

"That Billy"

"That Billy, he's a thief."

Mike's parents didn't like Billy.

"That Billy, he's a thug."

"So? So is Uncle George," thought Mike.

One summer morning, Billy, Mike and the boys watched an old man walk the length of the beach, running his metal detector along the sand. Every once in a while, a rapid series of beeps would compete with the wind and the gulls, and the man's face would erupt in a toothless smile, then he'd dig with his hands in the dirt, dust off his treasure.

That's when his face would change. Billy would laugh at the hungry look in the old man's eye, and the others would follow.

It was Billy who suggested they start planting stuff in the sand, junk they found in their fathers' workshops or under the cushions of their mothers' sofas.

"That Billy, he's always up to no good. And you just follow him."

True. Mike knew that before the end of the week, he'd be planting junk in the sand and watching the old man pick it up. Laughing.

On Friday, they met at seven in the morning. They walked in a wavy line, burying the spoils of their scavenger hunt: nuts and bolts, screws, broken watches and tarnished necklaces. After, they headed to the corner store and bought a bag of penny candy; Swedish Fish, Squirrel Nuts and Pixy Stix.

Then they waited.

The man waved at them, his hand a map of bulging veins and arthritic knobs, and Billy waved back, wearing his most innocent smile. Billy was fair and freckled; They were all fair and freckled, but their skin was growing pink from the summer sun. Mike thought the old man looked familiar.

First, the man stooped with effort to pick up an old watch that belonged to Tommy's father, its face cracked, forever frozen at 10:45. He tossed it aside. The boys held their laughter. Next, there was a broken screw driver, buried at least a foot down by Dave that very morning; again, the old man dug with his hands, his eyes greedy. They watched as he sprung upon treasure after treasure, listening to the beeps of his metal detector as he stopped, dug, then moved on. Billy was beside himself with joy. But Mike felt something else. He knew what they were doing was mean, but it wasn't that.

"That Billy, he's a crook."

"So is Uncle George," said Mike.

A slap against his jaw.

"Never talk that way about family. And stop hanging out with that Billy. That Billy is going to be your downfall."

Each morning, the boys would meet, bury their junk, pool their money and buy penny candy, then they'd sit and wait. Everyday, a wave of veins and knobby joints, then the beep, the hope and the digging; tarnished chains, broken tie clips, rusty nails, small engine parts, a piece of a model car, some broken old toy. An empty bucket. Always the bucket empty as the man made his way down the beach away from them.

"Damn, this guy is picky about his junk," Billy said. "What the hell's he looking for?"

The others nodded in agreement.

One day, the old man followed the usual routine, but when he got to a particular ring one of them had buried, Mike noticed his face held onto the hope a bit longer. His hands were under the dirt, and his fingers had touched metal, he pulled the ring to the surface and held it up in the sun. For a few moments, the glow in his eyes stayed. He looked relieved. Then, just like that, he was crestfallen again.

Mike didn't like this game anymore.

Later that day, Mike was working at his family's bakery when the old man came in, ordered a coffee and sat in the corner, staring out the window.

"Who is that guy?" Mike asked his sister Teresa.

"It's sad. His wife died a few months ago," she whispered. "Uncle George has her wedding ring. She pawned it when she found out she was sick. She told her husband she lost it on the beach."

And then, Mike remembered. He'd seen the old man sitting in that exact spot with his wife. Then, behind the counter at his uncle's pawnshop: The old woman, shaky hands pulling the ring off her finger. Tears in her eyes and Uncle George, scooping it in his big paw across the counter.

"That's all you can give me for it?"

"That's all it's worth."

Mike told the boys about the ring.

"We ought to stop," he said. "It's mean."

"What a sissy," Billy said. "You know where the ring is? Why don't you palm it and give it back to the guy?"

"I can't do that," Mike said. "My uncle--My parents would--"

"Aw, come on, boys," Billy said, and Tommy and Dave followed.

The next morning, the boys sat chomping on candy, mashing bits of red and brown in their teeth. Then, the beep, the hope and the digging. On three occasions, the man dug, smiled and lifted a wedding ring up into the sunlight, then dropped it to the ground.

Tommy's mouth dropped open, then Dave's.

More beeps. The man continued to dig. A smile. But this time, as he pulled his hands from the dirt, his face didn't change.

"Thank you," he whispered to no one, or to the sky, or to the sand.

Tommy and Dave looked at Mike, their eyes wide.

"No--" he said. "I didn't--It wasn't--" And it wasn't him. Mike had been awake all night, praying for a solution.

"Aw, shut up," Billy said. "We all know it was you."

"But it wasn't--"

Mike caught Billy's eye and shut his mouth.

Mike knew there would be a broken lock at Uncle George's pawnshop.

That the ring case would be empty.

And that Billy was a thief.