Kevin McIlvoy

THE FIFTH STATION

"Keenly felt and vividly remembered. It broke my heart half a dozen times."
—Richard Russo

COLLIER FICTION

A NOVEL BY KEVIN McILVOY

THE FIFTH STATION

COLLIER BOOKS
Macmillan Publishing Company
New York

Published by arrangement with Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill

Collier Books
Macmillan Publishing Company
866 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10022
Collier Macmillan Canada, Inc.

Parts of this novel first appeared, in different form, in *Portland Review*, *Telescope*, and *MSS*.

The author thanks Dan Ursini, Ken Smith, Rick Russo, Ann Rohovec, Ken Kuhlken, and Robert Houston; The Family Inn, for the table in the corner and the refills; New Mexico State University, for the freedom to risk the three-point shots. And Margee, Colin, and Paddy for believing, morning after morning.

This work was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
McIlvoy, Kevin, 1953–
The fifth station : a novel / by Kevin McIlvoy.—1st Collier Books ed.
p. cm.
ISBN 0-02-034622-0
I. Title.
PS3563.C369F5 1989 89-9964 CIP
813'.54—dc20

Cover illustration by Doug Fraser
Cover design by Wendy Bass

First Collier Books Edition 1989

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America

1

It won't make a difference to write down here that I was the reason my younger brother, Matthew, died. My father, who never knew it, is dead. My mother, who knows it, who has been broken by it, writes me, her youngest now at thirty-two years of age, from Illinois. She says all the misery of the world walks along the Way of the Cross to Calvary. And she prays my older brother Luke and I "will soon understand."

I toast Jesus. Bottoms up to the Son of God.

Luke's a street bum, a hobo here in Las Almas. I never need to be reminded that he knows how Matthew died. Cheers to my fellow drunks, Matthew and my father, impaled on bottles to my left and right. I forgive your sins. Surely you will be with me in hell this very day.

None of this can make a difference. But I have to get it down: how it could have been. I *have* to remember how it was the day he died. His words, maybe. Maybe, his open eyes.

At the steel mill the high-risk jobs pay twenty-six cents more an hour. That's about two extra dollars a shift, but

then you usually get overtime on those jobs, so with the double-time it adds up. We were told the big, nine-story smokestacks at the hot strip mill would need to have their brick insides torn out, and we sat in the bar You Dam Right after the four-to-twelve shift discussing whether we wanted to volunteer for the job the next day. Our foreman said he thought it was work that was only done every thirty years or so. Old-timers at the mill said they never heard of it being done ever.

Matthew said, "We're talking about—let's see—probably an extra forty bucks." Three years out of high school, he had that high school enthusiasm, my brother. He had a sharp mind that nothing could ever dull. And he was probably the finest athlete Meltenville ever produced. "Between us," he said, "it'd be a hundred and fifty-some bucks total for the night if they double us over." We always figured our income that way—as the total between us. We had plans to open a sign-painting shop all our own somewhere away from the steel mill that ground my father and his father and grandfather into just enough dust to bury us too. In another year we'd have enough saved to leave Illinois for New Mexico, where Luke was.

The year didn't sound like so long a time to either of us that afternoon. We shot pool and talked about it with Stan Lipiniski and Howard Paskas, who were just off work from the blooming mill. We didn't bet on the pool game but we won so often Stan and Howard started running out of quarters to feed the table. I said I'd get some change, but Howard, whose work goggles had worn an extra line

under his already line-worn eyes, said to save it. "We don't want you leaving letters off your signs out West just for lack of paint, huh, Stan?" Stan, a Pole, hardly ever understood English, which was made from sounds weaker, after all, than the sounds of the slab shearer he operated.

In his usual thick soup of clichés, Stan said, "No sir you bet not on your life one bit!"

Matthew's laughter was soft, I guess because he knew Stan and had worked with him before we were moved to the hot strip. Guys like Matthew and me, who could speak some Polish, usually worked with Stan so he didn't get instructions wrong and hurt himself.

"Sure don't want no signs," said Howard, "that say 'urger King,' do we?"

Stan's face was a question mark. He said, "Damn right by God." Stan understood Matthew's laughter. I mean, he understood he wasn't being laughted *at*. Matthew had seen him through his greenhat days and into the union, and would let his lunch sit if Stan came to him with a question.

"I've been thinking about that," Matthew said. "If we're going to mix our own paint to save money, we're going to have to study up."

I groaned. "They've got mixing charts and things, don't they?"

Howard racked the balls and rolled the cue ball down the table to me. "You painting the bell on the Taco Bell or shooting?"

"The moon," said Stan who could enjoy a laugh as good as the next guy.

When they left an hour later, we were still drinking, playing eight ball, and forgetting who was shooting stripes and who had solids.

Matthew told me I'd better learn to book up because I'd have to be a regular paint-scholar Ph.D. "That's for sure you're right about that and don't I know it!" I said. By that time pool was hopeless.

Laughter's a good way to know you've drunk too much. You get that feeling that your hand won't lift a glass of ice but your insides are like cork. You laugh and feel your heart and guts bob inside you and you know: too much. I bought a straight-up Johnny Walker Red and one for Matthew and looked at the big spring water Budweiser clock and said, "Two-thirty! In the morning!"

Matthew put his arm on my shoulder and I hitched my hand on his there. We're not a family that hugs. Not the McWelts. So, it always felt good to be drunk enough to put our arms around each other.

"A miracle," I said, looking at the bright plastic water flowing out of the clock on the wall of Knud Hildebrandt's bar. "You closed?" I asked Knud, who was wiping tables around us.

"Half an hour ago," Knud said. "Take him home, Matthew." It was what he always said. He'd known our dad and grandfather. I always wondered if he had let *them* stay past closing time too. But I never asked because it made me mad having somebody tell my little brother to take his big brother home. Couldn't he see Matthew was just as smashed as me?

"Sell us some cigarettes," said Matthew. Knud gave us a

pack. We probably all but kissed him, like drunks will do for the smallest favor.

I pointed at the perfect stream of water on the wall. "The miracle of Budweiser. Turning water into beer."

Knud pulled the plug.

"A miracle," said Matthew, looking away.

I helped Matthew out of his chair. "See you later, Knud. Or earlier. We're going to tear out the inside throat of that smokestack." I pointed out his neon-green window at the sky. "The nine-story one."

Matthew said, "You damn right!" We laughed at the stupid joke, the bar's favorite overused joke.

"Good night," said Knud, not laughing.

We were so wet-eyed with our funniness, we forgot to pay our tab. We walked the eight blocks to the 20th Street railroad crossing and another four blocks to our apartment on Sherman, then got our money. Bounce-passing a basketball between us, we walked back through the rotten ice-cold weather. A couple of times one of us missed a pass so we had to go into the street. Finally, we just charged down the middle of 20th, passing the ball, fumbling and staggering, but not falling even once. Knud had closed up the bar.

It's a slow acid, booze. But if your work so completely wastes you that—drunk or not—you can always eat and—drunk or not—you can sleep, how do you know the acid's burning you away at the nerves and eyes, and how do you know it's burning away your will to do anything but dream and drink and work some more in order to dream and drink?

At four a.m. after Matthew fell asleep, I called Homer, the hot roll finishing foreman on the graveyard shift, and asked

him to save the smokestack work for Matthew and me on Christmas.

"Dangerous," he said. "You know that."

"Twenty-six extra cents an hour's worth."

He grunted. "McWelts," he said, like he was writing it down. Even over the phone I could hear the slabs boom onto the platforms in the ovens and scream as they were pressed through the rollers.

"Overtime?" I asked.

"Sure."

"Double time?"

He agreed to that. He was a nice man, Homer; so protective that some called him Homo. But only behind his back. When I thanked him, he said we could kiss his feet when we came in at noon. "Each toe, boys."

Growing up in Meltenville we knew lots of guys like Homer. My mom's friends were church friends or cousins or mothers she met through her children's playmates. My dad's friends came from everywhere: steelworkers, barmates, butchers, old class buddies, ex-bosses, and vets. He could easily get genuinely close to the salesman at the Spalding's Sport and Trophy, where my brothers and I bought our letter sweaters and where our winner's plaques and statues were engraved with our name or school name.

When Luke was still working at the blast furnace, we lived within ten blocks of the mill. A long time ago. St. Louis was a bridge away. The St. Louis Arch, the Gateway to the West, was finished around the time I was twelve and Matthew was nine, but it was more awesome incomplete than when it was complete. Big as a tennis court, a sign

short of the McKinley bridge had Stan the Man Musial on it. His head was tilted back, his eyes following the place far beyond the sign where the home-run hit was headed. Above Jack Buck and Harry Caray floated the neon words, "It's A Home Run!!!" The exclamation points were baseball bats; the periods, baseballs. Not far from the Baseball Cardinals sign, but blocked by brick two-stories, was a Mobil station. From our house we couldn't see the station itself but couldn't miss the winged horse above it, turning slowly and powerfully, high in the air.

A block south of us lived our grandmother and grandfather. We had a neighbor, next door, who kept our basketballs when they strayed over her high Cyclone fence. Kept them right on her back porch just to show us. Another neighbor stole them back for us just to show *her.* And behind us, across a deep, narrow alley, we had a neighbor who liked to drink. My dad drank with him almost every weekend. Bottles set down between them on a carpenter's workbench, they drank and worked on "projects" and never finished the cabinets, the sewing tables, the chairs, or anything, but got slobbery drunk. They showed *everybody.*

At dinnertime, Mom would send me to get Dad. "Just him," she'd say, because he'd often bring Mr. Paschowski home to tumble his food off the table and talk football and blow his nose in his balled-up napkin.

"Just him, Michael," she'd say. "Please." She wouldn't let Matthew come with me.

I couldn't do any good. At the back door to our kitchen, Dad and Joe Paschowski would lean on the chains of the hanging porch rocker. We would stop to smell the oxtail

soup and the strong tea before Dad banged his fist on the screen-door frame.

"Mike here," he'd say to Mother, "undered if Joe could have dinner ith us." When he was most drunk he always dropped *w*s; he would form the *w* with his lips, but then was incapable of the necessary push of air.

I would helplessly shake my head and shrug to show Mother I had tried to bring only Dad. Matthew would say, "Boy, oh boy" in that wiseass way that was already too full of irony for a nine-year-old.

Afterward, after the floor and table were puddled with his soup and tea, Mr. Paschowski would clear his sinuses, ball his napkin up and, gripping it tightly in his palm, solemnly say, "Patricia, I thank you."

"Underful soup," Dad would say. "You think so, Mike?" If I didn't give him an answer, he could get one from Matthew. "Right, Dad."

Then the two men would talk about Unitas's arm or argue about how the season was going to size up or, if a game or a fight was on television, they would go to Joe's to watch it.

Booze helps me forget distinctions between the truth and the exaggerated truth, so less is required for me to remember.

Basketballs. They always help. A workbench I have brought all the way to New Mexico with me.

Another thing: a quilt my mother took twelve years to make. Barely contained in each large white panel of it is a whorl of blossoming American Red Rose. When I pull

my knees up and cradle my head on the quilt, I can make a warm mound of earth to sink into.

This was a long time ago.

Luke had accepted a basketball scholarship at SIU-Edwardsville and was commuting to campus from his apartment out behind the Siebold Grocery on Madison Avenue. He didn't visit too often.

That Thanksgiving he had planned on coming over, but canceled at the last minute. When I had to go tell Dad dinner was ready, he and Joe sent me away. "Mike," Joe said, "inform your dear mother we'll be arriving shortly before the fourth quarter." He talked that deliberate way, I was told, because he had been a judge once. I didn't believe it then. I don't know what I believe now.

When I returned home and told her what Joe had said, she turned away from me. "It's already two-thirty," she said. "I wish just once." She spoke into the screen door facing the alley. "Just once."

As far as I could tell, it was the one thing she said more often than anything else. To try understanding him, I studied her. In our neighborhood of broad-shouldered, noble Polish women, she was an exception: her character conveyed in a slighter frame, in thinner arms and smaller hands; her shoulders narrow and bowed a little, her face missing the impressive marble resolve of the Polish women. It could be a stern face when she corrected those who assumed incorrectly she was Polish. "I am," she politely told them, "Lithuanian."

Matthew and I came in from practicing hook shots and

we drank some milk. Matthew said he didn't like blue milk. She said he was welcome to have water if two percent wasn't good enough for him. "God," he said. She looked bullets at him and said, "You can eat soap if you don't watch out."

The turkey was odd-smelling. When I said as much, she frowned at me.

At three o'clock, waiting for them to come, we set out the butter and bread and poured the iced tea. "What do you think?" she asked. She was referring to the table, but I had half answered her before I realized that. "They'll be here right away," I said. "Mr. Paschowski said before the. . . ."

For the next half hour we talked about the Thanksgiving mass, and Matthew complained about how long high masses were; she said they were ceremonies and ceremonies were meant to be long. Wasn't Father Luzinski looking bad these days, she asked, and wanted to know who would replace him, as if Matthew and I could possibly know. Like some kind of predictable feint before the outside jump shot, this patter was usually a sign.

She reminded us that Grandmother was also ill and that it must have been the first time in a long time Grandmother had missed a high mass. Our Aunt Norma had brought Thanksgiving dinner to her and Grandfather. We'd visit them after our meal, "if it's not too late," she said, her fisted hands disappearing into her apron pockets. We heard Dad's voice and his laughter.

"Pat, put the dinner down," he said from the alley. "Our chops have been set and aiting on the first score." He placed his arm around Joe's shoulder and heralded him in through

the screen door. He held a chair out for him. "Judge Joseph Paschowski presiding!" he said. Though he was gifted with the Irish instinct for making kings of his friends, he treated none so grandly as Mr. Paschowski. When Dad moved to kiss her on the mouth, Mom offered a cold cheek to him.

He sat down. "They're knee-deep in mud and moving no air a yard at a time, boys, and I never—" But as she placed the main course on the table, he stopped. He ran his hands over the hair at his temples and his smile suddenly stood in awkward contrast to the straight lines forming around it. Bumping the table away from him, he said, "Patricia?" He stared at the serving dish. "It's ham."

"Yes," Mother said. By seating herself, she both challenged him and backed away from him.

"You know damn ell Joe can't eat that!" He pointed at it as if at a horror.

Scored into diamonds, topped with two big pineapple slices, two bright red maraschino eyes, and a glaze of brown sugar, it looked and smelled exactly like what it was: the forbidden food. The food we all, Dad included, loved and never ate because our visitor for every Christian holiday meal was Jewish. Kosher, so he said.

Joe mumbled something about knowing when he was not welcome and wishing he had known before. His face contracted with genuine disappointment.

"You think this is funny?" Dad asked her. "You think I have to put up with this crap?" When she didn't answer, he said, "I don't! By God, I don't!" I had never seen him so wild with rage though I had seen him rip an unironed shirt in two and try to kick the President out of the radio.

Once, at three in the morning, I had seen him lean over Mrs. Roczyky's fence and scream at the top of his lungs, "Give us our goddamn basketballs back!" Though many times I had heard him ask, "You think I have to put up with this crap?" it had never run me through with such fear.

"Matthew," he said, "you know about this?" He leaned over the table, and his expression changed. Matthew was his closest ally among his three sons. Sadly now, he said, "You did. You did, huh?" Matthew was unable to shake his head no. I remembered how, earlier, I had smelled ham.

Mr. Paschowski gripped the edge of the table and then stood. "I got—I'd better—"

Mother finally spoke. "Yes, Joe. Let's let this one meal be ours."

"What?" Dad asked. "What!"

"Just this once," she said. "Please." The word was his invitation to explode. That was always true. It always amazed me how, knowing that, she would say the word. Surely she must have known it.

Dad was circling the table to reach her when Mr. Paschowski said, "My dear boys." I held open the screen door for him. We followed him and then stood in our backyard averting our eyes from him where he had stopped in the alley. Our neighbor Mr. Mihalich, the man who stole back our basketballs, was on his back porch. "You all right?" he asked.

The voice calmed Joe. He pulled his shirtsleeves over his wrists. "Of course," he said, and walked slowly to his house.

"You boys," Mihalich asked, "you okay?"

Impossible to answer that. When Mr. Paschowski was gone, we went into the garage and sat on the hood of the car. I heard the screen door slam and Dad cross the alley to Joe's. I imagined he would tell Mr. Paschowski that it was an accident, that she forgot. Just forgot. Then, Dad's laughter would set things right.

"There he goes," said Matthew.

"Kyrie eleison," I said.

"Christe eleison," he said. (We were both server boys at the mass.) The sacrilege made us feel better.

On the wall shelves around us hung car guts of every kind: an assortment of rubber hoses and mufflers, a dozen or more batteries, belts, gaskets, disassembled engine parts. A Snap-On tool chest stood in one corner.

Moonlighting from the steel mill, Dad had been a mechanic, though not for long. At first, our backyard had been lined up with cars needing repair because word spread in town that he was cheap and quick. Then, so I've been told, the fruits of his labor began to show up broken down on driveways and road shoulders and condemned to junkyards. When word spread *why* he was so quick and why so cheap, we could play again in the backyard "whenever you please" he said, because he wasn't "going to be no grease monkey for nobody, by God."

One time he was a sample-man for a big soap company. It was his job to give out free samples in neighborhoods of St. Louis and East St. Louis and then, according to an alternating monthly schedule, return to make sales. He was a foreman at the blooming mill by then, but he wanted more. He must have been a very fine sample-man but he was, for

certain, no salesman. On every spare inch of the garage floor, tall boxes of WHIM (The Slim Box of Shimmer!) grew pale and bloated from moisture.

In front of the car, on either side of the Snap-On tool chest, were two newspaper Tie-Ups, table machines that grabbed and tied a folded newspaper with a *cashunk!* that was music to Dad's ears during all the time he was a distributor for the *Press Record.* When he lost that job too, I heard him tell her, "Pat, I just can't be a goddamn grown-up paperboy all my life. I just won't!"

So, he did bookkeeping for Gregowizki's Meat Market and some other businesses in Alton and Mitchell. He even had his own office machinery. "He's a smart man," Mother said, earnest in wanting us to believe it. "He's not going to be locked up in the mill all his life, you know."

Around that time, Mom had gone to work in a shoe store. Her one-to-six shift and Dad's combined steel mill graveyard shift and nine-to-noon work in Alton and Mitchell kept us all apart. Home by ten o'clock, Dad, who had usually been at Mr. Paschowski's since three or four, was a happy drunkard, his strong laughter like the exhalation of pure joy, his inhibitions so uncontained that his love could be as dangerous as his purest anger. Mother became so word-empty that Matthew and I hung on anything she said. At night when she called "Good night" up the stairs to us, that was enough to sleep on. Those two words.

"Love ya guys. 'Night," Dad would call up, much later.

Now, lying back on the Olds, I watched my breath form and dissolve in the cold air. Matthew said, "Maybe Luke could come." He trusted in him more than I did. Sometimes