

Alison Flynn

REMEMBER BILLY

William Witherspoon preferred to arrive first at the office. It gave him time to make those important few adjustments — to straighten papers, buff his ashtray, and assess the moistness of the soil in his pot-plant. So this Thursday morning as he turned his key in the lock, he was distressed to hear the voices of his staff, already at their desks.

“Good morning Mr Witherspoon.” said Angela.

“Good morning Mr Witherspoon.” said Beryl.

“Good morning ladies.” replied William Witherspoon. He glanced at Carolyn’s vacant desk.

“Oh, Mr Witherspoon — have you heard about poor Carolyn? Rushed off to hospital overnight, her little boy’s at Angela’s house staying with Angela’s mother. Her blood pressure’s shot right up, Carolyn’s that is, not Angela’s mother’s ... they think she may have to stay in hospital till the baby’s born and it’s way too soon yet —”

Mr Witherspoon held up a protesting hand to ward off this spate of unwanted information, but Beryl was in full flow.

“The point is Mr Witherspoon we’re all going to take turns minding Billy while she’s in hospital, she’s that worried about him. That no-good husband of hers shot through a while back so she needs all the help we can give. Billy’s not a bit of trouble. I’ll put you down for Friday evening, through to Saturday afternoon when I can collect him after my gym class.”

Beryl was all bustle and self-importance, clipboard at the ready. William Witherspoon recoiled in horror.

“Oh, really, Beryl, I’m sure you ladies would do a far better job ...” he began feebly. But Beryl swept on.

“Come, come, Mr Witherspoon, it’s all shoulders to the wheel in a crisis in this office. It can’t be too hard, can it, just one small boy. After all you were a boy yourself once.” This thought seemed to give her pause, but she continued

stoutly, "There. Friday night, this coming Friday. Now I can set poor Carolyn's mind at rest when I visit her this afternoon.

Mr Witherspoon tried to escape, but Beryl waylaid him again.

"Of course you'll want to put in for the flowers?"

"Of course ..."

He extracted his wallet and drew out a five dollar note.

"Ten dollars should do." said Beryl.

Mr Witherspoon moved his hand obediently to the compartment storing his ten dollar notes.

"Thanks ever so, Mr Witherspoon, with the roster and all Carolyn will feel much easier in her mind, so important that she be able to rest ..."

He could take no more. He escaped to his office and closed the door.

William Witherspoon lived alone. He came home from his day's work and found the television guide precisely where he left it. His freezer held a neat stack of dinners-for-one and he divided one loaf of bread into exact portions for the week ahead. He switched on his answering machine and found no messages. He knew that when the time came to leave the apartment he need only pack his clothing and disappear without a trace.

His apartment was one of eight in a dull part of town. His neighbours were elderly, or infirm, or both. They could set their watches by Mr Witherspoon's movements, but they never dropped in to pass the time of day. He was known to the local newsagent and greengrocer, but only by his purchases.

That night as he heated his dinner-for-one and made his cup of tea, he laid plans. After eating his meal, carefully flattening the carton it came in, he trod through the apartment retrieving various items. The plastic which had covered his armchair and sofa when he purchased them. His spare set of sheets. The fold-up bed he had purchased in case his mattress failed to dry punctually after its bi-annual steam cleaning.

Reluctantly, he made the fold-up bed in his spare room. He spread the plastic over his armchair and sofa. He put the television guide away. Then he sat down with a pen and paper, and wrote a shopping-list.

Toothbrush (small)
Loaf of bread (small)
Disinfectant

And as an afterthought,

Milk (small)

William Witherspoon did not drink milk. He used powdered milk on his cereal, and took his tea black. But he felt sure small boys should drink a glass of milk. Before bed. He wondered what time this boy would go to bed. Early, surely. Suddenly he knew a moment of panic. He could not recall the child's name. Then he remembered. Billy.

Billy arrived in a flurry of instructions from Beryl and an inordinate amount of luggage.

"Now, he likes wheet-bix for breakfast, with sugar and sultanas. He has his reader to finish over the weekend, he's ever so clever, aren't you pet, so good with his reading. You need to fill in the form in his reader cover. His laundry's all up to date except for what he'll use overnight, he's had one or two little accidents you know, poor mite, what with all the upset —" (Mr Witherspoon made a hurried note to look for more plastic.) "Now he knows where his poor mother is and what's happening and he's being ever such a brave boy, aren't you pet ..."

Mr Witherspoon and Billy endured Beryl's monologue anxiously. Billy shuffled and squirmed and peeked around the room. Eventually, he slunk away and sat down on the armchair, scrawny legs swinging, tattered sneakers banging the upholstery.

"... I'll be back around four, no later than five tomorrow, and I'll take him straight over to Angela's for the night then it's back to little old me for Sunday! Won't we have a fine time then, Billy!" Beryl finished off gaily. Billy swung his legs faster. Mr Witherspoon fretted for his woodwork.

"Well, thank you Beryl; I expect we'll — manage."

"Of course you will! Probably be up to mischief as soon as my back's turned. Well, boys will be boys, won't they pet!"

For a ghastly moment Mr Witherspoon thought she was addressing him, but she had swooped on Billy for a last embrace. Billy submitted bravely. At last she left.

"Well." said Mr Witherspoon.

Billy said nothing. Bang bang bang went his feet on the upholstery. Mr Witherspoon winced. The silence lengthened.

"Are yer chairs new or summfen'?"

Mr Witherspoon jumped.

"New? No, not new."

"Why've they got plastic on 'em then?"

Mr Witherspoon had failed to ascertain Billy's age. Seven perhaps. And precocious with it.

"To keep them clean, of course." he replied briskly.

"Makes 'em kinda sticky ter sit on."

Mr Witherspoon considered the alternative.

"Yes, I suppose it does." He cleared his throat. "Well. I expect you'd like to settle in. Let's put your things in the bedroom, shall we?"

Billy marched after Mr Witherspoon. His weighty backpack swung across his scrawny shoulders and hit the wall. Mr Witherspoon cringed. "You don't have much stuff, MrWivvaspoon, do ya?" commented Billy, looking around the sparse room. "Where's ya toys an' stuff?"

"I don't keep any toys, Billy."

"Just as well I brung me own then."

"Brought."

"What?"

"Pardon." Mr Witherspoon corrected.

"I said, WHAT?"

"Say pardon, not what."

"Ohh!" Billy's urchin face cleared. "Pardon, Mr Wivvaspoon?"

"I was reminding you not to say 'brung.' The correct word is 'brought'."

"Ohh!" said Billy. "You mean, it's just as well I brought me cars."

Mr Witherspoon considered the delinquent "me." He felt an infinite weariness settle over him.

"You can play with your cars tomorrow, Billy. It's dinnertime now."

Dinner was a tricky affair, with Billy slurping his drink noisily and asking where the chips and baked beans were. He poked at the meal-for-one with a suspicious finger.

"What's this stuff Mr Wivvaspoon?" he asked, pointing. Mr Witherspoon tried to explain gravy to his young guest.

"Jeez." said Billy, impressed. "I thought yer could only get tomato sauce."

"Doesn't you mother cook meat like this sometimes, Billy? With vegetables, and gravy?"

"Don't reckon so, Mr Wivvaspoon! She says after work it's all she can do ter open a can of baked beans!"

Billy chortled as if this were a huge joke. Mr Witherspoon made no comment, being entirely unable to think of one. He cleared away their cutlery, aware of Billy's watching eyes as he flattened the cartons and stacked them in his recycling pile.

"Well now. Drink your milk, and then it must be time for a bath."

"'Aven't yer got icecream? Fer puddin'? Me mum always gives me icecream fer puddin'."

"Well — no. I don't have pudding, Billy."

"But I *have* ter have puddin'."

Billy's voice rose ominously, his tough little chin suddenly quivering. Mr Witherspoon spoke hurriedly.

"Now then, now then! I'm sorry about the pudding. But we can get some icecream tomorrow."

"Promise?"

Mr Witherspoon didn't make promises. Promises were dangerous things. Then the quiver started again. He took a deep breath. A deep knot tied itself in his stomach.

"I promise."

Billy's face split into a wide smile, bright as dybreak. Mr Witherspoon blinked, dazzled. His own cheeks felt stiff and awkward. But they formed something like a smile in response.

He directed Billy to the bathroom. Then he realised Billy might need help with the taps, or the water temperature. He dithered in the hallway. Eventually he knocked. Then he turned the handle and opened the door.

Billy was capering with joyous naked abandon around the steam-filled bathroom. The bath had developed an avalanche of bubbles. He had put Mr Witherspoon's shampoo to creative use. Mr Witherspoon averted his eyes, adjusted the taps, and hurried out.

Fifteen minutes later he entered again. The bathroom floor was awash, the two towels sodden on the floor. Billy was kneeling up on the vanity peering at himself in the mirror, his face festooned with a bubbly beard. Mr Witherspoon spoke more sharply than he had intended.

"Come along, Billy. Pyjamas please, immediately. Don't forget to brush your teeth. I bought you a toothbrush in case you've forgotten yours."

"'Course I 'aven't!" Billy retorted scornfully. "It's a Digimon toofbrush. I take it everywhere wiv me!"

Mr Witherspoon retreated.

At last Billy was ready. Mr Witherspoon trod gingerly through Billy's strewn belongings to where he lay under the heavy, old fashioned blankets.

It was the pyjamas that did it. Blue-and-white striped flannel. He could practically smell Lifebuoy soap, feel the scratchy collar, the stiffness of the buttons. Mr Witherspoon said gruffly,

"Goodnight. Sleep well," and hastened back to the safe outskirts of the room. He clicked off the light.

"Mr Wivvaspoon?"

"Yes, Billy?"

"Where's me night light? I have ter 'ave a night light."

Mr Witherspoon opened his mouth to chivvy him. Forgotten phrases rose to his lips. *A big boy like you? You're not scared of the dark, are you? What could possibly harm you?* But he stopped himself. Instead, he fetched his desk lamp, took it into Billy's room, and set it up in a far corner so that its light was not too bright.

"Will that do?"

"Fankyou, Mr Wivvaspoon.

Once again William Witherspoon left. Once again the small voice halted him.

"Mr Wivvaspoon?"

"Yes Billy?" said Mr Witherspoon, who was beginning to hate the sound of his own name.

"Mr Wivvaspoon, will me mum be all right?"

Mr Witherspoon remembered a small boy in blue-and-white striped flannel pyjamas. A peaky little boy lying in the dark listening to distant cries and groans. Hearing footsteps hurry past, the *ting* of the telephone as the doctor was summoned, the scraping of branches on the bedroom window. Huddling in his bed hearing voices murmuring anxiously in the hall, without a thought for the little boy lying within, wondering, worrying. Sitting bolt upright in bed as a sudden keening shattered the darkness.

Mr Witherspoon remembered an aunt belatedly recalling the little boy and coming in to smooth his hair and reassure him that tomorrow he could see his mama. That he was not to worry. Everything would be all right.

Promises she had no right to make. Promises she had no power to keep. Promises that betrayed the little boy's heart, because in the morning there was — nothing. No Mama, no baby, no safety, no joy. Nothing.

Don't make promises. Never make promises.

Then he recalled he ice-cream.

He went back and sat carefully on the edge of the bed.

"Billy, I can't say what will happen. But I know your mother's in the best possible place, with the right people to help her and the baby. She'll be well taken care of. So will you. Will that do?"

Billy eyed him for a moment. Then he nodded deliberately.

"Can you sleep now, do you think?" Mr Witherspoon asked him.

He received another nod. Satisfied, he stood to go. But this time he turned back.

"You didn't tell me what flavour icecream you like."

The little boy's face lit up.

"Chocolate."

And the two Billys smiled at each other.