

## BILLY GOATS GRUFF

I'm eight years old. It's after school and those of us who signed up, get to stay late and watch a production of The Billy Goats Gruff. But not in the auditorium, in the library. Actors in matching black turtlenecks greet us as we file in and then sit in a semi circle.

"A stage can be anywhere," says the man with the beard as he moves aside two tables. "All you need are actors and an audience."

Next he asks, "Who knows the story of The Billy Goats Gruff?"

We raise our hands. I do! I do!

"Well great then," he says, "Let's begin!"

They make an entire new world appear before us. They do this using only themselves, our regular metal-legged school chairs as props, and some lights.

"Can I get over the bridge to eat the green grass on the other side?" the first goat brother asks the troll.

Everyone - both watching and doing - is in agreement, absorbed in this story. It is so clean. And easy. And funny too. I don't want it to end, this Billy Goats Gruff. They ask for a volunteer and then pick me to be the one to cross the bridge. To ask the troll. My skinny legs stand in this space of the focus on me now. They guide me when I cannot speak- when no words come out of my mouth.

"Say this," the actor reminds me, helping me to not be shy. "We'll move around you."

And then, before I know it, the show is over and these actors are moving the chairs back and unplugging their special spotlights. They zip up their bags, say goodbye and it is just the library again.

“Get your coats,” the teacher is saying, “Time to go home.”

I turn back before I leave to see if there’s any trace left in the room of the stage that I’d inhabited just minutes before with the actors, where everything was so still and focused and perfect, but there isn’t. It is just business as usual. Kids line up at the front desk and wait as the librarian moves her rubber stamp from inkpad to inside plastic covered book after book, until she gets to theirs. They act as if nothing extraordinary has just happened here. But it *has* happened. Which means it could happen again someday, I think. My skin tingles.

I head out the back door of the school to cross through the parking lot, which is empty now except for a few cars. I start to walk toward the path. A big kid with a plaid shirt that buttons up, but not in an even way because of where his stomach pushes it out near the bottom, steps in front of me. Stops me.

He might be somebody’s big brother I think. He might need to find them. Someone who stayed late after school for the show, like me.

“Lay down,” he says to me.

“What?” I ask.

“Lay down,” he says again- this time leaning in like it’s a secret.

I’m not sure what to make of this. Then he’s behind me and uses his foot to sweep me off balance.

“I said, lay down.”

He pushes me forward, face down to the ground in the middle of the parking lot and then climbs on top of me – his butt on my back like I’m a flat horse.

“What grade are you in?” he asks me.

I'm looking down at black tar. I can smell it. It is hard to breathe right under the weight of him.

"Second," I say.

"Pull down your pants," he says.

"No."

"Pull your pants down."

I kick up my feet to try and reach the back of him. He takes one hand and grabbing both my ankles presses them down towards the ground. I hear a noise like a whimper coming from me.

"I'm not getting off of you until you pull down your pants," he says.

"Well then," I say to him, "we're going to be here for a very long time."

A couple minutes pass after that and nobody says anything.

"Can you breathe?" he asks me.

"Yeah," I say, "But you're kinda heavy."

He shifts his weight so more of it is on his own legs.

"Is this better?" he asks.

"Yes."

"Don't try and move," he says.

I don't. I still hurt in the place where he'd held my ankles.

Patty Hines comes out of the back door and sees him on me. She walks over. She knows him by name and tells him she's Patty.

"I'm Mike's sister," she says to him in her thick Boston accent, "You go to Meadowbrook togetha."

Meadowbrook is the junior high next to our school.