

## Valley Girl

a short story by  
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I am surrounded by ghosts. As I drive down the narrow dirt road, speckled with yellow and brown fallen leaves, the phantoms swirl about me, bringing to mind fragments of forgotten lore. I hear chatter and laughter as the figures flash, unchanged in 30 years. It's hard to believe these people are all gone.

I turn my car into the cemetery grounds, my visit not complete until I have stopped by every gravestone. I try to recall all the names, some nearly obliterated by moss that creeps across the granite tombs. I find our family plot, the resting place of my grandparents and their daughter Nellie, my father's sister, who died from meningitis just after her thirteenth birthday. I didn't know her, but her picture was always on our bookcase, and the events of her life chiselled into my childhood as deeply as the inscriptions on her headstone.

I was born at a time when most of the men had deserted Manitoba's Birdtail Valley to fight in the war. 'Hospital' and 'war' were the first words I can remember. I used to say them over and over to myself: hospital, war. They sounded grown-up.

We on the farm did not suffer as much as some city people from the Depression of the '30s and the gap in normality caused by the war. Although there was no cash, there was always enough to eat. I was born after the Depression, but the subject was still new: "In the '30s you could buy a young calf for a dollar . . . but who had the dollar?" My mother's voice: "I used to shine the floor with skim milk. We couldn't afford wax." I'd missed it all. I'd missed being included in the family legends: the day my father walked across the kitchen floor carrying a precious five-pound pail of syrup and suddenly dropped it. The family around the table watched in amazement as the impact sent the syrup flying straight to the ceiling, where it hung in a solid amber line from ceiling to floor. They talk about that yet. And I wasn't around.

I was not aware of my peculiar place in the family. I did not understand the tremendous sadness our family had suffered, before I came. Like the legend of the syrup pail, I accepted the stories: I once had a sister, Helen, who had died. It was her grave we went to visit each spring, to clean out the peony beds, and plant pansies. I knew only that I was born on her nineteenth birthday, and had come to replace her in some mystical way.

There had been so much illness. Somehow, I connected it all with the Depression. There had been five children, and

only my older brother, Ken, and I survived. Two boys, one dead at birth, the other dying when only a few days old, were both buried by our father. He had made his sons' coffins by hand, and laid out the bodies. Their graves are unmarked somewhere in the family plot.

I am 18 years younger than my brother, Ken. "Just a little Helen," the well-meaning neighbours used to say, and I felt proud. She had left me her things: knitted sweaters, jewellery, lovely gold lockets with her picture inside and that of her boyfriend who kept hoping to marry her even when they knew she would never recover from polio. I wore those lockets all through school, carrying the pictures of these people unknown to me. She left me her Evening in Paris toiletry set, her scented embroidered handkerchiefs, and little high-heeled shoes that fit me when I was 12 years old. I got her room, the two matching black-and-white dogs that sat on the dresser, and the jewellery box with the tasselled handles. I got her eyes, her personality . . . and even her birthday.

I return to my car, and slowly drive north along the one-lane country road, unchanged since my youth. I cross the narrow bridge over the slow-moving brown river, still smelling of swamp, holding its mysteries under cover of leaning willows. I pull into a field and turn off the engine. I stroll along a tractor-track into waves of heavy-headed grain. The wind sighs as it carries the heavy smell of oncoming autumn. The silent years close in.

My brother made his spending money by selling gopher tails. He bought his bicycle from gopher tails. Sometimes I would accompany him to check the traps. We would carry the dead gophers back home to the chopping block if he had forgotten his knife. One day I went out by myself. In the farthest corner of the field I spotted his newest trap, glinting silver in the sun. It had been sprung and now lay useless. I would reset it. He'd be so proud of me. Kneeling down, I grabbed the strong steel jaws with my small five-year-old hands. SNAP! The trap sprung to life, slapping my two hands back-to-back in its jaws. I pulled at the trap, but I couldn't get the chain off the stake that had been pounded deep into the ground. I yanked uselessly, sobbing. My hands were blue and bulging, bleeding where the teeth bit into my skin.

I sat down beside the gopher hole. Was something moving down there? Was I to be trapped here forever? Would the gophers run over me in the night if no one came

to get me? I sobbed aloud. Then, losing all control, I wailed until tears flooded my throat. The wind pushed my cries back, dried my tears, reprimanded me for breaking the prairie silence. The dog ran around, nervous, whining. Then, with one guilty back-glance, he slunk away over the rise, belly to the ground, tail between his retreating legs.

I lay down on the prickly stubble, burrowed into the warm earth, and eventually fell asleep. I dreamed I saw a waving endless field, and somewhere in the middle two black moving specks. Closer and closer they came, their shapes wavering in the horizon. The gophers were silenced, the prairie quiet as if becoming dormant until the advancing forms could be recognized. The forms took shape: my dog, and behind him my mother, running.

Now, as I stand in this field of silken yellow, I see again the little girl who sat awaiting her fate, feel again the fear and fury of abandonment. I pick off a stock and brush the full barley beard against my face. It rasps against my skin.

I get into my car and drive further, past the old farmhouse whose owners are now gone . . . to the seniors' home in Rossburn, or to live with family members in Brandon or Winnipeg. I can imagine them staring out the windows onto the prairie that changes only with the seasons.

I drive north. The road twists and turns, following the Birdtail River. There, the brush becomes taller and willows from the riverbank are replaced by poplars and spruce. I am entering the Riding Mountain National Park. I never knew it was so close, just six miles from the farm, but in the days of my childhood a trip that required planning, taking a full day from the farm labours. I have never been here before.

I park the car and climb up onto a bluff where I can look back on my valley. It shimmers with heat and distance. I can see the old farmhouse with its high pointed four-sided roof that sheltered me so many years ago. I look across to the Ukrainian cemetery and see the ornate stones that I once viewed from my swing behind the buggy shed. My gaze sweeps the valley. Here, I'm still somebody's child.