

GEMINI

Rob Mimpriss

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When women asked Derek Roberts about the scar on his shoulder, he would say that he had been born with three arms and the doctors had left him two. If they laughed too loudly or demanded the truth he would explain that he could have been one of identical twins, but this second twin had never separated or matured, developing only as a nerveless excrescence that the doctors had removed. And he might also say that the loss made him sad: sad that he could have had a brother, could have been twice the man he was in the world, sad also that but for chance he would have been the stunted one, the spare limb.

And he would see how disgust narrowed the woman's eyes, or sympathy softened her voice. In a drab Slovenian town he got dressed by the light of the gas flare outside, and walked through trafficless streets to the depot to sleep in his lorry. In the Hungarian-speaking part of Romania a girl knotted a scarf round their wrists so that he would be conjoined while they slept. And he wondered that a town even uglier than his own, where a man leaned his bike against a lamppost and pissed against a wood fence, should have raised anyone so deft in her feelings as that girl, Violeta.

When he met Sharon she seemed afraid of the scar, afraid also to ask questions when men are so prone to rage, and so at first he had no chance to tell her about his fear of fatherhood or his sense of thwarted potential. Later, when they were expecting a child, it was he who seemed to be pregnant, a victim of nausea and stomach pains, and a dread that the birth would go badly: not only the scar drove his fear, but a certain genetic slur against their region. She was born without defects, yet discovering an inconstancy he had not guessed at in himself, he had abandoned his wife when

Anwen was five years old, moving first into a house shared with college students, and later into a bedsit near the railway station yard. He was driving the lorry much closer to home, but sometimes he would wake up with a start, wondering whose bed he was in, and in what country.

Now Anwen was eleven, and Derek was calling at the family home to spend an evening with his family. The faint stars of his birth sign were shining as he turned onto that dead-end street, and a woman in a window undid her blouse to breastfeed while her husband opened his first after-work beer. Derek stepped past a girl's broken bicycle, and knocked at the door where he had never needed to knock when he was the husband.

'Anwen's at a neighbour's house,' said Sharon, 'but she'll be back before dinner.' She shirked his kiss, moving away to turn the sound down on a quiz show, and Derek saw that the reproachfulness she had showed him since the divorce was darkening into bitterness. He cleared his throat. 'Is this a friend?'

'Maybe. Rachel seemed happy enough to have Anwen's company, and they only live across the road.' She shrugged. 'So if they get on, then yes.'

'And how's school? Is she still behaving?'

'There's been no trouble so far this year.'

It was the best answer he could have hoped for. In the early days of Anwen's schooling, things searched for and presumed lost had been found in secret places: bars of chocolate, boxes of chalk, beloved toys of Anwen's or things belonging to other children. In her last year at junior school she had gone missing one lunch hour, turning up not in the streets or park where they had searched, but in a forgotten cupboard in the school gymnasium. It seemed she sought to keep things safe where only she could find them, that her mother the hoarder and refugee and her father the renegade had joined their failings in Anwen. Yet she had outgrown that difficult time, settling down to days at school and evenings with her mother, sometimes even fleetingly making friends. Now the latch clicked and there was a breeze at his ankles as Anwen arrived home. She reached up her arms to catch Derek's embrace, delighted with her father, and then put her lunchbox by the sink and went

upstairs to get changed. Derek stayed with Sharon, watching as she put the potatoes to boil and took sausages from the fridge: the simple task of preparing a meal that they had so often shared when they were married.

When they were alone Sharon had evaded his touch, avoided even looking at him, but now for Anwen's sake he must be shown welcome, and so he found himself sitting in his old place, a tablecloth laid, and it seemed almost natural to fill his glass with water from the jug and put his old piano CD in the player on the shelf. Anwen carried her plate to the table and sat down opposite her father, but dignified and self-conscious, she waited for her parents before starting to eat.

'Did you have a good time with Rachel, Anwen?' asked Sharon.

Anwen looked up. She thought for a minute. 'We sat in her room. Rachel's room is nicer than mine, but she's not allowed a TV or CD player in case it stops her studying. And she's not allowed drinks or biscuits in her room because of the crumbs.' She shrugged. 'So we did homework.'

'Did Mrs Garfield behave all right with you?'

'I don't think she likes other children in the house; she hardly spoke to me. Then she sent me home when she wanted Rachel to help with the cooking.'

'What homework did you do, Anwen?' Derek asked.

'Maths. You have to look at graphs with distance and time, and decide how fast things go.' Anwen held a sausage on her fork and nibbled at it delicately. 'I'd have got more work done upstairs here on my own. I don't think I'll bother going to Rachel's again.'

'Anwen,' said Sharon, 'I'm not letting you lose another friend. If Rachel wants to spend time with you, don't you dare say no.' But Anwen put down her fork, pushing her chair away from the table and folding her arms across her chest. A knock on the door followed this protest, and as her mother got up to answer, something flared in Anwen's eyes, some insecurity or doubt.

‘We need to talk to you, Sharon,’ said the visitor. She was a tall, lean woman with a face unused to smiling, and as she spoke, something proud and resentful pushed at her voice: she deserved better than this dingy street, these uncouth people, and she wanted it known. Sharon stood back to let her inside, and the woman guided her daughter in front of her, a girl with brown hair of a lighter shade than her mother’s, dressed in grey trousers and green sweatshirt, the same uniform as Anwen’s. A look passed between the two children, embarrassment on Rachel’s side, fear and betrayal on Anwen’s.

‘This is Derek, my ex-husband,’ said Sharon. ‘This is Rachel’s mother Stephanie, who had Anwen round after school.’ The woman glanced at Derek, dismissive of ex-husbands, and Sharon asked, ‘Is everything all right, Stephanie? Is this to do with Anwen?’

‘It’s to do with Anwen, yes,’ said the woman. ‘It seems your daughter stole some money from my purse when she was at my house today.’

Sharon glanced at Anwen, still sitting opposite Derek at the table. ‘I hope there’s some other explanation,’ she said. ‘But we’d better sit down and see. You too, Anwen.’ She gestured towards the fireplace and chairs and Stephanie sat down on the sofa, pushing herself backward and crossing her legs, while Rachel perched on the edge of the cushion beside her. Anwen came reluctantly to stand by her mother, and when Derek began to get up from his seat Sharon gave him the faintest of frowns. ‘So what’s this about?’

‘I saw it happen, Mrs Roberts,’ said Rachel. She raised her eyes to look at Sharon, and although her voice trembled she kept it under control. ‘We were doing homework in my room, and Anwen went to the bathroom. I heard the flush but she didn’t come back, so I went to see what was happening. Anwen came out of mum’s room and she didn’t want me to see her hand. I looked in mum’s room later and her handbag was open.’ She swallowed. ‘Sorry, Anwen; I had to tell.’

‘I know,’ said Anwen. She could barely be heard. Her arms hung by her sides in stiff self-consciousness.

‘Did you go in Mrs Garfield’s room, Anwen?’ said Sharon.

There was a silence. Anwen glanced at her mother, and looked at the floor. ‘Yes,’ she said.

‘What were you doing in there? Anwen, talk to me.’

‘I went to look in her bag.’ She hesitated. ‘I wanted to see what she kept in it.’

‘Did you take any money like Mrs Garfield says?’ For a moment the child met her mother’s gaze. It seemed she might go through life like this, vulnerable yet untouched.

‘Go upstairs and sit in your room,’ said Sharon. She watched with pursed lips, waiting until she was gone. ‘I’m sorry you’ve had this trouble, Stephanie. Anwen’s taken and hidden things in the past, but she isn’t a thief.’

‘Twenty pounds is missing from my purse,’ said Stephanie. ‘You can call it what you like, but I want my money.’ And it seemed from the way she took it and left that it was not the money she had come to restore, but her sense of her due: somehow she had come to this fate, but it was not hers. Sharon sat down at the table to eat, her diplomacy exhausted. The meat had gone cold, the gravy congealed, and she finished her meal without interest or pleasure. She laughed briefly. ‘That’s a new one, anyway.’

‘Do you want Anwen down so she can finish?’

‘She’s old enough to be punished for this, Derek. You can say goodbye to her if you must, but she’s not coming downstairs tonight.’

A pause. ‘I’ll go up then,’ said Derek. Her room was as neat and sparse as a cell. A lamp and a laptop lay on the desk, and a family photo on her bedside locker. It was hard to imagine such an orderly child stealing from naughtiness, or for gain. Sweets and chocolates given her at Christmas seemed to last her half the year; gifts of toys or games were taken out and briefly played with, then tidily repackaged. He sat down on the stool by the desk.

‘Your mother agreed to let me say goodbye before I go.’

She lowered her eyes. Since the divorce she had learnt how adults think: this departure was part of her punishment, and his. ‘Are things okay at school?’ he asked. ‘Are you still being bullied?’

‘They’re okay,’ said Anwen.

‘Do you have any friends? Apart from Rachel.’ Anwen said nothing. ‘Your mum told me she’s very pleased with the marks you get for your homework.’

‘Dad.’

‘Yes, love.’

‘If you didn’t live here, where would you live? If you decided to leave.’

‘I wouldn’t,’ said Derek; ‘my daughter is here. I wouldn’t want you and your mum to leave either.’ She smiled at this. Another child might have sought his affection. ‘You know your mother had to give Mr Garfield twenty pounds?’

A pause. ‘Yes, I know,’ said Anwen.

‘Would you like to tell me what happened to the money?’

There was still no reply. And even in this neat room there were places it could be hidden until she might need it: under the skirting board or in the roll of her window blind, behind the panel of her light switch hidden carefully with the wires. And he felt a sudden surge of anger against these women, in all their pride and strength and frailty, who blamed him for wrecking their lives.

Sharon was wiping the table when he went downstairs. ‘I’m going home,’ he said, and took his coat from the hook by the door. Sensing his mood, Sharon came close to him and offered him a kiss.

‘Try and see her soon.’

‘Just let me go,’ said Derek. He walked his anger out on the street. He sometimes wondered what that other one might have made of his life, how his family would have fared. His hand strayed to the scar, a reminder of all that was weak and degenerate in him.

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