



The Vanishing Of  
AVELINE JONES

*To Mum, who's doing her own vanishing trick.  
Thank you for everything.*

# The Vanishing Of AVELINE JONES



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“Sometimes, those who are carried off  
are allowed, after many years, a final glimpse  
of their friends.”

The Celtic Twilight,  
*William Butler Yeats, 1893*



## Chapter 1

# *A Mystery Awaits*

Lulled by the rhythmic clinkety-clack of the train, Aveline's eyelids drooped. Sleep reached out with its soft, spongy arms, but she resisted and blinked herself awake. Outside, the countryside drowned beneath a watery deluge, the rain hurling itself horizontally across the landscape like a fistful of grey nails. Grim mires of dark water pooled in the fields. Black clouds billowed like clenched fists. Frowning, Aveline pushed back her glasses. This was supposed to be the best time of the year. The laziest. The comfiest. The most magical. School had finished and the Christmas holidays had started. By now, she should have been existing mainly on chocolate, watching films in her zebra onesie, and curled up on the

cushions in front of the fire reading her favourite books. Nothing to do and all day to do it. Instead, here she was, sitting on a hard seat in a chilly train carriage with a rumbling stomach.

They were on their way to a village called Scarbury, about fifty miles away from their home in Bristol. Aveline's Uncle Rowan lived there – or at least he used to live there – before he'd disappeared.

Aveline had only been two years old at the time, but her mum had told her a little bit about what had happened. It had been December, almost ten years ago. He had gone out one day, and just never came back. At first, everyone expected Uncle Rowan to reappear. It wasn't that unusual for him to go AWOL every now and then. But as time passed, and he didn't return, it quickly went from odd, to weird, to worrying. No sightings. No clues. Just thin air and an empty house gathering dust and junk mail. Since that day, Uncle Rowan had never been heard from again. And so, eventually, the time had come when her mum had to accept that, miracles aside, he wouldn't be coming back. And with mortgage payments on his house still outstanding, they would need to sell it. It was a sad task for Aveline's mum, almost like an official goodbye, which is why she'd wanted to conclude matters before Christmas.

Blinking out of her trance, Aveline glanced across the table, which was covered with coffee cups, mobile phones, biscuit wrappers, books and a scattered deck of playing cards. Opposite her, Aunt Lilian twitched in her seat. She'd fallen into a doze sometime after they boarded the train. Even in her sleep, she frowned slightly, obviously displeased at whatever was happening in her dreams. This trip would be hard on her, too. Uncle Rowan was her younger brother. Normally strong and assured about everything, right now, Aunt Lilian looked small and fragile. Aveline would have gone and sat beside her, and maybe leaned into her a little, but Aveline's mum was sleeping, too, her head lolling against Aunt Lilian's shoulder. Aveline silently promised herself that she would try to be there for them both over the next few days.

Rummaging in her backpack, Aveline retrieved the only photo she had of herself and her Uncle Rowan. She pulled it close to her face. Then she drew it away until it was in her lap, peering at it through half-closed eyes. She repeated this motion a couple of times, like a detective examining an important clue. The photograph had a white border around it, and the colours had faded. It showed a man standing by the edge of a lake, wearing hiking shorts and a grubby blue T-shirt. He had long, straight, black

hair, parted in the middle, and small, round glasses with wire frames, behind which narrowed eyes peered suspiciously at the camera. By far, his most striking feature was his bushy beard, which sprawled over the lower half of his face. He was holding the hand of a tiny girl who resembled a baby bird that had fallen out of the nest. Aveline smiled at her younger self, hoping that these days she didn't look quite so scruffy and bewildered.

"Does it ring any bells?" her mum said with a tired smile.

Aveline shook her head. She hadn't realized her mum had woken up.

"No, sorry, Mum."

"Don't be sorry, love, you were only tiny. But you remember me talking about him when you got older?"

"A bit," Aveline said, wanting her mum to talk more about his disappearance but afraid to ask. Her mum always seemed reluctant to discuss *that* part of Uncle Rowan's life, and Aveline was sure there must be more to it than the few vague details she had. In the end, she settled for a safer option. "What was he like?"

Aveline's mum smiled sadly, before beginning to clear their lunch leftovers off the table.

"Very kind. Super smart. Generous to a fault. But

always very shy, even with his own family. He definitely kept his cards close to his chest."

"How do you mean?" Aveline asked. She wanted to know Uncle Rowan better; her own memories were so vague.

"Well, I'd suddenly find it was time to say goodbye to him and realize that I'd been speaking about myself the whole time. I think he liked to keep his private life... well...private. I wish I'd taken more time to be with him, but I was a busy, single mum and, sometimes, all I could think about was getting through to the end of the day in one piece. I suppose in some respects, we drifted apart. It happens – you're so absorbed in your own life and your own problems that you forget about everybody else's until it's too late."

Her mum nudged a knuckle at the corner of her eye, as if she'd drifted off into her own little world for a moment. Aveline glanced away. The rain left glistening scars on the train windows. More sodden, lifeless fields sped by, reflecting the sombre mood in the train carriage. Aveline wanted to say something upbeat, but it was hard to find the words. The bleak winter weather dampened everything, including her spirits.

"What did Uncle Rowan do, you know, as a job?"

“He was an archaeologist. It meant he worked alone, a lot, which I think suited him very well. And he always seemed to be rushing off somewhere, which is probably why we didn’t get to see him that much. But even though you didn’t get to know him, Aveline, I do know that he thought the world of you.”

A tingle of pleasure warmed Aveline’s cheeks.

“Really?”

“Oh, yes. He didn’t have any children of his own, you see, so he quite took to his new niece after you were born. He called you *Little Ave*, and you were equally taken with him, following him around like a baby duck paddling after its mother.”

“No, I did not!”

“I thought you said you couldn’t remember anything?” Aveline’s mum said with a *gotcha* grin. Glancing at her watch, Aveline’s mum eased herself out of her seat. “I think we’re nearly there, love. I’m just popping to the loo.”

Aveline leaned back into her seat with a smile. It felt good to know that her Uncle Rowan had loved her. She only wished he hadn’t vanished before she’d got the chance to get to know him better. If only she could discover what had happened. Maybe he was still out there somewhere?

“Tickets, please!”

Glancing up, Aveline saw Harold, his floppy fringe framing a giant grin. As always, she was glad he was here. Him *and* his terrible jokes. She hadn’t been sure he’d want to come, but his mum and dad were away with their furniture business again, and with school having just finished for the holidays, he had a few days free and nothing better to do. Also, Aveline had told him that they were here to solve a mystery, which while more of a *hope* than a *fact*, had intrigued him enough to agree to join her.

“I’d keep my voice down if I were you,” Aveline whispered. “If my aunt wakes up, she might decide you need to do some extra study.”

With a nervous glance at Aunt Lilian, Harold squeezed in next to Aveline.

“You know, trying to pee on a train isn’t easy,” he said in a low voice.

“Thanks for the update,” Aveline said, which made Harold snicker. She could happily live life without knowing the grisly details of Harold’s bathroom challenges.

“So, what’s the plan then?” Harold said, twirling his dark fringe around his finger like strands of liquorice.

“We’re putting my Uncle Rowan’s house on the market.”

Harold paused, letting the strand of hair unwind itself.

“No, I mean, aren’t we going to try and find out more about...” Harold gave Aunt Lilian another quick glance. “You know.”

“His disappearance?” Aveline whispered.

“Yes, I mean, it’s strange that we don’t know much about what happened. You’d think they might have CCTV or something.”

Pushing back her glasses, Aveline sighed.

“It was ten years ago, Harold, and he lives in a small village. Not sure they were hooked up with a state-of-the-art CCTV system.”

“He could have been kidnapped.”

“No ransom notes. Besides, I’m not sure that scruffy archaeologists without much money are high up on the list of kidnap targets.”

Harold shrugged his shoulders.

“Witness protection programme? I dunno, maybe he saw something he shouldn’t have and was given a new identity.”

“While possible –” Aveline said, screwing up her face – “I really doubt he witnessed any mafia deals in a small village near Cheltenham.”

“Alright, fair enough. Do you have any theories?”

“No, but that’s exactly what we’re here for,” Aveline said. “And you know what’s going to help us? We’re going to have his house all to ourselves. Mum arranged for a cleaner to go in every now and then, but apart from that, it hasn’t been touched. It should be just as he left it. There’s got to be something in there that’s going to tell us more.”

Harold sat up in his seat, his eyes shining at the prospect.

“Okay, what’s the name of the place where he lives again?”

“Scarbury.”

Harold fell silent, pulled out his phone and began to look at something. After a few minutes he said *woah* under his breath and began to move his fingers really fast as though he was reading something fascinating. Eventually, Aveline couldn’t help but peer over.

“What are you looking at that’s so interesting?”

“Thought you would have already found this yourself.”

“Found what?”

Harold raised his eyebrows. “Take a look.”

Handing her his phone, Harold sat back and crossed his arms. Pushing back her glasses, Aveline saw that he’d been reading a blog.



## The Spooky Blogspot

### *Strange Lights Spotted Above Scarbury*

A number of people living in and around Scarbury have reported seeing ghostly lights at night, again, close to the old long barrow. Residents shared pictures and videos on social media, many claiming that the lights appeared to be moving. Mike Williams, 42, a local builder, said that generations of his family have witnessed the strange phenomenon. "My grandmother used to call the lights will-o'-the-wisps. She told me they were evil faeries, trying to lure unsuspecting travellers off the path, sometimes into bogs and rivers where they would drown. My father used to see the lights a lot, too, and he always told me never to follow them." However, local geologist, Mia Khan, offers an alternative explanation. "As organic matter in waterlogged fields and marshes breaks down, it releases flammable toxic gases that can often burst into flame as they come into contact with the air. I strongly suspect that this is what people are actually seeing."

*Posted Dec 16, 2021 by:*

*Sammy-Adamu-Taylor11@SpookyBlogspot*

Aveline handed him back the phone. "That's weird. How did you find it?"

"There's this thing called the internet, see, and if you type stuff into your browser it—"

Aveline pushed him away.

"You could be a comedian, Harold...if only you had some funny jokes."

They were interrupted by the sound of a crackly voice over the train tannoy.

*We'll shortly be arriving at Cheltenham, where this train will terminate. Please remember to take all your belongings with you when you leave and thank you for travelling with Great Western Railway. Next stop, Cheltenham.*

Blinking furiously, Aunt Lilian shot up from her seat and began to hurriedly help pack away their belongings, while Aveline's mum arrived back from the loo and started handing down their bags. As Aveline disembarked onto the windswept platform, needles of icy rain blew into her face. Shivering, she bowed her head. Now that they'd actually arrived, everything seemed slightly daunting.

Her uncle, gone.

A house, abandoned.

Answers, none.

But she was determined to find some. Her mum and aunt needed to know.

Taking a deep breath, she followed the others through the ticket gates. Thankfully, there was a row of taxis waiting outside, their exhausts sending plumes of petrol-scented smoke into the air. A man with a shaven head wound down his window when he saw them approach.

“Now then, am I right in thinking that you four will be wanting a taxi?” the taxi driver said in a cheery voice.

“You would indeed be correct,” Aunt Lilian said. “These four will be very grateful if you could take them to Scarbury.”

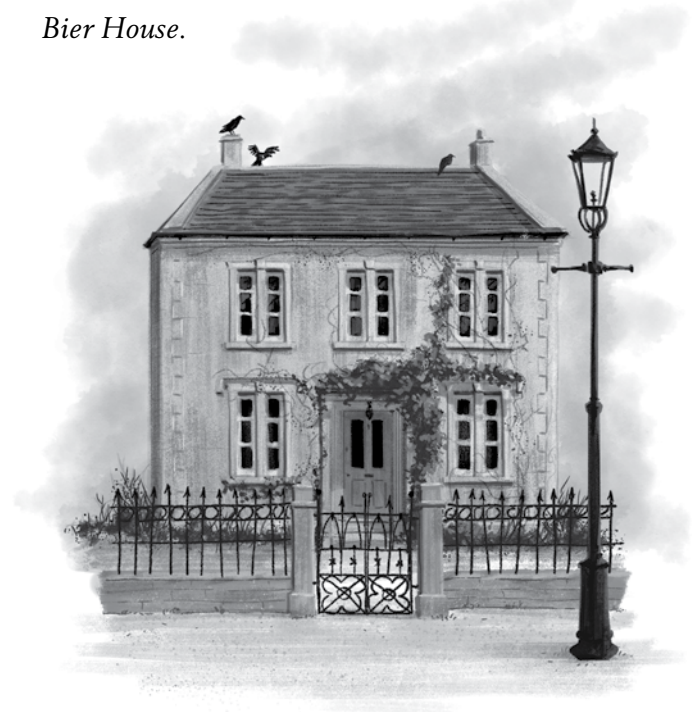
While the driver loaded their bags into the boot, they climbed in, with Aunt Lilian assuming a position of authority in the front seat. After being outside in the cold, the warm air humming through the taxi felt like a hug, and Aveline stretched out her cold toes.

After they’d navigated their way through Cheltenham’s busy streets, the lanes narrowed. The houses grew older and more historic. Huge trees lined the road, their branches hanging above the pavements like leafy umbrellas. The modern street lights fell away to be replaced by the occasional lamp, and in the darkening

afternoon, it did feel a little as if they’d stepped back in time. Aveline felt a flicker of apprehension as their final destination drew near. With a hiss of tyres on the damp road, the taxi drew to a halt.

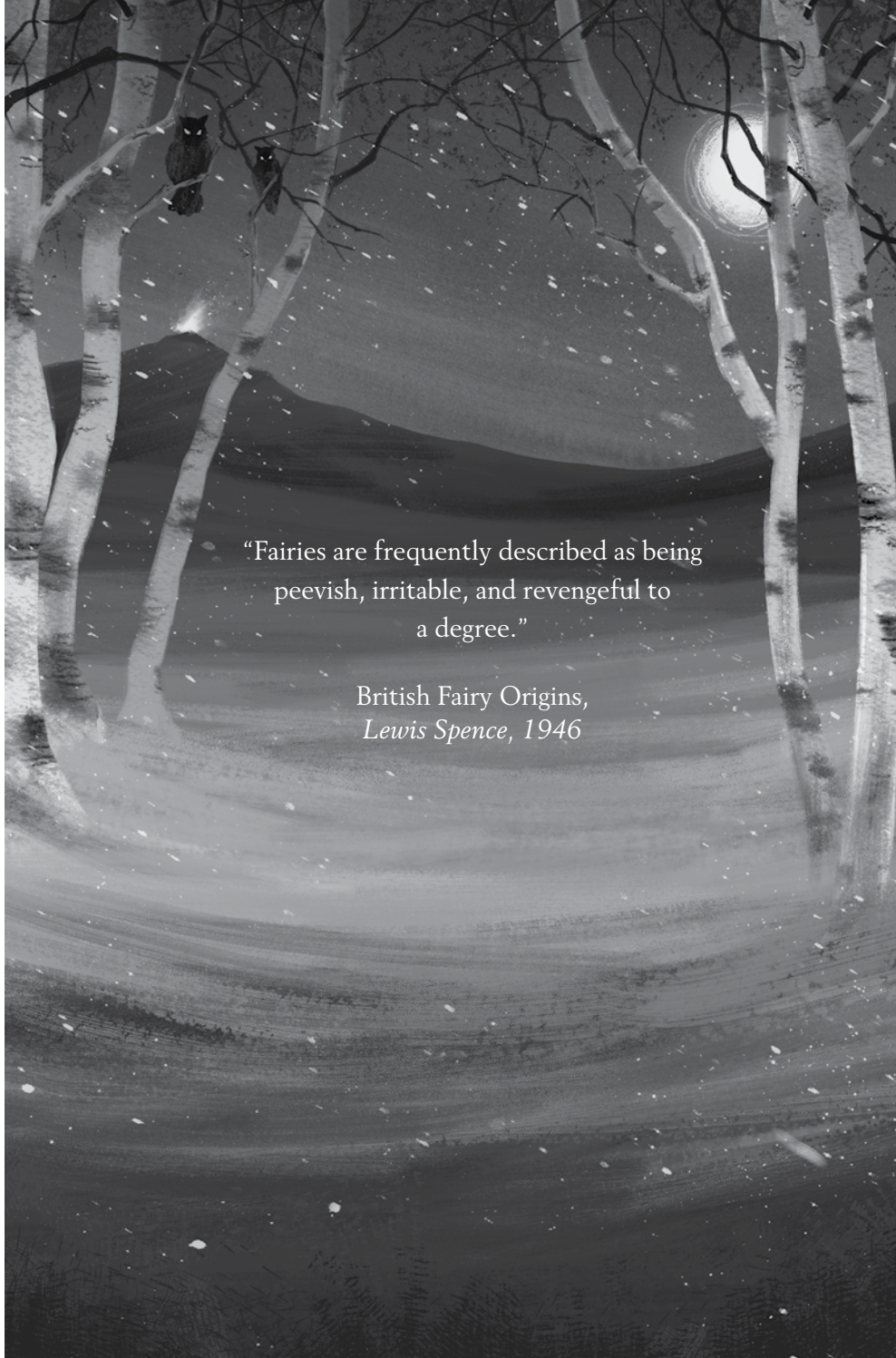
Aveline peered out of the window at a large, two-storey house, built from sandstone. Iron railings fenced it off from the road. A solitary lamp post stood guard outside. Steps led up to a path and then on to a porch, above which dark windows glinted like suspicious eyes. A sign on the gate read:

*Bier House.*



Aveline took a deep breath.

The truth to Uncle Rowan's disappearance could lie somewhere within these four walls.



“Fairies are frequently described as being  
peevish, irritable, and revengeful to  
a degree.”

*British Fairy Origins,  
Lewis Spence, 1946*