

**Because Of The Red Fox**



# Because Of The Red Fox

A MAGICAL NATURE TALE

*by*

*Jane Valencia*

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WASHINGTON

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## DEDICATION

*For Amri, who insisted I finish this book ... now!*

*For Gwynne, who patiently listened to just about every version of the  
tale, and offered insights*

*For Andy, who believed in the Green Chapel, back when I first put  
fingers to keyboard twenty-six years ago*

*And to the Mathias family, without whom this book would have been  
entirely different (no chickens, for one!), and especially ...*

*For Lisa, whose story dolls literally created the characters in this book*

*And In Loving Memory of all the hens and cockerels / roosters no  
longer with us who strode into our hearts and imaginations at  
Plain Old Farm*

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## PROLOGUE

**H**AVE YOU HEARD about the Reweaving of the World? It's happening right now—all around us—slipping in with whiskered face and sensitive nose, with careful movements and on springing, silent paws.

Just what, you may ask, *is* the Reweaving of the World? Something very *paw*-some. Ho, ho. But enough from the Bad Pun Department of Shell's Joke Shop. Dear Reader, enter with me a Tree of Tales.

The story begins!



THE FIRST BRANCH:  
A FAERIE RIDE AWAY

*Wherein the obvious is not always so, and dreams can have  
toenails and a wicked grin*



## LEAF 1

### I WANT TO GO TO THE INSIDE BAY

“**W**HY CAN'T THERE BE FOXES on Yonder?” Shell demanded. Under the prickly holly bush that sheltered Annie’s Teahouse, she jerked back on her heels. “Okay, so we live on an island—Yonder Island—but that shouldn’t make any difference.”

“No one’s ever seen a fox here—ever!” Santa, the eldest of the three girls, whacked the weathered board balanced on the stump that served as a table. With a squeak, her sister Annie grabbed at the toppling fir cones that she used as teacups. Santa continued with the scathing words: “*We should know!*”

Shell snorted. “Because you’ve lived here all your life and I haven’t? Well, maybe new eyes can spot what old eyes can’t.”

Hearing herself Shell blinked in confusion, because she really was angry, not just kidding around anymore. Luckily, her cousin Samantha—called Santa by all who knew and loved her (no one else allowed!)—seemed to have taken Shell’s words in fun.

“So it’s a war, is it?” Santa’s eyes gleamed. “Girls, let’s head to the field!”

This idea was too enticing to refuse.

Avoiding the glossy leaves that spiked in from all sides, Santa and Annie scrambled out from under Mother Holly, surely the largest of her kind in any forest anywhere (so the three agreed).

“*Ooch, ouch!*” Pricked and jabbed despite her care, Shell paused to breathe deeply of the forest green, the conifers and the leafy trees, and to feel the dirt under her hands. Until three weeks ago she had lived with her dad in a suburban townhouse with a pocket garden. Now the forest and fields of the Hundred Acre Wood Farm Community were her yard.

Not for the first time, Shell felt completely amazed—showered with good fortune. “I’m so glad I’m here,” she whispered to the forest. “So glad I didn’t end up in Mom’s Welsh village.” Although she cut short her words, the leaves rustled as if they sympathized.

“Come on, Shell!” Santa yelled from up the trail.

“Don’t tell,” she murmured to this top-secret area of the woods, which she and her cousins had named the Mental Village. And, as if agreeing, the forest nodded into silence. Her mouth dropped open. “Um, thanks,” she said. Wouldn’t it be wondrous if the trees could really understand her?

With a parting wave to Mother Holly and to the Mental Village Shell pelted between sword fern and prickly salmonberry. Crossing a boggy stretch, she caught up with her cousins near the Octopus Tree, a huge redcedar with low-drooping branches. On other days, Annie clambered high, high up that tree, practically to the top, without a shred of fear. Santa, in turn, would follow with long determined stretches of her arms. Shell kept to the lower branches, draping herself like a mountain lion on this tree limb, or perching on that one

as if it were a swing. Someday she'd climb as high as her cousins, but she didn't dare yet go much higher than her own height.

Now, however, the three cousins (respectively) slapped, patted, and trailed their fingers against the tree as they passed it. Sprinting across the gravel driveway, they reached the field. Here the mown grass lay delightfully thick. Snatching up armfuls of "mowings" (as they called the grass clippings), the cousins heaved grass into faces and hair, and down shirts and skorts.

The sisters Annie and Samantha, ages eleven and thirteen respectively, and cousin Shell, age twelve and in the middle, toppled in a heap. Framed by her careful shoulder-length black hair, Annie's elfin face peeked through the grasses. Adorned in a pink headband and ribboned shirt and skirt, Annie seemed to sparkle at the edges. Dark-haired like her sister, Santa was tall and long-limbed, with an intensity to her features that her sister could never mimic. Santa scooped the mowings with powerful arm-sweeps.

The three cousins piled mowings upon themselves, creating a cut-grass burrow.

"Why can't there be foxes here on Yonder?" Shell asked again.

She plucked a blade of grass out of the thick hair she wore in a single braid. Her girl-next-door nature belied her slightly unusual coloring of light mocha skin, ash blonde hair, and hazel eyes. Something about Shell regularly stirred onlookers to feel as if they gazed at her in a shifting of light and shadow.

"The poop I found is about the right size—" Shell held her hands a few inches apart, "—and it's different from a dog's. The poop I found has bits of fur and bone in it, and it—the poop—is squiggly at

the ends, and it sits at a kind of animal path crossroad. A fox would surely nose about such a place.”

“We—don’t—have—foxes—on—Yonder Island,” Santa spat out each word. “No one’s ever seen one.”

“People see bears on the island.” Rolling onto her back, Annie smoothed mowings away from her face. “Every once in awhile a bear swims to Yonder, or floats over here on a log or something. And the bear goes blackberrying or salmon fishing and has oh so much fun, until finally it gets moved off—maybe by pet control—I can’t remember.”

Santa snorted. “Yeah, well that’s different.”

“How?” Shell asked. “You have all kinds of animals here—deer, raccoons, mice, snakes—” Shell choked as Annie scrunched a handful of grass down her shirt. “No fair!”

Another flurry of grass-flinging ensued. Shell retaliated against her usually gentle and dreamy younger cousin, and Santa, never one to miss an opportunity to inflict mayhem on her sister, gleefully joined in. Armfuls descended in arcs, sweeps, and cascades.

“Oof, *pax*, *pax*!” Santa shouted, after Shell scrubbed her hair with grass and leaves. “That’s Latin for ‘peace’, you heathens!”

“Fine—if you really mean it!” Flopping to the ground, Shell resumed her trail of thought. “How did the animals get here in the first place? And why can’t it mean that foxes got here, too?”

“We have wolves!” Annie said brightly.

“In a *wildlife* sanctuary.” Santa’s voice was drenched in scorn.

Annie gave an amiable shrug.

“What’s with the foxes, Shell?” Santa asked. “You’re obsessed!”



“You know so much about them!” Annie chirped.

“I don’t know so much. And I am not obsessed!” Shell poked her fingers through a mat of clippings. “Remember when Aunt Jo was selling her house to Dad, and she came to visit us in California? I asked her then. I had her tell me about every fox encounter she’s ever had.”

“Whatever for?!” Santa exclaimed. “She’s never met any on the Island, right?”

“No, but ...” Shell cupped the grass matting in her hands. “About the time Aunt Jo decided to move, I began dreaming ...” She glanced up at the rustling leaves of the enormous black poplar trees that lined the long driveway. “I have *dreams* about foxes.” The words dropped out—softly.

“You do?” Annie said. She sprinkled grass clippings into the air like fairy dust.

“Yeah,” Shell said slowly. “About all kinds of foxes—different kinds of foxes from what you’d find when you’re awake. In my dreams they’re called ‘bard foxes’—you know,” she gestured to Santa, “—like how you say that Shakespeare is called ‘the Bard’.”

Propping herself on her elbows, Shell’s voice heightened in excitement. “All kinds of bard foxes exist—I mean, when I dream about them. Barred foxes, spelled b-a-r-r-e-d, are foxes that are striped red and white. Swirl foxes have red curlicues on white fur, Dappled foxes are red with white polka-dots, and White-Headed foxes are all red with white heads. But it was the Red Fox that tickled my nose last night—with a feather or a leaf, I’m not sure which—and it woke me up.”

“I dreamed about wild teapots last night,” Annie sighed. “A whole herd of them, jangling through the upper wood. Oh, last night must have been heavenly if we were dreaming such things!”

“Annie, you’re weird!” Santa said. “And that’s pretty weird, too, Shell. When did you get so inventive? I’ve never heard of bard foxes before, or Dappled or Swirl. Or of red foxes that tickle noses.”

“Well, of course you haven’t,” Shell said, miffed at the suggestion that she was unimaginative. “They’re in *my* dreams, not yours.”

“Don’t you think we ought to at least take a look at Shell’s poop?” Annie asked.

“Ew, gross!” and “What?!” Santa’s and Shell’s voices crashed in midair.

“The fox poop, the fox poop,” Annie said hastily. “Boy, you guys are noisy!”

“I think the technical word for animal poop is ‘scat’,” Santa said in her superior-to-little-sister voice. “By all means, let’s see this *scat*. And let’s hurry up, because we really ought to hoof it if we’re going to catch the direct bus to Seattle.”

“Hoof it?” Shell arched an eyebrow. “Are we horses now?”

But before Santa could respond, Annie leaped to her feet.

“The bookstore!” she shouted, and broke into song: “I want to go to the Inside Bay, or maybe just to Books Overway—”

Shell, completely familiar with Annie’s poems and songs after living three weeks on Yonder Island, joined in with full and emphatic voice.

“—or maybe up to the Island Bookshop, or maybe down to Powell’s—”

“Come on, guys,” Santa struggled to interrupt. “We have a two mile walk ahead of us. Sing on the way!”

But Shell and Annie had arrived at the dramatic finale: “Oh! Oh! Oh! Oh—!”

Letting out a sigh, Annie hugged her daypack in a fit of rapture.

With the Bookshop Chant complete Shell grabbed a stick and pointed toward the road.

“The poop—I mean scat—is up near the head of the driveway.” Shouldering her daypack she led the way up the slope. “It’s at just the right place for a fox to show up. We have the forest on that side, and the field on this side, and the chicken coop over there.” Shell gestured left, then around, and then right. “As you can see, there’s a kind of animal crossroads here.” She jabbed at narrow paths criss-crossing the grass.

“Raccoons,” Santa gestured imperiously. “They den in that cedar over there.” She pointed to a tree beyond an alder- and blackberry-shrouded pond.

“Look, Santa. See the bits of fur and bone? And the length—the *style* of this scat?”

“Style! Whoever heard of poop as having style?”

With a stick Shell prodded the object in question. “And it’s in the middle of the field,” she said. “That—” another prod with the stick, “—is *not* raccoon scat.”

“And you’re the big expert?” Santa said.

“Yes!” Shell said. Then: “No!” She paused. “Aunt Jo must have told me.” But another figure superimposed itself on her thoughts: a giant of a man with a snowy beard and a kindly eye.

“Aunt Jo knows about scat,” Santa gave a curt nod, “being a wildlife expert and running a nature school and all.”

“Right,” Shell shook away the dream-image. She plucked at the Nature Ways t-shirt she happened to be wearing, a gift from their aunt. “Anyway, I’m sure Aunt Jo ... or someone ... told me that raccoons tend to have latrines—you know, toilets—near their dens, or at the base of trees. Or maybe I figured it out myself.”

“You’re right about raccoon latrines,” Santa said. “But you couldn’t have figured out about them on your own.” Her voice had become lofty again. “You were born and bred in the ’burbs. That was your native habitat until May Eve.”

“Hey, we had raccoons in our neighborhoods! Lots of them! Mountain lions, too, sometimes, and rattlesnakes.”

Annie squeaked.

“We even had foxes once in awhile.” Shell glared at Santa. “Anyway,” She straightened. “I intend to use my birthday money to buy a book about this sort of thing—scat, that is.”

“A book about poop,” Annie gave a dreamy sigh. “Animal poop. How luscious.”

“Annie,” Santa said, hands on hips. “You are disgusting!”

With a determined fierceness that surprised her, Shell strode up to the road. “Come on, cousins. On we go!”

## LEAF 2

### FOX WALK OVERTOWN

THE COUSINS MARCHED up the Farm-To-Market Road, and on past the forest of red alder, Douglas-fir, western redcedar, and bigleaf maple. The tree names (including their scientific designations) had been carefully drilled into Shell's brain by Santa. Annie had introduced the trees themselves to Shell by way of hugs of the trunks, and through the scents and tastes of leaves, needles, and even bark. Flipping open a stack of guidebooks to appropriate pages to verify her statements, Santa had emphatically assured Shell that the trees were not—she repeated, absolutely not—poisonous. As Shell nodded a hello to *Acer macrophyllum* (aka bigleaf maple) and to *Pseudo-something menzie-something* (okay, Doug-fir), she realized, not for the first time, how unusual her life had become since she'd arrived on Yonder.

“Teacher Annie and Teacher Santa,” Shell murmured. The bigleaf maple leaves fluttered as if to say, *Us, too, of course!*

The Farm-To-Market Road bordered the northeast section of the Hundred Acre Wood Farm Community—the gathering of homes, fields, and forest that provided a generous portion of the

neighborhood's food and living needs. The cousins crossed the road. Now in single file, they delighted in the mist of Wet Place Creek as it tumbled into a culvert to their left.

"All the birds!" Santa spread her arms. "They're just nattering away—'thank you, thank you, thank you!'"

"They're what?" asked Shell.

"You know," Annie said. "Singing their gratitude—their list in song about why they're so happy. They sing their thanksgiving in the morning especially as a way of greeting and blessing the day. 'Thank you, earth, for my good night's sleep. Thank you, worm, you are oh so delicious!'"

"That's what the birds are doing when they sing?" Shell watched a flight of small birds dart over the highway. "They're being thankful?"

"Well, yeah, what do you think they're doing?" Santa said.

"I don't know—reestablishing their territory?"

"Thank you, oh sun," Annie pranced ahead, flapping her arms. "You warm my feathers. Thank you, stars, I gulp down your songs and stories—"

Santa nodded sagely despite Annie's antics.

Gazing from one cousin to the other, Shell shook her head. To Santa she said with reproof, "And you doubt the presence of foxes on Yonder Island."

"Car!" Annie shouted.

They veered as far to the right as possible without tumbling into the ditch. A mini-van swung past.

"Find your feet!" Santa yelled.

At that moment a raspy growl launched up the road.

“Ugh, what is that noise?” Santa shouted, slapping her hands over her ears. “What’s happening to peace in the country?”

Stepping into the road, Shell looked ahead. She noted a set of fluorescent orange signs and safety cones, a few vehicles, men in hard hats, and a flagman. “It’s just some kind of tree service.”

With a mouse squeak, Annie darted into the road and dragged Shell back to the shoulder.

Shell laughed. “Annie, it’s okay. I know how to watch for cars!”

Santa scowled. “I don’t understand why the workers have to make so much noise.”

“They’re probably just making sure no big trees come down on the road during the next winter storms,” Annie said. “To help keep us safe.”

“We don’t need ...” Face red, Santa flailed her hands, “... *dragons* devouring the Hundred Acre Wood!”

Shell began, “That machine is hardly a dragon—”

A roar of blades gnashing tree limbs erupted.

“That reminds me.” Maintaining her stride, Santa pulled off her daypack and fished through the top. “Ah. Time to call Mom.”

“How does tree shredding remind you to call Aunt Jen?” Shell asked.

Santa flicked her fingers in an impatient response. She keyed up her small hand-held radio, currently sporting a stubby “rubber duck” antenna. “WB6RRU this is N6SCM.”

A voice crackled across the handie-talkie. “*N6SCM, this is WB6RRU.*”

Both Santa and Aunt Jen were amateur radio operators. They had licenses to operate their radios on certain frequencies, with call signs as part of that licensing.

“Hi Mom, just letting you know that we’re on our way. We’ve turned the corner onto Crockett Road.”

*“Only that far? I thought you took off ages ago!”*

“Relax, Mom. We have plenty of time to catch the bus. We had important business to tend to in the Mental Village—you know, the woods—”

“Fir needle tea at my Teahouse,” Annie called. “And marking details for a map we’re drawing—Santa’s Airport, Shell’s Joke Shop, and my Teahouse, of course—” Yanking a many-times folded piece of paper from her pocket, she waved it as if her mother could see it.

Santa flapped her arm to signal Annie to quiet down. “Then Shell had to show us some scat. Scat, Mom, s-c-a-t. You know, animal poop? Yeah. Anyway, we’re on our way. We just got away from all that tree chomping noise up the road.”

*“Oh yes, the Bard Hats are clearing the way. They’re laying new connective lines to increase the power flow. The trees have gotten tangled and the old power lines are too feeble—”*

“Bard Hats? You mean Hard Hats? I’m not sure I’m hearing you correctly.” Santa scowled. “Anyway, I’ll let you know when we get to the bus stop.”

*“—be sure to check in—”*

“Mom, I just told you I would! N6SCM—clear!”

Santa held down the power key to turn off her handie-talkie. She stuffed it back in her pack. “Honestly, I don’t know how many



times I discussed this with her! I made her a plan. Detailed! We're catching the 118 express bus uptown at 8:41. The bus will board the nine a.m. ferry, disembark at 9:20, and proceed overtown. It will drop us off in front of the Inside Bay Bookstore at approximately 9:40. I'll call when we reach the bookstore and when we leave, and at every point of significance, including our excursion Undertown, until we're back on Yonder. I told her about twenty times—she even has my very detailed plan pinned onto the wall!"

"She's just worried," Annie said.

Shell paused. "Why should she be worried? You've done this before, right? Gone on your own to downtown Seattle? Er, " Shell fished for the proper Yonder lingo, rigorously drilled into her by Santa, who, if not always correct, was very precise. "I mean, you've gone before by yourselves *overtown*, right?"

"Never," Annie sighed happily.

"She's only letting us do this because you're with us, Shell," said Santa, disgruntled. "Your dad assured her that you have sufficient city experience skills."

"City experience," Shell said. "Ha! Dad barely let me take the bus around town, much less to a bustling city center. And I lived in the suburbs, supposedly the gentler, kinder human habitation."

"Well, anyway," Santa said. "He seemed to think you could assist us poor country mice in navigating city buses and streets." With a sniff she gestured at Annie. "You know that we barely know whether to look left or right when we cross the street."

"You're kidding, right?" Shell asked, then shook her head. After all, Yonder had no traffic lights. But it did have a four-way stop that

made crossing the street a harrowing experience. None of the drivers ever seemed to have a clue as to whose turn it was legally. On the other hand, Santa really could be pulling her leg.

“Dad could probably tell how nervous Aunt Jen was to let us go.” Shell observed. “But he knows how organized you are, Santa. I bet you even scoped out our route using the satellite mapping images on the internet, right?”

“Darn right I did,” Santa said, her voice smug.

“Mom just knows you get stage fright when you cross busy streets,” Annie said.

Santa spluttered.

“And she’s afraid of bad guys.”

“Well, I told her how we’d deal with that,” Santa said angrily. “I have a whole huge plan.”

Shell laughed. “I’m sure you do.”

“Wait until you hear it. It’s great—completely opposite to what Mom’s afraid of.”

“Wh-what’s she afraid of?” quavered Annie.

Santa ignored her. “Okay, listen to this girls.” And she swung around, planting herself smack in front of the other two. “Instead of being hapless prey to the evil city predators, we’ll be superheroes in disguise—a superhero team. You know, like the Animal Force.”

“Uh,” uttered Annie.

“We’ll have super-powers?” Shell asked. “Cool! And what are our powers, oh, cousin of genius?”

“Oh, it’s obvious,” Santa said. And she paused, clearly waiting for them to catch on.

“Is it?” Shell said. “You mean, Annie will brew a potent tea that will render them full of peace and good will. Santa, you’ll soar around on wings of thought, confusing and bemusing bad guys with the details of all your plans, and I’ll—” she paused. What would her great power be?

Santa shook her head. “Why do you think I had you bring your pocket knives?”

“Pocket knives aren’t super-powers,” Annie said.

“Yeah, but they can be our *instruments* of power, like light sabers or magic wands. When threatened we wield them.”

Shell laughed “Santa, you dope! We’re not going to be able to fight anybody off with pocket knives.”

“Our training starts now, as we walk to the bus stop!”

“It takes two hands to pull out the blade!”

“Are we going to be fighting?” Annie sounded scared.

“No,” Shell said. “We’re not. Santa, no way could you have told your mom this part, because she’d have known it was just plain dumb.”

“Okay, okay! Boy, Shell, you have no sense of humor. You’re the proprietor of the Mental Village’s Joke Shop, and you can’t even take a joke!”

As Santa’s face reddened, Shell realized that her cousin truly had come up with this whacky idea about being superheroes in the city keeping a lookout for bad guys, and using pocket knives as some kind of magical defense. Sometimes Santa’s flights of fancy took her into left field—which was odd since she presented herself as so matter-of-fact most of the time. But this was over-the-top even for her

own contradictory nature. *She's just nervous about going to the city,* Shell decided. She took a breath.

“So, great idea number two is ....?” Gently Shell pulled out her pocket knife. Blade still nestled in the handle she sketched a large “2” in the air.

“Just spy work,” Santa said. “We’ll be like spies and notice everything, everyone. People beside us, behind us, two blocks in any direction.”

Shell nodded. Yes, that was more like it. “That will work. We use Owl Eyes and Deer Ears.” She named the practices that nature teacher Aunt Jo had taught all of them years ago for sneaking in the woods.

“And Fox Walk, of course!” Annie shifted into a gliding, soft-footed stride.

“Exactly what I told Mom!” Tugging a paper from her pocket, Santa waved it at the girls. “See, it’s in my plan.” She stabbed at the sheet with her finger. “Three pairs of eyes, three pairs of ears. Watchful and alert!”

“We’ll be like cats,” Annie sighed.

“Right! The way cats are when they seem like they’re totally ignoring you, and yet they’re ready to spring away in a moment!”

“I’m amazed that your mom didn’t make Annie and me co-sign this great document with vows and blood.” Shell paused as Annie shrieked in protest. “Well, I guess she did quiz me pretty thoroughly about my city experience, now that I think of it. You know, like do I know how to catch buses, and even more important, how to get off of them.”

Annie squawked.

Santa cast a scornful glance at her sister. “Yeah, I may get ‘stage fright’, as she says, at street corners, but Annie gets as brittle as burnt toast when she gets on and off escalators. I think she’ll have the same reaction when we’re across the water and it’s time to get off the bus.”

“Across the water,” Shell echoed. “Is that more Island lingo?”

Santa ignored her. “We’ll have to position ourselves as close to the front as we can. Just beyond the space reserved for the Elders.”

“Elders? Now that’s *got* to be more Island lingo. You mean ‘senior citizens’, right?”

“No, I mean ‘Elders,’” Santa said. “The folks with long life wisdom.”

“Sounds like senior citizens to me.”

“Well, yes and no. ‘Senior citizens’ is a term related more toward age, and yes, respect. But ‘Elders’ refers specifically to those who steward vision and peace in a community, and on Yonder Island, our over-sixty-fives aren’t just senior citizens, they have a specific role and place in—”

“—the front of the bus?” Shell grinned.

Santa spluttered yet again. “That’s not—!”

“Anyway,” Shell hastened. “We can always move when the—*Elders*—board the bus.”

“Better not to have to move at all!”

“Okay, okay.” With a bow, Shell said, “You’re the boss, Santa. On this expedition across the water I follow you.”

Santa gave a curt nod. They hiked on in silence.

As they crossed the Washboard Road (so called because the road was as wavy as a washboard, shaking cars as they bumped down the hill), they heard the pelting of feet. A young girl ran up from a farmhouse driveway to meet them. She had curly brown hair and a wide, smiling face.

“Maya Pasidamaya!” cried Annie.

“Hi Maya. How’s the supermarket?” said Santa. Maya’s parents owned a bustling grocery store in the heart of—er, uptown.

“Hi Candy Cane, Hi Pasta, Hi Angel Food Cake. Pasidamaya Family Market is great, thank you very much. I slept in it last night!”

“Isn’t there some health regulation against sleeping in a supermarket?” Santa asked.

Maya shrugged. “Well, Papa had us sleep in the staff room. But I got up in the middle of the night and moved my bedroll smack in the center of Aisle Seven. Ah, you should have heard the bins of bulk food murmuring to each other, the dried fruit engaging in sweet singing, barely audible. The nuts and grains rumbling and grumbling, the jelly beans and assorted candies ribbing each other and making dumb jokes—”

“Maya, you’re weird,” sighed Santa. She turned to Shell. “Can you believe she’s only seven years old? She talks like she’s eighty-seven! She, however, is *not* a junior edition Elder.”

“I’m not seven. I’m six and eleven-twelfths. My birthday is next month. I *don’t* think you’re invited.” Maya jogged alongside them, trying to keep up with Santa’s long-legged strides.

Santa gave a fake choke. “Woe is me. You don’t mean that, Maya?”

Maya only grinned. “Anyway, about the bulk foods.” She resumed her tale. “Well, it was all very congenial until the Green Knight showed up.”

*Wham!* It was as if Shell had slammed into an invisible wall. “The Green Knight?!”

Shell swung her closed pocket knife at the air, as if flailing for protection against her own thoughts. She tried to make sense of flashing images of metal-bladed weapons, fierce red eyes, lips drawn back from laughing teeth. Her voice rasped. “What did you say?”

Maya walked backward. She looked directly into Shell’s eyes. “You heard me, Pasta. And you know what it means.” Gripping her hands around an imaginary object, she pushed back and forth through the air. “You’d better sharpen that pocket knife of yours. Green Knight Meat Haus And Boucherie is coming to you. Fox-in-the-Field Produce is in danger!”

Half of Maya’s words were nonsense, but the other half weren’t. Words, images, and knowings reverberated through Shell’s being. Something about a Green Knight—the Green Knight. Something about a fox—a real fox, a red fox. A hunt, maybe through time, maybe through space—it felt like that. Huge and horrid and twisted and tangled. Shell choked.

With a jolt in her stride, Annie emitted a brief, “*Urk!*” And Santa came to a full stop.

“What is it about foxes today,” Fists thrust against her hips, Santa glared at each girl in turn—Annie, Shell, and Maya—as if they were totally in cahoots with one another.

# SANTA'S LIST OF WHAT ANNIE IS

*... when she is getting on and off the bus:*

brittle as burnt toast

stiff as burnt crust

petrified as ancient wood

as stiff as death

collapsed like a fallen tree

stuck as a pole through a fence

as stuck as a boulder in the mud

as trapped as an axe in a stump

COMING SOON TO A FARMSTAND NEAR YOU:

Santa's Island Lexicon—maybe!



ATTENTION!

## ANIMAL FORMS

**S**HELL HERE WITH A SPECIAL REPORT. The powers that be (that would be our benign dictator, Santa, and her glittery assistant, Annie) insist that we clarify what we mean by certain terminology, so that you, too, can be super-powered in the city, or super-stealthy in the forest.

The trick is to become a member of the Animal Force. Okay, so I now I have to inform you about the AF. See, Annie and Santa made up a comic book series ages ago that they wrote and drew and sent me in the mail (yes, a very old-fashioned way of doing things). The Animal Force comic was about these superhero people who have special animal powers. So, among these do-gooders are folk like Eagle Man who has the keen vision and massively sharp and strong talons of an eagle, and Otter Woman, who slides and glides and who is as slippery and laughing as an otter, and so on.

The cool thing (so my informants, aka Santa and Annie, tell me—oh, and our Aunt Jo, too, who helped us play around with all this super-duper-stuff when we were knee-high to frogs) is that *any* human can cloak his or herself in animal nature. We can *all* become

## BECAUSE OF THE RED FOX

members of the Animal Force, and so have cool abilities and perceptions that can help us in anything we do. Nice idea, huh?

For entering the city or the forest, Annie, Santa, and I have chosen to “clothe” ourselves in five specific animal forms (detailed below). Try them yourself, and see if you, too, become super-charged with Animal Force!

### **Secret Animal Form #1: Owl Eyes**

By imagining that we are owls with enormous eyes and a large circle of sight, we can widen our field of vision to notice even the very slightest of movements (watch out if you’re a mouse!). Hold out your arms and wriggle your fingers. Move your hands like a windmill above, below and beside you to get a sense of just how wide your visual perception can be. How wide can you hold out your arms and still see your wriggling fingers? Owl Eyes! Maintain that wide-angle vision and now add ....

### **Secret Animal Form #2: Deer Ears**

Imagine that you have the large sensitive ears of a deer! You can even cup your hands around your ears to intensify what you can hear. Listen for the nearest sound, the farthest, the softest, the loudest. Listen in every direction, in a circle around you. Do you hear the wind? Are birds singing near you? Are they calling out in alarm? From which direction? Okay, so now you’re a human with Owl Eyes and Deer Ears. You’ve got quite a look already! Now let’s add on a ...

### **Secret Animal Form #3: Dog Nose**

You know how excited and sloppy dogs are. They love to sniff everything and anything, even supremely gross things. They practically slurp things up with their noses! Imagine that you have

the supercharged sense of smell of a dog, and that all the scents that you inhale give you powerful and complicated information about the world around you. What if you could smell all that you can see, hear, or touch?

#### **Secret Animal Form #4: Raccoon Touch**

Raccoons have sensitive paws that give them all kinds of information as they move along and touch and grasp. We have them, too—sensitive hands, that is, not paws! If you had no sense of sight, hearing, smell, or taste, what might your sense of touch reveal to you about your surroundings? What is the feel of the air on your skin? The feel of your clothes? What are the textures on a tree, your favorite chair? What does dirt feel like? How about the different foods on your dinner plate?

So, now you have Owl Eyes, Deer Ears, Dog Nose, and Raccoon Touch. It's time to—(don't shriek, Santa! You know that this is the next "step", ha ha, so to speak!)—add on your fox feet.

#### **Secret Animal Form #5: Fox Walk**

Foxes are known for their sneaky quiet ways. As a fox, you walk in a gliding motion, keeping the weight of your body on your back leg, as you carefully step forward. Do you hear a crackle as you put your foot down? Pause! Either move your foot to a different place or set it down gently. Aim for silence and smoothness. Ideally as you Fox Walk with your full Animal Force senses, you'll be aware of many things around you, and you'll be able to stop short (and not fall over!) in an instant. Use the Fox Walk and your animal senses to move so stealthily that you practically become invisible! I'm not making this up. It really *is* possible!

## BECAUSE OF THE RED FOX

You can add other animal senses and forms, too, if you'd like. Snake Taste, for instance, is a way you can gather information from the air through your tastebuds. How does your favorite animal (bird, fish, etc.) inspire you with its super-charged way of being? What happens when you put on that animal form and prowl the neighborhood?

—Oh, what's that, Santa? Oh, of course—well, our Readers know all about that! ... Oh, very well ...

Okay, Readers. Santa wants me to make this public service announcement:

(Here it is. Ahem.)

“Accomplishment and expertise in Animal Forms is no substitute for Common Sense.”

That said (or typed), I must say, that while what Santa suggests may be true, I do feel that practicing Animal Forms (and mixing them all together), can actually help *feed* one's common sense.

There you have it, Readers. This is Shell Wakefield, returning you to our regularly scheduled Leaf!

## 3RD LEAF

### ABOUT TIME

**S**ANTA MIGHT BE TAKING Maya's not-so-casual mention of "fox" personally, but Shell felt as if her head had erupted into zigzags of flame. But not, as one might presume, due to the mention of "fox".

"Green Knight," Shell gasped. "What do you know about the Green Knight?"

"Big as a redcedar in its twelfth year of growth," said Maya. "Red fierce eyes, green skin, green hair, green clothes. All over: green. Except for those eyes. And those yellow teeth."

"You're joking, right?" Santa said. "What would something like that be doing after hours in a grocery store?!"

"Grabbing a can of Jolly-O Giant green beans," Maya said. "What else?"

"He doesn't eat organic?" Annie asked.

"What are you all talking about?!" Santa shouted, exasperated.

With a swallow, Shell tried to keep her voice even. "So what happened when this—Green Knight—showed up in Aisle Seven?"

"Aisle Three, actually. Vegetables. Soups. The peas and corn were all of a dither when he popped in. After he grabbed the beans,

he stalked over to the deli section, yanked open the refrigerator, grabbed a ham and hacked it to pieces with his battle axe. The noise was horrific—all the hot dogs yapping and howling. The Green Knight scarfed down all that ham. Next he grabbed a wheel of cheese—Cheshire, of course—hacked that up and tossed bits to the dogs. Then he whacked open the can of beans and just quaffed it. Yuck. What a mess.

“Off he tromped to dessert, Aisle Five, freezer section. Grabbed a stack of Fox Hill Frozen Fudge Cakes and downed those, quick as you please—the cardboard, too, but not the plastic.”

Maya reached for what the girls called a “wishwillow”—a large floating dandelion-like puff—that wafted overhead. “I grabbed an industrial mop from one of the behind-the-scenes rooms and soaped and sponged the night away. Can’t believe Papa slept through it all.”

Santa snatched the seed.

“I don’t understand,” Santa dangled the wishwillow by one strand of silk, giving it a shake. “What would something like that—a big weird man, you say?—what would some huge guy be doing popping into a grocery store?”

“It’s obvious.” Maya riveted her attention on Shell. “What better gateway for a hunter in these modern times than the supermarket. And that’s what the Green Knight is, am I right?” she asked Shell. “A hunter. *The Hunter*.”

“Well, yeah.” Shell felt about as dizzy as the twirling wishwillow. “The Green Knight ... is ... certainly ... hunting ....”

“What, the red fox?” Santa said, in that annoyed tone of hers.

“Of course,” Maya said. “The red fox and—” she jabbed at Shell.

Images skittered into Shell's mind like snippets of the kind of dream you tell yourself you'd better not forget, but you do so anyway. A thick-chested towering green-skinned, green-haired snarling man. Red eyes and bloody hands, a huge corroded iron axe. A sly and mischievous red fox. And, like snatches of dream, the images scuttled away even as she tried to tack them into place in her memory.

Shell shook her head. "The Hunter hunting me? I don't know what you're talking about."

But she had said *The Hunter*, and those words thumped and reverberated around inside her like a basketball in an empty corridor.

Maya put her hands on her hips. "Remember soon, Pasta. If you know what's good for the world. Gotta run!" And with that, she dashed back the way she had come.

"She is totally nuts," Santa said, releasing the wishwillow.

Annie's eyes were wide. "A green scary giant is hunting you, Shell?"

Shell gave a shaky laugh. "Oh, come on. Santa's right. *That* is crazy. And how would Maya know about it even if it were true?"

"She's of the Weird," Santa said loftily. "Weird, as in the Old English word *Wyrd*—"

"Old English is Dragon English, Shell," Annie interrupted. "Humans used to speak that kind of English, I don't know, I guess more than a thousand years ago."

"Annie, what are you talking about?" Santa protested. "You're right about humans and when they spoke Old English, but what's the stuff about dragons?"

“Dragons spoke it, too,” Annie said. “Of course they did! Didn’t you tell me that a bunch of those poems from way back then were full of riddles? And of course, dragons speak in riddles—everyone knows that.”

“Everyone?” Shell wrinkled her forehead, bewildered.

“Ugh,” Santa said. She swung toward Shell. “Wyrd has to do with doom, destiny, and fate, as in ‘everything must come to an end’. That’s Maya, all right—and Annie, too—my dooms for sure. Annie doesn’t quite walk in the regular world, and Maya *certainly* doesn’t.”

*Which world, then?* Shell almost voiced the question but thought the better of it.

Pocketing her knife, she resumed walking. “Are we going to make the bus, Santa? It must be awfully late by now.”

Glancing at her watch, Santa shrieked. “Oh no, we never should have let Maya distract us with all her wild tales!”

“Or looked for fox scat, or stopped to have a grass fight in the field, or to drink tea in my Teahouse.” Annie recounted the activities of the morning on her fingers.

“My plan! My beautiful plan!”

Shell nodded, befuddled.

*Tha-clock, ca-lop! Cloppety clop, dattery plop.*

“Hark,” Annie danced in place. “We’re saved!”

“The draft horses! And Doc North!”

Shell turned. Drawing an old-fashioned wagon, a team of enormous dark horses approached from down the road.

“Who,” she asked, “is Doc North?”

“One of our neighbors, of course! And one of our island Elders.”



Santa waved to the horses' driver. In scale with the horses, the man had a large face and large hands himself.

"Whoa," the man called to his horses, and they drew up to the girls.

Annie sprang up and down.

"Doc, Doc, we're about to miss our bus. Are you heading toward town?"

"Well, you're in luck," Doc rumbled from above. "I'm headin' to town for some essentials at the Hardware Store. Climb on in. I'm sure the boys and I can get you there in time."

The girls scrambled into the back of the wagon. With a jingling of the harness, the huge dark horses with hooves like platters continued on their way.

"Wow," Shell breathed as the draft horses thudded toward town. She felt enveloped in a warm horsey smell. "This is island living!"

"It's great, isn't it," Santa said as they rattled along. "But I'm afraid even Doc's draft horses aren't going to get us to the bus on time."

"We'll see about that," Doc called back cheerfully.

Minutes earlier, the horses pulled up at the YMCA, and the girls leaped out of the wagon. "Bye, Doc! Thank you! Thank you, Chomp and Stomp!"

With a wave of a large hand (not green, not bloody, not mean), Doc urged his horses forward, and continued down the highway.

"Awesome!" Shell crowed.

"And look," Annie pointed at her watch. "It's now only 8:35 instead of 8:45."

“What? No way!” Santa whipped around.

“How did that happen?” Shell stared at Annie’s wrist.

“Island magic.” Annie kissed the air.

And sure enough, the bus showed up right on the newly adjusted time. Sharing a last bemused glance, Shell and Santa, with Annie close behind, piled onto the bus. They paid their fares, grabbed their transfers, and settled in with the commuters on their way to Seattle.

Up the island the bus rocked, belched, and squealed, past fields, farms, and forest. It lurched down ferry hill to the north end dock, and past the line of cars waiting to board the ferry. With elephantine precision it lumbered onto the huge green-and-white ferry, which to Shell appeared to be a crouching and kindly (she hoped) beast, gathering cars and people into its mouth.

As the line of cars trailed in from behind, the girls left the bus and climbed upstairs to the passenger deck. The girls headed to the Faerie Food Cafe. They picked out turkey and avocado panini, and cups of Minglement tea, Girl Grey™ being the agreed upon favorite.

“Good food, good health!” said Santa.

“Douglas-fir trees,” Shell murmured, “bigleaf maple, draft horses, the car ferry, Doc—well, his hands. The Green Knight ...” She made herself laugh. “Is everything large on Yonder?”

“Last week you were saying that everything was small!” Santa said. “The town, the population, the roads ...”

“I guess I did,” Shell said. “But everything looks different this week. Mmm.” She sipped her tea.

The ferry swished forward. The loudspeaker crackled to life. “Welcome aboard the Washington State Ferries.” Mouthing along

with the words, the cousins launched into expressive hand gestures. Yes, Shell's island education had included ferry announcement scripts. "May I have your attention, please. For security reasons, we ask you to not leave children, luggage, packages or other personal belongings unattended during this crossing—"

At this point Shell executed a complicated zigzag maneuver with her arms. Santa nodded vigorously in approval.

"—Upon arrival at our final destination, all passengers *must* disembark the vessel. For your information, smoking is not allowed on the ferry *at any time*. Thank for your attention, and we hope you enjoy your trip!"

"Are we unattended children?" asked Annie.

"Hush!" Santa flicked her fingers at her sister. "Here, 15-puzzles all around." Fishing three plastic shapes from her daypack, she dealt the puzzles like cards. "Time for frustration!"

For the next few minutes, the cousins shifted the little numbered squares of their puzzles, grumbling and growling as they attempted to set them in order.

"Hey," Annie said, setting aside her puzzle. "Did you guys ever decide what books you're looking for?"

"A book on animal tracks and sign," Shell said promptly. "Remember? The book on animal poop?"

"Oh yes!" Closing her eyes, Annie inhaled as if delighted at the scent.

Shell nudged her with her shoe. "And you?"

"Teapots," Annie sighed. "How to identify teapots. The rarer the better!"

“I thought you were after a book on the Camino de Santiago!” Santa said.

“What’s a ‘Camino de ...’” Shell began.

“A pilgrimage,” said Santa. “A five-hundred mile walk in Spain, and Annie has this thing about wanting to map the pilgrimage onto the highways and byways of Yonder. Mom did a short pilgrimage once, and that inspired Annie to imagine a long pilgrimage in a short place. Or something.” Santa rolled her eyes.

“Right now I’m thinking about teapots.” Annie folded her hands. “When I get to the bookstore, I might be back to the Camino. Then again, I might leave the Camino until our next trip, whenever that is. Or maybe I’ll leave the teapots ...”

“But I still don’t know what—” Shell began.

“Let’s buy a book on chickens!” Santa interrupted.

Shell groaned. Her cousins were nuts about chickens. At times totally over-the-top obsessed. And Santa intended for Shell to become as crazy about chickens and raising chickens as they were.

Santa leaned forward. “If we have any extra money, we’ll get that chicken book. We’ll make sure it covers all the important stuff so we’ll know what to do when we order our baby chicks. How to make chicken tractors, chicken coops, brooder boxes—”

“We already made a brooder box. It’s in the garage.”

Santa waved her hand. “That’s only a rigged up cardboard box. I’m talking about something with wood and wire. We’ll get a book that covers all the needs for the chicks and chickens, as well as how to kill and cook them—the chickens, that is. Recipes for eggs. All the good stuff.”

“You want to *kill* your chickens?” asked Shell.

“Well, of course,” Santa said. “We eat chicken, so it makes sense to be part of the whole process. I think the Buff Orpingtons—,” and she grinned with a bit of mischief, because all three girls thought they might order one or two of this breed, “—are especially good to eat.”

“You’re not killing any chickens I get,” said Shell.

“No, you can do it yourself when the time comes.”

“Gack! I just want eggs from my chickens, not chicken itself!”

“Yeah, but in a few years they won’t be laying as well, and so that’s when you kill your chickens for stew. I’m getting a few extra chickens, cockerels, so I—we—can eat them when they mature and start crowing, say at four months old—”

“That’s not my plan for my chickens,” Annie said.

“Oh, man,” Santa said. “Didn’t either of you read my twenty point proposal when I brought up the whole ordering chickens idea?”

“To be honest,” Shell said, “no.”

Santa slammed her palm on the table. “I don’t just write those things for my health! I do a lot of research and thinking. Besides we’re part of a Farm Community! Chickens aren’t pets—they’re working members of the family.”

“Until we axe them,” Shell said, sardonically.

“Of course! That’s the way it is on farms! And in the so-called ‘real world’. Chickens don’t just show up plucked and belly up in the meat department. They have lives, and those lives can be either good or hideous. You know as well as I do that our chickens will have a good life with us, as opposed to the poor chickens in those factories!”

“Oh, please,” Annie said. “I’m still eating. Can we talk about commercially grown chickens later?”

“Okay, we can talk about them over dinner,” Santa said with a gleam in her eye.

“Santa, no!” Shell said, vehement. “No—more—talk—about—this—subject! Not—over—food!” She slammed her own fist on the table. Santa could be way too prone to highlighting unpleasant details.

With a sniff, Santa folded her arms. But in the next moment she loosened and leaned forward.

“Anyway, are we agreed?” Santa fixed her eyes on Shell. “We pool our money and buy a book on chickens—in addition to our own choices, of course.”

“If we must,” Shell sighed just as Annie chirped: “Here, here!”

Shell glanced out the window, noticing the sweep of a woodland park and the topple of shorefront houses. “Hey, we’re practically to the West End Ferry Dock. Shouldn’t we get back to the bus?”

Santa panicked. “Quick, slide those puzzles over here. Wrap up those sandwiches, toss out those cups! Move it, girls!”

They charged down the steps, and past a row of parked cars. At the front of the ferry they reached the bus, and clambered on board. Once inside they settled in with plenty of excitement.

“My gosh, we’re heading onto land,” Santa said. “Into West End and points north and east!”

Shell rolled her eyes. Then she nudged her cousins, “Hey,” she whispered, as a regal dark man with a sweep of white hair and tiny glasses perched on his nose boarded the bus. He leaned slowly up

each step, making use of a beautifully carved and polished hardwood cane. He settled next to a round Asian woman with papery skin who sipped from a clay cup filled with some earthy-scented beverage. “Are they Elders, too?”

Annie nodded vigorously.

“A day trip to Seattle, dears?” the woman called.

“Yes, Mrs. Wren,” Santa replied. “To the Inside Bay Bookstore!”

“Ah, the unusual and wondrous have always moved into the mundane by way of tales, books, all manner of imaginative arts.” Mr. Ohm’s rich voice rumbled in resonance with the bus engine. “No doubt you’ll encounter magic in such a many-storied place.” His glasses glinted as his gaze fixed on each of the girls.

“Hmm, yes, we think so, Mr. Ohm” Santa said, settling back as if taken aback.

But the regal man and the wizened woman both waved in a friendly way, and settled into a chat between themselves.

Off the ferry, along the dock, left onto Front Shore Drive. The bus roared and lurched and paused and continued on its way through West End and beyond. Shell realized that this was the first time she’d been off Yonder since she and her dad, Paul, had arrived on a lush rain-drenched May Day midmorning, her birthday.

*That’s funny,* she thought. *Didn’t we leave the Bay Area in autumn—in fact, actually on Halloween night?* So how come she and Dad had showed up on Yonder six months later, on May 1st? She tapped at the bus window glass, perplexed.

As houses and roads paraded past, Shell attempted to sort her thoughts. She and Dad had arrived on Yonder on her birthday! But

... they'd packed all their things, set off in the truck back when leaves had begun falling from the trees, and Shell would normally have been dressing up in costume for a night of spooky and silly fun with her friends ....

Shell felt a quiver in her gut. How could she have forgotten? She straightened slowly, bewildered. Shell and her father had been all set to travel to what Paul fancifully referred to as “mythic Wales”. Wales, the small British country bordering the west of England, was filled with tales and place names related to legend, including to that of the heroic King Arthur. Wales was also where Shell’s mother, Elinn, lived. Her parents had this arrangement—a little odd, maybe—where Shell lived several years with one parent, and then several years with the other. Now it was time for Shell to live with her Mom while Dad’s business took him elsewhere. Overseas, Shell guessed, though neither parent ever had much to say about the specifics of their lives when they were away from her.

But at the last minute, instead of catching a shuttle to the San Francisco Airport, they had caught a cab to their storage unit. Emptying the unit that was supposed to have held all their possessions for the next several years, they had loaded all of their belongings into a Haul-Your-Way truck and headed north instead.

“Change of plans,” Paul had explained, with flushed agitation. “Primewave—” He was referring to the company for which he worked, “—has been bought up by a multinational corporation—El Sol Source Macrosystems, have you heard of it?” He shoved a box against a stack already inside the truck. “El Sol has a branch in Seattle, and they want me working there now, in person, not out on special business.



They're reviving a project your mom and I worked on, before you were born ...." His eyes lit with fevered excitement.

"And of course Seattle is a hop-skip-and-a-jump from Yonder Island. So we're going to live in Jo's green church—" he gave a wild laugh that bewildered Shell as much as anything else he was saying, "—sooner rather than much, much later. I'll be able to commute to work by ferry."

"But what about Wales?" Shell asked. "What about *Mom*?"

"Oh, Shellie, things are shifting all over the place. Your mom and I are working together on it. And we even have backing now, from El Sol Source! Your Mom—" He gazed toward the north. "Yes, we'll meet your mom again soon, I promise you."

Night had settled in fast as they headed out of the San Francisco Bay Area in the moving truck. Soon they'd left jack o'lanterns and trick-or-treaters far behind. Up Interstate 680, across the Benicia Bridge to 580 to the 505 cut-off that fed onto Interstate 5, then on upstate through the Central Valley. Paul had literally driven all night while Shell slid in and out of sleep. Twice he stopped at a Winged Tires Feed And Fuel for gas for the truck and a push-button espresso for himself.

"At least I know what I'm getting." Pushing the tab on the plastic lid, Paul sighed in resignation and took a gulp of the potent mess. At home Paul made every effort to create the perfect cappuccino each morning with his Italian espresso machine. Nothing push-button for him.

Exhausted and confused Shell gazed out the window at a star-filled sky overlaid by patches of black—the mountains of the Siskiyou

Range that divided Oregon from California—and, from someplace else, maybe.

“Why are we heading north?” Shell mumbled once, snapping awake as Dad coaxed the lumbering Haul-Your-Way up the mountain grade. Sliding at the edge of sleep she blurted, “That’s where Yonder is, not Wales.”

“North to the Pacific Northwest,” Paul replied in a wistful voice. “The direction of heritage, ancestors, twilight, stories, and—condolence. That’s exactly where we’re headed.”

What was he talking about? Paul was not making any sense.

“Yonder isn’t Wales,” Shell said. Suddenly fearful that he was falling asleep at the wheel, she clutched her dad’s arm.

The memory and her words—had she just spoken them aloud?—jolted Shell back to the present and West Seattle.

“I can’t be remembering right,” Shell said under her breath. No way could she and Paul have left the San Francisco Bay Area on Halloween only to arrive on Yonder a night and a day later, on May 1st. And though Paul had said—had *promised*—that Shell would be reunited with her mom up here, he hadn’t mentioned her once since their arrival on Yonder. Where the heck was Mom?

What was going on with time anyway? Even scarier, what was going on with her memory? Why hadn’t she wondered about their journey north? Why hadn’t she thought to ask questions? She hadn’t even thought to ask where and how she and Elinn were going to meet up. Not in Wales, as she’d always assumed, but ... maybe on Yonder?

“Yonder Island isn’t Wales’.” Santa echoed in that matter-of-fact tone of hers. Shell had indeed spoken aloud. “Darn right it isn’t.”

## INTERLUDE

### AT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD FARM STAND

**T**HIS WEEK AT YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD Hundred Acre Wood Farm  
Community Farm Stand:

baby gourmet lettuce  
baby mustard greens  
kale greens and florets  
rhubarb  
asparagus  
leeks  
eggs

*Totally yummy!*

**Note** (*from Santa*): The above comment about so-called “yummy greens” reflects the opinions of a junior member of our farm community. Yes, that would be Annie. Greens are all well and good, essential and everything, but not, as she says “totally yummy”.

**Note 2** (*from Shell*): I happen to think Hundred Acre Farm Community greens are indeed “totally yummy”. You are so wrong, Santa.

**Note 3:** Urrr!

**Shell’s Note, 4th in the series:** Never mind, Santa. Let’s get on with the regularly scheduled ...

**Note 5** (*from Annie*): Wait! Wait! What about King Arthur. Don’t you think we should tell our farm food subscribers about King Arthur?

**Note 6** (*Santa here, trying to keep things sensible*): King Arthur has nothing to do with salad greens.

**Note 7** (*from Annie*): But he’s come up a couple of times in our writings, just like plants come up in a garden!

**Santa’s Note, the 8th:** Urg! Maybe “King Arthur” is some supermarket brand name, but on Yonder we honor him as a mythic magnificence.

**Annie’s Grace Note, 9th:** Yes! He’s vigorous in our hearts and souls, like sustainably grown organic greens! He’s a vital force.

**Santa’s Taking Charge In The Face of “My sister is hopeless”,**

**Note 10:** Fine then. Shell, you can give the hundred word version, since King Arthur has nothing to do with farm food, but everything to do with your beyond-the-mists-of-time heritage, seeing as your mom is half-Welsh!

**Note 11** (*Shell taking over*): Riiight. Okay, then, Readers, here we go. Lots of legends exist about Arthur, King of the Britons. He may actually have been a historic warlord, battling invaders to

Britain in the sixth century. Medieval stories tell a bunch of stuff about King Arthur pulling a sword from a stone, gathering together a circle of knights to battle evil, taking council from Merlin the Magician, and being at odds with the enchantress Morgan Le Fey, his half-sister. I guess a kindly encounter he had with her was when she ferried him to the mystic isle of Avalon to heal him from fatal wounds he'd received in battle.

**Note 12** (*Santa resumes*): That's way more than a hundred words, Shell. The most important thing to say about King Arthur's legend is that Morgan Le Fey is in it, and she's smart, powerful, scheming, and of varied temperament and motive, just like the sea.

**Note 12** (*Shell*): Uhh .... What does Morgan have to do with the sea?

**Note 13** (*Santa*): Shell, you're of Welsh descent! You should know. "Mor" is Welsh for the sea! And Morgan Le Fey is a water goddess of some kind—way, way back. She has everything to do with everything.

**Note 14** (*Annie*): Because the waters of life began with the sea! The sea is the beginning of the earth. And that's where King Arthur is right now, at the beginning of things, because Morgan le Fey healed him.

**Shell's Final Note, the 15th**: Riiiiight, Annie. That's a random statement. Well, folks, enough of this kale. Back to our continually interrupted and serrated next Leaf.