

On Your Marks

Bill's mom always told him that coffee would stunt his growth. Yet here they were, seated at his large oak dinner table, he sipping casually at his morning brew, she positioned at the opposite side of the table, sobbing quietly.

In her hands, his mother held his father's belt; it was old and tattered, its useful life complete, the large brass buckle at its end dulled with a discoloring brown. She looked up at him, attempting to hold up the buckle. It shattered as she lifted it, crashing onto the table in a resounding thump and clatter. As she attempted to pull up a section of its black leather, it dissolved into dust within her hands. Angrily, Mom swiped at the growing dust cloud, shrieking loudly as she disappeared into the disseminating particles.

Bill awoke in a cold, drenching sweat. The nightmare seemed so real. Was the presence of his deceased mother waiting for him at his table?

Quietly, he rose from his restless slumber and approached the kitchen with nervous trepidation. The room lay dark and lifeless, lit only by the early morning sunrise, as the sole rattle of an overused ceiling fan filled the air. Bill sighed in relief, for it had only been a dream.

Unwittingly turning away from the macabre scene, he failed to notice a small pile of dust gradually swirling in circles on the floor beneath the wooden chairs of the empty table.

This was the day to contact his attorney. It had been a long time coming for Bill, and he knew that this action would bring a horde of psychiatrists into their lives; but he had to do it, lest Billy meet his mother's aggression again.

Meticulously, he typed his e-mail request, forcing himself not to think as he proceeded:

"I would like to make an appointment with you for next week—after Monday, if possible—to discuss my divorce options. The problem is that the alcohol has not left the marriage, as we had agreed, and I am looking for work not just locally but possibly out of state."

It was direct and succinct, displaying little emotion or afterthought.

Bill studied the message, looking for anything that required explanation. He should just hit the Send button and be done with it. Slowly, he moved his mouse pointer over the screen and selected the action, his heart and mind clenching with reluctance.

The machine pumped out his hidden malevolence through the house's dawdling dialup connection, and then, in a sudden flash, it was gone, just as his mother had disappeared into his nightmares.

For the next few hours, Bill searched his e-mail, waiting for the attorney's reply to his message. Systematically driving himself to new levels of anxiety, he decided it was best just to turn away from it for now, leaving his isolated attic for an exercise session.

"I have to prepare for the trip downstate," Bill explained to Jamie, "and not sit around driving myself crazy, waiting for the attorney to get back to Me." *This could take days.*

"I'm thrilled your son made it downstate!" Jamie replied. *I am also relieved that you have calmed down.*

Unfortunately, because she had chosen not to join him for the trip, she was not really a part of it. Still, Jamie was disappointed that Bill had not tried harder to get her to come with them.

Linda seemed unconcerned with her son's accomplishments. She was too upset about how Bill pushed her aside the last few months and how rudely he treated her. What difference did it make if Billy was heading downstate for state championships? The achievement did not involve her.

The contrast between the two women was striking, Bill noted. Maybe that was because of the different ways that he acted towards them. Where he had shown his friend Jamie the greatest of respect, his wife received nothing but disdain. Perhaps he had been unfair all along.

As the long road to the finals disappeared behind them, Bill gazed at his sleeping daughter, huddled contently in the car's passenger seat beside him. The two had made this trip together last year and she had held up well, safe within her father's watchful presence.

They missed Billy's one-hundred-meter dash quarterfinals, and unfortunately, he was not fast enough to qualify for the next day's finals for this class. He had another chance in the two-hundred-meter run Saturday afternoon. Over a cell phone conversation, Bill told him not to worry, that he should concentrate on preparing for this race instead. Billy focused that night on drowning his sorrows in pizza and pop with the rest of the track team.

Lou awoke when they finally arrived in town, not missing the opportunity to scold her father for his failure at finding the lodge entrance. She found the entire fiascoes quite amusing, and mischievously teased him with her innocent laughter as he barked obsessively at darkened road repairs, which blocked access.

They checked into their hotel room after one in the morning. Thankfully, they each had their own full-size bed.

Lou scampered into the sheltering covers of her bed, saying good night to her beleaguered father with her beautiful smile. Then she closed her eyes to return to her rest. *She could be so appeasing to the soul*, thought Bill, and he was thankful that her mind was not fraught with the types of debilitating conflict that her mother, brother, and he chose to engage in.

Five hours later, the room's alarm clock rattled them from their short slumber. Bill allowed his daughter additional rest while he showered, and then it was Lou's turn to soak under the awakening water.

Since they had been to the stadium the previous year, they knew their way around, so there was plenty of time to stop for steamy coffee and savory piles of golden-brown pancakes. Once their bellies were full, the two sleepy spectators continued on the patchy road, looking forward to seeing Billy smoke the track in front of the state, just as he had done so effortlessly for his town up north.

Bill and his daughter at last arrived at the event, passing through the arena's large concrete entrance gate, eager for the race. Collecting a program for the outing, they stepped into a massive crowd.

Families of young contenders worked their way through the stadium, some congregating under cramped tent canvases, others waiting in hot dog and pizza lines extending better than thirty people deep. A herd of competitors gathered earnestly at a red brick wall, posting scores of events past and schedules of those to come, each runner eagerly searching for their claim to fame in the aggressive state standings.

A concrete walk encircled the rows of busy spectator seats. Swarms of anxious parents, coaches, teachers, and skinny student runners chanted loudly for their schools, as Bill clutched tightly at his daughter's hand, the two making their way through the bustling crowd to the spot taken by Billy's school, a grassy area at the end of the stands.

They found Billy there, not pleased with his performance in the one-hundred-meter dash, coach and teammates attempting to lift their star runner's spirits and build him up for his next event, the start of which was nearing rapidly.

Billy was disappointed that his father did not witness the one-hundred-meter. Perhaps if Bill and Lou made it there a day earlier, he would have done better. The coach grew weary of his pouting attitude, and some of the mothers chaperoning the event took to him, almost babying him.

Bill went to work on his downtrodden son immediately. He reminded him that it did not matter that much; if he did well, that was cool, but the fact that they made it here in the first place was a major feat in itself. Coach was upset because Billy had shown prospects of putting forth a good show, yet here he was, complaining, no longer acting like part of the team.

Bill took Billy down to the edge of the grassy area above the track, where they could speak one-on-one.

"You're not upset about anything going on at home?" Bill asked. "Because if you are, you shouldn't be now. This meet is about you guys, so you should enjoy it and push to win, not cry about somebody else having run better than you."

"I know," Billy conceded, "I just wanted to run in the one-hundred-meter finals today."

"You did fantastic in the one hundred," Bill continued to work on him. "I would not worry about that; you need to concentrate on your next race. You are not going to let these kids from down south show you their backs, are you?"

"He's just whining for attention," Billy's good friend, the shot-put master, told Bill.

Billy smiled, seeming to grow more motivated with all these statements, and they returned to sit with the others.

It was finally time for the two-hundred-meter dash. Bill and Coach proudly watched Billy make his way from the grassy area down to the track, approaching his opportunity for thirty seconds of fame and the accolades, which would follow.

Billy lined up for the third of six heats in the race.

The first two heats proceeded briskly, with the first won decisively by some tall boy that appeared to be at least eighteen years of age, and the second won in a come-behind classic in the race's final three seconds.

Finally, it was Billy's turn to prove himself. He moved to the starting lines with seven other hopeful contenders. They methodically set themselves for the race.

The dark red track, spattered with yellow lane lines and distance markers, stretched ahead of Billy as he assumed position at the fourth lane's starting line. Ignoring the noisy crowds in the stands above him, he engaged in the pre-race stretching of his young muscles.

His mind was finally ready. The remaining seven runners did not matter as he directed his concentration to the start, searching for the optimal position to launch himself.

Bill surveyed his son's competition. Two of the other boys had the long and lanky legs needed to surpass Billy. One of these longer-legged boys, wearing gold shorts, vigilantly positioned himself on

a larger starting chock. With this, he could achieve greater lift, and that might make a difference in this race.

He appeared strong and stalwart as he readied, out of sight to Billy, who was crouched at his start line, waiting for the gun. This was the kid to beat, Bill determined.

“On your marks!” the announcer declared.

The eight boys in the race steadied themselves in their positions, tensed and eager.

“Get set!” the next directive resounded.

At the same time, all eight runners raised their hips, ready to lurch forward at the gun. The girls in their team began to call at Billy, issuing cheers for the team’s star sprinter.

Bang! The starting gun fired.

The runners leaped forward into the challenge. Billy launched well into the top three positions for the race. Bill looked back at the boy wearing the gold shorts. His foot briefly caught in his large chocks— only for an instant, yet long enough to slow his start and propel Billy ahead of him.

“Go, go, go!” Billy’s team eagerly chanted as he pulled ahead of the second position, completing the first one hundred meters a stride behind the lead runner. As the race progressed, Billy closed on him, the boy with the golden shorts panting closely behind. Billy’s team breathlessly watched him pass his final adversary and take the lead, his arms flailing up and down.

For the critical closing ten meters of the race, Billy led the heat to the finish line, the boy in the gold shorts trailing by two short strides.

His teammates jumped all over Billy as he returned to them, and the awkwardness and uncertainty he displayed before the race completely evaporated. This was Billy’s moment of triumph, for he had won his heat, and his race time earned him a place in the top twenty for the event, recorded for all time in the annals of the state track records for elementary schools.

Bill and Coach basked in their success at motivating the boy to push forward and finish on top, a brief moment of triumph to remain with Billy for the rest of his life. Bill was confident that this phase of his plan was now complete, for his son had achieved greatness in the world that he knew, able to finish eighth grade with a respectable standing.

This having been accomplished, it was time for Bill to file his legal complaints with the courts, finally addressing last February’s violent clash between Billy and his mother.

As they drove back to their hometown, Lou and her father celebrated Billy’s performance at the race. Despite this, Bill felt dismayed that Linda had not witnessed the boy’s accomplishments.

“Too bad your mother did not come with us,” Bill expressed his concern.

Lou just shrugged her small thin shoulders, demonstrating her desire to remain neutral in the conflict.

“Did she tell you why she did not want to come?” Bill probed her further.

“She says she didn’t want to be harassed,” Lou responded, deliberating a short moment to consider what she could reveal to her father.

There it was; the perfect excuse. Bill again felt the ominous presence of the accusations of harassment levied against him. This time, though, those claims would go both ways. He was not about to be put out of the house again under such atrocious allegations.

The question about what to do for his good friend at the club still hounded him. She could become a part of this sorry divorce just for having talked with Bill. He saw how easily the lawyers might blame her, although she never directly attempted to persuade Bill to do this.

Her only crime was that she had listened to Bill as he belabored in its miserable consequences. As soon as the lawyers started looking into how he spent his time the last few months and to whom he talked, her name might come up. Perhaps it was best for Bill to alter the time of his exercise routines to avoid her now, at least until his life could stabilize somewhat.

This divorce just promised to evolve into something that was too ugly to share with anyone else.

Bill's appointment with the attorney went as he planned, as he uttered the important words that his marriage was finished. The attorney just had to move the case back to active status, but Bill needed to wait his turn.

The request to have liquor removed from his house was a sticky point; *did Bill have any documented evidence that this was necessary, such as any incidents of physical abuse?*

Once again, Bill hesitated to share his wife's use of the belt. He was saving this for the children to talk about in mediation. That day he did not reveal the most concealed secret of his family's violent domestic aberration. Bill felt it was bad enough he was selling his soul to this counselor and the courts, and he was especially leery of sharing his children's souls with them. He needed to think about this a little harder.

Jamie was surprised and ecstatic that Bill had taken this course of action. "You served her!" she declared with an encouraged grin, as if this was all so unexpected, and cause to celebrate. Had Jamie not been listening all these weeks?

Her sudden jubilation concerned Bill. He regretted any future role she could have in the assault that he was facing. Withdrawn in the affront he was making, Bill painfully debated whether he should mention the belt in his conversations with her, and especially with his attorney.

"Are you sure it's about you?" Janet asked her sister as Jamie later boasted in the club's locker room with reference to Bill's filings.

Memorial Day weekend was nearing, and Jamie wanted to know what Bill was doing that weekend. "Will you be here the next couple of days?" she asked demandingly.

Bill shuddered. She had again caught him completely off his guard. Why was she responding to him this way now, when his immediate future actions might be falling under intense scrutiny? Her timing could not have been worse.

"I'll be in and out," he answered quietly, lacking the commitment she was looking for. She fell silent as he sulked away from her, withdrawing timidly to his warm shower.

He was confident in his actions up to this point, knowing exactly what to say to his attorney as he proceeded with the master plan. Now, as he examined the next e-mail to send, he felt very unsure of himself:

"I remember now the incident where she had hit Billy. He was yelling at her, so she took a belt to his behind. It never occurred again, and Billy seems to have limited memory of the whole incident, so I'm hesitant to use it."

The following afternoon, he received the attorney's response, in all its livid glory:

“When did your wife hit Billy with a belt? When did Billy tell you about this? Do you believe that it is true? If it is, we need to act. Please call me to discuss this issue.”

The previous week, Bill questioned his son on what he remembered from that late February night. Billy first told him he did not remember exactly what happened, and then, when pressed again, stated that if he had to testify about it, he would refuse. If Billy suddenly remembered the incident while attending mediation and Bill said nothing, Bill was just as much at fault for allowing the event to happen without intervening or reporting it.

When Billy arrived home from school that afternoon, Bill sat him down to address the issue again. “I am being asked about the night you may have gotten hit with the belt,” Bill pressed on the young boy, “and I need to know the truth. What do you remember?”

Billy paused for a moment, and then decided to rely once more upon his ultimate trust in his father. “I remember yelling at her,” he stated angrily, “and I remember getting hit with a belt, and I remember it was black!”

There was no doubt in Bill’s mind what he needed to do now. The walls were down and the panic absent. He had to be swift and non-judgmental in his actions, proceeding solely on instinct. He had to prevent Billy from learning any further behaviors that would mold him into exactly what Linda accused Bill of being in the first place. The truth would come out, one way or another, and it needed addressing as soon as possible.

Bill felt a huge burden lifted from his back, and he was wondering if his good friend from the club was looking for him there. What would she think of all this? The cat was out of the bag now. He might as well tell her what had been happening in his mind all this time, and maybe she could offer a little of her promising insight.

Yet late Wednesday afternoon, she was not around. Bill tried his luck in the passing hours of Thursday morning and early afternoon, but still he could not locate his absent exercise partner.

All for the best, for she probably doubted Bill from his lackluster response to her attempted arrangement, and most likely had moved onto someone a bit more appreciative. Bill languished in his self-doubt, fighting the regret that he had possibly mismanaged his friend’s emotions and she may not want to speak with him again. What did he matter to her, anyway? Bill did not believe that a gorgeous woman like that would restrict her interests to only him.

Thursday evening, Bill revealed to Linda that he met with his attorney again and new divorce petitions were on their way to her lawyer. She flew into a rage, demanding that Bill leave the house, allowing her time alone with the children. Bill considered her disposition, then, deciding she would not dare attempt to pull anything now, agreed to this. Once more, he spent an evening walking it off in the city, but this time he was planning for a different life, not shaking away the demons of spousal abuse.

As he made his way across the rocky border of the city’s expansive lakefront, he wondered what Jamie might be doing at the moment. The solemn lament of not following her lead bore deeply upon him. *That is what he planned for, was it not?*

Bill was rejecting everything around him, fearing anything that could have any meaning at all, taking the necessary steps to dismiss love from his life and free himself of its miserable burdens of abuse. His drive towards self-preservation directed him into a caustic path of tearing down anything that he knew, so that he could construct a new life from the ashes of the old.

His wife attempted to touch him the next night, asking what she had done wrong. Bill adamantly pushed her away, telling her he decided this in March and she should go discuss it with her children. She resigned to calling her lawyer, who immediately advised her to rid the house of all

alcohol that she might have stored there.

They spent Memorial Day weekend trapped in their forlorn home, he working on various repairs; after all, the judge would force the sale of the structure, so he should get it ready for such. As he scraped away at old paint, careful not to break his chipped putty knife, he thought about Jamie again. No, she was too far gone. After all, he had done nothing for her, and it was a little too late to start now. *Just let it go*, he thought to himself. She probably did not want him bothering her at this point, anyway, and it was not for him to pursue anymore.

Tuesday found him once again on the rowing machine at the club. The lonely weekend spent in the same house as his wife had exacted its toll on him, and he was relieved that it was over. Soon the new divorce petitions would be ready for him to sign, and it could at last get underway.

He spotted Jamie on the opposite side of the floor. Usually when he saw her, she was on his side of the room, grinding away at a machine no more than three rows back. She was maintaining her distance from him, that much was clear, and Bill prayed that she would not see him. *Maybe he should leave before causing her any further irritation*, he painfully deliberated.

Bill decided to abandon the rower and work some stationary weights, behind Jamie, where she could not see him, and then he would leave. Casually, he slipped off his machine, keeping his body low and hidden. He crept away from the floor and moved behind the Stairmasters that she enjoyed so much, finally reaching the machines that would complete his stay there for the day, avoiding the dialogue that he knew he could no longer share with her.

As he started on a lateral pull-down station near the Stairmasters, Jamie suddenly appeared at the end machine, not looking at him, yet close enough for Bill not to ignore. *Crap!* he thought to himself as he completed his demanding reps. Well, he might as well say hello to her, and then make his escape to the temperate showers.

“So what happened to you?” he asked her ingenuously as he approached. “You just disappeared off the face of this earth.”

An expression of fury fell upon Jamie, and Bill could see anger in those fragile eyes that once looked upon and assumed a comforting control over him. “I was here every day last week!” she fumed, falling into an unbreakable pout, non-blinking and deadly.

Bill looked back at her in confusion, knowing that he made the effort to look for her the previous week but had failed miserably. Then he felt as if his legs had turned to rubber, and found it difficult to debate the situation. Here he was, in a confrontation with his friend, who he had so desperately not wanted to see get hurt. Yet there she was, disappointed in him, tearing him apart with her angry gaze, and he had to avoid an argument with her.

Not wishing to offer her any excuses and continue into the fight, he pulled out a tactic she had taught him, quickly changing the subject to the waiting he was doing with his lawyer and how much clearer his thinking was now that the alcohol had disappeared from his house. Jamie’s pout disappeared, and she acknowledged this good state of affairs. Still, she was somewhat disappointed that he had not continued the debate, for this meant that she had lost control of the quarrel, having not said her final words of good-bye to him, in the demeaning way that she really wanted to say it.

They talked about nothing for a few more moments, an awkward conversation, not really honestly expressing themselves to each other, and then decided they had said enough.

That was the final time Bill saw Jamie at the club. Any workouts he attended in the following weeks resulted in a vain search for her, and Bill suddenly felt very empty. The gym used to be an outlet of relief and escape for him. She was missing, and with her went a piece of him, and he could no longer

deny the reality of his loneliness.

There never was a Bill and Jamie; the two did not allow it to progress that far. What limited time they gave to each other Bill would always hold close to his heart. She was a friend he could never forget, someone who remained within his thoughts for many months to come. He grew concerned that she was not around. Did the problems with her back return? Was she treated well?

He eventually resigned himself to the simple fact that she had just moved on. The world she knew before meeting him demanded that she return to where she belonged, leaving him to work out the issues and straighten out his own home. He assumed that she and her friends watched him for his crimes. What a fool Bill was to think this, for it was her world that had been watching her, not him, protecting her from what she might find in this cold and hostile age.

Yet in the limited time that they offered to each other, she had changed him, drastically. Where before he felt paranoia, rage, and desperation, she forced him to put that aside and act with hope and progress, even through one of the worst of his panic attacks. Before she approached him, he knew only anger, confusion, followed by depression, possibly to become suicidal. Now he felt direction and some limited purpose, despite his shortcomings and failures. In many ways, she had awakened him.

He could no longer build walls to shelter him from the pain. That had cost him this time, and he had to change. The loss of her presence there with him; of his fall from her graces, ripped this defense mechanism from his mind's vast arsenal of protection, removing the barriers, bringing him closer to restoring his capacity to love; and for that, he would be eternally indebted to her.

As they parted that fateful Tuesday after Memorial Day, Bill knew she was gone and that he would never be able to share himself with her again. He searched desperately to bring forward the protecting panic, allowing him to build his sheltering walls, but it too was gone, and he could not escape the realization of her goodbye, although the denial was strong. No, there would be no descent into maddening, hindering rage this time around, only the complete and devastating sadness of the loss of his good friend.

He would just have to stand up, wrestle this bull to the ground by the balls, and face it head on, as she had taught him.