

Part 2

Your Family: Basic Training Camp

The dynamics that are required to make
any relationship work: Just keep putting
your love out there.

Alan Cohen



Narrative 2

Noses and Other Not-so-Important Things

We were returning from Nana and Grandpa's house. Christmas vacation was never long enough. We all had to go back to school in the morning, including Mom. She had taken up substitute teaching at our school. Poor Mom. I could barely stand the thought of it.

We pulled the seat down in the back of the Banana Boat. Muffin Dog was curled up by my feet. Denis and I drew an imaginary line between us.

"This is my side," he said. "Don't put your stuff on my side, or else."

"Or else what?" I said, loud enough for Dad to hear.

"Stop it, you two," said Dad. "You two would fight over space if you drove around in the Empire State Building on wheels. Just cut it out. There are kids starving all over the world and you two are fighting over space in a car as big as the backyard."

"At least there aren't poisonous toads in the car," I mumbled.

The toads in question collected around our swimming pool every night. They sounded exactly like dogs. Wild barking dogs. The first few nights Denis and I couldn't figure out what they were—they didn't start to bark until the lights were out. I never could have imagined being surrounded by a colony of poisonous



barking toads in our backyard, 10 minutes outside of the booming metropolis of Miami, Florida.

When we drove down the highway, we would write big signs to truckers behind us. We were having a great conversation when one trucker wrote to us, *How Old?*

Denis grabbed the marker from me and wrote, 15.

I immediately began to shake my head back and forth. I mouthed, *He's only fourteen*. Denis was so mad his whole face turned bright red and he pushed me hard. The trucker laughed and blew his horn at us.

Mom said, "No more messages to truckers for a while."

Dad added, "It isn't safe anyway."

Denis said, "I wish you were a boy."

I said, "I wish your feet didn't smell."

Dad said, "I wish you'd both shut up."

Mom said, "Please don't say shut up."

Muffin stayed neutral.

"Nana said you have Dad's nose," Denis said to me.

He was out to start World War III. All the men in Dad's family had huge noses. Every time they got together, they had the official family Nose Off to see whose nose was the biggest that year. Somehow they took into account the possibility that their noses could still grow.

Why did I have to get a man's nose?

"Isn't that great, a Roman nose on a modern American. Why couldn't I have your nose?" I asked Mom.

Mom had a perfect nose. She could have been a movie star.

"All of the smartest people have big noses. They get more oxygen to the brain." Mom was trying to make the fact that I had a nose like my father's less painful.

"Do you think that's why Dodi walks and talks in her sleep? Maybe you get so much extra oxygen through your big nose that your brain doesn't know what to do with it." Denis just couldn't let the opportunity for a good fight pass by.

"I do not walk and talk in my sleep, Denis," I argued.

"Yes you do," they all answered.

Muffin looked sympathetic.

"Why don't you sign her up for one of those dream clinics? I saw it on TV. They take freaks like Dodi and hook them up to machines while they sleep so they can see why you are so differ-

ent from the rest of us. They pay you for it. She's a wonder of science. What do you think, Mom? We might get some sleep if we farmed her out at night." Denis was really asking for it.

I looked out the window and pretended that I didn't care that he was assassinating my character.

Dad had had enough. "Cut it out, Denis."

"Dad, I need to go to the bathroom," I said, hopefully. I really did have to go, but I was also trying to get off the subject of my nose and sleep problems.

"We're almost home. Can you wait till we get home? We just stopped," Dad said.

We had stopped two hours ago. We were fifty miles away from home. Plenty of time to talk about my nose.

In Miami, all of the houses are only one level. I was afraid of some criminal climbing in my window at night from the backyard, so I kept my windows shut. I left them cracked open only because I didn't want to suffocate. The fan was going. Round and round and round.

I was half-asleep. The voice came low and distant at first.

"Are you awake, Dodi? This is God. Why are you such a goody-goody?"

I gasped, but didn't sit up in bed. I was sure it wasn't God. But what else could it be? Would a burglar know my name? My scalp itched with anxiety.

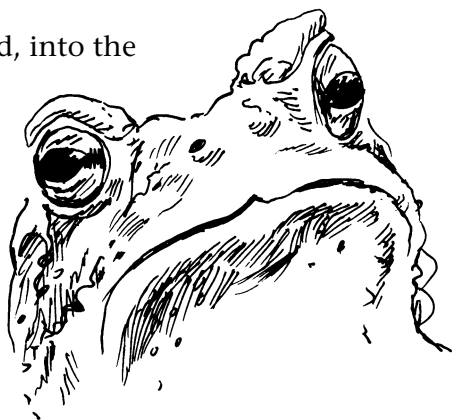
Then I woke all the way up. I knew who it was. No one else would call me a goody-goody. Certainly not God, I would hope.

"Dodi, are you there? Are you there?" the voice called, in a quiet whisper.

"Yes, I'm here. Where else would I be in the middle of the night?" I answered.

"Denis, don't you ever sleep?" I asked, into the darkness.

"Dodi, don't you ever leave your windows open at night? It would be so much easier for me to hook up my equipment. Are you afraid of the toads?" Then he began trying to suppress his laughter. He must have been leaning into the microphone, it was so loud. I sat up and looked out my win-



dow were I could see the microphone and the little speaker hooked up.

Denis was worried. Dad and Mom got a letter in the mail from school. Based on experience, Denis and I were pretty sure it was about him. He wasn't the sort of student who got congratulatory letters in the mail. Denis was so wild that when I was on my worst behavior ever, I didn't even run a close second to him. I couldn't even run in the same race.

"Dodi, what was that letter all about?" he asked, as if I would know.

"Do you want to come in here, or do you want to keep pretending you're God?" I asked. I was afraid we'd wake up Mom and Dad.

"Yeah, I'll be right there," he answered.

I had been thinking about the letter all night. This is what I imagined it said:

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Fellenz,

We regret to inform you that we are unable to handle your son at our school. We will talk to the governor about paying you large sums of money to send him to school somewhere else. We have tested him and found that he has a genius IQ. However, his antics in school are just a little beyond our current capacity to manage. Please inform us regarding your decision as soon as possible.

Most Urgently Yours,

Mr. So-and-So

Principal

PS We have no objections to your daughter's presence.

I couldn't remember the principal's name. He seemed like a nice person. He would greet us if he passed one of us in the hall during a class. There were so many kids in our school that it was impossible for him to know who was who. Our school was incredibly overcrowded. When we walked through the hall, kids would moo, like cows. There were some really mean kids there, too. Kids to be avoided at all costs. Kids who would pick a fight with you if they didn't like the color of the socks you wore. But no one messed with Denis. He had one of those walks that other kids just knew meant *stay away*. I think I was the opposite. Maybe we were really some weird kind of twins and everything he got, I didn't get, and vice-versa.

"Dodi, what do you think that letter said?" Denis was sitting at

the end of my bed now.

I could see Denis' face in the moonlight. He looked worried.

"I think you're toast." I said, sensitively.

"I think they want to send me to a private school," he said, with a look of dread on his moonlit face.

"How can we afford private school?" I asked. Jealousy was rapidly chilling my veins. I would have given anything to go to private school.

"I don't know. I overheard Dad and Mom talking and they said something about putting me in private school and Mom subbing more to help pay for it."

Life wasn't fair. Denis was socially maladjusted so he got to go to private school. I never gave anyone any problems and did all of my work and I had to stay in that rotten school.

Denis was one of those rare characters who didn't care about what other people thought of him. If he could have managed to control his anger a bit better, he could have done really well. He was incredibly smart. He could take apart anything—a radio, a phone, a car, you name it—and make something new out of it. He also had a courageous streak. He could never stand to see other people being picked on. In fifth grade, he did something amazing.

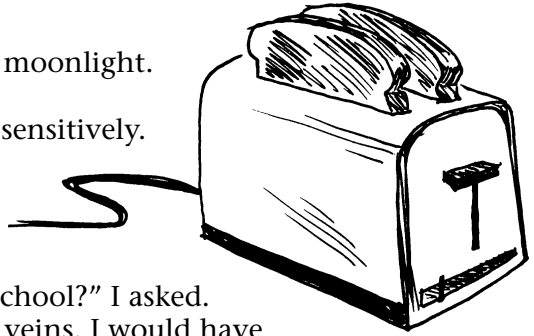
His teacher had a bad habit of making fun of some of the kids in the class. One boy was a favorite target. His name was Billy. One day Mr. So-and-So called on Billy. (I'll withhold the teacher's real name, he may have changed his ways, and I'd hate to expose him if that's the case.)

"Billy, stand up," said Mr. So-and-So. "Class, when I call on you, I want you to tell Billy what you really think of him. I'll start. Billy, I think you are the laziest student I ever had. Next." That's what Mr. So-and-So said, I kid you not.

He had the whole class go around and come up with a put-down for Billy. Billy had to stand there while he was being insulted.

Then Mr. So-and-So called on Denis. Denis was the last one.

Denis said, "This is wrong. What you all are doing is wrong. How would you feel if someone did this to you? I like Billy and I think he's cool. I think you all are a bunch of jerks."



Billy's mom called our mother that night. She told Mom that my brother was a saint to stand up for her son. She said that poor Billy hadn't stopped crying since he came home from school. He never wanted to go to school again. He was humiliated and devastated. She said that Denis was a savior. Through his gasps for air as he wept, Billy had said to his mother, "Denis Fellenz was the only one who stood up for me."

Denis was like that. He was fiercely loyal to the people he cared about. He said what he thought. Most people didn't like that quality in a hyperactive 14-year-old boy with a genius IQ.

"I can't believe that you might go to private school," I muttered.

"Yeah, me neither," he said soberly. He didn't understand my inner jealousy.

"Are you nervous about your flute competition? Do you think it would help if they let you bring the birds?" he asked.

Six months ago I had started to play the flute. I loved playing. I loved the flute. I became flute-obsessed. I practiced constantly. Mom got me a teacher, Lori. Lori said my progress was off the charts. It was because I worked so hard to be good.

My whole world changed when I placed my fingers over the silver keys. I felt light and powerful at once. It took me at least two months to get to the point where my cat wouldn't run away when I played. I practiced and practiced.

"I'm not nervous. You're kidding about the birds, right?" I asked.

Our two parakeets sat on my fingers when I played. They loved the flute. They would sit, one on each hand, and sing when I played.

"You are such a liar! You are too nervous!" he said.

He knew I was nervous. I got nervous when I rode the bus to school for the first time. Of course I was a mess over the flute competition.

We heard a fumbling sound from down the hall. We weren't whispering anymore. Maybe we had woken them up.

"See ya," Denis whispered and tiptoed away, into the darkness.

Saturday morning came too fast. Mom, Dad, Lori, Kenny the pianist and I sat in the school cafeteria, waiting for my turn to perform. Lori told me not to be nervous. She said that I had mastered the piece two weeks ago. Lori went to the University of

Miami and had a flute scholarship. She could have probably played Mozart with her toes. She was talented, and she pushed me hard. She told me to imagine that every time I started a song, a tiny little man had to walk across an imaginary tightrope. When I finished, he got to the other side safely. When I stumbled he stumbled. When I lost concentration and really messed up—he fell. To his death. No pressure.

Dad was trying to stuff some snacks into me. He said it would make me feel better. I said it would make me throw up. What I didn't need was a little chocolate and caffeine to calm me down. I took a sip of the soda, just to make him feel like he was being helpful. I knew that playing golf on Saturday morning was a ritual for him, and he didn't have to come. Somehow I appreciated the sacrifice.

"Don't worry, Tootsies."

Dad called me Tootsies. How embarrassing.

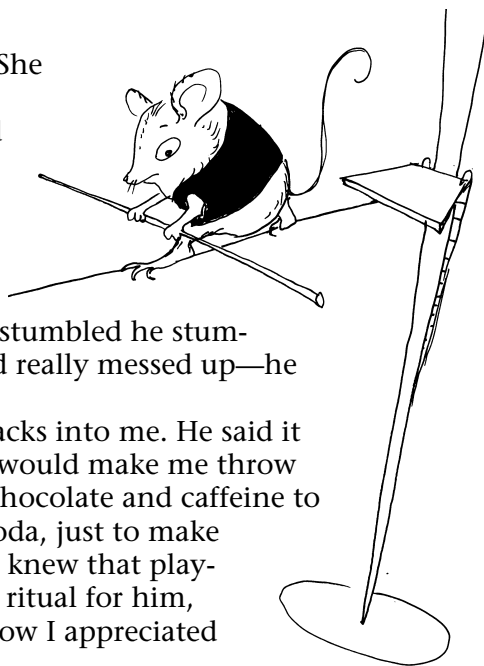
"I know exactly how you feel," he continued. "When I was in the army they put me in the airborne division. I had to parachute out of airplanes on a daily basis. Every time I did it I thought I would die. I hated it. You know I'm afraid of heights."

That was true. He didn't even like to go to the top of the fake Eiffel Tower at the amusement park.

Kenny, my piano accompanist, chewed his nails and watched the clock. He looked bored. He was probably thinking about Jane, another flutist. He would have licked mud off her feet, if she would have let him. I, on the other hand, wasn't crazy about her. If Jane could have had her way, she would have had a royal entourage everywhere she went.

The cafeteria was incredibly clean. It was strange to see a school cafeteria so full of adults. Their long bodies looked funny on the little blue plastic stools attached to the folding lunch tables.

Lots of other parents administered emotional first aid to their trembling children. You would have thought that we were going off to war instead of music competition. Lisa was there too. We had just started to be friends. She lived a block away. She played



the flute and we sat next to each other in band class. Lisa agreed that Jane needed to eat a piece of humble pie.

Unlike me, Lisa had to practice under duress. Her parents locked her into her bedroom for two hours every afternoon to study and practice.

Her mom came over to meet my parents. She had on thick glasses that magnified her dark eye make-up.

Then I heard my name being called across the cafeteria. I felt like I was at the worst doctor's appointment of my life.

"Dorothy Fellenz?" called the woman, looking around.

It was my turn.

The five of us entered the competition room. Two judges sat in front of us. The piano faced the wall. *Great!* I thought. *If I don't have to look at the judges it will be much easier.* Everyone sat down. I had to stand, of course. They smiled and asked me if I would like to warm up. I turned to the piano. I didn't need to warm up, though. If I was any warmer they would have had to rush me to intensive care.

"You can begin whenever you are ready," said the female judge. She was a big woman, soft and relaxed. She smiled at me. Her eyes seemed to say, *It's okay, I understand. Don't worry. You are going to do fine.*

I wanted to turn my back to them, but Lori must have read my mind because she shot me a look that said, *Don't even think about what you are thinking about.*

I put my music on the stand and faced them. I smiled a nervous twitching kind of smile. I lifted my flute to my mouth and began.

My hands shook. *Concentrate. Concentrate. Concentrate.*

I imagined the man on the wire. Then I felt like Mom was sending me some invisible waves of peace, like a warm breeze blowing through me, and my anxiety drifted away. Suddenly I imagined that the judges were just friends, and that they weren't manic note scribblers. I imagined that my song would make them happy, if for a moment. Maybe it would bring back some happy memory. Some forgotten joy.

After a few minutes, I was finished. It took so long to prepare for a few minutes' worth of performance. The judges thanked me, but didn't clap or say a word. Lori said they never clap. It's against the Music Competition Judge Rules to clap. That would be too simple. Too natural. They had to talk about my song, behind

closed doors, for half a day. Then they would issue the verdict.

We waited in the cafeteria. We waited and waited. Then we waited some more.

Kenny went home to dream about Jane the goddess with the frizzy hair. We ate chocolate and drank sodas. Dad told us stupid jokes. And still we waited. Finally, they called Lori to a small room. They gave her my score sheet with all the comments on it. She smiled as if she were trying to hide something by not letting her teeth show. Her face was glowing. She headed back toward our table.

"You got a superior," she said.

You can't do better than a superior.

News traveled fast. Two days seemed like a million years. It was Monday. I was in Health class. The talking wallflowers were sitting behind me. They had perfect attendance.

Then they began.

"I heard Dodi got a superior," said Lee Ann.

"For what, rented pony riding? On her English test? I heard someone say that Mr. Surindowski really likes her. Maybe that Spanish boy Victor gave her a superior for being the least stuck up of all the girls," mocked Laura.

I was trying hard to ignore them.

"Did you know she's Irish?" continued Lee Ann.

"No, she's American," replied Laura.

"I know she was born here, but I bet she's really Irish. Don't you see? She has some red in her hair. Do you think she has a hot temper, Laura?" Lee Ann was really pushing it this time.

I decided to give them a shock. I turned around to face them.

"You've got it all wrong. I'm Roman," I said with a straight face.

"Like real Rome?" Lee Ann asked. She was confused.

"Like Rome, Italy. Maybe you haven't studied it yet. Anyhow, forget about the hair. You should have known I was Roman by my nose," I said, pointing to my nose shamelessly. Suddenly I didn't care about my big nose anymore.

"Are you really Roman?" Laura asked, puzzled by this new piece of information.

"But there's nothing wrong with your nose," they said, as one.

I just smiled and turned around. Then the bell rang.

Thinking About It

1. Do you think that it is useful for siblings to learn how to get along with each other? Why do you think siblings are sometimes jealous of each other? What is a healthy way to deal with jealousy when it comes up in a family?
2. If you were in the same situation as Denis, when Billy was being picked on, what do you think you would do? Do you think that Denis handled it well? What are other possible ways of dealing with the problem?
3. How does a person show that he or she is loyal? If a friend or someone in your family is disloyal to you, and that person apologizes, would you forgive him or her? Do you think that someone who is disloyal can grow to become loyal? Is loyalty important to you? What does loyalty have to do with honesty?