

# Natural Bridge

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NATE AND DRAKE  
*for John*

For months after my brother Jesse died, my other brother Nate was terrified. When our father took us in our funeral suits to his gravesite every Sunday morning at Restland—a gray-pink granite headstone that read *Jesse James Truitt, 1962-1965*—Nate stared down at the dark scar of dirt, his eyes wide and round as the Band-Aids the nurses had stuck into the crooks of Jesse’s arms, and Nate dug a hole into the fresh black-gumbo with the toe of his dress shoe till my father told him to stop. Then Nate started in on all his stupid questions.

*Can he breathe down there, Travis? Is he cold? Does he get wet when it rains? Does his big box fill up with water? What if he opens his eyes in the dark?*

Nate was a fragile, gentle boy of five, just two years older than Jesse, who loved our brother most and took great care to hand him his G. I. Joe whenever he demanded it, even when Jesse smashed the scarred doll against the coffee table and ripped off his camouflage khakis and beat him with a coat hangar, laughing, and pulled off his head and arms and threw him hard against the wall and then dunked him till he was full of water, lying on the bottom of the tub. Nate stroked the top of Jesse’s soft blond head like the baby goat’s that had butted him in the Marsalis petting zoo—Jesse, the beautiful child, not like Nate, whose teeth came in all crooked like a nightmare vampire’s escaped from his grave. Nate had dull red hair like the rusty Brill-O pads under our leaky kitchen sink, and our father called it *kinky* like a nigger boy’s and cut it close to the scalp and would never pet or touch it at all, except to shear it all off. Nate had soft, red lips, too, too much like a girl’s, our father said, and too big, like two bright sea slugs writhing across his face whenever Nate covered his mouth to smile.

Nate spent most of his time in our bedroom closet, talking to G. I. Joe.

"We got to get him out of there, Joe," he said. "There's not enough air down there."

A month after the funeral, my mother let me stay the weekend with my older cousin Drake, who was seventeen and tough and muscular and cool and drove a red MG convertible and listened to the Rolling Stones, and who, my mother always reminded us, was strikingly handsome and blond like our brother Jesse would've been if only he'd just lived like the rest of us to grow up.

At sixteen, Drake ran away from his Texas Aggie father who'd lashed him naked with a bullwhip on their farm in Waxahatchie when he'd put his baby sister into the oven and turned it on, and everywhere Drake drove me around with the top down the girls along the sidewalks all swung their heads and swooned, smiling stupidly and giggling as he honked. Drake lived in the Wellington Apartments in East Dallas, and the tiny efficiency he called his *pad* had rows of cans of Campbell's vegetable soup in the kitchen cabinets, which he fixed me without thinning it with water as our mother had the year Jesse was sick, and I blew on the thick, sweet soup, spoonful by spoonful, as it burned the roof of my mouth while I looked at the stacks of *Playboys* he kept on his coffee table from the Beacon Street Good Will.

When I fell to sleep on his couch the first night, he woke me up with a pillow covering my face, laughing as I screamed, till he lifted the pillow and told me to shut the hell up. When I swam in his apartment pool the next day, he called me *chickenshit* with all the tanning girls laughing, then dunked me, holding me under until I came up coughing chlorinated water that burned in my lungs for days.

When I got back home, Nate clung to me, saying he'd dreamed that I'd bled to death, and I pushed him away and waited till dark in our two sagging bunks—which Nate had asked our father to unstack and push together while I was gone, just a crack between them, which I told Nate never to cross—and when I thought I heard Nate's sleeping

wheeze, I sat on the pillow I'd laid softly across his face, then laughed at his muffled screams. The next night, I jerked off the first time I can remember, and Nate said, "Travis, you all right? I'm afraid," and I told him to shut the hell up, what'd he think it was, a ghost? Then the moan I'd tried to hide became louder as I raised my hand across the crack between our beds and lowered it, palm-down, over his face.

"I know that's you, Travis," he said. "I know that's your hand."

I pulled my hand away, feigning sleep, and said, "What the hell'd you wake me up for?" and I shook him hard by the arm and said, "Go back to sleep. What's the matter with you? You're such a chickenshit." Ten minutes later, I raised my hand again and dropped it over his face, laughing like Drake or Dracula, till Nate started to scream. Then our father showed himself in his skivvies at our dark door, the thin brown belt from his business slacks wrapped around his fist.

After that night, I left Nate alone, and I took forever to sleep and then I dreamed I'd woken, wet and shivering, eyes wide in the dark, in a muffled, padded place, softness hemming in my legs and arms as rain-water rose around me, a soft, cool pillow of wet cotton stuffed into my mouth.

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<http://www.umsl.edu/~natural/number11/williford.html>

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