

THE  
REAPPEARANCE  
OF  
RACHEL  
PRICE

HOLLY  
JACKSON





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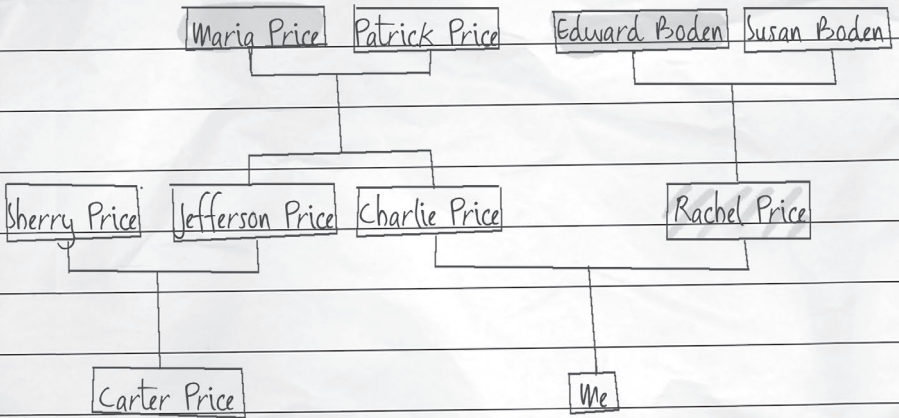
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Annabel Price


8<sup>th</sup> Grade


2/13/2020

## My Family Tree



Key

 Deceased

 Not sure

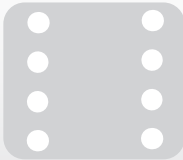
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## The Disappearance of Rachel Price

Documentary

Crime

Filming 2024

☆ Rate

### Crew:

**Ramsey Lee** ... producer, director

**James Myers** ... camera operator

**Saba Iqbal** ... sound department

**Ash Maddox** ... camera assistant

# ONE

“What do you think happened to your mother?”

The word sounded wrong to Bel when he said it. Mother. Unnatural. Not quite as bad as Mom. That one pushed between her lips, misshapen and mad, like a bloated slug finally breaking free, splatting there on the floor for everyone to stare at. Because everyone would, everyone always did. The word didn't belong in her mouth, so Bel didn't say it, not if she could help it. At least there was a coldness to mother, a sense of distance.

“It's OK, please take your time,” Ramsey said, the vowels clipped and exposed.

Bel looked across at him, avoiding the camera. Lines of concern crisscrossed his black skin, pulling around his eyes as they fixed on Bel's, because she was already taking her time, too much, more than she had in the pre-interviews the past few days. He reached up to scratch his temple, right where his dark coiled hair faded out above his ears. Ramsey Lee: filmmaker, director, from South London—a whole world away, and yet here he was in Gorham, New Hampshire, sitting across from her.

Ramsey cleared his throat.

“Um . . .,” Bel began, choking on that slug. “I don't know.”

Ramsey sat back, his chair creaking, and Bel knew from the flicker of disappointment in his face that she was doing a bad job. Worse.

It must have been the camera. The camera changed things, the permanence of it. One day thousands of people would watch this, separated from her only by the glass of their television screens. They would analyze every word she said, every pause she took, and have something to say about it. They'd study her face: her warm white skin and the flush of her cheeks, her sharp chin that sharpened more when she spoke and especially when she smiled, her short honey-blond hair, her round gray-blue eyes. Doesn't she look just like Rachel did, they'd say, those people beyond the television screen. Bel thought she looked more like her dad, actually. Thanks, though.

"Sorry," Bel added, pressing her eyelids together, bright orange patches where the three softbox lights glared at her. She just had to get through this documentary, pretend to not be hating every second, talk about Rachel, then life could go back to normal, back to not talking about Rachel.

Ramsey shook his head, a smile breaking through.

"Don't worry," he said. "It's a difficult question."

It wasn't, though, not really. And the answer wasn't difficult either. Bel really didn't know what had happened to her. No one did. That was the point of all this.

"I think she was—"

Someone stumbled behind the camera, tripping on a cable that ripped out of the wall. One of the lights flickered and died, swaying on its rickety leg. A hand reached out to grab it before it fell, righting it.

"Oh shit. Sorry, Rams," the tripper said, chasing the loose wire back to the outlet. Now that the light was out, Bel could see him properly for the first time. She couldn't say she'd noticed him before, when Ramsey had introduced the crew, too dazzled by the lights and the camera. He must have been the youngest of the four documentary crew members, couldn't be much older than her. And he was, just maybe, the most ridiculous person Bel had ever seen. He had shoulder-length brown hair that fell in thick curls, pushed off to one side of his pale face, full of angles and shadows. He wore flared tartan pants and a bright purple sweater with little green-and-yellow dinosaurs marching across his chest.

"Sorry," he said again, the o giving him away; must be from London too. He grunted as he pushed the plug in and the light sparked back to life, hiding him from Bel. Thank God, that ugly sweater was distracting.

"I told you to gaffer all the wires down, Ash," Ramsey said, shifting to glance behind the box light.

"I did . . .," came Ash's voice from behind the light, somehow angular, just like his face. "Until the tape ran out."

"Mate, we have like fifty thousand rolls upstairs," Ramsey replied.

"Fifty thousand and one," said the woman standing behind the microphone: a long pole balanced on a tripod, with a fluffy gray head hovering over Bel and Ramsey, just above the shot. Saba, that was what Ramsey had called her, introducing her as the Sound Person. She was wearing a huge pair of headphones that dwarfed her face, pushing the brown skin of her cheeks into unnatural folds.

"Sorry," came Ash's voice. "I'll fix it later."

"It's OK," Ramsey said, his face softening for a second. Then, to the man behind the huge camera: "James, why are you panning to Ash?"

"Thought we were aiming for a cinéma vérité style for the doc, that you might want this in," the camera operator replied.

"No, I don't want this in. Let's reset the shot and go for another take. And everyone watch where you're stepping this time."

Ramsey flashed an apologetic smile at Bel, sitting here on a plush couch across from them all, the cushions artfully arranged and rearranged behind her.

"Ash is my brother-in-law," he said, as though in explanation. "Known him since he was eleven. It's his first job, isn't it, Ash? Camera assistant."

Ash: camera assistant. Saba: sound person. James: camera operator. And Ramsey: filmmaker, producer, director. Must have been nice, to have words like that follow your name, words you'd chosen. Bel's were different: This is Annabel. The daughter of Rachel Price. That last part said in a knowing whisper. Because even though Rachel was gone, everything existed only in relation to her. Gorham wasn't its own place anymore; it was the town where Rachel Price

had lived. Number 33 Milton Street wasn't Bel's home, it was the house Rachel Price had lived in. Bel's dad, Charlie Price, well, he was Rachel Price's husband, even though the Price part had come from him.

"Ash, the clapper," Ramsey reminded him.

"Oh." Ash emerged from behind the light, a black-and-white clapper board clasped between his hands. Printed on it were the words: The Disappearance of Rachel Price. The name of the documentary. Below that, a handwritten: Interview with Bel. And she was surprised, really, that it didn't just say Rachel Price's daughter.

Ash walked in front of the camera, the hems of his pants swishing loudly together.

"Take six," he said, bringing the clapper stick down to the slate with a sharp bang, hurrying out of the shot.

"Let's start again." Ramsey let out a long breath. They'd been here for hours already, and it was starting to show on his face. "Your mum has now been missing for more than sixteen years. In all that time, there has been no sign of her. No activity on her bank accounts, no communication with family, no body found despite extensive searches. Of course there have been sightings," he said, leaning on the word too hard so it came out sideways. "People on the internet who claim to have seen Rachel in Paris. Brazil. Even one a few months ago nearby in North Conway. But of course, these are unsubstantiated claims. Your mum vanished without a trace on February thirteenth, 2008. What do you think happened to her?"

Bel couldn't say I don't know again, otherwise she'd never be allowed to leave.

"It's as much a mystery for me as the rest of the world," she said, and from the flash in Ramsey's eyes, she knew that was a better answer. OK, keep going. "I know all the theories people have about what happened. And if I had to pick the one . . ."

Ramsey nodded, urging her on.

"I think she was trying to leave. She left. Then maybe she was killed by an opportunistic killer—that's the term the media uses. Or



maybe she got lost in the White Mountains and died in the snow, and an animal got to her remains. That's why we never found her."

Ramsey leaned forward, finger cupping his chin thoughtfully.

"So, Bel, you're saying you think the most likely scenario is that your mother is dead?"

Bel half nodded, staring down at the coffee table in front of her. The full glass bottle of water that was a prop only, she wasn't allowed to drink it. The marble chessboard laid out with all the pieces prepared for battle, her knees pointed down the center in no-man's-land. This repurposed conference room in the Royalty Inn hotel on Main Street was the stage. The water bottle, the chessboard and the cushions were the props. None of this was real to anyone else, it was all for show.

"Yes. I think she's dead. I think she died that day or not long after."

Did she think that? Did it really matter? Gone was gone.

Ramsey was looking at the chessboard too now.

"You say you think your mum was trying to leave," he said, bringing his eyes back. "Do you mean that she was running away?"

Bel shrugged. "I guess."

"But there is compelling evidence that opposes the ran away theory. Rachel didn't withdraw any money from her bank account in the days and weeks leading up to her disappearance. If she was planning to run away and start a new life, she would have needed money to do that. Not only that, but she didn't take her wallet containing her ID with her, and she'd left her bank cards at home. Nor did she take her phone. She didn't pack any clothes or belongings. None at all. She didn't even take her coat with her on that freezing day, it was left in the car too, with her phone and wallet."

And me, Bel thought.

"What do you say to that?" Ramsey asked her.

What did he want her to say?

"I don't know." Bel went back to those three words, hid behind them.

Ramsey seemed to sense the barricade, backing off and straightening up.

"You're eighteen now, Bel. You weren't even two years old when Rachel went missing. Twenty-two months old, in fact. And of course, one of the most notable things about this case that sets it apart from all others, was that you were with her. You were with your mum when she disappeared."

"Yes," Bel said, knowing what question was coming next. It didn't matter how many times it was asked; the answer was the same. And it was worse for Bel, trust her.

"And you don't remember anything at all that day? Being in the mall? Being in the car?"

"I don't remember anything," she said flatly. "I was too young to remember. Or to tell anyone what I saw that day."

"And here's the craziest thing." Ramsey leaned forward, words spiking in the middle as he attempted to keep his voice even. "You were a toddler, too young to communicate properly with anyone, with the police. But if someone did take Rachel, abduct her from the car where it was found abandoned with you inside, that means you must have seen exactly who it was. You saw them. At one point in time, you must have known, however briefly, the answer to the mystery."

"I know."

Crazy, wasn't it? The craziest thing, in fact.

Bel closed her eyes, three blazing sunspots invading the dark world inside her head. Those lights were just too bright. Were they giving off heat too, or was that just her imagination? Explain why her face was so hot, then.

"Are you OK to continue?" Ramsey asked her.

"Yeah." She didn't have a choice, really. Contracts had been agreed to, waivers and releases signed. And, most importantly, she had promised her dad. She could pretend to be nice, for his sake. Say yes and no and sorry in the right places.

"You really have no memories from that day at all?"

"No." And she wouldn't the next time he asked too. Or the one after that. She had no memory of what happened, no idea. Just what she knew later, when she was old enough to know things: that she

had been left behind. Abandoned there in the backseat of the car, however it happened.

"This case is one of the most discussed and studied on true-crime podcasts and social media, enduring in the public consciousness even sixteen years later," Ramsey said, eyes glittering. "The name Rachel Price is almost synonymous with mystery. Because her disappearance was like a puzzle, and it's human nature to want to solve a puzzle, don't you think?"

Was Bel supposed to answer that? Too late.

"And that's because," Ramsey continued, "Rachel seemed to disappear twice that day. Can you tell us what happened that afternoon, at two p.m.? Where your mum and you went?"

"Again?"

"Yes, please. For the camera," Ramsey said, taking the blame off Bel and putting it on the camera instead. Cameras didn't have feelings. Ramsey seemed nice like that. But then, of course, he wanted her to think he was nice, didn't he?

Bel cleared her throat. "That afternoon, I was in the car with Rachel. She drove us to the White Mountains Mall, which is in Berlin. Not far from Gorham, about ten minutes away. Security cameras recorded both of us walking into the mall. Rachel was carrying me."

"And why were you at the mall?"

"She often took me there on her days off, I've been told," Bel said. "Rachel used to work at a coffeehouse there. Went back for the coffee, to see her old friends. That wasn't out of the ordinary. It was called the Moose Mouse Coffeehouse."

Of course, Bel didn't remember that, but she'd seen the security camera footage since, the last images of Rachel Price alive. Sitting at the coffeehouse, baby Bel in a bright blue padded coat with marshmallow arms, wriggling in Rachel's lap. Surrounded by empty tables. Blurry but happy, those tiny figures seemed. Not knowing that they were both about to disappear, one for good.

"But what was out of the ordinary," Ramsey countered, "is that after you finished your drinks, Rachel got up to leave, still carrying you. You walked away from the Moose Mouse Coffeehouse at

two-forty-nine, the cameras show us this, we can follow you on the footage. But then you turn a corner, a blind spot between the mall security cameras, and . . . ?”

He seemed to be waiting for something.

“We disappeared,” Bel said, filling in the blanks.

“Vanished into thin air,” Ramsey added. “You don’t appear on the camera you should have if Rachel had kept walking. You don’t appear on any of the cameras after that, none of the ones by the exits. Nowhere. Which means you couldn’t have left. And yet you did. You both disappeared inside that mall, and there is no explanation. Any idea how?”

“I don’t know, I don’t remember.” Bit of a running theme.

“Police analyzed that footage after Rachel’s disappearance. They studied and counted everyone into the mall, and counted everyone back out again. The numbers matched except for two. You and Rachel. The only two who entered and never left. The police even considered whether you’d left in disguise for some reason, changed your appearances, but that didn’t work with the numbers. You’d simply vanished.”

Bel shrugged, unsure what Ramsey wanted her to say. She was un-vanished now.

“The next thing we know, you’ve reappeared. You were found alone in Rachel’s car, abandoned on the side of a road, close to Moose Brook State Park. The car was pulled up on the shoulder, in the snow, headlights on, engine still running. A man” —Ramsey checked his notes—“Julian Tripp, was driving past and found you just after six o’clock. He called the police immediately—”

“He’s actually my homeroom teacher now. Mr. Tripp.”

Ramsey smiled, didn’t mind the interruption. “Small world.”

“Well, small town,” Bel corrected him.

“I think it’s clear why true-crime fanatics have focused on this case. There have been no answers since the trial ended. It can’t be solved and it will never make sense. It must be so much harder for you because you were there for all of it.” Ramsey paused. “What has it been like, Bel? Growing up in the shadow of this impossible mystery?”

No one had ever put it quite like that before. It did feel like a shadow, most days, a dark, unpleasant thing that you looked away from if you knew what was good for you. And Bel did. She rubbed her nose, hard enough to click the cartilage inside. Then remembered she was on camera, the microphone hovering above her. Damn. Hopefully Ramsey would edit that out.

"It's been OK," she said eventually. "I accepted a long time ago that we would never have answers. It's not my fault I can't remember any of it; I was just too young. And because I don't have those memories, we will never solve the Rachel Price mystery, but I'm OK with that. Honestly. I have my dad." Bel paused, a small smile stretching her mouth, pulling her chin into a point. "He tried his hardest to give me as normal a childhood possible, under the circumstances. He's the best dad I could ask for. That's why I don't want people to feel sorry for me," she said, meaning it. She hoped the camera could tell that. "I'm lucky, actually—"

"Um, Ramsey," Ash's voice floated in beyond the light.

"We're filming, Ash." Ramsey turned to glare at him.

"Oh, I know." He sidestepped closer and Bel could finally see him again, blinking him into existence. "It's just that we've gone over schedule, and I think . . ."

He gestured at the door, leading into the lobby of the hotel. Encased in the window panel was a face, pushed up against the glass, watching them. Bel shaded her eyes with a cupped hand, but the lights were still too bright to see who it was.

"She's here already," Ash said, checking the time on his phone. "She's early."

"Who's she?" Bel asked. She knew that Carter and Aunt Sherry weren't filming their interviews until next week.

"Shit," Ramsey hissed, checking his own watch. He glanced quickly at Bel, eyes wide, losing their kind lines.

Bel leaned forward, losing hers too. She hardened her voice. "Who's here, Ramsey? Who's she?"