

FROM THE DARKNESS RIGHT UNDER OUR FEET

stories by

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Smokestack Polka

MY OLDER COUSIN IRENE—WE CALLED HER REENIE FOR SHORT—got married six months after my father died.

The three of us—me, my mother, my older brother Jimmy—were still living on Landau Street then, two blocks from the Joliet railyards where my father had worked, and where, many years later, my brother and I got jobs when we finished high school. I know things could have been much worse for us. There hadn't been any agonizing months or even weeks of a gray, thinning illness with my father, but a stiff heart attack that kicked him flat as he walked home from work one night two weeks before Halloween. The railroad union relief fund and life insurance checks started coming in right away, so there weren't any worries about food, clothes, or housing. My mother, a nurse at Mercy Hospital, had only taken a week off work after the funeral, and still made sure we got our meals, and our asses out of bed in the morning to get to school on time.

Still, things were far from calm. I was only eleven, and the loss I felt was rooted in confusion, though I clearly remember knowing that my father was gone for good. I knew this even when I took to sitting on the stoop at dusk those first few weeks (something

I'd never done when my father was alive), just to see what the sky above the neighborhood looked like at the time he should have been walking home from the yards. It was almost winter and the sun was gone by five, leaving the air purple and cold behind a rickety skyline of bare trees, phone poles, smokestacks, and steeples. The tired, steady shuffle of yard workers would pass in their oily blues, coughing over the filterless Camels and Pall Malls they clutched in their dirty fists. A few of them would wave or nod when they saw me, but most would hush and look at the ground, frightened by me, the little porch orphan who might have mistook one of them for his dead father and tried to follow him home. I wasn't waiting for anyone, but my mother thought I was being melodramatic.

"Come inside," she finally told me. "This is the hardest time of the day for me and I don't want to be in the house by myself. Besides, it's not healthy for you to sit out here in the cold like this every night. It won't change anything."

I think dusk was even harder on my older brother Jimmy, who was fourteen and hadn't been home for those hours in weeks. Father Zajc had told our mother to let Jimmy have extra time with his friends, so long as he tried to keep up with his studies and chores. But Jimmy wasn't keeping up with his studies; he'd just started high school a few months before and the deficiency notices were already coming to the house. My mother hadn't found these letters, since Jimmy always got to the mail while she was still at work. I watched him burn them in the dirt behind our garage, and he said if I told our mother about them he'd knock me into next month.

After my mother made me come inside that night, I followed her into the kitchen and watched her rinse cabbage in the sink. I realized she wanted me to be there with her, but I didn't know what I was supposed to say or do, so I stood by the table with my hands locked behind me and stared at her back, the floor, her back again, tense and thankful that at least the sink water was

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filling our silence. She shut off the faucet, braced her hands on the sink, then looked out the window and shook her head.

“The hell with Father Zajc,” she said; I flinched because I’d never heard anyone, especially my mother, say something like that about a priest. “Jimmy’s my son,” she said. “Mine. I don’t care what Father Zajc says. My son belongs at home.”

She turned from the window and stared at me for a while, as if she was waiting for me to either agree or argue with what she’d just said. “Go find your brother,” she told me.

“Right now?” I said.

“Yes,” she said. “Go find him. Please. Get him home for dinner.”

I was glad to get out of that kitchen, but I hated having to take Jimmy away from his friends because I knew he’d get mad and probably lose his temper. He knew how to channel his rage into painful abuse that didn’t leave any marks, that didn’t leave black eyes or split lips or bloody noses. He’d grab a lock of my hair and pull until I squealed, twist my arm behind me and yank so that my wrist was only inches from the back of my neck. I never told on Jimmy, but not because I was afraid of what he might do to me if I did. I never told on him because he always made up for what he’d done before I had the chance to get him in trouble.

“Hey, hey,” he’d say if I started to cry. “Come on, I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

As angry and hurt as I was, I’d believe him, especially when he’d point to his gut or cheek and say, “Go ahead, hit me back.”

I took him up on his offer a few times. He squinted, yelped, fell over, even though none of my weak punches deserved that kind of response. I knew he was faking the pain, and even that made me feel better.

Jimmy hadn’t touched me since our father’s death, and I wanted things to stay that way, so that night I looked for him at all the spots where I knew he wouldn’t be: Andy and Sophie’s, the corner tavern packed for Monday Night Football; the Hrvatski Kulturni Klub, a place where the neighborhood’s oldest men

played jukebox polkas and coughed war stories over games of barbudi and cards and short glasses of red brandy. Then I went to the Laundromat, bright, empty, and warm, and though I was freezing I didn't dare go inside, since I knew that Mrs. Kodiak, the crazy, starving widow who lived in the apartment above the place, would cram me into a dryer the second I stepped inside; Saint Sabina's, my family's parish, where I sat in a pew in the back long enough to warm myself, then got scared of the way the vigil candles made wavy shadows on the faces of the painted statues, so that their eyes and mouths looked evil and animated under thorns and drops of blood. I ran out of there and headed home so I could tell my mother I couldn't find Jimmy.

Two blocks from the house I cut through someone's yard and walked down the alley between Landau and Dearborn. I knew my mother would be waiting for me at the front door, and I didn't want her to see me coming home empty-handed. I stepped on the cold, cracked alley pavement slowly, stalling the moment when I'd have to disappoint my mother, when I'd have to lie to her face and tell her how I'd honestly tried to find my older brother. I knew she'd ask where I'd looked, and as I shuffled alongside the darkened rows of garages and garbage cans, I made up a dishonest list of answers: Aladdin's Arcade, the schoolyard, Cheney Drug, and, where I actually did find Jimmy that night, the alley behind our house.

I saw him about half a block ahead under the white glow of the streetlight that hung from a phone pole near the corner, and I immediately ducked behind a garage and watched him from the shadows. He was with five of his friends, all of whom were crouched in a circle around something I couldn't see. Jimmy stood above and behind them, smoking. I thought at first that his friends were trying to set something on fire; whatever they were doing in the circle was a struggle that made them curse and jerk. Then the largest of them, Mike Rhomza, held a brick above his head and brought it down with a grunt that made the others laugh. My brother took a quick last drag off his cigarette, flicked

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it away, then crossed his arms and said, “Okay, for crissakes, quiet. Now bring it up.”

The boys in the circle hushed, stood straight, and backed away. Jimmy already had another cigarette going. In charge, giving orders that were followed without question, casually smoking like a champ of old habit, my brother Jimmy had assumed the role of a grown up: maybe a cop or a railyard hack—maybe our father. I felt like running out from behind the garage and begging to be included in whatever they were doing, to be told what to do, to have unreasonable orders barked at me. I would have done anything he’d asked. But when Mike Rhomza turned from the circle and dropped the brick so that his other hand was free, he was covered in the glow of the streetlight, and I could see everything: his red winter cap, maroon coat, and the wounded, shaking gray cat he clutched with both hands by its neck.

“Hurry up,” Mike said. “This fucking cat stinks like shit. I don’t want to get its goddamn germs.”

One of the boys picked up the brick and another produced a hammer and rusted rail spike, and again the group gathered in a circle around the illuminated phone pole, this time to nail the cat to the wood through the loose skin on its back. The animal’s head shot back and its mouth stretched open, but only a dull hiss came from it. By then I was huffing the kind of hot breaths someone has right before he throws up, but I didn’t look away until after the boys backed up to pitch rocks and bottles at the dangling cat, didn’t leave my hiding spot until I watched Jimmy wind up a horrid brick pitch that crushed the cat’s head and ended the game. Then I lost it. I almost puked. Only a small part of me was sick from watching such a graphic torture. The rest of me was sick simply from knowing my older brother Jimmy was capable of such a thing.

My mother was waiting behind the front door when I got home. “What’s the matter?” she said. “The color’s all gone from your face.”

“Nothing,” I said, trying to get past her. “I couldn’t find Jimmy is all. I looked everywhere.”

She stopped me anyway, turned me around by both shoulders and lifted my head up with her thumb under my chin. “You’re a sheet,” she said, touching my cheek to check for a fever. I didn’t think I was tough enough to hide what I knew from my mother, and waited for her to pull the truth from me with a long list of questions.

But she never did. “I shouldn’t have sent you out running in the cold like that,” was all she said. “You’re sick now,” she said, and I knew I was off the hook. She made up a plate of crackers and sent me upstairs to bed, assuring me I’d have to stay home from school the next day, a kind of gift, I believed, for enduring the chaos of searching and scheming and lying on behalf of my big brother, who should have been caught and brought home in the first place.

I lay in bed for an hour before Jimmy finally got back. Though our house had two floors, it was small enough to tell from upstairs where exactly people were talking, especially if they were arguing, and my mother hadn’t let Jimmy get any further than the front door. They were at it down there, telling, shouting, yelling, back and forth and over each other so that I couldn’t even make out what was said. Then I heard Jimmy march upstairs, and when he slammed our bedroom door behind him I jolted, pretending he’d woken me up, though he didn’t notice one way or the other. He dropped his coat on the floor and sat on his bed without looking at me. His black hair was dirty and hung an inch over the collar of his red flannel shirt. I sniffed the air he’d brought in with him for cat blood, but I only picked up the salty yellow smell of cigarettes. I was propped up on my elbows, watching Jimmy and waiting for him to regard me, but he only stared at the floor, sucked on a finger stained by smoke, shook his head and muttered, “Shit,” drawing the word out in a long whisper like he really meant it.

“Where were you?” I finally asked him, ready to catch him in a lie.