

The Beachcomber

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Martin lit a fag and watched the old man poking about the manky seaweed. He stood a while, then flicked the half-smoked cigarette on the ground and stepped over the low wall. The sand was wet with last night's rain and his trainers left deep prints where he landed.

He blamed those arseholes at the Crown. They'd gone on and on, winding him up until he'd knocked back his pint and slammed the empty glass down on the bar. He heard them roaring and laughing as the door swung behind him and his cheeks burned. He stormed out past the church and as far as the old garage but his rage did not subside. The pounding waves of the North Sea got snarled up with the jeering and heckling in his ears and every word those stupid bastards said was knotted stubbornly inside him. As he turned into the terrace and out of the buffeting winds, one or two lights shone from the upstairs windows of their neighbours but their house was submerged in darkness. The old man had forgotten to leave the outside light on, that was all. It didn't mean he'd lost the fucking plot. Martin went through to the sitting room and fumbled for the light switch. His granda was still up, sitting in the shadows, a mug of tea untouched in the cubby beside him. He shifted in his chair and nodded but didn't ask Martin about his evening. Even when Martin reeled off the names of who was all there, he said only, 'Aye,' and it was barely a whisper. That was when Martin said it. It was like getting the fireside poker and trying to jab life into dying embers but his words had no effect or so he'd thought. His granda simply rose from his chair and went through to the back bedroom.

Now, the morning was calm and as Martin walked along the shore, he stared at him, trying to fathom what he was thinking but the old man's head was down: his eyes little more than creases in his weathered face. He was wearing the same paint-splattered dungers and ganzie he always wore and the same itchy jacket with its smells of fish and oil but it looked to Martin as if he'd had the air sucked right out of him. He was so intent on the bladder wrack and the furred rope and the bits of plastic fork that Martin was nearly at him before he looked up.

'I thoct wi the storm...' his granda said, staring out at the rolling waves. Seagulls soared above the water; their reputations as scavengers left behind at the village's chippers and ice-cream shops. Martin screwed up his eyes against the light reflected off the water. His granda had taken him out once, long ago. He remembered how the wind and rain had battered his cheeks and messed up his hair till it was clinging to his head. He remembered the openness.

'There wis that fish box in Fife, mind I telt ye?' his granda mumbled. 'Washed up wi the storm aifter twenty year.'

Martin shook his head. How many times?

'They got it back tae the faimly. They were on the news, mind?'

Martin remembered fine. He remembered how his granda had been all fired up after watching it. There was no telling him. He burst into life like the old Tilley lamp when it flared up with too much pressure, making Martin jump back from the flames. The morning after the news story, he watched his granda from the kitchen window. He was like a kid in wellies stomping out of the house with something to prove.

'Alec says I can go out with him,' Martin said. He didn't say no-one else wanted to while his granda was out here making an arse of himself every day.

'Fit about yer job?'

'There's no jobs.' None that he wanted.

When he was little, Martin would sit on the swirly carpet with his knees tucked under his chin, wanting to be the first thing his granda saw when he came home off the boat. When the door opened, his granda would throw his old coat on top of Martin and shout, 'Far is he then? Far's he hidin?' And Martin would giggle in the near darkness while his granda got a row from Granny and told to 'Get that filthy thing aff the loon.'

'Aa that studyin,' his granda muttered.

One time, his granda had got him up in the middle of the night, it felt like, and they tiptoed out of the house like burglars. He took Martin to a huge warehouse with rows and rows of trays of shiny fish with bulging eyes, half covered in ice, and big, loud men calling out numbers and cheek in equal measure. He stuck close to his granda's legs with his mouth hanging open and his granda said if he wasn't careful, he'd be mistaken for a fish and sold to the highest bidder.

Martin turned away from his granda to look back at the village. It was hard to imagine there was anyone there behind the jumble of white-washed fronts. That folk were going about their business and knowing everyone else's business around them. They had been good, at first. They said they were lucky, his granda and Alec. And even when his granda started scouring the beach, they could understand, they would be the same. But when he was still searching a year later, it began: fit wis he thinking, that *Fair Dawn* would just wash up at her home port? Fifteen years on, he was the laughing stock of the village.

The old man picked up a piece of plastic tubing and turned it over in his hands, feeling the ridges with the tips of his gnarly fingers.

'I hid a feeling days afore,' his granda said, his voice all low and quiet. 'Aboot turning ower and ower in the green waves. I was never sure if it was me thinking about it, made it happen or if I'd hid some kind of a warning, like a premonition.'

'Superstitious crap,' Martin said under his breath, working at a pebble poking out of the sand with the toe of his trainer. But there was little conviction in his words and he knew it.

'We hid a row, yer granny and me,' his granda went on, as if he hadn't heard. Martin looked up. Granny had been dead five years past. They told her it was cancer in the summer; she died before the year was out. Martin often found his granda looking into a photo of her, taken a while back at the hall. It looked like she might have been giving the photographer a hard time but her eyes were shining.

'It wis ower some gype in the village.' The old man dropped the piece of tubing and gave it a kick. It scudded along the sand. 'She telt me I wis a damned fool for being sae jealous for nae reason and wis she nae even allowed to spik to fowk fan I wis awa for days on end?' His granda looked back along the shore. 'It made ma blood boil. I couldnae stand to be in the same room as her.'

'What did you do?' Martin asked

'I went looking for a deckhand, that's fit I did. I wisnae supposed tae ging oot till the followin wikk but there wis Alec. He'd bin oot wi me afore. He wis jist a young loon at the time, of course he said aye.' Alec had turned out to be a good skipper, everyone said so. He had a decent boat, bigger than *Fair Dawn*. It would easily get them back home when the crap kicked up twenty miles offshore. And he would look out for Martin. Keep him right, just till he got going. He would give him a chance.

'When the storm turned, I did aathing richt, I'm sure of it,' his granda said.

Martin closed his eyes and breathed deeply. He had just turned nine when it had happened and they had all talked over the top of him - his granny, the neighbours, the big men - as if he hadn't mattered. As if everything he and his granda had shared together had gone down with *Fair Dawn* too.

'It's been long enough, Granda. It's time to stop now, surely? Why're you out here every day? Still looking for the wreckage after all this time.' It seemed to be ages before his granda answered and all the while, the waves crashed on the shore and the sea gulls circled and dived above the water. When he did speak, Martin wasn't sure if his granda had heard the question right or if he was still talking about the night *Fair Dawn* had lurched into the oncoming swell.

'Fan the wave hits, ye jist hiv to hing on, for dear life,' the old man said. He turned his back on Martin and the village and went on picking through the debris.