

Hide and Seek

by **Steven Wineman**

I was sitting next to our cabin in a low-slung canvas folding chair, waiting to see what would happen next. It was the summer of 1962. I was thirteen, my brother was seventeen. He had called my parents from Detroit, saying he was going to kill himself by driving his car into a tree. It was over a boy, David, who apparently had rejected him. My mother told me all this. She spoke in an even voice, trying to be calm and matter of fact. But I had been reading my mother's emotional state all my life, always on the alert for the next outburst, and I could tell she was using every ounce of strength to hold herself together. "I don't think he'll do it," she said. "It's a plea for help. If Jimmy meant to kill himself, he wouldn't have called."

It was a warm, bright day, and I maneuvered the chair into a patch of sunlight that managed to wend through the branches of tall trees surrounding our cabin. I felt the heat of the sun on my face, on my bare arms, and I listened for the approach of my brother's car. Instead I heard the subdued voices of my parents from inside the cabin. It was a rare event for my mother and father to be carrying on a civil conversation. I couldn't catch the words, but their tones said everything I needed to know.

I was riveted on all of it—the depth of my parents' concern, the looming panic in the air, the drama of the moment—and feeling nothing. It was an old trick, one that I had mastered over many years of being the quiet, good boy in a family where everyone else was ready to explode at any moment

I had an internal switch that I flipped to turn off my feelings. I used it every time my parents screamed at each other. It had become an automatic response, one that enabled me to take in all the details of their fights—the points of contention, the escalating decibels, the swearing, who was more logical (always my father), who was irrational (always my mother), the predictable patterns at the end when my father would

denounce my mother as impossible and walk away, and my mother would fling her final epithets and dissolve into sobs as she shrieked to the walls, "What did I ever do to deserve this?" I somehow knew that I couldn't afford to feel how my parents' warfare was affecting me, so I didn't. I listened, I noticed, I drew conclusions, and then I went on with my life.

With Jimmy, I was not as successful. When I was four he started physically assaulting me. He'd lure me into wrestling matches by promising to let me win, and then he pinned me on the floor and clawed at my stomach. From my perspective, he was an impossibly big boy; he had complete physical command over my body. Each time I let myself be tricked into believing that he would keep his word, that he wouldn't hurt me, that I could have fun with him the way I imagined other brothers relating and come out unscathed. At the key moment, every time, my trust was betrayed and I knew then exactly what was coming, the physical reality of being held down on my back on the floor, unable to move, his legs on top of mine, one big arm dominating the upper part of my body as I tried to squirm and push back without the slightest effect. I could feel what he was going to do to my stomach before he did it, a physical memory that had been stamped into me. And then it came, the abdominal claw hold. With his big hand Jimmy dug into my belly, and it was as if his fingers were inside me, twisting, stabbing, inflicting a burning relentless pain at a depth that didn't seem conceivable, and all I wanted in the world was for him to be off me and for the pain to stop, and there was nothing I could do to make that happen. He announced what he was doing like a sportscaster at a wrestling match, and he laughed and said that the fans were going wild, and after an expanse of time I could not measure, he would pin me to a count of three, pounding the floor with his terrible hand, and declare himself the winner.

Afterward, when he had left and I had rolled over onto my stomach in a hopeless gesture of self-protection, as I sobbed and felt the fibers of the rug moisten under my face, I would fantasize about growing up to be bigger than Jimmy and beating him up mercilessly, so he would feel what I was feeling.

When I was ten we moved to a new neighborhood, and something about that change of place somehow affected Jimmy and the abuse stopped cold. In many other

ways, he was still a pain in the neck, with his domination of the TV and his nasty habit of jerking the sports section out of my hands, his bizarre behavior in public and his constantly provoking my mother to yell at him. But he never touched me again; and I didn't look back. I left behind my revenge fantasies like a bad dream. Jimmy's role in my life was to be someone I moved away from. He was the bad brother; I was the good one, an identity which my mother assigned to me and I eagerly embraced. My mission was to be as unlike Jimmy as humanly possible, not to emulate his sadistic behavior.

Now, at thirteen, sitting outside our cabin in the warm afternoon sun on my personal suicide watch, I could so easily have hoped that Jimmy had gone ahead and killed himself. But I didn't. I just stayed small and quiet and out of the way, and waited to see what would happen, not hoping anything. When, after about an hour, my brother pulled up in his blue and white Buick, I allowed myself the thinnest sliver of relief.

We spent summers at the University of Michigan Fresh Air camp, where my father served as Clinical Director of a program for disturbed and delinquent boys. Well before Jimmy threatened suicide and was hospitalized in a psychiatric unit in Ann Arbor, I was aware of the irony that my father had a son who was deeply disturbed.

But camp had always been a respite for all four of us from the troubles that beset my family the rest of the year when we were at home in Detroit. My father was in his element, doing work that he loved and too engrossed to get sidetracked into fighting with my mother. Besides, we had our meals in the huge dining hall filled with campers and staff, our cabin was in earshot of a women's dorm up the hill, and these benign social facts of community life helped to keep us on good behavior. Camp was the only place I can remember my mother being happy, as she spent her days at the waterfront sunbathing and chatting with other staff wives. And at camp, Jimmy kept his hands off me.

That summer of 1962 had started with Jimmy bringing David out with us for the first few days before the campers would arrive. Neither of us had ever had a friend visit before. I was aware that Jimmy was gay (not the word we used then); I knew this because my parents knew and talked about it freely in front of me. But it didn't occur to

me, during the time his friend was with us at camp, that David might be his boyfriend. The living presence of a same-sex relationship, the tenderness and pain of longing and rejection between two boys—all of us together in one small cabin—was beyond my imagination.

David was a pleasant guy, polite to my parents and nicer to me than I had any reason to expect. He and I practiced golf shots on the vacant athletic field, and he reassured me that I was hitting the ball a good hundred yards with my seven iron. I didn't see anything weird, in any sense, happening between him and my brother. Just the opposite: David's entire visit seemed refreshingly normal. Jimmy, who had gone through high school without any apparent social connections, finally had a friend, a regular guy. Then it was time for David to leave, and Jimmy drove him to Detroit.

When Jimmy returned to camp, not having crashed his car into a tree, he went with our father to the back room of the cabin. They stayed there for a long time. They had to be talking, though I couldn't hear anything. Finally, Dad came out and told my mother and me that he would be taking Jimmy to Ann Arbor to go into the hospital. I don't know if my brother actively agreed to this, having reached a place of desperation from which he wanted help, or if he only acquiesced, feeling he had no other choice. Jimmy wasn't saying anything; I had never seen him so subdued.

My mother, in tears, started gathering his things to pack. She found a marker and as she wrote Jimmy's name on the collars of his shirts, the waistbands of his pants and underwear, she kept saying that she was ruining his clothes.

My brother wrote me bland letters from the hospital. The Tigers were collapsing again in the heat of the summer; did I think they could rally? If not Detroit, did any team stand a chance to catch the Yankees? What was going on at camp? Would I be swimming across the lake? Or had I already? Nothing about what it was like being in the hospital, or how he was coping with having had a breakdown. No acknowledgment of the dissonance between these friendly, superficial letters and the long years when he had terrorized me.

I wasn't happy to be hearing from Jimmy every week or ten days, but I took it in

stride. My overriding feeling was relief to have him out of my daily life. I wrote back, short dutiful letters, matching his tone, despairing of the Tigers, answering his questions about life at camp. And for me, underneath that dissonance between our vanilla correspondence and a history I was desperate to leave behind, there was something I recognized: Jimmy liked me. I always understood this, a barely articulated knowledge from which I tried to shield myself as best I could. All those many times that Jimmy pinned me on the floor and clawed at my stomach, it was a wildly distorted act of affection. There was a reason he wrote to me and not to our parents.

Two and a half years later—after he would get out of the hospital, enroll at U of M, drop out after one semester, and spend the better part of a year sitting in his room at home rocking back and forth while he listened to music on his phonograph; after he would enroll at Wayne, and drop out two semesters later; after he would be called in by the police for questioning following complaints that he was sitting in his car during early morning hours looking into people's homes with his telescope—at age twenty Jimmy would place a collect call to me from somewhere in Ohio, saying he had left the state and not to worry about him. And forty years later, following decades of adult life in which we had almost nothing to do with each other, Jimmy and I would again correspond, this time while he was serving fifteen years in a Michigan prison for child molesting. He would sign each of his letters, “Love, Jimmy.”

Homosexual was one word we used for my brother's attraction to boys. But my parents, both of whom were social workers, also referred to it as Jimmy's symptom. This reflected a conventional wisdom among mental health practitioners, taken to be a kind of enlightenment, that homosexuality did not make a boy like Jimmy bad; it made him sick.

It was a distinction without a difference, given the stigma attached to both sexual “perversion” and mental illness. But in my mother's case, it was hardly even a distinction: she had been calling Jimmy bad for as long as I could remember, out loud and using that exact word, if not about his sexuality then in regard to many other things about him. He was disobedient, causing scene after scene. He was bizarre, engaged

with imaginary playmates, the Pookeeboo Man and the Klockaboong Man, long past the stage of early childhood when this could be considered appropriate. He embarrassed her in public, for example by asking waitresses personal questions or quizzing them about obscure facts when we went to restaurants. To my mother these were devastating events, and later in the car, or at home during yet another incident, she screamed at Jimmy that he was throwing his life away, that he would grow up to dig ditches. During Jimmy's senior year in high school, my mother was called in to speak to his guidance counselor after he had written the lyrics of a rock song, "Mashed Potatoes," on a math test. When she got home she was in a kind of frenzy, shrieking at my brother, mortified that a child of hers could do such a thing.

Mom talked openly to me about Jimmy's problems. She said she discovered his homosexuality by reading his journal when she was cleaning his room, also during his senior year. Growing up in my family I took things to be normal—like my mother cleaning the room of an able bodied seventeen-year-old—that later I would see as signs of dysfunction. Even at the time, though, it seemed creepy to me that my mother had read Jimmy's journal. But she persuaded herself that he left it out in the open because he wanted her to read it. It was his way, she said, of letting her know about his symptom.

The closest town to camp was Pinckney. Its business district consisted of one long block with angle parking. There was a general store; a drug store with a soda fountain, a pinball machine, and racks of comic books; a Gulf gas station with a red coke machine; and La Rosa's bar, where my father took me sometimes and we would get individual-sized pizzas, not slices but small circles topped with pepperoni.

We were sitting at a table at La Rosa's a couple of weeks after Jimmy was hospitalized, my father having a beer with his pizza, me drinking a coke, when he asked me if I wanted to see a therapist.

"Why?" I asked.

"You know, Steven," my father said. "With Jimmy in the hospital, I thought—well." He took a sip of his beer, put the glass down, then raised both hands, palms up. "I

wondered if it would be helpful for you, to have someone to talk to.”

“About Jimmy being in the hospital?”

He nodded, his eyes regarding me from behind his glasses with kindness I could not miss, even in the semi-darkness of the bar. There was a Johnny Cash song, “Walk the Line,” an oldie even then, playing on the jukebox.

“I’m fine, Dad,” I said.

He said okay, he just had wanted to check and to let me know this was an option. If I felt differently at any time I could tell him. I said sure, but I didn’t think I would feel differently. And that was the end of it.

I took my father’s offer as a genuine expression of concern, which it surely was, though I was a little taken aback that he couldn’t see how Jimmy being in the hospital and out of my life was *great* for me—almost to the point of finding the conversation humorous. It was so easy to see my father’s blind spot, and impossible to see my own. I had no clue what a good thing it might have been for me to talk to a therapist about my brother—not because he was in the hospital, but because of everything that had happened before, the vast swath of damage he had inflicted on me for most of my conscious memory.

There was a kind of conspiracy between my father and me to believe I was fundamentally okay. Neither of us could see beyond the immediate question of how I was affected by having a brother in a mental hospital. We explored the terrain of surface wounds, a comfort zone for each of us. It didn’t occur to him or me that there might be internal bleeding.

Several years later, when I was in college hundreds of miles away from Detroit, I would start making efforts to understand my brother’s life from his point of view, a project which has continued episodically ever since. In college, I wrote a play with a character based on Jimmy whose parents view him as sick because he speaks in poetry. In my thirties, I would spend a few years working on an unfinished novel in which the protagonist is a reindeer, born into a human family, his true nature invisible to almost everyone despite the antlers sticking out of his head. Only his mother, in her most

desperate moments, acknowledges his antlers, his hooves, his impossible body; she sends him to a psychiatrist, and eventually puts him in the hospital to be cured of being a reindeer. Just as Jimmy was put into psychiatric care to be cured of being gay.

Who would my brother have become if he had grown up in a family and a society that had embraced healthy gay sexuality? The answer is that I don't know. Homophobia must have played an important role in distorting Jimmy's sexuality. After his debacle with David, Jimmy would become sexually oriented to younger boys, I believe, because of the safety and sense of control he got from his ability to manipulate their acquiescence, as well as the sheer physical attraction. But Jimmy's own humanity was crushed by many forces—a social intolerance of difference that included but went beyond homophobia; a mother who placed impossible demands on him to conform to her desire for a child he could not be, and who consequently made him an object of her rage. It's true that I was raised by the same mother, with very different results. But I had the advantage of being designated the good child, in maximum contrast to the bad older brother. Being good imposed its own costs, but nothing like the burdens suffered by my brother.

If I think of Jimmy being a victim—of homophobia, of a mother who crushed him—as one theme in a fugue, then the second theme, the stark counterpoint, is the incalculable harm he has done. When Jimmy was finally arrested in 2000 for fondling two boys, the police searched his apartment and found bags of boys' underwear, more than a thousand recordings and photos of his sexual encounters with boys, pictures on his walls of adolescent and adult males whipping him, which he acknowledged having paid them to do. These monstrous acts, the suffering my brother caused others and himself, the number of lives he touched, the cascading effects of his abuse: these things make his life an excruciating story about chains of violence, how suffering passes down and passes through so many people who stand in its path, how it can spread like wildfire. Within the broad and awful sweep of Jimmy's acts of abuse and manipulation, there is a long string of personal stories that I don't know but can imagine from my own experience. Stories of boys who are now men and harbor secrets and shame. Men who carry deep and private violations, who are hounded by unbearable feelings which in

some of them undoubtedly erupt and cause further damage. Men who were lured by my brother into sadistic acts, a descent into their worst selves.

Then there are my feelings, the third part of the fugue, feelings I've been playing hide and seek with all my life. I have tried to escape or resolve my feelings by leaving home, by taking Jimmy's point of view, by analyzing how the same person can be victim and perpetrator, by going to therapy, by not thinking about my brother and attending to my own life. For all these efforts, inside me there is still a little boy lying pinned on the floor under the big body that I can never budge, helpless against the onslaught of Jimmy's fingers, his relentless will to dominate me, my world reduced to the burning pain in my gut. Decades after I moved away, when I was back in Detroit for one of my infrequent visits with my family, I was standing next to Jimmy and found myself shaking with rage; the years collapsed, I could feel him all over me and all I wanted was to get him off my body. Becoming a father released an onslaught of feelings tracing back to my childhood abuse that left me barely able to function. I still feel shame at never having said no when Jimmy wanted to wrestle, at having allowed myself to be duped over and over again by his promises to let me win. Now, in my sixties, I work at accepting what seems obviously true, that these feelings are here to stay, that I can't outrun or outflank them, that my task is to find ways to hold and be with the history that lives in me.

When I was a little boy, our house had a vestibule with a coat closet, and on the closet door was a full-length mirror. Sometimes when I had nothing to do and no one else was around, I would stand in front of the mirror and imagine that the boy I saw was not me. He looked a lot like me but he was someone else, standing in the vestibule to a different house. If I moved all the way to the wall on my left and turned my whole body at an angle, I could glimpse into the living room of that other house. I would try to crane myself to see more but there was always a limit. Somewhere in the other house lived a different family, which must include a different brother, always beyond my reach.

Jimmy and I corresponded for several years after he went to prison. It was something I undertook with hugely mixed feelings. How to strike a tenable balance between some kind of compassion for my brother and an allegiance to the vulnerable

part of myself that still carried wounds Jimmy inflicted when we were children? I don't think I was ever able to adequately answer that question.

The first letters reminded me of our correspondence when Jimmy was in the hospital in 1962—they were mostly chatter. Jimmy described the daily prison regimen, but said nothing about what it meant to him, emotionally, psychologically, to be there. Eventually I asked what he thought about the things he had done that led to his imprisonment. He acknowledged having made mistakes but in the next breath dismissed it, writing that gaining insight in prison is like locking the barn door after the horse is out.

By this point it had become important, maybe necessary, for me to communicate honestly to Jimmy about what he had done to me. I wrote him a long letter in which I described how he had abused me, and that he had done this many times over a period of years. I told him that he had injured me psychologically in ways I had never fully recovered from. I said that I thought he had also wounded himself, even more deeply than me, by treating me so badly. I told him I believed he had the capacity to learn from mistakes and use the learning to heal old wounds.

In Jimmy's response, he said he didn't remember events from our childhood as well as I did, though he didn't deny or dispute my account. Then he wrote, "Sorry if I overdid it." That was it, five words, a throwaway line. I felt like I'd run into a stone wall. It didn't surprise me, if anything it was what I had expected, and still I was furious.

I don't think that committing monstrous acts makes someone a monster. I believe there is a core of humanity in my brother. But it's also true that I don't know how to reach it.

On Saturday afternoons during the summer of 1962, my parents would drive to Ann Arbor, twenty miles from camp, to visit Jimmy and meet with a hospital social worker. For days after each visit my mother would berate the social worker—that vile woman, she called her, the nerve of her to suggest there was something my mother might have done to cause Jimmy's problems. "I was nothing but good to that boy," she would say over and over again, to my father, to me, to the air.

Most of the Saturdays I stayed at our cabin. I would listen to a Tigers game on the radio, or I would read. I enjoyed the quiet of the surrounding woods and the time to myself. But as dusk would gather and my parents had still not returned, I found myself anxious that they had gotten into an accident and were dead. My father was a careless driver, but I didn't worry about him crashing the car at other times. Only on those Saturdays. I sat in our cabin holding an image of myself as an orphan. What would my life be then? I didn't really believe this would happen, but I couldn't shake the fear. I waited, straining to hear the sound of my father's car. Then they would pull up, and I would let out a breath, and my life would go on.



Steven Wineman's novel *The Therapy Journal* is forthcoming from Golden Antelope Press. He is the author of *The Politics of Human Services* (South End Press) and *Power-Under: Trauma and Nonviolent Social Change* (www.TraumaAndNonviolence.com). His work has most recently appeared in *The Cincinnati Review*, *Blue Lyra Review*, *The Bangalore Review*, *Catapult*, and *The Furious Gazelle*. Steve retired in 2014 after working in community mental health for thirty-five years.