

## **Gone Missing**

by Mark Cyzyk

Long ago, a high school classmate of mine disappeared.

There was no reason to believe he had run away or committed suicide. No apparent connection with illegal activities. He just disappeared.

As the years passed, our County Police came to investigate his disappearance as a homicide. They had a suspect but not much evidence, nor did they have a body.

They did not find the body for eight years.

I've often thought, then and now, how excruciating those eight years must have been for my classmate's parents. Your son has disappeared from your lives. There is no body to indicate that he's dead. He's simply gone missing. The terrible abyss of loss yawns open, right to the tips of your toes. And this is something you stare into, day after day after day.

In his late forties, my brother-in-law Dave started to go blind, as had his father before him. Knowing what to expect, he enrolled in a special school in Colorado where he would learn how to be blind.

If my brother-in-law were to be cast in a Shakespearean play, he would be billed as the Genial Rustic. His unkempt hair and beard perfectly framed his persistently smiling, knowing eyes and impish grin. Under his halo of good humor, he was super-smart, genuinely gregarious, a master carpenter, with rockstar skilz on the guitar, and was one of the coolest guys I've ever known.

I cannot imagine him ever being angry, and while I know going blind must have depressed him, he did not wallow. He headed West to prepare for living without light.

Reports from school in Colorado were that he was every bit the character there that he was here. And every bit as beloved too. He was apparently one of the older students in class and had a sort of fatherly presence there.

On a mid-December day when the sun had barely risen, Dave met two friends outside his apartment at the bus stop. Three classmates huddled in the cold sunrise.

The driver turned the corner at the bus stop. Black tires on black ice. She panicked as the SUV hurtled toward them.

Freeze frame: How fragile goodness is, so reliant on luck. How often is human agency impotent? In that instant, no intention, no effort, nothing she did could have altered the inexorable centrifugal force of physics. In that instant, she was captive of a merciless momentum. Metal and motion.

The two survivors reported that Dave shoved them both out of the way, just in time. He died a hero.

That's Dave.

My childhood best friend was the youngest of a large family, one of the few African-American families in our rural school district.

On the way to register for kindergarten, my mom saw my soon-to-be-best-friend and his mother walking across the open fields to do the same. My mom picked them up and drove them there and back. And so our friendship began.

Somewhere there are pictures of us playing on the front lawn. We were like two puppies. My mom deposited us there and we commenced to scramble and play in the country sunshine.

We became like brothers. As our school years passed, we never lost that connection. I think of him as a brother to this day.

But sometimes brothers take radically different paths.

Through the early part of high school, my friend had an ambition and a plan: He intended to go to university on a full wrestling scholarship and ultimately become a veterinarian. He was smart, had good grades in our high school academic program, was one of the top wrestlers on our high school team, and his interest in becoming a veterinarian was no doubt because his father was a trainer of race horses. He grew up feeding and caring for the various animals on their small farm.

But in late high school, he dropped out of the academic program, went on work-study, and as far as I can tell, started doing drugs.

I only saw him twice after high school graduation.

He moved to the city, was in trouble with the law, was imprisoned.

Decades later, my brother informed me: “Did you hear that Andre was stabbed to death?”

I looked up the mention in the police blotter. To some I’m sure he was just another Black man bleeding out on the unforgiving streets of Baltimore. To me he was a long-lost brother.

I remember wailing with grief. There are times when sounds of anguish erupt from deep inside and you surprise yourself. You did not think yourself capable of making such sounds.

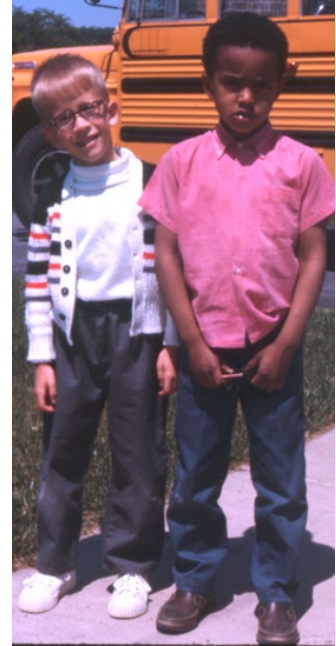
I always thought I would see him again.

Twenty-one years ago, I endured a surprise and vicious divorce.

It broke me.

I was able to muster enough strength to demand joint custody of our three-year-old daughter. This was granted, more out of the convenience for her mother than the fact that I fought for it. I remember asking to adjust the schedule and being told no, “Not so you can have more time to play Daddy.” I eventually got an additional half-hour, every two weeks.

I spent the next fifteen years raising my daughter, as I had her first three years, driving her across the county to school for nine of those years, doing everything a single parent does: Making breakfast, dinner, packing lunches, bathing, going clothes shopping, braiding her hair, reading every night, seeing that she was smartly dressed and had appropriate gifts to bring to all those birthday parties, helping with homework, attending parent-teacher conferences, orchestra and chorus performances, encouraging her to attend Social Friday Nights at the middle school, driving her to camp in the summers, making sure her mom got a nice present from her for her birthday, for Christmas, for Mother’s Day. We chilled out with pre-sleep music: Pink Floyd, Nick Drake, Genesis, Over



*Mark and Andre, 1969*

The Rhine, sang along at the top of our lungs with Aladdin's "A Whole New World" in the car on the way to school, dried tears in the theater watching "The Fault In Our Stars." I taught her how to tie her shoes, how to ride a bike, how to drive, how to cook. All the other joys of parenthood.

We were close. When I decided to remarry, she was the first person I told, and it was our secret for the few weeks before I actually proposed. After school, we would take Walk-n-Talks around the neighborhood. During the era of video stores, on a Friday evening we'd walk down to pick out two videos for the weekend and bring home Chinese takeout, chit-chatting all the way and back.

I remember, around the time it was to be expected that she would be getting her first period, we were in a store walking past the Feminine Products section.

"Is there something we may or may not yet need to buy for something that may or may not yet be happening now or in the near future—or not?"

Her wry grin always let me know I had gotten through.

"*Dad*, I will tell you when it's needed!" (Which she did.)

"Good talk, Dad. Good talk."

She was a total and utter joy, not just for me, but also for her many friends, her teachers, and as the only grandchild, for her extended family. Smart, witty, beautiful, charming, shy but often the center of attention in her diverse circles of friends, deeply thoughtful, kind, content.

In middle school she had a boyfriend. I remember going to pick him up so they could have a formal date at a local restaurant. They were the cutest. His parents and I made them pose for pictures, then we dutifully faded away for the evening.

But like my childhood friend, in high school her path took a sharp turn.

Just before her junior year something horrible happened. It's not clear what. As the months, then years passed, it's not something she confided to me, to her mother, to her teachers or school counselors, therapists, or psychiatrists. I know this because four years later she confided in a single person, my mother, her paternal grandmother, then swore her to secrecy. That secret has been kept.

That surreptitious divulgence was the last time anyone on my side of her family had contact with her.

To back up, as she entered her high school junior year, it was clear that something was wrong. And so began the weeks and months of therapist and psychiatrist appointments culminating in a leave of absence from school and enrollment in an outpatient treatment program at a local psychiatric hospital. There is nothing quite like the feeling of dropping your precious little one off at the mental hospital.

None of these measures had an effect.

Thus began the harrowing year and a half of home school and suicide watch. The County sent a harried teacher out to the house. The goal now was just to get my daughter through school. But even with pared down requirements, she was consistently failing. Some days the teacher would arrive but my daughter would not get out of bed. I'd call in to work—another day on suicide watch.

After a year and a half of this, she did end up graduating from high school, barely. I remember purchasing her maroon regalia but seeing only pictures of her in it from the graduation celebration at her mother's house.

A week of vacation with me followed. It was clear, though, she wanted no part of it. I cut vacation short, we had our first major argument, and I dropped her off at her mother's house for chill down. It was the first time I can recall being angry with her.

She was a week short of turning eighteen.

Ever since, she's gone missing.

For years thereafter, until the death of her grandfather, neglected and heartbroken over her loss, I texted or emailed her on a daily basis. No response.

It's been seven years without her. For the first few, I tried not to think about her disappearance too much for fear I would go insane. Here, at seven years, it's become the new normal. I often wonder if I'd even recognize her now. I often see young women her age strolling around our small city. I look and look and wonder if one of them is my daughter.

It is a horrible thing to think of your own child as a stranger.

These four vignettes are in chronological order, told by date of disappearance. They are also in order, from least to most, of how large a role each person played on the stage of my life. Looking back, the disappearance of my high school classmate was an

ominous portent of things to come. That my brother-in-law and childhood best friend died so suddenly and violently has forced me to dispense with any naive notions I may have had about cosmic justice.

That my daughter has gone missing for so long through her own volition has unmade my world. Now the world seems unreal, hostile, unreliable, undesirable, not to be trusted. The estrangement from her has opened my aged eyes, only to see the intrinsic ugliness of the world.

I always thought I'd see my childhood best friend again; I fully expect to never see my daughter again. I'm not even sure I want to.

The first half of life is about fullness—fullness of friendships, fullness of potential, fullness of romance, fullness of family. The second half is about emptiness—the void left by the death of grandparents, of parents, in-laws, aunts and uncles, of dear friends, the demise of marriages, the wake of emptiness after the children are gone. Maturity consists, in part, in coming to terms with this emptiness. Maturity consists, in part, by carrying on despite being haunted by all that has passed.

Suddenly, or so it seems, we are alone, surrounded by ghosts.

**Mark Cyzyk** writes from Maryland, USA. He turned sixty-one in May.