

The
Poet Laureate
of Brooklyn
—— *a novella* ——

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KRIN VAN TATENHOVE



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Cover design and interior formatting provided by Casselberry Creative Design.

Second Shore Publishing

ISBN: 9798171923747

*Anyone who writes is a seeker. You look at a blank page and
you're seeking. The role is assigned to us and never removed.
I think this is an unbelievable blessing.*

– Louise Glück

*You are Whitman, you are Poe, you are Mark Twain, you
are Emily Dickinson and Edna St. Vincent Millay, you are
Neruda and Mayakovsky and Pasolini...you can conquer the
conquerors with words...*

- Lawrence Ferlinghetti, from *Poetry as Insurgent Art*

*Dedicated to those who lift their words
like candles of hope and inspiration*

*And to Bruce “Barney” Warren,
a dear friend and laureate in his own right*

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Prologue

May 23, 1970, Brooklyn, New York

At 9:45 a.m., Billy stood to the side of the makeshift stage and tried to take it all in. He had expected a crowd, even hoped for one, but nothing had prepared him for this.

Hundreds of people filled Grand Army Plaza, the crowd stretching across the open space. They had come by subway, bus, or on foot. Some sat cross-legged on the pavement. Others leaned against the low stone walls or stood talking in groups. Students from Erasmus Hall mingled with teens from other schools. Billy saw scores of Unmuted Voices T-shirts, the words in bold white letters against black, giving the gathering a sense of cohesion. A few parents stood on the periphery, cautiously watching their offspring inhabit a world that felt both familiar and alien.

Hand-painted signs bobbed above the crowd:

**WORDS ARE WEAPONS
POETRY IS POWER
END THE WAR
UNMUTE YOUR VOICE**

Billy looked at the police on the edges of the crowd. Not many, but enough to remind him that the words shared on this day could be incendiary. New York City had seen its share of volatility in recent weeks, and the establishment was taking no chances.

Jorge stood near the PA system, nodding his head as he neared the end of his hour long playlist. His long hair fluttered in the breeze. He had treated the gathering to tunes like CSNY's *Woodstock*, Cream's *Strange Brew*, Zeppelin's *Communication Breakdown*, Melanie's *Lay Down*, the Stones' *Gimme Shelter*, the Temptations' *Ball of Confusion*, Hendrix's *Voodoo Child*, and the Stooges' *I Wanna Be Your Dog*. Now, with only minutes before go time, he blasted out Randy Bachman's opening chords of *American Woman*. The riff bounced off the surrounding buildings and drifted into the park beyond, pulling people closer.

As the tune neared its conclusion, Jorge turned to Billy and nodded. "It's all yours, my man."

"This is really happening," Billy said softly as he squared his shoulders.

Behind him, Suzy adjusted some papers in her hands. "You sound surprised."

"I am," he admitted. "I thought maybe fifty people would show up. Maybe a hundred if we were lucky."

She smiled. "You've always underestimated yourself. That's why you need me."

Billy gave her a quick hug, then faced the crowd. He saw Lucas near the front, talking animatedly with a group from the poetry club. He glanced one more time at the police officers. They were watchful but not aggressive, a stance that could change quickly. Being honest with himself, he almost wished for some confrontation, something that would give witness to the power of their voices.

“You ready?” Suzy asked.

Billy nodded, though his heart had begun to beat faster.

“I think so.”

Chapter One

Brooklyn, New York, 1963

Billy Knight grew up in a six-story brick building on East 17th in Flatbush. The municipal beige hallways were narrow and dim. In winter they smelled faintly of boiled cabbage and damp wool. In summer, hot tar and old newspapers. When the weather grew cold, the radiators clanged like iron skeletons trying to recall a marimba tune.

With his active mind, Billy imagined that buildings had memory. The walls absorbed laughter and shouting, crying and lullabies, storing them in their bones. When he pressed his ear to the plaster at night, he could hear televisions murmuring, pipes expanding, and footsteps on the stairs. The building never slept, as if it was recording the traces of its inhabitants. He sometimes gave words to those sounds, testing them under his breath, then stringing them together, experimenting with their order.

The Knights' apartment was on the fourth floor. It had two bedrooms, a small living room, a narrow galley kitchen, and a bathroom with faded green tiles. Billy shared a bedroom with his older brother, David. Their single window faced an

alley where cats gathered nightly among the garbage cans, marking their territories with yowls and growls.

At age ten, Billy was short and wiry, his blonde hair tinged with Irish red from his mother's side. His dark blue eyes were sharp and intense. Because of his size, he attracted bullies. His nose had been bloodied twice before he turned nine, once over a stickball dispute, and once because he refused to give up his seat on the bus to a boy who mistook his size for authority. Billy had learned that if he braced himself like a fire hydrant and refused to budge, most opponents eventually grew bored.

David was three years older, stretching into adolescence, his shoulders broadening and his voice changing. Teachers remembered him. Girls noticed him first. He was protective of Billy, especially when there were threats, but Billy rebuffed his brother's assistance, determined to be self-sufficient. David didn't always understand that refusal, but he respected it.

Their father, Patrick, rose before dawn each weekday, his boots thudding across the apartment floor. Billy often awoke and listened to the scrape of chair legs, the tea kettle whistle, and his father's cough. Patrick worked the Red Hook docks as a longshoreman operating a forklift. He was handsome in a rough-hewn way: tall, dark Irish, with black hair and brown eyes. His hands were enormous, lined with scars from old injuries on the job. In the evenings, he ate dinner, grabbed a beer, then watched *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke*, or *The Andy Griffith Show*. Doing homework nearby, Billy sometimes watched his father's face in the flicker from the TV, the only time his expression seemed peaceful. Occasionally, he heard him murmur lines from the shows, trying them on, as if he was imagining a different life.

Their mother, Margaret, had an entirely different presence. She floated where Patrick stomped. Her prettiness appeared slowly, her blue eyes lingering on you when you spoke, her soft smile present even when she was tired. Her thick

auburn hair was usually pinned up in haste, and Billy loved how her laughter rose and faded like a struck bell.

Margaret and Patrick had each been rebellious in high school, moving in different circles until a chance meeting at a party sparked an immediate physical attraction. When Margaret became pregnant, their Catholic families left little room for alternatives, and they were pushed into marriage out of obligation rather than love. After David's birth, something steadier took hold between them. They were rarely affectionate in public, but when they were, their care for one another was unmistakable. Margaret took care of the cooking, cleaning, and laundry while Patrick brought home his wages to support their lower middle class existence.

Margaret transcended her station in two ways. First, by taking night classes at Brooklyn College with the goal of finishing a degree. Second, by reading books from the library. When her chores were done in the evening, she would sit at the kitchen table, a novel open in her hands, a cup of tea beside her. From an early age, Billy noticed how her brow furrowed in concentration, or how her lips curled in a grin at something she'd just read. Sometimes he heard her repeat a single sentence aloud, as if she was savoring it.

During his third grade year, Margaret had asked him to join her at the table. She slid a copy of *The Tower Treasure* to him, the first volume of the Hardy Boys mysteries.

"Try reading this," she said, "I think you'll like it."

The cover showed the brothers pressing themselves against a rocky cliff. In the distance was a looming tower, a lone beam of light shining down from its highest window.

"I love the cover," Billy said. "It definitely makes me want to read it."

He did, not only enjoying the story, but how the sentences carried him there. He soon found himself returning to both the

school library and the public library with Margaret to check out more. He followed Frank and Joe through titles like *The Secret of the Old Mill* and *The House on the Cliff*. And there were other books that captured his attention: *Encyclopedia Brown*, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, *Island of the Blue Dolphins*, *Incredible Journey*, and *A Wrinkle in Time*.

One of the librarians, a middle-aged woman with intense eyes and a quick smile, knew Billy by name, greeting him warmly when he came to the counter with a new stack.

“What adventures are you taking this time?” she once said. “For a boy your age, I’m amazed at the quantity of what you read. Keep it up!”

In the evenings after dinner, he and Margaret had a quiet ritual, each of them reading their respective books as they sat across from each other. Margaret would ask him about the clues Frank and Joe Hardy had uncovered, and Billy would recount them excitedly, sometimes guessing at the ending before he’d reached it. Margaret listened to him the way some people listen to music.

“What’s your favorite type of book?” Billy asked her one evening.

She looked at him thoughtfully, then smiled and slid a bookmark into place before answering. “The kind where people say what they mean. The kind where there are endless possibilities.”

“What is this one?” Bill asked, pointing to the volume in her hands.

Margaret turned the book so that he could see the cover. It showed a woman in a blue dress standing above the bright Mediterranean Sea, her hair blowing in the wind. Emblazoned over it were the words *The Moon-Spinners* by Mary Stewart.

“What’s it about?” Billy persisted.

Margaret searched his face, always pleased at his

curiosity. “It’s about a young woman on vacation in Greece who finds a man hiding in the mountains because some bad people are after him. She helps take care of him and tries to figure out what kind of trouble he’s in. Most of the book is about her traveling around little villages and along the sea while she slowly solves the mystery.”

Billy had seen Greece in an atlas and it seemed like another planet. He pictured the mountains, the turquoise ocean, and the characters hiding from danger. He imagined his mother in a place like that, walking along some bright road, free of the urban confines of Flatbush, her feet no long echoing on tiles but covered with the dust of adventure.

Margaret watched her son digest it all, knowing that her boy’s imagination ran rampant. She reached across the table and took his hand. “Maybe we’ll go there someday. You never know.”

She pushed a strand a hair behind her ear. “Meanwhile, there are library shelves full of worlds for you to explore.”

Billy fully intended to make those journeys.

Within the greater melting pot of New York City, the Knight’s neighborhood was mostly Irish and Italian. You could hear Italian words and Irish brogues in the bodegas and along the street. On summer evenings, women leaned from their apartment windows, calling children home in accents that revealed their heritage. Laundry lines stitched the sky between buildings, and radios hummed the latest hits on WABC.

Most people in Flatbush couldn’t afford a color television, so they watched the evening news with Walter Cronkite in black and white. They heard about the Civil Rights movement, especially the efforts of Martin Luther King, Jr.

President Kennedy was levying sanctions against Cuba, and across the Atlantic, the Beatles topped the charts in the UK with their first album, *Please Please Me*.

David had saved enough money doing chores for neighbors to buy a simple record player. He wore the grooves out of *Surfin' Safari* by the Beach Boys, and he had albums by Bob Dylan, Sam Cooke, and The Four Tops. Billy enjoyed listening to music with him, especially drawn to Dylan's lyrics on songs like *A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall*. Each line spiked his imagination.

Besides reading, Billy's other obsession was stickball, the unofficial law of the neighborhood. Manhole covers on East 17th served as home plate and second, while the door handles of cars parked on opposites of the street provided first and third. They played between passing cars, scattering and reforming like pigeons whenever a car nosed through.

Billy was a natural. He had quick wrists and patience at the plate. He could foul off balls until the pitcher grew impatient and left something fat over the strike zone. He ran hard, arms pumping, legs churning, flying close to the ground. Disputes among the neighborhood boys were constant, seemingly a part of every game. Was it a fair ball? Did he tag up? Did it clear the invisible fence? Sometimes it got so heated that it led to shoving, usually half-hearted and short-lived.

One afternoon, a disagreement between Billy and Frankie Russo escalated beyond shouting. Frankie pointed at the sewer grate, then jabbed a finger into Billy's chest.

"You didn't touch it, Billy! You skipped right past!"

Billy shook his head, his voice steady. "I did, Frankie. You just didn't see." Frankie swung first, shouting, "Liar!" The punch was clumsy but solid. Billy tasted blood immediately. The metallic flavor was vivid, something he would remember more than the blow. He didn't cry. Instead, he wiped his mouth

and met Frankie's gaze.

"You want another shot?" he spat, anger tightening his jaw. He lunged back with furious precision, surprising even himself as he landed a punch on Frankie's jaw.

"Enough!" shouted one of the older boys, stepping between them. Another boy grabbed Frankie's arm. "Let it go, both of you!"

After a staring match where neither of them blinked, Billy walked home alone, his lip swollen and his shirt streaked with blood.

Patrick noticed the split lip before Margaret did. "What happened?"

"Ball game," Billy muttered.

Patrick studied him a moment longer than usual. "You win?"

Billy hesitated. "I didn't back down."

Patrick nodded once, rare approval flickering in his expression. Billy carried that flicker like a trophy for days.

At school, approval operated differently. Cortelyou Elementary was three stories of red brick, its windows flashing sunlight. Billy drifted through its halls as though moving underwater. He wasn't a poor student; he just found most lessons colorless. Geography maps blurred together. Arithmetic felt like counting someone else's money. Practicing cursive seemed futile.

Reading, however, continued to light his fire. He loved the rhythm of paragraphs, and he thrilled to how a single sentence could lead him somewhere new and unexpected. He read passages under his breath, testing their cadence. When he came upon unfamiliar words, he could look them up in the classroom dictionary, adding them to his mental lexicon and

sometimes trying them out with others.

One night over dinner, he paused with a forkful of food halfway to his mouth. “Mom, this meatloaf is succulent. It displays your culinary skills.”

Margaret laughed while Patrick just frowned and shook his head.

In conferences, teachers described Billy as intelligent and highly capable, but often inattentive. His reviews were less than enthusiastic. David, on the other hand, drew both students and faculty to him with his charisma. He was athletic, loud and certain, and though his grades weren’t always stellar, teachers found him so likable that they often rounded their marks higher in his favor.

Patrick Knight never understood the bond Margaret and Billy had through their reading, but he understood David instinctively. They often spoke to each other as if Billy wasn’t in the room.

“What about that catch that Mantle made?” Patrick said after supper one night, his voice tinged with admiration. “He tracked it all the way. Never took his eyes off the ball.”

David grinned, having watched the Yankee’s game with his father on TV. “Unbelievable. It seemed impossible, but he made it look easy. The crowd went wild.”

Patrick nodded. “That’s what separates the greats. He’s got that instinct. Always knows where to be.”

Billy listened from the doorway, absorbing their exchange like secondhand smoke.

At dinner one evening, Billy mentioned a story he’d read in class, a tale about a boy who stowed away on a ship to escape his life in the streets. Billy loved the way the words evoked images of the sailing vessel, the ocean waves, and the dark starry nights.

Patrick barely glanced up. “You want the sea? I’ll take

you to the docks.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Billy said.

Patrick’s fork paused midair. “Then say what you mean.”

Margaret’s eyes flicked between them. Billy saw his father’s challenging look and dropped his explanation, staring at his plate.

That night in bed, he replayed the conversation. Like his mother, he longed to say what he meant, to let it all out, even if someone didn’t appreciate it. It was a pressure to express himself, and he wasn’t sure how he could unleash it.

Patrick’s cough broke the silence, echoing down the hallway. Billy closed his eyes and imagined people who would encourage him to explore his imagination, not shut it down. He didn’t know where those voices would come from, but he would soon, and they wouldn’t be shy.

Meanwhile, the pressure inside him kept building.

Chapter Two

September 1965

Shellbank Junior High stood in Sheepshead Bay, larger and newer than Cortelyou. Its shining floors and gleaming lockers hinted at pride and order.

The students were also different. Some brought leather book bags, wore polished shoes, and had stylish haircuts. Billy overheard talk of parents with office jobs, vacations to the Jersey Shore, piano lessons, and summer camps. Alone at lunch, he quietly observed the way a boy spread his arm over the back of a chair as if he owned the cafeteria. He spoke freely, unafraid of interruption, his friends laughing at what he said.

Billy wondered what it would be like to voice his opinions with that aura of authority. He answered questions when asked but never volunteered. He moved among groups without belonging, feeling both visible and invisible. A sudden growth spurt made his awkwardness worse. He was even taller than David now, struggling to adjust to the new reality of his body.

Billy had one close friend, Lucas, a Puerto Rican boy

whose father worked on the docks alongside Patrick. Lucas was shorter than Billy, but just as scrappy if someone messed with him. His olive skin and dark eyes gave him an exotic look, especially when he looked at you and sized you up. He insisted that no one shorten his name to Luke, and if they did, the flash of anger in his expression quickly corrected them.

Occasionally, Billy and Lucas would save their meager allowances to see a movie. Billy especially liked *El Dorado* with John Wayne, and the James Bond movie, *Thunderball*. One afternoon as they waited in the dim theater for *A Few Dollars More* to start, Lucas turned to Billy. "I've always liked this feeling right before the movie begins. It's like waiting for possibilities and adventure. You know what I mean?"

"I do," said Billy. "It's like walking out on the deck of a ship before the sun rises. A ship that's about to enter a new port, a new world."

Lucas whistled softly. "Yeah, man. I've always loved the way your mind works."

As the lights dimmed and previews rolled onto the screen, Billy felt the anticipation settle around them like a warm blanket. The hush in the theater connected him to everyone else waiting for the story to unfold. For a moment, he forgot about the awkwardness of school or the conflict with his father at home. In that shared silence, he felt hopeful, as if the world outside the theater could also be filled with fresh beginnings and unexpected adventures.

One day, Billy's English teacher, Mrs. Walker, said something that made him sit bolt upright in his seat.

"Language," she said, "is not merely decoration. It is power!" She wrote "Language is power!" on the chalkboard in

her firm, looping script, the exclamation point like a slash of lightning.

She stood at the front of the classroom with dark hair gathered loosely at the nape of her neck. She wore a long skirt that fell past her knees and a blouse with rolled sleeves. There was chalk dust on her fingers. She seemed so alert and alive, so confident in what she was trying to convey.

“Power,” she repeated, tapping the word. “Words can persuade. They can wound. They can comfort. They can reveal.”

She wasn’t reading from a textbook. She was saying what she meant, confiding something urgent.

Billy leaned forward and nodded.

Over the next few weeks, Mrs. Walker read poems aloud to the class. Not rushing, not performing, but simply allowing each line to breathe, as if the silence between stanzas was part of the whole.

One afternoon she read *I celebrate myself, and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

Whitman’s words hung in the air, and it was exactly as Mrs. Walker had described. They had power! *Celebrate myself?* Billy thought. In Flatbush, celebration always followed victory. It was never something you carried inside of you all the time.

He copied the words into the margin of his notebook and underlined them twice.



In the early spring of 1966, Mrs. Walker asked the students to create their own poems.

“Write about something you love,” she said. “Or something you fear. Or something you often think about. Be specific. Details are what make a poem come alive.”

Some of the students yawned and shook their heads. Billy just stared at a blank page in his composition book. Around him, pencils slowly began to scratch, but he hesitated. Love felt like an abstract word. Fear felt too revealing. But there *was* something he had thought about a lot over the years. The New York Yankees. His father had taken him and David to a few games, and the experience was seared into his memory. The geometry of the diamond. The way the crowd at the stadium would rise as one organism when a ball arced toward the bleachers. He thought of his father's rare grin when the team won.

He began to write, using many of the words he had been storing in his head. The first lines were awkward, so he crossed them out and tried again. Then they began to rush out of him, as if that inner pressure he had felt for so many years was finding its release. He was so absorbed in the writing, crossing out words and choosing new ones, that he barely noticed the bell sounding for the next class period. When he finished, the poem read:

At Yankee Stadium

The concrete feels warm through the soles of my Keds.
I can smell the roasted peanuts
and the sharp green snap of fresh-cut grass.
I hold my ticket like it's a treasure map,
afraid it might flutter away.

The vendors shout and their voices echo,
Cold soda! Get your cold soda!
Mustard stings my nose.
Popcorn steam drifts past my face.

When the bat cracks the ball,
I feel the excitement in the crowd like electricity.

I watch Mickey Mantle step to the plate,
his shoulders easy, like he knows a secret.
The crowd leans forward all at once.
My heart does too.
I can taste salt from my own nervous lip
while the pitcher winds up like he's in slow motion.

By the time the lights glow against the dark,
my hands are sticky and my throat is sore from cheering.
And I know I love this game!
The dirt, the noise, the bright white bases,
all of it settles something inside me,
like a lesson I might one day learn to say in words.

Two days later, when Mrs. Walker returned the poems, she placed Billy's paper face down on his desk and said quietly, "Stay after class, please."

Billy's stomach tightened. Was he in trouble? He replayed every minor infraction he'd committed: tardiness, missed homework, a whispered joke. When the room emptied, Mrs. Walker strode back to his desk and lifted his paper gently.

"Billy Knight," she said, "do you know what you've done here?"

He shrugged, bracing.

"You've written a poem with a pulse."

He stared at her, trying to decipher what she meant.

"You understand imagery instinctively," she continued.
"And rhythm. You may not know the technical terms yet, but

your ear knows. This poem feels alive.”

No teacher had ever addressed him that way, and Billy knew that Mrs. Walker didn’t normally praise her students extravagantly. Instead, she asked questions, and that’s exactly what she did next.

“Why did you end this stanza here?”

“I don’t know,” Billy admitted.

“Then let’s find out.”

She spoke to him as if he were capable of more than he currently understood, and it excited him. They worked on the poem together, making a few minor adjustments. Then, before he left with a note explaining his lateness to his next class, Mrs. Walker said, “I think you may be a prodigy, Billy. Do you know what that word means?”

He nodded. “A young person who is especially good at something. I remember the word from a story I read about a girl whose piano playing amazed everyone.”

Mrs. Walker nodded. “That’s it. And I would never use that word lightly. We have a talent show in May. I would like you to read this.”

Billy felt himself recoiling. “No,” he blurted.

She studied him calmly. “Why?”

He searched for a reason to justify his refusal. “People will probably just laugh.”

“Why would they?”

Because I’m awkward, came the usual stream of his thoughts. *Because I’m not David. Because this isn’t what boys like me should be doing.*

“I don’t know,” he muttered.

“Fear is often a doorway. You don’t have to walk through it today. But you will. I guarantee it. And that will be the beginning of Billy Knight sharing his gift with the world.”

He mumbled his thanks, then left unsettled. For the

rest of the day, he kept replaying their meeting in his mind. He remembered the line from Whitman that had struck him as both strange and liberating. *I Celebrate myself, and sing myself...*

At dinner that night, David talked about tryouts for the basketball team at Erasmus High School. Patrick nodded approvingly.

"You'll do great," he said. "Maybe even varsity next year."

Billy waited for an opening. "There's a talent show," he said. "I'm thinking of participating."

Patrick glanced up, then chuckled. "How? Do you sing or dance? You do magic?"

"No."

"Then what?"

"I wrote something."

David smiled slightly, trying to be encouraging. "And what? You're gonna recite it?"

Billy felt heat rise to his face.

Patrick chewed slowly. "Recite what?"

"A poem."

The word drifted awkwardly through the kitchen, as if it had no place to lodge.

Patrick wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "That so."

Silence followed.

"You gonna join Little League this spring?" Patrick said, abruptly changing the subject. He had been pestering Billy for years to register.

"Maybe," Billy said, though he doubted it.

"Maybe's not an answer."

Billy's jaw tightened. "I don't know if I want to."

Patrick's fork paused midair. "Why? You love baseball."

"I love watching it."

"Then play it."

"Maybe I don't want to play."

The air shifted.

Patrick leaned back. "You're good at stickball. Besides, men *do* things. They don't just talk about them or write about them."

Billy felt something ignite. "Writing is doing."

For an instant, there was genuine curiosity in Patrick's face, but he quickly buried it. "Doing what, exactly?"

Billy opened his mouth and realized he didn't yet have the vocabulary to defend himself. The words retreated.

Margaret placed her hand lightly on Patrick's arm. "He's finding his way, honey."

Patrick didn't look at her. "He'll find it faster on a field than in a notebook."

That night, Billy lay awake longer than usual. He imagined himself at the plate, swinging and missing. He imagined himself at a podium with a microphone, his voice cracking. Both made him nervous, but only one felt like it might matter. And he sensed that if he stepped up to that microphone, nothing would ever be the same.

Chapter Three

May 1966

Facing his fears, Billy agreed to participate in the talent show. He and Mrs. Walker began meeting after school once a week, not only to rehearse the recitation, but to work on other poems Billy had begun to write. They sat at a student table near the window as Mrs. Walker urged him to cut unnecessary words or sharpen an image.

“Don’t tell me it was loud,” she said. “Show me the sound.”

She circled clichés in red. “If someone else has said it, you must say it differently.”

She began to lend him collections of poetry from her personal collection.

“I know it’ll be hard to understand some of these,” she said. “But just let them soak in and stretch your mind. Poetry has a pervasive way of affecting us.”

Some of the volumes were classical, others more modern. He found himself drawn to poems by T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, and Theodore Roethke. He couldn’t always decipher

the intent of each poem, but Mrs. Walker helped him with great patience as they discussed different words and allusions. Then he discovered Beat poets like Ginsberg, Ferlinghetti, and Snyder, their counterculture leanings awakening new thoughts and possibilities.

One afternoon, he arrived late to his session with Mrs. Walker. She was staring out the window into the schoolyard when he entered.

“Sorry,” he said.

She turned quickly, almost startled. “No apology needed.”

There was something in her face he hadn’t seen before. It seemed like weariness, or perhaps longing.

“My husband used to write,” she said suddenly.

Billy blinked.

“We met in a literature class in college, and he had a real gift with words. I always encouraged him, but then life set in, especially our daughter being born.”

She smiled faintly, then smoothed a crease in her skirt. Billy noticed a faint tiredness in her eyes. “He sells insurance now.”

Billy didn’t know what to say. Her confession had opened a level of closeness that he had never expected.

“Don’t get me wrong,” she added, as if to correct herself. “He’s very good at what he does, and he’s been a great husband. But sometimes I think about what he set aside. When I ask him about it, he just shrugs and says the desire isn’t there any longer.”

She met his gaze.

“Don’t set aside what is yours, Billy. Will you promise me that?”

The weight of that sentence landed heavily. Just a couple of months earlier, he would have thought it strange that

a teacher would address him with such an intimate request. But Mrs. Walker had become more than a teacher. She was now his mentor, and he had grown to care about her.

“I promise,” he said.

The night of the talent show arrived.

The auditorium was packed, smelling of varnish and nervous sweat. Students sang popular songs or performed dance routines together. One boy attempted a magic trick that failed spectacularly. Laughter and goodwill rippled through the assembled family members.

Billy stood backstage, wondering if anyone would notice the sweat beads breaking out on his forehead. He scanned the audience through a narrow gap in the curtain. David and his mother were in the third row, enjoying the show, but Patrick wasn't with them.

When his name was called, he walked to the microphone as if approaching some kind of judgment. He began softly. The first line wavered a bit, and he heard a cough from somewhere in the audience as heat rose to his ears.

Then his voice grew steadier, like a bike catching a higher gear. By the third stanza, the room was quiet. Not with a restless sense of boredom but with keen attention. He almost forgot the audience as the words carrying him forward, line by line.

When he finished, there was a beat of silence long enough to spin his doubts again. But then there was applause, not thunderous, but real. It felt more like recognition than approval. He bowed awkwardly, then stepped back from the microphone.

Backstage, Mrs. Walker squeezed his shoulder. “You

see? Words have power.”

He nodded, feeling a strength rise inside him that was new and welcome.

There were a few other acts, and then the Principal, Mr. Lewis, came to the microphone to announce the winner.

“I think we can all agree,” he said, “that Shellbank Junior High is alive with talents of many kinds. Let’s show our enthusiasm for every single participant this evening.”

This time the applause was thunderous. When it died down, Mr. Lewis continued.

“Our judges found the decision difficult, but they have decided to award first prize to Billy Knight, especially because the poem he recited wasn’t written by some other author. It was his own creation.”

Billy was taken by surprise, never imagining this would happen. He went forward and received the first place ribbon. It felt flimsy in his hand, but the sensation in his chest, a surge of purpose and celebration, felt new and welcome.

Afterward, Margaret embraced him, her eyes shining.

“I’m so proud of you,” she whispered.

David punched his arm lightly. “Guess you showed ‘em.”

When they got home, Patrick was sitting at the kitchen table drinking a beer.

“How’d it go?” he asked without looking up.

“He won,” Margaret said, her eyes gleaming.

Patrick looked at Billy and shrugged his shoulders nonchalantly. Their eyes locked until his father looked away, as if he was embarrassed by how he was treating his son. Billy just shook his head and went to his bedroom.

Later that night, as he lay in bed staring at the alley window, he realized something quietly devastating. Success in one arena didn’t grant you an exemption in another. His father’s

approval operated by different laws.

But still, beneath the disappointment, something steadier persisted. The feeling he had while sharing his own words, the receptance of the crowd, the approval from both Mrs. Walker and his mother: all of it would remain with him.

When he had stood at that microphone, speaking words he had written, he had felt aligned with himself. Like he was inhabiting his own skin in a new way. It was something he knew he needed to celebrate, even protect. And he suspected that protecting it would not be easy.

Chapter Four

Fall 1966

Billy had continued his meetings with Mrs. Walker into his eighth grade year. They were the highlight of his week, a time when they discussed both Billy's poems and the poetry of other writers. His own compositions poured out of him as he filled one composition notebook after another. Mrs. Walker appreciated how prolific he had become, but she cautioned him.

"So much of writing," she said, "is in the editing. I've heard that some poets linger over the choice of a single word for hours."

Margaret asked to read most of what he created, supportive at every turn. Patrick, however, simply tolerated his son's new preoccupation, convinced it was a phase that would pass.

Billy joined the Shellbank basketball team, rather than Little League. His height had led the school coach to recruit him. Billy was reluctant, and the move was more to appease

Patrick's sports obsession than his own desire. He did it without ceremony, announcing it one night over dinner.

Patrick looked up from his plate, his eyes brightening with surprise. "That's great news, Billy," he said, leaning forward. "Shellbank's a good team. You'll do well there."

Margaret smiled across the table. "I think you'll enjoy it, Billy," she added gently.

Patrick nodded, a rare warmth in his voice. "You know, I played basketball when I was your age. If you need any pointers, just let me know."

Billy managed a smile, unaccustomed to his father's enthusiasm. "Thanks, Dad," he replied quietly.

During his initial practices, Billy felt ungainly. He had played hoops with friends at a local park, but had never been as good at basketball as he was at stickball. He could hustle down the court, and he had decent ball sense for when to pass to a team member, but his scoring was atrocious, his shots usually coming up short and hitting the rim.

Patrick attended a couple after-school games, getting off early from work to watch his son. He sat in the bleachers, his arms folded, calling out instructions that Billy hadn't asked for.

"Keep your wrist straight! Follow through on your shot! Don't overthink it!"

During one game, the coach kept Billy in the game until the final moments, needing his height on defense. In the closing seconds, Billy was fouled and had a chance to clinch the game with two free throws.

He missed both, and when the ball bounced off the rim, it seemed to be in slow motion. Everyone in the bleachers groaned.

That night at dinner, there was the usual tension. Patrick recounted the last moments of the game, his voice tone showing

obvious dissatisfaction.

“He’ll get it,” David said. “It takes time.”

Patrick didn’t respond. Margaret passed around the food with a smile, hoping to break the tension, but Billy ate in silence, staring down at his plate. He didn’t want to look directly at his father with the anger that would surely show through his eyes.

Patrick leaned back in his chair. “What is with you?”

Billy cautiously looked at him. “What do you mean?”

“It’s like a part of you isn’t there. Like you’re not paying attention.”

Billy looked away, afraid of the anger rising inside him.

Patrick persisted. “I know you can concentrate. I see it when you’re reading with your mom or writing in all those composition books of yours. Why can’t you do the same on the court?”

Something in Billy cracked. “That’s the difference between us,” he said with acid in his tone. “You probably couldn’t write a paragraph that made any sense, but you don’t see the value in what I do. I pay attention to a lot of things that you don’t. Why can’t you just accept that I’m not like you and I never will be?”

The room went still. Patrick’s eyes hardened. “You can say what you want about me. But scribbling and daydreaming doesn’t put food on the table!”

Patrick’s voice had risen to a shout. Billy rose before he could stop himself. “Neither does yelling, old man.”

Patrick stood slowly, bracing his chest and taking a step toward Billy, who was now taller than his father. Margaret stepped between them.

“That’s enough,” she said softly.

Billy turned and retreated to his bedroom, his heart pounding. He heard Patrick’s chair scrape sharply against the

floor and words murmured between his parents that he couldn't decipher. He lay on his bed staring at the ceiling until the pipes began knocking their metallic lullaby. He felt like he had crossed some line and could never go back.

More importantly, he didn't want to.

The next afternoon was his weekly meeting with Mrs. Walker. He was still simmering from the previous evening, and now that feeling was mixed with guilt.

Mrs. Walker noticed. "You're quieter than usual."

Billy hesitated. "Why do other people try to run your life according to their own plans? Why don't they just accept you for who you are?"

She leaned back in her chair. "Are you talking about your father?"

"Yeah. Last night we got into it. I'm tired of his expectations and his criticism. I'm tired of trying to be what he wants me to be."

Mrs. Walker let a deep silence flow between them. "Does your father read?"

"No."

"Does he ever listen?"

Billy paused. "Sometimes. When it's about sports."

Again, silence, as if Mrs. Walker was carefully choosing her words. "You are never going to fit someone else's mold, Billy. You've begun to follow your own star. And even if a working class man can't understand the beauty of that, he's still your father. Maybe that question of accepting people for who they are includes you doing the same for him."

He took a deep breath and looked at her. As usual, she had reframed the situation in a way that made him think deeper

and longer, even if he didn't like it.

"That won't be easy," he said.

She smiled faintly. "Nothing worthwhile ever is."

She suddenly stood and went to the bookshelf behind her desk. She was so well-acquainted with the volumes that she could grab one, flip to a page, and read it aloud to the class. This time, she chose an anthology of contemporary American poets, opened it to a particular spot, and handed it to Billy.

"Read this, please."

It was *Those Winter Sundays* by Robert Hayden, a description of a boy's lack of appreciation for the sacrifices made by his working class father. One line stood out to Billy: *What did I know of love's austere and lonely offices?*

He read those words aloud to Mrs. Walker. "I'm not sure of the meaning of austere."

"It means having no comfort or luxury. Spartan. Do you understand what Hayden is trying to say?"

"Yes," Billy said. "The boy is realizing all the hard work his father does that he never appreciates. He's saying that a man does his duty for his family, not expecting to be noticed or thanked."

"Exactly," said Mrs. Walker.

"In a different way," said Billy, "it's like your husband selling insurance."

Mrs. Walker chuckled softly. "Touché."

Their eyes met in silence. Billy's mind went to images of his father coming through the front door of the house after work. He would take off his coat and set down his lunch pail, his face drawn and tired from the day's labor. For the first time, Billy saw his father more clearly. It didn't make things easier, just more complicated. Still, he felt his heart soften just a bit.

"Thank you," he said to Mrs. Walker.

Chapter Five

January 1967

Margaret's illness announced itself with fatigue. She stopped humming to herself while she worked. She began leaving sentences unfinished, as if they required too much energy to complete. She began sitting more often, and one afternoon, Billy found her resting at the kitchen table with her head bowed.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Just tired," she said, though her smile came slower than usual.

Then there were the doctor appointments, sometimes twice a week. After one of them, Billy heard his parents whispering in their bedroom, and the word biopsy floated through the hallway.

Patrick grew restless and angry. He opened beer cans earlier after work, and he snapped at small irritations like someone leaving their shoes on the floor or the trash not taken out promptly.

One night, Billy found him alone in the kitchen, staring at nothing.

“Do you pray, Billy?” Patrick asked without looking at him.

Billy hesitated. “I don’t really know how. And I’m not even sure of what the word God means.”

Patrick nodded once. “Me neither. And right now I regret that.”

It was the most vulnerable sentence Billy had ever heard his father speak.

The diagnosis arrived on a chilly winter afternoon. Stage Four metastatic breast cancer, inoperable, having spread to other parts of Margaret’s body. The treatment plan would include radiation and hormonal therapy, but the doctors were honest about the infinitesimal odds of recovery. Privately, Margaret had considered refusing treatment, but Patrick had convinced her to at least take a shot at what was available.

She gathered Billy and David at the dinner table to announce the news. Her composure frightened Billy more than panic would have.

“We’ll face it,” she said. “We’re a family, and nothing can take that away from us.”

Patrick gripped the edge of the table until his knuckles whitened.

Billy dropped out of basketball, and when he announced it at dinner, Patrick treated it like a foregone conclusion. Besides, the family had more pressing things to worry about with Margaret’s illness. As she lost weight during her treatments, the mood in the house grew more somber. Patrick took over some of the cooking, Billy handled the laundry, and David made sure the floors and bathroom stayed clean. They each stepped up, filling in the gaps and trying to keep the home running as smoothly as

possible.

At school, Mrs. Walker noticed the shadows under Billy's eyes.

"Tell me," she said gently.

He did. All of it. His mother weakening, the diagnosis, the stoic way she was handling it.

Mrs. Walker put her hand on his shoulder. "I'm truly sorry. For her, for you, and for all your family."

Billy finally let tears fall from his eyes, unashamed in Mrs. Walker's presence.

Grief," she said quietly, "begins even before the loss. It begins when we know that the loss is possible."

He swallowed. "But what do I do with it?"

"You can only feel it as fully as possible," she said. "But it also helps to talk about it. I'm always here for you. And in your case, maybe even write about it. Not to fix it, but to hold it to you in a different way."

As the eighth-grade talent show approached, Mrs. Walker urged Billy to participate again. With all that was going on his life, he hesitated to commit, but Margaret insisted.

"I want to hear you," she said, her voice thinner now. "You have a gift, Billy, and gifts are meant to be shared with others."

So, he wrote a new poem about unexpected events that crash into our lives and alter the course of everything. He read it to Mrs. Walker first.

Before You See It Coming

Once my bike chain snapped on me

halfway down the biggest hill.
I was flying, feeling brave,
and then the pedals spun like air
and I had nothing left to steer with.

One morning a man on our block
didn't go to work as usual.
An ambulance came with its lights off,
and someone said he got sick so fast
it was like a bulb burning out in the middle of a sentence.

We all know about that famous cruise ship
that sank on its maiden voyage.
People were eating dinner and laughing,
not knowing that icy water
was already climbing the walls.

It seems like trouble works that way,
waiting behind regular moments,
like a story you have learned to trust,
until a page suddenly tears
in the middle of a paragraph
you thought you understood.

So I keep noticing small things,
the warmth of the sun on a wall,
the sound of someone whistling nearby,
the slow blue of evening coming,
before the page turns again.

When he finished, Mrs. Walker wiped at the corner of
one of her eyes. "Read that," she said. "Read it for your mom.

Read it for the school.”

The night of the talent show, Margaret wore a coat too large for her shrinking frame. Patrick escorted her carefully down the aisle. Word of their family’s struggles had spread throughout the school, and Billy was surprised that even students of a different social status had spoken kind words of support to him. Tonight was no different. As Margaret reached the end of the aisle near the front row, a family rose deferentially and offered their seats.

Billy felt his throat tighten at the sight. Not just because of his mother’s frail condition, but because of the unexpected grace he had encountered in the school community. It was so easy, he realized, to assume what others were like until they revealed their true natures.

When his turn came to read and he stepped to the mic, there was no tremor in his voice this time. It was as if he had something to say that was applicable to every person present, and he knew it. As if the words were a communal utterance.

When he finished, the applause was even stronger than the year before.

Afterwards, Margaret embraced him, her bones sharp beneath his arms. He tucked the poem in her pocket and kissed her cheek.

“Promise me,” she whispered, “that you’ll follow what’s yours.”

“I promise,” he said.

Patrick stood a few feet away, hands in pockets. “You really wrote that?”

“Yes.”

Patrick nodded slowly.

“It was... strong,” he said. “Good job, son.”

Remembering everything Mrs. Walker had taught him through the poem by Robert Hayden, Billy moved toward his father and gave him a hug. Patrick was stiff at first, then relaxed, as if he needed the solace even more than his son.

Margaret died in early June of 1967, just before the end of Billy's eighth grade year. Though the family didn't attend church, Margaret was a cradle Catholic, so they had an obligatory funeral mass for her at Holy Cross. The service left Billy cold, alternating between English and Latin, phrases that had no weight or meaning for him. The priest gave a generic eulogy that could have applied to anyone.

What struck Billy more than the ritual was the number of people who had shown up to honor his mother. Margaret's kind and supportive nature had touched the lives of people throughout the neighborhood. During the reception in the church's fellowship hall, the neighbors seemed far more genuine than the priest when they offered condolences. Billy accepted their words with a nod and a smile even though he felt numb inside.

After the memorial service, a few people joined the family at the burial in Cypress Hills Cemetery, where the priest said some perfunctory words. It was an unusually warm day, the sun beating down on them. Given the family's low income, they couldn't afford to buy suits, but Patrick had purchased button down white shirts for all three of them, and even without jackets, they sweated profusely in the heat.

Billy could smell the fecund odor of the soil in the open grave. As they lowered Margaret's casket into the ground, a heavy sadness pressed on his chest, making it difficult to breathe. He felt a sense of emptiness and disbelief, struggling

to accept that his mother was truly gone.

Back home, their small apartment felt cavernous without her. He caught himself listening for the small sounds she used to make. At night in their beds, he and David began a new routine. They would share some of their fondest memories of Margaret, and Billy was surprised at the depth of detail that David remembered. It made him feel closer to his brother.

One afternoon, Billy went into his parents' room, where Patrick hadn't yet touched any of Margaret's belongings. He opened the top drawer of her dresser, knowing it contained her mementos and personal items. There, folded neatly to one side, was a piece of paper. He picked it up and spread it open. It was the poem he had read at the eighth grade talent show. His lips moved as he read it aloud softly, remembering how she had looked so shrunken in her coat as she sat in the front row.

Billy was so lost in the memory that he didn't hear Patrick come into the room.

"She always loved your writing," he said.

Billy turned to his father and nodded. Patrick stepped further into the room. The two of them gazed at each other for a quiet moment.

"Writing won't make you safe," he said finally.

Billy winced. "Neither will working on the docks.

The words hung between them. Patrick flinched, not in anger, but in recognition. For a moment, Billy saw not a dockworker or authority figure, but a man who had lost the center of his existence, leaving him terrified of losing what he couldn't control.

Then Patrick stood straighter. "I don't know how we'll ever deal with your mom being gone. I know I can never replace her, but if you need something, just let me know, Billy." His voice caught in his throat for a second, then he continued. "Just let me know."

“I will, Dad. And you let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.”

They didn’t embrace again. They just looked at each other and nodded, an unspoken contract that made Billy feel more like a man.

On a Saturday afternoon just before eighth grade graduation, Billy walked alone to Prospect Park. The foliage of the trees was vibrant green in the late spring warmth. Children sailed toy boats at the edge of the lake, their parents looking on protectively. Dogs fetched balls and Frisbees, racing over the grass with joyful abandon.

Billy noticed it all. Every detail. And he thought about the passage of time. Even though a major portion of his own life had stopped for good, the rest of the world refused to pause. It had always been that way, he realized, and it always would be.

He stood in the shade of an elm tree and unfolded a new poem, one he had just written, specifically for his mom. He hadn’t shared it with anyone else, even Mrs. Walker, saving it for this private moment.

He read it aloud.

Mom, eighth grade is almost over.
Everyone signs yearbooks in loud hallways
like they’re leaving a train station.
You used to meet me at the door
and ask what I saw that day
as if the world had left small notes for me.

I keep seeing the kitchen table—
the yellow light over it,

your tea cooling beside your elbow
while you read my pages slowly,
like someone walking along a shoreline
looking for beautiful shells.

Remember the poem about the storm?
You stopped me in the middle
and pointed to one line—
the wind rattling the fence boards.
You said, “That’s the real part,”
and tapped the page twice.

Even near the end,
when the hospital rooms felt as thin and pale
as winter sunlight,
you still asked if I had brought my notebook.
You told me writing is a lantern,
not bright enough to fix the dark,
but enough to keep going.

I’m still writing, Mom.
The notebook is open on the same table.
Sometimes when I finish a line
I look up without thinking,
like a ball player checking the stands
for the one face that’s always there,
or a runner glancing back
to see if the person who cheered first
is still applauding.

He wiped tears from his eyes, took a deep breath, and
looked out over the people enjoying themselves on a perfect

afternoon. There was a young couple sprawled on a blanket nearby, their bodies entwined, their transistor radio tuned to WABC. *Groovin'* by The Young Rascals floated into the air as if the band had written the tune exactly for a day like this.

He remembered his mom's last words to him, spoken two days before her body began to shut down and she became unresponsive. David and Patrick had gone to the hospital cafeteria while Billy sat on the chair next to her bed.

She had reached out to take his hand. "I remember one day when you asked me what kinds of books I liked to read. I knew right then that you had a curiosity about words inside you."

"I remember that day," he said.

"Promise me, again, Billy, that you will never give up your writing. I think it will take you places you've never imagined."

Billy's swallowed back a wave of raw emotion, not wanting to disturb her. "I promise, Mom. I love you."

"I love you, too, Billy. More than you will ever know."

The loud laughter of two children running nearby interrupted his reverie. He folded the poem and tucked it back in his pocket. It struck him that writing was not just for expression, but also for preservation. He started home through Flatbush past stoops and bakeries and boys arguing over a close play at second, and he once again realized a quietly irreversible truth about his life. Inside him, language had taken root forever. It was no longer about promises to his mother, to Mrs. Walker, or even himself. It was a force embedded deep inside him, both a joy and a compulsion that would not leave. It was now organic to his whole being.

And on that summer day in 1967, he never imagined how prophetic his mother's last words had been. He had no idea just how far words would take Billy Knight, the boy from Brooklyn.

Chapter Six

Summer 1967

In the months after Margaret's death, it seemed as if the entire country erupted into social madness. The evening news showed starkly contrasting scenes that were both thrilling and frightening.

In San Francisco, an estimated one hundred thousand young people gathered in Golden Gate Park for what reporters were calling the "Summer of Love." Boys with long locks strummed guitars while girls wearing flowers in their hair danced barefoot in the grass. They spoke about peace, freedom, and ending the war in Vietnam.

On other nights, the news showed unrest and violence, what newscasters called the "Long Hot Summer." Fueled by racism and economic inequality, riots broke out in Black neighborhoods of Detroit, Newark, and dozens of other cities. There were scenes of violence between protesters and the police while smoke rose above rooftops and sirens screamed through the streets. The number of disturbances eventually reached more than one hundred and fifty across the country.

Billy watched some of it from the couch in their Flatbush apartment, the black-and-white television flickering against the walls. The voices blurred together, but certain words lodged in his head—casualties, escalation, unrest. But mostly he felt numb. Margaret's absence had settled into the rooms and his heart like an invisible weight.

There was no bereavement leave for Patrick. He had continued to work at the docks every morning before sunrise. The job had become even more important now, something solid he could hold on to. He rarely spoke about Margaret, but occasionally Billy would notice him standing silently at the kitchen sink, staring out the window. Another time, he heard him humming a few notes of a tune that Billy realized was a favorite of his mother's

Billy and David continued to share household chores. Billy cooked simple meals of eggs, pasta, or canned soup, while David handled the grocery shopping and the trash. Neither of them mentioned it, but they both understood that the apartment needed to stay orderly now that Margaret was gone. It was a defense against the darkness.

Billy developed a new routine with his writing as well. He began writing in a separate journal that he called his Black Book. It was where he jotted down feelings that threatened to overwhelm him. Words full of rage and guilt and despair, not forming them into poems but just letting them pour onto the pages.

*Arithmetic can't bury the screams
Mothers clawing in the dark
Why are we nodding while they choke us?
If language is power, then it's a fucking weapon
Their words crawl down our throats and rot there!*

He would close the notebook after lines like those, his pulse quickened, as if he had said something aloud that no one was supposed to hear.

David changed the most after Margaret's death. At first his grief was silent, but as that summer stretched out, it hardened into anger. It showed in the way he slammed the apartment door or argued with Patrick about trivial things.

He had grown his hair out, defying his father's criticism so forcefully that Patrick backed off. Then came his new friends, boys from the neighborhood who also had long hair and dressed in army jackets with peace symbol patches sewn into them. They would gather in Prospect Park or on the stoops of their apartment buildings after dark. Some of them were already growing mustaches or sideburns, talking about college protests and draft cards.

One night Billy smelled marijuana smoke drifting through the open window of their bedroom. He looked down and saw some teenagers hanging out below near the trashcans.

David grinned from his bed. "Smells like a good batch. Maybe as good as the one I sampled last week."

David raised an eyebrow. "You can always join me," he continued.

Billy just shook his head. He had smoked weed with Lucas once, primarily because someone told him it would enhance his creativity. Instead he felt fuzzy-headed and a bit paranoid.

"Not my bag," he said to David.

"Suit yourself, brother."

Meanwhile, the war in Vietnam came up in conversation more often, especially at the dinner table.

“Every day on the news they report the body count,” David said one evening, “but they’re still sending in more troops.”

Patrick shrugged from his chair. “That’s the nature of war.”

David’s jaw tightened. “But it’s fucking crazy. They’re not attacking us! It’s on the other side of the world. Guys my age dying in rice paddies just because their lottery numbers came up before others.”

Patrick didn’t respond.

David turned to Billy. “You write about everything it seems. The city, your head, all those voices you’re always talking about. So write about this. About what’s actually happening.”

Billy didn’t answer right away “Don’t confuse silence with not knowing,” he said, his voice low and tight. “I know how to write it. I just don’t know how to write it without turning it into something people will dismiss as ranting and raving.”

“Yeah, you do,” David shot back. “You just don’t want to deal with what might happen if you join the resistance.”

Billy let out a short, humorless breath. “You think I can pin this down, give it shape, and suddenly it means something? That it fixes anything? It doesn’t. It just sits there on the page while everything keeps burning.”

He leaned back, his eyes sharp. “But don’t mistake that for fear. If I write it, I’ll write it the way it is. Ugly, unfinished, and impossible to ignore. And people won’t thank me for it.”

Music helped both David and Billy that summer. 1967 produced new sounds every week, and the record stores along Flatbush Avenue displayed album covers like windows into other universes.

One Saturday afternoon, David came home carrying three of them.

“Check these out,” he said, dropping them onto the kitchen table. First albums by The Doors, Jefferson Airplane, and The Jimi Hendrix Experience. David placed the needle on the Doors’ album. The driving bass of *Break on Through*, coupled with Jim Morrison’s poetry, hooked them both. They listened to the entire album, the sound filling the apartment in a way that felt rebellious and alive. When Morrison screamed the words to *The End*, Billy knew that it came from the poet’s own Black Book.

Another album captured Billy’s heart that summer, the new release by the Beatles, *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*. The cover was a carnival of color, with dozens of faces staring out like ghosts from different centuries. Billy lay on his bed and listened to it repeatedly. The songs were miniature worlds with marching bands, dreamlike orchestras, and floating voices. When he heard “picture yourself in a boat on a river, with tangerine trees and marmalade skies,” his mind drifted away with the poetry.

Later that week, David brought home another album.

“*Flowers*,” he announced, placing it beside the turntable. “The new one by the Stones.”

Billy laughed. “You’re becoming a one man music store.”

“Music is part of the revolution, man!”

Billy’s mind was febrile all summer, trying to assimilate the evening news and the psychedelic music. The familiar pressure to write was stronger every day, prompting him to fill his composition notebooks with new verses. In his Black Book,

he jotted his visceral feelings, not just about the body count of young men dying halfway across the world, but about his mother's death, about the racism that was igniting cities across America.

Mrs. Walker had encouraged him to read poetry more widely throughout the summer, so he took numerous trips to the library, zeroing in on the poetry shelves. On one of those visits, he checked out a copy of *Howl and Other Poems* by Allen Ginsberg.

The poems startled him, the lines rushing forward without tidy structure. They moved like waves crashing against the shore, filled with images of cities, madness, prophets, and a wild spiritual hunger.

Billy read passages aloud in a corner of the library. When he came across allusions he didn't understand, he went to the large copy of the Columbia Encyclopedia that was open on a desk in the reference section and furthered his education.

There was one of Ginsberg's poems that he especially loved, *A Supermarket in California*. Ginsberg describes walking through an imaginary grocery store with Walt Whitman, saying *Ah, dear father, graybeard, lonely old courage-teacher*. Billy remembered those first words of Whitman that Mrs. Walker had written on the chalkboard. They were a match that lit a fuse in his life.

In contrast to Ginsberg, he discovered the lyrical simplicity of Langston Hughes, a Black man speaking his truth to America. He borrowed books and began experimenting with different styles. Sometimes longer, freer lines that echoed the wild rides of Ginsberg. At other times, simple images reminiscent of Emily Dickinson or Hughes. The poems spilled across the pages of his notebook like crowded subway cars of thought.

Sometimes he showed them to Lucas, who was still his closest friend. Lucas was steady and curious in a way

that balanced Billy's flights of imagination. They spent many afternoons wandering through the neighborhood or sitting on stoops talking about girls, movies, music, and the strange direction the world was heading.

One day near the end of summer vacation, Lucas said, "Let's go somewhere."

"Where?"

"Brighton Beach."

Billy grinned. "You mean the Riviera?"

"Exactly."

They took the subway from Flatbush, the train rattling toward the ocean. When it burst above ground near the end of the line, sunlight poured through the windows and the smell of salt drifted in. Families and sunburned tourists crowded the beach. Vendors sold hot dogs and lemon ice along the boardwalk. The Atlantic stretched out endlessly, glittering under the afternoon sun.

Billy and Lucas kicked off their shoes, holding them in their hands as they walked along the edge of the water. For a while they said nothing, letting the rhythm of the waves settle around them.

Finally Lucas spoke. "My old man's working double shifts lately. He says he's trying to save for the deposit on a larger apartment."

Billy nodded. "My dad is burying himself in work also, but not just for the pay. I think it's his way of dealing with grief."

Lucas looked at him. "And you write." He paused, searching Billy's face. "Does it help? With everything?"

Billy shrugged. "Sometimes it feels like letting steam out of a kettle. At other times, I'm not sure it does much."

"Do you have something new you can read to me?" Lucas asked, nudging Billy with his elbow.

Billy hesitated, then reached into his backpack and

pulled out a composition notebook rather than his Black Book. “This one’s different. I’ve been experimenting with something wilder.”

Lucas smirked, then leaned back on his hands, ready to listen. “Good. It’s about fucking time you let out that crazy man inside you.”

While seagulls circled overhead, Billy cleared his throat and began reading a poem, its images inspired by the beat poets.

Fourteen and Restless

I saw the boys of Brooklyn,
leaning against buildings and streetlights,
while the subway howled through its tunnels
like some mechanical animal
dragging the whole city behind it.

We were fourteen
as restless as loose wires in a streetlamp
buzzing above the avenue.

Neon signs blinked awake
over laundromats and liquor stores—
red, blue, green halos
humming through the humid night
like electric prayers no one remembered saying.

From every apartment window
came the glow of televisions—
faces of men in dark suits
talking about Vietnam
as if the war were just another borough

across a bridge we might cross someday.

Mothers washed dishes
with the deadly news whispering behind them.
Fathers smoked by the windows.
Sirens stitched the streets together
Like one long thread of urgency.

And the radios—
always the radios—
spilling wild guitars and tambourines
into the stairwells and sidewalks
until the whole neighborhood vibrated
like a jukebox with a broken heart.

We wandered past bakeries closing for the night,
past old men arguing in Italian and Polish,
past stoops where girls laughed
like glass bottles clinking in a crate.

Someone said the world is erupting.
Someone said whole cities are already on fire.
Someone said the war will come looking
for boys not yet finished becoming men.

The trains roared again beneath us.
The windows flickered.
The neon kept blinking
like the city itself couldn't fall asleep.

And we stood there
fourteen and electric with questions

watching Brooklyn breathe in the dark,
wondering if growing up
meant learning how to carry
all that noise inside your chest
without exploding into light.

Lucas listened without interrupting. When Billy finished, the only sound was the ocean rolling against the shore.

“That was something,” Lucas said quietly.

“Good something or bad something?”

“More than good,” Lucas said. “Like you’re trying to capture the whole city at once.”

Billy looked out at the water, surprised by how accurate that felt. That was exactly what he was *always* trying to do. Make sense of the overwhelming flood of images and emotions that comprised his life. But then he wondered if even his best friend, Lucas, could withstand the stark words that he kept in his Black Book.

They stayed at the beach until evening, watching the sky turn orange above the Atlantic. Eventually the boardwalk lights flicked on and the crowds began drifting toward the subway.

As they walked back toward the station, Lucas nudged him.

“You know,” he said, “one day you’re writing is going to make you famous.”

Billy laughed. “Famous poets don’t come from Flatbush.”

Lucas shrugged. “Why not?”

Billy didn’t answer, but as the train carried them back toward Brooklyn, he felt the familiar pressure building inside him again, language searching for a way out. He knew that if he wrote what he was really thinking, there could be consequences. And he was starting not to care.

Chapter Seven

Winter 1967

Winter pressed into Brooklyn, probing every nook and cranny. The cold came down the avenues, slipping through coat seams and cracked window frames, settling into the bones of buildings. The radiators in the Knight apartment resumed their uneven percussion of clanks, hisses, and hollow knocks, echoing through the pipes with messages no one could translate.

Erasmus Hall High School stood larger than anything Billy had known before. Its wide corridors carried a constant current of bodies and voices, like a human weather system that shifted between classes. Lockers slammed, laughter flared, and voices called out to each other in greetings.

Billy moved through it all with a quiet alertness. The adjustment to high school wasn't only about the size of the building, but the feeling of being absorbed into something less forgiving. At Shellbank, there had still been corners of familiarity. Here, everything felt in motion, like it could sweep you along or leave you behind without anyone even noticing.

He had grown again, the change happening almost

without his awareness, until one morning he caught his reflection in a classroom window and realized he was looking slightly down at boys he used to meet eye-to-eye. His shoulders had broadened, but his limbs still felt loosely assembled. He had grown his reddish blond hair to his collar, curling slightly at the ends. David's was longer still, brushing his shoulders in a way that drew both admiration and criticism, depending on who was looking.

Patrick had said nothing at first, but couldn't seem to resist. "You look like a goddamn guitar player," he muttered one evening, his voice tinged with both annoyance and sarcasm as he stared at David's long hair.

David smiled faintly, brushing a loose strand behind his ear. "Maybe I am."

Billy glanced between them, tired of the old argument brewing again. "Yeah, Dad, maybe you have a son who's a poet and another who's a musician."

Patrick scoffed. "It's not about the guitar or your composition books. It's about looking like you don't care about anything. Like you're just waiting to get in trouble."

David shrugged, still smiling, but his eyes were now serious. "Maybe I care about different things than you do. Maybe getting in some trouble is the only way to respond to the fucking lunacy of this country."

The tension that followed hung in the air. Fucking lunacy was right, thought Billy. Those two words summed up so many of the sentences in his Black Book, and the weight of that volume was growing heavier every day.

Billy watched as Patrick looked away, his jaw set, while David seemed content letting the silence stretch between them, a quiet challenge lingering beneath his sardonic smile.

David changed in other ways as well. He spent less time at home and more with that group of friends who gathered in Prospect Park. They talked about the war with a growing urgency that felt close enough to touch. Billy could smell both cigarette and marijuana smoke on David's clothing when he returned.

"I could be next, you know" David said one night as they lay in bed staring at the ceiling. "Next month I have to register."

David didn't say it as a complaint, but like a fact that had already settled into him. A fact that Billy had resisted thinking about. Losing David after losing his mother would feel like the end of the world, and now, hearing the concern in his brother's voice, it made it more immediate, as if the future had suddenly leaned forward.

"What will you do?" Billy asked.

David shrugged in his bed, but it was far from casual. "I don't know yet. But I'm not just going to walk into it without thinking."

Public protests were now a regular occurrence in New York City. The previous April, four hundred thousand people had marched from Central Park to the United Nations building. The event started with the burning of draft cards, and ended with speeches by notable supporters including Martin Luther King, Jr. King said, "I join you in this mobilization because I cannot be a silent onlooker while evil rages."

Groups of students were also gathering regularly in the courtyard of Erasmus High School, mirroring what was happening in the world around them.

Billy listened more than he spoke. He certainly felt the same pull toward questioning authority, toward resisting what was wrong. He felt the same horror and anger as he heard the war's body count on nightly TV. But as others moved outward

into crowds, Billy turned inward.

He wrote, both in his regular journals and his Black Book.

Most days at lunch, Billy found his way to the courtyard, a rectangular space bordered by brick walls and narrow patches of brittle winter grass. A few benches lined the edges, though many students preferred to stand in clusters, talking loudly enough to be heard over one another.

Billy usually sat alone. Not because he couldn't join others, but because he needed to release the words always building inside him. He had read an interview with the poet Robert Creeley, who said that, for him, the pressure to write a new poem was a profound restlessness, like the urge to take a long walk. For Billy, it felt like wanting to get up and run.

Lucas remained his closest friend, and he respected Billy's need to be alone. They still met on weekends, wandering through the neighborhood or catching a movie when they could afford it. Lucas had grown as well, his movements quicker, his voice deeper, though his steady and balanced energy remained unchanged.

One day, they sat on a stoop in the neighborhood, drinking 7-ups. Even seated, Billy was a head taller than Lucas.

"You're like a tower now," Lucas said, looking up at him.

Billy laughed. "A tower of power. Aspire of spontaneity."

Lucas grinned. "Or maybe the star center in the key."

Billy grew more serious. "You know I gave up basketball."

"I know, I know," Lucas said, nudging him. "I'm just fucking with you. Are you still writing every day?"

“Every day. Whenever I get a break.”

Lucas nodded, satisfied. “Good. Don’t stop. That’s your destiny, for sure, not basketball or anybody else’s dreams.”

It happened on a gray afternoon in late January 1968.

Billy sat in the courtyard, his notebook open, the page half-filled with a poem he wasn’t sure how to finish. The lines moved in fragments, images of winter streets, the echo of footsteps, the feeling of something waiting just beyond understanding. He was so absorbed that he didn’t notice the figure approaching until a shadow fell across the page.

He looked up to find Mr. Cole, his English teacher, standing there with his hands in the pockets of his coat. A smile played at the corners of his mouth. He was younger than most of the other teachers, with dark hair that fell loosely across his forehead and down to his shoulders. He wore a narrow hipster tie and a jacket that looked slightly worn, as if he had pulled it off the rack of a thrift store. Almost all the students liked him. He had a presence that felt relaxed without being careless. He took a keen interest in each of them, quietly encouraging them to question authority and follow their own paths. More than once, the school administration had warned him not to stir up trouble.

“What are you working on?” he asked.

Billy hesitated. In the past year, his writing had become more private, something he felt didn’t belong to the casual curiosity of others. But there was something in Mr. Cole’s earnest tone that made refusal feel unnecessary.

“Just something I’m writing.”

Mr. Cole nodded. “Mind if I take a look?”

Billy paused, then handed him the notebook.

Mr. Cole read silently at first, his eyes moving steadily across the page. Then he read it again, more slowly this time. Billy watched him, trying to decipher his reaction. There was no immediate response, just concentration.

Finally, Mr. Cole looked up. "This is good," he said simply.

Billy felt a flicker of relief.

"You've got an ear," Mr. Cole continued. "For rhythm. For how a line lands." He tapped the page lightly. "Where did you learn this?"

Billy shrugged. "A mentor encouraged me, but mostly, I just hear it. And I try to absorb the poems of others. Not to mimic them, but to let all those different styles roam around inside me and widen the conversation."

Mr. Cole smiled. "That's the best answer you could have given."

He handed the notebook back.

"Come by after school," he said. "Room 214."

Billy blinked. "For what?"

"To talk," Mr. Cole replied. "About this. About writing."

He started to walk away, then turned back briefly.

"I'm not bullshitting you, Billy," he said. "You've got a rare talent."

Then he was gone, absorbed into the movement of the courtyard.

Billy looked down at his notebook. The words on the page felt slightly different now, as if they had gained more legitimacy through another set of eyes.



By the time Billy arrived in Mr. Cole's classroom, most of the building had emptied, the hallways finally calm, as if they were

catching their breath. Inside, Mr. Cole sat at his desk flipping through a stack of papers.

“You came,” he said, looking up.

Billy nodded. “That surprises you?”

“Not really,” Mr. Cole said. “But writing can very personal, and I was pretty forward with you. Pull up a chair.”

They sat across from each other. Billy placed his notebook on the desk between them.

At first, the conversation moved slowly. Mr. Cole asked about his classes, his interests, and his home life. Billy answered in short sentences, still unsure how much to reveal. But Mr. Cole didn’t rush him. He let the silences stretch just long enough to feel natural before asking another question, each one opening a small door. Gradually, Billy found himself speaking more freely. About his mother and the possibility of David being drafted. About the notebooks he had filled, and the way writing felt less like a choice and more like a necessary compulsion. Mr. Cole listened carefully.

When Billy finished, he leaned back in his chair. He hadn’t known how much he needed to vent.

“That’s a lot to deal with at a young age,” said Mr. Cole. “I can tell that writing has been a force that helps you get through all of it.”

He reached for the notebook. “May I?”

Billy nodded.

“I’m not kidding, Billy. You have something rare. Let me read this to you so you can recognize its power more clearly.”

Before Billy could respond, Mr. Cole began to read his latest poem aloud, one he had been polishing for days. Like Mrs. Walker, Mr. Cole gave deliberate attention to each line. His voice rose and fell with the rhythm, pausing where the words needed space, pressing forward where they carried momentum.

I am a hallway of voices that never quite empties.
My mother softly reading, her words like light on water.
My father's words, blunt as dock iron, ringing in my ribs.
Songs spilling from open doorways into the summer streets,
each lyric settling somewhere inside me,
like dust that turns into my own breath when I begin to speak.

I hear the city talking in a thousand borrowed tongues,
friends daring and joking, names echoing off brick walls,
newscasters shaping the world into fear and certainty,
and I carry it all, not as noise but as weather,
a shifting sky that colors every word I try to claim as mine.

And then the poets arrive in that sky like electric storms.
Their verses stretch beyond fences I didn't know were there,
with voices that refuse to kneel, that sing even in darkness,
they enter me, rearranging the furniture of my thoughts
until I can't tell where they end and I begin,
only that something inside me has changed.

So when I speak or write, it is never only my voice.
It is a chorus shaped by love and argument, silence and sound,
a thousand unseen hands guiding the rhythm forward,
and somewhere within that chorus, I am becoming
not an echo, not an imitation,
but a gathering uniquely my own,
a living sound made from every voice that refused to leave me.

Billy felt a strange sensation as he listened. It was his poem, but hearing it spoken by someone else gave it a weight he hadn't recognized before. Certain lines stood out more clearly.

Others revealed rhythms he hadn't consciously intended. It was as if the poem had become something that could exist in the world on its own, not just in his notebook.

When Mr. Cole finished, the room felt momentarily still. "You hear that?" he asked.

Billy nodded.

"That's you," Mr. Cole said. "That's your voice."

Mr. Cole studied him for a moment longer than felt comfortable.

"That's your voice," he repeated. "But it's not all of it."

Billy frowned. "What do you mean?"

"There's something you're not putting on the page," Mr. Cole said. "Something sharper. I can hear it even in the lines you hold back."

Billy looked down at the notebook.

"What are you afraid will happen if you say it?" Mr. Cole asked.

Billy didn't answer. Mr. Cole leaned forward slightly. "The poems you're avoiding, those are the ones you're going to have to write someday."

Mr. Cole was right. There was a part of him that wanted to scream and cry and rant, and he wondered if that voice would ever find a place in this world, if it would ever be heard.

Billy and Mr. Cole began meeting once a week after school. Like he had with Mrs. Walker, Billy looked forward to each session. Mr. Cole had an ear for poetry that felt precise and intuitive at the same time. He could point to a single word and suggest a change that made the entire line sharper.

"Don't settle," he would often say. "If there's a better word, find it."

Sometimes they worked line by line. Other times they talked more broadly about rhythm and imagery, or the way a poem could hold multiple meanings at once. Billy absorbed it all. He found himself revising more carefully, listening more closely to the cadence of his own lines. He brought in more images from his Black Book, realizing that they also needed crafting so that their cutting edges would fit in context.

One afternoon, after reading a new poem, Mr. Cole set the notebook down and studied him.

"You ever think about sharing more regularly with others?" he asked. "Because I have an idea."

"What is it?"

"There used to be a poetry club on campus a few years back. Nothing huge, but it had some life to it."

"What happened?"

"The teacher who sponsored it moved out of state, and no one picked it up again."

He leaned forward slightly. "I'd sponsor it if someone wanted to start it up again."

Billy blinked. "Me?"

"Why not?"

Billy let out a small laugh. "I don't think anyone would show up. For a sports game, sure. Or even some kind of protest in the courtyard. But a poetry club? I think that would be last on most peoples' lists."

Mr. Cole smiled. "You'd be surprised. There are more students out there longing to do something different. And I know there are a lot of closet writers. They just don't have a place to go."

Billy considered this. He pictured the courtyard, the clusters of students, the noise and movement. It was hard to imagine any of them sitting down to talk seriously about poetry.

"I don't know," he said with a shrug.

“That’s fine,” Mr. Cole replied. “Think about it.” He tapped the notebook. “Sometimes the thing you’re not sure about is the exact thing you should try.”

That night in the apartment, Billy sat at the kitchen table with his notebook open. The radiator hissed softly behind him. The hallway outside the door carried faint sounds of neighbors going about their routines. He stared at the page, but he wasn’t writing. He was thinking about the idea of a poetry club. Were there other students who might be writing in notebooks of their own? Would they welcome the chance to find a group where they could share without the risk of judgment, bringing their private voices into the open?. It made him uneasy, but beneath that uneasiness, there was a growing curiosity.

He picked up his pen. After a moment, he began to write about the feeling of standing at the edge of something uncertain, something risky, something that might expand if he allowed it to. The words came slowly at first, then more steadily.

Chapter Eight

February 1969

Room 214 had changed since Billy and Mr. Cole had launched Unmuted Voices, the campus poetry club. The desks were no longer arranged in rows but in a loose circle. The chalkboard along the front wall carried fragments of lines from different poets—Whitman, Ginsberg, Dickinson—written in different hands, some in neat script, others slanted and urgent. There were flyers taped to the walls that announced local poetry readings in Brooklyn, and some about protests happening throughout New York City.

Billy stood near the window as the group gathered, filling the chairs until nearly twenty students sat in the circle, their notebooks open or resting on their laps.

It still surprised him. What had started as a quiet suggestion from Mr. Cole had grown into something with gravity and purpose. Something that was still evolving.

Mr. Cole leaned against the back wall, arms folded, observing without interference. He had taken on the role of sponsor in name, but he rarely intervened in the meetings. The

energy of the group belonged to the students, especially Billy.

Billy moved into the circle and took a seat. “How are you all doing?”

There was a murmur of comments, most of them a version of okay.

“Then let’s get to it,” Billy continued. “Who wants to start?”

There was a moment of hesitation, the familiar tension that came before someone risked being heard. Then Suzy Young raised her hand.

“I will.”

Billy nodded as Suzy shifted in her chair, tucking a strand of her long raven hair behind her ear. She wore her usual combination of bell bottoms, Converse high tops, a loose blouse that moved slightly when she breathed. There was a quiet confidence in her, more like a woman than a teenager, but Billy knew how much work it had taken for her to get to that place. The two of them had spent many hours talking after the rest of the group left the meeting. Their friendship was blooming into something more serious, but they were both being patient.

She looked around the room, meeting a few eyes, then lowered her gaze to the page she held in her hand. “This one’s called *City Without Sleep*.”

I walk past windows that never close their eyes,
each one glowing like a question no one answers.
A man argues with himself on a stoop,
his words spilling into the street
like a weight that keeps slipping through his hands.

Neon flickers over a laundromat,
red light washing over the glass

as if the whole place is breathing.
Somewhere, a radio keeps playing
even though no one is listening,
a song about love that sounds more like a warning.

I think about all the people
who don't know each other
but share the same night,
the same restless turning,
the same feeling that something is about to happen
but never quite does.
And I wonder if the city stays awake for us,
or if we're the ones who forgot how to sleep.

When she finished, the room held its silence a moment longer than usual. Then someone exhaled.

"That line about the radio," one of the boys said. "That was... real."

"Yeah," another added. "Like it's always on, even when it shouldn't be."

Suzy smiled faintly, her shoulders easing as she sat back down.

Billy nodded. "I love it, Suzy. It's the details. That's what makes it land."

She glanced at him, and for a second the rest of the room seemed to recede. There was something unspoken between them now that had grown through the quiet understanding of what it meant to put your inner life into words.

Jorge Padilla leaned forward, his eyes sharp and restless. He had been one of the first students to join the club. He brushed back his long dark hair. "I have to say something. We sit here every week and talk about poems and lines, but what's the

point if we don't say something that makes an impact outside these doors? You know, something that hits back at the people in charge. All the big shots running things, sending kids off to war, feeding the military machine. We ought to be calling them out. We ought to be using our words to tear down the walls they build, not just decorate them."

Rachel Pence's voice emerged, quiet and steady. "He's right. You all know that my brother has been in Vietnam for six months now. Every day, I wonder if he'll ever come home. I'm tired of just hoping. We need to start using our words more as protest and *make* them hear us."

For a moment, her trembling hand gripped the edge of her chair, knuckles pale, and the group fell silent, feeling her conviction and anger like a draft of frigid air in the room.

Billy glanced down at his backpack which held his Black Book. He thought of the scrawled lines that expressed his own rage at injustice. He thought about how he could soon be in Rachel's place, mourning over David's deployment.

"But would anyone listen?" said Gerard Dupont, whose verse was less political and more lyrical. "We're just high school students. People far more prestigious than us are trying to make a difference."

Jorge nodded, determined. "It's not about prestige. It's about fanning the flames wherever we are. It's about being part of something bigger than us. It's about adding our words to the chorus. That's the whole point of this club, right? Unmuting our voices!"

"All right," Billy said, clearing his throat slightly. "Before someone else reads, this is a perfect moment to show you guys something."

He reached into his backpack and pulled out a folded stack of fabric. A few curious looks circled the room.

"What's that?" a student named Ellen asked from across

the circle.

Billy grinned and held one up. It was a black T-shirt emblazoned with bold white letters that said **UNMUTED VOICES**. Below that, in a smaller script, *Speak Your Truth!*

A ripple of reactions moved through the group.

“Groovy,” someone said.

“Right on,” said another.

Billy nodded. “I know. Thanks to Mr. Cole.”

Mr. Cole stepped forward slightly. “We had a donor. Someone who believes in what you’re doing here.”

Billy handed a few shirts around the circle. The students touched the fabric, reading the words as if confirming they were real.

“This is perfect,” Suzy said quietly.

Billy felt a warmth rise in his chest. “Mr. Cole and I figured that if we’re going keep doing this, we should be more visible.”

Jorge was not about to be placated. “Visible how? I dig the T-Shirts, but what else? Do you mean like readings? Or more than that?”

Billy met his gaze. “More than that.”

There was a murmur of approval, but Jorge looked unconvinced. He had become a de facto leader for the more radical students in the group, those who were already involved in protests, who had found in poetry a language for their anger. They had been gradually trying to push the group further.

“I agree with Jorge,” said Nadia Guzman, a student who often held a protest sign in the school courtyard, “Words aren’t just for notebooks. They should be out there on the streets where people can hear them.”

Mr. Cole didn’t intervene, and Billy hesitated only briefly.

“Then let’s get them out there,” he said.

The energy in the room shifted. Something was building.

Chapter Nine

July 1969

The warm summer night began with a movie they weren't supposed to see. Billy, Suzy, Lucas, and two other friends, wanted to catch the new release of *Easy Rider* showing at the Loew's Kings Theatre, but it had an R rating. Fortunately, one of the students in Unmuted Voices worked as an usher there. He was willing to open the rear door and let them slip in just before show time.

The film was unlike anything they'd seen, a drifting, sunlit ride across America as two counterculture bikers chased a loose idea of freedom. Along the way, their encounters with fellow hippies and hostile locals exposed the deep fractures running through America. Billy had never heard of Dennis Hopper or Peter Fonda, but the film's raw, unpolished edge pulled him in. The wide open roads felt a world away from Brooklyn, yet the restless searching at its core felt uncomfortably close. When Hopper was gunned down in the final moments and the credits rolled over his burning motorcycle, Billy felt a sharp mix of sadness and rage.

When the lights came up, no one spoke immediately. They walked out into the balmy Brooklyn night, the air thick and humming with traffic.

“Shit,” said Lucas, “that was definitely a downer.”

“Yeah,” Suzy replied, “but it was also very real.”

Billy nodded. “I agree. Almost too real. It made me want to scream.”

They walked together for a while, the group moving loosely along the sidewalk. At the corner near Suzy’s street, she slowed.

“I’m gonna head home,” she said.

Billy glanced at the others. “I’ll walk with you.”

Lucas grinned slightly and nodded. “Okay, see you guys later.

The group continued, leaving Billy and Suzy alone. For a while, they walked in silence. To Billy, the city always felt different at night, less crowded, more exposed. Most storefronts were dark, but the streetlights cast long shadows across the pavement. A breeze brushed against their skin, still warm but tinged with the cooler promise of midnight. From somewhere deep in the borough, the faint clang of subway rails vibrated through the ground, a reminder of the city’s restless pulse.

“That movie,” Suzy said, “was like a prophecy. It made me focus even more on the violence in our country. Not just the obvious fighting, but the stuff that’s beneath the surface ready to erupt. It’s scary.”

Billy considered that. “I agree.”

He lapsed into silence for a beat, then continued. “So much goes on in our lives that no one else sees. I sometimes think about the drama that each of us carries around like a weight. Those feelings that never get expressed. They don’t go away. They just sit there and simmer under everything.”

She nodded slowly. “I hear you. Like a parallel life that

nobody talks about.”

They walked another block.

“My dad left when I was six,” she said suddenly.

He had never asked her much about why her father was gone, figuring she would share when she was ready. That was the nature of their relationship. Lots of space to be who they wanted to be in their own timing. Billy glanced at her but didn’t interrupt.

“He moved to Los Angeles,” she continued. “Said he needed a fresh start.” She let out a small, humorless laugh. “He made it sound like starting over was clean. Like he could just leave the pieces behind without any consequences.”

Billy felt a familiar tightening in his chest.

“I don’t really remember him that much,” she added. “Just the idea of him. Like a story I was told once but I forgot the details. I’ve tried to contact him by phone and letters, but he never responds. Only a Christmas card once a year.”

She paused. “A fucking Christmas card.”

He nodded. “I get that.”

She looked at him again. “Do you really?” Her voice sounded exasperated, even slightly challenging.

He took a breath. “Not in the same way. But losing someone changes everything. It’s not a one-time adjustment. You just keep adjusting as life goes on.”

She didn’t ask him to explain further. She already knew about his mother.

They turned onto her block.

“Do you ever feel like you see things differently than everyone else?” she asked.

“All the time.”

“Like everything’s...more?”

“Exactly,” he replied. “Like it all means something, even when it shouldn’t, and you don’t want to miss the details

that might open up a new revelation.”

She smiled faintly. “That’s exactly what I mean.”

They reached her building. The front door was locked, but through its square window you could see the foyer where stairs led to upper floors.

“My mom’s probably home,” she said, unlocking the door with her key and pushing it open.

“I’ll walk you up.”

When they reached Suzy’s apartment, it was quiet. On the small table near the entrance sat a folded note. Suzy read it, then glanced at Billy.

“She’s out and won’t be back until really late.”

There was a pause. Not awkward. Just charged.

“Do you want to stay for a bit?” she asked.

Billy nodded.

They moved into the living room and sat beside each other on the couch. For a while, they talked about the movie, the club, and current events. The conversation drifted, slowing, until it gave way to something quieter.

“Do you ever think about where this is all going?” Suzy asked softly. “I don’t mean the state of the world. I mean you and me together?”

Billy hesitated, then smiled “Sometimes. But I’d rather just let it flow.”

She met his gaze, then leaned towards him. Their first kiss was tentative, but when neither of them pulled away, it deepened into something slow and searching. Time seemed to loosen. Without warning, Suzy stood and took his hand, leading him down the short hallway to her bedroom. The room was simple, with books stacked on a small desk, a record player in the corner, posters on the wall. They paused near the bed, and for a moment, they just looked at each other.

“Are you sure?” Billy asked quietly, feeling as if every

cell in his body wanted her.

She nodded. "Are you?"

He nodded. "But we don't have to rush anything."

"I know," she replied with a beautiful smile. "That's why I'm not.

"I don't have a condom," he said bluntly.

She smiled. "I didn't think you would, but we can explore each other in other ways."

What followed was neither hurried nor careless. A shared tenderness guided them, an understanding to move slowly and pay attention. Their hands explored before they committed, their breaths steadied each other, and when they came closer, it was with caution rather than abandon. They were learning the language of each other's bodies, how to both give and receive pleasure.

The world outside receded, the moments expanding into something neither of them would ever forget. Intuitively, they knew this, making each of them more deliberate and alert.

Afterward, they lay side by side, the room dim except for the soft glow of a streetlight filtering through the window. Billy stared at the ceiling, feeling a combination of calm and intensity, as if something inside him had shifted permanently, not just because of what they had done, but because of how carefully they had done it.

Suzu turned her head toward him. "Everything feels different."

He nodded and kissed her on the cheek. "Like there's a before and after now."

She reached for his hand. They stayed like that for a while in silence that enveloped them like a cocoon.

"There's something I haven't told you," he said.

She just waited.

"I have what I call my Black Book. It doesn't really

have any finished poems. It's just a collection of raw emotions. Some of them about my rage when I watch the evening news, others about the grief over my mother which can still be so overwhelming that it feels like I'm drowning. When I look at the future and start to wonder if things will ever get better, I add more. The words feel radioactive, like it would be toxic for others to read and not very helpful. But it helps *me* for sure. It's a release."

She was silent, but she squeezed his hand harder.

"Will you let me read it sometime?"

In the weeks that followed, they became inseparable, taking their lovemaking to another level. Billy allowed Suzy to rummage through his Black Book. The words that had always been snippets, inchoate and unformed, were now coalescing into a series of searing poems unlike anything he had written before. Suzy quietly read them and had a strange response. She simply hugged him tightly and whispered, "Yes, yes."

When they entered their junior year in the fall of 1969, they were the center of Unmuted Voices. Others gathered around them, drawn to the energy they created together. The club grew even larger. They wrote and read. They argued about meaning and what poetry could and should do. As Billy had promised, they increasingly took their voices beyond Room 214. They wore their shirts and staged impromptu readings in the courtyard. Before and after school, as students were arriving or departing, they would stand near the front steps and read aloud to whoever would listen. Some students laughed, but others stopped, and a few even stayed. It didn't matter to the club members. They were no longer waiting for permission. They were unmuting.

Mr. Cole watched it all with a quiet satisfaction. One afternoon, as the group dispersed after a meeting, he caught Billy's eye.

"That day when we first talked about this," he said, "I don't think either of us expected it to grow this large. You started something powerful, Billy."

Billy glanced around the room, taking in the chairs, the notebooks, and the lingering presence of voices.

"No," he said. "*We* did."

Mr. Cole smiled. "You just needed a nudge."

Billy grinned. "Well, teacher, thanks for the nudge, but I think it was more like a shove. See you tomorrow."

Mr. Cole laughed and nodded as Billy stepped into the hallway where Suzy was waiting for him.

"Ready?" she asked.

"For what?" he said, half-smiling.

"Whatever comes next," she replied with a mischievous grin.

They walked together into the noise and movement of the street, their shoulders brushing, their steps coordinated. Billy felt not only aligned with himself, but connected to something larger. It was that chorus he had written about in the poem he first shared with Mr. Cole, and it was only getting louder.

Chapter Ten

February 1970

Winter held Brooklyn in its icy grip. Snow had fallen twice in the early weeks of February, each storm leaving behind a crusted residue along the curbs that turned black within days. The streets looked tired, as if the city itself had grown weary of weathering so many seasons.

Inside the apartment on East 17th Street, the rhythm of life continued in the pattern formed after Margaret's death, but there was a deeper heaviness now because David was gone. His absence lingered in the apartment as tangibly as the loss of Margaret, but it was different. It pulsed with the knowledge that somewhere across the world, in a place Billy could only imagine, his brother's life might end without warning.

After graduating in June of 1969, David had been called to active duty. His draft lottery number had been so low that resistance felt futile. Despite all his anger about the war, he faced his deployment with a quiet resolve that surprised Billy.

"Obviously, I don't want to go," David had said the night before he left, sitting on the edge of his bed. "But I'm

not running either. If I went to Canada, I might *never* have the chance to return.”

Billy had nodded, unsure of what to say. Even he had no words big enough to hold what they were both feeling. Now David was in the Navy, assigned to the *USS Coral Sea*, an aircraft carrier stationed in the Gulf of Tonkin. He worked in the mess hall, far from the cockpit of fighter jets or the chaos of combat zones, but not far enough to escape the war entirely. His letters made that clear. They arrived every two weeks or so, addressed to Billy. After he had shared them with Patrick, Billy stored them in a shoebox beneath his bed.

One night, after Patrick had gone to sleep, Billy opened the latest one and read it again by the dim light of his bedside lamp.

February 3, 1970

Billy, I don't know how to describe this place to you without sounding like I'm making it up. The ship feels like a floating city. There are more people here than I ever thought could fit in one place, and somehow it still feels lonely. My work in the mess hall is loud and hot and constantly busy. We feed hundreds of guys every meal, and sometimes I look at their faces and wonder which ones are going to be here a month from now. Planes take off all day, and when they come back, not all of them land the way they're supposed to.

Don't worry, I'm safe enough where I am. But safe doesn't mean untouched. You hear things. You feel it in the air. I think about home a lot, especially Mom. I keep remembering small things, like the way she used to tap your paper when she found a line in one of your poems that she liked. I didn't notice stuff like that when it was happening. I wish I had. You always saw things more clearly than I did. Maybe that's why you write.

I'm glad you stuck with it. Don't let anything stop you. I miss you, brother, more than I expected to. Tell Dad hello. I love you both. – David

Billy folded the letter carefully and stared at the wall for a long time. It was strange to see this vulnerable version of his brother. The David he had grown up with had always seemed so certain, but the letters revealed a quieter and deeper side to his personality.

Billy wrote back the next morning before school.

February 12, 1970

David, your letters sound like you finally slowed down enough to notice things. I guess that's one thing we have in common now. A lot has changed here, too. Unmuted Voices has gotten bigger. There are more than thirty of us now, and people really listen when we read. It's not just a club anymore. It feels like a movement. I wish you could see one of our meetings. It reminds me of what Mom used to say about endless possibilities.

I've gotten even closer to Suzy, so close that I can't imagine my life without her now. She writes like she's already lived ten lives. I especially love that she never pretends to be anything more than who she is.

Dad doesn't say much. We get through the days. That's about it. I miss you, too. The apartment feels too quiet without you playing your music all the time. I look forward to your letters. Love, Billy

He sealed the envelope and placed it by the door. It would go out with him in the morning.

At breakfast the next day, he and Patrick sat across from each other at the kitchen table. Billy watched his father sipping

from his coffee mug. The past year had settled into Patrick's face. The lines around his eyes had deepened, but there was also something softer there, a quietness that hadn't existed before.

Patrick glanced at the letter resting near the door.

"You gonna mail that today?"

"Yes."

Patrick nodded. "Next time, if you're willing, would you let me read it first?" Then, after a small pause. "Maybe you could also sign it from both of us." He looked up, meeting Billy's eyes. "I miss him too."

Billy felt the gentleness that had been growing between them. "Yeah, Dad. I'd like that."

For a moment, neither of them looked away. Billy was still adjusting to this new version of Patrick. His hair had grown past his shoulders now, brushing his collar in a way that would have drawn a sharp word in the past, but Patrick hadn't said a thing. Their lives had settled into a rhythm, both moving through the small rituals of keeping their home together. But there were small gestures that had never been there before. Patrick resting his hand briefly on Billy's shoulder when passing behind his chair. Billy pouring a second cup of coffee for Patrick without asking. The way Patrick sometimes lingered in the doorway of Billy's room, as if he meant to say something but couldn't find the words.

They still didn't talk much, but the silence between them no longer felt like distance.

Unmuted Voices continued to grow into a vibrant, restless community. The students came from different neighborhoods and backgrounds, drawn together by the need to say something that mattered.

Billy's own voice had begun to carry into the community. Two of his poems had been published in a local arts newspaper in Brooklyn. The tabloid was modest, its circulation limited, but it felt like a doorway opening. One of the poems got reviewed by another counterculture newspaper. *A young prodigy*, the reviewer had written, *Billy Knight possesses an intuitive grasp of imagery and rhythm that suggests a rare and developing talent.*

Billy had read the line several times. As always, the word *prodigy* felt too large, but he had to admit that the recognition felt good, as if all those hours of quietly filling his notebooks now mattered at a different level.

Billy and Mr. Cole continued their weekly meetings. One afternoon, Billy listened to the sounds outside the room as the school emptied for the day. The distant slam of lockers echoed down the hallway, followed by the fading murmur of voices drifting toward the exits. Inside, the room felt like a sanctuary that Billy had the privilege of entering on a regular basis.

He sat across from Mr. Cole, his notebook resting on the desk in front of him. Winter light angled through the tall windows, casting long shadows across the rows of empty chairs.

Mr. Cole leaned back slightly, studying Billy with a thoughtful expression. "I've been thinking."

"Uh oh," Billy said with a grin. "Now what?"

Mr. Cole laughed. "About what this group has become."

Billy glanced around the room, as if he could still see the students gathered there. Suzy near the windows, arms folded as she listened, Jorge leaning forward on his knees, like he was ready to pounce. Rachel, Ellen, and Gerard with their attentive faces. Newer members lining the walls because the chairs had run out. The restless shifting and the respectful hush when someone began to read.

“It has definitely become something I never expected,” Billy said.

Mr. Cole gave a small nod. “It has exceeded my expectations also.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

“There’s nothing like it in the district,” Mr. Cole continued. “Not in any of the other schools. Or in New York City in general, from what I can tell.”

Billy felt a swell of pride about that, but he also had a sense of responsibility about where to lead the group further.

Mr. Cole leaned forward, resting his forearms on the desk. “And that presents an opportunity.”

Billy smiled and his attention sharpened. “Here it comes. Your new idea.”

Mr. Cole’s eyes held his. “Yes. What if Unmuted Voices sponsored a district-wide poetry happening? A contest of sorts. Something not on campus but somewhere in the city.”

Billy was quiet, absorbing the idea. “District-wide?”

“Students from every high school,” Mr. Cole said. “Anyone who wants to read could submit a poem for consideration. We could choose a setting that gives what we’re doing here the kind of exposure it deserves.”

Billy could already see it beginning to form in his mind. Not in a classroom or a school auditorium, but something much larger. Voices he’d never heard before. Poems carried across neighborhoods and maybe into other boroughs.

Mr. Cole watched him closely, measuring the way the idea was taking hold.

“And,” he added, “what if the audience decided the winner?”

Billy let out a quiet breath. That part changed everything. It could be something alive and unpredictable. It would belong to the people who showed up, not just the ones who organized

it.

“It’s never been done,” Mr. Cole said. “Not like this. Not for high school students.”

Billy leaned back in his chair, his mind moving quickly. He thought about the energy in the room during meetings, the way a single poem could shift the air, the way voices rose and collided and sometimes, unexpectedly, found harmony. He thought about what it would mean to take that energy to a whole new level.

“It could be huge,” Billy said.

Mr. Cole smiled faintly. “It could.”

Another pause, but this one felt charged. Billy looked down at his notebook, then back up again. There was an instant where hesitation could have entered, fueled by all the practical questions, but that instant passed. Instead, he felt the same certainty he sometimes felt when a line of poetry arrived fully formed, without effort, like it had been waiting for him all along.

“I think we should do it,” Billy said. His voice was steady, without hesitation.

Mr. Cole held his gaze for a second longer, then nodded. “Then we’ll start figuring out how.”

At the next Unmuted Voices meeting, Billy presented the idea formally to the group. The response was enthusiastic and unanimous. They would do it. They would create something that didn’t yet exist. After some discussion, they decided on the location: Grand Army Plaza, a public space, open and symbolic, where the city often gathered in all its diversity.

Then Mr. Cole mentioned the need for a permits from both the district and the borough.

“What’s the point,” one student argued. “This is about freedom of speech. Why should we need permission? Why can’t it just be a happening?”

Others echoed the same sentiment.

“It shouldn’t be controlled,” one girl added. “Not by the city, not by anyone.”

Mr. Cole listened until everyone had their say. That was his style.

“I totally understand what you’re saying,” he said patiently. “But if you really want this to happen, we need to go through the proper channels.”

There was pushback, a heated clash between idealism and practicality. Billy watched it unfold, recognizing both sides. Finally, he spoke.

“If we don’t get the permits,” he said, “we risk not having an event at all.”

The room quieted.

“This isn’t about control,” he continued. “It’s about making sure it happens.”

After a moment, heads began to nod. Reluctantly, the group agreed.

They secured the permits for late May, just weeks before the end of school. Then the real work began. The group created flyers and distributed them through school channels across the district. They wrote short scripts for morning PA announcements on campuses to spread the news. Mr. Cole promoted the idea with other teachers in the district, gaining their support and enthusiasm. They took advantage of free publicity in the calendars of local newspapers.

Submissions began to arrive in a volume none of them

had expected. Some were typed, others handwritten. They came in stacks to the school through intercampus mail delivery. Many of them were raw, uneven, and searching, but each one carried something genuine. Billy and a small group from Unmuted Voices reviewed them carefully. They did not want to dampen the enthusiasm for the event, but there was no way they could entertain so many readers.

They selected a diverse group of poets with different voices, distinctive styles, and contrasting perspectives. It wasn't just about technical skill. It was about authenticity and presence, something they hoped could reach an audience.

It wasn't easy, especially because Billy and the others knew what it would feel like to be told you weren't selected. They drafted letters to those chosen and those rejected, describing the process and encouraging each poet to keep writing, especially because this would hopefully be an annual event.

Excitement continued to build. A small article appeared in the Brooklyn Heights Press. The headline read **Poetry Happening at Grand Army Plaza**, with the sub-headlines reading **Open to the Entire Brooklyn School district. Winners Chosen by the Audience.**

Billy stood one afternoon at the edge of Grand Army Plaza, watching the traffic circle the monument, the city moving as it always had. It was hard to imagine that in just a few weeks, this space would resound with voices that were young, unfiltered, and alive.

This wouldn't just be an event. It would be a statement, a declaration that all their voices mattered.

Billy turned and walked back toward Flatbush, once again amazed at the path his own writing had laid out before him.

Chapter Eleven

May 23, 1970, Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn

At 9:45 a.m., Billy stood to the side of the makeshift stage and tried to take it all in. He had expected a crowd, even hoped for one, but nothing had prepared him for this.

Hundreds of people filled Grand Army Plaza, the crowd stretching across the open space. They had come by subway, bus, or on foot. Some sat cross-legged on the pavement. Others leaned against the low stone walls or stood talking in groups. Students from Erasmus Hall mingled with teens from other schools. Billy saw scores of Unmuted Voices T-shirts, the words in bold white letters against black, giving the gathering a sense of cohesion. A few parents stood on the periphery, cautiously watching their offspring inhabit a world that felt both familiar and alien.

Hand-painted signs bobbed above the crowd:

WORDS ARE WEAPONS

POETRY IS POWER

END THE WAR

UNMUTE YOUR VOICE

Billy looked at the police on the edges of the crowd. Not many, but enough to remind him that the words shared on this day could be incendiary. New York City had seen its share of volatility in recent weeks, and the establishment was taking no chances.

Jorge stood near the PA system, nodding his head as he neared the end of his hour long playlist. His long hair fluttered in the breeze. He had treated the gathering to tunes like CSNY's *Woodstock*, Cream's *Strange Brew*, Zeppelin's *Communication Breakdown*, Melanie's *Lay Down*, the Stones' *Gimme Shelter*, the Temptations' *Ball of Confusion*, Hendrix's *Voodoo Child*, and the Stooges' *I Wanna Be Your Dog*. Now, with only minutes before go time, he blasted out Randy Bachman's opening chords of *American Woman*. The riff bounced off the surrounding buildings and drifted into the park beyond, pulling people closer.

As the tune neared its conclusion, Jorge turned to Billy and nodded. "It's all yours, my man."

"This is really happening," Billy said softly as he squared his shoulders.

Behind him, Suzy adjusted some papers in her hands. "You sound surprised."

"I am," he admitted. "I thought maybe fifty people would show up. Maybe a hundred if we were lucky."

She smiled. "You've always underestimated yourself. That's why you need me."

Billy gave her a quick hug, then faced the crowd. He saw Lucas near the front, talking animatedly with a group from the poetry club. He glanced one more time at the police officers. They were watchful but not aggressive, a stance that could change quickly. Being honest with himself, he almost wished for some confrontation, something that would give witness to the power of their voices.

“You ready?” Suzy asked.

Billy nodded, though his heart had begun to beat faster.

“I think so.”

At exactly 10:00 a.m., Jorge lowered the music. A ripple of anticipation moved through the crowd, conversations softening and heads turning toward the stage.

Billy stepped forward. The microphone was slightly too low, so he adjusted it, the metal squeaking faintly. For a moment, he simply looked out at all the faces. Some were expectant, some skeptical, some smiling. A torrent of images raced through his head. Mrs. Walker that day in class when she had scrawled “language is power” across the chalkboard. His mother at the kitchen table, quietly reading novels that helped her soar to other places. His father at the docks, lifting crates, carrying burdens that had no poetry in them, but certainly contained dignity. And David, far away in the Gulf of Tonkin, sitting in his quarters and writing a letter that would travel halfway across the world.

He leaned into the microphone.

“Good morning,” he said, his voice clearer and steadier than he felt. “Welcome to the first annual Unmuted Voices Poetry Happening.”

Applause rose immediately, warm and encouraging. Billy smiled, letting it settle.

“When we started this club,” he continued, “it was just a handful of us in a classroom after school, trying to figure out how to say what we felt. We didn’t know if anyone would listen.”

He gestured to the crowd.

“Today, it looks like a lot of people are listening.”

Laughter and cheers followed.

“We all know that a poem is not about sounding smart or impressing people. It’s about telling the truth as clearly as

we can. And today, we're going to hear a lot of different truths from a wide variety of people."

He paused.

"But before we begin with the readers, I want to thank our teacher and sponsor at Erasmus, Mr. Cole."

He turned slightly, spotting his teacher near the side of the stage. Mr. Cole gave a modest nod, his expression proud but restrained.

"He was the one who suggested the club and this happening. He believed in me, in this, in all of you before it was anything."

Applause swelled again.

Billy took a breath.

"Let's get started!"

The first reader was a quiet sophomore named Alan who wrote about his father's barbershop. The smell of talc and aftershave, the rhythm of scissors, and the stories that passed between the chairs. His voice trembled at first, but by the final lines, it had steadied into something confident and clear.

When he finished, Billy raised both hands high.

"Let's hear it!"

The crowd responded with a strong cheer, louder than Alan expected. He stepped down from the stage with a grin that seemed to surprise even him. Billy made a mental note. People responded to honesty.

The second reader, a girl named Denise, delivered a fiery, rhythmic piece about the war, about boys sent overseas and coming back changed, or not coming back at all. Her words landed harder and sharper, drawing louder reactions, a few shouts of agreement from the crowd. Antiwar signs bobbed higher above the crowd, and it seemed that the police officers were more poised.

When she finished, Billy again lifted his hands, asking

for applause, feeling the energy build and shift. He began to understand something important. This wasn't just a series of readings. It was a conversation, a living, breathing exchange between the speakers and the listeners.

The third reader was Suzy. She glided to the microphone with a calm that seemed almost effortless, but Billy knew better. He knew that she had rewritten this poem repeatedly, chasing the exact rhythm she wanted.

She looked out at the crowd, then began.

Her poem moved through the streets of New York. Through its subway platforms and tenement stairwells, through late-night diners and alleyways where broken people tried to hold themselves together. She didn't romanticize them or pity them. She simply honored them. She spoke of a man sleeping on cardboard beneath a streetlight. Of a woman counting coins at a laundromat, her hands trembling. Of children laughing as they played stickball in the streets with nowhere else to go.

Her voice carried a quiet intensity that pulled the crowd inward. Even the police officers seemed to lean slightly closer.

Billy felt a tightening in his chest. *This is what it's about*, he thought.

When she finished, there was a brief silence, then a surge of applause louder than anything yet. Billy raised his hands again, but this time he didn't need to guide them. The crowd was already there.

Suzy stepped down, meeting his eyes for just a second. He nodded with a smile.

The readings continued with a mix of voices and subjects. Some were political, some deeply personal, some humorous and playful. A boy read a poem about stickball that made Billy and many in the crowd laugh aloud. Another girl read a piece about her grandmother's cooking that drew applause.

Billy kept track of it all, not in any formal way, but

instinctively remembering who connected the most. Time moved faster than he expected. Soon, they were nearing the end of the time their permit had allotted. Billy stepped back toward the microphone, ready to thank everyone, ask again for their favorite, then bring the event to a close. But before he could speak, Suzy moved past him and took the microphone.

“As Billy mentioned,” she said, her voice bright with emotion, “we are indebted to Mr. Cole for his leadership, but there’s another person we need to thank. All of this would not have been possible without the vision and dedication of the president of Unmuted Voices, Billy Knight.”

The crowd cheered. Billy felt heat rise to his face.

“And,” she added with a smile, “he just happens to be the love of my life.”

There were cheers, whistles, and laughter.

Billy shook his head slightly, half embarrassed, half overwhelmed.

“He said he didn’t want to read today,” Suzy continued. “But I’m insisting.”

She turned to him, then back to the crowd.

“My nickname for him is The Poet Laureate of Brooklyn. What do all of you say? Do you want to hear one of his poems?”

The answer came like a wave. Yes! Yes! Yes!

Billy hesitated for only a second. Then he stepped forward. Suzy met him at the center of the stage. They embraced, and before he could overthink it, she kissed him long enough for the crowd to erupt again. When they separated, Billy laughed softly, shaking his head.

“You didn’t give me much of a choice,” he murmured.

“Sometimes you need a push,” she replied. “We all know that about you. It’s one of the reasons we love you.”

He moved to the microphone, looking out at everything this had become, and as his eyes moved across the front of the

crowd, a familiar face caught his attention. It was Mrs. Walker beside her husband. Both of them raised their fists above their heads. Then, near them, Billy saw Patrick Knight, his posture as solid as ever. For a second, Billy wondered if he was imagining it. Then Patrick also raised his hand and gave him a thumbs up. Billy returned a thumbs up to his father then faced the microphone again.

“We live in a world that often doesn’t value poetry,” he began.

The crowd quieted immediately.

“Not the war generals. Not the politicians in Washington. Not the bulls on Wall Street.”

A few murmurs of agreement.

“And because of that, not even the boys and girls growing up around us, kids who might discover something inside themselves if they were encouraged. If someone gave them the nudge and the space to unmute their voices.”

Applause broke out.

“Unmute their voices,” Billy shouted.

The crowd grew louder and more restless. Billy waited, then continued.

“I’ve carried this around with me for a long time. A page torn from what I call my Black Book.”

A ripple of curiosity.

“It’s been burning a hole in my pocket.”

He paused.

“I dedicate this to my mother, to my brother serving in Vietnam, and to my hardworking father. I dedicate it to every person struggling against justice. I dedicate it to every single name that is part of the body counts they give us on TV each night.”

The air seemed to still. Billy took a breath and began.

Don't tell me I'm too young.
Don't fucking begin with your lies and doublespeak.
You taught me to see this.
I learned it from you.
From your newspapers
that fold death into columns like it belongs there.

You ship boys across an ocean and baptize it as duty,
like the word can rinse the filth from your hands.
You speak in clean, bloodless numbers,
as if arithmetic can bury the screams,
as if stats can keep mothers from clawing at the dark.

If language is power, then it's a loaded weapon,
and you fire it without flinching,
round after round of polished lies.
Meanwhile. there are parents
learning a new silence so profound that it alters their DNA.
There are children learning to be invisible
before they even learn how to read.

America! Is this what you call progress?
You build cities that scrape the sky
alongside neighborhoods that never get to look up.
You let a man's skin decide how far his shadow can reach.
You invent machines that cross oceans in hours
but can't cross the distance between people
on the same block.

I walk your streets and I feel both things at once,
the promise and the lie.
The music pouring out of windows like something holy

and the sirens that cut through like a correction.
Tell me! How do you hold all of this without breaking?
Or is breaking us what you've decided to call progress?

Why aren't more of us waking up!
Why do we let your words
crawl down our throats and rot there?
How many more graves will you dig
before we rip the mic from your hands and call this what it is?

You need to beware.
We are young, we are watching,
we are writing this down in words that burn the page.
And we will not disappear.
And we will not soften.

Because once you see it you cannot unsee it,
the system that keeps choosing
the same people to carry the cost,
like blood seeping through pavement cracks,
disappearing before anyone has to answer for it.

So don't ask us to be patient.
Don't ask us to be complicit in your lunacy.
Don't ask us to call this anything
but what it is,
a system that survives
by convincing us to accept
what we should be setting on fire!

As he spoke the last word, Billy reached into his pocket
and pulled out a lighter. He flicked it and held it to the paper in

his hand, holding it high as it burned. There was a beat, then an explosion of sound. Applause surged through the plaza, louder than anything that had come before. On the edges of the crowd, students turned to face the police, shouting “Set fire to the lies! Set fire to the lies!” The chant spread across the plaza until it was so loud it drowned out the sounds of traffic.

The police pushed back as a phalanx, not beating anyone yet, but threatening it. Billy looked out, slightly stunned. He found his father again. When their eyes locked, Patrick clapped once, twice, then furiously.

Billy grabbed the mic.

“Listen!” he shouted.

The crowd stayed restless, pushing at the edges.

“Listen to me!” he shouted again. “Don’t let them goad you into violence! Don’t let them make you a statistic! Let our words ring out and stand as our witness!”

A few students at the edge of the crowd turned to face him, and then, gradually, all of them began to turn, accepting his leadership. From somewhere in the crowd, a voice called out:

“Poet Laureate of Brooklyn!”

Another voice picked it up.

“Poet Laureate of Brooklyn!”

It spread quickly, gaining rhythm and force. The police on the fringe backed up a few paces, their truncheons still poised.

“Poet Laureate of Brooklyn! Poet Laureate of Brooklyn!”

Billy felt the words wash over him, almost unreal. He turned slightly toward Suzy.

“Come here,” he said softly.

She stepped beside him and he took her hand. Together, they raised their joined arms into the air. The chant continued,

echoing through the plaza and into the city that had shaped all of them.

As he looked out at the explosion of life, he thought of the boy he had been, small and uncertain, searching for a voice. He thought of all those who had helped him on his journey, of their voices and their words that had slowly formed a path forward.

Those voices were no longer muted. And neither was his.

Epilogue

During their senior year, Billy and Suzy helped organize the second Unmuted Voices Poetry Happening, and it was more successful than the first. A New York Times reporter even covered it.

Billy graduated from high school in 1971 near the top of his class. He and Suzy walked across the same stage to receive their diplomas, their relationship stronger than ever. They both attended the City University of New York, taking advantage of its tuition-free policy for local residents. They still lived at home, but were always together, helping each other with their studies and continuing their involvement with other poets on the college campus.

After serving two years in Vietnam, David returned to New York City. He was a different man, more mature and contained. Through the connections of Patrick, he began working as a longshoreman on the Red Hook docks. He eventually married a woman named Lydia and they had two children, living a working-class life not far from the Knight's

apartment in Flatbush.

Patrick never remarried. When he became a grandfather, his demeanor changed in ways that surprised his sons. He doted on the children, kneeling to meet them at eye level, his large hands suddenly gentle. It gave Billy and David a quiet, shared satisfaction to see the growing softness in their father.

Billy's poetry began to find its way beyond Brooklyn. His work appeared not only in small New York journals, but in publications across the country, including *The Chowder Review* and *The Wormwood Review*.

One afternoon, he opened a thin envelope from California. Inside it was a letter from an editor he had never met. He said that one of Billy's poems got passed from hand to hand in a workshop before finally landing on his desk. *There is a voice in this poem that does not ask permission*, the editor wrote. *We would like to publish it.*

Billy read the line twice, then handed the letter to Suzy without speaking.

A student from Chicago wrote to him, saying she had heard one of his poems read aloud at a campus gathering and had copied it down by hand because she couldn't find it anywhere else.

In 1975, a small independent press agreed to publish Billy's first collection. Although the print run was small and the cover unadorned, Billy examined the book for a long time before opening it, as if uncertain that its contents remained his own.

Knowing it was a long shot, Billy applied for admission and a scholarship to the Iowa Writers' Workshop. To his surprise, they accepted him. Suzy was hesitant at first, but agreed to join him. They moved together to Ames, Iowa, where the rhythm of life felt slower, the horizon wider. Billy completed an MFA in Literature, and Suzy graduated with an M. Ed, emphasizing

special education.

Because they had grown to love the feel of a smaller city, they decided to stay in Ames. Suzy became a special education teacher at a junior high school in the Ames Community School District. Billy started as an adjunct professor at Iowa State, garnering enough accolades from students and the administration to be hired as an Assistant Professor, a tenure track position.

In his classroom, Billy did more than teach literature. He asked his students what they noticed about the world around them, what felt unjust, what felt invisible. On the wall behind his desk, he kept a framed photograph of Mr. Cole, and when his students hesitated, he would tell them what Mr. Cole had once told him: “The poem you’re avoiding is the one you need to write.”

Suzy became known not only for her patience, but for her quiet insistence that her students were capable of more than anyone expected of them. She stayed late, rewrote lesson plans, and challenged school board decisions that limited special education resources. “They just need someone to listen,” she told Billy more than once. “That’s where everything starts.”

In Ames, they began hosting informal poetry nights in the living room of their rented home. Students, teachers, and strangers drifted in, sitting cross-legged on the floor, reading aloud in voices that trembled at first, then steadied. Billy never gave the gatherings a name, but Suzy sometimes smiled and called them *Unmuted Voices, Midwest Edition*.

America’s formal involvement in the Vietnam War ended in 1973 with the signing of the Paris Peace Accords. Billy and Suzy remained active organizers, advocating for women’s rights and gay rights. They attended rallies when they could, sometimes with colleagues, sometimes just the two of them. At other times, their political engagement was quieter, with letters

written late at night or petitions signed.

In 1978, Billy and Suzy got married. They had originally planned a small ceremony by the lake at Ana Hayden Heritage Park in Ames, but the cost of bringing their families to Iowa led them back to New York. Wanting to stay outdoors rather than in a church, they chose Grand Army Plaza, intending something simple and informal.

But word traveled. Friends from Erasmus, from CUNY, from the early days of Unmuted Voices, and others they had met along the way began to arrive. By the time the ceremony began, nearly a hundred people had gathered in the very place where Billy and Suzy had once stood before a crowd at the first Unmuted Voices Poetry Happening.

As they held hands and stood together, Billy looked out at the faces, familiar and unfamiliar, past and present, and he had the same feeling he did at those poetry events. It wasn't just a crowd. It was a gathering, a happening, a chorus.

And he would forever be a part of it.