“I’ve Got Gloria” by ME Kerr

“Hello? Mrs. Whitman?”
“Yes?”
“I’ve got Gloria.”
“Oh, thank heaven! Is she all right?”
“She’s fine, Mrs. Whitman.”
“Where is she?”
“She’s here with me.”
“Who are you?”
“You can call me Bud.”
“Bud who?”
“Never mind that, Mrs. Whitman. I’ve got your little dog and she’s anxious to get back home.”
“Oh, I know she is. She must miss me terribly. Where are you? I’ll come and get her right away.”
“Not so fast, Mrs. Whitman. First, there’s a little something you must do.”
“Anything. Just tell me where to find you.”
“I’ll find you, Mrs. Whitman, after you do as I say.”
“What do you mean, Bud?”
“I mean that I’ll need some money before I get Gloria home safely to you.”
“Money?”
“She’s a very valuable dog.”
“Not really. I got her from the pound.”
“But she’s valuable to you, isn’t she?
“She’s everything to me.”
“So you have to prove it, Mrs. Whitman.”
“What is this?”

“A dognapping. I have your dog and you have to pay to have her returned safely to you.”
There was a pause.
I could just imagine her face – that face I hated ever since she flunked me. That mean, freckled face, with the glasses over those hard little green eyes, the small, pursed lips, the mop of frizzy red hair topping it all... Well, top this, Mrs. Whitman: I do not even have that nutsy little bulldog of yours. She is lost, just as your countless signs nailed up everywhere announce that she is... All I have is this one chance to get revenge, and I’m grabbing it!
Now her voice came carefully. “How much do you want?”
“A thousand dollars, Mrs. Whitman. A thou, in one-hundred dollar bills, and Gloria will be back drooling on your lap.”
“A thousand dollars?”
Got to you, didn’t I? Did your stomach turn over the way mine did when I saw that F in math?
“You heard me, Mrs. Whitman.”
“Are you one of my students?”
“Oh, like I’m going to tell you if I am.”
“You must be.”
“I could be, couldn’t I? You’re not everyone’s dream teacher, are you?”
“Please, don’t hurt my dog.”
“I’m not cruel by nature.”
I don’t take after my old man. He said he was sorry that I flunked math because he knew how much I was counting on the hike through Yellowstone this summer. He said maybe the other guys would take some photos so I could see what I was missing while I went to summer school to get a passing grade. “Gee, Scott,” he said, “what a shame, and now you won’t get an allowance, either, or have TV in your bedroom, or the use of the computer. But never mind, sonny boy,” he said, “there’ll
be lots to do around the house. I'll leave lists for you every day of things to be done before I get home."

Mrs. Whitman whined, "I just don’t have a thousand dollars. I don’t know where I’ll get so much money, either."

Sometimes I whined that way, and my mom would say, “Scotty, we wouldn’t be so hard on you if you’d only take responsibility for your actions. We tell you to be in at eleven pm and you claim the bus was late. We ask you to take the tapes back to Videoland and you say we never said to do it. You always have an excuse for everything! You never blame yourself.”

"Mrs. Whitman? I don’t mean to be hard on you but that’s the deal, see. A thou in hundreds."

“Just don’t hurt Gloria.”

“Gee, what a shame that you have to worry about such a thing. She’s such a sweet little dog, and I know she misses you because she’s not eating.”

“She doesn’t eat dog food, Bud. I cook for her.”

“That’s why she doesn’t eat, hmm? I don’t like to cook.”

“You could just put a frozen dinner in the microwave. A turkey dinner, or a Swanson’s pot roast. I’ll pay you for it.”

“A thousand dollars plus ten for frozen dinners? Is that what you’re suggesting?”

“Let me think. Please. I have to think how I can get the money.”

“Of course, you do. I’ll call you back, Mrs. Whitman, and meanwhile I’ll go to the store and get some Swanson’s frozen dinners.”

“When will you -”

I hung up.

I could hear Dad coming up the stairs.

“Scott?”

“Yes, sir?”

“I’m going to take the car in for an oil change. I want you to come with me.”

“I have some homework, sir.”

“I want you to come with me. Now.”

In the car, he said, “We need to talk.”

“What about it?”

“You have to make up the math grade. That you have to do. I’m sorry you can’t go to Yellowstone.”

“Yeah.”

“There’s not other way if you want to get into any kind of college. Your other grades are fine. But you need math... What’s so hard about math, Scott?”

“I hate it!”

“I did, too, but I learned it. You have to study.”

“Mrs. Whitman doesn’t like me.”

“Why doesn’t she like you?”

“She doesn’t like anyone but that bulldog.”

“Who’s lost, apparently.”

“Yeah.”

“But she wouldn’t deliberately flunk you, would she?”

“Who knows?”

“Do you really think a teacher would flunk you because she doesn’t like you?”

“Who knows?”

“Scott, you’ve got to admit when you’re wrong. I’ll give you an example. I was wrong when I said you couldn’t have an allowance or TV or use of the computer, et cetera. I was angry and I just blew! That was wrong. It wouldn’t have made it
any easier for you while you’re trying to get a passing grade in math. So I was wrong! I apologize and I take it back.”

“How come?”

“How come? Because I’m sorry. I thought about it and it bothered me. I’m a hothead, and I don’t like that about myself. Okay?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe that’s what’s wrong here.”

“What’s wrong where?”

“Between us.”

“Is something wrong between us?”

“Scotty, I’m trying to talk to you. About us. I want to work things out so we get along better.”

“Yeah.”

“Sometimes I do or say rash things.”

“Yeah.”

“I always feel lousy after.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Do you understand? I shouldn’t take things out on you. That’s petty. Life is hard enough. We don’t have to be mean and spiteful with each other. Agreed?”

“Yeah.” I was thinking about the time our dog didn’t come home one night. I couldn’t sleep. I prayed. When he got back all muddy the next morning, I broke into tears and told him, “Now you’re making me blubber like a baby.”

Dad was still on my case.

“Scott, I want you to think about why Mrs. Whitman flunked you.”

“I just told you: she doesn’t like me.”

“Are you really convinced that you’re good at math but the reason you failed was because she doesn’t like you?”

“Maybe.”

“Is she a good teacher?”

“She never smiles. She’s got these tight little lips and these ugly freckles.”

“So she’s not a good teacher?”

“I can’t learn from her.”

“Did you study hard?”

“I studied. Sure. I studied.”

“How many others flunked math?”

“What?”

“How many others failed math?”

“No one.”

“Speak up.”

“I said, I’m the only one.”

“So others learn from her despite her tight little lips and ugly freckles?”

“I guess.”

“Scotty, who’s to blame for your flunking math?”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay.”

“Who is to blame?”

“Me. Okay? I didn’t study that hard.”

He sighed and said, “There. Good. You’ve accepted the blame... How do you feel?”

“I feel okay.” I really didn’t, though. I was thinking about that dumb bulldog running loose somewhere, and about Mrs. Whitman worried sick now that she thought Gloria’d been dognapped.

Dad said, “I think we both feel a lot better.”

We sat around in the waiting room at the service centre. Dad read *Sports Illustrated*, but I couldn’t concentrate on the magazines there or the ballgame on TV. I was down. I knew what Dad meant when he’d told me he felt bad after he “blew” and that he didn’t like himself for it.

I kept glancing toward the pay phone. I stuck my hands in my pants pockets. I had a few quarters.
“I’m going to call Al and see what he’s doing tonight,” I said.
Dad said, “Wait until you get home. We’ll be leaving shortly.”
“I’m going to look around,” I said.
I didn’t know Mrs. Whitman’s number. I’d copied it down from one of the
Lost Dog signs and ripped it up after I’d called her. I hadn’t planned to follow up the
call, get money from her: nothing like that. I just wanted to give her a good scare.
I went over to the phone book and looked her up.
Then I ducked inside the phone booth, fed the slot a quarter, and dialled.
“Hello?”
“Mrs. Whitman? I don’t have your dog. I was playing a joke.”
“I know you don’t have my dog. Gloria’s home. The dog warden found her
and brought her back right after you hung up on me.”
I was relieved. At least she wouldn’t have to go all night worrying about
getting Gloria back.
“I was wrong,” I said. “It was petty. I’m sorry.”
“Do you know what you put me through, Scott Perkins?”
I just hung up.
I stood there with my face flaming.
“Scott?” My father was looking all over for me, calling me and calling me.
“Scott! Are you here? The car’s ready!”

All the way home, he lectured me on how contrary I was. Why couldn’t I
have waited to phone Al? What was it about me that made me just go ahead and do
something I was expressly told I shouldn’t do? “Just when I think we’ve gotten
someplace,” he said, “you turn around and go against my wishes.”
“Why?” he shouted.
I said, “What?” I hadn’t been concentrating on all he was saying. I was
thinking that now she knew my name – don’t ask me how – and now what was she
going to do about it?

“I asked you why you go against my wishes,” Dad said. “Nothing I say seems
to register with you.”
“It registers on me,” I said. “I just seem to screw up sometimes.”
“I can hardly believe my ears.” He was smiling. “You actually said sometimes
you screw up. That’s a new one.”
“Yeah,” I said. “That’s a new one.”
Then we both laughed, but I was still shaking, remembering Mrs. Whitman
saying my name that way.
When we got in the house, Mom said, “The funniest thing happened when
you were gone. The phone rang and this woman asked what number this was. I told
her, and she asked whom she was speaking to. I told her and she said,
‘Perkins…Perkins. Do you have a boy named Scott?’ I said that we did, and she said,
‘This is Martha Whitman. Tell him I’ll see him this summer. I’m teaching remedial
math.’”

I figured that right after I’d hung from calling her about Gloria, she’d dialled
*69. I’d heard you could do that. The phone would ring whoever called you last.
That was why she’d asked my mother what number it was and who was speaking.
Dad said, “You see, Scott, Mrs. Whitman doesn’t dislike you, or she wouldn’t
have called here to tell you she’d see you this summer.”
“I was wrong,” I said. “Wrong again.”
Oh, was I ever!