

Billy

By Kirsten Bakstran

Billy runs through bushes, trying to ignore the thorns scratching at his skin. He knows the pain those boys will inflict would be much worse, so he pushes on even as the branches seem to reach out to grab him.

“Itty Bitty Billyyyyyy where are youu?” Gabe’s voice and the cackles from his friends echo around him. Billy runs faster, deeper and deeper into the forest until he can’t hear anything but the pounding of his feet on the ground and his heart in his chest. He finally stops and listens. The forest is dead silent except the occasional twittering of birds. Their joyful songs feel like mocking to Billy as he fights back the tears he tells himself are from anger. He looks around and realizes that while he lost his tormentors, he also lost his way. The sun is starting to set and he feels the emptiness of the forest close in around him. There’s plenty of space, but Billy feels like he’s back at school, stuffed in his locker again. He sets off, trying to retrace his steps and hold off the creeping fear.

Billy walks for what seems like an eternity, but there’s no end to the forest in sight. He thinks about his mom and dad and little sister at home. They must be worried about him. He wished more than anything that he could be home right now, enjoying his dad’s famous meatloaf, which Billy always douses in ketchup. He’s never told his parents anything about his bullies. He tells himself that it’s because he doesn’t want to worry them and because they won’t be able to do anything, which are both true. But deep down, he knows it’s also because he couldn’t bear to see the pitying, disappointed look in their eyes. It’s the one the janitor gave Billy when he freed him from his locker. And it was the one his sister Julie gave him when she saw him get pushed face first in the mud on the way home from school one day. He doesn’t walk home with her anymore.

Billy looks around with desperation. He can barely see now. Even the moon seems to have given up on him, hiding behind the clouds. But then, Billy notices a flickering light in the distance. His legs feel like jelly and his throat aches, but he forces himself to set off towards it. He thought it may be a streetlight or maybe even a car, but as he gets closer he finds it coming from a small fire outside a decrepit hut made from sticks set against an arching tree. For a reason Billy can’t quite explain, the image of a deer carcass, picked clean by scavengers, that he’d found on a boy scout trip when he was six jumps into his mind. He feels the hair on his

arms stand up, as if his body knows something his mind can't yet grasp. Billy begins to back up, knowing he'd rather be lost than stay here, but then he hears a creaking voice behind him.

"Ah, child. Not leaving so soon I hope." Billy's heart seems to stop as he turns around to see a towering man dressed in animal fur and skins. He can't tell where the man's bushy beard begins and ends because his face is covered in a mixture of mud and what Billy prays is anything but dried blood.

"No need to be afraid, child" The man coos. Billy wants desperately to run but he can't get his feet to move.

"You're afraid a lot, aren't you? I can feel it buried deep within you." The man reaches out, grazing Billy's cheek with his long, talon-like fingers.

"There was a time I was afraid too. Would you like to know how I overcame it? That lowest of human emotions?" Billy has never been so scared in his life, but he also feels a deep longing. Not quite hope. More of a hunger. He nods his head. He's so fucking tired of being afraid all the time. The man walks over to his hut on his stilt-like legs, then folds his body in on itself to fit inside. Billy knows he should leave. His skin feels like it's trying to crawl off his body and his neck is coated in an ice cold sweat. But Billy is also tired of running. The man emerges carrying a goblet made of bone. He holds it out to Billy, and Billy takes it. Looking inside, he sees a dark red, viscous liquid beating like a heart. Then the odor reaches his nostrils. The putrid, rancid smell of death hits him like a slap. He gags. With terror and tears in his eyes, Billy looks up at the man. He notices for the first time his gleaming red eyes. The man smiles with entirely too many teeth, then reaches out to tilt the goblet up towards Billy. Billy closes his eyes and sips.

Gabe sits outside behind his slab house, playing with the switchblade he stole from his uncle. From inside his house, he can hear Pop yelling, which he knows will soon turn into Mom screaming. It isn't worth the wallop he'd receive for getting involved though. His dad was just a few sips of Coors away from passing out anyway. And, why did Mom have to leave the garbage cans out on the street like that. She knows how Pop hates that. Gabe hates her for it. And he hates him too. He flips out the knife, stabs it into the ground, then pulls it out along with a clump of muddy ground. Gabe looks up as he hears the soft sound of crunching of leaves from the edge of his yard.

"Who's there?" Gabe yells, brandishing his knife. He can't see anything. The dim light from his home can't penetrate the darkness over there. There's another footstep.

"Who the fuck is over there?" He yells again as goosebumps crawl up his arms.

“It’s probably just a possum. Or that dumbass nosey neighbor,” he thinks to himself. But the goosebumps don’t go away and he feels a terrible sick feeling in his stomach. A putrid scent reaches his nose and Gabe gags.

“What the fuck is that?” Gabe says as he starts to back away.

A terrible voice reaches out from beside the tree. “Aw, are you scared, Gabe? How does it feel to be scared?”

Gabe trips over his feet and falls back. He is scared. Incomprehensibly terrified. He can’t move as he starts to wet himself.

“Pleasssee” Gabe stutters as a figure steps out from the darkness. “Buh....Billy?” Gabe asks, unable to fully comprehend what he’s seeing. Then he notices the blood red eyes and pallor skin. He screams with all his might, but the sound echoes for only for a second before it’s cut off.