

Longtime Gone
by Kurt Dinan

The following excerpts from Juliet Larson's A Survival Guide for Parents of Missing Children (Chapter Fifteen: Coping with a Long-Term Disappearance) are used with the author's permission.

"First off, you must remember that while no one can comprehend the emotions you are feeling, you are surrounded by people who care and are willing to help."

In the beginning there were ribbons and posters and food and the kindness of strangers. The town wrapped us in a constant blanket of compassion, even joining the police on the line as they walked the woods of Welsch Park with metal poles probing the earth for the soft give of a covered body.

Now, however, Penny and I are treated as if a small circle of contagion surrounds us. We are the parents of that girl. They smile in passing and extend counterfeit support, but their eyes say it all - "Don't get too close or our child may be next." Then after a moment of pitying looks they offer apologies ("We really are running late") before retreating with their children into their warm houses to talk of picnics and school plays and swimming lessons.

For them there is no opening their child's bedroom door every night praying she'll be there. They don't stare at each passing car certain their child's in the trunk. And they don't wonder if someone stuck his prick in their daughter before choking out her last breath.

Their days and nights have no unanswered questions hammering at them as they try to work, as they try to shower, or as they try to sleep - Do the stars look different where Molly is? Or do her lifeless eyes stare at nothing but dirt and decomposing leaves? Is she nearby - less than one mile from this house - or cities, states, or even oceans away? Or is my nine-year-old angel, the child who at six said she wanted to marry me when she grew up, scattered over twenty miles of dark highway?

There are no answers in the silence except for this truth - the day Molly went missing the entire planet became a potential graveyard.

####

"You and your spouse must remain a united front in the search for your child."

At the breakfast table, Penny sits resembling a chemo patient, her face and body emaciated, her hair a wiry, tangled mess. She remembers nothing of the night before - the sobbing in her sleep, the murmurs of "She was just

there." Instead, Penny picks at her toast and stares out the front window to the driveway.

I put my coffee cup in the sink and say, "I have some errands to run. Do you want to meet out for lunch?"

When Penny doesn't move, I try again, saying, "What do you think? Maybe we can meet at the Red Fish?"

Nothing.

"I'll have my phone in case someone calls."

I reach for her shoulder and say, "Penn?"

Her eyes don't leave the window, but she says in a voice barely above a whisper, "I need to be here when she gets back."

And as I leave the house, Penny continues her still and silent vigil, ghosts in her eyes.

####

"Your child is an individual, not a statistic."

After church, Reverend Young puts his arm around me and says God is watching over Molly.

I want to share his faith, but I know the numbers:

Missing children not located within forty-eight hours of their disappearance have a survival rate of less than twenty-five percent. After thirty days that number drops to five percent.

As of today, Molly will be gone one hundred and twenty-two days.

More than half of all girls abducted are sexually assaulted by the perpetrator. One hundred percent of all missing children found murdered are killed within the first month. In the last ten years, over one thousand children under the age of ten have vanished into the wind never to be seen again.

So when I reopen my eyes, and Reverend Young is nodding his peaceful look as if he truly believes God is watching over us, I pull away and say, "If God exists, Reverend, He runs the universe using the Devil's arithmetic."

####

"It can be therapeutic to keep your child's memory alive by continuing to celebrate special occasions such as birthdays and holidays."

Despite her original protestations, Penny gives in and on February 8th I buy a small vanilla cake with chocolate icing and ten candles.

Together we sing "Happy Birthday" as the winter daylight fades, only the yellow burn of the candles illuminating the room.

I say, "Happy Birthday, Peanut" and Penny whispers a "Happy Birthday, Molly Ann."

We blow out the candles and send out silent wishes.

Following tradition, Penny brings out the scrapbook. We hold hands as we laugh and cry reliving Molly's past birthdays - at one, her small face and hands covered with cake and frosting; at five, on the rented miniature pony in our backyard; at seven, surrounded by six friends in their pajamas during her first slumber party.

Penny's hand feels good in mine, her first show of affection in months. A spark of life, small but unyielding, is alive in the room. And although it is unspoken, we feel good through the tears as we reminisce.

This mood holds until we turn to the birthday held one year ago at Brant Park. The birthday pictures of years ago had a distance to them, as if they are snapshots from some past life. But these pictures of Molly's ninth birthday are too near and too real, as if twelve months ago was only twelve hours. Neither of us speaks as I turn the pages through this birthday; we both sit dry and empty.

On the final page of pictures is the photo that will keep me up for the next thirty-four hours before my body betrays me and I collapse in exhaustion. It is the picture

I will carry in my back pocket and stare at most days until my eyes ache.

In it, Molly stands alone beside a picnic table covered with a mountain of presents and a Little Mermaid cake. She is wearing a yellow and white dress and her grin shows no self-consciousness of the three missing teeth in front.

Behind Molly, standing in the background just beyond the picnic tables is a blurred-out man wearing a baseball cap. His arms appear crossed and he may have a moustache. One thing is certain though - he is looking at Molly.

No one else puts the significance on the picture that I do. Penny focuses on it for only a moment before her vacant eyes return and she plods silently off to bed. The police feign interest and call it a tenuous lead at best.

But I know. And I know despite the fruitless hours I spend scrutinizing the blurry man, comparing him against pictures of friends and family and known felons in the state.

And deep down, in those places I only visit when the lights are out and the house is quiet, I surrender to the knowledge that as certain as I am that the birthday party man is involved in Molly's disappearance, there is nothing I can do about it.

####

"Returning to work will take readjustment and patience, but will allow you to focus your energies in a positive manner."

I stand in front of the classroom and try not to throw up. I have deliberately stayed away from this place since Molly's disappearance; seeing children makes my ache all the more tortuous.

Finally, I force out, "It's good to see everyone again. I didn't think I'd ever miss a bunch of seventh graders, but I did."

Some of the students chuckle nervously. I keep talking before I dry up completely.

"We need to talk about all of this before we get back to work. If we don't, I'm afraid everything in here will be muddy for the remainder of the year. So I brought in some donuts--"

This gets their attention.

"--and we're going to talk and eat before we start again."

I reach behind my desk and pull out four boxes from the local bakery. The students approach slowly like deer to handheld food.

After they have returned to their seats, I recount Molly's story and where the investigation stands. The abbreviated version takes five minutes, and I tell it with curious detachment, as if relating a secondhand story that I play no role in.

When asked for questions, they hide behind donuts, concentrating on each bite, not wanting to catch my eye.

Finally, Gina McCoy raises her hand. Taped to the wall behind her is the present Molly gave me last Father's Day - a crayon drawing of our house with the three of us in front.

The corners of my vision start to darken then. I try to blink it away and call on Gina who says, "Didn't they arrest someone when it happened?"

My stomach knots and the black walls close in a bit more. "No, there were no arrests. Some people were questioned but then released."

Tim Vernon puts his hand up.

"Weren't you here when it happened?"

I nod but don't speak. My vision is now a long, darkened tunnel. The same electric jolt flows through me that I felt six months back when I answered my room phone to Penny in a panic telling me Molly had vanished.

Mark Reedy asks, "Is there anything we can do to help?"

Yes, Mark, get my fucking daughter back.

For a moment I wonder if I've said this aloud. I shake my head and eek out a dry-mouthed, "Just be careful, okay?"

Across the room then a voice asks, "Do you miss her?" The brash stupidity of the question almost makes me laugh. I turn to see who it is and see Molly sitting at a desk. She is wearing the same pair of jeans and red jacket she had on the day of her disappearance. I grip the edges of the table and close my eyes tight. When I open them again I see only Stephanie Ball, a mixture of confusion and worry on her face.

Sweat trails down my back and my skin is covered in a thin layer of frost. The room sits in darkness, only a sliver of vision remaining, the students nothing but silhouetted shapes.

Stephanie's question echoes in my head - "Do you miss her?" - and then I am up and stumbling to where I think the door is. Every reminder of Molly in the room is brilliantly illuminated - the family picture on my desk, Molly's favorite book Where the Sidewalk Ends on the bookshelf, the macaroni-covered pencil jar Molly made at vacation Bible school. My stomach rolls over and I taste

acid in my throat. I push desks aside and fall against the door, my clammy hand searching for the knob.

I turn back to the darkened shapes in the room and say, "It should have been any one of you - any one of you but her."

Then I fall to my knees and throw up three cups of coffee and six months of grief.

####

"Volunteering your time will allow you to feel a part of the community and will help create bonds with others."

I sit at my usual bench near the food court and mask my surveillance with a newspaper and coffee. All around me families shop and eat, oblivious to the dangers surrounding them.

He could be here. The police will tell you predators are everywhere, in our towns, in our parks, even living next door. Most are observers only, searching for masturbation fodder as they watch boys or girls enter the dressing rooms of Sears or straddle the teeter-totter at the playground.

Others, though, wait for the moment when a parent is distracted or busy or has left her daughter in the driveway while she goes inside to the bathroom. These are the men who bring about the end of the world.

Nearby in the indoor play area, the children caper about as their parents pay half-hearted attention. I want to shake them from their stupor, plead for their vigilance. But Penny and I were just like them. We lived under the delusion of safety. Every parent does. It's the children who suffer, and who must be watched.

I spy a little boy, probably only five, wander from the pit of colored plastic balls to the front window of Krazytown Toys. No parents move to stop him.

He disappears into the store and past the clerk, a high school kid who doesn't see the boy walk by. I find him in the back in front of the Roboman display.

"Are you lost?"

When he doesn't look up I kneel down beside him and say, "Where are your Mommy and Daddy?"

He puts down a Roboman Rocket box and starts to walk away. That's when I take his wrist.

"You need to be careful," I say holding him still. "You shouldn't leave your parents like that."

He jerks his arm frantically and screams. Instinctively, I clamp my hand over his small mouth.

"Just listen to me. I want to help you."

His tears run over my hands, holding him off the ground as he kicks and bites.

"It's dangerous to be alone. You could get hurt."

And that's when the clerk comes around the corner with the boy's mother. Both of them stop dead.

I let the boy go and pull away. He is in his mother's arms in seconds. She goes hysterical, holding her child far out of my reach, murder in her eyes.

My words stammer out. "I was only trying to help. He wandered off and I came after him."

It does no good. Red-faced and crying, she rushes the child down the aisle and out of the store. The clerk looks at me and I can see he's working out what to do. He says, "You need to wait here" and moves for the wall phone.

I race out the door to the mall exit. The whole way home, I check and recheck my rearview mirror, waiting for the police to appear.

When I am safe and the rush of adrenaline subsides, my anger builds. None of them understand. None of them listen. They walk the malls and parks ignorant of what can happen in an instant. They live blindly with their hand-holding and their cocoa and their stories before bedtime. They shit on Molly and don't even know it.

And for that they deserve whatever they get.

####

"For your own physical and mental well-being, it is essential you find healthy ways to release your emotions."

The house rests in a state of static hibernation, the kitchen calendar idling on a perpetual September 27th. Molly's room remains untouched, her bed unmade, her limp brown bear Cody peeking out from under the covers.

Penny is now borderline catatonic - by day at her post in the front window, at night sitting in the bedroom tensing at every set of headlights coming down the street. Lost in a fog of memories and guilt and blame, she doesn't talk anymore. When Molly disappeared, Penny's mind went with her.

I lace up my running shoes and escape into the darkness of the neighborhood. My feet fall in quiet strides on the pavement and soon I am wet from the July heat.

The endorphin rush takes over, surging through me as I leave the delirium of the house first one mile, then five miles behind. Yet with each stride farther away from the house, the thoughts slowly creep back in - Is Molly waiting inside that house for me to rescue her? Is she underneath the shed over there? Haven't I seen that van driving slowly on our street before?

Soon it is a torrent. Molly loved summertime. Molly bought me this baseball hat. Molly would be in bed by now. Molly has been gone exactly three-hundred and twenty-six days.

I can't turn it off.

Molly would sneak into our bed during thunderstorms and pull in close to me. In the morning, she would wake us by jumping on the bed until we opened our eyes. Then she would laugh and fall onto us, our little band of happy thieves.

And now she's gone.

I continue running through these memories, lost in an exercise haze when in the silence I spot him up ahead - a doughy man on the corner with a leashed cocker spaniel. Even in the darkness, I can tell he fits the basics of the standard profile - white and in his late twenties. Not the man from the birthday picture, but that doesn't matter. He easily could be the one who took Molly, and that's enough for tonight.

Ten months of agonizing frustration boil over. He is the man. And he isn't the man. Not breaking stride, I race over and smash my forearm into his neck. His head snaps forward with a sharp crack and he crumbles to the ground. I am on his back before he can cry out. I beat at

his head with wild, arcing fists. He struggles under me, wrestling about in the grass as I pound his ears and neck while his dog whimpers nearby.

The entire time I think only of Molly curled up safe beside me in bed while the thunder and lightning reign outside.

I beat him until he stops moving. His breathing is slow and strained. The dark stain of blood trickles down the curb and into the gutter. For a moment I remain straddling his back trying to recapture my breath. The street is deserted, slumbering in the summer's stillness. I picture Molly's smile on that last morning when I said goodbye to her before work. Then I begin to cry.

The man manages a muted call for help that dies in the night. I stand and shake the ache out of my hands before beginning the long jog home to the best night of sleep I have had in months.

####

"Never give up hope."

I spend the anniversary trying to get lost.

In front of my car on this back country road is a little boy riding his bike, slaloming between stones in the road. Did he know Molly? Or does he know Molly now by some new name?

I taught Molly to ride when she was five.

What I know now, what it has taken me a year to understand, is that I am the only one who ever cared about Molly. Down to ninety-six pounds, Penny sits in the hospital, lost in a labyrinth of her own grief, her abandonment complete. The police have relegated Molly to a dusty filing cabinet awaiting a new lead. And to the media, Molly is nothing but last year's news.

My daughter is a forgotten child to everyone but me and whoever took her.

Somewhere someone knows the truth about Molly. Is he aware it has been one year today? Does he know what has become of me? Of Penny? Of our family? Or has he discarded Molly like everyone else?

I can't go on anymore not knowing. Each day is nothing but a fog of slowly passing hours while the world continues on as if Molly never existed. I'm tired of the helplessness, of the tears, and of the emptiness.

But more than anything, I'm tired of being the only one who cares or understands this desolation.

And so, this boy, radiating bright promise and endless potential, riding alone along this country road back to his parents' arms, will never make it home. Hours later on

this deserted roadside they'll find his blue bike and his
dusty baseball glove.

And nothing else.