

In Providence: Missing in Providence



If you ask when anyone last saw her, you'll get a variety of times and places. You'll get assurances that she looked happy. That she seemed fine. That she was always doing this sort of thing. Appearing and disappearing. Cutting ties with people for no reason at all. There's only one friend who doesn't buy it.

"This was different. It doesn't feel like it did all the other times. She would still call. Her thing was—she'd get a job somewhere or two jobs and she'd get home late, wherever she was, and you'd wake up to a voicemail from her in the morning. One Sunday I got three of them from her, telling me I need to keep my ringer on when I go to bed, in case there's an emergency. But when is there ever an emergency anymore?"

They grew up together. Went to school together. They were each other's prom dates. Their houses were on the south side of Providence, but after attending Johnson and Wales together, they got an apartment near Parade Street.

"We had a good time. She was fun. When she decided it was time to party, that was it. You were going to have a party. One night it was a Tuesday, and you would have thought we were giving money away. People were coming from up and down the block, because our house was— It was the place to be. That was because of her. Everybody wanted to be around her."

But sometimes the brighter something shines, the harder it is to keep it burning.

"She would bail on you. That's true. She stiffed me on rent more than once. I never held it against her, but you couldn't stay mad at her. It was impossible to stay mad at her. The first time she disappeared,

she was gone for a week. I think after that it was a little more than a week, and for the next couple of years, when she would go missing, it would be for a month. Sometimes two months. Never more than that.”

It’s been five years.

“Nobody will say she’s missing now, because people keep saying they’ve seen her. I see people all the time — and people will message me — and tell me they saw her working at a restaurant downtown. I call the restaurant and they’ve never heard of her. Somebody else says they talked to her outside a bar. Talked to her for an hour. They told her that people were looking for her, and she laughed it off. Said she doesn’t want to be bothered. I don’t buy it. It’s not just me she doesn’t talk to anymore. People she stayed friends with her whole life. People who were like family to her. Now the only time anybody sees her is by accident, and when you look into it, it’s wrong. It was the wrong person or they were drunk and only thought they saw her. I say she’s missing. That’s what I say.”

If you go to the police and tell them somebody is missing, but everyone keeps seeing them, you don’t get very far. Whenever it seems like enough time has passed without a sighting, three will pop up. Somebody will say they bumped into her at a movie theater in Warwick. Somebody else will say she was walking down the road in Pawtucket and they waved to her as they drove by. Another person will even say they saw her at a concert in Boston. The appearances are always quick, and if anyone manages to speak with her, she’ll tell them she’s doing well and there’s no reason to worry. Nobody thinks she looks sick or under any kind of influence. She still seems like the same magnetic personality that used to throw parties on a Tuesday and once bought a drum set off the back of a pick-up truck without any intention to learn how to play.

“Her old phone number doesn’t work. Why wouldn’t she still have her phone? You ask people about that and they tell you she must have run out of money. If she doesn’t have money for a phone, how is she going to bars and concerts? Someone saw her in the front row of a concert at Foxwoods two years ago. Where’d she get the money for a front row ticket? One of our friends said they saw her in a brand new car, stopped at a light in North Providence. She could never afford a brand new car. I just want to know what’s going on. Something isn’t right. If she wants to disappear, why is she still at all these local places? Why are people seeing her in Rhode Island all over the place? It doesn’t make any sense.”

But this is where I disagree.

“That’s saying all these people are right, but they can’t all be wrong either.”

Rhode Island seems like the perfect place to get lost. Any place can be, really, if you think about it. After all, what does it take to fall off the map?

“How come I’ve never seen her?”

Deactivate your social media. Disconnect your phone. Stop answering emails. Quit your job. Get a new one. Don’t tell anyone.

“If I saw her for myself, then I would believe it, but why haven’t I?”

Change where you go. Your habits. Get your coffee from a different cafe. Buy your clothes from a different store. Or better yet. Online. Do as much online as you can.

“Why does the person who wants to see her the most never see her? You would think if anybody would be seeing her, it’s me. The person who’s been looking for her all this time.”

The scary thing about loving someone is the constant hum in the back of your mind, telling you that if they wanted to, they could, at any point, disappear. Nothing keeps anybody anywhere. Not leases. Not marriage licenses. Not promises. Not the longevity of a friendship or the comfort of someone who loves you no matter how many times you walk away from them. Not the warmth of knowing that if you went missing, somebody would come looking for you.

“If I saw her, I’d tell her I’m glad she’s doing good, and I’d ask what’s going on. That’s all I want to know. What’s going on. But if she tells me it’s all good, then it’s all good and I don’t have anything else to say. I only need five minutes. That’s it. But I need to see her for myself.”

If you’re in Providence on one of these chilly October evenings, you might see a woman who looks familiar to you. You might wave at her. She might wave back. You might think she looks overdressed. In clothes that don’t quite fit her, but because of their style, not their size. You might see her sharing a cigarette with someone outside a bar. You might see her sitting outside, having a cup of coffee.

“She’s always alone when people see her. She was never alone. Never in her life was she alone.”

But it could be your mind playing tricks on you. Maybe you're not seeing what you think you are.

"I don't trust it."

As the nights arrive earlier, it's harder to tell what it is you're seeing, isn't it?

"But maybe one day I'll see her for myself."

In a city where everybody knows everybody, it's easy to think you know someone.

"That's what I pray for."

Until you realize-

"I pray for it every day."

You don't.