

The Gannet

by Iain MacDonald

“If I went there a second time; it’d be as hopeless as the first.”

This was the thought in Torvald’s mind as he finished tying up his boat. The crab pots lay empty with mouths aghast showing hungry, netted bellies. A breath of exasperation came from the old fisherman’s lips - the cracked skin on his chin like a road map of some forgotten kingdom. Finishing the knot, he stood up straight and stretched out of the weight of the day. The sky was growing darker - night came and enveloped the day with an unstoppable lust. He took one last look at the sea - his provider - then turned his back and started walking up the hill. The sea sounded behind him, crashing against the shore like laughter.

The path was straight and led directly to where Torvald wanted to go; *The Shochad*. He stuffed his hands into his wax coat pockets and lifted out his pipe. Once lit, the puffs of smoke became a fog around his head - a passerby would swear they had seen a ghost. As the small light appeared in the distance, he thought of the men inside and the smells and the sounds. George the crofter would be sat at the table to the right of the door reading a small book and occasionally you’d hear him scribbling down a note, as if his life and wife depended on it. What he wrote no one knew and he wasn’t one for sharing. Seamag would be sat at the end of the bar, his head raised with a pained smile -

“My woman will be wantin’ me home! This is my last one. Just one more for the ditch,” he’d say. His wife - a fiery redhead called Halla - was a hell of a woman. Stoney and ancient as if carved from ivory. Beautiful too, but that didn’t matter much to Torvald.

There’d be Duncan and Willy, arguing about this or the other as siblings tend to do. The young mainlander, Patrick, who came over so long ago he hardly seemed like a mainlander anymore, or in fact, young. The bar man, a small tubby man they called ‘Horse’ would be expecting Torvald, and have a dram waiting.

This is what kept Torvald warm as he walked the cold path. A man could forget a poor days fishing in *The Shochad* and dream of better ones.

So it was that Torvald came to the wooden door and pushed it open. Those familiar smells and sounds rushed out the door and he closed it quickly behind him, lest they be lost to the outside world forever. He stood in front of the door and observed the scene around him. The smell was toil and yeasty. The brothers Duncan and Willy hardly looked up from one another but gave him a welcoming nod. George was sitting by the table to the right of the door, as predicted, and just by sensing his presence, he said -

“Torvald.” A book-reading man need not say much more in the way of a greeting.

The aforementioned Torvald approached the empty stool as Horse placed a dram on the bar top.

“Poor day at the crabs?” Horse asked, but knew the answer.

“When is it not?” George answered, on Torvald’s behalf.

Before he could take the first sip to release the pain of the day, he heard Seamag’s voice coming from the end of the bar, drifting over like syrup.

“Just this one for me and then I’m off, Torv. Halla will have the potatoes ready and the soup will be cold by now. I might have to suck it out through the earth. Again.” Halla had been known to pour Seamag’s dinner out the window if he came home pissed. He had had to fight many a dog for his supper.

Patrick, at a distance, exchanged pleasantries as Torvald began filling up his pipe with his calloused hands. He mentioned something about the mainland and a change which come upon it. They spoke, but Torvald remained passive, as ever.

And this is how the night went on.

* * * * *

What surprised all the men after several hours of this relative normality was a loud thump against the wooden door of *The Shochad*. Torvald was first to raise his head as silence slowly fell upon the arguing brothers and scribbling scribe. George closed his book and placed it flat on the table. Although it may seem insignificant to most people, this thump at the door caused a mis-alignment in all these men that night. Torvald rose.

“What do you suppose that was?” Horse asked with slight hesitancy and fear.

The men looked around at one another. They looked like weary chess pieces.

“It wouldn’t be Halla,” Seamag asserted, bolting in with positive affirmation. “She’d never come and drag me home. That’d be too good for me!” What was to be one more drink had so far turned into four more.

Torvald led the wary crowd to the door and slowly pushed it open. As the door creaked open, it was clear the night had grown blacker and colder since he had made the short walk from his boat.

“Hmph!” He heard Patrick sound dismissively behind him.

As the men were ready to turn back and resume their night inside, Torvald glanced at his feet and saw the sprawled body of a gannet. Its huge wingspan spread, exposing its pearly white belly. Eyes open and black as night.

"A gannet," George stated with authority, some memory of ancient mythology in his crusty voice.

"Dead?" asked Duncan.

Torvald pressed his boot, gently, into its side.

"Dead."

"It must have flown straight into the door," Horse suggested with an element of wonder and surprise.

"Birds at night," George pitched in. "An omen."

The men stood around that dead bird in an almost druidic silence. A silence that even the mystics would struggle to hear. It was as if all their silences, a lifetime's worth, had come at once for each of those men - crofters, fisherman, writer and brothers. An unstoppable hum of quietness, starting at their feet and travelling up through their bloated guts, choking their hearts.

Torvald looked around at the men - the only one moving was Seamag. He wept silent tears and his shoulders moved up and down, like a machine, obscuring the moon behind him as they rose and fell. All the men knew that Halla had died five years ago - Seamag never wanted to admit it to himself or any other.

"I'll get a shovel." Horse said; breaking the fragility as he turned and went back inside.

Torvald stared into the gannet's black eye and saw the sea - beckoning him forward.

Word Count: 1131

