

Is That Right?

Billy Myers had been injured in Vietnam. His apartment was a second-story one-bedroom on Boyle Street. The phone rang. He set down his scotch. He answered the phone.

"Where are you, Billy?" He worked with Gladys at the post office, the night shift. She sounded a little drunk.

He had a sip of scotch. "I'm just sitting here watching TV." The TV was off. So was the stereo. Billy Myers was sitting on his couch in the dark.

"But you said you might come, Billy. We're having a good time. Almost everybody's here."

"Is Jim Otis there?"

"No," she said.

"Is Donny McCarthy there?"

"That's not the point," she said. "You said you were coming."

"I said I was thinking about coming." He left it at that. He could hear the people at the party. They were loud and laughing. Sounded like they were pretty drunk.

"It's Christmas Eve, Billy. We all want to see you."

He had a sip of scotch. "Is that right?"

"Billy, you're not feeling bad about telling me, are you? I'm your friend. I would never tell anyone." He'd just got too drunk with her one night. Then someone started screaming some Metallica lyrics in the phone. John Corsi, from Shipping. Gladys was

laughing. Then it got quieter. "I gotta get a drink." He could tell she was slurring. He could hear her moving across the VFW hall to the cash bar.

"Billy, I would never tell anyone that you got your penis shot off in Vietnam." He thought he heard some people laugh.

He had a sip. "I gotta go," he said. He had a sip. He hung up. The bastards.

Billy was wide awake. Usually he was just starting work now, but it was Christmas Eve. Nobody was working. He poured three fingers of warm scotch and gulped it down, one, two, three. He got his coat. It had started to rain, but was so warm it didn't matter. He got his raincoat instead. It was really dark out. He went back and had two slugs right from the bottle. He put the pipe in the inside pocket of his raincoat.

At the end of the block he walked by the big porch on the yellow house. Some chicks were sitting out there smoking and talking.

"So wait. You're telling me he admitted he was there that night?"

"Absolutely. And all the cats were still alive."

The other one said there you go.

He stopped walking. The guy did it, he said to them.

The girl standing said that's what I'm saying. Where you going? Do you want to smoke a joint? I gotta go he said and kept walking.

He turned the corner at Charles Avenue. You had to go off the sidewalk to step around the puddles. You couldn't blame someone for killing all the cats. The goddam things were probably shitting in the back of the closet anyway. There was a coffee shop

to go at the corner of Earl Street. He had killed four people, or six, so far. Sometimes in Nam you would shoot somebody but never know if you really killed them.

At the coffee shop there was a tall skinny kid with long hair behind him in line. A girl with a backpack with him asked the kid what is your New Year's resolution. The kid said I've decided to completely cast out fear and doubt.

Billy said large with cream and sugar. She said a dollar sixty eight please. The girl with a backpack said but is that like, possible?

What do you mean, said the kid.

He picked up his coffee to go. You're an asshole he said to the kid, and just walked out of the coffee shop.

The rain was coming down steady now. He flipped up his hood. The coffee was pisswarm. He chugged it and had to take a leak before Ranbourne Terrace. There was a parking lot there without lights that came on.

He was taking a leak. Completely cast out fear and doubt. What a moron. Try people bleeding and screaming and getting blown up by grenades. Try being so scared the shit runs down inside your pantleg. Try getting shot. Try that sometime. Idiot. Completely cast out fear and doubt, my ass. He finished emptying his bladder into the plastic bag hung from his waist inside his baggy jeans.

A couple girls walked by on the sidewalk. One was saying I knew him in high school. Somebody beat him up really bad with a pipe.

There you go. He turned right down Douglas Street. The VFW hall was two blocks on the left. He reached inside his raincoat to feel the lead pipe.

The VFW hall was spilling fluorescent light out all its windows. You could hear the band cranking-- Bob Segar, "Against the Wind". People were probably dancing still. Billy Myers strode through the door of the VFW Hall on Christmas Eve at ten-thirty-one PM. It was a Thursday that year. It was raining. He walked in and there was a guy on crutches, his right leg just something missing below the hip.

"Billy Mears! You finally made it. You fucker. " John Winglemire scooted across the floor on his crutches and clumsily hugged Billy. "Us vets gotta stick together, bro." He was drunk.

"Billy! You came!" Gladys was headed toward him, weaving a little. She hugged him, really pulling him close. She let go and said, "What do you have in your coat?"

"Let me hang it up," said Billy, and he did.

"June!" said John Winglemire, fidgeting on his crutches. "Look who's here! My lovely wife! Billy Mears is here, honey!"

"Billy Mears! Haven't seen you in forever. I want a kiss." June Winglemire began staggering across the floor to him, started to fade left, then weave right and was taking a headfirst dive to the linoleum when he lunged and caught her in his arms, and steadied her, and held her.

"Will you look at that! Billy Mears finally shows up, and two seconds later he's groping my wife!" John Winglemire was shouting and laughing. June planted a sloppy kiss on Billy's lips. People came over and started pounding him on the back and shaking his hand.

"It's about time you showed up, Billy!" shouted John Corsi. "What can I get you to drink? The night's young! Merry Christmas, guy! A toast to Billy Myers!" John Corsi raised his glass and so did they all.