

The Motions

After our mother dies, my brothers and I must go to a woman's house every day after school. We can't go to our house because we are too young to look after ourselves, we are told. So we go to Wanda's house. Wanda watches other kids after school, too. She is nice to us, but it is not the same as going home. Around sundown, our father comes for us.

Sometimes we go to a little drive-in and get hamburgers for supper. We do this on days when our father says he is very tired. I am rarely hungry anymore, but I like the hamburgers at the drive-in. The hamburgers come in a white paper bag. The bag is warm when I hold it against my chest. Grease spreads across the bag. Sometimes we eat the hamburgers in the pickup with our father, parked next to the drive-in. My brothers and I sit shoulder-to-shoulder and pass around the hamburgers and French fries from the bag. We chew silently and watch cars go by on the road. Other times, we drive home with the hamburgers. I hold the warm bag in my lap. At home, we sit quietly around the dining room table and eat. Our house seems empty. The whole world seems empty. Our father goes through the motions, asking us about school. We go through the motions, telling him school was okay.

Sometimes when we go home from Wanda's we find that someone has been in our house, and has left supper waiting for us. Our father reads a note left on the counter next to the stove. I watch his face as he reads. Sometimes he will read the note aloud to my brothers and me. The notes always say there's such-and-such in the oven and some other stuff on the stove and something else in the refrigerator, and if there is anything they can do just please call, and their thoughts are with us, and God bless us, and so on. Our father tells us who has left the notes. I do not forget the names.

Each time our father reads one of the notes, I watch him closely. I have grown increasingly watchful of our father. My brothers and I depend on him now for everything. I know it must be hard for him, and I worry about what will happen if it is too hard. He looks to see who signed the note, and he tells us. He does not forget the names.

Something really bad has happened in our lives, and we make our way through the aftermath as best we can. I am not doing very well. Everywhere I go, I know I am watched. I am no longer anonymous in our little town. I am one of the little boys whose mother has died. From the corners of my eyes, I see hands move to cover mouths. I hear the whispers and the low tones. I see a woman poke her friend and jerk a thumb toward me. A boy steps to the front of our fourth-grade classroom to say that he is giving me a wristwatch because my mother is dead. Teachers on playground duty cast furtive glances and make mental notes. I don't like people to watch me. I don't want to be noticed.

An old woman sees my brothers and me playing near Wanda's house. She walks slowly over to us and asks us if we are the kids whose mother died, and we again have to acknowledge that, yes, we are. She tells us she had meant to make some cookies for us, and one of my brothers looks hard at her and asks her why did she not do it, then. My brothers don't want to be noticed, either. We wish that anyone who didn't give a goddamned about us before would just go back to feeling that way, even if they mean well.

I am anesthetized, numb to everything but sadness and anger. I am going through the motions. I just keep going, and I do make it through the days and nights. We all make it, somehow. When the summer comes, my brothers and I stay at Wanda's house all day. We play baseball and football and

try to make things ordinary again. I don't feel like eating, and I am tired but I don't sleep well, and I start to twist my hair with my fingers until my hair falls out. My father buzzes my hair off so I can't twist it anymore. He probably thinks I'm going crazy, and if he does, he is right. I feel like I have gone a little crazy.

I get very sick during the summer, and I think I might die, like my mother. Finally, I am taken to the doctor, and I get some medicine that Wanda says my father will have to explain to me. The medicine is the kind you have to stick up your butt, my father explains, reading the package with a sour look, and I decide I don't like this type of medicine. My father doesn't like it either, and he doesn't like talking about these things. I am thinking that this would have been my mother's job, and I can see my father is thinking the same thing, though he never mentions my mother. He is not yet able to mention her, and I am sorry to have made him think of her with the medicine. I don't want anyone putting something up my butt, including my mother. So I tell my father I will do it myself, but I flush the medicine down the toilet. My father doesn't ask me about it, and I don't die, after all.

I start doing what I can to help my father and brothers. I could have learned to cook, iron clothes, do the laundry, but my father doesn't want me to do these things. He never says why, but I think he doesn't want things to be any harder for my brothers and me than they already are. So he does as much as he can himself. Still, many things do not get done. It doesn't bother us too much. We are doing all we can do, just going through the motions.