The Sluice

by Thomas J. Ventimiglia

Everybody knew Billy Miller. He had messy hair and crooked teeth that he hid behind a thin-lipped smile. He and his friend Jimmy Rodgers, who everyone called Cock on account of his red hair that stuck up like a comb, were inseparable. They liked to steal boats, drink beer, and go crabbing out by Pumpkin Patch Marsh. Every year they got progressively worse—worse in school, worse in behavior—so that when his sister Laura finally started high school, she could tell by the way the teachers said her name—"Miller?"—that it already had certain associations. Sooner or later they'd see the difference and say, "You're not anything like your brother." And, always she'd say "Mr. Soandso, I *hate* my brother." Well, lots of little sisters said that about their siblings. But for Laura, it was a problem of the word "hate" not being strong enough. You had to take "hate" and "disgust" and maybe "puke" and "snot" or "turlet" (the way Aunt Molly said "toilet") and mix them up all together in a bowl of spit to get the sense of how she felt about him.

Case in point: two months ago Billy and his friends went to Rockaway Bridge to see if they could jump off. This was not at all unusual. Kids jumped from the lowest point of the bridge all the time; it wasn't more than fifteen feet. But, Billy and Cock teased this Polish kid, Michael Czerniak, to jump off the *center* of the bridge. Those who saw it said Michael sat on the edge for twenty minutes while Billy and the Cock teased him. They said that as soon as he leapt, he twisted around to get back to the bridge, clawing at the cement like a cat over a bath. They said he was lucky to only break his arm and that the boys who bullied him to jump off ought to be ashamed. Of course, when people asked Billy if he regretted it, he said "Hell, we was just trying have a little fun is all."

So when everyone at school started whispering that Billy had shot the sluice, Laura was annoyed. The news echoed through

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the school all day, until a small crowd had gathered on the front steps. The sluice was a tunnel over on Bay 1st Street. It was five feet wide and stretched beneath Broad Channel to keep the moon tide and storms from flooding the boulevard. Seeing all that water being sucked into a dark tunnel and shot out the other side got someone thinking that they should swim through it. Some kids made it through. But often enough, some kids did not. For each generation there was a first, on both accounts.

Now, Billy sat on the steps of the school, with a cigarette and a RC cola, boasting how he'd made it through.

“It was real swell!” he said. Kids from every grade surrounded Billy and his friends. They were equal parts fascinated and frightened of the boys. Laura stood at the edge of the crowd and watched suspiciously.

“But didn't they close that thing up when the O'Shea boy died?” asked one boy.

“Yea,” said Billy, “They put a gate there and a sign that said danger. But we bent it back. It was pretty dirty in there,” he said, “some graffiti, too.”

“Was it high tide?” asked another boy.

“What do you mean was it high tide? You can't shoot the sluice when it's low tide, stupid,” said Billy. “Would you get a load of this guy, Cock? Was it high tide? Some question!”

“I know. You're the sluicer. He just doesn't get it,” said Cock.

“Hey that sounds pretty good! *The Sluicer*,” said Billy.

“You're not a sluicer. You're a moron,” snapped Laura.

Everyone turned and looked at her strangely. She stood there with her books in her arms. It wasn't often that someone challenged Billy Miller.

“Who asked you,” said Billy. “Why don't you go run along.”

“And nobody's dumb enough to go through that thing anymore. Except you.”

“I said scram, slut.”

“Or maybe you're just lying again, like you always do.”

The crowd of kids became restless and electric. The mere fact that someone doubted Billy Miller made it possible to wonder if Billy had really done it. One kid said “yea! Wait a minute.” But before he could finish his sentence Billy had shoved him to the ground. Then, Billy stared at Laura. His mouth grew taut against his cheeks. Everyone thought it was funny how Billy's sister made him angry, but Laura knew this look. It scared her a little. That was the other word you could mix in the bowl of feelings she had for her brother—“fear”—because what most kids didn't know was that he was like a machine. Once you turned him on, he went all the way through his motions before he turned off. Like the time he came at her with an ax and tried to break down the door because she had kissed one of his friends. He smashed the door real good two of three times before her father finally stopped him. He got punished a bit. The door was replaced, but without a knob.

Now she could see the machine had turned on again. The dead look in the eye, the fluttering of eyelids that would make you think he was just pretending. But he wasn't. Billy walked up to her and poured his soda over her head. She dropped her books and knocked the bottle out his hand. The kids started yelling.

“Billy Miller!” yelled Ms. Madison from the principal's window. “What's going on out there? All of you, stay right there! You hear me!”

“Oh shit!” said Cock and took off. Billy ran too, but not before he kicked Laura's books into the street. “I'll be back,” he warned.

“Good!” she yelled.

Ms. Madison came trotting down the steps and gave Laura a dirty look.

“You're Laura Miller, aren't you? Didn't you just start here? And wasn't that's your brother?”

“Yes Ma'am.”

“Figures. Another Miller.”

Laura waited all afternoon for Billy to get her. When she got home, the house was silent. In the evening, she sat up in her room and listened to hear if her brother had come back inside. She felt a coldness in her heart for him, cold enough to scare her for having that kind of feeling. She laid her head against the windowsill but he never came. She slept deeply through most of the night, except for a brief moment when she dreamed she was drowning.

The next morning she woke up to the sound of hammering. She hoped it might be her father fixing some part of the house for a change. But when she got up to look, the door was fixed and wouldn't open. She peeked through the hole. Billy was bent over, hammering something into the floor. She addressed him politely.

"Billy? What are you doing?"

"Shut up," he said between blows.

"C'mon, Bill. Fine. You're not a moron. I take it back. Now can you please let me out? I have to pee."

"Too bad," he said. "You should have thought of that before you opened your big mouth." He dropped the hammer and poked his eye through the door, almost against hers.

"Now we're even," he said and walked away.

"Billy!"

She pushed on the door, but it wouldn't budge.

"Billy!" she yelled again, but there was still no answer. She heard him laugh outside her window, and when she looked down, there he was with Cock.

"Hey, Laura," Cock said. He had a big smile and a short wave. Obviously he had no idea what was going on. "You want to go make out or something later?"

"You wish. Maybe if you convince Billy to let me out of my room. I got to pee. You hear that, Bill?"

"You can pee on your bed for all I care," said her brother. Cock asked what was going on, but Billy just said, "C'mon, let's go."

For a minute she stood in her room unsure of what to do. She tried to hear if there was anybody in the house, but heard nothing. Then Laura felt a serious wave of panic shutter through her, making her urge to pee a little more pressing. She banged against the door, but it was no use. She had just about given up, sliding down to the floor and wondering what she could pee into, when she heard a voice.

"Jesus! Family like I never. Hello?"

"Aunt Molly?" she yelled.

"Laura? Where are you? Come down here! Where's your mother? What a mess!"

"I can't," she yelled.

"What do you mean you can't?"

"Come up here."

Laura imagined her favorite aunt walking as she did in that slow saunter. She was the most athletic person in Broad Channel. She could outrun, out-throw, out-swim, and outtalk anyone that challenged her. But she walked like she was perpetually going uphill.

"In here. Billy locked me in. He nailed something in front of the door."

Molly looked through the door hole.

"Can you get me out?"

Molly picked up the hammer and yank the wood from the floor. "Jesus, Mary and Joseph, someone ought to get a handle on your brother. Where's your mother?"

"Who knows?"

Molly pulled at the wood and nearly fell backwards when it finally came to. She opened the door, gave Laura a look of frustration. Laura ran to the toilet. Then Molly said, "Come on. Get your bathing suit. We're going on a trip."

In a few minutes, Laura was dressed. Molly was sitting in her big old '51 Frazer smoking a cigarette and listening to the radio. Laura remembered when she bought the car and Laura's father said that she didn't have any sense buying it. He was just jealous

because he couldn't afford it, not so long as he spent all his money drinking. She was dressed for the country with her jeans rolled up and a bandanna in her short curled hair. She wore sunglasses and her bare foot was hanging out the window with unpainted nails. Sometimes it was hard to believe she was Laura's aunt. Molly was only a little younger than Laura's father. But, she was full of life. Her favorite singer was Rosemary Clooney, but she also understood why Laura loved Elvis.

"Where we going?" asked Laura.

"Out to Long Island, with Kittie."

Though she had met her only once or twice, Laura couldn't help thinking Kittie looked like a Vivien Leigh. She wore a Juliet cap and Jackie Kennedy sunglasses. She was from The Point, a closed community at the end of Rockaway where all the rich people lived. When Molly pulled up to the gate, Kittie jumped in the car with a young girl who Laura didn't know. She was Kittie's cousin. Her name was Charlotte and she was about a year or two older than Laura, maybe Billy's age.

On the drive out to Long Island, Laura felt like they were four women running away. Molly was their smoking, smiling Moses. Soon they were passing trees and old rickety farmhouses and the breeze began to smell faintly of soil and pine.

"Oh, it's like a perfume," said Kittie, holding her hat and letting the wind through her hair.

"Doesn't take much to get away," smiled Molly.

"Speak for yourself, girl. My husband hates when I go out with you."

Kittie turned to the girls.

"Well this isn't one of your high school dances girls. You're free to speak up. Laura, honey, why, you're a skinny little thing, ain't you? Don't your Aunt Molly feed you? You know, I was just saying, Charlotte here was the Breezy Point swim champion two years in a row. Just the fastest little thing you ever did see. You should have seen her kicking her little legs in that pool. From one

side to the other, so quick you could have missed it. Isn't that right Charlotte?"

"I'm pretty fast, I suppose."

Laura could see a shy, troubled look in Charlotte's face. She kept looking out the window as if she was being taken to prison.

Molly looked up into the rear view mirror. "Laura's a pretty good swimmer. Ain't you, Laura?"

"Well, isn't that nice?" said Kittie. "Which pool do you swim at?"

"I swim in the bay," said Laura.

"In the bay? Don't they dump toilet in that water?"

"I bet Laura will beat Charlotte around the float," said Molly.

Laura's face turned red.

"Oh, my, a bet!" said Kittie, placing her had on her chest as if she might lose her breath.

"Two dollars," said Molly, winking at Laura.

"Two dollars! Why Ms. Molly Miller! Look at you bringing your little sweet niece into sin right here before all of us. You ought to be ashamed!" She settled a little deeper into her seat and looked out the window. "I'll just have to take your two dollars as punishment is what I'll do."

They turned onto a little dirt road that lead right to a lake and where the bugs seemed to sizzle in the heat of the tall grass. Before long, the ladies were in their bathing suits kicking about in the lake yelling about how refreshing it was. Laura changed slowly and hoped that they would forget about the bet. Molly jumped up onto the little wooden float and yelled out—"Ok, Kittie O'Donahue, don't get your two dollars wet now!"—she knew it was too late. Charlotte smiled in a friendly way. Her pink two-piece bathing suit was the same one Laura had seen in McCall's last month. As they waded out to the deep part of the lake, Charlotte asked, "Your brother's Billy Miller right?"

"Why?"

“I've heard of him is all.”

With the word “go,” they dove in, swimming side by side and kicking away with a fury. Laura's elbows shot out of the water like pistons and grabbed at the lake water to pull it behind her. She could feel her body cutting through the water with greater and greater ease. In some things, it is better to be a skinny little weirdo, she thought. But in the last push for the float, she felt a hand brush her ankle. Then again and again, until finally she felt fingers wrap around her ankle. Laura whipped her foot free and kicked Charlotte square in the face.

“My nose,” yelled Charlotte. She held her face while a stream of red dribbled over her lips and into the water.

“My God!” yelled Kittie. “Did you see that! Are you bleeding? Charlotte? Oh, Molly! Get a towel or something.”

“It's just a little friendly competition. Ain't nothing wrong with that,” said Molly.

“Well, maybe you're just being a little too easy here. This girl's bleeding after all!”

Kittie was taking all the precautions. “Now don't you lay down, you hear me. I don't want you falling asleep. And if you feel dizzy, you say something. I'll make mean old Molly hear take you to a hospital.”

Kittie didn't seem to know what Charlotte had done and Laura didn't want to bring it up. Charlotte evidently didn't think it was all that serious. She just nodded and sat on the float with a towel on her nose and with the same troubled look she had before. Laura felt as if she had spoiled the day. Molly put her arm around Laura.

When Kittie finally stopped fussing, she turned to Molly and said “You know it's about time someone showed you how to behave” and pushed her into the water.

The rest of the day was a kind of paradise. The tension of the moment disappeared as if it were bleached out by the sun. The ladies spoke about all kinds of things from movies to sports to

clothes. Molly told a story of how she had tried out for the All American Girls Baseball league, but hadn't made the cut. Kittie said she wished she had Audrey Hepburn's eyes. They talked about the difference of living on the bay versus living on the ocean. Kittie and Charlotte were ocean people. But Molly and Laura were bay people. Laura wasn't sure what the difference was, but maybe all the problems in the ocean didn't seem so bad because there was so much water to hide them in. In the bay, whatever had sunk, rotted, or spilled was hiding just beneath the surface. Sooner or later everyone would know it was there.

On the way home, the car was hot and the girls were asleep except for Laura and Molly. Laura sat in the front seat and watched the brush and marshland that stretched out along the channel. Without really knowing why, she asked Molly about the sluice.

“The Sluice? Over on Bay 1st? Sure. Your father was one of first people to shoot the sluice,” said Molly. “Then he said that girls couldn't do it so one day I tried.”

“You went in? You shot the sluice?”

“Sure. You go in, you know, during high tide and the water pushes you through. Just got to watch how you come up because it's not easy to catch the beams in there. The water pushes you through pretty fast.”

“I heard it's really dirty down there. Filled with graffiti and all,” said Laura.

“Well, it's dark. That's why you got to use your hands to catch beams. There's just enough air at the top for your face. I don't know about any graffiti, though.”

They crossed the bridge and entered Broad Channel. They passed the grocery store and the Laundromat, the church and the school. Then they passed the sluice. Laura saw her brother and Cock throwing stones at some old boats. Her eyes just fell to the floor. It was the one thing about Broad Channel: Everyone you loved was just around the corner from everyone you hated. Molly pulled the car over.

“Here's a few dollars. Go on back to the grocery store there and buy some milk and cold cuts for dinner. And a pack of Lucky's for me. And don't get lost.”

“You can't get lost in Broad Channel, Aunt Molly.”

“Oh, yes you can,” she said, looking in the rearview mirror. “You most certainly can.”

Molly looked over the back seat at the three women sleeping and then whispered: “You were right to kick her. I saw what she was doing to you. And when someone is doing something like that then they deserve a kick in the face. You hear me? You had never be ashamed to standing up for yourself, even if people don't quite understand at the time. It ain't about other people.”

Laura nodded her head. “Sorry.”

“And stop being sorry all the time. You don't get anywhere being sorry. Now go on and get me my cigarettes and pick up some pajamas on the way back. You're staying at my house tonight.”

Laura watched Molly's car pull away. She was glad to be staying at her house. She turned and walked on the crooked sidewalks towards the store. She knew she would have to pass her brother and his friends to get to the market, so she crossed the boulevard to walk on the other side so that they wouldn't see her. From across the street, she saw her brother yelling and jumping up and down on a piece of wood and Michael Czerniak with his arm in a sling. Then, with a bag full of groceries, she started heading back. But, in that half-second turn out of the store, she knew she wasn't going to cross the street. It was as if her anger and the rising tide were one, leading to that one dark place.

When she got there, a group of boys were throwing stones and looking over the edge of the sluice. Her brother was in the center of the boys, taller and bigger than them all.

“Pussy!” said her brother down into the canal. “C'mon Cock, get in there!”

She walked right behind her brother as he said this and looked at Michael Czerniak. She motioned to Michael to stay quiet.

She didn't want to disturb the natural habitat of her brother acting like a fool. Finally, Michael tapped Billy on the shoulder with his good hand.

"What the fuck do you want?" he said.

Laura looked at him for only a second because as soon as she came near him, his arms fell to the sides, the way he did when their father caught him doing something dumb. All the boys hushed themselves.

"Nice way to talk," she said.

"Who the hell let you out of your room? What did you do? Piss yourself? Get lost."

"This ain't your street. I got as much right."

Cock came up from the bay smiling and said, "Hey Laura."

"Hey, Cock."

"Cock, you cock, what are you doing? Get back down there."

"Shove off. You go down there," said Cock dryly.

Laura turned to Michael who seemed more wounded than simply a broken arm. "Did it hurt?" asked Laura.

"Not much, but it wasn't so smart."

"No, it wasn't. But I could've told you that before you jumped."

"Doc said that I could've got water up my ass and did internal damage."

They all laughed.

"Yea Bill got him good that time," said Cock trying to join in, but trailing off as if he said the wrong thing.

"Cock, get back down there, I said," barked Billy.

"What? Now he's going make you shoot the sluice too. You know, Cock, just because he done it doesn't mean you have to," said Laura.

They all laughed when Laura said that and for a second Laura was confused.

Cock proudly announced: “Billy never done it and no one else, either. It's impossible. As soon as you get sucked into that thing, you'd drown. Look.”

They all looked over the edge of the street to where the sluice was drawing the high tide into its mouth. The water turned as smooth a grey-green glass and bent towards the hole. All sorts of debris moved slowly towards it and then instantly disappeared.

“What do you mean, ‘never done it'?” asked Laura.

“We were just kidding with everyone. Ain't no one had the nerve enough to go into that thing,” said Cock.

“Then why are you here?”

“Billy said he wanted to do it, but he never did.”

Laura turned to Billy, who was red in the face. His stuck his hands deep into his pockets and he spit. “You're a real stupid ass, you know that, Cock?”

“Why don't you stop pushing people around, Billy?” demanded Laura.

“Why don't you mind your business? Ugly bitch.”

“It's all my business.”

“Eat shit.”

“Smells like you already did.”

The boys said “ooooh” at the same time. Billy knocked the groceries out of Laura's hands and the bottle of milk broke and was pouring out white all over the dirty street.

“Good job, Jerk! I'm going tell Aunt Molly what you did.”

“You can go tell that old butch anything you want. You can even go tell her I said she's a butch. Cause she is. Even Daddy said so.”

“You shut up, Billy Miller,” said Laura.

“Aw, what are you going do? Cry? C'mon cry for your old Aunt Molly. Cry!”

Laura watched as Billy's crooked teeth emerged from behind his thin lips and felt a numb anger come over her. She pushed Billy so hard that he lost his footing and fell into the water. He fell awkwardly, head first, and it turned her stomach to see him

go. She ran over the edge but couldn't see him right away. Then she heard his voice:

"Help! Help!"

Laura saw him standing in the water by the rocks. He had not fallen into the sluice. "What is it?" she said, pretending not to care.

"My arm! I fell on it! I think it's broke."

Laura and the boys went down to the edge of the water.

"That was some fall," said the Cock.

"Bullshit," said Laura, not sure if he was lying or not. She stepped closer to him but, as soon as she came near, Billy jumped up and pulled her head first into the water. At first he held her down, but then he dunked her, again and again, each time moving deeper into the water. Finally, he was chin high in the water and she scratched at him and grabbed his nuts until he let go. "Get off me!" she screamed, "You fucking asshole. I hate you. I hate you."