

## **Ana Nana and the Missing Sheep**

Ana Nana wasn't her real name, of course. She used to be called Diana, but after seven kids (alive, as she preferred), two husbands (deceased, also as she preferred), and innumerable grandkids, her name had evolved. She took the change very seriously. Visiting Ana Nana meant she fed you within an inch of your life. People came to drink tea, eat food liberally slathered with butter, and gorge on homemade cookies until they had to be rolled away.

For her outsized presence, Ana Nana was a short woman, only five feet tall, and nearly five feet in circumference. She often told people "I'm built like a top, and I'll spin till I drop," and never were truer words spoken. If she wasn't carding wool or knitting, she was taking care of her myriad grandchildren, and if she wasn't doing that, she worked out in the field with a small flock of blue-ribbon sheep.

One of whom was missing. Ramses III the Great, her prize-winning ram.

This wasn't the first time. Anyone who's worked with sheep knows that the only life forms more determined to off themselves were guinea fowl and toddlers. If Ramses didn't get himself stuck under a fence, it was under a hedge, in a bog, or once, inexplicably, in an open field.

Of course, the last time Ramses got stuck, he hadn't left a trail of blood. Also, it hadn't sent the rest of the flock scurrying to the barn to huddle together amidst the comforting smells of hay and manure, and to peer anxiously out the doorway like a bunch of frightened, well, sheep.

This could not stand. Ana Nana had driven the last wolf pack out in a flurry of single combat, a blueberry pie, and a call to Barry, a neighboring farmer who raised dogs. She could handle a sheep stealer.

Ana Nana grabbed her stoutest cane, her stiffest cloak, and her meanest sheepdog and set forth. The situation grew complicated when the dog refused to follow the trail,

backing away with its tail between its legs. She left him behind, grumbling to herself. No matter, the only things that could deter Ana Nana was running low on wine or when the Google read “internet connectivity problems.” When that happened, she called her grandsons.

She trudged down the sloping lea of her pastures, towards the dark wood nestled in the hollow below her farmhouse. Ana Nana hoped whatever creature had done for Ramses hadn’t gone too far in.

Fortunately, or unfortunately, she found what she sought just a few paces in from the shadow of the tree line. Ramses’ remains rested amongst the gnarled roots of an ancient oak, twice as far around as Ana Nana herself. The body lay in a black pool of bloody mud and viscera, which is why it shocked her when it shuddered and rose to its feet as she approached.

**“BAA. I AM SHEEP. BAA,”** the corpse said.

Ana Nana hadn’t seen such a blatant lie since her blueberry-stained grandson blamed her missing tarts on his sister. She peered closely at the creature. Ramses’ coat looked clean (for a sheep, which was to say, filthy), but his legs were both thinner and thicker than usual, the original flesh and bone paired away and transmuted to shifting, ebon shadows. Ramses’ eyes stared up at her with sepulchral flames that burned with the warmth of frostbite.

After much deliberation, she said, “I see that. And what a wonderful sheep you are.”

**“BAA,”** said the creature that was definitely not a sheep.

Ana Nana narrowed her eyes. “Should we... go back to the barn?”

**“BAA,”** said the creature. **“I MEAN YES, I MEAN BAA.”**

“Just so you know,” Ana Nana said, “Sheep bleat. They don’t say ‘baa’”.

**“Baa,”** bleated the creature.

“Exactly.” Against her better judgement, she turned her back on the creature and started wending her way back up the hill, the being shambling after her. Ana Nana opened her mouth to point out that sheep legs did not move back first, then front, nor did they have more than four, but decided better of it. If she stopped to point out how many ways the creature could improve its sheep behavior, they’d both be there all night.

“What do I call you?”

**“AM SHEEP, CALL SHEEP.”**

Ana Nana glanced back at the creature.

**“Baa?”** It went.

“Very well, Ramses. Come along.” She continued into the sunlight, the creature staggering back and forth at her heels. Ana Nana wondering if the sun would affect it, but it stayed close to her shadow, while at the same time the sun went behind a series of clouds, each one appearing and dissipating before the sun could clear it.

When they reached the top of the hill, Ana Nana headed straight towards her house.

**“BARN?”** Said the creature. She turned in time to see a matte black tongue dart out and lick the creature’s sheep lips.

Ana Nana shook her head. “Don’t you remember? You’re a special sheep. I feed you dinner in the house.”

**“Baa.”** The creature nodded, following Ana Nana into her house. When it entered, her electricity sputtered and went out in a shower of sparks. No matter, she had a gas range. She seated the creature at the kitchen table – a very disturbing process that reminded her sheep didn’t bend that way and busied herself in cooking dinner.

With the freezer out, she grabbed most of the meat she could find and fired up the broiler. Lamb sausage, lamb chops, lamb ribs, all slathered in olive oil and rubbed thoroughly with butter. To keep the creature occupied, she set a single chocolate-chip

cookie and a glass of milk in front of it. Dozens of tiny hands slithered forth from beneath the wool to seize the cookie. Ana Nana banged the pots extra loud to cover up the slurping noises.

**“MORE?”**

“That depends”, Ana Nana said. “Cookies are for truthtellers.”

**“Baa?”**

“Not this time.” She took her oldest cleaver, with its cruel, sharp edges of black iron and handle of silver and slammed it into her chopping block with a meaty thunk. Gripping the handle, she turned to glare at her guest. “Are you an eldritch beastie beyond mortal ken who eats cookies and minds his manners when he’s a guest in this home, or are you a passed your prime ram ready to be turned into glue?”

The flaming eyes stared at her. Ana Nana stared back and gripped her cleaver tighter. Slowly, the fire warmed, the shadows brightened. Two ghostly hands slipped out from beneath the sheepskin to grip the knife and fork.

**“More cookies, please.”**

“That’s what I thought,” Ana Nana said, fetching another cookie from the jar. Now let’s feed you up. You look like you’re skin and bones.”