



so it
came to
pass

Kirby Atkins

Very early in my life it was too late.
—Marguerite Duras

It is possible that things will not get better
than they are now, or have been known to be.
It is possible that we are past the middle now.
It is possible that we have crossed the great water
without knowing it, and stand now on the other side.

—Robyn Sarah

Prologue

On the morning of his thirty-third birthday he awoke in the bed he had slept in as a five year old.

The warmth of his own small body. Quilt and blanket. In the pre-dawn dark he turned his face upward and curled his legs into his chest. Above him was the old criss-crossed pattern, a sight reaching back to the dawn of memory. A first fact in all his world. It was there again. It had always been there. Springs and the smell of cold metal. The frame of the upper bunk. The screws. The gate stretched and the mattress resting on top. His brother up there lowing in sleep.

In the warm delirium his first thoughts were exchanged for earlier instincts. Picture replacing picture. A habit not conjured for ages rose naturally, primordial, gentle, removing years.

Older and younger. Ready to wake.

Ready to resume.

The walls dimmed brighter. His legs stretched out. Smaller muscles on smaller bones. Thin pajamas twisting over his body, slick with fire retardant color and chemical. Elastic cuffs riding up his ankles.

A high breath and his long lashes fluttered open.

He was in his room.

Felted eyes stared from the foot of his bed. A monkey in a yellow shirt. An orange dog. Above this he could see the door. The hallway. The bathroom across the hallway. The soap on the side of the tub, glowing bright green in the new light.

It was after breakfast before he remembered Amy.

Milk-swollen cereal floated in his bowl. He looked up and saw his brother rise. Black hair leaving the room. Voices behind the wall. Here's your coat, Ted. I'll tie your shoes. Say it with me. Bunny ears, bunny ears. Jump into the hole—

I can do it.

Jump into the hole.

I know.

He stared at his cereal, still listening. Amy was a woman at school. No, that's not right.

Over, under, pull it tight.

Amy was the lady in the station wagon who picked them up sometimes.

No she wasn't. That was Camille.

Good job. Where's your other shoe?

Under the table in the kitchen.

A woman walked in. Not Amy.

Mom. That's Mom.

But Mom was dead.

She bent over. Hair, black, falling down her neck, grazing her shoulder. Acne scarred face with make up. Still, so beautiful. Petite hands and frame. Those black eyes darting. Such a bundle inside of her. God, she's beautiful. He'd almost forgotten.

She grabbed a white shoe with dangling laces and left the room.

You do this one. Bunny ears, bunny ears—

Jump into the hole.

Jump into the hole.

They were riding in the Volkswagen now. Ted up front. Him in the back. Seat belts, no car seats. His mom was driving. The flat Illinois landscape skirted by. Gray snow in patches. Passing trees, naked, splayed and black, stretching over the windows. The radio spoke of President Ford and the bicentennial.

They came to the school. His brother climbed out. Vague goodbyes and the door slammed shut. He stayed in the back. She turned up the radio. That song about Leroy Brown. There's a cuss word in that song.

They were back home. He heard his own fluting voice say I want toast.

Then he was on the wicker couch with jelly toast and a glass of milk. Underdog on the big wooden television. After that Bullwinkle. After that the Lone Ranger. Then he was in his room playing with the Fisher Price schoolhouse. Laying on his stomach, he looked into the tiny classroom and set up the wooden people.

Who was Amy? Was she a grown up or a friend?

He could see her face.

She was a woman.

Amy.

He lay there for a long time.

Lunch. Peanut butter on toast with chocolate milk.

Mom was cooking Brussel sprouts for dinner. Some kind of corned beef in the oven. Four o'clock. Camille brought Ted home in her station wagon. Douglas thought his brother looked so grown up as he wrestled out of his coat. They turned on the television to watch Sesame Street. Zoom. Spider-man on the Electric Company. Why do they make us read everything on this show? Why don't they just tell us the story? The whole house smelled of corned beef.

A lean man stumbled in the front door smelling of cigarettes and cold weather. Corduroy sports coat and a scarf laid across the rocking couch. Not there, Daniel, she said. Hang them up. Wool cap pulled off leaving an explosion of curly, black hair. Dad. Angst. Ambition. An artist. Someone still plotting a deliberate path through the world. Tales to tell of his day but he's too weary to tell them. Still, he's not done. He'll be up and out tomorrow morning. A world of echoing hallways and wafting cigarette smoke. The smell of oil paint and a hot kiln firing students' shitty pots.

The channel is flipped to Nightly News. John Chancellor. Typewriter sounds as he speaks.

Wash your hands and come to the table. The reek of corned beef. He and Ted ate in the kitchen, Mom and Dad in the living room. Do I have to finish this? One more Brussel sprout. Just eat it. Don't cause trouble. Swallow and it will all be over. Drink your milk. Good boy.

Jiffy Pop and we'll watch Sonny and Cher.

Ted had his Letter People book sprawled open on the floor. Mister S with the silly socks. Little Miss A says "achoo!" Put the Letter People cards together and make a word.

He heard his own voice ask, when will I get Letter People cards, Mom?

Next year. You'll be reading next year.

But he could read now. He could read everything. On TV it said Barnaby Jones, Tuesdays at 9:00.

Bath time. He sat in the back of the tub. Ted up front with the knobs and the running water. They sucked on the rag, threw it against the tile and watched it smack and slide down. Don't splash so much. Ted got out first, Mom waiting with a towel spread open like eagle's wings. The water choking down the drain. He propelled himself back and forth in the tub, waiting for his turn to get out.

Winnie the Pooh pajamas from Sears. Zipper up, ankle to neck and then back down a bit. Comfy, cozy. We'll read now. Song of the South. Uncle Remus. Dad does the voices. Legs bounce, body sleepy, squirming. Heavy lids. Everybody ready for this story to end. Sighs and rubbing eyes. Scratchy cigarette kiss on the head.

Good night.

He watched his mom's hips, silhouetted against the nightlight, her small stomach pressed against the ladder, as she said goodnight to Ted on the top bunk. The room was black but the bathroom across the hall was brighter than daytime.

You know I love you?

Yes.

You know Daddy loves you?

Yes.

And grandma loves you and grandpa?

Yes.

And Maw and Granddaddy?

Yawning. Yes.

Okay, then.

Goodnight, Mom.

She bent down to his bunk. Her small frame looming over him. Black eyes blinking. Her smile, not a pretty smile. Not as pretty as she is. She grabbed the lump his toes made under the covers.

Goodnight, snodgrass.

Mom, if I see someone in my room tonight and he has ears like this, I won't be scared, you know why?

Why?

Because it's Batman.
She smiled. Okay.
She kissed his eyes.
Goodnight, Mom.
And she left, closing the door only slightly.

Ted was asleep. TV in the next room at a low volume. The Mary Tyler Moore Show. Studio audience laughing.

In the dark he could see through the half open door, across the hall, into the bathroom. The green bar of soap. Shiny and wet now. He pulled out a plastic telescope they bought at the Shell station. His gaze leapt across the dark room, across the hallway, the soap close now, framed in a trembling black circle.

Amy.

The TV shut off. Mumbling. Floor boards gently pop. Daniel said that Tony has a gallery show Saturday night and he should make an appearance. Does she want to come?

No. What would I do? I don't like his stuff. What's he painting with now anyway? Coffee?

Yes. Coffee. Well you could have a few drinks and talk with Marie.

What would I talk to Marie about?

I don't know. Just a chance to get out. I can get a sitter.

Why don't I just—

Jesus, Judy. I can get a sitter.

I don't want a sitter. I'll stay home. I told Mama I'd call her long distance. Those are your people.

Jesus.

More lights shut off.

Finally the bathroom goes out. He can't see the soap anymore and the telescope goes down. Breathing and creaking in the next room.

The buzz of quiet and then finally— quiet.

The lower bunk, a womb. The house, a world.

He felt his own existence like a dim beacon in the dark. He closed his eyes and opened them again. Self when nothing more is certain. With the room gloaming like a netherworld and his mind untethered, he saw her again.

Amy

She would be breathing. Asleep next to him.

His wife. He had a wife.

My God.

Amy.

PART 1

One

Judy had long dreamed herself dead.

It was a lust— a craving for non-being that didn't need a reason, as lust needs no reason. Her veins held the poison that kept the sickness inside and it would be so easy to open up all those canals and let the sickness out.

So easy.

And there was nothing to stop her from doing this thing. Even now. Who could stop her? Even at this moment. What could anyone do about it? If she stood up— right now and excused herself, found a place— it didn't need to be a special place— and opened her veins. And the feeling.

The feeling would be like sitting in a bathtub draining— the line of water tracing down her body, her neck, her arms, the small of her back and hips, until she was empty and fell asleep— or better yet— better than the consciousness that clings and judges whether sleep is good or bad, to not be in this world in any form. Better than sleep. Better than rest. To not be. What was so horrible about that? Why did everyone seem to think it so bad?

So she'd wandered her life and tried not to stare at people doing happiness, a magic trick, a dexterity of mind so effortless. They rolled out of their homes daily, curious enough about all things to not even glance away, not even for a moment. Who were these people?

And so insistent they were that Judy should not glance away. But she did. Often she would excuse herself to be alone and glance away and see what she saw and knew she saw it though others denied it. And so methods became very important. Some way to do this thing without making problems for her children or for Daniel. The means. The road. The end.

The tools.

What were the tools? What should she use?

Tylenol. But that ended up not being like sleep or the bathtub draining. Dreadfully awake while organs were shutting down, nausea, knowing she was leaving with only a window of time to change her mind. So in the middle of the night she woke Daniel and cried breathlessly, breaking all night decorums and silences, and confessed what she had done.

Oh Jesus, Judy.

Jesus.

Blur of images and intermittent dark. All the while somehow knowing. That once the wheel had turned and the earth emerged from its own shadow, the body would stir again and all things, such as they are, would be waiting, ready to resume. The same objects, faces. Limitations. The mind tethered once more.

So Douglas woke again in the pre-dawn dark and turned his face upward. Above him was the criss-crossed pattern, the springs and smell of cold metal. The frame of the upper bunk. The screws. The gate stretched and the mattress resting on top. His brother up there lowing in sleep.

They wandered into the kitchen, softly padding footie pajamas, rubbing crusty eyes, and found Camille at the breakfast table, smoking a cigarette with a box of donuts at her elbow.

“Hi, guys,” she said and made her face smile.

They ate, and in light of all that color and sugar and the bright white box, the news Camille gave them between puffs on her cigarette seemed merely interesting. Mom was sick again. They would visit her soon. How many donuts can they have? Eat them all. And a tall glass of milk to polish it off.

Later neighbors visited with brightly wrapped presents. Faculty and students from Daniel’s school, each with a gift. Christmas without warning. Large play-sets to assemble and keep the boys busy. A Fisher Price service station. Batman and Robin dolls with a bat-cave and bat-mobil.

And the next morning with Camille. And all that week. At night she stood by the stove and made Jiffy Pop, still with cigarette dangling. But always turning to the boys with a smile. “What do you need, hon? Cereal? Climb up there and get you a bowl.” The next day Pizza Hut for lunch. Baskin Robins after that, and finally they drove across town to a moonscape of asphalt with cars parked next to an orange brick building.

So cold today. Zip up your coat.

Daniel met them in a room where every sound echoed and passing people spoke in hushed tones. He grimaced at the boys and bummed a cigarette from Camille.

“So,” he said, lighting up and taking a large breath, “she’s a little different but she’s fine. She’s fine. Just like being sick when you’re sick. You know that feeling, right? Ted, when you had chicken pocks last year—the fever? You don’t feel like yourself so— She doesn’t have a fever but she doesn’t feel like herself which makes her seem different but she just needs to feel better. And she will, so— that’s it.”

The boys nodded.

He took them to Judy.

She sat on a couch in a room with a blanket on her legs. Her hair was cut short. Her manner was off. More talkative. Bizarrely so. And she apologized in ways that bit chunks out of them.

“I guess I’m crazy and chicken,” she said and worked a smile that flashed and disappeared quickly. Her face was so flushed it seemed to pulse. “But don’t worry about your silly mama,” she said and smiled again. The boys nodded.

And now it was time for them to talk. They fussed at her for not asking for help when she needed it. And they repeated phrases they heard when people fussed at them. And she quickly nodded, “yes!” she said and pointed at their chests.

“Yes! You’re right. You’re right!”

And they nodded back like maybe they had just done something important.

Veda, Judy's mother, nodded as well. She had come up from Texas, a lean woman in a powder blue pant suit. A pointed chin. Her hair was a high gray dome and her small eyes never seemed to blink. "Listen to your children, Judy," she said. "They're speaking the truth. They love you. You see how they love you? And Jesus does too, darlin'." She stroked Judy's hair. "Jesus loves you too." Then Camille gathered the boys and took them to Sambo's for pancakes and then back home again to play and watch TV.

There was only so much brooding little boys could do. Play was their work and it was time to go back to work.

When Judy finally came home Camille had to go. Much love to you all, but she was in a hurry. Had to feed the dogs, see her mother. Daniel looked bewildered in her absence. Somehow Ted took the lead. "So let's figure out your medicine," he said, taking his mother's hand.

They sat at the kitchen table with a yellow pad and pen, Daniel, Judy, and Ted. Douglas watched from the door. She could eat this but not that, Daniel said. She must take this pill and be seen taking it. In the morning and then again at bedtime. Ted nodded, open faced. Judy just stared. Finally Daniel put out his cigarette. He kissed Ted and Judy each on the top of their heads. "You guys watch out for each other. I'm proud of you. Now I got class at eight tomorrow so— I'll be out at seven. So much work to do. I don't know if I'll ever catch up." He ran his hand through Douglas' hair on the way out.

Judy stayed at the table, wide eyed for a moment. "You're saving my life," she finally said and smiled at Ted. Ted nodded. Douglas stayed silent. These people seemed to know what they were doing— the sick and the ones who looked after them.

Then it happened again.

One summer morning.

The warmth of his own body. Quilt and blanket. In the pre-dawn dark he turned his face upward and curled his legs into his chest.

Walls dimming brighter.

Somehow they had slept late. Like it was Saturday, but it wasn't Saturday.

Padding into the kitchen they found Camille, legs crossed, smoking a cigarette. Box of donuts open on the table. "Hi boys," she said. "Come in and have some breakfast."

This time when they visited the hospital Judy was in a craft therapy group and had painted two porcelain cats to look like Veda's cats. Her hair was cut even shorter now, and she had a hunted look under those bangs. Douglas heard them say something about shock treatment. It seemed to work but they didn't know why.

He also noticed something strange about his mother's mouth. She kept planting her tongue in front of her teeth, bulging out the top of her lip. Finally someone asked a question—

She looked up and mumbled.

“Cottage cheese and crackers.”

“And 7up,” Daniel put in.

She nodded. “and 7up.”

Her front tooth was a different shape. But her tongue was there in an instant. Douglas stared and her eyes went down.

When she came home again she was on Lithium which made her face break out. She covered it as best she could with make up but her cheeks were swollen as if she had been stung by bees. Ted continued to help, reminding Judy every morning to take her medicine and reminding Daniel every night to make sure she had taken it before bed.

And a gloomy stability set in.

She wandered the house, cleaning, drinking coffee, folding clothes, her mind turning like a wheel. Growing lust for her own demise following her room to room while Daniel worked late and the boys chattered away in sunny selfishness. Plodding back and forth, carpet and kitchen, plate and toilet, making toast, calling the boys, answering questions as they leaned and draped their small bodies on her, loving the smell of their shampooed heads for just a moment before setting them loose again to stomp and laugh, peeing with the door open, not ever pausing conversation, enamored by the game or story that was happening now, at this moment. And she left them, wandering back to the kitchen, still the thing followed her, that clinging ghost. She cooked fish sticks on a cookie sheet and mashed potatoes from a box, served them on plates with a dollop of ketchup, eaten by the warm glow of the television throbbing the Flintstones, The Six Million Dollar Man. Eyes rubbing until sleepiness set in. A Little Debbie with a glass of milk and then bed. And the lust followed. And the lust followed.

Then they had to pack the house and move to Champaign Urbana. Daniel was to teach at another high school while attending classes at night to earn his MFA.

“It’s what’s next,” Daniel said with an exhausted expression. “It’s what I have to do. I’m sorry. Really, but— I’m sorry.”

Judy nodded. “It’s further away from mama,” she said.

“Yes.”

“And Camille.”

Daniel was patting his pockets for a cigarette. Finally he found one and lit up.

They were quiet for a long time and then ate supper.

They would live in an upper story apartment. The boys were warned— this won’t be like living in a house. They could not jump around lest they disturb the downstairs neighbors. So on a summer afternoon, the family pulled out of the gravel driveway and left the house in Jacksonville. It was the first house Douglas ever knew in the world. Somehow he still believed they would be back for supper that night.

Champaign was fine.

A busy street outside the apartment complex.

There was a long hallway leading to their new home. Green shag carpet inside. They had a short balcony where Judy could watch the boys walk to school. Third grade for Ted, second for Douglas. They had new galoshes and bright yellow rain coats.

That first night.

Quilt and blanket.

Above him the criss-crossed pattern. Springs and the smell of cold metal. The frame of the upper bunk. The screws. His brother up there lowing in sleep.

That first fact in a new room.

Daniel had an assignment in one of his night classes to make a short film. He wanted to interview Judy about her depression.

“What the hell, right? Am I right? Let’s make art out of this. I mean, what the fuck, right?” he said. “It will be cathartic for both of us.”

The boys came home from school to find Judy sitting in a chair in the middle of the living room. Daniel waved them away and pointed at the camera. Keep quiet or go outside. They went to their room and tried to be quiet. Beyond the buzz of the apartment, behind the door, they could hear their mother narrating her life. Growing up in Texas, she had always felt this way. And something else they couldn’t quite hear. She went on and on. She was very articulate. Really good. No doubt she was putting in a good effort for all their sakes.

Ted joined a cub scout group that met on Thursday nights. Before long he started earning badges for different activities, basket weaving, a race car made from a block of wood. Douglas drew comics on typing paper and admired Ted’s badges.

They ate chicken pot pies with “To Tell the Truth” on TV— a Mark Goodson-Bill Todman production. Bath time. A bowl of cereal and off to bed. Daniel always came in late. Sometimes he would stumble into the boys’ room to say goodnight, a city smell on his clothes.

They were only in Urbana a few months when Judy’s father died of a sudden heart attack. His name was Everett, a veteran of World War Two. After the war he worked at Exxon for thirty years. He kept three cabinets of rifles at his home in Texas. He had black hair circling a shaved crown and smoked a pipe that whistled in his teeth. He wore horned rim glasses and brown pants pulled up to his chest. His small mouth seemed incapable of expression, a straight line neither smiling or frowning. His eyebrows never moved. Ted and Douglas barely knew him. But he was dead now so—

The long drive from Champaign to Beaumont for the funeral. Daniel kept one hand on the wheel and nursed a cigarette. His window was down just enough for the smoke to escape onto the roaring highway. Judy had something very important to tell the boys and kept turning to look at them in the back seat. Grandma Veda was not her real mother. Her real mother was a cajun woman living in Louisiana. This woman had left Grandpa Everett when she was just a baby. Judy hadn’t known any of this until her eighteenth birthday. The boys sat still. Okay. So anyway— now that Everett had died Judy felt it was time to meet her real mother. Her name was Mildred. After the funeral

they would drive further south to Louisiana to visit her before heading back to Champaign. Grandpa would have thought this a betrayal were he still living.

“But he’s dead now so you can go see her,” Douglas said.

Judy smiled a little. “That’s right.”

“You’ve never met her before?” Ted asked.

She shook her head. “No. She wrote me a letter once. Grandpa got the letter and tried to hide it from me. But I found it.”

“You found it?”

She nodded.

“What did it say?”

“That she was sorry. That she was young when she had me. She was asking for forgiveness.”

“Did you forgive her?”

“I wrote her and said that I did.”

“That’s good,” Douglas said. “So she’s nice.”

“She is,” Judy said. “She was in the letter anyway.”

At the funeral Veda didn’t cry but kept a noble look about her as friends and family milled by to look at the body. Everett lay in the casket with his pants pulled up to his chest, his mouth with the same straight line, his eyebrows still not moving. Veda told the boys that Grandpa actually visited her last night in her kitchen. She felt him touch her arm and heard his voice “as clear as you’re hearing mine now,” she said. The boys just stared.

She kneeled down and looked them in the eye.

“Do you want to know what he said?”

Douglas shook his head but noticed Ted was nodding so he nodded too.

“He told me not to worry. He said that we are in the hands of Jesus and that everything was going to be alright. He actually said that. Isn’t that something?”

It was something. The boys had never heard Grandpa Everett say anything like that while he was alive.

They drove on to Louisiana. As they pulled into Mildred’s driveway a tottering woman came out of the house with arms extended. She was remarkably short with a face like a troll. Cropped black hair. Her eyes disappeared when she smiled.

“Well hey, good lookin’,” she said in a cracked voice. She grabbed Judy and held her tight, kissing her hard on the cheek. “Oh my stars, you lovely girl!” Judy rubbed the old woman’s back until they finally came apart.

“It’s nice to finally meet you,” Judy said. “I’m— I’m sorry it took so long.”

Mildred waved her off. “It don’t matter none!” she said. “It don’t matter.” Her face was a series of sink holes, sockets and gums, a spotted raisin.

Judy smiled back, her eyes exploring the woman’s face as if it might hold some message for her.

Once inside Douglas noticed how Mildred stood in the kitchen with a dishtowel the same as his mother, hip flung out and feet close together. “You can call me Grandma-ma if you want, hon,” she said to Douglas. “Or Grandma-ma-ma since you got tree of ‘em now. Tree!”

Grandma-ma-ma put on zydeco music and took Judy’s hand to dance. “Dis is where you come from, sweetheart. Dis is you— even if you don’t know it!” Daniel and Ted sat at the table and tried a boudin ball. Douglas watched as his mother awkwardly danced with the little troll woman.

Later that night Daniel lit Mildred’s cigarette as they washed dishes. Ted watched television in the next room. Judy was sitting at the table. Douglas lay his head on her lap.

“I’m not going to say anything bad about Everett,” Mildred said. “He was your daddy. I won’t say anything bad about him.”

“I don’t mind,” Judy replied and stroked Douglas’ hair. “I know what he was.”

“Still,” Mildred said. “Still. It was my choice to leave. I’m glad I made dat choice. I loved you, Judy. Dat’s got nothing to do with it. It had more to do with Everett. Still, I’m not going to say anything bad about your daddy.”

“What was— what was I like?” Judy asked.

Mildred put out her cigarette in the sink and looked hard at Judy.

“You was beautiful, an’ dat’s the truth. Just beautiful.”

Judy nodded and her eyes went down. “Was I— happy? As a baby?”

“You was when I left you,” Mildred laughed. “You was on my watch. I made my choices. Everett made his. You makin’ yours now. We all do what we do and did what we did. Dat’s it. An’ we forgive an’ we let each other be. Dat’s the only way. Now was I sad ‘bout my choices? I was. I still can be if I wanna. I can do dat. But I choose not to do dat. An’ I choose not to say anything bad about your daddy. Not a word. Not me. We happy cause we choose to be happy. Dat’s what we do. It’s dangerous otherwise. You’ll just drown in tears. Now I know what you told me. I know you got depression. Dat’s hard. I know dat’s hard. I had it. But I made a choice and my choice was to not regret nothin’. Not anything. I’ll be responsible. I’ll take blame if it’s mine. But I won’t let dat get me neither. I’ll rise up and be happy cause dat’s all anyone can do. Ain’t nobody gonna give you permission to do dat. You do it. Dat’s it. Dat’s all.”

Daniel took a drag on his cigarette. “We’re doing okay. We are really. I made a film about it. We’re going to be okay.”

Mildred wrapped her arms around Daniel’s waist and smiled, her eyes receding into her face. “Oh, well isn’t dat smart! A film! Isn’t dat just so smart!” She laughed. “I wished I had a good lookin’ man like dis, Judy. A good lookin’ man like dis!”

Judy nodded and stroked Douglas’ hair.

All that week other relatives stopped by the little house off the interstate to meet Judy, Daniel, and the boys. For days Judy was treated like lost treasure. And she looked at each relative as they came. Douglas saw her look at them— as if any of them might have something to tell her outside of obvious love.

Finally they loaded the car.
The long drive back to Illinois.

Champaign.
Cold, gray skies.

The apartment was freezing when they unlocked the door and stumbled inside.
They turned on the lights, the heat.

Get in bed. We'll unpack tomorrow. No, there's no milk for cereal tonight. We'll get some in the morning.

Off to bed now. I love you, Ted, Douglas. Yes. Off to bed.
Good night.

While they were gone a tornado destroyed the K-Mart a few blocks away. The boys resumed school, stomping through puddles in their boots, flapping the arms of their yellow plastic raincoats. Douglas felt like a character on television, walking home after school with no adult watching. He and Ted climbed the stairs to the apartment and sat at the kitchen table for a snack, like men having beers after work.

Judy wanted to move closer to Louisiana and be near Mildred. One night Douglas watched her and Daniel argue while he finished a turkey pot pie.

"I just feel like if I could talk with her—" and Judy shook her head, not knowing what she wanted to say.

"You have to be patient, Judy," Daniel said sucking a cigarette. "Everything is coming. It is. But I have to finish my degree. We don't have anything if we don't have that."

Judy stared for a while.

"Mama called," she finally said. "She's upset about Mildred. Not upset, but she's — you know — concerned. I don't know. Maybe we should move closer to Mama instead. Are there any museums in Beaumont?"

"Beaumont? I don't know anything about fucking Beaumont. What happened to Louisiana?"

"Mama is the one who raised me. I don't want her to think I'm just — abandoning her after Daddy died."

"How are you abandoning her?"

"I just don't want to hurt anyone."

"You're not hurting anyone, Judy."

"I'm hurting Mama."

"No you're not. She's just doing that manipulative bullshit she always does. You know how she is."

"So Louisiana?"

"No. Or maybe. I don't know what jobs are in Louisiana. All I'm trying to do now is get my degree and then we'll have to see what happens. We'll just have to see. There's no short cut here."

Judy nodded.

“But we’re still a long way off from that. This will take a couple of years if I can stick with it— but I have to stick with it.”

Judy nodded again.

Daniel took a breath. “What is it that you want?” he asked.

She didn’t answer.

“What are you looking for?”

She closed her eyes. “I’m just thinking that maybe if I spend some time with Mildred I could find out.”

“Find out what?”

“What happened.”

“I think she told you what happened.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“Then what do you mean?”

She shook her head.

Douglas still had the bottom crust on his pot pie to eat. It was soggy and he picked at it with his fork.

Daniel got his coat and took a long walk.

Christmas in the new apartment seemed strange but boxes were opened and Christmas ornaments came out like old friends. Ted’s green reindeer with glitter on its horns. The bendable Santa with the real feeling beard. Douglas peeled back some of the beard to see what Santa would look like shaved. It was only a furry sticker. No face underneath.

The Sears holiday catalogue tumbled open on the floor. Color photos in the front and back, clothes and toys. Black and white photos in the middle, mattresses and proud women displaying their bras. They picked out toys they wanted. Superheroes and bad guys. A ventriloquist dummy. A snow cone machine.

If they missed the Christmas specials on TV they wouldn’t see them for another year. Charlie Brown gave Douglas goosebumps. Something mysterious and meaningful but he didn’t know what. Rudolph. The Burl Ives snowman in his miniature world. Distant jingle bells signal a stranger coming at night. He’ll break into your house, eat your food. But he likes you. He’ll leave you a note.

One night Judy took the boys outside to see what their tree looked like from across the street.

Cars raced by in the slush.

“Where is it?” Ted asked.

Judy kneeled down. “Right there,” she said and pointed.

Up high, in the industrial pattern of windows, they could see tiny lights glinting, defiant, humble. That’s where they lived, their bright spot in this dark, windy world. Comfort that felt like the love of God.

“I love Christmas,” Douglas said.

“It’s better out here,” Judy said. “I don’t know why. Somehow far away it’s always better.”

She was right. When the long awaited morning arrived the boys woke while it was still dark. They sprang up like dogs hearing a doorbell. “Two-thirty?” Daniel rubbed his head so his hair stood on end. “Okay, alright. Fine,” he said. “Give us a minute. Don’t jump and wake the neighbors.” The boys tore into everything with a fierceness rivaling teenage lust. Judy and Daniel sat bleary eyed on opposite couches. When it was over Daniel went back to bed. Judy stayed up a while with the boys and drank coffee. The day dragged on with intermittent napping from Daniel and Judy. The boys kept going. All these new things. So much to do they felt a strange obligation to spend equal time with every toy or activity. Finally they dropped into bed that night like debaucherers swollen with desires only partially fulfilled.

And that was that. Tomorrow normal life would resume, without magic or the spirits watching over us.

Winter dissolved to spring and then summer. The boys were surprised to see Champaign Urbana transform into more than just parking lots and brick buildings. Trees along the street began to bloom and green. It was getting warm. End of school parties were arranged and Judy made three cakes, one for Ted’s class, one for Douglas’, and one for Daniel’s.

“I’m not going to drive to school with a cake in my lap,” Daniel said.

“Not in your lap,” Judy said. “Put it in the seat next to you.”

“It’ll slide around and fall on the floor. I would have to watch it the whole time.”

“It won’t slide around.”

“Sure it will. You know how many lights I have to go through.”

“The seat tilts and the cake is heavy. It won’t slide around.”

“It will.”

“I do this all the time, Daniel. It won’t slide.”

“It’s not that kind of party anyway. We’ll be drinking. Nobody wants cake with drinks. They want cheese and salty stuff.” He turned to Ted and Douglas. “Why don’t you guys tear into this one. We’ll eat it at home.”

The boys cheered and stuck their fingers in the frosting. Daniel came close to Judy.

“I’ll buy a couple of bags of chips tonight and we’ll go together. They’re screening the films you know. And some of them are pretty incredible. Paul did something with animation.”

Judy was quiet for a moment.

“They’re going to watch your film?”

Daniel shrugged. “Yeah. That was the plan wasn’t it? I mean— I made it for people to see.” He paused for a moment, looking at her. “But if you don’t want me to show it— It would be a shame though. I mean you were so fearless during that interview, Judy. Really. And it could mean a lot to someone if it got out there. You know, if it got to festivals or something.”

More quiet. The boys continued licking their fingers.

“Cathartic, remember?” Daniel finally said. “That was the whole point in doing it, right?”

“Would you still get your grade?” she asked. “If you didn’t show it?”

Daniel nodded. “Yeah, sure. I guess. I’d get my grade either way, but...”

She was still thinking. Finally she shook her head, raising her hands.

“You know, it’s fine. It’s fine. Just— I’m just not sure I want to go. I don’t want to see it. It would be too—”

“People will want to talk to you about it. I swear, Judy, some of them are probably going through the same thing. Think how much it would have meant for you to see a film like this a few months ago, to know that there were other people feeling the same shit.”

Judy was quiet.

Daniel glanced over at the boys, still licking their fingers. “Guys. Go play outside for while. It’s mommy and daddy time. Put on your coats.”

“It’s too warm for coats now,” Ted said.

“Go play outside.”

The boys rose from the table. They wandered out of the apartment and into the hallway, closing the door behind them. They started lazily down the steps.

“How long do you think it will take this time?” Douglas asked.

“Usually half an hour.” Ted sighed. “Come on. I made a fort across the street. It’s that dirt mound but you can’t get your shoes muddy or Mom will get mad.”

That night they all went to the university party. The boys grabbed sandwiches from a card table and poured soda into plastic cups. They explored the large space while Daniel and Judy mingled with the crowd. There were sculptures that stopped the boys in their tracks— two giant cats made of newspaper, a bathtub filled with nails. They stared with open mouths at murals on the walls— the head of a butchered pig, black blood draining. A morbidly fat woman laying on the floor with legs spread. One room was a maze created from orange and yellow shag carpet. Other kids were running through it. One wore a t-shirt that read “Keep On Truckin,” another kid had an afro that made his head look twice its size. A woman wearing a long denim vest came over and told the boys they could bring food into the maze and run around as much as they wanted but needed to stay out of the next room after the doors shut. They were showing the graduate school films so noise needed to stay at a manageable level. The boys nodded and quickly joined the others, tearing through the maze, clutching flimsy sandwiches.

The floor was so sticky their shoes nearly ripped off. After a breathless turn Douglas sat on the floor and peeled a slice of bologna from his foot. A girl threw herself down next to him. She had a shiny gold purse hanging from her shoulder.

“I’m Susanne Mushrush,” she said. Yellow hair and a face smooth as cream. Dimples when she smiled. “What’s your name?”

“Douglas.”

“Do you like my purse?” she asked and tilted it back and forth to catch the light.

“I do,” Douglas said. “So gold and shiny. What do you do with it?”

She shrugged. “Oh, you know— keep stuff. Gum. Stickers.” She opened the jaws of the purse revealing a white silk lining, but it looked like a small animal had exploded inside. Red like the stain of entrails, scarred waxy blue, green, purple all mixed to mud.

“Crayons mostly,” she said and closed the purse with a snap. Douglas nodded. In an instant the girl was up and running again. Douglas felt a little sick but stumbled to his feet to join her.

They wound in and out of carpet walls like dogs set loose to chase and collide in a surreal labyrinth. Screams and breath labored, swell of blood and throbbing heads, faces smiling till they ached. The walls thudded with the clamor and trampling, in and out with dust like powdered gold in their wake— the world a rushing dream as they ran, bunching to a mob in corners and then running again. Whatever food Douglas brought with him was gone now though he hadn’t eaten it. Pumping his arms he careened down a corner and collided with the afro boy who screamed, wheeled and disappeared down another path. Always ahead was the girl with her purse and Douglas watched as it bounced and swung on her shoulder. The high voices shrieked all around until he heard another voice...

He stopped.

It was gone.

Then he heard the voice again, outside these orange walls.

He kept forward.

He was only trotting now, sucking air and looking for the exit though he had passed it many times before. It came back around, the shag carpet only hanging now from the abused plywood. Douglas hurried out. Underneath the thundering he could hear it again— behind the wooden double doors just ahead. The voice was electric, volume high with a ticking or flickering that seemed to slow and start.

His mother.

She was explaining herself. On the film. And her voice echoed hollow and indistinct from behind the doors as a steady light pulsed.

And that night he lay in bed, his mother bending over him to brush his hair back and say all the needful things before sleep, but her face was dark against the hallway light and he could see nothing of it. She retreated like a shadow and he fell into that hole, mind subordinate to weary body.

And the blank, silent dark.

And then he woke.

The warmth of his own small body. Quilt and blanket. In the pre-dawn dark he turned his face upward and curled his legs into his chest. Above him was the old criss-crossed pattern. Springs and the smell of cold metal. The screws and the frame of the upper bunk.

Ted and Douglas wandered out into the living room in footie pajamas.

It was quiet.

The sun was streaking through chiffon curtains. Motes of dust hung in the air like a golden world underwater.

So quiet. And glancing down the boys slowly walked forward, toward a streak of blood and vomit laying thick on the carpet.

They stared for a long while.

There was a sour smell.

Finally Douglas called out.

“Camille!” but his voice echoed dully in the apartment.

“She’s in Jacksonville,” Ted said. He walked carefully around the vomit as if it were a wounded animal and hurried into the kitchen. Douglas stayed planted.

After a moment, Ted peered out from the kitchen. The boys stared at each other from across the room.

“Check their bedroom,” Ted said quietly. But Douglas didn’t move. The streak of sick looked like a dead slug, heavy and impacted in the carpet. Ted waited and finally moved across the room, heels thumping past his brother and down the hallway. There was a pause and presently his heels thumped back.

“They’re not there either.”

“They’re not asleep?”

“No. And the bed’s not made. Covers on the floor.”

“Do you know how to use the telephone?”

“I know our number. 668-9585.”

“What about the neighbors or something?”

“I don’t know any of the neighbors. There’s that one kid.”

“Robbie?”

“Ronnie.”

“Do you know where he lives?”

Ted shook his head.

They stood there a long while, eyes down, breathing.

Soon they shuffled to the other side of the room. Ted sat on the rocking couch, Douglas across from him on the wicker couch. All was quiet save for the ticking of a bookshelf clock. Douglas might have turned on the television but somehow couldn’t make the effort. His arms tingled so he wrapped them around gathered knees and remained still.

Blocks of light on the wall slowly crept downward.

Morning passed.

A large dog barked far away. A car passed on the road, music blaring, then fading.

And still the boys sat.

Half lidded they examined the cartoon characters on their pajamas and traced them out with small fingers.

The central air kicked in. A drone of breath filled the room, a buffer for all thought and sound, until the walls slowly dimmed.