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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, sometimes terribly laid out. 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. Horses scare me a bit, and cats mostly creep me out.

Don't go assuming I decided to be a dog person and not a cat person on purpose. It's really just how these things happen. I know it's stupid, but I'm not a cat person, but I live on a island full of cats. Pretty full. There's probably thirty or more. Counting cats is no easier than herding them.

The cats living on Sisters Island have been raising their 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 actually belonged to the cats and and the ornery bees and other scritters first, and still did.

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. Did at least two of them swim here? Did they cross the causeway at low, low tide, on a very calm day? What were they thinking? Cats don't care for water, right?

The cat population on the island was 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 too, like she was their god and they were offering her sacrifices, to send good weather their way or something. I don't know what cats pray for. 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), and 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, and I think he had to close his business down, which is why he never got them all. They were more clever than he was. I'm sure he was smart enough, but the cats on this island are pretty damn clever.

Anyhow, afterwards - after I had to look after the island, it wasn't long before the cats figured out I was the new replacement lady god. I don't know how else to describe it. I wouldn't want to be a rat or a field mouse or a songbird (which could leave at any time, so they get a bit less of my sympathy really) on this island. It would be like waking up in a horror movie every day - cats all over the place.

I've tried different ways to scare the critters away before the other critters 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 that goes.

You might be wondering how the first meeting (that I remember) with Bee went. I'll get there. I just wanted to mention the cats, because

the deck was covered with them when Mom and I finally got to the house. I mean, I didn't know what I was looking at, at first. Little slinky shadows moving all over the place - 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, 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. She wasn't afraid of the pitch dark or Gnomes, but cats everywhere was something else. I just grabbed onto her sleeve, and said, there sure are a lot of cats. 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 some time to observe the comings and going of cats, I'm fairly certain they might have been looking for the Gnome that I saw. I haven't yet been left a dead Gnome. Bee never-ever mentioned finding one of those either... but she didn't always tell me everything. I 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 - 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 windows 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 directions. It was like Bee was a wind and the cats were all 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 sprinted 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, and she didn't say anything, but I knew right then that she was glad we hadn't been swept out to sea while trying to row a boat to her island. I guess that's a thing that's happened once or twice to other people. Not usually at high tide though - I guess maybe it was lucky we got there late. I'm not sure.

Once we were inside Aunt Bee's crazy old house, which smelled delicious, she fed us peanut butter cookies while we waited for the apple pie in the oven to prepare itself to be eaten. I'm a big fan of food, I'll admit it. There aren't too many foods I've met that I didn't like at least well enough to try a bite or two. 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.

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 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 to her. 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 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, she just laughed 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. She said she was proud of me for finding my courage, all those years. I suppose after that, I was proud of me too. How could I not be? She told me to.

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... we got to Bee's late because 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.

Great Aunt Bee had one obvious flaw, right off, as far as I was concerned. Even before I met her. She didn't like dogs, like, at all. She didn't even want one on the whole island, anywhere. 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.

I think though now that she was 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 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 a bit rough in that week just before we set out for Elders Falls, after I heard Dooley couldn't stay with us... but she said Claudette was awesome and loved dogs, and Dooley would love Claudette, and 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... well, I felt less sad. 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 mind. Dooley's 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 wheelbarrow as a launchpad, and Claudette said she had never seen a dog do that before, and I got to tell her that Dooley does that all the time, because he's the smartest dog in the world. 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.

I liked Claudette right away, and she had 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.

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.

I didn't care for the boat ride, that first summer. It seemed pretty dodgy. 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 thought that was a pretty funny way to talk about trusting something. How far you could throw it. So I didn't leave the island that Summer, except for twice. The time I almost drowned 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.

Turtle Norm was in my overnight bag, and 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 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.

The next morning, Mom and I slept in. We each had our own room, but 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. 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.

I wanted to go get the rest of my stuff from the boat 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, and 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 ago, 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 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 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 just 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 closet and was showing her to Bee when Mom came in, and started eating 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 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 haunted. 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 or something, so we just kind do our own thing, and mostly leave each other alone. 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 haunted, I don't know. It's never really done anything dangerous or mean. It just seems to like doing things itself. I didn't know about any of that then, though. 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, god of the Cats might keep in a curio cabinet in her haunted house. There was a crystal ball, but as soon as I saw that, Bee called from the other room and said not to touch the crystal ball, because it was very old. OK, then. There were dishes, which I didn't care about, and more little figures, including some little soldiers - knights of old, and a wizard or two. There was a stuffed unicorn, which looked pretty old, 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 Punycorn, because it was small and he liked getting his sister all wound up. Punycorn was sitting on a stack of doilies. I

didn't know what a doily was until I saw those and ask Bee what they were. There must have been twenty of them in there at the time. The number changes a bit but usually it's around twenty. They were all folded up. I still don't know why a curio cabinet needs so many doilies. Why does anybody?

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

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 much 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 at me. I guess I decided to stand where it happened to be looking. Except remember, I know about this curio cabinet, now that I'm older, so if you were to ask me today, I'd just shrug and say yeah, no, the Knight was probably looking at me. Except it wasn't a Knight at all - it was a unicorn too.

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. Mom 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.

Mom 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 that were full of tattoos. They're mostly pretty interesting, some are abstract, some look like vines, there are a couple of Star Wars ones, one with a giant robot from another movie, a couple I wish she could erase, and then this unicorn. It's on her left forearm, 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 calm 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 it together.

Ani has always loved unicorns. I didn't really know that until I went to stay with Bee though, and saw 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, actually. 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'd find 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 really wish she had finished them. I wanted to know what happened to those unicorns, in those flowers.

The stories were always about either normal-sized unicorns that lived amongst the giant flowers, or about tiny unicorns living amongst 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 amongst lots of flowers. Ani was very good at colouring with coloured pencils, but she got really, really good with watercolours. I wish she had finished her stories. I still want to know what happened to those unicorns, amongst all of those flowers.

But I hadn't found Ani's drawings of unicorns and flowers 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 the knight pieces that all had horns made out of toothpicks, glues to their heads. There was a definite unicorn theme. 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? I couldn't think of anything, really. That was all she said about it, at the time. OK, then.

Our stuff was still in the boat, as it turned out. 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, into the trees. Like it 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 crows could read, and had a sense of humour.