

SCRITTERS & FOLKS

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The barn cats are always bringing me dead rats and mice and birds. Sometimes a small snake. I get two or three scritter kills a week, some weeks - I never go a week it seems without at least one of them showing up somewhere unexpected. I'm never amused. I had hamsters when I was young and a turtle too and I'm fond of almost all small types of animals. And dogs of all sizes, but especially medium-sized ones. Horses scare me a bit, I'll admit, and cats mostly creep me out.

Don't go assuming I decided to be a dog person and not a cat person on purpose or anything. It's really just how these things happen. I grew up with a dog, not a cat. I know it's stupid, but I'm not a cat person, but I live on a island full of cats. Pretty full, anyway. There's probably thirty or more. Counting cats is no easier than herding them, so I don't really know for certain how many there really are any more. Maybe there's a hundred, I just couldn't say.

The cats living on The Sisters have been raising their cat families here longer than I've been alive anywhere - even before Mother Ani and Uncle Norm got here. Bee told me once that the cats let her and her Sisters move onto the Island, and as far as she was concerned, the island still belonged to the cats and the ornery bees and other scritters who were here first.

I don't remember believing that or not believing that, about the island being owned by the scritters, but now that I've had ten years to think about it, I wonder how the cats would have gotten here, if not for people, anyway. Did at least two of the cats swim here, long ago, for some reason? Did some get left here by pirates, back in the pirate days? Did some cats wait until the causeway was built, and then cross it at low, low tide, on a very calm day, when nobody was the wiser? What were they thinking? Cats don't care for water at all, right? That's what I thought anyway. There's water all over the place here. I don't really get where those cats came from. I should have asked Bee a few more times, but I gave up after a while.

The cat population on the island was already a little bit out of control when I first stayed here with Bee. I think she liked them, but I don't know. They would bring her rats and also field mice and little songbirds now and then, and a snake or two, like she was their god and they were offering her sacrifices, to send good luck their way or something. I don't know what cats pray for. Bee would always just tut-tut and say oh how sad, the cats got another bird or mouse or whatever, but she'd never really scold the cats - just bury the poor dead thing in one of her gardens - the one that used to have the really beautiful flowers. Those were the flowers that brought the angry old bees around.

No cat that I ever saw ever got scolded for anything, not by Bee. Sometimes I think Bee didn't really like birds as much as you might think she maybe did, by looking at her. You'd think all old ladies must like songbirds, but then you'd think all old ladies must like cats, and how can that all be true, all in one old lady? I think you'd have to choose, wouldn't you? I don't know.

Once Ani saw how many cats Bee and I were sharing Sisters Island with, she kind of lost it a bit. She really doesn't like cats. At least not in bunches like that. She got a guy to come all summer and fall, to trap them, fix them, and release them into the cat shelter in town.

That guy put a lot of work in, for months, but I think he had to close his business down, which is why we never got them all. The cats were just more clever than he was. I'm sure he was smart enough, but the cats on this island are pretty damn smart. His name was Rudolph, I remember that. His nose wasn't *not* red, either. It was a little bit red. I liked that part. Rudolph the reddish-nosed cat catcher. I miss him a bit, but I don't need anybody here trying to catch all the cats now. That's just a waste of resources. Bee was right - this island belongs to those who got here first. The ones that don't put up fences, and don't put out traps, and don't mind if you live here too, right next to them.

Anyhow, after Bee died, once I had to look after the island on my own for a few weeks, it wasn't really long before the cats figured out that I was the new replacement lady god of cats. I don't know how else to describe it. They started brining me things. I wouldn't want to be on this island as a rat or a field mouse or a songbird, or a small snake even. It would be like waking up in a horror movie every day - cats wanting to kill you, all over the place. Songbirds can leave the island at any time, so they get a bit less of my sympathy, really. But still.

I've tried different ways to scare the scritters away before the other scritters get them, but that was one thing Bee never thought to learn at all, and so she definitely didn't teach me anything useful, as far as keeping peace between the scritters goes. She had a policy of leaving the scritters to the scritters, I think. Step on one of her flowers though, and you better watch out. She didn't love that.

You might be wondering how my first meeting with Bee that I remember went. I'm about to get there. I just wanted to mention the cats, because the veranda was covered with them when Mom and I finally got to the house that night. I mean, I didn't know what I was looking at, at first. Little slinky shadows moving all over the place in the moonlight - hanging out on the steps, sliding along the house's foundation, hopping out of bushes suddenly - running away from us like we were about to kill them, or skulking close behind us, like they were planning to kill us, watching us from tree branches, growling or meowing or sometimes purring, or all three. Mom was losing it - she looked like she was going to turn around and run back into the darkness, to go find

the boat. That's how many cats there were. She wasn't afraid of the pitch dark or even Gnomes, but cats all over the place was something else to her, I guess.

Didn't Ani grow up on this island? I guess she never got used to the cats. That's what she told me later. I just grabbed onto her sleeve, and said there sure are a lot of cats here. I'm sure they're fine.

I'm sure they're fine. I don't know what I meant by that. Looking back, after having had a lot more time to observe the comings and goings of cats here, I'm fairly certain they might have been on the lookout for the Gnome that I saw. I haven't yet been left a dead Gnome, though. Bee never-ever mentioned finding a dead one of those anywhere either... but she didn't always tell me everything. I do know that's true.

Anyhow, I prefer dogs, and I've got enough life experience at this point to say that, and not feel that I need to apologize for feeling that way. I'm sure some specific cats are nice. You can go look for them if you want - I'll stay here and clean up their occasional murder scenes.

When Mom and I got close to the old house, the light from the widows watch went out, and another light came on inside soon after, and all the windows started to glow, and I could see shapes of furniture and all those knickknacks Bee kept on her window sills, and the house certainly looked like it could be haunted if it wanted to be, but it wasn't scary then at all, it looked cozy and warm inside. I thought at first I saw shapes of different people moving around in there, like there was a whole meeting going on, but I soon found out it was only Bee in there, by herself. It must have been the curtains moving or reflections or shadows inside. And then one shadow appeared at the front door, and it looked to be looking out at us for a moment, and then it opened the door, and stepped out, and then it was my Great Aunt Bee, on the porch.

Well, did the cats ever take off quick, in all the directions. It was like Bee was a wind and the cats were all just leaves, and before you knew it, it was just Great Aunt Bee standing on the porch, in a silhouette, leaning on a cane, and no cats, and no Gnomes. Mom went up the steps and she and Aunt Bee hugged and the whole time I could tell Aunt Bee was looking at me. I waited until she motioned for me to bring it in, so I walked up the steps and leaned against Mom and let Bee's old arm hug me too, for the first time, and she didn't say anything, but I knew right then that she was glad we hadn't been swept out into the Bay while trying to row a boat to her weird island. I guess that's a thing that's happened once or twice to other people who've tried to get here, when Bee hadn't invited them, and hadn't known they were coming.

Once we were inside Aunt Bee's house, which smelled delicious, she fed us peanut butter cookies and milk while we waited for the apple pie in the first oven to finish baking. I'm a big fan of food, I'll admit it, I'm not ashamed. There aren't too many foods I've met that I didn't like the idea of at least well enough to try a good mouthful. Mostly I eat everything I get a chance to, but I don't overdo it usually. Our visit was off to a good start again. Cookies and pie. I really didn't need anything else. I even forgot about the Gnome for a while, and all of Mother Ani's pirate cussing.

Bee has two ovens in her kitchen, which is abnormal. One of them is a fairly regular oven, and one looks like a big pizza oven with an old iron door. The kind you might want to pop Hansel or Gretel into, if you were into that sort of thing, and nobody was looking. I'm not sure why adults tell kids stories like that. I mean, I'm over it now, but for most of that whole year I ended up staying with Bee, I always made sure I never got myself between her and that pizza oven, especially with my back turned. I felt a little bad about that for years, really. Last year I finally had to tell Bee that story, and how by the next Summer's visit with her, when I was fourteen, I wasn't worried at all about her pushing me into the oven anymore, and that it was really just an irrational fear, and that she shouldn't take it personally.

Instead of getting mad, Bee just laughed really, really hard. I thought she might rupture something, she was bent forward and holding on to the countertop and couldn't breathe, and then while she still couldn't say anything, because of laughter, she held out her arm for me to bring it in, and then she gave me the longest, warmest hug I have ever let anybody give me so far. She said she was so proud of me for finding my courage, all those years. I suppose after that, I was a bit proud of me too. How could I not be? Bee told me to be. Sometimes you only need one person to do that. Sometimes, one is all you need.

Wait, you might be wondering where Dooley went. I said earlier that Dooley was my dog-brother and that we had all driven to visit Bee together - that is Mom, me, Dooley, and Turtle Norm. So, where's Dooley and Turtle Norm, right now, you might be wondering. I kind of forgot that part, I got excited telling you about seeing the mountain and the train and the town and the Bay and the island, and I skipped the part where we dropped off Dooley at Claudette's.

Let me back up a bit. We got to Bee's late because Mother Ani is always either late or early going places, but never on time, and we had to stop for gas and I had to ask the gas guy lots of questions about the island, after he told us it was probably haunted, and then we had to drop Dooley off at Claudette's. That's Uncle Norm's fiancé. Sometimes I just call her The Girlfriend, though not often, and she doesn't mind that anyway, either way. I think she finds it funny, most of the time. She's been Norm's fiancé for years.

Great Aunt Bee had one obvious problem, right off, as far as I could tell. Even before I met her. She didn't like dogs. Like, at all. She didn't even want one on the whole island. Dooley would have been fine in the chicken coop or sleeping under the rowboat or in a spare tire or up a tree or really anywhere where he could hear me when I called for him, but Bee was having none of that. No dogs. Still don't know why. She never told me. Did one bite her once or twice? I just don't know.

I think though now that she was maybe worried about how the cats might seek revenge, if a dog showed up. I've wondered that a few times in recent years. I wouldn't put it past The Sisters cats, to be like that. Anyway, Mom tried everything but Bee was not budging on that one thing. No dogs on Sisters Island. Period. That seemed harsh.

I was actually really sad about it and I kicked up a huge fuss and generally made Mom's life pretty rough in that week just before we set out for Elders Falls, after I heard Dooley couldn't stay with us at Bee's house... but Mom said Claudette was awesome and loved dogs, and Dooley would love Claudette. Once we pulled up to Claudette's little house, with its great big fenced-in yard, and I saw five other dogs running around like mad in there, and Mom said those were the neighbour dogs and they were always just visiting Claudette on their own and two of them knew how to let themselves into the yard, and none of them ever tried to run away, when they were at Claudette's... well, I felt less sad then. I tried to hug Dooley goodbye but by then he was bouncing all over the front and back seat of the car because he had seen the other dogs too and he was losing his literal dog mind. Dooley was one of those dogs.

Claudette came over and I opened the door and Dooley ran out and pounced on her, which is how he says hello, and then he ran toward the fenced yard, and then he stopped and turned around and ran back to lick my face all over the place and then he ran back toward the fence again and just jumped it. He used a nearby wheelbarrow as a launchpad to clear the fence, and Claudette said I've never seen a dog do that before, how old is Dooley again, and I got to tell her that Dooley was as old as me, and he does that kind of thing all the time, because he's probably the smartest, strongest dog in the world for his size. All of the other dogs just acted like they had been waiting the whole time for him specifically to show up, even though he had never met any of them, and their playdate in Claudette's backyard just went through the roof after that.

Ani and Claudette were talking like they knew each other forever, and I liked Claudette right away. Her house is really low and flat, and has too many windows and she has a French accent and I asked if she was from Paris and she said she had visited there once, but no, she was from Elders Falls, and I said oh OK then. She tussled my hair when we were about to leave, and said, see you soon, Maevis. Although most of my friends and acquaintances call me Maeve, I like being called Maevis too. I really liked Claudette right away, really. Her house, where she and Norm now both live, is almost exactly halfway between the Island's causeway gate and Elders Falls Public Library. I measured it using Norm's odometer once. He thought I was watching his speed to tell him if he was speeding, which he was, but I was just measuring distance, not distance over time.

So that's where Dooley went, before we got to the island. He spent the whole summer with Claudette, and I visited him a couple of times there but not as much as I had thought I would. We were both having our own adventures. I knew he was OK. I think he knew I was too. I don't know what dogs worry about.

Except for our very first pirate crossing when we first got to the island, I didn't care for the boat rides, that first summer. The boat seemed pretty dodgy. It's a weirdly tippy boat, sometimes. I've tried different things to fix that, but it doesn't matter, it wants to tip when it feels like it. I'm not a boat repair person, anyhow.

Even Bee, who lived on an island, didn't trust the sea very much - not as far as she could throw it. That's how she put it. I don't trust the sea as far as I can throw it, Maevis. Just remember that. I thought that was a pretty funny way to talk about trusting something - how far you could throw it, or not throw it. So I didn't leave the island that Summer, except for twice. The time I almost got swept out into the Bay doesn't count, because I technically didn't leave the island so much as end up on another part of it. That's when I first found the *Old* Old Shed, but I'll have to save that for later in the story.

I didn't leave Turtle Norm with Claudette. She was in my overnight bag, in her box, which was wrapped in my pyjamas. Mom and I had agreed we would not tell Bee we had brought a turtle at all, until Bee was trapped on the island with the turtle, and didn't have much choice. As it turned out, Bee didn't mind turtles anyway. It turned out she liked basically all animals, except for dogs. I found that pretty weird and I spent a lot of time that Summer asking her about why she didn't like dogs, but she would just shrug or shake her head or maybe offer me a cookie. She came around about dogs, eventually though. That's still another story. My life has a lot of those. I suppose yours does too.

Mom and I each had our own room at Bee's, but that first night, once the sun went down and the house got dark and started making creaking noises for no reason, I couldn't stop thinking of the Gnome and all those cats, and that maybe the house was haunted, like the gas station guy said, so I ended up sleeping in Mom's bed. Our rooms were just across the hall from each other, but even that distance can seem like a long way when you're wondering if the house you're in is actually haunted, or if the gas station guy was just trying to be funny.

The next morning I got up before Mom, and Mom was still snoring, and I went downstairs and Bee had made bacon, which was one of my favourite breakfast foods then, back when I was still eating pigs and cows and chickens every so often. Bee made bacon and eggs like nobody's business. I could choose between rye bread and whole wheat, and grapefruit juice or orange juice. I asked if I could have a little bit of everything, and Bee said she understood, and so that's what we both had - everything we could.

I wanted to go get the rest of my things from the rowboat before the Sea took it away, but I didn't want to go alone. I didn't want to say I was scared of being alone, generally, or that I was scared of the outdoors, and I was scared of Gnomes now too, so I just said I needed help getting stuff out of the boat. Bee said she couldn't go because she had hurt her leg, and I said well that would explain the cane. When did she hurt it, I asked her. She said she hurt it two weeks before, and that's why Ani and I

had come to visit her - to help out while she got better, and I said oh, I didn't know that, and she said that was no problem, but she couldn't walk down to the dock with me. I think now she was trying to see if I might want to go by myself, but I wasn't interested in that idea. So instead I examined all of the knickknacks in the kitchen, and as I was looking at the big clock she said that was the Grandfather's Clock, which had belonged to her Grandfather, which made sense.

Bee had lots of pots and spoons and bottles and dried flowers and things on shelves everywhere, and hanging from hooks on the wall and from a couple of old racks hanging from the ceiling. There were herbs everywhere, which I thought were just dead plants, but they were herbs. There were little miniature cows and ducks and cats, but no dogs, all over the window sills, and they looked easy to break so I picked one up carefully to see what Bee would do, but she just said that's Maurice the Cow. I said cows are girls, and Bee agreed, and that's when I decided to tell her I had brought a turtle and the turtle's name was Norm, but the turtle was a girl. Bee said, that's wonderful. I guess it was. I went and got Turtle Norm from my new room and was showing her to Bee when Mom came in, and ate the rest of the bacon and eggs.

While Bee and Ani started talking about the weather and Bee's leg and when Uncle Norm was going to stop by, I left Turtle Norm with them and went into the living room. I guess you'd call it a living room. There are too many couches and none of them match but that doesn't matter, and a big fireplace and bunches of pots and urns all over the place, and that damned curio cabinet. I say it that way because I think it's cursed. I still have it, but I try to ignore it when I can, mostly. I'm worried if I try and get rid of it, it will get mad at me or something, so we just kind do our own thing, and mostly leave each other alone. I dust it now and then, to be courteous, and it's never decided to fall on me or anything while I'm walking by, so.

You never know when things in the curio cabinet that were in one place one day will be a bit somewhere else another day. I'm not kidding, but I get it if you think I'm making that up. It's probably cursed, I don't know. It's never really done anything dangerous or mean, that I know about. It just seems to like doing things itself, or maybe to mess with

me. I don't give it the satisfaction of knowing that it kind of weirds me out. When I see something has changed by itself in there, I just shrug, like it's no big deal, and then try not to think about it too much.

I didn't know about any of that stuff about the cabinet then, though, during my first day staying with Bee. I just went over to look at it, like it was a standard, weird old cabinet.

You can imagine what kinds of things Great Aunt Bee, Lady God of The Sisters Cats might keep in a curio cabinet in her probably-haunted house. There was a crystal ball, for instance, but as soon as I even saw that, Bee called from the other room and said not to touch the crystal ball, because it was very old. OK, then. I knew I'd be touching it later when I had a chance, which I did, a bunch of times. There were dishes, which I didn't care about, and more little figures, including some tiny soldiers - knights of old, and a wizard or two, like Gandalf. That kind of thing. There was a stuffed unicorn, which looked pretty ragged, and like it had been run over a few times by something. That turned out to be Ani's old unicorn, which she called Pepper, but Normand always called Punicorn, because it was small and he liked getting Ani all wound up.

Punicorn was sitting on a stack of doilies. I didn't know what a doily was until I saw those and asked Bee what they were. There must have been twenty of them in there at the time. Why did people need doilies? The number of doilies in the cabinet changes a bit but usually it's around twenty. They were all folded up, when I first saw them in there. I still don't know why a curio cabinet needs so many doilies. Why does anybody? Just use a magazine. You can read those when you get bored. What can you do with a doily? Nothing else, really.

Below these were some books, really old ones. I've read most of them now, but not all of them. They're very strange and it takes me a long time to read one. Then it takes me a long time after reading one to really understand what it's saying. Some of them give me weird dreams.

But right at eye level, there was this pair of chessboards, folded up, and next to them, all the little pieces from both were arranged in groups, like there was some meeting going on between them. All of them except for one, that is. A Knight, which I just thought was a Horse, back then, I didn't know about chess. The Knight was not in the meeting with the other little pieces. It was right up next to the glass of the curio cabinet, looking right back at me. I figured I had decided to stand where it happened to be looking. Except remember, I know about this curio cabinet now, now that I'm older, so if you were to ask me today, I'd just shrug and say yeah, no, the little Knight was probably looking at me.

Except it wasn't a Knight at all - it was a unicorn too. It had a little horn on its head, so that's how I knew.

What's with all the unicorns, I asked Mom, while we were walking down the trail toward the docks again after breakfast, to get the rest of our stuff from the boat, assuming it hadn't floated away. What do you mean, why do I like unicorns? she asked. I said yeah, why.

Ani has tattoos, I should have mentioned that earlier, so you could imagine all the things I've told you so far but then include Mom having tattoos in them now. You can always go back and re-read this I guess, and add tattoos to Mom. She has tattoos all the way up both of her arms, and on the back of her neck, and a couple on her ankles and one I wasn't supposed to know about and am not supposed to talk about. I grew up being held by arms and shoulders that were full of beautiful tattoos.

The tattoos are mostly pretty interesting, some are abstract, some look like vines, some look like chains, there are a couple of Star Wars ones, one of a bear, called BearBear, one with a giant robot from another movie, a couple I wish she would erase, and then this one of a unicorn. It's on her left forearm, jumping out of flowers, and it was her first, and it's always been my favourite tattoo. She spent a lot of money on it, but that's not why it's my favourite. Sometimes when she was rocking me to try and get me to sleep or settle down, when I was really little, I would reach out and boop the unicorn's nose

on her arm. After a while, Mom got good at saying boop! right when I did that, and then eventually I would say boop! any time I booped the unicorn on my Mother Ani's beautiful arm. Sometimes, we would say boop! together.

Ani has always loved unicorns. I didn't really know that until I went to stay with Bee though, and saw all the unicorns in the curio cabinet, and then later found Ani's old sketchbooks in the attics, once I stopped thinking that's where the ghost might hang out. The ghost doesn't like the attics, as it turned out. I think they're too spooky even for ghosts.

In Ani's old sketchbooks, there were drawings and drawings and drawings of flowers and unicorns. So many flowers and unicorns. I could tell which books came first, because at first she wasn't great at drawing these things, but over time she got really good. As she got better at drawing flowers and unicorns, she eventually started to make these into stories. I've found hundreds of pages of stories Ani had done, about flowers and unicorns, when she was younger. None of them seemed to ever get finished, but I wish she had finished those stories. I wanted to know what happened to all those unicorns, in all those flowers.

The stories were always about either normal-sized unicorns that lived among the giant flowers, or about tiny unicorns living among the normal flowers. She left it open to interpretation, which I've always appreciated. I prefer the tiny unicorn theory myself, but either one works, really. There were always plots going on, with these unicorns. Sometimes the plots were about the flowers, something was threatening the flowers for instance, and sometimes they were about the unicorns, who just happened to be among lots of flowers, during their unicorn dramas. Ani was very good at colouring with coloured pencils, but she got really, really good with watercolours. I really wish she would finish her stories. Maybe I'll ask her, when we start talking to each other again.

But I haven't found Ani's drawings of unicorns and flowers yet, when we first went to Ootelo.

BUT I HADN'T FOUND ANI'S drawings of unicorns and towers yet, when we first got to Sister's Island. I was just asking her what the deal was with her tattoo, and then about the stuffed unicorn and then the knight pieces that all had little horns made out of toothpicks, glued to their heads, in Bee's curio cabinet. There was a definite unicorn theme, even a kid could see that. Mom doesn't always talk about herself, so sometimes I get curious and make her do it.

Well, she told me, I just always really liked unicorns. I don't know why. What's not to like about a unicorn? Well, I couldn't think of anything, really. That was all she said about it, at the time. OK, then. I had expected more, but that's all I got.

Our stuff was still in the boat, as it turned out, and the boat hadn't been swept out to sea either. Nothing exciting there. We saw our first crow of the day as we were getting our stuff out of the boat. It flew in from the direction of the Mainland Road, landed on the dock, and just walked up the path, past the **No Flyers Please** sign, and into the trees. Like he didn't even know we were there.

Mom and I had a good laugh about that. Mom was laughing because she thought it was a funny coincidence. I was laughing because I hadn't known until just then that crows could read, and had a sense of humour.