

The Lucky Place

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Zu Vincent



Front Street
Asheville, North Carolina

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Several talented people have championed this novel. It's a privilege to work with my editor Joy Neaves and the Front Street staff, my agent Erin Murphy, and the extraordinary Carolyn Coman.

I'd like to thank Vermont College and its fine community of writers for their encouragement and support, including the wise pros Jacqueline Woodson, Jane Resh Thomas, Tim Wynne-Jones, M.T. Anderson, Marc Aronson, and Margaret Bechard. Special thanks to Elizabeth Bluemle and the Flying Pig Bookstore.

I owe a long-standing debt to the many passionate readers and writers in California and the support offered from writer's groups in San Francisco, Sacramento, Santa Cruz, Squaw Valley and the Chico area. Thanks as well to the Iowa Writer's Workshop.

I'm forever grateful to fellow writers Barb, Debbie, Rose, Tami and Vicki for their friendship and laughter, and to Ann for always loving this story. Thank you Laurie for being in my world. And my love and awe to my gifted first readers and family, the artists Harry, Kiara, and Aubrie.

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Printed in the United States of America
Designed by Helen Robinson
First edition

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA
Vincent, Zu.

The lucky place / Zu Vincent.—1st ed.
p. cm.

Summary: In the 1970s, a girl comes of age struggling with the loss of two father figures in her life.

ISBN 978-1-932425-70-3 (hardcover : alk. paper)

[1. Fathers and daughters—Fiction. 2. Coming of age—Fiction.]
I. Title.

PZ7.V7453Lu 2008
[Fic]—dc22 2007018357

Front Street
An Imprint of Boyds Mills Press, Inc.
815 Church Street
Honesdale, Pennsylvania 18431

*for H.K.
and in memory of
Vince and John Mark*

Part 1

“So sad, too bad, your dad.”

—*Old Daddy*

At the Races

There are always secrets.

“Mum’s the word,” says Daddy. “We were never at the races.” He has hold of our hands and we’re standing in a mash of people. He lets go to drink from the secret skinny bottle he keeps inside his coat. His eyes crinkle at the edges, and he pushes his hat way back on his head and pulls it forward again.

Daddy’s hair is curly black and his eyes are very blue. He calls me Baby Doll. Jamie is his little man. Jamie’s hair is curly black and his eyes are very blue, too. Daddy says Jamie can charm the pants off a snake. I can’t charm the pants off a snake.

“This here’s my little girl, this here’s my Baby Doll,” says Daddy to the man with fat gold buttons.

“Hello,” the man says, but I don’t talk back. I go way inside where he can’t reach me. “Baby Doll, same as the horse,” he says. He pinches my cheek and laughs. “Cat got your tongue?” he asks.

Daddy gives money to the lady with the fence in front of her face to put on Baby Doll. Then we climb the big stairs to sit on hard, sunny benches. Daddy’s getting his floppy smile, the one that makes him friends. His friends crowd all around us. They thump his back. They laugh when he laughs.

He shakes everybody’s hand. “How de do,” he says, “name’s Sikes.” He pushes his hat back on his head and tips his secret skinny bottle way up in the sky to get it all. Then he pulls his hat back down.

Jamie is five, so he’s too big, but I can sit on Daddy’s lap. I put my hands on Daddy’s cheeks where the little hairs poke out. He kisses me wet and squeezes. I feel in my coat pocket for

my ticket to the races. It's long and smooth and a horse runs across one end. There are more tickets like this on the floor by Daddy's feet, because people throw them there and step on them. I look around to see if any of the other tickets are still good enough to save, but none of them are as nice as mine.

There's nothing else to do. The sun gets hot and Daddy takes my coat off. I've got my Sunday-school dress underneath. Daddy lights a Chesterfield. His silver lighter clicks open and the flame pops up. He asks his friends if it isn't a thirsty day, and they say yes, it's a thirsty day, so he buys them grown-up drinks. Jamie begs for hot dogs and Cokes.

A giant voice above our heads calls the names of the horses lining up. Daddy tells me to stand on the seat to see them. The bell rings and the horses run. They kick up dust. All the people shout together, but Daddy's shouts are loudest. "Go, Baby Doll, go!" he yells, and his veins swell big in his neck.

It doesn't take as long for the horses to race as it does to wait for them. All they do is run around the big track and back again. When they're done Daddy jumps up and down and hugs us.

"She did it! She did it!" he shouts. He bumps my hot dog and spills ketchup on my dress, but he doesn't care. "Stay here while I collect," Daddy says.

Jamie sits on the bench, but I shake my head. "No, no, no," I say. I hug Daddy's neck. I don't want him to leave us. Daddy rubs his pokey cheek. He tries to unhook my arms, only I hold on good, so he has to pick me up and take me with him.

There are a hundred people where we collect. They stand in more long lines and push. Daddy sets me down and I can't see anything. I have to hold very tight to his hand. I let go when he gets his money. Then I grab his hand back.

Jamie has our places saved on the sunny bench. He makes Daddy's new friends move over. He has to yell and shove.

"We're rich," Daddy says. "We made a killing." He waves the dollars for his friends to see. "Good ol' Baby Doll," he says. "I knew it'd be Baby Doll."

Daddy's friends crowd in. They ask Daddy if he isn't thirsty again, and Daddy says he's always thirsty, so they buy him more grown-up drinks. They watch him count his money. They whisper in his ear. Pretty soon Daddy's holding out his money. "Take some, Tom," he says, "Mike. We made a killing, didn't we make a killing, Baby Doll?" And Tom and Mike take some of Daddy's money.

We stand up and sit down for the horses so many times that Daddy's friends are leaving. Jamie doesn't have to shove to keep our places anymore. "We're just betting now," Daddy says. "Betting that we back another winner." My legs get tired, but I still want to go with Daddy down the stairs and into the mash of people.

This time the stairs seem like forever. At the bottom the people are a bunch of legs and hands. Daddy walks like a hay-wire toy. He's lost his floppy smile. I try to keep his hand, but it moves too fast and gets away.

"Daddy!" I yell. "Daddy!" I grab his coat edge. Daddy's coat jerks one way and then the other. It flies out of my fingers so I can't get it back. It disappears between the legs and hands, and Daddy's swallowed up.

Beer for Breakfast

Mama lets me sleep with her when Gold Buttons brings me home from the races. She lays in the big bed and holds me extra tight. She smells like lipstick, grown-up drink, and the secret things in her top drawer. “My baby,” she whispers, “my baby,” and smooths my hair. She smooths and smooths until it feels like that place in my head will have a crease in the morning. But I don’t tell her to stop. Mama’s crying.

“I’ll kill him,” she says. “I will.” Her grown-up drink has melty ice and makes wet circles on the table. She rolls the glass on her forehead. She leaves the light burning.

I don’t want Mama to kill Daddy. I shut my eyes and pretend I never let go, that I held on tight to Daddy, so he could bring me home like he brought Jamie. I’m hot with Mama’s arms around me. Then I’m cold. I’m falling through the cold and I land in a hard place where she’s covering me up. I hear her slippers soft on the floor, her shushy gown. I see my clown-face night-light and the crack of light at the door. The light stretches and Mama’s inside it. She stands so long it’s like her face is pressing into mine. Pressing how she does when my forehead is hot.

I must be dreaming. I dream a crash and Mama yells through the wall.

“How could you, Sikes!” screams Mama. “How could you?”

“Honey, please calm down.”

I roll over in my bed. I scrunch under the covers, and my hands fit down between my knees. I squeeze my eyes shut. I think that’s Daddy talking.

But in the morning, Daddy isn’t home. Aunt Larue is in the kitchen, watching Mama pick up dishes. Mama walks back and

forth, tossing dishes in the sink, and the dishes bang. “The last straw and I mean it,” Mama says.

Jamie and I spread Lincoln Logs on the living room rug. We watch Aunt Larue’s skinny back and Mama moving near the sink. “Let’s make a fort,” Jamie whispers. He lays out four logs for the square.

“Slow down, Belle,” says Aunt Larue. “You’re making me dizzy.” Aunt Larue’s voice is crackly when she talks. She takes a sip of beer. Beer is brown in tall bottles and makes your tongue flinch. “Don’t ever get to liking it,” she says when I make a face. “Especially not for breakfast.” But Jamie asks for another taste.

Mama can’t slow down. Her hands go this way and that. They crawl up her throat; they poke her hair. “What am I doing here? What am I doing?” she says. She scrubs the dishes. She looks out the window at our brown old grass. “I’ve got to turn my luck around.”

“He’s just laying low. He’ll straighten up.” The beer makes Aunt Larue burp.

Mama grabs Aunt Larue’s beer and takes a drink. “And what if he doesn’t?”

“You’ve got two kids,” says Aunt Larue.

“So do you, and you left Sam.”

“Sam left me. You don’t want to be alone.”

Mama slaps the beer bottle down. Her face is pink and shiny. “I won’t ever be alone,” she says.

“What are you saying? Does *he* still call?”

“Shhh.” Mama looks over at me and Jamie, and she and Aunt Larue start to whisper.

The fort gets higher. Jamie lets me pick out the red pieces for the roof. “I lost Daddy,” I tell him. “I couldn’t hold on.”

“That’s because you’re little.” Jamie helps me put the red pieces on straight. He can make the fort look good. “I would’ve stayed right with him.”

“It’s not because I’m little,” I say. “Daddy went too fast.”

“Don’t cry. Want me to dance for you?” Jamie jumps up. He taps his feet across the floor, heel-toe, heel-toe, and his dancing makes me smile.

Laying Low

You two better straighten up and fly right, Mama tells us when we’re bad. Now Daddy’s bad, too, and I close my eyes and wish and wish for him to straighten up. When he’s laying low, Mama’s mad, Jamie has a sorry face, and I don’t know what to do. All day I listen for Daddy’s step outside. His jingly keys. “Come away from the window,” Mama says at bedtime. “He’s not coming back.” The way she says this makes me think she doesn’t want him to.

She lets us stay in her bed. She reads to us from the book with the leathery-smelling pages. The book pictures have no frames but walk around the printed stories, bright and deep, until you fall into them.

“Things are changing,” Mama says when the story is over. “I want you kids to be extra good.”

“I will,” I promise, but I feel funny. What things? What’s changing? I don’t want things to change. The phone rings and Mama hurries to get it. Jamie hasn’t promised to be extra good. He follows and pulls on her skirt, but Mama says, “It’s not Daddy.” Then she turns away and whispers.

“Call Daddy,” Jamie begs when she hangs up. “Tell him to come home.”

“I can’t. He’s gone to work,” Mama says. “He’s out of town.” A salesman doesn’t work in any one place. He drives around. He talks to people. “Your daddy could sell anything to anybody,” Mama says. “He’s a regular charm-boy. Jamie, you get that from him.” The way she says this I can’t tell if it’s good or not.

Daddy doesn’t come back and he doesn’t come back. Mama calls Aunt Larue to stay with us while she works. Aunt Larue is a sourpuss and makes us pull Mama’s green chair against the door when Mama leaves. “Nobody’s safe on the south side,” says Aunt Larue. “That’s why your mama wants out.”

Ellis

Mama has a day off. She takes forever combing her hair and making her fingernails pointy red. She wears her church suit even though it’s not Sunday. She rushes us. She says Jamie and I have to dress up too, so we can get our picture.

I don’t like dressing up. I have to wear the new white hat that looks big as a plate with blue ribbons around the edge. Those ribbons are exactly the color of the blue ribbons on my dress. The dress is scratchy and has an extra dress on top that Mama calls a pinafore. There’s more blue in my socks turned over at the ankles and edged with lace, and my shoes are shiny black.

I don’t want to have my picture in this dress. I shake my head when Mama holds it out. I won’t step in.

“Cassie,” Mama says. “You’re wearing it. I worked hard to

buy this dress. I never had a dress of my own at your age. I only had old hand-me-downs.”

I look at Mama. She has black stuff on her eyes and red red lipstick. Her hair is a color she calls auburn. “Gentlemen prefer blondes, they marry brunettes, but the whole world loves a red-head,” Mama says. I don’t know what old hand-me-downs are.

Mama grabs my shoulders. Her hands shake but her voice is soft. “Sweetheart, please be good,” she says. “And we might get a new daddy.”

“But where’s our old daddy?” I say. “Why isn’t he coming back?”

Mama blinks and a tear comes out. She wipes it away with her handkerchief.

My stomach squeezes. “Mama,” I say, “do we have to get a new daddy because I lost the old one at the races?”

“Don’t be silly, Cass,” says Mama. “It started long before that.” She kisses me quick and calls for Jamie to hurry.

I have to walk careful in the hat or it tips to the side, and I have to step big onto the curb so I don’t get a mark on the toes of my shoes. They hurt my feet, but they smell good. Like the box and the whispering paper and like something else, too.

“I could have got tap shoes instead,” Jamie says about his new blue suit. “Real ones made from patent leather.” When he grows up he wants to dance like Fred Astaire.

“Someday,” Mama says. “How do I look?” I think she looks pretty, but she isn’t sure. She stops under a tree in the big black parking lot. The parking lot is sunny and hurts to look at. We wait while she pokes at her hair, and pulls her jacket straight even though it’s already straight. She opens her purse and takes a little mirror out so she can see to put on more red lipstick.

Watching Mama, I touch my hat to tell if it's crooked. I promise myself to be extra good. I wonder if we're going to find our new daddy in the store. I want to ask Jamie, but he runs ahead of us across the parking lot. "Jamie!" Mama yells. "Look both ways!" And she grabs my hand and pulls me across too, and into the dark, cool store. I can't see anything for a while until my eyes unfuzz.

"Don't ever do that again." Mama catches Jamie by the door. "You could have been run over."

"No, I couldn't. I looked."

"Listen to me. Stay right with me." Mama wears gloves that come off one finger at a time. She pulls and pulls and looks around. A man is waving to us. He's tall and has slicked-back hair and a little black mustache.

"Who are you?" Jamie asks when he comes over.

Mama laughs like something is funny. "This is Ellis, from work." Mama's work is being a waitress at El Rancho restaurant. She puts her cheek against the man's cheek. She looks right in his eyes. "Here they are," she says about us. She laughs again.

"Hello, Jamie." Ellis smiles. "You must be the five-year-old." Ellis's hand goes over his slicked-back hair. Then he shakes Jamie's hand.

Jamie stares at him. He doesn't smile back.

Ellis wears a tie like a big shoestring around his neck, and a black stone on the tie. He doesn't wear a hat like Daddy, but he smokes a pipe. He puffs and bends his knees until his face fits in front of my face. He takes my hand and shakes it, too.

"Hello, Cassie," he says. "Almost four, right?" I don't know how he knows our names and ages.

“Aren’t you going to say hello?” Mama’s nails pinch my back. “She’s shy,” she says when I don’t say anything.

Ellis nods. “That’s okay. I have a little girl as shy as you. And Jamie, I have a boy your age. Someday you can meet them.”

His eyes have little happy lights in them. He doesn’t say the cat got my tongue. If we’re going to pick a new daddy here, I’d like this one. But if he already has a little girl like me and boy like Jamie, how can he be our daddy?

“After your picture,” Ellis says, “would you like to ride the elephant?” My stomach squeezes. I don’t know what elephant he means. He stands back up until he’s way taller than Mama.

Mama says, “Oh, Ellis, she’s too little.”

“Are you too little?” he asks.

“I’m not too little,” Jamie says. “But it isn’t real.”

“Sure it’s real,” Ellis says. “He’s over in front of JC Penney.” One of his eyes squinches down without the other one. Jamie calls this a wink.

Riding the Elephant

After our picture we walk to see the elephant. I keep thinking about Ellis’s little girl and boy. Jamie holds Mama’s hand and won’t let go. He doesn’t run ahead. I walk next to Ellis. “Don’t stare, Cass,” Mama whispers, but I can’t help it. I’ve never picked a new daddy before.

We find a bunch of people and Ellis looks over their heads and says the elephant isn’t here yet. He gives the ticket man money and takes two tickets. He holds them out to Jamie and me.

“It isn’t real,” Jamie says again. He looks funny at me when

I take a ticket. Mama takes the other one when Jamie won't touch it. Jamie nudges me and goes over and shows the ticket man how he can dance like Fred Astaire.

"You want to join the circus?" the ticket man asks, and Mama hears and grabs Jamie to make him stop.

"The elephant's coming," Ellis says. "Who wants to see?" His hands go big around my middle and swing me up. I land on top of his shoulder, which makes me giggle. From here I can look over all the people's heads.

Jamie's wrong. The elephant is real. He's taller than any of the cars and taller than the parking-lot trees. He's got floppy ears and a big snake nose. He's wearing baskets on his back. Children sit in the baskets, with the bottoms of their shoes sticking out.

The elephant gets bigger and bigger. His feet are round and hairy and his skin is extra. His nose curls up and falls down. His tiny eyes look backwards. A man walks beside him and holds a stick in his hand and taps the elephant's foot. The man's not half as tall as the elephant.

When the elephant walks close, Mama yanks Jamie back. The man shouts and the elephant kneels down so he can take the children out.

Jamie is mad that Ellis is right. "I'm not going!" he shouts, and Mama's face gets red. Once the basket is empty, new children get in.

"Jamie," Mama says, "Ellis already bought your ticket."

"No." Jamie shakes his head.

Ellis swoops me down from his shoulder. "How about you, Cassie?" His eyes have the little happy lights in them.

I look at the children climbing in the baskets. "Yes," I say.

Mama makes her surprised face. “Not without Jamie!” she says. “Jamie, take her hand.” Only Jamie won’t. I think he’s scared. But I’m not scared. I want to ride the elephant. When Mama tries to take my ticket back I hold on tight.

“I want to ride the elephant!” I say.

“You won’t be able to hang on by yourself,” says Mama.

“I can hang on,” I tell her.

And Ellis says, “Let her, Belle. It’s safe.”

“You promise to hang on?” Mama shakes me. She waits. She smells so good I want to hug her neck.

“I promise,” I say. I run for the elephant and the elephant man scoops me up and tucks me in the basket. I want Jamie to look at me, but he won’t—he watches his shoes. And Mama’s eyes are stuck on Ellis.

The elephant man pulls a belt tight around me. I stick my hands on the basket. My blue dress crinkles. The sleeves pinch tight around the tops of my arms. Mama remembers to look now. She asks the elephant man if he’s sure the strap will hold, but the elephant’s already going up.

I never thought before what an elephant smells like. I never thought before how high you would be on an elephant’s back. The basket moves like it might fall off, first one way, then the other, every time the elephant steps.

My stomach is red ribbons. I think about falling all that way. I can see the tops of cars and trees. My tiny Mama acts like she wants me back right now, except it’s too late.

“Hang on!” she screams, but it’s windy up here. The wind grabs my hat and I have to let go of the basket to save it. Mama’s mouth falls open. She hides her face in Ellis’s shoulder, which I’ve never seen her do with anyone but Daddy before.

I set the hat safe in my lap. The place for my head stands up round and flat as a birthday cake. When Mama lights the candles she says, “Don’t blow them out until you make a wish.” I wish we could have this new daddy—then it wouldn’t be so bad that I lost our old one at the races.

Pretty soon Mama and Ellis grow tinier and tinier until I can’t see them anymore. And it’s like losing Daddy, only different, because I’m the one going away.

When the Milk Ran Dry

Daddy comes back smelling bad. Jamie and I run out of bed and stand by the chair until his eyes find us. “So sad, too bad, your dad,” he says in his funny voice. “Tough titty said the kitty when the milk ran dry.”

Jamie giggles. I tell Daddy I’m sorry I lost him at the races. “Go back to bed,” Mama says. She helps Daddy out of his chair and he walks like the haywire toy, down the hall to the bathroom. He bumps into the wall where the copper plate hangs, the one with the ship sailing away. Mama grabs the ship and tries to hold Daddy up. “In your room, now!” she tells us.

Daddy’s face is scary, hanging down.

Jamie waits until Mama has got Daddy in the bathroom. Then he sneaks back along the hallway to the bathroom door. I sneak behind him. Mama pushes the door shut, but it doesn’t close tight. We can see her and Daddy between the crack.

Daddy’s on the toilet seat. Mama bends over the tub. The pipes bang when she turns the faucet. She kneels on the rug.

“Take these off,” she says, and I hear Daddy’s shoes hit

the floor. “Oh, no!” Mama sounds mad when she pulls down Daddy’s pants.

“I’m sorry, honey.” Daddy’s hand tries to touch Mama’s face. It moves around like he can’t see. Jamie looks at me and plugs his nose. Daddy has messed his pants like a baby.

Gotcha

A rock pushes against my face. I don’t know why I should be sleeping on it. I open my eyes and Jamie’s bed sags, so I know he’s up there. His mattress is held above mine by wire; if the wire breaks he’ll fall on me. I roll over and the rock is only Mama’s empty powder box, the see-through one with little grooves on top. That’s where I keep my tickets, the ones from the races and the elephant ride. I stand up and poke at Jamie’s mattress.

Mama is in her robe in the kitchen, frying bacon. She jabs the fork into the pan, jabs and jabs. Her hair has yellow around it from the window sun. The bacon pops. “Jamie, Cassie, go wake your daddy,” she says. “Wait!” she says. “Remember our secret? Both of you?”

We aren’t supposed to tell Daddy about Ellis giving us a ticket to ride the elephant. Mama says never take that ticket out of her powder box. Never mention Ellis’s name. She says it’s on the Q.T., which is another word for secret. “Just give Daddy a kiss,” she says.

Jamie and I tiptoe into Mama and Daddy’s room. It’s dark with the curtains shut. We sneak up to the bed. Daddy’s hair curls black around his head. His hand with the big gold ring is

still. “Daddy! Daddy!” we call, then jump back. Daddy grabs at Jamie, but he catches me.

“Gotcha!” Daddy growls. Jamie screams and runs away.

“Help! Help!” I say. Daddy pulls me smash against his pokey cheek, and my heart beats fast.

“I can’t tell,” I say. “Ellis is a secret!” Daddy lets go and stares.

Daddy stays in his room with the door shut. Mama whispers on the phone. I hide under the table holding my ballerina doll, the one with pointy toes and clicky eyes, and when she goes to sleep her eyes fall shut. Daddy comes out with his hanging-down face and pulls the phone away. Mama wants the phone back, but Daddy won’t give it. He puts it to his ear.

“Sikes, don’t.” Mama tries to grab it.

“Who is this?” Daddy asks. He waits. Then he slams the phone down. “Was it him?”

“Who? What are you talking about?”

“Cassie told me, Belle. You think you’re in love with that damn cook. Where’s my Chesterfields?” Daddy’s fingers shake.

“What did Cassie tell you?” Mama says. I cover my ears when I hear my name.

“I don’t want him around my kids, damn it.”

Mama starts to yell. “And you’re so much better? Look at you. You’re either sick or off on a binge. We haven’t seen you in weeks.”

Daddy shakes worse. He finds his Chesterfields. He opens his lighter and the flame pops up. “They’re my kids. Not his. They need their old man.”

“Sober,” Mama says.

“You’ve made up your mind, haven’t you? Just like that. You want to go off with that damn cook.” Daddy sounds sad.

Nobody says anything until Mama says, “I just want a family, Sikes.”

My ballerina doll goes to sleep and her eyes fall shut. I lay down with her and my stomach squeezes. I just want a family, too.

The Snake

Mama’s at work. Daddy is watching us. He watches us from the couch, lying down. Jamie has a Dennis the Menace I’m not allowed to touch. But Jamie is outside and Dennis is on the floor. He isn’t wearing his little jeans. I look for the jeans and find them under Jamie’s Indian blanket, the one with the cowboys sitting around campfires and the Indians sneaking up on them. I hold Dennis and try to dress him. I stick my fingers in his tiny pockets, which go down like real pockets. I wish I had some tiny money to put in there.

Jamie can sneak up on me faster than anything. He grabs Dennis before I even have the pants half on. Dennis flies up, up above my head, way on top of Jamie’s arm where I can’t reach.

“Please!” I beg Jamie. I pull on his shirt.

Jamie jiggles Dennis and says, “Trade. I get to play with your ballerina doll.”

“No.”

“She’s mine until tomorrow.”

“When’s tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow is tomorrow, you dope. The day after today. And I can do her hair and take her tutu off.”

Jamie loves her clicky eyes and pointy toes. He loves how her hair is pink, and her tutu is pink and so are her shiny slippers and tights. He gives me Dennis the Menace and I hand him my ballerina doll.

“Put her down,” says Daddy from the doorway. “That’s a girl’s doll, Jamie. Boys aren’t supposed to play with ballerina dolls.”

“Mama lets me.”

“Mama isn’t here.”

After Daddy says this, Jamie cries, in the bathroom where Daddy can’t hear. Only I know. I press my ear to the door when Daddy falls asleep on the couch.

“Jamie,” I say. “You can have her. I won’t tell. Don’t cry, Jamie. Come out.”

“Go away,” says Jamie.

I wait. I don’t know what else to do when he won’t play with me. I lay on the floor by the door. I try to see under the crack. I listen. I shove my fingers in, and the pink ballerina doll’s feet. The floor is hard and cool. My fingers get stuck and they hurt when I pull them out.

The door swings back and Jamie is there. “I don’t want that stupid doll,” he says. “Come on.”

Outside the paint is a color called aqua. Daddy is supposed to put it on the garage walls, only he never does. Jamie opens the paint and sticks the brushes in. One for me and one for him. The way he looks at me I know we aren’t supposed to do this.

We paint the neighbor lady’s dog. Jamie holds her while I paint her, and I hold her while Jamie does. Her name is Trixie

and she's usually fluffy white. Trixie stands still and her tongue droops down. She doesn't move until Daddy comes out.

Daddy is tall on the step. His face is sour and has dents in it from sleeping. He holds a snake in his hand. He comes down the step and the snake goes for Jamie. Jamie screams and the snake goes *Crack. Crack. Crack. Crack.*

"Don't, Daddy! Don't, Daddy!" I shout. I watch Daddy's hand. Daddy stops and looks at me. He blinks like he just woke up. He sits hard on the step. The snake doesn't move. It doesn't look like a snake now. It looks like his alligator belt. But I'm still afraid it will change.

Jamie has run into the yard. Daddy is on the step. He looks sorry at Jamie and he looks sorry at me and he sits and sits.

I think Daddy must be frozen.

Straight Man

"When you were little," Daddy tells me, "my sister tried to steal you. She picked you up and wouldn't let go. She was walking out the door. 'This is the prettiest baby I've ever seen,' she said. 'Just like a baby doll. If I thought I could have me a baby as pretty as this one, I'd go on home and have her.'"

His voice is big in my ear. I fit on his lap and he holds my legs out straight to help my pigeon toes go away. I move when he moves. "Look at me!" Jamie calls. He does his heel-toe across the floor.

Daddy laughs. "You and me, we'll go on the road. A song-and-dance team, Jamie."

"Time for church." Mama comes out of the bedroom all