

*I know an old lady who swallowed a fly  
I don't know why she swallowed a fly  
I guess she'll die.*

*I know an old lady who swallowed a spider  
That wriggled and jiggled and tickled inside her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly  
But I don't know why she swallowed the fly  
I guess she'll die.*

Billy mumbled the words to himself and pedaled with the rhythm as he made his way along the dusty gravel road to her house. It was hot, easily ninety degrees, and he cursed the heat, the dust coating his bare legs and making them itch, the rusty bicycle that made biking far more work than it should be, and the old lady he was on his way to see as he sweated and started making up his own words.

*I know an old lady who swallowed a fly  
I know damn well why she swallowed the fly  
She's too mean to die.  
I know an old lady who swallowed a spider  
But it wasn't poisonous, and it didn't kill her  
She swallowed the spider to catch the fly  
I know damn well why she swallowed the fly  
I'm not lucky enough for her to die.*

The song always reminded him of his sister. With the real words, not his words. He and Tracy used to sing it, laughing at the silliness of it, when they'd run through their wheat fields. Back when they had wheat fields. Back when there were things to laugh about.

His eyes burned the way they always did when he thought about Tracy, about how much he missed her. Not that he'd ever admit it—the tears or the fact that he missed her—but he did. A lot. So he made himself stop thinking about her and instead focused on the ugly, weathered, grey house that grew closer far too quickly.

Under the blistering sun, Billy swore he could see the paint peeling and curling, falling right off the warped siding. She was going to make him paint it, he knew she was. She'd snapped something to that effect a couple of times during the past week. Billy hoped she'd forget about it, but knew she wouldn't. Her Swiss cheese memory was maddeningly hole-free when it came to the crappy stuff.

And he'd probably have to paint the fence too. The brand new fence that mocked him every time he passed it.

Billy turned off the road and into her yard, keeping his back to the stupid fence. He threw down his bike on the lawn that was more weeds than it was lawn. But those weeds were meticulously cut since Billy mowed them once a week. Twice the week before since she'd been in a particularly foul mood. It had been the first thing she'd told him when he'd knocked on her door for the first time two-and-a-half weeks ago.

'Mower's in the shed, boy. Get busy.'

No introductions, no instructions, nothing but barked orders followed by a door slammed in his face. Today, like most days since, a note was taped to the door telling him what she expected him to do. Not that he needed the note. The paint cans on the porch were notice enough.

"Damn, bullshit paint," Billy muttered as he kicked at a can and ripped the note from the door. He swiped his arm across his forehead. He'd soaked through his shirt on the ride over and the sweating didn't show any signs of letting up. Billy eyed the house, looked up to the sky, and tried to work out whether he'd be able to somehow keep himself in the shade while he painted. Maybe if he moved from one side of the house to another...

Those hopes were dashed when he looked at the note.

*Start with the back. Don't skimp on the scraping.*

Scraping? What the hell did that mean? He looked down again at the paint cans and spotted a couple of rusty-handled things that looked kind of like his mom's old kitchen tools. The things she'd used when she made pancakes.

Billy hadn't eaten a pancake in five years.

He kicked the paint can again, hard enough this time that the pain in his big toe was almost worse than the pain in his heart.

Next to the flat things was some kind of brush. He picked it up and ran his hand over the bristles. Metal. Hard and sharp. He turned it over in his hands, squinted at the house, then took a tentative swipe across the peeling paint. Dirty, grey flakes snowed down and covered his hand and wrist.

"Well, shit."

He looked up, down, and across the expanse of the wide house front. He let his eyes wander to the right and pictured the high, flat wall dotted with windows on that side of the house. To the left, more of the same. The back, the side that faced the barn, had another door, a lot more windows, and endless, endless siding.

The job would take him the rest of his life.

Billy threw down the brush and trudged to the side of the house in search of the hose. He twisted the faucet and after a rattle and a thump, water splattered from the end of the mottled green hose that was coiled tightly enough and hidden well enough by the weeds it looked like a snake ready to strike. He kind of wished it would. He felt ready for a fight.

He waited, then flicked one finger through the stream. Still too hot. He'd learned his lesson the week before when ready to pass out from the heat, he'd staggered to the hose, turned it on, and stuck his mouth under the stream, gulping. The scalding water that filled his mouth and splashed on his face had led to a stream of a different kind. Billy had been rather proud of the inventive swear words he'd screamed at the top of his lungs, but they had gotten the old lady out of her house and had gotten Billy an additional hour of work that day.

So now, he waited. When the water finally cooled enough, Billy sucked down what felt like gallons, but he knew within the hour he'd feel like he hadn't had a drop in days.

Damn Kansas summer.

When he returned to the front door, she was waiting.

"You turn that hose off all the way? It was dripping the other day."

"It's off."

"Better be." She looked him up and down. "You know how to paint?"

"Dip the brush in the paint then rub it on the house? I think I can handle it."

She fisted her hands on her hips and scowled at him. "Don't get smart with me, boy. Did you read the note? There's scraping needs to be done."

"I read it."

"I want all that old paint off before the new goes on, you hear me?"

"I hear you."

"Show me."

"Huh?"

"Show me you know what you're doing. Start scraping."

Billy huffed out his breath and slanted his eyes at the woman who had stepped all the way out of the door to stand behind him and watch. He picked up the brush he'd used earlier and stretching his hand over his head, ran it down over the rough, wood siding. Like before, flecks of paint fluttered to the ground.

"No, no, no. I thought you said you knew what you were doing?"

"You told me to scrape. I scraped. What the hell do you want?"

Her eyes narrowed to slits. "What did I tell you about language?"

Billy grunted at her and waited for the lecture he was certain would follow. Instead, she bent over with a grunt of her own and picked up one of the flat, kitchen tool-like things.

"This way, or you'll damage the wood."

She slid the tool from right to left. Larger curls of paint fell and with a couple of swipes, she cleared most of the board. She held out her hand for the brush, then used it to sweep lightly over what she'd already scraped to finish the job.

"Use this first." She pushed the scraper toward him. "It will take off most of the paint. Clean it up with the brush. And go easy."

“Yes ma’am.”

Billy took the tools back from her. He clamped his teeth down on his tongue to keep himself from asking her why the hell she didn’t just do the job herself if she thought she was so damn good at it. He didn’t want more extra hours.

“Got it?”

“Yeah.”

“Get the back scraped then paint that side before you move to the next side. Work from the top, down. You’ll need a ladder. It’s in the barn.”

Billy froze, still bent over and reaching for the paint can.

“The barn? But—”

“Go in, get the ladder, and get out. It’s on the left side. Don’t expect the lights to work.”

He didn’t say any more, didn’t ask any more questions, just stood and walked toward the barn. He heard her follow him off the porch, around the side of the house. Her eyes bored holes in his back, but he kept his trained on the barn door, not giving her the satisfaction of turning to look at her.

The door stuck with his first pull, catching on the dirt that years of relentless winds had piled in front of it. Billy kicked at the dirt, smoothing the pile and lowering it enough that he figured the door would swing over it. He was rewarded with a loud creak as the rusty hinges protested the unwelcome interruption of their years-long slumber.

Old, rotting hay, the faint memory of the animals that once called the barn home, and the acrid tang of gasoline and diesel fuel all blanketed under years of dust assailed Billy’s nose. He sneezed.

It was dark; the only bit of light coming from the sunlight able to sneak through the partially open door or through the cracked and rotting boards of the barn’s walls. The only windows were up high and were too dirty to let in much light. Part of him wanted to explore, to search, to find what he knew—what everyone knew—had to be there, somewhere, but another part of him wanted to run, didn’t want to find anything but a ladder.

He’d been told from day one to stay out of the barn, that there was no reason for him to go inside as everything he’d need he’d find in the shed. She must not have considered he’d need a ladder for painting. Or, she’d forgotten where the ladder was. Whatever the reason, he was inside for the first time.

He turned his head one way, then the other. It wasn’t so bad. If his friends were there, if she wasn’t standing on the side of the house watching and waiting, if he had a flashlight, he’d look around. Yeah, he told himself, he’d look around. He wasn’t afraid. The stories were true, everyone knew they were true, but he wasn’t afraid. He stood up straighter and puffed out his chest.

When the door slammed shut behind him with enough force to shake the walls and block out most of what little light there was, he crouched and threw his arms over his head. But nearly as quickly, he jumped up and looked around, as embarrassed as if he’d had an audience.

“Damn wind,” he muttered as he pushed the door back open to let in what light he could.

The ladder was on the left, as she’d said, about twenty feet from the door, propped against the wall between an old milk can and a couple of shovels. Billy shuffled through the dirt and bits of trampled hay to grab it and hoist it over his shoulder. When he turned to head back for the door, the end of the ladder knocked over the shovels and sent up a cloud of dust that engulfed him. Sneezing again and swearing between each sneeze, he stomped out the door, kicking it closed behind him.

He watched her eye him, nod to herself when the barn door closed, then turn back toward the house without a word. Fine by him.

After an hour, Billy decided there wasn’t much worse than scraping paint off an old house. He had paint flecks in his hair, in his eyes, all over his arms, and because he couldn’t stop himself from swearing about the stupid job, the rickety ladder, and the endless expanse of warped siding, in his mouth.

At that moment, he hated Old Lady Baxter more than he’d ever hated anyone. And that was saying something as he had a long list of people he hated. To pass the time while he scraped, he listed and ranked them in his head.

Number One: Old Lady Baxter. It was her fault he was spending his summer slaving away under the blazing sun instead of hanging out at the lake with his friends and watching Julie Tucker who he knew would fill out her bikini far better than she had the year before.

Number Two: Damn Judge O'Malley. Also to blame for how he was spending his summer. While Billy begrudgingly admitted to himself that even scraping paint was better than jail, he still hated Judge O'Malley. And he always would.

Number Three: Cancer. Okay, so cancer wasn't a person, but he could still hate it. Five years ago, it had taken away his mom as viciously as if it had been a real live person wielding a gun. He could certainly hate it.

Number Four: His dad. Four and a half years ago, his dad had stopped giving a damn and started drinking. If life hadn't already been shitty enough, it got really shitty then.

Number Five: His Aunt Cindy. Four years and five months ago, Aunt Cindy took Tracy to live with her. Any bullshit she'd tried to feed him about wanting to take him too, about how sorry she was she didn't have the room, about how she knew that he wouldn't want to leave his home and his friends anyway, was just that. Bullshit. She didn't want a pain-in-the-ass troublemaker. Billy was smart enough to figure that out.

Number Six: His friends. They got to spend the summer at the lake, or working for money instead of for free. And getting their driver's licenses.

Number Seven: Himself.