

The rest of the summer of 1959 was a drag, a blur of working in the café, wandering in the woods, and trying to forget Annette. The work in the café held few surprises except for rare occasions of good-looking kids coming in, usually having fun with each other while I fed their faces. While I slaved away most mornings and afternoons, Daddy often took off fishing with his buddies. It was pretty easy for me to avoid eating his catch. One day they showed up with a whale of a catfish in Ox's pickup, bought from a guy who'd netted the monster down in the Little River. They butchered it up for catfish steaks to sell in the café, another dish I avoided, but they sold real well. When the summer heat set in again, I started sleeping outside under the hickory tree in a pile of pets. My new pupdog Lobo was getting big enough to chase and track critters now. I checked in on favorite spots (and beloved trees) and planted more flowers at the grotto. The weeping willow cutting I planted by the spring branch was now as tall as me.



Forgetting Annette got easier and easier. If she should cross my mind at work, I'd just say hi and go about my business. Soon she stopped dropping by all that often. Out in the woods, almost nothing would remind me of her, but a number of times I found new pictures in magazines. I could now admire them objectively and dispassionately, thinking she sure was gorgeous. But just like me, she lived in a world of her very own (apparently infatuated by Fabian). Now we were just like dear old friends. I caught her in Zorro re-runs and once on American Bandstand singing "Lonesome Guitar" and was happy she was so famous. Here I was

once again saying goodbye to a loved one, though we'd never met. It was tremendously painful but a truly great privilege to adore Annette all those years. What would my country-bumpkin life have been without her? She was a diamond in my lonely, dark youth. But no more...

Now in my 18th year, I was about to start my senior year in high school, it was high time for me to start planning for my future. Beyond starting my college fund (now worth about \$400), I hadn't given it much thought. None of the counselors at school last year had asked about our ambitions for after high school, if only because it wasn't really a question. Most figured on getting married to somebody soon if not sooner, girls to homemakers, and guys to work a job. Rather than marry right away, many fellows enlisted in the armed forces or left for nomadic work on pipelines and other construction. Those that stayed home and married most often went to work in the local papermill off to the west of Ashdown belching smoke and stink.

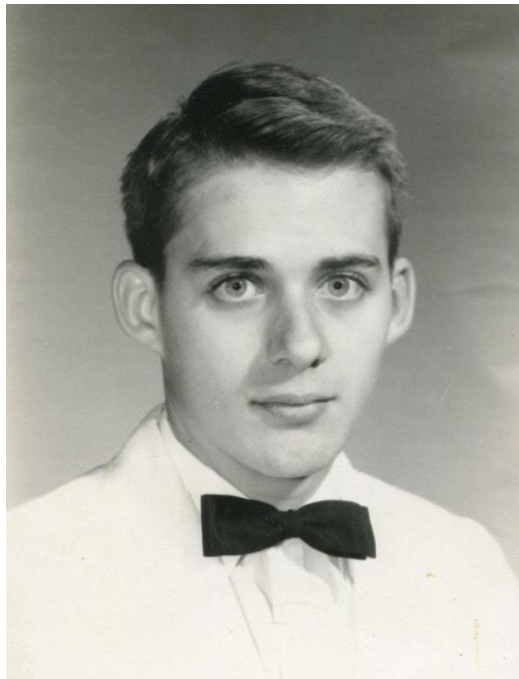
Only the rare high school student had college plans, usually the few hoping to become teachers or other professionals. With no such specifics in mind, I knew I'd best get me some higher education somewhere. The only college I knew of was Henderson State Teachers College in Arkadelphia, but there was bound to be a lot more places—like Harvard and MIT. I'd happened to catch some TV episodes about the cadets at West Point, and the glamour of their uniforms and beautiful campus impressed me terribly. Just then I got a letter from Ed in Texarkana saying he was hoping for an appointment to West Point from our Congressman, and that lit my fire. I wrote to the Congressman, Senator Fulbright, respectfully requesting an appointment as well.

That hopeful work done, I put education aside and in my spare time, largely later evenings, concentrated on art. Earlier in the summer I'd started doodling at drawing people, sweet scenes

with Annette, portraits of friends, etc. Ever since, I'd been sketching various folks, most times from memory, but sometimes from them modelling, like the picture I drew of old Margie, our afternoon cook with a face full of wrinkles. Lots of the sketches were of (attractive) imaginary guys and gals, including new portraits of my future sons and daughters, mother as yet unknown. Creating their lovely features with my pencil, especially lips and eyes, was an intimacy and fulfilling joy that assuaged my general loneliness without fantasies of Annette.

Only a couple weeks after my letter to the Senator, I got a packet in the mail with a nice letter and a complicated form to fill out. The questions on the form got me to thinking that maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Going to West Point would mean enlisting in the Army, and that was right down at the lowest bottom of my aspirations for the future. Lower even that becoming a priest! I wrote the Senator back with many thanks and let him know I'd changed my mind about West Point. I respectfully asked that he consider my friend Ed from Texarkana. When I mailed that letter, I didn't know it, but I'd just dodged a very big bullet. (Ed did too.)

The last days of summer flew by in a blur of work marked that Wednesday with a journal entry of strange significance. "I had a shock when I made change for one of the Frog Level boys. I took out 78¢ for his chicken fry and drink. He gave me a sort of hurt look, kind of belligerent and questioning. In the second our eyes met, I felt very odd." I gave no more thought to my "shock" and "odd" feeling, not bothering to segue as usual into brotherly affection.



Richard as Senior, 1959-60

The next day it started all over again with the trip down to Mary Nell's and our winding drive over the hills to Ben Lomond. I was happy to hug Guy, a bit taller now and a nice-looking teenager. At school, I caught Mr. Garrison in the hall to talk about trading lockers, and I felt a hand on mine. I turned to find my Denny. Walking down the hall to the auditorium, I admired my buddy, also taller now and well-built. We sat together in assembly, our arms touching, and I felt a glow of fraternal love. His cheeks were still smooth and blushing, and his brown eyes...

Denny and I would be together in Psychology and Government, but that's all. Maxito and I would be partners on a lot of things and sit next to each other in typing. Knowing that I was a super typist, Mr. Beck had convinced me to take that class so I could compete in the state contest next spring at the college in Arkadelphia. Anyway, it would be an easy A. I still had the arrangement of track one day a week and

office work twice a week. I couldn't take Spanish anymore, so I filled that hole with Chemistry.

Back home after the short day of orientation, I worked all afternoon and got to say goodbye to the handsome Coke-truck driver who was happily quitting his job. In the evening Kay drove over to take me to a 4-H meeting. I commented in the journal about the little Jackson boy who was "so cute with green eyes and smooth, tanned cheeks. His front teeth were just a shade bucked, and when he smiled, he was adorable." Home again, I tried to draw his picture from memory, but the likeness was a disaster. I couldn't get his mouth right.

On the bus ride home the next day, I sat with a sweet little boy named Johnny and studied his face for drawing—"a broad forehead under wavy brown hair, big brown eyes, a beautiful nose with a splendid little flare to the nostrils. His mouth has a form I can't describe, and his face narrows to a fine chin. I longed to cuddle him like a little brother." This time I neutralized the "odd" attraction by thinking of it as brotherly love. The resulting portrait was also a failure.

That Sunday night I dreamt of walking down a lane, and Annette appeared out in a field standing there with a vulture. She smiled and beckoned to me, and I knew she loved me. When I woke up, I cuddled my pillow, feeling her warm in my arms, and then I pushed her away, knowing that the dream was just reliving old habits of my hopeless love. I was adamant about not loving her anymore and made up my mind right there to look around school again for a girl to be at least friends with, some girl to distract me from memories of my past love. Of course, I'd take Denny's advice and not let the girl get her hooks in me. Just be friends...

The fall of 1959 was a perfect storm of adolescent emotions. I think my previous three years of adoring Annette had been an extremely stressful, protracted trauma, a three-way discordance of romantic, religious, and social tensions. From the get go, my monumental love for the Mouseketeer was a lose-lose-lose situation, and when I started slipping out of Annette's imaginary enchantment (and the church's literal brainwashing), a new, real world opened up for me. As an armchair psychotherapist, I believe that in that real, new world I suffered from a kind of adolescent posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) with confused thoughts and erratic behavior. In a twist of illogic, I may have even unconsciously blamed Annette for my long suffering.

My immediate plan to find another girl just for casually intimate company was jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. In another twist of erratic logic, I apparently expected some other girl to repay me generously for my hormonal losses. I didn't care about romance, just about kissing and snuggling, neither of which I'd ever experienced. Whatever girl I wound up kissing and snuggling didn't matter at all. She'd merely be the animate object of my impersonal affection.

Once again, I scoped out the female population of Ashdown High and like last year, the Miss Pretty Girl was Louise, now in the tenth grade. The first couple weeks, I greeted her in the hall and obviously watched her over lunches. Once I caught her outside Assembly and lied that all summer I'd missed seeing her terribly. She gave me a shy smile, laughing, and slipped away to her seat. Another time I said I just wanted to be good friends with her. Louise tossed her pretty blonde curls and said, "You're still too old for me!" Her unjust rejection hurt me terribly.

Later, she came over to me in Study Hall and said, "Okay, Richard, we can be friends. Will you tutor me in math?" Mr. Beck approved the setup, and I started seeing Louise officially once a week instead of a typing class. We wound up good, businesslike friends, but I kept flirting with her and wishing I could hug and kiss her. She thought my awkward advances were funny and fended them off with comments about younger admirers from her class. Her constant rejections sometimes hurt my feelings, and I probably secretly blamed her for my pain and frustration.

Significantly, that Friday I remembered to write in my journal a startling past incident. "In assembly yesterday I stood by Dennis saying the Pledge of Allegiance. I looked at his cheeks and actually longed to kiss them." The parameters of my brotherly love were apparently expanding. I'd never kissed anybody except Annette in my fantasy, and the thought of kissing a boy struck me as powerfully strange. Enough to note it in the journal. I also noted looking at Sherry in Chemistry class and wanting to kiss her tender nape. I must have had the kissing fever.

Also significantly, that Friday I got a new Walt Disney Magazine with oodles of pictures of Annette. I tried to look at them stoically as of someone I used to love and realized that I still care deeply for her, the remnants of my platonic love. That night I dreamt again of her standing at a distance and waving to me, in greeting or farewell? Awake, I hoped it was *adios*.

Awake, my brain seemed to bubble with inspirations for drawing, poems, and stories. I got a brainstorm and outlined a whole novel, a mash-up I'd call an apocalyptic, politically reactionary, science fiction, action-thriller, heroic romance. Thank goodness, I never wrote the first page. Speaking of conservative, in my adolescent excitement, I noted in the journal a conversation with Mary Nell about Negroes spurred by seeing some Ku Klux Klan posters along the highway. I parroted Mike's ugly comments in Philadelphia, though I didn't want to be prejudiced and had no strong feelings about folks I'd rarely even seen. In fact, I naively wondered what the big honking deal was about being white.

That week also, basketball season started again, and my evenings working the after-game crowds in the café. Again I got to see all my old friends from round about and some new folks on the teams. Again, the female thighs in their uniforms were fascinating. I was struck by how much bigger my Lockesburg classmates had gotten—bigger and older. The guys looked somehow coarser and scruffier, lots with pimples and smoking, trying to look tough. Many of the girls looked fatter and rougher with teased-out hair, some with pimples too. At least my old wrestling friend Sammy, now a tall star basketball player, was still handsome and smooth-cheeked.

Seeing how most of them had changed really hurt my heart, and I dreaded to think—to know—that I was changing too. I really didn't want to grow up. I hated shaving off the scraggly hairs on my lip and chin. Remembering that great Disney movie Peter Pan long ago, I imagined my band of brothers and little boys flying off to a land where we'd never have to grow up. "Second star to the right, and on till morning..." Another pain was that lots of the basketball girls kept making eyes at me or even shamelessly flirting and teasing. Pretending I didn't notice, I politely went about my serving business. I often sensed a certain admiration, fear, or suspicion from the guys who probably knew all about my brainy reputation.

I spread the word that my Boudoir R'n'R Romps would resume on Thursday evenings, and a nice crowd of local kids showed up, My *querido hermano* Denny even drove up from Ashdown, not to dance but to see me hosting the hop. (Sadly, the KCMC-TV station had stopped doing their teen hop show, but we still had American Bandstand—if I had time to watch. My favorite old dancers were gone now, but some new dancers were real good-looking and good-moving.) I got maybe 20 locals, many old timers like Shelba, Jimmy, and Iona, and some pubescent kids as well. Iona brought her 13-year-old brother Reese, and my sister Judy (same age) did her spastic giraffe dance with him. I started the show by having Rocking Albert DJ for me so I could visit with my special guest Denny.

We sat again on the bench in the front yard in the pink glow from the café. *Mi hermano* threw his arm around my shoulders, and I announced that having 'broken up' with my fantasy girlfriend Annette, I now felt so terribly lonely. Denny squeezed me. "Hey! All those kids dancing in your bedroom! And the crowds of folks in your café... Why do you feel lonely? Try living like me in a dead neighborhood in a tiny town with few friends and a Mom and Dad rarely home together."

Looking at things from Denny's perspective made my ritual lament of loneliness sound dumb-silly. I told him not to feel so lonely because he had the best friend in the world—me. "Well, my

best friend in the world, my Dad says we best steer clear of girls for the next seven or so years. Till we're old enough maybe to have some common sense. My Dad's the wisest person I know, except you, Mr. Brainstein."

Horried by that nickname, I begged my buddy never to call me that again, and he promised. I wondered what Denny's Dad had to say about sex, like what horny guys are supposed to do for seven more years. My father had never breathed a syllable about the mysterious subject to me. "Dad says that's what God gave us hands for!" I'd almost reached that conclusion myself, though I hadn't done the manual trick in the past month. "Oh, and get this: Dad says that girls smell like fish..." That grossed me completely out. "...another reason to keep our long noses out of girls' business." I was impressed by his Dad's folksy wisdom.

In Sunday's Texarkana Gazette there was a big story about the Four States Fair coming the next weekend, the biggest celebration around, much bigger than the county fairs with all the livestock since it was a regional event for Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas. I got excited about the midway with a carnival and rides but realistically and sadly figured I wouldn't be going.

The solution was my old literary trick. I devoted a couple pages in my journal to a fiction about going to the carnival with Annette, once again simply a character in a story, as was I. We rode rides, played midway games, saw sideshows, etc. Meanwhile, we even conversed like two human beings, and I said I'd always remember her, my first true love. In parting, I asked for a kiss which she planted gently on my cheek. I didn't dare to kiss her divinity. It was a touching scene of farewell that made me feel wildly free. Seven years wasn't really that long...

The subject of the soon-to-be-missed carnival arose again on Wednesday when I sat with beautiful Louise over her math assignment. She was going to the fair with her family. That evening a story appeared in my journal about going to the carnival with Louise and her family of parents, brother, and sister. Her siblings were younger still, and I became their shepherd through the crowds, lines, and rides. Louise was super-friendly, holding onto my arm and making charming chatter. I said I was happy we were just good friends now. Unbidden, she too kissed my cheek, and I stifled a desire to smooch on her pretty neck. That would be messing with a girl. Anyway, the imaginary carnival was lots of fun, even this second time around.

On our bus ride home on Friday, I sat with sweet Guy who was excited about going tomorrow to the Fair with his folks. I grieved that I wouldn't get to go. Anyway, I worked in the café all Saturday morning, and after lunch Guy and his Mom stopped in to invite me to come along with them. Mamacita thanked them heartily, and I too got excited. That evening I put on my new black sweatshirt with the sailboat, and she drove me over to their place in Ben Lomond.

Guy and I climbed into the back of their pickup and got tucked down under a blanket for the ride. Lying cuddled up with a dear friend in the growing dark was such a new experience for me. On the way, Guy and I sang 'Clementine' (a number of times) and made hand-shadow pictures in the car headlights. We stopped at Weaver's Café in Ashdown, and when Guy went in to get us hamburgers, his Mom told me her brother-in-law was a Catholic and was so nice. All the way to Texarkana we made more shadow pictures, chattered, wrestled a bit, and lay back watching the stars come out. My heart felt full of this splendid little brother—just about as big as me.

We first went with his folks into the agricultural section to admire the livestock, but Guy and I soon begged off to go out on the midway. Our first ride was on the Tilt-a-Whirl that I recalled

from long ago as a kid in Texas, then others that swung you around and flipped you over something fierce. Then there was that wicked Ferris wheel. As long as my eyes were shut, it felt neat going up, but going down was still scary as heck. Guy laughed at my reactions. We played a few of the game-booths without winning anything, looked in a sideshow at a hideously deformed little guy smoking a cigar, and watched a scruffy derelict wrestle a big alligator, hugging and kissing it. The Tilt-a-Whirl was still my favorite.

To go home, Guy and I got under the blanket again. A late moon had risen, and lying in its silver light, we talked about girls. He didn't have a girlfriend yet, and I passed on the sage advice from Denny's Dad. Guy just lay there looking up at the moon, and his profile with his full upper lip was truly beautiful. Between Ashdown and the Hill, we wrestled around and cut up. In our scuffling, he grabbed me in a bear-hug, kissed my cheek, and said he loved me. I said that was a good thing—if not, I'd have to throw him out of the truck. This, my third time to the Four States Fair, was tremendously more fun than those earlier two fantasies of messing with girls.

Sunday evening, Denny came up to the Hill—just to see me, he said—and we hung out in the café listening to the juke box and shooting pinball. For a long while, we sat out front on the big chain along the parking area and talked. Again, my heart overflowed with brotherly love. On the Monday morning school bus ride, I sat with *querido* Guy, and we reminisced about our fun at the fair. He giggled recalling how scared I got, threatening to strangle him if he dared to rock our Ferris wheel seat again. At school, we heard that Maxito's older brother Stan got killed on Saturday. He worked for a logging company, and a tree fell on him. *Mi hermano* Maxito was absent, of course, but I got horribly sad for him, imagining having a real beloved brother to lose.

With so many dear brothers in spirit, I didn't feel at all lonely, especially not needing a girlfriend anymore. My hungry longing to embrace and kiss a girl now seemed so childish. I apologized to Annette for pestering her with my lugubrious fantasies and promised to behave like a polite friend. On American Bandstand that afternoon, Dick played her new record, a silly ditty called "First Name Initial." It was pretty awful, but I was happy to hear her lilting voice again. This reminded me that her birthday was coming up again next month, a celebration I'd forgotten last year, and I resolved to think of a present to send her as a parting gift. A keepsake to remind her of a wonderful lover she'd never known—and never would.

Besides going to the Four States Fair three times, my fall as a high school senior was the busiest time I'd yet experienced in my young life. School and bus business was the lion's share, and then there was the zookeeping, mowing, waiting on tables, game crowds, bedroom hops, at least a dozen pen pals to keep up with, and precious little time to worry about feeling lonely. Sally and I wrote almost daily playing a hard game of chess—she was good! My German pal Horst sent me great Deutschland stamps, and I reciprocated with model ships. I started pen-palling with my cousin Danny in Wisconsin, who was more isolated than I living out on their farm. My 4-H camp friend Margaret liked to trade poems, hers as lyrical about the natural world as mine. And Ed in Texarkana and I exchanged intelligent and scholarly discussions, notably avoiding religion.

The next week when Maxito came back to school after the family funeral affairs for his brother Stan, he was sort of depressed, still grieving I figured. I gave him many hugs of sympathy and called him *mi hermano*, which made him smile. Meanwhile, I tutored pretty Louise in math an hour a week, and Mr. Beck asked me to also tutor *mi hijito* Tommy Youngblood. While tooting both cute blond tutees, I admired their sensuous young mouths and smooth throats. Mr. Beck also talked to me about college plans and taking the College Entrance Exam at the end of

September. He advised me about applying to universities, and I decided on Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Rensselaer Polytechnic, University of Maryland, and UCLA.

Then Father Jordan suggested Notre Dame... Ed wrote that he was applying to Loyola in Chicago, but I emphatically axed those Catholic institutions from my list. For the hell of it, I decided also to apply to Yale and Princeton. Consequently, I was inordinately busy in my rare spare time all through October writing college applications—with Mr. Beck's assistance. He also asked me to join Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA) to compete for the school in their spelling bee. They clearly planned on making a lot of mileage off my braininess.

While twiddling my thumbs waiting at the College Entrance Exam in El Dorado, I decided what to do for a birthday present for Annette, my parting gift. I'd read in a recent magazine article that she collected dolls, and I decided to carve her a wooden doll. Only she'd have to be standing stiff like an idol—for the girl who'd been my idol for so long. For its pretty red color, I chose a piece of red haw (hawthorn), which was a fairly hard wood to whittle, but my pocket knife was pretty sharp. With only two weeks for production, I envisioned the doll for simplicity's sake as a pioneer-type girl in a full, long skirt and ruffled bonnet that I named Melissa.

At home I stayed frantically busy what with whittling, chores, work, dancing, and college applications. The simple carving went painfully slowly, causing several blisters on my fingers. Meanwhile at school, life was much more leisurely with crowds of friends and a confusion of conversations and class lectures. One morning as I walked down the hall from Psychology class, a nice 11th-grader girl named Charleen, an *amiga* whom I'd scandalously head-hugged last year in my neighbor-loving frenzy, sidled up to me and said, "Hola, amigo!" She was taking Spanish this year. On the way to our classes, we spoke about our schedules and said *adios* on parting.

In the next days, for some reason, Charleen and I started running into each other frequently around campus or on lunch breaks out in the gym, and we'd share Spanish words. When Maxito warned that she was sweet on me, I started noticing flirty looks that made me uncomfortable. Her hooks were out. Not to start messing with a girl but simply to be polite, when we saw each other in passing, I was friendly. Other times I'd duck down another hall to avoid meeting. Once when I was in the gym about to play volley ball with Denny she came over to watch and asked to hold my class ring while I played. I stupidly let her. Denny chided me for messing... After the game, I quickly retrieved my ring and ran off to the restroom.

The girl started waiting in the hall for me outside my classes and chasing me down around campus, usually asking for some silly favor like borrowing an eraser. I was certain she had her hooks out big time and took to sneaking around to avoid her. Whenever I wound up walking beside her, Charleen would try to hold my arm or hand, but I'd pull away, not wanting anyone to think we were 'together.' I was perfectly clear about not actually 'liking' her or having 'the hots' for her. Charleen was pretty homely, her butt sort of big, and some kind of a pimple or bump on her forehead peeked out from under her bangs.

The only humane thing to do was to 'dump' Charleen, and I wondered how to do it gently. I asked Maxito, and he guffawed, "Tell her to get lost!" That wasn't quite what I had in mind. When I ran into Charleen in the hall the next morning, I gave her a quick, bright smile and said, "Buenos dias, muchacha-cha!"—with a cha-cha step. She giggled. "Hola, muchacho-cha!" The rest of the day I avoided her completely.

In Chemistry class, I spaced out the stuff about valences in molecular reactions, thinking about Denny's loneliness and realizing that I really didn't feel lonely anymore. All this time I'd been telling myself the same untruth, feeling sorry for myself. Just like all these years I'd kept telling myself I loved Annette, since I knew that was how I was supposed to feel for some girl and suffering unspeakably in my hopeless passion. I actually had it pretty good now, even without a girlfriend, now that I knew better than to mess with girls anymore.

The next week when Charlene and I met, she looked forlorn and wondered if something was wrong. Having no experience with teenage relationships, I denied anything the matter, and she glowed with happiness. I was impressed by my power to so easily make a girl feel happy. When I couldn't avoid meeting her, I was always briefly friendly and chatty. She'd beam with pleasure, throw out a few flirtatious hooks, and then look real sad at my rushed goodbyes. I kept planning to tell her to take a hike, but the occasion never arose. It didn't seem very urgent because we'd soon become such casual friends, but then I erratically changed my mind.

I commented in the journal about taking a perverse pleasure in my power over her emotions. In my disassociated confusion, I suddenly decided to dash Charleen's hopes and cause her the kind of pain I'd felt in loving Annette. Illogically, I also took perverse pleasure in such vengeance on girls in general for supposedly rejecting me. On the way home, when I told Mary Nell my nefarious plan to ditch Charleen, she said it was cruel, and I'd pay for my meanness. Uncaringly, I replied that I'd already paid in advance. This sadistic ruthlessness was terribly uncharacteristic of me, yet another serious symptom of my PTSD.

Journal descriptions of my days expanded with many real, mundane details—dropping all my previous flights of romantic fantasy. I listed the songs I melodiously sang on the long uphill walks home, like "Tavern in the Town," "Wanderer's Song," and Johnny Mathis' beautiful song "The Twelfth of Never." Expanding my journal entries led to longer narratives, and I grew more observant and analytical, sometimes surprisingly so. I even wrote out whole conversations with various friends. One with Mary Nell was about her anguish over being a heavy, homely girl no guy would date and her wishing tearfully to be a boy. I couldn't offer much consolation besides a sympathetic ear. Besides, I'd never had even the vaguest wish to be a girl.

Those first weeks of October were emotionally quite confusing, and there's a certain poetic irony in the fact that various themes came to fruition on Annette's birthday, Thursday 10/22. On the theme of brotherly love for Denny, I had a sudden flash of emotional awareness. "Before Assembly, I sat with Dennis and put my arm across his knee. His leg felt firm and wonderful, and I love him so much. As we were leaving, I put my arm around his waist. He is so—so—well, I don't know. Do you suppose I'm homosexual?" Lacking any real concept of the clinical term, I didn't find that passing wonder at all disturbing and went immediately on to a paragraph about pretty Louise's new hairdo, mentioning how much I still wished I could hug and kiss her. But as usual, she rebuffed all my clumsy flirting and again hurt my feelings.

(This was my first conscious use of that vague term, which I think I first heard from Maxito. At some point back in September I'd mentioned how handsome Frankie Avalon was, and my friend said, "He's a homo." I said we all were homos, *homo sapiens*. Maxito explained he meant homo like in homo-sexual, a prevert. Why would anyone call such a famous celebrity—who sang "Venus"—a prevert? I figured Maxito was just jealous of the handsome singer. After all, he said the same thing about other famous guys like Fabian, Ricky Nelson, and even Elvis.)

Then there was the theme of messing with girls. All that day, with much sneaking around, I avoided Charleen. I planned to lower the boom on her but was a coward about being mean for the first time in my life. At the last moment, I took the bull by the horns and found Charleen out waiting for her school bus. She got all whiney about where had I been, and what was wrong, and pawing affectionately at my arms and chest. That was more than I could take, and I blurted out honestly, “Look, I’m glad to be your friend—just not your boyfriend! Okay?” Charlene started crying, but I hard-heartedly turned away to my bus. Her crying didn’t give me all that much pleasure, but I was enormously relieved knowing that I was now through messing with girls.

Well, not quite through... Early that evening of Annette’s birthday, before kids showed up for a bedroom hop, I whittled a while on Melissa, which had gone horribly slowly what with blisters and other busyness. I kept telling myself that Annette would forgive it being a belated birthday present. In fact, that evening I carved a last lump off her elbow and admired it, calling the doll done. But then I thought to make Melissa’s waist just a tiny bit thinner. My blade struck a knot and slid silently all the way into the side of my hand.

I stared at it in shock, automatically pulled it out, and spouted blood all over my primitive little doll. Mamacita helped me wash and dress the wound. Now that I’d anointed Annette’s idol with a blood sacrifice, I decided not to send the parting gift to her. Our crazy romance had now ended emphatically with Bloody Melissa. My idol and I were finally finished, and I now had seven more years not to mess with girls. At the bedroom hop, I danced around with Shelba and waved my bandaged hand triumphantly.

On Friday morning outside Assembly, Denny said, “I hear you dumped Charleen. Good!” I’d just said I wasn’t her boyfriend. He said, “I told you not to mess with girls, didn’t I, ol’ buddy?” I admitted he’d said that and leaned up against him. Again with a passing wonder, I wrote: “...going to our seats, I felt Denny put his arm around my waist. I held his hand. Perhaps I’m—But it feels so good because I love Denny.” This time it wasn’t a flash of emotional awareness, just a glimmer of possibility.

One day in the next week, I noted that we sat together in Assembly basically playing hands, and in a Psychology class Denny blew me a kiss. Our enormous brotherly love must have been perfectly obvious to everyone, the way we caressed each other’s hands, arms, chests, backs, and waists. All the rest of our best-buddhood, our affectionate fraternal relations remained on this same tangibly intimate level. Our platonic innocence apparently survived by not knowing any other way to love. Boys only “messed” with girls but were just pals or brothers with other boys.

Almost every day I recorded an exchange or two with my spirit-brother Denny, usually winding up with a flat statement that I loved him. Our frequent chats in the hall or at classes were simply social dressing for an intense affection that would nowadays be called a bromance. We shared a lot of jokey flirting and intimate insinuation masking our inarticulate passion. My journal pages were also full of affectionate comments about my other *amigos*, fellows at school like Guy and a quiet, freckled new kid named Bill. Then there were the little boys Johnny and Mickey on the school bus that I longed to hold and cuddle, paternally of course. Not messing with silly girls anymore, I was necessarily left with the comfortable company of boys.

The confusion of my PTSD emotions continued through the next weeks. While I had come to unclear and unfulfilling terms with my fraternal love for Denny, I still didn’t feel quite at quits with Annette yet. In unguarded moments, I slipped back into the habitual rut of fantasies, but I’d

right away make myself stop—like refusing to scratch an itch. My blood sacrifice had been the final ritual. At least I wasn't dreaming about her anymore. Annette was history.

On the other hand, the symptoms of my disorder intensified on the issue of messing with girls. The day after my flatly rejecting Charleen, she chased me down in the hall, begging to know what was wrong, why I didn't want to be her boyfriend. Her whining was revolting. I wordlessly turned away and avoided her for the rest of the day. The next week, whenever she could, Charleen tried to get my attention, but I pointedly ignored her. My cruel power over this innocent victim was good retribution for the anguish of my romantic trauma with Annette.

Being cold and aloof to a girl who openly liked me was absolutely uncharacteristic of my polite, loving nature, but it gave me a weird satisfaction. The next Monday, after a girl-free school day, Charleen caught up with me at my school bus and seized my arm, demanding to know why I was mad at her. I twisted away and snapped nastily, "Why don't you just leave me alone?" She stared at me in shock, and I climbed on the bus feeling sadistically satisfied. Looking back on this miserable affair, I'm appalled by my heartless, mindless attitudes. Undeniably PTSD.

My disordered condition also began to manifest on the family front, which through all these Arkansas years had been quiescent and almost impersonal. We simply lived and worked together on different schedules with minimal interaction. By October, however, I was noting in my journal altercations with Daddy and episodes of angry irritation mostly with him and often with Judy. That came to an ugly head on Monday evening four days after the famous birthday when he, she and I were watching TV, Mamacita at work in the café.

Between mindless programs, Judy and I started arguing over what to watch next. I wanted some idiotic sitcom, and she insisted on one of her stupid westerns. I felt an insane urge to strangle her, but I settled for twisting her arm. Daddy shouted at me to stop, I snarled that I hated her guts, and he slapped my face. Then he shoved me into my room where I flopped at my desk and burst into tears of rage and seethed with hate, a hideous emotion I'd never felt before, horribly ironic in happening right in front of Bloody Melissa, the symbol of my insane love.

Soon, Daddy came in and surprised me by apologizing for slapping me. I told him how Judy irritates me so much with her selfishness, and he said I shouldn't hit her again. He'd talk to her about always getting her way. It was apparently something of a catharsis, as I described, "When Daddy left, he touched my back and showed me the light. I see that I'm just a little boy still who wants a happy family with a brother to share things with." I started sobbing again. That touch on my back was the first and only time I could remember my father touching me affectionately, and I'm impressed that I wrote so laconically how he "showed me the light."

My growing antipathy to girls meant I didn't even consider "sharing things with" my selfish sister. My longing for a brother obviously wasn't satisfied with the limited intimacy Denny and I shared almost every day. I still remarked often on strong fraternal feelings for boys I'd see in the café and game crowds, and the friendly new fellow Bill at school. At church that fall I'd been fascinated by a boy from Mena named Ron who served as an altar boy, and I loved how the sunlight fell on his golden hair, unwittingly my angel-brother who made Sundays special.

That week after the famous birthday, on Friday I saw that Denny was absent in Assembly and wondered what was up. In Chemistry class, my friend Don told me that last night my best buddy got drunk and had a fight. I was incredulous and numb with grief the rest of the morning and

only thought again about Denny again on Saturday evening, lamenting his loss of innocence. Sunday morning at church, I was understandably distracted by Ron in his lacey surplice.



I'm fairly sure, judging from my nice clothes, that Mamacita must have taken this snapshot of me after getting back from church. The fancy bench is where Denny and I sat for our evening *tête-à-têtes*. I recognize those spiffy socks and find my smile vaguely ironic, considering the traumatically disordered mind and insane, adolescent passions behind it.

That afternoon, Denny showed up at my door wanting to look at the new litter of pups and pick out one for his cousin. The pleasure of being with him dispelled any thought of his drunkenness and fight. It was so true that just to see him smile made my life worthwhile. Then we went out to his car where I met his mother. She asked me to come visit Denny sometime. But then, when did I ever get to visit anyone?

Monday morning I found Denny in the hall. Some other boys came up to us and remarked on his ruckus last Thursday night. He acted embarrassed and repentant and said he was sick on Friday from it, swearing he'd never do it again. I hoped so. Standing beside him, I touched him often just to feel him. While I watched him talking with the other guys, I wished I could convince my *querido* not to grow up—and we'd fly off to Peter Pan's Neverland together.

For some mysterious reason, I didn't have school on November 5 or 6. Maybe because that was when hunting season started? Anyway, I'd planned to go hunting on Thursday, but it was too windy, and I hung out doing chores at home and at the café. On Friday, I took Lobo and my gun out in the woods for a while but scared up no game. However, I came across some beautiful wood shells (fungi on trees and fallen logs) for my collection.

That afternoon, I was bored enough to tackle my frequent gruesome chore of grinding up beef into hamburger and smashing it into patties, hundreds of them between tissues. Chopping up the slabs of raw meat, cranking the huge grinder handle, and watching the worms of ground beef squirm out into the pan was hypnotic. Mashing out scoops of meat in the press was tiring, as was peeling potatoes and shoving them through the slicer for French fries. I also had a bushel of them to do. Five years' experience in both tasks had taught me to be expert at both culinary skills.

My underlying stress disorder also manifested in disturbing dreams. While I was torturing poor Charlene at school, I dreamt one night of swinging a machete and slicing my legs. Later came a very Freudian dream of standing close to my Denny, and he handed me a glass of milk. Now I'd never cared for milk (and soon would develop loud lactose intolerance), but I drank it happily and ecstatically melted into my buddy's being. This very same Friday night, perhaps triggered by my afternoon butchering, I dreamed of murder (as I'd once called my destruction of Charlene's fantasies). Lots of folks were imprisoned in our big dog pen, and with another machete, I blithely hacked them into great bloody chunks. As dreams do, the scene immediately switched to me on the steps of a castle in royal crown and cape, as though proud of a great victory. I believe such violent and symbolic dreams are serious PTSD symptoms.

After an unremarkable weekend, on Monday, Daddy took me with him deer-hunting up north of Dierks, likely trying to make up for our altercation last week. But we had very little conversation on the long early-morning drive. I got a stand on a hillside far removed from anyone else to wait for deer to be hounded up out of the river bottoms, like six hours of solitary confinement. I sat on the log with Grandpa's fancy old shotgun and watched for motion in the woodsy valley while thinking fraternal thoughts about Denny, meditating on the beauty of autumnal nature, making up stories, wondering what lies outside the universe, and worrying about college applications. Rare shots sounded from around about, and I probably napped occasionally. Then the car horn honked to call me back. Daddy shot him a three-point buck.

We got back to the Hill in time to catch American Bandstand., and I was stunned when Dick Clark introduced their guest, calling Annette the Most Promising Female Vocalist of 1959. For the past week, I'd totally banished her from my mind, and now here she was back in my face demanding my attention again, singing her stupid new song, First Name Initial. She grinned flirtatiously at the camera and pranced choreographically around in her full skirt, all the while hiding the pendant on her necklace. Seeing her anew after so many months, still looking pretty and sweet, I felt dizzy and furious. Annette finished the song and with an alluring gesture let drop her pendant, an "R." I was horrified. She was trying to lure me once more into her trap.

I leapt up from the floor in front of the TV and without waiting for my former idol to exit behind the guest curtain (stepping on the spot I'd once touched), I raced outside into the yard, moaning in rage and disgust. When I finally calmed down, I marched into my room, gathered up my old magazines, pictures of Annette (except that first one of the lovely Mouseketeer), and Bloody Melissa. Still furious, I hauled them out into the back field where I built an altar of old lettuce boxes and enshrining the grotesque idol among photos of the fallen star, set it afire. Then I tossed the rest of the memorabilia of my insane passion into the leaping flames. Free at last...

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