

Gilbert B Fumbleberry

by gerard varni

Gilbert B Fumbleberry was eight years old, and he was in trouble. While his mom was cooking lunch, he was in the living room watching television. There was a commercial for a new pair of athletic shoes, and it showed a man running through the store, jumping over things, bumping into people, knocking over racks of clothes. But in the end, he won. Gilbert couldn't tell if it was for football or basketball or baseball or just for running really fast or why he even won. But there was no doubt he won. Everyone was cheering. They were the coolest shoes ever.

It was so exciting that it made Gilbert want to run, too. So he did. He jumped over the couch, ran around the big chair that his dad always liked to sit in with the square thing in front of it that he put his feet on. Gilbert was running on a wooden floor in his socks, so it was slippery. And maybe because he wasn't wearing shoes, that's what made him do it. He wanted to have shoes on. And not just any shoes, but the shoes in the commercial which made the man seem like he was superhuman. They were the newest model from the company YouDaRunna —GripperRippers. At the end of the commercial, the announcer said in a deep, dramatic voice: "YouDaRunna. You grip, you rip, you win." And Gilbert wanted to win. He really wanted to win.

And when the commercial was over, Gilbert began jumpng up and down with his arms pumping and a big smile on his face. And that's when it happened. He decided to do a victory lap, but he ran right into the freshwater fish tank in the corner of the room. Suddenly, everything turned into slow motion as he watched the fish tank begin to wobble and teeter. And then it fell. It crashed onto the floor and exploded. Gilbert staggered backwards, horrified and shot

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through with panic. There was broken glass and water and the fish all flippity-floppity. He knew they weren't breathing, because he was in third grade and he understood that fish needed water to breathe. Not at all like people who couldn't breathe in water because they needed air.

He saw the Angelfish, the Blue Glass Guppy, the Calico Goldfish, the Green Neontetra, the Small Red Goldfish and the Glasscat. He knew all their names because his father had read a book with him that described them. And, in fact, he had given them all names: Angie, Gupster, Cali, Neo, Goldy and Cool Cat. And now they were flopping and floundering, spinning and thrashing. He was stunned, unable to move, as if he had turned to stone. And then he heard his mother from the kitchen: "Gilbert, what was that? Are you jumping on the couch again? Lunch is almost ready. Your dad will be home in about 10 minutes."

Gilbert was terrified. He had to save the fish. So he tiptoed through the broken glass and the water and began gathering up Angie, Gupster, Cali and the others; and then he sprinted to the bathroom. He looked at the toilet and thought to himself, "No way." Once, when one of the fish had died, his dad took him to the toilet and said, "This is the way we bury them, son. They like water, so just give it a flush."

This time, he went to the sink, turned on the faucet and pushed the drain down. He gently put the fish in the sink and waited. The water began to rise. The fish began to swim. But, "no! no! no!" this can't be happening, he thought. (He almost said *damn*, but he'd been taught not to say bad words.) The drain wouldn't go all the way down, and the water was running out as fast as it was coming in. The fish weren't gonna make it. He started to whimper, which turned into crying and then utter sobbing. He'd killed the fish. And all because of those stupid GripperRippers. He realized that Cali and Neo and Goldy were way more important than a pair of shoes. Stupid *damn* shoes. ("Sorry," he thought.)

And then he heard the front door open and his dad's voice. He knew he had to get out. Still in his socks, he ran out the backdoor

and down the street, not knowing where he was going but absolutely sure that he had to leave. He sprinted toward the park next to his school. By the time he got there, runnels of sweat were singing down his cheeks and his body and all under his clothes. He was gulping air, and he felt like a racehorse after a really long run. He reached the oak tree by the mulberry bush where he always ate his lunch alone and he collapsed, the tears still gliding down his face, which was all red and puffy. "Damn," he said (and this time he didn't care), "I'm in big trouble". He sagged against the big oak tree, with no idea of what to do next.

"What's wrong, son?"

Startled, he looked to his left and saw an old woman. Now he was embarrassed, and began to smear the tears from his face.

"Nothing's wrong. I just been runnin' and sweatin'.

"Those look like tears. Are you sad about something?"

And now the tears came even harder, and he didn't even try to smear them away. "I killed my fish, Mrs. And I broke the 'quarium and got water all over the wood floor and I tried to save 'em in the bathroom but the sink wouldn't fill up so they couldn't breathe 'cause they don't breathe air like us they breathe water but the water just kept draining out and they were flopping and gasping and then they stopped on account of the no water. I killed my fish. And they all had names too."

Gilbert was out of breath, sniffing and snorting, his lungs exhausted. And he was shivering. He put his face in his hands. The woman reached over and touched his head, tousled his hair. "First of all, it's pronounced *aquarium*, not *'quarium*. And it's not *'cause*, it's *because*.

"Now, tell me, did you do it on purpose?" she asked gently, knowingly.

"No! No! I would never do that. I fed 'em every day and cleaned the 'quarium, I mean the aquarium, and talked to them about stuff, you know, what my school was like that day and if they were getting along and having fun? It was an accident. I was running around the living room, and I bumped into it and it fell and hit the floor and just

kinda blew up and there was broken glass and water and flopping fish. I really did try to save them. And now I'm sad and scared both. When I go home, my parents are gonna be real angry. I'll probably be on restriction forever."

"What were their names?"

"My mom's name is Sally and my dad is Max."

"No, silly, what did you name your fish?"

"Oh. Well, there was Angie, Gupster, Cali, Neo, Goldy and Cool Cat."

"I bet Angie was an Angelfish."

"Yeah," said Gilbert, "how did you know?"

"Because I used to be a teacher, and we had a freshwater fish tank in our classroom."

"How did you know it was a freshwater tank?" asked Gilbert.

"Because Angelfish live in fresh water."

Then they moved onto another subject, because the woman could see the boy was beginning to tear-up again. Her appearance was somewhat bedraggled. Her hair was tangled and mussed. Her blue sweater soiled and threadbare. Her shoes were shabby. Her teeth were dark, and some were missing.

"So, please, tell me your age and name, young man."

Gilbert hesitated. He had always been ashamed of his name. He endured a lot of teasing because of it. But this lady seemed kind, and so he told her.

"I am eight years old, in the third grade, and my name is Gilbert B Fumbleberry."

The woman showed no discernible reaction. She nodded her head approvingly.

"Well, now, that is quite a distinguished name. I hope you're proud of it."

"I get teased a lot. Kids call me "gilfart" and "fumble dummy." I'm sorta used to it, but sometimes it still makes me mad, and lonely too."

The woman looked at him with what he thought were the kindest eyes he'd ever seen. And then she spoke.

“Well, Gilbert B Fumbleberry, I have known a lot of children in my life; and I believe you have the most distinguished and fascinating name that I have ever heard. Do you know anything about its origin?”

Gilbert was well-prepared for the question. “I don't know much, 'cause I'm only in third grade. But when I told my dad about getting teased, he just smiled and walked me over to the computer and we went on the Internet. Since then, I've always remembered where the name *Gilbert* comes from. It's Germanic (whatever that means). But the really important part that I memorized is that it's made of two names: *Gisil*, which means 'noble youth,' And *Berht*, which means famous and smart.” So now when the kids make fun of me, I tell them I am noble and smart and someday I'm gonna be famous. *Fumbleberry*, I'm not sure about. But my dad's from England, and he says it's an honored name there.”

“Well, Gilbert, that is quite impressive. Instead of fighting with the bullies, you've done research that shows you have an esteemed name. It's always better to use words in those situations. People tend to remember the things you *say* a lot longer than the tussling, you know, the fighting. Violence never solves anything, and it sure won't change people's minds.

Then Gilbert said, “So what's your name?”

“My name is Vivian Bethany Bailey. You can call me Miss Viv.”

“I like that, Miss Viv. It kinda rhymes and the B's go together. That's a cool name.”

“Well, thank you very much Gilbert. That is perhaps the nicest compliment I've ever received regarding my name.”

Gilbert and Miss Viv had been talking for a couple of hours, sitting under the oak tree near the mulberry bush. The sun was low in the sky, and the leaves on the oak tree looked like orange-green gems. There was no breeze, no birds chirping, no insects fluttering or buzzing. It was hushed and peaceful. And neither Gilbert or Miss Viv spoke. Gilbert enjoyed the stillness. It took his mind off the fish and the fact that he was pretty sure his parents weren't mad at him anymore; they were scared and worried. What had happened?

Where did Gilbert go? That made him sad, but he didn't know what to do.

Then Miss Viv broke the silence and asked, "Gilbert, are you hungry? And would you like a soda?"

"Yeah, that would be good. I kinda ruined lunch."

Miss Viv pushed herself up using the back of the tree. She reached into the bush and pulled out a shopping cart that was filled with blankets and plastic bags and clothes and cardboard and other junk he didn't recognize.

"Did you just go shopping?" Gilbert asked.

"No, sweetie, these are just some of the things I take with me everyday."

"Why don't you leave them at your house."

"I don't have a house, Gilbert, or an apartment, or anything like that?"

Gilbert looked stunned. "But where do you sleep and watch TV and eat and take showers and stuff?"

"Right here. This is where I live and sleep and eat. I don't watch TV. And I perform my ablutions in gas station bathrooms."

"What are *'ablutions'*? Gilbert asked, still with an astonished look on his face.

"The word is *ablutions*. And it means cleaning up. I use the sink to wash."

"How do you fit in a sink?"

"Don't be silly, Gilbert. I use the soap and water to wash my face and my hair and my body. Soaped-up paper towels are just like washcloths."

"And then what do you do?"

"I dry off with more paper towels. And then I walk around the city, go to museums, sit under my tree and read books."

And then Gilbert asked, "Don't you have a job?"

Miss Viv looked at him and smiled. "Not anymore. I used to be a school teacher. In fact, I taught 3rd grade, the very grade you're in now."

"School is boring," Gilbert sighed.

"Sometimes. But more often it's dazzling and spectacular. It's the place where you learn to comprehend, think logically, discover and store things in your mind that will make the rest of your life magnificent and miraculous. I realize it's difficult to envision now, but when you go to school you can do anything: become a scientist, an astronaut, own a company, write books, become an artist, anything that makes you feel happy. You can even become a teacher."

"Wow," muttered Gilbert, "there were a lot of big words in there that I didn't understand."

Miss Viv swished his hair and said, "Exactly, and that's why school is good."

Then she went to the shopping cart and pulled out a plastic bag. She reached into it and pulled out two peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and two sodas.

"Sorry the soda's not cold," she said. "But ice doesn't stay around long here."

"That's okay," Gilbert laughed. "I don't like cold soda."

So they began eating their sandwiches, and Gilbert hesitated, then looked at Miss Viv and said, "You're black."

"Yes, that's true. And do you know what? You're white."

"Did you have to stop being a teacher because you're black, 'cause I know some people that don't like it if you're black?"

"Gilbert, you should say *because*, not just *'cause*. And no, I had to stop teaching because the school ran out of money, and some of us lost our jobs. I can tell you one thing, though, the color of my skin had nothing to do with it. Let me ask you something. All your fish, the ones that were in the accident today, what color were they?"

"Well *Goldie* was gold and *Angie* was yellow and black and, well, they were all kinds of colors."

"And did you love and respect them all?"

"Well, of course, I loved 'em, otherwise I wouldn't feel so bad."

Gilbert took a big bite of his sandwich and a long drink of his soda. Then he burped.

"Excuse me, Miss Viv. It's the bubbles. But what's 'spect mean?"

“That’s *respect*, Gilbert. When you treat someone with respect, you treat them with honor. You are polite and kind to them. Color doesn’t matter. You loved Goldie and Angie, even though they were different colors. That’s respect. And it should be the same with people. I mean, we’ve been sitting here going on three hours. Did you ever think to yourself, “Hey, Miss Viv is black?”

“No, it just popped into my head now. Maybe it was the burpy bubbles in the cola.”

They both laughed.

“I won’t lie to you, Gilbert, there are a lot of people in this world who don’t love or respect other people because of the color of their skin. But to tell the straight truth, they’re idiots. Do you believe that you and I are idiots?”

“No, Miss Viv, I think you’re real smart, a lot smarter than me.”

“Well, let me tell you Gilbert B Fumbleberry, you’re only in the third grade and you’re already smarter than most folks out there. By the time you get to be my age, you will have made a significant difference in this world.”

They finished their sandwiches and sodas, and Vivian put the plastic bag back in the shopping cart and pushed it into the mulberry bush.

“Gilbert, I’d like to talk with you again sometime. Maybe we can have lunch on Sundays, if you’re not busy with your parents.” But right now, we need to get you home. I imagine your mom and dad are downright worried about what happened to you, especially with that broken aquarium. So I’m gonna walk you home.

Gilbert was staring at the setting sun. “You know, Miss Viv, I love looking at the sun when it’s almost gone. It kinda looks like an orange and apple squished together. Those are the colors. And the puffy clouds under it look like a bed. It’s going to sleep. And I wonder if it dreams. I mean, does it dream about what it’s gonna do tomorrow, or does it dream about all the people down here and what will happen to them? Like will they be happy or lonely? Will something good happen, or will they kill some fish by accident and be sad? What does the sun think about? I like to think it’s good stuff.

Is that weird, I mean for me to wonder about what the sun thinks before it goes to sleep?"

Miss Viv stared at Gilbert with a feeling (actually a knowing) of incredulity. And suddenly she desperately missed being a teacher, a feeling she hadn't felt for years. Tears welled in her eyes. Gilbert thought he'd said something wrong or dumb or hurtful.

"I'm sorry, Miss Viv. I didn't mean to make you cry."

"Gilbert, I'm crying because I'm so very happy. You are a remarkable young man. Your insight is extraordinary; your imagination is wonderful. The things you just said are marvelous. They are breathtaking. I wish I could have been your teacher."

"You're using those big words again, Miss Viv. I don't really understand all of them, but I wish you were my teacher, too. You're nice and smart and you explain things so they make sense."

The orange-apple sun had settled into its cloud bed, and it was getting dark. The moon was rising and it was surrounded by a destiny of prickly stars. Vivian was staring at the twinkling tableau.

"Gilbert, you know how you told me about the setting sun?"

"Yes, m'am," he answered.

"Well, now I'm going to tell you what I think of the moon and the stars. Is that alright with you?"

"Absolutely! Please, I want to know."

"See that full moon and all those stars piercing holes in the darkness? I like to believe that's a temporary view of heaven. Because I think the light beyond is where we'll all go someday. It puts me at ease, makes me feel peaceful. That's why I'm not sad that I lost my job and I sleep outside. I don't feel troubles looking up into that sky.

"Even when it's raining and you can't see the stars?" asked Gilbert.

"Yes, because I know they're still out there. And they'll be back the next night or the next. That's the one thing you can count on. They'll be back and glowing brightly. Alright, Gilbert B Fumbleberry, it's time to get you home. Your parents are probably overwrought."

"What's that?"

“It means worried, very worried. I probably shouldn't have let you stay this long. But you're such an astonishing boy. And it's been quite awhile since I've had a unique and wonderful discussion with a person like you — child or adult. I believe I've been selfish keeping you here all this time.”

Miss Viv reached into the bush and pulled out her shopping cart. She picked off the stray leaves. “Okay, Gilbert, which way do we go?” He pointed, and they started walking. The listless light of the streetlights created a lackluster path down the sidewalk.

“Miss Viv, do you ‘spose my fish went through the moon and those stars and made it into heaven?”

“The word is *suppose*, Gilbert.” And with a look of certainty, she stared directly into his eyes and said, “Yes, I suppose that's precisely where they are.”

“Thanks, Miss Viv,” said Gilbert. And he moved to his left, put his two hands on the shopping cart and helped her push it toward home.

