

The Best of Intentions

A novel by Gilbert Van Hoeydonck

Excerpt

“We need to shift stock,” she said.

Kurt sat up with a jolt. “Excuse me?” he said, a slight quaver in his voice, “what did you just say?”

Fran faced him over the rim of her narrow glasses. “I said we need to shift more stock.”

Kurt slapped his notebook shut. He had everyone’s attention now. The normal meeting room murmuring had stopped. The fluorescent tubes overhead hummed, like lightsabers anticipating a mortal blow.

“These are vulnerable children you are talking about, kids who’ve been neglected and abused, who’ve been in and out of foster care placements, and you describe them as *stock*?”

Joe raised his eyebrows. One of the managers checked a page in her diary with great concentration.

Fran looked at him across the long table. Like a scene from *High Noon*, Kurt thought. Is she going to reach for that holster? Not now, Kurt. Stop the fantasy thinking. Too much at stake.

“I don’t need a lecture about child protection from you,” Fran began, “I’ve been in this game longer than you, so stop the bleeding heart stuff and let’s be professional. At the end of the day we’re accountable to the department and ultimately to the minister.”

Debbie nodded in agreement with her boss.

“We’re judged on outcomes,” Fran continued. “That means children removed from dysfunctional families, young persons discharged from foster care. We can’t just sit and gab about family dynamics—we need throughput.”

Kurt leaned forward, a pudgy panther preparing to pounce. “Sure, we need to evaluate our practice in terms of outcomes, but it is important how we frame our thinking—”

She cut him off. Her face looked flushed now. “Look, this isn’t second-year social work at uni. I’m not going to have this discussion. We have a long agenda to get through.”

Kurt felt everyone’s eyes on him. The telltale signs of anger he had so often explained to irate parents now raced through his body. Hot cheeks, tensed muscles, turmoil in your stomach. He looked down at the table. His eyes boiled. I should take a deep breath, he thought, but his heart was pounding.

“So, Petra, maybe you can walk us through the stats for the last quarter,” suggested Fran. The tension in the room ebbed away.

The data projector added its hum as Petra showed her monthly slides. Number of notifications of abuse. Number of cases investigated. Number of home visits. Number of children placed in out-of-home care.

Kurt thought of the young family he had met that morning in Bayswater. The usual stuff. Two junkies too busy worrying about their next hit to give much thought to their baby, a pallid creature with dull eyes, weighed down by his soiled nappy like one of those dolls with a low centre of gravity that you can push without it ever toppling over. You could swan in and remove their child on the basis of neglect. Then what? There was no money to provide more state care and what care there was seemed so basic that its critics reckoned it was just another form of neglect. Planned sensory deprivation, one academic had called it. Or you could work with the parents, build on what strengths they had, teach them living skills and basic risk management strategies. Link them in with a detox service. That approach, of course, required a lot of time with the family. And in Fran’s universe, time was not a gift between humans but something that ruined your throughput stats.

A commotion in the room brought Kurt back to the meeting.

“Her waters broke yesterday,” he heard Fran say, “and she gave birth around 7:00 p.m. A healthy boy. Mother and child doing well. Husband slightly overwhelmed.” Everyone laughed.

“We’ve sent flowers,” said Debbie, “and I’m sending a card round the office. Please keep it moving.”

“So, with one protective worker out of action in a maternity ward and two others still on stress leave, the Southern Outreach office have asked us to bring forward Jennifer’s secondment,” Fran continued. “I have authorised that, and Jen will take up her position as acting manager tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow?” Joe raised his eyebrows.

“Yes,” said Jennifer, “It’s all rather sudden, but I’ve managed to catch most people about my current case load. It’s just Kurt—”

Kurt looked up.

“You were out this morning and I need to brief you about one of my cases. It’s a Srecko Bosovic—”

“How do you spell that?”

Jennifer spelled out the name. “The boy’s sixteen. Serbian background I think, or Croatian, not sure. Always mix those up.” She blushed. “Anyhow, kid grew up in the Latrobe Valley. Morwell. He was sexually abused in his early teens and has been in several foster placements since. He’s now officially living with a foster parent in Silvan but he seems to spend most of his time in a squat somewhere in Heathmont.”

“Is there a case plan?” asked Kurt.

“I’ll give you my notes right after this meeting. It’s straightforward, really.”

“Well then, I shall tackle it with great efficiency,” said Kurt. Nobody smiled, and he regretted the sulkiness of his sarcasm. The corner of Fran’s mouth had twitched, almost imperceptibly. They were in opposing camps now, and he had blinked first.

As they milled out of the meeting room, Joe touched Kurt’s elbow.

“Like your jacket. Real leather?”

“Yeah,” said Kurt, “lamb.”

“Looks great. I’ve always wanted one of those. I thought Buddhists weren’t meant to wear leather though?”

“Oh,” said Kurt, “Dunno. I suppose. Sometimes I think I’m not much of a Buddhist.”

“Chin up, mate,” said Joe, “we all have bad days.”

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