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Deborah O'Connor read English at Newnham College, Cambridge, before going on to become a television producer. Born and bred in the North-East of England, she now lives in East London with her husband and daughter.

MY HUSBAND'S SON

DEBORAH O'CONNOR

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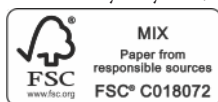
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For Alan, my huckleberry friend.

Prologue

He appears from behind the door like a gift. He is alone, his stare daydream-soft.

She sees a chance, steps forward and puts a finger to her lips in warning. Keep quiet. His gaze narrows. But he is not scared, not yet.

She hesitates. Despite everything, he is not hers to take. Then he smiles. Gap-toothed and cresting a thick patch of blond hair. His eyes are a dark, almost black, brown. A beautiful child. She reaches for him.

'Let's go.'

He tilts on his heel, wary.

Her hand around his wrist, she leads him into the corridor. She decides against the lift and heads for the stairs. Before they descend, she checks to see if they have been followed.

Soon the boy is slowing, asking to go back. She tightens her grip and they take the steps two at a time, the red lights flashing in the soles of his trainers. Still he protests. Cajolery abandoned, she half pulls, half carries him until finally they reach the ground floor and find themselves funnelled into a car park. Sheltered from sight by a shallow overhang, she releases her hold and tries to think. What to do next? She stole him on impulse. There is no plan.

While he nurses his wrist, she scans the horizon. In the near distance she can see the neat incision of dual carriageway curving

its way down through the landscape, while to the right is a small clump of houses. She decides on the carriageway. It is the riskiest of the two – between here and there is nothing but open ground; they will be exposed, easy to spot – but if they can make it across they might be able to lose themselves in amongst the small peaks on the other side.

She takes his wrist and urges him forward, through the grass. They make good progress, but the road is further than she thought. She increases the pace and soon the boy is stumbling, struggling to keep up. Each time she feels him about to lose his footing, she braces and yanks him into the air. He dangles from her hand and his feet lift off the ground. He rights himself, she drops him to the floor and they continue.

They're almost there. Ahead, the traffic roars. At the side of the road she stops to let him rest. There are tears on his face. She glances at the block from which they fled. They need to push on, but she does not move.

The boy senses an opportunity and asks gently to go back.

She considers the possibility. She could release him, let him retreat. He would be reunited with his family and although a small amount of confusion and distress would follow, it would be minimal, soon forgotten.

The boy realises polite negotiation is not working and starts to beg. He gulps down a sob and, for a second, his features contort into a familiar expression.

The arrangement of cheeks, brow, nose and chin is one she has seen before. It feels like finding a match, a key that fits. It seems to make his face shine extra bright.

She grabs his hand and assesses the flow of cars.

'Stay close.'

She waits for a lull in the traffic. As soon as a gap appears, she launches them both into the middle of the road. Then they are running, horns beeping, the air searing her lungs, as they try to make it across to the peaks on the other side, to safety.

1

The day I stumbled upon him was just like any other. I'd been out of town, at a sales presentation, and I was on my way home. I was tired and I wanted to get some wine to have with dinner and so, even though it wasn't the nicest of streets, I stopped at the first place I could: an off-licence.

The place had seemed normal from the outside, but inside was a different matter. A long, thin room, it was badly lit and only slightly wider than your average corridor. The shop was made stranger still by the fact that the till, alcohol, crisps, sweets and cigarettes were all securely displayed some distance from the door, behind a metal cage of brown wire squares.

I made my way to the opposite end of the room and I'd almost reached the counter when a man appeared behind the cage. He noticed me looking and gave it a rattle.

'It might not look pretty, but it works a treat. No shoplifting, no getting beaten up.'

He wore a sovereign ring on every finger and the curl of them through the cage made it look like he'd been blessed with an extra set of golden knuckles.

I laughed politely and peered through the holes, trying to see what was for sale, but then a movement behind the cage caught my eye. I peered closer.

Silhouetted by a single, weak, fluorescent light, I saw a small boy. He was in a shadowy corridor that led to the rear of the shop, rocking back and forwards on his heels. He leant forward, into the light, and I caught a glimpse of his face. And even though it was only a glimpse, my body responded instantly: my armpits blotting my shirt, my ribs fractious with air.

I steadied myself against the counter. I was seeing things. I must be.

I forced my attention back to the man.

'A bottle of . . .' But then I couldn't help myself and my eyes reached over his shoulder, to the boy.

My first instinct was to look for any signs of distress, but he seemed well cared for. Apple-cheeked, his jeans and T-shirt were smart, his blond hair clean and neatly shorn. I tried to work out how old he was. He seemed to be about eight, the same age Barney would've been by now. And then, as I always did whenever I calculated Barney's age, I immediately thought about what age Lauren would be if she were still around.

I realised that the man had followed my gaze to the now-empty doorway. I looked away as quickly as I could and was scrabbling to come up with something that would explain my interest in the back of his shop when he answered a question I hadn't asked.

'He's home sick with a cold.'

The off-licence's door-siren went and a woman wearing a fake Lacoste jumper pushed a pram up to the counter. Without asking what she wanted, the man hoisted himself off his stool and went to the vodka shelf, his hip jowls escaping from his too-tight Newcastle United shirt as he reached for her favoured brand. The woman

placed her money in the metal drawer through which all cash and booze was exchanged and, as he pulled the drawer forward, it made a satisfying 'shunk-shunk' noise. The customer snugged her vodka next to the baby, lumpish in his blankets, and directed the pram back out onto the street.

'A bottle of rosé?' I said, pretending to scour the shelves. I was desperate for another look, but I wanted to reassure the man that I wasn't bothered, that the child wasn't on my radar.

'Rosé?' It was as though he'd never heard the word before. 'Not much call for that kind of thing round here.' He sniffed. 'I might have some out the back.' He headed off towards a small room to the right of the counter.

Feeling calmer, I watched as the boy tiptoed out of the corridor and over to the confectionery. Positioning himself directly beneath the Dairy Milks, he placed a foot on the first display shelf and pulled himself up to the rack. He almost had one of the bars in his grasp when he realised I was watching. He froze, his unsupported leg dangling in mid-air. I gave him a wink, letting him know he was OK. Still, he hesitated, not sure whether I was to be trusted.

'I knew we had some somewhere.'

It was the man, returning with a dusty bottle of pink Jacob's Creek.

The boy took his chance, snatched a chocolate bar away from the pile and got down from the shelf unseen. He began to retreat into the corridor, pressing himself flat against the wall. He was almost free and clear when he made the mistake of shoving the chocolate into his jean pocket. The crackle of the wrapper pricked the man's ears and he turned round, whiplash fast.

'What are you doing out here? Stealing sweets again?'

The boy shook his head.

'I don't believe you,' said the man. 'Empty your pockets.'

Slowly, the boy reached his hand towards the pocket containing the chocolate bar.

I didn't want him to get in trouble so I said the first thing that came into my head.

'Champagne. The other thing I need is a bottle of champagne.'

The man turned back to me, the boy's crime forgotten.

'Champagne?' He licked his lips. 'Pricey stuff that.'

I thought about our overdraft. I should change it to something cheaper, but I didn't want to draw any more attention to myself than necessary.

The boy peeped out from behind the man. His eyes were the same dark brown as Jason's, his two front teeth wonky with a large gap in the middle.

I tried to think rationally. Maybe the only reason he seemed familiar was because I was looking at him through the prism of the cage. Maybe it was because its pixelated version of the world mirrored those blocky computer mock-ups the forensic artist had done of Barney at various future ages.

Jason had a line of the mock-ups Blu-Tacked to the walls in the spare room, the fakery of the pictures growing more and more obvious as the distance widened between the last real photo of Barney and the forensic artist's increasingly diluted guesswork. The first image had him sporting a childish bowl-cut, the second a tracksuit top zipped to his chin, and then the 'oldest' had him in a white open-necked shirt, his hair cropped and stiff with gel. In

all of the images his face wore the same half-smirk and dead eyes.

Was this him? Could it be?

It didn't matter what I thought. The one person who would know immediately was his father.

I looked through the cage and round to where the man had disappeared into the storeroom. I could hear the chink of bottles being moved as he hunted for champagne. Jason was teaching forty miles away, at a community college. If I called him now, he could make his excuses and be here within the hour. I was reaching for my phone when the man returned to the counter.

'Here you go,' he said, brandishing a bottle of Moët.

I placed the money in the metal drawer and tried for one last look. The boy was sat cross-legged on the floor, oblivious, tucking into his chocolate booty.

Grabbing the carrier of bottles, I backed towards the exit, unsteady in my heels, and tested behind for the door handle. Outside, in the daylight, I half-ran, half-walked to the car.

I tried to straighten my thoughts. My heart felt as fat and red with blood as if it had been my own daughter back there, but finding Barney so close to home after all this time was outlandish. I didn't want to bring Jason here on some wild goose chase, but my reaction to the child had been so immediate, so visceral. That could not, in good faith, be discounted. Still, I hesitated. Should I just call it in to the police?

In the car I dialled Jason's number, but his phone went through to voicemail. Of course. He kept it turned off in class. I started the engine. The man in the off-licence didn't seem to have realised that I'd recognised the boy, but I couldn't be sure. For all I knew,

right this minute he might be bundling him out the back of the shop and into a van; already moving the child on to somewhere else, somewhere dark and secret that we'd never be able to find. There might not be much time.

I'd go to the college and talk to Jason in person. I'd persuade him to come back here with me now, before it was too late.

2

I barrelled down the college hallways, the tick of my heels loud on the herringbone parquet. I reached Jason's classroom and approached the door's small, square window. Inside he was writing on a blackboard, his students sitting around him in a semicircle. He'd just said something that had made them all laugh.

He looked up from his notes and, on reflex, I took a step back away from the window.

The drive had dampened my fervour.

I kept thinking about probabilities.

Ten days earlier there had been another setback in what was now a five-year search for my husband's son. A British family on holiday in Istanbul had seen a boy matching Barney's age-progression photo, begging with a street gang in Taksim Square. It had been a credible lead and everyone had got their hopes up, especially Jason. But within a few days the police were able to confirm the child's connection to a local Turkish family. Jason had been crushed.

After that, what was more likely? That I'd just happened to chance upon Barney? Or that, because of recent events, I'd wanted so badly for someone, anyone, to find him that I'd projected him onto the next child I'd come across?

Jason asked for a volunteer. A track-suited man in his mid-forties came forward and got down on the ground. Jason knelt beside

him and, after lifting the man's knee into a right angle, he laid his arm out wide and gently tilted him into the recovery position.

Wearing a blue-and-grey-checked flannel shirt, grey jeans and white Converse low-tops, Jason wore his blond hair undercut with the top kept long and gelled back, away from his forehead. He had a habit of rubbing his hand against the short undercut when he was worried: the friction seemed to calm his nerves.

I tapped on the glass and he looked up. Maybe the last few weeks had skewed my judgement, but I couldn't ignore my gut. I needed a second opinion.

He gave me a questioning frown-smile, trying to work out what I was doing here. I beckoned him out to the corridor and, after setting the class an exercise to be going on with, he made his excuses.

'Everything OK?' he asked as he shut the door. He looked behind me, as though there might be someone there who could offer an explanation for my presence. 'Has something happened?'

'Everything is fine. Just fine. It's just – I was just –' I'd been holding my breath and the words sounded more hurried than I'd intended. 'I know this is going to sound weird. I was in this shop. There was a kid, behind the counter.' I forced myself to say it out loud. 'He looked like Barney.'

His eyes widened but then, within seconds, he recovered his composure.

'OK.' His voice was calm. Five years of countless disappointments had left him cautious.

'I want you to come and have a look. Now.'

'Now?' He looked back at the classroom.

'If we wait then there's no guarantee he'll be out in the open like this again.'

'You're really fired up.'

'I, of all people, wouldn't come to you like this unless I thought it was important. You know that.'

He took a breath and exhaled slowly.

'No stone unturned, right?'

I smiled. This was his favourite mantra.

'Exactly.'

'Let me finish up.' He checked the door window. The students were getting restless. 'I was nearly done anyway. Then I'm all yours.'

'Thank you.' We hugged, my embrace a combination of relief and gratitude, and he returned to the classroom.

It didn't take long for him to assign homework and gather his things and then we were on our way, towards the exit that led to the car park.

Outside, the day had finished with a scorch, the mid-September heat quilting itself over the town, the only sounds the bark-bark of a tetchy dog and the half-hearted wails of a distant siren.

I waited until Jason got into his Golf before walking over to where I'd parked.

Once inside my car, I looked back over to him, ready to coordinate our departure. The sun was shining directly onto his windscreen, a blinding white glare. He hadn't shaved in days and his stubble glittered in the light. I watched as he reached his hand up, ready to flip down the visor, but then he paused. Lifting his face towards the heat, he closed his eyes. It looked like he was offering himself up to the sky.

3

We reached the off-licence, parked and came together on the pavement. Jason took in the tramp asleep on a bench and the teenage boy trying to balance pushing a pram with keeping control of two unruly Staffordshire bull terriers. Swearing loudly, he was directing his curses evenly between the crying baby and the misbehaving dogs.

‘What were you doing in this neck of the woods?’

‘I had an area-manager meeting, in Gateshead.’

I took his hand and led him over to the entrance. An illuminated blue sign protruded over the width of the shop’s scuffed façade, announcing the off-licence’s name – Wine City – in a cartoonish red font. Wires looped and dangled to the right of the sign’s edging, overspill from the electrics within.

‘The lighting in there isn’t great, but it’s good enough.’ I tried to sound reasonable. ‘You’ll need to direct your attention out back. There’s a corridor.’

For a brief moment I considered the possibility that, if the boy was indeed Barney, his captor might recognise Jason. If that happened, then the man would know we were onto him. It was a risk, but one I decided was worth taking.

Jason pushed back his shoulders and lifted his chin. He didn’t seem to harbour any real hope that the child inside was his son.

'Here goes.'

Once the door had swung shut, I took up a position to the left of the shop and waited, braced for the reaction I was sure would come.

Alone, I began to imagine how the rescue might play out if Jason was able to make a positive ID. How the police would force their way in through the front door with a battering ram, how they would disperse inside to secure the area, how Jason would follow behind and find Barney shivering and crying in the corner and how he would scoop him up into his arms and to safety.

But then it seemed like no sooner had Jason gone inside than the door was swinging open and he was back on the street, clutching a soft drink.

'Well?'

'Not Barney,' he said, holding his free palm out flat in apology. He went to head back to his car and I grabbed his elbow.

'Wait. You don't think there's even a slight similarity?'

'He looks nothing like the mock-ups. The bone structure, his nose. It goes against everything the forensic artists have always said.'

'What about the bloke behind the counter?' I asked, unwilling to give up quite that easily. 'He seemed dodgy.'

'There was no bloke. It was a woman. Maybe he'd finished his shift?'

I felt a tightening at the base of my skull. The beginnings of a headache. I'd thought that once I'd had his verdict I'd be able to put my mind at rest, but now I found that wasn't the case.

'Jason, please,' I said, 'take another look.'

He studied my face, as though searching for an answer. Unable

to find what he was looking for, he sighed and, apparently deciding to humour me all the same, returned inside.

Again I waited. I pictured his eyes roaming over the child's hair, build and facial features and held my breath, certain that this time, he would see it.

He seemed to be taking much longer. I let my heart race. Maybe he'd had a rethink. But as he exited the shop he shook his head.

The tightness at the base of my skull began to spread across the rest of my scalp.

'I'm so sorry.' I reached for him but he shrugged me away. 'I thought it was him, truly.'

'No harm done. You did the right thing.' His voice was soft but I could tell he was upset. 'And I know you meant well.' He set his gaze forward, towards where our cars were parked. 'But now I'm tired. Can we please go home?'