sign that had been cut off about six inches from the ground. The first time I saw the pipe, I mistook it for a robin eating dew worms on the grass. My dad was taking me fishing at 6 in the morning. I loved that river then, but now I hate it.

From the bridge, Boris and I and the others stared over the cement railings to watch the cliff swallows darting swiftly and erratically for invisible mosquitoes and mayflies and midges on the evening air. The swallows nested under the bridge. We used to throw rocks at the clay nests to dislodge them and the young birds. After a while, though, we stopped doing that because the babies never lived after we got them out of the river.

Once across the bridge, we strutted to Lorne Carr Billiards. We thought it was cool to play there, on the beautiful dark green felt lit by dull lights over brown-railed tables. Scotty ran the place. Our money was soon gone. All we could do was watch with awe as Indian Joe and Bullet-Shot Bert played snooker like magicians.

Larry and Curly ran back at him and really gave it to him this time—with knees, elbows and feet—as the cadets began to run full speed.

**W**e left the hall around 11 o'clock. The air was fresh and cool when we walked up the stairs to Eighth Avenue. We could see stars even downtown. We just had to do something to make the summer memorable.

Near the Uptown Theatre, we stopped in the middle of the sidewalk and thrust pointed fingers at the stars. All of us cried, "Look! Look!" when anyone came near us. A drunk lunged at us with grunting gestures and words. We laughed and skipped away. At the corner of Seventh Avenue and Eighth Street, we all squeezed into a phone booth. From there, we kicked a can and wore it on our heels like a lift for a polio victim.

Now the streets were almost empty. We took a short cut through the Palomino Apartments to get to Fifth Avenue. Two guys were fighting in the alley there. One had the other down and was kicking him hard in the ribs with his pointed shoes—like the ones Curly was wearing. Lots of guys wore them in those days. We all practiced kicking our own or another guy's upraised hands. We even had contests. But we did not stick around to watch these guys fighting; they looked dead serious.

As we walked back toward the bridge, a great idea came to us all at once. On the other side of the river we could see three cadets from Mewata Armoury standing at the bus stop by the Fairplay Pet Store, waiting to catch the last trolley. It was summer, yet I still see the trolley hissing a blue, incandescent trail like it would on a January night with ice fog at minus 30. But there could not have been sparks in August. The cadets just stood there sharing cigarettes.

"Moe. Walk ahead of us about 10 feet."

"Why?"

"Never mind. Just look back at us now and start walking faster."

"Okay. Look scared now," we hissed.

We walked faster with our arms swinging widely and elbows brushing each other's.

"Run, you bastard, Moe!" and he began to run with those over-the-shoulder looks you see in detective movies.

We let him get about halfway across before we started to run after him. Moe acted terrified when we began chanting obscenities.

"MoeMoe! MoeMoe! MoeMoe!"

He ran faster. The sound of our chant matched the fall of our feet on the bridge concrete.

"MoeMoe! MoeMoe! MoeMoe!"

The cadets just watched and smoked. I could see the red glow of their cigarettes as they inhaled.

At the end of the bridge Moe turned right, onto the grass near the red-robin pipe. He pretended to trip, and we caught him there. I remember being afraid he might have fallen on the pipe, but he hadn't.

"Fake it good, Moe. They're not coming yet," we whispered.

"Now stand up and we'll push you back to the river."

He squealed, "No! No!" as we formed a circle around him and Stooged him to the ground.

"You dirty rotten son-of-a-bitch!" we screamed. We had to keep from laughing. The cadets just stood silent. Moe grabbed Curly's leg.

"Let go of my leg, you idiot! What are you, some kind of homo?" said Curly.

The cadets had crowded together now. They looked at us several times. They conferred. Then a green and cream trolley rolled between us—a few



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pale faces staring blankly from the windows. Their looks amused me then but haunt me now—that growing recognition of what they thought was happening on the riverbank. A grey-haired lady stared straight at me, raised her hand and crossed herself as she passed.

The cadets still stood there. Only when the WAIT light at the crosswalk turned to WALK did they flip their cigarettes into the gutter and begin trotting after us. We ran a few yards and watched Moe pretend to stagger to his feet all doubled over. Larry and Curly ran back at him and really gave it to him this time—with knees, elbows and feet—as the cadets began to run full speed.

“C’mon, let’s go!” I yelled.

We took off.

“YOU BASTARDS!” yelled the cadets after us.

Moe put even more into his acting and writhing and screaming, as if in paroxysms of pain. He staggered up again and then fell to the ground in a curled ball, like an armadillo. Armadillo Moe.

We ran toward the park and the safety of Yeats’s alley. We looked back only once and saw two of the cadets chasing us. The other was still standing over Moe. Jesus, we were scared! We made it to the dark of the alley 50 yards ahead of the cadets. We jumped a fence and cut through Nicholsons’ yard and then McMasters’ to the safety of Yeats’s raspberry patch. My heart pounded so hard I couldn’t hear at first. Later, there was the shuffle of feet on gravel in the alley. The cadets peered into each back yard. One of them said, “I’ll beat the living shit out of that little bastard when I get him.” We knew they would never catch us, though, and we had to stifle our chuckles. Delicious red juice ran out of our mouths and

down our chins as we sniggered in the raspberry canes.

We stayed there a long time after the cadets passed. When we left, we were stiff in the legs and full of raspberries and brave talk. Curly and Larry went straight home, while Boris and I went back to the river.

“Moe? Moe? Where are you?” we called, as we rounded the willows downstream from where we’d Stooged him. That’s where we expected him to hide if he was still around. He wasn’t hiding though. He was still on the grass in that funny armadillo pose.

“Hey, Moe? They’re gone.” But he didn’t answer. I put my hand on his shoulder and shook him. His body rolled over. There was a gaping hole beneath his nose and luminous teeth were scattered on the grass beside his face. The back of his head was bashed in behind both ears. His face was pulpy and his clothes were covered with blood and vomit.

We heard sirens but didn’t run this time. An ambulance and the police arrived while we stood there.

**T**hree cadets testified they saw us beat a “faggot” and that they had tried to prevent us. Several passengers from the bus said they saw us beat Moe, too. Nothing ever said about that night can change what happened to Moe—or to us afterwards. I cannot make sense of it. We all wept at our trial. Yes, we were boys. Yes, we were followers. And yes, there was a beating. But they called Moe a homosexual, and he wasn’t one.

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