

Misplaced Love

by Garf Collins

Sally looked despondently down at her meagre breakfast – stale bread with a scraping of jam. It didn't seem fair. Len, her Mum's new boy-friend, was enjoying bacon and eggs. Eleven years old Sally and her mother Cynthia had recently been moved into a 1960s estate which was being progressively demolished. Its drab grey walls seemed in keeping with their fraught lives.

The arrival of Len had added to poor Sally's unhappiness. He had no job and didn't look likely to get one. Sally's few remaining toys had been sold to fund just one night's drinking. After this Sally had lain crying in her bed as she cuddled the small stray kitten which she had adopted as her own.

"He can take away everything else but I won't let him take you away from me," she had whispered into the kitten's soft fur.

"Eat your breakfast love," Cynthia urged, "Nearly time to go to school. You look really pretty in that nice dress I got you."

Sally was already overawed by the school which she had joined in the middle of the first term. There were a few children like her but many from the nearby private estate. The dress now made it impossible for her to go. One of the well-meaning liberal Mum's had taken pity on Cynthia at the school gate and offered her the dress, saying, "this dress would look very nice on Sally. It's a bit small for Samantha now. She's growing so quickly."

Cynthia had gladly accepted. The lack of a uniform at the school created a peer pressure which she knew she couldn't afford to satisfy for her daughter.

With the eye of a sensitive child, Sally had recognised the dress and dreaded the thought of meeting Samantha. She could imagine her saying, "Oh! That's where my dress went. Mummy said she had sent it to the Lib-Dem's jumble sale."

With an anxious look Sally pleaded, "I don't feel well Mum. I've got a head ache."

Len scowled at her and shouted, "Get yourself off to school you miserable whinger."

"But Len, maybe she could stay here with you while I'm at work. Perhaps she'll feel better tomorrow."

"You keep out of it Cyn," growled Len as he hit her with a backhanded blow, sending her staggering into a corner with blood streaming from her nose. Tugging Sally by her hair to the door, he thrust her out. The kitten yelped as he trod on its tail. Further enraged he propelled the kitten after Sally with a vicious kick.

Hours afterwards, a late commuter on her way to the station came across a little girl clad in a smart dress with tear stained cheeks. She was sobbing bitterly as she tightly clutched a small lifeless kitten.

Stooping down the woman tried to get her to explain why she was there and what had upset her, although she suspected that the dead kitten was the likely explanation for her distress.

"Your poor kitten. Did it get hit by a car? How terrible. I'm Sarah. If you tell me where you live, I'll take you home. You can't stay here by the road on your own. What's your name?"

"Sally," she replied between sobs, "I never want to go back home. Len will just hit me again."

Sarah was alarmed at the plight of the poor girl. Although she had been hurrying to catch her train she forgot about her normal routine as she thought about how she could help Sally. She could see that there was no prospect of her going home immediately or even being prepared to say where it was. Fortunately, Sarah was a social worker in the borough so she decided to take Sally with her to the office.

Later when they had managed to get Sally to talk about her circumstances, they knew that she couldn't be taken home without further enquiries, so she was temporarily taken into the care of the borough and her mother was contacted.

That afternoon Sally's Mum arrived at the office with Len striding belligerently beside her. "Where's my daughter. Is she alright? We must take her home."

"Bloody load of interfering do-gooders you lot are," Len shouted as he pounded the desk with his fist.

"Len. I'm sure they are doing their best for Sally. Thank you for looking after her," Cynthia added as she turned to the social worker who had taken up Sally's case. "When can I see her and take her home."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible just yet. You see there are some circumstances we need to investigate first. She was extremely distressed when she was found and had evidence of bruising in several places."

"Stupid kid ran into a concrete post. She does it all the time. Can't see straight. Now let's get going. I've had enough of you bossing us around. Who do you think you are?"

With some difficulty Cynthia managed to persuade Len that they should leave which he did while still swearing at the staff.

The social worker turned to the colleague who had helped get them out of the office and said, "What a shame. She's such a lovely little girl and her mother seems very nice too but we will have to investigate their home life. It seems evident that the man is the problem. Did you notice the cut on the poor woman's face?"

"Yes I did. We see too many cases, I suspect like this one, where the woman wants a man in her life and makes a hasty decision. Then once installed he takes over and dominates the family often using bullying tactics and violence. The unfortunate woman feels trapped and unable to do anything about it. What a tragedy that nice people don't necessarily fall in love with nice people."