

SMART ALECK

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You can't imagine how relieved I was, exhilarated, to have my vile sin of last Thursday night forgiven. With a soul once again pure, on Sunday afternoon after church I paced around the parking area out in front of the house memorizing "The Raven" by Edgar Allen Poe. It was an assignment from Miss Cindy for English. Poe was my very favorite poet. Right after writing that sonnet a few weeks ago, I sent it off to a state poetry contest for kids and then wrote another poem in Poe's alliterative style about a blind cripple in a house-fire, pure gloomsville. "The Raven" was real fun to say in deep ominous tones like Vincent Price.

Monday afternoon the whole English class was quiet as mice for my recitation from *Once upon a midnight dreary...* to those last funereal lines, *And my soul from out that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted—nevermore.* Behind me, Mickey started the clapping.

Miss Cindy marked something down in her book, pushed her fancy glasses back up her nose, and asked ominously, "Who wants to go next?"

After Lord knows how long with not a peep from anybody, Mickey piped up, "Let Benny tell it again." The class laughed nervously, and Miss Cindy got real mad. I couldn't look at anyone out of pure embarrassment.

On the schoolbus, Willie sat with me and talked a lot about very little in his exuberant way. His obvious hero-worship of me was touching, and I hugged him a couple times for no particular reason. It just felt good, very like having a little brother. How different life would've been with a brother for company in the woods.

Riding out of Ben Lomond with Mary Nell up and down the hills, I was surprised when she said she didn't know any more of the poem than the first two verses. So I started in on it again. When I got to *And the silken sad uncertain rustling of each purple curtain...* she broke in with, "Don't! I don't want to think about that." She drove along pouting.

Confused, I soon asked, "Why are you mad at me?"

"I guess I'm just meaner than anyone else," she finally said with a sad smile. "I'm not mad at you, Ben—just aggravated. Everything for you is easy as pie. Well, we're not like that. I put up with you all the time, and I'm tired of it."

Horrified, I cringed over by the window, wondering if maybe I shouldn't just keep off to myself like a mouse from now on. What good was being smart? I hated to think I looked like that to Mary Nell—stuck up or conceited. Maybe I should draw up into a shell like a snail, keeping Danny as my best pal and not even talk to anyone else.

On the weary tromp up the big hill, so much warmer now with the winter ending, Steve Tanner, a toothless guy from over by Dierks, stopped gave me a ride home to the Hill in his logging truck. Walking up to my front porch, I heard yelling from around beside the house.

Janie was standing on the porch by the back corner screeching, "Foxy! Foxy!" Daddy was running round and round after Fauntleroy yelling, "God-damn son of a bitch fox!" Clearly the sly fox was having fun darting here and there with his leash flapping. He saw me right away and at my special tongue-click, came over to have his ears scratched.

Flushed from the chase, Daddy retrieved the leash and then stuffed a dip of that awful Copenhagen snuff in his lower lip. He didn't say anything, even hi or thank you, but I was used to that. At least Janie stopped her hysterical shrieking.

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Having saved the day, I retreated to the quiet house to catch Bandstand and watch Kenny

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 3. SMART ALECK

and Arlene dancing and having so much fun. I couldn't help but feel a tiny bit envious of them going every afternoon after school and dancing on television, but not enough for it to be a sin. I figured some of them were probably even Catholic, and that made me feel not quite so alone.

Deciding to have supper first and do chores in the dark, I sat on my favorite stool at the counter with a hamburger steak. Mom was helping with waitressing and standing by the coffee urn while Daddy figured checks at the register. I piddled with my mashed potatoes and gravy feeling awful depressed still over what Mary Nell said. I wished I could just run off to Annette, the only thing I lived for, my only love, the single beautiful thing in this lonely boy's life.

Suddenly I heard Daddy remark sourly, "Never mind." I looked up to find Mom with her patient smile offering me the A-1 steak sauce. "He's too good for us," Daddy went on angrily. "It's got to where we can't get a hat to fit him anymore."

I looked down at my plate, oval, beige, with maroon lines around the edges and reminded myself he must be mad about something else. Maybe Daddy didn't really mean the ugly things he called me all the time.

When I looked up again, he was still glaring at me and snarled, "You're so God-damn smart but I can still whip you."

"I'm sorry," I muttered and tried for an expressionless expression. Nothing you said would make any difference when he got going. Fortunately, just then Daddy had to go take care of some customers. But why did he have to pick that one point to gripe at?

Meanwhile Mom was twisting her apron pocket. "Don't you think," she half-whispered, "you ought to apologize for being disrespectful?"

Amazed, but whispering too, I said, "I wasn't. All I said was I was sorry."

Mom leaned close in by the candy case and said very quietly, "Daddy's real upset right now, honey. Try and not aggravate him."

"What's he mad about now?"

Mom checked first that Daddy was off with the customers and said, "The café's losing lots of money, and we're worried something terrible."

This news took me by complete surprise. I suggested, "Well, if you don't pay me..."

Mom patted me on the head and said, "Don't be silly, Benny. You've got to save up for college." She went off to check on the folks in booth number two.

In the middle of my apple pie, some local kids came in, sweet Cookie Carver and her two big brothers. She sat on the stool by me to talk. Just then, Annette's neat record "First Name Initial," started on the juke box. She wrinkled her nose and said, "I wish they'd take that record off. I hate it!" She tossed her ponytail. "You just like it because it's Annette."

My heart nearly stopped, but there was no way she could know. Then Cookie said a friend of somebody she knew had gone to see Annette and said that she wasn't hardly pretty at all and had a rough complexion. Stunned by this blasphemy, I managed to act totally uninvolved in the subject and escaped to take care of the zoo.

While lugging the buckets of slops across the highway, I assured my beautiful sweetheart that I still loved her no matter what she really looked like. Saying it right out loud, it seemed for a moment like I was really talking to my gorgeous darling. But then I had to wonder if I really would love her if she was as homely as Mary Nell.

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After all the work, I hung out in my barn of a bedroom, a huge room with nothing but a desk and chair along an inside wall, an old sofa under the side window, and my twin bed under the double windows in front. Depressed by Mary Nell's comment, Daddy's gripe, and Cookie's

complaint, I flopped on the sofa and moped.

Shortly, I recalled my essay from last year that won me that fabulous trip to Atlantic City and dug it out of the desk drawer. In the pale blue ink of my Parker fountain pen was the title: “What Is Being Done by Southwestern Electric Power Company and Other Power Companies to Develop Electrical Power from the Atom.” I’d represented the whole state of Arkansas at the First National Youth Conference on the Atom.

I pulled out my scrapbook of pictures and stuff from that most exciting thing in my life and got carried away by memories. Then I checked back in my journal to the entries on the trip. I’d caught the train in Texarkana and met up with Ted from Texas and Nick from Louisiana. Ted was a tall kid with glasses, sort of pompous, but nice enough. And Nick was a cute guy with really interesting lips. He seemed to like me right away.

We’d stayed at the 26-storey skyscraper hotel called the Claridge. From our room on the sixteenth floor, the street and ocean were so far below that I got all weak in the knees looking out the window. It was way higher than up in the highest hickory tree.

Some of what I wrote in the journal sounded pretty silly. *At the banquet our dinner was called Roast Sirloin of Beef Einstein with Mushroom Sauce Isotope with a Lettuce and Tomato Salad Fusion. For dessert we had Snow Ball Cyclotron.*

Then I came on something I’d totally forgotten. *The meal was served by a young Negro guy in a white coat who was incredibly handsome. Ted acted real disgusted and wouldn’t look at the waiter. When the guy served me coffee, I looked up at him, smiled, and said thank you like a polite customer. The waiter smiled back at me with bright dark eyes and said, “You’re very welcome, sir.” He held my eyes for a long moment, and his look was so tender.*

I skipped on to Saturday and our stop-over in Philadelphia when Nick and I left Ted at a pinball machine in the station and walked 40 blocks to Independence Hall, where we sneaked feels in the crack of the Liberty Bell. Then we got on the subway to go to the WFIL-TV station where they do American Bandstand.

It being Saturday, the place was closed. We explored behind the building and found the double doors behind the curtains where the guests perform. We were standing no more than a yard from where my sweetheart once stood. Nick liked Bandstand and was also disappointed. He grabbed my hand, and we danced together in the parking lot like a ritual.

Reading on, I discovered another forgotten memory. *We had to transfer subway trains at 19th Street for the train station, and some girls from a Catholic school, all dressed in white blouses and maroon skirts, got on behind us. Eavesdropping on their chatter, I heard them call this one girl Doris. She was beautiful with black hair and brown eyes and a Roman nose. Nick thought she was hot too. At our stop, the girls piled off in front of us and then realized it wasn’t theirs. As they rushed back past us onto the subway before the doors closed, Doris brushed by me touching my arm.*

Now in the stillness of the Arkansas evening, I sighed, sad for that moment when I’d been unfaithful to my darling Annette. Getting up from my desk, I walked over by the window and gazed out across the dark road to where the café was bright with its pink neons. A big car was pulling in by the rosebush. How different this all was from that trip last year.

I thought back to that night walking with Nick on the dark Atlantic City beach, listening to the rolling waves, a gentle roar that seemed to echo off the black sky. Now here I was stuck all alone at a truck stop out in the middle of nowhere. As though from over by the door, I could almost see myself, a gawky kid in a red plaid shirt leaning against the window frame. But inside I felt like a great tree on a hilltop, spreading its branches high and wide, maybe like one of those

giant walnut trees way back in the woods at the old Brooks place.

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As usual, I wandered over to the café in the evening, got me a Dr. Pepper, and went to play some pinball. Daddy had about six different fun machines in the little room at the end of the building, a popular place for kids to hang out. No one was there right now, and I started playing on the Ace of Hearts machine, distracted by the shiny ball and flashing lights. I kept up a bounce game with my left flipper and a bonus bumper for a good while.

From the doorway I heard a wolf-whistle and “Hi ya, Benny boy.” It was Danny, looking very cool, with Terry right behind, who nodded hi and went over to the Carnival machine down the way. My buddy came over to mine and tousled my head in greeting. By now my flattop had grown out a bit, more furry than fuzzy. When I’d asked Daddy to let me grow my hair out, he’d said, “Go ahead. But don’t expect it to help your ugly mug.” Right away Danny decided to grow his out too. It sure did help his ugly mug—made him look a lot like Gregory Peck.

I went off to get them some pop and Danny a Roi-Tan. That done, I watched him try to play the Ace of Hearts machine, about our hardest one, and then recalled to ask why he’d missed school today (which had made my day quite boring). He shrugged unconcernedly, concentrating on the shiny ball’s progress, and muttered, “I was feeling kind of sick.”

From over at the Carnival, Terry snorted, “Cause he was hung over. That’s why.”

“Shut up, asshole!” Danny grunted at him. He smiled at me shame-facedly and said, “Yeh, last night I drank a lot of bourbon and got sick.”

I was too shocked to say a word. But I didn’t want to argue. We were still buddies whatever he did. His guilty blush reminded me about reading the other day on ways to say bunches of things, like a ‘flock’ of sheep. It’s a ‘blush’ of boys. But the greatest is a ‘triumph’ of angels. Danny thought it all sounded silly.

Sitting on the chain out front, Danny remarked, “Mickey told me you were great in English class today.” So I recited “The Raven” again with much drama for my very best friend. Leaning close, I intoned the verses. When I got to *Is there—is there balm in Gilead?* Danny looked at me with such sad eyes. On each stanza, he chimed in ominously on the “nevermores.”

Then, just as I got to talking about the cute puppies Duchess just had by Lobo—Maybe he’d like one?—some cars pulled up, and a whole passel of Lockjaw kids piled out, all old chums from when I went to school up there. I waved, but Danny didn’t know them, of course.

We stayed out on the chain while he smoked his cigar. The stars were real bright over the pines in our front yard. Maybe it was Jupiter just over the roof of the garage. “What do you call a bunch of stars?” Danny asked. Of course I said it was a constellation, but he protested, “No, I bet it’s a splendor of stars.” I was more than willing to take his word for it.

Then we just swung on the chain, rubbing shoulders, while he smoked his cigar. We didn’t have to talk all the time. Just being together was enough. Eventually, he stubbed the Roi-Tan out on the concrete post and suggested, “Let’s go see what the Terror is up to.”

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The Lockjaw kids were scattered around the booths and counter, and Daddy had most of them served already. The juke box was blaring something country. Terry was down in number four making friends with Flossie, Patsy, and Liz. Danny scrunched in next to Flossie, and I pulled up a chair beside him. Both Flossie and Patsy looked real interested in my pal. Terry was making up to Liz and whispering with her.

Suddenly he got up and dragged Danny and me over by the Wurlitzer. He popped in a quarter and said to me, “You pick something.” Then he pulled Danny in close to us and

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 3. SMART ALECK

whispered, “Look, Liz says her and Flossie want to go riding. Which one of you wants her?”

I stared at the selection board without reading. Danny was silent too, but then he leaned close whispering, “You oughtta, Benny. You need some lovin’.” Still speechless, I quick punched some random songs, telling myself there was no connection between this sex stuff and love. But if I went riding with Flossie, I’d have to sneak off without Daddy knowing.

Impatient, Terry got sarcastic. “Maybe you two should go parking together.” Danny glared and took a half-hearted swing at him, missing by a mile.

“No fighting!” Daddy boomed out from over by the candy case.

Danny turned back to me with a huge blush, and I bet I was blushing too at the thought of making out with him. Terry looked sympathetic as he summed it up: “So Danny will go riding with the doll. Let’s go.”

We went back to number four, and Danny sat with his leg up over my knee. Rubbing his strong calf, I couldn’t pay attention to what they were talking, too overwhelmed by that thought of kissing my buddy, bewildered by the sensation. Ricky Nelson started singing about “Poor little fool, oh yeh!” Danny looked so handsome there laughing with Flossie, and I felt like a darned fool for even thinking of such things. Made me wonder if maybe there wasn’t a bat or two loose in my belfry.

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When they got up to go for their ride, I cleared the booth around Patsy, and Eddie and Royce came to sit with her. As I feared, Daddy roped me into washing dishes. The hideous dishwasher sat off to the side of the kitchen. Using long metal hooks, you had to yank the racks of plates and things back and forth in a storm of scalding, soapy water. Standing in this dingy dish room with that dark steaming monster was like being condemned to hard labor.

Picking up some plates I’d dried, Daddy stopped suddenly and to my surprise said, “I didn’t mean to yell at you before.”

I shrugged and said, “It’s okay.”

“But tell your friends,” he added, “I don’t want no horseplay in here.” Then he put the plates back down and looked at me thoughtfully. “I don’t know what you see in that Danny guy. He’s sure dopey looking—reminds me of Ed Norton.”

I was racking up the glasses to wash and didn’t pause or react to his insulting reference to that idiot sewer man on the Honeymooners. He should talk. One of his fishing buddies, the one aptly called Ox, looked like a bigger, bearded Ralph Cramden.

After not too awfully long, Danny and Terry came back in without the girls. “They had to get home early,” Terry said and plopped on a stool. “They’re some hot chicks.”

Danny giggled, blushed, and said, “Only time for a couple smooches.” He didn’t look in the least like Ed Norton to me, but I’d love him even if he did.

Soon Terry was talking cars with a guy, and Danny and I drifted into the empty pinball room. While he struggled on the Carnival machine, I asked, “Do you like Flossie much?”

“No,” Danny snickered and flipped the ball a long shot, “but she’ll do in a pinch.” He looked up at me with that gleam in his mischievous brown eye that gave me a sharp ache inside and pinched my tit. I squawked and pinched him back, on the side. He gave a wicked smile.

Quickly bored with the pinballs, we wandered outside again. Strolling along the dark highway, Danny got to talking seriously. “You know,” he began, dropping an arm over my shoulder, “I worry a lot about the future. I mean, you’re gonna be an atom scientist.”

I protested, “I haven’t decided any such thing, Danny, truly.”

“Anyhow,” he grunted, “I don’t even know what to want to be.” We thought on it as we

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 3. SMART ALECK

walked down the Hill in the dark. A car went whizzing past, its headlights so bright, then gone. Finally he said, "Well, I really love to drive tractors, and I bet those big road machines would be lots of fun." With a squeeze on my shoulder he turned us around to head back uphill.

Back on the big chain, which I'd come to think of as my fetters, I made what seemed to me a splendid suggestion. "You should be a movie star."

"I ain't smart enough for that," Danny mumbled.

We'd never talked about the difference in our grades. The fact that he had a hard time making C's didn't matter to me. To comfort him, I ruffled his hair, softer now that it was longer, and said jokingly, "If you don't want to be a star, you can be an astronomer." Then we tried finding all the splendors of stars that I could remember.

When Danny and Terry had to go, he got in the passenger seat of the Chevy and said, "See you tomorrow at the salt mine." He didn't understand. I lived at the salt mine.

Then off they went down the black highway, south over the lip of the Hill.

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