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## The Missing Person

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# THE MISSING PERSON

MAXINE KUMIN

They leave the car at one of those park-and-lock lots; “No Attendant After 9 P.M.” the signs warn. But Alan says it is senseless to try to drive into center city at this hour and she agrees with him. She tucks her purse out of sight under the front seat, unwilling to carry it in the predictable crowd.

“You have to take something, Ellie. Your wallet at least; you can’t walk around the city like an orphan.”

Because it is a very small fold-over wallet she argues only briefly, then thrusts it deep in her coat pocket. They trudge through blackened slush to the subway entrance.

Years ago Alan lived here, a student at the university. He knows intersections, sirens, one-way streets; he is a confident, serious man. She has ridden the subway four times in her life. She is terrified but says nothing. Her terror, she knows, is banal. They are sucked into the tube; the sound presses against her ears. Alan’s lips move. She nods, pretending to understand. At home it is so quiet she can hear the dog sneeze in the night. They are expelled at the correct stop.

Downtown is cluttered with Christmas lights and after-work pedestrians pushing in and out of shops. The corner taverns give off enough surplus heat to melt the sidewalks in rough arcs around their entrances. She comments on this, thinking of the sullen, now-empty wood stoves at home and their acres of forested, uninhabited land now locked under this new all-day snow.

They have driven 370 miles for this evening. They know no one in the city anymore, except Kathleen, their daughter-in-law, who has a part in the repertory production they have come to see. It is a substantial part, she has assured them by mail, the letter containing a pair of tickets. Kathleen still writes dutifully every six or eight months. She is living with an older man, a lighting technician. When the theater is dark she waits on tables in a nearby bistro. Words like *co-vivant* and *psyche, lifestyle* and *energy* bedeck her letters. Reading them, Alan snorts like a choosy horse picking through weeds for the timothy.

They are the parents of an MIA who married this girl six years ago on brief acquaintance. They feel wary about her still. Her grief was shallow and impossible to sustain. Theirs is eternal.

James Alan, the son—Jay, they had always called him—toyed with Canada, Sweden, and jail, but in the end inanition prevailed. He was drafted. He put on his country’s uniform, he was written up in the

*Argus County Gazette* under his high school graduation photo, and he came home of furlough that summer. Ellie remembers that his hands shook as if with cold. They were both ashamed of their fears, mother and son, sharing an aversion to Ferris wheels, observation towers, and diving boards, and they did not speak of his condition. Toward the end of the fourteen days he sent for Kathleen. They had been secretly married three months ago; he hoped his parents would love her as much as he did, his earnest face cracking with the desire to make an amalgam of his people, to consolidate his loyalties.

Kathleen wears her long hair parted in the middle. Whenever she leans forward, it sweeps across her eyes, the corners of her mouth—an impediment, Ellie thinks. Kathleen loves bathrobes and long-sleeved shirts. When Jay's furlough ends, she takes with her his flannel, his chamois, and his royal-blue corduroy shirts to keep her warm all winter. Only two months later, before the weather has turned properly cold, he disappears in a helicopter, this child who dreaded heights.

Every year thousands of Americans die accidental deaths. Bizarre deaths, drownings, freak electrocutions, mushroom poisonings. A man chokes to death on a piece of steak in an expensive restaurant. A young woman falls from her loved and trusted horse and breaks her neck. Jay vanishes over hostile territory; neither he nor his eleven companions are ever found. When an only child leaves you—she cannot yet say dies—the air comes out of the basketball, the tire flattens, your own lungs threaten to crumple.

She is reclusive. She grows things; she preserves and freezes and dries them; she knows all the local wild mushrooms, all the local nuts. In the winter in her greenhouse she harvests cherry tomatoes and actual curly lettuce. Her project this year is to make Belgian endive sprout under layers of well-manured sawdust in boxes in the cellar. When she is not forced away from the farm, she is peeking under the sawdust to see if the roots have sprouted yet.

This is the way Ellie's mind skips and bumbles as they gruel through the wet, halfhearted snowfall toward Liberty Street. They walk a little apart, husband and wife of twenty-eight years, not at all like two people who imagine they are holding one another. Ellie examines oncoming pedestrians. She notes what they are wearing, how they walk. A city stride is tight, she is thinking; at the same time she is thinking her winter coat is years behind the style. People walk angrily with tense buttock muscles, probably from the hard sidewalk.

The light changes. She stands obediently on the curb, watching, mooning. When the green goes on, she starts across. Alan is not at her side. She stops, waiting for him to catch up; she steps out of the human flow and waits next to a building. The texture of the rough brick makes itself felt against her back as she tries to relax, to lean into and imprison the moment.

In perhaps ten seconds she is flooded with panic. He has been struck by a car, he has been mugged and dragged into an alley, he has

## 134 VIETNAM GENERATION

suffered a stroke, a heart attack. She rushes back across the street, darting this way and that, like a dog separated from its master. Everything around her is normal. People press forward in both directions; they know what they are doing. Her ears are ringing, her eyes are filling with brilliant asterisks, her peripheral vision is fading.

A policeman was directing traffic at a major intersection two blocks behind her; she remembers passing him, remembers noting his cheeks inflated like birthday balloons around the whistle. He does not stop shrilling air through the whistle. Nor can she now attract his attention, even standing at his side, even tugging his sleeve. She is out of breath; it requires a great effort to remain coherent.

When finally he allots her a sentence—expecting, undoubtedly, to be asked directions—he shakes his head decisively. He is Traffic, he shouts, and points where she must go. At the precinct house, two blocks west, three south, a patrol car is drawn up to the sidewalk. An altercation is taking place on the steps. There are raised nightsticks, grunts, a scuffle, arms pinned behind backs. She waits as long as she dares, watching the gray snowflakes melt as they strike pavement, enlarging the puddles like a late spring snow in the sugar bush.

Alan sells debarkers and wood chippers and other mechanical wood-harvesting aids. He can tell every species of tree from its bark, and he can do this even with his eyes closed, just from the texture and aroma of the bark. Now he is getting into machinery that mills wood flour. “Do you know about wood flour?” she asks the sergeant. “It’s an expanding market. They add it to plastic as a low-grade reinforcement. It’s dangerous, it’s explosive, a spark will set it off. I always thought if something happened to Alan it would be with wood flour.”

She realizes she is babbling; the sergeant scribbles as she talks. Probably he thinks she is part of an underground cell, part of a plot to blow up the city’s water supply. Meanwhile in the back room she is aware of a methodical thumping, muffled voices. A suspect is being beaten? Someone is cranking a mimeo machine? It is hard to concentrate; she feels scattered. She feels as though the top of her head might come off and her brains ooze out, all gray and clayey.

Her husband might have stepped out to visit a friend, the sergeant suggests. Or he might have stepped in somewhere to answer a call of nature. Has she continued on to the theater where, after their accidental separation, he is possibly now anxiously waiting for her to catch up with him?

She has not. In any case, he has the tickets.

Has she thought of returning to the parking lot to see if he is waiting at the car for her, having become accidentally separated from her and realizing that she might grow confused about the location of theater but would remember where they have parked the car?

No, she has not thought of that. Besides, he has the car keys. Hers are in her purse. Which is locked in the car.

Any history of mental disorder?

Wordlessly she shakes her head.

Maybe—this hangs on the air although it is not actually voiced—maybe he has grown tired of her and has elected this admittedly uncommon method of deserting her. Does she remember any unusual incident that transpired between them today?

She resolves not to mention the incident of the wallet. After all, Alan is practical. She ought not to wander around a big city without her name and address and a few dollars. This is not Argus County, where the doors of households are left open and only stall latches are shut. No, nothing. Nothing!

Hundreds of people are reported missing every day, it is explained to her patiently, but with an air of lassitude. Of every hundred persons who are reported missing by their loved ones, 99 and 99/100ths of them are deliberately missing. They have dropped out, taken a powder, vamoosed, they don't want to be found. And 99 percent of the 99/100ths undergo a change of heart within the first twenty-four hours. They get over their bad feeling, they experience remorse, they return. This is the reason for the Police Department's regulation: a missing persons bulletin cannot be issued on her husband until approximately this time tomorrow.

No, he is genuinely sorry, he is not empowered to take down a description of the, ah, possibly missing person until tomorrow evening at approximately...

She gets up finally, fumbling, realizing that she is not carrying the pocketbook a woman may fumble to retrieve from her lap as she rises. She has no will. She is directionless. She cannot see beyond the passage of twenty-four hours so that she may return to this varnished brown office and describe her vanished husband to an officer of the law. For surely if they know what he looks like, they can find her.

Gradually her mind refocuses on the theater. It is all up to Kathleen now. It soothes her to imagine that Alan and Kathleen have been in secret communication all along. There is a word for it, it will come to her, right now she must just concentrate on walking in the right direction. Back, back past the traffic cop, his whistle now dangling on his chest. Alan knows how she feels about Kathleen. She pretends she is indifferent to her, but in truth she has resented her from the beginning. Back down Liberty Street in the direction of the theater, which actually is housed in a former church. That much she remembers from Kathleen's letter.... The word is *collusion*.

The church is shabby inside. It smells of mildew and low-grade heating oil. Footpaths are worn in the maroon carpet. The lobby is deserted except for a slender young man in a blue jump suit. The ebb and flow of conversation comes through the double doors; stagey laughter follows. The play is in progress. She and the young man converse in hushed tones. He has a pale goatee that points at her as he

## 136 VIETNAM GENERATION

talks. Everything is haloed in her sight. Her words have little halos around them, too, little sunbursts of Indian decoration.

She does not have the tickets, she is explaining; they are complimentary tickets sent to her and her husband. Who is. She does not know. By Kathleen Blakeslee. She is proud to have remembered Kathleen's other name. Their daughter-in-law.

What a shame, murmurs narrow beard, because Kathleen was called out of town just this morning. It seems her father had a heart attack in Cincinnati. Her part for this performance is being played by Angela Rountree.

They stand silently side by side, equally passive, although he is imparting information and she is absorbing it, her mind racing, seizing on and discarding possibilities. There's the scattered affirmative sound of applause. Lights go up; the double doors open.

"Excuse me," her companion says, distracted. He has his duties to perform. She stands for a moment watching the audience file past as if magically Alan and Kathleen might appear among them. Finally, she joins the last little cluster of people moving out into the night. As if she too had a sense of purpose, trailing behind a young couple, walking east again through the still intermittent snow to the mouth of the subway.

She is absorbed once again into the tunnel. Fishing out change for a token, she thinks to count her money: \$21.89. Strange, that extra ten—she has no memory of it. Somewhere Alan asked her to make change, somewhere in a turnpike Howard Johnson's handed her a ten-dollar bill and asked...? She has no memory. Terrible at figures, at maps, at mechanical devices. Intuitive. Adept with hammer and saw, nonmotorized tools, calm with animals. That's who I am, she tells herself over and over as the subway lights slap past, riffling like cards in a deck, and the clatter of a train passing in the other direction assaults her ears. Who I am I am miam. She gets off at the correct stop; she is followed. Deliberately she slows down, listening. She waits to be mugged. They are her own footsteps. She finds herself on the correct street. At the next corner looms the park-and-lock, lights around the perimeter feebly gleaming.

Somewhere toward the third section over, she thinks. Just below the middle strip. Here and there a set of headlights goes on, a motor makes that reassuring cough as it turns over. Others too are wholesomely bent on retrieving their cars. She does not tell herself that Alan waits inside theirs, she is beyond such fantasies now. There is a spare key attached by magnet under the left rocker panel; if only she can get inside! They took this step a year ago when Alan absentmindedly locked the keys in the car at the Eastern States Exposition. They are anomalies, both of them, unused to locks.

But the car is not where she remembers it. Not in the next row or the next. Frantic now, reversing sides, she prowls up and down the rows. Two figures are sitting on the hood of an old Edsel watching her.

There is a glint of a bottle being passed between them and by its glint, as it were, she spots her car, is *her* car now, parked right next to the Edsel.

They face each other, she and the two men. Boys, really. One is reed-thin with a shaved head the shape of a football. A religious sect? she thinks. And escaped convict? The other, heavier, bobs around. He is less clear, wrapped in an oversized coat—no, a blanket. They are black.

She cannot require herself to kneel down, feel under the car for the key. She cannot take possession of her car in their presence. The menace is so direct that someone, she thinks, has told them where to wait. Her plan is known. She will not invite a blow on the head with a blunt instrument; she will not so easily become another victim of the city. She moves away, giving no sign, as if still in search of a car, walks farther and farther, does not turn until she knows she is out of sight. And watches the two forms asprawl on the hood of the Edsel in the snow and the bottle tilting up.

Somehow she has no recollection of the entrance or the stairwell or even of the station platform; she is in the subway again. In motion, this time she leans her head back against the metal frame of the car, letting the pulse of the underground rock her. The shrieks of the rails, the protests of metal on metal blur into a kind of dangerous music. It is the music of the sea. Washed overboard, she bobs on the surface, determined not to drown. She does not even know which direction she is going in. She has not looked at any of her traveling companions to sort out the indigent, the malicious, and the crazy. At the end of the line only one other person is left in the car, a tired-looking middle-aged woman dressed in men's sneakers and wearing a bandanna knotted under her chin. When they get out, Ellie walks as close to this woman as she dares. Although they do not speak, there is something hovering between them. They are allies.

Suddenly she realizes how tenuous is the thread that ties her to the parking lot, the car, her pocketbook within, her identity. The subway has become her connector; she turns and hurries back down the dank steps. Conveniently, at the end of the line there is no choice to make. Conveniently, a car yawns in the station. A guard lounges alongside the empty conveyance. He blows his nose onto the tracks and she is grateful to him. She enters the car and goes immediately to the map to find her stop. Luckily, it is the name also of a famous painter and she has no difficulty locating it. Fourteen stops, though. She has come a long way. She sits down opposite the map so she can keep an eye on it. The car starts up.

It is after midnight now, the streets on the outskirts deserted, the sidewalks coated with a thin grease of city snow. Approaching the parking lot she has to fight her terror; suppose those two men are still there? She has to fight an impulse to fall to her knees, to wriggle along unseen like a guerrilla between the rows.



## 138 VIETNAM GENERATION

The Edsel is gone. Snow is beginning to stick to the wet lozenge of asphalt it covered. She can hear her heart. It makes explosive thumps of relief in her ears. Now she falls to her knees, groping under the car for the little magnetic cup. Her hand fastens on it immediately. What luck! She withdraws the key.

She opens the door and drops onto the front seat, has barely the presence of mind to pull the door closed and press down the lock before great waves of trembling overtake her. It is a shivering fit, the kind she endured during frequent childhood bouts of fever. Her body trembles, chattering like aspen leaves in a light wind. From time to time the quaking subsides. She takes a cautious calming breath as one does after the hiccups. Two breaths, three; then some subliminal thought racks her anew with tremors.

Little by little she sleeps, shakes, sleeps again. When she comes fully awake there is a line of light in the sky and her purse lies heavy in her lap like a cold animal. Somehow she has pulled it out from under the seat. She recognizes that she has been hugging it.

As soon as it is light enough to navigate without headlights, she takes out her own set of car keys and eases out of the lot. Except for the trucks, there is no traffic on the main artery into center city. Despite her normal panic at the multiple signs full of proscriptions, she has no trouble finding Liberty Street. After Liberty Street, the precinct house.

A new sergeant is on duty. It has not occurred to her that last night's man is off duty, has gone home for breakfast, is already safely asleep. She is surprised by her anger. This morning's sergeant respects her account of the night that has passed. He notes down carefully a description of Alan. She gives him a snapshot from her wallet, four years old now, but accurate enough. In it Alan stands by the barn, stiffly posed, squinting into the sun. The head of one horse, the rump of another are visible on the left. Alan is holding a sledge. He looks boyish and capable. And most of all, he looks startlingly like Jay.

Finally she begins the long drive home. Oddly peaceful, she ascribes the serenity to her extreme fatigue. Also to shock. You're in shock, she tells herself sternly, waiting to grieve. Think how you miss him. Think how you love, loved him.

But she cannot. The main thing now, the thing that is flooding her with euphoria, is how she has survived her ordeal. How she has coped. She has conquered the subway. She has forced the city to declare Alan a missing person twelve hours ahead of schedule. She knows now that Jay has been dead all these years. When will she need to know about Alan? She reviews the extreme and contradictory emotions the sight of Alan's dead, well-known body will arouse in her.

Resolutely, holding to fifty-five mph on the hypnotic turnpike, she pulls the lumpy brown leather pocketbook onto her lap and rests her free hand, palm down, on its surface.