

The Disappeared

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The year they tested us for scoliosis, I took my shirt off in front of the whole gym. Even the cheerleaders saw my bruises. I'd been scratching in my sleep. There were bugs coming in through cracks we couldn't find. There was something on the air. Noises from the attic. My skin was getting pale.

I was the first.

The several gym coaches, with their reflective scalps and high-cut shorts, crowded around me blowing whistles. They made me keep my shirt up over my head while they stood around and poked and pondered. Foul play was suspected. They sent directly for my father. They made him stand in the middle of the gym in front of everyone and shoot free-throws to prove he was a man. I didn't have to see to know. I heard the dribble and the inhale. He couldn't even hit the rim. The police showed up and bent him over and led him by his face out to their car. You could hear him screaming in the lobby. He sounded like a woman.

For weeks after I was well known. Even bookworms threw me up against the wall, eyes gleaming. The teachers turned their backs. I swallowed several teeth. The sores kept getting worse. I was sent home and dosed with medication. I massaged cream into my wounds. I was not allowed to sleep alone. My uncle came to stay with me in the evenings. He sat in my mother's chair and watched TV. I told him not to sit there because no one did after Mother. Dad expected her return any day now. He wanted to keep the smell of her worn inside it until then. My uncle did not listen. He ordered porn on my father's cable bill. He turned the volume up and sat watching in his underwear while I stood there knowing I'd be blamed.

Those women had the mark of something brimming in them. Something ruined and old and endless.

By the third night, I couldn't stand. I slept in fever, soaked in vision. Skin cells showered from my soft scalp. My nostrils gushed with liquid. You could see patterns in my forehead—weird clots of fat veins, knotted, dim. I crouped and cowed and cringed in the lack of moonlight. I felt my forehead coming off, the ooze of my blood becoming slower, full of glop. I felt surely soon I'd die, and there'd be nothing left to dicker. I pulled a tapeworm from my ear.

My uncle sent for surgeons. They measured my neck and graphed my reason. Backed with their charts and smarts and tallies, they said there was nothing they could do. They retested my blood pressure and reflexes for good measure. They said say ah and stroked their chins. Then they went into the kitchen with my uncle and stood around drinking beer and cracking jokes.

The verdict on my father's incarceration was changed from abuse to vast neglect, coupled with involuntary impending manslaughter. His sentence was increased. They showed him on the news. On the screen he did not look like the man I'd spent my life in rooms nearby. He didn't look like anyone I'd ever known.

The bugs continued to swarm my bedroom. Some had huge eyes. Some teeth. From my sickbed I learned their patterns. They were coming in through the floor. I watched them devour my winter coat. I watched them carry away my drum kit in pieces. I sensed the end was coming.

Another night I dreamed my mother. She had no hair. Her eyes were black. She came in through the window of my bedroom and hovered over. She kissed the crud out from my skin. Her cheeks filled with the throbbing. She filled me up with light.

The next morning my wounds had waned to splotches.

After a week, I was deemed well.

In the mirror my face looked smaller, somehow puckered, shrunken in. My eyes had changed from green to deep blue. The school required seven faxes of clearance before my readmission. Even then, people refused to come near me. Teachers requested my assignments be handed in laminated. I was reseated in far corners. My raised hand was never acknowledged. Once I'd had the answers; now I spent the hours fingering the gum stuck under my desk.

On weekends I visited Dad in prison. He was now serving twenty-five to life. They made him wear a plastic jumpsuit that also covered his head in an effort to keep the prisoners' breath from spreading their ideas. Through the visor, my father's eyes were bloodshot and a little puffy. His teeth were getting yellow. His small paunch from years of beer had flattened. He had a number on his chest. He refused to look at me directly. He either shook his head or nodded. This was my fault, I knew he thought. We spent our half-hour grunting, gumming, shrugged.

Each time before I left he asked one question, in sign language: HAS YOUR MOTHER FOUND HER WAY BACK YET?

Each time before I left, he slipped me a ten and told me where to go.

At home we had a map of downtown that Dad kept on the kitchen table where we used to eat together. He'd marked with dated dots in fluorescent Sharpie where he thought he'd seen her last. Mom was one of several who'd gone missing in recent weeks. Each night between commercials, the news showed reams and reams of disappeared—young girls with pigtails, Air Force pilots, stockbrokers, salesmen, teenage mothers. Hundreds had gone unaccounted. The missing ads covered milk cartons on every side. The government whispered *terrorism*. On the news they used our nation's other problems to serve as a distraction: the wilting trees; the mold-grown buildings, so thick that high-rise rooftops clung together; the color shift of oceans; the climaxed death-rate of new babies. The way the shores washed up with blood foam. How at night you couldn't see the moon.

Before prison, Dad had sat at night with his cell phone on his knee on vibrate, waiting to feel the pulse shoot up his leg and hear her on the other end, alive. His skin would flex at any tremor. The phone rang a lot. The loan folks wanted their money. Taxes. Electricity. They would not accept Visa or good will. Dad developed a tic and cursed with no control. He believed my mother's return in his heart. His list of sightings riddled the whole map. He thought he'd once heard her in the men's room at the movies. Once he'd seen her standing on the edge of a tobacco billboard, pointing down. He wanted me to keep tabs on these places. As well, he wanted further area covered. Mom had been appearing in his sleep. She would not be hard to find if he truly loved her, he said she whispered. *He should already know by now*. On his skin while lying in his cell bed, he made lists of the places he should have looked: that spot in the ocean where he'd first kissed her; the small plot where one day they'd be buried side by side; behind the moon where they joked they'd live forever; in places no one else could name. He wanted a full handwritten report of each location.

After school, before the sun dunked, I carried the map around in the nearer streets in search. Sometimes, as my dad had, I felt Mother's hair against my neck. I smelled her sweet sweat somehow pervading even in the heady rush of highway fumes. I heard her whistle no clear tune. I used the hours between school's end and draining light. I trolled the grocery, hiked the turnpike, stalked the dressing rooms of several local department stores. I felt that if I focused my effort to the right degree, I could bring an end to all this sinking. I'd find her somewhere, lost and listless; lead her home; reattach her name. Newly realigned, she'd argue Dad's innocence in court to vast amends, and then there'd be the three of us forever, fixed in the only home we'd ever known.

I did not find her at the creek bed where she'd once taught me how to swim via immersion.

I spent several hopeful evenings outside the dry cleaner's where she'd always taken all our clothes.

There were always small pools of weird air where I could feel her just behind me, or inside.

My uncle did not go home. He'd taken over my parents' bed and wore Dad's clothing. When asked for his opinion of his sister going missing, he curled a lip and snorted. Through the night he snored so loud you could hear it through the house. You could hear as well the insects crawling: their tiny wings and writhing sensors. You could hear the wreathes of spore and fungus. You could hear the slither in the ground. It was everywhere, not just my house. Neighborhood trees hung thick with buzzing. House roofs collapsed under heavy weight. They ran photo essays in the independent papers. The list of disappeared grew to include news anchors, journalists, and liberal pundits. I stayed awake and kept my hair combed. I tried not to walk in direct sludge.

I received an email from my father: SHE SAYS THERE'S NOT MUCH TIME.

I committed to further hours. I stayed up at night and blended in. I looked in the smaller places, the ones no one else could name: through the sidewalk, in the glare of stoplights, in the mouths of nameless dogs. I avoided major roads for all the police. Out of town travel had been restricted. They said it was in our best interests. They said recovery begins at home. I marched through the forest with a flashlight, being careful not to die. Trees fell at random in the black air. Anthills smothered whole backyards. It hadn't rained in half a year. You might start a mile-wide fire with one mislaid cigarette. The corporate news channel spent its hours showing pictures of dolphin babies and furry kittens cuddling in the breeze.

Meanwhile, at school, other people started getting sick. First, several players on the JV wrestling team shared a stage of ringworm—bright white mold growths on their muscles. The reigning captain collapsed in the hot lunch line. They had to cancel their best matches. The infestation was blamed on their high heat and tight quarters. Days later, Jenny Smithwick, the head cheerleader, grew a massive boil on the left side of her head. It swelled the skin around her eyelids until she couldn't see. She went to the hospital not for the boil itself but for how she'd tried to stab it out. The seething moved like small creation through the cramped halls of our school. Popular kids got it. Kids with glasses. Kids in special ed. Teachers called in sick; then their subs did. Sometimes we were left in rooms unmanned for hours. There were so many missing they quit sending people home. Fast rashes crept from collars. Guys showed up with their eyes puckered in glop. My lab partner, Maria Sanchez, suddenly grew a strange mustache. They had to sweep the hallways clear several times a day.

Instead of our usual assignments, we read manuals on how to better keep our bodies clean. Diagrams were posted in our lockers. Baskets of dental floss and disinfectant were placed in the nurse's office with the condoms.

Then, one day in the middle of my math class, men barged in in military gear. They had batons and air masks with weird reflectors. They made us stand in line with our hands against the wall. We spread and coughed while they roughed us over. They pulled hair samples and drew blood. From certain people they took skin grafts. The screaming filled the halls. They confiscated our cell phones and our book bags. Our class fish, Tommy, was deposed. The walls were doused with yellow powder. Several people fainted or threw up. They put black bags over the windows. The school's exit doors were sealed with putty. A voice that was not the cafeteria lady's came over the loudspeaker and said what was being served. We'd eaten lunch already. We sat at our desks with no looking at each other. Our questions were met with stares. Ms. Griggs, my homeroom teacher, was reprimanded for attempting exit. They laid her flat out on the ground.

We were contained like this without explanation. Because of the window bags, we couldn't tell how many days. There was a lot of time and no way to pass it. We were not allowed to talk. We were given crossword puzzles and origami. The PA played Bach and Brahms to cover the rumble overhead. When the cafeteria ran out of leftovers, we were fed through tubes lowered from the ceiling.

After the first rash of fistfights and paranoia spasms, they locked our wrists with plastic. They turned the a/c heat to high. The veins began to stand out on people's heads. Their skin went weird and red, then bright purple. Their hair fell out. Their teeth and nails grew green and yellow. Their swollen limbs bejeweled with sores. Cysts blew big like new balloons. I felt fine. I felt an aura, my mother's breath encircling my head. The costumed men carried the bodies of the expired elsewhere. Those who weren't sick were going crazy. I watched a boy stick out his own eyes. I watched a girl bang her head in on a blackboard. Others of us sat with our hands flat on the desktops, not sure which way to turn.

Soon the power was extinguished. False neon panels were employed. Peals of static began to interrupt the PA's symphonies. A voice on the airwaves squawked through with a contraband news report. *Look what we've done. Can you imagine? Half the nation under quarantine. The buildings crumpled. The oceans boil. The President's committed suicide. And now, just a bit too late, we're getting rain.* The men burst in and shot the speaker with a machine gun. They said to assume the duck-and-cover. One frail redhead whose glasses had been confiscated refused to get down. She walked around in small circles, reaching from desk to desk to guide her way. The men zapped her in the neck with a large prong. She ran straight into

a wall. She fell on the floor and bumped her forehead, and it spilled open on the white tile. None of the men would let me help them help her. They carried her out and wrapped our heads in plastic and went into the hall and shut the door. I heard the tumblers clicking in the lock. I saw the hall fill thick with smoke. There were sirens and screech and screaming. Something scraping on the roof. It wasn't long yet until something. I didn't try to think of what.

Small Susie Wang huddled beside me, praying. She prayed in hyperventilated mumble. She said, *Ooh ah God please mm yes ouch would you God please hurry God oh God.* She put her hands over her mouth.

I sat on the floor in the neon light with stomach rumbling and sounds of fire and the stink of rot. I saw things moving toward me and then gone. I couldn't remember how this all started. I couldn't find my name on my tongue or brain-embedded. I felt a burning in my chest. I fumbled in my pockets for my father's map. I stared and rubbed the paper between my fingers. I read the sightings' dots' dates with my wormed eyes, connecting them in order. There was the first point, where my father felt sure he'd seen mother digging in the neighbor's yard across the street. And the second, in the field of power wires where Dad swore he saw her running at full speed.

I connected dots until the first fifteen together formed a nostril.

Dots 16 through 34 became an eye.

Together the whole map made a perfect picture of my mother's missing head.

If I stared into the face, then, and focused on one clear section and let my brain go loose, I saw my mother's eyes come open. I saw her mouth begin to move. Her voice echoed deep inside me, clear and brimming, bright, alive.

She said, "Don't worry, son. I'm fat and happy. They have cake here. My hair is clean."

She said, "The world is sick and I am sorry."

She said, "You will be okay soon. I have your hand."

Her eyes seemed to swim around me. I felt her fingers in my hair. She whispered things she'd never mentioned. She nuzzled gleamings in my brain. As in: the day I'd drawn her flowers because all the fields were dying. As in: the downed bird we'd cleaned and given a name. Some of our years were wall to wall with wonder, she reminded. In spite of any absence, we had that.

I thought of my father, alone and elsewhere, his head cradled in his hands. I thought of the day he'd punched a hole straight through the kitchen wall, thinking she'd be tucked away there inside. All those places he'd looked and never found her. Inside their mattress. In stained glass windows. How he'd scoured the carpet for her stray hair and strung them all together with a ribbon; how he'd slept with that one lock swathed across his nostrils, hugging a pillow fitted with her night-

shirt. How he'd dug up the backyard, stripped and sweating. How he'd played her favorite song on repeat and loud, a lure. How when we took up the carpet in my bedroom to find her, under the carpet there was wood. Under the wood there was cracked concrete. Under the concrete there was dirt. Under the dirt there was a cavity of water. I swam down into the water with my nose clenched and lungs burning in my chest but I could not find the bottom and I couldn't see a thing.