

Nathan Ashborn

Your Husband Doesn't Live Here

**Everyone at This Address Knows Him
by a Different Name.**



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Different Name.

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THRILLER

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INTRO

If Paweł had answered his phone, Marta would never have gotten out of the car on Leszczynowa Street.

Now she stood in front of a three-story apartment building on the outskirts of Poznań, holding her phone in one hand and the paper envelope she had found beneath the doormat that morning in the other. The rain was barely falling. It seemed suspended in the air instead, settling over her hair in a fine layer of damp. For the sixth time that afternoon, her screen informed her that the call had gone to voicemail.

Paweł wasn't answering.

That alone should not have worried her. He worked in sales and spent half his life in the car, in meetings, in hotels and restaurants whose names Marta had stopped trying to remember. Sometimes he disappeared for four hours, sometimes eight. Usually, though, he sent a message first.

That morning, he had written only: "Warsaw. Back tomorrow evening. Love you."

Then she had found the envelope outside the door.

No stamp. No sender's name. On the front, someone had written by hand:

FOR MARTA RYBACKA.

Inside was a piece of paper with an address.

14 Leszczynowa Street, apartment 7.

And one sentence.

Ask who Adam Wysocki is.

For the first half hour, she had been convinced it was a mistake. Then she thought it might be a joke. After that,

someone from Paweł's work came to mind - an unhappy client, perhaps, or an ex he had never told her about. It was only later that she noticed something that made her enter the address into her navigation app instead of throwing the note away.

The handwriting.

She didn't recognize it, but she recognized the way the number seven had been written. With a short horizontal stroke through the middle.

Paweł wrote his sevens exactly the same way.

Marta entered the stairwell before she could convince herself to go back to the car.

The building smelled of detergent, wet coats, and boiled cabbage. On the wall beside the mailboxes hung a board listing apartment numbers and residents' names. Some had been printed, others written in pen.

Beside number seven:

A. WYSOCKI

Marta stared at the name longer than it took to read two words.

She took out her phone and photographed it.

That was the first moment she thought she should call the police.

The thought immediately made her feel ridiculous. What would she say? Someone had left her an address? A stranger's name was written beside a mailbox? Her husband had not answered his phone for a few hours?

She climbed to the first floor.

Apartment seven was on the left. The door was dark green and looked recently painted. Beside the peephole, someone had attached a small ceramic swallow.

Marta knew that swallow.

Not that exact one.

One just like it.

Two identical swallows hung in their own house above the doors leading onto the terrace. They had bought them three years earlier during a weekend in Kazimierz Dolny. Paweł had insisted, while Marta joked that they looked like decorations from his grandmother's house.

She pressed the bell.

For several seconds, nothing happened.

Then she heard footsteps.

A woman of perhaps sixty opened the door. She wore a gray sweater, and her glasses hung from a thin chain around her neck. She looked at Marta, then at the envelope in her hand.

Something in her face changed almost imperceptibly.

"Yes?"

Marta cleared her throat.

"I'm sorry. I'm looking for Adam Wysocki."

The woman did not answer at once.

"He's not here."

"Does he live here?"

This time the reaction was clearer. The woman frowned.

"And you are?"

Marta could have lied. Said she was from the housing association, the building administration, or that she had the wrong apartment. Instead, she heard herself say:

"Marta Rybacka."

Her surname had an effect she had not expected.

The woman stepped back.

"Please leave."

"I only want to speak to Mr. Wysocki."

"I told you, he's not here."

"When will he be back?"

The door began to close.

Marta slid her hand between the door and the frame.

"Please, wait. Someone gave me this address."

The woman stopped the door.

"Who?"

"I don't know."

Her gaze dropped to the envelope.

"Someone left it outside my door this morning."

For a moment, no sound came from inside the apartment. Marta caught a glimpse of the hallway: wooden flooring, a black umbrella, a shoe rack. A mirror hung on the wall.

And beneath it stood a pair of men's shoes.

Brown leather, with a darker mark near the left heel.

Marta had bought Paweł an identical pair for his fortieth birthday.

She felt her fingers tighten around the edge of the envelope.

"Those shoes..."

The woman glanced behind her.

And then she became genuinely frightened.

Not surprised.

Frightened.

"Please leave," she said more quietly.

"Who is Adam Wysocki?"

"I shouldn't be talking to you."

"Why?"

The woman closed her eyes for a second, as if trying to make a decision.

Then she looked directly into Marta's face.

"Because I don't know why you've come here."

"I just told you..."

"I know what you told me."

"Then please answer me. Who is Adam Wysocki?"

The woman said nothing.

Marta took out her phone.

The contact photo she had assigned to Paweł was still on the screen. She had taken it the previous summer by a lake. Paweł was sitting on a jetty, squinting into the sun. His hair was shorter than it was now, but otherwise he looked exactly the same.

She turned the screen toward the woman.

"Do you know this man?"

There was no hesitation.

It was the absence of hesitation that stole Marta's breath.

The woman looked at the photograph and went pale.

"Where did you get that picture?"

"He's my husband."

The woman looked up.

"No."

"Excuse me?"

"That's impossible."

Marta almost laughed, but no sound came from her throat.

"We've been married for nine years."

The woman gripped the door with both hands.

"What did you say his name was?"

"Paweł Rybacki."

The silence stretched.

Somewhere on the floor above, a dog barked. From the street came the sound of a passing bus.

The woman looked at the photograph again.

"Your husband doesn't live here."

Marta felt an absurd rush of relief.

"Good. Then apparently someone's decided to play some kind of..."

"Paweł Rybacki doesn't live here," the woman interrupted.

Marta lowered the phone.

"I understand."

"No." The woman shook her head. "You don't understand."

She turned, reached for a chest of drawers in the hallway, and took a photograph from one of the drawers. For a

moment, she held it against her chest as though trying to decide whether she should show it.

Then she handed it to Marta.

The photograph showed six people seated around a table on a terrace. It had to have been taken in summer. Two children, a dark-haired woman of about forty, an older married couple, and two men.

One of them was Paweł.

Not someone who looked like Paweł.

Paweł.

He was wearing the pale blue shirt Marta had ironed three weeks earlier before his trip to Wrocław.

Beside him sat the dark-haired woman. Her hand rested on his shoulder.

On the back of the photograph, someone had written in black pen:

July 2026. Adam's birthday.

Marta read the words twice.

"It's been edited."

The woman did not answer.

"This is some sick joke."

"Marta..."

"How do you know my first name?"

Only after she said it did she realize.

The older woman froze.

Marta stepped back.

"I never told you my first name."

"Please leave."

The door began to move.

"Who are you?"

"Please..."

"Who is Adam?"

The woman looked at her through the narrowing gap.

"The man in the photograph."

"That's Paweł."

"To you."

The door slammed shut.

A second later, Marta heard the lock turn.

She stood in the stairwell, clutching the photograph the woman had apparently forgotten to take back.

The phone vibrated in her other hand.

Her husband's name appeared on the screen.

Paweł.

Marta answered immediately.

"Where are you?"

For a brief moment, all she could hear was the hum of a car.

Then came his calm, familiar voice.

"I told you. Warsaw."

Marta looked at the green door of apartment seven.

"Paweł, who is Adam Wysocki?"

Silence on the other end.

Not a long one.