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Opening Extract from...

Mysteries

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Joe

The strangest memory of my childhood concerns my father's disappearance.

This is what I remember:

It was late September. I was nine years old, and my sister Heather was seven and a half. Although summer was officially over and we'd been back at school for weeks, the weather continued warm and sunny, fall only the faintest suggestion in the turning of the leaves, and nothing to hint at the long Midwestern winter yet to come. Everybody knew this fine spell couldn't last, and so on Saturday morning my mother announced we were going to go for a picnic in the country.

My dad drove, as usual. As we left Milwaukee, the globe compass fixed to the dashboard – to me, an object of lasting fascination – said we were heading north-northwest. I don't know how far we went. In those days, car journeys were always tedious and way too long. But this time, we stopped too soon. Dad pulled over to the side of a country road in the middle of nowhere. There was nothing but empty

fields all around. I could see a farmhouse in the distance and some cows grazing in the next field over, but nothing else: no park, no woods, no beach, not even a picnic table.

'Are we here?' asked Heather, her voice a whine of disbelief.

'No, no, not yet,' said our mom, at the same moment as our dad said, 'I have to see a man about a horse.'

'You mean *dog*,' Heather said. She giggled. 'See a man about a dog, not a horse, silly.'

'This time, it might just be a horse,' he said, giving her a wink as he got out of the car.

'You kids stay where you are,' Mom said sharply. 'He won't be long.'

My hand was already on the door handle, pressing down. 'I have to go, too.'

She sighed. 'Oh, all right. Not you, Heather. Stay.'

'Where's the bathroom?' Heather asked.

I was already out of the car and the door closed before I could hear her reply.

My father was only a few feet ahead of me, making his way slowly towards the field. He was in no hurry. He even paused and bent down to pick a flower.

A car was coming along the road from the other direction: I saw it glinting in the sun, though it was still far away. The land was surprisingly flat and open around here; a strange place to pick for a comfort stop, without even a tree to hide behind, and if my dad was really so desperate, that wasn't obvious from his leisurely pace. I trailed along behind, making no effort to catch up, eyes

fixed on his familiar figure as he proceeded to walk into the field.

And then, all at once, he wasn't there.

I blinked and stared, then broke into a run towards the place where I'd last seen him. The only thing I could think of was that he'd fallen, or maybe even thrown himself, into some hidden ditch or hole. But there was no sign of him, or of any possible hiding place when I reached the spot where he'd vanished. The ground was level and unbroken, the grass came up no higher than my knees, and I could see in one terrified glance that I was the only person in the whole wide field.

Behind me, I heard shouting. Looking back, I saw that a second car had pulled off the road beside ours: an open-topped, shiny black antique. This was the car I'd noticed earlier coming along the road from the other direction. My mother had got out and was now in agitated conversation with a bearded man in a suit, a woman wearing a floppy hat, and two girls.

My mother called me. With a feeling of heavy dread in my stomach, I went back to the car. Heather was still in the back seat, oblivious to the drama. Seeing me approach, she pressed her face to the window, flattening her nose and distorting her face into a leering, piggy grin. I was too bewildered to respond.

'Where's your father, Ian?'

I shook my head and closed my eyes, hoping I would wake up. My mother caught hold of my arms and shook me slightly. 'What happened? Where did he go? Ian, you

must know! What did you see? Did he say anything? You were with him!'

'I was following right behind him, then he wasn't there,' I said flatly.

'Yes!' The cry came from the woman in the old-fashioned car. She nodded eagerly. 'That's exactly what happened! He just *winked* out of existence.' She snapped her fingers in emphasis.

'I was watching the road, of course,' said the man, sounding apologetic. I had the feeling he'd said this before. He cleared his throat. 'So I didn't exactly see what happened. But I had noticed two figures in the field, a man and a boy, and when I looked again – just after Emma here cried out – there was just the boy.'

My mother's face settled into an aloof, stubborn expression I had seen before when one of us kids, or my father, was being difficult. It meant that she wasn't going to waste time on argument.

'Take me to him, Ian,' she said. 'Show me *exactly* where he was when you lost sight of him.'

I did what she said, although I already knew it was hopeless.

We searched that whole field, over and over again, at first quietly, then, in increasing desperation, calling loudly for 'Daddy!' and 'Joe!' The people in the other car, the only other witnesses to what had happened, stayed with us to help.

Finally, when it began to get dark, we gave up, driving to the nearest town to report my father missing. Here

again the people in the old-fashioned car were helpful: the man was a judge called Arnold Peck, his wife was a Sunday school teacher, both of them well-respected pillars of the local community – even their two solemn, pretty little girls had a reputation for honesty – and so the impossible tale of my father's disappearance was treated seriously. Search parties were organised, with dogs; a geologist was summoned from the university in Madison to advise on the possibility of hidden underground caves or sinkholes beneath the ordinary-looking ground.

But no trace of my father, or what might have become of him, could be found.

It's strange, after all these years, how vividly I still recall the events of that day: the heat of the sun on the back of my neck as I plodded around that desolate field; the smell of earth and crushed grass; the low buzz of insects; the particular shape and hue of the little yellow flower that my father stopped and picked before he started his endless journey; the despairing sound of my mother's voice calling his name.

What's really strange about it is that none of it actually happened.

My father *did* disappear – but not like that.

My 'memory' came from a book about great unsolved mysteries, which I'd been given as a present for my ninth birthday, just a few months before my father vanished. One of the stories in the book was about David Lang, a farmer from Gallatin, Tennessee, who disappeared while crossing a field near his house in full view of his entire

family and two visiting neighbours one bright sunny day in 1880.

How long I believed I'd seen the very same thing happen to my father, I don't know. At least I seem to have had the good sense not to talk about it to anyone, and eventually the fantasy fell away like a scab from an old cut.

But there's another twist in this tale of unreliable memory.

More than twenty years later, when I'd gone about as deeply into the subject of mysterious disappearances as it is possible to go, I discovered that the story of David Lang's disappearance was a complete fiction, probably inspired by a short story by Ambrose Bierce, but certainly with absolutely no basis in fact. It first saw light as a magazine article in 1953, and was picked up and retold in dozens of other places. Although later researchers conclusively proved that there never was a farmer named David Lang in Gallatin, and that everything about him and his mysterious disappearance was made up out of whole cloth, the story still survives, floating around on the internet, popping up in books dedicated to the unexplained, while other, genuine, disappearances are forgotten.

Although David Lang did not exist, real people vanish every day.

Let me tell you about some of them.