the house of memory

by sam deleo

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. 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. He waited tensed and ready, confused about what was happening.

But impasse had become a way of life for Billy over the last decade or so, starting in his mid 40's. Sometimes it kept him shut indoors for weeks at a time.

Until they moved two years ago, Billy, his sister Kathy and his mother lived in the same house the family had always lived in. No one in the family ever seriously considered Billy getting married or moving out on his own, but there had been a faint measure of hope extended for Kathy until her thirties passed her by, especially from her mother. The house was 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 seemed to be moving slowly up and down the streets at all times during the day, stopping occasionally to wave at neighbors on porches or rebalance themselves on the sidewalk.

Old stone-masoned churches dotted street corners, tucked from view by trees and hedges. Liquor stores, corner shops and a few pharmacies blended in with residential areas along the main avenues. A park abutted 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.

Tilting back and forth in painted steel chairs, drinking beer and iced teas in the backyard as dusk approached, this was the way Billy's household and many others in the block preferred to pass the warmer evenings. It was also one of the images in the recent dreams Billy had of the old neighborhood — he and his sister as children playing in the backyard on a warm summer evening while the rest of the family relaxed.

The other scene of the neighborhood that seemed to repeat itself in his unconscious involved a lavish Christmas dinner presided over by his father, dressed in his Sunday's best, except for his stark lack of pants, slicing up roasts for everyone and telling jokes and stories in his white boxers. Giant lead crystal chandeliers gleam about his head and in all the rooms of the house. Billy's mother Lila is dressed in a full-length bridal gown. The dinner seems to go on for hours and, at its end, the table is cleared and the adults begin playing cards while Billy, his sisters and the neighbor kids go out to play. In the darkness he becomes separated from the other children and disoriented. Every porchlight he follows turns out to belong to the wrong house, and, as the cold begins to make him shiver in his search, he snaps awake. Since the dreams occurred after the move to the new house, Billy interpreted them as messages strengthening his conviction that leaving the neighborhood was a mistake. He felt himself and the neighborhood intextricably linked, as if he could not be recognizable in another environment to himself or anyone else.

But not even Billy could deny that the area had seen an increase in crime. When the home and garage were burglarized on separate occasions, Jo Ann and Carol, Billy's two older sisters, pooled resources, got pre-qualified for what they thought would be a manageable mortgage loan and began looking for another house.

"Mumma's not stayin' here no more!" Jo Ann came out with one day, backed by the legitimacy of being the oldest and largest family member. "You two can do what you want," she added, without even looking in Billy and Kathy's direction. When she raised her voice and arched her eyebrows until they almost touched the straight edge of her tight curly black hair, holding them there sometimes for minutes while waiting for anyone to say anything, Jo Ann rarely encountered an argument. But Billy flew into a rage and knocked a lamp over on his way out to the backyard. He sat on the cold cement steps with his fears, his joints aching from the burst of motion.

Slightly younger than Jo Ann, Carol often found herself trying to smooth over the family's conflicts. She was one of the few people in the world Jo Ann would listen to. But she was in agreement with her older sister on this issue, and almost all issues regarding their mother's welfare — and, for that matter, Billy and Kathy's welfare, also — it was just that Jo Ann was a bit harder on their younger siblings than she was.

After about a month, Jo Ann and Carol decided to eliminate a garage from their search and found a house on the outlying western city limit for a reasonable price. It was layed out in a more modern floor plan, almost identical to the other houses in the block, with larger living areas on the main floor and fewer stairs for Lila, who was 84, and it had a front yard in trade of the old house's porch, which no one used anyway.

The tattered furnishings formerly set within the rounded plaster walls of the old house appeared even more antiquated against a background of crisp dry-wall finish in the new house, 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, as well as her macromet wall hangings, were dwarfed by the extra wall space. And she was continually relocating her collection of dolls, more precious to her than anything else she owned, because she couldn't seem to find the right home for them in her room. Only Jo Ann and Carol bought things to improve the appearance of the common areas, but there was a limit to how much they could afford to spend, and it had been exhausted with their chunk of the down payment.

Today was New Year's Eve, a Wedneday, and after Carol's husband and Jo Ann finished working a half-day, the family and extended family gathered for a ham and scalloped potatos dinner as they did every year. The visiting family members always left early in the evening, well before the hours to ring in the new year. Carol and Jo Ann had families of their own and lived in western New York townships within an hour's drive from their mother. Jo Ann lived on her own since getting divorced years ago, though her children all lived 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 laughed, "same as last year."

"Katie and Billy help you?"

"Well, yes, Kathy bought the ham."

"Kathy! Billy! You here?"

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

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

"My babies help me out fine."

"They're not babies. Don't call them that."

"Have a seat, honey, I'll fix you some coffee."

Lila, although now thin and frail, still possessed enough energy to be active, 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 the bread for dinner, but a year ago had to give up driving after backing into a gas pump and running over Kathy's foot while she was unloading groceries from the back seat. She still attempted to walk wherever she pleased within the boundaries of the neighborhood, no matter how often she found herself temporarily lost or how many times Jo Ann and Carol had told her to let Billy and Kathy take care of getting what she needed. Perhaps Billy and Kathy never considered their mother vulnerable because, living next to her in the same house, they never noticed her grow old.

"Mumma's 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 the snow in on the floor."

"Could be."

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

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

"You don't remember?"

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

Jo Ann paused what she was doing to point with the peeler in her hand. "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 doesn't do anything around here anymore," she said.

"I told you I don't like it here," he said before heading back to the living room.

"Just forget that, just drop it!" Kathy snapped after him, springing up from her seat so quickly she seemed to surprise her-

self for a moment, then walking to her bedroom and closing the door.

Pivotal to Kathy's reaction was the fact that if Billy had followed her advice and quit his obsession to move back to the old house, which was still densely occupied by the family of six that bought it two years ago, she wouldn't have had a legitimate reason to call the Department of Human Resources about her brother.

Unlike Kathy and Lila, 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 never bothered to solicit any formal confirmation from a doctor. Kathy believed he hadn't held many steady jobs in his life because of simple laziness, not because of a disease he happened to have over four decades ago. Lila, on the other hand, saw nothing at all wrong with her son.

Kathy hadn't informed her sisters she had called the Social Services extension in Human Resources, something she'd only threatened Billy with before, because she knew they would immediately defend Billy without listening to her side of things.

Growing up, Kathy had been teased by Billy, among others, for her chubbiness, 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 reluctantly from her room after Lila and Billy had almost finished eating, pick at a few things and drink beer and smoke cigarettes in silence.

She did not look at Billy anymore, even during the rare moments they spoke directly to each other, which Billy interpreted as another expression of her disapproval of his not working in the last several years. Her cheeks had hollowed under small and deep-set eyes, which were obscured sometimes by straight red bangs she parted in the middle. 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. A wisking noise from the jackets preceded her into a room.

"The both of you need to relax," Carol said as Kathy emerged from her bedroom with a tabloid and leaned an elbow in the kitchen doorway. "It's hard on mumma, you two always being at odds."

"You two have other people around you. You got- never mind," Kathy said.

"Carol's right," said Jo Ann, "you come home from work all stressed and it makes everyone else uptight."

"It ain't work that makes me uptight, it's this place."

"You can mix some cheese and milk for the sauce," said Carol.

"I'm the only one paying for basic necessities around here anymore. I don't see his pension money except as beers in the refrigerator."

Billy had loved to work when he was young but the novelty wore off over the years when it became clear that, without a degree or a marketable skill, he would be a consistent factotum of the labor pool. He had never learned to drive and so was often seen in the neighborhood walking to work, or a bus stop or walking to look for work. Being in an area full of veterans, his limp

matched the way many people on the street walked. Everyone one extra hitch in their stride away from toppling over.

When his father had his second stroke, he was admitted to the same hospital where Billy was working as part of the housekeeping staff. As the initial days of intensive care passed, Billy felt compelled to bring a broom in and sweep the floor whenever he visited his father in his room, both as a way to protect himself from what he thought could be grounds for firing and to show his dad just what kind of worker he really was.

His father spent most of his working life as a machinist at a plastics factory. Kathy followed his example by finding another industrial job as the sole woman supervisor at an aluminum plant, but only after refusing all his offers to find work through his contacts at the factory. Later, just after the 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 dinner their father would remain alone at the kitchen table with his newspapers and beers until it was time for him to go to bed. Retirement gave him full days for this pastime and the newspapers soon became the secondary attraction.

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, The Great Depression. Sometimes he would call Billy into the kitchen to question him about his chores, and, depending on how many drinks 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?"

"Uh, I guess 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 for his own good, then either pat him on the shoulder or tousle his hair 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 no longer paid much attention to him either. For the first time, matched against post-war civilities, the machines of employment, lines that everywhere seemed to

stretch longer and longer, societies of sharpers, buildings that stretched 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 witheld his trust from even his brothers there. What could he do, he often pondered, his only son relieved from the responsibilities of manhood but exempted from its entitlements? For his part, Billy read the change in his father as a welcoming sign and would badger him constantly about items in the paper, the details of his job or any number of random questions, until his father worked himself into a drunken froth and loudly let loose, "Enough already!" or "Where's your sister!?", meaning Kathy, not the two older sisters who by now were only interested in socializing with those their age.

Jo Ann put the potatoes in a pot to boil.

"Says here they think the woman who was fooling around with that senator was kidnapped," said Kathy, now at the table with her tabloid.

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

"How do you know that?"

"Didn't you hear what I just said: There's true stories about people and false ones they just make up to increase sales."

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

Kathy was only 18 months younger than Billy but she had looked up to him as a pre-teen imagines 13-year-olds to enjoy some revered perspective, and he would take full advantage of this when he was recovering from his illness, getting her to fetch him sandwiches, sodas and newly filled ice packs while he lounged on the sofa. It was one of the rare tastes of power in his life and was much more agreeable to him than the derision his illness would soon attract from classmates.

By her sophomore year Kathy shared a small social circle with two shy classmates from the neighborhood who were also in the history club and who also wondered what it would be like to become famous historians or politicians some day. Billy, as if to hide from an affliction he felt drew a thousand eyes, was on his way to a shuttered existence.

"Do you remember when we were little and slept in the same bed," he said to her one day from the sofa as she'd come home from classes and he had yet to return to school full time.

"Yes."

"Lie next to me again."

"Get out of here."

"Please," he said.

"No! You're crazy."

"Mumma's shopping," he said, his voice beginning to tremble. "Please, I need you to. Just for two minutes. Please."

"Two minutes," she said, not knowing why she said it, why she'd agreed to it. She lay down next to him on the couch and he put his arm around her shoulders and 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 seemed to slow and soften its beat. She wanted to think of her friends and of school but could not make her mind think of anything in particular. It was a sensation of falling, yet feeling weightless at the same time.

The daylight softened to the shade of the objects in the house; and, as if she suddenly remembered her brother next to her, she sprang up and said — "Enough!" — and gathered her books and hurried to her room. She felt a measure of resentment for a long time toward her brother after that, and toward herself for letting him talk her into such a thing. And she became more critical of him.

The further Billy lagged behind, the more she tried to push him away from her. If there had been a period of separation after they graduated from high school, Billy a year late, they may have regained some of the closeness they felt as children. As it was, without college or another reason to go away for an interim, they entered adulthood feeling as if they were both an only child.

Shortly after she married, Jo Ann turned her attention to helping Billy find a job. She explained to him that all he was lacking was the right motivation. It was also a way for her to avoid staying at home eating and watching television after quitting her part-time job to become a housewife. Jo Ann was a large woman even then and wore brightly colored stretch pants, possibly as a kind of dare for anyone to comment about her weight. "I'm no ballet dancer, but I move around fine," she reminded others whenever she had visible difficulty moving around. There were rumors in her township that late in their marriage she might have physically abused her ex-husband, a short chain-smoking man, but he never made mention of anything to confirm them.

About three times during the week, she would drive to town, pull her rusty Impala alongside the house and honk the horn. When Billy did not appear, she honked a second time. When he still did not appear, she would go inside and roust him. Then they would drive around to sites she had mapped out for the day that were usually centered around a line of work: warehouses and factories, department stores and restaurants, painting and construction contractors.

Sometimes her supervision caused confusion in the employer, and, with one elderly owner of the Warsaw Bakery, a Polish bakery/restaurant, nearly cost Billy his first job. Jo Ann was seated only a few tables away from Billy and the owner in the empty restaurant and could not resist interrupting them with comments about Billy's talents. She became annoyed about what she

thought was a reference to Billy's bout with polio, a topic which probably would've come up given his limp, but which Billy had been dismissing to potential employers as a wrenched knee he got while mowing the lawn.

"What do you mean, 'Can he work on his feet?' He had polio as a child, sir, he's not a cripple."

"It's alrigh-Jo Ann, it's alrigh-"

"No it's not alright, Billy. This man's passing judgement."

"Mam," the owner struggled.

"Lemme ask you this, what is it makes you think he can't work on his feet?"

"Mam, now I wasn't-"

"You certainly were."

Surrendering, the owner offered Billy a job busing tables. Jo Ann and Billy celebrated with root beer floats at a Tastee-Freeze afterward, her idea.

"I just reasoned with him," she said at the hard plastic yellow table on the store's small outdoor patio. "That's what you gotta learn, and then things turn out your way more often than not."

Billy's attitude improved almost immediately with the job. He talked more regularly — meaning more often and with less of a stutter. He looked forward to the mile-and-a-half walk to work every day, most times well before dawn, even though it took him about 30 minutes. He stopped by neighbors Joe and Tillie's place almost every afternoon when returning from work to have a beer with Joe.

"I don't know how you do it," he'd kid Joe, "sit around with nothing to do all day."

"Well I worked my whole life, Billy."

"Sure you did, Joe."

He began shaving everyday and occasionally wearing different clothes than his standard white V-neck tee shirt and Dickies pants that his father handed down to him.

The restaurant, however, did not do so well. A year or two before he closed the doors, the owner told Billy he had to let him go. It was a waste of his time, anyway, he told him, a career was what Billy needed. While many other of his employers would feel the same way in the future, Billy was content in doing a job, whatever it was, and that sometimes had a way of irking those around him.

After the Polish bakery, Billy soon energetically resumed landing a string of other jobs without his older sister, who had sworn she had done enough and it was up to others now because God knew she wasn't staying young forever and she had kids to

raise and a house and husband to keep. But Billy never felt that any place he worked at thereafter could be as good as the bakery, and he was never as committed to following a regular work schedule or to working regularly. He also refrained from eating Polish food again, because, he said, it brought back too many memories.

Billy's sole attempt at self-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 seven years older than Billy and Kathy. One afternoon she suggested to Lila that Billy, now in his mid-20s and recently laid off from the bakery, could earn some money cleaning her house once a week and doing some landscaping. She was a small round woman who focused on nothing but her daughter Susan, who grew less appreciative of this focus over the years. The daughter was tall and thin with deep brown eyes. She had worked as a secretary for over 12 years at the same company before it had gone out of business. Her shyness, fueled by her passion to stay at home reading crime and mystery novels, formed a substantial obstacle to her finding another job, and she eventually settled into a sedentery routine of accepting some freelance accounting — her college major — taking office temp jobs and reluctantly meeting her ex-coworkers for coffee or a drink when they got together.

Given her obsession to have her only child married, the mother saw Billy and Susan getting to know one another better as a bonus to hiring him for the work.

"Susan, you know Billy," she said 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.

She could not have imagined how quickly they would get to know each other. Perhaps it was only a way for Susan to strike back against her mother; or that the years spent alone, much like they gradually would for Billy, had a way of silencing the rational world and unsettling even the most basic relationships. It was not as if they stepped into the world each day from blank canvasses, but they lacked the line and form necessary for a backdrop to take shape. So Susan never needed a reason to seduce Billy, just as he never needed a reason to be seduced. On Billy's third day of work, Susan's mother discovered them in the garage, the big sliding door 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 thrusts were wholly independent of him, as if he were an upturned gardening rake she'd told him to put away. 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 encounter was too much for her. She bellowed the kind of loud and long moan one makes when falling, but neither Susan or Billy even turned their heads to acknowledger her. She muffled a higher-pitched scream for fear of attracting passers-by outside. Finally, she ran off sobbing.

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 chance at working again in the neighborhood was also gone.

Kathy and Susan, however, gradually became friends despite the incident with Billy and the fact that they had barely known each other growing up, given their age difference. They corresponded mostly through letters or phone calls, hardly ever meeting face to face. They would recommend books for each other to check out from the library, or talk about people in the news. Kathy looked forward to their regular Sunday phone conversations, cramming her tabloid and novel reading in during the week as if she were preparing for an exam. Only once did she bring up the encounter with Billy. Susan said nothing in reply.

Their contact slipped as Susan and then Kathy moved toward later middle age. Neither could trace the exact moment it began to happen, it was simply one more connection unraveling outside the safe indoor glow of their lives. Kathy transferred her weekend focus to exercising on the movable walking track and stationary bicycle in the basement. She became thinner while her sisters grew fatter. She smoked and drank a bit more. And she learned to think about herself less.

Billy's main support for his later attempts at finding a career fell to Carol. She encouraged him to apply for an apprenticeship as an electrician with a friend of her husband's. But Billy's father overruled everyone and found Billy a job working nights as a janitor at the factory. "It's good enough for me, it's good enough for him," he told Carol. For well over a decade, Billy watched factory workers come and go, thankful he worked a different shift than his father and did not have to worry over his scrutiny.

He hardly ever left the house except to get on the bus to go to work. He saw the same people daily for years but never spoke to them. His limp and habit of humming made most of them uneasy, anyway. Sometimes he would whistle loudly. He didn't know why at first. Then he realized he must have copied the habit from his neighbor Joe.

Neither Kathy or Billy ever struck up friendships with their co-workers outside the workplace. One by one, years registered without the range of their social contact extending beyond their family and those few remaining in the neighborhood who had known them as children, excepting Susan and her mother.

Kathy had her celebrity biographies and romance novels, and, while Billy never developed a hobby, his interest in sports, which he inherited from his father at a young age, continued unfettered without him ever placing a bet or attending a game. He had no favorite team or player, he just enjoyed watching the games, whatever they were, baseball, basketball, soccer, the Olympics. Without a familiarity of statistics, rosters or the history of teams, he always saw the contests as even matches, the outcomes completely uncertain, no matter how lopsided others might have regarded them.

"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."

"'Course not. That's why you go."

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

"Always … here," she mumbled to herself.

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’m not leaving mumma alone with him.”

“Why not?”

“’She can’t do everything herself.”

“Yeah, like buying hams. 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 demanded because hers was a temporary intrusion. He would have responded likewise to a much more polite request from Lila. But the days when he took it upon himself to try and mimic his father’s handyman traits in the old house were over. He avoiding doing by never wanting anything done.

In his mind, this was Jo Ann’s and Carol’s and especially Kathy’s house, she was the breadwinner. 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 regularly used her salary to help support both he and their mother. It was what he felt she always held over him.

Like permanently fixed coordinates in a grid parallel to the world they lived in, Billy sat in the living room and Kathy returned from work to her books and dolls in her room, again and again. With the desperation only a mother could feel, Lila had struggled for their congress, willed her days onward for it, sensing they needed her more now than when they were infants. But the years changed nothing.

“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."

"What are you talking about? 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 nobody."

"I'm afraid if mumma hurt herself while I was at work he couldn't help her? Maybe he'd be happier in a home."

"A home?!"

"Just for a while."

"What in the hell- a home? He's in a home, his home. Listen, stop this nonsense right now, 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 going 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 everyone else."

"It'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."

"Like hell," she said turning back to the magazine.

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."

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

"You know, in the old, in the old kitchen,-" Billy offered, entering for a refill.

"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 football game. 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 glare.

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 yelled, "Sleep well?"

"Not that loud, dummy," said Carol.

"Oh just like a baby, thank you for asking, Walter, just like a baby."

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 over the last few years. Now, they simply bowed their heads in a moment of silence and folded their hands together as if in prayer. When Lila would finally look up, the others knew it was time to begin passing the food.

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

"Thank you, honey."

"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, just rest now, mumma," continued Jo Ann. "Kathy and Billy can take care of their own meals."

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

"I cook- I cook just fine, I cook 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 that she and they wouldn't think of having it any other way. It was a comfortable routine and it gave her something to do with her days, even though it took her longer and longer to prepare a meal now.

"Kathy, I liked the way you cooked the squash better last year," said Jo Ann. "You had more brown sugar in there. These taste kind of bland, almost like they got over-"

"Then don't eat 'em," said Kathy.

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

"Whaddya think Billy?" said Walter.

"You had more brown sugar last time," finished Jo Ann.

When Walter drank a lot, he liked to see how far he could push Billy. He'd had Billy sneak him more beers than he was normally allowed between the sofa cushion and arm rest in the living room, and so was now loosened up.

"Don't really care for squash, I never, I don't really care for squash," said Billy, getting up to go to the refrigerator.

"I think everything tastes 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. "Shouldn't you buy 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, handing Walter a 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 toward the living room window. "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, quickly finishing his plate, taking it to the sink and heading out to the living room with a beer to watch football.

“He just doesn’t have any time,” laughed Walter. “Guess I touched a nerve.”

The kids went out to play in the snow after dinner. Walter didn’t return from his trip to the bathroom upstairs, instead falling 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 stillness of the first part of the day giving way to chill winds out of the north, a skin of frost beginning to form over everything. The afternoon light dimmed a shade and the mounds of snow blued.

“I’ve got to get mumma to the eye doctor this week, she’s having trouble reading, then replace that storm door in front sometime,” said Kathy. “It’s best if I handle it, cause I’m the one that knows what’s going on here.”

At hearing the first knock on the front door Billy got up quietly, looked at the strangers through the door’s short drapes, grabbed the newspaper from a rack by the side of the chair and sat 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?” asked Jo Ann.

“Hi, we’re from-” came muffled through the door.

“I know,” said Kathy, opening the door half way. “Thanks for coming during the holidays. I just wanted my sisters here so they could see for themselves.”

“See for themselves?” said the brown-suited man, who had loosened his tie and whose face wore a mixture of weariness 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 no no,” Jo Ann said, clutching Kathy’s by the wrist and thwarting 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.

“What are you up to?”

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

"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 smile that insisted enough cheerfulness to cover both her and the man, with some left over.

"I'm Billy's oldest sister, Jo Ann. Why are you here?"

"We were asked to come," said the man. "Were you not told about our visit?"

"We're here to make sure Billy has the best living option available to him, that's all," added the woman, peering around 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, we didn't initiate anything."

"I didn't, she did," said Jo Ann, nodding toward Kathy, who she was still smothering with her large frame, as if the workers needed the head gesture for verification. Kathy whispered in Jo Ann's ear 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 to almost a whisper again 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 and talk to Billy and we'll be on our way."

Billy's whole body tensed at hearing this. They weren't going on their way anywhere, at least not with him. 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 as a boy.

"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 both inside and out.

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

"Fine," said the woman.

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

"Well, mam, we can't really allow that according to-"

"It's okay," interrupted the man, brusquely shepherding the woman with his arm around her shoulders so both of them could finally come in all the way from the cold. As the storm door hissed quickly on it's broken piston arm and loudly clanged shut, the unmistaken 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 spotted Billy stepping into the light coming from the kitchen and around the doorcut. Billy dropped his beer bottle and quickly wide-stepped through the kitchen and out the side door of the house.

The temperature was colder than he expected and he jumped back inside to the closet porch, pulled a coat off its hanger and hurried through the backyard toward the alley. From the kitchen window Carol and the social worker woman saw him trotting along as he tried to pull Jo Ann's powder blue parka over his back, the children in the backyard laughing at the sight. He made it to the alley and vanished.

"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 informed me Billy gets along fine here."

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

"Well there's nothing we can do now," said the man, nodding in the direction Billy left.

"You said you would evaluate him, so let's go bring him back and you evaluate him."

"We can schedule another visit after the holiday, it's New Year's, mam," said the woman.

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

"Calm down Kathy!" 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!" she screamed even louder.

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

"Is she like this often?" whispered the woman to Jo Ann as she tried to use her as a shield and walk with her partner 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. "We've got to get Billy."

"Alright, just calm down. Calm down," said the man. "We better talk with her," he said lowly to the woman. "I have a feeling we'll need to-"

"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!”

“Please sit in the kitchen,” Jo Ann said to the man and woman, “I’ll take care of her.”

“It’s freezing Jo Ann, we’ve got to go get him,” Kathy said calmly after the couple walked away. “It’s for his own good.”

“He’ll be alright,” said Jo Ann, “He’s probably around the corner waiting. He’ll come back as soon as they leave.”

“No he won’t. You don’t understand.”

Jo Ann was only able to persuade Kathy from the door back to the kitchen by lying and telling her that the woman had threatened to call the mental ward at St. Christopher’s Community Hospital. Carol already had put on some coffee in the percolator.

Billy had dozed off for a few minutes in a neighbor’s garage, the beers and the cold wrapping him in a fuzzy anesthetic, but when he awoke he felt he’d been asleep for a long time and decided to be on his way. Daylight shone through the checkerboard window panes of the garage in a weak arc now, making both his fears and time itself feel strangely small for a moment.

It wasn’t a surprise she had gone this far, he thought, she’d warned him, but, at the same time, he 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 at him. She was jealous.

He was able to zip up the coat, given Jo Ann’s physique, but the sleeves ended well short of his wrists. He walked the alley to a side street, then down to the main thoroughfare that headed back toward town. It had been almost two months since he’d been outdoors this long. The holiday lights and decorations, which by now were lit up at many residences, had given the neighborhood an almost unrecognizable feel. Visitors were arriving at different houses and the muffled sound of voices and music drifted out from parties beginning early. The sleep and the beers that had insulated Billy in a warm fog were receding and he began to shiver. He pulled the hood of the parka as far over his head as possible, tunneling his vision away from the lights and distractions, and ducked into the wind at as rapid a pace as he could. His limp and the wind slowed him, though. His shoes tips were beginning to freeze.

Could Kathy honestly have seen this happening if they had just stayed at the old house, he wondered, where things had always seemed to take care of themselves? He got an idea. It was six to eight miles away but he put his head down determinedly and began walking back to the old neighborhood.

After Kathy’s outbursts, Jo Ann decided she had better check on her mother, who incredibly had slept through everything. 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 this family to go to college, that’s how many,” said Kathy.

“And why didn’t you?” said the man.

“I needed to work. I always got high grades. “

“It’s true,” said Carol, drying some dishes gently, both so everyone behind her at the table could hear each other and she could hear them. “She was especially good in math.”

“We need your work history next,” said the man.

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

“Where was your first job?”

“You don’t want to know about those little jobs,” said Carol.

“We need to fill out these forms, mam,” said the man.

“She’s always been a good worker,” Carol interjected again. “You can ask her employers.”

“My first real job I made supervisor,” Kathy said. “Supervisor! At Hartsel Industries.”

“How long were you there,” said the man, who was the one doing the writing while the woman swirled coffee in her cup.

“Twenty-one-and-a-half years. Do you know how many sick days I took in 21 years? Two! Less than one a decade. And guess how many times I was late for a shift? None. Everyone there respected-”

“That’s very good, thanks,” said the man.

“When I left they knew they couldn’t replace me.”

“She really was 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. "Everyone had silly ideas back then. I guess I woulda liked being a political scientist or history teacher."

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

The rustling of papers and boxes from the other room punctuated an uneasy silence for the social workers at the kitchen table with Kathy. Kathy tried to use the time to think of new defenses of her employment record, but could not suppress the growing sense of urgency she felt for her brother from spilling over. Carol had entered with a box of papers, providing the distraction Kathy was waiting for. She sprang up and ran through the side porch, grabbed her coat and hat in the same motion she flung the door open.

"Kathy!" yelled Carol, then looked blankly into the box of Kathy's tax forms and the records of her years of employment. "She'll be back," she said.

The man and the woman were not waiting. 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. Like many others during the holidays, they wanted to go home, have a good dinner, maybe a drink or two. It was New Year's Eve.

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 and therefore valid, she tried to reason.

There were the people inside and the people outside the house now, she thought. 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 only she knew where he was headed.