

ROBERT SHAW

## SOMETHING YOU ALWAYS WANTED

THE GIRL ACROSS THE STREET IS DARKER than her mother. She's darker than most of the people in the neighbourhood. She's Vietnamese, Cambodian. It's hard for him to tell. When he walks by them in the morning, while he is on his way to work and her mother walks her to school, they always wave.

That evening, he's on the porch with his partner, Eve. She talks about childbirth. She tells him that she's almost out of time and begins to add up dates and years. They are now forty-five in this conversation and their imaginary child is about to enter a high school.

"What school does he go to?" Eve asks.

He plays along. He answers an all-girls school. She looks away and stirs her drink with her baby finger. "He's always a he," he argues.

Eve tells him that she doesn't want a girl. They both stay silent.

Across the street there is a high-pitched screech and he sees the dark child run out the front door. She leaps off the porch and then stops before the curb. Eve lives on a busy street, but this June evening it is quiet and still.

"What's her problem?" Eve asks.

"I don't know," he answers.

"It's the problem with girls."

"What is she?"

Eve looks at her and then at him, "She's a war child."

He watches the mother walk to the sidewalk and touch her child's shoulder. The child brushes her away and forces her tiny body against a Norway maple on their front lawn. Then, the mother kneels down in front of her and wipes the tears from her face.

"She's adopted?" he asks Eve.

"Do you see a man in the house?"

"From where?" he asks. "Where is the war she was in?"

"I don't know."

Then Eve gives up on the baby fantasy with him. She has got back together with him for the second time this year. The first time she left was on a business trip to New York where she met someone, and the other time was when she reconnected with a man from college over the Internet. Eve insisted, as she continues to, that these were mistakes. She told him that to move forward one must close up the past. Eve has invited him to live in her house. She says that they are just testing the waters.

He stays awake that night while Eve sleeps. She wears a blindfold and earplugs. Sometimes she will scratch herself in her sleep and at one time he would gently pull her hand away, but now he lets her be. He rocks back and forth on a metal rocking chair that he purchased from work and reads one of her gossip magazines. He works for a company called Office Art. They supply businesses with paintings, furniture, faux-antiques, and tabletop gadgets. Eve has complained that the rocking chair looks too cold and sterile, that it belongs in a hospital maternity ward. She has protested against most of the work furniture that he has brought into her house. He watches her sleep and then pauses on a story about a broken marriage. In the distance, he hears the sound of a siren. At first it is far, but then it comes closer until it is almost outside the bedroom window. Eve sleeps through it.

Outside he sees other neighbours, firemen, paramedics and the dark child and her mother. The child swings and plays and then sits on the sidewalk in her pajamas. They, like most, are curious onlookers. But something about the child's aloofness makes him think that she's seen this before. That throughout her young life she has become accustomed to being woken up to the sounds of midnight sirens, men yelling orders, distress and worry in people's voices.

"It's carbon monoxide," the child's mother says to him. "That's all."

He stands next to her on the sidewalk.

"Did they get everyone out?" he asks.

"I think everything is fine."

He looks closely at her child. She is small and skinny. Fragile, he thinks. She gets up and holds her mother's arm. He walks them back to their porch. She introduces her daughter Anne to him and then herself as Joyce. He bends down and extends his hand to Anne, but she hides behind her mother

"You're staying with Eve?" Joyce asks.

"For now," he says.

Anne pulls on her mother's shirt.

"I should get her to bed," Joyce says. "Too much excitement."

"I should do the same," he says and smiles.

He doesn't go back to bed. Instead, he sits on Eve's porch and watches Joyce's house. Their porch light is on and then it's off and then the light upstairs turns on and off. He watches the fire trucks leave and the neighbours go back to their homes. He thinks about Anne and about children in other wars. He remembers late-night TV commercials with kids dressed in NFL jerseys carrying buckets of water from a well.

Eve tells him that in six months they should begin to try and have a child. She pours a coffee and then does stretches, while she balances a mug in her hand. She has spread out bank records and pay stubs on the breakfast table. She has underlined his monthly wage with a red marker and circled her wage with a green one. She makes more money than him.

"Bringing a child into this world can be costly," she explains.

He imagines that she will tell him to get out of the Office Art business and take a full-time job as a bartender at night and a handyman during the day. She doesn't say anything. He inserts a Genesis disc into the CD player, but doesn't press play.

"And what if it doesn't work?" he asks.

"Then it will be over," Eve answers.

"We could adopt."

"I want my own child."

"There are homeless children all over the world."

"I have beautiful eyes."

"They're hazel."

"This is difficult."

Eve picks up her workout bag and bicycle helmet. She works out more and more and is home less and less. He thinks that she just feels pressure from her pregnant friends.

"Press play?" he asks.

Eve walks past the stereo.

When he gets back from work that night Joyce and Anne are on Eve's front porch. Eve had sent him an e-mail earlier that day: *Off to John and Ruth's: be back in a couple of days*. John and Ruth live on a farm outside the city. He has brought home a gift to make up for the baby-talk fight. He's purchased wooden desktop African animals from work. There is a giraffe, a

tiger, and a baby elephant that is painted in an earth-tone green. He thinks these are things that Eve would place on a windowsill or scatter through the kitchen next to the salt and spices.

Joyce holds a nighttime bag and asks if Eve and him can watch Anne for a few hours. He invites them both in.

“Is Eve home?” Joyce asks.

“She’s away,” he answers.

Anne sits on the couch and plays with the wooden animals. Joyce tells him that she’ll be back soon and that their babysitter had to study for an exam. She offers to pay him. He joins Anne on the couch. She is wearing the same pink pajamas with raccoons on them from the night of the fire trucks. He presses his finger on one of the raccoons. She flinches. Then he tries to join in her game, but she shakes her head *no*.

In awhile, Joyce has come back. He carries Anne across the street for her. They stand in the hallway. She has pictures of Anne on the walls. Portraits of her at different ages: smiles, frowns, in a plastic pool, on the teacup ride at an amusement park.

“Motherhood is fun. I never really liked other people’s children,” Joyce says to him.

“We’re thinking of trying it out,” he says.

Joyce smiles. .

“Did she tell you that she plays the violin?”

He figures the recent temper tantrum was a result of violin lessons.

“Music can be frustrating,” he says.

“It’s the universal language.”

She takes Anne out of his arms and carries her upstairs.

On the fridge, in the kitchen, there are more pictures of Anne, her mother, and her birth mother. Joyce tells him that Anne is from Thailand and that she still communicates with her real mother and later this summer they will visit her.

“Why is Anne called a war child?” he asks.

Joyce tells him that she’s never heard her called that before. He sits uncomfortably.

“There’s no war where she’s from,” she says.

She tells him that there was a flood, but that Anne’s mother had too many children to feed and that Anne has a scar on her stomach from being malnourished.

“Is it hard to raise her alone?” he asks.

“It can be complicated,” she answers.

He places the wooden animals on her kitchen table. Joyce hands him a glass of wine.

Later that week there is a message from Eve. She is still at John and Ruth’s farm and will not come back. She thinks he should find somewhere else to live for now. “This is too difficult,” she says over the answering machine. He can hear someone in the background and the sound of plates being moved. He listens to it one more time and then unplugs the machine from the phone.

That night he mixes a drink and decides to listen to his Genesis disc. He sits on his Office Art rocking chair and smokes a rum-tipped cigar that he bought at the convenience store. He turns up the volume, but doesn’t press play. Then, he calls his sister in Victoria.

“It’s me,” he says.

“Is everything okay?”

“We’re going to try and have a child,” he says. “You’ll be an Aunt.”

His sister tells him she’s excited.

“Are things good with Eve?” she asks.

“Things are getting better.”

He rests the phone on his shoulder.

“It’s something you’ve always wanted,” she says.

“It is, I think.”

He hangs up the phone and mixes one more drink.

“We’re about to go to sleep,” Joyce tells him.

They are standing on her porch. He asks if he can come in for a bit.

She leads him up a narrow staircase to Anne’s room at the end of the hall. He stands by the door and watches her gently tuck Anne into bed. Joyce is meticulous and gentle with her daughter. They speak in a sleepy-time language. Anne talks about clouds and blueberries and then her mother recites a rhyme that has the words *merry* and *fairy*. They both look over at him.

“Anne says she likes you,” she says.

He holds Joyce in the hallway and she holds him back. They don’t let go for a long time. Then he moves his mouth to hers, but she stops him. In the living room, she brings him a glass of mineral water. “It will help your hangover,” she says. “You’ll thank me in the morning.”

He sits on the couch and sips the water. Joyce sits across from him and tells him that a war child is a new term; that the real war children were the offspring of Nazi soldiers during the Second World War.

“Not always Nazis,” she adds. “I guess a war child could have gone both ways.”

Now she assumes the phrase is an office-tower expression for children in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Northern Africa.

“What happened to Eve?” she asks.

“She’s still away,” he answers. “I’m moving out.”

Joyce tells him that soldiers would sleep with enemy women and then leave them.

“It must have been strange,” she says. “Growing up like that.”

“Was it name calling?” he asks.

“Maybe,” she says.

“Was it rape?” he asks.

They sit together for a little while longer. She invites him to Anne’s violin recital at the end of the week. Then there is a noise upstairs and she leaves the room. He picks up Anne’s violin and holds it in his hands. He can see Eve’s house from the window. He wonders if Joyce ever sees them fight, undress each other, drink too much. The violin feels light and smooth, well cared for. He looks at a sheet of music and reads: *Heiliger Dankgesang*.

“She gets scared,” Joyce says.

“About what?”

“Things that a ten-year-old would get scared of.”

Then he moves closer to her again and she doesn’t move away.

“Can I stay here tonight?” he asks.

“Not just yet,” she says.

The recital is in Anne’s school. The three of them walk together. It is a late June evening and humid. He has spent the last few days packing his furniture, books, clothes, but has left other things behind. He will move to a sublet for the rest of the summer. He’ll have roommates that are much younger than him and he will be living on the other side of the city. After, he’s unsure where he’ll go. Anne holds her mother’s hand. He carries her violin. With Anne’s free hand she waves to other neighbours: old ones, young ones.

“She waves to everybody,” he says.

“She loves people.”

“I don’t feel that special,” he says.

“She loves you too.”

Then he asks Joyce if he can come to Thailand with them. She says she’ll think about it. She tells him that the trip won’t be easy. She tells him

that Anne was only two when she left and that she can't speak the language. Joyce worries that her brothers and sisters and even her mother will all be strangers.

"She's been here for too long. Time has a way of changing people," Joyce says. "We all eventually forget where we came from."

Everything in the school is small, smaller than he can remember. They pass by tiny classrooms, miniature water fountains.

"They will be playing a Beethoven movement," she says to him. "Isn't that great?"

"How can children do that?" he asks.

"They must have ambitious teachers," she says.

They stand in line before being shuffled into the gymnasium. He sees Anne look at them. They move single file to the middle of the audience. He watches Anne hold her violin to her chin. He looks at the creamy brick walls in the gymnasium and the basketball net that hangs over the string ensemble. Then he feels Joyce grab his leg. She looks nervous. The room is full of other children's parents. There is the sound of cameras clicking, the coolness of a fan at the front spinning and spinning. Then the room goes dark and the music begins.