

MAKING OUT

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Four in the morning came awful darn early! I slapped off the alarm, scrambled out of bed in the chilly dark and hopped around on the cold floor looking for my clothes. Daddy didn't often do much of anything with me, much less go deer hunting. It was going to be an exciting escape from school. I pulled on pants, sweater, and boots and grabbed up my old denim jacket and red cap. This early in December it wasn't all that wintery yet, and figuring they'd be warm enough, I hustled out my door to get something for breakfast.

I had my very own front door, you see. The man that built our yellow-block house must've been scared of somehow getting caught inside, and he made five doors to the outside, like fire escapes, I suppose. Each door had its own porch with block columns and gabled roof, which I thought was fairly fancy. As I came out my door, Mom was just coming out of the other front door from the living room. She was heading across the road to go to work.

On the other side of night-quiet US Highway 71 sat our great truck stop café called Piney Hill, also built of yellow block with three front porches, its neon lights pink and welcoming under the dark pine trees. Mom's blonde hair was brushed up all pretty for work in the café so Daddy and I could go off hunting.

Same time as us, the day-cook Melba Johnson got to work. While I held the door open, she waddled in, tying an apron around her big belly, and I ordered some hotcakes and bacon. Waiting at the counter, I read the funnies in the newspaper and then wolfed down my cakes. Daddy filled thermos bottles from the coffee urn and had Melba pack us up some sandwiches.

Daddy was letting me use Grandpa's old shotgun, the one with scroll designs all over it, but warned that it kicked like a mule. Usually I went hunting with the .22 rifle I'd bought from the Conoco man and that mainly for squirrels. I was a fair shot. Of course, I reckoned with a shotgun and buckshot going all over the place, that didn't matter so much.

Back outside, by the pink of the neons again, I stowed the guns and shells in the trunk of our Desoto. Just then a teenaged boy came out of the café, probably with his father, and got in the driver's side of their car. Envious, I lamented that here I was seventeen and still didn't know how to drive. Living way out here in the backwoods of Arkansas, miles from the nearest town, a boy might as well be in prison without a car.

As ever, the ride with Daddy was quiet. We never talked much anyway, and I generally preferred to keep my thoughts to myself. The light from the dashboard made Daddy's thin gray hair seem even whiter. Not that he was old, I mean, but his black hair went gray back when I was just a little kid. Watching the headlights beam up the blacktop, I regretted again that my best pal Danny couldn't come with us. He'd have spent the night with me. But with his terrible grades, he couldn't skip out on this Friday at school.

Just then Daddy asked me to pour him some coffee, and I set the plastic cup on the open door of the glove compartment. But while pulling out the thermos plug, I bumped it off onto the floor. Before I could blink, Daddy back-handed me across the face and snapped, "For Chrissake, Benny! You moron." I'd learned long ago that saying anything wouldn't help, and anyway, what did dropping a cup have to do with IQ? After a moment of blessed silence, he went on, like I figured he would, "Look at you, always whining like a damn ten-year-old crybaby."

I mumbled, "I'm sorry," though there'd been no tears, and Daddy went back to his driving. I poured his coffee without incident and with my cheek still smarting, went back to looking out the car window into the dark, no sign of dawn yet over the pines.

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By Richard Balthazar

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Suddenly I remembered part of a dream from last night. *Danny and I are out hunting in a thick pine woods, and then we come out onto a gravel road and catch a ride in the back of a pickup truck with some other guys. One of them tries to kiss Danny.* Then it changed into something else I couldn't remember. Although I always wished and prayed for dreams about my secret sweetheart girlfriend, they were few and far between.

A cup of black coffee woke me up some more, and I set to recalling that other Saturday back last year when Daddy took me deer hunting up by the Dierks road. We didn't usually get much snow down here in the southwestern part of the state, but that day there'd been a light snowfall, and a sweet, cold breeze blew through the pines. I had no idea what kind of deer I was stalking—could've been a doe or even a buck with proud horns, but I tracked it for miles winding through those snowy woods. At times the deer even stopped to rest, waiting for me to catch up, like a game. There'd be melted patches of snow where it had lain down, and once in the nest of pine straw, I felt its warmth. The musky smell of the deer was hanging on the air.

In the village of Provo we picked up Daddy's friend Homer and then met up with Riley to follow his old truck way out into the hills. After we'd parked, Riley explained that this kind of deer hunting would be just waiting for the dogs to run them up these hillsides out of the woods in the river bottoms. That was okay by me, since I was used to still-hunting squirrels in the early mornings. Out back by the gravel pit, I'd sit by the tall hickory tree where they're always cutting, and I'd watch the new sun tip its leaves with gold.

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Riley gave me a real nice stand up on top of a hill covered with some of the tallest pines I ever saw hereabouts. He said it would have good sight lines down the slope to where a deer would come up the valley, but it was too dark to see what he was talking about. I got myself situated on a log leaning up against a convenient pine-trunk, and he disappeared with his flashlight. Everything was so quiet, even the bugs were still asleep.

Relaxing against the tree with the fancy shotgun lying across my lap, I savored the peace of the darkness and imagined being Deerslayer in that Cooper story with Danny as my wild Indian friend. By the time I heard the first hounds barking way off in the bottoms, a glow was rising in the eastern sky. A chilly fog was hanging around amongst the tree trunks, and slowly I began to make out the far hillside and valley between. Since a buck could come by at any minute, I started watching close and held the gun all cocked and ready. Fairly soon sunrays came peeping through, a blurry golden light on the high bare limbs of the white oak across the way. By now the gun was getting heavy.

There was a sudden small sound in the leaves off to my right, and out from behind a bush walked a big fat doe, looking around cautiously. I didn't make a move, except to carefully take my finger off the trigger. She continued slowly across the slope followed by a spotted fawn. A faint sound of barking came again, really a long way off, and the doe darted away, disappearing with her fawn into the bushes and mist. Reminding me of *The Yearling*, a book I'd read three times with many sobs, it made me none too anxious now to shoot even a legal buck deer.

The fog was thinning fast across the valley. I chuckled to think that if Danny had come hunting with me, he'd be off somewhere else at a stand all alone, just like me. He was my very best friend, but we never got to do much together outside of school. Small wonder since he lived right there in Ashdown near the school, and I was stuck at Piney Hill twenty miles away.

We'd met the first day of school last year when I got transferred south to Ashdown High for eleventh grade. (Daddy figured I'd get me a better education there than in the tiny school in Lockesburg, a village just six miles to the north.) That first morning, I'd gotten off the school

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bus in town to buy the geometry book, and on Main Street I came up on this tall boy going the same way. I liked him because he was real friendly, but he left me at the bookstore and went on to school. Later on we saw each other in the hall and said hi, and it turned out that in assembly, because of our last names together in the alphabet, we got seats next to each other in the first row of the class. Ever since then, Danny and I'd been the very best of pals.

The valley was now bright with morning, and the dogs were baying in the distance, circling around north. There was nothing else for a fair bit, and then a couple black crows flew by, cawing up a storm. For some wicked reason, I was suddenly tempted to the vile sin of the flesh, but I concentrated on watching a black beetle stumble clumsily along the log. Then I remembered I was supposed to be watching for deer, another way to ignore the temptation.

Being a Catholic,—as a matter of fact the one and only Catholic kid in my school, the rest all Baptists and Methodists—I suppose I was pretty religious because I tried hard to obey all the rules of the Church. Our parish priest, Father Jordan, always told me what was sinful, especially things like touching oneself impurely. Apparently the only pure touches were those required to use the bathroom or wash myself. This rule didn't make much sense to me.

I felt it a great privilege to be of the One True Faith, but it also kept me so terribly separate from everyone. A few years ago Father revealed in a catechism lesson that we mustn't become involved emotionally with non-Catholics. It hurt my heart that Danny was a poor, misguided Protestant, but the hardest was that I wasn't supposed to love a non-Catholic girl.

The only Catholic girl I knew beside my little sister Janie was Annette Funicello on the Mickey Mouse Club television show. So it was all right for me to fall in love with her, which I did like a ton of bricks. Annette was so beautiful and sweet, exactly how I imagined a girlfriend being. Since she was Catholic, it was perfectly okay for me to devote all my natural, romantic feelings to incomparable Annette. I could write my very own teenage love-song, like Frankie Avalon's wonderful "Venus," which I could even sing pretty good.

These past couple years, I'd religiously watched Annette dance and sing in that fun TV show. Back then when I could see her every day with those black curls and Mouseketeer ears, it was bliss. Nowadays with her off the show, I so rarely got to see my darling anymore and felt awful lonely. I had to seek Annette out in guest appearances on other shows, like on Zorro where she played a beautiful Mexican girl, or on the Danny Thomas Show. No one in the world, except my pen pal Betsy, who lived way off across the state in Jonesboro, knew about my consuming love for Annette Funicello all these last two long, lonesome years.

For a couple more hours on that quiet morning hill, there wasn't a single solitary sign of a deer. There was plenty time to think long thoughts of Annette and Danny. Frankly, it was pretty weird, discombobulating, to feel so much the same about my secret sweetheart and my best buddy. There was the same warmth inside me, almost a burning, of longing to be with her or him, the same joy in seeing them both, the same mysterious... It was darned confusing.

Thinking now about him, now about her, I probably even dozed off one or twice, so who knows how many deer got by me. Hearing a couple shots now and then far off across the hills, I figured at least some hunter was maybe getting him a deer.

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Finally I got hard-down hungry and abandoning my stand, made my way back up the valley to the car and truck. Homer got out our ham and cheese sandwiches that really hit the spot. Afterwards, Riley put me way down by the creek to watch for deer crossing the dirt road. He explained, "It's all in being in the right place at the right time." That sounded simple enough.

Because it was already getting too warm, I took off my jacket and leaned up against a

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sweet gum tree, all its fallen foliage now scattered about amongst the spiky seed balls and shriveling up from the fall's scarlet into a golden brown. On the tree trunk, I found a good chaw of the sweet sap, and chewing it happily, kept a sharp eye on the potential deer crossing.

Soon I got bored and let my mind wander, unleashing a fantasy of my divine Annette. *She's walking innocently along this dirt road. How surprised she is to see me standing here by the tree. She's got on a pioneer dress like on Davey Crockett, pretty as can be, and acts shy saying hello. I introduce myself real polite, and give her a big smile. We're sweethearts in nothing flat. I take her hand to help her across the stepping stones in the creek—and a wind came up in a whirling leaf-storm around me. The sweet gum leaves swirled up and fluttered like whirligigs, and little dust-devils made them scuttle along the sandy road like crazy spiders.*

There was always barking in the distance and sometimes a shot. I may have fallen asleep against the tree for a while. Anyway a long time later Homer finally hollered for me to come on back. Down at Daddy's stand, we found he'd got him a nice buck with four points. He seemed right proud and happy, a look I didn't often see in his pale blue eyes.

The dead deer looked so pitiful, its huge dark eyes clouding over, but it'd make good venison. They put the corpse in Riley's truck along with the one he'd bagged, and I flopped in the backseat of our car. You really had to wonder how the woods could keep so full of wild animals what with everybody and his brother hunting them all the time.

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I napped some more on the ride home, and by the time we got back to Piney Hill, the sun was lowering. I got nervous about the time. Earlier this week I'd figured out that my darling Annette would be the special guest on American Bandstand today. She'd just been voted Most Promising Female Vocalist for 1959. When I popped into the café, the clock fortunately showed plenty of time to grab a cold RC Cola, run across the road to the house, and switch on the TV.

Bandstand was my other favorite TV show, a great party every day after the long boring school bus ride from Ashdown. All those cool kids and neat Dick Clark were like another special family for me. Kenny and Arlene were my favorites. Arlene looked so much like my Annette, almost as pretty, and Kenny had dark curls too, and brown eyes. He actually answered one of my fan letters once, something my darling Annette never did.

Once I got a postcard from Walt Disney with her pretty picture in response to the long Valentine poem I wrote (and illustrated). How lucky those Bandstand kids were to be near fabulous people like Annette, like when she was on the show singing "Tall Paul." Her lovely black hair was longer now that she wasn't a Mouseketeer anymore.

Today Dick played some good rock and roll, and I danced around the living room still in my red hunting cap. Then sure enough the guest was Annette. She came bouncing out from behind the curtain, so pretty in her white sweater and skirt. She swayed with the music of her new record, her beautiful smile beaming at the camera, and her raven hair even longer. I wasn't sure I really liked it as much that way. It made her look so much more grown up and fancy.

Her delicate hand was hiding something at her throat. Of course, I knew the song was going to be "First Name Initial," and I ached to see what she was wearing on the chain. At the end of the first verse, she suddenly let go of it. A B! I stared, entranced, as she sang,

*I wear it at the soda shop,
I wear it at the record hop,
Ridin' to a movie in your Jeep,
I wear it when I go to gym,
I wear it when I take a swim,*

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I even wear it when I sleep!

Fixated on Annette's beauty, after the song I listened in anguish as she talked with Dick about Frankie Avalon and Fabian. When she mentioned Frankie, she grinned, and I could tell she was blushing. She called Paul Anka a tease and a practical joker. I couldn't feel jealous about those guys because I really liked them too, like comrades in love for her. I really thought Frankie was super, and Fabian was so handsome, with a hairy chest just like mine. In the close-ups of my darling I nearly drooled admiring her dark eyes and hair.

She spent a while at the autograph stand signing all the kids' books, her hand making the round shapes of that signature I knew so well from the magazines. Kenny slow-danced with her, and it made me feel so close, almost as though I could feel my famous darling in my arms. When Annette waved goodbye and went back behind the curtain, I fell down on the floor, overcome with romantic emotion. Those few moments of seeing her on the TV had been like the visit of an angel. My love for Annette was pure, almost religious adoration, untainted by anything physical, a truly grand passion.

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Not caring to watch any more of the show and still boggled by Annette's beauty, I staggered outside and raced around to do my chores before it got dark. An eternal part of daily life on Piney Hill was feeding all our animals. We might as well have had a zoo around the place, except Mom wouldn't allow any critters in the house. Just one of the parakeets Daddy was raising, a white one named Joe who could say, clear as a bell, "Hello, Joe."

The unpainted chickenhouse in the backyard was chock full of pets. I kept a lot of snakes, lizards, and turtles in there and raised white rats to feed the snakes. There were a few tarantulas and three-legged Rackety Coon, as well as lots of turkeys, chickens, ducks, and guinea hens. The tall bank of hutches was full of eating rabbits I had to feed with lettuce scraps from the café or armloads of clover or alfalfa from the back field.

The hard work was hauling big buckets of slops down to the lower end of the pasture for the hogs, only four of them left right now. Last year I'd raised a great red Poland China hog named Cornpone that won the blue ribbon for shoats at the county fair in DeQueen. With the money from the meatpackers, I bought me some cool cowboy boots with turquoise tops.

But that wasn't all. Next came hauling over the meat-bones for Daddy's pack of hounds in the pen behind the garage with extras for sister Janie's dog Duchess. My dog Sambo got killed on the highway last summer and now I had a blond-brown shepherd. In honor of last year's class in Spanish, I named him Lobo, but he actually looked more like a lion than a wolf. Then there was food for a couple crazy cats and chicken scraps for Fauntleroy S. Fox. At least I didn't have to feed the billygoat who ate whatever, and Janie would feed her horse Lady.

All that done and back over at the café, I washed up and sat in booth number three to eat a supper of hamburger steak and cherry pie with ice cream. Later on in my room I tuned the radio to WNOE for some more rock and roll and answered pen pal letters. I hadn't heard back yet from that girl Sally in Oklahoma, so I answered the German boy Horst's letter and told him about deer hunting. Then I wrote Betsy all about my glorious vision of Annette this afternoon and the miracle of her wearing my initial. Betsy had wormed out of my trap in our chess by mail, and I had to think hard for another attack. It was yet another normal, uneventful evening all alone on Piney Hill.

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Eventually, desperate for company, I wandered back across the road to the café. Piney Hill was about the only place kids from hereabouts had to go to see each other and hang out over

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a Coke and French fries. There weren't even any movie-houses anywhere because the preachers called them evil. On the other hand, I noticed they didn't seem to worry very much about their teenaged girls getting knocked up in the back seats of cars.

Talking with an old acquaintance from Lockesburg named Charles Cooper, I was amazed at how much he'd changed from before. His mouth had gone slack, and there were pimples all over his face. Cute Gloria Harrison stopped in too. Her blonde hair done up like Marilyn Monroe, she walked slinky and talked flirty with everybody, even me. All my old friends seemed to be growing up so fast.

Then Daddy had me wait on some folks that just came in so he could catch up on washing the dishes. Ever since fourteen, I'd generally helped out in the café whenever needed, waiting tables, cashiering, even cooking. Daddy had me work most Saturdays all day long, some Sundays after church, and even paid me fifty cents an hour. Summers I got to work a lot more during the weeks to save up for college.

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Pretty soon in the door walked Danny looking real cool in his blue athletic jacket. It was easy to see why the girls all thought he was so handsome with his square jaw and fabulous smile. He didn't get up here from Ashdown all that often to see me, and I was thrilled. He poked me hello and asked how the hunting went. I told him he didn't miss much of anything.

Getting some change from Daddy to play the pinball machines, Danny bought a Roi-Tan cigar for later on. With great pain I realized that even though he didn't have any pimples at all, my handsome Danny, just like Annette, was also changing. Did that mean I was too? I didn't feel any different—and had no pimples either—and I surely didn't want to smoke cigars, but I had to admit that I just wasn't a little boy anymore. Nearly eighteen was pretty darned old.

Watching Danny play the pinball, it was funny how I could lose track of time admiring his smooth cheeks and flashing brown eyes. His lips had really neat curves. Then we sat around at the counter goofing off. Danny idly twirled his stool back and forth a couple times, knocking my knee gently in passing. He grinned at me devilishly and whispered, "You sure got some pretty legs, Benny buddy." Nothing like his sleek legs, I reckoned and said nothing. "Don't mind me," he sighed. "I just got horns tonight."

I laughed. "You're lucky I didn't see you out in the woods today."

Shortly, Liz Butler came in with a new boyfriend from the town of Horatio off on the west side of the river. She smiled hello at me, and Danny eyed her desirously. A few years back, before I knew about the Church's awful rule, I'd had a huge crush on her. Liz was still cute with her long ponytail, but of course, nothing like my Annette. Actually, she looked a lot like Roberta Shore, who was my beloved's biggest rival for fame and popularity, and who, besides, was a Mormon. I had no idea what kind of heathen they were. Father Jordan didn't ever give me any details about pagan stuff like that.

Pretty soon Terry Miller showed up too. A classmate of ours, Terry always wore his collar up and flattop in a ducktail like the rock singers on television. He was a real hip guy, a regular ladies' man. I had to help Daddy clean up after a big bunch of folks in the dining area, and Danny went outside with Terry to smoke his cigar. In a few minutes I came out too.

Along the parking area in front of the café there was this huge chain strung up between big cement posts. They were sitting on the great links down by the rosebush. I sat next to Danny so my leg pushed up against his. He threw his arm over my shoulder and squeezed my neck. It felt so good I thought I was going to faint, but then I realized it was the smelly cigar.

They were talking about Terry's hot '57 Chevy parked right there in front of us, all shiny

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and black. Naturally I myself knew nothing about cars beyond what I could read on the hood. But I felt perfectly content listening to my good buddy chatter about whatever, as long as he kept his arm around my neck.

When Terry went back inside for a snack, Danny punched me on the arm, and I chased him across the road to our Desoto, down the way to the Phillips 66 station and around the pumps, back across the highway, up past the café, and around some cars. He finally let me catch him around the corner where Melvin, the night cook, parked his new red Plymouth. We collapsed on its shiny hood, breathless from running and laughing.

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Back inside the café while Danny and I were lounging at the counter again with a cream soda, Mary Nell came in with cute Judy Simpson, her friend. Mary Nell's dad, Mr. Curtis, didn't usually let her go out much. A plump girl with a round nose, she was also a confidante, but not about my secret love for Annette. She waved and went to sit in number four. Right away Terry smoothed back his hair all neat and went over to sit by Judy.

Mary Nell looked around at Danny and me and quickly turned away. She'd told me on the bus the other day she thought Danny was cute. (I'd have said hard-down handsome.) So I leaned over to my pal and whispered, "Maybe you ought to go sit with her."

A blush glowed on his cheeks, and he said, "Looks 'bout the best chance I got, huh?"

While he went over to talk to her, I helped Daddy by carrying them some ice cream and Cokes. Then I sat by myself in number three booth just looking at the tan vinyl back of theirs. Even if the Church wouldn't let me 'romance' these girls, at least Danny could make time with them, and if he was happy... When the juke box shut off, Danny went over with a dime and punched a couple tunes. On the way back to their booth, he gave me a funny grin.

His first song was "Chances Are" by Johnny Mathis that made me melt into a romantic heap: *Chances are, 'cause I wear that silly grin / The moment you come into view...* I had to admit, that was exactly the way I felt about Danny, too. His second choice was a sappy country love song by Kitty Wells that was all very sweet, but musically it made me retch.

When the song was finally over, they all got up out of number four. There was a mischievous gleam in my pal's dreamy brown eyes. Terry announced that they were just going for a little ride in his car. Mary Nell's smile promised complete school bus gossip.

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Left alone again, I walked on down to number five cabin, last in the line of our small motel cottages sitting back among the pine trees. Walking through the dark, I imagined Danny holding Mary Nell, kissing her. It was real confusing because I'd never kissed anybody at all, ever. As much as I'd fantasized about the passionate kisses I'd give Annette, I had absolutely no experience in the real thing. Down at the cabin I turned off the light somebody left on.

Ambling on down the hill to the edge of the woods, I wondered how Danny kissed. Like how exactly would he pucker his lips? Would he stick his tongue...? I skipped across the dark highway and trudged back uphill. An occasional car zipped past. From here I could see all of Piney Hill, the café gleaming under the black pines. Across the road, it made the white board fence around our yard almost glow. Under more pines, our house with all its porches looked mostly grey and black now in the night.

If you sat on the terrace out in front of the house, the bustle of the café was far enough away to be peaceful. I dutifully petted Duchess the dog and Smudge the deaf white cat, meanwhile feeling dizzy from all the pure desire boiling up inside me. It struck me as kind of like the deer hunt, gun all loaded and cocked but nothing to shoot.

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I leaned back, sighing, and gazed up through the pine branches at the stars, the very same ones that were shining down on Annette—and *now she's snuggling close and warm in my arms, resting her lovely head on my shoulder. Her curls brush against my cheek. I lift my hand to caress hers*—and a star shot across the sky trailing blue and red, disappearing behind the trees.

I was about to make a wish on it when a blue pickup roared up to the café. To my horror, I recognized it as Mary Nell's father's truck. Mr. Curtis was a local preacher and very strict. He stomped into the café, came back out, and looked up and down the highway. Then he stood by Mary Nell's car kicking gravel. What could I do? I panicked.

In a minute Terry's black car came racing up the hill, turning in to the south end of the parking lot, right into his clutches. I came running across the road like a fool and heard how he didn't even shout at Mary Nell, but quietly ordered her to drive straight on home. Terry said he'd give Judy a ride back to Ben Lomond. Mr. Curtis didn't say a word to Danny, who just stood there looking innocent as all get out.

When they were all gone, I asked my buddy if he was okay. "Just great," he laughed and squeezed my neck again to say goodbye. Getting into his car, he smiled up at me with one of those beautiful winks and said, "She was a hot smooch. Thanks, friend."

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After Danny drove off down the Hill, there wasn't time to wonder about those smooches. A school bus pulled up full of the basketball crowd from DeQueen, and I had to help Daddy out with the rush. As usual, it was a whirl of kids everywhere filling the booths and stools, a crowding, pushing, greedy bunch. I shifted into overdrive: make milkshake, get hamburger, make change, say thank you, again and again. With all the dozens of burgers ordered, back in the kitchen good old Melvin just placidly went on flipping patties and hollering, "Pick up."

Once a boy came up to the register to pay me for his burger, real good looking with dark curls on his forehead, and gave me a kind of challenging look, like daring me to something, but I couldn't imagine what. Or maybe a question? Then he was gone with the game crowd. I got to sweep up all the mess they left and wonder what in the world that had been all about.

What a relief it was to haul myself across the road at midnight and crawl out of my clothes into my comfy bed. I had to get up early in the morning to work. Even the trailer truck that pulled up out in front of the house, its refrigerator motor very loud, couldn't distract me from sinking into the sweet embrace of my beloved Annette. I hugged my pillow and nuzzled her pure white throat, breathing the fragrance of her curls. Real sleepy, I heard myself sigh passionately, "How I love to kiss your black lips." I laughed right out loud.

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