

GO BACK

By Karen Joy Fowler

I spent the first eleven years of my life in Bloomington, Indiana, but I don't remember it as eleven years. In fact, I couldn't tell you in what year or in what sequence anything happened, only in what season. It is as if in my mind my whole childhood is collapsed into one crowded year. And me, I grow, I shrink; I am three years old, ten, five; I am eight again and it is summer.

In the summer the tar on the streets turned liquid and bubbled. We popped the bubbles with our shoes on our way to the pool and came home smelling of tar and chlorine. In the evenings we chased fireflies and played long games of Capture the Flag. I was fast and smart and usually came home covered in glory.

The Rabinowitzes, our next-door neighbors, had a brief bat infestation in their upstairs closet. Stevie showed them to me during the day, hanging from the rod, sleeping among Mrs. Rabinowitz's print dresses. You could see their teeth, and the closet smelled of mothballs. At dusk the bats streamed into the sky through an attic grate, which Mr. Rabinowitz then screened over. You might have thought they were birds, except for the way they shrieked.

Above the Rabinowitzes' bed hung a Star of David made of straw. Mrs. Rabinowitz's wedding ring was of tin. They came from Germany and spoke with accents. Mrs. Rabinowitz was much calmer than my mother would have been about the bats.

Stevie Rabinowitz was my best friend. He moved in next door when we were both four years old. Stevie could already read. He learned off the sports page. He would come over in the morning for toast and juice and to tell my father the baseball standings. We played Uncle Wiggily and he read both his own cards and mine. When I played with Stevie, we drew cards I never drew with anyone

else. After I could read for myself, the cards were ordinary again. But when Stevie read them, Uncle Wiggily said that he would play for the Pirates when he grew up. He went ahead two spaces. I would play for the Dodgers. I would be the first girl to bat leadoff in the majors. I went ahead three spaces. Uncle Wiggily said Stevie would have a baby sister and his parents would pay her all the attention. He went back three spaces. Uncle Wiggily said I was too bossy. I was supposed to go back three spaces, but I wouldn't.

“Sometimes going back is better,” my mother told me when I complained about it to her. “Sometimes it only looks like you're losing when really it's the only way to win.”

Uncle Wiggily said that we would meet movie stars, and in the summer Jayne Mansfield came to the Indianapolis 500. We went to the airport to get her autograph. She signed pictures of herself, dotting the *i* in Mansfield with a heart. Her husband was furious with her, but it probably didn't have anything to do with us. She looked like no woman I had ever seen.

In the spring my brother entered the science fair with a project on Euclidean principles in curved space. He took second prize. Spring was the season for jacks and baseball. My father bought an inflatable raft for fishing trips. When I came home from school, it was fully inflated, filling our living room. “How did I get it in here?” my father asked, tickling me under the chin like a cat. “It's a boat in a bottle. How did I do it, Yvette? How will I get it out again?”

In the winter he bought us skis, although there was nowhere in Indiana to go skiing. One snowy morning I looked outside and saw a blue parrot in the dogwood tree. My mother went out to it and coaxed it onto her finger. We put an ad in the paper, but no one ever called. My own parakeet was an albino who could talk. “Yvette is pretty,” it said. “Pretty, pretty, pretty.” And sometimes, “Yvette, be quiet!”

In the winter we went sledding on Ballantine Hill. When we came inside again, the heat would make our fingers ache. There was an ice storm that closed Elm Heights Elementary for a

whole day since no one could keep their footing. I stayed home with my mother and brother and father, as if it were Christmas already.

Uncle Wiggily said the Kinsers' house would burn down and this happened in the winter. One Sunday morning, my mother answered the door. She was already up, cooking breakfast; I was lying in bed waiting for the house to get warm. I couldn't hear what she said, but the tone of her voice made me get up and I met my brother in the hallway. The five Kinser children were crying in our kitchen. They were all in their pajamas, their slippers wet with snow, holding toys and books in their laps.

There'd been a fire in Meg's closet, Barbara, the oldest, said. Barbara found it and then she had to hunt for Meg, who was hiding under her bed and didn't answer for a long time. And then her mother wouldn't let her go back and get Tweed.

"Where is the dog?" my father asked.

"She sleeps on the back porch," said Barbara.

We could hear the sirens coming now. "I think you should wait," my mother said, but my father went into the snow, his pipe in his mouth, sending streams of smoke around his face. We all watched him from the kitchen window.

He passed the Kinser parents, who were standing in the street watching for the fire trucks. They spoke to him briefly. The Kinser adults didn't like my father, who didn't go to church. The rest of my family didn't go to church either—my brother and I considered it a great gift our parents had given us, our Sunday mornings—but my father drank and was noisy about it. Bobby Kinser, Stevie Rabinowitz, and I argued religion. Bobby's family believed in God and Christ, Stevie's in God but not Christ; my family didn't believe in either one. Also, my father wouldn't go to the local barbershop, because they wouldn't take black customers. The barber was a friend of the Kinsers. My father went up the steps of the Kinser house and in through the front door.

The fire trucks arrived and began unrolling the hoses. My father did not come back. Flames were visible through the glass of the upstairs windows. A net curtain burned, browning and curling at the edges as if it were newspaper. The glass cracked and black smoke came out, thick as oatmeal. The firemen spoke to the Kinsers; there were gestures and shouting. The ladder went up. And then, finally, Tweed bolted into the front yard with my father behind her.

My father had burned his hand, but not badly. The firemen were very angry at him. "You're not just risking your own life," one of them shouted. "Someone has to go in after you. You have children. Did you think about them?"

My father hardly paused. He came through the kitchen with Tweed. Tweed checked for each of the Kinser children in turn. My father went to my mother. He was still smoking his pipe. She put his hand under the water faucet. "You're proud of me," my father said to her. "You might as well admit it."

"I shouldn't be," she said, holding onto his hand, smiling back at him. "Sometimes I just can't help myself," and suddenly, just like that, I was in love with fires and storms, thunder and wind. I can remember a lot of fires and storms in Indiana when I was growing up, but what I remember is that they were never big enough. No matter how much damage they did, I was never satisfied.

In the spring there was a green sky and a tornado watch. "A tornado sounds like a train," our teacher, Miss Radcliffe, told us. "But by the time you hear it, it's too late for you."

"Then how do you know it sounds like a train?" asked Stevie. When the tornado came it picked up a horse trailer and carried it seven miles, dumping it finally in Bryan's Park just six blocks from where I lived.

In the fall the Imperial Theater was struck by lightning and set afire. I'd seen *Ben-Hur* there and *Old Yeller*. Stevie and I biked over. We were unlikely to get permission to go to a fire so we

didn't ask. This was my first fire in the rain. The insides of the theater were gutted, but the outside was untouched. The police wouldn't let us get near enough to see anything.

In the fall Elm Heights held a Halloween carnival. I wore a red cape with a hood and carried a basket for treats. My brother bought me a cake I wanted with his very own money. There was a booth where you could win a goldfish by throwing a ring over its bowl, and I won at this, too. Barbara Kinser organized all her brothers and her sister to spend their money at this booth. By the end of the evening they'd won thirty-three goldfish, all of which boiled to death in the winter when their house caught fire.

In the spring the nursery school where my mother taught held a picnic at Converse Park. Converse was forty minutes out of town, heavily wooded and big. It contained the Tulip Tree Trace, a twenty-two-mile hike my father took me and my brother and the Kinser and Rabinowitz children on in the summer. We weren't very old, but we all made it, even Julia Rabinowitz, Stevie's little sister. I remember my mother sitting on the hood of the car, waiting for us, smiling and waving when she finally saw us all walking in.

My father didn't come to the nursery school picnic. He was fly-fishing on the Wabash River. He was camping out. He was to be gone the whole weekend. Stevie came to the picnic so I'd have someone my own age to play with.

Stevie said if we walked down the trace, but not all the way down to the sycamores, if we took a turn off to the right and went downhill again, there was a cabin his father had shown him. We went looking for it. My father was a botanist at the university and had been teaching me the names of trees and wild plants. I walked and named things for Stevie.

It took us awhile to find it and then it wasn't really a cabin, just the remnant of a cabin. The front door was gone, if there had ever been a front door. Weeds grew up around the windows, blocking the light. Inside was ghastly, a webby, musty place with one dim little room, a jumble of

bad-smelling clothing on the floor, plates and cups and silverware for four on the table. The plates were of tin, the clothes old-fashioned. There was a black dress with a bustle.

“They left in the middle of dinner,” Stevie told me. “Without packing or anything. They left everything.”

I thought there must have been something awful to make them leave like that, something that really frightened them, but Stevie said no. It was gold. A wagon train came by and told them there was gold in California, and they left without even eating their dinner. The food got cold and spoiled and bugs ate it and eventually it just dissolved away, leaving only the chicken bones on the tin plates.

“The historical society keeps the cabin up,” Stevie said, but it didn’t look kept up to me. My mother’s parents lived in California. My grandfather was a dentist and he put gold into people’s teeth. Stevie didn’t have any grandparents at all.

It started to rain. We had about twenty minutes back down the trace to the picnic. The rain was light at first, then so heavy it was hard to walk in it. Water streamed down the trace over our feet, up to our ankles.

The nursery school party was gathered by the picnic tables, which were sheltered and on a hill. I found my mother. She dried my face with a paper napkin, never really looking at me, looking instead down to the gravel parking lot where we’d left our cars. Water covered the lot, deep and deeper. While we watched, our cars began to move, only jostled at first, but then lifted. They floated away, fifty, sixty feet downhill and piled up on each other in a big metal dam.

The city sent a bus and some firemen to pick us up. They stretched a rope across the gravel lot and carried the children, including me and Stevie, across the water. The adults and my brother came next, holding on to the rope. My mother was worried about my father, out on the Wabash in his inflatable boat.

He didn't come home that night, but he did manage to call. My mother spoke to him and told my brother and me to go to the Rabinowitzes' and tell them we were having dinner with them. Mrs. Rabinowitz made me a peanut butter sandwich, because she knew I didn't like fish. She talked to my mother on the phone and said my brother and I were to spend the night.

In the morning it was still raining. I went home before anyone else was up. My mother and father were in the living room. My mother was in her robe. She was crying. My father was drunk. "I love her more than I ever loved anyone," my father said in a strangled, slurred voice. "Nobody will believe it because nobody wants to believe it. They prefer it ugly."

"How can you say that?" my mother asked. She was holding his hand. "Tell me how you have the nerve to say that to me."

"I just can't help myself," my father answered. He saw me and his voice rose. "Go back to the Rabinowitzes'. Do as you're told."

By the time I got back, I was crying hard. Mrs. Rabinowitz heard me. She came down from the bedroom and held me in her lap. Mr. Bush, the milkman, came to the door. He had just been to my house. He spoke to Mrs. Rabinowitz in a whisper while he handed her their milk. "Cynthia Marciti drowned," he told her.

"I know," Mrs. Rabinowitz said.

"Her parents thought she was at a slumber party. She was out on the Wabash."

"I know," Mrs. Rabinowitz said. Cynthia Marciti baby-sat for me occasionally. She was a student of my father's. My brother and I stayed with the Rabinowitzes for four more days.

On Friday, my mother came walking across the lawn, dressed in a black dress. "No one expects this of you," Mr. Rabinowitz told her. "You don't have to."

"She was eighteen years old," my mother said. "Do you think I could blame her for any of this?"

Stevie told me that my father paid for the gravestone. He said it was very big and had an angel on it. I didn't see how this could be possible. My father didn't believe in angels.

The Rabinowitzes drove my mother to the funeral. I hadn't seen my father in four days. When I tried to talk to my brother about the angel, he told me to shut up. "I wish everybody would just leave me alone," he said, which was unnecessary because pretty much everybody was.

Stevie and I got out the Uncle Wiggily board. I couldn't read my first card, because of the tears in my eyes. "Read it to me," I said, handing it to Stevie.

"Uncle Wiggily says you are moving to California," Stevie said. "Go ahead three spaces."

I put the card in my pocket. At some point I must have used it as a bookmark, because seven years later I found it again, stuck in a book in my grandparents' house, in the bedroom my mother had slept in as a child, which was now my room. There were no seasons in California. In seven years I had had to learn to remember things differently.

I had been eleven years old the last time I saw Stevie. Now I was eighteen, the same age as Cynthia Marciti.

The card had Uncle Wiggily's picture on it, a rabbit gentleman farmer in a top hat, collar, and cuffs. "Uncle Wiggily says you will marry a man who is a lot like you are. You will have two children, a boy and a girl. You turn out very ordinary," it said. "Go back three spaces."