

Geppetto's Boy

Yes, the boy lived with me, but I don't know where he went off to. He says I'm his mother but I've told you before he's not mine. Women tend to remember the small things in life, like who they gave birth to. I told the boy that. Square to his face. The first few words I ever say when he first come to my door. And he smiled to be nice but he gave me that look like he knew better than me. It started me thinking that he might be up to some mischief. I've got a good eye for coming mischief. That's one of the main reasons I got myself rid of Geppetto long before.

And I don't know why Geppetto sent the boy to me. I figure whatever tramp he knocked up couldn't care for the boy and sent him to Geppetto and then Geppetto up and dies, or maybe he went on some other one of his trips or something, and tells the boy to go live with me. You want a better answer go ask Geppetto. Every time I asked the boy why he's even here he just looks at me and smiles all nice and says, "because you're my mother," like it's the stupidest question I could ask. I deny it every time he calls me mother. "I'm not your mum," I say. "Oh yes you are. Father said so," he says. "Who's your father?" I say and he says "Geppetto the carpenter." Well then I say, "Your father don't know his own brains from a hill of beans" and he says, "father taught me and I learned for myself never to tell lies. You'd know if I'm lying. I'm a real, honest boy."

I hate to admit it, but the boy does look a bit like me. Like he might be my son just on looks alone. Most strangers don't question it. But unless there's some kind of reverse immaculate conception – so immaculate it goes without actually bearing and breast-feeding the child – then he ain't mine.

This whole thing had to have started with Geppetto. He had a liking for telling crazy stories and swearing to their truth. Sometimes he got people to believe those stories, ridiculous as

they were. Living inside of giant sharks and table legs giving insults and blue-haired fairies and wise old bugs and boys turning into donkeys. He thought it was some sort of magic, but he must have been going crazy. He drank you know. Drank whatever he could get his hands on. That was his only goal in life: find enough money for his next drink and sit out on the front porch, or sometimes go to the bar and tell outrageous stories. Except I knew most of what he did and didn't do and not so much of his stories was really the truth. That's a large reason why I left him.

I left him because he was an idiot. But I guess that's why I liked him to begin with. When I first met Geppetto all that talk was endearing. He'd look at me with wide fascinated eyes and stroke my hair. "You're so beautiful," he says. And no matter how many times he says it, it never grew old and I believed him. You know when a man looks at you and he's got a look in his eye and he says you're beautiful and you feel that you are? Sometimes when my hair's all messed and I'm dirty from doing laundry or scrubbing, I feel ugly. But Geppetto took that right out of me with those eyes and that one line. "You're beautiful." He had this ability with all the other women too, but I was the only one he sought out when he wasn't off in his own fantasy world. He called me beautiful in the mornings after we'd made love and that was almost too much sometimes. I got to loving him fit to burst. That's why I almost married the man. When Geppetto was having fun, so was everyone else. Not a better time in the world.

Let's hold on a second here, though. Remember I didn't marry him. He was plenty annoying and an idiot like I said. Open a bottle of wine and Geppetto drinks it all. Try to have a dinner with friends and Geppetto rants off some story the whole night long. Sure, it's all entertainment to him. If you're in the mood he's the most fun to be around. But when you want something besides fun, like sleep or any kind of calm, Geppetto wasn't having any of that. That aggravated a lot of people, not just me. The marriage thing didn't have anything to do with the

infertility thing or the money thing, so it's not what people say. So what if some common girl doesn't want to marry the town charmer? I say let the people talk all they want.

Geppetto says he was giving up the carpentry trade to start carving puppets, and for a while I thought he might have a good idea. He took me to Mangiafuoco Theater one night and I was entertained by the puppets and the way they could move. Almost like they were real girls and boys minus all that clackety-clackin' wood. We spoke to the puppet string-puller guys after the show and I saw them wrap the little dolls in soft cloth and place them in cases lined with felt. They treated the puppets better than most men treat their grandfather's pocket watch. It made sense that Geppetto could carve and sell these puppets at high prices to the rich town men and the traveling shows. Even just having a stock of the right kinds of paints and strings could turn a profit. "I'll be the only supplier in town," Geppetto says. It made sense. He always was a dreamer but this time it sounded like he had a logical approach to the fantasy.

So he goes and does it. Of course, everyone laughed at him. Then the next set of players come through town and they buy one of his puppets. A rich man buys one for his son and then the son wants another. He earned enough to get a drink and then maybe make a new puppet or two to sell. It might have made more money if he had actually stuck with it instead of drinking all the money away. It wasn't the first time he did that, but it was the last time I was going to put up with it. After that it was the last I saw of him. Last I heard of him too.

Me and him were coming on some hard times before he run off. My parents didn't like him much. Didn't have the right kinds of prospects. I was only seventeen at the time, and my father's the protective type. He's a simple merchant but he kept having this crazy idea that I might marry someone rich and make the family proud. Just because I fell in love with a rich man and made him proud doesn't make him right though. Maybe I could have been as happy if I

married Geppetto, maybe not. I could have likely married rich and been unhappy. Francis was a wonderful man and I don't regret a single moment I've spent with him thank you very much.

So I marry Francis and Geppetto becomes more of a lunatic – so I hear. Like I said, I never seen him since I left him – and then one day this little boy knocks on my door. “Hello?” I say because I'm thinking the boy's going to pull out some trinkets he's made trying to sell them for a few lira and I'm going to have to brush this cute boy from my stoop with an angry look.

“My name in Pinocchio,” he says. “I'm your son.” And he had this little cat with him, walking figure-eights between his legs like the cat was nervous. Until the boy settled in for a while, that cat never left his side. Cat's still around the house somewhere. Meows like it's calling for the boy and don't know he's off and gone just like his father.

I was near to shooin' the boy off. Francis took a liking to the boy though. Francis comes to the door and starts talking to the boy. Bless his heart because Francis is such a good man, loving and kind to all God's creatures great and small but cast me down if he's not gypped more than any other man in town. Always giving a lira to the blind man here and a lira to the dirty-faced girl there and the pouty-face man with his hands out. All the small change he gives out in his lifetime he might as well have built an orphanage and stocked it with games. “Haven't eaten in days,” a drunk says and out will come Francis's coins. Nevermind it's the same drunk we saw a three days ago, asking for food then too. And the drunk goes right off to the liquor. “If you keep giving them the money they just keep coming back to ask for more,” I say. And Francis he wags a finger and he says, “What you do unto the least of my people” and I have to nod and say okay because I know I can't argue with that.

And so Francis lets the boy in. The boy's dressed well enough. A nice suit but it's worn. First I'm thinking it won't be much more than a hot meal and maybe the boy can sleep in from

the street for a night. Crazy thing, he offers to pay us for the food and lodging. Offers a gold coin he pulls from a little pouch. Well, that about does it for Francis. They wake up the next day and Francis feeds him breakfast. I'd have had the boy out by dawn if I was in charge, but not Francis. Francis up and takes the boy out, and back they come with new pants and shirts and shoes for the boy. That night Francis sits down next to me on the bed before we say our prayers and says, "Why didn't you tell me about the boy?" I say to him, "I didn't know myself. He's not my son like he says." He looks down and shakes his head. "I wish you told me is all," he says. He says, "the boy is wonderful and I'm happy to raise him since we can't have our own." He looks up at me again, got a happy and trusting look in his eye – the one that made me know I love him – and says, "No more secrets?" I say, "No more secrets." He kissed me and we say our prayers with some extra special lines added in for the boy.

The next few days, Francis hires a painter to do one of the guest rooms and soon the boy is enrolled in school. That's a crazy matter altogether. Francis says to him, "I've got you into school for next week," and the boy shouts all excited. Most kids hate school and drag their feet and here's the boy hooting and hollering. He says he can read and write already and turns out he does it better than any kid his age and I'll eat my hat if Geppetto taught him anything. And off he skips – the boy even knew enough to ask for one of Francis's old belts to strap his new books together. He comes home that first day and tells us all about his numbers, prattling on about this and that like I didn't know arithmetic either. Don't take me for something I'm not, but I know my numbers and writing. Not the best, I'm not too ashamed to admit it, but when Francis needs my help with some business I can scribe and do numbers like any of his assistants.

It was about the time that the boy told us it was his birthday that things started going skewy. "Your birthday?" I say, trying to sound happy. I never thought much about how old he

was or when his birthday might be or anything like that. With a name like his, he didn't have a Saints Day, so it just never came to mind. "Yes," he says, "tomorrow. I'm excited."

"Gosh," I say, "I don't even know how old you are. What birthday is this one?"

"Let's see," he says. He starts counting on his fingers. "I was born four years ago."

"Oh don't be silly," I say, "how old are you really?" Except he gives me this puzzled look, face tilted and lips straight. Looks at me like I'm the one talking gibberish.

"Four," he says again. Straight as an arrow.

"You can't be any younger than twelve," I say. "Your father and I separated..." this time I counted on my fingers, "just after... well, it would be going on about fifteen years now."

"But I was made into a boy four years ago today. I know it for certain because that's when father started feeling better."

What he says could have been all true except his only being four years old. I could overlook some things – like me being his mother – but this was a bit much. It didn't make me mad or nothing, but it just rubbed me the wrong way. Like buying something from a new vendor; he gives you a funny look and suddenly you can't shake the feeling that you just got gypped. I saw the boy wasn't trying to be mean and wasn't trying to be a nuisance. It was the reality about him. He really thought he was only four. When I pulled Francis into the room that night and whispered what the boy had say, Francis just says, "So he's a special boy. He's done other stuff." I say, "Other stuff? Like what?" And Francis explains how he talks to his cat and then waits while the cat meows and then responds as if the cat says something. Says how the boy will touch something sharp and cut himself – nothing bad, but drawing blood – and then winces back and has a look of betrayal on his face like he never knew a knife could cut or a hot poker could burn. He tells me that the boy likes to tell wild stories and I just laughed at that and said he really was

Geppetto's son. Francis says, "There's a lot of things he don't know that every other boy his age should. But then again, he knows a lot more about some things that even we adults don't know."

So I just keep treating the boy like I always done and we have a birthday meal for him and we say, "Happy fourth birthday," and some friends who ask how old he is laugh when the boys tells them he's only four. They rub his head and call him a joker and tell me to watch out for him growing older. Francis decides to take us to a puppet show. It came into town that night – I saw the posters and started to plant the idea that we should go out to celebrate when really I just wanted to go to the show myself. Not that Francis wouldn't have taken me, of course, but it just sounds selfish to say I want to do something on the boy's birthday.

We go and the show is good and the crowd laughs and Francis gives the boy and me a coin to throw up on stage when the puppets take their bows. I toss mine up and say, "Bravo!" or something like that. The boy looks down at the coin in his hand and then looks up at me and Francis and down to the coin again, like we're telling him to bury the coin in the ground or something ridiculous. "Throw it," I say. I point to the stage. "It's for them. It tells them you like their show." He looks to the stage but his face don't change. He throws it really soft and underhanded. It lands just on the ledge of the stage. Two hands reaching from around the backstage and picking up the coins had to go out full-elbow to grab it. The boy turned and left after he tossed the coin and I followed him out.

"What's wrong?" I say. "Didn't like the show?"

"I liked it fine, I guess," he says. "It's just..." and he fades off and don't say anything more. Francis and I look at each other and I wonder if I should say anything. Francis just shrugs. He puts his arm over the boy's shoulder and he takes my hand in his other hand and we walk

home like that. The boy cheered up soon enough. Although we never did go to another puppet show. Probably made him think of Geppetto.

And a couple months went by like that. The boy went off to school during the day. Comes back happy as a clam most days telling us what he's learned. He was polite and obedient. Even when I gave him chores, he still smiled and seemed happy to work. He'd dance when he was sweeping, like the broom was some fair maiden. He'd nod his head and wave his hands when dusting like he was conducting an orchestra. It was like he was just happy to be a boy. Nevermind having a hard life with some strange woman like me – I know well enough I'm no ray of sunshine all the time, although I have my moments and most often I'm a real nice lady. He loved carrying wood and stacking it in the corner by the fire. My woodpile never was so organized and straight and perfect before the boy came. But he always seemed to grow sad when he'd have to throw a log on the fire. He did it all solemn, like he was laying a flower on a coffin.

Which is another thing. I hadn't talked to the boy about his father maybe being dead and all that yet. Seemed too soon then. It wasn't until after Francis died that I sat the boy down to talk to him about death and brought up Geppetto. But the boy swore that Geppetto wasn't dead. Says Geppetto left him a letter that says Geppetto went out to get them some more money and that he should go live with his mother. Gives the boy my name and tells him what road to take to the city. How he got my married name I don't know and really don't care to know. I keep in regular touch with my friends back there so it wouldn't surprise me if one of them knows it and told him. Goodness knows my father would never have talked to him.

“So when does Geppetto get back?” I say and the boy shrugs and smiles like time goes on forever and it's no big deal that his own father has abandoned him. “Why'd he call me your mother? You know I'm not your mother,” I say. He says, “Father always said you were. I asked

where I came from and he told me about mothers and fathers. He showed me a picture of you he drew. That makes you my mother.” I wasn’t about to talk about God’s miracle of birth right after we had just buried Francis. And there never was another good time to talk. The boy ran off not too long after that.

With Francis gone things changed. And I don’t mean just the obvious things either. We struggled to get by. Not financially. Francis’s family is more than generous and provides wonderfully. But the small things. The extra seat at the head of the table. Getting used to cooking for two instead of three. Those Sunday afternoons between masses when Francis and I would read on the front porch or by the fire. It changed the dynamic of the house.

But that can’t be the whole reason the boy ran off. My enemies will tell you I was mean to the boy. My friends will say I was a fine mother. Now I’m not saying I was the nicest of the ladies to him and sure I got angry at him once in a while, but that was never much more than any mother would do to her son. I still asked him about his day at school and listened to him and all those things Francis did before. We still did the chores like we did before. It’s just that, well, the spirit of the house was lower. I always knew Francis was a good man, but I guess I just didn’t know how good I had it. And the boy didn’t either I think. With Francis gone he likely just started to miss Geppetto.

Without Francis around I spent more time with the boy, but we never got along like he did with Francis. He grew on me a bit and we had a few good times. But mainly we just went about our days. It wasn’t until after Francis died that the boy got some bad habits and messes. He tended to leave whatever had his attention out in the open. He gets this from Geppetto because he was like a mutt that tracks in the house – only way to clean up is to follow the mutt around and wipe up after him. But with the boy it was never that much. A board game here. A drawing and

pencil there. A book lying open on the dinner table or untied shoes left halfway up the staircase. He never made the bed in the morning. I'd remind him every day and he says, "I'm sorry. I forgot," and looks at me all sad-faced and really sorry. Little puppy dog eyes that took all the mad out of me. But he was a forgetful boy then. I never knew for certain, but I think he was getting himself into some trouble at school too.

Then he started looking sick. Not green like he was going to vomit sick. Just sickly. His skin started getting whiter. Not whiter like a ghost or pale, but whiter like sun-dried pinewood. I asked him a bunch if he was okay and he says yes but he didn't say it cheerfully like he used to. I started serving him some more food, thinking maybe I wasn't giving a growing boy what he needs. What do I know about growing boys anyways? But that didn't work either. He ate like any other boy would, I suspect. I filled his plate and sometimes gave him seconds and he ate it all. Still, though, he looked skinnier every day. He started moving slower. Stopped dancing when he swept. Let the woodpile get low. That, I thought, was normal for a while. What boy likes doing household chores? It wasn't until I was sitting out on the porch one day and saw him coming home from school looking drained all the same. He was even walking with a friend who lives on our street. They said goodbye near the front porch and he held on the railing and pulled himself up the stairs. "You feeling good?" I say and he says, "I'm fine" and goes on in.

The sickness wasn't all of it either. I think he was up to some sort of mischief because I started finding weird things in his room. I would find paint chips on his floor. Except he doesn't have a paint set. I've never seen him painting and he never talks about it. I started looking around for a chipped toy or something that needed re-touching but I couldn't find anything. Strangest of all, I started finding bits of string in his bed some of the mornings before he ran away. But I never was missing any string and I never knew where he got it.

The boy just kept getting more melancholy. He dresses for school and leaves without giving one of his cheery goodbyes. He don't sing or dance when he does his chores. He eats his food and then goes to bed. "I don't feel well," he says and leaves half a plate of food on the table – the first time he's left food. Next day is worse and the next day is worse. His legs stiffen up like he's got rusted knees or he's a pirate with a wooden leg. His balance is off. His feet hit the floor heavy, real clickity-clacky.

The day before he run off he was a different color altogether. Not pale like the sickly, just a lighter shade of white like a woman who's never been in the sun. That night I'm tucking him into bed – I tucked him in early because he wasn't feeling too well – and he asks me if I believe he's really my boy. He has that puppy dog look on his face and I didn't know what to do. I wanted to hug him and tell him that mother will make everything all better. But I can't lie to the boy. I didn't want to say something to him now to make him feel better only to make him feel worse when I have to tell him later that he's not really my son. So I tell him no, that he's not my boy. But I tell him I'm happy he's in my home. I tell him that he's my gift from God and I'm eternally thankful for the gift. He smiled a bit but it wasn't much of a smile. Not one of his real smiles.

I read him a story like I usually do. It was some story he likes about fairies. I close the book and he asks, "Mother, do you believe in fairies?" I say, "I believe in God's angels and they're like fairies in a way." He says, "No, like fairies that come and make your wishes come true?" I tell him that God makes wishes and prayers come true and that there are no real fairies. He seems depressed by this so I tell him that I do like the stories about the fairies, that they're good entertaining stories. He gives me another of his fake smiles.

Last thing I did was stroke his hair and kiss his forehead. His hair felt rough but it looked neatly combed. And his forehead felt stiff, like his head under his skin was hollow. We said goodnight and I went to bed. In the morning he had run off.

I look around the house and can't find him and he doesn't come home from school that day and that's the last anyone I know's seen of him. Left his clothes, left his books, and he even left a little hand-carved puppet on his bed, all tucked in like he was a father putting his boy to sleep. I miss him sometimes. Even though he wasn't my son and I have no claim to him, you grow used to certain things. And the house is certainly lonely now. I know I never did love him the way a mother does but I'd like to think that for not being my boy I gave it a good shake and made his life better in some ways. I certainly couldn't have done any worse than Geppetto.