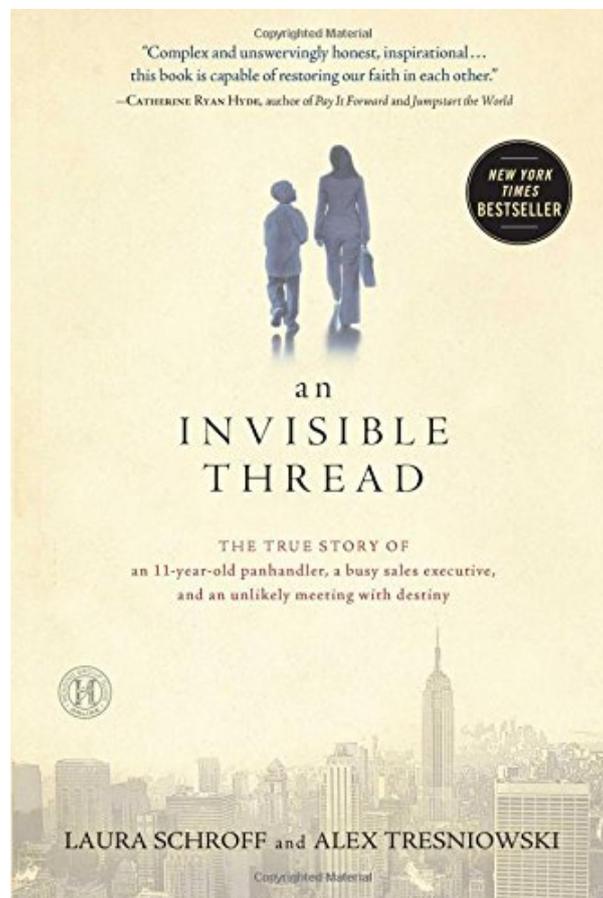
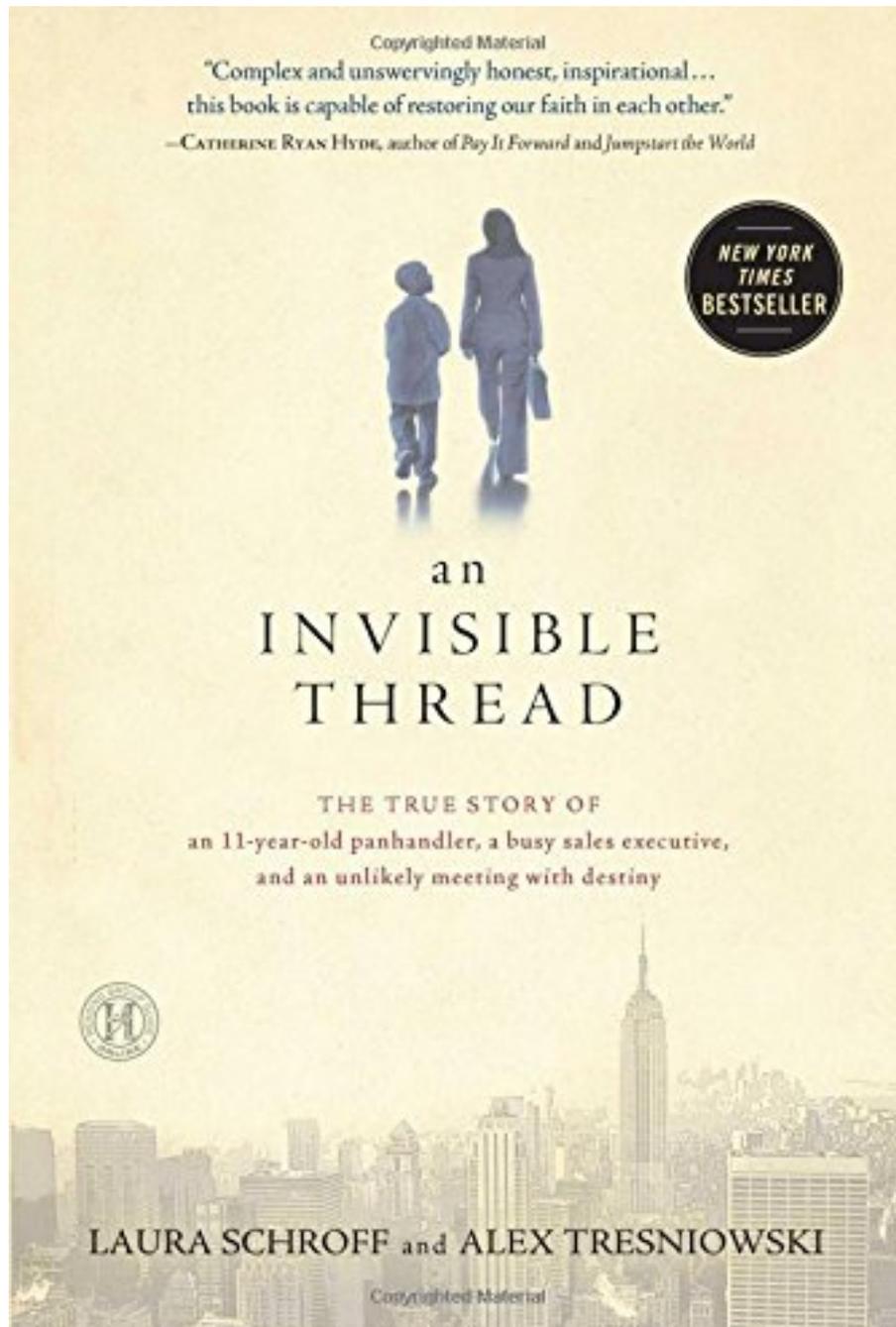


**AN INVISIBLE THREAD: THE TRUE STORY
OF AN 11-YEAR-OLD PANHANDLER, A
BUSY SALES EXECUTIVE, AND AN
UNLIKELY MEETING WITH DESTINY BY
LAURA S**



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Review

"I thought I knew what **An Invisible Thread** was going to be. I thought it would be a simple and hopeful story about a woman who saved a boy. I was wrong. It's a complex and unswervingly honest story about a woman and a boy who saved each other. By its raw honesty and lack of excess sentimentality, it is even more inspirational. This is a book capable of restoring our faith in each other and in the very idea that maybe everything is going to be okay after all." (Catherine Ryan Hyde, author of *Pay It Forward* and *Jumpstart the World*)

"**An Invisible Thread**—a remarkable story, told so beautifully and honestly—shows us what's possible when we are not afraid to connect with another human being and tap into our compassion. It is a story about the power each of us has to elevate someone else's life and how our own life is enriched in the process. This special book reminds us that damaging cycles can be broken and not to neglect the humanity of the strangers we brush up against every day." (Chris Gardner, bestselling author of *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Start Where You Are*)

"A straightforward tale of kindness and paying it forward in 1980s New York . . . For readers seeking an uplifting reminder that small gestures matter." (Kirkus Reviews)

"According to an old Chinese proverb, there's an invisible thread that connects two people who are destined to meet and influence each other's lives. . . . As Schroff relates Maurice's story, she tells of her own father's alcoholism and abuse, and readers see how desperately these two need each other in this feel-good story about the far-reaching benefits of kindness." (Publishers Weekly)

"**An Invisible Thread** is like *The Blind Side*, but instead of football, it's food. These are two people who were brought together by one simple meal, and it literally changed the course of both of their lives. This is a must-read . . . you can read it in a day because it's impossible to put down. If you read it and find it as moving as I

did, pay it forward: buy a copy and give it to a friend.” (Rachael Ray, host of The Rachael Ray Show)

“This book is a game-changer . . . each chapter touches your heart. An Invisible Thread is a gift to us all. America needs this book now more than ever.” (“Coach” Ron Tunick, national radio show host, “The Business of Life”)

“An incredible story . . . I would encourage everyone to pick up this book.” (Clayton Morris, host, Fox & Friends)

“If you have a beating heart—or if you fear you’re suffering a hardening of the emotional arteries—you really ought to commit to this book at the earliest possible opportunity . . . read this book. And pass it on. And encourage the next reader to do the same.” (Jesse Kornbluth Huffington Post)

About the Author

Laura Schroff is a former advertising executive who has helped launch three of the most successful start-ups in Time Inc. history—InStyle, Teen People, and People StyleWatch. Schroff has also worked as the New York Division Manager at People magazine and as Associate Publisher at Brides magazine. She lives in New York City.

Alex Tresniowski is a former human-interest writer at People and the bestselling author of several books, most notably *The Vendetta*, which was purchased by Universal Studios and used as a basis for the movie *Public Enemies*. His other titles include *An Invisible Thread*, *Waking Up In Heaven*, and *The Light Between Us*.

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An Invisible Thread

“Excuse me, lady, do you have any spare change?”

This was the first thing he said to me, on 56th Street in New York City, right around the corner from Broadway, on a sunny September day.

And 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.

I came back and I looked at him, and I realized he was just a boy. Earlier, out of the corner of my eye, I had noticed he was young. But now, looking at him, I saw that he was a child—tiny body, sticks for arms, big round eyes. He wore a burgundy sweatshirt that was smudged and frayed and ratty burgundy sweatpants to match. He had scuffed white sneakers with untied laces, and his fingernails were dirty. But his eyes were bright and there was a general sweetness about him. He was, I would soon learn, eleven years old.

He stretched his palm toward me, and he asked again, “Excuse me, lady, do you have any spare change? I am hungry.”

What I said in response may have surprised him, but it really shocked me.

“If you’re hungry,” I said, “I’ll take you to McDonald’s and buy you lunch.”

“Can I have a cheeseburger?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“How about a Big Mac?”

“That’s okay, too.”

“How about a Diet Coke?”

“Yes, that’s okay.”

“Well, how about a thick chocolate shake and French fries?”

I told him he could have anything he wanted. And then I asked him if I could join him for lunch.

He thought about it for a second.

“Sure,” he finally said.

We had lunch together that day, at McDonald’s.

And after that, we got together every Monday.

For the next 150 Mondays.

His name is Maurice, and he changed my life.

Why did I stop and go back to Maurice? It is easier for me to tell you why I ignored him in the first place. I ignored him, very simply, because he wasn’t in my schedule.

You see, I am a woman whose life runs on schedules. I make appointments, I fill slots, I micromanage the clock. I bounce around from meeting to meeting, ticking things off a list. I am not merely punctual; I am fifteen minutes early for any and every engagement. This is how I live; it is who I am—but some things in life do not fit neatly into a schedule.

Rain, for example. On the day I met Maurice—September 1, 1986—a huge storm swept over the city, and I awoke to darkness and hammering rain. It was Labor Day weekend and the summer was slipping away, but I had tickets to the U.S. Open tennis tournament that afternoon—box seats, three rows from center court. I wasn’t a big tennis fan, but I loved having such great seats; to me, the tickets were tangible evidence of how successful I’d become. In 1986 I was thirty-five years old and an advertising sales executive for USA Today, and I was very good at what I did, which was building relationships through sheer force of personality. Maybe I wasn’t exactly where I wanted to be in my life—after all, I was still single, and another summer had come and gone without me finding that someone special—but by any standard I was doing pretty well. Taking clients to the Open and sitting courtside for free was just another measure of how far this girl from a working-class Long Island town had come.

But then the rains washed out the day, and by noon the Open had been postponed. I pattered around my apartment, tidied up a bit, made some calls, and read the paper until the rain finally let up in mid-afternoon. I grabbed a sweater and dashed out for a walk. I may not have had a destination, but I had a definite purpose—to enjoy the fall chill in the air and the peeking sun on my face, to get a little exercise, to say good-bye to summer. Stopping was never part of the plan.

And so, when Maurice spoke to me, I just kept going. Another thing to remember is that this was New York in the 1980s, a time when vagrants and panhandlers were as common a sight in the city as kids on bikes or moms with strollers. The nation was enjoying an economic boom, and on Wall Street new millionaires were minted every day. But the flip side was a widening gap between the rich and the poor, and nowhere was this more evident than on the streets of New York City. Whatever wealth was supposed to trickle down to the middle class did not come close to reaching the city's poorest, most desperate people, and for many of them the only recourse was living on the streets. After a while you got used to the sight of them—hard, gaunt men and sad, haunted women, wearing rags, camped on corners, sleeping on grates, asking for change. It is tough to imagine anyone could see them and not feel deeply moved by their plight. Yet they were just so prevalent that most people made an almost subconscious decision to simply look the other way—to, basically, ignore them. The problem seemed so vast, so endemic, that stopping to help a single panhandler could feel all but pointless. And so we swept past them every day, great waves of us going on with our lives and accepting that there was nothing we could really do to help.

There had been one homeless man I briefly came to know the winter before I met Maurice. His name was Stan, and he lived on the street off Sixth Avenue, not far from my apartment. Stan was a stocky guy in his midforties who owned a pair of wool gloves, a navy blue skullcap, old work shoes, and a few other things stuffed into plastic shopping bags, certainly not any of the simple creature comforts we take for granted—a warm blanket, for instance, or a winter coat. He slept on a subway grate, and the steam from the trains kept him alive.

One day I asked if he'd like a cup of coffee, and he answered that he would, with milk and four sugars, please. And it became part of my routine to bring him a cup of coffee on the way to work. I'd ask Stan how he was doing and I'd wish him good luck, until one morning he was gone and the grate was just a grate again, not Stan's spot. And just like that he vanished from my life, without a hint of what happened to him. I felt sad that he was no longer there and I often wondered what became of him, but I went on with my life and over time I stopped thinking about Stan. I hate to believe my compassion for him and others like him was a casual thing, but if I'm really honest with myself, I'd have to say that it was. I cared, but I didn't care enough to make a real change in my life to help. I was not some heroic do-gooder. I learned, like most New Yorkers, to tune out the nuisance.

Then came Maurice. I walked past him to the corner, onto Broadway, and, halfway to the other side in the middle of the avenue, just stopped. I stood there for a few moments, in front of cars waiting for the light to change, until a horn sounded and startled me. I turned around and hustled back to the sidewalk. I don't remember thinking about it or even making a conscious decision to turn around. I just remember doing it.

Looking back all these years later, I believe there was a strong, unseen connection that pulled me back to Maurice. It's something I call an invisible thread. It is, as the old Chinese proverb tells us, something that connects two people who are destined to meet, regardless of time and place and circumstance. Some legends call it the red string of fate; others, the thread of destiny. It is, I believe, what brought Maurice and I to the same stretch of sidewalk in a vast, teeming city—just two people out of eight million, somehow connected, somehow meant to be friends.

Look, neither of us is a superhero, nor even especially virtuous. When we met we were just two people with complicated pasts and fragile dreams. But somehow we found each other, and we became friends.

And that, you will see, made all the difference for us both. |An Invisible Thread

We walked across the avenue to the McDonald's, and for the first few moments neither of us spoke. This thing we were doing—going to lunch, a couple of strangers, an adult and a child—it was weird, and we both felt it.

Finally, I said, “Hi, I’m Laura.”

“I’m Maurice,” he said.

We got in line and I ordered the meal he’d asked for—Big Mac, fries, thick chocolate shake—and I got the same for myself. We found a table and sat down, and Maurice tore into his food. He’s famished, I thought. Maybe he doesn’t know when he will eat again. It took him just a few minutes to pack it all away. When he was done, he asked where I lived. We were sitting by the side window and could see my apartment building, the Symphony, from our table, so I pointed and said, “Right there.”

“Do you live in a hotel, too?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “it’s an apartment.”

“Like the Jeffersons?”

“Oh, the TV show. Not as big. It’s just a studio. Where do you live?”

He hesitated for a moment before telling me he lived at the Bryant, a welfare hotel on West 54th Street and Broadway.

I couldn’t believe he lived just two blocks from my apartment. One street was all that separated our worlds.

I would later learn that the simple act of telling me where he lived was a leap of faith for Maurice. He was not in the habit of trusting adults, much less white adults. If I had thought about it I might have realized no one had ever stopped to talk to him, or asked him where he lived, or been nice to him, or bought him lunch. Why wouldn’t he be suspicious of me? How could he be sure I wasn’t a Social Services worker trying to take him away from his family? When he went home later and told one of his uncles some woman had taken him to McDonald’s, the uncle said, “She is trying to snatch you. Stay away from her. Stay off that corner, in case she comes back.”

I figured I should tell Maurice something about myself. Part of me felt that taking him to lunch was a good thing to do, but another part wasn’t entirely comfortable with it. After all, he was a child and I was a stranger, and hadn’t children everywhere been taught not to follow strangers? Was I crossing some line here? I imagine some will say what I did was flat-out wrong. All I can say is, in my heart, I believe it was the only thing I could have done in that situation. Still, I understand how people might be skeptical. So I figured if I told him something about myself, I wouldn’t be such a stranger.

“I work at USA Today,” I said.

I could tell he had no idea what that meant. I explained it was a newspaper, and that it was new, and that we

were trying to be the first national newspaper in the country. I told him my job was selling advertising, which was how the newspaper paid for itself. None of this cleared things up.

“What do you do all day?” he asked.

Ah, he wanted to know my schedule. I ran through it for him—sales calls, meetings, working lunches, presentations, sometimes client dinners.

“Every day?”

“Yes, every day.”

“Do you ever miss a day?”

“If I’m sick,” I said. “But I’m rarely sick.”

“But you never just not do it one day?”

“No, never. That’s my job. And besides, I really like what I do.”

Maurice could barely grasp what I was saying. Only later would I learn that until he got to know me, he had never known anyone with a job.

There was something else I didn’t know about Maurice as I sat across from him that day. I didn’t know that in the pocket of his sweatpants he had a knife.

Not a knife, actually, but a small razor-blade box cutter. He had stolen it from a Duane Reade on Broadway. It was a measure of my inability to fathom his world that I never thought for a single moment he might be carrying a weapon. The idea of a weapon in his delicate little hands was incomprehensible to me. It never dawned on me that he could even use one, much less that he might truly need one to protect himself from the violence that permeated his life.

For a good part of Maurice’s childhood, the greatest harm he faced came from the man who gave him life.

Maurice’s father wasn’t around for very long, but in that short time he was an inordinately damaging presence—an out-of-control buzz saw you couldn’t shut off. He was also named Maurice, after his own absentee dad, but when he was born no one knew how to spell it so he became Morris. It wasn’t long before most people called him Lefty anyway, because, although he was right-handed, it was his left that he used to knock people out.

Morris was just five foot two, but his size only made him tougher, more aggressive, as if he had something to prove every minute of every day. In the notoriously dangerous east Brooklyn neighborhood where he lived—a one-square-mile tract known as Brownsville, birthplace of the nefarious 1940s gang Murder Inc. and later home to some of the roughest street gangs in the country—Morris was one of the most feared men of all.

As a member of the infamous Tomahawks street gang, Morris was a stick-up man, and he was brazenly good at it. He even routinely robbed people he knew. There was a dice game on Howard Avenue—fifteen or twenty people, piles of tens and twenties in a pot—and Morris sometimes liked to play. One night he

announced he was robbing the game. Ain't nobody takin' nothin' from me, one man said. Morris hit him once in the face with the butt of his gun and knocked him out, then scooped up several hundred dollars and walked away. No one else said a word. The next day Morris leaned against a car in front of his building, smiling as the very people he had robbed walked by. He was daring them to say something. No one did.

Morris finally met his match in a spark plug named Darcella. Slender and pretty, with light skin and soft features, Darcella was one of eleven children born to Rose, a single mother from Baltimore who moved her family to the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn. Darcella grew up surrounded by brothers and wound up as tough as any of them; she was known to fight anyone who crossed her, male or female, throwing blizzards of punches and never seeming to tire. People weren't sure if she was crazy or just mean. In her teens she was one of the few female members of the Tomahawks, and she wore the gang's black leather jacket with pride.

Then she fell for a gang member who impressed her with his swagger. They were never a good match, Morris and Darcella. They were both too explosive, too much like each other, but they became a couple anyway. She called him Junebug, evolved from Junior, since technically he was Maurice, Jr. He called her Red, from Red Bone, a nickname for fair-skinned black women. They had three children, all before Darcella turned twenty. First came two daughters, Celeste and LaToya. And then a son—a boy she named Maurice.

Sadly for Maurice and his sisters, the language his parents understood best was a discourse of violent action, not words. Morris, in particular, was a heavy drug user and an alcoholic, and coke, dope, and Wild Irish Rose easily triggered his rages. When he came home at all, it was to rail at his family with both curses and fists. He would routinely slap his daughters in the head; one time, he hit Celeste so hard he ruptured her eardrum. He would slap and push and punch Darcella with the same ruthless efficiency that terrified everyone in Brownsville, and he would slap and punch Maurice, his only son. When the boy would cry, he would say, "Shut up, punk," and hit him again.

Morris would disappear for days to be with his girlfriend, Diane, then come home and warn Darcella not to even look at another man. Morris's infidelity finally pushed her too far, and she packed up her children and found an apartment in the notorious Marcy Projects in Bed-Stuy. A complex of twenty-seven six-story buildings on nearly thirty acres, with some 1,700 apartments housing more than 4,000 people, the Marcy was riddled with drugs and violence, hardly anyone's idea of a sanctuary. But for Darcella it was a place to escape an even greater threat.

Morris found them anyway. One night he burst into their apartment and demanded to talk to Darcella. "Red, I can't let you leave me," he said, crying. "I love you." With young Maurice watching, Darcella stood her ground.

"I'm not havin' it," she said. "You're no good; get out."

Morris cocked his left fist and punched Darcella in the face.

She fell to the floor, and Maurice grabbed hold of his father's leg to stop him from hitting her again. Morris flicked the boy against a wall. That, it turned out, was a mistake: Darcella saw her son on the ground, ran to the kitchen, and came out with a steak knife.

Morris didn't flinch. It was hardly the first time he'd found himself at the point of a knife. "What you gonna do with that?" he asked.

Darcella lunged toward his chest. His arms came up to defend himself, so she stabbed him in the arms. She

stabbed him again and again as he tried to block the blows, and finally he staggered into the hallway and fell, covered in blood, crying, “Red, you stabbed me! You tried to kill me! I don’t believe you did this!”

Maurice, wide-eyed, watched it all. Finally, the police came and asked Morris who had attacked him so savagely.

“Some guys,” is all he said.

And with that, Morris limped away. Maurice, just five years old, watched his father go. His family, as he knew it, was no more.

My first lunch with Maurice was over thirty minutes after it began, but I didn’t want to say good-bye to Maurice just yet. When we stepped out into the street, the sun was bright and strong, so I asked Maurice if he wanted to take a walk in Central Park.

“Okay,” he said with a shrug.

We walked into the south end of the park and strolled along a path toward the Great Lawn. Bicyclists, joggers, mothers and toddlers, laughing teenagers, everyone, it seemed, was carefree. Once again, we didn’t say much; we just walked side by side. I wanted to know more about him and about the circumstances that led him to begging in the street but I held back, because I didn’t want him to think I was snooping around.

I did ask him one thing.

“So, Maurice, what about you? What do you want to do when you grow up?”

“I don’t know,” he said without hesitation.

“No? Don’t you ever think about it?”

“No,” he replied flatly.

Maurice didn’t spend his days dreaming of becoming a policeman, or an astronaut, or a shortstop, or the president; he didn’t even know these were dreams most boys have. And even if he could have imagined a life for himself beyond the misery that was his world, what would have been the point of dreaming about that life? There was nothing Maurice wanted to be, because there was no reason to believe he could be anything except what he was—a scrounger, a beggar, a street kid.

In the park there was a brisk fall breeze, leaves fluttered away from trees, and the sun peeked through the giant elms. We seemed a million miles away from the concrete core of the city. I didn’t ask Maurice any more questions. I just let him enjoy this break from his street routine. When we left the park, we passed a Häagen-Dazs, and I asked him if he wanted some ice cream.

“Can I get a chocolate cone?” he asked.

“You bet,” I said.

I ordered two cones, and when I handed one to him, I saw Maurice smile for the very first time. It was not a big smile, not wide and toothy like you see with most kids. It was quick to appear and just as quick to vanish.

But it happened, and I saw it, and it seemed to me like a beautiful, shiny new thing.

When we finished our ice cream I asked, “Is there anything else you want to do?”

“Can we go play video games?”

“Sure we can.” So we walked to an arcade on Broadway. I gave Maurice a few quarters and watched him play StreetFighter. He lost himself in the game like any kid would. He jerked the joystick and stuck out his tongue and stood on his toes and made noises as he blew up things with his spaceship missiles. It was fun to watch him play.

Later that day, it occurred to me that buying lunch for Maurice and spending a couple of hours with him had made me feel—at very little expense in time and money—inordinately good. And that, in turn, made me feel guilty. Was the only reason I had stopped and bought him lunch to make myself feel good for a while? Had I, instead of window-shopping or going to a movie, chosen to divert myself by buying Maurice a burger and an ice cream? Was there something inherently patronizing about what I did, something maybe even exploitative?

Help out a poor kid, feel better about your own life?

I didn’t have the answers back then. All I knew was that being with Maurice felt right. We left the arcade and strolled down Broadway, winding up on 56th Street, right where we had met. I opened my purse and handed Maurice my business card.

“Look, if you’re ever hungry, please call me and I’ll make sure you have something to eat.”

Maurice took the card, looked at it, and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Thank you for my lunch and my Häagen-Dazs,” he said. “I had a great day.”

“Me too,” I said. And then he went one way, and I went another.

I wondered if I would ever see Maurice again. Certainly there was a very good chance I wouldn’t. At that time, I didn’t know how tough things were for Maurice, how truly dire his family life was. If I had, I don’t think I’d have let him walk away. I think I might have hugged him and never let go.

But I did walk away, and when I turned around to look for him in the bustle of Broadway, he was already gone, invisible again. I had to accept he might be out of my life for good—that our strange little friendship was over just as it was beginning.

Yet I believed then and I believe now that there is something in the universe that brings people who need each other together. There is something that helps two wildly disparate people somehow forge a bond. Maybe it is precisely the thing that haunts us most that makes us reach out to others we think can provide some solace. Maybe it was my own past that made me turn around and find Maurice that day. And maybe, just maybe, that invisible thread of fate would bring us back together again.

And then, as I walked back home, I felt a surge of regret, because, while I had given Maurice my business card, I hadn’t given him a quarter for the call. This was way before cell phones, and I couldn’t be sure he had a landline in his apartment. If he wanted to reach me he’d likely have to use a pay phone, which meant he

would have to beg for the quarter.

But in the end it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

Because on the way home Maurice threw my business card in the trash. The boy stands alone on a sidewalk in Brooklyn and this is what he sees: a woman running for her life, and another woman chasing her with a hammer. He recognizes one woman as his father's girlfriend. The other, the one with the hammer, he doesn't know.

The boy is stuck in something like hell. He is six years old and covered in small red bites from chinch—bedbugs—and he is woefully skinny due to an unchecked case of ringworm. He is so hungry his stomach hurts, but then being hungry is nothing new to him. When he was two years old the pangs got so bad he rooted through the trash and ate rat droppings and had to have his stomach pumped. He is staying in his father's cramped, filthy apartment in a desolate stretch of Brooklyn, sleeping with stepbrothers who wet the bed, surviving in a place that smells like death. 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.

He does not pray, does not know how, but he thinks, Please don't let my father let me die. And this thought, in a way, is its own little prayer.

And then the boy sees his father come up the block, and the woman with the hammer sees him too, and she screams, "Junebug, where is my son?!"

The boy recognizes this voice, and he says, "Mom?"

The woman with the hammer looks down at the boy, and she looks puzzled, until she looks harder and finally says, "Maurice?"

The boy didn't recognize his mother because her teeth had fallen out from smoking dope.

The mother didn't recognize her son because he was shriveled from the ringworm.

Now she is chasing Junebug and yelling, "Look what you did to my baby!"

The boy should be frightened, or confused, but more than anything what the boy feels is happiness. He is happy that his mother has come back to get him, and because of that he is not going to die—at least not now, at least not in this place.

He will remember this as the moment when he knew his mother loved him.

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AN INVISIBLE THREAD: THE TRUE STORY OF AN 11-YEAR-OLD PANHANDLER, A BUSY SALES EXECUTIVE, AND AN UNLIKELY MEETING WITH DESTINY BY LAURA S PDF

In the tradition of the New York Times bestseller *The Blind Side*, *An Invisible Thread* tells of the unlikely friendship between a busy executive and a disadvantaged young boy, and how both of their lives changed forever.

“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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Review

"I thought I knew what *An Invisible Thread* was going to be. I thought it would be a simple and hopeful story about a woman who saved a boy. I was wrong. It's a complex and unswervingly honest story about a woman and a boy who saved each other. By its raw honesty and lack of excess sentimentality, it is even more inspirational. This is a book capable of restoring our faith in each other and in the very idea that maybe everything is going to be okay after all." (Catherine Ryan Hyde, author of *Pay It Forward* and *Jumpstart the World*)

"*An Invisible Thread*—a remarkable story, told so beautifully and honestly—shows us what's possible when we are not afraid to connect with another human being and tap into our compassion. It is a story about the

power each of us has to elevate someone else's life and how our own life is enriched in the process. This special book reminds us that damaging cycles can be broken and not to neglect the humanity of the strangers we brush up against every day." (Chris Gardner, bestselling author of *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Start Where You Are*)

"A straightforward tale of kindness and paying it forward in 1980s New York . . . For readers seeking an uplifting reminder that small gestures matter." (Kirkus Reviews)

"According to an old Chinese proverb, there's an invisible thread that connects two people who are destined to meet and influence each other's lives. . . . As Schroff relates Maurice's story, she tells of her own father's alcoholism and abuse, and readers see how desperately these two need each other in this feel-good story about the far-reaching benefits of kindness." (Publishers Weekly)

"An Invisible Thread is like *The Blind Side*, but instead of football, it's food. These are two people who were brought together by one simple meal, and it literally changed the course of both of their lives. This is a must-read . . . you can read it in a day because it's impossible to put down. If you read it and find it as moving as I did, pay it forward: buy a copy and give it to a friend." (Rachael Ray, host of *The Rachael Ray Show*)

"This book is a game-changer . . . each chapter touches your heart. *An Invisible Thread* is a gift to us all. America needs this book now more than ever." ("Coach" Ron Tunick, national radio show host, "The Business of Life")

"An incredible story . . . I would encourage everyone to pick up this book." (Clayton Morris, host, *Fox & Friends*)

"If you have a beating heart—or if you fear you're suffering a hardening of the emotional arteries—you really ought to commit to this book at the earliest possible opportunity . . . read this book. And pass it on. And encourage the next reader to do the same." (Jesse Kornbluth *Huffington Post*)

About the Author

Laura Schroff is a former advertising executive who has helped launch three of the most successful start-ups in Time Inc. history—*InStyle*, *Teen People*, and *People StyleWatch*. Schroff has also worked as the New York Division Manager at *People* magazine and as Associate Publisher at *Brides* magazine. She lives in New York City.

Alex Tresniowski is a former human-interest writer at *People* and the bestselling author of several books, most notably *The Vendetta*, which was purchased by Universal Studios and used as a basis for the movie *Public Enemies*. His other titles include *An Invisible Thread*, *Waking Up In Heaven*, and *The Light Between Us*.

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An Invisible Thread

"Excuse me, lady, do you have any spare change?"

This was the first thing he said to me, on 56th Street in New York City, right around the corner from Broadway, on a sunny September day.

And 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.

I came back and I looked at him, and I realized he was just a boy. Earlier, out of the corner of my eye, I had noticed he was young. But now, looking at him, I saw that he was a child—tiny body, sticks for arms, big round eyes. He wore a burgundy sweatshirt that was smudged and frayed and ratty burgundy sweatpants to match. He had scuffed white sneakers with untied laces, and his fingernails were dirty. But his eyes were bright and there was a general sweetness about him. He was, I would soon learn, eleven years old.

He stretched his palm toward me, and he asked again, “Excuse me, lady, do you have any spare change? I am hungry.”

What I said in response may have surprised him, but it really shocked me.

“If you're hungry,” I said, “I'll take you to McDonald's and buy you lunch.”

“Can I have a cheeseburger?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“How about a Big Mac?”

“That's okay, too.”

“How about a Diet Coke?”

“Yes, that's okay.”

“Well, how about a thick chocolate shake and French fries?”

I told him he could have anything he wanted. And then I asked him if I could join him for lunch.

He thought about it for a second.

“Sure,” he finally said.

We had lunch together that day, at McDonald's.

And after that, we got together every Monday.

For the next 150 Mondays.

His name is Maurice, and he changed my life.

Why did I stop and go back to Maurice? It is easier for me to tell you why I ignored him in the first place. I ignored him, very simply, because he wasn't in my schedule.

You see, I am a woman whose life runs on schedules. I make appointments, I fill slots, I micromanage the

clock. I bounce around from meeting to meeting, ticking things off a list. I am not merely punctual; I am fifteen minutes early for any and every engagement. This is how I live; it is who I am—but some things in life do not fit neatly into a schedule.

Rain, for example. On the day I met Maurice—September 1, 1986—a huge storm swept over the city, and I awoke to darkness and hammering rain. It was Labor Day weekend and the summer was slipping away, but I had tickets to the U.S. Open tennis tournament that afternoon—box seats, three rows from center court. I wasn't a big tennis fan, but I loved having such great seats; to me, the tickets were tangible evidence of how successful I'd become. In 1986 I was thirty-five years old and an advertising sales executive for USA Today, and I was very good at what I did, which was building relationships through sheer force of personality. Maybe I wasn't exactly where I wanted to be in my life—after all, I was still single, and another summer had come and gone without me finding that someone special—but by any standard I was doing pretty well. Taking clients to the Open and sitting courtside for free was just another measure of how far this girl from a working-class Long Island town had come.

But then the rains washed out the day, and by noon the Open had been postponed. I puttered around my apartment, tidied up a bit, made some calls, and read the paper until the rain finally let up in mid-afternoon. I grabbed a sweater and dashed out for a walk. I may not have had a destination, but I had a definite purpose—to enjoy the fall chill in the air and the peeking sun on my face, to get a little exercise, to say goodbye to summer. Stopping was never part of the plan.

And so, when Maurice spoke to me, I just kept going. Another thing to remember is that this was New York in the 1980s, a time when vagrants and panhandlers were as common a sight in the city as kids on bikes or moms with strollers. The nation was enjoying an economic boom, and on Wall Street new millionaires were minted every day. But the flip side was a widening gap between the rich and the poor, and nowhere was this more evident than on the streets of New York City. Whatever wealth was supposed to trickle down to the middle class did not come close to reaching the city's poorest, most desperate people, and for many of them the only recourse was living on the streets. After a while you got used to the sight of them—hard, gaunt men and sad, haunted women, wearing rags, camped on corners, sleeping on grates, asking for change. It is tough to imagine anyone could see them and not feel deeply moved by their plight. Yet they were just so prevalent that most people made an almost subconscious decision to simply look the other way—to, basically, ignore them. The problem seemed so vast, so endemic, that stopping to help a single panhandler could feel all but pointless. And so we swept past them every day, great waves of us going on with our lives and accepting that there was nothing we could really do to help.

There had been one homeless man I briefly came to know the winter before I met Maurice. His name was Stan, and he lived on the street off Sixth Avenue, not far from my apartment. Stan was a stocky guy in his midforties who owned a pair of wool gloves, a navy blue skullcap, old work shoes, and a few other things stuffed into plastic shopping bags, certainly not any of the simple creature comforts we take for granted—a warm blanket, for instance, or a winter coat. He slept on a subway grate, and the steam from the trains kept him alive.

One day I asked if he'd like a cup of coffee, and he answered that he would, with milk and four sugars, please. And it became part of my routine to bring him a cup of coffee on the way to work. I'd ask Stan how he was doing and I'd wish him good luck, until one morning he was gone and the grate was just a grate again, not Stan's spot. And just like that he vanished from my life, without a hint of what happened to him. I felt sad that he was no longer there and I often wondered what became of him, but I went on with my life and over time I stopped thinking about Stan. I hate to believe my compassion for him and others like him was a casual thing, but if I'm really honest with myself, I'd have to say that it was. I cared, but I didn't care enough

to make a real change in my life to help. I was not some heroic do-gooder. I learned, like most New Yorkers, to tune out the nuisance.

Then came Maurice. I walked past him to the corner, onto Broadway, and, halfway to the other side in the middle of the avenue, just stopped. I stood there for a few moments, in front of cars waiting for the light to change, until a horn sounded and startled me. I turned around and hustled back to the sidewalk. I don't remember thinking about it or even making a conscious decision to turn around. I just remember doing it.

Looking back all these years later, I believe there was a strong, unseen connection that pulled me back to Maurice. It's something I call an invisible thread. It is, as the old Chinese proverb tells us, something that connects two people who are destined to meet, regardless of time and place and circumstance. Some legends call it the red string of fate; others, the thread of destiny. It is, I believe, what brought Maurice and I to the same stretch of sidewalk in a vast, teeming city—just two people out of eight million, somehow connected, somehow meant to be friends.

Look, neither of us is a superhero, nor even especially virtuous. When we met we were just two people with complicated pasts and fragile dreams. But somehow we found each other, and we became friends.

And that, you will see, made all the difference for us both. |An Invisible Thread

We walked across the avenue to the McDonald's, and for the first few moments neither of us spoke. This thing we were doing—going to lunch, a couple of strangers, an adult and a child—it was weird, and we both felt it.

Finally, I said, "Hi, I'm Laura."

"I'm Maurice," he said.

We got in line and I ordered the meal he'd asked for—Big Mac, fries, thick chocolate shake—and I got the same for myself. We found a table and sat down, and Maurice tore into his food. He's famished, I thought. Maybe he doesn't know when he will eat again. It took him just a few minutes to pack it all away. When he was done, he asked where I lived. We were sitting by the side window and could see my apartment building, the Symphony, from our table, so I pointed and said, "Right there."

"Do you live in a hotel, too?" he asked.

"No," I said, "it's an apartment."

"Like the Jeffersons?"

"Oh, the TV show. Not as big. It's just a studio. Where do you live?"

He hesitated for a moment before telling me he lived at the Bryant, a welfare hotel on West 54th Street and Broadway.

I couldn't believe he lived just two blocks from my apartment. One street was all that separated our worlds.

I would later learn that the simple act of telling me where he lived was a leap of faith for Maurice. He was not in the habit of trusting adults, much less white adults. If I had thought about it I might have realized no one had ever stopped to talk to him, or asked him where he lived, or been nice to him, or bought him lunch.

Why wouldn't he be suspicious of me? How could he be sure I wasn't a Social Services worker trying to take him away from his family? When he went home later and told one of his uncles some woman had taken him to McDonald's, the uncle said, "She is trying to snatch you. Stay away from her. Stay off that corner, in case she comes back."

I figured I should tell Maurice something about myself. Part of me felt that taking him to lunch was a good thing to do, but another part wasn't entirely comfortable with it. After all, he was a child and I was a stranger, and hadn't children everywhere been taught not to follow strangers? Was I crossing some line here? I imagine some will say what I did was flat-out wrong. All I can say is, in my heart, I believe it was the only thing I could have done in that situation. Still, I understand how people might be skeptical. So I figured if I told him something about myself, I wouldn't be such a stranger.

"I work at USA Today," I said.

I could tell he had no idea what that meant. I explained it was a newspaper, and that it was new, and that we were trying to be the first national newspaper in the country. I told him my job was selling advertising, which was how the newspaper paid for itself. None of this cleared things up.

"What do you do all day?" he asked.

Ah, he wanted to know my schedule. I ran through it for him—sales calls, meetings, working lunches, presentations, sometimes client dinners.

"Every day?"

"Yes, every day."

"Do you ever miss a day?"

"If I'm sick," I said. "But I'm rarely sick."

"But you never just not do it one day?"

"No, never. That's my job. And besides, I really like what I do."

Maurice could barely grasp what I was saying. Only later would I learn that until he got to know me, he had never known anyone with a job.

There was something else I didn't know about Maurice as I sat across from him that day. I didn't know that in the pocket of his sweatpants he had a knife.

Not a knife, actually, but a small razor-blade box cutter. He had stolen it from a Duane Reade on Broadway. It was a measure of my inability to fathom his world that I never thought for a single moment he might be carrying a weapon. The idea of a weapon in his delicate little hands was incomprehensible to me. It never dawned on me that he could even use one, much less that he might truly need one to protect himself from the violence that permeated his life.

For a good part of Maurice's childhood, the greatest harm he faced came from the man who gave him life.

Maurice's father wasn't around for very long, but in that short time he was an inordinately damaging presence—an out-of-control buzz saw you couldn't shut off. He was also named Maurice, after his own absentee dad, but when he was born no one knew how to spell it so he became Morris. It wasn't long before most people called him Lefty anyway, because, although he was right-handed, it was his left that he used to knock people out.

Morris was just five foot two, but his size only made him tougher, more aggressive, as if he had something to prove every minute of every day. In the notoriously dangerous east Brooklyn neighborhood where he lived—a one-square-mile tract known as Brownsville, birthplace of the nefarious 1940s gang Murder Inc. and later home to some of the roughest street gangs in the country—Morris was one of the most feared men of all.

As a member of the infamous Tomahawks street gang, Morris was a stick-up man, and he was brazenly good at it. He even routinely robbed people he knew. There was a dice game on Howard Avenue—fifteen or twenty people, piles of tens and twenties in a pot—and Morris sometimes liked to play. One night he announced he was robbing the game. Ain't nobody takin' nothin' from me, one man said. Morris hit him once in the face with the butt of his gun and knocked him out, then scooped up several hundred dollars and walked away. No one else said a word. The next day Morris leaned against a car in front of his building, smiling as the very people he had robbed walked by. He was daring them to say something. No one did.

Morris finally met his match in a spark plug named Darcella. Slender and pretty, with light skin and soft features, Darcella was one of eleven children born to Rose, a single mother from Baltimore who moved her family to the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn. Darcella grew up surrounded by brothers and wound up as tough as any of them; she was known to fight anyone who crossed her, male or female, throwing blizzards of punches and never seeming to tire. People weren't sure if she was crazy or just mean. In her teens she was one of the few female members of the Tomahawks, and she wore the gang's black leather jacket with pride.

Then she fell for a gang member who impressed her with his swagger. They were never a good match, Morris and Darcella. They were both too explosive, too much like each other, but they became a couple anyway. She called him Junebug, evolved from Junior, since technically he was Maurice, Jr. He called her Red, from Red Bone, a nickname for fair-skinned black women. They had three children, all before Darcella turned twenty. First came two daughters, Celeste and LaToya. And then a son—a boy she named Maurice.

Sadly for Maurice and his sisters, the language his parents understood best was a discourse of violent action, not words. Morris, in particular, was a heavy drug user and an alcoholic, and coke, dope, and Wild Irish Rose easily triggered his rages. When he came home at all, it was to rail at his family with both curses and fists. He would routinely slap his daughters in the head; one time, he hit Celeste so hard he ruptured her eardrum. He would slap and push and punch Darcella with the same ruthless efficiency that terrified everyone in Brownsville, and he would slap and punch Maurice, his only son. When the boy would cry, he would say, "Shut up, punk," and hit him again.

Morris would disappear for days to be with his girlfriend, Diane, then come home and warn Darcella not to even look at another man. Morris's infidelity finally pushed her too far, and she packed up her children and found an apartment in the notorious Marcy Projects in Bed-Stuy. A complex of twenty-seven six-story buildings on nearly thirty acres, with some 1,700 apartments housing more than 4,000 people, the Marcy was riddled with drugs and violence, hardly anyone's idea of a sanctuary. But for Darcella it was a place to escape an even greater threat.

Morris found them anyway. One night he burst into their apartment and demanded to talk to Darcella. "Red,

I can't let you leave me," he said, crying. "I love you." With young Maurice watching, Darcella stood her ground.

"I'm not havin' it," she said. "You're no good; get out."

Morris cocked his left fist and punched Darcella in the face.

She fell to the floor, and Maurice grabbed hold of his father's leg to stop him from hitting her again. Morris flicked the boy against a wall. That, it turned out, was a mistake: Darcella saw her son on the ground, ran to the kitchen, and came out with a steak knife.

Morris didn't flinch. It was hardly the first time he'd found himself at the point of a knife. "What you gonna do with that?" he asked.

Darcella lunged toward his chest. His arms came up to defend himself, so she stabbed him in the arms. She stabbed him again and again as he tried to block the blows, and finally he staggered into the hallway and fell, covered in blood, crying, "Red, you stabbed me! You tried to kill me! I don't believe you did this!"

Maurice, wide-eyed, watched it all. Finally, the police came and asked Morris who had attacked him so savagely.

"Some guys," is all he said.

And with that, Morris limped away. Maurice, just five years old, watched his father go. His family, as he knew it, was no more.

My first lunch with Maurice was over thirty minutes after it began, but I didn't want to say good-bye to Maurice just yet. When we stepped out into the street, the sun was bright and strong, so I asked Maurice if he wanted to take a walk in Central Park.

"Okay," he said with a shrug.

We walked into the south end of the park and strolled along a path toward the Great Lawn. Bicyclists, joggers, mothers and toddlers, laughing teenagers, everyone, it seemed, was carefree. Once again, we didn't say much; we just walked side by side. I wanted to know more about him and about the circumstances that led him to begging in the street but I held back, because I didn't want him to think I was snooping around.

I did ask him one thing.

"So, Maurice, what about you? What do you want to do when you grow up?"

"I don't know," he said without hesitation.

"No? Don't you ever think about it?"

"No," he replied flatly.

Maurice didn't spend his days dreaming of becoming a policeman, or an astronaut, or a shortstop, or the president; he didn't even know these were dreams most boys have. And even if he could have imagined a life

for himself beyond the misery that was his world, what would have been the point of dreaming about that life? There was nothing Maurice wanted to be, because there was no reason to believe he could be anything except what he was—a scrounger, a beggar, a street kid.

In the park there was a brisk fall breeze, leaves fluttered away from trees, and the sun peeked through the giant elms. We seemed a million miles away from the concrete core of the city. I didn't ask Maurice any more questions. I just let him enjoy this break from his street routine. When we left the park, we passed a Häagen-Dazs, and I asked him if he wanted some ice cream.

"Can I get a chocolate cone?" he asked.

"You bet," I said.

I ordered two cones, and when I handed one to him, I saw Maurice smile for the very first time. It was not a big smile, not wide and toothy like you see with most kids. It was quick to appear and just as quick to vanish. But it happened, and I saw it, and it seemed to me like a beautiful, shiny new thing.

When we finished our ice cream I asked, "Is there anything else you want to do?"

"Can we go play video games?"

"Sure we can." So we walked to an arcade on Broadway. I gave Maurice a few quarters and watched him play StreetFighter. He lost himself in the game like any kid would. He jerked the joystick and stuck out his tongue and stood on his toes and made noises as he blew up things with his spaceship missiles. It was fun to watch him play.

Later that day, it occurred to me that buying lunch for Maurice and spending a couple of hours with him had made me feel—at very little expense in time and money—inordinately good. And that, in turn, made me feel guilty. Was the only reason I had stopped and bought him lunch to make myself feel good for a while? Had I, instead of window-shopping or going to a movie, chosen to divert myself by buying Maurice a burger and an ice cream? Was there something inherently patronizing about what I did, something maybe even exploitative?

Help out a poor kid, feel better about your own life?

I didn't have the answers back then. All I knew was that being with Maurice felt right. We left the arcade and strolled down Broadway, winding up on 56th Street, right where we had met. I opened my purse and handed Maurice my business card.

"Look, if you're ever hungry, please call me and I'll make sure you have something to eat."

Maurice took the card, looked at it, and stuffed it in his pocket.

"Thank you for my lunch and my Häagen-Dazs," he said. "I had a great day."

"Me too," I said. And then he went one way, and I went another.

I wondered if I would ever see Maurice again. Certainly there was a very good chance I wouldn't. At that time, I didn't know how tough things were for Maurice, how truly dire his family life was. If I had, I don't

think I'd have let him walk away. I think I might have hugged him and never let go.

But I did walk away, and when I turned around to look for him in the bustle of Broadway, he was already gone, invisible again. I had to accept he might be out of my life for good—that our strange little friendship was over just as it was beginning.

Yet I believed then and I believe now that there is something in the universe that brings people who need each other together. There is something that helps two wildly disparate people somehow forge a bond. Maybe it is precisely the thing that haunts us most that makes us reach out to others we think can provide some solace. Maybe it was my own past that made me turn around and find Maurice that day. And maybe, just maybe, that invisible thread of fate would bring us back together again.

And then, as I walked back home, I felt a surge of regret, because, while I had given Maurice my business card, I hadn't given him a quarter for the call. This was way before cell phones, and I couldn't be sure he had a landline in his apartment. If he wanted to reach me he'd likely have to use a pay phone, which meant he would have to beg for the quarter.

But in the end it wouldn't have mattered anyway.

Because on the way home Maurice threw my business card in the trash. The boy stands alone on a sidewalk in Brooklyn and this is what he sees: a woman running for her life, and another woman chasing her with a hammer. He recognizes one woman as his father's girlfriend. The other, the one with the hammer, he doesn't know.

The boy is stuck in something like hell. He is six years old and covered in small red bites from chinch—bedbugs—and he is woefully skinny due to an unchecked case of ringworm. He is so hungry his stomach hurts, but then being hungry is nothing new to him. When he was two years old the pangs got so bad he rooted through the trash and ate rat droppings and had to have his stomach pumped. He is staying in his father's cramped, filthy apartment in a desolate stretch of Brooklyn, sleeping with stepbrothers who wet the bed, surviving in a place that smells like death. 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.

He does not pray, does not know how, but he thinks, Please don't let my father let me die. And this thought, in a way, is its own little prayer.

And then the boy sees his father come up the block, and the woman with the hammer sees him too, and she screams, "Junebug, where is my son?!"

The boy recognizes this voice, and he says, "Mom?"

The woman with the hammer looks down at the boy, and she looks puzzled, until she looks harder and finally says, "Maurice?"

The boy didn't recognize his mother because her teeth had fallen out from smoking dope.

The mother didn't recognize her son because he was shriveled from the ringworm.

Now she is chasing Junebug and yelling, "Look what you did to my baby!"

The boy should be frightened, or confused, but more than anything what the boy feels is happiness. He is happy that his mother has come back to get him, and because of that he is not going to die—at least not now, at least not in this place.

He will remember this as the moment when he knew his mother loved him.

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Most helpful customer reviews

273 of 283 people found the following review helpful.

Wonderful

By Silver's Reviews

Maurice had never met anyone like Laura and Laura had never met anyone like Maurice. They were from two different worlds. Laura doesn't know why she stopped and turned back after Maurice asked her for some money, but she is glad she did.

Through Maurice, Laura learned about the life he and thousands of others were living on a daily basis....not a pleasant life at all. Laura was helping Maurice to live a better life at least one day a week, and it seemed to be paying off since she could see a change in him even though he had to go back to his horrible living conditions after he left her.

As well as learning about the living conditions of others, the author also gave the reader a chance to find out that her childhood/family life was not very easy.....her father was an abusive alcoholic, and her mother sat by not being able to defend herself or her children. Obviously the author's childhood and the childhood of her brothers and sisters had an impact on their entire life and on her decision to turn back and fulfill Maurice's plea for help.

The descriptions in the book are very detailed and heartbreaking but also heartwarming. You will become a part of the lives of every character and you will feel their pain and happiness.

An Invisible Thread is the perfect title for this book. The book brought to the surface that we all have a connection to other human beings even though that connection may not be outwardly visible.

I truly enjoyed the book because of the honesty of feelings and of human kindness and human connection. This is a must read. Laura Schroff is a brave woman to reveal all this about her life, but it definitely will make you realize that no matter how small the gesture may be, we can make a difference for someone else.
5/5

135 of 143 people found the following review helpful.

more complex than you might initially think

By a long way from home

I was very torn throughout the reading of this book. Once I finished reading I turned to the user reviews on amazon to see what others thought. I found myself agreeing with both the positive and negative reviews which made me sit back and think long and hard about things.

What drew me to the book was not just the story, but the fact that the first editorial review stated that there was a "lack of excess sentimentality" As far as my tastes go, I don't like gratuitous sentimentality so that simple statement was a ringing endorsement. But the book IS sentimental, sometimes overly so, and, as other less favorable reviews have pointed out, there is a self congratulatory undercurrent at times. There were

points in my reading of *An Invisible Thread* that I would have hurled the book across the room in frustration. The fact that I was reading on the kindle app for my android phone was probably the main reason for my restraint. The author was often the hero in her stories and I found myself wondering how much of a role revisionist history played in her retelling of her childhood and even certain scenes with Maurice. Or maybe not. There are already too many spoilers here in these user reviews so I am not going to give anything away, but suffice it to say that when Laura met Michael I was so angry I wasn't sure I would finish the book. Sure, she talked about her struggles with her decisions but I think I didn't always believe her. There were a few other instances of cowardice in the book that made me cringe but then I had to ask myself whether I would be any less cowardly in some of these emotionally difficult situations. Unfortunately, the answer is probably, NO. Edit* I should note, that along with what I am calling cowardice, Laura also showed incredible bravery and/or courage.

What I finally realized was that no matter how frustrated or angry I became at times, something was keeping me glued to this book. I am a truly terrible reader and always have been. Slow, distractible and easily bored. I can't remember the last book I read in one day. This one I read in half a day, losing precious hours of sleep as I dug deeper and deeper into the story. I loved Maurice. His indomitable spirit in the face of the overwhelming odds against him was just a joy to watch unfold. If I am honest with myself I would have to say that I ended up loving Laura as well. I didn't always like her but what she did for Maurice can't be denied no matter what you decide her motives were. Does it lessen the gift when the giver is also the receiver? I don't think so. Laura gave so much to Maurice and got so much back in return. I don't think we need to penalize her for the fact that in the process of saving Maurice, she managed to save herself as well. Isn't this precisely how so much of life works? Laura is multifaceted and as I turned pages I found myself with myriad emotions about her -- most of them quite positive. In fact, I would like to meet her and find out more of the story that didn't fit in these pages.

We humans are such complex creatures. To sum either one of these two characters up as either privileged, underprivileged, self serving, selfish, innocent, lovable, a victim, cowardly, a hero, a superhero, courageous, or sentimental, is to miss the fact that they are all of the above and then some. They are human. Flawed. Did Laura and Maurice always have pure motives for all the decisions they made? Probably not. I don't know anyone whose motives are always pure. Some reviewers question why Laura wrote the book if not for self congratulations. Maybe. Or maybe she knew she had a good story to tell. The fact that it painted her in a good light is just part of the tale. She DID do a good thing. Don't lose sight of that fact just because at times she seems to feel good about herself. She ought to feel good. It was a potentially miserably unhappy story with a warm and fuzzy ending (FYI - I usually hate warm and fuzzy endings). She did something that most people would not have done and she did it with conviction (and more than a bit of blind faith).

I don't know why Laura (and Alex) chose to write the book. I don't know whether she simply had a story to tell or whether she needed more self validation. I don't actually care WHY she wrote it. I care THAT she wrote it. It comes at a time in our lives when apathy is rampant and relationships are more fragile than ever. Was this a brilliant piece of writing? No, not at all really. Again, I don't really care. It was a simple story (albeit with some complex emotions) simply told. I enjoyed the journey and am finding the thoughtful aftermath more rich and colorful than I had expected.

Bottom line: I recommend the book.

126 of 134 people found the following review helpful.

I Wanted to Love It, But...

By Louisa M

God bless Laura Schroff and Maurice Maczyk. *An Invisible Thread* tells their story; Laura, a successful NY

career woman, and Maurice, the young 11-year-old panhandler, whom she helped and befriended. Her initial act of kindness, and the lessons they taught one another and share here, are indeed inspirational, and hopefully will help to change many lives for the better.

But parts of this book are difficult to read. The description of the welfare hotel where Maurice lived at one time is horrifying; the abuse that Laura and her family suffered at the hands of her alcoholic father is even worse. I must applaud the author for her honesty...although she does pat herself on the back a little too often, she also gives other people credit where due, and admits if she made a mistake.

There are many small details (for example, the brown bag lunches, and the bicycle) which add heart to the story, but then other chapters jump ahead abruptly, and suddenly the reader is two years in the future without knowing what transpired in between. Also, the editing could have been better...if Maurice is on a bike, he should "pedal" away, not "peddle," as it is spelled in the text.

For me, almost the saddest part of the book was the following sentence: "He (the author's husband) even relented and allowed me to invite Maurice to our home for Christmas one year." Allowed her? Wasn't it her home also? It is obvious that Laura and Maurice have always had a special relationship; what a pity that they were forced to miss any time together at all.

The photo inserts are helpful, and a nice addition, as is the follow-up interview with the author.

Ms. Schroff states that the book idea grew from a magazine article. It is a good book, but not great. Borrow it from the library, and use the money you would have spent on a purchase to perform your own act of kindness. I wish Laura, Maurice, and their entire extended family all the best.

See all 2219 customer reviews...

AN INVISIBLE THREAD: THE TRUE STORY OF AN 11-YEAR-OLD PANHANDLER, A BUSY SALES EXECUTIVE, AND AN UNLIKELY MEETING WITH DESTINY BY LAURA S PDF

Well, when else will certainly you discover this possibility to obtain this book **An Invisible Thread: The True Story Of An 11-Year-Old Panhandler, A Busy Sales Executive, And An Unlikely Meeting With Destiny By Laura S** soft documents? This is your good chance to be here and get this excellent book **An Invisible Thread: The True Story Of An 11-Year-Old Panhandler, A Busy Sales Executive, And An Unlikely Meeting With Destiny By Laura S** Never leave this book prior to downloading this soft documents of **An Invisible Thread: The True Story Of An 11-Year-Old Panhandler, A Busy Sales Executive, And An Unlikely Meeting With Destiny By Laura S** in web link that we offer. **An Invisible Thread: The True Story Of An 11-Year-Old Panhandler, A Busy Sales Executive, And An Unlikely Meeting With Destiny By Laura S** will actually make a lot to be your friend in your lonely. It will certainly be the most effective partner to boost your business and pastime.

Review

"I thought I knew what **An Invisible Thread** was going to be. I thought it would be a simple and hopeful story about a woman who saved a boy. I was wrong. It's a complex and unswervingly honest story about a woman and a boy who saved each other. By its raw honesty and lack of excess sentimentality, it is even more inspirational. This is a book capable of restoring our faith in each other and in the very idea that maybe everything is going to be okay after all." (Catherine Ryan Hyde, author of *Pay It Forward* and *Jumpstart the World*)

"**An Invisible Thread**—a remarkable story, told so beautifully and honestly—shows us what's possible when we are not afraid to connect with another human being and tap into our compassion. It is a story about the power each of us has to elevate someone else's life and how our own life is enriched in the process. This special book reminds us that damaging cycles can be broken and not to neglect the humanity of the strangers we brush up against every day." (Chris Gardner, bestselling author of *The Pursuit of Happyness* and *Start Where You Are*)

"A straightforward tale of kindness and paying it forward in 1980s New York . . . For readers seeking an uplifting reminder that small gestures matter." (Kirkus Reviews)

"According to an old Chinese proverb, there's an invisible thread that connects two people who are destined to meet and influence each other's lives. . . . As Schroff relates Maurice's story, she tells of her own father's alcoholism and abuse, and readers see how desperately these two need each other in this feel-good story about the far-reaching benefits of kindness." (Publishers Weekly)

"**An Invisible Thread** is like *The Blind Side*, but instead of football, it's food. These are two people who were brought together by one simple meal, and it literally changed the course of both of their lives. This is a must-read . . . you can read it in a day because it's impossible to put down. If you read it and find it as moving as I did, pay it forward: buy a copy and give it to a friend." (Rachael Ray, host of *The Rachael Ray Show*)

"This book is a game-changer . . . each chapter touches your heart. **An Invisible Thread** is a gift to us all.

America needs this book now more than ever.” (“Coach” Ron Tunick, national radio show host, “The Business of Life”)

“An incredible story . . . I would encourage everyone to pick up this book.” (Clayton Morris, host, Fox & Friends)

“If you have a beating heart—or if you fear you’re suffering a hardening of the emotional arteries—you really ought to commit to this book at the earliest possible opportunity . . . read this book. And pass it on. And encourage the next reader to do the same.” (Jesse Kornbluth Huffington Post)

About the Author

Laura Schroff is a former advertising executive who has helped launch three of the most successful start-ups in Time Inc. history—InStyle, Teen People, and People StyleWatch. Schroff has also worked as the New York Division Manager at People magazine and as Associate Publisher at Brides magazine. She lives in New York City.

Alex Tresniowski is a former human-interest writer at People and the bestselling author of several books, most notably *The Vendetta*, which was purchased by Universal Studios and used as a basis for the movie *Public Enemies*. His other titles include *An Invisible Thread*, *Waking Up In Heaven*, and *The Light Between Us*.

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An Invisible Thread

“Excuse me, lady, do you have any spare change?”

This was the first thing he said to me, on 56th Street in New York City, right around the corner from Broadway, on a sunny September day.

And 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.

I came back and I looked at him, and I realized he was just a boy. Earlier, out of the corner of my eye, I had noticed he was young. But now, looking at him, I saw that he was a child—tiny body, sticks for arms, big round eyes. He wore a burgundy sweatshirt that was smudged and frayed and ratty burgundy sweatpants to match. He had scuffed white sneakers with untied laces, and his fingernails were dirty. But his eyes were bright and there was a general sweetness about him. He was, I would soon learn, eleven years old.

He stretched his palm toward me, and he asked again, “Excuse me, lady, do you have any spare change? I am hungry.”

What I said in response may have surprised him, but it really shocked me.

“If you’re hungry,” I said, “I’ll take you to McDonald’s and buy you lunch.”

“Can I have a cheeseburger?” he asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“How about a Big Mac?”

“That’s okay, too.”

“How about a Diet Coke?”

“Yes, that’s okay.”

“Well, how about a thick chocolate shake and French fries?”

I told him he could have anything he wanted. And then I asked him if I could join him for lunch.

He thought about it for a second.

“Sure,” he finally said.

We had lunch together that day, at McDonald’s.

And after that, we got together every Monday.

For the next 150 Mondays.

His name is Maurice, and he changed my life.

Why did I stop and go back to Maurice? It is easier for me to tell you why I ignored him in the first place. I ignored him, very simply, because he wasn’t in my schedule.

You see, I am a woman whose life runs on schedules. I make appointments, I fill slots, I micromanage the clock. I bounce around from meeting to meeting, ticking things off a list. I am not merely punctual; I am fifteen minutes early for any and every engagement. This is how I live; it is who I am—but some things in life do not fit neatly into a schedule.

Rain, for example. On the day I met Maurice—September 1, 1986—a huge storm swept over the city, and I awoke to darkness and hammering rain. It was Labor Day weekend and the summer was slipping away, but I had tickets to the U.S. Open tennis tournament that afternoon—box seats, three rows from center court. I wasn’t a big tennis fan, but I loved having such great seats; to me, the tickets were tangible evidence of how successful I’d become. In 1986 I was thirty-five years old and an advertising sales executive for USA Today, and I was very good at what I did, which was building relationships through sheer force of personality. Maybe I wasn’t exactly where I wanted to be in my life—after all, I was still single, and another summer had come and gone without me finding that someone special—but by any standard I was doing pretty well. Taking clients to the Open and sitting courtside for free was just another measure of how far this girl from a working-class Long Island town had come.

But then the rains washed out the day, and by noon the Open had been postponed. I pattered around my apartment, tidied up a bit, made some calls, and read the paper until the rain finally let up in mid-afternoon. I grabbed a sweater and dashed out for a walk. I may not have had a destination, but I had a definite purpose—to enjoy the fall chill in the air and the peeking sun on my face, to get a little exercise, to say good-

bye to summer. Stopping was never part of the plan.

And so, when Maurice spoke to me, I just kept going. Another thing to remember is that this was New York in the 1980s, a time when vagrants and panhandlers were as common a sight in the city as kids on bikes or moms with strollers. The nation was enjoying an economic boom, and on Wall Street new millionaires were minted every day. But the flip side was a widening gap between the rich and the poor, and nowhere was this more evident than on the streets of New York City. Whatever wealth was supposed to trickle down to the middle class did not come close to reaching the city's poorest, most desperate people, and for many of them the only recourse was living on the streets. After a while you got used to the sight of them—hard, gaunt men and sad, haunted women, wearing rags, camped on corners, sleeping on grates, asking for change. It is tough to imagine anyone could see them and not feel deeply moved by their plight. Yet they were just so prevalent that most people made an almost subconscious decision to simply look the other way—to, basically, ignore them. The problem seemed so vast, so endemic, that stopping to help a single panhandler could feel all but pointless. And so we swept past them every day, great waves of us going on with our lives and accepting that there was nothing we could really do to help.

There had been one homeless man I briefly came to know the winter before I met Maurice. His name was Stan, and he lived on the street off Sixth Avenue, not far from my apartment. Stan was a stocky guy in his midforties who owned a pair of wool gloves, a navy blue skullcap, old work shoes, and a few other things stuffed into plastic shopping bags, certainly not any of the simple creature comforts we take for granted—a warm blanket, for instance, or a winter coat. He slept on a subway grate, and the steam from the trains kept him alive.

One day I asked if he'd like a cup of coffee, and he answered that he would, with milk and four sugars, please. And it became part of my routine to bring him a cup of coffee on the way to work. I'd ask Stan how he was doing and I'd wish him good luck, until one morning he was gone and the grate was just a grate again, not Stan's spot. And just like that he vanished from my life, without a hint of what happened to him. I felt sad that he was no longer there and I often wondered what became of him, but I went on with my life and over time I stopped thinking about Stan. I hate to believe my compassion for him and others like him was a casual thing, but if I'm really honest with myself, I'd have to say that it was. I cared, but I didn't care enough to make a real change in my life to help. I was not some heroic do-gooder. I learned, like most New Yorkers, to tune out the nuisance.

Then came Maurice. I walked past him to the corner, onto Broadway, and, halfway to the other side in the middle of the avenue, just stopped. I stood there for a few moments, in front of cars waiting for the light to change, until a horn sounded and startled me. I turned around and hustled back to the sidewalk. I don't remember thinking about it or even making a conscious decision to turn around. I just remember doing it.

Looking back all these years later, I believe there was a strong, unseen connection that pulled me back to Maurice. It's something I call an invisible thread. It is, as the old Chinese proverb tells us, something that connects two people who are destined to meet, regardless of time and place and circumstance. Some legends call it the red string of fate; others, the thread of destiny. It is, I believe, what brought Maurice and I to the same stretch of sidewalk in a vast, teeming city—just two people out of eight million, somehow connected, somehow meant to be friends.

Look, neither of us is a superhero, nor even especially virtuous. When we met we were just two people with complicated pasts and fragile dreams. But somehow we found each other, and we became friends.

And that, you will see, made all the difference for us both. |An Invisible Thread

We walked across the avenue to the McDonald's, and for the first few moments neither of us spoke. This thing we were doing—going to lunch, a couple of strangers, an adult and a child—it was weird, and we both felt it.

Finally, I said, “Hi, I’m Laura.”

“I’m Maurice,” he said.

We got in line and I ordered the meal he’d asked for—Big Mac, fries, thick chocolate shake—and I got the same for myself. We found a table and sat down, and Maurice tore into his food. He’s famished, I thought. Maybe he doesn’t know when he will eat again. It took him just a few minutes to pack it all away. When he was done, he asked where I lived. We were sitting by the side window and could see my apartment building, the Symphony, from our table, so I pointed and said, “Right there.”

“Do you live in a hotel, too?” he asked.

“No,” I said, “it’s an apartment.”

“Like the Jeffersons?”

“Oh, the TV show. Not as big. It’s just a studio. Where do you live?”

He hesitated for a moment before telling me he lived at the Bryant, a welfare hotel on West 54th Street and Broadway.

I couldn’t believe he lived just two blocks from my apartment. One street was all that separated our worlds.

I would later learn that the simple act of telling me where he lived was a leap of faith for Maurice. He was not in the habit of trusting adults, much less white adults. If I had thought about it I might have realized no one had ever stopped to talk to him, or asked him where he lived, or been nice to him, or bought him lunch. Why wouldn’t he be suspicious of me? How could he be sure I wasn’t a Social Services worker trying to take him away from his family? When he went home later and told one of his uncles some woman had taken him to McDonald’s, the uncle said, “She is trying to snatch you. Stay away from her. Stay off that corner, in case she comes back.”

I figured I should tell Maurice something about myself. Part of me felt that taking him to lunch was a good thing to do, but another part wasn’t entirely comfortable with it. After all, he was a child and I was a stranger, and hadn’t children everywhere been taught not to follow strangers? Was I crossing some line here? I imagine some will say what I did was flat-out wrong. All I can say is, in my heart, I believe it was the only thing I could have done in that situation. Still, I understand how people might be skeptical. So I figured if I told him something about myself, I wouldn’t be such a stranger.

“I work at USA Today,” I said.

I could tell he had no idea what that meant. I explained it was a newspaper, and that it was new, and that we were trying to be the first national newspaper in the country. I told him my job was selling advertising, which was how the newspaper paid for itself. None of this cleared things up.

“What do you do all day?” he asked.

Ah, he wanted to know my schedule. I ran through it for him—sales calls, meetings, working lunches, presentations, sometimes client dinners.

“Every day?”

“Yes, every day.”

“Do you ever miss a day?”

“If I’m sick,” I said. “But I’m rarely sick.”

“But you never just not do it one day?”

“No, never. That’s my job. And besides, I really like what I do.”

Maurice could barely grasp what I was saying. Only later would I learn that until he got to know me, he had never known anyone with a job.

There was something else I didn’t know about Maurice as I sat across from him that day. I didn’t know that in the pocket of his sweatpants he had a knife.

Not a knife, actually, but a small razor-blade box cutter. He had stolen it from a Duane Reade on Broadway. It was a measure of my inability to fathom his world that I never thought for a single moment he might be carrying a weapon. The idea of a weapon in his delicate little hands was incomprehensible to me. It never dawned on me that he could even use one, much less that he might truly need one to protect himself from the violence that permeated his life.

For a good part of Maurice’s childhood, the greatest harm he faced came from the man who gave him life.

Maurice’s father wasn’t around for very long, but in that short time he was an inordinately damaging presence—an out-of-control buzz saw you couldn’t shut off. He was also named Maurice, after his own absentee dad, but when he was born no one knew how to spell it so he became Morris. It wasn’t long before most people called him Lefty anyway, because, although he was right-handed, it was his left that he used to knock people out.

Morris was just five foot two, but his size only made him tougher, more aggressive, as if he had something to prove every minute of every day. In the notoriously dangerous east Brooklyn neighborhood where he lived—a one-square-mile tract known as Brownsville, birthplace of the nefarious 1940s gang Murder Inc. and later home to some of the roughest street gangs in the country—Morris was one of the most feared men of all.

As a member of the infamous Tomahawks street gang, Morris was a stick-up man, and he was brazenly good at it. He even routinely robbed people he knew. There was a dice game on Howard Avenue—fifteen or twenty people, piles of tens and twenties in a pot—and Morris sometimes liked to play. One night he announced he was robbing the game. Ain’t nobody takin’ nothin’ from me, one man said. Morris hit him once in the face with the butt of his gun and knocked him out, then scooped up several hundred dollars and walked away. No one else said a word. The next day Morris leaned against a car in front of his building, smiling as the very people he had robbed walked by. He was daring them to say something. No one did.

Morris finally met his match in a spark plug named Darcella. Slender and pretty, with light skin and soft features, Darcella was one of eleven children born to Rose, a single mother from Baltimore who moved her family to the Bed-Stuy section of Brooklyn. Darcella grew up surrounded by brothers and wound up as tough as any of them; she was known to fight anyone who crossed her, male or female, throwing blizzards of punches and never seeming to tire. People weren't sure if she was crazy or just mean. In her teens she was one of the few female members of the Tomahawks, and she wore the gang's black leather jacket with pride.

Then she fell for a gang member who impressed her with his swagger. They were never a good match, Morris and Darcella. They were both too explosive, too much like each other, but they became a couple anyway. She called him Junebug, evolved from Junior, since technically he was Maurice, Jr. He called her Red, from Red Bone, a nickname for fair-skinned black women. They had three children, all before Darcella turned twenty. First came two daughters, Celeste and LaToya. And then a son—a boy she named Maurice.

Sadly for Maurice and his sisters, the language his parents understood best was a discourse of violent action, not words. Morris, in particular, was a heavy drug user and an alcoholic, and coke, dope, and Wild Irish Rose easily triggered his rages. When he came home at all, it was to rail at his family with both curses and fists. He would routinely slap his daughters in the head; one time, he hit Celeste so hard he ruptured her eardrum. He would slap and push and punch Darcella with the same ruthless efficiency that terrified everyone in Brownsville, and he would slap and punch Maurice, his only son. When the boy would cry, he would say, "Shut up, punk," and hit him again.

Morris would disappear for days to be with his girlfriend, Diane, then come home and warn Darcella not to even look at another man. Morris's infidelity finally pushed her too far, and she packed up her children and found an apartment in the notorious Marcy Projects in Bed-Stuy. A complex of twenty-seven six-story buildings on nearly thirty acres, with some 1,700 apartments housing more than 4,000 people, the Marcy was riddled with drugs and violence, hardly anyone's idea of a sanctuary. But for Darcella it was a place to escape an even greater threat.

Morris found them anyway. One night he burst into their apartment and demanded to talk to Darcella. "Red, I can't let you leave me," he said, crying. "I love you." With young Maurice watching, Darcella stood her ground.

"I'm not havin' it," she said. "You're no good; get out."

Morris cocked his left fist and punched Darcella in the face.

She fell to the floor, and Maurice grabbed hold of his father's leg to stop him from hitting her again. Morris flicked the boy against a wall. That, it turned out, was a mistake: Darcella saw her son on the ground, ran to the kitchen, and came out with a steak knife.

Morris didn't flinch. It was hardly the first time he'd found himself at the point of a knife. "What you gonna do with that?" he asked.

Darcella lunged toward his chest. His arms came up to defend himself, so she stabbed him in the arms. She stabbed him again and again as he tried to block the blows, and finally he staggered into the hallway and fell, covered in blood, crying, "Red, you stabbed me! You tried to kill me! I don't believe you did this!"

Maurice, wide-eyed, watched it all. Finally, the police came and asked Morris who had attacked him so savagely.

“Some guys,” is all he said.

And with that, Morris limped away. Maurice, just five years old, watched his father go. His family, as he knew it, was no more.

My first lunch with Maurice was over thirty minutes after it began, but I didn't want to say good-bye to Maurice just yet. When we stepped out into the street, the sun was bright and strong, so I asked Maurice if he wanted to take a walk in Central Park.

“Okay,” he said with a shrug.

We walked into the south end of the park and strolled along a path toward the Great Lawn. Bicyclists, joggers, mothers and toddlers, laughing teenagers, everyone, it seemed, was carefree. Once again, we didn't say much; we just walked side by side. I wanted to know more about him and about the circumstances that led him to begging in the street but I held back, because I didn't want him to think I was snooping around.

I did ask him one thing.

“So, Maurice, what about you? What do you want to do when you grow up?”

“I don't know,” he said without hesitation.

“No? Don't you ever think about it?”

“No,” he replied flatly.

Maurice didn't spend his days dreaming of becoming a policeman, or an astronaut, or a shortstop, or the president; he didn't even know these were dreams most boys have. And even if he could have imagined a life for himself beyond the misery that was his world, what would have been the point of dreaming about that life? There was nothing Maurice wanted to be, because there was no reason to believe he could be anything except what he was—a scrounger, a beggar, a street kid.

In the park there was a brisk fall breeze, leaves fluttered away from trees, and the sun peeked through the giant elms. We seemed a million miles away from the concrete core of the city. I didn't ask Maurice any more questions. I just let him enjoy this break from his street routine. When we left the park, we passed a Häagen-Dazs, and I asked him if he wanted some ice cream.

“Can I get a chocolate cone?” he asked.

“You bet,” I said.

I ordered two cones, and when I handed one to him, I saw Maurice smile for the very first time. It was not a big smile, not wide and toothy like you see with most kids. It was quick to appear and just as quick to vanish. But it happened, and I saw it, and it seemed to me like a beautiful, shiny new thing.

When we finished our ice cream I asked, “Is there anything else you want to do?”

“Can we go play video games?”

“Sure we can.” So we walked to an arcade on Broadway. I gave Maurice a few quarters and watched him play StreetFighter. He lost himself in the game like any kid would. He jerked the joystick and stuck out his tongue and stood on his toes and made noises as he blew up things with his spaceship missiles. It was fun to watch him play.

Later that day, it occurred to me that buying lunch for Maurice and spending a couple of hours with him had made me feel—at very little expense in time and money—inordinately good. And that, in turn, made me feel guilty. Was the only reason I had stopped and bought him lunch to make myself feel good for a while? Had I, instead of window-shopping or going to a movie, chosen to divert myself by buying Maurice a burger and an ice cream? Was there something inherently patronizing about what I did, something maybe even exploitative?

Help out a poor kid, feel better about your own life?

I didn’t have the answers back then. All I knew was that being with Maurice felt right. We left the arcade and strolled down Broadway, winding up on 56th Street, right where we had met. I opened my purse and handed Maurice my business card.

“Look, if you’re ever hungry, please call me and I’ll make sure you have something to eat.”

Maurice took the card, looked at it, and stuffed it in his pocket.

“Thank you for my lunch and my Häagen-Dazs,” he said. “I had a great day.”

“Me too,” I said. And then he went one way, and I went another.

I wondered if I would ever see Maurice again. Certainly there was a very good chance I wouldn’t. At that time, I didn’t know how tough things were for Maurice, how truly dire his family life was. If I had, I don’t think I’d have let him walk away. I think I might have hugged him and never let go.

But I did walk away, and when I turned around to look for him in the bustle of Broadway, he was already gone, invisible again. I had to accept he might be out of my life for good—that our strange little friendship was over just as it was beginning.

Yet I believed then and I believe now that there is something in the universe that brings people who need each other together. There is something that helps two wildly disparate people somehow forge a bond. Maybe it is precisely the thing that haunts us most that makes us reach out to others we think can provide some solace. Maybe it was my own past that made me turn around and find Maurice that day. And maybe, just maybe, that invisible thread of fate would bring us back together again.

And then, as I walked back home, I felt a surge of regret, because, while I had given Maurice my business card, I hadn’t given him a quarter for the call. This was way before cell phones, and I couldn’t be sure he had a landline in his apartment. If he wanted to reach me he’d likely have to use a pay phone, which meant he would have to beg for the quarter.

But in the end it wouldn’t have mattered anyway.

Because on the way home Maurice threw my business card in the trash. The boy stands alone on a sidewalk in Brooklyn and this is what he sees: a woman running for her life, and another woman chasing her with a

hammer. He recognizes one woman as his father's girlfriend. The other, the one with the hammer, he doesn't know.

The boy is stuck in something like hell. He is six years old and covered in small red bites from chinch—bedbugs—and he is woefully skinny due to an unchecked case of ringworm. He is so hungry his stomach hurts, but then being hungry is nothing new to him. When he was two years old the pangs got so bad he rooted through the trash and ate rat droppings and had to have his stomach pumped. He is staying in his father's cramped, filthy apartment in a desolate stretch of Brooklyn, sleeping with stepbrothers who wet the bed, surviving in a place that smells like death. 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.

He does not pray, does not know how, but he thinks, Please don't let my father let me die. And this thought, in a way, is its own little prayer.

And then the boy sees his father come up the block, and the woman with the hammer sees him too, and she screams, "Junebug, where is my son?!"

The boy recognizes this voice, and he says, "Mom?"

The woman with the hammer looks down at the boy, and she looks puzzled, until she looks harder and finally says, "Maurice?"

The boy didn't recognize his mother because her teeth had fallen out from smoking dope.

The mother didn't recognize her son because he was shriveled from the ringworm.

Now she is chasing Junebug and yelling, "Look what you did to my baby!"

The boy should be frightened, or confused, but more than anything what the boy feels is happiness. He is happy that his mother has come back to get him, and because of that he is not going to die—at least not now, at least not in this place.

He will remember this as the moment when he knew his mother loved him.

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