BANG

# ABSENCE so GREAT

A NOVEL



## JANE KIRKPATRICK

AUTHOR OF A FLICKERING LIGHT

AN ABSENCE SO GREAT
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Scripture quotations or paraphrases are taken from the King James Version.

This book is a work of historical fiction based closely on real people and real events. Details that cannot be historically verified are purely products of the author's imagination.

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To Jerry, who is the loving eye behind the lens.

#### CAST OF CHARACTERS

Jessie Ann Gaebele a photographer

Lillian Ida Gaebele a seamstress and older sister

to Jessie

Selma Selena Gaebele a singer and younger sister

to Jessie

Roy William Gaebele a budding musician and younger

brother to Jessie, nicknamed

"Frog"

William and Ida Gaebele parents of Jessie and owners of a

drayage in Winona, Minnesota

\*Voe Henderson friend of Jessie's

Frederick John "FJ" Bauer owner of Bauer Studio

Jessie Otis Bauer wife of FJ and professional photo

retoucher

Russell, Donald (deceased), children of FJ and Jessie Otis

Winifred, Robert Bauer

Augie and Luise Staak FJ's sister and brother-in-law

Violet and Freddie children of Augie and Luise

Staak

Lottie Fort milliner in Winona

Ralph Carleton a Winona evangelist and

confidant of Mrs. Bauer

**Mrs. Suzanne Johnson	owner of a photographic studio

in Milwaukee

Henry and Mary Harms Jessie's landlords in Milwaukee

Marie Harms daughter of Henry and Mary

\*Joshua Behrens business student at Marquette

University, Milwaukee

\*\*Hilda Everson Jessie's employer in Eau Claire

Virginia Butler Jessie's employer in Bismarck

Herman Reinke FJ's North Dakota ranch partner

Charles Horton president, First National Bank

of Winona

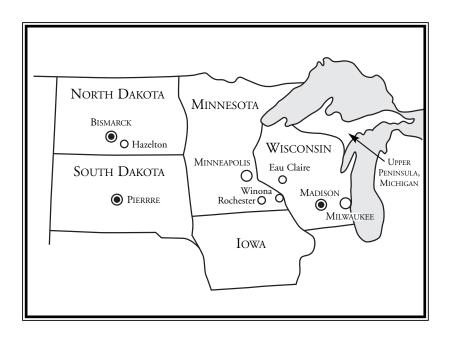
George Haas owner of Polonia Studio

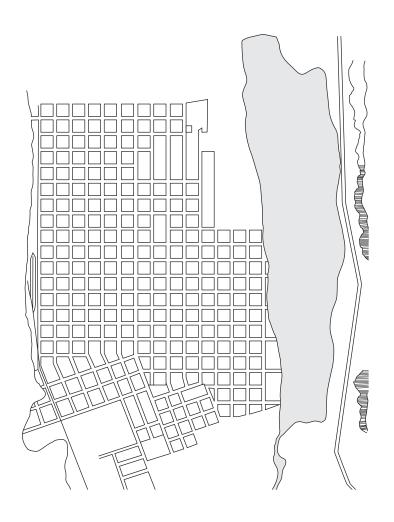
in Winona

The photographers identified in the text, including those at the photographer's association meeting, are actual historical figures.

<sup>\*</sup> Characters are created from the author's imagination.

<sup>\*\*</sup> Jessie Gaebele's actual employer's name in Eau Claire was Johnson; the name of her Milwaukee employer is unknown.





How could I ever prepare for an absence the size of you? —adapted from *Coastal Home* by MARK DOTY

Absence is to love what wind is to fire; it extinguishes the small, it enkindles the great.

—Comte de Bussy-Rabutin

And into whatsoever city or town ye shall enter, enquire who in it is worthy; and there abide till ye go thence.

—MATTHEW 10:11



Baby Misha December 1910, Johnson Studio, Milwaukee 5 x 7 Graflex

#### Loneliness

A photograph, like life, often reveals as much about who's absent as who's there.

This child's name is Misha, the son of Russian immigrants who arrived at the Johnson Studio in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The woman, the mother and wife, or so I assumed, wore a brightly colored headscarf tied beneath her square chin. The cloth framed a somber face the color of a toddler's first tooth. A thick shawl with fringe shimmered as she whispered, comforting the baby wrapped in her arms. The man's hat and suit and upright stature, with his dapper look and gentle eyes focused on the child, reminded me of Fred.

They were a contrast, the man appearing much older than she, and I wondered if he might not be the woman's father rather than a husband, perhaps grandfather to the child; but from their interactions I decided they were married with some age between them. Age differences always intrigue me, what with Fred's being twenty-six years older than I.

From within the cocoon of her clothing, the woman brought the child out, holding him up to me with two hands beneath the baby's arms, which stuck straight out like a scarecrow, wearing a red wool jacket and a knitted cap of yellow, red, and black yarn.

"You take? Pho-to-graph," she demanded, spreading the last word as though each syllable merited the same weight.

"Yes," I said. "But not today." I closed the door they'd stepped through so I could shut out the swirling snow set free from the porch I tried to keep swept. "But not today." I didn't want to lose the commission, but by late afternoon of a Wisconsin December, night consumed more of the day than a photographer liked. I shook my head, waved my hands palms down. "Not today."

"No?" the man asked. "No?"

The woman pulled the child back into her woolen shawl, shrugged her shoulders at the man.

I pointed up toward the window. "No light," I said. "I could use the flash, but it casts deep shadows on the subject."

The Johnson Studio wasn't anything grand like the Bauer Studio of Winona, Minnesota, the one I'd been trained in. It lacked the skylights that brought in the very essence of a photographer's life: warm natural light. "You come early tomorrow," I told him. "Your son can wear the christening dress again."

"Today. We must do it today," the man said in accented but better English than the woman's.

A hard jaw expressed the woman's displeasure, and the child began to fuss. The woman was definitely the mother. The eyebrows on the child stretched in soft brown lines over blue eyes just like those on the woman who held him. The child's mouth derived from the man who spoke in Russian now. A pleading tone carried his words.

They argued. Agony threaded his posture with palms outstretched, pleading. He wanted this photograph more than she did.

I picked up the appointment book and showed them an empty space, then pointed to the Seth Thomas clock sitting on my desk. "Nine. In the morning," I repeated, all the while looking at the child's face, the expressive eyes so full of trust and yet with a hint of concern, as though he could feel the tension between these adults.

"Today." The man turned back to me. "Even with poor light. It must be today. Tomorrow she goes away." His voice cracked as he averted his eyes.

"You might not be happy with the result," I told him.

"It will be all I have," he said. "They go back. The photograph is all she leaves me."

The emotion in his voice was likely more than he wanted to share with me, but I found that this often happened in my studio. Photographs could expose discomforts, which often led to confessions.

I nodded assent and brought them into the operating room, that place within a photographer's studio where light and living begin their journey onto paper and posterity.

The woman advanced as I moved the chair around to capture whatever I could of the fading light. I set up a lamp.

It was not an easy exposure. I thought of what Fred, my mentor, would do in the same circumstance, then stopped myself. I'd not compare the results. I tried my best not to allow thoughts of anything Fred did to come into my head, though I failed at that more often than not. A human weakness. I was here in Milwaukee to learn what I needed to pay attention to, and it wasn't memories of Fred.

I turned to see the woman remove the child's woolen jacket and cap and waited for her to remove her own, as I thought they'd all be in the photograph. But she handed me the child.

"Just Misha," the man said.

That decision, too, revealed more than they perhaps intended: the mother and child were leaving, but only the child was to be captured for his memory.

Misha's weight was no more than a watermelon. Delicate tatting stitched its way up the skirt. The flounced collar emphasized the roundness of the infant's face. My sister Lilly, a seamstress, would have approved of the fine handstitching on the child's garment, quite likely a christening gown. Misha looked angelic with those trusting blue eyes staring into mine.

"It will be better if you hold him," I said. "He'll look more relaxed." The man shook his head. "Just the child."

The woman pointed to a plant stand with a turned pedestal of maple and a flat seat that held a large fern. I moved the child to my hip. I had a younger brother and sister and carried infants that way, my arm around Misha's waist, his stocking legs dangling loose. Did the mother want the plant in the photograph? To my surprise, she removed the fern, set it on the floor, then brought the pedestal to sit in front of where my camera focused. The mother took the child from my arms and plopped Misha on the plant stand, allowing the skirt of the dress to flow down onto the turned pedestal. The woman smiled for the first time, revealing a single dimple and one broken tooth.

I had to admit, Misha's milk white dress against the dark pedestal presented a lovely contrast, but also a precarious sight, with the child

barely able to sit by himself balanced on the stand. He'd have to be braced, and I wasn't sure he'd like the discomfort of the posing stand. It would be so much better if the mother just held him on her lap or we placed the child in a chair, safely propping him up.

"You can't let him be by himself," I said. "The photograph will take too long; he won't be able to sit still. It will blur." It would be unsafe too.

The woman misunderstood and released her hands at that moment, allowing the child to simply be.

"No!" I shouted as I reached for the baby. Misha's eyes grew wide, and he made a small catlike sound of anxiety, turning to his mother.

"I'll have to brace him," I said. I turned to the man. "Tell your wife she'll have to hold the child steady until just before I take the picture. To be safe, even with the brace."

The man nodded, spoke to his wife, who secured the child while I brought the posing brace from the wardrobe where I kept photographic equipment not often used. The infant kicked his feet and smiled. How little it takes to appease us when we trust those around us to keep us safe.

I secured the brace, which looked like large tongs of a tuning fork, slipping them around the slender ribcage of the child and attaching the base to the plant stand. I fluffed the dress out to cover the contraption. It would be there just long enough to expose the film. "You stay holding him until I signal," I said. The man translated, and the woman nodded.

I worked fast then, racing against the light and my own anxiety about the security of the child. I rolled my Graflex to the best angle, checked the position in front of a dark backdrop, then lifted my hand up as I bent beneath the cloth. I held my breath.

But the mother appeared to have great confidence, for she stepped back before I signaled, and farther than necessary to be out of the picture. Her husband spoke to her, and she returned as the child wiggled. I straightened up, took a step forward, but the brace held firm. For how long, I couldn't know.

I glanced up at the feeble light then and whisked back behind the camera, pushing my own long skirt to the side with a swish. Who knew the story behind the separation of this family? It was something I'd never

know, even if the language didn't barricade such a conversation. How we put people we love in awkward poses is not a subject easily discussed even among intimates, let alone a photographer and her subjects.

The mother's choice of the plant stand was an odd one, and yet it created a lasting impression. As I looked at the child through the lens, Misha sat perfectly apart, a singular image of innocence detailed with delicate eyes and nose and ears and hands balled into soft fists. I wondered if I'd ever give birth one day to such perfection, if from my body would come a child created out of love, and if I did, would I one day put her into a fragile position even for a moment? Would I trust what I loved to an unseen brace?

Time and light faded. I lowered my hand as the signal. The woman stepped out of the picture. I exposed the film.

She had let happen what might, trusted in a strength she could not see. It's what I think of each time I see this portrait; it's the wish I cherish for my life.

PART 1

### SETTING



### Setting Things Right

Milwaukee, Wisconsin, four months earlier

JESSIE GAEBELE'S THOUGHTS AT TIMES behaved like a toddler's: one moment they stayed safely hidden in the pump organ's shadow, and the next minute they popped up to pull out all the stops, increasing in volume, shouting in her head, underscoring the aching loneliness that defined her days.

Today, as she stood in this men's refuge permeated by the scent of oil and grease and gasoline, she flicked away those toddler voices. She had good reasons to be here. She was eighteen years old, it was 1910, and young women alone were going places they'd never gone before. She didn't need to be embarrassed or afraid. Why had she come to Milwaukee if not to prove to herself and others that she could make wise choices and pursue a dream? One day she'd have her own photographic studio back in Winona, Minnesota, where her family lived. Her future beckoned, but she would return only when she'd proven to herself that she was in control of her heart.

"It might be best if you had your father look at it, Fräulein," the proprietor cautioned.

"I'm not purchasing it for my father," Jessie told him, a man her father's age she guessed.

"Ach, I'm sorry. You look so young. Your husband then."

Jessie took a deep breath. "It's for my own use."

The proprietor's eyes widened. "Ah, well, do you have"—he looked over her small frame—"the stamina to make such a purchase? Riding an Emblem's not like riding a bicycle or a horse, if you know what I mean."

She didn't know how to ride an Emblem or a Pierce or any other kind of motorcycle. She didn't know where she'd learn or practice, or where she'd keep it once she figured out a way to afford the gas. But it was the perfect accoutrement, so much more distinctive than a certain kind of hat or a new pair of shoes. Jessie needed inspiration with fall closing in on her, the days soon shortening into long, lonely nights. Winter always made her dreary, and this first one away from her family promised to weigh her down like the pile of wool quilts on the bed that she no longer shared with her sisters.

"I'm a photographer," Jessie told him, "and stronger than I look. I have my own income too. I assure you that I can afford to buy it." This wasn't quite the truth, but close. She planned to pay small portions each month. She'd read that some businesses did that now, calling it *credit*, from a Latin word meaning "to believe." The proprietor had to believe she would make the payment.

"Take a closer look then, Fräulein," the man told her, moving aside so she could step closer.

Don't do it. Don't do it.

She was here in this motorcycle shop because she'd seen the *Milwaukee Journal* photographer, Robert Taylor, making good use of such transportation. Unlike the Winona newspaper, the *Journal* printed photographs not just of disasters like the fire at the flour mill but of everyday things: people picnicking, ships easing along the Milwaukee River, the country's first kindergarten class. Studio shots they weren't. Nor were they tramp photographs, as Fred referred to photographs taken outside of the staged, controlled setting of a proper studio. To Jessie, spontaneous photographs of everyday life demonstrated the vibrancy of a people and a place. It was the kind of photography Jessie

preferred, a view of the world through a commonplace lens, reminding her that ordinary ways were worthy of remembering.

As a photographer, one needed to be distinctive, and that certainly made Robert Taylor so: his motorcycle, and the blue and white polka-dot cravat he always wore. A photograph of him had brought her to this place. Art did move people, Jessie thought wryly.

This purchase would allow her to get out into the countryside, where the fields and trees and streams of this southern Wisconsin landscape would fill the void she'd brought with her. Would Fred approve? She shook her head. Forgetting Fred was another reason she'd come to Milwaukee.

*Fred.* She would not give up control of her feelings to imagine a life that could never be. She'd buy this motorcycle and create new memories.

Don't do it!

"It's a good price, Fräulein. And I'd wager there's a young man who would be more than willing to train a student such as you how to use it." He grinned. "I'm assuming here that you don't know how to ride one."

"You've assumed correctly," Jessie told him. She moved the camera case to her other hand as she ran her gloved hand across the Emblem's shiny surface. "But that's a temporary state."

Two hundred dollars was a lot of money, and she'd committed herself to saving all she could so she could one day purchase her own studio instead of always working for someone else. Still, with a motorcycle she could leave the city on weekends, get away from the often overbearing kindnesses of her boarding family, the Harmses.

The proprietor cleared his throat in what sounded like impatience.

If she spent money on a motorcycle, she'd have to settle any guilty feelings over not sending more home to her family and accept that a little joy in her life didn't mean she was being lax. The machine would be an investment; that's how she'd think of it. It would make her focus on her work with greater effort. Wasn't that the truth?

"I've heard of females riding bicycles. Seen a few around the city too. But a woman on a motorcycle? That would be a first in my experience. And I'm a man of experience, if you know what I mean." He winked.

Jessie didn't, but being the first female to ride a motorcycle around Milwaukee did not appeal; an innovative way to make money did. Yes, the motorcycle would allow her that. The newspaper would buy her prints. She didn't know for certain that was the case, and she was trying to be honest with herself these days. At times that balance between what was and what could be felt precarious indeed. That, too, was part of her reason for being in Milwaukee, to practice being forthright. The newspaper might only want Robert Taylor's work. But there were dozens of other newspapers from outlying towns she could approach.

Don't do it!

If she could sell her prints, she could contribute to the Harms household, if they'd accept her money.

"You're thinking the price isn't fair, Fräulein? I can tell you that even Schwinn's motorcycle is that price, and it isn't half as sturdy as the Emblem. Or are you just using that pretty head of yours to calculate?" He grinned, then added, "Maybe you like my company on this Saturday afternoon."

"I'm sure it's a fair price." Jessie stroked the blue gas tank on the side with the Emblem label painted in black. Her fingers lingered over the smooth leather of the seat. She set the bag holding the 3A Graflex on the box above the front fender to see if the rectangular camera bag fit in front of the handlebars. It did.

Her eyes stopped at the chains and tires. She'd worked for a bicycle shop owner in Winona, cleaning and sorting bicycle parts, so she knew there'd be more than just the cost of the machine to worry about. There'd be expense to keeping it up too. Was her talent enough to pay for all this?

But, oh, how she'd love the independence! It would help fill up the hours of doubt that marked her arrival in Milwaukee. Who was Jessie Gaebele if she wasn't Lilly and Selma and Roy's sister, her parents' child, the apple of her grandparents' and uncle's eyes? Who was she if she wasn't Fred's...what? Student? Employee? Past paramour?

Paramour. She'd read a story employing that word in Woman's Home Companion. She and Fred hadn't been lovers, but she had been the "other woman," a weight as heavy as her camera case. Who was Jessie Gaebele when she was separated from those who had defined her? Her mouth felt dry.

"Wind rushes across your face and you feel like you're flying on one of these babies, if you know what I mean," the proprietor said. "You will feel as though you are in love."

"Absence is to love what wind is to fire; it extinguishes the small, it enkindles the great." A French writer had written that. She hadn't meant to say it out loud.

"Ah, love," he said and eased closer to her, and as he did, he shifted the wad of tobacco that pouched out his lower lip. He turned his head, and Jessie decided he'd moved to reach the spittoon sitting on a nearby bench. She wrinkled her nose, turned back to the Emblem.

"Men who ride these are in love with their machines," he said. He scratched at his arms, large, with muscles thick and twisted like old lilac trunks. "I can tell now that you've a good head on your shoulders...seeing as how you're taking such time to weigh the merits of this machine and know it'll take you to exceptional places." He moved closer to Jessie. "Maybe a pretty young thing like you just needs extra reassurance about such a big purchase."

"I know I wish to buy it, but I need to discuss whether you would allow me to purchase it on...credit. I'd give you a portion of the price now and then a sum each week."

"You want me to trust you? I'd need a substantial deposit for that."

He was beside her now, ignorant of the proper space between a gentleman and a lady. She could smell the day's sweat on his striped shirt, and she stepped sideways, putting distance between them but still steadying her camera perched on the machine.

"I'd have to be certain of your good intentions." His voice sounded lower now, his gaze moving like a slow flame up from her size three shoes to the glasses on her face. He stared into her eyes. She felt her face grow hot. "You give me something and I'll give you something, if you know what I mean." He nodded toward a door near the back. "Let's take this negotiation into my office."

Don't do it!

Jessie's hands felt damp inside her gloves, and she was alerted for the first time to the danger she was in.

"Come along, Fräulein," he said. He lifted her chin with his oilstained fingers. "It's perfectly safe. You need a man of my experience is all, precious little thing like you, to teach you about business ways. Credit indeed." He grinned.

She stumbled back from him, one hand still clinging awkwardly to her camera. There was no one else in the shop; it was situated in a district with other industries frequented by men but few women. It was late on a Saturday afternoon. No one would hear her cry of distress even if she shouted. Her heart pounded. She never should have come in here, a woman alone.

"I'll give you a special deal on the machine, if you know what I mean," he persisted.

You know what he means.

She finally heard the words inside her head, the ones meant to keep her safe. "I've made up my mind," Jessie said, hoping she wouldn't give him reason to persist so she could make as dignified an escape as her leaden feet would allow.

But he reached for her then, squeezed his wide paws at her cheeks. He lowered his face toward hers. Dark tobacco juice glistened in the corner of his mouth. He pushed her against the Emblem.

Get out! Get out!

How could she be so foolish! Jessie hefted the only weapon she had and struck him with her camera case, the force of it twisting her and the case to the ground. Only then did she consider what she'd destroyed and just how long it would take to earn her way back home.