

ELLEN WILBUR

### *Storms and Wars*

Before I got my powers everything was different. All that time right up to my eighteenth birthday, it was smooth and peaceful. Always the same. When I saw somebody downtown, they said, "Hi, Billy." They smiled. Nothing was wrong with them. They were all fine. Everybody was, and they never changed.

Back then the weather was so good. The stars came out and I could see the moon over the fields most nights. Mornings, when I opened up my eyes, the sun was there. Sometimes it could get windy. It snowed and it rained good and hard, but there were no bad storms, never a hurricane like the one last year that scared people to death.

Back then nobody was scared. They didn't need to be. Judge Johnson might get mad once in a while. He'd yell at someone, but there was nobody bad in Hinsdale. Nobody rotten that I knew.

There were a few kids that teased me. Jack Wilson teased me a few times. He called me stupid, said I was a retard. But Tom Stone always stuck up for me. One time he got Jack on the ground and sat on him till Jack was crying.

"I'm sorry, Billy," Tom made him say.

I can remember when the Eagles won the championship every year. It never mattered who was playing. Whether it was Buck Fuller, Bobby Freeman, or Jay Curry. The last game of the season Grandpa jumped up, red in the face. "They won it, Billy!" he yelled. "By God, they won it!" Then he took me by both arms and jumped me up and down. The whole gym was up and jumping, and everywhere I looked people were yelling and laughing and smiling, like Grandpa and me.

It used to be my head was light. I couldn't even feel it. I could run up the drive, hop the steps up to the porch, and it was more like I was flying. Now there's always something in my head. There's people there summer and winter. At night I dream of them and in the day they stay inside me. They never leave. There's Grandpa. There's Jeannie, my mother, disappeared since I was two. There's John McClarren, who shot himself after his barn burned down.

There's John's wife, Liz, and their girl, Julie, ten years old. She won't talk to anybody since John's dead. There's Carolyn Codman, the only one that calls me Bill instead of Billy. There's her husband, Nick. I don't like him. There's the baby, Lynn. There's Mrs. Boone. She scares me. I keep away from her, and if she ever comes my way, I turn around and run as fast as I can. There's poor Rooney, Mrs. Boone's old dog. There's Tom Stone, my best friend, and Ed, Tom's dad. There's Mr. Bessie at the pharmacy, Mrs. Tilly, Abe Knight, and all the people I work for. After that there's the Eagles, there's the weather, and there's more, enough to bust my head wide open. The older I get, the more there is. Some days my head's so heavy, like a water bucket filled up to the brim. I can hardly hold it up, it feels so full. And some days I'm dog tired, too tired even to say a word.

Grandpa says, "What's wrong with you, Billy? You sick or something?"

"No sir," I tell him.

"You don't look like yourself." He puts a hand on my shoulder. "What's bothering you?"

"Nothing," I say. Certain things I can't tell Grandpa just the way Grandpa never wants to talk to me about Jeannie.

"Don't ask me about her, Billy," he always says. "Didn't I tell you not to ask me?"

I eat my supper in a circle. I start with carrots, then a bite of potato, then after that the meat. Then I go on to the carrots. I try to keep my mind on every bite. Grandpa eats with me. The radio is on. In the summer we put on the Red Sox. All winter long we listen to the news. There's storms and wars and killings and car crashes. Grandpa says it gets worse every year.

Last summer I could eat one bite of meat after another. I could finish up my carrots first if I wanted. Now I've got to think about each bite and pay attention every minute. I can't say much to Grandpa or I'll lose track of myself. It's hard, but I can't quit, because there hasn't been a fire *anywhere* I've heard of, not even on the news.

The night the McClarren's barn burned down, Grandpa and me were eating supper. The phone rings. When Grandpa hangs up, he says, "It's a shame, Billy. John McClarren's just lost everything. All his stock, equipment, every blessed thing was in that barn. On top of that Tom Mason says he's got no insurance. He's ruined, Billy.

That poor man is positively ruined." While Grandpa was still talking, telling me about the fire, I started eating in a circle. I got that red hot burning at the back of my eyes, the same as I always get, my whole throat closed up tight so I could hardly breathe, the way it happens just before I *know*. Then it came to me if I kept on eating in a circle, there wouldn't be fires. As long as I ate like that Jim Bradley could polish up the fire trucks, sweep down the floors, and play cards all night long with nothing else to do, because he'd never have to leave the firehouse. Just Memorial Day, when the trucks would drive in the parade.

"You want more, Billy?" Grandpa says. "There's plenty of meat left. Some carrots, too."

"No thanks," I say.

"Celtics are on tonight. You want to call up Tom, see if he wants to watch the game with us?"

"Sure Grandpa," I smile. Tom's eighteen, the same as me. We do lots of things together. He takes me riding in his truck. We go fishing. Sometimes his girlfriend, Lois, goes with us. Last month they took me to Canobie Park, and we went on all the rides.

"If you're going to call up Tom, you'd better do it now. Otherwise it will be too late," says Grandpa.

"Sure," I say, but I feel more like I could go on up to my room, fall flat out on the bed, and sleep a year.

My room is Jeannie's, the same one she had while she lived here with Grandpa when Grandma was alive. She had the same walls as me, the same floors, and the same windows to look out. There's a board loose in the closet I pulled up one time and found some of her things. There were some little colored stones, a piece of bright red glass, and a white box. Inside it was a piece of silver chain. I put her picture in the box and I keep it there under the board. It's her old school picture Carolyn Codman gave to me last summer. "You mean you've never seen her picture?" Carolyn said. "I've got one in my yearbook." She jumps up, runs inside to get it. After I saw the picture, she said, "I think you ought to have this, Bill." She got some scissors, cut it out, and gave it to me.

My eighteenth birthday was the one time Grandpa talked to me about Jeannie. Grandpa made me a cake. He lights up all the candles, puts it down in front of me. "Now make a wish before you blow them out," he says.

"I wish," I said to Grandpa, "you'd tell me about Jeannie."

Grandpa didn't look too happy. He sighed. "All right," he says. "You're almost grown up. I guess you have a right to know about your mother. But there's one condition. Don't you ever ask me about her again. You promise, Billy?"

"Yessir," I said.

"Blow out the candles first," says Grandpa. I blew them all out with one blow.

"I wish I could tell you something nice about her," Grandpa said. "But she was no good, Billy. It's sad, but it's the truth. When she was six years old, they caught her stealing in Duffy's. Her pockets were full of things." Grandpa shook his head. "She was always coming home with things that weren't hers. We'd ask her where they came from and she'd reel off a good story. I never met a person in my life that lied as much as Jeannie. It was just natural to her to tell a lie." Grandpa sighed. "She was always in trouble. We tried everything to keep her in line, but no punishment, nothing we ever did made the slightest difference. The older she got, the worse she was. The high school suspended her six times. They caught her smoking, cheating, fighting. I can't remember what else. It seemed like every time I came home your grandma was crying over Jeannie, something she'd done. She made herself sick over that girl." Grandpa was quiet. He sat still, looking at the floor. "Jeannie could put up a good front," he went on. "She'd tell us she was sorry and turn on the tears, but there was no truth in her. All her life she was like that, ice in her veins. She cared for no one but herself." Grandpa bit his lip. "I hate to think of her," he said. He looked at me. "She used to sneak out of the house at night and go with one boy or another. There were so many, nobody knows which one it was that fathered you. When she found out she was pregnant, she ran away. Jim Henry happened to be in Randolph a few weeks after she'd gone. He saw her drunk on the street with some man. He tried to get her to come home, but she ran off. We called the police, but they never found her. She just disappeared.

“For three long years there was never a word from her. Your grandma got sick, her health broke down from worry, and she died at the end of that third summer. She was just forty-two years old. Her doctor said it was anemia and heart trouble, but if it wasn’t for Jeannie, I know she’d be alive today.

“Four months after your grandma died, Jeannie called home. She never asked about her mother. She was desperate, flat broke down in Florida. She was looking for money. She told me she hadn’t eaten for three days. I asked her what happened to the baby. She said you were born three months early, brain damaged. She’d kept you for two years. Don’t ask me how or where she kept you all that time. She said you were too much for her, you needed special care, and she’d put you in a state home outside of Randolph, close to Cedar Falls. Of course I thought she must be lying, but I decided to look into it. Well, that was how I found you,” Grandpa said. He looked at me. “Jim Henry drove down with me. We found the place, and all I’ll say is that it’s a blessing, Billy, you were so small that you can’t remember it. It was terrible. Half-dressed, dirty kids and grown folks thrown together, all crippled or retarded. You should have heard the noise. A person would be better dead than to live in a place like that. That’s what I thought.

“I took to you the minute I first saw you. I wish you could have seen yourself. You were the cutest little tyke, but you could hardly walk. They said it was a problem with your hip. You were born that way, and there was nothing to be done about it. Later on, when I took you to St. Anne’s, they told me there was an operation they could do. After it was done, you had a limp, but you could get around just fine, like you do now.

“It took me almost a year to get custody of you. I went down to see you in that hell hole every week till I could take you home. You didn’t say much, hardly talked at all, but you were always happy to see me. You should have seen the way your face lit up whenever I came in. There was a woman there, Mrs. Pitcher. She cared a lot for you. When Jeannie left you in that place, you cried for days, she said. No one could comfort you. You kept calling for your mother. You wouldn’t eat. You cried until you fell asleep and the moment you woke up, you went right back to crying. Then on the fifth day you stopped, you took some food, and you slept sixteen hours. After that, she said, you never cried again, as if you’d cried enough your

first week in that place to last you all your life. It didn't matter if you fell down, if one of the other kids hit you. You wouldn't cry. She'd never seen anything like it, she said. And you know that's how you've always been, Billy. Plenty of times I've wished you'd cry. Like the time you clipped your finger in the door, lost half your nail. It must have hurt like hell, and I told you to cry. But you wouldn't. Do you remember?"

"Yessir," I said.

Grandpa took out his pipe, fills it full and lights it up. He looked at me. "You know, that year I took you home with me was the worst year I ever had," he said. "I'd just lost your grandma and I'd been laid off my job for the first time in my life. I asked myself how I could care for you when I could hardly take care of myself. But it was the best thing I ever did. Tattersal hired me for better pay than I'd ever made at the mill, and the work suited me better. Mary McCallister had four children home then, and she said she'd be glad to look after you while I was at work. So everything turned out fine.

"I told Jeannie I had you. For a long time she kept calling, always looking for money. She never asked about you. That was the way she was. The first time I took you to Dr. Ryder, he ran some tests on you and asked a lot of questions. Later, he told me it was Jeannie's drinking that affected your brain, which is why your thinking's slow, and probably all that liquor gave you the bad hip, too." Grandpa shook his head. "Maybe I shouldn't be telling you all of this, Billy," he said, "but you've asked me often enough, you might as well get all of it this one time." He took his pipe out of his mouth and stared at me. "I never told you she was dead," he said. "You always liked to think she might come back. So when I got the news, I kept it to myself. One night five years ago, I got a call from the Florida police. They told me they found her lying on a bench in the town park. They said it was drugs that killed her. Alcohol and drugs. So that was how it ended, her whole life wasted, and everyone she touched was hurt." Grandpa sighed. "I guess that's all," he said. "I wish it was a nicer story." He reached across, put his hand down on my arm. "Now eat your cake," he said.

I started eating, but my throat was dry, cake stuck to it, and I couldn't swallow. I felt funny, like the time I got sick in the boat when Tom was going fast across the lake.

"You all right?" Grandpa said.

I looked at him, but I couldn't talk. I felt so queer, I had to put my head down on the table.

"Jesus, Billy," Grandpa said. He came over, put his arm around me. "I never should have told you. I wish to God I'd just kept still," he said.

All the while my head was down, whirling black inside. My eyes filled up, my nose and throat filled up, like I was drowning.

"You're all upset," said Grandpa. He patted my back, and I started heaving and sniffing and shaking. Once I started, I couldn't stop. Grandpa took me to my room, I lay down on my bed and cried so hard, it scared me. Grandpa got a washcloth, washed my face and wiped it with a towel. Still I couldn't stop. He sat by me on my bed the longest time. It seemed like half the night. "It's all right now, Billy. Everything's all right," he kept saying till I fell asleep. But after I cried like that it seemed like nothing was just right, as if the world changed over in one night and when I woke up the next day it was all different.

The first power I got was for the hurricane. Grandpa and me brought the chairs in from the porch. We took the garbage cans down to the cellar, the shovels and the rakes, the two hoses and the garden tools. We took everything we could inside, and nailed the screen door shut. Then we went downtown to board up Mrs. Tilly's shop. She was so nervous. "I know it's going to be a fearful storm," she said. "Look at my hands, how they're swelled up. It's my arthritis. They never hurt this bad before."

Downtown the windows of the shops were boarded up, and everything was locked up tight. People were scared. I never saw them all so scared. I was scared, too.

That night Grandpa put the truck in the garage. "We might as well turn in," he said. "We've done everything we can do." Grandpa went to bed. Pretty soon I heard him snoring, but I couldn't sleep. I kept walking in my room, around and around about a hundred times until I heard the wind start up. It was just a bit of a wind at first, but I could tell the hurricane was coming fast. I could picture all the houses blowing loose, hitting together, and the cars, how they'd be lifted right up off the streets. The trees would rip out of the ground and all of Hinsdale would be flying in the sky, smashed up and wrecked to bits. I kept walking in circles, couldn't make

myself sit down, and before I knew it, wind was shaking all my windows, whistling around the house. There was a big crash in the yard, and just when I was scared stiff, I got a vicious hot spell, and the power came to me like that. I went downstairs, put on my coat, stepped right outside. I knew *exactly* what to do. It was raining, wind tossing up the trees, knocking and shaking the garage door like it'd tear it open. Rain hit me in the face, got in my eyes so I could hardly see, but I kept going. Once I got to the highway the wind came up and slammed me on the back like it was going to blow me all the way to town. I started running. Wind was pushing at me, tearing up my hair. The houses by the road were all black, all the people tucked up in their beds. But I ran down the road all by myself, and I wasn't scared a bit.

Downtown were soda bottles, cans and sticks, newspapers and all kinds of things rolling and spinning up Main Street. The air was full of things, all blowing by my head. I saw the courthouse at the end, so big and white, I could see it in the dark. But I kept running, never stopped until I hit the courthouse grass. Then I slowed down, walked right over, I reached out my hand, and the minute I touched the flagpole, the wind died down just like I *knew* it would. I put both arms around the pole and held it tight. The rain stopped and the wind died right away to nothing. All you could hear was dripping everywhere, and pretty soon there were no clouds left in the sky. The stars came out, beautiful and clear, but I stayed on to be damn sure. My clothes were wet, soaked through. Towards morning it got cold, and I was shivering all over, but I didn't mind a bit. I was smiling, and I never felt so good in all my life.

Tuesdays I go to work for Carolyn Codman. It's yard work, mostly, but this summer I painted her garage, and it looks nice. "I never had a better worker than you," Carolyn says. Lots of people say that to me. I like to work. I've always liked to. Sometimes I come home with my sandwich in my pocket. Grandpa pulls it out. "Look at that, Billy. You never ate your lunch. You must be half-starved," he says. But I don't care. I've done odd jobs all over Hinsdale. There are lawns I mowed, windows I washed, trees I trimmed, and gardens and straight hedges I took care of. Wherever I go all over town I can see some work I did.



Tuesdays I walk from our house up to Codman's. Grandpa makes my sandwich. "Say hello to Carolyn for me," he says. "And don't forget to eat."

Our driveway is dirt from the house out to the road. It's full of stones. The big ones look so sharp and mean, I'd like to pick them up and throw them over in the field. But there's so many, I could never get them all. Anyway, I'd be afraid to touch them. The stones are Grandpa's troubles, all the bad things that could happen to him. They're all there on the drive. The big stones are big troubles. Terrible ones, like Grandpa getting killed in a car wreck. The little ones are little things, like Grandpa nicking his face with the razor. I got the power in the spring when Grandpa had a bad flu that wouldn't go away. When I hopped over all the stones and never touched one all the way out to the road, Grandpa started getting well. In a few days he was good as new.

Now I'm careful every time I go out. I get up on my toes and go hopping like a rabbit down the drive. Sometimes Grandpa sees me. "What the hell are you doing, Billy?" He's laughing.

"Nothing," I say. As long as I'm careful of the stones, Grandpa won't have a problem. And he *hasn't*. He's been fine.

When I go out to the highway, I don't worry about a thing unless I have a hot spell. One time there was a red car coming up behind me and I *knew* if I could get to Winham's post box before that car, then Mrs. Tilly wouldn't have arthritis for a week. I took off like a shot and ran so fast, I beat the car. I beat it by a mile, and felt so good I yelled and jumped up in the air.

Richmond Road is Codman's street, and there's a job for me. I've got to watch the lines along the sidewalk, make sure I don't step on one of them. This is for the Eagles. At the start of the season they kept losing. It seemed like they missed half their free throws and most of their three-pointers. Easy ones. "What's the *matter* with them?" Grandpa said. They lost the first three games they played. Then I got the power. It came to me on a Tuesday on my way up to Codman's. I turned hot, started stepping over all the lines. It was that simple, no trouble at all, and that was all it took. Friday night the Eagles beat Manchester High 62-58. After that they had two games home, one game away, they've got a game this Friday home, and they haven't lost one yet.

Sometimes I used to get upset when I was at Carolyn's. I always think of it when I'm heading up the hill. I got upset and wished I could tell Grandpa, but I never did. I was afraid Grandpa might say I couldn't work for Carolyn anymore, and I like to work for her. I've always liked to. I work for her from April to November. Then I put up her storm windows and I quit all my yard jobs for the winter. I don't go back to see her until spring.

Summer days when it's wicked hot, Carolyn calls me up to the front porch to sit with her and Lynn, the baby. "Why don't you take a break, Bill. Come have some lemonade," she says. She always calls me Bill, never Billy.

"You know, you look just like your mother," she says. "You've got her eyes. And your nose is just like hers exactly. Anyone ever told you that?"

She went to school with Jeannie, and she doesn't mind talking about her. She's told me lots of things. "She was so pretty," Carolyn says. "Much prettier than her picture. The boys were mad about her. My mother told me if she ever saw me with her, I'd be grounded for a year. Jeannie was wild, always getting into scrapes. One time she had an awful fight with Jane Bufithis, right in the school yard, scratched her face so Jane's still got scars. But you know, Bill, everybody's got a good side. I remember one day I forgot my lunch, was sitting in the school cafeteria at noon as hungry as could be, and Jeannie shared her lunch with me. She gave me half of everything," Carolyn said. "Now that was nice, don't you think so?"

"Yes, ma'am," I smiled. I was thinking of Jeannie.

"I know how proud she'd be, the way you've turned out," Carolyn said.

I was watching Mrs. Boone's big yard across the way. Paint's peeling off the house, the yard's a mess. It's full of junk. She never mows her grass, and her front step sags down like it's about to split in two the minute anybody comes to visit. But nobody ever goes to Mrs. Boone's house.

I always hate to see her. She scares me so much. She keeps poor Rooney tied out back. She never lets him loose. When I first saw Rooney, he barked every minute, made a ruckus all day long. He got his rope tied up around a tree so tight, he couldn't budge. Mrs. Boone sticks her head out the window, "Quiet!" she yells, and if he won't stop barking sometimes she comes out, gets a stick

and cracks him hard over the head. "Now you shut up!" she says. Rooney's quiet, but just as soon as she's inside, he starts right up again, worse than ever. She keeps him out year round. He's got a little house, but it's not warm. She doesn't care how cold he gets. Winter nights when it's frigid, Rooney carries on and cries till Carolyn can't stand it. She calls Town Hall and the police, but they won't come. They're all afraid of Mrs. Boone.

When I work at Codman's, I always bring something for Rooney. I take him some hamburg from the fridge, a bit of frankfurt, or I give him a bite of my lunch. Rooney will eat anything I give him. I do it quick, hide in the bushes and throw the food over the fence. The poor dog looks so bad, his bones stick out, like Mrs. Boone never feeds him.

I always say hello to Rooney. One time Mrs. Boone saw me throw some food to him. She came running out. "Get away from that fence, you hear me?" she yelled. "You bother that dog again, I swear to God I'll set him loose on you." Her face was puffed up, red, and she looked mad enough to kill me. She came charging over to the fence and I took off around the house. I never ran so fast. Carolyn let me in. I was shaking all over, so bad I couldn't stop myself. No one scares me more than Mrs. Boone. She scares me sick. The day she ever touches me, I'll lose all my powers flat and die right on the spot. I *know* because I've seen it in a dream. I always dream of Mrs. Boone, her chasing after me and me running till she gets so close I'm yelling bloody murder. Grandpa hears me, comes to my room, and shakes me. "Wake up, Billy," he says. "How come you're having these bad dreams?"

If Mrs. Boone ever turned Rooney loose on me, Rooney would run right over to me friendly as could be and be so happy to be loose, he'd never hurt anyone, least of all me. When he sees me coming, his tail's wagging, he jumps up to the fence. His mouth spreads open, like he's smiling. All the time I'm working, Rooney watches everything I do. He lies there biting on his rope, just like he wants to get free and come over and be with me. As long as he can see me, he doesn't make a sound. Carolyn looks out sometimes. "It's like a miracle," she says. "It's so peaceful, Bill, when you're here and the dog's quiet." She smiles, real happy, like there's nothing wrong and never was.

This spring, everyday I worked at Codman's, I went to knock at the back door. Most times Carolyn was in the kitchen with the baby. When she came out, I looked right at her face to see if it was marked. Sometimes her arms were marked all up and down. Sometimes her neck. One time both eyes were black, puffed up so she could hardly see.

"It was an accident," she said. "Somebody hit my car." But I knew Nick, her husband, did it. Nick came home lots of times around twelve noon. He'd see me working, he'd walk by, and never say hello. The meanness showed right in his face. And he is big, the biggest man I've seen. He went up the front steps, banged the front door shut so hard, it shook the house. He always banged it. Then the birds stopped singing, and everything got so quiet, you couldn't hear a sound the whole time Nick was there. When he came out, he stomped down the steps. I watched him go. He roared up his engine and ripped off in his black car. He drives fast. I've seen him go by lots of times, drive right through town as fast as hell, like he'll hit anything that gets in his way, and he won't care a bit.

I started to feel sick whenever Nick came home. He passed me on the walk, that mean look on his face, and when he went inside, I felt sicker and sicker, like I could lean right over and throw up my whole breakfast on the grass.

One time I heard him yelling. Carolyn was crying, pitiful and scared, and I could hear the baby, Lynn. She's crying, too. "PLEASE!" Carolyn's crying. I'm standing in the yard, don't know what to do. So I took out the power mower, got it running, and I mowed a circle all around the house. I started singing loud enough so Nick could hear me, "I've Been Working on the Railroad," "Row Your Boat," and every song I knew while I was mowing. I went around and around the house. I sang so hard, my head was splitting. Then I felt it come, the burning back of my eyes, my throat tight, like somebody's got me by the neck, and I started sweating bullets, because I *knew* I had the power. While I was still singing, I saw Nick come out the front door fast. He went down the walk, like somebody was chasing him. I wanted to yell after him and laugh right in his face, but I kept mowing and singing till the whole yard was done.

After that I made damn sure the grass was mowed down every week. Mowed right to the ground. I never let it go.

Last Tuesday Carolyn said, "You mind not singing so loud, Bill? Lynn's sleeping and it's bound to wake her up."

"I've got to sing loud," I told her. She stood there, real surprised, but that was all she said. There are no marks on her. Nick hasn't touched her. He doesn't come home at noon much anymore. I haven't seen him downtown either, which is fine with me. It doesn't matter if I fixed him, I still hate to see Nick Codman.

Grandpa always told me I was special. "You ever notice, Billy, how people warm up to you? When they see you coming, they look so pleased. They pat you on the back or put an arm around you. They're always happy to see you. Now with most people they don't act that way. It's because you're special. Did you know that?"

"Yessir," I said to Grandpa.

Some powers come to me just when I need them. Every week there's more, so by the time I'm fifty maybe there won't be much left to fix.

Wednesdays I work for Liz McClarren. She's got to sell the house and all John's land, but no one wants to buy it. When you turn up their road, you can see the barn burnt down to nothing but a heap. The ground's all black around it. When you get up close, you can still smell the fire. Julie's sitting on the fence, watching for me. I wave to her, say "Hi, Julie," but she doesn't move. When I get there, she hops down, starts after me. All day she follows me around the place, out to the field, when I take out the trash or paint the chicken coop. Wherever I go, she's right behind me, her mouth all squinched up tight. Liz says she doesn't know what to do with her. Darryl is back at school, but Julie won't go, and nobody can make her. She won't talk, hasn't said a word to anybody since John shot himself.

Wednesday night I come home late. Grandpa says, "I've got some bad news, Billy. Ed Stone had a heart attack today. They took him to St. Anne's. It's pretty bad. He's having surgery tomorrow. Tom called about an hour ago. He wants to know if you can work with him this Friday. He says he'll need the help."

"Sure, Grandpa," I say. Ed Stone, Tom's dad, owns Newtowne Grille. I work for Ed all winter, washing dishes. Tom works there, too.

"Don't look so scared," says Grandpa. "Ed's not dead yet. Lots of people have heart attacks, get over them, and they go on to live for years. I wouldn't be surprised if Ed pulls through. Now take your coat off and go wash your hands. I've got supper ready."

There's hamburg, french fries, and green beans all set in a circle. I start with french fries and I try to keep my mind on every bite.

"I'm thinking," Grandpa says, "maybe you should go up to Codman's in the morning, put up her storm windows. Tell Carolyn you've got to work with Tom and you won't be back till spring." Grandpa sits down. "I bet Ed will pull through. You know how tough he is. Of course, Tom's worried. You should call him."

"Yessir," I say. Last year Tom finished high school. Now Ed wants him to go away to college, but Tom doesn't want to. He's happy in Hinsdale and he likes it working at the Grille.

Ed gets so mad at Tom, he blows his stack, like he won't stop yelling till Tom leaves town. Ed used to be so nice. When Tom and me were little, he played ball with us. He took us skating lots of times. Ed was a great skater.

"Try to eat your supper," Grandpa says. "Maybe we'll go over to the hospital tomorrow night to see Ed. Would you like that?"

I smile.

"But Billy," Grandpa says, "I want you to get some sleep tonight. I want you to go to bed right after you eat, you hear me? You look so tired. I've never seen you look so tired. Are you sure you feel all right? You don't feel sick?"

"I'm not sick," I say, but I don't feel right. On top of that I've lost track of my supper, can't remember if I took a bite of beans or whether it was hamburg, and it scares me. I can see fires starting up all over, bad ones, and no one to blame for it but me. "I can't eat anymore," I say.

Grandpa sighs. "You hardly touched your food."

When I get in bed, it's pretty dark out, but I can see some birds come shooting by the window. They come all of a sudden, take me by surprise, and I jump up like they're after me, and let out a yell. There's a dog that barks all night now, down the road. It makes me think of Rooney. Of course poor Rooney's too far away for me to hear him. But Mrs. Boone is right there in my head, waiting to chase me down. She'll come after me the minute I shut my eyes. I *know* it.

She wants to get me so bad. She runs and runs, gets close enough that she starts smiling, reaches out her hand. Just one touch, that's all she needs, and BAM, I've lost my powers. I hate to sleep now. I lie there, my eyes wide open in the dark, and pretty soon I see Julie McClarren. It's like she's right there in my room, she looks so real. "Hi, Julie," I say. Her face is squinched up, watching me, but she doesn't say a word.

Next day Grandpa says, "I swear it doesn't seem like November." He's got the back door open wide, it's so warm. I've got a brand new winter jacket Grandpa bought me, but I've never worn it once. Every day's so nice, all I need is my old red sweater.

Grandpa gives me my sandwich. "Say hello to Carolyn for me," he says.

When I stop on the porch it looks like there's a thousand stones, big, mean ones popping up all over the driveway. So many stones, they scare me. But I get on my toes, hop down the drive just fine, and never touch one stone. By the time I get out to the highway I'm so tired, I could lie down by the road and rest right there. But I keep walking, no hot spells at all. Today it seems like the highway is so long, it'll take six hours to get to town.

At Richmond Road I'm careful of the lines on the sidewalk. Grandpa and me are going to watch the Eagles play Dunbarton High this Friday night, and Grandpa's all excited. "Jesus, they've gotten so good, Billy," he says. If they keep on like this, they'll win the championship for sure."

Up the hill old Rooney's barking loud enough that Mrs. Boone is bound to come outside and crack him with a stick, and I hope I don't see her.

I brought some ham for Rooney. He sees me, comes flying over to the fence. I put out my hand and Rooney licks it with his rough, old tongue. I take out two good slices, throw them over to him. Rooney's so hungry, he grabs the ham up in two bites. Then he lies there, biting on his rope. He doesn't make a peep.

I've got to clean the windows first, then slide up all the screens and snap in the storm windows just so. It's hard work, but I don't mind. I like to work.

By afternoon the sky's all dark, like rain, and it starts getting chilly. When I've finished with the windows, I take out the mower

and mow the grass down, right up to the house. All the while I'm singing loud. Carolyn comes out behind me, taps me on the shoulder. "Don't bother with that grass, Bill. You can just leave it," she says. "You know, it's *cold* out here. Aren't you cold?"

"No, Ma'am," I say, and I keep mowing. I'm thinking of Carolyn, what happens to her now that I can't mow the grass all winter? I never thought of it before, and it scares me.

When I'm all done, I go to the house to get my pay. "You know, Bill, next time you see me I'll have another baby," Carolyn says, patting her stomach. "It's due the end of March," she says, and I can see how big she is. I never noticed it before. "Now you take care," she says. "Lynn and me, we'll miss you."

I stop by the fence. Rooney's lying in his house, just his head stuck out the door. "Good-by, Rooney," I whisper to him. "I hope it's not too cold for you this winter." Rooney's head is turned up, his mouth wide open, smiling. He watches me go. I turn around to see him, and once I'm on the street, he starts to make a ruckus. I can hear him all the way down Richmond Road, and it makes me feel sad.

It's getting dark, real cold now. And just when I'm wishing I had on my new jacket, it starts snowing. I stop, put back my head, and I can see the whole sky is full of snow, the first snow of the year. It comes down heavy on my face. I've never seen snow come so thick and fast. I watch it hit the ground and pick up on the sidewalk, filling in the lines, so pretty soon, if I don't hurry up, there won't be a way in hell to help the Eagles win this Friday night. There won't be a way to help them all this winter, not if it snows, and I never thought of that before. I never thought of winter and the snow, that's how dumb I am. A dumb, slow-minded, stupid kid.

I start running, jump over all the lines while I can see them. But when I get to the highway, I stop still, watching the snow. It's coming down so fast and thick all over town. Up at Codman's on the grass, over the sidewalks, and all the way out to the house. The snow is falling on our roof, on the garage, over the yard. I can just picture it. It's falling heavy on the driveway, hiding all the stones. So by the time I get out there tonight, I'll step on some big stone and never even know it, some mean bastard of a stone just big enough to give Grandpa a car wreck, hurt him bad, maybe kill him. The more I think of it, the more I don't want to go home. I may be dumb, but not that dumb.



"Stupid Billy," I say to myself. I pull my sandwich out of my pocket, throw it on the ground, and stomp it with my foot. "You dumb, stupid, fool kid, Billy," I say, and I start hitting myself all over, punch my stomach as hard as I can, slap my face, yank on my hair, pull some of it out, just like I did in school. Miss Monroe yelled at me. All the kids ran up, grabbed me by the arms, held me tight so I couldn't move. Tom was with them.

"It doesn't matter, Billy," he said to me. "Now stop it."

Downtown the lights are on in all the shops. "Dumb fool, Billy," I say. I'm upset, breathing hard and sweating. I stop by Oakley's Drug, just looking in the window. Mr. Bessie's in there, back of the counter. Mrs. Tilly's there. Her sister, Belle, is with her. "Stupid Billy," I say to myself. And Mrs. Tilly looks out and sees me. She waves to me and smiles.

Mr. Bessie walks over, opens the door. "What are you doing out there, Billy? Heaven's sakes, come in. You look cold." He puts his arm around me and pulls me inside. "Just look at you," he says.

Snow's all over me. Mr. Bessie brushes it off my hair and my sweater. "You all right, Billy?" he asks. "Why don't you sit down a minute. I'll get you a nice hot cup of coffee."

But I can't sit down. I'm so hot, sweat's pouring off me under my clothes, down my sides and down my back. I've never sweat so much before, and my heart's beating fast. My head is hurting, too.

"Something wrong with you, Billy?" Mrs. Tilly says. Her sister, Belle, turns around. She's got on a black coat and a blue scarf that's hanging loose around her neck. I keep looking at that scarf. The color is so bright.

"It's awful late. How come you're not home with your grandpa?" Mrs. Tilly asks.

"I can't go home," I tell her. All the while I'm looking at that bright, blue scarf, my whole throat swelling up so I can hardly talk.

"Well, why not, honey?" Mrs. Tilly asks, real nice.

Sweat's pouring down my arms, my legs, all of me getting hotter and hotter, so hot I can tell that something BIG is happening, like there's sixty powers coming to me all at once and I'm some rickety blast furnace just about to blow. Before I know it, I walk up to Belle. Belle puts up her hand, but I reach right over, yank the scarf off, turn around and run out of the place, all of them yelling, "BILLY!"

I run all the way down Main Street, slip one time and fall in the snow, but I've still got the scarf tight in my hand, and the next time I see Julie McClarren, she'll be smiling and talking all day long, just like she used to. The power came to me like that. A thousand powers came, and I'm still full to bursting with them, my whole self on fire. I *never* was so hot, like I can fix the whole world in one night, and I know exactly what to do.

On Bickford Street I put my thumb out, and a big fish truck stops to pick me up right off.

"It's a miserable night," the man says, "but it's sure pretty."

"Yessir," I say. The snow's coming down so thick, like it'll bury everything in town, but that doesn't bother me at all. I feel more like it's summer out, I'm that hot, and all I have to go is three miles up the pike to St. Anne's.

When we get there, I've got the scarf tied up around me underneath my sweater. I hop out, all excited, like I've got a thousand things to do, and I go right inside, ask the nurse where I can find Ed Stone. She's real friendly, takes me in the elevator. All the while my two hands are heating up till they're both burning hot, like fire.

I see Ed lying on his bed. He's sound asleep, breathing real hard. He looks so bad, all hooked up to machines. I go right up to him and I know just what to do. I lift up his shirt, put both my hands as hot as blazes on Ed's chest, right over his heart, press down real hard, and burn the sickness out. I can feel it melt like a hard knot under my hands, smaller and smaller till it's all gone away. Ed's breathing soft and easy now, without a problem, and when I lift up my hands, I see red marks, just like burns on Ed's skin. I smooth back Ed's hair with my hand, keep smoothing it back, and I put my face down close to Ed's.

"It's all right, Ed," I say to him. "You're fine now." I can see Ed feels so good, his mouth's curved up, he's smiling in his sleep, and he's *cured* just like that.

I'm running down the stairs so fast, I trip three times, but I don't fall. My heart's beating like fury, I'm in such a hurry. Outside, the snow is almost to my knees. It's coming sideways, shiny white, falling down like walls, it is so thick. Like every inch of air is snow. But I'm burning up. I never felt so big and strong, a thousand things to do, and sixty tons of snow can't stop me. Nothing can stop me now. I'm starting down the pike and Abe Knight pulls up.

"Is that you, Billy? Do you need a ride?"

"I've got to get to Richmond Road," I tell him.

"Well, hop in," he says. "I'll take you. This is some storm, isn't it?"

"Yessir," I say. My whole shirt's soaked right through with sweat, stuck to me under my sweater, like I get a hot spell every minute and sixty million powers coming all at once, if I don't blow up first.

Abe stops just at the top of Richmond Road. The wind's come up. Snow's everywhere. "Jesus," Abe says. "I can't see a thing. Is this where you want to be?"

"Yessir," I say.

"You take care now, Billy," he says. Then he drives off real slow.

I can hear Rooney right off, barking and wailing long and high, just like he's hurt himself, he sounds so bad. It's pitch dark, no lights on the road. Just two lights on at Codman's. Mrs. Boone's house is so black, I can hardly see it. But I know she's in there. Rooney smells me coming, quiets down all of a sudden, and pretty soon I see him switching his tail. He's all excited.

"Hi, Rooney," is all I say. I'm nervous. I know exactly what to do, but I've never done a thing so bad. I'm kicking up the snow right by the fence. I've got to find six good-sized stones. Rooney's watching all the while, biting on his rope like crazy. Pretty soon I've got the stones. I'm walking through the snow, and everything's so quiet, like there's nothing there. When I stop up close to Codman's house, I start pissing in my pants and I can't stop it. I can feel the piss go down my leg like fire. I throw the first stone, and it smashes through Carolyn's kitchen window, wicked loud. I throw off the next one as hard as I can, and I hit another window square in the middle. If I can smash six of Codman's windows with six stones then Carolyn will be safe for life. That's the power. I throw another stone, and it goes through. The light comes on upstairs. Just behind me, Mrs. Boone's house starts to light up, too, and the whole yard gets bright. Then Mrs. Boone yanks up a window.

"What the *hell's* going on out there?" she yells.

But I just throw a stone. The downstairs lights come on, and the yard's so bright, I'm all lit up. I throw off two more stones, one right after another. They both smash through, and I jump in the air, I feel so good. Then I start running, the yard's bright as day, and I can see six windows with six holes.

Mrs. Boone's outside. "You *better* run, boy!" she yells, and she's after me. I get out to the road, but just then I hear Rooney barking, like he's calling to me, and when I turn around, I see Rooney jump his fence, fly right through the air, and come down running free around the yard. Mrs. Boone sees him, too, and she stops still.

"Rooney!" she shouts at him. But Rooney's leaping, he's tearing all over, like he's so happy, he's gone crazy. It makes me smile to see him. I stand there watching till I laugh out loud.

"Rooney!" Mrs. Boone keeps saying, and she's after that old dog, sliding all around the yard. But Rooney gets away each time, and Mrs. Boone is mad enough to kill him.

"Bastard!" she screams at him. "Wait till I catch you! Just you wait!" she says, and she slips, falls hard in the snow right on her face. Rooney whirls around, starts running towards me, fast as hell. Then I see car lights coming full speed up the hill. Rooney's almost to the road. I'm running toward him.

"Stop Rooney," I'm calling, but Rooney's flying, jumps right off the curb into my arms, and knocks me down. Then the light comes blasting up, and just before it hits us, I see it's Nick Codman's big, black car.

The next thing I know, I'm flat out in the snow. There are flashing lights and people all around. Rooney's on top of me, like a ton of weight on my chest. I've got my arms around him tight, and he doesn't budge. Mrs. Boone steps up. She's looking down at me, her two eyes shiny, black, and mean. I twist and turn myself, but Rooney's such a weight, I can't get up. Mrs. Boone's just watching all the while, then starts smiling, like she knows she's got me now. Blood's coming up my throat, it's filling up my mouth and running off my chin. Mrs. Boone leans over me, smiling. She puts out her hand, reaches down closer and closer. Then she touches me and she finishes me like that.

There are fires starting up all over town. I can hear Jim Bradley's trucks, all the horns and sirens going. And there are ambulances, rescue trucks keep blazing by, like there's a thousand heart attacks and crashes, people getting hurt so bad. Blood's everywhere. It's pouring out. The snow's all red with blood. They pick me up and I'm so light, I feel like I'm floating up higher and higher, till I'm so high up, I can't hear a thing in the world.

It's so nice. I lie down in the field, lie in the grass just like a kid with nowhere to go and nothing to do. Sun's coming down so warm and bright all over. I turn my head and I see Rooney lying right beside me. I watch him roll over, rub his back down in the grass, and turn his belly up to get the sun. It makes me smile to see it. I feel so good, I'm all lit up inside.

There's a long road by the field. Far down it Jeannie's coming. She's so far away that I can hardly see her, but I know it's her. I lie there watching, and I feel so peaceful, like I'd never want to move. She gets bigger and bigger, steps off the road. Her hair's loose and she's got on a white dress. I just watch her. She's coming over the grass.

"Billy," she says. She starts running, her arms out to me. I sit up. She's coming so fast. Then I hear Grandpa calling my name.

"Billy. Billy, *please!*" he's calling. Jeannie slows down, stops right in the middle of the field, like she hears Grandpa. Rooney perks his head up, too. "Billy, please!" Grandpa keeps saying. The whole field is turning dark. "Can you hear me, Billy?"

"Where are you, Grandpa?" I ask. I can't see a thing now.

"I'm right here, boy," says Grandpa close by my ear. "Open your eyes." But I feel like I hurt all over. I can taste blood. I'm stiff, and my whole body hurts so bad, I'm scared to move. Grandpa puts an arm under my neck, lifts me up, and my head falls back, so light, all emptied out. All the people, everything is gone and there is nothing there.

"I lost them, Grandpa. I lost all my powers," I say.

Grandpa's whole arm is shaking. "Open your eyes, Billy. Please," he says, all upset. So I look up.

"Well, thank God," Grandpa says. His old face is looking down at me, all twisted up. "I thought I'd lost you, Billy. I thought I'd lost you for good." Grandpa's crying.

I reach up, touch his face. I love him. I put my arms around him tight, and I come back like that.