

KID STUFF



A MEMOIR OF CHRONIC INNOCENCE

by

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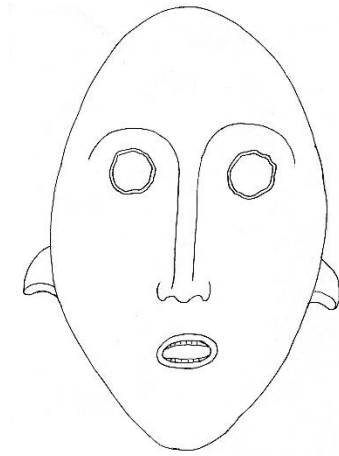
First Edition, 2025

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THE ID-KID

As realtors always say, the biggest factor in life is “Location, location, location.” It’s the setting of our personal plays, the scene of our most intimate dramas. So, I’ll arrange the story of my tenebrous early lives by locations, each a microcosm for an invisible microorganism.



Stone Mask, Lawrenceburg IN

The setting of my first remembered scene, my ‘hometown,’ was on an almost rural road just outside of the small town of Lawrenceburg in the extreme southeast corner of Indiana, basically an interstate suburb of Cincinnati over in Ohio. Much later, I learned that the area had been previously inhabited by mound building folk, a ‘Hopewell’ stone mask found in the vicinity that looks intriguingly Celtic.)

Anyhow, Nowlin Road ran northwest-ish out of Lawrenceburg between a flat field (of corn perhaps) reaching west to distant trees along a stream I never saw and our side, edged with a steep bank up to yards and houses, more specifically corn fields behind extending to a closer wooded hillside on the east, Cemetery Hill. As a toddler, I saw it as a massive mountain, while it was in fact just a modest bump on the verdant landscape along the Ohio River.

I suspect that its mortuary name may hark back to Hopewell mounds on its summit, a common site for such monuments, and in fact the fields across the road would have been perfect for a geometric ceremonial earthwork, let’s say a huge circle attached to a square, something like the works near Chillicothe. Maybe the tyke lived significantly at an ancient sacred site.

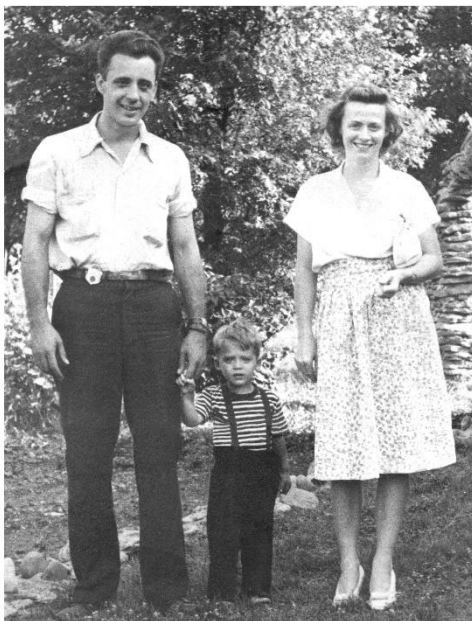


Mother and Knee-hugger, 1945

Childhood back then would have been vastly different when I was a kid—probably even more different than that innocent epoch was from nowadays, eighty years later. (How many are lucky enough to remember history that long ago?) My own childhood now exists, like all life experiences in the past, as pure immanence only in my head, nowhere else, and it deserves real-ization in words. Hence, a memoir of a microorganism.

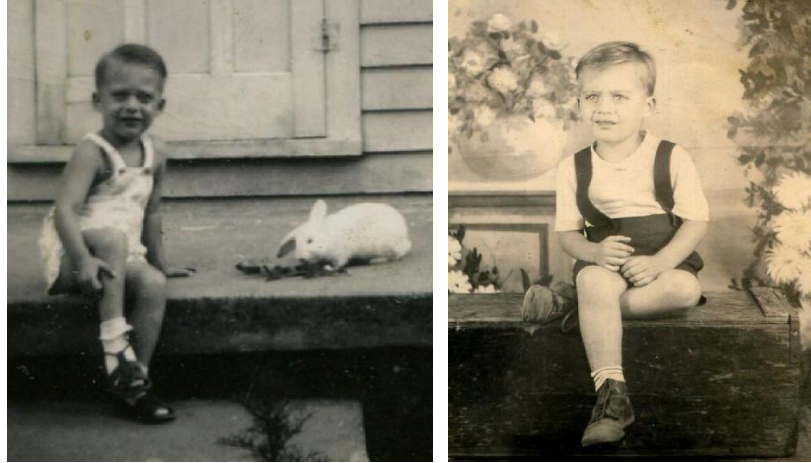
Our house at 45 Nowlin Road sat above the road with maybe ten cement steps down the front slope, which seemed to a three-year old knee-hugger a gigantic precipice. My first lucid memory of life as a towheaded tyke is of sitting beside my mother on the top step on a gloaming evening, a starry sky over the dark fields across the road. We watched carefully in both directions to be the first to see the headlights of approaching cars, and if it had only one, to say, “Be-diddle!” That gave you the right to kiss the other. I recall be-diddles were pretty frequently seen on Nowlin Road in 1945, and I suspect she let me win at least half the time.

The three years before those be-diddles are essentially blank, no trace of a memory, which is of course perfectly natural. Some say they can remember the bloody trauma of birth and helpless vulnerability of infancy, but I'd rather not, thank you very much. The few pictures I have from those primordial years right after my birth in Baltimore are sufficiently vivid reminders.



So, as a location, Baltimore meant little to Dickie, though of course, it mattered a lot for my mother Yvonne and father Ray. It was her hometown, and when he came from rural Wisconsin to work for the brand-new Social Security Administration, they met somewhere, somehow. I have only a few photos of their courtship and no details. A couple years later, he took a new job doing Alcohol Tax work with a Seagram's distillery and moved us to little Lawrenceburg. I gather that the hospital I was born in (April 26, 1942, at 9:41 am) is now a parking lot.

Shortly before we left Baltimore, someone took this farewell picture of our little family, I imagine in the backyard of my grandparents' house at 2403 Elsinore Avenue. (We lived at 628 Wyanoke, and I don't see any such yard in my photo of that place.)



Back at Nowlin Road, when I was three or maybe four came my second memorable experience, this one quite vivid. At the breakfast table, I apparently told Mama I wanted to do something or other. She said in twenty minutes we could do whatever and explained about the hands of the kitchen clock moving around the dial. When the thin one made a full circle, the bigger one would move up a notch, which would be a minute. I'd have to wait while it slowly clicked one minute after another—twenty times from this number to that one.

Simple enough... While Mama did whatever she needed to do at the sink, I sat patiently at the table watching the thin hand slowly make its circle clicking off each minute. I already knew how to count and announced each number aloud. But twenty minutes seemed interminable. My first experience with timekeeping essentially operated on nanoseconds.

Naturally, the time eventually passed, and I finally got to do what I so desired. Nowadays in my old age, I understand the metaphorical lesson in that memory. In life, time starts rolling like a ball at the top of a hill, from a standstill very slowly across the slight incline of the summit, and as time passes, the incline steepens asymptotically. The ball of course rolls ever faster down the hillside, its speed continually accelerating until years become months, months weeks, etc. Already I'm at the point that the weeks pass like days, twenty minutes like the blink of an eye.



What I wanted to do was most likely go outside to play in the yard. I loved searching through the grass and weeds for bugs—fascinated by them being so much smaller than me. There was a rope swing from a tree branch in the front yard only recalled from a long-lost photo of me happily swinging on it. Seems I was holding a kiddie-book and laughing.

I apparently had other toys like the sturdy-looking rocking horse in this photo. Frankly, were it not for this photo, I'd never have remembered either the horse or the fancy cowboy getup. But in fact, that little sheriff's badge on my vest stirs up a faint memory. I'd bet the duds and rocking horse were presents for my fourth birthday. Note in the background a distinctly rural ambiance with the late wintery yard and fallow cornfield behind and foot-slope of Cemetery Hill.

But mostly I recall riding my fancy tricycle, zipping across that bumpy yard. [A brief historical digression: A mere eighty years ago, parenting was much different than nowadays. Kids were often left outside on their own, unsupervised—the only way for a mother to get any housework done or find a moment of peace and quiet.] In no time, our tricyclist found that riding his vehicle was much smoother on the gravel lane beside the house that led back toward the hill. Just across was a neighbor's house, and halfway to the hill was another.

Merrily I'd barrel along up and down the lane between those two houses. Once, taking off from the more distant house, I clumsily caught my toe in the spokes of the front wheel and got it neatly sliced almost in half. Pain, blood, and agonized shrieking... The neighbor lady came out of her house and carried me home for Mama to treat my terrible injury. The second toe on my left foot is still vaguely heart-shaped around the scar. I'm still unsure about the life lesson I was supposed to learn from that mishap.

Other tricycle jaunts took me even farther up the lane to a woodsy slope down into a ravine. The dark forest was intimidating, so I only played along the edge of it where there was a big tree stump. It was the perfect height of a table for a tiny kid, and I used it to make mudpies like cookies and lay them out in the sun to "cook," each one with a pretty stone on top like a cherry. I expect my inspiration came from the ditty "Patty cake, patty cake, baker's man..." To this day, I've never made another mudpie or even a real cookie, but that delicious display of earthen pastries lingers meaninglessly in my memory.

On another day, while I was busily baking mud, I heard a little pop from the woods down in the ravine and a moment later felt a sting on my upper arm. A tiny brownish bead plopped down onto a cookie (like the decorative "sprinkles" they use today). No blood, just a moment's sting. I took it home to show Mama, and she figured some bad boy must have shot at me with a B-B gun. Consequently, I was forbidden to go near the ravine again, my bakery was out of business. So much for my first commercial enterprise.



The neighbors on the other side of our house were a family with two little girls, the older I'd say around six or seven and the younger, Joyce, my age. We sometimes played in our adjacent backyards, though she didn't appreciate my fixation on bugs. Our memorable incident was on their back steps where Joyce and I got into a heated argument about who had moved first to the neighborhood. Though neither of us had any way of knowing what we were talking about, I was adamant that my family had been first to arrive. I don't know what resolution we came to, but there's a good chance that Joyce was in fact correct. Intransigence of opinions based on incomplete data has been something I've battled for many decades now—with limited success.

That summer of 1946, the 4th of July was apparently (with the end of a war of which I had no concept) a huge celebration. Daddy took me to the big front yard of another neighbor up the street to shoot off fireworks. First, he lit sparklers for me to wave around like magic wands and then little firecrackers that exploded with a startling bang a safe distance away on the lawn. My excitement was delightful.

Then Daddy went for the big guns, tossing out red cherry-bombs that made even more noise. When that novelty wore off, he put one in a Campbell's Soup can to see what would happen. No surprise: A huge boom that blew the bottom off the can. It flew through the air and hit Daddy square in the forehead! He dropped like a rock, knocked out cold. Shocked out of my infantile so-called mind, I screamed and screamed.

The neighbors rushed out to carry Daddy back over to our house where, while Mama washed out his wound, he soon regained consciousness. The can-bottom had narrowly missed slicing his eye, and he only suffered a minor scar across his eyebrow. Meanwhile, I suffered such horror that ever after I never wanted to have anything to do with fireworks—other than just watch huge displays like those for the Bicentennial on the Mall in DC.



Much less threatening was the time Daddy took me fishing at a little stream out in the country. To get to it, we crossed a wooden covered bridge, the only one I've ever in my life seen since. He sat me down on the bank with a little pole, a red and white bobber on the line, and explained how to catch a fish. I sat patiently watching for the bobber to bobble while he fished a little way upstream. This first try at fishing wasn't terribly successful. When my bobber finally bobbed, I hooked a tiny perch maybe three inches long. Daddy made a big deal about my prowess, but we tossed it back into the river. I don't recall us going fishing again.

Growing up in rural Wisconsin, Daddy loved fishing and hunting, and this was his first and only attempt to enlist me in the "sport." I started hunting only as a much older adolescent willing to shoot a gun. After high school, I put my rifle down and haven't touched a firearm since.



While we're on the subject of Daddy's upbringing, he was also very into horses. Here we see him at maybe 10 (i.e., 1926) mounted on his pony. Note his stylish knee-breeches and laced riding boots! In his young face in these photos, I can now see or imagine a strong resemblance to me around those same ages. Small wonder... Though I share no interest in hunting or equestrian activity.

I'm sure it was that pony that inspired him, soon after we moved to Lawrenceburg, to start a riding stable in a barn a short way up the road. He often rode his favorite steed, a huge horse named Prince down to the house and tried to teach me to ride. It was scary sitting so high up on Prince and even harder on the broad mare called Fatty because I couldn't begin to get my legs around her belly. Once, Prince stopped quickly, tossing me over his head onto my own on a rock in the yard. Much wailing...

Another of my father's hobbies, so to speak, was taxidermy. Mama countenanced his hunting, fishing, and horsing around, but stuffing dead animals left her cold. I remember her complaints about the constant chemical stink on the back porch where he did his dirty work. Daddy tried to interest me in "helping" him stuff a red cardinal bird, and I managed to make a few stitches under the feathers on its breast—more than enough for my limited attention span. But I preferred playing on the grey fox he'd stuffed. It sat watchfully on its haunches with a startled, disturbing expression—because Daddy had used owl eyes instead of a fox's. I'd ride on its sloping back and soon managed to bend its wire frame disastrously.

Must have been about then (around 4 ½) that I suffered more stressful accidents. First, down in the back part of the grungy basement—a filthy furnace room and sooty coalbin up front—in Mama's laundry room was a sloshy wringer-washing machine and a wide-slatted table for stacking sheets and towels. I stupidly stuck my arm into the wringer and watched in horror as it gobbled me up to my bony shoulder. Mama quickly released the rollers, and my skinny arm was fine. It hadn't even hurt enough for me to notice, and we just laughed.

That cute reminiscence illustrates the archaic age of laundry facilities when I was tiny. (In fact, even 25 years later I'd stand in a similar basement washing diapers, run them through a now old-fashioned wringer, and hang them on a line out in the back yard.) In those early 1940s, Mama hung our laundry out back on high clotheslines, way too high for me to worry about. I'd go off and ride my rocking horse or tricycle.

The second accident was a bit more traumatic. Once, while Mama folded linens, I pranced around on the slatted tabletop—probably not a hyperactive but at least physically energetic tot. One leap landed my bare baby-foot square in the slot between boards. My foot and ankle fit nicely through the hole, but my knobby knee got scraped painfully on its way through.

I was surely shrieking even before the table managed to eat my leg all the way up to the hip. Mama tried lifting me out, but my knee was trapped (and bleeding). In desperation, she left me there screaming bloody murder and raced across the lane to get the neighbor-man, who used a hammer to pry up the board and release me. Of course, my fright lasted longer than the pain. That's the sum-total of infantile traumas that supposedly would have shaped my core being. However, I don't think those experiences had any appreciable effect.

Up to the age of five, little really penetrated my comatose mind. My tiny world was inhabited only by vague, undefined presences like Mama, Daddy, that neighbor-savior from across the lane, and little Joyce next door. Dickie had absolutely no concept of himself, even as a nebulous presence. He was merely an Id-Entity, an ectoplasmic being ruled by pleasure and pain. As a non-person, I'd yet to develop any kind of personality, thoughts or desires.

I now have a hard time believing those who claim to have had rational cognizance at such a tender age. Sure, it's not unusual to hold memories, maybe even from babyhood, but I seriously doubt claims of existential enlightenments. Perhaps Daddy's cherry-bomb mishap could have been such for me, but I had no concept of death—the noise and blood were scary enough for a toddling Id-Entity. (I admit, however, that it did precipitate my life-long aversion to fireworks.)

World War II ended in September 1945, when I was a little over three, but naturally, I was totally unaware of any of that. I learned much later that after Pearl Harbor in December 1941—while I was gestating—Daddy had wanted to enlist, but the Army rejected him for a weak heart

from severe scarlet fever as a teenager. The Wisconsin doctors had told his parents he'd probably not live past 20. I can only imagine my pregnant Mama's patriotic feelings about his wanting to enlist and about his surviving that dire prognostication. Personally, I'm exorbitantly grateful for the latter at least. Being born without a father must be distressing enough, but never having been conceived would be inconceivably worse.

In any case, the country's Post-War prosperity bought us an amazing radio, a wood-toned box of Philco with a swath of dials across the front. Perched on a cabinet, it presided over the living room where our domestic cluster of Presences and Id-Entity listened to the disembodied voices of Jack Benny and Bob Hope. Honestly, the Id-Kid can almost remember that, especially the hypnotic name Rochester, and that guy's gravelly voice.

In 1946, economic conditions must have improved rapidly because later that year Daddy brought home another astounding invention, a television set! (Wikiword is that in 1946, only 44,000 Americans had one—with stations in most major cities. We were fortunate to live right next door to Cincinnati. So, I guess that meant Daddy was hot to keep up with trends, though he clung to his old late-30s Ford.) Likely, our tv set was an RCA model, a big wooden case with 7-inch screen, a rabbit-ear antenna, and knobs to position its grainy black-and-white images.

We were certainly a chic modern family now, clustering around our spectacular new media machine and watching actual people on its tiny screen. That was my very first awakening to the existence of other entities in an external world beyond Nowlin Road. Nevertheless, I simply cannot recall any specifics of those tv shows—except one for a reason I must now explain.

The Id-Kid naturally never noticed nor had any concept of why the Mama-Presence might have grown a big belly. About five weeks after my fifth birthday—which meant nothing to me beyond the probable cake—Mama inexplicably disappeared for a couple days in early June. I wasn't at all troubled by being left in custody of Daddy-Presence. But when I rode with him in the car (a unique, exciting experience in itself) to somewhere and picked up Mama, I got gob-smacked by the bundle she was carrying—a baby with a shock of black hair and a twisty, sleepy expression.



Soon I accepted the new entity into my world as my baby sister and watched it in fascination. The parameters of my Id-Entity suddenly expanded to include being a big brother, and in my first creative act, I suggested we name her Judy—after the heroine of a tv series I enjoyed (but can't recall): "A Date with Judy." My sweet sister Judy was thus a very early victim of the new media culture—and I the unwitting agent of that travesty.

Judy's crib was put in my bedroom, where she woke me up often crying. Mama quickly addressed whatever with bottles and cuddles. One night though, Judy didn't cry out, but her loud and labored breathing woke me. She was thrashing around in her crib gasping, and I ran screaming for Mama. They raced her to the hospital where she was revived and spent two weeks in an oxygen tent. That was my first awareness of death's possibility and my first flush of gratitude to the universe when Judy finally came home.

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BIG BRO



The arrival of my little sister Judy Ann made a quantum change in my infantile Id-Entity. Reflecting that change, Mama and Daddy started calling me Dick. Suddenly, the empty-headed little tyke was also a big brother! Into my world on Nowlin Road a strange new presence had come, a squishy, fuzzy-headed baby-sister. Fascinated, I hovered over the helpless infant, playing with it like a pet or toy.

Very soon, while changing Judy's diaper, Mama explained what made our baby a little girl—as opposed to what made me a little boy: the tiny cashew of my penis. For the first time, I understood that people came in different genders. My Id-Entity now had to expand to also include being a boy.

Speaking of cashews, I'd learned early along to refer to mine as my "part." That's what Mama called it, probably feeling that more genteel than calling my frontal appendage my "member." Equipment in the rear was dismissed as my "tail." Of course, Judy's tiny slit was also her part.

Mama taught that personal parts and tails were simply for excretion. We used our parts to "tinkle" and tails to "oomp." (That arcane terminology stayed with me for many years—until I encountered some less onomatopoetic slang expressions, probably in Junior High.)



At some point in 1947 the Nowlin Road world expanded to five with yet another presence, a white toy fox terrier that Daddy named Peppy. I loved horsing around with the playful Peppy, but baby Judy was my personal pet. (Nowadays I like to think of that little dog as a Mexican Pepé or a Pepi—as in Pharoah.)

In the summer of 1948, grandparents visited, and they took this slanted photo of our family all together on a bench in our back yard. I'm struck by Mama's dated hairstyle and prim way of sitting with feet together. While Judy shows her joy over the Peppy puppy, maybe I'm keeping my mischievous inclinations in check. Particularly, I note that even at the age of 32, Daddy's hairline was receding. In this snapshot his heavy Native American heritage seems also apparent in complexion and bone structure. Or maybe I'm just imagining stuff.

The year between these two pictures—when I was five—passed leaving no specific memories. Way back then, especially in the semi-rural environment of Nowlin Road, there was no such thing as a kindergarten to prepare kids for regular school. Childcare for me and Judy naturally fell entirely to Mama, who no doubt appreciated my constant attention to baby Judy as it left her freer to do housework, of which I'm sure there was a surfeit. Daddy would suddenly appear in the evenings and on weekends merely to eat with us and preside over the household, choosing which shows to watch on the television.

Looking back from this vast distance, I can't recall even a single instance of physical closeness, not even once that I sat on Mama's or Daddy's lap or snuggled. In the family picture above, I indeed cozied up to Mama and held her arm, a memory solely from this photograph. Perhaps that's a telling comment on our family's psychodynamics. Scanning over all the years since, I find that we never grew closer or more affectionate with each other. As the years passed, we moved farther apart, but that was largely due to environmental factors. More on that later.

As a matter of fact, I don't believe Mama nursed me or Judy. I have only a primordial image of rubber-nippled baby-bottles and the testing of formula temperature on wrists—the newest innovation at the time in feeding babies. If there had been any suckling, you can bet I'd remember something about seeing Mama's breasts (which she called "bosoms"). I won't worry about what damage may have been done to my tender psyche by being bottle-fed, but maybe that's why I've never had the slightest interest in female bazooms.

In the fall of 1948, at age six I started first grade in a tiny country school called Homestead on the far side of Cemetery Hill. I don't think Mama knew how to drive, and Daddy would take the old Ford to work, probably driving me there in the morning. I vaguely recall walking after school with a little girl and her mother, Mama's friend named Corrine, down the Hill to their house. But I distinctly recall that she wore such thick glasses that her eyes looked scarily huge. Corrine must have driven me down our lane the short way home because I can't imagine how Mama could have come for me, what with having a babe in arms.

First grade at Homestead might as well have been a kindergarten. Instruction mostly amounted to playing games and listening to stories. If I'm not mistaken, our focus was on counting, which I already knew a bit about, and simple addition, which I found easy and fun. Otherwise, there were lots of recesses for us kids to play outside. My clearest memory of the place was of a big pile of dirt beside the schoolyard with its swings and such. Covered with grass and probably six feet high, it was tall enough to look to us kiddies like a veritable mountain—and was great fun to climb and slide or roll down.

Knowing what I know now about the prehistory of that Ohio River area, I bet that pile of dirt was an ancient Indian mound, but as usual in that thoughtless time, it was ignored as a meaningless pile of dirt, great for kids to play on. Perhaps I remember it best because during that winter (when there was light snow on the ground), while playing on the mound, I suffered my first major trauma by losing one of my mittens! It was utterly gone, and I wept bitterly. I was tortured by that Mother Goose nursery rhyme: "The three little kittens, they lost their mittens, / And they began to cry... / What! Lost your mittens, you naughty kittens! / Then you shall have no pie." At an innocent six, I couldn't imagine a worse fate than having no pie.



As soon as my school was over, we took a trip to Baltimore to visit grandparents. They and various aunts had visited us before, so I had a confused concept of some people being called “relatives,” including Mama’s teenaged sister Aunt Jackie. On their earlier visit, Jackie had slept with me in my bed, and one night in my restless sleep, I kicked her out of the bed. She probably also remembered that incident for the rest of her life.

In Baltimore the biggest surprise was meeting a “cousin,” Aunt Dotsy’s little boy Johnnie, around the same age as Judy. My consternation in this snapshot with Peppy is understandable, considering the strange new place and crowd of new family members. Just like that, I had to recognize that the world was full of a lot more people and places other than little old Nowlin Road. My importance at home as a big brother was seriously diminished by this new, larger context.



When we got home to Indiana, I was confronted with yet another paradigm shift. For some reason, Mama volunteered to be Den Mother for the troop of Cub Scouts they’d enrolled me in. There were like eight of us little boys, all excited to have dark blue uniforms and scout caps. Lord knows what activities and games Mama supervised because I can’t remember diddle.

What I do recall, in painful clarity, was throwing conniption fits when the other Cubs wouldn’t do what I wanted. My first exercise in socialization revealed that Dick was a control freak. One might say a spoiled brat. A dick? Usually, I agree with Edith Piaf about regretting nothing but bitterly regret causing Mama such mortifying embarrassment. Finally, after a loud shouting/crying jag, she exiled me to the back porch where I could only watch their games and apparently learned my lesson about playing nice.

At the end of the summer, the Cub Scout stuff shifted into high gear, and we went on a three-day camping trip. Talk about a shock! Suddenly I found myself outside of the world of my family and simply another Cub in the company of uncooperative Cub-kids and bossy troop leaders. In the confusing new reality, I had no idea what was expected of me and meekly followed orders and camping rules to spread my sleeping bag in one of the tents and take my place on a log around a campfire to listen to strange stories.

The first night a ghost story scared the bejesus out of me and several other Cubs. After tooth-brushing, we were told to “pee” in the little outhouse thing, which I gathered meant tinkle, but with the strangeness of it all, I couldn’t manage. It was hard to fall asleep in the unfamiliar tent with five other little Cubs thrashing around and making noises. But morning came with the thrill of eating bacon and eggs cooked on a campfire. I still couldn’t make myself do it in the outhouse and snuck off into the woods to tinkle secretly behind a bush.

The problem was that I also needed to oomp but couldn't make myself squat over the hole in the outhouse. And not being a bear, I couldn't figure out how to do it in the woods. Instead, I spent the day of games and hiking around the woods in discomfort and tried not to eat very much. I told the troop leader I didn't feel good and opted out of the campfire stories, hiding in my sleeping bag and suffering. I even went once to the awful outhouse, but my bowels refused to dump. So, the night was restless misery, relieved only by the gentle patter of rain on the tent.

In the early misty morning, our troop leader sent me off with a little hatchet to chop some sticks for the campfire, and I hid in the bushes to tinkle again. I was tempted to squat over a log to oomp but too shy to pull down my uniform pants, even in the privacy of bushes. Nearby, I found a big fallen tree and attacked a little branch with my hatchet. The night's rain had made the log moist, and in my ineptitude, the hatchet slid down the wet branch and slammed into the thumb of my left hand.

A huge cut and blood all over the place. Not to mention shrieks of agony. The troop leaders came running and hurried me back to the campsite where they cleaned my wound and bandaged it up. They decided I should be taken home for medical attention, and some other discontented Cubs went back with us. At home, I raced off to our familiar toilet and deposited a huge load of oomp. Mama was horrified by my injury, but the doctor said it was minor and gave me a mere four stitches. That trauma convinced me that I wasn't interested in Cub Scouts anymore, and I think Mama was probably relieved to quit being a Den Mother.

This review of my first years of life has impressed me with the fact that my upbringing was essentially (and blessedly) "heathen." There was no mention of a larger or spiritual dimension of life. Nor did I know anything about churches, religions, or morality. The concepts of a supreme being or after-life never penetrated my infantile awareness. Even when Daddy got aggravated and said, "For Cries Ache!" I had no clue what that meant. Apparently, my behavior (like my Cub Scout conniptions) was only called good or bad depending on parental moods.

Many years later I learned that my father's family was traditionally Wisconsin-Catholic, and my mother's father George was raised French Catholic but converted to Lutheran to marry my grandmother Freda. Mama was raised (loosely) as Lutheran but as a teenager converted to Catholic—probably while working as an aide in a religious institution (insane asylum). When I was little, neither she nor Daddy ever intimated any religious opinions, and I don't recall them ever going to a church service. However, they baptized me and sister Judy Catholic (like when I had my own daughters christened in an Episcopalian church simply for form's sake.)

However, during the summer of 1949, it was probably Mama who experienced a revival of her faith, such as it may have been, and convinced Daddy that Dick should go to a Catholic school. Oh, dear... I don't recall that my parents started going to church, but I certainly did. Enrolled in the second grade at St. Lawrence Elementary, I had to attend Mass every weekday morning, Saturdays and Sundays much appreciated days off.

Attending Mass was one thing—paying attention to the interminable Latin garble another. And the priest's sermons/gospels might as well have also been in Latin for all they conveyed. What I most enjoyed was singing nonsense syllables like "tan tomb air go sack ramen tomb."

Then the black-robed nuns herded us kids to our classrooms, where I quickly discovered that I was seriously retarded. While I'd been playing games and losing mittens in the first grade at Homestead, these St. Lawrence first-graders had been learning the alphabet and how to read and spell words like cat and dog. All those letters posted over the blackboard looked to me like another kind of Latin garble, but I spent a few lunch periods deciphering and drawing them. Before our big nun really noticed, I'd functionally taught myself to sound them out in words, but the difference between "c," "k," and "s" confused me somewhat. Of course, "x" was a puzzle.

Besides pounding knowledge into our little heads with whacks of rulers on knuckles, the nuns naturally tried their damndest to instill in us reverence for and awe of Catholic mythology. I simply couldn't understand the riddle of the Trinity. God the Father, God the Son, and Holy Mother Mary made a certain sense, but what about this fourth guy, the Holy Ghost who sounded like a cartoon character? Nor did they ever explain what "holy" meant, but everything was holy this and holy that. And what was that gruesome thing with a guy nailed up on boards? We were supposed to pray to it, but I also wasn't clear on what "pray" meant.

The big black nuns also urged us to be pious children, and so I dutifully went to the nearby religious store and bought some "holy" souvenirs: a small plastic figurine of a Cries Child holding a ball and stick—it glowed in the dark—and a pretty prayer card of the Holy Virgin with a heart on fire for Mama. The figurine languished a while on my dresser and then got blessedly lost forever. (Many decades later when my mother passed away at 94, I found the prayer card in her box of old costume jewelry—lots of cheap earrings, necklaces and bracelets I'd given her as a little kid—and threw them all out.)

That's how at the age of seven I became a more or less normal schoolchild without a care in the world, except having my little sister to mess with during the day. At school that year, I didn't make any friends—still unaware of there being anybody else in the world. Of course, the nuns were a stark reality—like furniture, but after school I was happy to get home to my familiar world and role as big brother.



In this picture from that fall of 1949 of Mama with Judy and me, I'm struck by Mama's air of calm, perhaps stunned, resignation: A young mother responsible for two kids, albeit well-behaved, hidden away out in rural Indiana without any friends other than Corinne. She often said, even then, how bitterly she missed her big city life and family in Baltimore.

What's more, I doubt her marriage to Daddy was particularly romantic anymore, if it ever was. I recall no affectionate gestures between them or anyone ever saying they loved somebody. The fact that they had only us two kids was telling—either good economic sense, effective Catholic birth control, or simple abstinence for one reason or another. Both paternal grandparents were from huge families (of 10 and 11 kids). My Trinité grandfather was one of about a dozen, and my aunt/uncle generation mostly had like a half-dozen each. I was well satisfied having just one little sister.



Oddly, I also have no recollection whatsoever of celebrating religious holidays—not the vaguest memory of Christmas festivities, decorated trees, presents, or even anything about Santa Claus. No doubt I saw some kind of creche scene at my school, but the background story never penetrated my childish awareness. Again, I give thanks for my heathen upbringing.

Instead, winter simply meant a season of cold and sometimes snow. Probably in early 1950, we had an enormous snowfall that turned Cemetery Hill into a huge white mountain. Daddy hitched up some horses to haul a big sleigh up the hill, and a whole bunch of us from the neighborhood climbed in for a wild slide down the long snowy slope.

The first part of the sleigh ride was exciting fun, but then about halfway down the hill, our vehicle slid onto a smooth stretch of snow that was in fact a deep gully full of brush. The sleigh dived into the gully taking our screaming crowd deep under the snow into the branches and brambles. It took quite a while for us to dig our way out, many with cuts and other injuries. Fortunately, I seemed to have survived unscathed.

However, later in the spring when we were back to shirtsleeves, Mama found a strange hard bump on my left elbow. They took me to a doctor who diagnosed a foreign object and removed a two-inch black thorn from my arm. I still recall that weird feeling of him pulling it out, and it grossed me out that the thing had been moving around inside my body ever since the sleighride.

By the end of the school year, everybody decided that it was time for devout little Dick to have his First Holy Communion. The nuns made me recite all kinds of catechism questions and answers that were just gibberish to memorize. Obviously, my doctrinal grounding for First Communion was pretty shaky.



Before they'd let me do the Communion thing (Did it have anything to do with the Communism thing everybody was talking about?), I was supposed to go to Confession. My catechism nun explained that I'd have to tell the priest any sins I'd committed. Her definition of "sin" was anything that offended God, and while I wracked my tiny, innocent brain over what I could possibly confess, she said not to worry, assuring me the priest would forgive me whatever.

Dressed up in my white suit, [By the way, I think that's the neighbors' old outhouse in the background.], I went that Sunday morning to church with my family for the first time ever. I lined up with some other Firsters at the

confessional, and kneeling in the curtained booth, I recited, “Bless me, Father...” Nothing else came out. The priest behind the grille said, “Yes, my son? Do you have a sin to confess?” I answered honestly, “No.” He chuckled and said, “Well, say five Our Fathers.”

The ritual of First Communion was so unremarkable that I have no memory of it and certainly wasn’t impressed by the papery white wafer. The famous metaphorical meaning of Communion was lost on me. (In school years afterwards, at our obligatory morning Masses I usually didn’t take Communion because you had to fast and not eat anything for breakfast before. I wasn’t about to skip breakfast for a little piece of tasteless cracker.)



Of the summer of 1950 when I was eight and out of school, I have no memories other than those evoked by this picture of my family on a rare swimming outing. Even without the picture, though, I’d vividly recall that day along a little river with a deep, dark pool beside the big cement columns supporting a little bridge.

In that pool Daddy taught me to “dog-paddle” back and forth between the column and the rocky shore. In the middle of one of my crossings, I was seized by cramps in my thighs and sank like a rock. Heroically, Daddy jumped in and pulled me safely out of the drink. One doesn’t easily forget one’s father saving one’s life. But I’m embarrassed to see my new chubbiness.

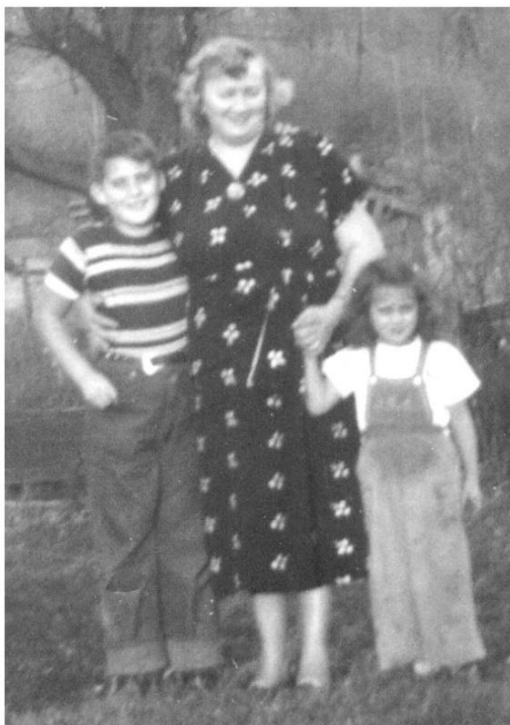


Already by the school year’s end, I’d “fleshed out” considerably as seen in this second-grade class picture. That wide grin was strategic. It hid the crookedness of my new teeth and almost gave me nice dimples. I really shouldn’t look hard at such old pictures and note all the changes in my looks in these seventy-five years. Like the cute blond hair gone dark (and only now going grey), that delicate nose twice broken and poorly reset, and especially those tiny ears that are now at least twice as big—and hairy! What strange childish thoughts were lurking behind those expressive eyes? Probably not many...

When I’d turned eight, I began to find the five years between Judy and me an obstacle. Neglecting my big-brother’s duties of caring for and playing with her, I’d run off to play somewhere by myself. That was probably my first step toward becoming a loner.

###

PLAYMATE



For some reason, come the summer of 1950, we largely stopped taking pictures, just a couple with the Trinité grandparents' visit, like this one of Grandma Freda with Judy and me. The folks must have had some concern to document our childhood in a studio shot of big brother and little sister revealing my crooked teeth, which only got worse as my jaw grew and the chompers started moving around. So, for this third section of my Nowlin Road sojourn, I'll have to make do with verbal reminiscences. No doubt I've forgotten a lot that would have been spurred by some archival photos...

After my near drowning, my parents decided that Dick needed to learn to swim properly, and they signed me up for lessons at the local pool. Daddy took me there and accompanied me through the locker room to suit up. I was only slightly uncomfortable undressing in the group of unclothed people and not particularly interested in looking at anybody—except Daddy. This was my first (and only) time to see him naked, and there was just a moment to check out his hairy part—again with no particular interest. People's personal parts were none of my business.

I splashed around in the pool with several other kids until the young lady-instructor gave us lessons on stroking and kicking. It came naturally to me to streak through the water like a torpedo, holding my plump body straight and streamlined, and in short order I learned to swim on my back and do the butterfly stroke. Daddy watched from the poolside, and I could tell he was proud of my success. As soon as I got a chance, I tried swimming underwater, holding my breath and undulating like an otter. The instructor said I was a natural-born swimmer, and at home Daddy told Mama that I swam like a seal.

For about a month, they took me to the pool a couple times a week to practice, and then, satisfied that I could swim reasonably, we stopped. The rest of the summer, I more or less abandoned Judy and played by myself, often roaming around the woods on Cemetery Hill and exploring in the ravine. This was my first exposure to the natural world around me, an enormously important factor in my many decades of life since. Not that I learned the names of any of the plants or trees, just their spirits.

Closer to home, Mama explained that the pit of the peach I'd just eaten would grow into a tree. I planted it in our backyard and patiently waited for it to sprout. I recall that it did so but have lost track of what happened to it afterwards. Meanwhile, I loved the beautiful blue morning glories growing on the wire fence of Daddy's chicken yard. Also, I'd find big black and yellow spiders whose web had a zigzag ladder in the middle, and I'd toss in bugs and watch the spiders wrap up their victims in silk. Over my many decades since, my interest in nature never flagged.

Daddy was a great one for raising things, like a little hutch of rabbits, and a big cage full of brightly colored parakeets with nesting boxes, tiny eggs, and itsy-bitsy chicks. He'd let me see them, but I couldn't touch... Mama agreed to cook the rabbits, but she wouldn't eat them. I thought they were quite tasty. She figured that chicken was normal food and roasted them beautifully with stuffing or made great soups.

My roaming the woods on Cemetery Hill produced an exciting adventure. Climbing the woodsy wilderness high up the hill, I came upon the ruins of a little old house. The unpainted wood walls were falling down, and the windows were all broken out. Though I now doubt the place had been abandoned for much more than a few years, for a kid of as few, it literally reeked of mystery. Bravely, I explored inside, checking out the two small rooms with rotten floors and broken furniture scattered about. Unfortunately, no treasures were to be found. On other roams, I sometimes stopped by the ruin, resting under a big tree to imagine the story of its "life."

Maybe it had been the homestead of a pioneer family long ago, or the cabin of a farmer with cows in the fields below. Whatever, this was my first encounter with the real notion of history. At school the nuns had talked about big cities important in American history, and I'd started to get a concept of the depth of time. It freaked me out to learn that all those huge city buildings had been built by people, pioneers. The hard work had to have taken hundreds of years! How long would it take for me to build even a tiny house like this ruin? Obviously, I can trace my life-long fascination with history back to this early adventure.

By August, the farmers who planted sweet corn at the foot of Cemetery Hill started harvesting it, and they bundled the stalks in conical shocks scattered around the fields to dry for livestock feed in the winter. Leaving Judy to her own little sister devices, I often disappeared into the fields and played in the shocks. It was easy to burrow in between the stalks and hollow out a little room in the teepee-shaped shock. Of course, it was dark in there with lots of bugs and mice, but I loved pretending to be one of them, hidden away from the world. Creating such secret "hideouts" was a frequent strategy throughout my childhood and youth.

But that summer of 1950 wasn't all just wandering in the woods and hiding in corn shocks. At some point, an ad in a magazine or comic book turned me on to stamp-collecting with its colorful array of pictures and historical references. I knew squat about the Postal Service or mail in general but soon watched my parents' mail for the stamps (all of 3¢!). I loved the tall aqua one for the National Capital Sesquicentennial with a pretty statue and the golden one for the

California Centennial with a prospector and some pioneers. With Mama's help, I excitedly sent off for a pack of 50 assorted US stamps that came with a small album.

Late in the summer we went to Baltimore again to visit the relatives. I'm certain we drove but don't know in what car. Surely it wasn't the old Ford: Judy and I'd have had to sit in the rumble seat the whole way. (Like the Postal Service and the rest of the world beyond Nowlin Road, I paid no attention to automobiles.) The trip had to take many hours, maybe two days with a motel stay somewhere, but I recall absolutely nothing of the travel itself—or of later returning home.

Yet I vividly recall certain details of the visit. Most vivid is the memory of that cut crystal dish Grandma Freda kept on the dining room table full of green leaf-shaped mint jellies. I'd never eaten anything so delicious, but Mama only let me take one or two at a time. Another novelty was a second dish with whole walnuts and a silver nutcracker. Grandpa George snacked on them frequently. For mischief, I carefully cracked several open, ate the nutmeats, and glued the half-shells back together again. Grandpa was mystified why his walnuts were empty, while I laughed impishly. Mama made me apologize for the trick and promise not to do it again.

That trip to Baltimore was my first truly memorable life experience, the first time a new context made a strong impression on me. Particularly vivid, though unspecific, is the memory of walking along the grandparents' street, Elsinore Avenue. The broad sidewalks passed nicely fenced yards of great big two-storey houses in the shade of giant trees—way bigger than any I'd ever seen before. The comparison to Nowlin Road was stark. Similarly, Grandma's backyard was lush with blooming bushes, flowers, and plush grass. My favorites were the big balls of bright blue petals that I know now were hydrangeas. She had a fancy iron bench back among the bushes to rest in the shade. I understood how Indiana would make Mama really miss living in Baltimore.

The most memorable aspect of the trip was Grandma's permission to rummage around in their attic that had bright windows in gables. It was crammed full of boxes, trunks, chests, and storage furniture and permeated with an intoxicating fragrance, an ancient perfume of old clothes, books, pressed flowers, and a tinge of mothballs that I'll never forget. Inspired by my recent exposure to the concept of history, I spent fascinated hours shuffling through an amazing array of my grandparents' hoarded stuff, particularly enthralled by miscellaneous old envelopes with stamps for my collection. Unfortunately, I found only a few from years past, mostly with pictures of famous people. The knickknacks and old pictures were endlessly intriguing, some showing Mama and the aunts as little girls.

Back in Indiana, my memories of the Baltimore trip were alive for about two days, and then I was dragged back into the reality of St. Lawrence Elementary, the implacable nuns, and daily Mass (a cross I hadn't had to bear all summer since First Communion). But this year, my third grade proved something vastly different than before. Much as I'd been awakened to life experiences, I suddenly found myself awake to other people in my reality. More precisely, I found a friend, a new kid in my class named Billy with black hair. To remember our names, the nun made us sit in alphabetical order, and we wound up at desks next to each other.

Billy and I became exclusive, devoted playmates for the next two years. Nothing of my third and fourth grade school experience remains with me except our paradisiacal recesses out in the schoolyard. In fact, the one thing I remember of the third grade otherwise was that just before Thanksgiving the folks took me to the hospital to have my tonsils (and adenoids) removed. I never understood what that was all about, but I remember the doctor saying my throat would be

sore for a while and I should eat only very soft things. Well, forget that because the next day we had turkey and stuffing, and my throat felt fine.

The best play with Billy happened under a spreading tree (maybe a maple, but I didn't know a maple from a pine back then) in an offset in the tall stone and brick school building. It had a fat, bumpy trunk and a surrounding network of exposed, knobby roots that created little caves (garages) and roadways perfect for our toy cars and trucks. Before long, we'd designed a whole geography around the tree, naming areas as little towns and staging car chases along the highway roots. I'm still amazed to think how endlessly exhilarating our automotive fantasies were those two years Billy and I had together, even during the colder winter months.

Sometimes our recess play was more low key. We'd seek shelter from cold winds by huddling behind the tree in bushes back in the building's offset, where we happily chattered and joked as little boys are wont to do. A favorite pastime was rubbing sticks on the sharp stone corners of the schoolhouse window sills and filing them into complicated shapes like totem poles. We assembled secret forests of little carved poles behind the bushes and in special places, like parks, among the tree roots. The other kids, who concentrated on the swings, slide, and balls, thought we were weird, but in our splendid friendship, we were oblivious to anybody else.

Our closest moments may have been those interminable, silent times of enduring Mass every morning. We'd sit side by side in our P-You(!) tuning out the boring rituals up at the altar, sometimes exchanging sympathetic smiles of strained patience. Early on in our mute tribulation we evolved a subtle system of finger signs to comment unobtrusively on kids (or nuns) who fell asleep during the service or other silly distractions. The hardest part was stifling laughter.

Many friends of my adult years have told me tales of their being 8 to 10 years old and awakening to sexual feelings for guys or girls. I'm here to tell you that little Dick experienced absolutely nothing of that with Billy. I can't imagine how Billy's sexual feelings could be ignited by the chubby kid with crooked teeth that I was then. My overwhelming affection for my friend was a flood of fond feelings now easily recognized as profound love. Of course, I hadn't even the vaguest conception of love, much less of sex, feeling only the consuming joy of friendly companionship. In the evenings and weekends for two years, I thought about Billy a lot, but there was always the hard truth of out of sight, out of mind.

Only once—I think it was probably during the fourth grade—did I get to spend any time with Billy outside of school. For his birthday, his parents threw him a party on a Saturday afternoon at their house, and I of course was invited. Daddy dropped me off there and promised to come back for me in two hours. I was thrilled to be on my own in Billy's world. He met me at the door and took my present with huge thanks, a nice black belt with a silvery cowboy buckle. Then I loitered around the party watching all the kids talking to each other and especially watching my best buddy busily hosting everybody. A consummate wallflower at my very first party, I felt very left out and took consolation in knowing that come Monday, Billy would be all mine again.

In the midst of my passionate friendship for Billy, I'm sorry to say that I was captured by the cultural wave of television. I've always boasted of being TV-free, but I'm surprised to realize now that in that new era of entertainment, as an eight-year-old kid (low-hanging fruit for the industry), I got sucked into the broader culture of America. Up till that point, I'd only been involved in the cult of organized religion, and that, thank goodness, to a very limited extent.

Instead of mooning around about Billy, I easily wasted my time watching our new Admiral TV set, a big black boxy thing with a much larger screen than the old Philco. Judy and I were often glued to the tube, a convenient kid-sitter for Mama, never missing a show of Howdy Doody. Silly as it was, I also loved Kukla, Fran and Ollie, especially the way Ollie the one-toothed dragon, would flop on the floor with a stupid expression. Judy enjoyed all the western shows like Hopalong Cassidy and Cisco Kid, but I preferred the Lone Ranger.

Mama and Daddy would join us to watch big programs like Jackie Gleason and Arthur Godfrey, and again I preferred Milton Berle and particularly Red Skelton. We laughed ourselves silly over I Love Lucy, which was most formative for my developing sense of humor. Important in that regard also were the funnies in the Sunday newspapers, especially Pogo and Li'l Abner, but I also loved Alley Oop, Prince Valiant, and Tarzan. (I'm still a big fan of comic strips.) More literarily, I had my favorite comic books, Fox and the Crow, Donald Duck, and Uncle Scrooge. Who wouldn't be fascinated by three cubic acres of money?

In that vein, I remember the Dr. Seuss books that enchanted me, particularly Horton Hatches the Egg. The surreal image of an elephant squatting in a bird nest in a little tree has stayed with me vividly ever since. In fact, Horton's pronouncement became a maxim for my life: "I meant what I said and I said what I meant. An elephant's faithful one hundred percent!" In the book If I Ran the Zoo, I found expression of my ambitions to make things wonderful, which has perhaps led to the creative impulses of my old age.

A show the family regularly watched was Your Hit Parade with all those great singers like Snooky Lanson. I learned to sing a bunch of the hit songs like Mockingbird Hill, the Tennessee Waltz, and The Lion Sleeps Tonight. My vocal repertoire expanded with Kate Smith's beautiful God Bless America, When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain, and I'll Be Seeing You. Another song I learned from somewhere that affected me deeply was Down by the Riverside: "Gonna lay down my sword and shield / Down by the Riverside / ... and study war no more." That vaguely gospel song apparently led me to life-long pacificism. Of course, for vocal fireworks and humor, I learned Clementine to perfection, reveling in her "herring boxes without topses." Billy thought I was a great singer, and that was all that mattered.

Looking back on my early media/accluturation experience, I'm thankful that it was so early along in the TV age—when the bait was relatively innocuous and hid the hook inside so well. Those early programs gave me a classic cultural baseline that fairly much hid the racism, prejudice, and rapacious commercialism soon to overtake the industry. I never saw the Amos and Andy show and didn't know Jack Benny's Rochester was black. In fact, I'd never seen nor thought about a black person, and my only experience with Hispanics or Native Americans was in western shows like Tonto in Lone Ranger and Cisco Kid. Those fascinating characters were as unusual as the cowboys themselves and no more real to me than Horton in his tiny tree.

What burns me now is that all those hours in front of the tube, fascinating as they may have been, were terrible distractions from the real business of my childhood. I should have been busy with play or games—or simply wallowing in my friendly love for Billy. Instead, I'd sit there on the floor hypnotized by black-and-white images of unreal people and basically senseless stories. That's why I now consider most kinds of entertainment simply squandering life.

All that aside, I regret mostly that Billy and I had to spend so much time apart, all those evenings, weekends, and particularly the long summers out of school. It wasn't like we could

talk on the phone. When apart, we were isolated in our separate worlds. It's especially painful to recall that at the end of our fourth-grade year we didn't know that it was all over. I don't think we even said goodbye on that last day. There was no reason to think about the future. We just left to live our solo lives at home and depend on the TV for entertainment.

Early in that summer of 1952, when I was a tubby ten, my folks apparently decided I was old enough and got me a bicycle, which Daddy undertook to teach me to ride. His explanations about balancing and steering made perfect sense to me, but maybe because of my chubbiness I couldn't master the techniques or get going fast enough to balance. That long ago, simple training wheels at least weren't common or available. In several days of "lessons," I kept falling over and off the contraption, and every day Daddy would get angrier at my failures, cussing up a storm. Finally, he threw up his hands and walked away, leaving me furiously ashamed of my ineptitude.

From this aged vantage point, and knowing how our relationship would evolve, I think that traumatic debacle was when Daddy started losing affection or respect for his awkward son. Afterwards, he simply put the bike away in the garage and never referred to it again. Nor did I. And I spent the summer with Billy "out of sight," replaced by solo play and many TV programs.

Consequently, Billy was "out-of-mind," and of course, five-year-old Judy wasn't very much company. Little Joyce next door and I had never gotten close, she much more involved with her older sister and some girls living up the road. The only other kid around was a twelve-year-old girl across the lane named Frieda, and we rarely ever saw each other. It was quite a surprise when one day Frieda was out in their back yard and called to me to come on over because she had something to show me. With nothing better to do, I trotted over there. In the far corner of the yard beside their garage, there was a big camping tent that was collapsed into a pile of canvas.

Frieda made me crawl in under it with her where it was pretty dark with not much room to move. Wiggling around, she whispered, "Look at this." I couldn't really see much of anything but could tell she'd taken off her panties, a silly thing to do if she was going to show me something. Before I could say anything, she grabbed my head and pulled my face down toward her part. It smelled really strange, like cinnamon mixed with a fishy odor. Revolted, I tried to pull away and was only saved by Frieda's mother calling from their back door for her to come inside. She quickly pulled her panties back on, told me to stay there till she got indoors, and without another word was gone. I waited a minute and crawled out from under the tent, putting the odd experience out of my mind. But even after all these years I clearly recall the disgusting odor of being molested by a pubescent girl, though I had no idea it had anything to do with anything called sex.

When I consider Daddy's bad temper about my bike lessons, I think there was a lot more going on than just my clumsiness. Many years later, my aged mother told me that he was always angry about having to work for a living when he just wanted to go hunting and fishing. I can certainly sympathize with that disgruntlement, a common malaise for modern men. While Daddy never remarked in my hearing about his job at the Schenley distillery, I expect that it wasn't all that much fun figuring out taxes on the alcohol. Ultimately, late in the summer, he came home with news that he'd found a new job—in Texas at a Monsanto oil refinery.

The timing of this new opportunity wasn't ideal. Getting ready for the move at the end of September meant I couldn't go back to school at St. Lawrence Elementary and wouldn't be seeing Billy again. No more splendid recesses or shared suffering at Mass. Mama helped me write him a letter about our move and being so sorry to leave him. Billy wrote me a note back

with much regret and suggesting we become pen pals. It was cold comfort but all we could do. On the other hand, I didn't feel sad at all about leaving the Catholic school.

I tried to help Mama pack up our stuff in big boxes for the moving van. She let me decide what old toys I wanted to keep, which weren't many, and insisted that Daddy couldn't take his stuffed animals, especially that sway-backed fox. Daddy sold off his horses, except for a mare named Lady he'd bought for Judy (who was already wild for riding). He arranged for Lady to board at a nearby farm until he could bring her down to Texas too. I don't know how he did it, but Daddy somehow managed to ship his collection of parakeets, big cage and all, off to Texas.

As our departure time approached, I got ever more excited at the thought of going to fabulous Texas, my head swimming with images of cowboys, horses, and cactuses so familiar from the TV. The night before we left, I was so wound up I couldn't sleep and threw up at least twice.

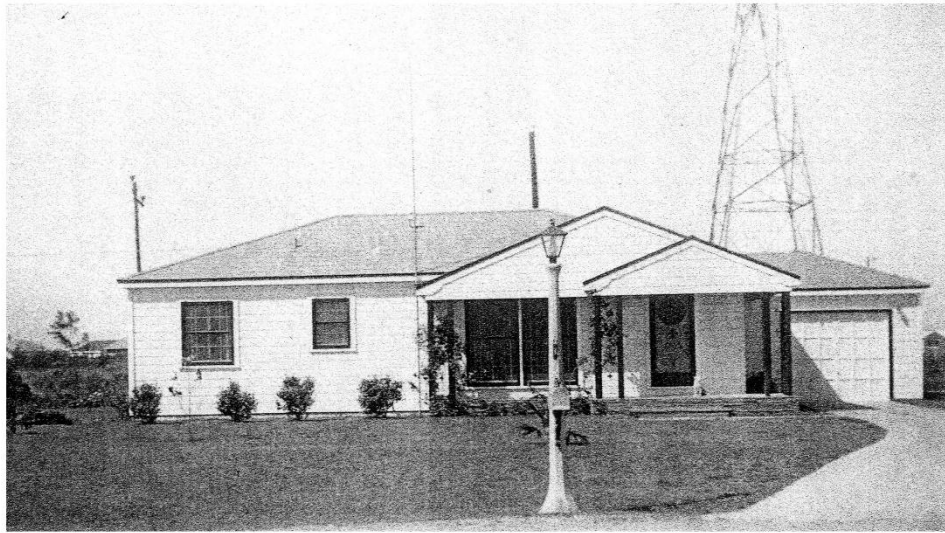
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Something like 25 years later, I took my two teenaged daughters camping on an Indian-mound expedition across southern Ohio. Being near Cincinnati, we drove to Lawrenceburg just across the state line and sought out the old place on Nowlin Road, now called Nowlin Avenue. The level of the roadway had been changed dramatically so the high bank out front was gone, and there were houses all over the place, including the fields across the way, all along the lane (now a street), and across the slopes of Cemetery Hill. The big arbor vitae bushes by the front steps were gone, and the trees in the yard had grown enormously over my quarter-century away.

About a week after getting home to DC, I heard from my mother that she'd just gotten a letter from our neighbor up the road, Dolly Schnebelt, that our old house had burned down.

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SUDDEN SABBATICAL....



#10 Southlawn Circle, La Marque TX, 1952

Naturally, as a ten-year-old witless kid, I had no idea of or care about how Daddy orchestrated our move to La Marque, Texas, a suburban town nestled between Texas City and Galveston. At the time, La Marque's population was around 1,500, mainly housing workers for the surrounding chemical and refining industries. Daddy's job was at a Monsanto plant.

La Marque's landscape was flat as a pancake with precious few trees anywhere. Our new home was brand-new at the end of a circle street, 10 Southlawn Circle (now called Avenue), with some neighboring houses off down the street. Behind the house ran (and still runs) a huge drainage ditch with a tall high-tension line, the tower seen in the above photo. Sitting by the front door is our little dog Peppy. Note the ancient-tech TV antenna to the left of the front porch.



The photo also reminds me of my first little-boy chore: mowing that great expanse of grass. Daddy got a clanky new mower for me to push laboriously around in decreasing circles. Already lush when we moved in, the grass was a surprising new kind called St. Augustine, broad-leafed and low-growing with long vine-like tendrils. Fortunately, I was a rather chunky kid with plenty of weight to shove the heavy lawnmower around. Even in early October, the grass was still growing, and the hot days made me sweat like crazy.

Besides the continuing hot weather, the most remarkable thing for me in La Marque was that so late in the school year, I couldn't enroll in the local elementary school for the fall term but had to wait for January. (Judy had no problem getting into a kindergarten though.) That sudden sabbatical turned out to be probably the most impactful experience in my long schooling. Legally truant, I used my free time not only for idly playing around but mostly for intensive "independent study."

Mama suggested I do what she was doing: reading books from the nearby public library. She left me to choose whatever I wanted, and I quickly devoured all the children's classics, soon moving on to the famous books of literature. Again, as a witless ten-year-old, I wonder how much of them I actually understood, but I was a prodigious reading machine for several hours every day. Mama encouraged me to write little book reports about each of them, and in the three months to January I read like 90 books, I kid you not! The unusual experience definitely switched my unwitting young brain into high gear. I started my second term of fifth grade at basically a ninth-grade intelligence level, which simply made me a pudgy little nerd—but more on that later. (Nowadays I can recall once reading classic things like “The Count of Monte Cristo” or “Oliver Twist,” but I’ve got to read them again nowadays to remember anything at all.)

Though I usually had my nose stuck in a book, I still played around like little boys do, even without playmates, all the other kids imprisoned in classrooms. I don't recall feeling particularly lonely, except for missing my Indiana buddy Billy. On Nowlin Road I'd learned to be a loner, and my truant fall on Southlawn Circle just reinforced that personal characteristic. Maybe symbolically, the very first thing I did (after mowing the lawn) was pull out my rebellious old bicycle and ride off down the street without even a wobble. Suddenly a free agent, I roamed the neighborhood and explored a patch of scrubby woods a short way up the drainage ditch where an old tree was real easy to climb.

With flat, open fields all around, my only real playground was in the drainage ditch, which was at least fifteen feet deep with fairly steep sides down to a diddling stream at the bottom. The shallow creek was maybe three feet wide among watery weeds and willowy shoots here and there. A high-tension tower straddled a ridge in the ditch wild with blackberry bushes. No doubt big rains would flood it, but I only once ever saw the stream get a bit deeper. Besides fascinating tadpoles, frogs, and turtles, it also had pools of tiny silver minnows. I patrolled up and down the ditch supervising the wildlife and usually wound up sitting in the shade of a bush to read.

Though playmates were lacking, I at least had the energetic company of our Peppy puppy. After five years together, the little white dog had become my personal pet. She stuck by me wherever I wandered (when not on my bicycle) and often cuddled on my lap while I read my books, absent-mindedly scratching her ear. Not that I knew it then, but I deeply loved that perky terrier. Peppy was the first ever creature I could lavish with affection and tenderness, pure puppy love.

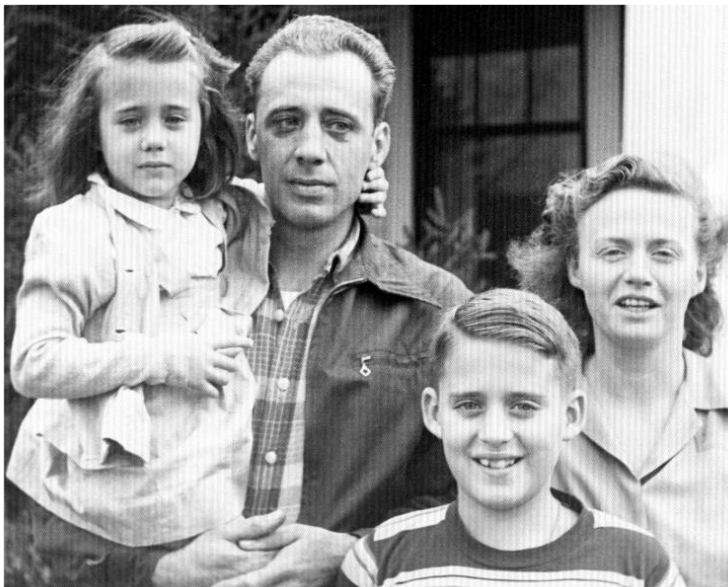


When they got home from school, I played some with the bunch of neighbor kids, the Knights. There was Jo-Ann, a girl tall as me and a year older; Georgette was a couple of years younger than me, and their brother Ronnie maybe a year younger than Judy. On the back of this snapshot, Mama didn't identify the young blonde girl on the group's right. With the age differences, I naturally bonded most closely with Jo-Ann, a tomboy with fluffy blonde hair and freckles, and that bond was simply good neighbors. After school, she was often off with her girlfriends. After supper, the Knight kids always had to do their homework, leaving me to read more books with Peppy in my lap.

During the first weeks, I got to know their father, Mr. Knight, a professional fisherman. His big sailboat was parked behind their house, and vast nets hung all around on frames. I'd find him out there later in the mornings and watch him mending his nets with thick cords and huge needles. I can still see his hands, big and strong with knobby fingers. He had dark, curly hair and was full of jokes and fun. But I was mystified why he kept calling me "stud," considering the only kind of stud I knew was like on a belt. Sometimes on weekends, Daddy went along on fishing trips in the sailboat out on Galveston Bay, but they said I was too young to come along. That was fine with me to be left at home reading "Moby Dick" or "Madame Bovary."

Meanwhile, I discovered the joy of running barefoot on the soft, sandy beach in Galveston and swimming in the small, salty waves. A number of times, Daddy took me along with him surf-fishing. We'd stand on the beach and cast our lines way out in the surf, carefully reeling them in as waves brought our bait back up the beach. I never caught anything that way myself but indeed witnessed Daddy hooking two big trout-looking fishes. A few evenings he and some friends took me along the bayshore where we waded carefully through shallow water with flashlights spearing weird flat flounders with both eyes on the top side of their heads. You had to spot and spear them very quickly, before they fluttered off in a flurry of sand. I managed to stab a few and Mama cooked them up for us, my favorite eating kind of fish.

I think Daddy was fairly happy with the fishing there in Texas, not much in the way of hunting of course, but he acted real proud about Mama cooking up his catch. Mr. Knight would sometimes give us a bucket of shrimps that I loved, and we'd go out along the creeks to catch blue crabs using hunks of chicken for bait. I loved crabs too, but they were awful hard to eat what with all the shells and having to use nutpicks.



Early that fall, Mama had Mrs. Knight take a picture of us out in the front yard. I now find Daddy's distant, slightly distracted look in this photo disturbing. That was how I always seemed to see him—not looking directly at me with a blank expression.

Nowadays, I read his look as an underlying unhappiness which would play out in subsequent years. No doubt his premature greying hair at a mere 36 was painful for him. He often griped about how he hated his boring paper work at the Monsanto plant, but he was at least glad the job paid decently.

Daddy was more of a doting father with Judy, and she clung to him affectionately. He often held her in his arms or on his lap, but I was never "dandled" like that. Mama rarely touched me except to fix my hair. No good-night kisses—just "Sleep tight!" I'd learned long before not to expect any expressions of affection, and I devoted my own tenderness to little Peppy. By the way, I seemed to always wear striped t-shirts, like the uniform of an overweight bookworm.

Thank goodness, Daddy never got back into taxidermy, but then his job kept him pretty busy. He didn't get home till after dark in the winter, just in time for dinner, and then he'd relax watching TV. I didn't care for many of the TV programs, spending most of my time reading library books. A show I really liked was "I Love Lucy," and once I laughed myself into a gasping asthma fit. Watching that show was about the only time I ever heard Daddy laugh out loud, though sometimes he'd chuckle at Jackie Gleason. I always laughed at everything like a fool.

My sabbatical from fifth grade meant that I spent lots more time with Mama, just the two of us, without obtrusion by small siblings. After her housework, she seemed have a good deal of time to do things like sew and crochet. I distinctly remember a crocheted "picture" she did of a fancy, flouncy lady walking with a parasol. We often sat on the driveway in the afternoon shade of the garage and played vast games of Canasta or fast games of Gin Rummy. Sometimes we walked down to the park and swang on the swings. I think Mama enjoyed having me around to talk to. Instead of simply mother and son, I felt us becoming regular dear friends.

Mama was of course good friends with Mrs. Knight next door, who had a car and would take them grocery shopping. A sweet, motherly woman, she seemed always terribly busy with her husband's fish business and three kids, so they didn't do much together otherwise. In fact, it's pretty clear to me that Mama must have felt awfully isolated and alone left at home on the flat fields of Southlawn beside an ugly drainage ditch. I wasn't old enough back then to recognize her plight, but now in my dotage I'm sure glad I could offer Mama companionable solace.

Of course, Judy was home from kindergarten for a good while every day, and since the Knight kids were in school, we naturally hung out together—more like me just keeping an eye on her over whatever book I was into. In general, I started feeling like her big brother again. Judy was in fact a very cute little girl. Now that she was six there was some semblance of communication possible. I guess you could say that we were a pretty close family of three. Our fourth, Daddy, was only around evenings and weekends to give orders and relax, and he didn't get involved with anything around the house—except to make sure I mowed the lawn every week.

In late October, anticipating Halloween, Mama sewed me up a special costume for trick or treat, a holiday I hadn't ever enjoyed back in rural Indiana. I was a little bear with fuzzy ears like Winnie the Pooh. Mr. Knight drove all us kids down to an avenue that crossed a bridge over the drainage ditch and led into a neighborhood thick with houses. (We obviously lived on the wrong, low-class side of the ditch.) Sadly, I can't recall what costumes anyone else wore, but we all got great bags of candy and goodies. Somehow I managed to burst out a seam on my bear suit. Mama made Judy and me ration out our loot so it would last.

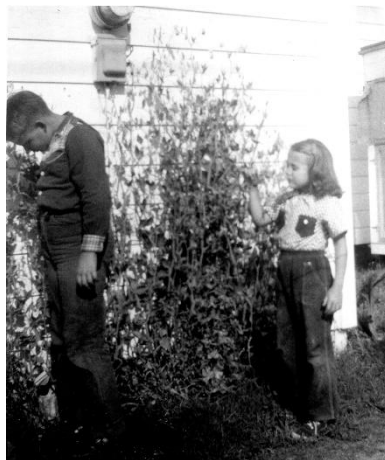
As Christmas approached, we of course didn't do anything special about decorating, though we went next door to admire the Knights' pretty tree with popcorn and cranberry strands and a bunch of cute, glittery ornaments. That Wednesday, Daddy got off early from the plant for Christmas Eve, and he came home driving a great big blue Buick, a fancy model they called the Roadmaster with chrome porthole decorations along the hood.

Looking so proud and pleased with himself, he explained that it was last year's model, and he got it cheap from his boss, a rich guy who bought a new-model car every year. He actually hugged Mama, asking how she liked the Christmas present. She got all flustered and said now we'd have to go to church the next day. I didn't see the connection, but Daddy said sure.

We got there early enough to hear the carols, and I collected the pages with lyrics. Of course, I'd learned Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" from the TV, and I was so thrilled by the new songs that I practiced them the whole next week. Daddy told me to shut up. Singing carols after the holiday was over was stupid. (His favorite singer was Theresa Brewer, probably because she was so pretty. Mama got even by preferring Perry Como, I expect for the same reason.)

Lamar Elementary, maybe six blocks away, opened on January 5, and my sabbatical was over. Suddenly my days were confined to a (bright) classroom. Right away, I showed the Teacher Lady my vast collection of book reviews from the fall's reading, and she was hugely impressed, commenting that I must be a very bright young man. In any case, paying close attention to her, I found lessons easily understood and remembered, so there was no scholarly pressure or stress.

The only stress was dealing with the class bully named Lonnie, a fat kid who "threw his weight around." He took a dislike to me for being a smarty-pants and kept threatening to beat me up on the way home. Strategically, I made friends and walked home with Henry, a tall kid who lived halfway to my house, and Lonnie didn't have to go that far. In his backyard, Henry had a huge spreading tree where his father had built him a big treehouse. Playing there with him, I felt a little jealous of Henry's good fortune but made sure to visit him on weekends as well.



After an unnoticeable winter, spring came early in La Marque, like mid-February. Mama went wild planting gardens around the house and had me help her with the digging. We filled the planters along the front porch with beautiful red coleus and made a long bed with petunias, zinnias, and verbena along the back fence. We planted a row of sweet peas along the back of the garage. Of course, Judy's little watering can couldn't do much for the petunias,

and sweet peas don't have a great deal of fragrance. I'm pleased to see me in a "western" shirt, but my pudgy posture is atrocious. That spring of 1953 was my intensive intro into the joys of gardening—which eventually even made my living for about twenty years and still occupies most of my sunlit hours outside.

Literally, the only moment in class that spring that still lives in my memory, for good reason, was on Thursday, March 5, when our teacher lady announced happily that had Stalin died! I didn't know who he was, and she explained that Stalin was like the King of Russia. I'd read in my many books about the strange concept of dying but had never thought about death in my personal world. It seemed odd that Teacher was so pleased about someone not being alive anymore. When I mentioned this news to my parents over supper, they just shrugged. Daddy said now maybe the damned communists would give up. Knowing nothing about world politics, I was tremendously confused and decided to keep my mouth shut.

Subsequently, I soon had direct experience with death. One evening, I got home from school a bit later than usual, Henry and I having played a long game of Monopoly in his treehouse. Daddy was already home from work, out on the porch talking to Mr. Knight. When I walked up, they

both looked at me sadly. Flatly, Daddy said, “Peppy’s dead.” I was paralyzed in horror. Mr. Knight had seen a “hot-rod” kid driving his pickup truck crazy all over our side field and chasing Peppy down in the tall grass. I started crying and cried all evening and into the night, imagining my puppy’s terror and wishing I could run over the vicious “hot-rod” like that.

At breakfast, my parents tried to calm my grief, my first time ever to feel that emotion, but their sympathy didn’t help much. In a flash of parental insight, Daddy suggested we all go see a movie that evening. Now, I’d never been to a movie, and his wise suggestion calmed me down. He was talking about the new Disney movie called “Peter Pan.” I’d read and adored Barrie’s book, and the thought of it being a movie was hugely exciting. I’m ashamed to say that my profound grief for my Peppy-puppy love evaporated immediately.

Since I was unprepared for the emotional immediacy of cinema, the movie totally captivated me. Peter’s urging Wendy to come with him to Never Land where she’d never have to grow up spoke directly to my heart. I was supremely ready to fly right out that window with them. I almost got lost in the complicated plot of the Lost Boys, Captain Hook, the Crocodile, Tinker Bell, Tiger Lily, and all that, and the ending left me stunned. Of course, I chose to fly away with Peter back to Never Land—and never grow up. Leaving the theater, I looked up at the moon and saw the second star to the right. I’d just fly straight on till morning... (The horrible prospect of growing up only reared its head again for me a couple years later.)



Easter came around on April 5 that year, and Mama herded us all off to church again. I was of course not at all pleased about the “holy day of obligation,” but Mama seemed to be gearing up her religious fervor. My white blazer coat was a signal that I’d be wasting my Sunday morning ignoring Latin mumbo-jumbo and the priest’s boring homily. Judy’s get-up with that silly hat was in a word unfortunate, which her resigned expression well acknowledges. (Back then women were supposed to wear hats in church, and men couldn’t, a custom that made no sense to me.)

Either that glimpse through the window of the living room or the shining “holy raiment” of our Easter finery calls to mind another childhood experience. A hall led off the living room to the folks’ bedroom, and off either side were Judy’s room (in front) and mine (in back). There I suffered an awful recurring nightmare, the first time maybe right around then. It returned three or four times in exact detail over the next year or so, burning the images into my mind and waking me in sobbing horror.

I’d be standing at the top of a hill holding a glistening white wheel as tall as my waist, and I’d release it to roll off to the right along a path or track downhill. It would roll unhurriedly along through trees and flowers, eventually getting lost in a confusion of greenery and houses at the bottom of the hill. A while later, it would appear and roll (dreamlike) along the continuing path back up the hill to stop in front of me again. The problem was that when it appeared again down

there, it would be dark and dirty, and when it came back to me, it was all black and dripping with grease and filth. I always awoke wailing in existential horror, and Mama would try to comfort me. Many years later, I mentioned the weird dream to a friendly Jungian therapist, and she said something about an innate fear of time and life passing. Maybe, but so what? The memory of it remains an inexplicable psychological artifact.

My big adventure that spring happened close to home. On a Saturday afternoon, somewhere around my 11th birthday in late April, Daddy went with me on a wander along the drainage ditch, proposing to catch frogs and have Mama cook us up a mess of frog legs for supper. She threw a fit and refused. Which was just as well because we only found tiny frogs with even tinier legs. Still, Daddy was pleased with his little joke.

As we walked home along the mounded upper edge of the ditch, suddenly an armadillo flushed out of the bushes and streaked off toward a hole in the dirt pile. I streaked after it and just as it got halfway into the hole, grabbed its tail. The armadillo was really strong, and I had to brace my feet beside the hole to keep from being pulled in. Daddy told me to hold on tight and ran over to the house, racing back in a moment with a gunny sack.

He opened it at the exit hole in the other side of the bank and told me to let go. Whereupon the armadillo shot through its tunnel and out into the bag. Trapped in the dark bag, the poor creature rolled up into a protective ball. Daddy tossed the bag into the trunk of the Buick, and we drove out into open country to let it go. On the way home, he joked that maybe we should have had Mama cook it for us. I seriously doubted she'd want to.

The armadillo's burrow gave me a great idea. Over the next week or two, I used a shovel to dig a trench there across the dirt pile. Then I laid a big piece of board over it as a roof, made a back wall of willow branches, and hung a sheet in front for a door. That fast I had me a hideout, not as fancy as Henry's treehouse, but my own private place—like those hidden spots in the corn shocks before in Indiana. It was a wonderful place to hang out and read—or just waste time.

In the process of excavation, I came across a fascinating whitish "rock." Now, you have to understand that along the Texas Gulf coast, there are simply NO rocks, just a sandy sort of loam for soil. So the thing was of immediate interest. With mostly flat, though knobby, top and bottom, it was a rough oval about five inches long and three wide with fairly smooth sides. The top surface was lined with ridges of whiter material. Even as an 11-year-old, I recognized it right off as a mammoth's tooth. My parents convinced me to toss it in the trash, but recently I've read about mammoth fossils found under the Gulf Coast sands. I'll believe it.

Soon after school let out for the summer, as a matter of fact on June 2, Judy's birthday, on TV they showed the coronation of Queen Elizabeth. I was riveted to the screen watching an honest-to-God queen get crowned. She was such a pretty young woman and now the Queen of England! We Americans didn't believe in such titles, but it was still a thrill. (Naturally, I didn't know that Elizabeth would reign in England for most of my lifetime.) Now that Stalin was dead, I hoped to get to see a real King sometime. Recalling the King of France character in "Huckleberry Finn," I asked Mama if France still had a king. She said no—they'd cut off the last one's head a long time ago. That somewhat curbed my enthusiasm for nobility.

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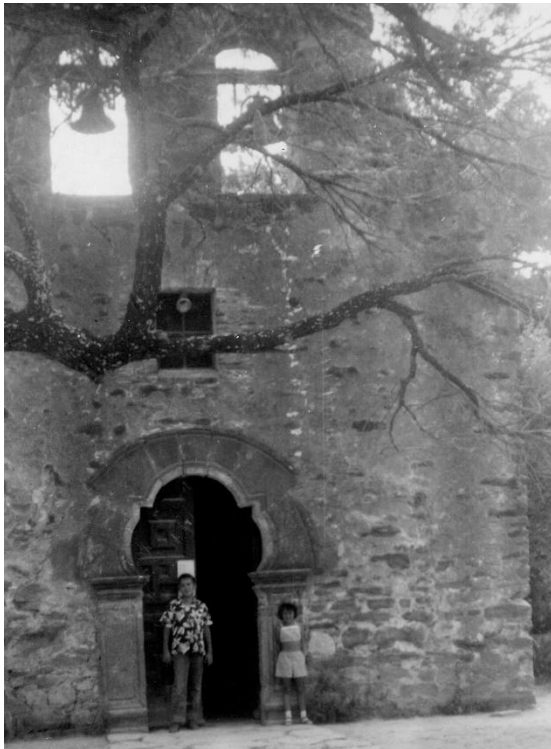
A DORKIER DORK

Very soon in June, my old playmate Billy and his family stopped by on their vacation drive. We were both noticeably taller than the year before in Lawrenceburg, and he looked strangely different, thinner and older, though still recognizable. I was really happy to see him and talk about our year apart, but I couldn't find those wonderful best-buddy feelings again for this stranger. He probably felt much the same about me.

When they left, I felt sadly empty but soon forgot all about Billy, much the way I'd closed the chapter on my Peppy love. Besides, it wasn't long till we took off on our own family vacation. My first trip, our move from Indiana to La Marque, had left no memory in my child's brain, but this family vacation was memorable, if not remembered in fine detail. My first adventure!

In our beautiful blue Buick, we headed to Houston up a brand-new, four-lane "super highway," apparently the first such in the country. I was thrilled to see the big buildings in the city, but afterwards when we turned west across Texas, it was just winding, two-lane roads across flat, open country. I sat beside Judy in the back seat with my pile of library books and read, ignoring the landscape. She hugged her dollies and stared out the window at all the nothing.

On the little roads, we stopped the first night at a dark motel in a tiny town and the next day made it to San Antonio and a Mexican-looking motel that made Mama nervous for some reason. Driving around the city the next day, it felt like a Mexican city with its tile roofs on the great old buildings and almost tropical flowers and trees. The historic Alamo fascinated me with its glimpses of when Texas as once a part of Mexico. Of course, I knew about Davey Crockett and Jim Bowie getting killed there, but I hadn't understood why or how it happened.



Glimpses of the ancient past fascinated me, like visiting the missions from hundreds of years before. The San Juan Mission sat among huge dark trees along a peaceful river, and all around it were enormous clumps of century plants taller even than Daddy. I admired the old stonework and impressive bell-tower but had no interest in going inside. It was dark and dreary, and the paintings were the same. Something about it said "Inquisition," which I'd learned about from some book and didn't want to think about. My disinclination to organized religion was already taking shape.

By the way, in her typically industrious way, Mama had sewn me a Hawaiian shirt for an eleventh birthday present, green with bright tropical flowers all over it. I thought it was the fanciest thing ever and wore it continuously all through the vacation, as you'll observe in the following photographs. At least I didn't have much opportunity to get it dirty, and the flowers well hid any occasional grime.

From there, our drive west on the little winding roads seemed to go on for a week with nightly stays in unremarkable motels in the middle of nowhere. There wasn't a thing to see anywhere except wide open, flat, dry desert, occasional little mountains in the far distance. I certainly wasn't watching, sitting silently in my own little reading world in the back seat. Lord knows how poor Judy kept herself occupied. Her doll must have done double or triple duty. I realize now the small difference between my anti-social bookworm behavior and the video-game/social-networking fixation of my grandson some sixty years later on a long drive with me and his parents. At least the scenery crossing Oklahoma and Arkansas then was entertaining—and the trip was considerably shorter what with interstate highways.



In truth, I think our drive across west Texas to the town of Pecos probably took only three, maybe four days, and by then the landscape had turned rather rougher. And only a bit greener. We visited the old house of Judge Roy Bean and the story of his “law west of the Pecos,” a chapter of history I’d known nothing about, reminding me of TV western shows like *Gunsmoke*.

To stretch our legs, we strolled in a nice little park with paths along the Pecos River. Mama said the empty desert views had almost driven her crazy. Daddy said he’d teach her to drive and give him a break. Mama flatly refused. I suggested I could learn, but that went nowhere. To my mind, the Pecos seemed a mighty small stream to be called a “river.” More like a creek...

After crossing into the formerly lawless lands west of the Pecos, we had a couple more days of driving to our ultimate destination, fortunately with much more interesting landscape of mountains and cliffs. I even took breaks from my pages to admire the rocks, buttes, and mesas familiar again from TV westerns.

We were going to El Paso to visit Mama’s great-aunt Henriette. She lived partway up a mountain slope, and from the yard, you looked out over the city to mountains in Mexico, my first glimpse of a foreign country. Henriette’s children were grown and gone away, a daughter Rose who was becoming a nun, and two sons, Paul and John, who were becoming priests/monks with the Christian Brothers. I was quite negatively impressed by their churchly vocations, but Mama may have found it a bit inspiring. (Forget about it!)

(This is a good opportunity to remark on the curious incidental threads that run through life. Nearly twenty years later, I had occasion to meet with Brother Paul when he was the Abbot, Rector, or whatever of St. John’s Academy (for boys) in Covington, Louisiana. That brief relationship is described in one of my memoirs, “Lord Wind.” Ten years after that, when I’d moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, I encountered both Brothers, Paul having become Principal of St. Michael’s High School. And twenty-five years later, as Assistant Dean at the College of Santa Fe, I enjoyed a glowing reputation among the teaching Christian Brothers there as the cousin of venerable Brother Paul. I don’t believe we ever particularly liked each other.)



The folks had mapped out our return drive by a slightly different route. We'd go around the southern end of the Guadalupe Mountains on the border between Texas and New Mexico. Down there, we'd see El Capitan, a mountain then touted as the highest peak in Texas (but now known to be only fourth highest). I was hugely impressed by the monolith, the most enormous thing I'd seen thus far in my short life!

Mama unwittingly took a great snapshot of Daddy with Judy and me with El Capitan in the background—great if only because it perfectly illustrated the way I was starting to see the world. Things close up like Daddy and Judy were in pretty good focus, but stuff at a distance like the mountain behind us was all pretty much a blur. Mama made me stop reading when it was too bright in the back seat. It was easier on my weak eyes to merely admire the landscape.

The next leg of our trip was north into New Mexico along the dramatic slopes of the Guadalupe Mountains to Carlsbad (my first time in that state which would eventually become home for the last half of my life). Carlsbad, of course, was home of the famous Carlsbad Caverns. We checked into a motel, grabbed sandwiches at a diner, and made it up to the cavern entrance to watch the flight of thousands of bats out into the sunset sky. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. The cavern entrance itself was one humongous hole! First thing in the morning, we drove up the mountains to the cavern entrance and walked down a vast, long set of steps into the hole.

The upper lip of the cave looming way high over our heads, we descended farther into shade and deeper shadows around monster boulders that clustered closer as the hole shrank, and the steps kept twisting around and down, down... Our descent around mountainous boulders was dimly lit, the lights glistening off cave walls and sometimes fading off into darkness under high roofs of the chambers. Like the other folks ambling down the path, we'd stop occasionally to feel the mystery of being deep inside the earth and listen to the faint dripping off stalactites.

The path led ever downward and eventually through a refreshment area. By then Mama (and I) were worried about the long climb back up and out of the cavern, but Daddy showed us an elevator for leaving. After lunch, we followed a guide down into the lower chambers, and in one, we all sat around while he turned out the lights. The blackness was utter and gave me the strange feeling of expanding out into infinite dimensions. My first mystical revelation!

(Once again, this is a good opportunity to note historical echoes in my long life. About forty years later, on January 6, 1994, to be exact, I wound up in the very early, snowy and frigid morning in the empty parking lot at Carlsbad Caverns. After a leisurely smoke of some high-octane marijuana, I was the first visitor at the entrance booth and indeed, the only one. For several hours I floated through my own private cavern, experiencing mystical revelations galore. But that one when I was a mere eleven I'd bet was at least as psychedelic.)

My mind blown by the caverns, I rode most of the way home in a coma. Heading back east across Texas, we dropped south through San Angelo and Austin, where I admired the beautiful State Capitol building. Another first for my list. Until we approached Austin, the roads were devoid of landscape interest, and I welcomed the chance to rest my exhausted eyes. Besides, there was so much in this wonderful vacation to relive and rejoice in. (It was our first, and sadly last, family vacation ever, though later we took some long driving trips for family matters.)

Southlawn Circle was like always when we got back at the end of June, except that our lawn sorely needed mowing. The long grass was terribly hard work with the push-mower, and Daddy made me mow it twice. But he took us to the beach in Galveston that Saturday, the Fourth of July. Mama told Judy and me about when she was a girl and went to Coney Island and out on the Chesapeake Bay on sailboats. It was hard to imagine Mama as a young girl. Daddy left us with our towels and umbrellas and wandered up and down the beach surf-fishing. The fireworks that evening were spectacular, another first for me!



We went frequently to Galveston for swimming and fishing, and I got brown as a berry in the sun. But for summer fun around the house, I made do with our little wading pool in the back yard. In this photo you can also see Daddy's cage for his parakeets. In this bucolic scene in the wading pool, Judy looks terrifically pixie-like with her dolly, and I wonder about my odd gesture with the ball. I think it's a great picture of our close big-brother/little-sister relationship when she wasn't off playing with the Knight kids. I didn't spend much time with all those girls, preferring my solitary boy-stuff.

That summer of 1953 was full of boyish adventures (no more armadillos, though). In my drainage ditch explorations, I caught some fascinating pets, including a huge horny toad almost a foot long. I tied little reins to its horns to pull a tiny wagon. I also caught a couple spreading adders, hog-nosed snakes that spread their necks out like a cobra to threaten but then played dead when really scared. Some pretty lizards and ugly toads... A big terrapin (box turtle) was lots of fun to feed bugs, grasshoppers, and juicy blackberries.

The day I brought the turtle home with news of the ripe blackberries, we all climbed down into the ditch with buckets and picked berries along the ridge under the high-tension tower. Being so short, Judy was great at berry-picking. While ambling along the path (and eating more berries than I picked), I was stopped short by a fat black snake flopping across the path in front of me—a cotton-mouth water moccasin that had struck at my leg but missed. Daddy jumped on top of the poisonous snake and killed it, but Mama was scared out of her wits and took Judy on home. Daddy and I went on to pick enough berries for several pies.

Forgetting about my earlier fiasco with the Cub Scouts, Mama signed me up for weekly meetings of a Boy Scout troop as a "tenderfoot." I was now mature enough to behave properly in the scout activities and took great interest in learning to "lash" sticks together with cords for my first merit badge. With Mr. Knight's help, I also worked on a merit badge for tying knots. There were so many different kinds of knots to learn that I couldn't keep them straight, so to speak. I was

immensely relieved that there were no camping-out plans, that debacle having happened earlier in the summer. Our scout meetings continued into the fall—until I got sick and tired of them. What Mama couldn't understand—nor could I—was why I made no new friends in the scout troop. Maybe it was because I was a pudgy new dork among tight-knit groups of old friends. And my book-wormish nature may have had a little something to do with it.



Probably more to the point, by early August an eye doctor had fitted me with glasses for my severe myopia. This picture taken on the occasion of Judy's immaculate First Communion, is a gentle reminder of my degradation. Of course, Mama also wore glasses, so it wasn't quite so humiliating. I might also complain about the severe crewcut, but it wouldn't do any good. (Something tells me that either that night or soon after, I probably had another of those recurring nightmares. Dressing in white may have had something to do with it.)

Consequently, I became an even dorkier dork, a four-eyed freak to be ridiculed and ostracized from student society. On the other hand, my third and fourth eyes allowed me to read more books, often using even brief lulls in scout activities to knock off a few more pages. I didn't invite any of the other dorky scouts into my private world. Nor did I open up that September to any of the other kids in my new sixth grade at Lamar Elementary. I'd already run through anything interesting in its library and relied on the nearby Public Library for my literary fixes. Sixth grade never got in the way of my extracurricular reading. Its classes were no-brainers.

Ever since my fifth-grade sabbatical, I'd kept a book or two—or three—going, and after reading most classic French and English novels, I turned to writers like Pearl Buck, Anya Seton, and Thomas B. Costain. Some modern books like Waltari's "The Egyptian" and Evelyn Waugh's "Brideshead Revisited" left me totally confused, but like the rest, I soon forgot their plots. During the earlier spring, I'd discovered science fiction, devouring books by George Orwell, Isaac Asimov, and Ray Bradbury. (One of my most favorites, read on the long vacation drive, was Thor Heyerdahl's exciting "Kon-Tiki.") My new glasses were a miracle of literary magic.

I got deeply into another extracurricular activity that fall, glee club. It was the most fun I could imagine school ever being. We were about twenty from various grades who liked to sing. The director-teacher, a skinny young fellow name of Mr. Miller, also in glasses, played the piano for us. Twice a week we met and sang a wild range of songs from folk, popular, and holiday traditions. The teacher seemed to like me and said I had a wonderful "boy-soprano" voice. He had me sing a solo of "Battle Hymn of the Republic" at a recital. I got chummy with some boys and girls, but they were in other grades, and we only saw each other at club meetings.

Mr. Miller was also coach for the eighth grade's Christmas show, a long program of holiday carols, and he got them to include me for some solos like "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." When I sang the high notes, it gave me goosebumps. Mama and Judy were very impressed by my vocal performance, but Daddy said nothing at all, even when the teacher told him I was star quality. At least I appreciated his praise.

In the second term of sixth grade, I continued with the glee club and became even better friends with Mr. Miller. He gave me (and all of us singers) great advice about how to sing various notes, and I started learning how to read those spotty notes on the musical lines. Later I also signed up for a square-dance club and learned to move in various rhythms. It was great fun twirling around with girls in dosidoes, allemandes, and promenades. I'm not sure how graceful I was, but nobody else looked all that graceful either.

Square-dancing was more about moving the right direction. It was tremendously important as my first step in becoming a pathological dancer. (Over the next 70 years, I evolved from square through Rock'n'roll, Latin, Greek, hippie, disco, go-go, hip-hop, electronic, etc., and eventually into ecstatic, my current style...) But even more important, the square-dance club provided an occasion for the first rumblings of pre-pubescent emotions in my almost 12-year-old life. In the club, there was a cute little girl named Barbara, in my sixth grade too, but rather short with dark eyes and curly brown hair like Shirley Temple.

I couldn't take my eyes off her pretty little face, though she pointedly avoided me. When we encountered each other in the dance figures, Barbara wouldn't even look at me, just sashaying on by. At first, I wondered if my "four eyes" frightened her, but then I worried about being so much bigger than her. I always smiled sweetly at her, but she totally ignored the leering dork. After a couple weeks of frustrated admiration in the dance club, I started thinking about little Barbara outside of school and soon even as I lay in bed trying to go to sleep. There was nothing at all sexual about my thoughts, more like a religious appreciation of how cute and sweet she looked.

As my feelings grew warmer over the next weeks, I imagined hugging her like a doll or pet, but I still had no concept of kissing. In a word, I was in profound puppy love for the little girl. When the club decided to do a dance recital, I screwed up my courage and spoke to Barbara for the first time, asking her to be my partner for the recital. She looked at me directly for the first time and coldly said, "No." My pre-pubescent heart was broken, and I refused to dance in the recital. After that, I stopped even thinking about her—fortunately, still too young to worry about girlfriends.

At the same time in late March while I was being spurned by Barbara, I discovered a brand-new source of excitement. Mr. Miller got several of us kids together for a "piano" club. I'd of course picked up a little bit in glee club about those spidery notes on the music lines, but my singing was mostly knowing how the notes were supposed to sound anyway. Now Mr. Miller started teaching us about how the keys on a piano reflected those musical notes. He gave us long strips of paper with the black and white keys named a, b, c, and so on, and we practiced placing our fingers on them to make chords—not that I exactly grasped what those were.

It was thrilling to try the fingerings out on the piano itself and hear the kind of music they made. Between glee club and piano lessons, Mr. Miller opened up a whole fascinating new world for me. No sooner had I learned the keyboard than I wrote a short piano "concerto" that Mr. Miller kindly played for me. He said it sounded a bit like Stravinsky. Looking back on it, I'm not sure if that was a compliment, but it might have been. In any case, I take it now as one.

In early April, Daddy left on a trip in the Buick with no explanation. Judy and I were told nothing but that he'd be gone for a few days. I was too oblivious to suspect anything afoot. With him gone, Mama said she was scared to stay nights in our house alone and arranged for us to sleep over at the Knights.' I was dubious about that being any safer, but now I well understand Mama's young wife's fears at being left unprotected by her lordly master. Ah, the patriarchy...

That evening we packed up our pajamas and marched around the Circle to the Knights' house. Mr. Knight was off in his boat on a fishing trip, and Mrs. Knight fed us all a good supper of meatloaf and green beans. She laughed about being happy for an opportunity to cook something besides fish, and the kids were also happy. After supper, we sat dutifully around the living room doing our homework and then played board games till bedtime.

Mrs. Knight put Mama in Ronnie's bedroom and Judy and me with her three kids in the big bed (crosswise) that JoAnn and Georgette shared. We lay five lumps in a row with JoAnn and me on the ends and Ronnie in the middle, nicely symmetrical. Naturally, we indulged in much joking around and wiggling but soon enough drifted off to safe and sound sleep. Later in the night, the bedroom door opened—the bright light waking me up—and then closed.

A loud voice outside sounded angry, then silence. Shortly, Mama came in and got me up out of the bed, leading me groggily out into the dark living room, and put me down on the sofa under a pretty quilt. Angry voices still came from the kitchen. When I asked what was the matter, Mama claimed nothing, but I thought I heard Mrs. Knight say, "...but he's only eleven!" I fuzzily thought, "Actually, almost 12," and went back to sleep.

When I got home from school the next day, I found Mama all busy in the kitchen making supper for Mrs. Knight and her kids, roasted chicken with potatoes and so on. It was to thank them for putting us up last night. Mama said we wouldn't sleep there again tonight, and feeling much the brave young man, I told her I could take good care of her and Judy anyway. Supper with the neighbor guests was fun, and I reminded Mrs. Knight that I was almost 12.

When Daddy got home, they sent Judy and me outside to play and after a while came out on the porch. Mama was drying her eyes with a hankie, and Daddy looked pleased as a cat that ate a canary. But they didn't tell Judy or me anything about what was going on. For a couple weeks, life and school went on as usual for us kids, and meanwhile the folks took to packing everything in boxes. It didn't take a genius to deduce that we were going to move.

Finally, at breakfast one morning, Mama broke the news. All she said (with a few tears) was we were going to some place called Arkansas—way out in the woods. Leaving the week before my birthday. A moment's paranoid thought of Hansel and Gretel abandoned in the forest, but then I recalled Cooper's great novel "The Deerslayer" and got at least a little bit excited.

That meant I had about a week to say goodbye to teacher, classmates, and glee- and square-dance-club friends. I told Mr. Miller about leaving, which he much regretted, but I never found the courage to say a real farewell. A truck came early on Friday morning to load up our stuff, and we drove off in the Buick. Clearly, Mama, Judy, and I were merely pieces of baggage for Daddy to drag along wherever he wanted to go. He was snatching me away from my beloved books, music, dance, and school fun at Southlawn—to go live somewhere out in the woods?! Rats!

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TWO LITTLE SAVAGES

As our youth nowadays would say, I literally ran across a random statement intended as a joke but in fact quite pithy: “Most children aren’t aware that they’re watching their parents grow up.” It cast a new light on this history of my childhood. Daddy’s patriarchal attitudes about family were part and parcel of his own upbringing, instilled in the young *pater familias* along with the duties of working a job to support us. As wife and kids, we were merely collateral characters in his faithful entourage.

That worked well for us as a family in Indiana and Texas while Daddy was a young man in his twenties and early thirties, but as you may have noticed, he started aging prematurely. I frankly doubt he was ever comfortable or happy in his jobs, and that stress surely didn’t help any. By the time we left La Marque, his hair had mostly gone white and he’d gotten rather thinner.



Penney's Café, 1954



The home on Penney Hill



The gas station

Honestly, I have to commend Daddy that at the discontented age of 38, he decided to take life by the horns and try something totally different! His decision certainly arose from his family history. In Wisconsin, Grandpa Joe had been a tavern-keeper until Prohibition put him out of business, and then they ran a neighborhood grocery store. As a teenager fresh out of high school, Daddy’s first job was pumping gas at a Shell station.

Much later, when we were both seriously old, my mother told me Daddy hated working for anyone else and always wanted to be his own boss—like Grandpa Joe before him. And he liked selling things. So, maybe it made pretty good sense to run the truck-stop called Penney’s Café with service station and motel—on a US highway out in the backwoods of Arkansas. It was a very ambitious business move.

Penney Hill was a cluster of yellow-block buildings with red roofs, including five motel cabins behind the café, a fancy castle on the small hill, an island in an ocean of pine-woods. On its 14 acres, the “estate” included a field

behind house, and down the hill behind that through some woods was a small stock pond.

Oddly, the former owner had stocked the pond with goldfish! Ralph was also odd otherwise, building the big house with six doors to the outside. Apparently, he was afraid of getting trapped inside in a fire (in a block building). Ralph had to sell the place, I soon learned, because of a divorce. His Mexican wife Juanita (another oddity) caught him romancing a young waitress in the café named Carolyn and took him for whatever she could get. Juanita left with a local reputation of very wicked woman. Immediately, Ralph married Carolyn, and we moved in.

That Sunday evening we stayed in a motel in a little town called Ashdown on US 74 a short way south of our destination, and on Monday morning, my 12th birthday, we got to Penney Hill. It was a stunning birthday present, a new magical world of pine trees everywhere you looked. I was thrilled by all the wilderness to explore. At first, little Judy looked around incuriously, and then she ran into the house to find her room. Mine turned out to be a big barn-like room on the left front corner with its own front door and columned porch.

When we got there, Mama surveyed Penney Hill with a blank expression and remarked only that it was an awful big commercial enterprise. Nothing in her homemaking background had prepared her for so much public business, and I'm sure this sudden sea-change in her mid-thirties was a very fearsome thing. In response, like people in tribulation all through the ages have done, she turned for solace to religion.

Back in Texas, Mama had held loosely by the church on occasion, taking us to Mass on special holy days and doing things like First Communions, but when we got to Arkansas, she switched to regular, more intense religiosity. First thing she did was find out where the nearest Catholic church was—and that was the rub. She discovered that we were now the only Catholic family in the entirety of Sevier County, everybody else Baptists or Methodists or some such. But Mama soon found us a missionary church in DeQueen, the modest seat of the county twenty-some miles to the north, for Mass that next Sunday.

The church was a small white clapboard building with a hint of a steeple and steps up to the front door. The inside might have held sixty people in its pews, but the congregation was only about forty, small family groups gathered together from the surrounding countryside and villages. The priest was a little, balding guy who went through the motions devoutly, and his Latin liturgy was easily ignored. I was more interested in any kids in the “audience,” but the few were all too old or young for friends. Such ritual fun was to be my weekly ordeal for the next couple years.

Meanwhile, back on Penney Hill on my birthday, Daddy took us all on a tour of his new estate. He was all proud smiles and excitement, a side of him I'd never seen, and I was happy for him—if trepidatious in my own heart. We scoped out the counters, booths, and dining areas in the café, the kitchen and walk-in freezer, and the five pretty little cabins back at the edge of the woods. He said it was about six miles east and three west off through the woods to any other habitation.

The house seemed huge with like eight rooms, and the oddest thing was off the back porch, a big concrete cubicle set half-way underground. Daddy called it a “storm cellar” and explained that Ralph had built it wrong—without ventilation or a sump pump. It was all dark and wet and stinky inside, and Daddy warned us to never go in there because of snakes and vermin. I certainly didn't want to go in there at all for any reason. Out in the back yard were a big chicken house/barn and a garage full of old farm equipment. Across the field we got a view away to the next wooded hillside. Pine trees everywhere.

The moving truck arrived that afternoon with our furniture, and to keep out of the way, I sat at the café counter with Judy on twirly stools with bottles of grape soda and watched the waitress, a curly-haired teenager named Melba, handle the steady stream of customers. A skinny older guy named Howard was working the counter and cash register, and the fat cook in the kitchen was named Mae. Judy felt real scared of all the wild woods everywhere around, but I thought they were the best part of it all. Then Daddy came get us to help Mama organize stuff.

A little later, I was back over at the café for a pack of Fritos and met the old man Jim who ran the filling station, a stooped fellow with a big growth on his eyebrow and bony hands. Melba said he often spent time sitting in a booth with coffee, a Camel, and a view of folks that pulled into the station. He was real friendly with me and dirty-joked about my name being Dick. That was when I decided to start calling myself Ricky. Much more dignified. Just then, a school bus rolled past and stopped down the hill at a little lane on the south side of our property.

A boy about my age and a smaller girl got off and walked off along the drive. Howard explained how that was Kay and his little sister Kathy. They lived a piece away on the hillside with their mother Tommye, who was Ralph's older sister-in-law. On the way, was the house Ralph built for his mother, whom they called Mammaw, another yellow-block, red-roofed place. Kay and Kathy's daddy Runyon was off working on the pipeline, along with their older brother David. After Howard's saga of the Penney family, I almost felt like a character in their story. When I asked what Ralph was going to do now that he'd sold the Hill, Howard told me he was building him a grocery store a couple miles down the road near Falls Chapel—also out of yellow block.

I was intrigued by the boy's girlish name Kay—and his mother's mannish name Tommye. The only other Kay-boy I knew was that character in "The Snow Queen," the Andersen fairytale. While she valiantly tried to make us supper in her new kitchen, I told Mama about the unusual neighbor family down the lane, and she was glad there was at least somebody living nearby. Our supper was pork chops, mashed potatoes, and green beans that Daddy had her get from the café kitchen. He said she could just get whatever groceries she ever needed from the café stock.

Mama had me wash dishes while she did some more organizing. When I'd finished and gone to my new room to unpack clothes, Daddy came over from the café with some guests to meet us, the neighbor lady Tommye and her kids. A little younger than me with a doll-like round face and messy short hair, Kay smiled at me broadly and said, "Hi, I'm Kay Penney." Then he turned to Tommye, maybe shy at telling me, and said, "Gee, Mom, now I'll have somebody to play with!"

Me too. Happily, I shook Kay's hand with, "Hi, I'm Ricky." My parents were startled, and I said flatly, "Ricky's a lot nicer, don't you think so, Mom?" She hesitated at this second new address and then said, "Yeah, Ricky's better for a big boy." But Daddy just frowned. I'd never dare call him Dad. Judy and Kathy, with maybe two years age difference between them, were polite with each other but said little. Kay was jealous that I had the whole month of May off from school, but we'd play afternoons when he got home on the school bus.

In bed that night I had a hard time going to sleep for all the exciting new stuff—and the pinkish neon lights of the café across the highway shining bright through my windows. The truck stop was open all night with frequent racket of trucks' refrigeration motors running. But my long birthday had really worn me out, and I finally slept. Ricky was twelve now and ready to explore his new world. Tuesday morning, Mom didn't make me breakfast but sent me over to the café for a special short stack of pancakes with scrambled eggs and bacon. I already liked living on Penney Hill a lot.

When Daddy saw me finishing off my breakfast, he set me to sweeping out the whole place, a little messy after the all-night business, and then had me scrub the floors with a huge, heavy mop. That would be my regular job every morning after breakfast until school started next fall. We were all going to have to pitch in to run the family business. Judy was assigned to help Mom

with cleaning up the motel cabins, three having been rented the night before. They washed the used sheets and towels and hung them out to dry on the line behind the house.

Meanwhile, Daddy stayed busy tending the café counter for Howard's day off with all the regular truckers and area folks wanting to meet the new owner. He literally glowed with pride and kept smiling happily, the master of the castle. After my mopping, he set me to do a load of dishes in the huge, sloshing, steaming dishwasher. Then he let me off to go play, but I had to come back around four o'clock to wash some more dishes. I wasn't any too thrilled by the prospect of this schedule all summer but forgot to ask if I'd have a day or two off.

With most of the days free for exploring, I'd surely get the lay of the land fairly quickly, and Kay was bound to be a great guide. That Tuesday I crossed the back field and wandered down the hill through the woods to the stock pond. Coming out on the high bank, I found the water speckled with golden flowers of goldfish breathing at the surface. Then I ambled through the trackless pinewoods down the long slope of the hill, eventually coming to a creek which followed a long way up and around to where it crossed the highway at the southern foot of Penney Hill.

My second shift of dish-washing didn't take too long what with Kay helping me dry and put stuff away. He'd sometimes helped out his Uncle Ralph that way before. It was actually sort of fun with someone to talk to. He told me the creek I'd walked along was called the Wulsey. As we were leaving, Daddy told me to be home by 7:30 for supper.

Kay wondered what we should do, and I asked him to take me to the most interesting place he knew of. That was a vast network of gravel pits on the southwest slope of the Hill with cliff-walls like 15 feet high, like a landscape on another planet. Kay explained that was how his Uncle Ralph got the money to build all the stuff on Penny Hill. I was appalled at the devastation of the wooded hillside. Out in the middle of one pit was a flat elevation like a mesa crowned with a huge oak tree. At least that giant was spared. We wandered aimlessly afterwards, chattering pointlessly and getting to know each other.

I didn't find the daily routine of my janitorial and scullery work terribly oppressive, but by that weekend I could tell that Mom wasn't very happy about being a washerwoman. And on top of that, Daddy set her to waiting tables some in the afternoon. At our suppers at home, with the food again brought over from the café, she often remarked how tired she was. Daddy would excitedly talk about the folks he'd met during the day, and Judy would zone off somewhere in Kiddie-land. I really wondered what the poor kid did alone by herself all day.

While Daddy's new enterprise excited and fulfilled him personally, it effectively ended our family life. Soon after these early attempts at communal family meals, we began eating, often separately on our own schedules, in the café. On Sundays after church, Mom would usually roast a chicken with stuffing so we could have at least one family meal. Our once nuclear family became simply a cooperative labor force, each with our jobs. The four of us existed in our own private microcosms on Penney Hill with few personal interactions beyond orders, complaints, or rebukes. This was when Ricky's earlier loner, lone wolf inclinations really came to the fore.

Nonetheless, the Lone Wolf was very impressed with what a peaceful, happy boy Kay was. Not since Billy in Indiana had I felt so pleased just to be with a friend, to share things with a buddy. Kay, of course, had never had any boy living nearby for friends and was thrilled about our coming summer together. The rest of May, between my jobs and his school, we spent all our free

time together roaming the woods and dreaming and planning what we'd do when. Kay's school, where we'd go too in the fall, was six miles north in Lockesburg, population 714. When its term ended in late May, Kay became my fulltime playmate—at least around my family jobs.

Daddy gave me Sundays off from mopping, etc., so Mom could take me to church. Right away, he'd taught her to drive so he could work in the café. Impressively, our little bald priest was a true missionary. Before or after the DeQueen rites, he'd say Mass way off east in Nashville and down south in Forman. At Mom's urging, when we got home, Daddy would drive 25 miles to one of those towns for a dose of religion. I'd be willing to bet he'd just sit in a diner somewhere with a cup of coffee and local chat. Mind you, I wouldn't blame him...

Family jobs notwithstanding, that May began a long, Edenic, pre-pubescent idyll. My good buddy Kay and I roamed the environs of Penney Hill, feral young boys footloose in the vast forested hills and valleys. On our rambles Kay soon taught me much woodsy lore, like how to squat your tail out over a fallen log to, as he said, take a dump. Another piece of local wisdom was to always carry a big stick. He made me one like his, a small, peeled hickory tree about four feet long, great for whacking snakes. I sometimes used mine like a wizard's staff, but it was also good for clearing your way through bushes.

Our first enterprise, inspired by my memory of Jody's flutter-mills in "The Yearling," was building some paddle-wheel boats out of old wooden cigar boxes, cigars being big sales items in the café, powered by rubber bands. We floated them on a nice pool on the Wulsey and ran races across the stream. Moving on, we dreamed bigger and built a "hut" out of long fence rails that lay scattered helter-skelter around the field below Mammaw Penney's house. Making a room like five feet square and high, we stacked them crisscross under an enormous sweetgum tree.

Apropos that, Kay taught me to chew that tree's clear, sticky, and sweet sap as gum. It tasted just like you'd think a beautiful tree should taste. We found a big piece of corrugated roofing tin back behind the garage to use for a roof. The biggest gaps between the "logs" we stuffed with gunny sacks but left some smaller ones open for windows. Sitting on the dirt floor, we would read our comic books, play cards, or engage in general kid stuff.

As proud "hut"-owners, Kay took me across the highway to another little block house where his friend Elsa lived with her elderly husband P.D. She was an older German woman, a bit plump, with grey hair in a big bun all the time, very sweet and lavish with her cookies. With amusement, she'd watched our construction project and commended our little hut for being "picturesque." Mammaw Penney was also generous with her cookies and encouraging of our play, but she had nothing to say about our splendid hut.

Our roaming took us in all directions, most of the places of course, already familiar for Kay, but sometimes we'd come on a scene he hadn't seen. One of our first "hikes" was out the dirt track west from Mammaw's house running through her gardens. It crossed a big field to a tiny unpainted barn of two empty stables and a small tack-shed, which was one of Kay's favorite places "to get away from stuff." I was fascinated by the piles of rusting equipment and machines lying about the barnyard and heaped all along the track, mostly unidentifiable but with big wheels or gears and mysterious shapes. (With my later history of sculpture using found objects, this memory makes me salivate.)

The track skirted the edge of the gravel pit and lead a long way downhill toward the Wulsey. On the other side, we trudged up the next hill, another long, gentle slope and at its summit, there was nothing to be seen but trees. Kay led me down the other side to a big field around two huge black walnut trees and the ruined foundation of an old cabin, most of the stone fireplace and chimney still standing. He called it the Old Brooks Place and said Clayton Brooks had lived there as a little boy. Clayton was the late husband of old Margie who sometimes worked as cook in the café. In the spring, all around the old homeplace would be covered with yellow daffodils. And on the south side of the field was a humongous patch of raspberries gone wild. Just wait till July! Once again, I was thrilled by the sense of history in this place, albeit simply the history of some kid long ago named Clayton. The solitary chimney was worthy of a profound poem.

The fate of our hut was dire. Daddy needed the tin to fix the garage roof, and Uncle Ralph took the wood to build a rail fence at his new store. Besides, Daddy thought our hut looked like some stupid shack out of Africa. Undeterred, Kay and I sat on piles of gunny sacks and laid plans to build a real log cabin in the woods down from his Mom's house.

But before we got into that engrossing project, Kay led me sort of south across the Wulsey, tramping along with our big sticks for miles over hill and dale, and we came out on the Old Highway, a big gravel road. He said it was the ancestral route of US 74 running from up near Lockesburg south along the Cossatot River and swinging back east to the village of Falls Chapel. A mile or so north you'd come to the river, and on the other bank was a tiny village called Frog Level. He had a couple kids from Frog Level in his grade at school, a year behind mine.

Here I should mention that our tramp over hill and dale, and subsequently the couple miles on the Old Highway to Falls Chapel, wasn't exactly alone. Kay's constant companions were two big dogs, his furry shepherd called simply Shep and his Mammaw's spotted white soup hound by the odd name of Towser. They'd stick close to Kay most of the time, usually within easy reach of his petting hand. My less attentive canine companion was Duchess, the brown and white shepherd Daddy had got Judy for a pet, although she already had two cats. Duchess joined our boy-hikes only if she felt so inclined.

Daddy said he was looking for a dog for me, but I wasn't too excited about the prospect. He still had parakeets in that big cage, and then in late July, he got four big brindle hunting hounds and kept them in a high-fenced pen behind the garage—using our hut's tin roof on a big doghouse. Right next to the dog-pen, he made a pen for two spotted hogs. A new daily part of my job was hauling buckets of feed from the café, meat-bones and scraps for the hounds and other food garbage for the hogs. I certainly didn't need yet another animal mouth to feed.

The miles along the Old Highway to Falls Chapel were more woods, of course, but with occasional tracks leading off to houses mostly unpainted and ramshackle, some apparently abandoned. Kay knew many of the local families by name and/or reputation. The village itself was scattered around the Y of the Old and New Highways, and along a curving lane were an ancient schoolhouse, a newer church and cemetery, and several houses. In the point between the highways, Kay showed me an old cemetery with hoary tombstones from the past century. He said the first Chapel had stood just behind the graveyard but had burned down.

Our log cabin project began with a burst of energy as we chopped enthusiastically at pine saplings with our little hatchets, but cutting a tree down was long, hard work, not to mention notching the ends to fit together at the corners. A week later, by unanimous vote we cancelled

the project. Besides, the Dog Days of August were getting hard-down hot, and we just lazed around in the cool shade under the hickory tree in our back yard. Daddy wouldn't let us hang out in the air-conditioned café bothering customers with the clanging noise of the pinball machines. Otherwise, he'd just put me to work at the hot, steamy dishwasher. So, we also visited Elsa frequently to enjoy her cookies.

But Mom kept hard at work with the motel laundry, and sometimes Kay and I gave her a hand hanging out the sheets and towels or even making up the rooms. One afternoon she had to go to the hardware store in Lockesburg for something and took us along to check out the little library Kay knew of near his schoolhouse. It was in a store-front with stacks of old books on the former grocery shelves, and I mean old books, things like from the 19th century. I asked the old lady if they had anything good about the woods, and she pulled down a couple newer looking books by Ernest Thompson Seton. Kay grabbed up "The Biography of a Grizzly," and I checked out "Two Little Savages," a seriously intriguing title.*

Well, my library book was full of rustic handicraft projects for kids out in the woods just like Kay and me. We tried out a bunch of them with mixed success but great fun. The big one that totally inspired us was the diagrams and instructions for building a dam on a small stream. There was a perfect place for one in a valley along the Wulsey. It would make a deep pool for swimming and fishing. To make the dam, we'd have to drive in two rows of stakes across the stream and fill the gap with rocks and dirt. Easier said than done... The stakes wouldn't go into the gravelly ground very far, and the stream's flow kept washing them out. A week later, that worthy undertaking was also abandoned.

The lazy, hot days drove me to investigate the few old books my folks had on a shelf in their bedroom. A couple older books by H. Allen Smith called curiously "Low Man on a Totem Pole" and "Lost in the Horse Latitudes" were fairly funny but left me wanting something a lot more literary. Besides some Reader's Digest condensed books of things I'd already read in their full versions, I read a thin black volume of funny verse called "Archy and Mehitabel" by Don Marquis from 1927 and fell in love with Mehitabel, an alley cat. For a while, I ran around singing her song, "toujours gai toujours gai—there's a dance in the old dame yet"***

In our last few summer weeks in September, Kay and I, two little savages, wandered in other directions. He took me east to see the pipeline, its clearcut swath across the countryside slicing through the forest, and along its path lay lovely, scattered fields and gentle landscape views. Another time northeast we came to ancient white-oak grove with their huge tree-trunks like columns under the vast temple domes of their canopies. Kay told me that just beyond the grove were some niggers living in their shacks, a settlement called Humpersneck.***

We carefully skirted around the black community with no further comment, though I really wanted to ask lots of questions. I'd never seen a Negro person up close (except Johnny Mathis on TV) and wondered what was so strange about them. But I got the feeling Kay didn't know either. Coming up on a deep ravine Kay also didn't know about, I suggested we explore it. The sides

** Long after, in 1989-90, I was thrilled to attend meetings at the late author's "castle" in Seton Village outside of Santa Fe with his daughter. I'd never forgotten his woodsy/literary books.*

*** Little did I know, but that the same summer the book was being set to music as a back-alley opera with Carol Channing singing the role of Mehitabel.*

**** Decades later, when segregation had faded, the little black community became Oak Grove.*

were so steep, it was hard to get down, and on the way we found some enormous stone logs sticking out of the bank in a jumbled pile. I was glad to find something new for my buddy Kay and explain how they were “petrified” or turned to stone. But we couldn’t find any pieces small enough to take home. By the way, Kay had much enjoyed “The Biography of a Grizzly. He said it made him feel just like a bear.

Shortly before school started up again, Daddy showed up with a dog for me. He said the little brown and white puppy was some kind of terrier, like Peppy of dear memory, an energetic, bright-eyed critter that kept trying to lick my nose. Of course, it quickly stole my heart and soon was “dogging” my every step. Shep, Towser, and Duchess totally ignored it. From reading more Seton, I remembered his “Bingo, the Story of My Dog,” and so I named my poochie Bingo.

Ever since the four hunting hounds and two hogs, Daddy had slowly but surely been adding to our menagerie. First he got a mean old goat and two horses for the back field, one for him and a mare named Lady for Judy. At least the goat found its own food, and Judy had to feed and groom Lady. (She was a huge fan of the western shows on TV, and having a horse made her into a real cowgirl.) He also got two more hunting hounds and a dozen colorful bantam chickens. When school started, Daddy let me off afternoon dishwasher duty to care for all the animals. Since I now ran this zoo, I caught me some great snakes and raised white mice to feed them.

Meanwhile, Mom ran the house like a dictator forbidding any animals inside, Judy’s cats included. The only exception was one of the parakeets, a white one named Joe, very tame, that liked to sit on folks’ heads and shoulders. He learned to say, “Hello, Joe!” and would suddenly sidle over to say it in your ear. Mom thought it was sweet. Then one day Joe stumbled off her head, fell into the dishwater, and drowned. We never got any of the others to talk.

The dreaded day came for school to start again, seventh grade for me and sixth for Kay. Far too early that morning, the schoolbus stopped for the four of us. The first day at Lockesburg Elementary was wildly different than that modern school in Texas. This one was a two-story, white wooden building with a small bell-tower and classroom windows all around, obviously pretty old, definitely a country school. My classroom was on the first floor front looking out across a parking lot at the newer brick high school, where someday I’d go for ninth grade. My sixteen classmates looked pretty homely, a lot different than the normal kids I’d known in Texas. Mostly it was their haircuts—and scruffy clothes. Kay called them hillbillies, which made me wonder what that made us living on Penney Hill.

As before in earlier grades, my school days passed on automatic, the classes simply something easy to learn, and my best times were recesses playing with Kay on the merry-go-round or swings. Lunchtimes were often spent down the block at the little library. It kept us nicely supplied with reading stuff, if outdated, and I steered Kay to books I’d enjoyed, like “Dr. Doolittle.” After our routine school days, my buddy sometimes helped me feed the zoo, and then we’d go for an evening ramble in the woods with our pack of dogs.

Whenever Kay’s Mom called him in to supper, I’d go order mine in the café. I truly loved our chicken-fried steak with white gravy, but I usually skipped around the menu. Another favorite was pork chops with applesauce. As long as I’d do some dishes, Daddy didn’t mind if I hung around after supper to see who came in. Lots of local kids stopped in for hamburgers and french fries, but I didn’t know them. Some of the teenagers were really cool with slicked-down haircuts and muscle shirts. Often Kay would come over after homework to play pinballs with me and

listen to the juke box. It was fun living out in the middle of nowhere but still having all kinds of company at home.

But the work schedule at the café was pretty intense. There was a morning shift of locals like Howard with Mae as cook and Irene as waitress; another guy named Ron worked afternoons with Margie as cook and Mom as waitress, and Daddy worked night shift with Willie as cook and his wife Honey as waitress till midnight. Daddy'd sleep mornings and often go fishing in the afternoons. We saw little of each other, no problem as far as I was concerned, and same went for Mom always busy at work when I got home from school. And in the midst of this, after her grueling days at school, Judy'd ride her Lady around and around the field and watch western shows. I caught a few with her, not too boring, like "Cisco Kid." In fact, now that school had stopped my mop job and dishwasher duty, I was a free agent—except for running the zoo.

Around our school days, Kay and I still had time for savagery, pointless rambles in the shorter evenings, long Saturdays for exploratory expeditions and occasional camp-outs in the wild. Sunday mornings were lost to church of course, Kay's a Baptist chapel in nearby Ben Lomond, and those afternoons we usually piddled away with pets and pinball machines. All fall, our camaraderie grew ever closer until I began to feel for Kay like the brother I'd always wanted. But we never spoke of the closeness, just took it for granted.

Our expeditions explored widely in the northern quadrants, miles of unbroken pinewoods on rolling hills and valleys. Far northeast toward the Cossatot, we came upon a crystalline stream in an enchanted vale full of dark holly trees. Kay called it a "spring branch" of the Wulsey, and indeed a spring arose from the hillside, gurgling out from under a ledge of stone and flowing over waterfalls into a pool in the branch. I suggested it might be the Fountain of Youth, but Kay didn't think so. (In later years, this little spring was to become my special secret grotto.)



In late November, hunting season opened, and Daddy got all happy. He loved to hunt but hadn't managed to do much in Indiana or Texas. Back home in Wisconsin, he and Grampa Joe had hunted a lot of pheasants, and I treasure this photo of him as a late teenager with his dog, gun, and three beautiful dead birds. In 1954, prematurely aged at 38, he looked much different, of course.

He hired Irene's husband Kent to work occasional nights for him in the café to go off with a couple chums and his pack of hounds to shoot deer. He didn't bag any that year, but they slaughtered lots of swamp rabbits down in the river bottoms that I helped clean and pack in the walk-in freezer. We had special rabbit stew on the café menu for a long time. That part of Arkansas being prime coon-hunting country, they also went out nights with flashlights and hounds to hunt those varmints. We couldn't put coon on our menu, but they tasted great at the community barbecue in Lockesburg.



Soon after hunting season opened, Daddy gave me a neat .22 rifle he'd bought off the Conoco man. Kay already had him a fancy one used to be his brother David's. Thus heavily armed, with four amateur hunting dogs, we hunted up hill and down—not for deer or coon, of course, but squirrel. Kay and folks around there called them “tree-rats. We also bagged some possums that were a hit at the big barbecue. Mom said the coon was pretty good, but she refused even to try the possum. I thought it was pretty tasty. Daddy pitched in some of his frozen swamp rabbits, and there was a feast of goat, chicken, pork and such to celebrate Thanksgiving.

In this photo taken before a hunt, Kay and I sit on the edge of the stormcellar roof with our passel of dogs, Bingo adorable on my lap. In the upper right is the hickory stick my buddy made for me. Anyway, I bet Daddy was pleased to induct his bookworm son into the ancient order of huntsmen.

I'm ashamed to say that squirrel-hunting back then is a poignant and almost poetic memory. It certainly didn't fit philosophically or ecologically into the notion of this being an Edenic interlude in the woods. While my predatory activities continued for some years, by the time I left Arkansas, I'd abandoned the practice and haven't held another firearm now for lo, these many decades, much less killed anything but bugs—and some of those with regret.

That first season, Kay taught me clever strategies. I learned three ways to hunt squirrels. The first was to let the dogs roam around and flush one, rush after it barking wildly, and drive it up a tree. Bingo was a particularly enthusiastic squirrel-chaser. Then we'd run to the noise, inspect the critter's refuge, and trick it into scrambling around the trunk to hide from one of us so the other could shoot it. This worked mainly for the smaller grey squirrels.

The bigger fox squirrels (with fox-red markings in their pretty fur) usually fled to their nests, big piles of leaves high up in branches. In that case, or whenever we found a nest, we'd just shoot into the middle of it, and if the squirrel got hit, it would leap out, often dead before hitting the ground. Fox squirrels were the best for eating, either stewed or fried. Kay tended to bag more than I because even with my glasses, I couldn't see them as clearly way up in the trees.

The third strategy was the “still-hunt.” Really early of a morning, we'd each stake out a big hickory tree where they'd been “cutting,” dropping nutshells around on the ground, and find an unobtrusive place to sit with our gun quietly watching. I enjoyed the peaceful solitude that often lured unsuspecting squirrels to come feast on nuts. It might only be a few minutes of this silent stalking before one would blithely come leaping through the trees and start foraging. Waiting till it was perched up there obliviously cutting a nut, I'd aim to hit it in the head. Cleaning the carcasses, we skinned them carefully and stretched the pelts out on boards. Daddy showed us how to tan the hides like a taxidermist, but we couldn't figure out what to do with them afterwards. As a descendant of French Canadian fur-traders, it felt peculiarly appropriate for me.

I was truly surprised at Christmas when my folks gave me a great radio. Daddy explained it was so I wouldn't spend so much time hanging around the café listening to the juke box. I didn't care much for the whiney country songs like those by Kitty Wells, but the new "rock and roll" stuff like "Rock Around the Clock" was exciting. With my new radio, I could bring in the super-station WNOE from New Orleans and soon became an expert in all the new stuff.

With the onset of winter—not as cold and nasty as those in Indiana but colder and nastier than in Texas—we watched a lot of TV programs in the evenings and on weekends. Kay didn't have a set at home, so ours was a treat for him. We watched Judy's horse operas, fun variety shows like Milton Berle and Ed Sullivan, the adventures of "Superman," and the hilarious "Honeymooners" and "I Love Lucy." Having a buddy to laugh with made everything twice as funny.

For boring programs, we'd adjourn to my big bedroom to play cards or board games and listen to the popular songs on WNOE. Sometimes we'd lie on my huge couch and read our library books. I'd started some old teen "romances" by Gene Stratton Porter set in a swamp in Indiana called the Limberlost, and Kay was hooked on the Hardy Boys mysteries. Anything we did was splendid fun because we were doing it together.

When Kay's 12th birthday rolled around in early January, Elsa threw him a party with mothers, little sisters, us, and a German chocolate cake with coconut on it. We celebrated both being 12 for a few months together, almost like twins. I agonized over a gift for him and bought a stack of comic books after church from the DeQueen drugstore that was open on Sundays, lots of his favorite "Fox and Crow" and "Donald Duck."



By mid-March, Spring was popping out everywhere, and we resumed our forest rambles. The daffodils around the Old Brooks Place were spectacular. But our evenings were kept busy helping Mammaw Penney plant her big garden, lots of digging, hoeing, and pulling weeds. It reminded me of helping Mom with her flowers in Texas, but she was too busy with work at the café to do anything around our house. Kay helped me put in a bed of petunias for her by the back porch and iris along the front walk.

Remembering my little peach tree in Indiana, I planted another in our junky back yard, seen here in this rare picture with an adoring Bingo in my lap. I'm not sure what all that crap was lying around, but it was hidden behind the chicken house. The little tree grew nicely till the billy-goat ate it.

Soon it was April already with flowers everywhere, dogwoods and redbuds glowing white and red in the woods about. Mammaw's squash, beans, peas, corn, green stuff, beets, turnips, radishes, and various berries were growing great guns, and she had Kay's cousin Junior from Ben Lomond come over Saturdays to help us. He was a funny, fat-cheeked kid a little older than

us, a teenager more interested in goofing off and drinking soda pop than taking care of the crops. On breaks, we'd horse around with the dogs and run races down the lane. Junior was fast, but Kay could run a little faster.

Once I tricked them both into Mammaw's chicken coop and locked them inside. Standing back in the lane, I lobbed rocks at the weathered walls of the coop and teased them about laying me some eggs before I'd let them out. Well, to this day I'm amazed at how Junior managed to sail an oyster shell (a source of calcium for the hens) out through a small knot-hole—and it hit me right in the forehead, sticking straight into my skull, or as Pogo would say, “head-bone.”

Stunned stupid, I was still able to undo the latch and let them out of the coop. Mammaw kindly doctored me up, pulling out pieces of shell with tweezers and treating it with Mercurochrome and a bandage. It healed quickly, leaving a thin scar across my third eye, but at the time I didn't know anything about such mysticism. Instead, I thought of it symbolically as a mark of special distinction like a badge. (Maybe it was. It's still there 70 years later.) Kids at school thought Junior's trick was an incredible feat of skill.

I called it one hell of a 13th birthday present. The very next week I officially became a teenager, and Kay and I sadly weren't almost twins anymore. Elsa whipped up another party with another chocolate cake. When I showed her my mark of distinction, she told me to forget about such nonsense. Elsa explained that she was a follower of Swedenborg, who taught us we shouldn't try to distinguish ourselves. I'd never heard of the humble guy and actually figured that becoming distinguished was the point of being alive, but I didn't argue. Kay gave me a whistle-flute he'd whittled from the golden heart of a honey locust tree.

Being a teenager felt different mostly for seeing things now in a new light. Suddenly, I woke up to being an individual person instead of just an unconscious kid. The world around me seemed somehow more real and beautiful, and people (family, Kay, school kids, and even customers) looked like real individuals too, independent beings in their own worlds and not just fixtures in mine. Maybe it was an effect of getting hit in the head-bone with that oyster shell. Hauling the heavy buckets of slop for the hogs, I felt stronger in my shoulders and like getting taller. Standing back-to-back, Kay and I couldn't really judge because he was getting taller too.

In May the woods exploded with lush leaves and flowers, and my body seemed to vibrate and glow with the sun. Kay and I stripped and rolled around naked with the dogs, laughing and hooting, in the cool, fragrant white flowers of clover growing back behind the Old Brooks Place. Our rambles, safaris, and camp-outs were perfectly idyllic, definitely Edenic, like afternoons skinny-dipping in the Wulsey or in the spring branch at our secret grotto. Though now technically older than Kay, I still felt that thrilling twin-brother connection and could sense his deep affection and respect for me, a conscious closeness needing no words.

When the school year ended, Kay and I had our whole days together. Daddy took us with him fishing down south on the Little River where we caught some big catfish. One day we hitched a ride with a trucker named Petie south to Ashdown, the biggest town around, to the drugstore there for more comic books and magazines. With an errand to run in Lockesburg, Daddy's friend Mr. Hallman drove us back home. Avoiding the billy-goat, we ran races around the back field and sometimes wrestled on the soft pine-straw in the shady front yard. He ran faster, but being a bit bigger, I usually won the wrestling matches, pinning his struggling body to the ground.



For Judy's eighth birthday on June 2, sweet Elsa threw another party, of course with another chocolate cake. This picture she took is a touching portrait of Mom in a rare moment off from work in the café. I believe she's still wearing her waitress apron. Meanwhile her strapping teenage son shamelessly stuffs his face with cake. Right behind me, Kay studiously plays a little xylophone that I recall distinctly. Here you see his intense concentration on whatever he did, and whenever he smiled or laughed, his whole round face would light up.

No more than a few days later, my buddy Kay showed up with terrible news. His dad was back briefly from his pipeline job in Kansas and was going to move them all over near other family in Ben Lomond. That week! Only five miles away but as good as on the moon. I was devastated, but Kay was all excited about having five cousins (including Junior) as neighbors and getting to go to school next year in Ashdown. I helped them load the truck and waved goodbye.

One night soon after, lying in bed listening to the trucks parked out front, I got an early urge to pee but felt too lazy to get up. Instead, I just lay there, and the darnedest, silliest idea crossed my mind. A crazy what-ifs... What if I stuck my pecker up Kay's butt and peed inside him? No sooner had I wondered that than I had to run to the toilet, and the thought utterly disappeared. But the memory of that first sexual thought, confused and incomplete, has lingered. I don't think of it as a primordial indication of being gay—more like the archetypal male function of penetration. In my physical experience, females had played no role, and the physicality of my companionship with Kay may have sparked the perverse thought. Also, losing his company may have awakened a semi-conscious desire to consummate our closeness.

In only a few days, we took a trip to Baltimore to see Mom's family. Daddy hired some folks to run the café for him, and we could only be away for a week, leaving us just a couple days in Baltimore. On the drive, I kept my nose buried in "Don Quixote de la Mancha," and living in that big book, behaved like a typical teenager, uncommunicative and withdrawn. Even in our visits with Aunt Dotsy and her several kids, all younger and of no interest to me, I was a silent, distracted guest, too depressed by my aloneness to appreciate company.

On the way home we stopped to see the Natural Bridge in Virginia, an amazing landmark with actual trees growing on the long span of the high arch. On the trail up to the scene, we passed a beautiful weeping willow tree, and I snatched a cutting that I put in some creek water in my Coke bottle. Back home, I let it sit on my windowsill till it showed some roots and then planted it in the backyard. Only a few years later when it had grown to a surprising ten feet did Daddy notice that I'd planted it right on top of the septic tank. No wonder...

When we got home from the whirlwind trip, Mom told me I was smelling stinky (probably all the new-teen hormones in my sweat) and ordered me into the bathtub for a soak. Since our water got pumped up the hill from the creek to the north, the pressure was awfully low, and we usually washed off in the trickles from the shower on the back porch. It was quite a luxury to run enough

water into the tub for a real bath. While the warm water ran out of the faucet, I lay on my back and let it splash on my legs. Then I scooted down, hanging my legs over the end of the tub, and let it splash on my crotch.

The warm sensation was very pleasant, and it quickly spread like fire through my hips. I lay there enthralled as my prick and balls seemed to swell and radiate joy through my whole body. I enjoyed the incredible feeling for only a few moments before my prick began throbbing in waves and moans of ecstasy. Looking down at it, I was horrified to see it spurting out gobs of white stuff across my stomach and worried that maybe I'd broken something down there. The warm water splashing on it afterwards still felt real nice, but not so much compared to that ecstatic explosion, those thrilling throbs. Thus my very first orgasm was totally spontaneous, a perfect surprise, and achieved without even touching myself. Ricky was now certifiably pubescent.

My sweet pup-dog Bingo and I wandered pointlessly around the familiar woods, sadly recalling times there with Kay and the other dogs. Hugely pregnant by Shep, Duchess now wasn't inclined to wander with us. Once we visited the grotto and splashed in the branch. Another day we went to the Old Brooks Place, but the wild raspberries weren't ripe yet. On the old logging road, I found a box turtle to take home for a pet. In our solitary wanders, having cuddly Bingo with me was a huge comfort and joy, and I soon stopped feeling lonely for Kay, that other little savage.

Maybe it was even that same afternoon, after hauling the slops for the hogs and meat-bones for the hounds and ceremoniously feeding my snakes some mice, that I brought over some meat-scrap as treats for Duchess and Bingo. Usually they ate the Purina dog chow Daddy mostly had me feed his hounds with. While spreading chickenfeed for the bantams, I saw Bingo over by the gate coughing real hard, like choking, and ran to him. By then he was choking so hard he fell flat on the ground, his eyes wild and paws scrabbling. When I grabbed him up, his head and body jerked horribly with a wheezing whine, and then he went limp, dead in my arms!

Daddy's diagnosis was no consolation. My poor pup-dog Bingo choked to death on a chicken bone. I dug him a grave under the big cedar tree at the foot of the field, and Kent helped me put up a board fence around the plot to keep the horses and goat out.

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CREATIVE JUICES

My thirteen-year cycle of childhood wrapped up with two exceptionally large explosions: discovering the infinite dimensions of orgasm (i.e., life) and realizing the transience of personal reality (i.e., death). Without skipping a beat, my adolescence exploded into our next cycle of frenetic action, ambition, and the hungry curiosity of a blossoming mind. And of course, the evangelists of modern American culture were avidly waiting right there for opportunities to “fertilize” a fresh new teenager with their doctrines, myths, styles and definitions.

Before I had even a moment to wonder about those first explosions ending my childhood, as a matter of fact only a day or so after Bingo’s funeral, our runty little parish priest from DeQueen dropped by Penney Hill offering to give Judy and me weekly catechism “lessons.” Mom thought it a splendid idea, but Daddy kept his skepticism under cover. My own was something I dared not express. In my barnlike-bedroom, the priest perfunctorily started my first private “lesson,” not with the expected: “Who made the world?” but with the flat statement, “I guess by now you’ve learned about sex.”

Talking with anyone about sex was completely outside of my experience, especially with a strange man. It took me a moment to respond, “I think I did.” There was no question my bathtub experience was anything but sex, glorious, wonderful sex, something like guys at school joking about “jacking off.” As well, a couple nights before, I’d had a “wet dream” about my body turning into a blooming tree (and making a mess on my pillow). Without looking at me from his end of my sofa, the priest put his hands together to emphasize the sanctity of his words and pronounced, “Sex is a mortal sin.”

I naively asked, “What do you mean?” This was the exactly wrong thing to ask because it precipitated a confounding deluge of ifs, ands, and buts, as well as many exceptions and special circumstances. The upshot was apparently that even thinking about sex could doom you to hell—unless you were married, of course, then anything went... Even then, I was appalled by the situational ethics involved in this sexual morality.

When I asked why sex was a sin, the priest smiled compassionately: “Because it’s an offense against God.” I had no trouble thinking of murder and violence and theft being offenses against the goodness of God, but I couldn’t go along with human sex being any skin off God’s personal nose. I didn’t bother with further conversation and merely listened idly to the questionable, confused, and disingenuous “lessons” of this small-minded priest. I never appreciated his visits.

However, having been taught that obedience to Holy Mother Church’s teachings was a good thing for one’s rap sheet, I put my thoughts of orgasmic sex in a special box to be visited only occasionally. And then I only had to confess to “touching myself impurely,” pay five Our Fathers and five Hail Marys, and be made innocent again. Sex with other people wasn’t even part of the equation yet.

That’s where my adolescence got side-swiped by another wave of indoctrination, this one far more subtle and far-reaching into my perspectives on reality, the Age of Entertainment. The 50s exploded with a barrage of music of all kinds in the recording/radio industries. They inundated me with the values and virtues of an American teen of the times, not to mention the absolute dichotomy between boys and girls. That dichotomy took me hugely by surprise because I’d

never given much thought to the morphological differences. Even with little Barbara in Texas, I didn't "love" her as a girl, but as a sweet person.

My early exposure to popular music was pretty intense. Since moving to Penney Hill, I'd heard lots of country songs and hit-parade stuff on our juke box, and at home I listened all the time to WNOE for the newest rock and roll. And now, according to the most popular songs, I was supposed to have a special girl-friend. For that matter, I didn't know what it meant to "like" a girl. Somehow sex was somewhere in there too, and we weren't supposed to think about that. Sometimes, I'd see a teenaged girl in the café and admire her, especially if she was pretty. Of all the girls I knew, I didn't particularly "like" any of them. Not that I disliked any of them either. It was all too hypothetical.

With my precious pooch Bingo choked to death and with no playmate or dog for pet, I mostly hung out around the café seeing folks, helping out with chores (like dishwashing and peeling potatoes), and listening to the juke box. In late June and early July Daddy let a big local orchard set up a peach stand in front of our house down by the driveway. A pretty maid of sixteen named Mary Jane was the vendor, and I enjoyed visiting with the black haired beauty between her drive-up customers. She was way too old for me, a gawky fourteen year-old, but I pretended a suave urbanity that the shy country girl may have believed.

In those dogless days of summer, I got to feeling intellectually hungry and scrounged around looking for any book. I ran across Mom's old high school Gregg typing textbook, which inspired me to pull out her old Remington machine (with the wide-open keys and semi-circle of letter strikers on top). Practicing every morning after breakfast for an hour, I soon learned to touch-type instead of discovering a key and landing on it (the Columbus System). Not that I had need for the skill, but practicing the "qwerty" patterns to the lovely sounds of WNOE rock and roll gave me a great feeling of accomplishment, almost like learning to play the piano. (My self-taught typing has served me well professionally and personally for lo these many years, as did the art of shorthand I later learned for notation. And I can still write in cursive!)

Without Kay to run around with in the woods, by late August I found myself spending more time with that other brainwashing machine of the Entertainment Age, the television. With Judy's company, I started watching various horse operas with muscular cowboys like Gunsmoke and Cisco Kid. Of course, I loved watching Superman and The Danny Thomas Show. Then I found a new program called the Buster Brown Show with some funny characters like Midnight the Cat that weirdly licked its lips and said, "Nice!" And Froggy the Gremlin that kept interrupting and distracting whoever was talking. Later on in the summer, that show had a great film about a kid my age from India named Gunga Ram who ran around the jungle in a big diaper.

Another later-starting TV show I really liked was The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet, a view of a wholesome family totally unlike my own, and I felt an immediate brotherhood for Ricky Nelson. Beside sharing a name, I secretly thought he and I looked a lot alike and would make a great rock'n'roll duo like the Everly Brothers. At that impressionable age, My most alluring ambition was to become a famous popular singer. (One of my very favorite songs was Donna by Ritchie Valens, which I could sing perfectly.) The biggest obstacle to this ambition was the fact that I had no idea how to play a guitar. Frankly, to my untrained eye it simply looked like them strumming occasionally and randomly on the strings. Besides, I was sure that Ricky Nelson would be happy to give me music lessons.



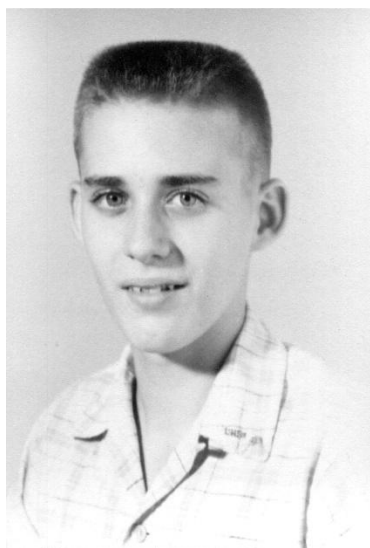
Apart from the popular songs and TV shows, those later summer days were excruciatingly boring. I even resorted in my desperation to sitting on Judy's horse as in this photo she took. My sister constantly nagged me to ride her horse, so I got on it for the photo-shoot, and then got right down. You'll note those shoes aren't cowboy boots.

Also, my zookeeping took a couple hours every day. Daddy had gotten rid of his last parakeets and was now using their cage for a three-legged old raccoon, a mean critter always snarling at me. There were two more hunting hounds, a new hutch of brown rabbits, another porker to haul slops for, and a flock of ducks that kept eating Mom's petunias.

But best was the little brown piglet Daddy got me for a 4-H project. In honor of the L'il Abner comic strip, I named him Jubilation T. Cornpone, and we frolicked in the back field. Cuddling my little Cornpone, I felt like that sultry Capp character Moonbeam McSwine. One hot August afternoon when thunder clouds piled up across the southern half of the sky, grumbling and flashing lightnings here and there,

Cornpone and I leapt around like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, shouting, oinking, and directing the strikes. The next day old-lady Elsa across the road called me Storm King.

Just as school started, I found two new TV programs to watch soon after getting off the school bus. American Bandstand and The Mickey Mouse Club sucked me body and soul into a new world full of beautiful, talented kids. Bandstand grabbed me first with its fun party of great rock'n'roll music and passel of stylish teenagers. I joined them dancing in the solitude of our living room. My favorite dancers were Kennie and Arlene. The MMC took me by storm with its crew of talented teens who sang, danced, and performed. What hooked me was their theme song: "Come along and sing a song and join the jamboree..." Suddenly, I went from being just another of the Nelson boys to a big club of beautiful, creative kids. M-I-C-K-E-Y M-O-...



Starting Eighth Grade at Lockesburg, professional PR advice would have told me to keep my mouth shut for this unfortunate portrait. I was definitely moving into the "long-faced" phase of adolescent growth emphasized by that stylish flat-top haircut. Maybe there was a touch of suave urbanity to the look. I can't get over the tiny ears—now 70 years later, they're huge and hairy! The awful teeth are gone now, after enormous ordeal and expense, replaced by a rack of newscaster pearly-whites!

I had two good chums in my class for bumming around during recesses. We called ourselves the Lockjaw Trio. One was a black-haired looker named Leonard, (whom I affectionately called Bodie). He had a reputation for being pretty bright—until I started getting better grades and stole his thunder. The other was the son of the school principal, a "fleshy" kid named Bob, whom I rather

insensitively addressed as “Blob,” no offense intended. Those couple great guys were friends enough for me, and I tried to avoid the company of bossy girls...

On that subject, besides a dozen wild-eyed teenaged boys, my class included as many girls of appropriate age also hyped up on hormones. Surely I must have suffered endocrinal storms myself, but I frankly don’t recollect any. That fall I was struck, however, by a nice girl named Patricia—maybe because she delivered newspapers from her bike in the mornings. Passing by on the school bus, I’d see her expertly tossing papers onto porches. Sometimes I dreamt about her and naively told her the next day about the dream. She usually laughed and quickly made her escape from the importunate suitor. Understandably, my amorous suit never went anywhere.

My closest relations with Bodie and Blob were during PE. Coach Hale convinced the three of us (being slightly taller than most) to learn basketball to train for next year on the Junior High team. The locker room was a strange experience for me, never having undressed in front of anybody else before. All the pale, smooth, rounded bodies of the other boys made me feel conspicuous with little fringes of curly hair sprouting around my nipples and a thin line of them down past my navel to a sprouting bush. Everybody stared at me, impressed by my masculinity. Bodie even called me a “he-man.”

I was fine when it came to the basic training of running around the gym because once I got my momentum started, I could run real fast, barreling around the floor like a juggernaut. But when it came to the fine points of the game, I was terribly awkward—couldn’t make a basket for the life of me, and dribbling while running was impossible. On the other hand, Coach recognized that I was great at guarding and stopping shots, sticking like glue to my opponent. To my amazement, I once made a free throw!

About three weeks of that, and in the course of a practice game, a tall blond kid named Otho made a hook shot and came down with his elbow on the bridge of my nose. Pain indescribable and a fountain of blood onto the gym floor. They got the school nurse out there right away to do what she could and called the doctor at the little hospital in DeQueen. Twenty minutes later, he was resetting the broken bone and packing my nose with cotton. The bandages were like a mask, leaving just small holes for me to see through, and breathing through my mouth was awful.

Daddy told Coach Hale to forget about me for any sports teams next year. I couldn’t be going off to games all over the place because he’d need me to work in the café. Consequently, when I’d somewhat recovered from the nose-job, I wound up in a gymnastics class, swinging on trapezes and rolling around on mats. Sometimes we learned wrestling holds. It was fun to feel a guy struggling helplessly in your arms. I loved wrestling with Sammy, a cute pipsqueak cousin of Bodie’s from over by Frog Level—because he was so easy to hold down.

Must have been that early October when they showed a short historical skit on MMC with the cute Mouseketeer Annette playing a girl in colonial times. She was a tremendous actress, and the skit set me thinking creatively. How about a story of a boy and girl falling love in a dramatically historic situation. Having just read in history class about the War of 1812, I decided to set it at the battle for Fort McHenry in Baltimore—when “The Star Spangled Banner” was written. The inspiration was a good one, but I didn’t know what I was getting into.

Without even a working title, I jumped onto the old typewriter and spent what little free time I had over the next many months pounding those keys. In lieu of looking for a real-life girlfriend,

as I was supposed to be doing, I created a love affair on paper. Imagining Annette as the heroine Anne and casting myself as a swash-buckling teenager named Jack Sharp, two kids doing menial jobs around the Fort, I ran them through some standard (mild) Disneyesque adventures but soon hit the wall, understandably. Some action scenes were nicely cinematic, but in my devoutly non-sexual orientation, Jack and Anne's relationship eventually became empty exercises.

Daddy was dead serious about me working in the café on ball-game nights. Basketball season started in late October, and two or three nights a week busloads of players and game-goers would stop after their games at towns all around. Usually only two a night, but that was enough to overrun the café's booths and counters for a couple hours. Waiting on these kids from all over, officiously taking orders and delivering their cheeseburgers and fries earned me many social points and contacts. On top of that, I gained much notoriety for my weird nose-mask (supposed to come off in late November. Of course, I also got to hear lots of rock'n'roll on the juke box. He didn't say anything, but I got the vague impression that Daddy appreciated my hard work.

Meanwhile, back last year, the man who owned the Wurlitzer juke box had started giving me the records he took off, and I soon had a great collection of rock'n'roll songs to play on my little phonograph at home. Often as not, various local kids would hang out at the café until I was through with game-crowd work, and we'd run across the road to my huge room to dance.

The shy wall-flower boys would sit around on the couch and bed while mostly the girls and I cut a rug. I was thrilled to play a DJ just like Dick Clark. Folks have wondered if I'd been terribly lonely confined those years on Penney Hill, not going to games or school parties, but no—between daytime café society, evening game crowds, and my teen hops, I wasn't at all. The parties came to me. I felt an odd kind of pride that my dance parties made the local preachers denounce me as a papist demon luring good Christian youth into debauchery and depravity.

The basketball season lasted through Thanksgiving, followed by an even longer football season, and the team busses kept on stopping at the café for cokes and burgers. It seemed like parties almost every night. When my bandage came off, there went all my athletic credibility. I once more became a homely teenaged waiter in a truck stop. But at least I'd made a passing acquaintance with kids from all around the area and learned to socialize civilly with almost anybody. (In later years as a waiter, I sincerely appreciated that early training on the Hill.)

In early December, I did an afternoon shift for Daddy to go hunting with his pals, and a crowd of young guys, mostly in leather jackets, poured in from two big vans out front. I seated the ten of them grandly in our dining area, pulling several tables together for their "party" and brought them glasses of water. One of them, a cocky hoodlum type asked if we had anything stronger, and I politely answered, "No, sir. This is a dry county." There were hoots of dismay, and the big guy with a lot of black hair at the head of the table, clearly the leader of the pack, said, "Then we'll just have ice tea."

Then he asked, "What you got good to eat, kid?" I handed around menus, recommending chicken-fried steak—or T-bone. I dutifully wrote down their orders for several and a couple hamburger steaks. The big guy looked at me challengingly and asked if I knew who he was. Always honest, I said, "No, sir, I don't." He snatched away my pad and pen, tore off a blank page, and wrote something on the back of it. "My autograph," he announced. "I'm going to be famous very soon." The autograph read "Elvis Presley" with great big loop for the bottom of the 'y.' I politely wished him well with becoming famous and proceeded to serve up their orders.

When I handed Elvis his T-bone (medium rare), he asked me if I knew how to sing, and I answered in the enthusiastic positive. “Sing something for me,” he suggested, “anything.” With such a broad license, I burst into my favorite: “In a cavern, in a canyon/excavating for a mine/dwelt a mine forty-niner...” At that point the laughter around the table shut me right up. Elvis smiled at me and said, “Sounding pretty good...” Such was the extent of my first brush with impending fame. It validated my ambitions to become a popular singer.

In mid-December we got the news that Daddy’s father, Grandpa Joe, had died in Wisconsin. The next day we took off for the funeral. Daddy and Mom had arranged for Judy and me to stay with Aunt Bernice on their farm out in the country. It was the first time I’d met her three kids, my cousins, Danny, Gary, and Barbara. In the few days before the funeral in Fondulac, we cousins played in the deep snow covering everything, a wonderful new experience for me, but I kept getting awfully cold hands. Once we went ice-skating on the creek running across their pasture, and I was thrilled how easily I took to it, even managing some figure eights. Needless to say, I have no memory of any funeral ceremonies I may have attended. Immediately afterwards, we headed off home. The whole trip was like a few days’ snowy dream.

Meanwhile, Arkansas was still dry pine-woods. Like with Thanksgiving, we usually never did much for the holiday season either—Mom was always so busy with work around the café and motel. But one morning I woke to a light snowfall overnight. I tromped off eastward across the snow-speckled woods with my hatchet and cut down a nice cedar tree a little taller than me. Dragging it home left a broad trail like a bear through the snow. Mom seemed happy for my help decorating the living room and standing the tree to glitter in the front window. That was basically the extent of our celebrations—with few presents under the tree. In the new year of 1956 on Epiphany, it came time to haul the poor sacrificed tree away to the brushpile.

Back in school for the new term, nobody in the world knew I was writing a novel, not even Mom. She often worked evenings in the café and wasn’t around to hear me banging on the typewriter. Trying to find a way around the romantic roadblock, I kept grinding out awkward and naïve “adventures for my imaginary couple. At least there was a lot of opportunity to describe landscapes and sailing around in old ships on the Chesapeake, though I had little realistic concept of such situations.

One evening soon after Epiphany, I sat at my desk cogitating the quandary of how to shift the romances of the kids in my make-believe life into high gear, and WNOE played new release, a song by some guy with gripping voice that commanded attention on every word. “...Down at the end of Lonely Street at Heartbreak Hotel.” The DJ introduced the singer as newcomer Elvis Presley, and I just about fell out of my chair! The surprise news of this celebrity connection hot-wired my artistic inspiration, and I jumped back into the novel with a new approach.

Of course, my writing had progressed in fits and starts for months, interrupted by things like the Wisconsin trip, distracting holidays, and the many nights of graciously hosting hordes of admiring youth in the café. Those game-nights and dance parties now suggested the perfect solution to my literary problem. Jack and Anne were at such an impasse in their story because they needed friends. Incidentally, two actors were waiting in the wings, the Bandstand couple Ken and Arlene. Arlene looked enough like Annette to be her twin—so be it—and Ken was her ardent admirer. I concocted amorous group activities, relying heavily on romantic atmosphere and an underlying theme that this was how guys are supposed to “like” girls. A number of times, I remarked on the special closeness Jack felt for Ken—as the boyfriend of Anne’s twin sister.

All spring, still stymied by the prohibition against sex, I plodded literarily along, taking the quartet from one mushy (frustrating) scene to another. However, the writing taught me the unparalleled joy of creating an imaginary world more wonderful than so-called reality. Apart from work, school, and zoo, the boring world of Arkansas faded away, replaced by exciting Ft. McHenry and my famous friends. By my birthday in 1956, both unconsummated couples limped through the off-stage battle, and then as a rousing finale everybody sang the new anthem.



Only in writing the final words did I find its (cringeworthy) title: TO BE FOREVER FREE. My first *oeuvre* was 110 typed pages. Thereafter, it went into the drawer, and I shamefacedly admit that I only recently read it. Literary comments aside, I appreciate how neatly it was typed and the way it created an envisioned world with characters I'd known only through the TV. Those three celebrities came to feel more like personal friends, and I rejoiced every time I'd see them on MMC or Bandstand, which was (week)daily. In half-hour shots I got to revel in their virtual presences and feel like part of their party.

I believe this picture was taken on my birthday—that shirt being a present, quite eye-catching with red-orange, black, and white stripes. I'm still wearing my dorky black specs, but notice that those are cowboy boots now. I have to admit that by this time as a fifteen year-old who'd been primarily living in his novel, I didn't feel particularly close to my sister Judy, a dippy nine year-old horse-freak. Of course, now I appreciate how hard it must have been for her imprisoned all by her

lonesome on Penney Hill. Her one nearby friend from school, a lass named Lavenia, lived a few miles away over on the old highway, but they rarely got to see each other outside of school.

An irritating thread weaving through my months as an eighth-grader was the string of catechism “visits” by our priest, whose proper name I never learned. Right away, “Father” slipped off his weekly session schedule and only dropped by about once a month, hallelujah! Each time I could ask specific questions and get sermons on the topics. With license to ask whatever I wanted, I immediately got down to brass tacks.

I told him about guys at school saying Catholics weren't Christians, and we worshipped the Virgin Mary. That was good for a lengthy denial. I wondered about the difference between the “Christian” denominations and learned that the Protestants didn't recognize the Pope as the head of the faith. He couldn't really explain why Catholics thought he was, but it had been that way for a couple thousand years. And people who didn't agree were heretics, doomed to hell. Period.

A bit wary after that pronouncement, at our next session, I reported that my Protestant friends said they didn't believe in the Pope because they followed Jesus Christ and the Bible. Father squirmed on his end of the sofa when I asked why Catholics never seemed to talk much about Jesus or read the Bible. I'd never seen one, except the big book kids read passages from at the start of daily assemblies at school. Besides, Father's sermons and gospels only referenced quotes from things like St. Paul's Corinthians. I had a hard time believing my ears when he said

Catholics simply shouldn't read the Bible because it was too confusing. We should leave it to Holy Mother Church to explain it for us. I smelled something distinctly fishy about that.

Next month I asked why the Church called sex a sin. I didn't see it listed anywhere in the Ten Commandments. Father explained that it was included under "adultery," which meant sex with anybody other than one's spouse. Not what my dictionary said... (In other words, sex was only a sin if you weren't a member of the elite club of married folks.) I wasn't all that convinced by these situational ethics. Besides, how did this notion of marriage arise in the first place? Father couldn't address that historical question and escaped to Judy's less combative bedroom.

Throughout the spring, I inundated Father with my troubling questions, attempting to find some consistent rationale behind this Catholicism into which I'd been involuntarily baptized. He couldn't explain to me why the Church's teachings had so much more to do with rules and regulations than with the "legends" of Jesus Christ. He left me wondering how the Church knew what God wanted—or was offended by. When I told Father that my Baptist buddies had never seen anything in their bibles about heaven and hell, he claimed the Church knew about those things through divine revelation. Once again, I smelled a fish.

When I finished my novel, my creative juices were still bubbling busily. In May, I switched gears from the typewriter to the pencil and labored for a week or so on a drawing, a scene etched on my memory from that winter visit to Wisconsin:



Obviously, a take on the ice-skating excursion with cousins to the creek in their pasture, I let myself go with subtle narratives. I particularly like the bunny by the fallen log and the distant tree with flocking crows.

My impetus was a newspaper call for entries for a state teen-art contest, and before I blinked, my work was snapped up (with a \$10 prize) for a museum show. I gather the original still resides in some collection somewhere in Arkansas. Several years ago, I used this reproduction for a holiday card which I sent to Cousin Danny (who now lives in Alamogordo), and he sentimentally recognized the scene in his childhood's field.

That summer I was undistracted by novels and pencils and only occasionally busy helping in the café. Free as a bird (for the last time in my life), I ran around barefoot in shorts and got brown as a berry, deeply tanned by my many regular hours of lawn-mowing around the house and café. By now, my beautiful Poland China shoat, Jubilation T. Cornpone, had grown on good feed and buckets of slops into a pudgy "yearling" who still liked to romp with me, but preferred to do so in the mud. I was known to wrestle with him in his wallow—more ambiguous adolescent fantasies of Moonbeam McSwine.

Pig-wrestling almost compensated me for not having a dog, a companion to roam the woods with. Dog- and shoe-less, I spent my splendid June days roaming across the woods and hills, checking in on places Kay and I had known so well. I vividly recall crouching in a fragrant, sunny patch of blackberries chomping them like a terrapin and staining my hands and lips. Often I jumped into our pond and splashed around with the goldfish, lying out afterwards on the leafy bank to dry off in the sun. Sometimes I hiked back to the Old Brooks Place to check out the two huge walnut trees, one of which was looking sort of sickly, and to partake of the wild raspberries.

Each weekday I made sure to catch my Bandstand and MMC programs in the late afternoons and faithfully take care of my zoo-duties. Occasionally, after feeding all the critters, I'd take off in the long evenings with my trusty hickory stick and a bag of supper. With the summer, I became a feral boy, a wild child of the forest. My adolescent body, usually naked as a jaybird, came alive with sexual energy. Scampering and frolicking in the woods or swimming in the Wulsey—where Kay and I had planned a dam—I got constant erections. There was an ecstasy in blithely dancing around with a hard on, a blessed exhilaration and celebration of life.

My great joy was climbing favorite trees and lying naked on their branches like a lithe panther. When inspired by the intimacy of the blessed tree-beings, I'd hug their splendid smooth trunks or limbs, rubbing my proud prick to orgasm and roaring my joy across the silent woods. I never confessed any of this to Father on Sundays because I never touched myself impurely. Besides, sex with plants was splendidly spiritual. When night fell, I'd eat my cold supper and stretch out on a mossy bank to sleep like an exhausted faun.

Other days I hiked in the barefoot buff back to the secret grotto Kay and I had found and danced around on the sandy banks of the spring branch doing cartwheels and flips like I'd learned in Gymnastics. Downstream a way was a vast bank of honeysuckle vines, and nuzzling into it, more than once I made love to the sweetly fragrant flowers. The gentle tickling of the leaves and tendrils around my prick sent waves of joy through my young brown body. One day I brought a nice big cutting of my weeping willow to plant in the moist slope near the branch. Later, a smooth-trunked holly tree down near the water seduced me into arboreal intimacies.

At home on the Hill, besides the constant lawn-mowing, running the zoo, and watching my TV programs, I always had things to occupy idle hours, like pumping gas at the Conoco station where Daddy had a new manager, a little guy named Tennyson with a twisted foot. I also washed customers' windshields for him and checked their oil. Other times I went down the road to visit

with dear Elsa. Her husband PD was very old, sick, and senile and stayed in his bed most of the time, his gaunt face lost in a cloud of frizzy white hair. His vacant eyes freaked me out, and I steered clear of him. I usually hung out on her back porch playing gin rummy with the sweet old lady. I picked her a big batch of ripe persimmons off the patch of trees beside our house.

By mid-June, the peach stand was back again out front of the house. Mary Jane was peddling the fruit again, older still and even cuter. Now in my fifteenth year, I kept on flirting jokingly with her and often caught her admiring my tanned body and chest hairs. (Mom always made me wear a T-shirt whenever I went into the café.) Mary Jane often had me man her booth so she could go over to the café for a coke or lunch, or just to cool off. Late June had gotten pretty hot.

When the Fourth of July rolled around, I took over the peach stand in the late afternoon so Mary Jane could go on a date to Texarkana to see the fireworks. The heat was pretty intense, but at least it was shady in the booth. My main problem was all the bees buzzing around looking for over-ripes. With a good deal of tourist traffic along the highway, many folks stopped for baskets of beautiful peaches. Around 5:30 in the lingering heat, I heard a little whimper and scuffling sound behind the booth and investigating, found it coming from a tiny, mangy puppy. The poor thing, a male of unidentifiable breed, was all scabs and bones with a bleeding cut on its shoulder. No doubt some horribly cruel person had tossed it out of their car onto the side of the road.

Well, what was one more critter for the zoo? I hollered for Judy to go over to the café for a bowl of milk and filled a bucket at the front faucet to give the sad little orphan a bath. Daddy advised me on treating its mange and cleaning its cut. All clean and gorged on milk, it fell asleep in a peach basket while I sold the rest of the fruit and then retired to the café for supper. Always a push-over for a sick animal, Judy took loving care of the puppy for me while I ate. I decided, considering the day's auspicious date, I'd name it Uncle Sam.

In the swelter of July, for coolness I started sleeping out in the backyard on the ground under our spreading hickory tree. As well, dogs cuddled into my nest of pine needles with me. Duchess acted very maternal to Uncle Sam, and Daddy's new beagle Belle flat-out ignored him. Soon the rest of my family followed suit, Daddy and Mom's mattress spread out on the storm cellar and Judy's cot under the weeping willow. I loved the sounds of the night-birds, the plaintive trill of the whippoorwill, and watching bats flutter across the moony sky over our back field. But repose in such cool comfort didn't much help one to face the day's oven. Luckily, we had a tall swamp-cooler tower beside the café, burbling constantly to cool the place down. Too hot to ramble, so I didn't—focusing on daily dips in pond or creek, both dropping alarmingly in water levels.

For a change, I decided to set myself up a laboratory in the old cowshed Kay had showed me. Last Christmas, Mom's old maid sister, Aunt Sissie, had sent me a chemistry set which I put away in my closet. As the eldest and farthest away, I must have been her favorite nephew. For my birthday she'd sent me two lp albums, one of the Peer Gynt Suite and the other of Hungarian Dances by some bearded guy named Brahms. The music on both records was surprising, a far cry from the simple guitar music I always heard in popular songs. And I heard lots of other strange instruments playing and sounds I didn't recognize.

In the one still-standing cowstall was a plank table just right for my rows of chemical bottles and cans. Following the printed instructions, I arranged little spoons, dishes, and test-tubes properly and set up a fat candle to use as directed for a Bunsen burner. For my first experiment, I mixed

two of the mysterious powders, one red and one blue, in a test-tube with water. No effect. Put a cork in it and shook it violently so it looked purple. The red powder settled out first.

Frustrated as a chemist, I resorted to plain old alchemy, lit my Bunsen candle and held the tube over the flame. The purple soup started bubbling, and suddenly with an explosive pop, the cork shot up through the rusty tin roof of the cowshed. When my scientific surprise had subsided, I proudly realized that I'd rediscovered the principle of the steam engine. On several occasions, I prepared chemical recipes with few notable or even interesting results. Before long, I boxed up my lab and put it back in the closet. (Incidentally, a few years later I was briefly a Chemistry major in college.)

As the summer rolled on through July and August, the heat did too, except for a couple days of much-needed rain. We all spent lots of time in the "air-conditioned" café, whether or not we were working, and lots of locals dropped in for refreshing visits with ice cream or ice tea. I spent many hours with our pinball machines in a side room where Daddy kept local souvenirs like cypress-knee lamps that never sold. With so much practice, I soon became a regular pinball whizz, bumping the machines around just so to keep the pinball bouncing between bumpers, and flipping it expertly back up to the top of the board.



Summer heat notwithstanding, one Sunday in late August the whole family got dressed up for Church. Even Daddy was going too because it was for Judy's confirmation, the culmination of Father's catechism visits. This snapshot is the last full-family picture to be taken of us for several years. It gives me pause to see the body language, how we hold onto each other. I bet Mom's left hand behind her hip holds my hand. I've seen little other evidence elsewhere of such closeness in my Arkansas family. We all lived our very separate lives in order to survive on Penney Hill.

I also must pause to note that sly grin on my teenaged face in this immortalized moment. Do I perhaps see something of a lascivious tree-hugging faun peeping out through my cocky expression?

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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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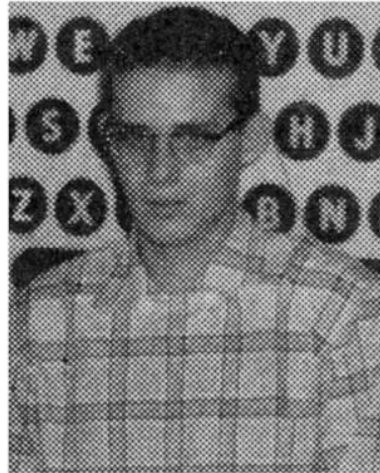
One may well wonder how a relatively sapient, albeit juvenile, member of the genus *Homo* could ever let himself get backed into a hole like that. I see clearly now that an insidious cult entrapped me—despite my rational doubts and misgivings. Rejecting the doctrine of original sin (and its attendant 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.

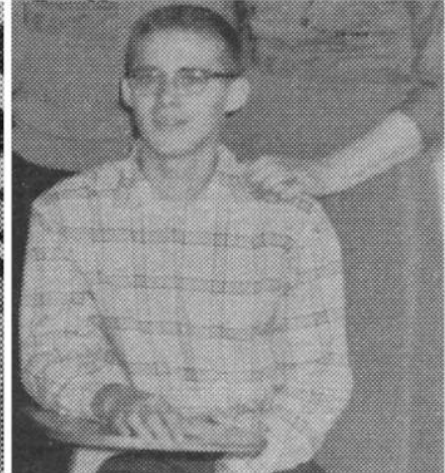
The 1957-58 school year, my 10th grade, brought academic duties shown in these grainy photos from the Blue Darter yearbook. For good reason, I have absolutely no memory of doing anything at all in these responsible positions. Note my much more attractive (less dorky) new specs!



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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SHORT SHORTS

After tearfully laying my sweet Sambo to rest in the graveyard under the cedar tree, I mourned for days, especially since my negligence was what caused his death. I'd been so preoccupied by fantasies of my secret passion for Annette that I'd forgotten taking my dear doggie across the highway with me to get the buckets of slops and bones for the zoo. How was he to know to look out for cars when racing after me? True to Elsa's earlier words, once again I had to say goodbye to a loved one. The pain of my grief was only softened by several long days of work in the café.

The next Wednesday, Daddy drove me down to register at the new school, Ashdown High. It was a big new building surrounded by enormous oak trees with a gymnasium and football field behind. Registration was in the gym with tables scattered about and strange kids milling around to sign up for classes. I found it intimidating. Daddy introduced me to the Superintendent, white-haired Mr. Franks, who greeted me brightly with, "So, you're the Whiz Kid, eh, Richard?" In this new mature world of a Junior, I'd decided to stop being Ricky and go by my full name.

My schedule was crammed with M-W-F classes alternating with others on T-Th, like first period Psychology and Civics and fourth period alternating PE and American History. I signed up for a new class in Spanish, and Daddy wondered why I'd want to learn that strange language. Why not? When you threw in English Lit with Speech and Trigonometry with Chemistry, it looked like a pretty heavy-duty schedule, but I was thrilled by the challenge.

On Friday, the school had a half-day orientation with 10-minute class periods, which was a test for our travel arrangements. Mornings, Daddy would drive me down to the Little River bottoms where a preacher's daughter named Mary Nell lived, a round-nosed girl in tenth grade. I'd ride with her up and down hills to Ben Lomond and catch the bus at the old schoolhouse. Like me and Mary Nell, about ten kids from the countryside waited there for our 20-mile trip.

Passing through Ben Lomond, we picked up another half-dozen or so kids. A cute younger boy sat with me and introduced himself as Guy, explaining that his grandad was our bus driver. I was saddened that Kay didn't ride with us, and Mary Nell said he and some older boys always drove to school a bit later. Then we went back down into the river bottoms to the US highway, and going south, we loaded the bus full of boys and girls, mostly younger. In Ashdown, I had the driver let me off at the Drug Store on Main Street to buy my Chemistry and Trig books. He directed me to walk two blocks east, turn right, and go three blocks south to the school.

While in the store, I also bought some TV magazines and the latest Teen. On the way out, I met up with a tall handsome boy also on his way to school. This Dennis said he worked in the Drug Store on Saturdays as a soda jerk, which felt like a wonderful connection between us. We walked to school together, chatting and getting acquainted. At school in the auditorium, I saw Dennis across the crowd, and we waved. Mr. Franks briefly greeted us all and sent us to the office for locker assignments, then to our first-period classrooms.

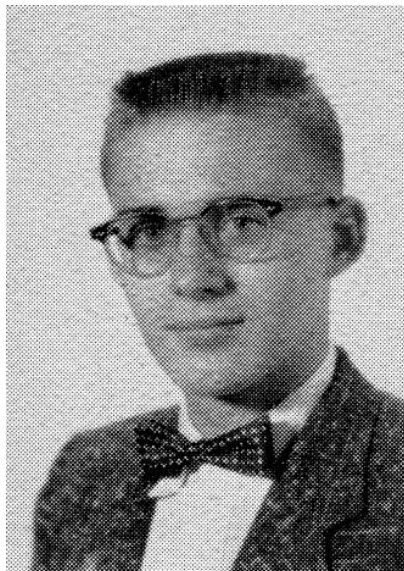
At the office, I was thrilled to find that my friend, Maxey, was to be my locker partner. We met by our locker and happily shook hands remembering our fun at 4-H camp. At my first-period, Mr. Franks for Psychology, I was happy to find Dennis there too. We sat at desks beside each other and shared complicit grins. In Mr. Garrison's math classroom for Trigonometry, Maxey sat behind me and advised that our teacher, an older balding guy, reportedly graded very easily. I was glad to see Dennis again in fifth period English Literature with a magisterial old woman

called Miss Susy. Happily, I again had Maxey in sixth-period Spanish class with nice Mrs. Briant. She had me hooked from her first happy “Hola...”

On the bus for our return trip to Ben Lomond. I was surprised to see Kay get on too. He shoosed Guy out of my seat and sat down. His friends were going on to Texarkana for the afternoon, and he’d go fishing with his cousin over at White Cliffs. I felt sorry for Guy getting pushed around. On the drive back to Mary Nell’s, she told me Kay was something of a bully. I wondered how my dear old chum could have turned into such a rude fellow now.

My trip home from school didn’t include any rides after getting back to Mary Nell’s. Her house sat beside Winter Creek below the big hill up to Falls Chapel, and I had to walk—or hitchhike—the rest of the way back to Penney Hill, something like two and a half miles. Fortunately, that Friday mid-day was bright and sunny, warm enough, in fact, to take off my shirt on the way up the big hill. Near the top, a car stopped for my thumb, an elderly couple from nearby Wilton going to Lockesburg. They took me on to the Hill, stopped in for a soda pop, and said hi to Daddy. As an important businessman, he was well-known to most folks in the area.

After lunch, Daddy didn’t need me to work, and I lay on my couch with my new magazines. For months I’d been watching closely for the new TV season and found little, at least nothing promising visions of my darling Annette. The magazines were my only source of hope. They reported that adorable Annette was working on her career as a popular singer and actress. In the new Teen issue, I discovered to my horror that the MMC was over with! I wouldn’t get to see even old reruns of my beloved! A celebrity magazine said she’d appear in guest roles on some regular shows, but they didn’t give dates. I’d have to watch those shows so as not to miss her. I took cold comfort in the hope of seeing my famous angel the way she looked now, probably even more gorgeous than that darling Mouseketeer. I’d have to make do with fewer epiphanies. My eternal love and devotion would just have to live on fewer passionate visions of Annette.



Richard as Junior 1958-59

This official yearbook portrait of the new Richard mortifies this much older Rich, if only for the terminally geeky flattop, but that clip-on bowtie is the kicker. I think the sport coat and tie, if not white shirt, were probably shared among us junior boys on “school-picture day.” Girls all wore white blouses with dark ribbons at a high throat. Very fancy... I’m glad for my much more sophisticated glasses and that I’d learned to keep my lips closed over my crooked teeth.

Right before school started, Mom took me to see our dentist over in Nashville, like 20 miles to the east, the only one in the area. I didn’t enjoy him at all. When I’d get a cavity, even a tiny one, he’d hollow out the tooth and pack it with metal. Anyway, this time he yanked two fine top teeth, my bicuspid, for my front teeth to have some room to spread out. (In 1966, I finally got braces, and in the 70s I had the poison metal replaced with epoxy. Now my mouth is full of false teeth. So it goes.)

Our Junior class was at least three times the size of my Lockesburg class last year, like 69, with a small majority of boys. This led to a confused crowd as we gathered in the auditorium for

Monday's assembly, and the class sponsors sat us alphabetically by last name in rows behind this year's Seniors. The underclassmen and junior high kids sat behind us.

Suddenly Dennis appeared and told the kids on my left all to move down one seat so he could sit with me. He grinned nicely explaining, "I heard you're real smart—let's see if any of it will rub off on me." Thrilled by his bright friendliness, I asked, "You mean, like cooties?" Roaring at my witticism, he punched my shoulder affectionately. Then Mr. Franks came out in front of the stage and motioned for our attention. Dennis grinned at me again and blushed rosily across his cheeks. Clearly, we'd become great buddies at first sight there outside the Drug Store.

I skipped my first Study Hall and went down to the Office for a private talk with Mr. Franks. He was worried that I had some problem already, and I explained how and why Daddy didn't want me doing any team sports for PE—what with my having to work the game crowds in the café. We compromised that I'd do one day a week of track for PE, and the other two I'd work in his office since I was such a good typist. His secretary Lula was really happy for me to help her out with typing exams and reports. A tiny part of wanting out of PE was I felt sort of weird about the other guys getting to see I was "cut." Being Catholic was downright embarrassing.

I was even more embarrassed when Mr. Franks said since I was a Catholic, they'd start serving fish for Friday lunch in the cafeteria. I told him not to—I'd just bring a cheese sandwich from the café or something. Making everybody else suffer because of my religion's unnecessary nonsense seemed just plain wrong. Besides, I didn't like fish—not even tuna, salmon, nor especially the bass or perch Daddy was always catching. It made my throat itch. (In fact, a decade later that was to turn into an anaphylactic allergy to any fish with fins that put me into the hospital three times. I haven't touched that brain food now for 60 years—without noticeable effect.)

Going by Richard was easy with the new kids at school, but the change didn't work all that well at home. Mom immediately, even enthusiastically, started calling me Richard in an affectionate tone of voice, but Daddy kept calling me Ricky, probably trying to keep me a little boy. On the third hand, Judy, who had rarely called my name anyway, called me the formal, "Big Brother," like in imperial China or something. When she heard about my name change, our cook Mae started addressing me, maybe sarcastically, as Sir Richard (the Lion-Hearted). I didn't correct her that he was actually a King.

Speaking of names, Spanish class really was fun. Maxey and I started saying things in the new language in the halls and calling each other by our Spanish names, mine of course Ricardo, and his an invented "Maxito." We used our fractured foreign lingo as a private, secret code. No doubt our Spanish hall exercises all year helped us both ace the classes. Meanwhile, at home I started calling Mom the affectionate Mamacita, and ever after (nearly 60 years) she signed all her notes and letters to me that way. (While off at college, I started calling her the formal Mother. In her early 80's Mother took a class in Spanish, but she shyly never spoke a word of it to me.)

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September may have been busy at school with all the new classes, but the routines of my personal life at home on the Hill were mostly same old. There was still American Bandstand when I got home from school, but no MMC anymore! No longer did I get a daily fix of obsolete images of my beloved, and I only realized occasionally that in the midst of the new school and new kids, I hadn't thought much about Annette. However, I knew I still loved her passionately,

insanely. Whenever I thought of her, I'd drift off in tender dreams of her beauty. I just couldn't understand why Annette wasn't to be seen all fall on TV. There was nothing in the magazines or news of programs she'd be on. My enormous love was starving for new visions of my adorable angel. My two-year-old recycled images were worn out. I longed to see Annette now in all her fame and glory. Oh, my, what if she went blonde?

The parade of new kids at school was intensely distracting from my Annette-fixation, though not unaffected by it. As I perused the passing crowds of girls with an eye to the angelic, several pretty maidens of various ages caught my eye, some stunning, but their beauties paled in the light of Annette's perfection. Always something sort of unfinished about their faces, or maybe too round, and most girls seemed to have the same, almost shapeless mouth. A truly pretty girl seemed a rare bird. It was usually their hairdo that ruined their looks. I was truly impressed by the identical twins in tenth, Cinda and Linda. With short black hair, they were wispy as sprites, delicate-featured, and bright-eyed. Walking down the hall, the Twindas were like beautiful fairy queens in procession. All they needed was gossamer wings to be butterflies.

Nevertheless, I decided to keep my eye on the female population for a so-called girlfriend. I now considered the Church's rule about non-Catholic emotional involvements with girls to be as nonsensical as the one about fish on Fridays. Anyway, I'd never obeyed that one regarding boys. I wasn't going to avoid making friends—or girlfriends—with someone simply because they weren't the same religion. What did that stuff have to do with loving one's neighbor?

And now I felt ready to "like" some girl enough to spend intimate time with her. Whatever that meant. Not that we could "go steady" because I couldn't take her out anywhere in the evenings. Such platonic daytime company would certainly assuage my loneliness, and at home evenings, I could again dream of Annette—if I remembered to do so. I hoped she'd forgive my infidelity, especially since she wouldn't know anything about it. Besides, I read that Annette had been going out with Paul Anka for a while, lucky guy. Now I just had to find an appealing girl.

In the parade of kids through halls and crowds in schoolyards, I also watched the boys and noted some truly handsome specimens of various sizes and shapes. Of course, I considered my buddy Dennis the very best-looking, but there were several of movie-star quality. The star of the show was a Senior boy named Gale with wavy dark hair, dark eyes, and long, expressive lips. In general, I found that boys seemed to have an easier time being good-looking than girls did being pretty. Boys' mouths were usually very individual, their smiles recognizable signals of character and feeling. Gale's broad, open smile radiated confidence, but he walked around in a loose way that ruined any "screen presence." He was just another handsome face—as was I, I concluded, as long as I smiled with my lips closed.

Besides the new school and fascinating classes, September at home on the Hill often distracted my romantic longings for Annette with late lawn mowings, long woods walks without Sambo, and work in the café. In October, the basketball season got rolling again, and we had several busloads of teams three or four nights a week. That included a bunch of new buses with girl-teams coming from their games. I was struck by their soft, white thighs in those uniform shorts, surprising since you never got to see their legs in those full-skirted dresses. They looked a lot different than the boys' skinny, muscular legs in their shorts. Ogling the girls' legs gave me a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach, not sickly, just strange—made me think of that silly old song, "Who Wears Short Shorts?"

Add to that several carloads of friends and family from the games. A good number of those ordered whole dinners that kept Milton or Lilly hopping in the kitchen. By now serving the game crowds was old-hat for me, and I enjoyed playing gracious host, like a garrulous innkeeper, to my friends and neighbors. Now I actually knew some of the Ashdown players, and old friends from Lockesburg High would stop in from their games somewhere. One Darter basketball player was my old buddy Bodi's cousin from Frog Level, Sammy, the one I used to pin so easily on the wrestling mat. A lot taller now, he wouldn't be so easy to wrestle down. He reported that Bodi got the job at the chicken plant and bought them a neat pickup truck. Their baby was due in a couple months. Not to show my distress at the chilling news, I lied brightly, "That's great!"

In those frantic game crowds, per Daddy's orders, I kept a lid on the boys' teenage outbursts of horseplay, and lots of the girls made calves' eyes at me. I appreciated their amorous attentions but was usually too busy to respond. Nor was I interested. None of the young ladies, white thighs notwithstanding, was particularly attractive, and I almost stopped hoping to meet one suitable for romance. Besides, romance could so easily lead to Bodi's predicament... I was tempted to forget all about girlfriends. Recalling that my true, if absent, beloved was Annette, I gaily floated above and ignored the flirtations of the crowds of girls.

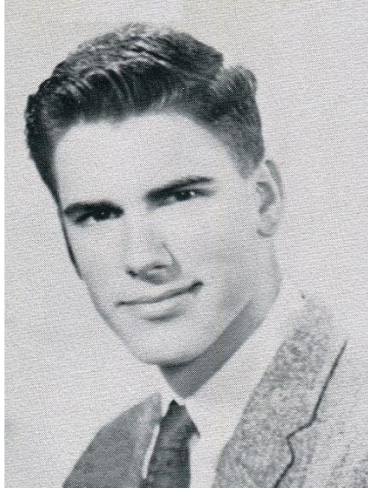
A nice Lockesburg woman named Irene, wife of Daddy's handyman, Kent, often worked in the café as a dinner waitress. That family had moved last summer down to Falls Chapel so she'd be closer to her job, and now Daddy got her to help us with the game crowds too. Daddy did the cash register, while I handled the north end, and Irene covered the south.

Her two daughters, Shelba and Anita in tenth and eighth at Lockesburg, would come up with her and hang out with the crowds. Sweet girls, but a little on the heavy side, they'd also come over to my room to dance. Lots of the local kids kept showing up, some of the wallflower boys even trying to dance some. Elizabeth, the girl I almost had a crush on in eighth grade, came often to the hops and danced wildly. She was a great one for getting the wallflowers out on the floor and trying to dance. I did the same with shy girls, but there weren't as many of them.

Now in eleventh and a well-developed female with lots of curves and suggestive roundnesses, Elizabeth called our dance parties Poor Richard's Ballroom and Comic Book Parlor. Both boys and girls liked to lounge around on my bed, couch, or floor reading my vast collection of comic books. I had piles of Scrooge, Donald, Mickey, Bugs, Porky, Woodie and so on, as well as occasional Classics Illustrated. (They put a dent in my college fund but only cost 10 cents each.)

With these regular week-night hops now in their third season, the local preachers had stopped anathemizing me, and their kids flocked to my boudoir. Sometimes classmates from Ashdown would drive up for the parties. Even Mary Nell's preacher father let her come at times with her Ben Lomond girl pals. Despite my rural isolation on Penney Hill, I somehow wound up as the center of local teenage society. And when my dancers had drifted off for the night, I'd happily lay me down to dreams of Annette—if I remembered my fantasy passion.

Remembering it turned out to be a problem. By mid-October, the wild pace of my school and social life turned romantic thoughts of Annette into secondary concerns. It suddenly dawned on me that her birthday was coming up again, and I hadn't thought about even sending her another card. After all, she didn't know I existed. Nevertheless, I was agonized by neglecting my suitor's responsibility to proclaim eternal devotion. Consequently, for the next couple weeks I doubled down on romantic imaginings of my incomparable darling.



Dennis as Halloween King

I didn't care much about missing ball games at school, but I did about being left out of other teen events. In particular, I felt awful about not going that Friday evening to the Halloween Ball in the gym when folks dressed up in wild costumes. They elected a whole Halloween court of King, Queen, and Maids with their Knights who got their pictures in the "Panther Eyes" yearbook. At least I didn't have to worry about making a costume.

I was thrilled that my handsome buddy Dennis got picked for King. I thought he was a whole lot better looking than Gale, and his smile hinted at his mischievous humor. No wonder Mary Nell had a secret crush on Dennis, but for some reason he didn't go out with girls. Meanwhile, he frequently remarked to me about having the hots for Betty Lou, the cheerleader with lots of big teeth. She'd have made a great Ipana toothpaste commercial.

That Saturday morning I worked in the café, feeling mistreated by missing the big party but consoling myself with outdated fantasies of Mouseketeer Annette. By later morning, I managed to put my distress aside and settle down into my usual waiter mode. That was when a family of tourists, mother, father, and curly-haired teenaged daughter, came in and took Booth #2. The girl was incredibly gorgeous in shorter shorts than I'd ever imagined, smooth thighs shining like pale neons, and a short blouse showing off a bathing-beauty flat stomach and small pointy bosoms. Fetching them waters and menus, I couldn't take my eyes off her curves, but she never looked once at me, her delicate nose in a magazine obstructing my view of her delicious thighs.

All through the several steps of serving them breakfast and handling bunches of other customers, that girl's scrumptious body glowed like a beacon. She was a great magnet pulling me closer, closer, and aligning my poles with hers. All the while, she still never looked at me, even when thanking me for her plate of hotcakes and bacon. I got that strange feeling in my stomach again, only now the heat was all over my body. Suddenly I understood what Denny meant by "having the hots" for someone—and what "liking" a girl really meant.

Plainly and simply, it was sexual desire, which I wasn't supposed to think about, but here it was right in front of my nose. There was no ignoring it. At every opportunity I gazed with unfamiliar lust on the girl's pin-up beauty and her thighs curving up to... My knowledge of female anatomy gave out at that point, but my imagination enthusiastically filled in details. Meanwhile, I realized how I'd never felt such hots for Annette, none of this blazing desire for her body. I hadn't ever fantasized other than our prim little kisses, just touching cheek or lips. But now I longed to leap on top of this girl in her short shorts and explore her whole mouth, tongue and all.

The dreaded moment came when the family picked up to leave. The girl walked gracefully over to me at the cash register to pay their check. She handed me the cash with a huge smile and a melodious, "Thanks, hon!" My breath stopped at the endearment, but I managed my standard, "Thank you, and y'all come back." She laughed playfully and teased, "Maybe we will... We're going to Fort Smith." Anything to prolong our conversation, I said, "Some pretty mountains up in the Ozarks." Again she giggled charmingly, "We come from Ozark, Alabama!" She stuck her hand out at me: "Hi, I'm Victoria. What's your name, hon?" Breathlessly shaking her soft hand, I answered, and the mother called from by the door, "C'mon, Vicky. We leaving. Stop flirting!" Victoria gave me an affectionate wave and walked out of my life forever.

One would think that a teenaged boy working in a truck-stop café would have such tempting encounters with voluptuous females frequently, but I certainly didn't. Victoria blew into and out of my life like a tornado, leaving me in emotional wreckage. She blew the roof right off of my safe little house of sexual cards and fantasies in a whirlwind of desire. All my naïve innocence was demolished, gone with the wind. Beautiful Victoria cast a new light on my old obsession with Annette, and I immediately suffered huge remorse for betraying my beloved so blatantly.

Also, this first blast of explicit sexual heat frightened me deeply. No wonder poor Bodie got trapped so easily in marriage and fatherhood, fates which I certainly didn't want until much later in the future. Though frightened, I soon started thinking about Annette sexually, wondering about her thighs and the sensuous curves of her body—now no doubt far more seductive than in her Mouseketeer years. I hadn't seen her since back last spring in re-runs and impatiently waited for her promised appearances on the Danny Thomas Show and Zorro. I desperately wanted someone to love, and now I knew that love essentially meant sex. Given that dire context of girlfriends, I decided to focus my aspirations on my platonically angelic Annette.

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Though I'd been forced to go cold turkey off TV images of Annette, that fall I still had the regular sessions of American Bandstand to keep me hopping. Sadly, my favorite dancers like Kenny and Arlene weren't there anymore, but the new crowd kept me up on the latest moves, and Dick played the latest hit songs. In September, the KCMC-TV station in Texarkana started broadcasting a local Teen Hop show on Saturday afternoons with a fat guy named Herschel as the DJ. It was fun watching for kids I knew from schools around the area.

One Saturday in November, one of my regular Lockesburg dancers named Iona got her mother to drive a bunch of us down to the Hop, Iona and me, Shelba and Anita, and two of boys from our LHS class, Charles and John, who sometimes came to my parties. It was exhilarating to dance in front of the big TV cameras, knowing that my cool moves were being seen everywhere around. Riding the same airwaves as my darling Annette was the closest I'd ever felt to her.

In the middle of the program, Herschel talked with kids and cornered me for an interview. I told him we were down from Lockesburg, but I went to school in Ashdown—along with two couples from there I recognized in the crowd. I said I hoped to dance at his Hop often. Herschel hurried over there to talk to them too. The TV show was only an hour long, and on the way home, we wondered how many of our friends had seen us, if we'd be famous now. We weren't.

American Bandstand was my lifeline to rock'n'roll culture, where I'd first hear the newest hits and see the singers in guest appearances. My magazines said Annette was now working on her singing career. In fact, in late November, Dick announced her new release and played "Tall Paul," which had a good dance beat, but the lyrics were terribly forgettable. I listened avidly, however, to the dulcet tones of my beloved's beautiful voice, the very first new utterances I'd heard from her lovely lips in two years, and they renewed my obsessive love for her.

My instantaneous passion for Victoria and eternal adoration for Annette led me to ponder love. Clearly, its reverse side was lust, and pure love required eliminating sexual desires from our feelings. Then one could—and should—feel pure love for everybody. In my next catechism conversation, I mentioned this to Father Jordan, who noted that the Christ had said as much, to love our neighbor as ourself. I asked why then we weren't supposed to get emotionally involved

with non-Catholics. He said that “neighbor” meant people of our same religion. I heartily disagreed with this definition and paraphrased Christ’s words as the universal “Love each other.”

In early December, the subject came up in Mr. Frank’s Psychology class. All fall, I’d ignored his boring lectures as Protestant sermons about how good and bad people behaved. Now he talked about the Ten Commandments and gave us a list (which had never come up in my catechism). To my analytical mind, the first three were egotistical authoritarian demands by the deity, and I wondered who those “strange” gods might be. Mr. Franks said they were “false” gods like the idols and devils the heathen believed in, which was no help at all.

The fourth about honoring our father and mother made ultimate sense, but the rest were merely “thou shalt nots” and seemed to go without saying. Looking affectionately at handsome Denny across the aisle, I asked Mr. Franks what about Jesus saying we should love each other. He brushed that off as simply useful advice to keep things peaceful. That useful advice promptly became the cornerstone of my personal religion. I’d just ignore any other dogma of my Catholic cult and Mr. Franks’ fundamentalism and love everybody as myself, including God.

Invigorated by my new religious enlightenment, I started spreading my love around the kids at school. Already in Spanish class I’d been calling dear Maxito *amigo mio*, and with my new license to love I now addressed everybody, starting with Denny of course, that way—or girls as *amiga*, explicitly expressing my spiritual affection. Sometimes I’d call Denny or Maxito the special *querido* (dear) or *hermano* (brother). Feeling that way for girls (*querida* or *hermana*) was simple since loving them didn’t involve sex anymore, and it was even easier with boys because it had nothing to do with sex in the first place. In general, everybody seemed to enjoy my fondness, and it made me feel tremendously virtuous.

At home, when I hugged Mamacita, she acted pleasantly surprised. When I tried it with Daddy calling him *Padrecito*, he pushed me away with a growl. Hugging Judy out of the blue, I called her Sweetie, and she also pushed me away, snapping, “Get away, you creep!” Customers in the cafe seemed amused when I addressed them in Spanish endearments. It was pretty easy when they were good-looking, but with homely folks my love was usually spiced with compassion and curiosity. Loving everybody felt liberating and made me stop feeling so lonely.

In our three weeks off from school for the holidays, I got lots of practice in loving old friends and total strangers. However, that didn’t distract me from my habitual fantasies of Annette. Only I got tired of imagining our courtship since it never led anywhere. To get around that sexual abyss, I fantasized the future when she and I’d be a married couple, our love-making already a *fait accompli*. That way, without messy details, I envisioned our future children. Specifically, I prophesied five sons and maybe one daughter, more than enough for Annette to produce.

Our kids would all be dark-haired and dark-eyed like their mother. We’d have younger twin sons and three older ones, the oldest being a beautiful boy named Marc. The others were Billy and Gnon (no idea where that name came from), the twins Damon and Tulyn (again where?), and the girl Catherina. I spent evenings drawing their portraits at ages from six to twelve, all vaguely resembling Frankie Avalon, Fabian, or their mother. Having constructed this wonderful future family, I could now stop worrying about what fate might have in store for my happiness.

#

With the start of 1959, my second Junior semester kicked into high gear on several levels of adolescent activity. My life turned into something of a roller-coaster whipping me around from giddy heights to miserable lows. Perhaps the mood swings were typical of a natural teenage bipolarity, but there were a lot more highs than lows, and the latter generally weren't terribly deep. Overall, my life was manageable, if not particularly normal.

Maybe I should be grateful that just as school started again, I began a diary of the significant events of each day—like a real literary writer—opening each day with “Dear Diary.” Within a week I switched to the more dignified, “Dear Journal.” The entries reviewed the mundane details of my days, noted my profound thoughts, and focused on my various fantasies. On the first day back at school I commented on a handsome new boy named Spencer and feeling a strong brotherly love for him. Thus the journal recorded my special love for folks, girls included, though not as frequently. I remarked on boys on Bandstand, in the café, at church, or wherever, happy that I could love them now. Often they reminded me of my imaginary sons.

Each entry I followed with a monogram designed some years before to combine our initials:



In addition, at the end of each entry I always carried on about my passionate, eternal love for Annette, like a musical coda. I see now that this formulaic chant was essentially a self-hypnotic device to convince myself of my eternal passion which had begun to falter. Later, when my romantic fixation started seriously crumbling, I sometimes forgot that magical incantation. However, I always drew the monogram for its symbolic value.

Less than a month after starting my journal, I had to write the most heart-wrenching entry of my adolescence. February 3, 1959, was to become known as “The Day the Music Died.” That was the day that Buddy Holly, Richie Valens, and the Big Bopper perished in a plane crash. I wept bitterly for their fame and glory being so violently and mercilessly ended. After losing Bingo and Sambo, this was my closest brush with death. For days, I mourned the singers and wrote on a song of grief I didn't finish. Just hearing their songs, like Richie's La Bamba, brought tears.

With the New Year, my eternal passion for Annette was rewarded with the promised media blitz of appearances on TV shows. After a year and a half of recycled visions, I suddenly got to see my beloved in all her current celebrity glory, and every occasion was a prelude of excited expectation, an exaltation of fresh adoration, and ultimately a vague sense of disappointment. Her first epiphany was the long-anticipated spot as the special guest on American Bandstand singing her new hit Tall Paul. I suspected my darling was simply lip-syncing the silly song.

The disappointment came in realizing that at 17 Annette didn't look much older than two years before on MMC. Her hairdo was only a little longer, but her high, very black, arched eyebrows way up on her forehead were disturbing. Her high-necked, full-skirted dress didn't show off her femininity at all. In a word, my angel had been eclipsed in the beauty department by Victoria in her short shorts. But I'd go on loving Annette madly because I'd sworn to love her forever and ever. Also, I had no one else to adore, and that lovely family was waiting for us in the future.

Annette's awful song got played constantly on Bandstand, WNOE, and our juke box. Soon I couldn't bear to hear her sweet voice sing such stupid, obnoxious lyrics, and I felt awful for my

darling that her hit song was so terrible. After a month or so, it faded away. She came out with more songs that I only heard once or twice before they too were forgotten. I was sad for my angel that her singing career wasn't taking off. However, she was cast in a Walt Disney movie called "Shaggy Dog," which I naturally didn't get to see, and the magazines forecasted a bunch of movies for her in the future. That someday soon Annette would surely become a big movie star was hugely depressing. She was leaving me behind, an anonymous hick in the backwoods.

All that spring her guest appearances on TV came fast and furious, a few each month. In a couple episodes of Walt Disney's "The Nine Lives of Elfege Baca" in January and February," she played a Mexican girl named Chiquita with much longer black hair. She looked beautiful but unfamiliar with those same awful eyebrows. Next she appeared in episodes of "Zorro" as a Spanish girl named Anita, again tremendously beautiful. It disturbed me that in both of these series she looked painfully "wasp-waisted," corseted so tightly she could scarcely breathe.

In one of the Zorro episodes, Anita supposedly played on a guitar and sang a sad, slow song "Lonely Guitar" about wanting somebody to love her. I was watching the show with Mamacita and Judy and couldn't scream out that here I was—a boy who loved her wildly! The role apparently was a birthday gift from her patron Walt Disney, a chance to act with her TV hero Guy Williams. Obviously, she didn't need any stupid old birthday card from a lowly plebian fan like me, nor the Valentine card and poem I'd recently sent her in spite of my misgivings.

Annette appeared a half-dozen times from February into May on the Danny Thomas sit-com as an Italian exchange student named Gina. She still looked her old Mouseketeer self with shorter hair but with those weird eyebrows. Her dresses were mostly prim and full, one with a lower, squared neckline. Usually, she posed sideways with books or whatever obscuring her bust, but her amazing wasp-waist emphasized her top and bottom, like a caricature of a sex-pot. Her funny lines weren't very humorous, though emphasized by a fake laugh-track. The high-school boys swarming around her were blond collegiate jocks, and I was embarrassed by her silly behavior with them. Of course, she was just following some stupid script.

Because our TV was on the blink, I had to miss Annette's final episode on DTS in later May. That one, I read later, was about Gina running for Class President. That deprivation (and a situation I'll discuss at an appropriate point later), sank me into a slough of loneliness and depression. After two years of old images of Annette, my third year of imaginary love was wearing me out. In its first six months I never saw my darling, and now I'd had four months of blasts of her beauty and subsequent fits of disappointment. And the coming months promised no fuel for my romantic obsession. Maybe she'd sing more songs on the radio, but there was no way I'd ever see whatever movie she might make. Hopeless love...

By now, my abstract, platonic passion for Annette was losing its punch, my adoration fading. I started regretting my oath of eternal love. In the moving feast of her TV appearances, I often forgot the magic incantation of my love for her at the end of journal entries. In her stardom, Annette had moved so far away and above me that by summer, I saw my fantasies were sheer insanity. I simply had to stop loving her, a horrifying prospect. Easier said than done...

(At this venerable age, I see that the images I idolized weren't of any real girl but of a media creature, a lovely character in someone else's fantasy. I was an idolator in the cult of Annette.)

#

A joyous theme in my personal life throughout that spring was dancing. The weekly dances in my boudoir ballroom settled down into a Thursday night schedule, but others were frequent at local birthday parties, at 4-H meetings, and even at a new ice-cream parlor in Lockesburg, where I was usually asked to bring my phonograph and record collection. A couple more times I got to go to the Teen Hop in Texarkana, once taken there by a 4-H mother from Melrose and another time by Daddy who had shopping to do in the big city. That time, sister Judy came along, and she flailed around in front of the TV cameras like a spastic giraffe. Herschel interviewed me again, and I put in a plug for our café on Penney Hill. Any fame was again fleeting.

Early along in January, several Frog Level Boys showed up one Thursday evening wanting to come to my hop. Though I didn't learn their names right then, I extended my brotherly love calling them *amigos*, which confused them considerably. I was touched to see how protectively they held hands to run carefully across the highway. Their sweet camaraderie was something I sorely missed in my solitary, if nonetheless social, existence on the Hill.

Shelba and Elizabeth got a couple of them up to dance, but most just wanted to read comic books. When I played the Everly Brothers' hit "Wake Up, Little Susy," two of them danced joyfully with each other, and the rest of us paid no attention to the scandal. After all, they were either brothers or cousins... On later Thursdays, I learned most of their names, some odd like Cletus or Delwin, but the others an assortment of Jims, Toms, and Johns. At later hops, they loosened up to dance with girls, but a few still danced with each other. After all, girls could dance together—why not boys?

In the background of my faithfully following Annette's TV appearances and frequent dance parties, I kept on fantasizing my a future family. By the start of school, I'd written descriptions of each of my planned sons with physical details and character comments but had no idea what to do with the pages. It was enough that they clarified my visions of the boys.

Once school started with my new love for everybody, I got swamped with so many ideas for stories I had no time to write them down. After that first visit by the Frog Level kids, in order to experience their happy camaraderie, I decided to return again to my old theme of a group of related boys. Before I knew it, I was folding the Frog Level Boys in together with the bunch of imaginary sons and consolidating their character sketches.

At school I soon saw more boys for brotherly love whose details I could swipe for my creations. Within a month or so, I had the characters down pretty good but was at a loss what to do with them plot-wise. Piecemeal, I started concocting rural adventures for two or three of them at a time to dramatize their affectionate and supportive relationships. Again I was exercising my literary magic to conjure up a happy world, not one with me in it, but still a happy one. Less happy was when I got an envelope from Walt Disney Magazine returning my story "High Water on the Cossatot" after almost a year. They'd been trying to edit it down short enough to publish while keeping its "rural tone." I was disappointed but still happy that they'd liked its tone.

By the end of March, thanks to writing between chores, while at slow work, instead of going to bed on time, in Study Hall periods, on the school bus, and in productive cogitation on my long walks uphill home from Mary Nell's, I had a pile of episodes that might have made a good TV series. But like wanting to be a popular singer, I hadn't a clue how to make that happen. Having done their emotional job for me, the magical pages got filed with my novels, but they've since

disappeared. I sorely regret losing them because they were probably the best writing I did as a teenager, jam-packed full of brotherly/paternal love.

Another theme that spring in my personal life was generally about the Church and specifically about driving. (I bet you've been waiting ever since that comment about fish for school lunches on Fridays for these perennial issues in an adolescent life.) The instructional visits by Father Jordan continued sporadically, but they were neither anticipated nor appreciated. Once, having read that Roberta Shore, my darling's main rival for teen stardom, was a Mormon, I asked what kind of religion that was. Without explaining, Father Jordan called them accursed heretics practicing polygamy and made them sound far worse than normal Protestants. About Hindus and Mohammedans and their "false gods" and idols, he answered with even less information.

By late that spring, fully content with my new Love-Each-Other faith, I'd written off mostly all the cult's canonical teachings as lame apologies for senseless myths and rules. However, for some ungodly—I use this word on purpose.—reason, my deeply indoctrinated mind couldn't stop thinking of sex as mortally sinful, repulsive, repugnant, etc. Otherwise, I rejected everything from paradise, original sin, messianism, resurrections, rituals, and notions of heaven and hell to the moral authority of man-made institutions, governments included.

Apparently, I'd somehow become a complete anarchist, though not an atheist. I was perfectly fine with there being some supreme being out there somewhere, a power with little interest in this puny world and immensely more involved in the bigger picture of the universe and its galaxies. Unfortunately, the guilt-ridden, twisted idea of sex as sin, like a Catholic cult birthmark on my psyche, took a long, long time to die.

We still went to Dequeen on Sundays for Mass, which I could easily ignore, occupied as I was usually with romantic fantasies or more immediate affectionate feelings for folks in the pews around me. It was difficult whipping up my each-other love for the older folks, but I tried hard. Often folks saw me grinning at them and smiled back. About once a month, I'd confess to an impure interlude in bed, a remarkably infrequent rate of masturbation for a teenage boy. Usually I suffered hideous remorse and self-loathing for several days and nights till the next Sunday's absolution, feeling miserably unworthy to think of Annette, much less imagine loving her.

One Sunday early in the New Year, Mamacita said Daddy would let her teach me to drive the car, a newer DeSoto with automatic transmission. She closely supervised me on the highway north to Dequeen and then took over outside that town (pop. 7,000 and seat of Sevier County). Then I'd drive us home again. It was a snap on the basically empty highway, simply a matter of steering straight. Any time I got close to 40 mph, Mom made me slow down. If a car came up from behind, I had to slow way down and pull onto the shoulder, which I even then knew was a poor driving strategy. Soon she started letting me drive in town too and park near the church. That was good practice for traffic rules, stopping, turning, and backing up.

In late March when we got back from church, Mamacita arranged that Daddy would teach me to parallel park. He got out his ancient Ford Model T (stashed in the garage these many years under a tarp and piles of boxes) and parked it at a reasonable distance behind Kent's old pickup along the front fence. The old Ford he'd kept since before he and Mom got married. Anyway, his parking instructions were simple: "Do it like the book says." I should have remembered his bike-riding lesson, but that had been seven years ago. Carefully, I positioned the car properly to back

in between the two vehicles, pulled forward a bit to straighten it out, and then triumphantly backed up a tad to center it in the space. Clunk!

I'd misjudged the length of the DeSoto and lightly bumped into the Ford's bumper. Daddy whipped open the car door and dragged me out of the seat onto the ground, angrier than I'd ever seen him. He shouted that I was never to touch the car again and switched me on the back and arm with a tree branch. I scrambled up and tore off running through the persimmon grove back to the gravel pit. Hiding in my singing hole where only the hogs could hear me, I wept piteously. Mom didn't know my shame. She said that Daddy reported I knew how to park okay, and she could arrange for me to take the driving test for a license.

A few more Sundays driving to and from church restored my confidence, and one day in mid-April I took off from school to come to Dequeen for the driving test. In the test vehicle, an automatic Chevrolet of some sort, I maneuvered easily through stop lights and signs, left and right turns, and such complex operations with no comments from the tester. Then came the part about parking... Backing into the regulation-sized parking space between two barriers, I tried hard to get a sense of the size of the strange vehicle, but I must have cut too sharply and backed into the curb. So I pulled out and started over. This time the car slid nicely back into the space, but at the tail end of the turning in, the corner of its front bumper barely brushed the end of the almost invisible barrier. The tester said, "Sorry, kid. You can test again next month."

This failure, though only by a hair, plunged me into a deep, dark depression, one of my blackest, inspiring an idea for a grisly murder story, fortunately unwritten. I immediately got real sick and missed a few days of school for the flu. In my sick misery, I adjusted to my humiliating failure and reconciled myself to never getting a license. Why did I need to drive anyway? I wouldn't be going out with girls, and where did I need to go otherwise? I'd just remain a prisoner on Penney Hill until next year and then go away to college. Only one more year...

Even without a license, Mamacita still let me drive to church, and ironically I often managed to parallel park along the curb of the Dequeen street with no problem. Of course, I avoided doing it between two cars, which was sort of cheating. My depression faded into anticipation of my imminent birthday, romantic orgies with Annette's characters on Zorro and DTS, and meeting more adorable boys to love like my new *amigo* Danny in ninth. Finally, my black mood was utterly demolished when I got some spectacular news to be announced in the next chapter.

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LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

Ashdown High School was a fairly idyllic setting for my last two years of grade school. It was nicely modern, clean, and orderly. In a tiny town (pop. 3,000), the school was unbothered by the sad social problems of bigger or more urban schools. We had no gangs, no schoolyard bullies, no fights or public frays. Teachers were generally friendly and forgiving. Students were very live and let live with each other, all of white of skin and in some Christian sect.

This homogenous student body was a perfect population for me to practice my new creed of loving each other. None of the racial tensions, political pressures, or new-fangled sexual/gender issues that torment and divide adolescents nowadays... Nor was there (to my knowledge) any sort of drug culture, apart from your standard alcohol and tobacco addictions, and I had nothing to do with either of those vices. A bunch of boys, including dear Denny—who liked cigars—would gather under the “smoking tree” in the far corner of the schoolyard, a few girls too, to puff on cigarettes. Sometimes I hung around, non-smoking, just to be near my buddy.

Being white, though no longer in a Christian cult that mutilated its male members, I managed to blend easily in with my uncut Baptist and Methodist *amigos* and *campaneros*. Meanwhile, my reputation spread as being a “Whiz Kid,” and I’d catch comments about my big brain—because I’d made straight A’s last semester. I doubted my brain was any bigger than anybody else’s. As a ritual in loving others, at times I liked to hold kids’ heads gently between my hands, sending love directly into their brains. Some fled my “laying on of hands,” but most enjoyed the blessing. One girl asked if I planned to become a preacher. God forbid!

In this spring semester of my Junior year, I most appreciated Mrs. Briant’s fun class in Spanish, especially fun with Maxito there too. Most other classmates seemed to have a hard time remembering the vocabulary and often the genders of things. I found both of those things easy to remember. I loved the graceful flow of Spanish, kind of like singing, but some of the verb tenses got confusing. In the first semester, I’d read through the whole textbook “El Camino Real” and had already learned what we were covering now in class. In a word it was a *brisa* (breeze).

By the end of March, I’d read the few simple Spanish books in the school’s library (of course using a dictionary), and the Ashdown Public Library had none at all. I learned many new words to use in loving folks, like calling Denny *corazón* (heart) or cute little Tommy Youngblood in Seventh—a vision of my imaginary third son Gnon—*hijito* (little son). With so few diminutives or endearments, English was terribly poor in affectionate vocabulary.

My textbook (which I sentimentally still have!) was full of pictures of Mexican people and places, but my favorite was the title-page picture of an amazing pyramid. Mrs. Briant said it was built nearly two thousand years ago by a lost civilization. (I now know it to be the Pyramid of the Sun at Teotihuacan, my first exposure to Pre-Columbian Mesoamerica.) The book included lots of sections on Mexican geography and history, like Emperor Maximilian and Empress Carlota, and about the other countries in the Hispanic Americas, Simon Bolivar, ancient Peru, etc.

Naturally, exotic Mexico inspired me literarily, and I started an adventure novel about a teenager riding his bike to Mexico for a summer on their beaches. The bike trip soon got too boring, and I abandoned the brave rider somewhere out in the swamps of Louisiana. (I would only travel to Mexico—Puerto Vallarta—some 25 years later and soon after that fall into the rabbit hole of the Aztec ceremonial calendar, a 40-year obsession.)

Other classes were rather less engrossing, though the science and math classes were wonderfully instructive. I won't waste your attention on the least, though American History was notable for one thing. Coach Barnett (also my Track coach) had a way of saying "uh" between every word out of his mouth. I tried counting, making a mark for every "uh," but he always left me in the dust. A fairly new teacher, he must have still lacked self-confidence. On the track my one day a week, Coach watched me sprint and jump hurdles and always said, "Looking good." Rounding out my physical activity, many lunch hours I played volleyball or four-square ball in the gym with Denny, Maxito, *y con otros queridos*, or we'd hang out in the bleachers chatting.

Meanwhile, Miss Susy's English Lit class generally kept my attention. Many of our reading assignments I'd already read back in my Texas years, but I loved reviewing and having literary discussions about them. Early in that spring semester, she assigned us to read Edgar Allan Poe's long poem "The Raven," my absolute favorite poem, and memorize it, which was no problem because my memory was more or less photographic. (On tests like in Chemistry or History, I could just visualize the page in the book and read off the answer.)

Reciting it in class, I accompanied the lines with appropriate emotions and rhetorical gestures, and my classmates went wild. Of course, many of them got even more insecure about their own partial recitations. Sweating bullets about getting called on, Denny was reprieved for a few more days, and I coached him to recite several stanzas. Miss Susy proudly arranged for me to recite it in one morning's assembly from the stage. With my eyes closed (to avoid seeing the audience and to read from the pages), I added all the dramatic gestures, and got a huge round of applause.

In my new each-other creed, I tried to love as many girls as I could. The younger ones were easier to approach and giggled when I said I loved them. Boys mostly blushed or ignored me. When I'd hold their heads in my ritual, older girls often thought I was going to kiss them, and some even tried unsuccessfully to kiss me. They seemed to like hugs better, as though hoping maybe my "smart cooties" might rub off on them. A Senior *querida*, a sweet girl named Sara with dark-rimmed glasses, became a good friend over lunches and recess conversations.

One recess sitting on the swings, Sara seemed particularly moody. She suddenly upped and said something was bothering everybody. Of course, I was surprised and got apprehensive. Starting to cry, Sara said everybody hated the way I carried on about our classes being "easy as pie." She sobbed, "Richard, honey, we're just not like that here in Ashdown!" My eyes were opened to the cruel truth of her words, and I was deeply chastened, immediately resolving somehow to be more humble and reserved about displaying my "big-brainage." Through our Counselor, Mr. Beck, I agreed to tutor some kids struggling with math in the lower grades, and I refrained from crowing about my perfect scores on tests. I carefully hid any evidence of my apparent photographic memory and didn't ask teachers any more trick questions.

Between my continuing fixation on Annette's disappointing TV appearances and spreading my each-other affections around as widely as possible, I still found emotional time to watch out for potential girl-friends. It was the same old story of nobody comparing with my idol. However, I determined to consider a little blonde in Ninth named Louise. Curly-headed and vivacious, Louise was another Shirley Temple. She accepted my each-other love graciously and looked shyly away. I took her small hand in mine and called her the most beautiful girl in school, adding that I hoped we could be great friends. Louise withdrew her hand and said I was too old for her. She was absolutely correct, and I narrowed my sights to Tenth grade and my own class, where there were no obvious candidates.

Embarrassed now by my Whiz Kid reputation, I nevertheless gave it my best when I sat down to the Scholastic Aptitude Test in February. It wasn't easy as pie, but I thought it definitely a nice piece of cake. Publicly, I said nothing while we waited several days for the results. When it was my turn to meet with Mr. Beck, he congratulated me on ranking as a college senior in all three sections. I tried to thank him humbly and suggested we not spread this information around. My brain didn't need any more wise-ass publicity. He seemed to understand my dilemma.

A couple days later, I got a message (fortunately in the middle of Mr. Franks' psychological sermon) to come to the Principal's office. Mr. Flaherty, whom I'd rarely ever seen, was there with Mr. Beck and a strange guy they introduced as Mr. Cunningham with Southwestern Gas and Electric Company. The business man explained that his company was holding an essay contest, the winner to go to a big atomic energy conference in Atlantic City, New Jersey. My teachers figured I'd have a good shot at winning. I jumped at the chance.

Their contest would run first amongst high school students in three regions of Arkansas: north, central and south. The winners of the regions would then vie for the grand prize, the big trip to the First National Youth Conference on the Atom. Mr. Cunningham gave me lots of advice and models of writings about the essay's theme. I entitled it pretentiously "What Is Being Done by Southwestern Electric Power Company and Other Power Companies to Develop Electric Power from the Atom." It was a totally new subject for me and fun to learn about, but I tried to keep a low profile on the brainy matter. I swore my closest *queridos* to secrecy.

The last half of February was heavy-duty multi-tasking for me, dealing with constant classes, frequent work, happy parties of American Bandstand and my own bedroom hops, fits of writing on the Frog Level Boys' and other stories. the eternal zoo (now including a young fox named Fauntleroy), and my continual adoration of Annette in her guest spots. In the midst of that busyness, I somehow found time to draft my essay for the contest and finished it on March 2.

I guess I'm fortunate to still have a handwritten copy of what I submitted in a clean typed form. (Remember my professional-level typing skills in the school office where I made huge numbers of mimeograph stencils for tests and homework forms.) I read this essay now with a certain revulsion at the blatant political propaganda in its opening sentences, but actually all my blather about free enterprise that now sounds like crusty, reactionary ideology was in 1959 pretty much everyone's patriotic attitude. The rest of the essay reads like an extremely lucid and organized research paper, not at all a bad piece of PR even from today's standpoint.

After submitting my essay to Mr. Cunningham, the first part of March was very low-key. There were, of course, many ritual fantasies of Annette around her TV appearances, and every time I heard her Tall Paul on the radio or juke box, I liked it less. Kay picked me up for a girl's birthday party where we played a stupid kissing game but had a good dance (to my records). He also took me to a 4-H meetings with games. A new little boy with curly hair named Mickey started riding the bus from Wilton, looking just like I imagined my future son Damon. I kept feeling a strong brotherly/fatherly love and gave him a tender head-hug.

The weekend when spring officially started at last, I began to feel anxious about the essay. My self-confidence was faltering. To relieve my worries, I did what I've done many, many times since: worked outdoors. I went out with a hatchet and saw and trimmed the mass of ligustrum bushes overgrowing all around the house, hauled the mountain of branches out into the corner of the field, and then sat under the hickory tree to write a long idyllic nature poem.

That Monday morning after English Lit class Miss Susy asked me to stay for a moment. She said she was worried about me telling kids I loved them. I said I was just loving my neighbors—like Jesus told us to do. She frowned and said boys weren't supposed to love each other, and I shouldn't love more than one girl at a time. Miss Susy told me to stop my touching and head-holding because lots of the older kids thought it was weird and sort of perverted. To me, perverted meant crazy, sick in the head. Not even referring to my Jesus argument, her ridiculous rules knocked me for a loop, and I walked away without a word.

All that day I blindly obeyed Miss Susy's authoritarian instructions and toned down my each-other affections, was careful with physical contact, and no longer said "Love you" as a greeting or parting comment. Of course, I kept on calling folks *amigo* and such. On the school bus home, little Guy grabbed my head, pressed his forehead to mine, and ordered, "Love me!" I hugged him fondly. It seemed so unnatural, perverted even, to refrain from love-each-other gestures. On my solitary zoo-chores, I kept wondering why on earth doing what Jesus said we should do would make Christian folks think I was perverted.

In Tuesday morning's Study Hall, I managed to figure out why. To Miss Susy (and probably most other folks), "love" apparently meant "be in love with," sexually desire—i.e., have the hots for someone. Having decided to stop being in love with Annette, I certainly didn't feel anything sexual for anyone, and to Miss Susy's narrow mind, boys shouldn't "love" boys, and one should "love" only one girl at a time. In spite of being self-proclaimed Christians, poor folks like her didn't know that in platonic love those restrictions were meaningless. So, I could go on feeling the love-each-other emotions for my *queridos*, just not show it so much anymore.

My next opportunity to process the new restrictions came that afternoon while running around the track. While I loped along, I questioned Jesus's instructions (love thy neighbor, etc.) which I'd generalized to love-each-other (i.e. everybody). Now, a supremely compassionate God could probably do that, but how could a mere human being like me love the millions of strangers in the world? Maybe Jesus really did mean "neighbor" as in someone we know or socially relate to. Of course, we can always choose whom we relate socially to. So, I was still free to love anyone I chose—which was as many as possible, though not demonstratively.

In Wednesday morning's Study Hall, Mr. Cunningham showed up with fabulous news. My essay had won for the central region! Now I'd compete with the winners from the other regions, a boy from Texarkana for the south, and another from Fayetteville for the north. The gas company managers would interview each of us and then decide which should represent Arkansas at the conference. The word got around school right away, and the rest of the day was a flurry of warm congratulations, though premature. As my closest friends, Denny and Maxito apparently basked in my reflected glory, making it hard for me to respond humbly.

On Thursday evening, Denny drove up to Penney Hill with his friend Terry for my bedroom hop. They showed up quite a while early, and we hung out playing pinball machines and gabbing. I told my *amigos* that Miss Susy had complained about my loving behavior and asked if they thought I was perverted. Terry said she was just a sour old maid. Denny suggested I give her one of my head-hugs, gave me one, and blushed furiously. I went out to the juke box and played an old song by The Teddy Bears. As I sang along: "To know, know, know him / Is to love, love, love him / Just to see him smile / Makes my life worthwhile," my *querido* blushed again.

Before kids showed up to dance, we went over to the backyard for my buddies to see the latest litter of puppies ripe for new homes. Only Duchess knew who their father was. I'd keep a male with pale brown spots on white, already inappropriately named Lobo. Denny chose a female with black spots he'd name Nina, and Terry nabbed a much browner male to name Butch. The other two I planned to unload on the evening's dancers, just arriving. Delwin from Frog Level took one, and Iona took the last for her brother Reese. Duchess didn't even say goodbye to them.

While I got the hop jumping with some hot songs on the record player, Terry danced some with Shelba and Iona, and soon connected with Elizabeth. She was obviously smitten with his stylish clothes and ducktail. (Incidentally, Terry was the grandson of a former mayor of Ashdown, so of a certain chic class.) Denny danced some with Shelba and Ethel, though not very gracefully, and then sat on my bed shyly watching us frolic. When he got up and ambled outside, I asked freckly Albert from Wilton to DJ for me a while and followed.

Denny went over to our patio out front under the tall pines and sat on the bench in the pinkish glow of the café's neons. I joined him, asking nonchalantly, "How's it hanging?" He looked at me sideways, grinned wickedly, and said, "Long enough, amigo." A flood of that strange, wild brotherly love washed over me, and I had to say it out loud.

"You know, I've always wished I had a brother..." He leaned against my shoulder. "Me too..." (Indeed, my Denny was an only child.) I was elated. "Let's declare that we are! Like twin brothers separated at birth!" He laughed joyously. "We're brothers in Christ!" That reined in my horses pretty hard, and I grudgingly accepted *mi hermano's* personal frame of reference. Close enough... To change the tone of our talk, I mentioned that in Spanish his name was Dionisio, like the Greek god of wine Dionysius. Denny didn't like wine, he said, preferring rum, but I doubted he'd tasted much of either intoxicant.

Since we were intimate brothers now, I asked him something I'd been wondering about for a long time: how come he never went out with girls? "You've got a car—go out to places around Ashdown—and lots of chicks are hot for you!" Denny guffawed. "That's my problem! I don't want to get caught by no girl till I'm grown up! But some sure is tempting, like that Betty Lou." I understood his dilemma and remarked how my old buddy Bodie had that happen to him back in Tenth Grade, and now he was a husband-father at 17.

Denny confided that his Dad had taught him this lesson and forbidden him ever to mess around with girls. It seemed we both were living more or less chaste lives, perhaps for related reasons. In turn, for the first time I confided in someone, my new brother, that for three years I'd been fanatically in love with Annette Funicello—and didn't "mess with" girls otherwise. I neglected to say that my fanaticism was currently waning. Denny looked up into the pinkness and said, "Now I think I get your each-other thing. All that love with nowhere to go except out to everybody—like squeezing a balloon till it pops." His brotherly understanding was profound, and after a quiet while we went back to the hop.

I had an unusually hard time sleeping Friday night, tossed between the excitement of winning in the regional contest, frustration about trying to stop loving Annette, and the quandary of how to love my *amigos*. After scribbling on another Frog Level Boys story and solo pinball games, I fell asleep but soon half-woke in the dark and without remorse touched myself impurely. It felt like opening a pressure valve, and afterwards I slept peacefully. Only in the morning did I experience a vague sense of provisional guilt for a debatable infraction.

That being Easter weekend, I had only one day till confession to get my purity renewed, though by now I wasn't terribly concerned with hypothetical sins. Busy with work in the café and the inevitable mowing, I fought the habitual urge to fantasize my love for Annette—not because I felt unworthy, but because it was such an empty exercise idolizing her and those phantasmal kisses. I'd taken a giant step away from the inaccessible TV star, though my journal was full of doubts and the usual ritual incantations.

Off from school on Monday too, Daddy took me to the Men's Store in Ashdown to get some new clothes for the essay interview—and hopefully for the future conference. It was like getting new Easter duds, just a day late. We got a sharp white shirt, a fancy blue-spotted tie, and a grey pin-striped suit with wide lapels (no vest). He also bought me two new polo shirts, explaining them away as presents for my upcoming birthday next month.

Afterwards, we went to the Drug Store for magazines, some for Daddy about hunting and fishing and for me a Photoplay with a spread about Annette. (I still couldn't abandon her completely.) *Mi hermano hermoso* Dionisio was working the soda fountain and jerked us two perfect brown cows. Heading home, Daddy said he was sure goofy-looking, like dopey Ed Norton on "The Honeymooners." I certainly didn't agree with that insulting comparison. That afternoon at Lefty's I got a haircut, but not in the flattop style.

In the excitement of it all, that evening I wrote on my Frog Level story and completely spaced out Annette on the Danny Thomas Show—good progress in forgetting her. All the next day at school, I didn't think of her at all—only once in the evening, wistfully, while I slopped the hogs. I carried my new suit to school in a suit-bag and changed in the restroom for my 10 o'clock interview in Mr. Flaherty's office with Mr. Cunningham, a big shot named Mr. Brant, and the company's state manager. They asked me questions about hobbies, school favorites, and things like that and then took two pictures.

Afterwards, walking down the hall I waved to little Louise, and she skipped away. That was okay since I'd never be able to love her like Annette, nor ever "go out" with her. Over the holiday weekend, I'd decided, like Denny, not to let any girl "catch" me again. Annette had enslaved me platonically for three years, and now there was no way I'd ever let one snag me with her sexual snares. I knew pretty much how to live without thinking of sex. There were so many other "entertainments" in life without all that stress and frustration.

For example, the next couple days were very full socially: another dance at McDougal's with my gal-pals and on Friday a 4-H Council in Dequeen. They held a talent contest where I'd planned to sing Frankie's "Venus" but didn't because I no longer believed in those lyrics. "Venus, if you will / Please send a little girl for me to thrill..." To thrill a little girl meant one thing only to me now, one disgusting, sexual thing I'd never want to sing about.

When Ms. Mannis, our club advisor, got me home to the Hill, Daddy said Mr. Cunningham had stopped by to say I won. I WON the state contest! I'd never been so happy! Mr. Cunningham had said my essay was the very best in all three states. Of course, when everybody crowded round to congratulate me, I tried to be humble and not show my terrific pride.

Late Saturday morning, Aunt Jackie arrived for a visit with Uncle Joe and their two little kids, Tommy a tiny baby and Mike at two, both flaming redheads and loud. I had to move to a cot in Judy's room, which meant I wouldn't get anything done on my current story. Besides work and

another mowing that weekend, I went out into the woods to cut dogwood and redbud flowers for Irene and me to make bouquets on the café tables with my purple iris from the front yard.

In that day's Texarkana Gazette, there was an article with pictures of me and Ed Fougerousse, my competitor from Sacred Heart High School. I was amazed to learn that he too was a Catholic. My picture was very dignified in my new suit and handsome, even with my glasses, and without glasses, Ed looked like a friendly sort in a bowtie. At church on Sunday, Father Jordan announced my win in his sermon. When Mr. Franks announced it in Monday's assembly, there was applause, and all day was busy with humbly accepting everybody's congratulations.

My excitement over winning the contest kept mounting, and Sunday night, maybe also as a result of sleeping on the cot in Judy's room, I had a long dream of Annette walking along a pretty path with a tall guy (Tall Paul) that I recognized as Paul Anka. In the journal, I wrote, "I cried at him, 'I have as much right to love her as you do! Just because you have royal blood doesn't give you any privileges here.'" There followed a kissing scene with the dreamy Annette which I'd blush to quote. My insane obsession had not yet released me from its insidious clutches. Incidentally, that reference to royal blood must relate to their noble celebrity and my mortal nobodiness.

Or maybe it was because I was getting sick. Monday morning I felt poorly but still went to school. By noon I felt terrible, and Daddy called his friend Lester to pick me up. At home I found a letter from Ed congratulating me and wanting to be pen pals, which is also what I had in mind. Then I collapsed for the week of flu and finally got better by Friday evening.

I spent those miserable, nearly unconscious days desperately reading in an old encyclopedia that Mamacita had packed away ever since Indiana. That was how I found pictures of naked Greek and Roman gods and heroes and spent the weekend trying to draw them. I'd never seen stark naked folks before, and their smooth, sculpted bodies looked incredibly beautiful and sensuous. Drawing their torsos, thighs, and buttocks got me so hot that I had to let off steam a number of times in the nights, leaving any remorse appropriately for Sunday morning's confession.

Symbolically purified, I spent the next week before my big trip in mounting excitement. The trip kept getting shorter, losing a day before and after the conference. Two more disappeared because somebody's folks worried about airplanes, and we'd have to take the train. But I wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth, and besides, I'd never ridden on a train. Flying in a plane was fairly thrilling but a bit boring being so high above everything. From a train, I'd get to see the countryside and a bunch of towns and cities.

That Tuesday we got our annuals, fancy white padded volumes entitled Panther Eyes with a neat panther face. That led to some days of getting friends to write in yours for memories and to sign their pictures. Mine was soon crammed with good feelings and well wishes. I saved a page for Denny, and we sat in the gym bleachers writing to each other. Buried in his standard comments and lucky wishes was a sentence that gives this old gay man a sentimental pause: "I think you are a handsome and verry (*sic!*) cute boy." (Handsome vs. cute?)

Speaking of handsome, I remarked in the journal about seeing some handsome boys and trying to draw a portrait of Most Handsome Gail Gill from his yearbook photo. That Sunday was my birthday which I celebrated out in the spring woods climbing trees naked.

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Around classes on Monday and Tuesday, I made a list of names and addresses to send *amigos* postcards and legitimately hugged lots of them farewell. At home I gave the front yard a good mowing and then packed my suitcase. At ten, Daddy took me to Texarkana and the train station, and waiting in the lobby, he slipped me a \$20 bill for spending money, though I'd brought one from my college fund too. Soon, a pale young man walked by holding a sign "RICHARD B," and introduced himself as Buford Herren who'd be our chaperone to the conference. He gave me my train ticket and another \$20. Saying bye to Daddy, I impulsively tried to hug him while he just stood there. I was amazed to find that we were now the same size.

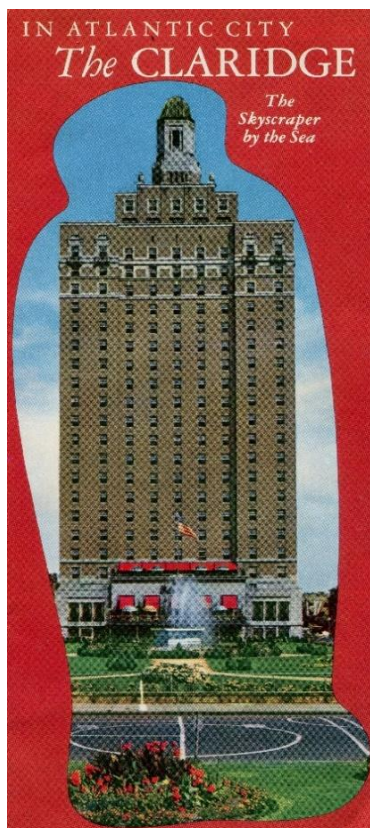
Reveling in the riches of so much spending money, I followed Mr. Herren past the ticket window and out onto the station platform by the waiting train, where I met Ebb Mobley from Kilgore, Texas, and Mike Ryan from Shreveport, Louisiana. I'll quote my journal impressions of these boys representing their states. "Ebb is a tall boy, 16, with blond hair and glasses like mine. He is a nice fellow but frankly, a little hammy. Mike is just a doll girl-wise. He has such straight white teeth and such an adorable lip, the molded type. His hair and his eyes are brown, and he wears it in a flattop with a cowlick on each side of his forehead, giving him a mohawk look." Mr. Herren explained that he was Mike's science teacher from Shreveport.

On board the train, we hit the hay right away in our little cubicles for what was left of the night. By morning, we were rolling across Missouri, and we chums just roamed around the train making fools of ourselves. At St. Louis we got off the train and killed time in the station looking at magazines. The train barreled across Illinois farmland into woodsy Indiana and the city of Terra Haute, where the three of us stood on the rear platform of the car, waving and shouting hi at people. Pretty soon, we lost two hours off the clock by crossing time zones.

The journal's next paragraph is a sad testimony to peer pressure. I uncharacteristically wrote: "One waiter we called Combo looked half-nigger and half-Chinese, about as dumb as they come." I'd never thought in such rude terms before, and my slur very likely quoted one or both of my companions. The train crossed a lot of Ohio that day, rolling through all kinds of towns, and as we three either trekked up and down the train or sat reading magazines, it seemed to get darker earlier than it should have.

We ate a sandwich supper in the dining car, where I was astounded by the exorbitant prices. If Daddy could charge such high prices in the café, we'd be stinking rich. We boys hit the sack soon in our sleeping shelves. Again, maybe from the unusual sleeping situation, that night Annette came to me in a dream and asked if I loved her. Of course, I recited my traditional litany of love. She sweetly said she loved me too, smiled invitingly, and disappeared. And I woke up with a "delicious pain" inside. My insane obsession obviously hadn't given up yet, sending the angel herself to lure me back under her spell. But I insisted that our love affair was over.

The porter woke us up early to get ready to change trains. We all sat in the lounge car watching Pennsylvania roll by and our arrival into Philadelphia. None of the others, including Mr. Herren, knew that poetically meant the City of Brotherly Love. We hung out in the station playing pinballs. As a grand master, I was impressed how good Ebb was at the flippers. On board the commuter train to Atlantic City, a tremendously unscenic ride, I fell asleep until we arrived. My companions and our chaperone were amazed to learn that the game of Monopoly was based on Atlantic City and its streets. Our hotel, the Claridge, was at the corner of Boardwalk and Park Place, the most expensive addresses on the gameboard.



Something tells me that at this point in the story of the trip, having already written it once, I should excerpt my journal. Here we go:

“We had a chauffeured Cadillac ride to the hotel where we registered and received badges and green briefcases full of materials. Then we changed clothes and went to hear a speech, ‘Miracles in the Making’ which was very boring. Then we had a get-acquainted luncheon of chicken with mushroom sauce (*called on the menu Creamed Chicken Fermi*). After this I went up to my room (*which I was sharing with Mr. Herren*) and wrote postcards, making myself nearly late for the three speeches of the afternoon ... on the industrial, agricultural, and medical uses of the atom (*also boring, but instructive*). Afterwards, we bummed around a while, and Mr. Herren disappeared!

“In bumming around, Mike, Ebb and I threw wet tissues out the windows (*16th floor rooms*) watching them splatter on the pavement so far below. (*None of us had ever seen such a tall building—24 floors.*)

“Mr. Herren wasn’t here for the banquet either, so we ate anyway (*a feast of Roast Sirloin of Beef Einstein with Mushroom Sauce Isotope*) and went out on Boardwalk again. Before the banquet, we’d gone down to the beach and got some shells. On this walk,

we played a game of miniature golf, which I lost, and on the way back Mike sang some lewd songs. He is deliciously sexy. (*Obviously, there was something going on in my psyche, but I hadn’t yet turned it into platonic brotherly love.*) Now I’m going to take a bath, and if Mr. Herren doesn’t show up, I’m going down to the other boys’ room.”

(*May 1, Friday*) “When I went back up to our room after spending the night on Mike’s couch, Mr. Herren was there. He’d gone to New York to look up a friend. So we dressed and went down to breakfast with Mike and Ebb... and then we walked along the Boardwalk to the Steel Pier for the Ripley ‘Believe It or Not’ exhibit. At an aquarium Mike and I bought some black sweatshirts



with sailboats on the front, and then we went back to the Claridge for another lunch and some more speeches, which weren’t too interesting. The last speaker was very long-winded and hardly said anything. After his speech, they adjourned the conference ... and I went upstairs to the Solarium to write a letter to Mom and Dad. I mailed it and after that took some pictures from the roof.

“That night we walked down along the Boardwalk. I had an artist draw my portrait. (*I was impressed at the time, but now see it as a very poor likeness—making me look like a thirteen-year-old with a totally wrong profile and nose. I guess I shouldn’t have expected much for a mere \$3.*) And then we went to an entertainment arcade to play a fun new game called Ski-Doo, which to my surprise, I turned out to be quite good at.

“On the way back to the hotel, we saw a bunch of girls all with the same kind of coats. Ebb observed, ‘They’re just like sheep. When one gets something, they all do too.’ Thinking aloud, I said indelicately, ‘I’d sure like to get into those sheep.’ (*I believe I was just acting out a typical macho teen-boy role for my companions and not implying imagined bestiality.*) Mike exclaimed, ‘I thought you were a nice boy!’ I got very embarrassed. Back at his room, Mike and I got some little square tissues from the bathroom and tossed them out the window. The wind caught them, and they fluttered out over the fountain in the dark like butterflies. Then we hustled to bed.”

That’s surely enough journal reportage of my representing Arkansas at the Conference on the Atom. We three state representatives and our chaperone agreed over breakfast that it had been no great shakes, especially with missing the opening day because of the train. Besides the less than gourmet food and forgettable speeches, it had at least been an impressive event. In our green packets we’d even gotten a welcome letter from President Eisenhower!

Our commuter train back to Philadelphia was at 12:45, giving Mike and me time to wander in the park and watch kids play baseball. On the commuter ride, the trainman told us the Phillies were in town at Connie Mack Stadium playing the Cubs. Our train for home would leave in the evening, again freeing Mike and me to sightsee all afternoon. Ebb wanted to read and relax with Mr. Herren in the waiting room, so I had the exclusive wonderful company of my newest *amigo*, admiring his good looks and enjoying his raunchy remarks about girls.

Leaving our luggage in a locker, Mike and I walked down to the stadium to watch some of the baseball game and eat hot dogs. At a souvenir stand, I admired a little Italian boy in a captain’s hat, his black hair hanging down over brown eyes. In the journal I for some reason felt the need to add: “He was just adorable.” No dancing around about brotherly or fatherly love. But the vision was momentary because Mike and I took off on the long walk to Independence Hall.

The route took us through downtown where everybody we saw was a Negro. I wondered what it would be like to love them like my neighbors, black *amigos*. Seeing several very handsome guys and beautiful girls along the way, I must have been quoting my confederate Mike when I wrote: “It was sickening.” Again, peer pressure affecting adolescent attitudes... At the historic Hall, we both did something very few folks since have been allowed to do. We stuck our hands into the crack in the Liberty Bell! One of us made a lewd comment about fingers in a crack.

From there we took a bus and a subway to 46th Street and the WFIL-TV station. Mike was also a fan of American Bandstand. As I’d feared, it was closed for the Saturday, and we walked around back to the wide loading-dock door where I knew special Bandstand guests entered from behind a big curtain. I bowed my head down onto the dock where I figured Annette had stood before entering to sing Tall Paul. It was pure anguish to think that this was the closest I’d ever come to my angel-idol, or ever would, a tiny spot where she’d once stood. It felt like a final farewell. From now on, no girl was going to trap me in her love knots.

Heading back to the train station, we got on the subway again, and at 19th we changed to a bus to 15th. Some cute girls from a school—a tartan-skirted school uniform—got on the bus, and I heard them call one Doris. She was knock-out beautiful with black hair, brown eyes, and Roman nose, an Annette on steroids, more stunning than Victoria in her short shorts. I gawked shamelessly. At 15th Street the girls piled off the bus with us right behind, slavering. Halfway out the door, they realized it wasn’t their stop and rushed around us two back onto the bus. Doris almost bumped into me and smiled beamingly, leaving me a quivering wreck.

On the way back to the station, I told Mike I was in love again, here mere moments after swearing off girls' love-traps. My ardor had cooled by the time we rejoined Ebb and Mr. Herren for supper and games of pinball. All evening I kept thinking about Doris and wondering why beauty always affected me so deeply, whether in a girl or a boy. Seeing someone truly beautiful made me hunger to consume somehow, to embrace or possess them utterly.

On the train, lying on our bunks on the top, Mike started joking around making funny rhymes in everything he or we said. For about a half-hour he kept us in stitches. Once I called him an idiot, and he replied, "You're not only crazy / But also lazy. / The way you leer, / People'd think you a queer." I'd never heard that phrase (or of the concept) before, though I knew the adjective as in 'a queer duck,' so I heard Mike without understanding what he actually said. Nobody reacted to the impromptu, perhaps unintended slur. I wonder nowadays if my admiring looks at Mike and "adorable" little boys were in fact leers. Platonic leers?

Between meals in the dining car, our Sunday on the train to St. Louis was spent roaming up and down the aisles bird-dogging girls. They weren't found very frequently, but the hunt for "dolls" with my chums was lots of fun. For the first time in my life, I felt like a normal teenaged boy. After a supper at the station, we boarded the next train with Mike and Mr. Herren in one car and Ebb and I in another. We boys sat in the dome car for some last time together cracking jokes. The Shreveport guys were transferring in the middle of the night, so we said goodbye, and Ebb and I went off to our bunks. I was real sad saying bye to Mike, and Ebb and I parted in Texarkana, our big adventure now over.

It was still early in the morning, and I had to wait in the station for Daddy. On the drive, I jabbered about the skyscraper hotel and fancy boardwalk but didn't say much about the atom conference itself. He dropped me off at school in time for Miss Susy's class where she had me report on the trip, and I told it all over again to the Spanish class. Back at home, I wrote a letter to Ed with the report, hoping he didn't feel too bad about losing the essay contest.

Apart from all the reporting, I didn't think much about the trip nor even miss the guys. Back to Arkansas... At school on Tuesday, Mr. Franks said they wanted me to give a talk to the Rotary Club the next day, and Mr. Beck invited me to do the same for the Lions the coming week. At noon on Wednesday, Mr. Franks took me there in my suit for a T-bone steak lunch, after which I gave my talk. At home that afternoon, I mowed grass around the motel cabins without a thought in my head, no memories of the trip or futile fantasies of romance. Having apparently escaped at last from Annette's enchantment, my life felt like a peaceful dream of sun and summer.

#

The last couple weeks of school were fairly uneventful. The graduating seniors had a program in assembly, and my *muchachas-amigas* Sara and Martha Kaye cried a lot. Then they all took off on the traditional class trip to New Orleans. Meanwhile, I too got very emotional about the coming summer without my *hermanos* Denny and Maxito. Understandably, I also started missing Mike and Ebb, reminiscing fondly about our exploits, particularly touring Philadelphia.

Parting with my *amigos* made me so lonely that stale old fantasies of Annette kept sneaking back into my head—along with fresh lascivious thoughts of Victoria and Doris. Dreadfully lonely for any kind of companionship, boy or girl, that Wednesday night I "jacked off" as Mike once called the impure act, which no longer felt impure, more an ecstatic release with no aftermath of guilt.

It felt so good that I unrepentantly did it again in the morning to banish the lonelies and a few more times that week. I ritually confessed the collection of misdeeds on Sunday.

For old times' sake, on Monday I watched the Danny Thomas Show with Annette playing the Italian girl Gina with much silliness about boyfriends. It plucked my heartstrings, but I looked at the famous girl now with newly objective eyes. She was indeed pretty and nicely shaped but no longer an angel. I realized that I still "loved" her in a neighborly caring way, but it felt like my passion had finally burned down to ashes.

On the other hand, my loneliness kept growing, stoked by all the cute girls and handsome guys I saw in my now frequent work in the café. Several times in the solitary nights, I assuaged my lonelies manually and then unloaded them *en masse* in next Sunday's confessional. In addition, I took some naked walks in the woods and made love to my favorite trees, innocent dalliances I never bothered Father Jordan with. The only contrition I felt for my therapeutic orgies was acknowledging that maybe I was letting myself go overboard, and I resolved not to let it become a habit. I didn't want to go blind.

The following Monday, I again saw Annette on the Danny Thomas Show and had a serious romantic relapse. In the journal I launched into another panegyric on her beauty and how I would have kissed her all over. All my renunciation went out the window when I found a terrible letter in the latest issue of Teen criticizing my darling's perfection and preferring Doreen Tracey. I heartily disagreed, proclaiming my eternal love and adoration, but soon I stopped thinking about her or sexy stuff. At work the next afternoon, I was horribly abashed to overhear two local guys in a booth talking about me. One wondered what "the kid" did for kicks, and the other replied, "Probably beats his meat..." Mortification and long days at work definitely cooled my jets.

The next week of my summer started with getting a letter from Ed inviting me to visit him the next weekend, and we could "double-date." I wrote back that evening in great excitement that I could likely come down on Saturday. On Thursday morning, Ed called up on the telephone (one of those cranked party-line boxes mounted on the wall) while I was at work and said to come on down. He asked if I wanted a date with a short or a tall girl. Truthfully, I had no preference, my mind flooded with imagined hugs and kisses with whatever. My very first date...

Since I've already written about the trip in a great deal more detail than I actually remember, I'll quote the naively written entries of the now-seasoned traveler. (May 30, Saturday:) "I rode to Texarkana with Johnny (*the Nehi soda-pop delivery guy*) and helped him at his stops. He let me off at the library where I called Ed. When he arrived, I hardly recognized him because of his glasses. His brother Jimmy is a card. He looks a lot like my cousin Skip, acts and talks like him. He is just as loveable as he can be.

"After leaving my things at Ed's, we three set off with our bathing suits and picked up two other boys, Joe and Mike. Mike is in the Seminary at San Antonio. (*I was intimidated by being in the company of so many Catholics wearing crosses and saint-medals and controlled my heretical tendencies.*) Then we went out to Lake Texarkana and swam around. (*I sensed that they were all impressed by my furry chest and lawn-mowing suntan.*) Afterwards, we went to Spark's Creamland for ice cream and played pinball machines. Back at the Fougousse home, Ed's mom fed us hamburgers and a big salad. I waited politely while Ed's dad said the traditional grace. (*Besides the strangeness of actually eating a meal all together, this devoutly Catholic family made me a little nervous as I talked about my adventure in Atlantic City.*)

“My date was named Judy Eldridge, a real doll. She was really pretty with black hair and brown eyes (*just like you know who*). Ed’s date was Marleen somebody. We rode over to the Paramount Theater and saw ‘The Hangman’ (*a quickly forgettable western starring Robert Taylor, hardly an inspiring film for a first date*). I wanted to hold Judy’s hand, but we didn’t know each other well enough. She let me buy her a candy bar, and then when the movie was over, we walked along the streets acting silly, skipping and running backwards and looking in the shop windows.

“Then we went to a magazine stand and looked around. I bought a 50¢ book ‘Rally Round the Flag, Boys!’ At a place called Charco’s we had French fries and cokes. I hoped maybe we’d go out somewhere and park because I wanted to kiss Judy. (*‘Parking’ was the only way I knew for boys and girls to get intimate out in my neck of the woods.*) While we drove back to her house, I just put my arm on the back of the seat and then quickly walked her up to their door, afraid Ed and Marleen were in a hurry. My first date ended kissless.”

I didn’t journal about that later evening at the Fougrousse home, but I recall that I had a nice cot in Ed’s room. He proudly showed me his huge stamp collection, and before getting into bed, knelt beside it to say a silent prayer. I just sat quietly on my cot, unwilling to pretend to such holiness. He didn’t remark on my wickedness, and we slept the sleep of exhausted teenagers.

(May 31, Sunday:) “Ed, Jimmy, and I went to 10 o’clock Mass. (*We took communion without going to confession, they apparently still sinless, and I being technically still in a state of grace.*) At Bryce’s Cafeteria, we had turkey dinners (*a buffet place that I found tremendously fancy*). Back at Ed’s, we bummed around at chess, and Joe came over with a boy named Tiffin. Then we went to Joe’s and played badminton and listened to his hi-fi jazz. It was real cool, man. Back at Ed’s, Mike came over, and we played poker. I bought 22¢ worth of chips and cashed out 54¢. I kept telling them I’d never played before, but they wouldn’t believe me.”

Early Monday morning, I rode the Greyhound bus home and went to work right away. Back to the grind... All the way home I savored the great fun of hanging out with the bunch of boys, doing all those boy-things with them. I was a bit jealous of Ed’s closeness with brother Jimmy and his coterie of friends and impressed by how little difference it made being in Catholic company. Boys were simply boys, whether seminarians or heathens. I enjoyed a cynical chuckle thinking of those nice Catholic boys probably also jacking off.

#

The next few weeks slipped into my standard summer groove with long days, mostly mornings into mid-afternoons except on Sundays, working in the café, never-ending lawn-mowing, and daily zoo-keeping. On Sundays I tried to get out into the woods to forage for ripening plums and blackberries and sometimes roamed around Ralph’s new gravel pit where they were hauling out truckloads of earth and knocking down trees in their way. One Saturday, Daddy and his friends took me swimming down at Paraclifta under the bridge. His friend Joe-Ed was early twenties, blond, and with his shirt off looked real well-built with a hairless chest. His other friend, a huge hairy guy with big black beard, was appropriately nicknamed Ox.

A couple times bunches of local kids showed up evenings to dance in my bedroom, and sometimes friends dropped in to play pinballs with me or just gab. The usual summer routines... Also, as usual, mid-June they set up the peach stand out front, but this year Mary Jane had gotten married, and her replacement was Leaetta, Iona’s fairly pretty older sister whom I knew from my

old class at Lockesburg High. In breaks from mowing, I'd hang out with her at the stand, and I could tell she found my sweaty, hairy, tanned body attractive. It made me feel wonderful to be admired, but I didn't feel any reciprocal "hots" for Leaetta, if only because she was too tall. Once more, I spent most evenings selling left-overs to late tourists and adding to my college fund. In the evenings I wrote reams of letters to my several pen pals, now including Ed, and at various times I was assailed by inspirations for stories and poems, most of which were adolescently morbid to the tune of E. A. Poe.

These weeks were a difficult time for me emotionally. After the Catholic camaraderie with Ed and friends, by Thursday I got to feeling very lonely again. That night I dreamt about Annette at a far distance, though she waved at me, and I woke to an ache of longing and the same old fantasies. I still hadn't extinguished my insane love. The next day, I climbed back on the wagon and denied her for a day or two, and then there she was again! Adoring Annette was an absolute addiction—I'd think I'd finally kicked her drug, and then loneliness would trigger a relapse into passionate madness, intensifying my loneliness in a continuous loop of longing.

In the process of my detox, between relapses, I often sank into depressions, bemoaning the impossibility of my love and feeling repulsive in my mediocrity. Meanwhile, I must have been making progress because I rarely mentioned her in my journal anymore. On a TV program "Disneyland '59," I caught sight of lovely Annette here and there in the crowds of dancers and singers and suffered my worst relapse into impotent passion. In agony and despair, I watched her dance in the fantastic world of Disneyland where I'd never go, and in bed that night for the first time, I exorcised the purity of my love for her by an autoerotic exercise.

However, I wrote in some detail in the journal about handsome guys like Frankie and Fabian and added Tony Curtis to that list. I often remarked on fellows I saw in the café, like a cute young deaf kid and a busload of charming Boy Scouts. A new deliveryman for Western Hatcheries who brought our chickens and eggs caught my eye. "I saw a man, hardly more than a boy, who was—it's hard to figure out how to say it—attractive—no, interesting, I guess. He wasn't particularly good looking but had sort of dark or brown hair, and his face was very pleasant. His cheeks were so round and blended right in with his smooth chin, and his eyes were brown, I believe. He just struck me as particularly desirable from a girl's point of view. I had that odd feeling for him and wish he were my brother. Oh, I'm so lonely..."

Devoting so much inarticulate (and ambiguous) description to the delivery guy showed that my emotional response to his "attractiveness" apparently ran rather deep. It's also an illustration of the fatal feedback loop I was in. Immediately after "so lonely," I wrote: "But I guess only Annette can fill that abyss in my heart, Annette and only Annette." From that "fix," it was but a step to renewed despair, another to some handsome candidate for brotherly love, a third into the abyss of loneliness, and then back to my futile passion for Annette. Round and round we go...

As is often the case, a change of setting made a world of difference. For three short days in the last week of June, just like the summer before, we had our 4-H Camp at Beaver's Bend park in Oklahoma, and with all the company to distract me from loneliness, it seems I never thought of Annette even once. The first afternoon's drizzly rain finally stopped so we could go swimming in the river, where I practiced doing flips. I wound up in a cabin with three other quiet guys from other counties, and we fell asleep early. The boys in other cabins acted up terribly until very late and had to do KP the next morning for it. That day was loads of fun with swimming again in the morning, a game of baseball in the afternoon, and then more swimming.

My official buddy all three times was a tall kid named Frank I knew from the state 4-H meeting. Showering off in the locker room afterwards, I kept modestly turned away from the other guys, but when I glanced over at Frank, I was stunned. His prick was incredibly enormous, several inches of it drooping with its hood of skin. Mine seemed to shrivel up and draw back up inside me like a turtle's head. The other boys in the shower also stared in awe. Weak in the knees, I looked away, vividly imagining Frank gripping that huge bone in both hands.



While I gawked at Frank's equipment, he must have seen my circumcision because he remarked, "Hey, Ricky, I didn't know you're a Jew!" I quickly explained that I was a Catholic, a Papist. In fact, I had no idea what in the heck a Jew was. Frank educated me: "They're the heathen folks who killed Jesus!" I'd always figured it was the Romans who crucified Him, but Frank argued that the Jews also did horrible things like eating babies. I figured I'd have to ask Father Jordan about this on his next catechism visit.

Several of us boys walked along the river and cut canes for the weenie roast when we'd do skits. For my impromptu skit I borrowed a skirt from Miss Miller to sing "Charlene Brown," a take-off of that silly Charlie song from last spring. It didn't go over well. Afterwards, we had a pretty candle-lighting ceremony. This year a black-haired dreamboat named Jesse got the best boy camper award, and my pen pal Margaret Birdsong got chosen best girl.

Back home to the Hill on Friday, I had weekend of tiresome work with barely a thought of my toppled idol or of Frank's enormity. On a trip with Daddy to Texarkana Saturday afternoon, he dropped me at the library to visit Ed at his summer job stacking magazines and to go to a music store and buy records. At home, a letter from pen pal Linda in California said apropos of nothing that she'd seen Annette in person. The mere mention of my star knocked me right off the wagon and into grandiose fantasies. Also, Walt Disney's PR people must have been working overtime putting out stories and pictures of Annette in magazines that piqued my passion mercilessly.

On Sunday I regained my saner senses and as a token of renewed renunciation, I didn't go see Annette in her "Shaggy Dog" movie playing that week in Dequeen. I didn't need another fix and might overdose on a whole movie. Instead, like trying to conquer my addiction by microdosing on beauty, I sublimated my romantic urges with attempts at art. After my earlier experience with sketching Greek gods, I steered clear of naked bodies.

That evening I drew a fantasy of Annette and me sitting together on the bank of a creek, and in the days following a few more sketches of her from old photographs, mostly unsuccessful. Remembering my portrait by that Boardwalk artist, I drew a picture of our afternoon cook Margie, who had remarkable wrinkles, some of my *amigos* Denny and Maxito from their yearbook pictures, and more of Frankie Avalon and Fabian from their magazine pictures, most fairly good likenesses. While drawing the handsome boys, I kept wondering how big their pricks were—surely not as gigantic as Frank's. But maybe...

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TRYING TO FORGET

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...

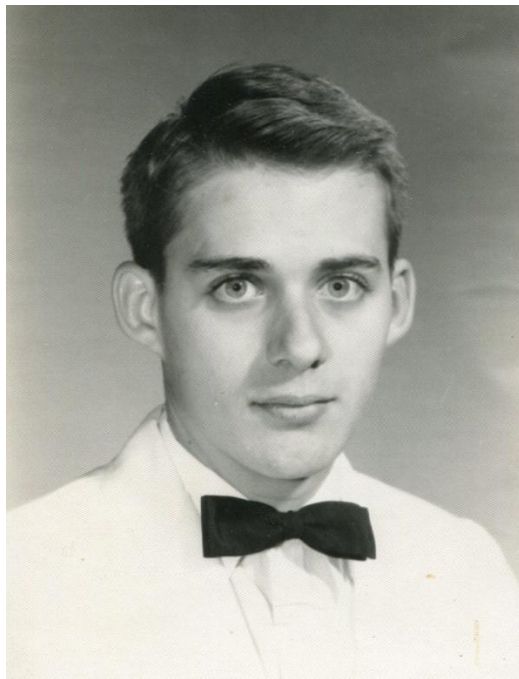
Now in my 18th year, I was about to start my senior year in high school, it was high time for me to start planning for my future. Beyond starting my college fund (now worth about \$400), I hadn't given it much thought. None of the counselors at school last year had asked about our ambitions for after 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-buddyhood, 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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THE VALEDICTATOR

After I dumped Charleen again, this time rudely, the miserable maiden gathered up the courage to approach me some days later begging for one of my class pictures. To spite her continued amorousness, I lied that I'd run out and ignored when she whined, "Why are you being so mean to me?" I couldn't have answered then, but nowadays I certainly can. In the throes of PTSD after the trauma of futilely adoring Annette Funicello for three years, I was deranged and vindictive. Sweet Charleen couldn't understand how she'd made me angry. My unreasoning anger was a classic symptom of my emotional disorder, no fault of hers. We never spoke again.

A peaceful island in my chaotic emotional sea was my comforting fraternal affection for Denny. That same day when I was hanging out in the hallway with my buddy, a hugely smiling Betty Lou came up to us to ask if we'd made our annual deposits yet. We hadn't, but I asked if her bank only took deposits once a year. She just giggled and trounced off down the hall. Blushing all over his face, Denny said, "Hush up! You're getting me a bone on!" I looked down at his pants, and indeed the bulge there was bigger than usual. I blurrily imagined his boner and joked, "Maybe it's time for that crazy hand jive." We both laughed all the way to class.

The next day we were out in the gym at lunch period sitting in the bleachers to watch some girls, including Betty Lou, play four-square ball. Denny leaned on me and moaned, "Oh, fuck! I'm so horny!" I joked, "Well, you best don't go out in the woods—hunting season starts tomorrow." We laughed, but I felt a big hollow, hungry feeling inside. I gently reminded him that according to his wise Dad, we mustn't mess with girls for some years yet. Sympathizing with *mi hermano*, I felt sad that he was suffering so. I'd suffered too for years—but with platonic horns.

Then came several days off from school ending with that catastrophic final encounter with Annette on American Bandstand. After the bonfire of my romantic insanities, I felt liberated, but the PTSD kept on confusing my emotions and reason. As has been clinically observed, my disorder was in fact rewiring my brain's circuits. My cultural conditioning made me repress any inclination to girls. I essentially was turning into a neuter person.

Back at school, we went to a pep rally in the gym where the cheerleaders did their routines, and the Panther band played while the Majorettes paraded. The drum major in a glittery uniform, feathered hat, bare legs, and white boots was Betty Lou, who twirled her baton dramatically. Beside me, Denny growled lustfully, "Grrr! I'd make do with just half of her!" To impress my buddy with the ridiculousness of his lust, I asked, "Which half, right or left?" He grabbed me in a headlock. Soon released from his strong arm, I asked, "Front or back?" This time Denny answered, "Either one..." Then he blushed furiously.

The thought gave me another hollow pain inside. I didn't appreciate my *querido*'s fixation on sex with girls but figured it was normal, something a brother had to love around. I was caught between exhilaration over burning up those memories of Annette and a nagging sadness about this complication in my otherwise splendid brotherhood with Denny. But my frequent fraternal feelings for boys... Where were these strong emotions supposed to go? I tried to solve that conundrum by my tried and true magic trick of writing a story, not exactly a story—but a lie...

Soon after the ceremonial bonfire, I inserted a fictional fellow into the mundane reality of my journal, a fifteen-year-old tow-head with blue eyes and "a cute little nose" named Billy Ray. While he was in the café's restroom, his "slovenly" foster parents abandoned him, driving away

in their “rattle-trap” car. Daddy called the state policeman Louie Hilton, who proposed taking Billy to the station in DeQueen, but I suggested he stay with us. My fiction ignored any real legal procedures. In my journal, we watched TV together and got to know each other.

The entry for the next day started with waking up beside Billy, who “had been nice to sleep with, his body very warm beside me all night.” (In early November, the nights were already rather chilly.) I admired his “fine lips” and left him there asleep to go to school. Having never slept with anyone before (only with dogs and cats), all I could invent in the way of sensations for my fantastic brother-story was the warmth of Billy’s closeness. In my authorial negligence, I figured he’d find something to do and didn’t remark on awkwardly leaving him alone all day.

Home again, I naturally joined Billy in watching American Bandstand. There had been no news of his fugitive foster folks. I quickly started imagining us adopting the lovable boy so I could have a foster-brother. After supper in the café, we played pinball machines. Later I enlisted him to help with the football game crowds bussing tables and running the dishwasher. Daddy paid Billy’s for three hours’ work (\$1.50), which pleased the sweet kid immensely.

In the bathroom getting ready for bed, I admired handsome Billy in just his white underpants with such smooth, tan skin and a good build. The next dozen journal lines were redacted not long after—wiped away by a brush with bleach. Effective... Too bad we don’t have anything to go on, not even my old memory, for what those lines described, but I doubt anything overtly sexual took place. I still had to sit at my desk and write up the day’s storyline, wrapping up with anticipation of once again lying close to beautiful Billy. Soon, I hoped he’d be my brother.

The next day’s journal entry (written that evening before hitting the hay) started with again waking up beside Billy thinking how perfect he was for a brother. Then my fantasy kicked into high gear as I apparently described what happened during the night. Those nine lines were also bleached away, but I think I recall the thrust of our fictional intimacy. Cuddled up under the blanket in the chillier night, I felt Billy’s lean body against mine like a smooth, strong tree and rubbed my prick along his thigh. (A nonfictional hand may have helped me to orgasm.) It’s significant that I can’t remember imagining any response from my potential brother. Having no coital experience, I had no idea how people act while or after getting humped. We went to sleep.

That day there was again no news about Billy’s foster parents. After our café supper, my solitary bath that evening turned into a tantalizing nude duo in our huge bathtub (with minimal water). Then we worked another busload or two of football folks and took some local kids over for a Boudoir Hop. I watched Anita make eyes at Billy, who danced like a Bandstand pro. Iona was all excited about our trip tomorrow. As County Champions, we were going for two days to Little Rock for the 4-H Club Congress at the Hotel Marion. She was thrilled never having stayed at a hotel before, but for me that was old hat after the Claridge. Billy was sad that I’d be going away.

In the morning, Daddy drove me up to the Bakers’ store where Miss McMannis, our 4-H sponsor, picked up Iona and me to go to DeQueen. From there, an Extension Service county guy named Mr. Ivy drove us and the Little River champions to Little Rock. We checked in to the hotel, picking up a program for the Congress, and climbed on buses for tours. It zipped right by Central High School, the hospital, and the zoo, stopping at last at the airport.

Next we stopped at the Arkansas Light and Power Company where I came face to face with my pen pal Sally in another group. Both our groups went from there to the state Capitol where I sat

in Gov. Faubus's chair. Back at the Hotel Marion, Sally and I sat in the lobby and talked. Long before, I'd confessed to her about Annette, and now I described burning up (cauterizing) that insanity. She was sad because she'd thought my romance was so beautiful, "like Don Quixote and his Dulcinea." Another reason to be happy that it was finally all over and done with...

After the banquet, there was a lame "Share-the-Fun" event in the ballroom where we played a game of talking to as many other champions as we could and getting them to sign up on our sheets for what they wanted to be in the future. I signed up for wildly random professions. A bunch of Arthur Murray Dancers demonstrated the cha-cha, samba, and tango, and then we all danced some Rock'n'roll. Sally was ecstatic because she'd dreamt of dancing with me.

First, the girls were sent off to their rooms, and a while later, we boys were dismissed to "go right to sleep." I was in a room with maybe eight other boys, beds laid out all over the place, and we didn't go right to sleep by any means. The next two pages of my journal were wiped clean where I'd described the adolescent horseplay, sexy comments, and dirty jokes told until the wee hours. It got me so hot that I reached down under my blanket and... When the hubbub calmed down, there were suspicious sounds in the darkness from the other beds, sudden grunts and groans, but I hugged my pillow imagining Billy's firm, tree-like limbs and at last fell asleep.

We ate a group breakfast, and three kids entertained us singing "Danny Boy," one of my favorite songs. I said goodbye to Sally and slept most of the way home. Neglecting literary continuity in my Billy story, I didn't remark in my journal that night on the main character of my lie—until just before signing off. I revealed that Billy was gone when I got back. Daddy took him up to DeQueen to see the county social worker. There being no progress on catching his odious foster parents, Patrolman Louie brought him back in the evening. In my authorial omnipotence, I ignored any messy details of my future brother's no doubt traumatic experience.

Lapses in the story of my imaginary brother continued to occur. Come Sunday morning (with no intimacy in the night before), I mentioned taking Billy with us to church and wondering what he thought about the rigmarole, which I basically ignored and participated in by force of habit. My fraternal affection for the altar-boy Ron seemed less intense now, overshadowed by my fictitious brotherhood with Billy. However, for the rest of Sunday and all day Monday I made no mention of the boy. Only after chronicling my supper and the chore of wrapping pipes down at the pumphouse on the spring branch did I think again of the dear hero of my fake story.

Remarking that Billy didn't help with the pipe-wrapping because of not having a heavy coat for the cold work, I flagrantly switched into fiction mode: "Oh, but I forgot (I don't know why), about what happened last night..." There followed 17 bleached-out lines that I'd give my left nut to read. (At this age, I've got little use for it.) My ephemeral memory of the imagined activity in that cold night is that it involved Billy's enthusiastic participation.

On Tuesday, the first thing in the day's entry began with "Last night was an experience. As Billy and I snuggled up together in the warm bed..." The whole rest of the page is blanked out, and the next page deals with daily stuff. The entry for Wednesday again began with an empty 2/3 page, and then I took up the day's usual events at school and at home without word one about Billy. This last imagined intimacy must have been a doozy because on Thursday and Friday I recorded no nocturnal activity at all. While describing Friday's walk from Mary Nell's home in the rain, I must have remembered (dreamt up) another affectionate nocturne with Billy, detailed enough to disappear 20 lines. However, I doubt any overt penetration was ever involved.

My fraternal fantasy of Billy must have triggered another PTSD symptom. Once dried off at home, I sank into a deep depression, feeling horribly unworthy of anything. Reflexively, I started doubting my decisions to quit the Church, to deny sins of the flesh, stereo-typical back-sliding. For half a melodramatic moment I imagined stabbing myself with the Melissa knife, but visions of hellfire stopped my hand. I don't think it was a totally serious suicidal intention, more of a romantic gesture for having spurned Annette.

Then I remembered to update on Billy, reporting that he'd been taken to Texarkana for official procedures, the best I could do in blur-speak. My depression deepened to the point of praying the rosary and begging to be made worthy. God again became a vindictive old man taking offense at what I did. Having essentially written Billy out of my life, I kept on wallowing in unworthiness and also prayed the rosary that Saturday evening. In a fervent confession on the morrow at church, I unloaded my sins and prayed so hard it didn't matter that Ron wasn't there.

A Sabbath walk in the woods with Lobo restored my soul, and revived my interrupted story line. I got home to find that Billy had come back from Texarkana. He happily announced that everything was worked out for him to stay with us, and in January we'd legally be foster-brothers. Oddly, in narrating the rest of that day, I said virtually nothing about Billy, nor did Monday's entry mention our cold night together. Apparently, my back-slid holiness threw a wet blanket on my fraternal fire. Billy was absent from my imagining that night, and I forgot all about arranging that he'd start to school with me that day.

In fact, only on Tuesday evening did Billy miraculously reappear, joining me in the usual activities of lessons, TV, and working the game crowds in the café. Then he dropped out, nothing that night or all day Wednesday. Curiously, for the past week there had also been no mention of my dear Denny, but I'm sure I saw him at school every day. My emotions were sorely confused between reality and fantasy. For an insane instant, I returned to Annette, bemoaning our ill-starred love. That night I dreamt of Annette riding on a bus with me, and she said, "I'm so tired of kissing." Maybe that was her way of saying goodbye.

On Thanksgiving Day, I despondently went out with the dogs and bagged my first squirrel of the season. That afternoon we got real busy with the buses for the afternoon Texarkana-DeQueen football game, and Daddy, Irene, and I worked the crowd alone. Mamacita was busy at the house making our turkey. It being a holiday, I'd cancelled my regular Thursday night Bedroom Ball. At our holiday dinner, my fictitious foster brother was forgotten.

Mamacita suggested we all say what we're thankful for. Judy was grateful for having her horse, Lady. To sound virtuous, I diplomatically gave thanks for my family and wonderful friends. Daddy was grudgingly thankful for a little bit of business in the café and (in a rare instance of humor) for the little bit of hair on his head. Traffic on the highway had fallen off sharply since last spring after they changed the taxes. I didn't understand that at all, but last weekend Daddy had started closing the café from midnight to 5:30 am to cut expenses. It was truly weird and sad to look out my window at the ghostly café sitting in the darkness across the highway.

Mamacita gave thanks for her healthy family and comfortable house to live in, adding that we'd find ways to make ends meet. For a long time I'd known that finances were thin but not that business was dying on the vine. Our round robin of gratitude buoyed up my flagging spirits a bit. But I wasn't thankful for three more days of holiday to face without my wonderful friends. In those days' journal entries, I made not one single reference to Billy or his fantasy story.

However, in the middle of chronicling Monday's walk home, I broke down and admitted, "All that about Billy was a lie—a black lie!" And said no more... Shortly before that at school, I'd reported on touching Denny and feeling my strong love for him. Real fraternity beat the heck out of fantasy. Fessing up made me cease my religious and romantic recidivism and revel once more in brotherly and/or paternal affections for attractive boys. That evening I whipped out the bleach brush to wipe away salacious or compromising journal lines, not to hide or deny their unwitting homosexuality but simply to bowdlerize the fictional narrative. It was all about fraternal love.

My mood improved greatly now that I'd renounced Annette and discovered the goal of fraternal love by inventing Billy. There wasn't a goal. The process of loving boys as brothers was the only point, just like loving one's neighbor. With that understanding, I forged peacefully on through my school days with a more sensitive awareness of my classmates and, of course, Dennis. That Thursday at a lecture on temperance, I sat strategically between him and Betty Lou, "my knee over his, and I put my hand on his leg."

After sixth period on Friday, Dennis and I left school early and walked to his house. He showed me his bedroom and collection of model airplanes. That old love for him made me want to hug him, but I reluctantly walked out to the highway to hitch a ride home. In the evening Daddy drove me to El Dorado, and we stopped at the Town House Motel for the night. I took the National Merit Scholarship test on Saturday. Daddy maybe appreciated the silent drive home with me, who like a regular teenager, read the whole way in "The Mouse That Roared."

Or maybe not... Tuesday evening while I was sitting on the living room sofa reading "The Prisoner of Zenda," Daddy came and sat beside me. He reminded me of a math problem about ships I'd told him about that morning on our ride down to Mary Nell's. Offhandedly and maybe insensitively, I said don't worry about it. Apparently, he'd been figuring on the problem and lost his temper, grabbing me by the hair and hollering, "Smarty-pants! Don't get smart with me!" He went into the kitchen and told Mamacita about the incident in much different words, which I humbly denied saying. Daddy screamed that I did so and made to hit me, driving me back into the living room, where he shouted, "Don't you get smart with me!" I sat down on the sofa, and he headed for the door, where he turned and shouted, "Don't ever ask me to help you with anything again! You're so damned smart, but I can still whip you!"

In fact, I hadn't asked for Daddy's help on the math problem, but maybe he thought I did. Afterwards, I thought a lot about this distressing altercation and realized I must have unwittingly hurt his paternal feelings. Hearing again his "so damned smart," it dawned on me that perhaps he was jealous of my braininess. Maybe that was why he so often called me dumb and stupid and never congratulated me on getting prizes or good grades. I took comfort that this was my father's problem and not mine, except that I needed to be more aware of his feelings. Still, it irked me him picking my big brain to gripe about. Mamacita asked me to apologize to Daddy for being disrespectful. I replied firmly, "I don't intend to apologize for something I didn't do and had no intention of doing." She quietly left me, and no one said a word ever after about the matter.

I probably should have expressed my sincere regrets to Daddy for the misunderstanding, but I was so hogtied emotionally by my personal PTSD that I was incapable of empathizing with anybody. My father was under a great deal of pressure with the failing business, his fragile health, and the wife and kids (including an emotionally disturbed, brilliant son), and I couldn't even see that his jealousy must have arisen from his enormous distress.

In the ten or so days between then and the holiday vacation, there were many festivities at school that kept me pleasantly occupied. On a Friday, Maxito said one of the Twindas had a crush on me—he wasn't sure which one. So I spent the weekend all excited about a girl maybe liking me, whether Cinda or Linda didn't matter. My resolve not to mess with girls anymore flew right out the window. The following week I took every opportunity around the attractive twins to pose provocatively, act debonair, and make sheep's eyes at them, but neither paid me any attention. By Wednesday I got very depressed, despairing of ever being loved.

Typical for PTSD sufferers, I rebounded from that despair back to the root of my ancient trauma, Annette. Now merely a ghostly absence, she didn't hear me beg her to let me love her again like before. I wallowed in my grievous passion, regretting that I'd abandoned my famous idol and claiming that her sacred kiss would cure all my pain and suffering. I was an abject wreck. The holiday break was a good thing, giving me time to climb out of that quicksand, though it meant a long time not seeing my Denny.

On Monday, Daddy, Judy, and I went back behind Baker's store to find a Christmas tree, which I toted on my back bent all the way to the car. Judy said I looked like one of the seven dwarves. After that we went shopping for gifts for each other, stopping at Model Drug in Ashdown, where Denny was crazily busy but looked so handsome it took my breath away. At the 4-H party that evening, we did lots of dancing, played fun games, and smashed a big donkey piñata.

In the midst of frequent work in the café, I started planning a novel about a first-century AD Briton boy taken into slavery by the Romans and figured I'd have to research what life was like in those times. The new inspiration lifted me out of another bout of depression. On Christmas Eve, after "Amahl and the Night Visitors," we opened presents. I got a fluffy red Frankie Avalon sweater from Mamacita, records and a new needle for my record player from Daddy, and a suitcase from Judy. I gave Mamacita a turquoise mixer, Daddy a flannel shirt, and Judy a pair of cowboy boots. For some reason, it was the most lavish and traditional Christmas we'd ever had. In magnanimous celebration, I decided to stop sounding like a little kid and start calling my parents Mom and Dad. They accepted the change without batting an eye.

After going to church in Nashville at the American Legion Hall, I worked the rest of the day in the café feeling uninspired, and the next day. And Sunday—with a break for another trip to church in DeQueen. And Monday mostly alone—when the place was just about empty. I cleaned off the glass shelves in the candy case and then cooked an order of soup and sandwich with French fries. Afterwards I peeled and cut up a bunch of potatoes and cooked two hamburgers.

With so few customers, it was horribly dull and boring, and I once again mourned the loss of my beloved Annette, as though she was the one who'd left me. I recovered from that illogical fit by remembering that long-past Christmas in Wisconsin ice-skating with my wonderful cousins. The leisure also allowed a fleeting flash of Buddhistic enlightenment: that wanting stuff was the root cause of pain in life, the pain of disappointment. Then I fantasized about being off at college sitting in my dorm room with a book, smoking a pipe, and feeling dignified and scholarly.

The last few days of 1959 were really slow in the café so I again worked all alone. One afternoon I went out hunting with the dogs but shot nothing. Another day, horribly cold and icy, Dad took me along rabbit-hunting. He bagged several, but I again shot nothing. At home we cleaned the catch and made rabbit-sausage, which was real tasty. On New Year's Eve I stayed up to watch Dick Clark's party with the Bandstand kids, and he had Frankie Avalon and Fabian on for guests.

They danced a few times, and I was amused that Fabian wasn't a very good dancer. I was hugely impressed at how natural and friendly Frankie seemed, and I felt a flood of brotherly love for him. Then I realized this was the same kind of unreal adoration I'd once felt for Annette. Now that I'd rung in 1960, I put those fraternal feelings aside and hit the sack.

As usual, I worked the first day of the new year, business real slow with uninspiring customers. Sometimes serving smiling folks their coffee or food, I'd look in their eyes and feel happy, but others had no depth in their eyes, merely existing. The second day of the year was even slower, and I was plagued by the cook Mae's husband Ebenezer sitting around for hours. An obnoxious expert on everything, he claimed electricity couldn't hurt him. The worst part was that he was wildly jealous of anyone even looking at fat Mae. The third day was a Sunday, and at church I admired my angel-brother Ron up by the altar. With the afternoon off and hunting season now over, I wandered in the woods and found a secret brook with several clear pools.

Back to the high school grind on Monday, it was snowing pretty hard. When I saw my Dennis, I was troubled by how different he looked with a flattop haircut, but he was still handsome with rosy cheeks and glinting eyes. In the evening I negotiated with Judy to watch "Father Knows Best" each week. She protested with wails that she couldn't watch "Wells Fargo," one of her 30-odd weekly westerns. I won the battle by demanding equal rights for TV time each week and settling for just FKB, AB, and "Dobie Gillis." Judy was so spoiled with a sour disposition. Anyone who looked crooked at her was a "stupid polecat!" I guess the poor girl had as hard a time as I being lonely in the backwoods of Arkansas. At least she didn't have to work in the café—yet. I certainly should have had more sympathy for her, but I was incapable of empathy.

That early week of the new year slid by with a few moments of fraternal affection for Denny and fits of worry about college applications. Come Saturday, I started feeling lousy and came down with the flu, missing school for three days. On Thursday when I went back, I heard right away that Denny's Dad had died on Tuesday. I felt utterly devastated for my beloved brother who was, of course, absent for the rest of the week. After Lit class my also smart friend Don invited me to spend the night with him on Friday next week. We might go to Texarkana for a movie.

I accepted the invite but worried since Dad had left early that morning to see about a manager job in a Howard Johnson's in Longview. If he got the job, he'd have to go back next Monday, and I'd have to take over running Penney Hill. Business had fallen off to the point that he'd gotten that desperate. Psychologically paralyzed, I couldn't see my father's misery and didn't react to his dire leaving with even one line in my journal.

Nor did I refer to his return the next day, apparently having taken the job. One might assume so since in the next few days he took me around the place showing how things worked, including the machinery in the pumphouse. I expressed no thoughts about the impending change. Also, I got to start driving again, taking the family to church and running errands to the grocery store, to prepare for taking charge of the business. On Sunday afternoon when Dad took the bus to Longview, I recorded nothing of it, as though my father were no significant part of my life. In my disordered mind, I was the only real being in my universe.

To cope with running Penney Hill, Mom and I shared the days, her working all day and me after school covering the supper and evening hours to closing. We hired some more locals, a homely Lockesburg girl named Lavenia with blond curls for another waitress, an old friend from Falls Chapel named Milton as on-call substitute anything, an old guy from Lockesburg named Elmo to

do janitorial, and when Margie retired for getting too old, a grandmotherly woman from Ashdown named Lilly. Life was pretty rushed, one darned thing after the other, and all week I made no mention of either seeing Denny, normally a daily event of note, or of missing him.

When I told her about Don's invite to overnight, Mom was great to let me do it. I just had to get Milton to work for me Friday evening. On Friday at school, I tried out for three roles for the senior play, and after school I went downtown with Don to get him a haircut. (In my amigo lingo, I called him Don Rico because he went formally by Don Richard.) He was perhaps the brightest kid in our class besides me, and I enjoyed his respect. While I liked the round-faced guy a lot, apart from his awful acne, I didn't feel all that much brotherly affection for him.

I described my overnight fairly laconically. "We ambled over to his house, and messed around playing Scrabble till his folks got home. After supper, he and I spruced up and buzzed down to Texarkana in his Renault. At the Paramount we saw "Samson and Delilah" (*an older film by Cecil B. DeMille starring Victor Mature and Heddy Lamarr*). The ass's jawbone scene and the falling temple scene were real weird, blood, brains, and guts all over the place. After that we zipped by the bowling alley to watch for a few minutes, and then it was bedward. Don turned on his electric blanket and nearly cooked me. I'm used to sleeping in a freezing room with one quilt." This first-ever time to sleep beside anyone sure wasn't anything to write home about, nothing like I'd imagined when lying with fictitious Billy.

Don Rico's Dad took me home Saturday morning, and I worked the rest of the day. In between occasional customers I cleaned up all over the place. That night I hit my familiar sack excited about getting up early to open and work while Mom and Judy went to church. My absence at Mass was unavoidable—and much appreciated. We had good after-church breakfast crowds and sizable Sunday lunch bunches that kept us hopping. When customers disappeared in the early afternoon, Mae and Lavenia left, and I had a virtual "I Love Lucy" scene.

"When Mae left, I discovered that I had to make gravy, and I had not the least idea how to. So I slung a handful of flour into the grease and poured in some milk. (*We served good old southern cream gravy.*) It looked like gravy, but then I thought it seemed too thin. So I added some more flour. That made it a wretched mess, and I went into hysterics over the lumps. Hearing my crazed laughter, Milton came back and showed me how to make it." Good gravy! Milton, a heavy-set guy in his later 20s, and I laughed about it for a long time afterwards.

At school, I greeted Denny's return with a sympathetic hug, and he gave me a bereaved smile without the glitter in his eye. I urged him to read for a role in the play because we had more tryouts that morning, but he flatly refused. I got the distinct impression that Mrs. Ward wanted me to play Dad. He had lots of lines in every scene, and I expect she figured I could learn them all. Back home, Mom told me Dad had called to say he was coming home tomorrow because he'd changed his mind. She and I were greatly relieved, but at the same time worried about what we'd do. Mom was optimistic that he had some plan, but I wasn't so sure. The next day I indeed landed the role of Dad, and when my Dad got home, I joked with a straight face that I was going to be a Dad! His eyes got big, and before he could explode, I added, "In a play." He laughed out loud at my trick but explained nothing about his change of mind or his future plans.

For the next couple weeks there were many rehearsals for the play, which I loved, really getting off on hamming it up as a bumbling father. Busy with theater, I didn't even once mention Denny, and my journal entries got much shorter. Finally, I noted sitting beside him on Friday in play

practice and talking. He had even worse hots for Betty Lou, but I didn't encourage him. Nor did I remark in the journal about my usual brotherly feelings. We were slowly growing apart. For that matter, my paternal affections for Guy and little Johnny and Mickey on the school bus were also tailing off. I now see that that as more PTSD to lose interest in relationships. That Saturday at work, I sank into a black mood, but Sunday's religious encounter with Ron brightened my spirits. Also, watching "Overland Trail" helped. One of the characters, "a handsome fellow named Doug McClure, had long, sensitive lips and smiled wonderfully."

The following Tuesday, American Bandstand had Annette on, and I panicked, running out into the back yard. Like a spooked squirrel, I scrambled up the hickory tree to sit among its new spring buds and moan in desperation. I soon got myself under control and climbed down to feed the zoo. The routine of classes and play practice anesthetized my pain. A distraction was in a rehearsal when my red-headed, freckly *amigo* Jackie had to knock me down. We ran the scene several times laughing like idiots and at last managed to do it with straight faces, like real actors.

At rehearsal a week later, Jackie invited me to stay over with him the coming Monday. We practiced the play most of the day, and "In the evening, I went home with Jackie. After supper, we went to play practice and afterwards to the Legion Hut dance. I danced with Ruthie, Martha Raye, Charlotte, Carol, and Ann. (*They were all happy to see me at last out on the town.*) Back at Jackie's, we listened to a record and then went to bed (*separately*) and talked late." Jackie was a funny, witty boy, and his pleasant company in the dark was a comfort I'd never known before.

In early March the cold and icy winter set in again, and school let out for a couple days—which messed up our schedule for rehearsals. That Sunday Ed came up to visit, and I showed him our boring points of interest like the pond and gravel pit. We listened to records and talked about plans for me coming to visit the next weekend. Tuesday I had an overnight with Maxito whose house was a beautiful brick place on a slight knoll in the middle of an open field. (*His father was a County Judge.*) "At his big pond, we got into their rowboat and pulled up the net with two perch in it. The air smelled like spring, but it was very dreary. Back at the house, we changed and left for the dress rehearsal but had to go to Allene first to pick up Vonnie. All through the rehearsal I kept forgetting my lines.

"When it was over, we went to the Legion Hut for another dance. Then Maxito and I headed back to his house. I slept with him in his big bed (*where he used to sleep with his late brother Stan*), and he kept the radio on WNOE all night. Twice I woke up, once during 'Greenfields' and once during 'Last Chance.' Both times I looked over at handsome Maxito and had the mad urge to reach out and touch him.

"We got up real early, and went to the pond again to pull up the net with a sucker and perch in it. We put a firecracker in the sucker and exploded it under water. As we walked through the woods, I had an odd feeling I can't describe while Maxito talked about his brother Stan. ... At school, Vonnie gave me the make-up works, rouge, eye-shadow, lip-stick and powder. We barely got ready by one o'clock. The matinee performance went well except for natural tenseness.

"When Mom and Dad got ready to go, we took Judy, Shelba, and Anita with us. Backstage, the making-up started all over again. Just before it started, Maxito took me out to his car for a "pick-me-up," vodka. I was in the mood to be reckless. So, I took a swig of it and chewed some gum. It felt wonderful doing something that no one would dream of me doing and being like other boys. But it didn't make me feel drunk at all.

“In our third scene, Betty Gail and John Ray got mixed up and called us out in the manner of the next scene. I had to bring us back with my reply, but we left out a couple of pages. Of course, there was the usual quota of goofs. As soon as it was over, Dad dragged me away, and I felt awful blue not getting to go to the dance at the Hut again and having to go home like a little boy, not getting to do anything like other fellows, no dates, no nothing. At home I got despondent, not caring a hoot in a hollow for anything.

“Dad drove me to Texarkana the next day to the Library where I read until Ed got off. Then we went to Bryce’s for lunch, and he decided he was too sick to take the achievement tests I’d come down for. He took me out to the college, and I introduced him to Maxito. We had the English test first, and it was pretty easy. Then came the advanced Math, really hard but possible. The Physics test was pure guesswork for me. Ed came back for me, and after supper we went to see ‘The Mummy’ and ‘The Curse of the Undead.’ In our late night laugh-fest and chat in the dark, Ed told me he’d applied to Tulane University in New Orleans and got offered a big scholarship. After church and hanging out, he drove me home and had supper with me in the café.

The next day I wrote an application to Tulane too with huge hopes. No word had come yet from the other schools, and I was getting hideously anxious. However, at the end of the next week, I heard from the U of Maryland and UCLA that I was accepted—with no offer of financial aid. Strike one, strike two... I fell into a black depression, worrying myself sick about college.

In my despondency, I relapsed into feeling lonely for some girl, then started aching specifically for Annette, preferring the familiar old traumatic pain to the present agony of hoping for a scholarship. That lasted a day or so, and then I masked the worry by feeling lonely again for a brother. That hadn’t bothered me much in recent weeks, even without the old closeness with Denny and with the overnights with great friends. But I kept coming back to the ugly worry about scholarships. Next Monday came letters of acceptance from both Yale and MIT without a penny of financial aid. Two more ducks down, with little hope for Princeton to come across.

To distract myself, I frantically devoured books and obsessively drew nature scenes. One book was “The Iliad,” and I was impressed by the beautiful brotherly relationship between Achilles and Patroclus. For some days, I forgot my anxiety by drawing a Grecian warrior in armor with his sword and shield standing in a sad pose I called “Achilles Grieving Patroclus.” Then the aching longing for a brother exploded, and I cried in my dark bed. Those old odd moments of intense brotherly love for Denny revived and filled my eyes with tears.

On April Fool’s Day, a whole bunch of us FBLA members went to a state meeting at Arkansas State Teachers College in Conway. Right away Maxito and I had to go to Room 206 for the Typing I contest. We had to retype a long business letter, and I confidently roared through it with only two typos, first to finish by some minutes. Maxito finished soon after me. Later playing dominoes and cards in the Student Center, we waited for the other contests to wrap up.

I was astounded that Maxito won Typing I. Mrs. Beck informed me that I’d left out a whole line in the letter. My over-confidence had been my downfall. Defeat tasted bitter, but at least I could be happy that dear Maxito was ecstatic over his win. At the motel, I got assigned to a shabby room with Leo, John Ray, and Bill, all real neat guys, where we dressed for the evening’s banquet. I sat between John Ray and Mr. Beck, listening to his corny jokes. Afterwards, at the Student Center for Fun Night, we watched skits. When we’d racked up all the chairs, they started playing some good music, and I danced with lots of the girls, which raised my spirits somewhat.

In our pajama party laughter and chatter that night, John Ray said that Mr. Beck had caught Buck and Carol smooching. He added that last year he'd gotten her into bed but didn't do the deed, and he'd been regretting not doing it ever since. I remarked that he'd have regretted it worse if he'd done it, and John Ray agreed. Then he mentioned some boys going to "houses of pleasure"—that Maxey went to one over in Forman. I was horrified! Scandalized by the awful ways "normal boys" messed with girls, I felt tormented by my difference and became terribly moralistic.

Still in a scandalized mood, when I got home the next afternoon, I found a letter from Princeton, again accepting me but offering no scholarship. Another duck down... My only real option now was Tulane. Except that the week before we'd heard at school that Southern State College in Magnolia was offering tuition scholarships to outstanding folks, and I could afford to go there, but that would be my very last resort.

Our yearbooks came in on Thursday, and although we hadn't been all that close for many weeks, I wrote a long note to Denny about the memories I'll always keep of him and hopes we could always be good friends. Sitting on the bleachers in the gym, I made him write in mine. Twice he called me a "real true friend," and toward the end of his encomium he wrote, "You are the kind of guy to me that I would like to solve my problems with and wouldn't be ashamed of it." The sexual import of his words totally escaped my platonic attitude, and I took them as simply an intimate profession of brotherly love.

One day Aunt Bernice called to say that Grandma had a tumor, and they'd operate next Tuesday. Dad decided to go to Wisconsin the next day, so Mom and I had to run the place again, only without the car. We didn't go to church on Sunday, and I worked most of the quiet day, marked only by admiring a handsome, well-built young man who came in for a sirloin steak for lunch. The next couple evenings I kept my mind off my depression by working mindlessly in the café. By Tuesday evening, I wrote that I was "half mad, half sad, and half depressed."

The next day I stayed in Ashdown, and Maxito and I went to Herb's drive-in where I sat in Patty's Thunderbird while he drag-raced with Buck (and won). Then Buck and I went home with him to hit the hay. We three slept in the big bed, again with WNOE on the radio. During the night, we kept getting tangled up. Several times Maxito lay on me and once scooted up against me so my lips pressed to the nape of his neck. Aside from the imagined cuddles with fictitious Billy, this was the most intimate contact with another body I'd ever experienced.

School was out Friday for Easter, and I worked all that day and Holy Saturday. Pleased to be able to miss church again, I covered a busy Easter morning with no time to be sad, lonely, or unhappy. Occasionally that holiday weekend, I got out into the woods to cut flowers for Irene and me to make bouquets for the booths and tables. Spring was such a beautiful season that I had a hard time remembering to feel anxious. However, in spite of the busy work, I still found time to feel blue and nervous about the college situation.

The next morning Mr. Walker told me and Don Rico that we'd be valedictorian and salutatorian respectively for graduation. I jokingly asked if I could be valedictator instead, and he just smiled. That helped my mood a little bit over the following days and evenings at work. When I got home on Friday, Dad was back from Wisconsin. Grandma had died on Monday, and her funeral was Thursday morning. I felt sorry for him, looking so pale and tired, not to mention mournful over losing his mother. Glory be, we couldn't go to church again that Sunday because the car broke down (after its long drive home from Wisconsin).

My birthday came up on Tuesday when I officially turned 18, starting my 19th year. After Assembly, we Senior boys stayed to see a film about the Navy, and during the noon hour I helped conduct the Student Council election. No one knew how miserable I was behind all the activity. Meanwhile, though I wasn't conscious of the fact, in several weeks packed full of normal life—ever since my squirrely escape from seeing Annette on American Bandstand—I hadn't thought even once about her. I was surely free now of that ancient trauma, but the side effects of my PTSD lingered on in depression and confusion.

It didn't make me any happier when on Wednesday morning I had to go downtown to register for the draft. That evening I went with Mr. Beck and his son Bill to their house out past Allene, a pretty place with a lawn full of big trees. We played softball with his two little brothers and later dominoes. Not too late, we climbed into fancy twin beds and quickly fell asleep. The bus ride to school from Bill's house was almost as long as mine from Ben Lomond. I truly appreciated the Beck boys' camaraderie after the solitary boredom of Penney Hill.

First thing at school on Friday, we took off in Mr. Beck's bus to Texarkana Community College to visit classes. I was sad that Denny didn't go, but he wasn't interested in college. Back at home I napped until 5:30 to go to work until closing, too busy to worry about anything. The weekend was no better, but at least I was adding a lot to my college fund. Dad finally talked to me about what he was going to do about our financial predicament—try to sell Penney Hill. So, we'd have to fix the place up considerably. Selling the old home was a disturbing thought, and I didn't dare think about what he and Mom would do then. Myself, I'd soon go off to college somewhere. He also decided to start keeping the café open all night again.

For the longest time, the Ashdown High Senior classes had been taking a big trip to New Orleans led by Miss Susy, but she'd been so sick this year that she backed out, and nobody else wanted to be our chaperone. So, Mr. and Mrs. Walker decided to take us up north to a nature camp on Petit Jean Mountain at a ranch owned by Nelson Rockefeller. Everybody was disappointed, and lots didn't want to go, including Denny. Since his Dad's death, to my fraternal disgust, he'd started going out with girls. I missed my innocent, blushing brother terribly.

We went on Friday in a fun busload of seniors. Right away I went swimming in the famous millionaire's huge pool, and then I went cliff-climbing with Leo (Bill's cousin) and Harold—who would win hands down for the homeliest guy in our class. We made it to Cedar Falls and climbed up beside the cataract. After supper there was a long dance with many female classmates I'd never dreamed of dancing with before. They seemed to enjoy my moves.

I went out to Ronnie's bunk house and played poker. Meanwhile, Maxito gave me lots of swigs at his vodka bottle, as did James. Daniel the clown gave me a shot of scotch. Then things got confused when guys started acting drunk. I described this first real experience with alcohol: "When I left for my cabin, the cool air made me feel giddy, as though I were walking in a dream. It was funny. I thought just as sanely as ever and reasonably, but I seemed to move in a dream."

Saturday morning we went to park areas on the mountain, and some of us walked down the river to the falls. After lunch at the lodge, we left, and I laughed all the way home. These mere two days of "nature camp" and hanging out with friends like a normal guy had lifted my spirits perhaps to the edge of hysteria. Or maybe it was the swan song of my ancient disorder—now that Annette had become for me a thing of the deep past. (In actual fact, I didn't think of her again for the next many years, ignoring her and all publicity of her singing and acting career.)



The last week of classes was very low-key, and all I did was practice my Valedictory (farewell) speech, work in flower beds and the café, and mow lawns. On Wednesday, I got a letter of acceptance from Tulane saying nothing yet about a scholarship. Thursday, Mom made me put on my cap and gown and took pictures. I felt stupid standing there like a serious black crow beside my front door, under a pine tree, or behind a huge planter with a pointy yucca plant. I like this picture with the iconic café in the background—and that ancient 50's Ford pickup truck.

Friday was all day off, which for me meant work in the café, and that evening Dad drove us to Ashdown for the graduation, where I gave my speech and Don Rico his. Both were rife with time-honored clichés. We paraded across the stage for diplomas, Denny right behind me but acting very distant. The long-awaited baccalaureate ceremony was a major anti-climax. After thanking and saying goodbye to teachers, Dad dragged me away before I could bid farewell to my friends. Just like that my whole high school history was chopped away in one fell swoop.

Going home, I felt stunned, insensate, like a disembodied head. By force of habit, I went to work in the café, automatically waiting on customers and not thinking about anything. Suddenly my past was wiped away, all my years of excitement and anguish gone with the wind, my adolescent fears and worries banished, as though I was newly born into a new world. My 18th birthday and high school graduation apparently marked my transition into maturity, when I ceased being a boy and became an adult. I assumed this shocked numbness was the normal state for adults.

Numbness ruled my automatic work in the café until Sammy came in with Iona. I hadn't seen him for months, ever since the game crowds, and I was pleased to see he was even taller and more good-looking. He'd also graduated the other day from Lockesburg (in a Senior class of twelve), and we congratulated each other with a warm hug. Feeling his lean body in my arms reminded me of years before when I used to wrestle him down. Iona was pleased as punch to be going out with handsome Sammy. Their visit kept me happy until I got off at midnight.

The stunned new adult spent most of Saturday starting on fix-up work around the place. I began by demolishing part of the decrepit white fence at the left back of the house and using the good boards to replace broken pieces on other areas. The newly open area I spaded up for flower beds, and Mom thought it looked real nice. Of course, it looked even better when I mowed some more, scattering stupid chickens out of the way. All that work earned me a great long nap, which I sure needed since I had to work in the café from 5:30 and all night long.

Now that I was an adult, for the next couple weeks my life became nothing but work, mornings, afternoons, and evenings. In between there was more mowing, grounds work around the café, motel cabins, and house. Every day I wore myself out and wondered if exhaustion was another word for making a living. The great part of it was that I no longer suffered fits of depression, just a nagging worry about when I'd hear from Tulane about the crucial scholarship question.

Bright spots in the grind were when Sammy dropped in, like that lazy Sunday afternoon with Iona again. They hung out playing pinball, and when not busy, I watched their affectionate relations with sympathetic tenderness. For the first time in many weeks, I felt a flood of fraternal love for Sammy—at least as strong as what I'd felt for Denny. The feeling kept me warm all week until Friday evening when he came in with the black-haired Frog Level boy, his little brother, and sat in a booth playing checkers. It gave me joy to watch them laughing together.

Going to sleep that Saturday night thinking about my deep feelings for Sammy, I had a vivid dream. He and I were staying all night in a big old house with some other Frog Level boys who were sleeping together, but Sammy and I lay alone in adjacent twin beds and talked to each other in the darkness. We talked about everything and anything, and I felt a closeness as though we were wrestling. Our intimate communication felt like mingling minds, melting into one another. It was far more profound than my earlier imaginings of lying with fictitious Billy.

After church, I went to work on a slow Sunday afternoon. Around 3:00, Sammy ambled in alone since Iona was busy, and he needed some company. Happy to provide it, I displayed my pinball wizardry with Sammy leaning on me, arm around my shoulders and breath close by my ear. Again, like in the dream, I felt us melting into each other. While he played, I draped an arm over his shoulders, lips so close to his delicate ear but stopped myself from kissing his cheek. Sammy stayed with me for over an hour, again talking about everything and anything over our dishes of vanilla ice cream. I was as happy as I could ever remember being, and then he left.

Two days later, I got a letter from Tulane offering me a full-tuition scholarship and student job to cover living expenses. I was ecstatic and ran around showing everyone the letter. My academic future was in the bag! Mom and Dad were real happy for me and gave me hugs. I ran over to the phone in the café and called Ed to tell him the big news and thank him profusely for telling me about Tulane. He got all excited about us going to the same college. We'd have fun...

Fun wasn't exactly the word for the rest of the week at work, but my college fund was adding up nicely. By Sunday I needed a day off, but all I got was the morning for church (where I missed seeing Ron, but no matter...), and in the afternoon it was back to the grind. By now I figured this nose to the old stone business was the essence of maturity. Oh, well, I'd be patient—just three months yet till I'd be gone. Bye-bye, Penney Hill! Howdy-do, New Orleans!

Thus I was in a peaceful, patient, hopeful mood when Sammy came in with Iona and some girls from Dallas. I announced my news about Tulane, and he said he'd found a job in a factory in Tulsa—leaving in two days. Iona was also leaving next week for California. I savored every moment with my brief brother as we played pinballs, close again in being the only boys there. Then we danced in the dining room to music on the juke box, our private three-way going-away party. In valediction, I hugged Iona and Sammy, who whispered, "Bless you, brother!"

After another mindless week at work, that Monday I caught a ride with a truck-driver friend named Mutt from Ft. Smith on his way to New Orleans to pick up a load of bananas. Riding in the empty truck was like riding a camel, bumping and thumping the whole way. Getting there late at night, he let me off on Canal Street a block from the Hotel New Orleans where I got a tiny, dingy room for \$6.70, way more costly than our motel. Up early, I ate breakfast at a lunch counter down Canal Street and took a bus uptown to the Tulane campus. Even more than in Philadelphia, everywhere were crowds of black folks, but most of them smiled brightly when I smiled and said hi. A thrilling, fascinating new world was waiting for me.

At Tulane, the Dean showed me around, and I chose the newest dormitory. Then I walked across the campus to St. Charles Avenue, wandered into Audubon Park with a bayou and humongous live oaks, and took the streetcar back downtown. In the afternoon I rode the ferry from Canal Street across the vast Mississippi and back again for a view of the Cathedral and Jackson Square. I couldn't wait to tell Denny about the fantastic voyage since he'd never been on a big boat.

After dinner at the hotel, I crossed Canal Street to the Sanger, a splendid theater with a starry-sky ceiling and Greek statues along the walls. They were showing "South Pacific." I swooned at the tropical beaches and palm trees, and especially the wonderful song "Bali Hai." Back in my room, I kept imagining that paradisiacal island "where the sky meets the sea." I hit the hay early and got up at 5:30 am to take a cab to the Louisa Street wharf, where I met Mutt with his truck full of bananas. Loaded, the ride home was much smoother than going down empty.

When I got home, Milton had a phone message from yesterday from my friend Dennis, who called to say he'd enlisted in the Navy and was leaving for North Carolina today. I was crushed, especially at the irony of thinking yesterday about him never being on a big boat—no telling him now about the ferry. Postponing my sadness, I dived back into constant work in the café.

A week later, Cousin Skip arrived on the Greyhound from Wisconsin to visit for a couple weeks and pick peaches at Mr. Bledsoe's orchard. I took a couple of days off to show him around my favorite places in the woods, and we helped set up the peach stand in front of the house. Though he was two years younger than she, my handsome cousin, who looked just like Sal Mineo, flirted wildly with Lea Etta, Iona's big sister back again to peddle peaches. When Skip went to work at the orchard about four miles up the road, Dad let his nephew drive the old Ford jalopy.

Skip came back each day exhausted and all sweaty and itchy from the peach fuzz. We at least had the friendly evenings to play games and hang out at the café with the local kids. I greatly appreciated his cousinly company and his popularity with the girls, but he stayed faithful to his girlfriend back home. Though it was already getting hard-down hot, we slept in my room, Skip on my sofa, and me in my little bed, all my windows wide open.

Each morning when I got up for work, I woke him to go to the orchard. I lingered briefly over his beautiful sleeping form, admiring his black curls and tanned chest, before touching his shoulder or tickling his nose. On Skip's later mornings with me, I tickled his tit with a feather or brushed it down his bare tummy to his belly button, which worked just as well. The morning before his last day at the orchard, I found him sprawled on the sofa in the heat with a big hard-on pushing up his white underpants. I felt a hungry fire inside of me and fought down the urge to run my finger along it. Instead, to wake him up, I snapped his elastic waistband.

We both slept late the next day when he was to leave. Skip climbed on the Greyhound and was gone, leaving me alone again with visions of his beauty, another valedictory to a beloved being. That night after a long day of work, I moved out to my cool summer bed under the hickory tree and snuggled the dogs, settling into a routine of early to work and late to bed. While counting down the two months till I could escape to New Orleans, I would also help Dad fix up the place. We'd repaint the fences and trim on the café, gas station, motel cabins, and house, making the beautiful old place look brand new again.

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