

Ushen unleashed havoc when either of the two nannas, Claire or Nance, thought to deal with her. They smelled of babies, baby formula and baby shit. At two years old Ushen would have nothing to do with babies.

By the time she was nearly four, she tolerated Callum only because he was her little brother. Even she could see how like her he was. They both had hair the same, like gold straw, the same that the princess spun into gold thread for Rumpelstiltskin. They both had brown eyes like round brown glassy marbles, and they both had wide feet that only fit into sandals, and wide hands with stubby fingers.

They'd never make piano players, Nanna Nancy said. Neither of them. Nanna Nancy resented Ushen mightily and she didn't care who knew it she said. "Maeve was my best friend for years and years and look at you now," she said. "No help at all with our *real* little girls."

Whenever Nanna Nancy said this she looked at Mother Maeve. Ushen too. Mother Maeve never explained, just cupped her hand over Ushen's head. So the days Mother Maeve went midwiving, Ushen played at Callum's house up the stairs above the bath house. Those days Ushen allowed Nanna Claire to brush Ushen's hair and tell her and Callum stories.

Mother Maeve would come home with stories of another baby born, boy or baby girl. Mother Nance would ask to see the colour of her gold and Ushen understood enough by then to know that Nanna Nance wasn't talking about hair.

Mother Maeve would frown like she had a pain. "What do you expect?" Nanna Nancy would say. "You thought that four adults and four kids can live on one baby a week, and a seven-day bread run?" Mother Maeve frowned a different way. Nanna Nancy laughed. "Don't expect me to go out to work. I have a full time job caring for our twins. Remember them?"

Some days Mother Maeve went with Father Nam on the bread run and came back with stories about the tiffanies, the baker where Mother Maeve and Father Nam picked up the bread, and the customers buying the bread. The baker's boy that fed Mumma-tiffany so many crusts Father Nam had to stop him, Mumma-tiffany was getting so fat.

In between, Mother Maeve took care of Ushen. Mother Maeve sewed Ushen her tunics and the pockets across the front to keep her treasures in. Mother Maeve cooked Ushen's dinners and spread her breakfast bread with honey. Father Nam kept a bee hive on the roof of the stables. Mother Maeve washed mud from Ushen every afternoon at the tap in the yard with the tiffanies looking on.

The tiffanies worked harder than anybody else. Every morning Father Nam led them out to deliver bread, and every second afternoon they carried parcels. That same year Father Nam married Mother Maeve. After Father Nam tacked a kitchen onto the side of the stables, he carpentered a cubby with a bed in it for Ushen opening into the kitchen. Mother Maeve and Father Nam slept in the bunkroom-for-two up the ladder above where the tiffanies had their stalls.

When she turned five, Father Nam took Ushen to infant school by tiffany every week-day morning after the first day when Mother Maeve signed her in. Her class mates loved her for the rides they got, one by one, from the school gate all around the whole school but outside the fence because the tiffanies were animals and couldn't be trusted around little people. Tiffanies didn't belong in schools.

After school, when Father Nam came to fetch Ushen to take all four home—the tiffany-animals and the Ushen-animal—he told her the story of how they were *all* animals. Every creature that swam and flew and moved on legs, however many, all were animals.

Ushen started sharing her meals with the tiffanies, sharing out her sandwiches four ways, until Mother Maeve sat Ushen down to a plate of tiffany food and taught her that every kind of animal needed its own kind of food. “Tiffany teeth are much stronger than human teeth,” Mother Maeve said. “Look at you trying to chew that hay. Don’t even try to swallow it. Tiffanies have two stomachs and the hay must go through both before the food will give up its nutrients.”

Remembering the feel of the prickly hay in her mouth didn’t stop Ushen sharing the special titbits Father Nam sometimes gave the tiffanies. She loved the salt-stone best and sucked on her piece for hours.

When she was six, Mother Maeve got Ushen ready for Father Nam to take her to the big school.

“Remember to tell them she’s smart for her age,” Nanna Claire said.

“And that she’s all appetite,” Nanna Nance said. “That there’ll be no reining in her chunkiness.” She laughed. “And that she’s short. For her age, I mean.”

“Water down a duck’s back,” Father Nam said.

“Feathers are their armor?” Ushen said.

Father Nam laughed. “Strong as steel.”

They had a lot of jokes like that. Father Nam helped Ushen onto Molly’s back since Mumma-tiffany had to carry the plain bread there was so much of it, and Nosy carried the sweet rolls. Molly always had to walk between the other two since Nosy always tried to snatch snacks from Mumma-tiffany’s baskets.

Ushen wore the only kind of dress that ever fit her. A wide tunic, now with a row of pockets up the side, instead of across her middle like she wore in prep school. The same knee-length shorts that everybody wore she saw when they got to the school.

“Yah! Look at the straw-top!” shouted a boy in the playground.

Ushen’s gold-straw hair stuck out every-which-way, no comb could tame it. Father Nam’s fierce grew and grew when he saw how the other kids looked at Ushen. “Tonight we start our Fight Club,” he said. “Just you and me.”

For a year Ushen exulted swinging the wooden sword at the chalked-on face on the punch-bag swinging from the rafters in the tiffany stables. When she started pretending the bag was an enemy at the school, a different name every day, Father Nam taught her how to kick her way out of trouble and how—with a well-placed punch—to stop an enemy in their tracks.

So Father Nam stood obdurate in front of the school principal’s desk Ushen stood obdurate beside him. “All the kids have to do is not to treat my girl like a punching bag,” he said. “Then her having to defend herself will also stop.”

It did stop. Even so, the only kids who’d talk with her were her little brother and Nanna

Nance's girls when they started big school the year Ushen turned eight. Father Nam started coming two afternoon's a week to teach self defence. And at self-defence Ushen shone, though that didn't help the rest of the time.

Then came the day that Mrs Principal gave Ushen a letter to take home. Of course Nanna Nance saw Ushen first. "Ha," she said. "Here's trouble."

Ushen slipped by her and took the letter into the stables. Hid it in Mumma-tiffany's stall under the straw. Sat down in that corner on the letter and showed Nanna Nance a bunch of bity teeth. When Father Nam brought the tiffanies home, Nanna Nance met him at the gates to complain.

When he brought the tiffanies into their stalls, he said, "Quick, give me the letter. I'll hide it in my shirt." They had to wait for Mother Maeve to come home, for her to read it. Nanna Nance came into the stables. Father Nam and Ushen brushed the animals and fed them. "She's in trouble, isn't she?" Nanna Nance said. "If I said it once, I'll say it again. She's just too ... I wouldn't be surprised if they expelled her."

Father Nam curved his hand round his ear. "What's that I hear? Your perfect little girls? Are they quarrelling?"

Ushen was astounded at Father Nam's naughty cheek. Would Nanna Nancy smack him? It was true though that Lison and Melly screamed and kicked and probably snatched at each others perfect hair. Ushen heard them too, through walls and closed doors, plain as day.

Father Nam brushed mumma-tiffany's broad back. "It's good to know they're just like every other kid," he said.

Nanna Nance said, "Hmph." She walked out.

They saw her hurrying into her house. The noise and upset between Lison and Melly stopped.

"Poor kids," Father Nam said.

Ushen didn't understand. "How are they *poor*?"

"Count up all the ways Maeve and Claire and I let you be a kid," Father Nam said. "That's how rich you are. Then count up all the ways Lison and Melly are not allowed those same things. That's how poor they are."

Mother Maeve said the letter was nothing for Ushen to worry about. That she'd been expecting something like it for weeks already. "I expect they learned about the high school lessons you've been doing at home."

Father Nam took Ushen to school next morning same as he used to when it was just her at the school.

"This is an *elementary* school, Mr Nam," Mrs Principal said.

"Don't I know it," Father Nam said.

"I *can* offer you the Outreach for Gifted Children Program where she can be home-schooled with an Outreach teacher twice a week," Mrs Principal said. "There is an additional cost, however."

“Isn’t there always?” Father Nam said.

“We’ll continue seeing you for the self-defence class?” she said.

“The additional cost? I will need to work the two half-days, Mrs Principal. Good day to you.”

That night in the stables, Ushen hid under the stairs up to the bunk room and listened.

Father Nam swore at Mother Maeve, and Mother Maeve swore right back. They used all the words the two Nannas wouldn’t let into their houses to protect the babies. Then Mother Maeve and Father Nam talked about all the ways that schools and teachers and everyone at the schools didn’t like Ushen. How they thought she was *other*. The fools, Father Nam said. Amen to that, Mother Maeve said.

That night Ushen started her secret project.

The Outreach teacher took Ushen places where she’d never been. The Zoo where other sorts of animals lived. Ushen loved the elephants best. They went to a Museum where all sort of interesting, and old, and different things were kept. And also bones and statues of other people. She stayed a long time in front of that exhibit.

The projects for Outreach were easy. Her main one stayed a secret. Only her little brother found out. Callum. Because he too was *other* Ushen told him her secret plan. And then he told her his secret. The thing Nanna Claire told him every night.

*The Huddle must never know you, Callum. They will call you to them and then they will eat you up.*

He didn’t know what it all meant. Only that he didn’t want to be eaten. Ushen hid Callum’s secret in her heart with her own and pressed forward with her project.