

**PUSH COMES TO SHOVE**

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When I ordered my hotcakes from Melba this morning, she said, “Right away, sir.” For some reason in these past several weeks of working together every day, she’d gotten a lot more respectful than before, but this was the first time she’d called me ‘sir’—after years of being snooty. Maybe it was because I was so grown up now. Or was she being sarcastic?

Down at the end of the counter, Daddy was waiting on a truck driver who said it was good to see him back. Daddy told him how he didn’t like that Holiday Inn in Dallas at all. You see, because business had been so bad at Piney Hill, shortly after Lew left, he went off to try out a job as a restaurant manager and earn some money.

Looking back on the summer, I could testify that it’d been right slow. There weren’t nearly as many trucks on 71 anymore, something about them raising taxes, and the tourist trade dropped off like a rock. Folks said if they’d ever finish that Millwood dam down on the river, we’d have us a good resort business with the bottoms flooded and all the fishermen. But it wouldn’t drown my creek valleys up here in the hills, just lots of good farmland in the bottoms.

Right before taking off to Dallas, Daddy put some ads in the newspapers to sell Piney Hill, which bothered me a lot. In spite of the loneliness, I really loved the place. Now Daddy was back and obviously depressed. There’d been absolutely nothing come of the ads.

Today was my first day now in well over a month not having to go to work. With Daddy gone, Mom and I’d been doing it all. I got six days with Melba and Margie and then on Sundays with Vonelle, Clark’s wife. Mom covered nights with Melvin or old Ezra, or sometimes Vonelle. All those days I watched summer pass by outside like the occasional cars zipping along the sunny highway. I resented getting such a raw deal but then recalled that beautiful Negro boy on the dock and those huge stalks of bananas. That helped me keep things in perspective.

Working Sundays, like Daddy did before, I hadn’t been able to go to Church, which I counted a blessing, but Father Jordan always stopped by on his way between towns. Across the road in the piney shade on the terrace, he’d hear my confession and give me Communion saved from the Mass just before. No longer concerned about touching myself supposedly impurely, I usually only confessed getting angry at stupid people. Father Jordan complimented me on my strong virtue, perhaps because I’d never even mentioned that sex stuff with Liz. But taking Communion out under a pine tree was pretty special, not having to sit through Mass and all.

After all these weeks, 37 tiring, boring days, I couldn’t tell one from another. I’d just get up off my pine straw bed at four-thirty in the morning and walk around like a machine all day. Getting off at five-thirty, I never got to see Bandstand anymore. Fortunately, Janie took over feeding the zoo, except for me hauling slops down to the hogs. Left with an evening hour and no energy, I’d often stagger like a zombie down to the pond and bother the goldfish. Or make a quick visit to my grotto, sere now in the late summer, its spring only a trickle.

I’d felt almost like being asleep, neither happy nor unhappy, like in limbo. Early on I’d thought about going out riding with Liz again, but she started going with a guy named Lonnie from DeQueen with a sharp red car. I didn’t really care. It was just sex, or almost anyway.

I wouldn’t let myself even think about missing Danny or Lew because to do so was to ache. But in the rare times I jazzed off, I would think about making love with Danny, then with Sammy, and soon even with sexy Reese. Seeing him so often became the high point of my tedious day. Not that I really loved Reese like Danny or Sammy, yet it was great thinking about doing it with him too. Wanting so much to kiss that handsome guy also made me ache inside.

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I carried my empty cup to the big urn and went back to number three with my fresh coffee. Slouching in the booth and looking back over the weeks of work—indeed over these six Piney Hill years—it felt like passing through a purifying fire, like a piece of iron being forged into steel. I stretched out my arms and legs and felt stronger, as though waking up from a long sleep. Maybe it was the caffeine, but mostly the excitement about a free day at last.

Looking out through the venetian blinds, the dust and drooping brown needles on the trees showed how hot these August dog-days were out there. The other afternoon I'd seen some heat lightning off to the west, but no rain now for some weeks. Heat ripples rose off the pavement of the highway, and white paint was peeling off the fence, mostly around the gates. That certainly wasn't much help for Daddy's chances of selling the place.

As I flipped through my new Saturday Review, Daddy sat down across from me with his coffee. While he was gone, I hadn't missed him at all. When he'd called to say he was coming home, my heart sank. Mom was so happy to see him get off the bus yesterday, and Janie ran up to hug him. I'd just stood by and said welcome home. He'd patted my shoulder and said, "Glad to be back." Right now, stirring his coffee slowly, he didn't look so glad.

"What's that you're reading?" Daddy asked suddenly. I showed him the math puzzle problem about trains and cars, which I knew would take algebra with two unknowns. While he read the problem, I noticed a tiny tear in the vinyl booth by his gray head, more things run down.

Daddy looked up from the magazine at me and said, "Benny, I came home for you too. Joe Ray wrote me you were looking unhappy."

"Just worn to a frazzle," I said, wondering why Joe Ray would think that. I was always polite and smiling whenever he'd come into the café.

Daddy said, "Well, you can rest up some now I'm back." We both sipped our coffee. "But things ain't good, Ben. I just don't know what to do."

He sounded pitiful, just like my Danny did when he said the same thing about work. Trying to be helpful, I said, "I bet somebody will come and buy the Hill real quick."

Just then another party came in the door, and he got up to take care of them. I felt real sorry that things were going so bad for him, but I'd be gone real quick too, and he'd surely manage something. Speaking of being gone, I wanted to get moving right now, out into my woods. Not to see a single, solitary customer. And naturally to get out of my clothes.

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As I crossed the highway, the old place again seemed so run down now baking in the morning heat. In the backyard Mom was hanging out the wash, looking in great spirits at having Daddy back home. She picked up a shirt, pinned it to the line, and asked, "What you going to do with yourself today, honey?"

"Just ramble," I said and helped hang up one of Janie's blouses. It seemed a good time to ask, "What will you all do when somebody buys the Hill?"

"Gee," Mom said, shaking out a pair of wet pants, "Daddy hasn't said what he's thinking yet." She brushed a wisp of her blond hair out of her face, and I could tell she was about to bust out crying. "I sure do hope it'll be in a city somewhere."

I knew Mom was a city girl and never did take much to living way out here in the middle of nowhere. Vaguely remembering where we'd lived before coming to Piney Hill, I tried to encourage her, suggesting, "Maybe you can go back to that town in Texas."

Mom made a face and shook her head. "Oh, no!" she laughed. "That place stank to high heaven!" Now I recalled that dreadful stench from the oil refineries. No, thank you!

## BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 13. PUSH COMES TO SHOVE

With nothing more to suggest, I left Mom at the clothesline and fetching my hickory stick off the porch, set off across the pasture. Out of the pine grove, Janie came galloping by on Lady, showing off how well she rides bareback. Then she made her horse rear and waved at me like Dale Evans or Annie Oakley, cowboy hat in the air. I stooped through the barbed wire fence and headed off along dirt road. Duchess plodded along beside me, and Lobo ran around signing fence posts and trees with his wet penmanship.

Kicking up the dust in the wheel-track, I thought about all the places I needed to go again before leaving, like over by the pipeline where the wild plums were probably ripe right now, and to the white oak grove, and... Only a couple more weeks left! A wave of farewell to it all swept over me. Goodbye to all these special places. Yes, even this big gravel pit—with its crumbly cliffs and dried-up puddles in the bottom, mud sunbaked into curly slabs—was a special place.

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My ratty track skirted the pit, passing under a giant hickory, and on impulse I swung up on a low branch. Quick as an awkward squirrel, I scrambled up the huge tree to a nice crotch of branches at the crown, maybe 50 feet up. It was my catbird seat among the fluttering leaves, thin enough to see out over the creek valley to the next hilltop and the old highway winding around through fields golden tan in the sun. I could even make out a piece of Mr. Griffin's barn.

With the green nuts on twigs all around and the dogs waiting tiny down on the ground, it felt like I'd stepped out of the world. Suddenly my body twitched like when you're dozing and snap awake, and I seemed to be looking at everything from afar. Suddenly I could see the reality of Piney Hill, the house and café's red roofs bright in the morning sun.

There was Daddy pouring coffee at the counter with his almost polite smile. What a huge disappointment Piney Hill turned out to be for him. But there was nothing I could do to help. It was his life, and soon I'd be leaving it. Still, I had to wonder where his life would go. Where would he take poor Mom after her misery here in Arkansas?

And there was Mom sitting at her sewing machine on the back porch right now looking plain worried sick. All these years with Daddy she'd had even less of a life of her own than I, and it wasn't over for her like it was for me. Then there was Janie, my pest of a kid sister, still out riding Lady. She must have had it pretty hard herself, all alone out here. No wonder all she ever thought about was horses. What if she was secretly in love with a handsome cowboy on one of her western shows? Like maybe that adorable Michael Landon, Little Joe on Bonanza.

In the distance a plume of dust rose and blew away like smoke from some car going somewhere, and I caught the faint roar of a big truck laboring up the Hill. It was a moment when time didn't seem to mean anything. All these years on the Hill now felt like swirling dreams, like smoke curling in the wind. No, more like a whirlwind of people and feelings. I never knew which way was up, lost in that chaos of rushing moments already blurring in my memory. Even those treasures with Danny were turning into a mythical past.

Out of the blur it suddenly came clear how Annette was like a stroke of lightning in my lonely life, filling three whole years with her light. But now it was over, no more wild aches or joy in her mere existence. Saying out loud, "My darling Annette," sounded like an old record.

Suddenly a bird flew into my tree, lit on a nearby branch, gave me a curious look, and flitted off with a tiny frightened chirp. With my newly opened eyes, I thought again about the stuff I'd learned from Lew and how everything was so different than I'd been taught. I got mad thinking how between my high school and the Church, I was kept in a state of darkest ignorance. Made you wonder what else Father Jordan hadn't told me about.

How silly that I was supposed to believe in a place called hell and another up the sky

called heaven. And a God sitting up there getting mortally offended anytime anyone did something the Church forbade. All this confused church and religion stuff was so terribly, truly, artificial and didn't make even common sense.

If you asked me, there was no defining the God, nor point in trying. I reckoned whatever the God was, It existed as everything, as every atom around me, as these hickory leaves and those rocks and the clouds—and as me too. The ubiquitous God. All you could do was try to describe the God in some way, like the eternal God, the infinite God, the inconceivable God... I repeated those deep thoughts several times like a mystical litany.

This rocky gravel pit and these woods all around I now understood as the God, as the real reality, existing beyond and outside of any made-up catechism or church concocted by Man. This earth and sky didn't give a hang about sins, unfortunately not even about real bad ones like killing. The God in everything actually didn't give a hang about anything. Instead, this whole bright world and universe was the God, a vast cathedral, an infinitely huge temple, where folks can give It thanks for us being the God too.

All that theology made my head spin—divinely—and I clutched the tree branches to steady myself on the high perch. Scattered clouds in the south showed the curvature of the earth, and it gave me a sudden feeling of knowing exactly where I was. I was a tiny speck at a spot off to the west of Highway 71, six miles south of Lockesburg, in the backwoods of Sevier County in southwestern Arkansas, in the south of the United States of America, in the northern hemisphere of the planet Earth, in the solar system.

For some strange reason I was also sitting up in the top of a hickory tree. Down below my perch up here in the branches, Lobo started jumping around and yapping excitedly at me like a squirrel he'd treed. So I climbed down, retrieved my stick, and forged on along the logging track. When I turned to say goodbye to the tree, it was already full of birds chirping wildly.

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I tromped along feeling a great pleasant emptiness inside that the woods soon filled with warm colors and summer fragrances. A patch of huckleberries in the dry grasses gave me a few sweet berries to munch. The track ran on down into the valley and across the Wulsey near my fossil bank. Though it was high summer the creek was still running decent. I stripped, threw both dogs into the pool, and jumped in after.

The water was wonderfully cool as I floated in dappled sunlight, nothing else in the world but me and the dogs in this secret valley. Peaceful, timeless, this would be a memory forever, a lovely fossil shell in my life. In streaks of sunlight the bluish dust of time filtered through the leaves, like powder falling from the blue sky, burying this precious moment in the past.

Leaving my clothes in a pile by the creek, I took up my stick again and headed up the other hill. Drying off in the breeze, the leaves and dirt soft under my bare feet, I felt so close to the earth and its creatures, like Adam. A rabbit stopped by a bush up the way, hoping I didn't see it, and then scurried away as the dogs crashed through the brush nearby. When I topped the hill at the old Brooks place, I was stunned.

The whole place was completely burnt over, blackened and charred. The smaller pines at the edge of the broad meadow had scorched and brown needles on their lower limbs, and all the lush grasses in the field were nothing but piles of ash. I walked across the powdery stuff to the home place with its crumbling piece of brick chimney. The millions of daffodils would be fine for next spring, of course, but the huge walnut tree that died this past spring wasn't there now. The one that was still alive looked so awfully lonely with the black all around.

Lying on the ground, nearly burned away, the dead tree's great branches were gone, mere

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burnt stubs, and various spots still smoldered. The enormous trunk had burned down to a charred log no more than a foot through. It must have been the heat lightning I saw the other day that hit it. I could vividly imagine how it blazed like a giant torch.

Down near the bottom of the trunk lay an old rusted iron plowshare, burnt free after probably a century. Who wouldn't think it was symbolic? So the me of before was burned away, and that diamond in my heart, my love for Annette, was here in my hand, just a rusty hunk of iron. I put the ancient plowshare back where it had lain for so long and felt miraculously cured. To celebrate, I painted black stripes all over me with pieces of the charcoal.

Both dogs ran up sooty and panting, and Lobo and I raced out into the scorched field, happily romping about. As though through the eyes of Duchess from over by the chimney, I could see us bounding and scampering around, a zebra-striped faun and soot-splotted wolf, dream creatures in an unreal landscape. When Lobo got bored, I danced by myself till I got tired and lay down in the shade of the live walnut. Soon I started daydreaming about making love with Danny, and so my prick wound up getting all black too.

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It took some work washing the dogs off in the creek and scrubbing most of the black off me. Then I made my way back home by about noon. Over a cheeseburger and chocolate shake, I looked out at the house again and figured I could best help Daddy out by fixing up the fence. That would certainly make the place look a lot nicer for a buyer. I ran over to get a hammer and started pounding nails back into the posts.

Mom said she'd go to Lockesburg for some white paint. Between hammer blows, I asked her to get some more three-inch nails too. "Imagine," Janie chortled, looking at her calloused hands, "three-inch nails!" Her fingernails were bitten down to the quick. This rare humor from my sister really made me laugh.

Once I got started painting, I realized that it was going to be no small task, probably three hundred feet of crisscrossed board fence. I dived into it with a mind again clear and huge as the whole world. Sloshing paint, I reveled in that enormous feeling of the God in everything, everywhere. However, after half-hour's religious progress, I had to calculate that the whole job could well take another three hours. What a shame that there were no little boys around for me, like Tom Sawyer, to con into doing the "whitewash."

I painted bravely on for a bit and then heard a barking squeak coming from behind a nearby pine trunk. Odd, I thought, what's a squirrel... Suddenly Janie's curly head peeked around the tree, and she asked, "Can I paint too, big brother?"

I wasn't idiot enough to say no, and Janie proved fairly good at slapping the paint on. We didn't talk much at first, but pretty often I'd hear her making noises again, quiet little chickie peeps, miaous, and such. Not that it bothered me, but then I asked, "Hey, squirt, why you making all those animal noises?"

She looked surprised that I'd ask. "Because they say how I feel, you dumb head."

"Oh," I said dubiously. "And what does moo mean?"

"If I was to moo at you," Janie giggled, "it means you're a total mush-brain." With that, she warbled like a canary and turned back to her painting.

Now I was surprised. "You mean you can do birds?"

Janie looked at me scornfully and proceeded to run through chirps and whistles and squeaks like a whole flock of songbirds. She was definitely good enough to be on Ed Sullivan. After a lovely meadowlark trill, she fell silent and went back to painting.

Though it still took nearly two hours, our painting job seemed to pass quickly because

Janie taught me to do a lot of animal noises. Naturally I was at my best as a chicken and a jackass. She could do a perfect horse's neigh and the uncanny night song of a whippoorwill. When finished, we both stood there grunting like satisfied hogs. Then I said, "Thanks a lot for all the help, Dr. Doolittle. So, is it true you talk to the animals?"

Janie nodded, embarrassed, and said, "But I don't think they understand me."

"Do you understand them?"

She grinned mischievously. "Mostly. They're funny."

"So are you," I laughed, "in the head." She made me wonder if being bats maybe ran in our family. Janie frowned at the accusation and moped at me.

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Now the fence was all new white, the yard suddenly looked a sloppy mess. What with all the working in the café, I'd had no time to take care of it proper, or the grass out front of the motel. I trudged along pushing the rickety old lawnmower, sweating and mulling things over. Edging the grass at the base of a pine, I was struck by a curious thought. Some people are ambidextrous. I could even write okay with my left hand. Could people be ambi-sextrous too? Maybe Mary the Sno-Cone boy was like that, one way during the day and another at night. It'd make good sense for a morphodite, I figured.

While mowing under the scattered pines over in front of number five cabin, I kept feeling that glorious ubiquity of the God, especially in the heat of the sun on my bare shoulders and sweat running down my neck and chest. Round and around I pushed the clanking mower in ever-decreasing circles. To occupy my mind, I recited "The Raven" again and my graduation speech, solved the equations for this morning's math problem, and thought up some lyrics for a song saying farewell to the forests and hills of my childhood.

Right as I finished, Mom came out of the café with a big glass of ice tea for me that really hit the spot. She looked around, checking out the fences and the neat yards, and thought they looked swell. So did I, and I told her that was all the work I planned on doing today. Maybe tomorrow I'd try and paint up the porches on the café.

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To relax, I took a walk with Lobo down to the pond. Sitting on the high bank, we watched the evening come on over the water. It was too late to swim. There were only a couple flowers of goldfish to dive when I tossed a pebble and called the Magic Fish to make my first wish: to find someone else to love. I never did ask Danny if his wish had come true.

Back at the house by dusk, I took a shower in the bathroom off the back porch and got the rest of the black off. It was thrilling to recall those great tiled showers stalls in the Robert Sharp dormitory. They most likely had a lot better water pressure than here on Piney Hill.

I ambled over to the café for some supper, and Margie fixed me a chickenfry. Then over at the house again, I turned my radio on to WNOE and wrote to Betsy. I told her right off about how after three years I'd at last fallen out of love with Annette. While I was describing the old plowshare, the door from the living room into my room opened, and Daddy came in. Surprised, I turned from my desk and said hi. I couldn't remember him ever coming in my room before.

"Hi," Daddy said back. "You know, I been thinking on that problem in the magazine."

Pleased that he'd found it interesting, I said, "Oh yeh, I worked that out this afternoon mowing the lawn." The words were barely out of my mouth when Daddy's face screwed up in the familiar rage. Instinctively I ducked, but he still managed to smack me hard upside the head, knocking me and the chair over backwards onto the floor.

He stood over me shouting down, "Just see if I try and help you again, you smart-ass son

of a bitch!” With a kick in my thigh, he stomped out, slamming the door so hard the curtain rod fell off, the white lace crumpling up on the floor. Stunned, I lay there not even feeling the hit or kick, nor the least bit like crying. What had happened to wake up that monster in Daddy again?

I stood up slowly, furious about the injustice and determined not to put up with it anymore. It quickly grew into a cold, hard anger. Whatever spark of love I might have felt for Daddy this morning had just been knocked right out of me. Clearly push had just come to shove. Standing there with the chair on its back and the letter on the desk, I decided what to do.

From under the bed I took out my suitcase and started pulling stuff out of dresser drawers. First things I packed were my Frankie Avalon sweater with its floppy collar, and Danny’s striped shirt that I’d never given back. While I was choosing some other shirts, Mom looked into the room and saw me packing. “What are you doing?” she asked quietly, pushing the crumpled curtain back with the door, but of course she knew.

“I’m going,” I said simply. “I’m 18 and I’m going.” Gathering up shirts and pants, my arms were full. Mom stood by the chair lying there and cried. Janie looked in the doorway, all scared. For an instant I kind of faltered but went on anyway, “I’ll catch the Greyhound tomorrow and go on to New Orleans now.” Like Fats Domino, I was ready to walk there.

Mom sniffed hard and asked, “Why do you have to go right now, Benny?”

Her tears made it hard for me not to cry. “He hates me, and I’m going.”

“No,” Mom sobbed, “Daddy loves you. He just doesn’t know how...” As far as I was concerned, I had no feelings left whatsoever. Mom stood there by the overturned chair crying while I packed the shirts. Janie disappeared. “Please, honey,” she said softly and stroked my shoulder, “try and understand how worried Daddy is. He didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“What else does a fist mean?” I asked and wadded some pants into the suitcase. “I’m not staying here and getting beat up on anymore.” For a moment Mom stood there crying silently and then left. I heard the front screen door close.

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In the King Edward cigar box on my dresser I found \$380 after having paid my fees and buying some clothes from the catalog. It would just have to be enough, I reckoned. Take the Greyhound straight to New Orleans, and until I could get into the dorm, I’d camp out down in those willow woods along the river. A guy could do okay there for a couple weeks with all those big boats on the river and a grocery store probably not too far away.

That meant fetching my sleeping bag from the back room. Then I started packing my journal and old novels into a cardboard box. Maybe I should just have Mom send them to me, but I didn’t want anyone seeing all that stuff about Annette. Then there was all my huge record collection, the books on the shelves... I started to get really confused because I couldn’t take all that much with me now.

In a daze I picked up random things on my desk and then scribbled on the letter to Betsy, “Change of plans. Will write from New Orleans.” While I was addressing the envelope, Daddy appeared in the doorway again. I stepped away behind the overturned chair.

“I’m sorry,” he said with a choke, his eyes pained. “I don’t want you to go.”

“I’m going,” I insisted and wary of more blows, put some pens into the suitcase.

Daddy very slowly bent and picked up the chair. “But for your Mom, just stay till you have to go, like we planned, please.” His face turned very pale, and he looked away toward the door. “She’s all torn up about this.” When he turned back to me, Daddy’s eyes were wet. His next words came in a rush, “I really am sorry. I just wanted to do something with you, for you, I

mean, because I..." I stared, and when he took a step toward me, I backed away. Covering his eyes, he mumbled, "Don't go yet. Please. I... I do love you, Benny."

If he wanted me to say I loved him too, I couldn't lie. Inside, I didn't love anybody anymore. My heart was empty without Annette or Danny or anyone. As Daddy wiped his face, our eyes met, and I saw despair there, more than just the grief of this moment. "When you sell this place," I said, hoping sincerely, "things will get better." And even better without me.

Daddy's pale eyes looked real sincere when he said, "Look, Benny, I really do appreciate all the work you done, the fence and all." Again he moved toward me, but I was near the bed and couldn't back away, so he managed to get his arms around me, squeezing hard.

I stood there thinking we were really the same size now, and there was that distinctive smell he had. I hadn't felt his arms around me since I was a tiny kid, and that lost look in his eyes. And he was actually asking me instead of ordering. So what were a couple more weeks? It would be a lot easier just to stay on, and it didn't really matter now I knew how I truly felt. "Okay," I conceded. Besides, the money from two more weeks' work would come in real handy when I'd at last be on my own in New Orleans.

Daddy squeezed me again and much to my relief, let go. Surely my smile was as weak as his. "I'll go tell your Mom," he said. "She'll be happy." With that, he turned and left.

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After a minute or two, I finally moved from where I was standing by the bed, turned out the lamp, and drifted out the side door around into the backyard. Though it was still fairly early, after my busy day off, I was more than ready to hit the sack. Lobo came and cuddled up with me on the pile of pine straw.

*I dreamt—Danny's with me again, inside an old barn. We're sitting on hay close together, paging through an album full of pictures of people I don't know, and the pages start turning into strange playing cards. We play a funny poker with the faces, and Danny wins. Suddenly, there's furniture piled up all over the place, and my buddy and I spread dustcovers on the chairs and lamps and such. Understanding that Danny is going to leave me now, I cry out and take hold of his arm. With his beautiful smile, he says, "I know what you want." He hands me a precious little green pond-turtle with red spots like rubies. The next instant, he's gone.*

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