

Shelter

By Jane Ratcliffe

I jump inside every time Billy touches me, because technically he shouldn't be alive.

Tonight is no different. His fingers brush against my hand on their way to the olive oil; my neck muscles tighten and short, quick prickles spread across my scalp.

“You fucking taught death about death,” Stewart says as I exhale.

Stewart is Billy's best friend from junior high. He has the nearly hairless scalp and hyper-erect posture of a Marine.

“There was never a doubt,” Billy says, though his eyes still have a grayish cast.

We're at our favorite Italian restaurant on First Avenue; it's long and narrow, like most of New York City, with a worn white penny tile floor and a bevy of snapshots of the owner's lineage strewn across the dark paneled walls. It smells of thin crust pizzas cooking in the open brick oven and of the bourbon dozing in each of our heavy crystal glasses.

“It's beautiful how God has a plan for each of us,” Stewart's wife Lucy says. Bright blond hair streams over her bare shoulders. Her folded tan arms rest on the table near her bread plate. They're both just back from assignment in the Ivory Coast, the bridges of their noses and the tips of their ears faintly pink.

“I don't know about God,” Billy says. “In my case it was Mathilda.”

All eyes shift toward me and I say. “I think it was more likely the doctors.”

“She's being modest,” Billy says. “I'm telling you, Mattie nursed me back to

health.”

“I can’t even boil water,” I say, shaking my head.

“It was her love,” Billy says with his new self-assurance. “It was her love that saved me.”

“It wasn’t quite as gothic as he makes it sound.” I sip my drink, a rarity these days. Billy and I have a baby together: Clementine. The week she was born, Billy’s cancer went into a miraculous remission; the sort where folks usually see a white light and hear voices and then come back with deep spiritual insights. In Billy’s case it was as if all he’d needed to see was his wriggly pink daughter on the pillow beside his head.

He dunks a piece of warm bread in a plate of lightly salted olive oil. Although it’s nearing nine o’clock the sun is still vibrant; it filters in through the window haloing the back of Billy’s hair.

“I don’t know why you’re being so shy,” he says. He takes a bite of the bread, swallows. “I’m just saying, you stuck by me. Without you, I wouldn’t be here right now.”

I have a good twenty years on Billy and have at times pondered what we’re doing together. At first it had been as simple as the sex, then as complex as stage four breast cancer and he had no family, no one to take him in—and now, of course, there’s Clem.

“Love can be very healing,” Lucy says her voice as buoyant and bright as a backyard fairy, yet there’s a defiance to it, as if she’s accustomed to arguments. “I mean, what can go wrong when there’s love?”

Stewart takes a gulp of his bourbon. “From where I sit, a lot can go wrong,” he says. “Somebody loves somebody else’s house so much they want to take it, but the other person loves it so much they don’t want to give it up. So, bam, it’s a war. And nobody

ends up winning, really, and the house gets blown up and you have a bunch of dead kids. Or at least it looks that way from where I'm sitting."

When Billy had cancer, Stewart was stationed in Abidjan guarding our embassy there. That's where he'd met Lucy who'd been doing missionary work. Three nights ago they'd returned to New Jersey, where Stewart and Billy grew up.

Out of the corner of my eye I study Billy. He's handsome and obviously imbued with that rare sort of kindness where he'll do anything to help anyone, even if he just met them. He's back at school, once more studying philosophy—the loft is littered with Plato, Camus, and Thomas More—and NYU has given him a job as a TA for Central Problems in Philosophy. The notes he writes for his students are often longer than the papers themselves. "Maybe you're going overboard," I once said to him. "I can help them," he responded without looking up, pencil skidding across the paper. He takes being alive quite seriously.

"Man, you're a fucking father," Stewart says. "That's wild."

"Congratulations," Lucy says and to me she adds, "I bet you guys will want to get married now."

"Who knows?" I say, with a practiced smile. I was married once before and things ended painfully. After that, I promised myself I would never lose anything I loved again, even if it meant limiting the scope of my affections. No new cats, no new friends, no new husbands—though with Clementine I'd clearly broken the rule. I raise my glass. "But congratulations on yours."

"Thanks," Stewart says, "Today's our three month anniversary."

"Wow," Billy says. He raises his glass and clinks Stewart's, Lucy's, then mine.

“You’ll be the next ones with a baby.”

Stewart lets out a pent up breath. “I don’t know about that. We’re just settling in at the moment. We found a place on Second Street today. One bedroom, five story walkup, tiny but it’s ours.”

“There’s a window over the kitchen sink and it has a bathtub,” Lucy says and the pink glow spreads to her cheeks. I’m tossed back to my youth and the delight of first love, of first apartments, of windows and bathtubs and lugging things like new sheets that have only ever belonged to the two of you up five flights of pretty wonderful stairs.

“You scored, man,” Billy says, eyebrows raised with approval.

Lucy beams. Her whole life awaits her and she knows it.

I look at Billy, hungry for that same wonder. The sun is lowering slowly, blossoming into a deep orangey-red. It shifts the back of his dusty brown hair into a faint purple. The few times we’ve made love lately I’ve tasted the metallic tang of the chemo still leaving him and, despite my best efforts, I’ve cringed. It’s not the first time I’ve detected a hole in my heart where my love should be.

The restaurant is packed, and although Billy and I are regulars we’re in a section with a waiter who doesn’t know us and doesn’t seem to want to. When he appears with our arugula salad, we fall into silence as he positions it in the middle of the table, then places a heavy white plate—nearly as worn and chipped as the floor—in front of each of us. The salad needs dressing and since no one else reaches for it, I sprinkle it with vinegar then add olive oil and a little salt, trying to fend off the feelings that I’ve been assigned this task because I’m the literal and figurative mother of group.

“I bet you *can* boil water,” Lucy says. Her pale eyes watch my every move as I slice the arugula into smaller and smaller pieces. “You’re a natural with that salad.”

I glance up and we share a smile. The corners of her eyes crinkle gently and I notice she has a sprinkling of freckles across her nose as tiny as flecks of sand. She’s too young to be married, I think, before remembering I was about her age when I married Banks. I pick up my fork and Billy’s and begin tossing the greens.

“She can make wicked almond butter and honey sandwiches too.” Billy slips his arm around me and the prickling sensation shoots into my hands now so that I nearly drop the utensils. There’s not a day that goes by that I don’t see him hollowed beneath the crisp, white sheets or hear his shallow, phlegmy breaths or remember the rawness of his skin as the top layer peeled away, a side effect of the cocktail of drugs that was dripping into him from the bags suspended above the hospital bed that had been rolled into the guest bedroom to provide easier access for the day nurse as well as to make Billy’s death more comfortable. How could my love have saved him? How can I love someone who almost abandoned me like that?

Stewart looks at me and I sense the beginnings of approval in his gaze. “What more do you need,” he says, “than boiled water, and almond butter and honey sandwiches?”

Billy’s shoulders relax into a posture I haven’t seen since we first met. “That’s what I’m talking about,” he says. The silliness of our first kiss stumbles through my mind. A rooftop on Avenue D. The Fourth of July. Billy bravely leaning forward for an overdue caress—we’d be flirting for hours—just as I lean forward for a carrot stick from the party plate. Our teeth tapping against each other, laughter, then the snugness of his mouth.

“Do you cook?” I ask Lucy. She sips her bourbon as I plunk some of the tossed

salad onto her plate. I nod at Stewart and he holds out his dish.

“A little.” Lucy says softly.

“Lucy can cook anything under the sun,” Stewart says, and I feel ashamed to be pushing forty-five and still unable to throw a dinner party that wasn’t ordered in. He adds: “Why do you think I married her.”

We all dig into our salads. The heavy scent of truffles and eggplant reaches us from the brick oven and I know it’s our pizza that’s cooking now.

“So you’re married,” Billy says, a wad of lettuce tucked into his left cheek. “I never thought you had it in you, Stew. Good going.”

“Never thought I had it in me?” Stewart asks. “Why not?”

“Well, you know.” Billy laughs in a private sort of way.

“Because I liked to fuck around?”

Lucy squirms in her chair in a manner that doesn’t seem coy.

Billy sneaks me a quick glance reflecting... embarrassment? Pleasure? The ongoing thrill of being alive?

“She knows all about it,” Stewart says, and gazing radiantly at Lucy, he adds, “No secrets. I think that’s how you stop things from going wrong with love. You fucking talk about it. That way nobody gets their house blown up.”

“Stewart’s correct,” Lucy says. “I know all about his dalliances. But they don’t matter. They happened before he had a relationship with God.”

Billy eyes Stewart curiously. Stewart merely cuts into his salad.

“Hmm,” Billy says. His hair is now long enough to push behind his ears, and when he does so I feel an odd pride, which registers just behind my heart almost as an ache.

“What exactly does that entail, Stew?”

“It entails making sure nobody gets hurt,” Stewart says. “It entails keeping all the assholes in the world away from the people that aren’t assholes.”

“That’s God’s role?” Billy says. “Sorting out the assholes?”

Lucy shakes her head. “It entails putting others before yourself,” she says. “It means kindness. Love.”

The path of their discussion oddly agitates me. “Putting others before yourself is a form of love?” I say.

“Of course.” Lucy runs a hand over her hair.

I ask her, “But if you love others more than yourself, don’t you run the risk of exhausting yourself? You know the whole thing about being on a plane when the oxygen mask drops. You’re supposed to put yours on first before assisting anyone else.”

She shakes her head. “I would help other people first.”

“It’s what *you* did,” Billy says looking at me. Near what I thought was the end with Billy, when I’d been up for days straight, not eating, not working, instead easing cool cloths across his hot forehead and spooning fresh vegetable broth into his slack mouth, the hospice nurse, a broad shouldered Scottish woman with hooded eyes and a rich, throaty voice had said to me, “Listen to me, lass: dying with him won’t save him. And it sure as shite won’t save the nipper.” Her words had sent a jolt through my body, and I’d covered my belly. Clementine kicked into my hands.

“That doesn’t surprise me,” Lucy says. “When we’re faced with terrible situations, it’s our instinct to help even if we put ourselves at risk.”

“I just don’t want blood on my hands,” I say, surprising myself with the depth of

my emotion. “It’s why I don’t eat meat or wear leather. I don’t want some other being to die so I can live.”

Lucy shakes her head. “When we were in Abidjan,” she says, “the city was engulfed in fighting for five days. It was so loud you couldn’t even hear what the person next to you was saying. All this heavy weaponry. Buildings were being brought down to the ground and a whole bunch of people couldn’t get out either because their homes collapsed too quickly or because they would have just been running into gunfire. I was there doing missionary work and after the fighting finally stopped, we went around with the soldiers and the rescue workers who were digging out the survivors.”

Stewart runs his hands over his head. “It was brutal, man. You could hear all these people crying out for help, but a lot of them were buried under rubble. And if you weren’t careful you could create a bigger mess than what was already there.”

Lucy nods. “It was really bad. It smelled like diesel fumes. And there was a lot of dust floating in the air, it seemed to take days for it to settle. And the cries. Stewart’s right, the cries were horrible. On the first day we tried to help we came to this one house. It had been green with a beautiful garden and through the cracks in the rubble we could see a woman inside. She was on her knees with her body stretched out before her like she was praying. Stewart stuck his hand through the narrow gap to see if she was still alive, but she wasn’t.”

Stewart looks out the window toward the setting sun and shakes his head. Grief seems to flood his eyes, but just as quickly he turns back toward us smiling.

“That’s how we met,” he says. “We met in front of that house.”

“That must have been intense,” I say.

Stewart and Lucy study each another, then Stewart puts his hand on hers. “Yeah, it was. Especially because at first she drove me nuts.”

“Why?” Billy asks, a forkful of salad in front of his mouth.

“Well, the woman was dead and there were so many others who needed help, so we left the house figuring we’d come back later for the body after all the survivors had been found. But Lucy here kept following me around saying we needed to go back to that house and get the woman. I kept telling her the woman was dead. Her body was *cold*. But Lucy wouldn’t let up.”

“Why?” I ask.

Lucy shrugs. “I just had one of those feelings. I just felt like that woman needed us. And, see, our team didn’t have the authority to dig. We were there to help the wounded with basic care, give them water and blankets, and let the doctors know about the emergencies. The only person who could dig to get to her was Stewart.”

“So what happened?” Billy asks. “Did she lure you back there?”

Stewart nods. “Just the first of many lures, as things turned out.”

“Stewart and his team went back, and he stuck his hand through the crack again. This time he could feel that she’d used her body to create a space, like a shelter, and underneath it was a baby.”

“I almost started crying, man,” Stewart says, his cheeks flushed. “It was crazy. The baby’s little fingers grabbed onto me. Just barely. But enough so I knew it was alive.”

“So they dug the woman out,” Lucy says. “It took awhile. But when they got to her we saw that her back was crushed and her head as well. But beneath her, wrapped in this floral blanket, was the most beautiful baby boy.”

“Little fucker was asleep. Asleep! Can you believe it?”

“He was really beautiful,” Lucy says. “Stewart handed him to me so I could clean him up while we waited for the doctor, but I knew the moment I held him that he was okay.” She pauses here and gathers herself and Stewart looks at her with a sort of love that seems in contrast to his stoic appearance. “Anyway,” she says, “I opened up his blanket so that I could shake out some of the dirt and rubble and inside was a cell phone. There was a text message on the screen. It read: *Si tu reussis a survivre, sache a quel point je t’aime*. If you can survive, you must remember that I love you.”

I want to say something important here. Something as weighty and pure as what that mother had written, but nothing—not one word—comes to mind.

“Amazing,” Billy says, and he’s laughing. It’s a wild, free laugh, almost like a child’s. Have I heard this laugh of his before?

Stewart leans over and kisses Lucy, their fingers intertwined.

“Very moving,” I say, because it is. What instinct! What generosity! What love!

Billy coughs and reaches for his water. There’s a sadness to the way his fingers wrap around his glass as well as the manner in which he lowers his head and parts his lips to drink. And out of nowhere, Stewart says, “I’m sorry I wasn’t here for you, man. I’m sorry I was overseas.”

“He thought about you all the time,” Lucy says. “Even before meeting you tonight, I felt like I knew you. He told me all the stories. And his mom talks about you all the time also. It’s like you’re her second son.”

When Billy was first diagnosed, I felt I had no choice but to provide him with shelter and care. He’d seemed so alone. But now I remember Mrs. Cohn, Stewart’s

mother, had offered to take him in. Had I created this myth of Billy's aloneness as a way to dodge my rule of no more love; as a way to care for someone out of duty rather than choice? He'd been packing his bags for Jersey when I'd stopped him. "Come with me," I'd said to him, already sick every morning with Clementine. "Come." And he had.

"You guys are sweet," Billy says, shaking red pepper flakes on his slice. "I got all your emails and letters. Mathilda read each one of them to me. Sometimes more than once."

"Good," Stewart says. "That's good." Then he turns toward me with a look of genuine gratitude and says, "Thanks."

And in that moment I understand Billy's earlier protestations about love. There's an eruption in my chest, a small explosion, a twinkling vastness to which I'm unaccustomed, and I have to quickly swig my bourbon to stem any possible tears. The best I can offer in return is a nod.

"We're glad you made it through, man," Stewart says, and Billy takes a mouthful of water and, swallowing, nods appreciatively.

When we part from Stewart and Lucy it's after eleven. Billy's usually in bed by ten these days, but tonight he's lively, his steps more closely resembling skips as we walk home. A hot breeze tumbles over us and the streets smell salty. I've lived here so long, I know what every crack and dent and dip of the sidewalk will feel like before we set foot on it.

Billy's shoulders are still loose and he swings his arms as we walk. I look up at him and am nearly undone by his beauty. Up close like this, he smells of the grass and dirt lingering on his skin from when he took Clementine to the park earlier today. The

openness in my chest hurts; it's as if I can feel air moving inside me. We turn right on Houston and the noise of the traffic picks up.

“There was plenty of doubt,” I say. I look at him to see if he understands.

And he does. “I know that.”

“You almost abandoned me.”

“Abandoned you,” Billy says with a gravity to his voice that I've never heard. He stops walking and as if attached by an invisible band I draw to a halt as well. A young couple, flowing shirts and skirts and hair, laughing as freely as birds in song, is forced to momentarily separate to go around us. “I fought with everything in me to come back to you.”

“That's not what it felt like,” I say, though I find I believe him—and the smells, the stained bedsheets, the lunch I'd made that day now in the stainless steel bucket beside his bed all rush through me, through this chasm in my chest, and lift up so I swear I can see them, like fog, quivering against the brightness of the streetlamp.

“Oh baby,” he says, and although neither one of us touches the other I feel him more intensely than when we're making love. “Let's go home. I miss Clementine when I'm away from her for this long.” And there's so much happiness and longing and joy in his voice that I almost weep. He takes my hand and rather than prickles I swear I can feel his pulse. Then we're on the move again.

“What do you think Clemmie thinks about?” Billy says. “I mean, do you think she misses us when we're gone?”

I imagine us back at the loft, Clementine in her crib, her perfect breathing reaching us through the monitor, Billy and I sleepily curled onto the couch, the distant tip of the

Chrysler Building shimmering like a star caught in our window, his flesh warm and strumming effortlessly into mine.

“Yes,” I say, stopping and pulling him into me, as if he fits inside my heart.

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