

## The Toad

He kept a toad. Who does that? I don't know where the little brat found it, but it lived in one of the cellar window wells. That's what my dad calls the little pits with metal walls in front of the basement windows. You could say that it wasn't really his pet since it lived outside, you could say that the whole thing was harmless, you could say I overreacted, but you'd be wrong. I mean, things didn't go exactly as planned—not that I had made any solid plans—but I don't apologize for any of it.

See, the brat just didn't get how much of a sissy he seemed when he would take it out and rub his finger on it like he was petting the stupid, little thing. Partly, I blame E.T. But even though he loved that weird-looking alien, still, when it came out, he was a baby, not even in school yet. The kid's seven now, and he has to look out for what people will think of him. I even told on him, but mom didn't see it as a big deal. So, I went one step further, and I told Dad on him. I was sure Dad would put a stop to such gay nonsense. Dad hates girly stuff. But even he didn't get it. Didn't get how gay it looked for his son to play with a stupid toad and talk to it! And the voice he used when he talked to it was just so ... gay! It was like he loved the stupid thing. They weren't going to do anything about it, clearly, so in a way it's their fault, too. But no. It's not a fault-type deal. This was good for him.

I'm his big brother, and it's my job to toughen him up, make a man out of him if nobody else will. I'd already pushed all the pressure points I knew about like the temple, behind the ear, in the shoulder, the elbow and between the finger joints so many times that he barely felt anything anymore when I assaulted him there. I'd also choked him and punched him when mom and dad weren't looking, always when they weren't looking. I even clothes-lined him one time on the street. He rushed at me like he thought he could attack me, and I just side-stepped and put out an arm. I'm not sure if I really thought he'd fall like that, but after cracking his skull on the street with a loud thwack, he just got up and gave me a pouting face before running off. Maybe

he cried about it in the house, but he sure as heck didn't cry in front of the neighborhood kids. That's how I know I've been doing a good job. That and when he tells on me, he pretty much gets in trouble for tattling, so maybe our parents secretly think I'm doing a good job, too.

So, on this one day, after school, I decided to fix the problem myself. Since I'm in the sixth grade, I get out earlier than those little kids in the elementary school. I even ride a bus home. That made it easier.

The bell rang, and we all jumped up like a bunch of crazy crickets and ran into the hall. Locker doors banged and crashed open and shut. Everyone wanted to leave, especially me. Kids shoved me into the cold metal of my locker as they walked past in the hall. A few boys took it further, and I got pushed almost all the way into my locker. Girls chimed in, "Trying to live in your locker now, Willyuuuum?" Obviously, this wasn't fair. I'm clearly not trying to get into my locker. They were also teasing me for liking my full name, I'm pretty sure. I just think "Bill" sounds like a hick name, and Billy sounds like a girl. Like in that song, "Billie Jean is not my lover. She's just a girl." Not to mention how big of a gaylord Michael Jackson is, too.

The air rushed past my ears as I ran for the bus, and I was almost near the exit when my foot hit something, and I went flying. Someone tripped me again. My palms and elbows struck the linoleum floor first, then I was sliding, and somehow I hit my chin, too. Now, my chin hurt like all hell, and even my head felt kinda funny. I rolled onto my back, and Mikey Gräbe stood over me.

"Have a nice trip, Diffin?" he asked, using my last name, and then he crossed his chubby forearms across his little boy boobs. Not even an original insult, but the girls in the hallway tittered like mad magpies.

What's really not fair about this kid bullying me and getting away with it, is that he's bigger and fatter than me! He calls me names like twerp and fatty, but he's the fat one. Why don't kids notice it? It's a crazy, tough world in the middle school, but at least my little brother will be ready.

"Just gonna sit on the floor, pudge-o?" he said, and all the kids laughed some more. I'll never understand why none of them ever stop laughing long enough to see how much more of a fat kid he is. One of

these days, I'm gonna dust myself off and punch that fat head right in his fat face. But that day I had more important business to attend to. I got up, straightened my backpack and walked away, trying to show the other kids that I didn't think it was a big deal. That didn't really work though because behind me Mikey started to cluck and call me a chicken. It hurt so much, and I wanted to turn around and fight this jerk who never had the nerve to be so mean to me in the neighborhood, almost like he's only rough on me at school where a bunch of kids can see. Why would he even do that? It's so two faced, and it just doesn't make any sense. Why play baseball with me and the other kids at Grassy Plains Field on weekends, then bully me in school?

So, I let him cluck away for today because back home there was a toad that needed to be separated from a little boy. Because I wasn't going to let all my hard work at toughening him up go to waste over some stupid pet. And it needed to be done before he got home from school. That way he might not even notice it was gone, and I wouldn't have to snatch it from him or bother fighting him for it. So if I missed the bus, by the time I walked home, it would be too late. Then it would be the weekend, a whole bunch more days for him to love that wart-infested little creature even more.

No. That couldn't happen, wouldn't happen, not on my watch.

By the time I got to the bus, it was already pretty full. The air inside had gotten to have that sticky, thick feeling when too many bodies cram in close together. Three sets of eyes stared at me like I was a dummy from every seat, full, all of them. I had to walk by the kids I like with a little wave or nod. Each step I took brought me closer to the back of the bus and more eyes looking down on me from below.

Finally, three rows from the way back, I saw two heads, both turned down or away. Two older girls, whose names I didn't know. It was like if they didn't look at me, I wouldn't notice that they sat in the only seat with an opening. I get pretty nervous talking to girls. Not sure why. Ever since the third grade actually. I think they're pretty and all—well some of 'em are real pretty anyways. And I mean, I'm not some gay-wad, so I should like talking to girls, right?

I stopped next to them, and they still didn't look up. I cleared my throat, and they still didn't see me.

"Hey," I found the courage to say, "can I scootch in?" Ugh.

Why did I use that word? Scootch? Seriously?

"This seat is saved for our friend," the one closer said.

I looked up and down the aisle and saw three heads in each and every seat. "But there's nowhere else, and she's not here," I said.

"She will be," said the other girl.

I stood for what felt like forever, wondering if I should sit on the floor or push my way in beside the girls. If I forced my way in, that wouldn't be very gentlemanly, and the girls could screech and whine, making the other kids wanna beat me up.

"Sit down back there!" the bus driver suddenly shouted as he closed the door and started up the rumbling engine.

The girls, rolling their eyes and wagging their heads all around, scooted over, and I slid in beside them, but they only left me enough room for one butt-cheek. So, I sat there, one leg in the middle of the walk-way and balancing on half my ass. Somehow, I felt, this was really all my little brother's fault. If I didn't have to go straight home to fix his problem, I could've fought Gräbe today, and then I would've missed the bus and not have been in that boat.

That was when they started flicking the backs of my ears. The girls beside me began giggling, and I felt the heat of anger and embarrassment rise from my throat to my face. I knew I was turning beet red. Laughing from behind me rolled all around, and then my ears were flicked again. This time it really hurt, but I didn't let them know that. I stayed tough, like a man should. They kept flicking and whispering and joking though. I turned at one point and said, "Real funny, guys," but that just made them crack up more. They went on chuckling and flicking, and I couldn't be happier when my stop finally came.

Once the kids from my stop got off, I met up with Charlie, Dylan, and Sam, the guys I hang around with on my block. Charlie's hair is crazy curly, not nappy, just really big and poofy, and he always has the darkest tan every summer. My mom said he's Italian, but he told me once he's really Armenian or something. Anyways, he's a bit of a weird one. One of his favorite games is to cut earthworms in half and see which half keeps moving for the longest.

Dylan lives across the street from me. He's always seriously pale and thin. I guess he's got some lung disease he was born with, so his dad lets him have fireworks, ride dirt-bikes and do other dangerous

things—probably doesn't think he'll live a full life anyhow, might as well have fun.

Sam is the oldest, and he lives down the street. A lot of people look up to him. He's actually the darkest, being a black kid. Sam is going to be a Navy pilot when he grows up, and so will I. Sam says that Navy pilots are the best. They even call themselves aviators instead of just boring old "pilots." I like the idea of being a soldier, fighting for my country without having to get all dirty in the mud and jungles. We'll be like Maverick and Goose. Both able to come cruising safely above everyone and drop death on the enemy.

Anyways, once we were off the bus, I told them that I was going to solve the old toad problem we'd been talking about. They didn't think the toad was as bad as the fact that he listened to Bon Jovi, which I already tried to nix, even put his poster of the band on my dartboard. They did like the idea of me doing something mean to my kid brother though. Especially since I never let them be mean to him. Not that I was sure he needed my protection anymore after the Frankie Wilder incident where this kid about my age who lived down the street picked a fight with him—his friend Bobby came to get me—and when I came running from Sam's house to protect him, all I saw was Frankie in a mean half-Nelson, crying his eyes out and little Jimmy, my baby bro, yelling at him to beg for mercy.

That was a proud moment for me.

But yeah, no need to undo all that with a dumb reptile. So, the boys and I ran to get to my house, even though it was right around the corner, and we had plenty of time. We got so excited at the possibility of removing the toad and upsetting Jim. We dropped our bags in the yard, and I flung open the metal gate. And there it was, all gross, bumpy, brown skin. It flicked its tongue and blinked its eyes. We all knelt down beside it, and it was like it knew I was going to take it away because it sort of scampered to the side on its needle toes to hide under a brown leaf. I had to admit it had pretty good camouflage. If I hadn't just seen it in there, I wouldn't have known where to look for it.

I lifted the dried up leaf, and the little critter leapt so high I fell back from my knees to my butt. My friends all laughed, and my face got hot again. While I got back to a crouch, the guys had all started reaching in, trying to get their hands on the jumpy little thing. But

every time someone got close, another boy's hand would dart in and break it all up. Too many hands shot and swung everywhere, and the critter somehow kept popping out of our grasp.

"Stop," I said and reached out my arms to try to still them.

They did stop, but then Charlie reached in one more time with a fumbling effort.

"No. Come on." I tried to sound like a teacher's serious voice. "Let me."

Charlie finally stopped with his grubby little grabs, and I leaned down toward the warty creature in the window well. Moving my hands real slow, I pretended that I wasn't trying to capture it. I made believe that I loved the stupid thing. I think it believed my fake caring; I mean, I maybe almost did, too. Keeping my hands real still, I tried to say with my mind, I'm your buddy. When my hands were nearly on top of it, I heard myself say, "Hey, little fella. That's it." The sound of my friendly voice kinda shocked me.

It didn't start to jump until I already had my fingers and thumbs pretty much wrapped around its shoulders. Its little legs flailed out behind it as I wrapped my mitts around him. His big, white belly rubbed softly on my left hand even as his little claws scratched me, and his rough, bumpy back nuzzled against my right. His whole body grew larger and smaller with each little breath. He blinked at me. I think he wondered what was going to happen next.

"What are you gonna do with him, William?" Sam asked, sounding almost bored already.

I hadn't really thought of doing anything with him actually. All I knew was he needed to go away. I held the little guy in my hands and looked around the back yard. There was old lady Carroway's giant pine tree with the wild roses growing out of it. I could throw him in there. But as I walked to it, it occurred to me just how close that was from the spot where I'd taken him. Only about ten steps. Turning around and walking under the monkey bars of our neat, old jungle gym, I had the bright idea of tossing him over the picket fence that ran across the back of our property. But as I got near there, I could see how easy it would be for this little burrower to just squeak underneath it and get back. In fact, our entire yard was too small. Anywhere I dropped this guy, he would find his way back too easy.

"William?" Dylan asked.

Charlie stared at me with his arms across his chest like hot shit.

I always liked these guys to think I had made my plans eleven steps ahead of where they would have planned, so I didn't let on that I had no clue. I shrugged like I knew everything and nodded toward the driveway.

Once I stepped foot on the driveway though, I still couldn't think of anything, so I kept walking slow, like some old tortoise tottering one crooked leg at a time.

"What are ya doin?" Charlie asked, "a funeral march?"

"Yeah, he's doin a funeral march for that little toad bastard," Dylan chimed in with a snort.

The little guy squirmed in my hand like he knew the words, and the way his baggy skin moved in my hands reminded me of a ballsack. Totally grossed out, I moved him from my two cupped hands to squeezing him by the chest between my pointer finger and thumb. His little legs kicked every which way, but at least it wasn't like holding nuts in my hands anymore. Really, everything about the toad was so gay, and I would save the kid from it.

I just kept walking, trying to think and feeling pretty foolish. The guys mentioning funeral marches made me think they expected me to kill the thing. But that hadn't crossed my mind at all. At the end of the driveway, I looked for a solution. I knew Jim would be coming home soon from the left, so I turned right. But when I got to the intersection, I still couldn't make up my mind. I thought of just dumping him in the bushes of the Mortadella's yard, but Charlie and Dylan had started humming that march from the cartoons when someone dies. It occurred to me that I probably had to kill this little fella.

What did the brat call him? Tommy? Tommy the toad. How stupid. He squirmed in my fingers, and I looked at his bulging eyes and strangely curved chin. He was kinda cool lookin, actually. The thought of killing him seemed crazy, so I walked on. Without noticing it though, I fell into the tune the boys had started. Dum dum da dum, DUM, dum dum, dum dum, da dum.

As I hummed along, I thought a little about how to actually kill him. I'd never killed anything but bugs before. I wasn't sure I had the strength, or whatever it takes to squish him in my hands. As we

walked up along the big, dirt parking lot across from the donut shop, I searched for a big rock. That would definitely do the job, but was pretty gruesome. Then it dawned on me I really didn't want to kill this little guy. Nothing but garbage and pebbles lay scattered in the dusty lot, and I began to feel the eyes of my friends on me. I couldn't let them think I didn't have it all figured out. And even though I now knew I didn't want to kill Tommy the toad, it was too late to change my mind like some kinda woman. A man does man things without pussy-footing about.

A truck whizzed by on Willett Ave, and a solution struck me that was so obvious it was like when you can't find your bus pass because it's in your pocket. I'd make little Tommy the toad play frogger in the street. It might even be fun to watch. And that way I could avoid looking like a sissy in front of the guys and also not have to feel like I killed the toad myself. Only a few steps away from the road, Charlie grabbed my elbow.

"What are you gonna do?" he asked.

Sam rushed over to my other side. "You don't have to kill it, you know," he said. "No way it would find its way back to your house from here."

Rather than explain to Charlie what I was going to do or tell Sam why I had to do it, I took a few more paces toward the road and stopped at the curb, and I tried to time the coming set of tires on a clunking old pickup truck. The guys all stood around me now. I could feel their eyes on me. I had set this whole thing up and it needed to happen now. As the truck's fat, black tires came closer and closer, I aimed for a spot where I thought they would totally miss. Considering how to do it with the least chance of hurting the little thing, I chucked it, and it flew like an airplane in what they call a flat spin. That's when a pilot loses control of his jet, and it spins like a Frisbee, the nose whipping around the tail horizontally. It's almost impossible to get out of, I'm pretty sure. Anyways, the toad looked just like that as it flew to the pavement, and I thought it'd have the best chance of not rolling under a tire that way.

"Oh, man!" Dylan screamed as the toad landed and rolled to a stop despite my maneuver.

Those tires came by quick, and we all lost sight of the toad.

Just as fast though, we saw it again. It had rolled off its back and sat there like a fat king. It looked right at me before taking one surprisingly long jump back toward us. When it landed, it took a moment to get its little, clawed feet set under it, or maybe to decide which way to jump next. Either way, it sat still in that part of the road as another set of tires rolled down the street headed right for it. I began to second guess my decision. Half of me was about to run into the street to save the little guy, but the other half knew that I would never live that down in the neighborhood. Maybe the driver would see him and swerve. But I seriously doubted that a driver would ever see such a little guy in the road. Besides, his brownish gray skin blended right in with the dingy road. Pretty good camouflage.

Did I even have time to save him, I wondered. I remained where I was, and so did Tommy the toad. He looked at me. I tried to will him through eye contact to take one more little leap to safety. I had kind of expected him to cross the street easily, and I'd be out of killing the little guy. Now it looked bad. Our eyes locked. My blues and his weird little black ones met for a few quick seconds, and then he was gone. Smooshed by the big, black rubber tires.

"Whoa!" Dylan yelled.

"Awesome," Charlie said.

They started cracking up, and that made me smile a little, but then I saw Sam, the look on his face like my mom's when I brought home that C in Math. She told me she was disappointed because she knew I could do better. Sam shook his head and walked home. I was glad he didn't say anything because then Dylan would change his mind about what I had done. Instead, the three of us couldn't get over how funny it was all the way back to my house. Charlie kept replaying the whole thing over again like we hadn't seen it, but it entertained Dylan and the two of them fooling and kidding made me laugh, too. It was catchy. Like a bad flu. But it helped me remember that I'd done the right thing.

We had just about stopped joking about it a few minutes later, shooting hoops at my house when Jim came walking up the driveway with his dopey, thick glasses and stupid moussed up hair. Charlie started snickering and Dylan shushed him. Jim went inside the house and came back almost immediately without his backpack.

"Where's mom?" he asked.

"At work, lamebrain," I said. "You knew she was working tonight."

"Oh, yeah," he said, nodding. Then he walked right into the backyard. I had hoped he would forget all about his little friend today, but it didn't seem like that would happen.

Charlie and Dylan started chuckling again.

"We should go see his face," Charlie said. "He's gonna freak."

It didn't take long for Jim to come running. "Tommy's gone!" he said. "I can't believe he got out of there!"

He was a little sad, but mostly surprised and maybe a little impressed. Problem solved, I thought. No more idiot, little brother in love with a pet toad and no way for him to know what happened. No need for him to try to make me feel bad for doing what I needed to. I was just congratulating myself in my head for being such a good big brother when Dylan opened his stupid, fat mouth.

"No way," he said. He stopped to check that Charlie would also think this was funny. Charlie looked like he was about to fall to pieces, so Dylan went on, "He didn't escape."

"What d'ya mean?" Jim asked, turning his head to one side and scrunching up his face.

God, he looked like such a dorky, little fairy. It was okay, I told myself. The truth would toughen him up some more. He definitely needed it.

"Your brother happened," Dylan said in a mysterious and kind of creepy tone.

Jim looked right at me. "What did you do?" he asked accusingly.

I shrugged.

Charlie said, "Check Willett Ave."

We all looked in that direction. You could almost see it between the side of the Mortadella house and a small group of trees. Just then a Mack truck grumbled down it.

"No," Jim said, almost falling over. "You wouldn't! Nobody is that cruel!" he said all overly dramatic.

The guys almost died, and I said nothing, so off he bolted to check the street. I wasn't sure if he'd even see the smudge in the

road after this much time. Could be he would just think Tommy had escaped to safety somewhere.

Then Charlie suggested we bike over to see Jim's reaction. I shrugged it off, but Dylan thought it was brilliant. I jumped on my bike and tagged along so they wouldn't think I was ashamed or anything.

By the time we got to Willett Ave, Jim stood on the sidewalk, looking at the street. As we rolled up, he turned around, a look of shock and desperation pulling his eyes wide open and twisting his mouth all up.

"You shoulda seen it," Dylan said as he pulled up.

"Yeah," Charlie said, "little guy didn't stand a chance."

"What?" he asked. The look on his face. You'd think that it was totally unbelievable that someone might kill a stinky toad. "What did you do, exactly?" he asked like he was about to cry. He wouldn't cry though. I'd beaten that out of him, I'm pretty sure. He knew that only girls and sissies cried in public.

"Your bro chucked him into the road, and he got squashed," Dylan said and forced a fake cackle like a cheesy movie villain.

Jim looked about to fall down. I could tell he wanted to cry. His face was so twisted, and when the string of bad words came bursting from his mouth, you could hear that he was about to break into sobs like a little girl.

But I didn't feel bad.

He flung himself at me and punched me in the chest. Now, I don't take that from anyone. Not even my kid brother, especially not in front of people, so I pushed him onto his ass and into the dirt lot. He sat there in a cloud of dust on the edge of tears.

But I didn't feel bad.

"Why?" he asked in that shrill, about to cry voice.

"Because your brother is cold as hell," Charlie said.

His eyes, magnified by his grimy, coke-bottle lenses, darted from Charlie to me, expecting something more. His freakishly big, blue eyes locked with mine. He looked pathetic, weak, betrayed. I looked at the donut shop.

"Toads give warts," is all I said. I didn't want to explain that it was all part of toughening him up, making him more of a man. I don't

know if it's 'cause I looked more manly not explaining, maybe even more the tough guy if I did it just to be mean. But I didn't explain that I did it for all the right reasons. That the toad had to go and somehow killing him was the best way. I didn't think that was all that cold.

He grabbed his head and started breathing really heavy.

But I honestly didn't feel bad.

He grunted, then did it again for longer until it became a wild yell. This kid could take on the world he'd be so tough.

"You're the worst brother in the history of brothers," he said. "An evil asshole and I hope you die!" He got up and ran off, hopefully not to cry somewhere.

But I didn't feel bad. I'm telling you, I really didn't feel bad at all.