

The Spaces between Us

I'd only gone in to get shelter from the downpour.

"Sir, are you looking for something in particular?" Her name badge – *Louise* – was pinned to her large chest at an angle, but I resisted the urge to straighten it. A glance revealed no engagement or wedding ring, and as her blinking milky-blue eyes stared at me with an expression I couldn't read; a wave of nausea rose up from my stomach. I observed her brain going into overdrive: *male, late 50's, alone, business suit. Aha. Quick stop on his way to work...*

"Just looking... thanks."

Her steely gaze was in contrast with her toothy smile. Rain had seeped into a tiny split in the sole of my shoe. I hoped she'd move away but she inched closer and leant into me with a conciliatory air. "There's almost *too* much choice," her voice morphed into a stage whisper. "Isn't there?"

Until I backed away from her and nearly knocked over a pyramid display of nappies; I didn't even know which shop I was in. It turned out to be Mothercare.

"Boy or girl?" Confidence shimmered off her like heat. Her verbal muscles flexed as she prepared to demonstrate her extensive knowledge and honestly, I had no idea I was going to lie until the word just dropped out. "Boy..."

"And how old is your..." her mouth twisted as if she were sucking on a sweet and wasn't sure yet if she liked the taste. "...Grandson?" Her voice rose at the end which I found slightly comical. I gazed at the platform next to me where a ginormous toy panda wobbled.

“Eight weeks.” I managed a small smile.

She reached up without turning round and pulled a pair of blue booties off a rack behind her. “These are our best seller.” As she handed them to me, our fingertips met and a spark of electricity passed between us. Her giggle transformed her in an instant.

“And with winter coming....” she added, in case I hadn’t already decided. A smear of fuchsia lipstick had worked its way onto one of her front teeth and I was glad of something to fixate on.

“Do you have a piccy?” Her eyes brimmed with a hunger that I recognised.

I patted down my pockets. “Oh... not on me.”

A shadow crossed her face, but when she asked me questions anyway, the lies came without thinking; they came like they were the truth. Yes, he was only a few weeks old, it was tiring but... no, he was too little, we’d not seen many smiles yet... his name?... His name... was... Daniel. My hand trembled when I took my change.

I telephoned work and told them I wasn’t feeling well. I was the boss so it wasn’t a big deal.

Safely at home, sitting on my bed, I took the booties out of the bag. I turned them over and over in my hands; impossibly small, unbelievably soft. I rubbed one against my cheek, inhaling their newness, before stuffing them under the mattress, as if they were pornography. I wandered from room to room of the house which was too big for only me. When I’d bought it thirty years ago, I never imagined it wouldn’t be filled with children, and a wife. I kept waiting for my perfect family to come into being, but somehow the years

passed, and slowly it dawned on me that it might never happen. I never moved because the house was close to work and the area was desirable. But the boat sailed without me. Childless women are flooded with sympathy and support: egg donors, IVF, mumsnet, netmums, but where's my crisis line? How am I supposed to grieve for the family I *know* I'm destined to have?

My attention to my career paid off and these days I'm drowning in money. I have more money than one man could ever need; and absolutely no-one to share it with or leave it to. I donate to Barnardos, Save the Children, NSPCC; they all get a generous donation. I am a 'dad' of sorts – to six children in Africa; but still; that doesn't satisfy *my* hunger.

A tiny germ of an idea started to grow, and then blossom. The seed had been sown years ago. As my plan developed, I was confident that as long as I laid the groundwork, I'd have no cause to worry. People are always more concerned with the minutiae of their own lives rather than anyone else's. This could be the fresh start I craved, and once it was done, perhaps I'd move house after all. Money can buy most things and those who say it can't buy happiness just aren't rich enough.

Later that afternoon the sky was clear. I changed and went into the garden. In the shed, I lifted down the secateurs and the trowel off their pegs, ready for a spot of gardening. Kneeling at the flowerbeds with my eyes closed, the sun warmed my eyelids. I worked quietly for a long while, digging out the dandelions and untangling the bindweed. And even though aquilegia in bloom looks quite pretty; it had to go. I heard Bob's lawnmower. I could sow some groundwork now. I dusted the dirt from my knees and leant against the garden fence which was shoulder height.

“There’s likely to be a bit of noise round here soon.”

Bob, a quiet, retired golf enthusiast, wound his lawnmower lead up slowly. “Noise?” He moved closer to his side of the fence and frowned. “You’re not getting a dog?”

“Dog? No.”

Bob’s grin revealed nicotine-stained teeth. “Having a birthday bash?” He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply.

“No. I’m not a fan of parties.” I started back across the lawn towards the house and picking up my garden tools I said casually, over my shoulder. “There’ll be a baby.”

“Got yourself in a spot of bother, at your age?” He cackled to himself, highly amused.

I was nearer the house now than the fence. I stopped and turned towards him. He stopped smiling.

“Sarah, my eldest, is off to Australia with work for a bit.”

Bob rubbed the back of his sunburnt neck. “Didn’t even know you had kids to be honest, Jim.” He smiles sheepishly.

This is what I was counting on; not really knowing your neighbours.

“Well, she doesn’t like coming down this way.”

Bob looked briefly interested; here was something to relate down the social club later, you could tell. “Where’s the babies dad?”

“She’s divorced.”

“Oh.” He nodded then and shambled off towards his conservatory. I was no longer the mysterious neighbour who turned down annual BBQ invitations. I was just another bachelor with whom he shared gardening tips; living an ordinary life with a dull history; kids and divorce; nothing exceptional.

I slept with the booties every night for a week. They were comforting against my face.

For weeks, walking to and from work, all I could focus on was new-borns wailing. Small, furry toys dangling out of prams, fecund women heaving themselves around, *Mother & Baby* magazines on newsagents’ stands. I spent my weekends browsing baby shops; my fingers lingering over Jellycat blue bunnies and floppy-limbed monkeys. Whenever I had a business meeting in a nearby town, I stopped in a baby shop and at each place, my story grew. The details became fleshed out: croup, teething, nappy rash, they all became clear in my mind. I commented on stranger’s children at bus stops, ‘How cute! How old?’ and after an initial reluctance, once the women had gazed at my Rolex watch and leather attaché briefcase, gold cuff links and suit, they relaxed and were only too keen to share and advise. That’s all they really wanted, especially when the babies were small. A chance to talk about it; motherhood. They told me more than Gina Ford and Miriam Stoppard put together. I was recommended Aston’s teething powders, Huggies over Pampers, Halo’s and Horns hypo-allergenic body wash... and I digested the information as a starving man would food. They were all suddenly so interested. I loved seeing the memory time-shift within them; their eyes misting over as they remembered nuzzling new-borns.

All the men I work with are fathers, or are about to become them *again* with their subsequent wives. The screensavers of their grandchildren taunt me with the absence of my own. There *have* been women who were interested, but none of them would complement me

as a parent. I've never had that spark; the pang of recognition my father described when he met my mother. Fostering or adopting was never an option; the process was too long, too invasive.

I needed to be in Scotland on business. So afterwards I spent time around North Lanarkshire, getting a feel for the place. I knew this was my chance; far from home, with a rented car. If I was patient and watchful, I was sure an opportunity would present itself. And on a quiet Saturday morning in Larkhall, it did. A thin anxious-looking woman left a buggy outside a corner off-licence; just for a moment. Who does that? They don't deserve to be a parent. There was no-one else around. I watched from my parked car on the corner as she went inside. He was asleep in the buggy. It had to be him. I felt something tug at me inside. I'd found him; my boy.

I was surprised at how easy it was. I wasn't scared. I got out of my car and strolled across the road. The buggy straps slipped easily off his shoulders. I held him close and quickly walked back to my car. He stirred but didn't wake. With shaking hands, I buckled him into the car seat I'd bought and drove carefully away, and that was that. In my rear view mirror, no-one screamed or waved. She hadn't even come out of the off-licence.

I always knew the child would be six months or older. I never wanted to deprive a tiny baby of his mother; especially if it was breastfeeding. Robert Winston says those first six months are crucial to development, but after that? That's where nurture can take over. He'll have a better life with me, he'll want for nothing. I know what I'm doing. I just don't know how long I've got. But then, does any parent, really? Now that I've taken redundancy, I know I've got more time than most.

I must admit, the ride home was a blur. I remember stopping off at a service station to give him his first feed. I kept him in his car seat. He guzzled the 9oz of formula easily and was clearly used to taking a bottle. I was careful to keep the teat filled at the top, holding the bottle at an angle so as not to induce wind in the little fella. The nappy change in the toilets wasn't as simple as the Pampers adverts made it look though. I went through half a pack of wet wipes trying to clean him up.

When we get home it's late. I struggle inside with the car seat, which weighs a ton, and feel a rush of relief when I finally close the front door behind me. In the living room, settled in a vibrating chair, Daniel regards me warily, but he's not crying, yet. I dangle a rusk in front of him and he grabs for it. It's probably time to defrost the Annabel Karmel sweet potato and lamb casserole. A bit of bonding first I think, so I make my hand dance inside my gorilla glove puppet and am rewarded with gurgles, coos... smiles. My whole life's been leading up to this moment. He's got brown eyes; like me. They're like melting Minstrels.

Throughout my early forties all I heard at work Christmas parties, was: 'When are you going to settle down?' and every time I heard it, I wilted inside. Unhappily-married women, on their third glass of Chablis, would crowd around me. The Christmas tree lights reflected off their sparkly earrings and sequinned dresses gave me a migraine. They whispered to each other as I walked away; their eyes following me like I was prey.

By my mid-fifties, they'd stopped asking.

Missing children spark frantic nationwide searches. And this is a baby. The media will be all over it. If I'm going to keep him then I'll have to act quickly. He's got lots of curly blonde hair which I'll need to cut and dye. He's feminine, with his huge eyes and full lips.

He must be about seven months old; he can sit up unaided and his t-shirt reads 6-9 months. I prepare another bottle. The Miriam Stoppard book sits open on the kitchen counter; although I don't need it since I committed most of the information to memory long ago.

I've transformed one of my spare rooms into a nursery, hung the jungle print wallpaper myself. Rattles and teethingers and toys bulge out of Mothercare bags. The assistant Louise and I have become quite friendly over the past few months. She was extremely helpful when I explained I'd be looking after him, since my daughter would be abroad with work.

Daniel's face slowly turns red, like he's holding his breath and his fists are in tight little bunches. His eyes are glazed. My heart constricts but he just farts loudly and we both squeal in relief. He reveals toothless gums at me, flapping his arms at his sides. I gaze in awe but his smiles quickly fade and he cries almost constantly for over two hours. The noise is one I cannot block out and with a sudden realisation I know that from this point forward, my life is forever changed. I rock and bounce him but it takes hours for him to fall asleep. I'm not sure it's anything like I thought it would be. With his cries and snuffles, it's obvious he's missing something, aware things are different. But it's alright. We've got a lifetime to bond.

I creep downstairs and turn on the television. On the BBC news there's a huge picture of him with phone numbers and tweets across the bottom of the screen. His real name does not suit him. It isn't Daniel. And now here *she* is, here she comes; the Mum. Tall and willowy; etched from soft smudged lines, panicky fear and worry bleeding out of her. Behind her is Dad, stout with jet black hair and a beer belly. The arrogant angle of his chin is erased now and his mouth jerks like he's broken inside. The detective makes an appeal. "No questions, just please return him." He's lying. There would be questions. There would be

punishment. There would be help offered. I don't want any of those. I kneel in front of the screen and stroke it with my fingers. I can answer his questions from here.

"So, Detective. If I told you my childhood sweetheart terminated twins just before she left me, what would you think? How would you feel if I revealed that I used to be happily married, until our son died? He was stillborn; or he was three. Maybe he was seven, twelve, twenty-two. He was murdered, or had a car accident, committed suicide. Actually, he drowned, or perhaps he's in prison. My ex-wife was an alcoholic, a drug addict, a religious zealot, a cheat. I was adopted, abandoned, abused. Is any of this true? And would it matter, really? Isn't it enough that I have this love to give? All this love, but never the right recipient. Do I have your sympathy yet? Or only your contempt? I'll take anything. Any kind of acknowledgment would be great. I'm not a bad man."

I turn the television off and go upstairs to the nursery. I stand over the cot and watch Daniel sleep. He lies on his tummy, his arms and legs spread out. I can't remember if it's dangerous for them to sleep on their fronts, so I turn him gently onto his side. His tiny chest rises and falls. The dummy that I'd resorted to has fallen out. I stare at my boy and hold my breath, for finally, here he is. I can't believe it. It feels like I've been waiting for this forever. I've never seen a baby so close up before. What a perfect miniature of a person... all that potential...

The next morning Mothercare is quiet; but we're there early. I park the buggy in front of a display of cuddly farm animals.

“Hello again.” Louise says. Daniel wriggles forward in his buggy and waves a cloth book at her. She leans down and smiles warmly at him. “Hello Danny-boy.” He gives her a winning smile, clearly loving the sound of a woman’s voice.

“He’s here then.” She stares at me like we share a secret, or a private joke. “Oh, there’s definitely a family resemblance.”

“We’re off to the park later on. We’ve got some bread to feed the ducks.” I indicated the plastic carrier bag hanging from the buggy handles.

She doesn’t look at me, but smiles at Daniel and speaks in a sing-song baby voice; loving and tender. Her blue eyes are kindly. I’d not noticed how long her eyelashes were before.

“Going to the park? I like to feed the duckie-wuckies too. Especially on my lunch break. It’s a date. I’ll see you there at 1pm.”

She walks briskly back over to the tills.

Staring after her, I lean into the buggy and tuck in Daniel’s blanket and wonder what she sees when she looks at my boy.

My boy who will never will be my boy; whose name is not, and never will be, Daniel.