

The Fisherman

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O'Donnachú is a fisherman. This defines him, first and foremost: the rope calluses on his hands, the dried film of salt on his face and clothes. His little house and his workshop next door overlook the gray and shuddering sea, and it is all he has ever known. The boat was his father's—is his father's, still, in whatever part of O'Donnachú is still a small, frightened boy clinging to the side as the little currach rolls over vast, implacable waves. He was a fisherman for ten years before he pulled the woman out of the water. He went on being a fisherman during their lives together, and will certainly still do so now that she is gone. This is a throwaway in the stories, though—who else but a fisherman should pull such a creature in with his nets? In later years, when he catches snippets of his own story being traded between young men in the ale house, when he hears that his tale has been set to paper by a man he has never met, in words he has never learned to cipher, he will always wonder at this: that it should be rendered so small, this most important part of his life.

Perhaps it never should have been allowed to grow so big in the first place. And here is the paradox: if it had not, perhaps she would still be here. And if she were here, perhaps it would not have swelled to such unseemly proportion. This is the question raised to him by old—former?—friends over a pint of strong

beer. The alewife sweeps up their empty cups in her thick, strong arms and hustles away to refill them, and O'Donnachú shakes his head slowly. The bitter sting of amusement only just takes the edge off the great swell of sorrow below. That is not it at all, friends. That is not it at all.

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A man needs a companion. This is the way of things. A fisherman more than most—in the years after his father's passing, O'Donnachú struggled to hold the boat steady while repairing the fish-weirs, to haul in even half-full nets. There were youths in the village, but there were other fishermen too, and O'Donnachú had no parents petition him for an apprenticeship. He was lonely, though lacking in the words to describe this condition. He was tired as well, worn and weary, and this he could put a name to rather easily.

He found her on a bright afternoon, not long after his midday meal—not at a dusky twilight, as the stories will later have it. Even taking into account his aching back, the net he'd cast was absurdly difficult to haul in. When at last the net broke water and he saw the reason for its unusual heft, he forgot his weary muscles. The currach rocked perilously as he sprang up to roll the net's contents over the side: dying fish flopped left and right, dancing helplessly around his feet, as the woman's limp body slithered free of its trap.

She was naked, compact muscles slack under umber-tanned skin, and salt-water streams ran out of her nose and mouth. Her waist was narrow and her shoulders broad, and for a wild moment O'Donnachú wondered if she had managed to swim all the way out from shore. Her lips were blue-tinged and he wasn't sure that her chest was moving—in the space before he could steady himself to set hands on her, her eyes flew open and she sat up as straight as a spear.

She stared at him for a moment, and then her hands flew to her own shoulders, groping at the bare skin there. She looked wildly to either side, and began pawing through the still-gasping fish until her fingernails scratched at the wooden bottom of the boat. O'Donnachú, silent and stunned, could only watch as she searched the boat from prow to stern. It was several long minutes before she collapsed to a sit and turned wide, miserable eyes up at him.

He told her he was sorry, and his voice was rough and raw; it had been three days, perhaps, since last he'd been among company. He shucked his jacket to hand it to her. Her face crimped slightly with some unknown emotion as she held the rough garment; then she slid it gingerly over her shoulders. He explained to her that he couldn't see that there were any other survivors from her boat, offered her to come home with him, for the night. Then they might see what could be done with her come the morning.

She blinked at him, then turned her head to rest her chin on the side of the boat. She gazed out over the unresponsive sea as the wind picked up and O'Donnachú struggled with the oars as the boat seemed to drag all the way back home.

The woman had still said not a word by the time the boat made harbor; O'Donnachú pointed out his house to her, and she drifted off toward it as he gathered up the day's small catch in baskets. Before leaving the boat tied up for the day, he waded out into the sea and groped at the underside of the currach, trying to feel out why it had stopped obeying his demands.

To his surprise, his fingers caught on something soft and yielding, snagged up on one of the nails that held the canvas cover over the planks of the hull. A

solid tug, and he held in his hands a long fur coat, of a woman's size, finely made—his fingers could not even find a seam. It must have come from the same ship whose sinking had nearly drowned the woman who now waited in his cottage—it might even be hers. After a moment's hesitation, he wedged the coat under his arm and carried it with the baskets of fish to his workshop. He wrapped the coat in an oilcloth, scabbled a hole in the corner of the dirt floor, and buried the sack under a layer of dirt and stone. Times were lean, and he might get a good price for such a thing when next a traveling merchant passed through town.

By the time he walked through his own front door, the woman was standing just inside with her arms wrapped around herself. A sharp crease had formed between her dark brows, and she was still dressed in his sodden jacket.

O'Donnachú offered to make a fire, and she turned blank eyes on him again. He wondered if she was Norman, or even English, to register so little comprehension of his words; a bubble of resentment rose up in him, only to quickly burst as her gaze returned to the floor.

She was listless as he led her to the hearth, peeled the wet jacket from her, combed her damp hair with his fingers. He dressed her in his spare shirt, gave her cheese and dried fish to eat and a cup of milk to drink. She ate half-heartedly, then curled up in the corner against the hearth with her head on her arms.

Where will you go? he wondered aloud. What will we do with you?

In the morning, she was gone, and immediately he feared the worst. But his possessions were undisturbed; the woman was sitting on the front stoop, frowning out over the tranquil gray sea just beyond his door. She took the bread he offered her, ignored or did not comprehend his explanations of his plans for the day, and looked the other way when he stood to go. But he felt her eyes on him, as he loaded the baskets of fish back into his boat and rowed away toward town.

He sold out of stock fast—he hadn't much to sell, after all. The coin was light in his pocket as he left his boat tied up and strolled into town. None at the ale house had heard tell of a ship meant to lay port in town, or anywhere nearby; nor had any other man found flotsam or jetsam from such a vessel. O'Donnachú stood outside the ale house for a moment or two, with his hands in his pockets. Then he turned to the east and strode briskly toward the shop he had in mind.

Two armspans of cloth, he told the shopkeeper, and had to convince her he wanted the plain blue woolen, yes, this one here, and not any sort of sailcloth. He added another armspan of linen to the pile, tucked them under his arm, and turned his feet toward his boat, toward home.

She was waiting in the same place he'd left her, the red flush of sunburn crawling across her nose and forehead. But she followed him inside, and plucked idly at the cloth that he laid on the table. She stood stock still while he measured her height and her waist with a length of old rope, and her eyes darted back and forth like a frightened hind's. When he finished, she retreated back outside, and he set to cutting the cloth. His stitches were large and rough, and sewn with the same thread he used to repair his nets. Her eyes glinted strangely when, after a near-sleepless night, he offered the dress to her. She stood up and peeled off his old tunic, and the early light off the ocean waves rippled across her skin. He turned away and took over her role of frowning out over the sea as she dressed slowly, with unsure fingers. It was not a pretty

dress, nor a shapely one, but it was functional, and—though he did not know it then—there would be many more dresses to come, and better ones, too.

She stood there, in the dress, and her face was still unreadable. She looked at him, and at the boat he had pulled onto shore not, it seemed, so very long ago, and she pointed.

Well, he allowed, after a meal, yes, he might do well to set out to sea and bring in what catch might be had. And if she would like to come with him, that might be all right, so long as she didn't sink his boat as well as her last one.

And she smiled.

It was only a second pair of hands, at first, until some better arrangement could be found—hands that quickly grew calloused hauling in nets. And a second pair of eyes, ones sharper than O'Donnachú's own, for spotting a broken weir or a fraying line. And a second pair of arms, for when O'Donnachú's back grew weary at the oars. And it was company: quiet company, to be sure, but company that could say more with a point of those fingers, with a flash of those eyes, than any man at the ale house could explain in an hour.

Folk in the village talked, at first, when the woman first appeared in O'Donnachú's home. A bride from out of town, O'Donnachú told them, the exchange of bride-price for woman facilitated by an unnamed cousin of his in an unnamed, faraway town. He called her Órnait, and held her hand gingerly in his much larger one. Suspicious smirks were slow to turn over to words of congratulation, but turn they did, for most folk, in time. It was some months later, on a cold winter night, that the woman who both was and was not Órnait stopped him before he could retire to sleep in his recent customary place at the foot of his own bed. And she smiled once more, and those hands, those eyes, made truth of his lies at last.

For a long time, he forgot about the fur coat that lay hidden in his workshop. It wasn't hard to do, with the day-to-day worries of his work and the woman pressing any other thoughts out of his mind. And for a time after that, there were no merchants passing through, or at least none of a quality to offer him more than a pittance for such a prize. By the time a better class of vendor arrived in town, O'Donnachú had hit upon a new use for the thing: a gift for the woman who had given his life a new light. While she was busy airing the nets one late afternoon, after a long morning spent at sea, he excused himself to his workshop, pulled the coat free of its hiding place, and shook it loose of the old oilcloth he'd wrapped it in.

The strangeness of the garment hadn't bothered him before, in his bewilderment at finding the woman lost at sea. Now he frowned at the seamlessness of it, the strange shape and cut. He lay the coat over the raised rack on which he repaired his boat, and the shadows played tricks with his eyes, so that the sleeves seemed first to be of a fit to the curve of a woman's arm, then to shrink in length and stretch in girth, like the fin of a fish or the flipper of a seal.

And then he knew.

The woman he called Órnait looked at him with concern pinching her mouth, when he emerged from the workshop, once he had shoved the coat back its in covering and buried it once more. She stood up from her work with the nets and hurried to his side, and her hand was cool where she laid it on his neck. Her eyes asked, is there anything, anything wrong?

He put his arm around her, and led her back into the house, and told her nothing.

Cod, bream, whiting, mackerel by the fistful. She threw her head back in a silent laugh when, one day, a stray octopus that had gotten itself stuck in the net dragged itself back over the side with a startled, affronted dignity. Every so often, a scallop shell would be tossed up with the catch, and even more rarely than that, a live specimen. Whenever he came across one, he would cut through the thick tough muscle that held the thing closed, and firmly prod the fleshy mass inside. He would search it relentlessly, thoroughly, before tossing the ruined mess overboard. On one such occasion, she touched his fingers lightly as he reached for his knife, and her head canted to the side in a wordless question. He grinned, and shrugged. Just in case, he said. You never know.

She was a terrible cook, but he had skill enough over the stove, and her talents lay elsewhere. It was she who went diving to repair the weirs and free snagged nets; she who did more than her share of hauling in a heavy catch. She spent many nights with her sewing in a chair outside the front door, listening to the sound of the waves, her waves, as they crashed on the shore. She would smile at him, if he came out to stand beside her, and hold his hand for a spell before she turned back to her work. But no number of cheering words from him, no soft kisses or whispered promises, took away the wistful look in her eyes.

And still, shameful creature that he knew himself to be, he said nothing.

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Such gentle memories slide away from him too easily these days. He wants to picture her laughing, dark-haired, momentarily caught up out of her faraway sorrow. Instead, in the inn with his friends, he is seized by a different image: her pale and terrible face, lashed by gray-streaked hair in the twilight gale. She didn't weep—he never once saw her weep. But she had waited for him, in the workshop door, and brandished the coat in his face like a weapon. And, sure enough, a weapon it was—it had cut him deeply enough, to see her like that. And then a flicker of grim satisfaction in her, to see she'd done to him a fraction of what he'd done to her. She pushed past him, shucking Órnait's clothes as she ran down the beach, and the sleek black seal dove beneath the waves for good.

In the morning, he took the currach out as usual, and the oars were heavy in his hands as he rowed.

O'Donnachú pays for the drink and excuses himself from the table. His friends' low muttering follows him out of the inn, and, it seems to him, all the way back to his boat, across the harbor, and out along the shoreline to his cottage. He feels himself finally alone, however, when he steps into his workshop. He digs up the old oilcloth from where it lies buried once again, pulls free the yellow linen dress from within. He crushes it against his face and inhales as deeply as he can. He smells nothing but salt and sand.

He stands there for an uncountable time before carefully replacing the dress in its sepulcher. It is dark outside, and as he walks the few paces between the workshop and his home, he thinks for a moment that he sees a flicker of movement along the beach—a long tapered shape slithering back into the tidal waters. But no. Moonlight sliding between the clouds reveals no such visitor, and he banishes this, the latest in a long chain of wistful manifestations, as a

product of too much ale and too little sleep. He falls into bed, barely managing to kick off his boots, and is swallowed up in dream-roiled slumber.

She comes to him tonight in a dream, and she is more terrible here than she ever was as the fleeing selkie or the human woman he loved and hurt. She speaks to him, but he understands little more now than he did when she was silent. Her anger flays him to his core, and when at last it is too, too much, this recedes into sharp pangs of loss. She loved him—loves him—and this is worse than all the anger in the world. She is commanding something from him, demanding it, wheedling, decreeing, and he is suffocating under the weight of it, when, as quickly as he dropped into sleep, he awakes.

In the morning, he finds on his front stoop a pearl the size of his fist.

He holds it for a moment and stares at himself in the smooth, ruddy luster. Overcome by emotions he is not equipped to handle, let alone comprehend, he raises his hand high over his shoulder to throw the ridiculous thing back into the waves from which it came.

A slick splash from the direction of his boat-tie stops him, and he spins—too late to catch a glimpse of her. Far too late to offer amends or apologies. He lowers his hand, cradles the pearl against his chest. With new purpose now, he walks toward his workshop. The pearl settles neatly into the folds of the yellow dress, and the dark oil-cloth closes around both.

He sets out to sea at around his usual hour. He checks the fish-weirs for damage, finds none, lowers his nets, hauls in the catch. Cod, bream, whiting, mackerel by the fistful. No octopus today, and no scallops either.

