

The Secret of Cherry Grove

by Anikó Wéber

What if I woke up one morning to find
I was a wounded deer?
What if I woke up one morning to find
I was the rising sun?
If I turned into a girl, what would I be like?
If I turned into a boy, what would I be like?
And you, what would you most like to become?

Chapter 1

The Crying Ghost

'You won't believe what happened!' Katie scribbled on the back page of her tatty notebook, then smoothed a lock of hair back from her face and glanced around the classroom to see if the coast was clear. Miss Erika stood in front of the teacher's desk in her worn jeans, absorbed in reciting some poem. Most of the students were leaning back dreamily at their desks, wishing they were at home... or on the beach... or in a cake shop... or anywhere else at all!

No one was listening. 'Now is the time!' thought Katie; quickly tearing the lined sheet from the notebook with a single movement. She folded it up and scrawled *'For Delia'* onto it, then leaned forward and tapped Georgie on the back with her finger.

'Georgie,' she whispered to the round-headed boy in front, 'give this to Delia!' He shrugged sleepily and accepted the letter. By the time Miss Erika had begun to read the next poem, the reply had arrived, written on the same piece of paper. Katie unfolded it.

'You won't believe what happened! Of course not! :P But tell me anyway!'

Katie raised her pen to her lips and pondered for a moment. Then she leaned on her desk and began to write rapidly. *'It was amazing! Unbelievable + wonderful! It so happened that I was alone. Yesterday. At home. And suddenly I heard a strange noise. Someone was crying. I quickly ran to the window and saw...'*

'Katie! KATIE!'

'I-oh-Yes?' Katie clutched her head in alarm. Miss Erika was leaning against the teacher's desk, looking over at her angrily. Katie met her class teacher's gaze. She was not afraid of her, but she didn't like her either. She always tried to imagine her dressed in cool clothes instead of her worn out

old gear. Today she was picturing her with a red necklace and a blue T-shirt instead of the baggy trousers and denim jacket that she'd probably been wearing since the dawn of time.

Miss Erika raised an eyebrow. Seemingly quite unaware that Katie had just gifted her with a pretty T-shirt. She was far more interested in spiritual than earthly goods.

'I have been UNDERSTANDING with you! I gave up on our revision, on studying, and agreed not to start any new material in the last week! I brought the most beautiful poems into class! And in response you, Katie, are drawing at your desk.'

'I wasn't drawing,' Katie shook her head, 'I...'

'Stop making excuses! Enough of these lies! I'd rather continue reading for the sake of THOSE who can appreciate BEAUTY,' Miss Erika snapped, obviously offended, and adjusting the position of her glasses on her nose.

'Beauty?' Katie muttered to herself. Why don't the teachers understand that their students have to stare at them all day? They could at least dress up in some normal-looking, BEAUTIFUL clothes, she thought before she forgot all about Miss Erika and returned her attention to her letter.

'...and I saw... my reflection. Outside, there was no one on the street, but my face appeared on the glass, and behind me was another face! A strange girl. She was wiping her big, tear-filled eyes. I turned quickly, but she had gone. All I found was the cold spot where she had been standing. I searched the apartment. The kitchen, the bathroom, my own room and my mother's bedroom; but I couldn't find her anywhere. Where do you think she went? And how did she get into our house? No one can disappear that quickly, in a puff of smoke! I think it was a ghost. What do you think?'

Katie chewed on the end of her pen as she read over the writing. It was good! she thought, then folded the letter back and kicked Georgie's chair under the bench. In his sleep Georgie must have been strolling on the beach when Katie's burst into his reverie. He spun round and grumpily took Katie's note.

'Why didn't you bring your phone in if you wanted to send messages?' he whispered.

'Because it's not allowed, and they confiscated it twice last week... and besides... they've got Delia's in their cupboard.'

It was obvious that Georgie wanted to say something back. Something really pithy; but nothing came to mind. Or perhaps he thought that he could get back to dozing on his desk sooner if he just delivered the message quickly and didn't argue.

He leaned forward to Delia as Katie waited. Meanwhile, Miss Erika was reciting away. Her voice droning on in the background, like the incessant blaring of a TV left on somewhere: *"And many a thought came to mind / Each more beautiful than the last, / While time to a halt did grind, / although the cart was racing fast."*

Katie ignored the poem, even though she also felt that time had come to a standstill. She blinked out excitedly from behind Georgie's broad shoulders. She saw Delia and Renata heads together, obviously reading her letter. What would they say? Would they like it? Would they find it exciting?

Katie waited and waited, then shuddered. At that moment Delia and Renata started laughing soundlessly. Madison whispered something and Delia's pen began to move. And the reply to her letter had arrived. *'Delia: No, I don't believe it! It's just a story. Why are you always telling lies? There are no such things as ghosts! And even if there were, then why would they decide to appear to you?'*

Katie pouted and crumpled the paper. It turned into a tiny pellet. Meanwhile Miss Erika was steadfastly reciting: "You can have no idea / How sad it is for a poet to hear: / That his verse is shoddy, his poem is lame, / And brings him not one jot of fame/ I have heard such words outspoken / But my heart was never broken!"

Katie tried to shut out the voices and stared out of the window. What did she see? The impossibly blue June sky and the lazily floating clouds. And her own face. The girl who had turned 11 on April 21, barely a month and a half before, was now finishing class five. Katie couldn't decide if she was pretty or not. Everything about her felt bigger than normal: her eyes were huge and her eyelashes long. That might be pretty. She had a big nose and a lot of freckles on her face. That might not be so good. She had long, reddish-brown hair. That could be nice, but it was always such a mess. Maybe that would not be so nice. Skinny. That might be a good thing. But her hands were very long. Maybe that wouldn't be so good. The scales swung back and forth. Of course, her mum thought she was beautiful, but did her friends think she was pretty? And would Alex think she was pretty? Alex was a boy in year six, a blonde. Katie saw him from the upstairs window of her classroom during the breaktime. He was downstairs playing football with his friends, and Katie had the strangest feeling. It was love at first sight she thought. Unfortunately, everyone else felt much the same. All the girls fell in love with Alex in much the same way, at first sight. It was rather discouraging for Katie. She never mentioned her feelings to Delia, Renata, Maya, or Izzy. Particularly given that Maya was crazy about Alex. And Delia and Izzy too. And Maya knew him personally. She was the type of girl who could pick up any boy. And Izzy was the type who had shiny, straight hair and a baby face. So, there it was, they all had an advantage over her.

Katie's reflection was frowning in the mirror, for a moment, but really just for a moment. Then she smiled again.

What if...

What if one day I woke up and I was as light as a cloud?

What if I could leap up into the sky?

What if in the clouds there was a deserted, invisible country?

I could lay down on the white, candy-floss hills.

The sun would be closer. And everything would be bright and shiny.

What if...

What if... they'd finally get round to *ringing the bell*.

Katie shuddered. Not because the bell was ringing, but because of what Miss Erika said.

"Now, don't forget that Friday there will be a running race! Everyone should bring sandwiches and come in track suits. After the second lesson, we'll be heading out to the park.

Katie pulled a face, as if she had just bitten on a lemon. She hated racing! Ten minutes per team. Ten minutes of freedom. Ten minutes of fun. Followed by at least two hours of boredom. Two hours of bondage. They waited in their classroom for the entire year to compete. In the meantime, they could eat their sandwiches, cheer on the students who were running, or chat. Or be bored stiff. What an opportunity!

"See you then!" the class teacher bellowed goodbye over the bell.

"Goodbye!" echoed the class in reply.

Katie stood up, a little slowly and thoughtfully. When she looked around, half the students had already disappeared. Delia, Renata, Maya and Izzy too. They hadn't waited for her. No problem! She'd find them in the playground. Just one more lesson and they could go home! She skipped hurriedly down the stairs, cut through the grey, stone-flagged corridor, rounded the corner, and was suddenly blinded by the brightness. The dark lobby made the sunlight outside feel even brighter than it was. It was midday and very hot. Most of the students were sitting in the shade on the steps of the climbing frames or walking in small groups under the trees. The lower school students had lunch at that time and the eighth graders could stay in their classrooms; so, this was when the courtyard was at its quietest. It was easy to spot who was friends with whom. Eight boys from the class were playing football together on the field. Two people were sitting on a bench hunched over their phones, despite the school rules strictly forbidding it. In the morning, everyone had to lock their tablets and phones in their lockers. Katie's neighbour in class, the diminutive and skinny Viktor, was probably thinking about this as he walked in front of the bushes, kicking a round pebble, evidently bored. Georgie propped himself up against a tree to continue his nap, while the girls stood in three small circles in the shade. Katie finally spotted Delia and the others. She ran over to them. The circle opened and let her in. Renata was explaining something.

'Mum has already paid. It's on in the first week of July.'

'What is?' asked Katie, joining the conversation.

'The drama camp! And it's being held in a real theatre with real actors! I can't wait!'

'Just don't forget that you're coming to a horse show with me at the end of June! You promised.'
Delia interjected.

'Of course, of course,' Renata nodded, then turned to the others. 'And you? Are any of you going anywhere?'

'To a canoeing camp,' Maya said, 'For five days.'

'And Maya is coming to Greece with our family. Mum said she could,' Izzy enthused, and jumped up to hug Maya.

'And Izzy is coming with us to Malta,' grinned Maya.

'And you, Katie?' Delia turned to Katie. Katie had been waiting for just that. She had been listening impatiently for some time. She could hardly contain the big news, which she had only found out the previous day. Now all her friends' jaws would drop!

'Mum's going to work in America, in Canada, for the summer! And I'm going to go with her!'

'Wow! Really?' Maya looked at her doubtfully. Katie blushed.

'Yes. Seriously. You know that my mum travels a lot for work.'

'Yeah... but she's never taken you with her before.'

'I know, but that was because the trips were during term time and dad had to take care of me. But it's going to be TWO MONTHS, and over the SUMMER!' The girls were convinced. Renata blinked enviously. Delia was enthusiastic.

'Will you bring us a present from Canada?'

'Yes!'

'And take photos! Lots and lots of photos!'

'Of course!'

'Uh, it's like...' began Izzy, but the thought was left hanging half-formed when her voice was drowned out by the bell, and all the girls started running to make their way through the thronging students. Katie finished the sentence for her: 'It's so exciting! Canada!'

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