

Nathan Ashborn

The Child in the Wrong Photograph

**In a School Photo, She Recognized
the Son She Had Buried.**



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THRILLER

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INTRO

Alicja saw Leon at 11:17, between an advertisement for robotics classes and a reminder that payment for the school trip to Toruń was due by Friday.

She had not been looking for him.

For four years, she had done everything she could not to look for him.

She was sitting at the kitchen table with a mug of coffee she had already reheated twice, scrolling through her niece's school website only because Joanna had called that morning and asked her to check the gallery from the school fair. Apparently Lena was standing somewhere near the principal, bursting with pride over her medal from the sixty-meter race.

Alicja scrolled past the first photograph.

The second.

She found Lena in the third.

In the fourth, she saw her dead son.

Her finger stopped on the laptop screen.

For several seconds, she felt nothing. No fear, no surprise, none of the sudden pain that used to strike without warning whenever she passed a boy in a red jacket or heard a child laughing in a store with a laugh that sounded like his.

Only silence.

The photograph showed more than a dozen children standing outside the school entrance. Lena was near the front, partly obscured by a woman in a yellow vest. Behind

her, a teacher was talking to a man. In the background, someone was carrying a folding table.

And there, beside the metal fence, stood a boy.

He was turned sideways.

Slightly blurred.

Outside the center of the frame.

He wore a navy sweatshirt, and his fair hair had grown a little too long over his ears. He was looking somewhere beyond the photograph, as though someone had just called his name.

Alicja leaned toward the screen.

No.

She said it aloud.

"No."

She enlarged the photograph.

The pixels broke apart into little colored squares. The boy's face lost its sharpness, but some things did not need sharpness.

The line of his nose.

The left ear that stuck out slightly.

The way he held his head - chin lowered just a little, shoulders raised, exactly as Leon always did when he felt he was being watched.

Alicja zoomed in again.

There was a pale line across his right eyebrow.

A scar.

Leon had been seven when he fell against the concrete rim of a fountain. Three stitches. For months afterward, he told everyone he had been attacked by a shark.

Alicja pulled her hands away from the keyboard.

The mug stood beside her elbow. She knocked it over, spilling coffee across the table. It began dripping onto the floor.

She did not move.

Leon would be eleven now.

The boy in the photograph looked eleven.

That meant nothing.

Children resembled one another. People saw faces in clouds, figures in shadows, dead relatives on train platforms and in supermarkets. During the first year after the funeral, Alicja herself had run after strange boys three times. Once, outside the entrance to a shopping mall, she had grabbed a child by the arm.

His mother had screamed.

Alicja had apologized until she ran out of words.

She had never done it again.

In four years, she had learned one thing: longing was very good at forging reality.

She closed her eyes.

She should close the page.

Call Joanna.

Tell her Lena looked beautiful with her medal.

Clean up the coffee.

Do something ordinary.

She opened her eyes and looked at the boy again.

At his left hand.

Leon had a habit almost no one noticed except Alicja. When he was nervous, he pressed his thumb between his index and middle fingers. He did not bite his nails. He did not pick at his cuticles. He simply clenched his hand in that strange way, as if he were trying to hide his thumb.

The boy by the fence was doing exactly the same thing.

Alicja stood up so abruptly that the chair toppled onto the floor.

Her phone was lying on the windowsill.

She called Joanna.

Her sister answered on the fourth ring.

"Did you find her?"

"When was the fair?"

"What?"

"The fair. When was it?"

There was a short silence on the other end.

"Saturday. Why?"

Alicja stared at the screen.

"Were you there the whole time?"

"Almost. What happened?"

"Do you know all the children in Lena's class?"

"Alicja..."

"Do you?"

Joanna breathed out.

"Most of them. Some of the parents too. What's going on?"

Alicja swallowed.

"There's a boy in one of the pictures."

This time the silence lasted longer.

Too long.

"What kind of boy?"

Alicja caught the change in her sister's voice immediately. Joanna had not asked which boy.

She had asked what kind.

"He's wearing a navy sweatshirt. In the back, by the fence."

"Alicja, don't start."

The words came instantly, as if they had been prepared in advance.

Alicja went still.

"Don't start what?"

"You know what."

"I haven't even told you what I saw."

Joanna said nothing.

The growl of a garbage truck came from the street. Someone slammed a car door. An ordinary Tuesday morning went on with shameless indifference.

"Joanna."

"That isn't Leon."

Cold slid from the back of Alicja's neck down her spine.

She had not said his name.

Not once.

"How do you know?"

"Because Leon is dead."

"That's not what I asked."

A voice sounded on the other end, muffled and male. Joanna told someone she would be there in a moment.

"I have to go."

"Who's with you?"

"I'm at work."

"Why did you say it wasn't Leon when I never told you who the boy looked like?"

"Alicja, please."

There was no irritation in her voice now.

There was fear.

Alicja sat down slowly.

"Do you know that boy?"

The call ended.

For a moment, she stared at the phone, waiting for Joanna to call back.

She did not.

Alicja returned to the laptop.

The school website was still open. She right-clicked the photograph and saved it to her desktop.

Then she refreshed the gallery.

The photograph was gone.

She scrolled back up.

Again.

There was Lena with her medal.

There was the principal.

There were children standing beside the cake stall.

The photograph taken outside the entrance was no longer there.

Alicja sat perfectly still until the screen dimmed.

Her phone vibrated.

Not Joanna.

An unknown number.

One message.

No greeting. No signature.

Only seven words.

Do not look for the child you already buried.

Alicja read them three times.

Then she looked toward the doorway leading into the hall.

On the console table, in a wooden frame, stood the last photograph of Leon, taken one week before his death.

For the first time in four years, she did not think of it as a photograph of a dead child.

She thought of it as a photograph of a child someone desperately wanted her to believe was dead.

Chapter 1 - The Name She Didn't Know

For the first three minutes after reading the message, Alicja did nothing.

Her phone lay on the table, its screen slowly dimming, while the seven words remained behind her eyelids with such clarity it was as if someone had written them on the inside of her skull.

Do not look for the child you already buried.

Then she began to act.

Not because she had stopped being afraid. Fear had simply made room for something more useful. Alicja took a screenshot, saved the number even though she knew there was probably no simple way to trace anything from it, and emailed the photograph from the school website to her private account. Only then did she check the file she had saved on her desktop.

It opened without a problem.

The boy was still there.

It should have been absurd, but she felt relieved.

If the photograph had disappeared from her computer as well, she would have had to admit that something was happening to her that, for four years, she had feared more than grief itself.

That she had stopped being able to tell memory from reality.

She enlarged the photograph again.