

Zach & Bill
A Short Story
By Ian Herring

Bill moves his face away from hers. He picks his glasses up off the nightstand and brushes his curly, brown hair out of his eyes. “What’s wrong?” she asks. He presses his finger to his lips as he creeps to the window. Bill’s eyes widen and his cheeks sink down. He whips around, snags his Budweiser shirt from the bed, and opens the door. “What is going on?” the girl asks again.

“Shut the fuck up,” Bill says through his teeth as he closes the door behind him. Down the hall Zach crouches at the top of the stairs. “How many are there?” he asks with his shirt over his head.

“You said this wasn’t going to happen,” whispers Zach.

“Well, it is,” Bill replies, “what are we going to do?”

“I didn’t make an escape plan. You tell me.”

“I use the front door once her parents are asleep.”

“Well, her parents aren’t here, dude. The fucking cops are.”

“Calm down,” Bill thwaps Zach in the head. Zach returns with a glare. “C’mon let’s go.” Zach sneaks down the stairs behind Bill. The wooden stairs vibrate more and more with each step taken. “Lil Wayne is still playing. That’s a good sign.” Zach rolls his eyes. Once at the bottom of the stairs, three knocks bang on the house’s front door. Bill peers around the corner. One of the fellow party goers creaks the door open. Multiple police officers flood into the living room.

“Turn off the music,” says a cop in the living room. The music stops. “What’s going on here?” All of the teenagers exchange meek glances. Until one of the boys points up to a balloon that reads, “Congrats Grad!” on the side. Bill retreats from the corner and looks at Zach.

“The back door. Let’s make a run for it.”

“Are you sure?” Zach asks.

“Positive.” Zach takes one step backwards and crushes an empty beer can under his foot. They both freeze. Bill raises his hands and peeps his head around the corner once more. He makes eye contact with about seven police officers. All of whom are standing around a bunch of party goers.

“Do not move,” says one cop. Zach and Bill take off in the opposite direction towards the back door. “Stop!” The pair are already in the backyard.

“C’mon! Why didn’t you grab ‘em?” asks Pete. A tall policeman with a thin, blonde mustache and a buzz cut.

“They were on the other side of the room!” replies another officer. “What’d you expect me to do?”

“Your job,” Pete says as he moves to the back door. Marrion, an older cop, enters the house. He scans the room and smirks when he realizes what these kids have been up to.

“What’s goin’ on, Pete?” asks Marrion with his hands on his hips.

“Two of these brats ran out the back. I’ll bring ‘em right back.”

“How about you just—” Pete slams the door behind him, cutting off Marrion. Pete turns on his flashlight and holds it next to his head. He scans the treeline a few times before making his way into the woods.

Zach and Bill sprint through the forest. Dodging trees left and right, jumping over fallen logs, and crunching leaves with every step that they take. Zach is ahead of him. “Hold on. Wait, wait, wait,” says Bill. Zach turns around and sees him bent over with his hands on his knees. Bill

raises a finger and says, “I just need one moment.” He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a vape. Zach marches over to him, slaps the vape to the ground, and grabs Bill by the shoulders.

“Are you serious?! We don’t have time for this,” says Zach. Bill pulls Zach’s hands off of him. Bill points to a large, collapsed tree.

“We can hide there. Not for long. Just need a minute.” Zach scans the distance they have covered. They duck behind the fallen tree. Zach peers over the log. “You would have seen someone by now,” says Bill. He slinks down beside him. Zach runs his fingers through his black hair, leans his head against the log, and looks up into the trees. Bill twiddles his thumbs and then gasps. Zach turns to him with a raised eyebrow. Gleaming, Bill pulls his car keys out of his pocket. Shaking them in Zach’s face. Zach pushes his hand away.

“We are not going back,” he says.

“I need my car, man,” says Bill. Zach places his face in his hands.

“We *will* get caught. There’s a road up ahead. We’ll get an uber.”

“My parents will know we snuck out if my car isn’t there in the morning.”

“Arrested or grounded? Which sounds better to you?”

“Neither!”

“I can’t comprehend how much of a dumbass you can be sometimes!” Bill’s face tightens and he stares away from Zach wild-eyed. Zach scoffs and rolls his eyes. Bill crosses his arms.

“We can’t all be geniuses like *Zach Markham*,” says Bill.

“What is your problem?” Bill glares at him.

“You.”

“Me?” Zach straightens his posture. “You dragged me to this party. You’ve brought me to every party you go to since we were in middle school.”

“Yeah, ‘cause you’re a loser. No one at our school thinks you’re cool. They all say you’re a nerd.”

“So what? I’m never coming back here once Summer ends. I don’t care what those hicks think of me.” Bill furrows his brow.

“You should. You need my help.” Zach laughs at his remark.

“Your help? I need *your* help? That’s priceless.” Bill’s face gets red. “I will never need your help, Bill.” Zach stands up and looks down at him. “You’re never going to leave this town. You’ll never amount to anything!” Leaves crunch in the distance behind Zach. Bill notices and waves his hands up and down to get Zach to sit.

“Zach, shut up,” he whispers.

“You want to call me a loser? You pretentious punk.” Zach leans over and points his finger in Bill’s face. “I can’t wait to visit my parents and have you take my order at McDonald’s. Who knows... Maybe you’ll become a manager in five years.” The crunching of leaves gets louder.

“Behind you,” Bill pleads. Moonlight glistens across his eyes. Zach closes his mouth, widens his eyes, and brings his hand back at his side. He slowly looks over his shoulder. Pete shines his light directly into Zach’s face. Zach raises his arm to shield him from the light. Pete circles around the boys. With his left hand, he motions for Zach to sit. He does and Pete then rests his hand on his equipment belt. Bill looks over to Zach.

“Nuh uh.” Pete motions Bill to look him in the eyes with his middle and pointer finger. Pete spreads his stance and spits on the ground. “Looks like you boys are shit outta luck,” he laughs. “You two actually thought you could escape me? The law?”

“Sir, we-” says Zach.

“Quiet. That was a, uh, rhetorical question.” He squats down and shines his light back and forth between their faces. “Boy, you two sure are hammered.” He gets up and motions them to stand. Bill grabs a rock and compresses it next to his thigh. “Delinquents. The both of you. I cannot wait to get ahold of your parents. Drinking under age. Evading arrest. Phew! Buncha little criminals right here.” Bill and Zach stand up. They make eye contact. Bill gives him a sly smile and nods. Zach tilts his head and furrows his brow a little.

“With all do respect, officer, fuck you. And fuck your porn stache,” says Bill as he gives Pete the middle finger. Pete steps towards him and places his free hand on his taser.

“Why you little-” Bill throws and hits Pete with the rock. Pete stumbles back onto one knee, grabbing his chest.

“Run!” Bill yells to Zach. Bill takes off deeper into the woods. Zach runs right by Pete. But Pete grabs at his ankle. He doesn’t get a hold of it, but causes Zach to lose balance and fall. Bill looks over his shoulder to see Pete standing over Zach. He stops and shouts “Zach!” Who is laying on his back staring up at Pete.

“Get out of here!” Zach yells without breaking eye contact with Pete. Bill hesitates for a moment and then runs off.

“Come here you little shit,” Pete grunts as he picks Zach up by his collar. “You just assaulted an officer of the law!” He screams out into the forest. Zach tightens his lips and hangs his head. Pete is gripping him by the back of his shirt. He begins to guide Zach back to the house. “Once I got you in cuffs you bet your ass I’ll be going back for your friend. Don’t want you to be lonely in your cell tonight.” Zach glares up at him and then spits on Pete’s shoe. Pete stops walking, closes his eyes, and inhales deeply. “Move!” Veins pop out of Pete’s neck.

Bill watches it all go down behind a tree 25 yards away. Once Pete and Zach are out of sight, he begins pacing back and forth with his hands on his head. He takes his hands down and hits them against his thighs. "Fuck!" He looks back to where Pete and Zach were. Shaking his head, he turns around and takes a few steps deeper into the woods. A stick about the size of a baseball bat rests on the ground near Bill's feet. He looks at it, purses his lips, and picks it up.

"I don't know who that kid thinks he is. Hitting me with a goddamn rock. Punk." Pete shoves Zach forward. "Keep moving."

"I didn't even slow down!" says Zach as he throws his hands into the air.

"Shut up, boy." Pete says.

"You're a loon."

"Excuse me?" Pete stops and places his hand on his taser. "I've got no problem carrying you back."

"With those chicken legs?" Zach scoffs. Pete glares and removes the taser from its holster. "You're going to taze an 18 year old?" Pete points the taser at Zach.

"Eighteen means you're a legal adult." Pete's smirk quickly vanishes as Bill breaks a heavy stick across his back. "Gah!" Bill shoves Pete to the ground and kicks him in the side. Bill takes off running and motions for Zach to join him. The boys run and put some distance between them and the cop. Pete pushes himself up but falls back to the ground before he can get a foot under him. The boys are covering more and more distance with every step that they take.

"Bill. Wait up," says Zach as he slows to a stop. Bill turns around and posts up on a tree. Zach opens his mouth but nothing comes out. He looks down and scratches the back of his head. "Look, man. I'm so--"

"Save it." Bill starts walking away. Zach jogs up to him and they walk side-by-side.

“Thank you,” says Zach. Bill lifts his hand and wipes something off his face. “I was being a dick earlier, and I-” Bill shoves Zach away from him.

“I said save it!” he shouts. Tears roll down Bill’s face as he breathes heavily. He continues to walk and Zach trails behind him. Zach’s face is burning red. After a moment, Bill whips around to face him. “You’re the one that’s leaving me here.” Bill wipes the tears off of his face. “I have to stay here in this shit hole of a town while you go off to have the time of your life at UGA.” Zach steps forward and places his hand on Bill’s shoulder. Bill begins to cry harder.

“I’m not going to leave forever. I’ll be back to visit. I promise.”

“It doesn’t matter. I won’t know what to do.”

“Sure you will, Bill. You’ll just have to find someone else to drag to all of these parties.” Bill looks up at Zach and smiles through his tears. But soon goes back to sobbing. “Hey Bill, listen. We can talk more about this later. But... you, uh, we just beat up a cop. We need to get to the road.” Bill wipes his face again and nods.

“You’re right. You’re right.”

“Awesome. C’mon.” Zach pats him on the back and they continue to walk. A bullet wizzes past their heads and lands in a nearby tree trunk. They book it. Sprinting faster than they have their entire lives. “We’re close!” Zach hurdles over a rock and Bill slides under a branch. Another gunshot, this time it hits the dirt right behind Bill’s feet.

“What the fuck!” screams Bill. Zach explodes through the treeline and down the slope to the road. He turns to look back for Bill who after a second emerges and tumbles down. Zach rushes over and helps him up. They turn to run but come face-to-face with Marrion.

Marrion leans against the hood of his patrol car. Smoking a cigarette with his hand on his gun holster. “You two having a good night?” asks Marrion. The boys are motionless. Their arms

spread out ready to move in any direction at any moment. Bill shifts his right foot and Marrion raises his hand at him. “Don’t.” Marrion flicks his cigarette away and points to the radio on his shoulder. “You two could definitely outrun me. But you can’t outrun this.” The boys exchange shady looks. Zach shrugs and loosens his posture. “Did you two run into the officer that followed you into the woods?”

“That fucking psycho with the moustache? He almost shot me!” shouts Bill.

“He what?” asks Marrion as he stands up straight.

“Officer. Your partner tried to kill us in those woods. He shot at us twice. How the hell did you not hear him?” Zach asks. Marrion taps his right ear a few times and then removes his hearing aid. He examines it in his hand for a moment.

“Ah!” he says. Marrion twists a knob on the aid and puts it back in his ear. “Wasn’t up all of the way.”

“Are you fucking serious!?” shouts Bill. “What kind of cop are you? You’re the same age as my grandfather!”

“Where is he?” Marrion asks again. At that moment Pete busts through the treeline. His uniform is dirtied with sticks, twigs, and some blood. He stands at the top of the hill for a moment and then raises his gun at Bill.

“Get on the ground! Now!” Pete marches down the hill towards him with his gun aimed. Bill puts his hands in the air and drops to one knee.

“Stand down, Pete! For Christ’s sake!” Marrion yells as he unclips the holster of his gun. Pete continues towards Bill. Zach looks at Marrion with his wide eyes.

“You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say-”

“Pete!” Marrion pulls out his gun. “What are you doing?!” Pete keeps his gun on Bill but looks up at Marrion with furrowed brows.

“I’m making an arrest! You don’t know what these two did back there!”

“You’re right, Pete. I do not. But look at what you are doing. They are kids. Put your gun away.”

“They’re 18. They’re adults! I am acting well within the law here.”

“They just finished high school. This was a graduation party!” Marrion moves closer to Pete with his gun in hand but not aimed at anyone. “At least take your finger off of the goddamn trigger.” Pete looks back and forth between Marrion and Bill. He lowers his gun and takes a step back. “Get behind me kid.” Marrion beckons for Bill. Bill gets up and runs next to Zach. Marrion gets right next to Pete.

“You don’t know what they fucking did,” mutters Pete.

“Looks like the only thing that got hurt was your pride.” Pete flashes Marrion a nasty look. Marrion turns his back on Pete and faces the boys. Bill taps Zach on the shoulder and motions his head towards the other side of the road. Marrion clears his throat and points back to the radio. Shaking his head from side to side. “What happened?” Bill looks at Zach.

“We ran,” says Zach.

“Why?” asks Marrion.

“Is that not obvious? We’re under 21. Drunk. Cops show up. We freak. And we run.” Marrion tilts his head and nods.

“And your plan was... what, exactly?” he asks.

“Call an uber once we got to the road.” Marrion turns back to Pete, scoffs, and points at the boys with his thumb.

“Sounds pretty responsible. Don’t ya think, Pete?”

“They assaulted an officer of the law.” Pete glares. “How in the world is that responsible?”

“You attacked us!” Bill shouts.

“That’s bullshit!” Pete yells as he points at Bill.

“Calm down! For the last time,” says Marrion. Pete scrunches up his face and marches towards Marrion.

“You’re just going to let them go aren’t you?” Pete gets in Marrion’s face. “After what they just did?!”

“Step back. Right now.” Marrion takes a more serious tone. Both men glare into one another’s eyes. Zach and Bill keep their focus on the policemen as they slink away. “If you hadn’t run after them and listened to me. Then we both would have been here waiting for them. Same outcome. Except someone wouldn’t have their panties in a twist. Now. Step. Back.” Marrion shoves Pete away from him. Pete tightens his grip around his pistol. The boys carefully take each step. Pete looks up over Marrion and sees the boys putting distance between them.

“Go!” yells Bill. Marrion keeps his focus on Pete. Who raises his pistol and takes aim. A third shot is fired. Zach and Bill stop in their tracks. They rapidly place their hands all over their bodies to check for blood. Bill keeps patting himself down.

“Bill...” says Zach.

“What? What?” he replies. Zach points a finger over to the policemen.

“Look...” Bill turns his head to the cops. Smoke flows into the pale moonlight from Marrion’s gun. Who is standing over Pete’s body.