

Spring 2020

**A1A**

Kevin Clouther

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/wrtswrkshpfacpub>

Please take our feedback survey at: [https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

[SV\\_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE](https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE)

**A1A**

Billy knew he had to do it all before time ran out. How much time he had was an interesting question. The answer was not a lot. The answer was to get moving already.

His whole life he'd been moving. From nice neighborhood to less nice, from one pose to the next. He liked moving, and people liked watching him move. Although he couldn't see everything, he could see that, the pleasure others took in watching him. He took no such pleasure in watching anyone else.

Things that brought Billy pleasure: salt water in his hair, his mother's laughter in the next room over, pickles on cheeseburgers.

The ocean was best. There he was small, just the size he wanted to be. Who in the ocean feels otherwise? The key was patience, waiting for the tug and then swimming furiously, so his body crested just as the wave did. To be carried, to give himself over completely to an invisible force—when he timed it right, there was no better feeling. And then, when it was over, to swim back and wait for the tug again. The best days that was all he did.

But there were no waves this day. He bobbed in the ocean, willing them to form, but none of his spells worked. On shore, the sand was covered with empty towels. He lay on the first one he reached. The sun got to work right away. He closed his eyes. He could almost forget sometimes. When he opened them, a shape was fighting its way into focus. He pushed himself up and squinted, though that didn't help. He squinted for other people, to show he was trying.

“That’s my towel,” the shape said.

“It didn’t feel right,” Billy confessed.

How long had he slept? It seemed only a moment, yet the towels had all been tucked into bags or slung over shoulders, the sand returned to its primal state. He retrieved his shirt and sandals from beneath the bottom step of the pavilion, where he always left them. It gave him faith to return to them unstolen. He never brought a towel of his own. The world had a way of accommodating this need.

Billy smelled the exhaust of the patrol car before it announced itself at the top of the steps. The car was piloted by his mother’s boyfriend, a man whose loud and insistent belief in justice—civic and personal— was betrayed by his perpetually red face. Officer Peters asked Billy if he wanted to go for a ride.

“I didn’t steal the towel,” Billy said.

“What towel?” the officer asked, securing the handcuffs.

They drove slowly in the way only cops do. Billy stared at the usual things from the back of the car.

“I want to show you something,” Officer Peters said.

This wasn’t Billy’s first ride in the back. Officer Peters had a way, since he started dating Billy’s mother, of finding Billy. Although he’d never admit it, this impressed him. Billy respected cleverness. He liked that Officer Peters never told Billy how he knew where he was, though the more Billy thought about this, the easier it seemed. It wasn’t like he was running a drug ring.

The car always had a destination, the more horrifying the better. Sometimes they toured blasted-out neighborhoods, the likes of which Billy had no idea existed, which was the point. Every house had a chain-link fence, waist high. Every house had a barking dog inside the fence. Every house had a car missing something—a wheel, a window— on the other side of the fence.

“You don’t know how lucky you are,” Officer Peters liked to say when they passed a particularly incomplete car.

“I know exactly how lucky I am,” Billy said each time.

Other times they drove past people living with their tattered possessions beneath overpasses. He didn’t think a car could go so slow. Some people had signs constructed from cardboard boxes and magic marker. The signs pointed to their status as veterans or parents. *Anything helps*, the signs all read. Officer Peters read them knowingly. His tone was clear: nothing helps.

Another thing he liked to do was offer examples. Did Billy know (he never knew—that was also the point) that most violent crimes occur between five and eight? In the *evening*, Officer Peters emphasized, as though there were something suspiciously feminine about the word, and they were in on a private joke. Billy didn’t think, from the back seat of the patrol car, that he was in on anything. He wondered if they were about to see a violent crime. It wasn’t even two o’clock.

Their first stop—there was usually more than one—was a parking lot. Billy didn’t see any other cars. He thought: drug deal. Then he thought: where’s the dealer? Who’s the dealt?

“What do you notice?” Officer Peters wanted to know.

“Nobody’s here.”

It occurred to Billy, not for the first time, that Officer Peters could do something very bad. There wasn’t anybody to prevent him from doing so. He turned off the ignition while Billy considered this. “The thing about your mother,” Officer Peters said, “is she has a lot on her plate.”

“That’s one thing.”

At this point, he opened the door. Billy examined his locked door mournfully. He watched Officer Peters patrol the empty parking lot.

“I want to help your mother,” he said, “which is a way of helping you.”

“You can start with letting me out.”

He peered at Billy through the open door. Officer Peters reached into his pocket. Billy feared mace, but Officer Peters produced a book of matches. One by one he began to light them.

“She loves me.” He dropped a match. “She loves me not.”

Billy distrusted showiness. It seemed a distraction from imminent menace.

“What am I being charged with?” he asked.

“Don’t get cute.”

Officer Peters closed his door, reappearing at Billy’s, where he knocked on the window, as though the door weren’t locked, as though Billy’s wrists weren’t dented from cuffs. Officer Peters swung the door wide.

He said, “Some things you have to see for yourself.”

Billy blinked into the Florida sun, relentlessly bright, even in its slow descent. How did anyone get away with anything in this light?

Officer Peters produced his gun, aimed it at the horizon. In profile, arms outstretched and fingers wrapped around the weapon, he almost resembled somebody’s idea of courage.

“You’re blind, right?” he asked.

“Legally.”

“What kind of law is that?”

“I can see, just not—”

He discharged one, two, three, four rounds into the light. It was true that Billy couldn’t follow them to their resting place.

“Somebody will hear you,” he said.

“Your hearing is *sensitive*, on account of the blindness.”

Sensitive was a word Billy could do without; he’d heard that one enough.

“Anyhow, that’s not what I want to show you,” Officer Peters said.

He undid the cuffs. They walked for a while before a building rose from the asphalt. *Rose* was overstating it. The building was squat, like you could jump onto the roof with a running head start. Billy considered doing this now that he could move his arms again.

“The inhabitants,” Officer Peters said, “are salt of the earth types.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“It means they have nothing, and people feel bad.”

Officers Peters didn’t wait for a reply to his knocking. Billy couldn’t believe how dark it was inside. It was as though someone had sucked all the light out of the room with a vacuum. Or maybe it was a vacuum they entered.

“I asked you to leave.” Officer Peters lit another match. “But here you are.”

*You*, Billy learned, was a big number. Maybe twenty-five. Maybe double that.

“Some are legal,” Officer Peters said. “Some aren’t. You can’t just ask.”

When he reached for his belt, everyone flinched, but he only produced a flashlight. He kept the light out of people’s eyes, choosing to run the beam over each of the walls, highlighting what wasn’t there. Light switches weren’t there. Or windows. Then he turned his beam to the floor, which wasn’t exactly dirt. A small dog mistook this for a game and leapt at the light.

“*Volver*,” a woman whispered, urgently.

“Revolver?” Officer Peters asked.

“To return,” Billy said.

The dog looked up at Officer Peters. He reached out his hand, which the dog first sniffed and then licked. For a long time, this was the only sound in the room.

“Leave,” Officer Peters said. “For your own good. *Salir*.”

“A *donde*?” a man asked.

“*Donde no es mi problema*.”

When Officer Peters clicked off the light, the dog barked a solitary bark. He left through the door he’d entered. Billy followed.

“Why?” he asked.

“Not everyone feels the way I do.”

“How do you feel?”

Officer Peters stopped. "I'm not trying to be your father."

The walk back to the car was quiet. Maybe the job numbed you. Or maybe growing up numbed you. Or maybe he wasn't numb. Maybe, on the inside, he was screaming. Billy looked for evidence of this. He listened.

"I guess I should bring you home," Officer Peters said, "or back to the beach. What do you think?"

"Can I sit in front?"

"Your mother told me you're smart. Or think you are."

"She thinks I am."

"You can never sit in front."

At least this time Billy could sit without handcuffs. "Beach," he decided.

"Too late."

But they weren't taking any route home that Billy recognized.

"This isn't the way we go," he said.

"I thought you couldn't see."

"I'm listening to the road."

Officer Peters increased his speed.

"One more stop," he said.

They were far from A1A now, approaching 95. You could take it all the way to Miami. Or Maine. Billy had never been to either. He wondered about Officer Peters' jurisdiction.

"My mother's expecting me," Billy said.

"She's expecting me, too."

It was amazing how even with the lights off and the sirens silent, cars got out of their way.

"Where are we going?" Billy asked.

"I got a call."

"I didn't hear any call."

That was another thing Billy wondered about: aren't cops supposed to travel in twos? Movies were unanimous on this point.

"Why don't you have a partner?" he asked.

"She's on stakeout."

"Staking out what?"

They were going very fast now. Billy tried to read the billboards. He got the general idea. Buying things makes beautiful people happy. Billy distrusted beautiful people.

"What will happen to the people we saw?" he asked.

"If they're smart, they'll leave."

Billy wasn't sure. If they had somewhere else to go, why be underground in the first place? When he got home, he'd go back. He didn't know what he'd do, but he'd do something. He divided the world between people who tried and people who'd given up. Or never started. Mostly, he encountered these people, though he still believed in the possibility of being someone else. At least, sometimes he did. Other times, he thought it was all bullshit.

Officer Peters drove to a different city. Billy had never been there, though they didn't travel far. The city was principally known for its prison, which backed into an endless expanse of swamp, more or less unchanged from the beginning of time.

"I know about this place," Billy said.

"You don't know anything."

It didn't look like his idea of prison. For one thing, the wall was so tall he could scarcely see anything. The color of the wall surprised him. It looked as though it were made of sand. He wanted to touch it, if only to confirm he couldn't push his fingers through to the other side. He suspected Officer Peters wanted Billy to ask about the other side, but he was unwilling to do so.

"My mother really is expecting me," he said.

“My job is to keep them out of here.”

“So keep them out.”

Officer Peters nodded, as if in response to a higher calling.

“Although they don’t go here first,” he said. “They don’t even go to the same place. It’s complicated.”

A patrol car approached from the opposite direction. When the car stopped, the driver’s side window lowered.

“This part is like the movies,” Officer Peters admitted.

“Who do you have back there?” the other officer asked.

“Juvenile delinquent.”

“Bad news about the thing I was going to do for you.”

Officer Peters fiddled with some buttons on the dashboard. “Can you at least take him back to his mother’s?” he asked.

Officer Peters looked back to Billy. There was something apologetic in the look, even gentle. It made him uncomfortable. He thought it made Officer Peters uncomfortable, too. But he held his gaze. Maybe he recognized something of Billy’s mother. Or maybe he felt bad sentencing Billy to a fate he didn’t understand.

Whatever the look was, his opinion wasn’t solicited. Officer Martinez let Billy sit in front.

“So you know how to get there,” he said.

“Get where?” Officer Martinez asked.

He took little interest in other cars. He treated traffic lights as poorly thought out suggestions. His car, more than Officer Peters’, purred with authority. Or was it arrogance? Billy may have been pursuing distinctions that didn’t exist. He couldn’t believe how fast they were going when they started going faster.

“How long have you known Officer Peters?” Officer Martinez asked.

“I don’t really know him.”

“That’s not what he says.”

Billy was curious but unwilling to reveal this. At the time, his unwillingness was a fierce point of pride.

“You probably think the job is a lot of car chases and gun fights,” Officer Martinez said.

“I don’t think that.”

Billy saw something different in Officer Martinez’s driving, even as Officer Martinez maintained an extraordinary speed. It was as though he suddenly remembered where he was going, or what he was leaving. It was as though he’d been avoiding something that roared into his mind and set up camp, and there was nothing to do but deal with this thing.

Billy said, “Do you know about the house with like a million—”

“Lot of houses like that.”

Outside, the world began to resemble something Billy recognized. He counted the drug stores and nail places and bagels shops. The only thing different in each strip mall was the coloring on the signs. Even the cars in the parking lots were the same.

“Can we go to the house?” Billy asked.

“To do what?”

“Help.”

“So a cop and a kid—shouldn’t you be in school?”

“Technically.”

“Cop and kid knock and say what? You’re free not to get caught. Take this opportunity to seek opportunity, so long as you seek it in the right places.”

“It’s not so much what we say.”

“What so much is it?”

One step at a time, Billy thought.

“Sure,” Officer Martinez decided, “we can go.”

But he meant what he said: there were a lot of houses like that. They could drive all day without knocking on the right door, which is precisely what they did.

It was always the same. Nobody opened the door. Officer Martinez acted unsurprised, even uninterested. Billy was unaccustomed to adults taking him seriously and observed Officer Martinez for signs of mockery. Billy found none.

The doors began to blend together. What separates one door from another beyond what lies on the other side? Officer Martinez expressed no curiosity. He didn't announce himself or look through windows.

"Is this part of your normal routine?" Billy asked.

"There's no normal." Officer Martinez knocked twice before turning to the car. "There's no routine."

Each door Billy wondered if it would be the last. He was getting tired. Or maybe disillusioned. He asked Officer Martinez if that was the point.

"There's no point," he said.

Billy began to study the doors for clues. He began to study Officer Martinez. Perhaps there was something Billy had missed, something that would shed light on—no, he was being stupid. It wasn't like that. He knew better. Still, he couldn't help himself. Didn't this door look a little heavier, a little darker?

"That about does it," Officer Martinez eventually said.

"Does what?"

"You're not authorized to receive that answer."

"So there really is no point?"

He stared at the patrol car and then at Billy.

Officer Martinez said, "You're going to have to tell me where you live."

Billy told him.

"You're going to have to tell me a few more things."

But it wasn't true. Officer Martinez never asked, and Billy never volunteered. Even if he weren't frightened, Billy didn't know what to say.

They drove at a normal speed. He didn't look at anything, and he didn't listen to anything. Patiently, he waited to get home, where his life would resume as though nothing had happened. Nothing had happened.

His mother, as promised, was expecting him. She stood tall, burning, glorious. Billy wanted to say or do something to let her know her light filled the doorway, but when he opened his mouth, he felt his face contorting into a shape anguished and irrevocable. He hoped there was ancient wisdom to this shame.

She said, "Someday you'll leave me."

He said, "It's not like—"

"I know what it's like."

But she didn't know. How could she? This wasn't his life. This was something else, borrowed maybe, or left on the doorstep. Tomorrow or the next day or the day after that, he'd start his life. Billy knew it wouldn't last long, so he'd have to be ready. He'd have to make his life count once it was his.

---

**Kevin Clouther** is the author of *We Were Flying to Chicago: Stories*. His stories have appeared in *The Gettysburg Review*, *The Greensboro Review*, *Gulf Coast*, *The New Orleans Review*, and *Puerto Del Sol* among other journals, and he has contributed essays to *The Millions*, *NPR*, *Poets & Writers*, *Salon*, and *Tin House*. He is an Assistant Professor at the University of Nebraska Omaha Writer's Workshop, where he is Program Coordinator of the MFA in Writing.