Fintan Mac Bochra
The Cliff

Jujoman

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.

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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.

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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.

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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."