

The Missing Person

By Jennifer Finney Boylan

That was the summer I gave up on being a boy, and became a girl instead. Most people didn't notice the difference, because it wasn't a matter of what I wore, or even how I acted. But something changed in my heart that year, and never changed back.

I didn't know the word transgendered back then, and even after I learned the word it would be years and years before I could say it out loud. But the summer between eighth and ninth grades I knew that somehow I had left the world of boys for good, and began slowly, blindly, feeling my way toward the world of women.

We'd moved that June into a house in Devon, Pennsylvania, a town famous for its weeklong horse show and country fair. For the last week of May and the first week of June, Devon was filled with men and women wearing jodhpurs and carrying riding crops, open jumpers, hunters, and the Budweiser Clydesdales. Women in long dresses sat in the backs of antique horse-drawn carriages, and as I stood in the front yard of our house, I watched as they rolled down the street away from me and waved good-bye.

People said our house was haunted, that a girl who had drowned in the 1920s floated through the hallways, or paced around and around in the attic. The bedroom that I was sleeping in had been hers, a long time ago.

In the summertime I kept all of the windows open in my room, and sometimes late at night I'd hear, on the street outside, the sound of a single rider approaching, the hooves clopping ominously as the horse drew nearer and nearer.

Other times, I heard - or imagined that I could hear - the sound of small footsteps going around and around in a circle on the floor of the attic over my head.

My dog, Sausage - a fat, demented Dalmatian - raised her head and listened to the footsteps and growled. *You know who that is, Sausage?* I said to the dog. *That's somebody who isn't really there.* The dog nodded. Sausage had a pretty good sense of what the deal was. *Somebody who isn't really there? The dog said. You mean - someone like you?*

That was the same summer that some friends of my parents - the Reynoldses - welcomed an exchange student named Li Fung into their house. Li Fung came from Taiwan and had come to America in order to study English.

She'd been at the Reynoldses house for only a few days, though, when she suddenly disappeared. She'd gone up to her room before dinner one night, locked the door, and vanished.

When the Reynoldses called her down for dinner, there was no response, and with a sense of rising panic, they banged on her door. Mr. Reynolds eventually kicked the door open with his foot, sending the dead-bolt skittering across the room.

When they entered Li Fung's bedroom, they found her shoes placed neatly together at the foot of her bed. Her window - like me, she lived on the third floor of an old, supposedly haunted house - was closed. The closet door, which held the very few

Jenny Finney Boylan, 'The Missing Person' in *How Beautiful the Ordinary*, ed. by Michael Cart (New York: Harper Teen, 2009) pp.154-173.

articles of clothing Li Fung had brought with her from Taiwan, was slightly ajar. On her bed, open and facedown, was a copy of a book called *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*.

The police were called in, including a pair of detectives who checked the room for signs of forced entry. There were none. No one had propped a ladder up and climbed to the third floor and hauled her off no one had tampered with the lock. Li Fung had simply gone up to her room and turned to steam.

Sometimes I considered the mystery of Li Fung as I lay in my bed listening to the soft creak of footsteps from the attic or the clomp of horses' hooves on the street. It seemed to me that the secret of the disappearance lay in the open copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* that had been left upon her bed. My theory? She'd fallen into the book.

I knew it was a tragedy and everything; and there was no doubt that the Reynoldses, whom I'd see in the days to come drinking gin in our black living room with my parents, had been fundamentally unraveled by the turn of events. But there was a part of me that was resentful of Li Fung as well, just dissolving into nothing like that. To me it seemed she'd taken the easy way out.

I woke up to hear my mother yelling. I checked my clock. It was after midnight.

"You promised you'd be back by ten," my mother said. "You gave me your word!"

"I'm sorry," said Lydia, my older sister. "I didn't want to worry you."

"I've been worried sick!" said my mother.

"I was fine."

They were standing in the hallway, my mother in her doorway, my sister in hers, having at it. My sister was wearing a hippie skirt. Sometimes, when no one was home, I stole her skirt out of the hamper and wore it while I read a book in my room. But it looked better on her than it did on me.

"You could have been dead somewhere. Killed!"

"Mother, stop being so paranoid!"

"You lied to me!" my mother shouted.

"Can we not talk about this now?" my sister said. "Jesus Christ!"

"Don't use that tone of voice with me!"

"Then stop nagging me!"

"You're grounded, for two weeks!" my mother shouted.

"Go to hell!" Lydia shouted, and slammed her door. For a while I lay there in the dark, wondering what was going to happen to my sister.

In the morning, my mother was sitting at the table by herself, drinking coffee.

"What was all that shouting last night?"

"What shouting?" said my mother.

"You and Lydia," I said. "Going at it like that."

"We were just having a discussion," my mother said. "Lydia disappointed us by staying out too late."

"How come you never give me a curfew?" I asked, which was a fair enough question. My parents never told me I had to be home by a certain time, ever.

"Well, it's different with you," said my mother generously. "You're the boy."

On the last day of the Devon Horse Show, everyone in my family mysteriously left the house. I think my father was at the hardware store, my mother at the hairdresser. I don't know where my sister was. But the only ones home were me and the dog, and the ghost of the girl who wasn't there.

I crept down the third-floor stairs, opened the hamper, and got out the hippie skirt my sister had thrown in the hamper. Then I put on a black Danskin leotard top, applied some pale lipstick, and looked at myself in the mirror. Because of my long hair and small bones, I looked like a fairly normal fourteen-year-old girl.

From outside I heard the sounds of horses' hooves on the street.

Okay, I thought. I'll do it.

Sausage looked at me as I headed for the door, one of my sister's purses hanging from one shoulder. *Are you crazy?* the dog said. *Are you out of your mind?*

I nodded to the dog. *I might be, I said.*

Then I went outside, got on my brown Schwinn, and rode my bike to the Devon Horse Show.

In a plastic lawn chair sat a man in a sleeveless undershirt, drinking lemonade, listening to the Phillies game on a transistor radio. He waved at me as I sped past.

I locked the bike and walked through the carnival gates. Before me was a large oval ring where girls in hard hats rode green hunters. To the right was the ornate Victorian grandstand, filled with men and women in straw bonnets. There was the distant sound of a calliope playing "In the Good Old Summertime," the smell of buttered popcorn. Candy strippers sold lemon sticks. Boys my age walked through the teeming crowds holding foaming lavender bouquets of cotton candy. An announcer on a public address system described the progress of the equestrians. *One jump fault, two time faults. The next exhibitor is Melanie Brown, of Ghost Lantern Farm, in Chadd's Ford, Pennsylvania, riding Homin' Notime. Melanie Brown of Chadd's Ford.*

There was scattered applause from the grandstand. Ladies fanned themselves with their programs.

Overhead, the summer sun shone down on me. It was the first time in my life I had ever felt the sun on my face as a girl. I felt like someone who had been released from jail, like someone who'd spent her whole life in prison only to be unexpectedly paroled, at the age of fourteen, and set loose upon the world.

My heart pounded in my breast. Jesus, I thought as I walked through the unperturbed crowd. Can't they tell?

It didn't appear that they could.

I walked through the midway, where kids were throwing darts at balloons, squirting water guns into the mouths of plastic clowns, hurling baseballs at stacks of milk bottles. From a booth a woman in an Amish habit sold Pennsylvania Dutch funnel cakes. Above me, reaching toward the hot sun, the Ferris wheel spun around and around. The screams of girls rose and fell from the sky.

There was a sign by the Ferris wheel. IF YOU STAND HERE WHILE WHEEL IS TURNING, YOU WILL BE KILLED.

I stood by a large oak tree and watched a woman painting someone's portrait in

pastels. The person she was drawing wasn't there; she was rendering the picture from a photograph. She looked at me and smiled.

"What's your name?" she said kindly.

"Jenny," I said.

I was fourteen years old, and it was the first time in my life I had spoken my name out loud.

"Are you riding in the show, Jenny?"

"No," I said.

"Oh, I could have sworn you were a rider," she said, adding color to the cheeks of the woman in her portrait. "You have that equestrian look, the red cheeks, the pageboy."

"Thank you," I said.

"I have a daughter about your age, the woman said. She wasn't looking at me now, but was focusing her attention, instead, on her work. "She used to ride. Now it's just boys, boys, boys. Do you have a boyfriend, Jenny?"

"No," I said.

She looked over at me. "Are you all right, honey?"

I nodded my head.

"You're not lost, are you?"

I didn't know what to tell her. *Yeah, I'm lost, I guess.*

I turned and ran into the crowd. I wondered, not for the last time, if stealing my sister's clothes and walking around in public had been such a good idea.

I reached the midway. Little kids were riding on the merry-go-round. It had a real steam calliope inside, which played "O Them Golden Slippers." Moms and dads stood at the edge of the railing, waving each time their little children whirled past.

"Be prepared to be amazed," said a voice.

I turned around. A man in a top hat was standing on a box. "Yes, you there, little miss. Gather round and witness these feats of legerdemain, guaranteed to astonish and astound."

Above him was a hand-painted banner that read, THE GREAT SCARAMUZZINO. FEATS OF MYSTERY 50¢.

I reached into my sister's purse and handed him two quarters. He put them in a cigar box on a chair by his side.

There was a guy named Sal Scaramuzzino at my middle school - a hugely fat, kind of mean guy, who lived down in South Philadelphia. At school, Sal was always offering to beat me up, a service that I usually declined. But the Scaramuzzino I knew didn't seem to have much in common with this guy. The Scaramuzzino I knew had no feats of mystery.

"Now watch carefully, little miss," he said as he waved a white silk handkerchief through the air, "as once again we demonstrate" - he stuffed the handkerchief inside his fist - "that the hand is quicker than the eye!" He opened his hand, and the handkerchief had disappeared.

There was applause behind me. The Great Scaramuzzino was drawing a crowd. There were three guys a little older than I was and two girls. The girls were wearing makeup. Their bras were not filled with socks, which is more than we could say about some people.

"And now, little miss," he said, reaching out for me with a hand covered with a white buttoned glove and spinning me by the shoulder, "we spin you once, twice, three times, we spin you, and *presto change-o* –"

He pulled a handkerchief out of my sister's purse.

"The hand is quicker than the eye!" The teenagers applauded again. The Great Scaramuzzino wasn't done yet. He pulled out another handkerchief from my purse, only this one was red, and it was knotted to another, colored green. He started to pull on the hankies, and now a long chain of scarves was emerging from my purse. The magician waved them through the air. Then he stuffed them all inside a black top hat.

The Great Scaramuzzino waved a black wand over the hat, reached in, and pulled out a bouquet of roses. To my total shame, he gave them to me. Everyone applauded.

There was a boy standing next to me who had braces and bad skin. "How do you, like, think he did that?" he said, and his voice broke. I felt sorry for him. I knew how hard it was, talking to girls.

"Now let me present to you the disappearing orb," said the magician. He put what looked like an eggcup on the table before him, and placed an ovoid lid upon it. "*Presto change-o* appears the sphere of mystery." He removed the lid, and a white sphere was there. Then he put the lid back on the eggcup, waved his hands, and removed it again. The sphere was gone.

"And now, pick a card, any card," said the Great Scaramuzzino, and fanned a deck before me. I picked a card with one hand. The other was still holding the bouquet of roses.

"Without showing me the card, look at its face." I looked at it. It was the queen of diamonds. "You can show your friend as well." I showed the card to the boy next to me. He nodded and looked at me, as if the two of us were now linked, somehow, by the fact that we shared a secret.

"Now put it back in the deck," said the Great Scaramuzzino. The crowd watching the magician was growing large now. Grown-ups were watching. I felt sweat beginning to pour down my temples. I put the card in, and the Great Scaramuzzino closed and shuffled the deck.

"My name's Mark," said the boy.

"I'm Jenny," I said.

"Are you, like, here with anyone?"

"No," I said.

"Cool," said Mark, and reached out and took my hand. Mark's palm was sweaty.

"And now," the Great Scaramuzzino said. "Once again we learn. The hand is quicker than the-" He reached out toward me with his buttoned glove. Mark squeezed my hand, then softly slid his fingers up my arm toward the crook of my elbow.

I dropped the bouquet of roses, turned, and ran. Ran past the Ferris wheel and the booth for funnel cakes and the Nether Providence Tack Shop and the press box where some of the characters from *Dark Shadows*, a television show, were handing out autographed pictures of themselves. I ran past the hamburger stand, past the pizza booth and the tree where the lady was still painting portraits in pastels. Two Pennsylvania State cops stood by the blue water barrel with their hands on their holsters. One of them looked at me closely as I sped past.

I ran out the gates and found my bicycle and pedaled for my life, heading up the

hill toward home. From behind me I heard the voice of the announcer commentating the show. All riders reverse now, all reverse.

I got home to find my parents car in the driveway. *They were back.*

I wondered whether it would be better, in the end, to enter the house in my sister's paisley skirt or to enter it naked. This last suggestion I discarded, but who knows? Naked actually had a lot to recommend it, compared to the other option.

My mother, I knew, would be in the kitchen. My father was probably in the basement, looking very carefully at whatever it was he'd bought at the hardware store. Drill bits and a fertilizer spreader. An electric screwdriver.

The whereabouts of my sister, whose clothes I was wearing, were unknown.

I crept around the front of the house and walked across the porch. I peeked in the door. I heard my mother in the kitchen, heard the sound of the television in the family room. I swooped through the front hall and ran up the stairs, two steps at a time, toward my room on the third floor. I got to the bathroom and locked it with a deadbolt.

There was an old wooden cabinet, badly made, in the corner of the bathroom that had a loose board in the bottom. I pulled off the loose board, and put the skirt and the blouse in the secret compartment. There was other stuff already in there. A pair of my mother's earrings. A necklace. A copy of *Seventeen* magazine, a paperback edition of *The Feminine Mystique*, which I had tried to read and did not understand. I put the loose board back in place. Then took a deep breath.

I ran some hot water in the sink and rubbed off the lipstick. I got soap on my lips, rubbed them until they were raw, then dried off with a towel.

I pulled on a pair of blue jeans and a white T-shirt and stuck my hair behind my ears, looked in the mirror. I was a boy again. My eyes filled with tears. *But I don't want this*, I whispered to my reflection. *I want to stay Jenny.*

"Jimm-eeee," my mother called up the stairs. "Are you up there?"

Just a second, I answered in my boy voice.

All right, you, I said to the mirror. *Now you listen up. You're never doing this again, okay?*

I was just about to leave the bathroom when I realized I'd forgotten to put my sister's purse in the hidey-hole. It was lying on its side by the door. I pulled the loose board off the bottom of the cabinet again. Then I dumped the contents of the purse onto the floor.

It contained three dollars, some change, a tube of rose-colored lipstick, and a single playing card. *Hey*, I thought, *this isn't mine*. I picked up the card and looked at it.

Queen of diamonds.

The Great Scaramuzzino had tried to teach me that the hand was quicker than the eye, and I thought, *Okay, maybe so. But then, if you think about it, so what?* As far as I was concerned, the eye was pretty slow.

A few days later, the Reynoldses found Li Fung.

Mrs. Reynolds had been out in her living room, dusting, when she heard a strange, soft weeping sound. At first she thought it was a bird, trapped in the wall, but it didn't sound like a bird. It was a human voice, although the words it was saying were not English. For a few moments, Mrs. Reynolds thought that Li Fung had come back to haunt

her, to blame her for allowing her to vanish like that.

Then she realized that Li Fung was actually in the wall. She called her husband, who came home from work and knocked on the wall. Li Fung knocked back. A few minutes later, he started smashing through the wall with a sledgehammer. The old plaster of the house gave way relatively quickly. A few minutes after that, they had a hole big enough to look through. There was Li Fung, wedged between one of the support beams and some electrical wires. Plaster dust was in her hair, and her skin was black and blue. She could barely open her eyes.

"Why, Li Fung," said Mrs. Reynolds. "What in the world are you doing in the wall?"

After the ambulance came, after the girl was taken off to Bryn Mawr Hospital and treated for lacerations and a broken leg and dehydration, the story slowly came out. Li Fung had been reading *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, and then decided to change her clothes. Li Fung opened her closet door, and then saw something hanging in the back. She had failed to notice that there weren't any floorboards in the back of the closet, just exposed insulation, or perhaps she did not understand that the fluffy, cloudlike material would not support the weight of her body. In any case, she had stepped onto, and then fallen through, the insulation in the back of her closet, which closed up behind her, as she fell, in slow motion, the two stories behind the walls of the Reynoldses' house. She had been knocked out, briefly, and then she came to. When she woke up, it wasn't quite clear where she was. Li Fung, in her weakened condition, had cried out softly from behind the insulation and plaster where she was wedged, but the Reynoldses had not heard her. She'd stayed like that for days and days before Mrs. Reynolds, by accident, heard the soft sounds of distress in a language she did not understand.

After she got out of the hospital, she went back to the Reynoldses as if nothing had happened, although it was true that she had bruises on her face and arms for a while, and she had to spend six weeks in a cast. The Reynoldses friends signed their names on Li Fung's cast, but this didn't cheer her up. Before the school year began, she went back to Taiwan.

Apparently they'd gotten her out of the wall all right. But whenever she slept, Li Fung had nightmares, dreamed that she was once more trapped behind the wall of an old house, where no one could hear her voice.

One night, after the Devon Horse Show was over, after the big vans containing horses and riders and antique carriages had all driven away, my parents sat around the fireplace in their living room, talking about Li Fung. I was playing the piano for my father. He liked it when I played the rags of Scott Joplin. My father sat there smiling and smoking as I played, his whiskey in his hand.

"Can you imagine it?" said my mother.

"Imagine what?"

"That girl at the Reynoldses. All that time, trapped in the walls of your own house and no one even knowing that you're there?"

I played the piano for my parents in their black living room. I didn't say anything, but *Sure*, I thought. *Of course*. I could imagine exactly what that was like.