

Eddy and Flow

by Orson Scott Card

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Those weren't their actual names, of course. Edith and Florence, though, were not only old-fashioned names, they were impossible for babies to pronounce.

They were the same age and shared the same crib for years, and it caused some grief when they were given *two* grown-up style beds. They wouldn't have it, and no matter what they were told, they never fell asleep except when they were in the same bed. To placate their parents, Mr. and Mrs. River, they would sleep in one bed on one night, and in the other bed the next. Finally the parents reconciled themselves to the situation and no longer attempted to part them.

No one can remember when Edith became Eddy and Florence became Flow. They noticed, though, when the girls — precocious readers, both of them — decided to spell their names “Eddy” and “Flow.”

“Because we're the River girls, don't you see?” Flow explained.

Mother said, “That's nonsensical. Your name has no *W* in it, and Edith — well, her nickname should be Edie. That's a real name.”

“So is Eddy,” said Eddy.

“A boy’s name,” said Mother.

“But I’m a girl, so now it’s a girl’s name,” said Eddy.

“And there’s no reason I can’t add a *W* to *my* name,” said Flow.

“We’re both named for things that happen in a river,” said Eddy, “and that’s that.” They no longer answered to their official names..

They were as inseparable awake as asleep. They explored in the patch of woods near their house together, and learned how to capture squirrels and feed them till they were tame. But squirrels were not enough for them. By age four, they came home talking about their friend Fox, and then how all the other animals were afraid of Bear, but not them, they tamed him.

This alarmed their parents, until they took the girls to a special kind of doctor, whose title began with a P that nobody pronounced. He interviewed them together, because they refused to talk to him separately. Eventually he emerged from the interview and reported to their parents. “They haven’t actually seen a bear in the woods. They explained to me that the woods weren’t large enough to be a bear’s habitat. So the bear — whom they visit and talk to every day — is entirely imaginary.”

“Are you sure?” asked Father.

“They explained it to me very carefully,” said the P-man.
“Our animal friends are entirely imaginary,” said one, and the other said, ‘Fox is real, and so is Doe.’ So the first one said, ‘But they don’t really talk to us or play with us, because foxes and deer don’t speak human language, and we don’t speak Vulpine or Cervine.’”

“Vulpine?” asked Father.

“Cervine?” asked Mother.

“They didn’t learn those words from you?” asked the P-man.

“They sound vaguely filthy,” said Father.

“Nothing vague about it,” said Mother.

“The scientific name for deer-kind is ‘cervidae,’ ” said P-man. “And for foxes, it would be ‘vulpidae’ if they weren’t within the family ‘canidae.’ ”

“Why would they be Canadian?” asked Mother.

“‘Canidae’ is the scientific name for the wolf-and-dog family,” said P-man. “But the girls rejected the idea of calling Fox a dog. ‘He’s ‘vulpes vulpes,’ ” they said, ‘and we call him Vulp.’ ”

“The girls know scientific names?” Father asked Mother.
“Don’t you supervise their computer use?”

“They know how to use your parents’ old encyclopedia,” said Mother. “I can lock the Britannica away, if you want.”

“Britannica?” asked Father. “They aren’t even reading the World Book?”

“They say that World Book has been dumbed down, for children.”

“Do they think they’re not children?” asked Father.

“They know they’re children,” said Mother, pretending to be patient.

P-man interrupted them. “Your girls are very bright. Throw in about five more *verys* and you’ll be closer to the facts. But they are still perfectly normal children who have become devoted to several imaginary friends, who are all animals who ‘conveniently speak English, unlike the real animals, who aren’t so well educated.’”

“You’re quoting them again,” said Father. “Right?”

“The frustration is that even though they look *nothing* alike, they talk exactly the same, chiming in on each other’s remarks,” said P-man. “So unless I had been taping them, I could never tell you which one said which thing.”

“So you’re not taping them,” said Father.

P-man seemed reluctant to respond.

“So you *are* taping them,” said Mother.

“*If there were any recordings,*” said P-man, “they would fall within doctor-patient confidentiality.”

“They’re minor children,” said Father. “And we’re their parents.”

“Then it’s a good thing there are no recordings,” said P-man.

On the way home, Father and Mother argued. “Of course he’s been recording them.”

“He said he wasn’t,” said Mother. “And I believe him.”

“And I don’t,” said Father. “Girls, you’re awfully quiet there in the back seat. Has he been taping you?”

“Nobody can tape us,” said Flow.

“We wouldn’t allow it,” said Eddy.

“Did he ask if he could tape you?” asked Mother.

“He never said anything that sensible,” said Flow.

“He just listens to us and we mostly talk to each other,” said Eddy.

“Why don’t we look alike?” asked Flow. “He seemed to think that children with the same birthday should look alike.”

“Is one of us adopted?” asked Eddy. “Is it me? I don’t look like either of my parents, if you are in fact my parents.”

“We are your parents,” said Father, firmly. “And you look like *my* mother’s mother, Eddy, if you must know.”

“I’ve never seen a picture of my great-grandmother,” said Eddy. “I’d like to see a relative I look like. I think I look Indian.”

“Navaho or Cherokee?” asked Flow.

“Silly,” said Eddy. “Dravidian. Southern India. Or Sri Lanka. Lots of people in America have adopted children from India or Pakistan or Bangladesh.”

“I want to learn Vulpine,” said Flow. “Maybe we could turn the real Vulpine into a friend instead of having to imagine a fox friend who speaks our language.”

And with that, the parents couldn’t get Eddy and Flow to talk about their session with the P-man anymore. Which was fine with them, because they didn’t want to have conversations about whether one of the girls was adopted. They hoped that the subject wouldn’t come up again, but of

course the girls thought about it and talked about it between each other every day. And several times a day.

“You look like Mother,” said Eddy.

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” asked Flow. “Is Mother pretty?”

“She doesn’t take care of her hair the way a lot of other women do,” said Eddy. “And she has a lot of white hairs. So she’s old.”

“They waited a long time to have children,” said Flow. “Maybe they *couldn’t* have children of their own, so *both* of us are adopted.”

“But we have the same birthday,” said Eddy.

“They *tell* us we have the same birthday,” said Flow, “but that only means they want us to *think* we were born on the same day.”

“So we aren’t really sisters?” asked Eddy.

“Of course we’re really sisters,” said Flow. “What would having different mothers and fathers have to do with that?”

They asked Bear and Fox about it, but both of their imaginary friends were quite certain that it was a stupid question that didn’t matter at all. “You’re both humans,” said Fox. “Humans all look alike.”

“So do foxes,” said Eddy, always the quicker one with a retort.

“Foxes don’t look anything like humans,” said Fox.

And Bear added, “Foxes don’t *smell* anything like humans, either.”

“Foxes all look like *each other*,” said Eddy.

“That’s because all the foxes in this wood *are* brothers and sisters,” said Fox.

“Or so their parents tell them,” said Bear. “Foxes are mostly liars, most of the time.”

“Am not,” said Fox.

It devolved into an acorn fight, but Flow threw too hard and Bear and Fox couldn’t pick up acorns one-handed. “Use your mouth,” Fox said to Bear. “Acorns taste icky,” said Bear to Fox. “You have to let them age underground for a few months,” said Fox to Bear. “I’m going to go look for fish,” said Bear to Fox.

“You just have to open a can of tuna,” said Flow.

“Or sardines,” said Eddy.

“I don’t like sardines,” said Flow. “They still have the skin on.”

And then it was dinnertime and the girls went inside and had soup with goldfish crackers and crumbled-up saltines.

“Fox says humans all look alike,” Flow announced at dinner.

“To a fox, I imagine we do,” said Father.

“Well, you’re big and we’re small,” said Eddy.

“But we all have four limbs, two eyes, and two ears,” said Father.

“So do bears and foxes,” said Eddy.

“Don’t talk back,” said Flow, who could see that Father didn’t like being contradicted.

“You have to talk back to make it a conversation,” said Eddy. “If we don’t talk back, then Father will just keep talking all by himself. That’s not a conversation, it’s a ... a ...”

“Monologue,” said Mother.

“A soliloquy,” said Father.

“Now you’re just making words up to make us feel dumb,” said Flow.

When the girls got bigger they went to school. Kindergarten was a breeze, except that the teacher complained to Mother that the girls kind of bossed the other kids around. “They seem to treat them,” said the teacher, “as if Eddy and Flow were the only *real* children, and the others were just their imaginary friends.”

Mother only smiled and said, “And we’re their imaginary parents. How do you like being their imaginary teacher?”

The teacher laughed, and they didn’t have that particular conversation again.

First grade, second grade — the girls could already read at about a fifth grade level. “Better than that, actually,” said the second grade teacher, “but our tests only show grade levels up to five.”

“Isn’t that hard on your sixth graders?” asked Mother.

“That’s middle school,” said the teacher. “We don’t need instruments to measure that.”

During the summer after fifth grade, the girls came to their parents in their bedroom, after the girls were supposed to be asleep. Father gave them a lecture about getting out of bed when they had been put down for the night.

“When the animal shelter kills unwanted dogs, don’t they call that ‘putting them down?’” asked Eddy.

“I wouldn’t know,” said Father.

“Which means he doesn’t think *we* should know,” said Eddy to Flow.

“That’s not what we came in here to discuss,” said Flow.

“It doesn’t matter what you wanted to discuss,” said Father. “Discussing ended when we said good-night about forty-five minutes ago.”

“Father, Mother,” said Eddy. “Please listen.”

“Our birthday is coming and you never know what to give us,” said Flow.

“You hint that we should ask for something, but we never know what to ask for,” said Eddy.

“We don’t know how much you can afford,” said Flow. “The *good* drones, the ones that can take pictures and stuff —”

“The ones with any range to speak of,” said Eddy.

“Cost a lot of money. How much do you make, Father?” asked Flow.

“You aren’t getting drones,” said Father.

“Just one drone,” said Flow. “We can share.”

“We’re good at sharing,” Eddy added.

“With each other, anyway,” said Flow.

“But we don’t want a drone,” said Eddy. “We’re not really asking for a drone. That was just a hypothetical.”

“They said ‘hypothetical,’ ” said Father to Mother.

“I heard them,” said Mother. “What I didn’t know was that *you* knew the word.”

Father made a face at Mother.

“Try to set an example of maturity for the girls, would you, Mr. River?” said Mother.

“Couldn’t you have been nice enough to have stupider children?” asked Father.

“I couldn’t control whose genes should predominate, yours or mine,” said Mother.

But after *that* petty argument finally petered out, and the girls were still in the parents’ bedroom, Mother said, “Girls, what is it you wanted to discuss with us?”

“Don’t reward them, Mrs. River,” said Father. All summer he had been calling her “Mrs. River” instead of “Mommy” or “Mother” or “Nan,” which was short for Nancy.

Ignoring their father's admonition, Flow said, "We want a brother."

Eddy said, "We know it takes more than the three months till our birthday, but if you give us a promissory note, we'll believe that you're trying."

"You don't need a brother," said Father.

"We each have a sister," said Flow. "But we only need *one* brother for us *both* to have one."

"No brother," said Father. "It would be cruel to bring a baby boy into this family."

Mother was offended by this. "And why is that, pray tell, Mr. River?"

"Imagine a boy trying to grow up with Flow and Eddy controlling his life," said Father. "The poor kid's penis would dry up and fall off just like the umbilical cord."

"We would not let anything happen to his penis," said Flow. "We're good girls and we don't care that boys have those things."

"You have a sister," said Father. "You don't need a brother. Now go back to bed. Don't make me spray water on you."

Eventually the girls went back to bed, without any water-spraying.

About a month after the girls started in sixth grade at the middle school, they came home laughing so hard that of course their mother asked them why. “Because Third got stuck in the girls’ bathroom and he wouldn’t come out because they’d all make fun of him.”

“Third?” asked Mother. “His name is Third?”

“The Firth of Third,” said Flow.

“We thought it was stupid that Scotland should have a Firth of Fourth,” said Eddy, “and not have a Firth of First, Second, or Third.”

“How does a Firth get stuck in the girls’ bathroom?” asked Mother.

“That’s just what we call our big brother when we’re at school.”

Mother didn’t even look up at the girls. They knew that they had been provocative. So they didn’t move on to another topic. They just stood and watched her. Eventually their patience was rewarded.

“Big brother?” asked Mother softly.

“Since at least one of us is adopted,” said Flow, “we adopted a brother, as well. *You* don’t have to take care of him. He piles leaves over himself to stay warm at night.”

“He sleeps in the woods?” asked Mother.

“He says he likes it better,” said Flow. “He really doesn’t like walls, except in a windstorm, and then he just chooses a side of the house to sleep on.”

“Don’t lie, Flow,” said her sister. “We haven’t *had* a windstorm since we got Firth.”

“Firth of Third,” said Flow to Mother, “because he’s the third child in our family.”

Eddy added, “Third in order of arrival, because he *is* older than we are, so I guess that should make him the Firth of First.”

“But it’s Third,” said Flow. “There’s no reason to teach him another name already.”

“I wish you *would* invite him in,” said Mother. “I don’t know if I like you associating out in the woods with an older boy.”

“Not that much older,” said Eddy. “We lend him toilet paper, too, but he doesn’t know about toilets. If we had an outhouse —”

Mother swallowed. “I’d like to meet him,” she said.

When the girls only looked at each other and said nothing, Mother went on. “If I don’t meet him, I’ll have to forbid you to associate with him anymore.”

Again the girls looked at each other. “You just can’t,” Eddy answered. “Without the food we bring him, he’ll starve.”

“Then bring him into the house so I can meet him,” said Mother.

“Can’t we take you out to see him?” asked Flow.

“He really hates walls,” said Eddy. “He actually said ‘hate hate hate,’ so I think he means it.”

“Then how did he get stuck in the girls’ bathroom?” asked Mother. “I’ve been to the school, and all the restrooms are indoors.”

“We told him about toilets and he wanted to see,” said Flow.

Eddy said, “He’s curious.”

“So am I,” said Mother. “Not about toilets. About boys who go into girls’ bathrooms with my daughters.”

Eddy and Flow nodded, reluctantly.

“Please invite him in,” said Mother. “For dinner. He can eat with all of us, instead of making a picnic of it in the woods.”

“I don’t know if he has any table manners,” said Flow.

“We can teach him,” said Mother. “Dinner tonight, or there’ll be no more food for him from *our* larder.”

“Mother,” said Eddy, “nobody says ‘larder’ anymore.”

“I do,” said Mother. “You just heard me say it.”

The girls walked out of the kitchen. Mother had no idea how they would deal with this challenge. Assuming Firth was another imaginary friend, either they’d tough it out and bring him into the house and have him sit in a chair that remained empty even when he was in it, or they’d say he refused to come in and he’d eat leaves and acorns or something.

The P-man had told Mother that she should go along with their imaginary friends, but Mother had never reconciled herself to the lying. If she let their lies stand unchallenged now, who knows what would happen later when the boys they lied about were real? Would she have to keep humoring them *then*?

And there was the (remote) possibility that Firth of Third was an actual wild boy who lived in the woods. In which case, he needed to be rescued, kept warm and safe, and, eventually, civilized.

Dinnertime came. The girls came in, looking downcast, and as they headed to the sink to wash up for dinner, Mother asked them, “Are we having a guest? I need to know how many places to set.”

Flow shook her head. “We couldn’t find him.”

“I think he was eavesdropping when you talked about wanting him to come inside our walls and he ran away,” said Eddy.

“Well, that’s unfortunate,” said Mother. “I made extra soup tonight. And we have a good fresh loaf to slice and slather with butter.”

The girls nodded, looking mournful. “We told him you’re a good cook,” said Flow.

“He didn’t know what we meant by the word ‘cook,’” said Eddy.

“He’s never had a cooked meal? Baked bread? Soup?” asked Mother.

“We don’t ask things like that,” said Flow.

“We play pirates,” said Eddy. “But he defeats us and arrests us.”

“Arrests you?” asked Mother.

“He reads us our rights, and then he explains that the penalty for piracy is death, so we should plead guilty to a lesser charge.”

Mother gave a tiny whoop of laughter. Like a crow's cry, that short. "Girls, you can't tell me he's never seen television."

"He's been arrested," said Flow. "He learned a lot from the attorney they provided for him."

"Or that was a tall tale, and he watches television through people's windows," said Eddy.

"I think he was really arrested," said Flow.

"Then why won't he tell us how he got away?" asked Eddy.
" Since he was really guilty of sneaking into houses and stealing things, they wouldn't have just let him go."

"Has he ever snuck into *this* house?" asked Mother.
"Considering he hate hate hates being inside walls?"

"He promised us he never would," said Eddy.

"Mother, what if we find him tomorrow morning, in time for breakfast?" asked Flow.

"If you can find him without leaving our yard," said Mother, "and most particularly without going into the woods, then yes, by all means bring him inside for breakfast."

"Um," said Eddy.

"Um?" replied Mother.

“He doesn’t know about clothes.”

“He sees you wearing clothes,” said Mother.

“No,” said Flow. “He thinks our bodies just grow this way.”

“But he’s naked,” said Mother.

“Well, not *anymore*,” said Flow. “We shared a pair of Father’s drawers. Old ones, from the ragpile in the basement. He ties a string around his waist to hold them up.”

“You gave him string?” asked Mother.

“No,” said Flow. “He already had some.”

“No he didn’t,” said Eddy. “That was the string I gave him the day before. He said he needed it to snare a rabbit or a rat.”

“A rat. Which he would eat,” said Mother. “But he doesn’t know what cooking is.”

“His skin is streaky with dried blood,” said Eddy.

“He says it’ll wash off when it rains again,” said Flow. “I think he swims a lot, too. When he’s catching fish with his hands.”

“He was naked when you gave him string,” said Mother.

Eddy turned to Flow. “I told you she’d make a big deal about his not having clothes.”

“I didn’t disagree with you, did I?” asked Flow.

When Mother came downstairs in the morning to start the day’s bread, there was a naked boy sitting on a chair beside the table. She walked around the table and ascertained that he was not naked, but wore an old holey pair of Father’s old briefs. “We can get you better clothes than that,” said Mother.

“I only wear this because Eddy and Flow said I had to or they couldn’t play with me.” The boy spoke surprisingly well. With a hint of an educated accent.

“How did you learn to speak so well?” asked Mother.

“Is there breakfast or not?” he asked.

“I just woke up. It takes time to cook anything up. And since you have been associating with my daughters, I have a right to demand answers from you.”

“They were sure you would think I was just imaginary.”

“I did think that,” said Mother. “But it turns out that unlike Fox and Bear, I can actually see you. I bet you even leave footprints.”

“Maybe I do,” said Firth. “I wouldn’t know. I’m never tracking myself when I search the ground.”

“You had parents. I think you even went to school.”

The boy said nothing.

“When I start frying the bacon,” said Mother, “the girls will come downstairs to eat.”

The boy nodded solemnly.

“So will my husband,” said Mother.

The boy nodded again.

“He will *not* be happy to see you,” said Mother.

“Big men never are,” the boy said.

“How many big men have you made unhappy by being visible?” asked Mother.

“All of them, so far,” said Third. Or was his name actually Firth or Third? Those girls and their love of punning.

“They call you their brother,” said Mother.

The boy did not react at all, not even with interest. “What is eating like?” he asked.

“Don’t you eat the rats and rabbits and fish you catch?”

“That would kill them,” he said.

“That it would,” said Mother.

“When you cook things, does that kill them?”

“The pig is already dead and butchered, and I slice the bacon before I fry it up. So it’s completely dead before the cooking starts.”

He looked blank.

“What words don’t you understand?” asked Mother.

“Fry.”

“Watch and learn,” she said. He leaned in and out as she prepared the bacon. In for the slicing, out when the pan got hot. But then the sizzling and popping of the bacon fat lured him closer — until a pop of grease hit him in the chest. He recoiled with a yelp.

“That’s why I stay back while it’s frying. But still, sometimes I get hit with a spot of hot fat. It’s just part of cooking. If you can’t stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen, that’s the old saying.”

“Do I have to leave?” he asked.

“The hot fat hit you, and you didn’t leave. So you *can* stand the heat, can’t you?”

“It’s warm in the house,” said Third, “but not as hot as that bacon splat.”

“I hope that’s the hottest thing that ever burns you,” said Mother.

The boy processed this for a long moment. “I think that means you are hoping that I *don’t* get burnt worse than that.”

“You understood me perfectly.”

“So you wish me well,” said Third.

“Let’s just say that I *don’t* wish you *harm*.” Mother looked him up and down. “If you’re going to hang around with our girls, we’ll have to get you proper clothes.”

Third nodded. “I love my sisters,” he said. “They love you, and you love them. Do you love me, too, as their brother?”

“If you truly behave brotherly toward them,” said Mother, “I am prepared to regard you as their brother.”

“And as your son?”

“*They* made you, not I,” said Mother.

“God makes us all,” said Third.

“Who told you that?” asked Mother.

“Eddy and Flow,” said Third. “They said they *wished* for me, but I became real only because God made it so.”

“That’s beyond my theology,” said Mother. “I went to college, but they taught no religion there.”

“What is college?”

“A school for advanced students.”

“Advanced teaching, but no religion?” asked Third. “That seems short-sighted.”

“You’re still learning the language, and already you’re a critic of higher education.”

“Flow and Eddy say they’ll go to college someday.”

“If they get good enough grades in school.”

“If they feel like it, Eddy said.”

“If a college admits them,” said Mother. “I fear the girls are lazy in their studies. They’d rather run around in the woods playing, um, ‘Pirate,’ yes?”

“We play Pirates at a very high level,” said Third. “There’s some Caribbean history in it. And literature. Captain Blood. Horatio Hornblower.”

“Fictional characters,” said Mother.

“Captain Blood was an Irish doctor who became a slave and then a pirate,” said Third. “But Captain Hornblower was an honest Englishman who joined the Navy and never broke the law.”

“They told you the stories?” asked Mother.

“They read them to me. When they weren’t running around in the woods.”

“Didn’t that take a long time?” asked Mother. “Those books don’t even have pictures.”

“They read very well,” said Third, “taking turns. And I listen even faster than they read.”

Mother chuckled. “I wonder how that is even possible.”

“I often know the next word before they say it,” said Third.

“Are you going to attend school in the fall?” asked Mother.

“I don’t know.”

“Can you read?” asked Mother.

“They’re teaching me. They say I’m learning quickly.”

“How are you with numbers?” asked Mother.

“I can count as high as you want. Ten, hundred, thousand, ten thousand, a hundred thousand, a million, and then billion, trillion, quadrillion, quintillion, sextillion, septillion, octillion, novillion, and that’s as far as they know the names of the numbers.” Third laughed and looked away. “I asked them if they had ever counted that high, and then had to stop for lack of a name for the number. And they said if all the humans who had ever lived spent their whole lives counting, the combined totals of their counting wouldn’t even come close to that high a number.”

“Were they right?”

“How would I know?” asked Third. “They told me I’m not ready for multiplication or division.”

“Firth of Third,” Mother said. “Why are you not invisible like Fox and Bear?”

“Fox and Bear are visible to all the other animals,” said Third. “They’re visible to me.”

“Are the girls in danger from them?” asked Mother.

“Bear gets growly sometimes, and sometimes Fox nips them too hard. But I heal the injury and it stops bleeding.”

Mother sat down in a chair at the side of the table. “How can I believe any of this? How are you even real?”

Father came into the room. “I smell bacon,” he said.

Mother gave a little cry and got up and turned the bacon in the pan. “It isn’t burnt. It’s just overly crisp.”

“I like it that way,” said Father.

Somewhat alarmed, Mother asked, “Have I been serving your bacon too rare all this time?”

“I like it every way you cook it,” said Father.

Third nodded. “He’s a good man,” he said to Mother.

The two of them looked at him silently.

“That’s what Eddy and Flow say. That Mother does everything right, and Father is a good man.”

Father laughed, a couple of barks of laughter. “He’s got that about right, I’d say.”

“May I be your son?” asked Third.

“Too late,” said Father. “You already exist, without my participation.”

“You can adopt me,” said Third. “The girls say that at least one of them is adopted already.”

“Why would they say that?” asked Mother, sounding offended.

“Because neither of them looks anything like the other, and they neither of them look like either of you.”

The parents exchanged glances.

The girls came down then, and Mother put the bacon on a plate on the table and then scrambled seven eggs in the bacon grease in the frying pan. While the eggs were cooking, the girls each nibbled on a piece of bacon, though Father ate nothing while Mother was still at the stove. Mother salted the eggs and then spooned them into a bowl, only to spoon them back out of the bowl onto their plates. Third got as big a serving as the girls.

Third watched how the girls used their spoons and forks to eat the scrambled eggs, and soon picked up the knack of spoon and fork. He knew that Mother and Father were judging him. So when the food was gone, and he laid his utensils on his empty plate just as the girls did, Father asked him, “Well?”

“Did you like the food?” asked Flow, translating.

“It didn’t need much chewing,” said Third. “Except the bacon.”

“Father was asking,” said Eddy, “whether you liked eating with spoon and fork.”

“The food comes off the fork easily, but after I stopped stabbing my tongue with the fork I got food into my mouth with either weapon fairly well.”

“I think he never ate with knife and fork before,” Flow said to the parents.

Eddy corrected her. “I think he never put food in his mouth and chewed it up and swallowed it before.”

The parents looked at Third.

“Not that I remember,” he said. “I don’t remember anything before the girls wished me here, though.”

“Just keep in mind,” said Eddy, “that after the good stuff has been digested out of the food, your body will eject the leftover stuff out of your butt as poop.”

“I’ve seen Bear and Fox poop in the woods,” said Third. “I know the way of it.”

“But you’ve never done it?” asked Flow.

“Not that I remember,” said Third.

“You have to wipe your butt with leaves after,” said Flow.

“Or swim for a while till your butt is clean,” said Eddy.

Father turned to Mother. “I hope their post-defecation swims are downstream from where you draw water.”

Mother smiled wanly.

It was a few days later when Third came inside for another meal. Mother helped him put on the clothes she had sewn for him. They fit well enough, and the string around his middle kept the pants from falling down. He seemed to like them.

Then Mother made him wash his hands before eating. During the meal, Father asked him the question that mattered most to him. “Third, what do you plan to do with my girls?”

Third looked quizzical. “We play together. We read together. My turn reading is getting longer every day.”

“And they play Pirates,” Mother added. “The girls are always the pirates, and Third arrests them.”

“But I never hang them,” said Third. “I bring them before a merciful judge, and they repent of piracy very sincerely.”

“We cry,” said Flow.

“You cry,” retorted Eddy. “I never cry. Not in a game, anyway. I’m very stout-hearted.”

“That’s playing,” said Father. “I ask you, Third, what do you plan to do with my girls?”

Third sat and thought for a moment. “I’m not their father,” he said. “They have you for that. And they didn’t wish for me to do anything their mother already does. So I suppose I’m here to do what a brother does.”

“Exactly,” said Father. “And what do you suppose that is?”

“I keep them safe,” said Third.

“From what?” asked Mother.

“From all danger.” Third looked definite. He nodded after he said that.

“What danger?” asked Mother.

“Anything that … anything dangerous,” said Third. “Do I have to think of *all* the dangers that might beset them?”

“You do if you’re going to prepare to protect them,” said Father.

“I’m strong, so I can fight bad guys, as long as they’re not a lot bigger than me, and there’s not too many of them.”

“What if there *are* too many of them?” asked Father.

“Then I would protect them till I die,” said Third.

“Please don’t die, Brother,” said Flow.

“I don’t want to die,” he said. “I like being here.”

“Father, do you *want* him to die?” asked Eddy.

“I want him to love you the way I do. All the way to dying for you, if need be.” Father was very firm about this.

“But I don’t want neither of you to die. Nor Mother neither,” said Flow.

“Then try to stay out of danger,” said Mother. “*All* of you. Dying is against the rules of this family.”

And since they were all rule-keeping people, they kept not-dying every day, and things were going well.

But as Christmas came closer and the weather got colder, the girls worried about Third. “How will he keep warm?” Flow asked Mother.

“Our fires keep the house warm,” said Mother. “He’s welcome to come inside.”

“But he has no bed in here,” said Eddy.

“He has no bed out there, either,” said Mother. “The hard ground or the hard floor, but indoors is warmer and outdoor things freeze and die in winter.”

“He pulls together leaves and lies on them,” said Flow.
“Because it’s softer.”

“He can make a bed of leaves in the great room near the hearth,” said Mother. “Or we can stuff a mattress with leaves, and cover him with a blanket or two.”

But Third laughed and said he would do well outdoors all winter. “I won’t die from cold,” he said. “If leaves don’t keep me warm, I’ll lie down with Bear and he’ll keep me nice and comfy.”

Of that Father had no doubt, nor Mother either, though it troubled them that a boy who called them Father and Mother had no bed or pillow in their house.

In spring, when the snow in the mountains began to melt, the stream near their house rose and soon overflowed its banks. Father warned the girls to stay away from the floodwater. “It’s too strong for you,” said Father.

“We’re the River family,” said Flow.

“I like it when the eddies spin me around,” said Eddy.

“I like the current to carry me swift and far,” said Flow.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Father.
“Nobody can swim stronger than the river, and nobody can ride on top of it when the current pulls you under.”

The girls laughed and promised not to go into the floodwater.

Father and Third dragged the family rowboat up the slope from the water to the front porch of the house. “You don’t need a boat to be safe on the porch, Father,” said Flow, laughing.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Father. And indeed she didn’t.

Because after a time the water sloshed all around the front porch, and the boat floated, and if it hadn’t been tied to the porch it would have been swept away.

When it was time to see about the neighbors, Father wouldn’t let the girls come out on the boat. “The boat is not stronger than the river,” said Father. “Stay here in the house, and go upstairs inside when your mother tells you to.” The girls agreed.

Then Father took Third out on the boat with him, and he rowed stronger than Father expected. “How did you learn to row so strong?” asked Father.

“I just row as strong as it takes to make the boat go,” said Third.

Father couldn’t argue with that logic.

They picked up neighbors from their front porches, and from their upstairs windows, and from their roofs, depending on where they lived. Sometimes, where three families had gathered on the same roof, the highest one, Father and Third had to make three trips to get them all to high ground. Father had to admit that without Third's strong rowing, he might not have been able to work against or across the current when he needed to.

And from time to time they checked back with their own house, and Mother and the girls waved happily from the upstairs windows and Mother called out, "I think the water is starting to go down now!"

And it *was* getting shallower. But not quickly, and the current didn't slacken. When they brought the rowboat back because all who had needed saving were safe, the girls came out on the porch to help them tie the rowboat again.

Then, playful and happy, Flow deliberately teetered on the edge of the porch and fell into the water, then showed off how well she swam. Eddy followed her example and they splashed and laughed.

"I told you to stay out of the water," said Father. "The river is stronger than you think."

"But our Father is stronger than the river," cried Flow.

"Help!" cried Eddy, who had been caught by a current.

Flow immediately swam out strongly toward her, but the river swept her right past Eddy, who had been caught in a spinning current.

Father jumped off the porch but he was not tall enough to say on his feet and walk to them, and the girls were getting farther and farther off and Father could not catch up at all.

Third stood on the porch, taking off all his clothes.

“What are you doing?” asked Mother.

“They wished me here when I was naked. Now clothes would weigh me down.” He kissed Mother on the cheek. “I can swim faster than any river, Mother,” he said. “I’ll bring my sisters home to you.”

He plunged into the river and struck out until he found the fastest current and then outswam it, so he soon caught up with the girls. While Third was doing that, Mother called Father by name and begged him to come back. “Third will do it!” she called. “Third will save them!”

Father fought his way to shore, exhausted, despairing, weeping because he had not saved his girls. But then he stood on the porch and watched downstream, and then they went upstairs to the window and watched farther downstream.

They saw the Firth of Third reach Eddy, but instead of taking her to shore, he made her hang on to him around his neck as he swam even more strongly to overtake Flow.

Then they reached Flow, and she also hung onto her brother by his shoulder and neck, and both sisters were on him like baby possums while he swam against the current.

“No, no, no,” said Father weakly from the window. “You can’t swim upstream! Go to the shore, take them to the shore!”

But Third *was* swimming upstream, the two girls clinging to him.

Father ran down the stairs, Mother after him, and both of them out onto the porch and then up to the higher, dryer ground, and they ran alongside the river, ever closer to where Third was struggling to swim the girls upstream to their parents.

Soon the parents were close enough to their children that they could call out and be heard. “Here we are!” called Father. “Bring them to us here!” cried Mother.

Third must have heard them, or maybe one of the girls, who told him, and instead of swimming into the current, Third began to swim across it. It seemed to take forever, it was impossible that Third could still be strong enough to swim at all, but he brought them to shore and the parents

ran down to peel the girls from his back and draw them the rest of the way to dry land.

Third, finally unburdened, staggered through the shallower water and weaker current toward the shore where Father and Mother were trying to warm the girls and dry them and then Father reached out to help Third, seeing that he was struggling, that he was utterly spent, but before Father could quite reach him, Third fell into the water and a current took him and he kept slipping farther from Father's reaching hands.

“Oh, come back, come back, my son!” cried Father.

But Third only rolled over in the water, his eyes closed, and the current took him. Father swam only a little way toward him before the boy was gone under the water and could not be seen anymore. Father, worn out with trying, once again came back to shore weeping.

“I couldn’t save him,” he said to his wife and daughters. “I couldn’t reach him, He was gone. I’ve lost my son. I’ve lost my boy.”

The parents and the daughters knelt on the shore, grieving.

And then, at last, they stood and walked along upstream back toward the house.

People they had boated up to higher ground came downslope to walk with them. "How strong your boy was," they said. "How well he rowed to save us all."

"And you," they said to the father. "It isn't right that you saved us all, but you lost your own boy."

"Thank God that he was here with us," said Mother, "or I would have lost all my family today, all."

"I'm sorry we played in the water," said Flow.

"I'm sorry I didn't obey you, Father," Eddy said.

But Father only held them close, by the shoulders, and kept walking back to the house.

When they were on the porch, the neighbors stood near, still praising and thanking Father, praising and mourning for Third.

Until father raise his hands in front of himself to signal silence. "He did everything he promised he would do," said Father. "He kept his sisters safe from harm. It took every bit of his strength to do it, and only when it was finished, only when the job was done, did he surrender to the river."

The neighbors murmured their assent.

Then Father placed his hands upon his daughters' heads.
"He was my true son. He was their true brother. Here is his inheritance."

Then he gathered the girls into his embrace, and Mother embraced the girls and her husband, and they wept in grief at the death of the boy, and wept in joy at the saving of the girls.

And from that day on, the people roundabout called it the River of Third, which soon became Third River. And the village, which used to have another name, became Third Village. Eventually, few people remembered that there had been a boy of that name, and then nobody remembered, but it was still the village and then the city of Third upon Third River, and strangers marveled that there should be a Third City and Third River without any river or city named Second or First.

And those who lived beside the river made it a law that every household would maintain a boat in good condition, and practice rowing it with strength, and when floods came, no man considered his family safe until every family was on higher ground. That was their inheritance.