

ALCHEMIST



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REVIEW

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THE BOY ON THE BICYCLE

Barbara Burkhardt

It was opening-day eve of the Illinois State Fair and the morning paper said Chicago Cubs legend Ernie Banks would be the Grand Marshall of the Fair Parade. A friend and I decided to take in the Springfield tradition; we'd both been away to school for the past few years and were up for a good dose of family fun in our hometown. Ernie Banks and the governor were scheduled to step off at 6pm from Ninth and Jackson, one block from the Lincoln home, make their way down Ninth Street, past the newspaper office and the Lincoln Depot, and head North till they reached the fairgrounds.

When we arrived at quarter till six, the curbs were packed with parents and kids clutching cotton candy, Cubs pennants and balloons. Some sat wedged together on the curb. We found a spot to stand in the grassy parkway. After-work arrivals scurried to find the best of the spots that were left, while the group of senior citizens in front of us had plopped their lawn chairs under a row of shade trees, claiming their territory. They fanned themselves with parade programs. One woman crocheted and sipped from a thermos.

Drums began to tap, and I found myself leaning to the right, part of a wave of people straining to see the head of the parade now making its way down Ninth Street. Five girls in go-go boots led the pack, carrying a red, white, and blue banner reading "Illinois State Fair Twilight Parade 1987—A Trip Through Candy land." Behind them strode life-size Tootsie Rolls, lollipops, and Mars bars who threw candy to the crowd. One youngster scrambled for the sweets which bounced along the pavement like grasshoppers.

"Here comes the governor!" cried one of the grey-haired women of the lawn chair club in front of me.

"And look who's with him!" said the bald man seated next to her. "Ernie Banks! Lord, could that boy play ball."

Suddenly a woman standing in the gutter darted out, a camera over her shoulder, pen and paper in hand. "I've got to get Ernie's autograph!" she cried. "My husband told me not to come home if I didn't have it!" In a few seconds she trotted ahead of the baseball star, snapped his picture, and handed him the pen and crumpled paper. He smiled and signed while continuing to keep pace with the gov.

"Now why didn't I think of that?" said the bald man in the lawn chair. "I'd kill for one of them autographs of Ernie Banks!"

The governor and his ambling entourage were followed closely by the mighty protectors of the community. Firefighters, paramedics, police, and the SWAT team rode by on every species of siren-equipped vehicle known to humankind. The time-released blasts from the varied horns silenced the conversations around me, and I could hear applause only between the harsh bursts of sound.

Amid the hubbub, I saw a boy of about fifteen coast by on a low dirt bicycle. His ebony arms gleamed in the sun and cropped afro cupped his round head. Carefree, he cycled ahead. What a thrill for him to see his baseball hero, I thought. With the crowd on the curb and the parade in the center of the street, he had the left lane all to himself. He weaved slightly to and fro—he had the best seat in the house.

Suddenly, a burly man shot up from the curb. His face was lined with rage, tendons pulled like cords in his thick neck. Hiking up his tight jeans at the belt line, he sprinted after the boy. He grabbed the slender teen from behind, flinging him from the bicycle. I cringed as he yelled at the boy, though I couldn't make out any of the language. My friend and I stared in disbelief. Others chattered excitedly, pointing at

the fight.

The boy scrambled to his feet, his eyes squinting, his brow furrowed. He jerked his bike from the ground, glanced back with his black, fiery eyes and headed on as fast as he could go.

"Did you see that?" the bald man asked his wife.

"Kids today," she retorted.

Naively, I had thought that attacks on black people only happened in the South, if they still happened at all. Although I couldn't hear what the man had yelled at the boy, I was fairly certain he had used the word "nigger." Nigger was the word my Dad hated to say aloud when he read *Tom Sawyer* to me when I was a child. He had explained that nigger was a word people used before Lincoln freed the slaves and he never ever wanted to hear me say it. It was a bad word, the worst word, much worse than damn. I never forgot that.

I saw the man who struck the boy sit down as the O'Fallon Marching Falcons paraded by. Leading off were the flag girls, waving their red and white banners in perfect rhythm to a rousing rendition of "La Bamba." The players marched heel-toe, heel-toe, gliding smoothly, as the white tubas swayed left and right in the back row. Behind the band strutted the "Marching Falconettes" in red and silver sequined costumes, punching metallic pom poms to the La Bamba beat. Having been involved in a similar "ettes" dance corps at the University of Illinois ourselves, my friend and I were good critics on the fine art of pom-pom execution. Were the girl's chins up, did they smile, were their pom pom punches sharp?

As the band passed by and a float with paper ice cream cones was making its approach, I saw the boy on the bicycle riding back down the street. His eyes were wide and wild, darting from face to face as he scanned the crowd. He pointed his finger, his teeth clenched, when he spied him in the long row of seated on-lookers to our right.

"Wachu do that for, man?" he shouted from the street. The white man stood, his fists clenched. His wife sprang to his side. Her knit top clung tightly to her body and her thin blonde hair hung like strings about her head. A small child grasped her hand.

The man shoved the boy twice, cursing and slapping at him, before the black teen retaliated with a swing that missed. Then the man let loose with punches that made the boy stumble back, that made him stagger and fall.

"I'd tan that boy's hide, too!" said the bald man, attempting to get up from his nylon-webbed throne for a better view. "They think they've got the right to do however they please. By God, I hope that boy learns his lesson."

"God, I don't believe this," my friend said.

A policeman came to break up the fight. He pulled the boy's arms behind his sweaty back and placed silver handcuffs around his wrists. A collective roar of approval rose from the elders in the chairs.

"Serves him right!" shouted the bald-headed man.

"He was pointin' his finger right at him," said his elderly wife, pointing her own finger. "He was lookin' right down that line o' people till he found him. He's going down to the station!"

The boy turned his head to see them. I saw his deep eyes looking, absorbing the hostility. Those eyes pressed into me until I had to look at the ground in embarrassment. My throat knotted up and my eyes burned. I felt helpless and enraged.

I remembered how I once had gone to church with a black friend, a preacher's daughter, while I was living in Chicago. It was on the South Side: the church was packed with men in crisp white shirts and women in vivid colors that shone against their dark skin like precious gems in velvet boxes.

I remember fifty white robes bursting through the side door, brown hands clapping to gospel beat, and voices melting like brown sugar with cream, thick as caramel. Full-bodied chords exploding, the choir swaying lifting their clasped hands to create overhead arches.

"We must take our neighbor by the hand and lift him up!" the preacher, my friend's dad, shouted when the music ended.

"We be takin' him, Lawd!" a voice wailed from the back.

"Alleluia!" shouted the woman on my left.

"Lookin' out over all you wonderful people, I do believe I see a guest with us this evening," said the preacher. Every eye was drawn to me like a magnet, the only pale face in sight. Many smiled as if they couldn't believe I was there, but were glad that I was. After the service, churchgoers came to greet me and say how happy they were to have me praying with them.

Now I saw a congregation in lawn chairs leering and jeering at the only black face in sight, while politicians drove by waving obliviously from their convertibles. I was glad that Ernie Banks hadn't seen this. Or then again, maybe I wished he had.

The lawn chair group was still buzzing as the boy walked away with the officer and the fifty brothers of Phi Zeta Psi fraternity boogied by with their contagious motown rhythm. They wore khaki shirts and pants and purple tams.

"We're the men of Phi Zeta Psi-i," began the leader.

"We're the men of Phi Zeta Psi-i," echoed the others.

"We'll be loyal till we die."

"We'll be loyal till we die."

In unison, they twirled, clapped and stomped fancy rhythms with their boot-clad feet.

"Look at them boys go! They sure got rhythm!" I heard from the lawn chairs.

A police officer was combing the area for witnesses to the fight. My friend and I went up and told him what we saw happen. A black man and his wife did the same, while "Illinois' 1987 Farming Family of the Year" rode by one a flat bed truck ("They're the backbone of this country!" hollered someone in a lawn chair).

The policeman walked up to the burly man on the curb, asked him a few questions, and handcuffed him without a struggle. It felt good to have stood up for something for a change, to get involved, to not mind my own business. What bothered and shocked me was the lawn chair mentality that neither police nor witnesses, no one, could change. I realized the sad truth that more people than I thought hadn't been bothered by the word nigger when they read *Tom Sawyer*.

The parade's finale was The Illinois State Fair Queen, dressed in a white and frothy organza gown, riding atop the most elaborate float of the evening. Pink cotton balls covered the float, creating a cotton candy kingdom beneath her throne. She balanced a rhinestone crown atop her brunette head, while holding a dozen red roses in one hand and waving to the crowd with the other. Her smile didn't flinch and her scarlet lipstick made her teeth clorox white ("Looks like my little granddaughter," from the lawn chairs).

Behind the float, I saw the boy walking his bicycle down the side of the street. After he passed the burly man's relatives and the lawn chairs, he looked over his shoulder, hopped on his bike, and headed on as fast as he could go. I hoped he could catch up to Ernie Banks or that maybe someone would take him by the hand and lift him up like the preacher had said. I wanted to say I was sorry, but I knew he wouldn't know me from the lady in the lawn chair.

BOB'S STORY

A journal entry

transcribed by Mary Brancato

On Wednesday, January 3rd, 1989 my life changed forever. It was the day that my test results were related to me. I'll never forget that moment the doctor said "we've been wondering when you would be back." I had been tested in late October '88 and was just terrified to go back for the results. After all, the doctor had examined me in October and told me "You do not have AIDS, no symptoms, no signs. I have no idea if you are HIV positive, but I can tell you that you do not have AIDS."

That was all that I wanted to hear, so I didn't return in two weeks for the results of the blood test. The feeling of panic never left me though, because in January of '88 I lost three dear friends to AIDS. One of whom I'd had unprotected encounters with.

I was jolted from my thoughts by the doctor's first question. "Do you think that you have the virus?" I started to say I didn't know, but he answered the question almost as he'd asked it. "You have. I'm sorry."

The doctor began by telling me that he was certain that the virus hadn't progressed very far because I was "asymptomatic". They wanted to do further blood tests on my T4 cells, which are basically the cells in the immune system that the virus destroys. Then he said I should be very discriminate about whom I told because it could be years before any problems would develop. He said that if I felt like I wanted to hurt myself, to call him day or night, his home phone number was in the book, and to come back in a week for the results of the new tests.

I felt totally numb, though not really surprised. I asked if I could go out to the waiting room and get my lover, Bill, who was confidently waiting, convinced that I was just being hyper and overly dramatic about the whole thing. I remember going down the hall, motioning for him to come, simultaneously shaking my head "yes." We walked back into the exam room and they immediately tested Bill.

All I can tell you about the next week was that it was filled with guilt, guilt and fear, and I cried every time I looked at Bill, convinced that I had killed him.

The next week, when I returned to the doctor's office, he informed me that I needn't worry about who knows anymore—that I was so far along with the virus that I could start showing symptoms at any time. I got the distinct impression that he expected me to keel over at any moment. He suggested I contact Social Security/Disability and Public Aid to help defray the cost of treatment: AZT (which costs about \$700 a month) and another drug called Pentamidine (at \$100 per treatment). Pentamidine is a drug that you inhale on a machine once a month to stop you from getting pneumocystis carinii, a type of pneumonia that no one ever got before, but now kills the majority of AIDS patients.

During the next few months my life really turned upside down. I just wanted to be left alone with my thoughts, to digest all of it, to come to terms with it. My lover, however, had a different game plan. He quit his job immediately, and set out to spend every second of every hour of every day with me. He was constantly analyzing me, and trying to get me to have sex. Sex was just a big turnoff to me. After all, it was because of sex that I was dying, wasn't it? Anyway, after about ten weeks of his constant attention, I was a very unpleasant person to be around. In

fact, I'd say that I was the most hateful person I have ever known. Bill left on an overnight trip with a girl we had both been friends with, and came back three days later with a new lover. GOOD FOR ME!

I asked him as he was moving out if he was going to be retested, and he informed me he already had, and he was fine. I seriously doubted that, but you can't control someone else's actions.

My doctor, in the meantime, was constantly wanting me to go to this support group. He kept telling me that I was doing OK mentally, but he thought that until I went to this support group I wasn't really accepting my condition. After about six months, in June, I finally drug myself to the "support group".

It was everything I had imagined it would be. There were six people and a mediator of sorts. Four of the six I had slept with. How appropriate, I thought. As I sat there wondering who I had given it to, or who had given it to whom, they asked THE QUESTION! "So Bob, tell us all how you got AIDS." My first impulse was to get up and leave, then I was tempted to say, "from a toilet seat—and you?" But I decided, for once in my life, not to say what I really wanted to.

So here I am in this room, with seven people staring at me. Seven people I would not have talked to if we were stranded alone on a lifeboat in the middle of the ocean, and they want me to spill it all. The mediator was a woman in her early 30's who is pretty, but makes it clear she thinks she's fat (she is, sort of). She always wants to talk about "not getting any". She has friends in the group, one her hairdresser and the other a frustrated designer who helps her pick out rugs during the meetings. Now this, to me, is real "support." We sure don't want anyone to have to walk on a cold, bare floor.

So now it's "can we talk?" time. I told them, though I wasn't happy about the situation, that I totally understood why it had happened to me. I never claimed to be a nun. A couple of the real queens looked at me like I had just admitted to being Pandora of the box, but they didn't open their mouths. I guess they were afraid that something might fly out, something they may have done that polite people don't talk about. I mean, let's face it, it wasn't a meeting of the Unfortunate Virgins Club. I told them I had probably slept with 500 lovers in the last 20 years, maybe 1000. That didn't bring any reaction from the crowd, only an acknowledging nod. I suppose they all could relate.

Other group members took their turns. It was all who had died, what had happened to so and so, you know, just fun fun fun. And then this one guy's biggest dilemma was that he wanted to meet another PWA (person with AIDS) so that he didn't have to use condoms. Now that, I thought, was really funny. It was the absolute worst problem with him. I don't remember a whole lot more except I was glad to get out of there. I got back to my friends' house and they wanted to know what had happened. After I described all the sordid little details, they somehow talked me into going at least four more times to be sure.

Immediately after my fourth session, I quit the group. But I was happy to hear that the one man had become involved with another member of our group so his problem was solved. Ah, love true love and unprotected sex.

It's funny that I'm just at this stage in my writing. I was informed just this very morning that one of the members of the group passed away this morning. It was the hairdresser. I would like to imagine that he just slipped away into a quiet sleep, but probably not. He had sclerosis of the liver, a very painful way to die. Again it hits--the fear of terrible suffering. I haven't seen anyone die easily.

I have this chilling feeling like I want to run and hide, just hide. That is, of course, the most horrible aspect of this disease. There is nowhere to run and nowhere to hide and no one can help you. At first you talk, and talking seems to help, but then suddenly it doesn't comfort you anymore. It's almost like falling off a cliff in slow motion. I often feel like the "cure" may have already been destroyed along with all the other miracles in the rain forest. Or maybe tomorrow will be the day it is lost forever.

* * * *

I'm sitting here all fluffed up, ready to go out to one of the local bars for a "beer bust" --\$3.00 for all the beer you care to drink. It's January something, 1990--I think it's around the 12th or 13th. I don't work or take the paper, so I don't know the exact date. I had been looking quite pale around the holidays, with dark circles under my eyes and so I decided to get a tan. I'm lucky that one of my roommates has a tanning bed, so it's free. So, my color is good, the blotchy skin is gone and so are the circles. I have been using moisturizer and Basis soap so the dry skin has also subsided. I feel about as well as I have for three months. It's as if I'm the old Bob, not the PWA. I took a shower to get ready to go out, and was singing to myself--"I Feel Pretty." It's been a long time since I've felt that way about myself. If, as I did for the past 12 months, you sit back and succumb to the disease, you have already died in a sense. I stayed around my roommates for the last 6 months. I refused all offers to go out and party and finally my other friends just stopped coming by. I was actually glad at first. I just wanted to stay at home alone. It finally started driving me wild, just staring at the same four walls (actually this old Victorian house has 13 rooms, so I'd stared at the same 52 walls. I found no comfort in numbers, however.) I just decided that my life isn't over, so stop acting like it is. Get up! Get out! But I'm not looking for sex.

* * * *

I went out last night and happened to meet a funeral director. We started talking about one thing and another, and prices of funerals as compared to actual costs. He was very candid. The profit margin is unbelievable.

I went to a funeral home about a month after I found out about my condition to make arrangements for the sake of my family, plus the fact that I've been responsible for my own party, so I must now be responsible for the clean up. Anyway, the funeral home gets \$400 from the Welfare Dept. to bury you. That includes a coffin and brother, I mean "coffin." I wouldn't be caught dead in it. It's a pine box covered with grey felt. It just, well, I can't think of a thing it wouldn't clash with.

The point, there is a point here somewhere...oh yes.... This funeral home told me last February that if I had what I wanted, which was to be taken from the hospital to the crematorium and handed to a friend, have a brief memorial service the next day at my church, and then have my friend scatter my ashes in the Pacific Ocean--no embalming, no headstone, no organist, no extras--the cost (excluding friend's trip to ocean; he's covering that)--*only* \$1,753.32.

This morning I was talking to one of my roommates and I decided that I'm not gonna spend my vacation money on a fire and a ride in the back of a station wagon. One of my roommates has a station wagon. He said he would pick me up and burn me in the back yard if I'd pay for the gas. Now that makes much more sense to me.

Seriously, shop around. Funeral homes, hearses, clothes...don't be foolish. I mean, you're already dead and these people want to have intercourse with you one last time. I just got back from another funeral home, across the street from the one I just described. The prices I got there were much better, everything I wanted for \$861.

* * * *

Today is a relatively good day for the 22nd of January. It's 53 degrees here in the Midwest. Bright, sunshine, blue skies. I've been running around trying to get ready for my trip to Miami, day after tomorrow. One of my friends is a flight attendant for a major airline and he has given me what they call a "buddy pass." I have been blessed with very good friends. I simply wouldn't make it without them. No way. I'm not just talking about free trips or gifts or any of that. Yes, it's nice going on trips, but that is a short-lived thing. It's having people who care about you just because you're you. I would be so much poorer without them.

Tiny mites—the world's best hope,
Spill in confetti colors
Across a green carpet
Legs flailing, they chase the
Black/white sphere
Sky—azure and gold
Parents watch, lumps in their throats.

SIX O'CLOCK SOCCER
B. Dickerman

ACADEMIC LOVE Shelly Chabak

You didn't love money,
yet in your clashing colors
you were picturesque.
Your stripes and plaids
and gifts of classics,
scented and yellowed from basement boxes
welcomed me home;
were testimonials of your logic
so basic and solid.

Centuries of philosophers lent you support.

I thought we were reasonable
but you were experience;
another time for leaving home
and burning bridges behind me.



FINITE Shelly Chabak

When a season withers and dies,
We know it will return in time
And we are comforted.
But as I watch you fade
I am afraid,
For I know
You will never pass this way again.

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