

# THE CHANGE

## RUTH GILCHRIST

OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

Initially, when he had been little, of course she worried about living so close to the sea. So, they had done the swimming lesson thing, and later he'd had sailing lessons. They had met a good group that way, the sort she thought had wider horizons, whom now, she hoped might not be so quick to judge a young person. So far, the teenage years had been manageable. She had read all the Maggie Dent articles, taught herself to keep communication light, never show shock. His moods tended to transmute into soggy heaps rather than shouting matches.

At first, Leila had felt fairly calm about the latest changes, at least he and his mates weren't causing trouble like some local youths, tombstoning at the harbour. Nor was he hiding in his room stuck like a limpet to his mobile device. Most of his time was spent down at the beach or in the water. The fresh air, sea, sand, would undoubtedly help him think his way through whatever was troubling him, surely this was a healthier way to channel the teenage angst. When he did rebel, it was in a way that Leila had not expected, and it didn't seem to fit with the latest teen trends. He refused to go to the barbers. Leila gritted her teeth and kept them clenched till his hair grew below his shoulders, now that it reached the curve of his spine, she felt happy that long hair suited him. She told herself not to worry about his choices, that swimming against the tide would only make him more resilient. However, she did not like the thought that he might have cut himself off from his peer group. His teacher had alluded to as much at the parents evening before the start of the summer holidays. The teacher had said he had stopped hanging around with the usual boisterous gang, preferring instead to float between the groups of girls.

Now, in the holidays he did not invite any of his friends around and had almost stopped bothering with his mobile. His laptop history showed reels of research into the effects of chemical pollutants on the oceans and the effect of climate change on marine mammals. Unlike most of the local lads he was more interested in the conservation side of marine life than looking into a future in the fishing industry. He had obviously dredged deeper into some of statistics on extinction and had bookmarked several pages on the consequence of pollution on reproduction. It was uncomfortable reading and it occurred to Leila that her son might be depressed. Other than give him time to think, she didn't know what else she could do. Even in

the wilder weather she couldn't stop him from going into the sea and now she wondered if she wasn't a little to blame, she could have chosen not to live by the sea. *What was she thinking encouraging a love of water sports?* She did however believe that her efforts meant her son's knowledge of the currents was far superior to that of most of the fisherman, and that comforted her a little. All she could do was steady herself for the storm she knew would come.

Two weeks before the end of the summer holidays it was Leila who broke the calm. He wasn't around much and she felt like he was drifting ever further beyond her reach. She got cross with him, said; *it was one thing leaving sand in the shower but fish scales were quite another - in future could he please wash his catch at the outside tap.* Of course, it didn't really cover what she wanted to say, or what she really wanted to ask. He knew it, he looked up at her with dark watery eyes and calmly told her he thought he needed to get away. When she asked him, (knowing full well the state of his bank account) if he had enough money for the fare. He looked at her unblinking and slowly said "yeah mum, don't worry I'll not be far away." With that he had swung the back door open, turning as he did, "Oh and mum, when I get back, we need to talk about what my father was." The door had rattled on its hinges, her emotions catching like a barb in her throat. She had watched him step over the pebbles, across the beach - stripping clothes as he went. By the time he reached the edge of the water he was down on the ground slithering into the surf. As his powerful shoulders dived beneath the surface, she saw the light wink of his tail. All she could manage to send after him was a strangled plea "Mind the nets."

*Serial awardee, Ruth Gilchrist did not start writing age five or study literature. She is continually surprised by her own work and now writes in all the spaces between the rest of living.*