

# Disappearing

*by Barbara Robinson*

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1988

Danny presses the buzzer. The pavement sparkles with frost and our breath mists in the frigid night air. We wait, then there's a long buzzing sound as the door-catch releases. We squeeze past the tangle of bicycles in the hallway and climb the staircase to the top flat. The door is off the latch, so we enter. John is sitting at the kitchen table – duck-egg blue Formica with a black cross-hatch motif, like biro scribbles – a packet of Gitanes at his elbow. He's wearing a grey, towelling dressing-gown and smoking a cigarette.

‘You ready?’ says Danny, standing near the doorway, impatient to leave. John smiles, eyes crinkling into near-nothingness, takes another drag of his cigarette. He is – quite clearly – not ready.

‘Nearly,’ he says, blowing smoke out of the corner of his mouth. I take the seat opposite him, pilfer a cigarette from his pack, light it and blow smoke into his face, grinning. He laughs, rubs his hand across the belt of his dressing-gown, blows smoke-rings in my direction and stubs out his cigarette. He removes rolling papers from his dressing gown pocket and begins making a joint. Danny reluctantly sits down at the table, looking pointedly at his watch. ‘We need to leave,’ he says, after a few minutes.

‘Smoke this first,’ John says. He lights the joint, takes a drag and hands it to Danny. ‘I just need a quick shower,’ he says, then leaves the room with surprising swiftness. Danny stares after him.

‘Un-fucking-believable!’ he says, turning back to me. ‘We’ll never get there at this rate.’ He looks at his watch again and passes the joint to me. I take a deep drag and my head swims. I shrug and nod towards the cigarette papers on the table.

‘Skin up,’ I say, partly because I want another joint and partly to give Danny something to do. As he constructs the joint, we chat about Emma, the girl he’s meeting, and he pauses several times to gesticulate as he weighs his chances with her. John re-appears as Danny finishes his task, his damp blonde curls smoothed with Black and White pomade.

‘Finally!’ says Danny, relaxed now. John takes a deep drag of the joint and hands it to me.

‘Hold on, I need the loo,’ he says, leaving the room again. Danny and I look at each other. I snort.

‘Un-fucking-believable,’ says Danny.

Later, John places the kettle on the hob. I'm sitting at his kitchen table again, rolling another joint. My eyes are level with his waistband as he leans across me to take cups from a shelf, the tip of his tan-coloured leather belt close to my face. I yank it, causing him to stumble, laugh and swear.

Danny disappeared with Emma as soon as we arrived at the student union, leaving John and I drinking at the bar, ignoring the looks of envy and admiration from nearby women. John is catnip to them, and they hate me, his female friend. Perhaps they know that I'm secretly sleeping with him. Now, as we sit at the table, drinking coffee and smoking, we speak of these women, as though he and I are nothing but friends.

When the night sky turns grey and the local radio station plays histrionic rock, John suggests we go to his room where we lie on the bed, listening to *Everything But The Girl*. My head is near his waist, and I pull the tip of his belt again. He smiles his cat's smile, eyes crinkling into nothingness, his wide, Slavic face all cheekbones and upward-slanting lines. Extra holes have been inexpertly punched into his belt-strap, and the waistband of his jeans seems cinched.

'You're disappearing,' I say, my voice catching a little. I stroke the leather of his belt, allowing my fingertips to feel the roughness around

the punched holes, the smoothness of the brass prong. I feel his own fingertips play gently with my hair, and warmth spreads upwards to my neck, lips, cheeks. I hold my breath so that the sound of it, ragged and uneven, can't be heard. He strokes the curve of my shoulder, his hand inching into the liminal zone between my neck and breasts. I budge in closer, folding back a corner of his shirt to lay my hand on his flat – almost concave – stomach, the chunky metal of my wrist-watch resting on the bulge inside his trousers. He gasps, quietly. I rest my cheek next to my hand, gently kissing the hairs around his naval. He tugs me upwards, wanting me to kiss his lips, but no, I haven't yet finished with this part of him. Soon though, I kiss a pathway up his body until I reach his face, where I bite his full, lower lip. He laughs, his eyes crinkling upwards and, without needing to unbuckle his belt, I smoothly slide my palm inside his jeans.

Afterwards, we doze, kissing and stroking. I'm drifting away when he laughs, pulling me back abruptly. 'What?' I say, my mouth full of sleep.

'You kissed your own shoulder,' he says.

'Oh,' I say, embarrassed.

As we drift again, he makes a sound. It's unlike his usual voice, which is a velvety drawl, like David Bowie's. Stripped of language, it's strange and inarticulate, the cry of a bird or an infant. And he looks like a child, as plosive puffs of breath from his full lips make his blonde curls resting on his forehead dance and quiver. The sound unsettles me for a moment, then I make my swift descent into unconsciousness.

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After we graduated, John travelled around Europe – France, mostly— before moving back to Surrey to live with his parents. I moved to Manchester, and so did Danny. John came up north to visit once or twice, and cards and letters were exchanged, but after a couple of years, contact dwindled to nothing.

A few years later, I phoned John to tell him I was pregnant. His mother answered (he still lived at home, though we were in our thirties by then) and I waited at least ten minutes, listening to distant voices, footsteps and silence, then the clatter of the receiver and John's velvety drawl emerging through dead air.

'Sorry about that,' he said. 'I was on the loo. Is everything OK?' I assured him that it was. 'Oh, thank God,' he said. 'I thought something

had happened to you or Danny.’ I smiled. Even a prospective calamity couldn’t make John rush. He congratulated me warmly but didn’t give his email address, which was for work only and not for personal correspondence. That was the last time I spoke to him.

But I thought about him a lot, and I think Danny did, too. ‘We must get in touch with John,’ he’d say. We’d checked the electoral register and he hadn’t been listed at his last address for ten years, so we assumed that that he’d moved on. We could have phoned the number we had for him and asked his parents – or the new occupants – for a forwarding address, but we didn’t. Were we too lazy, or was there some other reason?

We liked to speculate about how he might have changed. ‘What if he’s a thirty-stone shut-in?’ I would say, and that made us laugh because we couldn’t imagine him as anything other than he was in our memories: beautiful, cool, enigmatic.

## **2018**

Danny has news about John. We meet in a café where the hipster barista asks for the money upfront when I order coffee, which pisses me off. I stare at the back of his head with loathing, his beard so massive

that I can see it from behind. The toilets must be broken as there's a whiff of urine in the air.

'This is fucking unbelievable,' Danny tells me, shaking his head. 'It's so weird.' Ruth – one of John's ex-girlfriends from university, now living in Berlin – has phoned Danny. A phone call to his landline. In these days of emails and social media, such phone calls are reserved for important news. Ruth's news is that during a recent visit to her parents, she went looking for John. And found him.

'But it's really weird,' he says again, taking a sip of coffee.

'What did she say?' I say. I feel anxious and afraid. I feel excited.

'She said, "I think you and Barbara should get in touch with John. Something's wrong."'

Now I feel afraid. He tells me that Ruth turned up at John's address, expecting to find strangers who might know his whereabouts. A woman answers, and before Ruth can finish explaining who she is, she invites her in and points her towards the living room.

'Who's the woman?' I say.

'John's mum,' says Danny, 'I guess.'

'And John's in the living room?' I rub my arms, which are cold and

goose-fleshed.

‘That’s the weird bit. So, she goes in the room and there’s this – this old man. Thin and grey-looking with wispy hair, lying on the settee. Like an invalid.’

‘What?’ I say. I reach for my phone impulsively, then stop, realising that what I really want is a cigarette. I gave up smoking years ago, like everyone else.

‘John?’ I say.

Danny shrugs, his eyes wide. ‘I guess. But she didn’t recognise him. He looked the same age – if not older – than the woman who answered the door. She said the only thing she recognised was his voice.’ I thought about his voice, a velvety drawl, just like David Bowie’s.

‘What did he say?’

‘Not much, he asked about her kids. She said his teeth were yellow. She just stood there, babbling in shock while he sat on the settee, holding a notepad and pen, just nodding and listening.’

‘That sounds like John,’ I say, with a smile. ‘The nodding and listening.’ John was always a good listener. ‘But what’s wrong with him?’ We talk about this for a while. What could be the matter? Was he

physically ill, mentally ill? Both?

‘So, what happened next?’ I say.

‘She asked for his email address. He’s wrote it down on his notepad, gave her the piece of paper and she left.’

We say nothing for a while. ‘What should we do?’ I say, eventually.

‘We go and see him,’ says Danny.

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We are sitting in my car outside John’s house. ‘I’ll wait here while you knock on the door,’ says Danny, ‘then if he wants to see us, I’ll come in.’ This is our plan, concocted on the drive down south. I walk up to the front door of the semi-detached house and press the doorbell. Almost immediately, a tall, smiling woman wearing thick glasses and a floral housecoat answers the door. ‘Erm, hello,’ I say, ‘I’m a friend of John’s from university and – well, I just wondered if he’s at home.’

‘Come in!’ she says, looking pleased. ‘In the living room.’ I enter the hallway and she gestures with her hand towards a closed door on the left. I hesitate, and she nods encouragingly at me before she disappears through an open door leading to another room. I turn the handle and enter.

The first thing I see is a settee with cushions piled at one end, as though somebody has been reclining there. The curtains are partly closed, the lighting dim, and the room smells faintly of cigarettes, as though it is occupied by someone who smokes. I look around for John, but I'm as sure as I can be that he isn't there. At the other end of the settee there's a pile of neatly folded clothes with a tan-coloured leather belt resting on top. I pick it up and notice that the leather is brittle with age, and that several extra holes have been punched into the strap.

I see a packet of Gitanes on the floor, next to it a notepad with a pen jammed through the centre of the spiral. Still holding the belt, I bend down to pick up the notebook, which seems to contain several pages of writing, all of it in French, which I don't understand except for the odd word. Two stand out at the top of the page: *Je disparais*. I think it means 'I disappear' or 'I am disappearing'. I say the words aloud, both in French and English. There is a sound – a movement – behind me. I turn to face him.



**Barbara Robinson** has an MA in Creative Writing from MMU and reads at literary events in Manchester. Her short story *Supersum* was short-listed for the 2016 Willesden Herald prize and her novel *Elbow Street* shortlisted for the 2018 Andrea Badenoch Fiction Award and longlisted for the Grindstone Literary 2018 Novel Prize. She has had short stories published in *Ellipsis Zine* and *Fictive Dream*.