

# She's Not There

A novel by Richard Vetere



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*“Well, let me tell you about the way she looked  
the way she acts and the color of her hair  
her voice was soft and cool, her eyes were clear and bright  
but she’s not there.”*

THE ZOMBIES 1965



# 1

In the summer of 1965, I had just turned thirteen and my mother ran away. I can't remember all the details of that summer but I do remember the broad strokes and they were that my mother had run away and my father sent me to live with his sister and her husband.

My aunt and uncle had a house in upstate New York and though my mother had disappeared without even leaving a note I wasn't too upset. My parents argued a lot and I thought it was something that they did all the time anyway and that my mother leaving was just one of those things married people did to one another.

Of course, that is what I thought since it was over fifty years ago that all this happened and looking back I can only say that I remember it all through the prism of someone much older than even my parents were at the time all this happened.

I shared the situation with my best friend Frankie and he shared with me that his own parents were constantly threatening to leave one another and he had even heard of a cousin who left his wife to be with another woman who, according to Frankie, was already married to his best friend.

So, thinking back, I saw getting out of the city for a few days might be a worthwhile adventure and I embraced it with open arms. However, I had no idea that I'd be spending the entire summer in a small place which seemed to me at the time to be the middle of nowhere.

It all started when I came home from my last day of school before the summer break and my mother wasn't home. She was always home waiting for me so it was odd not to see her waiting for me. We lived in a nice brick house in Maspeth, Queens near the park and not far

from Shea Stadium. I loved the Mets but I loved the LA Dodgers even more mainly because I loved Sandy Koufax. He was the best pitcher in baseball and I loved the blue and white uniforms the Dodgers wore.

It was always quiet and residential in my neighborhood all year long. I even noticed that our car, a white Ford Fairlane, was not parked in front of our house.

I didn't think anything of it, so I rushed out to play with my friends down the park. However, when I did get home for dinner there was a police car parked in front of the Ford Fairlane. When I went inside my father was in the living room looking distraught though happy to see me. There were two uniformed police officers standing with him.

"You're here," my father stated.

"Sure, Pop, why wouldn't I be?"

That's when one of the cops spoke up. "She's an adult, Mister Ricci, and adults can come and go as they please if they are married or not. This happens more than you think. A spouse goes for a pack of cigarettes and they don't come home." Then the other smaller cop added, "Sometimes for weeks and sometimes never."

"We got all her information," the first cop said.

"She'll show up in no time," the second cop told my father and then both cops walked out of the house.

My father sat down on the sofa and lowered his head. He then quickly looked up at me as if he realized that me, seeing him that troubled, might worry me.

"Mom smokes?" I asked. "I didn't know she smoked."

"She didn't want you to see her smoke."

"How come?"

He was puzzled by my question but then opened up. "Look, Chris, your mother and I had a fight. I put some money down on the Yankees and they lost. She was angry with me."

"Yeah, I heard they lost again."

"It was a lot of money that I lost. So, she ran away."

"Ran away?"

"Yes."

"I thought only kids run away."

“Well, it’s not the same. Kids run away but they have to come home again. With adults it’s different.”

“How different?”

“Well, adults don’t have to come home. I mean, they do come home but there’s no law to say that they have to come home. Like it is with kids.”

“That’s weird.”

“Did she say anything to you this morning before you went to school?”

“About what?”

He lowered his head again. He shrugged. “I have a feeling she went to her sisters out in Pennsylvania. I see that the food money is gone from the container in the top drawer.”

I knew about the food money they kept in a big plaster beige pig my father always called the container.

“She’s coming back, right?” I asked.

He stood up and went over to me. He didn’t exactly hug me, but I do recall that he got really close to doing it. “Yeah, she’s coming back. She’s just letting off steam.”

“Oh.”

“But I have to give her some room. You know, breathing room to get over being mad at me.”

I always remember my father having big warm dark eyes. He had wavy black hair cut neatly for his job. He was a clerk and worked for a big company that did inventory in Manhattan.

I don’t remember much more from that night, but I do remember that when eventually I went to bed, I was feeling a little upset that my mother would run away without saying goodbye to me. I also couldn’t figure how she could leave me but then again, I was all of thirteen and I was certainly able to take care of myself, so I forgave her. However, the thought of living in Pennsylvania didn’t appeal to me.

The next morning before the sun was even up my father was on the phone talking to my Aunt Angie telling her that he was putting me on a bus before he went to work.

“Don’t forget to get him at the bus depot, Angie,” I remember him telling her on the phone.

I thought it was strange that he had to remind her. How do you forget to pick up a kid? I thought all adults were in my life to make sure they took care of me. I was learning that that wasn't always the case and it through me off balance.

My father helped me pack all my summer clothes in one suitcase. I took a few books that I wanted to have with me, my toothbrush, my ten-cent comb, my new brown leather wristband and my song book. I wanted desperately to learn how to play the guitar that summer but before I dared attempt it, I bought a song book hoping to teach myself how to learn to read music and play cords.

I also took with me my baseball cards. My favorite were of Bob Gibson, Mickey Mantle, Gil Hodges and of course Sandy Koufax.

I also took along my transistor radio. My favorite group was the Four Seasons and the very first song I ever heard was "Sherry." I was in the back seat of my car when it played on the radio. My mother and father were in the front seat, and we were coming home from somewhere.

We were just exiting the Long Island Expressway exit ramp at Maurice Avenue when it came on the radio. I was ten or eleven when I heard it. It was so strange to hear a song that suddenly made you think about yourself. I had never really thought about myself as a boy who might have feelings for a girl but hearing that song made me think it was something that might happen to me.

It was also that summer, or the summer before, that I became more aware of the routine of life. I liked routine and the routine was that I went to school all winter and I was allowed to stay home all summer.

My mother stopped working part-time. She was a waitress in Williamsburg, Brooklyn where she grew up and now, that I was home from school, she also stayed home to babysit me.

I used to play alone in the alleyway behind my house. My favorite game was being a U.S. Marshal in the Wild West and it was my job to find the bad guys and bring them to justice. I would walk the alleyway with a fake six gun on my belt, a white cowboy hat and sneakers looking for trouble. I can still see the bright sunshine spreading across the alleyway's concrete floor, edging down through the two-story brick buildings as I sauntered through the imaginary town.



Those mornings were so quiet and peaceful I could hear myself think. I would talk to myself telling myself that I was ready and able to tame any lawlessness when I had to. I also felt like I was growing as a boy and slowly into a man though I was just a teenager back then. I can hear my mother talk to her neighbors in the kitchen about how I played cowboy. Looking back, I realize now she talked about me with a lot of pride. She would make lunch for me, and I would eat it in the kitchen at the table looking out into the sunshine and Mount Zion Cemetery out in the distance and the Manhattan skyline beyond it.

That was about all I could remember from those days other than when my father took a vacation. He always got two weeks and he always took them in August.

The first week of our vacation we would eat out every night. My mother was never much of a cook so going out to dinner was a major treat for me.

Monday night my father would take us to the diner in Long Island City at Hunters Point. I remember having onion soup and the delicious small brown roles I had never seen before. It was processed and full of sugar but I really enjoyed it.

Tuesday night we went to an Italian restaurant in Williamsburg, and I loved the food. I always had pasta and meatballs. Wednesday, we went to the Sage Diner on Queens Boulevard where I had chicken soup and omelets with French fries. Thursday, we went to White Castles for burgers and Friday night was the night my father ordered take-out Chinese food. And my mother allowed me to drink soda since at home all we were allowed was milk. I don't think we ever drank water. My favorite soda was Coke-Cola, and I drank as much as I was allowed.

The second week of my father's vacation we went to a summer resort in Lake George, New York. I have fond memories of morning breakfast looking at the squirrels racing around outside the window while I enjoyed my pancakes. But now, with my mother gone, all of my routine was going to disappear.

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My father then drove me down to Port Authority in midtown, bought me a bus ticket, and the next thing I knew I was looking back at him out the window before he raced away to his car before he got a parking ticket.

The empty bus quickly headed north. With the sun rising over New Jersey and the Hudson River, I knew I was headed north. I struggled with the reality that I wasn't sure when I was going to see my best friend Frankie, my father and my mother again.

All along the bus ride I thought of how I always wanted to travel the country in a Ford Mustang. I had watched a TV show called *Route 66* where these two guys drove a hot Corvette around the country. I wanted to hop in a car like that, speed across the country with my best friends or even my best girl.

I had no idea what to speed across the country meant. All I knew of the country was New York City and now I was going to find out a lot more about Upstate New York.

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My aunt and uncle lived in the middle of nowhere in a small village named Old Bridge outside a place named Saugerties. Looking back now I figured that my father sent me to stay with them for two reasons. He knew he couldn't work and at the same time watch over me and he wanted to place me away from the drama that may unfold.

I can't recall what I was thinking as the bus took me along the New York State Thruway which was Interstate 87 and left me off at the bus depot in Saugerties. I was the only person who disembarked and after the bus pulled away I was all alone with my suitcase.

I remember feeling a bit dizzy getting off that bus. It might have been the country air, the unknown world around me or the uncertainty of what was coming, but the dizziness didn't last long. My father told me that my aunt would meet me there, and even though I didn't recall what she looked like, there was no one there to meet me. I found a bench and sat down staring across the main street watching

the occasional car pass and the handful of pedestrians who walked by.

Sitting on the bench I noticed how yellow everything was. Not used to being in the country I wasn't aware of how much sunlight there was in the world. From my perspective everything looked as if it had been dipped in yellow. Even the blue sky and the green in the trees and grassy fields had an impressive tint of yellow in them.

For a young boy who was used to jump starting his body to get to the school bus on time the luxury of just sitting on the bench allowing the morning to wash over me was a distinct pleasure I hadn't experienced before.

I don't remember how long I waited but ultimately a feeling of aloneness overcame me. I felt alone in the world for the first time in my young life. When I realized I didn't know anyone in my immediate vicinity, I was truly out of my element and the fact that my father was distraught and my mother had run away, made me feel like a solitary drifter. I looked around me and felt like I was an orphan or someone time forgot. I wondered if adults had these feelings as well.

Eventually an old dark green Dodge pulled up to the bus station. A woman with a mass of premature gray hair rolling around on her head peeked her face out of the car. "Christopher?" she asked.

I stood.

She opened the large door and got out of the car. She was tilting as she walked over to me. She was wearing a pale blue housedress and old worn brown shoes.

She leaned down and hugged me. I smelled the alcohol emanating from her as she did. I knew the smell from my father when he had a party with his friends. My father let me taste a drop of wine one night at one of those parties and I remembered not liking it.

"I had the wrong time!" She smiled then cheerfully picked up my suitcase, placed it in the back seat and then got behind the wheel.

I still hadn't moved.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

I murmured. "Should you drive?"

Perplexed, she frowned. "Oh, I can see fine enough without my glasses. How did you know I left them home?"

Not wanting to make more of a scene I got into the car and off she drove.

My aunt chatted away as she looked over the enormous dashboard and I looked up delighted at the rays of light that blasted down from the sky, through the trees and onto my face.

“Me and Marty are gonna take care of you. Your mother will show up soon enough but while you’re here you will have a good old-fashioned summer.”

I had no idea what a good old-fashioned summer was but with the window open I allowed the wind to caress my face as if I were on a magic carpet ride. It was fun seeing the hills off to my right and the large puffy white clouds to my left while my aunt drove us down the country road. It was a long ride through the hills passed stretches of cornfields and isolated farms dotting the landscape. On the last leg of our trip, I watched how my aunt barely navigated the curves on the single lane road all the while puffing on a cigarette that was dangling from her mouth. I didn’t take too many glances at her since I didn’t want to distract her and, to my delight, she was quiet until she reached her arm across my face pointing to a house off in the distance.

“There’s the house!” she said and I looked. I saw a speck on a hill off in the distance on the other side of a large expansive field of grass and weeds. My aunt then followed the road around a long winding right turn and, just as we came out of the turn, we were under a canopy of massive, tall trees that entirely blocked the sun and it was completely gone. We drove out from the canopy and rays of light filtered through the large tree limbs splattering speckled rays down on us.

We soon reached a crossroads and my aunt turned right again this time going up a steep dirt road that rose again into the trees. I held onto the door handle as the car rocked, bouncing us both up and down as we drove over small sticks and branches.

“We had such a rain last night!” my aunt told me. Her voice was hoarse, and though she was a little older than my father, she sounded like someone’s grandmother with the lilt of a frog in her voice.

We came down as quickly as we rose. The steep hill, and another right curve, took us passed a large barn. As we drove closer, I could see that the barn was rotting away. A tree had crashed into it. There

was a gaping hole in its entire right side. It was so long ago that the tree and barn, both the same color gray, looked fused together.

“You remember the mushroom barn?”

My recollections of the barn were slight if anything. Before I had left my father reminded me that the last time I had been to my Aunt Angie and Uncle Marty’s house, I was only five years old. My memories were of a summer long ago and my mother and father desperately trying to sleep in the oppressively humid, mountain air. Odd memories of a place I had only been to once before.

Once we drove passed the barn we drove to a small bridge that took us across a creek and then up another short hill. That’s when I saw it standing in all its aging glory: the house.

I hadn’t officially seen the movie *Psycho* since my father wouldn’t allow it, but I did see the movie posters and my aunt and uncle’s house looked exactly like the one standing on a hill, not entirely decrepit, but certainly haunted. Even in the bright sunlight it resembled the two-story gray wood and brick structure of the house in the movie with lone windows on the top floor peering eerily into the isolation surrounding it.

My aunt parked in the back of the house, which oddly faced the road, and when she opened the door, I heard dogs barking. One large mean looking black and white dog showed me his teeth as soon as he saw me. Satisfied that it scared the hell out of me, it quickly went back to a well-chewed bone. The dog was tied to an enormous grey tree. It was the biggest tree I ever saw.

“Shut up, Stalin,” my aunt shouted back at the dog as two others came running to her looking to be greeted and petted.

“Stalin’s bark is worse than his bite,” she told me. She then greeted the two other dogs. “We got Pinky and Brownie,” she said petting them.

Both were sleek, brown Shepard’s turning to me for acknowledgement, as they checked me out to make sure I was a friend. I couldn’t take my eyes off Stalin. “Do you ever let him run free?”

“Sometimes but only if we are watching him. He’s part Russian mongrel that one. If we let him go he might run back to Moscow.”

I had no idea if she was serious or not.

“It’s kind of funny that we hate the Russians, but we love our Stalin.”

“Ok,” I replied.

“I have some lunch for you, Chris,” my aunt then said, carrying my suitcase as she led me into the house.

To enter the house, you had to walk around to an enclosed porch. A thin wooden, squeaky door was part of the porch and once you entered the porch area, which was enclosed by a screen door, you would face the front door. The porch faced a cornfield and the one road beyond which we had just driven over. Once inside the house I had a flashback to the first time I had ever been inside. It was caused by the smell of mildew or mold that permeated the house like the odor of booze permeated the car.

The porch consisted of a long wooden table and flies. There were flies everywhere. There were dozens already dead having been caught on the overhanging fly strips. Once passed the porch and into the house, I came face to face with large stairs made of dark wood which led to the bedrooms on the second floor.

To the right was a dark living room and furniture that not only looked old but was made of dark wood and pine to make the room seem even darker. To the left, where my aunt led me, was the kitchen and beyond the kitchen a door leading to the basement.

“Get settled in!” she said with a big smile. “Your bedroom is the first door on the right at the top of the stairs.” She then quickly poured herself a drink of what I would later learn was rye and soda and preceded to unwrap a sandwich for me. I quickly dragged my suitcase up the stairs reaching the top, out of breath. I found the first door to the right and opened it.

My bedroom looked much better than the rest of the house. I could see the bed was made with light green bed sheets and there was a desk and a large window which looked off to the large hill looming diagonally to the cornfield to the side of the house.

I opened my suitcase placing some of my clothes in the drawers and then went downstairs to the kitchen. My aunt was already gone but she left my ham and cheese sandwich and glass of milk for me which I ate heartily.

Once again, I found myself alone taken aback at how quiet the house was. The kitchen was small with lacey curtains on the windows

and a large sink and refrigerator taking up most of the space. The table I sat at was surrounded by light blue metal chairs.

Sitting there I realized that I didn't hear any noise other than the occasional dog bark. There were no sounds of car traffic or overhead jets flying off to places I didn't think I'd ever see. I didn't even hear any birds singing either. All I did hear was the sound of the wind through the trees and my own thoughts racing through my head.

I was struck by the notion that I was going to spend an entire summer in these surroundings and for the first time I was terribly angry with my mother.