

BILLIE THE STREET

Billie's mind is strong. Her spirit, doubly so. Despite this, her life is about to come to an abrupt end.

You see, Billie, sixteen years old, with chocolate skin and hazelnut eyes, dressed in tight white shorts and her favourite trainers which are now a size too small, and carrying a smudge of ice-cream on the sleeve of her blouse, has a single fault.

Billie's flesh is weak.

Not when compared to the others in her class who, along with her have just finished school for the last time before the summer. Not when compared to her string-thin ginger tom cat, which she loves before anything else. Not even when compared to the fifteen other people in the street who are about to see her die.

But when weighed in against the five tonne steel fist of a pickup truck whose driver is not paying as much attention as perhaps he should be, Billie's flesh is weak.

I didn't see it happen. Neither did her parents: they were spared that at least, although her death spread through their lives like an aggressive rot, first weakening then slowly degrading the fabric of their marriage. Her mother's eventual suicide wasn't noticed for two days while her once graceful body swung slowly at the end of a makeshift rope, bare feet that kicked and twitched now en-pointe above the cracked tiles of the hallway. Both the father and the cat disappeared, although the father was found six months later in the burned out wreckage of the family car. I couldn't tell you if he was a suicide or not, but that was the official story.

The cat... well that's another matter altogether, but then cats always are.

As the driver raises his view to the road (*and it has only been a second that he's glanced away, so little time, such a small thing to do*), he sees the girl step out in front of him. His limbs, numb with cold surprise, try to remember what they're supposed to do next. Pupils dilating, he moves one steel toe-capped boot towards the brake pedal, knowing he can't stop in time. His brain calculates the inevitable collision with a sickening accuracy, even as it floods his body with paralysing horror. Hands gripping the wheel, he has the choice to either swerve, or to blast the horn.

He chooses the latter.

You might ask: how do I know this? How can I possibly describe this scene in such detail, given that I've already claimed I wasn't there? I'll come to that. For now, let's say that there are individuals (*rare, strange, and often dangerous*) who can transcend the boundaries of reality. They walk along

the cracks in the worlds, see things that others never will. I am like that. So was Billie, although she never knew it. It was the reason I liked her.

She notices the truck just before the noise of the horn drags in the attention of the other people who are about to bear witness to her final moment. Her mouth forms a perfect 'O' of shock as her head turns, thick black hair fanning into the air around her. She raises a hand, as though it will help (*though it won't, and she knows it*), as though it will persuade the pick-up to stop, to cease. The delicate stems of her fingers (*elegant bones and the imperceptible start of a violinist's calluses*) reach out almost gently towards her killer.

They meet.

For the people on the street, the noise of her body hitting the front of the truck is masked almost completely by the shrieking of brakes and the air rupturing blast of the horn (*some might say that's a blessing, but if so then it's a small one*). For the ones who were looking right at her, Billie's death is instant: one moment of terror, lasting not quite long enough for her to realise her bladder has let go, then she's nothing to them but the memory of flesh and blood, and the lingering taste of rising bile.

They don't see the truth of it. They've never pushed, naked and screaming, between the boundaries of reality, never fallen through the endless shrieking pit of Halla's Drop, been hounded through the eternal dark of the trees at Crowhold, or traversed the secrets of the White Web. You haven't either, but I have some hope that you might understand, if I explain it to you.

There's *some* truth in what those people saw, I suppose. But knowing only part of the truth is often worse than an outright lie. Let me tell you what really happened.

First, let's go back a little way.

so here's our Billie	and here is the truck
sweet warmth of a beating heart	all cold unfeeling metal
one hand extended	unable to stop

They meet.

The world stops.

Reality fractures; a tiny piece of it falling away. I felt that. I could have been thousands of miles away, and still felt it. She cracked the world in that moment. Changed it. Destroyed it and built it anew.

Sometimes I wonder who else felt it.

The problem with damaging reality like that is that it leaves marks. Scars. Little pockets of... other things. Places where, if you know how, you can walk through the cracks and into other worlds where monsters crawl in the shadows and the lords of misrule govern with fists of iron and minds as fast as summer lightning.

There are two kinds of splinter reality. The definitions aren't important to you. What's important is that each one of them (*and there are many, so many that even I've never been to all of them*) has *rules*. Take the street where Billie died as an example, since you already know how *this* splinter came into being. The people stand with hands at their mouths; eyes wide and jaws open. They are statues carved in flesh, and they do not move. The wisps of cloud that hang like cotton candy in the air rest as though pinned in place. To the casual observer, time seems to have stopped. It hasn't. Time exists in this frozen place; only it's slow, so slow you might never notice its inexorable creep towards the point of obliteration. The closer you get to the centre the slower it moves, until at the mid-point, at that connection between flesh and metal, you might wait a thousand years to feel the passage of a single second.

That's the first rule; time here is inviolate. It cannot be stopped.

The second rule is to do with gravity. Don't get confused now, I'm not talking about it the way you were shown it in your childhood science lessons. Physics applies here, F is still equal to $G((m_1*m_2)/r^2)$, even if the perception of it is slowed down. I'm talking about gravity as a definition of the mental, not the physical. The eye and the mind are both drawn in, focussed to a narrow point, unable to look away, just as the witnesses to her death were. The danger, of course, is that such a focus will kill you. Stare too long at Billie, and you'll die. It'll be so painful that your screams won't even begin to give your agony a voice. It'll be so slow that stars will seem to burn out before it's over. First your fingertips will ache. That's the sign to leave, the point of no return. Once it progresses enough that the bones of your fingers begin to shriek under a pressure you can't see or understand, and the skin around your nails ruptures so that your blood flows dark and rich onto your skin, once that happens, it's far too late. You'll die as she did, but you'll do it here, where time is inviolate and lingering.

Despite that, the second rule isn't the problem.

The problem is the third and final rule: there is *nowhere* here where you cannot see Billie. She is *everything*. The doors of the houses do not open, the windows are unbreakable. Stand behind something, and you'll find yourself moved out from behind it, stepping towards her. Turn and walk away, and you'll find yourself walking back in the opposite direction.

For all her innocence, Billie is now deadly. She's gone, and if you're not careful, she'll take you with her.

I could try to take you to see her anyway if you wanted, but I don't think you'd like it. Even if you could face the horror that saturates that place, and even if you could stand proof against the risks and the rules, I doubt you could fit between the cracks to get there. I'm small enough to go, string-thin thing that I am, so I'll visit her on my own.

The street doesn't hold the same dangers for me: I'm another matter altogether.

But then cats always are.