

INDIAN WELL

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This time I fell into sin yesterday evening without even meaning to. After another long Saturday at work in the café, I'd gone down to the pond and jumped in. These hot spring days made the water warm on top, while still pretty chilly down below. Enjoying the sunset, I floated quietly, so quietly that a big flower of goldfish formed on the surface near my left hand, making little blurping sounds as they gulped air. More fishes started nibbling at me, tickling all over my legs and back. Before I knew what was going on, I was irresistibly tempted to... At least there was only one night to wait for absolution.

I always got to sleep Sunday mornings till seven-thirty. It was easier that way to survive without eating till Communion at the nine o'clock Mass in DeQueen—of course, after going to confession. I was generally light-headed with hunger by the time we'd get home. The uncomfortable church clothes didn't help either: green slacks with a buckle on the back that Mom ordered me from the Sears catalog and a white nylon fancy shirt.

At the café, Melvin asked once more if I wanted some orange juice. His poor Protestant mind just couldn't grasp the need to fast before receiving the Lord. Daddy usually didn't go to church with us but went afterwards to Nashville where Father said a later Mass. Mom always got upset when he'd decide not to go, which was fairly frequent. I guess having to work was a good excuse, so it wasn't technically a sin for him to miss Mass.

Janie sat in the front seat in our gray Desoto, and I got the whole backseat to stretch out in. Mom would always get nervous when she had to drive the car, going slowly even when there were no other cars on the road. It took us like half an hour to go the twenty miles to DeQueen. While Janie read the funny papers, I watched the monotonous pine woods along the road and tried to ignore the horrible hunger pangs. Once I got the funnies, I forgot about eating.

North of Lockjaw the highway crossed the Cossatot River and its bottoms with some lovely green fields with oaks and elms just about fully leafed out now. A few horses and cows were scattered around grazing beneath them. Though the river was a lazy meander here, I'd heard tell that further upstream it had some wild rapids.

In DeQueen at the corner by the courthouse with the stoplight, we came up on that blue station wagon with the Henderson family from up by Mena. I sure hoped that blond kid Tom, their cousin, was still visiting from Oklahoma. I'd seen him last Sunday, and in my catechism lesson Father told me the boy lived over near Broken Bow and was part Choctaw. We followed behind them the couple blocks to St. Elizabeth's.

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I was so happy to see that Tom was still visiting. He and I knelt in the same pew waiting to confess, and I was thrilled to be so close to him and admire his brown eyes. When it came Tom's turn in the confessional, he was in there for a fair while, and I wondered what sin this handsome fellow might have on his soul, surely nothing like the great blotch on my own.

My turn behind the curtain came at last, and I knelt on the cushioned bench with the shadow of Father Jordan hunched over behind the grille. I ran expertly through the required prayers and then came to the awful part. I confessed feeling jealous twice (about Paul Anka with Annette, which I didn't reveal), twice hitting my sister, (actually just poking her lightly when she aggravated me), and once, just once, mind you, touching myself impurely. Thank goodness you didn't have to go into the gory details of a sin.

Father gave me penance of ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys, which was fewer than

usual. Maybe he'd despaired of my ever overcoming sin, but I still felt ecstatic to be pure again. Before I'd finished my penitent prayers, Father came out and called Tom up to serve. I'd never learned, nor cared, to be an altar boy, but I knew most of the lovely Latin responses anyway.

After grinding out the last Hail Marys, I joined Mom and Janie in their pew up front. Janie looked deceptively cherubic, all dolled up with curls over her ears, and her funny pink band of a hat. Sitting on the hard pew and fingering the missal's red ribbon for today's service, I rejoiced that I was again worthy of my adorable Annette.

Then Tom came out in his white altar-boy robe and rang the tinkly silver bells to start the Mass. He glided around the altar handing Father the holy things. He knelt slowly, gracefully, so lithe in the surplice or whatever you call it. His voice was deep in the responses.

During the Gospel, as Tom sat patiently on the bench with his hands on his lap, his profile was perfect, hair gleaming gold and nose finely pointed. Sunlight through the window gilded his eyelashes, like a painted angel. Before Communion when he rang the bells again, I shivered with happiness. Walking along the Communion rail beside Father, he held the silver salver right under my chin, and I felt a connection of my soul with his, and with God of course.

When the service was over and everybody was leaving, I tried to keep Mom and Janie from going too fast so maybe Tom would come out from in back. But they plowed on out the door, and he didn't show. It was bitter thinking he'd most likely be gone next week, and we hadn't had a chance to say word one to each other. When I took Communion, Tom had looked at me with a nice smile, but that was all.

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After Mass we stopped at Hooker's Drugstore, about the only place around open on Sundays, for some toothpaste. Besides a Milky Way to keep me from fainting, I found a new Teen magazine with handsome Fabian on the cover and the newest Scrooge McDuck funny book. Imagine three cubic acres of money! Once we were outside of town on 71, I asked Mom if I could practice driving again like we'd done some other Sunday mornings.

Mom said, "I told Daddy I'm teaching you. He says okay, but you got to be careful."

Stopping along the highway where it was wide open in both directions, Mom pulled the car way off on the shoulder. The Desoto had automatic transmission, and controlling the steering wheel and speed wasn't hard at all. I had to wonder why they made such a big deal about how difficult it was, like brain surgery or something.

She wouldn't let me go over forty, so it was pretty much pooping along on my side of the line while everybody passed us. Safely driving along, I reminded Mom that I needed to learn parallel parking for the license. She agreed to talk to Daddy and even let me drive up to park behind the mailbox. With all the cars at the café, maybe Daddy hadn't seen us getting home.

Melvin heaped some fried eggs on my hotcakes for breakfast. The whole world was bright now that I was back in a state of grace. Suddenly I heard Daddy start yelling in the kitchen. The hotcakes stuck in my throat. It got quiet again, and pretty soon Mom came out front and said Daddy would teach me parking.

I wolfed down the rest of my breakfast and ran home to change clothes. I wondered why he wouldn't let Mom show me parking, and the prospect of him doing the teaching gave me great pause. I recalled all too well his angry attempts way back when to teach me to ride a bike. (We abandoned the frustrating lessons quickly, and in about a year I just got on the contraption and rode away.) If I was lucky, this might go okay—no need to balance on two wheels.

Daddy pulled the old Ford out of the garage and stopped it along the fence by the persimmon patch. Looking aggravated and bored, he spit out his old Copenhagen and told me to

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 5. INDIAN WELL

get in the Desoto. He stepped back with one instruction: "Do it like in the training manual."

Fortunately I'd read the pamphlet, and the geometry of the maneuver was real simple. The first few times I pulled up beside the jalopy and parked behind it were fairly easy, even though I had a hard time with reverse at first. The next time I felt I'd gotten the hang of it.

Then on the fifth time backing in behind the Ford, the bumpers just barely touched. Daddy blew his lid, screaming at me to get out of the car right this minute. Horrified, I did so, and he yelled, "You don't touch this car again!" Then he picked up a branch and took to switching me hard on the shoulders.

I ran away, leaping the fence and escaping off among the persimmon trees. In a daze, I stumbled off towards the old gravel pit and wound up under the black-jack oak that stood alone on a kind of butte in the pit. After a few miserable tears, I realized how vain and selfish I was. Vain because what right did someone as insignificant as me have to love such a glorious beauty as Annette Funicello? Me, a miserable clod of the earth, as lowly as a stone in this gravel pit. That led to wondering what all this gravel was doing up here on top of a hill. And where do you suppose it came from anyway?

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Back at home and still depressed, I sat under my weeping willow tree in the backyard and played with the frisky puppies. Duchess didn't mind leaving them with me and Lobo and wandering off for some peace and quiet. I think Lobo liked them climbing all over him. A jet plane flew by, high overhead, going west, the way I wanted with all my heart to go. Resisting the temptation to daydream, I decided to take a walk.

Modestly, I could say I knew the woods around here like the back of my hand in a radius of three or four miles. I loved the old Brooks place with fields of wild daffodils earlier this spring and two giant walnut trees, one pretty near dead. Around where its cabin once stood, the raspberries had run wild and almost covered the old chimney.

I knew of lots of pretty valleys back in the hills, creeks with swimming holes, lizards and woodpeckers everywhere. Kids here called them peckerwoods. And I had me this one special white oak grove with a carpet of leaves so thick on the ground, no brush anywhere, like a park. I'd sit there under the huge trees standing like columns or pillars and listen to the total silence, like thousands of years ago.

But it being full spring, I decided to go to my secret grotto and do some gardening work. I'd found it two summers ago off over a couple ridges to the northwest. That was right when I found Annette on the TV show, and I dedicated the special spot to her, just like that fellow Laddie in the Gene Stratton Porter novel who made a secret garden for the girl he loved. With trowel and clippers in hand, my trusty hickory stick, and faithful Lobo scouting around here and there, I set off down the hill past the hog pen into the tall pine grove.

The grotto was a spring on the slope of a creek valley that bubbled out of outcroppings of rock covered with blankets of thick moss. A ledge ran along over a long cave hardly big enough anywhere for a dog to stick his head in. The curtains of moss on the bank hid a labyrinth of tiny caverns. The stream from the spring started as a thin, silvery waterfall.

I'd moved wildflowers into the area, purple wild phlox, red cardinal flowers, and that grass with blue ones. From home I'd brought some irises that were blooming so pretty purple right now, and homestead lilies for their reddish gold in summer. Honeysuckle twined around some trees, and there were even two bittersweet bushes, so lovely last fall with their orange petals and red berries. Down by the spring branch the hollies were very dark.

I shucked out of my clothes right away. I always liked to get naked in the woods since

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 5. INDIAN WELL

there was absolutely nobody else around to see. With my trowel, I set to clearing winter stuff out of the bed of the trickling stream. Then I cleaned out the little pool with the dam I made last year just down the slope a ways. I was surprised to see a place where the water had cut through my dam and run in a different channel.

But I was even more surprised to see that the break had been repaired! Looking closer, I saw how somebody had stood off to the side to do it. There was part of a bare footprint in the moist soil. Suddenly I felt like Robinson Crusoe. Who could it have been? The nearest folks were an ancient couple who lived off north on the old gravel highway. For all I knew, it must have been a forest elf, and I thanked him kindly for the favor.

Then I set to clipping back the overgrown muscadine vines down by the spring branch to open up the view across the valley. Even naked, it got hot enough to sweat, and I splashed around in the branch washing the mud off my hands and knees. It felt pretty cold. Little fish darted among the roots of the tall holly tree on the bank. I was ecstatic to be in a state of blessed grace again and twirled round and round on the gravelly sandbar in a dizzying dance.

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In a bliss of blessedness, I wandered home to my room and stretched out on the sofa to read in the new magazine about Fabian. He was so good looking it was pitiful. Then I wrote to Betsy about Annette going out now with Paul Anka, who wrote a song especially for my darling called "Lonely Girl," just like that sad one for me. I also wrote my pen pal confidante about my dream the other night of seeing Annette with Paul and telling him his noble blood didn't give him any more right to love her than me.

Still elated and excited, I needed to keep busy and started filling out a housing form for my college next year. Last week I'd gotten accepted with a great scholarship into Tulane University in New Orleans. They also promised me a student job, so I wouldn't need anything from Daddy and Mom. Another big reason to feel happy. I'd only managed to fill out the boring home address stuff when there was a knock at my screen door.

Danny peered in through the screen at me. I jumped up from my desk in the thrill of seeing him. I'd thought about him all yesterday at work. My buddy drove all the way up to Piney Hill to get his new puppy, and he was also excited and happy. The blue and red striped polo shirt made his chest look very broad.

In the backyard we found the three puppies left playing while Duchess lay on the grass by the garage paying them no mind. Danny cuddled his, the one with the dark spots. When I asked if he wanted to take a walk in my woods, he sang suggestively, "In the pines, in the pines, where the sun never shines..." Talking about grandparents and things, we ambled down to the pond. The pups ran along with Lobo, but Duchess took a rain check on the hike.

When we came out on the high bank over the pond, there were those big golden flowers of fish blooming here and there on its greenish surface. Danny whistled in amazement. Then I took a chance on sounding crazy and told him that last week I caught the King of Fishes and described its golden feather-fins. I also told him about the three wishes I'd gotten to let it go.

"Make a wish right now," he commanded. "I want to see it happen."

Instead, since he was my very best pal, I offered him one of my wishes. I made him toss a pebble into the pond to call the King of Fishes, and of course all the flowers disappeared. Then I made him close his eyes and make a wish. He stood that way for only a brief moment and opened his eyes, giving me a naughty look, but wouldn't say what he wished. I sure hoped it would come true, and then I'd use my remaining two.

On the path back up the hill we came upon a king snake a couple feet long, all beautiful

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 5. INDIAN WELL

green, black, and yellow. I caught it and showed Danny how there were no fangs when it bit. It just felt like sandpaper. Seeing as how I'd likely run up on it again, I let it go this time.

Right below the pasture we got to my great white oak. The Sunday afternoon sun was bright in its new greenery, timeless, the fragrance of spring, somehow eternal. How perfect this first time to be out in the woods with my Danny, buddies completely alone with each other. I wanted to tell him everything, show him all my treasures, take him to my secret places, and let him see what life was like for me here on Piney Hill.

Noticing the shallow Indian well full of leaves, Danny said it sure looked like a great place for a nap. So I pushed him in, and he pulled me tumbling after. Wrestling around, I took to tickling Danny in the ribs, and he struggled, laughing and begging me to quit. Tears glistened in his brown eyes. When I stopped, he instantly jumped me and pinned me flat on my back, knees on my elbows so I couldn't tickle anymore.

Danny leaned over me, grinning mischievously, and stroked my furry cheek. "I love your fuzz," he said, laughed, and asked, "Wanna know what I wished?" I nodded. "Here, I'll show you," he said with a sly smile and popped open the buttons on his fly. His pecker stood right up in the air, maybe six inches from my nose, a lot bigger than mine. He moaned and said, "My balls are about to explode!"

All my blessed bliss of the day was blown away by his cock sticking out of his pants like a dark-headed snake. How could temptation ambush me so soon after being made pure again? Why did the devil use my beloved friend to lure me into sin? When Danny started touching himself impurely, I struggled out from under him, protesting that what he was doing was a sin.

"Maybe for you, Benny babe," he said, rolling over in the leaves, and kept on moving his hand. "But I think it's like a little bit of heaven."

"Well, I'm not going to watch," I protested in a fit of virtue and walked over to stare at the trunk of the white oak. Hearing Danny's sweet groans, I had to struggle not to get hard myself. Listening to a bird singing somewhere didn't help. Then a deep grunt.

When Danny climbed out of the leaf-well, he was handsomer than ever, his eyes brown and shining. How could I love him so much in spite of his sinful ways? I ruffled his soft hair to show I loved him anyway. Crossing the pasture with the puppies scampering around under foot, Danny decided to name his Nina.

Unfortunately he had to get home for supper. We put Nina in a cardboard box on the front seat of his car, and I kissed her goodbye. Danny looked at us with such a cute smile that I almost wanted to kiss him goodbye too. I told him to be nice to her, and he tweaked my chin hairs, winked, and said, "Don't let your meat loaf." Then he drove away down the hill.

I wandered listlessly around under the tall pines, humming, "In the pines, in the pines..." and thinking with horror and fascination about what Danny had done in the Indian well, horror that he did such things, and fascination at seeing his prick. But Danny was a poor, misguided Protestant, and I felt suddenly proud showing my buddy an example of the One Holy Faith.

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A chickenfry was supper, and fortunately there were no more run-ins with Daddy. Then the same old chores of feeding the zoo. Dumping the meat bones into the dog pen, I noticed the birddog pup working a board loose near the doghouse. So I climbed in and pounded the board back into place real tight. I petted some of the affectionate lop-eared hounds and on impulse climbed up on top the roof of the tall doghouse, something I hadn't done for a couple years.

It was a lovely evening view off across the gravel pit toward the other hill, stripes of sunset clouds in gold and gray and rose. Back then when I was first in love with Annette, after

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 5. INDIAN WELL

seeing her every day on the television, I'd climb up here and in my memory again see her bouncing up to the camera with a bright "Annette" and raising her arm in a cheer.

Now here I was back on the old doghouse, still in love with her, but my love seemed to be starving—or burning out like a fire falling to embers. It didn't warm me anymore, not like then when I'd sit here and reverently sing the theme song: *Come along and sing this song / And join our family, M-I-C...* Singing it now, I was too sad to finish and climbed down off the roof.

After a quiet hour and some on the sofa reading a book about a Canada goose, "Manka, the Sky Gypsy," I was ready to fly away myself, but the only place to fly was to the café for a soda pop. I drifted slowly across the road recalling Danny's sin this afternoon.

Stopping thoughtfully in the middle of the highway, the only headlight approaching from a fair way down the hill, I told myself it wasn't a sin for Danny because he didn't believe it was. Conversely then, it was a sin for me because I believed it was. And I believed that because the Church said it was. And they said that because..?

Hustling the rest of the way across the road for the car to zoom by, I stopped again on the parking gravel, thinking back to my rote catechism about what sin is: an offense against God. How on earth could one even hope to offend God, to affect God in any way? Maybe the Ten Commandments were just good old common sense, no lying, killing, etc. But where do they say anything about touching oneself impurely? Why in the devil would God be offended by that? That was too much theology for me, and I went on into the café.

Inside I found a bunch of the local kids and sat around number two chatting with them. Ruthie, a tall dark-haired girl on the basketball team, told us how at last week's game in El Dorado she got fouled real bad in a jump shot, and everybody fell smack on top of her. She exclaimed, "I was lost as a bat in a whirlwind!" The image was so funny I choked on my root beer laughing. I could just see a crazy bat fluttering madly, wild-eyed, in the whirling wind with no idea which way's up.

Jimmy Sutton pounded my back to help the coughing, but if I thought of that confused critter again, I'd start giggling. To distract myself I told them about the two cute puppies I had left. Turned out Martha, Ruthie's sister, wanted one, and so did Royce. So we went across the road to pick them up. Duchess didn't seem to notice her pups' departure at all.

Back in my room I hit the sack, thankful for keeping pure all day in spite of that temptation with Danny. But I couldn't think about that in case it too was temptation, sort of second-hand. I dreamt—*of standing by Danny and Mr. Gilbert in the school hallway with a glass of milk in my hand. I drink it and put my arm around Danny, pulling him close against me. Danny bends his face close to mine, and I stroke his cheek. Then we walk beside each other, going to his house. We hear a dinner bell and start to run. I outrun him along the path, though he can outrun me. We run and the scenes swerve as we turn around a lake, and a big white mansion appears, set in dark cedars and oaks. We run down to splash across a creek and up toward the house.*

That was all because I woke up in the dark night feeling happy and sad, peaceful and fearful, and incredibly confused. I couldn't tell which way's up—a lot like Ruthie's bat.

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