

The Good, the Bad, & the Ugly

by Jack Swenson

Ben and I are having lunch in Baldy's. He drives down one day in December every year. We both have birthdays that month.

I order a cheeseburger and fries. Ben orders a salad. He tells the waitress to hold the dressing.

Ben used to have a belly, but now he's skinny. Ben's good at resisting temptation. I'm not.

We shoot the breeze about what we've been up to, places he's been to, people he's seen. Ben does most of the talking. I ask questions. I don't do much traveling; Ben does. He's the Man Who Came to Dinner. He visits old girlfriends, some of whom are now married.

Three women come into the restaurant and sit down in the booth across from us. There's a kid, too, a little boy, three or four years old. One of the women is a brassy blond, and when she takes off her coat, I almost choke on a French fry. She's wearing a tee-shirt with some writing on it. "*Good girls do bad things,*" it says.

Ben's sitting with his back to the newcomers, but he watched them come in, and when they're seated, he swivels his head and checks them out. "Y'suppose?" he whispers.

About that time the kid slides down, crawls out from under the booth, and makes a bee-line for our table. He hangs on with his grubby little fingers and looks at me with big blue eyes. "Why aren't you in school?" I ask.

Mama's up and out of the booth like a shot. She swoops down and picks up the kid. She gives us a dazzling smile. "Sorry about that," she says.

She turns to leave, but I hold up a finger. "One question," I say. Her smile fades. "What bad things do you do?" I ask.

"Why do you ask, Grandpa?" she replies, then turns and marches away.

I look at Ben and he looks at me. "What?" I ask.

