

# ALMOST THE SAME BLUE

In this short story, JOHN O'DONNELL imagines the heartache of a mother searching for her child who has been abducted



and the holdall with plastic shopping bag inside, stuffed with money, and he nods and reaches over, opening the passenger door. The T-shirt underneath his denim jacket says “Just Do It”, and the ashtray is a cairn of butts. In the rear of the van there are empty cages, dozens of them, smeared with droppings, and the blue plume of smoke rising from his cigarette cannot hide the feral stink.

You ask him about her. “Soon,” he says, pointing out through the front windscreen at the way ahead, and your hands tighten on the holdall as the van rattles along narrow country roads, the cages clattering in the back. Taller, you think, she will definitely be taller. And blonde, yes, still blonde. But that coat she’d been wearing, her favourite, the brown fake sheepskin with the flower-embroidered sleeves, the one in all the posters; that coat will probably no longer fit her.

At the outskirts of a midland town the van veers off into a housing estate. In the twilight, children are playing on a green area littered with the bones of long-dead machinery, and out of habit you lean forward to look at them more closely, to see if you can recognise her. The van drives into a crescent and stops outside the furthest house. The young man points to the front door but does not follow you, and when you press the doorbell a shape comes towards you on the far side of the frosted glass, and you hear the clicking of the latch.

The woman answering the door is older than you are: a hank of steel-grey hair, the creases on her weatherbeaten face like hunting trails on an ancient map. Again you show the pendant and the holdall, and she ushers you in through the narrow hallway, past the closed door of a living room from which you can hear low voices and the sound of a television, a game show in full swing.

You follow the woman down into the kitchen. Crusted dishes fester in the sink. The wall behind the cooker is stained with grease. On the window sill a radio is playing country and western, the rich Mississippi baritone of Charley Pride wondering *Is Anyone Going To San Antone*. The woman pulls a chair out from the table and motions to you to sit.

“So where is she?” you ask, your voice louder than you’d intended. The woman shakes her head, pretending not to understand. “Here,” you say, lifting the holdall on to the table and shaking it. “Here. Look.”

“Please,” the woman says. She calls out through the doorway, and from upstairs a voice answers, in a language you do not understand. The woman closes the door and sits down opposite you. “We wait,” she says, and she smiles quickly at you before she looks away.

A pair of child’s jeans are hanging over the back of a chair. *Folsom Prison Blues* is playing, Johnny Cash twanging away on the guitar. The grimy kitchen window where the radio sits gives out onto a small back garden; the light is almost gone, but you can make out an upturned tricycle on an unkempt patch of grass. At the end wall there is a wooden shed, the door bolted and padlocked, with a

**Y**ou recognise it immediately, the imitation-silver teddy bear dangling from its cheap chain. There is a torn scrap of paper in the envelope as well, with an unknown phone number scrawled in biro.

“Please, no, Katherine,” says Donald when you tell him. “But you insisted we should follow up on everything,” you say to him, the man who’d been your husband almost two years ago, when it happened. “No stone unturned, remember? You said.”

There is a silence at the far end of the phone. “She’s gone, Katherine,” Donald says eventually. You imagine him slowly shaking his head. “You need to learn to grieve,” he says.

You hang up, and weigh the pendant in your hand, thinking that to grieve would be a kind of treason, and although Donald has suggested you contact the police about the envelope, you know you will not go back to the airless torpor of the station, the weary face of Willis, the heavy-set detective who’d said six months ago that scarce resources meant the investigation was being scaled back.

So you tell no-one else, although you ring the number, just in case, and when it eventually rings out you are almost relieved.

**TALLER, you think, she will DEFINITELY be taller. And blonde, yes, still blonde.**

But the second time it answers.

The new notes come slickly from the machines. Twelve withdrawals, twelve different ATMs: it takes three days, but this is how he wants it, the voice who gives you the instructions in almost-perfect English. You say her name and ask to speak to her, and you hear him shouting in another language to someone else, wherever he is answering your call, before he replies: “Right now that is not possible, but soon.” You ask is she alright, your heart lunging in your chest. “Yes, yes,” he says impatiently, and then he talks again about the money, and where and when he’ll meet you.

“And no police, yes?” he says, and for a moment the jumbled syntax confuses you before you agree.

“No police,” he says again. “Or no girl.”

In the early evening you wait for him at the bypass. He is younger than his voice suggests, the brown-eyed man who pulls up in the van. You show him the pendant,

## FICTION

window covered by wire mesh.

The woman is bent over her phone, its icy glow reflected in her face. In the distance a car revs up, backfires and pulls away.

"Emily," you say to her. No day passes without you saying it, repeating it to yourself, as if naming your loss could fill the space that's left behind, a space widening and deepening since that moment in the shopping mall when you'd turned around to find your daughter gone.

You rustle the contents of the holdall again, and the woman looks up.

"Her name is Emily," you say. "Did you know that?"

A dog is barking, somewhere among the houses in the estate; it barks and barks and barks, and then it stops.

"Em-i-ly," the woman repeats carefully, nodding. "Yes," she says then, returning to her phone.

Now Patsy Cline comes on. "Crazy," sings Patsy, her voice freighted with anguish and regret, "I'm crazy for feeling so lonely," and as you listen you peer out once more at the shed. There is a ledge beside the window, with a little opening guarded by a grille, and you wonder what this could be for, when you see a movement, in behind the mesh.

"I'm crazy," sings Patsy, belting it out, "crazy for feeling so blue." Another flicker, and another; something is alive out there, in the shed. You stand up, pushing back your chair, and the woman's eyes widen in alarm. "Please," she says, making the flattening gesture with her hand: calm down, this is under control.

"I just ... my ... I just want ..." you say, spluttering as you are pointing out the window, out towards the bottom of the garden.

"No, no," the woman says, rising to her feet. "Please, lady," she says, and her hand is still outstretched when the door from the hall into the kitchen opens and a girl is standing in the doorway, with yellow hair falling over the shoulders of her coat, a fake sheepskin with flowers on the sleeves.

"And then some day, you'd leave me for somebody new," croons Patsy, in the zone. The woman looks at you and gestures, almost proudly, at the girl. "Your daughter," she says.

How often have you imagined this? How many times have you tried to will this moment of reunion into being: your daughter, running towards you, hurling herself at you as you pull her in, inhaling her, her hair, her breath, her skin? You step towards her, your arms held wide in welcome, waiting for her, your lungs gasping for air, since you are briefly unable even to speak. The girl hesitates, then scampers over to the woman and wraps herself around her, her face pressed in against the top button of the woman's jeans. The woman shrugs, a wordless half-smile at you - children, eh? - and bends to whisper into the girl's ear, eyeing as she does the holdall on the table. The girl turns in a slow and doubtful pirouette towards you. The woman gives her a nudge, and the girl edges over across the kitchen. Tentatively she leans into you, her face gingerly touching your waist, and as you close your arms around her, immediately you know.

"Cos I'm crazy for trying, and crazy for crying": Patsy's lush contralto is winding up for the end.

You stroke her hair, feeling its brittleness, its dryness, the strands coarsened by the cheap blonde dye which is already growing out. The woman says something quickly to the girl, something you do not understand, and in response the girl slides her reluctant hands further around your waist. You bend to nuzzle her, seeing the dark roots at the crown of the girl's head, and you try to breathe her in, although you know you will not recognize the slightly musty odour of this girl, the stale tang of her breath.

Outside a pigeon comes wheeling in over the garden, a plump grey shape hovering over the shed before it lands. It perches on the little ledge, murmuring and fluttering to itself. You hear another sound then, faint at first: it is the girl, whimpering, her bony shoulders juddering in this coat your daughter never wore. You hold on even tighter as she wriggles, struggling to get away; you hold on for dear life until the girl wrenches herself free and rushes back across the kitchen, throwing herself against the woman once again. The woman admonishes her quietly, trying to soothe her, but the girl will not let go.

"And I'm crazy for loving you," sings Patsy, wringing out every last ounce of heartbreak.

On the far side of the table the woman looks at you and frowns, pausing for a moment before she yanks the bulging plastic shopping bag out of the holdall.

"Now you must leave," she says.

In the dusk the pigeon leans against the grille. Inside the shed the others jostle for position at the mesh; the grille opens, and the pigeon disappears.

"Emily," you say, as you reach out towards her, a supplication: please, take my hand. The girl mewls again, clings more tightly than ever to the woman's waist.

And even though you know, you keep on saying it, over and over like a prayer that goes unanswered. "Emily," you say to this girl with the wrong forehead, and too-high cheekbones, and eyes of almost the same blue. ■



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