

## **YOU DON'T KNOW YOUR OWN NAME, BUT YOU KNOW MINE**

*Inspired by 'Billy Stay' by Zach Bryan\**

“Hello, I’m here to see Billy again,” I said to the receptionist, Rebecca.

“He’s been moved down the corridor, third door on the left,” she said, softly. “He will probably be asleep but when he’s not, he’s surprisingly lucid.”

I turned quickly into the corridor, which seemed to stretch on and on and was filled with the occasional wheelchair and the sound of hacking coughs.

Billy’s room was peaceful, though it was still dark grey except for the light sneaking under the blinds, framing Billy and the bed he was lying in. He was muttering to himself.

“Hello,” I said, standing in the doorway unsure where to sit.

He muttered and came to a natural pause before answering, “Good afternoon.”

I paused, both my hands clutching a plastic shopping bag on my lap as I found a seat. “How are you?” I said. A stupid question.

“There’s someone else in the room,” he said. “Everyone keeps talking to someone called Billy.”

I paused again, this time for much longer. “He must be gone now,” I said. Billy just nodded.

After a while, I said, “Do you want a Coke?” as I pulled a bottle out of the bag.

“She liked Cokes,” he said.

“She?”

“The girl... I bought her flowers, you know. Black-eyed Susans. I picked them off the road on the way to her house... She wasn’t happy to see me.”

I rested my head on the back of the wall and gazed at the blind that covered the window. “Why wasn’t she happy to see you?”

“She had told me to never talk to her again. Said her Daddy didn’t like me. He was the butcher, and I used to go down every Saturday night when he was closing up, and he’d give me the offcuts. ‘Good lad,’ he’d say. ‘Don’t worry about the hand you get, just work hard.’”

“What happened next?” I said, trying to wrestle my eyes away from the man splayed out in the bed with his hollow cheeks and falling-out hair. His youth eroded away.

“I came back the next day, and she said no again, but I got a dance with her at James Thompson’s dance hall... made her laugh. Said Patricia Neumann’s dress looked like a shrivelled apricot.” I laughed quietly, watching the last traces of the twilight sun fade away from underneath the blinds.

Billy was somehow hauling himself up so he sat upright, his eyes also on the fading light. “She was pretty, like the flowers. She had blonde hair, and I liked it when she smiled. When she smiled,” he said, crumpling into the bed. I grabbed his hand and held his palm, shaking as I waited to see if he was still breathing. After five or so breaths, I sat back down on the chair, my plastic grocery bag half-spilled on the linoleum floor.

I sat there for half an hour. Snivelling. The groceries left where they were. “Billy,” I said. “Please, just stay a while. I need you.” I fell asleep and woke up at six in the morning. Billy was there, sitting again, eyes open, his head cocked to the side staring at the dawn light. “You all right?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “You know, you’ve got to let go sometimes. Sometimes, fear is just the brain telling you that you have to go on... I told her that.”

“Did you?” My voice was breaking.

“Yeah,” he said. “June 28, 1965. Day I asked her to marry me... her Mamma didn’t like me, for real this time. The summer holidays had just started, and I bought a plastic ring from the general store. I’d told her I loved her two months before this, and she said she loved me back, but her

Daddy would kill me if we ran away. We were down by Custer's Creek. There were fireflies there. They'd dance over the creek and there'd be reflections, as if two of them were dancing together perfectly, matching each step, each twirl, and each dive. I asked if she wanted to dance, and she called me crazy, so I stood there smiling at her and asked if she wanted to marry me. She was crying when she danced. That's when I said it: 'you've got to let go sometimes. Sometimes, fear is just the brain telling you that you have to go on.'

"What if you don't wanna let go?" I said, staring at him now, my jaw clenched and my eyes beginning to glisten.

"Funny, she said the same thing, and I didn't say anything, but she knew." He said, as he was slumping back into bed. Then, a little later, "Mary, her name was Mary." I cried then, but he didn't seem to notice. He was smiling, but his eyes were misting up. I don't know how long we sat there half crying. I don't know who fell asleep first, but I remember waking up at night. It was hot, the AC must have been broken because it had stopped whirring. That's when I heard it, "I love you, goodbye." In the morning, the men came and asked if I wanted to clean the body. I said, 'no', and walked out the door and down the long corridor. The receptionist, Rebecca said, "Mary, can I get you anything?" I shook my head and walked to the carpark.

It was a twenty-minute drive to Custer's Creek. The morning light was filtering through the old willow tree, and I was crying as I had done sixty years ago. It felt like hours later when I stood to go. Again, no words had been needed. As I walked away from Custer's Creek, I knew what he wanted me to know.

*\*Zach Bryan's song 'Billy Stay' includes the character name Billy, certain lines such as 'I love you, goodbye', and the concept of a wife talking to her husband with a neurodegenerative disease about a girl from his past, who turns out to be his wife who he's speaking to. Nearly everything else is self-created.*