

*Joan Fox*

## Angelfire

**A**fter my brother left for Vietnam, my father was transferred and we moved to the outskirts of Omaha. While my parents arranged the new house, much as the old one had been, down to my absent brother's room, I walked to the road. I liked the brick roads that dead-ended at the edges of cornfields. I liked being in a different place. And I found friends I liked better than the ones I had left behind. Of them all, Jamie was the one I wanted to impress.

If I didn't like a person, I thought it had to be my fault. Jamie, though, didn't like most people. And she was always talking down someone. My mother met her once and said she was tacky. But I stayed out long past my curfew, leaning forward like someone about to confess, to hear the truth about other people from Jamie. Even so, I imagined my mother's feelings hurt every time she saw me leaving the house again on my mission to get Jamie's regard. I couldn't help feeling there was a place in between that was the best to be at. I thought that, but I worried all the time that people wouldn't like me.

Jamie was different. She didn't seem to care whether people liked her or not, and she wasn't scared of being wrong. Jamie'd had a hard life, but she didn't know that I knew. It was supposed to be a secret, said Wanda, who had told me. Sometimes I worried I might let on that I knew and then Jamie wouldn't like me.

Most days, Jamie, Wanda and I sat in the back of the schoolbus, throwing things at the other kids. We would take out our cigarettes so everyone could see and then put them back quickly, so the driver wouldn't. Jamie would take out her wallet and show me the picture of her father. He wore a green plaid suit and his ears stuck out. But he was dead, so I didn't say anything. Jamie showed me his picture almost every day.

Once, when we were alone, Wanda told me why Jamie carried the picture of her father with her. He was dead because Jamie's mother had shot him. Jamie's mother was in prison, somewhere near Lincoln, and Jamie saw her a couple times a year. It was, Wanda said, a long ride on a bus that stopped everywhere between here and there. I tried to picture Jamie in the room while her mother was shooting. After Wanda told me that about Jamie, I liked to look at Jamie's picture of her father.

Jamie didn't know I knew anything. She told me she lived with her aunt and her uncle and that she didn't like them much at all. Wanda told me they were really Jamie's foster parents. She said they could treat Jamie any way they wanted, and Jamie still had to stay with them.

Some days when we got off the bus from school, we went to the tracks. One day I came home with grease on my pants. My mother eyed me. "You smell like the stockyards," she said. "And you're going to church on Sunday?" Then she went into my brother's room and closed the door behind her. I went down the hall to my room. And that evening we ate as usual, as a family of three, seated near the empty chair that was my brother.

The next day, Wanda said Jamie's foster father said he knew the grease on Jamie's pants was there because she was letting some boys do it.

We had walked on the ties, smoking, and some boys had come through the weeds and corn. All of us walked together along the tracks, smoking, not speaking. The air was charged with a curious silence the smoke drifted into. Even Jamie had been silent.

Nothing had happened, but eating supper with my parents that night I wished they were cruel: I wanted some drama in my life.

What was dramatic about my life was what I heard about other people: One night, Wanda told me, Jamie's foster father had come into Jamie's bed. Wanda said that Jamie had lost the hair over one ear from him. That was why Jamie had to part her hair differently. Wanda said that once, to get away from him, Jamie went down to the stockyards to sleep in a truck.

Wanda and her family moved across the river to Council Bluffs.

Now, I thought, Jamie will tell everything to me. First. Only. I tried to get her alone, hoping then she would tell me about her dead father and her mother and her foster family.

Once I tried to think of my father coming after me, but it was such a funny thought that it almost made me laugh. My father was a small man, and he was hardly ever home. I couldn't think of him leaving the bedroom where he and my

mother slept to open my bedroom door, sit on the edge of my canopy bed and then get under the covers with me. I'd never even seen him in his underwear.

Long before he left home for the army, my brother and I used to play this game with our father. We would hide in the pantry, on a ledge behind all the cans. Marching back and forth outside the pantry door, our father would pretend he didn't know where we were. My brother and I would laugh so hard, trying not to be heard, I would feel the skin of my face shaking. And then that wonderful moment of terror when we heard our father's hand turning the doorknob. My father and brother would race to the light string, seeing who would be the first to pull it, stunning us all in light. This was months, maybe years, before my brother's number was called.

Most days, before she moved away, the three of us used to go over to Wanda's house after school. We painted our nails, put on purple eyeshadow and smoked and talked. I would strain my eyes wide and empty listening to everything Jamie and Wanda knew about everyone. Wanda's mother worked, but she didn't mind us being there when she came home.

I liked to listen to Wanda and her mother tease each other. I'd try to make myself invisible so I could study the mother's make-up. I hated when she spoke to me.

"Look at the way your hair's growing," she'd say. "How about a perm, how about it?" Or, "Look at that strange way you put on make-up—is that white powder around your eyes?"

My mother wouldn't let me have a permanent. It was her way of trying to keep me young and protected as long as she could. And except for the purple eyeshadow I wore at Wanda's house, I didn't wear make-up. What Wanda's mother thought was make-up really was my face going blotchy with embarrassment. I would imagine Jamie's disdain for me floating in the smoke rings coming out of her mouth.

After a while, I'd go home. Sometimes Jamie left with me, and sometimes I saw her walk down to the tracks, away from the direction of her house. I'd wait for her but she wouldn't come.

After Wanda moved, Jamie and I went down to the tracks almost every day. There wasn't any other place to go after school.

One time, Jamie started a small fire with a cigarette butt. We watched it burn for a while, and when it started to grow, racing like a snake through the weeds, I tried to put it out.

A train roared by and the engineer put his head out the window and I saw how his mouth opened to yell what I couldn't hear over the sounds of the train. Jamie just laughed as the train went by. She watched me beating the grass and kicking

through the com to put out the fire. Since that time, I began to notice her throwing down burning matches and cigarettes all the time. And, when I stamped on them, she just laughed at me.

She still didn't tell me about her mother killing her father. She didn't tell me anything about her foster father either. All she ever said was how much she hated her uncle. And one day, she came to school with a black eye.

"How'd you get that?" I asked. "And your make-up looks like Wanda's mom's. Maybe you should try a new color?"

"You're the one who needs make-up," she threw back. "Why don't you ever wear any?"

I didn't dare say another word.

It was raining so hard that day, we didn't go down to the tracks after school, but to the store instead. I was glad she still wanted to be with me. We walked down all the aisles, the soles of our shoes sticking and making sounds like tape at every step. Jamie put a box of Mystic Mint cookies in her purse.

I started to put some corn chips in mine, but the clerk looked up at the crackle sound. I walked up front and bought cigarettes from him.

We walked out into the rain and were eating the cookies when Jamie suddenly dropped the whole box and grabbed my arm.

She pulled me in front of her as a shield and tried to hide in some bushes. A car skidded on the wet pavement and then stopped near us at the side of the road. A very tall man jumped out. He was good looking, and he smelled like sweet cigars.

"What are you doing?" he asked Jamie. "Do you want a ride home?"

Jamie scowled at him, dark cookie crumbs around her mouth.

"No," Jamie answered. "I don't want a ride home. We're going somewhere."

Then she pulled me away by my arm. I could hear her breathing hard and I didn't like her dragging me by my arm. I pulled away. The man and his car were gone.

"Who was that?" I asked. "Boy, is he good looking."

We sat down on a wet bench, and while we smoked, Jamie told me I was crazy. She said, "I never should have thought you were smart enough to understand anything at all." The rain came down hard then, in a silver curtain, and I watched her walk away.

I have lost my chance, I told myself, She'll never tell me anything. I sat, getting wetter.

After a while, I went home. I sat at the table, wearing my bathrobe, listening to the falling and dropping of silverware. I heard myself chewing.

Then Jamie called me on the phone. She asked me to come over. My heart leapt. Her voice was funny, though she was laughing. Even Wanda had never been to her house.

I dressed in jeans and a windbreaker. I opened my window, pulled myself to its ledge and jumped to the grass.

I ran. I began to sweat even though it was cold. When I was a block away, I slowed down and lit a cigarette. I wanted to be calm when Jamie saw me. I wanted to be cool.

The house was dark. Jamie was waiting for me at the front door. She pulled me inside. The house was quiet and cold. It seemed to me huge with empty spaces. The door closed.

Jamie pulled me through the room and when I asked her if anyone else was home, she didn't say anything. All the rooms so far were dark. We came to a room where the windows were high and narrow; dark red curtains moved in and out with the drafts.

"Where's your aunt?" I asked. We were at the end of a hallway. There was a door with light showing from underneath it.

"Out with her boyfriends. Come on." Jamie opened the door and pulled me inside.

Stretched out on the sofa was the man from earlier that afternoon. His feet hung over the edge. He was still wearing his shoes, and a newspaper was folded across his stomach. Jamie threw it onto the floor.

"Don't look so worried," she said. "This is a good night, nothing will wake him." Her laugh sounded like a dare. I stepped back. The man's eyes were closed, and his pants were undone. One of his hands was on the elastic band of his underwear, and there was a patch of black hairs coming out of his underwear, up his stomach, and then going under his shirt.

Jamie grabbed a bottle of "Jack Daniel's" from the floor and said, "Let's finish what he started." Holding the bottle to her mouth, she leaned back her head and drank.

She held the bottle over the man and sprinkled drops from it on him, as if it were holy water. He didn't move.

Jamie handed the bottle to me. I took a big swallow. As the liquid went down burning my throat, its sweetness made me gag. I heard Jamie saying that if there was a fire she'd never drag this man from the house.

"Never," she repeated and grabbed the bottle from me.

The way she said “never” scared me. Jamie dropped the bottle on the man’s stomach. It rolled off and knocked against her leg. Little splashes of the liquid seemed to spray everywhere.

“Give me some matches, or you won’t believe what’ll go around about you tomorrow.” Jamie picked up the bottle, lowered her voice to a whisper offering another drink to me, “I know you’ll help.”

Her face hardly moved when she spoke. I ran to the door. My hand rattled the knob before it opened. I ran from the house. I didn’t want to know anything about her, or her mother killing her father, or what it was like for her to visit her mother in the penitentiary. I didn’t want to know about her foster father coming to her bed, and his hitting her, either.

I was on a brick road near the fields and I looked up from the ground at the corn. Some stalks were bent and beaten down from the rain. I stopped running.

I remembered how Jamie would smile at her father’s picture before she showed it to me. I tilted back my head so my face got wet. The air smelled like corn and dirt and rain.

I didn’t want the door of our house to be locked when I got there. A sob rose in my throat as I opened it and slowly entered. I wanted to be in the pantry of our old house, hiding with my brother, returned back to that time when all our scars were from falling, and they were still pink and thick enough to compare.

I walked into the room that was waiting for him to come back from where he was fighting. I fell onto his bed. I lay there, under the tightly tucked in sheets that my mother changed weekly.

The rain kept falling; the corn was a jungle. Lying in his bed, I prayed that my brother would be able to come through, back to us. Only the miracle that returns any of us would return him. I cried and prayed for what seemed a long time before I realized I didn’t want my mother to have to search for me in the morning. And I didn’t want to wait until morning. I ran down the hall to my parents’ bedroom.

**Joan Fox’s** poems have been published in various journals, such as *Writer’s Forum*. Her most recently published poems appeared in *Stand*. Other poems are forthcoming in *Red Rock Review* and a story is forthcoming in *Flyway*.