

Disappearance in a Mid-Sized Town

The truth is, no one really gave a shit about Leroy Samuelson until he disappeared. He wasn't particularly interesting—he had lived in the same house all his life, gone to school with the same kids for thirteen years, graduated and taken a job at a diner in the center of his mid-sized town. He'd been working there for six years, sleeping in his childhood room, and kind of seeing a girl from his high school class when one day, without warning, he was gone. And while Leroy Samuelson wasn't particularly interesting, his town was the kind of place people rarely leave, much less vanish from.

But vanish Leroy did, on a warm night in mid-April sometime between the end of his shift at the diner and the beginning of the Angels game. We know this because his mother had cooked his favorite meal in anticipation (Kraft mac and cheese with ketchup and a hardboiled egg) and set it out on the coffee table at 7:55. She turned on the TV at 8:00. When he wasn't home for the first pitch nine minutes later, she got the police on the phone.

Drastic, one might say. Dramatic. And they used those words when they found out, the neighbors and the grade school teachers and the shopkeepers and the coworkers. They said she was overreacting. But if nothing else, Amalia Samuelson knew her son, and she knew he would never miss an Angels game.

It became clear in the coming days, when Leroy missed two shifts and a date with his kind-of girlfriend Emily, that his mother had been correct. And as the police combed the streets and missing person ads were run in the daily paper, Leroy Samuelson's mid-sized hometown was turned upside down.

And the truth is, most people hadn't thought about Leroy Samuelson in a long time. There was always a nod of recognition when they saw him on shift at the diner or wandering the aisles of the supermarket, but there was never any serious consideration of his character. This all changed when they turned on the local news one night and newscaster Jennifer Ellis, who grew up around the corner from Leroy, appeared on screen to announce his disappearance. Her simple statement ("Local resident Leroy Samuelson has been reported missing. Any information regarding his whereabouts should be reported to the police.") seemed to trigger a collective refresh of the town's memories. Everyone, it seemed, had something to say.

"Leroy was such a good guy," former classmate Abby Sullivan told a friend over coffee at the local Starbucks. She had spoken to Leroy exactly once, when he'd handed her back a dropped pencil in freshman year biology. But her eyes filled with tears as she sipped her cappuccino and tried to recall the sound of his voice.

"Hey buddy, hope you're okay!" began a post on Leroy's Facebook wall from a neighbor named Chris Gillan. Chris was a former linebacker a few years older than Leroy, and in fact he had stolen Leroy's cafeteria lunch on more than one occasion. But this was all forgotten as Chris poured his heart into a sixty-character social media message. "We're worried about you back here! Come home!"

“Leroy was my first kiss, you know,” Sarah Graham confided to her sister, referring to an incident in third grade PE when she and Leroy dove for the ball at the same time and ended up smashing their faces together. This collision had knocked out the last of Sarah’s baby teeth and broken Leroy’s nose, but only the most romantic details survive the test of memory.

Other reflections on Leroy came from his boss at the diner, who described Leroy as a “dedicated worker” even though he had nearly been fired twice. There was a loving Instagram photo and lengthy caption from kind-of girlfriend Emily, declaring her love and worry and asking for Leroy to be kept in everyone’s thoughts and prayers.

The only one with nothing to say, it seemed, was Amalia Samuelson. Interview requests from the press were met with slammed doors; casseroles delivered by the neighbors were left on the porch to rot; a call from Emily was reportedly answered with a curt “Who are you?”

It went on this way for weeks, with everyone who had ever even seen Leroy remembering the person they thought he was. It became unclear whether they thought him to be missing or dead. After two months, the police stopped looking. After three the candles and flowers began to appear on the sidewalk outside of Leroy’s home. Four and Emily started dating Chris the former linebacker. Five and his mother started getting her groceries delivered. Everyone forgot her face.

And then, six months after he disappeared, in a mid-sized town two counties over, in a diner much like the one where he had been employed, Leroy Samuelson was found watching the first Angels game of the season with a bowl of Kraft mac and cheese, ketchup, and a hardboiled egg. The waiter who called the police said Leroy had been coming in for weeks, but it had taken a while to recognize him from the pictures on the news.

“He looks just like a guy I knew in high school,” the waiter said with a shrug.

The next day, Leroy came back. But despite the fanfare surrounding his disappearance, the streets were silent when he passed through the city limits. Abby Sullivan realized that she had forgotten not just Leroy’s voice, but also his face. Sarah Graham examined the box of baby teeth on her nightstand, lost all at once in the third grade. The owner of the diner where Leroy worked penciled him in for the next morning’s shift. Emily abruptly dumped former linebacker Chris (who suddenly remember why he’d hated Leroy all those years ago) and made reservations at a restaurant she and Leroy used to kind of enjoy. No one could really remember why they’d remembered Leroy Samuelson at all.

The last interest in Leroy’s disappearance and return came from newscaster Jennifer Ellis, who was parked outside Leroy’s childhood home at 8:00 the evening he arrived. She asked him why he’d left and he stood for a moment on the porch, swaying, his face vaguely troubled. Finally, and slowly, he said, “I’m sorry, I guess I don’t know. I didn’t really realize I was gone.” Then he stepped inside and closed the door. His mother was at the store buying Kraft mac and cheese and there was another Angels game on tonight. First pitch was in seven minutes. He couldn’t miss it.