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A Place Called Here

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Extract

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1

Jenny-May Butler, the little girl who lived across the road from me, went missing when I was a child.

The Gardaí launched an investigation, which led to their lengthy public search for her. For months every night the story was on the news, every day it was on the front pages of the papers, everywhere it was discussed in every conversation. The entire country pitched in to help; it was the biggest search for a missing person I, at ten years of age, had ever seen, and it seemed to affect everyone.

Jenny-May Butler was a blonde-haired, blue-eyed beauty, who smiled and beamed from the TV screen into the living room of every home around the country, causing eyes to fill with tears and parents to hug their children that extra bit tighter before they sent them off to bed. She was in everyone's dreams and everyone's prayers.

She too was ten years old, and in my class at school. I used to stare at the pretty photograph of her on the news every day and listen to the reporters speak about her as though she was an angel. From the way they described her, you never would have known that she threw stones at Fiona Brady during yard time when the teacher wasn't looking, or that she called me a 'frizzy-haired cow' in front of Stephen Spencer just so he would

fancy her instead of me. No, for those few months she had become the perfect being and I didn't think it fair to ruin that. After a while even I forgot about all the bad things she'd done because she wasn't just Jenny-May any more: she was Jenny-May Butler, the sweet missing girl from the nice family who cried on the nine o'clock news every night.

She was never found – not her body, not a trace of her; it was as though she had disappeared into thin air. No suspicious characters had been seen lurking around, no CCTV was available to show her last movements. There were no witnesses, no suspects; the Gardaí had questioned everyone possible. The street became suspicious, its inhabitants calling friendly hellos to one another on the way to their cars in the early morning but all the time wondering, second-guessing, and visualising surprisingly distorted thoughts they couldn't help about their neighbours. Washing cars, painting picket fences, weeding the flowerbeds, and mowing lawns on Saturday mornings while surreptitiously looking around the neighbourhood brought shameful thoughts. People were shocked at themselves, angry that this incident had perverted their minds.

Pointed fingers behind closed doors couldn't give the Gardaí any leads; they had absolutely nothing to go on but a pretty picture.

I always wondered where Jenny-May went, where she had disappeared to, how on earth anyone could just vanish into thin air without a trace without *someone* knowing *something*.

At night I would look out my bedroom window and stare at her house. The porch light was always on, acting as a beacon to guide Jenny-May home. Mrs Butler couldn't sleep any more, and I could see her perpetually perched on the edge of her couch, as though she was on her marks waiting for the pistol to be fired. She would sit in her living room, looking out the window, waiting for someone to call by with news. Sometimes I would wave at her and she'd wave back sadly. Most of the time she couldn't see past her tears.

Like Mrs Butler, I wasn't happy with not having any answers. I liked Jenny-May Butler a lot more when she was gone than when she was here and that also interested me. I missed her, the *idea* of her, and wondered if she was somewhere nearby, throwing stones at someone else and laughing loudly, but that we just couldn't find her or hear her. I took to searching thoroughly for everything I mislaid after that. When my favourite pair of socks went missing I turned the house upside down while my worried parents looked on, not knowing what to do but eventually settling on helping me.

It disturbed me that frequently my missing possessions were nowhere to be found and on the odd time that I did find them, it disturbed me that, in the case of the socks, I could only ever find one. Then I'd picture Jenny-May Butler somewhere, throwing stones, laughing and wearing my favourite socks.

I never wanted anything new; from the age of ten, I was convinced that you couldn't replace what was lost. I insisted on things having to be found.

I think I wondered about all those odd pairs of socks as much as Mrs Butler worried about her daughter. I too stayed awake at night, running through all the unanswerable questions. Each time my lids grew heavy and neared closing, another question would be flung from the depths of my mind, forcing my lids to open again. Much-needed sleep was kept at bay and each morning I was more tired yet none the wiser.

Perhaps this is why it happened to me. Perhaps because I had spent so many years turning my own life upside down and looking for everything, I had forgotten to look for myself. Somewhere along the line I had forgotten to figure out who and where I was.

Twenty-four years after Jenny-May Butler disappeared, I went missing too.

This is my story.

2

My life has been made up of a great many ironies. My going missing only added to an already very long list.

First, I'm six foot one. Ever since I was a child I've been towering over just about everyone. I could never get lost in a shopping centre like other kids; I could never hide properly when playing games; I was never asked to dance at discos; I was the only teenager that wasn't aching to buy her first pair of high heels. Jenny-May Butler's favourite name for me – well, certainly one of her top ten – was 'daddy-longlegs' which she liked to call me in front of large crowds of her friends and admirers. Believe me, I've heard them all. I was the kind of person you could see coming from a mile away: I was the awkward dancer on the dance floor, the girl at the cinema that nobody wanted to sit behind, the one in the shop that rooted for the extra-long-legged trousers, the girl in the back line of every photograph. You see, I stick out like a sore thumb. Everyone who passes me, registers me and remembers me. But despite all that, I went missing. Never mind the odd socks, never mind Jenny-May Butler; how a throbbing sore thumb on a hand so bland couldn't be seen was the ultimate icing on the cake. The mystery that beat all mysteries was my own.

The second irony is that my job was to search for missing persons. For years I worked as a garda. With a desire to work solely on missing persons cases, but without working in an actual division assigned to these, I had to rest solely upon the 'luck' of coming across these cases. You see, the Jenny-May Butler situation really sparked off something inside me. I wanted answers, I wanted solutions and I wanted to find them all myself. I suppose my searching became an obsession. I looked around the outside world for so many clues I don't think that I once thought about what was going on inside my own head.

In the Guards sometimes we found missing people in a state I won't ever forget for the rest of this life and far into the next, and then there were the people who just didn't want to be found. Often we uncovered only a trace, too often not even that. Those were the moments that drove me to keep looking far beyond my call of duty. I would investigate cases long after they were closed, stay in touch with families long after I should. I realised I couldn't go on to the next case without solving the previous, with the result that there was too much paperwork and too little action. And so knowing that my heart lay only in finding the missing, I left the Gardaí and I searched in my own time.

You wouldn't believe how many people out there wanted to search as much as I did. The families always wondered what my reason was. They had a reason, a link, a love for the missing, whereas my fees were barely enough for me to get by on, so if it wasn't monetary, what was my motivation? Peace of mind, I suppose. A way to help me close my eyes and sleep at night.

How can someone like me, with my physical attributes and my mental attitude, go missing?

I've just realised that I haven't even told you my name. It's Sandy Shortt. It's OK, you can laugh. I know you want to. I would too if it wasn't so bloody heartbreaking. My parents

called me Sandy because I was born with a head of sandy-coloured hair. Pity they didn't foresee that my hair would turn as black as coal. They didn't know either that those cute podgy little legs would soon stop kicking and start growing at such a fast rate, for so long. So Sandy Shortt is my name. That is who I am supposed to be, how I am identified and recorded for all time, but I am neither of those things. The contradiction often makes people laugh during introductions. Pardon me if I fail to crack a smile. You see, there's nothing funny about being missing and I realised there's nothing very different about being missing: every day I do the same as I did when I was working. I search. Only this time I search for a way back to be found.

I have learned one thing worth mentioning. There is one huge difference in my life from before, one vital piece of evidence. For once in my life I want to go home.

What bad timing to realise such a thing. The biggest irony of all.

3

I was born and reared in County Leitrim in Ireland, the smallest county in the country with a population of about 25,000. Once the county town, Leitrim has the remains of a castle and some other ancient buildings, but it has lost its former importance and dwindled to a village. The landscape ranges from bushy brown hills to majestic mountains with yawning valleys and countless picturesque lakes. Leitrim is landlocked, bounded to the west by Sligo and Roscommon, to the south by Roscommon and Longford, to the east by Cavan and Fermanagh, and to the north by Donegal. When there, I feel it brings on a sudden feeling of claustrophobia and an overwhelming desire for solid ground.

There's a saying about Leitrim and that is that the best thing to come out of Leitrim is the road to Dublin. I finished school when I was seventeen, applied for the Guards and I eventually got myself on that road to Dublin. Since then I have rarely travelled back. Once every two months I used to visit my parents in the three-bedroom terraced house in a small cul-de-sac of twelve houses where I grew up. The usual intention was to stay for the weekend but most of the time I only lasted a day, using an emergency at work as the excuse to grab my unpacked bag by the door and

drive, drive, drive very fast on the best thing to come out of Leitrim.

I didn't have a bad relationship with my parents. They were always so supportive, even ready to dive in front of bullets, into fires and off mountains if it meant my happiness. The truth is they made me uneasy. In their eyes I could see who they saw and I didn't like it. I saw my reflection in their expressions more than in any mirror. Some people have the power to do that, to look at you and their faces let you know exactly how you're behaving. I suppose it was because they loved me, but I couldn't spend too much time with people who loved me because of those eyes, because of that reflection.

Ever since I was ten they had tiptoed around me, watched me warily. They had pretend conversations and false laughs that echoed around the house. They would try to distract me, create an ease and normality in the atmosphere, but I knew that they were doing it and why, and it only made me aware that something was wrong.

They were so supportive, they loved me so much and each time the house was about to be turned upside down for yet another gruelling search they never gave in without a pleasant fight. Milk and cookies at the kitchen table, the radio on in the background and the washing machine going, all to break the uncomfortable silence that would inevitably ensue.

Mum would give me that smile, that smile that didn't reach her eyes, the smile that made her back teeth clench and grind when she thought I wasn't looking. With forced easiness in her voice and that forced face of happiness, she would cock her head to one side, try not to let me know she was studying me intently and say, 'Why do you want to search the house again, honey?' She always called me 'honey', like she knew as much as I did that I was no more Sandy Shortt than Jenny-May Butler an angel.

No matter how much action and noise had been created

in the kitchen to avoid the uncomfortable silence, it didn't seem to work. The silence drowned it all out.

My answer: 'Because I can't find it, Mum.'

'What pair are they?' – the easy smile, the pretence that this was a casual conversation and not a desperate attempt at interrogation to find out how my mind worked.

'My blue ones with the white stripes,' I answered on one typical occasion. I insisted on bright coloured socks, bright and identifiable so that they could be easily found.

'Well, maybe you didn't put both of them in the linen basket, honey. Maybe the one you're looking for is somewhere in your room.' A smile, trying not to fidget, swallow hard.

I shook my head. 'I put them both in the basket, I saw you put them both in the machine and only one came back out. It's not in the machine and it's not in the basket.'

The plan to have the washing machine switched on as a distraction backfired and was then the focus of attention. My mum tried not to struggle with losing that placid smile as she glanced at the overturned basket on the kitchen floor, all her folded clothes scattered and rolled in messy piles. For one second she let the façade drop. I could have missed it with a blink but I didn't. I saw the look on her face when she glanced down. It was fear. Not for the missing sock, but for me. She quickly plastered the smile on again, shrugging like it was all no big deal.

'Perhaps it blew away in the wind. I had the patio door open.'

I shook my head.

'Or it could have fallen out of the basket when I carried it over from there to there.'

I shook my head again.

She swallowed and her smile tightened. 'Maybe it's caught up in the sheets. Those sheets are so big; you'd never see a little sock hidden in there.'

'I already checked.'

She took a cookie from the centre of the table and bit down hard, anything to take the smile off her aching face. She chewed for a while, pretending not to be thinking, pretending to listen to the radio and humming the tune of a song she didn't even know. All to fool me into thinking there was nothing to be worried about.

'Honey,' she smiled, 'sometimes things just get lost.'

'Where do they go when they're lost?'

'They don't *go* anywhere,' she smiled. 'They are always in the place we dropped them or left them behind. We're just not looking in the right area when we can't find them.'

'But I've looked in *all* the places, Mum. I *always* do.'

I had, I always did. I turned everything upside down; there was no place in the small house that ever went untouched.

'A sock can't just get up and walk away without a foot in it,' Mum false-laughed.

You see, just like how Mum gave up right there, that's the point when most people stop wondering, when most people stop caring. You can't find something, you know it's somewhere and even though you've looked *everywhere* there's still no sign. So you put it down to your own madness, blame yourself for losing it and eventually forget about it. I couldn't do that.

I remember my dad returning from work that evening to a house that had been literally turned upside down.

'Lose something, honey?'

'My blue sock with the white stripes,' came my muffled reply from under the couch.

'Just the one again?'

I nodded.

'Left foot or right foot?'

'Left.'

'OK, I'll look upstairs.' He hung his coat on the rack by the door, placed his umbrella in the stand, gave his flustered

wife a tender kiss on the cheek and an encouraging rub on the back and then made his way upstairs. For two hours he stayed in my parents' room, looking, but I couldn't hear him moving around. One peep through the keyhole revealed a man lying on his back on the bed with a face cloth over his eyes.

On my visits in later years they would ask the same easy-going questions that were never intended to be intrusive, but to someone who was already armoured up to her eyeballs they felt as such.

'Any interesting cases at work?'

'What's going on in Dublin?'

'How's the apartment?'

'Any boyfriends?'

There were never any boyfriends; I didn't want another pair of eyes as telling as my parents' haunting me day in and day out. I'd had lovers and fighters, boyfriends, men-friends and one-night-only friends. I'd tried enough to know that anything long term wasn't going to work. I couldn't be intimate; I couldn't care enough, give enough or want enough. I had no desire for what these men offered, they had no understanding of what I wanted, so tight smiles all round while I told my parents that work was fine, Dublin was busy, the apartment was great and no, no boyfriends.

Every single time I left the house, even the times when I cut my visits short, Dad would announce proudly that I was the best thing to come out of Leitrim.

The fault never lay with Leitrim, nor did it with my parents. They were so supportive, and I only realise it now. I'm finding that with every passing day, that realisation is so much more frustrating than never finding anything.