

BILLY AND THE DEVIL

by
DEAN LILLEYMAN

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organisation. This book is made from acid-free paper from an FSC®-certified provider. FSC is the only forest-
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“This is wild stuff, very dark and very brilliant.”

– Conor O’Callaghan, author of *The Sun King*

“Put it this way, a great novel doesn’t end after you have read the last page. It reaches out after publication and plants its own mythology in the world. This is the highest achievement of Lilleyman’s debut. I recommend: read this book.”

– Interrobang Arts Magazine

“Brilliantly evoked in all its sordid detail, black humour, demented courage, and alienation.”

– Jane Rogers, author of *Mr Wroe’s Virgins* and *Promised Lands*

“Billy and the Devil is a completely convincing character study. Said Billy is a laugh, a tart, a drunk, and more. Dean Lilleyman uses various writerly and unmannerly techniques to show us the many ages and faces of his loveable and detestable anti-hero. The book is tender, funny, sad and grotesque – but however gruelling Billy’s descent becomes, it bleeds its own dark poetry. Here, dirty realism has left Los Angeles for Chesterfield, where it finds itself at a garden barbeque drinking Leibfraumilch and barley wine. Terrific.”

– Matthew Clegg, author of *West North East*

“This book is not going to be everyone’s cup of tea. And that is its strength. A brutal, brilliant debut. Should be read in all schools.”

– Joe England, editor of *PUSH*

“Billy and the Devil is written with energy, intelligence, anger, insight, heartbreak, and then some. Dean Lilleyman writes with an attention to detail that makes the world of this professional drinker utterly compelling. His prose is as sharp as a bag of knives.”

– Chris Jones, author of Skin

“Lilleyman manages to craft a highly entertaining and passive book that plays on the reader’s response to the characters but also manages to mould itself around whoever is reading it. It feels highly personal. It is the real world and this means that nothing around you matters while you read it; the real world is more important than anything else.”

– Jim Gibson, Hand Job Zine

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**In the middle of my journey through life, I woke to find
myself in a dark wood.**

Dante

There is no fate that cannot be surmounted by scorn.

Camus



You wake to a soundless house...

And the knowingness that they're not here anymore seeps slow-creep inwards, that dark weight that makes you blur, yourself falling away from yourself, that shadow-hook-tug that pulls from deep.

You keep your eyes closed, bringing your knees up to your chest, wrapping your arms around your legs until you're a tight ball in the womb of your bed. You lie there, your head under the stale-ale fug of bed-sheets, damp from night-sweats of whatever dark dreams took you.

And yet, you wish for a return to this sleep, a sleep that takes this waking away.

A lurch of lead-heavy gut makes you free an arm to pull the sheets from your face, and eyes closed tight, you breathe.

In. Out. In.

And then you can hold it no longer. The daylight snaps and burns as you retch that brown-yellow water onto the green lino below, again, again, feeling that bitter string of saliva hanging from your lips

as you see the empty Guinness bottles skittled, that black scuffed shoe by the dirty skirting board, that spatter of black shit in the seat of your crumpled trousers.

The room tilts.

You remember walking the burning fields with her. She wore that long blue dress, those little red roses dancing over her breasts, her behind. You had her in the woods by the stream, her eyes catching the sun that glittered through the leaves.

There's a three-quarters-drunk bottle of Watney's Pale Ale on the mantelpiece. That light lights itself inside of you. You knock the sour booze back. A salty tang makes your tongue spasm. **PISS?**

In the dusty gold-rimmed mirror is your thin mottled face. You reach for the half-toothed comb from your inside jacket-pocket, then tug it through your oily matted hair.

Behind you is the living room you shared with your wife and your children.

They left the red settee and the table. They left the cupboard and two yellow plates. They left a picture of a crying clown and a blue teacup. They left a coal bucket and this mirror.

You wash your face in cold water from the kitchen tap, and then you piss into the sink.

By the sink is a dirty blue teacup. By the dirty blue teacup is a solicitor's letter saying you can't go near her, or the kids.

You wake to a soundless house...

You zip yourself up and leave by the backdoor.
You don't lock up.

There is four pounds in your pocket and change.
You finger the coins as the bus nears town. Through
the window you see the Crooked Spire. The lead
slates catch the sunlight in a dull glint. A swirl of
pigeons twists like backwards smoke over rooftops
to your left. A mother with a shopping basket walks
the pavement holding her small daughter's hand.
They are laughing at a joke you will never hear.

When Ena and the kids left, they didn't tell you
where they'd gone. When you came back from the
pub and read the note, you sat on the red settee and
cried. Then you threw the two yellow plates against
the wall. No one would tell you where they'd gone.
The whole street pretended not to know. Then you
went to the council offices pretending you were
Ena's brother just out the army, and that you'd been
to her old address and she wasn't there anymore.
And of course the woman from the council told you.

She was stupid, like all women are.

The first pub you go to is The Fox's Vault. You're
not barred from here but the landlord gives you that
look as he pours your pint.

Behave now, he says.

You smile, and say, Of course.

The first pint is beautiful. You neck it in three.
That light lights itself inside of you.

You ask for another. The landlord gives you that
look again, says, Last one, Walter.

You nod, say Yes, go sit by the jukebox with your
drink.

You drink, light your first fag of the day. It too, is
beautiful. Remember the first fag you ever had? The
one Dad gave you? Both of you sat in front of the
hearth, the firelight dancing on his face. How old
were you? Ten? Eleven?

Dad never said much, did he. Unless he was
pissed. Mam saying, Don't Frank, don't.

He broke her wrist once, didn't he. Her telling
you and your brothers and sisters that she fell
making the fire. None of you believed her. But then,
none of you said anything, did you.

You finish your pint and walk out into the
sunshine. So bloody what if she's gone and took the
kids with her? So bloody fucking what?

In The Queen's Head, the landlord says No,
so you flick him the jacks and head to the Fleece.
You're not barred from there.

You drink three pints of Brampton Bitter, three
double Bell's. You're on your fourth when Gerry
Jones walks in so you sup up unseen in the snug,
walk out by the side-door. You owe Gerry money.

You wake to a soundless house...

You already know he's been looking for you.

The Welbeck, you think.

As you head out onto Knifsmithgate, a Salvation Army band is playing. A woman in a stupid black hat shakes a collection box in front of you. You tell her, Go sell your fat fuckin tits for pork.

She stops shaking her tin and looks at you, her lips parted as though to say something, but she doesn't. The Co-op clock says two-thirty. Half-an-hour till closing. You quicken your pace.

When you leave the Welbeck, the town gets in your way. You push the stupid chuffs from out of your path. Somewhere the Salvation Army band is still playing. Onward, you weave your way past the market, and that gobshite fruit and veg bloke has parked his stupid fucking horse and cart by his stupid fucking stall. You slap the horse's arse with the flat of your hand and it jumps a little, the cart's wooden wheels rattling across the cobbles. The gobshite fruit and veg bloke stops shouting about apples and says Hey! Hey! What the bloody hell d'yer think you're doing? his scraggy lad grabbing the reins, Eeeasy Samson, eeeasy.

You spin on your heel and point a finger.

SHUT. YOUR BLEEDIN'. TRAP.

And off you walk, too much on your plate to be bothered by stupid little chuffs like him, pushing

past a stupid long-hair busker on the corner of Clark's, his guitar clanging against the lamppost, **SHIFT PUFFTER**, knowing you need space, space from these stupid chuffs and their stupid fucking faces.

You head to the Regal Picture House. You don't care what's showing. You just need space.

The film is called *The Reptile*. People are dying of what they think is the plague in a little village on the moors. A darkie with black staring eyes seems to be at the bottom of it.

You fall into sleep, and you see her eyes catching the sun, a sun that glitters through leaves, your fingers that move through her soft hair, the cool hush of the stream and the woodpigeon's lullaby, the warm breath of September soft hustling the trees, and I love you Ena Black with all my heart I do, and I will...

And you will wake, and a mansion will be burning, a reptile man-creature screaming in the flames, and you will leave the dark of the picture house, walking back out into the late afternoon sun, through the thinning streets to Woolworth's, where you will find that long aisle of plates and bowls and cutlery, take that silver ten-inch breadknife from the shelf, leaving with it pocketed and unpaid for, that blade nestled beside your oily half-toothed comb, and that piece of paper, with that house number on it, that street name, that place where they went.

Halfway up the street

She stops to light a fag, watches some sparrows fight over batter-bits, left by a slow-blown chip-paper that tumbleweeds across the Courthouse grass. From the pavement she squints to make out the headline exclaiming Sandie Shaw a winner.

She drags deep on her fag, exhales, puts both hands back on the pram and starts walking, steering around a curled mound of dog muck.

Jean and her sisters watched the Eurovision on their new second-hand black and white TV on Saturday night, bought by her mam the weekend before from a woman at work. Jean and her sisters gasped when Sandie's microphone didn't work at first, and then moved as one to the edge of the new second-hand settee when Sandie's voice came through loud and clear.

Jean would like her hair cut like Sandie's, but for now she wears it in a beehive.

She stoops by the cenotaph to pull the backs of her

sandals up, and to stop her heart beating fast she sings the first line of Sandie's chorus, almost breathing it into the mouth of the pram. Say you love me madly, I'll gladly, be there.

She frowns, drags on her fag, then starts reading the blackened names on the cenotaph.

For those who fell.

She gets as far as Evans G, then understands these names mean nothing to her, and placing one hand on the pram she moves on in slow measured steps, fag in mouth, using her free hand to check her hair.

In the mirror this morning she thought she looked older. This is something she wants, and has been practising an older face. The older face doesn't smile.

She takes her fag out and glances down to her belly and legs as she walks. In her brown suede miniskirt her belly has lost its little pudding, and she thinks her legs have gained nothing after the birth.

In the distance, the Post Office clock looks like it reads a quarter-to-one, but she can't be sure without her glasses.

Jean puts the brake on the big old pram and moves around to the side of it, peering into the flaky chrome struts that hold the hood up. Her black eyeliner is thick today, and her slate-grey eyes stare back between curls of peeling silver. She rubs the loose flakes off and wishes she had a new pram. When the woman from the Social came to tell her

Halfway up the street

someone had donated a used pram and did she want it, Jean felt happy. She walked all the way across town to a big old house to collect it. The woman who was donating the pram smiled at Jean, but she could tell the woman was judging her.

Jean's mam warned her people would be like this when she came home with the baby.

Jean knew this anyway.

Lifting the brake with the toe of her sandal, Jean and the pram move off slowly. She still has quarter of an hour until she meets Mick, and Mick is always late.

Her heart starts beating faster again when she thinks of him, and she hates herself for not being strong and calm like an older woman would.

She parks the pram by the bench and sits down, pulling her skirt down lower.

Stamping her fag out, she remembers Mick's face when she told him she was pregnant. She remembers the flicker of shock in his eyes, the blink, then the grin, the Oh well I suppose we'd best get married then. Typical Mick. But there was to be no wedding, white or otherwise, Jean's mam forbidding her to ever see Mick again.

He's bad like your dad, Jean's mam had said. And you can't make the same mistake I made.

No.

Jean cried when she found out she was pregnant. She didn't tell her mam at first, not until she started

to show. Jean's mam was still poorly anyway, so it would have done no good to tell her.

Jean remembers standing up in the courtroom to tell the judge what she saw her dad do to her mother, all the time knowing that inside her belly a new life was growing, and would keep on growing until she could hide it no longer.

Her dad stared at her in the courtroom as she told what she saw, so she looked down at her black sandals while she said it. Jean had promised herself that she wouldn't cry when she told it, but she did. The judge gave him six years, which made Jean cry again.

She wanted him to go away forever.

She wanted him to come home and be her dad.

Jean watched the policeman put the handcuffs on him, and then take her dad down some steps that led to a heavy door. He glanced over his shoulder at Jean, and she thought he smiled at her.

She lights another fag, standing up to look at the Post Office clock again. In her letter she told Mick one o'clock at the Town Hall steps. She picked there because it was far enough from home for her mam not to see, but close enough to get home quick if she needed to.

She won't let Mick see her cry. She can't cry. She's too old for that now.

Rocking the pram as she walks, the squeak squeak of the springs measuring her stride, Jean checks her

Halfway up the street

beehive again with her free hand, pulls her skirt down a little, then looks up to see a single white cloud shaped like a fish. In all the blue sky this is the only cloud, and Jean imagines herself laying across the back of the cloudfish, high above the world and the people in it, looking down on everything and no one knowing she was there.

She stops at the street corner that turns towards the Town Hall, takes another drag on her fag, then with both hands firmly on the pram she moves on, around the corner to where she can see the Town Hall steps, long slow-breathing like when she had the baby.

Typical.

Mick is late, but Jean is almost happy at this. This gives her time to sit and think what she's going to say to him.

She parks the pram and sits three steps up with her feet on the pavement, careful not to show her knickers. She imagines Mick stood in front of her, and she thinks that she will stay sitting, she will stay sitting and she will tell him that the baby in the pram is his son.

When Jean's mam made her not see Mick anymore, Jean wrote him a letter to tell him. She said she would always love him, but she couldn't be with him. She told him she was going away to a Magdalene house in Sheffield and someone would adopt the baby. She imagined herself older in the

letter, and had used words like fate and responsibility.

Jean was crying when she wrote the letter. She had to rewrite it twice because some tears had fallen onto the page and that was no good. That was the kind of thing that girls did in films and books, crying onto letters to be sent to far-away lovers, and this wasn't a film, or a book.

Jean drags on her fag, stamps it out, then looks up again to the cloudfish. Its tail has broken away from its body and she imagines herself falling through the gap, rushing towards the earth and its people, all of them looking up and pointing.

Hello Jean.

She blinks, turning her gaze across the face of the sun towards the voice.

There stands Mick, grinning. He is wearing the same leather jacket he always wore, and his hair is still long like it always was. He is holding hands with a blonde girl in a short red dress who is also grinning. Her lipstick is a brighter red than her dress and Jean thinks the girl looks like a slag.

Jean stands up quickly and points to the pram where the baby lies sleeping, its little fists slowly-clenching by its tiny mouth.

This is Billy, says Jean in a voice that sounds older, stronger, And I'm keeping him.

Mick and the girl have stopped grinning as Jean turns on her heel, pushing the pram back towards home, where she will make up the baby's bottle,

Halfway up the street

feed his eager mouth by the backyard daffodils, his dark eyes watching the yellow heads nod in the first breath of summer, the world underneath them slow-turning, a tiny hand gripping a little finger, mine, these things will say...

...mine.