

TO MARKET, TO MARKET: THE REBRANDING OF BILLY BAILEY

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Billy and Principal Andrew Alty went all the way back to kindergarten, when Billy had convinced Mitchell McCoy that the green fingerpaint was Shamrock Shake, and watched with glee as the little babyface had scarfed it all down. Billy knew that Andrew Alty knew his style: refined, controlled, and above all, 'personal'. Billy never would've dropped a dozen M-80s down the girls' toilet. His stuff was always one-on-one, and possessed of a degree of charm and subtlety. But nevertheless, here was Billy, along with the sixth-grade bumper-crop of nasty-come-latelies, called on the carpet in front of Andrew Alty's massive desk. Andrew Alty was an athletic forty, a babyface true-and-through, and a charismatic thought-leader in his demographic. Hormones. They were the problem.

Billy Bailey was the finest heel the sixth grade had ever seen – a true artisan who kept his brand pure and unsullied, picking and managing his strategic alliances with the utmost care and acumen. He'd dumped BanginBumpin Fireworks (a division of The Shanghai Novelty Company, Ltd.) in the fourth grade, fer chrissakes. Their ladyfingers were too small to bother with; their M-80s were so big that you'd have to be a lunatic to go near them. But sixth grade was the Year of the Hormone at Pepsi Elementary. Boys who'd been babyfaces since kindergarten suddenly sprouted acne, pubic hair, and an uncontrollable urge to impress girls. Their weak brands were no match for the onslaught of -osterones and -ogens that flooded their brains, and in short order they found themselves switching over to heel. As a result, the sixth grade was experiencing a heel glut. Last year's Little Lord Fauntleroy's were now busy snapping bras, dropping textbooks, cracking grading computers, and blowing up the girls' toilets.

Hormones. They made Billy want to puke.

Andrew Alty gave them his sternest stare, the one over the top of his half-rims that was guaranteed to reduce a fourth-grader to tears. The poseurs alongside of Billy shuffled their feet nervously and looked away. Billy struggled to control his anger, and to meet Andrew Alty's stare with his tried-and-true antidote, a carefree, mischievous grin.

"Ten thousand dollars," Andrew Alty said, for the third time. "What will your parents say, I wonder, when I tell them that it will cost ten thousand dollars to replumb the girls' change-room? Boys, I wouldn't want to be in your shoes when that happens. I imagine that it will go very hard for all of you." He treated them all to another megawatt of stare.

"But I didn't do it!" wailed Mitchell McCoy, who'd gotten a Blue Ribbon in the fifth-grade Science Fair for a consumer research report on relative inflammabilities of a range of allegedly fire-proof blue-jeans.

Billy shot him a look of disgust. 'But I didn't do it!' Suck.

Andrew Alty looked at him. "So you say. You may be telling the truth. No way to find out, though – not unless we bring the police in to fingerprint you all." The emphasis he put on "police" and "fingerprint" was admirably subtle, Billy thought. He actually liked Andrew Alty, most of the time. The man had a good, strong brand, and he tended it most carefully. "Of course, once I

involve the police, it will be out of my hands. It will be a criminal matter.” Again, just the lightest breath of emphasis on “criminal.” Billy had to hand it to him.

“It goes without saying that if any of you know how I could resolve this without involving the police, I’d be glad to hear about it. Why don’t you take a moment to think about it?”

The boys shuffled their feet. A few of them choked back sobs. Finally, Mitchell McCoy swung an accusing finger at Billy. “He did it! I saw him sneak in with the M-80s, and matches! He told me if I said anything, he’d beat me up again!”

Billy had seen it coming. Mitchell was almost certainly the culprit – every science-fair project he’d ever done had involved blowing something up or setting something on fire. And Mitchell had nursed a grudge for an entire year, ever since Billy had sent him into the mud during an autumn game of tackle-tag, and then sent him back again and again when he tried to rush Billy.

He stared coolly at Andrew Alty. Billy could practically see the wheels turn in his head. Mitchell McCoy’s parents were overbearing, with a hands-on approach to Mitchell McCoy’s academic career that often sent one or both to Pepsi Elementary on the pretence of helping out with a bake-sale or fun-faire. Fingering Mitchell McCoy for the Incident would surely call down their interminable wrath. Andrew Alty turned his gaze on Billy. “What do you say to this?”

“Consider the source,” is what Billy said – it was one of his catch-phrases this term, a tie-in with a kids-only newsfeed. Billy had brought it to Pepsi Elementary, and had spread it beyond the sixth grade into the fifth, with some penetration into the fourth. He liked the sound of it – it was subtly insulting and smart.

Unfortunately, Andrew Alty was considering the source – and the source’s high-octane-pain-in-the-ass parents. “That’s all you have to say, son?” he said, with deadly seriousness.

‘Until I speak to my agent, it is’, Billy thought, and kept mum.

#

Billy’s phone was ringing when he let himself into his parents’ place. Billy had paged his agent on the way home from school. He was suspended indefinitely, pending a parent-teacher meeting, but that wasn’t what bothered Billy. He was worried about his brand-identity, and that meant talking to Bennie Beasley, endorsement broker and personal agent extraordinaire. Bennie Beasley was chipper to a fault, and made sympathetic noises as Billy related the day’s events.

“Well!” he said, finally. “What a pickle!”

“What are you going to do about it, Bennie Beasley?”

“Well, it’s a really sticky sandwich, Billy Bailey. You could deny it all, call for a police investigation. But I can tell you right now, that’s going to mean unspun media coverage, and the sponsors aren’t going to like that. In the long run, involving the authorities is going to cost you, big.

”On the other hand, you could admit to everything. The sponsors still won’t like that – they like their heels sane and under control. But you’ve got a relationship with them, Billy. You’re loyal to them, and they’re loyal to you. We could probably hit BanginBumpin up for a post-facto fee, you know. That would salvage things somewhat.“

Billy had already figured all this out, even the part about going to the fireworks manufacturer for some money, but there was one thing bothering him.”Who pays the ten thou for the damages, Bennie Beasley?“

Bennie Beasley sighed.”I’m afraid you’d be on the hook for that. We’ll take it out of the trust. I know it’s a tough jellybean, but you’re going to have to chew it.“

Billy felt the anger bubble up his chest, and he carefully vented some of it.”No. Way. Never. I’m not going to pay a cent. If it takes a police investigation, fine, so be it. If that costs me down the road, I’ll suck it up. But I am not paying out ten grand to cover some half-wit stunt Mitchell McCoy pulled. It’ll dilute me. It’s not my style.“ He let the anger give his voice a dangerous edge. “Billy Bailey! Listen to me! I’m not saying this is a good solution – I’m saying it’s the better of two terrible ones. I’ve got another client who just went through a similar situation. He bit the bacon, swallowed his pie, and toughed it out. You can do that, too. I’m telling you this as your friend, son. If you call the cops, you’re through as a heel.”

Billy felt a lightbulb flash in his head. He pushed the anger all the way down. “I think I’d better talk it over with my parents,” he said, calmly.

“That’s my tunafish!” Bennie Beasley said. “You do that, and call me back, anytime. You’ve got my number.”

#

Billy had three hours until his parents, Barbara and Buford Bailey, came home from the office. He spent it putting together a shareholder presentation. He got out some flip-chart paper and a six-pack of colour markers and carefully wrote:

Rebranding Strategy Notes

Problem: Surplus of amateur heels

Solution: Rebrand property – babyface

Critical Path:

- 1) Fire Bennie Beasely
- 2) Initiate police investigation
- 3) Buckle down on grades
- 3a) Seek babyface sponsors (other divisions?)

He surveyed it critically, added some colour underlines, then made himself a Skippy SuperChunk on Wonder with Welch's. Then he fleshed out each point, listing pros and cons, using a separate sheet for each, tacking them to the cork-rail that ringed the family room. He finished up by writing out an agenda, just as Barbara and Buford Bailey came home.

#

Buford Bailey was Billy's VP Operations, so it fell to him to fire Bennie Beasely. Billy supervised him as he downloaded and filled out the Notice of Intent to Terminate, then faxed it off to Bennie Beasely.

Billy and Barbara Bailey went through his things, packing the slingshots and air rifles and gangsta posters into the FedEx boxes they'd arrived in. They piled up all the war comics and t-shirts with rude slogans and bagged them in Hefty Tie N Tosses. When they were finished, Billy's room was a pristine expanse of empty Ikea Billy shelves, his wardrobe reduced to his church suit and a few pairs of Levi's whose knees he hadn't gotten around to ripping out yet.

They paged Principal Andrew Alty and gave formal notice of their desire to involve the police. Billy listened in on the extension, and was pleased to hear Andrew Alty groaning in frustration. Billy did four hours of homework, vetted by Barbara and Buford Bailey: Math, Marketing and Society, Geography, and a special report for Consumer Science on the effects of various bottled waters when used in the preparation of Ramen Noodles. Buford dug out an old soft-sided nylon briefcase, and they packed the hardcopy in it, along with a selection of pens and a new, staid, black-and-silver PDA.

Billy and Barbara Bailey went to the Sears Galleria and bought a few outfits, and then he was ready to go back to school.

#

Billy kept his head up as he left for school the next day, for Barbara and Buford Bailey's benefit. But once he'd turned the corner at the end of the block, he slowed down, dropped his gaze to his loafers, and fretted.

Billy's brand had been established early on, in the first month of kindergarten. He'd been the first in the category – he'd defined "heel" for his classmates. Sure, there'd been heels in the upper grades, but they had no interaction with his class.

Billy had been the heel. When others followed the trail he'd blazed, pitching spitwads or putting the boot in during a game of British Bulldog, their behaviour had been compared to Billy's. More than half of the endorsement dollars that flowed into the sixth grade went straight into Billy's trust account.

As well they should. If you were a sixth-grader looking for a risque t-shirt, nine times out of ten it'd be a shirt that Billy had worn that week. If you went to see a violent movie, it'd be one that Billy had presented a book-report on. If you wanted a PDA with a shotgun mic attachment for cross-playground spying, what better model than the one that Billy could often be seen holding up to his ear, grinning mischievously?

In the minds of the consumers of Pepsi Elementary, Billy owned the word "mischief." The immutable wisdom of the ages said that nothing Billy could do would change that. It would be like trying to sell Evian Brake Fluid. A brand-killer.

In the searing light of his anger with Andrew Alty and Bennie Beasely and Mitchell McCoy, switching categories had seemed like a bold, sexy move. In the glum winter daylight, it seemed like suicide. What was he doing?

As he neared the playground, he saw the earlybirds, babyfaces all, gathered to play their gentle games in the brief calm before the shouting, shoving heels arrived. And he was gobsmacked by revelation.

Billy Bailey, heel, was synonymous with mischief. That would never change. But who wanted to be synonymous with mischief? The world was full of little bastards, getting into their petty troubles. Sponsors couldn't care less about them and their weak, puny brands. At the same time, the few babyfaces remaining in the sixth grade were miserable specimens of the category – snivelling wimps, not child-genius virtuosos. The sponsors barely noticed them, so ineffectual were their brands.

Truth be told, sponsorship was lean in the sixth grade. They were nearly ready for Nintendo Middle School, where they'd be lowly seventh-graders, taking every cue from the wise and savvy eighth-graders, who trembled on the cusp of high-school. In that tough marketplace, heels were jocks or gangstas, the stakes were raised, and real violence was a genuine possibility. The sixth-grade crop of heels was mostly doomed. Billy had gotten out while the getting was good.

Billy's brand had been so strong because he was first in the category. Becoming a babyface, he'd be last in the category – he'd be playing catch-up with the snivelling wimps. He just couldn't stomach the prospect.

But if Billy were to create a new category, he would be first to market in it – the automatic leader. And he could leverage the things that had made his brand important to begin with: his native charisma, his understanding of the importance of consistency and caution when managing a brand.

Billy would own a new word in the minds of the consumers at Pepsi Elementary.

That word would be: Dissent.

And so Billy Bailey, heel, gave way to Billy "Bug" Bailey, dissenter.

#

His first sponsor came on-board a week later.

The promised criminal investigation had fizzled quietly after a fingerprinting session and an intense series of meetings between Principal Andrew Alty and Mitchell McCoy's overbearing parental units. And Billy "Bug" Bailey had attended five days of classes without a single logomark, a single brand, or a single label on his person.

He turned in his homework impeccably and on-time, but he refused to incorporate any of the school's approved sponsors into his personal curriculum. His assignments contained no registered trademarks. And they were signed Bug Bailey.

In the playground, Bug's new brand met with a great deal of consumer resistance. Mitchell McCoy confronted him during a game of tackle-tag, dropping Billy as he charged for the home-base at the swing-set.

"Got you!" he hissed through clenched teeth. He had a heavy-metal t-shirt on, with more umlauts than the entire Ring Cycle; a TimePuker watch on a studded bracelet; and Doc Marten's ButtKicker 2000s, with the plated shin-guards. "You beetle!"

Bug wriggled from beneath him, stood and dusted himself off. "Beetle?" he said, wondering if it was a new insult he'd missed.

"Bug, beetle, what's the difference? Either way, you're something disgusting that I squish."

Bug cocked an eyebrow. "The Doc Marten's are a bad idea," he said, off-hand. "Too much line-extension, they've weakened the brand. That's what I told them when they offered me a pair." Of course, no one had ever offered Mitchell McCoy anything – he always paid.

"Bug!" Mitchell McCoy shouted. He looked around to make sure that any heels in range heard him. "Bug!"

Bug kept his cool, confident that Mitchell McCoy couldn't muster the support of any of the heels on the playground. And he was right. The others looked a little embarrassed and moved off. Panic flashed in Mitchell McCoy's eyes.

He charged.

Bug stood perfectly still, let Mitchell McCoy jump on him, force him to the ground. Bug twisted to shield his groin and face, but Mitchell McCoy managed to open a cut over his left eyebrow before a teacher broke it up.

He spent the rest of the day in class, soaking up the blood with one of the janitor's shop rags: he refused to wear the Band-Aids the school nurse had offered him. Mitchell McCoy's parents descended on the principal's office like kingfishers, and left with Mitchell McCoy on a two-week

suspension.

When Bug left the schoolyard, a limo was waiting for him.

#

“Billy, Jesus, you look like you’ve been in a war,” is what Ronnie Ryan, the rep from Polygram, said as Bug approached the limo. Ronnie Ryan had always been good for a half-dozen new CDs every week, gangsta rap and narco-mariachi dance stuff. But they had communicated through Bennie, mostly, never this flashy limousine service.

“Can I give you a ride?” Ronnie Ryan asked.

“Sure,” Bug said, and got in the limo.

Ronnie Ryan had an intense cell-phone conversation as they were pulling out, but once they’d hit the highway, he rang off and gave Billy a great big smile. Ronnie Ryan had always reminded Billy of a second-grade heel, more high-strung than mean, with his expensive brand-new casual clothes and his artfully mussed hair.

“I wanted to make a quick stop on the way, I hope you don’t mind,” Ronnie Ryan said. “I think you’ll be interested.”

Bug knew that Ronnie Ryan knew that Bug wasn’t a heel any longer. He was intrigued by whatever it was that Ronnie Ryan thought would tempt him, but cool enough not to show it. He took a Yoo-Hoo from the minibar and settled back for the ride.

They pulled up in front of a warehouse whose broken windows leered at him. From within, he heard wailing guitars and hoarse singing. Ronnie Ryan held the door open for him. “You’re going to love these guys,” he said.

#

The band was called Honey-Roasted Landlords. Three B.Comm. grads – a guitar, a bass and a drum-kit. They wore faded track-pants and plain white t-shirts with off-brand tennis shoes. They weren’t bad.

“I thought you’d like them,” Ronnie Ryan said, after they’d finished rehearsing. “We’re releasing them on our bootleg label, photocopied inserts, home-toasted CDs. They’re testing very high in the 11-16 market.”

Bug nodded sagely. “My rate has doubled,” he said, as off-handedly as he could manage.

Ronnie Ryan swallowed. Bug held his gaze. When you focus a brand down, you end up with a premium product. Rolex makes nothing but watches, and they cost the world; Matsushita makes everything from stereos to space stations, and they have to sell on price, incentives and rebates.

Bug knew which camp he was in.

Ronnie Ryan nodded, finally. The B.Com. with the guitar watched the proceedings with undisguised interest. He snapped Billy a nod that was a salute, one artist to another.

“Let’s get you home, huh?” Ronnie Ryan said.

#

Things were shaky, that first month, but by the end of it, he had a solid seven sponsors lined up, all at double his old rate. He wore “homemade” band-shirts; did Music Appreciation reports on “indie” singles he downloaded from “pirate” sites; wore street-vendor styles that had been mass-produced – sans label – by DKNY’s Chechen facility.

The kids on the playground spent the first week staring in shock; the second, shaking their heads in pity; the third, covertly studying him; and by the fourth, it seemed like a couple were ready to follow his lead. The umlauts dwindled, the hand-drawn t-shirts multiplied. Bug’s sponsors were delighted.

Bug knew that it wasn’t enough, though. He needed to promote more than himself; he needed to promote the category, to bring some of the stronger heel brands into the fold, to grow the field.

Sure, it might decrease his market-share, but it would increase the overall size of the market.

He had to pick his competition.

#

Mitchell McCoy came off his two-week suspension even more hostile to Bug. He spent the entire morning glaring at Bug while the teacher moused through a PepsiOne multimedia on the Civil War.

Bug made a note of his reaction. He liked to know where he stood. And more and more, it seemed that he stood somewhere very fine indeed. He tried to picture the class seen from overhead, and saw the homemade t-shirts clustered densely around his desk and then thinning in proportion to the distance from it. He could almost see his influence rippling outwards.

Mitchell McCoy sat in the opposite corner of the room, one more black speedmetal t-shirt inside a knot of the same. Bug cocked his head at him and pondered until the recess bell rang.

On the schoolyard, he deliberately distanced himself from the other dissenters, sitting in the shelter of an emergency exit, tapping a game of solitaire on his new PDA, which he'd decorated with "underground" stickers for "indie" cartoon shows. He peeked up occasionally and watched Mitchell McCoy make his way across the playground to him. He suppressed a grin. This had all started when Mitchell McCoy hadn't had the sense to stay down in a game of tackle-tag, and Mitchell McCoy hadn't learned a thing.

He pretended not to notice Mitchell McCoy's approach, but peripherally watched the oxblood-coloured ButtKicker 2000s crunch towards him, kick his PDA into the sky.

"Nice shirt, Bug!"

Bug simulated a cringe. "Why can't you just leave me alone, Mitchell McCoy?" he whined.

Mitchell McCoy grinned wolfishly. "Why can't you weave me awone?" he said, in a baby-voice.

"Because I don't like you, Bug. You think you're so great –"

"You're just jealous because you don't have any endorsement deals," Bug said, with a calculated amount of petulance.

Mitchell McCoy purpled. "Oh yeah, and I suppose you're just rolling in it these days, with crap like that shirt and those shoes and those nasty CDs you keep bringing in..." He trailed off, comprehension crawling with glacial sloth across his acne. "That's it! You've got deals with these guys! Independent, my butt!"

"No I don't," Bug said, too quickly.

"Oh yes you do! Wait'll I tell everyone! You're a dead man, Bug." Mitchell McCoy rubbed his hands and did a little ButtKicker 2000 dance.

"Don't!" Bug said. "Please! I'll do anything." Bug consciously didn't hold his breath, tried to play the part to its utmost. This was the moment of truth.

"What can you do?"

"Well, I could hook you up with my sponsors," Bug said, forcing misery into his voice. "Then you'd be in on it, too."

"What makes you think I'd want to endorse any of your low-rent sponsors, Bug?"

"How else are you going to pay for the girl's toilet?" Bug wondered if he was showing too much premeditation, but Mitchell McCoy was hooked.

"How do I know they'll want to sign me?" he asked, almost drooling.

"I'll tell them. They'll consider the source."

"It's a deal," Mitchell McCoy said. "I'll meet you at the back gate after school." He walked away, pausing to crush Bug's PDA underfoot.

#

They met Ronnie Ryan in an alley a block from the school. Once they were in the limo, Bug dropped the pretence that he was scared of Mitchell McCoy. He and Ronnie Ryan tag-teamed Mitchell McCoy, giving him pointers on dress, speech, comportment and behaviour. Mitchell McCoy's eyes, already bugged out from the moment he'd seen the stretch limo, grew wider with every moment, and he nodded unconsciously as they tore apart his brand.

Finally, Ronnie Ryan passed him a neatly folded bundle: non-name sneakers, homemade CDs, track-pants, a t-shirt with Honey-Roasted Landlord written in Magic Marker. He dug out a Hefty Tie N Toss and shook it open. "Toss everything in," he commanded. "The boots, the shirt, anything in your pockets. You're not a heel anymore."

Bug and Ronnie Ryan politely turned their heads while Mitchell McCoy changed. Ronnie Ryan had him sign a nondisclosure and a noncompete, then sent him packing.

"You're sure about this?" he asked Bug once they were alone.

"I'm growing the category," Bug said. "It's the natural next-step."

"But that kid –" Ronnie Ryan gave a dramatic shudder. "Ugh."

"Don't worry about it," Bug said. "I'll make sure he does his part. He's the perfect number-two brand – dumb and easy to figure out."

"Take this, will you?" Ronnie Ryan said, holding out the Tie N Toss. "I can't even bear to hold it."

#

Mitchell McCoy was a loser. Bug knew that. But he'd underestimated how much of a loser he was. When he dumped out the Tie N Toss in his bedroom that night, he nearly laughed out loud.

Mitchell McCoy's pockets had been filled with BanginBumpin M-80s. Some people never learn.

Bug got a couple of Zip-Loc bags from the kitchen and put them on like gloves. He picked up the M-80s and carefully slipped them into his pocket.

He set the alarm for 7AM, so that he could get to school nice and early. Early enough to drop the M-80s – covered in Mitchell McCoy’s fingerprints – down the newly rebuilt girls’ toilets.

As he nestled under the covers, he felt a tremor of doubt. He wasn’t a heel anymore, so wasn’t setting up Mitchell McCoy off-strategy?

He pondered it while sleep overtook him, and in the morning he knew the answer.

Billy “Bug” Bailey could act like a heel if he wanted to. He was a category-killer.

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