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Heroes & Villains

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CFGH-FM (101.01, *The Falls!*) is my favourite radio station. Before my thirteenth birthday, I had heard about radio, and I had heard lots of radio. We had a car now and then while I was growing up, and cars have radios, so I heard lots of radio, whenever we had one. You ignore them after a while, if you're like me. They're usually too loud and the people on them all talk weird. If a person near me started talking to me like people on the radio talk, I'd walk away from them. I don't think I could help it.

But CFGH-FM, I like that radio station. I started listening to it on my thirteenth birthday, because I was so bored and sad and I wanted to know what the people in town were talking about, that I ended up fixing an old radio. That's how sad and bored I was. You probably don't know this, but I didn't know how to fix anything before my thirteenth birthday. Really, nothing much. I could use tape and glue and a stapler for some things. I don't need to exaggerate, and why would I? Not a handy person, before fixing my first radio.

But by the end of my thirteenth birthday, I had fixed a damn radio. The first sounds that came out of my new old radio that wasn't static, were the voices of Jillian Peeks and Lewis Vale, radio personalities. They were talking about climate change. I almost changed the channel - this again, is what I remember thinking. I didn't want to hear it. I didn't want to hear that I chose to be born just so that I could watch the world slide into the ocean,

so all the Morgans and everybody else could end up at the bottom of the sea together, going oops, wrong turn, too fast, we broke the planet. Sorry.

There should be a law about what you say around kids, about how little hope you leave them to work with. I said something like this to Bee, once. She started acting a bit different after that. I'm not sure how to explain it. That's around the time she started taking me out on walks.

But I didn't change the channel. The only other radio channel we get in Elders Falls anyway is full of the same music and ads every day, and they don't change them much and nobody I know listens to that channel, and I forget its callsign anyway. It's got an X in it, that's all I remember. I just listen to *The Falls* (CFGH-FM, 101.01). I know I've said that enough times now. I'm plugging it. One of my old classmates runs it now. They let me butt in line in the cafeteria sometimes.

So I didn't change the channel, even though they were talking about my least favourite subject, which was climate change.

I don't know why I kept listening. It was something about how Jillian Peeks said things. Lewis Vale was being a doom-sayer. That's what he does. He's really good at it, but he doesn't really believe that things are so bad, he's just really good at saying that he does. That's what I think. He's the Devil's Advocate of the team. He does this so Jillian can tell him he's wrong. He's wrong about things being hopeless, and people being mean, and only caring about money all the time, and bombs being unavoidable, and that we'll never fix things and never stop bombing and shooting and never get to Mars and then learn how to make it up to all the animals we've harmed in the making of this movie about humans trying to be human on planet Earth.

Jillian tells Lewis he's wrong, and he grumbles and he listens and he complains, and he says but, and no, I hear you, it's just that, and he brings on experts and quotes some websites and in the end he usually says that Jillian makes a pretty strong case, really, but he's not quite ready to give up being a curmudgeon just yet, or something like that. Then Jillian gives a bunch of links too, and references and books and things they want the listeners to follow up on. It's a whole thing they do.

At the end of every episode, Jillian Peeks and Lewis Vale thank us all for listening and Lewis thanks his co-host, Dr. Jillian Peeks, and he makes a point to say the Dr. part clearly, because she's got four degrees and has climbed the second-tallest mountain in the world, twice, knows five languages, and she doesn't even mention any of that on her website, so he does, which she hates, but he doesn't like people not knowing how smart his cohost is, and how lucky he's been to find a job talking with her every day. I like both of them a lot, for different reasons.

I couldn't change the channel, while they were discussing climate change and Lewis was being pessimistic and Jillian was being level-headed and thinking sideways, and the two of them changed my mind about how old I might end up getting to be someday, and what I might feel about getting to be that old, in the uncertain future. They did that in the second half of the first episode I ever listened to. The show is called *Elders Calls*, which I still think is a really dumb name for a radio show, but I get it. It's a call-in show, and you already know how we name things here.

By the time I got to Bee's actual house on the island, for the first time, it was late, because Ani and I didn't make a great rowing team, and the wind made us land in the bushes near the dock on the island, rather than on the dock, where we had been aiming for. Ani was cussing by then, but I wasn't bothered, it just felt like we were pirates about to bury our treasure by moonlight, but a storm had come up, which is standard pirate stuff. Pirates cuss about all kinds of things. I heard an owl somewhere, and the ocean was making splashing sounds all over the island shore, and roaring sounds in other places, and we could see car lights on the Mainland Road going by the shoulder where we had parked the car, near the closed gate. I wondered if those people wondered whose car that was. I wondered if they saw the we had missed the dock and had landed our boat in some shrubs instead. I didn't want anybody worrying about us, we were going to be OK.

Mom decided we'd leave the boat tied to a tree until the morning, and just take our overnight clothes, and leave all the other stuff in the boat. There was a heavy rubbery tarp in it, so we hauled that over our stuff, once we got our PJs and toothbrushes and a box of cookies out of the boat. We

walked back through the bushes along the shore and got to the dock, where we had been aiming the boat but missed. Ani had slipped and one of her feet went into the water, right halfway to her knee. I had to tell her to stop cussing like a pirate when there were kids around.

That's when I saw the Gnome in the moonlight. That was the first time.

It was short, and standing on the dock, I think I actually screamed but now I don't remember. Mom yelled what's the matter and I didn't Gnow about Gnomes yet but I pointed and said that there was a Leprechaun on the dock, and Mom said what and I pointed and then the Gnome scurried really fast off the dock and into the trees. He was creepy fast.

Now imagine you'd only ever seen ceramic garden gnomes, and they can be a bit creepy even when they're standing still, kind of like tiny clowns who hang out in your garden and Gnow things they aren't going to tell you, because you're Gnot one of them, and you Gnever will be. Now imagine you saw one move, really fast, when you really weren't thinking it was going to do that at all. What would you think you just saw? I've been thinking a lot about Gnomes since that Gnight I saw one move, rather than stand still, like you expect them to. It had been a little dark shape, because the moon was bright and high up, but sort of behind it. But it was a Gnome, and its eyes shone in the dark at me, and then it was gone.

I wasn't sure then what I wanted to do, really. Mom didn't believe I saw anything weird but she was already pretty done with stumbling around in the dark with a daughter who had no boating skills and too much imagination and too many Oreos in her. Mom wanted a beer, I knew that. She had been driving all day and had expected to be at Bee's two hours ago and me already in bed and her and Bee having a beer and talking about whatever. I didn't know about Bee, but I knew what Mom had imagined, when the day started out. She hadn't imagined right.

I didn't really want to stay there, in the dark. I knew there were clouds up there in the sky, somewhere. I had seen a few when we were unpacking the car and loading the boat. Once the moonlight got shut down, we'd be in the real dark. Mom had forgotten the flashlight in the car. Maybe that was me who forgot it. I had borrowed it to read something under a blanket. I

wasn't crazy about how the evening had turned out either. Things had started pretty well when we first got to the island, and then all of the sudden we were stranded, without a light source, maybe stalked by an evil Leprechaun - which I now know was a Gnome, Leprechauns aren't real.

I've had other encounters with Gnomes on the island, loads of them. That first one left an impression though.

Near where the dock was on the island side, where we now were, the causeway just drove right into the water. We mostly use it as a boat ramp really, and to cross by foot at low, low tide, on a really calm day. That's maybe where we should have aimed our boat. There was also a signpost, and we could still read it, because of the moon. It said: **No Flyers Please**.

I knew what a flyer was, but I wasn't sure why the sign was there. Mom said she wasn't sure either and didn't care anyway and then she asked me if I was coming and she just walked up this path and right into the dark. Now I've been up and down Driveway Road a lot since then, but back then, I had no idea where that went, or where Mom went, the trees blocked the moon and they were thick and she must have known where she was going and I guessed I was supposed to follow her, and that's right where I had seen the Gnome scamper into the trees. There was a cloud starting to cover up the moon, and I just decided I was going to follow Mom right into the darkness, and so I did.

At first, I couldn't see where I was going and I poked my eye with a tree branch and Mom told me to walk in the middle of the road and not drag myself through the trees, and to stop whining so much and then asked me if I was OK, but I didn't really answer her, I was kind of mad. I couldn't see anything, I didn't know where the middle of the road was. Where was she? She was walking in front, I could hear her footsteps but she wasn't even waiting for me. That's Mother Ani, sometimes. She just gets it into her head she's going somewhere, and she's either going to leave you behind or force you to keep up. I told her to wait up, that I had a branch in my eye and a rock in my shoe and I really did see a Leprechaun and was she sure there no wolves or bears living on the island and did she really think the house was haunted like that guy at the gas station said and she just asked me if there were any Oreos left, and I said no. But I lied, there were two left, and

I ate them quietly while we were walking so she wouldn't find them later. I needed them more than she did, right then.

Pretty soon my eyes started to adjust to the road. This is a thing that can happen, when there's some moonlight out - you think you just walked into the blackest possible place you could ever walk into, and then after a while your eyes adjust and it's like you have night vision. Really bad night vision, probably, but maybe better than you would think. Seeing where we were wasn't a huge improvement for me on that walk, because everything was shadowy and like from a black and white movie, and I had to be careful not to let my imagination tell me about all the things I might be seeing in the trees and on the road up ahead, and behind us. I could see the moon way up peeking at us through the leaves, and I wondered how far the house was, and I wondered if my Great Aunt was ever scared of living on a big dark Island, all alone. Every time an owl hoo'ed, it was like a shiver up my back. I had static cling on my arms and hands and neck and everywhere. That's what it felt like. I remember.

I'm trying to be a storyteller here, you might have noticed. It's a narrative. I'm remembering what I felt like, and even though I walk around in the dark on the island all the time now, I can still remember when I would have thought that would be a dumb-crazy thing to do.

Now, I do it all the time. I figured out that the Gnomes are more scared of us, than we are of them. They're definitely more scared of me. I've been trying to catch one for years now. They're really quick, and I'm still trying.

Liz is supposed to come over on the weekend to help me move the ladder around and have coffee and talk about her kid. Liz has a husband and a kid, and she's pregnant again and so pretty soon there'll be two little Light Brights coming by to visit.

Liz's name is Elizabeth Brighter. That's a funny name, isn't it? I thought so too when I first met her, but I liked it. She made friends with me, back when I didn't know how to do that for myself. I had tried different things with other kids but it never worked out very well. I would ask people why they were

born, for example. I would do that and they wonder what I meant, I guess. Maybe the question is just weird. It's not like I didn't know I had that problem, with the tone of voice I use sometimes, or the look I have on my face when I'm saying things, which doesn't always match up, I just didn't know exactly what to do about it. I still don't sometimes, but maybe I'm better at it now, I don't know.

I kept trying for a while to make friends and then at some point I just stopped trying for a while, and then one day I met Niall, and he was even weirder than I was, and I hadn't thought that was a thing that could happen, and so I got interested in trying to make friends again, around then. He was a tough nut to crack. The next year, Liz just sat at my table and I think she decided we were going to be friends, and then it just happened, like it was no big deal. I didn't see what it was that she did to make it happen, but it happened. We've been friends ever since then. I even told her that I loved her once, when I knew she couldn't hear me because of the belt sander. I don't tell people I love them. That's serious business. I love lots of people, I just don't tell them when they can hear. It's more fun that way.

I call Liz's kid Bright Bit, but his name is Harry. That's a classy name I suppose. I call him Light Bright too. Because he's small, right? Sometimes Bitty Bright, Little Bits, BittyBoop, or Bubba Pancakes (if I'm making him pancakes, which I'm very good at). It doesn't much matter what I call Harry, when I call Harry, he just laughs. He laughs hard. Liz tells me I am good with kids, and she doesn't tell me I would make a good mother because she knows I know that already, and it's not in the cards right now. I like being an Aunt. Aunt Maevis. I'm not a real Aunt, but Liz says that I am. Someday I hope to be a Great Aunt. I'll be a Really Great one. I had the best teacher for that.

Liz's husband is Peotr, and that's not pronounced the way I thought it was, when I first said hi to Peotr after meeting him for the first time. Liz had only written me letters and one email about Peotr, so I got his name wrong the whole time, until I said it out loud wrong. Peotr didn't seem to mind. He's a nice guy I guess. I think he tried to kiss me once, but I put a stop to that. I ducked. I told him I wasn't for kissing, and also he was married to my best friend, Liz, his wife. It made me a bit mad afterward, but at the time I didn't know what to think. It was like seeing that little Gnome where I hadn't

imagined I'd see one, all over again. I didn't tell Liz, and I know what you're probably thinking. You're probably thinking that I should tell Liz. I don't know about that. Little Bits is about to have a Bittier Bit brother or sister, and I like being his Aunt and I don't want his dad to go away, like some Denny or Floyd. But I really don't know about that.

Peotr doesn't drop by with Liz any more for visits. He drops her off and runs errands and picks her up when she's done visiting. He's always just nice and polite when I see him though. I think his son really likes him. I hope Harry turns out to be just like Liz.

Once we're done with painting the kitchen, there's shingles all over the lawn that need putting back. We've had some weather on the island. I say we, meaning me and the owls and crows and chickens and Gnomes and barn cats and all the others. Most of us don't really care about shingles, but some do. I don't like climbing up onto some parts of Bee's house. There's gables and dormers and some treacherous steep parts involved. It's one of those kinds of old houses you could fall off of and make a big scene of it on your way down. Lots of places for things to make nests in and leak through and you just never know what you're going to find. I don't mind it though, I wish I could just get a job fixing Bee's house. I'd be fine with that. I need to get a harness when I'm in town next. I have to find where the boat ended up first. Hopefully it's on the island this time. It usually is.

We didn't see the Gnome again that night, after it scampered into the trees. We were climbing up to the island's top, I could tell after a while. If I looked back, it was pretty easy to tell that the island was slanted toward the water, and when I looked forward, it was pretty easy to tell it was slanted up, toward the top of the island. We were walking up. I couldn't really see well, but you can tell when you're going up.

Mom had told me that's where Bee's house was, up there, and that from the widows watch you could see over the trees in all directions and the mountain felt like it was right there, and the town was further off, but you could watch all the boats coming and going and if you had a telescope you could spy on the people near the water on Main Street, and on the other

side you could see the wetlands and the Settlements and the lighthouse and then straight out to the sea. So I had seen some of those things already from the car and then I had seen some of the island and now I sort of knew where we must be and I didn't feel quite so lost anymore, but I was still scared of the dark. I didn't know what a widows watch was, but I was going to find out, as soon as I could.

Then I saw a light through the trees, way up ahead, and because we were walking it was waving back and forth and winking at us through the leaves, and I had a moment where I thought it might be a ghost but then Mom said, there it is Mae-Bee, we're almost there.

Mom calls me Mae-Bee sometimes. That's because my middle name is Beatrice, because I'm named after my Great Aunt Bee. The light I saw was from the widow's watch, but I didn't know it yet. Aunt Bee had turned the light on way up there, just for me to see, just then.

I didn't want to bore you with my narrative describing how I took a car and a boat and a walk with my Mom and ended up at my Great Aunt Bee's place. I mean it was interesting to me at the time, but I'm not sure what you're thinking about it right now. You're probably wondering when the villain's going to show up.

Don't be too hard on Peotr. He's not a bad dad to his kid, he's not the best either, trying to kiss people who aren't Liz like that. This story's not really about dads as much as it's about moms and uncles and aunts and sisters and cousins. That's just how it goes, sometimes. I'm not anti-dad or anything. Don't go getting that idea. I've met some really good dads. Liz's dad's pretty good. Officer Hope Flowers has like ten children and a thousand grandchildren. Every one of his kids loved him. I think Uncle Norm is a great dad too. I just gave away a big, big spoiler right there.

Uncle Norm's real name is Normand and he is a really important character in my story, and so is Claudette Eclairé, his fiancé. I'll call him Normand more so you don't think I'm talking about the turtle, but I'll probably still call him Norm sometimes because that's what I mostly call him unless I'm trying

to be formal, or the Turtle's there and I have to get more specific. Turtle Norm is not a big part of my story, but if I'm talking about her I'll let you know.

I'll tell you a bunch of stories about Claudette and Normand sometime, and maybe you'll forget they have a daughter now and when I get back to finally telling you about her, you'll have forgotten and will be surprised and excited to meet her, like I was. I wish you had been there when Claudette told everybody. There was shouting all over the place and Norm actually picked up a picnic table, he was so happy, I had never seen him lift anything quite that heavy, but it makes sense, he's pretty big and he was pretty happy. He saves up his strength for being really happy, as it turns out. That makes sense too. When he gets mad he just gets kind of sulky and weak.

So it's not like there haven't been a lot of great dads in my story. Really, don't worry about it. I'm OK.

There is no villain, that's probably the biggest spoiler. Not a typical evil person who shows up wringing their hands and cackling about how they're going to show you, and you'll rue the day and all of that. There's Magic in this story, which is probably Science, but no evil wizards or crazy witches. If there's something like a villain, it's probably time and fear. I've been thinking about it, and in my life, the villain is always mostly time and fear. It ties me up on the tracks, so I end up going nowhere fast, just kicking. And life's too short for that, when you know that you've been sent here to be a Hero, instead.