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THE STORY

NATHAN REED

NARRIUM STORIES

Narrium Stories

Reed Nathan

The Story

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Аннотация

Daniel Kord has always been the one others rely on — a school deputy head, a husband, and a father who never allows himself to break. Then a notebook appears in his bag, describing events that haven't happened yet. As Daniel searches for its author, he is forced to confront not the future, but his own past, his family, and the choices that shaped his life. A story about what remains when the strongest finally cracks.

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Chapter 1

The call came at 7:14, while Daniel Kord was still in the hallway with one arm in his coat. He looked at the screen, saw the school counselor's name, and put the coat back on the hook. He already knew, from the fact that she was calling this early, that it would be a long day, that he'd come home after dark, that Clare would leave dinner in the oven and a note about how to warm it.

"The Garrety boy," the counselor said, instead of hello. "He wasn't here yesterday, he isn't here today, the mother won't pick up, and I don't know, Daniel. I really don't know."

"I know," Daniel said.

It was the first thing he said most mornings, and it was almost always untrue, and it almost always worked. He heard her exhale on the other end — slowly, the way people exhale when someone has finally taken the weight off them. He was used to the sound. He couldn't remember when people had started breathing out like that around him, but it had been a long time ago, and it hadn't stopped since.

"I'll stop by on my way in," he said. "Give me the address again, and don't call child services yet. If I haven't texted you by nine, call them."

He wrote the address on the back of an envelope by the bowl where the keys lived. His hand was steady. He'd noticed long ago that his hand went steady at moments like this, steadier than

when he signed birthday cards, and once that had surprised him, and now it didn't.

Clare came out of the kitchen in her robe, two mugs in her hands, and saw the coat on the hook and the envelope in his.

"Today?" she asked. Not what's wrong. In sixteen years she'd stopped asking what's wrong. She asked today? — and the one word held all of it: so you're leaving early, so I don't know when you'll be back, so somewhere someone is falling again and again you're at the bottom with your arms open.

"It's nothing," Daniel said. "A boy skipping school. I'll go take a look."

That was untrue too, a soft, domestic untruth he handed her every morning, the way he put sugar in her coffee without asking whether she wanted one spoon or two, because he knew it was two. Clare nodded and gave him his mug, and he drank one swallow standing up, burned his mouth, and set the mug down on the counter half-finished. It would stand there all day. He'd wash it in the evening.

"Did you eat?" Clare asked.

"I ate," he said, not having eaten.

The Garrety house stood at the end of a street where the asphalt gave way to gravel, where the snow along the fences had gone gray from the road. Daniel knocked, then knocked again, then sat down on the porch step where he could be seen from the window, and waited. He knew how to wait on other people's porches. It was a part of the job that wasn't written into any

description — to sit in a way that let the person behind the curtain understand that you weren't leaving, and that you weren't angry, and that you had nowhere to hurry, even when you had somewhere to hurry.

After twenty minutes the door opened. The mother stood in the gap, holding the frame, and from the way she held it Daniel understood the whole of the night before, and the night before that, and why the boy wasn't going to school. His face didn't change. He'd taught himself long ago not to let his face change. A face that doesn't change is the first thing a person needs when they're braced for you to recoil.

"Hello," Daniel said. "I'm from the school. Not from child services, not from the police. Can I come in for a minute? I'm cold out here on your porch."

It was a small trick — to ask as if he were the one who needed help, as if he were the one freezing and asking to be let into the warmth, rather than she the one drowning and he the one come to pull her out. People let in the one who's cold. They don't let in the one who's come to save them. Daniel knew the difference so deeply that he no longer counted it as a trick. He counted it simply as the way doors open.

The boy was sitting at the kitchen table over a bowl of cereal gone soft. Thin, with the look Daniel recognized out of a thousand — the look of someone who has already decided something final about himself and is now only waiting for the world to confirm it. Daniel sat down across from him, not close,

and didn't ask why he wasn't in school. He asked whether the boy had finished, and whether he might have some cereal too, because he hadn't had time for breakfast.

The boy looked at him. For the first time the whole while — looked at him straight on.

"You serious?" he said.

"Serious," Daniel said. "I've been up since six."

The boy got up and took down a second bowl, and that second bowl was already half the work done, though neither the boy nor his mother knew it, and Daniel knew it, and didn't let it show, because letting it show would have ruined everything.

He had the boy at school by eleven, squared things with the counselor, wrote to the people who needed writing to and not to the ones who didn't, and by noon he was at his desk, where three stacks of paper waited and a list of eleven people he had to call back. He called nine of them. The tenth — a teacher whose class was coming apart, and not only his class, it seemed — he talked with for forty minutes, and at the end he heard it in the receiver, that same slow, unburdened exhale, and he set the phone down and sat still for a minute, looking out at the schoolyard where there was nothing but wind.

He thought of nothing in that minute. It was his skill and his rest — to think of nothing in the minutes between other people's burdens. He sat there empty, and it was good, and it was the only time in the day when he felt good, though he wouldn't have called it good, wouldn't have called it anything at all.

The eleventh he didn't call back. He looked at the name, and set it aside, and told himself he'd call tomorrow, and both of those motions — looking and setting aside — he did without lingering, because to linger would have been to notice that he was putting it off, and he didn't want to notice.

He got home at half past eight. Dinner was in the oven, a note on the table — 350 degrees, 15 minutes, no more — and Daniel read it and smiled at Clare's handwriting, round and looping, which hadn't changed in sixteen years, the way she herself hadn't changed in the thing he leaned on, though they had both changed in everything else.

Ayla was in her room; a strip of blue screen-light came from under the door and no sound came with it. He stood at her door, lifted his hand to knock, and didn't, and went down to the kitchen. He couldn't remember when he'd stopped knocking on her door. It had happened gradually, the way everything that mattered in his house happened gradually, without a single day you could point to.

He ate standing at the stove, straight out of the dish, though Clare didn't like it when he did that. Clare was asleep already, or pretending to be — in their house they both knew how to pretend to sleep, and both knew not to check whether the other was. Daniel washed the dish, washed his own morning mug still standing on the counter, dried his hands, and went to his bag for the papers he'd brought home to finish.

He always left the bag on the same chair, always unzipped

it with the same motion, always took the papers out without looking, because he knew what was where. This time his hand met something that shouldn't have been there. Not a folder. Not a book. A notebook — an ordinary one, hardbound, the kind sold at any kiosk, worn soft at the corners as though it had been carried a long time.

Daniel took it out and set it on the table. He hadn't put it in the bag. He remembered everything he put in the bag — it was part of him, to remember what was where — and this notebook he had not put there.

He opened it.

The handwriting was his.

Not like his. His. The same slant, the same way of leaving the loops unfinished, the same pressure that pressed into the paper so hard the lines could be read from the back of the page. He turned the pages faster and faster, and the pages were full — dates, days, years, his days, written from the inside, not the way others saw them but the way only he saw them.

He stopped on the last written page. Today's date. And under it — about the Garrety boy, about the second bowl of cereal, about how he'd sat down on the porch so he could be seen from the window. About what he had told no one today. About what he had done, alone on a stranger's porch, when he thought no one could see him.

Chapter 2

All right, Daniel told himself. Let's work this out.

He closed the notebook and laid his palm flat on the cover, the way he laid his palm on the desk in his office before a hard conversation, and he thought it through in order, the way he was used to thinking things through in order. He had a method. When something didn't add up — a child vanished, a mother wouldn't answer, a number in the register wouldn't reconcile — he didn't ask how is this possible. He asked who, when, and why. Three questions. Everything always came untangled from those.

Who. The bag had stood in the staff room half the day. It had stood at home all evening. The office didn't lock at lunch. The list of people who'd had access to the bag today was long, and that was good — a long list isn't a mystery, it's just work. The cleaning woman. Two people from the admin wing. The counselor, who'd come by at noon. Any parent waiting in the corridor. He ran the list in his head and felt the ground come back: a list can be checked, a list can be narrowed, a list has an end.

When. The notebook was worn at the corners — so it hadn't been made today. It had been carried, maybe for weeks. So someone had prepared this in advance, over a long time, and only today had slipped it in. That narrowed it: a random person doesn't do that. That's done by someone who knows him closely and has been saving it up.

Why. Here he stopped. He always stopped longest on why, because why was about people, and people were his work. Who needed Daniel Kord to believe that someone was keeping a diary of him in his own hand? To frighten him. To throw him off. Revenge — but for what, and whose. He turned the faces over the way he turned keys on a ring, by feel, without looking, and not one key fit this door, and that didn't alarm him. It doesn't fit now — it'll fit by morning. He stood, poured a glass of water, drank half, set the glass down on the table.

The handwriting.

He opened the notebook again and brought the lamp closer. This was where the real work was. To forge the handwriting of a whole notebook isn't forging a signature. It's hundreds of pages. It's either a machine or a person who'd had his samples, many of them, over years. He studied the slant, the way the loops broke off, the pressure. He knew his own hand worse than he'd thought — who among us knows his own hand, we don't read it, we write with it — and now, looking closely, he caught himself at something strange: the writing wasn't merely similar. It was familiar with that inside-out familiarity you flinch from — the familiarity of yourself seen from outside.

He reread the line about the porch. Then reread it once more. He didn't notice he'd read it twice.

The first version, the cleanest: someone with access to his records — old reports, notes, lists — had gathered his handwriting over years, given it to a specialist, who'd reproduced

it. Possible. Expensive, difficult, strange, but possible. Daniel liked this version. It was solvable. He set it first in his mind and felt almost relief, the working relief that came when a first solid edge began to show in the chaos.

But the line about the porch.

The handwriting could be forged. The facts of his day could be gathered, harder but possible: he could have been watched, someone could have seen him sit on the step at the Garretys', someone could have known about the boy. It's a small town. People talk. That was still a version. That was still work.

But the thing written after the words about the porch — about what he had done when he thought no one could see — no one had seen that. He was as sure of it as he was sure of few things. He tested the certainty with the same method: who could have seen. Did the Garrety window face the porch? No, the window was to the side. A car on the street? He'd have noticed a car; he noticed cars. A camera? On that street, where the asphalt gives way to gravel, there were no cameras — there wasn't even a streetlight.

He sat holding two things at once: the version that explained everything, and the one line the version didn't cover. And instead of growing uneasy, he did what he always did — he looked for the third thing that would tie the first two together. There has to be a third thing. There's always a third thing. He got up to fetch the envelope with the Garrety address from the hallway, why he couldn't have said, only that his hands needed something to do while his head worked.

In the hallway he turned on the light, took the envelope, came back. He left the hallway light on.

He sat down again and began listing in the margin of a notepad — not the notebook, his own working pad — everyone who over the last years might have had access and motive. The list grew. He wrote fast, small, and the hand in the notepad was the same as the hand in the notebook, and that was normal, it was his hand, but for a second his own hand looked strange to him, and he stopped writing, looked at it, didn't understand that he was looking, and went on writing.

By midnight he had eleven names, and not one of them explained the line about the porch.

Eleven. He noted the number to himself and didn't linger on it.

He pushed the pad away and rubbed his eyes. The tiredness was ordinary, working tiredness, and there was even something soothing in it: tired meant he had worked, and working meant this was a task, and a task meant it had a solution he simply hadn't found yet. He'd nearly convinced himself. He was good at convincing himself — it was the underside of being good at convincing others, and he rarely turned the skill on himself, but tonight he turned it, and it worked.

He closed the notebook. Set the pad on top of it. Set his palm on top of the pad. And in that posture — palm on two notebooks, his own and not his own — he sat longer than he'd meant to, looking not at the table but through it.

Then he did what he always did when a task wouldn't solve

by nightfall: he put it off till morning. In the morning the head is fresh, in the morning the list will narrow, in the morning the third thing will turn up. He stood, switched off the lamp. The desk drawer where he'd put the notebook he pushed not quite shut, and didn't notice. The drawer stayed open a finger's width, and in the dark of the office it was the one thing out of line — a narrow black gap where there had always been a straight edge.

He went upstairs. At Ayla's door the blue strip beneath it had gone dark — so she'd fallen asleep, or switched off the light so he'd think she had. He stood. He lifted his hand. And lowered it without knocking, the way he lowered it every night.

In the bedroom Clare lay facing the wall. He lay down beside her, on top of the covers, not fully undressed, the way he lay down when he knew he wouldn't sleep. He lay there and thought not about the notebook. He thought about having forgotten to do something, some small evening thing of the kind he did without thinking, and he couldn't remember which, and that small unclosed thing nagged at him more than the notebook did, because the notebook was a mystery, and this was disorder, and disorder in his own house he could not abide.

Downstairs, in the empty hallway, the light he'd left on burned all night.

Chapter 3

In the morning the notebook lay in the half-open drawer, and Daniel, dressing, pulled it all the way open, took the notebook out, and read the top line of a new page he hadn't finished the night before. It was about Wednesday. About how on Wednesday a person who had never wept in front of him would weep. Daniel closed the notebook, pushed the drawer shut — this time all the way, automatically, not marking yesterday's lapse — and went down, because it was Wednesday, and Wednesday was an ordinary day, and he had eleven things to do before noon, and weeping people were his work, and someone or other would weep, people weep, there was nothing in it.

He'd forgotten the line by the time the kettle boiled.

Marcus Dell caught him in the corridor before first period, and from the way Marcus held his stack of notebooks — pressed to his chest with both arms, the way you hold not notebooks but something that might fall out of the person himself — Daniel understood the conversation wouldn't be about notebooks.

"You got a minute?" Marcus asked. "No — you don't. You never have a minute, and you find one anyway, and I don't understand how you do it."

"I've got a minute," Daniel said.

They went out to the stair landing where they'd smoked twenty years ago, when they were both younger and when Marcus still

laughed the laugh Daniel hadn't heard in a long time. Marcus set the notebooks on the windowsill and looked out at the same empty yard, and didn't speak right away.

"Lena took the little one to her mother's," he said. "For a while, she says. I know what for a while means. I said for a while myself when I left grad school. For a while is for good, just slower."

Daniel was silent. He knew how to be silent in a way that wasn't empty but open, the way you open a door and step back so the person can decide for himself whether to come in.

"I look at you," Marcus said, and turned to him for the first time, "and I think: there's a man with everything holding. The house holds, the daughter holds, the school holds on him, half the town holds on him. And I think, if it holds for Daniel, then it's possible at all. Then a person is capable of it. And then I go home, and half the closet's empty, and I think — so I'm the one who isn't capable. And that, Dan, that's the hardest part. Not that she left. That you can and I can't."

And here Daniel did what he always did. He said, calmly and warmly, that more was holding for Marcus than it felt like, that children come back, that Lena would come back, that he just had to get through this week, then the next, one at a time, and that he, Daniel, was right here. Every word was right. Marcus listened, and nodded, and at the end exhaled — that same slow exhale — and said thank you, you have no idea, and took the notebooks off the sill and went to his lesson standing a little straighter than

he'd come.

Daniel watched him go and felt nothing beyond the usual: the thing was done, the man walked straighter. He didn't notice — and if he had, he wouldn't have admitted it — that he hadn't said one true word to Marcus. That half his own house had long stood empty, only with full closets. That capable wasn't a word for him. That he'd given Marcus something to lean on that wasn't there. Marcus went off carrying the image of a Daniel who held, and now that image held Marcus, and Daniel had just topped it up a little more.

He saw Theo from the office window — the boy standing at the far end of the yard, alone, the way people stand not because they want to be alone but because there's nowhere else. Two others came up to him, and Daniel knew the two, and knew how it went, and got up to go down, but by the time he had his jacket on the two had already gone and Theo was still standing, and he picked up from the ground the thing they'd thrown — his own hat, it seemed — and brushed it off, and didn't put it on, but pushed it into his pocket, and that motion, the way the boy brushed it off and didn't put it on, told Daniel more than an hour of talk would have.

He didn't go down. He told himself he'd come later, more gently, when the boy wouldn't know he'd been watched from the third floor, because to go down now would be to show Theo that his humiliation had been seen from above, and that couldn't be done. It was true. And it was a convenient truth, because it let

him not go now. Daniel stood at the window and watched the boy, and recognized something in him so exactly that he turned away first — before Theo could lift his head and see, in the window, an adult watching and not coming.

He sat down to work. He wrote Theo's name on the list of people he needed to go to. The list was long. Theo's name was not first on it.

Ayla called at four, which she never did, and Daniel saw her name on the screen and felt a short prick — not of gladness, of alarm, because a daughter who doesn't call calls only when something.

"Dad," Ayla said. "Can you pick me up. Not from school. From Mina's."

"What happened?"

"Nothing." A pause. "Just come get me."

He went. Mina's house was on the other side of town, and Ayla was waiting outside, though it was cold, waiting outside and not in, and that outside told Daniel that something inside had ended. She got into the car without looking at him, buckled in, and they drove, and she was silent, and he was silent, and he knew how to be silent, but with her the skill somehow didn't work the way it did with strangers — with strangers silence opened a door, and with his daughter it closed one, and he didn't understand the difference, and it was the one thing in his whole life he'd never learned to do.

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