

anne-marie oomen

BITCHATHANE

They say spider ghosts run among the deaders in my family—deaders is what my Aunt Toots called those of us who have kicked the bucket. According to her, spider ghosting only happens to the women, some to a greater degree, some to a lesser. 'Course no gal in the family actually knows if she is a spider ghost until she's dead, so there's that. Aunt Toots told me it wasn't a very good name for the phenomenon, because it wasn't about the way you looked—that don't work in this family of big-boned hussies—but it was a thing about sticking people together. Spider ghosts were women who, after they

*Author's note: I heard the core of this from my friend Peggy who is an old construction worker in the U.P. She told me this tale about how her first husband died. I've tried to capture her voice. She said she didn't mind that I put it down in her words.*

died, show up again whenever something looked like it really needed sticking together, the way a web would stick one thing to another. She even went so far as to say they could serve as phantom matchmakers. I said that was just what we needed, a *phantom* matchmaker up here in the *U.P., last wilderness* and all that, but she didn't get the humor and just blew out her generic cig so the smoke gathered in the red nest of her hair. She just said there were lots of variations but it always had to do with linking one thing to another. When I suggested that maybe it was like fly tape she got all offended and said, "No girl, it's like spiders. You'll see." Then she'd wax philosophical. "There is a fragility to the world—but it's connected by the merest slip of things—like dust, or molecules of nothing." She was a lonely woman, but she loved me and protected me from my mom who was crazy religious. She was the kind of carpenter who got respect, even from the men, and she read a lot of books, and we both had red hair and we were not fat, just built.

I never believed about the spider ghosts myself. Never had any evidence that it might be true. Unless of course, you count our profession, which is construction—all us women ended up either in building or marrying it, so we know all about king studs and lap studs and, for that matter, male studs, not to mention how much weight a rafter will carry before it sags with the snow load. Aunt Toots could tell you why sometimes a house shouldn't hang together but it does. She'd say, "There is that one crossbeam, it's the one," and it would be. That would be the structural point that joined one wall to another and held a house together despite all the forces to the contrary. But I don't think that makes us potential spider ghosts, just good builders.

When I asked my mom, she wouldn't own it, her being a good Christian in the fold down at Seney Reformed, and she

said, between her finishing the roof on the chicken coop and delivering one more baby, she'd had enough of that talk, that what we made stuck together because of real work and factual materials and hammers and nails and God's will. She said, "You ever seen a spider ghost?" I hadn't. 'Course it didn't occur to me that she might be a skeptic because my daddy didn't stick, making the whole concept uglier than what is usual, even for her.

But one night on the porch with Aunt Toots—she was drinking hard then—she looked at me and said, "It's not spiders bringing fibers out of their stomachs like the old comics, or chemicals out their gloves like that new movie. It might be something beautiful." Maybe she knew the cancer was closing in on her already and she could see some things I couldn't, but I just smoked my doobie (my vice of choice), thinking there wasn't much beauty in the world I knew, what with its mud-bogged nights and chew-boogered men. Even if you found a good man, and there were some I guess, you still had to contend with the bad economy or throwing a tie-rod in the middle of a snowstorm. Men couldn't stop fate, or chance, or whatever it is that runs the world. There was the way a bungee cord could snap and tear across your eyes or a tie strap could let go of a load on a flatbed—take you right out. Nothing was guaranteed. So there wasn't much that seemed to want to stick together in my view.

And beauty wasn't even in the picture.

But Aunt Toots and me would sit on the porch with our boots on the railing, talking. She told me stories of things that were delicate—not like the lumber and thud work we all lived out between bouts with the halfway decent men we could find. We sat there, Aunt Toots rubbing her carpenter's elbow and cursing any builder who could not put a nail down in three

blows, then talking about the silver minnows she saw in the shallows of the creek bed. And a wind came up like it always did when she was in pain, and we both stood it for a minute. Then she said, “You wait, it ain’t like you think.” And tipped her bottle into the chipped Elks mug from the last fundraiser and kept tossing back the Jack D to ease the pain. I finally had to dump the last of her brown liquor into the hound’s dish before she got too slurry and my mom walked out and scolded us both for being the sinners we were.

Still, what she said stuck—pun intended—and when she died of lung cancer, I thought about the “sticking together part” on a number of levels, like if there would ever be a human being in my life who I would be able to talk with the way I had with her—or if there would ever be a man for me. Granted, I’m just in the middle of the terrible twenties but a young body can get a little panicked up here, living on the fringes through these winters with dogs gone wild and snow-mobiles on the fritz.

So nothing came of the spider ghosting for a long time. She sure as hell didn’t show up when the entire sheet of cheap linoleum needed to stick down on old Hooster’s basement floor—you only get one chance with linoleum. Nope, the moisture and cock-eyed, cantankerous concrete floor just made it bubble. Not sticking there.

Then I met Shed Clinton in the Luce Talk Bar and Grill. He was what’s called an “independent” builder, and I thought, well, let’s see how far this goes. But after enough barhopping and construction talk, which I am good at because I do it, we still looked like a moonless midnight without any stars. Then one night, I’m kind of in my cups with too much cheap Bud Light. I’d spent the day slamming down a floor over some bowed joists and I had slipped on the glue you put on the joists

to reinforce the plywood you are putting down. Fell right through to the basement and the only thing that saved me was a pile of rolled-up insulation—which of course did my own lungs little good. I should've took it for a sign. I was feeling sore and lonely and all Shed wanted to do was shoot pool. So here's how it went down: he's teetering over the table, sets up, says for me to break, and I send up this thing—Mom might call it prayer—but it was really just a thought, and then I miss the break entirely and he just shakes his head like I'm an idiot.

I sit down and pop another Bud.

Before long I notice this woman on the other side of the bar, and it's my Aunt Toots, just there in the dim of the light, smoking and drinking her brown liquor. She doesn't look like a deader but when she rises she's like Tyvek in the wind, the way it balloons away from a building if you don't tack it down right. She points her finger like it was a popgun right at Shed and tips her head like she's asking a question. I don't believe it but I nod, and she sort of pools near me and leans over and reaches out her long arm and puts one hand on his shoulder and her other hand on mine. It's not like wind, more like a kind of cool goo—not like Spider-Man and all the Marvel comic BS, but a real-from-the-other-side ghost superpower, from the “deaders” themselves, coming back to help out. Sticking things together—like any good construction worker. Making a web. And I can smell the glue I been breathing all day and I think that must be it. Some kind of hallucination.

But after that, he's all over me.

Beautiful.

So I think, that's how it's done, but I never told him about having seen my Aunt Toots in her spider ghost routine, or her helping us out. What would a born and bred Yooper say about spider ghosts?

So one thing led to another and Shed and me got married by the local justice in our first half-finished house, second story wide open to the weather, with a handful of crooked carpenters, framers, plumbers, and drywallers (there's a breed!) standing around waiting to tap the keg. I felt proud of getting married wearing a hard hat with some lacy tulle glued to it, and didn't mind that Shed never even looked at the new steel-toed boots I bought for the occasion. It all seemed like a good thing, especially when we got to dancing on the subfloor, and then some of the guys took to swinging like monkeys on the trusses, and the party got wild and they talked about it for years down at the bar.

Except then, as those years went by, there was the other thing—just who Shed was. And I realized that the sticking together part was just a figment of whatever passes for imagination in me.

It started small.

Like, my name is Peggy, but he shortened it to Piggy. He'd yell when he needed some spikes, or tenpennies.

"Hey Piggy, where's that ta by fur."

Or if he was trying to be nice. "Hey piglet, bring a Budster like the budster you er."

At first I liked it, but after a while.

But who would have thought he'd end up like that, wrapped up like a dark mummy at the bottom of a two-story, nine-twelve pitch roof.

Sometime in there, I had a bad streak of luck—lost a load of lumber taking a short cut through the McMillan swamp. Spent an entire day cutting a set of trusses half foot too short—couldn't do anything but bite the dust on that. Shed was not kind about it, and then there was the family crap. Mom was

having another baby and laid off from driving truck for the Home Depot in Newberry, and I was busting ass on our third house but started wishing I could just sit on the porch with Aunt Toots—even though she was a deader. Started wondering if I had any spider ghost in me and what it would be like to be a deader too.

And just like that, Aunt Toots started showing up. Peeping in the window with a haze of generic cigarette smoke wreathing her red hair. Or sitting on the edge of a building site, holding a hammer, tool belt wrapped around her waist like an apron. I would of dismissed Aunt Toots's visitations as my just being down in the dumps, but mom said it just proved I was weird right down to the bones and I should march myself to Seney Reformed and talk to Pastor.

But there was also the fact that three different women in Newberry took the time to track me down or call me. One sent me a picture.

Shed never noticed Aunt Toots. Wasn't in him. He was tough as ironwood, that's why the carpentry came easy to him. If anyone had in-your-face ways, it was him, but imaginings, ideas? The dead? 'Nuff said. He could stick things together all right, but it was more like force things together, and when he did, they stuck. Houses, garages, people.

Sometimes he hit things so they'd stay together.

So falling wouldn't have come easy. Falling isn't a stuck-together thing. But the way it happened, maybe it was.

I wasn't with him that morning on the roof.

I'd told him I was leaving and I'd said it that morning over oatmeal and the chaser I needed because that was what it took to say the words. He said, here we are in the middle of this new house project, the one we'd been working toward for years, *our best yet, this one we'd sell for big money, this one we'd do*

*right*. He'd told me all this, but I just finished my cereal with those little shriveled up raisins and said, *It's OK, I'm going now* in that voice I know could make him feel like he needed a clean shirt and to wipe mud off his boots. Of course, he just laughed and when I said, *No, really, I'm going*, he said, *Aw, come on Piglet, don't do that, it's you and me and nothin between us but your red c-hair*. Now I don't want to offend nobody but the *c* in "c-hair" stands in for the four-letter word for a woman's intimate parts. I'm giving you the abbreviation, but he said the word. Now I am no prude about cussing, but that's a word I don't like to hear tossed around like loose nails. (OK, I hate this kind of talk but it's a funky carpenter's term for a unit of measurement. A "c-hair" is a small measurement, but a "red c-hair" is the tiniest of all, like a sixty-fourth of an inch. That's what it's called, believe it or not.) Like I said, I don't want to offend, but it's the language of the work and it's not beautiful. That whole line was his version of how close we were supposed to be.

That's when I told him I knew about Dot down at Dot's Landing. He said I misunderstood, but I didn't. I know because I been dreaming about the dot of darkness when a nailhead starts to rust that means something's gone wrong in the wood. Or the bitty iota of muck a fly leaves on a window—it's really shit. Dots of it. And then the picture the one woman sent. Dot kissing him, his hand down her pants. Looked like a real good party. But he said no, he'd just picked up building supplies. Bituthene, he said. It's roofing material. Brand name, Grace's Ice and Water Shield. But then I actually produced the receipt from the hotel—when he's always said he stays with Brany Muggles out on the river, and they go fish. Even I know that's what they call predictable in bad movies. After I said that, he got real hard.

But here's the thing I didn't want to say. Twice he left a foam sheet of insulation placed over a two-story drop through an unfinished stairwell. Just as I was about to step on it, Aunt Toots had showed up in the wind, right then, rubbing her carpenter's elbow. Came out from under the rafter tails like a piece of plastic blowing in the wind—the way you see it float around building sites—and came right up that stairwell and lifted the piece up so I saw what I was about to do. Accidents happen all the time around building sites. They do.

So after our talk, Shed heaves himself out the beat-up Winnebago we live in at our work site and lumbers across the sand and debris to the extension ladder leaning against the roof. He'd just cut thirty feet of that Grace's Bituthene real straight with his utility knife and rolled it up and heaved it on his shoulder. A thirty-foot roll—more than we'd ever stuck down together, and now he crawls up the ladder, steps onto the scaffolding, which is just a plank hanging off the roof, and he's balanced between the top rung and the two-foot step onto the planking, right up there in the canopy of the trees.

Usually I am right behind him, stuck to the work just like he is. Not today. I step out and stand on what passes for a porch at the side of the trailer. I can just see him climbing the ladder to the roof, but I'm not really paying attention. I am thinking about how things come apart. About unsticking. I am thinking about if you have the power to stick something together, doesn't the reverse seem true—you could unstick it, too.

The wind picks up and that's when she, Aunt Toots, just floats right out of the cement mixer—just like she spends every night there.

He slams the roll of Bituthene down on the roof and sets up to pull off the brown backing paper. It looks like extra thick

tar paper and that's what it is, but with a sticky side, like that contact paper some gals put on kitchen shelves. For fun, he calls it "bitchathane." Everyone does. All the boys down at the Luce Talk'll just hoot you out of the place if you say the name like it looks. They say bitchathane. I always thought the word would sound like *beauty-thane*. I had pointed this out one night at the bar. Shed said he liked that, said it slow like, *Beauty-thane*, in front of the gang, but when he said it like that, the boys got kind of uproarious with their cue sticks. I'm not real smart but I know sometimes words don't mean what you think they mean, and sometimes they mean the opposite. It was an idea I could just barely hang on to, but I know when he said, "Beauty-thane," drawing it out like every part of the word was dirty, he might as well have said bitchathane. He might as well have called me a red c-hair, I felt that small.

So, I am just watching, and then Aunt Toots is standing right next to me. I should have known then. I should have said I believed right then and let it go at that. But with spider ghosts, you are caught in the web. All I can do is stare as it happens.

Back-fill dust rises in little tornadoes.

Dogs mill like they do when they're nerved up and itching to hunt.

Shed knows it won't be an easy job to do alone—not dangerous except for the height, but just easier when two people do it so one can unroll the bitchathane while the other keeps the tarry, sticky edge lined up with the drip edge of the roof. You have to keep it unrolling all even and clean along that edge. It's made to cling to your roof forever, keep the ice dams from building up. It's got serious glue. You have to get it just right. If you don't, you can still lift a section off the roof but it's real tricky and takes a lot of patience. The stuff sticks where you don't expect it to, and if you somehow let it touch itself—

sticky side to sticky side, then you're up shit creek. And that's when the cursing starts.

But if you're lucky, bitchathane just unrolls like toilet paper off the roll, and then it feels like there can't be any big deal about working with this stuff and that's what Shed is thinking. We'd done it before when it went like that.

He is hoping for that.

He is hoping that the paper liner will slide off one way and he'll unroll all that sticky-side down tar paper right to the edge of the roof, even Steven, sealed and done by coffee break, when he will climb down and tell me he doesn't need me. Ever. He would have too.

But I hear my Aunt Toot's whiskey-turned voice right next to me, and she is lighting up a bent generic, saying, "Something like beauty" with a wicked-ass grin. You can be saying beauty when it's really bitchy you mean, and that's what throws off his timing, her bitchy wind.

He's unrolled a good ten feet of the bitchathane when that wind hoists up a nightmare gust and twists the brown paper liner into the air like a dark sail. While he is trying to sort that out, he realizes he has to lift up and reset that whole section because now it's slipped a couple inches off the roof.

So he does something he's never done before, something I'd suggested a couple of times—that you get right off the scaffolding and climb up the roof, using the roof jacks to hang on to and to brace yourself. Then you come at the bitchathane from above. He always said that I could try it if I wanted to but I never did. Just didn't have the nerve, facing down the roof like that. But that day, he's mad, and that's how it happens. Because that's the only way a ten-foot section of that Grace's Ice and Water Shield can be up in the air far enough that wind can lift it and blow it back on itself.

He doesn't want that sheet of black tar sticking to itself so he stands up, trying to yank it apart. Then he slips from the pitch, gets his shoes in the glue, and the force of his moving weight slips more of the bitchathane off the roof. Tough as he is, he nearly gets it free, gets himself free. He's tugging one end, thinking he'll get it straight yet, when the wind pushes the loose flap and it blows up against his body, wraps right to him. He steps onto the slippery part of the roof, then falls onto the already exposed glue and tries to roll sideways, but I guess he loses his sense of direction. He twists the way that makes more of the stuff come up and wrap around him.

So now it's stuck to itself and he's in the middle of it. I see the danger, start moving, start shouting to hold still, and I see him being real clear about what's happening, trying to move slowly, getting an arm free to hold himself up off the roof and using the other to slide this crazy man-sleeve down, but it's caught on the fabric of his wifebeater, getting tighter and tighter, and the stuff just keeps rolling him up and then his arms are caught like in a straitjacket. He's trying to wiggle down to the scaffolding where he will be safer, but he can't gain footing. His body comes to the edge of the roof. Trembles.

If he'd fallen on the plank, that might of saved him. But no, the man-mummy he's become slowly slips sideways and over the edge, real simple, and though his head may have struck the corner of the scaffolding on the way down, it is, as they say in the building business, pretty much a fatal fall from the start.

It happens quicker, harsher, with more points of measurement than how I tell it.

But even in that moment when he gets so trussed up that even his spirit won't ever come undone, I understand, there is a beauty in it, too. Right alongside horror, there's this other-

worldly moment, like a strand of dust from some high place just hanging over our lives, floating and glimmering for a long time, maybe all the years we were bad together. That kind of delicate strength. And then it connects. Linked to another thing. And it sticks, pulls taut. Tighter. And then it breaks. When that happens, you can't do nothing, you only watch like you aren't there at all, like time isn't real, like death and life don't exist how we think they do. One minute the thread is floating, then connected, then not. Gone on the wind. It's all tender and quiet where that happens.

That kind of beauty.

Then you're screaming.

Because you wished it. And the spider ghost that is the closest thing to family helped you get what you wanted.

It takes the paramedics a half hour to cut him out of all that bitchathane.

I sit on the porch, cold as first snow. But as I watch, words are with me in a different way. Bitchathane. Beauty-thane. Leaving. Loving. Loathing. The thickness of a red c-hair, not as a measurement of closeness, but of distance.

Aunt Toots sits with me until my mother comes all the way from Newberry before she eases into the trusses and under the flatbed, slipping away like the deaders do.

