

SISTERS & OTHERS

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Normand stopped by this morning, to drop off some shingles and some shingle nails and a new ladder, which I didn't ask for. I had asked him to bring me shingles and some shingle nails and then a big roll of duct tape so I could just fix the broken ladder I already had, but he thought that was a dumb idea and so he specifically didn't bring me any duct tape, but brought me a new ladder instead. It's huge. I told him, what am I, a contractor, and to bring the new ladder back, I had a perfectly good ladder and only needed a lot of duct tape, which is what I had asked him for to begin with. He could have brought me a lifetime supply of duct tape for what he paid for that ladder. He told me to shut up and just take the ladder, it was on sale anyway, and stop being a stubborn dumb-ass like my mother.

I could tell Norm was in a mood. I asked him how The Girlfriend was doing and he said getting easier to live with every day, and the way he said it I could tell she had gotten mad at him for some dumb thing he had done, because he's said that before about Claudette and that's pretty much always why. He has a certain look when he's gotten in trouble for doing something dumb. It's his I-got-caught-doing-something-dumb look. Now he was trying to make me think I was the one being dumb, but you can totally fix a broken ladder with enough duct tape, everybody knows that.

Claudette and Normand fight sometimes but that's just normal couple shenanigans. Some people aren't good at fighting nice and shouldn't be together, but that's not Claudette and Norm. They're just regular folks who get cranky a lot, and fight like normal people, not crazy people, and they're not mean about it.

I get it. I decided I wasn't going to ask what dumb thing he had done this time. That usually gets him going when I ask that, and I like to get him going sometimes, but since he had gone and got me my shingles and things I thought I'd do him a favour and not get him going today. Even if he did get me a ladder that I never asked him for at all, and can't lift anyway.

Uncle Norm and I hit it off pretty much the first time we met. Mother Ani had just left to go do whatever she was going to do Out West while I stayed on Bee's weird, haunted island of cats, and I was sitting on the front porch waiting for her to come back, because she had forgotten her new hiking shoes, which she had planned to use on the island but never took out of the box, which wasn't a surprise.

I figured there was a fifty-fifty chance she'd notice she had forgot the shoes when she left me at Bee's, and a fifty-fifty chance if she did, she'd bother to come back for them. So I gave myself a one-in-four chance of seeing my Mom again before she disappeared for the rest of the Summer. Ani had been talking about doing hiking since that previous Summer, but we both kind of knew she'd probably leave the shoes in the box and then eventually give them to somebody else who would either use them or give them to somebody else again or throw them out or else just keep them in a closet forever. She didn't come back for the shoes. It was only a one-in-four chance. I had waited for an hour or something. That's about the right amount of time for those odds. I was a kid back then, I didn't have anything else to do anyway, right then.

Instead, it was Uncle Norm who showed up, while I was waiting on the porch for Mom to come back. I had heard about him a lot of course, and I guess he had held me when I was a baby a few times, but this was going to be the first time we ever actually met and would both remember. Kind of crazy when you think about it. He had been Up North or Out West all that time I was growing up in all those places Out West and Down South, and he had only been back home in Elders Falls for a month or something.

He was driving a pickup truck, which kind of blew my mind a little because that meant he had driven across the old causeway, and Bee and Ani had both told me only a complete madman would try driving across the old causeway, even if it was low, low tide on a calm day. But there he was, pulling up in a green pickup truck, which he had just driven across the old causeway, which is just barely not in the ocean at the best of times.

The first thing I noticed about my Uncle Norm when he got out of his old truck was that he didn't look like a madman, and he didn't look like Ani either. He was big. I mean, both tall and kind of fat in the middle and also had big hands, like what I imagined a viking might look like after a big meal, but with glasses and a dumpy sweater and carrying twelve grocery bags. Sort of a stay-at-home viking.

He came over with all his grocery bags to where I was sitting on the porch and sat down and asked me what my turtle's name was, because Turtle Norm was on the step next to me, also waiting to see if Ani would remember her hiking shoes. I told him her name was Norm, and I think he found that funny, and he said something like, oh, that Ani - she's a card. It was Mom who had named the turtle Norm. She named her after her brother, because she says Uncle Norm takes his sweet time doing most things. I don't remember all the details of every scene of my life, so I'm not entirely sure that's exactly what Norm and I said, when we first met, but that's the gist. It's called paraphrasing. I guess I'm assuming you know that by now about my stories, but maybe you didn't, but now you do.

You might be thinking, wait, I thought Maeve said she remembered the time before she was even born - that must mean she has a great memory, so why is she forgetting stuff, then? Continuity error. I understand why you would ask that, but I just have an average person's memory, except I remember this one time before I was born, that most people don't remember at all. I sometimes wish I had a perfect memory about everything, because that would be handy, but then other times I think that wouldn't be so much fun. Some things are nicer to forget. But I'm pretty sure that's what Norm said, when we first met - what's the turtle's name, and oh, that Ani. Then we talked about

Star Wars for a bit and then something really cool happened - the fireflies came out.

The fireflies can be crazy here. But that Summer, when I was still eleven and had just met Bee for the first time, and had only been in her house for a week, I hadn't seen a single firefly yet. It was like Normand brought them along in his truck. Even though he had shut it off, the truck kept making ticking noises after he got out of it for a while, like it was spring-loaded, and I got a bit worried it might explode, or something. But it didn't, and eventually it stopped ticking.

Norm sat and watched the fireflies with me for a while and I remember that we didn't talk after that. Norm didn't really try doing that how's-school-going thing that adults like to do with kids they've just met. Kids hate that stuff. At least, I did. The fireflies had just come out and my Mom hadn't come back for her hiking shoes, even though that would have been an easy excuse to see her daughter one more time, and I just wanted to sit there with my turtle and my new uncle and the fireflies and not say anything at all, really. And that's exactly what Norm and I did, even though we had just met. I remember sitting there and thinking, hey, I'm about one-quarter of this guy. I mean, we have some of the same genes. That was a weird feeling. Our genetics were already acquainted. There must have been a million fireflies. At least a hundred anyway.

So this morning after Uncle Norm didn't bring me the duct tape I wanted, I just told him to stop driving over the causeway like a madman because I didn't want him to end up in the ocean eventually, and he told me to stop being stupid and then he gave me a side-hug and left me with all the shingle-repair equipment, right there on the driveway, and then he backed his minivan down the lane, instead of turning it around first. That meant he was going to back it clear across the causeway, and he knew I knew that, and I could see him looking at me out the driver's side window with his deadpan, what-are-you-going-to-do face, when he should have been watching where he was backing up instead. He just did that on purpose to get back at me for telling him to bring the damn ladder back, and bring me my damn duct tape like I had asked him to do in the first place.

Just before he backed his minivan into the tree line, he made dumb cross-eyes at me, and I snorted. My uncle is such a dumb-ass.

When it comes to hugs, Normand and Bee and I are a lot alike. We all like them well enough, but we don't like being the one to start them. Of the three of us though, Bee was the best at starting hugs, because she was oldest and had the most practice at mastering or hiding her fear. Normand is the the next best at it, because he is forced to start hugs now and then, otherwise Claudette starts to get on his case, and I have the least practice at starting hugs.

That first summer when I asked Bee about the chess sets in the curio cabinet, and why they were in there, and who glued the little spikes to the Knights' heads to turn them into Unicorns, she said oh, that was Normand and Ani who had done that, when they were my age or something. I mean, my age back then, so like eleven or thirteen. What I soon found out about Normand was that he was a big, giant nerd. He liked comic books and Star Trek and boardgames and making little miniatures. What I found out a bit later, once I got into the attics, was that Mother Ani had been a big nerd too, just different. I had some serious nerd genes. That helped explain some things.

Bee had said that Ani was having a rough time at school when she was my age back then and she pretended to be sick for a whole week once, and Normand tried to get her to play chess one day but she thought chess was boring and stupid so he said you're right, Ani, let's make up an even better game than chess, and then that's what they did. That is what I found out, when I asked Bee about those chess sets and the home-made unicorns I found.

Bee didn't remember any of the rules because she didn't like games all that much, except for Poker sometimes, so the first chance I got to ask Normand something, it was about the chess sets and what game he and Mom had turned them into. Here's how the rules went, that he could remember:

- There were no Kings. Somebody had thrown them in the Bay, to see if they would float or something. They did, and they never came back. Just the kings, and one

Bishop, for some reason. That's all that got thrown into the Bay or wherever. So, no Kings in the game. The story was they had all gone to conquer the world and were having adventures elsewhere, or else had drowned. This backstory about where all the kings had gone had no real effect on the game, but it also kind of did. Norm calls that a meta-game. I don't really get that.

- All of the Pawns were actually called Knights, which was a bit confusing, because the horses were usually the Knights in chess. That's why he had glued little shields and swords on all the Pawns - so they could be Knights instead. I hadn't noticed he had added those - I had just assumed some Pawns came with little swords and shields sometimes, in some chess sets. Normand was really good at makerism, even back then.
- The Queens were really Witches. They had magic powers over Life and Death and Mind Control.
- The Rooks were actually Castles, and they couldn't move, you had to build them by spending the corpses of your fallen enemies. I thought that was pretty cool. They were castles of bones. Pretty dark. Normand said it wasn't like that, you built the Castles after succeeding at warfare, and the cost in pieces was just an abstraction. I didn't know what that word meant back then and I liked my explanation better, and still do. Castles of bones.
- The Knights were actually Unicorns. That was Norm's idea to get Ani interested in the game, and it worked. Norm's not as dumb as he sometimes decides to look. Unicorns were hard to kill and they could protect other pieces and resist magic. They were the coolest characters in the game, although the Witches were pretty badass too.
- Because the Bishops couldn't be divided evenly between the players, because there was one missing at Sea, they were on nobody's team, and just moved around randomly on the board, bothering the other pieces, sometimes fighting with each other, and generally getting in the way of everything. Ani had painted them all weird colours, and she and Norm called them Aristocrats. They had no defined purpose aside from taking up time and space on the board. Normand said they were a House Rule, so if you were short on time, you could omit the Aristocrats and the game would kind of just go faster.
- They would flip bunches of Othello chips to randomize things like who won fights and how teleportation worked, and what the Aristocrats might do that mostly wouldn't matter.

I thought that game sounded pretty fun and I asked him if we could get it out and play it right then but he said he had to go and it would have to be another time, and he actually didn't remember the specific rules, just the overview. He said maybe I could extrapolate from what he told me, and come up with the rules again, and I shrugged and said sure, but I didn't know what extrapolating was. He said I could look that up in Bee's dictionary and I said sure, but I didn't know where that was and he shrugged and said he was sure I'd figure it out, then he got up to leave.

I remember saying wait, Uncle Norm, what was the game called? And he thought about it and then said, we called it Super Chess. Super Chess? What a really dumb name. That's what I told him. I think he was a little offended but Normand often looks offended even when he isn't. He said well you can come up with a better name, then, smarty pants.

And I said, Ok then. Your game should be called Witches and Knights and Unicorn Fights. I don't know where I got that idea, it just seemed kind of obvious to me. I think he liked that name, and he said, Ok, then that's the name of our game.

And then, all at once, that's what it was.

I kind of envy Uncle Normand. One reason is that he can lift a ladder all by himself off the roof of a minivan and not even know what a big deal that is to some people. He clearly doesn't even work out, so it's not like he's trying too hard to impress anybody. Uncle Norm is a big nerd but he just got all those ladder-lifting genes when he and Mother Ani were inside their Mother. I forgot to mention that Ani and Norm are twins. I always forget that because they don't look anything alike, because Ani is kind of short, and has trouble opening jars by herself, even the ones you've opened for her once or twice already. The woman has no wrists - they're just little tattooed sticks really. Maybe I'm exaggerating a bit. Also, Ani and Norm are never acting the same age as each other anyway. Sometimes Mother Ani seems like the more mature one and then sometimes Uncle Norm does. A lot of times, neither do. Once, at Bee's funeral, they both seemed a lot older, at the same time. That was the only time I'd seen that.

Ani and Norm never talk about their childhood, and especially about being twins, because that means people will want to know what it must have been like for their mother, having twins like the two of them, and how much trouble they must have been for her, but also how much of a blessing it would have been for her too, and neither of them ever seem to want to talk about their mother or how much of a blessing their childhoods might have been. Sometimes, I forget they even had parents. They've always just acted like they're Bee's kids - maybe kids she found in the forest, or brought home from the library and never brought back, and the late fees got too big, so she never did.

Bee had two sisters. This is what I've been told. One was Ani and Norm's Mom, who is my grandmother, and one is Great Aunt Agatha. I haven't met either of these women because they were both dead or missing before I ever had the chance to meet them. Mom never talks about them, and neither does Normand, and neither did Bee. Claudette told me a few things years ago but asked me not to bring it up again. Even what she told me didn't really fill in very much. Agatha never married and I guess my grandmother didn't either, and no I don't even know her name. Nobody will tell me, I'm not kidding. She's like a black hole in our family. Like a not-person. Whenever I sometimes think about her, all I see in my head is a curly, tangled, dark shape, surrounded by the other people or places I'm imagining she might have gotten close to, or into.

There were three houses on Sister's Island, not one. I didn't know about the other two until my second visit with Bee, when I was fourteen. That's the year I got really nosy and started snooping around everywhere and looking for clues about my family. I figured if I knew enough about my family, I might remember why I had decided to be born and live with them in the first place. What did they need me for, anyway? I didn't know. I wanted to know, you know?

And that's the Summer I found out that Bee's sisters hadn't lived in the same house with her like I thought they had. They had each built their own house, and they weren't even next door to each other, they were as far away from each other as you could put three houses on Sisters Island.

I guess that's how I'd have chosen to do it too, actually. Probably. I like being around people, but I also sometimes like deciding when that's going to happen, and when that's not going to happen. It's hard to do that if you step out on your front porch and there's your two weird sisters stepping out onto theirs at the same time, and you're all feeling awkward now because of the strange family secret hanging between the three of you, that Maeve never gets to hear about. So the houses were really far apart.

The reason the other two houses were hard to find at first was because my grandmother's house was just a burnt foundation by the time I finally found it by almost falling into it, and Great Aunt Agatha's house had been completely covered in the biggest weeping willow you have ever seen. It had grown right up from the cellar through the middle of her kitchen, into the bedroom upstairs, straight through the attic, and broke a hole in the roof, and then covered the entire house, so you could practically not know there was a little old house in there once, unless you happened to come at it from the Shore side and look up, and could see a chimney just poking out through the branches. I did get the fireplace working, once, and yes it's pretty cool watching chimney smoke coming out of a willow tree. I only did that once though - Bee got there faster than I thought she could ever move, and was not happy at all, and I didn't get let into the kitchen or near any baked goods for a whole week, which is just too long.

Even though Bee's sisters must have been pretty weird, and at least one of them was maybe even evil, I still envy her that she had sisters. Just like I envy Normand that he had a sister. I often wish I had a sister. A brother would have been OK too, but Dooley was basically a person who ran around on four legs and occasionally ate your socks so he was kind of a weird brother already, and we were almost even the same age. We still would be, if dogs lived until they were at least twenty-four. I'm not going to forgive

Science for that choice.

When Liz came along though, and got all in my face, but in a way that didn't make me want to go hide in a closet, I think I got myself a kind of sister. That's what it felt like. I've never told her that. For the last couple of years, I've been telling myself that I need to tell Liz that she reminds me of a sister. I mean, I feel like she could be my sister. She's like a sister to me. That's what I should tell her. It's just scary. I don't know why. I've never had any human siblings so I don't know how easy they are to lose. What if she got mad about not being able to just be my best friend? What if I'm not good sister material? Liz already has a sister and a brother. I don't want to replace them or anything, that's not what I want to do. I wouldn't ask them to think of me as a sister too, that would not be a requirement. It would be fine if they did but I'd be ok if just Liz thought that I was like a sister to her too. The second sister she never had, or something. I wouldn't mind that. Sometimes I overthink things.

But I haven't told her yet, but she's coming over on the weekend so I needed to get the roof shingles back straight so she wouldn't make me let her spend the whole visit helping put them back, and instead we could both sit inside under the already shingled roof and drink spiked ice tea or whatever while I got brave enough to tell her that she was like my sister, and sorry but it just took me a long time and a bit of vodka to say it. I don't drink unless I've got something on my mind I need to say, and am having trouble saying it. I almost never have trouble saying what's on my mind. I'm kind of a teetotaler.

That's why I was sort of mad at Normand for bringing the ladder. Because the ladder he brought was a deluxe, heavy-duty model and twice as heavy as the old one I have that just needed a lot of duct tape to fix, and he never thinks that not everybody else around him is as damn big as he is. He thinks everybody is damn big, I think. He's funny. Sometimes it makes me mad but then you can't help feeling a bit flattered too. Normand thinks I can lift a two-hundred-pound ladder.

Anyway, I can't move this damn ladder up the driveway and across the lawn and up the side of the house without a wheelbarrow or lots of pulleys, and I don't have any pulleys and the wheelbarrow's got a flat. It's a big freaking ladder. I'm not a contractor, Norm.

Normand is right about one thing. Everything is a damn side quest. Where did I put the air pump? I thought about calling him on his phone and telling him to come back and either bring me my damn duct tape or else help me with the damn shingles, but nope. I don't need that guy today. Maevis got this.

I'm sorry for swearing so much, I'm just tired and getting nervous about the ice tea. I don't want Liz helping me with the shingles. I want her to sit down so I can tell her she's my sister, and that I love her.

Because she should know that.

Bee's House, Years Ago:

Normand and Ani Morgan are sitting on his bedroom floor, and the game pieces are scattered around, and he's rubbing his chin, trying to remember where he put the Kings, and how to get his sister to stop crying.

What is Ani crying about? If some boy... if somebody's done something or said something... well, Norm is going to find that out and then maybe say something to that guy. Norm isn't a fighter. He doesn't think he would punch anybody in the mouth or anything. He doesn't feel like hitting anybody. Not just for being a normal jerk, anyway. Norm knows he has a threshold though, and just on the other side of that, he is pretty sure he's capable of punching somebody in the mouth. Maybe not *super* hard, but hard enough. He just doesn't plan to go there unless he has to. He hopes he doesn't have to. There is a Bishop missing too. Goddammit.

"Have you been doing stuff with the chess pieces?'" he tries to make that into conversation, and not an accusation. He hates it when Ani takes his stuff, but doesn't take it seriously while she's doing it.

"No." Ani snuffles. She knows Norm isn't mad about the chess pieces. "It's not a *boy problem*, ok? Don't get yourself all wound up. I don't need a stupid knight in shining armour, OK."

"What did *I* say? When did I say the word *boy*? I didn't say anything about *boys*. What's wrong with knights." Norm arranges and rearranges the pieces that he can find in no particular order, just so he can do something with his hands to make his agitation go somewhere. He has a Batman comic book to read, and he has to have it back to the comic shop tomorrow before they decide to notice it's missing, and now his sister is crying, and he can't enjoy Batman adventures while Ani is crying. He still thinks it's probably a boy problem. Ani's problems are usually those, these days. They are only thirteen, what the hell. He isn't planning on having girl problems until at least seventeen or eighteen. (It turns out he will be twenty-two, but he doesn't know that right now, and he probably wouldn't be all that upset if he did. He's always found women overly complicated, so why rush into things like that).

Ani wipes her eyes. "You *always* think it's a boy problem. Every time."

It *is* a boy problem... *this* time, as it happens. But not in the way she thinks that *he* thinks it is. She thinks *he* always thinks he knows what he's talking about - but neither of them really know anything.

"Whatever," Norm finds the last pawn and puts it in the lineup and starts going through game rule permutations in his mind. He's never liked how pawns are always called *pawns* anyway. It makes them seem so... expendable and unimportant. Like they have no will of their own at all. No individual goals, no hopes, no dreams. They are the backbone of the Kings' and Queens' army; no chess game could happen without pawns. It just seems unfair to him to call them pawns, that's all. Maybe that's why he's

never liked chess as much as he figures he should. Who knows. "Ever since you turned twelve, it *has* been a boy problem, every time. Remember you when you were eleven? No problems except hornets. Remember that? You weren't bothered by anything, except maybe hornets. You were basically *bulletproof* before boys came along."

Ani just glowers at the floor. Normand is always saying weird things. *Bulletproof*? What did *that* mean? She isn't a superhero. And she had other problems when she was eleven, besides hornets. She isn't bulletproof, whatever that meant.

"Ever since *you* turned twelve, you've been a pain in the neck. But you were always a pain in the *ass*, even *before* you turned twelve." Ani has mostly managed to string that burn together without too many pauses, but Normand just shakes his head and snorts. "Nice one."

"Shut up."

"Let's play chess. Who needs Kings."

"I hate chess. It's *stupid* and *boring*."

"No... it's like, the most respected board game in the world. Really, really smart people and computers play this. *You're* boring." Normand never calls his sister stupid. "Let's play chess."

"No. I'm not playing *stupid chess*. You made me learn it when we were camping and that was the worst camping trip I've ever had because that's all you wanted to do. *Stupid Chess*."

"It *rained* the whole time. You didn't want to do anything anyway. Don't be a dumb-ass." Normand doesn't mind calling Ani a dumb-ass. That's different.

"*You're* a dumb-ass.", Ani retorted, but without much of her usual fire.

"Chess is great and there's this thing called a knight which you move either straight across or with the

Okadaay, smart-ass, then why don't we just make up some other stupid game with the pieces? I have reading to do. You *know* I'm just trying to make you feel better right?"

"Great job."

"Shut up. Do you want to make up your *very own game*, or not? It'll be even better than *Stupid Chess*. I promise." Normand already has half the rules figured out, but he needs Ani to want to do this too. It takes two.

Ani gives him that look that says she doesn't believe that he believes himself.

Normand shrugs dramatically and makes his eyes real wide at her, the thing he does to mean *What?* "You just said chess is boring and stupid. So even *you* should be able to make a more fun game with all these *awesome* pieces, right? *Look* at these things-" he holds up a Queen and waves it in Ani's face "The most powerful piece in chess is a *Queen*. How's that for girl power, right? You're all about girl power, right? I know *I* am, so you better be. And then, look at these -" he scoops up several pawns in his hand, "all these little guys, they need *your* help. They're called *pawns*, can you believe that? What the hell, Ani! That's just rude."

Ani shakes her head. "You're being stupid."

"And you're being a boring *dumb-ass*. I can't believe we're related." He sprinkles all the pawns all around Ani's feet, crying in a wee little voice, "*Heeeelppp usss, Ani Morrrgannn... we need your heeelllppp! Nobody respects ussss!*"

"Shut up, you're such a weirdo. Like, a serious weirdo." Ani is crying again but with a half-smile on her face, which she can't help, which Normand knows means she is double mad at him now, or is about to cave, or else hit him or something. He doesn't care which anymore, he needs to read that comic, and this is taking too long.

He picks up the Knight and holds it aloft and Ani's eyes can't help but follow it around

he picks up the knight, and holds it aloft and Ani's eyes can't help but follow it around, because she is waiting for the next part of the story, and she can't help it either. There is always a story with Normand. Normand says, "And this is a UNICORN! It lost its horn in a wicked-ass Unicorn fight, but you should see the *other* Unicorn, because unicorns are tough as frickin *nails*, and they *never* back down. Oh sure, they might cry when they get hurt, but they *suck it up*, slap on another horn, and get back out there!" Norm dramatically holds the Knight piece aloft, like he's hoping it will get hit by magic lightning. A dramatic pause.

Ani snorts, but is still frowning and there's tears and snot everywhere and she wants to hit Norm, but she really loves unicorns too much and Normand can be such a jerk making her laugh when she just wants to be sad. "*What?*" she says, wiping her damn eyes on her damn shirt, "Get out *where*, you idiot? What are you ever *talking* about?"

Normand points the Knight-now-Unicorn straight at his sister and says, "Out into the *world*, to *kick ass*, you dumb-ass, like unicorns were *born to do*. Don't ever you forget what Unicorns were born to do."

So I fell off the stupid roof. I found some masking tape and it turns out that's not as strong as duct tape at all, no matter how much you use, especially when the ladder's wet. I might have twisted or broken my ankle. I'm going to blame Norm, once I finish crawling to the wherever my phone got to, and then finish crawling to wherever I left my charger, if the battery's dead. I wish I had thought to use my phone to record this story, instead of an old tape recorder.

The moral of my story might end up being, use both hands when you're climbing a ladder. Three-point contact at all times.

If I survive the crawl and find my phone in time, which I'm pretty sure I will, I'll tell you about the time when I saw the Gnome rummaging around in Bee's carrots, and chased it off with a stick. I have a lot of Gnome stories. I wish Liz were here.