The Fisherman

By D Arthur Ryan

The old man’s hand went to his face, scratching his weathered skin beneath his short, gray stubble. Unlike other men, he made this motion deliberately, letting himself feel and appreciate the itch before scratching it. He knew that freshly growing hair itched. He knew that all men felt this same itch on their cheeks as their beards sprouted. This familiarity gave him comfort.

He was in town to sell his fish. Looking around him, he saw and appreciated the town. The people were friendly--to each other, not to him. But he liked that about them. They were decent people, wanting to do good in the world and wanting good things for each other. They were not eager to embrace the blackness that existed outside of their warms hearths, and watched the old man warily as he made his way down the street.

Even the architecture of the town was pleasing to him, simple as it was. The houses were small and comfortable, with thatched or wood-shingled roofs. The walls, however, were all made of stone, and sturdy. In this rocky and hard land, stone was plentiful. And he loved it. It was immutable, the same stone day in and day out.

The dog pulling the cart along the stone street knew not to stop at the market, and continued down the street past the square without so much as a pause. No one wanted the fish of an old hermit who was either cursed or malicious, and as much as he desired the human company that would have come with selling to happy townspeople, he had long ago given up trying to have friends. He turned his gaze from the square, faced resolutely back into the wind, and followed his dog down the street.

At the pub, the dog came to a halt. The two barrels on the cart contained fish from the last weeks catches, and the more the patrons drank, the less they cared who caught their fish. Lucky Jack, the owner, came out the back door after the old man’s knock. Even though he would buy his fish, Lucky Jack distrusted the old man as much as everyone else. Between being cursed and demanding to be paid in silver, the old man did not get half as much as he should have for his catch. But what he got, he took gratefully and started back to his home. There was work to be done, and the sacrifices of being the cursed hermit were useless if the work was not done.

The road from town back to the old man’s house was small, overgrown, and lonely. No one traveled the road but him, and that not frequently. As he topped the rise to his house, he caught sight of the mountains. As it always did, the panoramic view of the highlands in the distance took his breath away. At once beautiful and forbidding, wild and inviting, they held in many ways the rhythms of his life in their hands. As he gazed at their expanse today, the tightness he hadn’t realized he had been holding in the town eased, and he relaxed a half measure and surveyed his land.

The view of the sea was as amazing as the view of the mountains from his perch at the top of a seaside cliff. Most people thought he was crazy to live here. The views were a novelty, and the wind-blasted cliff produced small and hard-fought vegetables that could barely sustain an old man, let alone an old man and an apprentice. The path down to his fishing boat was long and arduous, and the waters here were known to be temperamental, avoided by fishermen who sold lovely fish in the market.

Ben, his apprentice, sat at the workbench outside the house mending nets and preparing for the next day’s fishing. He loved the boy, but steadfastly refused to show it. Ben was a good boy--honest, hard-working, and with unflagging energy and determination that a man in his occupation could not do without.

Ben looked up as he heard the cart approach, smiled, and waved to the old man. He enjoyed the challenge of their work, embraced and sought it. No one would come to fish the hardest waters on the coast without being excited by challenge. For Ben, everything had been a challenge since joining the old man two years ago. The old man was quiet, introspective, and walled off. The cliff they lived on made them sweat and bleed for every small turnip, every shriveled tree of firewood, and each net of fish they brought home. But at the end of the day, Ben felt alive as he never had in town.

The old man patted Ben on the shoulder and went in to begin preparing the stew for their dinner. They ate and retired to their beds. Ben longed for a conversation with the old man after dinner. Not the talk of the next day and the chores that lay ahead and how Ben needed to learn faster, but stories of the old man’s adventures over a drink by the fire. But the morning would come early, and a day on the sea with the old man was no easy day, so they retired to their beds to embrace sleep.

The trek down the cliff before the sun rose was arduous. The old man took the crevace decent deftly, with experience and the confidence that comes from embracing a challenge over a long life. They set the nets in the boat, locked in the oars, and began rowing to the fishing grounds. First they rowed up the coast, steadily and on until Ben’s arms started to tire and the sun flashed above the horizon. Then they turned to sea, toward the shoals where the fish lived.

Ben remembered when he had asked the old man why they didn’t fish directly out from the cabin, or take a direct route to the shoals. The old man had explained about the drop-off, the shallow water suddenly turning deep and creating dangerous currents and swells. No one fished that area, not even the old man. As far as Ben had known, no one even rowed or sailed a boat through that part of the sea.

Getting to the shoals, they cast their nets and began to look for the schools that would yield a good day’s catch. Ben did not feel the need to explore the deep waters--the shoals were dangerous enough. The shallow water was dangerous for the big boats, but what made them dangerous for the old man and Ben was the long row from shore. They could barely see land. A storm now may mean disaster for the little boat, and both the old man and Ben watched closely to the sky as well as the water.

Ben knew that he was at least the third apprentice the old man had taken in the last twenty years. The others had not survived the difficulties of the job. The old man had survived, however, and this is why the townspeople did not like or trust him. Most thought he pushed the boys too hard, and was too reckless. Some thought that when trouble came, the old man put his own safety above that of his apprentice. Others thought worse. Ben did not believe any of this.

The job was difficult, and dangerous, but the rewards were great. While others learned to fish tame waters, Ben felt his expertise growing. With each passing season, he felt more comfortable facing not just his fishing water, but any water. While others watched their nets, Ben watched everything. The wind, the waves, the fish, the clouds. It all matters when working with the old man.

And this is what Ben loved. The challenge. And the reward. The reward was not a large estate, or a beautiful house in town, or being the envy of the townspeople. The reward was Ben. The reward was the skills he gained that could never be taken away. The reward was the feeling that Ben had each night laying in bed, knowing that he faced another challenge and lived. For Ben, there was no place else he would rather fish, and no other person from whom he would want to learn.

The next day was shooting day. The old man was not wealthy, and his choice of fishing grounds and curse with apprentices was not the only reason. The old man regularly took days off from fishing to hunt, to work his garden, to trap, and to train. He spent days practicing shooting, tracking, and running. He made Ben run everywhere on those days--to the boat to retrieve something he had forgotten, to the garden, to the traps.

But today, Ben was excited to practice his marksmanship. Everyone hunted for extra meat. Everyone knew how to fire a rifle. A few people even knew how to fire a pistol. But nobody had time to practice, they just did it. Ben thought it odd that the old man would practice something so mundane as shooting, and that he would do it so oddly.

First, they started at the beach. The old man rowed out into the waves, and dropped several brown logs wrapped in red squirrel fur into the water. Ben had to wait until he rowed back to shore before beginning the exercise. The old man would tell Ben to track all of the logs, not lose sight of a single one, and have a plan. Ben wasn’t sure what he needed a plan for since he was just shooting logs, but he always at least ordered his targets in his mind before the old man returned.

When the old man returned, he would talk to Ben for a few minutes. Ben got the sense this was meant to be more distracting than helpful, but never rebuffed the old man. After the conversation, the old man would ask Ben to shoot each log, once, making sure the shot found its mark. The bobbing of the logs on the waves made the shot difficult, but Ben usually was able to hit most of the logs. The old man would act pleased at first, but quickly become taciturn and tell Ben that he needed to hit each log before he could be a truly skilled hunter. A miss could mean a day without dinner, or worse.

Next, they hiked up the cliff together to the house. The old man made Ben face the house until a set time. When the old man allowed, Ben turned back toward the sea and had to locate and shoot at each of the logs as quickly as he could. Today, Ben found the logs quickly, but only hit two of the five.

The old man watched Ben shoot at the logs. His eye was quick. He had found one of the logs before even the old man had. But his aim was hurried. The old man suspected that Ben felt the pressure of the situation, rather than taking his time. It was a habit that the old man needed to find a way to break. He allowed himself some hope at Ben’s quick eyes and natural intellect, but made a promise to himself to find a way to improve his marksmanship.

That night, they performed a curious task. Ben had only done this once before, and still thought it was one of the most odd things about the old man. After dinner, the old man had Ben cast silver from his fish selling. The old man took most of the silver from his money box, gathered his mold and ladle, and asked Ben to begin melting the silver coins.

The last time they had done this, Ben had expressed his shock and asked why they would waste precious silver. The old man remembered that evening. He had thought about telling Ben the fulness of his apprenticeship, the depth of their mission, and the importance of these bullets. He had remembered his other apprentices, their skills, their promise, their faces and questions. The old man grieved that night--not his loneliness, but the young men who were almost good enough.

Ben remembered the old man’s eyes the last time they had made molded silver. He had asked why, and watched the old man. He remembered the old mans face, and his eyes. Ben remembered the faraway look and, most of all, the silence. The old man had not said another word that evening. And so this evening, Ben would not ask again.

The silver cast, the tools returned to the tool shed, the two men retired to bed. Ben wandered what meaning lay behind this strange ritual. He wondered how the fishing would be tomorrow. He wondered whether the old man would ever see him as an equal, as a friend, worthy of the full secrets of his oddities and commiseration of their chosen hardships.

The following morning, the old man surprising Ben by having Edward, the dog, on a short leash at the door rather than his fishing hat in hand. Today would be a tracking day--two days in a row of not fishing.

The old man liked Edward. He was a Rottweiler, not as swift as the wolfhound that the old man’s master had preferred, but sturdier, with more loving eyes and affection. Edward was also able to pull the cart for the old man, which was the one luxury he allowed himself when he inherited the operation after his apprenticeship. And Edward was affectionate, loving, loyal, and most importantly, not human. The old man appreciated him more with year, and with each apprentice.

As they began their tracking, the old man reminded Ben to watch his scent and mind the wind--as if Ben needed another reminder. The old man was certainly different in that regard. While most trackers aggressively tracked their prey, be it deer or elk or any other creature, the old man worked slowly. His method was different, cautious, almost as if he expected his prey to turn on him at any moment.

They worked through the morning, tracking a deer into the woods and besting it, as they usually did, around midday. They butchered the animal on the spot, had lunch from their catch, and packed the meat on their backs to carry home. With luck, it would last long enough to fill another two barrels with fish.

As they walked home, the old man watched Ben. Ben noticed his gaze, but avoided it. He had noticed the change in the old man recently. He was not friendly. He was not happy. But he seemed somehow more content. Ben hoped that we was living up to the old man’s expectations as an apprentice. He hoped that he could one day match the old man’s talent and vigor and devotion to his chosen life.

One evening, they returned home from their fishing grounds. The nets were not overflowing, but neither were they empty. The old man seemed content, and Ben was happy to have mastered the water for another day. As they crested the cliff in front of the house, the old man’s gait changed. He stiffened, and quickened his pace toward the house. Looking around, Ben noticed a small light on the horizon, directly to their north. It flickered like a fire, and looked like it was coming from the tallest peak in the highlands. He wondered what the old man was concerned about. At that distance, it must have been quite a bonfire for Ben to have seen it, but still nothing able to threaten their small cottage.

The old man set about his activities. He had hoped for more time. More time to properly address the lad’s marksmanship. More time to somehow prepare him for what was coming. He didn’t know what else he coult have done--if he had he would have done it already. All that could happen now was to act. He told Ben to grab his rifle and pistol. He took a small box from a little box on the shelf. Ben had never really noticed the box. Now he had a fistful of gleaming, silver bullets thrust at him. The old man instructed him to load with these tonight, and prepare to track.

Ben looked at the old man, questions filling his mind. He had worke with the old man for two years now, and knew him well. The old man’s face did not change, but Ben could see the change in his eyes, the wall. It was barely noticeable, but it was there.

The old man went outside and started about his evening chores. Ben was not sure why they would put the sheep in the pen while also carrying these strange bullets and going out on a night hunt. Of all the oddities of the old man, this he had never seen.

The old man went into the sheep pen, and put a lead on one of the sheep. He drove a sturdy stick into the ground, and tied the sheep to the stick. As Edward came near, the old man commanded him to guard the sheep, and turned to Ben. Ben saw the dog crouch near the wall, but his focus was immediately consumed by the old man. He noticed the old man’s hand start to raise, as if to touch his shoulder and reassure him, before quickly changing directions to reach into his pocket.

Ben barely heard the old man’s words that told him tonight’s hunt would be his most difficult yet, but could not miss the mix of hardness and fear in his voice. The old man pulled six silver bullets from his pocket, gave three to Ben, and loaded his rifle. With one last, quick look at Ben, the old man toward the woods, heading inland away from both the sea and the signal fire.

They moved quickly, not stopping to look at the ground or the sky, merely trying to cover distance. After an hour, they turned north toward the highlands, and their pace slowed somewhat. The old man was focused, like a hound on the hunt. Ben was tense with fear and curiosity, wondering what could bring about such a change in the old man’s demeanor. He wondered other things, too. He went through the list of predators they had hunted, how they had approached each, and their victories in each hunt. He began to feel more confident in their pursuit, like his training had given him whatever he needed to face this moment of unknown. But each time his confidence grew, he glanced at the old man and it withered to fear and questions.

As they crept through a small field among the trees, the old man slowed, turning his head around with his eyes closed, his nose held high. Was he smelling the air? Ben was puzzled, but focused on his training. He searched the ground, the sky, the trees, back to the ground.

There!

The largest paw print Ben had ever seen glistened in a patch of mud. He stopped still, the old man watching him.

The looked at each other for a brief moment, a question unspoken on Ben’s lips. The old man turned quickly along the track, and began loping in the direction of the beast. His pace was hurried, but patient. He moved as quickly as possible while maintaining his silence, and always his vigilance. His head first hung low, looking at the ground, the raised to the air, sniffing as he walked.

Ben watched the trail, the trees, but could not help watching the old man as well. He knew his eyes belonged elsewhere, but could not command them. Every shadow under every tree held monsters. Every rock sticking out of the ground loomed at him. His heart pounded as it never had before. The exertion brought sweat to his face, the fear brought sweat to his hands.

After another hour of tense progress, Ben’s focus was broken by the old man slowing, and by barking. He had been so focused on the chase that he had not realized they had nearly reached the cottage again, or that his hands ached for their tight grip on his rifle. Now he heard Edward, menacing as he had never heard the sweet dog snarl before.

As they crept up to the edge of the clearing around the cottage, the old man made no sounds, did not glance at Ben, only looked to be on a razor’s edge. Ben could see past the old man, the sheep still standing in the pen, and Edward focused and snarling.

Looking at what? The old man scanned the walls of the sheep pen, as Ben looked at Edward, who snarled ferociously and started to run at Ben.

The old man and Ben realized together they had been outdone. They turned as one, bringing up rifles at a darkness that made no sound. A dark blur of brown fur sprang out of the darkness at Ben, who fired reflexively, feeling the rifle recoil in his shoulder as his mind emptied of distractions and his training took over. He did not see, so much as feel the presence. It moved more than any log on a wave would move, but was also much closer. Still, it was fast, and nearly upon Ben even as he saw it.

His muzzle spoke, and the beast growled as it crashed into Ben. It’s frame was easily half again as large as Ben, and it’s speed and weight knocked him into the air before he dropped heavily to the ground. They seemed to roll together for a brief moment as Ben squeezed the trigger of his rifle again.

A yelp and snarl pierced the night as the creature continued its roll, leaping from Ben’s chest and forcing him to the ground as it jumped at the old man, it’s original target. The old man did not blink or move, but like a statue fired a shot into the beast’s chest. It staggered, but did not fall.

Ben tried to recover his feet, but could not breathe let alone stand. He struggled to take in a breath as he rolled over and looked at the man. He heard another snarl, but this one rushing at them from a new direction.

Into the fray another blur ran, colliding with the beast and dragging it to the ground. Edward had arrived, and with a jaw full hatred was clamped onto the beasts arm, attempting to drag it to the ground.

There was only a heartbeat between the first shot and the second. Only enough time for Ben to roll over and Edward to halt the advance. But that was enough for the old man. His second shot pierced the monster’s skull, and it fell to the ground with a lifeless thud.

The old man checked the monster, then quickly moved to Ben and looked him over. Ben insisted he was not hurt, only winded, as the old man examined him thoroughly. Ben was exuberant from their victory. His breath returning, he stood and shifted his gaze between the old man and the werewolf.

The old man pulled at a bloody rip near the ankle of Ben’s trousers. He stood and looked at Ben, who beamed with the first truly difficult victory of youth. Ben recounted the evening in his mind--the signal fire, the hurried tracking, and old man’s odd ways, the decoy and the dog, the shots from each of them that had wounded and killed the beast. Memories of his training filled his head as he began to understand why a man would need to track differently when hunting such dangerous prey.

All of the pieces of the last two years fell into place in his mind, including the apprentices who villagers had assumed lost at sea or worse. The townspeople could not even begin to imagine how much worse the apprentices’ ends likely were. As this thought struck him, Ben felt a pang of regret for their unknown sacrifices, and a connection to them immediately that felt as strong as any kinship. He also felt a certain pride at having succeeded where they had failed. He ashamedly tried to squash this, but it simultaneously gave him heart to turn back to the rest of the task at hand. As he looked at the old man’s face, he wondered how eyes that had survived so much, eyes that housed a soul so competently lethal and eyes of a man who must have won such amazing victories could yet appear so sad.

He thought of all of the people that would not know of their efforts, of their hard-fought win this night. He thought of all of the people who did not know the danger that nearly was upon them, and thought a brief and selfish sadness that was quickly swallowed again by his jubilence and pride.

The old man sent Ben to the house to retrieve a blanket, while he himself gathered some iron rings. Together they grabbed the werewolf and rolled it into the blanket. As Ben examined it, he felt something amiss. Something was odd that he could not place. Sure, werewolves were not real in the first place, but it was deeper than that. The creature had legs that were more human than wolf, made to run long distances. It’s hands were a strange mix of hands and paws, but with claws that looked like they should have been able to rip through a wooden door. As Ben worked the werewolf around, it came to him--the hair.

The creature had hair everywhere. It was more hair and hair in more places than any man or even beast would have. It had hair on the soles of its feet and the palms of its hands, bristling around nostrils and ears that could barely be seen. It was long, brown, thick, and furry. He did not have long to gaze and wonder at this before they had wrapped it in the blanket.

They each hoisted an end of the blanket, and began the difficult journey down to the boat. Ben wondered why they went to the sea at a time like this, rather than burying or burning the corpse. But to the sea they went, giving Ben yet another surprise this night. They paddled, not to the fishing grounds, or down the southern shoreline, but directly away from the shore toward the treacherous depths that all boats knew to avoid.

It was here, the old man told him, that they would ensure this beast never walked the earth again. From these forbidden depths, no hand would inadvertently disturb their kill. The fish would finish the work the two men had begun. With that, they tied the iron rings to the blanket and heaved the load into the water. It hit with a splash, rocked the boat, and within a minute was out of sight. The stretch of salt and waves had swallowed it, showing no sign that anything was ever amiss.

As he watched the moon dance on the waves, Ben barely noticed the old man’s hand slip into his pocket. He saw a brief flash of silvery light, perhaps the moon on the waves.

Ben turned his attention back toward the man, wondering what type of celebration this evening deserved. Ben favored Brandy after a cool evening, but wondered with what the old man savored his victories.

Seeing the old man begin to raise his rifle, Ben’s blood came alive again as he quickly turned to see what danger was behind him. Seeing nothing, he turned back to the old man, and they locked eyes. Ben saw a tear form in the old man’s eye, his mind racing with questions as he absent-mindedly scratched an unfamiliar itch in the palm of his hand.