

## Teach your children well.

(A fable for grown-ups)

Once-upon-a-time, long, long ago, there lived a little prince. The King and Queen had long awaited the arrival of their first child and now he was arrived they loved him as much as any child, royal or commoner, had ever been loved.

‘Now that we have a son, it is our duty to keep him safe, so we shall name him Cautus, which means on-guard or cautious,’ said the King, and the Queen agreed.

‘There will be no sword play or jousting for our bundle of joy,’ she added, ‘and he will be forever kept precious and will, as a consequence of our wise and prudent decision, live a long and protected life!’

And so, the years passed. Cautus lived within the castle grounds mixing only with those few servants and advisors trusted to keep him from harm. Never was he allowed out by himself and could only guess at what the world outside (of which he had heard tell in whispers and guarded conversation) was really like. To him, the castle battlements were strictly out of bounds and most of his days were spent reading or painting, or playing in the soft-play area his parents had ordered built for him in the shadows of the great North Tower – thereby reducing unnecessary exposure to the sun.

The occasion of his thirteenth birthday, when he had unwrapped the last of his presents (*another* book of cautionary tales), and a servant had blown out the twelfth and final candle adorning the sugar-free birthday cake, Cautus suddenly turned to his parents and said a most extraordinary thing:

‘Mother, Father, why am I not allowed out to play, as I have heard rumoured, other children of my age are wont to do?’

At this, the Queen went quite into a fluster, the King choked on his soft drink, and a troubled whisper rippled through the corridors and halls of the great building.

Cautus licked his fingers, and waited.

And waited – but no answer was forthcoming.

Several weeks later, just after sunset, the Queen decided to give Cautus just one last goodnight kiss and climbed the long stone staircase to his room. Bending to kiss his cheek she recoiled in horror and let out a scream that reverberated through the now empty chamber – her little boy was gone!

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Far away, on the other side of the kingdom, Cautus slammed down his empty flagon and ordered another draught of ale. Decora, his new, older, girlfriend, lit another of the strange cigarettes she had introduced him to, took a long drag and passed it over. A band of minstrels were playing their latest bawdy ballad so loudly that it was almost impossible to hear.

‘So,’ Cautus screamed across the ale-drenched table, ‘what say you? Another couple of drinks, something from the pie-seller, then I’ll nick another wagon and drive us back to your place.’

Decora merely smiled, tweaked her piercing, and slipped under the table.

Moral: Allow children to find their own way in life.

500 words