

The Finding Man

by
Leith C MacArthur

1

June, 1985

It is a summer day, heat pressing in like an atmospheric plague; a lumbering day, breathless with its own weight. And the sky is pale, like Bradley's dying eye.

Two weeks of blistering temperatures, and now they say a storm is coming. Torrential rains. High tides. Winds that will scour parking lots and blow away the trash. Hurricane, typhoon, an errant asteroid or two. I don't care. I'm on sabbatical from caring.

Bradley and I are up on the high-bridge of my tugboat, *Paralus*, baking in the sun. I've just finished making some notations in my journal when the phone rings. Bradley stirs from her slumber at my feet. Unwilling to expend the energy necessary to lift her head off the steel plates, she peers up at me with her one good eye.

I palm the cordless phone. "Yes," I say.

"I'm looking for William Snow." A woman's voice, thick with confidentiality.

"That's me,"

"You're the guy they call The Finding Man, right?"

Here we go again. Jesus.

"What can I do for you?" I say.

"I want you to find the father of my daughter, Amber-Lee."

I've never heard the name before, yet the instant the woman says it—*Amber-Lee*—I feel this little *thump* in my neck, like a tap into an artery.

"Why?" I say.

“Why what?”

“Why do you want to find him?”

“Does it matter?”

“Lady. I don’t look for stolen cars, lost keys, or dead-beat dads. Yes, it matters.”

“Right,” she says. “I knew this was a bad idea.” And she hangs up.

I drop the phone, look down at Bradley and smile. “Yeah, I know. I’m irresistible.”

Bradley heaves her bulk off the rough steel floor. Like a weary horse, she trundles over to me and offers her furrowed skull. As I rub her head, she stretches her neck, closes her eyes and lets her tongue tumble from her mouth. The instant I take my hand away, she slumps back down onto the hot floor and pretends to go back to sleep. But I know better.

And I also know—as surely as Bradley will soon go blind—I’ve not heard the last of that woman.

2

The Girl

For three days the rain came. Unrelenting, merciless, it assaulted the hull of my ship, pelted her steel skin with its endless barrage. Bradley paced incessantly during the gale, stalking the companionways and sniffing under the doors. At times she thrust her crumpled head into darkened compartments, whining forlornly as if she felt helpless to protect her home.

In the middle of the fourth night the storm died, and there fell upon my ship a silence so stunning, I was wrenched from my sleep.

* * *

I spend the better part of the next day scrubbing and hosing down the rough and dented hull of my boat. While I work, Bradley plays with a piece of driftwood, scampering around on the forward deck like a pup with an imaginary friend.

By two that afternoon, I've had my fill of duty. Bradley is fast asleep down in The Pit, her heavy snores drifting evenly out the horn-shaped air vents on the bridge. In bare feet, I stretch for twenty minutes, then go through a series of calisthenics and old karate katas; slowly, so as not to strain my weather-stressed frame.

After I finish my workout I shower, then return to the high-bridge and take my favorite position in the canvas recliner—to bake in the sun, to bask in the sunshine of my oblivion. It's a nice, tidy day. *Paralus*, the hundred-foot tugboat atop which I'm now lounging, and within which I've been stubbornly deteriorating, has been washed clean of the city's soot. Fluted by the steel air vents, Bradley's rhythmic snores further cushion my emotional amnesia. I lay with my face upturned to the broad blue sky, emitting all the vibrancy of a pet rock. When the cordless phone rings, I pick it up slow. Say hello. Blink drowsily into the sun.

"Are you The Finding Man?" a child's voice says. Gentle. Imploring.

Which evokes my first smile in a week. "Well, I suppose I might be. And who might you be?"

"Could you help me find my Daddy?"

My eyes are drawn to the shadows in the cove. Halfway out to the breakwater, a man is trying to pull-start the motor hanging off the back of his old, wooden skiff. The tide is running out fast, dragging the tiny boat straight toward the big rocks at the base of the jetty. The guy is in trouble.

I feel a clutch of apprehension at my neck. I don't know that guy. Don't owe him a thing. Why do I feel the need to *rescue*?

"I bet I can guess your name," I say. "Now don't tell me, okay?"

"No you can't." That voice, sweet as springtime.

"Let's see, is it . . . Judy?"

"Noooo. I told you that you couldn't guess." With a little chuckle at the end.

"Okay. How about . . . Priscilla?"

"No. You can't guess it. You can't."

"Wait! Wait! I've got it! Yes, *I've got it*. It's . . . Amber-Lee!"

"Hey! How'd you do that?"

I push myself out of the recliner and move to the railing, cradling the phone between shoulder and jaw. The skiff is about to crash onto the rocks. The man yanks feverishly on the pull-rope of the motor, back bent in earnest. A puff of gray smoke belches from the beneath the engine and floats off with the wind. A split-second later, I hear the chug of the backfire—the motor's emphatic refusal to start.

"How did you get my number, Amber-Lee?"

"Mommy wrote it on a paper 'cause she said that we could *call* you. But when she didn't call you, I took it." Here, the sweet voice becomes faint. "I think she was afraid 'cause he would get mad at her again."

"Who would get mad at her?"

"Daddy," she says. So soft, I can barely hear.

"Didn't you say you wanted me to help you find him?"

"No. Not *this* Daddy. My *real* Daddy."

"Oh, I see. Where do you live, Amber-Lee?"

"I live in my house." Spoken singsong, matter of fact.

Stupid me.

"Of course, you do," I say. I look over my shoulder at the spool-table near the smokestack. My journal is there, next to the cold cup of coffee. "Do you know your phone number, Amber-Lee?"

"Of *course* I do!" It's 8 - 6 - 2 - 5 - 4 . . ." Her melody tapers to a whisper. "My Mommy's coming. I have to go now."

Soft click in my ear.

I turn the phone off, lean my elbows on the rough iron railing. 862-54 something. A Barrington exchange. I squint at the green shoreline on the other side of the bay. Somewhere in that direction, a very bright little girl is missing her Daddy.

I look for the guy in the skiff. Find him, just about to crash onto the rocks. With a desperate glance at the jetty, he gives one last, mighty pull, then gives up and abandons ship—by stepping off the bow onto a nice, flat boulder.

Jumping from rock to rock like a little cricket, the guy climbs to the top of the jetty, stops, looks back to where he tied his boat. In frustration, he scoops up a rock and throws it into the bay.

Amber-Lee, Amber-Lee, come the whisperings from inside my head.

"No. Not another girl," I say, to the sea and to the sky.

I breathe. Try to let the girl go. Try to forget. These days, everything is about forgetting.

I watch as the guy turns toward the sun and ambles stoop-shouldered into the wind.

3

A Minor Known

For the next two days I focus on my number two avocation, which is grinding, sanding, and de-rusting *Paralus*.

From time to time I think about Amber-Lee, her mother, and the phone number. 862-54 . . . something. There were only a hundred possibilities for the two missing numbers. I could have taken the time. Called them all.

But I wouldn't have to. You see, some things I just know.

In the Company of Stone

Friday. 3:20 PM. Same time, different weather.

And again, I was out on the high deck when she calls.

"Mommy's taking a nap. Is your name really William Snow?"

"Yes."

"It makes me think of Christmas. Mommy told me I had a cat once and his name was Bill but I don't remember. Bill died when we was in Florida."

"Do you come from Florida?"

"Umm . . . I don't know." Her voice uncomprehending, chamois soft.

"Did you live in Florida, Amber-Lee? With your cat named Bill?"

"Umm . . . Mommy said we lived in Florida once but I don't remember. *Daddy* lived in Florida."

"Which Daddy? This one now, or your real Daddy?"

"Umm . . . this one, I think. I don't know."

"And what is this one's name?"

She hesitates, then says, "Victor. But I'm not supposed to call him that."

I think I see a ghost. It seemed to pass astern of my boat, trailing behind a ribbon of black water. The chill wind finds old breaks in my bones.

"*Is* Victor your Daddy?"

"*Nooooo*," she wails, a tiny siren winding down. "Will you help me find my Daddy? *Pleeeeze!*"

Like the ghost, an old thought sweeps behind my mind. Fear comes cold and moist to my skin. This is how it usually starts. The memories of terrible secrets kept, these things I've always known.

"I don't understand. Won't your Mommy let you see your real Daddy?"

"*Nooo*. If I ask her to see him and I can't, then I would cry. Daddy doesn't like it when I cry. He gets mad and he . . ."

"What is it Amber-Lee? Tell me what he does."

"Guess what?' This time, her voice is barely audible. "I go to school. I'm in the first grade."

I close my eyes.

I try to erase the images that are beginning to form in the swirling darkness. I breathe, focus on concrete and stone. It takes a moment, but then a more solid vision blocks out the others. A fortress with walls thirty feet thick and a half-mile high. Inside, an oasis where children play, their laughter tinkling like chimes in the wind.

"What's your last name, Amber-Lee?"

"My name is Amber-Lee Alvarado. I live at 1 - 4 - 5 Sea Drive, Barrington, Rhode Island. My phone number is 8 - 6 - 2 - 5 - 4 - 8 - 2."

"That's good. You're a very smart girl."

"No, I'm not. I'm *not* smart." Anger in her small voice now. "Daddy says I'm dumb."

I can almost hear my molars grind. “Victor’s wrong, that’s all. Every body makes mistakes. You’re not dumb. You’re smart.”

“But Daddy says I’m dumb, ‘cause you know why?”

My fingers grip the rough steel rail. “Why?”

“Cause he says I don’t know my own Daddy. But he’s *not* my Daddy. Why doesn’t Mommy want to find my real Daddy anymore?”

I’ve already decided I’m going to help Amber-Lee. After losing my little sister, I vowed I’d never again ignore my internal sensors, my intuitions—my gift.

Some say it’s my curse.

“Amber-Lee. I’d like to come see you. Maybe if I talk to your Mommy, she and I can work something out. Would you like that?”

“I don’t know. We don’t have any company. If Daddy was home when you . . . Sometimes he does bad things when he gets mad. I think maybe he did something to Bill the cat. Oh-oh. Mommy’s coming. I have to go now. Bye.”

Her parting word touches me like a teardrop.

I give my weight to the railing and my face to the cold wind. A few years ago I made a promise to someone, that I’d never put myself into a place where my mind could rip apart again. I want nothing to do with those frightening images. But I already know if I’m to be of help to this girl, someday I’ll have to let them back in.

The instant I think this, I see the coffin—see myself leaning over it, inspecting the deep gouges in the wooden lid, the shredded nails at the ends of the small, bloodied fingers. The child was lying there in her crude sarcophagus, her little nightgown bunched and stained with blood. In that moment, I knew I’d never forget the look of horror and disbelief carved into her fragile face. I was afraid my teeth would crack and my bones would crumble.

The images vanish, leaving nothing but stillness and the slight shift of *Paralus*’ mass as she moves beneath me, moving me. My steel monster, breathing in her sleep.

I push myself away from the railing. Dizzy, gasping for air, I stagger downward through the darkened corridors of my ship. Finding Bradley in The Pit, curled in the corner on her blanket, I gently lower my body next to hers and inhale the warm smell of her doggie shampoo. As I rest my head against her muscled flank, she lifts her head, glances over her shoulder, and gives me her soft, one-eyed gaze. She moans a greeting, then slips quietly back into sleep.

I drift off with her, to a meadow by the shore of a still lake. Two small girls stand facing each other, smiling and blowing dandelion spores across the water. I know them both, but I cannot remember their names.

I drift more. Down, beneath the lake, to a darkness known only at the core of solid rock. And there, in the company of stone, under the weight of water, I fell to my knees and I pray.

Elena

Before I make the call, I imagine myself as someone older. Shorter, fair hair, wrinkled skin, nasally voice.

I close my eyes and recite a few meaningless sentences out loud. Satisfied, I pick up the phone and dial the number.

Four rings.

“Hello?” She has a nice voice. Rich. Deep.

“May I speak with Mrs. Alvarado, please?”

Across the distance, I sense her recoil. “Who is this?”

“My name is Randolph Scott, Mrs. Alvarado. I represent Trinity Arbiter Ratings. Some time ago you filled out an application for a card at Macy’s. At the bottom, you checked the box for the survey, which entered you into a drawing. I’m calling to tell you that the drawing has been held and your card has been selected. I’m happy to inform you that you’ve won a . . .”

“Look, what-ever-your-name-is. I’m very busy and I’m not interes . . .”

“ . . . leather coat, Mrs. Alvarado. A *full*-length, Brazilian wrap-around with genuine Chinchilla collar and cuffs. This exquisite coat is valued at over six thousand dollars. It’s a thing of beauty.”

“Excuse me? You can’t be serious.”

“Oh yes. I assure you it’s quite real, Mrs. Alvarado. To put it simply, this is *your lucky day!* All that’s required is that you answer a few survey questions. Nothing too personal, I assure you. Now, you’ve not responded to one of our surveys in the past, have you? That would disqualify you for this lovely gift.”

I keep my eyes closed, envision myself floating in the silken current of a lazy river.

“No! No one’s called before! Yes! Of course! I can take a few minutes. Go right ahead Mr. . .”

“Scott, Mrs. Alvarado. Randolph Scott.”

“I’m all ears, Mr. Scott.”

And very obliging is Amber-Lee’s mother. She confirms that her name is Elena Alvarado, that she does indeed live at 145 Sea Drive, Barrington, RI. Has lived there three years, three months, with her husband Victor Alvarado, and her only child, Amber-Lee, who will be seven years old on November the eleventh. Elena is thirty-six. She works “in the metals business” five days a week, nine in the morning to three in the afternoon. Victor is thirty-nine, an entrepreneur. Joint income in excess of one hundred thousand. They own two vehicles: a Mercedes coupe and a Volvo wagon. And yes, of course she watches television, but no, she doesn’t often listen to the radio. Only when she’s in her car. Will

that affect the Brazilian wrap she's about to receive? I assure her, nothing can affect that gift.

By the time we're done, her voice has settled into its lower registers. She ends sounding a bit seductive, as if this might ensure the arrival of her coat.

After I hang up, I stare at the rivets in my steel-plated walls.

I go aft to my quarters. Take off my bathing suit and put on jeans, t-shirt, sneakers. I switch the phone to answer mode, go up the narrow steel stairs, go into the galley, and dig a few rib bones out of the freezer. Then I go to the catwalk overlooking The Pit, where *Paralus's* immense diesel engine used to be.

I can't see Bradley through the shadows, so I toss the bones into a far corner and hear them clunk off something in the dark. Immediately, there are scurrying sounds, then ferocious chomping.

Leaving Bradley to devour her treats, I go down the corridor, through the oval cut in the plates to my hundred-pound front door. Heaving the door open, I go out into the world of light and occasional hope.

I don't bother to lock the door. There's no need. Anyone who'd go inside *Paralus* without me would have to be out of his mind. Because of Bradley. Who's content to stay put in The Pit.