

ANNIE OVER

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Thursday morning on the schoolbus I sat in the back with Willie, who yanked on the hairs on my jaw, smiled in his cute bucktoothed way, and said, "I like your beard."

So did I. The fur growing along my jaw line and fuzz on my upper lip made me feel like an animal. Remembering Betsy in Little Rock a few weeks ago, I said, "Someone said I look like Abraham Lincoln. Think so?"

Willie looked at me figuring. He borrowed Cynthia's American History book from across the aisle and found a picture of Lincoln. The kids all around checked it out and agreed that I bore a strong likeness to that President. Next thing, they started calling me Honest Abe.

In homeroom we got our white annuals with an embossed black panther on the cover. There was an extra photo of me as Most Scholarly that looked reasonably good and one of Danny standing by the blackboard with Normalynn. I told him he looked awful handsome, and he snorted in embarrassment, blushing like he used to.

We continued paging through our yearbooks, and Danny said almost secretively, "Wanna stay over with me tonight and go to the game?" He meant the senior girls' basketball game with DeQueen. Of course I wanted to... But I tried to be realistic that whenever Danny had asked me over before, Daddy had always said no. Still, it was worth another try just for the hell of it. After all, my eighteenth birthday was two days ago, and I needed more birthday presents besides the blue nylon Sunday shirt that Mom got for me because I was outgrowing the white one.

During fourth period I made a nervous phone call home to the café from the office. Since Mom was doing the day shift, she was who answered. When I asked, she hesitated a good bit but finally said I could at least stay for the game. But I had to come right home afterwards to help when the game crowd got to the café. Stopping at Piney Hill was a high point for the kids driving and the team buses heading home from games wherever.

Every time you turned around, someone was writing in your annual, or you in theirs. Betty Lou caught me outside the gym and amongst other things, wrote slightly ungrammatically: "To go along with your great personality, your a marvel in the books, and such an individual, like a beatnick (your beard)." I'd never thought of myself as being that individual, not like her boyfriend Jim Bob, a great basketball player.

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At lunchtime I found Danny high up in the bleachers near the gym's roof girders. He greeted me with, "Hi there, Honest Abe." Apparently the schoolbus gossip had already spread widely around school. Then he gently tugged on the hairs on my chinny-chin-chin.

"I can stay for the game," I announced happily, "but I'll need a ride home afterwards."

"My water pump went out yesterday," Danny groaned. "But there'll be some DeQueen guys to hitch with." Nothing else to do, it was enough to at least have an evening with him.

We'd saved pages in our annuals especially for each other, and while we sat on the bleachers, I wrote for him as best I could about what a super friend he was and how we'd be friends forever, even signing it with love. What Danny wrote was very touching: "You don't know how it makes me feel to have a real true friend as honest and sincere as you, Benny. I think you are a handsome and very cute boy. You are the kind of guy to me that I would like to solve my problems with and wouldn't be ashamed of it." And he signed it, "Love, Danny."

After we'd read each other's notes, we just sat there smiling at each other like idiots. I couldn't imagine what problems he meant, or what there was to be ashamed of, but it was

wonderful that he thought our friendship was so special.

Little Willie caught me in the hall outside of Trig class, and I wrote real sincerely for him. When I handed his annual back, he slammed it shut to read later, and I closed mine too. During my class, I looked to see: “Dear Benny, you’ll never know what knowing you has ment for me and how much you have encuraged me. I hope you have everything you want in life. God bless you. A friend always, your little brother Willie.” It was so sweet I got all teary.

Instead of our English class next, Miss Cindy held try-outs for the senior play, which was called “Going Steady.” We’d have two weeks of rehearsals and then perform it. It was so exciting to think of acting on a stage that I got nervous in my stomach waiting for my turn to audition. Earlier, I’d begged Danny to audition—He could get out of History class for it—but he didn’t want to be on stage. He’d have been perfect for the lead boy Scotty’s role.

I’d signed up to audition for three parts, including Scotty, but Miss Cindy only let me read for the father, Malcolm Burnaby. She said I was perfect for the part because it had lots of lines I could probably remember best. Of course, my beard probably had a lot to do with it, making me look grown up. Mickey, who looked of course like a real teenager with his fine features, dark flattop, and greeny-blue eyes, got picked for Scotty.

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After school, I tossed my annual and play script in my locker for tomorrow and left with Danny, walking down the shady street beside him. I was so happy to be with my buddy instead of on the Ben Lomond bus. At the corner of Main Street while we waited for the light, Danny gave me a pitiful look and mumbled sadly, “Shit, I’m so horny I can’t see straight.”

I tried to comfort him and took his arm. “Here, I’ll help you across the street.” He laughed and gave me an affectionate poke.

In Phillips’ Drugstore where Danny worked on Saturdays, he made us a couple chocolate sodas, and we sat together leaning on the cool marble of the counter top. Danny whispered, “Do Catholics really truly believe it’s a sin to jack off?” Excited to spread the Truth of the Church, I assured him we do and then wondered for a moment if I still did. He shrugged and asked, “You don’t never play on the skin flute?”

Without looking at him, after a chuckle and a slurp of soda, I admitted, “Only when I simply can’t resist the temptation.”

Danny slurped his own soda and laughed, “I can resist anything but temptation.” Seeing another opportunity, I talked about keeping our souls free from mortal sin so as not to go to hell when we die. With a serious expression, Danny broke in, “But all you gotta do is take Jesus for your savior.” I argued that we’re still responsible for our own personal sins. Danny snorted, “Including tooting off. Well, I’m sure glad I’m no Catholic and wish you wasn’t neither.”

I was so shocked all I could do was stare. This wasn’t at all where I wanted our conversation to go. Besides, I was getting less and less confident about arguing the sinfulness of doing those things, and I still wasn’t at all clear on what sex had to do with God. The best thing was to drop the subject and get back to being best buddies.

It was only five blocks to Danny’s house, which was all quiet since his Mama didn’t get home from work at the Sheriff’s Office till five, and his Pop was on the evening shift, three to eleven, over at the paper mill. In the yard we were greeted by a bounding puppy named Nina, almost as overjoyed to see her master as I was to be with him.

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Danny found his basketball lying by the steps and suggested we play Annie Over. So we wound up on either side of their long brown house pitching the ball back and forth over the roof

to each other. To let the other know you were throwing, you had to shout, “Annie Over!” I always hollered, “Danny Over!” Nina got super excited, running around and around the house each time we’d throw the ball.

Most of Danny’s throws kept coming down in the big legustrum bushes, and after a half dozen more tosses, I got bored. Besides, I really didn’t like not being able to see my buddy. Catching his next throw, I raced around the house with the ball. He was looking expectantly up at the roof when I hollered, and the ball whopped him upside the head.

“You rat-fink!” Danny yelled and chased me hooting and growling off across the yard. A tackle sent us crashing into the tall bushes at the back of the house. “Gotcha!” he shouted triumphantly as we fell through the crunching branches.

He landed smack on top of me, face down on the ground, and was pretty heavy. I wiggled to try and roll him off and suddenly felt him hard against my behind. He started rubbing and panting in my ear. Again all I could do was laugh, especially since Nina was jumping all over us, and try to pull his arms loose. Finally he let go and moaned piteously.

Struggling to stand up, I scolded, “Bad puppy dog!” Danny sat on the ground looking ashamed, and I patted him on the head like a good dog. He grabbed me with a growl and pulled me down to the ground, humping my leg with great fervor, and Nina again joined the fray. We both collapsed in laughter. Crawling out of the bushes, he grinned at me and blushed. Wrestling with him like that had somehow caused me to get hard too, so I’m sure I also blushed.

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With Danny dribbling the basketball and Nina nipping at my heels, we strolled out to the front yard and found his mother pulling into the driveway in a blue Buick. Ethel was a sweet-looking heavy woman with one of those beehive hairdos. Danny quickly explained about inviting me to supper to go to the basketball game.

Opening the back car door, she said, “You’re that smart kid he’s been talking about? Ben? Well, I just been to the grocery and got a bunch of pork chops.” She looked hard at us. “You two been rassling?” We nodded and let her pick grass out of our hair.

“Look what you done, buster,” Ethel chided Danny. “You done tore Ben’s shirt.” She pointed out a small rip in the side under my arm. I assured her it was there already, my old red plaid shirt. As we climbed the porch steps with the grocery bags, behind us Ethel said, “Dirt all over you boys! Into the tub with you two. Supper be ready in a half hour. Get cracking!”

First, Danny showed me his bedroom, bright with two windows and his stuff scattered around, his bed neatly made. It was too bad I couldn’t sleep there tonight with him. Model airplanes were hanging all over the place, and there was an aquarium with a green pond turtle with red spots sitting on a rock. He’d once had a goldfish too, but the turtle ate it.

Their bathroom was real nice with white tiles around the lower walls and a green vine in the window with lacey curtains. The sink was standing on a porcelain pedestal. Danny turned the water on in a huge bathtub almost big enough for four people with claws for feet. Since we never took PE together (and I didn’t take it at all this year), we hadn’t ever seen each other naked so while we undressed, I admired his good shoulder muscles and round behind.

Wrapping a green towel around his waist, Danny turned toward me and looked my hairy body up and down. I didn’t even feel shy about being circumcised. He gave me a funny look when he saw it. Then he asked, “Know what I got again?” Something was pushing the towel straight out in front of him.

He was so beautiful I could barely breathe. Not looking at his protrusion, I asked innocently, “You got a problem?” Then recalling a filthy joke Mickey told us recently, I asked,

“Isn’t that one of those one-eyed trouser snakes you got there?” We both guffawed over Mick’s dirty joke again.

Danny sprinkled some blue powder under the faucet, and the tub quickly filled with suds. He dropped his towel revealing a less urgent problem, and climbed. The bubbles came up to our necks, and our legs immediately got all tangled up under the water. Danny turned off the faucet and pushed bubbles at me. “Well,” he said with a frown, “looks like you lost me my bet.” He tickled my rib with his toe and explained, “Ol’ Mick and me had a bet. He bet me you’re cut, but I bet you wasn’t. I figured only Jews did that.”

I grabbed his foot and said, “Mom said it was because we’re Catholic, but I don’t know anything about Jews doing it.”

Danny broke in. “Mick says papists are pretty much the same.”

“I don’t think so,” I said, confused. “You know, I really hate that they cut it off. It makes me feel like a freak.”

Danny laughed and said, “As long as it works.” He made a grab for my crotch, missing, and asked, “Does it?”

I tossed some suds at him and sighed, “That’s my problem. When it works, it’s a sin.” Having had enough of that subject, I asked, “So what did you lose on your bet?”

“Oh, nothing much. Never mind,” Danny said and started rubbing his arms with a big pink bar of soap. Suddenly there was that fragrance I’d often noticed about him at school. He leaned forward and rubbed my arms with his soapy hands.

We traded off washing each other's backs. Rubbing my buddy’s smooth shoulders and sides felt great, and when he washed mine, Danny asked about the bruises on my back. I’d almost forgotten about them. Daddy gave me a licking last week, and they were almost better now. I omitted that it was with an extension cord—and for slamming the screen door.

He reached around me with both arms and hugged me, nuzzling his face up to my ear and humming that Elvis song “Love Me Tender.” Lying back in his arms among the bubbles, I basked in the golden evening sun through the white curtains feeling happier than ever before. When I felt him getting hard against my back, it started happening to me too. Somehow I found the will power to say that we should probably get out of the tub now.

While we dried off, I admired Danny’s prick almost drooping with its dark hood of foreskin. He quickly pulled on his pants and brought me his blue and red striped shirt to wear instead of my torn one. He sniffed the cooking smell and said, “I better go help set the table.”

I checked out in the mirror how my beard was doing and definitely saw Abraham Lincoln as a young man. Then, noticing the safety razor lying on the sink by the toothpaste, I lathered my face with soap and in just a few moments had shaved it all off. Rinsed off, I admired the handsome new face looking back at me. My blue eyes were huge and my cheeks smooth like Danny’s. As a matter of fact, I suddenly looked a lot like Rock Hudson.

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Wearing Danny’s shirt felt really strange, like in a dream, as I walked down their unfamiliar hall to the yellow-tiled kitchen. Ethel didn’t look up from mashing the potatoes. Danny was setting out the silverware, and I sat down at the table acting like nothing was different. “Well,” Ethel announced, “supper in a couple minutes. You want some ice tea, hon?” Danny set the glass down in front of me and winked but didn’t notice anything.

Only when he was bringing me a plate with pork chop, gravy-lake of potatoes, and canned corn did surprise flash in his great brown eyes. We both burst out laughing. Ethel turned from the stove to see. “My, but you a good-looking kid. Not like some hereabouts.”

Danny stroked my cheek and whispered, “Kissable.”

The radio was on for the news, so supper was pretty quiet but really tasty. We listened to stuff about bills before Congress and the cost of living and such, and Danny and I kept looking at each other. Ethel finished first and got up from the table announcing, “I got my bridge game. Gotta go.” She quickly cut us some chocolate cake and said, “I’ll clear up before Pop gets home.” Then she trotted off down the hall.

When we were done, Danny got out his gray sweater for himself and loaned me his blue athletic jacket with the A. His clothes gave me a peaceful warm feeling. Walking down the nearly dark street with Danny beside me whistling some tune, I got to thinking about sex again. Imagining my buddy screwing a girl, I asked if he’d ever done it.

“Have you?” he asked suspiciously. Even though I’d asked first, he made me admit I hadn’t. “Well, I did one time last fall,” he confessed as we came up on Walnut Street. “I was staying over with Mickey, and he took me to see this girl over in Foreman. It was only five dollars.” At the corner he moaned, “Boy! I’d sure love to get into Betty Lou’s pants.”

Trying to sound serious, I asked, “Do you think they’d fit?”

Danny laughed weakly and moaned again, “I’m horny as a billygoat.”

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At the gym we sat on a bench outside watching kids arrive. Snuggling my hands in the jacket pockets, I felt something of my buddy about me. Pretty quick I spied four guys from DeQueen I’d seen a lot at Piney Hill. When I called over to them, it took the skinny one whose name I knew was Harry a minute to recognize me, and he laughed, “Hey, where’s your beard? You sure a long ways from home.”

I explained needing to get back to Piney Hill after the game, and the short one with curls on his forehead piped up, “We’ll get you there in two shakes.”

Harry introduced me and Danny around to his friends Henry, Dwayne, and Georgie, the short one. It was Dwayne’s wheels, and he assured me, “I can get up to a hundred easy.” I figured that wouldn’t be necessary.

At first I had to stifle a giggle looking at Henry. With almost no chin, he looked just like Pogo the Possum. Then I reminded myself that folks can’t help the way they look. I felt so sorry for him having to look at Pogo in the mirror, and me lucky enough now to see Rock Hudson.

I caused quite a stir coming into the gym, not only because me being at a game was unheard of, but also of course for being clean-shaven and in Danny’s athletic jacket. Pretty Nyla the Rodeo Queen giggled that I looked sharp, reminding me of the Gillette commercial. Several school chums were impressed, and lots of girls giggled when they saw my smooth face. No more Abraham Lincoln. Mickey hollered from way up the bleachers that I looked real hot. I rather enjoyed all the attention and appreciation.

We climbed a ways up the bleachers and sat down just in time to see the teams come running out onto the court. We all yelled and clapped. Betty Lou was among them, definitely pretty with long legs so smooth and short blue shorts. Danny watched her hungrily and growled.

Once the game got started, I leaned against my buddy and watched half-heartedly as the crowd of girls, ours in blue and DeQueen’s in red, rushed up and down the court. It was almost as exciting as watching ping pong. For long periods I simply rested my eyes enjoying the warmth of Danny’s clothes and him against me.

At halftime, more kids carried on about how good I looked now that I’d shaved off my beard. I joked that I’d been an ugly duckling before and felt really cool suddenly. I’d never seen myself as a hot number before. During the second half, I ignored the constantly bouncing ball

and scurrying girls and dozed for real, floating in the contentment of being with my Danny.

Periodically he'd comment approvingly on parts of Betty Lou's anatomy, and I'd mumble agreement. At some dramatic play on the court, Danny jumped up hollering. I almost fell over on the bench. He sat back down and looked at his big hands lying in his lap, sighing, "I guess it's best you can't stay over tonight, Benny." With a sly smile, he held out his hand palm up and added, "By tomorrow morning I bet there'll be fur all over this."

To comfort my Danny in his romantic woe, I offered, "Well at least you won't be able to see it." It took a moment for that to click, and we laughed. But he was probably right that it was best. I was sure the temptation would be too much for my virtue. Actually I really wanted to sin with Danny, so according the Father Jordan, I'd already sinned. You can't win for losing.

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It wasn't a close game at all. Ours won 64 to 47. Danny and I raced out of the gym and out front for my ride. Dwayne was already waiting right there in a green and white Chevy pickup, and Georgie and the rest were coming right behind us. I gave my buddy back his jacket, and the five of us piled in on the one seat with Georgie as the littlest sitting on Harry's lap.

I was by the window, and leaning close, Danny said, "I sure wish you could've stayed over with me anyway." That made two of us. I rubbed his strong arm resting there in the window and sighed remembering the model airplanes flying around over his bed.

"Fifteen minutes and we be there," Dwayne promised and threw the truck into gear. We raced down the drive and careened so fast onto Maple Street that I quick checked my door was locked. He squealed the truck around all the corners getting to the highway north, the whole time the radio blaring some yucky country song with a corny Hawaiian guitar.

I was a nervous wreck by the time we got out of town. Then we flew low, streaking over the dark rolling landscape toward the river bottoms, passing cars like they were standing still. At Wilton, a wide spot in the road with a gas station, Harry complained about Georgie's bones poking his leg, so the kid scooted over onto my lap. I didn't feel any bones, just soft and warm.

We roared past Mary Nell's house like nobody's business, tearing up the big hill in nothing flat, and sailing past Falls Chapel and Fred's store. The café was still quiet, only a couple cars nosed up to the chain. Sorry when Georgie got off my lap, I jumped out after him and offered the guys free french-fries for the favor.

Daddy was standing by the register when we all came in. He looked at me in puzzlement for a minute and then gave a crooked smile. "Well, look at you," he said and turning toward the kitchen hollered, "Hey, Melvin! Come see what the kid's done now." Maybe there was even something pleased in his voice.

Melvin came out front and was real surprised. He rubbed my cheek and said, "Soft as a baby's ass. You looking quite a stud, Ben." Daddy watched from the register but didn't say anything more. I asked Melvin for four fries for the DeQueen boys and went to see what else they wanted before the rush started.

The next hour or so passed in a tired blur of burgers and drinks and juke box roaring. As soon as I could manage, I begged off home.

All I could think of were those blissful moments with Danny this evening and the things he was probably doing right now with his furry hand. Getting ready for bed, I kept on his striped shirt to feel him close. Then lying there in the dark, I thought about Danny some more, how beautiful he was naked, and my poor weak virtue was once again overcome by sin.

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