

Jill

Chelsea Yates

I met her through photocopied fliers scotch-taped to storefront windows.¹ The local radio station taught me how to pronounce her last name. The grown-ups I knew rarely said it out loud. When they did, they spoke it cautiously, as if doing so might summon a demon.

My friend Trent remembers her because she went missing the one summer his family drove to Nashville and visited the Grand Ole Opry. When they returned home, her disappearance was all over the news. The police came around to ask his parents if they'd seen anything suspicious in the neighborhood. His house had a McGruff the Crime Dog sign in their window, so a kid in trouble might've rung their bell. But, no, they'd been out of town.

She lived with her mom and brother in Kansas but had been spending the summer with her dad and stepmom in our little Nebraska town. They rented an apartment in a building near downtown, which at the time was a few blocks of wide parking and old buildings. I lived in a different part of town, but I was also aware of her disappearance. Everyone was. She was just nine, like Trent and me.

Her dad and stepmom worked early shifts and weren't home the morning it happened. She got herself up, dressed, and left the apartment. She walked to her babysitter's house, about three blocks from Trent's house. Instead of knocking on the front door or going around back, she sat on the front porch. That was the last anyone saw of her.

But kidnappings didn't happen in our town. At least, that's what everyone thought until hers. Our high school basketball team had won the state championship that spring with a last-second shot. Over the summer, there was a buzz in the air—the

1. This essay explores the disappearance of Jill Cutshall, a girl who went missing from Norfolk, Nebraska, in 1987, and has never been found.

kind of joy that makes a town feel invincible. Then, in August, her disappearance changed everything. The mood shifted. Something had taken flight that summer—not just her, but a sense of certainty, of safety, of what could and couldn't happen here.

Her parents were blamed. Broken home. Bad news. What was her dad thinking, leaving her alone at odd hours? Where was her stepmom? Not a suitable arrangement for kids, people said—as if poor judgment explained everything.

In the weeks, months, and eventually years that followed, her disappearance was treated less as a community tragedy and more as a family problem. Something unfortunate, yes—but it wasn't ours to worry about.

Maybe that was the story adults told us kids so we wouldn't be scared. Or maybe it was what they told themselves so they wouldn't be. But the truth was simpler, and more terrifying: it could have happened to any of us.

Her disappearance loomed over the start of fourth grade. Her mom moved to town to be closer to the search. "MISSING" posters filled bulletin boards and shop windows. Some featured a hand-drawn illustration of her, which surprised some of us kids who thought only cops on TV shows worked with sketch artists on that kind of thing. Others presented what looked like a photocopied school picture. I remember thinking the two images didn't look much alike.

I liked her smile from the photograph, though. It was bright, and she had big front teeth—the kind that must have recently grown in, replacing baby teeth. Her long blonde hair was parted in the middle, each side pulled back in a barrette. I'd stare at her likeness, curious if we'd been at the swimming pool together or gone down the tornado slide at the park, one after the other. I wondered what her favorite cereal was and what Saturday morning cartoons she liked best.

Here's something I don't remember: changes. We kids still walked to school unattended and returned to empty houses in the afternoon. We played in our front yards and rode our bikes around town unsupervised. We were instructed not to talk to strangers or get into strange cars—as if we would have had control in those situations.

The T-shirt, jeans, and underwear she'd been wearing were found about three months later, on the grounds of a nearby wildlife refuge. Eventually, two men were accused of abducting her. Both lived in the same apartment building as her dad and stepmom. Both had records. Both were questioned. Neither was arrested. A few years later, her mom petitioned signatures to convene a grand jury, which determined there was sufficient evidence to bring one of the men to trial. He was convicted of kidnapping and sentenced to life in prison. The other was not charged.

There was never a confession, or a body.

Trent and I didn't know each other the summer she went missing. We became friends one afternoon a few years later sitting side by side during a junior high assembly. For years, our friendship fluttered like moths around a porch light, drawn to shared curiosities. We traded favorite songs and poets, ate school lunches together, and later, in college, found ourselves in the same classrooms with the same professors. Now, in our mid-40s, we still circle each other's sky, making a point to check in, to stay tethered.

We never spoke of her back then, when we first met in junior high, though in our own ways we both carried her with us. It wasn't until a recent catch-up call that she surfaced between us. We talked about the trace she left behind—the unsettled questions and the thoughts that still unsettle us. Her

disappearance taught us that bad things don't always come with a reason, or a warning. Sometimes they just happen.

But I like to think she flew. That morning, the moment she turned away from the babysitter's front door, I imagine she sprouted small wings—fragile, trembling, but determined. As she fought and thrashed and screamed, those wings caught fire. Fueled by fury, they grew stronger, brighter, until she broke away, rising in a blaze that scorched the hands that tried to hold her down.

And then she hovered above them, above us—no longer just a little girl, but something more: a beautiful bird reborn in flame, wings now fully feathered and glowing, trailing embers, free to catch the sunlight.

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