

BILLY

A short story by Timothy Freriks

The screams shattered his peace. He sat up, breathing hard, sweating. He rammed his hands to his temples. *Stop!* he yelled aloud. *Leave me alone!* It was the kids, the taunting, jeering, angry kids that came to him when he slept. They were screaming in his head again, their madness engulfing his mind, their hate and laughter echoing.

The young man opened his eyes and looked around to get his bearings; he had drifted off to sleep, but the clock on the painted concrete wall in the hallway had not. It told him that he hadn't lost much time, enough for the nightmare to visit again, but not enough to put him much closer to the event that would end his pain.

"You OK?" the large guard asked as he poked his head around the corner. The fat black man in the faded blue uniform had become almost compassionate since the final stay request was denied. He grunted and stared at Billy for a moment then tucked his head back to his solitaire at the little table behind the light green wall. His head hit the single hanging bulb as he did, as he often did, swinging eerie shadows onto the wall beyond the cell. "Shit," the guard spat, as he often did.

Billy watched the clock on the wall as the light played off of it. He didn't answer the guard. The screaming had stopped for a moment, but the deafening silence returned, broken only by the incessant tic-tic of the wall clock. As the disorientation of waking up lifted, the fear flowed in again: always the fear, the bone-chilling horror of his reality.

He looked at the clock again. 3:45 am. *Oh God*, he thought as his mind grappled with the calculation, only... less than four hours to live. He clenched his fists into stone and began to rock back and forth as his stomach twisted, tightly, one way then the other. When he opened his hands, they were white and trembling. He was scared, scared to the very depth of his soul and he closed his eyes, trying to divert his thoughts.

Maria. She was beautiful, even 'Dumb Billy' could see that. She had lived down the street from the trailer that his mother had finally been able to buy after his father left. Maria would come and help clean up the place when his mother drank a little too much and got mad and crashed around inside the trailer. She never put him down, like everyone else did—'bastard son of that whore Wilma Cutler', they would say, calling him names: 'retarded, stupid, coward'. And they would laugh at him. No. Maria was different, she knew what Billy knew: his mother was a

good woman, kind and generous when she could be—when her demons let her—and loving. She didn't deserve the life she was living.

His father left them with nothing but troubled memories and bills. His mother had to work two jobs but when Billy was old enough, he helped too, working after school in the fields for the rich folks when the Alabama cotton came in. The day he brought the first paycheck home he was proud; he had finally done something to help, something like a grown man. Maria was there, cleaning, while mother was busy nursing a particularly painful bout with her arthritis. Whiskey helped she said, it always helped. Maria stayed for dinner, a pizza that Billy bought with his own money, and they ate and laughed and Billy still remembers the warmth that he felt that night. It was at that point—and the fact that he had just turned 15—that made him wonder if he was in love with Maria.

Billy was not very smart, not enough to understand most things, but he had come to accept it. He could work hard in the fields, though, and could bring home money to help his mother who just kept getting worse, so bad that she couldn't go out to clean many houses anymore. It wasn't enough—it was never enough—and every two weeks Billy would walk to the Government Office to pick up the Poor Pay, as the 'decent' folks in the small southern town called it. There he would hear the whispered insults, spoken just loud enough, as he walked past the barber shop and grocery.

Loser. Well, his folks are no good either. But he would drop his head and walk around them, crying softly to himself. *He can't even take care of his drunken mother.* Someday, Billy would tell himself, someday I'll show them, somehow. The boys taunted him: 'retard', they said. They laughed and bumped him into the lockers in the hallways, but he wouldn't fight back; he was too kind-hearted to hurt anyone. He'd just lower his eyes and walk away. In the school yard, he'd dust off the dirt the kids would throw at him and just move away.

But he couldn't dust off the hurt and the guilt at the fact that he couldn't provide for his mother. It wasn't fair, he told himself. But 'fair' didn't seem to be on Billy's side. Ever. So, he just wandered through life, doing the best he could.

When he had turned 18, Billy was still tall and terribly thin, but strong, in his own way. Maria would laugh about his prominent Adam's apple and protruding jaw, and he would laugh too. The boys of the town had stopped teasing him so much about his awkwardness and slow manner, but the memories were strong, haunting him, waking him up at night. It made him feel empty, worthless, and so much the coward when he didn't fight back.

“Billy?”

The voice startled him from his thoughts. “Yes?” He blinked and looked up to see the preacher at the cell door.

“I thought I’d stop by,” he said in a soft voice, ‘before...’ He let the sentence drop, but Billy’s stomach turned and twisted even tighter; a cold shudder went through him as red water of reality flooded back into his conscious mind. He had thought a lot about death in the last few months, but he was unable to concentrate for long and he always found other things, easier things, to think about. But now that it was almost at hand, it ate at his guts like a rat nibbling on an old pizza crust.

Billy raised his eyes to the preacher. He had never been long on religion and the preacher’s mumbled words didn’t comfort him. God was supposed to help people, not let them go through what Billy was going through. At least God should be fair. He looked down at his hands and started to rock again, back and forth. A headache was starting to pound through his head and down his neck into his shoulders.

Why don’t you stand up to them, his father had said when he came back once to visit. *Why are you a sissy? Be a man!* he would scream as he hit Billy who would lower his head even farther as he took the blows and cried. *Stop sniffing! Be a man! Be a man!*

But it isn’t fair, he would toss back at his father when he found enough courage to respond.

Fair belongs to them, stupid, his father would yell back. *Be a man! Be brave!*

Be a man! Be brave! he heard over and over again, echoing through his brain as he lie back on his cot. He pulled the covers over him, gasping against the heavy coldness of terror. He pulled his knees to his chest and rocked rhythmically. His body shook as he sweated. *Think of Maria,* he said. *Think of Maria.*

He had never told Maria how he felt; he probably should have. He just assumed she loved him, too. Even ‘Slow Billy’ had emotions, had needs and feelings. *It didn’t take brains to want to love someone,* his mother had said once. But no one would touch him, except his mother, and that was good, but not in the way his young body wanted to be touched. Maria would come to him in his sleep, her thick black hair falling over her green eyes and smooth olive skin when she laughed. He was always strong in his dreams, and smart, and brave; the boys would run away in fear and Maria would smile at him and touch him. In his dreams, he was a man; he was brave.

But Billy’s and Maria’s reality was not to be a fairy tale. The direction of their fate was irrevocably set one day when he was 20. He had overheard Maria tell his mother that she could help her no more; she was going to Texas to work in a factory. Billy was devastated. *She can’t,* he told himself. *She can’t leave us. She can’t leave me!* Somewhere in his slow mind an idea had

formed. Maria is leaving because she doesn't know how I feel. If she knew, she would live here with us, with me, and we could be happy.

The next day Billy had decided to tell her all of that, after which he fully expected that they would start their life together. It was after dark when she arrived home from her day job. Billy went to meet her at the bus stop, by the Waffle House, just past the entrance to the trailer park. He rehearsed it all day: take her arm and lead her into the park behind the clubhouse, tell her how he feels. She would, of course, fall into his arms and they would make love and marry and live forever.

The moment came. He did take her arm at the bus stop, but she pulled away at first until he insisted, then she let him. She didn't smile, but it didn't matter, Billy didn't notice, his energy was concentrated on what he would do next and his heart was filled with a love for her that he didn't know how to express. It reminded him of the pressure cooker his mother used once. *We have to talk*, he said, trying to sound like a man. She complained when he pulled her toward the park but went with him, saying she only had a few minutes.

The next moments were blurred; he couldn't remember much except that she kept hitting him. He felt desire that he couldn't control and to him, in his fevered mind's eye, they were making love, the way he remembered his father and mother did it when they didn't know he was in the trailer. It was rough: His mother would scream and hit his father and his father would scream for her to shut up and hit her back. *That's the way men do it, son!* his father yelled whenever he was discovered. In the distorted passion that had gripped him at that moment, he kept seeing his father's face, red, puffing, angry, screaming at him:

Be a man!

And he kept seeing the boy's faces, taunting, laughing. His anger rose at them as he threw Maria down, tearing at her clothes, tearing at their insults, trying to be a man. He didn't realize he was exposing a madness he kept hidden, even from himself. *Stop!* she screamed.

Stop It! Stop It! RAPE! HELP!

She had slapped him hard and he fell against a tree then sat up, breathing in gasps, staring at her. Stunned. My precious Maria! His senses had returned quickly. *What have I done?* he shouted, baffled. There was such fear in her wide eyes. *This is not right!* he yelled at himself. He looked down, surprised that his pants were on, unbelted, unzipped, but still on. In his mind, they were naked. *I must make her understand, I didn't mean to hurt her. I want to love her.*

"I'm sorry," he had said. He zipped his pants up and went to her and as he did, she tried to stand, to escape, pulling her torn dress across her body. *I'm sorry!*

His passion and anger was gone. But she didn't know that. In her attempt to flee her attacker, she stumbled. Her foot had caught a curb in the parking lot and her head fell hard against a

pickup truck bumper. When she hit the ground, she was still. Billy ran up to her and choked back vomit. His beautiful Maria was so suddenly quiet, her thick black hair matted with a growing pool of blood, glistening in the parking lot light.

He touched her hand and was suddenly, strangely calm, sitting next to her, staring vacantly. *I'm so sorry! Please get up and forgive me. I was trying to be a man, your man.*

He hadn't heard the footsteps approach a moment later or the crackling of twigs and dried leaves, of heavy men running, drawn by her screams. He knew she was dead, that much sank into his brain, but he didn't understand, nor care, about the pushing and yelling and flashing lights and the loneliness of cold cells.

His Maria was gone, killed in a bizarre accident. Everyone blamed him, and in a way, he blamed himself: if he only hadn't been so clumsy, so angry, so passionate. He was engulfed with sadness. He was numb, unable to understand the reality of the quick trial and the accusations of the people who were laughing and jeering, pointing, and spitting their anger. Still. Again.

Be a man! his father's voice said several times from somewhere inside of him while the judge was telling him he must die for the murder of Maria Garcia. He saw his mother, crying, his father, sneering. *Take it like a man!* his eyes said.

But Billy couldn't. He cried and sobbed. The question of why were they doing this finally surfaced under the weight of sorrow and emptiness. *I didn't kill her! I loved her! But it was too late. This isn't fair!* But they wouldn't believe his claims of innocence—that it was an accident.

As he left the courtroom he saw the townspeople in the room, pointing and saying they knew he was no good anyway. *Her clothes were torn: he's guilty!* He was better off dead.

Maybe they were right, maybe simply his living was guilt enough.

“You want chicken?”

Billy raised his head, startled. He plunged back to his dark grey cell.

The guard was holding a tray and Billy nodded numbly, stood and pulled it into the cell. But he wasn't hungry. After a moment he gave it back to the guard and sat down. Most things were beyond his ability to understand, he knew that, and he knew also that it was apparently his lot in life to be made fun of, and degraded, to run when he should fight. But why he was in this dark, lonely cell was a question that he didn't even care about anymore. He just was.

And in... he checked the clock and struggled to perform the math... two hours his life itself would be taken from him. He understood that, and rationalized it. It was not a good life, anyhow, it never was, but it was the only life he had.

He wanted to piss. He wanted to run. Even if he could run through the bars, he couldn't run from the searing, aching guilt... and fear. He lay back on his cot and stared at the ceiling, seeing his mother's face. *Make the pain go away, mommy*, he cried as his body trembled again and terror stabbed and squeezed his gut, engulfing his soul with a cold tension so deep it seemed to penetrate every fiber. Only if his body could accept his fate, like his mind had.

Somehow he fell asleep, as if to avoid the problem, like he had done with everything else in his life.

"Billy?" the guard said. "Billy, it's time."

Billy opened his eyes and reality re-entered with a jolt. As he fixed his gaze on the clock he realized he had slept for almost two hours. The thought that those were his last hours—that he wasted his final time—hit him like a sledgehammer. *Loser! You can't even die right!* The cold pain of fear and the shakes immediately seized his body again as the guard put his hand on Billy's arm.

"Let's go," the guard said pulling him up roughly. The preacher hurried up to them, rubbing his eyes, sliding to a stop at the cell door.

Wait! Billy yelled to himself as he felt himself being pulled up and out. *Wait! I'm not ready.* His knees gave away as his body focused on his mind's horror, his stomach knotted and empty, one foot dragging, a million angry insects crawling just under his skin. *Mother! Stop them! I know what they're doing! I want to be a man, father! I want to be brave! I want to make them stop! Not yet! I have to take care of my mother! Who will help her? I have to! Maria, come back!*

"Into the valley of death..." The preacher's voice trailed off. Billy couldn't hear him over the roar of a hundred screeching voices roaring through his consciousness, filling and echoing through the cavern of his skull. *Death*, they chanted. *Death*.

His brain was firing off feverish images. Alternately he would think of something, a memory, a place that made him happy then he would think of going back there then the collision with certainty would hit him. *You're never going anywhere, it said. You're going to die in a few minutes. Then there will be nothing.*

Die. When the thoughts came back to that word again, his guts would churn even more and his head would drop and, through his quivering jaw he would try to form the words NO! THIS ISN'T FAIR. But fair belonged to the kids who pointed and laughed. *Stupid!* he heard them cry over and over. And 'fair' belonged to the guard and the preacher and his lawyer who had told him he deserved to die. Fair was not for Billy Cutler; not for the village idiot, the murderer, The rapist.

The door ahead opened and he stiffened. Inside was the wooden chair. *Oh, Jesus!* For a moment he pulled against the grip of the guard. But there was nowhere to go; even through the daze and unholy din of terror, he knew that. There was no escape. *Then do it!* he yelled to them but he said nothing aloud. *Stop the pain!* He said nothing aloud as they pushed him into the chair and strapped him down.

DO IT! he yelled at them silently as splintered waves of red hot horror surged through the cold, quivering body that he couldn't control any longer. *OR STOP IT! STOP THIS PAIN!* But the guards took an eternity to do their work. In slow motion they moved, hour after tortured hour passed as they put on the contacts and the shackles. He watched, his eyes wide, his head pounding and rocking. He wanted to piss. He wanted to shit. He wanted to vomit.

DO IT! STOP THE PAIN! But they wouldn't hurry. The preacher's voice kept droning on as Billy looked out at the stiff faces of the witnesses, each laughing and pointing behind their tense and pristine masks.

He saw his father. *Be a man* his father's eyes said as they touched his. *Be brave!*

I want to be! Billy cried. *I don't know how! Oh, Jesus! Why didn't you teach me how!*

OH GOD!

The fire of anguish and dread seared his every pore and he almost screamed, but he didn't. *I'm trying, father! I'm sorry, mother! I want to take care of you!* His eyes met the deep brown sad eyes of the preacher who settled against the gray wall. *I'm sorry, Maria. I just wanted you to love me!*

"You're a brave man," the preacher said just as the guard lowered the hood over his head.

Billy didn't comprehend at first what he had heard. "What?" he asked.

"You're a brave man, Billy Cutler," the preacher repeated.

Just for an instant, as the words sank beneath the horror, he felt a strange calm and the panic flushed from him. *I am?* But in the next instant the impact of the white hot fire of the electricity tore through his body, convulsing him rigidly against the straps, ripping his mouth and eyes open in his final surprise. Searing sheets of orange and red exploded in his mind, displacing reality as the thundering noise of a thousand evil, screaming unleashed demons shredded his consciousness.

Birmingham Daily News

September 25, 1975

MOTHER OF WRONGLY EXECUTED MAN AWARDED \$750,000

On August 14, 1974, William "Billy" Cutler was executed at the Holman Correctional Facility in Atmore, Alabama, for the rape and murder of Maria Garcia. On August 28, Sarah Wilson, a resident of the Belle Acres trailer park tearfully confessed to police that she witnessed the incident from her car behind the Waffle House and that it was an accident. She also admitted that there was no rape. She told authorities that she saw Maria trip and hit her head as she ran from Mr. Cutler.

William Cutler was innocent of murder. His conviction was subsequently overturned, posthumously.

His mother, Wilma Cutler, was awarded \$750,000 in a wrongful death settlement. She plans to purchase a small house in a Birmingham suburb and live out her life in comfort. She asked that her privacy be respected.

The whereabouts of his father, John Lee Cutler, are unknown.