



Another Metamorphosis

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A Moral Tale about Obsession
(for Steve Bissette)

Billy liked dinosaurs. He played dinosaurs, collected dinosaur toys, drew pictures of dinosaurs, great shambling beasts of tooth and claw, whose passing shook the jungles and whose drooling jaws devoured figures not unlike his sisters. For birthdays and holidays they came as presents from well-meaning relatives and family friends who'd say, "We know how much Billy likes his dinosaurs!" with a wink and a grin at his mom and dad and a dismissive pat on Billy's head, already a-buzz with plans for working the new models into his repertoire.

"You like dinosaurs so much, why dontcha marry one," his older sister would taunt from the womb-like depths of her unpleasantly brown bean-bag chair.

"Billy and a dinosaur sittin' in a tree," his younger twin sisters would chant in unison, their ghostly faces bathed in the glow of the black and white TV screen, "K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Billy with a baby carriage!"

"You girls hush now," his mom would scold over her section of the newspaper, while Billy's dad would snort and try to pretend he was still awake. The scene was repeated often. Very often.

Did Billy mind? No. In fact, he hardly gave it any notice at all. Fourteen years: Billy couldn't quite concentrate on anything that wasn't about dinosaurs. His teachers despaired: his science project was inevitably "An Intimate Look at Fossils" or "The World Captured in Amber's Limbo"—when pushed, very hard, he might be persuaded to drag himself into the speculative realm of the twentieth century with "Coelacanth: The Modern Dinosaur."

"Perhaps he will be a great paleontologist one day," Miss Bentley remarked in the Teachers' Lounge one day during Billy's trample through sixth-grade, though her voice reflected little in the way of hope.

"Yeah," sneered Mr. Peterson, sneaking his arm around her waist because no one else was there yet, "And maybe he'll just marry a dinosaur and lay eggs." Miss Bentley hiccoughed a cute little tinny laugh.

Billy didn't marry a dinosaur. They were extinct. He knew that. After all, he'd studied dinosaurs a long time; not that he'd ever entertained any notions of marrying a dinosaur. Love, marriage, sex: these things didn't really ever enter into Billy's calculations.

Cars did. When Billy was fourteen, cars entered his world. He looked up one day and saw Cissy Martin's cherry red Corvair with the top down and, for the briefest span of time, dinosaurs were knocked out of his head like so many bowling pins. They came back, of course, like the homing pigeons they begat, but it was as if their temporary absence had allowed the walls of Billy's mind to breathe and settle. Somehow there was room for cars and dinosaurs.

By sixteen Billy had a car of his own, a sleek—or so it seemed to him—green Impala that roared down the streets of Finleydale like a Triceratops with hotfoot. He briefly considered putting horns on the hood reminiscent of just such a beast, but the technical details were far beyond his meager artistic skills, feeble and malnourished through the years of neglect, so he settled for Magic Markers and the burning light of the U-Draw-It Project-A-Picture that belonged to his older sister Margaret, which held steady the image of a Brontosaurus while he patiently traced its intricate form on the passenger side, to be complemented later with a steely-looking Triceratops on the driver-side door. The exhibit was best viewed in bright sunlight. Billy yearned to put a raging Tyrannosaurus Rex on the hood of his green machine, but the practical difficulties of shining the great beast's likeness onto the Impala's hood proved too much for him, though he often whiled away his senior year classes with inexpertly imagined schemes involving ropes and pulleys that could somehow make his dream a reality.

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vague notion of freedom; a liberty that would prove to be short-lived even if events had not turned out as they did, for Billy's future inclined precipitously toward an insider's view of the auto factory undercoating process, as he was destined to be squeezed into a distinctly cushy berth at the plant by the clever manipulations of his well-placed Uncle Otto, who expected that Billy might just as well spend his waking hours contemplating dinosaurs provided he paused from time to time to advance the assembly line by the increment of one car. It would have been an enviable position.

But as Billy drove blithely around his hometown, fate was rearing its undeniable head like a mean-spirited water-dwelling brute of a dinosaur, perhaps a cranky Brachiosaurus on a particularly bad day. Fate, that day, took the shape of VW microbus loaded down with too many of Billy's former schoolmates, themselves loaded with any number of highly questionable substances. At the stoplight where Fourth met Main, Billy hummed tunelessly a non-existent song waiting for the signal to change. Behind him, two hundred yards, the bus roared forward expelling foul smoke and the guitar stylings of Ted Nugent, its driver overcome by a giggling fit brought on by a bad joke involving urination. The two hundred yards became one; that one became fifty. Still the light did not change. As the distance between the immovable Impala and the unstoppable van slivered to a mere ten yards, the driver dimly recognized their danger and slammed on the brakes. Billy's eyes caught a indefinite blur of VW in his rearview mirror and his mouth gaped slackly. The minibus shrieked like a girl and spun slowly to its right, but before it could complete more than thirty degrees of a graceful arc, it slammed into the back of the Dino-wheels shooting them and a shocked Billy into the intersection with what remained of his trunk, the bus spraying passengers out every orifice—one or two spending their last conscious seconds wishing for a seat-belt and wondering whether their underwear was actually clean, the remainder merely whispering, "Wow," before their foggy lights were forever extinguished.

Billy's sudden entrance into the intersection was greeted with alarm by the driver of a blue Chevy pick-up, her considerable forward momentum trumping that of the Impala's as it sheared off most of the front end with a sound like nails on a chalkboard. Passersby cringed. Billy screamed. His dream car lay in at least three or four pieces that he could see, even without turning his rapidly-stiffening neck. It was terrible. Deafened by

the pain of his loss, he did not hear the cries and shouts and gasps of the onlookers and his fellow victims; instead, over and over the shearing sound of the Chevy's assault screeched through his soul like the death-cry of Erichthonius.

Billy stood numbly, his hands in his pockets, while the officials took stock of the damage and moved what remained of the VW's passengers to the local emergency services. "It's not so bad," the Chevy's pilot tried to tell him as two women in blue jumpsuits strapped him into a neck-brace and bundled him onto stretcher, "And anyway, the insurance will pay for it. It sure wasn't your fault." Her eyes turned with awe to the misshapen hulk of the minibus which still sported a right arm like some crazy antenna, though two police officers were trying to work it loose. But Billy was inconsolable. His car could never be resurrected—nor could it be duplicated; his sister had sold the U-Draw-It projector at the family garage sale last year for one whole dollar. If only he had known! Billy had made over fifteen dollars that day but never even considered the possibility of such a need.

As he lay in his bed that night after the tedious x-rays and the endless forms and the excited attentions of his family—"We saw you on TV!" his dad said, "And you looked terrible!" Stacey and Tracey crowed—Billy chewed on his tragedy as if it were cud. The dinosaurs around his room—models, statues, pictures, posters, fossils, little plastic toys and even a squirt-gun—seemed to sympathize mutely with his suffering, but they could not feel his pain. Billy was not one to wax philosophic. It felt like tragedy and that's what he thought of it, trying to call to mind a tenuous reference to King Lear that he was unable to articulate. There was no hope; but he was not one to think of shuffling off his mortal coil to end the slings and arrows of an admittedly outrageous fortune, nor to experience a life-changing moment of decision and resolve. Instead he lay sleepless for an hour or so with the accident on mental instant-replay, occasionally punctuating the depiction with the single word, "tragedy," mouthed silently.

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One minute he was happy as the proverbial clam, the next forty years of his existence securely unionized. The next? WHAM! His dreams shattered in pieces all over the corner of Main and Fourth mixed with the blood of wasted metalheads. Not that his reaction wasn't extreme, mind you. I'm sure his family thought so. They probably would have said, "Think it over, Billy. This is a big decision. Take your time." Well, his parents at any rate would likely have said something like that. His

sisters, of course, would have been characteristically blunt. But Tracey and Stacey didn't have a chance to pooh-pooh Billy's transformation. They—like their mom and dad—were crushed as a result of it. Margaret, thanks to the lure of Betty Louise's lurid stash of *Playgirl* and *Sex Puppet* magazines, owed her continuing existence to attending a "childish" (to her eighteen years of world-weary experience) slumber party on that fateful night.

Billy awoke in the pre-dawn caress of sunlight with the certainty that something was definitely wrong. First, his neck ached like a snake-bite. He was already reaching his arm up to feel for the cause when the sad memory of his loss returned. He had scant seconds to mourn his vehicle before its image was obliterated by three painfully acute realizations. One: he was looking at the sky. Two: his arm had never reached his neck because it had somehow shortened, pawing impotently beside its mate, and had sprouted claws. Three: he smelled blood and its aroma overpowered his senses like the combined perfume of ten thousand Thanksgiving turkeys and a hundred chocolate cheesecakes.

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Using the sticks in tandem, Billy rooted through the wreckage in the area of his parents' bedroom, finally locating them under a ten-foot square chunk of ceiling. He leaned over to see if, unlikely though it may be, there might still be signs of life. No, they were quite dead. Big dinosaur tears rolled down his face to drip off his lower mandible. Billy nudged his mother's blood-soaked corpse sadly, but a fire raged through his oversized-for-a-dinosaur brain. The fire said, "EAT!"

Almost before he knew it, his jaws snapped open upon her form. The taste of blood was even more exquisite than the smell and he threw his head back to swallow the bits. It was so good, he roared with glee. Billy flicked out his tongue to savor the lingering drops around his mouth. He saw his father when he lowered his head again and felt another stab of guilt, but it was quickly drowned out by the rumble from his whetted appetite. One two, one two, and chew and chew; his father made a second snack. The twins were hardly worth the bother, but as long as he was here and hungry, he might as well help himself.

Billy tossed the sticks away, hunger still uppermost in his hybrid mind. Think, damn it, he scolded himself. Cows, came the answer; not two miles away the suburbs gave way to farm lands and there was plenty of livestock to eat. Billy ambled out of what was left of his childhood home, whacking the red maple with his tail as he passed. He roared with laughter and used his tail to smash each mailbox as he went by, striding down the middle of the sleepy little lane.

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the National Guard screeched into action and located him, Billy had munched his way through some twenty or thirty of the finest Guernseys in the country.

Billy was beginning to feel sleepy. The sun was too hot now. But his adrenaline—or whatever the dinosaur equivalent was—pumped up when he saw the Guard, three fire-trucks and a swarm of State Troopers. They had a tank. “Cool!” thought Billy, wistfully yearning for his lost car once more. Obviously they were going to use it on him, which did worry him a bit. The commander of the forces screamed “Fire!” at a man with a flag, who brought his flag down crisply, so that the guy in the tank pushed his button. Billy was ready. A burst of fire flashed from the tank’s snout and the discharge hurtled toward him. Billy ducked to his right just below the trajectory of the missile, which went on to take out three heifers with its explosion. Billy howled with pleasure and triumph. They tried again—and again, and again. By the fourth shot, the score was Billy 0 and cows 7. The Guards stopped firing while they considered what to do. Billy yawned.

“My god!” shouted one of the cops, studying Billy intently, “It’s as if he knows what we’re trying to do!”

Billy heard this and nodded his head up and down vigorously. The cop grabbed her partner and gesticulated wildly. Her partner seemed to think the eggs had slipped off her plate, but she grabbed more of the cops, including one with a lot of badges and a big walkie talkie. The crowd around her grew, the Guards joining in. The firefighters remained aloof.

Finally the knot around her broke. The commander of the Guards handed her his bullhorn. She walked bravely out toward Billy, who blinked down at her. He could see her try to moisten her lips before raising the bullhorn to them.

“Can you understand us?”

Billy nodded vehemently. The crowd gasped. It had grown significantly despite the danger; station wagons lined the road outside the farm and the cordon that had been thrown up around it.

“Can you speak?”

Billy shook his head and roared to demonstrate. Hundreds of flashes went off; the media had arrived.

“Why are you killing?”

Billy rubbed his tummy with one claw-tipped hand, hoping she would understand.

She seemed to do so. “Could you take a time out while we discuss a plan?”

Billy nodded once more and hunkered his weight down to a comfortable crouch to doze. The cop looked with awe at the bones around Billy, then reluctantly turned back to the troops. They needed a plan.

They found one.

In six months it was open to the general public, bringing a prosperity to Finleydale that the Guernseys and even the autoworkers had never been able to do. Dino-World tickets out-sold those of Disneyworld in its first year. People were more than willing to shell out twenty-five bucks a head to watch Billy chow down on cows, pigs and the occasional exotic animal. For his part, Billy was a good boy and didn't eat any more people—except for that unfortunate movie producer who seemed to forget, despite repeated warnings, that Billy could indeed understand every word he said. The movie was already made, though, so the company decided not to sue as long as Billy agreed to appear in the TV ads and on *Good Morning America*.

Billy was happy: he now ate cows for a living and roamed freely around the enormous compound of Dino-Park, posing for pictures from time to time and thinking about dinosaurs in general any damn time he pleased. Margaret even brought out his dinosaur paraphernalia and keepsakes, once she put two and two together and came up with Billy and, of course, once she got over being mad at him for eating the rest of the family. There was just too much money to be made. My Brother the Dinosaur was on the New York Times Bestseller list for over sixty weeks before the paperback came out. Sure, scientists from all over the world would come and scrape little cells off his neck and collect clippings from his claws, but balanced against his three comic books lines and his forthcoming movies, Billy found he could take even those indignities in stride.

All in all, Billy liked being a dinosaur. It was a wonderful life.

(NB: This story appeared in *DreamForge* magazine in November 1996)

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Cars did. When Billy was fourteen, cars entered his world. He looked up one day and saw Cissy Martin's cherry red Corvair with the top down and, for the briefest span of time, dinosaurs were knocked out of his head like so many bowling pins. They came back, of course, like the homing pigeons they begat, but it was as if their temporary absence had allowed the walls of Billy's mind to breathe and settle. Somehow there was room for cars and dinosaurs.

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People were awake now. Commuters rose and shone and stepped out on their porches to get the morning paper. Billy greeted them. Most were too shocked to react with anything other than horrified stares and slack jaws. A few who'd had their coffee shrieked with fear. Old man Ellison lost it, his last thought a simple "No!" as his mind, his heart and his bowels all slipped out of conscious control, and he sank moistly to the floor. Billy turned at the corner, spying those monstrous Anderson kids out in their front yard, surprised from their morning cartoons by the cacophony of his passing. He bellowed and lunged at them, catching the youngest and slowest one in his razoring teeth before it could reach the safety of the screened-in porch. Billy tossed it in the air and swallowed without chewing, then veered back to the road.

It took longer than you'd think to get the proper authorities out there that day. A string of bizarre calls to the police and animal control finally resulted in a cruiser being sent into the normally quiet neighborhood. The lone cop radioed for help before he was even sure what had happened; there was just too much carnage along the road. By the time the National Guard screeched into action and located him, Billy had

munched his way through some twenty or thirty of the finest Guernseys in the country.

Billy was beginning to feel sleepy. The sun was too hot now. But his adrenaline—or whatever the dinosaur equivalent was—pumped up when he saw the Guard, three fire-trucks and a swarm of State Troopers. They had a tank. “Cool!” thought Billy, wistfully yearning for his lost car once more. Obviously they were going to use it on him, which did worry him a bit. The commander of the forces screamed “Fire!” at a man with a flag, who brought his flag down crisply, so that the guy in the tank pushed his button. Billy was ready. A burst of fire flashed from the tank’s snout and the discharge hurtled toward him. Billy ducked to his right just below the trajectory of the missile, which went on to take out three heifers with its explosion. Billy howled with pleasure and triumph. They tried again—and again, and again. By the fourth shot, the score was Billy 0 and cows 7. The Guards stopped firing while they considered what to do. Billy yawned.

“My god!” shouted one of the cops, studying Billy intently, “It’s as if he knows what we’re trying to do!”

Billy heard this and nodded his head up and down vigorously. The cop grabbed her partner and gesticulated wildly. Her partner seemed to think the eggs had slipped off her plate, but she grabbed more of the cops, including one with a lot of badges and a big walkie talkie. The crowd around her grew, the Guards joining in. The firefighters remained aloof.

Finally the knot around her broke. The commander of the Guards handed her his bullhorn. She walked bravely out toward Billy, who blinked down at her. He could see her try to moisten her lips before raising the bullhorn to them.

“Can you understand us?”

Billy nodded vehemently. The crowd gasped. It had grown significantly despite the danger; station wagons lined the road outside the farm and the cordon that had been thrown up around it.

“Can you speak?”

Billy shook his head and roared to demonstrate. Hundreds of flashes went off; the media had arrived.

“Why are you killing?”

Billy rubbed his tummy with one claw-tipped hand, hoping she would understand.

She seemed to do so. “Could you take a time out while we discuss a plan?”

Billy nodded once more and hunkered his weight down to a comfortable crouch to doze. The cop looked with awe at the bones around Billy, then reluctantly turned back to the troops. They needed a plan.

They found one.

In six months it was open to the general public, bringing a prosperity to Finleydale that the Guernseys and even the autoworkers had never been able to do. Dino-World tickets out-sold those of Disneyworld in its first year. People were more than willing to shell out twenty-five bucks a head to watch Billy chow down on cows, pigs and the occasional exotic animal. For his part, Billy was a good boy and didn't eat any more people—except for that unfortunate movie producer who seemed to forget, despite repeated warnings, that Billy could indeed understand every word he said. The movie was already made, though, so the company decided not to sue as long as Billy agreed to appear in the TV ads and on *Good Morning America*.

Billy was happy: he now ate cows for a living and roamed freely around the enormous compound of Dino-Park, posing for pictures from time to time and thinking about dinosaurs in general any damn time he pleased. Margaret even brought out his dinosaur paraphernalia and keepsakes, once she put two and two together and came up with Billy and, of course, once she got over being mad at him for eating the rest of the family. There was just too much money to be made. *My Brother the Dinosaur* was on the New York Times Bestseller list for over sixty weeks before the paperback came out. Sure, scientists from all over the world would come and scrape little cells off his neck and collect clippings from his claws, but balanced against his three comic books lines and his forthcoming movies, Billy found he could take even those indignities in stride.

All in all, Billy liked being a dinosaur. It was a wonderful life.

NB: This story appeared in *DreamForge* magazine in November 1996.

From the same author on Feedbacks

Not Waving (1991)

A woman devolves into madness on a road trip to Las Vegas after an auto accident and several failed suicide attempts. The title comes from Stevie Smith's poem which features the lines, "I was much too far out all my life /

And not waving but drowning." Oddly enough, I wrote this long before I became an English professor (and it's nothing like my life, I hasten to add). It was rejected by one agent in Los Angeles for being "too relentlessly dark" (it was the 80s, dark was out).

Cruel (1992)

Dangerous Liaisons in leather jackets: it's 1982 in New Jersey, but the story's still the same as it was for Anthony and Cleopatra.



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