

"A comedy, a tragedy, and a tour-de-force examination of what it means to make art and survive your family. The best single-word description would be brilliant."

—ANN PATCHETT



*The*  
**FAMILY FANG**

A NOVEL

**KEVIN WILSON**

*Author of Tunneling to the Center of the Earth*

# The Family Fang

Kevin Wilson



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# **Dedication**

*for Leigh Anne*

## Epigraph

*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*

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## 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 unconstitutional! 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.