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# On Chapel Sands

My Mother and Other Missing Persons

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All the characters and events in this book are real.

Only one name has been changed,  
in the final chapter.

*The Beach*

This is how it began, and how it would end, on the long pale strand of a Lincolnshire beach in the last hour of sun, the daylight moon small as a kite in the sky. Far below, a child of three was playing by herself with a new tin spade. It was still strangely warm in that autumn of 1929, and she had taken off her plimsolls to feel the day's heat lingering in the sand beneath her feet. Short fair hair, no coat, blue eyes and dress to match: that was the description later given to the police.

She had come out of the house that afternoon and along the short path to the beach with her mother, Mrs Veda Elston. They had already been there for some time, with biscuits in an old tartan

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tin, digging and sieving the sand. The tide was receding when they arrived, the concussion of waves on the shore gradually quietening as the day wore on; by now the sea was almost half a mile in the distance. In this lull, on their own familiar beach, and so comfortingly close to home, Veda must have let her daughter wander free for a moment. For she did not see what happened next.

Someone moved swiftly across the beach and began talking to the little girl. Someone she perhaps knew because no sounds were heard as they coaxed her away. One minute she was there, barefoot and absorbed, spade in hand, seconds later she was taken off the sands at the village of Chapel St Leonards apparently without anybody noticing at all. Thus was my mother kidnapped.

I see the scene again and again, always trying to grasp the unfathomable moment in which she vanished and everything changed. The place where she was playing empties into air; the tide freezes; the beach turns blank. Time stands still on the shore. How many minutes before her absence begins to register, before Veda becomes uneasy and then fearful, before the silence is broken by shouting and rushing to the spot where the spade lies fallen? The waves continue their impervious lapping, gulls drifting on the surface as the afternoon fades. How long before anybody missed my mother?

\*

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I have the police report of that day. It is scant. Mrs Elston takes her daughter to the beach at or around 2.30 p.m. Approximately two hours later, the child disappears so fast that she couldn't have got anywhere near the water. Unable to find her on the sands, Mrs Elston retraces their steps, searching the path and even the house in case she might have found her way home. Neighbours help look for the child. An urgent telegram is sent to the father, who is away for work, summoning him back to Chapel.

All of this is duly reported to the police, but not until the following day; and not, I suspect, by Veda. I hear instead the brusque authority of my grandfather George. Veda appears silent with shock. All she offers, via her husband, is the possibility that the child must have wandered up the beach behind her and out of sight. She herself was sitting on a blanket, knitting or staring dreamily out to sea in the mild afternoon sun, as I imagine it, with one eye on the child, occasionally plying her with biscuits – until she just slipped out of view. Perhaps the crisis was not immediately apparent. After all, the beach at Chapel was so innocent, like the child; and her little legs could not have carried her far. But then came darkness with no trace, and more stricken searching, before Veda had to spend the first dreadful night alone without her daughter.

How could she have disappeared? The beach, to begin with, is

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completely flat. A broad street of spotless sand, scattered with angel-wing shells, it seems to stretch forever in both directions. There are no coves, dunes or rocks where an adult could hide a child; everything stands in open view.

To reach it you must walk up and over an artificial incline of heaped sand that is supposed to act as a barrier to the sea; a barrier so ineffectual that houses, cattle and villagers have been swept away in historic storms. This little embankment runs for miles along the coastline and from its top people can be seen walking far away in the distance. Tennyson, the Victorian poet born and raised not far from Chapel, was drawn back to it all through his life. 'I used to stand on this sand-built ridge,' he wrote in old age, 'and think it was the spine-bone of the world!'

Veda's mother once saw Tennyson on Chapel Sands: pressing along against the strident north-easterly winds, black cloak blowing, hat held on in brows-down melancholy.

Come over this ridge and even more surprising than the flatness is the way the sand appears to merge with the sea. The beach is tawny brown and so is the brine, because it washes over beds of clay. On a still day they become one vast continuous expanse, an optical illusion only dispelled when a chink of reflected blue sky spangles the water or a sudden gust troubles the surface.

Perhaps that stillness slowed the events of the day. Veda did not

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notice what was happening quickly enough. Nobody scrambled up that ridge in time to spot any hurriedly departing figures. Footsteps muffled by the sand, voices dispersed on the mellow sea air, all it took was a prolonged moment of parental inattention. No commotion. Nobody saw, and perhaps there were few other people there to witness the incident, for it was a weekday afternoon in October. Nor was this yet a crowded beach as it is today in high season. Black-and-white photographs from the 1920s show deserted sands or very occasional hikers in hobnail boots and straw hats buying tea from a hut by the Pulley, as they still call the narrow passage where horses once pulled cargoes of tobacco and paraffin over the ridge into the village.

The beach was always Chapel's livelihood. Boats went out for whiting, people searched for mussels, shrimped in the waves at low tide. Ships sometimes ran aground, stalled in the shallows, their debris washing fruitfully ashore. There might be wood for the fire, treasurable in those days before electricity; and on Sundays people took bags and went coaling. Stranger things turned up too. A ship running guns lost its dangerous cargo at Chapel and soldiers had to be brought in to handle the live ammunition. A case of glassware was shared out among the villagers, not a single piece shattered. And once a crate of grapefruit spilled out across the sands, odd yellow globes never seen before by anyone except Mr Stow,



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proprietor of Stow's Stores by the Pulley; where in the world had they come from?

All along the sea's margin, curds of delicate foam arrive on incoming waves. My mother used to hurl them gleefully about, risking her father's instant reproach. In winter, sea-driven winds direct from Scandinavia skim sand into the air, stinging the eyes and gritting the mouth. There are spring tides when the water feels warmer than the grey rain spattering its surface and blazing summer days when you can swim forever, it feels, along the unchanging shore. This level strand, with its inviting sea, was the great playground of my mother's youth. She went there with George, paddling in the shallow froth, clambering about the tide pools, digging holes, drawing in the sand. He took photographs of her with his Box Brownie and even in those monochrome days they show the beach at Chapel exactly as I knew it too, from the holidays of my own childhood.

Photography gives us memories we hardly knew we had: the house where we were born, our infant selves, the embarrassing clothes we once wore. But the camera is also capable of giving us memories we cannot actually have because we were not there in the first place. This rare gift, this strange illusion of *déjà vu*, characterises all of George's pictures for me. He photographs his daughter on the shore, laughing in a swimming costume I remember as pale

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lilac, embroidered with a butterfly, though of course I neither saw nor wore it. She sits in front of a bell tent with a kettle brewing on a portable stove, its meagre flame the result of the purple methylated spirits that fuelled it, and I scent that sharp stinging reek. There is a picture of her beaming at the bottom of a gigantic hole which I know George has been excavating all day, the sand damper and colder the deeper he digs into the secret innards of the beach. She is carefully seated inside, in clean clothes for the camera. I am with her, smile pinned to my face too, waiting to be lifted back out.

Every beach shot is ecstatic, and almost proverbial: my mother looks happy as a clam. Years of happiness, or so it seems, on Chapel Sands. I particularly love the sight of her perched on the shoulders of a sun-browned man who bears his load with patient resignation. She is

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about five, so tanned her eyebrows look white, and the lilac costume is nearly slipping from her thin body as she lifts her arms like a gleeful reveller at a festival. The man's name is Frank, and he is a friend of George, who is in his customary position behind the camera. But a line of apparently innocuous foam is stealing up behind them. Not many weeks after the picture was taken, Frank fell deeply asleep on an inflatable raft on this beach. The tide stole him away to his fate, a dark disappearance somewhere out in the North Sea.

All the beach photographs in the Elston family album were taken by George. He would not yield his Box Brownie to anyone

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else, which is why he never appears on the shore with his daughter. But on the other hand, neither does Veda. I did not notice these absences as a child, leafing through the illuminated treasury of my mother's early life, images to go with the stories she told, but of course they strike me every time I look as an adult. George Elston is there, recording the moment, but his wife is not. My mother has not a single memory of going to the beach again with Veda.

The photographs in the family album are few and tiny, no larger than a matchbox, in a landscape-shaped book that is barely ten inches by eight. This modest volume has only twenty-two pages, yet half of them are completely empty. All my life this puzzled me. For years I thought it was a matter of thrift; but film for a Box Brownie was relatively cheap, even for a poor family like the Elstons. In fact George appears to be selecting only the best images from many rolls of film for his album; there are rejects in the back, and considerable time passes between one picture and the next. And time is precisely what I should have noticed. There are no photographs of my mother before the age of three. There are none of Veda, George and Betty together, and the whole narrative runs out when she is around the age of thirteen. One decade in the light, then many black pages.

'Betty, Chapel'. This is written in George's firm hand on the back of these photographs of his daughter. Other people drift in

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and out of shot, nameless strangers, now forgotten. But she is always given as Betty. Except in one stray image, slipped inside the back cover of the album, never attached, that does not fit anywhere in the sequence. This picture shows my mother as a young child on Chapel Sands, but with a different name on the reverse in an unknown hand. Here she is not called Betty. She is Grace.

My mother was born on 8 August 1926 in the shadow of a windmill in a Lincolnshire village. One month later, she was christened Grace in the parish church. No father is cited on the birth certificate; the child was to be considered fatherless. At the age of three, she was passed to George and Veda Elston, given this new name Betty, and taken to live in Chapel St Leonards. The Elstons were going to be her parents now. Henceforth, she was to be considered lucky.

But she did not feel that way. As an adult she began to call herself Elizabeth, having always hated the name Betty, specifically for its associations with George. It was incredible to me, when young, that this abundantly loving woman could so have loathed her father that she would change her own name to be free of his reach. But I knew very little of her story yet, and neither did she. My mother did not see her own birth certificate until she was forty. She did not know that she was once called Grace, had no sense of her existence before the age of three. The knowledge of her early life came – and

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went – in waves over the years. Something would be established, believed, and then washed away; then it would happen all over again, the arriving wave disrupting the old in a kind of tidal confusion. Even now, in her nineties, she has no idea precisely how or why she ceased to be Grace, but I know that it was before she ever reached the home of Veda and George. She stopped searching long ago; now I must discover the truth of her story.

The name they will be calling in desperation on the sands that day is Betty – Betty Elston, three-year-old daughter of the Elstons at Number 1 St Leonard's Villas, who are well known in Chapel. George Maybrook Elston – he always signs his name in full, with some flourish – is a travelling salesman. He sells industrial textile soaps, setting off by train every Monday morning with a suitcase of samples to extol to factory managers across England all the way through until Friday. He is away on that autumn day in 1929. So Veda must try to reach him wherever he is, perhaps in Leeds or Liverpool in a commercial hotel. They do not have a telephone, and neither do any of their neighbours, so she goes to the post office at the back of Stow's Stores to send that frantic telegram. Mrs Stow offers comfort; Mr Stow gathers other villagers to join in the search. I suspect they have private thoughts about where she is, and even who might have taken her. Perhaps that is why the police are not involved until the following day. But their guesses will all be wrong.

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The hue and cry ran along the coast from one village to the next, from Chapel to Ingoldmells and Anderby Creek. If the missing child left any footprints in the sand they led nowhere, or faded out too soon. If there were witnesses who could offer something more useful than the colour of Betty's dress then they never spoke up, even when the policeman called. The first day passed with no news of her, and then another; by which stage the police could surely offer only dwindling reassurance. Three more days of agony followed. And then Betty was discovered, unharmed and dressed in brand-new clothes – now red, as if through some curious Doppler shift – in a house not twelve miles from the shore.

My mother has no memory of these events. Nobody ever spoke of them at home, in Chapel St Leonards or anywhere else. It was another half-century and more before she even learned of the kidnap.

The dead may be invisible, but they are not absent; so writes St Augustine. We carry their influence, their attitudes, their genes. Their behaviour may form or deform our own. The actions of all these villagers have affected my mother right up to this day, most particularly the behaviour of her parents and those who took her. Her life began with a false start and continued with a long chain of deceptions, abetted by acts of communal silence so determined they have continued into my life too. The mystery of what happened,

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how it changed her, and her own children, has run through my days ever since I first heard of the incident on the beach thirty years ago. Then it seemed to me that all we needed was more evidence to solve it, more knowledge in the form of documents, letters, hard facts. But to my surprise the truth turns out to pivot on images as much as words. To discover it has involved looking harder, looking closer, paying more attention to the smallest of visual details – the clues in a dress, the distinctive slant of a copperplate hand, the miniature faces in the family album.

I picture each scene, as we all do with puzzles, assembling the evidence in the mind's eye. But the habit is also involuntary. My mother is an artist, my father was an artist; it is the family profession. Every evening, after teaching at Edinburgh College of Art, my father would draw for hours in his sketchbook. These drawings took the form of lyrical abstractions of the golden mean, the cuneiform alphabet, the newly revealed wonders of the subatomic particle, occasionally a couple of highwire acrobats for his children. But recollections of the day would materialise too: a student at an easel, a bowl of spaghetti cooked by my mother, and all conceived within frames; just as her doodles during a phone call would appear as finished tableaux. She might even draw the telephone itself, with its spiralling cord, add an elaborate table, then set the table with dahlias, all while hanging on for a dentist's appointment.



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She taught me how to remember paintings in those long-ago days before I could take their image home from the museum in the blink of an iPhone: first draw the frame, then summarise the main shapes and volumes in rapid thumbnail. Rembrandt sketched a Titian in just the same way at an Amsterdam auction. Even the picturing of pictures is ingrained.

This is almost the only way that I can think, in fact. And I have thought of this day on Chapel Sands all these years, trying to imagine who took Betty – ‘presumed stolen’ is the police phrase – and how it could have happened, to gauge the force of it, the effect on her and on everyone involved. I picture Veda, bewildered, afraid, inexperienced, not long in charge of this child who is suddenly lost, perhaps never in charge of her again on the sands; George, trying to control the situation at a distance, rushing home to take charge; Betty, an inkling in blue, moving about the beach in the last of the light, and then gone. The more I have discovered, the more I realise that there was a life before the kidnap, and a life afterwards, and they were not the same for anyone.