When I Found You

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Part One

Nathan McCann



2 October 1960

The Day He Found You in the Woods

Nathan McCann stood in his dark kitchen, a good two hours before dawn. He flipped on the overhead light, halfway hoping to see the coffeemaker all set up with water and grounds and waiting to be plugged in and set to percolating. Instead he saw the filter basket lying empty in the dish drain, looking abandoned and bare.

Why he always expected otherwise, he wasn't sure. It had been years since Flora set up coffee for him on these early mornings. Decades since she rose early with him to serve fried eggs and orange juice and toast.

Quietly, so as not to wake her, he took a box of oat flake cereal down from the cupboard, then stood in the cold rush of air from the icebox and poured skim milk into a yellow plastic bowl.

You don't have to be so quiet, he thought to himself. Flora was in her bedroom at the far end of the hall with

the door closed. But he *was* quiet, always had been in such situations, and felt unlikely to change his pattern now.

As he sat down at the cool Formica table to eat his cereal, he heard Sadie, his curly-coated retriever, awake and ready to go, excited by the prospect of a light on in the house before sunrise. He sat listening to the periodic ringing of the chain-link of her kennel run as she jumped up and hit it with her front paws. Born and bred for just such a morning as this, Sadie recognized a good duck-hunt at its first visible or audible indication.

He often wished he could bring her into the house with him, Sadie who gave so readily of her time and attention. But Flora would have none of it.

Nathan stood in the cool autumn dark, a moment before sunrise, his shotgun angled up across his shoulder.

He insisted that Sadie obey him.

He called her name again, cross with her for forcing him to break the morning stillness, the very reason he had come. In the six years he'd owned the dog, she had never before refused to come when he called.

Remembering this, he shined his big lantern flashlight on her. In the brief instant before she squinted her eyes and turned her face from the light, he saw something, some look that would do for an explanation. In that instinctive way a man knows his dog and a dog

knows her man, she had been able to say something to him. She was not defying his judgment, but asking him to consider, for a moment, her own.

'You must come,' she said by way of her expression. 'You must.'

For the first time in the six years he'd owned her, Nathan obeyed his dog. He came when she called him.

She stood under a tree, digging. But she was not digging in that frantic way dogs do, both front feet flying in rhythm. Instead she gently pushed leaves aside with her muzzle, and occasionally with one front paw.

He couldn't see around her, so he pulled her off by the collar.

'OK, girl. I'm here now. Let me see what you've got.'

He shined the light on the mound of fallen leaves. Jutting out from the pile was an unfathomably small – yet unmistakably human – foot.

'Dear God,' Nathan said, and set the flashlight down.

He scooped underneath the lump with both gloved hands at once, lifted the child up to him, blew leaves off its face. It was wrapped in a sweater – a regular adult-sized sweater – and wore a tiny, well-fitted, multi-colored knit cap. It could not have been more than a day or two old.

He felt he would know more if he could hold the flashlight and the child at the same time.

He pulled off one glove with his teeth and touched

the skin of its face. It felt cool against the backs of his fingers.

'What kind of person would do such a thing?' he said quietly. He looked up to the sky as if God were immediately available to answer that question.

The sky had gone light now, but just a trace. Dawn had not crested the hill but lay beyond the horizon somewhere, informally stating that it planned to come to stay.

He set the child gently on the bed of leaves and looked more closely with the flashlight. The child moved its lips and jaw sluggishly, a dry-mouthed gesture, as if mashing something against its palate, or, in any case, wishing it could.

'Dear God,' Nathan said again.

He had not until that moment considered the possibility that the child might be alive.

He left his shotgun in the nest of leaves, because he needed both hands to steady the child's body against his, hold the head firmly to his chest. He and his dog sprinted for the station wagon.

Behind them, dawn broke across the lake. Ducks flew unmolested. Forgotten.

At the hospital, two emergency-room workers sprang into rapid, jerky motion when they saw what Nathan held. They set the infant on a cart, a speck in the middle of an ocean, and unwrapped the sweater. A boy, Nathan

saw. A boy still wearing his umbilical cord, a badge of innocence.

As they ran, rolling the cart alongside, a doctor caught up and pulled off the knit cap. It fell to the linoleum floor unnoticed. Nathan picked it up, stowed it in a zippered pocket of his hunting vest. It was so small, that cap; it wouldn't cover Nathan's palm.

He moved as close to the door of the examining room as he felt would be allowed.

He heard the doctor say, 'Throw him out in the woods on an October night, then give him a nice warm sweater and a little hand-knit hat to hold in his body heat. Now that's ambivalence.'

Nathan walked down the hall and bought a cup of hot coffee from a vending machine. It was indeed hot, but that's all that could be said for it.

He stood for several minutes in front of the coffee machine, gazing into its shiny metal face as if looking at a television set, or out a window. Or into a mirror. Because, in fact, he could see a vague, slightly distorted reflection of himself there.

Nathan was not a man given to eyeing himself for extended moments in mirrors. Shaving was one thing, but to look into his own eyes would cause him to demur, much the way he would if looking into the eyes of another. But the image was just ill-defined enough to cause him no stress or embarrassment.

So he stood for a moment, sipping the dreadful coffee, allowing himself to take in the evidence of his own sentience. Feeling, in a way he could not have explained, that some history was being shaped, the importance of which could not be fully estimated.

Something had been set in motion, he allowed himself to think, that could never, and perhaps should never, be reversed.

When he had finished the coffee, he rinsed out the cup at the water fountain and refilled it with fresh water.

He walked back out to the station wagon to offer Sadie a drink.

Twenty or thirty minutes later the doctor came out of that room.

'Doctor,' Nathan called, and ran down the hall. The doctor looked blank, as if he could not recall where he'd seen Nathan before. 'I'm the man who found that baby in the woods.'

'Ah, yes,' the doctor said. 'So you are. Can you stay a few minutes? The police will want to speak with you. If you have to go, please leave your phone number at the desk. I'm sure you understand. They'll want all the details they can get. To try to find who did this thing.'

'How is the boy?'

'What kind of shape is he in? Bad shape. Will he survive? Maybe. I don't promise, but he's a fighter.

Sometimes they're stronger than you can imagine at that age.'

'I want to adopt that boy,' Nathan said.

He felt more than a little bit stunned to hear himself say those words.

First of all, he had not really known this to be the case. At least, not in words. Not in an identifiable sense. It was as if he had told the doctor and himself in one broad stroke. And, secondly, it was unlike him to share his thoughts easily with others, especially if he had not had sufficient time to mull them over, grow accustomed to them.

It seemed this was a morning of unlimited firsts.

'If he survives, you mean.'

'Yes,' Nathan said. Already stung by the gravity of the warning. 'If he survives.'

'I'm sorry,' the doctor said. 'Adoption would not be my department.'

He told the story in earnest detail to the two policemen when they arrived and took his statement, careful to stress that the real hero was sitting out in the back seat of his station wagon.

'Baby'd be dead if it wasn't for you,' the more vocal of the two policemen said. He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, the type who seemed to rely more on brawn than intellect to guide him through this life. Normally Nathan would have been intimidated and

repelled by such a man, law officer or not. So it raised a strange and conflicted set of emotions when the policeman spoke to him as a hero.

'And Sadie,' Nathan said. 'My dog. She's a curly-coated retriever. She's a remarkable animal.'

'Right. Look. We know you've got stuff to do, but we need you to show us the exact crime scene.'

'No inconvenience,' Nathan said. 'I was on my way back there now, to retrieve my shotgun.'

They began walking toward the hospital parking lot together.

'I want to adopt that boy,' Nathan said. Not so much to bare his soul, but in hopes of being steered in the right direction. He felt an unfamiliar sense of haste, as if something could slip away from him if he didn't hurry and pin it down.

'We couldn't tell you nothing about that,' the policeman replied.

Nathan wisely resisted the impulse to correct his grammar.

He would never have found the spot the first time without the help of his dog, as stated. That much was a given. Now he realized he likely could not find it again without her. Not for the sake of his shotgun, and not for the purposes of the law.

Initially he left her in the car, worried that she might in some way disturb the crime scene. Or that

the policemen would somehow think she might.

It never occurred to him that he could not walk, in a direct line, back to the scene of such a momentous discovery.

For twenty minutes or so he walked around in a circle, noting that every tree looked very much like every other. He should have been paying better attention, he told himself. Perhaps even to say he berated himself would not have been stating it too strongly. He prided himself on the careful situational awareness of a hunter. But his routine had been destroyed earlier that morning, and everything had been changed. By the time he had realized the importance of noting and memorizing his surroundings he had been shocked into a state of being unable to do so.

And he was inordinately embarrassed about that, now.

And, in addition to feeling humiliated by the two officers who watched him fumble about lost, he also registered that his grandfather had given him that shotgun as a gift, and that it was irreplaceable.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'I was so stunned to make the discovery. I guess I didn't properly note my surroundings.'

'Just take a deep breath and keep looking,' the larger, more vocal officer said.

'Maybe if I could get Sadie out of the car? She might go right to the spot.'

'Fine, get her,' he said. As if Nathan should have done so sooner.

She went right to the spot.

It took Nathan and the two officers a moment to catch up with her. And during that moment, Nathan worried terribly that she might disturb the crime scene. She might begin digging again. Although, he told himself, she had been digging at the crime scene already. But still he braced himself, needing her to behave perfectly in front of the police.

She didn't dig, or in any other way affect the pile of leaves. She just stood with her nose twitching, as if the earth under her feet might harbor an inexhaustible supply of abandoned newborns. And that another might be just about to surface.

Nathan caught up to her, and held her by the collar.

'Good girl,' he said, and picked up his priceless shotgun.

He stood looking around, memorizing his location. Searching for clues that would distinguish this tree from all other trees. That would allow him to find this place again. A bit like locking the barn door after the horse has been stolen, his brain told him. Something his grandfather had used to say.

He watched the officers marking off the area with crime-scene tape. And wondered, in a vague sort of way, why. It was a pile of leaves. What would it tell them? How would it help them find the person who had

committed this terrible act? So far as Nathan could see, it had nothing to say.

'Where do you suppose she got a tiny knit cap the size of a newborn's head?' Nathan asked. Probably just to feel somehow connected to the moment again. 'After all, the baby was just a few hours old. I can't imagine that left much time for shopping.'

'I imagine she knitted it,' the quieter of the two officers said. 'Can't say for a fact, but it makes more sense.'

Another silent moment.

'If they find her, they won't give her custody of the child again. Will they?'

The bigger, more vocal officer seemed to be studiously ignoring him.

'I think she's made the point that she doesn't want it,' the quiet one said.

'If she changed her mind, I mean.'

'Well, she can change her mind all she wants. But she'll be in prison. For a very long time.'

Nathan felt heartened to hear that news.

'Maybe call the department of social services,' the more vocal cop said, correctly sensing where Nathan was headed with this. 'Now, if you don't mind, Mr McCann, we'll take it from here.'

Nathan made his way back to the car, slowly this time. Still holding Sadie's collar. And feeling a measure short of heroic.

* * *

'I want to adopt that boy,' Nathan said to his wife, Flora, over a late brunch. They sat at the kitchen table, Nathan smearing jam on his English muffin. He preferred butter, but was having to watch his waist.

'Don't be absurd,' Flora said. She sat with a cigarette high in the crook of her first two fingers, reading the paper. She had the gravelly voice of a drinking woman, which she was not.

Nathan sipped his coffee; it was hot and strong. He felt a pang of loss remembering there would be no roast duck for supper. 'Why is it absurd?'

'Neither one of us is very fond of kids. We made up our mind against them. Besides, we're hardly kids ourselves.'

'No, *you* made up your mind against them. You decided for both of us.'

Flora looked up from her paper for the first time. Peered at him through the smoke. 'I thought you said it was more than you wanted to take on in life.'

'This is different. This was meant to be.'

She took a puff of her cigarette, set it down on the ashtray, and regarded him briefly. 'Nathan,' she began. Nathan thought he heard a note of derision. Condescension, even. 'I've known you twenty-nine years, and you have never before said that anything was "meant to be".'

'Maybe in twenty-nine years nothing else came into that category.'

Still the harshness of her scrutiny. 'Why?'

'Why what?'

'Why what do you think? Why would you suddenly want to adopt the child of a perfect stranger? It makes no sense.'

He opened his mouth to answer, then stopped himself. You simply didn't say, to the person who has shared her life with you, that her company was not enough to fulfill you. The truth though it may be. It was unnecessarily hurtful, and not intended to serve the common good.

He took a different tack.

'I've just had this feeling. Since I found him. I can't describe it. But it's an emotion—'

She cut him off rudely. 'An emotion? That's unlike you.'

'My point, exactly,' Nathan said. 'And now that I have it, I don't want it to go away. I just don't feel willing to give it up again. To go back to the way things felt before.'

He stopped there, feeling he skated dangerously close to the judgment he had earlier decided against voicing.

A difficult pause.

Then Flora shook her head. 'Anyway, the kid probably has somebody. A mother. They could find the mother.'

'If they find her,' Nathan said evenly, 'they will put her in jail.'

'And then it could turn out he has some other kin that would take him.'

'Maybe,' Nathan said. 'We'll see. It just seems to me that when an infant is alone in the woods, slowly dying . . . then that child has . . . for all intents and purposes . . . no one.'

'I guess we'll see,' Flora said.

'Yes. I guess we'll see.'

Nothing more was said about it for the remainder of the day, though Nathan was sure he could feel its presence at each moment, and he wondered if Flora could, too. He glanced over at her often, but saw no signs of her being similarly haunted.

Nathan dined on a simple evening meal of chicken and dumplings. He praised Flora for her cooking of it, and it was a more than adequate meal. In fact, he might have enjoyed it a great deal if not for the sense that it could not replace the anticipated roast duck. It simply was not what he'd been set to receive.

After dinner, Flora retired to her room. She had a TV set in her bedroom, the only one in the house. Nathan despised the drone of television dialogue as background to his life.

It wasn't unusual for Flora to disappear right after dinner, but on this night Nathan was more than usually aware of it.

He sat on his bed across the hall, with his door open. Her bedroom door was closed, and as far as Nathan could hear, her TV had not been turned on yet. She must

have been undressing for bed. Now and then he could see the vague shadow of feet cross the gap underneath her door. One of her floorboards tended to squeak when she crossed it, and she made no attempt to avoid it, as Nathan would have done.

For the first time in a very long time, years, Nathan felt tempted to knock on her door. Request that they spend a bit of time together. They could talk, or even play a game of cards. But before he could rise, he remembered her dismissive tone earlier in the day. No, the fact that he was feeling empty, he realized, did not mean in any way that Flora could, or would, help him fill that void.

He rose, and walked to the kitchen phone.

He called directory assistance, and asked for the number of the hospital.

He dialed, and got what sounded like a switchboard.

'Patient information, please,' he said.

'What is the name of the patient?' a cool woman's voice responded.

That disarmed him.

'Well. He doesn't have a name,' Nathan said. 'I wanted to learn the condition of an abandoned newborn I found this morning in the woods. I brought him to your hospital. John Doe is his name, I suppose. At the moment.'

'Are you family?'

'I'm the man who found him in the woods. What family would he have, then?'

'Then you're not blood family.'

'No. I'm not.'

'Then I'm afraid I can't release any information to you.'

'I see,' Nathan said. 'Will you please connect me with your emergency room?'

A pause, followed by what sounded like a sigh.

'Hold on. I'll connect you.'

A few seconds of silence. Nathan felt his molars pressing too tightly together along one side.

Then a click, and a brusque male voice on the line.

'ER.'

'Oh. Yes. I'm sorry to bother you,' Nathan said, wondering how he had started off on such disadvantaged footing. 'But I'm the man who brought in that baby this morning, and I was hoping to talk to the doctor who—'

'This is Dr Battaglia,' the voice said.

Nathan felt more than surprised. He had expected to leave a message which would not be returned until morning. 'My goodness, you work long shifts down there.'

'Ho,' the doctor said. 'You have no idea.'

'I tried to get some word on his condition without bothering you,' Nathan said. 'But they wouldn't tell me anything. They said I'm not blood family.'

'Yeah, they're like that. Swimming in their rules. Now, me, I guess I figure you're as close to family as that poor

little beggar has got. So I'll tell you. He's still with us. Call back in the morning and talk to Dr Wilburn. I'll tell him you'll be calling. First twenty-four hours will be the most crucial. If the kid is still alive in the morning . . . mind you, it's no guarantee. There are no guarantees in this business. But if he's still kicking when you call in the morning, that'll be a very good sign.'

Nathan closed his door and lay, fully dressed, on the bed. Tomorrow he had a morning appointment with the recently widowed Mrs MacElroy. Helping her work out the financial details of her sad new life. That was inconvenient timing, but as soon as that meeting was over, he could begin to make his calls. Find out if the child had a social worker yet. Learn whom he should talk to, and how to proceed.

Then he chided himself for thinking of his meeting with the widow MacElroy as inconvenient. After all, her inconvenience was certainly greater than his. It wasn't like him to think so much of his own needs or place them above those of others.

He would have to watch that.

He listened to the occasional creak of Flora's squeaky board, and noticed it sounded lonely. Or maybe that was just him.