



"The emotional range and depth of these stories, the clarity and deftness, is astonishing." ALICE MUNRO

vanishing  
*and other stories*

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## *v a n i s h i n g*

WEEKS PASS and the police give up their investigations. The newspapermen who wrote “Local Writer Vanishes” find other stories. Months go by, then a year.

Marlene and Bea drink afternoon coffee and their conversation slips back to the everyday: the price of potatoes at Loblaws, who’s a good doctor and who’s not, what kind of pictures are showing these days. Marlene goes to *shul* more often, and stands for the Mourners’ Kaddish.

But Tabitha imagines that her father stepped onto a bus, then onto a boat, and soon they’ll receive a postcard from India. She imagines him showing up in five years, his hair greyed or gone, with stories of living in Oregon, or Alaska, or the Alps. She imagines he simply moved into an apartment downtown. Sometimes—and this really puts ants in her stomach—she imagines he is hiding somewhere in the house, behind the couch

or in the closets. She checks under her bed every night before she goes to sleep.



THE DAY NATHAN DISAPPEARED began like any other Saturday. Marlene put a long coat over her housedress and dragged Tabitha to Honest Ed's. They bought a pie plate on sale, six pairs of nylons, some patterned dishcloths, and—after Tabitha pleaded—a life-sized ceramic bust of Elvis Presley. “Where will we put that thing, Tabby?” Marlene said as they stood in line at the till. “What will your father say?”

But Tabitha knew her mother loved the Elvis too—the realistic folds in his collar, the glassy brown eyes, that smile. During the streetcar ride home, he sat on Tabitha's lap and she wrapped her arms around his smooth, painted shoulders. He made it all worthwhile—Marlene's housedress, the streetcar windows that steamed up from people's breath, and even Honest Ed's itself. The crowded aisles, high ceilings, and the sign outside that announced *Honest Ed's: Only the Floors Are Crooked!*

When they arrived home, Tabitha went in ahead to find the perfect place for the Elvis, and that's when she saw the attic's open hatch. She stared at the ceiling's gape. Never in her ten years had she known her father to treat his office carelessly. She thought of calling to Marlene, but Tabitha knew how slowly her mother moved—how her hips cracked when she bent to unbuckle her shoes, and how she hung each coat on its proper hanger. And Tabitha didn't want to speak her worst fear aloud, wasn't even sure if a nightmare thought like this could be spoken.

“Dad?” she called up into the dark place where he did his writing. No answer, and before she could help it, she imagined her father hanging from the ceiling. She pictured it like the movies: his crumpled face and a sinister, creaking rope. She imagined that his swinging body looked long—not tall, long. She climbed the ladder, feeling sick and dizzy as she put her foot on the final step. Then, weak-kneed with relief—initial, foolish relief—she found the attic empty.



HE SEEMED TO HAVE LEFT IN A RUSH. They know he walked out the front door and locked it behind him, bringing only his thick wool coat, his scarf and hat, his umbrella. He left his typewriter, his books.

They might have assumed he'd gone to the office for a couple of hours, or out for a walk, if he hadn't taken the time to tidy the attic before he left. The scripts of his finished plays were held together with paper clips, last-minute changes indicated in pencil in the margins. The more recent works were stacked on the floor. Marlene put these in a box and tied it closed with string, because he'd left a note that read, *Unfinished*.



THREE YEARS LATER, the plays Nathan completed are produced in Toronto and Halifax. Marlene gets a job as a bookkeeper and discovers that she's good at it. At Tabitha's bat mitzvah, the rabbi says he's rarely seen such a dramatic reading of the *parshah*.

Life is as uplifting as a musical, except that sometimes Tabitha wakes at night to find Marlene humming Paul Anka songs into her ear. “You had a bad dream,” says her mother, and she touches Tabitha’s forehead. “What was it? A monster? That falling feeling?”

No matter how hard she tries, Tabitha can’t remember. All that lingers is sweat on her pyjamas and a bad feeling in her throat.



WHEN TABITHA SHOWED HER MOTHER the open hatch, the empty attic, Marlene stared at the floor and furniture, her hands hanging at her sides. She bent to look at some of the papers, then went to the window by Nathan’s desk. “He’s gone,” she said, more to herself than to Tabitha. Then she descended to the kitchen, where afternoon light still brightened the room. She picked up the phone and Tabitha knew it was to call her sister, to ask Bea to come over, right away, please. But Marlene just held the receiver in her hand as though it were heavy, as though she were too tired to dial.

Tabitha touched Marlene’s hip, where the housedress pleated. “I’ll do it,” she said. “I’ll call her.”

Half an hour later, Bea brought *mandel* bread and said things like, “Maybe he was murdered. Or kidnapped.”

Marlene shook her head. “Kidnapped people don’t bring umbrellas with them. Besides, everybody liked him. He was a gentle man. And a good lawyer.”

Marlene didn’t mention Lev, but Tabitha imagined her father leaving the house to see him, putting on a suit and brushing the lint from his hat. Nothing out of the ordinary, though maybe that day Nathan hesitated when he got halfway there. Anything could

have happened. Maybe he turned into a shop and fell in love with the beautiful clerk. Maybe he stepped off the Bloor Viaduct. She imagined his body buried under snow. She imagined it would turn up in spring. But she didn't say any of this, because Bea was saying, "Maybe burglars broke in and attacked him," and Marlene was holding a cup of tea to her chest, shivering.



SIX YEARS AFTER NATHAN'S DISAPPEARANCE, one of his plays is performed off-Broadway, and an academic from Montreal writes about the influence of Yiddish theatre on his sense of structure. Marlene gets some royalties and moves in with Bea. They don't need to worry about coupons anymore, but they do.

At sixteen, Tabitha drops out of school and gets a job as a secretary. She buys a record player and collects LPs. She takes swimming lessons because she wants to be Esther Williams.

Nearly everybody's heard of the playwright who disappeared, and when people learn Tabitha's last name, three times out of five they ask if there's any relation. When she nods, they say things like, "He must have been such a fascinating man." Yes, she smiles. He was very clever. Vanishing, she thinks, was the smartest thing he ever did.



THE FIRST TIME Tabitha had gone into the attic, she was seven years old and forbidden.

"He's very busy," Marlene would say, never allowing Nathan's work to be disturbed. "He's writing."

But Tabitha needed to know what this word *writing* meant. Of course, she knew how to write. In Mrs. Hill's grade two class she was forced to spell out words in a notebook, and was learning how to form each letter: upper case, lower, cursive. But surely this wasn't connected to what her father did in the attic. *He's writing*. Marlene said it with such reverence that it was obvious she herself didn't know what, exactly, Nathan did up there.

So while Marlene weeded the small, patchy flower beds that lined the porch, Tabitha climbed the ladder. She knew her father was up there because she could hear the floorboards creak as he took a few steps or adjusted himself in his chair. She pressed against the hatch—it felt heavy to her then—and she was almost relieved when she couldn't lift it. But then it squeaked open and she saw into the cramped room. Even in the middle of the day, it was dark. She could smell the dust and the damp.

“Yes?” Her father sounded far away.

Tabitha knew she should gently ease the hatch down and run to the yard. She still wore her sun hat and she should be outside, helping Marlene water the marigolds.

“What is it?” Her father's voice sounded closer now, and he opened the hatch all the way. “Yes?”

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark. Then she saw his ironed pants, tucked shirt, slim and serious face.

“Does your mother want something?”

She shook her head. The sun hat, which was too big because Marlene wanted it to last, slipped over her eyes. He bent to fix it and she felt his hand on top of her head.

“I wanted to see the attic,” she said. “I wanted to see what you do.”

“I rarely do much.” He nodded for her to climb into the dim room. The ceiling was so low it nearly grazed his thin hair. There were papers everywhere—organized, or perhaps not organized, on the floor, the desk, in boxes, and along the windowsill of the turret window. “Come on,” he said. “You can help me with something.”

She hated to hear these words from Marlene, as they meant Tabitha would be asked to put away dishes, or help pick rocks from the flower beds. But Nathan cleared some papers off an old wooden chair and nodded for her to take a seat. The chair had arms, a high back, and looked like his own. He handed her three sheets of paper that he had typewritten. “Well.” He sat across from her. “You can read, can’t you?”

The ink was smudged in some places, and there were pencil scratchings in the margins. It wasn’t like the picture books she was used to, and she didn’t know where to begin, so she said, “I’m an excellent reader.” Her teacher had told her this after Tabitha read a passage aloud in class. “If only I’d spend less time daydreaming and more time concentrating on my studies.” She imitated Mrs. Hill’s stiff lips and intonation, her emphasis on less and more.

“Is that so?” Nathan smiled at her joke. For a second he looked at her the way he looked at Lev—as though she were a good show, one that captivated him. “What do they make you read in school?”

“Some poems. And the Lord’s Prayer.”

“Ah. Of course.” He pointed to a sentence at the top of the page. “Start here and go to the bottom. It’s a monologue.”

So Tabitha sat across from her father and read what he told her to read. He closed his eyes, and she thought at first that he wasn’t listening. But every once in a while he took the paper from her to slash out a word or add sentences in a hand she couldn’t make out.

He didn't explain the plot and she couldn't understand it on her own; the person on the page seemed injured, but she didn't know how or why. Still, she read—with an even intonation, the way Mrs. Hill had taught. Occasionally her father said things like, “Can you repeat the last line?” or “Not so fast. Pay attention to the rhythm.”

After this, going into the attic didn't scare her. If Nathan didn't want her help, she would sit in the chair—her chair—and watch him type. She was almost sure that he liked having her there, and once he said, “You are a good reader. Damn good.” After three years, she got so she could decipher his handwriting.

Tabitha never told her mother of these visits, and she knew this was a betrayal. But she didn't want to share what she knew of his piles of paper and his slanted, chaotic notes. It was too precious, this secret.



BY THE 1970S, some critics claim him as a visionary of a socialist utopia, and the literary journals love him. A long-running production of his most popular work plays at the Eaton Auditorium.

Tabitha lives in New York, and she often sees her father. He'll be in brown polyester, or sometimes in cowboy boots. He'll be a man on a billboard, or a friendly, blurry face when she's smoked too much hash. The guy behind the counter at her local grocer's. Or a man in a dance bar, in a purple suit and fake eyelashes. She learns to ignore these visions so she can enjoy the city, her own success.

She is invited to every party worth attending and she is the life of them, sampling all New York offers her: the dancing, the threesomes, the various chemical highs. She has her mother's strong

nose and dark eyes, mixed with a haunting kind of ingenuousness. This proves to be marketable. She gets cast in roles that involve crying and shrieking. As a lark, she keeps a running tally of how many times she gets to kill herself onstage.



LIKE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY, the night before he vanished, Nathan invited Lev for dinner. He liked to hear the law student's opinions, and Marlene liked to cook and fuss. Lev came over at six because he usually shared a Scotch with Nathan before dinner. They would go to the attic to avoid the noise of the radio that Marlene and Tabitha played in the kitchen. The smell of their cigarettes slipped through the attic's hatch and Tabitha imagined their hushed voices, the clink of ice cube to glass, and Lev in her chair. But that night, he didn't arrive alone. That night, Lev brought a woman.

Her name was Sofia, and she had brown hair that curled around her ears. She wore a pencil skirt, a wide red belt, and a small leather hat. She hadn't dressed up her outfit the way Marlene would have, with makeup and pearls. She didn't have to. Her skin had a natural blush and her navy sweater brought out her eyes. Tabitha had never seen anyone so graceful, so poised. Next to this woman, she felt ashamed of her mother, and ashamed of her own awkward body. She imitated Sofia's posture, stretched her neck and held her shoulders straight.

"This beautiful lady," said Lev as he stood in the doorway, "has agreed to be my wife."

Nathan curved the corners of his mouth into something that resembled a smile and nodded to the woman.

Marlene held out her hand. “How lovely to meet you.” She took Sofia’s coat and gloves. “How lovely.”

Over dinner, the men spoke of books. Lev had recently published a first collection, and though Nathan never wrote a single line of verse, poetry was the only topic seriously broached at the Sabbath table. From nearly two years of these dinners, Tabitha learned that Nathan was forever grateful for Klein and Lev found him depressing. Lev deemed Pound “robust and brilliant”; Nathan thought him a fascist, and a victim of his own poetic rules. Nathan admired Elizabeth Bishop, but Lev didn’t pay much attention to her. And they never agreed on Layton.

“I love him,” Lev stated that Friday night. He was extremely handsome, which was maybe what gave him so much confidence in his own opinions. “I love him the way a son loves a father.”

Nathan leaned back in his chair and shook his head, his cheeks reddened from wine. Their conversations sounded like arguments, but Nathan rarely appeared happier. He listened when Lev spoke and seemed to find everything about him—his youth, his ego—engaging. If Marlene noticed, she seemed to treat it as a necessary ill, like the arthritis in her fingers, the fluid that collected in her legs. “Now,” she said. “Would anyone like more beans?”

“A tough, brutish father. That’s the way I love the man.”

“He’s a drunk,” said Sofia. She seemed older than Lev. Maybe it was her rich voice, or the way she so confidently helped Marlene in the kitchen before the meal.

“So he’s picked his poison.” Lev turned to her. “That’s his right.”

“Of course.” Sofia placed her fork and knife on her plate with a click. “But I hardly find it charming.”

“Sofia has little use for certain kinds of men.” Lev smiled and showed his pleasantly crooked teeth. He picked up her hand and kissed the tips of her fingers. “Men who are wholeheartedly male.”

“Then she’s an astute young woman.” Nathan looked Lev in the eye. He smiled the kind of smile people use to cover up anger, or simple heartache. The kind of smile that never quite succeeds. “She’s a prize.”



IN THE 1980S, someone publishes a biography that gets it all wrong, Marlene and Bea spend half of every year in Florida, and Tabitha has become brash, too loud, a lush.

She is well liked, though fat and poor, and she wakes one morning to find that her hair has become a brazen, phony blond. There is nothing of Sofia in her now. She has lost her grace, her ingenuousness, her youth. She treats it like a joke, a big joke, the way her old self has disappeared inside this other woman. But in private, she doesn’t find it funny. She has nightmares—sweaty, waking nightmares—that her father will find her like this. In this body, in this hair, tipsy and hysterical.



TWO DAYS AFTER NATHAN VANISHED, Lev knocked on the door. He’d come from the office and said he didn’t have much time, was just dropping by. He sat on the couch in a dark, pressed suit. Marlene took Nathan’s leather chair and sat on the edge of it. Tabitha curled up on the couch, as far from Lev as possible.

Without Nathan in the house, he seemed less warm, less assured. He was interested in the legalities: what the police had said, how the search was proceeding. He interrogated Marlene and she repeated what had happened, exactly as it had happened. The streetcar trip, the shopping, the empty house. She answered Lev's questions but seemed worn by them. When she finished, he pointed to the corner of the room and said, "Is that Elvis Presley?"

Marlene refilled his coffee cup.

"There are only so many possibilities." He bit into a lemon cookie. "Either your husband's disappearance was planned or accidental. Either he's alive or dead." Lev seemed to find comfort in this kind of statement.

"He's probably just taking an extended day of rest," said Marlene. This was a joke, but even she didn't laugh.

"I'm sure this will all be cleared up," he said. "There's probably an explanation."

Marlene put her cup on the table. She hadn't touched her coffee.

"I can see him waltzing in here tomorrow like nothing happened." Lev smiled at Marlene, smiled at Tabitha, then laughed—a short, coughing laugh. "Wouldn't that be so like him?"

"Anyway, he'll be glad to know you dropped by." Marlene stood. "He cares so much about you."

Then Lev made a noise that was quieter than his laugh, and sounded even more like coughing. When he wiped his face, Tabitha realized he was crying.

"I'm sure there's no need for that," Marlene said, in the same voice she used to tell Tabitha to *Stop dawdling* or *Quit picking at your food*.

But when Lev turned away and choked out the word “Sorry,” Marlene settled herself beside him on the couch and put her arm around him. Despite the suit, he looked like a child, helpless and shaky. He rested his head on her shoulder. “It’s okay,” Marlene said, and rocked him back and forth.

Tabitha heard Lev’s strange sobbing and understood what her mother must have known. Marlene let him press his wet, closed eyes into her cotton shirt. “You poor thing,” she said. “You poor boy.”



IN THE EARLY 1990S, Tabitha checks into rehab, where she meets Charlie Sheen, then meets her future husband. His name is Stanley and he is shy. He admits that he wasted his life, and Tabitha finds this very honest, very brave. There is nothing like Betty Ford sex, and the first time they make love, he cries.

When they check out, he proposes. Two months later, they are married. One year after that, he is rebuilding his law practice and she is making a comeback, playing disturbed mothers and oversexed divorcees. They rent an apartment in Manhattan, and Tabitha learns him: his elaborate tea ritual, his fitful sleep, his splendid reading voice.

She eases away from friends and considers teaching theatre rather than acting. She takes up cooking and purchases things for their comfort—dishes and wineglasses and soft wool blankets. She feels a dedication as simple and big-hearted as Marlene’s.



THE YEAR BEFORE HE LEFT, Nathan had begun to say things like, “Not now, Tabitha,” or “I need to concentrate, please,” when he heard her steps on the ladder. For a month before he disappeared, she hadn’t ventured into the attic at all.

But that Friday evening, she silently climbed the steps after dinner. What drew her there was the look on his face when he’d stood and left the table in the middle of the meal. The defeated way he’d said, “I’ve got work to see to.”

After Lev and Sofia went home, and while Marlene changed out of the blouse and green skirt she wore for company, Tabitha opened the hatch and pulled herself up, edging along the dusty floor until she slid into the office.

Nathan hadn’t heard her come in—or if he had, he didn’t find her presence important. He sat at his desk, facing away from her, and she stared at the back of his neck. He didn’t turn to her or clear the stack of books from the chair. There was a blank sheet of paper rolled into the typewriter, so white it glowed under the lamp. He stared out the window, not even attempting to punch the keys.



BEA PASSES AWAY SUDDENLY, and Tabitha flies home to help Marlene with the details: obituary, casket, stone. Maybe it comes from age, or from living with a sister for decades, but Marlene has lost any sense of propriety. She rinses dishes instead of washing them with soap, and forgets to close the door when she pees.

After sitting shiva, they give Bea’s clothes and her cribbage board to the Goodwill. Then they pack Marlene’s dishes and the

canned goods she stockpiles—*might as well buy lots when they're on sale*—so Marlene can move to a smaller place. As Tabitha fills a box with her mother's old records, she finds the Elvis. He's at the back of Marlene's closet, looking out like a ghost. He smells of mothballs, and his slim ceramic nose has broken off. Still, there's something about him. He's as strange and charming as ever.



TABITHA STRETCHED UP on the tips of her toes and her head nearly touched the attic's ceiling. She wanted, like her father, to see out the window. When she did this, the light must have changed, or the floorboards shifted, because he turned around. His wooden chair squeaked as it swivelled. "What are you doing here, Tabitha?" He was the only one, then, who called her by her full name.

"Nothing."

"Have they gone?"

She nodded. "I'm supposed to be helping with the dishes."

"I shouldn't have left the table like that. Tell your mother I'm sorry."

When she wasn't reading the lines he gave her, she didn't know how to talk to him, so she said the only thing that came into her head. "Wasn't Lev's fiancée pretty? Like a movie star?"

"Prettier," he said quietly. "Because it's real life."

Tabitha nodded and looked toward his desk. The typewriter, the blank sheet of paper.

"Did you know I haven't written anything in nearly a year?" He spoke as though it were a statistic, a fact that piqued his interest.

She shook her head. She understood exactly what this meant: that he wouldn't need her anymore, that there was no reason for her to be in the attic. That the chair was no longer hers.

"But that's a secret." He raised one eyebrow, an exaggerated expression that reminded her of when he would read bedtime stories. When he terrified her, doing all the voices. "Can you keep a secret?"

She heard Marlene in the kitchen, running water for the dishes. Tabitha had a few minutes before her mother needed her to dry. "Sometimes."

"That's a truthful answer." He leaned back in his chair. "Of course, I've written reviews and letters and things. But I haven't really written."

There was the sound of Marlene opening and closing a cupboard. "I should go down soon," said Tabitha. "She wouldn't want me here."

"Your mother is a very sweet person," he said. "I think that's why I married her. Because she seemed like the only honest person on earth." He laughed then, and it sounded hollow in the low-ceilinged attic. "Isn't that incredible? I married the only honest person on earth."

Tabitha stared at his shoes. They were brown leather and polished. "If it's just that you're not really writing," she said, imitating his emphasis on *really*, "then you should tell her the truth. It would probably make her happy, because then you could come downstairs more."

"The truth? It would break her heart," he said. "I don't suppose you're old enough yet. I don't suppose you've had your heart broken."

“Yes, I have.” This was a lie. But Tabitha had seen enough romances to know how to cast her eyes down and pause, breathlessly, before adding, “Once.”

“Then I’m sorry for you,” he said, and turned back to the window. His voice had a harshness that told her she hadn’t fooled him. He was the only audience, she would later realize, that she hadn’t been able to fool.



WITHIN A YEAR OF BEA, Marlene dies. And after her mother’s stroke, Tabitha can’t think of a single thing to say to Stanley. He holds her, tries to give comfort, but everything about him seems foreign: his smell, his pilled sweaters. He is a stranger, a man she never knew. So Tabitha walks out of her own life.

She leaves her marriage and New York and moves to a more manageable city. One with glass-fronted buildings, and bridges that stretch over waterways. She doesn’t know anyone there, though once she runs into Lev as she’s buying groceries. “Tabby,” he says. “Is that really you?”

He looks tired, less handsome, and he wears an expensive suit that doesn’t fit his soft body. He says that Sofia left him long ago, after she too became a successful lawyer. He says he visits the kids every Hanukkah.

She wants to ask him questions. “Have you heard anything about my father?” Or, “Do you still miss him?” But it seems ridiculous to say those things under fluorescent lights, beside shelves of microwaveable popcorn and freeze-dried soups. And Lev is talking about how he’d seen her picture in a magazine years

ago and couldn't believe it. "I said to myself, that can't be the same girl!"

Neither of them suggests staying in touch, and they never see each other again. Tabitha gets a job in a bookstore, where the owner finds it amusing that she was once well known on the stage. Eventually, she too finds it amusing. So she settles, for a while, into this role behind the counter. And cultivates—perfectly—the sad, knowledgeable smile that customers seem to like.



TABITHA STOOD IN THE ATTIC surrounded by Nathan's books and the dim light, faced with her father's back. She wanted to say something—apologize for her lie, or ask why he had left the table, who had broken his heart. But he stared out the turret window as though there was something out there. So she slipped down the ladder, closed the hatch, and ran to the living room. She looked out the big window, the one Marlene washed with vinegar every week. She wanted to see whatever he'd seen. But there was nothing outside. Just the usual street lamps and lawns. Houses with drawn curtains. The everyday, falling snow.