

GETTING NAKED

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After that long weekend, first thing Monday morning when we were standing by our lockers, Danny said he'd gone fishing on the Little River with his uncle George in a motorboat and caught a bunch of catfish. I asked if Mickey and he'd gotten very drunk on that vodka after the play. He looked away and replied off-handedly, "Yep." That just made me more curious.

On the way to Civics I pulled him aside in the hallway and asked right out if he'd really done it for Mickey. "Really do what?" he asked with an innocent look and then blushed crimson. I'd bet dollars to donuts he really did do it.

Danny, Mickey, and I sat together in Study Hall in a bunch by the windows. Outside it was getting dark like for a storm, and the wind was whipping up in the oak trees. I felt jealousy whipping round in me just like that wind. Mickey leaned close and whispered loud enough that Danny surely could hear, "Got one left over, Ben. Say the word and it's yours."

I was stupefied by temptation and speechless. Danny looked away, not blushing but looking mad. Mickey giggled at our confusion and whispered, "What the hell! It's yours for whenever you want it, pal." Danny muttered an obscenity, and I blushed enough for us both.

Everybody else was studying for finals, but with a straight-A average, I was exempt from the tests. I tried my best to concentrate on my valedictorian speech about the blessings of freedom, but it was hard not to think of pricks in... Danny studied in his literature book, and Mickey was supposed to be struggling with his Trig assignment.

Instead, Mick passed me a note: "Watch out for the teeth." I giggled as quietly as I could in total consternation. The mere idea of a blowjob was so totally ridiculous. To stand there with your boner in someone's mouth, like in a comic strip, as silly as sticking it in someone's armpit. Or someone sticking it in your mouth so you can't talk, and his pubic hairs tickling your nose and making you sneeze. Still, I had to wonder how it would feel. Of course, I wasn't getting a heck of a lot done on my speech.

That was when the sky outside the big windows turned ugly green, and blasts of wind whipped and shrieked in the line of oak trees in the schoolyard. There was a deafening roar, and as we watched in horror, a black tornado slammed down in the street and moved along it yanking up and tossing oak trees right and left like toothpicks, sucking a couple up into its whirling spout. Then just like that it lifted up into the sky, jumped over the schoolhouse, and was gone.

The kids in the Study Hall were all hollering and running around, but we three were still by the big window dumbstruck by the destruction and our narrow escape from disaster. Finally Danny muttered, "Praise Jesus!" Mickey and I said, "Amen." I figured that wasn't just a Protestant thing. Being that close to absolute chaos made a big impression on me. A tornado! It sort of put my own private whirlwind in perspective. Maybe I couldn't tell which way was up, but at least I still knew where I was—beside my best buddy.

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At lunch hour we went out to the street to survey the damage. The big trees were snapped to pieces. We sat in the shade under one of the surviving trees. Danny looked awful worried, or maybe it was still the fear. To comfort him, I whispered that he didn't really have to give me a blowjob unless he wanted to.

Then we got down to serious planning for me to stay over with him. Danny decided he'd have his mother Ethel call my folks at the café tomorrow and invite me formal-like to come for Wednesday when there was a party for us seniors in the gym. I hoped maybe we could arrange

some dates even and go parking in Danny's car.

Tuesday at lunch Danny called his mother from the office and came out with a glum face. "Your dad just said flat no," he sighed. "Not even no reason."

At lunch on Wednesday we sat out on the football field with our shirts off, tanning and talking. There was only tomorrow at school, Friday off, and Graduation on Saturday. We still had so much yet to say in such a short time.

Danny suddenly got a bright idea. "I'll come up to the Hill tomorrow night and rent a cabin so we can have us a senior party all our own. And I'll bring some liquor. Uncle George can get me some tonight in Texarkana." I wasn't going to argue with that, but we couldn't let Daddy know about the liquor.

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To be daring on our last day of school, at noon on Thursday we left campus and walked down shady First Street to the Drugstore. It felt special in the noontime light. Danny told me that last night at the senior party he'd slow-danced with Nyla the Knockout and gotten on a bone. Also he'd found out Betty Lou was going off to college, too.

I screwed up my courage to ask, "What was it like with Mickey? You know..."

Danny laughed. "You shouldn't be thinking about sins like that, Benny." He was right, and I tried not to think about it.

We sat in the Drugstore's quiet far booth with a lunch of banana splits flooded in chocolate sauce. I was feeling awful sentimental knowing that after Graduation, like last summer, I'd have to work in the café. Daddy said last Friday I'd work full-time days.

Danny encouraged me, "After all, you got you a job, right?" He looked so cute with whipped cream and chocolate smears on his upper lip. Then he got serious and said, "Benny, I don't know what to do myself. Mr. Phillips says I can work half-time here still, but that won't earn much. What am I gonna do, Benny?"

How I wished I could give my Danny advice, but what did I know? Jobs around here in Ashdown were as rare as toes on a snake. Out of high school, lots of guys would get married right away and try for a travelling job on the pipelines or if they were lucky, go to work in the paper mill. Lots more had no choice but to sign up for the armed services right away. Folks said the County draft board never had any work to do.

"Hey," I brightened, recalling our earlier conversation, "How about getting a job with the county or state road department? Driving those big road graders ought to be fun."

Danny was quiet for a while and then said, "Yeh, maybe." While he nibbled on his ice cream and worried, I did the same. I kept thinking what graduation really meant and was agonized that I wouldn't get to see Danny every day anymore.

After the last school bell, Danny walked me to the Ben Lomond bus and with a wicked smile said, "See you later, pal." I knew he meant around nine-thirty this evening. Then there was the last ride in the old schoolbus across the river bottoms with Willie giggling and chattering beside me. The last ride in Mary Nell's green Studebaker, the last walk up the hill, last look back at the view, and last hitchhike (with a tourist couple from Illinois) home to Piney Hill.

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I told Daddy right away about Danny coming up and renting a cabin and us having our own private senior party. He actually chuckled, "Well, you make sure Ed Norton signs in the register and pays his three dollars." He even agreed that I wouldn't have to work till one o'clock so maybe we could go for a hike tomorrow morning.

However, this evening Daddy had to take Mom to an ice cream social affair over at the

Belcher place, so I had to work for him. It was fairly busy, keeping me running, and I figured it was a good trade-off for tomorrow morning. It also kept me from watching the clock and thinking about my friend's arrival.

He showed up right at the promised time, and I rejoiced to see him in a brief moment between customers. We registered him in the motel book as Mr. Ed Norton from Brooklyn for number five, the nice one out by the woods. I told him it was the honeymoon cabin, and he gave me a wicked wink. Then, while I kept working, Danny hung out happily with the pinballs. In passing I'd peek in at him every chance I got, just for his smile.

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The folks got home shortly before ten from their party, and it was time for ours. Danny carried some Cokes and ice down to number five, and I ran over to the house for my cards and radio. Going down to the cabin, I trotted along through the pine shadows from the low half-moon and suddenly felt as though I was in some other reality. The window of the cabin glowed with the lamp through white curtains, an almost magical place.

When I walked in, I got a huge surprise to find Danny with all his clothes off, buck-naked, lounging on the bed with a Roi-Tan and a water-glass of brown drink. He laughed, "I like to be comfortable when I get drunk. Have a rum and Coke, good buddy."

He went over to the dresser and poured me a drink. Meanwhile, I shucked out of my clothes too and told him how I always like to get naked, roaming out in the woods and even swinging on vines in trees like Tarzan. Danny handed me the glass and brushed the hair on my chest, laughing, "Benny of the Apes. But Tarzan wore pants."

"Only in the movies," I insisted. "I bet Mrs. Gorilla didn't sew him any lace panties."

Danny laughed and raised his glass. "Drink up, Benny-boy."

I took a good slug of my drink. It was sweet and sneaky at the back of my nose. Danny sprawled out on the bed again and left his cigar to go out in the ashtray, which I silently appreciated. He remarked, "I've never been naked outside. Oh, yeh, skinny-dipping at the river, but not just walking around."

I plugged in the radio and got up on the bed with my drink and the deck of cards. The music came on with "The Happy Organ," quite a circus-y way to start off a party. Sitting tailor-fashion cross-legged, I took another sip and started shuffling the cards. The drink tasted even better now that the fumes up my nose weren't so strange. And it felt so natural sitting here with Danny like this, just the two of us with nothing on and nothing else to do.

We started out playing blackjack poker, and whenever you lost, you had to take a huge slug of your drink. After several rounds of winning and losing and as many slugs, the both of us were in mighty relaxed moods, chattering and laughing and carrying on over our cards. When the radio started that really silly old song "Purple People Eater," we commenced giggling hysterically and scattered cards all over.

With yet another drink, maybe our third, we gathered up the cards and switched to gin rummy. After a few hands and still another drink, I got up for the bathroom and felt happily blurry, so light, not really connected to the floor. Back on the bed, I found Danny had dealt. While I arranged the cards in my hand, he remarked, "I wanna get my rocks off pretty soon." I called him a sex-fiend, and he asked, "What else am I supposed to do with a boner on?"

"Just ignore it," I said. "When I get a hard on out in the woods or whatever, I ignore it." To be truthful with him, I added, "Most of the time."

Danny leaned back on the pillows at the head of the bed and considered his cards. Then he looked down at his crotch and sighed, "Show me how to ignore that." His prick was slowly

quivering and lifting, growing, that secret head slipping out of its hood, peeking at me like a little animal. I couldn't ignore it. It was hypnotic.

He tossed his cards aside, laughed, and asked, "And what about that?" He pointed at what was happening to me too. He grinned guiltily, looking cuter than anybody should.

Leaping up off the bed, I babbled, "Just don't touch it! Don't look at it! Or think about it! Do something else!" Feeling dizzy from the booze, I marched back and forth looking at the ceiling and got more and more confused.

Danny jumped up from the bed and said, "I know what. We can go outside." It sounded like a good idea to me. Even though the soles of my feet were tough as leather, I'd learned from experience to wear shoes outside at night in case of stepping on things you can't see. So we looked plain silly all naked in just shoes, no socks, and I could hardly stop laughing. Even so, our erections weren't discouraged.

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Being near midnight, it was real quiet outside the cabin with the moon getting lower in the west. Danny and I stepped out into the slanting streaks of moonlight, and again it felt like a magic place. We stood looking at each other, naked and strange in the silver light. Obviously he wasn't thinking about something else. Apparently I wasn't either.

There was a trail, an animal track, leading down the slope into the woods. You could just make it out running through the grass and bushes into the darker woods. We walked along with me blabbering about something, anything, and it seemed to work for me. One look showed that it didn't for my buddy. He moaned and reached for it, but I ordered him not to.

A piece down the track, suddenly a cloud slid across the moon, and it got dark as nobody's business. We stopped walking and peered around in the darkness. There wasn't even a glow of the café neons anywhere. Danny exclaimed, "I can't see a thing!"

Well, I could see a bit, enough to tell he was looking the other way. With only a tiny rustle in the leaves and bushes, I slipped tiptoe off to the right and hid behind the tree beside us. Danny turned and said, "Hey, what you doing, Benny?" I stifled a giggle and listened to him call, "Where are you? Come on, buddy!"

I let him stew in the dark for a moment calling me, and then the cloud slipped on past the moon. When Danny turned away again looking for me, I stepped out from behind the tree and said, "Hey!" He gave a cry of relief and grabbed my arm. "What's all the shouting?" I asked nonchalantly and lied, "I was standing right here the whole time."

"No, you weren't. You were just scaring me." He pinched my bare butt for revenge.

"Did it work?" I asked, and we both saw that it did. So we continued our walk a while. With the next cloud shadow, we waited in the dark, and Danny grabbed my hand so I couldn't slip off this time. In the distance a truck labored up the Hill with a low growl. Holding his hand got me hard again. When the moon came back out, I saw that my pal was too.

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Danny announced that he needed another drink, and though I still felt real tipsy, even drunk, I wanted another one too. So we headed back to the cabin still holding hands. Safe and sound inside, we kicked off our shoes, and he made drinks. Right away he chugged half of his.

That was when the radio started playing "The Twist," and we danced around the room giggling like fools. The wild song really got our private party rolling again. Then we decided to play naked charades. First off, Danny did a six-word movie, and after getting 'around' and 'world,' I guessed the 'eighty days.' My charade was the movie, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," which stumped me on doing 'tin,' but Danny didn't know the movie anyway.

On his next turn, Danny stood in front of me wobbling woozily with a soft expression in his big brown eyes. The radio started that romantic Elvis song “It’s Now or Never.” Then, instead of signaling book or movie or whatever, he rotated his hips sexily, his prick lifting and poking straight out at me. I stared in drunken awe. Taking both my hands in his he pulled me up from sitting on the bed and held our clasped hands over our heads. Standing so close up to each other, we knocked together like sticks. Danny whispered, “Is this touching?”

Since touching was with hands, I didn’t think so, and we proceeded to have a sword-fight. The splendid bumping made me weak in the knees, and I fell back onto the bed, dragging Danny with me. Falling smack on top of me, he stuck his prick up between my legs and started pumping. Lifting up a little, he smiled at me with an expression of surprise, and brought his mouth down on mine. It was a kiss like nothing I’d ever imagined. I felt his breathing, his heart, his thrusting, and the resonance in my own body. And then blinding joy.

We lay in a pile on the bed, breathing in each other’s ear. How amazing it was to hold my Danny in the amber dim lamplight of our cozy cabin. His smiling eyes were so close and full of that wordless love and understanding of best friends. I marveled at the wild things rum can lead to, things you’d never do except with your very, very best friend.

I somehow managed to reach over and turn off the lamp. The radio started that dreamy piece “Sleepwalk,” and cuddling close, we slept. I dreamt of a bell ringing in the distance.

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The morning was bright with sun on the curtains, and a brilliant haze filled the room. Danny’s wristwatch on the bed table said nearly eight. He rubbed his forehead with a little headache from the booze. But even with all that rum, I felt fit as a fiddle. When he turned toward me, I saw a dark hickey on his throat and got a spasm of joy recalling when I did that.

We got up and took a shower together, scrubbing each other down. Of course, Danny got excited, and I called him a sex-fiend again. He rubbed my chest and blushing furiously, asked, “Did you like it?” I nodded and asked if he did. He also nodded.

Ignoring our erections, we dried off and reluctantly got dressed. Putting on clothes again felt unpleasant and strange, but we were both starving for breakfast. Before we checked out, I made sure to clean up our messes and all evidence of rum so Mom wouldn’t find anything when she came in later to do the cabin over. Danny hid the empty rum bottle in his car.

At the café first thing I got him some Bayer aspirin for his hangover and took us some coffee to number two. Then I ordered up breakfast from Melba. Mom was working the front and came by to ask if we’d had fun at our party. I sure hoped she wouldn’t notice the hickey on my pal’s neck, but why should she think I was the one who made it?

Danny replied politely, “We played cards and charades till awful late, ma’am, and talked and listened to the radio.” He didn’t say word one about walking naked in the woods or some other things. When Mom went to see to a customer, he whispered, “And some other things.”

We smiled at each other over our coffee cups, Danny in that wicked way of his. I just gazed at him, remembering the kiss, wanting it again. He asked me what I was thinking, and I whispered truthfully, “Kissing you.” That was when Melba hollered pick-up, and I jumped up to fetch our hotcakes and sausage. Danny puckered at me when I served him.

We ate hungrily in silence. There was nothing in the world except Danny across the booth from me, that glint of mischief in his eye. Under the table our legs secretly rubbed together. Once after I took a big syrupy bite of my cakes, he looked at my mouth and said, “Sweet.” That was exactly what I was thinking about the drop of syrup on his upper lip.

Mom passed by with the refill pot and topped off our cups. We sat in the booth a while

longer over our coffee and talked about what to do with our morning. I jumped at the chance to suggest hiking to my secret spring, my enchanted glade, and Danny thought that was great. Behind his hand, he whispered, "And we can get naked again." With that pleasant thought in mind, I quickly cleared our dishes, and we took off.

We picked up a couple walking sticks off the back porch and set off with frisky Lobo across the pasture. I led us down past the hog pen and through the pine thicket to the track on the west side of the Hill. Danny looked so happy out here in the woods, skipping along down the path with Lobo nipping at his heels. He was like a faun in a mythical forest. I recalled those other things we'd done last night and realized that one of them was making love. We'd sealed our friendship forever by making love.

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Hurrying to catch up with Danny on the trail, I took his hand so we could touch. He squeezed it and said, "Whatever happens, Benny, I'll never forget last night." Well, that made two of us. I teased, asking what he wouldn't forget, and Danny almost whispered, "Making love." Then we walked along silently for a ways. He kept looking around at the woods around, but since I knew the places so well, I just looked at my buddy and couldn't forget it either.

The track ran along the top of the slope above the spring branch, and just a piece down from it we got to the mossy shelves and waterfall. Lobo ran off into the woods down by the branch to explore. Danny looked around my valley in awe at all the flowers in bloom now in mid-May. The bank of honeysuckle was blooming too, its fragrance floating on the breeze. One pretty purple iris was blooming late, and some critter had been digging at the edge of the patch. The slopes below the mossy ledges were also soft green with moss and grasses.

Right away Danny and I stripped out of our clothes and grinned happily at each other's nakedness. We took handfuls of the cool waterfall to drink and then lay down on the green slope. He pulled me close to put my head on his shoulder, and the morning sunshine speckled our bodies. In a nearby tree a mockingbird started up a concert of trills and chirps.

Stroking his chest affectionately, I told my pal about the mysterious elf that had repaired my dam earlier in the spring. He laughed and nuzzled my hair. "You know, Benny, that's why I love you. Elves and enchanted glades and magic fish."

I asked, "Danny, do you have any idea how much I love you?"

"Some," he answered into my hair. "About half as much as I love you." With me silent in overjoyed outrage, he sighed, "Benny, babe, what do you dream about the future for us?"

His question stopped me in my tracks. I'd never dreamed about a future other than going off to college. I'd never given a thought to what that would mean. Suddenly it got horrifyingly clear that it meant leaving my Danny. Ashamed and anguished, I said, "Gee, I don't know."

"Well," Danny said squeezing me close, "I've got a couple dreams. One's that I'll go off with you to your college, but there's no way I could stand to live in a big city."

Off across the spring branch Lobo gave a couple barks like at some varmint.

I asked, "What's your other dream?"

He giggled. "I just thought how maybe you and me could get some jobs and build us a great big house, one of them white ones with porches and balconies." I could see it, like Mr. Jack's house at Paraclifta with columns and tall oaks at the corners. Danny went on in a whisper, "And we could marry some gals to have kids and raise up our families together in our house."

The simple beauty of his dream was so totally possible. The world seemed to turn upside down as I imagined forgetting about college and doing that with Danny, loving each other as best friends for the rest of our lives. In my confused silence, he said, "And tomorrow we've got to

graduate. Benny, I don't know what to do. I just don't know..."

I felt the sob rising in his chest and hugged him close, nuzzling his throat. When his hand took hold of my prick, without hesitating I gripped his too and marveled at the firm, strong feel of him in my hand. We looked at each other in wonder and fell into the kiss again, riding the waves of joy in each other's body.

After a while, across the way Lobo started barking again, yappy, sounding like he'd treed a squirrel. We listened and laughed at his futile excitement. Then we ambled down the slope past the bank of honeysuckle to the spring branch. My favorite swimming hole under the dark holly tree was barely knee-deep, so you had to lie down on the gravelly bottom to get wet, but the delicious cool was well worth it.

We stretched out side by side splashing our feet, and I tried to cheer us up with thoughts of all the time we still had this summer to spend together, going places together, and some other things... Wiggling his toes, Danny said, "Benny, I didn't tell you before, but this Monday coming we're going to visit relatives in Shreveport for nearly three weeks." I might as well have been kicked in the head by a mule. He brushed my cheek and sighed, "I'll miss you so much, babe. But I'll be back real quick."

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Daddy dropped me off at the schoolhouse on Saturday morning to get ready for the graduation ceremony, and they went on downtown to the department store to get Janie some new shoes. I rushed back to the dressing room where they were passing out the boys' robes and found Danny waiting impatiently for me in the hallway. Already in his black gown and silly cap, he was holding up the wall and whistling tunelessly. The way we smiled at each other there wasn't any need to say hi.

My pal stood with me in line to get my gown. He still couldn't believe Daddy wouldn't let me stay for the barbecue picnic celebration this afternoon. Right before he left yesterday, he'd asked Daddy nicely, even promising to bring me home to the Hill afterwards. I wasn't surprised, but just as disappointed. He helped me into my robe.

When Mickey came in, he said we all looked like a bunch of black crows. I told him that would be a murder of crows, and Danny and I started flapping our robes and cawing. Next thing, all the other guys in the hall started doing it, and the Shop teacher Mr. Dewey got all flustered trying to calm us down. In the confusion Danny blew me a secret kiss.

Waiting for the families and folks to get seated in the auditorium, Danny and I leaned by our lockers, close again like old times. We whispered about what we'd done since yesterday afternoon and bemoaned three whole weeks apart. At the edge of his collar I saw the hickey was still dark, and it got me hard. Maybe it showed on my face because he whispered, "Me, too."

As Valedictorian, I had to march first in line leading the graduating Class of 1960 into the auditorium with Sarah Jane, the Salutatorian, right behind me. But then she and I peeled off to go up on the stage, and the rest went to the front rows of seats. From my chair on the stage, Danny and I had a good view of each other between two pots of red flowers, and I couldn't take my eyes off his big brown ones.

I'd totally memorized my speech and rattled on profoundly about the blessings of freedom. Looking around at all the people out front, I was amazed at their rapt attention and blank faces. My own family was sitting near the back looking the same way. Up close in front, my buddy gave me a naughty smile and almost made me lose my place in the speech. Maybe I did, but no one seemed to notice.

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We marched proudly past Mr. Foster to get our diplomas with flashbulbs popping off all over the place. When the ceremony was finally over with everybody tossing their caps in the air, I jumped down off the stage to Danny. In the midst of all the hollering and hooting, we hugged each other for a long minute. Then it was time to go find our families. On the way outside, we congratulated Mickey, who was naturally surrounded by a gaggle of girls.

Danny's folks were waiting by the door and congratulated us warmly. His nice mama Ethel gave me a big hug. I was pleased to meet his Pop, who was named Vernon, a tall man looking a whole lot like my buddy. He shook my hand and said, "I'm mighty pleased to meet you, Ben. My boy's talked so much about you." Danny rolled his eyes.

We took them over to meet my family who were waiting in the shade of one of the surviving oaks in the schoolyard. During the introductions, Daddy made his face into that mask he always wears with customers, not quite smiling, that polite look. Janie stood there looking bored, and Mom was real happy to meet them.

Clapping me on the shoulder, Vernon remarked to Daddy, "You must be right proud of your boy here being the Valid... Anyway whatever that word is."

Daddy didn't change expression one bit or say anything, but Mom quickly replied that they were real proud of me. Then we got down to taking pictures. Ethel took one of us for our whole family, as did Mom for the three of them. They also took some snapshots of my pal and me in our crow costumes leaning on each other and another of us flapping and cawing.

Daddy didn't even smile at that. Instead his expression was aggravated. I couldn't imagine what was eating him. Nevertheless, after our crow dance, Danny gave it another try, politely asking Daddy if I could just stay for the graduation picnic. He'd bring me home.

Now the expression turned into the angry one I was too familiar with. He snapped at Danny, "I already told you no, and no means no!"

Now Mom knew better than to make a peep, but Ethel didn't. She said, "Well, my gracious! Why can't he just stay..."

"Keep your nose out of this, lady!" he said with a glare, his face getting darker.

"Hey, mister," Vernon jumped in, "What do you think you..."

"He's got work to do," Daddy growled. He shoved me hard in the chest. "And you go take off that get-up. Five minutes." He yanked Mom away, and a terrified Janie followed them toward the car that was parked on the street.

"Well, I never!" Ethel sputtered in insulted distress. I shriveled up in humiliation, but she hugged me close, and Danny joined in.

Vernon patted me gently on the shoulder and asked, "What's his problem?" I didn't want to say it seemed like Daddy didn't like me graduating—or growing up at all—and couldn't do thing one about it but get mad. "Well, you'll be alright, son," Vernon said. "Not long now and you'll get away to college. Not too long..." His tone said Danny told him about the licking.

When Danny and I'd turned in all the rented stuff, all we had left was our diploma and tassel. After goodbyes to classmates in the hall, we went back outside. His folks hugged me again, and so did he. He whispered in my ear, "Just three weeks." Then he gave me a three-fingered wave. I did too, like our secret hand-signal.

On the way to the car I managed to dry my eyes. So much for the blessings of freedom. Scarcely a word was spoken all the way home. It was like having a thundercloud in the car. But strangely, when we got back to the Hill, Daddy didn't even make me work. Melvin was already covering the afternoon. Why would he say I had to work and couldn't stay for the picnic? It was an awful thing to say about your father, but it seemed to me like just pure meanness.

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I sat in number three picking at a cheeseburger and hearing Danny's Pop say again, "Not too long..." Then a bunch of the Lockjaw seniors, kids I'd gone to junior high with, Becky Sharp and Royce Potter, Flossie Miller, Leo Hallman, and some others stopped in to pick up some soda pops, chips, and stuff for their graduation swimming party at Paraclifta.

They invited me to come along, and Daddy said, "Sure, go on. What the hell! You graduated too." When he turned back to the kitchen, I walked out the door with the kids without a word. His permission was a cruel kindness. Why couldn't he have said the same thing to my Danny? I felt totally robbed of this special afternoon with my buddy.

The swimming hole at Paraclifta was a big deep one on the Cossatot under a high bridge. Guys would jump off it into the river, but I wasn't about to. My old flame from eighth grade, Pam, was there in a pink bathing suit looking very much a woman now, and she was real friendly. Since I was the only hairy guy there, I caught lots of them, even the guys, looking at my body, some sneaky-like and others with an odd expression. It was my first time in a bathing suit with any of these kids, and I didn't know whether to feel ashamed or proud.

Even down in the river, splashing around under the bridge, you could see up the road a piece to where Mr. Jack's big white house sat with its columns and oak trees. The fields all around it were greener than possible, so peaceful and almost real, just like in Danny's beautiful dream for us.

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