

BILLY'S NEW HILL

I remember the first time I held you.

It was one bright dripping morning in the summer holidays, and you called round with your mam's big holdall and Billy Mac jumping up and down.

'I found a new hill,' Billy kept shouting, his eyes big.

'I don't know what he means,' you said. 'He wants to show me.'

'Don't fret, love,' my mam said. 'Billy's all right, inside. Our Tommy'll go with you.'

So I was out the door with my toast, a step in front of you and five behind Billy Mac. 'Come on,' he called. 'I found a new hill.'

Mam had told me how your mam kept pretending your dad would fly back out of the sky one day, and how I wasn't to talk about it. So instead I said, quiet like, 'Mam's right, y'know. Billy never hurt anyone.'

And where the houses ended was the lane, overgrown and sticky with hawthorn and privet; and in the puddles and the muddy ponds we could see the big blue sky. Billy went splashing through them, but you stepped around in your strappy shoes and white ankle socks, washed and ironed by your desolate mam.

'Where's this hill?' I called.

'Up the big field,' said Billy. 'I found it, I did. There's a dead man,' he added, grinning.

And I thought you stopped.

'Come on,' I said. 'Leave your mam's bag here.' So you put it under the tree and looked at me. 'Let's catch up,' I said.

Then we were climbing up Grewson's field, with the corn already knee-high and the hedge-thorns scratching, our shoes caked heavy with mud and our faces red.

'Were you frightened, last night,' I asked, 'in the thunderstorm?'

'No,' you said. 'Were you?'

'Nah,' I said.

Billy pointed. '*There's* my hill!' he said. Risen over the corn, near the top of the field, was a big mound of soil that hadn't been there before. There was a smell like steam engines on a wet night, and wisps of smoke drifted up from the mound.

'My hill,' Billy was saying. 'I found a dead man.'

I turned and said, 'Billy and me can go on, if you like.'

You shook your head, and when I saw how scared you were, I got all tight in the throat. I took your hand to help you over the ditch. Then, we were there.

'It's hollow,' you said.

‘Yeah,’ I said, ‘like a crater on the moon.’

‘My hill,’ said Billy.

With dirty hands and knees, we scrambled up the side and looked in.



We saw this deep pit, full of steam and smoke, of hot metal and spurted earth, and a silver-grey gleam under the morning sun.

‘There’s a dead man,’ whispered Billy.

Next to me you shifted, leaning over.

‘Don’t be daft,’ I said. ‘There’s no dead man.’

Then you said, ‘No, look, there’s like a window – something’s in there – ’

Then we all shouted, cause the pile of soil we’d been sitting on suddenly slithered like dry sand out of a seaside bucket, and down we tumbled next to the silver thing.

‘It’s a plane,’ I said, scrambling up, ‘or a piece of it. Musta came down in the storm.’ A twisted propeller, a cockpit like an Airfix kit, and a few feet of torn metal, then nothing but soil.

Billy was whooping, ‘Told ya, told ya!’

And you were looking in the cockpit, saying, ‘it’s not Dad,’ and there was something squashed against the cracked glass, and you pushed at it, and this *thing* fell out with a big leather coat and goggle-eyes that couldn’t see, and you screamed.

Billy was laughing, and I nearly hit him, but I said, ‘Come on,’ and helped you up and you were crying ‘Oh God ,Oh God,’ with your hands to your mouth, and we scrambled out, filthy.

‘We’ll go and tell Mam,’ I said.

We’d gone fifty yards when we heard the engine. And we looked round expecting to see the dead flier taking to the skies in his half-a-plane, and we ran, and we ran, and fell panting by the tree.

‘Wait,’ I said, ‘it’s only a tractor. Just Old Grewson come for a look. It’s all right, Bren.’

Billy said, ‘I got to go now. *I* found a hill.’

And you stood there sobbing, and all I could do was put my arms around you.

That was the first time.

