

The young woman was floating face down in the water, about a mile southwest of the southern tip of Manhattan. Wearing only red running shorts and a black sports bra, she was barely visible to the naked eye of the captain of the Staten Island Ferry: When he caught sight of her bobbing head, it was like glimpsing the tip of a ballpoint pen across a busy city street. Less than four minutes later, a skiff piloted by two of the ferry's deckhands pulled up alongside the woman. One man took hold of her ankles while the other grabbed her shoulders. As she was lifted from the water, she gasped.

The City

"I went from going for a run to being in the ambulance," the woman said several months later in describing her ordeal. "It was like 10 minutes had passed. But it was almost three weeks." On Aug. 28, a Thursday, a 23-year-old schoolteacher from Hamilton Heights named Hannah Emily Upp went for a jog along Riverside Drive. That jog is the last thing that Ms. Upp says she remembers before the deckhands rescued her from the waters of New York Harbor on the morning of Tuesday, Sept. 16. Rumors and speculation abounded about what befell Ms. Upp. She disappeared the day before the start of a new school year at Thurgood Marshall Academy, a Harlem school, where she taught Spanish. She left behind her wallet, her cell phone, her ID and a host of troubling questions.

It was as if the city had simply opened wide and swallowed her whole — until she was seen on a security camera at the Midtown Apple store checking her e-mail. Then she vanished again. And then reappeared, not only at the Apple store but also at a Starbucks and several New York Sports Clubs, where news reports said she went to shower. Was she suffering from bipolar disorder? Running away from an overly demanding job? Escaping from a city that can overwhelm even the most resilient? Other questions lingered. Did she forage for food? Where did she sleep? Most baffling of all, how did she survive for so long without money or any identification in one of the world's busiest and most complex cities?

That she was rescued, alive and well, is in itself amazing; most such stories do not have happy endings. But the explanation for what had happened raised even more questions than Ms. Upp's disappearance had — for her more than for anybody. After her rescue, while she was recovering from hypothermia and dehydration at Richmond University Medical Center in Staten Island, she was told that she was suffering from dissociative fugue, a rare form of amnesia that causes people to forget their identity, suddenly and without warning, and can last from a few hours to years.

"It's weird," Ms. Upp said a few weeks ago over a cup of tea in a Hell's Kitchen cafe, the first time in the five months since her rescue that she had talked publicly about her experience. "How do you feel guilty for something you didn't even know you did? It's not your fault, but it's still somehow you. So it's definitely made me reconsider everything. Who was I before? Who was I then — is that part of me? Who am I now?"

An Appetite for Travel

The answer to that last question, at least on the surface, is a bright, introspective young woman with an easy laugh and an expansive smile. Dressed this day for a job interview, she wore a black blazer and a knee-length skirt that contrasted with the slim silver hoop piercing her right nostril and the bright red

metal wristwatch peeking out from beneath her sleeve. She looked like any other recent college graduate negotiating the rapidly narrowing space between youth and adulthood. Her questions about her identity are, to some degree, no different from those of her peers who haven't had to deal with highly publicized memory loss.

"When you're just starting out, you have one job to your name: There's your professional identity and then there's who you are," she said. She may be questioning who she is after her experience, she added, "but everybody is." She laughed and added, "This is just extra." Before she jogged out of her life that August day, Ms. Upp had a demanding schedule. The previous fall, after graduating from Bryn Mawr, she began teaching Spanish to more than 200 seventh and eighth graders at Thurgood Marshall Academy while studying for a master's degree in education at Pace University. It was a challenging job, but one she loved.

Ms. Upp also loved to travel. She grew up in a small town in Oregon, the daughter of two pastors (her mother, who lives in Philadelphia, and her father, who is in India, are divorced). While at college, Ms. Upp spent a semester in Buenos Aires, visited Ghana, Poland and Puerto Rico with the school's choir, and traveled with friends through Europe. Last summer, she went to Japan to visit her brother, who is in the Navy, and to New Delhi to visit Piyali Bhattacharya, a close friend and former Bryn Mawr classmate.

"I asked her if she would be O.K. while I was at work, since she doesn't speak any Hindi and being a white woman in Delhi can be a bit daunting," Ms. Bhattacharya said in an e-mail message. "But as always, Hannah proved me wrong. She hopped off by herself, took a full tour of the Old City, admittedly the most difficult part of the city to navigate, and met me for coffee afterwards!"

The 'Jason Bourne' Affliction

The medical condition diagnosed in Ms. Upp is so uncommon that few psychiatrists ever see it. Characterized in part by sudden and unexpected travel combined with an inability to recall one's past, dissociative fugue demonstrates the glasslike fragility of memory and identity. Its most famous sufferer is the fictional Jason Bourne, the secret agent made flesh on film by Matt Damon. The Bourne character takes his name from Ansel Bourne, a Rhode Island preacher who suffered the earliest recorded case of the condition when he was en route to Providence in 1887. The preacher continued to Norristown, Pa., where he opened a store and lived with another family, until one day he "woke up." The memory of how to perform mundane tasks like hailing a cab or even using the Internet remains intact. Victims lose only the memories tied to their identity. "It's as if a whole set of information about one's self, our autobiography, goes off line," said Dr. Richard Loewenstein, one of the nation's few experts on dissociative fugue.

"We tend to experience our identity as a thing, as if it's a constant," added Dr. Loewenstein, who is medical director of the trauma program at Sheppard and Enoch Pratt Hospital in Baltimore, and has treated five patients with dissociative fugue. "But it's a lot less stable and has less unity than we want to believe." Travel is a defining characteristic.

"People have been known to not only travel across cities or countries, but also across continents," said Dr. Philip Coons, a professor emeritus of psychiatry at Indiana University and the author of a book on the

subject. "The explanation behind the fugue is that the person is running away from a bad situation, from a bad marriage or a bad financial situation."

The Missing Chapter

When Ms. Upp failed to return to her apartment after four days, her roommates contacted the police. After a week with no word, and fearing that she had been a victim of a kidnapping or another violent crime, her friends and family posted messages on blogs and started a Facebook page called "We're Not Giving Upp (on Hannah)," which was dedicated to tracking her down. Accompanying many postings was a photograph of a smiling young woman with warm hazel eyes, glossy brown hair and a white rose tucked behind one ear. Despite the optimistic tone of the postings, her family was frantic. "At first, you try to come up with any kind of possible theory that could provide a simple, harmless explanation of where she might be," her brother, Dan Upp, said from Japan. "But considering the circumstances, you really can't convince yourself that any of them are feasible, and you're left with the unavoidable conclusion that something is very wrong."

Ms. Upp credits the police with helping her piece together what happened during the missing weeks. Though details like where she ate and slept remain elusive to her, security camera footage and conversations with police detectives have provided some clues to the where if not the why. According to police reports, Ms. Upp spent a lot of time in places like Riverside Drive, "where if you're in running gear, no one's going to look at you twice," she said. When she revisited Riverside Drive after leaving the hospital, Ms. Upp said, "it seemed to make sense to me. Not only is it one of my favorite places, but there's something soothing about the sound of water and just not feeling trapped in the concrete jungle."

Ms. Upp's doctors have helped her make sense of other clues, like her stops at the Apple store, where she was seen both checking her e-mail and speaking with a fellow Pace student. "I was on a computer, but there's no evidence in my Gmail account of any e-mails being sent or read," Ms. Upp said. She did log in, something her doctors attributed to a muscle memory: How many times in our lives have we typed in our name and password without even thinking? "So their theory," Ms. Upp said, "is that I thought, hey, this is a computer, this is what I do with a computer." But once she opened her e-mail, she couldn't figure out who Hannah was and why everyone was looking for her. "So I logged out and left." Her conversation with the Pace student had a similarly surreal quality. While Ms. Upp says she does not recall the meeting, a store security camera showed her speaking with the young man, who had asked her if she was the missing student everyone was trying to find. She said she wasn't.

News reports of her appearances at various New York Sports Club locations suggest that she was careful to keep moving, though Ms. Upp believes that the number of sightings was exaggerated. For one thing, she pointed out, she did not have her gym ID with her; for another, the gym knew she was missing and surely would have contacted the police had she appeared.

The one tangible clue to the extent of her travels was the large blister on her heel. In addition to the hypothermia, dehydration and a sunburn, the blister was the only physical record of her three weeks spent on the move, and it suggests why she eventually left the city's streets for its waterways: Her feet hurt.

"They think that just as I was wandering on land, I wandered in the water," Ms. Upp said. "I don't think I had a purpose. But I had that really big blister, so maybe I just didn't want my shoes on anymore."

The Rescue

Capt. Christopher Covella, a mariner with 32 years of experience and more than 17,000 trips aboard Staten Island ferries to his credit, was in the pilot house of the John J. Marchi on Sept. 16, heading to Staten Island from Manhattan, when he saw something out of place. "At 11:50 a.m. I noticed something in the water that didn't belong there," Captain Covella said. "All it was, was a head and it was slightly more than a quarter-mile away."

Slowing down the boat, he instructed two of his deckhands to prepare to enter the water near Robbins Reef, a tiny outcropping of land topped by a lighthouse just off the north shore of Staten Island. The two deckhands, Michael Sabatino, 28, and Ephriam Washington, 31, hung over the edge of the ferry in a 12-foot aluminum skiff as the captain edged his craft toward the island. About 200 feet away from Ms. Upp, who was floating face down, the men were lowered into the water. When they reached her, Mr. Washington put his hands under Ms. Upp's arms, turned her face up, and, with the help of Mr. Sabatino, lifted her into the skiff.

"We realized that she was breathing and had no major cuts or bruises, so we decided to bring her back to St. George," Mr. Washington said. Three minutes later, they were at the Staten Island Ferry terminal. After Ms. Upp's rescue, newspapers reported that she had jumped off a Staten Island pier in a suicide attempt. The reality, Ms. Upp said, was far less sensational, if almost as dramatic. Together with Captain Covella, she determined that it would have been impossible for her to jump off the pier and swim against the current to the spot where she was rescued. Instead, she believes that she left Manhattan from the Chelsea pier and kayak dock where she once attended a 9/11 memorial.

"From what I can piece together, I left Manhattan late at night," she said. "I've gone back over lunar records to figure out if there was a full moon then, which sounds right. At that point in the tidal records, the current would have been in my favor, so whether I was Olympic swimming or doggy paddling, I could have made it." Made it, that is, to Robbins Reef, where she pulled herself ashore after swimming for several hours. She believes that she spent the next day sitting on the rocks around the lighthouse, a theory supported by the fresh sunburn she sported when she was rescued. She remained on the island until she returned to the water around 11 the following morning.

Then she was in an ambulance speeding toward the hospital. When her family and friends arrived, Ms. Upp said, "it was, wow, I'm happy to see you, but why are you so happy to see me?" The day she was discharged, Ms. Upp posted a statement on the Facebook page her friends had created. "I needed to publicly acknowledge my gratitude for everything, from search parties to people just caring," she said. "I did feel that I owed people at least some explanation," one that would put all the speculation to rest.

The Next Steps

Although Ms. Upp was quickly courted by television talk shows, she decided to start rebuilding her life away from the spotlight. "Maybe people I've never met and never will meet will think I'm crazy," she acknowledged, "but maybe it's better than going on Oprah, you know?" Initially, Ms. Upp said she believed that once she returned to her apartment, she would leave her ordeal in the past. But in some ways, it was just beginning. Never mind the reporter who showed up on her doorstep two hours after she arrived home; the larger question was whether she could resume her daily life without worrying about stumbling into another fugue. And would she forever be known as "that missing teacher"?

Ms. Upp considered leaving New York altogether, perhaps going to Japan to live with her brother. But, ultimately, she decided to stay. "I didn't want my life to change in such a way that the things I enjoy I couldn't enjoy anymore," she said. "It was just, I can't let New York win."

Recovery has been slow. Simple social routines like seeing friends and taking a dance class have helped her re-establish her personal identity. Figuring out her professional identity has been harder. Ms. Upp is on leave from her teaching job, and though the post is still open to her, she is uncertain about returning. Was it significant, she wonders, that she disappeared the day before school started?

"There's a lot of room for self-doubt and confusion there," she said. "And, well, I don't know. I certainly would never have intended to do that, but it makes you wonder." She wonders, too, about what caused the fugue state. So far, a possible catalyst has yet to emerge. "That's the hardest thing," Ms. Upp acknowledged. "If I don't feel confident about the trigger, how do you start with prevention?" She has learned, however, that fugues are usually isolated events. "If you work through it, you can usually go on to live a normal life," she said. "Obviously, the hardest part is the period right after. It's textbook that you feel shame, you feel embarrassed, you feel guilt — all things I've definitely felt."

She has also experienced something rarely afforded to anyone in this city: the chance to slow down. "If anything," she said, "I've gotten a time to really appreciate what normal life is like. I've never had a moment in my life where I've just stopped and said, hold on, let's re-evaluate everything." Ms. Upp's friends have no doubt about her ability to move on. "If Hannah doesn't want to let this incident eat away at the rest of her life, then it won't be an issue any more than the common cold is an issue to you or me," Ms. Bhattacharya said. "She's an incredibly strong woman who knows how to deal with a ghost and then release it." And day by day, she works to put the "missing teacher" label behind her. "My roommates and I have a code word to show that I'm not going to fugue again," Ms. Upp said. "My roommate had done this long interview with ABC, and the only thing they ended up printing was that I was a friendly vegetarian who likes to try new dishes. So if I don't get home one night, they'll text me, like, 'friendly vegetarian.' And I'll say, 'who likes to try new dishes.' And we know we're on the same page."

Perhaps the most moving public coda to Ms. Upp's experience occurred a month after her rescue, when she attended a community board meeting in Willowbrook, Staten Island, honoring the three men who had saved her life. "Everyone kept saying, 'We're so glad you're alive; these things don't end this way,'" Ms. Upp remembered. "Just to see how happy and proud they were, it was a huge honor." And Captain Covella said: "It makes you feel real good being a hero. I mean, another minute or so, and we would have lost her."