

A Man and a Boy

Will Freeman was thirty-six years old and he had never had a job in his life. Sometimes he thought about working. He looked through the job advertisements in newspapers and wrote occasional letters to employers, but he was never invited to interviews.

He didn't mind. He was OK as he was. He was a cool guy with a cool lifestyle. He read quite a lot; he saw films in the afternoons; he went running; he cooked nice meals for himself and his friends. When he got bored, he went to Rome or New York or Barcelona for a few days.

Will didn't need to work for money because in 1938 his father had written a very successful Christmas song. Many famous singers had made recordings of this song, and each time Will's father had received royalties. Since his death the royalties had come to Will.

So Will had become rich without having to work at all. He was happy with his life. He lived in a nice flat in London and drove a fast car. He liked women and had lots of girlfriends, but he never got too involved with them. He preferred to look at other people's lives from the outside, like watching TV. If a relationship with a woman became complicated, he ended it. He wanted to keep his life simple.

In the evenings Will usually went out with friends. These were guys who worked in music shops or belonged to the same sports clubs as Will, or who were part of the same pub-quiz team. They weren't close friends - but they were good enough for a drink or a meal.

The evenings were fine, but Will had a lot of free time during the day because all his friends were at work. So he filled the time bath, tidying his flat, going to the shops, watching Countdown. Countdown was an afternoon TV quiz show and it was his favourite programme. Sometimes he wondered how his friends had time to work. How could a person work and have a bath on the same day?

Will didn't like children. He wasn't interested in them, and he didn't want any responsibility for them. But his friends, John and Christine, had two. The second was a baby girl, born just the week before, and Will had been invited to see her.

When he arrived at John and Christine's flat, there were children's toys everywhere. Pieces of brightly coloured plastic were spread all over the floor, videos lay out of their cases near the TV, a white cloth over the sofa was covered with dirty brown marks... How could people live like this?

Christine came in holding the new baby while John was in the kitchen making tea. 'This is Imogen,' she said.

'Oh,' said Will. 'Right.' He paused. What did people usually say about babies? 'She's...' he began, but stopped again. It was no good. He decided to ask Christine about herself instead. 'How are you, Chris?' he asked.

'Well, you know. I'm rather tired.'

'Why? A lot of parties?'

'No. I've just had a baby.'

'Oh. Right.'

John came into the room, carrying three cups of tea. 'Barney's gone to his grandmother's today,' he said, for no reason that Will could understand.

'How's Barney?' Barney was two, and interesting only to his parents, but Will knew he should ask John something.

'He's fine, thanks,' said John. 'He's still getting used to Imogen, but he's lovely'

Will had met Barney before and knew that he wasn't lovely, but he decided not to say anything.

'I'm fine, thanks.'

'Don't you want your own family?'

I can't think of anything worse, thought Will. 'Not yet,' he said.

We're worried about you,' said Christine.

'I'm OK as I am, thanks,' said Will.

'Maybe,' said Christine, and smiled.

Will was beginning to feel very uncomfortable. Why did they want him to have children? Children would make him very unhappy. If John and Christine wanted children, and to be unhappy, that was fine. (Will was sure that John and Christine were very unhappy, even if they didn't realize it.) But why should they want him to be unhappy too?

Will could see only one reason for having children. When you were old and poor, then they could look after you. But Will had plenty of money, so he didn't need toys on the floor or dirty sofas.

John and Christine used to be OK, he thought. Will and a girlfriend had gone out to nightclubs with them once or twice a week, and they had all had a lot of fun. But since John and Christine had had children, everything had changed. Will didn't want to meet Imogen, or hear how Barney was. He didn't want to hear about Christine's tiredness. He decided not to visit them again.

'We were wondering,' said John, 'whether you'd like to be Imogen's godfather?' The two of them looked at Will, smiling and waiting for his reply.

Will laughed nervously. 'Godfather?' he said. 'You mean... church and things? Birthday presents? If you two are killed in an air crash, I'll have to look after her?'

'Yes.'

'You're joking, aren't you?' you're a very serious and responsible person.'

'Oh, no,' said Will quickly. 'No, I'm not. I'm really a very shallow kind of person. Thank you very much for asking me, but I can't think of anything worse.'

He didn't stay much longer.

Not far away, in the Holloway area of London, a twelve-year-old boy called Marcus was lying in bed, unable to sleep. He was worrying about his mum and his new school.

Marcus's mum was called Fiona, and she and Marcus had only been in London for a few weeks. They had moved there on the first day of the summer holidays because Fiona had got a new job. Before moving to London, they had lived in Cambridge, where Marcus's father, Clive,

still lived. Fiona and Clive had separated four years ago.

Marcus thought London was quite boring. He and Fiona hadn't done much in the holidays. They'd been to see Home Alone 2, which wasn't as good as Home Alone 1. They'd been to have a look at his new school, which was big and horrible. And they'd had lots of talks about London and the changes in their lives. But really they were sitting around waiting for their London lives to begin.

Marcus had had two kinds of life. The first, which had ended when he was eight, was the normal, boring kind, with school and holidays and homework and weekend visits to grandparents. The second kind was more confused because there were more people and places in it: his mother's boyfriends and his dad's girlfriends; flats and houses; Cambridge and London. It was surprising how many things had changed when Fiona and Clive's relationship ended.

But Marcus didn't mind. Sometimes, he thought, he even

More happened, and that was a good thing.

But now Marcus was very worried about his mum. She had started crying a lot in London - much more than in Cambridge. He didn't know why she cried. He wondered if it was about boyfriends. Marcus didn't mind if his mum had a boyfriend. She was pretty, he thought, and nice, and funny sometimes. He wanted his mum to meet someone who would make her happy.

He couldn't help his mum with her problems, and she couldn't help him with his other big problem - school. His first day at his new London school had been a disaster.

Marcus knew that he was different from most other kids of his age. He wasn't right for schools. Not big secondary schools like the one in London. His school in Cambridge hadn't been so bad. The children there were younger, and there were lots of weird kids there, so Marcus hadn't felt uncomfortable.

It was OK not to be right for some things, he thought. He knew that he wasn't right for parties because he was very shy. That wasn't a problem because he didn't have to go to parties. But he had to go to school.

Marcus couldn't talk to his mum about his problems at school, because she couldn't help. She couldn't move him to another school. Even if she did move him, it wouldn't make any difference. He'd still be himself, and that, it seemed to Marcus, was his real problem. The other kids laughed at him because he was weird. They laughed because he had the wrong trousers, the wrong shoes and the wrong haircut.

Marcus knew that he was weird partly because his mum was weird. She was always telling him that clothes and hair weren't important. She didn't want him to watch 'rubbish' TV or listen to 'rubbish' music or play 'rubbish' computer games. All the other kids spent their time doing these things, but Marcus had to argue with his mother for hours and he usually lost. She could explain

Bob Marley and Joni Mitchell. And why it was more important to read books than to play on the Gameboy that his dad had given him.

He was quite happy at home, listening to Joni Mitchell or reading books, but it didn't do him any good at school. It made him different, and because he was different the other kids made him feel uncomfortable.

It wasn't all his mum's fault. Sometimes Marcus just did weird things. Like the singing. He

always sang songs to himself inside his head but sometimes, when he was nervous, the song just came out of his mouth. It had happened in his English lesson on the first day of his new school. The teacher was reading and all the other students in the room were quiet. Suddenly, for no reason at all, Marcus had started to sing, and all the other kids had laughed at him.