

BE NICE TO MR. CAMPBELL

A STORY

BY ROBERT LOWRY

SHE was fixing the salad when her cowboy came back from next door.

"Dear, do you *always* have to slam the screendoor like that?"

He opened the refrigerator and brought out the ice cream he hadn't finished at lunch.

"You'll spoil your dinner, puddin. You're going to have such a nice dinner."

But he wasn't having any of her; he was searching in the drawer for a spoon. With a terrible rasping noise he dragged a chair over to the table and began to eat. He had a spot of chocolate on the end of his button nose now, and a dribble ran down from the corner of his wide, pink mouth, past his chin.

"Look, you're getting it all over yourself. You've just *got* to keep yourself clean, sweetheart. We're having company tonight."

He went ahead shoving big spoonfuls of ice cream into his mouth, his

long-lashed eyes staring down at the plate. There was simply no use talking to him when he was in this mood; she'd already shouted herself hoarse finding that out. But in the end she couldn't resist. "Wipe your mouth off, for goodness sake!" She went toward him with a towel, and for the first time he looked up at her, his round blue eyes flat with resistance. "Take this and wipe your mouth off, Joey."

He caught the towel, jerked it from her hand and threw it on the floor. "No."

She felt her hands grip; her heart began pounding. "No? Just what do you mean saying no to your mother, Joey?"

"I mean no," Joey said. "N-O. And I'm not going to keep clean, either." He was mashing the ice cream into a soupy mess with his spoon.

"Then you won't be allowed to eat with us, dear. You'll just have to

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take your dinner in the kitchen."

"I don't care," he said sullenly. "I'd rather have it in the kitchen anyway. I don't want to eat with Mr. Campbell." He was stirring the ice cream now, slopping some of it over the side of the dish. "He's too fat."

She could only stand there staring down at him, at his round mussed tow-head bent over the dish, his ears stuck out in a way she could never understand since she'd always bought him hats that fitted, his cowboy suit already dirty with that one spot of chocolate on the vest. She avoided hearing more about Mr. Campbell by saying, "You ought to try to keep your cowboy suit clean, darling. You'll want to wear it Saturday when your father takes you to the circus."

He looked up at her, his moist underlip belligerent. "My father bought me this suit."

"Of course your father bought it for you." She went back to the salad and began shredding in the carrots. "That's all the more reason to keep it clean, so you'll look nice when he sees you in it."

"You didn't buy it, my father bought it. You never buy me anything as good as a cowboy suit."

"But your father went out West, Joey," she said. "You can only buy nice cowboy suits like yours out West."

"Why don't *you* ever take me out

West? If I lived with Daddy *he'd* take me."

She slid the salad bowl into the refrigerator and washed her hands at the sink. She tried to think of the proper answer to this question, but each answer seemed wrong. The books — she could go back to the books and see what they advised. But she already knew: they never had anything encouraging to say about a child of divorced parents; it was all an uphill struggle, a series of compromises, a forced string of compliments about the absent member of the family which only seemed to make the child long more for him. "Let's not go through all that again," she said lamely. "Just go wash your face and hands now."

He surprised her by actually walking over to the sink and obeying her.

"And will you promise Mommy you'll be nice to Mr. Campbell when he comes?"

She jumped when the screendoor slammed. He'd gone out into the yard to play again.

II

You have got to love a woman, Tony Campbell thought, to go out this far to see her. He was taking the river drive and keeping his speed five miles over the limit. The river looked plenty busy out there. A string of coal barges going by, some people

fishing off their houseboat, a paddle-wheeler pushing upstream along the far shore. It's funny how you never think how many people make their living off the river, he thought, and he remembered a piece in the paper this morning that had surprised him by giving figures showing there was more river traffic now than ever before. You wouldn't think that, Tony Campbell thought.

Well, he couldn't fool himself about Lois, he liked her even if she did live ten miles from town and own the worst brat in the U. S. My God, he thought, I *must* like her, when you consider I never get anything more for my trip out here than the privilege of sitting in that living room all evening afraid even to hold hands because the brat might poke his nose in. Let's see, he'd known her almost a month now. And during the whole period he'd been really alone with her exactly two times — once after the party where he'd first met her (she'd escaped from her friend, that dame who made the ceramics, so he could take her home), and once when the kid had spent the night at his father's apartment. The rest of the time they'd had to sit in that damn living room playing records low and hardly able to talk for fear the kid would wake up and come down and start his scene again. Three nights ago, when he'd been out here for dinner, the

kid had refused even to shake hands — and had topped everything by going upstairs and pounding on the floor with a hammer, pretending he was building something. Lois acts like she's afraid of him, Tony thought. She's too soft with him, that's the main trouble. What he needs is a good walloping.

But I better watch myself, he added, or that's the way I'll be spending my evenings all the rest of my life — walloping that kid. Or no, she probably wouldn't even let me talk back to him. If I hitched up with her, it would be just like it is now. The kid would be in charge of everything; our whole life would have to be built around his whims. . . . Too bad, he thought. A real knockout of a girl, too. And she certainly was gazing at him out of the softest, dampest eyes in history every time he saw her. Only she'd better come through with more than that pretty soon, if she wanted him to go on making this pilgrimage every other night or so. He was getting a little tired of her acting as though even a kiss with the brat in the same house was some sort of sin. After all, she'd been married, she knew her way around. She ought to be wise to the fact that acting aloof all the time didn't make a woman more attractive.

He turned off the drive into a suburban street lined with trees and

small frame houses. Just why that snafu husband of hers had wanted to move her 'way out here to the end of the world, he couldn't figure out. He must have been a real goof, Tony thought. No wonder she divorced him — ten thousand dollars a year or no ten thousand dollars a year.

He pushed on the brake and turned off the motor. As he slammed the door he noticed the two kids digging a hole in the side yard — Joey hardly recognizable in sombrero, chaps, and high-heel boots.

"Hello there, Buffalo Bill," Tony said.

The kid didn't answer or even look up. Tony mounted the porch steps and the door opened.

"Somebody's had his car polished," she said.

"That's me," Tony said. "Always clean and respectable."

He noticed that she didn't touch him till they were inside the house with the door closed. Then she put her arms around him and kissed him very lightly on the mouth, in order not to spoil her lipstick. The softness and smell of her made him feel better about the drive out. He had a beauty here, all right — big slanted blue eyes, wide full mouth, creamy complexion, and dark heavy hair that swept back off her heart-shaped face. A little thin, but that wasn't really noticeable because her breasts and

hips were good. She looked younger than any girl of thirty had a right to. No wonder when he'd met her at that party he'd never guessed she was already a mother with a seven-year-old kid on her hands.

"Anybody hungry?" she asked. "Or could you stand a drink first?"

III

They mixed martinis in the kitchen and carried them through the dining room, where he noticed ominously that three places were set at the table, into the living room.

"I spoke to Joey when I came in," he said. "But he didn't bother to answer."

"Oh, he probably didn't hear. He's so intense when he's playing."

He didn't say anything to that. There was no use making a big thing out of criticizing the kid, she always got excited then and went through the whole list of his merits — report cards, bright sayings, examples of politeness to strangers, and all the rest. Well, it was probably true, the kid might be all right to other people. It's like she says, Tony thought. Joey just resents me because he doesn't want anybody to take his father's place. And yet he couldn't drive the notion out of his head that even if the kid were grown up and they met casually somewhere without any past connections, they still wouldn't like

each other. The kid was too sullen and too loud-mouthed both at the same time.

Lois had moved over closer to him. It gave him a sense of power to put his arm around her narrow shoulders like this.

"Does anybody love anybody?" she asked, flashing up her eyes.

She was kind of rushing it this evening. "Somebody loves *you*," he said, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach because he knew where this kind of talk, cold-sober before dinner, might lead him.

"Then don't I rate a kiss?"

He looked down at her amazed — she'd always been so stingy with her kisses while the kid was still awake. He leaned over her, the smell of her heavy in his nostrils, and kissed her mouth. Rich — a deep kiss. He couldn't remember kisses any better, and he guessed he'd had his share. He slid his hand up to her breast, but she stiffened and sat up straight, pushing urgently against his chest.

For Christ sake, he thought, if she'd make up her —

And then he saw that Buffalo Bill was standing in the doorway staring at them.

"Did Sammy go home?" Lois asked breathlessly.

"Yes," Joey said. "I chased him home."

"Why, that's not nice, dear." She

leaned forward and brushed the spray of blond hair off his forehead, but it fell back into place again. "That's no way to treat your friends."

"He laughed at me when I hurt my knee," Joey said. "He's not going to laugh at *me*."

After holding his face away and making a somewhat furtive attempt to wipe off the lipstick, Tony finally looked up. He had to raise up on one buttock to stuff the handkerchief back in his pocket — must be picking up a little weight since he'd bought this suit last winter. "What were you digging out there?" he asked. "A hole to China?"

Joey sat down and began to kick his legs against the chair. He didn't look at Tony. "You can't dig a hole to China. What do you know about digging?"

Tony tried to laugh. "Oh, I've had my share of digging, all right." He winked at Lois. "I thought I'd never get through digging foxholes when I was in the Army."

"You weren't either in the Army," Joey said, kicking harder and staring straight ahead. "You're too fat."

"Stop swinging your legs, dear. And you mustn't dispute Mr. Campbell's word."

"My father was in the Army but *he* wasn't. He wasn't anywhere. He's too fat to go anywhere."

"If you talk like that any more,

Joey, you're going to be sent out of the room."

"I will not! I can stay here as long as I feel like it. Why don't you send *him* out of the room?"

A blind flash of anger brought Tony to his feet. "Well, if that's the alternative —"

"Please sit down, Tony," Lois said, grabbing his hand and smiling up at him. "Joey doesn't really mean what he's saying. He's been playing all afternoon and he's awfully tired."

Tony let himself be persuaded to sit down again. He lit a cigarette, adding fire to the fire that was already in his face. Why the hell, he wondered, did I come all the way out here just to get myself involved in something like this?

Joey's face was white and implacable. "You like *him* better than my father, don't you," Joey said.

"For Christ sake," Tony said, "if we have to go through all that again —"

"Please." Lois put her hand on his arm. "Joey's going to bed right after dinner if he keeps talking like this. And he won't have any stories read to him for an entire week."

"I am *not* going to bed right after dinner. I'm going to stay up as long as he's here."

Lois jumped up: Tony was shocked at how witch-like her face could look when she was angry. "You're going to

bed right now if you keep this up!" she shouted. "You'll eat your dinner right this minute and go straight to bed without another word!"

With a fine sense of diplomacy, Joey got off the chair and left the room, and Lois sank back down on the sofa. She tried to force her strained face into a smile, but without much success. "Do you have a cigarette, darling?" When he gave her one and lit it, she continued, "And how's the printing business these days?"

"Inky," Tony said, and in spite of the fact that he made his joke without much heart, she threw back her head and laughed elaborately — a kind of nervous release from the tension she'd just endured, he decided. "I had one customer today who said that the red we used on his job wasn't red enough."

"Oh, I love that!" Lois laughed.

"So I told him that next time I'd drain a pint of my blood into it and try to improve it."

"Oh, Tony, you didn't!"

"Sure I did," Tony said, suddenly realizing that it was a better line than he'd guessed it was this morning — especially since old Weaver hadn't cracked a smile. "You can't please some people no matter how hard you try, least of all in the printing business."

They sat quietly for a while, con-

templating in silence the profound humor of Tony's answer, and then Lois pushed her soft shoulder against his chest and murmured, "Oh darling, I don't know *what* I'd have done if you hadn't come out tonight. You *are* getting to be a habit, you know."

"Good or bad?"

She arched her eyebrows and took a deep drag on her cigarette before she smudged it out. "Smoking's my only *bad* habit."

He ran his hand down her ribs. "Could we try that kiss again?"

She leaned forward to listen. "I think that he's out in the kitchen, darling."

"For God's sake, do we have to go through this same watching-and-waiting game every time I see you?"

She turned her hurt face to him then, showing him moist eyes. He felt like a heel.

"It's just that we're never alone," Tony said. "I always feel I have an enemy in the house — even when he's sleeping."

She sighed, and let herself go limp against the back of the sofa. "But you just don't understand him, darling. You think he doesn't like you, and, believe me, that isn't true. Why, only yesterday he was after me to know when you were coming out again. Don't you see how much of a shock for him it must be to know that someone else is claiming some of

my affection? You really can't expect a child to react any other way."

"Oh, I expect it all right," Tony said. "But how long is it going to keep up?"

She sat staring at the door through which Joey had disappeared. "He'll get over it soon," she said hopefully. "Really, darling, he's a *very* sweet and affectionate child. And polite, too. Did I tell you that his teacher sent a note home with his report saying how well-mannered he is?"

IV

He couldn't bring himself to cross her — she was a mother with her child. And it was obvious enough the kind of split-up person the kid was, trying to be the man of the house now that his father was gone. Yet the intense hatred that brewed in him wasn't easy to get rid of. It had been years since he'd felt this way about anybody.

"Let's get back to that kiss," she murmured. And this time *she* came to him — pushing her breasts against him hard and letting her mouth cover his. He closed his eyes, setting himself for something special, noting as he did so that she was acting more in love with him tonight than she ever had before. He ran his hand up her back, thinking, if she's willing to kiss like this here with the kid still awake, maybe tonight after —

"I want to listen to my radio program."

She jerked away from him. Joey stood blank-faced in the doorway, holding a white portable radio in his hands; he acted as though he hadn't seen a thing.

"Your radio program is off now," Lois said shrilly. "Go wash your face and hands, we're going to have dinner in a minute."

"It is *not* off! It's only six o'clock." He came on into the room and put the radio on the desk. "I want to know where it is on the dial." He began turning the knob around, bringing in an assortment of raucous noises.

"Which program are you talking about?"

"You know which one! The Flying Demon."

"Is that program still on the air?" Tony asked.

"You shut up!"

"You'd better be the one to shut up," Tony said, abashed because he'd really only asked the question to show Lois that he wasn't mad at the kid. "For God's sake, Lois, doesn't he have any manners at all?"

"I have more manners than you have! Fat Stuff!"

Tony was off the sofa and reaching for the kid before he realized it. But after he'd grabbed the tiny wrist he couldn't do anything except hold on, and the kid was shouting, "Take your

hands off me! I'll tell my father on you!" He let him go and stood staring down at him, wishing he didn't have to glance over and see the look on Lois' face.

Joey slid off the chair and ran around to the sofa. Now he was sitting in the exact spot where Tony had been sitting, beside his mother.

"Fat Stuff!" Joey said. "Fat Stuff! Fat Stuff! Fat Stuff!"

Tony went into the dining room and picked up his hat from the chair.

"Upstairs this minute!" he heard Lois saying. "And no more movies for a whole month!"

"I don't care, he hit me," Joey was saying. "He can't hit me and get away with it."

"He *didn't* hit you, he merely grabbed you when you drove him to exasperation. Button up your shirt."

Tony went to the living room door. "Think I'll take a run up the street and get some cigarettes; I'm all out," he said.

"But I have cigarettes somewhere," Lois said, glancing around the room. "You don't have to go out for them, I'll find some — I think upstairs."

He turned away. "I'll be back in a minute."

As he was opening the car door he heard her call from the house, "I'll have dinner on the table when you get back." He didn't look around; he started the motor.

V

"You're eating your dinner and then you're going to bed," Lois said. "I don't want any more nonsense out of you. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I don't care, he started it."

"Just be quiet now and sit down and eat your dinner. We've heard enough out of you for one evening."

Suddenly docile, he sat down at the table and quietly devoured the roast beef and vegetables she brought him. She felt that she had triumphed after all, because he ate everything without objections, refusing nothing. And he did look darling sitting there — poor confused little thing. Certainly it wasn't his fault that he acted this way. It was the fault of his parents . . . of unfortunate circumstances for which she felt partly responsible. But the circumstances had been unavoidable. Even during the first months of her marriage she'd realized that she'd made a mistake; that under Arthur's likable exterior there was a steel barrier which kept him from communicating with people, from experiencing any of the carefree pleasantries which made living with another person possible. They'd had nothing to say to each other, that was the truth of the matter. He'd settled her out here far from town and driven home every evening

to eat, read the paper, and go to bed. And when Joey had arrived, he'd reacted like a spoiled child. He'd been positively *jealous* of her interest in her baby; had refused to pay the slightest attention to him. Of course, now that Joey was growing up he was showing more interest. He could swoop down at any moment and take him off to glamorous weekends whenever he chose to, spend piles of money, lavish gifts on him — no wonder Joey thought his father was some sort of god while she looked like the drab everyday reality. And there was no explaining to Arthur that this was the worst possible thing for the child — that *she* had to live with him every day of the week, not just a few hours a month like his father. As for the divorce, she had no regrets about it. Who could say whether it would be better for a child to grow up in a frigid, unfriendly atmosphere, rather than as the adored object of a mother and father who were separated? And besides, everyone knew that seven was a difficult age for any youngster.

"Come on now, cowboy," she said, taking his hand. "Let's toddle off to bed."

"I got to get something." He jerked away from her and flew into the living room, coming back in a moment carrying the white radio. She was going to object, but felt too worn out, and merely took him by

the hand and led him up the stairs.

In the room he sat down on the bed while she knelt at his feet and took off his shoes and socks. Looking up at him she saw a face so small, so wronged, so innocent, that it hurt her to look at him. He was the child of a love that was dead, wasn't he? So how could he be expected to react like anything except a lost creature? She was all he really had to depend on now, and she must never fail him in any way. Hugging him to her suddenly, she wanted to kiss him, but he pushed her away.

"Don't you want Mommy to kiss you?" she asked. "Mommy loves her little boy-baby."

"You can kiss me if you read me a story."

But she rebelled at that. "No story tonight," she said. "You've been naughty to Mr. Campbell. You shouldn't be naughty like that to one of Mother's friends."

"I don't like him. I don't want him coming around here."

"But *why* don't you like him, Joey? He's very nice to you."

"He's too fat, that's why."

"You mean you only like thin people? It would be a strange kind of world if there were only thin people in it."

He was in bed now, propped up against the pillow. "Is Mr. Campbell coming back?" he asked, the wide

blue long-lashed eyes that hurt her heart staring blankly at her.

"Of course he's coming back, dear."

"When?"

"In a few minutes."

"That's why you won't read me a story, isn't it?"

"No, of course it isn't. I won't read you a story because you've been naughty today. Naughty little boys don't deserve stories."

He turned his face to the wall. "No, you're not telling me the truth. You won't read me a story because you'd rather be downstairs with Mr. Campbell."

She moved over closer to him. "Give Mommy a goodnight kiss."

"I want a story," he said without turning.

She stared for a while at his back — at the form of his little body in the blue pajamas. Finally, she asked, resignedly, "If I read you one page will you go right to sleep?"

"*The Little Red Fire Engine*," he said, jumping up and pulling the book from the bookcase.

And after she'd read the page, he was very good, he put his arms around her neck and kissed her. "Lie down with me for a minute, Mommy," he said. "Just till Mr. Campbell comes back."

She lay down beside him, her arms around him, her cheek against his, her ear alert for the sound of Tony's

footsteps on the porch. When Joey's breathing became regular she gently disengaged herself from him, got up, and tucked the covers snugly up around his chin. After one last lingering glance at the way a spray of blond hair, like a small hand, persisted in falling over his forehead, she turned off the light and went downstairs.

VI

In the kitchen, the roast, a few slices cut off the end, rested on top of the stove. The grease in the bottom of the pan had cooled and turned white.

In the dining room, the two unused plates and the carefully arranged silverware around them gleamed in the darkness on either side of the small vase of red roses, which were beginning to wilt.

In the living room, Lois lay curled in the corner of the sofa like a small animal seeking protection from the weather. She had been sleeping like this, her shoes knocked off on the floor and her silk-stockinged legs curled under her, for over an hour, but even now, awakening slowly, she didn't change her position.

Tony wasn't the first. Six months after her separation there had been Herb, too tall for her, too impossibly quiet for her, too much of a snob for her—a news announcer on the local radio station. Herb had called the whole thing off after he'd grown

angry because she wouldn't go on a week-end trip to the Indianapolis auto races with him. She could hear his voice on the phone even now saying, "You're just going to have to learn to separate yourself from that kid of yours once in a while, Lois, or you'll never have any life of your own." He hadn't called again—and she'd hoped nobody would ever call again. But then, a month later, she'd met Ted, the brother-in-law of a neighbor of hers, and he'd taken up some of her evenings in the period immediately after her divorce had come through, leaving quite suddenly, with no promises for the future, when his company had transferred him to its Chicago office. And just now there had been Tony; she could already prepare herself to start looking back on Tony. It annoyed her a little when she realized that of these three men, she'd chosen to sleep only with Herb; and he had certainly attracted her least of all. But perhaps it had happened like that because he'd been the first man to come into her life after her marriage had broken up, and she had slept with him in a kind of nihilistic rejection of everything that was finished with and behind her.

She had really begun to care about Tony; it wouldn't have been very much longer till they would have had a real affair. And now he was gone. In

the first hour of waiting here for his return she'd tried to worry herself with the thought that perhaps something terrible had happened to delay him. But it hadn't worked; she needed only to think about the huffy way he'd left to know that he had probably not even stopped at the drugstore for cigarettes, but had driven straight on back to town.

She felt utterly alone. She wanted to go up to bed, but couldn't force her legs to move off this sofa. She longed for a cigarette and stiffened in resentment at the thought that he hadn't even bothered to bring her a pack before he left for good. These two stale Martini glasses here before her: she wanted to sweep them off the table with the back of her hand. And yet she only sat here — stagnant, alone, slightly ill.

She came alert when she thought she heard Joey say something upstairs. He might only be talking in his sleep, but . . . So she roused herself at last and went out through the living room. She was already on the stairs when the phone began to ring.

"Hello, Lois?"

Should she just hang up or should she listen to what he had to say? She listened.

"Yes, Tony, what is it?"

"Lois . . . I'm drunk."

"Yes, that's quite evident, Tony."

"I couldn't come back tonight,

Lois. I meant to come back . . . but a man can take just so much."

She hardened. "So much of what, Tony?"

He was too drunk to pay any attention to her question. "You'll let that kid ruin your life, Lois. If I hadn't had a few drinks I wouldn't be telling you this, but somebody ought to tell you. You're not doing Joey a favor or yourself either when you let him take advantage of you like that. You're still young enough to have some fun, Lois. You ought to — Look, why don't you get a baby-sitter tonight?"

"What?"

"Get a baby-sitter tonight and I'll come around with the car in about fifteen minutes and pick you up."

She couldn't help the short laugh that escaped her. "A baby-sitter!" she said, and all her sudden hatred for him seemed to form a knot in her forehead. "So that's your solution — Fat Stuff!"

It had slipped out unconsciously, and she noted the unbelieving pause at the other end before she jammed down the receiver and went upstairs.

Joey lay on his side now, his right arm raised above his head as though he were throwing a baseball in his sleep. The warmth and meaning of her life flowed back into her veins as she went on into the room and stood gazing down at him.

He awoke with a start when she tucked the sheet up around him. "Mommy," he said, stretching up his arms.

She leaned over and let him embrace her.

"Mommy," he said sleepily, "stay here with me. Will you sleep with me tonight, Mommy, please?"

"Of course I will, darling," she whispered.

And when she came back from the bathroom and lay down beside him, she felt her spirit envelop him and embrace him, in the way that her arms were doing, and she felt the world outside slipping farther and farther away from her.

FIFTEENTH ANNIVERSARY

BY ETHEL BARNETT DE VITO

Sometimes it seemed to her he slipped his label
And husband, father, gone without a trace,
Would leave a brooding changeling in his place:
A stranger sitting at the breakfast table.
And yet, she thought, all those bound to each other,
Who wake and dine together, plan as one,
Who dream stretched side by side till night is done:
What do we ever know of one another?

Did not each mind hold strange forbidden fruit
As hers sometimes, when winds blew by the eaves
While she stood shaken that her sober root
Spawned thoughts like gold and scarlet flying leaves —
Let his leaves also blow in blowing weather,
Beneath the earth, their roots had grown together.