

## The Misplaced

Her name even sounds strange to me now. Sloane. Like the sound an insect would make, or a drunk person. It's hard to believe we shared countless nights with our legs bent into each other's underneath the cool down comforter.

We grew up on the cusp of normalcy. Our generation's parents could remember the sweet chill of diet cola and the sound of a quiet movie theater. We, in our thirties, couldn't. We only knew these things had existed. We heard our parents and grandparents describe them in such detail, that we believed in them in the way you believe in your wildest dreams, a feeling more than a picture in your mind.

"Have you ever thought of doing it?" Sloane asked me.

"Doing what?"

"You know," she said. "Going to sea."

We were walking along the road, away from home, to the end of our town. We'd turn back when we got to the fence, though it wasn't required. Beyond the fence lie fields of daffodils. Sloane loved to look at them from afar but felt reverse claustrophobic when she actually ran into them, away from town.

Two men passed us going the other direction. One was wearing a t-shirt with the Revs' symbol on it – an arrow with a line through it. The Revs mission in the beginning had been clear enough. They wanted things to be the way they'd been before – not before with television, texting, and music you could hear through a speaker, but before that. It was hard for me to pick a side. I hadn't known the technology they vilified, but neither had these guys on the road who were clearly even younger than I was. Maybe they were right, but those of us who were against

them – me included – at least wanted the choice I guess. Couldn't we just reject the technology we didn't like as we saw fit, in our own lives? The Revs had painted themselves as some sort of revolutionaries, but then they'd started to outnumber the rest of us, the very people they'd maligned for being too powerful. That was their real problem.

“I haven't really thought about it,” I said to her. “Have you?”

“Yes. Who hasn't?”

“Me. I just said I hadn't.”

“Come on, Mark. Everyone's at least thought about it. We could leave all this behind,” she said, sweeping her arms across the landscape. All I saw were daffodils. I didn't see anything to want to get away from. Sloane, on the other hand, talked like the generation before or after us, but not ours. Our parents talked like that because they remembered what the world had been like before the Revs, but they didn't dream of doing anything about it. It might as well have been a campfire tale the way they talked about it. School-aged kids talked about it when they thought we couldn't hear, because there was camaraderie in their optimism and stupidity and longing to change the world.

“Do you think people really do it?” I asked her. “Go to sea?”

“Where else would they go, when they disappear?”

“Anywhere. Nowhere seems more farfetched to me than grabbing a boat and rowing off into the horizon. Maybe they get abducted. Taken up by the Revs. Or maybe there's a reason they call them The Misplaced.”

Formal news had stopped a long time ago but you heard about people leaving it all behind. People said there was an island out there, and maybe there was. Maybe it was all sandy

beaches and clear water. Or, maybe there was an island but it was inhabited and ruled by Revs just like home. As far as I knew, no one had ever come back so no one knew the truth.

“Don’t say that,” she said snippily. “I heard if you wear a purple bandanna, they let you on the island because they know you have good intentions and you’re just trying to get away from all this.”

“Then why wouldn’t the Revs just row up in their boats with purple bandannas around their necks?”

She frowned.

“What about Max?” I said. Max was our neighbor. About a year earlier, we’d begun to smell something like overheated trash coming from his apartment. After a few days of this, I knocked. No one answered. It got so bad, we couldn’t sleep. That night, I pulled on socks and shuffled to Max’s door. I knocked again, no answer. I worried for a split second that the smell was Max’s decomposing body, so I put my hand on the doorknob. I barely had to touch it and the door opened; it had been ajar the whole time. Max wasn’t inside, and the smell was only rotten vegetables, carrots to be exact, turning black on Max’s counter.

“He left,” she argued.

“Or someone took him. You know what he was working on in there.”

When we’d discovered the rotten carrots, we’d taken the opportunity to scour Max’s apartment, before we called down to the guard of our building to report Max’s disappearance. Inside the apartment, we found what I realized was a computer, though I’d never seen one before and haven’t seen one since. Max seemed to be building it, or taking it apart; it was hard to tell which. There were jagged pieces of metal spread all over his desk and a keyboard with letters I knew were for typing. It was exactly the type of thing the Revs hated, the kind of thing that

would make you one of The Misplaced. They weren't missing, because that indicated that they could still be found. I knew the second I turned the doorknob that Max would never be found.

"I just don't think there's anything out there," I told her.

"You don't think the sea exists?"

"I think it exists like our house exists or those fields. I don't think it exists the way people talk about it, like it's somewhere you can escape."

"You don't seem like you want to escape." She sounded surprised.

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The two most popular soccer teams in our city played each other in June every year and Sloane and I always went. Sloane planned to meet me at my office and I was running late as usual. I hadn't logged the required five minutes at The Gate yet and she was already waiting downstairs. I usually did this particular civic duty just before I ate lunch since the cork board that was The Gate was just next to the refrigerator. The purpose of The Gate was to find missing people. The Revs wanted to know where we all were. Of course, we weren't trying to find missing people so the Revs could bring them back, but no one said that out loud. The Gate was rumored to have started as part of a dissertation by a brilliant sociologist. Once the Revs found out about it, they scooped up the idea and started using it themselves. They valued things like sociology, which before them, had been infantilized.

Five years later, The Gate was a complex system of runners who brought the photographs to every office and public building in the city, and I imagined, every city and town everywhere. Additional staff members vetted the photographs that users submitted to the boards. Submitting

photos was another civic responsibility that wasn't technically required, but everyone did it. It was impossible to track who actually visited The Gate and how frequently, but everyone from the CEOs of our companies to our parents piped the same message – YOU can help save a person from slipping into the stream of oblivion. It seemed so simple, and I actually knew people who had done it. A woman I worked with had seen her neighbor's kid in the background of a photo, caught mid-sway, moving back and forth to the music in an anonymous place far away. There was a weird sort of celebrity around people who found people in the photos for weeks and sometimes even months. This, even though we were doing the Revs' work and we all hated them.

I wanted to be nonchalant about the Revs. I wanted to just skip a day of participating in The Gate here and there. Sloane was waiting outside, and it would've been very convenient to lock up my office and meet her downstairs.

When I got to The Gate, a few of my coworkers stood around looking at the photos. We offered each other quick nods, all anxious to get to the soccer game. There were about forty photos on the board at any one time. I looked over them quickly and then one more time more carefully. My eyes stopped at a photo of a group dining together in a café. In the foreground were three middle-aged women wearing pastel colors and bright lips, their arms around each other. The café looked like it could've been anywhere, with small white tables and floral wallpaper.

Whoever had taken the picture had also perfectly captured two younger women in the background, sitting at a small table with coffees in front of them. One had bright blonde hair that couldn't possibly have been natural. The other had dark brown curls held back with aviator

sunglasses. They were smiling, seemingly caught mid-joke. Both of them were wearing white v-neck t-shirts with the unmistakable crossed-out arrow.

I looked at my coworkers with a sheepish smile. None of them seemed to recognize Sloane in the photo. There was a small box with blank slips of paper and a pencil sitting on top. If we recognized someone, we were supposed to write the number of the photo and the name of the person. I knew that if I picked up that pencil in front of my coworkers, it was absolutely the point of no return. I also knew that if I didn't and someone found out, I'd probably go missing myself, and my photo wouldn't end up on The Gate.

I couldn't do it.

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I walked outside to see the girl in the photo. The humidity hadn't arrived yet but the heat had already moved in. Sloane wore white jean shorts and the same aviator sunglasses she had on in her picture on The Gate. We walked to the stadium, joining up with the jovial crowds as we went. I was so struck by Sloane's beauty – her olive skin, her curls – that I stopped in my tracks for a moment before pushing forward to keep up. She reached back and grabbed my hand. Then, she squeezed my hand in hers, something she'd never done before. I felt in that moment like I barely knew her. It seemed like something you'd do to a distant, dying relative while they lie in a hospital bed, but also like the most intimate gesture of affection imaginable.

We bought hot dogs and put too much mustard on them and cold beers and headed to our seats. Sloane didn't move to touch my hand again, but I watched her out the corner of my eye for every reaction like we were on our first date. We didn't care much about who won the game

– we were more there because everyone else was. We cheered for the Vipers because we'd inadvertently sat in a section which seemed to be full of the team's fans. Not knowing much about soccer, our sighs and cheers were sometimes a half second behind the people around us.

“Do you want another hot dog?” she asked me.

“No.”

“Okay. I'll be back in a few minutes.”

I wanted to say something so badly. I needed to tell her what I'd seen, but it would change everything. When something truly life changing happens, people wish for what they once had. That's impossible, though. Even if you get back what you lost, there's a shadow in the background; moving forward, it's a new normal. I didn't want that.

I didn't want to be mad at her. If someone had asked me, what would you do if you found out Sloane was a Rev, I would've said that I'd break off all ties immediately. But now I was essentially in possession of that exact information and all I wanted to do was pretend I didn't know.

When she didn't come back twenty minutes later, I went to look for her. I passed through the tunnel and past the vendors selling pretzels and cotton candy. The mix of salty and sweet smells was both tantalizing and nauseating. I kept an eye out for Sloane's white jean shorts and the aviators perched on her head, but I didn't see her. I went back to our seats, thinking maybe we'd crossed paths. When she wasn't there, my palms began to sweat. I tore back through the tunnel and started running along the concourse, yelling her name. I ducked my head into every women's room and checked every concession line, but I couldn't find her.

The game ended and people began streaming towards the exits. I couldn't have gone against the crowd no matter how badly I wanted to and I didn't have a destination in mind anyway.

A group of Revs was hanging by the exit. It seemed impossible that Sloane could be one of them now. The Revs were set up at a table with a banner, looking for recruits. A number of people nodded their heads at the Revs or offered up a salute in solidarity. The banner had the same arrow as all those bumper stickers and t-shirts.

I turned and moved with the endless sea of soccer jerseys, down the escalators and ramps and out onto the street. I would never find her at the train station – there were too many people – so I hopped onto the train and headed back to our apartment.

There was no note, but I knew she was gone for good as soon as I unlocked the door. Our place smelled different already. Her absence had given way to the dominant smell of my own scent: the milk from my cereal sloshing in the sink, the sweat on my running shoes, and the woody smell of my deodorant.

As I moved into our bedroom searching for a note, I saw a box sitting in the middle of the bed. It was small and white and it could've contained anything. I picked it up and held it for a minute before opening it, knowing the contents were my future. Inside, was a purple bandanna.

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Three days after she disappeared, I returned to work. I was lucky she'd left on a Friday night so I could wallow alone for a couple days and not have to deal with questioning coworkers.



I walked in to see the framed drawing Sloane had made for me two years earlier. It was a sketch of a woman in profile standing in front of the daffodils at the edge of town.

I knew I had to find her picture on The Gate again. What if I'd been wrong?

I wasn't.

None of my coworkers were around but I still tried not to stare at her photo for too long. No one had said anything to me. I wanted to assume that it was because no one knew about Sloane, though I imagined most people were scared enough of the Revs that their natural tendency would be to avoid me even if they did know.

I didn't know what would happen to Sloane or to me if I identified her, or if I didn't. Since she had apparently joined up with the Revs, they probably knew where she was already. Maybe, in this case, it was a test for me. Maybe I'd face the consequences, instead of Sloane for being in the photo.

I looked again at the box where I should've put her name and the number of her photo. I held my hand in the air, reaching for the pencil, but I brought it back down to my side as soon as a coworker walked past me and said hello. I didn't want the photograph to disappear, and I knew that once I wrote down its number, it would be snatched off of every cork board in the city and scrutinized by people I would never meet.

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I turned in my resignation at work the following day. I packed a small duffel bag. I wasn't sure what to bring. I was still half convinced that if I could actually make it to the sea and find a boat, I'd be floating at sea the rest of my days, which wouldn't be many, before dying of

starvation or exposure. I packed layers of clothing, a can opener, and as many cans as I could carry. I packed every extra set of contact lenses I had plus my glasses. I packed a roll of toilet paper.

I actually knew how to get to “the sea” as people called it, or what I supposed people considered the launching place for the sea. I’d gleaned more information than I’d even realized. I picked up my duffel bag and walked to the door of the apartment. I walked the half mile or so downtown to the bus station. There weren’t actually busses anymore, just caravans of horses you could ride to a given destination for a very reasonable fee.

Port of Brizo was a place for castoffs, for those who had given up on life as we knew it. Most people went there because they were sick of the Revs and the only life the Revs made possible for us. I suppose I wasn’t so different, but it was one Rev in particular who might as well have picked me up and placed me on that horse.

It was a day’s ride, first through miles of the familiar daffodil fields before the land gave way to the ruins of large industrial looking farms. This was as far as I’d ever been from home.

The Port was a small town. I was surprised to see that tourists came to gawk at the people who pushed the small wooden boats out to sea. There was an ice cream shop and a coffee shop and several restaurants offering takeout with a few tables each set out on the sidewalk. The weather was warmer than home, and I took in a breath and smelled the sea air. As I walked away from the horses, two small girls walked by with their mother. The girls were wearing white eyelet dresses and they waved at me. Their mother pulled them away. Obviously I was here for a different reason than they were. They were the zoo visitors and I was the zoo.

I’d expected somewhere quieter, or where true revolution was in the air, the kind of revolution the Revs had once started decades ago, before they’d turned. But this looked like the

seaside resort towns I'd read about in novels. I'd expected it would be hard to find a boat, and that I'd have to perhaps figure out how to build my own on a lonely beach to the sounds of the waves crashing. However, I saw that there were numerous vendors selling boats. I selected a vendor and walked over to him. He barely glanced at me, interested only in the sweaty money I handed over.

"We sell bandannas, too," he said, trying to upcharge me.

"I already have one. Thanks."

I tried to look him in the eye but he avoided it. Did he believe in all of it, or was he just capitalizing on the people who did?

Did I believe in it? He must've thought so.

I sat down on the beach with my boat in front of me half pulled into the water. I bought an ice cream from an elderly man in a seersucker suit walking by. It was vanilla with a chocolate coating and as the chocolate broke, the ice cream ran down my chin in small globs. I threw the ice cream stick in the sand and my duffel in the boat. I climbed into my new home and pushed off with an oar. I saw the two little girls again, about twenty yards away with the same kind of ice cream I'd just eaten. They were waving to me, and I was thankful for the last bit of human contact.

I'd never been in a boat before, and it took me a minute to feel steady on the rocking waves, and another ten minutes to figure out how to actually row. I hadn't considered this part, but it wasn't as hard as I might've feared either. I held both oars tightly in my hand, already feeling the callouses I was sure would form, and began to pull and then let go in steady strokes.

When I could no longer see the shoreline, I placed my oars down in my lap and took out the purple bandanna, just in case.