

The Homecoming

By Cait Atherton

Shenn Oie'l Verrey, Old Manx Christmas Eve (January 5th)

Cats are queer articles, and that's a fact. I'll keep my voice low, for they've got ears on them like divils.

Take that young fella over there sleeping on the hearth, toasting himself, nice as you like. He's a lazy creature, takes a yawn and a stretch just to haul himself up to sip his milk.

But there's been nights when he's jumped up, bone-rigid, ears quivering, no reason at all. He's clawed paint off the door and away he's gone. Some of those nights it's been calm enough to hear an owl land on the tangly *cuirn*, the moon shining like a silver shilling. But othertimes the wind's been fit to pull the trees from their sockets, but still, up he's sprung. No matter if it's blowing fit to clear the sky of stars and the hail pelting these windows like fistfuls of pebbles -- when he gets the call, he's off down the glen, then up to them old white stones on the cliff. And I've seen them there myself, cat kith and kin, gathered together, shunning or palling-up, depending; spatching, speaking their old tongue. Cat business. I be damned if any ordinary man or woman ever dare to go near when them ones are at it.

Your grannie Bahee now, she knew about those fellas. Just look at them ears twitch when I mention her name. Let's tip on another scuttleful and draw up your chair to the fire girl – that's got it blazing nicely -- and I'll tell you all about her. That's why you've come here I take it? Close them curtains and plug in the lamp. Don't mind that window rattling; let me fix the latch. It's a blowy night.

Give me a moment to get my breath back and I'll take another look at you. When I first saw you today a queer notion I had when I opened the door, quite brought me back to my girlhood. Something about you put me immediately in mind of Bahee, even before you breathed a word about who you were. And how will a smart young lady from New York find us Manx folk with our old-fashioned ways? But looking at you sitting there, it's like you belong. You've got her eyes dear. And of course, that hair.

Your grannie and me, we were born in this cottage. That's her and your granddad in their finery on the dresser. I've still got the primmies pressed from her wedding bouquet -- but never having caught a man myself, can't say they brought me much luck. And that's her oak chair you're sitting in; she liked to curl herself up in it too, just like you're doing now, her fingers tracing out the carvings on the armrest, yes just like that.

Now your grannie was a sight to behold when we were childer. Hair like a copper pan, skin like fresh milk -- and her eyes, them eyes were like seeing sunshine through a leaf. Mighty fond of losing her way on the mountain she was, wading through streams and talking to herself. Holding up her skirts and letting the fish scramble over her toes, sitting in the trees gabbing to the blackbirds and lying in the grass, watching the bumbees suck the honey out of foxgloves. Them were the easy days, I can tell you.

Well the problems came as she grew. Other childer shed their playing days like the fluff blown off a dandelion, but not her. A great lump of a girl she was, to be skipping off school and going down the glen each day, chit-chatting like she was with her best friend, but nobody there, never nobody there. The *skeet* went round that she'd fallen under a *guesag*. Now there's plenty in those days that still feared witchappery talk and were terrible afraid of the *moonjer veggey*. There was old Jack Kerruish who got stroked by one of the little people years before, he dribbled and drawled from that day on, never quite right in mouth or mind. He was the first one that turned against her. And Janey Quilliam and Dollin Quayle, well they both started up saying something should be done. Of course they're long gone now, God bless them. But in those days, weren't they the big ones, the ones folk listened to?

When they first knocked on our door, Father just shook his head.

Then Janey's son (and him the worst for teasing poor Bahee at school) said she'd come to him in a dream and tempted him something awful. When he woke, he'd started with the worst dose of measles, leaving pocks on his face and a turn in his eye. Cursed him she had, or so he claimed, but to my mind I wouldn't trust him as far as I could throw him. But same week Dollin said he saw Bahee cross his field, chit-chatting to herself. Then his best brown heifer died calving. So that's when everyone knew there was no avoiding.

The minister wouldn't do it. He was too modern thinking, said he didn't want to get involved. But Janey had it that if you knew who to ask, there was an old Roman priest down Castletown way who sorted these things for a fee. So on May Eve, with Bahee out on her wanders and the afternoon still glorious, he thumped at our door. All serious he was, with his

dried-tattie face and his bat-black skirts flapping. Had them rosary beads, a Roman Bible and some of that Holy Water.

“It’s a grim business,” he said to Mother who was weeping fit to bring down a storm. “But no little lamb shall be lost. Let Our Lord’s good light burn away the blackness into which she has slipped.”

An odd procession they made going down the glen: Father O’Rourke holding his bible to his chest, gold cross glinting on the leather; my weeping mother behind, her elbow supported by Father; and Janey Quilliam and Dollin Quayle tagging along -- to see it done proper, I’d wager. They looked for her down the glen, three of them taking the high path thrashing through the bluebells, the other two taking the low path, winding past the stream. They looked for her by the *spooyt* and along the little rutted road. The trees shrugged and sougled, telling them they wouldn’t find her here. At the beach they searched the *buggane*’s cave, the tide snorting over the slimy stones, but she wasn’t there either. Mother kept saying, “Leave her, leave her, what’s the harm she’s done?” and I saw Janey whisper to Dollin who said something to Father and Father had to shake Mother quite strong-like, and remind her of all the goings-on and how everyone would be the better for it, once the witchery was lifted from their girl.

They climbed the rabbit path high onto the headland. My heart was tripping over itself, for of course I knew she’d been up there all the while. I let them pass further along the coast track to Peel. As they rounded the corner, father’s stick sending the jackdaws clapping out of their nests, I turned back quick-like, parted the bramble bush and hopped over the stile.

She was sitting there, in the grassy dip, surrounded by them quartzzy old stones. Stringing primmies, she was, a fine few already done in her lap. By gum, she was an angel, the sun blazing in her hair and those fingers busy as you like.

“Run Ba, run,” I told her. “There’s an old priest coming for you and Mother’s about to drown with crying.”

But she just sat there, never spoke, just strung those primmies, slitting the green stems with her fingernail and pulling them through until the heads caught in a chain. And around her hovered a strange sort of peace. The honeyspice smell off the warm gorse, the growing of the long grass in the dip and the feeling that time itself was a notion we’d all thought up recently, but wasn’t really worth fussing about. She put the crown of primmies on her head and closed her eyes. After a while, she reached out with her fingertips, humming along to a tune – grinning, fluttering her fingers, for all the world as if she was welcoming, and being welcomed.

Do you know what I mean dear? Oh it must sound strange to you, but I swear it’s a fact ... But oh, that’s the style, you’ve got it girl, that’s almost the uncanny tune itself, how could you possibly know? Well I longed to see who she was seeing, to catch a glimpse for myself -- and I nearly did, I know I nearly did -- but the next thing there’s black linen flapping, the muttering of some papish prayer and her hair’s dripping with holy water. She opened her eyes and stared at us all. Then she upped, like the March wind but faster, between the stones, over the far gorse hedge and I swear there’s the tinkle of bells and laughter, and she’d gone.

Well Mother trembled like a mouse in a trap, but Father told her it was for the best. Father O'Rourke wrung his hairy old hands and said it had been a sorry sight. Heavy-hearted, with the sun sinking into the sea, we set off back to the village. But the first thing we saw was a plume of smoke coming up the chimney of this cottage. We smelt broth as we opened the door. And there was Bahee, stirring the pot, good as you like.

"Good evening Mother and Father," she said. "And Father O'Rourke too. I've made a spot of supper to thank you for your trouble."

And an even more peculiar thing happened later that night.

A cat came. A sleek puss with a coat as black as midnight and a tiny star of light at its throat. He scratched at the door and when Bahee opened it, he sauntered in and lay down on that very hearth where his nibs lies now, stretched himself taut from tip to toenail then curled into a snooze, for all the world as if he'd honoured us by his coming. Father was for tossing him back outside, but Mother, she told him no. Some things are not for interfering with, she said.

As for Bahee, she never did go back to school, instead she became a wonder of a help to Mother around the cottage and we hardly ever saw her again in the glen. Young men buzzed round her and she chose your granddad, although there were plenty of others in the queue. She became the spickest housewife and mother of a fine son, born and raised under these rafters. Of course he was your father and mighty proud she was of him too, although it fair broke her heart when he went off to his university place on the Mainland. Too clever for us, she'd said. Too clever for this cottage with it's old ways. She never answered his letters,

Bahee never being a big one for the writing. But she missed him something awful. And after he left for your America, well she never understood why he did that. “Who in their right mind would want to wander so far?” she’d say. Time went by, as it does. Then, with Bahee newly gone under, within that very same year, we heard that you’d been born. That’s the worst of it; she never saw the snaps he sent – and you the spit of her too. That’s the way it goes, I suppose.

It’s just smoke dear, I’m not one to get upset about things. Are you warm enough? Let me give the fire a poke. Don’t mind him rubbing your legs -- he likes you, that’s all. Mostly he shuns visitors, so you’re a special one. Let me pour his nibs his milk, then maybe he’ll leave you alone. Oh don’t worry about me; I always get dizzy when I bend down. Just give me your arm, need a moment to get steady. It’s coming on worse recently, but then that’s the way with getting up in years.

The last one left, that’s me.

So you’ll want to know about her in her prime. A regular chapel-goer she was, your grannie. Second best voice in the choir, stitched every one of them chapel kneelers and trimmed the Sunday flowers each week.

Yet I’ll tell you something. I’ve never mentioned this to a soul before. But what harm can it do now after all this time?

When Old Christmas Eve came round, she always came over peculiar. After the rest of us went up them stairs to bed, she’d tiptoe back down. Back to the dying fire and that old puss. Her head bent close to his, she’d murmur to him. And he’d gargle back, quiet, but

determined-like. Watching them from the landing, I'd swear they were exchanging news of an old country. Her asking, him telling. And next, he'd be clawing at the door and she'd be pulling on her coat and gloves -- and off they'd go. I didn't let on to a soul. I didn't want any more funny business. But I'd watch and wonder at it.

Yes, queer creatures them cats, that's a fact. Never see them die. Just pad off into the night when their time comes. Give them a week or two, sometimes a month, and a new fella arrives. Proud as you like, stretches out by the fire – I'd say it's them that own this place, not us.

Tea dear? Let's get that kettle on. I've got some mince pies warming. Make sure the door's bolted, the wind's rattling up the glen tonight. Here, help me take down your grannie's wedding set. Only two cups left, but she'd want you to have the best. Shame on my shaky old hands rattling the china. I'm getting on, and there's none that can change that. Let me pour your tea -- and when we're ready, I'll tell you about the night your grannie left us.

The strangest thing of all.

It was a stone-cold January night but your granddad went all the way to Douglas to visit her in the hospital. She was in for one of those hip jobs. Put up an awful fuss she did, but the doctor told her there'd be no more traipsing round the village unless she had it fixed. Well I reckon she must have known best, because day after the operation she took a fever and by the time your granddad got to Noble's, matron was waiting for him on the steps wringing her hands, condoling. He was in a bad way. He loved your grannie, make no

mistake. Well he wanted her home that night, and a fair old stink he must have made 'cus by them days a person newly deceased got took to one of them chapel of rest places. But your granddad was having none of that. They got him a car and a coffin sorted, and by midnight he was bringing her home.

He said he wasn't sure if he was seeing straight; all teary, no doubt. But he swore that on the way home, every time they passed a graveyard, a pair or more eyes glittered out at him. Two ginger Manxies perched on the Braddan wall, bold as brass; a big stumpy fella poked his head through the church railings at Glenvine. And a moon-white one, with eyes like wet emeralds, sprang up onto a gravestone at St John's.

When he got here, I was dozing by the fire. It was *Oie'l Verrey*, same as tonight, and I was still in the old habit of lighting a candle and hoping for the myrrh to bloom with the midnight bells, although not since way back when we were childer did the chapel bells ring out on Old Christmas Eve. Well your granddad he was a plain-speaking man. That door there, it just blew open and he said: "She's gone."

The cat was up like a pin poked in him – and before I knew what's what, he's under your granddad's legs and out. But even though I'd been dozing, I heard something. First time I'd caught a cat's tongue -- and the last. As he streaked passed me that puss said as clear as day: "Oh my! Caught sleeping. Can't be late for the homecoming!"

Have a drop more, let me fill your cup. Oh I spilled some -- silly of me to get upset, it was all such a long while ago. But I do miss her something awful.

Now look, that's unusual. Him purring so loud, twisting himself round your legs. Arching his back, stiff as a horseshoe. He really likes you, he does. And what are you saying dear, my ears aren't what they used to be ... Oh it's him you're talking to are you? Fancy that! With the firelight on your hair and him gargling away at you like that, it takes me right back ...

Look! He's a mind to be off now! I told you how he gets like this when the call comes. That awful whining and him scratching at the door ... well I'll not be stopping him.

But you? Where are you going this time of night dear? You're welcome here and it's a night not fit for wandering ...

When you smile at me like that you give me shivers! Like she's here with me now. Like time is something and nothing ... and beyond it all, when all's said and done, childhood's still all about us, just waiting for us to remember. To remember where we came from. And where we're all going.

Well if you're sure -- here, take her old gloves and coat. Quick or you'll lose him! Isn't the wreath of *hullin* with its blazing berries you bought me a lovely sight hanging on the door? And is it just a fancy, or can I smell myrrh in the garden? Watch your step now, that path to the glen gets slippery when jack frost is about ...

What's that you're saying? Can't be late?

Late for what dear? And what are you doing now? I'm light-headed and my hand is a-tremble in yours. Oh dear, no, it's far too cold a night, I really shouldn't go outside with

you ... But listen! Listen! The old Christmas bells are pealing like there's no tomorrow ...
how that can be with the chapel long tumbled down?

Where are we going? What's that you're saying ...?

... Home? And I'm coming too?

The End