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A Novel

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Advance praise for The Act of Disappearing

“An exquisite exploration of motherhood and madness and the cost of withholding the truth from generation to generation. Gower’s characters are bursting with life, and the sly way he unravels the mystery at the heart of the story is sure to surprise. Hauntingly beautiful.”

—Fiona Davis, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Lions of Fifth Avenue*

“A thrilling story, remarkably told, Nathan Gower’s debut *The Act of Disappearing* is as propulsive as it is moving. A mystery lies at the heart of this novel, but Gower also never loses sight of the humanity of his characters in his honest portrayal of parenthood, family, and mental health.”

—Lara Prescott, *New York Times* bestselling author of *The Secrets We Kept*

“*The Act of Disappearing* is a perfectly calibrated balance of propulsive suspense and elegant prose, resulting in a complex and beautifully written debut. The novel introduces readers to compelling characters and conjures different time periods and places so vividly that they will feel the real world is falling away as they disappear into its pages.”

—Silas House, author of *Lark Ascending*

“Set in rural Kentucky and Brooklyn, Nathan Gower’s *The Act of Disappearing* is a cinematic, suspenseful literary page-turner rich with memorable and lively characters. A remarkable novel about a community’s secrets and silences, familial inheritances and myths, and the power of sharing hidden stories.”

—Carter Sickels, author of *The Prettiest Star*

“*The Act of Disappearing* broods on identity, small-town secrets, multigenerational legacies, and the claims we have to our own and others’ stories. Indelible, charismatic characters—Julia White and Kate Fairchild chief among them—propel Nathan Gower’s intricately plotted cold-case

mystery. A beautifully imagined, splendid debut.”

—K. L. Cook, author of *Marrying Kind*

“Nathan Gower’s *The Act of Disappearing* masterfully alternates two suspenseful storylines that will keep you up turning pages straight to the stunning end. This is a remarkable debut!”

—Jessica Anya Blau, author of *Mary Jane*

“Nathan Gower takes us to the most intimate spaces of his characters’ lives, with the rich prose, tolerance, and page-turning realism of a young John Steinbeck.”

—Simon Van Booy, author of *Night Came with Many Stars*

“This is a saga of a small-town girl, dutiful and kind—perhaps more than most—whose life is made unbearable by what are now nearly by-gone mores. Whatever the current standards oppressing those who are finding their own way, *The Act of Disappearing* stills a moment of time with all the poignancy of a Shakespearian tragedy.”

—Sena Jeter Naslund, author of *Ahab’s Wife*

“In tightly woven dual timelines, Nathan Gower conjures a complex mother/daughter plot that spans decades and geographies, yet one reality abides: even the most hallowed institutions and time-honored scripts will limit and even deform women’s lives. In Gower’s vision, however, and in the mystery this novel unfolds, women can vault beyond the destinies written for them. This is a book of hard-biting realism and tender mercies. A triumph for its writer.”

—Elaine Neil Orr, author of *Swimming Between Worlds*

“*The Act of Disappearing* is a riveting read. The characters—from both timelines—haunted me and made it difficult to do anything else until I learned their full, true stories. Full of secrets and yearnings, this book examines many different kinds of inheritance and connection. Gower’s

writing is gorgeous and the plot adeptly woven with unexpected twists. This is a fantastic debut, and I'm already eager for what he writes next."

—Katrina Kittle, author of *Morning in This Broken World*

"Nathan Gower takes readers on a mesmerizing journey through time and emotional turmoil in *The Act of Disappearing*, a poignant story that blends history and personal struggle. Gower's skillful storytelling keeps readers engaged and invested in Julia's journey as well as the characters from the past. With each turn of the page, the characters became more real, their struggles and hopes more palpable. This novel is thought-provoking and beautifully written. I found myself both satisfied and saddened when I got to the final page. Gower's voice is one that we did not know we were waiting for, but now that it is here, we will all be waiting with bated breath for his next work of fiction."

—Angela Jackson-Brown, author of *When Stars Rain Down*

Nathan Gower is Professor of English at Campbellsville University. He holds an MFA in fiction from Spalding University and a PhD in humanities with an emphasis in aesthetics and creativity from the University of Louisville. He lives with his family in central Kentucky.

The Act of Disappearing

Nathan Gower



For Rochelle, always

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THE PHOTOGRAPH

All cameras capture the dead.

The shutter opens, consumes the light, creates the image: an illusion, the ghost of some former self, what *was* but can never again *be*. The same person is never photographed twice.

That's where we start—with a photograph, the end of one life, the beginning of another.

The date printed on the back is July 4, 1964.

See the glossy surface of the front, the train bridge stretched across the Ohio River. Notice the brilliant bursts of fireworks against the fallen dusk, curtains of light threatening to drape the truss of the bridge. Now look down to the bottom-right corner: see the tiny figure of a woman suspended in air—captured in the liminal space between life and death—falling to the black waters below.

If you squint, you may even see what she holds in her arms, crushed against her chest with the shattering force of a mother's love: a swaddled baby.

* * *

My name is Julia White. This is not my story.

PART ONE:

THE RABBIT NEST

1

A dead body is a haunting thing. Every time I close my eyes, the onslaught of memory: blue-white skin and twisted limbs, bulbous eyes, and purple lips—my mom’s corpse lying stiff in her Poughkeepsie apartment, an empty pill bottle atop the note on her nightstand. Most days I can forget. But today, on the three-year anniversary of her death, the swell of grief crushes my ribs, an inflating balloon that refuses to burst.

Right now, I need my mom more than ever. I’ve been on mental health leave from work for the past few weeks, but now I’m back at the Sundowner bar in Brooklyn. Inside, the blue-black darkness is a salve against the hard light of the city. An hour into my shift I have stirred myself into negronis and Manhattans, shaken my regrets into gimlets and margaritas. Then some guy sporting an ironic fedora orders a dirty martini—Ryan’s drink. I reach for the olive brine, but it’s too much. Pinprick sweat gathers at my temples. I rush to the closet-sized bathroom behind the bar before my knees give out. Kneeling on the filthy terracotta floor tiles, I retch out the remnants of a blackberry smoothie, seedy and blood-purple. I wipe the seat of the toilet with a paper towel, rinse my mouth, check my mascara. As soon as I get back to the bar, Myra pulls me aside, tucks my hair behind my ear.

“Jules, honey, you don’t have to be here,” she says. Her voice holds the authority of a bar manager and the concern of a roommate. She’s both, so it works.

“Of course I do.” I can barely afford to eat, let alone help Myra pay the rent. Sure, our little Crown Heights studio is *Brooklyn cheap*, but it’s still Brooklyn.

“Look at me, babe.” Myra tilts my chin, catches my eyes. “It’s okay if you’re not ready. Give yourself time.” The jaundice glow of the bar cuts across her skin, splitting her into shadow and light. The silhouetted hook of her nose, the curvature of her ear—my brain morphs her face into a mirage of Ryan. I try to edge past her, but she won’t budge.

“I can’t—” I start, but I don’t know what comes next.

Myra pulls me into her, kisses my forehead. “We’ll talk about it later. If

you insist on staying, then get that guy another old-fashioned.” She nods toward an old man sitting alone in my favorite corner of the bar—the dead zone where you can drink in the shadows, hiding from the incessant hum of electric light.

* * *

I serve the old-fashioned but don’t say anything—nobody chooses to sit in the dead zone if they want to make small talk. By the time I come back to the other side of the counter, two emo-looking dudes are whisper-yelling about something.

“I swear to God, that has to be him,” one of them says. His lip piercing is infected—cherry red, encrusted. My stomach lurches.

“Twenty bucks says it isn’t,” says the guy next to him. I try to ignore them, but I have to grab a jar of Luxardo cherries from under the counter, so I come into their orbit.

“Hey, help us settle something,” says Mr. Infection. It isn’t a question, but a demand. “That guy over there,” he says, stealing a glance at the man in the corner sipping his old-fashioned. “Is that who I think it is?” I want to tell them both that I’m not in the mood to referee their little boy battle. But I need tips, so—

“It would help if you tell me who you think he is,” I say. He looks back one last time, then leans in close.

“Jonathan Aster,” he says, just above a whisper.

I have no idea who Jonathan Aster is. Well, that’s not entirely true. His name floats in the ether of my consciousness the same way it does in most New Yorkers’. The idea of him—his fame, his mythos—these things I know. But I couldn’t pick him out of a lineup, and I certainly don’t know why he would be ordering drinks in our seedy little hipster bar. Jonathan Aster probably has *SoHo penthouse* money. I’m sure he could find a nice top-shelf bourbon in Manhattan without needing to cross the bridge.

“Okay, so I’m totally sorry about this,” I say, serving the old man another drink. I gesture to the guys at the counter. “But those two goth wannabes over there think you’re Jonathan Aster, and they’re not going to leave me alone until I find out.” He eyes the two dudes on the other side of the bar, stirs his drink.

I wait for him to answer. He doesn’t.

“So, I mean—are you? Jonathan Aster?” The man studies my face, tilts his head. He leans forward out of the shadows, giving me the best look at him I’ve had all night. His iron gray hair curls at his ears, frames his angular face. His emerald eyes pop against his black suit, his silver tie. He looks to be pushing seventy, maybe even older—but he’s controlled, assured. He stands slowly, moves to the other side of the table, pulls out a chair.

“Care to sit with me?” he says. He moves back to the other side, slides into his seat, takes a drink. Saliva rushes against my tongue the way it does just before I puke. The scorch of vomit threatens my throat, but I’m able to choke it back down. Whether he’s Jonathan Aster is no matter—I know the type of man he is. I slide the chair back under the table, the legs hitting the metal pole underneath with a *clank*.

“And then what?” I say.

“Pardon?”

“I sit with you, and then what? You buy me a drink?”

“If you’d like.”

“So I just walk off my job and have a drink with you. And then—what’s next? You tell me about your job? Your money? Your power? Maybe I reach across the table, brush my fingers over your knuckles.” I cock my head, study his face. “And then we have another drink, and another, and another. Pretty soon you’re hoping I forget that you’re old enough to be my grandfather. Maybe I go home with you. Am I on the right track here?”

“You have quite an imagination,” he says.

“Maybe.” I lean across the table, get right in his face. “But look me in the eye and tell me you don’t think you’re three steps away from buying access to my body like it’s just another cocktail.” His eyes widen, an animal caught in a snare. He sips the dregs of his bourbon. The liquor shimmers on his upper lip.

I start to leave, but no—I won’t give him the satisfaction. I won’t be made to feel crazy. Not tonight.

“Here’s the thing,” I say, locking eyes with the old man. “I don’t care who you are. I’m paid to serve you drinks, not to stroke your fragile masculinity. You want to impress someone with your mystery and intrigue? Try those two fanboys at the bar.”

“Fair enough.” He holds a hand in front of him—a flag of surrender. I collect his empty rocks glass and turn to leave. “But could I ask you to do me one small favor?” I would ignore him, but then he adds one word, one that

sends pinpricks down my spine: “Julia.”

I freeze. Slowly, I turn back to him.

“How do you know my name? Who are you?” He reaches into the leather messenger bag at his feet, pulls out a paperback book. When I see the cover, my face catches fire. I pull back the chair, take a seat.

“I am Jonathan Aster,” he says, placing a pen atop the book. “And if I’ve found the right woman, you’re Julia White.” He flashes a smile, crinkling the skin around his eyes. “Would you do me the honor? Please?” He extends the pen to me, opens my book to the cover page.

* * *

I can’t say anything for an eternity—maybe two full minutes—so I sit, stunned, listening to one of the world’s most famous art photographer drone on about how much he loves my little book.

“It’s remarkable, really—the blending of genres. I’ve never seen anything like it.” He thumbs through the dog-eared pages, then flips back to the note before the prologue. He raises a finger with a dramatic flair, reads my words back to me: “*What follows is both real and imagined, history and myth, fact and fiction. The truth of this story belongs to me—and hopefully to my mother. Beyond that, I make no promises.*”

He looks at me with wonder in his eyes. “Simply marvelous,” he says. I’m lost in the moment when I feel a hand against my shoulder. I flinch.

“Sorry, love,” says Myra. “Didn’t mean to scare you. Just checking to see if we need anything over here.” She smiles at Aster, but then looks to me, cocks her eyebrow in a way that asks, *Is this creepy old man threatening you?*

“We’re good,” I say, placing my hand on top of Myra’s. “Just give me a sec and I’ll be back at the bar.” The two goth fanboys are gawking, but I avoid their eyes. Myra waves me off.

“Take your time.” She regards the book on the table. “Who am I to keep you from your fans?” She nudges my shoulder, walks away. I look back to Aster, but I don’t know how to proceed.

“Listen, Mr. Aster—” I start.

“Jonathan. Please.”

“I’m sorry about earlier. I just—” I stop, gesture around the room as if it holds an explanation. A man walks through the front of the bar, and for a split

second, I think it's Ryan.

"You're a woman who works in a dark room full of men," he says. "No apologies needed." Tears threaten my eyes. Grief pools inside me, an inkblot spreading through the chest.

"So, how about that drink?" asks Aster. "Is that allowed?"

"I don't drink," I say reflexively. I realize only after I say the words that I am telling a half-truth.

"A bartender who doesn't drink? Seems like a story waiting to be told." I grab a cocktail napkin from the table, dab my eyes.

"Why are you really here?" I ask. "I mean, I'm flattered you've read my book—really, I am. To be honest, I'm not even sure how you found it."

"You can find anything if you know where to look."

"Sure. But it's not exactly topping any Google searches. My little indie publisher says I've sold an astounding 376 copies." Instantly, I'm transported back to the night of the book launch last month, memories skipping across my mind's reel like jump cuts in a movie: my slackened face in the dirty bathroom mirror. Ryan's greedy hands across my chest, my hands pawing at his shirt. My bare back pressed against the cold concrete wall. Hot breath against my ear. The tug and pull of dry skin. I try not to blink. My throat constricts. "The fact that you've found a copy can't be a coincidence," I say, willing myself back to the present moment.

Aster pushes the book in front of me, extends the pen in my direction once again. It's clear he isn't going to talk until I comply. I take the pen, swoop my signature below my printed name on the title page. Aster studies the signature and smiles.

"I'm here because I need your help," he says. "With a job."

"A job?"

"Or an assignment, if you prefer."

"I don't prefer anything. I'm just trying to figure out—"

"I want you to write a book for me." He says this without a sliver of irony, which is enough to make me laugh out loud, despite everything. Aster holds his glass in the air, gestures toward the bar for another drink. I must be making an incredulous face because he adds, "Is the idea really that absurd? That I would ask a writer to write a book?"

I'm forced to gather myself. "Look, Mr. Aster, you seem to be a sincere person."

"I like to think so."