

UNCLE MIKE

“ **A**nnual Birthday to you. Annual Birthday to you...”

Our home was a small flat on the first floor of a plain boxy building, just like all the other homes in all the other plain boxy buildings that surrounded the School. The furniture consisted of schoolroom castoffs, old school chairs and desks, a foldout table that we ate at. Built into recesses in every wall were two-way TV screens and cameras.

We had just finished supper, so I was sitting at the table with my parents and my sister. My Mom put a brown spongy cake down in front of me. A single lit candle was stuck into the top of the cake, just above my name, Billy 9F, which was written in blue ink. You had to be careful not to eat any part of your name because the ink would make you barf, guaranteed.

My parents finished singing *Annual Birthday* to me. “*Annual Birthday, dear Billy 9F. Annual Birthday to you.*”

It wasn't a happy song, especially the way my parents sang it, kind of like they'd totally given up on life several birthdays ago.

Filomena didn't sing at all. She just stared at me from across the table as if she was trying to vaporize me with her eyes.

"Filomena wasn't singing," I said.

"I was singing in my head," she said.

"That's not singing. That's mental."

My parents looked pretty nervous. They were always nervous when Filomena was around.

"Now, now, son," said my Dad. "Filomena is not mental. She just has a lot on her mind. Isn't that right, sweetheart?"

"My mind is always working. And I am always watching."

"Okay, Billy!" my Mom said, trying and failing to sound cheerful and not scared out of her wits. "Make a wish!"

Filomena and I kept staring at each other. "I've already made a wish," I said.

"So have I," she said.

I blew out the candle. My Dad reached out to steady my Mom's hand, which was good because she was shaking like a leaf. And holding a pretty big knife.

"All right, then!" my Dad said. "Let's have cake!"

"I don't want cake right now," Filomena said.

"Okay!" said my Dad. "Let's have cake a little later!"

"It's *my* birthday," I said. "I want to have cake now."

"We'll have cake a little later," my Mom said. "Why don't you open your present now, Billy? I mean, Billy 9F?"

My Dad jumped up and went to a supply closet. He opened the door and wheeled out a very large upright package on a trolley.

The package was a head taller than my Dad, wrapped in industrial brown paper, tied with a crude ribbon and a sad attempt at a bow.

“Go on, Billy! 9F! Open it!” my Dad said.

I got out of my chair and went over to the trolley. I pulled on the loose end of the ribbon. Suddenly, the brown wrapping exploded and out jumped — a grown man. Not just grown. Old. He was at least in his late fifties. Bald, paunchy and smiling way too much for my liking. I was more than a little weirded out.

“What the hell?!” I said.

From the telescreen, under a photo of the Principal, a deep voice growled. “Language violation. Billy 9F. Four demerits.”

“He also swore twice under his breath during dinner,” Filomena said to the screen.

“Billy 9F. Twelve demerits.”

I looked at my parents. “What the...? What *is* this?”

“It’s your new big brother!” my Dad said as if it was both a terrific surprise and the most normal thing in the world.

“Brother?! He’s an old man!”

“I’m only fifty-seven, Billy 9F!” said the stranger, smiling like a madman.

“He’s only fifty-seven!” said my Dad.

“My name is Mike!”

“His name is Mike!”

“Why is he smiling like that?” said Filomena. “He shouldn’t be smiling. You shouldn’t be smiling.”

"I'm not smiling!" the stranger said, smiling.

"What do you think, Billy?" asked my Mom.

"9F," said Filomena.

"Billy 9F," said my Mom.

"I think it's the most disturbing birthday present anybody has ever received. Ever!"

"What's wrong with it?" my Dad asked.

"You don't just buy somebody a big brother! And even if you did, he wouldn't be fifty-seven years old!"

"I'm in tiptop shape, Billy 9F!" said the weirdo stranger. "Feel my abs!"

"Feel his abs!" said my Dad.

"I don't want to feel his abs!" I was getting a little upset. "I don't want to feel anybody's abs! I don't want a big brother!"

"How about an uncle, then?" said the world's worst birthday present. "You can call me Uncle Mike!"

"You can call him Uncle Mike!" said my Dad.

"I don't want to call him Uncle Mike! I don't want to call him anything! Whose idea was this, anyway?"

"Well," my Mom said, "after consulting with Miss Frijiid, and Filomena of course, we decided that a pre-approved mentor is just what you need. To be a role model, to follow you around, go to class with you and keep you on the straight and narrow."

"Well, thanks. But I don't want him. You'll have to take him back."

Filomena shook her evil little head. "No exchanges, no returns.

But I'm not happy about the smiling."

"I'll work on the smiling!" he said. Smiling.

"Your Uncle Mike is here to stay, Billy. 9F," my Dad said.

"He's not my Uncle Mike!"

"Once you two get to know each other better, I'm sure you and Uncle Mike will have a swell time," my Mom said.

"This is totally insane! And, and where's he supposed to sleep?"

In my room, apparently. On the floor. About three inches away from my bed. With a pillow under his head, a blanket over him and that great big stupid smile on his face.

"Good night, Billy 9F," he said. My room was pretty small and my bed was pretty low, so our heads were practically touching.

"I don't believe this," I said. I turned off the bedside lamp. The room was completely dark. Let's just say I was feeling pretty uncomfortable about the whole situation.

After a few seconds, I heard *Uncle Mike* whisper, "Shall I tell you a story?"

"NOOOOOO!"



Yes, life is serious!

Yes, life is serious!

The next morning as we sang the School Anthem, I looked across the aisle to my left. Where Wilson sat the day before, where he had sat every day, was just his empty chair and desk. Wilson wasn't there and he might not be there ever again. And it was my fault.

Yes, life is serious!

The Principal tells me so.

LIFE IS SERIOUS! WOOT WOOT!

And everybody in the School sat down. As I was opening up my notebook, I felt a tap on my shoulder. I didn't need to look. I knew who it was. It was my new *pal*, Uncle Mike. He followed me to School and now he was sitting right behind me.

"Billy!" he whispered way too loudly. "Billy! Billy! Billy! Billy!" First thing in the morning and he was already super annoying.

"What?!" I whispered back, super annoyed.

"It's me! Uncle Mike! I'm sitting right behind you!"

"I realize that, *Uncle Mike*."

"Billy! Billy!"

"What do you want?!"

"That empty desk. Over there." Uncle Mike pointed at Wilson's empty desk. "Was that Wilson's desk? Wilson 9F?"

"Yes."

"It's empty now."

"I know that."

"You made him laugh, didn't you, Billy? He laughed too much and now he's gone, isn't he? He's gone to fight in the Clown Wars, hasn't he? Huh? Hasn't he, Billy?"

"Yes! Now be quiet!"

"Okay. Sorry, Billy." Uncle Mike was quiet for about three seconds. "He might never come back, Billy. And if he does, well, he'll never be the same. You know that, don't you Billy?"

“Yes! I know that!”

“You must feel really, really, really, really, really, really, really bad. Huh, Billy?”

I turned around and glared at Uncle Mike. “Yes! I feel bad! I feel really bad, okay?!”

I said that way too loud. I looked up to the front of the class. I knew Miss Frijiid would be staring at me. She was.

“Billy 9F!” she growled. I stood up.

“Yes, Miss Frijiid.”

“Who’s the teacher of this class, Billy 9F?”

“You are, Miss Frijiid.”

“Not Uncle Mike 9F?”

“No. Not Uncle Mike. 9F.”

“I’m glad we got that settled. Sit down. Eight demerits and an hour’s detention.”

I sat down. Uncle Mike started whispering again.

“Billy! Detention! That’s not good! And eight demerits! Whoa! Sucks to be you, huh?”

“Uncle Mike 9F!” Miss Frijiid squealed. Uncle Mike jumped up.

“Yes, Miss Frigid! Uh, Miss Turgid. Miss Farthead. Miss...”

“Eight demerits! And an hour’s detention!”

Uncle Mike, a little shaken, sat down. After about three seconds, he started whispering again. “Whoa. It sucks to be me too, huh Billy? Billy? Billy?”

I decided then and there never to have another birthday.