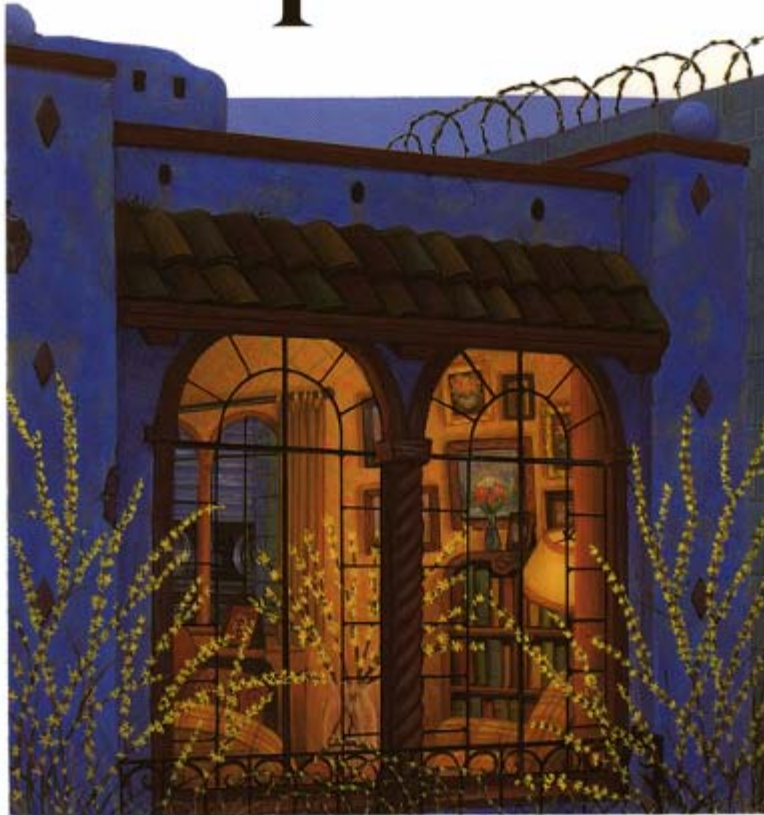


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SPRING 1997 Issue 22

GLIMMER TRAIN



Stories by Mary Overton, Kevin Canty, Alice Mattison, Lex Williford,
Pete Fromm, Mary Gordon, Judy Budnitz, Ami Silber.

Interview with writer George Clark.



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Writer Silenced: Win Tin
by Jake Kreilkamp

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Lex Williford

This is a "before" picture, Easter, 1963, five kids already practiced at their fake smiles: me, top left, with obligatory butch haircut; my sister Lisa, top right, with auburn bangs; my brother John, bottom right, with carrot-top crew cut; and my redheaded sister Lou, bottom left, as always holding our brother Carl, beautiful blond child, just months before he got sick.

Lex Williford, a Texas native, holds an MFA from the University of Arkansas. The 1994 Shane Stevens Fellow in Fiction at Bread Loaf Writers' Conference and a recipient of a 1993 National Endowment of the Arts fellowship, he was also co-winner of the 1993 Iowa School of Letters Award for Short Fiction for his book, *Macauley's Thumb*. Two stories from that collection, "Macauley's Thumb" and "Hoo's Last Bubble Bath," appeared in *Glimmer Train Stories*. Williford teaches in the MFA program at the University of Alabama.

Lex Williford
LEX WILLIFORD
Jesse

*In memory of Carl Alan Williford
July 15, 1962 – November 5, 1965*

The year my brother Jesse got sick, what we always feared the most were the nosebleeds. Once they got started, my mother could almost never make them stop, holding an old towel or Jesse's blood-soaked pajama tops under his nose for hours sometimes, squeezing his nostrils shut between her forefinger and thumb, praying that she and my father wouldn't have to take him back again to Baylor Hospital. And what we all feared most I also secretly wanted the most, sometimes even prayed for. Almost every night at the beginning, when Jesse was still strong and angry and mean, as I lay in a room all to myself in the house my father designed, built, and would soon lose because of him, I stared up at my plastic models, the few that had survived him, dangling from my mother's white sewing thread, high up, out of Jesse's reach, and sometimes I imagined being able to hit him as hard as I could, in the stomach, in the nose, till he bled.

"Pray for him," Sister Mary Ruth told us kids at Mass every weekday morning before classes at St. Patrick's School. "Pray for yourselves," my mother told us, "to be strong." But towards the end, when Jesse was like an old man, always limp in my mother's lap and harmless to anyone anymore, as I lay sleepless in the top bunk listening to him moan in his sleep almost every

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night, across the cramped room we three boys had to share in that green-shuttered rental house the last three months Jesse was alive, I prayed for him to die. By then, Jesse always had at least one black eye, and bruises everywhere—on the tips of his fingers and thumbs from all the blood tests, in the crooks of his bone-thin arms and the backs of his hands and the insides of his wrists from all the transfusions, on his elbows and knees and shins from even the slightest bump or fall. His stomach was distended from his swollen liver and spleen, the lymph nodes behind his ears so swollen that he always had a finger in his ear from the constant throbbing, and the glands at his jaws as swollen as JFK's had been when he'd been shot that same month Jesse fell into his first coma, that same awful November in Dallas. By then, the last two months, the only way my parents could keep Jesse from bleeding to death was to take turns every other day driving to Wadley Clinic to give a pint of their whole blood in the mornings, and then to return in the afternoons, haggard, exhausted, to get their own blood back, all their platelets spun out for Jesse. By then, all I could see anymore when I knelt in the pew every morning before class, and looked up at the crucified Christ over the altar—his head fallen limp and bleeding from his crown of thorns, his knees and elbows bloody from falling, his hands and feet pierced, his body gaunt, bloody, and gray—was my own brother hanging there on that cross. And all I could do anymore was pray to God to take him, soon, soon—not just to end his suffering, but to end my own.

Once, a month after Dr. Speigal's diagnosis of leukemia and Jesse's return from his first long stay at Baylor Hospital, my father brought home a punching bag, a bowling pin-shaped blow-up clown with a sandbag base that caused the clown to pop back up, grinning, every time Jesse punched him hard in the face, and Jesse and my sister Emma both fell laughing to the floor. Ever since they'd heard his diagnosis, my parents had been bringing

home extravagant gifts for Jesse: a bright stripe-billed Toucan Sam and a stuffed panda bear as big as Jesse, a red metal tractor for Jesse to push up and down the driveway like a tricycle. Whatever he saw, whatever he wanted, he got, but he destroyed everything almost as soon as he got it—chewing off the toucan's plastic beak; ripping a hole in the panda's face and tearing out handfuls of stuffing, then scattering them all over the house; ramming his tractor into the hallway wall, over and over again, until the tractor's steering wheel fell off and there was a huge knee-high hole in the Sheetrock. The punching clown, my father told my mother, might help the kid let off a little steam, without hurting his brothers, his sisters, or himself.

But like all his other gifts—the Tonto outfit and the bow-and-arrow set from the Jaycee's, the Superman costume from my mother's sister Netta, the motorized police car from my mother's parents, Hanny and Pop Pop—Jesse soon grew bored with the clown, always more interested in hitting Nate or me instead, knowing we couldn't hit him back; always more interested in getting his hands on the toys Nate and I managed to get, one way or the other. They were ours, after all, not his.

One Saturday afternoon, when Nate bought a green Luger water pistol with the dollar Hanny had given him at the QuikStop down at the corner of Beacon and Columbia, where Pop Pop's old service station used to be, Jesse threw down his new police car, the wheels flying off, the electric motor shrieking to a stop, and he grabbed for the pistol. Nate gave it to him without hesitation, without a word, sweet kid that he was, and stood there squeezing his eyes shut while Jesse squirted him over and over again in the face. His shirt was water-soaked by the time Hanny walked into the room and stopped Jesse, took the water pistol away from him for a while. I wouldn't stop him, though, wouldn't take anything from him anymore. By then, I wouldn't even go near him most of the time, except when he'd fallen or

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hurt himself, whenever there was any threat from harm. I'd become one of his fiercest protectors by then, along with Emma and my father, no matter what he'd done to Nate, or to me.

The same thing happened a few days later with the rubber dart gun Pop Pop bought Nate to replace his lost water pistol. Right off, the moment he saw it in Nate's hand, Jesse dropped the water pistol to the floor and never looked at it again. And, right off, the moment Nate saw that Jesse wanted it, he handed the dart gun over to him, then each of the darts, one at a time. "It's okay, son," my father told Nate. "Let him have it. We'll just get you another one, okay?" But my father never did get Nate another one, and Nate never said a thing about it one way or the other, never said much, anyway, except when he talked to GI Joe in our bedroom closet. He just picked up the water pistol Jesse had taken from him at the beginning and walked out smiling to the front porch to play.

The dart gun was with Jesse for months after that and during his next long stay at Baylor, when he'd just learned new words to make my parents flinch—*tee tee* and *doo doo*—from the encephalitic boy with the frog eyes and basketball head who shared his room and died the next week. When Jesse saw Pop Pop the week after that, walking through the hospital room door, he said, "Butt!" and shot Pop Pop from the hospital bed, the rubber dart sticking between Pop Pop's eyes and staying there because Jesse and Emma'd both spit on it. The two of them laughed so hard they both peed Jesse's hospital bed.

Emma was always climbing into bed with Jesse whenever Hanny and Pop Pop took us to visit him at Baylor, was always climbing into bed with him at home, tickling him and laughing with him and sleeping with him, reading to him when my parents were too tired, always too tired. She read him *The Cat in the Hat* or *Miranda the Panda Is on the Verandah* until he'd memorized every line, then brought his red portable record

player to his bed, endlessly playing tinny, scratched 45-RPM kids' records, or stealing my parents' 33-RPM records from their RCA console downstairs. Then they'd both recite together the story of Niki Niki Timbo Oso Rimbo Uma Muchi Gama Gama Guchi, the Japanese boy with the longest name in the world, so fat that he got wedged into the well. Or they'd laugh at Soupy Sales or Bill Cosby or Jonathan Winters records. Or they'd sing along with *West Side Story*, or *South Pacific*, or the Beatles's "Hard Day's Night," while I played Ringo's drum parts on my knees with my cardboard coat-hanger drumsticks. Or sometimes late at night they sang a nonsense song they'd made up together in Jesse's bed—almost a hum, a whisper, a secret song that only the two of them could understand:

Hi gee gee, ho wee wee,

No boddee oddee oddees hum num nuh.

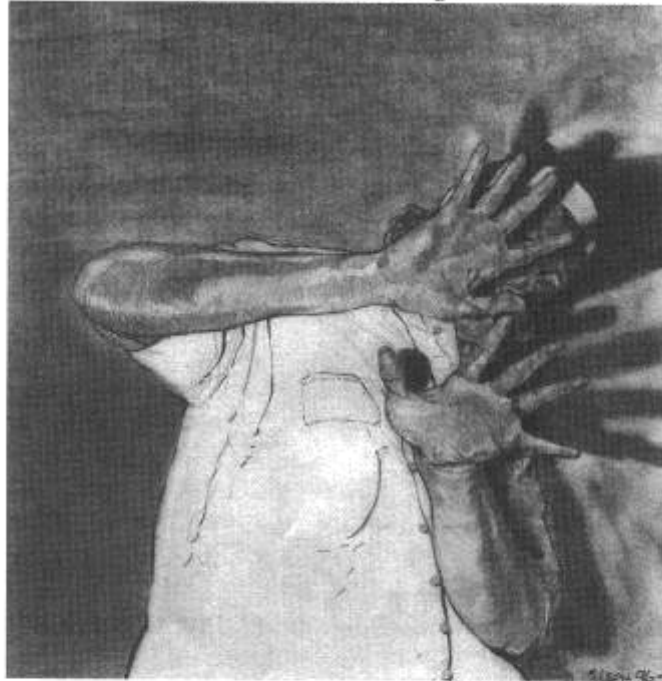
No meeto, no dreenko, no munnee have aye nun ...

When Jesse was back at Baylor again, he'd save Emma the strawberry Jell-O or lime sherbet from his bland hospital dinner tray, even though it was mostly melted by the time we all came to visit from Hanny and Pop Pop's, because Emma liked sherbet and Jell-O, and the cold sometimes hurt Jesse's gums. Sometimes he'd let her play with the electric switches next to his bed, would let her move the bed and its stainless-steel guardrails up and down, then let her pet his pricked and bruised arms, taped to the transfusion boards, when he'd let no one else except the nurses touch him there, not even my mother sometimes. Emma wiggled the plastic tubes coming down from the clear plasma bottles and red transfusion bags and laughed, pretending the tubes were worms or snakes, then kissed the crook in Jesse's arm or his wrist or the back of his hand over and over again, where the white tape was, where the needles went into his veins.

One Sunday morning after Mass at St. James's, we all sat in the waiting room at Baylor, Hanny checking her watch for children's

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visiting hours to begin. We all heard Jesse's high, shrilling scream from the end of the ward, and Emma jumped from Hanny's lap, running like a big loping cat down the long corridors to Jesse's room. When she saw my mother holding Jesse down while the attending nurse tried to find a vein that hadn't collapsed, and stuck Jesse's wrist with the needle again and again, Emma turned over the nurse's cart, then the transfusion tree next to Jesse's bed, and the bottle hanging from it shattered to the floor. Then Emma picked up Jesse's dart gun from the nightstand, stripped off the rubber suction cups, and started shooting at the nurse's face.



My father ran around the bed to catch Emma and she ducked, throwing the dart gun at him, then took off her black Sunday shoes and threw them as hard as she could at the nurse. My father chased Emma around the bed as she tiptoed through the splinters

of glass that slit into her toes through her white cotton socks. Then she slid and fell into the pink slick of platelets and glass and blood plasma. When my father'd finally caught her up in his arms, Emma kicked him and hit him and spit in his face and bit him and shouted, "Stop it, stop it, stop it!" He draped Emma, kicking, over his shoulder and carried her back out to the waiting room, held her by her wrist high in the air, and paddled her backside hard with his open hand as she swung there.

"What in hell's wrong with you, little girl?" he shouted. "You want to tell me that? Do you? Do you?"

Then Hanny shouted, "Travis!" and my father handed Emma over to her, walked straight past the nurse's desk, and pushed the elevator button down, spending the next two hours pacing and chain-smoking in the hospital parking lot.

Emma didn't cry once during her whipping, didn't even cry when the head nurse peeled off her sticky wet socks and tweezed the glass slivers from her bare feet, swabbing the dots of blood sweating from her heels with rubbing alcohol. Emma just sat in Hanny's lap in a waiting-room chair, panting, her blue eyes fierce and pale, like the snow leopard's we'd seen at the Marsalis Zoo in Oak Cliff the summer before Jesse got sick.

After that day, Jesse threw away the rubber suction cups from the darts and started taking aim at my eyes when I walked into his room at Baylor, at the eyes of the new hemophiliac boy in the bed next to his, and my father finally had to take the dart gun away from him for good.

Jesse hardly ever touched Emma's things, or my other sister Hanna's. Emma brought his miniature piano to his bed all the time and let him hammer on all the keys till most of them had gone dead or fallen off, and she let him scribble loops all over her Crayola drawings of bright birds and mermaids on her bedroom walls. And all it took from Hanna was one of her brown-eyed, dark looks when Jesse walked in on Ken and Barbie's wedding,

or approached Hanna's Kenner Kitchen with its light-bulb oven and cardboard refrigerator, and Jesse knew to stay away. But even more than Nate's things—his plastic pistols and GI Joes and Tonka trucks—Jesse wanted mine: my Paladin wallet cards (*Have Gun, Will Travel*), which he took from my dresser drawer one morning and played with in his bubble bath till they'd shredded apart, or my round-levered plastic rifle from *The Rifleman*, which he broke in half against the mimosa tree in our backyard, or my gray, felt Confederate cap from *The Rebel*, which he threw up on the roof of our house while I wasn't looking. My father found the cap months later when we were moving out, sun bleached and mildew rotten in the rain gutter. More than these, though, Jesse wanted my plastic models, the kits from Revell and Lindbergh and Aurora I'd glued together and painted, and bought with money I'd earned from mowing Hanny and Pop Pop's lawn in east Dallas: my X-15 and Mercury Redstone rockets, my Spitfire and Corsair warplanes, my Red Baron's triplane and the Spirit of St. Louis, and especially my monster kits, the Frankenstein Monster and the Werewolf, Dracula and the Mummy, and the Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Before Jesse was sick, I'd kept my models on my dresser, or on the shelves my father had built into the wall of the bedroom which I had all to myself in our new house. But three months after Jesse fell ill, when he was big enough to stand on the end of my bed and pull them all down, he began playing with them while I was away at school. When I caught him and told him he couldn't play with them anymore and took them away, he waited until I was gone and threw them all against my bedroom wall. I glued the models back together as well as I could, and my father helped me hang them from the ceiling with the thread my mother used to sew patches onto the knees of my jeans.

"Travis," my father said, standing on one of his barstools, looping white thread around the end of a thumbtack in the

ceiling, "you got to understand, son. He's not even three yet. He's just a baby, you know?"

That year, for my tenth birthday, my father bought me a balsa model kit—a Sopwith Camel like the biplane his father had once co-piloted at Fort McNair with an RAF pilot during World War I, while chief engineer for the sanitary-sewer division of the U.S. Army Air Corps in Washington, D.C.

Two weeks before my birthday would have been my grandfather's seventieth birthday. When my father'd gone out to the grave site at Restland to clip around his father's granite headstone and cut fresh bluebonnets from the roadside for the bronze vase, he remembered the summer before his father died in 1945, when Truman bombed Hiroshima and Nagasaki and ended the war. My father'd stayed in a dormitory with his father at Texas A & M University, while his father designed and built an X-ray machine he used to analyze paving-asphalt aggregates for the Texas Highway Department. And, my father told me, he remembered his father buying plans for a Sopwith Camel balsa kit on his tenth birthday that summer. The two of them traced and cut the balsa stock for the cowling and other plane parts from the plan's paper templates, then into strips of ribbing for the fuselage and wings, laying white tissue paper over the ribbing and gluing it there, wetting the paper and watching it dry and stretch taut, then painting it with clear dope and camouflage paint and taking it out and flying it only once for thirty minutes one afternoon at Kyle Field, where the Texas Aggies played their football games.

It was the only summer my father'd ever spent much time with his father alone, he told me while we worked, the only thing they'd ever really done together, just the two of them. My father wished later that he'd paid more attention, because he didn't know it would be the last time, had no way of knowing that the X-rays would bloom the black mole on his father's

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shoulder into a melanoma, and that his father would die the next summer at the house in Houston which he'd bought for his mother and spinster sisters.

It took my father and I four Saturdays to build the Sopwith Camel, time he spared for me when he didn't have time—not with his new partnership, Hazard and Phelan Associates, Architects, not after his partner Hap had lost the big high-rise job he'd said would make them both rich and raise enough money to fly Jesse to the Mayo Clinic. Jesse watched my father and me work together at the kitchen table, shuffling in his pajama feet across the Mexican tiles, standing on his toes and picking up the half-finished tail rudder, saying, "Daddy, can I have it?"

My father took it from him and said, "No, Jesse boy. Sorry, but this one's for your big brother." Then my father looked at me, at the worry in my eyes, shook his head, and said, "My God, Travis, do you have any idea how much you're like my father? So damn *serious* all the time. Cheer up, will you, for crying out loud?" He put me back to work, sanding the plane's tail rudder while he hooked the long rubber band into the propeller's eye hook, then fed it back through the hole in the fuselage to the eye hook in the tail.

"You paying attention?" he said a while later and laughed, then shook his head.

That last Saturday, just as we'd finished dipping the red and yellow target decals into a bowl of water and slid them, slick, onto the Sopwith Camel's camouflaged wings, Jesse came shuffling into the kitchen, crying, his pajama tops bloody, a snotty drool of blood stringing down into his palms, cupped under his face.

"Daddy?" he said.

My father squeezed his eyes shut and said, "God, oh God," then shouted, "Helen!"

We didn't fly the balsa biplane for another month after that,

weeks after my tenth birthday party at Hanny and Pop Pop's, which my parents had missed because Jesse was in ICU vomiting blood for three days straight. When my parents brought him back home, he was still terribly sick—swollen neck and stomach, stick arms and legs, like a poster child for CARE or UNICEF, except for his white skin, his straight blond hair, and his fierce blue eyes, like the pilot lights on the gas stove—and he was still in danger of hemorrhaging again at any time. It had been Jesse's longest stay in the hospital up till then, and my father'd made him stay in his bed all the time, wouldn't let him go anywhere in the house with all its high, angular balconies and stairs and tiled steps between split levels, wouldn't let him go outside either, not even when I'd bothered my father so many times after he'd gotten home late from work that he finally agreed to take me out to fly the Sopwith Camel in the cul-de-sac down the street.

"Why don't you let him go outside with you?" my mother asked my father that Saturday afternoon, as he stood winding up the propeller with me at the front door, one eye closed against the smoke of the Lucky Strike between his teeth. Jesse held onto my mother's pant leg in the foyer, crying, a bruised thumb in his mouth, his chewed and frayed Tony the Tiger bath sponge wedged between the tip of his nose and the crook of his forefinger. "He just wants to watch you fly the airplane, honey. That's all. He thinks you're punishing him."

My father stopped winding the propeller and nodded over to the big bay window facing the front yard from the dining room. "He can watch us fly the damn thing from in here."

"What's it going to hurt for him to go outside, Travis, you want to tell me that? You're being unreasonable."

"No, Helen."

"I'll go outside with him, then, all right? I'll make sure nothing happens. Will that make you feel better?"

"Goddammit, Helen, I said no."

"It's a beautiful day out there, Travis, and it's not going to hurt

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him to get a little sun. He could use a little sun, you know that.”

“No,” my father said. “No.” He huffed out a sigh and a puff of smoke, then shook his head and nodded over at me. “Jesus, Travis,” he told me, “get the front door, will you?” He stepped outside and looked back at my mother, her arms folded, Jesse crying behind her leg in the doorway. “I don’t need this from you, Helen,” my father said. “This is the last goddamn thing I need from you right now, you know?” Then he turned and kicked the front door shut behind him.

In the circle down the street at the dead end of Broken Bow Road, my father said, “All right, son, all you got to do is hold the propeller like this and hold the fuselage here, back by the tail. Then just let the propeller go as you toss it off. Like this.” My father snapped his wrist twice without letting the plane or the propeller go, then said, “Get it?”

“Got it.”

“Good.” My father handed the plane over to me, the propeller slipping from my fingers and spinning out in my hands. Then my father shook his head and said, “Jesus, Jesus, Travis. All right, all right, just wind the damn thing back up again, will you?” He took a long drag from his Lucky, closed his eyes, and tilted his face up into the afternoon sun, sighing smoke up at the sky.

I held the plane up to let it go and glanced over at Jesse in our house down the street, sucking his thumb, his forehead pressed up against the bay window. Then I looked back at my father.

He folded his arms and said, “Go on.”

“What if it crashes?” I said.

“It won’t. Not if you keep the nose up. Just keep the nose up, all right?”

“I can’t,” I said. “It’ll crash.”

“If it crashes, it crashes. Worse goddamn things have happened in this world.”

I held onto the propeller, held the plane’s nose up, held my breath. I looked out at the street ahead of me, at all the houses,

the parked cars, the telephone poles, the wires strung taut between them.

"I don't want to," I said. "I changed my mind."

"Give me that goddamn thing," my father said, and snatched the plane away from me. Then with one quick pivot of his forearm he sent the Sopwith Camel into the air, gliding only about fifteen yards before landing on all its rubber wheels with its nose up, bouncing over a dip in the asphalt, then turning and bumping to a stop at the curb.

"See?" my father said. "It didn't crash. I told you it wouldn't." Then he walked to the plane, stooped to pick it up, and handed it to me. "That's enough," he said. "I've had enough. Enough. We'll fly it again some other time." He walked back to the house without waiting for me, without even looking back.

In my bedroom ten minutes later, I laid the plane on my bed for just a moment, to go to the bathroom down the hall, and when I came back Jesse was standing there next to my bed in his Superman suit, the Sopwith Camel smashed at his feet. Feeling a fist rise in my throat, I fell on him, held him down to the floor, and hit him in the stomach, then in the face, and Jesse started screaming and then Emma ran to my door and started screaming in the hallway, and my father pulled me off and threw me against my dresser, knocking a drawer out on top of me, clothes spilling everywhere.

"Oh God," my father said, falling to his knees next to Jesse, and pulling Jesse's pajama tops up around his stomach to check for the blue spread of a hemorrhaging bruise. He cupped Jesse's face in his hands, turning it left and right, then opened his nostrils and peeled back his lips, to check for bleeding gums.

When he saw that Jesse was all right for the moment, my father turned to me, red faced, a single blue vein under the skin at the thinning red hair of his widow's peak. Then he fell on me, pinned me to the floor, and pressed his forearm hard into my windpipe till I choked. "Don't you ever hit him again, ever,

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ever," my father shouted, hitting me once hard in the stomach, then hitting my thigh and my ribs with his fists, again and again.

"Travis!" my mother shouted from the doorway, and fell on my father's back, pulling him off me.

My father stood, wild-eyed, looking at his hands as if they belonged to someone else, then looked down at me, took in a breath, and said, "My God, Travis, do you understand what you could've just done? Do you have any idea? Well, let me tell you. You could've killed him. He could've died. Do you understand me? Do you?"

"Yes, sir," I said, holding my stomach, thinking at any moment I'd throw up. "I'm sorry, but he did it on purpose."

"I don't care. I don't give a good goddamn what he did. I don't care if he burned the whole goddamn house down. Hell, they're going to take it away from us anyway. Don't you ever do that again, do you hear me? *Ever*. We can replace the goddamn house. We can replace the stupid goddamn *plane*. But we can't replace him, do you understand me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

"Yes, sir," I said. "Yes."

My father pressed his palms into his eyes a moment, pulling his fingers down his face. He turned to my mother, who knelt next to Jesse, checking him just as my father had done moments before. "Do you think we should take him to Baylor, Helen? What if there's internal bleeding? I just don't think we should take any goddamn chances here."

"He's all right," my mother said. "I think he's all right."

"I'm taking him to Baylor right now," my father said. "Go get his overnight bag, and I'll call the hospital to let them know we're on our way."

"No, Travis," my mother said, stooping to pick up Jesse, hitching him up to her hip. "Let's wait. I'll call Dr. Speigal first, to see what she says. Then I'll watch him. I'll watch him close."

"We'll both watch him," my father said. "Tonight we'll watch him in shifts."

"You can't afford to lose any more sleep, Travis, you know that," my mother told my father. "And what about your big meeting with Zimmerman tomorrow?"

My father sighed. "Hap'll just have to handle things tomorrow."

"You can't afford to have Hap handle things tomorrow," my mother said.

My father stepped toward my mother, then stopped, his blue eyes half-lidded, fierce, and pale. "You always contradict me, Helen, do you know that? Do you just *have* to contradict me every goddamn minute of every goddamn day? Look, I don't need you arguing with me right now, telling me how to run my goddamn business, all right?"

My mother blinked, her head cocked, her mouth open a little, as if she'd just been slapped. She shifted Jesse from her hip to her shoulder.

"Go put Jesse down on the couch," my father told her, "and watch him till I call Dr. Speigal, all right? Do you think you can do that?"

My mother looked down, nodded, and followed my father out of the room. As she passed through the open doorway, Jesse looked down at me from over my mother's shoulder, his face changed, his eyes more afraid than I'd ever seen them. I was afraid, too, and sorry, more than I'd ever been. When my father turned back in the doorway and looked at me sitting at the end of my bed, his face was changed, too, the face of a man I'd never seen before, his eyes a cold blue, burning, like Pop Pop's white German shepherd Hey-Boy's, after he'd eaten all the pups in the litter and Pop Pop had to shoot him with his .22. My father swept his hand across the room, pointing to my underwear and T-shirts and rolled socks scattered all over the floor, then to the twisted balsa wood-and-tissue biplane we'd built together. "This room

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is a mess, Travis," he said. "Clean up this goddamn mess, will you?" Then he kicked my bedroom door shut behind him.


Neither of my parents could sleep that night, and neither could I. And though it turned out that Jesse would have only a shiner the next week—his left eye swollen shut the next day, a blue half-moon turning to black and then to yellow—I was sure he'd die that night if I slept. I stayed awake all night and prayed that he wouldn't die, half hoping that he would, then hating myself for that hope, hating myself for being sleepy and then for not being able to sleep, for closing my eyes and then for not being able to close them. I lay staring up at my patched-together warplanes above me, ready to dive and fall, staring up at Dracula and the Werewolf and the Creature from the Black Lagoon dangling from the white threads hanging from my bedroom ceiling, their mouths and hands black with blood in the dark.

By then all of us were becoming insomniacs. Jesse turned and moaned in his bed across the room we shared in that green-shuttered rental house on Estate Lane, which we'd moved into a month later, and I held my pillow over my head half the night, then got up and padded down the cold linoleum tile of the hallway to my parents' room, and said, "Mom, Dad, he won't stop." Then one of them, my father, my mother, got up, exhausted, and followed me back down the hallway to our bedroom and picked Jesse up, his pillows and sheets covered with sweat and sometimes blood, and took him down the hallway to their room to toss and moan in their bed between them, pressing his hot, sweaty face into my mother's face all night, his thin, bruised arm slung out over her neck.

Other nights my mother rocked Jesse in the dark living room till dawn, creaking the red Naugahyde rocker with cigarette burns on its arms. Or my father walked half the night through the dark house, wearing his dress slacks with no shirt, his dress shoes with no socks, smoking one Lucky after another, the

bright ash wagging in the dark hallways, the ice tinkling the sweating glass in his hand, as he paced the hall past our bedrooms. Some nights my father left us gifts for the morning, like the one I found on my dresser, as I packed the last of the boxes to move out of my room on Broken Bow: a Guillows balsa model kit of a German BF-109 Messerschmidt, with a note taped to the box, saying, "I couldn't find another Sopwith Camel, son. I looked everywhere. I'm sorry." Then some nights my father just came into the room we three boys shared on Estate Lane and stood over Jesse's bed, just stood there for hours sometimes, till I whispered from the top bunk, "Dad?" and he left the room without answering, without saying a word.

Other nights Hanna sneaked into the kitchen and ate the entire layer of chocolate from the Neapolitan ice cream in the freezer, or all the Hershey's semi-sweet morsels my mother had hidden in the pantry for chocolate-chip cookies. Or Nate got up in his frayed and yellow-stained skivvies, and closed the door to our closet, clicking it shut, then whispering to GI Joe half the night. Or sometimes he just lay awake in the bunk beneath mine, kicking the slats holding up my mattress, keeping me up half the night, snoring like a man, grinding his teeth in his sleep till I thought they'd break off in his mouth, rolling around in his bed, kicking off his sheets and blankets, and mumbling, "No, no," till I'd throw everything on my bed—my sheets, my blankets, my pillow, my bedspread—to cover and muffle him again. And even then I couldn't sleep.

And then, some nights, when everything was quiet and I was finally dropping off, Emma'd come to our bedroom doorway, wide-eyed, listening for Jesse's breathing, and when she knew he was there asleep in his bed, and not in my parents', or in some hospital bed all the way on the other side of Dallas, she climbed into his bed and spooned up to him and hummed to him half the night their secret song in the dark. 

And these are two “after” pictures, my brother Carl at age three just before he died, his sweet courage as he sticks his finger in his ear, his fierce tenacity as he takes aim with his red dart gun at someone, probably my brother John, or me.



I’ve tried for years to write about my brother’s illness, the most difficult writing assignment I’ve ever given myself, a mine field of potential sentimentality and unresolved grief.

Right after I wrote this story, I told a massage therapist about it while she worked the chronically sore muscles in my lower back.

“I lost my little brother, too,” she said, “in much the same way.” Then she told me about her brother’s illness and death, pressing her thumbs hard into the hard knot of muscles that fisted at the base of my spine. “I don’t know what is down here,” she said, “but it’s deep and it’s been here a long time. Time to let it go, don’t you think?” And then as if she’d flipped a switch, I began to weep. I completely lost it. I went on and on, tried again and again to stop, but couldn’t.

If he’d lived, my brother would have turned thirty-five this July. I can only think of him as eternally three.

“Jesse,” *Glimmer Train Stories* 22 (Spring 1997): 49-65, 147.

<http://www.glimmertrain.com/is22sprin19.html>

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