

## *Spilt Milk*

*Oh, no! No! Dad's gonna kill me.* Billy stood in the kitchen petrified, all but his thoughts, as milk seeped down his legs and spread along the kitchen floor like an oozing gunshot wound to the chest. Billy was four, and memories of his brief life blossomed amid mortal fear.

Billy lived with his dad, George Stevens, for a sum of four years before George grew weary of domestic bliss. Billy could count the memories of living with his dad on one hand. When he was two, Billy's mom, who despaired at not having a daughter, sat him in their almost-new car, an off-white 1969 Chevy Impala station wagon, death-black vinyl interior, metal trap-door in the rear to hide a spare tire but mostly used to terrify a youngest brother with claustrophobia. But this day his two older brothers were at school. So, Billy got to ride in the front.

Billy and his mom were on their way to bring George the lunch he had forgotten on the kitchen counter. They met in the gravel parking lot of the First Methodist Church, where Billy's mom typed and folded Sunday morning service programs. George silently grabbed the brown paper bag, glanced toward the Impala, and turned towards his own car. Billy began to cry when he realized his dad was returning to work. Billy's dad pivoted towards the Impala, knelt within inches of Billy's wet face, and began to laugh. "Ahhh, whatsamattah, you cryin'?" Then, he stood, frowned at Billy's mom and said, "Huh, I guess you had a girl after all."

George hated crying. It reminded him of childhood, when his younger sister, Melanie, had to eat on the floor next to the dog because she was born with no thumbs. His oldest sister, Mryna, was the first and only to protest. She was also the first to fly, all

the way through the kitchen and out the back door. She landed in a convent near Idaho, but she was not made to be a nun. George's mother almost cried, but she was magic. She could drink from a bottle and make everything turn dry, except her husband. The more she swallowed, the dryer she became. Then, one day she stumbled, hit her chest on the back of a wooden chair, and crushed her heart into powder. At her funeral George wanted to cry. Maybe a gallon of tears would bring her home, but she was already underground before he had thought of it.

One day Billy got to see his dad at work, men's shoes at JC Penny. George was in a hurry and needed Billy to be in a hurry. George didn't hold hands, but he did offer his left index finger. It was massive, an oak tree branch, larger than Billy's entire hand. Billy revered it.

George's favorite pastime was watching his first born, Jacob Joseph, compete. Everyone called him JJ. He was a kinesthetic Mozart, an athletic genius by age six. JJ excelled in football, basketball, and wrestling too, but nothing compared to baseball. He was, as they say in baseball-speak, a Five-Tool-Guy: he could hit for power, hit for average, run, throw, and field. He was everything Billy's dad wanted to be.

David is Billy's middle brother, three years his elder. Of Billy's five fingered memories, only one places his dad and David in the same room. JJ was with his mom at piano lessons, the one extra-curricular activity George wanted no part of. Thus, Billy, David, and George found themselves in a most rare circumstance, alone together. George *cooked* dinner. Billy's mom could cook, probably the best gift she ever received from her mother. George, however, had no culinary gifts, selecting the simplest meal in the world to prepare, hamburger. Then, he mutilated it with onions.

George did not speak while he blackened the meat, but he sighed painfully to make certain his two boys understood the magnitude of his effort. “Finish your plates,” he said flatly. Billy’s eyes fell upon the smoldering charcoaled mass. David froze, but time did not. “Eat!” George commanded, his voice threatening and oppressive like November skies. The first bite assaulted Billy’s taste buds, then his esophagus. His innards were set upon a carnival ride, while tiny diamonds of fevered sweat formed upon his brow. He glanced at David, always stoic, silent, determined to do his duty and be recognized by his father, recognized as worthy to be called *son*.

Billy’s young stomach had built no immunity. So, he devised a plan. Every time his dad’s attention strayed, he’d take a bite and chew thoroughly, making a meat paste with his overflowing saliva. Billy spit the mortar into his left hand and discretely discarded it beneath David’s chair until his plate was clean enough for the cupboard. Triumphantly, Billy asked, “Can I go outside and play now?”

“You finish your milk?”

“Yes,” bolstered by the understanding that it was all he’d have in his stomach until breakfast. To make sure, George walked over to inspect then offered the simple emotionless praise David dearly coveted, “Well done.” At the moment Billy began to excuse himself, thinking he had escaped his own personal Alcatraz, his dad hollered, “What the hell is that?!?! Goddammit David, you eat speck off the floor!” Billy’s plan worked. George thought David had spit his *dinner* on the floor. David was dumbstruck. “Now!” George concluded, stirring David into semi-consciousness. Outside the kitchen window, a mere thirty-six inches away from his brother, Billy played in the dirt, grinning.

When Billy was three, he got to spend an entire summer day with his dad, his mom, and his two brothers. They went to Purdy Bay next to Burley Lagoon along the west side of Puget Sound, opposite Seattle, about half way between Port Orchard and Gig Harbor. Billy thought Purdy meant pretty, pretty sparkles, millions of them body surfing atop the ripples and waves. Billy ran along the tide-pressed sand, softer than most Washington beaches, warm between his toes. Near the highway, though, there were rocks, some big, some small, all dark, jagged, and menacing. They summoned Billy to their unique igneous and metamorphic worlds. He ran to them. Immediately, he unearthed the Goliath of green plastic army men holding an unexploded grenade. He was nearly three inches tall, twice as tall as all Billy's other army men.

Billy ran to his dad, "Look what I found Dad! Isn't he amazing?!" Billy held the plastic war hero high, the same way he held his first lost tooth. Initially, George seemed startled, as though Billy had shaken him from a dream where George spent most of his days. He looked concerned until Billy stubbed his left big toe on a rock that Billy couldn't see because he kept shifting his eyes from his dad to the three-inch army man and back again. It hurt. Dark, almost purple blood oozed from Billy's toe. His mom had the look and the *Oh* sound mom's make when their offspring are hurt. His dad began to smile. Billy began to cry. "Boys don't cry," he said. It was his smile that hurt.

When Billy was four and his brothers were staying the weekend with friends, while his mom was at work, he found himself in the kitchen. Billy's mom was a bank teller, Kitsap County Savings and Loan. She worked full-time to put George through business school at the University of Washington. His diploma says his real name is George Adoniram Stevens. He was proud, the only college graduate from his family: an

alcoholic dad, deceased mom, five sisters, and a bastard half-brother he never told Billy about. George wanted boys. He wanted to go to college. He wanted to know his dad. He wanted to be smart. He wanted people to know he was smart. He didn't want people to know Billy's mom put him through school. He didn't want *anyone* to know she beat him by exactly one point on an IQ test. He got her to agree to cheat at pinochle against Billy's brothers when they were six and ten. He doesn't want you to know that.

On the day Billy was finding himself in the kitchen, he also found his dad in the rec-room. George had a day off, and Billy got to spend it with him. It was the greatest day ever.

Billy loved bacon, the scent, the melodious sizzle, the texture of it when it's soft, the taste mixed with egg yolk and maple syrup. On the greatest day ever, his dad did not mutilate four hand-selected, thickly sliced slabs of bacon. He did not burn two mashed potato cakes in the remaining bacon grease. Three eggs were turned over-medium with the care of a maternity nurse. Two pieces of richly buttered whole-wheat toast were top-dressed with home made wild-blackberry jam.

The celebration of breakfast began with twelve ounces of 34-degree freshly squeezed orange juice, and it was washed down with a glacial glass of whole milk. It was the most perfectly matched family of breakfast food ever assembled, and it sat atop a plate on George's rolling belly while he reclined, watching other people golf on TV.

Billy was met in the kitchen by an empty bowl, a box of month old Cheerios, and room temperature milk. He wished he hadn't spilt the milk.

Sometimes ideas fall out of the sky like a forgotten satellite. They orbit the earth for years stretched over decades. Their usefulness is usurped by technology, and

eventually they are forgotten, until their orbit disintegrates. Sometimes they have to be destroyed. Other times they burn up during a blind date with the atmosphere. The particles are rendered harmless and microscopic. But some are like a virus, falling all the way to earth, landing in uninvited places, like George's brain. He captured one of those ideas the morning Billy spilt his milk.

"What did you do?!" he asked. No, he roared. He didn't get up from his chair. It was a blue overstuffed rocking chair with a matching blue ottoman. Gold paisley stitching with flecks of pink made them to feel like they belonged in the new decade. George bought them at the Gonzales's garage sale for a dollar apiece. They were vomit-green until Billy's mom reupholstered them. When Billy was seven, he sat on the top of the back of the chair, fell and landed on his head. He threw up all over the cushion in original green.

"I'm sorry for spilling, dad. I'm really sorry!" Billy was telling the truth. He was really sorry, but he didn't cry. Then, George arose. To Billy's immense relief, George did not grab the crib board. Billy never saw it, but David told him their dad once spanked him with the crib board. David said it hurt, badly enough to tell Billy about it. George didn't spank Billy with the crib board though a few years later he called Billy the *luckiest shitty crib player ever*.

"Come outside," he said, both feet already on the patio. Billy's tongue went as dry as a towel. Even so, Billy loved *outside*. His sandbox was there. It was sunny. The yard was immaculately groomed by Billy's mom, her personal Eden, not yet corrupted. Billy followed his dad through the rec-room to the back yard patio, where George filled a purple plastic half-gallon bucket full of water with his dark green garden hose. Billy used

to imagine that hose was a snake, neatly coiled, ready to spring. Snakes scared Billy, but he loved that bucket. He built entire empires of castles with it in his sandbox.

“Billy,” he said, “I want to teach you about centrifugal force.” It was the biggest word Billy had ever heard, and it immediately took root in the base of his brain. Its magnitude spread into another chamber giving birth to a notion he could not identify for several years, Intrigue. George topped off the bucket, grabbed the yellow plastic handle and said, “Watch.” He swung the bucket vigorously with his right hand below his hips then over his head, round and round like a miniature carnival ride half a dozen times. No water spilled. “Now you try.”

A firestorm ignited inside of Billy. His dad wanted him to join in an experiment. Billy was going to experience centrifugal force! He lunged for the bucket. With both hands and all of his pride Billy gave it a heave. In super-slow motion the purple plastic bucket filled with water rose from the ground over his head, suspended in a picture, and promptly emptied itself atop his head.

ROARS of guttural laughter boomeranged off trees, down the neighborhood street and back again, resting in the ears of a four year-old, crushed like his mother’s begonias. By fortune the hail of laughter and dripping water camouflaged Billy’s tears. And, just as suddenly, George was silent, probing Billy with his eyes. “Now,” he said, door to the rec-room open, “take off your shirt and wipe the milk off the kitchen floor.”

Two days later, George moved out. Two years after that he moved to California.

Billy’s mom told him between gasps and sobs that his dad was not coming home. He never did. Billy did not cry.