

Lost and Found

Falling into step with the boy, Thisman draws close and whispers in a voice only for him. Says, "I wish I had a little boy just like you. I wish you were my own," and the boy believes it, every single word.

He is lost, but not in the way he has been taught to be. Not in a supermarket; not in a shopping mall. There are no police officers or security guards to whom he can give his name and address. There is no one to page his parents over a loudspeaker to come and get him. None of the clocks where they go give the correct time and there are no calendars to mark the days. He never knows where or when he is. He remembers little of how he came to be with Thisman. He remembers only: being pulled into a car; waking up and finding himself tied to a chair in an unrecognizable room of an unfamiliar house; Thisman sitting nearby, watching and waiting; the television beside Thisman showing a movie with two naked women coiled around each another and writhing like snakes; Thisman predicting he would be a fast learner- pointing to the women, saying he would learn to do the same.

They never stay in any one place too long. They get into the car and Thisman drives. The boy is given something to drink before they leave and he never wakes until they have made it. Where they are is always secret. Sometimes it is a hotel room and they stay for weeks. Sometimes it is a borrowed house to which Thisman has the keys and they stay just long enough for the food in the fridge to spoil. In the borrowed house, Thisman feeds him soda and Cheetos for breakfast. The boy asks for cereal, milk and juice because that is what his parents give him; that is what he knows. When he mentions his parents, Thisman grows angry, cuts him off, says, "You're my little boy. I'm your father now." But Thisman looks nothing like the boy's father and-besides-his father never touches him that way.

Hardly ever is the boy left alone. He and Thisman are together everywhere they go. Unlike his parents who woke him every day only to leave

him-feeding him, dressing him, rushing him only to rid themselves of him, dropping him off with strangers paid to care, and later depositing him at school in a classroom full of other left-behind boys and girls, Thisman wants him near all the time. If Thisman has a name, the boy doesn't know it. Has never been told it. Has been told not to ask. Has been told he asks too many questions. Thisman says that from now on the boy must call him Dad. If Thisman must leave, he ties the boy to a chair-twining ropes across his thighs and under the seat, across his chest and torso, and over his hands crossed at the wrists-until he returns. "Stay put," he says, as if the boy could do anything else.

Only once does Thisman forget to bind him. They are in a motel near an airfield-the boy can hear the planes as they take off and land-when Thisman decides to shower and leave the boy free. The boy waits until he hears the water running before he tries to call home. He lifts the phone's receiver and dials the only number he knows by heart. As soon as the voice says hello, the boy whispers, "I'm your son."

Someone not his parents asks, "Who is this?"

The boy says, "Come get me."

The listener hangs up. The boy does not guess that Thisman can play havoc with the phone and rearrange the numbers so that nothing matches up. Guessing the truth would only fuel the fire of his fear.

From there on out, it's easy for the boy to believe what Thisman says. And why shouldn't he? After all, his parents have never come. No one in his family wants him anymore; honestly, they never did. His parents are happy now, so much happier without him. Glad to be rid of him, they've moved on with their lives. Now they have only one child to care for, one less mouth to feed. They now spend less money on cereal and save on presents come Christmas. Now there is one less boy to whine and beg as they push the shopping cart down the aisles of the supermarket, one less child to distract them. They wouldn't want him now anyway, since he's no longer a good boy. Thisman is the only one who wants him; Thisman is the only one who loves him; Thisman is the only one who cares. The boy knows these things because Thisman tells him so, his words a litany the

boy hears so often he thinks they are the thoughts inside of his own head.

Once, during his predictions, Thisman put his hand on the boy's shoulder and said, "Your little brother doesn't even remember you anymore. He thinks he's an only child. He doesn't remember a thing about having you for a brother." He'd squeezed the boy's shoulder and squinted into the distance as if he could see past the thick motel curtains and the dirty windows that were sealed shut, past the motel parking lot that he had already checked for out of town plates, past it all and straight into the boy's home-past his front door and the foyer where he always left his toys and on through the swinging door and into the kitchen and dining room where his mother sat feeding his brother. He doesn't ask how Thisman knows he has a baby brother. It confirms what he suspects. Thisman knows all; Thisman can see all things; Thisman's threats are not idle. If Thisman says that he'll kill the boy's family unless the boy behaves, the boy knows it to be so.