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Child of Gold



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London

He knew now. He knew exactly what he had to do. He was absolutely sure. First, for a few more weeks, he had to hold on, to carry on putting up with this disgusting everyday life. Everyday, he came home after a hard day's work and Bobby would run to him. He'd take him in his arms and he would hold him tight until the child could barely breathe. They both needed this long embrace. Kevin knew it couldn't make up for the long day of neglect the child had been through, the lack of affection he had felt day after day from his mother, but this was what he could give him to start with. Then came the difficult moment when he had to care for the needs of his dear darling boy: blow his nose, ask him questions about his day, then start cooking a good dinner for him—if ever there was something left in the fridge, that is. A difficult moment because in the meantime, he had to face Clara. Cope with her. Most of the time he would find her lying on the bed, smoking cigarette after cigarette. Most of the time, her infernal brother would be around, sprawling on the sofa, playing loud, aggressive music that was unbearable for the delicate ears of a three year-old. She would barely answer his questions. Had Bobby been taken to nursery school today? Sometimes she replied aggressively: "Of course? Why do you ask?" But more often than not, she'd say, "I didn't feel very well this morning, so I couldn't take him." And some times even: "I don't know, why the hell should I remember?" Those times he knew that she was heavily doped and then, he felt fear creep up behind the back of his neck because he knew too well that anything could happen. She could start shouting, she could become violent, or she could just start raving, which frightened Bobby just as much. But on that particular December evening, he felt it would not be so difficult to face her. He had found the solution. He had been thinking of a divorce for some time, but he didn't want that. He knew the judges would probably give her the custody of the child, even if he could prove that she was a drug addict, that all the money he had earned these last four years had been used to pay for the various combinations of products that she and her brother consumed everyday. They had been living in a slum, in a derelict district of London whereas he was making quite a lot of money. Was he not one of the best furniture designers in London? He and Bobby should have lived like kings. And even if he got the custody of the child, she would have the right to visit him, the right to poison his life. No, what he wanted to do now was to take the child away for good. He was still very young, just three. He could forget her altogether. He would start a new life somewhere else with him. He would enable him to grow up into a fine young man, into a happy man. He would play his role as a father, just as any normal father would do. She would never learn where they had gone.

After the usual hugging and kissing with Bobby, he went to her. For once, that brother of hers was absent. She was vaguely doped, her eyes lost in a distant world. He tried to talk with her nevertheless:

“Have you had a nice day?”

“Why do ask hypocritical questions? You don’t give a damn if I had a nice day or not. No I didn’t have a nice day. Pete is out, you see. I don’t like it when he leaves me alone.”

“So what have you done?”

“Nothing.”

“Interesting conversation.”

Suddenly she became violent. “Get the hell out of my room! And take that wimp away! He’s been crying all day. I can’t stand him.” Kevin’s blood froze. He went to the child and kissed him tenderly. Then he looked at the boy carefully. Had she beaten him? He didn’t usually suspect her of hitting Bobby, because in her incredible, unnatural way, she loved him. She would sometimes run to him and smother him with kisses. Then neglect him for days on end.

“Mummy tells me you’ve been crying?”

“Yea.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“Were you hungry?”

“Yea.”

“Did you go to school?”

“No, Mummy didn’t take me.”

He started to cook some eggs and a slice of ham for him. Then he’d make him some pancakes because that was what Bobby liked best. “It’s more like breakfast than dinner, isn’t it, darling?” “I didn’t have any breakfast anyway” Bobby answered plaintively.

Oh, yes, she deserved it. The news had come the day before. The firm he worked for was having some difficulties. They hadn’t been able to adapt to the new fashion quickly enough. The Laura Ashley style was sweeping over London. Everything had to look as if it came from a thatched-roofed cottage. It had to look old and delicate and natural. Nothing like the solid, modern furniture they were making. They would soon have to make a few of their executives redundant and there could be a nice pay off package. He knew he was appreciated but not liked. He didn’t resent his colleagues for that. He understood them. How could they really like him? Whenever there was a party, an invitation of some sort, he had to decline. He had of course never

told anybody how ashamed he was of the woman he was living with, that it was absolutely impossible for him to take her out. It was impossible to bring a colleague home for a cup of tea. So they had started to regard him as a secretive character, a rather anti-social bloke and they had stopped inviting him. And he was of course very often tense, irritable after the sleepless nights of quarrelling with her and Pete. Sometimes he was late when he felt he had to take Bobby away from her for the day and when he decided to take him to school himself. So, he knew that if somebody had to go, it'd be him. He would just have to be a little bit moodier than usual just to make sure. Then, there was this firm in Italy.

Bobby was ready for bed now. He took off his clothes, put him in his bath, played for a while with the little plastic toys the child liked so much: a little ship with a propeller, which went round the bath making all sorts of wavelets when you wound it. A black and white squeaking duck.

“I think you'd better change your pyjamas tonight.”

“Can I put on the blue ones, Daddy?”

“Sure, if they're clean.”

“Will you tell me the story of the magic bean?”

“Again? I've been telling you this story for the last three nights, Bobby.”

“I want the story of the magic bean.”

“OK, OK, you'll have it.”

As Kevin passed in front of the mirror with Bobby in his arms, he looked at the picture they formed with pride. They were so different physically. Kevin was dark-haired and dark-eyed with a rather long face whereas Bobby was all round, blond and curly and he had his mother's big blue eyes. He was his child of gold. But they looked alike in another special way. “It's the love between us that shows” Kevin thought.

Naples

“Dad, are we going to go and buy my new stereo today?”

“It might be a good idea. Your mother's busy in the garden and Gina will come and visit her this afternoon. So we can take some time off, the two of us.”

Bobby smiled. He felt really happy. Not just because they were going to buy the new stereo that his parents were offering him for his sixteenth birthday, but to spend some time alone with his father was always a great pleasure. Not that he didn't love his mother. He knew she was not his biological mother and that his real mother was dead. Anita had married his

father when he was five years old. He remembered the wedding very well and how proud he had felt on that particular day. How handsome his father had seemed to him and how beautiful and loving Anita had been. He also knew how much she had loved him and cared for him ever since. Yes, he loved her very much. But the complicity there was between his father and himself was something unique that was growing even stronger as he was changing into a young man. They drove to Naples and were soon lost in the busy crowds of shoppers in the town centre. Buying the stereo was fun too. Kevin's Italian had never become quite good enough and it was a pleasure for Bobby to take the lead when the shop assistants became rather technical. Finally, as they always did when they spent the day in Naples, Kevin drove to one particular spot where they had a lovely view of the bay, and there, they just sat, watching the sun go down behind the azure clouds above the horizon. And as usual Kevin said: "To see Naples and live!" Bobby didn't understand what his father really meant, but he liked hearing him say that. Then, another car stopped, and two English tourists got out. One was a middle-aged man, the other a woman who caught Bobby's attention because there was something vaguely familiar about her. She was perhaps forty, perhaps younger, perhaps older. She was blond and beautiful, but had a tired face, a very sad look in her big blue eyes. She turned in their direction and suddenly seemed thunderstruck. Bobby saw his father react in the same way. "Kevin!" she exclaimed in a muffled voice, as if she couldn't breathe anymore. Then she turned to the middle-aged man and said: "Do you mind if I have a word with this gentleman, dear?" The middle aged man, her husband most certainly, seemed to have understood something Bobby was still unable to grasp. At last, his father spoke, as if coming out from a torpor: "Let's cross over and let me buy you a drink at Dominici's, it's just opposite the road". She nodded and they crossed over, leaving Bobby and the foreign gentleman alone. He was obviously very embarrassed and tried to begin a conversation.

"So, you are English too, young man? Seems to be hoards of English people in Naples these days."

"No I'm Italian," said Bobby proudly. "My father is English."

"Nice weather today, isn't it?"

Bobby thought: "Here I am, speaking with a perfectly stupid Englishman I don't give a damn about, while my father is having a conversation with a woman whose apparition has completely dumbstruck him. What I am doing here?" He answered rather aggressively: "The weather's always nice here" He left the man alone and crossed over: his father and the woman were not outside the café. He wanted to find them. He felt this was something he couldn't be left out from. Suddenly he froze. They were sitting behind some huge plants that divided the café into two sections. He could hear them, and

unless something caught their attention and made them turn round, they wouldn't see him. He sat down cautiously, without making any noise. The woman was speaking in a strained, hissing, aggressive voice:

"I never really loved you, Kevin. I only got interested in you when I realized I was pregnant", she was saying. "I needed a father for my child. Somebody stupid enough to provide for us and not to understand the truth. Didn't you ever realise that Bobby doesn't look like you at all? You're so dumb, so conceited that you never asked yourself what sort of relationship I had with my brother? Poor Kevin, we've fooled you all along."

His father's voice was strangely quiet as he answered: "Well, I must admit I had not understood at the very first that he was Pete's son. But you don't seem to feel so bad about all this Clara. Well, you needn't really. Cause, you know, I never really loved you either. I got interested in you only when I realised you were pregnant. You see, I'd known it all along, ever since I was 16."

"Known what?"

"At sixteen, I had the mumps. I made tests. They told me I'd never have any children. I'm sterile, you know. So, it became a sort of obsession for me. I had to be a father, one way or other. The other girls I had dated seriously had usually left me after I'd told them I wanted to adopt a child. They either didn't want any children at all, or they wanted children of their own. I was desperate, I was turning thirty and couldn't imagine how I'd manage. And then I met you. I had hardly slept with you once or twice when you told me you were pregnant and I was the father. I had the feeling you were sent by Providence. OK, you gave me a hard time of it, but you see Clara, you thought you were using me, while in fact, I was using you, all along. Thank you for Bobby, Clara."