Fifteen by Ellen Wilbur

**IT WAS AUGUST FIRST,** the hottest day all summer. It was hard to breathe, it was so hot. I was fifteen, mowing the front yard, and I was hurrying to get it done before my dad got home. My sisters, Lynn and Christie, were on the front step, playing cards, and I could see my mother in her garden down the hill. Fred was with her. It was so hot that when she came up to the house, she turned on the hose and let the kids run through it. Fred kept falling on the ground. His diaper got so wet, she took it off and let him run naked.

“Look out, Tom,” she called. She turned the hose on me. The water was like ice, but I stopped mowing, turned around, and let it hit me in the face and on the chest till I was cold right through. Mom kicked off her shoes, aimed the hose straight at the sky. The kids all stopped to watch her. She turned her face up and shut her eyes. The water fell down on her like a shower till her hair turned dark, her dress stuck to her back, and we could see how thin she was. After a while she hosed down her feet, put on her shoes. Then she turned the water on the girls and Fred while they ran all around the yard, screaming so much, I wondered what Dad would say if he drove up and saw them. He might think it was funny, take the hose and spray the kids himself. Or it might make him mad as hell to see Mom dripping wet and the baby running naked in the yard.

Mom was chasing Fred, waving the hose. She always let things go too far. Fred was laughing. His hair was plastered down and he was shining wet all over. He kept falling. I could see his mouth was turning blue. He ran at me, grabbed hold of my leg, and he was screaming bloody murder. I could feel him shaking, his whole body shivering and cold.

“That’s enough,” I said to my mother. She looked surprised, but she put down the hose and shut it off. She got a towel that was hanging on the line, wrapped Fred in it. She picked him up, and the girls went after her inside.

I kept mowing. The grass was soaked in places and the front walk was all spattered. Dad never liked to wet the grass till after dark, and I hoped it would dry out before he saw it. Grass stuck to my shoes and built up on the wheels. I was worried it would choke the motor, but I kept going. All I wanted was to finish and get up to my room.

**Every night,** when he came in, Dad said, “Where’s Tom?” He never asked about the others. He had to know where I was, what I was doing, as if I was up to something.

“Don’t you ever let me catch you lying to me,” he said to me one time for no reason. Mom stood up for me.

“Why would he lie? He never lies,” she said to him. Dad shook his head and walked away, disgusted.

When he was feeling good, he liked to sing. Some nights he piled us all into the truck and took us for a drive. We stopped at Richter’s and he bought us ice cream. We tossed the ball with him out in our yard, we’d smile and play with him the way he liked, but I never trusted him.

He hit all of us sometimes, but he hit me hardest and the most. I had a dream one time when I was small that he came to my room, sat by me on my bed. “Tommy,” he said. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I hurt you. It makes me sick to think of it.” He hardly ever called me Tommy. It was always Tom, and in the dream he looked so sad that when I woke up and saw him eating in the kitchen, I ran to him, hopped onto his lap, and leaned my head against him.

“What’s this?” he said, surprised. He was stiff all over, but he didn’t put me down.

When I was fifteen, he stopped hitting me. I was the only one he didn’t touch except for Fred, but he yelled at me all the time, more than he ever had before. Just the sight of me could make him mad. “Son of a bitch, if you aren’t lazy,” was the kind of thing he said if he saw me lying on the couch. I never stood up to him. He was six foot four, two hundred pounds at least. I thought of all the things I’d like to say to him, but I never said them. Nobody talked back to him.

Most of the time I couldn’t stand to look at him or be around him, and I felt half sick when he was in the house, not knowing what would happen. “One of these days I’m going to disappear,” I told my mother. “I just can’t take him anymore.”

“Don’t talk like that,” she cried. “If you went off, what would I do? What would I do, Tom, can you imagine? It would kill me!” She got louder and louder, more and more upset, till I told her that I didn’t mean it.

Fred was just eighteen months old. All of us loved him, but Dad was a different person when he was with Fred. He changed into a man we didn’t know. If Fred fell down or hurt himself or cried, Dad wasn’t mad. He picked the baby up and held him close. He’d talk to him in a soft voice he never used with my sisters, Mom, or me. He’d kiss Fred on both cheeks and on the nose and laugh and smile at him. The girls would stare and stare at Dad when he was holding Fred. Their eyes were serious and wide and they didn’t say a word.

When she turned five, my sister Christie blew out the candles on her cake and looked straight up at Dad. “Why do you just love Fred?” she asked. “Why don’t you love me too?”

“Now that’s the dumbest thing I ever heard,” he yelled. “How could you ask me such a stupid question?” You could see the fire in Dad’s eyes. He shoved his chair back from the table and stomped out of the room.

**That day** I was still mowing when Dad hopped out of his car. He stopped on his way up the front walk and stood still with his hands on his hips. He was frowning. “Look behind you. Look at what you’ve left,” he called to me.

I turned around. There was a place I’d missed, but I looked right at him. “I don’t see anything,” I said.

“What are you, blind?” His voice rose.

I didn’t answer him and started mowing.

“Look at me when I talk to you,” he said. “You’ll have to go back over everything you missed. Do you hear me?” He was standing by the grass, huge and dark. “Tom!”

“I hear you,” I said, and I threw the mower out of my hands. It fell over on its side, the motor roaring and the wheels spinning.

“What the hell are you doing?” he yelled. “Pick that up this minute.”

I didn’t move. It was as if I didn’t care what happened anymore.

“Son of a bitch,” he cried, and he ran at me, both hands out to get me. He grabbed my shirt, but I jerked away from him, turned my back, and started running.

Mom came outside. “Tommy!” she called, but I jumped the hedge and started down the street.

“I’ll kill that kid,” Dad shouted, and I could hear him crashing through the bushes. Mrs. Hughes was in her yard. She looked up, surprised. I felt foolish but kept going. I was thinking he’d stop, but when I turned my head I saw him coming down the middle of the street right after me. The Johnson kids stopped playing. They stared at us, and Mr. Lewis jumped up from the rocker on his porch and stood there watching. We were out in public like a show for the whole town to see, running like two clowns down Creighton Road. I kept thinking that he’d stop, but we went by the grammar school and he was right behind me.

“Bastard!” he yelled. I turned again, and when I saw his face I knew he’d never quit. The more he had to run, the madder he would get, and by the time he caught up with me and grabbed me, I knew he’d beat me down in front of everyone. I speeded up as fast as I could go and headed straight downtown. I thought I’d go to the police station and beg the men to save me. But when I got to Main Street and I saw the sign that said Police, I was too scared to stop. I knew he’d put on a good act, he’d win them over in a flash, and they’d give me back to him. So I kept going.

It was close to five o’clock. There were just two men walking ahead of us on the street. They didn’t even see us. I turned onto County Road and headed out of town. If I could get far enough, I thought I’d take my chances in the woods.

“Tom!” he yelled. My head was spinning, my throat so dry I couldn’t swallow. I kept running, looked ahead of me and saw Black Mountain rising up above the trees. I knew that I could never go back to our house again. Not after this.

The asphalt stopped and turned into a dirt road. By the time I got there I felt as if I might pass out. There was a sharp pain in my side. I turned around, and when he saw my face, he shook his fist at me. There were just the two of us out there, empty fields on both sides of the road, and I wished I’d never left town.

I could see the trees ahead of us. There were ten miles of thick woods that went all the way out to the mountain. My legs were shaking, my side was burning up, it hurt so much, and I wanted to be sick. It felt like I was running through molasses, going nowhere. He was gaining on me. I heard him breathing, gasping for air, and when I turned around, I saw how close he was. He’d ripped his collar open and his face was purple. It was twisted like somebody had just rammed a knife into his back. All his teeth were gritted tight, and I could tell he thought he had me. I tripped over a rock, almost fell, and then I got a second wind. I took off like a shot, faster and faster. It seemed like I had never run so fast before, but it was easy. I could feel him falling back. I didn’t even have to look. I kept on flying down the road, my eyes so full of sweat that I could hardly see. The fields were just a blur. I knew he’d never catch me. I could feel him falling away from me, farther and farther away. The heat of the day closed in around me. I was wrapped up tight inside it, and all I knew was the sound of my own feet on the road and myself breathing.

“Tom,” he called. His voice was just a speck, so far back and so little that I almost missed it. I turned my head and saw him lying like a black heap on the road a quarter mile or so behind me. He was moving, rolling side to side. “Help me!” he cried, and I swung around and stopped. His knees were up and he was rolling in the dirt. “Tommy,” he called. I saw his legs go down. Then he lay still.

There were crickets in the grass, millions of them singing together, and it felt like the fields began to move in a big circle all around me. Everything under the sky was moving and turning slowly around and around. I started walking toward him. My shirt was soaked, stuck to my back. I was thinking he might jump up and grab me when I got up close, but he never moved. I stopped about a foot away from him. He was lying on his back, both hands up on his chest. His eyes were rolled up, looking at the sky, his mouth stuck open wide, like he was going to yell.

The sun flashed on a car that was heading out of town. I saw it was Jack Tildon’s old white Chevy, and I started running toward it, waving my arms and yelling.

**Two days** I stayed in bed. The doctor said it was heat stroke. My mother came into my room all the time, wiping my face with a wet cloth, trying to make me drink. She sat on my bed and took my hand, but it was like I wasn’t there. When she rubbed my arm, I couldn’t feel it.

“Try to sleep,” she said. She put the fan on high and left. The shades were down and the room was dark, but I could tell the difference in the house without him in it. The place seemed huge, all emptied out and quiet. The voices echoed coming up the stairs. I lay there listening to them, looking at my room. I thought of how no one would miss him. Never once. They would be glad that he was gone.

Sometimes a breeze blew out the shades, the light came in, and I could look down at the yard and see his truck parked in the drive, the same as always. The sun was beating on the hood, and the hot air came into the room. Then the wind died out, the shades sucked back against the screens, and the room was dark. I lay there all day long. The fan went back and forth across my face and every now and then I noticed that my face was wet and I was crying.

I heard them laughing in the kitchen. Fred was screeching and my mother and the girls were laughing. They went on and on until I couldn’t stand to hear it.

“Cut it out,” I called down to them, but they kept laughing, louder and louder. I jumped off the bed, threw my door open wide so hard it hit the wall, and I ran over to the stairs.

“Stop it!” I yelled down, and they all went quiet. I stood there, breathing hard. My legs were weak and I sat down on the stairs, leaned my head against the wall, and shut my eyes.

“Honey?” my mother said. I raised my head and saw her down the stairs. She was holding Fred. “We woke you up. I’m sorry.” I just looked at her until a breeze came down the hall and my head cleared. Fred was staring at me, sucking his thumb. He never took his eyes off me.

“Let him come up,” I said. My mother put him down, and he started crawling up the stairs. She came behind him so he wouldn’t fall.

“We shouldn’t have been carrying on like that, making so much noise.” My mother shook her head. She sighed.

“I’ll watch him,” I said to her.

She stopped a minute. Then she turned around and went downstairs. I lay back on the rug. Fred lay on top of me. I could feel his stomach pumping up and down, and when I pulled his thumb out of his mouth, he smiled. He was all hot and sticky, but he felt good on me. He touched my nose and looked at me with his big eyes.

“Lie down,” I said, and he put his head down on my chest. His head was burning hot, the hair all sweaty. I blew air through his hair, and we lay still. The hall was getting dark, and I could hear my mother and the girls putting out the plates and starting supper. Fred’s eyes were open. His arms hung down and he lay on me like he’d never want to move. A breeze came down the hall, I rubbed his back, brushed up the wet hair from his neck, and I kept kissing him on the head over and over, like I couldn’t stop.