

Babies Have Blond Hair in England

John's soft blond looks might get him bugged in prison. Drunk driving had caught him in the net. One month down, four more to come. Seems excessive for the incident. The cow damaged his car but nobody died.

Then there's Olivia. She packs up their son, Tommy, and all the stuff they need for the day. The two grab a local bus from the village to the town, then take the train one and a half hour's north to Her Majesty's Prison, High Downs, in Surrey, to see John, Tommy's dad.

They meet in the open family area. He looks hardened after only four weeks inside. His curly golden hair, so much like Tommy's, is now shaved. There are pimples on his face adding to his overall dirty look. This must be killing him as he is so fastidious with his appearance. He didn't have muscles before and now he seems softer, less significant.

He looks at her in anger mixed with sadness. He needs to blame this situation on somebody. Olivia no longer wants to take it. But she's not done. She wishes she could be. Tommy sits quietly, rocking, watching his dad and waits for attention that never comes.

"I know drink driving is stupid, Livy," John repeats over and over. "But I wanted to get home to you. You're my life."

Olivia didn't quite see it that way. Who did he rush off to all the many other drunken nights? She's alone with all of this. It's better her parents don't know where he's been this last month and she hopes they never will. Her mum, June, thinks Olivia is a fool. "I told you Livy, he's no good. Does he do anything for you and Tommy?" Her father, Walter, disapproves as well. "What kind of man leaves his woman with his seed to raise on her own? What if your mum and I didn't help out? What then, he'd let you starve?" But they bring some nutritious food and it's a break in the day.

Being committed in a relationship isn't high on John's list. After all, it's not possible to hold mercury in your hand for long. He's the personification of that toxin. When the two spend time together, she feels he is hers and hers alone. John belabors the point that they are not serious, it's all just a lark. Olivia clings to him, never certain when they would be together again. Until he moved in, well sort of. John spent a few nights a week with her and the rest of the time he lived as the wind. Whenever she laments that she feels isolated from him the moment he walks out the door, he just smiles, tips his hat and leaves, exiting stage left. After she got pregnant with Tommy he promised they could be happy families, except nothing was different. She reminds herself, you can't change the wind.

Once Tommy came along she thought John would open up his life. His father, Stephen, lives across town. He doesn't introduce her and they don't drop by Stephen's pub for a pint together.

John says, "Look he's got four sons and four grandsons, He doesn't have time for you. I take Tommy to see my dad plenty. That's enough for both of them."

It's been over a month now and Tommy misses him. "Mommy, I want to see Granddaddy Stevie."

"I know my love, you will." Liv feels like marching into that pub and giving him an earful. Yet she doesn't want to take her grievances out on him.

Stephen loves his grandsons and he, too, misses Tommy. He's a sweet old gent, always with a hearty smile for the boy who reminds him of John.

The playground is mom's and son's daily salvation. Tommy makes friends easily. He's bright and open and shares his bucket, shovel, ball, and anything else they cart to the playground. There's a cute boy they've seen a couple of times. He's three or four, curly blond hair frames his face, and his natural affinity to Tommy is remarkable. Olivia hopes the kids become friends and has visions of play dates, and maybe the mums could babysit for each other sometimes.

She walks over to the woman sitting on the bench. "Hi," she says. "Your son is adorable. They play so nicely together don't they?"

The woman, a real beauty with sexy, wide-open hazel eyes, raven locks, and a curvy figure, looks up from her magazine and smiles. "I was thinking the same thing. I'm Wanda, and my son is Johnny."

Olivia and Wanda seem to have much in common. Johnny has an inch or two on Tommy, otherwise, they look pretty similar.

"My days off are Wednesday and Saturday," Wanda says. "Wouldn't it be grand if we could meet here with the kids?"

Olivia is thrilled. "We can have some adult conversation! That's brilliant, I'm in."

They meet on Wanda's days off. Olivia feels she can open up and she does. She begins to crave these moments.

"Tommy's dad drinks too much," Olivia says. "At first it was okay because John is so much fun when he's drinking." Finally, slowly, she says, "He's fun with everybody else that is. Somehow, I'm always the reason he gives for running down to the pub and getting sloshed."

Wanda laughs out loud at this. "I know it's not funny, but Johnny's dad is the exact same way. I always wait for him to turn ugly on me, but he usually passes out first."

Olivia is a bit uncomfortable with these conversations. She doesn't want to be disloyal and hides many details of her life. But she needs this friendship. She

recognizes a like spirit and wants to tell her that John is in prison because of the drink. Surely, Wanda has secrets too.

At the playground the women discover that both boys' third birthdays are the next week. They plan a picnic down by the river for the following Saturday. Olivia invites her mom and dad. Wanda's parents died five years ago in a drink-driving accident, so she asks if she could invite Johnny's paternal grandfather. Neither woman makes mention of their boys' dads or whether they'll show at all.

Saturday is a sunny day. The sky's a deep cornflower blue, and there's a light breeze at the tops of the trees down by the river. Wanda brings a home-baked chocolate cake and colorful streamers to tie from tree to tree. Olivia has a portable grill, some bangers, a few beers for the adults, and juice.

Olivia's parents arrive first. Tommy runs to them, tugging on the gifts in their arms, suffering the kisses his grandmum plants on him. He reaches up and grabs Grand-pop Walter dragging him over to Johnny. They all plop on the ground and start wrestling. A man on a bike rides up and toots his horn. Both Tommy and Johnny look up and in unison scream out, "Granddaddy! Granddaddy!"

They toddle to him, faces full of happiness to see their grandfather, and jump into his arms as he struggles to get free of the bike and the boxes. "Johnny! Hi fella." Granddaddy Stephen says. "Tommy! What a surprise! I didn't know I'd see you too! I had no idea you're all friends."

Olivia's mom registers this first. Her gasp is audible as she shoves her hand to her mouth. Wanda and Olivia watch the scene and the penny drops.

"That son of a bitch," whispers Olivia.

"I'll kill him," mumbles Wanda as she packs up her things readying to leave.

The look that passes between the two women is shock, pain, and betrayal. But whose? They each at once hate yet care for the other. Damn that run-around, two-timing, cheat.

Olivia composes herself first. She walks over to Wanda who's yanking at the streamers causing them to tear like winner's tape. She touches Wanda's arm gently. She thinks she will choose the friendship of this woman over the disrespect and disregard her man has shown her time and again.

Wanda turns and faces her, defiance and strength in her stance. "He lived with us before he went to prison," Wanda snarls. Her breath, mixed with spittle, forcefully escapes her lips. "I guess you're the other tart then." She squares her body like she's ready to fight, yet gently places her hand on her stomach. "And so you know, I'm four months pregnant with John's baby, again."

Olivia sinks to the ground, clutching herself around the waist, unsteady, and says simply, "Me too."