

BEDTIME STORY

On nights like this, when it's raining and cold, when the streets are black and shining and the fog gathers around the streetlights, I look out the living room window of our apartment into the intersection hoping Jimmy will walk past the shops. I imagine him out there in his old army jacket, his hair long tailed and wild and sticking out in all directions from under his ball cap like a torn cat's fur. I think about his face lifted upward against the wind and rain, about the glaze sliding down over his eyes as it does when he's out of it.

Being his sister, I worry about him all the time. Jimmy walks the streets every night. The weather doesn't seem to make a difference. It could be zero with the wind blowing the snow into drifts and he would still be out there walking. I worry about him getting mugged or raped or freezing to death crouched against a brick wall in some alley.

As he walks, he hums to himself or repeats a word or slogan, over and over. You can see his lips moving. Sometimes he just stands on a street corner, hands in the pockets of his jacket, lips moving, talking to himself.

When he came to live with Phil and I and became lucid for a period of time, he told me he was just trying to figure out what he was doing standing there, how he got there, things such as that. What he set out to look for and forgot. He's looking for something just like most of us but what's different is that he spends all his waking moments in the process of looking. He doesn't know what he's looking for. "I haven't found it yet, little sister," he told me. "I had it once. Now it's gone, whatever it was."

I have to control the impulse to throw on my coat and go out into the rain looking for him. It's a real struggle for me not to. But I have to think about my son, Athens, and about Phil.

It's been over a year since Jimmy left and I know it still bothers Phil, the thing about Jimmy, although Phil says it doesn't anymore. Phil just goes quiet on me without any warning. He'll be sitting in the easy chair reading and the book will fall from his hands into his lap and he'll stare ahead for minutes at a time. His look will be distant and puzzled, a lot like Jimmy's. At other times, his eyes grow very small and I can feel him watching me across the room, like he's trying to figure me out or guess what I'm thinking. Or, he'll be playing on the carpet with Athens and just drop a building block or a ball and sit and stare at the carpet with Athens pulling at him to get his attention. I'll hear Athens whining or crying and I'll look to see what's going on and I'll ask Phil if anything is wrong and he'll come to and cock his head and say, "What?" One day last week he took me to lunch and we left Athens with his mom and dad and he asked me again, like he has a hundred times, "Honey, is Athens Jimmy's baby?" And I have to remind him that I was already a month pregnant when Jimmy came in off the street to live with us. We try to keep the evenings quiet now. It helps us feel things are normal. They're not, and will never be, but I wish they were. I have to think of Athens, and of Phil. I still love Phil, poor guy. He doesn't really know what hit him. I'm not sure I do either. But I'll always love Phil. We've even started having sex again. I'm going to take better care of him. It's just that I can't stop thinking about Jimmy. I wish he could find what he's looking for and be a normal person.

I wish he could be himself again. How do things get to be such a mess? None of us ever expected this.

I feel like I'm standing watch looking out the window into the rain. I wish I could stop but I can't. It's a longing, that's what I tell my therapist, a longing. I wish I could get Phil to go to a therapist. He'd feel a lot better. He has this thing about not taking medication and about not telling his feelings to other people. I ask Phil how he's feeling. He always just says he's fine.

When I first met Phil I was fifteen and rebelling against Daddy who had come to the point of being drunk by eight or nine o'clock. He didn't do anything to hurt Jimmy and me, just sort of ignored us. Old Mrs. Geiske, the housekeeper, was gone by then. Daddy figured Jimmy and I were old enough to take care of ourselves. Jimmy was a junior in high school and I was a freshman. Phil was a sophomore with long swirling hair and he played lead guitar in what he called an urban folk band. Phil was never very creative but he played the guitar well and he knew all the technical stuff about the equipment and that's probably why the band kept him around. Don't tell him I said so though. He's very sensitive about the success I had at one time in ballet.

I fell in love with him right away. He's really cute. His band was playing at a mall and my friend, Lucille Gomez, and I had snuck off on a school night just to get out of the house. Lucy's parents were always fighting.

Phil has a small sharp face and tiny dark eyes. His face has filled out a lot since then and his hair is cut short and stylish. Phil has always had the ability to anticipate the trend and he was pre-1980's before the fashion thing went from hippy to yuppie. He wears dark rimmed glasses now and looks very official. His

skills with electronics have paid off for him. He's a gifted computer programmer. Someday he's going out on his own. He's not one to work for The Man. He still plays guitar with his friends now and then. Music today sucks and he's not into it so he's just waiting for his stuff to come back around.

Daddy cried when I told him I was pregnant by Phil. Phil's parents are semi well-to-do and they wanted me to get rid of the baby, thinking that Phil would get tired of me after a while and dump me like I was any other groupie. Phil's not like that. He's a real guy.

We ran off together and lived for a while with some of Phil's friends in a three-room apartment. They were runaways too and the place was a mess. About a month into my pregnancy I started bleeding and it felt like my lower stomach was being twisted inward like a corkscrew. Phil called a cab and ran me to the hospital and I lost whatever it was and Daddy let me come home. Daddy tried to be nice to Phil but he always resented Phil for getting me pregnant. He let us continue to see each other, something I still appreciate.

During that time I would go into Jimmy's room in the middle of the night like I did when we were little and Daddy was on the road. I crawled into bed with him and he held me just like he did when I was little and he would let me cry without saying anything. Phil never knew this.

Phil and I decided we wanted to get married but we needed Daddy's permission. He said okay although he thought we should wait a while but Phil's parents went apeshit. They even offered to send me to college and pay for my ballet classes if I would get Phil out of my face. But I was in love with Phil and felt dedicated to him and thought we had a mission to carry out, his music and

my ballet. Art for art's sake, that kind of thing. I don't know what Phil said to his parents but based on subsequent encounters with them, all tense, uptight and stressful, I think he told them that if they didn't consent to us getting married they could kiss his little juvenile ass goodbye. Even so they would feed him money from time to time but nothing special. We had a dinky apartment in a kind of hip part of town where musicians and artists and actors lived and we made it on twofers and friends helping us and Daddy coming through in a pinch.

Phil had a lot of different jobs. He worked at a nursery planting trees and flowers. He caught a terrific tan and lost a lot of baby fat he had accumulated in the stomach area. At night his band came over to jam and practice and he got some gigs at various spots around town. It was the time of Joan Baez and Bob Dylan and Simon and Garfunkel and The Byrds. Jimmy had already moved to New York by way of Julliard and I'd get letters from him telling me about the city and the classical music scene there. He seemed to be doing very well. I worked as a waitress part time and practiced ballet in the afternoon with a local company that took me on practically for free because they wanted me in their program.

The future was out there like the night surrounding the wooden slats of our little balcony and like the sounds of our neighbor playing his hand harp to the notes of the bluegrass of an Appalachian hillside. That's what Phil called it.

I was only a year-and-a-half years old when Mama left Daddy. Jimmy remembers her a little. In my memory there was just Daddy, Jimmy and me, housekeepers, of which there were several, but Mrs. Geiske was the last one and she was around the longest. Jimmy tells me Mama had thick red hair and she was tall and pretty and could sing a very pure note.

Mrs. Geiske was something else again. Big and fat, with wild looking hair. She wore anklets with dirty tennis shoes. She pretty much smelled like vinegar.

Daddy thought Mrs. Geiske was steady and responsible. He had terrible experiences with other housekeepers, like the one who was arrested for shoplifting and Jimmy and I spent a whole afternoon in jail with her until Daddy could get us all out. I only know this from Jimmy because I don't remember any of it.

Jimmy and I were scared to death of Mrs. Geiske. Daddy never saw her when she was mean to us. She had a switch that she kept hidden in her room. Jimmy and I snuck in from time to time and broke it into pieces that we scattered throughout the house. When we tried to tell Daddy about being switched, he seemed so amazed that we could see he didn't believe us. Jimmy tried to tell him one night and Daddy got very angry with him so Jimmy must have decided to keep it between him and me.

Mrs. Geiske's thing was that we should be quiet all the time and not mess up the house. She couldn't cook worth a damn and, when Daddy was out of town, which was a lot, we often had cold cereal for dinner. I think too Mrs. Geiske was pocketing some of the grocery money Daddy left for her. Daddy looked very young then. I think he had some hope Mama would come back. I don't know the real reason she left. Jimmy thinks because of boredom. He thinks she had hopes of being a famous singer and didn't want the burden of two kids hanging around her neck. I don't know if she loved Daddy and will never know because she was run over by a hit-and-run driver in the street late one night in New Orleans. Jimmy told me that. I don't know how he found out. Maybe overheard Daddy

talking on the phone. Knowing myself better now, I can see how a lot of things can come between a man and a woman: money, different ways of doing things, different desires and interests, little things like brushing your teeth and belching without covering your mouth, loss of aspirations, outside lovers or just a general sense of the world caving in on you or leaving you in the dust. And plain ordinary boredom. I would like to say these things are not important in love but they are.

I would like to say that the trouble between Daddy and Mama doesn't mean anything to me or shouldn't influence my life, my way of seeing things, but it does a lot. You like to feel good about where you come from. Anybody who says differently is full of shit. I do know Daddy had a lot of debt Mama left him. I don't know the details. He worked for some chickenshit company that made him travel all the time and they didn't pay him well. He was a salesman of sorts but Daddy never struck me as any kind of a salesman at all. He didn't look like he could sell you anything. He was too mellow. He might have made a great teacher or a priest or a horticulturist. I saw my Daddy turn from a very young looking guy dating a lot of different women to a very old man sitting at home sipping his booze in front of the television. I saw this happen very fast. To me, Daddy's just another one of those wiggly creatures caught out in the bright sunlight of day that life has put a big shoe on and crunched through the hard shell of hope.

When Daddy was gone and Mrs. Geiske watched us, that's when Jimmy and I formed our bond. Mrs. Geiske always put us to bed early so she wouldn't have to put up with us. She did just what she had to do to give Daddy the impression that we were well taken care of, like appointments to the pediatrician and the dentist and such. She never read to us like Daddy did on the weekends.

She'd watch the evening sitcoms while Jimmy and I did our homework or played outside with the neighborhood brats until it turned dark. She spent the entire evening munching on chocolate chip cookies or tortilla chips or mini pizzas and slurp colas or hot chocolates with melted marshmallows. What a hog she was. She'd see that we had a bath and brush our teeth and laid out our clothes for school and every now and then she managed to give us a smelly hug. She'd hit the sack about ten thirty, just after the local news, and retreat to her bedroom to take in the late shows and nip a little cola and rum. If one of us woke in the night with a bad dream she'd be a little wobbly and smell like booze and puke breath and be very crabby.

Once she was in her bedroom and nipping and quacking like a choking mallard at some stupid joke made for people like her who never got past the slip on the banana peel routine when Jimmy snuck into my room with his flashlight and a handful of books. He could read well in advance of his age and I would cuddle up against him and he would wrap his arm around me so I could lay my head on his shoulder while he read to me with the flashlight. Jimmy tried to change his voice to match the character in the story. He would whinny like a horse or moo like a cow or oink-oink like a pig or cackle like an old witch. Sometimes he would stop to explain things in the story I didn't understand and this led to discussions about why things were the way they were. Now that I think about it, Jimmy knew an awful lot for his age.

He was clever too about the way he would smuggle snacks into my room without Mrs. Geiske knowing. For example, if I wanted a peanut butter and banana sandwich, he would take a dirty knife from the dishwasher, clean it by

hand, skim a thin layer from the peanut butter jar and the tub of butter, peel back the banana, skim some of the pulp and spread all these things on the heels of bread that accumulated in the bread box. To this day I still prefer the heels to the regular slices. Jimmy would clean the knife again and put it back into the dishwasher, rinse a dirty glass, mix me a soda cocktail out of the bottles of cola and other soft drinks in the refrigerator, just a little from each so none would be missing and bring my sandwich and drink to me stalking by Mrs. Geiske's door. When I became sleepy, Jimmy would kiss me goodnight and pull the blanket up around my neck and then return the glass to the dishwasher and the books to the playroom where Mrs. Geiske made us put them away each night.

It was during these secret sessions that we started calling each other Puss and Pussy. Daddy liked to tease me about my name, Catherine. He'd call me kitten because I always wanted a kitty but I was allergic to cats and none of us could really take care of a pet anyway. So he'd smile and say, "Here kitty kitty," or "Hey Kat, time to eat," or "Be a good cat and come sit on my lap so I can give you some of this delicious cherry cough syrup." Jimmy followed Daddy around the house when he was home and took to calling me kitty too.

Daddy gave us a great book one Christmas called, "Puss N' Boots." It was a large, slick book with a bright, colorful illustration of Puss right on the cover, standing on the wharf by a sailing ship, a dashing, dapper character with tall black boots and golden spurs reaching up to his knees, a rogue's hat with a long feather perched on the back of his head, a wide beaming smile, and a curved sword hanging off a wide black belt with a gold buckle. To me, Jimmy was my Puss N' Boots, my protector, my hero.

In addition to reading me stories like Little Red Riding Hood, Jimmy often read children's verses and nursery rhymes. Sometimes he would sing them to me like Daddy did. One of my favorites, mostly because of the way Jimmy sang it, plaintively and with some longing, went like this:

*"Ding dong bell
Pussy's in the well,
Who put her in?
Little Tommy Flynn*

*What a naughty boy was that
Who tried to drown the Pussy Cat,
Who never did him any harm
But kill the mice in father's barn"*

And together we'd sing:

*"Pussy Cat, where have you been?
O meow, I've been to London to visit the queen
Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat, what did you there?
O meow, I frightened the little mouse under her chair"*

This put us in the habit of calling each other, Puss and Pussy. When Jimmy crawled in bed beside me I'd whisper, "Hello, Puss." He'd tickle me a little and whisper back, "Hello, Pussy." One night I will never forget and that I still have nightmares about was the night when Jimmy had just crawled into my bed and said somewhat louder than usual, "Hello, pussy," and the door sprang open and Mrs. Geiske flicked on the light and charged over to Jimmy and grabbed him by the scruff of his pajamas and shook him until his head bobbed. Then she slapped him so hard across the face I thought I could hear the walls ring.

"What was that you said, young man?" she snarled, still shaking him.

"Hello, pussy," Jimmy shouted back, red with rage.

"That's exactly what I thought you said, you nasty little shit. Wait until I tell your father about this. And what else have you been up to, young man. Sticking your hands into sister's panties." She poked him in the ribs. "Huh? Huh?"

"I didn't do nothing," Jimmy pleaded. "I didn't do a thing."

"We'll see about that. We'll see what sister has to say. Now Catherine, you lay right down and get to sleep before I smack you too."

Mrs. Geiske slammed the door shut, dragged Jimmy out of my room and I could hear Jimmy screaming and howling. He told me that Mrs. Geiske washed out his mouth with soap and swore that if she ever caught him in bed with me again, she'd have Daddy send him off to a reform school for perverts.

I don't know that she ever told Daddy. Probably afraid he'd fire her for beating the shit out of Jimmy, we figured. He didn't like violence. Told us so. Never spanked us that I can recall.

Daddy loved the ballet. He watched it on public television and bought tickets whenever a ballet company came to town. He followed the local companies too. Every Christmas he took Jimmy and me to see the "Nutcracker Suite." He liked to put well known ballet music on the stereo and teach Jimmy and me how to get into various positions. I don't know where he picked all of that up. Not from grandma and grandpa. They didn't know squat about that stuff.

Ballet got to be a regular thing between Daddy and me. When he walked in the door on Friday nights, the first thing he did was holler "pas de deux" and I'd come running into the great room of our apartment and scream back, "pas de deux" and I'd spin around and dance for him. Daddy'd pick me up and give me a

big hug and carry me to wherever Jimmy was and pull Jimmy next to him and give Jimmy a big hug with his other arm. He was so happy to see us. I believe he did get tears in his eyes. Being gone and separated from us was hard on him.

We only had one car so we'd have to drive Mrs. Geiske home to her sister's house for the weekend. Then Daddy'd take us out to eat and to a movie or roller skating or ice skating and sit up late reading us stories or nursery rhymes. Daddy spent the whole weekend playing with us except when he had a date now and then and went to the ballet or the symphony. There was a girl named Datey from across the street who babysat. She mostly talked to her boyfriend on the phone. Saturdays Daddy played classical or folk music on the stereo and occasionally some jazz or rock and roll. He liked his music live so Jimmy and I went with him whenever the city or the parks department or the symphony sponsored free concerts. I remember going with Daddy to jazz jams on Saturday afternoons at a restaurant where Jimmy and I drank so many Rob Roys we nearly wet our pants.

It was very important to Daddy that Jimmy and I had a chance to do what other kids got to do. Jimmy tried his hand at basketball and baseball but didn't do well at either. I took swimming classes and ballet.

When Jimmy was eight or nine. Daddy bought him a cheap little guitar. Daddy was amazed that Jimmy could teach himself to play some of the songs from the song sheets that came with it. One Friday afternoon after we had taken Mrs. Geiske home, Jimmy told Daddy he wanted to have a Haydn record for his birthday.

"Haydn!" Daddy laughed, "What do you know about Haydn?"

"Miss Finch played it for us at school today. A violin concerto. It's the best music I ever heard."

Daddy just looked at him, shook his head and grinned.

"Jimmy, shit," Daddy grinned. "You knock me out."

That's how Jimmy discovered a love and the gift he had for the violin.

Daddy called up a professor friend at the Conservatory and found a young violinist named Ross who was studying there to give Jimmy lessons three days a week after school. Of course, Mrs. Geiske grumbled at Jimmy all the way back and forth from his lessons because she didn't want to get up off her lazy ass and take him to the university. She must have known that Jimmy would snitch on her if she tried to fudge because she made certain Jimmy never missed.

Jimmy couldn't wait to get to his lesson with Ross. I'm sure Ross made some kid a great daddy. He spent a lot of time with Jimmy and laughed at just about everything Jimmy said. He didn't believe in yelling at his students or driving them loony with practice. Ross told Jimmy that if he didn't love the violin better than anything in this whole world and if he wasn't having more fun than watching cartoons with me on Saturday mornings he should look for something else to do.

Nobody had to force Jimmy to practice violin. Once Daddy bought him a used model that Jimmy played constantly. Daddy had to talk to Jimmy about neglecting the rest of his homework and finally Daddy set up an hour a night when Jimmy had to put his violin away and study the rest of his subjects.

Ross was a tall, funny looking guy with big glasses and hair parted in the middle that never laid down right. But when he spoke to you, you had to like him.

He was so gentle and interested in you. He braided my hair once when I was late for one of Jimmy's recitals and I cried all the way over because Mrs. Geiske wouldn't braid my hair. Mrs. Geiske was yanking on me and bawling me out when Ross accidentally passed us in the lobby of the music hall.

"What's the matter little one?" Ross asked, bending down to me.

"Oh, she's fussin' about her damn hair again," Mrs. Geiske snorted before I had a chance to say anything.

"Well, she wants to be pretty for Jimmy's recital, don't you Catherine. Now tell me, what can I do about it?"

"I wanted it in a braid," I said through my tears.

"She don't need no braid. I've already told her it looks better combed out anyway." Mrs. Geiske snorted, looking at Ross for a vote of confidence.

I noticed Ross did a startled take at Mrs. Geiske's hair.

"Let me have a crack at it, okay?" Ross said to Mrs. Geiske, kneeling down beside me and putting his hand on my shoulder. "Okay if I braid it for you?"

I shook a bunch of yeses and Ross had it braided in no time.

"Used to do that for my sister," Ross laughed and walked on.

Mrs. Geiske started right in on me. That was typical Mrs. Geiske.

"Okay, ya brat. Got what ya wanted with a few tears, did ya? Well, take it from me, it won't work for ya. They'll catch on. Ya little sneak."

Ross graduated from the Conservatory but arranged for Jimmy to have lessons with his professor. That's how well Jimmy was doing. Dr. Fritts convinced Daddy that Jimmy should be in a special school and he helped Jimmy get a scholarship. It was a school in town for the well-to-do but they accepted

gifted children for practically nothing. In the summers, Jimmy went away for two and three weeks at a time to attend workshops and play in youth symphonies. I missed him but I got to stay with my Aunt Denise and Uncle Eddie in Omaha and play with my cousins, Tanya and Jewel.

Early on, Ross taught Jimmy to play a lot of childhood songs so he fiddled them for me and I sang along. We always sang "Pussy Cat, Pussy Cat," and "Ding, Dong, Bell" even though Mrs. Geiske tromped around the house, snorting to herself. She and Daddy finally had it out about the nicknames Jimmy and I had given ourselves and Daddy told her she wasn't to say another word about it.

On those nights when Jimmy fiddled for me I just leaned back on my hands and admired him, my Puss N' Boots.

At the same time Jimmy was taking violin lessons I was doing pretty well myself in ballet. Eventually, I successfully auditioned with Madam Fouquet's class and by the time I was in sixth grade I was dancing in the same "Nutcracker Suite" I used to see with Daddy and Jimmy. My high school didn't have ballet so I danced with the local company. But junior year while Jimmy went on to the Julliard I worked pretty hard too at getting pregnant with Phil and that put the quietus on my dancing career for some years to come. I think, in addition to all the other things a father must feel on those kinds of occasions, that's one of the reasons Daddy took it so hard. He so loved seeing me dance.

The older Jimmy got and the longer he was away the less I knew him. He grew quiet and downright cranky and was short tempered with me and Daddy. He seldom answered my letters and only talked to me briefly when he called home to talk to Daddy. He had begun changing before he moved to New York. I

think it was about the time Mrs. Geiske departed the premises. One morning when he was a sophomore in high school and I had just started ninth grade I woke to a loud, nasty argument between Jimmy and Mrs. Geiske. Daddy had come home on Thursday night with the flu and was sleeping in. I had never heard Jimmy talk back so loudly to Mrs. Geiske or curse at her so openly. I jumped out of bed and wrapped my robe around me and hurried down the hall to catch the action. I guess Mrs. Geiske had been going through Jimmy's things and had found some skin books. Jimmy was outraged. Just as Jimmy walked into the great room to challenge Mrs. Geiske, Daddy stomped down the hall from his room in his undershorts, unusual for Daddy who was a tad shy.

"What in thee hell is going on here? I'm trying to get some sleep. I'm sick, you know," Daddy honked, sounding like a seal with his sore throat and stuffy nose.

"Jimmy won't do anything I tell him to do," Mrs. Geiske whined and wept, tears shooting out like water from a shower head.

"Goddamnit, Doreen, just pack up your shit and get out of here. I've had enough of this squabbling. Be out of here by tomorrow night," Daddy declared, and stomped back to his bedroom. Jimmy and I raised our fists in victory and jubilation. Mrs. Geiske formed a hideous face, turned it back on us and scowled.

"You nasty little shits. I hope you rot in hell."

That Friday night, while Jimmy went out with his friends and I spent the night with a girl from school, Mrs. Geiske's family came in a pickup truck and moved her out, lock, stock and barrel.

But Jimmy must have felt encouraged by his outburst. He started blowing up at me or Daddy over the smallest thing. In a way, we were glad to have him pack up and go. Within a few months he had a girlfriend in New York. I think her real name was Rena but he called her Angel since she played the harp. He sent a picture home. I didn't care for her, at least the way she looked in the picture. She had a face like an egg, perfectly smooth and white, with a tiny plain mouth, no lipstick, her hair pulled back so tightly into a bun I was surprised her eyebrows didn't pull up an inch, and a self-satisfied smirk. She was sitting at the harp in what appeared to be an Elizabethan outfit that was open in the front and dropped in a circle down her chest. She didn't have any tits to speak of. I didn't tell Jimmy but I didn't think she would age well either. Kind of pre-Prunella. She looked fine now at eighteen or nineteen but what about thirty or forty?

The worse thing happened to Jimmy then. He had only been in New York about a year and a half when he got a draft notice. Daddy thought there had been some mistake so he called our senator and congressman and wrote the President and the Department of the Army. Daddy always fought hard for us if seldom successfully. The bottom line was Jimmy couldn't get a deferment for some reason I never understood. He appealed in front of the board and everything but they wouldn't budge. I guess because Daddy wasn't rich or didn't know anybody famous, that's why. I talked to Jimmy about running away to Canada and he said, no, he'd never get back to his music then.

Jimmy was even worse about writing home in the army than he was at school. He tried to enlist for an assignment related in some way to music but after basic training at Fort Polk, Louisiana, he was sent to a special school to train

as a medic. "At least I won't be shooting at somebody I don't know," Jimmy told me on the telephone. Angel thought Jimmy should have tried to become a conscientious objector or take off to Canada or go to jail rather than submit to the draft. When Jimmy didn't do any of those things, she told him to stop writing and calling. I knew that little bitch had her nose up her ass.

Jimmy went straight from medic school to Vietnam. He landed there in December, 1968 just before Second Tet. Daddy and I and Phil watched the news together every night and lay awake worrying about him. The few letters he did manage to dash off didn't say very much except that it was worse there than anybody knew and being a medic was no piece of cake because of all the gore he had to put up with. I cried when I read that. My sweet, gentle Jimmy.

Which surprised us all the more when Jimmy reupped for a second tour with the Rangers or some such thing. Daddy just couldn't figure it out. He talked to Jimmy for an hour on the phone when Jimmy was on R & R in Sydney and about all Jimmy could say was he couldn't explain it even to himself but he just had to be there. Finally, we got used to the idea of Jimmy being gone. Daddy had taken up with a lady named Margo who was in her early thirties and a trained opera singer. She taught at the Conservatory and sang in minor roles whenever the opera came to town. Daddy was doing a lot better personally and had gained back some of his youthfulness. Margo had a lot to do with it. She persuaded Daddy to quit his job as a salesman and open a music store. I think Margo had money from a former marriage or an inheritance and gave Daddy some seed money. He slowed down a lot on the booze as well. Switched to wine. It was sad, I thought, that Daddy finally was able to give up traveling after Jimmy and I were

already grown. Daddy and I were getting along well too and he had finally accepted Phil and learned to like him. He and Phil played guitars together and went to concerts and cooked out for Margo and me.

Even as we reconciled ourselves to Jimmy being gone and apparently gung-ho about Vietnam, on a very sad day for us Daddy received a one-page letter from the Department of the Army. It was hard for us to follow but from what we could make of it, Jimmy had been involved in some type of illegal activity, stealing and selling equipment and supplies — we couldn't tell exactly — and had been put up for a courts marshal and dishonorable discharge. But before the Army could string him up and ship him home he had tried to hang himself and had been in an Army hospital in Guam for the mentally ill. We were so shocked we just sat around all evening as though at his wake. "Why didn't they tell me about this three months ago," Daddy raged. He called our senator and congressman and phoned the Department of the Army but couldn't get any new or more complete information except that Jimmy would be arriving by train in ten days.

Daddy and Phil and I went to the station to meet him. It was about ten thirty in the morning on a hot and muggy August day. We waited until the train had emptied and still no Jimmy. Then a military officer of some kind stepped off the train and led Jimmy down the steps onto the platform. Daddy and I had planned to accept Jimmy no matter what they said he had done and were simply going to rejoice and be glad he was alive and well. But the guy that stepped off that train was no Jimmy. It was some kind of zombie with its head cricked to one side mumbling and driveling out of its mouth. The officer led Jimmy, halfway

stumbling, over to the three of us because I was holding up a "Welcome Home, Jimmy," sign.

"Mr. Quinn?" he asked Daddy.

"Yes," Daddy barely said.

"I'm Chief Transportation Officer Warren and I have orders here to deliver your son, James Robert Quinn," he said pulling a packet out of a brief case. "I have some papers I'd like you to sign acknowledging that Mr. Quinn has been turned over to your custody."

"Hey, Pussy," Jimmy said to me out of nowhere, with a smile that made my skin crawl. His head teetered from side to side like a balancing rock.

Daddy stood very still, a wax figure, as though halted in the middle of time.

"Officer Warren," Daddy finally began, "you do this to me, to my son. You bring him here like this, in this condition, and just drop him off like a piece of goddamn baggage. This is my son, Jimmy, the virtuoso violinist, the player of Haydn, Brahms and Vivaldi."

"I love Haydn," Jimmy grinned.

"Sir, I'm just following orders, sir, I..."

"Well, any idiot can just look at him and see there's something wrong. Look at what's been done to him for godsakes. This isn't the boy we sent off to your goddamn, bullshit war. Is that all you're going to do, bring him here and drop him off like this."

Before Officer Warren could answer, Jimmy said, "Hello, Daddy," like a little boy looking up with admiring eyes at a father he hadn't seen for a while.

"Hello, Daddy," he said again, tilting his head and sounding like he had an I.Q. of about 40.

"Hello, Jimmy," Daddy said, grabbing Jimmy fiercely and pulling him into his chest and shaking and sobbing on Jimmy's shoulder ever so grievously. The next thing, Phil and I and Daddy and Jimmy were hugging and crying all over each other strung by our arms in a circle. Officer Warren sort of stood at attention with his hands behind his back until our family display had run its course.

Daddy pulled Officer Warren off to one side and they went to a telephone booth and made several calls — I don't know who to — but I suspect the Pentagon or Department of the Army or our senator or congressman or anybody with a little power and the end result was that we drove Jimmy to the VA hospital. We were met there by two orderlies with a wheelchair and a very young looking military doctor who injected Jimmy with something that caused him to turn in on himself like a roly-poly. Even in this position he managed to lift his head and turn it sideways with an odd turtle-like smile.

The doctor who examined Jimmy called Daddy in for a conference two days later. He told Daddy that Jimmy was to stay heavily medicated until he settled down, ("Down to what?" Daddy shouted) and it would take three to four weeks before the medication would be out of his system and before he could do anything about developing a diagnosis and a treatment plan.

They wouldn't let us visit Jimmy for about two weeks. When we first walked into the small room where they had him seated at a wooden table, he

lifted his finger, eyes as wide as full moons, into the air and said, "I saw...I saw...I saw...", and then went quiet. That's all he would say. "I saw."

As the medication worked its way out of his system, Jimmy went through several different stages. At first, he sat on the side of the bed holding his pillow and humming or saying in a sing sing voice, "Ding, dong, bell, ding, dong, bell —" over and over. Then he turned violent and had to be restrained and put in solitary until he calmed down. Over the years Jimmy was given different diagnoses depending on the doctor. Paranoid schizophrenia. Character disorder. Manic depression. Schizoid personality. Genetic defect. Battle fatigue. You name it. He spent about eight months in the hospital before his first release but that was just the beginning. I've lost track of how many times Jimmy was in and out of the hospital. Then periods of time, a year and or more when he half way functioned but was never the Jimmy we knew, never the boy with the violin. For a while he was involved in a stolen car or drug ring. Fortunately, he was never arrested or put back in the hospital because of it. He was very cruel to Daddy and me during that period, bitter, self-centered.

I worried so much about Jimmy I couldn't worry anymore. I helped him move in and out of apartments. I straightened out his bank accounts. I replaced the carpets and the sofas he accidentally burned by dropping lighted cigarettes down on them. I cleaned up his dried vomit when he got sick from drinking too much and never bothered to clean it up himself. After a while I had to more or less give up on Jimmy and move ahead with Phil and try to start over with my dancing career. Too old then, I thought. So I went back to waitressing at a bar down the street from the apartment Phil and I moved into. It was an old place

but we liked it for the large living room and three bedrooms. The balcony made it seem even larger and like our first place looked out over the street where we could hear people come and go, streets musicians and the general hubbub.

My periods are as predictable as phases of the moon. So when I missed my period in August of the year when we asked Jimmy to move in with us, I told Phil I thought I was finally pregnant. I made an appointment with the doctor and Phil and I had a special dinner to celebrate even though we didn't have the official word yet. Two days later after I got off work at the bar from where I was waiting tables. That would be about three or so in the afternoon after we had the place cleaned up and ready for the dinner crowd. I stopped in a book store on the way home to look for a book I had read about in the Sunday paper. I signed up for a ballet class the week before just for fun. It started at six o'clock and ran until eight o'clock and I wanted to get home and fix something for Phil before he came home at five.

The minute I walked into the bookstore I spotted Jimmy standing by the new bookrack paging through a paperback. I walked up behind him and tapped him on the shoulder. He jumped at my sudden touch, then seeing me his eyes lit up. It was a Jimmy I hadn't seen for a while.

"Hey, Pussy," he said in a clear soft voice. He had taken to wearing his hair in a braided ponytail but it was clean and shiny. His clothes looked old and faded but they too were clean.

"How have you been, Jimmy?"

"I'm doing ok, sis. I really am."

"Jimmy," I couldn't stop myself, "I'm pretty sure, not absolutely, but I'm pretty sure I'm going to have a baby."

Jimmy lifted me up off the floor.

"Really, Kat, my god. I can't believe it. Holy shit, me an uncle and Phil a daddy."

"And daddy a grandpa."

It was the first time I had seen Jimmy that lucid in years.

"I've started to practice again," Jimmy told me, beaming. "Oh, not a lot, just a little. I bought me a used jalopy model violin. There's so much I've forgotten. I woke up one morning and there was a piece by Haydn that kept going through my head. Like the clouds had broken and the light was coming through. Hearing it was driving me crazy. I couldn't quite hum it so I went to a pawn shop and bought it. Then I could at least feel my way through it. And I found some old sheet music at the used record store down the street. But don't tell, Daddy. I don't want him to get his hopes up."

"I want to buy a book, Jimmy, and then I have to go fix Phil some dinner."

"You go ahead, sweetie. I'm trying to find a good novel to read. I haven't read anything for the longest time."

"Jimmy, call me, will you? Come over and have dinner with Phil and me. We miss you so much. I'm free on Tuesday and Thursday. Call me, Jimmy."

My heart beat fast all the way home. I couldn't wait to tell Phil. He was busy reading the paper but threw it down and stood up and smiled a genuine smile.

"That's great, honey. Do you think he's snapped out of it or something?"

"I don't know, Phil. I can't get my hopes up. But let's have him over, ok?"

A week later I got the good news that I was pregnant. I called to tell Daddy and Margo and then spent an afternoon hunting down Jimmy who was sitting on a bench in the square. I invited him over for dinner. He was very calm and only smoked one cigarette out on the balcony and talked about music with Phil. We started having him over twice a week.

How do things get so messed up?

Jimmy had found a dumpy apartment not far from where Phil and I lived. At one time he had accumulated some money working with a shady character named Mobley that allowed him to get off the street. I had heard that Mobley stole motorcycles or sold drugs or something like that. Jimmy never mentioned Mobley so I supposed that phase of his life was over. Jimmy also got some money from the VA. Daddy worked that out for him. That's how he got by.

A few weeks after the doctor's office called to tell me that I was pregnant Jimmy got a notice in the mail from his landlord that they had sold the building and were going to tear it down. Jimmy had thirty days to find another place. I didn't want Jimmy living in one of those pay-as-you-go dives where all the bums hang out so I asked Phil if Jimmy could live with us for a few months and sleep in the baby's room. Phil didn't have a problem with it. In fact, I think he enjoyed having Jimmy around to talk to at night. Phil is a loner anyway and doesn't have a lot of friends and was probably getting tired of talking to me, we had been married so long. Jimmy said he would help paint the room and do some wallpapering and run errands for us.

The doctor was worried about me having a miscarriage. I had been pregnant two other times since I pulled my teenage stunt and lost the baby both times within the first month. The doctor felt pretty good about me carrying this baby to term because he had straightened out my innards over the years and there was new medication that would help me hold on to it. But he didn't want me to work at the restaurant or to continue with the ballet. He didn't want me to take any chances. I don't know why I did.

The gist of it is that I found myself at home with Jimmy. The first thing Jimmy did was to buy a book of nursery rhymes for me and the baby. We started to develop a routine. I'd wake up and get Phil off to work and Jimmy and I would sit drinking our coffee and reading the newspaper. Then we'd take our showers and get dressed and join each other again on the sofa and Jimmy would pick out some nursery rhymes and read them to me.

"Remember 'Ding Dong Bell?' " Jimmy asked one day, his eyes darkening for a minute.

I never knew what to bring up with Jimmy. I didn't want to disturb the delicate balance I could feel at work in Jimmy's eyes. I tried not to mention anything in the past, mommy, Mrs. Geiske, the war, the hospital. I tried to keep my conversation centered on what was happening in the present. But now that he'd brought up Pussy again, I didn't have a problem mentioning Puss N' Boots.

"You've always been my Puss N' Boots, Jimmy," I smiled. "You kept me safe from all the scary stuff, Mrs Geiske and such. Remember her, the mean old bitch."

"She's probably dead by now and rotting in hell," Jimmy said bitterly. He looked out into the great beyond a second and then came back. "Oh well, all's well that ends well, I guess," he finally said.

He got in the habit of reading me a fairy tale, a poem he'd come across or a nursery rhyme every day, just for fun he said, to help me get in the mood for the baby. I sat next to him on the sofa at first but as I became more comfortable with him and he seemed more his old self again I began to snuggle against him and lay my head on his shoulder as he read.

After lunch I would give him a list of things to buy at the grocery store or hardware store and he helped me fix dinner in the late afternoon. He started to remove the old wallpaper and sand the trim around the doorway and floorboards of the baby's room. He thought we should carpet the room so it would be quiet and warm in the winter. Sometimes he would take out his old violin and work through a piece. I could hear him from where I sat in the living room. He would begin working through a piece and doing well, then there would be a long silence and then more music. He played little pieces for Phil and me in the evenings before going out for a walk so we could be alone. He began going to the movies from time to time. He looked at several apartments and found one not too far from us that he thought he could afford. He had to wait six weeks before the current tenant vacated it. Then he needed a week to clean and paint it. The new landlord agreed to knock a little off the rent if Jimmy painted it himself. In the meantime he would keep staying with us.

How do things get so messed up? Why can't we just roll along when things are going so well?

One morning after I had taken my shower Jimmy came out of the bathroom wrapped in a towel and was drying his hair with another. The weather was still hot and humid and we didn't have central air, just a rattling old window unit in the living room and one in our bedroom. Jimmy slept on a mattress on the floor of the baby's room with a revolving fan and an opened window.

That morning Jimmy sat on an ottoman next to my easy chair drying his hair and telling me where he planned to go that day.

"Here Jimmy," I said out of the blue, "let me comb your hair out."

Jimmy's hair was still quite long, hanging down below his neck. I took my wide toothed comb and began pulling through the tangles. Jimmy had beautiful hair and it was gleaming and soft. As I combed his hair I began to notice how beautiful his shoulders were and, for some reason, I don't know why, and I still curse the impulse, I bent over and kissed Jimmy on the back of the neck.

"Hey Puss," I said.

"Hey Pussy," he whispered.

That's how we began making love. It wasn't anything he planned or I planned. We simply rose up together and I undid the towel from behind Jimmy and opened it up with my hands. I just stood there looking at his nakedness, how tall and strong and beautiful and innocent he was, my Puss N' Boots, and I dropped my towel, embraced him, suddenly panting and crazy and inflamed, and soon we were rolling on the floor, not so much kissing but devouring each other, feeding some hunger that had never been satisfied, trying to fill a void, trying to go back to some need we had buried and forgotten.

Afterward, laying there on the carpet with Jimmy sprawled on top of me out of breath and weeping, I thought that this man must not be my brother. He didn't feel like a brother to me. I had never felt like this with Phil. For the first time in my life, I knew what ecstasy must be. It may have been all those years he was gone or that my true memory of him had been submerged. Or that I had wanted him like that for so long.

Jimmy was shaking. He was upset and afraid. He wanted to know if he should leave. No, Jimmy, I told him, please stay, please don't leave, not until your apartment is ready.

"We shouldn't do this again, Kat, never again," he kept telling me. "Let this be the last time."

We repeated that vow almost every day after that first lovemaking, "This will be the last time. Never again. Let's don't hurt Phil."

But then after a shower one of us would weaken. One day it would be me. "Please, Puss. Please take me to bed." I was shameless. Another day when I felt stronger Jimmy would come naked into the living room and look at me smiling, and say, "Hey, Pussy," and I would come to him and lead him willingly to the mattress in the baby's room.

I lived like that for almost a month, eating my forbidden fruit by day, and making affectionate love to Phil by night when we could. My passion for Jimmy returned when Phil and I went to bed. At least I didn't fantasize about Jimmy when I was with Phil or vice versa. I'll give myself credit for that. I tried to fight it too. I really did. It was as though once I crossed the line it was so easy to give in and cross the line again. It was if I had been hypnotized or drugged. I had no

resistance. It was something I wanted, something I couldn't stay away from. For that period of time, however naively, I thought of Jimmy and I as some kind of god and goddess who had sprung from a single vine into two wild and brilliantly colored flowers. We were meant to bloom together, to experience this bit of sunshine and violent wind and rain and the peacefulness after the storm.

It was inevitable that Phil would walk in on us. I knew that, dammit, but I just couldn't stop. One afternoon when he felt like he was coming down with something and out of sorts, he decided to come home early. We should have known we would be discovered. That is what happens in mythology when men seek to become gods. They are struck down and transformed from flowers into dried stalks that lean over ponds and weep together in the wind. I read that somewhere.

Jimmy and I had allowed ourselves to fall asleep under the top sheet wrapped around each other. I remember being in a dream state, a sweet, sunny meadow, when a large wrathful ogre appeared out of nowhere and began roaring and raging and attacking.

"You sick, crazy, sleazy bastard..." Phil screamed from above, pulling us apart, jumping on top of Jimmy, pummeling his head and face until blood was squirting everywhere. Jimmy, still half asleep, lay defenseless under the barrage of Phil's fists and only stirred when Phil left the bedroom to get a knife.

Somehow I had the presence of mind to get up and lock the door. Luckily, we were in the baby's room where Jimmy slept and his clothes were there.

"Get dressed, Jimmy. Get dressed quick," I said, shaking him and pulling at him to get up. Blood was drooling out of his mouth and I think Phil's ring had

gashed him on the side of his head. Phil was pounding on the door, screaming and shouting, calling Jimmy a sick bastard and all other kinds of hurtful nasty names. I could see the transformation in Jimmy's eyes immediately, the terror at the sight of blood, the fear of the anger and rage in Phil's voice.

There was no way for Jimmy to get out of the room except through the door. The room had a window but we were two stories up and the window only dropped into an alley. I did the only thing I could think to do. I unlocked the door, yanked it open, and jumped on Phil scratching and clawing. The knife only grazed my stomach but the blood spurted out like I had been dealt a major wound. Jimmy started screaming and bawling and Phil paled and looked horrified. "The baby, oh my god, our baby," Phil yelled out in the most hideous voice. "Our baby is dead." I fainted.

Between Phil and Jimmy they managed to cover the wound with a kitchen towel tied up behind my back to stop the bleeding. They wrapped me in a blanket and Jimmy held me while Phil drove to the hospital. Once they got me to the emergency room, so the nurses told me, they had to sedate Phil because he was hysterical. Jimmy carried me into the ER and took off running once I was lifted onto a gurney.

When Phil and I saw each other for the first time after I came to several hours later, we cried ourselves silly. I kept smoothing back Phil's hair and begging him to forgive me. He lay his head on my breasts and kept begging me to forgive him. It was the closest moment of our time together and the first time since Jimmy and I started making love that I realized what a crazy time it had

been, how crazy our lives had been, how the world had been against the three of us from day one. I loved Phil so much then.

We had some counseling. I thought the psychiatrist really knew what he was talking about. He said people like Jimmy sort of spread their craziness all around and when a family was vulnerable, like we were, worried about the baby and all, it was difficult to sort out what was crazy and what was not. He explained to Phil, after spending several sessions with me, that what happened had nothing to do with his attractiveness to me or my love for him or the strength of our marriage. He could tell we were a solid, loving couple and these things will happen no matter how strong a love is. Phil felt a lot better after that and took pills for a few months to lift his spirits. He would cry unexpectedly, particularly if anything came up on television or in magazines or in movies about mothers and their babies. He was so afraid of me losing Athens, our beautiful boy, who was not lost in the confusion of those terrible days.

I comforted him. I had him lay his head between my breasts and smell the sweetness of my milk. I rubbed the back of his neck and hummed to him. He would fall asleep like that. Everything the psychiatrist told Phil was true. What he did not tell him was that I still longed for Jimmy and always would.

We never did tell Daddy and Margo. I didn't mention it to Phil. I just told Daddy I heard Jimmy had a relapse and was back in VA.

And it was so exciting when Athens was born. Phil was in the delivery room and watched as his head poked out and then, splat, all the rest of him. He already had Phil's curly little lockets stuck against his head and because he reminded Phil of Julius Caesar or a chubby little god you might see in a

Renaissance painting, Phil wanted to call him Rome because of its mighty empire. I said if we were going to call him Rome, I'd just as well call him Athens because to me the Greeks were a much purer breed than the Romans. They were the true classics. So Phil said, okay, we'll call him Athens.

I haven't seen Jimmy since I went to the hospital with the stab wound. Daddy tells me he's been admitted to the V.A. several times since his relapse. The police would pick him up and know where to take him. I heard from friends about him wandering the streets wearing his army jacket and an old ball cap.

I try to stay away from the living room window or alone on the balcony when Phil is home. At first, he asked me not to see Jimmy again for a while. He didn't know how long. Then the other day reading the paper on the new sofa he looked up at me suddenly and said, "Honey, it's ok for you to see Jimmy again. After all, he is your brother. It was just his illness."

"Only if it won't bother you, Phil," I said.

"It will. But I'll get over it. That seems such a long time ago. You go ahead and see Jimmy if you want."

I tried not to seem too excited. I know it still bothers Phil though he says it doesn't. I need to take care of him and my baby boy, Athens. When Athens gets a little older I might try to get into ballet somehow. Probably too old but I feel the excitement lifting me up.

If you should see Jimmy wandering the streets or squatting down in an alley or looking in a store window or talking to himself somewhere, you tell him it's okay to come see Catherine again, and I know as I say this how crazy it must sound to hear it.

Actually, I have seen him walking by. Twice. He was just trudging along in the rain talking to himself. I so wanted to run out to him and tell him everything is turning out okay. I slip behind the curtain lest he see me watching him. I don't think he even knows he's walking down our street. He doesn't look up at the balcony. But as he walked past on those two occasions I found myself humming, and thought by means of ESP, he might be humming too:

*"Ding, dong bell,
Pussy's in the well..."*

Ding. Dong. Ding.