Fintan Mac Bochra
The Long Years

Jujoman

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.

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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.