

(This chapter was deleted from the final manuscript of I'M LOOKING THROUGH YOU. Readers of that book will probably see that the story of T.J. – which I also tried, and failed, to work into the text of SHE'S NOT THERE-- doesn't really fit into the story I was trying to tell. So the text below is presented in the same way those "deleted scenes" are included in the DVD of a film; it's nice to have a little "bonus feature"; but it's also true that if this were really all that good, it'd have been in the final, published book in the first place.

In any case, I also present it as a memorial to my friend T.J., who, however briefly, was a good friend of mine.)

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The Missing Person

By Jenny Boylan

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At about the same time we moved into the Coffin House, some friends of my parents--the Reynolds--welcomed an exchange student into their house named Li Fung. Li Fung, a grim, serious girl from Taiwan, was enrolled in eleventh grade at the local public school, where she proceeded to get straight A's. She was not as successful making friends, though, and the Reynolds occasionally

wondered whether, when no one was looking, Li Fung was lying face down on her bed and sobbing, dreaming of home.

Then, one day, Li Fung disappeared. She came home after school, went up to her bedroom to work on her homework, locked the door, and vanished. When the Reynolds called her down for dinner, there was no response, and, with a sense of rising panic, banged on her door. Mr. Reynolds eventually kicked the door open with his foot, sending the deadbolt skittering across the room.

This is what they found when they entered Li Fung's bedroom: her schoolbooks, open upon her desk; her shoes placed neatly together at the foot of her bed. Her window – this was on a third-floor room--was closed. The closet door, which held the very few articles of clothing Li Fung had brought with her from Taiwan, was slightly ajar. On her bed, open and face down, was a copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull*, which was a book popular at that time which had been written from the point of view of a bird.

The police were called in, including a pair of detectives, who checked the room for signs of forced entry. There were none. No one had propped a ladder up and climbed up to the third floor and hauled her off; no one had tampered with the lock. Li Fung had simply come home, started her homework, and turned to steam.

As I considered the mystery of Li Fung, while I did my German homework in the room with the hissing radiator, it seemed to me that the secret

of her disappearance lay in the opened copy of *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* that had been left upon her bed. My theory? She'd fallen into the book.

I knew it was a tragedy and everything; and there was no doubt that the Reynolds, whom I'd see in the days to come, drinking gin in our black living room with my parents, had been fundamentally unraveled by the turn of events. But there was a part of me that was resentful of Li Fung as well, just dissolving into nothing like that. To me it seemed she'd taken the easy way out.

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The only friend I had at Haverford for the first year was a black guy named T.J., who lived in North Philadelphia. One day, I asked T.J. if he wanted to come over to my house. He wouldn't rule it out, even though he was black and I was white. "Sure," he said. "I'll come to your damn house. What do I care?"

I told T.J. that if things worked out maybe I could visit his house in North Philly sometime, too.

T.J. shook his head. "I don't know man. You come up North Philly, they stab your ass."

"Who?" I said. "Who'd stab my ass?"

T.J. shook his head. "Who *wouldn't*?" he said, thoughtfully.

"But wouldn't you tell them," I said, "wouldn't you tell them I'm cool?"

T.J. looked surprised. "What'd I say *that* for?"

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One Saturday afternoon, my mother called up the stairs, "Jimmy, your friend is here." At the time I was wearing my sister's bra, stuffed with gym socks, and I was reading *Catcher in the Rye*. Holden Caulfield got on my nerves though. He seemed to have lost his ability to look on the bright side. There was one scene in that book I read again and again, in which he's staying at a hotel in New York and he's looking out the window and there observes a man in another hotel room putting on womens' clothes and walking around. He shakes his head, Holden, that is, at how messed up some people are. Sitting there in my sister's bra, looking for all the world like a relatively normal hippie chick of fourteen, all I could think was, *hey Holden. At least I didn't leave the fencing foils on the subway like a complete idiot.*

I heard the stairs creaking beneath someone's feet. I pulled my shirt off, unhooked the bra, stuffed it under my bed. There was a knock on the door, and once my shirt was back on, I opened it. "Hey man," said my friend. "Am I glad to see you."

"T.J.," I said. "What are you doing here?"

"I had to get out of North Philly," he said. "These dudes were *chasin'* me."

Quite frankly I was a little annoyed to see T.J. because I had, after all, been deeply involved until that moment in the serious business of being a girl and reading this novel and I resented being sucked back into some other world

without being consulted. It was also clear enough that T.J. was here for the duration – a day, maybe two. When could he go back to Philly? “I don’t know, man,” he said. “I better wait till some of this serious shit blows over.”

There were two rolled up socks on the floor next to my bed.

“What ya doin’?” T.J. said.

“Nothing.”

We walked down to the WaWa and bought a pack of Tarytons and then we hung out at the train station smoking them. We put pennies on the rails and watched a freight train smash them flat. After the train passed, we picked up the pennies, which were still warm. The pennies were no longer round, and the Great Emancipator’s features were now distorted and faint.

As we hung out at the station, I noticed that T.J. was talking, very, very quietly, to himself. I couldn’t make out what he was saying, but it was clear he had some very involved private conversation going on.

“What are you saying?”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothing.”

“Yes you are, you’re talking to yourself.”

“What do you care?”

I shrugged.

We walked back to the Coffin House, past the mansions and the tennis courts, on Somerset Boulevard. A sense of shame burned within me at the sight of flagrant wealth and privilege all around us. I wanted to say to turn to T.J., to

let him know I didn't really belong here, that my heart was actually still back in the paths of the woods in Newtown Square, where I drank from the swamp waters that gave you bosoms and fed a snake named Marbles mayonnaise sandwiches. In my heart I wondered if, as far as straight, white people were concerned, being African-American and being transgendered weren't really all that different.

In the years since this moment, I've come to understand some of the flaws in this theory. But it was something I thought a lot about when I was fourteen. When I was young, every difference seemed the same.

We came into the house through the front door, stood beneath the chandelier with the cobwebs, and looked into the living room through the big arch with the keystone. My father was sitting in a wingchair, surrounded by black walls, reading the Evening Bulletin.

"Dad, this is T.J.," I said. My father and T.J. checked each other out.

"How do," my father said, finally.

"Yo," said T.J. . "You his Dad?"

"You bet," said Dad.

"We were going to listen to some records," I said.

"Why not?" said my father.

That night we slept in the guest room, in the twin beds. I was hoping he would leave in the morning, but I wasn't sure. T.J. seemed very comfortable at our house.

Suddenly, from overhead, there came the soft sound of footsteps. I pictured the woman I had seen in the mirror, with the cold eyes and the sad face. She was pacing again.

"You hear that?" I said.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"What do you think it is?"

"Some dead guy?"

"I don't know," I said. "I think the house is haunted."

"This is some big motherfuckin surprise to you?"

"It was when we moved in."

"Shit, man. White people are always surprised they got ghosts and monsters. I tell you what. Black people never expect anything different."

I took this in. As always, T.J. made my white guilt float right to the top, like a marshmallow in instant cocoa.

"I saw a ghost in the mirror upstairs."

"Yeah? What did she look like?"

"She was old. She was looking over my shoulder."

He wasn't impressed. "That's it?" he said.

"Another time," I said. "I saw this blue mist drift across the hall."

"I seen guys with butcher knives," said T.J. .

"These are ghosts?" I said.

"No, James," he said. "These are *actual* guys."

We were silent for a while. "Don't tell anybody I told you about the ghosts," I said. "Okay?"

He laughed bitterly. "Who'm I gonna tell?"

"I don't know."

"And you don't say nothing about the guys who are chasin' me, you understand?"

"Okay."

As I lay there in the dark, I wondered if there even *were* any guys, or if, like me, his guys were at least partly made out of rolled up gym socks.

"There's this chick who's boyfriend wants to kill me," he said.

"Kill you?" I said. "Like, actually kill you?"

"Tell you what, we'll call'em T.J.'s Believe Em Or Nots. You can believe'em, or you can not believe'em, I don't give a shit."

"Why's he want to kill you?"

"Why do you think?"

"Do these guys know you're here?" I said.

"I don't know," said T.J. .

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"I mean I don't know. These are pretty bad ass guys. They might figure it out."

"You mean, like, they could come out here, looking for you?"

He made a sound like *tssk*, a sound which showed exactly how disappointed he was in me. "Don't worry Boylan. You ain't the one they want."

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I woke up to hear my mother yelling. I checked my clock. It was after midnight.

"You promised you'd be back by ten," my mother said. "You gave me your word!"

"I'm sorry," said Lydia. "I didn't want to worry you."

"I've been worried sick!" said my mother.

"I was fine."

They were standing in the hallway, my mother in her doorway, my sister in hers, having at it.

"You could have been dead somewhere. Killed!"

"Mother, stop being so paranoid!"

"You lied to me," my mother shouted.

"Can we not talk about this now!" my sister said. "Jesus Christ!"

"Don't use that tone of voice with me!"

"Then stop nagging me!"

"You're grounded, for two weeks," my mother shouted.

"Go to hell," Lydia shouted, and slammed her door. For a while I lay there in the dark, wondering what was going to happen to my sister.

In the morning, my mother was sitting at the table by herself, drinking coffee.

“What was all that shouting last night?”

“What shouting?” said my mother.

“You and Lydia,” I said. “Going at it like that.”

“We were just having a discussion,” my mother said. “Lydia disappointed us by staying out too late..”

“How come you never give me a curfew?” I asked, which was a fair enough question. My parents never told me I had to be home by a certain time, ever.

“Well it’s different with you,” said my mother, generously. “You’re the boy.”

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Then, unexpectedly, the Reynolds found Li Fung.

Mrs. Reynolds had been out in her living room, dusting, when she heard a strange, soft weeping sound. At first she thought it was a bird, trapped in the wall, but it didn’t sound like a bird. It was a human voice, although the words it was saying were not English. For a few moments, Mrs. Reynolds thought that Li Fung had come back to haunt her, to blame her for allowing her to vanish like that.

Then she realized that Li Fung was actually in the wall. She called her husband, who came home from work and knocked on the wall. Li Fung knocked

back. A few minutes later, he started smashing through the wall with a sledgehammer. The old plaster of the house gave way relatively quickly. A few minutes after that, they had a hole big enough to look through. There was Li Fung, wedged between one of the support beams and some electrical wires. Plaster dust was in her hair, and her skin was black and blue. She could barely open her eyes.

“Why Li Fung,” said Mrs. Reynolds. “What in the world are you doing in the wall?”

After the ambulance came, after the girl was taken off to Bryn Mawr Hospital and treated for lacerations and a broken leg and dehydration, the story slowly came out. Li Fung had come home from school one day, locked her door, and done her homework. She’d read a little of Jonathan Livingston Seagull, then decided to change out of her school clothes. Li Fung opened her closet door, then saw something hanging in the back. She had failed to notice that there weren’t any floorboards in the back of the closet, just exposed insulation, or perhaps she did not understand that the fluffy, cloudlike material would not support the weight of her body. In any case, she had stepped onto, and then fallen through the insulation in the back of her closet, which closed up behind her, as she fell, in slow motion, the two stories, behind the walls of the Reynolds house. She had been knocked out, briefly, then came to. When she woke up, it wasn’t quite clear where she was. Li Fung, in her weakened condition, had cried out softly from behind the insulation and plaster where she was wedged,

but the Reynolds had not heard her. She'd stayed like that for days and days before Mrs. Reynolds, by accident, heard the soft sounds of distress, in a language she did not understand.

After she got out of the hospital, she went back to school, as if nothing had happened, although it was true that she had bruises on her face and arms for a while, and she had to spend six weeks in the cast. All her friends signed their names on the plaster, along with jocular slogans like: *Li Fung! Next time take the stairs!*

One night, as my parents sat around the fireplace in their black living room, the dogs in the usual pile, my mother brought up the topic of Li Fung. We didn't talk about it in front of the Reynolds, who were deeply embarrassed by the whole state of affairs.

I was playing the *Fanfare for the Common Man* for my father, and not particularly well. "And now," announced my father. "Play it backwards."

My rendition of the Copeland was so tentative that I didn't really see what difference playing it backwards would make. So I did as I was told. My father sat there smiling and smoking, his whiskey in his hand.

"Gosh," he said, looking out the window. "Look how drunk it's getting outside."

Dad's mole had been taken off. The doctors grafted a piece of his leg onto his back. The mole was studied and examined. Then the doctors gave us their

opinion of the mole. He'd probably be fine, they said. They thought they'd gotten it all.

"Can you imagine it?" said my mother.

"Imagine what?"

"That girl at the Reynolds. All that time, trapped in the walls of your own house, and no one even knowing that you're there?"

I played the piano for my parents in their black living room. I didn't say anything, but *sure*, I thought. *Of course*. I could imagine exactly what that was like.

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About ten years later, I was living in New York, trying to become a famous writer. I was discouraged when I discovered that this project was going to take longer than I thought. I'd worked at Classics Books for a year while I worked on a novel entitled *Ammonia Quintet*, a project I suggested was a "parody of the entire world." Part of the plot involved a wizard named Fezriddle who winds up being attacked by a pack of wild waffle irons. The only possible antidote for this, the wizard learns, is to fill their mouths with batter, which you have to leave in there for a precise amount of time in order for the counterspell to succeed. How much time? *Until the steaming stops*.

I lived in a deeply scary apartment on 108th Street and Amsterdam, one floor above an S&M dungeon and, right next door, a health food store that actually sold no health food. If you walked into the store, you found yourself in

a dark space with walls painted black, and a wire fence at one end of the room with a hole in it. You slid five dollars into the hole, and a moment later, a purple hand grabbed the money. The hand was old and wizened; it looked to me as if these were the fingers of an Egyptian pharaoh, just back from the dead. After the hand with the money disappeared – like the action on some sort of antique bank--a small manila envelope containing marijuana slid out. The envelopes were stamped with the single word: HEARTBEAT.

I lived with a young filmmaker named Charlie Kaufman, who was working at the time as a production assistant on a Woody Allen film that turned out to be *Zelig*. Charlie wasn't allowed to talk about the movie, though. Woody made everyone take a vow of silence, like Ezra Pound. For my own part I was working at *American Bystander* magazine, the "*American Punch*" spearheaded by the first cast of Saturday Night Live. One weekend I was supposed to go on something called the A to Z bar tour, an annual debacle that featured a busload of comedians and writers drinking all day at twenty-six different bars.

John Belushi's sudden death that week had turned it into a moveable dirge, however, and I decided to pass. Instead, I stayed home and drank beers with Charlie Kaufman, who had had a bad day because he'd called up Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara, to whom he'd been told he might be able to sell some jokes. To Charlie's surprise, it was Anne Meara herself who answered the phone when he called, and immediately demanded that Charlie start reeling out his wares if he was supposed to be so funny, telling one gag after the other. Anne

Meara wasn't impressed with Charlie, and it's fair to say that he wasn't impressed with her either. The two of us sat around drinking beer after that, and watching *The Prisoner of Zenda* on my Aunt Nora's 1966 black-and-white Zenith television set, the same one that, many years earlier, my Uncle Sean had taken all to pieces.

When the phone rang, Charlie picked it up and stood for a moment, listening to whoever it was with some measure of confusion. Then he said, "It's for you."

"Hello?" I said.

"Is this Boylan?" said the voice.

"Yeah..."

"It's me. T.J. ." There were shouts and moans and screams in the background. "They got me locked up."

It took me more than moment to remember my old friend from the Haverford School. I hadn't thought much about him in eight years.

"T.J. ," I said. "Where are you?"

"I'm upstate. They let me use the phone." In the background, I heard the sound of someone sobbing.

"What have you been doing, T.J. ," I said, unsure how he'd found me, or what it was he wanted. "Are you all right?"

"Well I've had some problems," he said. "For a while they thought it was epilepsy, but now they say that ain't it."

"Epilepsy," I said. I tried to imagine where it was he was calling from.

"I get these fits, you know."

"Fits." Before me sat Charlie Kaufman, sitting on a red swivel chair, watching the *Prisoner of Zenda*. There was a big swordfight.

"So you ever hear from anybody back at Haverford?" he asked.

"Not really," I said. "Zero, sometimes Otto." In the background, somebody screamed again.

"How long do you have to stay – where you are?" I still wasn't sure if it was a prison or a hospital.

"Oh, I'm ain't leaving here," he said, as if the idea was humorous. "Not this week."

"What's wrong with you?" I said. "I mean, if it's not epilepsy."

"Well now see, they got stuff they know, and they got stuff they don't know. And what's wrong with me exactly is one of the things they *don't* know."

In the background, someone said something to T.J. , and he put his hand over the receiver to talk back to them.

"I gotta go," he said, after a moment.

"Yeah, well, it's – good to hear from you," I said. "I'm sorry we, you know. Lost touch." I was lying to him, though, and he knew it. I was thrilled we'd lost touch, in fact, didn't know how thrilled I'd been until he called me up and reminded me.

“Yeah,” he said, as if he were reading my mind. “Well we can just call this one of T.J. ’s Believe Em or Nots. I was just thinking about that place, is all. Haverford.”

“I believe ‘em,” I said.

“Hell, Boylan,” he said. “Back then? You were like, the only friend I had.”

“Me?” I said, thinking of the time he had held me in a strangulating headlock. “I mean-- I’m sorry.”

“Ain’t your fault,” he said.

After I hung up the phone, I sat back down with Charlie again and watched the rest of the movie on my aunt’s terrible television. Years later, when Charlie made *Being John Malkovich*, a minor part of the plot involves the Carmen Diaz character who realizes she wants to be a man. It’s all very funny, the whole transsexual business. Even *I* think it’s funny, sometimes.

I went to bed that night on my mattress on the floor. The windows, which had bars on them but no screens, were wide open into the New York summer night, and flies buzzed around my head. In the alley behind our building, German shepherds barked. People yelled at the dogs out of upper story windows, and threw glass bottles at them, bottles which smashed into a thousand pieces as they hit the cement. There was salsa music and car alarms.

From the S&M Dungeon downstairs, a young man sobbed, *Stop, please stop. I’m dying please stop.*

