John of John

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"Every man's work, pursued steadily, tends in this way to become an end in itself, and so to bridge over the loveless chasms of his life."

Silas Marner, George Eliot

"Islanders the world over are born for exile. Islands give you a privileged childhood and then, once they've made you what you are, leave you with no place to express it."

The Living Past, Donald Macleod

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Her feet were as purple as calf liver. That's what his father had said before he hung up. Cal had been standing in the red phone box at the bottom of the Meadows, watching the rugby players stretch on the lush green grass. Their white shorts clung to their haunches, and in the soft smirr the cloth became sheer and he could see the elasticated lines of their briefs. He was only half-listening as his father read from the New Testament.

His father had never been fond of small talk. This gave their telephone calls the feeling of a service line, like when you dialled the Speaking Clock and then reset your watch to it. When Cal mentioned this to his father, the truth of it made his father laugh, for John Macleod believed the spirit was indeed in need of constant calibration, and Cal made his calibrations every Wednesday at 6 p.m. prompt and twice again on the Sabbath.

He couldn't afford the long-distance call to the isles so they developed a signalling system where he would call home at the agreed-upon hour, wait for three pips, and then hang up. His father would immediately call back. This required turning up early and pretending to talk to someone so no passer-by could block the telephone.

It had taken some time to find the perfect place to worship, a solitary phone box that wasn't back-to-back with another. When his father precented the psalm, the expectation was Cal would sing it back to him in Gaelic with the full power of his belief. But when a particularly handsome man would stroll past he would cringe and lower his voice and, without fail, John would ask him why he was wavering. It was mortifying to deal with the glances of passing strangers. For this reason, he spent a good portion of their time together with his eyes closed or with his back turned to the path. He found he did his best singing while his fingers searched the calling cards left by the prostitutes and masseuses.

For all that, he liked the Meadows. The rolling fields helped slow his mind. It was one of the few spaces where the city took a breath, and he found it helped match the rhythm of his thoughts to his father's unhurried talk. He knew his father was staring out at the sea.

"Ciamar a tha thu an-diugh?" his father asked in Gaelic. *And how are you today?*

"*Fine. And you?*"

"*Not bad. Upright. All praise to God.*"

Their conversation was always censored, missing the things they couldn't talk about. Cal never mentioned he had nowhere to live. He never said that since graduating he had been abusing the charity of his classmates, surfing from one settee to the next, waiting for them to leave for work so he could forage like a wood mouse, taking just enough food to sate his hunger but never so much as to get caught. He never mentioned how he dripped dry after a shower, or how he studied the tideline of a milk bottle so he could replace what he took with tap water, or how he wandered the Edinburgh suburbs of an evening so his friends wouldn't feel the burden of feeding him.

He didn't mention that he had found work with a band of Albanian women cleaning the sick-splattered toilets of Negociants and the Rose Street pub. Or how when he went to collect his first wage packet, they'd deducted half of it for cleaning supplies and another seven pound fifty

for storing the mops and pails. Or how when he'd confronted them, they'd told him to take it up with their burly, hirsute husbands if he thought the charges unfair. And he certainly had not told his father how he hadn't had the courage to do that.

He absolutely didn't mention that he spent more nights than he wanted to with a gentle Welshman who, when Cal fucked him, liked to lie on his belly with his arms pinned beneath himself, his hands clasped in some devotional gesture of helplessness. If he were ever to tell his father that, he was certain those would be the last words they would ever share.

"*There are so many pigeons here and they are not a bit afraid.*" With so much that could never be said, he tried to buoy along the first part of their conversation, and like a person treading water, there was always a slight edge of desperation to his talk. Throughout the week he carried a piece of scrap paper with him and jotted down subjects that would fill the time. He took the paper from his pocket and studied the list. His father must have thought him empty-headed, because he seemed to be fascinated by all sorts of uninteresting things.

"*I saw a lot of red cars today.*" He winced, remembering he had said this on a previous call. He placed a strand of hair in his mouth and sucked the rain from it.

It was a relief when the small talk ended and the prayer began, then all Cal had to do was receive the Word and murmur his assent at the end. John was softly spoken and as the precentor of their church he had developed a fine singing voice. When he read the Gaelic scripture, the damning words always transformed into something lyrical, beautiful, incantatory.

"A bhràithre, ma tha neach air bith air a ghlacadh ann an euceart sam bith . . ." he began. "*Brethren, if anyone is caught in wrongdoing, you who are spiritual should bring him back in the spirit of gentleness. Watch yourself, lest you also be tempted.*"

For the past few weeks his mind had been stuck on Galatians, running backwards and forwards over the need for brotherly correction.

It could be like that with his father: a particular book could come on him like a season and take hold of him for months.

At the end of their prayers, John led them in song. He precented the line, singing it first, and then Cal – three hundred miles away and watching rugby players grapple in the soft rain – sang it back to him with as much devotion as he could muster.

After the singing the men lapsed into a stilted small talk again. His father had never been to the capital and Cal had learnt not to talk too much about Edinburgh, or else the next sermon would focus on all manner of sin. If Cal asked him about the sheep, or the weaving, or the weather, he received the same answer, for what good was passing remark on something that never changed. "*It's fine. It'll be better tomorrow. God willing.*"

So it was significant when John mentioned Cal's grandmother and the purpling of her feet. Cal could picture the calf-liver colour immediately, how it could be purple and grey and cream at the very same time, both dead and grotesquely alive. He could picture swollen feet that were mottled and fatty-looking, blood blooming and fulminating underneath a cloudy skin.

"*Calf liver? Are you sure?*" Even as he asked it, he knew he hadn't needed to. They had spent their lives weaving cloth, holding the weft up to the light to check the consistency. Between them, all talk about colour was considered and accurate.

"*It's that exact shade*," said John. "*It's not just her feet. Her heart isn't good and she complains about her circulation. She's limping, slowing down. And she's more addled than usual. She tells me she talks to the sheep.*"

"*She's always done that.*"

"*Now she claims they're talking back.*" John made a small clicking noise. "*Your mother's mother is not my responsibility, John-Calum. We've discussed this.*"

"*I know. But why can't she go live with my mam?*"

There was a dead silence that made Cal fear they had been disconnected.

"*Hello. Dad. Are you there?*"

"*Yes?*" said John. "*I'm here. Do you expect a response to every stupid question?*" There was another pause. "*Your grandmother says that this is her home and this is where she'll end her days. She sees no reason to leave.*"

Cal suppressed a desire to provoke him. He wanted to ask why his mother couldn't return home, why couldn't she care for her own mother and spare him the burden of returning, but the question would only cause a fight, so he swallowed it and said nothing.

"*It's time*," said John finally and with all the certainty of a man who knew the exact timing of any job to be done. "*You've had your fun.*"

Cal thought back to this last conversation as the ferry did its terrible lurch. He palmed the eccie and wondered how it might make him feel if he took it on a roiling belly. If he timed it right then the ecstasy should be ebbing away as he arrived home. He wanted to roll up feeling lovely, numb to the tight feeling that came over him when he saw the little whitehouse at the edge of the sea.

He swallowed the pill and washed it down with a gulp of cider.

The ferry was chuntering across the water, but he turned and watched the harbour recede. He had spent his college years explaining to mainlanders why, as an islander, he could not swim. The townies thought it a madness. It seemed everyone on the mainland was given lessons in the local pool, pungent, tepid, chemical things, as though that man-made calmness could prepare you for this capricious, implacable sea.

It didn't feel like August. The rain was slanted, driven by the type of westerly that hurried the seas and slowed all the boats. As the harbour grew more distant, there was a rare break in the clouds and the dull sky split open above the low town. It glinted in the brief sunshine, taunting him to turn back. He shrank down into the bucket seat and pulled his hat over his ears.

The batteries from his Walkman had died on the coach to Glasgow. He had no desire to get a CD player. He had spent his youth collecting these songs, listening religiously to John Peel and Pete Tong, taping tunes from the radio while he muffled his ghetto blaster with a pillow

and stuffed his bedsheets along the bottom of the door. He rolled the batteries between his fingers and licked the tips, hoping for a resurrection. They worked for a half-song more, before Siouxsie Sioux slurred to a slow, drunken death.

There were six damp cigarettes left in his packet. He took one and, shielding it from the weather, lit it. He puffed it once and finding it bitter, he held it out and wondered if it would burn to ash before it was snuffed by the rain. It passed the time.

He had hardly slept since leaving Edinburgh the afternoon before. It was required that he arrive in Uig early enough to catch the only crossing to Harris. So, he'd left Edinburgh on the coach, passing through Glasgow but skirting all the islanders that like to gather in the pubs around Partick. He'd caught another bus headed north for the Highlands and made it to Fort William, where he again avoided the island exiles, the distant acquaintances who would have gladly opened their homes and offered him a warm meal and a couch to sleep on for the night, and instead squandered the last of his cleaning wages to spend the night, feeling sulky and unloved, on a bottom bunk in a backpackers' hostel.

In the morning, he headed to the Isle of Skye, where he'd journeyed to the north-western part of the island and caught the boat that would carry him across the sea. From a bus to a coach, to a coach, to a hostel, to a coach that boarded the Kyle ferry, to another bus, to this island ferry, to the island bus, and then finally, to the long walk at the end, it would take him almost twenty hours to get home, an entire day to travel less than three hundred miles.

He blew upon the burning tip of his cigarette and felt his eyes grow heavy as he waited for the pill to do its work. He made a list of the things that he had missed about home: the quiet, Doll Macdonald, the sea. Then he made a list of the things he dreaded: the quiet, Doll Macdonald, the sea.

The rain was forming puddles on the seats. The puddles became little oceans as the ferry rocked on the Minch. He hunkered down and watched the tides wash back and forth. Warmed by his congealing

self-pity, he felt an oily resentment towards his father, a disgraceful rancour towards his grandmother's ageing body, but marbled through this ran a vein of shame, that he should be so selfish, so reluctant to care for those who had once cared for him.

Halfway across the Minch, a steward came out to check on him. The rain was almost horizontal. The steward approached him cautiously before ordering him to move indoors.

The interior was quiet. It was easy to tell the islanders from the visitors because the islanders rarely looked out at the sea. They read quietly, or filled out crosswords in discarded newspapers. They sprawled on benches, sleeping soundly, their hands clasped over their chests, their bodies twisted as they kept both feet respectfully on the floor.

Cal was dripping wet, dragging a large bin bag, his jaw grinding on the pill as he roamed the lounges in search of an empty corner. He looked down at his toes coming through his burst Converse. If he was seen – and he was sure that he had been – then his father would hear about the state of him long before he reached home.

Everything he owned fit into a backpack and one doubled bin bag. It had taken him less than ten minutes to pack up four years of his life. It had taken a little longer to fold himself away, to hide all the bits of himself that had slowly been unfurling since he had arrived on the mainland. In truth, he had not changed that much since he had been at college, and as he roamed the ferry he wondered if he had always known he would be forced to come home eventually.

He tucked himself into the quietest row he could find. He shoved his hands into his oxters and rested his head against the panelled wall.

Across from him sat a well-dressed woman he was certain he didn't know. She wore a fine tweed suit and her snow-white hair was curled and set. There was no make-up on her face and the only shiny parts of her were a discreet wedding band and the small pearls at her earlobes. The tossing didn't seem to bother her and he knew her to be an islander. She had her eyes closed and she sat in quiet reflection, her hands clasped on top of her copy of the Authorised Version.

The old ferry churned slower than he remembered. Whenever it carried him away, it skited across the waves like a skimming stone. Now it groaned and protested as it made its dogged way towards the islands, as though it shared his own reluctance. The engine sound was a comfort to him, that muffled *whoosh-whoosh* that felt like blood pulsing in his throat, a thrum that travelled through his soles and up his spine till it hummed in his mind.

"Dè thachair dha d' aodann?" said the woman. Her eyes were open now, her expanding pupils swallowing him whole.

He touched his face and felt the heat on his forehead where he had picked at a spot until it bled.

The woman took a tissue from her handbag. She gave it to him to wipe the blood and said in Gaelic, "*And what do you have to be grinning about?*"

"*Nothing. I'm just happy to be heading home.*"

"*You should take your hat off. You'll not feel the benefit.*"

He was wearing a lime-green knitted cap, a colour so acidic it could ruin appetites. It was still pulled low over his ears and Cal considered removing it, but then he remembered what was concealed underneath. "*I'm fine.*"

"*And you're white as a ghost. Not a fan of the boat, I see.*" She unwrapped a roll of sugary pastilles and leant forwards to offer him one. She must have smelt the drink on him because she sniffed and her face curdled. As she sat back her knees clicked. "*Would you listen to that. I'm nothing but a bag of kindling.*"

The pastille helped concentrate his gurning. "*It's the damp. I can feel it already.*"

"*Oh? I'm surprised you can feel anything at all. The state you're in.*" The woman sat a while turning all the buttons on her coat the right way up. She peered at him without blinking. "*I feel like I know you, son. Where are you from?*"

"*Falabay.*"

"*Oh, they like their drink there.*" The woman chuckled bitterly. "*I'm from Shawbost, myself, but Falabay . . . that's a hard place. Hard, but*

beautiful," she conceded. "*Though why anyone would want to live on those rocks is beyond me*."

He had never considered it optional before. It had been his maternal great-grandfather's tenancy, his livelihood, and in the way of these things, it had passed to Ella and eventually one day it would be his.

She sucked on her sweetie, her cheek a rattling blister. "*And what did you say your name was?*"

The boat lurched and Cal closed his eyes against the drop. "*John Macleod. John-Calum*."

John Macleod. It was a name as common as white sheep. He preferred Cal, which is what everyone called him. It was less of a constant reminder of his father.

The woman frowned. "*And who do you belong to?*"

It was a question that islanders always asked. With families struggling on for centuries wherever they had a spit of intractable land, the same names echoed on and on and so they needed to know his sloinntireachd, his lineage. "*I'm John of John of Iain of Iain the Breabadair.*"

The woman considered this. "*I know you*," she said eventually. "*I knew your grandfather. He volunteered at the lifeboat society with my father. Good man. Is your grandmother still alive?*"

He never knew his father's mother – nor had his father; Granny Macleod had died when John was a baby. She died in bed, a few days after she had given birth to John, who she had named with the Anglicised version of Iain, in the hope that the family would soon emigrate to Detroit where her husband had been promised work as a panel beater. Cal assumed this woman must mean his mother's mother. "*Our Ella? Yes. My father looks after her. Or, she looks after my father, depending on who you ask*."

"*Ella*. Eh-la. *That's it. The Glaswegian. She is a right one, eh? No man could tell her!*" The woman patted her heart but whether it was in reverence or disgust Cal could not quite tell.

"*You've been away a while, I see*." He wondered how she could see such a thing, but before he could respond she added, "*You're dressed for city weather*."

"*Yes. I was away at college, art school*," he said.

"*And so will you behave now?*" she said, staring right at him.

"*What do you mean?*"

"*Be a good influence on the young ones. Leave the filth of the mainland behind.*"

"*Oh, I see*," he said, laughing a little. "*Yes, of course I will. But you've no cause to worry. There are no young ones where I'm from.*"

A wave broke against the window. It startled him. The woman didn't react.

"John-Calum?" The tall man who called his name had been staggering to the bathroom, his bandy legs unaccustomed to the sea. Cal, who had been forcing a smile for the woman, lost his smile before he recovered it again. He was angry at himself for not having considered where the toilets were when he chose this seat. "Aidh—it never is!"

Innes MacInnes lived a few miles from the Macleod croft, which was close enough to be considered a neighbour. He was the only friend his father seemed to have. Innes lived with his younger brother, both of them bachelors, and between them they fought over the running of the family croft and cared for their elderly, cantankerous father. He was known as Innes Ciùin, Gentle Innes, to distinguish from his father, Innes Crùbaidh, a flint-hearted old bastard. The islanders called the men this to their faces. No one gave or took offence.

Innes was tall and had a slightly hungry look to him. His tawny hair was thinning and he feathered it at the front to cover the rising peaks. He was a quiet man who had a gentle way of speaking. The sides of his thin mouth curled up in a smile and he seemed unable to regulate it, whether he was sharing good news or bad. For a man in his late forties, he was still in fair shape thanks to the demands of the croft, and Cal thought it was possible, in certain lights, to say he was handsome.

Innes looked to the Shawbost woman and then back to Cal, worried that he had interrupted some private joke. He couldn't understand why Cal was grinning, yet the woman was upright and unblinking.

"I saw your father on Thursday. Aidh—he never said you were coming back."

Innes had a singular way of speaking, a sharp intake of breath at the exact moment he began to expel words, a pulmonic ingression of sorts: the Harris gasp. And although he didn't say 'aye', preferring the proper 'yes', his gasp made it seem like he was constantly agreeing with himself and gave his speech a cautious, halting quality. "Aidh—are you all right? You don't seem like your usual self?"

This man who had known him his whole life had no idea about his usual self.

His tongue felt swollen. He pushed it into his bottom lip. "I took a seasickness pill. It's made me feel weird."

"Well, is this a visit, or are you back with us for good?"

"For a wee while anyway."

Innes exhaled like he could not believe it. "Thought you would be away conquering the world. Aidh—big university graduate and all that."

Innes's younger brother Sorley had gone away to study, a luxury that Innes Crùbaidh had not allowed his eldest son. Sorley had gone to Glasgow but came back to the island all the same. It was unfair to Innes, who had missed out on the opportunity on the understanding that being the eldest he would manage the land, look after their father, and eventually the croft would be his alone.

A PhD in French History was a useless thing for an agricultural life – it must have been a useless thing to study altogether because Sorley, bow-chested but penniless, washed up at home. Any opportunity he got, he used his education to criticise his docile, methodical brother, and when he failed to get his way in practical matters, he peppered his arguments with big 'university words'. He tried to incorporate socialist systems better suited for running Chinese factories than organising the spreading of kelp. More than once, he'd sat down and sketched a new process for digging and turning the ancient peat beds – lining up the islanders in an efficient factory line and disregarding three thousand years of community.

Through all of Sorley's lording, Innes had developed a suspicion of higher education. He saw it to be nothing better than a class con to

separate them 'that could' from them that 'had-read-about-how-to-do-it-and-so-thought-they-could-but-were-now-too-educated-to-bother-and-should-therefore-manage-those-who-did'.

Cal considered the Shawbost woman. He didn't want to feel like a failure, but they wouldn't appreciate him being bragail. "I still have plans. But there's plenty of time for that."

"Doll Macdonald will be happy to see you. And young Isla will be over the moon."

"Do bhràmair?" asked the Shawbost woman.

Cal had no idea why he cared what this woman thought but he blurted out a correction. "No, we weren't sweethearts. Not really."

Innes turned back to Cal. "Aidh—well, I'll give you a run down the road, sure."

From the harbour in town it was still a long journey home. If he accepted the lift, Innes would drive him to the door and he would arrive home too soon. Cal needed time to adjust, to be amongst strangers a little longer, to drink more cider, to let the ecstasy ebb away. The quietness of the long walk at the end was a good place to resign himself to his fate.

"Thanks all the same. But I've got some things to do. I'm meeting a friend."

"Who?"

"Och, nobody you know."

Innes smirked at the absurd statement. "Sure you're all right? You look a bit lost."

"Yeah. Fine." What skinned him was that the closer he got to home, the more lost he felt. He got up, fearful he might utter his thoughts out loud. He gathered his loose wits and clapped Innes on the shoulder, then before he realised what he was doing he hugged him. Innes went rigid in his arms and Cal thought it was possible that he had not been hugged since he was a boy.

"Look. I fancy one last pint before I head home. You know my father likes a dry house."

"As he should!" said the Shawbost woman.

Cal moved away from Innes. "I'll come round and see you when I'm settled. OK?"

It was an abrupt way to dismiss a man he had known his entire life. He shouldered the backpack and, cradling the bin bag in his arms, he scuttled back out into the rain.

The ferry rocked as its wake hit the jetty. The tourists tottered, delighted to be thrown about one last time. The ramblers were shivering. They pulled their anoraks tight, their wind-scalded faces peering through elasticated peepholes.

The boat docked and the lorries came off first. Cal hung back to be sure Innes had driven away before he disembarked. Being unable to swim, he never felt completely safe until his feet were back on solid ground and he tapped his heels on the seafront in the island tradition. When he was in school, the children were taught the horror of the *Iolaire* disaster and every New Year's Day, his grandmother baked a Bundt cake in the shape of a life ring to remember the 205 souls who had perished so close to home.

He was marching behind the passenger cars when a strong hand clapped his shoulder. He knew the man only vaguely, a broad, affable, fish farmer from Seilebost. "Any chance you brought some fresh fanny with you?"

Cal chuckled half-heartedly. "Any chance you're headed up the road? I could use a lift."

The man explained how his car was off the road, needing repairs he couldn't afford. He was spending the afternoon in Tarbert with his aunt, and his brother would drive up from Seilebost and collect him later that night. Without any hesitation he extended both his aunt's hospitality and his brother's service, but Cal declined both and thanked the man whose name he was still unsure of.

He waited for the man to walk away before he sloped over to the bus shelter. He missed the first bus on purpose, knowing that if he did not catch the next he would be stranded for the night.

He took his time and finished the last can of cider. Crouching inside the shelter, he unpacked his backpack and then repacked it carefully. At the bottom he hid his Walkman and the dubbed cassettes, then he covered them with old copies of *The Face* magazine. There was a free gay newspaper in the front pocket – why he still had it, he didn't know – but when he thought about putting it in the bin, he was gripped with a fear that the wind would catch it and blow it across the island. He folded the newspaper and tucked it beneath the lining of his bag, thinking it would be safer to burn it at home. On top of all this he stuffed his dirty laundry and then crowned it, proudly, with his mother's discarded Bible.