

VANISHING ■

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In a house where people could teleport, we never panicked when folk went missing.

My family was always disappearing. Here one day and gone the next. There was the time when my grandpa left home right after breakfast and called from Mexico an hour later to say hi. Even Mom vanished for a week. Right before she left, she had fallen into one of her “moods.” It was a cloudy-day kind of mood, a sit-in-your-room-with-the-lights-off kind of mood, a bury-me-alive-in-the-graveyard kind of mood. She got that way sometimes. We didn’t talk about it much. So, when my big sister disappeared it was no big deal. But when she didn’t come back by dinnertime. Mom and Dad got worried.

My parents didn’t call the cops. Instead, they faded away too, for months they were gone. Were they searching for her? I never knew. I only knew the weren’t there.

It was a strange thing, my sister’s disappearance, because people in my house didn’t usually vanish all at once. A segmented-form of invisibility came first. My family tended to fade in and out of reality, spectral and ghostly, like the body of the Cheshire Cat. One moment you would see a piece of them here, and a few hours later, you would see a piece of them there. There were always flashes of body parts coming and going until the whole person vanished. But my sister was just gone one day. And that was the start of something new. But Grandma disappeared the old way and was a disembodied head for two days before she left and never returned.

After Grandma was gone, Mom and Dad came home again. Grandpa couldn’t raise my brother and me alone. At first, my parents went out of their way to make us happy. We went out to eat, played games and went to the amusement park. We didn’t talk about my sister or Grandma leaving, and in this

way, my brother and I learned never to talk about anything painful at all. So, there was silence between us when Mom and Dad started arguing. She screamed. He screamed. She went out with other men. He went out with other women. She drank. He drank. Not long after a big blowup Dad went into the bathroom and never came back out. We all took it in stride because we all knew it was coming. Dad like Grandma was old school. His arms disappeared the night before he vanished. It was no big deal, he didn't hug us much anyway.

I knew the day was coming soon that I would be able to teleport and I couldn't wait. My sister was only a year older than I was, so I figured it'd be soon. Mom was screaming at my brother and me a lot these days. She accused us of planning to abandon her like everyone else. We denied this truth with lies and false promises to stay forever.

My little brother left next. He went all at once like my sister. We were at the park, and he called for me to watch him perform a trick. He did a back flip, and even before his feet touched the ground, he had faded from sight and never came back. This time someone did call the cops. I did. When they arrived, they shook their sad cop heads, and with their square-jawed cop faces they informed me with a patronizing and terrifying solemnity that there wasn't much hope of their finding my brother. They said that people who could teleport were, by their very nature difficult to locate. I told them I understood but that I still had to try. They said they were sorry and wished me luck.

When I told Mom we needed to look for my brother, she laughed sourly. "And where on Earth would we start?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Exactly," she said.

One day I went to wake Grandpa for breakfast, and he was gone. Grandpa was the only one in our family who ever left a note before he went. It said, "Virginia Beach, here I come." He left in the new way, all at once. I smiled. "You go, Grandpa."

Since only Mom and me were left, she chained me to the house so I couldn't wander off. She told me it was a love chain, and that everything would be okay because love is never bad.

"Why didn't you use it on the others?" I asked.

"It never occurred to me to do so until they were gone," she said.

I didn't want a chain. I yelled and broke things. I begged Mom to remove it. She ignored my protestations, so I spent the next year inside with Mom watching television, eating Cheetos, drinking Cokes, and growing larger.

Outside the house, the world moved on, and I envied those kids whose families would always be visible and lingering. And whose mom's didn't chain them. I wanted to go out and play, but it was too significant a risk for Mom to take.

Over the years, Dad was the only one to reappear from time to time. I never saw him use a door. I'd come clanking, dragging my chain downstairs, and there he'd be, in the kitchen, making a sandwich or sitting on the sofa with a beer, like he'd never left, like everything was normal, like he'd just run to the grocery store for milk.

The last time Dad showed up, I asked him if I could go with him when he left again or at least could he take this chain off me. He shook his head. "Couldn't even if I wanted to," he said. "Our power doesn't work that way. Besides, someone needs to stay with your mom. Your grandparents are gone as well as

your siblings. She's lost too much as it is."

It was a bright sunny morning when I saw Dad go. He was staring out the bay window at the rundown row of shotgun houses across the street. Oblique strokes of light, with large dust motes drifting through them like dead angels, beamed past him, slicing through gaps in the curtains. Dad's fade away was gradual, daylight transforming into dusk. At least this time he turned and waved goodbye. He closed his eyes and leaked into transparency. My father faded into nothingness and I never saw him again. Mom was in the bathroom. When she came out, she didn't notice me or that Dad was gone. She started watching television and never mentioned the man again.

After Dad left, I spent long hours staring at myself in the mirror trying to pop out of existence. I would squeeze my eyes so tight in concentration that my head would start to ache. I would run at the wall hoping to disappear, only to smash into it. I jumped from the top of the staircase, hoping the adrenaline would kick-start something inside me. Nothing happened except for a few fractures and a bloody nose.

When the age at which I should've acquired my power had passed and then another year followed that one, Mom hugged me. "I'm so glad you can't teleport," she said smiling like she'd won the lotto. "I guess the chain worked. Now you can stay with me forever."

"Yay," I mumbled.

So weeks turned into months and months into years. I lost track of the date and my age. Time just kept passing unnoticed. It collected in stealth like the heavy pouches of flesh now riding my bones. One day I came lumbering down the steps to the living room. The walk downstairs was difficult for me, hauling my hundreds of pounds plus this stupid chain. I waddled to my favorite spot in front of the television, collapsed into a

large bean bag chair, and gasped. I took a sip of Coke from a half-empty two-liter bottle that I had left on the end table the night before. Why bother with a glass? I began to channel surf and then cursed when I realized I had forgotten to make myself a bowl of chocolate ice cream.

I looked at my hands; two big meaty lumps of flesh. My digits seemed to have melded together so that instead of grasping things, I lobster clawed them. What had I become? Anger swirled deep inside my expansive gut — a grinding nausea ached against my ribcage. I cried.

This wasn't the life I had wanted.

This wasn't who I was supposed to be.

I screamed.

I wept some more.

I grasped Mom's love chain with the force of what little will I had remaining and pulled. And pulled. And pulled. I summoned strength I thought I had lost long ago and I pulled.

It snapped.

The living room faded away. What faded in was a long, grayish-blue crescent of water, spread across the horizon, like the scimitar of God. White fists of foam battered a shoreline in front of me. A fresh, cool breeze washed over me tangy with salt and seaweed. In the air was the stench of sour fish rot, barbecue, alcohol, and sweet ice cream. The rushing surf made a breathing sound as it whispered and washed the sand. Overhead, gulls sang out in squawks, and, somewhere, children were laughing. There was a scorching heat on my back that burned my pale Elmore's Glue flesh. My big pink feet squished into white sand and were suddenly on fire. Insanely, I

got the absurd impression of roasting piglets.

I unfurled. I trembled. I vibrated with an almost electric terror. What came next was hyperventilation, and a long bead of sweat rolled down my back. My eyes closed, and I begged God to take me away from here. I wanted to be home that instant.

The heat waned, and I dared to open my eyes. Mom was there on the couch and I was comfortably nestled within the bean bag chair again. Its folds, caressing my folds. The View was on the television, and the women were yelling at each other. A bowl of potato chips and dip sat reassuringly on the end table. I released a sigh so deep and long that the Grand Canyon would've been jealous.

“You came back,” said Mom, smiling. “I knew you would.”

“Yeah,” I said. “But could you do me a favor?”

“What?”

I retrieved the two broken lengths of chain. “Could you fix this?”

She nodded. “Sure, but you don't need it. It never kept you here. You could've teleported whenever you wished.”

No. I was chained.

Mom shook her head as if she could read my thoughts.

I wiped a big palm across my face unsure of how to deal with that revelation. In the end the answer seemed clear. I held up both halves of the chain. “Fix it anyway,” I said. “It's good to be home.”