Fintan Mac Bochra
White Fire

Jujoman

Part One: Childhood

4. White Fire

SIVE

I don't believe in signs. I want that said before anything else.

My mother believed in them, and her mother before her. They saw a sign in every crow on the roof and every cup that broke, and in all those years a sign never told them one useful thing. So I don't believe in signs. I only notice them.

The boy stayed with us. He ate what I put in front of him and slept in the bed by the fire, and he hardly spoke, so I talked enough for the three of us.

"Fish tonight," I told him one evening, stirring the pot. "Fish tomorrow too, unless Calum falls in and they catch him instead."

The boy looked at the wall.

"Are you hungry?"

"Yes."

That was a good evening. In those weeks, "yes" was a whole conversation.

Calum was mending a net by the door. "You're wasting your breath.

He's looking at the wall."

"He's listening to me while he looks at the wall. You do the same thing."

Calum opened his mouth, thought better of it, and went back to his net, which after twenty-five years I know to be his way of telling me I'm right.

The boy followed him everywhere. Every morning he went down the path behind Calum with that comb in his fist, and he sat on the sand for as long as Calum mended the nets.

"It's like having a gull behind the boat," Calum grumbled one night. "I turn round, and there he is."

"Then walk slower, so the gull can keep up."

"I don't walk slower for anybody."

He did, though. I watched him from the door the next morning, going down that path like an old man, with the boy right at his heels.

* * *

The first time the boy talked in his sleep, it woke us both.

It was the middle of the night, and the fire was down to red. The boy was turning in his blanket, and words were coming out of him, fast and soft.

Calum sat up. "What's he saying?"

"Hush."

I lay still and listened. The words were almost ours. They had the same shape, the way a cousin has the same shape as you, and yet

every one of them slipped past me. Then the words turned into a tune, and he sang a few notes of it, very low, before he turned over and was quiet.

Somebody sang him that every night. Somebody who isn't coming. It was a long time before either of us slept again.

Two days later I was humming over the fire when Calum stopped in the doorway.

"Where did you learn that?"

"Learn what?"

"That tune. That's his."

I put down the spoon, because he was right. I had been humming it all morning, and to this day I have no idea where I got it.

The boy still went up to the cliff most evenings. Once I took him a heel of bread up there, and I stopped on the path before he saw me. He was sitting in the grass with his face turned to the empty air beside him, and he was smiling, as pleased as if somebody had come to keep him company, though I could see for myself that he was alone.

I left the bread on a stone and kept it from Calum, who would only have told me that children do that.

And how would he know? We had never had one.

At the bottom of the path I looked back. He was talking now, very quietly, with his head bent, as you talk to someone sitting close beside you.

* * *

Then there was his hair.

It began with the one white lock at the front, the one I found the day he came down. A week later there were two, and by the time the cold weather came, the white had spread through his head like frost through a field.

One evening I sat him on a stool to cut it, while Calum held the lamp.

"Look at this." I held a lock up to the light, black at the end and white at the root, like a candle burned halfway down.

"It's the salt," Calum muttered. "Salt does strange things to hair."

"Salt doesn't do that, and you know it."

He let that pass, and held the lamp a little closer.

He's frightened. Calum, who has never once been frightened of the sea.

I cut it short, and it grew back whiter than before. By the spring every last hair on his head was white. He was a small boy with the hair of an old man, and you could see him from the other end of the beach.

The village had things to say about it, as I knew it would. I grew up among those women, and I know how they talk.

There were three of them at the well when I came down with my buckets, and they stopped talking when they saw me, which told me what they had been talking about.

"How's the boy, Sive?" asked the eldest.

"Growing."

"Growing white, I hear." She pulled up her rope, hand over hand. "My mother used to say that what the sea marks, it comes back for."

"Your mother said a lot of things. She said your husband would make you happy."

The other two laughed into their buckets while the old woman stood stiff as a post. As I walked away, she made the sign against bad luck behind my back, sure that I had missed it.

* * *

Old Brennan said it to Calum's face, and I was there to hear it.

I had brought Calum his bread down at the boats. The boy was at the edge of the water with his comb, looking out to sea, when Brennan came and stood too close to Calum, as he does with everybody.

"That one's not right, Calum."

Calum went on coiling his rope as if the wind had spoken.

"He should have drowned in that storm. Everybody knows it." Brennan nodded toward the water's edge. "If he were mine, I'd give him back to the sea. The sea's not done with him."

If Calum doesn't answer him, I will. Calum finished the rope. He laid it in the bottom of the boat, neatly, and only then did he look up.

"The sea had its chance. It dropped him. I picked him up. That's how it works with fish, and that's how it works with boys."

Brennan opened his mouth. Calum went on looking at him until Brennan shut it again and went away up the sand.

I have been married to that man for twenty-five years, and it is the best thing I ever heard him say. I kept that to myself, because he would only have gone out to look at the boat.

* * *

There was one thing left, and I was the one who brought it up, as I bring up most things.

"He needs a name."

It was evening. The boy was sitting on the floor by the fire, pulling a bit of net apart and putting it back together, which he had learned from watching Calum and was getting good at.

"He had one," Calum answered. "He'll tell us when he's ready."

"He doesn't have it anymore. I asked him. He looked for it so hard, Calum, I thought he would be sick. It's gone." I put down my sewing. "I'm not going to call him 'lad' until he's a grown man. I'm not going to shout 'boy' down the beach like I'm calling a dog."

"What, then?"

I studied the boy for a while. The fire was behind him, shining through his hair, so that his whole head seemed to be burning with a white flame that gave no heat.

"Look at that. It's like a fire. A white fire."

Calum went very still. I know that stillness, and it means that something has come up from the bottom of him that took him by surprise.

"There's an old word for that," he said slowly. "My grandmother used it. I haven't thought of it in thirty years."

"What word?"

"Fintan."

The boy's hands stopped on the net.

He turned his head and looked at Calum. Since the day he came down from the cliff he had kept his eyes away from ours, and now he was looking at my husband as if Calum had called him from a long way off, and he had heard.

And Calum had only been trying the word out.

I don't believe in signs. I only notice them. I noticed that one.

FINTAN

The word went into me like a stone into water.

I had never heard it before, or I thought I hadn't. But there was a place in me where there was only the sound of the wind, and the word went straight there and stayed. It fit, like my foot in my own footprint.

That's mine. Calum looked as surprised as I was.

"Fintan," I said.

In those days I kept to a few words: yes, no, not hungry. But I said this one out loud, because it was mine.

Sive put both hands over her mouth. Calum cleared his throat.

"Well. That's settled, then."

That was how I got my name. Or maybe I got it back. The only person who could have told me which was gone.

After that I talked a little more. One morning I shouted "Wait!" on the path, because Calum was walking too fast, and he stopped so suddenly that I walked into his legs.

And I grew. Like a weed after rain, Sive said, when she had to let down my tunic twice in one summer.

Calum put me in the boat as soon as I was big enough to hold an oar. I had no wish to get in. I stood on the sand with my feet in the water, and my legs refused to move.

It took her. It will take me too. Calum sat in the boat and waited. He was the best at waiting of any man I ever met.

"The sea's big," he said after a while. "That's all it is. Big. It doesn't care about you one way or the other. You learn where it's safe and where it's not, and then you stay where it's safe. That's all fishing is."

I got in. I held on to the side with both hands the whole way out, and when he gave me the line I held that too tight as well. When the first fish pulled, I almost went over the side after it.

Calum caught me by the back of my tunic.

"Not that way. The fish comes to us."

I've got one. I've got a fish! It was a small fish, and I had never been so proud of anything. I carried it home myself, and Sive had to look at it properly before I would let her cook it.

"That's the finest fish I ever saw!"

"It's small."

"Then it's the finest small fish I ever saw. Calum, did you ever catch

one like that?"

"Never," Calum said, with his mouth full.

The other children were slower than the fish. All that year they watched me from behind the boats and ran when I turned round, because their mothers had told them about my hair.

The first one to come out was Niall, the net-maker's son, who was my age and had lost both his front teeth. He walked up to me on the sand one morning with the others whispering behind him.

"Does it hurt?"

"What?"

"Your hair."

"No."

"Can I touch it?"

I thought about it, and bent my head. He put one finger on it, very quickly, as you touch a crab to see if it is dead.

"It's just hair!" he shouted back at the boats, and he sounded let down.

He isn't afraid of me. He's the first one. After that Niall came looking for me most days, and little by little the others came with him.

I was about seven the first time I called her Mum.

It slipped out. I had fallen on the rocks below the house and cut my knee open, and I came up the path with blood all down my leg, shouting for her. "Mum! Mum!" Then I heard myself.

I stopped in the middle of the yard, feeling sick. I had a mother. I had sat on a cliff for her, and now I had given her name to someone else.

She's not my mum. My mum is in the sea. Sive washed the knee first, because it needed washing. Then she sat back on her heels.

"A boy can have two. One of them made you and sang to you. The other one's only here to wash your knees until the first one comes. There's no harm in calling us both the same thing. She wouldn't mind. I wouldn't, in her place."

I thought about it for a long time.

"All right."

I called Calum "Dad" not long after. He pretended to be deaf. Then he went out to look at the boat, at night, in the rain.

I still went up to the cliff, but I slept in my bed now, and I had stopped watching the sea for her. Sometimes the little light came and sat with me. I thought everybody had one.

One evening, up there, I heard shouting.

It came from the hill behind our house, where a small house leaned to one side. In front of its door stood a bald man with a big red beard, all alone, shouting at the sky.

Who is he shouting at? When I got home, I asked Mum.

"The man on the hill. Why does he shout?"

"Because he drinks." She kept her eyes on the pot. "You stay away from him. Do you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Promise."

"I promise."

I kept that promise for a few years.