# Mama's Boys

*by* Townsend Walker

It was late. He'd put in a long day. Stopped at Tony's. A steak and a couple of glasses of St. Emilion; then grabbed a cab home. Uptown, he got out; saw somebody sprawled across the bottom steps of his brownstone.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

A pale face was illuminated by the street light. A voice rasped, "Charlie?"

"Do I know you?"

"It's Bill."

The side of his little brother's thin face was streaked with dirt, and a bruised patch of leg stuck out between his cuff and shoe. *Jeezus.* It was the grungy baby, sometimes in his brothers' clothes, sometimes in his sisters', always in everyone's way, the last of nine. Eventually one of the older kids would pick him up and plop him in the wobbly high chair they'd all used, then ignore him.

"What are you doing here, Billy?"

"Just come to see my big brother."

Billy started to get up and slipped.

"That fancy little wife of yours home?"

Charlie was glad she wasn't.

"Nope, took the kids to Rochester to visit her parents. Good thing for you."

*That was unnecessary, why do I let him get to me.* Charlie reached down to give his brother a hand. Close up, the acrid scent of urine assaulted him. "Christ, you smell."

"Can I use your shower, borrow some clothes?"

"Never change, do you? Always asking for something."

Billy stepped back.

"Just a shower and some clothes, then I'll go."

While Billy was upstairs showering, Charlie tried to remember the last time he'd seen his kid brother: three, maybe four years ago.

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They'd never been close; thirteen years between them. But then Billy had never been close to anyone. He'd show up at some family affair, guided by some preternatural sense of timing, clown for the kids, mock his more successful brothers and sisters, cause a row, and disappear.

Billy limped down the stairs in bare feet. Charlie's plum colored polo shirt came down to Billy's knees and you could have put two of him in it. Billy took after their father: small wiry body, long bony face, and a rusty mop of curls. Charlie had the dark plumpness of his mother's side, which after years of good living had developed into a slick look, black hair combed straight back, a thick Andy Garcia.

His living room was a museum with delicate sofas and chairs covered in pale yellow silk. The wooden arms and legs were carved and gilt. The walls were hung with tapestries. Small paintings dotted the nooks. Billy sat on the edge of the sofa, as far away from his brother as possible. He twitched and avoided looking him in the eye; seemed preoccupied figuring out the pattern in the carpet.

“A drink?” Charlie asked.

Billy reached out to take the glass. Charlie gasped when he saw his brother's hand. It was covered with an angry burn-scar, traced with white welts.

“My God, what happened?” Charlie sat down beside his brother on the sofa.

“Flashback on a fire crew in California. Bunch of us got caught when the fire jumped the line.”

Billy was twitching again.

“Did anyone here know? Did you tell anyone?” Charlie asked, knowing the answer.

“Sure, like you'd all have come rushing out,” Billy said.

“Well shit, Billy, we are family.”

Billy shrugged his shoulders.

“I took care of myself. Got some comp money, went to college and started writing stories. I sent one back for everyone to read; the one that got published. Never heard from any of you.”

Charlie had read Billy's story about an aging male stripper in Trenton. It had taken him two weeks to get through the thirty pages.

“I read it.”

“Really?” Billy leaned forward.

“You write well.”

Billy's eyes retreated and he slumped back on the sofa; put his face in his hands.

Through his fingers, Billy said, “Out in California, I went to college for a couple of years.”

“Yeah, you said.”

“That's one of the things they didn't fix--my head,” Billy said. “I can't remember things I just said sometimes.”

“Because of the fire?”

”No, it was before that. The doctors tried to figure it out, but no luck. How about another drink?”

Charlie pushed himself out of the plush sofa, went over to the sideboard and poured another couple of fingers for both of them. Then sat back in a chair facing Billy.

Billy threw his drink back, and lay across the sofa, staring at the ceiling. Charlie winced, thinking what Mary would say if she saw his calloused feet on her yellow silk.

“Looks like you've got a real nice life here.”

“We're doing okay,” Charlie said.

“The way I see it, Mom's the reason you're here. The way she brown-nosed that family she was working for. Took you with her: showing off her first born son, to suck-up some rich bitch. Me? I didn't even get to suck tit; Mama was all dried up by the time I got there.”

Charlie thought about how their mother had taken him with her to the big house on East End Avenue. She'd dress him up like they were going to Mass. While his mother cleaned, Charlie waited in the library, a room larger than their apartment, and read. On the bus home, his mother quizzed him about the books. She had called him, “my little genius.”

Billy pulled himself up, suddenly alert. “This is not the life I dreamed about. Not even close.”

*Oh screw, here we go again, bitching about how everything is so unfair.*

He stared at Charlie. “You know, I could have been where you are, but you got the breaks, and I didn't,” Billy said. “By the time Mama got to me she didn't care: only thing left in her was meanness.”

“What are you talking about, you dickhead? There wasn't a mean bone in her body.”

It didn't seem Billy heard what he'd said.

“It just turned in on her, killed her. That's why she died, you know; that's why she died right after I left,” Billy went on. “Nobody to be mean to, nothing left to keep her standing.”

Charlie was stunned. He stared at the floor. *This was not Mama.* He remembered her bent figure, the house cleaning lady, dragging herself up the steps to their apartment every evening. *Where's he getting this from? We worked together, everyone pitched in, especially after Pops ran away.*

“And what do you think the rest of us were doing? You there in your crib. We were out selling papers, running errands for the neighbors, making deliveries for the grocer. Mama said, ‘Can't let a little baby go without milk.' Well, look at the little baby now.”

Billy looked up, eyes like cracked mirrors. “You want to know what it was like after you left. She never came to my games. She was in bed when I came home from school. She never made supper. Then when I was sixteen she made me quit school and get a job; said she needed the money.”

“Look Billy, you want to bitch. Don't bitch at me,” Charlie said. “I'll take you out to the cemetery, to Mama's grave; you can yell at her.”

Billy slumped into the sofa

“Cut to the chase,” Charlie said. “Why are you doing here?”

“Well, there's this program I heard about in Jersey I'd like to get into. It costs more than I've got; I was hoping you'd help. Get me on my feet.”

Billy stood up and started pacing the room, talking to the walls. “Electrician training. You go to school for a year, then become an apprentice. Twenty an hour they make. I need $2500 to enroll. I know I'll do well, then the school will cover the rest. I'll pay you back.”

Charlie looked guardedly at his brother. Billy continued in a hurry. “Maybe $200, just to get started.”

“We'll see,” Charlie said.

Billy shrugged his shoulders and held out his hands with an if-you-can expression on his face. The two brothers sat facing one another; Charlie looking at Billy, Billy looking around the room, then yawning. “You got an extra bedroom in this mansion of yours?”

Charlie hesitated. “Well, I guess you can stay in John's room. Just tonight, though; Mary and the boys are coming back tomorrow.”

He wasn't sure when they were coming back. Mary had left in a huff. *But what the hell; it had happened before; she'd get over it.*

“I guess it's beddy-bye then,” Billy said.

Charlie led the way up the stairs. At the doorway of the bedroom, Billy peered in.

“Son's a lot like you, huh? Neat freak, everything in its place.”

Billy went in sideways, and a bottle clanked against the frame. Charlie shook his head slowly.

“Sleeping syrup,” Billy said.

Charlie brushed his teeth, went to bed, but couldn't sleep. Billy. What could he do? He looked at the clock: 1:30. Cursed, thinking about his court date downtown at nine. A sleeping pill? Instead, he got up, and rearranged his papers. Finally, he closed his eyes, nearly asleep. A horrific crash. It sounded like a tree had fallen on the house. *Billy!* He sprang out of bed, got tangled in his pajamas, ran down the hall, sounds like the wall was being shredded, the door of his son's room was stuck.

“Open up! What's going on in there?”

Another crash.

“Billy!  For God's sake.”

The door gave way; he fell into the room cutting his foot on something.  *Dammit to hell!*  The bookshelf had been ripped from the wall, drawers were pulled out, clothes scattered, lamps smashed, Billy face down, hands bleeding, pants off, polo shirt bunched around his waist, stench of bourbon and urine in the air.

“Jesus Christ, Billy, what happened?

“Someone in here, there was someone in the room, looking for me, they went inside the wall, I tried to find them; couldn't.”

Billy struggled up, lay down on the bed and began to snore. Charlie grabbed him by the shoulder.

“Get up, you son of a bitch.”

Then Charlie saw his son's trophy busted up in the corner. “Why'd you do that?”

“I don't know.”

“Don't know?  You lousy bastard.  Don't know?  How many MVP trophies did you ever win?”

Billy began to search for a pair of pants to put on, rummaging through the debris of clothes, books, shelves, and electronic gear strewn on the floor.

“You rotten scum.  “I ought to call the cops.  You're going down to the bus terminal and I'm buying you a ticket out of here.

Billy slumped and started crying, his face twisted, the scar on his hand a livid red.  Charlie looked down at his pathetic little brother.

“If I hadn't seen you being brought home from the hospital in Mama's arms, I would have never thought we had the same mother.”

“We didn't,” Billy said in a near whisper.  “We didn't.”