

Hold Until Dawn

Carole Fives

Translated by Alison Anderson

Excerpt: Chapters 5-7

She went to see the Early Childhood Services at the city hall, but was told there were no spots available at any of the daycare centers. They could meet scarcely ten percent of the demand in this city, given the exponential rise in the number of births—you'd think everyone in Paris had come here to cocoon in the sun, said the municipal employee, none too subtly. Other, more provident women, reserved their spot months before the birth of their child—right from its conception!

But she had shown up out of the blue and, above all, she wasn't salaried.

She didn't give in, and pointed out that she'd submitted her first request over a year earlier. She was on her own, had no family here, no one to help her to look after her child. How could she go on working under these conditions?

Oh but when you were resourceful, a child didn't cost all that much! All you had to do was make your own meals, and avoid processed food, which was too greasy and too expensive. And besides, now she had all the time in the world to go to the market, find fresh produce, visit garage sales and goodwill stores. You could find clothing for next to nothing if you took the time to poke around—little down

jackets, adorable overalls and even boots, why, only this weekend the employee had found a pair of fur-lined shoes for her youngest, just five euros.

She had nodded, yes, of course, she didn't doubt the importance of fresh produce and going to the market, or the common sense of garage sales, but she had a profession, after all, and a resume, and she couldn't go on vegetating in this situation...

You did put down that you were not salaried? said the employee again.

She was self-employed. And needed urgently to follow up with existing clients, and scout for new ones... She could no longer keep up, at this pace, she had to have a spot at the daycare, even just one or two days a week, did the employee not understand that she had no safety net? She repeated it several times, at first quite distinctly, then in a fainter tone of voice, "no safety net."

She sat up straight. Didn't they need a graphic designer at the town hall? She had references, her former employers could vouch for her.

Calm down! No reason to get worked up. A lot of women were in her situation, the employee saw little else all day long, single mothers who were every bit as whiny, tired, and tiresome. There was nothing original about her request, nothing urgent, time to go home now with her little boy,

enjoy being with him, above all, these years go by so quickly!

They handed her brochures about the family allowance fund, they assured her she had her rights, there were benefits, maybe she could qualify for the minimum welfare payment, that would already be something. And why was she paying such an insane amount of rent? Sixty square meters? She had to leave that apartment as soon as possible for one that was better suited, a one-bedroom, she could buy a sofa-bed, she didn't need two bedrooms. She could put in a request for public housing, time to adapt to her new life as a mother. They gave her lists, leaflets with the names of associations, places where she could meet other parents who were in her situation.

Every time she went to put in a new request, she had to justify her position, provide the details of her situation. Women sitting at a desk, or by a telephone, questioning, invading their privacy. She played along, answered, tried to create some sense out of the chaos. When at last they had thoroughly parsed the problem, and analyzed her life, they gave her other numbers to call, other addresses to visit, on the other side of town, by bus, by tram, dragging the little one with her, where she'd start all over with the same interrogations, the same refrain.

The little boy would sit and watch these scenes, feeling the tension rise, sensing tears were about to flow, depending on the next question, courage ebbing away; he observed the outpouring of revelations. She was ashamed, ashamed on his behalf, ashamed for both of them, to see their family album thrown to the wolves like this, and everyone seemed to want a scrap of it, a polaroid.

In the search engine she types: LEAVE BABY ALONE + GO OUT. Clicks on a thread started by Titouette.

Titouette

I'm a top level sportswoman (I competed for 10 years) but since the birth of Baby #2 I haven't been able to do a thing. Even running, or just going to the gym, I can't find time. As a result, I've put on 20 pounds. ☹ I'm on 100% parental leave, at home with both kids. I could go running in the evening when my guy comes home from work, but honestly by 8 o'clock I don't have the strength to go back out! My little girl still takes long naps in the afternoon and her brother is in daycare. So, I was wondering whether I could maybe go out running during her nap, 15 or 20 minutes at the most. She's only 5 months old, sleeps like a log, at least 1 ½ to 2 hours, no risk she'll wake up. Has anyone ever done this? To run errands or anything like that?

HelloKitty

Are you out of your mind Titouette. And while you're at it why don't you go to the restaurant in the evening while she's asleep? Or to a nightclub, or the cinema?

Yeah, really, how could anything possibly happen to little Maddie McCann, sleeping quietly in her vacation home, while her parents were out having supper at a restaurant?

Name withheld

Your daughter could suffocate on her own vomit, wake up, cry so hard she'd get convulsions. Or there could be a fire, a thief, a pedophile... There was that little boy in Belgium, 4 or 5 years old. His parents were having an argument in the middle of the night, they went out to quarrel further away, and when they came back, the kid had disappeared. They found him a few days later, drowned in a nearby stream...

Anastasia

I couldn't agree more, HelloKitty...

Even just to go down to the garbage room or to get the mail I take my little girl in her stroller, you can never be too careful... Already, even when you're at home, loads of things can happen, so...

Pitchoune22

The worst thing of all is that women like this are allowed to be mothers.

I knew a woman like that, when she went clubbing she would lock her kids in their bedroom, bingo. And yet she was a nurse, so not a complete idiot.

HelloKitty

It's not because you're a nurse that you're any smarter than anyone else, there's the proof if ever you needed it!

What shocked me the most in Titouette's message is the "go running"—to enjoy herself, in other words!

I don't have a child yet but my heart races just at the thought of leaving a child alone in its little bed while I go off running or to the gym. I cannot understand these new mothers! No sooner their babies are born than they want to have their freedom back, time for themselves, they wonder when their babies will sleep through the night and stop crying... They must have been told a pack of lies about motherhood, I can't believe it, it's just not possible otherwise, what did they expect?

It wasn't an apartment, it was a hideout. She'd been lying low there for two years already. Two years with her days devoted to the boy, to the boy's body, to his well-being. Two years in isolation. They only went out to get some air, to the Parc de la Tête-d'Or, which was like an extension of the apartment. Or to the Monoprix. Very occasionally to the Café du Parc, with its terrace on a corner between two boulevards, with heavy traffic at rush hour. Café, park, supermarket, the sum total of their ventures out into the world. She would drink an espresso, and the little boy had an apple juice or a grenadine syrup, and time went by like that, with her sipping her drink, or sitting patiently on a bench in a square until he had climbed enough ladders, slid down enough slides, swung on enough swings.

At the traffic light, while they waited for the little man to turn green, it's okay, we can cross now, the boy would latch onto a stranger's trouser legs. "Daddy, Daddy!" he went, tugging on the man's trouser leg, his coat, anything that reminded him of his father. The man would pretend not to understand and continue on his way. She leaned down to

the boy, That's not your daddy, that's another man! And the boy fell silent.

In the morning they were the first ones at the market. At a time when most people were still asleep they were out trotting around among the vendors, admiring them as they raised their awnings, set up their stalls, exchanged good-natured invectives, slapped their hands together in greeting, lit cigarettes that immediately went out. Eight o'clock seemed a reasonable enough time to intrude on their little world, two pounds of carrots, please, without the tops, thank you. Apples, too, eggs, how much is your jam? They opened their cashbox for her, got the machine running, handed out their first change, the day could begin.

How could she have thought the park would be anything besides a place for edging closer to oblivion?

An endless parade of ducks, after the central walkway lined with flower beds, they'd forgotten the dried bread, they quickly hunted for cookie crumbs, or remains of a pain au chocolat at the bottom of their bags. Then the fish ponds, or the bear going round and round in his pen, his frantic half-crazed gaze. These outings were a change from their never-ending tête-à-tête, a change from the confinement of the apartment. They walked and walked, there were still the

merry-go-rounds, the petrified crocodiles, the parade of pink flamingos, the inaccessible giraffes. And then the duck fishing game, the coveted toys you could win for a fortune, which got broken almost instantly—knights' swords that bent in two, Mickey Mouse-shaped balloons that deflated, toy revolvers that fell to pieces and vanished into the park's litter baskets. Sometimes they would go all the way to the ponies, take a ticket, wait their turn; the ride would last a few minutes, and during those few minutes someone else was in charge of the boy. She would sit on a tree trunk and get out her smartphone and check her messages, to discover that the world had absolutely no need of her to go on turning.

But here came the little boy already, smiling on his pony, she took his picture, for him, for later, making memories for him, a Thursday in the park with Mommy, a testimony, a proof, it had existed.

When he began to seem tired she would think about heading home, but she hadn't planned ahead, he was already screaming with hunger, or fatigue, or else he didn't want to go home, and then he would run away, she had to hurry after him with the stroller, hoping he wouldn't trip, wouldn't disappear, wouldn't fall into the duck pond, wouldn't get knocked over by a bicycle, or a scooter, or be bitten by some huge dog, or kidnapped by a maniac...

When at last she caught up with him, she took hold of him, firmly, he fought her off, she knelt down, explained that they would come back another day, that now it was time to go home for supper and he could play with his toys at home, didn't he want to eat some noodles in tomato sauce or a nice hamburger? This only intensified his tantrum, he would stamp his foot, scream some more, none of her promises came anywhere close to the immediate pleasure of running through this cluster of trees, or jumping over that bush, or picking up new twigs, new feathers, different pebbles... She had become the enemy, the spoilsport, and he was not the least bit shy about letting her know, taking it out on her, kicking, pushing, screaming. People around them pretended not to notice, it was a scene in the park like so many others, children didn't want to leave their games or their animals, they would wield power over their parents for as long as they could. It had been a mistake not to go home sooner, not to have anticipated, she felt useless, helpless, was angry with the child, angry with herself. Her patience had run out, she dug her nails into his little arms, not very hard, no, just enough for him to sense her determination, for him to submit to the yoke, to concede defeat. A wasted effort, his screams and tears and kicks grew all the more intense, and there they were, fighting, the two of them, mother and son, until she managed with an

ultimate burst of strength to get him into the stroller, to put his arms through the straps, to join the two metal parts of the belt and slip them at last into the safety harness until she heard the salutary click. No matter how the boy struggled and raged, it was all over now, the machine was on its way. She gripped the vehicle's rubbery handles and charged ahead, full tilt, her face drained of color, her features drawn. Until the boy, drunk with speed and the succession of landscapes they were now seeing in reverse—merry-go-rounds, giraffes, crocodiles, bears, ducks, central walkway—finally calmed down. Sometimes he would fall asleep and then she would swear, why couldn't he wait until they were home to doze off, it would give her a few hours to work, a little extra time rescued from her sleep. And now he would be out of sync, he wouldn't sleep in the afternoon, and she'd be in for a whole day without a break, with a tired, tiresome child, and no end in sight.

These excursions left them distraught, undone, the pleasure of the outing itself had been spoiled, just a few more streets to go now, then the big lobby of the residence with its mosaics on the floor, propel herself and the stroller into the elevator and up to the top floor, their four walls, their daily little circle of hell.