

The Boys

by Tiff Holland

The Boys

The Boys, they call my brothers in the neighborhood, or Those Boys. The Taylor Boys. Sometimes, Mom calls them Thing One and Thing Two, like in *The Cat in the Hat*. Those bad boys. Nobody has brothers like my brothers, kicked off the school bus, barred from JC Penney only allowed one at a time in the corner store, where we go to buy Mom's cigarettes with a note *please sell Billy, Matty, Kimmie two packs of Marlboro Red*. Mom likes the hard box so they won't get squished in her purse. Mostly she sends me for her cigarettes because the boys are never around. They're always off getting into trouble.

I'm old enough, twelve, to know my brothers aren't really that bad. There's worse trouble they could get into than playing doctor behind the chicken coop, even worse than making bombs to throw at passing cars. Their bombs might smell bad, but rotten apples and stagnant water from the grape arbor, all wrapped up in a baggie, never hurt anyone. Mom says they try her, but she says I try her, too, and I've never gotten kicked out of anywhere.



Right now, she's in there crying, but I can't figure out why. No one got sent home from school with a note, or bit the teacher. It's been a long time since Matty showed Angel Gustino that condom. I don't know where he got it, but I have my ideas. Probably he swiped it when we went to Woolworth's with Gram one Sunday. But I'm not sure. We're still allowed in Woolworth's, all of us and Gram takes us every Sunday so Mom can go to church, can ask God for help.

Mom's been crying since we walked home from school yesterday. We walk now every day since the boys got kicked off the bus, and I almost like it, except for getting sent right out again, for cigarettes.

She stopped crying long enough to give me the note, the same note we re-use every day that she keeps under the phone the rest of the time, so it's easy to find.

Please the note says all folded up in my pocket while I walk up the road, not getting dirty or talking to any strangers. *Please* I whisper when I walk past the church.

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I've tried hitting the boys so they'll stop making Mom cry. I popped Matty one in the nose, which I shouldn't have done, the way it bleeds with the slightest touch, but I wanted him to know I was serious. Mom crying is serious. This isn't the first time she started. Once, Aunt Cathy even took Mom to see a doctor because she couldn't stop. The doctor sent her back home with some pills. Aunt Cathy told Dad the doctor said he sent Mom back home because she had the three of us to take care of, but Mom started right back up again, after wiping her face and telling Aunt Cathy she was alright so she would leave, go back home to her own kids, and I wanted to bring Mom one of those pills fast with some water. Instead, I went up to the corner to get her more cigarettes and left the brown sack on the table with the cigarettes and the note and all her change even though she said I could buy myself a Milky Way for walking up there, or a Reese's. After a minute, I heard her fish in the bag for a pack, and breathe out the smoke. That was the day I hit Matty in the nose, and when I came back from the store, I made Matty take off his t-shirt before there was too much blood. Mom doesn't need to worry about a bloody t-shirt, too.

Right now, the boys are being good. They're on the back road with the frisbee, throwing it back and forth at each other. At each other, not to each other. It's a game they invented, taking turns throwing the frisbee at each other's feet, knocking the white gravel out of the sticky black tar to use in their bombs. They're always together and never want to play ball or shoot hoops out back of the church anymore or run races down the hill, even though you get to going so

fast you feel like you're flying when you run down that hill, even though I let them win sometimes, so they'll want to race again. Sometimes, I get one of the neighbor kids to race me, even though most all of them are forbidden from playing with the Taylor kids.

I'm not going to hit the boys today, neither one of them, even though I want to hit something, want to hit something bad. Dad's going to get out the belt when he gets home, to teach us for making her cry. It won't matter that we were good today. So, I'm not going to hit my brothers. What Dad does later will be enough.

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The thing is, what I don't understand, is how me sitting here, reading all day after school can make her cry just as hard as when Billy got suspended. She looks at me, here in front of the window, watching the boys so she won't have to worry and reading one of the stack of books I bring home every week from the bookmobile, and she shakes her head and starts again. I've only ever been in real trouble myself once, and I had to punch Jerome that day on the school bus, he said the boys weren't really my brothers, or that Matty wasn't, that he is really Gram's, which is silly because that would make him my uncle, and I'm older than Matt, older than Matt and Billy who are ten and eleven, so close that when they were little people thought they were twins, but not twins. They don't even look anything like twins, Matt big as a eighth grader and Billy short and skinny as a stick. It's not easy having famous brothers.

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If I hear her, I'm going to stop reading, but right now, she's in there, curling that phone cord around her wrist so tight her hand looks white from the doorway, like she's not getting any blood to it, and I hope she smokes another cigarette soon, so she'll unwrap the cord to tap one from the pack.

I don't think Mom could make it without her cigarettes, not through another day, and I wish she could reach God on the phone instead of Gram and Cathy and Mary, my aunts. Then she wouldn't have to wait til Sunday. Cathy and Mary listen good but they always have to hang up to cook supper for my cousins, and it makes me sad to listen to her talk to Gram, *I just can't take it, Mom* I hear Mom say, day after day between cigarettes.

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This is one of Mom's cigarettes I have now. Dad smokes Pall Mall which are just for grownups, you can tell by the pack. I don't really feel better when I smoke, but I keep trying. I figure if they can make Mom feel that good, good enough to stop crying, then they'll make me feel better, too. I keep this one hidden behind my book in case she were to come in here, and I think it helps me to concentrate, keep an eye on the boys so they won't get into any trouble. Probably, cigarettes are like sex. I didn't like it the first few times Matty stuck his fingers in me, but I'm used to it now, and it probably isn't even a sin, since he's not really my brother.

I want Matty to be my brother I want all of us to live here together forever even though Dad told Gram last Sunday, *you'll have to take him back*. Matty swears he is my brother, and he should know whose kid he really is, right? He's been here as long as I can remember, we have pictures of the three of us, together in the basement when the boys were real little, two and three maybe. The boys in the red wagon Gram brought Matty for Easter one year, and Billy and me with chocolate smeared all over our faces from the baskets she brought us.

I made Matty touch me because just once, I wanted to have him to myself, away from Billy. Just once, I wanted to be part of The Taylor Kids. Usually, people don't even mean me when they say The Taylor Kids, and I was jealous, too, I admit it, of Angel Gustino. How could Matty show a perfect stranger a condom when me, his own sister, his flesh and blood has never seen one?

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Click, click, click, Dad goes down the hall. It's five-thirty. He is home from work, wearing his dress shoes with the thick heels, the noise they make like Mom's pumps only deeper. I look out the door when I see him on the porch, his shoes louder on the bricks, sharper, and then down the hall. He has his suit jacket over his arm and his vest is unbuttoned, hanging from his shoulders like the saloon doors in a western.

I put out my Marlboro. I listen when he closes the door to the kitchen where Mom has been on the phone now all afternoon. We never close the door to the kitchen. I forgot it even closes, and then it clicks.

If he goes, I go, I hear Mom say as Dad's shoes move back and forth across the room. The tile in there is orange and his shoes are shiny and black and I think of Fred Astaire when I hear him.

They're driving you crazy, he says back.

I think of the thin nylon socks he wears underneath, the way they could slide across that floor. It would be a smooth ride, but Dad keeps his shoes on. I can't make out what he's saying, even though his voice keeps getting louder. Now she's crying again. The door opening.

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He doesn't have the belt in his hand. He has Mom. He's helping her up the wooden steps with his belt still on, still buckled around his waist. She's moaning softly when he sets her on the bed. He turns the light on and I can see the flowered wallpaper, roses, that always give me the creeps when I lie in there with her. I go to bed with her some nights, when she's waiting for Dad to come home from his second job, and she doesn't want to be alone.

He helps her lie down with all of the roses looking on, open-mouthed but not saying anything. He leaves her alone with them.

I wait until he's gone to curl up beside the door. I listen for her breathing, and then when it's dry and even, I head outside.

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I look around for Billy and Matty, but they're nowhere in the yard, gone from the street. I'm tired of reading. I'm tired of smoking. Dad has a ladder laid out against the house. He's changed into jeans and a green t-shirt with a pocket for his smokes. He must not be going to his night job today. He's cleaning out the gutters, pushing big glovefuls of leaves out of the grooves with one hand, holding the ladder with the other. I stand right under the ladder, and I can see the soles of his tennis shoes, all squiggly-lined rubber.

Goddamn kids. He says, plucking a six inch maple sapling from the muck and tossing it down. I want to ask him if Mom is going to be alright, but then I start thinking how easy it would be for him to fall.

He sees me and yells down, *don't bother your mother!* Right as I give the ladder a good shove. He comes down quick, nothing like TV, not slow motion at all. His Pall Malls hit the ground, and then he hits the ground with a *umph* and the ladder cracks on top of him. He closes his eyes for a minute before he tries to get up while I don't run and don't try to help. When he can't do it himself he says, from the grass *go get your mother*, more tired than angry which is what I expected him to be, and then I run, and then she calls the ambulance since she can't drive, and the ambulance takes them to the hospital.

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Dad isn't allowed to go to work for two weeks, maybe longer. He broke his clavicle. His shoulders are all tied up in a figure eight, like a big white bow. They're in the living room now, smoking, and the boys are at Gram's since Mom is busying taking care of Dad. It

seems quiet here without them, without even the sound of the frisbee bouncing off the road.

Dad can't do anything himself, not take a bath or even get out of that chair without help. When he wants up, Mom gets under the arm on his good side. Sometimes, she yells for me to help.

Don't pull on him Mom tells me, and I kind of push from the back. All week they've been in there, watching tv during the day. I bring them bowls of chips and cokes and Mom explains the soaps to Dad.

Devon, she says, needs an operation and Amanda has amnesia.

Dad pretends not to listen, but he stops chewing at the sound of Mom's voice, and I know he hears what I hear, how clear she sounds, how sure. The room is all warm and close and smells of smoke, which has settled over them like atmosphere. She puts a pillow under his bad arm and every few hours she shakes a percodan from the brown bottle and gives it to him, waiting beside him with the water glass until he's swallowed. I know he knows I pushed him, that between the plucking and the ground he saw me, underneath him, that second he was part of the air, but he doesn't say anything to me, just gives me a *be careful* look when I'm helping him up. The first time I touched him, he flinched.

I'm heading to the store now for their cigarettes. I have a new note, because I have to get Dad's smokes, too. *Please sell Kimmie a packs of Marlboro and a pack of Pall Mall*, the note reads, and on the other side there's a list: milk, bread, coke, pound of chip chop. It shouldn't be too much to carry. I think I'll get myself a Reese's. I'm going to take my time.

