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Olives & Blueberries

updated 2022-05-19

It's Sunday afternoon and Normand got the wrong type of tacks for the roofing shingles, and I guess there was some kind of paper you're supposed to put down under them too, so he and Claudette argued some more because now it's Sunday and the stores are closed. Places in Elders Falls still do that old-timey thing of not opening so much on Sundays, so people who work retail don't have to feel like they need to work every damn day of their life. You can wait till Monday for the beer or butter or batteries or whatever that you forgot to buy on Saturday. You'll live.

So Claudette got mad at Normand because he waited until Sunday to start putting the shingles up, and that didn't last long, because now the stores are closed, and they both have to get back to work tomorrow. They think I'll try shingling the roof myself while I have a foot brace on, which is not really likely, considering I just fell off it pretty recently. I might make mistakes like a dumb-ass sometimes, but I'm not stupid. I told them I wouldn't go up there until they were back again, and I probably won't.

Norm only got to trying to do the shingles today, because he ended up spending all yesterday trying to figure out where all the bird noises he was hearing were coming from up there, and I said I didn't know, the birds were just up there somewhere, sometimes, so he got

kind of mad and told me I can't just let birds move into the roof, they were going to poop all over the place and make nests and ruin everything. He didn't use those exact words, but you get it.

What am I going to do about birds living in the house, anyway? I'm not a pest control service. Besides, they have a right to be here, like me. Some of those bird families have been on the island for longer than I've been alive anywhere. But not in the house, Normand says, the house isn't for scritters. That's what we call the critters here, on the island, because they're all mostly small. But he knows that's not true, about scritters and the house. It's always been a draw between the Folk and the Scritters, on Sisters Island.

Anyway, that was Saturday, yesterday. Here's how it went. Norm would go and put the Giant-Ass Ladder against some part of the house somewhere and go up there and hear some birds, and start stomping around trying to figure out where they were hiding, and then he'd stomp back down and come in to get some pop or juice or a flashlight, and he'd ask me how long the birds had been living in the roof or the soffits or the attic - or wherever he thought they were - and I'd shrug and say I really don't know, because I really didn't. Claudette and I were busy watching all the *Fraggle Rock* seasons on VHS right then - and eating pie and ice cream and cheddar cheese - which was the entire plan, end-to-end, and I wasn't deviating. I didn't want to be bothered with worrying about where all the birds happened to be, right then.

Then Normand would grumble and go back outside and move the Giant-Ass Ladder to some other part of the house and stomp around up there and hear more birds and come back down and tell me I had a serious bird problem, did I know that? But I just wanted to watch all of *Fraggle Rock* with Claudette, and not talk about anything at all, really, the whole time.

Eventually Claudette told Norm he wasn't allowed to tell us about any new birds he'd found anywhere, until we were done binging our shows. So he spent the next couple more hours after that stomping around all over the place up there and talking to himself loud enough that we heard him all the same, and we all knew he was still finding birds all over the place, anyway. That went on for another two hours and a few minutes.

That was yesterday, Saturday. I had seen Olivia just once that whole visit, real quick, when they all first got here, which was Friday night. That was when she skulked into the kitchen to grab enough food to keep herself going for the rest of the weekend, without having to come out from her room, once.

She was hermit-ing pretty hard in the upstairs small bedroom, all Friday night and yesterday. That's the little one with the tower window that looks over the chickens' Coop. That used to be my favourite room to hermit in, too. I get it.

Then Sunday morning came and Claudette and Normand couldn't figure out where Olivia is. She wasn't in her room anymore. Well, that's not a big surprise, because they just got into a big fight about school last night and Olive started yelling, and Norm started telling her, in old Bently's voice, that's enough, Young Lady, and that really got her going and she just ran upstairs and slammed her door two times, and then wouldn't come out for anyone... and Norm said to the door, fine, no dinner then, but she already had her food stocked up in there, and he knew that, so I don't really think that won him anything much.

Olive's also mad that we don't get Internet on the Island and the data coverage is usually not covering much of anything. We have a lot of weird clouds here. I think they mess with signals. I don't like Internet that much, I'll be honest, except for some things. When I need it, I go

to the Elders Falls Public Library, which has free Internet and good Internet security practices. These are both important, to get on the Internet with. I need reasons to go there to be around Folk sometime, so that's a pretty good reason to go - to get on the Internet for something. I have to go there soon to see if Arthur got that email I sent him the other day.

Anyhow Claudette and Norm had decided to just let Olive be, and they'd talk about it tomorrow. I guess that was a good plan. Tomorrow is now today though, and Olivia wasn't in her room, so.

We looked all over the house, and then I heard the back porch door, and she was trying to be sneaky about getting out, but she wasn't being sneaky, but she still managed to get out. By the time I had hobbled over, I saw her out in the backyard, way over by the trees, clear on the other side of the Gnome garden. She ran right into the trees, just like that. I've never seen Olive do that before. Right into the trees, no pausing. I'm not sure what to call that. I get it though. Last year, Olivia was still scared of bushes, because I had told her there were gobs of cranky old bees somewhere on the island, but I just couldn't remember exactly where. She wouldn't go near any bushes for a while, anywhere at all, and Norm can't convince me that this was my fault. I told her they weren't near the house, I did remember that much. Anyway, I guess Olive's not scared of bushes anymore, so that's good.

I told Norm and Claudette their kid got loose in the yard and ran into the woods, and they acted like they hadn't even thought that might happen. What the hell. It's a big island, and Olive's eleven now and she's been mad at everybody for a whole year, so what did they expect? She's eventually going to bolt somewhere.

Norm and Claudette both took off into the trees in different directions to find her. They didn't pick the right directions, in my opinion, but

they were too quick for me. So I hobbled upstairs to the widow's watch and watched the causeway, using my medium-sized telescope, in case Olive decided to hoof it back to the mainland road herself, and try something dumb like hitchhiking or walking along the road alone. But I didn't see anybody else come or go on the causeway, and then the tide got well up to the danger lines after about forty minutes, and I knew Olivia would stay on the island then, because she's scared of the rowboat, and it's missing anyway. I have to go find it sometime. Maybe it's still on the island, I don't know.

I went back downstairs once I knew Olive wasn't leaving the island. I know all the hiding places. I'd find her.

Normand and Claudette were back and starting to worry by then, but not like their daughter had run into the big woods. These were the small woods, and there was only one way off the island, and it was shut down by the tide, and nothing but family on the island, and some small scritters only, anyway. We all know this place pretty well. I know it best. But Norm knows almost all the places on it that I do. Claudette knows most of the standard places.

But still, the island's in the ocean. We had to find Olive. I figured she'd come back on her own, but you never know. The tide was coming up.

I'm not sure yet how much of the island Olive knows. She's only eleven, but eleven-year old Olive is already twice as brave as ten-year-old Olive had learned to be, by the time she got to ten. I have been watching that kid get braver, her whole life. I notice these things. I think some people don't think that I do, but I definitely do. I know all about how brave people are. That's one of my favourite things about them - how brave they are, when they decide. I'm trying to learn that too. Some days I'm getting better.

Some days I remember how much I really miss Dooley. Dooley would have found Olive in six-and-a-half seconds, maybe ten, tops. He would have dragged her back gently, if I'd told him to. He didn't always look like he knew what he was doing, but he always knew what he was doing, when it mattered. Dooley saved my life, two, or maybe three times. Pretty average for an un-average dog like Dools. Lots of good dogs save people's lives, in some way or another. They don't care much if we notice, you know - they just want some scratches and a treat or two, a really good run now and then, and then to know that we love them, so I wish my old Dog Dooley was still around and about.

He was a funny old hound. I still stop sometimes, right in the middle of whatever it is I'm at, and just think about that old Dooley Dog, and what he must be up to now, wherever he is. It still happens, how I'll stop everything, just like that. I might get another dog someday, maybe soon, I don't know. For child safety reasons.

But I told Claudette one of them should go down to the dock and just hang out there anyway, to make sure Olivia wouldn't try using the boat or maybe wading across the causeway, which I'm pretty sure she'd never, ever do, because that would be beyond stupid, and I've told her that forever, and every time she's ever visited here - just so she really, really knows, but then you just never know.

You might not know what the causeway's like, on our ocean here. You might think a causeway like that could ever be sometimes safe enough, if the sky was just right, right? But the island is in the ocean, so it's never really safe, no matter what you think the sky might say, that day. The waves crash over the causeway sometimes, even on calm days, right out of the blue. When you really don't think there's going to be a wave in sight- but right then, when you're thinking that, it will happen sometimes anyway.

Sometimes the wind will pick up, or something's happened out in the Bay... and there's a moment when, the spot where you're standing goes from surely safe to suddenly not, in a short moment. You think you're safe, and then you aren't, that's all I mean. You were wrong that time. The ocean doesn't care what we think we know about what it's going to do.

This isn't just what the causeway is like, on Sisters Island - this is what the Sisters is like, Herself, almost everywhere she meets the water, which is all around Her skirt. There are places on the Sisters where I will go without any of my emergency gear, even on a not-great day. And then there's a place or two on Her where I will never go, unless it's an emergency, and many other places in between, depending on the wind, and season, and year, and other things. Walking right up to the Bay' edge is usually just the smallest gamble, but it can be made a good bit smaller still, just by knowing when the tides are coming in and out, and what the sky is doing, and how never to step on wet rocks, or thin ice, or ever turn your back on Mother Nature.

I haven't told you about the granite teeth that ring the Sisters, either, on all Her sides except one - those rounded, rocky teeth that bare and subside themselves, with the rising and the falling of the tides. When the ocean surrounds you, knowing what is coming and what is going - and from where - this is what can keep you alive, to learn the lessons the land can teach you, so long as it doesn't take you. You have to be able to slow dance with the sea, when you're surrounded like that. And the waters and winds always lead that dance, never forget - your role is to be a good partner, by knowing what and when and how to follow the leader.

But above all, you must always be brave and true.

All of that, right there, and more, is what Great Aunt Bee would say to me, when she got me to pay more attention. She made me memorize some of those things pretty hard. Sometimes when I talk, I hear her voice, and not mine.

So that's why Norm's a madman for ever driving across the causeway, even at low, low tide, and on a clear day, which are the only times he ever does, mostly. But he still does. Nobody really likes it much, that he does that. We just pretend he's being nothing but a harmless dumb-ass, and nothing bad can ever happen to dumb-asses.

Anyway, I didn't really have to finish explaining about somebody needing to guard the dock and causeway, it was obvious, and Norm just needed a nudge and was off down the driveway as soon as I started saying it. I told Claudette to stay around the house in case Olive came back, but to also check the Coop and the Old New Shed, which is the shed that's closest to the house, so it's not hard to check. It's right there on the side.

I am going to go search the island and find Olive. I know all the hiding spots. That's what I told Claudette. Claudette told me I shouldn't walk around on the island with my foot like that, but I had my crutch and I had taken my Tylenol too, and now that I had a mission, I didn't feel quite so bad really. You know how they say when a kid's in danger, like trapped under something, how a mom can get super strong, and lift it off? Well I'm only Olive's cousin but I'm almost old enough to be her aunt, so I think I have a kind of almost-mom strength sometimes with her, and that's why my leg didn't really give me so much trouble, once Olive got loose on the island, and needed help. That's some kind of Science again.

I told Claudette look, I know all the hiding spots on the island. There isn't one I haven't found already. Olive's pretty smart, but she's not

Sisters-smart like me. I'll find her. That's what I told Claudette.

And I meant it. Claudette said OK, and I took my crutch and hobbled into the backyard, and past the Gnome garden, where I've seen the most Gnome sightings, but none too recently.

I went into the tree line where I had seen Olive go, and then I headed through the woods toward the New Old Shed, which was a few hundred yards away, just over the ridge and on the edge of the old orchard.

I guess I should mention about the sheds now, I don't know. Maybe it will be useful lore, later on, for something. There are four sheds on Sisters Island. There's the *Old Old Shed*, the *Old New Shed*, the *New Old Shed*, and the *New New Shed* - you can call most of them by a couple of different names. Everybody just calls that last one *The Shed*, for example, even though it's further from the house than the *Old New Shed*. Don't ask me, I don't *really* know why any of this is like that, either.

All of the Sheds were built by Bee's ex-husband, Bently. That's who everybody told me he was, anyway. They all said he was her ex-husband but I don't know about that. I never met him, I only heard all the stories. He built a lot of pretty good things around the island. I'm always finding his tools and plans and foundations and sometimes his maps and weird notes. I still think they all made up the part about him and Bee being a thing though. But who cares anyway, who was or wasn't what sort of person to somebody else, as long as they were kind? Anyway, that's apparently who built all the sheds on Sisters Island: Bently Harlo Morgan, Bee's old friend and maybe ex-husband or whatever.

The *Old Old Shed* is the oldest one, and it's pretty old. Almost collapsed, really old. It's halfway across the island, in some thick

trees, not far from a small cliff overlooking Maevis Cove, which is a really small cove on the island, which I'll tell you about some other time.

I slept in the Old, Old Shed four times in total, but it is *kind of* creepy and I get weird vibes around it sometimes, so I kind of just leave that Shed alone now, because the Spirit mostly shows up close to there, when it shows up, which is sometimes. We have a history.

The Old *New* shed was the one Bently built closest to the house, after he got tired of trekking away out into the woods to build whatever he was building in the Old *Old* shed. This was after Bee's Sisters' houses both had those things happen to them around the same time. You remember, with the tiny crater in one, and the Big Willow tree in the other. We keep all the lawn stuff in the Old *New* Shed, and extra chicken feed. We currently don't have any chickens. The last six we had all escaped one day because I forgot to do something, and they most probably got eaten or swept out to Sea, or maybe made it to the mainland, but that seems most unlikely. Chicken's aren't all that bright, but every now and then I catch sight of that one really crazy one who survived somehow, running around like it owns the whole island. I leave some feed out for it, now and then, so it doesn't go hungry, but I'm not really sure it needs it. I guess it prefers being a wild chicken. I'm a bit wary of it, I'll admit. You never know when it'll pop up.

The New *Old* Shed is a few hundred yards from the house - not as far as the *Old Old* shed, but pretty far - and in the direction of the orchard, which is over the low ridge, Bay-side. Bently built that one after Bee and he started up their big fight from a while before, and he started missing having a shed that was further away from the house, that he could actually also get to even in the Winter. I guess Bently hadn't really thought about Winter here, when he first picked where to put the *Old Old* shed - but now he had two sheds under his belt,

so he knew more about planning extra sheds by then, so he built the *New Old* shed in a much better place.

The *New Old* Shed is the coziest one, definitely. You can see the Ocean from its very small front porch. It has a little balcony on the top too, and you have to climb a short ladder to get to it. It's like somebody took a pretty OK, small house and shrunk it down once or twice more. Today they call that a tiny home, but it's still really just a shed.

The *New Old* Shed was the shed that Olive had run off in the direction of, and that was the same one that I had run off toward too, when I first decided to run away, right around the time I first stayed with Bee, right around almost Olive's age, exactly, actually. I was thinking about this while I was hobble-hiking toward the *New Old* Shed, through the woods, wondering how I'd find her this time.

Just to finish the shed story though - the fourth one is the *New New* Shed, or just the *Shed*. It's at the edge of the front yard, under the Big Old Elm, near where Norm likes to park his vehicles, when he's being a madman and having mild adventures driving over the causeway on calm days at really low tide. That's the shed where all the vehicle things go, and also is where the small workshop is. It's pretty functional, like a good, above-average shed. Sometimes I think of it more as a garage, but Bently always just called all his outbuildings sheds, so I'm not going to mess with that tradition. Why would I?

I forgot to tell you about the Outshed. I guess that makes five sheds. Six, if you count the ChickenShed, which I just call the Coop though. Bently's dead now, I don't think he cares anymore, what anybody calls any of his sheds.

Maybe I'll tell you more about the sheds later, I have no idea. I'm getting way off topic. I've found a lot of stuff in those sheds over the years and had a few adventures in them too and I just realized I could write a book just about that first year when I came to stay with Bee, and explored Sisters Island and learned about Spirits, and fired the .22 in anger for the first time, and I'm just going to have to leave those stories for later I guess.

I'm telling you about my cousin Olivia right now, and where she went, and what she needs.

The morning sky is vivid blue through the shaded trunks of trees, where they all give way at once, in a line, at the top ridge and along the high fence, to the wide, old, ornery orchard, which rolls and spreads its way gently and everywhere downhill, from that tree line, and outward, and across the old, faded cart track below at the orchard's base, and then some of it right over and up to the rocks, and then, in places, falling into the sea. The orchard tumbles always toward the sea. Right there at the top, where the little forest all around makes way for the wedge of space for apple trees and surly grasses, old Bently's best sitting-shed is set - squat and cozy - its front porch big enough for just two, right where you want to be to see both apples and ocean at once, with sun or moon, to boot.

There's a bucket for water-getting, and there once was a door, which nobody needed there anymore, and so became a workable work table around on the side... and inside, a bed frame where an air mattress might go, and a small cast-iron stove, and an old countertop, made new long ago, and an odd, little ladder leading to rafters and hatchway, and then shelves and a even a wee, wooden desk... and what else did a person need, anyhow? A book or puzzle,

and some paper, and pencils and a pen. There are a few of those old things, scattered around, too.

Maeve comes out of the trees and scans the orchard down toward the shore and Bay, and she doesn't see her cousin in any of it, and Olivia's not along the tree lines either, and Maeve comes around the side of the shed and Olivia isn't sitting on the stoop in one chair or the other - looking like some gloomy Gus - and Maeve steps up into the shed and pokes her head in, looks around twice, and says to herself, *Huh*. Olivia isn't where Maevis first thought she'd be at all.

Well, it's a big island. Maevis knows all the hiding spots - she is sure that's what she thinks she knows - but it is still a big island. Her foot is still really sore, but it doesn't matter like before - she has a mission now. She calls Olivia's name, twice, three times. She comes back down the steps, and sits for a bit. There's a good breeze coming up from below, with nothing unusual on it, and past the bigger, older, elders of the orchard, she can see such great swaths of lively water. The boats are out, away out there - several fishing, one or two just sailing about.

Further on, and away to their left, the squat Settlements on the Arm, and beyond that, just at the foot of the horizon, the Lighthouse Rock at the Bay's Broken Neck. Across and away on their right, the very beginnings of old docks along the lower tidal banks of the town of Elders Falls. Most of the town is still further on, rightward, beyond where you can see here, far behind the nearby tree line at the nearest edge of the orchard, where the oldest part of the crooked fencing still runs ragged.

Those whole, little sovereign regions along that full quarter of the island - the one facing off with the Elders' town across the Bay - are all those smooth, rough rocks, glossy sea mosses, weirdsome crags, and sullen, stoney holes and hollows, and gulleys of gravel spilling

into grassy crumbling cliffs, and even a marshy, lowly bit or two tossed in, and topped at times with twisted, wind-dried barren tangles of twiggy trees... and then there were all those old, cranky, Elder Bees, out there, somewhere... That's the whole part of the island where Maevis is sure the Gnomes must roam, when they decide to stray a touch too far from their proper home.

Maeve shakes her head, attempting to dismiss a nagging notion. Olivia wouldn't have gone *that* far though, she's fairly sure. For all she knows, Olive is already back at the house, getting an earful from her parents. Maeve doesn't want to go in the wrong direction, and spend the day looking in the wrong spot. So she keeps sitting, and looking over the orchard and down to the wide Bay.

Dooley would have found Olivia by now, easy-peasy. Maeve isn't worried though. It's a big island, but she isn't worried. Something tells her that Olive isn't far at all. That was not an *I'm-running-away-from-home-to-join-the-circus* sort of escape, that she saw Olivia do. That was an *I-don't-want-to-talk-to-anybody-right-now-unless-they-come-and-find-me* sort of escape. Maeve knows all about the different kinds.

And then she knows where Olive probably is. She gets off the little shed's little stoop, heads back into the woods toward the house, but halfway there, turns right into a glen instead of going home - the glen where wild blueberries grow in sunlight patches that move around throughout the days and seasons and years, and there's a finch flitting there and making a racket, and a dragonfly perturbed and a garter snake wippleing away through the grass, as Maeve enters the glade where the blueberries are always waiting to be pleasantly found.

Down among the bushes, is her cousin, Olivia - Olive, Livii - big frown on her face, and forlorn, sitting with arms hugging knees, and

her phone cast down on the ground beside her, under-employed.

"There's my favourite missing blueberry" says Maeve. "Found any cell service in there?"

"Not laughing." Olivia says, then, "Go away."

"Nope." Maeve wades her way into the blueberry bushes, never enjoying the scratches. "Move over" she says to Olivia, who heaves a sigh, but picks up her phone and shoves some bushes away to make barely enough room for both of them. There's not a lot of room for either of them. Maeve struggles to get seated among all the tangle, with her foot brace getting snagged and her crutch getting fetched up, and she just tosses it back where she came from, and then falls into a sit, next to Olivia, and then waits for her cousin to say anything.

"What are you *doing*, Maevis?"

"What are *you* doing, Olivia?"

"Stop it. Nothing's funny. I'm tired of all this crap about school. It's so old."

"Norm and Claudette are worried. You can't run off like that. Not on an island. That's a Bad Move."

"I don't care."

"Yes you do. Because *I* do, and it's my house now, and my island, and my rules forever. Don't do that again. Not here. I'm serious. Not until you're twenty or something."

Olivia scrunches up her face - like she's going to say something inappropriate, but then thinks better of it - and shakes her head and

just stamps her foot in the grass. Hard to do well when you're sitting down.

"Ouch. What's going on at school?"

"Nuh-uh." Olivia just shakes her head again. "No. Not talking about that. I'm not going to school. I'm not talking about it, and I'm not going."

Maeve grabs nearby blueberries and starts snacking. "What, never?"

"I'm *not* going tomorrow. They can ground me or take my stupid phone or whatever, it doesn't work anyway, I don't care. I'm not going. And *you're* not my mother and *you're* not going to make me either, so don't even try."

Maeve holds up her blueberry-stained hands, "I'm just the cousin who doesn't want you falling into the ocean and drowning like a dumb-ass. I don't care if you don't go to school. School, whatever. So stupid, right?"

Olivia's poking at her phone. "You never have any data on this stupid island."

"I don't think that's accurate. And don't call the Sisters *stupid* - she can *hear you*."

Maeve smears blueberry juice on Olive's forehead, and Olive yells "*Frig off!*", batting the hand away, too late "You're *weird*, Maeve. Why are you always so *weird*."

"And you're grounded, probably, and I'm not. I'm not even in trouble, so... I need to tell your parents that you're OK now."

"I'm *not* going back! I won't. I'm not going. Just - just don't."

"Calm down, *Jeebus*", Maeve is regretting having sat down a bit. She's having a tough time getting back on her feet now - blueberry bushes are pretty useless for hanging on to. She's got her hand on Olivia's head for leverage and Olivia yells again and then Maeve's up and swats her cousin and says, "I'll be right back. *Stay here*. I'm serious. You're not going to school tomorrow, don't worry. I'll be back in twenty-five minutes. Maybe twenty-eight. Less than thirty. *Stay here*. Eat natural blueberries, they fight cancer. That's what they say. You never know."

Olivia watches Maeve retrieving her crutch from the nearby bushes. "What do you mean? Is this a trick?"

"*What*? You just said you're *not* going to school, right? Am I wrong? Are you talking about the blueberries now? I don't understand what's happening."

Olivia looks confused, then says, "Yeah... no. No, I'm not going to school. I don't want to leave."

Maeve's got her crutch back under her arm, and her foot's really killing her again. She needs ice cream. "Well that's what I'm going to tell your folks, once I tell them you're not missing any more, and you're still alive." Maeve starts hobbling away, then turns around and levels her crutch back at her cousin, "But if you don't do your homework, or you run away again, I'm giving you back."

Olivia feels herself nod, and watches Maeve hobble back out of the blueberry glade and back into the woods. Olivia's phone's battery is dead, even though it was almost at half when Maeve showed up. Stupid island.

But she's not going to school tomorrow. She starts to breathe again, just a little bit. One day at a time.