



Gone Missing
Anthology Introduction

A friend of mine's daughter once came to him in a panic and asked quite stricken, "Is *this* it?" She was five at the time and not necessarily so precise, so my friend asked her to clarify. "THIS," she said with a gesture meant to encompass a great deal – life, the present, reality, "All of this. Is *this* all there is?" And then she wept, inconsolably. Perhaps she was paraphrasing Peggy Lee's classic song of life as a series of disappointments, "Is *that* all there is?" Hearing this story struck a chord with me. I felt like I'd been asking myself the same question—consciously or unconsciously—since I was about...five.

I don't know if it hit me with the force of an epiphany, as it did with my friend's daughter, but somewhere around age five I realized that existence was not an infinitely expanding universe of wonder and possibility but was instead a concrete, structured daily experience of time, space and predictability (not to mention other people's horrible children). And around this time I have my first memories of genuine sadness, of feeling a sense of loss that was more than just ice cream falling on the sidewalk. This feeling told me that from now on, consciousness would be a constant struggle between the possibilities of the imaginary and the disappointment of actual living. And this grieving for lost possibilities is something that has replayed itself throughout my life in different forms. Sometimes it's attached to the breakup of a relationship. Sometimes it's the memory of a particular landscape or simply a lost object. Whatever the stimuli, the emotional experiences are largely the same, varying in intensity, but always familiar. It's a feeling of suffering but also a sensation of being awake again, back in the world, fully myself and connected to other people. It is a seeming contradiction. In this state of grief, aware of the temporary nature of all things, I somehow become fully alive again. To quote Dr. Palinurus from *Gone Missing*, "It is both a pleasure and a pain." I think that's part of why we treasure our losses despite the suffering, or more accurately, *because* of the suffering.

Each of us at some time has that special loss. We tell ourselves stories about it, and that at least gives an outline to the absence. Our stories provide some dotted line around the thing that's missing, the life that could have been, the love and tenderness that somehow turned into pain and anguish. In creating *Gone Missing*, I wanted to find a way into that space. I wanted to learn if the mechanics of loss and grief were significantly different in other people. Or do we instead all just have different names and objects tagged to the various holes in hearts, with the nature of the holes themselves being more or less the same? And is there a way that we as a society remember lost things that can tell us

something about how we live now? Could these holes somehow make a map of absences that would describe the territory that encompasses both “all there is” and “all there might have been?”

These were some of the questions I had in mind when I began working with The Civilians to create *Gone Missing*. The rules were simple. Each company member conducted a series of interviews and listened to other people’s stories about lost objects. No stories of lost people were allowed. Pets were ok. The other rule was that the thing had to have truly “gone missing,” meaning that there was some question or mystery connected to the loss. A sock that disappeared in the laundry could count. An apartment that was destroyed by fire wouldn’t.

Over a period of several months, the members of the company gathered stories first hand in coffee shops, at bus stops, in retirement centers. Some of the subjects were relatives, some are friends, but most were complete strangers. We also interviewed “finders,” the people who have to deal with all the lost stuff. These interviews became the text for the show, and the actors of the company play the people they’ve interviewed. It’s important to mention that as a part of this process we didn’t take notes or record anything during these interviews. Whatever’s spoken is committed to memory and written down later, and the words are inevitably altered somehow by the listener. So we don’t identify anyone by name, as the character is not exactly them. It is an impression of them interpreted by a performer, as accurate as possible but--like all perceptions--subjective.

Responding to these interviews, composer Michael Friedman and playwright Peter Morris wrote original material resulting in the nine songs of *Gone Missing* and the radio interview between our host Teri and Dr. Alexander Palinurus, author of *Losers Weepers: A Cultural History of Nostalgia*. While the NPR-esque radio interview is a fiction, the facts are true and somehow all of these questions of loss and memory are indeed intimately connected to the lifecycle of the eel. I don’t know why.

As a maker of theater, I am predisposed to being curious about other people. Perhaps it’s merely *schadenfreude*, but I love listening to other people’s problems, especially strangers. I’m fascinated by how people talk, how they move, how they tell a story. This is the basic premise behind the work of The Civilians. All of our projects begin with that first step of going outside of oneself and seriously considering the existence of another human being. It’s almost always a surprising experience. When you sit down and let someone reveal themselves to you, you realize that people are never exactly what they seem. Your perceptions open up and in this moment the “possibilities of the imaginary” side of existence scores a point against the “disappointment of actual living.” That’s a big part of why I create our shows, to have this opportunity to get a

glimpse into another person's life and remind myself that what I think I know is much, much narrower than the real phenomena of existence in all its sad, sweet, cruel and strange beauty. And hopefully, by glimpsing into other people's losses and looking at what's "gone missing," we might think that we in fact do not bear our various holes and hurts alone. And that perhaps this empty space we carry inside is not something that will ever be completely filled or satisfied, but it is in fact part of what it means to be alive in the world and may be a quite necessary ingredient of living compassionately. And that perhaps this is indeed "all there is."

— *Steve Cosson*