

The Catch

Joe's casket was the first I'd carried. The gruff seriousness of the other male relatives as we prepared to lift him didn't seem so different from the way they went about all their other heavy jobs. Bursting out of their ill-fitting suits, they had about them the uncomfortable menace of the bouncers at the town's only nightclub.

My mum had dug out an old suit of my dad's. She'd looked at me differently as I slipped into the shoulder clasping embrace of his jacket, but everyone was looking at me differently that day. Before we'd set off I'd gone through the pockets, sniffed the armpits, searching for something of my father amidst the folds of fabric.

Johnny was totally scuttled. His hair, the colour of a fox that had lain dead by a motorway for a number of weeks, was plastered across his sweaty forehead.

"I've been up for three days," he belched in my ear.

"I figured it was that, or you'd climbed out of a volcano or been struck by lightning." I pulled him to one side. With my hands resting on his shoulders, I could feel his whole body shivering. "Pull yourself together."

As we lifted the casket, I smelt the varnished wood and was surprised by how light it was with six of us carrying him. Johnny was careening about at the front of the coffin and for a moment looked like he might drop it. With a pang of admiration at the absolute cheek of it, I noticed he'd painted his fingernails purple.

"Howling at his ain brother's funeral," Uncle James muttered. "His father will be black affronted."

As we walked into the church I stared at the back of Uncle Tam's head. His hair had been cut for the occasion, the barber's razor revealing a white, unweathered line above the bacon pink skin on his neck. I thought of the greenish bronze tinge of Joe's face when we'd dredged him up in our nets. But for the orange smock that we all wore, and the initials that Aunt Mary had inked onto his hood to stop arguments about whose oilskins they were, it would have been difficult to recognise him. Still, we all knew, had all known, from the moment he was hauled in. Once we'd cut him from the net and laid him amidst the twitching tails and gasping gills on the deck, his feet were the only thing I could look at.

They were mackerel belly white, and looked like something that actually did belong on the ocean floor.

“He’s not got his boots on.” Tam had finally said.

“No.”

“His boots weren’t in the cabin?”

“No. They must have come off.”

“And his socks? Joe was always one for wearing a couple ay pairs of socks.”

“He just went up on deck for a quick smoke. Mind, his cigarettes and lighter were missing.”

“Aye, right enough. It’s just strange that he didn’t come and see me. He’d always stop in at the wheelhouse. Even when he was foonert.”

As we walked into the church, Tam leant the side of his head against the coffin, and I wondered if that conversation was replaying in his mind, if he too was thinking of Joe’s feet. All through childhood I’d inherited football boots and school shoes that Joe had outgrown. It was the same when I started on the trawler. Joe’s old waldies, Joe’s old boots, the only two men in the family with size 13 feet – a weird source of pride. But when we’d pulled him in, his feet were horribly swollen. Did the swelling go down? Would an undertaker ever be able to squeeze those feet into a pair of his shoes?

The eyes of the congregation were on us and despite the cool, floral air of the church, my face burned. A journalist from the local rag stood at a pew near the back with a couple of sharper suited men, who I presumed worked for the nationals. The awful coincidence of a boat hauling in the body of one of its own crew a fortnight after he’d been lost had even made the telly, and the journalists gawked at us in the way I’d seen deckies look at some unidentifiable creature dredged from the deep. As we progressed down the aisle, I caught a glimpse of Nicky, a purple slash of lipstick smiling softly. She was wearing a dress, the secret curve of her pregnancy dangerously on show.

From outside the church you couldn’t see the colours of the stained glass windows as a pane of tinted plastic had been put in place to protect them from people like us. Back inside for the first time in years, I was reminded that the windows above the altar showed Jonah

and the whale, Noah in his ark and men pulling a bulging net full of fish into their boat. Written below a tapestry showing Christ talking to his disciples was the proclamation, *I will make you fishers of men*. Even the priest's robes had the symbol of a fish from a time when Christians too were condemned to live with the fear of detection.

As the congregation sang *Eternal father strong to save*, Tam's tuneless voice sang bravely above the rest. My own voice matched him, word for word, note for note and he looked at me over the bowed head of Johnny, who was clinging on to the pew as if it was a piece of flotsam. When we were asked to pray, I clasped my eyes shut and closed my fists, waiting for one small breath on the back of my neck to tell me that I could get through this. One of Tam's favourite sayings was, 'He that will learn to pray, let him go to sea.' It was only recently I'd understood what he meant.

Uncle James tugged on my jacket, and we got into position to carry the coffin. On account of Johnny being too howling to ken where he was meant to be, I ended up at the front, and felt Uncle Tam's powerful fingers clasp the back of my neck.

During the burial, gows wheeled around in the sky, as if we were throwing the unmarketable by-catch into the sea. They kept up their mirthless cackling, goading those below with the suggestion they'd seen all this before. Looking along to where my own father's drowned body had been buried, I tried to remember his face, but all I could see was the photo of him on our mantelpiece.

"He's got a bloody cheek," Uncle James growled. At the far end of the cemetery, amongst the weeping angels and twisted yew trees stood Inspector Grant. "After what he's put this family through."

The Inspector turned the collar of his long black coat against the chill and slipped out of sight. He'd had us in that interview room for hours. Slipped photos from the pathologists onto the table, as he'd talked about the blunt force trauma on the back of Joe's head. Sounded disappointed that the body, in the water for a fortnight, offered few clues. It was Johnny he'd been after. Listed the times the police had been called to separate them. As cold clods of earth were dropped on the coffin, the first tendrils of haar reached landward, reeled around the mourners and held them in a dank, chill embrace.

On the way to the wake at the clubhouse of the town's football team, Nicky caught up with me. For a moment, I glimpsed a glint of conspiracy in her eyes and as we followed my family she reached out to hold my hand.

"Are you surviving?" Her hand was limp in mine, and I in turn held hers as if it were a fledgling fallen from a nest. "You have to keep it together Malky. For all of our sakes." She cradled the bump, our bump.

A group of old worthies, trawlermen of Uncle Tam's vintage, waited at the door to shake my hand. They told me what a great skipper Joe would have been and what a loss he was to our family. Johnny skulked past them towards the bar, hands thrust in his pockets while the men stared at him with a look on their faces as if they were swallowing cod liver oil.

"Joe," Johnny slurred, sloshing the frothy head of his pint into his face. "Cunt that he was."

Aunt Mary shot us a sharp look. She was herding a flock of old wifies towards the sandwiches and was too far away to have heard, but the flick knife glint in her eyes told me everything. They'd eventually released Joe's body, but only after interviewing all of us a couple of times. Apart from Joe's injuries, the police had nothing. No blood spatter, no motive, no conflicting stories. They'd left the case open, unexplained, or whatever, but basically they had no leads. Aunt Mary though couldn't let it go. The town couldn't let it go. Not something like that. Johnny's name was dirt. Not that anyone was going to say anything to Aunt Mary, but she'd have heard whispers, picked up on looks with the sort of finely tuned sonar that women of her age are equipped. Police harassment. Police insensitivity. Police intimidation. That was what the rest of us talked about, but I could see she was forming her own theories.

She'd already snapped at Johnny to remove his baseball cap, which, to be fair, was decorated with a cannabis leaf motif. I glanced at him, obliviously staring into the universe of his pint glass with a look on his face that made him look glaikit as fuck. The sides of his ginger hair had been shaved short and chevron shapes had been sheared along his temples, their resemblance to some post-operative scars further adding to the impression that he was recovering from a lobotomy.

"Poor Joe," he said. "Poor sod. All he'd ever wanted was to become a skipper."

And it was true. Long before he was old enough to go out on *The Abiding Star*, he could argue about over-fishing, quotas and the Common Fisheries Policy. He understood when and where nets should be shot and kent how the engines and radar worked. He preferred the adults' company, their stories, the fishing lore. He even used old Doric words to describe the weather, or the contents of a catch. A salmon was never simply a salmon when it could be a brannock, a lax or a rawner. No one kent what any of these words meant apart from the old timers and it was dead embarrassing hearing Joe going on this way in front of normal people.

Joe found big cities, full of people who he couldn't place, disturbing. Even a place the size of Aberdeen freaked him out. Any man who made a bit of effort buying clothes that fitted, who didn't do a manual job, who actively sought out music that wasn't on the radio, who read anything that wasn't a tabloid or something to do with mechanics, who couldn't play darts or pool or any other pub game designed to make drinking with people that you didn't like just about tolerable, was, he'd suggest, suspect and very possibly a homosexual. Johnny's uselessness as a deckie, his who personality in fact, placed him firmly in this camp, and Joe wasn't shy about letting him know it.

I supped on my Tennents and watched the other men from our family, sitting a couple of feet from each other, locked in their own wee worlds, stroking the condensation from the side of their pints, like the sweat on the skin of a loved one. I chanced another look at Aunt Mary, busying herself around the cakes and coffees. She paused mid-way through slicing a scone and scowled back.

"Are you going to miss the trawling?" He shrugged like it was a dippit question. "There's nae money in it anymore and the risks aren't worth it. Even your auld man kens that. We can't compete wi the big commercial trawlers. He was only keeping on so that Joe could inherit the boat's license. Even Tam's not going to make it to sea once his chemo sessions start."

Johnny sucked hard on his long sad face, pale as one of those trees trunks that travel the sea for years sun bleached and ossified. "How many generations of trawlermen has there been in the family? He'll expect Johnny to take over."

Johnny had this unsettling habit of talking about himself in the third person, as if he was a character in a book. To be fair, if I was him, I'd adopt a similar strategy

"But he kens you hate it," I complained.

"Johnny minds when me and Joe were your age, how excited we got coming back intae port. We went out after my first shift tae see a film. Joe had this rucksack wi him and half way through the film, he goes, 'This is boring, watch this.' He turned the bag upside down and tips aw these crabs into the aisle in front ay us. We just sat back trying naw tae piss ourselves as these daft quines started screaming."

He rocked in his seat, laughing silently at the memory.

"That's what Johnny would miss. The craic wi the other deckies. You dinnae get those sort ay laughs in other jobs."

This was all bollocks. The only thing Johnny hated more than going to sea was his brother. The only reason he kept on was that with his reputation he wasn't going to find gainful employment in any of the exciting minimum wage jobs the town had to offer. But him as skipper? No chance. Even a town like this didn't have enough men desperate or daft enough to go to sea with him.

I needed Tam to sell that boat. As the eldest of the three brothers it was his decision, but through my dad a third of it was rightfully mine. I was eighteen: unskilled, uneducated, unemployed and with a bairn on its way. I thought of that night in the dump on Riff-Raff Road that Nicky rented. The snickering candles glinting off her legendary collection of letters in bottles, which deckies from various crews brought to her as gifts. As she told me she was pregnant, I didn't once take my eyes off those unopened bottles, at the unread ghost like messages forever enclosed. 'Of course, it'll have to be terminated,' she'd said fishing out a squashed packet of fags and lighting one. 'You don't have to do that.' I'd told her, and she'd looked in disgust at the cigarette before dropping it in a beer bottle, where it hissed in the dregs.

"You'd sell it though, wouldn't you?"

Johnny frowned and shrugged like a pool player pretending to hold a bad deck of cards.

I thought of our last time at sea. Johnny and his pal McMullan had spent the first few days zombified by the buprenorphine they got off the chemists, attempting, and somehow succeeding, to convince Tam that they were only hungover. I'd only started working on their trawler earlier that summer and within an hour of us leaving the harbour I'd been sick so many times that I was dry heaving, gulping air, trying to focus on something that wasn't constantly rolling. Joe was raging. Joe was always raging, but this time he at least had us three useless fuckers to focus his fury on.

Johnny slurped at his pint, half of it missing his mouth. He was even more of a sweaty, shit-faced shambles than normal, and I wondered how long he was going to hold it together.

Peering at me from those deep sunken eyes that all the men in our family have, he hissed, "You said he was dead. It was your idea to throw him in the water."

And I was back in that cabin. Joe waving the packet of buprenorphine in Johnny's face, saying he was sick of covering for him so he was and that he was going to show their dad the pills, make him face up to the fact that his son was a useless junkie. He'd on his oilskins and was looking for his socks when Johnny smashed the searchlight over the back of his skull. Joe'd sunk to his knees, then slowly crumpled onto the floor, the cabin suddenly rank with the smell of shite.

"I thought he was dead ... and it wasn't me that cracked him over the head. If you hadn't done that, none of this would have happened. So don't try and put the blame on me."

Johnny scowled and catching sight of McMullan, who was serenading the fruit machine, said, "Watch my drink. I'm going for a tab." With a barely detectable nod, he indicated that McMullan should follow him and the two slunk out of the Clubhouse.

And it was true. It was me who'd checked Joe's pulse and said he was dead. It was me who'd pulled his hood over his head to avoid any blood stains. It was me who'd gone up to the deck to check that Tam was in the wheelhouse. But we'd carried him together. Flopped him over the side into the dark choppy sea together. It wasn't until sitting in the interrogation room, with that Inspector Grant reading out the words from the pathologist's report about the salt water found in Joe's stomach, 'typical of death by drowning', that I'd finally thought of him struggling to keep his head above the lumps of water, as the lights of

the boat moved into the distance and he was left in the blackness, the sky sagging with stars that must have felt as far away as salvation. How long did it take for the lights to disappear? He'd have watched until they vanished. The only hope he had of surviving was the trawler coming back. How long would he have survived? A gulp of salt water here, a slap of ocean there.

Johnny snuck back into the clubhouse followed by Tam, who looked raging. After downing the rest of his pint and slinging his jacket on, Johnny headed for the door. As I followed, Uncle Tam grabbed my arm.

"You're not going anywhere wi that waste of space."

He sat me down at a table with Uncle James.

"That bad bastard is going over his length," Uncle James muttered. "Not fit tae tie his brother's bootlaces."

Uncle Tam's powerful fingers set about filling his pipe. Once lit the tobacco crackled like old vinyl as he sucked and chewed and spluttered. There were signs all around the clubhouse saying *No Smoking*, but there wasn't a man in the whole of this town that was going to challenge Tam, not on the day he'd put his son in the ground. In fact people nodded approvingly at this act of belligerence, even those who knew that the pipe was close to killing him.

I stared at the flecks of pastry on the plate in front of me and squeezed my hands between my knees to stop them shaking. Something horrible was about to happen. I sensed it in my uncles' slow, deliberate movements. Both men had removed their jackets and rolled their shirts up to their elbows as if they might, at any moment, be challenged to an arm wrestling competition. Their forearms, when not ushering pints to their mouths or stuffing tobacco into pipes, rested heavily on the table. I thought of the way crocodiles basked in the sun, waiting immobile until snapping into action. Had Tam finally worked out that Joe wasn't wearing socks or waldies because he'd been carried from the cabin? Had he finally worked out that his hood was tied so tightly on a dry night to stop blood dripping out on the step-ladder? I could just about get through an interview with the police, but if they two started

on me, I was done. Only once the pipe was smoking to Tam's satisfaction, did he turn to me.

"That one," he prodded the pipe in the direction of the door through which Johnny had left. "I've had my eye on him. He's mair dead to me than Joe will ever be." He coughed viscously and inspected his fist. "I'm not a well man Malky, and none of us are getting any younger."

I nodded. This was going in the direction I wanted it to go: the direction I needed it to go.

"This summer was to be my last at sea, but I'm done with it now. Joe was always going to become skipper and a bloody good job he would have made of it an aw. Even before all this, I would never have let his brother near the job. My conscience couldn't allow that. But now ... now."

"That's all done, Tam. I've always says that there's something not natural about that boy. A disgrace, so he is. A bloody disgrace."

"So that's it. The end of the line."

There was a long pause during which Tam billowed out great storm surges of smoke.

"Your father would be proud. Keeping up the family tradition and looking after your mother. Your father would be gey proud."

"The word is you've got a wee one on the way as well. It's a hard life. Not for everyone, but there's still good money in it.

"And you've got it in your blood."

"I could go on for a while yet if I kent I had someone in the family to train, to put through their tickets. Someone to become skipper."

I watched Tam's tumid nose, the constellations of broken capillaries, the weathered leathery skin of his gnarled hands. And I remembered the years after my auld man had died, how little Tam had done for us when the fishing was good, how the TVs in their sitting room had grown in width at the same rate as his belly, while my mum worked three jobs and I wore my cousins' hand-me-downs. Tam had lorded it over us then, Johnny and Joe had always taken the piss out of our scaffie house, but now that he had throat cancer and

his oldest son was dead and the other one messed up on drugs it was me that was taking charge.

“I’ll do it.”

The two of them lifted their glasses. And I knew I could take it: the nausea, the salt stiffened clothes, the nostril stinging stench, face scoured by gale force winds, hands hardening until they barely felt anything at all. But I’d be a real man. A proper man.

“There’s one catch,” Uncle James whispered, passing me a paper bag beneath the table.

“You’ll get the boat, but you’re to sort that one. The next time the two of you are at sea. It’s what everyone wants.”

I crunched the paper bag into my pocket, feeling the sharp point of the gutting knife and a sickness ferment in my stomach. I tried to catch Tam’s bleary eyes but he lent back coughing a huge claw of smoke into the air, that hung over us like a force 12 storm wave. My legs took me out of the clubhouse, and as I passed the church, I slowed before the row of stones with our family’s surname, the same forenames unimaginatively repeating themselves. I stopped at my father’s grave, as the haar drifted across the graveyard, slithering over my feet, wrapping around my ankles, deciding who the sea was going to claim next.