



## ***Salt and Bone***

by Amy Aderman

You can't ever *destroy* evil spirits—they have as much right to exist as we do, so we can only chase them away for a little while.

That's what Kate said. But Mrs. Carlson, my math teacher, said of course anything could be ended if some people would just work hard enough. I figured Kate knew better, though, seeing as how she was the one who'd been playing her bone flutes up on that cliff for years now.

She made the flutes out of deer bones. There were more deer than you could shake a bow at just a little ways inland, and my uncle liked to hunt. The venison went in the freezer, the fur got turned into rugs, and Kate got the bones. Something for everybody.

(When I was little, Ryan next door tried to make me cry by saying Kate locked up children in her house on the cliff and carved her flutes out of their bones. I broke his nose.)

Nobody was supposed to bother Kate when she was working. She might lose her concentration, and a spirit might capsize a boat, and then somebody might drown, and you wouldn't want to be responsible for making somebody *die*, would you?

I asked her about that once, after all of the boats returned to the harbor and all of the fishermen had stepped back on land on their own two feet.

Kate let out a weak puff of laughter. She was still sitting limply in her chair outside, and her short hair was damp with sweat. "The spirits take up all of my attention. I'm not saying you should throw a party and light firecrackers around me, but one person hasn't got much chance of breaking my focus."

And that was that.

By the time I reached high school, I visited more often. I didn't like to drive all the way to her house. It seemed like the spirits only paid attention to the ocean and the boats, but I worried they might do something to the brakes or the engine.

The best time to visit her was on a stormy day, when the fishermen couldn't go out. The spirits were still there, but there weren't any people on the water for them to attack. They always seemed to forget that Kate existed when she wasn't playing her flute. I don't know why, and I'm not sure she did, either.

I remember one day I stopped by her place in spring. It wasn't raining yet, but the sky had been cloudy all morning, and it was too choppy for the boats to go out. I'd been bored and skipped school with my friends after lunch. Sarah's parents weren't home, so she and Sam went to her place and there wasn't anybody else to hang out with. Kate had been doing what she did for so long that I think sometimes she forgot things like school existed and that she should have been telling me not to skip. Or maybe it was because she had so much responsibility already that she couldn't be bothered to care.

Anyway, the wind was so strong that my hair got blown into knots by the time I got to her place. It was a little house that'd been built after she came here and agreed to protect our boats; it didn't have many rooms, but the back of it was covered with windows, so that she could always see the ocean. The house was painted yellow. One time I asked if the color protected it from the spirits.

She laughed. "No, I just wanted some brightness in my life."

I sat with Kate by all those windows and watched her carve yet another flute. She probably could've done it in her sleep by now.

"How many of those have you made?" I asked.

"I don't know anymore. I used to keep count back when I got started, but that was ages ago." Kate tapped her knife on the table as she thought. Bone shavings were scattered across the wood in front of her. "If you were asking how many of the flutes have broken, I'd say at least a thousand, but I've made a lot more than that."

I glanced at the basket that held her unused flutes. There were about a dozen in it. I'd seen pictures of carved flutes other people made that had beautiful designs etched all over them, but Kate's were always plain. It didn't feel like there was any point in trying to make hers look special when she always had to keep making new flutes because the spirits broke them.

"Did you always make them?"

"Not at all. I used to buy them when I was just getting started—I wasn't much older than you, then. But it didn't take long for me to figure out that they work best for the person who makes them. They last longer, too."

"What's the longest you've ever had one last?"

"A week. But that was a very slow week. You have a lot of questions today—thinking of joining us?"

"No way. Besides, guitars are more fun, and you can't make one of *those* out of bone."

Kate grinned and settled more comfortably into her chair. "You'd be surprised what somebody can make when they have enough imagination."

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I shouldn't have gone there. Even though Kate had told me I wouldn't be a distraction, I knew better than to hang around when it was going to be a busy day for her. I really did. It was a beautiful summer day: not a cloud in the sky, and the water was glass-smooth. All of the fishing boats would be out today and even a few people who would dare to sail or paddle around the

harbor, just for fun. But it was the first day that my father was going fishing again since he broke his arm, and I couldn't stand just waiting at home with Mom.

I parked in my usual spot and ran to Kate's house. She sat in her wooden chair on the cliff. The ocean stretched out before us, and I saw the fishing boats scattered below. Her eyes were closed. She was already playing and the music hovered on the air around us.

I looked out onto the water. The boats had sailed far enough that now they were lowering their nets for today's catch. It would be a good day for bringing in plenty of fish, if the spirits didn't take control. The spirits never ran out of ways to meddle: they might capsize the boats, or send waves crashing over the fishermen when the water was calm not twenty feet away, or tangle the nets, or fill them with stones lifted up from the cold ocean bottom, deeper than any of us could swim.

Kate's music rippled like water. Her bone flutes had few holes, but she made them sound better than anything we played in music class. I didn't understand how something so beautiful could stop those evil spirits. I wondered how she had figured out which kinds of music worked best.

Dad and the others wouldn't be safe at home for a while yet. If you worked on one of the fishing boats, you had to learn that fine line between getting the largest catch possible for the day, and losing all of it because you stayed out one minute too long and couldn't fight the spirits any longer. I sat down but couldn't keep myself from pulling up handfuls of the thick grass.

The fishermen continued their work. The ocean began to grow restless around them. When I looked at Kate, I saw that she had opened her eyes but stared straight ahead. The rest of us could never see the spirits, only what they did, but I thought she could see them.

She'd told me that on days when the spirits weren't so strong, she might get only a few small cracks in that day's flute and she'd be able to keep using it for a while longer. But today she couldn't have been playing for more than an hour, and already I could see hair-thin cracks stretching all around the bone.

I knelt at the edge of the cliff and looked down. The waves tossed the boats around more and more, but they splashed highest against the part of the cliffs directly below us. They reached closer and closer to me as I watched, until a few drops of the salt spray landed on my lips. The water never really grew that warm, even in summer, and it tasted cold.

But I stayed put and watched. The boats must have been well anchored, because they didn't drift far.

There was a sharp *snap*. I jumped up.

Kate's flute had just cracked into at least a dozen pieces. She reached down and grabbed a new one from the basket wedged between her feet.

The minutes stretched on, feeling ten times longer than when I was waiting for school to end. The sun must have been crossing the sky, but it felt like that warm day was going to last forever. One of the boats was almost done pulling a full net aboard when it plummeted back into the water. The scales on all those fish gleamed in the sun right until they sank beneath the waves. The net of the next closest ship swung out into the air but was hauled back aboard.

Another crack. Kate swept the pieces of bone from her knees and played on.

A few of the boats started to return, the ones that always played it safe. They were the poorest but almost never lost a fisherman. Even with them back in the harbor, there were still plenty of people on the water for the spirits to torment.

Each flute broke faster than the one before. Soon there was only one left in the basket. Kate still hadn't looked at me, but I ran into the house. Six more flutes were completed. I laid all of them at her feet.

It wasn't at all windy up on the cliff, but a few of the boats started to be swept back and forth. One spun around in circles. I could see its fishermen holding on to the railings. Kate forced the spirits to make it stop, but by that time its catch was lost. That boat turned homeward.

I couldn't decide which was worse—watching what was happening on the water or seeing Kate grow more tired as her flutes kept shattering.

The rest of the boats returned to the harbor, one by one. The boat Dad was on was the last to turn back, as usual. Mom was always trying to get him to sign on to another boat, but the captain was his best friend.

They were moving so slowly! Even though there was only the one boat left, it didn't look like the spirits were going to stop anytime soon. Another gust of wind swept past us, pushing the boat back out into the ocean as it tried to sail home. The waves tugged it farther onto the deep water as Kate paused to pick up her next flute. It was the last one. She met my eyes for the first time as she brought the flute to her lips.

The music had been fast-paced since I got there. Now it slowed down until it sounded something like a lullaby. It was softer, too. I didn't know how the spirits could hear it all the way out there.

The wind began to die down, and the boat was able to creep inland. Then the waves pushed it back again. It reminded me of when the little kids played tug-of-war next door. I could have laughed, if it wasn't Dad and his friends trying to get home.

Kate didn't stop playing. The music was pretty, like when the water was calm and I walked out on the pier, and I could see deep down because the sun was shining. Even though all of us knew better than to tempt the spirits, at times like that I wanted to jump in and feel the water on my skin, and see how far out I could swim. There had to be good things in the ocean, too.

Her playing slowed down, and now she held the same low note for a long time. The waves flattened out like a hand was pressing down on them.

My father's boat lurched into the harbor.

Kate fell silent. I looked at her. Chips of the bone flutes were spread across her lap and the ground in front of us. She squeezed her fingers the tiniest bit, and the flute she held fell apart.

"Well," she said. "I haven't had a day like this in a long time." Her voice cracked, and her lips looked dry. I brought a glass of water and refilled it twice before she was done drinking. I had to hold the glass for her because her fingers were so stiff.

She didn't say anything for a while after that. We just sat there and looked at the ocean. Well, I looked. Her eyes were shut, and I couldn't tell if she'd fallen asleep. I'd have to tell Dad that they shouldn't go out tomorrow, since she had to carve more flutes.

Everything looked so calm now. The boats finished unloading today's catches. We'd see some of the fish in the store soon but the rest would be shipped away to places where the people didn't have to worry about their families being attacked by spirits when everyone was just trying to make a living. I wondered where the spirits went when they weren't bothering us.

After a while, Kate stirred. She took the basket that had held the spare flutes and brushed the shards from her lap into it. When she stiffly started to pick up the pieces of bone from the ground, I went over and helped.

"I need all of them," she reminded me.

"I know."

Finding the bones wasn't as hard as it could have been. The pieces of the flutes mostly dropped straight down when they broke, and none of them were smaller than my thumbnail. I still had to crawl on my hands and knees to make sure I'd found everything, but at least the pale bones stood out against the bright green grass.

When we were done, she asked, "Would you take care of it today?"

"Sure."

Kate smiled and handed the basket to me. "Thank you. Things would have turned out much worse if you weren't here." She went into her house before I could say anything. I wondered which she would do first: carve more flutes or pass out.

The pieces of bone softly clicked against one another as I drove to the beach. Later on, the place would be full of children splashing in the shallows (but only in the shallows) and my classmates sunbathing, but nobody came near the ocean so soon after the boats had been out. Strangers never imagined that something might be wrong with it.

I only stopped walking when the water was just about to touch the tips of my shoes. After I had a good grip on the basket, I tossed the bones as far out as I could. For a few moments they bobbed on top of the water. I waited.

A large wave rolled up, sucked all of the bones into it, and rolled out again. Not one flute piece was left behind.

Even Kate wasn't certain what happened to them, only that the offering seemed to keep the spirits happy for a little while. Every now and then, a couple of pieces would be washed back ashore. The bone would be polished and its sharp edges smoothed out like sea glass. I had one that I'd made into a necklace. For luck.

I sat down in front of the quiet ocean and waited for my friends. We would keep watch together.

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### **About the Author**

Amy Aderman is a Librarian in western New York. One of her favorite things about writing is doing research for her stories. Her short fiction has previously been published in *Daily Science Fiction*. Her first fantasy novel, *The Way to Winter*, is a retelling of H.C. Andersen's fairy tale, "The Snow Queen."

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This story first appeared as part of the Third Flatiron Anthology, *Ain't Superstitious*. If you enjoyed it, please check out the anthology on [Amazon](#) and [Smashwords](#).

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