Fintan Mac Bochra
The Staff

Jujoman

Part One: Childhood

6. The Staff

CALUM

I knew where the boy went long before Sive did. You can see the hill from my boat, and a man who has spent forty years watching the water for the smallest change will notice two figures on a hill that used to have only one.

I kept it from her, and I kept it from him. A boy needs one thing in his life that is his own, and I could see from the water that the shouting on the hill had stopped.

For years Ruadhan had stood outside his door in the evenings and shouted at the sky, and now, most evenings, he was quiet. Whatever the boy was doing up there, it was doing more good than all the fish I had ever left on that stone.

It was the bread that gave him away. It is nearly always the small things that give a man away, and a boy is only a small man.

"We're eating more bread," Sive said one evening, with her hands in the dough. "A loaf more every two days. I've counted."

"He's growing."

"He's growing, but he's not growing a loaf every two days." She

turned toward the boy, who was sitting by the fire mending a net and had gone very still.

Here it comes."Fintan. Where does the bread go?"

The boy was ten that spring, as near as we could guess. We never knew the day he was born, so Sive gave him one: the day I carried him through our door. A boy of ten can lie to his mother about many things, but bread is another matter when she is the woman who baked it. His eyes came to me for help, and mine went to the net.

"Up the hill."

I have seen Sive angry perhaps five times in nearly thirty years. When she is angry she goes quiet and very straight, and you would rather she shouted.

"You promised me."

"I know."

"You promised me, and you looked me in the face." She wiped her hands on her apron, slowly, finger by finger. "How long?"

"Since last spring."

"Since last spring." She turned to me. "And you."

There is no use lying to a woman who has already guessed, which I learned long before the boy came to us.

"I knew."

"You knew."

"I can see the hill from the boat, Sive. I watched them. Ruadhan

teaches him to stand, and to hold a stick, and to fall without breaking anything. That's all I've ever seen."

"He's a drunk who shouts at the sky."

"He doesn't shout anymore. Have you noticed? Not since the boy started going up." I put the net down, because there are some things a man should say with his hands empty. "And he hasn't been drunk since the autumn."

Her eyes stayed on the boy for a long time. The boy looked back at her, and I was proud of him for that, because I doubt I could have done it myself.

He never asked her. That's what hurts."He's not to go back," she said, and went out to the hens, though the hens had been shut in for an hour.

The boy stayed away from the hill for six days. On the seventh evening, the evening before his birthday, Ruadhan came down it.

Ruadhan was sober. I had seen him sober perhaps twice in all the years since he came south, and it made him look like a different man, a younger one and a sadder one. At our door he stopped, and stayed on the step.

"I'd like to borrow the boy tomorrow. For the day."

"No," said Sive.

"I've a thing to give him. It's his birthday, I'm told."

"You can give it to him here."

"It's not a thing you give a boy in front of his mother."

She went to shut the door on him. I put my hand on it, flat, and Sive looked at my hand, and then at me.

"Sive," Ruadhan said.

Ten years, and I have never once heard him say her name. "He's the only one who comes up my hill. He's the only one who has come up it since I came home. I've not touched a jug since the leaves fell. You can smell me if you like."

My wife left him unsmelled, though I think for a moment she considered it. Her eyes went past both of us to the boy, who was by the fire pretending to mend a net that had been mended twice already.

She's already lost. She knows it. She hates it. "You bring him back before dark. And you bring him back whole."

"Before dark. Whole."

With that he went back up the hill. Sive kept her words from me for the rest of that night, but I've slept beside a cold back before, and it always warms up by morning.

In the morning I heard the boy get up before it was light. He stopped by our bed to see if we were asleep. We were wide awake, but we are both very good at pretending.

After he had gone, Sive went to the door and stood there a long while, and I stayed where I was.

I lay there until the sun came up, telling myself that I wasn't worried.

FINTAN

I ran the whole way up.

He came down the hill. He came down the hill for me! Ruadhan was on his stone outside the door, though the sun had yet to come up. He looked as if he had waited there all night.

"You're late."

"The sun's not up."

"Then you're early. Sit down."

I sat on the grass. He reached behind the stone and held something out to me in both hands, carefully, as if it might break.

It was a stick.

It was a good stick, I'll give it that. It was straight and as tall as I was, and somebody had taken the bark off and rubbed it with sand until it shone. But it was a stick.

I had thought it would be a knife. I had been sure of it all night.

A stick. I got up in the dark for a stick. "This is the best weapon a fighter can carry," Ruadhan said.

"It's a stick."

"It's a staff."

"It looks like a stick."

He gave me a long look. Then he picked up Ashrod, which was leaning against his wall. I had seen her a hundred times by then, darker and older than mine, with the middle of her worn pale where his hands went. Before I could move, the end of her had tapped me

on the top of the head. It was only a tap, but I had missed the moment she left the wall.

"She bends like grass," Ruadhan said, "and she hits like iron. I've broken swords with her, and the arms that held them. Do you still think she looks like a stick?"

I rubbed my head.

"No."

"Good. Then you'll stop calling yours one. Stand up. We start with your feet. Everybody wants to start with their hands, and that's why everybody falls over."

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We spent the whole day on the hill.

Up to then he had only shown me how to stand and how to fall. Now he showed me how to hold the staff, where my hands went, and how to turn it without hitting myself in the face, which I managed to do twice anyway. And every time I let the end of it drop, Ashrod came out of nowhere and tapped me on the head.

"Dead," he said. "Dead. Dead again! You're the most killed boy on this coast."

By the middle of the day my arms were shaking, and by the afternoon I had stopped letting the end drop. He watched me for a good while in silence, and then he grunted.

That was the grunt. The good one. I had learned his grunts by then, the way you learn the sounds a boat makes. One grunt meant *wrong*. One meant *do it again*. A very short one meant *that was nearly not*

bad, and I had only heard that one twice before.

Afterward we sat in the grass and shared the bread I had brought.

"Who taught you?" I asked.

"A man in the north. In the war."

"What war?"

He looked at me as if I had asked him what the sea was.

"Calum's told you nothing? No. He wouldn't. He likes it quiet." He pulled up a stalk of grass and chewed it. "There's an island at the top of the land, boy. Tory, they call it. The Fomorians live there. And they have a lord. Balor."

The name came out of his mouth like something that tasted bad.

"When I was young, Balor's men came down out of the north. They came in iron, with their faces covered, and wherever they went they asked for the same people. The druids. The healers. The seers. Anyone who knew the old things."

"What did they want with them?"

Ruadhan took a moment before he answered, with his eyes on the sea at the bottom of the hill.

"They burned them."

His hand closed on the grass beside him until his knuckles went white, and I kept very quiet.

Like the fires on the beach. With people in them. It was a thought I wanted out of my head, so I stared at my staff.

"Why?"

"Because a man who can see what's coming is a hard man to rule." He threw the grass away. "So King Eochaid of Bearna raised an army against them. I was in it, with Ashrod. We pushed them north for three years. My last fight was at Galway." He moved his shoulders, and I knew he was thinking about his back. "After that there was a treaty, and Balor took his men home, and I came south with what was left of me."

"So they're gone."

"They went back." He turned to me. "That's not the same thing as gone."

I waited for the rest. I could feel there was more, something about the seers and the fires, something about why it mattered that I was the one on his hill.

But he only shook his head.

"Another day. That's enough old blood for a birthday."

Another day. He always says another day. He stood up and picked up Ashrod. The sun was getting low over the sea, and I remembered what he had promised Mum.

"Up," he said. "You've been dead eleven times today. Before dark, let's see if we can make it ten."