

# Family Bed

**by Kit Reed**

—We have to go!

Like a mouse with the cat crouched outside waiting, my sister burrows deeper. There is cocoa on her breath. —Why, when it's so nice?

—I mean it, Beth. I jab her fat flank. We are too old to be in here. Frankly, there are crumbs.

—Niice. Bethany, who Mother named after something I don't know about, drops into sleep like a stone into a pond.

Oh, sure it's nice in here. Too nice. Soft and warm and seductive. —Mom, other kids don't go to bed at ...

—Shh, Sarah. Can a person thunder in a whisper? Mother can. —We're the Dermotts. This is who we are.

The six of us are, like, trapped inside an idea she had. We used to be seven, but Darryl went out one night and that's all I know. Father says Darryl is fighting for our country in Lebanon.

—Sarah? My one remaining brother mutters, —Cover for me, dude.

My heart lurches. —Bill, you're not ...

He claps his hand over my mouth.

The word comes out in a little puff anyway, —leaving.

But he is. Bill bundles pillows into a guy-shaped heap as Mother shuts the book and turns off the light with that hateful snap, like she is shutting the lid on us. During the ritual night-nights, he slithers out like a ferret; outside a car waits— five cute guys giggling and whispering; they are heading for the mall. I grab his hand. —Don't go.

—Children! Mom's hiss breaks the connection between us. Am I the only one who hears him snaking across the rug? Outside the car starts up and my heart goes after it. There are kids at the mall, cute guys and loud music. I poke Bethany. —We can't go on like this.

But we do. You see us on TV, you see us in the magazines, the happy Dermotts, smiling, smiling, smiling, and you think, how wonderful: sweet family, together here in the dark, what closer bond?

Well, listen.

Here in the dark.

Get it?

Lights out after bedtime cocoa, that means, whether or not you are sleepy. No music at bedtime, no I-Pod, no whispering; no squirming and no humming please, you know it gets on my nerves. No Gameboy, children, and no TV, especially not now, and definitely no talking after the half hour officially designated for sharing in which we each have to say something embarrassing to make it stop, and as for cell calls or instant messaging, forget it. You get grounded, or worse.

—Mom, it's only nine p.m.!

—Finish your cocoa. It's nine o'clock, she says in Channel Five news tones. Grimly, she adds what I know by heart. —and I know where my children are. Night-night, children. Kisses, everybody. Mmm, now you. Mmmmm. And you. And you— is she counting? —Sleep tight.

*Mother, I'm sixteen years old!*

Nice, you think, but only because our mother has you brainwashed. We have the perfect mother. Everybody says so on TV. We are a media phenom: magazines, supermarket rags. *How perfect*, you think when she gets all gooshy about family stuff, which she does on every talk show between here and East Wherever, *I wish we were close like that. Snug as bunnies in the nest.*

Do you hear yourselves?

—Family bonding, Mother says with that smug, perfect smile, while Daddy nods gravely into whichever camera, yaaas, yaaas. —This is our private, special time.

Mom, everybody I care about is down at the mall!

But I am jabbed by knees and elbows and sandpaper heels on the special big bed Daddy built for us when we outgrew the super King, six Dermotts locked down for the night. Together. Again. Well, all but one, and this is what they are all ignoring, like: under cover of darkness, my one remaining big brother has fled.

I still miss Darryl. I love Billy and I'm scared for him, well, a little bit. But I am also pissed. Why should he have all the fun? He's malling with slutty Jacie Peterson, for all I know they are going to have sex, and me? I love Tommy, why can't I ... It's for his own good, I think, but I am lying to myself. —Mom.

—Shhhshh, Sarah, night-night.

—Mo-om!

She probably already knows. She'll blow it off just like everything else that doesn't fit her glowing picture, like, pretend it isn't happening. When I grab her toe she says, —Howard ...

Dad plants one foot on my shoulder. —Sarah, that's enough.

—But Dad! Bill is ... God only knows what he's doing and it is killing me. —Mother, he's gone!

—Honey, he probably had to ... Embarrassed pause. —You know.

—Pee? That's crap and you know it, he's ...

—Language!

I go on anyway. —down at the mall.

So she has to face the fact. —Not for long. Howard!

He yawns. —Don't worry, honey, he'll be back. Sleep tight.

—I said, Howard! When she gets that tone, it scares me shit.

—Mom, I was only kidding! *Billy, what have I done to you?*

Dad lunges up in a plume of bedcovers like Moby Dick spouting. —Okay, okay!

The minute it's done I feel bad. It's after Lights Out so we don't see our father dress. We don't see what he slides out of the drawer and snaps on his belt and we don't really know what he'll do when he catches Bill; we only know that it's happened before and Bill comes back to bed shaken but not changed. It happens and we never speak of it. We never speak of anything bad. It would wreck the show. Dad settles into his boots: *thump*.

I jump out of bed.—Daddy, I'll come with. Save him somehow.

Mother hauls me back by the hair. —It's a jungle out there.

—But I have to help!

—It isn't safe.

—Mom! I want to hit or yell bullshit, but we don't hit or yell in our family. We aren't allowed to whine.

—All the other kids ...

—Lie down. I'll read another chapter as an extra treat.

Last month it was *Pilgrim's Progress* and *Moby-Dick*, she has a great reading voice but the quizzes after are hard. Tonight it's *Don Quixote*, after which she reprises the night-nights and kills the light, after which we are expected to lie still until sleep rescues us, at least for now.

Like a person could sleep with Bill gone and Daddy out there, armed with God knows what. Plus. Beth's elbow is digging into my left boob and Dad's toenail scraped my neck when he left. Mom changes the sheets every day so there are never cocoa stains, but there are still crumbs. Probably this bed thing was cute when we were babies, but, Mom! Plus you and Daddy hog the pillows with Baby Ronnie jammed between you; God only knows when you had sex.

For the sake of our mother, we sleep in the belly of the beast, and in exchange for our freedom? We're famous on TV.

Tomorrow Vandella LeSpire is shooting the *Inside Everything* show from our very own bed. Mother's face is creamed to East Judas in preparation, and her hair is tweaked into cornrows on which, let me tell you, the beads and things look pretty lame. I mean, you can see the scalp and her hair is scruntly dyed blond. Cornrows are supposed to show that what we are doing is very next, like: nothing retro about Family Bed. Mother wants people to see us on TV and go, "how wonderful." What a good mother she is, to do this for her kids. See how safe and happy they are, bonding in the Family Bed.

Did I mention that's what she calls it? Family Bed.

Also known as Sleep Sharing. Anything to euphemize this fluffy jail. And you are wondering how a tenth-grader like me knows big, long, arcane words like arcane and euphemize? Tomorrow you'll hear Mother expatiating (another, and another!), earnestly facing the camera with her cornrows yanked back in a mini-lift that's supposed to make her look young. —The Family Bed is a great vocabulary builder, she'll say, count on it. —Plus the sense of security. My children never doubt that they are loved. Then

she'll quote the Bible. I've stared at this St. Luke guy and I still don't get it:

*Then the one inside answers, "Don't bother me. The door is already locked, and my children are with me in bed. I can't get up and give you anything."*

Sounds pretty mingy to me.

Mother will tell you we Dermotts owe our warm hearts and fantastic vocabularies to our execrable, life-changing private time in this paragon, my prison: the Family Bed.

Have I mentioned the farting and scratching, the nervosity that comes when you're tucked in with your dad and your brothers and one disappears; where *is* Darryl, anyway? To say nothing of the crumbs. It may sound superficial to you, but holy Cremora, when the earth's last picture is painted, there are the crumbs.

Later. Dad heaves Bill onto the bed. I hear compressed sobs. I touch his shoulder and he flinches. Is that blood drying? I wait until they are asleep. Then I murmur, —Billy, I'm *sorry*.

—Do you *know* what you did to me? His voice is a dry rasp.

—Oh God, Bill, I didn't know he was going to ...

Then he scares me. —You know, Darryl wasn't the first.

—*What?*

—You were too little to remember Howie, he says. —Howard Junior. Don't go thinking he was the first.

—The first what, Billy. The first *what?*

But Mother is stirring and he covers my mouth. —Tonight I got the ultimatum, he says in normal tones because he is beyond caring what comes down. Then Dad clears his throat and instead of finishing, Bill rolls over with a little groan; his back is to me and that's the end of that. But he says, like he wants them to hear him, —They're just keeping me here for the show.

So weird, sitting here in my jammies, drinking cocoa in the middle of the day.

—It began, Mother is telling Vandella LeSpire, —when Billy here was eentsy. Isn't Vandella surprised to find us all packed in bed in the middle of the day just to tape this show? Doesn't the woman see the *weird* in Mother's smile? —I love babies, they're so little and helpless and I love having them near. Mother's voice is soft and cosy, like it's bedtime already. —Billy's my oldest, you know.

Wait a minute. What about Darryl? On TV we kids are not allowed to speak. There's stuff I haven't told you about, like why they won't let us go near the cellar, which to tell the truth I am not exactly clear on, or the welts I saw on Billy's back when it got light.

—He'll always be my baby, Mother says while next to me, Bill's teeth grind until his molars crack.

—Aren't we all helpless babies in this world? My eentsy sweet Billy, all alone in a big, dark crib, of course he cried, wouldn't you? Mother's voice is full, fat and soft. —I brought him into the bed with us and it was beautiful. So you see, that was the beginning. Four lovely children, we all sleep together, and that's what keeps us close.

I mutter, —What about Darryl, Mom, but ... Worse: Billy is growling, —*What about Howie and them?*

Mother mashes us down. Then she gives Vandella that gooshy, luminous mother's smile. —I love my babies so much!

Vandella thinks to ask, —What happens when they grow up, Mrs. Dermott?

Mother is like a lighthouse, beaming radiant love. —They'll always be my babies, no matter what. She tickles Bill's cheek. It is obscene. —So little and helpless and sweet.

Shuttered in performance quality mascara, Vandella's eyes mist over at the thought. All you poor women with babies are looking at my mother and feeling inadequate, and us? Don't ask.

—This is our crucial bonding time, Mother tells Vandella in that sweet, level tone that means buy this or you die, —Bad mothers don't care what happens to their children as long as they're quiet. Good mommies keep their babies in the Family Bed.

Freaks. She has turned us into freaks.

At school the day after one of these shows there is the ritual shunning. For Bethy and Ronnie (did I mention "baby" Ronnie is in first grade?) there is also ritual name-calling followed by the ritual sticking of gum into their hair. Moms may fall for this crap because motherhood makes women feel anxious and inadequate, but, kids . . . kids see the dark circles under our eyes and they know. They recognize the cowed look and the pallor of frustration from time served in Family Bed where there's no argument and nobody gets a night off. —If Father and I have to be here every night, Mother says to us, and I feel the sharp edge of her resentment, —the least you can do is be here and be glad!

But none of this is conveyed to Vandella, who can't see past the forced smiles on our shining faces, and none of this filters into the pink fog that occludes the minds of new moms who are so anxious to do everything right that they will do anything, even something this heinously wrong.

When I am old enough to have a psychiatrist I will have one thing to thank Mother for— enough words to express what she's done to us. That is, if I live long enough to get a psychiatrist.

Then my brother Bill rises up on his elbows, grimacing to get Vandella's attention. Dad already has an elbow yoked around his neck so only I hear what comes out: —Ask her about the others. And faster than I can tell you, Bill disappears. Pretending they are in a father-son bear hug, Dad yanks him back under the giant duvet that covers us all. Vandella is extremely gracious. She promises to edit it out of the tape before this airs, but I have my suspicions. Don't these people lie, sometimes, to get the story that they want? Vandella thanks us and says she will be back Thursday to finish up live on her early morning show, interviewing the happy Dermotts as they spill out of the house. Mother has already picked out our wardrobes for the show.

. . . . .

Billy is gone. When we woke up he wasn't here. My sisters and I had to wear hotwired E bracelets to school today, with angora socks pulled up to hide the bulge: make one wrong step and the screech of pain will rend the ears of a stone lion. When we came to bed tonight nobody took them off. Billy is gone and Mother is pregnant again. Or she's thinking about it. I heard them talking in the night. When I got up to pee I hit something sharp.

—Arghhh!

—Sarah, what's the matter?

—I was only going to the bathroom! Razor wire rings the bed.

—Father will take you, Mother says. She uses her special voice, the one that rots stainless steel.

—Howard!

—First Bill and now razor wire. Where is Billy anyway?

Mother gasps as if I've asked where are the space aliens. —Who?

I let Dad lead me through the gap in the wire and see me to the bathroom. I exchange extra night-nights to prove I have returned to the Family Bed, but I am thinking. I am thinking hard.

Billy is in the house somewhere, I know it. I found one of his Hyperbolic space shoes under the bed this morning when I got up, and I'm not so sure about Mother or Dad but I do know my one remaining big brother. Without his Hyperbolic space shoes, Billy doesn't leave the house. A message for me, I think, when I find it. This is a message for me. Inside there is a scrap of paper. Block letters in Bill's yellow highlighter. DON'T DRINK IT.

I am scared, but I am excited. Billy may be gone from the Family Bed, but I know he's somewhere in the house. They've put him in Solitary or something, and all I have to do is find out where. I'll break him out and together he and I will run away.

As it turns out, this kid Tommy at school that I'm in love with? Tommy loves me back. Where I am in Arts he is on the Vocational track, which means he is an electronic genius. Disarms my e-bracelet via his PDA. I am still wearing it so when I check in at the Family Bed promptly tonight at 8:30, nobody knows it no longer works. I faint for the phone and then give Mother a gratifying squeal to prove she's put me in my place. Finesse the cocoa and try not to fall asleep during *Don Quixote*. Snuggle with Beth and Ronnie, who's been moved down to the foot of the bed to make room for the new baby to come.

—Night-night. Mother is rosier than a grotto full of Madonnas: pregnant already? She is sweet, sweeter than ever. -Now, sleep tight; I want you to look your best tomorrow. Remember, Vandella's going to have us on her show.

She is going to interview the six-er, five of us happy Dermotts in bright sunshine, although I already know that we kids never get to talk, and Billy? He is fighting for our country in Iran.

*I love them best when they're still babies, Mother says, so little and helpless and sweet.*

It's going to be a long night.

Before Dad falls asleep I make him lead me to the bathroom again. I've seen the gap in the razor wire by daylight, but I need to know how to navigate it in the dark. I don't really have to pee. Instead I stick my head under the basin. Ever so quietly, I tap the bathroom pipes. Clinkety *clink*. I hold my breath. Then I know. All I have to do is follow the plumbing down to the basement. That's Bill answering from somewhere deep under the house: clinkety *clink*.

I let Dad lead me back to bed. Then I wait. There is some shifting under the covers: Mother. There is some complaining: Dad. She must be hot to get herself that nice new baby.

Uggg. She wants him to Do It with her right here.

—Not tonight, Dad says. Then he uses his motivational voice. —You want to be pretty for the audience

tomorrow, right? Just think: *Inside Everything*. Us, live, on global TV.

Ugly, what she says to him next. I stuff Kleenex in my ears and wait for the parents to drop off. It isn't hard to get out of bed, really, once you set your mind to it; that isn't the problem. What I have to do next is very hard.

I have to break into the cellar. It's clear that's where they have him, because it's the one part of the house outside the living room (did I mention the white wall-to-wall carpet or the clear plastic slipcovers on the white furniture?) where we kids are forbidden to go.

The kitchen by night is a spooky place. Shafts of moonlight polishing Mother's spotless floor. Naturally I assume the door to the basement will be locked, but, surprise, it isn't seriously locked, it's only trip-it-with-your-credit-card locked. I do it with Dad's discarded Discover card. When she decided we were spending too much, Mom took it away from him and I happened to see where it went. I pull it out from under the Rubbermaid sheet in the kitchen silver drawer, which is also where Mother keeps her Maglite. Good thing. When I slide the Discover card down the door and it falls open, I expect the cellar to smell bad, don't know why, just the vibe I guess, all that: *Don't go down there, children, or else*.

Instead the air smells like flowers. Flowers and, as it turns out, my brother's sweat. I flick the Maglite around; it's bigger down there than I thought. At the bottom of the steps I whisper, —Bill?

I locate him by the sound. It's the sound you make when they've duct taped your mouth.

—My God, Billy, what have they done to you?

I find him at the entrance to the chamber under our living room, they have duct taped him to a post. He's taped to a post, and in the basement room behind him there is a bed that looks a lot like ours and the glow from my Maglite is dim but I make out figures in the bed and they are smiling, smiling, they look like wax replicas of Darryl—Darryl!—and two people I don't recognize.

—Billy, what happened?

He grimaces. I pull the tape off his mouth and he gasps. —I thought you'd never come.

Quick as I can manage, I start unwinding, walking around and around him as the tape peels off his neck, his shoulders. When his arms are free, I stop. —What's going on? What's that? I am looking at the bed.

—Oh, that. He gives me this strange smile. —They look perfect, right?

—What is it? Why are you here?

Bill smiles that warm Billy smile: —They haven't gotten to me yet.

—But you look terrible.

—When they do, he says, and this terrifies me, —I'll look like them.

I glance at the trio of statues or whatever they are. So pretty lying in the bed, so still. —What, Bill. What?

—I told you, they haven't gotten to me yet.

Come to think of it the figures in the bed don't look like statues, they look more like Grandma in the coffin. Perfect. Shiny. Clean. I bite my wrist. —Oh my God, what are we going to do?

—Don't worry, my brother Bill says: brave Billy. —I knew this was coming. I have a plan.

Elsewhere in the house I hear noises, or I think I do. I imagine Mother feeling around for me with those horny feet, I imagine her right foot making a swath over the empty sheet in my sector of the bed: I could swear I hear her growling —*Howard*— I wait for the terrifying *thump* as Dad lands in his boots. I imagine he is crossing the bedroom now, pulling the stun gun out of the dresser, I think I hear him pounding down the stairs, and when he finds me, what will happen next? My face drains white all the way down to the knuckles; you bet I am freaking. —What are we going to do?

—Chill, he says. Bill's arms are free, and he continues unwinding, but he can't bend over far enough to free his legs and feet. —First you have to get me down.

In spite of the fact that I am scared shit we will be discovered, I do as he says. I turn on the overhead, and, as instructed, I unwind the duct tape. As instructed, I start at the feet. They must have used a gallon of it. It is taking forever to unwind, and every time I go behind the post I have to look at the bed and the three whatever they are lying there in perfect peace, and I am so frightened that my whisper sounds more like a wheeze. —They're coming, I know it, they're going to catch us and when they do they'll put us in that bed with poor Darryl and ... who are the other two?

—Howie, I think. We have been whispering, but all of a sudden Bill is talking in normal tones. —And Duane. Did we know we had another big brother?

—Shh, they'll hear you!

Too loud. He is talking too loud. —I think the third one's Duane.

I am jittering, frantic. —Billy, shut up, they'll hear us. Hurry, they're coming!

But with that smile my brother just keeps on unwinding the tape. —No, he says. —No they aren't.

—How do you know?

The smile melts into an amazing, joyful grin. —You didn't drink the cocoa, right?

Smart Bill. My brother the genius. —How ...

—I told you I knew this was coming. I doctored the cocoa mix yesterday, before they got up.

—Billy, you didn't *kill* them or anything.

—Who, me? My big brother is grinning, grinning; he can't stop. —Hell no, they're *family*. They're sleeping like baby bunnies, or mice in their sweet little nest. Now hurry, he says. —We've got lots to do before Vandella's crew gets here to set up for the shoot.

. . . . .

So we have lots to do, but thanks to Mother's 9 p.m. bedtime we have plenty of time to do it in. By the time Bill and I come up into the kitchen it's barely midnight. It's just that time passes so mortal slowly when you're lying awake in the dark. The first thing we do is pour the rest of the dry cocoa into the Dispos-al and turn on every light in the house—well, except in the bedroom, where the four happy Dermotts are in a profound, drugged sleep. In the morning we have to drag our sleeping family



downstairs and out through the French doors in the living room and next we'll move what I guess is all that remains of our three big brothers—Duane, we hardly knew ye!—up from the basement and lay them out next to the others on the grass, but before we do that we will pull all the bedding off Father's super-king that he had specially built for us because the mattress is way too heavy for us to move. We'll lay out the bedding on our front lawn to make a simulacrum—gotta love that vocabulary!—of the bed. This is where the TV crew will find Mother and her *they'll always be my babies*, all of them sweet and clean and sleeping snugly under the duvet with their heads on the fluffy down pillows out in broad daylight right in front of the house. When she comes for the live telecast, Vandella LeSpire will have so many questions to ask Mother about the three big brothers, or what's left of them, she'll have so many questions about what Mother and Dad did to Howie and Darryl and Duane, and how they processed them to keep them sleeping like babies, that she won't notice that two living Dermott children are missing. See, once we're done setting up, Bill and I are running away on Dad's Discover card.

We're getting out of this paragon, our prison, this great American institution that mothers everywhere fear and admire and will—in the course of one broadcast—come to excoriate. They won't come looking for Billy and me. Not after they see this ostensibly wonderful mothering tool exposed for what it is. Mother laid out with Dad and her babies in broad daylight, just exactly how she wants them. Inert.

Safe and obedient. Snuggled down in the Family Bed.

The End