

The two men enter the pub and order loudly in accents from the south. It is late in the evening but they are wearing their fishing vests over thin and untarnished t-shirts, and he reads them straight away: a new adventure, picking up habits from their grandfathers, making the most of being confined to these islands. Their strange attire is an attempt to both stick out and blend in; they hope that a sage old local might take them under wing. The young are always so keen for connection.

They sit down at a table spitting distance from his, and he watches them sink three pints as the other drinkers begin to dawdle home; everyone else knows to be fresh for the early start. But these lads are here for excitement, not calm. It will be years before they learn to appreciate the still water, the thrill of catching nature at rest. He's seen it so many times he could have painted these boys out of thin air. Finally, the pub is quiet enough that he can speak without raising his bitter-soaked voice. He taps his ceramic finger, the third on his left hand, on the table gently and they look his way.

'Castle Loch is it, th'morra lads?'

It is; it's their first trip up here, a long drive from London. They're staying at the Moby Arms. They almost drown him in details; inherited the vintage gear, bought some OS maps, left their devices behind. He lets their enthusiasm wash over him, lets it refresh some of his social desiccation.

'You'll be after the vendace, no doubt?'

They glance at one another quickly, eyes darting like minnow. They don't know about the vendace; it's not in any of their books.

'No, no, she won't be. And even when she was, they got it wrong. Small, short-lived, extinct; not one of these things is true.'

The boys have quieted now, have leaned in. The pub is empty except for them, and the barman has put on the low music that he likes to hear. He sits in the anticipation for a moment; swims around in it, remembers how it feels to be enveloped in the attention of others. Slowly, he begins to speak,

'None will admit it, for the sake of competition. But we've all seen her in the pink light of the morning, all had a chance and couldn't land her in the boat. She's canny, as survivors have to be. The name given to her is Clipper, the biggest vendace there ever was.'

He takes a sip from his warm pint; across the surface, the dregs of foam have settled like scales.

'My own grandfather used to bring me here when we lived much further north. Weekend escapes from the city where we stayed, just he and I out on his old boat. He was one for the still mornings, my granda, and wouldn't like me to speak until the sky was fixed in blue. He might stay silent til afternoon, that old man, and nothing I could say could tempt him from it. But when he did open up, he'd tell me stories about his past in the navy; about the men he travelled with, and being married to the sea. And one time, he told me about Clipper.'

It was a fishing trip home with his closest pal from the ships. A full week they spent out on that loch together, two young lads just like you both, catching nothing but butterfly bites, as if the

water had been emptied; as if the fish had grown wings and flown away. Six whole days they sat, nothing doing. And then on the last morning, something hit the boat so hard they were knocked onto their knees. From the bank they were seen, pointing and screaming at the water; bigger than a man, they said, and flashing like silver. They cast off and my grandfather got a bite; she dragged them for half a mile before they gave up their rods. They came home bruised and battered and barely speaking. Granda never went fishing with his buddy again.'

He raises his porcelain digit in front of his face. A ring finger long ago sacrificed to the loch. The lads might gasp, but all he can hear is the stillness of those mornings.

'A'course I didn't believe him one bit. A dozen times he told me, the silly old fool, and there I was disbelieving. But one early start on a too-hot day I had my hands in the water. And there she was, Clipper, just a flash and away. Big as a man, just like they said. And there was I, a boy in the water and one finger down.'

There are things in Castle Loch that everyone knows about. Things that fell out of the sky and things that hide under the water. Lockerbie is full of these little secrets, these remnants of the past. He knows there's beauty in that loch; it appears differently to each generation, but it is there. The young will see it too.

'She's a living fossil. From the last ice age, they say. But then you could likely describe me just the same.'

The next morning, as the day breaks, he takes his coffee to the front door. He will not head out onto the water today. The boys will see it for themselves.