FLASH NONFICTION

Where No One Could Find You

by Lara Della Gaspera



"Disappearing Act" by Clemens Braun

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It always struck me as unusual, the way your childhood photos were displayed in a bathroom — a liminal space, neither public nor private, down the hallway on the second floor of your parent's house. There was no sink, just a toilet, these few pictures, and an oddly comforting smell of vanilla.

Your room felt grown-up, almost aseptic. The bed faced two abstract paintings — the kind that demand interpretation. On the desk were finance magazines, where your father had underlined passages for you. The whole house was filled with sharp angles, reflecting the same precision with which he arranged everyone at the dinner table: his back straight, his gaze firm, directing you beside me, while your mother took her silent seat opposite.

You had a beauty that was both strange and familiar. The first time we met I was nervous, measuring myself against what I assumed were my own flaws, unsure if you'd find me enough. It wasn't until later that night, after drinks had relaxed us, that I sensed a shift. On a bench in front of a bar, while I was waiting for my Uber, you reached for my neck, kissing me with an awkward force, as if you wanted to appear dominant but never quite managed.

I soon learned that the nights you used drugs were when I saw you at your best — leaning over, eager to distribute a line of powder, the first one always a large, dramatic mark in a ritual. It was never really about drugs for an occasion, but finding an occasion for the drugs. I'd watch you come alive, frantic, diving into the night with a relentless energy. Alone together, I felt like an accessory to your restlessness, trying to keep up with the late nights and whispered confessions, though often feeling on the edge, looking in. The sex was different then: vigorous, demanding, sometimes exhausting, yet I'd stay, hoping for the quiet connection I craved. Sometimes I'd imagine us, sober, in a prolonged intimacy that felt almost mythical in its absence.

You wore ideas like temporary costumes: a voice actor, a writer — these were aspirations you adopted for a moment, as though they'd define you, but never truly committing, never lingering long enough to let them take hold. And in your presence, I would wonder if you even liked me. There were days when you seemed repulsed by minor flaws, catching some imperfection with a look of faint disdain. You'd scoff if we saw an older woman daring to be sexual in a movie, and your '*Ew*' would land, heavy and dismissive. That first time we broke up, you told me that love just wasn't possible for you. When I repeated your words to you later, you acted as if they were from someone else.

Now, you've left again. This time, you said it wasn't marriage that repelled you, just the thought of marrying *me*. I try to recall memories that weren't tied up in my attempts to shape myself into something lovable. I remember the ease by which we once joked about our effortless connection — "Where's the catch?" But somewhere along the way, the catch

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emerged, coiled and became hidden, beneath layers of expectations.

The happiest memories are quieter, simpler, free from the shadow of your family's 'high society' expectations. In Berlin, with less money, I'd cook in the kitchen, while you'd sit nearby, watching, smoking, sometimes sharing stories about your nanny and her strict table manners. I told you of my father's similar rituals with his own parents, and there, in that cramped space, we laughed. In those moments, you softened, as if relieved of a performance, but the spell was always fleeting, breaking when the distance between us reasserted itself.

It was like you existed as a mirror, reflecting back what others sought in you, until it became unbearable. And when it did, you'd erase everything — withdraw, destroy, disappear. I'd be left wondering who you were, and who you wanted to be. You were the center, pulling others into your gravity, yet always shifting, elusive. Sometimes, I felt fear — fear of that unfixed nature, of seeing you become one person, then ten, then no one at all.

You carried an emptiness, vast and haunting. In moments of anger or icy silence, you would remove pieces of yourself, as if reclaiming something private and the closer I tried to get, the further you receded, back to a place where no one could find you. That version of you, the one who made me believe; would return again and again, but never the same.

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