

Billy



...a family put right

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Billy

Author's note

Billy grew from the 2014 NaNoWriMo (National Novel Writing Month). It is the story of a young boy and the impact he has on a dysfunctional family. Billy is damaged, but resilient. I hope I captured the transformative power of love. As always, your comments are welcome. Hope you enjoy this little tale. I like Billy. Expect to see more of him, Ken, Molly, and Grand. If you like this, you may want to look at [36 Questions](#). It is the backstory to Ken and Molly. I've posted it a Smashwords.

<https://www.smashwords.com/books/view/627874>

If you become a beta reader, I can get it for you free. Let me know. Have fun.

Prologue

Her body shuddered, convulsed, then went rigid. Her eyes were wide open, her mouth agape. She tried to talk, but could only gurgle and make guttural sounds. He turned on the light. Her pupils stayed dilated—big black discs. “Mattie, Mattie, what’s wrong?” He gently shook her. “Mattie, what’s wrong?” Her eyes did not follow him as he went to her side of the bed to get her glass of water. “Here, maybe this will help.” He offered her the glass. She did not reach for it. She did not turn her head. She did not blink. He dropped the glass and reached for his wife.

Chapter 1

Arrival

We were sleeping in. I’d been up late finishing an article. Molly didn’t have a class until ten. It was cold, wet, and miserable outside. More early March than late May, no reason to stir. Serenity was not to be. The phone rang. Molly rolled over to pick it up. “Hello... Yes, just a second... It’s your Aunt Flora,” she said, handing me the phone, then snuggling.

I stared at the phone. “Aunt Flora, what a surprise. How are you? ... No! ... When? ... How? ... When? ... I’ll be there.” I tossed the phone to Molly, cast about for my clothes, and sprinted to the bathroom.

“What’s wrong?” called Molly, holding the phone as I left the room.

“My mother died. Got to go home.”

Silence. The phone made the hang up noise. She put it back on the cradle. “Of course. Anything I can do?”

“No,” I said, from the bathroom doorway with half my face smeared with shaving cream.

“You sure?”

I nodded. “The funeral is Friday.”

“You have time.”

“If nothing goes wrong. Want to leave now.”

“I’ll take you to the airport.”

“Bus station.”

“Bus station?”

“Airlines won’t get me close enough.”

“Still, they’ll be faster. You can rent a car.”

“Fast is not what I need.”

“It’s not?” she asked, walking towards me.

“Not thinking clearly. Want to do something, but don’t want to spend too much time at home.”

“You don’t?”

“Long story.”

“I can drive you.”

“You have school.”

“This is more important.”

“Appreciate the offer, but I want to be alone. Okay?”

“Alone?”

“Want to sort this out. Wasn’t expecting this. It’s a shock.”

“Want to talk about it?”

I shook my head. “Maybe when I come back?”

“Want coffee?” she asked, turning and shaking her head.

“Please.” She walked to the kitchen. I finished shaving. We met in the kitchen after I showered. She was blowing on her mug. “Thanks.” I gave her a peck on her cheek.

“For what?” She touched my face.

“The coffee for one,” I said, reaching for my mug. “Not asking for the other.”

“I can wait until you’re ready. Still want to take the bus?”

“Now more than ever. It’ll give me time to think about things and still be doing something.”

She held the mug with both hands in front of her face. "That's a long time on the bus. Not my idea of fun. My offer still stands."

"None of this will be fun. I'll leave right after the funeral. May fly back."

"I'll drive you to the station." She reached out to touch my hand.

"I can catch a cab." I took her hand. "You'll be late for class."

"Class can wait. You're upset."

I snorted, then shook my head. "Mom is... was just barely fifty. She's never sick."

"Go pack." She squeezed my hand. "I'll take you to the station."

Threw a few things in a blue flight bag. Three hour wait before the next bus. Couldn't wait in our quiet apartment. Had to do something—needed distraction. Molly waited with me at the station. I appreciated the noise and chaos of the crowds. She left me to my thoughts, just held my hand.

Four buses and sixteen hours later, I arrived at the junction of 136 and Q Road. This was as far as he could take me. The driver opened the door to the quiet darkness. I could sense the corn before I stepped off the bus. This time of year it would be a few feet high and dark green. This time of year it

was always a few feet high and dark green. Nothing changes in corn country, including the people.

I stood looking north. Had to be overcast. There were no stars, no moon, and no lights anywhere. The gloom was a fitting homecoming. As my eyes adjusted, I trudged homeward. It was six miles to home. Home in name only. I should have rented a car. Escape on foot would not be practical.

As I approached the farm, the sky lightened, but the sun was yet to peak above the horizon. Dad was working on Fred. Fred was a 1956 red Ford tractor of questionable reliability. I've known Fred for as long as I have memory. We had little use for Fred since the state took most of the farm for the new interstate in the early 60s. I was too young to remember what the old farm was like, but my Dad did. That remembrance ossified my father's heart.

Dad kept fiddling with Fred until I was ten yards away, then he straightened and wiped his hands on a soiled rag. Dad was a tall man. He was three inches taller than me and rail thin. What little hair he had was white. I remember when there was more of it, and it was blond. Dad was a tired fifty. He looked it. "I suppose you heard," said Dad.

"Yes." I walked to him. "Aunt Flora called."

"Asked her not to."

"Why? Why would you do that?"

“Thought it best.”

“Best how?”

“Your mother and you had something special. Didn’t think you’d want to see her buried.”

That caught me by surprise. I put my bag down. “Never crossed my mind. Thought I should be here. Be here for her.”

“Didn’t think you came back for me. Wouldn’t for you.”

I shook my head. “Don’t imagine you would.” We exchanged glares. “Okay if I stay here, or should I go over to Aunt Flora’s?”

“You can stay here, if you want.” He nodded towards the house. “Your old room is just as you left it.”

“Thanks. Flora said it was a stroke. Any pain?”

He shook his head, then looked away. “She died in her sleep. When I woke up, she was gone. She went peaceable.”

“Small favors.”

“For her.” He wiped his hands on the oily rag.

I looked around, with my hands on my hips. “She’s the only good thing about this place.”

Dad winced when I said that. I’ve told him this before. Now it hurt. Wasn’t sorry I said it. He

nodded. "Your mother was the only good thing here." He stuffed the rag in his pocket and dropped a wrench into his carpenter's toolbox. "Had breakfast?"

I shook my head. "I could eat."

"Put your things away. I'll see what I can do."

"Don't bother. I can put something together."

"Suit yourself."

"You want anything?"

"No. You can wake Billy when you're up there."

"Who's Billy?"

"Mary's boy."

"Our Mary?" He nodded. "I'll be damned. I get to meet my nephew. Where's Mary?"

"No idea." He spit. He spit twice. "Never had the courtesy to stop by. Just left the kid at the airport then flew off."

"Left him at the airport?" He nodded. "When was that?"

"Couple months."

"Mary just left him there?"

He nodded, his lips pressed into a tight line. "She and her rotten husband flew in, dropped him

off, then left. Had to go to the airport to pick him up.”

“Mary left her son at the Omaha airport?”

He shook his head. “Provo.”

“What?” I shook my head. “Why would she do that? He’s what—four?”

“Five.”

“Nobody leaves a five year old at a rundown airport.”

“That’s your sister for you.” He picked up his wooden toolbox, kicked at a stone, and stomped away. His shoulders slumped from more than the weight of the toolbox.

Opening the screen door was like stepping through a time portal—nothing had changed. Walking up the stairs ticked back time with each step I took. Soon I was back in 1980, when I left.

I’d been back twice in eight years. Never to spend the night, just a quick visit with Mom. My room was the same. It will always be the same. Mom hoped I’d come back to stay. We knew I never would. On top of my dresser was Ezra. A comforting sight. I put my bag on the bed and knocked on Mary’s door. No response. I knocked again.

“Yes Grand,” said a soft little voice. “I’m up.”

“Billy? It’s your Uncle Ken. May I come in?”

“Uncle Ken?”

“Your mother’s brother.”

“Brother?”

“Yes. May I come in?”

“Yes.” Billy was still in bed. He was so small, even in a twin bed. Mary’s room had not changed either. Mary left two years before me. We left as soon as we graduated high school. Would’ve left sooner, but Mom wouldn’t hear of it. There was the old school desk where she used to store her makeup and spend hours fixated on a handheld mirror. She hoped her beauty would be her passport out—it was. On the wall at the foot of her bed was a poster of Farrah Fawcett. Mary looked like Farrah. Mary wanted to be Farrah.

Billy was under the old white chenille bedspread with brown vines and pink flowers. The vines seemed to wrap around him. “We’re about to have breakfast,” I said. “Would you like to join us?”

“Sorry,” said Billy.

“For what?”

“Dunno.” He rubbed his eyes. “Must have done somethin’ wrong.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I didn’t?”

I shook my head. “You didn’t. Need help getting dressed?”

He sat up. “I can do my shirt and things, not my shoes.”

“I can help you there. Why don’t you wash your face and put on your shoes. I’ll be down in the kitchen. We can tie them there.”

“K.” He cocked his head and closed his left eye. “You, my Mommy’s brother?”

I nodded, crossing my heart. “Cross my heart and hope to die.” Poor choice of words. Billy pulled the covers over his head and slid under them. “You okay, Billy boy?”

“Don’ die,” said Billy, peeking from behind the sheet. “Gran died.” He blinked three or four times.

“I won’t die. Hurry, I’m hungry. What would you like for breakfast?”

He lowered the sheet from his face. “Gran made pancakes,” said Billy, tilting his head with a faint smile. “Apple pancakes?”

“My favorite too. If we have apples, you’ll have apple pancakes.”

“Is Grand here?”

“Yes. Why?”

He pulled the covers down to his chest and looked at his hands. "He doesn't like me."

"Of course he likes you."

"Don't either," said Billy, twisting the sheet in his hands. "He hates me."

"No, he doesn't."

"Does so," said Billy, pushing the sheet away.

"Come on. Get dressed. I'll help you make your bed."

"Don' know how."

"I'll teach you. Hurry."

Billy had to slide off the bed backwards. He was three and half feet tall and thin—skinny. He was wearing my Red Ryder pajamas with sleeves and legs rolled up. Could have been me twenty years ago. Billy eyed me as he walked by on his way to the bathroom.

Five minutes later, he came back to the room. "Gran would find my clothes for me," said Billy.

"Find your clothes?"

"New ones," said Billy, pointing to the pile of clothes on the desk chair. "Those are old ones."

“How long have you been wearing those?” I picked up the shirt on the chair. The striped tee shirt and shorts were soiled.

“Since Gran left.”

“Two days ago?” He nodded. “Billy, can you take a bath by yourself?”

“I’m a big boy.” He said with his hands on his hips and tight lips.

“Yes, you are,” I said, shaking my head. “If I ran the bath and got you some new clothes, could you...”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes, you have to.” His shoulders slumped. “Any favorite clothes?”

“I can pick?”

“Sure. They’re your clothes.” His shorts and tee shirts were in the bottom drawer of the dresser. Not much of a selection. Time to do laundry. Billy had no fashion sense, but then neither do I. I made the bed while Billy took his bath.

Went to the basement and then the root cellar to find the apples. They were last season’s, but still good. Dad was waiting at the top of the

basement steps when I came out of the cellar.

“What are you doing, son?” he asked.

Dad didn’t call me son. I was always him, it, or you. “Billy wanted apple pancakes.” Showed him the five apples cradled in my shirt.

“You can make your mother’s pancakes?”

“Not hers, but close.”

He smiled, or as much as he can smile, and turned away. Went up to check on Billy. He was waiting for me leaning against his bed. He had his tennis shoes on, but the laces were untied. His wet hair was uncombed. He smiled his first smile. I saw Mary in his smile.

“What’s first?” I asked. “Shoes or hair?”

“Hair?”

“Don’t you ever comb your hair?”

“No.”

“Didn’t your mother or..., what do you call your grandmother?”

“Gran,” he said. “What do you call her?”

“Gran’s a good name,” I agreed. “Didn’t Gran comb your hair?”

“Yes.” He ran his fingers through his hair. His eyes narrowed. “Why did Gran leave?”

“She had to.”

“When she coming back?” He squinted.

“She can’t.”

“That what die means?” He looked at the floor.

“That’s what it means.”

He looked at me. His eyes blinking, then misting. Billy cried. “Gran loved me,” said Billy over and over. “Gran loved me.” He turned, then buried his head in the bedspread. I tried to comfort him, but he moved away from my hand. I let him cry it out.

“Where’s Billy?” asked Dad, while I peeled the apples.

“He’s crying. Told him Mom wasn’t coming back.”

He said nothing, just walked away. Heard muffled sobs coming from the front room. Now it was my turn to cry.