



VANISHED

Mabel, Episode 6: Vanished. In which the end is nigh.

[INTRO:]

MABEL: Hi, you've reached Mabel Martin. I'm not here to take your call right now, so please leave a message after the beep. Thanks!

[BEEP]

– down to the shore, and she said –

[BEEP]

It's seven in the morning. Sally hasn't called yet, so I'm lying here in bed, looking up at the white eye on the top of my bed. Lilly's bed. Lilly's eye. The day hasn't really begun yet, so I think it's all right to talk about this. It won't count.

My uncle disappeared, too. One day he was there, and then he wasn't; and he never came home. My grandparents looked for him. Of course they looked for him. They searched the shrubland for him, every day for weeks, and then every week for months and months. He went out with his friends and said he was going to walk home, sometime around midnight, but he never reached the house. He never reached anywhere. They found his shoes in an orchard, up off the main road out of town, and they found his wallet under a black chokeberry bush in the hills, something like fifteen miles away.

How do a kid's shoes end up in an orchard? I used to think it was impossible for anyone to just vanish, but I've been up in the wilderness. There's so much of it, and it's so ancient, it doesn't care about anything but seasons. Against the hills, against the shrubland, against the marshes, we're nothing. We're microscopic, we disappear so easily.

Sally told me what happened to your mother. Just once, when I first came here. I think she meant it as a warning, so I'd know not to talk about her daughter off-hand. You have to make these things clear. We were sitting out on the patio, I'd made iced tea that day. We weren't talking about family, even, but she pointed out at the hills and said to me, "That's where my daughter Lily was supposed to be the day she went missing."

I don't really remember what I answered. Probably made some sort of sympathetic noises. There's no polite etiquette for an announcement like that, is there? "Oh, a person in your family vanished mysteriously? Me too! Small world." I do remember what Sally said next. She didn't look at me at all, and I wasn't sure if she was even talking to me. I'm still not completely convinced she was. She spoke just softly, just barely, and she said, "They cut her out of the mountain for me."

It wasn't until weeks later I found out what actually happened from Liza. I'm sorry, Mabel. I really am. I know you were only four, but that doesn't change anything. You remember something like that, no matter how young you were or how long ago it happened. It gets inside you. Becomes part of your anatomy. It happened with my uncle, and I never even met him, he was gone long before I was born. But there are echoes that ripple outwards. My mom was the youngest of her brothers and sisters, and she grew up with his disappearance, saw the way it made her parents move away from each other, saw it turn her mother into someone she'd never been, controlling and – selfish with her affection, never giving too much of it away. So when my sister and I were born, Mom tried to do the opposite. Always told us she loved us, so much and so often that it felt like an obligation. Tried to keep us safe and let us be free at the same time, so we grew up looking over our shoulders. "Do what you want to do, but remember the world is dangerous, it'll chew you up if you don't pay attention. Have fun, but never, ever let your guard down."

I am sorry about your mother. Things shouldn't have been so hard for you. Life is unfair – life has no obligation to be fair – but still. I wish –

[DOORBELL]

Oh, hang on, I have to get that.

[BEEP]

That was weird. No one was there. You can see all the way down to the bottom of the hill, and there wasn't anyone. Unless whoever it was hopped the wall –

It's almost eight, I should go wake Sally up.

[BEEP]

[RUSTLING, THUDDING, RUNNING FOOTSTEPS AND HEAVY BREATHING]

[BEEP]

She's not there. Mabel, she's not there. Her chair's still where I left it beside her bed, but she's not – oh my god, oh my god, how –

[BEEP]

[STRANGE LAUGHTER]

[BEEP]

This is Anna Limon, my – I don't know what to do, she –

[BEEP]

Sally! *Sally!*

[BEEP]

[CRYING NOISES]

[BEEP]

I think this is my favourite room. It always smells like Christmas – there's a string of pomanders up on the wall, dried oranges stuck with cloves. There's the armchair snug in the corner, with the photographs of the house back in

the fifties overhead. There's the Martin family tree, the one Sally's mother embroidered, and the pheasant feathers in a flower vase. I'm sitting in the armchair right now. I've got a blanket, one of the good wool ones from the front room, and a cup of chamomile tea laced with brandy, and it's not raining, it's just cold, and dark.

She was out in the garden when I found her. Out in the rose garden, in her long nightgown. Lying on her stomach. I thought she was dead. She looked dead. Her lips were blue. I touched her hand, it was cold.

There were rose-vines growing over her ankles. In loops, thick, covered in thorns. Her ankles were bleeding down onto the ground. She's so frail, Mabel. She's so *small*. I started screaming, but there's no one out here, no one but us. I could scream and scream and no one would hear. I had my phone, I was calling 911 when Sally opened her eyes.

Another thing I like about this room is the damp-stains on the ceiling. That sounds funny, but it's true – you can look at them and see different shapes every time. Like now, one of them looks like a hand reaching out of the plaster. One of them looks like a rabbit jumping over a tree. I used to think that one was a girl in a long dress, but I don't know, maybe the shapes change. Maybe it's just perspective.

Sally couldn't speak for a long time after I found her. She started shivering as soon as she woke up, her teeth were chattering too much to say anything. I got her into the chair – I had to cut the roses back with the garden secateurs – and brought her back up to the house, and called an ambulance.

We were at the hospital all day. They said she had hypothermia, they said she was lucky – doctors kept saying that to me, over and over. She's so lucky you found her, she's so lucky to have you, so lucky to have survived the night. They figured she must have been outside all night. How, I said, how, how does a ninety-year-old woman with Parkinson's, who hasn't been able to walk on her own for over a year, how does she get down a staircase and through the house and out into the garden – down the garden steps, halfway down a hill – all on her own? Without her chair? How? But no one could answer me.

God, now that mark on the ceiling looks like an eye.

They're keeping her in the hospital overnight, for observation. I don't think there's anything really wrong with her at this point, I think they're trying to

catch her sleepwalking. Or whatever it was she did. I said I'd stay with her, but the nurses wouldn't let me.

Do you mind me being in your room? You could ask me not to come in here. You know I wouldn't –

My uncle Jack, they never found another trace of him, not after they found his wallet and his shoes. Do you know what I find weirdest about the whole thing? His wallet had like six hundred bucks in it. He was eighteen years old, worked at a gas station part time after school – my grandparents weren't destitute, but they were working class, you know? Six hundred dollars, back in the early eighties – that's a lot of money to someone like Jack. That's a lot of money, period. If someone hurt him, why didn't they take the cash? And if they didn't, if he just wandered off drunk and broke his neck or died of exposure somewhere in the wilderness, where did he get that money? My mom saw it, she said the bills were pristine. Even after they'd been out in the weather for weeks, they looked brand new. I know it's crazy, but the first time I heard about the money, I thought: that's payment. Someone's making recompense. For what? I don't know, I've got no idea. It was just a thought I had.

The nurses said I couldn't spend the night, so I waited with Sally until they kicked me out, sometime around nine o'clock. I told her I'd be back tomorrow early in the morning, and started getting my coat and bag together – but Sally asked me to wait. She said *please*.

I'm trying to tell it exactly as it happened, because I think you'll want to know this, too. Sally put a finger to her mouth, a hushing gesture. She said, "I tried to save her. Once I knew, I tried, but it was too late. You believe me, don't you, Anna?"

I said I believed her. I said of course I did. What else could I say? I said, "But I don't know who you're talking about. Your daughter? You mean you tried to save Lily?"

"No," she said, "not Lily. There was never any saving her. Not after what I did."

I could see the nurse coming towards us, I knew she was going to kick me out. And Sally was talking so *slowly*, she still hadn't quite thawed yet, not even then. I don't know what made me say it. Intuition? Desperation, maybe?

Something, something falling into place. I said, "Do you mean Luna Thorne? Is she the one you tried to save?"

Mabel, she was going to answer me, I know she was. She had tears in her eyes, every part of her was shaking, *she was going to answer*, she was going to tell the truth, she said *oh Anna, I'm so sorry*, and then the nurse was there. And the nurse made me leave, she walked me out of the ward. What could I do?

I drove home. I'm here alone, now, drinking Sally's brandy, but I think she owes me that much. She owes me a drink after today.

It's going to be okay. I think it will be. Sally's safe in the hospital, and tomorrow I'm going to go in early. She can tell me about Luna Thorne then. She will, too, I know she will. And when she does, I'll tell you, and then – the spell will be broken. The princess will walk out of the tower. Everything will be okay. I know it will.

[BEEP]

[OUTRO:]

Mabel is written and produced by Becca De La Rosa. The voice of Mabel Martin is [CENSORED]. The voice of Anna Limon is Becca De La Rosa. The music in this episode was by Ars Sonor, Caroline Park, Ketsa, Avoidant, Hogan Grip, and (morse), and all of it is available to download on the Free Music Archive at freemusicarchive.org. For more information about Mabel, including a full tracklist for each episode, visit us online at mabelpodcast.com, or on Twitter, @podcastmabel.