

A Man and a Boy

*Will could see only one reason for having children.
When you were old and poor, then they could look after you.*

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 with different half-hour activities – reading the paper, having a 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?

cool /ku:l/ (adj) an informal word for a person or thing that you like and admire

guy /gai/ (n) an informal word for a man

royalties /'rɔɪəltɪz/ (n pl) payments made to the writer of a book or a piece of music, connected to the sales of that work

be/get involved (with) /bi /,get ɪn'vɒlvd wɪð, wɪθ/ to be/become part of someone's life, or part of an activity or event

quiz /kwɪz/ (n) a competition in which you have to answer questions

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.

'What about you, Will?'

'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?'

godfather /'gɒd,fɑːðə/ (n) a man who promises, usually at a religious ceremony, to be responsible for a child's religious education