

TIN TOWN

Gavin Weston

COPPER BAY

Is it *Keehar* – is that the name of the gull in that new book, *Watership Down*? Here he is then, or one of his brothers, at least, poised on morning thermals, high above a glistening, cut-glass Irish Sea, either just for the sake of it, because he can, or simply because it is what he must do.

He is not hunting, or surveying. In fact he does not appear to be doing anything other than merely savouring the moment; hanging on the promise of the dawn. At play perhaps, or ever so mildly curious as to what this new day's rising orange orb has revealed upon the dead-flat expanse of water below.

He screeches, as a monochromatic flash of plastic and cord momentarily dips and dives before him, startling him, blocking his flight path for an instant before twisting into a downward arc, its toothy death's head motif a billowing, jittery leer which, with a gusty thwack, falls away and cuts across the bleeding flames of this awakening world. Too late, he spies the thin electric-blue cord and brushes it with the tip of an outstretched wing. He falters, but for the wisp of a moment, and with another crow torn from his enraged gullet, he too dips away towards the east, his image immolated in the burgeoning wall of morning fire.

With the snap of ribbons, the blue string pulls taut again, pointing a perfect angle to the boy and boat below. Then, as if giving in to the rising, turgid assault of light and heat, the wind simply stops dead, the skull flashing a final toothy grimace before tumbling downwards in a pirouette of plastic, cane and cord.

The boy in the little grey punt has not been paying attention. He has been elsewhere – as is his want – just now absorbed in the reconstructed Battle of Oosterbeek, Arnhem; thrilled

by the ingenuity of the Lapine leadership of Bigwig and Hazel as they struggle to resist the malevolence of General Woundwort and his allies.

Settling face down, the kite makes only a gentle splash on the barely moving water. Slack water. The sluggish heave of countless tons below. The slightest sound. The boy looks up and sees the cord buckled across shards of reflected summer light, the cruciform frame of the toy fallen like the mast of a defeated galleon. For a moment he thinks of Fletcher Christian, Captain Blythe, Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver. For a moment he is Robinson Crusoe. He glances towards the black headed gull, once again hanging on invisible skyhooks further out to sea, and wonders if it is fun to be a bird. He sets his book down next to the transom and shuffles on his knees towards the bow of the little vessel where he has tied the end of the kite string around an ancient, salty cleat. He is pleased with this kite, so perfectly balanced that it mostly flies itself. And eating into just a little of his holiday pocket money too. He unties the cord and begins to reel it in, the diamond of thin plastic lurching from the surface of the water, slapping like a damaged black wing, and then, half submerged like the fin of some great shark, it is dragged slowly towards the punt. He remembers the delicious fear of watching a huge basking shark glide beneath his father's sail boat the previous summer.

Another gull emits a throaty, rasping *skrake* and then drops towards the sea, smashing through the blue-black slick and chunks of light in search of what the local fishermen call the *silver darlin's*. The herring: silver darlin's. He loves this expression. 'In search of the silver darlin's.' But on this occasion the gull reappears with neither ling nor blocken, not to mention herring. The bird sprockles back into the air and flies off angrily towards the Ghost Rock lightship, the rusting hulk which marks the much feared hidden reefs snaking out northwards and southwards and for half a nautical mile eastwards also towards Butter Pladdy – thick with

seals – and the great watery chasm of the Beaufort Dyke. Chained forever above these treacherous black rocks, this emasculated vessel has kept vigil for longer than any living soul in Copper Bay cares to recall, its flashing red beacon a comfort to those on land and sea, the haunting laments of its foghorns this sentinel's only sad protest on greyer days than today.

The boy peers after the bird – a Lesser Black-backed gull – speeding towards the South Pladdy and its flooded folly, now eerie haunt of a colony of cormorants. The stump of this ill-planned monolith, a mile southwest of Ghost Rock, is all that is left of the lighthouse built in 1798 which, rather than protect those at sea, lured many to their peril. Ultimately the Commissioners of Irish Lights and the Beal Feirste Ballast Board had to admit that the structure had been built in the wrong place. It was abandoned in 1876 and the newly constructed lightship – freshly painted scarlet, its captor's name emblazoned on its port and starboard flanks in huge white letters – was chained in place and a small, rotating team of hardy men enlisted to tend her lantern, while that of the lighthouse was eventually stolen.

The gull encircles the craggy stump. For a moment the boy wonders if it will alight there. Then the rock itself seems to come to life, its dark surface suddenly animated by the flap and bustle of a throng of furious cormorants, and the gull, warned off, emits a defiant shriek and banks away from the colonised mass, once again heading out towards the horizon.

The boy reels in the last stretch of cord and then plucks the kite from the water. He sets it in the stern of the little dinghy and, unshipping the oars, begins to row towards the shore. The white skull, now dripping and salty, smiles up at him from the floor of the dinghy. He kicks the cord reel away from the bilge guttering with a grubby canvas shoe. He finds himself again pondering the notion that seagulls may simply like to play, then remembers that his grandfather has told him that to call these birds 'seagulls' is not in fact correct; that they are really opportunistic land birds who skulk around the shore, but would just as readily pick

the eye from a beggar on Royal Avenue, much as the ancient lighthouse's lantern had been purloined.

Papa is always so correct.

The boy puts his head down and pulls firmly, evenly on the varnished wooden oars, the familiar squeak of the rowlocks comforting, reassuring. He feels the early morning sunshine warm the back of his neck, marvels at the taste of salt on his lips, the forlorn call of a curlew. The cord lashing his shiny yellow lifejacket to his body chafes under his arms and for a moment he considers removing it. He has outgrown it. Finally. It is time to choose another from his grandfather's workshop, a world of wondrous order and exotic smells. He has missed all this. But it is the beginning of the summer holidays, he is in Copper Bay, staying with his adoring (and adored) grandparents, he has money in his pocket, a good book to read, a new sketchbook and some felt tip pens, a bottle of Cresta and six packets of Parma Violets, a new kite and a little pack of plastic frogmen with which, later, he plans to explore the flooded 'valleys' and vast 'canyons' of Cook's Rock and the 'Dully'. He has nearly enough tokens for a second, free Action Man and, carefully stored away in its special wooden box, 'L6', the beautiful model yacht which his grandfather built for his birthday, five years earlier, complete with its heavy lead keel and hand-stitched sails, lies waiting in the house. In a week or two he might repaint the punt. Red or blue. (There is enough paint.) Varnish its benches. Give it a name, 'Bounty' or 'Apollo' or 'Bobby'. Re-launch it from his Papa's slipway with a bottle of brown lemonade. His cousins from Armagh might visit. They would get the bikes out. Ride to the shop. Go for picnics. Swim from the raft. Sneak round to the Cove. Collect dulce and red 'eaters'. The tide is coming in. The sun has risen. And Gary Glitter is Number One!

Nearing the shore he hears an unfamiliar sound: *Thok! Thok!* A pause, and then again, *Thok!* He looks over his shoulder and sees an older boy, a long-trousered stranger, straddling the pinnacle of the 'Cooker' and smashing fist-sized lumps of dolomite into his beloved, pristine rock pools. For a moment they hold each other's stare, then each returns to his respective task. The boy in the boat is troubled by the activity of the older child. *Thok! Thok!* He thinks about the hermit crabs and anemones, the tiny starfish tucked away in crevices, the limpets, winkles, barnacles, 'blood-suckers', sea squirts and urchins – all now under assault from this invader. He considers voicing his concerns as he beaches the dinghy and scrambles out over the bow. But he has experienced trouble with boys from the caravan site before, so he holds his tongue and feels weak for doing so. *Thok! Thok!* He takes the damp painter and drags the punt across the weed and onto a clearing of grey sand, blisters of bladder-wrack popping under his feet as they skitter across the surface, trying to find purchase. He unfolds the little grapnel anchor and digs it into the sand. The older boy shoots him a filthy look, hurls a final missile into the deepest rock pool and then hops his way across the exposed reef, towards the punt. By the time the younger boy straightens to brush the sand from his hands, they are standing feet apart.

This then is how Levi Eastwood comes face to face with Ruairi Todd for the first time.