

CHAPTER FIVE: THROUGH THE CRACKS (THE FORGOTTEN)



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I gotta go, guys!" Bobby says, waving as he runs. His friends, oblivious, keep playing ball. The game was dragging on anyways and the way Bobby sees it, his time is better spent doing other things. He just got a new game for his GameStation 3 and is already almost done with it. He hopes he can play some more tonight before bed.

Bobby picks up a stick from the back of the church. It's big, almost as tall as he is, and weighs about as much as a baseball bat.

He bounces it off the cold ground, once, twice. He beats out a rhythm as he walks.

"Excuse me, young man," someone says. Bobby turns around to see a man in a car. The driver has a map in his hand and a confused look on his face. "Can you tell me which way is Overland Street?"

Bobby points down the road. "Two blocks that way."

The driver waves a polite thank-you and drives off. The entire subdivision is like a maze. Folks get lost in it all the time what with Park Street and Lark Street, Vine and Pine, Elm and Maple and Oak and Redwood. Why did people name streets after trees?

Bobby turns a right down Vine, crosses two lawns and goes up five steps to the familiar red door. He sets the branch against the wrought iron banister and kicks the dirt of his shoes. The ground is getting hard now but it's become habit for the boy after weeks of late summer mud.

He opens the screen door and pinches the latch, pushing on it. The door doesn't budge. Bobby reaches into his pocket for the key but comes up with a nickel and some lint. No way was he walking back to Park Street to hunt for some dumb old key.

He knocks on the door. Two good thumps.

Again.

He hears his mom inside. He hopes she's making dessert. He peers through the glass. She's sitting at the table, book in hand.

"Mom!" The boy yells, pounding harder on the door.

The woman inside looks up.

About time, the boy thinks.

The woman sets the book on the table, open face down, and crosses the living room to the door. She pulls back the sheer white curtain and looks right at Bobby. She looks to the left and then the right. Bobby waves his hand.

"Hello! Mom! Hello! Open the door!"

The woman lets go of the curtain, careful to set it properly in its place. She walks back to the kitchen table, picking up where she left off.

Bobby stands outside, dumbfounded.

"Man, what is up with her?"

The Forgotten

Another way children become missing is to be forgotten. Not just by their parents, though that's part of it, but by everybody and everything. A forgotten child has slipped out of their old lives (and sometimes our reality) and life becomes as though the child had no life prior to now. There's no record of him being born, registering at a school or with the Nature Scouts, no medical history or record of him ever taking piano lessons.

The only shred of memory is in the minds and hearts of the child's friends. And even that may be sketchy, more along the line of "Hey, didn't there used to be a kid in that house?" and "Was there a kid who played third base before Mitchell did?" A nagging

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question that could be picked at and expanded if there was reason to but, as it sits right now, it's just a thought in the back of the friend's mind that's hard to put a finger on.

Younger children have an easier time remembering, especially if they were close to the forgotten kid, say a neighbor, best friend, or even a sibling. Middle-aged kids, from 8 to 11, have a harder time, so much so that they may deny remembering even if they do have a small flickering memory. Older kids will likely dismiss the idea out of hand, claiming the kid who does remember is "full of it" or "talking nonsense" even if the forgotten kid is standing in front of them. "Never seen her before."

Obviously, adults have a really hard time remembering. The best chance is if the forgotten kid was their child, nephew, niece, or someone they taught or watched during the day, someone with whom adult had regular contact with.

Some adults manage to catch glimpses of forgotten children. These brushes with the in-between can manifest as a shadow on the side of the road, the echo of a child laughing at the playground, a brief glimpse a familiar-or-is-it face at the supermarket or the park. No matter how the child appears, his presence is only temporary. A second glance will show nothing but a road sign, a merry-go-round spinning in the wind, a stack of discount laundry detergent, or the burnt stump of an old tree. To those within the real world, the forgotten children are whispers in the wind, passing ideas, a persistent maybe or maybe not that has yet to be answered.

When a child is forgotten, he has two options. He can accept that he's been forgotten (sometimes to great relief) and live on either in the real world, the in-between as a sorta-ghost, or in Closetland, among other kids who live there. Or he can refuse it and fight to be remembered again. If he takes the second option, he'll likely need some help from a few stalwart PCs.

PART ONE: HOW IT HAPPENS

The world doesn't make a habit of forgetting the folks who live in it; it takes a significant event, a strong catalyst, in order for a child to slip bodily from the firm footing of reality into the in-between non-world that buffers our world from Closetland. We will get into the reasons behind disappearances next but first let's look at how it happens.

Quick, Like a Bandage

One moment the kid's there. The next he isn't. Just like that, a living, breathing, honest-to-goodness real-live human boy that saw six, maybe nine, maybe twelve years in this world is unplugged, yanked into the in-between as if he was never born. This type of forgotten child is the rarest and the strangest. No one knows what causes such a sudden (and sometimes violent-feeling) disappearance but the worst part is the kid still has a good memory of things. The world shut him out right-quick but he still has memories. And he'll need to fight to keep them if he ever wants back into our world.

Fading Memory

It starts with the family forgetting his name or overlooking him at family functions. "Oh, I didn't see you there" becomes a common phrase, as does "Hey, where did you come from?" Over time, it gets harder to remember the child's name but the parents cover it up because he looks familiar. The face, the face is familiar. Maybe he's a friend of one of their other kids? They keep this internalized, trying to never let on, until the blank stares start to linger and the name doesn't come anymore.

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Vanishing Act

The child starts to physically fade away, becoming transparent so that other people can't see him or can't notice he's there. He becomes like a ghost, fuzzing into view takes effort. The child feels this; he feels something is wrong. He starts to lose connections with people and places that new and then the older and stronger ties break. He doesn't remember his sister. And his sister doesn't remember him. He disappears from photographs with no trace he was ever in them. Over time, could be days or could be weeks or more, traces of the child's existence strip away one by one until the child is just a memory. Or worse, not a memory. The kid becomes nothing at all.

Time Jump

Some kids transition from one reality to another, a shift in space, if you will. But other shift in another way; they shift through time. This could be months or years or decades ahead—or behind. One moment, they're celebrating the first day of summer vacation and the next they're standing in a foot of snow. All the other effects happen as well: Folks don't remember them, paperwork and trophies are suddenly missing, et cetera but they are not only no longer in our world, they jumped forward or backward in time. Usually, you can count them jumped span in weeks but sometimes years or decades pass. A kid who was bragging about his sweet new portable cassette player one moment finds himself standing in front of a kid with the latest generation mp3pod the next.

PART TWO: WHY IT HAPPENS

Whether the child slowly fades from view is seems to vanish in thin air, there is always a reason. Unlike some of the other ways kids go missing, there isn't necessarily a motive. Kids aren't forgotten as punishment or to protect them; whatever intention there may be, it isn't usually that obvious. That doesn't mean the reasons don't hurt just as much if not more. Intentional or not, sudden or not, there is a why. Let's look at some of those below.

Because There is no Love

Children who do not have enough love to keep them rooted here can simply slip away from the world, becoming absorbed into Closetland as a consequence. Not to be overly sentimental, we are talking about severe negligence on the part of the parent or guardian. Children who are left to their own devices for long stretches while daddy bounces between work and the bar, or the mom takes off for three weeks to join her boyfriend halfway round the world while her kids are locked away in an apartment with instruction to "be good" and "don't answer the door for anybody but me." These are the children at risk.

Family, blood or bond, is what connects us to the world. When that doesn't exist, there isn't much to keep us here. Being forgotten isn't the fate of every neglected child but it's a risk some run, and others succumb to.

Chemical Eraser

As a corollary to the above, the neglect may not be physical but chemical. Meaning: isn't that the parent is away from the kid, working or partying or whatever, but is so insanely out of her head 24/7 that the child isn't so much as an afterthought. We've talked about other side effects of addiction in previous chapters and we can chalk this up to yet another.

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Side Effect of Grief

Say there are these parents, a mom and dad or a mom and mom or a dad and dad, and they have two lovely, bright, healthy children. Then there's an accident. Doesn't have to be anyone's fault. Could be the car hit an ice patch or no one saw the light change. And one of the children dies. The parents fall into depression, a sadness so deep and dark and exhausting, that they fail to recognize the child left behind and can only focus on the child that was taken from them.

Or say there is another set of parents. They have a kid too, maybe more than one. But the parents are unhappy. One of them is cheating, thinking of leaving the other. The other knows this and feels paralyzed, completely helpless, and is consumed by despair and coming loss that the child who needs love and attention can't be seen through the pain.

Either of these situations, and others, can result in a withdrawal of love so intense, rooted in pain that runs so deep, the child fades like an old photograph in the background.

