

PLAYING AROUND

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At lunch hour I found Danny out to the smoking tree. All morning, even in Study Hall, he'd been kind of withdrawn. Puffing on his cigar now, he mentioned offhandedly that he'd gone fishing on Sunday with Nina, and she'd fallen in the creek. Made me wonder, because he'd already told me that back on Monday. Must have forgotten. Then he added that she slept with him in bed now, which I didn't know, and she liked nibbling on his ear. Always the practical pig, I asked, "Don't she get fleas in your bed?"

"Nope," he laughed through a cloud of smoke, "but I got ants in my pants." He wiggled and rubbed his thighs with a moan of tender longing.

"Must be mighty hot in there for those poor little critters," I remarked.

Danny laughed and tugged on my shirt button. "You know, I sure wish you wasn't staying over with Mickey tonight, old buddy." I just tugged on his button too since there was nothing I could say except me too, and we headed off to class.

What with me needing to go to the dress rehearsal for our senior play, "Going Steady," and Mickey being in the play too, Daddy had actually agreed to me staying over with the Wileys. At least staying over with Mickey I wouldn't have to worry about being tempted to sin. I did so want to be close to Danny, best buddies, but not to be always tempted to impure touches.

Pretending in the play to be Mickey's father felt funny. I tried to talk in a deep voice to sound old. Actually the part had a lot of comedy lines. At one point, red-headed Jackie, who played the little brother Ricky because he could look so mean, had to accidentally knock me down. We'd make it look like he'd whopped the soup out of me, and it was all I could ever do to keep from laughing. In another scene I'd keep getting my tie comically tangled up.

It was such fun just being on stage. The rehearsals had been exciting with the repetitions to get a line or action just right. And memorizing was like a game. I quickly got so I knew everybody's lines. I could almost imagine how wonderful Annette's life must be among all the lights and cameras for real. But at least we were going to have a real audience.

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Danny and I said goodbye by the lockers. Again he wished I could stay with him instead. He grabbed my shirt pocket and said, "You better keep your pants on, Benny."

"I'm not in any hurry," I said, and then I understood. He didn't want me to do anything sinful with Mickey. It had never crossed my mind, but his jealousy was touching. I assured him, "I'll be good. Mickey won't tempt me, Danny."

"He better not," my buddy said threateningly. He put his arm over my shoulder, and we walked out together. Mickey was also coming out with some girls from eleventh hanging on his every word. Danny and I shared a last look, and I followed Mick off to his schoolbus.

His brother Phil from tenth got on right after us and took a seat as far away from ours as possible. Mickey said he was a bratty kid. Then I remembered that a year or so ago his older brother got killed in a logging accident when a tree fell on him. Watching the new views of countryside passing by outside the bus window, I felt a wave of sympathy for Mickey's loss.

The Wileys lived over near Alleene. His father was a county official. Their beautiful brick house sat on a knoll in a field with a long curving drive up to it. His folks didn't get home till six-thirty usually, and so we were free to wander around the place.

Mickey rowed me out onto their pond, three times the size of ours, and for a while we floated around on the darkling still waters. He was so happy about being in the play, but scared

about an audience. "I bet there'll be some beautiful babes in the front row looking at me," he moaned. Drawing on my vast theatrical experience, I told him that was why we were on stage—to be looked at. By everybody. That seemed to calm him down some.

Later we strolled together across a field of young alfalfa, its fragrance strong on the air. Off across the creek was a big white plantation house nestled back among the dark trees. Mickey said it was his grandpa's place. Though I'd never been there before, it seemed so familiar. There was such a sense of history, of the nineteenth century, wagons and cotton fields.

We sat around on the bank of the creek, and Mick told me about his romantic woes, namely that he couldn't make up his mind which of the many available girls he should make a play for. The problem was if he chose one, most of the rest would write him off forever. Not the one to ask, I didn't even try to offer any advice. Mick turned serious and asked, "So why don't you have a girlfriend, Benny?"

Of the several reasons, I chose to tell him the one about the Church's rule against getting involved with non-Catholic girls. That pretty much covered it without mentioning the painful subjects of absent Annettes, repressive fathers, eternal work, or lack of car. But saying just that sounded kind of strange to my own ears.

He laughed, shook his head, and said, "That sounds awful. Why? Are Catholic girls better, you think?" Again I couldn't say, but appreciated my friend's sympathy. He added, "Danny told me you don't even know how to drive."

"Oh, I know how alright," I replied, annoyed. "Only I can't use our car." I stopped before getting in too deep. We got up then and continued our walk past their big barns and a small orchard. Clearly Mick's family was pretty well off in comparison to mine.

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His folks still weren't home when we wolfed down some peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and left for dress rehearsal. He had his own car, a green Oldsmobile that was his brother Billy's. Mick told me to drive us, and since it was an automatic, I jumped at the chance. Being still good daylight, it was easy to steer down that long drive and turn right. Mickey didn't pay any attention to my driving but fiddled with the radio to find some good rock and roll.

We headed first to Alleene to pick up Bonnie, a very friendly girl, fairly fat with blonde hair, and mighty plain in the face, who was doing makeup for the play. Driving happily on toward Ashdown, I felt great listening to them chatter. It was like being a normal teenage boy. The road was real empty with almost no other cars. One did pass us going a mile a minute, maybe because I was going fairly slowly to be careful.

At the schoolhouse, Bonnie gave me the works, rouge, eye-shadow, lipstick and powder, and a fake mustache that felt like Groucho Marx. All the guys laughed at each other. I wasn't tense, but Jackie had butterflies in his stomach, and Betty Lou, who played Mollie, thought she was going to puke. I talked her out of it. Then we went out onto the stage and ran the play right straight through like clockwork. Nobody flubbed anything.

When Miss Cindy came backstage afterwards, we were jumping up and down so excited. But she was all unhappy, wishing we'd done something, anything, wrong. She explained that dress rehearsals were supposed to be awful for good luck on the performance. While scrubbing off my makeup, I had to chuckle at the old lady's Protestant superstitions.

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After washing off our stage makeup, we were getting ready to leave when Lewis Stevenson leaned in the dressing room and announced that there was a teen dance at the American Legion Hut. Bonnie was wild to go, and Mickey thought it would be interesting to see

what girls were there. I got excited about a teen dance and that maybe Danny would be there.

Since it was dark, Mickey drove us over there, and we found a big empty room with an old record player in the corner. It smelt like cigars. There were several kids dancing around to some old songs. I asked funny Ruby, who sat on my other side in assembly, to dance, and Mickey picked out red-headed Frances. He moved a lot like Jimmy, that handsome blond boy on Bandstand, with a sexy rhythm in his hips.

Wouldn't you know it, but the next record was my sweetheart's lovely old one, "Lonely Guitar," which I danced with Bonnie to be nice. She moved very smoothly in spite of her large size. Meanwhile, I savored the sound of my darling's lovely voice. By the end, I got depressed that the only way I could ever meet my love was by hearing her voice on a record. How very futile and senseless my love for this famous television star now seemed. Don Quixote indeed. Annette lived in a distant world that I would never be part of.

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Before long we went over to Herb's drive-in where the parking lot was a flurry of cars parked around and kids getting their orders from the pickup window. We gobbled a hotdog each, and while Mick took off to drag-race with Buck, who had a souped-up brown Ford, I went over to talk to Don and Patty, the most glamorous couple in our class, who were sitting in her red Thunderbird convertible. Everywhere I was reminded sadly of my beloved Annette. I'd recently read in Teen magazine that she had a white Thunderbird.

Patty thought it was great that I was out "on the town" at last, and I jokingly sang like Burl Ives, "John! John! The grey goose is gone, and the fox is on the town-o, town-o, town-o!" They looked at me strangely and then got my humor.

Turning serious, Patty said, "Benny, I been wanting to ask you something. Can I?" I shrugged assent. "Do Catholics believe in Jesus?"

Recalling the lines of the Apostle's Creed about His Only Son J. C., I said, "Sure. He's part of the Holy Trinity." Here I recognized another opportunity to explain my faith and went on, "It's God the Father, God the Son or Jesus, and the Holy Ghost. They're all one."

Patty and Don both said, "Oh," and shared a skeptical glance. Frankly, I wasn't very clear on it myself and was glad they dropped the inquiry.

Soon I moved over to sit in a car with Jackie and a couple other guys. They were smoking cigarettes and talking about girls and who'd done it with which one. The way I was so quiet, they probably thought I was a real stick-in-the-mud.

A flashy foreign sports car with Texas plates pulled up, and a young man got out. He was dressed stylish with tight pants and much ducktail on his haircut, looking a lot like Ricky Nelson. Jackie said offhandedly, "He looks queer." I didn't think so.

Then another guy, Claude from eleventh, said, "I hear there's one in Texarkana that sits in his car outside the movie house." I was about to ask one of what when Mickey and Buck came roaring back in their hot cars. Mickey had won their race.

We hunted up Bonnie from the cars all over the place and headed back to Alleene. Mickey exulted in his victory, carrying on about how Buck just didn't know how to drive that heap of his. I remarked that going so fast must be more like aiming a car than steering it.

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After dropping Bonnie off, we got back to find Mickey's parents at the kitchen table. It warmed my heart how his father hugged him hi, and his mother too. I shook hands politely and noted with surprise that Mr. Wiley was drinking beer. He had a big belly over his belt. Mrs. Wiley, also pretty fat, offered me a Dr. Pepper and got us some pineapple upside down cake.

Mr. Wiley said, “So I hear you’re going to Tulane, ain’t it?” I described the scholarship they gave me and told about my plans to go to New Orleans and see the place soon as school was over. “Too bad our Mick here hasn’t got such brains!” he lamented.

Mickey winked at me as we sat down to have our cake off real china plates. His mother patted his head and said, “He’s going to Henderson State, you know. That’s exciting too, isn’t it, honey?” The closeness and warmth here in this kitchen was even newer and more wonderful than the whole dress rehearsal, dance, and socializing at Herb’s.

We went into Mickey’s room to hit the sack. It had real nice furniture and curtains, very unlike my own. When I undressed, I laid my clothes on a chair and made for his big double bed, naked as a jaybird. I never wore underwear or pajamas, and apparently Mickey didn’t either. His body was very nicely built, his prick about the same size as mine.

“Boy!” he exclaimed, “You sure are a hairy guy.” Then he looked straight down at my prick and exclaimed, “I’ll be damned! You’re cut. So Danny lied, that fucker!”

“Lied?” I wondered as I climbed onto the bed.

“Yeh! To win our bet. He didn’t think I’d find out.” Suddenly I understood better why Danny had sounded so serious telling me to keep my pants on. Climbing onto the bed too, Mick paused thoughtfully and then flopped onto his pillow laughing. “Now he owes me two!”

“So you already paid up?”

“Yep—because I believed him.” He sounded pissed off.

“What did you guys bet?”

He lifted up on an elbow and looked at me with a question in his greenish eye. “Oh, nothing much. Never mind.”

Having heard the same thing twice, I was now even more intrigued. But if it was their secret... Of course, I couldn’t help getting a mite jealous about Danny having a secret with Mickey, and them not wanting to let me in on it.

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Mickey turned off the light and left the radio on WNOE real low. We lay there in the warm dark. He turned on his side facing me and said, “This used to be Billy’s and my room.” He didn’t sound as sad as I’d have expected. Maybe it was just that it had already been a year.

The next number on the radio was my Annette’s new song, “Dio Mio.” Much as I hated to admit it, the song wasn’t all that good, but the sweet tones of my darling’s voice got me all romantic. Feeling close with Mickey, I daringly remarked, “That Annette’s really something.”

He growled appreciatively. “How’d you like to find her in your bed?” He sprawled out on his back, a soft brightness shining on his body from the yard light. Rubbing his stomach, he mumbled, “Such beautiful tits.” He reached down and took hold of himself, growling again, “Boy! I’d sure like to fuck her.” His hand moved.

Fascinated, I watched Mickey desiring my darling. I didn’t even feel jealous because it was so natural. But it did start getting me hard. Suddenly I got a vivid image of another Mickey with round black ears jerking off over my beautiful Mouseketeer. I burst out laughing.

Just then this Mickey arched his slender back and collapsed with a groan. I had a hard time figuring out why something so utterly beautiful should be a sin. The Everly Brothers started singing another of my favorite oldie songs, “All I Have to Do Is Dream.”

In a minute Mickey asked, “You want to come too?”

Wanting to horribly, I said, “No, it’s a sin to touch yourself impurely.”

“Danny told me,” Mickey sighed. “How about I do it for you?”

I wasn’t quite sure of the doctrine on this one. Even if Mickey didn’t believe it a sin to

BAT IN A WHIRLWIND

By Richard Balthazar

Chapter 8. PLAYING AROUND

touch me that way, how about for me? Of course, if it had been Danny wanting to do it, you can bet your britches I'd let him. I made myself answer Mickey with, "I think we best go to sleep." My virtue tasted bitter though as I lay there in the dark trying to will my bone to go away.

Eventually I drifted off to sleep and had a vivid dream. *I'm walking with Danny in a sunny green field, a broad stream flowing by, clouds gleaming white, and then we're lying in soft grasses mixed with feathery flowers and flitting insects with colored wings. Now I'm a ravenous feline creature like a leopard or jaguar and leap onto Danny's body to devour him. I bite into his throat and taste his salty blood.* I awoke in the sweet darkness to find myself hugging up to Mickey's back, my lips to his shoulder. On the radio "Green Fields" was still playing.

In the morning I woke to see Mickey stretched out on his side smiling at me. The sun shone through the curtains on the beautiful curves of his body. He playfully pinched my tit and called me a sleepyhead. We wrestled around while the radio played "Battle of New Orleans" and sang along with Johnny Horton to the best part:

*They ran through the briars, and they ran through the brambles,
And they ran through the bushes where the rabbits couldn't go!
They ran so fast the hounds couldn't catch 'em,
On down the Mississippi to the Gulf of Mexico!*

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At school Mick ran off with a bunch of girls, and I found Danny hanging out by our lockers. He gave me a weak smile and hi as I approached. When I called him liar, liar, pants on fire, he looked down, ashamed. "So he knows," Danny sighed. "Damn!" He looked up with his wonderful old blush and said, "I really wanted to win the bet this time."

"Well, Mick says now you owe him two," I informed him. "So what did you guys bet?"

Danny sort of cringed and answered, "You don't want to know." I urged him again to tell me, and he asked, "Did you have a good time last night?" Recalling the taste of his throat in my dream, I allowed as how I did but said nothing more. He looked very sad.

We strolled into the auditorium for assembly, and everybody got reminded of the senior play tonight and tomorrow being Senior Day. Danny said he was planning to go fishing on the free day. He sure loved fishing. I figured my best hope was not to have to work in the café. Then maybe I'd take a hike to my white oak grove over by Humpersneck.

After Psychology class, before he had to go to Shop, Danny held me up against the wall of the hallway and asked, "Benny, don't you want to stay over with me tonight and spend Senior Day together?" Again the question wasn't if I wanted... I hemmed and hawed worrying about it being the second night in a row, the play, and all. He leaned close and whispered, "We'll go fishing down on the river."

I argued that I'd probably have to work but agreed to ask my folks when they came to the play tonight. Nervously I suggested we might have a better chance if he talked to Daddy.

"Leave it to me, buddy!" Danny said with a confident wink.

In Study Hall while Danny was reading in his history book, I composed a silly limerick:

*A lissome laddie named Danny
Has manly equipment uncanny,
Well hung up front
For the cunning stunt,
But his finest asset's his fanny.*

Reading it, he grinned and wiggled in his seat. I could still taste his dream-blood.

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After a nice dinner with friend Jackie and his family around a big dining table, he and I walked on back to school where Bonnie made us up for real. Looking at my fake mustache in the mirror, I thought about Mickey's real father and decided to put a towel around my middle to give me a bit of a belly. Miss Cindy thought it was a good idea. Back when my beard disappeared, she'd been pleased and said she would've asked me to shave it off anyway.

Then Mickey took me out back to his car where he had a huge bottle of vodka. In the mood to be reckless, I took a great big swig, and it burned all the way down. We each had another drink, and he offered me a piece of gum. I didn't feel any difference. I wasn't nervous about anything except about what Daddy would say tonight. I figured the play would be a snap.

However, true to Miss Cindy's Protestant superstition, it didn't go very smoothly at all. Actually, it was an incredible mess. Most of the kids were so nervous they couldn't think. Mickey did real good, only hesitating on a couple lines. But in the third scene Gail, the Mother, and Walter got all balled up and called us out like in the next scene.

Making the others come on with me anyway, I tried to bring us back to the right place with my line, somehow, even if I did have to drop a couple pages and invent reasons to order a bewildered Scotty back off stage. The kids picked it right up where they were supposed to, except for Betty Lou, who still thought we were in the other scene and got so painfully confused that she just exited.

There were some major goofs too, like when Jackie completely forgot his lines and after a long silence quite casually asked, "Would anyone else care to comment on that?" We all stood there dumbfounded while the audience roared. At another point Walter started his lines that explained something and got the names all mixed up. You couldn't follow what he was talking about. Then there was the time right in the middle of a tense scene between me and Scotty when all the lights went out for nearly a minute. It felt like ten minutes sitting there in the dark.

At the end while we were taking our bows, the applause sounded so great that I wondered about maybe going on stage professionally. For just that moment it was easy to imagine getting so famous that Annette would know me. When the clapping died down and the curtain closed, it got all sad. Gail and Betty Lou started crying.

I ran out to meet Danny in the back hallway so we could go see my folks about staying over. He laughed at my mustache and belly. We made our way through groups of the audience being stopped by schoolmates and parents with praise for my performance.

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My family was waiting at the side door of the auditorium. Daddy said hi to Danny with a frown and also frowned at my mustache. Mom shook his hand, and Janie smiled. I almost never saw that expression on her face. She actually turned it toward me and said, "You were great." I appreciated the effort it had cost her to say something so nice. "But," she said, "I don't understand why the father sent Scotty away that time."

"Neither do I," I said and noticed that Daddy was looking bored. Carefully I told him about Senior Day off tomorrow and a dance again at the Lions Club tonight.

Danny bravely jumped in. "Can Benny stay over with me and go fishing tomorrow?"

Mom looked down at the ground while Daddy said quietly, "Your mom might not care to have him hanging around." My heart sank.

Danny assured him it was fine. "I'll bring him home tomorrow evening."

Daddy looked angry and said, "No, he's already been gone from home one night."

Then Danny argued that maybe he could pick me up in the morning to go fishing.

Taking out his can of Copenhagen, Daddy said, "If he's off from school, he's got to work

tomorrow.” I knew that meant he was going fishing himself.

Danny grasped at straws. “I’ll bring him home after the dance tonight. Please, sir!”

“No.” Then Daddy turned to me and said, “Now let your mom take pictures so we can get on home.” Danny smiled at me sadly and hoped we could do it some other time. But it was such a short time till graduation that I couldn’t find much hope.

Mom was standing there with my flash camera. She stood me up by the wall and blinded me a couple times, once with Danny. Then Daddy told me to go wash the junk off my face so we could go home to Piney Hill.

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Back at the boys’ dressing room, which was almost empty by now, I sat down at the dressing table and took off the fake mustache and makeup. Danny stood behind my stool with his big hands on my shoulders. We looked at each other in the mirror with disappointed smiles. Taking off my hideous yellow tie, I moaned about how terribly I’d wanted to stay over with him. Laughing ironically, he ran his hands down inside my shirt and rubbed the hairs on my chest. Holding them still, I returned his loving expression in the mirror.

Mickey’s voice sounded from the doorway, “Playing feelies, hey?” We both jumped. Mickey winked at me and pulled a stool up to the makeup table beside me. “Let me get this stuff off quick,” he said business-like to Danny in the mirror, “so you can pay up on our bet—the one you lied on.” My buddy looked down, properly repentant for cheating.

With Daddy waiting for me at the car, I rushed to change my pants and joked, “Since it was about me, maybe I ought to collect the bet myself, don’t you think?”

“Why not?” Mickey agreed. “Since that lying skunk owes me two blowjobs now, you can get one, Benny, if you want.”

I stood there petrified with one leg in my pants, stunned. And doubly stunned to realize that Mickey had already paid off... And he was offering me... My Danny looked utterly miserable. I recalled him wanting to win the bet “this time,” which meant he’d lost it before, which meant... Coming to my senses, I mumbled, “No, thanks.”

“Well, let me know if you change your mind,” Mickey laughed as he finished with his cleanup, “unless I use ‘em both up tonight.” Slouched by the door, my buddy wouldn’t meet my eye. Mickey gathered up his stuff, kicked Danny’s leg, and said, “Come on, pal. There’s a little something you gotta do for me. And I got some vodka.”

“That’s good,” Danny said, “’cause I need to get real drunk tonight.”

I figured he meant so he could pay up on the bet. Like an addled fool, I tried to buckle up my belt, and Mickey punched my shoulder with, “Have a great Senior Day, Ben.”

“Thanks,” I said and ignored the irony.

“I’m real sorry, Benny,” Danny said and patted my smooth cheek. “I’ll catch a fish for you tomorrow.” Then he followed Mickey out the door.

Too upset to think straight, somehow I managed to get back out to the folks. Riding home in the dark backseat, I felt terribly blue about being dragged off home to Piney Hill like a little boy. Not to mention explosions of furious jealousy about Danny and Mickey. At some time tonight my best buddy was going to... Even being saved from committing a mortal sin didn’t seem particularly great as I rode along, a prisoner being hauled back to his jail.

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