

What She Didn't Know

Six days after the disappearance of her husband, Mrs. Gephardt decided it was time to contact the authorities.

Truthfully, she hadn't even realized six days had gone by, as one day followed another with faithful regularity: bingo with the girls, watering the azaleas, knitting a scarf for her grandson in Atlanta, and reading Voyage Home had fused her days into one long stream of comings and goings, of getting up and going down. It wasn't until their usual Sunday evening meal at the Parthenon diner followed by gin rummy and chamomile tea with Schnapps that she realized something was missing, followed by the realization that it was someone, followed by the realization that it was Herbert.

She was in the middle of dressing for dinner, standing by her bed in just her slip and her hosiery, when the vague feeling of uneasiness that had followed her all week crystallized into a fact, true and graspable - Herbert should have been there, Herbert should have been there to tell her not to wear what she was about to wear so that she would put on what she had planned to wear last week. The scene that should have stretched before her played in her mind, a version of every other time they had gone through the old routine. The absence of it shocked her so much that she had to lie down, at which point she tried to remember whether Herbert had been anywhere he ought to have been lately.

She felt that he must have been with her on Tuesday and Thursday in the garden, inching along the fence to cut the vines while she watered the azaleas, but she couldn't be sure. Her memory of that moment looked just like every other Tuesday and Thursday, and the one she was remembering might just as well been last week, or the week before. She didn't think she could remember a time when she didn't water the azaleas on Tuesday and Thursday, and when Herbert didn't come along to cut the vines. She thought he was surely there at the door on Wednesday and Friday to tell her what a silly thing bingo was, and to kiss her on the cheek as she left nonetheless, but again, nothing she could remember about that moment gave her any clue of when it might have been.

After going through several such scenes she finally stumbled on something which she knew had been different, which pin-pointed the last time he was certainly in the house. Last Monday he had said to her, as she was leaving for bingo, *It'll be nice to get out for a change*. She remembered wondering about that sentence in Elsie's car on the way to the bingo place, but since she hadn't been listening to what Herbert was saying before that, she didn't know why he'd said it. That was the last time she could distinctly remember seeing him, and the thought that he had been gone all this time threw her into spasms of dizziness. She took two of the aspirins on the night table and curled into bed, trying to remember anything, anything unusual about the week.

In the morning she woke early, as she always did, and hobbled to the bathroom. She was generally quite limber for her 82 years, but mornings were always a difficult time for her, spent in a mental fog that lasted until breakfast. The previous night's revelation lurked

furtively in the back of her mind like a nameless worry, but it was not until she knocked over Herbert's empty dentures glass that she remembered his absence. She fumbled to pick it up from the floor trying to think if she had already seen him get up and go downstairs, when his key phrase dislodged itself from her memory and she was flooded with the reality of his absence. She spent the next twenty minutes dressing herself to go to the police station, forgetting periodically what she was doing or where she had put something.

Finally she emerged from her large clapboard house, the one that she and Herbert had bought when their second son was born, and began resolutely walking the four blocks to the police station. The small pink feather on her hat waved jauntily as she walked, and for a moment she was filled with the happy pride which always came when she was outside, walking more briskly than any other 82 year old she knew: the pride of still being limber, of still having enough vitality to be independent. True, she walked more erectly, more primly than she ever had before, one foot following the other in a carefully orchestrated line, but she was there, she was able, she was alive. Then she turned the corner and, confused for a moment as to where she was going and why, she glanced down at the paper on which she had written the whole nasty affair, and felt sick remembering again that Herbert was gone.

In the police station they welcomed her warmly with the smile she herself used for young children, and ushered her over to a man with a long face and prickly beard. She explained that her husband was missing, as far as she could tell, since last Monday; and that she last remembered seeing him in their house before she left for bingo, but that since she had stayed out late with the girls that night, she didn't know whether he'd been there when she came back. The police man listened and asked if she'd looked for a note or other clues, if her husband had Alzheimer's or had wandered off before, and lastly, if she had checked the house to make sure he hadn't fallen somewhere and been unable to get help. She answered no to the first two questions, feeling slightly silly for having not looked. After about a minute of thinking, the last question struck her with its stunning vulgarity and she recoiled visibly, her small frame shaking under her hat. No, that was not possible, she told the officer, and simply asked him again if the police would conduct a search of the neighborhood, of the city in fact. He told her they would do their best with so little information, and advised her to think more deeply about where he could have gone.

All the way home she thought about him falling, laying sprawled on his back on the cellar floor or gardening shed, where she never would have looked. A terrible fear crept through her bones and pushed her toward home at the same time that it held her back. There were so many things she couldn't remember, so many things she couldn't pay attention to anymore. How horrible it was of her not to have looked, even for a note, even for a sign! She remembered the time that Danny, their middle child, had fallen down the stairs while everyone else was having hamburgers at the block party; she remembered how when they finally heard his screams Herbert himself fell trying to get there but carried Danny two blocks to the car just the same. She remembered the time that she forgot to pick up Justine from ballet class and Herbert had gone to get her and taken her

out for ice cream to forget the whole thing. As she opened the door to her house she listened apprehensively for any moaning, as silly as it seemed. Then she forgot why she was doing it, and looked down at her paper to remember.

That morning was tense, cruel. Without her routine she felt lost and confused, frequently stopping to wonder what she was doing or where she was. She searched the house as if a ghost would jump out at her at any minute; she searched behind couches and doors. She wasn't sure what she was looking for- a note, a clue, or a body, whichever came first. As she walked through the wide and sunny rooms on the first floor memories came flooding back - dessert on the couch in front of the Ed Sullivan show, Herbert and Justine in the middle, Danny and Pete on the back, Carolyn spread on the floor and herself in the big green armchair; Herbert's miniature golf obstacle course that ran from the parlor through the living room to the kitchen; pie-making contests between Justine and Carolyn that set the kitchen afloat in flour and drove Herbert crazy.

Now there was no Herbert in the parlor, no Herbert in the kitchen. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, in fact, except that Herbert was not there to put the cereal out of place and complain about the drafts. Where were her memories of their golden years now, she wondered, climbing the stairs? Why couldn't she remember anything meaningful, exciting? But there was no note in their bedroom or the girls', just memories of them leaning over Carolyn in her crib, their first baby born in that house. Just memories of him shaving before the big meeting with Barner Brothers, the one that got them their trip to Hawaii; just memories of long winter nights that seemed too short underneath the warm comforter. Standing in the middle of their room she couldn't even remember how she'd figured out he was gone. Everything was such a blur, such an unreachable wilderness, everything but the routine things that should have been and the memories that were. She checked his drawers to see if anything was gone; it looked like less but she could never be sure, because Herbert always had so many clothes anyway.

On the third floor she encountered the boys' rooms, barely used since they moved away about 30 years ago. She couldn't imagine why he would have gone up there, but it was one last hope. Late morning sunlight fell through Pete's window and made patterns on the bed, of dark and light. They had looked out of that window, she and Herbert, the first morning in their new house. They could see into the Pellman's yard two doors down one way and the Simons' to the other; they could see the sun rise over Mabel Pellman's peaked roof and set sedately behind Jack Simon's weathervane. When was the last time she had been up here with him? When was the last time they had ventured out of their daily cycles to enjoy the things they used to enjoy - rainstorms, boating, smoky bars, playing with their children, even talking?

She was reminded of that phrase, what he had said the last time she saw him. *It'll be nice to get out for a change.* He'd been saying something before that too, she figured, but she hadn't been listening. There was something he'd wanted then and she hadn't been listening. She held her face in her hands, feeling the wrinkles in her palms and her cheeks like great mountains, deep valleys. What was it, this mind, this attention? There were so many moments, present and past, that felt snuffed out, clouded, frustratingly

unreachable. Then again, there was so much she had control over, so much that she - she had often congratulated herself for it - could still do. They had engrained themselves into patterns, irrespective of each other. They were no longer living together, they were living in the same place. She had feared this would happen a long time ago, back when she had time spread in front of her like a field of grain, and so many paths to take. The clock struck the hour and slowly, she went downstairs.

She was nearly to the bottom of the steps when she heard him calling her name from the kitchen. She didn't believe it was truly him and not just a memory until she rounded the corner of the living room, and saw him through the open door.

"Herbert," she squeaked out, her voice sounding like it had been pent up for a long time, "You're home." He turned to her as quickly as his body would allow, a bit shakily, but in her eyes gracefully. He moved toward her with short but purposeful steps and clasped her close when he reached her, enveloped her as he hadn't done in a long time. She tried to inhale the familiar smell of his vest but there was something new mixed in, something that reminded her of places far away.

"Gracie, I'm sorry," he said, his voice muffled by her hair.

"Sorry? For what?" She was the one who felt sorry, she was the one who felt like trembling, begging pardon, starting again.

"I shouldn't have left like that. I know I told you I went to my brother Samuel's, but...I didn't go there. I needed to get away. I thought I could pretend that I was younger. I thought somehow there was a way to live without you, because we never noticed each other here. But I couldn't. Gracie, I'm sorry." He blubbered like a dramatic young man, like he did after their first real argument, that night in her mother's house.

She felt foolish and unworthy, wondering whether or not to tell him how forgetful she'd been. It didn't seem to matter now - all the clouded moments from the week before and the memories from years ago that were still sharp as cut glass - all of it faded away. He was back, after a week, home, and she knew it. The point was that she knew it.

This piece was written in high school. I still like most of it, though the ending feels a bit cliché. Would love to revise the ending with more mature eyes!