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Cast Away

DIM, FUZZY IMAGES FORM MOST of my early childhood memories. But one is clear and sharp.

Fear burned it permanently on my three-year-old brain.

Mother and I are standing in front of a large building. Piles of snow line the sidewalk.

“C’mon, Robby,” Mother says as she drags me up the steps to the front door. “They’re waiting for us.”

Soon we’re staying in a strange bedroom. I don’t know why. Eerie sounds and shadows keep me whimpering when I wake during the night. Mother shushes me.

A loud bell rings and wakes us up. The sun is shining and the scary shadows have disappeared. Unfamiliar sounds from last night change to running feet and laughter.

We eat breakfast in a big room with lots of kids, but they don’t seem to see us. When we finish, Mother takes me upstairs. A nameless lady in a long, dark dress meets us.

“Why don’t you go over there and play?” she says, pointing to a corner where a boy stacks building blocks.

I don’t move.

“Do what she says, Robby!” Mother orders.

Clinging to Mother’s leg, I hesitate. She brushes my hand away, grabs my arm, and drags me to the play area. She plops me on the floor, facing the boy with my back to her.

I reach for a block, but the kid grabs it. When he begins to scoop the other toys away from me, I turn to complain.

Only the strange lady is standing there.

Mother is gone.

“Mommy had to go to the hospital, Robby,” the woman tells me. “She took the train back to Chicago. She’ll come to see you again when she gets better.”

Her mouth keeps moving, but I don’t hear the words. When it finally sinks in that Mother has left me, I begin to whimper.

“Stop that, Robby,” the woman commands. “Play with the toys.”

“I want Mommy!” I scream. “I want Daddy. I want Grandma Gigi. I wanna go home!” The screams turn to loud sobs as I run toward the door. I try to open it, but can’t turn the handle.

“Stop that crying, Robby, or I’m going to spank you!” the woman warns.

“I wanna go home! I wanna go home!” I cry, throwing myself on the floor and kicking my feet.

The tantrum pushes her to the end of her patience. Yanking me off the floor, she spansks me again and again. Finally I clamp my teeth together to keep the cries inside.

She stops, but I can’t quit sniffing.

That night, the other kids ignore me.

When morning comes, I wake up in a wet bed. The woman scolds me.

After breakfast she puts a brown rubber cover over the mattress and a brown rubber sheet on top. She makes me lie between them all morning.

The rubber sheets are hot. They squeak when I move.

“Pee-pee baby,” some of the boys chant. “New kid is a pee-pee baby.” I’m ashamed, but too afraid to say anything.

The squeak of brown rubber sheets has tagged me as being bad, different.

Different from the other boys at the place where Mother has abandoned me.



In the weeks and months that followed, I heard nothing from Mother. But I did hear from Grandma Gigi.

I don’t know how or when she found out where I was. But once she did, she took the train from Chicago every Saturday to visit me in the little farming town of Princeton, Illinois.

Gigi was in her 60s, divorced, and poor. Living alone in a tiny apartment, she worked as a clerk at the big Marshall Field’s department store downtown. My mother, Joyce Mitchell, was her only child; I was Gigi’s only grandchild.

Visiting me wasn’t easy for Gigi. It meant leaving her apartment on the north side of the city early in the morning, walking four blocks on Ridge Boulevard to Howard Street, and catching a bus to the Howard station—then taking the Red Line elevated train to Belmont, changing to the Purple Line to Adams and Quincy, and

walking several long blocks to Union Station. There she caught the train known as the California Zephyr and rode for two hours to Princeton. Arriving about 10 A.M., she'd face five more blocks to the Covenant Children's Home.

When she finally saw me, Gigi would kneel and wait for me to run to her. Somehow she stayed on her feet as I threw myself into her arms. Hugging me close, she smelled good. She always looked like a lady—a modest but flattering dress covering her medium build, along with earrings, a necklace, nylon stockings, heels, and a hat with short, dark curls peeking out from under the brim.

“What new things have you learned since last I was here?” she'd always ask. I'd tell her all I could think of, then proudly tug her to the playground to show her my latest trick.

I was proud, too, when she said “Hi” to some of the other boys and called them by name. Kids like us felt special when someone remembered who we were.

Toward noon Gigi and I would walk to a small restaurant nearby. She ordered coffee, but rarely ate a meal. She let me look at the menu, then said, “How about a hamburger and a nice glass of milk? We'll have ice cream for dessert.” That always sounded good to me.

But 2:00 P.M. would come much too soon. Gigi had to say good-bye and leave to catch the 3:00 train back to the city.

“Gigi, take me with you,” I would beg. “Please, Gigi, please take me with you!”

That's when she would kneel again, tears in her eyes, saying the same thing she always said. “Robby, darling, you're my precious grandson. I'm sorry I can't keep you with me. I'm sorry your parents are too sick to keep you. Keep my love in your heart. It will always be there.”

I didn't understand what she meant. All I knew was that love seemed to fill me up each Saturday when she was with me. When she left, I felt empty and alone.

Time after time, standing outside the front door of the Children's Home, I watched her walk away. Arms crossed and hands tucked into armpits, I rocked slightly left to right.

Why won't you take me home with you? I cried silently. *I'll be a good boy, Gigi. I promise. I won't eat much! Please, please don't leave me here.*

Finally she would disappear from my tear-blurred sight.

And the only one left to hug me was . . . me.

“Wow. The moment I read the first page, I was crying. I couldn’t put the book down. I have a little boy who just turned four, and can’t imagine ever leaving him for longer than I have to. All I wanted to do was grab my little boy out of his bed and hold him. I am deeply humbled by this story. I hope it will change the lives of millions of people. It has mine.”

—BRIAN LITTRELL

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“*Castaway Kid* is an awesome story of the power of Jesus to redeem every facet of our lives. This is a great book that reminds me personally of God’s love. I cried real tears reading this; it is a must read.”

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“Before you sit down to read *Castaway Kid* by Rob Mitchell, I would suggest that you obtain a box of tissues. This compelling story grabs from the first page and helps you to understand what real loneliness and rejection feel like. More importantly, it puts into perspective the most important things in life, such as a relationship with God. This is a splendid example of how the hand of God can heal all wounds and boost us toward the goal of realizing our innate potential. When you finish this book, you will be ready to put down the tissue and pick up your conqueror’s helmet.”

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—DOTTY HOOTS

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Castaway Kid

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