

Finder by Patrick Taylor

Sometimes people leave things.

These things are usually small, inconspicuous, forgettable. Hats mostly.

Sometimes, when I find things, I imagine the stories behind them. Today I found a hairclip in a meadow across from the park. The clip is marked with thick stripes of red, gold, and black. It's skinny, precise.

*She chased her lover through the tangled weeds of the meadow as two uniformed men dragged her lover away toward a baleful, black car. The hairclip flung from her hair when she stumbled down a hill. She sat with her fingers pressed against her eyes, sobbing his name over and over again. She never came back for the clip.*

Of course, I know, most of the leavers *do* come back. That's why I do what I do.

I walk with my eyes on the ground, cutting psychic lines in concrete, dirt, sand, asphalt. Looking, always looking. The night I find Samantha, she tells me I walk funny. Really? I ask. My heels drag, swooshing in quick, tiny steps. Knees pointed inward, chin tucked against my collar. I guess she's right.

I find a lot of wallets. I never open them because that's a terrible invasion of privacy, and, given my firm stand on privacy, I would not intrude on others'. So I slide the wallets into my coat pocket and move on.

At my apartment, I scan the newspaper, noting key words in the Lost and Found section. Hat, wallet, hairclip. There's never a shortage of leavers and finders in this world. Leavers always look for what they've left, finders always find the things. However, none of the poor leavers in this paper can claim the things I have found because I subscribe to the national newspaper, not the local one. I administer this reading ritual simply as reassurance that leavers keep searching, so I may keep finding.

If a leaver was ever to knock on my door and ask for their sweater, or sunglasses, or book, I'd smile and invite them in for coffee. This is the day I've dreamt of, I'd tell them. The day of my ultimate appreciation. My purpose, even. We'd talk for hours and become lifelong friends.

My cell phone collection continues to expand. I keep them in a chest near the bathroom. There are probably fifty phones in that chest. At first, the phones would squeal night and day and flash the word HOME. A frightening urge to answer swept over me every time, but I didn't want to be impolite and answer phones that weren't properly mine. So I'd turn the power off and rest them back in the chest.

Samantha doesn't cry. She pats a swollen cushion on my unused sofa and curls up on top of it. The phones make more noise than her.

*Oh, my dear, oh me, oh my!*

*What is it, friend?*

*I've lost my engagement ring in the theater, and—oh sweet mercy, where ever can it be?*

*Rest easy, friend. It is here. I have found it.*

*Thank you, amazing stranger. You are truly my friend, my best friend.*

It's really nothing. Finding, I mean. Things left behind are everywhere.

On the bus stop bench, like a forgotten jewel, a small teddy bear, shivering in loneliness. Others stare questioningly at the bear, then at each other, wondering to whom

the sad furball belongs. I stride up and gently tuck the bear under my coat. The others mark me a moment, then drift back into their own thoughts. I cuddle the bear and name him Frank, 'cause he looks like a Frank. Samantha buries her face in him while she watches the TV I never used to turn on.

My apartment gets smaller everyday. I come home from work with bulging pockets.

I rest at the kitchen table and sift through the things that don't belong to me. Here's a necklace—fake gold—it sparkles under the kitchen light. Designer sunglasses look up at me attentively. I wonder what kind of face they once sat on. I found them at Denny's.

My boss barrels into the sewing room and says, "No one cares about nothing no more." All of us sewers gaze up at him from our individual desks, half-finished quilts yawning in our open palms.

"Yeah, you got that. Materialism at its finest." My boss pivots on his heel and crashes through the door to his office. We continue sewing. I want to agree with him, but he doesn't like me and I'd hate seeing him change his mind on account of our mutual understanding of things.

These days, when I find animals, I'm kind of stumped. I already have two dogs and a cat that aren't mine living in my apartment, along with Samantha. The dogs are named Gus and Wes because I like those names. The cat's called Cat because I don't like cats; I'm allergic. But I found her and it's my responsibility now to make sure she's fit as a fiddle in case her owner ever knocks on my door. The idea crosses me: Why not take them to the pound? I quickly stamp it out. What a horrid idea. I believe the owners would be appalled at my decision if I actually handed their pets to those incompetent fools. I've heard what goes on in those places. Plus, there's always the chance the innocent pets could be murdered, or catch a disease. No, it's much better here with me. Now, though, I have no more space and walk by left animals in utter self-loathing.

Samantha runs her fingers through Wes' fur; he succumbs to the pleasure of the experience and leans all dopy into her petite legs.

"His tag says Max," she states. Her voice is hushed as always, like spilled milk washing over tabletops.

"Remember how I told you it's impolite to pry into others' business?"

"But why do you call him Wes?" The dog collapses on the mint green rug and twitches his back leg.

"'Cause that's his name."

"Oh."

She's standing by a hot dog stand adjacent to a fashion store. So small and fragile, as if the wind could break her. She looks around, taps her feet on the sidewalk, looks around some more. A CD player crowds the linings of my coat pocket: I found it on the steps of an apartment building. Stuffed meat boils in the air, lingers between us. Hi, I say. Hi, she says. Her coat is purple and bloated. Burning hot dogs crowd our nostrils. Her hair is blonde cotton curls.

*Leave her here, the step-mother barks.*

*The callous father nods his head in amusement and together they leave frightened, seven-year-old Samantha next to a hot dog stand adjacent to a fashion store. The evil*

*step-mother and heartless father begin a new life in Bora Bora, selling imported kidneys on the local black market.*

“How dreadful,” I gasp.

Samantha quietly gulps and stares at me.

“Come, come.” Her tiny hand rests in mine like a perfect puzzle piece as we stroll home.

My boss is upset today. My boss is always upset.

“I can’t believe this crap. One minute, tops. I swear to God. I left the damn thing on the counter for one minute and poof, gone.”

The tuna sandwich sinks into my tonsils. I wash it out with an RC Cola—Samantha’s favorite. Some of the other sewers, irritated by my boss’ tantrum, vacate the break room. I’m thinking about vast fields of leavers marching through the grass, sweeping their hands at the ground. They can’t find what they’ve left behind.

“It’s probably Billy, that little bastard. You’d think I give him a big enough allowance, but no, he has to steal my Zippo too.” My boss grumbles loudly while watching the muted TV screen. Only the two of us are left in the break room. My lunch is almost finished. My boss’ll leave soon. “Damn punk! Probably using my lighter to toke up.”

When I wake up, Samantha has the TV on. I forgot I owned one.

“What’s your name?” she asks shyly.

“Don’t you know it’s impolite to pry into other people’s affairs? And besides, you shouldn’t talk to strangers.”

An uncomfortable quiet fills the apartment. I make for the kitchen. Samantha tracks me with her eyes, but remains motionless on the sofa. What a perfect doll child.

“Do you want breakfast?” I ask happily. She nods her head. “What would you like?” She points toward the refrigerator. “What? I don’t understand.” She points again, this time with more finality. “Why don’t you just say what you want?”

“Because you told me not to talk to strangers.”

“Yes I did,” I say, matter-of-factly. “And a good piece of advice. I’d expect your parents to have taught you such things, but seeing as how they’re illegal organ smugglers, I can’t blame you.” She gawks at me in bewilderment. “Once you know my name, then I’m no longer a stranger, right?” She nods with confused apprehension. “Well, there you have it.”

“What’s your name?”

“No, no. I told you it’s impolite to pry into others’ affairs. That just won’t do.” I reach for the orange juice and pour two glasses. Samantha wiggles deeper into the sofa. “You see, your name is Samantha—I know your name and that’s why it’s okay for me to talk to you.”

“But that’s not my name. My name is…”

“Uh-uh, sorry little missy.” I wag my finger at Samantha. “Privacy is my most valued tenet, and I would rather walk the earth blind than force myself on another person’s right to not share information.”

I dawdle in the kitchen a few moments, studying the stack of collectable cups I store near the sink. I found the Dumbo one outside Disneyland.

Samantha fidgets, intertwining her fingers and concentrating on the blotches of sunlight poking through the drapes and kissing the rug I found leaning against an abandoned house. Then a bright smile dawns on her face. “Your name is Barney!”

“Is it now?” I ask as I approach her with the glass of orange juice.

“Yes,” she responds coyly, accepting the juice and drinking it greedily.

I’m Barney.

My boss frets near my work desk: “The youth today. Jesus, what a bunch of lazy lowlifes.” I pause and watch him. He doesn’t seem to be addressing anyone in particular, especially not me, and all the workers press forward with their projects in zombie persistence.

“It’s all going to hell,” my boss preaches. “All of it. Shit, has anyone seen my workbag?”

I crouch in the Starbucks patio, picking up red and orange and green paperclips like fallen leaves. My fingers pinch eagerly at the colorful, taunting things and I’m overjoyed in my finding. Occasionally, the doors whisk open and a rushing blast of pungent lattes inundates my head. Chattering customers regard me with minimal concern as I descend farther and farther beneath the table. Paperclips trickle into my open palm like raindrops.

*Thank you. Thank you.*

*The crowd explodes with applause and praise.*

*I can’t tell you how special it is to be accepting this award. Being named the Most Incredible Person Ever isn’t easy, there’s so much more weight added to my work as a result, but I promise I’ll keep finding and helping. I promise.*

*Fireworks sparkle overhead and slip down the slate sky like painted fingernails scratching a chalkboard. Jovial! Jovial!*

“Barney? Barney?”

Soft hands rouse me from sleep. Samantha tugs on my wrist. The room is so dark that I awake in frozen panic until I recognize Samantha’s delicate voice.

“What is it, Samantha?”

“I don’t want to sleep on the couch. I’m scared,” she whimpers, already mounting the edge of my bed. “I had a bad dream.” She slides under the blanket and snuggles against my pillow.

I wipe the sleep from my eyes. “Well, okay. But you have to let me rest because tomorrow is Saturday and you know I go finding on Saturday.”

“You go what?” she asks sleepily.

“Finding. It’s very important work.” I lean into my half of the pillow.

“Oh.”

Samantha orders something I’ve never heard of; apparently, it’s a ham sandwich. We tread the checkered tiles, waiting for lunch, when someone cries, “Elizabeth!” Samantha swings her head around and leaps forward. I observe in terrified silence. She collides with a woman’s outstretched arms; Samantha is taken into her embrace. I trot toward them. A man appears. He kneels, weeping, and hugs Samantha and the woman. The man and woman have tired eyes, puffy and blue. I stand back.

Samantha looks up from my TV I don't watch, a chocolate mustache stain on her upper lip. She's lived with me for almost six months. "What do you mean, Barney?"

"Yes, that's right. You're very lucky I found you, Samantha." I nod knowingly. "There are a lot of bad finders out there. Who knows what might have become of you." I admire her adoringly and she considers my proclamation.

"You found me?"

"Yes, that's what I do. I'm a finder. I find things that are left all by themselves."

Samantha slurps her chocolate milk and brings her limpid eyes to mine. "Who found you?"

"Well, no one, goofy. I'm a finder. You don't *find* finders."

"Oh, God, Jesus, Elizabeth," the man wails. "We've been so worried, so worried. Come here, baby. Oh, God." A pool of onlookers forms around us. I lower my eyes.

"It's okay, Daddy. Barney found me."

"Who?" His question tapers off as he follows Samantha's directing finger, aimed squarely at me. "Who are you?" he asks indignantly.

"I'm Barney. I found Sa-Elizabeth."

"When? Where?" the mother stammers.

"I'm not at liberty to say, ma'am. Just know that she has been safely taken care of."

The mother stares at me in astonishment. "Thank you?"

"You're very welcome. Goodbye." I twirl around and walk swiftly for the exit, heels scraping the ground, knees grazing each other. The father catches me by the shoulder.

"What did you do to her, you freak?" He wrenches me around. The crowd churns with excited anticipation.

"No, Daddy," Samantha yelps. "He's my friend."

"What the hell did you do?" I smell his sweltering breath—I think he must've had a meatball sandwich. His hands crawl toward my neck and constrict.

"I found her," I wheeze. "That's it. That's what I do." Tears boil in his eyes. Mine too. "Found her," I breathe.

"Let him go, Daddy!"

"Found her...Sorry."

"Daddy!"