

SIN CITY

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So that Monday was the day for my trip to New Orleans. I was going to be riding down with our regular trucker customer Marty in his big rig. He usually made his banana run from Fort Smith down on Tuesdays and back on Wednesdays, but he said he'd go a day early this time so I could have me a day to see my new university. He'd take him a holiday.

Janie made me promise to bring her a souvenir of my trip. Mom told me to go out to number five and say goodbye to Daddy. He'd gone coon-hunting with Joe Ray last night, and they'd been out real late.

I walked out there remembering how just Thursday night last... And there was that awful loneliness for Danny again. When I knocked, Joe Ray opened the door, and the handsome guy didn't have a stitch on. His prick was so long and silky-looking it was hard not to stare. A lump under the rumpled sheets, Daddy groaned, "What time is it anyway?"

"Getting on ten," I said and snuck another look at Joe Ray. Daddy sat up and stretched a bit. I took a couple more steps into the room and added, "I reckon Marty will be along any minute now, and I came out to say bye."

Daddy stretched some more and rumbled his gray hair, and Joe Ray said happily, "We got us five coon for the barbecue."

Suddenly Daddy commanded, "No going into those French Quarters, you hear."

Joe Ray flopped down on the bed and said, "Aw, Lee, the kid needs to see him a good strip-tease." As far as I was concerned, he was showing me a pretty good one himself.

Pointing his finger at me, Daddy repeated, "No French Quarters. And say hi to Marty."

I closed the door behind me, peeking again at Joe Ray's prick. He hollered after me, "Watch out for pickpockets."

Strolling back through the pines to the café, that awful pang of missing Danny came back. For nearly two whole days apart I'd felt a huge hole inside of me. My only consolation was that with him going today to Shreveport, we'd be riding down the same road, Highway 71. Next time we got together, I could tell Danny all about New Orleans.

I sat on the chain by the rosebush and waited idly till Marty's big semi rattled up to park across the road in front of the house. A plump little man always wearing the same dark blue overalls, he climbed down from the truck cab and hollered, "Hi there, kiddo! Let me have a cup of coffee, and we'll roll on to Sin City."

I got Marty his coffee and a couple donuts and asked why he called New Orleans that. He chuckled and said, "You can find just about anything you want down there, son." Since I didn't plan on looking for anything in particular, I figured I could avoid the sin stuff.

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When Marty was done, I climbed into the high cab and tossed my old suitcase behind the seat. Mom, Janie, and Melba stood out front waving. He wiggled around getting his broad backside comfortable on the springy cushion, switched on the engine, and announced, "I'm afraid it'll be a bit bumpy going down empty, Ben, my boy. Best hold on to your hat."

He knew what he was talking about. Going down the Hill to Wulsey Creek nearly shook out my eyeteeth. The bouncing was awesome to behold. Marty joked that it was like riding a camel. As we rumbled through Falls Chapel, he lit up a pretty wooden pipe, and the cab filled with a sweet cherry smell. Crossing the swampy Little River bottoms, I almost got used to the infernal bouncing and was fixing to ask some more about New Orleans when Marty spoke up.

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“I’m gonna have me some fun down there. There’s this one little nigger whore I see...” He must have had second thoughts and went quiet. I tried not to show how shocked I was. “Well,” he said after a moment, “she ain’t exactly a nigger. One of them quadroons, you know, part white.” I was even more shocked. After all, he had a wife and kids back in Fort Smith, and him talking about whores.

Heading south out of Texarkana, I got a bit nervous about leaving everything of my life back there behind us. At least maybe my buddy was in one of the cars passing us on the highway. Then I got excited thinking that this was just like running away down the Mississippi River, only in a bucking banana truck.

We stopped at the Louisiana state line for lunch at a small café back among the trees. It was real modest in comparison to Piney Hill, a tiny white building called Maxine’s with a Dr. Pepper sign for pushing on the door, but they made a good hamburger.

Then everything started changing so fast. We rolled through Shreveport, and I mentally waved to Danny. One after another we passed through towns on the way to Alexandria, and then another string of them. Seeing all these towns and cities was unnerving. There were so many more people than I’d ever imagined, what with us living out there in the backwoods.

Supper was at a little café in Bunkie with bright stainless steel counters. It was pretty near dark when we got to the big city of Baton Rouge and rattled across a high bridge over the mighty Mississippi. In spite of the bouncing, I dozed the rest of the way to New Orleans.

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We came clanging and banging into the sprawling city around ten-thirty. There were so many lights everywhere. Marty drove the truck right straight down Canal Street, a huge wide boulevard with a quaint brown trolley car barreling merrily along on its track between rows of tall palm trees. It was a whole different world from the piney hills of Arkansas.

He let me off at the corner of a street called Baronne and leaning across the wide seat, repeated, “See you at the Luisa Street wharf around ten on Wednesday morning.” Then Marty rattled away, leaving me on the street corner in the middle of the city all by myself—except for a few folks walking here or there. This was the first time ever for me to be totally on my own, all alone in a strange place, and I loved the feeling of possibility in the fragrant air. It sure seemed muggy. All around, huge buildings loomed overhead in the night sky, way taller than any tree.

I quick checked my pocket for my wallet and then grabbed up my suitcase. Just down the block was the brightly lit sign for the Hotel New Orleans, where I’d written to reserve a room. It was a big place of several storeys with a comfy lobby and red leather chairs. As I walked up to the nice leather counter with brass studs, an old man came out of the back room.

When I told him my name, he looked at me over his glasses with a bored expression and said he’d never heard of me. I almost panicked, but he pushed a pad and pen at me and said, “Just sign in, kid. We got plenty o’ rooms.”

I gratefully filled out the form and paid the \$8.40 for the two nights. The old man gave me the key for room 509 and walked away into his back room without another word. There wasn’t even one of those bell-boys like in Little Rock. I wondered why he wasn’t more polite or friendly to his customers. He didn’t even tell me where to go. Maybe that was the way city people were, I figured, and quickly found a rickety elevator.

Even with a really high ceiling, my room turned out to be not much bigger than the bed, not much to compare with our motel cabins at home and costing more than a dollar a night more. After the exhausting trip, I ignored the heat and jumped onto the strange lumpy bed. I lay there sweating and thinking how my Danny was also sleeping somewhere else tonight—not in his

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wonderful bed under his model airplanes. Though the hot mattress seemed to be bouncing like the banana truck, I passed right out.

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I woke up on sweaty sheets, and the morning felt just as darned hot. The hotel room had a strange musty smell. In the dinky, dim bathroom I shaved and before I was done, started sweating buckets. In the drugstore on the corner I ordered hotcakes for breakfast. There were lots of Negroes in the store and even some black women working the counter. The hotcakes weren't anywhere near good as Melba's, and the coffee was stronger than I'd ever tasted.

I wandered along Canal Street, looking in the big store windows and admiring the tall palm trees. Then, using the map Tulane sent me, I went down to the corner with St. Charles Avenue and caught the Freret Street bus for my nine-thirty appointment.

On the bus white folks were filling all the seats up front, but farther back where only Negroes seemed to be sitting, there were some open ones. I walked on back and sat beside an older black lady with kinky gray hair. She smiled at me nicely, and when I smiled at the other Negro folks around, they smiled back.

Excited, I told the black lady I was going to go to Tulane, and she said, "That's nice, sonny." I peered past her out the window at the big houses and dark green oak trees along the street. She asked, "You from up north?"

"Yes, ma'm," I said, "I'm from up north in Arkansas."

She chuckled, probably thinking I was a hillbilly, and yanked a cord over the window that rang a bell up front. Then she stood up holding onto the metal post and said, "Well, here's my stop. So good luck and God bless you, boy." When she climbed off the bus, I sat there feeling real welcome to New Orleans.

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In the Housing Office at Tulane, I met Dean Wentworth, a short balding man. He shook my hand and said, "Hello, Ben. Good trip?" Smiling warmly, he tugged on his left earlobe. No call to tell him my innards were all shook up from riding in an empty banana truck, so I politely allowed as how it was fine.

Then for some reason he tugged on the skin at his throat and asked, "Do you have any preferences in a roommate?" Not that I'd thought about it, but I told him no jocks. Otherwise, just somebody smart. He laughed, "That won't be hard to find at Tulane, Ben."

So he took me off to see the dorms, first to Irby House and then to Phelps just like it across a quadrangle. They were great big dormitories with outside walkways around the floors, but inside the rooms it was awful dark for my taste.

Next, we walked down the street past McAlister Auditorium. You could tell it was semester break because there were so few guys around. There were just two in white shorts with tennis rackets walking ahead of us along the shady sidewalk. The third dormitory turned out to be the brand-new, seven-storey Robert Sharp Hall. The tennis players turned that way as well, and we caught up with them waiting at the elevator.

One was a homely brown-haired fellow name of Charlie Crockett from Virginia, and the other was a dark, good-looking guy oddly named France Cone. When he shook my hand, France said something I didn't catch, and so he repeated, "Shalom. That's Hebrew for peace." The Dean explained that he was an international student from Israel. The two of them, so tan in their white shorts, really impressed me, both sophomores.

They got off on the fourth floor, and the Dean and I rode on to the top for the view from the roof. It was so high up you could see out over the auditorium with its domed roof and tall

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bamboo all around, the new University Center across the way, and other big campus buildings down the street to the south. To the north loomed the huge bulk of the Sugar Bowl stadium, and everywhere the green, green trees.

Dean Wentworth saw how pleased I was and said, “All this will be yours, Ben, when you’re a Tulane greenie.” That’s what they called freshmen, it seemed, but I thought it sounded too much like “wienie.” He added, “And you’ll wear a beanie.” As far as I was concerned, that wasn’t going to happen. No wienie-beanies. Still I could tell I was going to like living here a lot. Then came the painful thought that I’d be living here without my buddy.

We rode the elevator back down to the fourth floor, and at the far end of the hall, the Dean showed me room 401 for example, bright and sunny with two neat desks by the window, narrow beds, and huge closets. This was what I had in mind. It was wild looking out the window over the tops of trees.

Down the hall we looked into the bathroom and heard water splashing. France and Charlie were taking showers. Below the tan lines their bottoms were white as their shorts. France waved to me. He sure was handsome with a body like a Greek statue—and he was circumcised! It was comforting to think there’d be some Catholic boys around. The bathroom itself was wonderful, tiled all over with sinks and showers.

With my rooming situation settled so quickly and easily, I crossed the street to the University Center and in the Snack Bar had a grilled cheese and ice tea. One side of the Snack Bar was a huge glass wall running alongside a swimming pool, the most enormous I ever saw. Another great reason to feel excited. At the Student Employment Office, they thought that with my food service background they could find me something good for my student job.

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Following my map, I crossed Freret Street and walked across the pretty campus. It was quiet and peaceful with huge old trees and buildings of different styles with signs out front for History, Theater, Architecture... I imagined all the boys who’d be rushing back and forth to classes this fall and got excited about being a freshman, even if called a greenie-wienie.

Right behind Architecture was the Chemistry building where I’d be busy. It was made of brownish stone with ornaments around the windows and roof. Don’t ask me why I picked that subject for my major, but the department was apparently happy to have the backwoods brainiac. The Chairman already wrote me that I’d be his lab assistant. I sat on the building’s broad steps out of the sun to breathe. Now it was getting to be hard down hot.

Once rested, I made my way around the gigantic granite Gibson Hall, across St. Charles Avenue and its trolley tracks, and through the fancy gates of Audubon Park. Past a lovely fountain with a statue, I came to a bayou meandering among palms and live oaks, and beyond it a golf course very green. The road curved to the right down a shady avenue of monster oaks with long, curving branches. Several bicycles passed me by with a quiet whoosh.

How ancient this city was! A heap sight older even than Mickey’s granddaddy’s place. It suddenly seemed as though I’d walked here before in this shade, and I felt immensely at home. It was an effort to remember anything of Arkansas at all. Surely, I thought, Danny would like living in such a beautiful city as this. We could make his first dream happen. I resolved when I saw him again, I’d just go on and beg him to come with me. Maybe I could change his mind.

My goal was to get to the Zoo off Magazine Street on the other end of the Park, and of course I saw every strange beast in the place. It was my first time for a real elephant and giraffe, all the rare sheep and bears, fabulous birds and snakes, monkeys with little faces so like people, and an actual walrus! My little menagerie was pretty darned pitiful in comparison. I kept

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reminding myself to remember each wonderful thing to tell Danny about when we get home.

After the Zoo, I was horribly thirsty. It was scorching hot, and I'd sweat more buckets. A ways off under a giant live oak was a Sno-Cone cart, and behind it stood a boy about my age, unbelievably good-looking with lots of wavy black hair and big dark eyes. If he were a girl, he'd have been even more beautiful than my Annette.

While he packed my cone, I watched his delicate fingers stained red from the flavoring, and he took my money without even looking at me. I sat up on a long drooping branch of the live oak with my cherry Sno-Cone and watched the beautiful boy lean idly on his elbows gazing wistfully out into the distance.

In the back part of the Zoo, I'd noticed some willow woods beyond the fence. Figuring that the Mississippi had to be right on the other side of them, I discovered a way around and struggled through the wild thickets to a track that sure enough led to the river bank. The brown water stretched away at least a mile wide, like a big lake, and an enormous ship glided upstream. The flood lapped along the muddy bank at my very feet. Slipping off a shoe, I dipped my toes in the water so I could tell Danny I'd done it.

The afternoon was so perfect, and I loved it all, the dorms, the campus, the park, the Zoo—and even these willow woods on the river. I rejoiced that soon this would be my world. As much as I loved our Piney Hill, the change couldn't come soon enough.

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My supper in the dining room of the Hotel New Orleans, a fancy place with white tablecloths and colored glass candle-holders, was pork chops with applesauce and peas. Marty had told me to save \$2.50 for the cab ride to the wharf, and after paying for dinner I had just enough left. Problem was in the morning I'd noticed some movie called "South Pacific" playing at the Saenger Theater just up Canal Street. So I dug out of my wallet pocket the check for \$5 from the National Society of Arts and Letters, third prize for my poem "Sonnet at Nine." The same old man at the desk acted real suspicious, but he cashed it for me anyway.

I bought a bag of popcorn and an orange soda and took a seat way down in front of the huge theater. The ceiling was rounded, dark blue like the night sky with stars sprinkled all over it like Danny's splendor of stars. Around the walls were fancy pedestals with Greek-looking statues like around a temple. Strangely, it felt a lot cooler inside the theater.

The name of the movie had intrigued me with its hint of tropical islands. When the grand curtain pulled open, I sure wasn't ready for what I saw and heard. The scenery was spectacular and the songs so inspiring. I'd never forget that gorgeous island with the sea waves all around, Valley High. It was exactly like my vision of paradise. That song "Some Enchanted Evening" was a perfect romantic dream of Annette.

At the end of the movie show, drunk with emotion, I staggered back out onto Canal Street. It was quite a shock coming from the South Pacific into the clatter of this big city, and out here on the street it was still hot as heck, even this late in the evening. There were mostly black folks walking on the sidewalk, way more even than I saw in Little Rock, but I didn't let it bother me. Lots of them smiled back at me.

I headed down the street toward the river and at intersections peeked down the streets into the French Quarter. It looked dark and quiet with balconies on the taller houses. At Bourbon Street I saw where the party must be some blocks down, all bright signs and lots of cars. But I trudged virtuously onward past more streets, Royal and Chartres, and came to a huge Roman temple building on the corner of Decatur with shadows among its soaring columns and carved capitals. It was a dreamlike vision of another world and time.

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Beyond that I came to a walkway down to a free ferryboat running across the Mississippi. Leaving the passenger lounge area, I went down to stand at the broad bow. The boat surged through the dark water and black night, and there was a mysterious, sweet, muddy fragrance on the river wind that helped cool me off. Far away on the distant bank lights glimmered.

For the ride back, I went up on the Observation Deck and stood with scattered people at a railing for a beautiful view of the city, a pretty church with a tall steeple all lit up behind a square, and other lights like jewels. There was the soft sound of the water splashing and that fragrance on the wind again. If only my Danny were here with me. He'd never been on a boat big as this ferry. How could I possibly describe it for him?

When we were about halfway across the river, a dark-haired guy came up to the railing beside me and asked where I was going. I said I was just out sight-seeing, and we got to talking. He said he was a Cajun, first one I ever saw, name of Andre. He seemed real nice and interested in talking, but the way he kept touching me on my shoulders and arms made me wonder if maybe he was a pickpocket. Without him seeing, I checked for my thin billfold.

Approaching the shore, Andre said he had to go back down to his car and asked if I wanted to come over to his house. I said I had a nice hotel room and was leaving early in the morning, and he wished me nice trip home. As the ferry was pulling into the dock, I saw off to the left an honest-to-God paddlewheel steamboat. It was hard to believe it was real.

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Walking back up Canal Street, when I came to Bourbon again, I wondered what kind of trouble I could get into simply walking down the street and taking a gander at goings-on. At the end of the second block at Bienville Street was a bar with a crowd milling around, and you could see into the back where a band of black men was playing some awful loud Dixieland jazz, good as the stuff on the Lawrence Welk Show.

Farther along was a dark, falling-down place called the Old Absinthe House. The rickety roof looked like any minute it'd fall on your head. Meanwhile the sidewalks were fairly full of mostly white folks, and everybody with drinks in their hands and acting drunk. I'd dodge out of their way to be polite and often step down into the street with the constant stream of cars.

On the corner of Conti Street was a place called Madame Francine's that sounded like a whorehouse, but the pictures along the walls showed dancing ladies covered in feathers and glitter and not much else. One poster was for Jada, an almost naked lady wrapped up in a huge boa constrictor. I'd never thought of dancing with a snake before.

A man in a dark vest with a pointy beard was on the steps of Madame Francine's, and as I passed, he called, "Hey, stud! Come on in and see some fine ass." I hurried on but glanced in the open door at a lady up on a stage dancing with bare breasts and rubbing her thighs lewdly. If that was a strip-tease, I definitely preferred Joe Ray's version.

In the next blocks with more bars and loud jazz bands, there were still folks staggering around everywhere. I reckoned business was pretty good for a Tuesday night. Passing a house across the street with a pretty lacey iron balcony, through the tall windows upstairs I was impressed to see glittery crystal chandeliers and big gold-framed pictures on the walls. The smell of beer was almost overwhelming, and it was hotter than blazes for being so late in the evening. I figured this must be what a sweat bath feels like.

At St. Peter Street I stopped to lean against a wall and watch the flood of folks of all sorts and shapes. I'd never seen so many in one place before. Across Bourbon on the other corner was a big bar with a sign for Dixie's Bar of Music. While I was looking at it, two very stylishly dressed, handsome young men came out, followed by a girl in tight black slacks and a silky

yellow blouse. Her black hair was teased out full, and she walked with her hips moving slinky. She was incredibly beautiful.

They crossed Bourbon and then came across St. Peter toward me. Coming near, the girl looked straight at me with a smile that made my knees go weak. Like lightning, I recognized the Sno-Cone boy, sure as shooting! He had the same exquisite eyes. The two fancy boys looked me over like maybe sizing me up for a fight, and he, (or was it she?), called brightly to me, "Hi there, handsome."

I stood there gawking, dumbfounded, and as they passed, one of the boys said, "Oh, Mary, don't go wrecking butch numbers on the street."

"But it's so easy," she-he, Mary, replied with another flirtatious look at me and walked away as sexily as Marilyn Monroe. Frankly, I did feel wrecked. Mary was absolutely, positively gorgeous, prettier than Annette by a long shot. I wondered if he-she was maybe one of those "morphodites" Danny once told me about. I couldn't wait to tell him about seeing one.

Panting in the crazy heat, I continued up the street past St. Ann Street, and the bars and foot traffic thinned way out. It was mostly just houses now with front steps sticking out on the sidewalk. I picked somebody's stoop near the corner of Dumaine to plop down and cool off. Kitty-corner across from me was a dark bar with a sign saying Lafitte's, like the pirate.

There were still folks walking up and down the sidewalk, but lots fewer. If anybody looked at me, I'd smile at them and say hi. But it got no cooler. Like doing a striptease myself, I took off my T-shirt and dried my face off with it. Shortly a guy who'd passed by a while before came back and nodded again at my hi. He stopped and asked, "Got a light?"

"Sorry," I said, "don't smoke."

The young crew-cut guy smiled curiously at my hairy chest and asked, "Busy tonight?"

The way I was draped over those front steps, I couldn't imagine why he'd think I might be. "Not so as I've noticed," I replied.

When he said he was Harry, I told him my name. Meanwhile he looked again at my chest with a suspicious expression that made me think I ought to put my shirt back on. Next thing he asked if I was looking for some fun. "I already had lots of fun today," I said. "I went to the Zoo and to a movie and on a ferry ride."

Harry leaned up against the house beside me and asked, "And what about tonight?"

"I'm about ready to hit the sack," I said. Wiping my face with my shirt again, I groaned, "I don't think I've ever been this hot."

"You do look really hot," he chuckled and with a nudge, asked, "How'd you like to come over to my place? It's air-conditioned."

I couldn't get over all this southern hospitality, two perfect strangers inviting me to their place. "Thanks anyway," I replied, "but I got me a place to sleep."

"How about I buy you a drink then?" Harry asked, eyeing my pants now like looking for something in my pockets.

Finally realizing he was a pickpocket, I hopped up from the stoop and said, "Thanks kindly, but I best be going. Nice to meet you, Harry."

"Before you go, Ben," he said, "how much you want for a trick?" I laughed that I didn't know any tricks and headed off down the street putting my damp shirt back on. Did I look like I was in a circus? Or a magician? He seemed normal enough, but he must have been a tad touched in the head. Good thing Joe Ray warned me about this kind of stuff.

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Virtuously ignoring the stripper bars, I trudged back down Bourbon Street to Canal where

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the trolleys still rumbled along and returned to my hotel feeling very pleased with the day's adventures. Tonight I noticed a fan way up in the dark by the ceiling and turned it on. Tired but still too hot to sleep, I lay naked across the lumpy bed while the lazy fan simply moved hot breezes around the room.

Sweltering, I tried imagining Annette and me on Valley High, on that white beach with tall palms, but the fantasy just didn't work. Try as I might, I couldn't picture my darling in a bathing suit. As a matter of fact, now that I hadn't seen her for several months, I didn't even know what Annette really looked like anymore. Now she seemed almost like a paper doll for me to dress up however I wanted, no more real than that tropical isle.

Instead, I took to pondering on the things I'd seen today and suddenly remembered that fantastic Roman temple building and the look of that pretty lit-up church from the ferry boat. I imagined Danny standing with me at the railing, the river wind in our faces. Then somehow *I'm dealing out cards to some strange guys, and my fingers are stained red.*

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My breakfast was scrambled eggs in the drugstore on the corner again, where I also bought Janie her souvenir, a fancy spoon with the Cathedral of St. Louis on it. Then the cab ride to the Luisa Street wharf only cost two dollars, maybe because he drove so fast. But I still got to see some pretty old houses with fancy woodwork all around their eaves and iron railings.

A huge red ship called Piraeus was at the dock with gangplanks and cranes, and some swarthy men on board waved to me. Marty's truck sat in a line off to left at a loading dock. He was nowhere to be seen. I got up on a huge crate and watched the conveyor belt bringing enormous stalks of green bananas up out of the hold of another ship farther down the wharf.

A line of Negro men picked up the bananas and hauled them to the trucks, struggling under the huge stalks balanced on their shoulders on pads or folded paper sacks. One was a handsome young guy who was real well-built. Sweat glistened down his bare black chest and darkened the waistband of his pants. Watching him toil in the amazing heat trudging back and forth made me feel terribly sad that some folks have to earn their living working so hard.

When Marty showed up, I hopped in the truck, and we rolled right on out of there. With the full load of bananas, it didn't bounce at all.

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