

An Island

by Joshua Jarman

Bailey visited on a day when the sea was still and grey, the swell quiet and calm, making only little white splashes on the rocks.

I stood watching him come in, and even with my bad eyesight I knew it was him from the lopsided way the boat moved. I met him in the cove and tied the guy rope round the iron loop on the rock. I took his hand and helped him out. He looked older than before. His hair was all grey and his eyelids looked heavier. He moved slowly.

You the postman? I said.

Ha ha, he said.

A little spray was coming up from the water.

Come on, I said.

We went up to the shack. We went inside and I put another log on the fire and filled the kettle and put it to boil.

Bailey looked around. He looked at my mattress in the corner, with the old blankets. He looked at it for a while, like he was making a point.

How are things? he said.

Very well, I said. Very well.

He took a seat by the fire and I took the other opposite him. We looked at the fire, and at the kettle. We looked at the flames reaching up to the kettle.

Sissy padded into the room. We turned and watched her come; she moved slowly and watched Bailey apprehensively.

She jumped up onto my lap. I started stroking her behind her ear.

Suppose she's happy here is she? said Bailey.

She was purring.

Yeah, I said.

And you? he said.

I looked at him.

How are things? he said.

I'm well, I told him.

The kettle started whistling. I nudged Sissy and she stirred and jumped down onto the floor. I got up and took the kettle off the boil and made two cups of tea. I handed one to Bailey.

We don't have milk, I said.

Sugar? he said.

I shrugged.

Of course not, he said.

We sat and waited for our tea to cool down. Sissy was stretched out by the fire, then she came up and jumped onto my lap again.

She catches crabs down on the rocks, I said.

Crabs? he said.

Just little ones. But they're full of protein, good diet for a young cat.

She's not so young.

Younger than us.

Well that's not hard, he said. Does she leave any crabs for you?

Not for me, I said.

I blew on my tea.

So, Bailey said, how do you survive out here?

Just fine, I said.

What do you eat? he said.

Rats, I said. Rocks, ash, rats. It's a simple life.

You've no teeth left, he said.

I wondered if he had only just noticed, or if he'd been waiting to say it.

It's the rocks, I said.

The fire crackled.

Nutritious though, I said. All the lichen and the leftover fibres of the crabs.

Bailey looked at me.

Oh yeah?

That's right, I said. And what are they eating on the mainland now?

He looked away.

Lots of stuff, he said. All sorts.

I nodded.

I took a sip of my tea. Bailey took a sip of his.

What sort of tea is this? he said.

It's a sort I make myself, I said. I make it from the salt and the lichen.

Rancid, he said.

I suppose so.

Do you remember that chamomile stuff mum used to make? I asked him.

I hated that stuff, he said. Hated the smell.

The fire crackled.

I liked it, I said.

Sissy looked up at me, stretched out and rolled over before jumping down and going to Bailey. After a moment she leaped onto his lap and curled up. He stroked her with his big heavy old hand. She closed her eyes.

We sat for a long time. The fire was going down so I went outside for wood. The light had dropped a bit and a wind had picked up. A light rain was falling; everything was grey

except for the grass and the moss which were a sort-of green. I turned my collar up against the cold and walked round the back of the shack to the wood store. I got a few good logs and carried them back inside.

More tea? I said.

Bailey looked at me.

Yeah, alright, he said.

I put the kettle back above the flames and we waited for it to boil. Sissy stirred and jumped down off Bailey's lap. She settled once more on mine.

I suppose she is old, isn't she? I said.

Bailey didn't say anything.

The wind had really picked up and I could hear it through the walls.

Don't you get lonely? he asked eventually.

I thought about this.

Very, I said. Don't you?

The fire crackled.

He seemed to like this answer, like I'd made a joke.

And you're just going to live out here forever are you?

I looked at the fire.

No, I said. I doubt I shall live forever.

He smiled again.

Sissy had fallen asleep. I could feel the rise and fall of her breath.