Fintan Mac Bochra
The Leaning House

Jujoman

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."