

DISAPPEARING FOOTPRINTS

A Shirley Brown Mystery Novel
by
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I'd like to acknowledge and dedicate this book to Melvertie Gipson, my mother,
and Leaner Quillen, my aunt, who together gave me the bones of this story through
a difference of opinion

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CHAPTER ONE - THE GAME

It was a cool, Saturday morning when Shirley Brown stepped outside her front door. She yawned rubbing sleep from her eyes and then stretched her arms way up over her head. Still yawning, she brought her arms to rest behind her head and stood quietly at the top of the open green porch to let the sleep ease away from her body. After several minutes, Shirley smiled and looked at the pink stucco house next door. She expected to see Phyllis Johnson, her best friend standing at the side edge of the front porch, but that space was empty. "Ha ha," she chuckled. That was just like Phyllis, to get her up at the break of dawn on a no school morning and then sleep in herself. Well it served her right, Shirley thought. She was the one who'd wanted to play this game. Maybe Phyllis was right. Maybe they had outgrown it.

"No!" Shirley said to herself stubbornly. They were still kids. She couldn't understand why Phyllis was in such a rush to grown up. She even wanted to copy some of the makeup tips Mona had given her. Mona, she thought and shuddered. No, they were still just kids. Besides, they hadn't played the game in so long. Shirley daydreamed for a moment and processed the changes taking place before her eyes. As Phyllis moved more and more towards makeup and boys, she wanted to hold onto everything they had done in the past. The game was her way of keeping things as they used to be when it was them against the world. "Phyllis is

the only one around here who has accepted my difference and allowed me to be who I am--as I am? Even I don't know who that is. But, it's important to keep things as they are," she muttered shaking away the lonely feelings that were growing inside her. That's why yesterday, on bended knees, she had begged Phyllis to play the game with her one more time, but, to her surprise Phyllis refused. She was afraid that the others might see them and ridicule them. It was then that Shirley realized she was losing her best friend. No, not yet. In frustration, she'd fallen on the grass and resorted to a bout of crying while hiding her face so Phyllis couldn't see that she was faking. Finally, the emotion moved Phyllis and she had agreed to play provided they played early in the morning when no one would be out to see them. For Phyllis early was before the sun rose.

Shirley walked towards the edge of the porch and leaned against the smooth surface of the white wooden pillar closest to Phyllis' porch. She'd give her a few more minutes, and then, she was going to get her. No matter what, the game was going to be played today. Shirley closed her eyes as a gentle spring breeze brushed across her cheeks.

"Umm," she moaned softly and sniffed enjoying the smell of the early morning dew. She listened as birds chirped out their morning songs and watched as the sun gently lit the morning sky. She stayed that way for a little while and then walked around to the other side of the pillar. It was time to wake Phyllis up. As she took the first step down, a smile crept across her face. Down on the pathway, at the edge of the bottom step, she saw them--footprints. "Oh, you've already started. Ha ha ha."

Excited, Shirley jumped the rest of the way down over the steps and landed in the first set of footprints perfectly. She followed them down the front walk. At the sidewalk, they turned right and went towards her driveway. So did she.

The footprints turned right again and went up Shirley's driveway. However, midway up the driveway, they abruptly stopped. Shirley looked around her. No way, she thought. There was no place for Phyllis to hide. The game couldn't be over this quickly. Yet, how? How did the prints end here? She was missing something. Shirley bent down and studied the footprints more carefully. On the third footprint back, she saw it. A slight overstep.

"Ohhh, you're getting good Phyllis. You walked backwards," Shirley muttered to herself.

She retraced the steps back down the driveway, exactly as Phyllis had done it, and found those leading out towards the street. They turned left and went along the curb. Shirley tiptoed along the curb and back past her front walk. They continued past her front yard and ended up in the lower portion of Phyllis' driveway. There, they turned left and continued upwards towards the sidewalk. At the sidewalk, they turned right, went down the block, and out into the street. Shirley stopped in amazement. The footprints were clearly visible on the blacktop. Shirley paused and wondered how she'd done that. She squatted down and examined the footprints for several minutes. Finally a car came along and the driver blew his horn to get her moving again.

She continued to follow the footprints which took her several blocks down Vineyard Avenue past the right side of the playground. Near the end of the block, the footprints ended under a large oak tree.

"I've got you now," Shirley said looking up into the tree where she expected to see Phyllis sitting. The smile which had erupted across her face, slowly faded and was replaced not by a feeling of surprise or disappointment, but by a feeling of foreboding. Confused, she looked up to see that the branch overhead was empty. This only added to her feeling of dread.

After several minutes, she shrugged it off and squatted down. Looking closely at the footprints she searched for another misstep. There weren't any. Dumbfounded, she rose from the ground, turned, and retraced her steps back down Vineyard Avenue. Perhaps, she'd missed something. Suddenly she felt an urge to look at the tree again. Maybe she was higher up in the foliage. From this distance, she could see that it was completely empty. She could also see footprints glistening on the blacktop of the street just beyond it. Anxiously, she ran down the street and past the tree. The footprints had veered off the sidewalk, onto the grass (where she had lost them), and back onto the sidewalk a few feet away. Still feeling uneasy, Shirley followed the footprints across the street where they turned left and continued down Thirtieth Street. At the corner of Thirtieth Street and Palm Grove Avenue, the footprints turned right, so did she.

Shirley continued to follow the footprints for half a mile when again, they came to an abrupt halt. This time, she stood in the middle of a vacant lot. She moved to the grass beside the footprints and turned slowly in a complete circle. As she did so, she observed every inch of the lot. To her right was a rusted broken down chain link fence. There were no footprints in the mud leading away from

where she was standing. Another turn and she was facing what was directly behind her. Slightly to her left, way back in the corner, was an old neglected garage, which they all referred to as the Shack. (The Shack was simply a place to hangout, when you got tired of sitting on your front porch or playing in the playground. Most of the kids in the neighborhood were latchkey, and it gave you some place to be when you didn't feel like being out on the streets, or at home alone.) There were no footprints headed off in that direction.

Now, Shirley squared her shoulders and looked at what was left of the Spanish style house that had proudly stood there three years ago. It had belonged to Mrs. Claudia Jenkins, a bossy old woman who everyone was afraid of. One Halloween, the house had mysteriously burned down and Mrs. Jenkins, losing everything she owned, had moved away to live with her daughter in New York. A short time after she'd left, the City sent a crew out to demolish and remove the burnt out structure. Yet, for some reason, they didn't take it all. Shirley studied the tall grassy mound that had grown in front of the cracked wooden flooring which had almost sunk to ground level. Looking at it now, gave her a creepy feeling. She carefully looked around the area. There was no indication that Phyllis had walked backwards. Here the footprints ended. She looked around again; there was dirt and debris all over the lot, but no place to hide. Again, that creepy feeling consumed Shirley. Suddenly she became aware that it was eerily quiet.

Of course, it was quiet, she rationalized. It was early on a Saturday morning. The people around here were working folks who loved to party on Friday night. The streets wouldn't come alive until after noon. Not wanting to give up, Shirley shrugged her fear away. She looked around trying to find another link to the footprints. There were none. She walked backwards in the footprints thus making a deeper impression. She was right, Phyllis hadn't done that. Get help, a voice said in her ear. She ignored it. She crisscrossed on the path and went around in circles, but the footprints ended right here on this muddy section of dirt. Right smack in the middle of nothing. She stood beside the mound with a puzzled expression on her face as a crackling noise overhead was followed by a loud clap of thunder.

Suddenly, she was underground in a small room crawling around on a dirt covered floor. It was dark and dank. The air was quickly leaving her body. She stopped where she was. "Just a little rest, then I'll go on," she muttered. She lay down and rested.

“Stand up,” that voice yelled at her. She dared not ignore it this time. She stood up. Her head pressed hard against the ceiling of the small room. It gave way, and fresh air came flooding into her lungs.

CHAPTER TWO -- THE DREAM

Gasping for air, the eleven-year-old jerked awake as a flash of lightening followed by another clap of thunder roared overhead. She was standing next to the bed in the sparsely furnished powder blue bedroom. She was still in Copper Springs, Oklahoma, her living nightmare for the last six months. The game she'd been playing with Phyllis back in Los Angeles was a dream. *Then why did it feel so real? And, why have I been having it every night this week?* Each time it got a little longer. A little more--scary. Monday, they were just beginning to play the game. She'd gotten as far as the overstep in the driveway. Tuesday, she'd gotten to the tree where Phyllis should have been but wasn't. Yesterday, she'd picked up the trail and moved over to the vacant lot where again Phyllis should have been, but wasn't. Today, she was underground and out of air.

She knew Phyllis was fine, they'd talked today, much as they'd done every day since her family came to run Uncle Curtis' farm following his accident. She'd even helped Phyllis study for a science test today that she was going to have tomorrow. *Yet, this dream seems so real. What if? No that's not going to happen. It can't happen.* She shuddered and pushed the thought from her mind.

She walked over to the bay window and looked out. The thunder and lightening had been joined by a pounding rain. She sat down and watched for several minutes before dozing off.

She heard a scream, dazed, she found herself standing on the walkway of her house back in Los Angeles. Phyllis came running towards her from the driveway. Shirley stepped back and braced herself expecting Phyllis to grab onto her. Instead, she ran right past. Surprised, Shirley turned to see Mona DuBois barreling towards her. She cringed, closed her eyes, and waited for the impact. Nothing happened. Slowly, she opened her right eye and peered at Mona. She stood a few feet in front of her; her light brown skin was red with rage. Sparks flashed off her hazel eyes as a look of pure hatred distorted her beautiful face. Shirley stood frozen, watching Mona's heaving chest as she huffed and puffed to catch her breath. Several minutes passed, someone screamed, and Phyllis ran past again.

"Help us," Mona said and took off after her.

A chill ran deep into Shirley's soul and again, she woke up. This time screaming.

Unexpectedly, her bedroom door opened and a small elderly woman stood there. Shirley screamed again.

"Child what's wrong with you? Why are you screaming?" her grandmother asked flipping the light switch by the door. The lights flickered on.

"Granny! You scared me!"

"I Scared you! You're the one in here screaming. I was just going to bed, what's wrong?"

"I had a nightmare, a terrible, terrible nightmare."

"You did, Sweet-pea," Granny said and sat on the window seat beside her. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Well, I've been having it since Monday. Each day, more gets added on. Today wasn't good. Phyllis has disappeared. I--I believe she's somewhere

underground, and she can't breathe. Worst of all, Granny, she was with Mona. Can you believe it! She was with Mona! Of course Mona was chasing her. Yet, I had the feeling--"

"Sweet-pea," Granny interrupted. "You're rambling. Take a deep breath, and slow down. Start at the beginning. What happened on the first day?" Granny finished pulling her into a hug.

"Well, Monday, wasn't bad. We just played the game."

"What game?"

"Disappearing Footprints. I told you about that game didn't I?"

"Is that's the one where you follow wet footprints around until they disappear and then try to figure out which way the animal or person went?"

"Yeah, that's it. We were always late for school playing that game. I remember one time we were following some large footprints and they just disappeared, from the middle of the sidewalk. We couldn't find them in the grass anywhere. Then a deep voice said, 'so this is why you're always late for school.' We took off running, but that voice told us to stop. It was Phyllis' dad. He was hanging by his knees from a tree branch that hung over the sidewalk. We never thought to look up."

They both laughed for a few seconds. Thunder sounded distantly, however, the rain continued pounding.

"What happened on Tuesday?" Granny asked.

"I got stuck. The footprints ended under a tree branch, and I thought she would be up in the tree, but she wasn't, and I couldn't find footprints anywhere--," she trailed off, thinking for a few seconds. "Then," she continued, "Wednesday night, I picked up the trail from the tree, and followed it over to a vacant lot. This time there were no buildings, or trees or junk she could hide behind. Besides, while I was standing in front of a grassy mound, I--it felt like she'd disappeared."

"Disappeared!"

“I can’t explain it Granny. It wasn’t like she was hiding. It was like she wasn’t there at all.”

Her grandmother gently rubbed her back. “Go on what happened tonight?”

“Tonight, I was standing on that spot where she disappeared and suddenly, I was underground crawling around on a dirt floor. Then, I was out of air.”

“That’s why you were screaming?”

“No. I fell asleep again. In this part of the dream, it was just Mona chasing Phyllis.”

“That made you scream,” her grandmother said incredulously.

“Granny! It was Mona! She asked me to help her. Mona!”

“I don’t get it, Sweet-pea.”

“Granny, Mona is the girl that called me a FREAK!”

“Oh, the girl you fought with because she was making fun of you.”

“The girl who kicked my butt.”

“Shirley Elaine, you know that’s not true.” Granny said laughing.

“Well, her friends did,” she said defensively.

Again, her grandmother laughed and rubbed her shoulder before pulling her into a tighter hug. “I heard you talking to Phyllis today, so I know she’s all right.”

“Yeah, she’s all right,” Shirley responded and fell silent as a myriad of thoughts ran through her mind. “Granny, what if--what if?”

“What if what?”

“What if it hasn’t happened yet?”

“You think you’re having a premonition?”

“A premonition what?”

“A premonition. That’s when you see something before it happens.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Of course you can,” Granny said and pushed her away as she studied her face. “Shirley Elaine! Hasn’t your mother talked to you about your special gift?”

“Special gift? I have a special gift, Granny. Really? What is it?”

Her grandmother chuckled softly as she took Shirley by the hand and led her back to bed. Shirley scrambled under the covers, and her grandmother tucked her in like her mother used to do when she was five. Shirley wiggled to get her arms free. “Granny, what’s that premonition thingy you were talking about?”

“Child you’ll find out soon enough,” she said giving Shirley a hug before heading for the door. The rain which had poured while they were talking was completely gone now. However, Shirley could still hear the thunder off in the distance. At the door her grandmother paused before turning off the light. “Don’t worry Sweet-pea, your friend is fine. I sense that you may also be suffering from a little separation anxiety,” she paused and studied Shirley’s face. “No--a loss. A deep, deep loss,” she said again pausing, this time in thought. “Soon, you’ll make some friends here who love you and that special gift of yours. I know someone who likes you already,” she finished switching off the light and closing the door softly.

The rain started falling again and Shirley rolled over onto her side to watch it. *How did her grandmother know she had suffered a loss and because of it she wasn’t trying to make any new friends? Why should she? Soon they’d be going back home. So she didn’t really need any new friends. Who was she kidding? Yes she would. Even back in Los Angeles.* She sighed and rolled over to face the door. *But Granny also said that she would make new friends soon.* She smiled at that last thought and fell back asleep.

CHAPTER THREE-FREAK!

The next day, Shirley walked into the school cafeteria and looked for a seat. As usual, Andrea Gayle Watson held court at the middle table on the far back wall next to the windows. Even on a day like this when heavy rainfall had driven everyone indoors, the two tables on each side of her as well as the three in front remained empty. Some eighth graders walked into the room and looked at the empty tables surrounding Andrea Gayle and her friends. They turned and walked in the opposite direction. At the front of the cafeteria, they moved four sixth-grade boys out of their seats while Andrea Gayle and her friends jeered.

As the boys scrambled for other seats, three opened up on the West wall. Shirley just beat Derrick Hanson to one of them. He grunted and turned to look for another chair instead of taking the empty one next to her. Her cheeks burned as she pulled out the chair next to Kathy Oliver, who turned, saw her standing there and scooted away from her. Even more embarrassed, Shirley reached for the chair next to it, however, Slowpoke Love was moving into it. Quickly, Shirley plopped down in the chair next to Kathy and busily stirred her spaghetti. After several minutes, her heart calmed down enough for her to take a bite.

“I don’t know how I’m going to explain it to her. I should have returned that journal when I had the chance. Now it’s toast. Completely gone--well mostly gone.” Kathy whispered to Angela Fields who sat on the other side of her.

Intrigued, Shirley leaned a little closer so that she could better hear their conversation. Suddenly, she heard a scream. She cringed expecting to see Phyllis followed by Mona running through the cafeteria. Rapidly, she closed her eyes and put her head down. “I can’t see them, I won’t see them. Please don’t let me see them,” she mouthed silently. Slowly, she looked up, straight in front of her Mona stood staring at her. Shirley was taken aback. She’d had seen many expressions on Mona’s face over the years, but the look of fear and desperation she gave her now was one she never envisioned. Unsettled, she stared back. *Is this the same girl who has tortured me and scared me senseless for--forever? The one I ran from daily? Mona! Afraid! Impossible!*

She could feel her face contorting. Her right eye began to close as she tried to comprehend the vision. She blinked and shook her head to clear it. Finally, the cafeteria wall came back into focus. Mona was gone. Nervously, she looked around the cafeteria. Only Billy Thompson, who sat across from Slowpoke, was watching her with a look of terror on his face. *Shoot, he saw me. Now what am I going to do?* She glanced back over at him. He was talking to his brother Mark, who looked over in her direction and scowled. Heat rose to her face, Shirley looked down at her plate. Her body tensed as thoughts raced through her mind. *In the daylight! I’m dreaming in the daylight! Isn’t it bad enough that they’re haunting my dreams at night, must they come during school hours too!* Shirley thoughts were briefly interrupted when Kathy again scooted away from her. *What did I do to Kathy? Why is she scooting away from me? Does she think I’m crazy too? Oh I so wanted to be friends with her and with Angela too. You’re wrong Granny. I won’t make any friends here. Besides, I don’t need any friends. Soon, I’ll be back in Los Angeles. Then I’ll have plenty of friends.* Shirley sighed and looked over at Billy again. She smiled. Without acknowledging her effort, he quickly pushed his chair away from the table and left. She put her fork down and pushed her plate away. She wasn’t hungry any more.

“I know, but that was rude, and that’s really not you. You need to apologize,” Angela said.

“Oh, all right! Stop fussing at me,” Kathy said and tapped Shirley on the shoulder. “Shirley, I’m--”

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