**Touch**
The islanders have many explanations. Some say that his mother must have eaten tayberries after Michaelmas, and that the Devil himself had found his way to her womb to smear juice on her son’s unborn cheek. Some profess to see the shape of a fish, caused by a craving for herring during the ripening. Some see the shape of a sword, and say it is evidence that he fought a fierce battle in a previous life. A visitor from one of the leeward harbours assures him that it is only half a mark. She promises that one day he will find its mirror on the body of his own true love. His mother says that she climbed too high, and sailed too far, up and out to where she could see the purple veils, and they could see her.

He has no memory of his father leaving the island, or of any time when he and his mother weren’t living alone together in the cramped, airless cottage. One of the first things he does remember with any clarity is the leg of a trestle table – solid, dark wood, blotched by a swirling knot at eye level. It’s not a bad memory. There’s a sound of feet shuffling and someone is crying quietly and blowing into a handkerchief. It’s a woman, but not his mother. He is being prodded and shushed, and there’s a firm hand at the back of his neck to hold him steady. He isn’t frightened. Why should he be frightened? There are no blows to his ears or slaps to the back of his knees. Of course, he could do without the dead fingers, cold and waxy, smelling strongly of pickle. They flop down from somewhere above him and he can’t avoid them. He closes his eyes and feels their coldness being rubbed back and forth over his face. There’s a long silence, a general muttering, and someone else begins to cry. This time it is his mother.

He learns to read. There are still some old dams who remember this twist and are eager to teach it, still plenty of the sturdier sort of book lying around. It’s an unconventional practice, but not exactly frowned upon. Moreover, it’s a convenient way of avoiding the other children. He dreads the summer months when he can’t wear a hat or hood, and he has to put up with their constant, ever-evolving, name-calls. He can run faster than anyone, not counting Lame-Annie who can’t run, and who has her own problems. He has no fear of physical pain, and will bark his shins hurtling around the corners of brick buildings, graze knees and elbows climbing over dry-stone walls. Anything to escape the chants – *We’re coming to get you, Splash-Face. Run and hide, Splash-Face.* Even some of the sacred songs are bent out of shape, put to new use to mither him – *na-na-na-na-na-na-na Splash-Man!* If he’s being honest, reading doesn’t really help, although it does improve his word-hoard, adding the fizz and bubble of “vascular”, “capillary”, “malformation”. He enjoys their choppy dance against his teeth and lip.

He grows. Hair sprouts. He becomes a familiar attendant at all the village funerals, as secretly reviled as a lucky dwarf and as necessary as the corpse-burner. The process has solidified into ritual over the years. One might even call it a performance. First he bows his head, then he steps forward, then he leaves a sober pause before placing the corpse’s cold hand over his own face, always making sure to cover the mark. There is usually a sharp intake of breath at this point, an almost imperceptible leaning forward on the part of the mourners. It’s as if some magic is expected. It never arrives.

Afterwards there will be a slow communal exhale, the men will cough and jingle old charms in the pockets of their mildewed heirloom suits, embarrassed without knowing why. The women will coo like collared doves, and one of them will put her arm around his mother and lead her away. Nothing ever changes – well, sometimes the sage tea is hot and strong and sometimes it’s weak as moggy pee, sometimes the cake is stale and sometimes it isn’t.

When he is twenty-two his mother becomes devout, and not in a good way. A fly-blown bible appears, and she starts to refer to the Mark of Cain. In late summer she is seen wandering the hills above the village where the brambles and tayberries grow. On Michaelmas morning the island is laid low by a bad wind. It lasts for five days. She closes the road-facing shutters, boils freshly picked berries with slaked lime, and swallows the crimson liquid. When she retches it is difficult to tell what is juice and what is blood. Both burn her lips and chin to the jawbone. It takes three candles for her to die. He holds the cooling hand through the night, reflecting that this is the first touch she has given him that isn’t a blow, or a slap, or a pressure at the back of his neck. He performs the usual movements, over and over, but when he looks in the mirror the vivid mark is still on him. If anything it has darkened, coarsened.

After his mother’s death, he’s no longer invited to village funerals. It becomes apparent that he only ever had a supporting role in these dramas, that the real focus had always been on her, on her reaction, on the ritual reinforcement of her disappointment. The family’s grief had been assuaged by witnessing hers, transferred, its contagion carried outside of the home.

The next year he takes a job at a farm repairing walls and fences. He loses the job when the farmer’s wife complains that he makes her nervous. He takes a job at the harbour helping to mend nets. He loses the job when the mackerel shoals fail to arrive that year. He takes a job daubing raddle onto the ewes that have been tupped. He loses the job when one of them produces a blind lamb with a twisted neck. He takes and loses many jobs from the grown children who had chased him in the past.

He tramps the island, north to south, east to west, looking for small opportunities for employment. Sometimes he overtakes Lame-Annie who seems to be doing the same, but with more success. She has a lovely, open face, and has never caused suspicion or distaste. He likes to give her a wide berth, not come up too fast or too close, for fear of causing her alarm or making her stumble. After a while they begin to nod to each other. He finds himself slowing down to fall into the halting rhythm of her stride. One day she offers him a share of her whey cheese and black bread. One day he catches up with her and hands over three blown wren’s eggs. He says he will show her where the sea-eagles nest, but somehow never does.

On the next Michaelmas eve, he sits with Lame-Annie by the cliff’s edge and tells her he is going to leave the island. The ‘o’ of her soft, pink mouth is a mixture of wonder and dread. Will she come with him? She will not, although she begs him to show her where the sea-eagles will nest in the following spring.

When the new children of the village find Lame-Annie on the beach, they don’t immediately inform their parents. They straighten out both legs – the long one with its exposed bone, and the short withered one. They wipe her startled eyes and open mouth, and bring a bunch of late daisies to lay on her breast. They thread bright rosehips and thrift into her hair. One child opens her clenched hand and gently strokes her palm, trying to brush away the stain of red rust that has gathered there.

 *According to Manx folklore, a birthmark can be cured by touching a dead person’s hand.
All explanations for birthmarks in the first paragraph are beliefs currently held somewhere in the world.*