

She Is Disappeared Now

She did not know she had disappeared yet but she had and she would and she will.

It is warm in the car. The heater blares like a radio. The headlights spread themselves out to the thick stands of pine and birch, where she sees a deer's hindquarters and back leg step off the two-lane highway and vanish in between the leafless spires. She gasps, cranes her neck and points to this as they pass, the whole scene now enveloped in the frosty gloom of one a.m.

The man she thinks is her friend now, her boyfriend once, slows the car down. He laughs too loud. She does not pick up on this. She does not see him at the same time grip the steering wheel like a rescue ladder in his black leather gloves. She cannot know the snarl inside him. It is one of those prisons he is trying to find his way out of without making too much noise. He keeps wishing himself good luck.

Instead, she turns back and smiles across the eternity of the front seat, the dashboard green illuminating the upturned corners of her mouth in a kind of movie scene-like way. He sees this as an alien might, as something observed from so far away he cannot give it any meaning. She thinks how nice it was to run into him the moment she did as he walked by the Brasilia Club. What a coincidence. She tells him this. He is glad he ran into her, too, he says. She hates taking cabs all the way back home late at night. The cab drivers never say a word and keep looking at her in the rear view mirror. She thinks about Erika, her girlfriend, who left the club early and her without a ride. She thanks him again for the lift. He is happy to oblige.

She asks if he was at the club as well? She didn't see him. No. Just stopping to stretch his legs. She only had two Rum and Cokes but still cut loose tonight and danced with anyone and

everyone. That sounds like fun, he says. She could have just gone to Beemer's near school but the Brasilia Club is the best for dancing. She asks what does he mean "stretching his legs"? What is he doing driving by himself after midnight? Doesn't he still live in the city over seventy miles away?

A velvet silence follows. She waits. It seems darker in this part of the woods. She asks if he heard her question. He looks as if he may not remember she still sits over there near the window, near the trees on that side of the car, trees that keep drawing endless, vertical bars at the sides of her eyes, thick enough to reach out and grip with her fingers. She looks away and leans her head against the window. It is nearing zero outside and the cold feels good on her hair and scalp. Maybe she mistook this man for someone she knew three years ago. Maybe he is someone else. She casts her breath onto the glass where it freezes in a patch she starts to scrape at with her gloved finger. She cannot know the snarl inside him.

He starts as he scrapes. She apologizes for asking all those questions. He keeps going. He says, as the headlights probe the forest that goes on and on and on, that he is going away. He explains he is going far. Tonight is the start of his journey. She casts her eyes to the back seat, its bowels deep and wide and empty. He glances back at the same time, then returns his gaze to the road. The winter has been awful for him. His mother died. And just like that, he is not a stranger to her anymore. Nothing is odd or out of place. She tells him how sorry she is to hear this. It was two days before Christmas, he tells her. Her mother died two weeks before the holiday. She asks if there is anything she can do. He thanks her but no. It is all done now. How did she die? He isn't sure. Neither are the doctors. They were still trying to figure it out. She stopped breathing. Where is his father? He doesn't know that, either. Then she remembers the story about his father.

He just went away. She tells him about her mother. She died two and a half years ago, just after the last time they saw each other. Cancer. He's sorry he never met her mother. He stares harder at the road, at the drifts of old snow pushed up against the countless tree trunks. The car seems to slow down. She guesses he was close to his mother. He says now it was like he never knew her but yes, if it had not been for her, he wouldn't have known what to do.

As one gets closer to somewhere they know, somewhere they want to be and believe they are returning to, they feel more in themselves, more a part of whatever the moment they are in is offering. This is how it is for her. The car is edging closer to campus, closer to home. She cannot help but feel there in the offered moment that the mother he lost is the mother she lost. She sees a ghostly, matronly figure stepping off the highway into the lost arboreal world surrounding them, just as the deer had moments before. His mother or hers? She turns to look into that patch of trees just passed, ignored now by the headlights. She often sees things like this. She wants to tell him what she thinks she saw. Instead, she just feels all so glad he shared his sad news with her. She feels something inside her slide across the cold, black surface of the front seat and crawl inside his heavy wool coat where it listens to his heart beating in his chest while the rest of her stays where she is, pushed up against the passenger door, watching the dark crossing of the car through the forest, where no one else in the world knows where she or he is.

His voice rumbles then purrs, like the car's dutiful engine, filling her with a sudden sense of getting somewhere. She's still in graduate school? How are her studies going? Not bad. A little long. Lots of work. What is she studying? Languages. Dead ones. Why? She wants to do academic research. Be a scholar. She loves reading ancient texts. She wants to publish articles and teach at universities and travel. She wants to live in Europe. What languages does she speak?

Latin of course. Welsh. Although it's not dead. Gaelic isn't either. There are some languages like Aramaic and Koine Greek and Hebrew used to write the majority of the Bible she plans to learn in the coming years. She stares at his face to see what any of what she has said has done to him. He feels her, turns for a moment probing for something, then looks back at the cold road. Maybe he heard something in her voice. Maybe he detects a lie.

She asks him what he's done since graduation. He moved to Chicago and worked as a paralegal, then came back last fall. When his mother became ill. He asks if she's ever been to Europe. He's never been. Europe was the last place she traveled with her mother who loved to travel and did all over the world. They went to Italy and Greece together where reading the Bible in its original tongues began to interest her. Is she religious? I guess enough to want to know what the books of the Bible are really saying. I was brought up Lutheran but only go occasionally.

And now far enough ahead, standing on the road's yellow divider line are a doe and her fawn. He slows the car to a crawl, then stops, the headlights covering the brown fur of the two animals like a heat lamp. He turns off the ignition and this makes her start. A silence explodes into the cabin replacing the smell of grease and gasoline, louder than the forced air from the car's heater, louder than the blood pounding in her brain. The two of them and the deer and the car are all statues now, frozen to this spot of road, succumbed to the winter that starts to pull the noisy heat out through infinitesimal cracks.

They are not moving anymore toward the thing that she knows. They sit there, he and her, the deer glaring into nothing but their own blindness. It is all a small, somehow projected scene onto the physical face of the world. The moment begins to fill with a terrible tension she does not

understand. She pulls her parka hood over her head as if she were afraid the doe and fawn might recognize her. There is no point to just stop and wait for the deer to move. He could edge them off the road. He is supposed to be driving her back home. He is leaving, going somewhere. This may be the last time they ever see each other. So they have been chatting, making small talk. But it only works if the car keeps moving. She tries to think of their dead mothers both dead together somewhere. This brought her comfort and closeness before. But now going home and the stopping and the stopping of time and the senselessness of the moment are piling up on her. The deer stand in the endless night in the endless tracts of woods amid nature and things and thoughts she does not need right now. While the cold hovers around the still car, a black and indifferent thing, she begins to think maybe she is going nowhere and will be going nowhere from now on.

It is the fawn that breaks the skin of the thing about to break in her. It lowers its head and flicks its tail, all white and almost joyous. Their tact of stillness is broken. Its mother keeps a steady watch on the beams of white light she cannot understand. But the baby's bravery gives her courage and she leads it at a scout's pace into the piney lair. As soon as the two vanish, he starts the car and they are moving again. And to her relief it is as if they had never stopped moving.

They are not a foot past the spot where the deer had stood when he says where he's going there won't be any deer. He has decided to take the money his mother left him and drive to Seattle where he will get on a boat and head for a place whose name it seems he cannot quite pronounce. It is in the South Pacific, an island in an island nation. It will be somewhere he can get away to for a while, maybe a year or more or forever. He ran into a guy in the city, an old high school pal, with one of the women from the island hooked on his arm. This was his wife and they were back to get his things and say goodbye to the frozen north forever.

This guy told him the place is one endless beach and visibility down into the ocean averages a hundred feet or more. She does not see how this is possible but he knows it's true. It is unspoiled, this island nation. As soon as he gets there, he plans on learning to scuba dive. He wants to see a certain purple fish that haunts the coral reefs. This fish travels in schools of five hundred or more, designed to ward off would-be predators. This guy says that when they approach you, they appear as an enormous fluttering flag of purple neon that one could imagine flying at the head of an army of undersea warriors. Since he heard this, he has not been able to get that image out of his head.

At this, he stops talking and turns for a moment to look at her. Her eyes are wide and wondering. He wants to see that purple flag of fish in them. He thinks he almost does. And then there are the turtles. Sea turtles. As big as he is. Kinder and gentler than any dog. You can ride on them, he says. All day if you like. Over and under and through the aqua waves and the ocean foam right up to the beaches. There are so few people on these islands, even fewer visitors, one can have a beach all to one's self and never see another soul. For days. There are coconuts and guava and mango and passion fruit. There are fish to eat and wild pig. And you can order whatever you like and have it flown in on a plane once a month from Hawaii or Australia or Japan or wherever. The few people who do live there are so friendly they never want you to leave. That's what happened to this guy. He was adopted by one of the island's families and married the daughter and they live on their own little island now.

He presses down on the accelerator after he says this and wonders what he might say next. Since he started the story, the temperature in the car has risen. She has lowered her hood and pulled the zipper of the parka down to her chest and sits smiling at him. The car begins to

climb up a steep hill, a noticeable change from the flat tract of forest that never seemed to want to end. The engine revs and strains against the gravity of itself.

He smiles back and he looks as if he is about ready to tell her he loves her but instead asks if she wants to come with him? She laughs without even thinking about what he might have just said. She does not think she heard him right. He asks again. She turns and scoots her back up against the passenger side door. She puts her knee up on the front seat and asks if he is kidding her? No. He would like her to come if she wants. You are joking, right? He says he has enough money from his mother to cover both of them for more than a year if that is her concern. He holds on to the steering wheel with one hand while he fumbles under his seat with the other, and then sits up holding a clear plastic bag thick with twenty dollar bills in the air between them. She sees his thin smile through the bag.

No. Her concern is not about the money. What is it then? She gives him that incredulous look, the one she is famous for amongst her few friends, the one that has helped her to create and maintain an academic plan all these years for learning the world's great dead languages. What about her life? What about grad school? Her doctorate? What about her philosophy exam on Monday morning? The car noses upwards, pointed toward the stars, toward Diana's crescent moon parked between Capella and Polaris. The whining engine mimics her protests. He lowers the bag onto the front seat. What about your life, he asks? What about grad school? Your doctorate? Your philosophy exam in the morning? What about it? She laughs. She laughs at his ludicrousness, his brashness, his naivety. She laughs trying to ward off the warmth swarming within her in places she does not want to be warm.

The car reaches the crest of the hill and levels out for just a moment before it begins its descent down, down into the valley where the town where the university where the apartment is where she lives. There it is, the campus down there, nestled up against the endless forest, the twinkle, twinkle of its hundreds of odd and separate lights striking out into little spaces of ice cold. Appearing, disappearing, reappearing, turning off and on between the trees as the car now darts down the other side of the hill.

She asks him again if he is serious? Yes. What is he trying to pull over on her? Nothing. So he's really going to this island? Yes. Is he really going to just keep driving all the way to Seattle, then hop on a boat and go to an island in the South Pacific? Yes. Where is all his stuff then, she says, looking again into the backseat. He doesn't need any stuff. Why does he want her to come with him? Why not? She says they don't really know each other. So?

So?

She feels something lapping over her bare leg. Warm, soft water. One of those yellow signs with a black serpentine squiggle down the middle appears in the headlights and the car takes a bend in the road, the campus filling in the hollow below and to the left of them. And the sea sloshes over her, bringing with it some sand the color of rose gold and fills the spaces between her toes. He drives with quiet intent, his destination a line far off about to go beyond her ability to imagine.

She goes back. They stand in front of her dormitory door. She sees him reach out to touch her face but stop himself and put his hand into the pocket of his jeans. He tells her it was a good movie. She says they should do it again sometime. The last time she sees him is in a bookstore. She catches him looking at pictures of nude women in a French photo magazine.

She goes ahead. He crawls up out of the Pacific, crawls on top of her and presses her lower back into the sand. She tastes the salt of the endless ocean that now replaces the endless forest. She is just as lost here as she was there. Maybe it is a better lost. It does not matter. She has no mother. She has no father. She only had a love for a fistful of decayed words. But now she loves him and the world he has brought to her. Her bronze figure dives off a coral reef. Submerged, she grabs and holds on. She rubs her belly and breasts against the shell of the turtle. A thin, invisible slickness gives it a smoothness unlike anything she has known. She takes a big breath as the turtle dives again and the car takes the last of the hill and the road flattens out before them and just ahead a sign appears announcing the coldest town she has ever lived in.

She can sense that unless she opens her mouth, he will drive straight through without stopping and head to the coast with her. At the town limits, he will begin to wend his way south toward the interstate. She wants to reach over and kiss him for that. She wants to straddle him for his obtuseness, have him take his eyes off the road just long enough to wreck the car and die in his lap. Instead she tells him there is a convenience store and a laundromat coming up on the left. And take the first right on Owens Street. It is only a couple of miles now. His face remains unchanged after she gives him the directions. He is imagining that far off line out to sea.

There comes the rapid gunfire of thoughts. They are together. Right now. There are only a few more hours and dawn will pierce the refrigerated earth and bring back a little warmth to the world bereft of it. Without saying a word, she could crawl in the back and sleep and he would not know to turn on Owens Street, but just to drive, drive. She could sleep and see the Latin words written on the inside of her skull dissolved by the purple school in the fishbowl of her brain. See him swimming past at a distance, about to disappear behind a reef. Fire a spear from a gun into

his naked thigh and bring him close, the gray black metal point protruding from his flesh. See his hair dance on the top of his head, his lips parted in agony. Every time she jerks on the line, more blood would pink the sea in rolling clouds. Controlling him, she moves herself over the length of him, touches him with her lips and fingertips.

With the laundromat in plain view, this electric image comes unplugged within her. It disrupts the current, the lust, the self-abandon under the coconut palms. It tosses her back into the wasteland of winter and heaves her into oblivion. She is no longer paddling in the balmy water the color of tourmalines. Neither is she wading through the drifts of snow on her way to read the texts of long deceased popes. She no longer feels the fleet of purple sea fishes fluttering past the curves of her body or her fingers freezing as they clear the thin ice away from the base of the first crocus of spring. She is in neither place living neither life.

He makes the right on Owens Street. She is in the car and outside the car. It is morning. It is day. She walks back and forth across a nameless two lane road. This road goes one way. It goes another. Not north, not south, not east, not west. One side of it is just the same as the other. There is nothing to help her decide which way to go. Her constant, obsessive crossing to and fro, back and forth reveals, makes no difference. There is nothing to mark or delineate the landscape. No trees, no cars, no trucks, no gas stations. Only an endless indifference of unbroken plain and putty-colored boulders scattered equidistant as far as she can see. It is a place she is all lost in. A landscape offering all the same. No variation. No direction. Nothing living. Nothing dead. Here, she will never find anyone again nor will anybody ever find her.

This car driving closer and closer to her destination, to her apartment with its furniture from a large, foreign-based store and its towels stolen from the campus pool only seems to

intensify the sense that she will never be found. By traveling home she is traveling toward annihilation. By traveling on with him she is as well. She seems to know that in this last half mile she is becoming invisible. No matter what she does she is going to disappear. But it is just too big an event to wrap her mind around. As the cozy neighborhood in which she resides shows its lawns and shrubs, it is something she must deny.

What is she to do? Where is she to go to witness this erasure of herself? Up the stairs to her mirror in the bathroom? Or straight to Seattle where by the time they arrive she will be all but gone? By choosing one she will be unable to do either. While going through the woods and coming over the hill, the world rearranged her reality into loud whispers. There in the generous dark it anticipated a future where she has none, where her molecules have been placed in a netherworld.

They are stopped now where the true night is waiting for her, hiding around the corners of the gabled, two-story house she lives in. Its children, passed into the past, dash across the white distance of its lawn, hop from branch to branch in the large oak, run up its steep stairs to the porch and slip inside her door. They wait and watch with their imaginary eyes. Her porch light above the landing shines a steady crystal beam onto the nearby evergreen, still iced in the last snow. It is this tree she likes to reach out for over her window railing and touch the top of. She can go outside and be gone or go inside and be gone or she can stay in the car and just go and be gone. Invisibility and missing and blankness are everywhere, in the subzero of the town, in the trapped heat of the car.

He stares across at her failure to move, adjusting his right glove, glancing down at the bagged money between them. She makes one last stab at still being somebody. She says she

knows what he really wants. He wants to go and find his island girl. He smiles, then laughs then reaches his arm out and this time touches her face. He says he could tell from that woman's smile, the wife of that guy, that she had never ever told a lie in her life. While his gloved fingers caress the back of her ear, she tries to smile a smile just like that.

Outside, the car's taillights burn red. Its exhaust pipes burp translucent smoke. The whole town keeps sleeping. No one will awake to know she is not included in the world anymore. The playful, secret children on the lawn and the frigid, white plain of her bed do not make a sound.

With nothing but that smile left, she is disappeared now.