

Billy Chuck

By Lily White

“Pretend to stab me,” my brother says. I lunge at him with an invisible knife and he takes my straight arm and bends it backwards. “Ow!” I say. My brother does Tai chi, but not just the slow motion stuff. He says he knows this trick where he can touch your arm and shoot you across the room. The “chi” force is a powerful thing, young grasshopper. Sometimes Chuck does his tai chi in the backyard, and my mom is embarrassed because of the neighbors. “He looks deranged,” she says. Through the kitchen window we watch his big hulking shape moving with all of the grace of a ten-toed sloth.

When I’m six, my brother’s friends are over at our house. They are laying black beauties on the driveway. Start at the bottom, rev the engine, pop the clutch and there it is: a long smear of black shiny rubber. The neighbors love us. I take off my clothes and run outside circling the house. The grass tickles my toes. Look at me. They call me the streak.

“Hand me the fuse,” Chuck says. He is holding the toilet paper tube level. We are in his room. I am seven and he is teaching me to make gunpowder from scratch. We mix sulfur, charcoal and “saltpeter,” which makes me think of salting a shriveled weenie. The shiny green fuse sticks out the side of the tube like the stem on a cherry. When the thing goes off, it’s a kick in the chest.

By the time I am ten and Chuck is twenty-three, we have watched every episode of Star Trek. My parents don't get him like I do, but that's only because they have no sense of humor. Chuck lives in the city with his two best friends, Dave and Mitch. He has a college degree in Psychology and some sort of job investigating welfare claims. I don't know what that has to do with Psychology. Now he's home and using the Vulcan mind meld on me, but so far it hasn't worked. He's got me squeezed between his legs like a vise in the TV room. I told him that I licked the salt off every one of his Pringles, and now if I move, I will die a horrible death. My mom tells us we are getting crumbs on the Oriental rug.

For his job, my brother sneaks around on fire escapes spying in peoples' windows. He says if somebody is on welfare and they have a turkey on Thanksgiving, they are probably ripping off the system. In his Chicago apartment, he has a waterbed. He let me lie down on it once. I don't know why he doesn't have a girlfriend. He comes back home on the weekends to Aurora in his "Beemer," an old green BMW he fixed up. When I turned ten, he taught me how to drive stick. He lets me drive it up Downer place to the Dairy Queen, and he doesn't even get nervous.

We order out for pizza, and he calls it "za," and mushrooms, "shrooms." I don't like mushrooms so he says to the guy on the phone, "Nothing that swims, and nothing that grows in the dark." After dinner, I play piano and we both sing in octaves like stars of old black and white musicals. "Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, you may see a stranger, across a crowded room." We sound pretty good. Just like Bing Crosby and Rosemary Clooney.

In the seventh grade, I invite my brother to hear me sing, “One Tin Soldier,” at my school assembly. It’s the theme from the movie Billy Jack. My brother loves this movie and calls himself Billy Chuck. If you never saw it, there’s this Indian guy (American Indian) who lives on a reservation out west somewhere, and the racist jerks in the town pick on the Indian kids at the hippy school and Billy Jack beats the crap out of them. The other Indians at the school have taken a vow of non-violence, but Billy Jack gets away with it because he’s half white and *non non-violent*.

After I sing, I get a standing ovation. I strike a pose of smiling humility, and scan the crowd for my mom and my brother. I find them sitting in the front row near the emergency exit. In the crowd of junior high kids, my huge brother looks oddly small. He is hunched over with his hands tucked between his thighs and is staring at the gym floor. It strikes me how different he looks here—so alien and alone—like he only comes alive when he is with me.

Chuck can imitate anybody: Vincent Price, Leonard Nimoy, Jack Nicholson, Bela Lagosi. Bela Lagosi is my favorite. His cape raised in front of him like a shield, he lifts one eyebrow, Spock-style, and sticks his right arm out toward me as if he’s grabbing my heart. While twisting his hand in mid-air, he repeats slowly: “Com...here. Com...here.” It’s the vampire luring his victim. He makes me watch Flash Gordon, which I hate, and wants to re-name our cat, “Urso,” after Emperor Ming’s pet bear. He likes to chant, “Eat...eat!” to our cat as she eats her kibbles.

At my best friend Margaret’s house, I try to do Boris Karloff. “Come in, come in, loook at him. I’ve been worhking on him for forhty years.” She and her

brother smile but it's clear they've never seen the movie. We play Truth or Dare instead.

I always choose dare.

One October evening when I am twelve, before Sue Bronson's big slumber party, my brother arrives at our house. He's on fire. He's got this black felt hat and cowboy boots just like Billy Jack, and is doing kung fu kicks in the air. We're in the TV room and he is cracking me up. First he's Peter Lorre; then he's Emperor Ming: "You don't like me my pet? Maybe you'd like to meet my friend Urrrso..." My face hurts, I'm laughing so hard. He goes from voice to voice, always returning to Billy Chuck. We engage in mock hand-to-hand combat and my mom comes in and tells us not to knock the pictures off the walls. I hate to leave but I can't miss the slumber party of the century.

That night, my friends and I play "Truth or Dare" and I run outside naked with only a pillow for cover. Later, Margaret, Sue Bronson and I collect of all the bras of the girls who are sleeping, soak them in water and put them in the freezer overnight. We take toothpaste and put it on the face of Joanna Peterson so that she gets it all over her hair.

On Sunday morning, we wake up and we are boring twelve-year-olds again. We munch on cereal and jam our sleeping bags into stuffsacs and wait for our moms to pick us up. My mom comes earlier than usual. As I climb into our Chevy Impala, she looks like she hasn't slept. Her hands flex white on the steering wheel and I wonder if I'm in trouble. She doesn't say anything as we drive the six blocks back to our house. Once home, I throw my sleeping bag on the floor. "Where's Chuck?" I ask, and she tells me what happened.

“Chuck tried to break into Smitty’s house last night.” She is sitting across from me at the kitchen table. I don’t register what she is saying right away. I know that “Smitty” is the crabby Mr. Smith from next door and that Chuck used to be friends with his son, Ritchie, when they were little. She goes on. “He thought there was a surprise party for him over there. Smitty hit him with a cue stick.” Her voice catches and she puts her elbows on the table and massages her eyes with her thin fingers. Her wedding ring looks too large for her hands. “He probably just wanted to visit Ritchie,” I say, even though I know this doesn’t make sense, since Ritchie, like Chuck, is twenty-five-years-old and living somewhere else. My mom fixes me with a hard stare and says, “We had him committed to Mercy Psychiatric.” I can hear her voice explaining how the police were called, and how he was taken to the emergency room, but I am no longer there. I’ve fallen into a deep hole. All of this feels like a dream or an evil conspiracy. How could all of this have happened while I was gone? How could they do this to my brother?

“We have to get him out of there!” I say.

Whatever my brother was doing over there, he was not crazy. Maybe he was breaking in to steal something, or he was stoned and thought his old pal, Ritchie, was still at home, but my brother is not crazy. The only explanation is that my parents have been taken over by aliens.

“Chuck signed the commitment papers himself, so I think he knew that he was in trouble.”

Hearing that, I shut up.

Later we get reports. He is resting. There are no broken bones. I imagine him in a padded room, with doctors in white coats trying to analyze his jokes about Emperor Ming. He hadn't slept for a full two weeks before that night. There were no drugs in his system.

Years later, when I was home from college, I asked him about it.

“So, what was it like?”

It was summertime and we were sitting on the red brick patio of my mom's house on Glenwood. Heat waves rose from the central air-conditioning unit chugging away behind the bushes. My dad had warned me never to ask Chuck about his nervous breakdown. “It's the most humiliating thing that can ever happen to a man,” he said, though now I know that there are plenty of other humiliating things that can happen. It all depends on your definition of the word. My brother and I were watching our cat, Ebony, stalk a pale yellow butterfly nearby.

“Well,” he began, “you know how the Egyptians used to think that cats were godlike creatures?”

I nodded as Ebony lifted her legs over the tall blades of grass, intent on her prey.

“That night, when I looked at the cat,” my brother continued, “she really *was* God.”

Ebony pounced on the butterfly and missed. Then she sat down and focused on licking her paws as if that had been her intention all along.

“I can see that.”

Here's what I think happened that night. My brother was excited. No one had ever thrown a surprise party for him before. Finally, he couldn't stand it any longer. He padded across the wet grass in his socks and cut through the tall bushes between our yards. The streetlamp from the school parking lot illuminated the concrete half circle that was the Smith's patio. Chuck tried the metal screen door but the little lock was on. He popped the screen out and tried the doorknob, but it wouldn't turn. He tried knocking, but his arm was at a weird angle stuck through the doorframe. Just then, the door flew open and there was Smitty standing there in his pajamas. He wound up and took a swing at my brother's arm with a pool cue. Chuck struggled to get free from the screen door while Smitty whacked him again and again. His chi force was powerless to stop it.

Ten days after he was committed, my parents took me to visit. The place seemed almost like a normal hospital except that it wasn't as clean, and the patients wore pants. At the end of the residence hall, there were old couches and mismatched coffee tables where mostly men lounged around and watched TV. There was one girl there, not much older than me, with stringy hair, flipping through a torn Seventeen magazine. She was wearing matching bracelets of white gauze.

My mom was dressed in a cheerful red skirt and jacket. She had clip-on pearl earrings as if she were going to a luncheon. My dad looked hip in his turtleneck and tweed jacket. He assumed a distant, professional air as we followed my brother on a tour of the facilities. Downstairs, there was a rec room with a ping-pong table. There

were balls but no paddles and a magazine rack that held only 7 record albums—strangely, all by Rod Stewart.

“Are they trying to *make* people crazy?” I said. I rolled my eyes, but no one laughed. Not even my brother.

We went back upstairs and waited for Chuck to say something. Every so often someone bellowed, “Mariaaanne!” from one of the rooms. Then we heard, “Shut up, Bobby,” followed by a snort of laughter. I looked at my brother for any reaction, a smile or an inside joke, but he was a blank. I asked him if he could practice his tai chi there, but he said that the nurses freaked out every time they saw him do it and tried to give him more Thorazine.

“What does it do to you?” I asked. “The Thorazine.” My dad flashed me a warning look. I just couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

“It’s like nothing,” he said. “Feels like nothing.”

I pictured him keeping the pills under his tongue like Jack Nicholson in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. I figured he was biding his time until he had a chance to escape. My eyes flashed to the drinking fountain on the wall. I wanted my real brother back again—the fun one. But, for now, Billy Chuck had left the building.

A week before Christmas, they still hadn’t let him out. Apparently, the holidays are a tricky time for mental patients. After my sister and her husband arrived from California, the three of us went to visit. I packed up some percussion instruments and brought my clarinet because the saxophone seemed too loud for indoors. I was on a mission to spread Christmas spirit. It was dark by the time we got there, and the TV was blaring *The Price is Right* as we walked by the lounge on the

way to Chuck's room. The stringy-haired girl was gone, and I wondered if she was still alive or if she had finally offed herself.

We got to the room, and my brother was sitting in the only chair and staring at the reading lamp. It seemed cozier at nighttime with the low light on the yellow plaid curtains. As we sat around the bed, I opened my bag of goodies and passed out the instruments. My sister got the recorder, because she is musical like me, my brother-in-law got the tambourine and a red Santa hat, and I tied jingle bells around my brother's ankle to keep time. I hoped Chuck was enjoying the spectacle, but it was hard to tell. He was both there and not there.

"Come on," I said, and pulled him up by the arm. I led the little parade around the residence hall playing Christmas carols and some Beatles tunes like "Eleanor Rigby" and "Norwegian Wood." I suck at playing the clarinet, but the three of us put on a good show. My brother followed behind like a jingly ghost. I was the Pied Piper of the asylum. When we finally stopped and the sound faded, it felt awkward and hollow like the silence that follows laughter. I packed up the clarinet and placed the Santa Hat on my brother's head. As he looked up at me, the hat slid off of his head and onto the floor. We were all relieved to get the hell out of there.

Eventually Chuck got out, but he wasn't the same. At my mom's house, I tried to attack him from behind with a "nerve pinch," and he ignored me. I grabbed his wrist to give him an Indian burn, and his arm went limp in my hand. I tried whacking his face with the pillow while he watched TV but he just batted it away like I was nuts. Maybe he was afraid if he was funny like before, they would put him away again--in the un-funny farm. I searched his face for signs of recognition, but my brother talked to me like I was no different from mom or dad. I wanted my old

brother back, but it was as if his personality had been buried under layers of chemicals. You're not supposed to grieve someone who's still breathing, but I missed Chuck.

On Thanksgiving last year, I noticed my brother slip out the door, so I hurried after him to bum a cigarette. He cupped his hands around mine against the wind, and then we started walking. I hate menthol, but I liked the feeling of having Chuck all to myself again.

Almost thirty years later, he lives in the same town, but on the East side. The houses in this neighborhood look small and dirty and there are rusty cars in the driveways. We had Thanksgiving here this year, because after our mom died, it was the best place to go.

I had to run to keep up with him as he turned the corner onto Montgomery Avenue. We passed by the heavily fortified Eastside Liquors and a dodgy Check Cashing place, but I cannot be afraid when I'm with him. He's 250 pounds and he still does tai chi. It's hard to imagine that so much time has gone by.

"I'm supposed to do jury duty, next week," he said.

"You gonna do it?" I asked.

"Yeah, well, I suppose I could try and get out of it. Start saying some racist stuff about hatin' darkies." He looked at me and grinned. For a moment I saw a flash of the old Billy Chuck. Ever since my mom died, I've noticed it more and more often: the old sardonic Chuck coming out.

We came across a dojo where we stopped and watched some young men training in their 'gi's' through the plate glass window.

“Did you ever do any Karate or kung fu?”

“Nah, too focused on the physical, not on the spiritual,” he said, watching the men do repeated high kicks.

“I tried to do Tai Chi in New York once,” I added, “but I didn’t keep it up. I don’t think I can even remember how it goes.” I bent my knees and put my hands up for the start of the sequence that I learned. My brother stubbed out his cigarette.

“You mean, like this,” he said, and he settled in alongside me.

While the men inside fought in silent pantomime, we moved together in slow motion—an island of peace in the middle of the sidewalk outside.