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THE BOY WHO DID NOT LISTEN TO HIS MOTHER

Cast:

NARRATOR

BILLY: Actor looking back upon his life.

FEMALE: Mother, incidental characters

MALE: Incidental characters

BILLY

All I wanted was a hug,

NARRATOR

said the once gangly teenager whose body had incrementally transformed unnoticed into this feeble, flabby shell belonging to an old man, heaving, heaving, heaving its incessant daily resistance to gravity, practically gasping for a share of the planet's oxygen.

BILLY

Gravity,

NARRATOR

the old man thought to himself,

BILLY

is how a planet, a globe, deprived as it is of arms, asks for a hug. And breathing,

NARRATOR

he extrapolated,

BILLY

is how an upper respiratory system, similarly deficient in the way of arms, engages the atmosphere in a hug. ... Just a hug,

NARRATOR

he thought ruefully, surveying in retrospect the great plains of an adulthood, not so much inhabited as traversed.

BILLY

Mother,

NARRATOR

he argued to himself,

BILLY

could hardly be blamed for not meeting my every little need.

NARRATOR

From his current vantage point, he allowed as how

BILLY

I guess she did the best she could with that one remaining leg of hers,

NARRATOR

the only limb left to her by God after the accident that claimed her husband, extremities and all, along with three of her own most cherished appendages. Over and over she asked

MOTHER

Why?

NARRATOR

What significance was she to make of the fact that only one leg survived of the eight limbs, unremarkably attached to two living torsos, that had entered the automobile one fateful evening, beginning the return trip home from a less-than-successful, but nonetheless diverting, performance of Kiss Me Kate, a performance inspiring in her an enthusiastic impromptu fantasy on behalf of her son to the effect that

MOTHER

Billy could be an actor! It doesn't look so hard.

NARRATOR

No sooner had she indulged this unanticipated fantasy when their car careened off the rain-slicked road, and upon emerging from the carnage, she had but one limb left intact.

MOTHER

Two people, one limb,

NARRATOR

she pondered.

MOTHER

Twelve-and-a-half percent. What sense is there to be made of it?

NARRATOR

On days when the arthritis relaxed its all-too-frequent affliction of her knee, she awkwardly wrapped that miraculously retained shank around the neck of her son, trying, occasionally with success, to avoid a vise-like grip on his trachea, as she whispered commandingly,

MOTHER

Son, don't ever mess with the theater. It'll kill you.

BILLY

Momma, you're strangling me,

NARRATOR

the boy would gasp in his remorseless hunger to feel his mother

BILLY

embrace me,

NARRATOR

blending as it did, in adolescent confusion, the delicate touch of the underside of a mother's knee with an all-too-frequent sensation of strangulation, caught as he was in the grip of her half-scissor hold.

BILLY

Can't breathe!

NARRATOR

So, perhaps not unexpectedly, when asked to select an extra-curricular high school activity, one that would exemplify and develop an adolescent's nascent sense of self, he smothered an inexplicable fascination he had developed for the Drama Club. Instead, he responded,

BILLY

Wrestling, I guess.

NARRATOR

For a while, wrestling proved a moderately satisfying pursuit, though most of his matches ended with Billy locked in a scissors hold.

BILLY

I give! I give! I give!

NARRATOR

But his sojourn with the team ended during a match in which he, pinned to the mat, locked in the dizzying embrace of his opponent's muscular legs, instead of grunting,

BILLY

I give!

NARRATOR

blurted out,

BILLY

I love you too!

NARRATOR

Forthwith, he was banished from the club.

MALE

The wrestling club's no place for behavior of that sort. It's completely inappropriate.

NARRATOR

With a heavy heart, and in shame and trepidation, he set out upon a search for another club in which he could hide. One afternoon, he found himself standing, forlorn, at the door of a room where auditions were in progress for

BILLY

The Taming of the Shrew.

MALE

You gonna try out, Billy?

MOTHER

(echoing) It'll kill you, kill you, kill you.

BILLY

No.

NARRATOR

He could not bring himself to go in. So his wayward search led him instead to the school Magic Club. There, other junior prestidigitators honed their skills poking silk scarves into fists wherefrom—

MALE AND FEMALE

Abacadabra! Abacadabra!

NARRATOR

—gold coins miraculously appeared.

MALE AND FEMALE

Presto! Presto!

NARRATOR

But Billy found himself mesmerized by the challenge of escaping from a

BILLY

straitjacket!

NARRATOR

He loved that trick.

BILLY

Wrap me up!

NARRATOR

he pleaded endlessly. Little by little, something began to awaken deep inside Billy as he explored this thing that for him felt so new, so different, and yet was somehow inescapably familiar.

MALE

What he felt was

BILLY

trussed.

NARRATOR

Hour after hour he would practice, so that by the time he finally emerged from his canvas cocoon—

BILLY

Pres-to!

NARRATOR

—all the other members had left — hours earlier — returning home to the waiting arms of dotting mothers. Oddly, instead of getting better at the routine, it would take Billy longer and longer to excise himself from the sleeves that bound him tight.

BILLY

Unh! Unh!

NARRATOR

This the other members found tiresome, so one by one they drifted away from the club—

MALE AND FEMALE

Bye. See ya. Later.

NARRATOR

—until, by the time of the school's annual talent show, which in the interests of precision had recently been renamed The Variety Show, Billy was the only person left to represent the Magic Club.

BILLY

Who me?

NARRATOR

Despite continuing trepidation, and in monumental turmoil over his mother's advice—

MOTHER

It'll kill you.

NARRATOR

—he convinced himself that a variety show was actually only quasi-theater, not so much a performance as a demonstration, which is how he came to find himself one night upon a stage in a straitjacket, this time with an audience bearing witness to his writhing and wrenching, his yanking and churning, as he strained and he thrust, a veritable orgy of self-prestidigitation—

BILLY

Unh. Unh. Unh.

NARRATOR

—which had the unanticipated effect in that teen-filled auditorium, of raising high the heat, generating a wild, surging tide of gonads and hormones over which Billy found himself surfing—

BILLY

Unh! Unh! Unh!

NARRATOR

—its siren call drawing him ever closer to the precarious shore of that turbulent ocean, where for a single ecstatic moment he teetered, arms still locked in their coarse canvas prison, before taking an unscripted swan dive over the proscenium into the orchestra pit.

MALE AND FEMALE

Gasp!

NARRATOR

In those endless moments of unexpected flight, succumbing to the irresistible embrace of gravity, his mother's warning echoed through him—

MOTHER

(echoing) It'll kill you, kill you, kill you.

NARRATOR

—blending with gasps and cheers from the spectators, who were unsure if it was, or was not, part of the act.

BILLY

Mom—ma?

NARRATOR

As consciousness slowly drifted out of reach, before the arrival of an ambulance, a single tear made its way between Billy's flickering eyelids, and trickled down his cheek, as he heard first the tentative sound of one, then another, and yet another pair of hands, cautiously clapping together just as he'd seen at the end of a thousand inspirational Hollywood films, supplying their audience with the surrogate celluloid release of applause unobtainable in a movie house. Waves of sound wrapped around his crumpled body, caressing him, swaddling him in clouds of aural relief.

BILLY

Unnnnnh.

NARRATOR

Upon exiting the hospital, Billy placed his career as a magician on hold. He also knew that as surely as he had developed an addiction to the painkilling drugs so parsimoniously dispensed by the nurses, that he had discovered a compulsion which would prove over a lifetime to be an even more demanding mistress. He joined

BILLY

the Drama Club,

NARRATOR

that universal harbor where highly-confused, overly-sensitive, socially-maladroit adolescents who find themselves adrift in a sea of disaffection go to lose themselves—

MALE

Stel-la!

NARRATOR

—and to find others.

FEMALE

I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

NARRATOR

And in the process, it is not unheard of that a confused adolescent learns a thing or two about himself.

BILLY

Wherefore art thou Romeo?

NARRATOR

Try as he might—

MOTHER

No son, don't!

NARRATOR

—he could not get his mother to acquiesce in his decision.

MOTHER

(echoing) It'll kill you, kill you, kill you.

BILLY

I've been cast Momma!

NARRATOR

Never again would she set foot in a theater.

BILLY

I'm gonna be in Arms and the Man.

NARRATOR

So a lifetime on the stage, and never would he get to hear the comforting stomp of his mother's foot expressing approval for his exertions. These were the thoughts that now wracked the old actor with anxiety as he contemplated, measuring the success or failure of a career.

BILLY

Has it amounted to anything?

NARRATOR

the old man asked himself, looking back. A lifetime of work, and still he felt the stage a place he never truly belonged. A place with its ups—

BILLY

Alas poor Yorick.

NARRATOR

—and its downs.

BILLY

But ya are, Blanche. Ya are in a wheelchair.

NARRATOR

A lifetime spent in that refuge where all the broken people go who don't belong. A place where ruination dances nightly with redemption. A place of magic—

MALE

Presto!

NARRATOR

—and taboo.

MOTHER

(Echoing) Kill! Kill! Kill!

NARRATOR

He even took a stab at writing plays.

BILLY

And this is my adaptation of A Farewell To Arms.

FEMALE

Thank you.

NARRATOR

But he found the world of playwrights to be one populated by

BILLY

cranks, and crackpots.

NARRATOR

Thus, acting remained his enduring passion. Somehow, he had managed to stumble upon this wayward tribe, this club where all the world's Billies hide in open sight, engaged in an unremitting chase of – what?

BILLY

Just a hug.

NARRATOR

A netherworld of addicts, grappling for their drug of choice, the savory embrace by an audience of those with whom it finds favor.

BILLY

A worthy substitute?

NARRATOR

Billy wondered. ... Perhaps.

BILLY

(mouthed) Momma?

END OF PLAY