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The Child Who

Written by Simon Lelic

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SIMON LELIC

THE CHILD WHO





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For Sue and Les

'The men . . . had come wanting to kill
the kids who'd killed the kid, because
there's nothing worse than killing a kid.'

Blake Morrison, *As If* (1997)

The world seethes. Headlights blaze and horns rage and the drivers behind her, as they broach the outer lane to push past, hurl gestures and obscenities through the rain.

It is calmer within but she does not feel calm. She feels battered, blown off course. The radio is on, though she is no longer tuned to what it is saying. She has her phone in one hand and her head in the other. She is staring at the mobile's screen: at her husband's name and a number she has dialled less and less these past ten years.

Did you hear? she could say but of course he will have heard. What happened? she could ask. Then, how did they …? But he would not yet know any more than she does, nor tell her even if he did.

I'm sorry, she could say. She is not sorry, though; not remotely. And anyway it is not a bereavement, not in a sense that obliges contrition. It is a death but also a release. A culmination. A closing. Congratulations, then. Her sob is almost a laugh.

She lowers the phone and stares at brake lights through

melting glass. Then the wipers wipe and the world reforms and she shuts her eyes instead.

A hammering in her right ear startles her. She twitches and her phone drops and there is a face, when she looks, glowering through the window at hers. The face is framed in yellow; all about her is a flashing blue.

This is Brahms, she thinks. On the radio. Brahms or Berlioz. A lullaby, either way, and all of a sudden she has never felt so tired. It is over, then. They found him, they killed him. It is as definitive an end to things as there could ever be. So why, she asks herself, does it feel like another beginning?

The police car trails her all the way to her turn-off. When her exit approaches she indicates far too early. She eyes the unmarked BMW behind and contemplates switching the indicator off again. Instead she suffers its tut-tutting and wills the queue for the exit to pick up pace. Still the police car follows her. It joins the exit lane too and she grips the steering wheel tighter but at the roundabout the BMW dials past her and finally she allows herself a breath. She unsticks her hands from the wheel and shuffles in her seat. For the rest of the journey home, her attention is as much on the view behind as it is on the tarmac ahead.

The kitchen is dark and she leaves it dark until she gathers the will to boil an egg. The shell is fiddly, though, and scalds her fingers and in the end she cannot be bothered with it. She slides the plate away, toast and egg cup and all, and pulls her mug of tea and cigarettes nearer. Her phone, too. She checks the screen, just in case she has missed a call, even

though the house is silent and the phone has barely left her grip. And, anyway, why on earth would *he* call *her*? She is the last person on earth he would think to call.

She would turn on the radio but she could not cope with it. There will be nothing new, she is sure. Just gossip and guesswork and a story re-told by those who have no business telling it. Also, she does not want to hear the name: *his* name, the child's.

'Sod it,' she says. She scrolls and finds her husband's number and hits call before she can change her mind.

It does not even ring. It goes to voicemail. She hangs up but then dials again because voicemail might actually be no bad thing.

'Leo? It's Megan. Meg. I hope . . . I mean, I realise it's been a while since we spoke but . . . I'm calling to . . . I'm calling because of the news. I heard, obviously. In the car, on the way home. I had to pull over. Silly really but for a moment I just couldn't see straight. Partly it was the rain, I expect, because it was raining, you see. But you know that, of course. I mean, you were probably driving in it too because it's hardly stopped, has it, these past few weeks? I suppose you might be driving now, in fact, because this is about the time you usually . . . you would usually . . . Look. Anyway. I was just calling because of the news, as I say, and also to—'

The tone cuts her off.

She walks the house. It starts as something to do that involves anything other than sitting and turns into a procession through what has passed. The living room, for instance: this

is where Leo told her. She was seated here, at the bureau, and he was by the door and he was smiling, sort of, but also sweating and he said, Meg, listen, you'll never guess. But she did. Somehow, after hearing the evening bulletin that day, she just knew.

It is a coincidence, she is almost sure, that she so rarely comes in here any more. The kitchen is enough for her – the kitchen, a bathroom and half a bedroom. The other rooms, including the living room, she only ever enters to clean. Which is the pinnacle, now she thinks of it, of absurdity.

She should sell the house, really. She wanted it once – she fought for it, or was prepared to – but she does not need it. When they bought the place she adored that it was pristine but somehow it seems shabbier now than the Victorian terraces beyond the gates. Cracks border the ceiling, the skirting boards have wilted from the wall. The house settling, Leo called it. And if the house has settled, so has the estate, down into its shallow, overvalued foundations.

Look at the windows. They are uPVC, yellow where once they were white. There is condensation between the panes, as though an unseen face, shrouded by the cold night air, were pressed against the glass and peering in. She turns and closes the door a fraction too late to shut off the memory.

The staircase in the centre of the hallway entices her, its banisters like outstretched arms, but there is just the bathroom and her half a bedroom on the landing – nothing else up there that she is willing, in this mood, to contemplate.

The study: it was his war room. Empty now but for her laptop and some unfiled papers. He was in here late most

nights, plotting the course of his defeat. For it was never the outcome that was in question, just the extent of it. Lose big or lose bigger or lose more than you could have imagined. She was engaged then, despite the stakes. She stood here, behind his chair, or perched here, on a cushion of papers.

Please, Meg, I have a system.

Dinner time, Leo, or the system gets it.

That was at the start, though. The joking soon stopped, her visits to his study too. They stopped when it became clear what her husband had got them into.

When Leo calls back she does not answer. She does not trust herself to. She is in the study and in front of her, on the screen of her laptop, is a photograph she has shied away from for years. Like the sound of the child's name, the image sickens her. I don't know how, she once told Leo, you can bear to breathe the same air as he does, inhale his . . . effluence. She struggled to find the right word but felt sure she had struck upon it.

Her revulsion recurs. The photograph, it is true, has been manipulated. The boy's eyes appear black, slit, pupil-less, his skin bleached of warmth, the shadows that frame him sharpened. It is quite ridiculous, really, how heavy-handedly the image has been altered. Unnecessary, more to the point, when the rot in the boy's soul was plain to see. Even in the other photographs Leo showed her, the boy, as a child, did not convince. Compared to the image of his victim, for instance, there seemed something within the boy that was contrived, artificial, insincere. Something dormant.

She scrolls and finds a picture of her husband. Not manipulated this one, though it would need to be if the man it showed were to resemble the man her husband has become. So much of that fudge-brown hair and he paid it such little heed. Even for a court appearance – for the most important court appearance of his career – he seems barely to have bothered with a comb. His suit is single breasted and looks, for one of Leo's suits and as far as she can tell, reasonably sharp – which probably means that at the time it was antipathetic to the prevailing style. Antipathetic to the prevailing style. It sums up Leo's younger self well.

And maybe not just his younger self. How much has he really changed, after all? Wasn't that the point: that he didn't change? That he would not.

In the photograph she can just make out the scar on her husband's cheek. Still pink. Still liable to weeping blood. It lingered, she recalls, but faded eventually. Some scars do, after all.

He has left a message. Her phone is buzzing, propelling itself towards the table's edge. She watches it until it almost falls, then rescues it and lifts it to her ear. The message plays but it is silence – for a second, two, then the message ends. He thought about it, then. He changed his mind.

She watches *Newsnight*. She decides she may as well. Her will to resist, after all, has already been breached.

The story features, of course, though it has been bumped from the headline slot to accommodate massive tragedy in the near abroad – the very minimum, perhaps, that could have provoked such a shift.

She switches off after the first segment: mentally, to what they are saying, not the television itself. She is not yet ready for a return to the quiet. She is not yet ready to go to bed. This is not over, it strikes her. This, the way things are: this is not an ending. This is not how she will let it end.

She stands. She picks up the remote control and hits standby just as the picture she should really have been expecting fills the screen. And that is what she is left with, as she hauls herself from stair to stair and slips her blouse from her back and her body between the sheets and lies restless in the shallows of sleep: the face of the child who killed. The child, as she will remember him, who cost them their own.

1

It had the babble of a celebration.

There were only twelve of them gathered in the office – twelve of a fifteen-strong practice – but he had lost track already of the number of times he had recounted his story. Just happened to pick up the telephone. That's right: the call centre, with a message to ring the station. No, this was at the office still but ten minutes later and I would have been heading off to court. So, yeah, I get the message and I call the custody sergeant. And the custody sergeant says she's looking for a duty solicitor and she asks me if I'm free. And by this time all I'm thinking about is a sandwich because I've been up since five and I've eaten what, a Mars Bar, since breakfast. Also, I've had just about enough after dealing with this Clemence character: you know, the drunk and disorderly? The football thing, right: three traffic cones and a whistle and he had the Plymouth fans driving round in circles. Not even a thank you, though. Not even a goodbye, come to that, or a glance as he walked out the door. So anyway, the custody sergeant, she hears me hesitate. She says, Leo, is that you? I

say, it is, Gayle, but I was just about to head off to lunch. And Gayle, the custody sergeant . . . Do you know Gayle? She's the skinny one, the only Sri Lankan, she says, in the whole of Exeter. So Gayle says, Leo, I think you should take this. And it's the tone of her voice that does it. We get on well, Gayle and I, and I trust her. I sigh, I suppose, but I tell her fine. What have you got? Right, just like that. The biggest case in the county's history and it's mine, ours, this practice's, all because I happened to answer the telephone. Well, we'll see about that. Picking up that phone: it could just as easily turn out to be the worst mistake of my life!

He recounted it eagerly and did not wane in the re-telling. He took the call, he got the case. He should have told it with a shrug but like the others he was dizzy on caffeine and nerves. This was a beginning. For all of them but for Leonard Curtice in particular, this was where their careers would truly begin.

'So what's he like?'

It was Jenny, one of the admin girls, who had voiced the question but, from the hush that hurried in behind, she was clearly not the only one impatient to have it answered.

'What's who like?' Leo said, as though for a moment he had been genuinely confused. 'Oh, you mean the boy. You mean my client.' There was laughter and Leo savoured it because he knew he was about to disappoint. The truth was, he had spent an hour in the same room as Daniel Blake and not once had he heard the boy speak. Not once, that Leo saw, had the boy even looked at him, nor acknowledged his

presence on the Blake family's side of the table. If Leo had not known better, he might have described his manner as shy. 'Quiet,' then, was all he could say. Also: 'Just a boy. Just, I don't know. Like a scared little boy.'

Collectively, his colleagues twitched.

'Scared? I bet he was scared.' Terry Saunders held his cup with his hand around the hot part. He jabbed the handle towards Leo. 'I should hope he was. Little fucker. I mean, sorry, Jenny, sorry, Stacie, but – ' Terry puffed his cheeks, as though his temper were straining just at the thought of it ' – but that's exactly what he is. A little. Fucker.'

The others, the blokes at least, nodded. Even the girls made fair-enough eyes into their coffee.

'I know what you're saying, Terry, but—'

'There's no but, Leo. I mean, sure, he's your client now and I understand, sort of, why you're acting like you've just won the pools . . .'

'Now hold on, Terry. That's hardly—'

'. . . but let's not lose sight of who this kid is, shall we? Of what he did.' Again Leo tried to interrupt but Terry angled himself to centre stage. 'If it'd been me,' he said. 'If it'd been me with that kid in a room . . .' Once again he inflated his cheeks. 'Well. Let's just say, when I came out, I wouldn't have expected to be allowed to practise again.'

Terry stood to the height of Leo's shirt collar and was an uncut toenail above ten stone. He might, Leo estimated, just about be able to handle a twelve-year-old child but his bluster was in reality nothing more than that. Still, it garnered appreciation. There was nodding and mumbling in general

agreement. Jenny and Stacie both tutted but not, to Leo's ear, entirely wholeheartedly.

'Well,' Leo said. 'There's no denying it was a terrible crime. But the boy – Daniel – he hasn't been charged, not officially. He's barely spoken. And anyway it's hardly our place—'

'Did he do it, Leo?' This from Stacie. 'Surely they wouldn't have made the fuss they did if they weren't sure he did it?'

'Now, Stacie, you know I can't . . . That is, I shouldn't . . .' But already her eyes were leaching disappointment and Leo was loath to let down the crowd twice. 'Yes,' he said. 'I would say he did it. There's not a doubt, if I'm honest, in my mind.'

Talk about bluster. He was worse, in a way, than Terry, with all his nonsense about beating up a twelve-year-old. *No, Jenny. Yes, Stacie. There's not a doubt in my mind.* For pity's sake.

'Leonard.' A hand on his shoulder. 'A word.'

'Howard. Listen. I'm sorry if I . . .' Leo gestured to the dispersing crowd, his colleagues drifting back now to flashing phones and rolls of faxes.

'No, no. Enjoy the moment. It's a coup, I grant you.' Howard revealed a troupe of too-white teeth. Falsies, was the rumour, and there were doubts as well about the authenticity of the pelt on his crown. It was too thick, surely, to be home-grown; too solidly the colour of honey when a man of Howard's age – sixty? sixty-five? – should have been struggling against a tide of baldness just like most of the younger men in the practice. 'A real coup,' Howard was saying. 'Well done, Leonard.' His boss's hand was on Leo's shoulder again. He

found himself being led into a leafy corner of the open-plan office. 'How's your caseload? Got much on?'

'No, not really. A few odds and ends. Bread-and-butter stuff, mainly.' Drunk and disorderlies, exclusively, unleavened even by an ABH. There was such minimal variation in their work these days that Howard, really, should hardly have had to ask. Little wonder the office was so abuzz. Little wonder Leo was.

'Unload what you can, at least for the next week or so. Talk to Terence. Speak to me if he kicks up a fuss.'

'If you insist, Howard. I mean, I'm sure I can handle—'

'I'm sure you can, Leonard. But you'll have enough on your plate, I promise you.' Howard stopped and guided Leo round to face him.

'Howard, is something—'

'Are you ready, Leonard?' His boss gripped him on both shoulders now and sought out Leo's eyes with his.

'Ready? Well, I—'

'You understand what I'm asking you? You understand that this will be like nothing you have experienced before?'

'Well, yes, certainly. I mean—'

'He's a murderer, Leonard. He's twelve years old and he's a killer.'

Leo attempted a smile. 'An *alleged* killer, Howard. Don't forget—'

Howard squeezed. Leo could feel the man's fingernails through the polyester blend of his shirt. 'Don't piss about, Leonard. Enjoy the moment, certainly. Relish the attention if you must. But this little fucker killed an eleven-year-old girl.' Leo winced, as much at his boss's use of Terry's terminology

as at mention of the crime itself. 'He goddamn nearly raped her. You are his representative. You, as far as the entire country will see it, are on his side. Think about that for a moment. Think about what that might mean.'

'I've got a thick skin, I promise you,' said Leo, even though it felt like the skin on his shoulders was about to break. 'Really, Howard.' He squirmed and his boss's hands fell away. 'I'll be fine. It will all be fine.'

'And Megan? Your little girl – Eleanor, isn't it? Have you told them?'

'What? No. Not yet. I will tonight. When I get home. I've hardly had a minute since I took the call. That was, what? Two-ish? And it's already . . .' Leo looked to his watch. 'Wow. It's getting late, Howard. I should get going. You should get going. Celia will be wondering where you are.'

Howard regarded Leo beneath eyebrows joined at the middle. 'Okay,' he said. Then, slowly, he unpeeled his alabaster grin.