

SOME TAIL

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Well, here it was a week later, a week of wonderful companionship with my great cousin Lew. Okay, our companionship was just in the evenings after we were both done working, but it was such a relief after the days spent brooding over Danny being gone. In the long light evenings we'd walk in the woods or mess around in the old gravel pit, and then after dark we'd hang out at the café with the local kids. Iris stopped by pretty often, and while Lew sat with her in a booth making time, I'd play pinballs to waste mine. A couple times he managed to sneak off for a while with her and go parking, or as he called it, sparking.

In the evenings during our bumming around, we'd usually find us somewhere private in the woods to, as Lew called it, jazz off. He didn't want to miss out on his daily allowance. It was such fun horsing around with him that I frequently laughed out loud. I told him how Danny called it "playing on the skin flute," and Lew showed me some fingering moves that felt like spectacular music. But they always made it get over too quick.

We never touched each other or hugged when we had our races or jam sessions, another of Lew's funny terms. Those things were something I'd only do with my very best buddy. As handsome as he was, I couldn't even imagine kissing Cousin Lew like I did with Danny. He felt more like a brother, being a blood relation and all. Jazzing off with him was nothing like making love with Danny, but whenever I did it, I'd usually be thinking about Danny and me kissing. It made the memory seem so vivid.

Last weekend, Lew traded Sunday for Saturday off from picking peaches, and Daddy took us that morning down to Mr. Jack's barn and corral to see them cut some new steers. He said it was something boys really needed to see. Lew and I bravely watched the guys whack off the horn of the first young bull with huge choppers. We froze in horror. Then the second horn.

The blood spurted several feet from its head in both directions while it wailed in pain and terror. Then they dragged the poor animal to the ground and sliced off his great big balls just like that. I stopped breathing, but Lew gagged. The guys threw the testicles to a bunch of dogs that chewed on them ravenously. We both puked up our breakfast, and Daddy laughed at us. They still had another half-dozen to cut, but Lew and I went back to the car and tried to think of something else. There was still that bellowing.

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That afternoon I took Lew down to the Wulsey, the creek running round south of Piney Hill, to another one of my secret places. There was a low cliff right above the swimming hole, and in its face near the water level was a layer of soft bluish clay full of tiny seashells, like delicate scallops, powdery white and crumbly. I told Lew it was the biggest mystery I knew of, besides the stone logs sticking out of a hillside over near Humpersneck.

Lew said the logs were "petrified" wood and called the shells "fossils," more new words. It made me feel pretty dumb for being so smart. He explained how millions of years ago this land was ocean and then it turned into dry land, which of course raised a heap of questions. For instance, what was this about millions of years ago? They'd never said a thing about that in History class. I'd never even thought to ask Father Jordan about how old the world was, and only ever heard that the preachers said the world was about four thousand years old.

Lew guffawed at that as goofball fundamentalism and said everyone nowadays knew about geological ages and dinosaurs and stuff. I'd heard that word before but had thought they were just monsters in some fairy tale. Then he proceeded to tell me about another scientific

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 12. **SOME TAIL**

thing everybody knew about called “e-volution” with animals changing into new ones.

Even though I got an A+ from Mr. Thompson in Biology, he’d never said word one about animals ‘e-volving,’ or about us humans being descended from creatures like monkeys. They didn’t teach new scientific stuff like that in any of our Arkansas schools. I was stunned that here I was a graduated senior from high school, and didn’t know any of this. I believed Lew when he said his school was up-to-date. If you got to learn this kind of stuff in college, I was ready, Freddy! I couldn’t get over how my great cousin kept opening up whole new worlds for me.

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So as I was saying, here it was a week later, a Friday morning at work in the café for me and Lew’s last day at the peach orchard. The morning was the usual drag at work with Jim from the filling station hanging around with his coffee and continuous Camel. In passing I said, “Tomorrow Daddy’s going hunting swamp rabbits and needs to borrow your hounds.”

Jim got riled. “Then why in hell don’t he go find hisself some rabbit dogs?”

I was casual when I remarked, “That’s why he thought of yours.” He fumed.

Around about ten-thirty, four Frog Level boys came in. The thin one with the mustache said they were on their way down to Texarkana for a good time, a concept I couldn’t quite imagine. I hoped I could find out what Sammy was up to since he hadn’t been up to the Hill much since breaking up with Iris. But they were all jabbering about things to each other, and I had to butt out and just take their orders, all full stacks with sausage and coffee.

While I was setting out their silverware and glasses, Sammy walked in the door all bright and cheery with those sparkling blue eyes and cute dimples. He clapped me on the back with “Hi, Champ!” and scooted into number three beside the kid with freckles and wavy hair. “I’ll have same as them.” I just stared and mumbled a belated hi.

When I leaned around the corner to the kitchen and told Melba to add another full stack (when three near about fills up the grill), she threw up her hands and said, “Better not be one of them for you.” I knew she’d be out to check.

Drawing all the cups of coffee, I heard the front door open behind me and felt hands on my sides. A familiar voice said, “Pour me one too, hot stuff.” I turned to find it was Reese, the Western Hatcheries guy, looking mischievous as always. He just got handsomer and sexier all the time—and always left me a quarter tip. “I’ll just sit here,” Reese said, pointing at my stool, and leaned around into the kitchen to order a full stack and sausage. I had to laugh.

When I was at the boys’ booth serving their coffees, I caught Sammy’s eye and got a smile. “Seen Iris lately?” he asked.

Thinking maybe I ought not mention the hayride, I lied, “She hasn’t been in for a week or so.” I couldn’t tell if he looked sad about her or not the way his beautiful lips didn’t quite smile or frown, but curved in a delicious way. Like a whonk on the head, I was struck stupid by the desire to kiss his mouth, and I got so weak in the knees I fumbled with the last cup.

Recovering, I went back behind the counter to fill syrup pitchers, still hungering to kiss Sammy. I stood there idly, watching him laugh with his friends and imagining actually making love with him, like with Danny, as though we too were best buddies. With a sigh and a hard on, I dutifully returned to the syrup. Over the pitchers, I glanced up at Reese and saw him smiling at something in the paper. His proud mouth looked just as delicious.

Sure enough, predictable as ever, Melba soon came sneaking out of the kitchen and leaned up by the cash register. I pretended not to see her taking a head count. Reese looked up from the newspaper and saw her standing there, quite near. She said, “Just be a bit longer with your cakes, sugar.” Then she waddled back into the kitchen.

I left Reese a pitcher of syrup and took the others over to number three. Most of the boys were off in the pinball room, but Sammy and the heavy kid with a flattop were still sitting there with their coffee. “Hey, Benny,” Sammy said, “How about showing us some champion pinball playing?” Regretfully, I had to decline, indicating the few customers at the counter and the two nice old ladies just now walking in the door.

Hardly had I carried the ladies their waters and menus when Melba hollered, “Pick up.” I quick hauled the plates of pancakes to the boys who straggled back to their booth. Fetching the coffeepot for their refills, I almost ran into Melba strutting out of the kitchen with Reese’s cakes. She put them at his place and leaned her big belly up against the candy case.

While I was at the register filling in checks, it dawned on me that Melba was actually flirting with Reese. But then, like Lew told me the other day, everybody wants it, even ugly and old people. That was pretty hard to imagine with most folks. It was a good thing jealous Jessie wasn’t seeing this. I pointedly asked Melba how the pies were doing, and she went back into the kitchen. Reese winked at me, and I suddenly choked with the desire to kiss him too.

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About then some more customers came in, two older men in hats, a nice motherly lady in overalls too, and a pretty girl with curly brown hair and short shorts. She glanced at Sammy, then at me. Her eyes were green! And she was hard-down beautiful, like Loretta Young—even more beautiful than Mary the Sno-Cone boy! All of us guys simply stared.

They sat in number two with her on the outside looking our way. I went over with the menus and water. The girl’s breasts stretched out the pink blouse to the edge of the table, her lips so full, and her eyebrows a tad thick for a girl. They didn’t want the menus, all ordering scrambled eggs and bacon and coffee.

After telling Melba the orders, I drew their coffees. Reese was sitting nearby on my favorite stool shoveling in his cakes and grunted, “That’s some good.”

“I’ll tell Melba you think so,” I chuckled. When I got to the booth, the green-eyed girl was reading a rolled-up magazine and didn’t even look at me while I gave them their coffees. Then I took the pot over for a refill round for Sammy and the boys.

While I was pouring, Sammy said, “Me and Reuben are going swimming down at the Crossing. Wanna come?”

What kind of a question was that? Did I want to breathe? Wanting so terribly to kiss him, I barely managed to answer, “Sure would, Sammy, but I can’t now.” After all, I couldn’t ask Mom to cover—she went to see a sick neighbor lady—and Daddy was off fishing with Ox.

Sammy lamented, “But we’d have so much fun.”

Doubting he had any idea how much, I had to go pick up for the two old ladies. Next thing, Reese hauled out his big wallet on a chain to pay his 93 cents bill, and left with a quick see-you-later wave. Then the short boy came up and paid for their whole bunch, and Melba hollered pick-up again. When I came out with the load for number two, Sammy was leaving and gave me a dimpled smile. I didn’t have but a second to watch him go out.

The girl smiled up at me when I served her. When she said thanks, her green eyes melted my insides. Going back for the refill pot, I found Melba picking up Reese’s quarter. She looked at me defiantly and marched off to put the pies in the glass case. Too much for television.

I refilled number two and got another bright look from the girl that helped me through washing a rack of glasses in the awful dishwasher. Yanking the rack back and forth, I got to imagining Sammy all naked. Then just for comparison, how that green-eyed girl out there in the booth would look... Both were so desirable I wanted to scream. Fortunately, more customers

came in so I was busy enough for my bone to go away.

When number two was finished and they were all getting up, the beautiful girl came up to pay their check and watched me count the change into her slender, delicate hand. I said, "Thanks, and you all come back now." It sounded like someone else's voice.

"I'm sorry you can't go swimming with your friends," she said sweetly. "My name's Victoria. What's yours?"

Dazed by her fantastic eyes, I barely muttered, "Ben."

Her bunch was heading for the door. I just smiled at her dumbly, wistfully. The lady called from over by the door, "Vicky! We going."

"Well, bye," Vicky shrugged at me and followed the others out the door. I felt like a popped balloon, especially knowing that like so many others, I'd never ever see her again. Clearing the booth, I found they'd left me a whole fifty cents. Besides Reese's quarters, it was my first tip in a couple months.

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Later on, while loading Nehis into the Coke box, I tried comparing Victoria and Annette for most beautiful. But I stopped myself before too long because it seemed so futile. Both were unreal somehow, and that made me sad again. Soon I was wallowing in the misery of Danny being gone and what's more, Lew going home next Monday. I'd be left here all alone.

Good old Margie and I had that unspoken bargain that in the slack afternoons I'd cover for her to read the paper or embroider, and later on she'd handle it while I'd catch forty winks. Round about three I lay back on the seat of number one napping in the rosebush-filtered sun. Suddenly Margie called, "Your dad's home."

I peeked through the rosebush and saw Daddy and Joe Ray getting out of the Desoto over by the mailbox, and Ox was pulling up right behind in his pickup. I trotted across the highway to see what was up. In the bed of Ox's truck was the hugest goddam catfish anybody ever saw, maybe nine feet long, lying there big as that walrus in the New Orleans Zoo. Daddy said he got it off folks who netted it out of the Little River, and he'd butcher it up to serve in the café.

Joe Ray declared, "That mouth is easy big enough to swallow a full-growed man."

They backed the truck up under a good-sized black oak off to the side of the café, and hoisted the fish up by its tail from a branch. They got to work with big knives, and I stayed to watch the guts glob out into the tub. But I had to get back to work. In another lull in business I checked on the fish butchers who had it all skinned but were hacking with hatchet and saw trying to cut off the monster head.

Ox exclaimed, "I bet this fish is at least a hundred years old."

"Was," I corrected him and cautioned, "Don't go telling any customers their catfish steak's a hundred years old."

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In a couple hours Lew got back from the peach orchard and was so happy to be done with the work at last. He marveled at the giant catfish head with its long whiskers and sat for the last while of my work with a nice cold Dr. Pepper and the funny papers. As soon as Daddy showed up, we ran out to feed pets. After a quick supper together in number three, we bummed around, chasing each other across the pasture and fighting a pine-burr war out by the gravel pit.

Come evening, Lew and I sat on the terrace in the cool under the pines and played canasta, constantly having to shoo the cats and dogs away from our cards. I asked when we were going to take care of the problems in our pants, and Lew chuckled wickedly. "Not yet—we gonna get us some tail tonight!"

I was too surprised to squeak. He pulled some Trojans out of his pocket. “A guy down at the orchard got me some,” he explained, handing me a little packet. Staring in disbelief, I took it. Lew explained, “Iris says she wants to do it tonight. You know, before I go away.”

I certainly understood that but brandished the rubber and squeaked, “With me too?”

“No, no!” Lew laughed. “She’s got a date for you too, Cuz.”

“Who?” I squeaked again, but Lew wouldn’t say. When I reminded him that I didn’t know how to do it with a girl, he said you just had to warm them up first with some kissing and playing with their titties. Then you reach down there and feel them up some before you slip it in real slow. I got a bone on thinking about a girl, any girl, spreading her legs for...

The evening wore on with us playing pinballs. It took forever, and all I could think of was me actually having a date. By nine o’clock I was really nervous when Iris showed up, followed by Liz Butler. What a relief that she was going to be my date, my old friend and dance partner, real cute in a tight white blouse with her light brown hair up in a ponytail. As I sat down beside Liz in number four, I became acutely aware of the Trojan in my shirt pocket.

Iris was very intent on Lew as we all chatted about nothing in particular, and I got to feeling the same sort of affectionate attention from Liz. She was all smiles and kept touching my arm. Pretty soon Lew suggested we go for a little ride in Iris’ car. Liz took my hand and sighed, “I always wanted to go riding with you, Benny.”

Lew saw my concerned expression and whispered, “You and I can make like going home and meet up with them outside.” We got up with casual farewells to the girls, said goodnight to Daddy at the register, and walked out the door. Once outside, Lew and I waited by Iris’ car. Suddenly I got excited, in both ways, to be going out riding with a girl like other guys do. Thank goodness Liz was nice-looking and we were such good friends. After a bit the girls strolled out of the café, and we got into the car.

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Liz and I got into the back seat, of course, and she moved up close to me right away. I put my arm around her shoulders that felt smaller than I’d have thought. As the car rolled off down the Hill into the darkness, she grabbed my thigh, and I froze up the middle of saying something, fascinated by her fingers gently squeezing my leg. As we rode along through the dark, I know they were all talking about something, but I couldn’t follow anything but Liz’s fingers creeping up my thigh and getting me excited again.

Not too far and we turned off on a gravel road I didn’t know and bumped along between banks of trees. Liz snuggled close but kept her hands to herself. Soon we came to a tiny church house glowing white in the bright light on a post out front. Right beside it was a graveyard with a tall pinewoods behind, and Iris drove around back of the church to park in the dark.

As soon as she stopped the engine, Iris pounced on Lew in the front seat, and they started kissing, even slurping. I wondered if they were going to do it right there. Here in the back seat, Liz gave me a big smile, and so I leaned over to kiss her. Her mouth was already wide open, so I opened mine too and touched her tongue, soft and wet, tasting of peppermint lifesaver. In a reflex action, my boner came back again.

Then Liz suddenly sucked so hard on my tongue she nearly yanked it out of my head. I grunted in pain. Up front, Lew laughed and asked, “Want us to give you two some privacy?” Without waiting for an answer, he and Iris scrambled out of the car and scampered off into the darkness under the pines. I figured they’d find a nice patch of pine straw to do it on.

Liz grabbed me and rolled back on the seat, pulling me on top of her. I was afraid to rest too heavy on her big breasts, not knowing but what it might hurt to mash them. We were kissing

again, much less painfully, but it didn't feel at all like kissing Danny. She wiggled against my hard-on, and so I figured she was warmed up and took hold of her tit. There was a strange springiness, and it was weirdly conical from the brassiere.

Feeling up under it, I found her tit soft and warm. But kissing her soon got boring. Nothing much to do with your tongue stuck in somebody else's mouth. Again, not like the way Danny and I seemed to devour each other. Liz stroked my thigh, and so I pulled up her skirt (with her help) and following Lew's instructions, stuck my hand up inside her panties.

What I felt up there was a strange furry mound, and Liz again sucked hard on my tongue. With my middle finger, I felt along that slit in her crotch, and she grabbed hold of my boner through my pants. While we kept on kissing, she squeezed me, and I felt around to find her hole. My finger slid smoothly into her, making Liz moan and me shoot off in my pants, throbbing in her tight hand. When I went to pull my finger out of her, she held my hand right there.

Finally we stopped kissing so I could breathe again, and I slid my finger in and out of her, curious to watch her wiggle in delight. I had to stifle a laugh at the silliness of it. On one pull-out I rubbed some strange nubbin, and Liz gave a loud moan. So I tickled the nub again. The more I twiddled it, the more she moaned and then arched her body and quivered all over. I figured that probably meant she got off too.

As we lay there in a twisted pile, I asked if she liked it, and she grunted, "Uh-huh."

I considered the same question for myself but couldn't answer even that enthusiastically. It all seemed so mechanical, and now it was over, what was there to say? I helped Liz get her skirt down around her legs. I really wanted to get out of the car, but she climbed onto my lap and started kissing on my ears and neck. It felt pretty good, and at least I didn't have to talk.

And it wasn't too long till Lew and Iris came back out of the woods. When she turned on the light in the car to get the sticks and pine straw out of her hair, Lew gave me a triumphant wink. I attempted the same, even though I felt no triumph, only a vague disappointment, as though missing something I didn't know wasn't there.

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Iris dropped Lew and me off down the road a ways under the lip of the Hill and then made a U-turn to head back toward Lockjaw. In the starlight he and I took the dark path behind the service station. As we crossed toward the backyard, one of Jim's stupid fox-hounds gave a lazy bark, but not loud enough to wake Mom or Janie.

The past weekend, to escape the heat in the house, we'd hauled Mom and Daddy's big mattress out onto the top of the storm-cellar up out of the way of the dogs. Janie's cot was back behind the weeping willow's hanging branches. Usually I'd sleep on a cot under the big hickory, but this year Lew got a bright idea. Inspired by the Indian well, we built a square of boards and filled it with about two feet of pine straw we'd raked up in the front yard. With a blanket spread out over, it was as fine a mattress as you could want, a bit firm, but comfortable enough.

I put on some swimming trunks for pajamas, and Lew always slept in his underpants anyway. Lobo climbed into our bed to join the cuddle. Though Lew conked out right away, I lay there in the dark night, sleepless. With my face nuzzled into his curls, I kept dreading how in just a couple days Lew would leave me too. The next two months till my escape to New Orleans were going to be so terribly lonely without Danny, without Lew. And an unfamiliar voice in my head added, "Without Annette..."

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