

A theme of grief in missing women story

Life



Chapters of Grief

The feeling of grief overtakes people, changing their mindsets in a multitude of ways. Having the capability to transform even further into a subset of mental states, this emotion is truly difficult to capture in words. The short story “Missing Women,” written by June Spence, portrays the changing stages of grief through the characterization of the town, which displays the real-world concept of how media coverage molds the flexible minds of its viewers. Morphing before the eyes of the reader, the community starts off optimistic about the disappearance, which gradually disintegrates into a suspicion, finally evolving into a haunting disdain for the women. With the help of missing posters, billboards, and newspaper articles, the physical forms of the missing persons gradually dissolve into two-dimensional placeholders, where the images of the women are mentally erased by the town.

As each missing woman’s mysterious background is described in detail, the community revels in sheer appallment. They are especially concerned for Adelle, who is voiced to be a pure, uninvolved being in the situation. When describing the physical descriptions of the victims, Adelle is labeled as “the more academic and wholesomely cheerleadish one, willowy and fine-boned” (Spence 209). From these qualities, she is characterized as the more likeable victim, compared to the party-hard mindset of Vicki. Although “of the missing mother, Kay, and daughter, Vicki, [the town is] not so sure” (210), Adelle appears well-established in the community, with more details being known about her personal life. She possesses the aura of a simple next-door girl, with nothing to hide, her life always open for anyone to view.

Additionally, with the mention of “ her abandoned purse [with] medicine Adelle must take every day” (210), she receives a quality of vulnerability that resonates within the community. There is a convincing factor in her delicacy, in the hope that nothing too terrible can happen to a girl with such a clean slate. The idea of escape is also toyed around with, for the possibility of kidnapping and murder offer too much of a dark contrast for the light-hearted citizens. They reason, “ Still, each of the three might have had her own reasons for wanting to disappear... Running off might have been easier to contemplate as a group: the girls plotting new looks in better towns” (210), hoping that instead of a grisly reality, they will be comforted with the thoughts of a spontaneous escape. The exquisite detailing of each woman’s life plays into this thought process, displaying how the citizens of the town are all familiar with one another. The knowledge of “ Kay falling behind in her mortgage payments...police [finding] an unopened urine test kit in [Vicki’s] bureau...Adelle, the consummate perfectionist, failing precalculus” (210) appears to be known to everyone, implying that these people live in a small, close-knit town. This reinforces the hopefulness of the citizens, stating the importance of seeing the brighter side of an otherwise grim situation concerning their neighbors. The town remains trusting throughout the search on land and water, despite the passing of multiple days. Although no further leads are found, “ the surrounding woods still swarm promisingly with hunters and hounds” (210), allowing the community to come together and unite in their valiant efforts. The generosity of the townspeople is evident, as well as their ability to stand as one to take a stance on the mind-boggling mystery. With Spence’s unique first-person plural point of view, readers can clearly notice the singularity of the town, as the community states, “ All of us

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admirable, the way we rally together. We say ‘ we.’ We say ‘ our community,’ ‘ our women’ ” (210). The use of first-person plural perspective presents the audience as a part of the action, making it seem as if they are stepping directly into the town. When the missing posters are put up, the minds of the townspeople, as well as those of the readers, are molded by the media form. The posters resonate with hope, which reassures its viewers that the women are still alive and well, ultimately brainwashing them into thinking everything will return to normal if optimism is applied.

What starts off as a optimistic approach to curiosity gradually begins to evolve into an uncertainty guided by distrust and suspicion. As the extensive search comes to an end, a clue sparks up as “ an anonymous call about a box, hidden in the park, containing information about the missing women” (211) is taken. The unknown caller is an important figure, standing as a bigger, more knowledgeable being in comparison to the baffled citizens. His presence stands as a fine line between finding the missing women and leaving the town, as well as the readers, on the edge of their seats in suspense. However, when the findings of the police result in an abandoned building, people are left crushingly disappointed, as well as a bit unnerved. The town states, “ Someone who could snatch three women away without a trace might then goad the searchers. No person of authority will come right out and say so, but there it is. We feel it, huddled indoors, or venturing out in twos and threes” (211). The presence of the anonymous caller brings forth a sense of paranoia into the community — someone possessing the capability to toy with their emotions from an unknown perspective. This nameless character is transformed into a symbol of suspicion, forcing townspeople to

group up, to even tackle the simple feat of going outdoors. He reinforces a silent mandate, mocking authorities to prove they cannot control all that has gone awry. Similarly, Spence also incorporates Adelle's mannerisms to portray the suspicious curiosity within the community. When comparing her to the caller, the similarities are striking. According to her peers at school, she was described to be "unapproachable... [carrying] herself as if maybe she thought she was a little better than everyone else" (212). This contrasts with the depiction of her at the beginning of the piece, donning the wedding dress with innocence. Likewise with the morphing theme of curiosity, the image of Adelle seems to change shape in the townspeople's minds. However, the suspicions do not stop with just her. The community begins to doubt her family, stating, "Her parents start to seem a little too perfect in their televised worry... We can't help but wonder: don't they have to work? The friendly wood panels on their station wagon begin to come across as less than sincere" (212). The town is distrusting of the two, questioning their motives and over-analyzing their actions. Although the household seems genuine in their efforts to retrace the steps to find their daughter, they come off both egotistical and greedy in other people's minds. Adelle's parents only watch out for their daughter, as "[her] face appears alone on a billboard and a separate award fund is established from her college savings, [and] we say they are elitist" (212). Spence incorporates her first-person plural perspective once again, in order to display the harmful effects of media. The minds of the readers, as well as those of the townspeople, are molded into disliking Adelle's parents, which morphs their hope into suspicion. In this way, a connection is born between the characterizations of the anonymous caller, Adelle, and her parents. The narcissistic manner in which all three

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parties carry themselves ties together to affect the town negatively, forcing them to be warily hesitant of their surroundings.

As time passes, talk regarding the missing women begins to die down. A general disinterest overtakes the community, as they store their attentiveness in other hobbies. However, amongst these citizens, the mayor decides to create a shrine commemorating the missing women. In response, the townspeople are indifferent, claiming, “ We are momentarily tensed by the drama of his speech, but he is voicing sentiments of weeks ago. A belated coda. We’ve gotten on with it” (213). As the mayor stands as an authorial figure guiding the town, one would expect more respect and recognition given during his testimony. Instead, he is mocked by his own people and talked down to, despite his efforts to commemorate an unfortunate happening. In this sense, the close-minded community rejects the recollection of the missing women, leaving them to be forgotten; all of the efforts put into searching for them is essentially abandoned. Spence utilizes the first person plural point of view here once again, where the town states, “[I]n retrospect we will see that it was here the story’s last traces turned to ash” (214). Here, both the readers and the town begin to realize that news regarding the tragedy is dying down. Directly affected by the involvement of media, the two parties garner a general disinterest, propelled by the “ newspaper finally [succumbing] to investigative inertia... [when] the women’s photos are sponged from the B pages” (213). On the other hand, when the cartoonist displays her satirical artwork in the newspaper, it is taken down for being “ generally derided as tasteless” (214). Although not explicitly stated, it is implied that the entire town has reached a consensus

on the distastefulness of the piece. An ironic uncertainty lies in the community, where commemorating the women appears to be an extraneous task, but satirizing the torch suddenly becomes taboo. Since the townspeople dislike the notion of disrespecting the victims, yet do not state their care outwardly, their sincere thoughts appear to be internalized. The voiced apathy is their final form of grief, as they hide behind their nonchalant appearances while struggling to forget about the missing women in their heads. Instead of haunting the citizens through the regularly lighted torch, Kay, Vicki, and Adelle inhabit the innermost thoughts of the town. This idea is revisited at the very end of the short story, when the first-person plural voice speaks about the women reappearing in dreams. Considered to be an unspoken fantasy, the dream grimly states, “[W]e are running down a familiar forest path, hunted, and we sense them beneath the pads of our feet, planted deep in the dark green woods, bones cooling, and we wake, knowing they have been here all along” (214). Aware of the bleak reality, the townspeople keep this nightmare in their minds in silence, in constant remembrance of the past. Although erasing the past has been attempted, the town is inevitably unable to escape the grasp of the three missing women.

In conclusion, the stages of grief are separated into three different sections in June Spence’s short story “Missing Women.” The town’s reactions to essential figures throughout the piece, which are propelled by different forms of media, form the ever-changing phases created by the disappearance of the missing women. When the hopefulness of the missing posters changes into suspicion stirred by Adelle’s billboards, readers are able to see the story

take an abrupt turn. Nevertheless, the real twist occurs when the town becomes indifferent about the matter, falling into the pit of barren newspaper articles and satirical comics. The actual remorse is hidden, however, as the remembrance occurs in the thoughts of the town, opposed to word of mouth. Although the many forms of media gradually influences the community to physically forget about the missing women, the tragedy is never forgotten in their minds. The haunting thoughts of the occurrence never disappear, instead being constantly being rerun in their heads.