

**Nathan Ashborn**

# **My Neighbor Knows My Alarm**

**She Trusted Her with a Key. Now Someone  
Is Photographing Her Home from the Inside.**



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Is Photographing Her Home from the  
Inside.

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THRILLER

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# INTRO

The first photograph showed my entryway.

For a few seconds, I was certain I had taken it myself. My phone sometimes resurfaced old pictures at the worst possible moments - forgotten receipts, the washing machine's serial number, Franek's shoes photographed in a store before the start of the school year. So I stared at the screen while waiting at a red light on Rokicińska and tried to remember why I would ever have photographed my own shoe cabinet.

Then I noticed the time.

2:17 p.m.

The picture had arrived four minutes earlier.

It wasn't old.

The car behind me honked. I pulled away before the driver could do it again and put the phone facedown on the passenger seat. Seven minutes to home. Maybe six if I didn't hit traffic at the roundabout.

Franek finished school at three twenty. It was three oh three.

The house should have been empty.

At the next intersection, my phone vibrated again.

I didn't look.

I kept telling myself there had to be a reasonable explanation. Magda might have gone in without telling me. She sometimes picked up parcels left outside my door when a courier refused to wait. She had a key. She knew the alarm

code. Over the past six months, I had probably told her more about how my house worked than I had told anyone else.

After the divorce, Michał no longer had a key. I changed the lock cylinder two days after he moved out his last boxes. I changed the alarm code a week later, when I discovered he still remembered the old one.

Three people knew the new code.

Me.

Franek.

Magda from next door.

I turned onto our street so fast that the rear wheel scraped the curb. The row of semi-detached houses looked the way it always did: pale facades, identical graphite roofs, hedges everyone kept promising to trim before winter. Magda's white car was parked outside her house.

That reassured me.

For about two seconds.

Then I saw Magda herself.

She was kneeling on the lawn in front of her house, stuffing dry leaves into a black garbage bag. She was wearing a green jacket, gardening gloves, and headphones over her ears. She didn't look up until I slammed my car door.

She waved.

She didn't look like someone who had been walking through my house forty-some minutes earlier, taking pictures.

"You're home early," she called.

"Were you at my place today?"

She pulled one headphone away from her ear.

"What?"

"In the house. Mine."

She frowned.

"No."

She answered immediately.

Too immediately, I thought, and then hated myself for thinking it.

I took out my phone.

The second message was still waiting unopened. The same unknown number. No text.

I tapped the screen.

This time someone had photographed the kitchen.

They were standing beside the island, roughly where I put my work bag every morning. The frame showed the table, the coffee machine, part of the patio door, and my reflection in the black glass of the oven.

Not my reflection now.

The reflection of the person holding the phone.

I zoomed in.

There was no face. Just a dark shape against the window.

"Alicja?"

Magda had come closer.

I locked the screen.

I don't know why.

A minute earlier, the first thing I had wanted to do was show her the photographs. Now the knowledge that she was

the only person besides me and my eleven-year-old son who knew the code made me close my hand around the phone as if it were something I needed to protect.

"Did your alarm go off?" she asked.

I looked at her.

"No."

"Then why are you asking if I was inside?"

"I think I left a window open."

The lie came too easily.

Magda glanced toward my house.

"I can go in with you."

"You don't have to."

"Ala."

"Really. I probably just remembered it wrong."

I headed toward the gate.

The alarm app showed a green icon.

SYSTEM ARMED.

Last status change: 7:41 a.m.

I had armed it that morning when I left with Franek.

There had been no disarming at 2:17 p.m.

I stopped.

Checked again.

7:41 - full arming.

No later activity.

Someone could have taken the photograph earlier and only sent it now.

That thought should have made me feel better.

It didn't.

I pressed my finger to the lock reader. There was a soft click. The door opened a few inches.

I didn't go in.

The house was silent. The steady hum of the refrigerator drifted in from the living room, and somewhere upstairs the automatic air freshener was running. I knew those sounds. They were ordinary.

The entryway looked ordinary too.

Shoe cabinet. Mirror. Coat rack. Franek's blue hoodie thrown across the bench despite three consecutive reminders to put his things in the closet.

I took out my phone and opened the first photograph.

I compared the image to what I saw in front of me.

That was when I noticed the difference.

In the photograph, the closet door was slightly open.

Now it was closed.

"Everything okay?" Magda called from behind the fence.

I turned my head.

She was still standing in front of her own house.

"Yes."

I stepped inside and closed the door.

I didn't take off my shoes.

First I checked the living room. Then the kitchen. The downstairs bathroom. My office. I didn't call out or ask whether anyone was there. I had no intention of warning someone who might be standing only a few yards away from me.

My morning coffee mug was still on the kitchen counter.

There were no muddy footprints by the patio door.

The windows were shut.

I went back to the entryway and opened the closet.

Jackets.

A coat.

Franek's backpack from last year.

A box of cables.

Nothing else.

My phone vibrated for the third time.

This time the message contained a single sentence.

DON'T JUST CHECK THE DOORS.

Below it was a photograph.

Of my bedroom.

I sat down on the first stair before my legs could make the decision for me.

The photographer had been standing right beside the bed. The frame showed the window, part of the wardrobe, and the bedside table. On it were a book, a charger, and the glass of water I had left there that morning.

But the picture did not show the entire room.

Someone had deliberately aimed the camera lower.

At the open drawer of the bedside table.

The one where I kept my passport, a few documents, and a small envelope of cash for emergencies.

The drawer was open.

I looked up toward the first floor.

From where I was sitting, I could see the bedroom door.

It was closed.

I didn't remember closing it that morning.

My phone rang.

Franek.

I answered immediately.

"Mom, are you home already?"

I could hear children and a teacher's voice in the background.

"I am. Why?"

"Because our teacher let us out early."

I looked at the time.

3:14.

"Stay at school."

"But Magda texted me that she could pick me up."

I didn't answer.

"Mom?"

I looked through the narrow window beside the front door.

Magda was no longer on the lawn.

Her black bag of leaves lay open beside the hedge.

"Franek, listen to me very carefully. Don't leave the building. Don't go with anyone. Not even Magda."

There was silence on the other end.

"Why?"

A fourth message appeared on the screen.

No photograph.

DO YOU REALLY THINK THE PROBLEM COMES IN  
THROUGH THE DOOR?