



## THE WITCH

My brother and I were given over to the Department of Children and Family Services after our father and his girlfriend left us alone in the car one too many times. The reason we were put in the car had to do with some trouble when we were younger, in some of the different places that we lived, when we were left home by ourselves. Neighbors had made calls and DCFS had come around, turning our father into a concerned and head-nodding parent, at least while the interview lasted. Once the investigator left, he had things to say about people who tried to tell you what to do with your own goddamn kids. They should just shut their faces. “Let’s go,” he said. “In the car, now. Vamoose.” He wasn’t bad-tempered, at least not as a rule, but people who thought they were better than us, by way of criticism or interference, brought out the angry side of him.

At the time when everything changed for us, my brother Kerry was seven and I was five. We knew the rules, the chief one being: Stay in the car! We accepted that there were compli-

cated, unexplained adult things that we were not a part of, in places where we were not allowed. But sometimes we were scooped up, Kerry and me, and brought inside to a room with people and noise and the wonderful colored lights of cigarette machines and jukeboxes, encouraged to tell people our names, wear somebody's baseball cap, and drink the Cokes prepared for us with straws and maraschino cherries.

And sometimes Monica, our father's girlfriend, drove. Then she'd stay in the car with us and keep the engine running while our father went inside some unfamiliar restaurant or house. These errands made Monica nervous, made her speak sharply to us and turn around in her seat to keep watch, some worry in the air that filled Kerry and me with the uncomprehending anxiety of dogs. And when our father finally returned, we were all so glad to see him!

But mostly it was just me and Kerry, left on our own to wait. We were fine with being in the car, a maroon Chevy, not new, that drove like a boat. We knew its territories of front and back, its resources, its smells and textures. We always had something given to us to eat, like cheese popcorn, two bags, so that there would be no fighting. We had a portable radio, only one of those, so that we did fight over it, but the fighting was also a way of keeping busy.

Most often we fell asleep and woke up when our father and Monica returned, carrying on whatever conversation or argument was in progress, telling us to go back to sleep. The car started and we were borne away, watching streetlights through a bit of window, this one and this one and this one, all left behind by our motion, and this was a comfort.

Normal is whatever you grow up with. Sometimes Monica

made us French toast with syrup for breakfast, and so we whined for French toast whenever we thought it might pay off. We had television to watch, and our intense, competitive friendships with kids we saw in the hallways and stairwells. All of this to say, we didn't think anything was so bad. We knew bad right away when it showed up.

Kerry was a crybaby. Our father said so. Kerry was a candy ass. This was said in a spirit of encouragement and exhortation, since it was a worrisome thing for a boy to be soft, not stand up to teasing or hardship. People would keep coming at you. When Kerry tried not to cry, it was just as pitiful as the crying itself. He had a round chin and a full lower lip that quavered, or, as our father used to say, "You could ride that lower lip home!"

The expectations were different for girls, and anyway, I didn't need the same advice about standing up for myself. Our father's name for me was Little Big Mouth. I didn't have a portion of Kerry's fair good looks either; everything about me was browner and sharper. I don't know why we were so different, why I couldn't have been more sweet-tempered, why Kerry didn't have more fight in him. Throughout my life I've struggled with the notion of things that were someone's *fault*, of things that were done *on purpose*, and it was a relief when I finally came to understand that one thing we are not to blame for is our own natures.

Monica hadn't always been with us. I knew that from having it told to me, and Kerry claimed he could remember the very day we met her. I said I did too, even though I didn't. My baby memories were too confused, and how were you supposed to remember somebody not being there? Or maybe she had been around us but not yet living with us as she did now. I think she

was a little slow, with a ceiling on her comprehension. She had a round, pop-eyed face and limp black hair that she wore long, and she favored purplish lipstick that coated the ends of her cigarettes. If Kerry or I did something we weren't supposed to, she waved her hands and said, "You kids! Why you don't behave? I'm telling your dad on you!" We never paid attention. Monica wasn't entirely an adult, we sensed, and could be disregarded without consequences.

Our father didn't like to sit home. He'd done something that involved driving—a truck? a bus?—until he hurt his back and couldn't work regular hours. His back still pained him and we learned to walk wide of him when it put him in a mood. But if he was feeling good enough, or even borderline, he needed to get out and blow the stink off, as he called it, see and be seen, claim his old place among other men of the world. And since Monica wasn't going to be left behind, and since now we could not be left behind either, we all went.

One problem with staying in the car was when we had to go to the bathroom. Sometimes either Monica or our father came to check on us and carry us to some back entrance or passageway where there was a toilet. At other times they didn't come and didn't come, and we tried not to wet ourselves, or sometimes we did and were shamed.

Once, whimpering from urgency, Kerry got out of the car and stood behind some trash containers to pee. I watched, unbelieving and horrified. And jealous at how much easier it was for boys to manage these things. "I'm telling," I said, when Kerry let himself back in and relocked the car door.

“You better not.”

“I don’t have to, they can see right where you peed.”

He looked out the window to see if that was true. “No you can’t,” he said, but he didn’t sound so sure.

“You are going to get beat bloody.” It was one of our father’s occasional pronouncements, although so far we had not been made to bleed.

“Shut up.” He kicked me and I kicked back.

When our father and Monica returned, they were fizzy and cheerful. “How are my little buckaroos?” my father asked. “How’s the desperadoes?”

We said, faintly, that we were okay. Monica said, “They look hungry.”

“Now how can you tell that by looking? Let’s get a move on.”

“You know what sounds good right about now? Chicken and waffles. Where’s a place around here we can get that?”

“Some other time, Mon.”

“That’s not fair. I bet if you was the one wanted chicken and waffles, we’d be halfway there by now.”

“Shut it, Monica,” our father said, but not unpleasantly, because he was in such fine spirits. “If you were the one with the car, you could drive yourself to the moon.” He turned on the radio and started singing along with it.

Kerry and I kept quiet in the back seat, and I didn’t give him up. Like it or not, we were stuck together in some things.

So the next time I had to go, I told Kerry, “Move.” He was sitting next to the door on the sidewalk side. On the street, cars passed by us fast, with a shivery sound of rushing air.

“You better not.”

I popped out and made a face at him through the car win-

dow. I walked a little way, looking for a good place. But everything was out in the open, and it wasn't fully dark yet, and I didn't think I could crouch down and pee on the sidewalk, in front of everyone. I didn't know where our father and Monica had gone. None of the buildings looked likely. I kept walking.

Behind me, a car door slammed, and Kerry ran to catch up with me. "You're gonna be in trouble."

"Well so are you now."

Kerry walked backward in front of me. "Where are you going?"

"Home."

"Uh-uh!"

I ignored him. He didn't have any way to stop me.

"You don't know where it is."

"Yes I do." I didn't think we were that far away. And both Kerry and I wore house keys around our necks on shoelaces, just in case.

Kerry looked back at the car. It wasn't too late for him to return to it, but he kept walking with me, looking all worried. "Candy ass," I said.

"You're a candy ass," he said, but that was so lame, I didn't bother answering back.

If I'd found anyplace I could have peed, or if we'd managed to get ourselves home, things would have gone differently. But we walked and walked, and the street didn't offer anything like a bathroom, and we came to an intersection I didn't recognize, though I set off with confidence in one direction. Walking, I didn't have to go so bad. I thought I could keep on for a while.

Kerry lagged a pace or two behind me. He thought I was going to get in trouble and he was trying to stay out of the way. It was dark by now and the lights around us, from cars, street-

lights, store windows, were bright and glassy, and the shadows beyond the lights were a reaching-out kind of black.

I'd been lost for a while. I knew it but I didn't want to come out and say it, and anyway, I had the idea that I could find our building if I only looked hard enough. At least I think that's how I thought. I was five, and it was a whole world ago.

The street was becoming less and less promising. There were vacant lots with chewed-looking weeds, and the gobbling noise of loud music from a passing car. I wondered if our father and Monica had come back yet and found us missing, or if they were still inside having their important fun. I was holding on to my pee so tight, I was having trouble walking. We came to a big lighted storefront, a grocery, with people going in and out of the automatic doors, and we hung back, afraid of getting in the way.

A lady on her way out of the store stopped and peered down at us. "Harold," she said to the man with her, "look, two little white babies."

Because we were white, and the lady and the man and everybody else around us was black.

"Where's your mamma?" the lady said, and we just stared at her. We didn't have one of those. "Awright, no matter, we fine her for you. You-all lost? Harold, you go put them bags up and come right back." She squatted down in front of us. "Can you talk, honey?"

"I have to go to the bathroom," I announced. Now that there was somebody to complain to, I was tearing up.

"Yeah?" She took my hand. "Come on with me, then. Brother too." She held out her other hand to Kerry, who was sniffing now. We were both moved by our own piteousness.

She led us through the store, back to the place with gray

mops resting in buckets, jugs of blue industrial cleanser, and a small, walled-off toilet. The lady asked if I needed any help, and it shocked me to think of some strange lady watching me pee, though she was just being nice. After I came out, Kerry said he had to go too, and then the lady directed us to wash our hands, lifting us up so we could reach the utility sink. She took us back through the store again, and we were set on a bench in an office where a radio played, and given cartons of chocolate milk and a package of cake doughnuts to eat.

And shouldn't everything have been all right then? We had been found, tended to, soothed. Our father and Monica should have come in, full of remorse and relief, to bear us away, and promise never to let us out of their sight again. Or maybe we could have gone home with the lady who found us. She seemed to know a thing or two about children. She and Harold could have taken us in, two strange little white birds hatched in a different nest, and we would have begun a new, improbable life.

Instead the police were called, and protective services, and different adult strangers herded us this way and that, talking in ways that were meant to be reassuring, I guess, but the enormity of what was happening made us both cry. Of course they had all seen crying children before, and children who had been beaten, burned, starved, violated, in much worse shape than Kerry and I. They were, perhaps, a little brusque with us, a little impatient. We sat in a room decorated with crayon drawings, with books and puzzles and rag dolls and toy trucks, and these were meant to distract and amuse us, but none of them were our toys, and we hung back from them.

Because it was already so late, too late to do anything else with us, Kerry and I spent the night in a kind of dormitory with blue night lights on the walls, wearing clean, much-laundered

pajamas, each of us tucked in with some other child's stuffed bear. We were the only ones sleeping there, though we heard adult feet passing the open door and, from other rooms, different shrill or urgent sounds. I must have slept. But I kept waking up and seeing the blue lights and then I would remember everything that had happened, the weight of it sliding onto me in an instant.

I heard Kerry in the next bed, moving and restless. "Are you awake?" I whispered.

"Why did you get out of the car?" he said, and his voice was thick and full of snot from all his crying.

"Shut up."

"You weren't supposed to."

"Well you did too."

"You started it!"

Some noise beyond the doorway made us stop talking, and fall back into uneasy sleep. This was exactly the weight bearing down on me: the knowledge that I had set a terrible thing in motion.

In the morning we thought that we'd be going home now. But after breakfast (juice, apple slices, oatmeal that curdled in our mouths), it was explained to us that we would be going to stay at a lady's house for a while. There were some things that had to be discussed with our father. He was fine, he said to tell us hello, and that he missed us. (Kerry and I looked down at the floor at this. It was not a thing our father would say.) Meanwhile, we would be with Mrs. Wojo (her name was longer and more complicated, but that is what we heard), a lady who helped out with children when they needed a place to stay.

I said that we didn't need a place to stay, we just needed to go home. But we would not be going home. Explained and re-

peated to us by adults who had so much practice in telling children unpleasant things. We were going to Mrs. Wojo's.

Was our father mad at us, was that why he wouldn't come for us? Did he really know where we were, or were they making that up?

In the car on our way to Mrs. Wojo's, I tried to memorize landmarks so that we could find our way back to somewhere familiar. One of the DCFS people, a woman, sat in the back seat between Kerry and me so I couldn't talk to him. Another woman drove, and I guess they had names but I've forgotten them. It was one of those spring days that freezes up and turns water in gutters to oil-covered sumps, and a scouring wind pours out of the sky. We passed blocks and blocks of old warehouses, black-windowed buildings of dark red brick where nothing had happened for a very long time. A fenced-off park with a baseball diamond, chill and empty. Some streets of ordinary commerce, little shops and car lots and motels.

I wasn't crying now. I was too sore-hearted and tired. I watched the cold world slide by outside, and it seemed like there was nowhere in it for me. The car turned and turned, and here were streets of small houses. They were shingled in white, green, or gray, each with some kind of porch or stoop, each with its own small square yard set off with board fences. The car slowed and pulled over to the curb. "Okay, kids," the DCFS woman in the back seat with us said, in the voice adults use to try to head off any trouble, cheery and energetic but full of lurking strain. "Here we are!"

At least the house looked nice. It was white with red trim, and frilly curtains in the windows. It was too early in the season for flowers, but the window boxes were filled with red plastic geraniums. Someone was at least making an effort. Kerry and I

were led up the front steps and the DCFS woman rang the bell. The front door was gated off with an ironwork barrier, painted white, and beyond that was a glass panel, and beyond that, a lace curtain.

The curtain stirred and there were a great many sounds of locks unsnapping and bolts sliding before we were admitted. The DCFS woman put a hand on each of our shoulders and propelled us forward. "This is Kerry. And this is Jo."

Too many things were happening at once for me to take everything in, but later I learned the details of that room by heart: the reclining chair, exclusive to the use of Mrs. Wojo, with the protective plastic doily across the back. The television table alongside where the remote control lived, and the different items necessary for the comfort and convenience of Mrs. Wojo. Kleenex, ashtray, eyeglasses case, crossword puzzle book with the small gold pen hitched to its spine. The television itself, furniture-like and old-fashioned even for that time. The line of African violets on the windowsill, each of them set on top of a cottage cheese carton with a wick made of nylon stocking. The plaid sofa with the clear plastic hood laid over the back cushions, the lamp with the base in the shape of a ceramic fish balanced on its tail. The carpet, a dank green. The air had a thickened quality, different layers of smells. Cigarettes, something yeasty, something burnt, and many cleaning products.

Mrs. Wojo stooped to get down close to us. "Hello, children." She had a powdery face, with powder under her lipstick too, so that her red mouth was worked into paste in the corners. She wore eyeglasses with pink frames and her hair was gray and puffed out. Like the house, she had layers of smells: soap, hair spray, undergarments, Pond's hand cream. And in the moment her face was closest to mine, she breathed out, and I smelled not

just cigarettes, but something black, dead, fouled in her, and I knew her for what she was, and she saw that I knew it and her eyes glittered even as her mouth still smiled.

“Can they have candy?” she asked the DCFS woman. “Would you like some candy?” She held out a glass bowl with a mound of lemon drops stuck together. Kerry and I each picked one loose. “What do you say?” Mrs. Wojo prompted us, and we each said thank you.

The candies were hard and they stayed in a lump under our tongues for a long time.

Then we were taken upstairs to see the bedroom prepared for us, two little beds made up with checkerboard quilts, one blue, one yellow, and a dresser and a closet for all the clothes we didn’t have. (These arrived later, collected from our home and transported in paper bags.)

The bathroom was downstairs, tiled in green, with a shower curtain patterned in seashells. Mrs. Wojo’s magisterial bedroom was next to it. We caught a glimpse of dark wood and a white chenille bedspread. Mrs. Wojo and the DCFS woman had a number of things to discuss, while Kerry and I stayed silent. Kerry kept rubbing his eyes like he was sleepy, but it turned out there was something wrong with them, pinkeye, and I caught it too and we both had to have ointment squeezed into our eyes, which we fought as hard as we could, our hair yanked back to make us submit and stay still.

But this was yet to come. The two adults finished their talking, and the DCFS woman prepared to leave. She said that she would be back to see us soon, and that we should behave and do everything that Mrs. Wojo told us to. Mrs. Wojo escorted her out, saying goodbye in a musical voice. Then she redid all the locks and bolts and turned to face us.

“Kerry,” she said. “That’s a girl’s name. Are you a little girl?” She lifted a piece of his long, fair hair. “We’ll get this cut so you don’t turn femmy.”

Then she looked at me. “Joe, that’s a boy’s name. Did somebody think that was funny? Both of you named queer?”

“I’m Joanne,” I said, not knowing what queer was, except that I didn’t want to be it.

“That’s not much better, is it? My name is Mrs. —” And here she spoke her full name, that impossible sequence of tangled consonants. “Say it.”

“Mrs. Wohohohoho,” Kerry and I came up with. She shook her head.

“Not the sharpest knives in the drawer, are you? Never mind. Go play in the back yard while I get your lunch ready.”

We still had our coats on. She took us through the kitchen, with its enormous gas stove and more of the African violets set on a window ledge, and a smell of dishrags, out to a landing. Stairs led down to a basement, and opposite, the back door. “Go on,” she said. “What are you waiting for, Christmas? Scoot.”

The door closed behind us. The back yard was not as nice as the front. It was fenced off in chain link, with wood slats set into it for privacy. One bare tree, staked down with wires, grew in a plot of gravel. A sidewalk along one side led to some garbage cans and a high gate to the alley, padlocked. The wind was shrill and cold. Kerry rubbed at his eyes. I sucked on the collar of my coat for warmth. What were we supposed to do? Not just, what were we supposed to do in the cold yard, but for the whole of a day, or many days, in Mrs. Wojo’s house?

After a while she called us back inside. We took off our shoes at the door, and then we washed our hands in the bathroom. She sat us down at the kitchen table and brought out two glasses

of milk and two plates with sandwiches cut into quarters. Kerry and I tried them. They were filled with a thin, fishy paste, and we put them back down again.

“What’s the matter with you?” Mrs. Wojo demanded. She was watching us from the doorway, smoking a cigarette and tapping the ashes into the lid of a jelly jar. “What do we got here, picky eaters?”

“I don’t like it,” I said. I didn’t see any reason not to say so. I was that young. Kerry kept looking at his plate. He was scared for me.

“It’s tuna fish. Don’t tell me you don’t like tuna fish.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. The tuna we had at home was mixed with mayonnaise and sweet pickle relish. This wasn’t the same. “How about milk?” Mrs. Wojo said. “You all right with milk?”

“I like chocolate milk.”

“Do you now,” Mrs. Wojo said, agreeably. She reached the end of her cigarette, put it out in the jar lid, and set the lid on the kitchen counter. “Well, when you’re old enough to get a job and earn money, then you can go buy chocolate milk. If you don’t want to eat, that’s your business. You look like you could miss a few meals and not suffer. You, now—” She stood behind Kerry and patted at his arms and shoulders. “You could use a little fattening up.”

She turned and rummaged around in a cupboard. “Let’s try, ah, peanut butter. A little good old PB and J.”

We watched while she hauled out the peanut butter and jelly, spread slabs of them on bread, cut the sandwich into four pieces, and replaced Kerry’s tuna fish with this new plate. Kerry and I looked at her, waiting. “Where’s mine?” I asked.

“Your what? Your lunch? Sitting right in front of you. If you don’t want to eat it, I can’t make you.”

The telephone rang then. Mrs. Wojo gave us an annoyed look, as if we were the ones interrupting her, and went out into the hall to answer it. Kerry shoved his plate at me. I took half the sandwich and shoved it back. I crammed it into my mouth and Kerry started in on his half. We heard Mrs. Wojo on the phone, her voice delighted and flirty. She said goodbye, in her fake, pleasant voice, and hung up. I wasn’t quick enough, my cheeks still bulging with bread when she came back in. I froze, awaiting my punishment.

“That’s better,” she said to Kerry. “You need to make a habit of cleaning your plate. Get some size on you. As for you, Missy.” She nodded in my direction. “If you don’t like lunch, maybe you’ll have a better appetite for supper.”

Kerry and I traded looks, and I got the rest of the sandwich down as fast as I could.

It was a piece of luck to discover Mrs. Wojo’s weakness right away—namely, she couldn’t see five feet in front of her face.

After lunch we were sent upstairs for naps. “We don’t take naps,” I said, but quietly, under my breath.

“What’s that?”

Mrs. Wojo swung around to face us. She wore capri pants that showed her red, knobby ankles, and a shirt with a pattern of pineapples. I fixed my eyes on them, pineapple pineapple pineapple pineapple, so as not to look at her. “Nothing,” I said.

“Do you two know why you’re here?” We didn’t answer. “Do you?”

We said we did not. “It’s because you have unfit parents.” She paused to let that sink in.

I didn't know what that meant, unfit. Like clothes fit you?

"The state wants to keep you from turning into juvenile delinquents. That's why they took you away. You understand?"

We didn't. She exhaled, and the pineapples billowed in and out. "Now, upstairs, and keep quiet."

"My daddy says, people should keep their noses on their own faces."

I thought she would hit me. But she wasn't a hitter. Instead she gripped my wrist and squeezed hard. "And who's your daddy? A jailbird? A drug addict?" She released me. My wrist burned for a long time.

Upstairs, Kerry sat on one bed and I took the other. We heard the television going, some show with lots of laughing and applause. We didn't talk about what Mrs. Wojo had said about our father. It would have made it real. We looked out the window, a dormer at the back of the house. The view was of the yard, and the alley, and the grid of similar small, fenced yards and the houses beyond them. Where was our house? All I knew was you needed a car to get there.

Kerry rubbed at his eyes again. By morning they would be crusted over, and would have to be pried open with a warm washcloth. He said, "You shouldn't make her mad."

"I didn't." She was already mad. "Is she a witch?"

"There aren't witches."

"Are too." I knew them from television. Mostly they were green-skinned, but not always.

"There aren't any just walking around."

"I bet there are."

The argument didn't go anywhere. We didn't have enough energy to keep it up. Pretty soon Kerry fell asleep but I didn't. I poked around the room and found those things that were

meant for children's entertainment: A set of alphabet blocks. A picture book, *The Golden Treasury of Bible Stories*. A jigsaw puzzle in a box spilling pieces.

I had to go to the bathroom, so I went down the stairs, as quietly as I could, waiting on each step. I crept past the door to the living room and the back of Mrs. Wojo's head as she watched her show, smoke rising from her cigarette in a question-mark shape.

I didn't turn on a light in the bathroom. The green tile and the green plastic curtains over the small window gave everything a drowned, underwater look. I peed and then spent some time investigating the different bottles and jars set out on the sink and tub and the shelf over the toilet. There were a lot of them, as if it took a great many potions and paint pots for Mrs. Wojo to make her natural self presentable to unsuspecting eyes.

I'd shut and latched the door behind me and suddenly there was a terrific rattling and commotion, Mrs. Wojo on its other side. "Open the door this instant!"

Fright made me clumsy with the latch. When I did manage it, the door flew open and smacked into me. I yelped, and Mrs. Wojo made the room echo with her rage. "WE DO NOT LOCK DOORS IN THIS HOUSE! NEVER! EVER! DO YOU UNDERSTAND? DO YOU?"

She kept yelling until I whimpered that I did. Of course it wasn't true about the doors. The front door was bolted and triple-locked, as were the back door and the back gate, and of course, the door that led to the basement.

Dinner was meat loaf, mashed potatoes, and frozen green beans that squeaked when you tried to get them on a fork. Kerry's plate had more food on it. I didn't complain. There was no point. After we were done eating, and had taken our plates to

the kitchen sink, Mrs. Wojo took her own plate into the living room and ate in front of the television. We were allowed to sit on the plaid couch and watch with her, although we had to stay still. It was some old black-and-white movie with songs and dancing, a production of such vast and purposeful boredom that I wondered what I had done wrong now, that I had to sit through it. I wondered what our father and Monica were doing right now, if they were out looking for us.

Then the movie was over and Mrs. Wojo said it was time for our baths.

We didn't argue, though we might have said we didn't need a bath just then, or we didn't take baths, only showers. I don't like to admit how quick she'd beat me down, but she had.

There is no greater powerlessness than being a child. So Mrs. Wojo set out towels for us, and the pajamas we'd brought with us from DCFS, and ran water in the tub. She sat on the toilet and clamped first Kerry, then me, between her knees and picked through our scalps, looking for nits. Her hands were hard and practiced. Satisfied that we didn't have lice, she pushed the plastic curtain with the seashells to one side. "All right now, get undressed and hop in."

I found my voice. "We don't do that."

"Don't do what?"

"Take baths together."

Mrs. Wojo made a show of her exasperation. "The two of you would tax the patience of a saint. What have you got to hide? Do you think I'm going to heat up water for two baths? Does this look like the Grand Hotel? Do you want to wait until that water's cold?"

She was going to watch us too. And maybe it shouldn't have been any big deal, a child's nakedness, but it was, it felt as if we

had been stripped not only of our clothes but of some last defense against her as well. I couldn't keep from looking at Kerry, his small, dangling parts and bare bottom, and he couldn't keep from looking at me. We had been made helpless. We allowed Mrs. Wojo to pour some stinging shampoo over our heads and into our eyes and scrub out our ears. The water was something less than hot. By the time we were declared clean, made to stand, and wrapped in stale-smelling green towels, I was so sunk in misery, all I wanted was to hide myself away.

Kerry started crying. His eyes hurt him, but nobody had figured that out yet. Mrs. Wojo grumbled as she got him into his pajamas, saying things along the lines of ungrateful children who didn't have anything to complain about. But when we were dressed, she shooed me upstairs and kept him with her. "Run along," she told me. "Don't worry, he's coming."

I climbed the stairs and waited. After a little while, Kerry came upstairs, accompanied by Mrs. Wojo's shouted instructions from the hallway, telling us to get to sleep, no fooling around.

The light on the stairway was left on, bright enough for a hospital. Kerry put his hand out and showed me two cookies, the packaged kind known as Fudge Ripple. "Here. She thinks I ate them."

I took one and Kerry the other, and we sucked the last bit of sweetness from them.

Oh she hated me. She really did. Because I was female, or because I had a mouth on me, or a face that showed my mistrust, or all of that. The why didn't matter. We were enemies. The next day she started in on me, giving me chores to do that I had no chance of doing right, things like going over the heavy furniture with a rag and a can of wax, or adding water to the cottage cheese cartons that fed her fussy African violets. And

every time I did something wrong, I would be punished with an extra chore. “Why doesn’t Kerry have to do anything?” I asked, and Mrs. Wojo said it was because he had the pinkeye, though by then I had it too, or later because he complained of a stomach-ache, or some other invention. And because we were treated this unequally, and because we were only children, after a time Kerry began to lord it over me and behave as if I deserved no better.

The DCFS woman came by that next afternoon with the paper sacks full of our clothing. We hate it here, I told her. We want to go home. But the DCFS woman was used to children who said such things, because of course the children hated these places they had been sent to, it was understandable.

Kerry and I were seated at the table in the dining room, where we had not been allowed until now. The wallpaper was a pattern of creeping vines; the tablecloth was starched and spidery lace. The DCFS woman sat with us. Mrs. Wojo was somewhere else, in the kitchen, probably. We were whispering. Mrs. Wojo might be half-blind, but her hearing was supersonic. Kerry said he wanted to see our father.

“We’re working on that,” the DCFS woman said, in an unnecessarily loud and cheerful voice. “Give us a few days.”

We didn’t say anything more. We were hemmed in at every turn by adult actions and adult dictates, pronouncements, decisions, decrees. Days and days went by, I don’t know how many. Long enough for the pinkeye to clear up. Long enough for the smell of Mrs. Wojo’s cigarettes to work its way into our clothes. We didn’t know she was paid to feed and house us—I will not say take care of us—until she told us so.

It was that portion of the evening devoted to television watching. Mrs. Wojo was in her recliner while Kerry and I sat on

the plaid couch with the plastic cover that betrayed any fidgeting. We'd found a pair of hand puppets, a dog and a cow, and sometimes we made the puppets wrestle and beat at each other in silent, furious combat. The television only got three channels and we'd given up on it producing anything interesting. Mrs. Wojo favored movies, elderly dramas about World War II soldiers and the girls they left behind them, or struggles between good and evil played out among cattle ranchers, or deeply unfunny comedies. She couldn't see much of the screen but she enjoyed following the story line, those dramas of virtue rewarded, of sacrifice and triumph.

In the breaks between shows she got up to fetch more cigarettes or go to the bathroom or make herself a highball. (She drank, but not catastrophically.) Returning from one of these, she paused and regarded us, shaking her head at whatever she saw in us that was so visibly deficient. "They need to pay me a lot more if they want me to keep taking in strays."

She rearranged herself in the recliner. Kerry and I looked at each other. I said, "Who pays you for us? Our dad?"

Mrs. Wojo laughed and raised her glass to her mouth, turning the rim cloudy with her lipstick. The drinks always put her in a more indulgently communicative mood. "Your daddy? I'm sure he doesn't have a pot to piss in. The state pays for you. You're foster children, and I'm your foster mother."

"No you aren't," I said, uselessly, not knowing what "foster" meant, but certain she wasn't any kind of mother to us.

Mrs. Wojo laughed again, and dabbed at her mouth with Kleenex. "Fine. Have it your way."

Kerry said, "Does that mean we have to stay here from now on?"

Her show was starting up, so she waved this away. “You can only stay in foster care until you’re eighteen.”

It was a lot to think about. No one had explained any of this to us, or if they did, we had not understood, and we didn’t understand now, especially the part about being eighteen. Eighteen! We would never be eighteen! Mrs. Wojo would never let us grow up, go to school, leave the house. She’d use spells and charms and the pure evilness of her nature to keep us small, helpless, captive.

But it made sense to know that she was paid money for us. How else to explain it? And they didn’t pay her enough, which was why she was always so mad.

Another television night. The show was one of the ones with dancing, a woman in a twirly skirt, violins, romance of a particularly coy, sick-making variety. Then the show ended and Mrs. Wojo snapped the television off. Getting up from the recliner, she hummed the melody and took a few gliding steps across the carpet. Her eyes were closed and her powdery face tilted upward, smiling in secret reverie. Her striped blouse, still damp in patches from the evening’s dishwashing, belled out around her.

“Mrs. Wojo?” Kerry piped up then. “Do you have any kids? You know, your own?”

She stopped her swaying and opened her eyes. I waited for her to blow up with rage, but she walked past us and into the dining room.

We heard her opening and shutting drawers in the big glass-fronted buffet that held her collection of ceremonial china. When she came back in, she was holding a boxlike object in gold metal. It had a latch in the center that Mrs. Wojo worked

open, splitting it into two framed portraits. She set them down on the table in front of us so we could see.

“That’s him,” she said. “That’s my Frank. Go ahead, you can look at him.”

There were two color pictures, one of a fat-faced baby wrapped in a blue blanket, the other a boy a year or two older than Kerry. He was posed in the front yard of Mrs. Wojo’s house, a weedy kid in google-eyed glasses. He was wearing shorts and a peculiar shirt, buttoned up tight beneath his chin and with stiff, oversized sleeves that stood away from his thin arms. The photographer had forgotten to tell him to smile. He looked like a kid we wouldn’t want to play with.

We looked from one picture to the other. What were we supposed to say about him?

“Where is he?” I asked.

“In heaven.”

Mrs. Wojo coughed and sniffled. “My baby. He’s an angel now.”

I stared at Frank’s blurry eyes behind their glasses. I felt a little sick.

“So what happened?” Kerry asked. He must not have been as afraid of her now that he was her favorite.

Mrs. Wojo picked up the portrait frame and snapped it shut. “Polio. Do you know what that is? Well, there used to be this disease. A lot of children came down with it. Every summer there’d be what they call an epidemic, children all over, one day they’re fine, the next, they’re cripples. You know what cripples are, don’t you?”

“It started out like the flu, with a fever and a sore throat and whatnot, and then pains, pains all over. And once it got

bad it paralyzed them so's their legs would be all twisted up and they couldn't walk. All these little children in leg braces, using crutches. Sometimes it went to the muscles that make you breathe and they wouldn't work right and the children had to be put into what they called an iron lung machine, a big metal tube that did their breathing for them, and they had to stay inside it for the rest of their lives."

I tried not breathing. I saw the iron lung machine in my mind. The metal tube puffed in and out with a whoosh and a clang. There was a whole room of them, and inside each one was a child, and each child was pale and shriveled and growing old.

"My poor Frankie. He caught the virus from going swimming at the public pool. He came home with an earache and he didn't want his supper, and that night he woke up screaming and screaming. His stomach hurt him and then his back and then his legs. He had seizures where he went blank in the head and his poor little body almost lifted off the mattress."

Mrs. Wojo was in the grip of her story now. Her useless eyes were lifted to the ceiling, seeing the long-ago. You would have thought it was all too awful to remember, but she took some kind of energy from it, the testament of suffering. "He went to the hospital, to the ward with the other polio children. They put steamed wool blankets over him and rubbed him down with arnica. The virus went to pneumonia, his lungs filled up with water. For a night and a day he choked on his own insides. Then the life went out of him and he was at peace. He's buried up at Queen of Heaven Cemetery, with a statue of the Archangel Raphael, the Healer."

She reached the end of her story and lowered her gaze to us. "Did anybody bother to get you two your vaccinations? I'll have to ask."

That night in bed I couldn't keep myself from thinking about Frank. I saw him as he was in his picture, a dumb-looking kid forever alone, then later when he was sick, his skin white as paste, sweating under his steamed blankets, drowning from the inside out. He had lived in this very house, and might have slept in this very bed. I felt myself growing heavy, falling into the grooves of the mattress his body had made. Frank was dead but that didn't keep him from being curious about me. He came in from the cemetery, an angel with crutches in place of wings, and tugged at my pillow. "Move over," he said. "Or I'll give you polio."

I pinched my mouth together and squeezed my eyes shut so the polio couldn't get in. He was smothering me with his dead, flopping arms and legs. I was already inside the iron lung. It was rusty and echoing and it had swallowed me up and now I was trapped. I screamed, and it took me a lot of frantic heartbeats to realize the scream had not left my mouth, and my eyes had opened to the stark light of the stairway, and my brother asleep in the bed across from me.

It was witchcraft that gave me such a dream. I knew Mrs. Wojo had done it on purpose, told us a horrible story so it got stuck in my brain.

One thing we never asked her about? Mr. Wojo. It was just as well.

Our father and Monica came to see us! We had just about given up! We didn't know they were coming, but all that day Mrs. Wojo had me helping her clean, and as usual, I couldn't do anything to please her. "Does that look clean to you?" she'd demand, and there was no right answer.

We scrubbed down the front porch steps, we polished the glass of the front door. We vacuumed and dusted. I fetched rags,

buckets, polish, cleansers. The bathroom got a new air freshener cone that sent out waves of industrial-strength gardenia. Mrs. Wojo set up some ancient lawn chairs in the back yard, the kind with interwoven straps. Then we were told to change clothes, wash our necks, faces, and ears, go out in the yard, sit in the chairs, and stay there.

The back door closed on us. Small as I was, the woven seat of the chair sagged beneath me. I still wasn't any good at sitting still and I kicked at the chair frame, trying to get something to break. There wasn't ever anything to do in the back yard. From the alley beyond the fence came occasionally interesting sounds of cars passing, garbage trucks, voices, but we never saw any of it. The weather had turned warm enough for flies and Kerry swatted them away. Mrs. Wojo fed him up so much, his face was getting round. He never saved cookies for me anymore. I said, "You look like a femmy girl." He still hadn't gotten his hair cut.

"Shut up. You smell like pee."

"I do not." I didn't think I did. Then the back door opened and our father stood there, with Monica crowding up behind him.

We were so unprepared for the sight of them that we just sat there staring. "Hey there, guys," our father said, jolly, but with an edge of annoyance. I guess we were supposed to rush toward him, overjoyed. "Whatsa matter with you, come here."

We did get up then and allow ourselves to be embraced and patted. Both our father and Monica looked out of breath, keyed up. She had pulled her hair back into a ponytail and was wearing a new pair of pinchy-looking shoes. Our father had shaved with so much care that his face was bright pink. They looked the way a photograph of people you know can look, familiar and strange at the same time.

One of the DCFS women came to the screen door and looked out at us. It was what they call a supervised visit.

They sat down in the extra lawn chairs and wobbled around, trying to get comfortable. Our father cursed mildly, the chair hurting his bad back. "Are we going home?" I asked. I was bouncing up and down, already gone.

"Ah, we have to work a few things out before that happens," my father said, and though I wasn't a big cryer I did cry then, and Kerry did too, out of the kind of emotional hydraulics that can lead to a whole room full of crying children, once one of them starts up. "Oh come on now," our father said, uselessly. "It's not so bad here, is it? You both look great, she must be taking great care of you."

"She's a witch," I said, and that got their attention, startled them, but I followed it up with, "She doesn't like me," and that allowed them to relax, dismiss me.

"Of course she likes you, honey," our father said. "She likes children, that's why she takes care of them."

"She's got her a real nice house," Monica said. "If I could stay in a house like this, I'd count my lucky stars."

Kerry was still crying and our father was getting impatient with him. "Come on, buddy, turn off those waterworks. Let's take a look at you. Put on a little weight, have you?"

"She's fattening him up so she can sell him to the gypsies! She locks us in the basement!"

Our father and Monica put their lips together in a way that was both tolerant and disapproving, and I knew they didn't believe me, and that there was no point in telling them about the dreams I had every night where Frank tried to smother me and give me polio, so that every night I fought hard not to fall asleep and always lost.

But they should have listened to me. They really should have.

Just then the screen door opened and Mrs. Wojo came out, carrying a tray with glasses of lemonade and some packaged cookies set out on paper napkins. “I thought you all might like a refreshment,” she said, sweet as pie. She was wearing a dress made of some shiny navy blue fabric and when she lifted up her arms, you could see the white, baked-in rings of old deodorant and old sweat.

I helped myself to three of the cookies. Her eyes cut me an evil look but she didn’t dare say anything in front of the others. When she had gone back inside, our father said, “See? She’s real nice.” But he seemed to disbelieve himself even as he spoke, his shoulders sinking.

I said, “We could leave with you. We could run real fast, they won’t catch us.”

“Actually, honey, you can’t. It’s a matter of the law now.” The idea of the law seemed to take something out of him, deflate him. He shifted his weight in the miserable chair.

Monica scrubbed the cookie crumbs from her mouth with the back of her hand, and our father asked her what was wrong with using a napkin. They had themselves a little fuss about it, back and forth, and finally Monica waved her hands around and said, “Well, why do we even have to be here? It’s because these kids got themselves out of the car! Why did you do that, huh? You know you wasn’t supposed to!”

Kerry said, “Jo got out first. It was her fault.”

The solid weight of the guilt landed on me. Everything had been my fault and always would be. I said, “I was trying to walk home.”

Monica said, “The whole way to North Halsted? That would have been some trick.”

“Keep your pants on, Monica. It’s not like it matters now. Ah crap.” Our father was trying to get himself loose from the lawn chair.

Kerry and I cried some more when they were on their way out the front door. We saw the old maroon Chevy parked at the curb, and the sight of it pierced us, the wrongness of it driving away without us. “It’s gonna be fine,” our father said, as we clung to his legs, wetting his knees with our tears. “Pretty soon school’s gonna start, well, Ker’s gonna have school. Think how smart you’ll get!”

Then the door shut, and they were gone. Mrs. Wojo locked and bolted it after them. We stopped crying right away. It wouldn’t do us any good.

Mrs. Wojo let the silence settle. Then she said, “So that’s your father, is it? Well, that explains a few things.” Then she went off to undo and dispose of the remnants of her hospitality.

I wanted to call them back and explain things better. Because it was one of Mrs. Wojo’s jokes that she was going to sell Kerry to the gypsies when he was fat enough—whatever a gypsy was—and after a while we understood it as a joke, the same way our father said teasing, unpleasant things. But she did lock us in the basement.

The entire time we’d been at Mrs. Wojo’s, we hadn’t left the house or back yard. Still, Mrs. Wojo had her needs, her grocery shopping, her life carried on outside her four walls. And when a need arose, she herded us into the basement and locked the door to the landing. The first time we were unsuspecting. After that we tried hiding from her, and once I kicked at her shins and missed, and she clamped both hands on my shoulders and put her big powdered face next to mine and breathed death at me. “Do you want to go to the juvenile home? Do you want to live

in a cell and take crazy pills? Hah? Get on down there.” She slammed the door on us and slid the lock into place.

The basement was where Mrs. Wojo did her laundry. There were two squat machines and a deep tub sink, and a clothesline where she hung different horrible items of clothing. Her underpants had cuffs around the leg holes, her bras were large and heroically reinforced, a triumph of elastic. The furnace was down there too, and an old coal chute, and some half-windows up high in the walls, barred over against burglars. In a part of it, where there were no windows, the concrete floor gave out and there was only bare earth. The basement seemed to be larger than the house itself, with side passages and cupboards and a workbench with buckets of calcified paint, old coffee cans filled with nails, knuckle-shaped metal parts of unknown use, old light switches. We poked around a little but the place scared us. We had been taken away from our father because he’d locked us in a car—this had been explained to us—and now Mrs. Wojo locked us in a basement and nobody wanted to believe me about it.

Then after a while, and I suppose it wasn’t ever all that long, we’d hear her footsteps overhead, and the door opened and we were summoned upstairs, to help put away the groceries or some other chore. Once, as she was leaving, Kerry begged to go with her, and you could see her hesitate, wanting to, but sorting it out. “Not today, maybe some other time.”

“You suck,” I informed him, once we were locked in together. It was one of my father’s sayings.

“I’m going to tell you said that.”

“Well I’m going to dig up worms and put them in your bed.” I was furious with him for his weakness, for abandoning me.

“I’ll tell about that too.” He had a collaborator’s smugness. I

hated him. I hated his fat face and his pretty hair and the look and smell of his alien, boy's body, and I imagine he hated me too for his own, interlocking set of reasons. But we had no choice in each other. The twoness of us was fixed for all time.

I didn't plan what happened to Mrs. Wojo, except in the sense that I had imagined a hundred different scenes of escaping her, a kid's imaginings in which I became a cowboy or a soldier or something else powerful and victorious. In the end, it came about because she forgot to secure us in the back yard while she did the laundry.

Because she always did that, kicked us out of the house when she had chores to do in the basement. I expect she didn't trust us to be alone and unsupervised in the house. We might steal food, or break something, or use the telephone to call long distance. We stayed in the yard until she was ready to let us back in, the door latched against us, and that was that.

Except for this particular day. I was thirsty, and impatient, and when I pulled at the handle of the door to rattle it, it opened. Kerry wasn't paying attention. He was sitting at the edge of the gravel, sorting the rocks. I went inside. I wasn't especially quiet about it, but the laundry machines were rolling and sudsing in the basement, and I guess they covered my noise. I went into the kitchen and reached up to the sink to fill a glass and drink. Then I went back to the landing and without any thought at all, I shut the basement door and slipped the bolt in place.

Nothing happened. I went back outside. I watched Kerry play with the rocks. After a while he looked up, squinting at me. "What were you doing?"

"I got a drink."

"Well I want one too."

"Go ahead," I told him. He got up, watching me in a mis-

trustful way, and we both stood on the back stairs. “See?” I said, presenting him with the fact of the open door.

I went in first and Kerry followed. He took a glass from the dish drainer, ran the tap, and drank. “Where is she?”

I pointed to the basement door. “Down there.” He didn’t understand at first. I dragged a chair over to the cupboard where Mrs. Wojo kept the cookies, climbed up, and pulled them out. They weren’t a good kind, some flavored wafer, dry as toast, but I took a handful and pushed the package at him. He didn’t take any. I opened the refrigerator and poked around, but there was nothing I wanted, only a lot of little bowls hooded in plastic.

“What are you doing?” Kerry whispered, stricken. Understand, at that point I was only feeling clever about evading Mrs. Wojo for a little while. I just wanted to break some rules before she reappeared to punish me. It hadn’t yet occurred to me that she couldn’t get out.

But then she was at the top of the steps, pounding at the door and making it shudder. “UNDO THIS LOCK THIS INSTANT! I MEAN IT, YOU LITTLE SHITS!”

The swearing shocked us as much as anything. We stood together on the step above the landing while she worked the door-knob, uselessly, from the other side. “OPEN THIS DOOR! OR I WILL SKIN YOU ALIVE! YOU THINK I’M KIDDING?”

“We have to let her out,” Kerry said, still whispering. I shook my head, no. I didn’t want to be skinned alive. “We have to,” he said again. “We can call the fire department, they’ll let her out.”

“Are you kidding?” I said. New and wonderful ideas were swooping through my head like birds, like my head was a room with wide-open windows.

“DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH TROUBLE YOU’RE IN?”

YOU ARE IN FOR A WORLD OF HURT! I WILL BEAT YOU DOWN! AND THEN YOU ARE GOING TO JAIL!"

Her big black purse was on the kitchen table. I dumped it upside down. I wasn't even thinking of stealing from her. I just wanted to be bad. In the mess of old Kleenex and gum and powder, I saw her key ring. Kerry saw it too. He grabbed for it but I got it first.

"Give it to me!"

"No!"

The basement door was still shaking. I got up my nerve and hopped past it to the back door. "Come on," I said to Kerry, but he just stood there.

"Kerry, honey?" Mrs. Wojo stopped beating on the door. "Are you there? I know you didn't do anything. I know it's not your fault."

The giddiness went out of me and my stomach pitched. Mrs. Wojo went on. "I know you're a good boy. Why don't you open the door and I'll fix you some Kool-Aid, the purple kind you like."

"She's lying," I said, and I swear on my life I saw black specks fly out of the keyhole then, like a swarm of black bees, and the next instant they were gone, and when she spoke again there was more of an edge to it, like she couldn't concentrate on both things at once, hating me and coaxing him.

"If you let me out, we can go to a baseball game. I bet you've never seen one of those, have you? We can sit up front so you can catch the ball when it comes into the stands. You can have a hot dog. Two, if you want them."

"If you let her out," I said, "she'll give you polio, like she did Frank."

She roared, and the door shook in its frame, and Kerry ran after me out to the yard.

I needed his help to unlock the gate, because it was just out of my reach, and it took a long time to find the right key and get it to turn. But we managed it, and then we were on the other side of the fence. The alley, now that we could see it for ourselves, was a place of marvels, rutted tire tracks, plastic bags blown against a fence, a lane of blue sky overhead.

We started running. It didn't matter what direction, since we were completely lost, and when we came to a street we slowed down. Nobody was following us. We walked a long time, and we probably looked pretty draggled when we walked up to a parked taxi, since we knew that taxis took people places, and asked the driver if he'd take us home. "We live on North Halsted," I said. "We were with our dad, at the ball game, and we got lost in the crowd."

Kerry stood gaping at me. It was the first big lie I ever told, but not the last.

The driver considered us, then talked into his radio, and got out to usher us into the back seat. He kept up a kindly, one-sided conversation as he drove. We didn't understand a word of it because of his accent. We kept our faces close to the windows, looking for our building.

And here it was, heaving up out of the vast strangeness of the city, and the maroon Chevy right in front! And our father standing over the Chevy's open trunk!

We set up a holler and the cab pulled over to the curb. We got out and ran to him, shouting. This time he was the one who didn't know what to make of us. "What's this?" he said. "Kids, how did you get here?"

"We took a cab," Kerry said.

“We ran away,” I added.

“Wait here,” our father said, and he walked over to lean into the cab’s window. He spent some time talking to the driver, shifting his weight from one foot to the other, and finally he straightened up and the cab drove away with a friendly tap of its horn. “All right, you monkeys,” our father said. “Run along upstairs now.”

We scrambled up and burst through the open door, and then we stopped dead. The place was empty, except for the landlord’s furniture, and some bulging plastic trash bags. Monica was sweeping the bare floor. She stopped when she saw us. “Wow.” She looked at the broom, then once more at us. “Wow.”

Our father came in after us. “Well isn’t this a nice surprise. We were just on our way to see you.”

We didn’t say anything. He said, “Now don’t get all upset. We knew you were in a real good place, that was the A-number-one most important thing.”

“We aren’t going back there,” I said, and Kerry started to speak, but I crowded into him and he kept silent.

Our father said, “Then I guess you’re coming along for the ride. Are you up for it? It’s gonna be a little crowded, what with the car all loaded up. I don’t want to hear a peep out of you, understood?”

We forgave them. What choice did we have? We got in the car and we drove a long ways to a different city, where we lived with different names. Everything up until then was left behind us. And in this new place, in ways that were both slow and sudden, we grew up.

I don’t see Kerry very often these days, and we don’t talk much, and never about Mrs. Wojo. I had my own bad dreams and I imagine he had his. Did she manage to break a window,

call for help, get herself out? Was she even now out looking for us, picking up our trail? I worried about that for years and years. Or did she stay in that basement until somebody noticed her African violets all dead from neglect, her mail piling up, the bills unpaid? Sooner or later somebody would tap at the front windows, make calls, force the door. Sooner or later they'd find their way down to the basement and there she'd be, turned to leather and stench. Alive or dead, she was a vicious ghost.

Was it my fault for locking that door? For being bad and disobedient? For getting out of the car when we had been told to stay in? But why were we left in that car to begin with? Why was our father the way he was, or why was Monica? You might as well ask, why did Frank get polio and die? The world is made up of questions. Each of us has to live with our own answers.