



An Invisible Thread: The True Story of an 11-Year-Old Panhandler, a Busy Sales Executive, and an Unlikely Meeting with Destiny

Laura Schroff, Alex Tresniowski

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“Excuse me lady, do you have any spare change? I am hungry.”

When I heard him, I didn’t really hear him. His words were part of the clatter, like a car horn or someone yelling for a cab. They were, you could say, just noise—the kind of nuisance New Yorkers learn to tune out. So I walked right by him, as if he wasn’t there.

But then, just a few yards past him, I stopped.

And then—and I’m still not sure why I did this—I came back.

When Laura Schroff first met Maurice on a New York City street corner, she had no idea that she was standing on the brink of an incredible and unlikely friendship that would inevitably change both their lives. As one lunch at McDonald’s with Maurice turns into two, then into a weekly occurrence that is fast growing into an inexplicable connection, Laura learns heart-wrenching details about Maurice’s horrific childhood.

The boy is stuck in something like hell. He is six years old and covered in small red bites from chinchies—bed bugs—and he is woefully skinny due to an unchecked case of ringworm. He is so hungry his stomach hurts, but then he is used to being hungry: when he was two years old the pangs got so bad he rooted through the trash and ate rat droppings. He had to have his stomach pumped. He is staying in his father’s cramped, filthy apartment, sleeping with stepbrothers who wet the bed, surviving in a place that smells like something died. He has not seen his mother in three months, and he doesn’t know why. His world is a world of drugs and violence and unrelenting chaos, and he has the wisdom to know, even at six, that if something does not change for him soon, he might not make it.

Sprinkled throughout the book is also Laura’s own story of her turbulent childhood. Every now and then, something about Maurice’s struggles reminds her of her past, how her father’s alcohol-induced rages shaped the person she became and, in a way, led her to Maurice.

He started by cursing my mother and screaming at her in front of all of us. My mother pulled us closer to her and waited for it to pass. But it didn’t. My father left the room and came back with two full liquor bottles. He threw them right over our heads, and they smashed against the wall. Liquor and glass rained down on us, and we pulled up the covers to shield ourselves. My father hurled the next bottle, and then went back for two more. They shattered just above our heads; the sound was sickening. My father kept screaming and ranting, worse than I’d ever heard him before. When he ran out of bottles he went into the kitchen and overturned the table and smashed the chairs. Just then the phone rang, and my mother rushed to get it. I heard her screaming to the caller to get help. My father grabbed the phone from her and ripped the base right out of the wall. My mother ran back to us as my father kept kicking and throwing furniture, unstoppable, out of his mind.

As their friendship grows, Laura offers Maurice simple experiences he comes to treasure: learning how to set a table, trimming a Christmas tree, visiting her nieces and nephew on Long Island, and even having homemade lunches to bring to school.

“If you make me lunch,” he said, “will you put it in a brown paper bag?”

I didn’t really understand the question. “Okay, sure. But why do you want it in a brown paper bag?”

“Because when I see kids come to school with their lunch in a brown paper bag, that means someone cares about them.”

I looked away when Maurice said that, so he wouldn’t see me tear up. A simple brown paper bag, I thought.

To me, it meant nothing. To him, it was everything.

It is the heartwarming story of a friendship that has spanned thirty years, that brought life to an over-scheduled professional who had lost sight of family and happiness and hope to a hungry and desperate boy whose family background in drugs and crime and squalor seemed an inescapable fate.

He had, inside of him, some miraculous reserve of goodness and strength, some fierce will to be special. I saw this in his hopeful face the day he asked for spare change, and I see it in his eyes today. Whatever made me notice him on that street corner so many years ago is clearly something that cannot be extinguished, no matter how relentless the forces aligned against it. Some may call it spirit. Some might call it heart. Whatever it was, it drew me to him, as if we were bound by some invisible, unbreakable thread.

And whatever it is, it binds us still.

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