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LAVENDER'S BLUE

"Lavender's blue, dilly, dilly, lavender's green," Cat sang, "when you are king, dilly, dilly, I shall be queen." The baby gurgled quietly to himself as he sucked his fist, and his eyes drifted shut, as they usually did when Cat sang him this song. He still hadn't been named, this third one of her baby boys. With Cory and Kell, she had known what they were called almost as soon as she had realised she was pregnant, but this little one with his funny shock of hair that made him look like a red-crested cockatoo had reached the ripe old age of almost four weeks without a name of his own—he was just 'Baby'.

"Call up your men, dilly dilly, set them to work," she sang, "some to the plough, some to the fork. Some to make hay, some to cut corn, while you and I, dilly, dilly, keep ourselves warm." She bent down and laid the sleeping baby into the cradle, his sandy lashes fanned out on his round cheeks.

"Speaking of working men and of forks," Cat said, "it's time for Papa to come for dinner." She walked into the kitchen, where her stepdaughter and oldest son were playing on the floor. "Bibby, could you go get Papa please?"

"No, he's not ready to come yet," said the girl, who was in the middle of pulling a shirt knotted out of handkerchiefs over the head of a nondescript little stuffed animal.

"What do you mean, he's not ready to come?" Cat put the dinner plates on the table.

"He's still busy," Bibby said. She was lisping a bit, in typical six-year-old fashion—she had lost both of her front teeth in the space of the last two weeks and wasn't quite used to talking through the gap in her teeth.

Cory looked up from his block tower. "Mumma, I'm hungwy!"

"Yes, sweetie," said Cat, "we'll eat as soon as Papa comes in. Bibby..."

"I told you, Mumma, he's still doing something! He feels rushed."

Cat frowned at Bibby. What made the girl think she knew whether her father was ready to come for dinner? This was the second time in the last week she had simply refused to do something

Cat had asked her to do, with the same reasoning. Cat knew that Bibby had the same intuitive ability she had herself that allowed her to sense her family's needs—"being an Unissima", they called it. It came from being your birth mother's only child. Bibby supposedly had a double dose of it, being the only daughter of a woman who was an Unissima herself, but Cat had been under the impression that it just meant the girl had shown signs of her ability extremely early, when she was only a toddler. It wasn't as if she could read minds—could she?

"I guess I'll get him myself, then," Cat said, trying to keep herself from sounding annoyed. She untied her apron, then stepped out of the cottage into the warm spring sunshine and went across to the workshop on the other side of the yard, sticking her head in the door. "Guy, dinner is ready! Are you coming?"

"Can't right now, Cat!" He was standing over a large bucket, dunking a pottery bowl into a greyish slurry. He pulled it out, let it drip off, then put it on a board which already held a dozen of similarly coated dishes. "I have to get these bowls glazed; we're doing a glost firing tomorrow morning. Don't wait for me with dinner; I'll come in when I have this lot done." He gestured at another batch of bowls which sat on the worktable, waiting to be glazed.

"It's okay, Mumma," Bibby said when Cat came back into the kitchen. She twisted a red-gold curl around her finger. "Don't be upset; Papa'll come in soon. And I made Cory wash his hands for dinner."

Cat shook off her irritation and smiled at the girl. "Good job," she said, then picked up Cory and sat him in his place on the bench. "One potato or two?" she asked, as she began to dish out the food to the kids.

"Two, please," said Bibby, climbed up on her chair and carefully set her stuffed animal next to her plate. "And lots of butter'n parsley. Flick likes butter'n parsley."

"Is that what you call your stuffie—Flick? I thought it was Mimi."

"Yup. I think it's Flick now," the girl said through a mouthful of potato. "It only was Mimi last week. Names change sometimes, you know, and you gotta listen and make sure they're right. Can Flick have some cheese with his 'tato? He said 'please!'"

"Oh, very well, if he said 'please'." Cat handed her a slice of cheese.

Bibby gave her a bright gap-toothed smile, and let her stuffed animal take a pretend bite of potato from the end of her fork.

Cat sat down to her own dinner. She hoped Baby would nap long enough for her to be able to eat in peace; two-year-old Kell was still asleep in the next room, too, and he often napped right through the dinner hour, which sometimes allowed her an extra break.

She was in luck. Neither of the little boys made a sound until she had finished her meal and cleared up the dirty dishes. Perhaps she would even be able to sneak in a little rest herself before they woke?

Quietly she opened the door to the bedroom and peeked in. In the cradle, Baby was snoring a soft little baby snore like the creak of a tiny weather vane turning in the wind. And over on the boys' bed—she couldn't even see little Kell's red hair; he had buried himself right under the covers again. He would get all sweaty and overheated; she'd better pull the blanket away from at least his face.

But wait—*was* that lump under the blankets a little boy's body? Cat took three more strides, reached out a hand and pulled back the quilt.

No Kell. *No Kell!* Where was he? Her gaze whipped around the room, searching for her toddler. In the corner by the bathroom? No. Inside the open box bed? Not there either. Beside the big cupboard? No again. And then Cat's eye fell on the outside door, and her heart leapt into her throat: the door was ajar. Just a crack, so slight that she had overlooked it at first, but the door was open! Had she forgotten to latch it? Or had Kell learned to lift the latch himself?

She ran over and yanked open the door. "Kell! Kellie? Where are you?"

No red-headed toddler anywhere in sight. Not by the pump, not by the big kiln, not by the

firewood stack. “Kellie!” Harsh fear clutched her by the throat.

Suddenly she saw out of the corner of her eye Bibby’s copper hair flying as the girl burst out of the front door and ran across the yard to the workshop.

“Papa, Papa,” Bibby called, “come quick, it’s Mumma!”

A moment later, Guy rushed out of the workshop on the heels of his daughter. “Cat! Cat, what is it? Are you hurt?”

“No, Papa,” Bibby called, “she’s over here, and she’s really scared!”

“What is it, what’s wrong?”

“It’s Kell!” A sob caught in Cat’s throat. “He’s not in his bed, and the back door was open! I don’t know where he is! He could be anywhere! Maybe he fell in the clay pit! Maybe he...”

“It’s okay, Mumma,” Bibby said, her big turquoise eyes on Cat’s face. “It’s okay, don’t be scared. You’ll get better.”

“It’s not me! It’s Kell! What if he’s hurt? What if...”

“But he’s not,” the girl said.

“How can you say that? You can’t know that! He’s not here, he’s not anywhere...” Cat could hear the rising hysteria in her own voice. “Guy, do something!”

But her husband’s eyes were on his daughter. “What do you know, Bibby?”

She didn’t respond, so he repeated himself, more sharply. “Ysbina! What are you saying about Kell?”

Her head flew around. “He’s fine!” she said. “Don’t you know? It’s Mumma that’s scared and needs your help.” She looked from one of them to the other, a slightly puzzled expression on her face.

“How should we know that? We *can’t* know that! What if...” Cat began, the panic in her throat choking her and setting her ears ringing.

But Guy held up a hand as if to stop her. He was still looking at the girl. “Do you know where Kell is? Is he in the house?”

“No... No, he’s not in the house. I don’t really know where he is, but he’s fine. He’s happy,” she said. “Don’t you know that, Mumma?”

Cat couldn’t think. She couldn’t feel. She couldn’t sense anything but the overwhelming fear that something had happened to her little boy, that he was out there somewhere in the woods, perhaps bleeding, crying, frightened, that...

Suddenly she felt Guy’s hands cupping her shoulders, and his turquoise eyes bored into hers. “Cat,” he said firmly, “Bibby is right! Think, Karana, think! *Do* you know? You’re Unissima, you have the Knowing! Do you *feel* that Kell is hurt?”

And with the warmth of his touch, Cat could feel a calm flowing into her that drove the panic into the background. She drew a deep breath, then another one. A feeling rose inside of her that came alongside the fear and pushed it away, replacing it with a certainty of what she needed to do.

“The woods,” she said, “he’s in the Wald! And—no, he’s not hurt. You’re right, Bibby.”

“Yup,” said the girl. “And he’s—something with lavender.” She tipped her head like she was listening to something. “Oh, *you* know, Mumma.”

And Cat did indeed know. Not exactly what Bibby meant about lavender, but she knew where to start looking for little Kell.

“Watch the boys, sweetie,” she said. “Papa and I are going to get Kell.”

He was exactly where Cat knew he had gone, and it was his singing that guided them. A few hundred yards past the Septimus Tree, in a little clearing, they heard him.

“Wawember boo, diwwy diwwy, wawember gheen...” his little voice sang, and there he was, sitting in the middle of a big clump of blooming lavender, happily playing with a handful of flowers and two rocks.

Cat snatched him up and hugged him so tightly he started to squirm.

Guy wrapped his arms around both of them. “Well done, Karana; well done!” he said in Cat’s ear, then gave Kell a squeeze of his own. “Don’t ever run away like that again, you little rascal!” he said.

Kell thrust the lavender blossoms in his grubby little hand at Cat. “Fowers, Mumma!”
“Yes,” said Cat, her voice shaking, “yes, lavender!”

“Well done,” said Guy again when they got back to the cottage. “He really was in the lavender. Well done, Bibby Karana.”

The girl smiled a gap-toothed smile, then tipped her head to the side. “I think...” she said, “I think I’m going to be ‘Bina’ now. ‘Bibby’ is a name for little kids.”

Cat smiled back at her. “Makes sense to me,” she said. “You’re sure not a little kid any more; I can’t think what I would have done without you today. I didn’t know that Kellie was okay until you said so and made me pay attention to my Knowing. How did you know?”

The girl wrinkled her forehead. “What do you mean?”

“How did you know that Kell was okay?”

“Well, you can just feel how people are feeling, can’t you?”

Guy smiled at his little daughter. “No, Karana, we can’t. Most of us don’t know at all what’s happening with other people unless we see it with our eyes, or they tell us. And even an Unissima like Mama doesn’t always know, right, Cat?”

Cat nodded. “I only know sometimes, mostly in emergencies. But you haven’t always been able to feel it so precisely, either, have you, Bibby?”

“I dunno,” the girl said, squeezing the tip of her tongue out between the gap in her teeth. “And it’s Bina.”

“Maybe your special Knowing is getting stronger because you’re growing up,” Cat said. “And you certainly are. So, you want to be Bina now? We’ll try to get used to it. Where’s Cory and Baby?”

“Well, when you and Papa went to find Kell, me and Cory looked at a picture book, and then Dilly woke up and I sang him the Lavender Song and Cory helped rock the cradle, and Dilly went back to sleep for a bit. Oh, but there he’s woke up again!”

They could hear the baby crying in the house, but Cat didn’t immediately go to him.

“Dilly?” she said, thinking hard. “You think Baby’s name is Dilly?”

Bibby—Bina now—tipped her head to the side again. “Yup,” she said after a moment, “seems that’s his name.”

Cat turned to Guy. “What do you think? Could that be short for something?”

“Dilly? Dil—Aldyl! With a ‘y’ in it. That was my grandfather’s name. I like it.”

“Aldyl—yes. It’s right. So Dyllie it is!”

They went inside, and Cat bent down and picked up the baby.

“Lavender’s blue, dilly, dilly,” she sang, “lavender’s green; when you are king, dilly, dilly, I shall be queen.” She looked into Baby Dyllie’s slate-blue eyes and rocked him to the tune. “Let the birds sing, dilly, dilly, and the lambs play; we shall be safe, dilly, dilly, out of harm’s way.” She smiled across at Guy, who held little Kell in his arms, swaying with the music. “Who told me so, dilly, dilly, who told me so?” Cat sang. “‘Twas my own heart, Dyllie, Dyllie, that told me so.”

