

# You, Disappearing

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*The apocalypse was quiet. It had a way about it, a certain charm. It could be called graceful. It was taking a long time.*



**Dana Schutz**, *Singed Picnic*, 2008. Oil on canvas. Courtesy of the artist and Petzel, New York

When I went downstairs this morning and found Cookie missing, I knew that official emergency procedure called for me to phone all the information in to the Bureau of Disappearances. At the prompting of the prerecorded voice, I would enter my social security number and zip code. I would press “2” to report

the sudden absence of an animal, “3” for “domestic animal,” and then at the sound of the tone I would speak the word “cat” clearly and audibly into the telephone receiver. The woman’s voice would then give a short parametric definition of a cat, and if this definition matched my missing item, I could press the pound sign to record a fifteen-second description. A three-note melody would let me know that my claim had been filed, and then that lovely prerecorded voice would read out my assigned case number, along with some instructions on how to update or cancel my claim.

Instead, I picked up the phone and pushed your number into it. I was always telling you about problems you couldn’t fix, as though multiplying badness could dilute it.

“Cookie’s gone,” I said, and waited for your response.

There was a pause on the other end of the line.

“Have you phoned it in?” you asked. Your voice was casual, like it was someone else’s pet entirely, a pet from a faraway land owned by people we’d never meet.

“I didn’t,” I said. “I’m kind of depressed,” I added. I was often depressed, but now we all had better reasons to be.

“I’m sorry,” you said back.

“Cookie loved to chew on wires,” I said.

“I know,” you said. You didn’t say you wished you could be here. I didn’t say it either.

There was nothing more to say. I hung up the phone. Sometimes I dialed you back right away just to hear you pick up and know that your hands were, at that very moment, resting on a chunk of plastic that threaded its way delicately to me over hundreds of miles of wire and cord. To know that even though your voice had disappeared, you had not yet. But recently I hadn’t been allowing myself any callbacks. I was getting more afraid of the day when you wouldn’t pick up.

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The apocalypse was quiet. It had a way about it, a certain charm. It could be called graceful. It was taking a long time.

People prepared for an apocalypse that they could take up arms against, bunker down with. People hoarded filtered water, canned corn, dry milk, batteries. They published books on how to get things done in the new post-world, a world that they always imagined as being much like our own, only missing one or two key things. They might imagine, for example, that survivors would reemerge onto a planet stripped of all vegetable and plant life. First, the animals would grow vicious and then starve. It would be important to hoard as

many of these animals as possible, pack them in salt and hide them away to keep. You'd want to have a supply of emergency seed to grow in a secure location, maybe using sterilized soil that you had already hoarded. Then you'd want to gather a crew. One muscleman with a heart of gold, a scientist type, an engineer, a child, and somebody that you thought maybe you could love, if you survived long enough to love them.

Nobody thought the apocalypse would be so polite and quirky. Things just popped out of existence, like they had forgotten all about themselves. Now when you misplaced your keys, you didn't go looking for them. Maybe you went to your landlord and asked for the spare set, took them to the hardware store and made two copies this time, an extra in case the disappearing wasn't a one-off but part of a trend. Or maybe you took this as a sign and decided to leave instead, walked out directionless into the world to find your own vanishing point, which meant moving to Chicago to stay with your brother, who still had the keys to his house and a spare set to give to you.

It was cute the way this apocalypse zapped things out of existence, one by one. It was so clean and easy, like clicking on a little box to close an Internet browser window. It had a sense of humor: a fat man walking down the street lined with small abandoned shops would look down and find that his trousers had vanished, baring his out-of-season Halloween boxers to the public. That kind of humor.

Videos of things like this used to show up all the time on the Internet, until the Internet went.

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I thought I would visit the Ferris wheel at the pier before it vanished. I didn't know when it would go. I had the idea that I could try to be the last person ever to visit it, but that would require a lot of work, a lot of waiting around and watching, and there were things to do even in the time of last things. I put two apples in a plastic bag and headed out the door, which I didn't lock even though it would have been easy to do. I took the elevator down to the first floor and walked on East Jackson Drive to the edge of the water, then up along the highway holding onto the handrail with one gloved hand. A sedan full of teenagers drove by, and one of them shouted a blurry word at me that sounded like it had once been a taunt. It was winter, but it wasn't so cold. There was less weather, the same way there was less of everything. This day resembled the day before: sleepy air and wan blue sky, no clouds but a vague foggy white that might just have been a thinning of the atmosphere.

At the pier I saw the seagulls huddling together on the boardwalk, pressing their dirty white bodies up against each other. They seemed able to eat

anything—crusts, rinds, paper napkins. They were made to survive, even in a fading world that was unthinking itself faster than we could fill it back up with our trash. One seagull worked to swallow a little plastic toy lion, snapping its beak down on it with blunt patience. The Ferris wheel loomed up big behind them at the end of the pier, though it wasn't as big as it had seemed the first time I saw it. The wheel was missing spokes at random, and some of the red seating cars had gone. It looked like the mouth of someone who had been punched over and over again in the face.

I walked over to it, right out in the open, but nobody saw me. When I reached the base the controls were all locked up. It had a big goofy lever that you could set to different speeds, like in a cartoon. I ducked the chain and climbed into the ground-level car, the one in starting position, and staggered from one side of the car to the other to try to make it swing, but it wasn't any fun. Then I sat facing the water and put down the guardrail. The lake licked at the shore the way it used to. When water disappears, other water rushes in right away to take its place, you never see any kind of hole or gap. Then when I reached into my plastic bag, I only had one apple.

This apocalypse disappears objects of all kinds, and it swallows memories whole too. I didn't want to be around you when you forgot me. I didn't want to watch it fall out of your head so easily, I was hoping to forget you first. But sometimes I second-guessed that. Then I called you and tried to be angry, as though you were the one who had been so afraid of being forgotten that you needed to move out of the apartment, out of the city and into another city where nothing had any familiarity to start with, or any familiarity to lose. I thought you might have forgotten who did what to whom, but you haven't yet.

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When the first things began to disappear it had looked funny, like a continuity slip-up in a bad movie. You and I would make sound effects for them, shouting “poof!” or “boink!” as some flowers blinked themselves out of existence. This was how we'd make each other laugh. In those days the world still looked full, even though it was emptying fast. Then too many things vanished to keep making the sounds: we saw it was sad that anything in the world had gone and could not return. You joked around, saying there'd be fewer chores, our lives would clean up after themselves for a change, but still you went on doing the dishes, vacuuming the little spaces around and under the furniture, putting on a fresh shirt every day, making the bed. You folded cups out of paper for us to drink from when the glasses went away, and when the paper went you used the nice cloth napkins, which worked badly. You were the sort of person that keeps it all going, and I was the other kind.

This became clear two weeks after the first vanishings, when the news stations named it “The Disappocalypse.” On the day they called it irreversible, I walked out of the office just before lunch. I didn’t tell anyone where I was going, I didn’t reply to the e-mails asking whether we wanted to cancel our health insurance and cash out retirement plans. I knew I wouldn’t be coming back. The subway was shut down so I walked all the way to our apartment on Myrtle Avenue, across the Brooklyn Bridge to the Flatbush Extension. On that day the world still felt crowded. The sky above was pure undiluted blue, thick enough to mask how much emptiness lay behind it, out past the atmosphere. Cars were lined up on the bridge, bumper to bumper. Drivers honked sporadically, without aggression, like migrating geese.

When I got home it was late afternoon and you’d be back by six-thirty. I tried reading the newspaper but I’d read all I could stand about the vanishing, and the other sections had been thinning out, some with blank patches nobody bothered to fill where the color of the paper showed through grayish and soft. Then it was seven-thirty, and eight, and still you weren’t around. I gave Cookie her dry food and refilled her water. I started crying and stopped again and then dragged eyeliner back over my lids so that I looked the way I had before. When you showed up it was close to nine, and you smelled normal: no sweat, no cigarettes, no liquor. Where had you been? You had been working late. Hadn’t you heard? They said “irreversible,” “imminent,” “end of days.” They used those words.

I put wet marks into your shirt as you held me. Then when I pulled away your chest looked back at me with two blurry eyes.

“Why did you do that?” I asked. “Why were you away so long?”

“I was working,” you said. “A lot of people have left, you know that. Toby and Marianne and all of the interns. We’re understaffed. I’m on two new building projects.” Your back was warm and real under my hands.

“There’s nothing to build,” I said. “The world is going.”

“I know that,” you replied. “But there isn’t anything we can do about it.”

“That’s what I’m saying,” I said.

I looked at you looking at me. I heard that we were saying the same thing, though I didn’t understand how it was possible for us to mean it so differently. Later that night I asked you to quit your job too, stay home with me during the days. We could get survival-ready, rent a garden-level apartment with barricadeable windows. We could walk around all day getting to know the things that wouldn’t be there for much longer. But you wouldn’t. You liked being an architect. You said it would make you happy to have added even one thing to a world now headed for total subtraction.

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The walking path next to the highway passed under a bridge. In the cool dark beneath was a bench facing onto some empty lot full of broken glass from bottles that people had thrown, just because. When sunlight hit the broken pieces, the ground lit up like a reverse chandelier, a glittering patch of green and white. Now there was less each time I walked by. Also, no bench. I stood there facing the glass, eating my last apple.

There had been times when I thought I might be with you indefinitely, something approaching an entire life. But then when there was only a finite amount of time, a thing we could see the limit of, I wasn't so sure. I didn't know how to use a unit of time like this, too long for a game of chess or a movie but so much shorter than we had imagined. It felt like one of those days when we woke up too late for breakfast and lay in bed until it was too late for lunch. Those days made me nervous. On those days we fought about how to use our time. You didn't want to live your life under pressure, as though we'd run out, as though it were the last days. I'm not ill, you said. We aren't dying, we don't have cancer, you said. So I don't want to live like we do, you said. There are two kinds of people, and one of them will give up first.

When we fought, you got over it first. I'd watch you from the kitchen, through a rectangular space cut into the wall, and I could see you studying the newspaper, ducking your head down to read small details in the photographs. I saw how gracefully you fell back into whatever article you had been reading before. Even then I knew: whatever hollow I made in you if I left would heal up like a hole sunk into water, quick as water rushing to fill some passing wound.

This far from the pier I could still hear the seagulls fighting over scraps, crying out with their harsh voices. Sounds carried further these days, tearing through the thin air like a stone thrown as hard as you can toward the sea. The bitten-down apple core wettened my right-hand glove, while with the other hand I pressed on the bridge of my nose. There are two kinds of people: one will only weep when the possibility exists, however remote, that someone will hear them. I put the core of the apple down on the ground and looked at it. Poof, I said. I waited for something to happen. Then I went and walked back up the path toward the high-rise.

When I got home I collected all of Cookie's toys, her food bowl and water bowl, the little purple ball with a bell in it, the stuffed squeaking duck that was almost her size. I lined them all up on the mantle in the living room so that I could watch them disappear, one after the other.

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Was the disappearing growing faster every day? No. Was it moving geographically from west to east, or east to west? Was it vanishing the world

alphabetically, taxonomically, or in chronological order? It wasn't. As hard as we tried to understand it, there didn't seem to be much order to the disappearing at all. A week would go by with everything pretty much in its proper place, and then all of a sudden there was no such thing as magazines, not in your home or anyone else's, and nobody to bother making new ones. Did it work its way down from the biggest things to the smallest? Was there a plan? When you were in the right mood, when you were too tired to care much, it was beautiful—like watching the house across the street as someone walked through it turning each of the lights off in order, one by one, for the night.

I sat on the floor of my brother's empty living room and ate four chocolate-chip granola bars in a row. I had already called you once today, but I was working on a reason to call you again. Experts suggested that the things disappearing most quickly now might be intangible, metaphysical: concepts, memories, and modes of thought were just as vulnerable to erasure, they said, though they couldn't give any concrete examples. I thought I'd better call you to see if you still remembered that Cookie had gone.

I pushed the buttons in order. It rang twice, and then I heard you.

"Hello?" you said.

"It's me," I said.

"It's you," you said back to me.

"I just wanted to call to see if you still remembered Cookie," I said.

"Of course I still remember Cookie," you said.

There was silence on both our ends, a blur of static on the line between us.

"What do you remember?" I asked.

"I remember that you picked her because she bit you," you said, "and you decided it was important that you win this one animal over. I remember you didn't know how to hold a cat at the beginning so you grabbed her just anywhere. You grabbed her in the middle and tried to pick her up that way. You got bit a lot," you added.

"I have your number memorized," I said.

"That's good," you said.

And I said I should let you go, and you said goodnight, and we hung up on each other.

I missed you more now than I had when I lost you. I was forgetting the bad things faster than I forgot the good, and the changing ratio felt a little bit like falling in love even though I was actually speaking to you less and less. I used to play a game I called "Are We Going To Make It?" You were playing too, whether you knew it or not. It worked like this: you'd forget that we were going to see the movie together and you'd go by yourself instead or with a friend, while I waited at home. Or you'd stay at work until four in the morning and forget to

charge your phone, and you'd wake me up on the couch where I had fallen asleep trying to stay up for you. Then I would ask myself: Are We Going To Make It? And the next thing, whatever thing you did next, would become the answer, a murky thing that I'd study until I was too tired to think about it anymore.

An "independent physicist" living in Arizona had become famous for his theories on how the Disappearing might be a sort of existential illusion, analogous to an optical illusion. He said the fact that we still remember what's been taken and can picture it in our minds is proof that it still exists. It's like how you only see the duck or the bunny at a given moment, never both, he said. Only imagine that instead of knowing the bunny exists alongside your experience of the duck, you believe that it's been irrevocably lost. It's all about vantage point, he said, temporal vantage point: the way you might lose sight of your house when you drive away from it, but find it again when you look for it from the top of a hill. To think your house was lost, he said, would be loony. Disappeared things were like this, he said, coexistent but obscured in time. This was his theory of spatiotemporal obstruction. Those who believed in it believed that there was one special place that offered temporal "higher ground." They made pilgrimages to a particular beach in Normandy where the cliffs were chalky white, the color of doves, and where it was rumored that recently disappeared things sometimes reappeared, soft-edged and worn and looking thirty or forty years older. In 1759, a twelve-year-old girl was said to have drowned herself there to avoid marriage to a much older man.

I sat on the floor and put the granola bar wrappers in a plastic bag. I put the plastic bag inside another plastic bag. Plastic bags were disappearing too, but my brother had had so many of them to begin with. Then I picked up the phone to call you back. I put your number in from memory.

Instead of you, I heard an error song and a recorded voice telling me my call could not be completed.

I dialed the Bureau of Disappearances. At the prompt, I pressed "1" for "person," then "1" again for "male." I pressed "3" to indicate "age twenty-one to thirty." Then I was supposed to press "3" for "friend," but instead I pressed "2" for "lover or significant other." I hoped you wouldn't mind. The beautiful female voice declared you a "male lover between the ages of twenty-one and thirty" and asked if that was correct. I pressed the pound key and then I described you.

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I remember it was a bright morning in the fall and I woke onto your face looking in on mine. Some mornings when we woke together we pretended that one of us had forgotten who the other was. One of us had become an amnesiac. That one would ask: Who are you? Where am I? and it was the other's job to

make up a new story. A good story was long, and the best stories could make me feel like I had gotten a whole second life, a bonus one. Yellow leaves outside the window threw yellowish light on the sheets as you told me not to worry. I was safe, I was with you. We had been living together since grad school, we met on the hottest day of the year, near the gondolas in the middle of the park. We were sitting on benches facing the pond and eating the same kind of sandwich, turkey and swiss in a spinach wrap.

“But that’s what actually happened,” I said.

“I know,” you said, making a fake guilty face.

In the fall afternoon, leaves fell off whenever they fell off: it didn’t depend on their color or weight or the force of the wind outdoors.

You added: “I just couldn’t think of anything.”

The disappearing when it started happening was everywhere, subtly, it hung on our days the way a specific hour does on a moment, dragging it down and reminding you of how much time you’ve let pass. It was a flavor you woke up with in your mouth, like the taste of blood on a dry winter morning. This made leaving easier in the moments before I had realized what I was planning to do. I stood outside of our building with no keys and I was calling you over and over on the cell phone even though I knew you were at work. Each time I got your voicemail I imagined that you had vanished, until one time I imagined that you had vanished and I didn’t feel any way about it. It was like I had disappeared. I saw the things continuing without me, and I didn’t mind. I went to the ATM on the corner and pulled everything out of my checking account. Checking accounts were still around then, existing invisibly somewhere. Possibly they exist still, even though the banks went. I took the cash and our car and got on the highway, driving on I-80 west toward Chicago. If it hadn’t been the End of Days would we still be together? The most difficult thing about leaving you was discovering that I went on: that I had to be there sixteen hours a day watching myself live my own life, that I had to stay near myself all the time as I asked myself question after question, that I had to sit there in my body and watch the phone ring over and over next to me that night, after you had gotten home.

After the announcement, people did one of two things. Either they tried to care more, or they tried caring less. They decided to survive, to collect and hide and ration, or they decided to let the amount of time left in their lives work away at them. They tried to grow vegetables in their small backyards or they let the yard get overgrown, falling asleep drunk in the afternoon on a lawn chair encircled by weeds. For a while we did whatever we had chosen with dedication. But it was difficult to stay dedicated for more than a few weeks and eventually we muddled, caring about things sloppily and in spurts. We poked at the dirt and then fell asleep feeling that we should have done more or maybe less. In the end, there was only one kind of person.

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In the master bedroom I turned down the sheets. My brother wouldn't be back again, but I made the bed every day to be a good guest. I made it the hotel way, everything tucked in, the sheets stretched tight across the mattress and leaving no room to shift or wrinkle. Sleeping in it meant that you had to tear it apart. I yanked the pillows out from underneath the blankets, pulled the sheets down to the foot of the bed, let the comforter fall to the floor. Then I climbed in.

I have one of the last working phones, I said aloud.

I had started sleeping with the lights on: I wanted more minutes of seeing, more things I could see if I happened to open my eyes. Outside the window there was snow falling, falling like movie snow, all the dreamy fluffy bits drifting around in the light of a single streetlamp. I wished that I loved the woman on the Disappearance hotline so that I could call and hear her voice anytime I wanted, and feel that feeling that it didn't seem I'd be feeling again. Whoever loved her was lucky, if they were still around. I watched the snow slow down, thin out. Then it was two or three pieces at a time, falling reversibly, wavering up and down and up again like they didn't know where to go.

The light stayed on for a few minutes. I saw my reflection in the window. Then the bulb blanked out overhead. In the dark I could hear the cord swinging empty above, but I saw nothing. I knew from the mounting silence that other things were vanishing too. They say everything in the world vibrates at its own specific frequency, each thing releases a tiny bit of sound. But nothing, nothing doesn't vibrate at all. I felt the heat radiating from my body with no place to go. Dots of darkness that weren't really there drifted past my eyes. How would I know I was vanishing if there were nobody around to see me? What would tell me that I wasn't just falling asleep? In the darkness I couldn't see the disappearing any longer but I knew it was all going, going far, far away. Until gradually I didn't even know that anymore.

There was a woman in Lincoln, Nebraska, who claimed to be able to communicate with the disappeared. You could call her on the telephone and tell her who you were looking for, their full name, how old, how tall, how heavy. She would go out to the old well behind her house, a well that her grandfather had built decades earlier, and shout that information deep down into it. In the echo that came back they said you could hear whispers from the other side, your loved ones grabbing and molding the shouted words, distorting them to say what they needed said. You had to pay her in real gold, jewelry or bullion: it had to gleam. She wished we could hear their voices as she did, how happy they are, how they miss us. She said that everything that disappeared from our side went over to

theirs, where they kept living normal lives waiting for the things still lingering with us to join them, and make the world whole once more.