

WRITING A LIFE

The hot summer of 1956 finally started cooling off by late August, and I occasionally went for rambles in the woods again, frolicking in fields and hugging chosen trees. Time was running out before school started, and I treasured these last chances to be a wild child.

At home, I faithfully followed my Bandstand and Mouse Club shows. With great interest, I observed the evolution of the dancing crowd on Bandstand and was pleased that Kenny and Arlene kept on coming to the party in Philadelphia. At times Dick Clark had special guests, and it was neat actually seeing them perform their hit songs. Otherwise, they were just names. There were a few changes among the Mouseketeers too, and I was more than pleased that Annette was hanging in there still. She was turning into the prettiest girl I could imagine and was so talented at so many things that I was completely hornswoggled. I regretted horribly having cast her in that silly role of Anne in last year's novel.

I also watched some new cowboy shows in the evenings, as well as The \$64,000 Question, which challenged me to answer some crazy questions, sometimes correctly. Hit songs on the radio and juke box still captivated me, especially those by Elvis like Hound Dog and Blue Suede Shoes. Having actually seen and spoken to him, I was a devoted fan of Elvis, waiting impatiently for every new record. I quickly learned to sing Love Me Tender with dramatic emotion in a voice like his. Not to bother folks, I found a distant spot out in the old gravel pit like an amphitheater with tall walls where I could sing that and other songs on the top of my lungs. The acoustics were splendid, and no one could hear me caterwauling except the hogs in their stinky sty.



In September when I started school in Lockesburg again, I somehow found myself elected Freshman Class President for 1956-57—without campaigning and without duties for this honorary title. My class was a mere dozen boys and the same number of girls, all hormonally charged. Though Father had trained me well not to think about sex, I found myself looking at the girls with a bit more interest. Some, like Elizabeth Harrison and Lavern Deal, were oddly more attractive this year, but they never gave me the time of day. I got the feeling they avoided me because I was a papist.

My guy-friends were, of course, a year older now and rather bigger, as was I. Bodie and Blob got on the Junior High basketball team, but I did track, so we didn't have as much time together, just recesses and lunches. I wasn't very good at sprints but did well on the long-distance courses. Though I was pretty good, per Daddy's advice, Coach Hale didn't plan on me being on the team for track meets anywhere. That was perfectly fine with me.

Ricky, Freshman President (56-57)

Though Judy had now been confirmed in the faith, our parish priest's monthly catechism visits continued, much to my chagrin. At his September visit after school began, Father launched into a talk about how God is so forgiving, pardoning any sin that we sincerely repent of. That's when I told him I didn't believe in Original Sin. Anyway, why was it a sin to eat a piece of fruit?

Father explained that by eating the apple, Adam and Eve had disobeyed God, and disobedience was the applicable sin. It seemed to me that punishing such a minor infraction by expulsion from the Garden of Eden was awfully mean and arbitrary. What's more, holding the grudge forever over the whole human race was cruel and unjust. Why on earth was I supposed to take the blame for something someone else did? To answer my questions, Father suggested I study for the priesthood, and then he scooted off to Judy's session. I tossed his suggestion in the trash.

Over those last months of summer and through September, my rescued puppy Uncle Sam grew apace and amazed me by turning into a glossy black shepherd with white chest and feet, a perfectly beautiful dog that I loved wildly. I called him Sambo, but refused the "L'il Black" that people always tried to add. Sambo was too little to accompany me on my summer rambles, but by October he was big enough to scamper around in the woods.



Come October, many of my evenings were back to happily working the basketball game crowds in the café. This year Bodie and Blob were on Lockesburg's second-string junior team and so got to ride on the bus. I was proud for them see my fancy café-castle and me in my snazzy job. Bodie got himself an old car and started coming down to the cafe other evenings, mostly with cute girls on "dates." The next day at school, he'd describe the girls to me in prurient, though not graphic detail. I was mystified by his fascination with titties, but mostly jealous that Bodie was living like a normal teen out looking for a pretty girl to fall in love with.

That fall my bedroom hops got even more popular, maybe as many as four or five couples dancing. It really felt like my very own Bandstand, keeping the crowd hopping with great songs and interspersing encouraging comments like a real DJ. Elizabeth Harrison's sister Ethel often showed up, and she was a great dance partner swirling her full skirt. Despite the many dancing girls at my hops, I felt nothing like a "liking" for any of them, whatever that might feel like. I still didn't know. Some evenings Bodie showed up with a date, and some of their sexy moves sort of shocked me. Nothing I'd do on the dance floor, or anywhere else for that matter.

When hunting season started in November, one Saturday at the gas station I bought me a .22 rifle from the Conoco delivery man—for \$30. I set up some bottles on the fence posts out back and practiced shooting. I only missed about half the time. The problem was that I had to wear my glasses to aim exactly, and they made the woods look weirdly detailed, like a different world.

That Sunday after surviving Mass, I took off squirrel-hunting with Sambo in the woods north of the Hill where there were lots more oaks and hickories. The fallen leaves were fresh and crunchy underfoot. I hoped Sambo would wander around and start tracking a squirrel, but he stuck close to me. Farther along, helped out by my glasses, I saw one scoot along a high branch and hide behind the tree trunk. I tossed a big stick into the leaves on the other side of the tree, making the critter crawl around to my side, and I picked it off with a lucky shot. I offered it for Sambo to sniff and maybe start learning to hunt, but he wasn't at all interested. (As a matter of fact, Sambo never did make much of a hunting dog.)

In November, the routine of football game crowds in the café continued, of course, and I was in my element waiting on all the young folks, not to mention the frequent dances I hosted in my huge boudoir. In the midst of all the socializing and triggered by the romantic songs on the radio and juke box, I kept on wondering when I'd ever meet some girl to "like." I knew dozens of comely young maidens, but not a single one worked any magic on me. I didn't exactly feel lonely or frustrated in my strange, crowded isolation, but all the same, I wasn't living a normal teenaged life and felt like some kind of freak. However, a relatively happy freak.

Thinking about last year's freaky experience of writing a novel with me and Annette cast as the couple, I'd been so happy living in that imaginary world all those months of writing. I'd read somewhere that one should only write about things they knew, so clearly, my mistake was trying to write about Ft. McHenry. I decided to try again with a story set somewhere rural like the country around home. This time I'd be the hero (with another name) in a love story, and the pretty girl would only coincidentally be named Annie. No celebrity casting in this novel. I would create a fictional scenario much happier than my solitary, freaky real life on Penney Hill.

Over my school-free Thanksgiving holiday, I started typing busily on my new escape from reality, jumping into a silly scene of my alter-ego country boy named Roy stealing watermelons from a neighboring farmer's patch, shades of Tom Sawyer... Before my holiday was over, I'd expanded the scene to include the farmer's visiting granddaughter Annie, more watermelon nonsense, and a rambunctious bull. Being a well-trained chauvinist, the boy Roy was fairly antagonistic to the girl and dismissive, but she responded in a civil and carefree manner. It was so vivid in my mind that I even drew a colored picture of the bull in the field.

Again, this manuscript has languished in my files for seven decades, and I'm only now trying to read it to find out what was going on in my 15 year-old mind. This spurt was Chapter 1, setting up a familiar bucolic scene with the hero and introducing the pretty but unappreciated heroine. In fact, Roy wound up sounding like rather a jerk. Lots of room for character and plot development.

In October, Father's dose of doctrine was negligible garble about particular saints to pray to for this or that, like to St. Jude for hopeless cases. For November, right after Thanksgiving, to my cynical questions about all the emphasis on sacrifice, like the crucifixion, he recommended again I become a priest. Of course, there was no earthly way that was going to happen. What with the holidays, we blessedly skipped a December session. Otherwise, the holidays passed unnoticed in my school-free weeks of pounding away on the old Remington.

With the start of 1957, I was immersed up to my eyelids in fantasizing the beginning stages of a typical teenage romance. In the first several months of the new year, I had eyes and ears for little more than the growing attraction between the imaginary Roy and Annie. Following the advice to write about what I knew, I'd let slip an early reference to Spanish moss hanging in the trees

(shades of “The Yearling”) and later decided the setting was somewhere rural in Mississippi (Faulkner country), intimating a contemporary timeframe in the early 50s.

As the pages rolled off the Remington, there were the usual mundane chores to do, enduring the weeks of uninspiring classes at school, feeding the zoo, working occasionally in the café, and romping all over the place with Sambo. That winter and spring, Cornpone swelled up into a great lumbering hog, but unbeknownst to anyone else, I was emotionally living on a Mississippi farm. Nothing much of note happened in those months to draw me back into the present in Arkansas. Most notable, though, was on Epiphany when Elvis appeared on the Ed Sullivan show, a major thrill seeing my idol perform. It gave me another powerful shot of artistic ambition, but I still hadn’t figured out how to start building my career as a famous singer.

Right after New Year’s, I moved into Chapter 2 and wrote about Roy’s Sunday ordeal of going to boring church (denomination unspecified) and falling asleep during the sermon. In a later encounter with Annie, there was again a fair amount of boy-girl approach/avoidance. The girl remarked on wishing for some kind of mystery to solve and make her summer more interesting (shades of Nancy Drew). That was a good clue as to where my plot would be heading.

True to the recipe, Chapter 3 began with Roy going fishing and letting Annie tag along. In a too-long description of the rural landscape, I tried to write down my vivid imaginings in excessive detail. Showing Annie how to fish was a quiet competition full of friction, male arrogance, and suspicion, and naturally she fell into the creek. Roy added “clumsy” to his list of things he “dislikes” about girls. Annie got angry when he tried to frighten her with a snake and continued to pick on her rather rudely. Then she simply ignored him. In this chapter, I may have been working through some adolescent gender issues I didn’t realize I had.

By February—after Father’s pointless January visit with another argument about heaven and hell—I got into Chapter 4. It started with an excessively detailed description of squirrel hunting that distinctly reflected my hunting trip with Sambo. Only the fictional dog was a good hunter. Then the scene switched to the river—at a swimming hole very like the local McKellar’s Crossing—replete with a familiar rope tied to a sycamore tree for swinging out over the water. When Annie and others showed up, the scene got out of hand with lots of splashing, swinging, and horseplay in frequently awkward narration. Too many mere words failing me, I drew another picture of the scene. Notably, Annie taught Roy how to swim properly, and he momentarily and passingly admired her in her blue bathing suit. The romantic ice was starting to break.

On no real schedule in and around school and normal life on Penney Hill, chapter quickly followed chapter. Monthly catechism sessions barely interrupted my concentration on the love story between Roy and Annie. It was a splendid substitute for my loveless real life. In Chapter 5 I went too deeply into details of Roy’s wide assortment of pets—not unlike my own—and then I started setting up the plot. An old black man, a former slave, told them a story about burying a necklace of jewels to hide it from the invading Yankees, and the novel thus became a story of buried treasure. Something to build a love story around...

Call me masochistic—I’ve just finished reading this 215-page second novel by a teenage boy who didn’t know his butt from a hole in the ground. Don’t ask about its less cringeworthy but deadly boring title, and let me try to be kind in my remarks about this valiant literary effort. Throughout the spring months, I was possessed by the muse and moved through the mundane world of Arkansas almost in a dream. Frequent visions of beautiful Annette on MMC supplied

vivid details for describing Roy's Annie. My new "buried treasure" theme was a very useful direction to take the pressure off of the Roy-Annie matter. I had no idea of what their next step should be to stoke the planned romance.

That's why I made the same mistake as before—hauling in more characters. This time a bunch of grownups and kids seriously thickened the soup as everyone got involved in the treasure hunt. My model "mystery" was of course the Hardy Boys series with Tim Considine that had been showing on the MMC. (I also thought Tim and I looked a lot alike.) So, when I got the crew all assembled, I realized that simply digging up a treasure wasn't enough for high drama and added in a kidnapping with an (illogical) demand for the necklace as ransom.

I doubt I knew where I was going with this and was just flying by the seat of my pants. As parts of the confusing hubbub, Roy and Annie had ample chance to interact momentarily and build on their unacknowledged attraction. I sent the crowd off with shovels to a holly grove by the river for much digging at the bases of trees, which caused one to topple over. Guess what! Among its lifted roots, it showed a jewel box. Talk about serendipity!

Throughout the digging, Roy didn't pay much attention to Annie—or vice versa. Nor later when all were focusing on the search of an old barn for the kidnappers. Ignorant of laws, I framed the crime as a much less serious offense than it truly was, but it allowed me to spin out a truckload of action. The dozen characters and ten policemen raced around helter-skelter searching for and chasing crooks like a bunch of Keystone Cops. The capture of the crooks and rescue of the feisty young girl was anti-climactic and low-key. Their arrest again showed I hadn't the faintest notion of proper judicial procedure, though the police eventually hauled the bad guys away.

Sadly, my awkward narrative skills weren't quite up to that complicated job, and suddenly I was back to square one with Roy and Annie off-handedly being aware of each other's existence. Like judicial procedure, I knew nothing about "courting" but wanted to wrap the love story up in the next couple chapters. So, this must have been near when I turned sixteen in late April and had to endure yet another priestly visit. Father had only missed one catechism visit all spring, much appreciated, and I'd wool-gathered through most of them, tuning out his nonsensical doctrine. Truly in a literary quandary, in our April session, I asked Father if kissing a girl was a sin. He said not if you just touched lips together. Going any farther could be a temptation.

Farther? Temptation to what sin? Oh, sex. I wondered since you never saw folks kissing on TV. I pressed the issue, asking if making out was a sin. (I'd heard some sketchy details of this romantic activity from my experienced friend Bodie.) Like hugging? Stroking her cheek? Father assured me that I could put my arm around a girl, hug her, caress her face, and hold her hand, but I must never touch her impurely. I well understood the urge to caress and kiss a girl like a sweet pet, but why would you ever want to touch her part? How about touching her titties? Same question. Father forbade even looking at women's breasts—not that I had any intention of doing so.

At least our discussion gave me some guidelines for bringing Roy and Annie together on the page. In the meantime, I hauled in another character to complete another couple, like an example for the two, who started talking about liking each other. Elated, Roy asked Annie to go to a "barn dance" (reflecting the rural setting) where he managed to put his arm around her in dances. Later, they talked more intimately, and while walking outside in the (romantic) moonlight, Annie kissed him on the mouth—knocking his socks off, so to speak.

To me, as the writer, that was about as far as I knew to go, but I went on anyway, taking the lovebirds back into the barn and dumping them on a pile of hay. (For some reason, hayrides had enormous erotic implications for me—like lying in bed.) There were permissible hugs and caresses without impure touches and with sighs of affection, wrapping the love story up with a perfectly chaste “roll in the hay,” though I hadn’t yet heard that expression.

Having read this adolescent dithering, I see that on the romance theme, it got not much farther than the first novel, up to the kids recognizing their mutual attraction. That was inevitable because I wasn’t writing about anything I knew. Sure, the rural setting and activities were well known, but like judicial procedures and techniques of courtship, most interpersonal and social matters were simply ignored. My problem was that I didn’t know much about anything.

I didn’t get very far in characterizing either, except for Roy’s sexist hesitance and Annie’s plucky beauty. It surprised me to see a black character (old man Pete) prominently involved and pointedly accepted in the group. Not sure where that came from, maybe from Huckleberry’s friend Jim. I’d had absolutely no exposure to black folks. (All I knew was a small group of them lived over past the white oak grove at Humpersneck.)

By the end of school in May 1957, I filed these typed pages beside the first novel for this next reading now seventy years later. Accomplishing my purpose, I never gave it another thought. I’d managed to conjure up a fictional girlfriend and go through the motions expected of me as a virile teenager. Now I just had to wait for a real one, girl that is. Having had such a wonderful imaginary love affair took the pressure off my social inclinations, and I waited patiently.



Meanwhile, I mowed grass, fed the zoo, worked at the café, and helped Mom with motel laundry. Naked rambles in the woods with Sambo resumed, and in mid-June they set up the peach stand by the highway again. Naturally, my Cornpone had by then grown into a huge red hog, and we took him to the County Fair in DeQueen to win the blue ribbon. Then, I sold him to the meatpackers, using the prize money for new cowboy boots with bright turquoise tops.

Whenever I worked at the café, which was many quiet afternoons, I kept a sharp eye out for pretty girls, but saw very few. They all understandably left soon, usually without giving me a second look, a lowly waiter devouring them with my eyes. Very occasionally one would smile sweetly at me and make me feel all handsome and romantic. My favorite kind of cutie of course was a brunette (like Annette), and I liked big, bright eyes. She should have full, kissable lips and be slender. Big girls turned me off—thinking of all that flesh.

Sometimes I’d hike with my sweet pupdog and hickory stick down to the secret grotto to plant flowers out of our gardens at home: bittersweet bushes, iris, morning glories... Like the one in Porter’s novel “Laddie,” I planned a paradise as a gift for a girlfriend, should I ever come by one. With its lovely spring cascading down into the branch, the grotto was already a little Eden. Last year’s weeping willow sprout was growing great guns. I romped with Sambo in a deeper pool beside my beloved holly tree and rejoiced again in the bank of fragrant honeysuckle. Small wonder that I didn’t feel particularly deprived heterosexually speaking...

On Father's doctrinal stop-by in late May, he sadly let me know that he was leaving our parish, and next month we'd get a new priest in Dequeen, a young Jesuit named Father Jordan. Saying goodbye, Father patted my shoulder paternally. The next Sunday at mass I saw this new Father Jordan, a slightly overweight, round-faced guy with a receding hairline. No guessing what he was like, but judging by his scrambled sermon, he'd probably make more of the same noise. I was surprised—and not at all grateful—that at the end of June, Father Jordan “stopped by” at Penney Hill. Apparently inheriting Father So-and-so's schedule, he'd come to catechize us.

I was surprised again to find him a warm and friendly guy who asked me all about being a teenager out in the woods, my school life, and my interests. I told him about everything, including even about liking to write. He asked if I had a girlfriend yet, and I admitted that I didn't—because I didn't know many girls. Okay, I sort of liked some of the girls in my class, but they didn't know I was alive. This Father sympathetically patted my hand and remarked, “Well, you mustn't get emotionally involved with a non-Catholic anyway.”

I stopped breathing for a moment, astounded. I'd never heard of such a horrid rule. To be thorough, Father Jordan added, “And be careful about having non-Catholic friends—they'll lead you into sin.” I doubt I said two more words to him before he left me to go indoctrinate Judy. What a horrible prohibition! Here we were, the only Catholics in the county, and the only Catholic girl I knew was my little sister. Where was I going to find any Catholics for friends? Again I hated getting baptized into a church with such stupid rules, like a snooty club. Disgusted, I went out to feed the zoo. At least animals didn't have churches or insane rules.

That summer (as well as the next few), the orchard boss was generous. Mary Jane, who looked a whole lot prettier to me this year but would now be a senior in high school, got off at six. The boss said I could sell anything left over, give culls away, and keep whatever money for my “college fund,” something I'd never thought about before. My first official act was to sort out the ripest basketful for the café's morning cook Mae to turn into our famous little round pies, apple, chocolate cream, coconut, cherry, and now the perfect local peach pies.

So, evenings after my slow afternoons in the café, I happily peddled bushels and pecks to late passersby and gave culls away for cooking and making brandy. Our part of Arkansas was all dry counties, but one could discreetly make their own booze. Sitting outside beside the highway in the white-boarded stand (matching our fence) was a heck of a lot more fun than serving up burgers and fries in the café. (Some forty years later when I became a vendor of recycled plants at our local farmers market, I looked back fondly on those years of late-June and early-July evenings selling pretty peaches.)

Meanwhile, my afternoons in the café were truly slow, customers drifting in occasionally one or two at a time, usually wanting ice tea or a sodapop. In between, I'd make myself comfy and doze in a booth. In the weeks since finishing my novel, I'd been itching to write something again. Father's new rule meant I should essentially stop conjuring up relationships with girls, and so I started thinking about stories about brothers. The theme obviously came from a deep underlying loneliness, appropriate girls being rare as hen's teeth and no more boys for chumming around. For several years, I'd secretly wished for a real brother, someone even closer than my dear playmate Billie or my little savage chum Kay. Camaraderie at school with Bodie and Blob was stuck at the casual level of pals. Rather than set up the Remington, I brought over a notepad and my old Parker pen to #1 booth where I could keep an eye on things.

In my neat penmanship, I started scribbling a story inspired by our fat morning cook, Mae—who made our pies and dipped snuff. She was the last child in her family, the 23rd (!) with eight sisters and 14 brothers. There’d been four wives, all obviously bred to death. By the time Mae was born, a good third of the siblings were grown up and gone, but the rest were a solid crew of helpers on the father’s big farm. It had to be big to feed some 20 people,. Mae was middle-aged now, making this in the early century before the World War. She said when she was a tiny thing, several more of her brothers took off to fight in it, leaving the family’s mostly girls with more work. Some of those soldiers got killed by the Krauts. It was a disturbing story, but I jumped on the premise of an outrageously huge family. Writing about a kid with a whole passel of siblings, I hoped my literary magic would let me vicariously experience intense brotherhood.

For several weeks I sat between customers in #1 writing slowly about my mental images of the kid’s several brothers, both older and younger because he was around ten. I wrote slowly like a true author, chewing on each sentence until it felt right and thinking long and hard about what the next one should say. Also, writing in longhand took longer than typing, except for all my typos. With the pen, I wasn’t so careless. I conjured up much bucolic scenery, rustic folderol, and a confusing bustle of household and farming activities. (Like in the novels before, I’d made the mistake of having way too many characters in my story.)

So, I was forced to deal with the sleeping arrangements for so many in such a limited a space. Judiciously, I furnished it with four beds, each accommodating four crosswise kids in random and shifting distribution. My ten year-old kid usually slept by his fifteen year-old brother who cuddled him to sleep. After several escapades and adventures, I added more fraternal intimacies. They were poignantly touching and soothed my secret wish for a brother, but by the end of July I gave up in frustration—with no idea where the story should go.

The next Sunday in Dequeen we stopped after Mass at the Drug Store (the only place open on the Sabbath under the “blue laws” of the time), where I picked up a new Scrooge McDuck comic book and the latest issue of Teen Magazine, my only source of TV and celebrity news. I read the first on the way home and waited till I could stretch out on my sofa couch with the magazine. Imagine my elation to read that Annette was a Catholic, which I didn’t know to assume from her Italian family. We papists weren’t generally much approved of across the country, so this surprising news was probably an attempt to besmirch my leading lady’s PR image.

For me, it was the Church’s *imprimatur*. This girl, my longtime dear friend and co-star, was suddenly available to be my girlfriend for real. Now it didn’t have to be the imaginary Jack and Ann or Roy and Annie, but the more or less real Ricky and Annette, an actual live human being to fantasize about. Having staged them so many times, I could so easily imagine our affectionate intimacies—holding her in my arms, breathing the fragrance of her black curls, kissing her cheeks. Now I’d focus my romantic emotions on Annette, the most beautiful girl in the world.

Of course, I knew I should keep my new love secret, or folks would call me crazy. Maybe I was, but over the next weeks, the inspiration of loving Annette from afar calmed my loneliness in work and chores with visions of her beauty, and in the next weeks, her afternoon appearances on MMC were thrilling epiphanies. Her smiles took my breath away, and each show left me quivering with romantic longing. It felt tremendous to abandon myself to passion, albeit it long-distance and unrequited. Someday, somehow we’d be together. I’d just have to be patient...

In mid-August, I took a trip on an airplane! My Aunt Sissie had sent her favorite nephew a letter inviting him to come visit them for a couple weeks in Baltimore. She'd hoped I'd enjoy seeing something of the "modern world" beyond the woods of Arkansas and sent me plane tickets to fly from Texarkana through Memphis and Cincinnati to Baltimore. Not only was I flying on a plane, but alone, my first real solo adventure. Looking out the little round window from so high up was thrilling, and I loved the roars in taking off and landing, so powerful. My generous aunt met me at the plane in her new sports car, a pretty yellow MG, and drove me downtown to Grandma's house on Elsinore Avenue.

It was disorienting leaving the Arkansas woods in the early morning and being in the city so far away in Maryland later the same evening. Aunt Sissie was still living at Grandma's, and they put me up in a little bedroom under a gable. It had that comforting "grandparents" smell I recalled so fondly, and there were still mint-leaf jellies on the table and a bowl of walnuts for Grandpa. At dinner, they made me talk at length about my boring, isolated life on Penney Hill, and Aunt Sissie exclaimed that I certainly needed to experience some civilized city life and culture.

Her agenda for my two-week exposure to civilization included three plays. Two were what she called "summer stock" theater performed in a big barn called Hilltop Theatre out in the country. They were entitled "Point of No Return" and "Desk Set," though I can't recall a shred of what they were about. Seeing real theater in a fancy barn was thrilling. Sissie was doing props for the play we'd see the next week, and she took me downtown to an interesting rehearsal. The actors worked on their characters and repeated their lines in different ways. I felt like I learned a whole lot about acting and appreciated how hard Annette must have worked on her shows.

The most memorable part of my whole Baltimore trip was when they ordered in a big lunch for everybody—something I'd never seen before—pizza! I'd always loved singing that old Dean Martin song "That's Amore" with the moon meeting your eye like a big pizza pie, but I'd had no idea what a "pizza pie" (piece of pie?) was. This one was topped with a tasty sausage called pepperoni, another novelty. For dessert we had a delicious green ice cream made with something called pistachios. Something new every time I turned around. The next week's play was in a church and called "The Second Man." It was also forgettable but great fun to watch.



Annapolis w/ Johnnie



Gettysburg



Gettysburg

Between theatrical performances, visits to a mall called Mondawmin, and walking around the city, we rode in Grandpa's Lincoln to historic sites. Dotsy's eldest boy Cousin Johnnie came with us to Annapolis to the Naval Academy, which was real impressive with fancy buildings. Their Chapel was the biggest church I'd ever seen. (I wasn't to return to the Academy Chapel for another 40 years—when I attended my only nephew's wedding there as his faerie godfather.)

Another day we drove to Gettysburg Battlefield in Pennsylvania. Naturally, some years before I'd had to memorize the Gettysburg Address, so I knew the historical context of the Civil War. There were lots of elegant monuments and statues scattered all over the place, but to be truthful, I wasn't all that impressed. In fact, were it not for these photographs that Grandma took, I doubt I would've recalled even going to Gettysburg. Battlefields bring me down.

It was a different story going with Aunt Sissie to nearby Ft. McHenry—weird seeing the place for real and recognizing how totally different it was from what I'd imagined. The maze of angular ramparts and scattered barracks and other buildings were tremendously confusing. I saw one corner of a building by a rampart that might have worked for a scene with Jack and Ann. While my aunt and I wandered the ramparts, I confided in her that last year I'd written a novel about Ft. McHenry. She got all excited over me being so creative. Avoiding mention of my silly second novel, I told her about the prize for my Wisconsin winter scene.



Between excursions, we visited with relatives around Baltimore. Aunt Jackie and Uncle Jack were married last year, and Dotsy had six sweet kids. Cousin Johnnie was lucky having a family like I wanted: five brothers and one sister. He was a cute blond boy who tugged my heartstrings. (In all these years since, I've never seen these cousins again.)

Flying home was another exciting adventure. We flew over other states to Atlanta and across the South to Arkansas, and over Mississippi we hit some rough weather that bumped the plane around and scared us all. Getting back to Penney Hill, I realized that for two whole weeks I'd almost never thought about Annette, my secret sweetheart. My passionate love exploded all over me again and turned into a full-fledged psychotic obsession.

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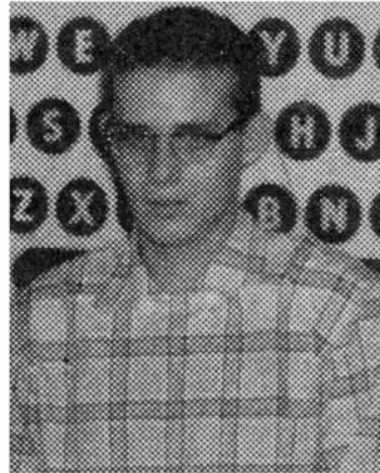
One may well wonder how a relatively sapient, albeit juvenile, member of the genus *Homo* could ever let himself get backed into a hole like that. I see clearly now that an insidious cult entrapped me—despite my rational doubts and misgivings. Rejecting the doctrine of original sin (and its attendant universal, eternal repentance and sacrifice), I still accepted that disobedience was the root, the essence of evil. However dubious its basic principles or later mythology, any additional rules of the cult still had to be scrupulously obeyed. So, I devoutly abjured sex and meekly accepted the xenophobic restrictions on romantic involvements with girls. My only alternative was platonic adoration of an angel that I could see every day on TV. However, I flatly rejected the cult's prohibition on having non-Catholic friends or fraternal relationships with guys.

The last week of August before school started up again, most days I frantically pushed the lawnmower around with my head in the clouds adoring my angelic new sweetheart Annette. In the evenings, I worked mechanically in the café, waiting impatiently for the new season of MMC to begin and bring me new epiphanies of my angel. A few nights still, I slept out under the hickory with my critters, cuddling Sambo and whispering my love-longing in his furry ear.

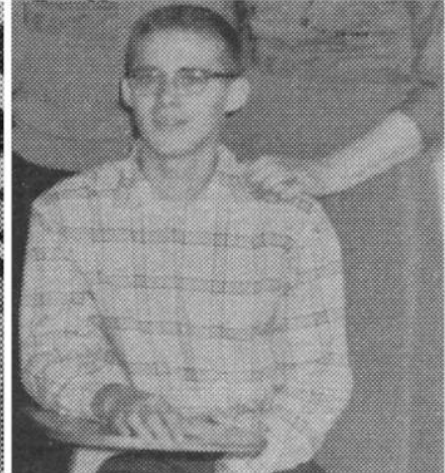
The 1957-58 school year, my 10th grade, brought academic duties shown in these grainy photos from the Blue Darter yearbook. For good reason, I have absolutely no memory of doing anything at all in these responsible positions. Note my much more attractive (less dorky) new specs!



Student Council



Yearbook Staff



FTA Secretary

In our first full week of school, that Wednesday, nine Negro kids tried to enroll at the white Central High School in Little Rock. Gov. Faubus called in the Arkansas National Guard to block them. There was enormous noise on the radio and TV news shows and much uproar among our students and faculty, and I viscerally supported the nine kids. (I'd always wondered where the invisible black kids in our county went to school.) Then when Pres. Eisenhower sent in federal troops to protect the kids, the noise got even louder. But the ugly integration drama had no effect on life at Ashdown's all-white High School. Far more auspicious and horrifying in my teenaged life, also in September, was that the MMC didn't start a new season!

Instead, it went into reruns from the previous two years. My obsession with Annette had to dine on familiar old visions of my angel when she was so much younger and would flounce up to the camera with that happy wave. I could only wonder what my darling was doing now and what she looked like. I was drawn back to earlier emotional ages with only *dejavu* to feed my fixation and had to make do with re-heated epiphanies and freeze-dried fantasies. (Nowadays I bet Walt Disney probably didn't continue episodes with Annette anymore because she was getting, shall we say, too top-heavy, which would have distorted her white Mouseketeer shirt.)

Another huge noise in the news in early October was with Russia's launch of Sputnik 1, earth's first artificial satellite. I was impressed, though not overly much. Our "cold war" with Russia had been going on behind the scenes for quite a while, and I'd never paid it much attention. Like the Little Rock drama, the conflict with Russia happened way beyond my little Arkansas world, and I was fine with that. There were more immediate and serious romantic matters to attend to.

Early October was also when the basketball season started, and I again was drafted into helping mechanically with the evening game crowds in the café. The hubbub of kids with their hamburgers, fries, and sodapops distracted me only briefly from my romantic obsession, temporarily drawing me back into the real world. When the last of the crowds left, I quickly turned back into a catatonic teenager, utterly possessed by hormonal (yet spiritual) dreams of my perfect love. When local kids showed up to dance in my ballroom, I was again mechanically welcoming, DJing and dancing like an automaton, imagining beloved Annette in my arms. Meanwhile, every day at school, points of interest in classes might occasionally draw my attention to this world, but for hours on end I sat at my desks day-dreaming and doodling. Our class material was so simple that even with a 10% attention rate, my grades didn't suffer.

Also in early October I undertook a labor of love. I'd read in a recent issue of Teen Magazine that my angel's birthday was Oct. 22, only half a year younger than I. Of course, I got all fired up to send her a birthday card with my loving best wishes. But it couldn't be as simple as just that. I'd make it a very special token of my great love. For several days I labored on a colored card (pencils) with a floral border around a formal "Happy Birthday" and a big, mind-bogglingly ornate "Annette" in red. Down in the right corner I signed it, also ornately, "Ricky."

Though saddled with this lovely fixation, I still found occasions for literary inspiration. Lines for poems would pop into my mind, but I couldn't concentrate long enough to grow anything poetic from them. Inchoate sparks of story ideas would flash momentarily and then fizzle out in the bright light of my secret love. In early November, our English teacher, Blob's mother, had us read Shakespeare's "MacBeth," my first experience of that writer. It was an eye-opener, and I wrote a sequel (attempting similar language) called "MacBeth in Hell." The villainous couple plotted to overthrow Satan. Coming up with no plot ideas, I cancelled the misbegotten project.

Soon it turned into football season again, and my work with the game crowds and dancers at my hops kept me vaguely in touch with reality—between fits of passionate fantasy. I had one truly unusual experience: Father Jordan arranged with Daddy to take me to a football game in Ashdown! He felt I needed to get out like other kids, and he promised to get me back to the café in time to work the crowd. It was weird sitting with the priest off by ourselves in the bleachers, but I didn't know any of the kids anyway, and I had no interest in football. We raced back to Penney Hill, beating the Dequeen bus by about five minutes. (My next football game was at the 1964 Sugar Bowl in New Orleans when we sat in the snow!)



That Wednesday I got a big brown envelope in the mail from Walt Disney—a huge glossy picture of my beloved Annette! Something to give holiday thanks for the next day... She looked just like she did two years before as a perky Mouseketeer, back when I cast her as my co-star Anne in the Ft. McHenry novel. This publicity portrait was a perfect icon for the altar of my profound love—in the present re-runs she still looked just this beautiful and innocent. Speaking of *déjà vu*... But my love was timeless, and current reality didn't matter to my fantastic passion.

While stupefied by re-run visions of an earlier Annette, I was sadly aware that my old pals Bodie and Blob were drifting away from me, both also pursuing females. Blob was smitten by a cute girl in our class named Laura and spent all his class-free time in

close consultation with her. Meanwhile, Bodie was now going steady with a girl from 11th grade named Sue, who apparently had a thing for younger guys. They dropped by Penney Hill fairly frequently and danced (sensuously) at my impromptu bedroom hops. I was pleased for my handsome buddy but envied his romantic exploits. Blob didn't visit the café much because, like me, his folks didn't let him drive their car on dates.

Hypnotized by my ethereal sweetheart and increasingly cut off from my former pals, I got to feeling terribly lonely again for a brother. Resorting to my literary magic, I decided to revisit the story of brothers in a huge family, now several neighboring families to cut down on the cast. Over the next couple months, I wrote assiduously on what I called "Old Time Country" about affectionate friendships between hillbilly boys. None ever went anywhere satisfying, but where could they go? The writing effectively assuaged my loneliness, but I eventually dropped the project. (Thank goodness, I didn't archive the pages and won't have to read them again.)

Cutting through the layers of my romantic obsession and fraternal fantasies, there were a few events of note in those busy months. First, shortly before Christmas came the dire news that my famous friend Elvis got drafted into the Army! I was devastated. Then, on Christmas Day, Mom took me and Judy to Dequeen to see Walt Disney's movie "Old Yeller"—my only cinematic experience in those Arkansas years—which made me weep copiously. Last but not least, early in January 1958, Sputnik 1 crashed to earth and burned. I was politically gratified and even more so at the end of the month when the US launched Explorer 1. Take that, you Commies!

All that spring, my only social activities were monthly 4-H club meetings and catechism lessons. Meanwhile, I was bombarded by inspirations for poems and stories which rarely made it through a few lines or pages. The one exception was my story about a dramatic rescue in a flood called "High Water on the Cossatot." I typed it up to send to WD Magazine with high hopes. Again, I don't have a copy, but I think it had a beginning, a middle, and an end. Meanwhile, the only events that penetrated my rural world were news of Castro's growing revolution in Cuba. I was horrified that evil Communists were fighting so close to our wonderful capitalistic country.

Most horrifying was in late March, when my good buddy Bodie dropped out of school to get married. Somehow he'd knocked up his girlfriend Sue, and they disappeared from Lockesburg High. Saying goodbye to him was excruciating. He said not to worry—he'd get a job at the chicken processing plant in Dequeen, and they'd live on the land Sue's folks had up near Dierks. Soon my pal Blob let me know that his father (principal) and mother (English teacher) had found new jobs in north Missouri, and they'd be moving away in May. I was bereft.

In early April, unbeknownst to me at school, Blob's dad drove down to Penney Hill to talk to Daddy about me, not about any bad grades, but with my straight A's, I was way too bright for the tiny school at Lockesburg. He suggested maybe I transfer to Little River County's bigger and better school in Ashdown some 20 miles south of Penney Hill. What's more, he recommended maybe I skip at least one grade forward to senior—or two and go right into college in Texarkana. Daddy felt strongly that I shouldn't get outside of my age group and went the next day to see the Ashdown folks about me switching there next year.

When he told me about the change, I took it as a fantastic birthday present—to escape from pitiful, buddy-less Lockjaw and go to a big modern school with a whole new crowd of guys and gals. Of course, it would be a long haul getting to that distant school and back home. I'd have to catch the school bus some miles away in the village of Ben Lomond, but we'd work that all out

somehow. Thrilled that I'd be riding the bus with my old chum Kay, I fled back into my mad fantasies of angel Annette. Right then, I was crooning the Everly Brothers' big hit "All I Have to Do is Dream" and soon was singing Rick Nelson's "Poor Little Fool." That summer I learned to sing the beautiful Italian song "Nel blu dipinto di blu" ("Volare"), though I had no idea in the world what the words meant. It was enough knowing that "volare" meant "to fly."



Beyond the eternal mowing and continual work in the café, I had little summertime to prowl the woods with my Sambo. With no more reruns of the MMC, I was cut off at the romantic knees and made do with re-hashed, recycled, shopworn visions of my beloved TV star. Out at the peach stand this year, the graduated Mary Jane was almost flirty with me as a 17 year-old, but I was otherwise enthralled.

Right away I went with my club to Fayetteville for a 4-H Week at the University of Arkansas, a huge impressive institution. The meetings and speeches were fairly boring, but I met a friendly girl named Sally from Bentonville and a pretty Indian girl from Oklahoma with the lovely last name Birdsong. We agreed to be pen pals. Sally wasn't pretty, a tad plump, but she was enthusiastically happy. She took this embarrassing picture of me. I'm not sure if my pose was modest or provocative—or if the girl behind me was amused or skeptical.



In July, I went to 4-H camp at a state park in Oklahoma called Beaver's Bend. We slept in bunkhouses, had fun arts and crafts events, and swam a lot in a beautiful river. The boys in my cabin were mostly younger which made me a natural leader and advisor. I made friends with a cute guy named Maxey in another cabin, who'd be in my class next year at Ashdown. I was impressed by Maxey's romantic escapades, sneaking off with girls at night to go skinny-dipping in the river. I fraternally liked a handsome blond boy in my cabin named Larry, the son of our PE coach in Lockjaw. They gave me a wall-lamp as a trophy for "Best Camper."

Back to the lawnmower and café, I also sank back into stale dreams of Annette, content only in having a focus for my enormous need to love someone. The usual hot Arkansas summer setting in, our café's welcoming coolness again brought in lots of locals and tourists, and Daddy amazed me by proposing he pay me for the hours I'd work—He must have talked with the peach boss.—for my college fund. Long before, I'd learned that my folks couldn't help me any with costs for college, and soon I'd better start looking around for some scholarships. Daddy could only pay me fifty cents an hour, but I figured I was also getting room and board. Sometimes I'd sing that great old song from last year, "Get a Job!"

I always had Annette to abjectly adore in between my waiter and cashier tasks. The agony was not seeing my darling's beauty all summer, not even in old re-runs. I kept my eye on the TV magazines for news of where and when to see her again. Word had it that Annette would make

guest appearances on various shows next season, and I waited breathlessly to find out what my angel looked like now. In a magazine last year, her hair was longer, but I liked it shorter.

One late August morning, I got up early to clean up around the motel cabins before the day's heat set in. I started out raking pine needles around #5 down by Elsa's little house. First thing, I noticed she was sitting on her back porch resting her old grey head on the table. When I walked over to say hi, she looked up at me with tearful eyes, quiet for a moment, and then sobbed, "He's dead!" Understanding, I sat down across from her, taking her wrinkled hand in mine, and between sobs, she finally talked about her marriage to PD.

During the war, he'd been a Russian POW in a Nazi camp and was worked nearly to death, then got transferred to Buchenwald. At the end of the war, liberated by the Americans, PD was sent to a hospital where Elsa was his nurse. She married the much older man and came with him to the US to keep on taking care of him. A US soldier he'd befriended (a cousin of Ralph Penney) convinced him to "retire" in Arkansas and got Ralph to build the refugees the little house where they'd lived for the past 13 years.

With nothing I could say, I just held Elsa's hand. In telling me this, she calmed down and asked me to have my father call the funeral home in Texarkana for her. I scurried on up to the café and told Daddy what had happened. He said, "I wondered when that old PD would croak." Mom took a pitcher of ice tea down to visit with the bereaved widow. I went over to the house, sat under the hickory tree, cuddled my Sambo, and grieved for the ancient senile man I'd never really known. His death seemed unreal, like just another little detail in his sad story.

The undertakers got there in the early afternoon, and I led their hearse down the track to Elsa's house. Not wanting to see the dead man, I watched from the café as they carried the corpse out in a black bag. In the evening, Mom had me take Elsa a plate of supper (her favorite ham with peas and mashed potatoes). I was surprised that she'd packed up two big suitcases already with her things. She'd take the Greyhound to Texarkana, pick up PD's ashes, and like he wanted, scatter them in the Mississippi River. Then she'd go to her sister's place in upstate New York.

I was almost in a state of shock at the huge changes happening for the first time. First, a person I knew personally had died, and now this benevolent old woman, companion of my boyhood, like my loving grandmother, was going away, and I'd never see her again. She patted my cheek and said, "Get used to it, Storm King. It will happen many times... Sooner or later, we all have to say goodbye." The next morning when the Greyhound bus made its stop, along with another local passenger, Elsa got on, tearfully waving goodbye, and was gone. That's when I cried.

The rest of the sad day, I worked while Daddy went fishing with his buddies. After supper, I set to feeding the zoo, mechanically lugging the slops and scraps from the café across the road. Suddenly, behind me, a horn beeped, and brakes squealed. I turned just in time to see my Sambo slammed by a pickup truck! It drove on, leaving my sweet pet lying all broken on the blacktop. I ran to him, but Sambo was already dead. It was crying time again...

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