

The Acorn Plan

The Acorn Plan TIM McLAURIN

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THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO MY MOTHER Darlene Rowena McLaurin AND TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER Reese Alexander McLaurin

The Acorn Plan

BUBBLE RILEY decided to drink all the wine in the world the night Billy cut the soldier's lung in half. He made the pledge right after the Fayetteville police had gone, standing alone in front of Jerry's Burger Barn, staring at the puddle of blood and wishing they hadn't gotten so drunk.

Most of the crowd had left; seeing someone cut was not unusual at Jerry's, especially when Billy was around. They'd gone back to their cars, to their hot beer, cold hamburgers and nooky. But Bubble stood motionless for several minutes, his head lowered, mumbling, noticing how the soldier's blood was already congealing around the edges and how, against the black asphalt, it looked so very red.

Bubble walked to the curb and sat. Slowly he rocked, cradling his gut, which burned from all the wine. "Goddamn dumb-ass boy," he mumbled, shaking his head. He knew Billy hadn't set out to cut the soldier. They hadn't even planned on coming to Jerry's, but had considered going to the river and fishing for bullheads.

"Naw, not that, Bubble," Billy had said. "Last time you got so drunk I had to tote you back up the bank."

"You got a better idea?"

Billy took another swig of wine from the bottle they shared. "We could go over to Marge Thompson's house. I saw her today, and she said to stop by."

"She ain't wanting to see the two of us, old fart I am."

"Margie? Shit. She'd want the four of us if we were that many."

"Thought you said she's a claptrap."

Billy nodded while taking another guzzle of wine. "What about some pool? We could go over to Earl's Place and take them schoolboy's quarters."

"You forgetting you still owe Earl for that busted window?"

Bubble took the bottle from his nephew. He knew Billy was getting drunk. He was a damn good boy when sober, but lately Billy got a mean streak in him when he drank too much. That bothered Bubble.

"I wish your car was running," Billy said. "We could buy a case of beer and go to the drive-in flick."

Bubble nodded his head and felt sad. Just this week he had sold the battery. "What about the walk-in?"

"Naw, I don't like sitting in them nasty seats."

Bubble measured the bottle against the street light. Half empty. He felt even sadder.

"What say I run over to the grill and get another?" Billy asked.

"You don't need no more wine."

Billy laughed. "Man that's twenty-one don't have to drink milk." He scooted across the street and returned with another quart bottle. They sat on the up-turned Pepsi crates for half an hour more, passing the bottle and debating.

"We could go to the bowling alley on Raeford Road."

"Naw. The bus line is fixing to shut down."

"You hungry?" Billy asked.

"Yeah, come to think of it," Bubble answered. He tried to drink on an empty stomach. That way, the wine went further. Bubble emptied the bottle. It amazed him how quick bottles seemed to go these days.

Both were close to knee-walking when they left, so they weaved a course through backyards and alleys to keep out of sight of the cops. They reached the white cinder block, neon-lit diner, just as the car-privileged crowd was returning from downtown, mostly local people who leaned on their horns

while backing into parking spaces. The people shouted to one another, drinking beer and tossing empty cans on the pavement.

More than a few lowered their voices when Billy stumbled by. Some even shut up altogether and sat quietly in their cars, a sensible practice when Billy was noticeably drunk.

Billy stepped onto a picnic table bench. "Sons of bitches," he roared. "Daughters of queers, Billy boy is here."

"Hush that kind of talk," Bubble grumbled.

"Why?"

fingers to the music.

"Cause the law will think you're drunk."

"I am drunk." Billy stepped on top of the concrete table. "Sons of sluts. Come here to Billy, and he'll slice your butts."

Billy jerked back his head and laughed, but no one in the cars did. They looked at their food. Bubble frowned until Billy stepped down, then went to the window and ordered a couple of hamburgers with fries.

"You sit down and eat this and sober up some," Bubble ordered.

Billy squeezed catsup on his fries, joked with Bubble, and watched cars circle the diner. He shouted at people he knew and at some he didn't know. Trouble rode in on the loud-motored '57 Chevy, candy-apple red, jacked high in the rear and sporting polished Crager mags. Billy watched it pass. The cam went whump, whump and the stereo was cranked up loud. "Bad ride, ain't it," Billy said.

The driver backed into a space, the engine revved several times, then shut down. The stereo kept blasting. A tall man with a soldier's short hair and bearing stepped out. He wore tight jeans and a T-shirt that revealed the legs of a nude lady tatooed on his right bicep. He bopped along to the diner, snapping his

"Hey, buddy," Billy shouted. "What you pay for that rod?" The soldier stopped and turned toward Billy. He peered over the rim of his shades, then walked on.

Billy squinted one eye at Bubble. He shouted louder. "I said there, my man, what you pay for that thing?"

"More money than you'll ever have," the soldier called over his shoulder. Then he leaned into the order window.

Billy tried to stand, but Bubble grabbed his arm. "Let it be," he warned.

"Hey, fuck you, grunt," Billy shouted at the soldier.

The soldier finished his order before he came over. "You got a problem, man?" He cocked one hand over his back pocket.

"Naw, not me," Billy said, carefully inspecting his fingernails.

"Why you ask? You looking for a problem?"

"No. I just thought maybe you had a problem, that's all." The soldier turned to go.

"Hey, you with the airborne?" Billy asked.

"What if I am?"

"Cause I think the airborne sucks."

The soldier whirled back. Clutched in one fist gleamed the hooked blade of a paratrooper's knife. "Hey, fucker. I came here minding my own business. Might be best for you to do the same."

A crowd was quickly gathering in a semicircle, some grinning, but most watching with nervous eyes.

Slowly, Bubble stood. "Look, friend," he started.

"I ain't your friend, motherfucker."

"Well then, look here, mister. I'm sorry 'bout my nephew here. He's just real drunk. Why don't you go ahead and enjoy your food. We're real sorry."

The soldier hesitated before lowering the hand that held the knife. He tapped the side of the blade against his thigh. "O.K. Ain't no problem, pop. Just tell your boy to shut up his foul mouth."

"I'll do that. I sure will." Bubble turned and shook Billy's shoulder. "You stop it now, hear me?"

Billy leaned back on the bench against the table. His hands were behind his back. The soldier gave him a long, hard stare over his shades, then wheeled smartly about-face. "Dumb-ass hick," he said loudly.

"You suck. Airborne sucks. Your mama sucks," Billy taunted.

The soldier spun around on one heel and sliced in a wide arc. Billy came off the bench smooth and quick, slipping underneath the blade, and slashed across with his hawk-billed blade, catching the soldier under his armpit between two ribs. The sound was easy, just the rip of cloth, but the blade didn't surface until it reached the sternum and brought out chunks of pink lung. The soldier looked very surprised. He dropped his blade and knelt slowly, holding his ribs and moaning. Blood flowed from between his fingers, ran down his shirt and dripped on the pavement. He was still kneeling when the ambulance arrived.

BILLY knew there was no sense in running. Too many people there knew him, and besides, he felt a curious interest in the way the man knelt, his face white and his palm jammed tight against his chest. Somehow he seemed much more human now than when he was a bopping, juke-walking bad ass.

Billy slipped the knife to Bubble, then sat down on the curb and waited for the police to come screeching up.

The officers didn't rough him any; all the ones who worked the east side of Fayetteville had known Billy's father. They just snapped on a set of handcuffs and drove him to Central Station. He was locked in a cell along with several drunks, where he bent forward on a cot and drummed his fingers against the side of his head. An hour later, he was led into a small office for questioning.

"Why'd you cut him?" asked the detective.

Billy shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I was trying to save his life."

"Don't be a wise ass with me, Billy. I've known you since you were knee-high."

Billy shrugged again. He was led back to the cell.

Billy knew that Bubble had already made the call, and that Wallace Bain would be down in the morning to pay his bail, so he stretched out on the filthy bunk, watched the drunks cry and cuss, and chewed on his fingernails. Later, he slept the dreamless, snoring sleep that comes from too much wine.

It seemed Billy had just closed his eyes when he awakened to naked, electric lights, his tongue thick and temples throbbing. Someone was calling his name. He sat up and before him stood the jailer with Wallace Bain, stiff and out of place in his gray linen suit. Wallace wasn't frowning, but his eyes said he was fed up and worried. He stood over Billy's cot for several seconds. Then he did frown, so Billy frowned back and wished his head didn't hurt.

"He'll be all right," Billy said. "Lung meat always heals fast."

Wallace exhaled heavily. "Maybe, maybe not. We don't know for sure yet. One thing I do know, is that you're not all right."

"Yeah? As in why?"

"Jesus Christ, Billy! Three times in four months." Wallace lowered his voice. "The prosecutor says he's going to ask for attempted murder."

"Bull. For cutting someone? Hey, he swung first." Billy swallowed, the sound of it loud in his own ears. "If I'd wanted to kill him, I'd gone for his neck."

Wallace shook his head deliberately and stared at the concrete floor. The drunks watched Billy with new respect. "I can't figure you out anymore," Wallace said. "Just can't." He walked to the bars, then spun back. "I'm just glad your dad doesn't have to see this. It would kill Mike deader than that heart attack."

"Oh, he probably sees all right," Billy answered, narrowing his eyes. "Ain't you supposed to be able to see everything from up there?"

"For God's sake, Billy. You're nearly twenty-two. A grown man. What the hell is going on?" Wallace pulled out a handker-chief from his back pocket and mopped his forehead. "You know," he said quietly, "you might get time for this. Six months is a real possibility."

"Just get my bail, how 'bout? You're a lawyer, remember? Not a preacher."

"Yeah, well maybe I ain't no preacher, but I was your dad's

best friend. And I've known you since you were shitting yellow."

"Just get my bail, O.K.?"

"If I was about five years younger right now, I'd bust your ass good."

Wallace's face colored deep red and a thick vein stood out on his forehead. Then Billy smiled, the smile that could take anyone, his face lighting up and his eyes sparkling like troubled water. "Hey, you're sounding like you're back on the corner with my old man."

Wallace smacked fist into palm. He sighed. "I wish to hell you had another couple of years in the Marines. You still don't have any discipline."

"Get me out of here, Wallace," Billy repeated, the smile erased from his face. "I don't like it in here."

"It's going to take some time. I've got some convincing to do."

"I swear. I'll go straight as a hoe handle."

"The judge said no bail until they know this guy is going to be O.K."

"He'll make it. I wasn't cutting to kill."

Wallace left then, but didn't return for five days.