

STOMPED-ON TOAD-FROG

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In a daze, I wandered back into the house and sat on the hard floor in my empty room, the place where I'd danced so often with the Lockjaw kids to all that good rock and roll. I listened to the echoing silence and started crying. When I ran out of tears, I stumbled off to the back bathroom to shower. It was a sweet comfort that Zaya's forgotten yellow towel, dry already, was full of his deer-like fragrance. Putting on some clean clothes out of my suitcase, I suddenly felt scared that right now it was happening, the leaving. Time was speeding up, these last minutes racing away like the wind, whirling into the future. I got so dizzy I sat down on the floor again.

Finally able to cope, I went across the highway to the café for my last Saturday night on the Hill. Clark's wife Vonelle was waitressing, and Melvin wasn't all that busy with cashiering. I plopped on my stool with some chocolate ice cream. Leaning on the register, Melvin watched me slurp. "I sure hope that college can keep you in eats."

"I'm going to miss you, Melvin," I said sincerely.

"I 'spect not," he shrugged, tapping the pencil on the register. "No, you going off somewhere so far away, you won't be thinking none about us folks." A customer came up to pay. After his "Thank you, and y'all come back," Melvin smiled and told me, "You know, I'd of gone off to the city too, back when I was your age, Lord, I sure enough would of. But with my Mama all crippled up..."

To help out, I dried some plates for Melvin while he yanked a tray of glasses back and forth in the horrible machine. He said, "But I'll sure be missing you folks. Your old man's about the only real friend I got round here, even if I ain't much for fishing like Joe Ray." Then he had to go see to a customer's check.

When Daddy pulled up across the road and went into the house, I trotted on over. He explained that he was fixing to take the suitcases down to Horatio's and looked so relieved and happy, almost smiling. His blue eyes showed excitement and grief. He patted me on the shoulder and said, "Thanks for moving the furniture out, son." Even his voice was different.

To keep him company, I took the short ride down the Hill. On the way Daddy explained that Melvin would keep the café open tomorrow, and Mr. Stein and his family would get here in the afternoon to take over. He said the Steins had a 13 year-old son, also named Ben. I laughed inside, sadly, at the irony: another circumcised kid to suffer through his adolescence on Piney Hill. And this time Jewish. My heart went out to this unknown child.

Daddy remarked, "I guess it was right hard on you all these years on the Hill."

"It was okay," I lied, no use in complaining at this late date. "Just lonely was all."

"Well, I'm sorry it had to be... you know..." He turned the car into the Hoopers' drive.

"Don't worry," I replied. "I survived."

Horatio's white house always smelled to high heaven of cats, which was another reason to sleep at home on the Hill tonight. Horatio and his wife Martha drank tea and watched us bring in suitcases. As we were about to head back up the Hill, he clapped me on the back with good luck wishes and harrumphed, "Listen up, boy. You better watch out now for them communist professors and beatniks." His warning made me think they might be some interesting folks.

Back in the car, Daddy said, "Your mom says you won't stay with us in New Orleans."

"No, I'll live at the dorm," I replied, trying to sound forceful.

"And you're right," he said to my total surprise. "You need to set off on your own, son, you know, like a... a..." In the pause as he groped for the right word, I felt a small trace of that

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feeling I'd once had for this prematurely aging man, silver-haired, who by some random accident was my father. "...like a young man," he finally said.

"Thanks," I said, immensely relieved. More like a bird out of a cage. "Between my scholarship and the student job," I said, "I'll get along okay."

He pulled the car in behind the mailbox, turned off the motor and lights, looked straight at me, and said in fits and starts, "I think you'll... do just fine, Benny, and I'm... I'm real proud of you." Stunned, I simply sat there and watched him get out of the car.

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At the café, Daddy took over from Melvin, and I sat idly on my stool, my mind filled again with that feeling of Zaya's body against mine under those pine trees. I only got a couple minutes to hold him again before Mary Nell came in with her folks. We sat in number one for a last talk, and right away she got all teary. "Oh, Benny," she whispered, "I'm so miserable."

I patted her hand and lied, "We'll see each other again."

"That's not what I mean," she blubbered. "Benny, I've got to get married! He's from Foreman," she choked and reached for a paper napkin to dry her eyes.

I was horrified speechless by this awful fate befalling my old chum, and with no response from me, Mary Nell bawled some more. While she wept, I kept thinking of Zaya's mouth, and a voice inside screamed that he was gone. Just like Danny. After blowing her nose, Mary Nell apparently felt better, but I certainly didn't.

When Mary Nell was gone, I again sat on my stool, wistfully imagining Danny popping in the door the way he used to, tall and handsome. Leaving that woe behind, I spun around on the stool and remembered the firmness of Zaya's... Meanwhile some folks from Falls Chapel came in to say bye, and Louie the state patrolman stopped in for a chat with Daddy. Over more chocolate ice cream for old times' sake, I remembered Zaya's strong arms around me and...

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In a minute, Sammy came in with Liz. They took number four, and I sat beside him. They were going steady now for a week already, he said, and Liz looked happy as a pig in hot mud. Funny how looking at her, those things we once did together didn't seem real. Both of them were sad to hear I was leaving in the morning for New Orleans. Bringing them Cokes and potato chips, I thought about what great brothers we'd have been, Sammy and me.

"Oh, Benny," Liz exclaimed, "I'm going to miss you so much."

"Me, too," Sammy echoed.

"Sammy, baby," Liz wheedled, "can I give Benny a goodbye kiss for old times' sake?"

Sammy laughed and punched my shoulder. "You can kiss my girl anytime, Champ."

Liz leapt up, dragged me off into the dining table area, and grabbed me up in the wet kiss I remembered, uninspiring actually compared to... She wiggled close up against me. Peeking at Sammy who was watching us with a curious smile, I started getting hard and rubbed it against Liz's leg. She broke off the kiss and laughed, "Don't be naughty, Benny."

I think I blushed, but I looked first to see if Daddy had seen us. He was way down at the far end of the counter taking care of a couple customers. Sammy gave me a beautiful wink. At that very moment the door opened and in walked Father Jordan. Swallowing a scream, I told my pals that he was our priest, and I had to go talk to him.

Sammy leapt up from the booth with, "Not before I say goodbye too!" He opened his arms and stepped toward me, his lips ready for the kiss I wanted. But he turned slightly away and wrapped me in a strong hug, his cheek on mine. I held tight to him, so much smaller in my

arms than Zaya. He rubbed my back, and there was a spicy smell like clove behind his ear. Long moments and then Sammy whispered, “Jesus protect you, brother.”

I rubbed his back too and muttered, “You too, brother.”

With an extra squeeze, he sighed, “Yah!” and we let go of each other. Many of the customers sitting around were looking at us curiously. We smiled sadly at each other for more moments, until I managed to turn away and go do my duty.

Father Jordan was sitting on a stool down at the other end of the counter, talking to Mom. Daddy was clearly keeping busy elsewhere. Father lifted his droopy face and greeted me with his funny, “Good evening, lad.” He clapped me on the shoulder and said brightly, “So you’re going off to college at last. Too bad you couldn’t go to Loyola.”

“I didn’t apply there, Father,” I said apologetically and took the opportunity to chatter about how Loyola was right next door to Tulane and had this great Gothic cathedral.

Father asked what I knew was coming, “Would you take Holy Communion, my son?”

I well knew that he expected me to confess first, but as far as using the Lord’s name in vain today when I set a dresser on my toe, I’d already absolved myself of that. And in my new spiritual awareness, I found absolutely nothing impure about the loving afternoon with Zaya. “No, thanks,” I said off-handedly and then felt guilty. Realizing that this priest had so little inkling of the hugeness of the real God, and his Church was so limited, so finite, I consoled him with a promise to go to Loyola next Sunday for Mass. That seemed to satisfy him.

To be hospitable, I walked Father Jordan out to his car. He placed his hands on my shoulders and intoned, “Dear Lord, bless this pure youth as he sets out for the university. Let him not be led down the paths of evil in that city, but may his studies prosper and bear the fruits of learning. In Christ Jesus, our Lord.” He touched my cheek and added, “*Dominus vobiscum.*”

“*Et cum spiritu tuo,*” I responded properly, touched by this blessing from the man who’d listened patiently to all my so-called sins for so many years.

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When I went back into the café, I found that Sammy and Liz had gone already, out riding no doubt. I racked up glasses and cups for the dishwasher in one last bout with the monster. It helped calm me down in the swirl of emotional goodbyes. Recalling Zaya’s goodbye kiss, I found a few more tears and understood clearly that my anguish was being in love. This passion was far more real than any of those longings I’d ever felt for lovely Annette—even more fierce than my vast love for Danny. Again I leaned against the hideous machine and wept, never to see Zaya again. Nevermore!

Later, twirling on my stool again, I munched M&Ms, the sadness growing broader and deeper as I pondered on Sammy and Zaya, Danny and Annette. I saw that they’d now become like those frail shells in the blue clay of my past. Not only they, but all my friends, everybody in my past, were turning into fossils. All that chocolate may not have helped my mood.

What did help was little Willie coming in with his folks. Only he wasn’t so little anymore, probably grew two inches over the summer, nearly as tall as me. Wanting to be alone, we went outside down past the rosebush and sat on the huge chain in the moonlight looking down the bright road and out over the silvered tops of the pines on the hillside.

After our sad remarks about really missing each other, Willie looked down at his hands and said in a choked voice, “I want to tell you something, Benny—I love you.” Big tears ran down his cheeks. I lifted his chin and not daring otherwise, kissed his forehead, which made him start sobbing and cuddle close, sniffing on my shoulder.

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Feeling a sweet love for him as well, I stroked Willie's hair and cheek and said, "You can come visit me in New Orleans, and we can—"

"—No," he moaned, "Daddy don't believe in big cities—he'd never let me go."

We sat holding hands until his folks came out. To say that awful final word, Willie waited till their brown truck was heading off down the Hill and waved out the window.

Afterwards, feeling squeezed out empty, or as Ruthie would say, "like a stomped-on toad-frog," I diddled on my stool over ice tea thinking of Zaya and me in the pines, in the pines, where the sun... Shortly, Joe Ray came in and punched my shoulder. "Give 'em hell in that college, big fellow," he laughed.

Daddy asked me, "Why don't you take over a bit so Joe Ray and me can go outside and talk?" Of course I was glad to oblige. Besides most of the customers were taken care of, and any more would be for sure my last ones forever.

The first one to come in was that cute curly-headed guy from DeQueen name of Georgie. He wished me good luck in the future and like Sammy, hugged me goodbye. I was getting to like hugging and may have squeezed little Georgie too hard. But he didn't seem to mind. Going out the door, he smiled real big and waved.

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Nearly eleven, I headed back across the road, real weary in my muscles from the hauling and hefting all day. Out in the backyard, finally alone, I stretched out naked on my pine straw bed and looked out from the darkness under the hickory tree at the moonlit yard saying goodbye to the trees, the chickenhouse, and the dog pen. Lobo and Duchess came over and lay close by.

I closed my eyes with the wistful thought of wonderful Zaya and marveled about my black brother living all this time just a couple miles off across the woods. The night breeze whispering in the hickory leaves, I felt again my hands soaping up his strong thighs. Was Zaya lying in his bed thinking about me too right now? Maybe it was the moonlight, or the hard work of the day, but I had a long complicated dream—

It's golden evening, and I go to the river. Trees in straight rows, but they're huge tall oaks that make me think Tudor. The sunset turns amber, rays slanting through the columns. Standing on the high bank, I say to myself, "It's too late to swim." Below, there are jagged rocks in the bank. A chorus of voices sings sweetly, "Here are the crawdad towers of shrimp-gulls, here the polyp tubes of ash-clay, and chandelier coral."

Swift water in front of me, a wide river, and I follow its sinuous channel fast to the sea, which draws back, baring sand dunes and fields of sharp stones. A rain of powdery shells falls and shatters to blue dust. I don't want to stay here, so I fly high, high overhead and away, across the land, a desert-crosser returning, outrunning the river. Beneath blur rows of honey-green orchards to a blue lake.

Now I'm on the ground behind a big house among dark cedars. A familiar voice, Danny's, calls "Annie Over!" We're playing that stupid game. Again I feel desperate to see him. I run in the back door through an empty kitchen and down a hall past rooms of furniture draped with sheets. And I know it's our house, Danny's and mine, the one he dreamed of.

I open the big front door to let Danny in, but he isn't there. So I step out onto the porch of that beautiful plantation house with white columns looking out over the lake. Suddenly I see him running across the field, waving, and I find myself breathing hard as though I've just been running too. Danny is beautiful in the golden evening, laughing. I motion him in the door.

Evening sun streams through the windows, swirling around us. In the parlor, the sheets are strangely gone from the furniture. Little green turtles sit and crawl all over the sofa, chairs,

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and tables. Danny stands in front of me, a blush on his smooth cheeks and a glitter in his eye. Amber light burns like honey on his shoulders, and my own arm is also gilded. But my skin grows dark, dark like molasses, like Zaya's. Danny's arms encircle me, and there's a blinding joy of flowing into one another.

And we slide down, down, like down a boat slide, down a mossy channel into the lake among the reed pools. The water is thick and soft around us, the warm blood of the ancient living Earth. Part of it, Danny and I, I and he, we drift slowly around among waving seaweed. And I know that we, and everything else, are just cells in the body of the giant animal Earth.

Above, the sun glimmers down from a high shimmering circle on the surface, flashing through undulating sea-grasses. Fish dart about, brightly colored, splashes on the green. These are the glossons, the threrches, emerald black and leaf-brown birds, and we are they, in plumes and veils of rainbow-feathered fins, floating forever together and one.

—Awaking with a feeling of ecstasy, I looked at the spots of moonlight on my skin, still hearing the echo of those mysterious names, the glossons and threrches. All thought of sleep gone, I got up and walked around the cherry laurel into the side yard. The café neons were off, so it had to be after one, maybe even two. The Desoto was still here, and Joe Ray's car too. Off under the pines, a glow shone from the window of number five. Seemed Daddy and his best buddy still hadn't managed to say bye yet.

Drifting across the backyard, I wandered out the gate into the pasture with Lobo tail-wagging alongside. The moon was already over in the western sky, the trees down the slope blurry and soft in its light. The shadow under the cedar was inky dark, and the cliffs of the gravel pit glowed white. Overhead a late owl whirred by. All around the night was so very still, even the crickets asleep. Only the lonely sound of someone chugging up the Hill.

A thrill of excitement surged through my arms and legs. Tomorrow was but a few short hours away, and I'd really be leaving Piney Hill behind at last. All those years of waiting and longing were about over. Tomorrow! My life would start tomorrow morning! Exhilarated by the great unknown future awaiting me, I chased in wild circles with Lobo. Gamboling around the pasture like a lunatic elf, I decided to make the last of my wishes—that Zaya, my black elf-boy, were here to frolic with me.

Getting weary again, I snuggled my sweet Lobo another goodbye and wondered when I'd ever again get to dance like this, naked in the moonlight. I turned back toward the house where the trees were fuzzily silver, and my willow shimmered in the night breeze. Drowsily I crossed the pool of dappled dark under the big hickory to my pine straw bed, the moon-shadows making strange patterns and shapes on it. In the stillness I seemed to hear Zaya's voice again, like an echo—"Don't let's say bye yet, Mr. Ben."

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