

ANNIE

Annie sat on the grubby, pine-topped table, her arms held defiantly across her heaving chest. Her mother, mouthing veiled threats, tried once more to pry apart the little girl's skinny arms and force them into the sleeves of her threadbare winter coat. But Annie remained determined. She was not going to go. No, she was not going to go with this man in the thick khaki coat who stood uneasily at the other side of the small kitchen.

As her mother's hard, strong fingers dug deeper into the soft flesh of her arms Annie tensed more tightly. Her three-year-old logic had convinced her that if she could not be got into her coat, she could not be taken away. Her infant reasoning was eventually confirmed by the waiting man.

"It's no good, Vera," he said. "I can't take her out without a coat, not in this weather. In any case, she'll likely just kick up a racket all the way."

Annie's quick young brain immediately registered "kicking up a racket" as a useful second line of defense if her mother should succeed with the coat.

"Look, I'll have to be going or I'll miss my train," he added anxiously, looking at his watch.

Vera, exasperated by her daughter's obstinacy and open defiance, finally conceded defeat. In one swift movement she flung the coat across the room and swiped her hand across the child's face. Annie didn't flinch, but for a brief moment she wavered in her determination not to go with the man in khaki.

The man had treated her kindly in the hour or so he'd been there. When he'd lifted her onto his lap he smelled of cigarettes and beer and brilliantine, like most of the men who visited her mother. He'd given her chocolate too. But Annie remained wary. He'd told her he was her father and he'd come to take her to a nice new home in a place called Nottingham. They'd have to go on a long train ride and when they got there he'd buy her a dolly and a big, shiny doll's pram.

Annie considered this information thoughtfully. She'd never been on a train before and the thing she wanted most in all the world was a big, shiny doll's pram. You couldn't often believe what grown-ups promised, but he'd sounded as though he'd meant it. But no, here was her home. Here in these familiar, dingy basement rooms. Here with her mother. Her arms, which had begun to relax a little, tightened again across her bony chest.

The man in khaki walked towards her and shook his head sadly.

"Well, young lady," he said with a look which Annie, usually skilled in judging adult moods, could not quite fathom. "Don't say your father never offered you a home or a Christmas present. But if you won't come along with me you won't. You'll just have to stay here with your mother and make the best of it."

He bent down and kissed her on her hot, sweat-dampened head. She thought she saw tears in his eyes, but she was not quite sure. She'd never been kissed by a man before, or

seen one cry. Annie watched as with a curt, "That's it then, Vera, she's all yours," he handed her mother a small piece of paper, turned towards the door and left.

Her mother remained unusually still and silent as they listened to his heavy footsteps mounting the basement steps. Annie waited instinctively for her mother's wrath to fall upon her, but it did not. With merely a brief exclamation of "You stubborn little bitch!" Vera threw the slip of paper onto the table and walked quickly across the room to light a cigarette at the gas fire in the corner.

Annie watched warily as her mother began to relax into the heavy inhalations of cigarette smoke. When she judged it safe to move she unfolded her stiff little arms, and taking care not to scrape the feet of the chair on the bare brick of the kitchen floor, climbed down from the table. She crept quietly across the room to where her grubby, much loved rag doll lay in its shoe-box cradle.

These were her only toys. She picked up the little doll and having tenderly wrapped it in a piece of old gray flannel, nestled it gently in her weary arms. As she sat, slowly rocking the doll in rhythm with the pulse of her own tired body, she pictured herself with a real pink-faced, rosy-cheeked baby doll and a big, shiny black pram. A proper one, with hood and apron and bright silver wheels. And she wondered dreamily if the man in khaki, who had called himself her father, would really have bought her a pram and a dolly like he'd promised.

She'd realized from the start that his visit was somehow special. When other men dressed in khaki came to their dingy basement they always got quickly into her mother's big brass bed. And she'd be dumped into her own little cot, wedged tightly against the cold, damp bedroom wall, and told to sleep.

When she could not sleep she would lie and watch them, cautiously, through half closed lids. Most men would stand and look at her mother as she stripped to her silky, graying underwear, then glance uneasily across at Annie before removing their trousers and joining Vera on the bed. If her mother saw that she was still awake, she would push Annie's face hard against the cold mustiness of the bedroom wall with a fiercely whispered warning to get to sleep and stay that way. Then, giving a weakly apologetic smile, she'd turn back to the man.

Annie heard and smelled but dared not watch what followed. The strange heaving and grunting and muffled cries. The odor of sweat and adult bodies. The sudden silence. The sound of cigarettes being lit. The familiar smell of cigarette smoke. It was best to sleep. But when sleep would not come, she would sit up in the relaxed silence of the cigarette time and watch the man lying on the bed beside her mother blow rings of smoke up to the dingy, yellowed ceiling. Sometimes the man would smile at Annie, roll over, find his trousers and pass her a square of dark chocolate from the pocket. Next morning she would wake with the bitter-sweet taste still lingering in her mouth, and remember his smile and his kindness.

Twelve years later, Annie sat at the same grubby kitchen table biting slowly into a small, dark chocolate bar, desperate to make it last. Suddenly overcome by her craving, she crammed the remaining portion into her mouth and searched in her pockets, hoping to find enough small change to buy another. Short by a few pennies she rummaged in the

drawers of the battered kitchen cabinet, but discovered no money amid the assorted flotsam.

Recalling an occasion when she'd found a few stray coins scattered beneath her mother's bed, she went to look there. Scrabbling in the dust and fluff beneath the sagging springs, she came upon a small, battered cardboard box and pulled it towards her into the light. It contained not money, as she'd hoped, but an old rag doll, tightly wrapped in a piece of dirty, gray flannel.

Unexpectedly moved by her find, Annie cradled the little doll tenderly in her arms and gently rocked it to and fro. Through her fast welling tears she recalled her three-year-old self wishing for a real baby doll and a big, black shiny pram. And she saw again the kind-faced man in khaki who'd promised to buy them for her if she would go with him. The man who'd said he was her father.

Memories flooded back. Looking across the room to where her little bed had stood, she felt again the hard, damp coldness of the wall against her face. She heard the strange panting and groaning from her mother's bed. Remembered how she'd dared not look. She saw a little girl, who could bear the fearsome sounds no longer, standing on her bed and shouting at the man to leave her mummy alone. She witnessed the woman's fierce anger as she dragged the little girl from the bedroom and flung her onto the living room sofa. Her eyes smarted at the vicious smack across the tiny, bewildered face. She marveled at the child's resilience and courage, and wept for her.

Annie remembered that from then onwards she had refused to sleep anywhere except on that sofa. And that even there she was never completely safe. She shuddered at the more recent memory of the stranger who'd pulled back her blankets and touched her

barely pubescent breasts while she was sleeping. Who'd put his hand between her legs and offered her money to have sex with him, because her mother, sprawled on the bed in the adjoining room, was too drunk to oblige. She felt again the smack across her face, when her mother had sobered up and she had dared to tell her what the man had done.

She saw the bottles of vodka on the table when there was no food. Tasted the endless papers of chips and slices of bread and jam, eaten because her mother was too drunk to cook a meal. She didn't have to look back far for those days. They'd be with her still if she hadn't learned so well to fend for herself.

Annie sighed, and as she bent to return the little doll to its cardboard cradle, caught sight of a small scrap of paper at the bottom of the box. On it was written a Nottingham address. Her father's? She looked at it in disbelief. Had she picked it up and hidden it there all those years ago? Before she could even read? If so she did not remember. But her mother had always said that Nottingham was all she knew of him when she'd dared ask about her father. It seemed like some kind of magical second chance. And this time she was ready to take it. She began to pack.

When Vera finally returned in the early hours of the morning and fell into bed, Annie lay on the sofa feigning sleep. No men had visited their basement flat for almost a year. Not since Annie had grown old enough and bold enough to make them feel unwelcome. So Vera was obliged to go out now to find her pleasures and make a little money on the side for her vodka. Annie hoped it had been a good night as she opened the purse that her mother had tossed carelessly onto the kitchen table, and took out a ten shilling note and a handful of loose change. She picked up her coat and as she slipped it on wondered how different her life might have been had she not resisted this simple act

when her father had come for her so many years before. Then, taking a last lingering look around the shabby room, she zipped shut her small holdall, mouthed a silent goodbye towards Vera's bedroom door and headed for the railway station; with what she guessed was just enough money for a chocolate bar and a one way ticket to Nottingham.

As her train rumbled north, Annie finished the coffee and small bar of dark chocolate she'd been able to purchase from the machine on the station platform and fell asleep to deep, jumbled, childhood dreams. In what seemed no time, yet forever, the train slowed on its approach to Nottingham, jolting her awake and back into the present. The taste of chocolate was still strong in her mouth as she stood up to open the carriage door, took a deep breath and stepped down onto the platform.

Her father had said she would have to make the best of it with her mother, but Annie was sure he'd really wanted her to go with him. The look of disappointment on his face had remained imprinted on her young mind. It must have meant something for the memory to have lasted so long. She pinned her faith on intuition. It had, after all, usually served her well. Except, she remembered with a sudden shudder of doubt, at that first meeting with her father. But, with a one way ticket and no more money, all she could do now was trust in her memory of his kind and disappointed face.

Clutching her precious scrap of paper, and with directions from an early morning passer by, Annie made her way from the station through streets of small, terraced houses, not unlike the ones she'd left a couple of hours earlier. As she searched for the house that matched the address she felt a sudden wave of panic. What if this wasn't her father's address? What if he was dead or didn't want to know her? But her confidence returned with the thought of little Annie's stubbornness. She wasn't going to give up now. After

all, what did she have to lose except her dream of a better life?

And here was the house. Annie felt her heartbeat quicken as she reached for the shiny brass doorknocker. A tired looking middle-aged man in a thick woolen dressing gown answered her knock. He stood in the doorway and looked at her questioningly. But in Annie's mind there was not the slightest doubt who he was.

"Hello Dad," she said, stepping up onto the well scrubbed doorstep. "It's Annie." He stared at her in disbelief.

"Annie? My little Annie?"

"Yes Dad, your little Annie, but grown up some." She watched anxiously as he stood for several moments shaking his head and rubbing the dark stubble on his chin.

"How the hell did you get here?" he asked at last.

"I came on the train," she replied, simply.

"So you decided at last you'd better put your coat on, did you?" he said, folding his arms and trying to sound serious. Then, with a sudden chuckle, he added, "So long as you're not after that big, posh doll's pram I promised you!"

Annie smiled up at him, tears of relief rolling down her cheeks.

"No. I'm a bit too old for that now, Dad," she grinned, "but I do need a place to stay."

"Best be getting you indoors and finding you some breakfast then," he said, taking her bag from her shoulder. "And after that you can tell me what this is all about."

Annie was not entirely sure, but she thought she saw him brush a tear from his eye as he put an affectionate arm around her and ushered her into the house.

"Thanks Dad," she mumbled through her own unashamed tears. "I'm sorry to come

so early."

"Early?" he laughed, "I'd say you're a bit on the late side, Annie my girl. I've been waiting for you these past twelve years."