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The Man Who Disappeared

Written by Clare Morrall

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Clare Morrall

The Man Who Disappeared



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1

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To the Blue Coat children who think I should
dedicate a book to them and all the others who
are too polite to ask.

Part One

Chapter 1

Felix Kendall stands in the darkness, outside the friendly circle of light from the streetlamp. Cold seeps into him, numbing his fingertips. A breeze rustles the larches in the front garden of a house behind him on the opposite side of the road.

He watches.

Through a bright window, close to the pavement, he can see a family sitting in their dining room. The mother is spooning out the steaming contents of a casserole dish that she has just brought to the table, putting a piece of meat – chicken, lamb, pork? – on a plate and then pouring the sauce over it. She hands the meal to one of the children, a boy, who starts to help himself from the vegetable dishes placed in the middle of the table. He must be about six. Felix can see the round softness of his cheeks, his wayward dark hair, a little too long, the fringe soft and floppy over his forehead, his earnest concentration as he balances a potato on a spoon.

Rory – oh, Rory . . .

Two other children are waiting, talking to each other, arguing perhaps. There's some animosity between them, and they appeal to their father, who's sitting at the other end of the table.

It's a portrait of a family, a Dickensian scene of harmony, lit by a central light that hangs over the table. Everything is too perfect, too good to be true. Felix tries to convince himself that they hate each other, the husband and wife. They're probably about to divorce: the father is having an affair with

someone at work; the mother's running a successful business, living her life apart from the rest of the family; the meal is ready-made from Waitrose.

But he can't accept it, can't absorb the cynical chill of reality. He wants to believe in this cosiness, this world of families, this labyrinth of deeply entwined love.

That's the key, of course: love. He has been told this for as long as he can remember. 'We love you, Felix,' one of his aunts used to say, 'and that's all that matters.'

What have I done, Kate?

Frost glints on the road, nearby car windscreens are clouded with ice. Felix blows on his hands and shuffles his feet around, trying to bring some feeling back to his toes.

The father gets up suddenly and goes to the window. Felix forces himself into stillness and holds his breath, wondering if his movements have attracted attention. The man pulls down a blind, shutting him out into the night.

It's very dark out here. Felix thrusts his trembling hands into his pockets. The darkness is inside him, a black, black pit with no bottom.

He walks away, studying the houses he passes in the hope of another tableau, another family. He sees empty rooms, half lit from a hall beyond. There are bookshelves, tables, armchairs, Swiss cheese plants, photographs on mantelpieces. Occasional isolated people watching television, sitting at a computer. But no more families.

Lawrence, Millie . . .

Alfred's Mart is warm and brightly lit, an open-handed invitation to join the generous club of everyday life. Felix selects a few items for his supper, aware that he has only a limited supply of cash, and queues behind a woman with a trolley containing twenty loaves and sixteen cartons of milk. Is she a mother with dozens of children? She's far too well

kept for that – chic spiky haircut, long shimmery silk scarf with a bold green and purple geometric design.

‘Sorry,’ she says to him, seeing him watching her. ‘Do you want to go in front?’ Her voice is soft and breathy, as if she has asthma.

‘No problem,’ he says. He’s got all evening, all night, for ever. ‘I’m in no hurry.’

Compassion looms ominously out of her eyes. ‘Oh dear. No one to go home to?’

What gives her the right to ask personal questions? She’s not going to tell him why she has all those cartons of milk. At least, he hopes she isn’t. ‘My house got hit by lightning,’ he says, ‘and my wife went off with the fire brigade.’

She clearly hasn’t heard him properly, because a tap of sympathy opens up and starts to flow. ‘You poor thing—’

‘And my six children got run over by the fire engine as they cycled home to see what was going on.’

Ladybird, ladybird, fly away home—

Millie at two, fresh from the bath, her eyes drooping, then snapping alert, warm and cosy in his arms. White, plump pillows, the smell of fresh air and washing-powder.

Your house is on fire and your children are gone—

I can’t go home. It’s no longer possible. I would if I could – but I can’t.

There’s a shift in the woman’s manner, a pause while she decides how to interpret Felix’s reply. She doesn’t have enough information to know how to react. She manages a distant half-smile and turns her attention to packing her shopping.

Felix is ashamed of himself. He’s slipping out of the character he has spent years perfecting. Be friendly, be nice. The roadmap to success. He wonders if he should help her. It would redeem him, perhaps, and it would speed up her departure. But he stands and watches, his arms heavy with the paralysis of indecision.

She pays, and snatches a last glance at him out of the corner of her eye before wheeling her over-laden trolley away. Her tights are navy with seams at the back. A prostitute who offers her clients tea and toast afterwards?

He shouldn't have spoken to her. He mustn't draw attention to himself.

He packs his meagre purchases into a carrier-bag, wondering why he has bothered to buy anything. How could he possibly put his mind to food?

'Have you signed the petition for a pelican crossing outside the store?' asks the girl on the till, as he hands her a twenty-pound note.

Without thinking, Felix picks up the pen she's offering him – and stops. He can't use his own name. He searches for inspiration and sees the chocolate selection next to the till. *Martin Cadbury*, he writes with a flourish. 'What other action have you taken?' he asks.

She looks at him blankly. She's only about sixteen, not at all pretty, with her hair scraped back into a severe ponytail, accentuating her plump cheeks. 'What do you mean?' she says.

Felix is assailed by a familiar organisational streak, full of righteousness. Don't they know anything? All his years with the parent-teacher association at the children's schools qualify him to offer advice. Fêtes, concerts, trips to the theatre, summer balls. His work for the local volunteer group cleaning up the area, protests against planning applications, the fight against the proposed mobile-phone mast. He's done it all. He's good at it. It's like the smell of baking bread, fresh and mouth-watering, rushing through him with an unexpected pain of pleasure.

'A petition won't do it,' he says. 'These people only glance at the signatures, check there's nobody like Paul McCartney or the Queen on it, and then put the piles of paper into a convenient corner where they'll get taken away for recycling. You have to do something much more significant if you want a chance of success.'

She stares. 'Like what?'

'A demonstration, a feature on local television, a trip to Westminster to involve your MP, embarrass him in front of his colleagues, that kind of thing.'

She seems to be having difficulty taking it all in. 'Oh,' she says. 'You need to talk to my boss.'

'Another time,' says Felix. He puts his shopping into a carrier-bag.

'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?' says the girl.

Panic jolts through him. How could she possibly know? With some difficulty, he turns away from the till. His legs are stiff and his knees won't bend properly.

'Hey!' calls the girl. 'You forgot your change.'

It doesn't matter. I don't need it.

She leans over and grabs his arm. 'Here,' she says, putting the coins into his hand. 'You can't leave your change. I'd get into awful trouble.'

He produces his charming smile, the one that always gets him where he wants to be. He can feel his mouth opening, the lips parting. 'Thank you,' he says, and turns away.

The hotel lobby is filled with dozens of French schoolchildren when Felix returns with his shopping. They are congregated in groups, heaps of luggage arrayed around them, chattering with high-pitched excited voices. Their teachers are working hard, issuing instructions and trying to calm them down, but without much success. Felix is forced to take a diversion through the bar to reach the lifts.

On a low table, stationed between two white leather sofas, a well-thumbed copy of *The Times* catches his attention.

He stops.

He and George are staring out from the front page, their photographs side by side, with a smaller one of Kristin underneath.

It's as if he's been punched in the stomach. This must be a mistake. Someone must have picked up the wrong photograph.

With trembling hands, he leans over the table and grabs the newspaper. He reads his name below and the headline above.

He glances around to see if he's being watched, suddenly convinced that someone will recognise him, but everyone is caught up in the drama of the French schoolchildren. He hurries round the corner and decides to take the stairs. He can't wait for the lift – he can't stand still.

He drives himself up to the twenty-first floor, his breath uncontrolled and painful. He's not pacing himself now, not in training for a marathon, not having to prove himself. He's running with fear, terrified of what the newspaper is going to tell him.

Panting, he fumbles with his card in the lock, putting it in upside down at first, all the time checking over his shoulder that no one else has arrived on the floor. Once he's in, he slams on the light and drops his shopping. Standing there, he reads through the article. Then he reads it again.

Someone's got it horribly wrong. Of course there would inevitably be some media interest, but it should be a short paragraph on page seven, not headline news, not photographs on this scale. They seem to think he and George have masterminded a worldwide operation.

But I didn't know any of this. George didn't tell me the whole truth.

Why would you expect a dishonest man to be truthful?

I could have stopped it and I didn't.

He drops to the floor and hunches up on the carpet, wrapping his arms round his legs, staring into space. His mind races through a tangle of replayed conversations and missed connections, and a torrent of guilt and shame floods through him.

Two hours later, he arranges himself on the hotel-room floor, stretching his legs out in front of him. His purchases are laid on the carpet by his side. A bottle of Scotch; a wedge of strong Cheddar; a packet of water biscuits; a sharp cheese knife.

He's tried examining himself in a mirror, next to the newspaper, and concluded that it must be obvious he is the man in the photograph. His face is buried under an emerging beard and there are new hollows under his eyes, but it's so clearly him that he can't understand why the police aren't already knocking on his door. If he goes out again, he'll be spotted immediately. One of the hotel staff must have recognised him. His time is limited.

Everything has led to this hotel room in a small corner of a city far away from his home. His whole life, his record of achievement, has turned out to be inconsequential. A speck of dirt flicked by a duster, brushed aside, tossed out for the bin-men without a thought.

One minute he was cruising along, in control of his life, enjoying the breeze, and the next, everything had crumpled into a major pile-up that wasn't his fault.

Not true. It was his fault. He'd been driving with full headlights, miles over the speed limit, without looking far enough ahead.

How to lose your identity in five days. On Tuesday he didn't go to Hamburg. On Thursday, in a lucid moment, he sent an email to Kate from an Internet café, wanting to reassure her, even though she wouldn't know yet that he had gone. It was a mistake. He shouldn't have sent it. He'd tried to sound normal but it was difficult – impossible—

Everything he's done has been for Kate, for the family. As a child, he dreamt of having a family, imagining his own place within it, the complicated interactions between parents and children. The dream was a twenty-carat diamond, nurtured over the years, cut and polished, and he was willing to plough

through mud, dig through rock to get it. He'd constructed a family with as much skill as he could manage, pulling it all together with an expertise that he acquired from books, newspapers, advice from colleagues. He'd collected all the essential ingredients, mixed them up, created a work of art, an edifice of love.

He keeps telling himself it was real.

How could everything crumble so spectacularly? Was it really his fault? Was it the result of his actions, or had it been inevitable? Had he just built up a story, an ideal, that was ready to collapse the moment a small breeze blew from the north? Iceland, to be precise.

He sees a child sitting on a bed, alone, listening to clocks ticking in the empty silence. Rory? Or himself as a child?

The room is lit by a bedside lamp that is absurdly inadequate. Nobody could read in this light. You need brightness for reading. Perhaps people don't read any more. Perhaps he's unreasonable in his expectations.

No, his expectations haven't been unreasonable. He's believed in himself. He's always known he could do it, right from the beginning. How could he have predicted this?

But was his family just a painting hanging in a gallery, a figment of an artist's imagination? An English interior, a semi-sentimental portrait of life in the early twenty-first century?

He was expecting to go to Hamburg. For work. He'd delivered Rory to his friend's house and Millie to her school, where she was going to board for a week. Kate was in Canada. The world was organised, everyone was in the right place, there was no reason why anything should go wrong.

Except – something had happened on Monday that made him nervous. Ken, his driver, had been taking him home from a meeting in Bristol and they'd stopped for a break at a

motorway service station. When Felix went to pay for their coffees, the girl at the till dropped his change on the floor and there was some confusion, so when he finally picked up his tray, several people were watching him. One of them was a small man sitting at a table on his own, reading a newspaper. He was peering over the top of the pages, an ordinary man, middle-aged, dark hair, glasses, in a suit, nothing to distinguish him from anyone else.

But this was the fourth time Felix had seen him in the last week. He'd first stood next to him in the queue for taxis at Exmouth station, then he'd noticed him at a newsagent's in Budleigh Salterton and only yesterday, he'd caught a glimpse of his back as he left the foyer of his office block.

He studied the man in the motorway service station. Surely this was one encounter too far. For a brief second, their eyes made contact. Then the man's gaze slipped away as he folded his newspaper, stood up and left the room.

Was it coincidence? Or was he being watched?

On Tuesday, at six o'clock in the morning, Felix's driver dropped him by the entrance to Exeter St Davids station. 'Thanks, Ken,' he said, getting out.

'Have a good trip,' said Ken.

Felix stood and watched the Mercedes glide out of the station car park, go round the mini roundabout and head up the hill towards the city centre.

It was still dark. Orange lights lit the car park, and the station glowed with the welcoming yellow of electric warmth. The ticket office wasn't open yet, but there was a young woman drinking a cup of coffee behind the newspaper kiosk. She was wearing a hat and scarf and her hands, encased in woolly gloves, wrapped themselves round the plastic cup for warmth. Her breath escaped into the air in puffs of white steam.

Felix was earlier than he needed to be. He always allowed plenty of time to buy a newspaper, find the right platform, establish which end of the train would be First Class.

His mobile rang. Kate, he assumed. She'd miscalculated the time difference in Canada.

But it wasn't Kate. 'Felix—'

'George?'

'Felix, my man.' George's voice was distant, uneven, as if he was running.

'What's going on?' asked Felix.

'It's the Big Man,' said George.

'What are you talking about?'

A sharp memory of the Big Man, their headmaster from more than thirty years ago, thundering along the corridor towards them, his grey wispy hair awry, his eyes fixed on them from behind thick-lensed glasses, his voice booming: 'Kendall! Rangarajan!'

'Get out now, Felix, while you can—' There was a lot of crackling and the phone went dead. Felix took it away from his ear and stared at it. Did George mean what he thought he meant? He dialled back, but the line wouldn't connect.

A train was waiting on Platform One, hissing and wheezing as passengers climbed in and settled into their seats. Felix made for the exit, thinking his mobile would work better outside, then changed his mind and turned back abruptly. The height of the bridge crossing the platforms would give better reception.

As he doubled back, someone caught his attention, a flicker in the edge of his vision. A man, a small, inconsequential figure, was heading straight for him, but changed direction as soon as he realised they were going to collide and hurried towards the café. It was the man he had seen yesterday at the motorway service station. What was he doing at Exeter St Davids so early in the morning? Why was he so anxious to avoid Felix?

The icy bite of the morning frost seized Felix's arms and legs so that he couldn't move. The oxygen seemed to have been sucked out of the air.

His mobile rang again. Forcing himself to react, he put his finger to the button, ready to answer, then stopped. *It's the Big Man.* What if it wasn't George this time? What if there were other people on the station, watching him?

The train on Platform One was preparing to leave. Two men were working their way along, slamming the doors shut. Without conscious thought, Felix ran, tossing his mobile phone under the wheels of the train. He could hear shouting behind him, pounding footsteps, a whistle. He sprinted to the last open door and leapt on just before it was closed behind him. After a few seconds, the train started to move, gliding gently along the platform before accelerating.

The shadows in the room are creeping closer. Felix picks up the whisky, unscrews the top and raises the bottle to his lips. He gulps a couple of mouthfuls. He puts the bottle down and picks up the knife. His childhood had ended with a knife. It seems right that his adult life should end in the same way. He feels the blade. It slices into the soft part of his index finger and a wafer-thin trickle of blood squeezes out. Dark, dark red, almost black.

'Ouch!' His voice is oddly loud in the thick space around him. He's five years old again, paralysed by the sight of blood.

A deep sigh shudders through him.