The Disappeared

A Short Story

By Maryanne Peters

Quinn was off work. Injured in the line of duty they call it. Shot himself in the foot in the locker room. I like Quinn but he can be a klutz.

They paired me for a week or two with Gayle. Gayle is a lesbian, but you cannot deny that she is good at her job. She is just not the the cheeriest soul on the planet. It makes you wonder if lesbian sex can really be that satisfying.

But people’s private life is their own. I make no judgments.

Others might say that missing persons is not the most exciting work around, but it suits me. I don’t get called to crime scenes at all hours, I just work he leads when it suits me. You do get the occasional “the next 48 hours is crucial” sudden disappearances, but for those I am just part of a much larger team, and the team member with specialist experience. I find people.

The truth is that most of the cases I handle others would call cold. I get in touch with the last contact, sometimes a wife or husband, but sadly more often concerned parents.

“I want to let you know that the police are vigorously continuing to find your loved-one,” is my first line after introducing myself. “I just need to go through the details again.” The reason for that is that not all officers know the questions to ask. Sometimes the clue to a disappearance lies in the personality of the victim. Sometimes the key aspect of their personality is unknown, even to those closest to them.

Then you go through the available data – cell phone location, CCTV footage, credit card use, witness statements. You re-interview only if you feel you have to. Sometimes viewing the scene again helps – at the time of day when the last sighting was reported. It may help to see what the victim saw.

I work the processes and I get results. Sadly that is sometimes a body, but then I can get lucky. The best result is that the person was a runaway all along – nobody dead, nobody to prosecute, case solved.

But then there are the serial disappearances. They are the worst. You have a few cases open, and you might see a pattern that makes you check things. Patterns do not always mean that there is a single offender, but you have to consider it

Things were just starting to come together when Quinn shot himself in the foot and Gayle walked in the door.

“What do you mean a pattern?” she said.

“Look at all these cases.” I knew that she was just challenging me to support my thinking. “All young men. They leave ID and credit cards behind. Who does that? They take almost nothing except the clothes they stand up in, their phones with SIM cards out and few items of cash value. All very deliberate – like they want to disappear, or whoever is responsible wants us to think that. Then the last sightings are all in this general area here – a strong geographic link.”

“That is a big circle,” she said looking at the map I had posted on the “Crazy Wall” as we call it.

“Six disappearances in 3 years. That makes it a hell of a lot smaller.”

“So what is your plan?”

“We check for common features among the victims and then we look for any other disappearances that might fit. Then we tighten this circle and start looking for suspicious people operating inside it. It is not all built up.”

Gayle shrugged. I am not sure whether she was happy to be assigned to me, but I think I saw a flicker of interest in her eyes.

Six victims is enough to prompt revisiting six homes and the bedrooms of six young men. Gayle preferred to speak with the parents, and leave a male bedroom for another male to understand. We did two each evening and then we came back with results.

“We have two potential homosexuals, and one who viewed tranny porn, but apart from that these seem like normal young men,” I said.

“Homosexuality is normal,” said Gayle. Correct perhaps, but not helpful.

“We don’t have the phones, but we do have phone records and all seem to have had a series of conversations with a burner phone in the weeks before disappearance. None of those phones are functioning now, but they all seem to have saved the number as “JB” or “John”, so that seems a good link.”

“John is a common name,” said Gayle. Correct perhaps, but not helpful.

“The burner phones have unit numbers, so I will try to track where and when they were purchased,” I said. It seemed something that she could work on alone.

I decided to concentrate on last locations and look for a “link person”. This is not an uncommon approach although it may seem desperate. We can always find images of the missing person, but the idea is to examine the surveillance on either side of a sighting for persons unknown, and then see whether the same face comes up again in relation to last sighting of another missing person. Could the “link person” have something to do with all these disappearances?

He appeared as a shadowy figure in just one surveillance video. The victim was on the other side of the street, waiting. This mysterious man came into view and stopped. Did they call out? They turned and walked away and the victim followed. What had been said? This was one of the victims said to have been gay, so perhaps prostitution?

I stored the face away in my mind. It was fuzzy and might seem like the kind of image that you would never recognize a face from. Not until you see it that is. The following day and another set of videos run through at high speed until a figure appears at around the same time as the victim.

There it was. The victim walking, and just rewind a little and there he is. The mysterious man, walking ahead by about 20 paces. The face a little clearer now. Now I knew that I was looking for somebody else that made all the material worth viewing again.

This is police work. Slow and methodical. But effective. It was only a matter of time before I worked out that there was a vehicle – a large black SUV with reflective windows. In a series of images 2 people walk 20 paces apart and then further on they are not there. What was in common was a parked vehicle between those cameras, and in one image a partial plate – enough of a number to run the registration and rule out other vehicles.

“I have an address that I think we need to visit,” I said to Gayle, still sifting through a pile of burner phone sales dockets. She looked relieved to escape the desk.

We drove to the address that we had. It was a large house. There was a garage attached wide enough for two vehicles and perhaps deep enough for another two. The house dropped a little at the back and appeared to have a large basement not visible from the front. My instincts? This visit would need to be with a view to obtaining a search warrant.

But for now it was a knock on the door. We waited, but I felt it prudent to check my weapon and make sure that it could be drawn easily.

The man who answered the door surprised me a little. I suppose that as a policeman you think that you get a nose for criminals, or if not them, at least for evil in the scale I was contemplating. This man was a little older than me but struck me as appearing to be every persons favorite uncle – a ready smile and welcoming eyes.

I introduced myself and also Gayle, and indicated that we were investigating the disappearances of young men in the area. I asked whether we could come in to ask some questions. He waved us inside. There was no apparent reluctance. I was a little disappointed.

“My name is Paul Garrett,” he said. His name was on the title deeds.

He offered us tea or coffee. I nodded to Gayle and she engaged in the discussion of teas he might have so that they could go to the kitchen and give me a little time to explore his living room. This could be an unauthorized search so the rule is that you touch nothing. Something observed without intervention is admissible.

There was a long shelf with pictures of happy young women, and I was drawn to two of them in particular. I furtively took an image with my phone – not allowed. The truth is that I would need to ask my questions here. I still had my phone in my hand when Garrett returned.

“I have images of the victims on my phone,” I said. “Would you please have a look at them and tell me whether you recognize any of them?”

He took the phone and scrolled through. I was looking for signs that he might know them and be hiding it. The guilty often give themselves away when confronted with images like this, but if he was a killer he was a cold one. He gave away nothing.

“These people are unknown to me,” he said.

“Perhaps you know their families?” I asked. “I could not help but notice some of the photos on your shelf. Two in particular look like sisters of two of the victims.”

“I have sponsored a number of young women in my life,” Garrett said, with a look of genuine pride on his face. “I keep photos of them. It brings me joy. But these were all young women who were alone in the world, otherwise they would have no need of my help. I never knew their families, if they had any.”

I was getting nowhere. Gayle appeared with cups of tea – some weird blend that she had chosen with Garrett’s assistance. I needed to redirect.

“You have a beautiful home,” I said. “Would you mind if we had a look around?”

I could see that I had struck something with that request. He could refuse but that would raise questions. He could hardly claim sudden pressure of time as he had settled to share tea with us. But he was reluctant. It was not enough for a warrant. It was a flyer, but I felt that I needed to ask.

“Why not,” he said. It is just me these days. My wife died some years ago and my daughters have their own lives although they live close. We have four bedrooms upstairs.”

“I am particularly interested in your basement,” I said, fastening my gaze in search of signals. He stiffened slightly, but then relaxed.

“Am I suspected of foul play?” he asked.

“Should you be?” I responded. “We are looking into disappearances. We are following leads. Will you help us or not?”

“Come,” he said. He rose and went to the hall where there was a door to the basement stairs. He carried his mug of tea.

The door had no lock on it. The stairs were wide and clean, and well used. The smells that came from below put me a little on edge – bleach mixed with some kind of scent. I checked my weapon again. I noticed that Gayle was doing the same.

The basement was large and was sectioned off. One area seemed to be fitted out as a small clinic – a hospital bed and a large table. The other part seemed to be a beauty salon. It all looked very clean and well maintained. There was no sign of any barriers or restraints of any kind. I looked for hidden rooms, but the floor plan seemed to account for the full area of the house above.

“My wife suffered before she died. I am a retired physician so I could care for her here.” He waved his hand towards the hospital area. “As for this, well I have two daughters in the beauty business and they still come her often to use the facilities. I indulged their passion, you see. They could have what they wanted. They still can.”

Gayle looked at it all disapprovingly. I wondered what she might look like if she was to receive the styling like the stock hairdressing images above the wide mirror.

Then, quite by chance I noticed something. They say that a photographic memory makes for a good detective. I am not saying that I have that, but when you look at images of missing men over and over then somethings stick, in particular if you ask a question about it.

Won of the victims had been pictured with something around his neck – it was piece of metal that could easily be a pendant created by art, but I was told that it was shrapnel taken from his father’s leg – some old war wound that served to remind the boy of his heritage. It was unique and there it hung beside the mirror.

I drew my weapon, and took my stance, pointing the muzzle at Garrett.

“Gayle, get an evidence bag and carefully collect that pendant hanging over there,” I instructed her. “As for you Mr Garrett, I am arresting you in connection with the murder of the young man who was last seen wearing that item, so I must caution you …”.

“There has been no murder, Detective,” the man said, calmly taking a sip of his tea. “All of the people that you are looking for are alive and well. No crime has been committed. Please put you gun away. Take the pendant. Some choose to leave things behind, but they should not be left here. Let me explain. We can sit here if you like, or go back upstairs?”

I looked at this man. I saw the same person who had greeted me at the door only a short time before – the kindly uncle. I holstered my weapon.

“Alright, if you have an explanation I would like to hear it,” I said. I saw that Gayle had also drawn her weapon, but she was not ready to put it away.

“Lead the way up, Gayle,” I said. She was entitled to be cautious, but somehow I already believed this man even before he had spoken a word.

We sat down, but Gayle remained standing and tense.

“I said that I had two daughters, but that was not always the case,” he said. Of course I was puzzled. “My sons were both transgender, which was something that I had only a slight understanding of when they both revealed it. Now it is my specialty. I help young men become young women.”

He stopped there, to let it sink in. The problem with investigations is that while you are always told to be open to other explanations, to focus on what you do you tend to make key assumptions. Mine was that all these young men were dead – the victims of foul play.

“You will find you supposed victims in the photographs on that shelf, but in some cases you may need to look closely,” Garrett continued. “Had you given notice that you were coming I might have put them away. They all have their reasons for wanting to keep their transitions secret, so I would have tried to respect that. I hope that you might consider doing that too.”

“If what you are saying is true then I cannot do that,” I said. “They have relatives looking for them … in most cases.” A few I had picked up just from routine missing persons reports. “I need to close these cases.”

“If I was to introduce you to these victims, couldn’t you simply go back to the relatives and say that the person was alive but did not want to be reunited with them?” He looked at me with sincerity. Here was a man who cared deeply for the people he had helped.

I have to say that I looked at Gayle for another opinion, although why that would have mattered to me, I cannot say. She simply shrugged. Yet again, not helpful.

“You can introduce me to all of the people on my list?” I asked.

“Give me time to arrange it. They could come here if you like. My daughters too. They could come.”

“Until you can satisfy me, I would not like to let you out of my sight,” I said. “I do not have to take you into custody, but I am investigating serious crimes. If you have proof they did not happen, then I will need to have it first.”

“Two or three are no longer local, but I can bring everybody here, and we can facetime the others on my office computer off the hall,” he said.

I suppose that it is a measure of how well loved this man was that within hours his house was full of attractive young women and those who were not there were looking at me through the monitor screen.

They all had their stories to tell, but it seemed that what they had in common was a fear that their loved ones would discover that they had transitioned to female. There stories of expectation like the young man who had worn his father’s shrapnel around his neck, or household rife with hate and “transphobia” or even one or two who had simply never bonded with the people who now wanted just an answer to the simple question – “what happened to my son.”

Sometimes the answer to that question can never be given. We usually say that such a case remains open, and if there is a crime here it might be that I lied.

For the purposes of police records on each of the files that I closed I placed a photograph and a statement from a happy transwoman with the note – “Still officially disappeared but found – see attached for current location of the subject”.

The End

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