

A woman in silhouette stands looking out a large window at night. The window is divided into a grid of panes, some of which are brightly lit from within, creating a bokeh effect. The overall scene is dark with blue and yellow light tones.

**VIKKI  
WAKEFIELD**

**AFTER  
YOU  
WERE  
GONE**

**I WILL NEVER STOP  
LOOKING FOR YOU**



## BEFORE

When I was a child I believed there was a place where lost things collected, the way sea-drift found its way ashore to the same sheltered cove on our beach. I never knew if it was a story I'd heard or one I had made up, but I could picture it clearly: a black hole where time stood still and the lost things lingered—socks, shoes, purses, keys, missing pets—until people stopped looking for them and they faded from memory.

After Sarah was gone, I imagined her in that place. Suspended, sleeping.

Not knowing was like living inside a well with slippery sides and the occasional crack between stones, a foothold, a scrabbling place. I yearned for answers; I tortured myself, going over the things I could have changed if only I had been paying attention.

After Sarah was gone, I moved on, but I built my house around the well. While I was busy living, it sank deeper; the distance was greater, the light dimmer. This time the climb might be

impossible, but I had no choice—I let myself fall.

My life is a story in two parts.

Before.

After.

The day my daughter went missing, we were at war.

Our two-bedroom, ground-floor unit in the outer suburbs was one of twelve, close to a busy main road. I wanted to go to a weekend street market. At the time I didn't have a car, but the buses ran hourly and our stop was only a ten-minute walk away. The bus I wanted to catch arrived in fifteen minutes, but Sarah was still standing in the hallway, facing the wall, arms folded.

'It's going to rain,' I said. 'You'll be cold. Put on some long pants and a jacket.'

She shook her head and stamped her bejewelled flip-flops.

I tugged at her dress—pink with a leotard bodice and a tulle skirt, more suitable for a fairy-themed party than an unseasonably cool day. I'd taken her to see the fireworks at the beach the night before and she was overtired and bad-tempered.

'We'll miss the bus. Quickly—get changed.'

She slapped my hand. 'You can't make me!'

I stepped away lest I slap her in return. 'We're not going until you do as I ask.'

'I don't want to go. It's too far. The market is just stupid people and weird fruit.'

She flounced to her bedroom. Seconds later, I heard the chime of her jewellery box and the clack of beads.

I followed, taking deep breaths, and watched her from the doorway.

Sarah didn't look much like me except for her skin tone and build: golden and quick to tan, slim but muscular. She could

hold a handstand against a wall for five minutes and turn eight cartwheels in a row, but her hair was straight and dark, unlike my tight blonde curls, and so silky it slipped from a hair tie. She had fuller lips, inscrutable expressions, and eyebrows that threatened to meet. Fierce, independent and intelligent in a way that was spooky in a child, Sarah delighted in pushing me past logic and into pure reaction. If I lost my temper, she would smile.

‘Sarah, let’s go!’

I should have given in. If there was ever a moment in my life I could change, it was then.

But I listened to that infuriating chime, let my frustration build and peak, and by the time I’d dragged her from her bedroom, her graceful neck weighed down by a string of beads, she was crying. She grabbed her ever-present drawing supplies from the dining table—a leather briefcase that made her look like a tiny office worker—and tried to stuff her doll Annie inside. The catch wouldn’t close.

I wrenched the doll away and flung it on the couch. ‘I’ll just end up carrying her around. Leave Annie here.’

The police would ask me later if I saw anyone parked outside our block of units, if it was possible we were followed. I told the truth when I said I didn’t see anyone, but I was in no frame of mind to notice details. Even hypnotherapy only gave sharper, more painful focus to the things I’d done: squeezing Sarah’s hand too tightly, barking words I meant at the time and regretted later. The time I was trying to make up with long strides, pulling her along the footpath, was counteracted by her dragging weight. Sarah retaliated by plonking herself down, but I hauled her up by the armpits and recommenced our slow progress, unwilling to give her what she wanted—to go back home, and also, I suspected, to win.

We missed the bus.

The next one came after an hour of stony silence—Sarah scribbling furiously in her scrapbook, only breaking concentration to glare at me, covering her work with her arm so I couldn't see. Another portrait of her monstrous mother, no doubt. Sometimes she gave me a ball gown and wings; more often it was bulging eyes, claws and sharp teeth. Her mutinous expression had softened, but it had been replaced by a resoluteness that made me fear she was building towards a humiliating public tantrum.

But I won.

We got off the bus and trudged the last five hundred metres to the market in Buskers Lane, a cobbled street flanked by the kind of narrow-fronted shops that relabelled and resold imported goods as designer fashion and homewares. It was a busy, crazy maze: outside the shopfronts, stalls flanked a pedestrian walkway just wide enough for four people abreast. It was mostly junk jewellery, deep-fried food, homemade crafts and cheap souvenirs, but Sarah loved the snow cones and I always headed for the fresh produce.

Despite my insistence that Sarah should wear appropriate clothes, I'd worn ridiculous shoes: wedge heels that made walking on the uneven cobblestones difficult. My ankles ached, but I was determined not to go home until I'd filled my shopping bag with weird fruit and taught my daughter a lesson.

'Look, they have those crane kites you always wanted.'

Sarah was subdued. 'No.'

'Raspberry snow cone or Coke?'

She glared. 'They make my teeth hurt.'

I pointed to a man making balloon animals, but Sarah was having none of it.

'No.'

‘If you don’t snap out of it soon, miss, you’ll be going to bed at six o’clock for a week.’

It started to rain, a fine, floating mist that turned the cobblestones shiny and slick, enough to send people scurrying for cover.

I stopped at a stall to feel and smell the produce. The vendor held an umbrella over my head.

Sarah tugged at my arm. ‘I want to go home *now*.’

‘Then you’d better start walking.’ I said it without thinking, and picked up a spiky fruit. ‘What are these?’

‘Ritlee rambutan,’ the woman said. ‘They’re grown in North Queensland.’

‘Fresh?’

‘Came down yesterday. The jackfruit are from the Northern Territory. Very fresh.’

After choosing six rambutan and two jackfruit, I unfolded a canvas shopping bag and carefully placed the fruit inside. When I turned to speak to Sarah, she was gone.

‘Did you see my little girl?’

The vendor shook her head.

‘She was right here.’

I checked under the table. I looked up and down the street. No Sarah.

My temper flared again; instead of the expected tantrum, she’d pulled a disappearing act.

‘You saw her, though, right?’

She shook her head again. ‘No.’

‘She’s wearing a pink dress. If she comes back, can you tell her to wait here?’ I picked up my bag and ducked into a side street where I had a decent view of the area.

The rain was heavier now. My hair was sticking flat to my head and my arms were covered with goosebumps, but my primary

concern—and I would later admit this to the police—was that Sarah was hiding somewhere, watching. I suspected she had witnessed my rising panic and found another way to punish me.

So I hid.

I stayed there for at least five minutes, hoping Sarah would blow her cover when she realised I had gone. I wanted her to be the lost child standing in the middle of the street, crying because she couldn't find her mother. People would stop to help her. Still I'd wait, until her panic matched mine and she was inconsolable. I know I wasn't the first parent to think about pulling this trick, but maybe I was the first to actually do it, and to have the stunt backfire in such a spectacularly devastating way.

Ten minutes later, I'd abandoned my shopping bag and my ridiculous shoes under a table. I never found them again.

I worked my way from stall to stall. 'Have you seen a little girl?' I described her hair, her beads, her dress. Held my hand waist-high. Told them her name. My feet were bleeding, my left big toe stubbed and shredded.

A crowd began to gather.

'How long has she been missing?'

'Could she have run off?'

'Should I call the police?' a woman asked.

'I don't know!' I wailed. 'No. Yes!'

Somewhere, an accordion was playing the 'Beer Barrel Polka' in an endless loop. I'd never get the tune out of my head. I watched a blue helium balloon detach itself from a bunch and sail away—I remembered that, but I couldn't recall the faces of the people who tried to help.

It didn't occur to me that she wouldn't come back, or that we wouldn't find her. My panic was still laced with guilt and, if I am honest, anger.

Despair came later.

Over the following hours the search spread from the laneway to nearby streets and parks; the police knocked on doors and searched shops, warehouses, roofs, even drains, anywhere a child might have been hurt or become lost. The sky darkened. More rain fell. There were baying sniffer dogs, portable spotlights that hurt my eyes, and faceless people who asked the same questions over and over, as if I might remember things differently.

It was that evening, when the sun had set and the only people left were those directly involved in the search, when I first heard the word ‘abduction’. Until then, it had been ‘lost’, ‘missing’ and ‘misadventure’. I was sitting on the rear step of a police van, a scratchy blanket wrapped around my shaking shoulders, feeling numb and alone. There were calls to be made, but first I had to accept that Sarah was really gone.

A tall, middle-aged man wearing a dark suit approached, holding out his hand.

‘My name is Inspector James Hooper. I’ve been brought in as the specialist investigator on your daughter’s disappearance.’

He had a warm handshake and gentle eyes. After the repeated questioning and blunt manner of the other officers, it was too much. I broke down.

He gave me a packet of tissues and sat next to me. ‘Ms Morgan, we have to consider that this might be an abduction.’

‘A *what*?’

‘Is there anyone who might have taken your daughter? Anyone she’d go with willingly?’

I shook my head. There was nobody, unless someone from her school happened to be in Buskers Lane and thought it was a good idea to convince Sarah to go with them. It seemed like long odds.



‘My parents live in Athena Bay. Jess—my sister—is in Greece.’

He checked his notepad. ‘You’re a single parent. What about her father? Is there a custody arrangement?’

‘He’s not in her life,’ I said. ‘You’d be wasting time looking in that direction. I couldn’t even tell you where to find him.’

‘Regardless, we’ll need names—anyone you can think of, any details, no matter how small or insignificant they might seem.’

‘No, no, it’s nothing like that. This is my fault—she wanted to go home. I told her to start walking, but I didn’t mean it.’

‘We’re checking all possible routes.’ He closed his notepad and tucked it in his shirt pocket. ‘Do you think she might have tried to make her way home, alone?’

I pictured Sarah’s habitual scowl, the stubborn set of her chin. ‘It’s possible,’ I admitted.

‘There’s some footage coming in. We’ll see what that shows us. I know you must have been over things a dozen times, but—’

I started telling him about the argument.

He interrupted. ‘I know those things. Tell me about *her*.’

*She’s bright and wilful—we argue all the time—but she can be so sweet. She has a chickenpox scar on her right shoulder. Her bottom two teeth have just cut through. She believes in ghosts and fairies—she thinks she was a princess in a past life. She swims like a fish. Her earliest memory is of playing at the beach, and she likes hiding in small spaces but hates the dark.*

We spoke for nearly an hour. I showed him photos of Sarah on my phone, and sobbed.

‘I won’t stop until we find her,’ he promised.

At seven o’clock an officer told me she’d been instructed to drive me home. I didn’t want to leave, but by then it was no longer a busy market—just a wet and lonely street, cordoned off from

onlookers at each end. I clung to the possibility that Sarah had got lost. Perhaps someone had thought they were doing the right thing by taking her home. She might be waiting for me there, so I didn't argue.

I sat in the back of the police car, shaking so hard my teeth felt loose. I chewed my nails and the cuticles bled. Until then I had ricocheted from one fraught moment to the next, but now reality hauled me down so heavily I felt the shocking need to crawl into bed and sleep.

I made a mental list. It was a short one: call my parents, and call Jess in Greece. I had no idea what time it was there.

Back at the unit, there were other officers waiting, some already inside. They took my phone. They bagged Sarah's hairbrush. They questioned me relentlessly, through the night and into the early morning, until I could barely form a coherent sentence, let alone recall what I'd said before. They also gave me updates on their investigation, which were not reassuring.

Footage from the cameras in the laneway proved inconclusive. It was difficult to find a clear view of the street and the pedestrians because every angle was obscured by vendors' awnings and umbrellas. Every vehicle registration matched locals, vendors or visitors. No witnesses had come forward.

Sarah had simply vanished, as if she'd never been there.

The one thing the footage *did* prove was that I had spent roughly five minutes waiting in the side street, playing cat and mouse with my missing child, which at least gave police an approximate time for her possible abduction. Five minutes, waiting for her when I could have been looking. I should have remembered more: the exact time she disappeared, faces of passing people, cars in the parking lanes. But I simply waited, thinking she'd be back at any moment. I'd dragged Sarah all the way there, clenching her tiny

hand in my fist, and then I'd let go.

Five minutes, wasted.

I won and I lost.

By midmorning the questions had ceased and an officer had returned my phone. I was encouraged to rest. Instead I spent hours in my bedroom making desperate calls, while a revolving shift of police officers crowded the unit. My neighbours had been woken during the night and questioned. Jess had promised she would be on the first flight home and my parents were on their way. Each conversation only made Sarah's absence more painful and real, and I couldn't help but replay, over and over, what my mother had said when I managed to choke out that Sarah was missing.

*What are you saying, Abbie? Are you telling me you lost her?*

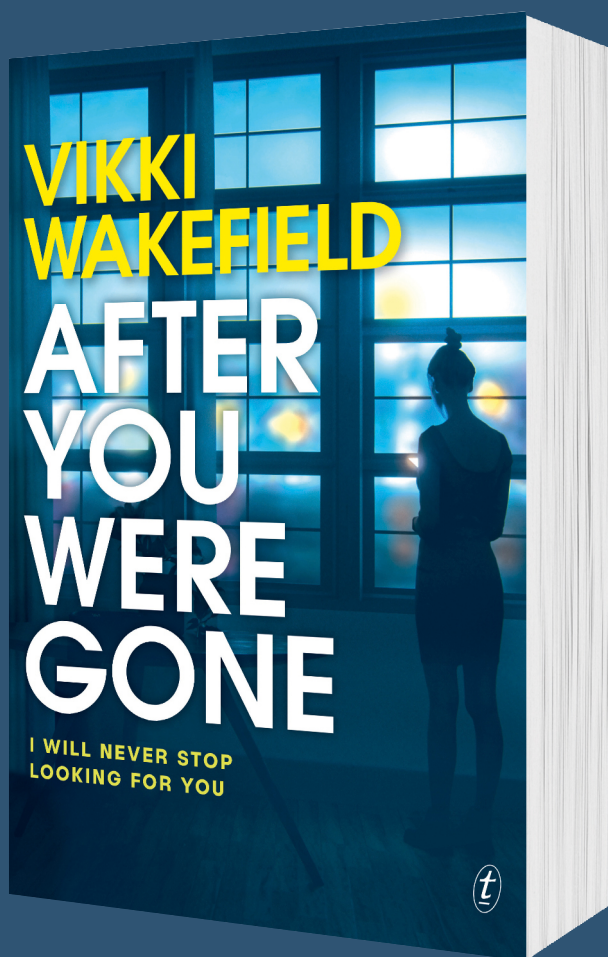
That she was distraught, but not shocked, was another twist of the knife.

My phone battery eventually died. I put it on charge and picked up a book from my bedside table. I'd read the first half, about a woman, an amnesiac, who woke each morning with no memory of her life. How awful, I'd thought, to forget everything while you slept. My bookmark was one of Sarah's drawings, given to me the day before. Now, when I unfolded the paper and looked more closely at her characteristic bobble-headed figures and fussy colouring in, the drawing seemed like an omen.

Sarah: smiling and dancing.

Me: standing over her, faintly menacing, hands on hips.

When I finished that book almost a year later, I knew intimately how terrible it was to wake each morning and remember.



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