

Uncles & Mothers

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I went back and found Claudette in the kitchen. She was trying to get cell phone service for some reason, which made no sense, and I told her that I found Olive and she was fine but she wasn't going back to school that week, and Claudette was about to tell me that oh no, I was wrong about that, and then I said, Hey. Claudette. I'm serious here. I made a promise. Olivia's staying with me this week. If she doesn't do her homework even once, unless there's a really good reason, then you can take her back. We'll watch the *Stars Wars* where Han shoots first, and eat ice cream and do homework. I'll make her clean the house. I've got loads of jobs I'm not doing that need doing anyway. That's what I said to Claudette, while she listened.

I think Claudette just really needed to sit down and have a think about everything - maybe something about how I said all of that made her not want to argue anyway. Either way, she just sat down at the table and rubbed her forehead hard, and muttered in French, and I don't speak French that well, so I just said that I was going to go tell Norm now, and she nodded and so I grabbed my ice cream from the fridge and a spoon and hobbled all the Jeebus way down Driveway Road to the dock and ate ice cream right out of the tub as I went. I could have taken Norm's car but it takes the same amount of time to walk, once you account for finding the keys and things. That's about how long Driveway Road is.

I met a crow walking up toward the house from the other way, on the right - they always seem to show up at sort of inconvenient times - and we kind of looked at each other while we passed, and that's a whole other thing that's been going on around here for a while now, and I'll tell you about it some

other time, probably. The crows don't ever fly on Sisters Island, did you know that? They walk. It's not that common to see, because they don't visit often, but sometimes I see one walking around, or walking by, or whatever. Never in the trees. They usually look at me, sometimes like, *Hey*. Sometimes I think one might even raise a wing at me and wave, but I haven't seen one do that yet. Sometimes they look like they just might, though. Anyway, I'll tell you about all that some other time. I have a few Crow stories now. One even has a Gnome in it.

I got to the dock and Norm was walking around doing nothing and I guess I can imagine how it might feel to not know where your daughter was, after they've just run off, so I didn't waste any time with suspense, and I told him that I found her and she's OK and he said well where'd she go? And I said she was staying with me for the week, and that I found her in the blueberries where I knew she'd be, and she wasn't going back with them today, because she's staying with me for the week, because I need help around the house, because I almost broke my leg, because of you, Norm. That's kind of what I said to my uncle Norm.

I'm not the best at reading people's faces, but his face did a couple of things, but then he didn't really say anything otherwise, so I just said OK then, and started to hobble back to the house, and almost fell, because I just had too much stuff going on. But Normand caught me in time and picked up my ice cream bucket and we walked together on the way back up.

We didn't see that Crow coming back, and Norm said thanks for finding The Olive, again, and I said well, you know, any time.

OK, I'll bite. I'll Be...

The day Normand Angus Morgan meets his twin sister's child for the first time, it's a Wednesday, and the kid is just eleven hours old, and the father is wholly gone - disappeared like a phantom the afternoon they'd all first learned that Ani was pregnant. Ani had an early, rough delivery and things had been touch and go there. Norm had driven his hatchback like a

madman all night to get to that hospital, and when the worst was over, and things were good again, they let him in to see his sister, and Ani waves weakly from her bed, through a fog of meds, and holds the baby out to him, like a prize she's found in the bushes somewhere. "Well, here you go. Look what I went and did, now. What are you gonna do, eh."

His plans to head Up North are out the window. His sister has a kid, and that kid doesn't have a dad worth having at all. What are you going to do.

Norm takes off his jacket, with the shiny studs and scary skulls, throws it on the chair, and takes the baby, and the kid's crying, and he doesn't know shit about how to hold babies, except everybody knows about their necks being weak, so he holds its tiny head in his giant hand, and the kid is all wrapped up tight in a light blue blanket, so it can barely move anyway.

He tries to imagine being in some oil field somewhere, making good money, while Ani and this baby are somewhere else, growing up without a dad, and he just can't manage to do it anymore - imagine doing that, like he could still imagine, just ninety-some seconds before. Imagination doesn't normally fail Normand, but this time, it left him hanging there, like it went off to find a vending machine. He can't even imagine where *Up North* is, right now, not from this room. What direction is Up North again? What turn could he possibly make, coming back out of the hospital parking lot, to get there? It could be in any direction, now. He isn't going in any of them. His compass is spinning. He's already as far North as he can get.

What is he going to do.

"Hello" he says to the kid, then not so sure what more to add. He's holding a wrinkled, little alien, wound up tight in a light blue blanket. It's a bit ugly, and it's frowning pretty damn hard, eyes squeezed shut, like it's already disappointed in the job he's doing, and it just can't bear to look at him, right now, messing things up already, like that. It has no weight to it at all - he's just holding a blanket ball, with a disappointed, wrinkled little frown. He wants it to smile. *Smile, kid, c'mon, it's not so bad* he thinks, but the kid doesn't seem to agree. Angry bubbles pop out of its frowny little mouth.

"What's its name?"

"Her name is Maevis Beatrice. Mae-Bee."

He gives his sister a look, and she levels one back, in that way, even right through the meds.

He repeats, "Maevis."

"She'll make it her *own*, Norm."

"If you say so. Are you sure?"

"That's what I say, so. And yep, I am."

"Ok, then, well." he looks at the angry apple doll he's holding, "Hello... Maevis Beatrice. I guess I'm your Uncle, Norm."

The little, shut-eyed alien frowns even more. *This was not the father, and they had been told there would be one present, on arrival. This had been made quite clear. They would need a mother and a father if they were going to succeed in this assignment. That had been the understanding.*

Of course, to babies, thoughts like these are altogether quite a bit fuzzier than they might sound in adult minds, or written down, with all that specificity and such, but this is the gist. It is not a cause for big smiles to this child at this moment, to not find the father waiting, as promised. They are dealing with a number of unexpected concerns - not the least of which is having to have any concerns at all. *They had not been informed of those either.*

The baby gives several small squeaks at Norm, who wants to hand it back but also wants it to smile first, before he does. It's wriggled an impossibly tiny hand out of all that blanket, somehow, and balls its wee fingers into the smallest fist he's ever seen.

It had been so cut and dry in the briefing. There had been no warning that deviations and complications were even possible, much less, imminent. It was like they had been... tricked into coming here.

The not-father feels safe though, to the child - and so, in this moment, they begin a long lifetime of grappling with the complexities and tragedies and mysteries of being sent into the World, on a mission of such obvious importance, but in the body and mind and probabilities of a single mortal being, who is most apt to forget why they are even there, what with all the fuss.

Ani is watching the spirit of her daughter start to fully gather, and ignite - she can see the light, like a bright bloom around the light blue blanket ball that Norm is cradling carefully in his arms. She's seen the auras of others all her life, but she's never seen her own daughter's until now - never one quite this colour before. She wonders what they gave her for the pain, and how much.

"I don't think she likes me." Norm notes, as the baby begins to squirm and grimace and croak and wave its new little fist around.

Ani yawns, "Well I've told her all about you already, dumb-ass, so what do you expect?"

Normand doesn't tell Ani to shut up, or call her anything back - he just wants this one baby to smile, just once, and to know that it isn't disappointed with him already. He really needs to not disappoint this one baby. He hadn't expected to really need that, until just a moment ago. Where had *that* even come from, just then? Why was *this* one baby frowning so damn hard?

The baby, being one, is incredibly malleable in this moment. It has already heard that it is a *she*, in some way, and it will hear that again and again, on so many more occasions, though at this moment can't say at all what that could mean. *What might it mean, to be called a she? What are these meaningful sounds? What is all of this?*

There is sound everywhere, now sharper, and clearer, and some of it piercing... and something else remarkable, as well. She's shutting her eyes from it, and *what is that*, and it's too much to take in, just yet, *all that... light...* Other curious and troubling inputs too, abound. Terrible itchiness - *where have the womb's waters gone?* Tugging sensations in connected

places, newly stretched out, or else squished differently, or pinched... a great number of novel forces at work, and all that new *lightness and emptiness and weight*, and the flipping and folding up and patting and poking, and *all the space and... air*, and all those forces they'll just call *Science*, someday... *what is all of this? It's all too nearly intolerable...*

And *what is a Maevis Beatrice?* And *where has the mother gone?* They - She - *had been assured there would be a mother.* The baby begins to wail anew, in frustrated search of her birthright, the mother. Eleven-hour-old Maevis is already forgetting the instructions, of course, awash as she is with entirely new questions and concerns and expectations - but luckily, she has been given instincts as well, and she grabs onto those quickly, once she finds them - although, even as her clear recollection of *exactly* what she *came here to do* begins to rapidly recede... *these instincts seem a poor substitute for certainty.* And now, she can only just wail and shake whatever this thing is on the end of that thing which she'll later be told is her own left fist, on her own left arm. And *she doesn't know why she's shaking these anyway.*

Maevis will not let it entirely go, though - that *right of hers* to know that *she has a purpose.* Give her instincts, *if those are needed here*, and call her a *she*, *if it really matters so very much...* but *she will not forget that they are here for some reason...* and now *the mother* just needs to know that too, so they can help her to *find it again*, someday.

Normand, wide-eyed, tries to hand the screaming, squirming baby back, but a groggy Ani puts up her hand, "*Nooo... I'm so clocking out for a while. I nearly died.*" She is beyond tired, but also happier than she had been in a good, long time. Her daughter is a *pulsar*, look at her - her aura has a temperature she can feel from here, these drugs are strong. Her kid is a *pulsar*.

Bull wouldn't be back, Ani had made sure of it. Maevis Beatrice Morgan didn't need any kind of father like that one.

Norm had been wearing his faded, *Empire Strikes Back* t-shirt under that stupid jacket of his, and now Maeve looks to her mother like she's trying to punch Darth Vader, and the shirt doesn't quite go with Norm's piercings, or

with holding an angry baby, or even with that terrified, solemn expression on his face that she's never seen there once before. What a hectic mess of a new uncle - but look at that baby glow. What's he worried about anyway? They'd all be fine, just fine. Ani would know what to do next. She wasn't worried about it.

"*Use the Force, Norm.* I need to sleep pretty hard now. I'll be back, I promise. Just don't drop her on her head." Then she rolls over and pulls the blankets over and falls asleep for days, because she almost died, getting that little girl out into the world, and that's pretty damn hard work.

The nurse checks all the tubes and screens and smiles at Normand and shrugs and says they'll be back to check in a bit, and to have a seat, maybe. He's handed a brochure on babies, like a instruction manual. Hey, here's your new Human Being. Batteries not included, of course. Results might vary, likely. No returns, naturally. A weird hospital, like all of them are.

He sits, and the little alien keeps squealing in spurts and fits, in protest of something or another, or else everything at once, and he can't stop looking at that tiny little fist waving around and that tiny little nose, which is just Ani's nose, scaled way down, and his twin has abandoned him by falling asleep, right in the middle of all her new daughter's noise and fuss and baby-cursing, and he just sinks even further into the hospital chair, and starts to slowly bounce the little grumpy thing up and down, and silently asks the Force to send Maevis Beatrice Morgan the dad she really needs, as soon as it can.

I was getting pretty hungry by the time the whole runaway kid emergency was over, so I told Claudette and Norm to wait in the house and I'd go talk to Olive for a while, because she and I hadn't seen each other in a bit anyway. Claudette gave me a little hug and Norm said he was going to check the main attic from the inside this time, to figure out where the birds definitely were. That seemed like a reasonable plan. I figured they could just hang out in the house and talk to each other, or not, or whatever.

I just didn't want to deal with anybody anymore that week, I'd almost had enough adult visits, if you want to know the truth. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy a good *Fraggle Rock* marathon with Claudette, and when Norm tries to help with the house, but there's a reason I'm still living on an island. Nobody's forcing me to, after all. It's an island, and there's usually just me and the scritters here, and that's usually just what we like.

So I said to them, hang out here, I'm going to go for a walk with Olive, and we'll be back at dinner, around five. You make some pizza, I want extra cheese.

I found Olivia still waiting for me, standing in middle of the blueberry bushes like she didn't know what to do with herself, and she had picked a whole handful of blueberries, and seemed to be waiting for further instructions, and I had been gone almost twenty-seven minutes, which was about what I had thought. I had brought a shoulder bag made out of old jeans filled with bags of potato chips, some lemonades, two sleeping bags, four pillows, a roll of toilet paper, matches for playing with, both spyglasses, my radio, and a big flashlight you can hang on things.

Olivia told me right then that I had to tell her parents she definitely wasn't going back with them, but I wasn't having any of that - I said, no, you tell them yourself, and be nice about it, or else. I told her she and I were going to stay in the New Old Shed that night and watch the moon or the rain, and the lighthouse and the town, and maybe look for the fox running through the orchard, like he didn't know we were watching him... but we were going to have pizza with her parents before that at the house a little later, and she was going to tell them she was sorry for running off, and then after dinner, her parents were going home, and leaving her with me. The tide would be down again by then. Then Olive and I would have the island to ourselves and the scritters, for the whole week.

She was getting ready to get really mad about the apology part, but I told her to switch it right off - I wasn't in the mood. My foot was killing me, and my best friend had just told me that I had let her down bad, and I needed my cousin to grow up a bit, just for a few days. I didn't know what else to say. I needed an adult, but she could step up instead. I need you to step-up, Olive. That's what I said. We're going to spend the week together,

taking care of Bee's house, together. She's watching us. She wants you to say you're sorry to Norm and Claudette. You can fake it. I said all of that to Olivia, while she listened. Then I handed her the big jean bag of things, because I wasn't carrying it any further. I was the one with the crutch and I had been doing all the lifting lately.

I guess I was having a weird day - everything I said was shutting people up for some reason. I don't usually manage to do that, maybe it had something to do with the Crow I saw, or the Tylenol, I don't know. It hadn't been a normal week. It's not like I've never fallen off of something, or never almost broken something, but I don't know what I was feeling. There was something new happening. It's still happening.

I told Olive to follow me, and she did, with the big jean bag full of things, and grumbling and loud-sighing like a tween and eating her blueberries that she'd picked. We walked through the woods a few hundred yards to the New Old shed, to get it ready for a wicked awesome sleepover. She'd been there only once before, which wasn't enough.

Olive seemed OK, overall though - I think it started sinking in that she wasn't going back to school for the whole week. I know how good that can feel, when you've had a little too much of school for a while. I wasn't going to mention all the work I had planned for her right then, I figured she just needed a night off too, like her parents did.

Sometimes I feel that Bee's still around. Sometimes the things I do remind me of Bee, a little bit, for example. Not really though, exactly. Bee wasn't always great with kids, but I'm kind of pretty good with them most of the time, for some reason. I think Liz was right. I don't like bragging though. But I felt Bee had something to do with it too - this whole day that happened. I've been thinking a lot lately about how much she taught me, and how she's still teaching me, because I'm still thinking about her all the time.

Olive didn't love finding out the shed didn't have any electricity in it. She knew that already from before, I thought, but I guess she hadn't paid attention the other time she had been there. That was the time she was eight, and had wanted to leave pretty bad, because she saw two spiders. I remember that. A small one and a smaller one. I have no time for that stuff,

about needing electricity everywhere all the time, and not wanting to ever see a spider, even once. Normand thinks she got that stuff from Claudette, but Claudette's not so bad outdoors. Normand says I didn't know Claudette when she was younger, and I guess he's right, because I didn't.

Olive didn't know how good she had it, with no electricity for a few hours, and sharing a shed with just a few spiders that couldn't kill you, but she would know, by the week's end. That's what Bee would manage to do anyway, if she were here, and if Olive happened to be me. So that's what was going to happen.

So the sun was high and the weather was already getting cool when we got to the top of the orchard where the New Old Shed is, and I knew we might get some wind and rain that night, from having heard it on the radio earlier, and I was hoping that might happen. Because I hadn't seen Olivia camping outdoors or anything close to that before, and especially not in the rain, with the wind whacking against the side of a shed, like it can, and I guess I just really wanted her to have that. I wanted to watch her figure out what she thought about being a little person on a big, windy island. I wanted to watch her watch that first fox. I wanted to see her taste potato chips under a full moon, listening to rain on a thin roof, or otherwise, a thousand crickets singing the song of their people. I wanted to see her breathing peacefully in a big sleeping bag, in a thunder storm, and without a door, or a care anywhere in the world. I was so selfish excited for her, I can't even tell you.

For a few moments, I even almost thought that maybe falling off the roof and losing my best friend for maybe forever but maybe not was what I had needed this week. Can you imagine that? I really don't know why some things happen sometimes.

So we set up our stuff - Olivia chose the loft for her sleeping bag, and what kid wouldn't? I couldn't really fit up there properly anymore, all that well, especially with the brace, so that was fine with me. I wasn't going to take that from her anyway, taking the loft. That's for kids first.

And we laid out our chip bags in order of how we figured we'd finish them off, and our lemonades, which would get warm, I warned her, but she didn't

seem to mind so much, and we got our pillows all sorted, and I found the pencils and the pen and paper and puzzles, and put them all in a pile on the table, in case we needed them later, and I said that we had a bug net for the door, and we didn't need the real door, which was a work table now, out on the side of the shed. Olive asked, well what about animals? What if they get in at us? And I said, they know never to come in here, and she said why, and I said, because I come out here now and then and pee around the outside of the shed, so they know who's boss here, and that grossed her out, of course, but it's the truth, so there you go. That works with the scritters here, anyway. I don't know about other places' scritters. I might not have much say about birds living in our attics, but all the animals here know who owns the sheds. I own most of them, and the Spirit's got the other one, for now.

While we were setting up, I was still trying to figure out that whole time, what the week was going to be like, in my head. I hadn't really planned on looking after a kid for five or six whole days when I woke up this morning, so I was still thinking about what had happened, and what we both needed to happen next. Olive had something she was going through, and I did too, so, we'll see.

I don't want to complicate things. I'm not going to worry, and instead, we'll just sleep in the shed tonight and listen to whatever the weather is going to do, and be OK with whichever scritters show up, and then we'll let Olive take the lead from there, tomorrow morning, rain or shine. I think she needs something even more than I do. I'll figure out what it is. I know all the hiding places.

The week Ani got out of the hospital, Bull showed up to meet his new daughter. The day after that, Ani and Maeve hit the road, and learned how to keep moving, under cover, while still chasing rainbows - because Mother Ani's daughter was not growing up a prisoner, or a fugitive.

Normand eventually found his bearings again, and spent his time Up North and Out West, to make good money not falling off of things, so someday Ani and Maeve could have themselves a castle, and maybe a moat - and

all the while, trying to keep up with where his sister was at, to watch from the tree lines for signs of charging bulls.

And Bee just waited, patient as ever, biding her time on the Isle of Elder Bees as it drifted in the Bay, watching like a widow for her family to wander itself back home, once again... as she knew it was only a matter of time, and she had all of that, in this World.