

## **Green Apples**

By Doni Eve

Janie lay on her stomach, pressing into a clump of sun-gilt grass that jutted up behind the rockery. It was a good hiding place, darkened by the shade of the biggest tree. The spacious yard was dotted with feathery Queen Anne's Lace and puffy dandelions gone to seed. Three Douglas firs, trunks knobby with scars from forgotten limbs, stood like sentries in front of the house, survivors of a century of storms and human development in this small patch on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island.

Janie's father had built rock rings around each tree to make raised gardens. Last fall, just after they had moved in, Janie's mom planted ferns and added snowdrop, crocus, and daffodil bulbs, their blooms marking the change from winter to spring. When the daffodils faded in May, she added shade-loving begonia, impatiens, and alyssum. Now, as the evening dimmed to night midweek in early August, and the last of the red in the sky bled to purple, the air filled with sweet scent.

The drumming of pounding feet and a *tonk* caught Janie's attention as one of the boys kicked the empty coffee can from its resting place in the middle of the lawn, followed by distant laughter and the rattle of the can bouncing on hard ground.

Becky cried out "c'mon you guys!"

On another day, Janie would have moved or made a sound allowing her four-year-old sister to find her and relieve her from the impossible mission of being “It” in a game of Kick the Can with her brother Robbie and his friend Mike.

Tonight, Janie had her eye on the Murphy’s garden next door. With her elbows digging into the ground and chin propped on her hands, she had an unobstructed sightline to the Murphy’s back yard. A bare bulb over the workshop door illuminated rows of lettuce, cabbage, carrots, and strawberries. White blossoms on the meticulously trellised peas glowed in the pale light.

There was no fence between the two properties. When they first moved in Mr. Murphy kept an eye on them as they played, wary, leaning silently on his rake. One day earlier in the year, when the rain let up and their mother sent them outside, their play had tumbled across the unseen line bordering the yards. He was friendly, warning them to be careful as he pointed out the tilled rows and bright green shoots of the emerging plants. Janie waved to Mrs. Murphy, watching from the kitchen window, then startled as Mrs. Murphy erupted onto the back porch, a frenzied clatter in her worn slippers and flapping apron.

“You kids stay away,” Mrs. Murphy screeched. “Keep to your own yard, you hear?”

Their mother, pegging laundry on the clothesline, came to see what the shouting was about.

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Murphy,” she said. “It won’t happen again.”

“The garden isn’t a place for kids,” Mrs. Murphy replied. “I don’t even let my grandchildren play there.”

The sky had darkened, and cool dampness seeped into Janie’s sleeves as the dew settled. She stood and walked to the centre of the lawn brushing bits of leaf and grass from her clothing.

“I see you, I see you, you’re *It!*” Becky yelled gleefully. The boys emerged and joined them.

“Hey guys,” Janie said. “I have an idea.”

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They ran, crouched like soldiers they had seen on the news from Vietnam dashing under whizzing helicopter blades, one by one in a single file beside the Murphy’s house. When they reached the garden, Janie pressed her finger to her lips.

Janie plucked two strawberries and popped them in her mouth before pointing out more to Becky. She grabbed handfuls of glossy pea pods, ripping them from the carefully tied vines, leaving wrecked tendrils and tattered stems drooping to the ground. The boys trampled tender lettuce heads as they searched for the biggest carrots. Janie knew all it would take was a whisper and she could stop them. She watched Robbie trip over Mike’s shoe and tumble into a row of cabbages as she filled the kangaroo pocket of her shirt with peas. An endless loop of her mother’s voice *you’re the oldest, you know better* played in her head. There was no doubt they would pay for this tomorrow.

She stepped from the shadows toward the raspberry canes along the back fence. The light outside the workshop flooded this part of the garden and would reveal them if anyone looked out from the house. Janie’s heart pounded, but she took her time, picking the reddest berries and eating them one by one, before finally whispering, “let’s go”.

The boys stifled giggles as they ran with Becky toddling behind, waving a carrot the length of her forearm, escaping to the darkness of their own yard to enjoy the spoils of the raid. Janie

lingered at the Murphy's apple tree, out of sight of their back door, grasping the bottom branch to swing her legs up. She perched on a high branch, surveying the ruins of the garden – pea vines bent to the ground, a trodden path over the lettuce, mounds of loose soil where they had pulled carrots, and one broken cabbage that had rolled between rows. Around her, apples dangled in all sizes and colours spanning green to bright yellow. One perfect golden orb hung on a bowed branch above her.

The same apple she'd tried to reach two days earlier.

It had been a warm, muggy afternoon. Bees droned over sweet clover in the lawn. A robin posed, head cocked, before diving into the grass to retrieve a fat, wriggling worm. In the backyard dirt pile, the boys dug roads with the Tonka bulldozer and dump truck, and the girls made houses and gardens, creating a miniature village. Janie scooped streets and cul-de-sacs, stacked twigs into stick houses, and placed pebbles in the soil to mark driveways. Becky dumped a handful of buttercups and daisies and Janie heaped them in front of the houses, choosing one shiny, yellow buttercup to hold under Becky's chin.

"Yup, you like butter!" she declared at the reflected glow on Becky's skin.

"Let me do it!" Becky squealed.

Becky picked a flower, thrusting it at Robbie's face.

"Buzz off," he said, batting her hand. He growled *vroom vroom VROOM* and drove his truck over their houses.

"Hey!" Janie shouted, pushing Robbie.

"Let's get outta here," Robbie said, and the boys abandoned the trucks to hop on their bikes and pedal away.

One look at Becky's quivering lips and Janie said, "It's okay, we'll fix it. Go get more pebbles from the driveway and I'll get sticks and flowers."

Janie headed for the sunny part of the lawn at the far side of the house. She picked a few daisies and returned, but she didn't see Becky. Janie walked to the driveway and scanned the road. Still no Becky. As she turned, she noticed a flicker of colour as Becky's white blouse and bobbing ponytail disappeared into the Murphy's workshop. Janie hesitated, checking the kitchen window in case Mrs. Murphy was waiting to jump out, yelling. After a few moments, she dashed past the garden and across the yard and knocked on the door.

Mr. Murphy's face appeared in the narrow opening and Janie peered into the murky gloom, looking for Becky

"I'm sorry Mr. Murphy," Janie said. "... if Becky's been any trouble. I'll take her home."

"Oh, okay," he said, opening the door wide. Becky stood behind him, holding a green-gold apple. "Would you like an apple too?" he offered.

"No thanks," she replied, glancing cautiously toward the house. "I don't think Mrs. Murphy would like it. C'mon Becky."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like an apple?" Mr. Murphy offered. "No need to worry about Mrs. Murphy. She's out shopping."

He led them to the tree.

"There's some nice ripe ones near the top. Look at that beauty there." He pointed to the biggest apple on the tree, shining gold in the sun.

"I'll help you up." He grasped Janie on both sides under her arms and lifted. Janie reached, but wasn't close enough.

"Let's try something else," he said.

He wrapped one arm around her chest and slid his hand under her bottom for leverage to hoist her higher.

“How’s that?” he asked. “Better?”

It was uncomfortable, Janie thought. The weight of her body pressed against his hand with only the flimsy terry cloth of her shorts as cushion.

*Just a little further.* The golden apple was so close.

*Why was he wiggling his fingers?*

It hurts, Janie thought. She quickly grabbed a smaller apple within easy reach.

“I got one,” she said. “I can come down now.”

“Take a bite,” he said, still holding her aloft.

Janie bit into the tough, green flesh. The tart juice sucked the moisture from her mouth.

“Good, isn’t it?”

She chewed, looking to the ground below.

“What do you say?” he said, finally setting her down.

“Thank you, Mr. Murphy.”

Janie grabbed Becky’s hand and pulled her home.

They burst through the back door to the kitchen where their mother was chopping lettuce.

Janie put the apple on the counter, and it rolled toward the sink, coming to a stop with the tiny bite mark facing up.

“You know green apples will give you a tummy ache,” their mother said.

“Mine’s good isn’t it, Mom?” Becky held up her apple.

Their mother stopped chopping. “Where’d you get that?”

“From Mr. Murphy,” Becky said. “He let me have one if I gave him a kiss.”

Their mother crouched, placing her hands on Becky's shoulders.

"Did he kiss you honey?" she asked.

"No," Becky said.

"Did he ask you to do anything? Or touch you?"

"He wanted me to give him a kiss," Becky said. "Then Janie came."

Their mother's eyes filled, and she buried her face in Becky's hair. She pulled Janie in, kissing them both on the head and holding them for several moments before turning to Janie. Janie froze, expecting the same questions, but her mother only smiled, mouthing *thank you*.

"Don't go near him again, okay? Stay away from him," she said. "Don't go in their yard, don't talk to him. Just stay away."

The girls nodded as their mother dumped both apples in the garbage.

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Now, two days later, Janie perched in the tree eyeing the same apple that had eluded her reach before. She imagined its taut, golden skin, cool and smooth in her hand, and how, as she bit in, the skin would pop, the fleshy fruit yielding to sweet juice.

She grasped the branch and started shaking. Apples rained down in a thudding hail, some breaking open when they hit the ground, others bouncing, rolling. She shook and shook until the perfect apple broke from its stem and hurtled down, smashing on the ground below.

The next morning the events of the night before flashed Janie's memory, regret stabbing deep into her stomach. *What will happen now?*

No one else was awake. She dressed in silence, put on her shoes, and stepped out the back door to view the damage. Mr. Murphy, his back to her, inspected the garden, Mrs. Murphy beside him.

Janie crept behind one of the big fir trees, crouching in the grass, still heavy with dew.

“Who would’ve done this?” Mrs. Murphy said. “Neighbourhood kids?”

Janie held her breath. He could see the destruction, the wasted fruit smashed. *He’ll know.*

A sparrow trilled in the tree above, masking her thudding heart.

“Must’ve been a bear,” he said.