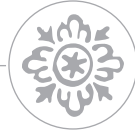


FROM

The Van Apfel Girls Are Gone

BY FELICITY MCLEAN



The ghost turned up in time for breakfast, summoned by the death rattle of cornflakes in their box.

She arrived on foot. *Bare feet.* Barelegged and white-knuckled, in a pale cotton nightie that clung to her calves and slipped off one shoulder as jaunty as a hat. Her hair was damp with sleep-sweat—whose wasn't that summer?—and stiff strands of it fenced in her thirteen-year-old face like blinkers strapped to a colt.

By the time we got there she was already halfway across the cul-de-sac. Her unseeing eyes, her stop-me shuffle, they'd taken her as far as that and she might have made it farther too, if it wasn't for the car that sat idling at a ninety-degree angle to her path. A right angle made from her wrongs.

The driver's elbow pointed accusingly out the window and he leaned out and shouted to each neighbor as they arrived on the scene: "She came from nowhere!" As if *that* was her crime. This girl who appeared from thin air.

We came running when we heard the squeal. Rubber against road. Rhyme against reason. We ran into the street and that's when we saw her, illuminated against the heat haze and the headlights that hadn't helped and that weren't needed anyway now the sun had sat up.

"Cordie! It's Cordie Van Apfel!"

"Jesus Christ. Is she *sleepwalking*?"

"Can she hear us? Can she see us, you reckon?"

Then Mr. Van Apfel appeared, stepping forward with his arms outstretched and his palms to the sky as if coming in from the Lord's outfield. In that instant he blocked the sun. Then he took another step closer and the eclipse was over and the sunshine streamed back in just as sinister as before.

“Nothing to see here, folks,” he declared in his lay-preacher’s soothe. “Nothing to see here.”

WE LOST ALL THREE GIRLS THAT SUMMER. Let them slip away like the words of some half-remembered song, and when one came back, she wasn’t the one we were trying to recall to begin with.

Spring slunk off too. Skulked away into the scrub and there, standing in its place, was the summer that scorched the air and burned our nostrils and sealed in the stink. Like the lids on our Tupperware lunchboxes.

“Jade Heddingly says if it gets hot enough your shadow will spontaneously rust,” I reported.

“It’s spontaneously *combust!*” my sister crowed. “Jade Heddingly is an idiot and so are you, and anyway your shadow can’t combust or rust or nothing. Your shadow is always there, dummy.”

“Not in the dark.”

Mum was right: you can’t see your shadow in the dark. She stood at the kitchen sink ripping the heads off geraniums. *Fritch, fritch, fritch*. She snapped the dead blooms off at the neck and dropped them into the sink, where their petals were the same color as the scabs we picked off our knees. It was the year the Cold War ended. The year they stopped making Atari 2600s forever. I was eleven and one sixth, but it wasn’t enough. By then we’d learned shadows vanished in the dark.

“What else did Jade tell you?” Laura said.

She waited until Mum went into the laundry before she asked the question, so that the two of us were left alone at the kitchen table, where we were pretending to do our homework.

“About shadows?”

“About anything. Go on, what else did Jade say?”

Jade Heddingly was fourteen, which meant she was old enough to wear braces on her teeth, but not so old that she used those teeth and her tongue and the rest of her mean mouth to stop saying “arks” instead of “ask.” Jade kept saying it wrong long after the rest of us had left behind “hostibul” and “lellow” and all those other word jumbles we said when we were little kids. *Why didn’t you arks my opinion?* she would whine. As if that would ever make you change your mind.

“What else did Jade say?” I echoed.

“Yeah.”

I leaned in before answering: “She told me that, to hide a dead body you bury it six feet underground, and then bury a dog three feet above that.”

“Why?”

“So that the police sniffer dogs will only dig as far as the dead dog, and they won’t find the body below.”

“That’s gross!” my sister squealed.

“Well, you arksed.”

“Is it true?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“Did she say anything else? You know, anything about—you know.”

“Nothing.”

“You sure?”

“Yeah, I’m sure,” I said defensively.

“Jade doesn’t know anything about it,” I added.

She didn’t know nothing about nothing.

WHAT WE *ALL* KNEW—even as far back as that—was that the valley stank. Jeez, it reeked. It smelled like a sore. Like the something bad had been dug out before the sky was stitched back over, low-slung and bruised and suffocating.

They never did work out why.

It wasn’t Ruth’s fault, but. That valley had smelled bad long before any of the Van Apfel girls ever went missing there. Even from our house high on the western rim, the stench would waft up the gully and smack us in the face on a hot, dry day, and they were all hot, dry days once the Cold War had ended.

That summer was the hottest on record.

Back in those days the valley had only been developed in places. It was dissected by a cutting where a skinny, two-lane road wound down and around and across the river and then slithered up and out again—but the real excavation work had been done long ago by something much more primitive than us. It was deep and wide. Trees covered both walls. Spindly, stunted she-oaks spewed from the basin, swallowing the sunlight and smothering the tide with their needles. Higher up there were paperbarks, and tea trees with their

camphorous lemon smell. Then hairpin banksias, river dog roses, and gums of every kind—woolybutts, blackbutts, bogongs, blue mallots, swamp mallots, and craven gray boxes—right up to the anemic angophoras that stood twisted and mangled all along the ridge line.

At school we called the valley the “bum crack.”

We steered clear of the Pryders and the Callum boys and the rest of that handful of kids who lived in the shanty-style shacks in clumps along the valley. You didn’t sit next to a Valley Kid on the bus if you could help it. But the strangest thing about the place wasn’t the kids who lived there. It wasn’t the silence, or the way the sunlight sloped in late in the morning and slid out again as soon as it could in the afternoon. No, the awful part was the *shape* of the thing. Those terrible, fall-able cliffs. The valley wasn’t V-shaped like normal river valleys—instead the whole canyon was a hollowed-out U. It was almost as wide at the bottom as it was at the top, as if an enormous rock had been chiseled out but somehow we’d gone and lost that too. It was a fat gap. A void.

Even now its geography is only worth mentioning because of what’s not there.

I used to spend hours down there on my own. I’d go when I was bored—when my sister was at Hannah’s—and when the wind was blowing the right way for a change and the stink wasn’t so awful. I’d pick heath flowers and suck the nectar out of their tiny pink throats and then I’d pretend they were poisonous and that I was going to die. Back then dying was nothing to be afraid of. At least, that’s what Hannah once said her dad said, and her dad was told it by God. But then, Hannah’s dad had never actually died and so *I’d* said: “What would your dad know?”

What none of us knew—what we’ll never know—is what happened to Hannah and Cordie that December.

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