

A Brother Lost

Ashley Womble

1 Like any New Yorker, I was no stranger to homeless people. I passed by them on my way to the shiny glass tower where I worked for a glossy women's magazine: the older lady perched atop a milk crate in the subway station, the man curled up in a dirty sleeping bag and clutching a stuffed animal. They were unfortunate ornaments of the city, unlucky in ways I never really considered.

2 Until one hot summer day in 2009 when my little brother Jay left his key on the coffee table and walked out of his house in West Texas to live on the streets. In the days that followed, I spent hours on the phone with detectives, social workers, and even the FBI, frantically trying to track him down. A friend designed a "Missing" poster using the most recent picture I had of him; he was wearing a hoodie and a Modest Mouse T-shirt, a can of beer in his hand and a deer-in-headlights expression on his face. I created a Facebook group and contacted old acquaintances still living in our hometown of Lubbock, begging everyone I even remotely knew to help me find him. No luck. If it had been me, a pretty young white woman, chances are my face would have been all over the news—but the sudden disappearance of a 20-year-old guy with paranoid schizophrenia didn't exactly warrant an Amber Alertⁱ.

3 In the year and a half that mental illness had ravaged my brother's mind, I'd learned to lower my expectations of what his life would be like. The smart kid who followed politics in elementary school probably wouldn't become a lawyer after all. Instead of going to college after high school, Jay became obsessed with 9/11 conspiracy theories. What began as merely eccentric curdled into something manic and disturbing: he believed the planners of 9/11 were a group of people called "the Cahoots" who had created a 24-hour television network to monitor his actions and control his thoughts. Eventually, his story expanded until the Cahoots became one branch of the New World Order—a government whose purpose was to overturn Christianity—and he had been appointed by God to stop it.

4 This made it hard for him to act normal, even in public. He'd lost his job busing tables after yelling "Stop the filming and hand over the tapes!" to everyone dining in the restaurant. Having friends or even a coherent conversation wouldn't be possible unless he took the antipsychotic medication he'd been prescribed while he was in the mental hospital. A legal adult, he was allowed to refuse treatment—and he did. Otherwise, the Cahoots would win.

5 I counted each day he'd been missing until they became weeks, until the number was so high I wondered if he was even still alive. That number was about the only thing I continued to keep track of. Dirty clothes and dishes piled up at home. I missed deadlines at work, and I got out of bed only if it was absolutely necessary. I cried often, but especially during thunderstorms—a reminder that wherever my brother was, he was unprotected. Eventually, it became clear that I was losing it too. So I did what my brother wouldn't allow himself to do: I started taking a pill that helped usher away my anxiety and depression.

6 Weeks after Jay disappeared, police in Maryland found him talking to a spider and had him hospitalized. He stayed for 72 hours. Then he went missing again.



7 September 11, 2009, was one of those drizzling mornings when I thought of my brother. There was the usual undertone of reverent sadness in the city, but for me, the date was a reminder of all that had gone wrong inside Jay's mind. And on that day, my phone finally rang.

8 "Hello." Jay's Southern drawl was unmistakable.

I sat straight up in my desk chair at work, wondering what I should do. Record the call? Take notes?

9 "Where are you?" I asked, as images of him sitting in a jail cell or stranded alone in an alley flashed in my head.

10 "Manhattan," he said.

11 My heart filled with hope. Then he asked me if I'd gone to the witchcraft celebration at the World Trade Center, where the Sorcerers had ordered the wind and the rain to destroy the ceremony. Once again, I just felt like a helpless stranger.

12 I asked nervously if I could buy him dinner. To my surprise, he agreed. Twenty minutes later, I met him near Penn Station; he was hunched under an awning next to a big blue tarp that covered his backpack and the paisley duffel he'd once borrowed. His pale skin had tanned and hair covered his face. He was staring at people as they walked by, but he didn't see me until I said his name. Standing face-to-face with him, I could see that he had lost a lot of weight. His cheekbones jutted out from his once-full face. If I had seen his picture I would have gasped. Instead, I just held out my arms.

13 Zagatⁱⁱ has no recommendations for where to take your homeless brother to dinner. We settled on the Mexican chain Chevys and sat in a booth near the back. He told me about hitchhiking to New York and sleeping in Central Park until the cops kicked him out. He grinned as he talked about sleeping on the steps of a downtown school, his smile still as charming as it had been when he was seven.

14 "Do you consider yourself homeless?" I asked.

15 "Oh, yes!" he answered proudly.

16 I wondered if the constant motion of wandering from town to town helped quiet the voices he heard—if it was his own kind of medication and, if so, could I really tell him that was the wrong way to live?

17 Earlier in the year I'd bribed him with a trip to visit me on the condition that he took his meds. Now he was sitting in front of me, and as much as I wanted to let him stay in my apartment, I knew I couldn't let him (my therapist discouraged it and my roommate rightly put her foot down). I approached the topic cautiously, my voice shaking as I asked, "Do you know why you can't stay with me?" His voice small and shamed, he answered, "Because I won't take my medication." He had always denied that he had schizophrenia, but his admission gave me hope that maybe someday that would change.

18 I tried to quiet my own inner voice, which told me Jay needed to be in the hospital where a team of psychiatrists could experiment with medications that would fix his mind. I could do some things for my brother: I could give him a little money for cigarettes. I could buy him a new backpack, a sleeping bag, good walking shoes. But the more I pushed him to get help, the more my own sanity escaped me.

19 So I let him go. He went to New Jersey, Florida, Louisiana. To a place where he told me from a pay phone he wouldn't call anymore because he didn't want me to know his whereabouts. I can only imagine what he looks like after a year on the streets: his hair must be long, skin tan and hardened, and his rail-thin body caked in dirt. He probably doesn't look much different from the homeless people I pass by on the streets of New York City. Seeing them makes my heart ache—makes me think about those they may have left behind, people who long to dust them off and put them on the right path, but who know, in the end, it's not their choice.

ⁱ a child abduction alert system

ⁱⁱ a guide that publishes ratings of restaurants

Practice

Find the implied main idea in the following passages:

1. One of my summer reading books was The Windows of Time. Though it's more than 100 pages long, I read it in one afternoon. I couldn't wait to see what happened to Evelyn, the main character. But by the time I got to the end, I wondered if I should have spent my afternoon doing something else. The ending was so awful that I completely forgot I'd enjoyed most of the book.

- a. The Windows of Time is a terrific novel.
- b. The Windows of Time is disappointing.
- c. The Windows of Time is full of suspense.
- d. The Windows of Time is a lousy novel.

2. Fortunately, none of Toby's friends had ever seen the apartment where Toby lived with his mother and sister. Sandwiched between two burnt-out buildings, his two-story apartment building was by far the ugliest one on the block. It was a real eyesore: peeling orange paint (orange!), broken windows, crooked steps, crooked everything. He could just imagine what his friends would say if they ever saw this poor excuse for a building.

- a. Toby wishes he could move to a nicer building.
- b. Toby wishes his dad still lived with them.
- c. Toby is glad none of his friends know where he lives.
- d. Toby is sad because he doesn't have any friends.

3. Day after day, Johnny chooses to sit at his computer instead of going outside with his friends. A few months ago, he'd get half a dozen phone calls from his friends every night. Now, he might get one or two a week. He used to have his friends come over two or three days a week after school. Now, he spends his afternoons alone with his computer.

- a. Johnny and his friends are all spending time with their computers instead of one another.
- b. Johnny's friends aren't very good friends.
- c. Johnny has alienated his friends by spending so much time on the computer.
- d. Johnny and his friends prefer to communicate by computer.

4. We've had Ginger since I was two years old. Every morning, she wakes me up by licking my cheek. That's her way of telling me she's hungry. When she wants attention, she'll weave in and out of my legs and meow until I pick her up and hold her. And I can always tell when Ginger wants to play. She'll bring me her toys and will keep dropping them (usually right on my homework!) until I stop what I'm doing and play with her for a while.

- a. I take excellent care of Ginger.
- b. Ginger is a demanding pet.
- c. Ginger and I have grown up together.
- d. Ginger is good at telling me what she wants.

5.A healthy diet with proper nutrition is essential for maintaining good overall health. Since vitamins were discovered early in the twentieth century, people have routinely been taking vitamin supplements for this purpose. The Recommended Daily Allowance (RDA) is a frequently used nutritional standard for maintaining optimal health.

The RDA specifies the recommended amount of a number of nutrients for people in many different age and gender groups. With RDA, consumers can see how much of those nutrients are offered in the products they buy and can better plan for a nutritious meal. But RDA values are based on the assumption that it is possible to accurately define nutritional requirements for a given group. In reality, individual nutritional requirements can vary widely within each group.

The efficiency with which a person converts food into nutrients can also vary widely. Certain foods, when eaten in combination, actually prevent the absorption of nutrients. For example, spinach combined with milk reduces the amount of calcium available to the body from the milk, but this is not reflected in RDA values. The RDA approach also specifies a different dietary requirement for each age and gender. However, it is clearly unrealistic to expect a homemaker to prepare a different menu for each family member.

Which of the following sentences best expresses the overall main idea of this passage?

- a. Still, although we cannot rely solely upon RDA to ensure our overall long-term health, it can be a useful guide.
- b. The RDA approach is problematic and should be avoided.
- c. It's important for consumers to monitor RDA levels carefully.
- d. After all, vitamins are the most important part of a healthy diet.

Where would this overall main idea make the most sense in the passage?

- a. At the beginning of the first paragraph
- b. At the end of the first paragraph
- c. At the beginning of the last paragraph
- d. At the end of the last paragraph

The Reading “A brother Lost”

1. Preview the reading, using the steps discussed in Chapter 1.
2. Connect the reading to your own experience by answering the following questions: How would you describe the homeless people you have seen in your city?

3. Mark and annotate as you read.

Based on your reading of “A Brother Lost”, answer the following questions:

1. What might the author be implying about her brother’s condition when she describes him as “wearing a hoodie and a Modest Mouse T-shirt, a can of beer in his hand, and a deer-in-headlights expression on his face”?
2. What does working in a “shiny glass tower … for a glossy women’s magazine” suggest about the author’s status in life?
3. The author writes, “Dirty clothes and dishes piled up at home, I missed deadlines at work, and I got out of bed only if it was absolutely necessary.” From this statement, what can you infer about her emotional condition?
4. When the author took her brother to dinner, they “sat in a booth near the back.” What might the location of the booth suggest about the author’s feelings about her brother?
5. Does the title of this piece, “A Brother Lost,” have more than one meaning? Make inferences about what the title means and what it suggests about the author’s attitude toward her subject.

Evaluating the source and the author

Practice Exercises

Exercise 1 – Read the following and complete the chart.

Text A:

“Dr. Lina Hassan, professor of environmental science at the University of Algiers, reports that air pollution levels have doubled since 2010 based on new satellite data.”

Text B:

“I think pollution is getting worse every year. People just don’t care! I see it every day in my city.”

Criteria	Text A	Text B
Author credentials		
Source type		
Evidence provided		
Bias or opinion		
Overall credibility		

Which text is more trustworthy? Why?

Exercise 2 – For each situation, discuss whether the source is appropriate and reliable. (Which would you use? Why or why not?)

1. Using an article from *Working Mother* magazine on family conflict for a sociology paper.

.....

2. Quoting *The New York Times* for a speech on innovation in China.

.....

3. Reading a research paper from *Educational Research Quarterly* for a project on bilingual education.

.....

4. Using a *TV Guide* article on crime for a paper on media effects.

.....

5. Referring to a book by former First Lady Laura Bush for a discussion on presidential power.
-

Exercise 3 – Choose two websites you use usually and evaluate them using the checklist below.

Criteria	First website	Second website
Website name and URL	
Sponsor or publisher		
Author and credentials		
Date of publication or update		
Purpose (inform / persuade / sell)		
Evidence or references		
Are links current and reliable?		
Overall reliability (High / Medium / Low)		

Exercise 4 – Read the following bios and decide who is more credible for a paper on mental health:

Author 1: Sara Brown is a freelance journalist who writes lifestyle articles for *Healthy Life Magazine*.

Author 2: Dr. Ahmed Karim is a licensed psychologist and university lecturer with 15 years of clinical experience.

Exercise 5 – What did you learn today about identifying trustworthy sources? And how can these skills help you in your studies or daily reading?
