

Oh, Nothing

by R Brent Smith

Billy and Charlotte are brother and sister. They attend Maple Street Public School, Billy in Grade 2, Charlotte in Grade 4. According to these two, nothing much of interest ever happens at school. Whenever their parents ask them what they did at school, their parents get little or no response.

One day turns out a little different. Out at recess, the children are outside in the school yard. Groups of children are engaged in various activities, there is the usual school yard sound, a high-pitched drone of young voices talking in their outside voices, mixed with yelling and punctuated with frequent squeals or screams of joy at play.

Billy and Charlotte are together, away from the other kids, hidden at the base of a large maple tree. Billy has snuck a pack of salty chips from home and the two are meeting to share the spoils of his thievery. As they are munching on the treat, glancing around to ensure that no one is watching them, they hear a strange sound. It is a swoosh, of growing volume, like a gust of wind churning up the leaves in the tree branches above. Glancing around, Charlotte spies something unusual, a green beam of light, a vertical shaft of emerald air, barely perceptible in the bright sunshine. The beam is randomly swerving about the school yard not far from them. Charlotte is not alarmed but curious as she points this out to her brother. Billy, squinting into the bright sunlight from the shadows of the tree, is having trouble seeing the beam. Charlotte is impatiently pointing it out when it suddenly swerves toward them. Before they can react, the beam is on them, shining down through the canopy of the tree above them. They feel a weird sensation, a vibration, a tingling all over. The school and school yard grow hazing as if viewing them through

a window during a heavy rain storm. Then the school yard fades to a featureless grey. Out of the grey emerges walls, metallic and curved. The children are surprised to find themselves suddenly in a room. The lighting is a dim blue-white. The buttons of their shirts are glowing a bright white. The laces on their runners are glowing as well.

A door opens and a creature like nothing they have ever seen enters. It is short, their height, has many eyes on stalks, like a snail. It glides toward them on a platform of slime. Billy, who always had a vivid imagination, blurts out, "Space aliens! That look like slugs?"

Charlotte is repulsed by this slimy creature. "Ew!"

The creature forms a projection from its otherwise smooth chest. The projection grows in length, forming what might be an arm. At the end of the arm, a hand-like shape forms, a thumb and fingers. With the hand, it attempts to grab Charlotte by the arm but she pulls away, backing up behind Billy. Having missed Charlotte with its newly grown pseudopod, the creature reaches for Billy. Billy is more curious than repulsed and allows it to grasp his arm. It feels warm, soft but powerful. The thing pulls Billy toward it and Billy is forced to take a couple of stumbling steps to prevent himself from falling. Charlotte cries, "Billy, stay away from it."

Billy is calm, "Let's see what it wants."

Charlotte has no interest in learning what it wants. She is convinced that whatever it is, it won't be good for them.

Billy asks it, "What do you want?"

The creature looks at him with its many eyes. A mouth forms on its front. The mouth forms words and says, "What do you want?" in a perfect copy of Billy's original question.

The creature continues to transform, a head forms around the mouth. Two of the eyes move into position over the mouth. Another arm sprouts as do two legs. The thing transforms into a slime version of Billy.

Charlotte again utters, “Ew, it looks like you.”

Billy laughs to see a slime version of himself looking back at him. “This is cool!”

The thing mouths back to him, “This is cool!”

The thing lets go of Billy and motions to him to follow it. The thing turns and moves unsteadily on two legs. A door opens and they walk out into another small room. Here, the walls are lined with control panels and screens. Sitting in bowls in front of various screens are more of the creatures. Most are featureless blobs of slug goo with several eyes on stalks sticking up. As Billy and Charlotte enter the room, all eyes turn toward them. Mouths form on the creatures and a conversation between them ensues. The language is a series of rude-sounding burps, raspberries and farts. The slime Billy leads the two to a table which is surrounded with all sorts of dentist-office-like instruments held in mechanical arms extending down from the ceiling. The slime Billy indicates to Billy that it wants him to get up onto the table. Billy takes a nervous look at the various instruments hanging about the table. He doesn't see anything sharp, no knives, drills or needles so he complies, reluctantly. He gives his sister a nervous glance. “I think they want to examine us.”

Charlotte backs away, “Don't do it Billy. They might cut you up!”

Billy isn't so worried. He thinks the way the creature morphed into different shapes was really cool and is amused by it all. He wants to see what else they can do. He climbs onto the table and lays on his back. Slime Billy presses a number of buttons and instruments swung over and around Billy. He is scanned by beams of red and yellow light. It is all over before he realizes

it. The creature motions for him to get down off the table and invites Charlotte onto the table. She draws back. Billy laughs, ‘Relax, it was nothing.’

With Billy’s reassurance and afraid of what the creature might do if she refuses, Charlotte slowly climbs into the table. She glancing nervously from Billy to the slime version of Billy. She lays back and slime Billy pushes some buttons. Beams scan and sensors move about and it is quickly done. Charlotte, breathing a huge sigh of relief, gets off the table and moves to stand beside Billy. The creature motions to them to follow. It leads them back to the original room. Billy comments, “I guess now that they have scanned us, they will let us go back.”

Charlotte isn’t so optimistic. “Or they will invite us to dinner, to eat us.”

Once in the original room, slime Billy touches a wall and a door slides open. Beyond, is a small room, like a closet. There is nothing in the room, just four walls. Charlotte grabs Billy’s arm. “That’s a jail cell. He’s not letting us go back home.”

Billy is confused. He says to the creature, “We want to go home.” He points to the ground below them.

The creature repeats Billy’s demand, “We want to go home.” Then adds, “Not now. Please enter the cell.”

Billy and Charlotte are shocked that the creature can speak English and that it is clearly keeping them there, in this tiny cell. It grasps Billy by the arm and pushes him toward the cell. Billy attempts to resist but the creature is strong, forcing Billy to take a couple of steps toward the cell. Panicking, Charlotte searches her pockets for something to fight back with. All she finds is the empty wrapper from the chips they had been eating under the tree. She thinks, “Oh, if only we hadn’t hidden under that tree, alone, away from all the other kids.” She pulls out the crumpled wrapper and throws it at the alien creature in desperation. The wrapper bounces

harmlessly off the creature but in doing so, some bits of salt spill from the bag. The creature shrieks at the caustic reaction of the salt with its flesh. Slime Billy's arm that the salt landed on drops to the floor, discarded by the creature. One-armed slime Billy backs away, in fright.

Billy quickly picks up the discarded wrapper. He holds it toward the creature. "Salt. Of course, slugs hate salt." Billy demands of the creature, "Send us home now, or I will spill more salt on you, on your ship."

The slime Billy shrieks in fear. "Okay, Okay. I will send you back."

The creature leads them back into the room where they first arrived on the ship. The creature leaves the room, the two are alone, wondering what will happen. Billy and Charlotte feel a strange tingling sensation and the room fades to grey. Moments later they are back under the tree in the school yard. The bell to end recess is ringing and all the kids have lined up to enter the school. A teacher, annoyed, is calling to Billy and Charlotte to hurry up. The two race for the lineup, glancing skyward as they run.

At home that night, at the dinner table, their father asks them what happened at school that day. The two exchange a brief glance and Charlotte replies, "Oh nothing."

Their parents exchange exasperated looks.