

An extract from Martha, Jack & Shanco.

“Aberaeron mackerel!”

Sam Fish’s cry was loud as the bell on his boat. Just a few weeks in the summer, before the seagulls turned seawards, his cries of fish rang around the local farmyards.

“Aberaeron mackerel!” He opened the back of the van and pulled towards him his weighing scales, the bundle of newspaper for wrapping and his knife. He caught sight of Shanco, peeping, behind him, and turned to face him.

“How are you lad?” Sam said, smiling. A fag was stuck between two gappy top teeth, the only ones left in the row. Martha appeared.

“Aber-,” Sam began again.

“Alright, alright!”

“How do, how do, Matilda?” When Sam first used to call, she’d correct his ‘Matilda.’ But five years in, she’d realised it made no difference.

“How much today then, Missus? I reckon you’re a bit hungry.” He put a friendly hand on Shanco’s shoulder, his knife waving.

“Six today, thanking you.”

“Remember this is a growing lad,” Sam winked, pushing his luck.

“Just six, thank you.”

“Six big ones then.”

“No. Six of the usual size. They taste better than the big ones.”

“Right-oh, six it is then.” Sam replied, fumbling among the fishy mix behind him. He chose six and put them on the scales. “Here we go then, just over six pounds here.”

“I’m sure you meant to clean them before weighing them, Sam.”

“Well, well, you drive a hard bargain and no mistake,” he said with a theatrical sigh, “Catch me out every time, you do.” A wink for Martha this time.

Sam sold them whole as a rule, but for some reason for Martha – could it be her serene fae? – he’d usually clean them before weighing so she’d get better value for money.

They watched Sam slicing through the hard skin so that the pink guts oozed out. He cut their heads and ran the flat of the blade down each backbone to cut away the cord of blood that spoiled the taste. As it touched each bone the knife gave a small metallic click like clockwork. He weighed them again and wrapped them in newspaper. Martha dropped the money into his bloody, slimy hand, sequinned with silver scales.

“Many thanks then, Matilda!”

He flung the money into an ice cream carton, scraped the pile of guts into another sheet and gave it to Shanco for the cat. The rest he slung into the van, and slamming the door, he jumped into the front and drove off on a dustwave, shouting, “See you next year then, if I’m not in Davy Jones’ locker.”