

AWAKE TO THIS WORLD

By

Kathleen Melin

The toddler not yet two-years-old eased open the screen door and slid across the threshold. The door closed behind him without a whisper. He stood for a moment, his chest lifted, his hands hanging limp in front of him. Then, his soft leather shoes crunched the gravel of the driveway -- thirty feet -- that went straight to West Road, a country shortcut to the highway.

A tall hedge lined the driveway on one side and enclosed the grass of the front yard, stiff from a dry summer. The grass, though sparse, shone green in the dark corner where it was protected from the sun by the hedge. A rogue apple tree heavy with fruit thrust through the hedge. Its branches bent to the ground with a burden of ripe green apples.

In the living room of the stubby house with the screen door to the driveway, Phoebe had dressed her toddler, Billy, wrapped him in kisses and hugs, and set him on the quilt-patterned couch where she'd slept every night for the last two months. She put a black-and-white checkerboard book of Mother Goose rhymes on his lap.

“Stay here, Billy. Momma will be right back.”

Down a short hall, Phoebe picked up the baby born four days ago. As she lifted him from the bed, she marveled at his watery softness. By comparison, Billy seemed so muscled, like such a big boy, and now, he was the big boy, the older brother. The new baby lay limp on her chest, still fitting her contours, the soft flesh of her abdomen, and barely awake to this world.

She grabbed a blanket and a diaper, turned, and carried him down the short hallway.

The Mother Goose book had flipped open on the floor, its spine stretched. The couch was empty.

“Billy, momma has the book.”

She sat down on the couch and nuzzled the newborn to her breast.

Silence. No light stomp from the other room, no swishing of fabric and crinkle of a diaper, none of the happy toddler talk *book book book*.

With the newborn at her breast, she pushed off the saggy couch and looked in the galley kitchen, the six-by-six bathroom, and the single bedroom. Billy had never left the house alone before. Still, she looked through the glass of the window to the front yard. She looked out the kitchen door to the fenced back yard checking to see that the gate was closed.

“Billy. Billy.”

Part question, part pleading, she called to him.

Phoebe set the sleepy newborn down at the back of the couch with a rolled-up blanket on his other side. She pushed through the screen door.

“Billy.”

She cried his name louder now. A car whizzed by on West Road.

“Oh my god. Oh my god. Billy! Billy!”

Her neighbor, Larry, retired early from the bust in farming, loped around the hedge on the driveway side.

“It’s Billy. I can’t find him.”

He cocked his head and rubbed his left hand up his face through the flat-top crew cut.

“I’ve looked in both yards,” Phoebe said.

Larry glanced at the perimeter of the front yard, the shrubbery in front of the house, and the opening to the road.

“Let’s sweep a larger circle.”

They called Billy’s name in echoes, his deep and hoarse from a voice unaccustomed to speaking, and hers high and thin.

After another five minutes, Vic, the trucker and barbershop baritone who lived across West Road, hesitated at its edge as another car sped by, then crossed into the yard where Phoebe and Larry stood again after completing their circles.

“We can’t find Billy,” Larry said.

“What happened?” Vic said, his bowed lips turning down.

“I dressed him and went to the bedroom to get the baby. He was gone when I came back.”

“How long ago?”

“Five . . . ten minutes.”

Vic scanned the dusty driveway, the lean-to garage with its few things, and all the visible edges of the front yard.

“Where’s Cliff?”

“He left early this morning.”

“Phoebe, you stay here. Larry, keep looking out back and into the field. I’ll search out front.”

Phoebe went back into the house and picked up the newborn. He wasn’t awake, he didn’t need anything, but she needed to hold him. She heard Larry and Vic calling Billy’s name as she slumped onto the cement step, holding the newborn, and leaned back against the screen door.

Just last year, when Billy was born across the country in Virginia, she thought she knew how to be a mother, felt prepared, and looked forward to it. They’d only been there for five months when he was born and barely gotten settled – the job, the brick rental house, some furniture, some dishes.

Her pregnancy hadn’t shown when they arrived. She’d looked for light work and been hired as the secretary at a mid-sized knitting mill. She’d gone in to fill out the papers. In HR, the tall thin gentleman in his pressed white shirt and skinny necktie looked at her health insurance form and pushed back from the white Formica table.

“Ma’am, I’m so sorry,” he said as he came around the table and put his hand on her elbow. At the slight pressure, she stood.

“Thing is, we’ve had a cancellation on a big order,” he said, escorting her through the door to the receptionist. “Dee, show Ms. Phoebe the way out. I’m so sorry Ma’am. Best wishes to you Ma’am.”

The disappointment stunned her for one day only. She had to work. She didn’t mind. She expected lean years starting out. The nutrition program helped, now that she was pregnant. Still, the money Cliff alone brought in didn’t quite cover their modest bills.

She took a temporary job and hoped to keep it after her maternity leave.

After Billy was born, the flurry of calls from friends and family who lived in the faraway Midwest was nice, but in the postpartum days of early winter, she was suddenly at home day after day.

Two and half weeks later, her boss, Michelle, came over with a spinach salad and curled up on the red Naugahyde couch while Phoebe nursed.

“I’m tired. Just adjusting,” Phoebe told Michelle.

“I’m closer to my children than anyone else,” Michelle said. At work, she fixed her hair in a tight bun on top of her head, but today, the wispy strands strayed around her face.

As Phoebe nursed, she felt the tiredness as immediate as if someone were pulling the shades.

Michelle gave her a frilly package that Phoebe opened to a pair of blue knit booties.

“Adorable, Michelle. Thanks so much,” she said. She yawned and settled deeper into the couch. Michelle went out to the kitchen for plates and when she got back, Phoebe startled awake.

“Tired, just tired, that’s all,” she said to Michelle, “and last night Cliff told me we’d be moving again.”

Michelle gave the plate to Phoebe piled high with big leaves of spinach. Phoebe couldn’t manage them with the fork and didn’t want to put the baby down since he was sleeping. But Michelle ate up and then grabbed her jacket.

“You enjoy that baby and rest up,” she said as she was leaving.

“How about work, Michelle? I want to come back to work.”

“You just rest up,” she said.

Afterward, the baby cried. And cried and cried. Phoebe did everything she knew how to do and still that firstborn had cried. She’d nursed and walked with him so the crying simmered, but then he’d start up again. The husband called to say he wouldn’t be coming home that

evening. The baby cried to a full on piercing shriek. She didn't have the car. She didn't know her neighbors. There was no one there to help her and she didn't know what to do. She'd done everything. In that screaming moment, she'd understood how a parent could take a pillow and put it over the face of a child.

Shame shuddered through her.

She could contain that thought -- understand it, without acting on it. Still, she'd thought it. How could she? She was one of the fortunate ones -- generally healthy, and with a husband, a place to live, food, and relatives and friends in other parts of the country who might have helped her if she'd lived near them. It was the loneliness. The loneliness. She was so alone.

After five weeks, the husband gone all day, pre-occupied all night, distant, no sex those weeks to bring him back to her, she'd sat eating lunch. Baby Billy, buckled in an infant seat and propped on the table, watched her. She sat there chewing, mindless bovine chewing. All that morning, she'd wordlessly gone from bed to laundry, to nursing, to folding, to nursing, to sweeping, to nursing. Now, she ate, ravenous for the calories and hoping for a nap, the sweetness of sleep, with her baby. She's been up all hours again.

She chewed, dismal and not tasting. Billy wobbled his head to the right. He looked at her and creased his lips into a little crook. She looked back at him, flat and emotionless. Maybe gas, she thought and kept on chewing.

Effortful and slow, the crease of his lips turned up on both sides. It subsided.

"Sweet baby boy," she said to him.

His lips creased again.

Perhaps it was a smile, she thought.

She smiled at him and this time, when he creased his lips, his mouth turned up at both corners. His cheeks dimpled. His pink gums glistened between his lips. His shoulders squirmed.

Phoebe raised her eyebrows and wrinkled her forehead.

“Sweet baby. My sweet baby,” she said.

He smiled back at her, brimful and shiny. She kept smiling while tears filled her eyes and washed down her cheeks.

She heard Vic and Larry’s voices circling in the distance beyond the yard. She stayed put, but called plaintively now and then, “Billy. Billy.”

A wisp of wind blew through the house and rattled the screen door. She craned around to see if it was Billy, but it wasn’t.

Last night, Phoebe’s mother had called. Cliff was gone. She’d put Billy to bed, set the newborn, still awake, on the couch, and picked up the phone.

Phoebe and her mother talked. The newborn began to fuss but Phoebe ignored him. She was talking to her mother. They talked on. There was nothing new. Same-old. Same-old. The baby’s fussing progressed to a full-on cry. But Phoebe kept listening to that mother, answering with syllables now and then, and clinging to the phone. She stayed on the phone nearly an hour and when her mother hung up, it was as if Phoebe woke up. She picked up the now desperately anxious baby. He couldn’t be soothed, wouldn’t nurse; this baby who she wanted so badly and worked so hard to keep in those long sick months. Surely, her own mother must have heard the crying. Surely, a mother with her mother’s experience would have understood and told her to tend the baby and to call back when she’d settled him. No, no, that wasn’t how it worked. *It was good for the baby to cry*—that was what her mother thought. That was how her mother did it. Her mother had kept a clean house and her tiny waist through five pregnancies with Phoebe and her four brothers. Phoebe had been fed on a schedule, gone for naps on a schedule, slept in her own

lonely crib in the room that held them all, and looked across it at her younger brothers who'd slept alone, too.

But Phoebe thought she'd done better. She'd given birth naturally, nursed the babies, carried them, and cuddled them close to her at night. Surely, she hadn't repeated the misery and loneliness. Surely, she hadn't perpetuated the abandonment.

"Billy, Billy, where are you, Billy?" Her face constricted. She stood up, and carrying the newborn on her chest, circled the front steps and the shadowy garage. She went into the house, still holding the sleeping baby, and leaned under the bed and looked in the closets, before returning to the screen door.

Now Vic and Larry's large circles swept into the road, across it to the neighbors in the front, into the meadow, and beyond to the trees in back, always calling, "Billy."

When Vic chugged back into the yard, red-faced and perspiring, Phoebe stood up, the new baby at her chest, her heart racing.

"We've been looking twenty minutes. How long before we came over?"

"Maybe five. Maybe ten."

"Have you called your husband?"

"No."

"It's been half an hour Phoebe. He's not even two. It's time to get help."

"Oh my god my god," she said.

Larry jogged into the yard.

"Did you find him?"

"Not yet," Vic said. "I'm going to make some calls."

"What is he wearing, Phoebe?"

“Red pants, a gray-and-red striped shirt, soft brown leather shoes that tie on top. He’s 19 months-old, thin light-blond hair. It’s never been cut . . . “

She started to cry at that.

Vic went into the house to make the calls and Larry headed back out to the roadway.

Now, with the newborn baby in her arms, Phoebe sank to the hard step again, the tears running down her face and onto her smock, soaking it, the same way the milk did when it first came in.

She wanted to be a mother. She had no doubt about that. She wanted these soft trusting bodies to come from her, but already, not even two years, she’d been humbled and baffled in ways she never believed possible.

She’d tried. She’d tried. Numb and lifeless, she’d done all the right things. But she just wasn’t there. Empty. All the right things, but without feeling. She’d left them, in a different way than her own mother, still she’d left them. Her face quivered as she continued to cry in soft agony.

In the far corner of the yard, concealed in a cave of hedge under the burdened branches of the apple tree, Billy sat on the supple grass. As the sun rose over the hedge, it glanced onto the apples and they sparkled before him. He looked up the bough at the apples clustered like blossoms, shimmering with sunlight. With his smooth baby hand and its perfect starfish fingers, he reached up and touched the gleam on an apple. The ripe apple, skin tight and smooth, dropped onto his lap. He looked down at it, then picked it up and pierced the skin with his teeth. Droplets of juice moistened his lips. He smiled at the sweetness and sucked it down. His name sounded around him, dimly and distantly. Mourning doves cooed above him. The muffled whine of cars

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roved past on the other side of the hedge. The sun inched higher and the back of his head felt warm. The apple lay in his lap.

He heard weeping. He looked toward the door to the house. It was his mother. She was weeping. He picked up the apple, sweet and green, leaned forward and pushed himself off the ground. The apple dropped. He picked it up with both hands and took it to her.

The End