

Drawn Words

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EwenMuir held up the drawing. "It's a chicken," he said.

"A chicken?" said Ewen's mother, Mairi, making a puzzled face. "Well, maybe when it's finished. I don't see anything there but a few squiggly lines."

"But it *is* finished. I've drawn just enough to see the chicken. All the rest is just details."

Ewen's mother stared at the paper and shrugged. Why couldn't she see it, Ewen wondered. At the age of twelve, he was easily the best artist in the county. The drawing he made of his father Gow and older brother Geordie plowing the fields had won a first-place ribbon at the annual summer fair. Even though Ewen's talent wasn't much use in the business of farming, his work was so good that his parents could scarcely begrudge him the luxury of that rarity of bartered goods, paper.

"Gow," Mairi called to her husband in the next room, "does this drawing look like a chicken to you?"

Ewen's father put down the gouge he was carefully honing against a whetstone and came over to look. Gow was a tall man, thin and wiry, with a laugh that belied his slight frame. The seasons of hard toil on the farm had etched his face with wrinkles beyond his forty years and his thick beard was showing traces of gray, but his eyes still sparkled with vigor as he viewed the drawing. "Yes, I do see something that might be a chicken when he's done with it."

"But I *am* finished," Ewen said. "See, this pointy bit is the beak, and this loop is the head, and this other one is the wing and the body. The extra little line underneath is supposed to be a leg."

"Nonsense," Gow said. "A line or two can't be a chicken. You have to add feathers, connect up those open spaces and color it in."

Ewen had been afraid they wouldn't understand. He had drawn chickens before. Good ones. And cows and horses and trees and houses and people. It was easy to draw things the same way other folks who had the talent did it. He was trying to do something new.

"But you see it, don't you?" Ewen said. "If you can see the chicken with just a couple of lines, then it's enough."

Ewen's brother Geordie came away from the basket-weaving he was working on to see what the fuss was about. "That's surely no chicken I've ever seen, Ewie."

"Yes," Mairi agreed. "I think I can make it out now, but why don't you fill in the rest of it so it looks like a normal drawing?"

"But that takes too long," Ewen said. "If I draw just a few lines that can represent the whole chicken, without having to draw every single feather, then I can draw it in just a few seconds."

Worry lines appeared on Gow's forehead.

"Why would you ever want to be able to draw a chicken so quickly?" Mairi asked.

"It's not just chickens," Ewen said, turning over the paper to show a few more sketches underneath .
"See, here I have a shape for a cow, a horse, and a pig. This pointy box is the shape for 'house' and this one—"

"It's a man," said Gow .

"Yes, yes," Ewen said, excited.

"Finish them, boy," Gow said sternly. "These are not proper drawings, and I don't care how quickly you can render them. A drawing of a man needs a proper face and hair and fingers. This is just a circle and a couple of lines, like a baby would make. There's no need to skimp on your art. Remember, anything worth doing is worth doing well."

Ewen's smile was replaced by a puzzled look. "But father, these aren't regular drawings. I think of them more as words drawn out on paper, and they stand for things just like spoken words stand for things. Instead of saying 'the cow went into the barn' I can draw a few shapes like this."

Ewen quickly sketched tiny shapes for "cow" and "barn", with a dashed line between them, and held it up to his mother and father to see.

Mairi's breath caught in her throat.

Gow snatched the sheaf of papers away from the boy and examined them. "Listen to me well," he said, turning them over, one by one. "You never drew these." When he reached the end of the collection he walked over to the fireplace and dropped the stack on the flaming logs.

Ewen started to rise when he realized what his father was doing, but Mairi held his wrist firmly and gave him a leave-it-be look that he knew better than to challenge. He looked to his brother for support, but Georgie knew when to stay out of it and had quietly gone back to his basketwork.

When Gow was finished at the fireplace, he turned to face his son with a look that was more frightened than angry .

"Ewen, you have to promise your mother and me that you will never make these drawn words again. Never."

Ewen looked over to his mother, but she nodded in agreement.

"But why? With drawn words I can make a whole story instead of just showing one scene at a time. It's like talking on paper."

"I know what it's like, and I won't allow it in this house."

"But it's just words. What's the harm?"

Gow's face grew very serious. "Drawn words are against the law. It used to be called *writing* , and it

has been banned for over a century."

"Writing," Ewen repeated, trying out the unfamiliar word. "Well, couldn't I just make the . . . writing . . . for myself? Nobody else has to see them."

"No. Absolutely not. Do you know what they do to people who write?"

"I didn't even know there was such a thing as writing, so how could I know what the penalty is?"

"Don't talk back to your father," Mairi said, a trickle of tears beginning in both eyes.

"Writing is a serious offense, with grave consequences," Gow said.

Ewen stared at his father. "For drawing words? But it's a *good* thing, isn't it? Stories could be saved on paper instead of having to remember them. People could trade stories like they trade vegetables and crafts. What's wrong with that?"

"People used to do just that sort of thing all the time before the Holy War," Gow said. "Men used writing to remember things that were best forgotten, and bartered the sweat of their brow for scraps of paper with writing on them. Writing caused our ancestors nothing but grief, and it was a blessing when their wicked society was destroyed."

Ewen was beginning to cry. "B-b-but I just wanted to draw good words about the farm, and you, and mother. Words aren't evil!"

Gow put his hands on Ewen's shoulders and looked him squarely in the eyes, "Ewen, you have to promise me from now on that you will only make proper drawings, or else we just won't be able to barter for any more paper for you. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," Ewen said. He couldn't imagine not having any more paper to work on.

"Do I have your word on it?"

"I g-guess so."

"Good. Now why don't you draw us a nice, normal chicken with feathers and such?" Gow said, handing Ewen a fresh sheet of the precious paper.

Ewen began working on a meticulously accurate rendering of a Dorking fowl in the barnyard, being extra careful to capture even the most minute of details. No one could argue that the drawing skimmed in any way, it was so lifelike. In the background, a chopping block and ax were plainly visible, but the happy chicken seemed oblivious to the danger.

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Ewen tried to keep his promise, but drawing objects the way they appeared in life no longer interested him. For every three conventional drawings he made, mostly to be traded away in town for small items and future obligations, he squirreled away a fourth sketch. He continued his private work whenever he could steal a few minutes away from the eyes of his family, and his collection of drawn word stories grew. He kept them hidden in the bottom of his clothing chest, and showed them to no one.

Over time, his repertoire of drawn words grew. Imagining that the old people before the Holy War must have had a drawn word for just about everything if they could tell proper stories on paper, Ewen set out to invent a shape for as many words as he could think of. Not just the easy words like "horse" and "tree", but intangible things like "fear" and "love". He made sketches for action words like "walk" and "sew", and modifying words like "fast" and "good". Some of the words didn't readily suggest pictures that could be stripped down to their barest essentials, so Ewen just made up arbitrary shapes for those. Other words he made from combinations of simpler symbols.

Ewen's stories were usually transcriptions of the old tales his parents told him. Stories of strong men and women surviving the bad times to build a simpler way of life. Even though he had memorized the stories from hearing them over and over, he was privately happy with the knowledge that he could never forget them now that he had set them down in drawn words.

Over time, Ewen began to think that his own life was a story worth setting down, too. He began making daily progress in an ongoing record of the events that transpired in his life. Sometimes nothing very important happened, and Ewen just wrote down his thoughts and dreams on those days. It surprised him how quickly the story of his life began piling up, and he felt sad for all the other people whose lives just slipped away unremembered.

One day late in his thirteenth year, Ewen was sitting in the outhouse, working on his drawn words in the dim light that seeped through the cracks, when his father opened the door without knocking. Gow immediately apologized when he saw the stall was occupied and turned to go, but he caught a glimpse of the paper on the boy's lap. Tiny, graceful shapes in long neat rows filled the sheet.

Gow snatched the paper and crumpled it into a tight ball.

"This is the last of these, Ewen Muir," he said, pointing a shaky finger at the boy. "There will be no more paper in this house, do you understand?"

Ewen quickly pulled up his trousers and ran from the outhouse as fast as he could. His father cursed and dropped the wadded up paper into the honey bucket under the outhouse bench.

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It was three days later, early in the morning, when the mayor and town elders burst into the farmhouse, enraged and accusing. Mr. Skene, the weasel-faced man who carted away the night soil and animal waste every week, was three steps behind them entering the house. Ewen's heart pounded like the blacksmith's hammer when one of the elders produced a stained, wrinkled sheet of paper bearing long rows of his drawn words.

"Skene here says he got this out of your outhouse, Muir," said the mayor, an older man with a nose ruddy from too many nights of drinking spirits.

"I thought it might be one of the boy's drawings," Skene said, "but when I flattened it out, I didn't know what it was."

"It's writing!" the elders shouted.

Ewen saw the color drain from his father's face as he tried to calm them down. "Gentlemen, it's just scribbles, nothing more. Let's all sit by the fire and share a cup of mead, shall we?"

"Muir, this is no mere scribbling," said the mayor. "We don't know what it means but the shapes are too consistent."

"Some of the symbols repeat," another man said. "It can't be meaningless scribble if it's so regular-like!"

"The Holy War never ends, Muir," said the dour-faced mayor, beckoning to the door. "You have to come with us, before you bring the fire down on all our heads."

Mairigasped and reached for her husband, but two of the elders held her back. Geordie took a few steps toward the group with his fists raised, but his father waved him off.

"Wait," said Ewen. "You're right, it is writing. But it's mine, not my father's."

The old men turned to face Ewen.

"He's lying," said Gow, looking frightened for the first time. "All right, I'll admit it. I have been writing like people did in the old days before the Holy War. Have mercy on me, for my family's sake."

When the men all turned their attention back to Gow, Ewen grabbed the filthy sheet of paper away from the mayor and held it out in front of him.

"No, it's mine," Ewen said, "and I'll prove it. The paper says, 'My father works so hard to make life good for Mother and Geordie and me. How many fine memories does he have that will be forgotten when he is gone? I will remember as many as I can for him.'"

Gow started to laugh. It was not his usual hearty laugh, Ewen noted, but a sham laugh for the elders. "Gentlemen," he said, "my Ewen is a good son, is he not?"

"God almighty, Muir, he read the writing!" the mayor said.

"He did nothing of the sort," Gow said. "He just made it up to protect me. You have your man, so let's get on with it."

The elders looked back and forth nervously at one another. Finally, one of them took the paper from Ewen and waved it in front of Gow, saying, "Read it then, if you know how."

Ewen saw his father stiffen as he looked at the paper. Gow cleared his throat nervously, and a few of the elders began eyeing Ewen with suspicion.

"The paper reads as follows," Gow said. "I, Gow Muir, a farmer of the land, believe the written word is a righteous thing."

The elders gasped and murmured. The one nearest Gow took a firm hold of his shirt.

"Before the Holy War, life was surely better than it is today. The townspeople are all fools, and I alone among them have the gift of writing."

"That's enough," said the mayor. "Gow Muir, you're coming with us."

"No, no!" Mairi screamed.

The men led Gow to the door. Before they pushed him across the threshold he turned back, and Ewen caught one last look of love in his eyes. Mairi, Geordie, and Ewen tried to follow, but several of the elders pushed them back inside.

"There's a duty to be done," one of the elders said, "and it's not a proper sight for women and children."

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The town fathers were decent enough to cut Gow's body down from the big oak tree behind the house before they left, sparing Mairi and the boys the sight of him hanging. Ewen and Geordie dug the grave and they buried him right there under the tree.

The next morning, Ewen ran away from home. Geordie was a better farmer than he would ever be, and with his mother, the two of them would be able to manage the farm just fine without him. Before he left, in the predawn hours, he worked tearfully above his father's grave. Around the base of the big oak he carved a series of curves and lines skillfully into the bark. The shapes were subtle, looking almost as if worn into the tree by nature. Only Ewen knew what they spelled: "Father, forgive me."

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Ewen followed the Tweed river west from Selkirk to Peebles, then north to the Firth of Forth and Edinburgh, a journey of four days. He carried a sack of foodstuffs from home, but the long hike increased his appetite, and he soon had to resort to stealing fruits and vegetables from farms along the way.

Edinburgh was the biggest city around, and Ewen only knew it by reputation. There were more people in one place than he had ever seen before—hundreds, perhaps thousands. Not just farmers, but tradesmen of all kind, and the crowded streets were lined with all manner of shops. There were tailors, butchers, woodwrights, blacksmiths, luthiers, and other shops for city things that Ewen didn't recognize.

By the time he reached the city it was late morning and he was ravenous from the long walk. The smell of cooked food coming from inside a public house drew him in. Ewen stood by the door for a minute before entering the busy room. A matronly serving-woman bid him to be seated, but he was leery of unfamiliar city customs.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Ewen said, holding up one of his drawings, "but how much food could I get in barter for something like this?"

The server glanced at the drawing, then back at Ewen, laughing. "That's a right good 'un, but I'm afraid you won't get a cracker for it in here. You're from the southern uplands aren't you?"

Ewen nodded yes. "Then what manner of barter do you accept?"

"What do you think, you silly bumpkin? We take coins—silver and gold. A quid for a meal, and a quarter for a draught, although I daresay you're a wee bit young for an ale."

Coins. They didn't use such things in the farmlands, always trading directly for goods and services. After all, you couldn't eat a coin, Ewen thought. But for a city like Edinburgh, where most people were not farmers, perhaps it made some sense.

Ewen held out more of his drawings. "I only have these. Is there a marketplace where I could trade

something like this for a few of your coins?"

"The whole city's a marketplace, dearie. Your drawings are pretty, but I don't know who might want to buy them. Maybe if you drew religious scenes instead of farm animals you might sell some of them to the crazy monks."

Ewen left the public house and wandered the streets, looking for some kind of shop that might trade in artworks. Several hours later, when he found none, he decided to open his own impromptu business. He took a half dozen of his best renderings from his bag and propped them up on the walkway, against the front of a cobbler's shop. Before he could finish setting up his display, the cobbler burst from the shop and yelled at him to get that trash off his property.

"I'm sorry," said Ewen. "I didn't know the walkway was private."

The cobbler frowned at him and looked at the artwork, stroking his long salt-and-pepper beard with a heavily callused hand.

"Those are pretty fair drawings," said the cobbler. "Did you make them yourself?"

"Yes sir, I did. And lots more. Would you like to see them? They are all for sale, if you would like one."

"No. I have no use for drawings, but I can see you have some skill with your hands. Looking to make some money in the big city, are you?"

"Yes sir, I am. I'm new in town and don't have any coins yet."

The cobbler made a sour face. "I can see you aren't from the city just from your clothing. They don't look like they were made by a proper tailor."

Ewen looked down at his garments. "My mother made them."

The cobbler rolled his eyes. "Boy, if you are in need of money, I might find use in my shop for an assistant, if you can handle the work. I cannot pay very much, but if you are any good, you might learn a useful trade."

Ewen pointed to the sign on the front of the cobbler's shop, a poor rendering of a shoe, much larger than life, but crudely drawn, probably by the cobbler himself.

"Would you like me to make you a proper sign?" Ewen asked.

"There's nothing wrong with my sign," the shopkeeper said, glaring at him. "I want you to help me make shoes."

Ewen's first thought was to pack away his drawings and move on, but the gnawing hunger in his stomach was overpowering.

"I don't know how to make shoes," Ewen said.

"I'll teach you what you need to know," said the cobbler. "If you have any talent with your hands, you can learn."

The cobbler's name was Logan, and over the next few months he trained Ewen to fashion simple footwear. Ewen's shoes were not fancy like the cobbler's own handiwork, but they were wearable and served well for the working people who couldn't afford the master's better wares. Ewen was allowed to sleep nights on the shop floor, in exchange for a portion of his meager wages. The cobbler also kept him barely fed for another portion of his dwindling earnings and only a pittance was left over for paper and art supplies, but it was enough for his few needs.

Logan had a collection of wooden foot models of different sizes, and Ewen was expected to make shoes to fit each of them, all exactly the same except for the size. He learned quickly to turn out a simple clog design, but before long the monotony of the task began to bore him. He wanted to try his hand at the more sophisticated models the cobbler crafted, and watched him carefully.

"Master Logan," he said to the cobbler, "what is the purpose of the little crown symbol you stamp onto the soles of the shoes you make?"

"That is my trademark," the cobbler replied. "It identifies the shoe as having been crafted by a master cobbler—me."

"So a simple mark signifies your work. Isn't that like what they used to call 'writing'?"

"Writing? You mean like books?" the shopkeeper said, looking surprised. "No, no. It is just a mark to tell my shoes apart from those made by other cobblers."

Ewen wondered what the odd word 'books' meant, but asked, "Can I put a trademark on the shoes I make, too?"

The cobbler looked puzzled. "But then my customers would get confused over which shoes were really made by me."

"Oh, I don't want to copy *your* trademark," Ewen said. "I'll make up my own mark, to insure sure no one confuses your superior craftsmanship with my novice work."

"Of that there's nary a need, I think. But if it would please you, go right ahead. Just be sure to make your mark different enough from my own so there can be no mistake."

"You can be sure of that, I promise."

Ewen drew and redrew sketches of his intended mark on paper first, getting it just right before he began embossing the design on the soles of the finished shoes. Instead of the small crown logo that Logan stamped into the leather of the shank, up near the heel, Ewen decided to make something larger, using the whole flat outsole of the heavy clogs that he toiled over for his mark.

His trademark was a portrait of his father.

It was a hard-working face, all bristly and rugged, yet still kind. The softness about the eyes was not lost on the rough underside of the heavy work shoes. Each of the portraits took nearly as long to tool into the hard sole as it took to produce the entire shoe, and Ewen worked at applying his trademark to the shoes in the evening by candlelight, after the cobbler had gone upstairs for the night, so the old man would not know how much time he was wasting.

Worked into the portrait, skillfully hidden in the twisting whiskers of his father's beard, were the drawn

words, "Father, forgive me."

Over the ensuing months, sales of the clogs were brisk, and Ewen soon learned to duplicate his trademark quickly. It seemed he could never make the shoes fast enough to build up the shop's inventory to the levels Logan demanded. While he toiled in the back of the shop, Logan sold the shoes in the front, so Ewen didn't know who was buying his creations, but someone surely was. A lot of someones. Ewen kept tally on a scrap of his drawing paper, one tick for each pair of clogs he made, and each group of ten circled. There were a lot of circles.

One day while Ewen was in the front of the shop taking orders from Logan, one of the more affluent customers came in and asked to be fitted with a pair of clogs. Logan tried to convince the customer that his brogues and balmorals were much better suited to the customer's station, but the customer insisted on a pair of "those shoes with the faces on the soles." Logan finally relented and sold him the clogs, charging the customer half again what he normally charged the common people for them, but the customer left the shop happy nonetheless.

That evening, after the workday was done, Logan fished a few coins out of the till and handed them to Ewen, saying, "I'm afraid I don't have any more use for you here. You'll have to go."

"But why?" Ewen asked.

"Look at this place, boy. The shoes are piling up in our inventory."

Ewen looked and saw the oxfords and balmorals and pumps, all the master's shoes, that had gone unsold over the past weeks.

"But people are still buying plenty of my clogs," Ewen said. "I've made nearly two hundred pairs and hardly any of them are left."

"Clogs are cheap," Logan said. "I need to sell proper shoes to a better class of people to make a good living. I need to sell the shoes that *I* make. I'm sorry, but an eager worker like you is sure to find something else to do in a city this size."

That night, with only a few saved coins in his pocket, Ewen packed his drawings in his sack and left the cobbler's shop.

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Several weeks went by after he had been discharged from the cobbler's shop, and Ewen still could not find another job. Work was scarce this time of the year with the harvest recently over and many unemployed farm hands looking to find a niche in the city before the winter cold set in. Begging was the only job Ewen could manage, making lifelike chalk drawings of cows and chickens on the wooden walkway near the center of town to attract the passersby.

Even at begging Ewen was a failure, barely making enough small change for the occasional drink of ale to go along with the crusts he fished from the waste bins behind the public houses. He thought about leaving the city, but with winter coming and the harvest already in, there were no field jobs to be had nor crops to be filched. It seemed his only option would be to return to his mother and brother, but he could hardly face them after the tragedy he had caused back home.

Thinking more and more of his dead father, Ewen began sketching his portrait on the sidewalk as a

tribute, and business instantly picked up. He seemed to have hit on something, as pedestrians would stop and admire his work with much more frequency than when he drew farm animals.

Each morning, Ewen touched up the larger-than-life portrait of his father he had drawn with colored chalk on the wooden walkway near the center of town. For some reason, the local rascals would deface it nightly after he had left to find a warm spot for the night, adding a crude halo over his father's head. If it didn't rain during the night, it only took a few minutes with a damp rag to erase the halo and add more chalk to the places where the color had worn thin from pedestrians' footsteps.

Hidden cunningly in the chalk portrait, just as on the shoes, were the drawn words, "Father, forgive me." On one side of the portrait, Ewen drew a couple of large coins, as a suggestion to the people who stopped to look. Ewen sat on the other side of the portrait and spent the hours sketching on what little paper he had remaining.

Many of the pedestrians seemed to recognize the face on the sidewalk and stopped to admire it. Ewen noted many of those interested spectators wore the shoes he had created. Once in a while, one of them would drop a real coin onto his chalked ones.

One day, as Ewen struggled to keep his drawing paper from fluttering away in the chill autumn breeze, he was distracted when a thin man dressed in black robes roomy enough to hold two of him looked over his shoulder with curious eyes. "That's a queer sort of drawing," the man said, looking at the paper. "Those shapes look almost like they might be some sort of writing."

"It's just some designs I'm working on," Ewen said, hurriedly stuffing the bundle of sheets into his sack.

The man looked down at the portrait on the sidewalk and said, "I rather like that. It's the same face as the one on the shoes, isn't it?"

Ewen nodded yes and smiled, hoping the man liked the portrait enough to drop a coin for him. Under the black robes, Ewen saw he was wearing a pair of his clogs.

"So, you're the one who made all the faces, then?"

Ewen nodded again. He was certain the fellow would leave a coin or two now.

"Could you answer a question for me and settle a dispute?" the man said, pointing at the sidewalk. "What's the meaning of those odd figures there, around the beard?"

Ewen's face flushed red. First the shapes on the paper, and now the hidden ones in the portrait. The man surely knew his drawn words were more than just random designs. The memory of the elders taking away his father played out briefly in Ewen's mind. Maybe it was time to own up to his work.

"I . . . I . . . it means 'Father, forgive me,'" Ewen said.

The man's eyebrows arched and he looked over the portrait again. "Father, forgive me? Is that supposed to be some kind of a prayer?"

Ewen thought quickly. "A prayer. Yes, a prayer. This is a picture of Jesus, and those are, um, His dying words on the cross."

The man frowned. "Jesus said, 'Father, forgive *them*, they know not what they do.'"

Ewen stiffened. "Well, maybe I heard it wrong."

"I thought it might be Jesus," the man said, "but shouldn't He be drawn with a halo? I'm afraid that He looks just like a common farmer the way you've drawn him here."

"Jesus *was* a common man," Ewen said.

The man reflected on that a few seconds. "Well, I just think He looks better with the halo."

Ewen thought about the halo the children added nightly to the portrait and asked, "Do you know about the halo?"

"Why, of course! You made the shoes, right?" the man said, pointing to his feet.

"Yes, but what about—"

"And the odd shapes in the beard mean, 'Father, forgive me,' but it's not in any kind of writing I've ever seen."

Ewen nodded, then thought about what the man implied. "You say you've seen writing? I mean, not my little squiggles, but real writing?"

"No," the man said, looking away nervously. "That's not what I meant."

"But you said—"

"You misheard," the man said, fishing a coin out of his pocket and dropping it on the sidewalk. "You be careful now."

The coin rolled along the walk and Ewen scrambled after it, snatching it while it was still in motion and squirreling it away safely in a deep pocket. When Ewen looked up, the man in black was gone.

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The next morning at his usual begging spot, Ewen found that someone had once again added a crude halo to his sidewalk portrait during the night. Instead of wiping it away this time, Ewen decided to let it remain, adding color and smoothing out the curve of it instead. There was no use fighting it, especially if the notion that his father's portrait was Jesus Christ was gaining some popularity. Maybe it would bring him a few extra coins to play up the phony religious angle. Perhaps that was the reason all along why the face had proved so popular.

The plan seemed to be working, and by late in the afternoon Ewen had collected more than enough coins for a decent meal when a familiar figure showed up to admire his handiwork.

"It's a sure moneymaker, that drawing of yours," the man said. It was Logan, the cobbler.

Ewen looked up at him from his seat on the walkway. "It's brought me a bit of luck," he said.

"Look, boy," said the cobbler, "I was a little hasty in sending you off like that. Since then everyone in town has come into my shop asking for a pair of those shoes of yours with the damned face."

Ewen smiled and touched up a spot on the sidewalk with some chalk.

"See, I'm asking you to come back," said the cobbler. "I'll give you half again what I was paying you before, if you'll just come back to my shop."

"Oh, I don't know," said Ewen. "I don't think I want to make any more of those clunky clogs."

"Then I'll show you how to make the fancy, expensive models," Logan said. "You don't even have to make shoes at all, if you don't want to. I'll make them. You just come back to the shop and put the faces on the soles."

"What, put *my* trademark on your superior work?" Ewen said in mock horror. "Won't the customers be confused?"

"Lad, I *need* those faces on the shoes."

Ewen looked away. "It's just a face. Why is that so important to you now?"

Logan lifted his foot, and for a second Ewen thought he was going to kick him. But Ewen recognized the shoe as one of his own clogs, and the cobbler held his foot up for him to look at. There on the sole was the face, his trademark, just as Ewen had tooled it into the hard leather. A bit worn from wear, perhaps, but still recognizable as his father's visage.

Where the leather sole had worn under the ball of the cobbler's foot, a round halo had appeared, framing his father's face.

"People say it's a miracle," the cobbler said. "A sign from God."

Ewen laughed. No wonder the portrait, with the added halo, was becoming so popular.

"Look, boy, come back to the shop and I'll double what I was paying you before. If you don't come back and put faces on my shoes, I'm going to be put out on the streets."

Ewen stared at Logan a few seconds, then said, "It's not so bad on the streets. You'll get used to it." He dug deeply in the pocket where he hid his coins, and came up with a hard-earned quarter, holding it out to the cobbler. "Here, Master Logan, go buy yourself a draught on me."

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Another week passed and the days grew chillier. One early morning found Ewen cutting through a back alley on his way to his usual sidewalk begging post. A patch of color on one grimy wall of the building near the mouth of the alley caught his attention. It was his father's face, painted right on the bricks.

The painting was an obvious imitation of the sidewalk portrait he had labored over for the past few weeks, and not at all a bad effort. The halo was featured even more prominently than he had been drawing it, so the lie that the face was Jesus must have been spreading. Ewen also noted that the drawn words that he normally disguised in the beard were all wrong in this portrait. Instead of his graceful curves, there were harsh angles and loops that bore little resemblance to his original drawing.

As Ewen reached the main street, he spotted a group of three boys a few years younger than himself

loitering near the mouth of the alleyway. Their clothing was ragged and their faces showed a trace of grime, so Ewen surmised they were runaways like himself.

"Excuse me, lads, do you know anything about this painting on the wall here?" Ewen asked.

The boys peeked around the corner of the building to see the painting. "Oh, that drawing is all over town," said the redheaded boy.

"Folks are calling it the Savior of Soles," said the boy with large patches on both knees of his well-worn pants. "You know, like on the shoes."

Ewen chuckled. Savior of Soles indeed. The three boys didn't laugh along with Ewen and looked very serious, so he stifled his laughter. One of them was the painter, he guessed.

"It's a good painting," Ewen said. "Just like the chalk one I've been keeping on the sidewalk near the square. Those funny shapes in the beard are a bit different, though. Do any of you lads know what those shapes are supposed to be?"

The redhead and the boy with the patches looked back and forth at each other and shrugged. "I dunno," said the third boy. "That's just how the drawing goes, isn't it?"

Ewen noticed a spot of paint on the boy's sleeve and guessed he was the artist.

"Well, not really," Ewen said, digging into his sack to pull out the sketches he had made when he was first designing the trademark for his footwear. "This is *my* drawing, so I guess I should know how it goes. Here, take a look at these."

"Hey, that's not right at all," said the boy with the paint-spotted clothing. "It doesn't even have a halo."

"This is the original drawing," Ewen said. "The halo came later. Look closely at the shapes in the beard. That's what's wrong in your, er, the painting over there on the wall."

The boy studied Ewen's drawing carefully, but the redheaded boy pulled a folded sheet of paper from a pocket and gave it to Ewen.

"This is what the face is supposed to look like, isn't it?" asked the redhead.

Ewen examined the paper. It was his father's face with the halo, faithfully copied in dark black ink, but the drawn words in the beard were all wrong. Whoever created the copy hadn't realized the significance of his graceful shapes, and had substituted harsh, angular ones in their place.

"Where did you get this paper?" Ewen asked, refolding the paper and pocketing it.

"The rectory gives them out with free food," the redhead said. "Sometimes we go there when we're hungry. We're supposed to pray to the face on the paper, I think."

"Well, they've got it wrong," Ewen said. "The original shapes I drew *mean* something. Let me show you how to make them correctly."

Over the course of the next few hours, Ewen showed the three of them how to draw "Father, forgive me" in drawn words. He explained how he had created the shapes, going from fully fleshed drawings to

stripped-down ones, and illustrated the transformation with a series of sketches on a sheet of paper. The boys were attentive and had little trouble understanding the concept and practicality of drawn words. Ewen cautioned them that it was "forbidden knowledge," which only made them even more interested in learning it. The boy with the paint-spotted clothing picked it up quickly and then began helping the others. Ewen and the boys became fast friends and traded other useful information, like good locations for begging and places where decent meals could be salvaged from the refuse cans.

"If you can draw a few little shapes to mean just about everything," said the redhead, "then are there drawn words for our names, too?"

Ewen learned their given names were Derek, Lachlan and Fergus, but rather than make up new shapes for them, he sketched the words for "red," "patch," and "painter" on individual scraps of paper and gave them to the boys. The three of them prized their written names, and began tracing the symbols in the air with their fingers, memorizing the shapes.

"Be careful about who you show these drawn words to," Ewen implored. "You could get into big trouble."

"Don't worry about us," Patch said. "We can look out for ourselves."

Ewen said good-bye and went to his usual sidewalk spot happy over having made his first real friends since leaving home. Over the next few weeks he would see the drawn words for "Red," "Patch," "Painter," and "Father, forgive me," appear in charcoal, chalk and paint on numerous walls and buildings all over town. His protégés were seemingly everywhere, reveling in the conspicuous display of their marks and testing the limits of their rebelliousness. Ewen met with them often over the weeks, and at each meeting the boys would ask him what the drawn words were for various things and carefully copy the symbols that Ewen showed them.

Ewen, too, began scrawling words on the walls after the sun went down. Things like, "Anything worth doing is worth doing well," and "Words aren't evil, men are." Ewen always signed his messages with the drawn word for his name.

Once, Ewen came across the chalked message on a wall, "The Savior of Soles' son is Ewen."

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The monastery at the edge of town was large and imposing. Ewen bruised his knuckles knocking at the big oak door and waited an eternity before a tall man in black robes came to admit him to a small antechamber.

"I'd, uh, like to speak to someone in charge," Ewen said.

"I am Brother Alastair," the man said, "the abbot of this monastery. You can speak to me."

Ewen pulled out the inked portrait of the Savior of Soles that he had taken from Red. "I asked at the church rectory where these were being given away, and the priest told me they were made by someone here at the monastery."

Brother Alastair gave a quick glance at the paper. "Perhaps. What is it you would like to know?"

"Someone wearing robes like yours once spoke to me on the street where I was begging and admired

the portrait I drew on the sidewalk. This portrait. It's my trademark."

"Your trademark? A trademark for begging?"

"Begging and shoemaking. That means the portrait belongs to me and others shouldn't be allowed to copy it."

Brother Alastair looked surprised at that. "But it's a picture of Our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus belongs to everyone."

"Well, this one belongs to me. I created it, and I know what you people are up to here." Ewen pointed to the paper. "Those shapes on the bottom of the portrait are . . . writing."

The abbot looked aghast. "What do you mean, writing? What, those little lines?"

"Yes, those lines. And I know it says 'Father, forgive me,' in whatever system you use here, if that robed man on the street remembered it correctly."

The abbot stifled a laugh.

"What's so funny?" Ewen said.

"It really says 'Come to the abbey.' It's a message for you."

Ewen's face wrinkled. "For me?"

"We've been waiting."

Ewen stopped breathing for a moment, wondering if a trap was about to be sprung. Brother Alastair just kept smiling, so Ewen said, "Well, here I am. But for what?"

"We are Benedictines here," the abbot said. "Most of us, anyway."

"What exactly does that mean?"

The monk walked over to a small desk and withdrew an object from a drawer. It was a rectangular thing the size of a paving stone, but bound in leather with gilt edges.

"Do you know what this is, son?" the monk asked.

Ewen shook his head no.

"Come over here then and have a look."

As Ewen approached, the monk opened the object to reveal paper inside. Hundreds of creamy, fine-textured pages, stacked tightly against one another and bound on one side. Each page was filled with row upon row of tiny, unfamiliar shapes. The monk turned the pages to a spot marked with a red ribbon and scanned down with his finger to find a passage, then read, "From the book of Isaiah: 'And now, go, write it before them on a tablet, and inscribe it in a book, that it may be for the time to come as a witness forever.'"

"A . . . book?" said Ewen , looking confused. "Whose words are those?"

"Yes, this is called a book," the monk said. "The Good Book, in fact. Its real name is the Bible. Many of us here believe it contains the words of God."

"Old-style writing!" Ewen said. "You could get killed for having that."

"As could you for writing prayers, or whatever, on the sidewalks. While writing is not strictly allowed in Edinburgh, some of our devout souls will admit the value in preserving the word of the Lord. We Benedictines are concerned not just with keeping alive the word of God, but with preserving *knowledge*."

Ewen thought of his drawn word stories. "Can I learn to write in your system?"

"Yes, of course," the monk said. "We were hoping that you might find your way here and work with us as a scribe. Perhaps as an illustrator, as well."

"You'd just take me like that?"

"Oh, we've seen your work around town before. This writing of yours looks most peculiar, but I can see in it a flair for calligraphy." Ewen made a face, so the abbot added, "That means you write beautifully."

"You can tell that just from the sidewalk drawings?"

"Yes. That and . . ." The monk shifted his weight onto one leg and lifted the other to show Ewen his shoe under the robe. It was one of Ewen's clogs, and there on the sole was his trademark portrait, with a worn-in halo.

"Would you like to stay on here at the monastery and become one of us?" the monk asked.

Ewen thought briefly about lying, but decided to trust the monk with the truth. "I have to admit, I'm not very religious."

"Well, that's not an absolute necessity," the monk said. "More than anything, we need scribes with steady hands."

The monk led him to an inner door and down a hallway to a large room at the back of the building. This room was lighted well from several large south-facing windows. Inside labored a handful of men sitting at desks, slowly copying tiny characters onto crisp white sheets of paper. One of the copyists was familiar as the man who had questioned him on the sidewalk.

"Are they all working on the Bible?" Ewen asked.

"No. We also keep other important works alive." Brother Alastair picked up a finished book from a nearby case. "This one is called *Macbeth* . It is very old. This one is *Tom Sawyer* . It, too, is pretty old."

"Were they saints?"

"Hardly. *Tom Sawyer* is about the adventures of a boy who grew up in America, long before the Holy War destroyed it. It's not a true story, but many people have admired the tale nonetheless."

Ewen looked about the room and noticed many large cabinets holding shelf upon shelf of thick volumes, as if they had been crafted solely for that purpose. Book cases. Ewen found the idea intriguing.

"What do you do with all of these books?" Ewen asked.

"We read them, of course, and trade them with the other monasteries and enlightened parties. They are primarily for safekeeping until the rest of the humanity decides to begin reading once again."

"But aren't you afraid of getting caught?"

"Weren't you?"

Ewen smiled slyly at the monk, who returned the grin.

"Tell me," Ewen said, "if I used writing to record the story of my father—how he lived and how he died—do you think anyone else would want to read it?"

"Perhaps," said the abbot. "It all depends on how interesting a man he was, and how skillfully you write the story."

Ewen didn't have to think about that too long. "Then I'd like very much to become one of your scribes."

Brother Alastair smiled warmly. Ewen thought of the newly found friend she'd be leaving behind on the streets and asked, "If I learned your system of writing, would it be all right to share the knowledge with some friends who might also care to learn?"

"By all means, lad, as long as you're sure these friends can be trusted. We want to encourage people to take up writing again."

"Good. When can I begin?"

The monk put a friendly hand on his shoulder. "It will take some time to teach you to write properly, but we can begin immediately."

"I'm looking forward to it," Ewen said. "Now, tell me more about this Tom Sawyer."