

Short Circuit

“Dad,” called Mary across the desolate living room, and when there was no answer she hurried through the dining room, into the kitchen and opened the cellar door. “Dad!” Nothing. Frantic, she ran upstairs, shouting, “Dad! Dad!” checking bedrooms, the bathroom, then ran back downstairs, and opened the closet. The stroller was gone. “Damn it!” she cried, and took off out the front door. She circled the block hoping that he remembered her rule about making lefts so that he’d wind up back at the house. There was no sign of him anywhere, and he had her daughter, Claire. She ran to the park a block away where neighborhood residents took their children to play. Everyone at the park knew Claire, and none of them had seen her.

Mary widened her search to outlying streets, and each block she scoured revived the changes she’d noticed in her dad since he retired, little things that seemed insignificant at first, but changes that deteriorated with incomprehensible speed. The first time she noticed something was amiss was when she came home from work and found Claire in the backyard by herself and Paddy asleep on the sofa. A week later she came home and found a mess in her diaper that had gone unchanged for hours and caused a rash that lasted for days. She made excuses for him as a single mother who can’t afford childcare does—his age, the amount of hours he spent watching his granddaughter. But then he disappeared one day and she had to call the police who found him hours later with Claire at a playground five blocks from the house.

It was a brilliant day, bright sun against deep blue sky, giant wads of floating cotton, not a trace of humidity—the kind of weather that nullified a parent’s rule to ensure their child’s welfare. No harm in short trek around the block, unless that rule—make a left at each corner, four lefts complete a square that returns home—is short circuited in the brain’s wiring and is overpowered by the downtown skyline inviting you to go straight. Even the pleading voice reverberating inside Paddy’s head, *Whatever you do, don’t leave the house!* wasn’t incentive to turn back. Rules governing a child’s safety no longer applied. The short trek around the block became an expedition to Old City.

Old City was Paddy's favorite neighborhood. Delancey Street, with its cobblestones, gas lamps, Eighteenth Century homes restored to their original condition, was his mother's birthplace. In her waning years he would push her in a wheelchair along the uneven sidewalks under century-old oaks and listen to stories about her childhood, how her father struggled to buy a neglected shell of a house in a neighborhood now occupied by lawyers, politicians, and authors. "Ben Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and John Adams walked these same streets," she told him.

Delancey Street always gave Paddy a warm feeling, even in the brutal Philadelphia winter, until suddenly the corner at Fourth Street wasn't getting any closer, and the harder he squinted the farther away it appeared. He stopped and turned. The corner behind him looked even farther. A woman in front of her house pruning vines in a window box took notice and after watching him for a few seconds, she asked, "Excuse me, sir, are you okay?"

Paddy's eyes darted from one side of the street to the other without moving his head. The block of Delancey Street he'd walked down countless times in his life was an unending tunnel of stone and brick and flowers and leaves.

"Sir?" echoed a voice.

The tunnel narrowed and darkened. Crevasses burrowed across his forehead, a surge of terror carved deep incisions into his skin, drops of panic blotted his face. He turned and squinted at her as if she were miles away.

She was frightened, her voice shaky. "Are... are you okay, sir?"

Paddy's eyes lased on an ornamental iron sun anchored to a wall over her shoulder. He tilted his head and his lips spread in a tortured smile.

A young couple walking down the other side of the street stopped and watched the encounter. The man had a shaved head, thick neck and wore a tight black tee shirt that stretched around his biceps. "Is everything okay, miss?" he called.

"I'm not sure. This man seems to be lost."

The young man started across the street, observing Paddy closely. "Are you okay, mister?" he asked.

Paddy turned with a surprised look. "What?"

The man looked at the stroller Paddy was pushing. "Is this your child?"

Paddy looked at the stroller as if seeing it for the first time.

The young man stepped closer. "I asked you if this was your child."

An off duty police officer who had been watching from his front door came out of the house. "Is everything okay?" he asked, and started walking down to the sidewalk.

Panic-stricken, Paddy locked his fingers around the handle and pushed the stroller, but the young man blocked his path. "I asked this guy whose baby this was and he won't answer," he told the officer.

Other pedestrians gathered, more neighbors watched.

"Is this your child, sir?" asked the police officer.

Paddy looked between the two men, and then ducked his head under the hood of the stroller. Claire grabbed his nose, then a handful of hair and started cooing, giggling. Paddy looked into the Claire's eyes and saw images of his own daughter—at birth, her first steps, first day of school, walking her down the aisle. "Mary," said Paddy, removing his head from the stroller. "She's not a child. Her name is Mary."

A neighbor recognized the stroller from a playground she took her toddler every now and then. And she knew the child's mother from talking with her while her own toddler played on the swings and sliding board. "Her name is not Mary. Her name is Claire."

"Sir, step away from the stroller," said the officer. He put his hand on the stroller handle and Paddy hauled back and punched him in the face knocking him to the ground. The young man locked him in a bear hug from behind. Paddy shook him off and shoved him against a tree with such force that he struck his head against the trunk and slithered to the pavement, then he trotted away pushing the stroller.

The woman who'd been pruning her vines screamed, "Someone call 911! Tell them a baby was kidnapped."

Paddy dodged a car, cut through an alley, and hit his stride on the other side of Fifth Street, running like the All Catholic linebacker he'd been in high school and in the semi-pro league after he graduated while working day shift on the docks. The men on the waterfront idolized him, his relentless work ethic; they respected him as a laborer and a

foreman. Nobody crossed Paddy. But physical prowess didn't translate to mental acuity, and though his body remained sturdy, his mind began to waver at an early age.

On the next block Paddy started waving to neighbors with a free hand thinking he was running Broad Street in the ten-mile race he ran each year, placing in the top ten in his age group even into his fifties. He broke a healthy sweat on the other side of Sixth Street, crossed Seventh, and at the corner of Eighth Street his mind cleared. A voice whispered, *Four lefts*. He turned south on Eighth and by the time he got to the traffic light on Washington Avenue his breathing had calmed. He looked inside the stroller and Claire smiled at him. The light turned green. Paddy was out for a peaceful stroll on a beautiful day with his granddaughter. Life couldn't be any better.

Mary looked up and down Third and Second Streets before combing Front Street for her missing daughter and dad. Towering cranes reached into the sky above the docks on the other side of Delaware Avenue where Paddy had spent thirty-five years loading and unloading cargo ships. The docks were Paddy's life, the longshoremen his family. He told stories about them every night at the dinner table, cherished having a beer with them at waterfront pubs. His sudden retirement last year was so unlikely. She'd been trying to convince herself that it was her father's decision until she bumped into an old friend at the supermarket who worked for her dad. "How's Paddy doing?" he asked. His tone made her suspicious. "What do you mean?" The dockworker hemmed and hawed like a schoolboy caught with a smut magazine, but she wasn't having any of it. Finally he told her that Paddy was mixing up orders, having his men place shipping containers in the wrong laydown areas where they were trucked to the wrong destinations. There were rumors that his mistakes cost the shipping companies tens, even hundreds of thousands of dollars.

The news saddened Mary, but at least now his getting lost with Claire made sense.

It had been weeks since she asked her dad to watch Clare, but today she was desperate. Her babysitter was sick and Mary had a doctor's appointment she couldn't miss. She hid the stroller in the closet, put on his favorite movie, and gave him strict orders not to leave the house. The doctor's office was close and she thought she would be home in an hour, but the waiting room was crowded. She was torn between staying and

leaving, but she couldn't wait any longer to have the lump on her breast examined. The doctor gave her good news that she couldn't wait to share with her dad. She called him and got no answer.

Mary stood at the corner of Front Street and Washington Avenue feeling hopeless. "Paddy loves Claire," she assured herself. Tension that had gripped her since she ran into her empty living room eased. "He'd never let anything happen to her." She had a sudden need to get home and started toward the park on Washington Avenue before turning left on Fourth Street.

Police cars canvassed the streets of Old City before widening their search to surrounding neighborhoods. They didn't go beyond Washington Avenue believing nobody could have made it that far in such a short period of time, especially pushing a stroller. Officers stopped and questioned parents, grandparents, babysitters, nannies—anyone pushing a stroller, walking with a young child, or looked suspicious. Captain Obie O'Brien knew his district better than anyone in the city—the neighborhoods, its residents, the characters, businessmen, junkies. He spent his rookie years on the streets of South Philly before taking over the ritzy areas of Old City and Society Hill, and he had a hunch.

Obie crossed over Washington Avenue and cruised south on Eighth Street. Up ahead on the other side of Federal Street he saw a man fitting the description of the abductor. He slowed next to him, and said, "Stop right there, buddy."

Paddy squinted at the street signs ahead of him and kept walking.

The Captain drove at walking speed for another block before pulling over. "Yo! I got a few questions for you."

Paddy's sights locked onto a sign that read Clancy Street and the short circuit in his brain reconnected. *Keep making lefts.*

Obie jumped out of the car and caught up with Paddy. "You deaf or something? I said I got a few questions for you."

"I gotta make a left up here," said Paddy without looking at him.

The Captain tightened his lips and walked next to him. A few seconds passed, and he asked, "Who's the baddest ass on the Philly waterfront?"

Paddy stopped as if he'd hit a stone wall. He turned and looked Obie in the eye.
“Paddy McBadass.”

Obie squeezed Paddy's iron bicep. “You're goddamn right he is,” he laughed.
“How about I walk you and Claire back to Mary's house?”

The two of them turned down Clancy Street reliving the good old days—the city championship they won as teammates at Roman Catholic, the cases of Irish whiskey they pilfered off the docks using a police van for the getaway, drunken New Years on Two Street. Obie held the key to get the glint back in Paddy's eye.

Mary turned the corner at Fourth Street at the same time Paddy and Obie crossed Fifth. She stopped at her front steps, picked a dead leaf off of a vine in her window box. Inside the front window hung a colorful stained glass sun she'd made with fiery orange rays.

Obie had Paddy laughing when they reached her house. “Look what I found,” he said to Mary.

She smiled. “How was your walk, Dad?”

“I don't know how anyone could stay inside on such a lovely day,” said Paddy.