Out of That Bed 1963

by Ginnah Howard

My father's hands were huge. His left knuckles gashed as a kid when he rode his bike too close to a moving train. When his fingers were fisted around a glass, the scarred joints bulged from his grip like blind eyes. No matter where I sat at the table, I always saw the white slash of his hand as he drank.

Once when I was trying to draw pictures of American presidents for a seventh grade project, my father lifted a bar of ivory soap from the sink, and with his army knife, using a quarter for George Washington's image, he carved a perfect profile. I watched this magic, hypnotized by the flashing of his knuckles and the emerging face. For the rest of the evening he sat beside me at that kitchen table, guiding my fingers when the nose of Lincoln, the ponytail of Jefferson, took a wrong turn.

This is my only good memory of my father, the only time I wasn't wary. Mostly we all feared him. Especially my mother and my little brother, T.J. My other brother, Bobby, and I inched around him a little less. Sometimes that granted us a margin of grudging respect. But only sometimes.

My father was a sergeant in the army. Off and on he was stationed in places like Korea and Germany; then we would have stretches of peace. My mother would work and she wouldn't drink, but as soon as he was home again, we felt his presence every minute whether he was in the house or not.

On the evenings he came home without a bottle under his arm, he'd eat dinner without saying much. We would try to get it right: Bobby and T.J. wouldn't fight; my mother would say, Tony, don't you want some corn? I'd start the dishes without being nagged. After he ate, he would go out to the garage. Sometimes he'd stand and look down into the engine. Sometimes he'd lean in the big doorway and look up and down the street. He'd watch the birds. Sometimes T.J. would go out and try to talk to him. Can I help you, Dad?

Sometimes my father would say yes or no. Sometimes he wouldn't say anything.

On the evenings when he had a bottle, we would know even before we saw him. A difference in the slam of the car door, the way he turned the knob. If I was at the table doing my homework and tried to fold up my books, he'd insist I stay. He'd call my brothers from wherever they were playing and give them orders: Take out the trash. Then he'd pour himself a drink, oily yellow liquid the color of cat eyes. Sit down, he'd say to my mother. I want to finish getting dinner, she'd say. Let Carla get off her behind and do something for a change. He would pour her a drink.

Then it would begin: You're getting to be a real fatty, T.J. Kids will start calling you fat boy soon. T.J.'s face would turn red. Then he'd duck his head and eat. Or he'd start on my mother. What is this? he'd say, holding up a spoonful of something we were having and pushing it to her nose. By now both of their faces would have that look: the loosened lips, the eyes, flat and staring.

T.J. and my mother would spend most of the dinner, eyes down, but Bobby and I wouldn't do this. Bobby would go somewhere else in his head. He'd look at his car magazine, imagine himself making the inside turn, the accelerator pressed to the floor. I'd watch my father's hand raise and lower, and if he looked at me, I would look at him back.

On those nights, without seeming to hurry, I'd try to get the dishes done and my brothers upstairs. If we could get out of the kitchen before the bottle was half empty, the chances were good that none of us would get into it with him, that T.J. wouldn't get smacked, that we could be in bed with the doors closed before he hit our mother.

One night when I was thirteen, I lay in bed listening to them in the kitchen below. Usually I tried not to hear; usually I pushed the pillow against my ears and said over and over, Make them stop, make them stop, until I fell asleep. But this night I listened. I could not hear words, just snarls, furniture scraping, a cry cut off. I got up

out of that bed and crept down the stairs. I hid in the dark hallway, just beyond the arc of light. My father stood over my mother. Her arms covered her head. He pulled her hands away, held them up to surrender. Little bleating sounds came from her clinched body. I wanted to scream at her, Fight back.

My father turned so I looked right into his eyes, but he didn't see me in the darkness. I barely breathed. Then my father grabbed the front of my mother's dress and pulled her up out of the chair. Bent over her, he whispered in a strangled voice, You slut. He was huge, his face falling apart; my mother looked so small, a blue flowered doll he lifted in the air.

When he put his fingers around my mother's throat, I backed down the hall and out the screen door. We lived in a stucco duplex up on a hill. The Lucianos' lights were on. It's an emergency, I said. I have to call the police. You must come, I said to the man who answered the phone. My father is killing my mother.

Bobby and T.J. and I watched from the upstairs window. Finally the police car pulled up. Two policemen got out. We heard them stomp across the porch. They banged on the door. We held on to each other. The kitchen became quiet. They knocked again. We heard our father say something, our mother plead. Then we heard her come through the house. We got a call, the policeman said. Is there a problem? She said, Nothing is wrong. Are you sure there's no problem? Yes, she said. Would you like us to come in to check things out? No, she said. I wanted to scream down the stairs, Liar, tell them what he does. The police went back to their car. We watched their taillights move away down the street.

I slept. Then I woke up in the dark. I knew he was in my room. I saw a flash of white and smelled the whiskey. I didn't move. He sat in the chair. I heard him swallow. Finally he backed into the dark hall. I got up and closed the door, loud enough to tell him, I know what you're doing.

The next morning after my father had gone, I said to my mother, He comes into my room nights. He sits by my bed. I'm afraid.

My mother turned back to the sink. She squeezed green liquid into the dish pan. She lifted the glasses and pushed them down into the soapy water. She did not look at me and she did not speak.