

*“Devouring time, blunt thou the lion’s paws,
And make the earth devour her own sweet brood;
Pluck the keen teeth from the fierce tiger’s jaws,
And burn the long-lived phoenix in her blood”*

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE, Sonnet no. 19



PROLOGUE

THEN



“IT’LL BE ON US ‘FORE WE HAVE TIME *to pray and pass water!*” yelled a voice from high in the rigging.

Lightning crashed in the distance, and a tide of black clouds swallowed the stars behind the ship. The Captain paced the deck. Half his men were starving and threatening mutiny. The other half were spilling their guts over the side, or fouling up the hold below.

The sickness was spreading. The storm was closing in. And Death waited on all sides, laughing in the shadows.

“*Then skip the prayer, hold your piss, and dump everything,*” he yelled back, gripping the hilt of his dagger.

“Sir,” the Steward said, holding his swollen stomach, and doing his best to stay standing as the boat lurched. “Are you sure you want to-?”

“Dump it all,” said the Captain, inching the blade from its silver scabbard. “The cannons. The bags. The liquor. The food that’s turned. Even the rats, if you can catch ‘em. Anything that could slow us down.”

The Steward winced and gagged as the deck dipped, and clutched at the arm of the Captain's salt-stained coat. "But the *haul*, sir? What we almost died for? What of the thing that's cursed us since we left?"

The Captain looked to the cabin door. A bearded priest stood in the shadows, shivering in his ashen robes. The holy man moved to block the door with darting eyes and a considerable girth.

"There's more to fear than *curses*, boy," the Captain hissed, slapping the young man's hand away. "Touch that box, and you'll know. *All of you. Go!*"

"Yes, sir," the Steward said, stumbling off towards the bow. "*You heard the Captain – dump it all!*"

The Captain turned and gripped the back rail. He watched the lightning dance and slice through the heavens. He saw the darkness creep towards him, like oil spilled across the sky.

I'm in a race with the Devil, he thought. *But when we're light as the whiskers on His face, we'll see who gets there first.*

With fingers full of splinters, he twisted the ring of gold on his left hand. It slid easily across his taut, pale skin, leaving smears of brown and red. Dirt and blood.

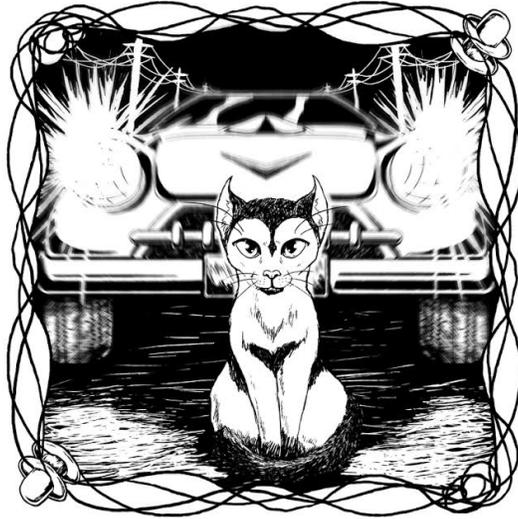
It won't be for nothing, I swear. To the edge of the Earth, the end of Time, and whatever stands between. We will raise a glass again in the New World, and laugh in its face. Together.

He looked up at the stars as the storm closed in and saw them extinguished, one-by-one, until just two remained. They glimmered and shone through gaps in the clouds like two great eyes in the darkness, burning on a demon's face that chased him across the sea.

Rest now, my love. For soon, you shall sleep no more.

With a gust of wind the eyes blinked out, shut tight in the storm. Far below, a lone man tilted back his head, and howled at the darkness.

Of Boys and Bones



BILLY BRAHM WAS HAVING A NIGHTMARE.

Now, there's nothing the least bit peculiar about a ten-year-old boy having a bad dream. Be it fanged beasts, or exploding volcanoes, or having to go up in front of the entire school to give a speech in your underwear, there isn't much call for alarm.

Just remember that you're dreaming. Run away as fast and as far as you can. And then wake yourself up.

But this boy's dream was different. It was different because there was no way to escape from it. It was different because he was already wide-awake.

Elizabeth and Stanley Brahm stood over their adopted son with masks of concern and frustration on their weary faces. For years, Billy's mother had scolded him for being accident-prone, causing them so much unnecessary worry (not to mention the implied expense).

"*You could trip on a whisker, or cut yourself in a rubber room,*" his mother would say, removing her glasses with a heavy sigh and furrowed brow.

Stanley Brahm would nod in agreement, keeping the fragile peace. As his mother continued to scold, Billy would watch his father turn and inch quietly from the room. The bald patch on top of his head would bob out the back door and gleam its way across the lawn, disappearing behind the doors of his workshop.

Billy couldn't argue with his mother. He may have been a smart boy – frighteningly smart, according to the standardized tests they gave at his school each year – but no amount of brain could dispute the boy's storied history of profound clumsiness.

When Billy was three he fell down the stairs with a double-scoop strawberry cone. Shag carpet softened the blows and absorbed the ice cream and blood, limiting the boy's suffering to two chipped teeth, a fat lip, and the ridicule of his three foster siblings.

When Billy was four he ran out of daycare, tripped on his untied shoes, and met the shale-and-gravel driveway face-first. At the doctor's, he shrieked as the little man with the lazy eye slid a needle and thread four times through his upper lip. The boy's siblings (down to two now) were no less cruel with their laughter.

When Billy was five, a hulking sixth grader – lunging to avoid a dodgeball throw of vicious intent – slammed him into a tetherball pole. Six weeks in a sling, and a broken collarbone to add to his 'scorecard'.

Billy's sole sibling at the time – a shy blonde girl with a love for stuffed bears and a tendency to cry – asked him in all seriousness if he was *cursed*, or just had really bad luck. Three weeks later, Billy watched from the kitchen window as the girl was packed neatly with her bear into a long grey car that would whisk her away to another home.

As he waved goodbye to her and remembered her words, he began to wonder the same thing.

A jolt of pain brought him back to the present. Back to the living room and the squeaky, lump-infested cot. Back to the plaster cast on his leg, and the reason he was trapped.

His mother unfolded a newspaper, sat down beside the bed, and began clipping a piece from a page near the front. For a minute Billy forgot his pain, hoping she had found a coupon for ice cream, or for the movies. His mother loved coupons as much as Billy loved ice cream, and movies, and dreams. Probably more.

“Do you have any idea how *lucky* you are?” his mother asked, though she wasn't really asking. She waved the strip of paper in front of his face. “You could've been killed! People must think we're *awful* parents.”

The news story was titled: 'SUMMER RUINED FOR LOCAL BOY'. That's all he could make out, aside from his school photo. The unflattering picture showcased his prominent overbite, bulging brown eyes, and a lopsided mop of chestnut hair. Billy never saw himself as a handsome boy before and now, after the accident, even less so.

The throbbing in his leg made it hard to focus and reading only made him dizzy. But the memories were slowly returning. They came to him in flickers of blood, and flashes of screeching metal.

Three weeks earlier, the boy had turned ten.

Two weeks ago, he got a perfect report card.

And last week?

Last week, Billy Brahm was hit by a car.



Billy's mother had had enough.

She was tired of the lounging in front of the TV, of the comic books strewn around living room, and of the toy-soldier wars that threatened to engulf the entire house.

In short, her son's tendency to dream was fraying the tip of her last working nerve.

"Silly Billy," she said, "I'd really like it if you found something to do outside. Something *productive*. Ask your father for a chore. Or build something. Or, maybe you could find a friend..."

She unscrewed the cap from a fat green bottle, and poured red wine up to the rim of a juice glass on the counter. After a long sip, Billy watched her putting extra muscle into kneading the pizza dough. Her face reddened, and began to resemble an heirloom tomato from their garden.

That's when the boy decided it was unwise to stay and risk losing his special 'perfect report card' dinner.

Billy shuffled to the front hall. Arranged for him on the low hall table were the blue wristwatch and matching running shoes that he got for his birthday. He put them on, opened the door, and stepped out into the heat of the first Sunday of summer.

Find a friend.

It's something she had said many times before. This only convinced the boy that his mother didn't have the best grasp on their geographical reality.

The Brahms lived in Appleton, a tiny rural town in the heart of the eastern valley. It had a year-round population that hovered just shy of 800.

The kids anywhere close to his age lived far away – past the sprawling orchards and sweet-corn fields and dairy farms – on the other side of the hills. A trek like that was a daunting prospect in the heat of late June with only a slim chance of success. Besides, after the year he'd had, Billy wasn't exactly keen to see anyone from his school anytime soon.

He circled the house and wandered back to his father's workshop. It was a small grey shack with white trim and topped with tarry black shingles.

The square door yawned open and Billy peered inside. Paint-flecked ply-board walls were lined with hanging tools, and a set of old golf clubs was hoisted high in a shiny black bag near the door.

Billy liked to watch his father work. Sometimes the man would spend all weekend in the shop cutting and sanding pieces of sweet-smelling wood. The shop was filled with projects in various stages of build and design – *unfinished masterpieces*, as his mother called them.

But that didn't seem to bother Stanley Brahm. He looked happy just pushing the circular saw through a fresh plank of cedar, as he was doing at that moment.

"Can I help?" Billy said.

The boy wasn't eager to follow through on the offer, but it was cooler there in the shade of the shop. He waited for an answer, but the man kept on cutting. Billy knew his father was focused because his tongue was still sticking out the side of his mouth.

"Dad! CAN I HELP?" Billy shouted.

Stanley jerked his hands at the sound, shearing the wood at an ugly angle. Unlike his mother, Billy's father wasn't one to show big emotions. This made the boy nervous, because the man's moods were harder to read. But it didn't take a psychic to see the annoyance hanging in the air just then with all that wood dust.

"Busy right now, son," his father said. He clicked off the saw and it whirred slow, stopping with a sudden *CHUK*. "How about you help your mom with the pizza? I'm sure she'd appreciate it."

"She sent me *outside*," Billy said.

"Of course she did," Stanley said, sliding off his safety goggles and wiping the sweat from his brow.

As his son stood in the doorway, still and unblinking, Stanley fought the urge to turn away. There had always been something he just couldn't place with the boy. Something unsettling. Something in his eyes that seemed to look right through people and take them apart.

"It's a gorgeous day," his father said. "Summer vacation, right? Go find a friend and kick the ball around. Just don't get those new shoes too dirty. You know how your mother is." Stanley winked, put his goggles on, and set the saw in motion. His tongue slid back into its sideways work groove. The conversation was over.

Find a friend.

Billy was starting to get the hint. His parents weren't keen on tripping over him constantly for the next two months. But they were also drawing the line on their son becoming what the parenting books had described as 'borderline antisocial'.

Pickings were slim in the valley if you weren't after apples. Plundering anthills in the sandpit with toy trucks and a magnifying glass wasn't going to cut it. Neither would a summer spent daydreaming in his favourite place – Billy saw the looks his folks shared when he spent too much time there.

That left only one option. Thankfully, it was a good one.

Billy would make a point of crossing the road to visit the old Thomas place as often as he could. It was a big two-storey house with a stone foundation, chipped white siding and dark, dusty windows. It seemed to sag in the middle, as if the weight of its age had made it exhale and refuse to stand tall again. Yet it looked perfectly comfortable with its bad posture,

peeling trim, and balding roof. The plants around the yard had grown tall and wild, defying the trimmed bushes and tidy squares of manicured lawn across the road.

It was *old*, to be sure. Billy had read in the paper that it was probably built in the early 1800's, but his father – whose job it was to inspect buildings and assure the township that they measured up to municipal codes – had been in the basement to help with a plumbing mishap. He placed the stonework in the foundation at fifty years older than the paper's estimate, maybe more.

The 1700's. Back to the days of the first settlers. The beginning of Appleton. It was part of the reason the boy loved it so much. But only part.

Billy had a ritual. First, he'd hop the ditch instead of using the driveway. Then he'd sit on the plank swing hanging from the huge elm out front. After a few swings he'd leap into the grass, hunt for four-leaf clovers, and then make his way around the side of the house.

He'd move through the garden then, and approach the old stone arch. Its curious shape was cracked and sun-bleached, and covered in snaking vines and wildflowers. It had grooves and markings on its smooth surface, but they were too shallow to share any secrets.

It was there beneath the stones – near the rose trellises and swaying sunflowers, with the sound of seashell wind chimes clattering in the breeze – that he would stop. And it was there that he would kneel in the grass, take a deep breath, and then call to *them*.

Billy was there to see Mrs. Thomas' cats. Which was all fine and good, because the old lady's attention was divided in countless furry directions.

There were fat cats and skinny cats. The long-tailed and the bobbed. The daring young leapers, and the old windowsill sleepers. Balls of waddling fluff, smooth-coated prowlers, and hairless ones that looked fragile and wise. The tiger-striped, the ring-tailed, and the ones with matching coloured socks and mittens. There were tabbies and calicos. Manx and Persians. Siamese and Bombay. Ragdolls and Birmans. Maine Coons and Russian Blues. There were Snowshoes and Somalis, Tonkinese and Turkish, and many, many more. Brown and beige and orange and grey and black and white and silver cats, each with gleaming eyes of emerald, or sapphire, or amber. A rainbow of precious stones.

On that fateful afternoon, a white tabby with black spots (or was it black with white ones?) had caught the boy's eye. It had just slipped out from one of the basement windows and was wiping its paws on the foundation.

Billy crouched low, as he had learned to do, and called to it. *Wsss, wsss, WSSS*. He forced the air gently between his teeth and tongue, extended his hand along the ground, and rubbed his thumb in circles against the index and middle fingers.

The cat stopped what it was doing, dropped to all fours, and turned to face him.

Billy was struck by its golden gaze, the blacks of its eyes narrowing in the sunlight. The cat looked as if ink had been spilled upon its head, painting a black helm that dribbled a dark spear down the bridge of its nose. This made its gleaming eyes and pink nostrils stand

out all the more on its narrow face. The cat's ears, jet-tipped and pointy, stiffened and curled towards the sound. It crouched as it stared with its black tail flattened, swaying across the loose dirt.

This is not for you, child.

Billy thought that if the creature could speak, that's what it would say. This was clearly a foolish thought. As anyone with sense will tell you, cats can't talk.

Yet Mrs. Thomas had claimed many times (over homemade apple pie with chunks of cheddar that she shared with her furry beggars) that cats could talk perfectly well, thank you very much. The problem was that most of us had forgotten how to *listen*.

The cat blinked and scampered off. Billy gave chase, following it through the long grass. He ran past the crumbling gazebo and the stone well and around the giant elm, whose lowest branch still held the swing in a lazy embrace.

He followed the cat all the way to the property's edge, watching it weave through the ditch and onto the road. He kept on following until it stopped in the middle of the far lane. The cat sat down on the pavement with half-opened eyes and measured breaths, and turned its head down the road to the north.

There was a growing shape in the dusk, faint and grey like a shadow. It was moving fast, and coming straight towards them.

Billy heard a voice.

'No more...'

The moments that followed were an insane blur. Shock and agony. Blood and breathlessness. Waves of sheer terror, not all of them Billy's.

His mind flashed, and his parents stood over him. They were shaking and crying, and waving traffic through as they called for help.

As he lay there, crumpled and bloody on the ribbon of asphalt, the boy remembered running out to help a cat for some reason. And when he heard his mother's wail over the hushed chatter of those who stopped to gawk, Billy tried very hard to convince himself that it was all just a terrible dream.

When the ambulance arrived, he was loaded onto a stretcher with a sickening jolt. He thought he heard someone say that he had slid across the road so fast that the soles of his new shoes had melted. His wristwatch was smashed, and his best jeans were beyond the help of any seamstress or commercial cleanser.

But those were just *things*. Far worse were the shattered bones and dangling tendons poking through the side of his shin, the flesh failing at its job of keeping them all in place.

Siren blaring, the ambulance sped north. Darkness was quick to descend, transforming the vehicle into a wheeled firefly that darted and flashed as it steered through the night.

Inside, the red lights set an eerie scene. The attendant's face was shadowed and grim as he steadied the boy's stretcher. Stanley Brahm crouched in silence beside him. Through a pained haze, the boy thought he saw tears running down the man's cheeks.

It must've been a dream, for Billy had never seen his father cry.

It took 45 minutes to reach the Middleton emergency room. The driver had radioed ahead and the on-call doctor met them at the door – a pasty man with thinning hair, a wide jaw, and small, precise eyes. His voice was steady as he directed everyone inside, and remained calm when he saw the extent of Billy's injuries.

As a nurse dabbed stinging liquid at the wounds on Billy's face, the doctor removed the boy's melted shoe and cut through the blood-soaked denim on his leg. Billy screamed as the jeans peeled away from his shin, and the pale man whitened another shade.

He shouted something at the nurse, and Billy moaned as a large needle jabbed into his hip. There was a muddle of voices as a numbing relief swept through his body. The boy tried to thank them, but the words wouldn't come and the room went black.

Another burst of pain, and Billy slid from the wooden carry-board and onto a cold, stiff bed. Two hours had passed, and he had been taken to the children's hospital all the way up in Bridgeton.

The attending physician had an angled face and shaggy hair, and seemed flustered by all the screaming. He asked the boy's father for some details, shook his hand, and had him sent from the room.

Thus began Billy's week in the hospital – a fuzzy, melted jumble of memories. There was the initial operation to set his leg. Painkiller drips and soiled bed-sheets. Dry meat and warm Jell-O. Bedside rounds of cribbage, where the boy would skunk his mother twice with a miraculous 29-point hand.

Then came *physio*.

The nurses wrapped his cast in plastic, and had Billy swim in a too-blue pool that stung his eyes. They gave him a pair of creaky wooden crutches, and had him practice moving in the halls between meals. They massaged his face with sticky liquids, and used tweezers to pull off the crusty scabs from his cheeks, chin, and forehead.

The hospital staff all gave the kindest smiles, used the gentlest touches, and spoke in the friendliest voices. They were nice when Billy cried, or when he was lazy, or even when he had a tantrum.

This confused the boy, even more than the painkillers did. Each day, his black-brown stare searched their faces for clues. Probed for secrets. Scanned for lies.

Something's wrong, he thought.

It was a long drive south on that rainy morning in early July. Little was said, as Billy had been given a sedative before they departed. When the Brahms finally arrived home, Stanley

carried his son inside. Elizabeth went straight to the kitchen, poured a glass of milk, and filled a plate with chocolate chip cookies.

Billy's heart sunk when he awoke, finding himself on the musty cot downstairs. It was too far away from his comics, and his toys, and his wallpaper adorned with pirate ships and treasure maps. It was too far from his bedroom window, which looked out upon the rolling fields and weeping willow trees. It was too far from the view of his favourite place in the world.



Another jolt brought Billy back to the present.

He had been home for several days now, and things didn't feel much better. He was still downstairs. The cot was still lumpy. The cast was still heavy, and scratched his thighs raw.

Then there was the horrible tingling – the maddening *itch* where the bones had pushed through the flesh – that he was unable to scratch. The more he thought about it, the more upset he became, and the more the itch spread.

It was creeping up his leg, moving higher every second. It finally made camp in his ears, and went to work in his brain. Billy's eyes welled with tears, and the low groan that was born in his belly grew to a howl in his lungs.

"It's okay, Billy, I'll be there in a second. I've got your favourite!" his mother shouted from the kitchen.

She shuffled across the linoleum and onto the living room carpet, carrying a tray of food that was piping hot. He was soothed a little as the smells worked their magic – tomato soup, a grilled cheese sandwich, and a glass of chocolate milk.

She propped up the cot and tilted the glass of milk into her son's mouth. She couldn't help but sigh as much of it ran down his chin, splashed on his chest, and soaked into the sheets.

"Drink it down," his mother said. "It will all be better soon."

"No, it won't," the boy said.

Billy met his mother's gaze as he drank. He watched her pupils dilate and contract. He drank more and saw her nostrils flare, and tiny beads of sweat glisten on her upper lip. He swallowed the rest, and was suddenly aware of a bitter, metallic taste that lingered on the back of his tongue.

A sound grew in Billy's head then, distant at first, yet strangely familiar. It was something he hadn't heard since that terrible day, just before the accident.

A voice.

As the milk swam through his belly and into his veins, it grew louder. Billy's vision blurred. The sights and smells and pains of the waking world drifted away in the drugged ether, until only the voice remained.

'No...' it hissed.

'No more...' it cried in the darkness.

'WE SLEEP NO MORE!'

And that's when the real nightmare began.