

THE RACE

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Our deaf white cat Smudge woke me up by walking over my head. He'd come in the window by my bed, open for what breezes could be caught in the hot June night. Soon, for the dead of summer, we'd move the mattresses out into the backyard so you could at least breathe. It was nearly seven, so I got right up. Usually I was up at five to go to work in the café, but today Mom was working for me. Daddy was letting me go pick peaches with cousin Lew, who was snoring on the sofa, sprawled on his back in a knot of sheet.

My cousin, who was younger than me by a year, Lew was visiting from Wisconsin for three weeks to work on the peach harvest. Lithe and tanned with a head of black curls and big brown eyes, Lew reminded me of Kenny on Bandstand or that dreamy Sal Mineo. When I went over and touched his chest to wake him, he stretched and groaned sensuously. He opened his dark eyes and wished me good morning. Then he sighed, "Well, another day at work."

He'd been staying with us something over a week now, just about every day working at the orchard, and I was afraid he was getting bored. At night we were stuck here on Piney Hill with each other and any kids who came to hang out at the café. Although Lew said he was wildly in love with his girlfriend Joannie in Wisconsin, he still flirted a lot with our local beauties, which didn't seem to me all that faithful. He was a Catholic too, and it was great having him go to church with us the other Sunday. On the Saturday before I'd taken him on a tour of my woodsy empire, pond, creek, and grotto. He said he could feel love all over the place.

While I waited for Lew to finish in the bathroom, I poked around in the front yard pulling grass out of my iris bed. Besides the excitement of going with Lew today, I was all wound up because at last the awful three weeks were over. Danny was going to be back from Shreveport by now. I'd expected a phone call Monday evening and sat around waiting. Yesterday I'd asked the operator twice for his number in Ashdown, but it just rang and rang. I figured he was bound to call up today while I'm off at the orchard with Lew.

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Lew drove us in the old Ford to Mr. Bledsoe's peach orchard a few miles up the road toward Lockjaw near the ancient falling-down schoolhouse. He took me over to the packing sheds to talk to the foreman. Behind the sheds was a beautiful old barn with amazing weathered wood, and behind that was a stretch of dark pine woods. The orchards were off to both sides of us, bright green and gold with all the fat fruit.

Along with several other folks from hereabouts, we set to some serious picking from the drooping branches. Pretty soon it got too hot for me, and I put my shirt back on so as not to get burnt. Not much chance to suntan this summer what with working nearly every day. Lew was already brown as a berry and didn't worry. I liked the way his sweat ran down his chest.

On a short break in the shade inside the old barn, he told me more about his life back home in Oshkosh, and I asked him how he thought this life of mine here in Arkansas compared. Lew said, "It's real nice with all these pretty woods, but Uncle Lee sure is strict on you."

I sighed, "I'm the Prisoner of Piney Hill." We both sort of laughed, me because I knew before not too long I'd escape and go to wonderful New Orleans, and live in a great dormitory with hundreds of other guys—in that city of palm trees and oaks that don't lose their leaves.

Peach-picking made the time pass pleasantly, if ever hotter. It didn't hold a candle to the heat in New Orleans. We hit the well-pump for a drink and ran into a big Lockjaw kid named Bo who told us about a hayride tonight from the schoolhouse at eight thirty. Lew got real

excited and ordered me to figure out some dates for us.

Hardly the right person for that job, I wondered frantically what to do. Well, maybe Iris would like to date Lew now that she and Sammy had broken up. But just about the only local girl I knew who wasn't going steady was Pam, whom I'd seen at Paraclifta on graduation day.

Lew insisted he'd ask Daddy to let us go, and at lunch he called from Mr. Bledsoe's house. He said we wanted to go on the hayride and then, to my surprise, added that we wanted to go swimming after work. Daddy apparently said yes and some more. I was dumbfounded. Lew handed me the receiver and said, "Your turn."

I asked the operator for the Barkers' number, and having seen my neat cousin before in the café, Iris jumped at the chance. Calling the Whitlows' number, I probably stunned Pam coming right out and asking her for a date to the hayride. She quickly replied, "I'd really like to, Benny." Also stunned, I hung the receiver back up on the wall.

After lunch of Melba's ham sandwiches eaten also in the shady old barn, the afternoon turned into a real scorcher. I got to thinking how my working in the café was pretty easy in comparison and felt a lot like that beautiful Negro guy hauling stalks of bananas off the ship. Picking bravely on, I kept wondering if Danny had called me yet. That made me too anxious, so I started worrying instead about the coming date with Pam, my very first date. Actually if it wasn't for the numberless peaches to pick, placing each fuzzy, golden fruit carefully in the bushel baskets, I'd have gone crazy from stress.

At five o'clock the bunch of us peach-pickers gathered around the porch for old Mr. Bledsoe to pay us each twelve dollars for the eight hours. That was twice what I earned for twelve or thirteen hours at the café, so all the sweating and fuzzi itch was well worth it.

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Lew drove the jalopy out the gravel road to McKellar's Crossing, a ford across the shallows in the Cossatot. A rutted track wandered off across the field beyond. If you walked a ways downstream, you came out of the bushes at the swimming hole. There were no rocks or stobs anywhere in the broad pool about fifteen feet deep in most parts, and a great rope swing hung from the branch of a sycamore on the bank. Lew jumped out of his clothes before I even had my shoes off and dived into the water.

Even as good a swimmer as I was, I had to admit that Lew was better, a lot stronger. I lost some quick races back and forth, and then we just splashed and horsed around for a good while with many cannonballs from the rope swing. I felt so happy having this companionship in my prison, even if for only the next week and some. Then we climbed out on the bank and lay down by a towering hickory tree to dry off. Lew's prick looked maybe bigger than mine, more like Danny's, and circumcised, of course.

The late afternoon sun slanted through the treetops across the river, their shadows lengthening across the water. A cicada began its loud, whirring song down the stream. Not a ripple disturbed the bright reflection of a few clouds on the still surface of the swimming hole. Lew broke the silence with, "I guess it can get awful lonesome, huh?"

I grunted, "Not many girlfriends in this neck of the woods."

Lew laughed and said, "Why not? You're so sexy with all this hair." He petted the hair on my chest. "Why don't you date one of these cute chicks you know?"

Wondering why he'd even ask that, I said, "You know, Lew... Catholics aren't supposed to get involved with non-Catholics."

Lew guffawed. "Benny, that's so old-fashioned! Nobody thinks that anymore. I mean, Joannie's even a Lutheran."

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 11. THE RACE

I lay there on the riverbank like an astounded fish out of water. Had my whole life been because of a mistake? I protested, “But Father Jordan said we...”

“That was just him,” Lew consoled. “You gotta watch out for the Jesuits.” Boy, I was so confused by now—and outraged—that I couldn’t speak. Lew patted my hairs again and said, “Too bad you thought that, Cuz. Some of those girls at the café got the hots for you, sexy guy.”

That just made it worse. I didn’t even know... Of course, Lew was the sexy one with his smooth, tanned chest. I couldn’t keep from looking at his prick, so much like mine, lolling there on his thigh. I asked, “Have you ever screwed a girl?”

“Plenty of times,” Lew replied emphatically. “Joannie’s not even my first. Back in tenth I went sparking with a girl named Sherry and fucked her like crazy.”

Impressed, I still had to wonder how many times was plenty. Since my worldly cousin would definitely know, I asked, “What’s it feel like?”

“There’s nothing like it!”

That wasn’t very helpful at all, and I seriously suspected it wouldn’t actually be all that much different from me making love with Danny. At that thought I got anxious again if my buddy had called me yet. Trying not to think about it, I asked Lew, “How do you get a girl to let you stick it in her?”

Lew laughed out loud and said, “Let you? Benny, if a girl wants it, she’ll even help you. You just better be ready.” What he meant was clear enough, but I wondered how you’d manage to be ready right on time. Then Lew pulled his watch out of his pants pocket and exclaimed, “Uh-oh! Uncle Lee said for us to be back by six thirty. We only got five minutes.”

Being late always drove Daddy wild. Scarcely into our pants, we piled into the Ford and splashed across the river, bouncing along the old track, a shortcut I knew to the old highway. It bounced so bad I banged my head on the roof. The track came out on the gravel road behind the Barkers’ store, and we roared away raising a plume of dust behind us. I sure hoped Daddy wouldn’t throw a fit. Maybe he wouldn’t slug me, not in front of Lew.

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It was only a couple minutes late when we got home. As we rolled over the lip of the Hill, Lew remarked again on how beautiful our place was, the buildings with red roofs and white fences and the tall clustering pines. We pulled up in front of the house, and I worried because the Desoto was gone. Surely Mom wasn’t still working after all day long.

We ran straight across the road and found Melvin leaning on the register with only two parties, both eating happily. He sighed dramatically, “Two more to feed.”

I nervously asked where Daddy was. Melvin chuckled, “Your dad was all antsy about you getting back, so I tell him I’ll mind the store. He’s just gone over to Lefty’s for a haircut.”

I asked if there was a phone call for me from Danny, but not that Melvin knew of. We sat in number four, and he took our orders like customers, a barbecue plate for me with ice tea, and three cheeseburgers and a chocolate shake for Lew. Then I went and checked for any note maybe by the register, only to be disappointed.

While we ate, Melvin sat on the stool across the way and said, “I hear you boys going on a hayride.” I told him we were going with Iris and Pam. Melvin said, “Well, I’m proud to hear you got yourself a date. ‘Bout time. I been telling your dad you young bucks need to go out and have some fun. Looks like maybe he heard what I’m talking.”

After supper Lew went to feed the zoo for me, and I took over so Melvin could go home to check on his crippled mother. About a quarter after seven who came in the door but my old pal Mickey on his way to summer school in Arkadelphia. Since business was quiet, I sat beside

him at the counter while he ate a BLT sandwich.

Finishing a bite, he said, "I saw Danny Monday afternoon at the department store."

Joy exploded in my head. "So he did get back!" I exclaimed. Then came the horror. "He said he was going to call me when he—"

With a serious expression, Mickey cut me off. "Danny asked me to tell you bye." He took a suck of his root beer, and I gripped the counter, trying to comprehend. About to take another bite of his sandwich, he said, "Him and Lester Purtell and Dickey Mason just upped and decided all of a sudden to enlist in the Navy. They left yesterday morning to the induction center in Texarkana. He was real sorry not having time to see you, Benny."

My mouth opened and closed silently. That was why the phone rang and rang in their empty house. Those little airplanes... The way Danny stood there under the tree waving his three fingers in goodbye. Now I'd never get to tell my buddy about New Orleans, about the steamboat, about the... I wouldn't see him again! Danny was gone! Feeling utterly lost, I closed my eyes and spun blindly on the counter stool—instead of shrieking.

Mickey must have thought I was taking it okay because he changed the subject. "Benny, old pal, you're going to be my model now in college. I want to be a know-it-all too." In spite of my anguish, I was almost amused by the left-handed compliment. That was when a trucker came in needing some supper. When I got back to Mickey, he was done with his sandwich. We gave each other big hugs and best wishes for colleges, and he took off for Arkadelphia.

Feeling in no way okay, I bumped into the cash register and staggered back to the monster dishwasher, where I wept on its battered metal. I kept seeing my Danny in a sailor suit on the deck of a ship way out on the ocean. Margie came out of the kitchen and asked what the matter was. It took me a bit to calm down enough to mumble that my friend was gone into the Navy. She patted my shoulder sympathetically, and that helped some.

When Lew got back from the feeding, he tried to help by playing some songs on the juke box and chattering about our upcoming dates. All that was the furthest thing from my mind, but for his sake I tried to act excited. Presently Daddy showed up with his new haircut, a lot shorter. It didn't make him look so bald in the front.

Coming in the door and seeing us on the stools, he gave a fishing buddy smile which I halfway thought might include me if only for being right next to Lew. Then he looked right at me with that smile and said, "Glad to see you survived a day of real work, Ben."

I had no idea how to respond to his possible compliment, and there was no way I could smile back, not now that Danny was gone. Lew and I thanked him for letting us go on the hayride and took off across the road to get ready.

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Getting dressed for the date, I was still feeling depressed about Danny and could hardly talk with Lew, who kept asking me about Iris, as if he didn't remember meeting the beautiful girl in the café. I just repeated something about cute and sweet. When we took off in the old Ford down the Hill, in a lame attempt to keep my spirits up, I told him we must look like Archie and Jughead. Lew laughed, "I get Veronica."

It was mostly dark by the time we got to the Barkers' store and picked up Iris. I was impressed how Lew got to know her right away with jokes and chatter, but I didn't feel very much like laughing with them. At Pam's place on the edge of Lockjaw, she came out looking shy with her curly brown hair fixed up real nice and a cute plaid skirt. I got the feeling she didn't care for Iris at all from that tone in her voice saying hi.

On the short ride to the schoolhouse, I sat quietly with Pam in the back seat, still too

miserable to think about her. I walked like a machine with them over to the far end of the ball field where the hayride was forming up, the waxing moon lighting our way. Lew suggested we climb up on the back of the wagon away from the main bunch of kids sitting at the front.

Nestling down on the haystack with Pam, I was overwhelmed by the irony. Here we were in this magical, silvery light of the moon, exactly the romantic scene I fantasized so often and childishly about Annette. But here I was with Pam without the slightest interest in being romantic. Truth be told, I still wanted to cry my eyes out.

Lew and Iris lay back on the hay talking close. I tried to talk about something with Pam, about how sad it was to graduate and see our friends go away. That led to me telling her how my very best pal Danny had gone and joined the Navy.

Pam didn't seem to appreciate the importance of that monstrous fact. She said, "It's really great you going off so far away to college. And such a big university." I managed a spark of enthusiasm about that and proceeded to tell her about the New Orleans trip. Since I couldn't tell Danny, I tried to tell Pam everything—even about seeing the morphodite. She was shocked.

Nearby Lew and Iris were making out. I figured they were 'frenching' like Danny and I did when... Looking at them, I felt a sob swell up in my chest. You could hear the camp songs the others were singing up front. Pam lay silently beside me, expectantly.

I couldn't stand it anymore and suggested, "Maybe we ought to go up front and sing with the others." Pam straightened her skirt, glanced at Lew and Iris hugging, and said okay. As we got up and made our way through the hay past them, I saw Lew's hand squeezing Iris's breast.

More than a dozen kids were up there singing spirituals and fun stuff like "Do Your Ears Hang Low?" We joined in, and the singing helped distract me from my woe for a while—until they started in on that beautiful "Whispering Hope." When we got to the part about "And he walks with me, and he talks with me, and he tells me I am his own," I started crying, but no one said anything, probably thinking I was religiously inspired.

When the clumping horses finally brought us back to the schoolhouse, Lew and Iris climbed down off the wagon looking ruffled with hay in their hair, but neither of them seemed the least bit embarrassed. Our walk to the car and ride back to Pam's house was real quiet. Up on her porch, she squeezed my hand and said goodnight and thanks for a fun time. I lied and said I'd had fun too. While Lew walked Iris up to her door and kissed her for a good long time, I sat in the jalopy and cried some more.

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On the way home Lew entertained me, talking in some detail about how much he enjoyed his date with Iris. When he said he particularly liked her tits, I giggled, embarrassed. Unable to relate, I offered nothing about Pam. He remarked generously, "You guys sing good though." Then he groaned and added, "Boy, do I need to get laid." In my misery I got an image of a huge hen laying Lew like an egg, and I took to laughing wildly and clucking like a chicken. He didn't know what to make of me.

Back on Piney Hill we poked our heads into the café to tell Daddy we were home. Across the highway the house was dark with Mom and Janie already asleep. We fell onto our bed and couch, and Lew yawned enormously. After our goodnights, it grew very quiet, the moonlight pouring in through the window like silent music in the warm night.

I lay naked on my bed wide awake, tormented by the thought that Danny was gone. My memory drew me back to our night of making love, and the tears came again. That thought of Danny's wonderful body against mine got me excited, and then I couldn't think of anything else. Desperate, I decided to get up and go out the side door into the night and find somewhere to wail

and moan to my heart's content without bothering anybody.

I pulled on my shoes and tiptoed past Lew, who stirred slightly on his couch. I about jumped out of my skin when he asked, "Where you going?"

"Outside," I said. "I can't sleep."

"Yeh," Lew sighed and sat up. "I'm too horny too." Seeing I was naked, Lew kicked off his underpants, and I told him to put his shoes on too. Walking out into the bright side yard with me, Lew squealed with glee at being naked. Then we ran out into the silvery pasture and cavorted like fauns in the moonlight with Lobo leaping at our sides. It was a perfect way to take my mind off my misery, even if it did remind me sadly of that naked walk with Danny.

After this lunatic exercise, we finally got tired and jumped down into the Indian well, flopping on the bed of soft old leaves. We'd barely settled in when Lew said he wanted to come and suggested we race to see who could do it first.

When I protested about mortal sin, he said again that Father Jordan was just a weirdo Jesuit. His priest was a Franciscan and didn't want to hear about him beating off, just about when he fucked Joannie. His priest just told him not to do it too much, which he figured meant no more than once a day.

I was flabbergasted things could be so different and yet the same Holy Mother Church. But come to think of it, I'd never seen anything in writing about sex being a sin. There was that set of seven cardinal sins in the catechism, but no catalog of the mortal ones. Had I just been boring Father Jordan all these years with my impure touches? But he was the one told me they were sinful in the first place.

No longer feeling certain what to think, my supposed virtue quickly failed the test, and our race ended in a tie, more or less. Too close to call. We fell asleep there in the leaves and woke up some hours later with the moon almost down. Arguing that it was tomorrow already, Lew wanted to race again. So we did. I won.

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