

## A Small History

In a forgotten place somewhere in the past, my mother teaches grade school and many of the kids are brought in on school buses from hollows and hamlets along dirt roads. Our own road is a concrete two-lane that runs past open fields and isolated houses. The house closest to us is a narrow bungalow perched at the crest of a hill. It sits up on blocks, has no foundation. We call it the shed. My mother says it ought to be against the law to rent a house like that to anybody. But people move in and out, or the house is empty whole seasons, winters mostly, when it must be barely habitable.

My brothers and I ride the bus to school. This year, when I'm in fifth grade, the bus stops at the shed and two scrawny boys walk out alone. They climb onto the bus and stand still for a moment in the aisle, looking at the rest of us. They have the ashen complexions that seem to characterize neglected kids from the country, and sores at their lips, and ill-fitting clothes. But these boys have their hair slicked back tall, Elvis Presley style, and their features are fine and sharp like those of little foxes. They take us in with their pale blue eyes, scent the air. The older one, who might be eight, puts his arm around the younger, and they sit down.

Soon I'm hearing about the younger one, Nathan, from my mother. He's in her first-grade class, one of two or three students she takes to the lunchroom in the mornings before school even starts. She finds them something to eat and the cooks look the other way. She takes clothes to school for Nathan too. And towels, and soap. He often comes to school smelling of urine. Sometimes he has accidents. She brings his dirty clothes home and washes them, and takes them back to school. Somehow Nathan knows who I am, that I am her daughter, and I see him standing alone during the long noon hours on the playground, watching me.

My mother tells me Nathan's mother takes off for weeks, riding around in a tour bus with some country singer. I've seen her downtown on Saturdays, at the five-and-dime record counter, a woman the size of a little girl, petite, with sharp features and pale eyes like her boys. Her brown hair hangs below her hips. She wears tight gold lamé pants, dangling spangled earrings, a short, fringed jacket. The kids seem to take care of themselves. Apparently there's another boy, younger than Nathan. Sometimes we see them all outside in the field behind the shed, but we never see the parents.

Nathan has another accident in class and my mother takes him into the teachers' restroom to help him change his clothes. She's preoccupied, having left the inexperienced student teacher in charge. She fills the sink with warm soapy water and hands him a washcloth. Then she actually looks at him. She's seen

marks on him before, but today there's no mistaking the long bands of discolored bruises across his back and hips and legs. She asks him what happened to him. And he doesn't make up a story about falling off a fence. He tells her in his soft flat voice that his daddy beat him with a board.

My mother takes him back to class, then calls the county child welfare office. She tells them that she's not sending him back to that house. Either they find a place for him or she'll take him home with her.

In fact, Nathan does come home with us in my mother's car. We share our chocolate milk and graham crackers with him while my mother makes more phone calls. She convinces a kindly older couple, Hank and Christine, friends of my father's, to take him. They sign themselves up to be approved as foster parents and child welfare comes to interview them that afternoon.

I know a little about a lot of people in the town by listening to adults talk. I know a little about Hank and Christine. They're childless. Hank is big and ruddy, with a shock of white hair. Years ago, he had a problem; he nearly drank himself to death. Now the town says of them, She stood right by him, and for once it worked.

It all seems to work tonight. Hank and Christine come for supper as though we're one big family. Then they take Nathan home with them to their spare room, to a teddy bear and a new coverlet printed with trucks and clouds. Over the next month they take him to a circus in a neighboring town, and shopping for a winter parka. He has a new pair of cowboy boots with stitching on the sides.

At school, at recess, he stands with his brother on the playground. Nearly every day, he brings his brother over to me, the two of them with their hands in their pockets. I wonder if the brother is angry because Nathan was taken away, but he doesn't seem angry. He inspects Nathan's new boots and seems eager to talk, as though he wants to make a good impression. I think about the first time I saw him on the school bus, the look on his wary face and his arm around Nathan. He had someone to protect. Now he's not sure.

The bell rings and the playground begins to empty. The boys go off in different directions. Nathan's brother hesitates, shuffling his feet. The look he gives me over his shoulder is one of such grudging hope and uncertainty that I feel anger at my mother. Why hasn't she rescued him, too. Rescued all the kids like him, who, after all, only have each other.

But soon I hear that Nathan's back with his family. The County couldn't keep him out of the home permanently if his parents consented to weekly home visits from a social worker. And very soon, before the visits even commence, the family moves on, disappears. The shack of a house stands empty again.

One day in the spring I'm riding my bicycle past and surprise myself by turning onto the dirt track that leads across scrub grass behind Nathan's house. I stand beside the rickety back porch, which is about as broad as a sidewalk. There's a view of fields, and the stream beyond, and the wooded hills. This is what Nathan saw. Over that way to the right he saw my house, a brick ranch house with trikes and bikes in the yard, as far away as the moon.

Strangely, there are no windows in the front of the shed. The four back windows are boarded up with thin plywood, but there's a circular window with a glass pane, like a peephole, in the back door. I look through. It's months since they left but the floor is strewn with objects as though they fled hurriedly yesterday, dropping things. A shoe. Torn magazines. A cot-sized mattress, ripped, propped up so that its contents spill out in a damaged froth. I see a hulking woodstove squarely in the middle of the one room, its awkward flue piercing the ceiling. I look for something of Nathan—the cowboy boots, or the coverlet, no longer sky blue, crumpled into a corner—but nothing is there. He's taken it all with him.