

BRUCE

Matthew Duffus

Some things you don't do when a stranger calls from a city a thousand miles away to tell you that your son has disappeared. You do not argue with your ex-wife, who received the call, no matter how much she blames you, and you do not waste time standing on principle: when her father, the boy's grandfather after all, tells you he will pay your travel expenses, you do not object. But most of all, you do not—you never—think the worst, even though it has been four months since your son last wrote and the check your ex-wife sent in reply was returned *Addressee Unknown*.

The morning after the call, I met Sandrine at the airfield outside Baltimore where her father kept his plane. She stood next to the Italian sports car that had occasioned one of our last fights as man and wife. I didn't care, as she insisted I had, that she bought the car without telling me—it was *her* money—but its excess, its gaudiness was such that I couldn't bear

to ride in it. Like her father, who, as a youth, had raced cars in France, she loved speed. She was a menace on the county roads east of where we lived. While farmers pattered along the gravel shoulder atop tractors, she blew past them, threading her way between their gigantic tires and the panic-stricken oncoming drivers. The car was three years old now, and she wanted to trade it in for a newer, faster model.

Over the past year, she'd stopped dyeing her hair, allowing streaks of metallic gray to grow in the way some women added highlights. The effect was stunning, adding a flash of color to the black hair that swept across her angular face. Under different, more benign, circumstances, I would have felt like a secret agent, meeting a beautiful French woman with five thousand dollars in an envelope at a secluded airstrip. But not at the time. Instead, I thought about how reluctant she'd been when I insisted on going myself. "You're not very good at this sort of thing," she'd said. If I was good at one thing, it was loving my family; that would have to suffice, I told her. Ultimately, she realized how badly I needed to go, and, being old fashioned, she believed that this kind of job required a man.

She was all business at the airfield, reminding me of the caller's words, the address of the hotel where she'd booked me a room, the names of the jazz clubs our son frequented. Finally, her speech completed, her façade

broke down. “I don’t know what to think, Bruce. Getting a call like that *in the middle of the afternoon?*”

She shuddered, and I grasped her shoulders, instinctively, I kept my arms outstretched to maintain the distance between us and to avoid seeming aggressive. But she hurled herself at my chest, leaning against me for a moment, almost hyperventilating, before shoving me away. She looked up at me, her eyes dry and focused, then walked to her car without turning back, as though we were two friends parting after a regular lunch date.

Our eldest son, Jamie, had gone to New Orleans three years earlier to become a jazz musician. Two years of music school in Boston had been enough for him to decide that he needed real world experience, not more lessons. “I have to test myself,” he’d told us—we were still married then, albeit not for long—his bags already packed, another semester’s tuition paid. “Maybe I’ll fail, but at least I’ll know.” We let him go, alone, as he had wanted, and Sandrine had wired money to a bank in New Orleans to tide him over while he got settled.

Like me, he detested the impersonality of e-mail, so he wrote long, wonderful letters, at first, telling us of his progress, the jam sessions he hoped would get him noticed, the fill-in work that might lead to a steady gig. As time passed and his aspirations remained unfulfilled, the letters became

infrequent, terse. Whether a week or a month apart, they ended with the same plea; the last letter, a postcard really, consisted of only two sentences: *Am moving again. Need money.*

New Orleans in August felt unlike anything I'd ever experienced: hazy, damp, unceasing in its oppressiveness even at ten-thirty at night when I checked into the Crescent Arms Hotel. I headed straight for the enclosed rooftop restaurant, and when the waiter in the white linen jacket came to take my order, instead of saying "Club soda," as I had for the last fifteen years, I said, "Gin and tonic," for this was one of the things you did in such circumstances. You clung to comfort and security to see you through.

I awoke dehydrated the next morning, my mouth dry from the unfamiliar taste of expensive gin, my body shivering from the air conditioner that had hummed all night in my expensive hotel room. The furniture was faux-antique: a heavily-stained, oak bedroom set, an unforgiving mattress, pillows piled three-deep against the expansive headboard. Gin and too little sleep had left my senses dulled and though my stomach cramped at times, almost doubling me over, I didn't wait for breakfast before setting out. I took three hundred dollars from the envelope Sandrine had given me, careful to keep her father's money separate from my own. Before leaving

Baltimore, I had emptied my checking account, all five hundred sixty-eight dollars of it.

At seven-thirty, I was on the street, already looking for my first air conditioned stop. The clubs Jamie had mentioned wouldn't open for hours, so I circled the various addresses he'd written from on my hotel-issued map. Sandrine expected a status report that evening. She'd even called it that, as though I were looking for one of the pieces of art she went in search of instead of our son. Jamie's brother, Philip, had called from Paris, offering to help me look, but his exams were coming up, and I couldn't bear to take him away from them. After completing a business degree the year before at my alma mater, he'd gone to the Sorbonne to study linguistics, acquiring the refinement necessary, in his grandfather's eyes, to take over the family business. Where I came from, a restaurant or a dental practice was a family business, not an international telecommunications company like the one Sandrine's family had owned for four generations. Philip would be the fifth. They'd given up on Jamie—too much like his dad, according to Auguste, Sandrine's father, who spent half the year in Paris and half in Baltimore. Like everything he said, he never expected this declaration to seem offensive. Years of studying charts and figures had made him see such comments as a statement of fact, not a value judgment.

The French Quarter teemed with a sweaty mix of American and foreign tourists who crowded the entrances to storefronts, debating whether or not, to bless it with their out-of-town money. Zydeco music blared from speakers inside the open doorways as if the city was full of manic accordion players.

The hotel's map ignored entire square blocks in favor of highlighting tourist attractions with the least amount of clutter in between, making it difficult for me to navigate the city. Even so, by lunch I had found three of Jamie's apartments, each one more depressing and out of the way than the last. I saw the basement studio protected by bars and wire mesh crisscrossing the windows, then the room he'd rented in a two-story house wedged between six-story buildings. A zoning quirk had allowed this shack to remain while all around it, condominiums supplanted hundred-year-old homes.

The only place I saw the inside of was his first apartment, in a three-story building with a postcard-worthy courtyard out back, two blocks from my hotel. I couldn't help feeling the optimism that must have buoyed my son while living in such a classic New Orleans setting. The apartment had been vacant for two months, according to the caretaker, who gave me a tour when I said I was looking for a place to rent. Each of the three rooms—

kitchen, living room, bedroom, all in a row—verged on being claustrophobic, even in their dusty emptiness.

After a ninety-second tour, I came clean. “I’m looking for my son. He lived here three years ago, in this same apartment.”

The old man’s pock-marked face went vacant, the color draining from his mottled cheeks. “Can’t help you.”

When I pressed him further, describing Jamie’s blond hair as it had been the last time I had seen him, the mole above his left eyebrow, the way he freckled in the sun, the man walked away. “Quit wasting my time,” he said.

Outside, a bird sang in the willow tree that shaded the front yard, its low-hanging branches hiding the cosmopolitan surroundings. A trolley dinged as it passed the building, the tour guide’s nonstop litany garbled by crackling feedback. Standing there, bracing myself for the sun that would beat down on me when I left the porch, I realized this was the only place I’d been that had anything of Jamie about it.

Auguste was right to say that Jamie took after me. As a baby, he cried constantly, stopping only when I held him. When he could crawl, he followed me everywhere, catching up just in time to watch me set off in a new direction. Even when he was a teenager instead of rebelling like most kids, the bond between us remained. Where Philip shared his mother’s restlessness, her need for stimulation, Jamie and I were content to sit in the

same place for hours. Sandrine constantly created projects to keep herself busy, like the art gallery, which began as a showcase for the family's collection (they'd been early patrons of Matisse, for one) and became a haven for new work by artists from all over the world. The longer we were married, the more trips she felt compelled to take in search of new talent. It would be easy to read this as her need to be away from me, which it was in part, but it ran deeper than that. Her father had the same compulsion; he would fly across the Atlantic for the most inconsequential meetings, claiming he didn't trust his subordinates to do their jobs. We all knew that it was simply his need for activity, which he'd passed on to his only child. Where Sandrine or Philip would have grown restless lingering on the porch of that apartment building, Jamie and I would have been satisfied sitting on the steps listening to the birds in the branches above us.

Jamie's trumpet playing was my fault, too, Sandrine reminded me every chance she had after he left for New Orleans. The instrument had been my father's, the one he played in Chicago dance bands to pay his way through seminary. Father Swing, his band mates called him. I had no musical ability, much to my father's dismay, but that didn't keep me from honking away on his horn for years after he gave it up. He had bad gums, which made the pressure of the mouthpiece against his lips unbearable by the time I reached junior high.

When he was eight, Jamie discovered the horn. Entranced by the ornate scrollwork around the bell, and my father's name, Victor, etched into the tarnished silver, he refused to let it out of his sight. At fifteen, he became the youngest principal player in the All-State Band. By the time he turned seventeen, he was so fiercely devoted to jazz that he wouldn't audition at Julliard, as his mother desired, because they accorded his music second-class status. I was the one who encouraged him to go to Berklee, so Sandrine blamed me for everything that had happened since. After all, when was the last time a symphonic player hit the skids and descended into whatever disgusting habits she assumed had led to her son's downfall?

If she thought this idea didn't plague me as it did her, she was wrong.

That night in my hotel room, I unlocked the mini-bar before calling Sandrine. The hotel bill would go directly to her father, but even his disappointment at my renewed drinking paled in comparison to how little I wanted to make this call. Sandrine had left two terse messages while I'd been at dinner, and I knew she would call back soon if I didn't preempt her.

I finished the two miniscule bottles of Tanqueray, picked up the phone, and dialed my old home number. It was ten-fifteen in New Orleans, an hour later in Baltimore. Sandrine answered before the second ring.

"Where have you been?" she said. "I've tried your room a dozen times."

“I can’t look for our son from my hotel room.”

After a long pause her tone softened. “Any luck?”

“No,” I said. I recounted my day for her: the apartments, the nearby stores, one of the clubs he’d mentioned. “So far, you’d think he never lived here.”

The phone wasn’t cordless, so I was trapped on the bed, propped up by a thick layer of pillows stacked against the headboard. I needed another drink, but the minibar was next to the dresser, too far for the cord to stretch.

“Are you still there? I asked what you’re going to do next.”

“Can you hang on a second?” I pressed the phone into the pillows to muffle the sound of a bottle cracking open. Out of ice, I drank the bourbon straight, without a glass, before picking up the phone. I could taste the oak casks it had been stored in, the liquor’s familiar bite in the back of my throat as I swallowed. I hadn’t been an angry drunk or one prone to accidents; if anything, when I drank, I retreated inside myself, and I could feel that pull, the desire to close up shop, get off the phone, and lie on the bed, a glass in my hand.

“I’ll try the rest of the clubs and walk around some more, just in case,” I said.

“That’s not much of a plan.”

“What would you suggest? This isn’t easy. All I know to do is retrace his steps.”

“Are you drinking?”

“Why would you ask that?”

“You are! You’re talking too fast, like you used to.”

“No, I’m not.” I said this slowly, carefully, making it that much more obvious.

“Jesus, Bruce. Find a meeting. New Orleans must be crawling with them.”

When I put the empty bottle on the nightstand, the alarm clock, already teetering on the edge, fell. It hit the corner of the burgundy rug, then rattled against the hardwood floor.

“What was *that*?” She breathed into the phone, trying one of the relaxation techniques her therapist had recommended. I imagined her in the overstuffed chair beside our—her—bed, feet tucked beneath her, eyes closed picturing the view of the Mediterranean from the hotel in Nice where we’d stayed during our honeymoon. “I can’t worry about both of you at once,” she said.

“I’m fine.” I crawled under the bedspread when the air conditioner clicked on. The blanket, some kind of cashmere blend, felt nice against my bare feet.

“I have to go, Bruce.”

“I’ll find him, I promise.”

“You better.” She swallowed the second word, a slight catch in her throat. “Take care of yourself.”

By the time I told her I would, the line was dead.

Sandrine and I had met during what was supposed to be her year-abroad in college. I was a junior, she, a sophomore, looking for someone as different from her father as possible. I fit the bill perfectly. I didn’t come from money, I wasn’t cosmopolitan, and I had no interest in her wealth or her father’s business. When the year ended, she told her father she was staying, and he was predictably upset, refusing to meet me until after we’d gotten engaged. And once we had met, he found it absurd, while Sandrine thought it charmingly antiquated, that I insisted on keeping my job as a high school history teacher instead of working for him. My one concession was moving from Providence to Baltimore so Sandrine could live near her father, and later, so that our boys could be close to their grandfather, who’d been a widower since his daughter was six.

As she got older, Sandrine’s attitudes fell in line more closely with her father’s, until one day, shortly before Jamie graduated high school, she realized she detested everything she’d once liked about me. She kept this to

herself for as long as she could, in part because she was as stubborn as her father and didn't want to concede that he'd been right all along, but also because she was afraid I'd take her money. Her stubbornness had kept her from even considering the prenuptial agreement Auguste had drawn up.

Finally, shortly after Jamie's New Orleans announcement, she told me the truth. "I'll never be happy living with you," she said.

If I'd felt about her the way she felt about me, it would have been easy to ignore this and keep living the way we had been, comfortable in the routine and repetition of our twenty years together. But I loved her too much to want to see her unhappy, and since I was the cause of this unhappiness, I divorced her without asking for a settlement and moved into a one-bedroom apartment that was only a step-up, at best, from the nicest of Jamie's places in New Orleans.

In the two and a half years since then, I'd watched her buy sports cars and Cézannes, smother her sons with gifts and take Philip on a three-month trip through Europe, but I had yet to see her find the happiness she couldn't have with me.

As far as I knew, Jamie's only day job in New Orleans had been as a baker's assistant at a French Quarter bakery, Kazman's, so I figured it would be the perfect place to have breakfast the next morning. But I was too late.

The store had changed hands two months' earlier, subsumed into the same chain of coffee shops Sandrine and her father frequented at home. The employees, too, had changed, the colorful cast of ne'er do wells and cantankerous, old women Jamie had described replaced by a bland, well-meaning crew of twenty-year-olds in matching maroon polo shirts. The coffee tepid and the mass-produced baked goods barely thawed, I couldn't help remembering my son's stories of arriving at work at two in the morning, straight from a club, to help the owner prepare the following day's confections from scratch.

Jamie had told me about this the last time I'd seen him, a year and a half earlier, for his grandmother's funeral. My mother had been living in a nursing home near Baltimore since my father died, and she succumbed, herself, after a mercifully short bout with Parkinson's. Jamie spent three days on my couch, accepting his mother's money for a plane ticket but not her hospitality—he'd taken our divorce hard, harder than I thought he would at his age, never referring to Sandrine in the rare letters he wrote me, even distancing himself from his brother, who had remained closer to their mother than to me.

He spoke enthusiastically and at length about the bakery, of how much he enjoyed taking raw ingredients and turning them into muffins, scones, and beignets customers paid top dollar for. And he was good at it, based on

the refrigerator-full of baked goods he left me with, so many that I passed them out to my classes so they wouldn't go stale before I could eat them all. This newfound talent gave me hope: even if jazz didn't work out, he'd have something to fall back on. It wasn't until I watched him walk through security at the airport that I wondered why he'd lost so much weight when he could bake like that.

I knew from my own reaction how disappointed Jamie would have been by Kazman's transformation, the dull Dixieland music pumped from speakers hidden behind ferns and folding screens that matched the abstract squiggles on the baristas' aprons, the coffee roaster so pristine I doubted it had ever been used. But why wouldn't he have seen this devolution first-hand? Kazman only hired help from the neighborhood, he'd told me, and if he still lived nearby, which I had no reason to count on, admittedly, he might walk by the store, shake his head as he looked in the window, and see his old man at a table on the other side of the plate glass, haggard from his recent travails. That thought alone kept me in my seat long after my coffee had cooled. But as with everything else I'd tried, this led to nothing.

Two nights later, no closer to finding Jamie, I walked into The Easy Speak, the last place on my list. I'd stretched out the search as long as I

could, falling back on the fantasy that the next place was always going to be the one where I'd find the clue leading to my son.

The Easy Speak was three blocks from Bourbon Street, and the owner had worked hard to appeal both to the tourists—the beer sloshing, *show us your tits!* crowd who took advantage of Bourbon Street's open container laws as they trolled between bars and strip clubs—and to the locals who avoided those places as much as they could. One trip past the line outside Preservation Hall, the on-street beer vendors, and the women luring people into their All Nude Revues convinced me that I'd be more comfortable with the locals.

The club was dim, a band already playing as I stumbled along the cobblestone floor, past the half-full tables, and to the bar. A wrought iron statue of a saxophone player hung above it on a wire, matching the iron accents lining the bar and the railing leading up to the balcony that looked in danger of collapsing. A young singer and a bassist raced through "It Was Just One of Those Things" faster than I'd ever heard it played.

I'd tried two clubs the night before, and my head still hurt from the secondhand smoke and all the drinks I'd bought in the hope that the more I tipped the bartenders, the more forthcoming they'd become. It hadn't worked, but I tried again. I ordered a scotch and left the change from my twenty on the rail.

A piano player and a drummer joined the other two on stage for “*Lover Man*” and “*I Thought About You*.” At the end of the second tune, the bartender stopped in front of me and leaned across the bar, more curious than threatening. From up close I could see a patch of stubble above the right ear of his shaved head.

“What’s the deal?” he said, rapping his knuckles on the bar next to my change.

I’d grown better at this over the past few days, so I stared at him for a moment, concentrating on the flecks of brown in his green eyes. Then I shrugged and said, “I’m looking for someone.”

He nodded and poured me a refill. “I’m not sure I can help you,” he said.

The trio played without the singer this time, a thumping, wild piece that turned into “*Caravan*” after building in volume and speed for a few minutes, during which time I waited for the bartender to return, to acknowledge me, to do something to convince me that my optimism wasn’t entirely misplaced. But he avoided me, lavishing attention on a couple at the other end of the bar, the only other customers.

I thought about asking the singer about Jamie now that she wasn’t on stage, but in the past, this line of questioning hadn’t borne any more fruit than talking to bartenders and club owners had. As far as I could tell, a revolving door of musicians came through New Orleans; the regulars had

been here forever, while others, like Jamie, were replaced so quickly they seemed like cogs in the city's great Music Machine. Only once had someone perked up at the mention of my son's name. "What's he been up to?" the young drummer had asked. "I haven't seen him in months."

When the bartender finally passed by me again, I grabbed his arm, pulled him toward me, and said, "I'm looking for my son. He used to play here." I told him Jamie's name, that he played the trumpet, that he'd written me about a Sunday night jam session, everything I could think of to jog his memory.

He looked down at the trembling, knobby fingers that clung to the ropes of his forearm muscles. I let go. "Doesn't ring a bell," he said.

"Maybe if I talked to someone else?"

"There isn't anyone else." He watched me reach into my back pocket. "And leave your money where it is. This isn't the movies."

We stared at each other, me with one hand in my pocket, him standing inches from me, mouth half-open. Even at the time I wondered what we must have looked like. Did I seem as overmatched as I felt?

"I need help," I said. "I've been here four days, and I can't find a trace of him."

The man's expression softened a little as he pulled away. He ran his tongue over his crooked front teeth before saying, "How do you know he's still here?"

I didn't, though I refused to consider any other possibility. If I couldn't find him here, where I had some idea of where to look, I knew he was lost.

When I remained silent, the bartender said, "If I were you, I'd go home. If he wants to be found, he'll come to you."

I finished my drink. "I'll take another."

The bartender frowned at me, then said, "One more, for the road."

The band wrapped up and someone at the end of the bar whistled and called after them. The singer. From here, I could tell she was older than she'd seemed on stage—my age, even. Her face was a mask of rouge and eyeliner.

The next morning I woke up late, and when I finally checked my messages from the night before, I found three from Sandrine. I hadn't called her since that first night, even though I knew how cruel it was to shut her out. But telling her I still hadn't found our son wasn't something I could do over the phone any longer. The tone of her messages ranged from concerned to angry to resigned, in the last one, the one that announced the end of my trip. *The plane will be ready at twelve-thirty. Call me in the morning*

so *I know you got this*. After a long enough pause, I expected the voice mail to cut her off, but she added, *I hope you're okay, Bruce*.

By the door, I found an envelope with an itemized bill marked "Paid in Full." That was it. My trip was over. I'd failed.

I called Sandrine, who didn't answer until the machine had already picked up. Philip's voice had replaced my own for the greeting—it's better to have a man's voice, Sandrine believed.

"Where have you been?" she said. "I've been calling."

"I know. I've been getting the messages."

"Don't be a shit, Bruce. I've been worried."

I didn't know what to say, so I studied the receipt, the long row of Xs before the last four digits of Auguste's Platinum card.

I could hear Sandrine shift the phone from one ear to the other. "I never should have let you go. I knew this trip wouldn't be good for you."

"It wasn't your decision. Besides, you can't expect a miracle. Give me a few more days. I haven't been here a week."

"I'll meet you at the air—"

I knew she intended to hang up, so I cut her off. "What now?"

Her reply was slow in coming. "We'll figure something out. Papa's thinking about a private detective."

Check-out was in twenty minutes, and since the bill already totaled more than two thousand dollars, I skipped taking a shower, something I never did, to be out on time. I had only one suitcase, an old valise lacking wheels or the microfiber that made new bags so light, and I crammed my sweaty, smoky clothes into its single compartment and zipped it shut. The shoulder strap had broken years ago, so I carried it out of the hotel and onto the street, alternating hands so as to not wear out my already-sore shoulders. But instead of getting in the taxi the doorman hailed, I decided to make one last circuit of Jamie's haunts. The plane wouldn't take off for ninety minutes, and even if I was late, it couldn't leave without its only passenger.

After four days of unrelenting sunshine, the overcast sky came as a relief, even though the humid air felt sticky, making everything damp to the touch. The streets were surprisingly empty, which saved me from fighting through the crowds with my bulky suitcase. I felt stiff, my body beginning to revolt against what I'd put it through over the past seventy-two hours; thanks to the weight of my bag and a three-day hangover I hadn't allowed myself to recuperate from, sweat soaked the back of my shirt by the time I reached St. Louis Cathedral a few blocks away.

There, on the street opposite the Cathedral, stood Jamie playing his horn for spare change.

I ran toward him, ignoring the arthritis raging in my knees from too much walking, focused only on the slouched form of my son's back. His private teacher had hated the way he stood, chin tucked in, feet too close together, but Jamie insisted on playing like his idol, Miles Davis, emulating his S-shaped profile on the cover of *Sketches of Spain*. I'd bought him the album early in his jazz period, thinking its orchestrations would appeal to his classical background. He played it constantly, notating, then mimicking Davis's extraordinary melodies, until he could play all but the most complex passages.

His legs looked too thin poking out of his khaki shorts, shoulder blades like wings beneath his tautly stretched t-shirt. His tone sounded gruffer, more like a dog's bark than the brilliant sound I remembered, but that could have been the New Orleans influence. For the first time, I wished I owned a cell phone, so that I could call Sandrine, pass the phone to Jamie, and have her hear she'd been wrong about me.

When I whirled around in front of him, my mistake was obvious. This was a boy, sixteen at best. His shaggy hair more red than blond, he stood at least three inches taller than my son, who had always been short for his age. The kid watched me out of the corner of his eye without missing a beat, fingers moving automatically while he tried to figure out what the sweaty, middle-aged man panting in front of him wanted.

He launched into “West End Blues,” my father’s favorite tune, the one he’d played as a feature night after night. He’d taught it to Jamie, in fact, during his last visit, a year before he died, when Jamie was seventeen. The horn had quivered as he brought it to his lips, but forty years of rust evaporated in a few bars, and he spent all afternoon sitting in my son’s room teaching it to him from memory, including Louis Armstrong’s luminous introduction and the one he’d composed to make his own rendition unique. I stood in the hallway, next to the half-closed door, listening to my father’s pristine, if wavering, tone, followed by my son’s bright, clean repetition.

When I was a boy, my father would come home from work and head straight to our basement, where he practiced until dinner. I would sit by my bedroom wall, ear pressed to the grate that conveyed heat from the boiler, and take in his playing, the etudes he used as warm-ups, the concertos he knew by memory, the dance music he played when he was in a good mood. He played so loudly and confidently that I imagined he could see me, two flights up, and wanted to put on a show just for me, his only child.

Finally, after countless run-throughs, my father’s pitch cracked on the high-C, and he had to stop.

I followed him into the bathroom off our guest room and watched him take out his dentures and wipe his mouth with his handkerchief. When he finished, I saw the blood that had stained the white linen.

“That was incredible, Dad.”

He nodded and put the handkerchief back in his pocket. He never said a word about what he’d done, not that day, nor during the three weeks I stayed with him before he died.

When the boy outside St. Louis Cathedral finished “West End Blues,” he played something I didn’t know, something funkier, and I reached into my pocket, pulled out one of Auguste’s fifties, and dropped it into his open case. The boy’s eyes were closed, and as I hobbled away, I wondered what he would do when he saw the bill lying among the singles and quarters. Would he look around, puzzled, or accept it as his due, relieved someone had *finally* seen his burgeoning greatness. What would Jamie have done? As I dropped onto a nearby bench, I realized I no longer had any idea. How could I hope to find someone who was such a mystery to me? My own son, no less.

The clouds soon grew darker. It began to rain, so I picked up my bag and walked beneath the shop awnings on my way toward the hotel cab stand. The cafés I passed were crowded, tables added here and there to make up for the patio space that was flooding from the violent summer storm. Steamed windows obscured the store interiors, and I was about to turn away when I saw it: in an antique store window, three blocks from the Cathedral, sat Jamie’s—my father’s—trumpet.

Inside the store, up close, the horn looked tarnished. A line of dirt filled the scrollwork along the bell that had attracted my son's attention so many years ago, and pea-sized dents peppered the U-curves of the tuning slides. My father had run a cloth along it every day before putting it back in its case, and I'd instructed Jamie to do the same when I reluctantly gave it to him. I'd kept the horn in my closet throughout college, graduate school, and the various apartments we'd rented before settling in suburban Baltimore. Even though I couldn't play it, not really, I'd found its presence, the possibility that I could buckle down and learn the thing, comforting.

The owner of the store appeared next to me, lifting the horn from its resting place. "It's a Hermann, you know. 1934, very rare," he said in a gravelly voice.

"Actually," I said once I'd found my father's name on the side, "it's a 1936. They only made 150 before the Nazis co-opted the factory for the war."

"You know your instruments," he said, pleased.

It felt heavy in my hands, as though it had put on weight in its recent distress. "I know this one. It belonged to my father."

He grabbed the horn. "Don't try that stuff with me," he said, walking away. "You won't cheat me with some sob story!"

Antique lamps sat on every available surface, providing the store's only light, and as I followed the man, I lost sight of him whenever he turned a

corner or passed into a darkened area—attractive as the lamps looked, some of them emitted almost no light thanks to their thick shades or heavily-plated stained glass. After weaving through the narrow aisles, passing enough Louis XIV chairs and Chippendale cabinets to fill my entire hotel, I caught up to him at the register in the back. The trumpet sat between us on the counter.

“I’ll pay whatever you want,” I said and reached for the price tag attached to the main tuning slide.

“I don’t have the case, so don’t bother complaining.” He blinked repeatedly while he watched me examine the horn again.

The valves creaked when I pressed them, none going down more than halfway before sticking. I tapped the fingerings of a C-scale on their pearly tops, surprised by my own recall. How many years had it been since I’d held this horn? How many more since I’d last thought of playing it?

“It just needs to be cleaned,” the man said. “And since you know so much about it, you know that price is a bargain.”

“I don’t want to haggle.” I took the envelope with Auguste’s money from my wet suitcase and counted out the exact amount. I had used hardly any of the money, so I figured he couldn’t begrudge me this purchase, even though he would disdain its nostalgia.

When I placed the stack of fifties on the counter, the man leaned forward. “Let me wrap this for you,” he said, picking up the horn carefully, one eye still on the money. “Don’t want it to get wet.”

“You don’t remember who brought it in, do you?”

“No,” he said, wrapping the horn in brown paper and tying it with twine. “It must have been six months ago. Maybe more. I was about to give up on it. You want a receipt?”

I told him I didn’t. I put the bundle under one arm, picked up my suitcase with the other, and walked back into the storm.

The plane could take off without me for all I cared. It wasn’t much, but buying the trumpet brought me closer to Jamie than anything else had in the time I’d been there. A hotel around the corner from the antique shop advertised rooms by the week, so I walked in, handed what remained of Auguste’s money to the attendant, and signed the spiral-bound register, for some reason giving into the impulse to use my father’s name instead of my own. Five weeks. Thirty-five more days in New Orleans. By then it would be mid-September, the school year already started, my job gone.

I bought silver polish and dish detergent—it was the only thing my father trusted to clean the inside of the horn—at a nearby store and holed up in my room to clean the trumpet. It still looked tarnished after I had

finished going over it, so I used my toothbrush to pry the dirt from the looping scrollwork my father had been so proud of when he found the instrument as a young seminarian. He'd worked a second job, on top of the dance band gigs, to afford it. Most nights, he was so tired, I'd overheard him tell Jamie (and why had he never told this to *me?*), that by the time he finished work and school, he'd fall asleep on the bus home. The drivers—he knew them all by sight if not by name—called out when his stop approached.

Jamie's teacher in Boston had encouraged him to buy a new horn, going so far as to drive him from store to store so he could try out different models. In the end, none of them was good enough for my son, and when he went back to my father's trumpet, his teacher conceded that the instrument sounded as though it had been made for him.

The more I scrubbed and polished, the more tiny scratches and nicks appeared in the lacquer, buried beneath the grime I'd removed. The deeper marks looked like a cubist embellishment on the horn's original design, a comment on the ornaments that had so dazzled my son. I don't know what Jamie had done to this instrument, but it would never look the same. How it sounded was more important, so even though I wasn't my son, or my father, I brought the horn to my lips and played.

Matthew Duffus's fiction has appeared in */nor*, *Cimarron Review*, and *Madison Review*, among other places. He has an MFA in fiction writing from the University of Minnesota and lives with his family in North Carolina.