Billy Goes Home

By Sam DeLeo

Youth was a book of broken shadows to her, drawing up blank gray slates in her mind, wide gaps of time now lost. And that was as it should be, she believed.

Youth was an absence that made room for what the days ahead could bring. How could it be otherwise if every passing day was one click forward from the partial to the whole of who she was.

Youth was naive and powerless, as powerless as her twin brother Billy had been made when he contracted polio, and as she had been while she watched him suffer. In these years, they were introduced to the kind of demands fate was capable of making, and, as if in spite of this, she concluded that what was important was what you did later with yourself independently, what character you achieved, what kind of a worker you were, how you supported yourself, these were the measures of a person's worth.

And now, finally, there was a way, there were finally some people who could bear witness to her worth. She couldn't remember exactly how long she had waited for a visit from people like this, or all the different ways she thought she might make it happen. But for at least the last few years it had slowly gained

momentum inside her as a way to make plain what she had been unable to explain about herself.

The first impression her brother had of the visitors was much less welcoming. At hearing the knock on the front door, Billy peaked through the short buffeted drapes at the strangers outside and walked as quickly as his limp would allow to a chair in the darkened hall just off the living room. Bending forward and peering into the living room, he tugged nervously on the tassels that lined the bottom ridge of the chair, a relic from an old sofa set missing a sofa, and allowed scenarios to invade his mind. If they tried removing him from the house, if they even tried removing him from his chair, he didn't know what he'd do to them. Maybe he'd throw his beer bottle at one of them. Or he would break off the neck of the bottle on the end table and come at them that way, like they did in the movies. He waited tensed and ready, but immobilized from his confusion about what was happening, about why these people had come.

When he was a boy he'd known real paralysis from the polio, but that was different, that didn't entail a choice of action on his part and had happened a long time ago. And it came back to him now only in a clutter of images: the family visits to the sanitarium, Kathy crying and afraid to look him in the eye, as if doing so might be contagious for a twin; the drab white room, its weak overhead light fading like his memory of being able to walk, a little more each day; the change of his poultices, the deep pleasure it gave, and, the only thing

more anticipated than that — seeing the face of his mother, calm and assured, the one source of hope amid the confusion that swarmed him daily.

The illness turned him inward in the way a fear closes in on one out habit even as the threat wanes, the way instinct resists domesticity, until the intention of his life left him behind and his days became a great stopping. Now, since he had been out of work for years, he sometimes spent weeks at a time without venturing outdoors. He had kept to himself, he thought, was that the reason for this visit? He twisted the tassels more rapidly. Had he done something, anything?

* * *

Except for the last two years, Billy, Kathy and their mother lived in the same house the family had lived in for a little over six decades, about five years before Billy and Kathy were born and just prior to the birth of their two older sisters. It was set in an old German neighborhood by the Soldiers & Sailors Home, just up a low and long hill from the bay of Lake Erie. Sometimes you could see the lake through the descent of houses and overhangs of napkin-leafed maples, their trunks blotched as if from psoriasis and mold-scented with age. Veterans always seemed to be moving slowly up and down the street, stopping occasionally to wave at neighbors on porches or rebalance themselves on the sidewalk.

It was a small three-bedroom brick house, like many others in the block, which meant two children to a bedroom. Until Billy became ill, he and Kathy shared the bedroom closest to the backyard, where they would often sneak after their bedtime to play.

Stone-masoned churches dotted the neighborhood street corners, tucked from view by trees and hedges. Liquor stores, corner shops and a few pharmacies blended with residential areas along the avenues and a green-grassed park with willows and spruces shading benches adjoined the Soldiers and Sailors Home, but, besides the veterans who came there to feed squirrels and trade stories, most people preferred their small yards and gardens as refuge from the downtown district and the industrial plants lining the lake shore.

Tilting back and forth in painted steel chairs, drinking beer and iced teas in the backyard as dusk approached was the way Billy's family and many others in the block passed the warmer evenings. It was also one of the images in the recent dreams Billy had of the old neighborhood — he and Kathy playing in the backyard on a warm summer evening just after everyone else in the family went to bed. They are playing games of hide-and-seek with flashlights in the backyard and Billy is winning them all, making Kathy more and more frustrated. But in the last game, Billy is unable to find Kathy. He looks everywhere possible to no avail and the batteries in his flashlight have died. When he tries to go back inside and get help to look for his sister he finds he is locked out. He knocks to get Kathy to let him in but she doesn’t come to the door. It seems a long time passes

and the night becomes darker and there is nowhere for him to go. Finally, he pulls loose the latticed skirting next to the back door and crawls in the dirt underneath the house, curling his body into fetal pose, waiting in fear of every noise that might manifest itself as a raccoon, rat, mouse.

Another dream involved an outlandish Christmas dinner presided over by his father, who was wearing a suit, slicing up roasts and telling jokes to everyone, none of which Billy had ever witnessed in his waking life. Giant lead crystal chandeliers gleamed about his head and in all the rooms of the house. Billy's mother Lila was dressed in a full-length white gown, bejeweled in diamond necklaces, earrings, pendants, rings and ankle bracelets, a combination of virgin bride and king's consort.

At dinner's end, his mother dances for the guests and they throw large amounts of money at her. The table is then cleared and the adults begin playing cards, while Billy, his sisters and the neighbor kids go out to play. It is again a starless and closed sky, and in the darkness he becomes separated from the other children and disoriented. Every porch light he follows turns out to belong to the wrong house. The snow turns black and he cannot see where he is walking, cannot even be sure that he is walking. As the cold wind begins to make his body shiver, he wakes up.

Billy felt the dreams were added proof that leaving the old neighborhood, the setting where everything he ever remembered about his life took place, was a grave mistake. He felt himself and the neighborhood so inextricably linked — the

veterans limping along just as he did from his polio; the neighbors who accepted him and still greeted him; the tattered home facades that reflected his moods, aged in the hue of the gray skies that weathered them; the streets' withered trees thirsting after their blood like the ventricles of his own heart, convalescent but enduring decade after decade —that it was as if he would not be recognizable in another environment to himself or anyone else.

The neighborhood had grown into a more desperate place over the years. The house and then the garage were broken into on separate occasions. One night Billy awoke to see a figure moving through the hazy blue of the kitchen, and, deciding to speak to it, found no words available to him. Silhouetted by the moonlight from the kitchen window over the sink, the intruder turned to face Billy, who, at over six-foot-two in a white T-shirt and boxers, cut an imposing shape in the darkened entry. He immediately tumbled back through the window he came in, jumped down to the yard and ran off. Billy padded back off to bed and didn't mention anything about it until the next evening when the darkness falling about the kitchen windows after dinner reminded him that what he saw was not from a dream.

At hearing of the incidents, Jo Ann and Carol, Billy's two older sisters, pooled their resources, got pre-qualified for what they thought would be a manageable mortgage loan and immediately began looking for another house. Both were big-bodied women who had married young and begun families about the same time Billy and Kathy were graduating from high school. They had

never flown on a plane or been more than 200 miles from their birthplace, but they had “seen enough of the world” in the words of Jo Ann, who made many of the family decisions as the oldest sibling.

"You two can do what you want," Jo Ann proclaimed after the second break-in without even looking toward Billy and Kathy seated at the table. "Mumma's not stayin' here no more!"

When she raised her voice and arched her eyebrows until they almost touched the straight edge of her curly black hair, holding them there sometimes until they began to quiver like a seagull on the horizon, waiting for anyone to say anything, Jo Ann rarely encountered opposition. But Billy couldn't contain himself. His body began to tremble. Unable to think of anything to counter Jo Ann with, he simply shook his head back and forth in the negative. He stood up and began heading toward his room, then slammed his fist into a wall, scraping the skin off the knuckles. Carol grabbed him, coaxed him in back into the chair and got his hand into cold water. Jo Ann's eyebrows remained arched.

Just two years and about 20 pounds Jo Ann’s junior, Carol could also present an imposing figure when she needed to, but more often she found herself trying to smooth over family conflicts as one of the few people whose opinion Jo Ann would give credence. Since their father died of a second stroke decades ago, Jo Ann and Carol had appointed themselves their mother's guardians. For a long time they both visited the house together on the weekends, taking turns driving. As years passed, they arrived on separate days, trading Saturdays for Sundays,

one relieving the other as sentries for the status quo, keeping vigil for the slightest variation from household routine.

After about a month of searching they settled on a house bordering the outlying western city limit. It was laid out in a more modern floor plan, identical to the other houses in the block, with larger living areas on the main floor and fewer stairs for Lila, who was 83. Every front yard had in its middle an oak tree about 20 years old, dating from when the houses were built. All of the homes in the block had garages except for the house they picked, which must have been a model home, where the space set aside for a garage was instead used as an office for the homebuilding company selling the homes. A driveway still lead right up to the side of the house, as if the home had been built atop a forgotten thoroughfare. Jo Ann and Carol were able to save some money from this floor plan arrangement, but the stranded driveway always drew questions from guests about the missing garage. "It wasn't stolen," Jo Ann would answer if Billy was present, an inside reminder for him of the crime in the old neighborhood.

The tattered furnishings formerly set within the rounded plaster walls of the old house appeared even more antiquated against the crisp dry-wall finish of the new home with its right angles and bright corners. Lila's cream-colored collection of ceramic dogs looked a pustular yellow now on the white mantle. The paintings of ships at sea that Kathy treasured and her macramé ceiling hangings were dwarfed by the extra space. And she was continually relocating her collection of porcelain dolls, which meant more to her than anything she

owned besides her phonograph and records, because she couldn't seem to find the right home for them in her room. She assumed there would be inconveniences to deal with in a move but had underestimated how disruptive they could be to one's schedule. She was not affected as drastically as Billy, but she did feel confused. It was the displacement of the move that disturbed Billy. With Kathy, it was the chaos.

Today was New Year's Eve, a Wednesday, and after Carol's husband and Jo Ann finished working half-days, the family and extended family met for a ham and scalloped potatoes dinner as they did every year, and for the second time in the new house. Everyone always left well before the hours to ring in the new year, at a "sane hour" as Carol said, and made the 45-minute drives back to the western New York townships where they lived — Jo Ann alone since divorcing years ago, but with her children close by.

"I see you done too much again, mumma," Jo Ann said after taking her coat off and surveying the loaves of homemade bread and pots of vegetables on the stove in the kitchen.

"Oh no, honey," Lila smiled, "same as last year."

"Katie and Billy help you?" she asked with one eyebrow raised and the other poised.

"Well, yes, Kathy bought the ham."

"Kathy! Billy!"

"Now it's alright, they help out just fine."

"I told you mumma, you have to start taking it easier on yourself."

"My babies help me out fine."

"Don't call them that."

"Have a seat, honey, I made coffee."

Lila, though now frail, still possessed the energy to be active and alert, even if she was hearing impaired and sometimes found herself in situations that offered more than she could handle physically. She had cooked the ham, the vegetables and baked bread for dinner, but a year ago had to give up driving after backing into a gas pump and running over Kathy's foot as she tried to brush some snow off the windshield for her mother. She still liked to walk in the neighborhood, no matter how often she found herself lost or how many times Jo Ann and Carol had told her to let Billy and Kathy take care of whatever it was she needed. Years ago, Billy used to accompany her to the grocery store, even though he always refused to actually enter the store. He would wait outside in the car while she shopped, then help load and unload the bags. Once, shortly after she stopped driving, they walked together to the store and Billy sat on the cement collar of a lamp post in the middle of the asphalt parking lot. Halfway home he fainted from heat exhaustion. That was the last time he ever went with her. Now Kathy did the shopping.

Perhaps Billy and Kathy never considered their mother vulnerable because, living beside her in the same house, they never saw her grow old; and because understanding someone else's need requires first grasping one's own. If Billy and

Kathy looked in a mirror occasionally they would notice changes written on their own faces, as well, the lines on their foreheads, creases around their eyes, graying heads, their jowls puffed with the excesses of unreleased words. But they did not mark the passage of time like others in the family, switching styles of clothes, exploring new interests, changing hairstyles. Whatever dreams, if any, that Billy and Kathy had fostered, be they born of the past or the future, did not permeate their daily lives, could not for very long survive the naked gaze of the present.

"Mumma's big buckle boots were wet when I came in the side door," Jo Ann said while peeling potatoes at the table.

"Kathy, Kathy must've put them on to go out," Billy said.

"Well Kathy said it was you might've brought in some snow in on the floor."

"Could be."

"You went out? The walk isn't even shoveled, what'd you go out for?"

"Dun- dunno. Can't remember- I can't remember now."

"You don't remember?"

"Might've just been for a minute. To check on somethin."

Jo Ann paused and pointed with the peeler. "You two better not be lettin' mumma go out in this weather to pick up things at the store. And somebody shovel the damn walk!" Billy got up and opened another beer from the refrigerator as Kathy took a seat at the table. He knew Jo Ann would expect it

done within the hour, and she knew he knew this. He was not trying to defy her, he just wanted to drink more before going out. Jo Ann knew this, too.

"He doesn't do much of anything anymore," Kathy said.

"I told you I don't like it, I don't like it here," Billy said halfway to the living room.

"Just forget that, just drop it," Kathy shouted after him, springing up from her chair so quickly she seemed to surprise herself for a moment, then, taking a beer from the fridge, heading to her bedroom and closing the door, actions that spoke to her history of defeats and frustrations regarding her brother in comparison to her older sisters' abilities to get him to act on their words, at least most of the time.

But not lost on Kathy was the fact that if Billy had listened to her and quit his obsession to move back to the old house — still solidly occupied by the family of five that bought it over18 months ago — she would not have had a legitimate reason to call the Department of Human Resources about her brother. It may turn out to be only, as they had put it, "a predicament of misperception," she thought, but it was an opportunity she had waited for too long to squander. Now, maybe everyone else would finally know the craziness she had endured for so many years living with him: his reluctance to go outdoors; his failure to work steadily; that unchanging expression painted on his face, a blank gaze that reflected neither forward or backward. They would see how tolerant and giving she had been toward him, she thought; for instance, when she bought him all

those new work clothes and t-shirts to motivate him to find a job a few years ago. And everyone who had known or even known *of* the family would see that, yes, Jo Ann and Carol had helped out, but she had been the main provider all these years since Billy had refused to work full-time after their father's death; and that, yes, damn it, she'd also provided in the later years when he refused to work at all.

Without Billy's obsession drawing all the attention toward him, Kathy may have never been awakened to the arrival of the role she had waited for so long. She was growingly becoming aware that her life could finally expand beyond the flawless record and few promotions she'd had in her career, and allow her to be seen in a light separate from that which she had always shared with Billy, as all twins seemed to do, and this was a startling option for her. The title to the house was in her name and it was well within her reach to pay off the mortgage herself, then donate the house to the family, to all her nieces and nephews to do what they will with it. She would have to find a smaller place and live out whatever remained of her life alone there. But she would become the childless matriarch of the family, remembered by the next generation because she will have been instrumental in their lives at a time in their youth when they needed help. No one could say she was selfish with her money, no one could forget a gesture like that.

But not everyone saw the Billy that she did. Jo Ann and Carol felt Billy's childhood bout with polio had left him limping through life mentally as well as

physically. They pointed to his stutter and habit of repeating things but had never received any factual corroboration from a doctor. When Billy was in his twenties they lobbied their father to let them take their brother in for a psychiatric evaluation, but he wouldn't hear of it, diagnosing his son as having "two arms, two legs and a head on his shoulders like everyone else."

Yet intertwined with Jo Ann and Carol's sympathetic measure of their brother was a contrasting belief that, despite whatever handicap they'd assigned him, he possessed the wits, common sense and intelligence to get by on his own, a contradiction that galled Kathy and had made her determined to force them one day to retract one side of their convenient pair of opinions. She knew there was nothing wrong with her brother, sitting on that couch for so many years watching baseball, drinking his beer. She had given up trying to talk sense to him. It was his simple laziness that held him back, she was convinced, not a disease he happened to have over four decades ago.

Lila, on the other hand, saw nothing at all wrong with her son.

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"Do you remember when we were little, when we were little and slept in the same bed?" Billy said to her from under some blankets on the sofa. He had tried to attend his ninth grade classes too soon after his illness, before he'd recovered

his strength, and now was suffering a fever. Kathy had just returned from her classes and was headed to her room to begin her homework.

"Yes. Why?" she said.

"Lie next to me again," said Billy, lifting the blankets up for her.

"Get out of here."

"Please," he said.

"No! What's the matter with you?" she said, throwing her book bundle on the reclining chair. He did not recognize the expression on his sister's face, her eyes black with the impudence of having looked at someone's illness for too long. He hadn't neglected to notice how she was becoming more, and he less, like everyone else at school.

"Mumma's shop- mumma's shopping," he said, his voice beginning to tremble. "Please, it's very cold, I'm very cold. Just for two minutes. Please." It wasn't just the fever. For the first time he'd known the feeling of being an outsider when he joined his new freshman classmates and saw them stare at the way he walked, endured the burn of new, unfamiliar nicknames and the comments about how he looked and dressed. He could sense himself turning back toward childhood but was helpless to control it, as when one's lost in a forest and begins walking in a haphazard direction because moving seems safer than staying where one is.

"Please, just for-"

"Two minutes, that's it!" she announced, surprising herself, not knowing why she'd agreed to it. She lay down next to him on the couch. He put his arm around her shoulders, pulled the blanket over them halfway. They both were still for what seemed like a long time to her.

A haze shrouded the sun and the afternoon light flattened inside the house. The second hand on the grandfather's clock in the living room, at first intensely audible, seemed to slow and soften its beat. She wanted to think of her friends and of school but could not make her mind focus on anything in particular. Her body slowly released against her will, a will that for the first time in her young life seemed foreign. It seemed so strange to her that the sense of touch could do this, as well as obscure the other senses. She closed her eyes and kept them closed. It was a sensation of falling, yet feeling light. They were playing in the backyard again, the elms in back partitioning the sun in broken shadows that made you dizzy if you moved too fast. Blood coursed through limbs and warmed her. A honeyed feeling, far back. And absolutely nothing to do about it. Nothing.

The daylight had blended with the shade of the objects in the house, and, as if she suddenly remembered the brother next to her, Kathy sprang up and said, "Enough! We stop this right now!" She gathered her books as if to run out of the house, then hurried to her room and locked the door. Billy, who had almost fallen asleep, glimpsed his sister just before she slammed the bedroom door behind her and thought it odd that she seemed to be shuddering, almost as if

from the chill he suddenly felt returning as he gathered the blankets that had fallen to the floor and pulled them all the way over his head.

She resented Billy bitterly for a long time after, was angry with herself for letting him talk her into such a thing. And she became more critical of him. Through her brother she could see that what the world pitied it later scorned, and she was never going to allow herself to be the object of either.

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Kathy had decided to come out and help baste the New Year's ham. "The two of you need to just relax," Carol yelled from the kitchen at hearing her younger sister whisk out of the bedroom in her windbreaker, a tabloid in one hand and a plastic dumbell in the other. Kathy leaned an elbow in the kitchen doorway while executing a few bicep curls. "It's hard on mumma, you two always being at odds," added Carol, her brow furrowed with concern greater than her words let on, as was almost always the case with whatever she said, her eyes watering as if about to tear. It drove Jo Ann and Kathy crazy.

Kathy and Billy rarely spoke to each other save for the occasions she would correct or redress something he'd said, which lately almost always involved them moving from the old neighborhood to the new one. This morning, very early, while Lila went out to the grocery for more butter and the whole house was flush with the last thin yellow stillness of dawn on the year's last day, Billy

spoke from where he sat in the dining room to the kitchen where Kathy was sitting with her back to him:

"This house is haunted," he said. No response.

"This house is haunted."

"What?!" Kathy said in a tone loud enough to show annoyance without her having to turn around. "Have you heard things?"

"No."

"Have you seen a ghost, or felt something?"

"No."

"Then what the hell are you talking about if you haven't seen or felt anything," she snapped.

"Nothing," he said. "I felt nothing. I me-mean, it's emp- it's empty here. This place is haunted by nothing."

Kathy rose and walked to her room with her coffee, opened the door and locked it behind her. It cannot by any means be allowed to happen again here, she thought: The ramblings in the same chanting voice, especially after her father died — not of a ghost — but of Billy either talking in his sleep or, especially, talking to himself in his room, talking about everything in his life, great and small, as if someone were sitting right there in front of him. How she used to hate the mumbling that carried from his room to hers in the old house. It only happened on occasion, but it was as if he planned words for her to hear, as if he were also talking to her as much as the ghosts in his head: "Why don't you leave

me alone?” "Everyone will see, everyone will see, I'm a good worker.” "You shouldn't have given up- given up on me." And perhaps he was speaking to her, and not to some phantom of the past he imagined, the words falling upon early morning's scraped and broken ground, born in a dry, dreamless night only to die with the light of day. When the family's religious upbringing would surface in him it would be, "Jesus is going to save me. Daddy, you'll see. Jesus is going- Jesus is going to save me."

At these times she always countered with one of her country records, usually her favorite, Hank Williams, playing it loud enough for Billy to hear but not so loud to wake their mother. During the many months before the move she always chose "House upon the Hill":

"Are you ready for his coming?/
Have you been true all along?/
Have you finished your building in glory?/
Will you move to this heavenly home?"

Sometimes neither of them slept at all. And it could continue throughout the next night, and sometimes even the next. It was a test of will. Kathy always won.

Kathy had been teased for her chubbiness when she was young, but as an adult had become almost gaunt through exercise and a habit of eating irregularly. Some nights now she would refuse to answer her bedroom door

when Lila called her for dinner. Or, she would emerge from her room after Lila and Billy had almost finished eating, pick at a few things and drink beer and smoke cigarettes in silence. Her cheeks had hollowed under small and deep-set eyes that were obscured sometimes by straight red bangs she parted on one side and which were only now showing streaks of gray. She had a habit of wearing her father's old windbreakers around the house with the sleeves pushed up to the elbows, as if she were constantly in training. The whisking noise from the jackets always preceded her into a room.

"That's exactly it," said Carol, "you come home from work all uptight and it makes everyone else uptight."

"It ain't work that makes me- wait a minute, what do YOU know about work?" And then wonderingly, "And what could be done, anyway?"

But Carol had taken offense and turned her back to her again. "You could mix some cheese and milk for the sauce for the potatoes."

If Social Services' evaluation proved that Billy would be better off in a home for the disabled, or even in an assisted living arrangement, then her sisters, relatives and everyone else would know that Kathy had been right all these decades. They would have to make more than the occasional visit to her mother, who would now be alone when she was at work. And she would- who knows what she would do, she thought. With the money she would save, maybe a vacation to Canada or even Mexico, somewhere farther than the rare trips she would take in her Buick Skylark to the outlying towns and counties along the

lake in New York and Pennsylvania. She had been to Niagara Falls as a child but never as an adult, even though it was only a couple of hours away. She could start there and explore the whole country of Canada by plane, or most probably train. There had to be many trains in a country that large, she reasoned. There's a Niagara Falls, Canada, too. They're like us. They've got moose. They've got everything we do. No one would know where she was, and she would not call or contact them. And she would meet people, people who didn't know her.

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Billy's first stab at employment ended quickly. Lila sometimes brought meals to a widow down the street who had lived in the neighborhood longer than anyone else in the block could remember and had a daughter living with her about 10 years older than Billy and Kathy. One summer she suggested to Lila that Billy, then in his early 20s, could earn some money doing some house chores and landscaping. She was a small round immigrant woman focused on attending to her daughter Susan, who grew less and less appreciative of this attention as years passed. The daughter was tall and thin with deep-set brown eyes. Those who had only known her as a chatty, outgoing girl would have trouble recognizing her as an adult — tight-lipped, pensive, with long hair that curved in on her ashen face, often obscuring her eyes. She had been very close to her father, a carpenter from Poland who, with two apprentices, had built his own successful

business. As a child she would accompany him on jobs, sometimes holding the measuring tape for him or pounding a nail in with his hammer.

Shortly after her 13th birthday he was killed in a collision with a drunk driver who'd run a red light. In the years that followed, Susan began spending much more time by herself, and the more her mother tried to protect her, the more withdrawn she became. She had attended one semester of college but refused to return after Christmas break. She took a job as a secretary and stayed 12 years at the same company before it had gone out of business. Her timorousness and her passion for pulp novels, which she sometimes read for several hours during the course of a day at home, did not help her efforts in finding another job. She eventually settled into a routine of accepting freelance typing assignments and temporary office jobs, occasionally meeting her old ex-coworkers for dinner or a drink, more out of obligation than desire.

The mother needed Billy to help maintain an aging house, but the potential suitors she'd already tried to introduce to her daughter included a mailman, milkman, bus driver and 63-year-old WWII veteran. Given her obsession to have her only child married off, she saw Billy and Susan getting to know each other as an added bonus to hiring him.

"Susan, you know Billy," she said on his first day. "Help show him where things are."

"What things?"

"Just help him!"

"I-I don't need a lot of help," Billy said.

Though these were some of the last words Billy and Susan uttered in each other's presence, they would come to know each other much quicker than the mother expected. Perhaps it was only a way for Susan to strike back against her mother; or that her years spent alone, much like those beginning to accumulate for Billy, had a way of silencing the rational world and confusing even simple relationships with people. It was not as if they stepped into the world each day from blank canvasses, but they lacked the line and form necessary to create a context for their lives to take shape. They did not see others so much as see themselves in others, a reflection that obscured all the usual pathways to relationships. So Susan never needed a reason to seduce Billy, just as he never needed a reason to be seduced, if seduction is an accurate term for what occurred, or even a set of signals Billy could interpret.

Billy liked women but had never seen one in the nude, had never experienced the physical transfer from attraction to erection. He sometimes wondered if his polio had affected him sexually, but he had no idea who or how to ask about these things. The only conversations his father had with him concerned sports or subjects that could be handled with sports metaphors, like stepping up to the plate, being tough in the clutch, knowing the difference between the winners and the losers. "Just like you find girls to play with now," he once told a young Billy who had asked about marriage, "you'll find a woman to

play with you when you're older. Then you sign a contract that says you'll play together forever and ever, both on the same team. Whether you win or lose."

After the polio he found it difficult to speak to his son; or, at least the truth became tougher to speak to his son. Billy became the initiator of conversation.

Now, here was a grown woman approaching Billy, 10 years his senior, not saying anything, but smiling very slightly and, without warning, as if through a previous agreement he'd forgotten, kissing him on the mouth. He barely moved his lips. Susan then looked away, as if diverted by something in the corner of the garage. There was a short pause, but it was not awkward for either of them.

Billy had liked the sensation of the kiss. He felt obliged to reciprocate. He leaned toward her and kissed her, this time forming his lips more to hers. Susan slapped him sharply across the face. Then she began laughing loudly. It occurred to Billy that the accepted response would be to do the same thing to her, and that courting was even stranger than he imagined. Instead, out of a feeling contrary to what he was thinking, he kissed her again, more forcefully. She placed her palms on his shoulders and began to pull him down. Their lips parted as they fell to the floor and knocked over a garbage can, but Billy pulled her close and kissed her again. She swung a thigh over Billy's waist and climbed on top of him. He felt his penis beginning to stiffen under her weight. The sensation was as if a motor had been started from the warm spark buzzing in his stomach. She unfastened his pants with her right hand and began stroking him. It stiffened even more. The buzz in his stomach seemed to be extending itself. Susan worked his penis inside

of her, hitting him twice in the chest with one of her palms, and Billy felt its tautness contrasted against the most delicate flesh he had ever felt. He hoped his penis would not soon lower in exhaustion like it had risen in excitement, because it felt too good, like a mixing of two person's insides.

Susan's mother discovered them with the sliding door of the garage fully retracted and the street in open view, and the rummaging sounds not at all caused by Billy packing up hand tools as she had expected. Billy was so inundated by cardboard boxes that at first sight the mother had wildly believed Susan's frantic thrusts were wholly independent of him, as if the penis she caught quick glimpses of were merely an upturned tool she'd told Billy to put away, or at best, that her daughter were suffering the temporary effects of a convulsive fit. The only greater horror than her daughter being unmarried was her being unmarried and having sex, and witnessing Susan in a position that seemed to initiate that was too much for her. She bellowed the kind of low and long moan made when one is losing one's balance and beginning to fall, but neither Susan or Billy turned their heads to acknowledger her. She muffled a higher-pitched scream for fear of attracting passers-by outside. And then ran off sobbing, locking herself in the bedroom she had once shared with her husband and pulling a bedspread over herself as if to hide from an imaginary mob who would soon be looking to apprehend her for the parenting failure, the tragic error, the crime she'd committed.

Billy was forbidden to even walk past the house again — to approach it on the same side of the street — by the mother's threat of calling the police. His own mother felt the embarrassment of neighborhood rumors. But he enjoyed a short-lived period of camaraderie with his father, who made no effort concealing his mild amusement over the incident. He'd make comments like, "The boy can't help it if women can't keep their hands off him," in front of Billy, who, if never smiling along with his father, was greatly appreciative of the attention. But when Billy tried to talk to him about Susan, his father was unwilling to listen very seriously, usually changing the subject.

His father was a large lumbering man who had worked most of his life as a machinist at a plastics factory overseeing the line of machines responsible for pouring cup molds. For years, the house was full of 12- and 16-ounce plastic cups from the factory that he'd proudly brought home and offered to guests to take home with them.

Kathy followed him in career by finding another industrial job as the only woman supervisor at an aluminum plant after refusing all her father's offers to find work through his contacts at the factory. Later, just after his first stroke forced him into retirement, she took a job at the plastics factory as if she had been waiting for it all along, and that was where she still worked as a senior supervisor.

Ever since any of the children could remember, each night after work their father would remain alone at the kitchen table after dinner with his newspapers and cupfuls of beer until it was time for him to go to bed.

He'd been rough with Billy when he was young, before the polio, because he believed it was the best way to prepare him for the likes of what he himself faced as a young man, namely, The Depression. Sometimes he would call Billy into the kitchen to question him about his chores, and, depending on how many beers he'd had, an assortment of other haphazardly chosen topics.

"So, you gonna play in the band or on the football field?"

"I don't know," Billy would say.

"You don't know? Which is it gonna be?"

"Whichever pays the most money, sir."

"Whichever pays the most, huh. You gonna be one of those Poindexters, smart college guy?"

"Yes!"

"Huh?"

"No."

A few times, if Billy had left a chore undone, his father would slap him with the back of his knuckles, explain to him it was done for his own good, then either pat him on the shoulder or tousle his hair with his great paw and send him back out to his mother and the hum of the radio in the living room.

But when the silent and blind fury of the polio arrived, and even after it had lifted, he seemed to have been more defeated by it than his son. He drank more, made love to his wife less. He no longer hit his son but he also no longer knew how he was to care for him. For the first time, matched against post-war civilities, the machines of employment, societies of sharpers, the buildings that grew taller and taller, he felt unable to help his son against all he felt to be crueler than himself. The factory union had offered him a religion, a cause to believe in, but secretly he withheld his trust from even his brothers there. What could he do, his only son — he often pondered — relieved from the responsibilities of manhood but exempted from its entitlements.

The neighborhood sex scandal actually gave his father brief hope that Billy would begin to live a more independent life. Billy found work first as a dishwasher and then as a line cook at a Polish bakery/restaurant, and became one of its more dependable employees. But two years later the restaurant closed because the sons of the aging owner decided they would be better off selling it. In frustration, Billy swore off all Polish food from then on. The bakery became the first stop in a varied succession of jobs thereafter, none of them lasting long, with the exception of a janitor position at his father's plastic factory. When stroke finally took his father, Billy simply stopped showing up at the factory, as if an obligation had come to an end.

Billy had loved work when he was young, but the novelty wore off sometime in the span of his thirties, when it became clear to everyone, including

him, that, without a degree or a marketable skill, he would be a consistent member of the labor pool's lowest level.

He had never learned to drive and so was often seen walking to work or to a bus stop, or walking to look for work. Being in an area full of veterans, the limp that the polio had left him with matched the way many people on the street walked. Everyone seemed one hitch in their step away from toppling over.

* * *

Kathy sat at her desk inspecting her dolls one by one, an almost daily routine for her, while everyone waited for the ham to finish cooking. Her doll collection represented regions from all over the world but was mass-produced by a company in Ithaca, New York. Every year, Kathy was one of the first to obtain their annual catalogue, and one of the first to place her order of any new models. Her goal was to own a doll from every country in the world. From various hobby books checked out from the library, the only books that differed from her usual diet of romance novels and celebrity biographies, she tried to learn something about the dress and customs of each country.

The Japanese doll seemed as untainted as fresh snow, Kathy thought, as she examined it. Her Spanish doll was costumed in full flamenco regalia. The Nigerian one was decorated as a tribal idol representing the "chi" of the country's Ibo people, the personal god they believed was assigned to every person alive.

Would that many gods, one for every person, make the world feel bigger or smaller, she wondered?

Only when she was alone in her room could the life of routine vacate her mind, could the porcelain dolls, dressed in a multitude of colors and costumes but staring with the exact same gleaming black eyes, speak to her of the unknown corners in the round world, of places one couldn't imagine without visiting, of people one had to meet to believe existed.

It was a dizzying mood, liberating her to imagine the world in terms of endless potentialities. But it was only an escape for her, a daydream, nothing more. Because things weren't really like that, they couldn't be, she knew. The world, far from being mysterious, revealed itself to her constantly, just at a pace faster than she could keep up with all the time.

That's why she always paid attention and observed closely. In her office at work, for instance, she had set up an erasable marker board that charted the duties completed each week by stations under her supervision, not as an employee surveillance check, but as a tool to help her keep things running as smoothly as possible. Even lunch breaks were charted so she could stagger them to reach the most efficient production levels. She was constantly walking the plant and taking notes on a clipboard, a practice which had made employees hateful of her in the beginning when she had tried assigning timed output levels to the various production lines. When this proved impossible because of machinery stoppages, sick leaves, differences in the levels of employee

experience, turnover and other variables, they came to view her notes and wanderings as simply the habits of an eccentric, an oddball. And although she treated them fair and her salty language was sometimes an endearing and amusing trait to the employees, she never allowed any social connections with them to arise for fear they might get in the way of her performing her job as efficiently as possible.

This was something the world could not take from her: Respect could at least exist in the workplace, if not always elsewhere, she thought, and one always had to be on the lookout for its absence or presence. She was never going to be a person who didn't know what was going on, she was never going to lose her drive, like her brother had.

* * *

The heat during the summer Billy's father died set record highs almost every week. The old house had no air conditioning, so Jo Ann and Carol had set up Vornado industrial floor fans in the upstairs bedroom where their father was confined after suffering a serious stroke that spring. No one knew for certain how much good the fans did him, since he'd lost his speech, but they seemed to help him sleep and Jo Ann believed they contributed in keeping his blood pressure down. Maybe just as importantly, they chased out the deafening silence

that would've permeated the room in their absence whenever a family member sat bedside to visit.

There was not much he could do for himself with his level of paralysis. He could feed himself with his right hand, but had to be held or strapped down when in a chair or wheelchair to keep from falling. Some days he was more responsive than others and could signal things with his good hand, but he did not have the dexterity to write.

The gravity of the illness seemed to siphon the oxygen from the house, leaving stale air and the torpid desperation it incubates. Kathy stopped working overtime and even came home early some days to help with her father. Jo Ann and Carol were there almost everyday, and Lila sometimes even slept in the same bed with her husband when he was first brought home from the hospital, so accustomed was she to the habit of his physical nearness over the years of their nights together. Complications such as his susceptibility to bedsores and his urination and bowel programs soon made this arrangement impossible. The reality that they had been more partners than lovers for so many years made it easier for Lila to accept that, for the time being, she was as much her husband's nurse as his wife.

The doctors had said that there were no guarantees, but that he would likely never walk again, that some people are more prone to stroke than others, that another could come and take him from them at any time. Or not. Lila continued washing and pressing his clothes, and at least made the effort to dress him in a

shirt and pants every day, unless he protested and preferred to stay in bedclothes.

It was confusing for everyone in the family to see such an imposing man made small and helpless, but especially so for Billy. In the beginning, he performed more chores around the house than normal to try and compensate for his father's paralysis. Then he took it upon himself to sit with his father every day after work. It was not an easy thing to do, but the doctors had stressed its importance. Lila also sat with him everyday, but the sisters found it too emotionally overwhelming on a daily basis and so worked out a schedule among themselves. They focused instead on their father's insurance policy and pension plan, taking care of the family's finances and expenses.

At first, Billy broke out of his usual reticence and spoke as much as he could during his visits, about the weather, the house and most especially sports, as if the more he talked, the more words his father would remember and the more he might be able to speak again. He sat in a folding chair faced in the same direction as his father's bed, so that they both stared straight ahead for the duration of the visits, sometimes catching the last few innings of an afternoon baseball game on the small TV on top of the dresser.

Then, as if realizing his father could also serve as his witness, he began to speak only about those things that he would never tell anyone: his fantasies concerning various women in the neighborhood, his hatred of the plastics factory, his memories of the polio. His father's face would often contort into

unfavorable expressions during these revelations, and sometimes he would shake his head back and forth to try and get his son to stop. But Billy never stopped. One day he told his father of how he had dreamed for many years of marrying Susan, of how he had thought about her everyday and often stayed up at night in hopes of being the only one in the neighborhood still awake beside her, as if this act would somehow lead to their union. He went on to physically describe her in detail, as if presenting proof to his father. He told him how her long hair made the hair on his arm stand up when it first brushed against him, like happened sometimes when he walked in his socks on carpet. He said her eyes were like black marbles with tiny specks of light, and her lips were shiny and soft. He described how delicate her neck was and how thin and smooth her skin was there. His father began to mildly and repeatedly shake his head back and forth, as if thinking, enough of this silly fascination and worship, how faithful had the human body been for either himself or his son, after all? Billy took no notice of his father's discomfort and began to describe how her mouth was sweet to his lips at first touch but did not last as long as candy, and how her thighs seemed to have the same tender flesh that her rear did. "Sometimes it bounced back and forth," he told his father, "it jiggled back and forth." His father began to shake his head more rapidly and emitted a low moan. Billy tried to give him some water but he would not take it. The amusement he'd experienced years ago from this incident between his son and Susan was gone. There was never a point of entry into it for him, either as a father or the person who perhaps now

weakly remembered the man he once was. And now Billy was describing Susan's vagina as the "inside of her skin," as a part of a hidden world he'd heard of but never felt before. "But I felt it," he said, "I felt it inside, and it was warm and comfortable, very comfortable. But all that's gone, long gone." Billy went on to detail why he blamed Susan's mother, the neighborhood and his own family for preventing a relationship growing between he and Susan.

"And it'll never happen again!" he yelled suddenly. His father had been venting a series of squeals that had gradually increased in volume and pitch until Billy had finally stopped his reverie and realized his father's agitation. He laid his hands on his father's chest, thinking this might be the second stroke the doctors had spoke about, then yelled for help. His mother rushed upstairs, but by the time she reached the bedroom, her husband had his eyes tightly shut and had slowed his rapid breathing to an almost normal pace. Lila removed Billy's hands.

As weeks progressed, the household methodically slipped into an infirmary of habit, with all of the bedpan transfers, vital sign recordings, feeding sessions and solitary footfalls up the creaking flight of stairs distributed into a schedule by Jo Ann, Carol and Lila. Though Billy's visits continued, he never again would effect such violent reactions in his father with his ramblings about Susan. Quite oppositely, he now sat in silence staring at his father, his chair turned directly toward him. He never spoke another word to him, either from a fear of exciting him or because he felt he had nothing more to say to his father.

The heat seemed to build on itself, each day passing an extra degree to the next one, which furnaced it until reaching its solar zenith. The only available air seemed to have risen off the streets like a transparent steam. The always-lush grounds of the park at the Soldiers & Sailors Home browned and withered in thirst. Absent even of the birds and squirrels, it hung in the sun's rays like a gleaming grave. As if life had been seared out of him, Billy's father grew feebler, until gradually, he was awake for smaller and smaller parts of each 24-hour cycle. Still, Billy sat with him, even against the wishes of his mother.

It did not matter if his father was conscious or not, Billy sat and watched him. Sometimes for an hour or two. Most of the time his father never knew Billy had been there. The shades were pulled all the time now to keep out the sun and no one turned the TV on anymore, leaving the room always either gray or darkened. The occasional closing of cabinet faces, the banging of pots and dishes from the kitchen below were the only noises that could reach he and his father. He was aware that he was the only one hearing them. He was aware that only he could hear his father's soft breath, see the crumpled sheet smooth ever so slightly during inhalation, watch the occasional twitch of the eyelids. But far from merely keeping a vigil, Billy stared intently at his father with another aim, almost instinctual in its persistence, as if he were trying to cross the bridge between wakefulness and sleep, never arriving but still hoping to break through each night. And through this nightly failure, he traced his own breath more intently, saw his eyes open and close, felt his own heart pump in its heavy case.

Oddly, Billy began to see himself as a child in his father, the spaces in the sick bed merely reversed. He remembered not remembering those great lapses in consciousness when the waves of the illness swelled too violent to hold at bay; and then the peace left in their wake that seemed somehow to pervade the world outside, where the larger cycles of the seasons felt broken by his smaller passages, time stunted to his mind's pace. If those days and nights had seemed like a dream over the years, why was it so many of the rest of the moments in his life could not speak to him, all these years he had worked small jobs and done what was expected of him by his family. Only now did he finally feel able to see beyond any of that. Was this how his father also felt now? Had he finally learned? Or did he feel the best part of himself slipping away?

In July one evening Billy's father woke up to find Billy staring at him. Their eyes met and held each other for a long time, and Billy could see tears flowing down his father's cheeks. His father motioned with his head for Billy to come closer — why, Billy would never know. Billy remained seated and a second time his father beckoned him to come near. Perhaps Billy sensed what was happening and felt it was best for both he and his father. It did not take long. His father looked at his son once more, his eyes softer, resigned to the fact his son would not be coming to his side. His eyes were still looking at Billy when Billy finally got up after many minutes had passed and closed them with his fingers. Then he walked downstairs to tell his mother.

For all the days of his life until his father died, Billy had managed to be fairly capricious emotionally, never lingering in any state of mind, positive or negative for too long, forgetting many things before they ever had a chance to take on a lasting impression with him. Perhaps it was the responsibilities he sensed, however real or imagined, of being the only male in the family left. Or, that he felt he could no longer look to be like or unlike his father either in the decisions he made or the ones he avoided. He never again went back to the plastics factory. He took temp jobs and odd jobs occasionally. But the routine of his life gradually began to encircle him, each day orbiting a little more beyond his control. His older sisters lectured he needed a change, a new career, a fresh start, and that even though he was in his forties, he could still do it. But all he could think of doing was stopping.

* * *

Kathy turned the flame down on the potato sauce and went back to the table and her beer and tabloid. "Says here they think the woman who was fooling around with that senator was kidnapped."

"Why would they kidnap her?" said Jo Ann.

"Oh come on, those kind of people have a lot to hide. Maybe it was one of his other mistresses. Or her family's probably one of those rich Washington families, maybe somebody did it for ransom."

"Could be. I don't trust those tabloids much."

"Well, there's the true stories about people and the false ones. I mean, when they start talking about that little girl in Idaho being killed by an alien, that's just sensationalism. But this one, that's how people are."

"How do you know?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said: There's the true stories and the false ones."

"You're tryin' to get me goin', aren't you? It ain't gonna' work."

Kathy ignored her, checked the sauce again and grabbed another beer from the fridge. They didn't argue now. When Kathy was of marrying age, Jo Ann brought friends of her husband to the house constantly but Kathy would never come out of her room to meet any of them, a source of many arguments between the sisters.

It never occurred to Carol, on the other hand, that not only might her sister go through life unmarried, but that she might not ever even meet a possible suitor. From her matriarchal perch in the countryside, any other way of life was unthinkable. All women became their mothers eventually.

"You've got to keep current with what's going on, Jo Ann," Kathy said finally.

* * *

They had moved in six months ago and Billy was still refusing to unpack his belongings or donate any of his savings to the house. And he was mailing primitive eviction notices to the family occupying the old house with made-up injunctions citing everything from termite infestation to bodies buried in the backyard. He signed them "House Chief Marchetti," borrowing the mayor's surname.

"I know what you're doing to that family," Kathy said standing behind him while he watched baseball reclining in the easy chair. "Maybe you'd like to be evicted, too."

Though Billy never developed a hobby, he inherited an interest in sports from his father when he was young that continued unfettered without him ever attending a game or placing a bet. He had no favorite team or player, just enjoyed watching the games, whatever they were, football, basketball, baseball — his favorite — the Olympics, soccer. Without much familiarity of statistics, rosters or the history of teams, he saw the games fairly even matches, their outcomes full of potential.

"Maybe you wanna', maybe you wanna' die in this house," he said.

"Fine," said Kathy, walking back to her room, her head lowered in disgust.

Everything had originally felt temporary to Billy, as if the whole ordeal was a prank about to be revealed. But the move soon triggered a deeper shift that had now overtaken him, almost as debilitating as the polio had been, but in a

different way. He stayed in bed now because he could not think of getting up, not because he couldn't.

The title of the house was in Kathy's name and she would be its inheritor, which had never been an issue with Billy, even though its value would be much higher than that of the old house. It was the suddenness of the move for him, of prospective buyers taking tours of the old home, then the movers seeming to appear out of nowhere at his door one day, interceding upon everything he ever accumulated through the years of his silent life and packing it away.

Kathy had never spoke a word about moving from the old neighborhood even while she was aware its decline was bringing home values down with it. It was about their mother, and where their mother was concerned Kathy and Billy knew they had no say in the decisions Jo Ann and Carol assumed. They had no claims on the old house above what it could provide for Lila. Kathy never allowed herself to ponder this fact, as if it were a temporary arrangement closing in on a 60-year extension. But Billy internalized it, believed it so strongly that now all his relationships, including those with the few surviving neighbors, seemed broken from an order that could not be fit together again.

He reached for the TV remote and turned the volume up until it was loud enough for Kathy to hear it in her room. Both of them acted out of habit, the intent having rusted away from the action years ago. As for the reaction, it could be split two ways: she either came out of her room, snatched the remote and turned it down; or, she refused to budge, no matter how loud the volume

became, and put her records on. He did not know if she would come out, but he hoped she would. And he didn't really know why.

He watched the pitcher work the hitter and the hitter work the pitcher. The bases were loaded with two outs. "Slider outside for a ball," the announcer fairly yelled. "Swing and a miss on an inside fastball." Home is the base that matters, in baseball and in life, Billy thought, suddenly proud for having thought it. "Fastball high and outside, swing and miss." "Slider outside, ball two." "Fastball inside corner- strike three!"

* * *

"Why don't you go out to the movies sometime, Billy?" said Carol as Billy came into the kitchen for another beer.

"'Cause they're not real. They're not real."

"'They're not real?! Course not. That's why you go."

"'Guess- guess- I guess I liked them all right when I was younger," he said. "But not now."

"You shouldn't coop yourself up like you do."

Billy stopped in the doorway, looking off to the side. "Hey Carol."

"Yeah?"

"You go see a movie."

"You see what I mean?" said Kathy. "Every day, how'd you like to put up with it every day."

"Well then just let him be!" said Jo Ann. "What the hell do you care what he does?"

"'Cause I live here, that's why."

"Then move out."

"Maybe I'll come live with you," Kathy threatened.

"No you won't."

"I couldn't leave mumma alone with him, anyway."

"Why not?"

"'She can't do everything herself."

"Yeah, like buying hams, that's a big goddamned help."

"We got an hour to get dinner ready," said Carol. Billy watched football in the living room and tuned out their conversation. He heard their voices, not their words, as if they were the repetitive calls of wildlife. He had shoveled the snow off the walk as Jo Ann had commanded because it was only a temporary intrusion. But the days when he took it upon himself to try and mimic his father's handyman traits in the old house were long over. This was Jo Ann and Carol's and especially Kathy's house, she was the breadwinner now paying the bills. He didn't resent this — he resented the move — but not this fact. Kathy had always known more about money than he had, but he did not trust her with his, even though she used her salary to help support everyone in the house. It was what he

felt she had always held over him and so he was not going to care a damn about it.

Like coordinates fixed on a grid that paralleled the world everyone else inhabited, Billy sat in the living room, Kathy returned from work to her books and dolls in her room — again and again. Lila had struggled for their congress, willed her final years onward for it, sensing they needed her more now than when they were children. But nothing changed.

"I'll check the ham, you set the table, Kathy," said Jo Ann.

"He's become a liability to the house," said Kathy.

"How?"

"Well he's not careful. He could start something on fire, or leave water running or something."

"Ha, what are you talking about?" Jo Ann laughed. "Daddy was a damn sight more liable, more liable to fall down and hurt himself or someone else when he was drunk. Billy never hurt anybody."

"Maybe he'd be happier in a home."

"A home?!"

"Just for a while."

"What in the hell are you- have you gone completely out of your mind? A home? He's in a home, his home. Listen, stop this nonsense right now, Katie, you hear?"

They worked quietly, interrupted only by Billy's beer runs to the refrigerator, Jo Ann and Carol handling most of the food and Kathy setting the table, then being drawn back to her tabloid. Carol's husband Walter arrived with their kids and they joined Billy and the football game in the living room. Jo Ann's children and grandchildren arrived next, with all the younger children then going outside to play.

"This family should sue that senator for having sex with their daughter," said Kathy. "He met her when she was a teenager! It says right here, he can't be allowed to get away with that."

"Can you baste the ham, Kathy," said Carol.

"Says he pursued her from job to job in Washington- well that's sexual harassment right there."

"I don't care about those people."

"People like him just think they're better than us."

"That stuff's nonsense," said Jo Ann.

"They do!"

"I meant the whole thing's nonsense, your tabloids too."

"You never were a reader, Jo Ann, you gotta read to find out what's going on."

"I can see what's going on just fine."

"I wouldn't be so sure."

The two older sisters agreed they'd wake Lila from her nap at three o'clock and by then dinner would be ready. Kathy basted the ham with some brown sugar sauce one last time and Jo Ann waited five minutes to turn the oven off. Kathy had gained a few beers on Jo Ann while reading her tabloid. Carol had sworn off beer years ago with the hope it might slow down her husband Walter's drinking.

"If there's any more rolls or bread," Jo Ann said, "get 'em ready, Kathy."

"Jesus H. Christ, we've got enough to eat already," said Kathy.

"In the old, in the old kitchen,-" Billy offered.

"We don't have time for that now," said Kathy, "we're trying to get dinner ready." Billy got another beer and walked back to the living room. Like his father late in life, he was drunk every day now. He didn't bicker with Kathy when he drank.

"Well, you know, either help out or go back to the football game. Jesus!" Kathy said in answer to Carol's stare.

Lila came out and walked toward the kitchen as Jo Ann's husband Walter was shakily trying to carve the ham.

"Hiya mumma," said Walter, "sleep well?"

"What?"

Putting down the knife and cupping his hands over his mouth, Walter screamed, "Sleep well?"

"Not that loud, dummy," said Jo Ann.

"Oh just like a baby," said Lila. Carol and Jo Ann brought the food out to the dining room. For about 10 years after her husband's death, Lila always insisted on uttering a short prayer in his remembrance before meals when the whole family was gathered, but that practice had been almost absentmindedly abandoned for a long time. Now, they simply bowed their heads in a moment of silence and folded their hands together as if in prayer. When Lila finally looked up, the others noticed it in their peripheral vision and, in a chain-reaction response, knew it was time to begin passing the food.

"Your ham turned out great again, mumma," said Carol.

"Thank you, honey," said Lila.

"But you don't have to keep cooking, mumma," said Jo Ann. "Let us take care of all the cooking now."

"It tastes good, it tastes very good, mumma," said Billy, "but I don't think this oven cooks as evenly as the old-"

"You've done your work all these years, just rest now, mumma," continued Jo Ann. "Kathy and Billy can take care of their meals."

"Well, I know I can," said Kathy.

"I cook fine, I cook just fine," said Billy.

Lila preferred to smile rather than debate the subject, but inside she knew that she would keep on cooking for her two children and they knew it too. It was a comfortable routine and it gave her something to do with her days, even though it took her longer now to prepare a meal.

"I liked the way you cooked the squash last year, Kathy," said Carol. "You had a little more brown sugar in there. But these are good, don't get me wro-"

"Don't eat 'em if you don't like 'em," said Kathy.

"They're fine, I'm just saying last year you did-"

"Whaddya think Billy?" said Walter.

"-You had more brown sugar last time," finished Carol.

When Walter drank, and on holidays he had freer reign to do so, he liked to see how far he could egg on Billy. He'd had Billy sneak him two beers right after he carved the meat and went back to the game, and was beginning to loosen up now.

"Don't really care for squash," said Billy, getting up to go to the refrigerator.

"I think everything tastes just fine," said Lila.

"Do you remember how we used to cook the squash for daddy?" said Carol. "All butter and salt, that's how he ate 'em."

"And they were so soft, almost mushy," said Lila.

"Two years in a row now I shoveled the sidewalk out front, Billy" said Walter, nudging Jo Ann. "You should be buyin' me a beer."

"I shoveled the walk to the house. But the front sidewalk, you shovel there and the wind just blows it back over what you did, just blows it back over what you did," said Billy, getting Walter his beer. "The old house faced away from the snowline. It faced away from the snowline."

"Wait a minute, are you trying to say you didn't have to shovel at the old place?"

"I'm saying it faced away, it faced away from the snow."

"So the snow only falls in a certain direction, then?"

"It comes from there," he said pointing out the living room window to the rows of gray houses on the other side of the street. "It comes from the lake, it comes out from the lake."

"Well, maybe just give yourself more time to do it and you'll be fine."

"I don't have time any more," said Billy, finishing his plate, taking it to the sink and heading out to the living room with a beer to watch the rest of the game.

"He just doesn't have any time," laughed Walter. "Guess I touched a nerve."

The kids went out to play in the airy flakes of snow that were beginning to sputter down as dinner neared its end. Walter, having secretly guzzled half a tumbler of after-dinner whiskey, didn't return from the bathroom upstairs and fell asleep on top of the guest bed next door, and Jo Ann took Lila back to her room to rest until dessert was served. A warm front had loosened the snow in the morning but now the sky was filling again with slabs of gray, the moist melt-off from the first part of the day giving way to a crisper air mass flowing south from Canada across the lake, a skin of frost beginning to form over everything. The afternoon light dimmed a shade and no longer reflected off the snow.

At hearing the knock on the front door, Billy had peaked quickly through its short buffeted drapes at the strangers outside and gone to sit in the darkened hall before the kitchen, near enough to hear but not be seen.

“I’ll get that!” Kathy said, running from the kitchen to the front door, where a man and a woman waited outside.

“Who in the world?” said Jo Ann.

"Hi, we're from-" came muffled through the door.

"I know," said Kathy, opening the door half way. "Thanks for making it over here right during the holidays, but I wanted my sisters here so they could see for themselves."

“See for themselves?" said the brown-suited man, who had loosened his tie and had a face that was a mixture of fatigue and indifference.

“You know, when you evaluate him.”

"What’s going on-," said Jo Ann.

“These people are here to talk to Billy,” said Kathy.

“No- wait just a minute here," Jo Ann said, clutching Kathy by the wrist and halting her effort to open the door all the way, so that in their push/pull struggle the door was kept wavering only about a quarter of the way open. "About what?”

“They want to make sure Billy’s alright here is all. Let go.”

“We’re from Social Services, I’m Brian and this is Emily,” said the man, pointing to a short woman who stood with a duck-like sturdiness and a cheerful expression.

“I’m Billy’s oldest sister, Jo Ann. Why are you here?”

“Your sister made an appointment with us," said the man. "She didn't mention we were coming?”

“We’re here to make sure Billy has the best living option available to him,” added the woman brightly, peering in front of the man to look in the crack of the door. At the mentioning of his name, Billy's stomach churned and he fitted himself even further into the chair. "You did call US."

“I didn't, she did, apparently," said Jo Ann, nodding toward Kathy, whom she was still preventing from opening the door with her large frame buttressed against her younger sister's hips and arms.

Kathy whispered in Jo Ann’s face that she wanted her and Carol here for this, that she thought these people might be able to help Billy, and to just let them talk to him. Jo Ann protested. Kathy began to raise her voice and Jo Ann reciprocated until Kathy lowered hers again to almost a whisper and talked rapidly.

"Ex-, mam, excuse us, but we did come all the way over here on New Year's Eve," said the man.

"We want to go home, too," said the woman. "Just let us do our job with Billy for a few minutes, then we'll be on our way."

Billy's whole body tensed at hearing this. They weren't going on their way with him anywhere. Slowly, he reached over and grabbed the neck of the beer bottle on the floor. He wasn't sure why. Time was short, he thought. Maybe he'd throw his beer bottle at one of them. Or he would break off the neck of the bottle on the end table and come at them that way, like they'd done in films he'd seen.

"Damn you Jo Ann, let me handle things for one minute of your goddamned life!" erupted Kathy so loudly and unexpectedly a momentary embarrassment silenced everyone.

"Excuse us. I'll make you some coffee, but then you'd better leave," said Carol, trying to interject some calm.

"Fine," said the woman, pushing the bill of her nose closer to the door opening.

"I want to be with Billy while you ask him whatever it is you ask him," said Jo Ann.

"We can't really allow that according to-"

"It's okay," interrupted the man, corralling the woman with his arm around her shoulders so both of them could finally come in from the cold. As the storm door hissed quickly on it's broken piston arm and loudly clanged shut, the unmistakable signal of entry that could be heard almost anywhere in the house, Billy had stood up with the bottle in his hand and moved slowly, his back to the wall, toward the kitchen.

"Billy!" Kathy yelled as soon as she saw him stepping into the light coming from the kitchen and around the door cut. Billy dropped his beer bottle and quickly wide-stepped through the kitchen and out the side door of the house. From the kitchen window Carol and the social worker woman watched him hobbling through the backyard and out the gate, the children in the backyard laughing at the sight.

"Well don't just stand there like stumps on a log," yelled Kathy. "Go get him!"

"We can't do that, mam," said the woman. "And no one but you seems to have been expecting us. Your sister Carol just told me Billy gets along fine here."

"You're gonna' listen to someone who doesn't even live here?"

"There's nothing we can do now," said the man as he was getting up.

"What!? He'll freeze out there."

"Billy can take care of himself, Kathy," said Jo Ann, "don't give me that crap after you just tried to get him thrown out of here into one of your 'homes.'"

"You don't understand."

"He's just out back waiting for them to leave."

"No he isn't, no he isn't either!"

* * *

Thirty minutes after the man and woman from Social Services had left, Billy still had not returned. Kathy had already begun both her search and her own escape on foot. When another hour passed and she hadn't returned Carol's panic finally infected Jo Ann. The wind was now defiantly hurling the snow upward toward the sky it fell from in an atmospheric duel.

Jo Ann drove slowly to allow her new snow tires to grip and for the sake of visibility. After a search of almost four hours for their brother, Jo Ann and Carol found themselves too late to heed their sister's warning, catching up to Billy curled on a bench in the park next to the Soldiers and Sailors Home, his body stiffened but still faintly breathing. By the time they pulled him to the warm car his body was no longer responsive. Maybe it was his heart, or the hypothermia or simply too much time and too little left of anything else. They returned with the news for everyone but the sleeping Lila, after notifying authorities and seeing Billy's body off. Kathy had returned in their absence, having passed the park earlier without seeing her brother, her feet badly frostbitten from walking the old neighborhood alone.

* * *

The wind had just begun to gust, growing more steadily strong, slanting the snow and forming small drifts in front of the curbs and yards. Party guests ran ducked into the wind from cars to houses. Inside, Carol had stopped her pacing,

left everyone sitting and staring at the table in the kitchen, and went upstairs to try to rouse Walter, awakening him but not able to get him to his feet.

"Mam, there really is nothing we can do without Billy cooperating," said the man finally, both to break the silence and move things toward an end for he and his partner.

"We might wait a little more," said the woman.

"You said you were going to evaluate him," said Kathy.

The man leaned in and whispered something to the woman. "It's New Year's, mam," said the woman, "the best we can probably do is to schedule another visit after the holiday."

"What? I don't give a good goddamn what day it is. You have-"

"Calm down," said Jo Ann.

"You have a job to do, per the taxpayers of the United States of America, and you're goddamn going to do it!" Kathy screamed.

"I'm sorry," said Jo Ann to the workers.

"Is she always like this?" whispered the woman to Jo Ann as she used her as a shield and walked with the man toward the front door.

"No! No, no, no," said Kathy, "you're not going anywhere yet." Kathy ran so quickly to the door to block it that it froze the others again.

"Okay, okay, calm down," said the man, then lowly to the woman, "let's sit down again for a moment."

"You're being paid taxpayers' money, my money," Kathy went on, "to do the job I called you to do."

"Mam, we're trained professionals, you don't determine what our job is," said the man.

"You do what I called you here to do!" screamed Kathy.

"Kathy! "yelled Jo Ann.

"We will stay only to file a report on you, mam," said the woman.

"You'll talk to Billy, not me. You've got to find him!"

"Go sit in the kitchen," Jo Ann said to the man and woman, "I'll take care of her."

Billy sat hidden in a neighbor's garage, the beers and the cold wrapping him in such a warm anesthetic that he'd actually dozed off for a few minutes. He awoke to the last rays of dusk showing through the windowpanes of the garage in a weak arc, making both his fears and time itself feel strangely small for a moment. He felt as if he'd been asleep for a long time and was jolted by the thought that the social workers were probably searching for him. He decided to be on his way.

It wasn't a surprise, he thought, Kathy had warned him, but, at the same time, he still couldn't believe she'd gone ahead and done it. He could keep to himself better than she could, he thought, and maybe that was what made her angry with him, she was jealous.

He walked the alley to a side street, then down to the main thoroughfare that headed back toward town. It had been almost a month since he'd been outdoors. In the blowing snow the holiday lights and decorations gave the neighborhood an almost unrecognizable feel. The muffled sound of voices and music and football rattled in tin-like frequencies through the doors and windows. The sleep and the beers that had insulated him in a warm fog were receding and he began to shiver through the light jacket he'd hastily grabbed as he went out the side door. He ducked into the wind at as rapid a pace as he could but his limp and the wind slowed him.

Could Kathy honestly have seen this happening if they had stayed at the old house, he wondered, where things had always managed to fall into order? He knew he was at least five miles away but he continued walking to the old neighborhood.

Jo Ann checked on her mother, whose lack of hearing had incredibly allowed her to sleep through everything, and Carol served the coffee in the kitchen.

“How many years of schooling have you completed?” the woman asked.

“I could have been the first one in the family to go to college, that’s how many,” said Kathy impatiently.

“And why didn’t you?” said the man.

“I needed to work. I got the high grades.”

"It's true," said Carol trying to frame her sisters' statements with what she felt to be normalcy, or at least faint optimism. She was looking out the kitchen window with her back to everyone. "She was especially good in math."

"How long have you been employed at your job?" said the man.

"You can talk to the people I work with for that, they'll tell you what kind of worker I am."

"Almost 20 years," said Carol, turning to face them for emphasis.

"Could you just fill this form out quickly and we'll be on our way and you can attend to your brother," said the man.

"It's true she's been a good worker her whole life," Carol interjected. "You can ask her employers about that."

"My first real job I made supervisor," Kathy said. "Supervisor! At Mack Industries."

"How long did you work there?" asked the man, who was the one doing the writing while the woman looked at the coffee in her cup.

"Ten years. Do you know how many sick days I took in 10 years? Two! Less than one a half-decade. And guess how many times I was late for a shift? None."

"That's very good," said the man.

"When I left-"

"She really was very well-liked there," said Carol. "She got along well with everyone."

"So you've maintained steady employment since your twenties?" said the man.

"Yes," said Carol, heading toward the den. "I can show you the tax forms."

"She means well," Kathy whispered while leaning toward the man, "but she never really had to work much in her life."

"Compared to you," said the man.

"Compared to anyone, except maybe Billy."

"What did you want to study?" asked the man.

"What?"

"In college."

"Oh I don't know," said Kathy.

"She was excellent in mathematics," shouted Carol from the other room. "Excellent!"

Kathy tried to think of new defenses of her employment record. Carol entered with a box of papers, providing distraction. Kathy sprang up and ran through the side porch, grabbing her coat and hat in the same motion she flung the door open. "Kathy wait" said Carol, "wait, we'll all go. Damn it!" She looked blankly into the box of Kathy's tax forms and the records of her years of employment. "She'll be back."

The man and the woman would not wait. It had seemed like an already long day had spun beyond their control and they wanted to put it behind them. Both

of their families lived on the other side of town and they just wanted to get home.

Kathy finally stopped running after she had gotten two blocks from the house, figuring she had a good enough lead on the couple that they would not be able to find her if they tried. But her head was still spinning. She did not want to think about their report, it couldn't be considered whole now, and therefore valid, she reasoned.

There were the true stories about people and the false ones. Which ones would be told about her? Which ones about Billy? She kept walking and walking, thinking what a good thing it was she was physically fit for moments like these. She needed to find her brother, and she knew where he could be found. Because she knew from her own life that no matter how alone one felt it only took one other life to witness the empty moments — not act on them — but simply witness them. This care was enough to remember the times and events no one else would, and to feel that other's lease shortening imperceptibly as if it were one's own, and ultimately, to make that life worth its full circle.

As she reluctantly imagined him in the past tense for a moment, she could feel a dull sensation creep into her limbs and make them heavy, softening her heartbeat as she walked on and caught her breath, bringing with it a clarity that she could not find adequate expression for, except maybe as love, but yet farther back.

Billy had reached the old house to find it deserted, the family out for the evening to celebrate, out of town, perhaps even out visiting the house where they themselves were born and raised. Billy tried, but was too weak by now to jimmy the back door open. He walked to Susan's house and through the lit windows could see young children playing in a living room. When her mother died years ago, Susan had moved to a small apartment, the house being too much for her to handle alone. He walked by the darkened old house again, then retreated to the park, hoping to return later when the family had come home. He was exhausted. He took a bench; memories chased the chill air away.

Perhaps he would tell the family that he used to climb the elm trees in their backyard when he was a child and that in the summers the whole family sat outside there till sundown, and sometimes well after sundown. That this was the house where he was stricken with a disease that almost crippled him. That here was where he'd thought he had fallen in love once. But mostly, that this was where he had chased away the ghosts of his future, where he had learned to kill his hope, and that it had taken a lifetime to do it. So that now, he was ready to take leave of his past as well.

END