

Marshall Jon Fisher

The Week of Falling Leaves

Still half-asleep from the bus ride, Billy stumbled through the halls, deposited his books in his locker, and made his way down to the gym. With a faint twinge in his gut no different from anyone with the bad luck of having PE first period, he walked into the gym classroom and found a seat at one of the long rectangular tables. Only now did his heart begin to beat faster, and he prayed the seats around him would fill.

But as always there was one left, and after the late bell rang Kurt Mills sauntered in and took his place across from Billy.

"Billy-boy, Billy-boy," he snarled, oblivious of Coach Lee's disapproving stare. "What do you say, Einstein?"

"Kurt," acknowledged Billy as softly as he could.

"Did you think about what I said?"

"What?"

"You mean you didn't do what I asked?"

Billy stared back at him. What was he talking about? Had Kurt said something of consequence one time while Billy was

nodding at him but listening to Coach Lee?

"Damn," whispered Kurt across the table. "Looks like I'm going to have to kick your ass, like I said."

Though this threat came every day and had yet to be delivered, Billy's pulse shot up on cue. Billy was of average height and skinny, Kurt was short and skinnier, but the smaller boy brandished a violent edge, and word had it that he was a black belt. No one messed with Kurt; in fact, no one acknowledged his existence. He was a nobody at school, a dark absence moving through the crowds between classes. But he had latched onto Billy like a virus, in first-period PE.

"Just kidding," Kurt hissed, bending over the table as if to stifle laughter. "Just testing you, Billy-boy, to see if you'd lie to me. I never asked you to do anything. We're buddies, Einstein. It's the other assholes I kill."

By the end of the day, the nervous feeling from PE had worn off, and when Billy took the soccer field he was feeling good again. He and his two best friends, Matt and John, had made the junior varsity team, and from then on autumn was filled with laps, drills, and games on the field encircled by slowly brightening trees. As the sun went down, the "late bus" took them and the other athletes, musicians, and club members home to dinner.

Dinner, homework, dessert by the TV, bed, alarm, breakfast,

and he was back on the bus. In grade school, the six-week grading period had seemed an epoch, a chasm too wide to see the other side. But now a week spiraled away before his eyes, and for the first time he had an inkling of how fast his life would go by; here it was almost Halloween. His was one of the first stops, so there was always an empty row, and he took a window seat and immediately propped his head against the glass and fell back asleep. The heat rising from the grate beneath the window, the soporific rocking over bumps and rolling into turns, the steady vibration of the motor; this dreamy transition between home and school was a treasured reprieve before the final abrupt awakening in front of the weathered old brick building.

Except for Gertie's entrance, that is. Nudged out of slumber by the jeers and laughter, he would keep his head against the glass, knowing that she had appeared at the top of the steps and was inching her way down the bus. Everyone else next to an empty seat would quickly cover it with their books, and Gertie would proceed, pretending that her classmates really were saving seats for friends, in violation of bus rules. Ignoring how the books came back up after she passed, until she reached Billy's place, where she would gratefully take the empty seat next to him.

"Hey, Gertie's got a boyfriend," howls came from the back seat, where delinquent upperclassmen tried to believe they

weren't schoolboys on a yellow bus. "How is she, Billy?"

And Gertie and Billy would ignore them in unspoken resistance, she stiff and upright with a plastic, long-suffering smile, he slumped against the window, retreating into his dark internal-combustion hypnosis.

He would just have fallen into another dream when the sudden silence of the cut engine would jolt him awake. The aisle was filled with scrambling bodies, and the sight of the aging, forbearing building out his window pulled the final covers from his nap.

Seconds later he was back in PE, looking at Coach Lee but hearing the tinny, menacing voice of Kurt Mills.

"You know Shitty Ferguson?"

Billy nodded. Mitty Ferguson was a nondescript personality whose name he'd known since first grade but who was never in his classes anymore, to whom he'd never spoken more than a couple words.

"You know why he's out of school?"

Billy shrugged; he would not have noticed whether or not Mitty made it to school.

"Side-kick to the head," Kurt hissed. "He pissed me off. Wouldn't lend me his Zeppelin tapes, like I wouldn't take care of them or something. I kicked his fucking ass." His long brown hair parted in the middle and fell over his face, looked like it

had never known shampoo. "Don't cross me, Billy-boy. Good thing for you we're buddies."

After Coach Lee took attendance and gave a short lecture on the rules of flag football, the class headed for the locker room and Kurt disappeared. When they emerged outside in their gym uniforms and formed lethargic teams for the thirty-five minutes remaining for sport, he was nowhere to be found. Out of school, with his friends, Billy loved these sports; but in the freezing early morning he hated the disorganized fractions of games in which the bigger boys dominated and half the kids loitered uninterested on the sidelines, and he envied Kurt his ability to disappear without repercussion. If Billy skipped out, Lee would have him running laps after school for sure. And besides, where would he go for thirty-five minutes?

After school everything was different. He was part of a team, running passing drills down the field, giving and receiving the ball, as he had since early childhood. The hard resistance of the ball against his instep was a comfortable, familiar thing in his life. And practice, when he could work up a sweat and kick hundreds of balls, was preferable to the games, when he spent half the time on the bench and even when in the game found those perfect situations of pass and go so rare.

Beginning with one maple by the corner of the south goal, the trees had been turning gradually for weeks. A few leaves had

fallen to the field, but most had remained on limbs in their swelling colors, as if waiting for saturation before pouring forth. Now, in the last week of October, they came down in a rain of orange and red. Every gust of wind that bended a corner kick fomented a swirling polychromatic dust storm that ended in a new leafy layer on the grass. The grounds maintenance men worked every morning to clear the fields, but by the end of practice Billy's cleats were crushing leaves as he raced to meet the ball. For a week they practiced under this glorious torrent, through bright thin sunshine and cold air that purged his chest of classroom dustiness. And the leaves seemed to make them run even harder, scramble back quicker for defense, chase down the ball till their lungs burned. When the trees were finally empty and the field raked clean, the season would be over.

Back at the rectangular table in the gym classroom. From the moment he woke until the signal to go to the locker room and change, this seven minutes was the focus of his mind. When he entered the room each morning, it seemed he had just left; time contorted until a day was a funnel, a cone with PE at the wide end and everything else narrowing into a point.

"I hear you got a girlfriend."

"What?" Billy, bleary-eyed, wanted nothing to do with this new line of inquisition.

"A girlfriend." Kurt's stringy hair all but obscured his eyes. His AC/DC tee-shirt seemed pasted with dried sweat to his imploding chest. Billy suddenly couldn't remember him wearing any other shirt. "Some of my buddies were putting you down. Calling you, basically, a pretty-boy teacher's-pet egghead pussy. I set them straight, I said you were all right. They appeared doubtful. Brought into question your geeky girlfriend."

"What?" It seemed the only word at Billy's disposal, and he struggled in vain to keep the pitch down near Kurt's.

"It's all right, dude. I got 'em on that too. 'And how much tail have you been getting?' I said. After all, pussy is pussy."

Billy concentrated on Coach Lee's peroration concerning laps.

"You are getting some, I assume? I mean, why else would a smart guy like you be going out with some ugly chick? Hey, you know what to do, don't you? If you need some how-to advice, you know where to go. Believe me, I've had my share of muff. Not like those losers. Nothing better to do but sit in the back of the bus and rag on my buddy's babe."

"Let's go!" Coach Lee foghorned. "On the track in five minutes!"

That afternoon the late bus broke down at the school, and the driver said it would take 45 minutes to get a replacement.

Since it was just that long a walk home, Billy and John and Laurie Ellis set out on foot. Had they been older, they would have remarked on the miraculously colored trees lining the back roads heading home. At fifteen, though, not so far removed from birth, they took it for granted, as what was only due them. They hadn't asked to be brought into this world and sent to high school; if spectacular foliage was theirs every autumn, that was just part of the deal.

"Are you guys applying for National Honor Society?" asked Laurie.

"I guess so." Billy had known Laurie since first grade, and had escorted her to the eighth grade prom eighteen months earlier. Chauffeured by his father, they had joined their friends at a fancy restaurant afterwards, and then on her doorstep exchanged a perilous goodnight kiss on the lips before he scurried back to his dad's car. Afterwards they quickly reverted to their ancient, platonic friendship.

"I'm going to run for NHS president next year," said John. "Stuff like that looks great for colleges. Why don't you guys run for vice president and treasurer?"

"Maybe we'll run for president too," said Laurie.

"Excuse me," said John. "I thought we were speaking seriously."

They approached John and Laurie's street, their socks

peppered with colored specks from kicking through piles of leaves.

"I don't know which is worse," said John, "walking or bussing. Next year, when I get my license, I'm buying a car, no matter what. Even if I have to work at McDonald's and settle for a \$200 junk heap."

"I'm with you," said Laurie. "I'll sell myself to pay for the gas."

"You'd probably do better at McDonald's."

"Ha ha ha. How about you, Billy? Gonna join our carpool?"

"Absolutely. Here's to individual transit."

"You can do my math homework to pay for the extra mileage," said John.

"Speaking of math homework, you can expect a call from me tonight," called Laurie as she and John turned onto their street.

Billy continued on, clumping along in his cleats, backpack heavy with clothes and books, kicking leaves, stones, anything, into imaginary goals.

"You let me down, Billy-boy."

"Wait, he's talking about the quiz," said Billy, trying to ignore Kurt's dark eyes bearing down on him. Instead of playing outside, they were being given a multiple-choice test on the

history and rules of basketball, their next sport.

"I said you let me down," Kurt hissed. "You didn't tell me she was a retard."

Billy slipped him a look of incomprehension. "Your girlfriend, buddy-boy. You embarrassed me. I was standing behind you, defending your right for poon-tang, and it turns out you've been letting a retard sit by you. You made me look bad."

"I didn't do anything," whispered Billy. "I just don't tell her to go away."

"Well, you're gonna start tomorrow, or I'm gonna kick your ass. Looks bad for a buddy of mine to sit next to some retard."

A copy of the quiz landed in front of each of them, and Billy started to read it, but he couldn't concentrate. He answered a few questions but was sure they were wrong. He suddenly couldn't remember what he'd memorized last night: the length of the court, the date of the first professional game, the name of the man who had first hung up peach baskets and encouraged his students to throw balls through them.

"Hey, let me see," said Kurt. "Who could possibly know this shit?" Billy neither covered nor moved his partially exposed paper. He tried to concentrate on the questions. What is the weight of a regulation NBA basketball?

"Fuck this shit," said Kurt when he saw Billy struggling with the answers. He quickly filled in all the blanks and turned

over his paper. "So Billy-boy, you're gonna stop letting the retard sit by you, aren't you?" Billy stared at his paper. "I know you don't want me to kick your head in."

When Coach Lee collected the tests, Billy had to quickly scribble the remaining answers as best he could. The class then went to the locker room, changed, and ran one quick lap before the period ended. Billy sprinted all the way.

When he took his window seat the next morning, he put his backpack on the seat next to him as if to save it. But as the bus groaned to a halt at the next stop, he picked it back up and held it on his lap. He sat upright the entire ride, and when the howls came from the back and the girl reached his row and took her seat as if by random choice, he almost looked her in the face. Loud smooching sounds from behind them faded into noise as the old bus coughed loudly down the road.

"You fucked up, Billy-boy. You sat next to the retard again. You made me look bad. I told them no way, he won't let her do it again, but you made a laughingstock of me. As a result, I'm gonna break your face this afternoon."

Coach Lee was grimly passing back yesterday's quizzes, one by one. "I almost ran out of ink marking these up, you chumps." He dropped one in front of Billy and continued on. Billy turned

it over, saw the "F" in bright red at the top, and turned it back. Not even an "I'm disappointed in you" next to the grade. In PE, he was just another name in the grade book.

"You and me are finished, Einstein, or should I say Moe," Kurt gestured at Billy's quiz. "Not such an egghead anymore, are you. I'm really glad I copied off you." He hadn't even glanced at his own grade, just crumpled the paper in his hands. "Well, you're not gonna be any smarter with my footprint on your brain. I haven't been training since I was five years old for nothing. You ever hear of a front snap kick to the chest? It's a long walk from your last class to the locker room, isn't it?" How did he know that? "You have to walk all the way across the courtyard, don't you? Well, that's where I'll meet you, Billy-boy. That's where I'll kick your ass. And don't try a different route, because I'll catch you, and I'll just hurt you worse."

Billy's face blazed. He stared straight ahead, over Kurt's head, waiting for the signal to escape to the dank, fetid locker room.

"You ever hear of a roundhouse kick to the temple? You ever hear of an axe kick to the face?"

Honors English and Honors Chemistry were over, and now Algebra II was as well. The final bell rang, and students ran for their lockers, their buses, their cars. Billy took his time

walking from his classroom at the corner of the building, down the long hallways. He was always the last one to get ready for practice, anyway, with the longest walk. He had never been in a real fight before. What would it feel like, the first time his precious cheekbone, so coddled and nurtured by his parents, felt the impact of a fist? Get at least one good punch in, he'd always heard. Even if they win, if they suffer some pain they'll think twice next time. Was it possible against a black belt?

As he neared the empty courtyard he would have to cross, his heart pounded against his ribcage and his skin burned as if with embarrassment. He could have changed his route, but Kurt would find him sometime. He almost welcomed the moment of contact, when his assailant would relieve him of the burden of choice. From that moment on, it would be instinct and fate.

With tears almost in his eyes, he pushed against heavy doors and stepped out into the courtyard. One foot after the other he crossed out into the open. He imagined a pair of eyes following him, but saw no one in his peripheral vision as he stared straight ahead at the matching metal doors on the opposite side.

When he reached and went through them, he breathed deeply again and almost cried in relief. Incredulous, he realized that it had never occurred to him that Kurt might actually have known no more karate than he did. He changed quickly to his soccer

uniform, laced up his cleats tightly, and headed out to join his teammates, ready to run drills forever.

Kurt didn't show up for PE the rest of the term, and after that Billy didn't have to take it, as he was now an official school athlete. The next year Billy's dad bought a new Toyota and gave his son his old dilapidated one, and it was Billy who chauffeured John and Laurie to school. They rode those cold early mornings in sleepy silence, hypnotized by the sputtering engine and the cheerful palaver of the morning DJ.