

I: BILLY'S NEW HILL

I remember the first time I held you.

It was one bright dripping morning in the summer holidays, and you called round with your mam's big holdall and Billy Mac jumping up and down.

'I found a new hill,' Billy kept shouting, his eyes big.

'I don't know what he means,' you said. 'He wants to show me.'

'Don't fret, love,' my mam said. 'Billy's all right, inside. Our Tommy'll go with you.'

So I was out the door with my toast, a step in front of you and five behind Billy Mac. 'Come on,' he called. 'I found a new hill.'

Mam had told me how your mam kept pretending your dad would fly back out of the sky one day, and how I wasn't to talk about it. So instead I said, quiet like, 'Mam's right, y'know. Billy never hurt anyone.'

And where the houses ended was the lane, overgrown and sticky with hawthorn and privet; and in the puddles and the muddy ponds we could see the big blue sky. Billy went splashing through them, but you stepped around in your strappy shoes and white ankle socks, washed and ironed by your desolate mam.

'Where's this hill?' I called.

'Up the big field,' said Billy. 'I found it, I did. There's a dead man,' he added, grinning.

And I thought you stopped.

'Come on,' I said. 'Leave your mam's bag here.' So you put it under the tree and looked at me. 'Let's catch up,' I said.

Then we were climbing up Grewson's field, with the corn already knee-high and the hedge-thorns scratching, our shoes caked heavy with mud and our faces red.

'Were you frightened, last night,' I asked, 'in the thunderstorm?'

'No,' you said. 'Were you?'

'Nah,' I said.

Billy pointed. 'There's my hill!' he said. Risen over the corn, near the top of the field, was a big mound of soil that hadn't been there before. There was a smell like steam engines on a wet night, and wisps of smoke drifted up from the mound.

'My hill,' Billy was saying. 'I found a dead man.'

I turned and said, 'Billy and me can go on, if you like.'

You shook your head, and when I saw how scared you were, I got all tight in the throat. I took your hand to help you over the ditch. Then, we were there.

'It's hollow,' you said.

'Yeah,' I said, 'like a crater on the moon.'

'My hill,' said Billy.

With dirty hands and knees, we scrambled up the side and looked in.



We saw this deep pit, full of steam and smoke, of hot metal and spurted earth, and a silver-grey gleam under the morning sun.

‘There’s a dead man,’ whispered Billy.

Next to me you shifted, leaning over.

‘Don’t be daft,’ I said. ‘There’s no dead man.’

Then you said, ‘No, look, there’s like a window – something’s in there – ’

Then we all shouted, cause the pile of soil we’d been sitting on suddenly slithered like dry sand out of a seaside bucket, and down we tumbled next to the silver thing.

‘It’s a plane,’ I said, scrambling up, ‘or a piece of it. Musta came down in the storm.’ A twisted propeller, a cockpit like an Airfix kit, and a few feet of torn metal, then nothing but soil.

Billy was whooping, ‘Told ya, told ya!’

And you were looking in the cockpit, saying, ‘it’s not Dad,’ and there was something squashed against the cracked glass, and you pushed at it, and this *thing* fell out with a big leather coat and goggle-eyes that couldn’t see, and you screamed.

Billy was laughing, and I nearly hit him, but I said, ‘Come on,’ and helped you up and you were crying ‘Oh God, Oh God,’ with your hands to your mouth, and we scrambled out, filthy.

‘We’ll go and tell Mam,’ I said.

We’d gone fifty yards when we heard the engine. And we looked round expecting to see the dead flier taking to the skies in his half-a-plane, and we ran, and we ran, and fell panting by the tree.

‘Wait,’ I said, ‘it’s only a tractor. Just Old Grewson come for a look. It’s all right, Bren.’

Billy said, ‘I got to go now. *I* found a hill.’

And you stood there sobbing, and all I could do was put my arms around you.

That was the first time.

II: BILLY'S BIG DANCE

I remember the second time I held you.

I hadn't seen you much since your mam finally admitted your dad was never coming back, and stopped going to church on Sundays. I never saw you at school, where the girls went one way and the boys went another. I did sometimes glimpse you doing your mam's shopping with the wicker basket and that lock of hair stuck to your forehead.

But that night, you were wearing your blue summer frock with yellow flowers, and you'd had your hair done so that it caught the light when you moved. It was the youth club dance in the old village hall, with the warped dusty boards and the mice: decorous dancing with orange squash. Miss Flatstone was in charge of the gramophone, playing wholesome Glenn Miller and Cab Calloway. When she turned her back for a minute someone stuck *Music! Music! Music!* on, and everyone got dancing, but the Vicar went and found her and we were soon back to *Pennsylvania 6500*. It was hot for May, and even with the windows open the place was steaming. Billy Mac was there too, his long legs like a new foal, sitting in a corner banging his chin with his knuckle, and swaying. The vicar went to talk to him but Billy looked away and muttered his answers. I knew Billy had stopped going to school, but thicko that I was, I didn't know why.

There was Johnny Border, the skinny lad with the quiff and big teeth, and Susan Jones, the blonde girl with the wide smile that had all the lads drooling, and Mickey Morgan, the copper's son with the personality of a fence post, and two dozen more of us, all escaped from our parents. And, there was big Brian Dignam: shoulders you could sit on, oak cheekbones, tiny eyes that looked everywhere at once, and thick, curled fingers. Brian had been circling round Susan all evening, but she'd escaped for two dances and now he'd come up to you and said something. You'd blushed and walked off.

When I walked by with a lemonade, you were talking to Billy Mac, and he was talking back, but he was standing right up close to you, waving and stamping a foot.

'I likes birds, I do,' Billy was saying. 'We got starlin's and sparrers on the farm, and little wrens. I likes to watch 'em.'

'That's lovely, Billy,' you said. 'I like birds too . . .'

'I got a book,' he said, his eyes big. 'F-from the libr'y. I seen a blue tit the other day -'

'Wot?' Brian had sidled up. 'You *dirty* boy, Mackenzie! Dirty, you hear me?' The grin cracked his face in two. 'I'm going to tell Vicar – using bad words, you were.'

Then he turned to you. 'Come on, Bren,' he grunted, 'you don't wanna go with looney boy.'

'Mind your own business, Brian,' you said. 'We were having a nice chat.'

Brian went red and pulled you away, squeezing your arm so hard it went white. I was plucking up the courage to say "hoy!", when Billy Mac whirled past me.

‘You – leave – her – alone!’ he was shouting, and everyone could hear him over *I’d’ve Baked a Cake*, and they all stopped. Including Brian, who was caught off guard when Billy, windmilling his arm, struck his jaw so hard he was lifted off the ground. Then old Flatstone was shouting and the vicar was flapping, and then the music stopped. In the silence I could hear Billy Mac panting. Brian was blinking and trying to get back to his feet, growling. Billy looked around amongst the stares; he looked around again, then took to his heels: out through the doors and into the late spring dusk. Brian was up, and was starting after him, but by now I’d woken up. I stood in his way. ‘Brian,’ I said, ‘leave him.’ But he shoved me aside and ran off.

‘He’ll never catch him,’ I said. ‘Billy’s fast. Brian’s stupid.’

You didn’t say anything because you were shaking, and holding back the tears. You still had that lock of hair stuck to your forehead. Then to my own surprise, I reached up and brushed it back into place. And suddenly you had your arms around me, your face pushed into my shoulder, and I could feel the heat of your skin through our thin summer clothes.

That was the second time.

III: BILLY MAC AND THE STORM

I remember another time I held you. A time of storm.

I'd been helping Geoff Gosling fix a leak in one of the houses on the new estate. He says if I do all right I can be his apprentice. We were unloading his motor van, ready to lock up, when Brian Dignam came pedalling down the road on a great black boneshaker, swearing his head off as he wobbled into the wind.

'Tsk,' said Geoff. 'I hear young Brian's been getting booze from the back door of the pub.' He shook his head. 'And him not twenty-one yet.'

We carted the rest of the tools indoors, and I was just closing up the van when you went by. I smiled and waved, and you waved back. Remember? Then I watched you for a bit. I knew your mam was ill, so you was always busy. But I wished I could see more of you.

After I'd washed my hands Geoff looked up at the pewter clouds and said, 'You'd better get yourself home, lad. Wireless says this wind's going ter get worse. Bin trouble in London, and Holland.'

He was right. The rain came down harder, smacking into my face on the wind that blew all across the fen and over the dyke. I got up on the embankment, and I had to struggle to stay on my feet. I hoped that you'd got home okay.

I'd covered a mile when Billy Mac burst out of the lane that leads down to the old wharf. He ran up to me, dripping and shaking.

'I killed him,' he shouted, his voice shrill above the wind. 'I killed him!' He slapped his head once, twice, then hopped in a circle, his bony legs jerking, his arms waving. He grabbed my shoulders and shook me. 'You got to come,' he said.

'Billy,' I said, wiping the rain from my eyes. 'Steady now.' I thought maybe he'd found a dead cat, or something.

'You got to come!' he screamed, dragging me down the lane. 'I killed him!' After a few yards I saw Brian's bike lying among the brown nettles, and I began to think something really was up.

'Come on!' he yelled.

We reached the old wharf, a weathered stone platform that stuck out into the swollen river, and there, stretched out on the ground, was Brian Dignam. And you were there, bending over him.

'He's bleeding,' you cried, over the wind. 'I can't stop it!'

Bleeding was right. Blood all over the wharf, blood on your face. A bloody stone on the ground. You were holding a white cloth to Brian's head.

'I killed him,' said Billy.

You looked up at me, pleading, and I saw you was bruised and scratched. Your lip was cut.

Billy held his head, moaning. 'I killed him,' he said.

'Help me!' you said.

But I knew Brian was dead. I took his wrist: nothing. You undid his shirt and felt for his heart.

‘Let me look,’ I said, and you took your hand away and I realised the cloth was your underskirt, and I saw your coat sleeve was ripped and your stockings torn. The side of Brian’s head was all caved in, a mass of blood and splintered bone.

‘He waited for me,’ you said, your voice shaking as I helped you up. ‘He dragged me down here. He hit me. Billy came . . .’

‘I killed him,’ said Billy.

‘Oh God, Tommy,’ you wailed, ‘what’ll we do?’

And something made me put out my arms out, and you threw yourself into them and sobbed on my shoulder.

‘It’s all right,’ I said, ‘I’ve got you.’

It blew harder, and I stood there holding you while Billy Mac whimpered and Brian lay cold on the wharf, his blood washing away in the rain.

It was just like you to want to visit Billy at the asylum. I know it’s sad to see him there, but I think he’s all right. *I hope* he is. When the doors closed behind us just now, I wanted talk to you, to let you know that if you wanted, I could hold you for always. But it didn’t seem like the right time, so I said nothing.

But now that we’re here at the bus stop, and you’ve taken my arm, and put your head on my shoulder, I reckon that maybe you know it already.

