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Opening Extract from...

The Family Fang

Written by Kevin Wilson

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the family fang

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for Leigh Anne

It is grotesque how they go on
loving us, we go on loving them

The effrontery, barely imaginable,
of having caused us. And of how.

Their lives: surely
we can do better than that.

— WILLIAM MEREDITH, "PARENTS"

"It wasn't real; it was a stage set, a stagy stage set."

— DOROTHY B. HUGHES, *IN A LONELY PLACE*

prologue

crime and punishment, 1985
artists: caleb and camille fang

Mr. and Mrs. Fang called it art. Their children called it mischief. "You make a mess and then you walk away from it," their daughter, Annie, told them. "It's a lot more complicated than that, honey," Mrs. Fang said as she handed detailed breakdowns of the event to each member of the family. "But there's a simplicity in what we do as well," Mr. Fang said. "Yes, there is that, too," his wife replied. Annie and her younger brother, Buster, said nothing. They were driving to Huntsville, two hours away, because they did not want to be recognized. Anonymity was a key element of the performances; it allowed them to set up the scenes without interruption from people who would be expecting mayhem.

As he sped down the highway, eager for expression, Mr. Fang stared at his son, six years old, in the rearview mirror. "Son," he said. "You want to go over your duties for today? Make sure we have everything

figured out?" Buster looked at the rough sketches in pencil that his mother had drawn on his piece of paper. "I'm going to eat big handfuls of jelly beans and laugh really loud." Mr. Fang nodded and then smiled with satisfaction. "That's it," he said. Mrs. Fang then suggested that Buster might throw some of the jelly beans in the air, which everyone in the van agreed was a good idea. "Annie," Mr. Fang continued, "what's your responsibility?" Annie was looking out the window, counting the number of dead animals they had passed, already up to five. "I'm the inside man," she said. "I tip off the employee." Mr. Fang smiled again. "And then what?" he asked. Annie yawned. "Then I get the heck out of there." When they finally arrived at the mall, they were ready for what would come next, the strangeness they would create for such a brief moment that people would suspect it had only been a dream.

The Fangs walked into the crowded mall and dispersed, each pretending the others did not exist. Mr. Fang sat in the food court and tested the focus on the tiny camera hidden in a pair of bulky eyeglasses that made him break out in a rash around his eyes whenever he wore them. Mrs. Fang walked with great purpose through the mall, swinging her arms with a wild, exaggerated motion in order to create the impression that she might be slightly crazy. Buster fished pennies out of the fountains, his pockets damp and overflowing with coinage. Annie bought a temporary tattoo from a kiosk that sold absurd, worthless knickknacks and then went to the restroom to rub the design onto her bicep, a skull with a rose between its teeth. She rolled the sleeve of her T-shirt back down over her arm to cover the tattoo and then sat in one of the bathroom stalls until the alarm on her watch beeped. It was time, and all four of them walked slowly to the bulk-candy shop for the thing that would occur only if each one of them did exactly what was required.

After five minutes of wandering aimlessly through the aisles of the store, Annie tugged on the shirt of the teenage boy behind the register.

"You wanna buy something, little girl?" he asked. "You need me to reach something for you? Because I'd be happy to do it." He was so kind that Annie felt slightly ashamed for what she would do next. "I'm not a tattletale," she told him. He looked confused and then leaned closer to her. "What's that, miss?" he asked. "I don't mean to be a tattletale," she said, "but that woman is stealing candy." She pointed at her mother, who was standing by a dispenser filled with jelly beans, a giant silver scoop in her hand. "That woman?" the boy asked. Annie nodded. "You did a good thing today, little girl," he said and handed her a lollipop that also doubled as a whistle as he went to get the manager. Annie unwrapped the lollipop and chomped down on it, the shards of sugar scratching the inside of her mouth, as she leaned against the counter. When she was finished, she took another lollipop from the display and put it in her pocket for later. When the manager and the employee returned from the back room, she walked out of the store and did not turn around, already assured of the scene that would transpire.

Having filled her fifth bag of jelly beans, Mrs. Fang cautiously looked around before stowing the unsealed bag away with the others beneath her jacket. She placed the scoop back in its holder and whistled as she walked down the aisle, feigning interest in several other candies, before heading toward the entrance of the store. Just as she stepped outside, she felt a hand on her arm and heard a man's voice say, "Excuse me, lady, but I think we've got a small problem here." Though she would be disappointed later, she let the faint hint of a smile creep across her face.

Mr. Fang watched as his wife shook her head and wore a look of disbelief as the manager pointed at the ridiculous bulges in her clothes, the contraband hidden so poorly that it added a wonderful absurdity to the proceedings. His wife then shouted, "I'm a diabetic, for crying out loud; I can't even eat candy." At this point, several people in the store turned toward the commotion. Mr. Fang moved as close as he could to the action just as his wife screamed, "This is unconsti-

tutional! My father plays golf with the governor. I'll just—" and that was when, with a slight adjustment in Mrs. Fang's posture, the bags of candy spilled open.

Buster ran past his father and watched as hundreds of jelly beans fell like hailstones from his mother's clothes and click-clacked against the floor of the shop. He knelt at his mother's feet and yelled, "Free candy!" as he shoved giant handfuls of the jelly beans, which were still spilling out of his mother, into his mouth. Two other children took up residence beside him, as if his mother was a piñata just broken open, and scrabbled for their own claim on the candy as Buster laughed with a scratchiness in his voice that made him sound like a much older person. By now, a crowd of about twenty people had gathered around the scene and his mother began to sob. "I can't go back to jail," she shouted, and Buster stood up from the mess of jelly beans on the floor and ran away. He realized that he had forgotten to throw the candy into the air and knew it would not go unmentioned when the family gathered to discuss the success of the event.

Thirty minutes later, the Fang children met up at the fountains and waited for their mother to extricate herself from the consequences of her ridiculous actions. She was probably being held by mall security until their father could convince them to let her off with a warning. He would show them their résumés, the clippings from the *New York Times* and *ArtForum*. He would say things like *public performance art* and *choreographed spontaneity* and *real life squared*. They would pay for the candy and most likely be banned from the mall. That night, they would go home and eat dinner and imagine all the people at the mall telling their friends and family about this strange and beautiful thing that happened that afternoon.

"What if they have to go to jail?" Buster asked his sister. She seemed to consider the possibility and then shrugged. "We'll just hitchhike back home and wait for them to escape." Buster agreed that this was a sound plan. "Or," he offered, "we could live here in the mall and Mom and

Dad wouldn't know where to find us." Annie shook her head. "They need us," she said. "Nothing works without you and me."

Buster emptied his pockets of the pennies he had taken earlier and lined them up in two equal stacks. He and his sister then took turns tossing them back into the fountains, each making wishes that they hoped were simple enough to come true.

chapter one

As soon as Annie walked onto the set, someone informed her that she would need to take her top off.

"Excuse me?" Annie said.

"Yeah," the woman continued, "we're gonna be shooting this one with no shirt on."

"Who are you?" Annie asked.

"I'm Janey," the woman said.

"No," Annie said, feeling as if maybe she had walked onto the wrong set. "What is your job on the movie?"

Janey frowned. "I'm the script supervisor. We've talked several times. Remember, a few days ago I was telling you about the time my uncle tried to kiss me?"

Annie did not remember this at all. "So, you supervise the script?" Annie asked.

Janey nodded, smiling.

"My copy of the script does not mention nudity for this scene."

"Well," Janey said. "It's kind of open-ended, I think. It's a judgment call."

"Nobody said anything when we rehearsed it," Annie said.

Janey simply shrugged.

"And Freeman said I'm supposed to take my top off?" Annie asked.

"Oh yeah," Janey said. "First thing this morning, he comes over to me and says, 'Tell Annie that she needs to be topless in the next shot.' "

"Where is Freeman right now?"

Janey looked around. "He said he was going to find someone to procure a very specific kind of sandwich."

Annie walked into an empty stall in the bathroom and called her agent. "They want me to get naked," she said. "Absolutely not," said Tommy, her agent. "You're nearly an A-list actress; you cannot do full frontal nudity." Annie clarified that it wasn't full frontal but a topless scene. There was a pause on the other end of the line. "Oh, well that's not so bad," Tommy said.

"It wasn't in the script," Annie said.

"Lots of things that aren't in the script turn up in movies," said Tommy. "I remember a story about this movie where an extra in the background has his dick hanging out of his pants."

"Yes," Annie replied. "To the detriment of the movie."

"In that case, yes," Tommy answered.

"So, I'm going to say that I'm not going to do it."

Her agent once again paused. In the background, she thought she could hear the sounds of a video game being played.

"That would not be a good idea. This could be an Oscar-winning role and you want to make waves?"

"You think this is an Oscar-winning role?" Annie asked.

"It depends on how strong the other contenders are next year," he answered. "It's looking like a thin year for women's roles, so, yeah, it

could happen. Don't go by me, though. I didn't think you'd get nominated for *Date Due* and look what happened."

"Okay," Annie said.

"My gut feeling is to take off your top and maybe it'll only be in the director's cut," her agent said.

"That is not my gut feeling," Annie replied.

"Fair enough, but nobody likes a difficult actor."

"I better go," Annie said.

"Besides, you have a great body," Tommy said just as Annie hung up on him.

She tried to call Lucy Wayne, who had directed her in *Date Due,* for which Annie had been nominated for an Oscar; she had played a shy, drug-addicted librarian who gets involved with skinheads, with tragic results. It was a movie that did not summarize well, Annie knew this, but it had jump-started her career. She trusted Lucy, had felt during the entire shoot that she was in capable hands; if Lucy had told her to take her top off, she would not have questioned it.

Of course, Lucy did not answer her phone and Annie felt that this was the kind of situation that did not translate well to a voice mail message. Her one steady, calming influence was out of range and so she had to make do with the options that were left to her.

Her parents thought it was a great idea. "I think you should go completely nude," her mother said. "Why only the top?" Annie heard her father yell in the background, "Tell them you'll do it if the male lead takes off his pants."

"He's right, you know," her mother said. "Female nudity isn't controversial anymore. Tell the director that he needs to film a penis if he wants to get a reaction."

"Okay, I'm beginning to think that you don't understand the problem," Annie said.

"What's the problem, honey?" her mother asked.

"I don't want to take my top off. I don't want to take my pants off. I definitely don't want Ethan to take his pants off. I want to film the scene the way we rehearsed it."

"Well, that sounds pretty boring to me," her mother said.

"That does not surprise me," Annie said and once again hung up the phone thinking that she had chosen to surround herself with people who were, for lack of a better term, retarded.

A voice from the next stall said, "If I were you, I'd tell them to give me an extra hundred thousand bucks to show my tits."

"That's nice," Annie said. "Thanks for the advice."

When she called her brother, Buster said that she should climb out the window of the bathroom and run away, which was his solution to most problems. "Just get the hell out of there before they talk you into doing something that you don't want to do," he said.

"I mean, I'm not crazy, right? This is weird?" Annie asked.

"It's weird," Buster reassured her.

"No one says a thing about nudity and then, the day of the shoot, I'm supposed to take off my top?" she said.

"It's weird," Buster said again. "It's not totally surprising, but it's weird."

"It's not surprising?"

"I remember hearing that on Freeman Sanders's first movie, he filmed an improvised scene where some actress gets humped by a dog, but it got cut out of the movie."

"I never heard that," Annie said.

"Well, I doubt it's something that Freeman would bring up in meetings with you," Buster responded.

"So what should I do?" Annie asked.

"Get the hell out of there," Buster shouted.

"I can't just leave, Buster. I have contractual obligations. It's a good movie, I think. It's a good part, at least. I'll just tell them I'm not going to do the scene."

A voice from outside the stall, Freeman's voice, said, "You're not going to do the scene?"

"Who the hell was that?" Buster asked.

"I better go," Annie said.

When she opened the door, Freeman was leaning against a sink, eating a sandwich that looked like three sandwiches stacked on top of each other. He was wearing his standard uniform: a black suit and tie with a wrinkled white dress shirt, sunglasses, and ratty old sneakers with no socks. "What's the problem?" he said.

"How long have you been out here?" Annie asked.

"Not long," he said. "The continuity girl said you were in the bathroom and people were starting to wonder if you were just scared about taking off your top or if you were in here doing coke. I thought I'd come in and find out."

"Well, I'm not doing coke."

"I'm a little disappointed," he said.

"I'm not going to take my top off, Freeman," she said.

Freeman looked around for a place to set his sandwich and, apparently realizing he was in a public restroom, opted to hold on to it. "Okay, okay," he said. "I'm just the director and writer; what do I know?"

"It doesn't make any sense," Annie yelled. "Some guy I've never met before comes by my apartment and I just stand there with my tits out?"

"I don't have time to explain the complexities of it to you," Freeman said. "Basically, it's about control and Gina would want to control the situation. And this is how she would do it."

"I'm not going to take off my top, Freeman."

"If you don't want to be a real actor, you should keep doing superhero movies and chick flicks."

"Go to hell," Annie said and then pushed past him and walked out of the restroom.

She found her costar, Ethan, enunciating his lines with great exaggeration, pacing in a tight circle. "Did you hear about this?" she asked him. He nodded. "And?" she said. "I have some advice," he said. "What I would do is think of the situation in such a way that you weren't an actress being asked to take off her top, but rather an actress playing an actress being asked to take off her top."

"Okay," she said, resisting the urge to punch him into unconsciousness.

"See," he continued, "it adds that extra layer of unreality that I think will actually make for a more complicated and interesting performance."

Before she could respond, the first assistant director, shooting schedule in hand, walked over to them. "How are we doing vis-à-vis you doing this next shot without a shirt on?" he asked her.

"Not happening," Annie said.

"Well, that's disappointing," he responded.

"I'll be in my trailer," she said.

"Waiting on talent," the AD shouted as Annie walked off the set.

The worst movie she'd ever been a part of, one of her first roles, was called *Pie in the Sky When You Die,* about a private detective who investigates a murder at a pie-eating contest during the county fair. When she read the script, she had assumed it was a comedy, and was shocked to learn that, with lines like "I guess I'll be the one eating humble pie" and "You'll find that I'm not as easy as pie" it was actually a serious

crime drama. "It's like *Murder on the Orient Express,*" the screenwriter told Annie during a read-through, "but instead of a train, it's got pie."

On the first day of shooting, one of the lead actors got food poisoning during the pie-eating contest and dropped out of the movie. A pig from the petting zoo broke out of its pen and destroyed a good deal of the recording equipment. Fifteen takes of a particularly difficult scene were shot with a camera that had no film in it. For Annie, it was a bizarre, unreal experience, watching something fall apart as you touched it. Halfway through the movie, the director told Annie that she would need to wear contacts that changed her blue eyes to green. "This movie needs flashes of green, something to catch the viewer's eye," he told her. "But we're halfway into the movie," Annie said. "Right," the director replied. "We're only halfway into the movie."

One of Annie's costars was Raven Kelly, who had been a femme fatale in several classic noir movies. On the set, Raven, seventy years old, never seemed to consult the script, did crossword puzzles during rehearsals, and stole every single scene. While they were side by side getting their makeup done, Annie asked her how she could stand working on this movie. "It's a job," Raven had said. "I do what will pay, whatever it is. You do your best, but sometimes the movie just isn't very good. No big loss. Still pays. I never understood artists, and I couldn't care less about craft and method and all that stuff. You stand where they tell you to stand, say your lines, and go home. It's just acting." The makeup artists continued to apply makeup so that Annie appeared younger and Raven appeared older. "But do you enjoy it?" Annie asked. Raven stared at Annie's reflection in the mirror. "I don't hate it," Raven said. "You spend enough time with anything, that's all you can really ask for."

Back in her trailer, the blinds closed, the sound of white noise hissing from a stress box, Annie sat on the sofa and closed her eyes. With each deep, measured breath, she imagined that various parts of her body

were slowly going numb, from her fingers to her hand to her wrist to her elbow to her shoulder, until she was as close to dead as she could be. It was an old Fang family technique employed before doing something disastrous. You pretended to be dead and when you came out of it, nothing, no matter how dire, seemed important. She remembered the four of them sitting silently in the van as they each died and came back to life, those brief minutes before they threw open the doors and pressed themselves so violently into the lives of everyone in the general area.

After thirty minutes, she returned to her body and stood up. She slipped out of her T-shirt and then unhooked her bra, letting it fall to the floor. Staring at the mirror, she watched herself as she delivered the lines for the scene. "I am not my sister's keeper," she said, avoiding the urge to cross her arms over her chest. She recited the last line of the scene, "I'm afraid I just don't care, Dr. Nesbitt," and, still topless, pushed open the door of her trailer and walked the fifty yards back to the set, ignoring the production assistants and crew that stared as she passed by them. She found Freeman sitting in his director's chair, still eating his sandwich, and said, "Let's get this fucking scene over with." Freeman smiled. "That's the spirit," he said. "Use that anger in the scene."

As she stood there, naked from the waist up, while the extras and crew and her costar and just about every single person involved in the movie all stared at her, Annie told herself that it was all about control. She was controlling the situation. She was totally, without a doubt, in control.