

Georgette

1.

I am in an introductory fiction writing class in college in New York City, and we are tasked with bringing in a paragraph we find particularly moving. This is my first semester at the small liberal arts college that I was accepted to after finishing community college in Nanticoke, PA. It is after my nervous breakdowns have started, and before I will know who I am. In a few weeks, I will go to a school psychologist who will ask me what I like about a book I am reading, and I will reply, “I like characters who change drastically.” He will refer me to a trans-identity clinic. I won’t go, thinking that he clearly doesn’t understand me. It will be years until I can accept myself.

I choose the paragraph from Hubert Selby, Jr.’s *Last Exit to Brooklyn* in which a transgender sex worker, Georgette, saves the atmosphere of a party by pulling down a book and reading Poe’s “The Raven” aloud as Charlie Parker echoes from the record player. I don’t then know why this section

makes me cry. Perhaps, I think, it is because Poe was my first love, literature in general my second, and despair in literature my third.

We go around the room, reading from Carver, Bowles, and Cheever. We never get to Georgette's shining moment.

At a later date, in the same class, we are assigned to write a short piece in which one of the characters has a secret. A boy in the class who is, by self-description, straight and cisgender writes a scene in which a transgender woman is hiding her gender identity from her lover. The big reveal is her final pronoun, which he writes as "s/he."

2.

I am on my way to a folk songshare with my friend Ellis, from college. We stop in an East Village garden, and they rub a buttercup under my chin, informing me that my chin is glowing, and it means I will fall in love. I meet a bartender at the dive bar where the folk music event takes place. I think, "He's the kind of guy I would sleep with once, then never talk to again."

On our second date, after sex, the bartender tells me that though she appears to the world as a cisgender male, she identifies as "spiritually transgender." We talk about our childhoods, and it becomes painfully clear to me that I shared all the hallmarks of a transgender child. I think about the years between then and now: my obsession with transgender people in literature and film; my determination

to make friends with the one transgender person in my small hometown for reasons I couldn't at the time understand; my fascination with David Bowie and Lou Reed, the closest access I have to such people in art.

I don't know any trans people other than the bartender and me. I go to the library, which has never failed me. I turn back to the books I grew up with like *Last Exit* while also reading more modern gender scholars and specialists like Kate Bornstein, Riki Wilchins, Judith Butler, and Julia Serrano. I begin to understand why Georgette made me cry.

3.

My Bachelor's degree in creative writing has landed me the only kind of job it probably ever will. I work in the office of a bookstore. My boss is the guy who wrote the "s/he" reveal all those years ago. I wonder if he remembers? I remember. I am not out at work.

Coworkers friend me on Facebook. They see my chosen name, which I still haven't been able to start using at work. They see my identification as transgender. Some of them are kind. There is the man with the long, white beard who I have seen in this bookstore since the first time I came in years ago, David. He asks me if I would prefer to be called Alex. His kindness breaks the aloof persona that I have affected for protection. But mostly, I eat lunch alone and write. One day someone tells me they would talk to me more, but that I have "an air of solitude."

I read *Last Exit to Brooklyn* critically. With a growing circle of transgender friends, many of them writers, with access to books written by transgender people, I see every one of the reductive tropes. Sad sex worker. Tragic heroin addict. Death. Exactly what every last cisgender person makes of transgender women in literature. I don't think deeply about the fact that many of the trans people I know *do* in fact do some kind of sex work to get by in New York—myself included, taking off my clothes on webcams and acting out men's fantasies on pay-per-hour phone lines. Or that a lot of us struggle with drinking and drugs. I think: This is wrong. This is problematic. Why do cis people keep portraying trans people this way? Even recent books such as *Adam* by Ariel Schrag have kept up the legacy of transness as cis foil.

I marry the bartender, who has transitioned with my support. I work at the bookstore for two years, and towards the end of my employment, she leaves me. I start drinking hard, wallowing in depression, and missing work. I get doctor's notes from the nurses at my trans specific clinic that use my chosen name. The guy who wrote the "s/he" reveal sits me down in his office. The walls don't go up to the ceiling, and everyone outside his office, in the larger office area, can hear every word. He talks about how I am no longer a reliable employee, and, anyway, what is going on with these notes being under a name that's not even mine?

I sit down to write this essay, and in doing so, pull up the paragraph that describes Georgette's moment of beauty. There are so many things wrong with this book. We can write our own stories so much better than those who use us to glimpse what it's like on the outside. But as I read, I see Selby writing with as much compassion as I could expect him to. The other characters look at Georgette as a man, as themselves as gay for their attraction to her. Selby never does—Selby sees Georgette as she wants to be seen. And though he kills Georgette, he first gives her this moment that is the most that any of his characters could hope for—harsh poetry.

There is so much I could have used, years before, that none of these books or any of the songs like “Walk on the Wild Side” ever gave me. Any sort of transmasculine person in literature or art, any sort of voice from someone much more like myself, any sort of positive portrayal of trans people. Someone saying that things will be a mess and a disaster, and, also, quite inexplicably, okay.

Again, at the moment of Georgette's death, I am crying.

How to Disappear

In 2016, in New York City, a 19-year-old engineering student named Nayla Kidd disappeared. She changed bank accounts, cell phone providers, shut down her social media, and ditched her Ivy League college to move to Bushwick and become an artist and model, all without informing anyone in her life. Social media jumped all over the story, and then news outlets latched on. Kidd was a missing person for around two weeks when the police finally found her.

I read her post-discovery missive in *The New York Post*, which described her fancy boarding school, full scholarship to Columbia University, calculated plans, the loving mom who had clearly sacrificed for her. I thought it was a story of absolute callousness. She'd had everything, but she said the pressure was too much, that she'd wanted to run away and have the fun life she saw in an East Williamsburg loft she was thinking of renting. I remember reading it, sitting there and staring at the words while thinking of my own picture plastered across subways and bus stations. How could she

do such a thing intentionally? Didn't she understand what it was like to be truly lost?

Perhaps I was jealous of the attention she received. When my mental illness made me a missing person in 2010, the NYPD suggested to my friends who reported me missing that I had run off to follow a band. Though my friends set up a cross-country network of activists looking for me in any of the places they thought I might have been, the NYPD did little. Had the cops accessed my bank account, or even looked at my Metrocard swipes (an investigation practice well-established by law enforcement by 2010), they'd have easily figured out that I wandered around the city for days before taking a bus to my hometown and checking myself into a hospital.

When I saw Kidd's story, I thought of all the resources that had gone into her "case," and all of those of us who really were lost, unhealthy, and scared, who were given little to no help.

Alone in a hospital bed that year, unknown, technically still "missing," my head still a wash of paranoia and confusion, I began to entertain a fantasy. What if I moved to the Midwest? Changed my name? My gender? Grew a beard? I couldn't remember ever thinking thoughts like this, but just then I had a vision of myself, flat-chested, wearing a white Hanes T-shirt, a genderless pair of Levis, and combat boots. What if I disappeared from my life? Started over as someone new? I was not well at the time—I was also standing in front of the mirror thinking about a bug I was certain had entered into my skin and been living in my bloodstream for years, something I now know is not true—but

since I had succeeded in disappearing from everyone in my life, I wondered, “What if I really need to disappear?”

It wasn't until years later when I remembered this fantasy that I began to empathize with Nayla Kidd.



At the time I became a missing person, I was fairly happy with my life—not when I thought about it too much, not when the things I couldn't control took control of me, but fairly happy. At 28, I had just graduated the college I had dreamed of attending when I was 18, where I'd studied creative writing on a hefty scholarship. I had a group of socially engaged, politically aware activist friends whom I considered a family. Though my relationship with my blood family had been strained by my mental illness over the prior few years, I knew that they loved me, even if they couldn't understand me. Well, that was what I kept telling myself.

I didn't consciously feel there was any reason for me to disappear.

It had been less than six months since my last nervous breakdown, which occurred around Christmas time, 2009, after I had just finished finals, and my mother and brother came to New York from Pennsylvania to pick me up for holiday break. They had driven from my hometown, a dilapidated former coal-mining town called Wilkes-Barre, the county-seat in a small Northern Appalachian valley, to my apartment at the end of Brooklyn, near Coney Island.

The minute I got into the car, my brother said something unabashedly racist. I remember putting my head against the cold window and shutting down. I'd been going to a really progressive college, I had learned so much, and my family said things like this. They believed my mental illness was "fake," little more than me "looking for attention." I rode the whole way home in silence, and, then, curled up in my old bed, fell apart.

At one point during the next few, awful days, I began talking to my mom about whether I was a boy or a girl. She yelled that she had never heard of such a thing, that I was talking like a crazy person.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" my older brother screamed. "Do you want mom to have a heart attack? Do you want me to have one? If she does, I'll fucking kill you. I'll break you in fucking half. I'll fucking kill you." It would not be the last time he would threaten my life.

After that break, once I got out of the hospital, I returned to school, and didn't engage much with my blood family. I called them occasionally, I felt bound to them, but I began removing myself from their lives as best I could. By May 2010—the time I disappeared—we were speaking less and less.



It's now been seven years since my last mental breakdown, and thinking of the state that made me run away from my life is not easy. I feel shame and guilt over inappropriate things I'd

said or done years before. There had been elaborate paranoid constructions based on biographies I'd read of Brian Wilson. There had been mild visual and auditory hallucinations. Walking down the street, I'd imagined I was in a *Truman Show*-like reality program, and the high-pitched tweets I heard in the sky were drones following and filming me. These are hard memories to return to, even harder because, as anyone who has left sanity for a time knows, a door once opened is never quite shut. Though I no longer live in fear of losing reality, the possibility remains like a cracked door's edge of light in a dark room.

During my breakdowns, there was also some of the most beautiful art I will ever create—two of my early published short stories were written from the depths of these mental hells, in hospitals. I would carry papers with me, ignore the therapeutic activities, scribble down the scenes that had flitted across my brain while I went in and out of my mind, and the sense I'd try to make of them through fiction.

In spring 2010, having just graduated college, I was planning on moving to Mexico to teach ESL. My chosen family of activists and I had just crossed an international border to attend a huge protest for a G20 summit. We ran from the police through parks in the night time with helicopters over our heads. We were arrested. By the time we got back home to New York City, I saw danger everywhere. I was in a very bad place.

Everyone in my life hated me, I was sure. Even as I curled up, unshowered and deeply depressed, on a friend's

couch while my friends tried to care for me, I was positive that there was something intrinsically unlovable about me, unequivocally wrong, and that any day, those around me would find out. Every relationship in my life was built on a lie, I was sure.

I left the couch for an appointment with my therapist. But I'd gotten the day wrong and the clinic was closed. This confirmed everything I was thinking—everyone hated me, they were pushing me out, I was locked out. I sent some cryptic texts to my friends and left my cell phone at a bus stop so I wouldn't have to answer any more calls from people I was convinced had discarded me.

Confused, depressed, and suicidal, I wandered around Coney Island, then took a train to the end of the 7 line in Queens. I tried to sleep on a subway bench, and the cops harassed me until I left. By this time, a day or two later, my friends had accepted that involving police—usually no activist's best friend—was the only way they might find me. While one NYPD officer was telling them I'd probably run off with a band, another was poking me with his baton and telling me to move along. I spent days being hustled from one place to another before I finally got on a bus, sick and sweaty and barely able to maintain any semblance of normalcy, and headed for my hometown, where I checked myself into a hospital.



It was in the blue plastic bed of that hospital with its scratchy white sheets that I began to imagine a life completely

unlike my own. I could escape and start over. I could be a different person. Mexico wasn't far enough. I had an old Metro North ticket receipt in my pocket that I kept looking at. It said THIS IS NOT A TICKET FOR TRAVEL, and I took it as a sign that this receipt was there with me for a reason. It meant that I couldn't go away geographically but keep the rest of my life the same. There had to be a clean break, a chance to start over completely.

As my medications kicked in, the thoughts began to clear. In a few days, I picked up the telephone and called my mother, who broke down in tears.



Shortly after that, my mother had a stroke, which my family blamed on my disappearance. My brother threatened to kill me again, and the bonds that I'd been holding onto were finally broken. I haven't seen them in eight years.

My mental health is stable now. I believe a great number of the things that haunted me—paranoia, feeling others would see me as I couldn't see myself and judge me unlovable—were relieved when I finally came out as transgender. It was not an easy process. I had fallen in love with another person, Mya, who was realizing slowly that she was transgender, and so many memories I'd blocked out came flooding back to me as we talked about our identities. Having someone understand me, love me, and support my gender identity let me be the person that I'd been hiding from myself, the too much and

too far that some of the people who had said they'd loved me all my life couldn't allow. Some people did look at the real me and judge me as unlovable. Others adapted, learned, embraced.

I don't think that everyone who goes missing is hiding such a deep secret. But when I think about that liminal space—where we can be invisible to those who make us who we are—I understand why we run.

When I read Nayla Kidd's story, I saw someone who had everything, but wanted it to be more, different, and exactly what she chose. Don't we all deserve that, though, to a degree? At times, I told myself it was enough for me to be the person I had become because of the pressure on me, but deep down, it wasn't. My psyche wouldn't allow it. And instead of making calculated moves, I made myself ill. The end result was the same. She ran. I ran.

I'm currently living in the Midwest, with a new name and a new gender, growing a beard. I didn't have to shed everyone in my life to do this. But maybe it had helped to disappear briefly. I wonder whether I would have made all these major, vital changes toward becoming a truer version of myself if I hadn't taken the space from everyone—if I hadn't had a momentary look at what my life might be if I were the only one choosing.