

When Good Men Do Nothing

by Keppiehed

A study in human nature.

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Chapter 1 of 1

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Prompt: "Temptation"

A/N: This was written for week #4 at Brigit's Flame. This week I went with the dreaded first person perspective. It's my least favorite, but this story just had to be told that way, and I have to try new things. A tip of the hat to my great beta, Azuire.

I clutched my books to my chest and peered around for a way to avoid the knot of bodies that was collecting, but my search was futile. My heart beat faster as I realized I would be funneled directly into the center of the chaos: the last place I ever wanted to be. I endeavored to stay out of whatever was happening; in my experience, wherever people were gathered, trouble followed. I made an attempt to change my route, but my feet were already skidding on the floor with the force of the rush. I tried my best not to get involved, but it seemed inevitable this time.

The crush of the crowd pressed me forward and it was either stumble or get caught in the tide with everyone else. *Was there even a choice?*

I kept my head down, trying not to attract attention. Whatever poor soul had drawn the wrath of the bullies, I could only be glad that it wasn't me. This time, it was not me. The thought ran through my mind like a chant. Was it a prayer for salvation or a wish for benediction? I clung to that idea as a drowning man clutches a raft. I hoped it didn't lessen the truth that I was safe in the masses. I just had to keep my head down. *See nothing.*

A crude circle had formed, the way of ritual humiliation since time immemorial. My eyes sought out the unlucky victim. Who had saved me from being the one begging for mercy at the center? Who was there in my stead?

Billy Brandon. Of course. The only other person it could be. Had I been hoping to see a stranger? Would that have made it better? I watched him stumble with a mixture of pity and relief. I knew only too well what it felt like to be there in his place. It was hard not to feel for him. We weren't friends, but he lived down the street. Some days we walked to school together. I knew that his mom had run off and his dad was a drunk. That was why he looked like he did: too skinny and wearing dirty jeans. I tried to help him out by telling him to wash his hair, at least. It wasn't my fault that he wouldn't—okay, maybe couldn't—listen and help himself.

It was his hair that was the subject of ridicule at the moment. The jeers were ugly, the taunts getting vicious. A girl named Kaylee stepped forward and gave him a shove.

I looked around for a teacher, for anyone who might come and break this up. For all of the anti-bullying talks and zero-tolerance policies, where was help when it was needed? Would no one do anything? Couldn't anyone step forth to stop this torment?

Billy bore it all stoically. He looked like a calf that had been poked with a cattle prod too many times; his eyes were glassy and empty. He didn't seem to be there at all.

I wanted to look away, but I couldn't. I knew I should say something, but they would do the same to me. And who would stand for me in this crowd? I looked at the faces of

my classmates. They were dazed, too, but with the lust for more entertainment. They had the appearance of people who wanted more all the time. A detached crowd who needed the fuel of stimulation and frenzy in a virtual feed right into their glazed brains.

It was when they started throwing food that the scene took on a sense of the sinister. What had been bullying in its worst form was still within the realms of what I had been through: hazing designed to humiliate. New tension settled over the crowd and brought with it an ominous foreboding that was turning ugly. All kinds of garbage pelted Billy, from banana peels to wads of paper and old wrappers—any sort of junk that collected in the bottoms of backpacks. Bill stood with his head bowed, unmoving. He surely felt the slick of juice hit his face and splatter his shirt. He must have known there were crumbs in his greasy hair and a rain of unidentifiable litter stuck to his collar, but he ignored it—us—all.

“Aww, he doesn't even know he's in the trash! He stinks like a junkyard anyway, he can't tell the difference!”

“Hey, you!”

My blood chilled.

“Yeah, you! What's your name?”

I glanced up quickly enough to see Greg, one of the ringleaders of this group, staring straight at me. My mouth went dry.

A mutter started in the crowd, a ripple that started and grew until I could make out the sound. My name. I went numb.

Greg smiled. “Hey, Sarah. Yeah, that's you, right? Is it true that you're friends with this loser?”

My gaze cut to Billy. He looked up for the first time. I saw him, really saw him. He wasn't dead-eyed after all. His eyes were pleading with me. He hadn't moved, but I could see the world of hurt right there. A vast universe of pain. As clearly as if he had spoken to me, had whispered right in my ear, I knew it in my heart that he was broken. I could see it written across his features, stamped there for the world to see. Could no one see this beautiful boy? Was no one else looking? He was crumbling and searching for a lifeline, for someone—anyone—to step up and save him. To see him.

I felt something cold in my hand. It was a bright red frozen drink that was mostly melted ice and food coloring. The bottom fell out of my stomach.

“I *said*, are you friends with this loser?” Greg asked. His tone of menace was unmistakable. I could feel his hand over mine, holding the drink tight. The ice melted with the heat of my fingers. I imagined the crystals dissolving into nothingness. An indistinct sludge.

I didn't look away from Billy. His eyes still held a trace of hope.

I shook my head ever so slightly. Barely a movement at all, but in that simple motion I saw his world crash down.

“Throw it,” Greg said.

“What?” I said. My voice was barely above a whisper.

“I said, throw it.”

I looked down at my hand as if it belonged to someone else. I didn't feel the cold anymore. Everything seemed numb. The faces of the crowd stared at me, as if everything important weighed on my word, my decision. I looked at Billy. His eyes were dead again. Any light I thought I'd seen had flickered out.

He knew my decision before I did. The temptation to fit in was too great.

I threw it.