

SHIPBUILDING

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OPEN BOOK UNBOUND WRITING

On the far north west coast of Scotland lies a peninsula known as Coigach. The *ch* sound comes from the back of the throat, echoing the slow pull of the tide on a shingle beach when the day is calm. The meaning of *Coigach* refers to the five townships contained within the almost island but our story, like all good tales, takes place at the edges, below the strandline, within the mysterious zone belonging to both land and sea.

It is here, in the intertidal, that our heroine dwells. She is small and slight, with eyes the colour of bladderwrack and skin as smooth and pale as mother-of-pearl. These things we know, but her name we do not and so for the sake of our tale we will call her Coigach Lass.

She is a shy creature, so elusive there are those who doubt her existence. Pay no heed to the naysayers and cynics for she is every bit as real as her water-bound cousins, the Blue Men of the Minch. But while those rogues concern themselves with the business of raising storms, capsizing boats and drowning sailors, our Coigach Lass devotes her time to shipbuilding.

She scours the shoreline for material, picking her way around the coast from Lag na Saille, *salt hollow*, to Rubha Duilich, *difficult point*, then on to Bàgh Faochag, *periwinkle bay*. Heading south she goes around Roinn a' Mhill, *sharp point of the hill*, searching rock and pool, raking over craggy inlets, before probing the caves at Geodha an Dà Fheannag, *the gully of the crows*. Always looking, forever gathering as she traverses Camus an Fhèidh, *the bay of the deer*. All she collects has been brought here by current and tide, carried by the flow, abandoned by the ebb.

Tatters and threads ripped and in patches, blue dungarees, herringbone dresses, roiled by the surge, chewed by the fishes. Taffeta ballgowns, silk smoking jackets, brined to the max with a sailor's regrets. Corduroy slacks, seersucker shorts, roiled by the surge, shredded on rocks.

Torn by time and tide, tossed by mighty waves, her bounty sweeps in from beyond the Gulf of Mexico. A profusion of flotsam heading her way, spinning through the straits of Florida, coasting by the Carolinas before hitching a lift on the North Atlantic Drift and being carried all the way to the shores of Coigach.

Where others see rags and refuse, debris and trash, she feels the pain contained within these lost and forsaken remnants, *despair, sorrow, loss*. Piece by piece she gathers them, *anguish envy, greed*. Rinsing them out, *pain, suffering, despair*, before tenderly laying them, *anxiety, poverty, disgust*, on the rocks above the splash zone, *melancholy, anger, grief*, where they will dry. Next is the most delicate part of the process, *deprivation, agony, boredom*. The piece by piece choosing and matching of what will go where, *confusion, horror, misery*. Then comes the stitching together.

Using twine from old rope, she darns, tacks, hems. Mending souls, repairing wounds, healing scars, she creates something new. Something infinitely more meaningful than the sum of its parts.

Coigach Lass sings as she sews, notes for stitches. Though she is rarely seen, the lilting tilt of her voice is often heard wafting on the breeze. For those who pay attention, it can be detected in the sigh of a storm petrel and in the cry of a kittiwake. When a merlin chatters, locals tilt their heads and say, *our Coigach Lass is busy today*.

Busy, she is always busy, for there is so much work to be done. The Blue Men splash and frolic like porpoise in Horse Sound, mocking, chiding, entreating her. *Take a break, cousin. Rest your weary fingers and come play with us a while*.

Coigach Lass shakes her head. For these seven Sabbaths past, the mournful cry of the Ban Sith, *banshee*, has been wailing on the wind and she knows she doesn't have much time left to complete her work. For all that has been accomplished, there is still much to do.

She has stitched the bow and lined the hull. She has hemmed the stern and edged the keel, and all of these parts she has sewn neatly together. She has even embroidered an anchor to keep her vessel at peace in Achnahaird Bay until the time comes to set sail. From the ills of the world, Coigach Lass has created a fine, seaworthy craft. A vessel constructed from humanity's pain. What is needed now is a rudder, for without a rudder to steer the ship, she will never complete her voyage.

The rudder needs to be strong and true, double stitched, no raw edges, for if the rudder frays, the ship will be cast adrift, the brine sucking at her until her seams come apart. But Coigach Lass will not contemplate such a fate. She sits on a rock, head bowed, stitching so fast her fingers are a blur. She's not singing now, but humming, the sound a vibration we can hear in our hearts. Soon, soon, her work will be done.

When the last stitch is complete, the threads tied off, Coigach Lass tilts her head. She is listening for the keen of the Ban Sith, the taunting calls of the Blue Men, but all is quiet. No bird song, no idle chatter stirs the air. A moment so still it feels as though every creature is holding its breath.

Coigach Lass holds the completed rudder in her hands. The ship she has built of its own cargo is now ready to set sail. She looks out across the vast expanse of ocean to the horizon. When the ship reaches its destination it will be swallowed whole by the silence at the curve of the earth.

All will be peace.

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