

The Boy in Halftone Dots

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Memorialized in black-and-white halftone dots on the side of a milk carton, was the visage of a ten-year-old boy. His photo from the school year prior lived beneath a single imposing word, “Missing.” This was not a unique occurrence. Countless other children who had gone missing in the weeks and months before had been printed on the blank cardboard cartons of milk. But no one cared.

Under the guise of a public service, the Oklahoma City Department of Produce and Dairy had received massive federal tax breaks after printing and circulating black-and-white photos of vanished boys and girls onto milk cartons. The company’s increase in profit had not been purely tax related, as grocery stores which stocked milk provided by the department had reported a surge in people purchasing extra milk cartons by the dozens. The uptick in sales could have seemed like a collective act by a concerned community, buying more milk in hopes the spread of a child’s image would help return the missing juvenile to their family. But, at the end of the day, despite all the printings, few children were found, and more children kept disappearing. Yet, no one cared. Some by virtue of disregard, others by vainly believing their patronage to a massive dairy conglomerate would reunite lost kids to their families; but most did not care because they could not care. All the vanished children were ghosts to the affluent citizens in the surrounding area. Those who went missing came from low-income and broken homes, where violence and emotional unrest was seen as their status quo to those on the outside.

The newspapers were quick to report on every missing child, especially after the unearthing of the ten-year-old boy’s corpse. Not only was it uncommon for a missing child to be found, but the familicide perpetrated by the boy’s father further tantalized journalists into plastering the story across the local newspapers. Eyes were rolled by the paper’s readers in a superficial reaction of shock and disgust. And then they turned the page, because regardless of the displays of brutality, bloodshed, or abject human depravity, no one cared, and every other day like clockwork, they went to their local market to buy the milk cartons.

The lines at the tiny, local, grocery store had been considerably longer, considering the relatively small size of the community it served. Among the sea of queued up jaded and exhausted adults, queued in line, stood an outlier. A boy who no one could get quite a good look at. When it was his turn to go up to the cashier to buy his milk, his stubby legs raised him up to

less than eye-level with the checkout stand. The only characteristic of him seen by the cashiers was the top of his curly, brown-haired head, and the dirty hoodie he wore which obscured all angles of his face, except for the very front. The boy was known more by his stench than anything else. Gil always stunk of spoiled milk.

Gil's classmates found him odd. He was a runtish kid for his age, often bullied for his stature. By every definition of the word, he was an outsider. Completely lacking any friends, acquaintances, or social remarkability. Gil's ostracization from the rest of the kids his age made him almost invisible. He had a stark apathy for schooling, notably more intense than the rest of his preteen peers. Exemplifying Gil's negligence towards schooling and social invisibility was his serial absenteeism, and complete disregard for punctuality whenever he did show up to school.

Gil shoved himself through the unlocked door, with three cartons of milk embraced by his unwashed hands. Gil never bothered to remove his shoes when he entered the house, nor did he bother to announce when he got home. He knew that no one would be there to scold him for tracking mud, and no one would be there to hear him if he declared his presence. The start of the year had marked Gil's newfound obsession with the photos of the missing children. He had first noticed the phenomenon when a yearbook photo of a classmate had appeared in the tightly dotted monochromatic printing on the side of a milk carton. Gil remembered this boy from years before, as one of the only kids in his class who did not pick on him for his height. He remembered the boy as someone who he felt safe with, someone who he called a friend.

A pair of rusted dressmaking scissors sat on the kitchen counter's filth-caked surface. Gil habitually used these scissors to puncture the carton of milk and carve a crude square cutout of the missing child's print. The milk would usually spill everywhere while he did this, and Gil never cleaned it up. The spoiled floor-milk had become one with the kitchen, eroding every wall with the stink of an abandoned morgue, and discoloring the once spotless tile floor into a sickly, jaundiced yellow. After three cartons of milk had been thoroughly dismembered, Gil added the photos of the missing children to his uneven accumulative stack of warped photo cutouts.

Admiring the collection of cutouts, Gil set each of the cardboard rectangles out on his kitchen table, counting every card he laid out. Forty-seven unique missing children, sprawled out on a cluttered table in front of the boy. Gil had begun sorting the cards from his oldest collected to his newest, he could tell their age by the intensity of yellowing on the once white carton

cutouts. As he finalized the layout of the cards, Gil heard a sharp knock at his door. Gil's lack of sociality conditioned him into locking up in the presence of humans. Yet, an acute curiosity formed in Gil, and wanting to know what unknown was standing behind his door. From his chair in the kitchen, Gil stood up, approached, and unlocked the door.

The milk delivery to the local market the next day was exactly on time. Among the cartons of the chilled beverage loaded into the refrigerators, three missing children accompanied the sides of the container. All with names, descriptions, and phone numbers to contact, except for one. The imposing "Missing" text was present on this outlier, but there was no name, nor phone number connected to the milk-carton-memorialized black-and-white halftone dot print of Gil's yearbook photo.