Fintan Mac Bochra

Jujoman

Part One: Childhood

1. The Awakening

Something pushed down on my chest.

It pushed again, harder, until something inside me gave way and the water came up my throat and out of my mouth. Then the air came in, burning all the way down, and it filled me until I thought my chest would crack.

I screamed.

I screamed with everything I had, the way you scream when you wake up from a nightmare and you are still half inside it.

A moment before, there had been only the dark. I had no body there, and there was no sound, and it was so quiet that I think I liked it.

Now everything hurt.

Two faces hung above me, a man's and a woman's, and both of them were old. The man had gray in his beard and lines around his eyes, and his hands were still on my chest, hands so big that each one covered half of me. The woman stood behind his shoulder with her fingers pressed over her mouth.

Who are these people?"Where is my mother?!"

It came out as a scream too. When I tried to sit up, the man held me down gently, like a fish that is about to jump out of the boat.

"Where is my mother?! Where is my mother?!"

"Easy," the man said. "Easy, now. You're all right."

I'm not all right. I want my mother. His voice was low and slow. The woman was saying something too, more softly, but I was shouting over her and her words were lost. I was still afraid for my mother. But the big hands were warm, and they were only holding me, and little by little my body stopped fighting because it had nothing left to fight with.

Once the shouting stopped, I noticed how thirsty I was.

My mouth tasted of salt, my tongue was stuck in it, and my stomach hurt as if a fist had closed inside it. In my whole life I had never been so thirsty.

I was lying on a bed, under a wool blanket that scratched. Above me was a roof of wood and straw, and somewhere close a fire was burning.

The man went away and came back slowly, carrying a cup in both hands, and held it to my mouth. It was water, and I drank so fast that half of it ran down my neck and made me cough.

"Slowly." He pulled the cup back. "There's more. Nobody's going to take it from you."

When he gave it to me again, I made myself drink slowly.

After the water came a bowl of something warm that smelled of fish. I ate it with my fingers, and they let me.

The woman stayed back near the fire and watched me the whole time. Her eyes were wet, but she was smiling.

*Why is she crying?*When the bowl was empty, I turned to the man.

"Where is my mother?"

My voice was small now. He took a while to answer, glancing first at the woman, who looked down at the floor.

"I don't know, little one." His voice was gentle. "We'll look for her."

I waited for more, but that was all he had.

*Why doesn't he know? He's big. Big people know.*He sat down on the edge of the bed and scratched his beard. Then he put a finger on his own chest.

"Calum."

He tapped his chest again.

"Calum."

My eyes went from the finger to his face.

"Calum," I repeated.

The man laughed, a big laugh, and turned to the woman, who laughed too with her hand over her mouth again.

Then the finger pointed at me.

"And you?"

I opened my mouth.

My name. What's my name? Nothing came.

I knew there was a word, a word that was mine, a word my mother used to say. I searched for it, and in the place where it should have been there was only the sound of the wind.

The wind brought her back. I remembered her arms around me and her long dark hair flying everywhere. Everything around us was wet and loud and falling, but her face was calm. *Have faith,* she had told me. *We are going to the land of the spirits.* Then she had sung to me, the old songs she sang when sleep wouldn't come, and even the storm had been too weak to stop her.

I wanted to hear them again. I closed my eyes to listen better, and the room went away.

* * *

When I opened my eyes, the house was empty.

Light came in under the door and through the gaps in the wall, and the fire had burned down to gray ash. Was it the next day, or many days later? I had no idea.

My body felt like mine again. I sat up without the room spinning, and when I put my feet on the floor my legs held me.

The house was a single room, with the bed, the fire, a table with two stools, and in the corner a pile of nets that smelled of the sea. I looked everywhere for something of mine, and there was nothing.

Outside, something went *slap,* wet and heavy. Then again.

I went to the door and pushed it open.

The woman was in the yard, throwing wet blankets over a rope she had tied between two posts. The wind caught them and slapped them against each other. Behind her there was grass, and behind the grass there was the sea.

She saw me and stopped, with a blanket half over the rope.

"So you're up! Feeling better?"

I nodded.

It was true, for my body. But there was a weight in my chest, where the water had been, and every time I thought of my mother it came up into my throat and I had to hold it down.

I held it down and nodded again.

"Have you seen my mother?"

Instead of answering, she looked past me, over my head, and I turned around.

Calum was coming up from the sea with three fish on a string, and I could tell by his face that he had heard me.

He put the fish down on a stone by the door and crouched in front of me, so that his face was level with mine. For a moment he only studied me. Then he put his hand on my head and turned a bit of my hair between his fingers, like a shell he had found on the beach.

Why is he looking at my hair?"Dark as a seal." He let the hair go. "Nobody on this coast has hair like that. You're not from here, are you, lad? Where do you come from?"

I thought about it.

"From the boat."

He nodded slowly, as if that was an answer.

"I'll tell you what I know. I was out in my boat when the storm came. I found you in the water. You were alone. That's all I saw."

That's not all. That can't be all."She's looking for me."

My voice broke on it, and everything I had been holding down came up at once.

"She's strong. She can swim. She's looking for me!"

Calum let me say it. He looked over my head at the woman, and she gave him a small nod.

"Tomorrow. Before the sun. The sea is still too rough today. Tomorrow I'll take you where I found you, and we'll look."

Tomorrow. She has to wait until tomorrow.

* * *

I hardly slept that night. I lay under the blanket listening to the sea, and with every wave I thought it might be her.

Calum woke me while it was still dark, and together we pushed his boat into the water. He rowed along the foot of the cliffs toward the light in the east. The sky was gray and the sea was still heavy, breaking white on the rocks beside us, so Calum kept the boat well out from them.

"It was worse than this." He spoke between strokes of the oars. "Much worse. I was too far out, that was my fault. Then I heard a cry, and I saw something pale in the water, where the sea was at its worst. I went in after it. It was you. You weren't breathing. I didn't

look for anything else. I rowed."

I kept my eyes on the water and my mouth shut.

"But the sea has its ways. If you were there, everything else was there too. And everything the sea takes on this coast, it brings here."

Everything. Her too. He pointed ahead with his chin. The cliff turned, and at its foot there was a dark hole in the rock, with the waves going in and out of it.

The sea was calmer under the cliff, and Calum rowed us in slowly, glancing over his shoulder.

There was wood everywhere.

Planks lay on the rocks and floated in the water, rising and falling with the waves. I saw a piece of a mast as thick as Calum, and rope tangled in the weed, and all of it was broken.

And on a rock, caught and torn, was a piece of blue cloth with a white sign on it.

I knew that sign. It was ours, and every day of my life it had flown from the top of the mast, over my head.

That's our flag. "That's my boat."

Calum stopped rowing.

"That's my boat! That's my boat!"

I stood up so fast that the boat rocked. I ran to one side of it, then to the other, shouting for her. I shouted at the hole in the cliff, at the water and at the planks, and I kept on shouting.

She was here. She had to be.

Part One: Childhood

2. The Cliff

I shouted until my voice went.

After that I looked. I wanted to get out and search under the planks, but Calum held my arm and shook his head, and I saw why. The wood was everywhere, knocking together as it rose and fell, and between the pieces the water was black.

So Calum did the looking for me. He pushed the boat slowly in among the wreck, hooked each plank with the end of his oar, pulled it up over the side, turned it over and let it go again, all without a word. I leaned over the side as far as he would let me and stared into the water between the pieces.

She's here. She's under something. She's waiting for me to find her.

The sun came up over the sea and climbed, and still Calum pulled up wood, and still I looked.

Late in the morning I found the comb.

It came knocking against our side with the weed, a comb of wood as long as my hand, with three of its teeth gone. I knew it before I had it in my fingers. My mother had one like it. She used it every morning, sitting on the deck with her back to the wind, and when she was done she let me try. It always caught in her hair, and she

laughed.

I lifted it out of the water, and the wood was cold and soft in my hand.

It's hers. So she's here. She's here! I held it up to show Calum. He looked at it, then at the water, and went back to pulling up planks.

Why isn't he happy? It's hers! My eyes went to the dark hole in the cliff. The waves went into it and came out again, and every time they came out they brought a little more wood.

"In there! Take me in there."

"Not now. The sea's still in it. It would throw us against the rock."

"She's in there!"

"Tonight the sea goes down. Then we'll go in."

"She's in there! You didn't look! You rowed away and you left her, and she's in there, and you won't go!"

I was angry at him, angrier than I had ever been at anyone. Somewhere I knew that he had done nothing wrong, and I was past caring. I called him every bad word I knew, which was only a few, and I hit him on the arm with the comb in my fist. He sat there and took it, perfectly still and perfectly silent, until I was empty. Then I sat down in the bottom of the boat and held the comb with both hands.

He went back to pulling up wood.

* * *

The sea went down at the end of the day, just as he had said. The hole in the cliff grew taller, the waves stopped going into it, and Calum turned the boat and rowed us in.

The light went away behind us. The roof came down so low that Calum had to bend his head, and the water under us lay black and still. It was cold in there, and it smelled of weed and of something dead.

At the back there was a shelf of rock where the sea had piled wood: planks, rope, a barrel with its top gone. While Calum held the boat against the shelf with his oar, I climbed up and pulled the wood apart with my hands, piece by piece, in the little light that came in from the mouth. I went all the way to the back, where the roof met the shelf and there was no more room, and I put my hands into the cracks.

I called her.

Answer me. Please answer me. The cave gave me my own voice back, twice, and then it was quiet.

She wasn't there. Nobody was.

I climbed down into the boat and lay on the bottom of it. My stomach turned over and I was sick on the boards, and then I lay down again right beside it, because I had stopped caring about that too.

Calum rowed us out into the last of the light, and neither of us spoke. I was done talking, to him or to anyone.

* * *

When the boat touched the sand I got out, walked past the house, and went on up the hill.

There was a light on top of the cliff. It was small and pale, and it moved the way a flame moves when you carry it. One moment it was there, and the next it was gone.

What is that? Had I really seen it? I was too tired to wonder, so I just went toward it.

The path climbed behind the house and ran along the top of the cliff, with the sea on the right, to the place where the cliff turned. From there you could see down to the rocks, the dark hole, and the wood rising and falling in the water.

I sat on the grass with the comb and I watched.

What was I watching for? A head in the water, maybe, or a hand, or her hair.

I stayed up there all night. It was cold, the grass was wet, and I had never slept outside by myself, so when it got really dark I was afraid.

Then the little light was there again, a little way off in the grass, bobbing up and down. I thought I was dreaming it. But the fear went out of me, because it felt like someone was sitting with me.

It would be years before I understood what I had seen that night.

I slept against a rock with my knees in my arms. In the morning the light was gone, and I was still there, and so was the sea.

I stayed. For how many days, I have no idea. I had stopped being hungry, and there was a hole in me where the hunger used to be. Sometimes it rained, and I let it rain on me. Sometimes a hair blew

across my eyes, and I pushed it away.

From up there you could see the whole village: the houses with smoke coming out of them, the boats pulled up on the sand, and the people walking about, small as beetles. Some of them stopped to stare up at me before they went on.

Calum looked up every day. I knew him by how he stood, with his hands at his sides. He would stand at the door of the house for a long time, facing the cliff, and then he would go to his boat.

Stop looking at me. Go and look for her. I was lost. What came after this? All I knew was that I had to stay up there, because going down meant that she wasn't coming.

* * *

One morning he came up.

I saw him on the path, far below and then closer, walking as slowly as he did everything. He sat down on the grass without a word, a little way off from me, and together we watched the sea.

"It's a good place to look from," he said at last.

I gave him no answer.

"I've looked from here too. Other times. Other people."

The waves came in and went out.

"My wife wanted to come up and fetch you the first night. I told her to leave you be." He pulled up a bit of grass and let the wind take it. "I told her you knew what you were doing. I'm not so sure now."

I looked at my knees, which had gone sharp.

"Come and eat something. Then sleep in a bed. The cliff will still be here tomorrow. I'll walk up with you myself, if you want."

I wanted to say no. I tried, but my mouth refused to do it. My legs were shaking, and so were my hands around the comb. I was too tired to be angry and too tired to say no, and that was all that was left of me.

I nodded.

He walked beside me, slowly, all the way down. When I stumbled he put his hand on my shoulder, and then he took it away again.

* * *

The woman was at the door.

She stood back, as she had the first time, and let Calum bring me in and sit me on the bed before she put a bowl in my hands. This time I ate. I ate it all, she filled it again, and I ate that too. My arms had gone so thin that I could see the bones in my wrists where the bowl rested on them.

When the bowl was empty the second time, she came closer and put her hand on my head, slowly, as you would with a dog you have only just met.

That's not how Mum does it. Then her hand stopped.

"Calum! Look. He has a white lock. Here, at the front. That wasn't there before."

Her words made no sense to me. My hair was black. Everyone's hair was black, where I came from.

By the door stood the tub of water she washed in. I got off the bed, went over to it and looked in.

A boy looked back at me out of the water. He was thin, and his hair was black like mine, but at the front, over his eye, one lock had turned white. White as the foam on the rocks.

That's not mine. I took it between my fingers and pulled, and the boy in the water did the same.

Calum had come to stand behind me. I could see him in the water too, big and dark, over my shoulder.

"That's not the only thing wrong with you," he said. "You're black to the ears. Come here."

Part One: Childhood

3. For Now

CALUM

He was the dirtiest thing I have ever put in that tub, and I have put fish guts in it.

Sive warmed the water on the fire, and I took it for granted that she would wash him herself. Instead she put the cloth in my hand and stepped back, as if the matter had been settled long before I came in.

"He came down the cliff with you. It should be you."

Arguing with my wife when she uses that voice is a waste of good breath, so I washed him. He was the first child I had ever washed, but I have scraped the weed off more hulls than I can remember and gutted more fish than I could count in a lifetime, so I went at him the way a man goes at any job that is new to him: I started at the top, worked my way down, and hoped nobody was watching.

He stood in the tub and let me do it, staring at the wall the whole time as if something was written there that only he could read.

He had been nine days up on that cliff. I know, because I counted them from my door, morning and evening. Before that there had been the storm, the cold sea, and the wreck he had pulled apart with his own two hands, and since then he had slept on wet grass and sat

out in the rain without once looking for shelter. All of it was still on him. When I poured the first jug over his head, the water ran off him gray, like water off a deck after a bad night.

Nine days. I've known grown men who wouldn't have lasted two.

Under the dirt there was very little boy left. I could count every one of his ribs, his knees were all scabs, and his palms were cut from the planks. One of his hands stayed shut, and I could see that all the water in the sea would fail to open it.

"Open your hand, lad. I'll do your fingers."

He looked at me then, for the first time since I'd stood him in the tub, and the hand stayed shut.

I knew what was in it. It was the comb he had fished out of the water that first morning, and as far as I could tell he had held on to it ever since, eating and sleeping.

It's all he has left of her. You don't take that from a man, and you don't take it from a boy. So I washed around the fist.

I talked while I worked. Anyone in Tramore will tell you I'm a man of few words, and the boy was deaf to all of it anyway, but a silence that long in a small house wants filling, so I told him about the tide. I told him it would turn before dark, and that the boats would go out on it in the morning, mine with them. When a man has nothing to say, he says what he knows.

By the end he was shaking, though the water was still warm. I have seen men shake like that when they step onto dry land after a storm, once there is nothing left to hold on for.

I dried him and put him in one of my shirts, with the sleeves hanging down past his knees. He was asleep before I had the blanket up to his chin, the fist tucked under his cheek.

I stood there watching him for longer than I needed to.

Somebody combed that hair once. Somebody sang to him at night.

Then I thought of the planks knocking together under the cliff, and I knew that nobody was out there looking for him, because there was nobody left to look.

So what do you do with a boy who has nobody?

* * *

I went outside so that Sive wouldn't see my face. Twenty-five years married, and I still think that works. She came out after me anyway, as she always does.

We stood by the wall with the sea in front of us. The light was going, the boats were only dark shapes on the sand, and for a while each of us kept quiet about what we were both thinking.

"Nobody's coming for him," I said at last.

"No."

"I went back to that cave three times while he was up there. It's empty, Sive. He's the only one who came ashore from that boat."

"I know. And you went along the coast asking. Two days, and you came home with no fish."

I had hoped that had slipped past her. After twenty-five years, I should have known better.

"He can't live on a cliff. Somebody has to take him. There are

families with children. He'd have other boys around him."

"Which family? Every house in Tramore has more mouths than fish."

"And ours doesn't?"

"Ours has two." Her voice had gone very quiet. "Ours has had two for twenty years."

We had agreed a long time ago to leave that alone. There are things a man and his wife set down together, like a heavy net, because carrying them every day would break their backs. She kept to that now. But she was standing beside me thinking about it, and after twenty-five years I can hear her think.

"One boat. One man fishing. One bad winter and we're eating the nets."

"Then we'll eat the nets."

"And if his mother comes? Say she's alive. Say she walks into the village a year from now, and by then he's ours."

Sive took her time, and when the answer came her voice was steady.

"Then I'll put his hand in hers myself, and I'll be glad for him. And after that I'll break in two. But not before, Calum. Not tonight, with a child asleep in my house who needs feeding."

She's already decided. She decided the moment she saw him at the door, and she's been waiting for me to catch up."He might go back up the cliff."

"Then you'll go up and sit with him again. You're good at it."

That was the end of it. I have won perhaps four arguments with my

wife in twenty-five years, and I have forgotten what every one of them was about. It's the ones you lose that you remember.

"You ask him. If I ask, it'll sound like an order."

"It would."

"And tell him it's for now. Only for now. I don't want him thinking we're taking her place."

She put her hand on my arm, and we went in.

She asked him in the morning. I made sure I was at the door, with my back to them and a net in my hands, because I had a knot to see to. It was a good knot, and I checked it four times.

FINTAN

I woke up in somebody else's shirt.

It was much too big, and it smelled of smoke and fish. My skin felt strange, tight and new, until I remembered the tub, and the big hands, and the gray water.

The comb was still in my fist. I checked.

The woman was sitting on the edge of the bed. She must have been waiting for me to wake up, because she stayed perfectly calm when I moved.

Calum was at the door with his back to us, busy with a net.

"I'm Sive. I don't think anybody told you. That one's Calum, but you know him."

I looked at her and kept quiet, because I had used up all my words in the boat.

That seemed to be fine with her. She knelt on the floor in front of me, so that I could look straight at her.

"We talked last night, him and me. We'd like you to stay with us. You'd eat here and sleep here. You could go up to your cliff whenever you like, and nobody would fetch you down."

She stopped, choosing her next words carefully.

"It would be for now. Only for now. Until..."

Until she comes. She left it there, and I understood her anyway. She was leaving a door open for my mother. Since the cave, Calum had stopped talking about her at all, and only looked at the water.

Past her shoulder I could see Calum's back. It was perfectly still, and so was the net in his hands.

He's listening. He wants to know what I'll say. I wanted my mother, and our boat, and the flag at the top of the mast. But all of that was in pieces under the cliff, and I was very tired, and the bed was warm.

I gave her one small nod.

Sive laughed and cried at the same time, which was new to me.

At the door, Calum dropped his net.

"Well," he said. He had to stop and start again. "Well. I've a knot to see to."

He went out and left the net on the floor.

Sive wiped her face with her sleeve. Then she turned back to me as if she had only just thought of something.

"We can't go on calling you 'the boy'. What's your name?"

I had searched for it every night up on the cliff, and every night I had found only the wind.

I held the comb tighter and kept silent.

Sive waited. Then she smiled, as if I had answered her.

"Never mind. We'll find you one."

I don't want a new one. I want mine.

4. White Fire

SIVE

I don't believe in signs. I want that said before anything else.

My mother believed in them, and her mother before her. They saw a sign in every crow on the roof and every cup that broke, and in all those years a sign never told them one useful thing. So I don't believe in signs. I only notice them.

The boy stayed with us. He ate what I put in front of him and slept in the bed by the fire, and he hardly spoke, so I talked enough for the three of us.

"Fish tonight," I told him one evening, stirring the pot. "Fish tomorrow too, unless Calum falls in and they catch him instead."

The boy looked at the wall.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

That was a good evening. In those weeks, "yes" was a whole conversation.

Calum was mending a net by the door. "You're wasting your breath.

He's looking at the wall."

"He's listening to me while he looks at the wall. You do the same thing."

Calum opened his mouth, thought better of it, and went back to his net, which after twenty-five years I know to be his way of telling me I'm right.

The boy followed him everywhere. Every morning he went down the path behind Calum with that comb in his fist, and he sat on the sand for as long as Calum mended the nets.

"It's like having a gull behind the boat," Calum grumbled one night. "I turn round, and there he is."

"Then walk slower, so the gull can keep up."

"I don't walk slower for anybody."

He did, though. I watched him from the door the next morning, going down that path like an old man, with the boy right at his heels.

* * *

The first time the boy talked in his sleep, it woke us both.

It was the middle of the night, and the fire was down to red. The boy was turning in his blanket, and words were coming out of him, fast and soft.

Calum sat up. "What's he saying?"

"Hush."

I lay still and listened. The words were almost ours. They had the same shape, the way a cousin has the same shape as you, and yet

every one of them slipped past me. Then the words turned into a tune, and he sang a few notes of it, very low, before he turned over and was quiet.

Somebody sang him that every night. Somebody who isn't coming. It was a long time before either of us slept again.

Two days later I was humming over the fire when Calum stopped in the doorway.

"Where did you learn that?"

"Learn what?"

"That tune. That's his."

I put down the spoon, because he was right. I had been humming it all morning, and to this day I have no idea where I got it.

The boy still went up to the cliff most evenings. Once I took him a heel of bread up there, and I stopped on the path before he saw me. He was sitting in the grass with his face turned to the empty air beside him, and he was smiling, as pleased as if somebody had come to keep him company, though I could see for myself that he was alone.

I left the bread on a stone and kept it from Calum, who would only have told me that children do that.

And how would he know? We had never had one.

At the bottom of the path I looked back. He was talking now, very quietly, with his head bent, as you talk to someone sitting close beside you.

* * *

Then there was his hair.

It began with the one white lock at the front, the one I found the day he came down. A week later there were two, and by the time the cold weather came, the white had spread through his head like frost through a field.

One evening I sat him on a stool to cut it, while Calum held the lamp.

"Look at this." I held a lock up to the light, black at the end and white at the root, like a candle burned halfway down.

"It's the salt," Calum muttered. "Salt does strange things to hair."

"Salt doesn't do that, and you know it."

He let that pass, and held the lamp a little closer.

He's frightened. Calum, who has never once been frightened of the sea.

I cut it short, and it grew back whiter than before. By the spring every last hair on his head was white. He was a small boy with the hair of an old man, and you could see him from the other end of the beach.

The village had things to say about it, as I knew it would. I grew up among those women, and I know how they talk.

There were three of them at the well when I came down with my buckets, and they stopped talking when they saw me, which told me what they had been talking about.

"How's the boy, Sive?" asked the eldest.

"Growing."

"Growing white, I hear." She pulled up her rope, hand over hand. "My mother used to say that what the sea marks, it comes back for."

"Your mother said a lot of things. She said your husband would make you happy."

The other two laughed into their buckets while the old woman stood stiff as a post. As I walked away, she made the sign against bad luck behind my back, sure that I had missed it.

* * *

Old Brennan said it to Calum's face, and I was there to hear it.

I had brought Calum his bread down at the boats. The boy was at the edge of the water with his comb, looking out to sea, when Brennan came and stood too close to Calum, as he does with everybody.

"That one's not right, Calum."

Calum went on coiling his rope as if the wind had spoken.

"He should have drowned in that storm. Everybody knows it." Brennan nodded toward the water's edge. "If he were mine, I'd give him back to the sea. The sea's not done with him."

If Calum doesn't answer him, I will. Calum finished the rope. He laid it in the bottom of the boat, neatly, and only then did he look up.

"The sea had its chance. It dropped him. I picked him up. That's how it works with fish, and that's how it works with boys."

Brennan opened his mouth. Calum went on looking at him until Brennan shut it again and went away up the sand.

I have been married to that man for twenty-five years, and it is the best thing I ever heard him say. I kept that to myself, because he would only have gone out to look at the boat.

* * *

There was one thing left, and I was the one who brought it up, as I bring up most things.

"He needs a name."

It was evening. The boy was sitting on the floor by the fire, pulling a bit of net apart and putting it back together, which he had learned from watching Calum and was getting good at.

"He had one," Calum answered. "He'll tell us when he's ready."

"He doesn't have it anymore. I asked him. He looked for it so hard, Calum, I thought he would be sick. It's gone." I put down my sewing. "I'm not going to call him 'lad' until he's a grown man. I'm not going to shout 'boy' down the beach like I'm calling a dog."

"What, then?"

I studied the boy for a while. The fire was behind him, shining through his hair, so that his whole head seemed to be burning with a white flame that gave no heat.

"Look at that. It's like a fire. A white fire."

Calum went very still. I know that stillness, and it means that something has come up from the bottom of him that took him by surprise.

"There's an old word for that," he said slowly. "My grandmother used it. I haven't thought of it in thirty years."

"What word?"

"Fintan."

The boy's hands stopped on the net.

He turned his head and looked at Calum. Since the day he came down from the cliff he had kept his eyes away from ours, and now he was looking at my husband as if Calum had called him from a long way off, and he had heard.

And Calum had only been trying the word out.

I don't believe in signs. I only notice them. I noticed that one.

FINTAN

The word went into me like a stone into water.

I had never heard it before, or I thought I hadn't. But there was a place in me where there was only the sound of the wind, and the word went straight there and stayed. It fit, like my foot in my own footprint.

That's mine. Calum looked as surprised as I was.

"Fintan," I said.

In those days I kept to a few words: yes, no, not hungry. But I said this one out loud, because it was mine.

Sive put both hands over her mouth. Calum cleared his throat.

"Well. That's settled, then."

That was how I got my name. Or maybe I got it back. The only person who could have told me which was gone.

After that I talked a little more. One morning I shouted "Wait!" on the path, because Calum was walking too fast, and he stopped so suddenly that I walked into his legs.

And I grew. Like a weed after rain, Sive said, when she had to let down my tunic twice in one summer.

Calum put me in the boat as soon as I was big enough to hold an oar. I had no wish to get in. I stood on the sand with my feet in the water, and my legs refused to move.

It took her. It will take me too. Calum sat in the boat and waited. He was the best at waiting of any man I ever met.

"The sea's big," he said after a while. "That's all it is. Big. It doesn't care about you one way or the other. You learn where it's safe and where it's not, and then you stay where it's safe. That's all fishing is."

I got in. I held on to the side with both hands the whole way out, and when he gave me the line I held that too tight as well. When the first fish pulled, I almost went over the side after it.

Calum caught me by the back of my tunic.

"Not that way. The fish comes to us."

I've got one. I've got a fish! It was a small fish, and I had never been so proud of anything. I carried it home myself, and Sive had to look at it properly before I would let her cook it.

"That's the finest fish I ever saw!"

"It's small."

"Then it's the finest small fish I ever saw. Calum, did you ever catch

one like that?"

"Never," Calum said, with his mouth full.

The other children were slower than the fish. All that year they watched me from behind the boats and ran when I turned round, because their mothers had told them about my hair.

The first one to come out was Niall, the net-maker's son, who was my age and had lost both his front teeth. He walked up to me on the sand one morning with the others whispering behind him.

"Does it hurt?"

"What?"

"Your hair."

"No."

"Can I touch it?"

I thought about it, and bent my head. He put one finger on it, very quickly, as you touch a crab to see if it is dead.

"It's just hair!" he shouted back at the boats, and he sounded let down.

He isn't afraid of me. He's the first one. After that Niall came looking for me most days, and little by little the others came with him.

I was about seven the first time I called her Mum.

It slipped out. I had fallen on the rocks below the house and cut my knee open, and I came up the path with blood all down my leg, shouting for her. "Mum! Mum!" Then I heard myself.

I stopped in the middle of the yard, feeling sick. I had a mother. I had sat on a cliff for her, and now I had given her name to someone else.

She's not my mum. My mum is in the sea. Sive washed the knee first, because it needed washing. Then she sat back on her heels.

"A boy can have two. One of them made you and sang to you. The other one's only here to wash your knees until the first one comes. There's no harm in calling us both the same thing. She wouldn't mind. I wouldn't, in her place."

I thought about it for a long time.

"All right."

I called Calum "Dad" not long after. He pretended to be deaf. Then he went out to look at the boat, at night, in the rain.

I still went up to the cliff, but I slept in my bed now, and I had stopped watching the sea for her. Sometimes the little light came and sat with me. I thought everybody had one.

One evening, up there, I heard shouting.

It came from the hill behind our house, where a small house leaned to one side. In front of its door stood a bald man with a big red beard, all alone, shouting at the sky.

Who is he shouting at? When I got home, I asked Mum.

"The man on the hill. Why does he shout?"

"Because he drinks." She kept her eyes on the pot. "You stay away from him. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Promise."

"I promise."

I kept that promise for a few years.

Part One: Childhood

5. The Leaning House

One morning, I saw him fight the wind.

I was nine, or near enough. I had gone up the cliff before the sun, as I still did some days, and the sea lay gray, flat and empty below me. Then something moved on the hill behind our house.

It was the red man. He was outside the leaning house, alone, with a long stick in his hands.

At first I thought he was drunk again. Then I saw what he was doing.

He was fighting. There was nobody there, but he was fighting them all the same. The stick went round him, over his head, then down, so fast that it blurred. He stepped, turned and stepped again, and his feet always knew where the other one was. Once he spun all the way round and stopped dead, with the end of the stick held out at the empty air, as if he had caught someone by the throat.

It looked as easy for him as pulling in a net was for Calum.

I sat in the wet grass and watched until the sun came up and he went inside.

What is he? I had no word for it. But I had never seen anybody move like that, and I wanted to see it again, closer.

* * *

I went up the hill that same afternoon.

Mum had told me to stay away from him, and for years I had. But that day Mum was at the well and Dad was at the boats, and the path up the hill was right there.

I asked Niall to come with me. He looked at me as if I had asked him to swim to the moon, so I went alone.

The leaning house was worse up close. Its roof sagged in the middle, and jugs lay in the grass by the door, where the red man was sitting on a stone.

He was bigger than I had thought. His head was completely bald, his beard was red and as wide as a bush, and one of his ears was only half there.

For a moment we just stared at each other.

"Get off my hill!"

"I saw you this morning. With the stick."

He picked up a clod of earth and threw it, and it hit the grass by my foot.

"The next one won't miss. Get off my hill!"

I ran.

I'm going back.

* * *

I went back the next day, and the day after that.

I kept my distance. I sat on a rock at the edge of his ground, a long

way from the door, and kept my mouth shut. The first time, he shouted at me. The second time, he shut his door so hard that a bit of the roof fell off. The third time, he stayed inside all day.

The fourth time, he came out with a jug and sat on his stone, and he drank as if I wasn't there.

That was better.

When I was on that rock, the sea went out of my head. All I could think about was the stick going round his head, and how his feet knew where to go.

On the sixth day I asked Dad about him, down at the boats, while he mended a net and I held the end of it for him.

"The red man. On the hill."

"Ruadhan." Dad kept his eyes on the net. "What about him?"

Ruadhan. So that was his name.

"Why does he live by himself?"

Dad pulled a knot tight, taking his time.

"He went north to the war when he was young. He came back by himself. Some men come back from a war, and some only come back from part of it."

"What does that mean?"

"It means stay away from him." His eyes finally came up to mine. "Your mother told you. I'm telling you too."

"You take him fish."

His hands stopped.

I had seen him do it. Every week he walked up the hill with a fish on a string and left it on the stone by the door, without ever knocking or staying.

"I take him fish," Dad said slowly, "because once, in a storm, long before you came to us, my boat went over. Ruadhan came into the water after me when nobody else would. And when he came back from the north with his back burned off, your mother and I sat by his bed all winter. So I take him fish." He went back to his net. "That doesn't make him safe. He's like a dog that's been kicked too many times. You keep your hand away from its mouth."

He didn't say I couldn't look at the dog. I kept that to myself. I'm not stupid.

* * *

That week, I followed Dad up the hill.

I stayed well back on the path, but he knew I was there, and since he never turned round to send me home, I kept going.

Ruadhan was in his doorway when we got there. His eyes went from the fish to Dad, and then over Dad's shoulder to me.

"You've brought your pup."

"He brought himself," Dad said. "He does that."

"He's been sitting on my rock for a week."

"I know. I can see your rock from my door."

The two of them looked at each other for a while, in a way that was

new to me. It made me think of two old boats sitting side by side on the sand.

"You're not drinking today."

"It's early."

"It's good to see." Dad put the fish on the stone. "Sive says come down and eat with us. Any night."

"Sive says that every year."

"And every year you don't come." Dad turned to go. Then he stopped, and spoke with his back still turned. "Don't hurt the boy, Ruadhan."

Ruadhan gave him no answer. He picked up the fish and went inside.

On the way down, Dad put his hand on my shoulder.

"I meant what I said about the dog."

"I know."

He sighed. I think he knew I was going back.

* * *

It rained for three days after that. The boats stayed on the sand, and there was no way up the hill without Mum seeing me.

On the fourth morning the rain stopped, and I went.

Ruadhan was asleep against the wall of his house, sitting in the mud with his legs out in front of him and his head on his chest, soaked to the skin. A jug lay on its side next to him, and the stick was across his knees.

Is he dead? I went closer. He was breathing, slow and rough, but he was very wet and very gray, and I thought of Dad sitting by his bed all winter.

What was I supposed to do? I did the first thing that came into my head, and reached out to take the stick off his knees, so that I could pull him up.

My fingers never reached it.

His hand closed on my wrist before I saw it move. One moment he was asleep, and the next his eyes were open and he had my arm in a grip so hard that I was on my knees in the mud.

He stared at me, and for a moment I think he had no idea where he was. It was the look you give someone you are about to hurt.

Then he saw who I was, and he let go.

"Don't." His voice was thick. "Don't ever touch that."

My wrist hurt. I held it against my chest, with my heart going so hard that I could feel it in my ears.

Run. Dad said. The dog. I stayed. I think it was because he looked more scared than I was.

"You were in the rain. You'll get sick."

He stared at me. Then he laughed, a short, rough laugh.

"You're the one from the cliff."

"Yes."

"I watched you up there. Nine days." He wiped the rain off his face

with his big hand. "I thought you'd die. Everybody did. You didn't."

I had no answer to that, so I kept quiet.

Getting up took him a while, and he had to lean on the stick to do it. Once he was standing, he looked down at me, and I saw that his eyes were only very tired.

"Go home. Your mother will be looking for you."

He went inside, and he left the door open.

He didn't shut it. He always shuts it. I stood in the mud for a long time, staring at that open door.

* * *

The next day, when I came up, he was outside with the stick.

He let me come. Then he started to move, as he had that first morning, slow at first and then faster, the stick turning round him until it hummed.

I sat on my rock and watched, and I forgot to breathe.

Teach me that. Please teach me that. When he stopped, his breath was as slow as if he had been sitting down. He leaned the stick against the wall and sat on his stone.

"What's it called?" I asked. "What you do."

He considered me for a moment.

"It's called staying alive."

Staying alive. Like on the cliff. Then he picked up the jug, peered into

it, and put it down again without drinking.

"Tomorrow," he said, "if you come, bring bread. And don't tell your mother."

Part One: Childhood

6. The Staff

CALUM

I knew where the boy went long before Sive did. You can see the hill from my boat, and a man who has spent forty years watching the water for the smallest change will notice two figures on a hill that used to have only one.

I kept it from her, and I kept it from him. A boy needs one thing in his life that is his own, and I could see from the water that the shouting on the hill had stopped.

For years Ruadhan had stood outside his door in the evenings and shouted at the sky, and now, most evenings, he was quiet. Whatever the boy was doing up there, it was doing more good than all the fish I had ever left on that stone.

It was the bread that gave him away. It is nearly always the small things that give a man away, and a boy is only a small man.

"We're eating more bread," Sive said one evening, with her hands in the dough. "A loaf more every two days. I've counted."

"He's growing."

"He's growing, but he's not growing a loaf every two days." She

turned toward the boy, who was sitting by the fire mending a net and had gone very still.

Here it comes."Fintan. Where does the bread go?"

The boy was ten that spring, as near as we could guess. We never knew the day he was born, so Sive gave him one: the day I carried him through our door. A boy of ten can lie to his mother about many things, but bread is another matter when she is the woman who baked it. His eyes came to me for help, and mine went to the net.

"Up the hill."

I have seen Sive angry perhaps five times in nearly thirty years. When she is angry she goes quiet and very straight, and you would rather she shouted.

"You promised me."

"I know."

"You promised me, and you looked me in the face." She wiped her hands on her apron, slowly, finger by finger. "How long?"

"Since last spring."

"Since last spring." She turned to me. "And you."

There is no use lying to a woman who has already guessed, which I learned long before the boy came to us.

"I knew."

"You knew."

"I can see the hill from the boat, Sive. I watched them. Ruadhan

teaches him to stand, and to hold a stick, and to fall without breaking anything. That's all I've ever seen."

"He's a drunk who shouts at the sky."

"He doesn't shout anymore. Have you noticed? Not since the boy started going up." I put the net down, because there are some things a man should say with his hands empty. "And he hasn't been drunk since the autumn."

Her eyes stayed on the boy for a long time. The boy looked back at her, and I was proud of him for that, because I doubt I could have done it myself.

He never asked her. That's what hurts."He's not to go back," she said, and went out to the hens, though the hens had been shut in for an hour.

The boy stayed away from the hill for six days. On the seventh evening, the evening before his birthday, Ruadhan came down it.

Ruadhan was sober. I had seen him sober perhaps twice in all the years since he came south, and it made him look like a different man, a younger one and a sadder one. At our door he stopped, and stayed on the step.

"I'd like to borrow the boy tomorrow. For the day."

"No," said Sive.

"I've a thing to give him. It's his birthday, I'm told."

"You can give it to him here."

"It's not a thing you give a boy in front of his mother."

She went to shut the door on him. I put my hand on it, flat, and Sive looked at my hand, and then at me.

"Sive," Ruadhan said.

Ten years, and I have never once heard him say her name. "He's the only one who comes up my hill. He's the only one who has come up it since I came home. I've not touched a jug since the leaves fell. You can smell me if you like."

My wife left him unsmelled, though I think for a moment she considered it. Her eyes went past both of us to the boy, who was by the fire pretending to mend a net that had been mended twice already.

She's already lost. She knows it. She hates it. "You bring him back before dark. And you bring him back whole."

"Before dark. Whole."

With that he went back up the hill. Sive kept her words from me for the rest of that night, but I've slept beside a cold back before, and it always warms up by morning.

In the morning I heard the boy get up before it was light. He stopped by our bed to see if we were asleep. We were wide awake, but we are both very good at pretending.

After he had gone, Sive went to the door and stood there a long while, and I stayed where I was.

I lay there until the sun came up, telling myself that I wasn't worried.

FINTAN

I ran the whole way up.

He came down the hill. He came down the hill for me! Ruadhan was on his stone outside the door, though the sun had yet to come up. He looked as if he had waited there all night.

"You're late."

"The sun's not up."

"Then you're early. Sit down."

I sat on the grass. He reached behind the stone and held something out to me in both hands, carefully, as if it might break.

It was a stick.

It was a good stick, I'll give it that. It was straight and as tall as I was, and somebody had taken the bark off and rubbed it with sand until it shone. But it was a stick.

I had thought it would be a knife. I had been sure of it all night.

A stick. I got up in the dark for a stick. "This is the best weapon a fighter can carry," Ruadhan said.

"It's a stick."

"It's a staff."

"It looks like a stick."

He gave me a long look. Then he picked up Ashrod, which was leaning against his wall. I had seen her a hundred times by then, darker and older than mine, with the middle of her worn pale where his hands went. Before I could move, the end of her had tapped me

on the top of the head. It was only a tap, but I had missed the moment she left the wall.

"She bends like grass," Ruadhan said, "and she hits like iron. I've broken swords with her, and the arms that held them. Do you still think she looks like a stick?"

I rubbed my head.

"No."

"Good. Then you'll stop calling yours one. Stand up. We start with your feet. Everybody wants to start with their hands, and that's why everybody falls over."

* * *

We spent the whole day on the hill.

Up to then he had only shown me how to stand and how to fall. Now he showed me how to hold the staff, where my hands went, and how to turn it without hitting myself in the face, which I managed to do twice anyway. And every time I let the end of it drop, Ashrod came out of nowhere and tapped me on the head.

"Dead," he said. "Dead. Dead again! You're the most killed boy on this coast."

By the middle of the day my arms were shaking, and by the afternoon I had stopped letting the end drop. He watched me for a good while in silence, and then he grunted.

That was the grunt. The good one. I had learned his grunts by then, the way you learn the sounds a boat makes. One grunt meant *wrong*. One meant *do it again*. A very short one meant *that was nearly not*

bad, and I had only heard that one twice before.

Afterward we sat in the grass and shared the bread I had brought.

"Who taught you?" I asked.

"A man in the north. In the war."

"What war?"

He looked at me as if I had asked him what the sea was.

"Calum's told you nothing? No. He wouldn't. He likes it quiet." He pulled up a stalk of grass and chewed it. "There's an island at the top of the land, boy. Tory, they call it. The Fomorians live there. And they have a lord. Balor."

The name came out of his mouth like something that tasted bad.

"When I was young, Balor's men came down out of the north. They came in iron, with their faces covered, and wherever they went they asked for the same people. The druids. The healers. The seers. Anyone who knew the old things."

"What did they want with them?"

Ruadhan took a moment before he answered, with his eyes on the sea at the bottom of the hill.

"They burned them."

His hand closed on the grass beside him until his knuckles went white, and I kept very quiet.

Like the fires on the beach. With people in them. It was a thought I wanted out of my head, so I stared at my staff.

"Why?"

"Because a man who can see what's coming is a hard man to rule." He threw the grass away. "So King Eochaid of Bearna raised an army against them. I was in it, with Ashrod. We pushed them north for three years. My last fight was at Galway." He moved his shoulders, and I knew he was thinking about his back. "After that there was a treaty, and Balor took his men home, and I came south with what was left of me."

"So they're gone."

"They went back." He turned to me. "That's not the same thing as gone."

I waited for the rest. I could feel there was more, something about the seers and the fires, something about why it mattered that I was the one on his hill.

But he only shook his head.

"Another day. That's enough old blood for a birthday."

Another day. He always says another day. He stood up and picked up Ashrod. The sun was getting low over the sea, and I remembered what he had promised Mum.

"Up," he said. "You've been dead eleven times today. Before dark, let's see if we can make it ten."

Part One: Childhood

7. The Long Years

We didn't make it ten. I died nine times before dark, and Ruadhan said it was the best birthday he had been to in twenty years.

I think it was the only birthday he had been to in twenty years.

After that, I went up the hill every day the boats stayed in, and plenty of days they went out. Dad kept his thoughts about it to himself. He simply started taking the boat out a little later in the morning, so that I could do both.

The staff was the easy part. Every day, before he let me pick it up, Ruadhan made me earn it.

He made me run up the hill with a bucket of water in each hand, and if I spilled any, I ran down and filled them again. "Water's for drinking," he would say. "Not for washing your feet." He made me stand on one foot on the wall behind his house until my leg shook, and then he pushed me off. "Down you go!" he called, every time, as if it were news. He made me fall, over and over, first onto grass and then onto stones, until I could hit the ground and hardly feel it.

"A man who can't fall," he liked to tell me, "falls once."

I would understand that later.

Some days I came home so tired that I fell asleep at the table with the spoon in my hand. Other days I came home with my arms blue from wrist to elbow.

"Look at you!" Mum held my arm up to the fire one evening. "You look like a mackerel."

"It doesn't hurt."

"Of course it hurts. You're just too proud to say so, like the other two." She rubbed something on the bruises that smelled of mint and old fish. "You tell that old goat from me that if he breaks you, I'll break him."

"He knows."

"I'm sure he does." She put my arm down. Then, more quietly, "He hasn't shouted once this winter. Did you know that?"

I knew. What surprised me was that she had noticed.

She's listening for him too. Every night.

* * *

That spring, Ruadhan came to supper.

Mum had asked him every year for ten years, and every year he had said no. This time he gave no answer at all. He just came down the hill one evening at dusk and stood in our doorway, with his beard combed and his hands empty, like a man who had forgotten why he was there.

He came. After ten years, he came. "Well," Mum said. "Don't stand there letting the heat out."

He came in and sat on the stool by the fire, which was Dad's stool,

and Dad let him. He ate two bowls of fish stew and most of the bread. When Mum put a cup of water in front of him instead of ale, he looked at it for a moment, and then he drank it.

Nobody said anything about the water. Nobody needed to. I had never heard Dad and Ruadhan talk for so long. They talked about the weather and about boats, and then about a storm, a long time ago, that Dad had told me about once on the beach.

"You were a fool to go in after me."

"You were a fool to be out in it."

"I was young."

"So was I." Ruadhan turned his cup round in his big hands. "We were both fools. One of us was lucky."

For a while after that the two of them sat in silence, and it was a good kind of quiet.

Then Ruadhan nodded at me.

"He's quick," he told Dad, as if I had left the room. "Quicker than I was at twice his age. His feet are good. His hands will come."

Dad put another piece of bread on my plate without a word, and I saw that he was keeping his eyes away from mine. It took me years to understand why.

* * *

Years passed like that.

I grew. My arms got long and my legs got longer, and Mum let down my tunic until there was nothing left to let down. By the time I

was twelve, I could run up the hill with both buckets full and keep every drop. By the time I was thirteen, I could sometimes stop Ashrod before she reached my head.

Sometimes.

The hours that were left belonged to Niall. We raced each other along the sand and dived off the black rocks, and his little sister Orla followed us everywhere, however fast we ran. When Niall wanted to know what I did on the hill all day, I showed him my bruises.

"And you go back?" He shook his head. "You're as mad as the old man."

He was grinning when he said it. By then the children of the village had stopped seeing my hair, and most days so had I.

My own staff was getting short. When I held it upright, it only came up to my chin.

"You'll outgrow it before it wears out," Ruadhan told me. "That's the way with good wood. And with boys."

He was different, those years. He still drank, but less than before, and never when I was there. He mended the roof of the leaning house, and it leaned a little less. Some evenings I looked up from the beach and saw his fire, and the hill was silent. That was the best sound I knew.

When there was meat in the house, it came from him. Every few weeks he took Ashrod and a bag and walked inland, past the last fields, into the forest beyond the hills. He came back after two days, or three, with a hare, or a bird, or once half a deer on his shoulders, and he always left the best part on Mum's doorstep.

"Take me with you," I begged, every time.

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because the hill forgives you when you make a mistake." He settled the bag on his shoulder. "The forest doesn't."

One day he'll say yes.

* * *

The summer I was thirteen, the Brennan boys found me on the beach.

There were three of them, all older than me and bigger, and they had held on to what their grandfather said about me at the boats when I was small. They had sticks. I had my staff.

"Look!" the eldest called. "The old man's dog has learned a trick."

Walk away. He'd tell you to walk away. I turned to go.

He swung at my back.

My feet moved first, the way Ruadhan had beaten into them on the hill. I stepped off the line of the stick, turned, and put the end of my staff behind his knee, and he went down on the sand. When the second one came at me, I knocked his stick out of his hands so hard that it spun into the sea. The third one looked at the other two on the ground, and at me, and ran.

It was over before I had time to be afraid.

I did it. I didn't even have to think! I looked up at the hill, where Ruadhan was standing outside the leaning house, watching.

There was no grunt when I came up. He took my staff out of my hands and looked at it, then at me, and his face was hard.

"Why did you do that?"

"He swung first."

"And the second one? Did he swing first too? Did you need to send his stick into the sea?" He gave me back my staff. "You did it because it felt good. Because they've laughed at your hair since you were six, and today you could make them stop."

I opened my mouth and shut it again. He was right, and I hated it.

"Listen to me." He took me by the shoulder, hard, so that I had to look at him. "I taught you this so you could stay alive, and so you could keep other people alive. The day you use it for pride, you're no better than the men who burned the druids. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Say it like you mean it."

"Yes!"

He held my eyes a little longer. Then he gave the very short grunt, the one that meant *that was nearly not bad*.

"Did you know any?" I asked. "Druids?"

He was slow to answer. His eyes went down the hill to the sea, as they had on my birthday.

"Some. There were people I loved who could see what was coming. Every one of them could." He picked up Ashrod and held her in both hands. "It didn't save them."

People he loved. He's never said that word before. I wanted to ask who, but his face told me to leave it alone.

"Another day," he said, and went inside.

That night, for the first time in a long while, the hill stayed dark.

* * *

That was the summer the dreams began.

The first time, I took it for an ordinary dream. I was standing in snow, at the bottom of a mountain so tall that its top was lost in the clouds. It was white and very far away, and much bigger than our hills. I had never seen it in my life, and yet I knew it, the way you know your own hand in the dark.

Somebody was singing at the top of it.

The words were too far away to hear, but I knew the tune. It was the tune I sang in my sleep, the one Mum hummed over the fire without knowing where she had learned it.

I woke up with my face wet and my heart pounding. My feet were cold, as if I had really been standing in the snow. Mum and Dad were asleep, and outside the sea was quiet.

What is that place? Why does it know me? I told nobody, not even Niall, not even Ruadhan. Said out loud, it would have sounded mad, and I had spent seven years trying to stop being the strange boy from the sea.

The dream came back. It came so often that I started to wait for it.

* * *

At the end of that summer, Ruadhan went into the forest again.

He came down the hill in the gray before dawn, with Ashrod on his shoulder and his bag on his back, and stopped at our door as he always did.

"Three days," he told Mum. "Four if the hunting's good."

"Bring back something with more meat on it than the last hare."

He laughed, and put his big hand on my head, the way he did when he thought I wasn't looking.

"Keep your feet moving. And don't get fat on your mother's stew while I'm gone."

I watched him walk up past the last fields until he was only a dot against the hills, and then he was gone.

Three days passed. Then four.

Four if the hunting's good. He said four. On the fifth morning, the path from the hills was still empty.