

IAN COLFORD

## Living with Prue

THE DIVORCE NEARLY finished me and then barely a month later I get this phone call.

"Jack?"

"Who's this?"

"It's your wife. Who do you think it is?"

"Nobody."

"That's a good start Jack. That's really good."

"Glad you like it. I'm eating supper."

"You want me to call back? Is that it? This isn't a convenient time?"

In fact I'm watching movements through the front window. It's October. Just coming up to dusk, and those two cats are squaring off again, this time in the driveway. The black and white one, Prue, crouches and raises her tail. The orange one slowly circles, ears flat to its head.

"What can I do for you, Eliza?"

"I want you to take Jamie for the weekend. I'm going up to the cabin with Ted. We're doing some work there so I won't be able to watch him. It's not a good place for a kid anyway. It's kind of rugged."

My place is kind of rugged too. But she doesn't know that.

"What if I have plans?"

"Since when did you have plans?"

I think this over while the cats begin their dance, sparring, teeth bared. The window is open a crack and I can hear a thin high whine, Prue's threatening hiss.

"True."

"So when will you come and get him?"

"What's today?"

Silence.

"You're serious? Today's Thursday, Jack. Get a calendar."

Wisely, the orange cat backs off and, low to the ground, bolts across the street. Prue relaxes, lifts one paw and licks it.

"I *had* a calendar. I *had* all kinds of things."

"Grow up."

She's right of course.

"How about tomorrow noon?"

"Fine."

There's a pause. I hear her draw on a cigarette and expel the breath.

"How are you these days?"

"Great. Just great. I'm working out. And Bert's coming by tonight. We're going to watch bowling on TV. I got some beer."

"Typical. You never learn, do you."

"I'm kidding, Eliza. I'm actually going out tonight."

"That's good to hear. With who?"

"I don't know. I only just decided this minute I was going out."

"Well, whatever you do, have fun. Okay? I'll see you tomorrow."

She's a whole lot friendlier than I thought she'd be, considering. Though since she wants something I guess she doesn't have much choice. She probably called a dozen people to take the kid off her hands. Everyone else said no. That's telling me something.

I hang up and go to the window. Prue's nowhere in sight. Probably rolling in the dirt somewhere under a bush. Savouring the victory. Later she'll come home with twigs and moss caught in her fur and leave a trail of it all through the place. Not that I care. She never tells me off, so I don't mind cleaning up her mess.

Eliza and I only spent a couple of years together. Basically she told me to get lost, changed the locks, got an unlisted phone number. It was my fault. I gambled. I drank. But that was because of Bert. He was my best friend and he gambled and drank too. Still

does, for all I know. We got into trouble—big trouble. I lost my job; it was a mess.

But I'm clean now. Haven't seen Bert for months. I got my own place, got my own cat. These days it's the cat that makes life worth living. She came when I was holed up in that dump in the north end after Eliza kicked me out, scratched at the window so I let her in. That was just after the big blow-up at work. I had to get a lawyer from legal aid, some kid who didn't know shit. Prue came to the window in the middle of the night, looking like someone had tossed her out of a moving car. This was winter. Her hair was matted and full of snow and ice. All I had in the place to eat were cheesies. I put some in a dish and she crunched them up. Started purring. I tell you, up till then I'd been hoping they'd throw me in jail for the money I took and never let me out. And that Seymour bastard friend of Bert's was still coming around trying to get his two grand out of me. I was thinking maybe I'd skip town or go out somewhere and let myself get run over by a truck, or jump off the bridge. Things were that bad. But when I saw the cat eating those cheesies it was like this light came on. I had nothing but I could still help someone. Sounds stupid, but I knew then that it wasn't over for me yet.

Jamie's an obnoxious brat but I always thought we got along okay. Not my son or anything. Eliza's got this list of exes a mile long. Some guy named Marty gave her Jamie. He's ten and he's got an attitude and his hair's too long. Needs a kick in the butt every now and then to set him straight. But we did things together, tossed a baseball around, played ball hockey. He'd watch the games with me on TV. I know it's tough on a kid with both parents working, never anyone home. Jamie's not as bad as some, that's for sure. I was all set to fill out those adoption papers, be his father for real. But then I got in with Bert and everything went sour. By the time Eliza caught on I'd spent almost every cent in both accounts, chequing *and* savings. Damn, it didn't take long once I got going.

I never went to jail after all. I got to do what's called restitution, give those bums back the money I took. I wanted to plead not guilty, say it was the booze and Bert and some personality defect (like maybe I was a retard, or I got kicked in the head when

I was real small) that got me to do those things, taking the money and stuff. But the lawyer wouldn't go for it. He made me admit everything. There's evidence, he said. It's all there. They got you. Make it easy on yourself and tell them the whole story. So I go up there and the judge, looking kind of groggy *I* thought, says to me that he'll hear what I have to say. And out it comes. All about how I cleaned out Eliza's two bank accounts and took money at work with Bert's help and then gambled it away. I even told him about that night Bert and me, we rolled this old guy in the alley back of Grover's Pub for about two hundred dollars. The judge puffed himself up, but I made sure he could see I was sorry. I'm no criminal, I says. Just stupid. He shakes his head and says it's a sad thing, and then the lawyer has to get his two cents in, saying I won't be doing anyone any good in jail. I could get another job easy and pay everyone back. And the judge agrees. Just like that I'm out on the street. Instant parole.

So I'm working now cleaning toilets at the YMCA, pulling in extra mopping up at one of the malls, and half what I make goes to Arnold Devis and his fat wife Meg who run the Golf-Pro shop. I took them for thousands. More than what I have to pay back, that's for sure. I guess they got what they deserve, letting a yoyo like me handle their money for them.

I'm sure Eliza will let me have the car. We didn't talk about it, but since she's going out of town with this "Ted" guy I can't see how there'd be any problem. I get off the bus at noon sharp and head over to Brunswick Street number 1200. It's a real nice building and I still can't believe I actually lived here once.

I haven't laid eyes on Jamie since all that shit went down and I'm a bit surprised to see he's got this thing like a dangly fish hanging from his ear. His hair is too short on one side and too long on the other. Looks dumb if you ask me, but nobody ever does, so I don't say anything.

"Hi," he says without even looking at me and then slumps off to his room. Baggy pants and big sneakers.

"He's a bit depressed," is all Eliza will tell me, like I can't see that for myself. She's got that tight look on her face, like everything's a problem. I know I have to watch myself.

The place is a mess and she's running around straightening and putting things away, emptying ashtrays into her hand. She's got on spandex and high heels. I wonder what kind of "work" she plans to do with Ted up at the cabin wearing those.

"Ted's going to be here in a few minutes. Do you want some juice or something? There's stuff in the fridge if you're hungry."

"I thought I'd take Jamie out for a hamburger."

"Jamie? He's vegetarian."

"Since when?"

"Since like last year or something. I don't know, Jack."

"He looks sick."

"Are you saying I'm not a good mother? Is that what you're saying?"

She's staring at me like I just pulled a gun.

"Jesus."

"Don't push me. Okay? I'm giving you a chance but that's all it is. You've got no right to question what I do."

We circle around each other. I avoid her eyes.

In a few minutes the buzzer goes. It's this Ted guy telling her to get a move on.

"You got a phone number out at that cabin or whatever it is? In case anything happens, not that it will."

"Everything you need to know is on the notepad in the kitchen."

She gets sentimental for a minute before taking off.

"Jack, he likes you. Try talking to him. He's getting to that age. He won't talk to his mother. He says I embarrass him."

Then she goes. No kiss for me. She doesn't even go into Jamie's room to say goodbye.

In the kitchen there's an apartment key and a building key. Half a page of instructions. No car key. This pisses me off.

I knock on Jamie's door.

"C'mon kiddo. Time to move. We got two days to kill."

He's lying on the bed with headphones on, mouthing words, tapping his fingers on the spread. He won't look at me.

"C'mon Jamie. We don't have all day."

I give the bed a jiggle with my foot.

“Earth to Jamie——”

He yanks the headphones off.

“You’re a loser. I don’t have to do what you say.”

“Who says I’m a loser?”

“Mom.”

That’s a big help. Thanks Eliza.

“Don’t believe everything you hear, kid. Where are the car keys? I got the urge to splurge. You with me or what?”

He looks at me.

“You stole our money.”

This again.

“Yeah, well ....”

“Mom says you should be in jail.”

“So she got me to come over to stay with you instead, huh? Same thing if you ask me.”

I should have known better. He puts the headphones on again.

“What’s this I hear about you being a vegetarian?”

Then the headphones are on the floor and he’s up off the bed.

“I’m going out.”

“Yeah, let’s go get something to eat. I’m starved.”

He’s rummaging in the closet. Pulls out a jacket, a cap, a basketball.

“Just leave me alone. I can take care of myself.”

“I promised your mother I’d stay with you and that’s what I’m going to do. Where did she hide the car keys?”

“We don’t have a car. Mom sold it.”

“Shit. Why’d she do that?” But I already know.

“Because we didn’t have any money.”

He pushes by me, out of the room.

“Loser.”

“Jamie, I can make it up to you.”

I promised myself way back that I wouldn’t plead with anyone. I’d apologize and I’d pay everyone what I owed them and I’d try to set things right. But I wouldn’t plead.

“I can make it up to you if you just give me a chance. That’s all I’m asking.”

He's at the front door staring at me like I just crawled out from under the radiator. I hate the look in his eyes, anger and raw contempt. I've seen enough of that to last the rest of my life. I know where it comes from too. Kids don't pick up stuff like that on their own. We got along well before, but I'm wishing he'd go now. I don't have the energy to keep elbowing my way back into people's lives. I had a good thing going here with Eliza and Jamie and I blew it. Over is over. I never should have come here today.

I must've been daydreaming 'cause I hear the door slam without actually seeing him leave. Through the wall I hear the thump of the basketball in the corridor. It fades as he heads down the hall. Then it's gone.

All I can think now is this must be Eliza's revenge. She knew I'd screw up and then she'd have another excuse to hate me. As if she didn't have enough already.

I know I have to get out of here, but I can't help taking a look around first, in her room, Jamie's room. Every picture of us together is gone. I can only imagine where. Eventually I find the baseball bat I gave Jamie for his last birthday in the closet, and it feels right in my hands. It fits. And before I know it I'm taking swings. Things go flying: shelves full of glass ornaments, a bookcase, lamps, dishes, a radio, and then the big things, the TV, the microwave. Everything makes a noise all its own. Broken plastic rattles in the air. The TV explodes with a smashed-glass sucking sound.

I could spend hours watching Prue. She's a proud animal. She doesn't need me, or anyone for that matter. Sure I feed her. But if I had to leave, she'd be able to take care of herself. Not like some people.

I don't know where Jamie went. I didn't even go looking for him. Living with Eliza, he probably *has* learned to take care of himself. I'd say he's better off on his own this weekend without either of us around to mess him up.

Prue rubs around my legs, looking for her supper. She doesn't know what I did today. Doesn't care either. But it goes both ways. I don't know how many bags of trash she ripped open or whose garden she pissed in.

There's a full moon out there and I guess that's what did it. Couldn't hold myself in one more minute. Went berserk. That's what I'll tell the judge. Just lucky there weren't any heads in the way of that bat, your honour sir.

Street noises. I keep the window open a crack and I hear everything. People swearing. A siren raising hell in the distance. Cats fighting, or mating. Sometimes it's hard to tell which.

It's as good as watching TV on a Saturday night.