

BILLY

A horde of children emerge from a school doorway on a bright autumn day and run this way and that over the black tarmac, like a swarm of multicolored ants disturbed from their nest. As they wave and call out to one another, their seemingly random movements begin to form into a pattern of friendships and games. Girls join together to skip rope, play two-ball against a wall or walk hand-in-hand in little gossiping groups. Boys scatter in games of tag, take sides as cops and robbers or fly like noisy airplanes, outstretched arms zooming teasingly close to the girls. Normal, boisterous six-year-olds, let out for their mid-morning break.

Away from the dash and noise, Billy stands alone. Sheltering from the chilly northeasterly wind, he huddles his back against the wall at the bottom end of the school yard. Occasionally one or two of his classmates run towards him, calling out for him to come and join their game. But he merely shakes his head and presses closer to the wall.

His teacher notices his isolation and walks across to him. "Come on Billy, you'll get cold standing there," she says. And taking one of his cold hands in her warm gloved one quietly leads him into a patch of sunshine. He stands with her for a while, silent, but reassured by her kindly presence. Then a little girl with a hurt knee takes her attention, and Billy drifts back to his place beside the wall.

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A whistle sounds and the children cease their play. A second whistle sounds and they all hurry towards the school door. Billy walks slowly in the same direction. He knows just how long it takes to be last in line. A couple of stragglers push roughly past him, but he hardly seems to notice. Being last is where he likes to be. If he's last into the cloakroom, his new coat won't get knocked down and trampled by the scramble of children trying to hang hats, scarves and coats on pegs which are too few and too close together to accommodate them. And he won't have to search for it at home time.

Entering the bright warmth of the classroom, Billy begins to relax. He's more comfortable here, where everything is more ordered and predictable. He likes to sit quietly and work at his writing, his sums and his reading. Most of all he loves reading. So, while the children around him chatter and distract one another, Billy remains focused on his tasks. For the reward for work well done and quickly completed is not only the teacher's praise, "Very good, Billy. Nice and neat and every one right," but the opportunity to choose his next activity.

Yet, unlike his classmates, it's not the chance to play in the Wendy house or with the toy cars and new construction set which motivates him. It's being able to sit quietly in the book corner and read. For with a book in front of him Billy becomes lost in a world of imagination. A world which has no place in it for his worries and sadness. With a book in his hands he doesn't miss his Mam so much.

Today, as usual, he is one of the first to finish his work. He goes to the library corner, takes a book from the shelf and turns over the first few pages to check out if he's going to like it. He sees a happy family group on every page. Mother, father, a boy, a girl, even a little dog, all having fun together and smiling. This is not what he needs to forget his troubles. He returns the book to the shelf and chooses another. A second contented family smiles back at him. Suddenly his beloved world of books seems full of nothing but ideal families. Families where the children have a mother

to collect them from school, to make cakes with them in the kitchen, to read them bedtime stories. Families where the father plays with his children and takes them to the park or the seaside. A father who has time for them, and doesn't have to spend every Sunday visiting his sick wife in hospital.

Billy puts the book back on the shelf, and fighting his welling tears turns from the story book section to the topic shelves and chooses randomly. The book he finds in his hands is called *Flowers of the English Countryside*. As a city child it's a subject about which he knows very little. Yet he knows enough about himself to realize that reading something new will occupy his mind. But his head is still full of happy, smiling families and he finds it difficult to concentrate on anything else. He absently turns each page until he reaches the final one. It's blank. He stares at it. The blankness reminds him of his sadness, so to fill the void he tries to conjure up his own family and picture them together on the empty page.

He sees his dad going off to work this morning, with his old army knapsack, filled with sandwiches, a slice of cake and a flask of tea, hanging from his shoulder. Granny Robson, who always arrives just as Dad is leaving, stands at the window, tying a bright blue ribbon in his little sister's blonde curls, getting ready to take her to the day nursery. He begins to picture his mother, but try as he might, all he can see is a vague blurred outline. He tries to recall exactly what she looks like by thinking of her photo. One taken before she got sick. His favorite. The one he looks at every day in its pretty, silver frame on the mantelpiece in the front room. But all he can see now is the familiar flowered dress and wide brimmed hat. The space between them, where her face should be, remains only a vague, gray oval.

Once again Billy's eyes begin to fill with tears. To stop them flowing further he sniffs, then biting his bottom lip he begins once more to leaf randomly through his book. The brightly colored flowers on every page mean nothing to him, until he catches sight of a small, pale yellow one which seems familiar. He runs his finger beneath its name and finds that it's called a primrose.

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He looks up, distant for a moment, wondering where he's seen this little flower before.

"Primroses are often found flowering beneath hedgerows and on railway embankments in early spring," Billy reads under his breath, carefully sounding out the more difficult words.

"Yes, that's it," he announces to himself with hushed excitement. "It was on my last birthday. When I went to see Mam in the hospital."

And he sits for a while remembering.

It was on a Sunday. Billy's sixth birthday. His father had decided to take the little lad with him when he went to visit his ailing wife. The hospital was not in the city where they lived, but far out in the country. They had to go by train. That was Billy's birthday treat. He loved going on train rides. He thought, with even more happiness, that he would be able to be with his Mam at last. He'd not seen her since she was let out of hospital for a few days at Christmas. But his Dad soon put him right on that score.

"Now look here, son, you'll not be allowed in to see your mother," he said. "If she's well enough they may let her come out to see you for a few minutes, but she's not been too good lately, so I'm not making any promises."

It was hard for Billy to hide his disappointment, he so needed to see her. He hoped and hoped all morning that she'd be well enough. He was afraid he'd forget what she looked like if he didn't see her soon.

The train ride was exciting, and for a while it took his mind off the possibility of not seeing his Mam. He sat by the window amazed at how fast the countryside rushed by. His Dad pointed out a river, bordered by tall trees, and told him that it was "their" river. The Tyne. The one where all the docks were. Where Dad and Uncle Albert worked. But Billy was more interested in the train itself, the sound of the engine, the clickety-clack of the

wheels, and what would happen if he climbed up and pulled the communication cord.

At one point the train had to stop for a while at a signal. They waited, in a deep cutting, between high, close embankments, for another train to pass. And that's where Billy saw the primroses. Hundreds of them scattered over the grassy bank. He didn't know what they were called back then, but he remembered wishing that he could get out and pick some for his Mam.

When they got off the train at Hexham his dad let Billy stop and look at the engine for a few minutes before they climbed the long hill from the station up towards the hospital. As they turned from the road through a wide stone gateway, Billy saw more of the little yellow flowers in the grass beyond. He ran on excitedly to pick some for his Mam. But his Dad called out to leave them be, because they belonged to the hospital. Disappointed, he returned to his father's side and looked up at the big, red brick hospital building, with its rows and rows of windows, and wondered whether his Mam would be looking out for him.

When they reached the entrance they went through a heavy, brown front door into a wide, high-windowed, hallway. There were lots of signs, and several long corridors that branched off in all directions. It smelled a bit like his school and the doctor's office mixed together, Billy thought, as he looked up to read the signs and tried to keep track of where they were going. He was glad that his Dad knew the way so well.

His father suddenly stopped, "Wait here son," he said, pointing to a long, well polished wooden bench at the side of the corridor. "This is where I have to go in to see your Mam," he added gruffly, as he disappeared through a pair of heavy, gray swing doors.

Billy waited and waited. It seemed like forever. Far longer than the time they'd spent on the train. He sat swinging his legs and wishing he'd brought along a book to read. Then, turning out his coat pockets in the hope of finding something there to

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amuse himself, he found a small piece of string. So he sat for a while absently tying and untying a succession of tiny knots. A few people walked past, coming in and out of the same big doors that his Dad had gone through. And once a lady came out, wearing a pale blue dressing gown. For a moment he thought it was his Mam. She had on a dressing gown like that when she went away in the ambulance. But it wasn't her. Disappointed, and tired of tying knots, he walked towards the doors, but their little round windows were set too high for a small boy to see through.

At last his Dad returned.

"Your Mam's not so good today, son. She wanted to come out to see you but they wouldn't let her."

"I wish I could see her," Billy said, bitterly disappointed and trying very hard not to cry. "I want to remember what she looks like, and I nearly can't."

"Well, your Mam's bed is a long way down the ward," his father said, "but I promised to hold you up at one of those little windows so she can see you."

He lifted Billy until his face filled one of the small round panes. Billy looked anxiously down the two long lines of beds. At first all the ladies looked the same, he couldn't tell which one was his Mam, but then she waved and smiled and Billy was able to focus on her face. And although she smiled, he thought how very sad she looked.

"Mam waved to me," he said, as his father lowered him back down to the floor.

"That's good, son, she'll be pleased to have seen you. Cheer her up a bit," his father replied, his voice hoarse with held in emotion.

It was almost dark by the time they got back to Hexham station. Billy fell asleep on the train and dreamed of his Mam. She was beautiful and smiling and wearing a wide brimmed hat and a lovely, blue flowered dressing gown. His Dad had to wake him

when they got back to the city, but Billy could still see his Mam's face as they rode the bus the rest of the way home.

With the memory of his birthday visit still clear in his mind, Billy turns back to the end of his book and stares intently at the blank page. His Mam's face gradually takes shape and he sees her wavy brown hair, her pale blue eyes and her sad smile, all clearly there on the page before him. He gazes at her image for a long time, and as he does so his young face mirrors her smiling sadness.

"Billy!" He startles as his teacher calls out his name. "Billy, put your book away now, we're lining up for dinner time."

He takes one last look at his mother's face, closes the book and returns it carefully to the shelf. The teacher finds a place for him at the front of the line, and the school bell rings to signal the end of the morning. Billy collects his coat, relieved that it's still hanging where he left it, and sets off for home. As always, Granny will be there with a good hot meal on the table for him. Just him and Granny. He enjoys their cozy dinner times together, without his little sister there to take most of the attention.

He's surprised to find his Aunt Mary waiting for him at the school gate.

"Come on, Billy lad," she says taking hold of his hand. "You're to come home with me for your dinner today, pet."

Worried by this sudden change in routine, Billy looks up at his auntie, questioningly.

"Why? Where's Granny?"

"Granny's fine," his auntie says, smiling to reassure him. "Your Dad will explain everything to you later on."

Billy loves his Aunt Mary dearly, and she is as fond of him. They spend a lot of time together because she's not been "blessed", as she puts it, with children of her own. Billy looks up at her again. There seems to be something different about her today. He

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suddenly realizes what it is. When she smiled at him just now, her eyes didn't twinkle as they usually do. She was smiling and looking sad at the same time, just like his Mam in the hospital, like he'd seen her in his book. The thought makes him anxious and he holds his auntie's hand more tightly.

They walk the short distance to Aunt Mary's house in unusual silence. She doesn't ask, as she normally does whenever she sees him, what he's been up to, what books he's been reading at school, what games he's been playing. And somehow today he's glad she doesn't ask.

Aunt Mary seems distracted as they eat their midday dinner, and apart from telling him to be a good boy and eat his cabbage up, she hardly says a word. She's just beginning to clear away their empty plates when the back door opens and Billy's father comes in. Billy is surprised. His Dad never comes home from work for dinner. That's why he takes his sandwiches and flask every morning.

Aunt Mary offers his Dad a cup of tea from the pot brewing on the side of the stove, but he merely shakes his head. He says nothing to Billy, doesn't even look at him. Just sits down at the table and covers his face with his hands. After a few moments he sighs heavily, lifts his head and turns to face his young son.

"I'm sorry Billy lad, but your Mam's dead. She died this morning. They phoned me at work to tell me she'd gone."

Billy's eyes fill with tears. As they begin to flow silently down his face, his Dad lays a hand on the little boy's shoulder.

"Don't cry, son. Don't cry," he says. "She'll be happy now. She's gone to live with Jesus."

Billy feels a sudden surge of anger. He doesn't want his Mam to live with Jesus. He wants her to live here, with him and his Dad and his baby sister. But he doesn't say anything, he can see that his Dad is upset enough without having to deal with his fuss.

Unable to speak, father and son watch tears of grief roll down one another's cheeks. His Dad finally gets up from his chair, kisses Billy briefly on the top of his head and nods a silent goodbye to Aunt Mary. Then, as if he has suddenly grown very old and very tired, he turns and walks slowly out through the still open back door.

At school that afternoon, Billy's teacher tells him she's sorry about his Mam. She puts an arm around him and suggests kindly that he might want to just sit quietly and read. He's grateful for this small concession to his grief and goes straight to the book corner. He pulls out *Flowers of the English Countryside* from where he'd left it that morning and turns immediately to the blank back page. He closes his eyes tightly for several seconds, hoping and hoping that he can conjure up the picture of his mother as he'd done just an hour or so before. If he can't get her face back now, he feels sure he'll never ever be able to remember it again. There will only be the way Aunt Mary looked at dinnertime and that old photo in the little silver frame to rely on.

Trembling with anxiety, Billy opens his eyes. For a moment the page in front of him appears empty, then, slowly but surely, his Mam's face comes into focus and smiles out at him. At first he's puzzled; it's not quite the same face that he left there this morning. Then he realizes the change. His Mam is really smiling; not just her mouth but her eyes too. Her sadness has disappeared. Dad was right. He'd said that Mam would be happy now.

His teacher looks across the classroom at Billy and smiles. As if aware of her gaze, he looks up from his book and smiles back at her. And she feels relieved that this quiet, lonely, self-sufficient little lad, whose mother has been ill for so long and finally died this very morning, is able to find such comfort in reading a book.

