

TREASURES OF DARKNESS

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Today being a Tuesday and a school day, I had to get up at six. Washing up in the bathroom didn't take long because I didn't shave yet, though I'd been hairy since about thirteen and had wonderful fuzz growing on my face. Folks liked my blue eyes and long lashes. I wore my brown hair in a flattop, real plain because Daddy said ducktail looked sissy. I didn't really like the hairdo, but it looked a lot better than a crew-cut. Daddy also said I had a skinny chicken neck and ears like a cab with both doors hanging open. I had to admit my ears did stick out a bit, but I'd squash them back whenever I thought to. Still, I considered myself fairly handsome, hopefully enough for Annette to fall in love with me.

Sister Janie left a bit later for her grade school in Lockesburg, the town about six miles north that we kids called Lockjaw. On my way back through her room, I shook her mattress to rouse her, and she snarled like an irritated cat. Another shake got her to sit up with her dark hair all awry, so I considered my fraternal duty accomplished.

Over at the café, Melba brought me out some soft-scrambled eggs and sausage and as always waited for me to say they were good. Naturally Daddy told me to hurry up. He always wanted to leave just a few minutes before I got done with the funny papers. I managed to finish Li'l Abner, with Moonbeam McSwine in Rome as a movie star called Appassionata Sonata.

The first stage of the long road to school every day was Daddy driving me a couple miles down the road to Mary Nell's house. Piney Hill, being on the second foothill of the Ouachita Mountains and in Sevier County, the bus only came out as far as Ben Lomond on the edge of Little River County. Just south of the first foothill was where Mary Nell lived, at the edge of the broad bottoms of the Little River, which was actually a real big river.

I'd always wait in the back seat of her green Studebaker for her to come out of their neat white house. Since it wasn't light enough yet to read, I just admired the winter landscape around their place. Huge sycamores leaned their spotted branches out over Winters Creek nearby. The flat fields on the other side were streaked with wisps of mist, and cows were scattered like dark bushes in the dawn dimness.

Waiting patiently, I daydreamed about maybe going to the teen party at the Lions Club on Friday night. Maybe I could go with pretty Louise. If Danny would take Mary Nell, we could double date. Louise was in ninth, fairly young of course, but a beautiful blonde girl just as pretty as any movie star, except my exquisite Annette. So as not to be unfaithful to my sweetheart and keep to the Church's rule, I tried to keep all my thoughts of Louise, a non-Catholic, properly detached, just friendly. But it would be fun to go to the party with them.

On the couple miles to Ben Lomond, Mary Nell was unhappy because Judy Simpson had a date with Terry for the party, but Danny still hadn't asked her. She looked about to cry as she wheeled us up and down the curving, hilly road. The other week when I'd expected her to be sad about getting caught by her father, she'd just laughed and squealed, "Ooh, Benny! He kisses like an animal." I wasn't certain what she meant by that, but it was an interesting thought. Danny was sure lucky to get to go out with girls, even one not very pretty and on the heavy side. But Mary Nell had a funny personality most of the time, and he said she was a hot smooch.

I remarked on wishing we could double date. Mary Nell said sympathetically, "I don't understand. All the other boys in your class get to take the car. Why can't you?"

Now that was going to take some answering. I suspected maybe it was because Daddy wanted to keep me home to work in the café, but it didn't seem right to mention that. I merely

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answered, sighing, “I don’t know. But I sure do feel like the Prisoner of Piney Hill.”

It really would’ve been neat to go places like other guys and do things with other kids. I’d only been to one football game in Ashdown. That was last year with Father Jordan, which was strange to start with. I had to miss the class party last week. Daddy wouldn’t ever let me stay over with anyone, not even Danny, to do things like that.

Along with some other backwoods kids, we caught the bus at the one-room school house in the village of Ben Lomond. For the 16-mile ride to Ashdown, I read in *Auntie Mame* by Patrick Dennis, laughing till my sides hurt. I sure did wish I had such a super neat aunt. I heard tell they were making a movie of it, but fat chance of me ever getting to see that. It was a couple years now since Mom took Janie and me to DeQueen to see “Old Yeller.”

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At school I waited out front for Danny. He came ambling up the walk under the oak trees whistling “Red River Valley.” He was so hot-looking it should be illegal. Danny’s flattop was a shade darker than mine with just a hint of a ducktail in back. That point of hair on his nape didn’t look sissy at all. Actually it was pretty darned sexy.

He had to go to the office and get him a newspaper article for Civics class. I already had mine, a short thing about Congress passing some bill. Afterwards, we hung out by the lockers, and he leaned lazily up against one. Something made me poke his stomach. Wiggling his hips, he asked, “Want something?” Then he blushed like crazy, his cheeks the color of cherries.

Unable to answer his question yay or nay, I poked him again and asked, “Why don’t you ask Mary Nell to go to the Lions Club party?”

Danny put his middle finger on his cheek in a meaningful gesture and gave me a big smile. “I’m through with girls. I won’t never ask Mary Nell for a date.” I must have looked shocked—because I was—and he explained, “She lives way up there by you. All that driving, and her old man being... You know.”

Well, there went the party. Still reeling, I choked, “You’re through with girls?”

“For a little while,” he laughed and poked my stomach.

Just then pretty Betty Lou, a cheerleader, came bouncing up to us, all smiles with her very white teeth like an Ipana commercial. Hugging a clipboard to her prominent chest, she asked cheerily, “Have you guys made your annual deposits yet?”

We’d both already paid, and when she’d wiggled her butt and gone on to the next bunch of kids down the hall, I quipped, “I wonder if her bank only takes deposits once a year.”

Danny laughed and blushed once again. “Be quiet. You’re about to get me on a bone.”

Going to our regular assembly seats, now on the very first row being seniors, he brushed my face with his red sweater in passing, and I caught a brief flower-like fragrance. Waiting for assembly to start, Danny looked over at Betty Lou with intense carnal interest. I whispered, “There’s a little muscle in your cheek that’s quivering.”

He didn’t take his eyes off of her and said, “That ain’t the only one. Boy, I could make do with just half of her.”

Deadpan, I asked, “Right or left?” Danny cracked up.

The Principal, Mr. Foster, a thin man with graying hair and a very high waist, stood up front and shushed the auditorium full of kids. In a minute everybody settled down. Then to my huge surprise, he called on me to give the Bible reading. It was real odd what with me being a Catholic, but the school had been real good about it. They even started serving fish for lunch on Fridays, and the other kids said they enjoyed the relief from Salisbury steak or such like.

I hoped even in a Protestant Bible maybe I could find a piece of Divine Wisdom for the

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kids and especially for my wonderful friend Danny. So I went and stood in front near the flag. When I opened the Bible, my eyes landed on Isaiah 45: verses 2 & 3, and I read:

*I will go before thee
And level the mountains.
I will break in pieces the doors of bronze
And cut asunder the bars of iron.
I will give thee the treasures of darkness
And the hoards in secret places.*

A bit taken aback by what I'd just read, I went and sat back down. Danny puckered at me and asked in a whisper, "You got some treasures of darkness, Benny, babe?" Unsure, I shrugged. The reading didn't sound very Biblical to me, all that I'll do this and I'll do that. But it was sure enough dramatic and poetic and said everything I'd do for Danny.

Right after assembly he had to rush off to get the news article he'd left in the restroom. Out in the hall, I ran into funny Mickey who was always joking me about girls. He half-whispered in a sing-song, "I know someone who's got a crush on you."

"You do?" I asked and went on mock-shyly, "Why, Mick, I didn't know you cared."

He chuckled and shrugged in the direction of the Hill twins, one of whom was looking at us with dismay. They were identical, sort of plain with short brown hair, and I couldn't tell which one it was, Wanda or Wendy. Both disappeared immediately.

Mickey was sure a great guy, real good looking with brown curls, and my second-best bud in school. We'd had a great time together last summer at 4-H camp. All the girls were chasing him, but he stayed aloof, I think you'd say, hard to get. Still I heard stories about him going skinny-dipping with some of them.

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Our first class was Mrs. Wilson's silly Civics, and Danny and I were both armed with our articles. My front desk was by a window looking out on the sidewalk, next to Polly, who never seemed to know I was alive. Danny's desk was in the second row right behind Polly, so I could see him by turning a little. He'd slouch in his seat, his long legs stuck up by my desk. In the desk behind me was bored Dickey who stared out the window all the time.

When, to my horror, Mr. Foster walked into the room, it meant we were going to have 'Syckology' instead. (That was Danny's word, but I added the first 'y.')

Mr. Foster's approach to psychology was rambling sermons about good and evil people that sounded rather religious to me, and the way he held his fingertips together reminded me of a hypocrite. Naturally, him being a Protestant heretic and all, he wasn't in God's grace, even if he was Principal.

At loose ends during the preaching, I tapped on Danny's knee with my pencil while he wadded up his useless news article. Only when Mr. Foster said something about the ascetic and altruistic things of life like friendship did I perk up my ear. Looking at my handsome pal, I thought how that was really true. A special friend like Danny was indeed a very spiritual thing, almost like being in love, but somehow different.

Later on, while picking at a fingernail in boredom, Danny slouched down again and spread his legs, showing a bulge in his pants. He was obviously thinking about Betty Lou again. As we left the class, I grabbed that muscle on his hip, and the lean motion was real sexy.

Danny had to go off to Shop, and I was next to Chemistry. In the hall I saw pretty Louise coming down the way, and my heart started pounding. Her dress was my favorite blue. In passing I asked sweetly, "Where are you bustling off to?" She smiled, wiggled her blonde curls, answered, "History," smiled again, and continued on her way. I stood there in the middle of the

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hall like a dope and then sadly stumbled along to my class.

Without Danny, Chemistry wasn't any fun. I sat in the third row right behind freckly Walter. Bored, I looked at the back of his crew-cut head and saw it just sitting there on his neck, a hairy bump, like a fuzzy mushroom, or a wart. The whole class long I kept choking on the absurdity of it, and afterwards out in the hall I laughed myself silly.

Not wanting to look dopey like that, I decided right then and there to grow my hair longer. I'd recently seen some cute guys dancing on Bandstand with a bit more hair, just enough to comb, a style I sort of liked. It might look good with my beard. Come to think of it, all the great rock'n'roll singers like Frankie and Fabian, even Elvis, had thick heads of hair. And look how handsome they all were. Now all I needed was for Daddy to let me do it.

In Study Hall, Danny had me read his piece for Speech class about coon hunting. His phrasing was so amusing, but overall it was written abominably. He kicked at my shoe while I read, and instead of laughing, I put my hand on his arm. In the big dictionary we looked up our names. His meant 'God is my judge,' which made very little sense, and mine as 'son of the right hand' made absolutely none. Danny interpreted by pumping his right fist and snickered.

He had to read a short chapter for American History, and I set to thinking about Fabian's great wave of hair. His name, Fabian Forte, was so perfect, the alliteration and Forte meaning strong. I had to wonder if it was his real name or a made up one. The rest of Study Hall I diddled around wondering on what great name I could use if I got to be a rock star. Lots of my inspirations were just plain silly, like Lance Long, and the best I managed was Billy Brightly, or for a more exotic tone, Billy Bravo. Of course, to be a star I'd probably need a guitar, and fat chance of Daddy buying me one, much less letting me take lessons. He always called music just a noisy waste of time.

Instead of Physical Education, for fourth periods while Danny was in Speech, I'd wrangled to work in Mr. Foster's office helping out his skinny secretary Mildred with the typing. (I'd taught myself to type at twelve and was an absolute whiz on the Smith Corona.) She needed two English tests typed, so I was busy for most of the hour on the stencils for the mimeograph.

Afterwards at the start of lunch hour when I was at the office door asking Mr. Gilbert, my Trigonometry teacher, about changing lockers, I felt a hand on my arm. Danny was standing there smiling at me. I was so glad to see him that I said his name right out loud.

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We spent most of lunch hour out in the gym playing volleyball. Standing out the first game, Danny watched Betty Lou practicing some cheers. He swallowed hard and looked like he wanted to run over and grab her. Louise was across the way in her blue dress, and I turned on my most carefree act clapping for the players. Finally we got in to play, and our team won.

All my afternoon classes were dull. There was English with grumpy old Miss Cindy, who bawled me out for doing the Bible reading so poorly, and History and Trigonometry, both with easy as pie tests. During a class-change, I saw Louise talking with someone and figured she was way too young for me anyway.

I caught Danny out in the hall by his locker to say goodbye. He was singing "Making Love" and winked at me. It was my turn to ask if he wanted something. His blush was well worth it. Then he narrowed his brown eyes skeptically and asked, "What you got, Benny-babe?"

Totally out of the blue, right there in the middle of the hallway, surprising me most of all, and maybe inspired by Billy Bravo, I gave my very best Jerry Lee Lewis imitation with gyrating hips and sang out, "Great balls of fire!" We both roared with laughter, and so did some other kids down the way, some even applauding. Danny gave me a silly grin and a slow-motion punch

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on the shoulder.

He walked me out to the schoolbus and on the way said, "I sure wish you lived in town so we could hang out together sometimes." That was something easier not thought about, and I asked what he'd be doing tonight. "Probably just go over to Herb's drive-in, have a Coke and fries, and see who shows up."

"Come on up to the Hill and see me again," I suggested, hoping it didn't sound like the begging it really was.

Danny sighed, "I'm almost out of gas." He nudged my shoulder apologetically and walked away, looking so handsome even from behind that I almost lost my balance.

Standing with the kids by our bus, I spied Louise heading for hers, and hoping to make her jealous, I put my arm around Mary Nell. Maybe she saw. Getting on the bus, my friend said she'd heard Louise liked another boy. I took a seat in the back and recalling Louise's one word to me, history, gazed out the window. Danny was ambling along way down the block.

Johnnie, the little kid with the whirly cowlick on the back of his neck, came and sat beside me. I grabbed his knee and squeezed it like a horse chewing a corncob, and he squealed, laughing, happy at the attention. When Johnnie got off just outside of Ashdown, Willie came over and sat with me. He was a sweet kid in eighth, not quite a little boy anymore, about fourteen, for whom I felt very brotherly, like wanting to hold him on my lap and hug him. Willie's slightly bucked teeth made his lips full. We horsed around and giggled the rest of the way to Ben Lomond.

On the long hike home from Mary Nell's, that first half-mile was hardest, up the hill with woods on both sides of the road. For being winter, the afternoon was pretty warm, and I slung my jacket over my shoulder for the climb. The view back over the river bottoms was all flat for miles out over the woods and fields.

At the top of the hill, I caught a ride in the back of the Gibson's truck, but they could only take me as far as Fred's store, a cement-block grocery still about a mile from Piney Hill. Then a man in a red truck stopped on his way to DeQueen, his black shirt and pointy teeth reminding me of Dracula. He had a picture of a totally naked lady hanging under the dashboard, which I had a hard time not looking at. Fortunately it only took a couple minutes to get to the Hill.

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When I went inside the café for a soda pop, Daddy was sweeping up back by the kitchen and snapped, "Sure took you long enough to get home."

Searching in the icy Coke box for an Upper 10, I replied, "I even had to catch two rides."

Before I knew it, he'd whacked me real hard on the shoulder with the broom handle, hollering, "Don't you mouth off at me, you smart-aleck!"

The blow really hurt. I wondered what had gotten his goat this time. After a moment, I mentioned, "The Gibsons said to say hello."

Just then the back doorbell buzzed, and Daddy ordered, "Go see what the damned niggers want." He shoved me toward the kitchen.

Precious few Negroes ever stopped at the Hill, and if they did, they had to go round back to order through a small window into the kitchen. I opened the wooden shutter and found a very black boy staring in at me expectantly. "Can I buy me four grape soda pops?" he asked very shyly and then added with a small smile, "Nehi. They for my Pappa's birthday party."

Fishing around in the icy water again, I was touched by the boy's present for his father's party. So I checked out the pie rack and found four chocolate cream pies to pack up in an empty donut box. Piney Hill was famous all over the place for its individual little pies made fresh every

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day: cherry, chocolate cream, pecan, sometimes lemon meringue, and in summer, fresh peach.

The Negro boy was amazed when I handed him his pops and the pies too and wished his Pappa a real happy birthday. "Thank you, sir. That's right kind of you," he said looking down like ashamed or afraid. I took his money for the pops and rang up the pies on my own money so Daddy wouldn't have anything more to gripe about.

Finally I was able to get my Upper 10 and then discovered to my great joy that Mr. Walsh, the man who owned the juke box, had changed records and left me "Quiet Village" and Paul Anka's "Lonely Boy," which was just how I'd felt these past couple years. I sang it all the time, just the way he did:

*I'm just a lonely boy, lonely and blue.
I'm all alone with nothing to do.
I've got everything I can think of,
But all that I need is someone to love.
Someone, yes, someone to love,
Someone to kiss...*

I also found that a new Walt Disney magazine had come in the mail with a big article and picture of my darling. She looked so glamorous with her beautiful smile, in a fashionable sweater and pleated skirt, both creamy colored, which made her long raven curls even more gorgeous. It swelled my heart with pride that she was so famous, but it made me sad that all I really knew about my darling was what I read in the magazines, like that she had two brothers, and her favorite perfume was White Shoulders.

After a great Bandstand show, it was chore time again. The zoo was even more work now that Daddy got three more hogs, and the muddy wallow was pretty full. Idly watching them snort and slurp at the trough, I got to thinking about the Negroes that lived over on the other side of the pipeline in Humpersneck. Often I wandered or hunted around there but always stayed away from their unpainted shacks. I never really saw many of them around anywhere, except Johnny Mathis on television sometimes, and he seemed like a pretty normal guy.

I knew all about Governor Faubus in Little Rock and the Negroes wanting to go to school with the white kids, but nothing like that was happening around here. As a matter of fact, I didn't even know where the ones here in Sevier County went to school. Funny how I'd never thought about that before. It sure was weird how some folks had black skin, like a whole other breed of animal.

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After supper in the café, I sat with Mom and Janie in the living room and watched a bit of Wagon Train on the television. It was the first of three or four western programs Janie would watch tonight, sitting cross-legged on the floor, eyes glued to the picture tube as though hypnotized. In no more than five minutes, the story got so dumb that I got up, grabbed my red Frankie Avalon sweater with the floppy collar, and went outside into the yard.

The full moon was shiny on the cherry laurel tree by the porch at the back corner of the house. Like the legustrum bushes along the wall, it kept its glossy green leaves all year long. Beyond that pool of shadow, the backyard glowed bright. Some high clouds swept past the moon with an almost face of shadows on its orb, so far away in space no one can ever go there. There was a timeless sensation as though this was many years ago, maybe even as long ago as those Indian mounds I heard tell of down in the river bottoms. A dog barked, long, low, and solitary on the other hill. Out in the pasture the cedar tree was all fluffy in the silvery light.

Sitting on the fence-rail nearby, I wrote a sonnet for my beloved Annette (in the notebook

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I started carrying around like the great writers do). I called it “Sonnet at Nine.” Understandably, it was about clouds sweeping across the moon and my romantic feelings, my pure longing for the absent Annette. I kind of talked the lines, making up rhymes, so full of fantastic love that it was real easy. I found the rhyme of ‘ranks’ and ‘phalanx’ aesthetically thrilling.

Idly, I wandered across the silvered pasture down toward the woods, coming to the huge white oak where I’d once thought to build a treehouse but was scared off by the high branches. Nearby was a big hole nearly full of the fall’s brown leaves, really only about five feet deep and ten across. It was what folks hereabouts call an ‘Indian well.’ I flopped in.

Lying on the soft, crinkly leaves, I looked up through the bare branches at the magical moon. Suddenly I remembered how wonderful Danny’s hip muscle had felt this morning. Reaching under my moon-speckled sweater, I found that place on my own hip right under the beltline, at the top of that cleft you see on ancient Greek statues. It felt just as sexy on me, but surely touching my hip wasn’t ‘impure.’

The sensation made me dizzy. Immediately came the temptation to pull down my zipper and... If I just rubbed it through my pants, it wasn’t really touching and surely no more than a venial sin. A few rubs and I knew I really should stop. Conquering the urges, I climbed back out of the Indian well feeling rather proud of myself for being so virtuous.

On the way back to the house, I decided it wasn’t worth it to go across the road to the café. Not much way Danny would be there since he was out of gas. He was the only one I wanted to see anyway. Besides, if I went over, I’d probably wind up washing dishes or waiting on somebody. Now the moonlight seemed somehow sad.

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