

## After Annabelle

The bones slept while I grew. They were my cousin Annabelle's bones. I spent the first decade of my life in the shadow of her disappearance. A shadow cast by absence. The darkest kind.

While the bones slept, my secret grew. One good wind would topple the old maple tree, spill what was hidden in its dead heart's hollow core. I've been waiting thirty years for that wind.

I never knew Annabelle. She vanished the summer I was born, vanished while hunting golf balls in the rough at Hidden Valley Golf Club. As a child, I heard the story a thousand times.

The kids who had gone ball hunting with Annabelle returned to Kilbride without her. They weren't worried about her – not at first. Annabelle must have been hiding on them, they thought, because she did things like that to get attention. Once she pretended her ankle was broken, so two boys had to make a chair with their hands linked to carry her half a mile through the woods. They were mad when it turned out her ankle was fine. So when Annabelle

disappeared, they thought it would serve her right if they left for home without her.

My Uncle Hugh and Aunt Rita didn't suspect anything was wrong until Annabelle didn't show up for supper. They supposed she was playing at one of the other kids' houses.

But after they phoned around and nobody had seen her since four in the afternoon, they started to fret. By eight o'clock, when it began to get dark, they were frantic. Uncle Hugh rounded up half a dozen neighbours and he brought along Susie, his yellow Labrador retriever – not good at following a scent, he always said, but eager as they come.

After they had looked for an hour without finding any trace of Annabelle, Uncle Hugh called the police. The next morning a real search began, with trained dogs, tracking experts, and dozens of volunteers.

Annabelle's picture and description appeared in newspapers and on TV. Missing-person posters all over Ontario asked if anybody had seen Annabelle Jenking. Age: Ten. Height: Four feet, six inches. Copper-red curls, blue eyes, freckles. Last seen wearing a white T-shirt, blue shorts, blue ankle socks and white sneakers,

For three days, the searchers were out from dawn to dark. Then the search was called off. My dad had been out with the searchers every day. When he got home on the last day of the search, he sank into his chair, muddy boots on the carpet, and stared for a long time at one-month-old me, Nora Jenking, blanket-wrapped in Mom's arms. Finally he said, "No daughter of mine is ever going to earn pocket money looking for golf balls."

“Never,” my mother had agreed, visualizing the shadowy form of a tramp slipping through the trees, a dirty hand clamped over Annabelle’s mouth, strong arms dragging her through the bushes. The act that followed was more than she could bear to imagine. The terror. The blood. The limp body borne away.

No trace of Annabelle ever turned up. Every lead turned out to be false. After ten years there was still no body, no suspect, and no idea of what had happened.

Aunt Rita and Uncle Hugh never got over their loss. Every year on Annabelle’s birthday, Aunt Rita brought out her big scrapbook and made me look at Annabelle’s baptismal certificate and her report cards, all the birthday cards she had ever received, and dozens of snapshots. Sometimes I caught Aunt Rita staring at me and then turning her face away. Once I asked Mom why my aunt looked at me funny.

“Because you look like Annabelle,” my mother said.

This was true. The framed photograph of Annabelle on Uncle Hugh and Aunt Rita’s piano could have fooled even me.

One day, when I was about nine, I overheard my parents and my aunt and uncle talking about Annabelle.

“I want closure,” Aunt Rita said. “Until I know for sure that she’s dead, I can’t move on.”

The way it sounded, she *hoped* somebody would find Annabelle’s body. This was weird.

As long as Annabelle’s body was not found, I could keep on dreaming that she would show up alive some day. I pictured her driving into Kilbride in a shiny red convertible,

stopping in front of her parents' house, getting out of her car. She would be about eighteen years old. Tall and gorgeous, with copper curls tumbling to her shoulders, and blue eyes just like mine. As long as nobody found her body, I believed this could happen.

Uncle Hugh and Aunt Rita's wish for closure made no sense to me. Nor did my parents' rule, "*Thou shalt not hunt for golf balls,*" which was the First Commandment in their book.

By the time I was ten, all my friends were earning money from selling golf balls they'd found in the rough, scrubbed and presented neatly in egg cartons. Four dollars a dozen.

The marketplace was the lawn behind the Hidden Valley clubhouse. Sales started just after eleven every Sunday morning, when Sunday school was out and the early golfers had finished their round. The kids would meet the golfers on their way from the eighteenth hole to the clubhouse. Business was brisk.

The club members counted on the village children to supply gently-used golf balls at a bargain price. The kids counted on the members for pocket money.

I considered it unfair to be shut out of the golf-ball business because of something that had happened when I was just a baby. Burning with envy, I watched my friends return muddy, mosquito-bitten and victorious from each ball-hunting expedition. They told me that golf-ball hunting was as much fun as fishing – which my parents didn't object to, but I hated. Every time I tried to put a worm on a hook, I felt the poor worm's suffering. Besides, the

golf-ball hunter had a better chance of success than the fisherman because a ball, once spotted, never got away.

And the rewards! Instead of a slimy fish that had to be scaled and cleaned, there was cash to spend at the Kilbride General Store on licorice pipes, gumballs, candy cigarettes, and comic books.

So I rebelled.

“This summer, I’m going to hunt golf balls,” I told my best friend, Barbara.

It was a Saturday afternoon in June. We were sitting on the edge of the wide porch in front of the Kilbride General Store, sharing a box of Reese’s Pieces that Barbara had paid for.

“But your parents won’t let you.”

“They won’t find out. I’ll go by myself when there’s nobody else around. You’ll be the only person who knows about it, and I trust you not to tell on me. If you sell the balls I find, I’ll pay you one dollar for every four dollars you get.”

Barbara popped another Reese’s Piece into her mouth. As she chewed, I could almost hear her mind working.

“Who’ll wash your golf balls and pack them in egg cartons?”

“You, I guess. I can’t take them to my house.”

“If I have to wash them, pack them, and sell them, I want two dollars.”

Go halvers! That was high. But she had a point.

“Oh, all right.”

A handful of Reese’s Pieces sealed the deal. As I munched, I felt a big bubble of happiness swell inside. No more mooching. Soon I’d have money to buy my own treats.

“When are you going to start?” Barbara asked.

“Tomorrow.”

“What about Sunday school?”

“Sunday school makes it the perfect time. I’ll have more than an hour while you’re all at Sunday school. Afterwards, maybe you can give me your Sunday school handout to show my parents.”

“I guess so.” She scratched the dirt with the toe of her running shoe. “You’ll wreck your good clothes in the rough. You need to wear old clothes.”

“I’ve thought about that. This afternoon I’ll put some old clothes in a plastic bag and hide it in that culvert on the Cumminsville Road.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Barbara stood up. “Gotta go home. Chores.”

Dad and Uncle Hugh were having a beer on the front porch when I reached home. Just looking at them, you’d know they were brothers. They had the same coppery hair and blue eyes. Uncle Hugh’s eyes were sadder than Dad’s, and he had more creases in his forehead.

“Nora, any chance you’ve seen Susie?” my uncle asked as I climbed the steps.

“Nope.” I opened the screen door.

“She’s been missing since yesterday.”

“Gee. That’s too bad.” I stopped without going inside and stood there not knowing what to say. Uncle Hugh and his old yellow Lab went everywhere together, Susie keeping close to his heels. She always sat beside him on the passenger seat when he delivered the rural mail.

“Susie will come home,” my dad said. “She’s too old to steal and too smart to get run over.”

“A fourteen-year-old dog doesn’t run off,” said Uncle Hugh.

Although I loved Susie, I agreed with Dad that nobody would steal her. Susie smelled bad, especially her breath. It stank like rotten meat. In dog years, she was ninety-eight.

“If I see Susie, I’ll bring her back.”

I went inside the house. In my closet I found pants and a shirt I had outgrown but could still squeeze into, as well as a pair of sneakers with holes in the toes. Then I snatched a length of red yarn from Mom’s knitting basket. This was to mark the hiding place where I would leave my ball-hunting clothes between expeditions. When I had stuffed everything into a plastic bag, I went out the back door so nobody would see me. The culvert on the Cumminsville Road was just outside Kilbride, on the way to Hidden Valley. I climbed down into the ditch and shoved my bag into the culvert as far as I could reach.

In the morning I headed off early to avoid the kids who really were going to Sunday school. After retrieving my bag of old clothes from the culvert, I took a shortcut through the woods.

That was when things started to go wrong. As soon as the blackflies saw me coming, they descended in a cloud. I was slapping and slapping at them, feeling mad at myself for not thinking to bring a little jar of bug spray.

I changed into my old clothes before climbing the fence at the rear of the golf course property. Then I folded my Sunday school clothes and hid them under a big burdock

leaf. The blackflies were at me every minute, and then an army of mosquitoes joined the attack.

According to the other kids, the rough beside the first fairway, on the east side, was the best location for ball hunting. It was part marsh and part woods, the soggy parts thick with tall grasses that looked like bamboo, and the dry parts covered with trees, bracken fern and tiger lilies.

The spot where I began searching was a few feet off the fairway, behind a curtain of cedar trees. I found three balls in the first ten minutes.

Golfers were already on the course. I could see them, but they couldn't see me. One pair hopped out of their golf cart not twenty feet from where I stood. I heard the whip of a club, but no whack.

"Shit!" the golfer said.

"Call it a mulligan." The other golfer swung his club. This time the whipping sound ended with a solid crack.

The man who'd spoken first said, "Good distance."

"Yeah. I had my balls irradiated. You should try it. Ten percent increased length."

A laugh. "That must help your sex life too."

They climbed into the golf cart, and it rolled up the slope in the direction of the green.

In the distance, church bells were ringing. The clang of the United Church bell in Kilbride made a nice harmony with the bong of the Anglican bell a mile to the east. Ding-dong. Dinga-ding-dong. Usually I liked the sound of the bells. But this time they made me feel guilty. What

was I doing, sneaking away when I was supposed to be in Sunday school?

I wished that I were back in Kilbride, in the dim church basement, learning about the Light of the World. Maybe God had sent those blackflies and mosquitoes to punish me for skipping – like plagues of locusts in the Old Testament.

But I was determined not to quit until I had a dozen balls.

As I worked my way from the drier to the soggy ground, I found another half-dozen. My pockets bulged. Three more would be enough.

At the edge of a shallow stream I sat on a log to rub my bites with mud. That took away some of the itch, and I was starting to feel more cheerful when I spotted a snapping turtle the size of a meat platter sunning itself six feet away. It had green moss in the ridges of its shell, and beady eyes that fixed on me. I wriggled sideways to put more space between us. The turtle stretched out its long, skinny neck so far you'd think it was about to climb out of its shell. I'd never heard of anyone being charged by a turtle, but there's always a first time.

I picked up a stick the size of a cane. The stick might be useful for fighting off turtles, I thought, or for dividing the grass as I searched for balls.

I was heading for higher ground when I saw the blue-bottle flies. There were thousands, buzzing around one particular spot in the undergrowth, hovering over it in a dancing swarm. They must have found the carcass of something big. I took one step closer. Then another.

Now I could see it. Under an undulating carpet of bluebottle flies lay the shape of a dog. I struck with my stick. The cloud of flies lifted. I saw the body of a yellow Labrador. The flies settled again.

“Susie!” A sob choked my throat.

I just wanted to go home, and it was time to leave anyway. I found three more balls as I worked my way toward the rear fence. Now I had a dozen. Four dollars was big money, even if I had to split it with Barbara.

There were big maple trees near the fence. One appeared to be hollow, with an opening at its base between two thick roots that stretched over the ground. I thrust my stick into the opening. The stick went way, way in. Just the sort of hole I needed to hide my old clothes for next time – if there was a next time. I got down on my hands and knees to look inside. No beady eyes peered out at me. I reached my hand into the hollow space. Sawdust, cool and crumbly. There must be termites in the tree. My fingers closed on something hard and smooth. I pulled out a bone about as long as my thigh. I was scared, but curious too. I reached into the hole again. Another bone. Then a child’s sneaker, with shreds of fabric that had once been white. And a blue sock.

That’s when I stopped.

Back into the hole went the bones and the sneaker and the sock. Then I changed into my Sunday school clothes and shoved my old clothes into the hole. I put the balls I had found into the plastic bag.

On my way to Barbara’s house I was shaking so hard I could hardly walk. I stopped at the horse trough outside

the General Store. With my hanky dipped in water, I wiped the mud and blood from my legs, arms, neck and face.

Barbara was watching out the window for me. She met me at her front door before I had time to knock.

“You look awful,” she said as she took the bag of golf balls from me. “Your face is lumpy and you’re covered with bites. Next time, remember to take bug spray with you.”

“There won’t be a next time. Golf-ball hunting is not for me.”

She tilted her head, inspecting me. “Maybe you’re right. Sooner or later your parents would find out, anyway.”

The ice cream and candy that I bought with my share of the golf ball money didn’t taste as good as they should have.

Pretty soon Uncle Hugh figured out for himself that old Susie had wandered off to die. I’m glad he never knew about the bluebottle flies.

Uncle Hugh and Aunt Rita died a few years ago, without closure. My parents passed away soon after.

Chelsea, my youngest child, is eleven years old. She has copper-red curls, blue eyes and freckles. She hunts golf balls with the other kids. Business is brisk Sunday mornings on the lawn behind the Hidden Valley clubhouse. Chelsea rolls her eyes when I warn her never to go into the woods by herself.

I’m still waiting for the wind that will topple that maple tree, bring everything to light. And yet there’s no one left who cares.