PREFACE

ANGUS BETHUNE

“A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune” is the one story in this collection that does not include a character from any of my novels. In the fall of 1988, shortly after finishing writing Chinese Handcuffs and looking for something a little lighter to cool off my word processor, I received a call from Don Gallo, who had previously edited two collections of short stories for young adults. Don asked me to submit a story for his third, to be called Connections, urging me, if possible, to avoid such mainstay subjects of young adult literature as death, disease, and lost love.

When I need a good idea, I run. Something about the cadence of my feet pounding on the road and the rhythm of air flowing in and out of me frees my mind to run to new ideas. It is possible I ran too far that day, or the sun was much hotter than I thought, because when I returned home, I knew two things about my story: It would be about a fat kid with two sets of gay parents (so when he visited his mother, he also visited his stepmother, and when he visited his father, he also visited his stepfather), and his name would be Angus Bethune. I had waited years to use that name.

It was my first attempt at writing a short story, so I felt I had nothing to lose. My ego was not wrapped up in getting it published. What happened next was magical for me. The short story form forced me to be precise beyond what had been required before, and the process gave me invaluable lessons in word and idea economy.

And I loved the finished product. So much that I wanted to keep it for myself. But I had promised it to Don, and to Don it went. However, I like to have my cake and eat it. And lick the frosted beaters and sell it at the fair and have people jump out of it. So I took the story back, making it the only story in this collection that has previously appeared in another book.
“A Brief Moment in the Life of Angus Bethune”

Sometimes, when I stand back and take a good look, I think my parents are ambassadors from hell. Two of them, at least, the biological ones, the big ones.

Four parents are what I have altogether, not unlike a whole lot of other kids. But quite unlike a whole lot of other kids, there ain’t a hetero among ‘em. My dad’s divorced and remarried, and my mom’s divorced and remarried, so my mathematical account of my family suggests simply another confused teenager from a broken home. But my dads aren’t married to my moms. They’re married to each other. Same with my moms.

However, that’s not the principal reason I sometimes see my so-called real parents as emissaries from way down under. As a matter of fact, that frightening little off-season trade took place prior to — though not much prior to — my birth, so until I began collecting expert feedback from friends at school, somewhere along about fourth grade, I perceived my situation as relatively normal.

No, what really hacks me off is that they didn’t conceive me in some high tech fashion that would have allowed them to dip into an alternative gene pool for my physical goodies. See, when people the size of my parents decide to reproduce, they usually dig a pit and crawl down in there together for several days. Really, I’m surprised someone in this family doesn’t have a trunk. Or a blowhole. I swear my gestation period was three years and seven months.

You don’t survive a genetic history like that unscathed. While farsighted parents of other infants my age were pre-enrolling their kids four years ahead into elite preschools, my dad was hounding the World Wrestling Federation to hold a spot for me sometime in the early 1990s. I mean, my mom had to go to the husky section of Safeway to buy me Pampers.

I’m a big kid.

And they named me Angus. God, a name like Angus Bethune would tumble Robert Redford from a nine and a half to a four, and I ain’t no Robert Redford.

“Angus is a cow,” I complained to my stepmother, Bella, the day in first grade I came home from school early for punching the bearer of that sad information in the stomach.

“Your mother must have had a good reason for naming you that,” she said.

“For naming me after a cow?”
“You can’t go around punching everyone who says that to you,” she warned.

“Yes, I can,” I said.

“Angus is a cow,” I said to my mother when she got home from her job at Westhead Trucking firm. “You guys named me after a cow.”

“Your father’s uncle was named Angus,” she said, stripping off her outer shirt with a loud sigh, then plopping into her easy chair with a beer, wearing nothing but her bra; a bra, I might add, that could have well floated an ejected fighter pilot to safety.

“So my father’s uncle was named after a cow, too,” I said. “What did he think of that?”

“Actually,” Mom said, “I think he was kind of proud. Angus was quite a farmer, you know.”

“Jesus help me,” I said, and went to my room.

As Angus, the fat kid with perverted parents, I’ve had my share of adjustment problems, though it isn’t as bad as it sounds. My parents’ gene pool wasn’t a total slump. Dad’s family has all kinds of high-school shot put record holders and hammer throwers and even a gridiron hero or two, and my mom’s sister almost made it to the Olympic trials in speed skating, so I was handed a fair-size cache of athletic ability. I am incredibly quick for a fat kid, and I have world-class reflexes. It is nearly impossible for the defensive lineman across from me to shake me, such are my anticipatory skills, and when I’m on defense, I need only to lock in on a running back’s hips to zero in on the tackle. I cannot be shaken free. Plus you don’t have to dig too deep in our ancestral remains to find an IQ safely into three digits, so grades come pretty easy to me. But I’d sure be willing to go into the winter trade meetings and swap reflexes, biceps, and brain cells, lock, stock, and barrel, for a little physical beauty.

Which brings me to tonight. I don’t want you to think I spend all my life bitching about being short-changed in the Tom Cruise department or about having parents a shade to the left of middle on your normal bell-shaped sexual curve; but tonight is a big night, and I don’t want the blubbery bogeyman or the phantoms of sexual perversity, who usually pop up to point me out for public mockery, mucking it up for me. I want normal. I want socially acceptable. See, I was elected Senior Winter Ball King, which means for about one minute I’ll be featured gliding across the floor beneath the crimson and gold crepe paper streamers at lake Michigan High School with Melissa Lefevre, the girl of my dreams — and only my
dreams – who was elected Senior Winter Ball Queen. For that minute we’ll be out there alone.

Alone with Melissa Lefevre.

Now I don’t want to go into the tomfoolery that must have gone on behind the scenes to get me elected to such a highly regarded post because to tell you the truth, I can’t even imagine. I mean, it’s a joke, I know that. I just don’t know whose. It’s a hell of a good one, though, because someone had to coax a plurality of more than five hundred seniors to forgo casting their ballots for any of a number of bona fide Adonises to write in the name of a cow. At first I tried to turn it down, but Granddad let me know right quick I’d draw a lot more attention if I made a fuss than if I acted as if I were the logical choice – indeed, the only choice – and went right along. Granddad is the man who taught me to be a dignified fat kid.

“Always remember these words, and live by ‘em,” he said after my third suspension from kindergarten for fighting. “Screw ‘em. Anybody doesn’t like the way you look, screw ‘em.”

And that’s just what I’ve done, because my grandfather – on my dad’s side – is one righteous dude, and as smart as they come in an extra-large widebody sport coat. Sometimes I’ve screwed ‘em by punching them in the nose, and sometimes by walking away. And sometimes by joining them – you know, laughing at myself. That’s the one that works best. But when my temper is quick, it likes to speak first, and often as not someone’s lying on the floor in a pool of nose fluids before I remember what a hoot it is to have the names of my mother and father dragged through the mud or my body compared with the Michelin tire man.

So you see, slowly but surely I’m getting all this under control. I don’t mind that my detractors – are legion – will wonder aloud tonight whether it is Melissa or I who is the Winter Ball Queen, a playful reference to my folks’ quirky preferences, and I don’t mind that I’ll likely hear, “Why do they just swim up on the beach like that?” at least three times. What I mind is that during those few seconds when Melissa and I have the floor to ourselves, all those kids, friend and foe, will be watching me dance. Now, I’ve chronicled the majority of my maladies here, but none remotely approaches my altogether bankrupt sense of rhythm. When it comes to clapping his hands or stomping his feet to the beat, Angus Bethune is completely, absolutely, and, most of all, irreversibly brain dead.

I’ve known about the dance for three weeks now. I even know the name of the song, though I don’t recognize it, and I went
out and spent hard-earned money on dance lessons, dance lessons that sent not one but two petite, anorexic-looking rookie Arthur Murray girls off sharpening their typing skills to apply at Kelly Services. Those girls had some sore pods.

I’ve been planning for Melissa Lefevre for a long time. I fell in love with her in kindergarten, when she dared a kid named Alex Immergluck to stick his tongue on a car bumper in minus-thirty-five-degree weather for calling her a “big, fat, snot-nosed deadbeat,” a term I’m sure now that was diagnostic of his home life, but that at the time served only to call up Melissa’s anger. Being a fat kid, I was interested in all the creative retaliatory methods I could get to store in the old computer for later use, and when I saw the patch of Alex’s tongue stuck tight to the bumper as he screamed down the street, holding his bleeding mouth, I knew I was in the company of genius. And such lovely genius it was. God, from kindergarten on, Melissa was that tan, sinewy-legged blond girl with the brown eyes that just make you ache. You ache a lot more when you’re a fat kid, though, because you know she was put on the earth, out of your reach, only to make you feel bad. You have no business trying to touch her.

But at the same time my grandfather — a huge silver-haired Rolls-Royce of a grandfather — kept telling me over and over I could have any damn thing I wanted. He told me that down under that sleeping bag of globules I wore beneath my skin beat the heart of a lion and the body of Jack la Lanne. In fact, in the fifth grade Granddad took me down to San Francisco on Jack’s sixty-fifth birthday to let me watch him swim to Alcatraz with his hands cuffed behind him, towing a boat on a line with his teeth. He did it, he really did. He still does.

Granddad also took me to San Francisco to see some gay people; but we went to a place called Polk Street, and it didn’t help much. I mean, my parents are working folks who are with only the person they’re with, and Polk Street was filled with people looking like they were headed for a Tandy leather swap meet. Maybe it helped, though. At least my parents looked more normal to me, although my mother could pass for Bruiser of the Week about fifty-two times in any given year, so normal is a relative term.

The bottom line, though, no matter how my grandfather tried to convince me otherwise, was that Melissa Lefevre would remain a Fig Newton of my imagination throughout my school years, and no matter how hard Granddad primed me, I would never have the
opportunity for any conversation with Melissa other than one in my head. Until tonight. Tonight I'll have to talk to her. If I don’t, she'll have only my dancing by which to remember me, which is like Mrs. Fudd remembering Elmer for his hair. It’d be a damn shame.

All I really want is my moment with her. I have no illusions, no thoughts of her being struck blind and asking me to take her home. When you’re different, on the down side, you learn to live from one scarce rich moment to the next, no matter the distance between. You become like a camel in a vast scorched desert dotted with precious oases, storing those cool, watery moments in your hump. Assuring survival until you stumble upon the next.

All I want is my moment.

So here I sit, my rented burgundy tux lying across my bed like a dropcloth waiting to be unfolded on the floor of the Sistine Chapel, digging deep into my reserves for the courage not to crumble, hoping for the power to call up the vision of the decent guy I know I am rather than the short-fused, round clown-jock so many people see. What can Melissa be thinking? She’ll be there with someone else, of course, so her winter Nightmare on Elm Street will last but a few minutes at most. She’s probably telling herself as I sit her that it’s like a trip to the dentist. No matter how badly he’s going to hurt you, no matter how many bare nerves he drills or how many syringes of Novocain he explodes into the roof of your mouth, in an hour you’ll walk out of there. And you’ll still be alive.

Of course, Melissa hasn’t seen me dance.

My dad was in an hour ago, looking sadly at me sitting here on the side of my bed in my underwear next to this glorious tuxedo, which, once on, will undoubtedly cast me as a giant plum. Dad’s the one who escorted me to Roland’s Big and Tall to have me fitted, and to make sure I got something that would be comfortable. He’s a sensitive guy, one who has always scouted uncharted waters for me in an attempt to clear away at least the huge logs, to render those waters a little more navigable.

He wore his Kissbusters T-Shirt, with the universal stop sign – a circle with a slash through it – over huge red lips. I gave one to each of my four parents back in junior high when I negotiated the No Kissing Contract. (“I don’t care with who or what you do in the sack at night,” I screamed out of exasperation during one of our bimonthly “absence of malice get-togethers,” designed by my parents to cement our extended family solidarity. “Just don’t kiss in front of me! I’m in junior high now! Look! Under here!” I said, raising my
arms, pointing to the budding tufts of hair. “I got a bouquet of flowering pubiscus under each arm! And the jury’s in: I like girls! The only people I want to see kissing are boys and girl! Not boys kissing boys. Not girls kissing girls! I want to see boys kissing girls! Understand? Hairy lips on smooth lips! Read mine! Boys...kissing...girls!” I started to walk out of the room, then whirled. “You know what I need? You ask me that all the time! ‘Angus, are you suffering emotional harm because we’re different? Angus, are you feeling angst? Angus, do you need help adjusting? Angus, do you want to see a therapist?’ I’m not having trouble adjusting! I don’t even know what angst is! I don’t want to see a therapist! I just don’t want to see you kissing! You want to know what I need? I’ll tell you! Role models! Someone to show me how things are done! Don’t you guys ever watch Oprah? Or Donahue?”) It was a marvelous tantrum, and effective in that it resulted in the now-famous ironclad No Kissing Contract, which I have since, for my part, dissolved but to which they adhere as if it were the Kama Sutra itself. You will not hear the smacking, sucking reverberations of lips parting in passion from lips in either of my happy homes.

“The cummerbund is good,” Dad says. “It changes your lines, acts almost as a girdle. Don’t keep the jackets buttoned for long: unbutton it early in the name of being casual. That way it won’t pull tight where you bulge.” Dad is the person most responsible for teaching me to dress a body ignored by the sensibilities of the world’s clothiers. It was he who taught me to buy pants with a high waist and to go ahead through the embarrassment of giving the salesman my full waist size – instead of cheating a few inches to save face – so I could always get all of myself into my pants and leave nothing hanging over. He also drilled into me that it is a mortal sin for a fat man to buy a shirt that tucks in. In short, my father is most responsible for teaching me to dress like a big top.

As he stands staring at the tuxedo, his brain grinding out camouflage intelligence, I read his mind.

“Don’t worry, Dad,” I say. “I can handle this.”

“You’ve had this girl on your mind a long time,” he says sadly. “I don’t want you to be hurt.”

I say, “I’m not going to be hurt, Dad,” thinking: Please don’t make me take care of you, too.

Alexander, my stepdad, walks through the bedroom door, places a hand on Dad’s shoulder, and guides him out of the room. He reappears in seconds, “Your father’s a pain in the butt
sometimes, huh,” he says, “worrying about things you wouldn’t even think about.”

I say, “Yeah, he is. Only this time I’m thinking of them. How am I going to get through this night without looking like Moby Melon with a stick in his butt?”

Alexander nods at my near-naked carcass. He is like an arrow, sleek and angular, the antithesis of my father. It is as if minor gods were given exactly enough clay to make two human forms but divided it up in a remedial math class. Alexander is also sensible – thought somewhat obscure – where my father is a romantic.

“Superman’s not brave,” he says.

I look up. “What?”

“Superman. He’s not brave.”

“I’ll send him a card.”

Alexander smiles. “You don’t understand. Superman’s not brave. He’s smart. He’s handsome. He’s even decent. But he’s not brave.”

I look at the tux, spread beside me, waiting. “Alexander, have I ever said it’s hard to follow you sometime?”

“He’s indestructible,” Alexander says. “You can’t be brave when you’re indestructible. It’s guys like you and me that are brave, Angus. Guys who are different and can be crushed – and know it – but go out there anyway.”

I looked at the tux. “I guess he wouldn’t wear such an outrageous suit if he knew he looked like a blue and red Oldsmobile in it, would he?”

Alexander put his hand on my shoulder. “The tux looks fine, Angus.” He left.

So now I stand at the door to the gym. The temperature is near zero, but I wear no coat because once inside. I want to stay cool as long as possible, to reduce the risk of the dike-bursting perspiration that has become my trademark. No pun intended.

Melissa – along with almost everyone, I would guess – is inside, waiting to be crowned Queen of the Winter Ball before suffering the humiliation of being jerked across the dance floor by an escort who should have “GOODYEAR” tattooed the length of both sides. My fear is nearly paralyzing, to tell the truth, but I’ve faced down this monster before – though, admittedly, he gets more fierce each time – and I’ll face him down again. When he beats me, I’m done.

Heads turn as I move through the door. I simulate drying my butt with a towel, hoping for a casual twist-and-shout move. Your
king is here. Rejoice. Marsha Stanwick stands behind the ticket table, and I casually hand her mine, eyes straight ahead on the band, walking lightly on the balls of my feet, like Raymond Burr through a field of dog poop sundaes. I pause to let my eyes adjust, hoping to God an empty table will appear, allowing me to drop out of the collective line of sight. Miraculously one does, and I squat, eyes still glued to the band, looking for all the world like the rock and roll critic from the *Trib*. If my fans are watching, they’re seeing a man who cares about music. I lightly tap my fingers to what I perceive to be the beat, blowing my cover to smithereens. I see Melissa on the dance floor with her boyfriend— a real jerk in my book, Rick Sanford—and my heart bursts against the walls of my chest, like in *Alien*. I order it back. A sophomore server leaves a glass of punch on the table, and I sip it slowly through the next song, after which the lead singer announces that the “royal couple” and their court are due behind the stage curtain in five minutes.

Tributaries of perspiration join at my rib cage to form a raging torrent of sweat rushing toward my shoes as I silently hyperventilate, listening for my grandfather’s voice, telling me to screw ‘em, telling me once again I can do anything I want. I want my moment.

I rise to head for the stage and look up to see Melissa on her boyfriend’s arm, coming toward me through the crowd parting on the dance floor. Sanford wears that cocky look, the one I remember from football, the one he wore continually until the day I wiped it off his face on the sideline during our first full-pad scrimmage. Golden Rick Sanford – Rick Running Back – danced his famous jig around end and turned upfield, thought he could juk me with a couple of cheap high school hip fakes, not realizing that this blimp was equipped with tracking radar. It took him almost fifteen seconds to get his wind back. Hacked him off big time, me being so fat and ugly. But now the look is back; we’re in his element. He’s country club; I’m country, a part of his crowd on the field only.

As they approach, I panic. The king has no clothes. I want to run. What am I doing here? What was I thinking of? Suddenly I’d give up my moment in a heartbeat for the right to disappear. What a fool, even to think…

They stand before me. “Angus, my man,” Rick slurs, and I realize it’s not a change of underwear he’s carrying in the paper bag. “I’m turning this lovely thing over to you for a while. Give her a chance to make a comparison. You know, be a bit more humble.”
Melissa drops his arm and smiles. She says, “Hi. Don’t pay any attention to him. He’s drunk. And even without that, he’s rude.”

I smile and nod, any words far, far from my throat.

Melissa says, “Why don’t we go on up?” and she takes my arm, leaving Rick’s hanging limply at his side.

“Yeah,” he says, squinting down at the paper sack in his hand, “why don’t you go on up? You right on up behind that curtain with my girl, snowball king.”

Melissa drops my arm and grips his elbow. “Shut up,” she whispers between her clenched teeth. “I’m warning you, Rick. Shut up.”

Rick tears his arm away. “Enjoy yourself,” he says to me, ignoring her. “Your campaign cost me a lot of money, probably close to two bucks a pound.” He looks me up and down as couples at the nearest tables turn to stare. The heat of humiliation floods up through my collar, and I fear the worst will follow. I fear I’ll cry. If I do, Rick’s in danger because it’s a Bethunian law that rage follows my tears as surely as baby chicks trail their mama. “Don’t you go be puttin’ your puffy meat hooks on my girl,” he says, and starts to poke me in the chest; but I look at his finger, and he thinks better.

Melissa takes my arm again and says, “Let’s go.”

We move two steps toward the stage, and Rick says loud, “Got your rubber gloves, honey?”

I turn, feeling Melissa’s urgent tug, pulling me toward the stage.

“What do you mean by that?” I ask quietly, knowing full well what he means by that.

“I wasn’t talking to you, bigfoot,” Rick says, looking past me to his girl. “I’m asking if my sweetie’s got her rubber gloves.”

Melissa says, “I hate you, Rick. I really do.”

Rick ignores her. “Bigfoot comes from a high-risk home,” he says. “Best wear your rubber gloves, honey, in case he has a cut.”

In that instant I sweep his feet with mine, and he lands hard on the floor. He moves to get up, but I’m over him, crowding. When he tries to push himself up, I kick his hands out, following his next movements like a cow dog, mirroring him perfectly, trapping him there on the floor. No chaperone is in view, so it isn’t totally out of hand yet. When he sees he can’t rise, I kneel, sweat pouring off my forehead like rain. Softly, very softly, I say, “You may not like how my parents live. But they’ve been together since 1971 – monogamous as the day is long. That’s a low-risk group, Rick. The only person at high risk right now is you.”
He looks into my eyes, and he knows I mean it, knows I’m past caring about my embarrassment. “Okay, man,” he says, raising his hands in surrender. “Just having a little fun.”

I’m apologizing to Melissa all the way up the backstage stairs, but she’s not having any. “You should have stomped on his throat,” she says, and I involuntarily visualize Alex Immergluck clutching at his bleeding mouth in the freezing cold next to the car bumper. “If you ever get another chance, I’ll pay you money.”

At the side door to the stage I say, “Speaking of embarrassment, there’s something you need to know.”

She waits.

“I can’t dance.”

Melissa smiles. “Not everyone’s Nureyev,” she says. “We’ll survive.”

I say, “Yeah, well, not everyone’s Quasimodo either. I didn’t say I can’t dance well. I said I can’t dance. Good people have been badly hurt trying to dance with me.”

We’re near the risers on the stage now, and our “court,” made up of juniors and sophomores, stands below the spot at the top where we are to be crowned. Melissa hushes me as we receive instructions from the senior class adviser. There will be trumpeting, the crowning by last year’s royalty, followed by a slow march down the portable steps to the gym floor to begin the royal dance.

We take our places. The darkness of the stage and the silence are excruciating. “What did he mean, my campaign cost him a lot of money?” I whisper.

“Never mind.”

I snort a laugh and say, “I can take it.”

“He’s rich, and he’s rude,” she says. “I’m embarrassed I’m with him.” She pauses, and slides her arm in mine. “I’m not with him. It was supposed to be a lesson for me…”

The curtains part as the trumpets blare.

“I gaze out into the spotlights, smiling like a giant “Have a Nice Day” grape. The introduction of last year’s king and queen begins, and they move toward us from stage left and right to relinquish their crowns to us. It all would be unbelievably ridiculous even if they weren’t crowning King Angus the Fat. Without moving her lips, Melissa says, “I picked a slow song. We don’t have to move much. Dance close to me. When you feel me lean, you lean. Whatever you do, don’t listen to the music. It’ll just mess you up. Trust me. My brother’s like you. Just follow.”
She grips my arm as the royal march starts and leads me down the risers to the portable steps leading to the dance floor. I have surrendered. If I am to survive this, it will be through the will of Melissa Lefevre.

Somehow I remember to hand her the traditional single long-stemmed rose, and she takes it in her hand, smiling, then pulls me tight. She says, “Shadow me.”

A part of me stays to concentrate, but another part goes to heaven. In my wildest dreams I could never have imagined Melissa Lefevre being nice to me in my moment, would never have dared imagine holding her tight without feeling pushy and ugly and way out of line. She whispers, “Relax,” into my ear, and I follow mechanically through a song I’d never heard, not that it would make a difference. When I’m finally relaxed enough and know I’m going to live, the words to “Limelight” filter into my head, and I realize I’m in it. Like the songwriter, I fear it yet am drawn to it like a shark to a dangling toe.


I wouldn’t know a good song from a hot rock; I’m just hoping it’s a long song. Feeling greedy now, I want my moment to last.

“Angus?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you ever get tired of who you are?”

I pull back a second, but it’s like Lois Lane releasing Superman’s hand twenty thousand feet in the air. She falls. I pull close again. “Do you know who you’re talking to?”

I feel her smile. “Yeah,” she says, “I thought so. I know it’s not the same, but it’s not always so great looking the way I do, either. I pay, too.”

She’s right. I think it’s not the same.

“Want to know something about me?” she asks, and I think: I’d like to know anything about you.

I say, “Sure.”

“I’m bulimic. Do you know what that is?”

I smile. “I’m a fat kid with faggot parents who’s been in therapy on and off for eighteen years,” I say. “Yes, I know what that is. It means when you eat too much, you chuck it up so you don’t turn out to look like me.”
“Close enough for discussion purposes. Don’t worry, I’m in therapy for it,” she says, noticing my concern. “A lot of pretty girls are.”

“Actually,” I say, “I even tried it once, but when I stuck my finger down my throat, I was still hungry and I almost ate my arm.”

Melissa laughs and holds me tighter. “You’re the only person I’ve ever told except for the people in my therapy group; I just wanted you to know things aren’t always as they appear. Would you do me a favor?”

“If it doesn’t involve more than giving up my life,” I say, feeling wonderful because Melissa isn’t a goddess anymore and because that doesn’t change a thing about the way I feel about her.

“Would you leave with me?”

My foot clomps onto her delicate toe.

“Concentrate,” she says. Then: “Would you?”

“You mean leave this dance? Leave this dance with you?”

I feel her nod.

I consider. “At least I don’t turn into a pumpkin at midnight. I’m a pumpkin already.”

“I like how you stood up for your family. It must be hard. Defending them all the time, I mean.”

“Compared to me, a boy named Sue had it made,” I say. The music ends; all dancers stop and clap politely. “I want to dance one more,” Melissa says. “A fast one.”

“I’ll wait over by the table.”

“No. I want to dance it with you.”

“You don’t understand,” I say. “When I dance to the beat of rock and roll, decent folks across this great land quake in their boots.”

She holds my hand tightly. “Listen. Do what you did when you wouldn’t let Rick up. Don’t listen to the music; just follow me the way you followed him.”

I try to protest; but the band breaks into “Bad Moon Rising,” and the dance floor erupts. Melissa pushes me back gently, and out of panic, I zero in, locking on her hips as I would a running back’s. I back away as she comes at me, mirroring her every move, top to bottom. She cuts to the sideline, and I meet her, dancing upfield nose to nose. As the band heats up, I remain locked in; though her steps become more and more intricate, she cannot shake me. A crowd gathers and I’m trapped inside a cheering circle, actually performing the unheard of: I’m Angus Bethune, Fat Man Extraordinaire, dancing in the limelight with Melissa Lefevre,
stepping outside the oppressive prison of my body to fly to the beat of Credence Clearwater Revival.

When the drummer bangs the last beat, the circle erupts in celebration, and I take a long, low bow. Melissa is clapping wildly. She reaches across and wipes a drop of sweat off my brow with her finger. When she touches the finger to her tongue, I tell God he can take me now.

“You bitch!” Rick yells at the door as I help Melissa into her coat. “You bitch! You practiced with this tub of lard! You guys were getting together dancing. You bitch. You set me up.” He turns to me. “I ought to take you out, fat boy,” he says, but his unimaginative description can’t touch my glory.

I put up a finger and wag it side to side in front of his nose. “You know the difference between you and me, Sanford?”

He says, “There are a lot of differences between us, lardo. You couldn’t count the differences between us.”

“That’s probably true,” I say, closing my fist under his nose. “But the one that matters right now is that I can make you ugly.”

He stares silently at my fist.

I say, “Don’t even think it. Next to dancing, that’s my strong suit.”