

Big Heid an ither Ewen stories by Elizabeth Cordiner

Big Heid

Cousin George

Heroes

Ewen, the Clouds an the Bone

The Real Thing

Aye

Faultless

Ewen an the Loose End

Big Heid

Ewen was examinin his heid in the mirror abune the fireplace. His mum had telt him that it was 'stappit fu'.

It didnae look fu to him. It looked pretty ordinary, no too big, no too wee. He kent whit she meant, though. She meant his heid wis fu of knowledge.

But there wis a lot tae ken, and no only on the island. The hale world wis fu o things ye wanted tae ken about. Whales, for example, an mountains, the names o planets, rivers, as weel as kings an queens o lang ago, or flags o different countries. Information. And then there were the stories, the sangs, the poems aboot thunderin hoofs in the forests an galleons in the mighty sea.

Ye kept it a' in yer heid.

Jimmy fae the black hoose had a big heid. But that was juist Jimmy. He had big ears anaw.

Jimmy kent things. He kent whaur the rabbit burrows were, he kent the length o a weasel, he kent the names o a' the birds, moths, an butterflies in Whinnie.

An Jimmy was a guid pal. He didnae try tae get his ain wey a' the time.

He didnae think that he wis the best. He didnae talk a' the time, like

Kenneth McKay.

Ye could rely on Jimmy. If ye tied a rope around a log, Jimmy wid pu it a' the wey hame for ye.

In return, ye wid help Jimmy when he wis stuck wi his readin.

Jimmy had trouble wi his readin. The words got a' mixed up, he'd say.

Ewen didnae really understaund it. Tae him, words were perfect, and placed perfectly. They sparkled, clean, bricht, sittin on a page like stars in the sky. But when Jimmy read oot loud in class, his hauns twisted thegither as the words danced an tangled, mangled up an without sense. He'd telt Ewen when they were checkin the beach thegither.

Jimmy wis interested, like Ewen, in makin things, an the shores o the island yielded up constant treasures, driftwood, auld tyres, bits o plastic. Wance, they had made a cartie thegither, an ran it doon Baldie brae tae the wee shop.

'Haud ticht,' Ewen had shouted, an he had scraped the leather fae the sides o his shoes, tryin tae brake it. Jimmy and he had taken turns each for nearly a hale week afore the cartie struck a wa an bent its wheels.

They had made a rope swing thegither, a telescope, even a tent fae auld raincoats, ower the lang summer holidays.

When Jimmy wisnae at schule for a few days, Ewen missed him, an

expected he had his sair chest again. Jimmy wis prone to this. But his mither sat him doon on the Friday nicht, and telt him,

‘Jimmy’s in hospital, Ewen. He’s no sae guid this time.’

Jimmy had been taken ower tae the mainland by ambulance, and his faither had gone wi him, for Jimmy had lived wi his faither since Ewen could remember, juist the twa o them.

‘Ye can see him when he comes hame,’ Ewen’s mither said, ‘Only faimily at the hospital.’

And Ewen knew that that was richt. Still, he’d hae liked to hae seen him.

‘Nae phonecalls yet,’ said his dad. And nae letter, thought Ewen, wha wouldnae be there to help Jimmy read it.

He wondered hoo Jimmy would be in the big hospital, Jimmy wha spent his life oot of doors, Jimmy wha kent the names o a’ the wild things, Jimmy wha wis tae lie still in bed till wha kent when.

Ewen wis sittin by the shore, one mornin, watchin the waves roll in and oot, when he got the idea.

He picked up a stane, then began walkin along the path tae schule. His heid bent low, he looked carefully at the grund. By the time he got to the playground, his pooches were stappit fu.

When Jimmy’s faither came hame at the weekend, Ewen’s mither

visited. She took wi her, as well as a fish pie for supper, a parcel, and when she left, she asked Jimmy's dad tae gie the parcel to Jimmy.

'When ye go back tae the hospital. It's fae Ewen.'

Jimmy was 'improvin,' Ewen's mither reported back tae Ewen, 'but his dad says he's no sleepin or eatin weel. He's fair missin the island.'

When Jimmy opened Ewen's parcel, he found, carefully wrapped in tissue paper, in the cardboard box whaur Ewen had put them, the feathers, the stanes, the shells, the sma bones, the shed snakeskin, the bits o green gless, smoothed and polished by the waves, that had the scents o the island still upon them.

Jimmy's dad told Ewen's mum that he smelled them a', and then closed his een, a stane clutched in wan haun, and slept deeply. When he awoke, he ate a hale sandwich, and then he placed everythin fae the box carefully on tap o his locker.

'Everythin,' said Jimmy's dad. Efter inspectin them, of coorse. Ewen kent withoot a shadow o a doot that Jimmy would inspect them, so he could ken a' aboot them. An he wid keep that knowledge, wi a' the rest that was in his big heid, tae share wi Ewen when he at last cam hame.

Cousin George

George, fae Glasgow, had come to Whinnie tae stey. For a visit. George had visited wance afore. Ewen remembered that then his cousin had frowned a lot. George wis still frownin. He looked permanently, said Ewen's mither, as if somewan had stolen his scone.

In Whinnie, the sea wis too wet for George, the wind too cauld, and the sky too bare.

Glasgow had everythin, shops, cars, entertainment, an George didnae mind sayin so. Often.

Ewen tried hard tae help George tae enjoy himsel. He introduced him tae Neil an the bike gang, but George had seen bigger skateboards, an had a bigger bike than Neil's at hame. He rode it in a big park. Ewen kent that he didnae need a park in which tae play. The hale island wis his park, an it had nae fence or gate, nor did it shut doon efter teatime. Puir George, thocht Ewen.

Ewen took George tae meet Jimmy. Jimmy showed him hoo tae cook in the open. George burned his finger an complained.

'He's a richt saftie, is he no?' said Jimmy.

Puir George, thocht Ewen.

When Jimmy showed him the seals, hooever, George perked up.

'They're real?' he asked.

Puir George, thocht both Jimmy an Ewen.

George said he had the very latest games, an the very biggest bedroom in Glasgow. He seemed to sit in it a lot, thocht Ewen, playin his games a' by himsef. He didnae seem tae dae much else. An there was so much else tae dae.

The island wis fu of things that ye could dae. Ye could walk tae the harbour tae see Colin and Murdo bring in the catch in their boat, the Mary Margaret. Ye could look for sea eagles abune the cliffs. Ye could find treasures washed up on the shore. Ye could hide in the wuid. An then there were the rockpools tae explore, the dunes an the creatures that lived there. Ewen showed George his island, whaur tae find the wee hidden creatures, an hoo tae use a magnifyin glass tae see the patterns on a butterfly's wing. Ewen's magnifyin glass had belonged to his dad, an afore that, tae his granddad. It wis sma, but satisfyingly heavy, wi a silver haundle. Ewen had had it for as lang as he could remember. It went everywhere wi him in his pooch.

When it went missin, he thocht that he must hae drapped it. Jimmy and he had been workin on the raft the day afore, an it micht hae fallen oot o his pooch.

He searched awfy hard, and then searched again when he got hame.

George didnae seem too bothered.

'Never mind,' his dad said.

'It's only a magnifyin glass.'

But he had looked disappointed, and Ewen had felt a stab o pain, as if he had let his dad doon.

An he missed the magnifyin glass. He couldnae see the teeny wee insects that burrowed intae the driftwood on the sand, or read marks on the pottery pieces washed up on the shore.

He hadnae realised hoo mony times he used it in his day-to-day life on the island, an he bitterly regretted his carelessness.

When it wis time for George tae go hame, Ewen went up tae his room to see if he was ready. The door wis open, an Ewen could see clearly that George wis lookin at a fly.....through his magnifyin glass.

When George heard him at the door, he jumped and hid the glass ablow the coverlet.

Ewen asked if he wis ready, then sat doon on the bed.

He said slowly,

'Huv ye enjoyed yersel, George?'

'Aye.'

'And did ye enjoy ma magnifyin glass?'

George looked up at Ewen, an his face coloured. He drapped his een.

‘Ah wis gaun tae gie it back,’ he said.

‘It wis only fur a loan.

‘Here.’

He uncovered the magnifyin glass an haunded it tae Ewen.

Ewen took it an pit it in his pooch. It felt guid.

‘Sure,’ he said.

‘Nae bother.’

That nicht, Ewen sat at the table wi his mum an dad, eatin his mum’s hot buttered scones, an thinkin about George, George wha wis noo back in Glasgow, George wha said he had everythin, but really had awfy little.

Nae pals like Jimmy, Neil, or wee Archie.

Nae links tae the seals, the birds, the wee silver fish, that were in Ewen’s wide world.

Nae proper hamemade fun.

And nae magnifyin glass tae mak his world mair understaundable.

Puir George.

Ewen wouldnae swap the island for a thousand superstores and giant multiplexi screens.

An maybe, he thocht, George wis beginnin tae realise that bein bigger wisnae ayeways better – even if ye had a magnifyin glass.

Heroes

Ewen's dad had been on the rigs for as lang as Ewen could remember. But this wis the langest time he had been awa. An Ewen could hae done wi his dad's advice. Aboot wee Archie.

It had started wi Assembly. The twa classes had been thegither in the hall and Miss McDonald had been talkin aboot heroes. A hero, she had said, is someone ye look up tae, someone ye rely on, someone wha does wonderfu things, someone wha maks things better. She said everyone had to go awa an think o a hero, someone in a story - like Captain Jack, Ewen supposed - or in real life. Then, next time, they would talk aboot the chosen heroes.

When the Assembly wis ower, the wee wans went oot of the hall first. When Archie went past Ewen, he waved and grinned. Anither tooth missin, Ewen noticed. He waved back.

At break time, wee Archie wis waitin for Ewen. He offered Ewen a sweetie, an they stood companionably together. Archie had begun to staund with Ewen every day. Ewen wondered if Archie had ony freends at a'. He had never seen him play wi onywan his ain age. Maybe that's what Archie shid be doin. Instead of staundin wi him.

'Did ye see me at the Assembly? Aboot the heroes?' Archie asked.

'Aye,' said Ewen.

Archie sooked on his boiled sweetie.

Then, 'Ah'd like fine tae be a hero,' he said, 'jist like Superman. Or you.'

'Me?'

Ewen wis astonished.

'Ye're jokin me. Ah'm nae hero.'

Archie said naethin, then, as the bell rang,

'See ye efter, Ewen.'

See ye efter. Ewen sighed.

Goin hame that day, alang Red Road, Ewen saw ahead twa o the wee wans. They were playin thegither. He recognised the twins, George an Hamish. Then he saw Archie. Waitin for him. Again. On his ain.

'Gaun watch me run tae the big tree,' said Archie.

'See if ah'm gettin as fast as you.'

Ewen watched him. George and Hamish had stopped, and were watchin anaw. Archie was getting faster, he thocht, an as he ran tae tell him so, he heard, faintly but unmistakably, the soond o a bark. It was Puggy's odd wee soond. Nae doot aboot it. Nae ither dug barked like Puggy. But whaur wis the wee thing?

He looked aroond. The soond wis comin fae ahent him. Fae a rabbit

hole.

Ewen bent doon tae the sma hole as Archie arrived.

‘Whit is it, Ewen? Whit huv ye fund?’

‘It’s Puggy, ah think.’

Ewen peered into the hole. He could juist see Puggy’s heid.

He ca’d his name, an the dug, ears twitchin, tried tae move towards him.

His paws scrabbled furiously. Then Ewen realised. Puggy wis stuck in the hole.

‘Whit will we dae, Ewen?’

Archie’s een were big.

Ewen thocht for a moment, then lay on his stomach and stretched his arms intae the hole. He felt his hauns close aroond Puggy’s hairy heid.

The dug whimpered.

Ewen gripped and pu’ed gently. Puggy wis still stuck.

He shifted slightly on his stomach and tried again. Naethin.

Then he heard Archie ca’in tae George an Hamish.

‘C’moan, boys. Ah’ve goat an idea.’

Three pairs o hauns fastened aroond Ewen’s ankles, an pu’ed. As Ewen went backwards, Puggy wis shot oot of the hole like a cork fae a bottle.

‘Weel done!’ said Ewen to Archie, as he held a shiverin Puggy.

‘Ye’re a richt wee hero.’

Next day, at break, Ewen stood by the wa. Archie wis usually waitin, but the day Archie wis no there.

Then he saw him runnin towards him.

‘Ewen,’ said Archie, ‘Ah’m no steysin the day, but ah’m no wantin ye tae think ah’ve forgotten ye. We’re still pals. It’s jist that, weel, George and Hamish asked me tae play wi them. They need me fur ideas. We’re playin at heroes.’

Ewen hid a smile.

‘Och, that’s fine, Archie. Ah’m here, mind, ony time ye want a blether. On ye go.’

They smacked palms, and Ewen turned tae meet Jimmy, while Archie ran towards his pals.

Things had turned oot weel, efter a’. On their ain. Funny really.

His dad wis his hero.

He himsel had been Archie’s hero.

And noo wee Archie wis George’s and Hamish’s hero.

Everybody, it seemed, needed a hero.

Tae help them through.

Juist like Puggy .

Ewen, the Clouds an the Bone

Ewen had loved watchin clouds for as lang as he could remember, certainly lang afore he kent the names for the various formations.

The island skies were wide, like windaes withoot curtains, he thocht, no like the wans in the hoose that his mither kept sae spick an span.

There wis ayeweys plenty tae see on the island, an as Ewen walked to and fae schule each day, plenty tae think about.

The skies seemed tae ask questions,

‘Hoo big is the world, hoo important am ah, whit’s it a’ aboot?’

The jewel-bricht frogs and lacy-winged moths he saw in the grasses as he walked seemed to be somehow joined wi the skies, and so wis he.

As he walked, he said under his breath the cloud names,

cumulonimbus, altostratus, stratocumulus, cirrus,

an his steps matched their rhythms.

It was on sic a day o clouds that Ewen fund the bone. It wis stickin oot fae a sand dune, and he examined it.

He’d fund bones afore – a’ the island fowk had. This was no an animal’s skull, or a breastbone, or a long thigh bone. He had a’ of them. There

wis naebody else aroond. He’d been the last wan tae leave the

schule. He hunkered doon, gently liftin it, dustin awa the saft white sand,

an oot the hale thing came.

It wis part o a jaw-bone. He could see a tooth, quite a large wan. This wis extremely interestin. He pit it ablow his airm an whistled as he walked hame.

When his dad wis hame fae the rigs, he wid show him his find.

His dad understood special finds. His mum wis less keen.

Maybe bones were mair o a man's thing, he thocht, like fast cars.

He went oot efter his tea, an took the bone wi him. Ye never knew, he nicht find anither bit.

As he walked wi it under his airm, he saw Liam. Liam wis instantly recognisable, shufflin through the scrub, comin towards him.

Liam lived wi his granny. He didnae go tae Ewen's schule. He wis too big. Or to Ewen's church. He helped oot in the garage.

Liam had a sma heid, wi thick broos. He had a squat body, yet long airms an big haunds. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, and as he came closer, Ewen could see the coarse black hairs on his foreairms. Ewen sensed danger, an kept his airm firmly aroond the bone.

'Whit huv ye got there?'

Liam wis blockin the path.

'Let me see, then.'

The big airms were reachin out.

'C'moan, gies it.'

His fingers were on the bone, an he tried tae wrest it fae ablow Ewen's airm. Ewen held on mair tichtly, but Liam gave a mighty pu', an the bone wis his.

He grinned, drappin his heid tae look at it, an Ewen felt a rage rise up in him.

He shouted, an threw himself on Liam, still yellin.

They fell backwards on tae the sand, wi Ewen on tap, pantin and pu'in, sand and grit a'where as they struggled.

Suddenly Liam rolled awa, got up, an wiped his airm across his neb.

'It's only a stupid bone,' he said, an he spat on the grund.

'Ye can huv it.'

Ewen picked up the bone fae whaur it lay.

It had hit a boulder, broken, an the tooth had come awa.

He pit the tooth safely in his pooch, an retraced his steps hame.

His neb wis bleedin, and his knee hurt fae whaur he had scraped it.

But he still had his bone.

His mither alternately scolded and babied him, but she took the bone an dighted it gently wi a cloth.

That nicht, Ewen pit the broken bone on tap o his dresser, next to the globe o the world. He had inspected it closely efter the fight.

So it wisnae quite the same shape ony mair? It had changed.

Well, so did mony things. Clouds, for example. They changed. A' the time. But they were still clouds, an the jawbone was still absolutely magic.

He sat on the bed in his pyjamas. His knee wis throbbin, but he had a job tae dae.

There wis a hole in the tooth, an Ewen carefully threaded it onto a string an hung it aroond his neck.

It could be a shark's tooth, he thocht. That wid be juist great, an he'd be able tae hae the magic wi him a' the time.

No a bad day really, he decided.

He'd stood up for himsel, an kept his prize.

No a bad day at a'.

That nicht, the moon shone through the windae o his bedroom, an the stars twinkled.

A wind blew the sand on the shore, exposin another part o the dug's jawbone that Ewen had fund. But Ewen slept deeply, his trophy tooth aroond his neck, an dreamed o swimmin wi sharks in the blue sea, while the white cumulonimbus clouds danced across the skies.

The next day, a cauld day wi a sky fu o dark clouds, Ewen wis wearin

the tooth around his neck when he met the gang.

There were fower o them in the gang, an they were a' in the square by the post office. Neil Duncan, the dentist's son, wis their leader.

They met in Neil's dad's shed, and were often to be seen on their cycles, pedallin in a lang, straight line doon the island roads.

Like flyin geese in formation, thought Ewen, only not in a V-shape.

Like the geese, they honked their horns anaw.

Neil liked bein a leader, Ewen thocht. He liked shoutin wi his loud voice, and when he shouted, which he did a lot, the sun glittered aff his braces.

Today, the gang were no on their bikes. Neil had a skateboard, an they were a' watchin him showin it aff. Ewen stopped an watched anaw.

'Go, go, Neiley,' chanted the gang, punchin the air.

Neily wisnae goin too weel, thocht Ewen. In fact, he himsel could probably do better. Neil fell aff a lot.

When he fell again, legs in the air, after attemptin a twirlie, Ewen couldnae hide his laugh.

Neil came ower.

'Naethin better tae dae?'

He looked at Ewen's woolly jumper.

'Awa hame. Yer maw'll need ye tae help her wi her knittin.'

The gang sniggered.

Neil rocked on his heels, and pit his face close tae Ewen's.

'Ah'll bet ye've never been oan a skateboard afore. Huv ye?'

Ewen shook his heid.

The gang sniggered again.

'Goan, then,' said Neil. 'Hae a try,'

and they a' settled back, ready for a laugh.

But Ewen had seen skateboarders afore on television, proper skateboarders, no this collection o wid-bes. He'd hurled doon braes mony a time wi his cartie when he himsel was wee.

He took his time, balanced first, wobblin.

Neil guffawed.

Then he slowly began tae move, picked up speed, an began tae use his weight tae guide an steer. He went twice around the square, an stopped in front o the group.

It had fa'en silent.

'Hoo did ye dae that turn?'asked Neil.

Ewen showed him, an Neil tried it oot.

'Ye're no bad,' said Neil.

When Ewen left, he had invitations tae jine them at ony time. Neil had noticed his shark's tooth. There wis admiration in his eyes. His braces glinted.

Sharks never had braces, Ewen thocht, but then sharks never had

dentists for faithers.

He wondered if he had enough money in his bank for a skateboard.

Maybe no. But he did hae a pair of roller skates. They'd dae. Till he could afford the real thing.

He whistled as he went tae the shed.

First, there wis the shark's tooth. Then the skateboard.

Life wis pretty guid.

An his teeth were straight.

The Real Thing

Ewen wis walkin hame. Jimmy an he had had a guid mornin on the cliff tops, an he was deep in thocht, rememberin whit they had seen and done. He wis close tae the village when the sudden soond o a horn broke the silence.

‘Ewen! Haw, Ewen!’

Neil, standin upright on his bike, wis pedallin towards him at speed.

Neil skidded to a halt inches fae Ewen’s neb. He wis grinnin, his mooth wide. He wiped his neb wi his airm.

‘Did ye think ah widnae stop? Bet ye were scared, eh?’

‘Ah can stop this bike oan a 5p piece. Ah’ve goat total control.

There’s no mony can dae that.’

Ewen studied Neil.

He wis wearing a short black leather jacket, an a black t-shirt wi ‘Wild One’ printed on it.

He had chain bracelets on his wrist, a thick studded belt around his waist, and on his feet, a pair o black and silver boots. His hair wis slicked back an shiny.

‘Ye’re lookin awfy---’

Ewen searched for a word.

'Wicked, eh?' Neil said wi satisfaction.

'Ye're lookin at a real biker.'

He jangled his bracelets.

'Ah've been cruisin aroond. Burnin some rubber. Ye ken?

He hooked his thumbs in his belt, an spat on the grund.

'Whit huv you been daein, Ewen?'

'Ah've been bird watchin, said Ewen, 'wi Jimmy.'

Ye micht like it, Neil. We saw ---'

Neil interrupted.

'Did ye notice onythin different? Wi ma racin' bike?'

He pinte.

Ewen looked. Neil's bike seemed as usual, the blue an purple flash painted on the side, wi Neil's name in red, the horn, amplified so that ye could hear it half way across the island. But there wis somethin new.

At the rear o the bike wis a metal pole, like an aerial, and on tap o the pole, a flag.

The flag showed a large bird wi a moose in its claws. There were drops o blood comin fae the sharp talons.

'See ma eagle? Ah hud tae send awa fur it. Ordered it special, like.

It's wan o the biggest. Real biker stuff.'

He wis pattin the pole as he spoke. Like clappin a dug, Ewen thocht.

'The rod fur the flag fits intae that wee clip there, juist abune the wheel.

Great, eh? There's naebody on the island got ane o thae.'

'Ah didnae ken ye liked eagles,' said Ewen.

'Jimmy ----'

Neil interrupted again.

'It's the picter ah like. Dae ye no see whit it's about?'

He gien Ewen a pityin look.

'It's aboot , it's aboot---'

He tried again.

'It's aboot bein strong, winnin an victory an—.' He stopped, strugglin, 'an a' that.'

A further thocht struck him, an he smiled.

'Ah've goat the eagle on ma pendant tae.'

He pu'ed oot a silver chain fae the neck o his t-shirt. At the end o the chain wis a lozenge-shaped pendant showin a bird in flight.

Ewen thocht the bird looked mair like an albatross than an eagle, but

Neil seemed happy wi it.

'An look, Ewen, ah've goat it oan ma belt buckle anaw.'

He pinted tae his waist whaur anither eagle flew.

Ewen thocht that Neil wid be a bit weighed doon wi his pendant an his heavy buckle wi the sticky-out wings.

But he nodded, and Neil seemed satisfied.

'Well, hae tae go. Finish ma run. This baby's rarin tae go. Seeya,'

an he jumped onto the saddle o his bike, makin vroom vroom noises.

As he rode aff, peepin his horn, the pole bounced aboot, makin the big flag move up and doon, so that the eagle's claws seemed tae seize the moose ower and ower again.

It wis efter teatime that nicht, efter Ewen had had his favourite fish pie, that he saw Neil again. Darkness was no far awa when the bike once mair came towards him as he walked.

Neil dismounted, an began tae walk wi him. His face wis streaked wi tears.

'Whit's up?' asked Ewen.

'Look!'

Neil gestured tae his bike.

'Ma flagpole. Ah've loast it.'

'Whaur aboot?' asked Ewen.

Neil shrugged his shooders.

'Ah went fur a run, doon tae the harbour, intae the toon, an then through the wuid, but ah've looked near a'where ah wis. There's nae sign o it.'

'Whaur hae ye no looked?'

Neil wiped his neb.

'In the wuid.'

'It could be there,' said Ewen.

'You'll hae gone ower a stane or a bit o tree. C'moan, ah'll go wi ye.'

Neil looked unsure.

'We'll no see.'

'Naw, ah've goat a torch,' said Ewen.

'Here!'

He gave it to Neil.

'You can go first wi it. You ken whaur ye've been.'

'Naw. You go first,' said Neil.

An he handed the torch tae Ewen.

They walked slowly through the wuid, Neil followin Ewen, an wheelin his bike. It wis beginnin tae get dark, an Ewen needed the torch. Neil wis richt behind him. Ewen felt a tap on his shooder.

He turned. Neil's eyes shone in the torch licht, an the braces on his teeth glinted.

'Ewen,' he said.

'Let's go hame.'

'Ah thocht ye wanted tae look fur yer pole?' Ewen said.

'Naw.'

There wis a silence.

Suddenly Ewen understood.

Neil wis feard.

'We'll try again in the mornin. Nae bother,' he said.

'Jist follow me back tae the road.'

When they parted, Neil didnae meet Ewen's een.

'See ye in the mornin,' said Ewen.

Ewen had a lot tae think about as he walked hame.

Next mornin, when Neil didnae appear, Ewen set off on his ain.

He wis walkin along the cliff path when he saw it. It was in the bushes ablow the path. He could see the pole shinin in the sunlight.

He bent doon, stretched his airm, and when he had the tap o it in his haun, he gien it a slicht pu'.

It seemed tae be stuck, so he pu'ed again.

It came awa, but the pu'ing had made him lose his balance. His feet slipped on the wet path, and he felt himself fa'.

The sides o the path were rocky, wi thick grass an moss, an led tae the sand an the cauld island waters.

For an instant Ewen felt fear, then somethin seemed to happen. He felt gripped, righted, an the sun overhead wis darkened for a moment by a great shadow. He opened his een. He was standin quite upright on the path, the flagpole in his haun.

There wis nae sign o ony helper. Had it really happened? He didnae ken.

The sky wis clear, but as he looked, he caught sight o the white tail o a huge sea eagle as it flew tae its nest on the furthest clifftop.

Ewen walked back tae the village wi the flagpole in his haund.

He wid tell Jimmy that he kent noo whaur the sea eagle they had been watchin had its nest.

He wid gie Neil the flagpole wi the pretend eagle on it.

Neil wid be pleased.

Ewen preferred the real thing.

Aye

'Naw. Ah'm no gaun.'

'Aw, c'moan'.

'Naw. Ah dinnae want tae.'

'But---'

'Naw. Ah'm tellin ye!'

Ewen looked at Jamesy. His face wis set in a rebellious frown.

'Ye cannae mak me.'

Ewen opened his mooth tae try wance mair.

'Naw, naw, naw! Ah'm no gaun wi ye. Never again.'

Ewen sighed. It wis up tae him then. They had a' said the same, includin

Brucey,

'Nae wey,'

an Billy,

'Ye're jokin. Efter last time?'

an Robert,

'Ma maw'll no let me.'

So, wi Jimmy awa on holiday, Ewen wis on his ain.

It seemed that naebody wanted tae help him look efter Jasmine.

An, truth tae tell, he wisnae too shair either.

Jasmine wis Mima's dochter, and Mima wis his mum's cousin.

Whenever she visited, Jasmine came anaw. Jasmine had been a cute wee toddler, but these days, weel, Ewen had nae words.

'They're comin the morn,' his mum had said.

'Keep an eye on her, Ewen.

Tak care o' her,' and his mum had laid a haun on his airm.

'Tak her oot tae play.'

Ewen had taken her oot tae play afore.

He kent whit that meant. An so did everywan else.

Jasmine had her dungarees on. Her feet were in combat boots, an her hair swung in twa braids.

Her een were sparklin when they left the hoose, and they continued that way a' efternoon.

They went doon tae the wuid, Jasmine ahead,

'Ewen, c'moan. Are ye chicken? We'll go up that tree. It's the biggest.

Hing on!

and tae the waterfa' that scooshed into the burn,

'Ewen, c'moan, get yer feet wet. Slide doon wi' me. Woo-hoo!

and tae the auld mill,

'Ewen, c'moan, we can get on tae the roof. It's lovely an high, eh?'

When they came tae the wa that ran between the mill and the shed, Jasmine stopped for a moment, considered it, then swung her legs ower the tap. For a moment she hung, suspended, then, as a stane wis dislodged by her graspin fingers, she fell.

That's it noo, thought Ewen. Broken airm, plaster, the lot.

When he ran ower, she wis on her side, her artificial leg stickin up in the air.

She got up, fastened it back intae place, and said,

'Oh, that wis braw. Did ye see me? Ah nearly did it.'

When they went back tae the hoose, Mima looked at her dochter.

'Wis that fun?' she asked.

Ye'll hae had a guid time.'

She turned to Ewen's mum.

'She says aye tae everythin', she said fondly, 'don't ye, Jasmine?'

'Thanks, Ewen. She'll remember this efter we go tae Africa. Ah've been tellin yer mum about it. Ah'm gaun tae nurse there. Jasmine's lookin forward tae it, a' thae rivers an animals.'

Jasmine nodded, her een shinin again.

'Woo-hoo!' she said.

Ewen chewed slowly as they had their tea.

Whit had the day been about? Keepin Jasmine safe?

And wha, he thocht, wi a smile, wid keep Africa safe?

Fae Jasmine?

Faultless

Ewen pit a dollop o broon sauce onto his chips. He liked his mum's chips. They were ayeways long an fat. He speared wan thochtfully, rememberin.

It had been wet that day. Everyone had had to stay inside schule durin mornin interval. He had been on his wey back tae his classroom efter takin a message tae Big Bill ,the janitor, when he had passed the open door o the wee wans' room, an stopped tae look in. It wis anither, yet familiar, world in there.

The wee wans were busy playin. Sandy wis buildin a brick tower, an Jackie and Gordon were doin a jigsaw.

He could see Mrs. McGregor in a corner, readin a story tae some o the wee lassies. Cheyenne McLeod wis engrossed as she picked her neb, Maggie Morrison almost in Mrs. McGregor's lap, her thumb in her mooth. Ewen had once sat in that very same corner. Mrs McGregor wis great at stories.

He looked aroond the room. Whaur wis Archie?

Archie wis staunding ower at the windae wi his pals, the twins, George and Hamish. He was haudin a ba, wan o thae big bouncy ones.

Suddenly Archie pit the ba doon, an kicked it.

It shot up, knocked doon Sandy's tower, and hit the windae, scatterin big bits o gless a' ower the flair.

The three wee boys stood motionless, frozen.

Mrs. McGregor wis on her feet straight awa, an ower tae the crime scene.

'Richt,' said Mrs. McGregor. 'Wha did this? Wha's at faut?'

Archie, George and Hamish looked at wan anither, then at the same time, they a' said,

'Me.'

There wis a silence, they looked at each ither again, then Archie stepped forrit.

'Naw, boys,' he said, 'Ah'm at faut. You're, you're----.'

He struggled for the word.

Then his face brightened.

'Fautless,' he said, squarin his wee shoulders.

'You're fautless.'

Ewen wiped some egg fae his chin. He could hear the wind outside, but he wis warm and cosy.

His mind went back again.

It had still been rainin when he had visited Granny Robertson efter schule. Granny Robertson had poor eyesicht, an loved to have someone read to her.

She had chosen a book o poems.

Ewen had begun well,

The ballad of Sir Patrick Spens.

'The King sits in Dunfermline town

Drinking the blude-red wine

O whaur will I get a skeely skipper

To sail this new ship of mine?'

It wis a lang poem, and he had been at the part about the deadly storm when he had stumbled an Granny Robertson had touched his airm.

'Ye're wrang, Ewen,' she had told him, then had recited it, word for word.

She had it a' off by heart.

Fautless.

He finished the last o the chips.

They were juist magic.

Fautless wis a great word, he thought.

So wis peerless.

Captain Jack wis peerless. Withoot equal. Nane better.

And then there wis priceless. Withoot price. So wonderfu ye couldnae

buy it.

Like the island when the sun rose first thing in the mornin.

He buttered a piece o breid.

'Dae I hae ony fauts?' he asked his mum.

'Aye,' she said.

'Ye dinnae pit the tap back on the sauce bottle efter ye've shaken it,'

and she laughed. 'That's a'.'

Ewen dipped his breid intae the last o the yolk.

He wisnae fautless, he kent.

But his mum's chips an eggs were.

Ewen an the Loose End

Ewen wis at a loose end. At least, that's whit his dad ca'ed it. Ewen kent whit his dad meant. A loose end wis a loose threid, wan no tied or attached, and he wis like that today. He hadnae tae be onywhere special, naebody needed him, an he could dae whit he wanted.

He wis at a loose end.

He could go oot or stey in.

He could climb a tree or read a book.

He could feel the wind on his face or curl up, cosy, by the fire.

As he pondered, there wis a knock at the door. He opened it to find Jimmy.

'Ah'm at a loose end,' said Jimmy, 'are you?'

A weak sun wis gildin the branches as they walked through the wuid thegither. Yellow an broon leaves were coverin the grund. Chestnut cases lay in clusters on the damp soil, an they could smell the wetness o the earth. A hedgehog wis slowly crossin the path ahead. As Ewen moved his heid, he felt he was a camera, snap, snap, puttin the picters in his memory, whaur he could find them an look at them later.

They walked tae a bend in the path. Whaur a big oak tree had stood afore the gales, there was noo a stump. The damaged tree had been cut

awa. Flattened an smoothed, the stump looked like a tabletop.

Jimmy jumped up and stood on it, then lay on his stomach, stretchin oot his airms.

‘Ah’m a superhero, flyin tae save the world,’ he said.

‘You be wan anaw, Ewen.’

‘No me,’ said Ewen. ‘It’s ma day aff. C’moan, let’s go an hae an ice-cream at Gianni’s.’

Gianni’s café, at the centre o the village, had been there for as lang as Ewen could remember. He liked the way it looked. He liked the outside o it, white, wi a design abune the door o a sun wi rays comin oot o it. He liked the inside o it, the green plastic chairs an the chrome trim around the ice-cream bar.

As the shop bell clanged, Gianni came oot from the back.

Gianni had wavy white hair, hair that never moved, no maitter whit the weather, a lined broon face an black button een.

‘Ah, the twa bambini,’ he said.

Gianni had a wife, Lucia, and a mither, Olivia, wha lived wi them.

Gianni’s son Luigi, his big boy, as he ca’ed him, wis studyin in Glasgow, but he would visit an help sometimes in the café.

When Luigi helped in the café there wid be music, and sometimes he would sing to the customers, 'O Sole Mio,' and the wan about Sorrento that made Ewen's mother dab her een.

Jimmy and Ewen could never decide whit ice-cream tae choose fae Gianni's menu. He had a large selection, includin a concoction that wis a mixture o ice-cream, cream, fruit, syrup an chocolate sprinkles.

It was served in a tall glass, and ye needed a special lang spune tae get tae the bottom o the tumbler.

Heaven must be like that, Ewen thocht.

When Gianni brought their order, which wis toffee icecream for Ewen, an strawberry for Jimmy, they could see the tattoos on his airms. This wis another reason for comin tae Gianni's. Gianni had a tattoo o a heart wi a sword stickin into it an draps o blood comin oot. He had a tattoo o a sailin ship on stormy waves. An he had a tattoo o a snake that went a' the wey up his airm an disappeared intae his rolled-up sleeve. An noo, as he set doon the dishes, the snake's tongue seemed tae flicker an its een tae flash.

They ate every bit of their ices, an as they gien Gianni their money, Jimmy pu'ed at Ewen's arm.

'Look.'

Ewen turned his heid. Gianni's mother wis staundin at the back o the shop watchin them. She looked awfy auld an awfy fierce. She wis

dressed a' in black, an leanin on a gold-topped stick.

Her face, he thocht, wis like a walnut, a' wrinkles an folds. It looked as if she had never smiled. She lifted a thin airm an beckoned tae them.

They stood, frozen. She beckoned again. They approached her slowly.

She signed tae them tae come closer. When they were in front o her, she stretched oot her broon haun ower Ewen's, then Jimmy's, palm, and closed them baith up. She said somethin in Italian, and then she smiled.

It was amazin, thocht Ewen. A' the lines and furrows lifted, an for a moment a bright an youthfu Olivia looked oot o her een.

'She likes you,' said Gianni.

Ewen and Jimmy opened their palms when they were ootside.

She had givn them 'caramelle', Italian sweets. On each wrapper wis written, Quanto Dolce Non Fare Niente. 'How sweet it is to do nothing,' Ewen's dad would translate for them later.

They were sookin their sweets as they ran through the wuids, jumpin ower logs an big stanes. On the wey they filled their pooches wi chestnuts. The green cases were open, an they could see the shiny broon conkers inside.

'That's a big ane,' said Jimmy.

'Wonder if it'll be a sixer?'

The conkers needed tae be threaded onto strings afore they could be

used for conker competitions. A conker needed tae be hard.

Even a big conker micht split when it hit a stronger nut. A conker that had won six battles, hittin and breakin six others, wis a serious contender for the championship.

‘Haw Ewen and Jimmy!’

Neil came roond the corner on his new bike.

‘See ma bike?’ he said.

‘It’s the latest model, ye ken. Oh, aye. Ah’ve been oot practisin wheelies.’

Ewen noticed that Neil’s knees were covered in plasters.

Neil was no really a natural at sports, he thoct.

‘Been gettin yer conkers? Ah’ve got mine a’readies,’ Neil said, ‘Ah’ve got the great big anes.’

‘Huv ye?’ said Jimmy quietly.

‘Aye, ah huv.’

Neil fell silent then, an scratched his knee.

‘Whit are you twa daein the day onywey?’

‘Oh, no much,’ said Ewen.

‘We’re at a loose end. Want tae jine us?’

‘Whit? Daein nothin? No me.’

An Neil turned, jumped onto his bike an crashed through the bushes.

They could hear him for miles.

'Race ye tae the burn,' said Jimmy.

The burn wis a broon stream that ran through the wuid's edge. In autumn, it filled up wi leaves, in winter it sparkled wi ice, an wance, in summer, it had dried up completely.

When they reached the burn, the efternoon wis turnin dark, an a sheen o frost lay on the leaves.

A bird flew tae a stane in the burn, watchin for any sign o life there.

Jimmy threw a stick intae the water, an it drifted slowly awa.

The leaves crackled as they walked hame.

'Whit are ye havin fur yer tea?' asked Jimmy.

'Mince an tatties,' said Ewen.

'Ah'm haein sausages,' said Jimmy.

'Ah like sausages.'

They parted, Ewen to go wan way, Jimmy the ither.

'Seeya,' they said.

'Weel,' said Ewen's dad, 'Had a guid efternune?'

'Aye,' said Ewen.

'It wis great bein at a loose end.'