

**A CHEER OF CHAMPIONS**

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Friday of the next week was the day for my trip to Little Rock as Sevier County 4-H Champion Boy. Danny had warned me to watch out because it was Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, but I didn't believe in such superstitions. Still it made me a little nervous. While I dressed, I wondered why people would believe in superstitions if they're not true. And if they're not true, how come folks thought them up in the first place? Starving for some breakfast, I pulled on my fancy cowboy boots with the turquoise tops and raced across the road.

After my soft-scrambled and sausage, Daddy drove me to the Barkers' store, and on the way I got an earful of gripes about not shaving. "You look like a stupid hillbilly," he grumped.

Adamant in my resolve not to shave, I dared to reply, "Yep, that's me, a Piney Hillbilly." "You sure got that right," Daddy snorted, but he wasn't through: "And your hair looks like a dirty mop." This, oddly, just after his barber friend Lefty fixed up my longer hair into a neat bit of a wave in front, almost like Elvis. He just had to complain about something.

As usual, the very last thing before I got out of the car he told me to behave myself. That was always so annoying because I couldn't even remember ever misbehaving. Well, unless you count that time Nick and I threw wads of wet tissue out the 16<sup>th</sup> floor window of that hotel in Atlantic City. (They splatted splendidly on cars and the sidewalk.) I knew it was wrong, but I couldn't resist dropping a few globs. Besides, Daddy didn't know about that.

Iris and I waited for Miss Mannis sitting on our suitcases out front under the big roof over their gas pumps. We'd been 4-H chums for a long time. Of course, my heart being wholly devoted to Annette, Iris not being Catholic, and her now going steady with Sammy, I had no romantic thoughts about her at all.

Iris had a delicate, pretty mouth and a great figure. No wonder my buddy Sammy really liked her. I couldn't help but imagine her out parking with him, kissing on his mouth and all that stuff. Only problem was that tiny mole on her left cheek, the kind that might grow hairs someday. Without it, I thought Iris would be perfectly beautiful.

She must have noticed me staring at it. "It's called a 'beauty mark,' Benny," she said with a coy smile and then explained, "You know, nothing's ever supposed to be perfect."

In fact, I saw now that she was perfectly imperfectly beautiful, maybe more than Annette. I told her so, minus the comparison.

She blushed modestly and changed the subject, squealing excitedly, "Oooh! I've never stayed in a hotel—not in my whole life."

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Miss Mannis finally appeared in her big black Chevrolet, and we took off for DeQueen. At the Sevier County Courthouse, we found the Little River County Champions already there. They were a homely freckled girl Edith Perkins and a good-looking blond guy named Leroy Watkins. They went to school in Foreman, both juniors. He smiled friendly at me and gave lovely Iris an obvious once-over, clearly liking what he saw. His flirty leer at her embarrassed me, but she was polite in meeting him. Then she proceeded pointedly to ignore him. So would I have, if Sammy was my boyfriend. There was no comparison.

A county guy named Mr. Lacey was driving us all to Little Rock in his big Ford station wagon, brand-new for 1959 and real fancy. I rode in the back seat between Edith and Leroy, while Iris sat way up front between the grownups. Edith pulled out a bag of crocheting and set right to work. She was County Champion for a big tablecloth and napkins she'd crocheted.

## BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 6. A CHEER OF CHAMPIONS

Leroy was Champ for growing an acre of snap-beans that he sold in a stand by the road. A tad put out that as a romantic poet, possible future rock star, and valedictorian of my class, I was being called a Champion just for raising a big hog, I admitted that ridiculous fact. They didn't even laugh. Then I showed off the great boots I bought with the money.

Edith turned out to be real funny telling stories about kids she knew very dramatically, pausing at times to check her pattern. In the meantime I watched Leroy and decided he was good-looking enough, like imperfectly imperfectly handsome. His hair was in a plain crew cut, so light you could hardly see it. Big blue eyes and a nice strong chin. The strangest thing about him was his mouth, almost like a little boy's, curving down at the corners, but not in a frown.

After cold drinks in Hot Springs, we got on the super highway, four lanes wide. All the rest of the way, it rained, and I nearly fell asleep what with the steady drone of the tires on the wet pavement and the regular flip-flap of the windshield wipers. Leroy did fall asleep, leaning his head on my shoulder. He smelled like hay.

The whole time Edith worked on some kind of doily. When we were passing through Benton, she tied it off and handed it to me. "I made it for you, Ben," she announced with a blush. I stared at the white doily in my hand—with a big red pig in the middle. Amazing, not a bad job at all. I thanked her politely for the curious trophy and wondered what on earth I could ever do with the thing. Folded, it fit in my back pocket.

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Arriving in Little Rock, you couldn't see much for all the rain still. When we pulled up to the Marion Hotel, Iris squealed excitedly again. It was a big place of several storeys with a covered entrance drive, so we were out of the rain. An old Negro man in a uniform with gold tassels came out and helped the women in with their bags.

At the check-in desk, we left all our bags for another old Negro man the clerk called the "bellboy," and crossed the lobby to the conference table to sign in and get our bright green Champion jackets. I got a medium. It felt too tight across the shoulders, but the sleeves on the larges were way too long. The lady said they were all cut that way. Rather irritated that I couldn't zip my jacket all the way up, I picked up the program for the state 4-H conference. The theme was impressive: "Tomorrow's Leaders in Action."

Mr. Lacey hurried us off to our rooms to get unpacked. Leroy and I raced up to number 624. Clearly, there'd be about half a dozen more guys in the room too, judging from the number of twin beds. He and I grabbed beds next to each other under a window.

We hustled by the coffee shop for a hamburger to go since the bus tour was almost ready to leave. There was no sign of Iris or Edith, but someone said the next bus was in about fifteen minutes. I half-way suspected Iris was avoiding Leroy. Maybe Edith was too. Leroy almost swallowed his hamburger whole, but I only managed to eat half of mine before we had to get on the bus. Feeling self-conscious, I stuffed the rest in my tight jacket pocket.

For some strange reason, on the tour of Little Rock, our bus took us past a lot of schools. It was bright and sunny again, and people were out all over the place. We saw two totally huge hospitals and went past Central High School, which sure was grand, almost like a palace. What with all the integration stuff that had been happening there, it was the most important place I'd ever been near—except of course, for Independence Hall.

While the bus rumbled down some more streets, Leroy leaned close to me whispering, "You ever see so many niggers? And them living right here in the city."

His disapproving tone bothered me, but I simply answered, "No, I guess I haven't." Truly there were way more black people around here than I'd ever seen before.

To my dismay, the bus drove right past the Zoo and hauled us to the new Arkansas Light and Power Company building. Because there were lots of our 4-H groups on different busses and schedules, we had to wait a while before going inside, and I went around behind our bus to eat the rest of my lunch in privacy. On the very last bite, it suddenly dawned on me that today was Friday. The bite stopped right at my Adam's apple and made me choke. Here I'd been free from sin for almost a whole week. Of course, since I'd just forgotten, it wasn't really a mortal sin eating meat on Friday. Just a venial one. And besides, I was truly contrite.

On the third floor of the Power Company, as I turned a corner, I came face to face with Betsy. So my pen pal was here at the conference too. She hadn't written that she was coming. We both said surprised hi's. Betsy looked a lot different now than when I'd met her around two years ago in Fayetteville (soon after I'd fallen in love with Annette). She was heavier, her hair longer and back in a pony-tail, making her face very round. We just had time to agree we'd meet up back at the hotel after the tour.

At the new Capitol Governor Faubus had the day off, so the Tax Collector welcomed us instead. Betsy came in with her group too. I suddenly got very nervous realizing that she was the only person in the whole world who knew about my secret love for Annette Funicello. Though her letters always sounded very understanding, I wondered if maybe Betsy might think I was a little bit batty. Sometimes I felt like it.

When I was heading for the door with my group, Betsy quickly crossed over to me and looking back, called, "Come on, Annette." I just about jumped out my skin, for an instant truly insane with hope. Betsy gave me a wicked grin as another girl came up to be introduced. She was cute enough with dark curls, short like my Annette's hair used to be. We shook hands, but I was too embarrassed to say anything more than a nice to meet you.

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When we met back at the hotel, Betsy and I sat down on a sofa in the lobby to catch up. Besides, my feet were hurting me, unused to all the walking and standing in my cowboy boots. Right away she laughed and admitted she hadn't written me about coming to Little Rock just so as to surprise me. She was County Champion Girl for sewing a fancy evening dress.

I felt kind of awkward, what with her knowing so much about me, and didn't know what to talk about. Since I'd written her a letter just two days ago, I told her about our rainy trip and showed her the unusual doily Edith made for me. She thought the hog was impressive.

Betsy suddenly said, "Oh, Benny, you look so handsome and distinguished now. I almost didn't recognize you with your beard and new hair style." I was real glad she liked it. Then she remarked, "You look almost like Abraham Lincoln."

Appreciative, I tried to be gallant and complimented her pretty long hair. Then I rambled on about how exciting it was to be going to Tulane next year, to get out of the backwoods and escape into a city. Talking about it with someone now for the first time, I felt the excitement even more keenly and self-consciously stopped my babbling.

Betsy patted my hand and said, "I'm so happy for you. Benny, you're such a special person." She said she'd told her boyfriend Bobby all about me, and he agreed. I cringed that now he too knew about Annette and figured he must really think me a kook. Betsy patted my hand again and said, "He thinks you're real cool, like an old-time knight with his lady fair."

"Make that a knight without his lady fair," I commented ruefully but realistically.

She laughed gently and said, "No, Ben. I think you're a Don Quixote, and Annette is your Dulcinea." (Like me, Betsy read lots of books, and we often wrote each other about them.)

After a second's surprise, I joked, "Got any windmills handy?" But I had to admit she'd

hit that nail smack on the head.

There was a while yet before the banquet started, so Betsy and I killed some more time in the hotel gift shop looking at magazines. Sure a better selection than even in Danny's drugstore in Ashdown. There among the movie and teenager things I suddenly got a glimpse of a familiar picture of my darling.

Betsy saw where I was looking and giggled. "Here's another one," she said, pulling out a magazine from farther down the rack. I was speechless with embarrassment and thrilled at the same time. In the new picture my gorgeous sweetheart was wearing a skirt with pink polka dots all over it. I simply stared. Betsy went and bought the magazine for me.

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I found room 624 full of guys. Leroy was lying on his bed in his underwear with a girlie magazine. I got a glimpse in it of big tits and also of something sticking up in his underpants. Some other fellows were also wandering around in the bathroom in underpants. They all said hi and introduced themselves. Weldon had a muscle-man chest. Somebody else was Floyd, Rodney, Darrell, Jimmy, and another one whose name I didn't quite hear.

I got into my white nylon shirt, the snap-on bowtie, blue with white dots, and my old brown suit. I hadn't put it on in so long that the pants were awful tight, and I stuffed the short cuffs inside my boot-tops. Leroy remarked, "You look pretty sharp." He looked sharp himself, slender and nice looking in a shiny gray suit and red tie. He snorted, "This banquet better be worth getting done up like a monkey."

Down in the lobby Betsy and the other Annette were waiting for us. Edith and Iris were off with other groups of kids somewhere again. Betsy's yellow dress showed her shoulders and had ruffles across the top, the Champion one she'd designed and sewed. I felt guilty for thinking how the frilly dress just made my old friend look heavier. With her necklace of blue stones, she had such big shoulders. Still, I realized, people don't have to be even pretty to be attractive.

This wrong Annette was wearing a fancy pink party dress. Her last name I found out was Gore. She really did look cute, even pretty, and I saw Leroy's eyes start shining that way. Around her neck I noticed a chain with some kind of medal or pendant, and my heart leapt to think maybe she was Catholic. So I asked.

"Oh, no," she laughed. "I'm a Piscopalian." Was that some new kind of Protestants? Noticing my lack of comprehension, she explained, "Actually, we're Anglican, just like Catholics, except we don't believe in the Pope."

Never having heard of such a church of angels, I gingerly asked her, "So who tells your Church what to believe then?"

"The Archbishop of Canterbury," Annette promptly responded and confused me further. She explained again, "It's the Church of England."

Now that was something I learned about in last year's world history class, but I didn't know there were still any of them around. There being so many kinds of churches, I had to wonder if there might not be other country-type churches, like the Church of Switzerland or Church of Greece. Maybe there was even a Church of America?

So the simple fact was, Annette wasn't Catholic. Ever faithful to my own beloved Annette, I had no choice but to leave this one to Leroy's more than friendly attentions. He looked so cute the way he started making up to her. For a tiny instant I wondered how faithful I actually would've been if this Annette was a real Catholic.

Her strange-sounding, just-like-Catholic religion got me wondering why there'd be so darned many churches for one religion. They all believed in the same God, though I was pretty

sure we Catholics were the only ones making such a big fuss about the Virgin Mary. For some reason the Jews and Mohamedans—and other heathen like the Chinese and the African tribes—believed in different Gods. It was all too confusing to figure out on an empty stomach.

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The big banquet room was full of long tables with white tablecloths and chrysanthemums with some kind of silver leaves. Mr. Lacey and Miss Mannis sat at a table with the other adults, and we found places near the back corner of the room. Right away I saw that the leaves were just legustrum leaves painted silver, like those big bushes back home in our yard. It was an interesting idea that maybe we could use in our café.

In a minute, a young Negro in a white jacket brought our plates. He was real handsome with his skin so black. He saw me looking at him and gave me bright smile, reminding me of that waiter in Atlantic City. The dinner was turkey and dressing with sweet potatoes and green beans. You'd have thought it was Thanksgiving.

Leroy looked at the waiter suspiciously and when he was gone, leaned over to me and said seriously, "I sure hope he didn't stick his finger in my food."

Shocked that he'd even think such a thing about a fellow waiter, even if he was a Negro, I remarked as sternly as I could, "I wouldn't worry about that none." Then I gave him my turkey, explaining about Catholics fasting on Fridays.

They gave me blank stares. Leroy protested, "But you ate a hamburger for lunch." Awkwardly I explained how it was only a venial sin because I'd forgotten.

Annette looked surprised, laughing uneasily, "You mean forgetting's a sin?" Fortunately the program started right then, and I was saved from any more religious conversation. Trying to explain sins like this was pretty hard.

A guy up in front of the room bellowed through a microphone, "Ladies and gentlemen!" A tall kid said a strange prayer—about all kinds of things and lots of "for Jesus Christ's sake." It was all I could do to keep from giggling because that was the way Daddy always cussed. Then a man with wire glasses gave a speech about striving for excellence that lasted until dessert, which was scrumptious lemon chiffon pie.

The State 4-H Secretary, a curly-headed girl, recited all the "equal training of the head, heart, hands, and health" stuff, and then three kids sang "Danny Boy," one of my favorite songs, of course. It got me all sentimental missing my buddy. The two girls and a boy harmonized and sounded especially nice on the line, *O come ye back when summer's in the meadow...*

After two more speeches on something or other, a man read off the names of all the County Champions and said what we were Champion for. You had to stand up so everyone could see you. It was sort of monotonous, so I wondered what a bunch of champions is called. How about a cheer of champions?

Pretty quick the man called my name over the microphone, adding, "For raising a prize-winning Poland China shoat." I stood up waving ironically to the folks, and it was great the way they all looked at me with admiration. Or maybe they were just impressed by my resemblance to Abraham Lincoln. When I sat back down, I fell into a trance of words bouncing off the walls, names of people I didn't know and wouldn't remember.

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At long last they let us out of the banquet room, herding us over into the ballroom for something called a Share-the-Fun party. They passed out sheets of paper with lists of careers. You had to meet enough people to get a new acquaintance's autograph by each one on the list. Leroy signed up with me first thing on the line for welder. Naturally I signed his by nuclear

scientist, which was at the top of the list.

With everybody asking, I quickly got bored always wanting to be the same thing. So I'd just pick one, like game warden, grocer, farmer, or fireman. If I chose something already taken, they'd just rush off for someone else. It was a fun game pretending that I passionately wanted to be a dairyman. Once I even tried nurse, but the girl looked at me like I was crazy. So I admitted it was a joke and said what I really wanted to be wasn't on the list: King. She added career no. 23: Ruler – and a line where I signed “Benjamin I.” Then I started adding careers all over the place, architect, poet, Senator, and such.

Finally they announced a dance, and a band of five kids banged around on the stage adjusting the microphone, blowing on it, and saying, “Checking, one, two, three,” just like professionals. First they played “You Ain't Nothing But a Hound Dog,” but the boy wasn't very good at imitating Elvis. He couldn't really sing worth a hoot either.

When the music started, we were supposed to dance with the person next to us. Well, right then I was talking to a nice guy named Jerry who wanted to be a police officer. We laughed and had to look around for some girls. I found one named Sheila Renfro with buck-teeth, and she turned out to be a pretty good dancer.

We had to change partners for the next number, “La Bamba,” that beautiful Spanish song by poor Ritchie Valens who died in a plane crash. I wound up dancing with Vonnie someone, and though it was such a great song, I couldn't dance very good to its strange rhythm. After some more songs and as many partners, I suddenly found myself by Annette—for “Sea of Love,” a great slow one. When she cuddled up to me, it felt funny, but I pretended she was my own Annette. Some kind of perfume got me dizzy, or maybe it was feeling her so warm in my arms.

Shortly she pulled away a little to look at me and said, “Betsy said you have a girlfriend.” I nearly choked saying I did. Did she know too? Annette asked, “What's she like?”

In case she did know, I couldn't lie, and if she didn't, it wouldn't matter. Careful with my dance steps, I answered vaguely, “She's very pretty and sweet.” Annette obviously wanted more, so I added, “She's a good dancer and can even sing.”

Leaning on my shoulder again, Annette said, “She's a lucky girl.” I held her close and figured my Annette certainly was lucky. Problem was, she didn't know I was alive. Then the band took a break, and I turned this pretty Annette over to Leroy's less than honorable intentions.

To a scratchy record, some Arthur Murray Dancers did the cha-cha, the samba, and the tango for us to watch. When the band started up again, I danced with Betsy, who was just too heavy to be graceful. But she looked so happy to be dancing with me that it made me feel very good, though my feet were aching again. We kept on dancing together for a few more songs, enjoying ourselves enormously.

Then the man at the microphone announced that the party was over. The girls were supposed to say goodnight and “retire” to their rooms. Betsy and I said sad goodbyes because we'd both be leaving early in the morning. She hugged me tight and said, “Write to me soon, Don Quixote.” Meanwhile, nearby Leroy was kissing Annette goodbye rather enthusiastically.

Under orders from the microphone, we boys had to hang around for several minutes. Since Leroy looked so sad, I put my arm around his shoulders and suggested maybe he and Annette could write to each other. He laughed resignedly and punched me on the chest. “What I want,” he snorted, “you can't put in an envelope.” Then the microphone man told us guys that we should “retire” too and go right to sleep.

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Up in our room it was a mess with everybody getting out of their party clothes. Leroy

helped pull off my boots so I could rub my feet. In my underwear waiting to brush my teeth, I listened to him carry on about this great car he wanted to buy, with whitewalls and some kind of power carburetor. All of a sudden the guy named Darrell hollered in the bathroom, “Watch out, you asshole!”

He was brushing at the sink, and apparently big Weldon had walked into him. Weldon stopped in mock surprise and looked at Darrell, who had bent back over the sink with his toothbrush. “Hey,” Weldon called out to the room, “any you guys want a nice piece of ass?” And he yanked down Darrell’s underpants so the poor guy was mooning us all.

Floyd jumped up off his bed shouting, “Me first!” Everyone laughed. Except Darrell, who quickly pulled his shorts back up and turned, toothbrush in hand, on Weldon, who just stood there looking dramatically innocent.

“Lay off, you cock-sucker!” Darrell snapped and spat in the sink. He was a pretty small guy to act so tough with someone as big as Weldon. I worried maybe it was going to be a fight.

But Weldon jumped back in pretend fright, covering up his crotch. “Are there cock-suckers in here? Oh, dear.” Even Darrell laughed.

The guy named Jimmy, the tall thin kid with red hair washing at the other sink, turned around toward us in the room. “I sure hope so,” he said, “’cause I need a blowjob bad.” He proudly showed us a big erection jutting out of the flap in his underpants. Everybody laughed, and with no volunteers, Jimmy sighed in resignation and put it away.

I was stunned by the exchange. The images of Darrell’s nice piece of ass and Jimmy’s huge bone left me speechless. And the mere thought of someone sucking on... Clearly this was mortal sin stuff. Taking my turn at the sink to brush, I made myself think about that religion thing instead, and it was just as confusing.

After I’d brushed, I climbed into bed and chattered some more with Leroy. It was great how friendly we’d gotten after just one day together. Only one thing bothered me: Leroy’s feet. He stuck his feet out from under the covers, and I saw his toes. His big toes, actually—really big and round with tiny nails, the rest looking tiny beside them. Ever since reading about how the Romans preferred feet with long second toes, Patrician feet, I’d been proud of my long toes. Leroy’s feet were horribly plebeian. I felt so sorry for him and figured they were like his great big beauty marks. Besides, like Betsy, he also didn’t have to be pretty to be nice and attractive.

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Once the last guy had brushed his teeth, the lights went out, and the street lights shone in patches on the ceiling. It was bright enough in the room to see the blanketed shapes in the rows of beds. In the dark silence, I got to wondering if eight fellows made a blush of boys.

Breaking the silence, someone, I think maybe Rodney, started telling a dirty joke about a Negro preacher with a huge prick, and I tried not to laugh. Then some of the others jumped in with even worse jokes. I plugged my ears with my fingers but could still hear the vulgarities.

Down at the end of the row, Jimmy suddenly jumped up and closed himself in the bathroom. The guy on the other side of Darrell loudly cackled, “Beat that meat!” There was a lot of embarrassed giggling from the other beds, and I fought down images of the sin happening in there. There was a flush, and Jimmy came out and crawled back under his blanket.

It was quiet again a moment, and suddenly Rodney got up and went into the bathroom. There was some giggling, and then from over in Leroy’s bed came a rhythmic rustling. He started breathing hard. Darrell exclaimed, “You guys are all sex fiends and perverts.”

The heat in my crotch was agonizing, but I battled the temptation. Turning over on my side didn’t help at all. After yet another flush it got real quiet in the room as guys dropped off to

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sleep. Across the way, by the reflected streetlight I saw a small movement under one of the blankets. Rolling over on my other side, I fought down the urges.

Soon it was clear that everybody else was asleep. Weldon coughed once, and Rodney made a whimper like a scary dream. With the strange silence in the hotel, no truck motors pulling up to the café or car doors slamming, I couldn't go to sleep. To distract myself from the big bone in my underpants, I tried thinking about my blessed love for Annette, how it was such an innocent, almost holy, adoration.

Suddenly, without even intending to, I was touching myself, just a little pressure, and all my resistance was futile. Then came the waves of remorse for being a wretched sinner. Again my soul was black as coal, and I cried silently into my pillow, thinking how I deserved to have ugly feet and bulbous toes.

Lying there awake, I pondered that depressing thought and suddenly told myself to wait just a cotton-picking minute. I was already dubious anyway about sex being a sin. And there was no way sin caused folks to have things like ugly feet. Then everybody would have them. Nobody deserved to. Like poor Leroy, unlucky people wound up with them for no moral reason.

Just imagine, I thought as I lay there in the dark, what the world would be like if folks got what they truly deserved, for good or bad. For instance, I'd have Annette for my real sweetheart. I'd bet my fancy boots way lots more people get what they don't deserve than get what they do.

Making myself overlook Leroy's negative attitudes about Negroes, I felt a new sympathy for him and his undeserved ugly feet and finally drifted off to sleep.

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When Miss Mannis dropped me off Saturday afternoon home at Piney Hill, I proudly walked into the café wearing my too-tight Champion jacket. Mom thought it was real beautiful green. She was working for Daddy, who was off with Joe Ray in the river bottoms hunting swamp rabbits. Janie even left off her horseplay and came across the road all excited to welcome me back. Actually, her first words were, "Tell me all about the champions, big brother."

There wasn't much I could say about them. Feeling magnanimous, if that's what you'd call it, I took off my jacket and handed it to Janie. "Here, you can have this, squirt—for when you get to be the County Champ horseback rider." Her face lit up like a flashbulb, and it fit her perfectly. I could have sworn she purred like a satisfied cat. Besides, for a Champion trophy I was a lot happier having that frilly white doily with fat red Cornpone in the middle.

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