Fintan Mac Bochra
For Now

Jujoman

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.