

Blood Knot

My Grandad is a kerosene lamp flickering on the fibreglass bottom of a boat. The crinkled collar of a polo shirt. A sea-wet hand coated in burley. I watch as he casts his handline over the side of the boat. The line nestles perfectly in the callused crook of his finger. I try to warm a bait prawn in my already frozen hands and fumble with numbness. Grandad looks down his nose at me and then out again to the water. I thread my hook through the prawn's back and push the barb through its head, the same way that I have watched him do thousands of times before. He nods his head.

I cast my rod out and the line whistles sharply in the breeze, punctuated by the plunk of sinker greeting water. Then, silence. Out here the sea is so still that not even the water lapping at the sides of the boat elicits noise. The type of water you imagine Christ walking over. Back over the land the sun peaks above huddled beach huts. Other early risers gather on the jetties, their blobbed outlines moving in routine machination. We bob together, laser focused, in the early morning.

'Well... I suppose you're a Marxist now?' he says, breaking the silence.

'No, Grandad. Not quite,' I reply. The thought of talking politics this far away from solid land feels almost obscene.

'We had a group of Marxists at work once. Tried to unionise us. Handed out fliers and wouldn't leave you alone until you took one. I made the mistake of leaving it in the back pocket of my work trousers. My Mum found it in the laundry basket, showed it to Dad. Never heard anything so loud in my life. Bellowed at me like a wounded bull. Haven't trusted those pinkos since.'

Unsure of the best way to reply to him, I am lucky that before the silence lingers for too long, he hooks a fish. He tugs the line taut and starts reeling in the handline. For a man of his age, his motions are as fluid as the water beneath us. The sport of it purges the arthritis from his joints. He bites his cheek. Orange sunlight glints in his eyes. With a flick, the fish is sent sailing onto the deck of the boat. It writhes and flits. It's a herring, speckled like a green-black tiger, amber eyes burning brilliantly in its head. Brighter than the kerosene lamp beside it. Almost instantaneously, Grandad pulls a knife from his pocket, takes its head off and throws it in the bucket. Burgundy blood pools below and I reach overboard to splash some water over it before it has a chance to take hold. He nods his head at me in thanks.

He wipes his hand on his shorts, the muck and blood settling amongst the salt stains. I often wondered how many times they'd seen the washing machine, though always answered this question for myself as soon as I remembered his sermons on the cleansing power of the sea. Over the years his wardrobe has hardly changed, the same few pieces worn again and again. The sweater he wears over his polo shirt is baggier now, his slight frame no longer capable of filling it out. The periodic need to roll his sleeves back up clearly frustrates him and he grunts as he slides his hand up his bony arms. I can't help but stare at the clusters of liver spots on his papery skin and the faded greens of his tattoos. He catches my gaze and tucks his free arm tighter under the other.

'I've never asked you, Grandad, but when did you get all those tattoos? What do they mean?'

'They mean I was a bloody stupid twenty-year-old more interested in trying to catch some girl's attention than thinking about my future. All the boys working on the docks got them back then. The port authority even had a deal with one of the parlours ashore; they'd take it straight out of your pay if you wanted them to. You're lucky you haven't had to deal with any of that nonsense. Work like that's a rough business.'

I sense there's more coming, but he stops himself.

'I know I'm lucky. You and Dad always make sure to remind me of it. You may think I'm soft for going to Uni, but I've learned a lot.'

He smirks.

'Think you're above a good cup of Blend 43, then? Or have all those *expresso* machines and fancy cafes spoiled life's luxuries for you?'

'Never,' I reply, biting back the urge to correct his pronunciation. 'As long as you've got sugar.'

He pulls the tin cups and thermos out and serves us generous, steaming cupfuls. Its bitter scent is the only thing that cuts through the piscine stink of the boat. We blow and drink deeply. Scrunch our noses in tandem.

I feel a twitch on my rod and give it a gentle tug. The tip doubles over and I start to reel, feeling the manic twirling of the fish below. It must have been ten years since I last fished, and I am shocked by the fish's strength.

'Skippy,' Grandad mutters, confidently.

I think back to the days spent in this boat, in what feels like a lifetime ago, and know that he is right. The glint of silver bulleting in the water serves as confirmation. My hand reels quickly, line fizzing before me, and the fish gets closer and closer to the water's surface. I jag the rod upwards to flick the skippy into the boat. But the line goes light again. I sigh, knowing I've lost it. I look over at Grandad and notice that, in the time that I have been battling this fish, he has silently caught and dispatched another three herring.

'You lost that one because you don't knot your hooks properly,' he says in a solemn tone, verging on disappointment.

'What do you mean?'

'Your knots are weaker than a politician's resolve,' he says. 'Give it here and watch.'

He takes the rod from my hand, fetches a new hook from the tackle box and guides the line to his sausage fingers. Moving with an impossible deftness, he spins the two separate pieces of line in a labyrinthine pattern, pulling it tight between his teeth. Removing the knife again from his pocket, he trims the line into neatness and passes the rod back to me.

'Did you get that?' he asks. I shake my head. 'They call that one a blood knot. That's how I always knew you were a brain. Never got the knots, could never fillet a fish and couldn't get a fire going to save your life. But by Jove you put me to shame in every other arena. I think you were about eight when you brought me *A Tale of Two Cities* to read before bed. By the time you were in Year Five I wasn't any help with your homework anymore. Thought that finding X was for treasure maps. All that I was useful for after that point was for giving you throw-downs out the back.'

At this point, I hear a quiver in his voice and look up to his face. Above his blotchy cheeks, tears well in his eyes. I feel dirty, as though this is something that I am not supposed to see. He drags his sleeve across his face and directs his gaze out across the water.

'Suppose that's why I got so good at playing a pull shot then, hey?' I ask, a gentle prompt to try and get him back to his sardonic self.

'You did, boy, you did. Christ it's a shame you went to pieces as soon as the ball started swinging, though.'

I laugh; at first at the jarring transition from compliment to scorn, and then because he is right. Soon after, once he knows he has my approval, he follows, cap-

toothed smile glistening in the morning sun. An old person's laugh always means more. They've already gone through it all. Seen this, seen that. If you manage to make them laugh it meant that it's something new. Something worth it.

'You sure you want to get into this teaching business, then?'

'Of course, I am, Grandad. Learned from the best.'

Another smile crosses his face and we sit again in the silence. Luxuriating in the lull. Over the next two hours Grandad and I fill the bucket with herring and skippy and whiting. Gone are the days where our trips out on the boat were a rapid-fire dash to fish our bag limit and dash back to shore.

Thinking back to our earlier conversation, I rekindle our discussion in search of some more definitive answers.

'So, what ended up happening with those Marxists? Did you and the boys tie them to anchors and send them to the bottom of the ocean? The Luca Brasi treatment?'

'No, no, of course not. Turned out that they were just a group of yuppies sent down by the University to try and *radicalise* a few of us. Jokes on them; we'd already had a union for a century and a half. That's the thing with most of that new-wave thinking – it's mostly just the old stuff reheated. And trust me when I tell you that some things don't microwave so well.'

I am impressed with his metaphor. Pressing him further, I continue the line of inquiry.

'And the tattoos?'

'Well, the horseshoe's for good luck, but I'm sure you'd have guessed that.'

'What about the panther, then?'

'I've got nothing for you other than "a panther seemed pretty cool at the time", unfortunately.'

He winks at me. I can tell that this is nothing more than a ploy from him to get me out on the boat again tomorrow in hope of another story and can't blame him for his attempted masquerade. I look at my watch and motion ashore.

Grandad takes his place at the helm of the boat, and I hoist the anchor aboard and start the motor. As he accelerates, the boat skips across the water, sending a fine spray through the air. The collar of his shirt wimples in the wind, and he raises his chest high. I watch as flecks of burley fall from his hands and onto the fibreglass

floor of the boat. On the floor next to me, the kerosene lamp, extinguished, radiates with warmth, hisses as it is misted with salt.