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# The Vanishing List

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## Introduction

Rain greets Claire Mercer at the town line, a fine, needling veil that turns the roadside maples the color of old coins. Ashgrove smells like wet apples and woodsmoke—like every fall of her childhood compressed into one breath. She lowers the window anyway and takes the sting of cold air on her cheek. The wipers drag a rhythm she used to know by heart. Somewhere beyond the ridgeline, the orchard spreads in neat rows, and the house—Mercer House, as if it were ever more than a drafty farmhouse with good bones—waits with its porch light dead and its windows dull as river stones.

The funeral is tomorrow. Today is errands: the keys from the lawyer who used to tuck butterscotch candies under the edge of his blotter, a drive past the church with its clean white steeple like a raised finger, a list in her phone of everything a daughter is supposed to remember. She parks by the back steps, the ones that groan in the same places they always did, and shoulders the door. The smell inside hits her first—damp wood, mothballs, a thread of lemon oil her mother favored—and beneath it, something colder, an attic smell that finds its way into the seams of the house when it rains.

Claire should unpack. She should call the florist, confirm the reception headcount, do all the small, necessary things that prove a life was lived and will be neatly put to bed. Instead, she stands in the kitchen and listens to the empty hum of the refrigerator and the hollow way her footsteps sound. Her recorder—habit more than plan—is in her coat pocket, a little black rectangle warm from her hand. She flips it once, twice. Not yet, she tells herself. This isn't a season. This is family. But her pulse has that investigative stutter anyway, the one that starts when a story is about to pull her under.

The attic ladder squeals when she pulls it down. Dust sifts onto her shoulders, pricks the back of her throat. Up top: a landscape of cardboard and plastic crates, the angular shadows of old furniture, a rolled rug that has puckered at one end like a tongue. The single bulb gives everything a sepia bruise. She moves by feel and memory, toeing the gaps between joists, easing aside a garment bag that still whispers with the crinkle of dry-cleaner plastic. It's cold enough to see her breath. It smells of cedar and old paper and something sweet, almost overripe, as if the attic has been saving the last note of harvest just for her.

She finds the ledger in a cedar chest no one but her mother ever opened, beneath neatly folded quilts and a box of photographs rubber-banded into decades. It doesn't look like anything at first—hand-bound, rough black linen, the spine stitched tight in small, careful crosshatches. No title, no embossing, just a thin ribbon that marks a place somewhere in the middle. The edges are soft from handling. When she takes it

in both hands, it is heavier than she expects, as if the weight of names has a physics after all.

Claire kneels on the warped plank floor and opens the book. Ink bleeds in delicate spidering from a fountain pen's nib. The dates step backward, orderly and calm, each line a cadence: a name, an age, a note so spare it might be a prayer. Thirty years. Forty. She licks her thumb to turn a page and tastes dust and iron. The handwriting modulates over time—loops tighten, slant changes, the pressure of the pen ghosts through, a lineage of hands all committed to the same task. The ribbon's place is a recent year. The paper there is still sharp under her fingertip. When she reaches it, a pale brown oval flutters free—a pressed apple slice thin as parchment, tissue-crisp. Someone slid it there as a marker, a little relic from the trees.

She doesn't mean to read ahead, but the eye does what it's trained to do. It snags on a familiar curl of a letter, on a childish abbreviation in a margin. A nickname like a pebble caught in the throat. For a second the room tilts and the attic's rafters angle like a camera frame; her breath catches in a small, involuntary sound she can't categorize as laugh or sob. Memory flashes in fragments—the shimmer of Mara's hair under stadium lights, her palms inked with doodles, the way she'd tap a pen to make a point. Claire feels a sudden ache behind her eyes. She tells herself it's the dust.

It occurs to her then, kneeling on splinters with rain ticking at the roof, how much silence can be engineered simply by writing things down where no one will look. The town is good at that: minutes approved by unanimous vote, a smile that closes a door, a thank-you note in looping script that means this is done. Claire's work—her literal work—is to hunt what hides in plain sight, to press record in the spaces where people prefer a gentle hush. But this feels different. The ledger hums in her hands, live wire under linen, and the house around her seems to lean in to listen.

She closes the book to steady herself and hears the soft rasp of the linen cover against her skin, like a whisper that could be her name. Outside, a car passes slow enough for its headlights to track across the ceiling and vanish. In the pause after, the rain deepens. Claire touches the ribbon again as if it might burn. Tomorrow, she will stand in a front pew and accept touch and condolences like a person underwater, all sound distant and distorted. Tonight, she is here with a list that has been waiting for her longer than she knew, the attic thick with breath she can almost see, the taste of apple and iron on her tongue.

She slides the ledger under her arm and climbs down, careful of the ladder's sway. In the kitchen she sets it on the table and rests her palms on either side of it, as if bracketing a body. The recorder is still in her pocket, warm, patient. She takes it out, presses it to the table, and listens to the tiny click of its button. "Ashgrove, Massachusetts," she says, her voice low, the words fogging in the cold air. "Mercer House. Day one." She doesn't say what she's really thinking—that the past hasn't just

arrived; it has been here all along, inked and waiting, a vanishing made permanent by the act of writing.

Somewhere in the house a pipe knocks, an old grievance. Claire opens the ledger again, steadier now, and lets the names line up like a path. The pages turn with a sound like the soft shuffle of a congregation rising. Outside, the orchard breathes its damp, sweet breath, and the town beyond it holds its secrets close. She leans into the pool of light, and begins to read.

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## CHAPTER ONE: The Ledger

Claire waited until the house settled. The funeral had been earlier, a three-syllable word that people wrapped in their coats and carried out the door, leaving her alone with the slow exhale of the old farmhouse. Shadows gathered in corners where the wallpaper had given up, and the tiniest crawl of refrigeration hum vibrated up through the soles of her shoes. Her mother's good china had been packed, the casseroles diverted to the homes of the newly grieving, and the lawyer had left a manila envelope on the counter containing a ring of skeleton keys and a letter that began, "Dear Claire, I regret to inform..." The rest was just legal architecture. She did not read it twice.

She did not intend to go back into the attic. But the ledger weighed on her as if the attic had placed a claim on her shoulders and would not release it until she returned. While the kettle performed its small metal scream, Claire stood in the hallway and looked up at the square hatch, the folded ladder like a tongue waiting to be stepped on. Rain hushed against the roof in an uneven pattern, the kind that forces a person to listen. She rubbed her thumb over the linen cover, felt the braille of the stitching. Then, kettle screaming again, she climbed.

The cedar chest had been her mother's sanctuary—everything in there had been officially sentimental, which meant it had been off-limits. Claire had known better than to ask questions about the scrapbooks and the letters with softened edges. The ledger sat exactly where she had left it two hours earlier, but it looked heavier now, as if the time apart had allowed it to soak up more of the attic's gloom. She lifted it, felt that odd density of paper bound into purpose. The ribbon marked a place mid-way, worn thin by a thumb's habit. When she slipped it out, it left a pale crescent of pressure on the page.

Names, dates, initials. Ink laid down with a steady hand: Linda Archer, age nineteen, initial S—S for what? Gone. A line of black ink ran through the name in a patient, deliberate slash, not angry, not rushed, simply final. The next line: Timothy B., age thirty-two, initial H. The slash again. Page after page, a roll call of absence. Claire breathed in cedar and old ink, the medicinal odor of a house that had been shut up too long. She turned the page and the paper whispered like dry leaves. The ribbon fell from her fingers and landed on the floor with the softest tick, and she did not pick it up.

It was a false name at first, a trick of the eye—the way a car's license plate reads a word for a second before correcting into letters. But the second time, the eye did not correct. Mara. Fifteen. Initial M. Date: April 13, 2017. The slash was there, the same

ink, the same hand. Claire felt her stomach flip, the drop you get on a roller coaster when the car slips a gear. She ran her fingertip over the letters, careful not to smudge. It was not the Mara of their house, not the girl who left socks on the floor and wrote song lyrics on the bathroom mirror, but the name was an artifact that belonged to her sister.

Her fingers were cold, stiff, and the attic had become a storage room for breath. She read the line again. It was impossible in the way many true things were—flat, simple, unglamorous. Three words and a date. Mara’s nickname, written by a stranger who knew it. It did not ask for explanation. It did not offer one. Claire flipped forward, then back, looking for the same handwriting she had seen earlier—loopy, generous, a bit theatrical in its tails. This entry did not match. It was precise, upright, a more disciplined hand. Someone else had written Mara into this ledger of departures.

She stood, knees cracking, and carried the ledger to the light under the single bulb, which swung slightly on its cord and made the shadows perform a slow rotation. The attic took that moment to settle, a groan of wood that sounded like a man turning in a chair. Downstairs, the house made its small complaint as well: the knock of pipe, the tick of the refrigerator relay. Claire felt, absurdly, that she was not alone, that the rafters themselves were listening. She flipped back to the ribbon’s original page, found the pressed apple slice and slid it into her palm. It was tissue-thin, translucent, still apple-sweet. Someone had wanted to hold the season there, or mark the season. It left a faint brown dust on her thumb.

She took out her phone. The screen blinked 7:42 p.m., and she had three unread texts from people who meant well and one from an unknown number she had ignored earlier. No signal at the back of the house, but the phone caught a sliver of Wi-Fi from the nearest neighbor, old Mrs. Kline, whose password was still “applepie123,” unchanged since Mara had cracked it in ninth grade. Claire opened a browser, typed in Mara Mercer Ashgrove missing. The old news items were there: the shimmering local coverage, the polite posts on community boards, the final update that felt more like a closing paragraph than a resolution. She pressed her lips together and closed the tab.

To avoid thinking, she worked, moving through the attic as if the ledger had given her tasks. She found a banker’s box labeled “MERCER—TAXES 09-12” and lifted the lid. Beneath neat files lay a stack of envelopes tied with a hair elastic. Inside, photographs slid out—some black and white, some color with the faded, orange cast of a past decade. Birthdays and barbecues, a winter with a snowman shaped like a lopsided muffin, Mara in a sleeveless dress at a town fair holding a ribbon for something she had grown in a pot. There was one of the sisters on the porch steps, arms slung around each other, squinting into a sun so bright it bleached the edges of the frame. Claire touched the corner of the photo and felt the rough drag of old paper, the slight curl of the back where it had once been taped.

She put the photos on the floor and kept looking. Beneath the photos, at the very bottom, wrapped in a dish towel embroidered with apples, was a cassette player. Cheap plastic, clear lid over the spools, a faint scuff mark on one side like a crescent moon. It was dead when she pressed play, but she found a pack of AA batteries in a tin of sewing supplies and slotted them in. The machine whirred, hesitated, then took the tape with a satisfying click. She pressed the small triangle of the play button. The reels turned. A hiss, then a voice. Not Mara's. A woman's, older, humming something tuneless, the scrape of a pen across paper, then silence. She fast-forwarded, stopped at another patch of noise. Nothing.

Claire carried the cassette player and the ledger downstairs and set them on the kitchen table. She poured boiling water over a tea bag in her mother's favorite mug, the one with a chip shaped like the state of Florida. She sat, and the chair creaked in a way that sounded like the letter R. The ledger lay closed, the ribbon tucked in, the pressed apple slice still in her palm. Outside, the rain thickened. She could see the orchard from the window if she stood on her toes—dark rows, low mist, the suggestion of trunks and branches making a geometry that had always looked like an assembly to her. She sat, and opened the ledger again.

Another page turned over with a dry whisper. The next entry after Mara's was a boy named Callum D., age seventeen, initial E. Gone, slashed. It felt too much like reading a list of the dead, except they weren't dead, or maybe they were. When you didn't know, a slash on a line could mean anything, and her mind had already decided on the worst. She pressed the apple slice flat against the table and watched it rock slightly. The kettle ticked as it cooled. The house listened.

Claire took the recorder from her pocket, set it on the table, and pressed the red button. The light blinked. She breathed out. "Ashgrove, Massachusetts," she said, voice low and close. "Mercer House. Seven fifty-three p.m. The attic. I found a ledger. It appears to be a list of people who disappeared from this town. It includes my sister." She paused, looked at the ceiling, the old water stains like maps. "I should say, it includes Mara. It's... it's a list. That's all." She stopped the recording and played it back to herself, just to hear her own words. The recorder's playback tinny, her voice unrecognizable, as if someone else had said it.

She stood and paced the length of the small kitchen—six steps from sink to pantry, six steps back. She had been a journalist long enough to know that finding a thing was not the same as understanding it. But her pulse had the hard, uneven rhythm of someone who had stumbled on a thing that had been waiting, specifically, for her. She looked out the window again, toward the orchard, and saw the faint glow of headlamps sweeping slowly along the far road that hugged the edge of the property. The lights dipped, then rose, then vanished behind the line of trees.

Her phone buzzed on the table. She reached for it automatically, expecting another condolence, another platitude wrapped in cotton batting. But the screen read: NEW MESSAGE—UNKNOWN. She tapped it open, thumb hovering over the block button. The message was not long. It was not a picture. It was not a threat in the way she had learned to recognize threats, with tone and volume and intent. It was typed in a small field, black on white, without color or ornament.

Stop digging.

The words sat there, unexplained, their urgency hiding in their neatness. She stared at them long enough for the screen to dim, then brighten again when she tapped it. Her thumb hovered over the reply icon. She did not type. She set the phone face down, and the kitchen felt suddenly smaller, the windows more like eyes. She reached for the ledger, not to hide it, but to keep it close, her palm flat on the cover.

Outside, a branch scraped the siding in a long, rhythmic shush, like a hand passing over the same spot again and again. The rain lifted, became a more insistent conversation. The headlamps did not return. She slid the phone into her pocket and pressed the recorder once more, just to have a voice in the room. "Unknown number," she said, quiet, factual. "'Stop digging.'" The click of the button sounded very loud. She held the ledger against her ribs, and waited.

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