

PENANCE

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Thank goodness I was so used this awful early hour. Before daylight, four-thirty am, that alarm went off for another Saturday at work. About my only motivation to get out of bed was the fifty cents an hour. Of course, if I didn't get my butt up, I knew all too well what would happen to it. Luckily, my savings for college next year were piling up nicely. With my great grades, I was pretty sure to get into one of the universities I was applying to. Of course, since I wouldn't be getting any help from the family, it'd be where I got the best scholarship.

Anyhow, I figured a boring Saturday at work was just punishment for a terrible sinner like me. My fall from grace, yet again, happened last Wednesday night. I'd tried rubbing myself a little bit through the blanket, you know, not really touching, but then I reached under... The abomination had weighed heavily on my soul, and I kept praying to live till Sunday to confess the mortal sin. Being alive and able to get up this morning, even for work, was a blessing, considering that the alternative was hell.

Whenever I was in a state of mortal sin, I wouldn't let myself think about my heavenly Annette. My sinful hands, even in imagining, were unworthy to touch her. That's why the past two nights had been doubly lonely. And now I resignedly tromped out my front door to do some early penance in the café. My only consolation was that back last month Danny had also got him a Saturday job at the drugstore in Ashdown, though with better hours.

This Saturday morning was different than usual though. It was the first morning the café hadn't been open all night. The past several weeks, business had gotten even slower, especially in the 'wee hours,' and Daddy decided to close from one to five. Across the highway, the cafe sat there all dark in the pre-dawn, the pink of the neons gone, sleeping in the late starlight. Two dark trucks loomed in the parking area waiting for us to open. I'd never seen it like this before. It was so weird that I ran inside right away to flip on the lights and wake it up.

As I'd learned in these years of working Saturdays, they were all just one darned thing after another, usually nothing particularly interesting or noteworthy. Punctuated by bouts with the miserable dishwashing machine. Long was about the only thing you could call a Saturday at work. I sure hoped business would pick up today because busy time flew. Idle time crawled.

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Melba arrived carrying her clean apron and some paper bags. She trounced back to the kitchen without a word to fire up the grill and deep-fry. She never felt good till her first dip of snuff. I right away put on some coffee for the two truckers, wiped down the counters and booths, and counted out the money for the register. When I picked up their orders in the kitchen, I asked for some cakes and sausage, and Melba said, "Okay, but only on condition you don't play the juke box for an hour."

The Midwest milkman arrived about then. In his white uniform he looked like Jackie Gleason playing a milkman. We called him Looney, but I didn't know his real name. He said, "I bet Mr. Lee I'd beat you here this morning, but I lost." He always teased me about sleeping on the job, but I sure wished he hadn't said anything like that to Daddy. Leaving Looney to his milk business, I took care of a couple new folks in number four.

While I was eating and wishing somebody'd play the juke box, Melba's husband Jessie came in. I cringed. He had black, rotten teeth and could get anybody's dander up. Digging into my hotcakes, I ignored him. When the Greyhound bus zoomed by and tooted, our bundle of newspapers plopped onto the gravel, and Jessie said, "Run out and fetch the papers, boy."

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Picking up the newspapers, I fumed and kicked gravel along the chain. Jessie was so dumb, like the time he argued with Looney saying, “Half and half ain’t no such thing, but pure cream.” He claimed electricity didn’t hurt him and was wild jealous of anybody with fat Melba. When I came back in, Jessie grumbled, “Gone so long, I figured you left and et your cakes.” Of course, he hadn’t, but I didn’t find his joke funny.

More customers came in, some truck drivers with cowboy hats who sat in number one. After fetching them their coffees, I sat quietly on my stool at the end of the counter with some more coffee and between customers read the funnies page in the paper. Afterwards I started daydreaming about my Annette, but then remembered my sinfulness and made myself stop. Instead, I wondered about sex, that mysterious thing I didn’t really understand, except for that one part that kept leading me into temptation.

Our priest, Father Jordan, never supplied any details about sex in his sermons or in our catechism classes. All Daddy ever said was one time when he took me out into the pasture where they were mating Lady with this big white stallion. While we watched, he commented, “Well, that’s how it works.”

That much I’d known from Biology class, but that stallion’s thing as long as my arm made me feel pretty queasy. My question was how did a boy get to that point with a girl in the first place? I mean, how do you get her to take off her panties? Suddenly the door opened with another customer, and Jessie said loudly, “Wake up, boy! Company’s coming.”

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Parties began coming in then, and I had me a workout till a good while after sunrise. At least they started playing the juke box some. Problem was, somebody played Johnny Cash’s “I Walk the Line” three times in a row. For some reason, Mr. Walsh had left that annoying country song on the juke box for a couple years now. I really enjoyed being busy, hustling for this or that, greeting folks with bright good mornings, serving them Melba’s great cooking, and of course taking their money at the register. I thought I was a really great waiter, and my math skills made doing tickets and change a snap.

When things started slowing down later, a lady came in with two boys, one about my size, but you could tell he was some years younger, maybe Willie’s age, and the other was a lot younger. The older, who had a cute round nose, she called Billy. He was wearing a red plaid shirt and blue pants with a hole in one knee, and the little one’s shirt was torn on the shoulder. I figured they must be pretty poor.

Even with our money problems, I counted myself real lucky here with my family owning Piney Hill. Without doubt, it was one of the nicest looking places around, a beautiful castle in comparison to most of the old wooden houses hereabouts. When I took the folks their orders, I admired Billy’s happy blue eyes and wide smile.

After they paid their check, since there was a lull in business, I went outside and watched Billy fiddle around under the hood of their old truck. He said he was checking the fan belt, and I was impressed. His mom told me they were from Hope, off southeast past Nashville, somewhere I’d never been. Then she asked for a pink rose off the bush by the chain, blooming wild now in the spring. I cut her a whole bouquet.

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Sometime after nine, Jim and Melvin showed up. Jim was a shriveled old man with a big bump on his cheek who ran the filling station for Daddy. Melvin was a local bachelor, kind of heavy with a baby face, who often worked in the café, mostly as night cook. Sitting in number three, they proceeded to drink many cups of coffee and watch me work. While I was stacking

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coffee cups on the shelf, I heard Jim say, "I wonder what the kid does for kicks."

Melvin remarked, "Probably beats his meat."

Utterly mortified, I retreated to the kitchen, praying to survive till tomorrow for absolution. While I waited on various customers, my two tormentors in the booth commented on something every time I came near, like Jim saying, "I'd sure like to see that kid do some real work!" Even though I was used to their jibes, they were really annoying.

Passing their booth carrying an order, I asked Jim, "How your sorry foxhounds doing?" He snorted in disgust. Recently Fauntleroy Fox had gotten loose and run out back behind the filling station where Jim's dogs were chained to their doghouses. Foxey got all those dogs going crazy on their chains, dancing around just beyond their reach. I saw him strut up to one that was barking fit to bust and calmly bite him on the nose. The reputation of Jim's dogs suffered when I told neighbor folks about that.

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Must have been ten-thirty when Horatio Hooper from down the way came in for his paper and sat at the counter. Smoking a smelly El Producto cigar while reading the news, he'd always complain about things, sounding like Major Hoople in the Our Boarding House comic strip. He was always going on about how Communism was such a great threat that we free people didn't stand a chance in the world. This morning Horatio started in on how the Russian Communists have even infiltrated the US Congress, and it sounded awful scary.

Now in our Civics class, Mrs. Wilson never talked about anything but our American constitution and government, and nary a word about such international stuff. As an American, I knew it was my duty to be democratic. Last year I got a book off the bookmobile by Mr. Hoover called "Masters of Deceit," but it was too confusing to finish. All I got out of it was that Mr. Khrushchev was a selfish and evil man. Why did the Russians even listen to him? After all, our President Eisenhower was so wise and good.

Then Daddy came in for some breakfast with his buddies Joe Ray and Donald. Joe Ray was handsome with curly blond hair, and Donald was the big guy with a black beard they called Ox. They were going fishing and would be back by four. Horatio sometimes went along, but today he was too busy, though I knew he'd probably sit here for at least another hour grumping.

Near lunchtime, the Western Hatcheries driver came in. A real regular customer, he got himself a cup of coffee, and leaned around the corner to ask Melba for a chickenfry. (Piney Hill chickenfries were also famous, curly and fluffy with good cream gravy, definitely worth the 89 cents.) Name of Reese, embroidered in yellow on his brown shirt pocket, he probably was nineteen or twenty, real handsome, walking kind of proud. It was hard to figure how to say it: like he was particularly desirable from a girl's point of view.

Reese took off his cap, ruffled his brown hair, and slouched on the stool across from where I was clearing number three. He said, "I hear Mr. Lee got him a hot new birddog pup."

"Yeh," I said, "but he's too young to be hot yet."

He looked me up and down, real serious, and said, "Bet you ain't. Getting any lately?" His smile had a teasing twist of the lip. I just stood there with my armload of dirty dishes and shrugged, wondering how I'd even know if I was. Reese winked at me and said, "I gotta say, Benny, you sure do look a lot hotter with more hair on top of your head." I sure needed to hear that today and grinned my thanks. Of course, he meant besides the little hairs on my chin.

While I was racking the dishes, Mom showed up with the new blue apron she'd just finished sewing. After her came sullen sister Janie who clucked like a chicken and stuck out her tongue at me. She never said much to me, and when she did, it was usually about one of the

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animals in our zoo, most often about her horse. Janie always kept herself busy grooming Lady or riding her around the pasture. I figured she was pretty lucky having some company on Piney Hill, even if it was a horse. Myself, I wasn't inclined to sitting on large animals.

Now I could have me a break before the afternoon shift. Before leaving, I carried Reese his chickenfry. With another wink, he said, "See you later, stud."

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On the way across the highway, I virtually inhaled my cheeseburger. First thing after, I dropped by the chickenhouse to check up on the screech-owl I was nursing. I'd discovered Hubert Whoobird flopping around in the bushes with a broken wing. Now that it was set and strapped to his body, he perched on the hen roost in the back. Chickens didn't seem to mind. Or he'd tromp around on the snake cages taunting them. For his lunch, I gave him a white mouse, which he held in one foot and munched like a candy bar.

No sooner did I step out of the shed than raindrops started plopping down in the yard, and I raced for the back porch. Comfortable in the wicker rocker, I watched the rain spraying off the eaves. Across the yard, drops splashed madly in new puddles. A cool breeze drifted onto the porch with the smell of wet trees and new spring leaves, and the rain sounded like music. Chickens pecked around in the puddles, soaked and bedraggled, too dumb to go inside. Duchess and her puppies, now almost old enough for new homes, scampered over from the garage. The female with the black spots was the one Danny wanted.

Rocking and resting, I pondered on Horatio's hoopla and President Eisenhower and all those others like Roosevelt and Lincoln. Maybe someday somebody from around here in Arkansas would become President. Not me! I didn't want to, but maybe that nice poor boy Bill this morning. While the pups romped around and the rain dripped, I plotted on a novel about that happening with the kid being smart like me. He becomes a Rhodes Scholar and stuff, and then is elected Governor of the state, and then... Fairly soon there was a break in the clouds, and blue shone through. When the sun burst out, the cedar tree by the chickenhouse wore millions of drops like diamonds on every needle.

Soon as I walked into the café, Mom ordered me to wash my hands real good. "God knows what you've been handling," she said and hurried off with a load of plates. Well-scrubbed at the back sink, I came out front to take over. Mom was at the register finishing up with a customer. Then she told me to be sure and help Margie patty up hamburger this afternoon, a chore about as boring as peeling potatoes. In the past few years I bet I'd peeled ten thousand potatoes. At least putting them through the cutter to make French fries was fun.

When Mom took off for the house, Melba fixed me a BLT to round off my lunch. She took off herself quick as Margie showed up. Margie was a thin older woman who laughed in quiet chuckles at everything, even my jokes. She had lots of wrinkles around her eyes like from smiling and was fun to be with in the quiet afternoons.

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Besides the mindless job of mashing out blobs of hamburger, we had to entertain each other for another hour or so because it was really slow again. Mostly coffee, pie, and ice cream as afternoon snacks for occasional truckers. There weren't many tourists, and when you got right down to it, you had to wonder what tourists could hope to see in this neck of the woods anyway. Folks said the bridge across the Little River was the only curved bridge in the world, but it wasn't all that impressive to look at. And I seriously doubted it was the only one.

Presently, the state patrolman, Louie, went whizzing by with his siren on. A few minutes later a car coming from the south stopped, and I asked the guy if he knew what had happened.

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Turned out a cattle truck had run off the road down near the lower Y and rolled down the embankment. Man said there were dead cows everywhere and live ones wandering crazy around the highway. Big trouble! What do you do with all that meat?

Then Miss Mannis, our advisor in the 4-H Club, came in and ordered a cheeseburger. She was a real nice homely old maid on her way back from the Larrimers who lived down the road a ways. She said that last night, right after the pie walk down at Fred's store, Oscar Larrimer dropped dead. Just like that.

Mom had taken me down there last night, and Mr. Larrimer spoke to me saying, "You're getting to be a handsome young man." I'd never even once thought he'd drop dead in just a little bit. It was a shame his Protestant soul went to hell. Then came the cold, horrible fear that if I dropped dead right now, after my vile sin, my soul would also be thrown into hell.

When I brought her lunch, Miss Mannis told me Iris Barker from up near Lockjaw and I had been chosen County Champion Girl and Boy and would get to go to a big banquet. We'd also get those beautiful green corduroy Champion jackets with the cloverleaf on the back. They chose me because my great hog Cornpone won that ribbon at the county fair and Iris for the huge quilt she made out of old ties. I saw it, and it was weird.

When she headed home, I left Margie alone a minute to run over and tell Mom the good news. She was at the table writing a letter and crying. Wiping her eyes, she tried to smile. "I was just writing to Aunt Donna about the business," she said to explain her tears. At a total loss for what to say, I handed her another Kleenex and told her about being County Champion Boy.

"Oh, honey," she laughed, "that's so wonderful. I'll let Aunt Donna know right now." I remembered to tell her Mr. Larrimer dropped dead last night and raced back to work.

When I told Margie that Mom was feeling awful sad and worried, she had me watch things a bit while she went over to visit. Only a few folks came in for coffee, and then our regular trucker customer Vince, a pleasant older guy with a long white mustache. I cooked him a hamburger steak just the way he liked it with cream gravy.

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Bringing Vince's order out, I noticed through the window some boys getting out of a car, the boys from Frog Level, a village off west of the Cossatot River. They always seemed so nice, and I smiled at them as they came in and sat in number four, all giggling and talking. While drawing them water from the fountain on the Coke machine, I recalled folks around Lockjaw whispering about the Frog Level boys being strange or something, but I had no idea what they meant. The boys all looked too handsome to be weird, and I never noticed anything unusual except a while back when two of them were holding hands under the table.

They ordered the usual Cokes and fries, and two got up to play the juke box. One of the two left in the booth, whose name I knew was Sammy, changed his order to onion rings and smiled at me with big dimples and bright blue eyes.

After cooking up the boys' fries and onion rings and serving them, I felt like a real fifth wheel and ruefully retired to the penance of dishwasher duty. We'd accumulated an entire rack of glasses and most of one of plates. So I turned on the monster machine, its roar drowning out the squawky country song one of the guys played on the juke box, and listlessly jerking the rack back and forth, wondered what it would be like to have a crowd of friends like that. To let the glasses cool, I went out front to find Vince ready to pay his check.

Then one of the boys came up to pay theirs too. Boy, was I surprised when three of them left, and Sammy was still sitting in the booth. While I cleared off their dishes, he said, "They're going off to DeQueen and buy a carburetor, but I don't wanna."

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“You want something else?” I asked, always the good waiter.

“Nah,” Sammy replied with a shake of the head. “I’ll just hang out.” His lazy grin made the dimples enormous.

“Well, if you do, just give a shout.”

He sat back and looked out through the venetian blinds. Dutifully, I went back to the hideous dishwasher and ran the load of plates without a customer one coming in. Just when I got to drying my least favorite, the hot silverware, Sammy came around from out front.

“I guess you know Iris Barker?” he casually asked. “She says she knows you real good.”

“Sure do,” I said and finished up the steaming spoons. “We went to junior high together up in Lockjaw.”

He sat up on the ice cream freezer where I could admire his lean legs and his proudly arched nose. The knife handles were still so hot I had to hold them the other way around to dry. Not without a certain personal pride, I added, “She and I were just chosen as 4-H County Champion Boy and Girl.”

“Wow!” Sammy exclaimed. “Congratulations, pal. What did you do?”

I admitted with considerable chagrin, “Raised a blue-ribbon shoat.”

Flashing his dimples, Sammy asked, “So, Mr. Champion, what’s Iris like really?”

“Well, I guess you could say she’s pretty cute and seems to be a sweet girl.”

“I know that,” he said with an impatient snort through his delicate nose. “I mean, does she like to, you know, go out with guys?”

“I think she goes on dates, but as to whether she likes to, I don’t know.”

Sammy laughed out loud, hopped off the freezer, stood right in front of me, and asked, “Think she’d like to go out with me?”

I too laughed out loud, “Like asking if the sun’ll come up tomorrow.” He was so handsome any girl would flip her wig.

The dishes all done, I longed to remove us from the presence of that ugly machine, so I suggested we go play pinballs. I opened up the Ace of Hearts machine with the key and clicked up several games. Sammy was delighted, and I leaned up against the Las Vegas machine to watch him play. Not a single customer came in for the longest, and we talked about all kinds of things while he flapped the flippers.

I couldn’t remember what we said but kept thinking what a perfect brother he’d be. It was odd how I felt almost the same strange love for him as for Danny, those mysterious, intense connections of friendship, that almost hunger. With my arm over his shoulder, I watched the ball suddenly shoot down between the flippers. There was a racket of car doors slamming outside, so I left Sammy struggling with the game and went to fetch waters.

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A young man and a lady came in and walked right up to the register. They wanted a room and didn’t seem to mind that our motel was three dollars a night. I asked why they were stopping so early in the day, not quite three-thirty, and the man whispered that they were newly-weds. Judging from the way the lady hung on his arm, she loved her new husband a lot.

I told Sammy it would just take a minute and led them in their car back through the pines to number five cabin. The units all sat a ways apart and had nice white front porches. The man remarked, “Way out in the woods, ain’t it! Perfect for a honeymoon!” There weren’t any wedding decorations on their car, but the way the lady squeezed up against him, they were probably anxious to get inside.

Walking on back to the café, I dreamed about a honeymoon with my Annette—to Venice,

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her favorite place according to the magazines. Then I looked down at the pine straw and gravel, remembering how unworthy I was of such dreams. Instead, I wondered what the man and lady were doing right now back there in that honeymoon cabin.

Sammy was waiting by the front door for me, having used up his games on the pinball already. He apologized with a shy smile. So I clicked up a few more. But instead of him playing, he pulled me over to the machine saying, “You play. I hear you’re real good.”

I rarely played around anyone, but a chance to impress Sammy was too attractive to miss. So I stepped up to the machine. Years of afternoons playing had taught me to know each like a rider his horse, only better. Gauging the tension on the plunger precisely, I could place the ball anywhere you want, and moving the flippers gently at the exact right moment, fling the ball all the way back up to the top. In addition, I knew just how hard to bump the machines around without the pendulum in the ring inside tilting them.

If of nothing else, I was a master of those flashing and clanging games. For a show-off demonstration, I kept a ball bouncing between bumpers for more than 60,000 points and five free games. Sammy got so excited that he threw his arm over my shoulder and hugged me. “You’re great!” he laughed. It felt so good I simply let the ball roll off the flipper and hugged him back.

He tried playing some more and bumped the machine around too hard. When it tilted, he crinkled his cute nose in disgust. The way he laughed I almost reached out to touch his cheek. It made me shiver to think how lucky Iris was to have such a dreamboat interested in her. Why couldn’t I have some girl interested in me like that? That confusing thought I put out of my mind again for moral reasons.

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Customers started coming in again keeping me busy, and in between I’d check on my friend. In about a half-hour Daddy showed up with Joe Ray and Ox—and several big blue-gills. He looked all happy and was even smiling when he saw me in the side room with Sammy. I came out and told him business had been real slow for the past couple hours. He grunted something as he pulled out cold orange Nehis for his friends.

When I came over to get Sammy a pop, Daddy frowned at me and asked, “You clean out the nigger room like I told you?”

Instantly I recalled him remarking yesterday about needing to clean it up, but I never imagined it was an order. Knowing the wisdom of not arguing, I just said, “I’m sorry. I forgot.”

Then he whopped me one across the mouth. “So you waste time with the pinballs.”

“It wasn’t busy...” I started, and he slapped me again.

“When Cora Lee gets here,” he growled, “you do as you’re told.” It was so humiliating I couldn’t even look at Joe Ray or Ox, and I hoped to heaven Sammy hadn’t seen.

Having seen the fishermen get home, Margie came back right then from visiting Mom and got yelled at too for wasting time. She walked back into the kitchen without a word.

Trying to act like nothing was wrong, I took Sammy his grape soda. From his sad smile I could tell he’d seen. “Thanks, Champ,” he said very quietly. “Don’t let it bug you.”

Wouldn’t you know it, but right then his friends pulled into the parking area outside the window and honked. Sammy waved to them and chugged his pop, accidentally dribbling a streak of purple across his chin and onto his shirt. Laughing, he said goodbye at the door and held my hand for a long minute. Then he said, “I think I’ll ask Iris if she’ll give me a date.”

“Good luck,” I said and added, “Don’t settle for a prune.” We laughed.

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Around four-thirty Cora Lee showed up. She was about nineteen with bad teeth and

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always wore lots of real sweet perfume. She sometimes waitressed for the so-called evening rush, and otherwise we had a nice neighbor lady named Vonelle. There was often a good crowd of locals into the café at supper time since the only other restaurants were in DeQueen to the north or Ashdown to the south, both twenty miles away.

With her to take care of customers, I followed Daddy's orders and set to cleaning out the back room. After twelve hours of work, I was getting weary but approached the job as more penance. Sweeping and mopping out the dingy green room, I thought about the happy afternoon with Sammy, and it made me feel less put upon. After another half-hour's work in the café, Daddy finally took over from me at five-thirty.

By the time I'd fed the zoo, evening was setting in, and I took off down the hill out back for some fishing of my own. Barefoot with a cane pole on my shoulder, I felt like Huck Finn. Okay, so I did have me a nice mother and a pretty place to live in, but just like Huck, I sure as shooting had a mean ol' pap. And if I had me a raft, I'd jump on it right now and float away down the Mississippi. All I needed was a great Negro friend like that Jim.

Our pond was a ways out in the woods, straight down past the white oak, and then you'd come out on the rise above the water. Along with perch and blue-gills, the man who built Piney Hill stocked the pond with goldfish that went wild. When you'd come out of the woods onto the bank, the greenish surface of the water was usually spotted with golden flowers of fish. Toss a rock, and they'd dive, the golden flowers disappearing.

I leaned back against a post oak, the pole propped across my arm. There were ripples of bugs on the surface and footprints of the breeze in the middle. My cork floated in the bright reflection of the sky. The sun snuck low under some clouds, golden, and soon they were aflame with red, a rosy island in the gold sky.

Suddenly my cork went ploop. After a bit of a battle, I pulled out a huge goldfish with a fancy fantail about a foot long. Its round eyes bulged and fins quivered like a strange bird pulled out of the reflected sky. I smoothed out its fins and tails like wet yellow feathers. Surely this was a magic fish like the King of Fishes in that fairytale. Maybe I could wish to be with my Annette, or to keep my soul free from sin, or even to be real famous. Because he was lying there gasping for water, I told this King of Fishes I'd let him go and make my wishes later. He flew away out over the pond like a bird, splashing into the sunset.

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Supper was fried chicken with some green beans and the usual ice tea. I wasn't half through when there was a sudden noise and shout from the kitchen, and Daddy came rushing out, his face twisted. "You come in here and mop up the mess you made, Mr. Smart Guy."

I had no idea what he was talking about but naturally leapt off my stool and raced to the kitchen. The refrigerator door was standing open, and the pitcher of ice tea was spilt all over the floor. Daddy yelled, "I open the door and it falls right out."

"I put it in same as hundreds..." I attempted to say and got a fist in the belly that slammed me up against the doorframe.

"Don't you sass me, you bastard! Now clean it up." He stomped out.

Margie kept turned away, scraping down the grill with the pumice block. Scarcely able to stand up or breathe from the pain in my stomach, I took the mop and cleaned the mess up. Yet another punishment for my sin, it meant I wouldn't have to say as many Hail Marys. Maybe I should have asked the Magic Fish to take me away from this place where I was just a slave. Again I imagined running away on that raft with Jim.

When I was finishing up, Daddy came back and said, "Clark's coming over tonight to

catch a bunch of chickens. You help.” What a Saturday night, I moaned inside. I didn’t feel like finishing my supper and staggered off across the road. But it really wasn’t my day.

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Before I got to the front gate, Father Jordan pulled up in his tan car. Oh, boy! Catechism time again. The priest stopped by every week or so to give us private religion lessons. He smiled and shook my hand, dignified with the white collar and black coat, but almost comic with droopy cheeks and baggy eyelids like a sad bulldog.

Mom was ironing in the living room when we came in, and he greeted her nicely. Janie, in her usual trance in front of the television set, suddenly turned white as a sheet knowing she was next. The priest and I went into my bedroom for privacy and sat at either end of my sofa. I wondered what new sin I’d learn about today.

Back when catechism had just been memorizing questions and answers, it was fine because I could do that without thinking about how illogical so much of it was. But nowadays it was getting to be private sermons. This time Father’s vague but stern message seemed to be a new rule that even to want to commit a sin was a sin. “Does that mean temptation’s a sin?” I asked carefully, feeling the hair on the back of my neck bristling.

Father Jordan answered a lot more than just no, apparently talking about things in general and sex in particular. Pretty soon he got back to desire being sinful. I couldn’t help asking, “So it’s a sin to want to love somebody?” That seemed pretty unfair.

Again, with a lot of words, he made no into something different. I changed the subject. “Do folks who die in a state of mortal sin absolutely, positively have to go to hell?”

Without hesitation, he affirmed that horrid sentence but then waffled. “Well, maybe if one is truly contrite at the moment of death, God might listen to his prayer.” That seemed quite reasonable. “But,” he added, “even after our sins are forgiven, we should continue to feel remorse.” This notion of permanent penance was none too thrilling. Once a sin was forgiven, I wanted to forget about it.

After a short silence, Father Jordan leaned closer and said, “Now, Ben, I know you’re a pious young man...”

At that very moment Daddy leaned in my door. “Clark’s here,” he announced. “Ben’s got him some chores to tend to, Father.” Then he hustled Janie in for her dose of religion. Daddy didn’t like it much when the priest dropped in.

Knowing that Father had been about to ask me again if I’d like to be a priest, which I most emphatically did not, I gratefully high-tailed it out the back door. Even killing chickens would be a lot more fun than catechism.

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Some squawking from the chickenhouse said Clark was at work already. At the door I saw his flashlight flicking on and off. He’d shine it suddenly in a roosting chicken’s eyes, grab it by the head, and with a flick of the wrist, that was that, one headless chicken. Just as I stepped inside, Clark flashed the light, and Whoobird’s big eyes blinked bright yellow. The owl gave out with an earsplitting screech that scared Clark shitless. It was enough to make a dog laugh. He didn’t think it was all that funny and went off to smoke a cigarette and calm his nerves.

Lots of chickens were roosting in the cedar tree by the fence, and Clark had me climb up to catch them. The first one slipped away and flew squawking into the dark over the field. The weird light of the cloudy moon shone in on me through the cedar needles, and the tree full of chickens seemed so unreal. I was some terrible monster stalking these same senseless chickens that had dragged around in the puddles earlier today. I grabbed their feet and held them down

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 4. PENANCE

for Clark to grab the head. Then I helped him gather the carcasses, some of which were still running and flopping around spraying blood all over the place.

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When Clark was gone and thank goodness, Father Jordan too, I couldn't stand the thought of going back over to the café and just lay around on my sofa reading an old Uncle Scrooge comic book. Shortly, there was a knock on my screen door. It was a bunch of Lockjaw kids, the Sharp girls, cute Liz Butler, Patsy, and some guys like Royce Potter and Jimmy Williams, each with a soda pop in hand and wanting to have a dance party. Since I had such a great record collection from Mr. Walsh and lots of space in my enormous room, we often had dance parties. Daddy liked getting the rowdy kids (and the music they played on the juke box) out of the café and would even send others over to join us later.

The shy kids sat around on the sofa or bed and watched the rest of us kick up our heels. My rock and roll parties had earned me a good reputation as the best dancer around—and a bad one with the local preachers for leading their kids into supposed sin and debauchery. I rather enjoyed being a bad influence. Like tonight, Janie sometimes abandoned her western shows and joined in. It was funny watching how awkwardly she danced with knees and elbows everywhere they shouldn't be, but she really enjoyed horsing around with us big kids.

Liz was also a Bandstand fan and my frequent partner at these impromptu dances. She and I tried some of the sharp new moves we'd seen this week on the television. So, after all, to my utter surprise, it wound up being a great Saturday night. By around eleven they all said good night and drifted back over to the café or home. I collapsed on the bed, giving thanks that in only a few short hours now my soul would be made clean again.

Perhaps as a reward for my heartfelt contrition, I had a dream of my darling. *Annette gets lost in the thick woods and sends up a smoke signal that I see way off over the trees. It spells out "TOOT" in great big smoke letters. I run for help, and on the way I find a huge yellowish monster sitting up in a tree like a bird. I hold it off with a knife that I'm grabbing by the blade. Now suddenly I'm one of the Mouseketeers, singing and dancing around with them, really one of them, and just like that Annette appears, as beautiful and sweet as ever, standing beside a buzzard. Then we rode off in a wagon across the curving bridge over the Little River.*

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