

SHORT STORY

The One Who Never Left

by Douglas Jern



"Automaton" by Suzette Dushi

The first disappearance happened on live national television. With the perfect dramatic timing of a well-rehearsed performance, the Emperor himself vanished into thin air as the abdication ceremony approached its climax, the big paper in his hands fluttering to the floor like a dying dove. One moment he was there, and in the next he was gone, with not so much as a peep to mark the transition.

At first I thought there was something wrong with the television set, but the panicked looks on the faces of the newscasters soon dispelled that suspicion. They were flapping their jaws like goldfishes in suits, too stunned to speak, until someone had the presence of mind to cut the feed and bring up a message about ‘technical difficulties’.

After that, the phenomenon snowballed. People began disappearing left, right and center: before the eyes of their loved ones, inside toilet stalls, on the streets, and in their homes. Traffic accidents skyrocketed as driverless cars careened into streetlights and sidewalks. All over the country unattended stoves and dropped cigarettes caused fires — fires that continued to burn as emergency response personnel disappeared too.

By the time a slew of government ministers had disappeared — an occasion that would have been cause for celebration under normal circumstances — the country was no longer in any state to care; those not consumed by panic were paralyzed by despair.

But the phenomenon was not confined to the islands of Japan. The world’s population fell drastically. The news outlets soon gave up on reporting the curious and terrifying event, because people were vanishing so rapidly that keeping up was impossible.

Three weeks after Emperor Akihito of Japan left the world as we know it, human civilization itself started to collapse. In the United States, armed forces established a short-lived military dictatorship that fell apart when most of its members disappeared. All other attempts to institute some form of control were equally fruitless. Eventually, people stopped trying and began to fend for themselves.

If there was any logic behind the disappearances, any set of rules governing who went and why, no one ever found it. Both young and old would vanish during all times of day. Christians were ecstatic, certain that the Rapture had come at last, while scientists tore out their hair in frustration at the seeming randomness of the phenomenon. The only conclusion that could be drawn was simple and, depending on your point of view, cruel: No one was safe.

My wife and I lasted quite long. Once we realized that life had become a big game of Russian roulette, we stuck together like conjoined twins. We never let each other out of sight, not even when going to the toilet. We’d fall asleep side by side, hands tightly

interlocked, and wake up the same way, breathing a sigh of relief to see the other's face. Every day I told her that I loved her, fearful that each may be the last.

Despite the constant dread that loomed over us, we found ways to make each other laugh and forget about our predicament at least for a moment. We often stayed up late, watching movies with the volume turned down, ad-libbing our own lines. Phone Booth was my personal favorite since it offered many opportunities for some truly outlandish jokes that had my wife in stitches every time.

This went on for four weeks, until one day at breakfast. I handed her the jam jar, and she disappeared. Just like the Emperor, there was no sound, no flash of light, no rush of air. One moment I was looking into her eyes, the next I was looking at empty space.

The jar cracked against the table, spilling blueberry jam all over the tablecloth. Then, there was nothing but silence as my brain tried and failed to come to terms with the new reality. She was gone.

I don't know how long I sat there, staring at the point where her face had been, willing her to be there again. All I know is that by the time I had cried my last tears, the sun was on its way down. I picked up the pieces of the broken jar and wiped up the jam with the tablecloth. Then I bundled it all up and chucked it out the window. I'd never eat blueberry jam again.

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The city of Nagoya is a ruin now. With no workers to do maintenance and repairs, many buildings and facilities have started to decay. The potholed streets, where once thousands of people and cars moved like fish in a stream, are now empty and silent, dotted with abandoned vehicles, trash, and other debris. I haven't heard another human voice in ages. For all I know, I'm the only one left in the city, the country, maybe even the world. Same thing, really — my world has shrunk down to this neighborhood between the JR train station and Nagoya Castle. I go out sometimes, to get some exercise, but mostly I stay inside. Survival isn't a problem; I have all the water and food I need here at home, looted from empty supermarkets and convenience stores. Canned food gets boring after a while, but at least it provides nutrition.

So here I sit on the couch — not at the kitchen table, never there — eating canned tuna and corn, reading books to pass the time. With the curtains drawn and the emptiness of the world shut out, I can almost believe that things are the way they used to be, back then. That it's just

a really quiet day and my wife is out shopping or having lunch with a friend. That she'll be home soon.

This daydreaming is pleasant, but never lasts long. I invariably find myself coming back to that morning when the jam jar dropped, and then my chest aches and my throat constricts as if I'm about to cry. Only I don't cry, because my tears seem to have run out. I only produce an odd staccato breathing and fabricated sobs that do little to ease the pain. In times like these, I genuinely wish for disappearance, no matter what comes after. If it's death, then that's fine. This is no life worth living anyway. If it's something else, well, could it be any worse?

So far, I'm still here. I don't know why — statistically, I shouldn't be, but we all know what Mark Twain had to say about "lies, damned lies," and so on. I've decided to wait another two weeks. If I'm not gone by then, I'll check out on my own. I've scrounged enough drugs from the local pharmacies to take down an elephant. All I have to do is pop them in my mouth and swallow, and then it'll be over. Knowing that I can punch my card on my own terms is the only thing that keeps me relatively sane nowadays. It's a small comfort, but better than nothing.

Knock, knock.

The sound echoes like a gunshot in the silence. I look up from my book. I almost dismiss it as a trick of my imagination when I hear it again. Two short, hesitant taps.

The book slides from my hands and lands on the carpet with a thump. My eyes are fixed on the open door to the hallway. I never lock the front door these days. I mean, what's the point? Sitting stock still on the couch, I hear the handle turn and the front door open. It squeaks a little on its unoiled hinges. A short silence. And then...

"Darling?"

Her voice! My heart leaps, and my vision starts to flicker like a strobe light. I try to answer, but my throat has contracted to a pinhole. Nothing but a thin wheeze escapes my lips.

Footsteps in the hallway. She's coming. I'm both elated and terrified. What if it's all a dream? God knows it wouldn't be the first time I've dreamt of her return. Seeing her smile at me from the other side of the kitchen table only to wake up alone in the bed with wet cheeks, as if my body knew that my mind was lying.

The footsteps draw closer, and there she is, standing in the doorway. Seeing her breaks my paralysis. I stand up on shaking legs and take a few steps toward her, my mouth shaping itself around the sweet sound of her name.

Then I stop. Something is wrong. I can see her clearly in front of me. It's her face, her body, her hair. But it's not her. It's not my wife standing there, looking at me with the same old smile. It's a stranger, a mimic, an unholy facsimile, and it inspires nothing but revulsion inside me.

If she notices my hesitation, she disguises it well. She closes the distance and embraces me. I wrap my arms around her, feeling the warmth and softness of her body. It's familiar, yet not quite right. Her body doesn't fit my arms the way it used to. Hugging her now feels like putting on a new pair of shoes identical to the old ones.

Still, at this point, any kind of human contact is balm for my soul, and I chalk up my initial mistrust to prolonged isolation. I tell myself that I'll grow accustomed to her company again — in time. She is my wife, after all. Isn't she?

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People began to reappear as suddenly and rapidly as they had disappeared, in the same physical condition. The population levels around the world were soon back to what they used to be, and people began the long, hard work to rebuild society. It was back-breaking labor, and participation was made mandatory by law — in Japan, at least.

I did my fair share of work, as did the woman who had been my wife. Ever since her reappearance, I've been doing my best to convince myself that it's really her.

It's not working.

Her absence changed her in some fundamental way. She doesn't seem to be aware of it, though, and I keep quiet on the matter, pretending to love her as I always have. Touching her still gives me that uncomfortable new-shoe feeling, and I don't think I'll ever get used to being around her. Sex is the worst, and she wants it more now than she did before. We do it with the lights out, which is a relief. In the dark I can imagine that she's still the woman I love.

She claims to have no memory of the time between her disappearance and her return, but says that she missed me terribly. I always say the same thing, telling her that I disappeared a short time after she did.

I don't know what happened to her while she was away, but she's missing more memories than she lets on. I put on Phone Booth again a few nights ago, and she claimed she'd never seen it before. When I made a joke about Colin Farrell's extended car warranty, she merely

looked at me like I was an alien. Like I somehow didn't belong. Ever since, I take great care not to talk about the time we spent bound together before her disappearance. That look in her eye unsettled me.

She's not the only one who's given me looks. Two months after the Great Reappearance, my company informed me that they were starting up business again. When I went to the office to greet my long-lost coworkers, I found that all of them had changed, too. They were at their desks when I stepped inside, and looked up as one man to scrutinize me with cold, unfeeling eyes. As I walked around the office, shaking hands and exchanging empty pleasantries, everyone neatly avoiding the subject of the disappearance, I knew that these were not the people I'd been working with for years. Their faces were the same, but the minds behind them were not.

I've noticed the change even in people I don't know, passing by on the street. There's something off about everyone I see. Something not right. I walk with a slight hunch nowadays, to make myself smaller, less noticeable, and I avoid making eye contact whenever I can.

It's the same with the people I see on TV, in the news and on game shows, both in the country and overseas. They talk and emote and act like ordinary people, yet it all looks hollow, as if they're not humans but merely pretending to be.

It seems that I'm the only one who's still the same person, the only one who never left. I'm surrounded by people yet all alone, terrified of what they might do to me if they find out the truth. In my nightmares, I stand in the middle of a vast square, millions of people watching me from tier upon tier of spectator stands, each pair of eyes as cold and menacing as my wife's and coworkers'. They know what I am. When I wake up, I'm soaked in cold sweat, listening for a knock on the door and the gruff voices of police officers come to take away the outsider, to hammer down the protruding nail.

The stash of pills in the medicine cabinet beckons me every morning, and every day their promise of freedom from this living hell rings that much sweeter. For I'm still the last person in the world, a lone swimmer in a sea of strangers. And I don't know how long I can keep my head above water.