

THE
GIRL
WHO
WASN'T
THERE

PENNY JOELSON

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For Cherry



There's no one coming to look for me because
no one even knows I've gone missing.

—*Unrest*



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No one sees me. I am a ghost. I am invisible. Life for me stopped still, one day—when I was not expecting it. Out there, I know that life goes on, that time moves forward, but it does so without me. I know I shouldn't, but I want to look once more—to take a peek out through the window at a world that is not mine. Do I dare?



It's dark when I see her. I'm closing my curtains, ready for bed—and there's a woman hurrying along our street toward the bus stop. There's something intense about the way she's moving. She darts like a bird. It's as if she's rushing to catch a bus—but there's no bus there and no one waiting. The street is quiet. I'm not sure why I keep watching but I do. She's skinny—with long, dark hair, maybe in her late teens, early twenties. She's barely more than a silhouette in the darkness, but as she passes the streetlight, it casts her elongated shadow across the road. The glow highlights the long, thin cardigan she's wearing. She pulls it tight around her, head bent against the chill November wind, but she goes past the bus stop without slowing down.

I see her glance around briefly as two cars pass. Now a silver car's coming. It swerves and stops alongside her. Her head turns sharply. At the same moment, a man jumps out from the passenger side. He grabs the woman by the arm. She

pulls away. They're struggling at least, that's what it looks like. Within seconds, he's opened the back door of the car and she's in. He bangs the door shut and jumps back in the front. The car drives off, disappearing around the corner.

It happened so fast—but I'm certain she didn't want to get into that car. The man was dragging her—forcing her in. I think he even had his hand over her mouth. I can barely believe it. I keep replaying it in my mind. My heart is thudding like a bass drum.

I'm staring out at the now empty street, still in shock, when a movement catches my eye. I look up at the house across the street, the window opposite mine. The curtain moved, I'm sure it did. Someone was looking out. Did they see what I just saw?

Should I call the police? There's a couple in that house across the street—if one of them saw, maybe they've gone to call the police right now. But even so...

"Mom!" I yell, grabbing my phone. "Mom!"

She's watching TV downstairs and I don't think she heard me. Anyway, I don't need her to tell me what to do, and I shouldn't wait. I shouldn't let them get too far away.

I sit on my bed and dial. My hand is shaking. I've never done this before—never dealt with a real emergency. I ask for police.

There's a calm voice at the end of the phone—a man's voice. He listens and then starts asking me questions.

I give my name, *Kasia Novak*, and address, *47 New Weald Lane*.

“Did you get the license plate number?” he asks. I feel instantly devastated. Why didn’t I?

“I’m sorry. No. It was all so fast,” I tell him.

“Don’t worry—you did the right thing to call. Any information you can give us will help. Can you describe the car?”

“It was silver—a hatchback...I’m not sure what kind.”

I can describe the woman but I didn’t see the driver and only have a vague impression of the man who jumped out. I’m a useless witness.

“Silver hatchback,” he repeats, as if he’s writing it down. “We’ll get someone on it right away.”

“Oh, and I think someone else might have seen it—across the street,” I tell him. “I think there was someone at the window upstairs. They might even have called you too. It was number forty-eight.”

“We’ll speak to them. Thank you for reporting the incident. Please call us if you remember any other details.” He gives me another phone number and a case number, which I write on a scrap of paper.

I have a sinking feeling as I put the phone down. I wish I’d gotten the license plate number. Maybe whoever was watching across the street did. I hope so.

“Mom! Mom!” I call again. She still doesn’t hear. I want to tell her. I need to tell her. I stand up, holding on to the window

ledge for support, and then walk slowly out into the hallway, one hand pressed against the wall. My glands are throbbing in my neck and my legs are throbbing too—a constant dull, familiar ache. “Mom!” No reply. I clutch the banister and put one foot gingerly on the top step. I’ve been thinking about trying to go downstairs for a few days, but I know now isn’t really the right moment. I’m too shaken up on top of everything else.

“Kasia! What are you doing?” Mom appears at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at me with concern. My legs give way and I sit down on the top step.

“I was calling you. You didn’t hear. I thought I’d come down...”

Mom’s up beside me now, tutting and holding out her arm. “You look very pale, *mój aniele*, my angel. Come on, time for bed. How many times do I have to tell you to take it slowly, not do too much too quickly? Just getting out of bed is a big achievement. You’re clearly not up to trying the stairs. You should text me if I don’t hear you.”

I’m too tired to argue, but I want to prove her wrong. I’m so fed up with being in my bedroom all the time. Tomorrow, I think to myself. Maybe I’ll try tomorrow. But I still want to tell her what just happened.

Mom helps me into bed and sits on the edge as I tell her all about what I saw. She’s really shocked.

“Kasia, how awful! Are you sure?”

“I think so...”

Mom touches my hand gently. “You did the right thing to phone the police. Now settle down and get some sleep. You look exhausted.”

She goes back down and I lie in my bed, staring at the same four walls. It’s been ten weeks since I’ve been downstairs.

