Fintan Mac Bochra
The Awakening

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.

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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.

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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.