

CATHERINE RYAN HYDE

BESTSELLING RICHARD & JUDY AUTHOR



What if the only way  
to save your mother...  
is to leave her?

# Don't Let Me Go

## About the Book

*'Remember how you said you'd always find me? Well, don't ever forget that. Please.'*

### **GRACE**

Ten-year-old Grace knows that her mum loves her, but her mum loves drugs too. There's only so long Grace can fend off the 'woman from the county' who is threatening to put her into care. Her only hope is...

### **BILLY**

Grown-man Billy Shine hasn't left his apartment for years. People scare him. And so day in, day out, he lives a perfectly orchestrated, silent life within his four walls. Until now...

### **THE PLAN**

Grace bursts into Billy's life with a loud voice and a plan to get her mum clean. But it won't be easy, because they will have to take away the one thing her mum needs most ... Grace.

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Also by Catherine Ryan Hyde

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# **DON'T LET ME GO**

*Catherine Ryan Hyde*



BLACK SWAN

In memory of Pat, who got me into my first writers'  
workshop ... somehow.



EVERY TIME BILLY looked out his front sliding-glass door, he saw the ugly, gray LA winter afternoon move that much closer to dark. A noticeable difference each time. Then he laughed, and chastised himself out loud, saying, 'What did we think, Billy Boy, that sunset would change its mind and break with tradition just this one night?'

He looked out again, hiding behind his curtain and wrapping it around himself as he leaned in front of the glass.

The little girl was still there.

'We know what this means,' he said. 'Don't we?'

But he didn't answer himself. Because he *did* know. So there was really no need to belabor the conversation.

He pulled his old flannel bathrobe over his pajamas, wrapping it too tightly around his stick-thin frame, then tying it with a rope that had replaced the robe's sash some half-dozen years earlier.

Yes.

Billy Shine was about to go outside.

Not out the apartment door and on to the street. Nothing that insanely radical. But out on to his little first-floor patio, or balcony, or whatever you might properly call that postage-stamp-sized piece of real estate adorned with two rusty lawn chairs.

He looked out again first, as though he might see a storm or a war or an alien invasion brewing. Some act of God that might justify his failure to follow through. But it was only a tiny bit closer to dark, which was hardly unexpected.

He unwedged the broomstick – the improvised burglar-proof lock for his sliding-glass patio door – coating his fingers with dust and lint as he did so. It hadn't been moved in ages. And it shamed him, because he prided himself on cleanliness.

'Note to self,' he said out loud. 'Clean everything. Even if it's something we think we won't use anytime soon. On principle, if for no other reason.'

Then he slid the door open just the tiniest bit, sucking in his breath, loudly, at the feel of the chill outdoor air.

The little girl glanced up, then down at her feet again.

Her hair looked almost comically disheveled, as if no one had brushed it for a week. Her blue cardigan sweater had been buttoned incorrectly. She could not have been more than nine or ten. She was sitting on a step, her arms wrapped around her own knees, rocking and staring at her shoes.

He'd expected something more from her, some more dramatic reaction to his presence, yet couldn't put his finger on exactly what he'd thought that might be.

He sat gingerly on the very edge of one rusty chair, leaning over the railing, looking down at the little girl's head from maybe three feet above her.

'A gracious good evening to you,' he said.

'Hi,' she said, in a voice like a soprano foghorn.

It made him jump. He almost upended the chair.

Though hardly an expert on children, Billy reasoned that a girl who looked that depressed should speak in a barely audible voice. Not that he hadn't heard this little girl's voice through the walls many times before. She lived in the basement apartment with her mother, so he heard her



often. Too often. And she'd never sounded only barely audible. Yet, somehow, he'd expected her to make an exception on maybe just this one occasion.

'Are you my neighbor?' she asked, in the same startling voice.

This time he was ready for it.

'It would seem that way,' he said.

'Then how come I never met you?'

'You're meeting me now. Take what you can get from this life.'

'You talk funny.'

'You talk loud.'

'Yeah, that's what everybody says. Do other people say you talk funny?'

'Not that I can recall,' Billy said. 'Then again, I don't talk to enough people to gather a genuine consensus.'

'Well, take my word for it. It's a weird way to talk, especially to a kid. What's your name?'

'Billy Shine. What's yours?'

'Shine? Like the stars, or like your floor shines if you wax it?'

'Yes. Like that.'

'Where did you get a name like Billy Shine?'

'Where did you get *your* name? Which, by the way, you still haven't told me.'

'Oh. It's Grace. And I got it from my mother.'

'Well, I didn't get the name Billy Shine from my mother. From my mother I got Donald Feldman. So I changed it.'

'Why?'

'Because I was in show business. I needed a dancer's name.'

'Donald Feldman isn't a dancer's name?'

'Not even a little bit.'

'How do you find out what is and what isn't?'

'You just know it in your heart. So, look. We could sit out here all night and continue this charming exchange. But I

actually came out here to ask you why you're sitting outside all by yourself.'

'I'm not, really,' she said. 'I'm really out here with you.'

'It's almost dark.'

She moved for the first time since he'd come outside, looking up as if to fact-check his sentence.

'Yeah,' she said. 'It is. So, you're not in show business any more?'

'No. Not at all. Not in any way. I'm not in any business now.'

'Didn't you like being a dancer?'

'I loved it. I adored it. It was my world. I sang, too. And acted.'

'So why'd you stop?'

'I wasn't cut out for it.'

'You weren't good?'

'I was very good.'

'Then what weren't you cut out for?'

Billy sighed. He had come out here to ask questions, not to answer them. And yet it had seemed so natural, so inevitable, when the roles reversed on him. In fact, he wondered why he'd ever thought he could be the grown-up in this - or, for that matter, any other - conversation. Just good acting skills, maybe. But who even knew where those skills had gone off to these days? What you don't use, you lose.

'Everything,' he said. 'I wasn't cut out for anything. Life. Life is something I'm just not cut out for.'

'But you're alive.'

'Marginally so, yes.'

'So you're doing it.'

'Not well, though. I am not turning in a suitable performance. Thank God the critics have moved on to more promising pastures, and not a moment too soon. Could you go inside if you tried? I mean, if you needed to?'

'Sure. I got the key right here.'

She held it up in the fading light. Held it for him to see. A shiny, new-looking key dangling on a cord around her neck. It caught and reflected a beam of light from the streetlamp, which had just come on. A miniature flash for Billy's eyes.

Shine, Billy thought. I *do* remember the concept.

'I'm having a little trouble,' he said, 'understanding why anyone would be outside when they could just as easily be in.'

'Don't you ever go outside?'

Oh, good God, Billy thought. Here we go again. There was just no way to stay on top of the conversation.

'Not if I can help it. Aren't you scared?'

'Not if I stay this close to home.'

'Well, *I'm* scared. I look out and see you out here all by yourself, and *I'm* scared. Even if you're not. So maybe I could talk you into doing me a favor. Maybe you could go back inside so I don't have to be scared any more.'

The little girl sighed grandly. Theatrically. A girl after Billy's own heart.

'*Oh, OK.* I was really only going to stay out till the streetlights came on, anyway.'

And she trudged up the stairs and disappeared inside.

'Great,' Billy said out loud, to himself, and to the dusk. 'If I'd known that, I could have saved myself a whole lot of honesty.'

Billy didn't sleep well that night. Not at all. He wasn't able to prove definitively that the massive, unspeakable act of going outdoors had caused the upset and the bad night, but it seemed reasonable to think it had. It was a place to which he could direct blame, at least, which was better than nothing.

When he did drift off, usually for just a few minutes at a time, he experienced the flapping of the wings. A recurrent dream, or half-dream, or illusion. Or hallucination. The

more disturbed by life he felt on any given day, the more the wings would beat in his sleep by night.

They tended to startle him awake again.

He did finally, eventually, get to sleep for real, but not until an hour or two after the sun came up. And by the time he finally woke, stretched, and rose – for it didn't pay to hurry these delicate issues – it was well after three thirty in the afternoon.

He rose, and tied back his hair in the usual manner – a long, narrow ponytail down the middle of his back. Then he leaned over the bathroom sink and shaved by feel, sometimes keeping his eyes closed, sometimes gazing into the plain wood of his medicine cabinet as if it contained a mirror, as it probably had at one time, and as most medicine cabinets did.

He made coffee, still halfway hearing the rustling of those wings in his head. A kind of non-macabre haunting. But a haunting, nonetheless.

He opened the refrigerator, only to remember, just as he did, that he was out of cream. And groceries would not be delivered again until Thursday.

He dumped three spoonfuls of sugar into his sad black coffee, stirred without enthusiasm, then carried the mug to his big sliding-glass door. He pulled back the curtains in order to peek at the spot where he'd seen the little girl the previous evening. Maybe she'd only been a dream or a vision, like the beating of wings, only louder.

She was still there. So apparently not.

Well. Not *still*, he told himself. Inwardly, silently, he corrected his own thinking. She had slept inside. Of course. She must be out there *again*. Yes, *again*. That felt at least slightly less disturbing.

He looked up to see old Mrs Hinman, the woman who lived in the attic apartment of his building, make her way down the sidewalk toward home.

‘Good,’ Billy said, out loud but in a whisper. ‘Tell her to go inside.’

The old woman moved in a slow but determined waddle, paper shopping-bag clutched tight, the neck of her single bottle of red wine protruding over the top of the bag. There was always a bottle, Billy had noticed, and it always protruded. Only one bottle, so it wasn’t that she drank all that much. Was she advertising? Or, as seemed more likely to Billy, keeping it close at hand in case it should be needed as a weapon?

This had been a decent working-class neighborhood once, even as recently as twelve years ago, and Billy could not forget that. He could not release the observation. Some inner part of him always felt he should have grown accustomed to the situation, but it was a habit. And the breaking of habits was not Billy Shine’s strong suit.

Wanting to know what, if anything, Mrs Hinman would do regarding the girl’s situation, Billy cracked open the sliding-glass door, as quietly as possible. Then he secured a post behind the curtain, still holding his pathetic black coffee, and watched and listened.

His heart pounded, but he wasn’t sure why. Then again, in what situation was he sure of ... really ... anything?

The old woman stopped at the bottom of the gray concrete stairs and looked up at the child, who was playing with a cheap-looking hand-held electronic game. She didn’t earn Grace’s attention immediately. But in time the girl grimaced, as if she had just lost the game anyway, and looked down to meet Mrs Hinman’s eyes.

‘Hello,’ Mrs Hinman said.

‘Hi,’ the girl said in return. That voice again. She had a voice that seemed capable of doubling as a glass-cutting device.

‘Where’s your mother?’

‘Inside.’

‘Why are you out here all by yourself?’

'Because my mother's inside.'

'Don't you think it's dangerous? This isn't a very good neighborhood, you know. What if some bad man came?'

'Then I would run inside and lock the door.'

'But maybe he will run faster than you can.'

'But I'm closer to the door than he is.'

'I suppose that's true. But it still troubles me. What's your mother doing in there that's so important?'

'She's asleep.'

'At four o'clock in the afternoon?'

'I don't know,' the little girl said. 'What time is it?'

'It's four o'clock in the afternoon.'

'Then, yes.'

Mrs Hinman sighed. Shook her head a few times. Then she made her way up the stairs, one apparently difficult step at a time, as though climbing an alp, and disappeared from Billy's view. He heard her come through the outer door and into the foyer.

And still the little girl stayed.

A few moments later he was washing his coffee cup in the sink, having poured most of the nasty stuff down the drain.

'Only a barbarian drinks coffee with no cream,' he said out loud, 'and we may be many things, and we deny none of them, but we are not a barbarian.'

Perhaps he'd make himself a cup of tea later, to replace the caffeine his body had come to expect. But when he checked the refrigerator again, he found he had no lemon. And only a barbarian drinks tea with no lemon.

He heard a pounding on the door of the basement apartment, just underneath his. It was the apartment where the little girl lived with her mother.

He waited, still and silent, wanting to hear if the mother would answer. But nothing and no one moved below him - at least, not that he was able to hear.

Then a much larger pounding startled him, and made him jump, and set his heart to hammering again. It was the sort of pounding a policeman will exact on a door just before breaking it down and entering without the occupant's permission.

Silence.

Maybe the mother wasn't even home. Maybe the little girl had been instructed in the art of making excuses for her mother while she worked, or ran around with men. It seemed incomprehensible, but Billy knew it happened as a matter of course these days. Motherhood was nothing like what it had used to be.

Then again, what was?

One more unusual thing transpired on that day.

It was only a few minutes later. Billy had been hearing the murmuring of voices in the hall, near the mailboxes. But that was nothing unusual, so he didn't make a point of listening.

It sounded like Mrs Hinman and Rayleen, that tall, pretty African-American woman who lived right across the hall from him. The one Billy sometimes envied through the glass, because she had style, and presented herself well. She always seemed sad, Rayleen. But Billy reasoned that to add happiness to your wish list would be to put the whole list of requests out of feasible reach. In the real world, style and appearance would have to do.

'Take what you can get from this life,' as he had told the little girl. As he would tell other people, if he knew any.

But then, suddenly, voices were being raised.

He heard Rayleen say - shout - with an agitation that seemed unlike her, 'Do not call Child Protective Services on that poor little girl! Promise me you won't! Promise!'

And Mrs Hinman, obviously alarmed by being shouted at, raised her voice and said, 'Well, what would be so wrong about that? It's what they're there for.'

Billy slunk to the door and pressed his ear against it.

'If you really hate that poor little girl so much,' Rayleen said, still distraught, 'you might as well just shoot her. I swear it would be a million times more humane than putting her in foster care.'

'Now why on earth would you say a thing like that?' Mrs Hinman replied.

And Rayleen said, 'Because I know. Because I know things. Things you don't know. Things you'll never have to know, and just be grateful for that.'

'Are you a social worker?' Mrs Hinman asked.

Rayleen snorted, and then said, 'No, I'm not a social worker. I'm a manicurist. You know that. I work at that hair and nail salon down on the boulevard.'

'Oh. Yes, of course. Of course you do. I'd just forgotten.'

And then, frustratingly, they moved off in the direction of the stairs to Mrs Hinman's apartment. And, though they continued to converse, their voices now came through Billy's door as nothing more than a muffled buzz.

Nearly two hours later, Billy looked out his glass door on to the gray winter day. Looked down on to the porch to see if the girl was still there.

She was.

He could have looked sooner. He'd thought of looking sooner. But he knew she would be, and he knew it would frighten him to see that she was.

He made a mental note to ask, for a second time - that is, if he ever got up the nerve to talk to her again - why she didn't sit inside.





THERE WAS JUST no getting around it. Curtis Schoenfeld was a giant stinkhead. Grace had known it for a long time, and so she wasn't quite sure why she'd listened to him, and why she'd let it hurt her feelings, what he'd said.

Why had she even believed him?

She sort of had, though, and that was just the problem.

You know how sometimes the nicest person in the world will yell at you and hurt your feelings because you're doing something like talking too much when they're trying to think or worry (or both)? Well, stinkheads are just the opposite of that, Grace supposed, because every now and then they will open their stinky mouths and say something horrible that might even possibly be true.

It was at the Saturday night meeting, the one in the church. Except not the church part of the church, not the religious part. It was the room where they did quilting lessons and had potlucks and stuff, and Sunday school, except this was only Saturday.

Some people even called that meeting the kid meeting, because lots of the people there were new in the program, and babysitters cost money. So people just brought their kids along. And it was a very big, very long room, so that the meeting people could sit on one side and have their meeting, and the kids could sit on the other side and be kids.

The kids had to be quiet. The meeting people didn't have to be quiet.

That F-word guy was sharing. One of the guys Grace didn't like. He seemed mad at everything, so that when he met you, he was already mad at you, and he didn't even know you yet. And every other word that came out of his mouth was that one Grace would not be likely to mention (but it started with an F).

'I mean, really,' she'd said once, complaining about him to her mom. 'Every other word. Get a dictionary.'

It's not like she exactly cared. She knew the word. She'd heard it before. It just seemed rude.

So Grace was on the other side of the room with Curtis Schoenfeld and Anna and River Lee. Anna and River Lee were playing pick-up sticks, but Curtis couldn't play, because he was in a wheelchair, and he couldn't reach down that far. He had that spinal thing, that spinal-something. He always said spina-something, but Grace knew he was just being lazy or stupid and leaving off the 'l' at the end, because everybody knows it's spinal, with an 'l' at the end. He was older than Grace, maybe even twelve, which is why she thought he should know these things.

So Grace wasn't playing pick-up sticks, either, because Curtis couldn't. How nice is that? Which is why Grace thought, after the fact, that it was a particularly bad time for Curtis to go and be a poophead to her.

And she wasn't shy - also after the fact - about sharing that opinion.

So, anyway, he leaned his big head over to her (he had a big head and a red face, that Curtis) and said, 'I heard your mom went out.'

Grace said, 'Curtis, you big moron, she did not go out. She's sitting right there.' And she pointed to the meeting side of the room.

He laughed, but it wasn't like a real laugh. It was more of a fake laugh, like an idiot laugh. First it just squeaked

out of his stinky lips like a balloon when you stretch the end (the end you just blew into, that is) and let air back out. But then later he changed it on purpose, and then it sounded like a donkey making that donkey noise.

Grace usually tried not to talk about Curtis like he was a total poophead, because you're supposed to be extra nice to someone who's in a wheelchair, but Curtis Schoenfeld just kept pushing it too far. Sometimes you just have to call a poophead a poophead, she firmly believed, no matter what he's sitting on.

'Not out of the *room*,' he said, 'out of the program. She's out. She's using. I can't believe you didn't know.'

Then the room got kind of spinny for just a second, and she could hear all those F-words firing off like little pops from a toy gun, like little firecrackers, and Grace remembered thinking how she *had* been extra-sleepy lately, her mom. That was in the one second before Grace decided to decide it wasn't true in any way.

So she gathered herself up big and she said, 'Curtis Schoenfeld, you are a total boogerhead!'

The F-words stopped. Everything stopped. It got real quiet in that big room, and Grace thought, Oooops. I think that might have been just a little tiny bit too loud.

Grace always had trouble with that. Loud came naturally to her, and quiet took a lot of work, and if she let down her guard for even one tiny little second the loud would come marching right back in again.

Grace's mom got up from the table and came back to the kid part of the room, and all three of the other kids gave Grace that look. You know. That 'you're gonna get it now' look.

She took hold of Grace's arm and walked her outside.

It was dark out there, and kind of cold. People always think it doesn't get cold in LA, but it gets plenty cold sometimes. And, also, they were in a neighborhood where it's not so smart to be outside, but Grace figured her mom

must've thought they were close enough to the people inside to be OK. Well. She didn't know what her mom thought, really, she just knew what *she* thought, which is that she would yell like the devil if anybody came up to them, and run inside for help. And she knew her mom must've felt safe enough, because she lit a cigarette and then sat down on the cold street with her back up against the church.

She ran a hand through her hair and sighed real big, and Grace could see a sort of embarrassing rip in her jeans.

'Grace, Grace, Grace,' she said. She seemed too calm, and Grace wondered why she wasn't getting mad. 'Can't you ever just be quiet?'

'I try,' Grace said. 'I try to be quiet, really I do.'

Her mom sighed another time, and puffed on her cigarette, and she seemed to be moving kind of slow.

So then Grace gathered up everything she had that was brave, and she said, 'Are you on drugs again?'

She braced for her mom to get mad, but nothing happened.

Her mom just blew out a long stream of smoke, and stared at it all the way out, like maybe if she watched closely enough it might sing and dance or something, and Grace remembered thinking she was pretty sure her mom used to do everything faster.

When her mom finally said something, this is what she said: 'I'm going to meetings. I'm at a meeting right now. I still call Yolanda every day. I'm working my ass off here, kiddo. I don't know what more you want from me.'

'Nothing,' Grace said. 'I'm sorry, I don't want anything more from you, that's fine. I'm sorry I was too loud. I was trying to be quiet, really I was, but then Curtis Schoenfeld was a boogerhead to me. And when I was trying to be extra-nice to him, too. He's such a liar. I wish I didn't have to go to meetings with him. Couldn't we go to different meetings, with no Curtis?'

A really, *really* long wait while her mom decided to answer.

'Like which ones? They don't all allow kids, you know.'

'Like that nice AA meeting at the rec center.'

'Right now I need the NA ones more.'

'Oh.'

'Just play with Anna. And ... you know ... the one with the weird name.'

'River Lee.'

'Right.'

'I wasn't *playing* with Curtis. You don't have to *play* with Curtis for him to be a boogerhead to you. He just *is*. There's no staying away from it.'

Grace's mom stomped out her cigarette and peered at her watch, extra-close in the dark, as if it had to touch her nose before she could see it.

Then she said, 'Deal with it for another twenty-five minutes, 'K?'

Grace sighed loud enough for her mom to hear. 'OK,' she said. But it came out sounding like the F-word guy trying to say 'pleased to meet you' and not sounding very pleased.

All three of the kids were staring at her when she went back in.

River Lee said, 'Did she yell at you?' in a sort of almost-whisper.

And Grace said, 'No. Not at all. Not even a little bit.'

She was being kind of snooty-proud in front of Curtis, and she knew it.

Nobody went back to playing right away, which was weird, because then they pretty much had no choice but to listen to the meeting. This ratty-looking woman, the kind of person you see sleeping on the street, shared how her kids got taken away when she went to jail for helping her boyfriend rob a bank. All behind drugs. They gave up the kids because they wanted more drugs, and that seemed like a good trade at the time.

Really depressing.

Then some other people shared, and they were sort of medium-depressing.

Some meetings weren't depressing. That nice AA meeting at the rec center was much better, Grace felt, because the people there had more time in the program, and usually it didn't make you want to kill yourself.

After the meeting Yolanda came up to Grace, and smiled down from way up above her, and Grace smiled back.

'Hey, Grace,' she said. 'Do you have my phone number?'

Grace shook her head and said, 'No, why would I have your phone number? It's my mom who's supposed to call you, not me.'

'I just thought you might want to have it.'

She handed Grace down a piece of paper with the numbers on it, and Grace read them off to herself, though she wasn't sure why. Maybe because it felt like school, like homework, as if Yolanda were saying, 'Look at these numbers and see if you know what they all are.' Grace knew her numbers really well, but did it anyway.

'OK. Um. Why would I want to have it again?'

'Just in case.'

'Just in case what?'

'Just in case you ever needed anything.'

'Then I would ask my mom.'

'Well, just in case she wasn't around, or you couldn't ask her for some reason.'

'Like what reason?'

'I don't know, Grace. Anything. If you were alone or something. Or if you were having trouble getting her to wake up. If you got scared about anything, you could call.'

That was when Grace decided not to ask any more questions. Not even one more.

'OK, thanks,' she said. And she stuck the phone number in her pocket.

'Don't tell your mom.'

*'OK.'*

Stop talking, she was thinking, but she didn't say it.

Then Yolanda gave them a ride home, which was good, because it's scary riding the bus home in the dark, and Grace was already scared.



BILLY WOKE SUDDENLY, hearing someone shout outside. It had come from the sidewalk in front of the apartment house.

Just one word.

'Hey!'

He squeezed his eyes closed again, mourning the sudden loss of his expectation for the new day: simply that it would be suitably quiet, and without conflict.

Then, being a realist at heart, he jumped up and slunk to his front lookout place, the big sliding-glass patio door, and peered around the curtain.

The girl was still there. No, not still. Again. Again, he meant.

Felipe Alvarez, one of his upstairs neighbors, was squatted down next to her, apparently engaging her in conversation. And Jake Lafferty, his other upstairs neighbor, was trotting up the walk to intervene, as if he found the scene quite unsatisfactory.

Then again, from what little he had been able to hear and observe over the years, Billy gathered that his gruff neighbor Lafferty found precious few situations to his liking. In fact, Lafferty even took it a step further by wearing that dissatisfaction on his sleeve, a misguided badge of ... well, something. Billy tried to decide what, but found he couldn't imagine.



Now Lafferty trotted to the base of the stairs and called out, 'Hey! José! What are you doing with that little girl?'

Felipe rose to his feet. Not combative, so much - well, not quite, Billy gathered - but ruffled, and on guard. It made Billy's poor tired heart hammer again, because it smacked of conflict, his least-favorite life element.

If only that little girl would go inside! Her presence there on the stairs, day in and day out, was like a wild card thrown into Billy's day, dealing him terrifyingly unpredictable hands.

But, terror or no, he wanted to hear what came next. So, ever so quietly, he slid open the patio door about six inches, the better to watch and listen.

'First off,' Felipe said in his fluent but heavily accented English, 'my name is not José.'

'Well, I didn't mean that it was,' Lafferty said. 'It's just an expression. A nickname. You know.'

'I *don't* know,' Felipe said. 'I don't know at all. Here's what I know. I know I've told you my name prob'ly ten times. And I know you told me your name once, and I don't never forget it. It's Jake. Right? So how bout I just call you Joe instead? I mean, most white American guys are named Joe, right? So that'll be close enough, don't you think?'

Billy glanced down at the little girl, to see if she looked afraid. But she gazed back up at the two men with an open, almost eager face. As if what happened next could only be entertaining and fun.

She was plump, that little girl. What was it these days with kids and extra weight? In Billy's day, kids ran around. There was barely such a thing as a fat kid. If there was, it was a rarity.

Then again, he'd spent nearly his entire childhood in dance class, which is hardly the land in which you'd find a plump kid - if there was such a phenomenon. Oh, he'd gone to school, of course. What choice would he have had? But he'd blocked those memories as best he could.

'I know his name!' Grace said. Well, shrieked.

But Felipe held up one hand to her and said, 'No, wait. Let's just wait and see if *he* knows it.'

'Listen you—' Lafferty said, signaling that he'd had quite enough.

Billy's heart hammered faster, wondering if one of the men would strike the other. But Lafferty never even managed to finish his sentence. Because, no matter how firmly you corked the mouth on that little girl, it didn't stay corked any longer than just that moment.

'It's Felipe!' she shouted, obviously proud of herself.

'Fine,' Lafferty said. 'Felipe. How about you answer my question now, Felipe?'

'Oh, yeah, and that's the other thing,' Felipe said. 'I was just asking Grace how come she's not in school, and that's *all* I was doing, and I don't appreciate your suggesting otherwise.'

'You really are always looking for a fight, aren't you?'

'Me? *Me?* I'm not the one looking for a fight, *compañero*. Every time I see you, you got that same chip on your shoulder. I don't fight with nobody. You ask anybody who knows me. You just carry that same fight with you every place you go, and then dress it up to look like the other guy's fight. You musta had that chip on your shoulder so long you don't even see it no more. I bet you don't even know what the world would look like without that great big chip blocking your view.'

Lafferty swelled his chest and opened his mouth to speak, but the noisy girl beat him to it.

'Do you guys have to fight?' she asked, at full volume.

Billy smiled, inwardly admiring her. From where on earth did that brand of courage emerge? Then again, she was a kid. A kid could get away with just about anything.

Lafferty looked down at the girl disapprovingly.

'Why *aren't* you in school?'

'Her name is Grace,' Felipe said.

'I know that,' Lafferty said, but it came off as unconvincing, and Billy was not sure, from the sound of it, whether Lafferty had known that at all. 'Why aren't you in school, Grace?'

'Cause I'm not allowed to walk all that way by myself. My mom has to take me. And she's asleep.'

'At nine o'clock in the morning?'

'Is it nine o'clock?'

'It is. Five after.'

'Then, yeah. At nine o'clock.'

'That doesn't sound right.'

'You're the one with the watch,' Grace said.

Lafferty sighed miserably. 'Do you have a key?'

Yes, Billy thought. She does. It's very new. It sparkles. It has shine. That wonderful, indefinable quality. Shine.

'Yep.' She held the key up so Lafferty could see it. It still dangled on the long cord around her neck.

'Go inside and see if you can wake her up.'

'I already tried.'

'Try again. Will ya?'

The girl blew out her breath, loud and dramatic. Then she rose to her feet and tromped inside.

The minute she did, Felipe made his way down the stairs. Lafferty moved closer, stood nearly chest to chest with the younger man, and they stared each other down.

Billy leaned on the edge of the sliding door, feeling mildly faint.

'I'm not your *compañero*,' Lafferty said.

'You don't even know what it means.'

'No, I don't, and that's just the trouble.'

'It's not an insult.'

'Well, how am I to know? When I was your age, I was taught to respect my elders. My father taught me that.'

'You know what *my* father taught *me*? That if I wanted respect I better plan on earning it. All I did was get down and ask that little girl how come she wasn't in school, and

then here you come out of nowhere, treating me like I'm some kind of child-molester or something.'

'You shouldn't even ask her *that* much. It's a crazy world. Everybody's suspicious about everything. Guy your age shouldn't even get that near a little girl to ask anything at all. It could be taken the wrong way.'

'A guy *my age*? You sure my age is the problem here? What about you? You asked her.'

'That's different. I'm older.'

'Oh. Right. I forgot. Guys in their fifties are never child-molesters.'

'You got a mouth on you, son.'

'I'm not your son.'

'You're sure as hell not. If you were my son you'd treat me with respect.'

Just then Grace appeared again, and the two men jumped back, as if the little girl were their parent or their teacher, and they'd been caught fighting. It seemed ludicrous to Billy from the outside, from the observer's stance, but in another way he could imagine how such a thing could happen in the confusion of the moment.

'She won't wake up,' Grace said.

Lafferty looked at Felipe, who looked back.

'That doesn't seem right,' Lafferty said to Felipe. Then, to the girl, 'Did you see any bottles lying around?'

'No. What kind of bottles?'

'Like the kind of bottles you drink from.'

'She wasn't drinking.'

'Is she OK? Should somebody call a doctor?'

'She's not sick. You just can't wake her up when she's sleeping.'

She sat back down on the stairs, as if planning on staying a while.

Lafferty looked back at Felipe again. Then he took the young man by the sleeve and pulled him across the weedy grass and out of the earshot of the little girl.

And that, unfortunately, put them squarely out of the range of Billy's ears as well.

But they weren't fighting now. That much Billy could tell from their body language. They had their heads together, conferring about something, deciding something. Occasionally Lafferty would glance over his shoulder toward Grace.

'Have a wonderful solution,' Billy said, out loud, but quietly enough so as not to give himself away to Grace, who was still quite close by on the stairs. 'Because this is certainly a problem.'

But a moment later Felipe peeled away and strode down the sloping lawn, out on to the sidewalk, and down the street.

Lafferty came up the stairs, and Billy waited hopefully, still thinking his neighbor might have a perfect idea up his sleeve. But he walked right by Grace, as if some alien force field had suddenly rendered her invisible.

Just as his foot touched the top step, he looked up and saw Billy watching - caught his eye - which was as close as possible to the only part of Billy peeking around the curtain. He stopped in his tracks.

'What're *you* looking at?' he bellowed.

Billy leaped backwards into his own apartment, folded over himself and sank to the rug, his heart fluttering in panic. He remained in this highly protective posture until he'd heard his neighbor come through the front apartment house door, close it behind him, and move along the hall and up the stairs.

Then he jumped up and slammed the glass patio door closed, quickly and gingerly, as if the door itself had been the source of all this upset.

He did not look out again at any time that morning.

He knew the girl must still be out there, but he could not bring himself to check.

It was almost dusk when he began to debate the issue with himself. Out loud.

'We don't want to know *that* badly,' he said.

Then, upon some reflection, 'We do want to know. Of course. Of course we do. Just not *that* badly.'

'Besides,' he added a moment later, 'it's not dark enough.'

He glanced out his sliding-glass door again.

'Then again, when the streetlights come on, it will be too late. Won't it? And then we'll have to wonder all night. And wondering tends to keep us awake.'

He sighed deeply, and tied on his old robe. But not really because he wanted to ask the question so badly as to brave the outdoors for his answer. More because there was simply no other way to end the utter exhaustion of wrestling with himself on the issue.

The little girl looked up when he slid the patio door open.

Billy did not initially step out.

It was a little earlier, a little lighter, than it had been the last time he'd gone outside. A shocking thought, he suddenly realized. Had he, really? He'd really gone outside? Maybe that had only been a dream.

He shook such thinking away again, forcing his mind to focus. Back to the issue at hand: that it was not as dark this time. And darkness served, if need be, as a rudimentary form of cover.

He wanted to step backwards, into his safe home, and slide the door closed again. But the little girl was watching him, waiting for him to come out. How insane would she think he was, if he backed up now? How much of the truth was he willing to let her see?

He took one step out into the cool late afternoon, then immediately dropped to his knees. He moved on his hands and knees for a step or two, then hit his belly and slithered to the edge of the patio. It had not been a move thought out