

The Kennedys

by William Walsh

Noah Kennedy, four years old, is drunk again. Due to an acid-base enzyme imbalance in the lining of his mouth, his saliva instantly ferments all liquids to alcohol.

Megan Kennedy is called megaphone because she doesn't need one.

Mrs. Kennedy recalls listening to Noah crying in his crib at night. He was almost two and he could say thirsty. He pronounced it fursty.

One day in early September Mr. Kennedy will come home from work and tell Mrs. Kennedy that he has seen his first school bus of the season, and that will signal to her that she should begin fixing him whiskey highballs after dinner instead of vodka tonics.

The year he starts eighth grade, Lucas Kennedy begins putting his father's whiskey in his soda after school. His first mixes were purposely weak. But before long he is mixing doubles and downing them. He raises his soda can in Noah's direction and says, Cheers, little dude.

Mrs. Kennedy told the pediatrician that Noah's breath smelled like beer. The doctor laughed. Later, Mrs. Kennedy overheard the doctor speaking about Noah with his receptionist. He called Noah little baby bobble-head.

Noah's diagnosis takes several years. A doctor from North Carolina reading his case dubs the condition Bootlegger's Syndrome. This nifty coinage brings national attention to the doctor and then to Noah once his identity is deduced.

Megan's hand smells of puppetry, which has become for her a passion. She is sent back to the bathroom to wash her hands before dinner. Megan had been given puppets to see if she might find a new voice for herself.

If Noah acts silly, Mrs. Kennedy will give him a blood test. It is more accurate than the breathalyzer.

The signal in spring for vodka tonics is different every year— the sight of a particular migrating bird or some early perennials preparing to bloom, an item on the evening news about pitchers and catchers reporting to Florida for spring training.

The juiceboxes are in the locked cupboard. One six ounce juicebox is for Noah the equivalent of a fifth of bourbon for a full-grown man. Just a sip, Mrs. Kennedy tells Noah.

Megan brings her father's old turntable into her bedroom and begins playing *Tapestry* by Carole King. She plays side one over and over. Megan puts her puppets away for good. She mixes rubbing alcohol with fingernail polish remover and bubblegum flavored cough syrup. She drinks it from one of the souvenir shot glasses from Mr. Kennedy's collection.

At her first AA meeting, Mrs. Kennedy sits next to the only other woman her age. The woman's name was Joan and she immediately asks Mrs. Kennedy if she had any gum. She says, I feel just toothless without a stick of gum in my mouth.

Deep in the woods behind his house, Noah discovers naturally occurring train tracks running between two wide trees. He follows the tracks over the hill at the end of the woods and into the long clearing. He drinks dirty water from a rain puddle and looks up to see his brother Lucas in the clearing with a girl who is hiding her face. Lucas is holding two cans of soda. Noah walks backwards from the long clearing and counts his steps out of the woods to the backdoor of his house. He wants to be sure he can find his way back to the puddle in the dark later that night.

