

The Salmon People

By Thomas McErlean

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Foreword

It gives me great pleasure as the Chair of the Peace IV Partnership to acknowledge this delightfully engaging and beautifully illustrated book, *The Salmon People*, produced by the Mountsandel Discovery & Heritage Group.

The story of Mountsandel resonates at a local level, but also has national relevance; as the book elicits “This is where the human story of this island began.” Moreover is that this Peace IV funded Programme “Understanding Our Area” is a perfect fit for this example of local history and heritage that has wider historical and anthropological significance.

I would encourage readers to get a real ‘feel’ for Mountsandel by visiting the actual site, and perhaps take in the wider Bann Corridor area, to get an idea of how our ancestors lived, survived, and co-existed with their environment. There is much that we could learn from them regarding the preservation of, and respect for, the environment, a current global priority, which we are no stranger to.

The glossary in itself is a great way of learning about the time-period in which these primary settlers lived, there is no doubt that the reader will learn something of value and perhaps even understand the significance of the use of the “Salmon” in crests in modern-day Coleraine.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Mountsandel Discovery & Heritage Group on a very successful publication and encourage them to continued efforts in increasing understanding and awareness of the uniqueness and significance of Mountsandel, Coleraine and the River Bann corridor. Such outreach work is incredibly important and of huge value to the preservation of our local heritage.

Cllr. Dermot Nicholl

Chair, Peace IV Partnership – Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council

The production and development of this booklet was instigated by the Mountsandel Discovery and Heritage Group (MDHG).

This publication is one approach to achieving the aim of Mountsandel Discovery and Heritage Group which was founded in 2017, under the patronage of Rotary Club of Coleraine, to increase understanding and awareness of the uniqueness and significance of Mountsandel, Coleraine and the River Bann corridor.

Through outreach, education and learning programmes, MDHG work to promote the archaeology and history of Mountsandel and regularly engage with many stakeholders and the local communities who live and work in this area of outstanding cultural heritage.

This booklet has been produced as part of the PEACE IV Understanding Our Area - People and Places project, supported by Causeway Coast and Glens Museum Services.



A project supported by the European Union's PEACE IV Programme,
managed by the Special EU Programmes Body (SEUPB).



Dedication

This short story was inspired by the work of our friend, the late Professor Peter Woodman, the director of the excavations at Mountsandel.

It is dedicated to his memory and to express our gratitude for his ground-breaking contribution to the study of Ireland's first settlers.

Introduction

The Discovery of Mesolithic Mountsandel

Between 1973 and 1977, a team of archaeologists including the author, under the direction of Peter Woodman, excavated the field beside Mountsandel Fort (The Hill), Coleraine in advance of a housing development.

They found postholes indicating circular or oval huts about 6 metres in diameter in the centre of which were hearths. All around the site an abundance of flint tools, flint debris and other stone artefacts were retrieved. These included cores, axes, microliths, blades and bladelets, flakes and much waste flint material. The excavation also uncovered charcoal, lots of hazelnut shells and fragments of the burnt bones of salmon, eels and other species of fish, wild pigs, wolf, hare and other animals, birds, nuts and seeds. These organic materials provided evidence of the varied seasonal food consumed by the Mesolithic people of Mountsandel.

Significantly the hazelnut shells and charcoal were radiocarbon dated and the results indicated that the site had been occupied about 10,000 years ago.

Mountsandel is the oldest known human settlement on this island and is of outstanding importance as part of our shared history and heritage, and a window into the lives of our earliest ancestors.

This is where the human story of this island began.

Context

Through the story of the ‘Salmon People’, inspired by the findings from the excavation of the Mesolithic Mountsandel site, it is possible to imagine the huts as those where a young boy, Shagan, and a young girl, Brekin, lived with their families. We can envisage the ashes in the hearths, which had survived for nearly 10,000 years, as the remains of the fires that warmed them during cold winter nights. From the organic material and flint found we know the food they ate and the tools used.



A vibrant, hand-drawn illustration of a natural landscape. A blue river flows from the top left towards the bottom right. In the upper section of the river, several dark, rounded shapes representing salmon are visible. The river is bordered by lush green trees and foliage. To the right of the river, a grassy area contains a cluster of small, dome-shaped tents. A brown path or streambed winds through the scene. At the bottom, the river narrows and flows over a rocky ledge, with more salmon depicted in the water below.

The Ford

The Hill
(Mountsandel)

The Camp

River Bann

The Salmon Leap

Mesolithic Mountsandel to the Present

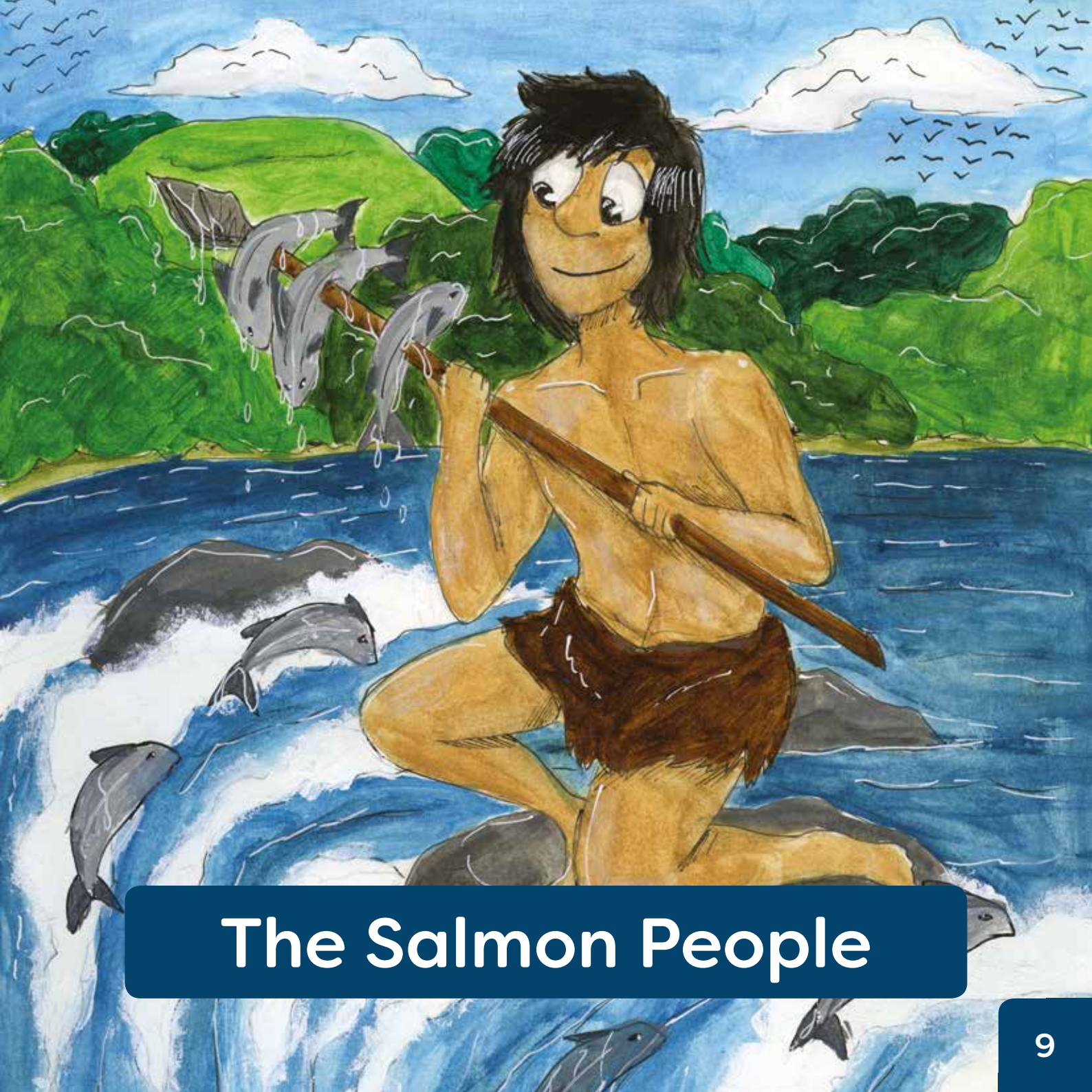
Mesolithic people continued hunting, fishing and gathering along the banks of the Bann from 10,000 to 6,000 years ago, when people with a new way of life arrived on the island. They were the first farmers and brought new animals and seeds. Gradually the Mesolithic people adopted their ways and intermarried with them. The bloodline from these Mesolithic people never died out and many people today carry their genes.

Down the millennia, Mountsandel (The Hill) was a place of assembly, a vantage point, and a fort. From the Mesolithic period to the Plantation of Ulster its shape was landscaped to fulfil many functions. During Gaelic times it was used as 'a Parley Hill' where people came together to make laws and settle disputes. In AD 1556, the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, the Earl of Sussex camped here with a great army.

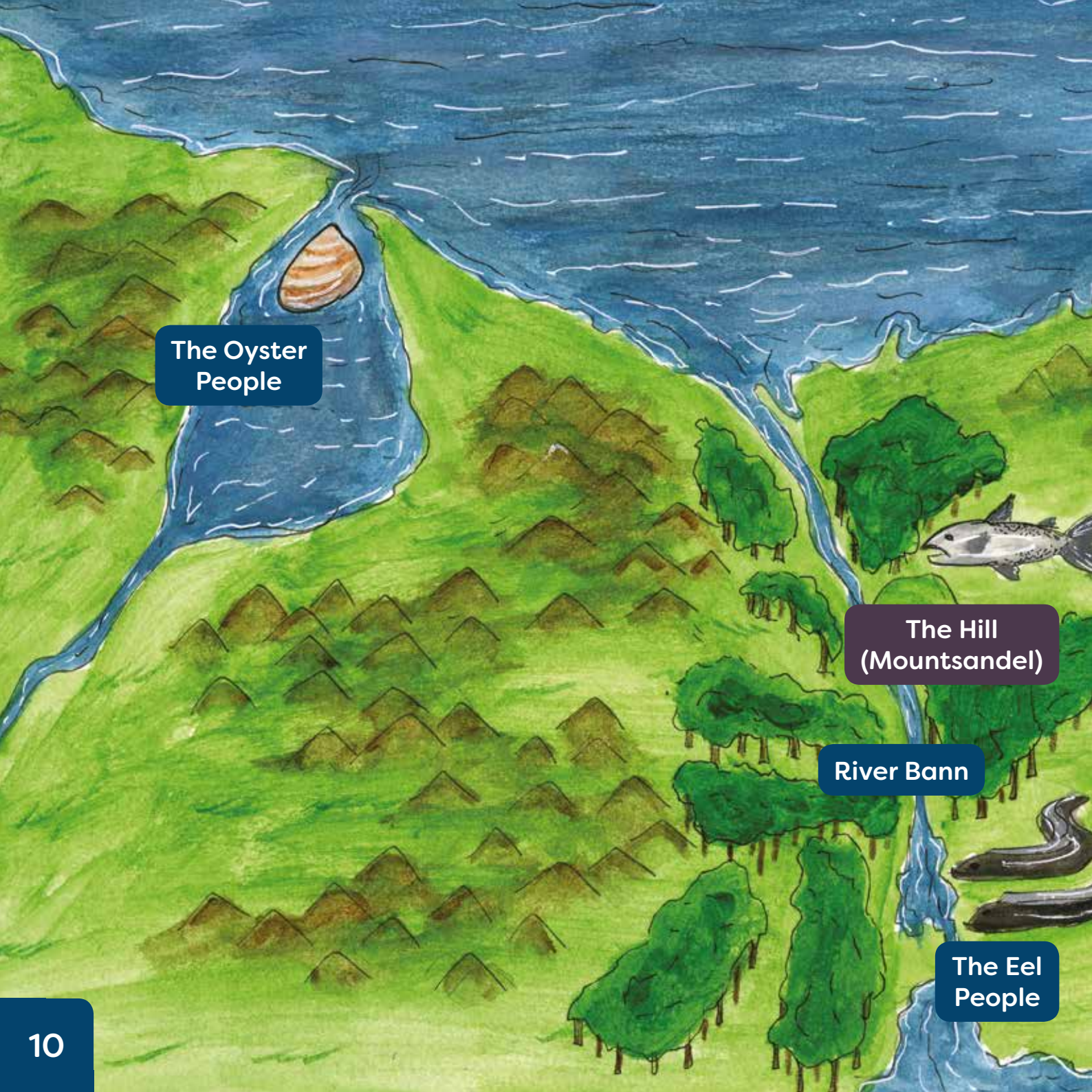
Over the centuries the name of the area has been recorded as: Knocksandel; Mount Sendal, after a local Anglo-Norman family called 'de Sendal'; Mount Sandy; and finally as it is known today, Mountsandel.

Mountsandel still draws people to gaze down at the timeless River Bann as it continues its journey to the sea. The salmon still struggle to get over the Leap in midsummer. Tragically their numbers have dwindled to a few thousand on a good year. The mysterious eels have also vastly declined.

Unlike the earliest settlers, today's people are failing to co-exist in harmony with the environment. Now is a good time to learn from the lessons of the past and to guide younger generations to respect the natural world around us.



The Salmon People



The Oyster
People

The Hill
(Mountsandel)

River Bann

The Eel
People



The Flint
People

The Salmon
People

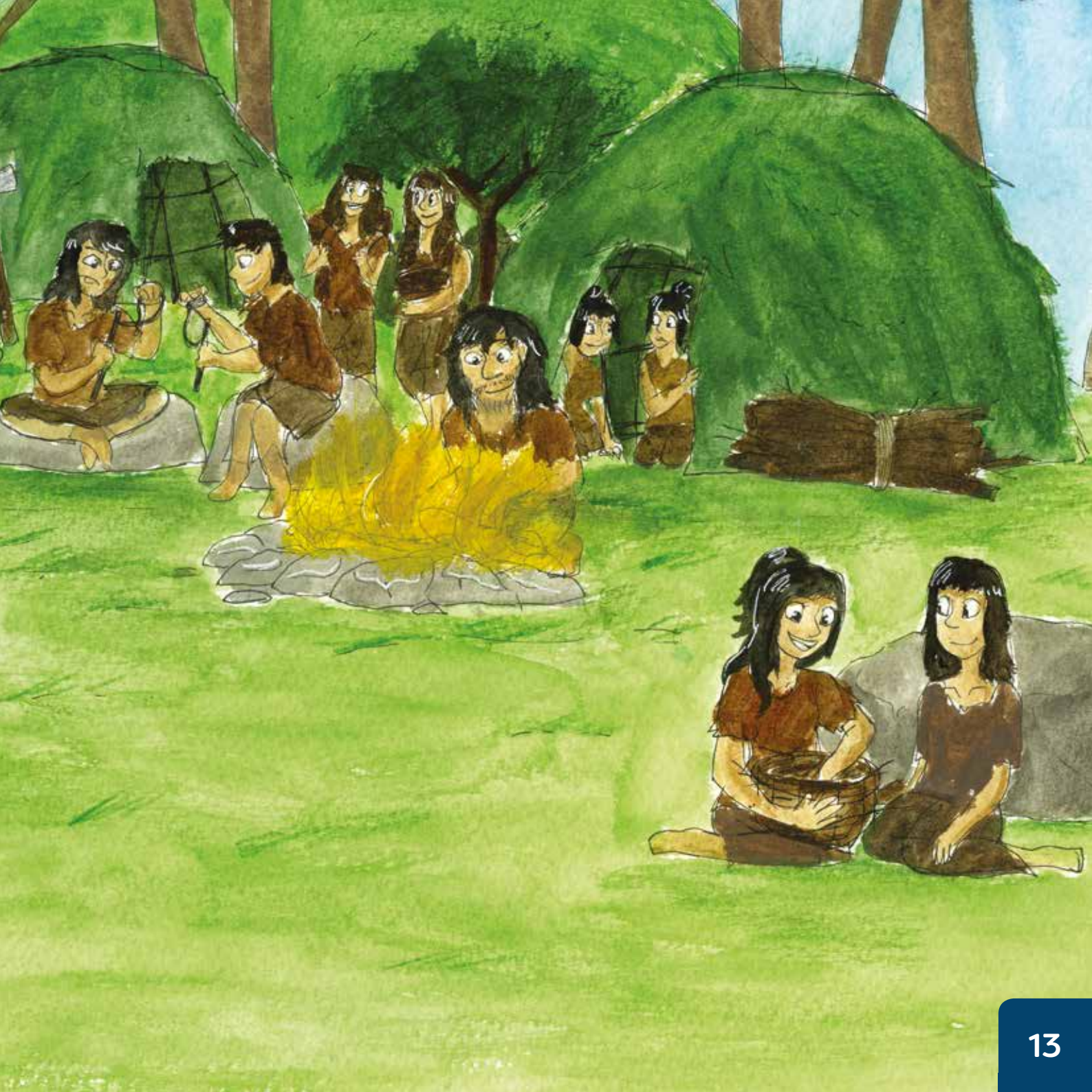
Summer

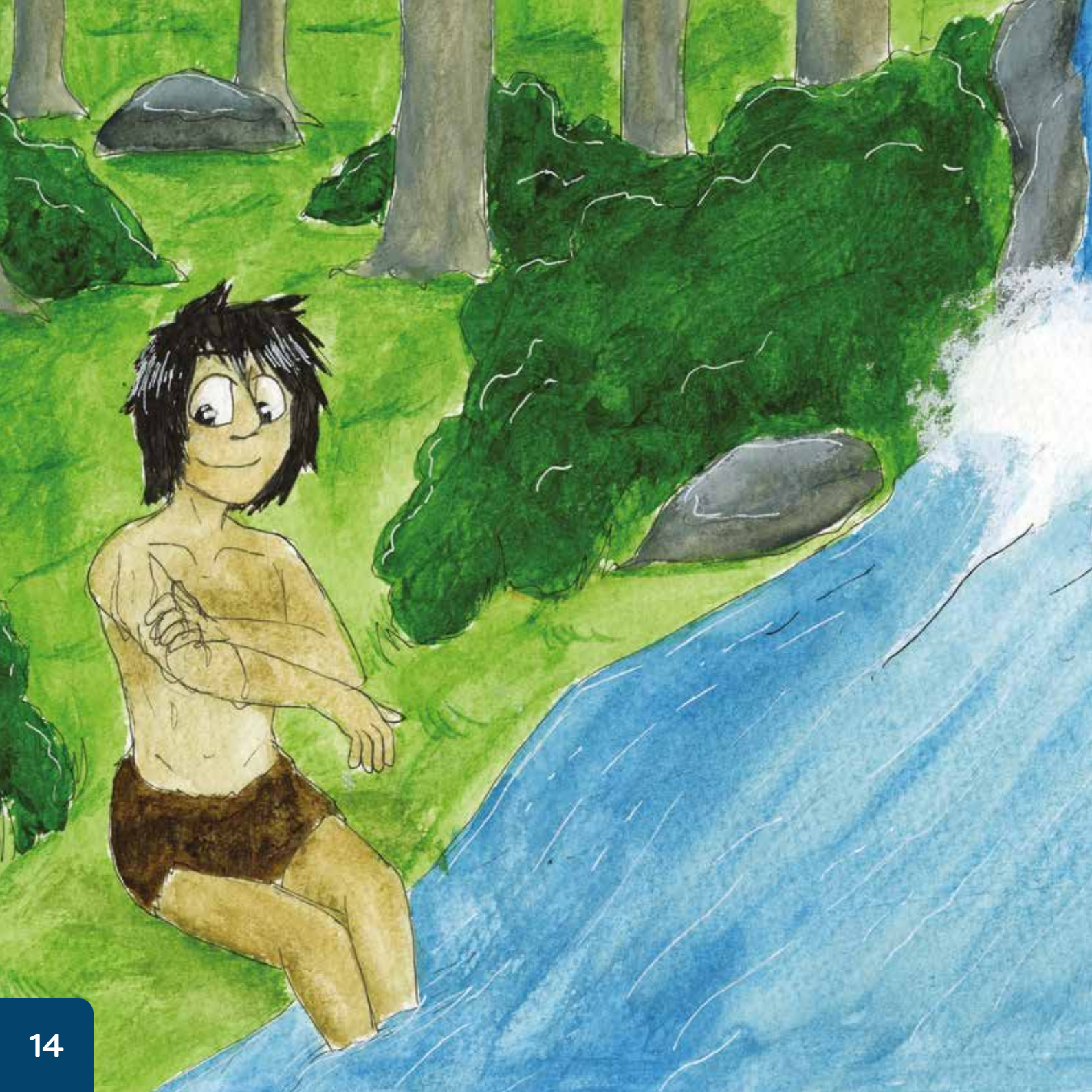
Faha, the holy man of the Salmon people, rose early, and stood outside his hut. The rays of the early morning sun caressed his face and matched his mood. He was happy, satisfied and proud. The great summer Gathering in honour of the Salmon God had ended yesterday. He congratulated himself; thanks to his leadership all had gone well. The salmon had returned in their thousands. There was no fighting and seven matches had been made between the boys and girls of all the bands. The Oyster people, the Flint people and the Eel people had gone back to their territories happy. Peace had been made with the Flint people. He was already thinking how he could make the Gathering next summer even greater.

Brekin was only half awake, in her parents' hut, when she realised her sister Dola wasn't lying beside her and then remembered Dola had gone away with the Oyster people and she felt sad. Dola had gone over the mountain, with her arranged match, without looking back. The hut seemed empty without her and it would be next year's Gathering before she would see her again. By then Dola would probably look like a stranger with her arms and legs painted and her hair arranged like an Oyster woman. She might even be carrying a baby in a basket on her back.

There and then Brekin decided she would always stay with her family beside the Bann. She would not accept a match with someone from another band. Instead she was determined to be matched with her cousin Shagan and have a new hut built beside their families.









Shagan was up early, his head still buzzing with excitement from the festivities of the past days at the Gathering. He went to wash in the river, and looking over at the racing waters of the Salmon Leap, he recalled the ceremonies carried out by Faha and others - the chasing of the bears, offerings to the Salmon God, the swim of the boys and girls who had been matched. As he dipped his head in the water he was struck with a pang of sadness when he thought of his friend, Coan, whose ashes had been thrown into the water at the Leap at high tide to float back home to the sea. Excitement returned as he dried his face and he longed for the months to go quickly to the Gathering next summer when he would come of age. Life had already changed; his brother had been matched with a girl of the Eel people and last night she had come to live in their hut. Shagan now had to sleep on the other side of the hut. His mother was delighted with her new daughter who could help with all the women's tasks.

After all the morning activities were completed, Faha summoned the families in the camp to assemble on the Hill. The location of the Hill was only a few steps from the hut cluster and overlooked the Bann. For all the Salmon people it was a sacred place. From this height, during the summer months, the Salmon God directed the salmon shoals up the Bann and over the Leap. It was also on the Hill, according to tradition, that many generations ago, the Salmon people built their first huts after they arrived there from the sea.

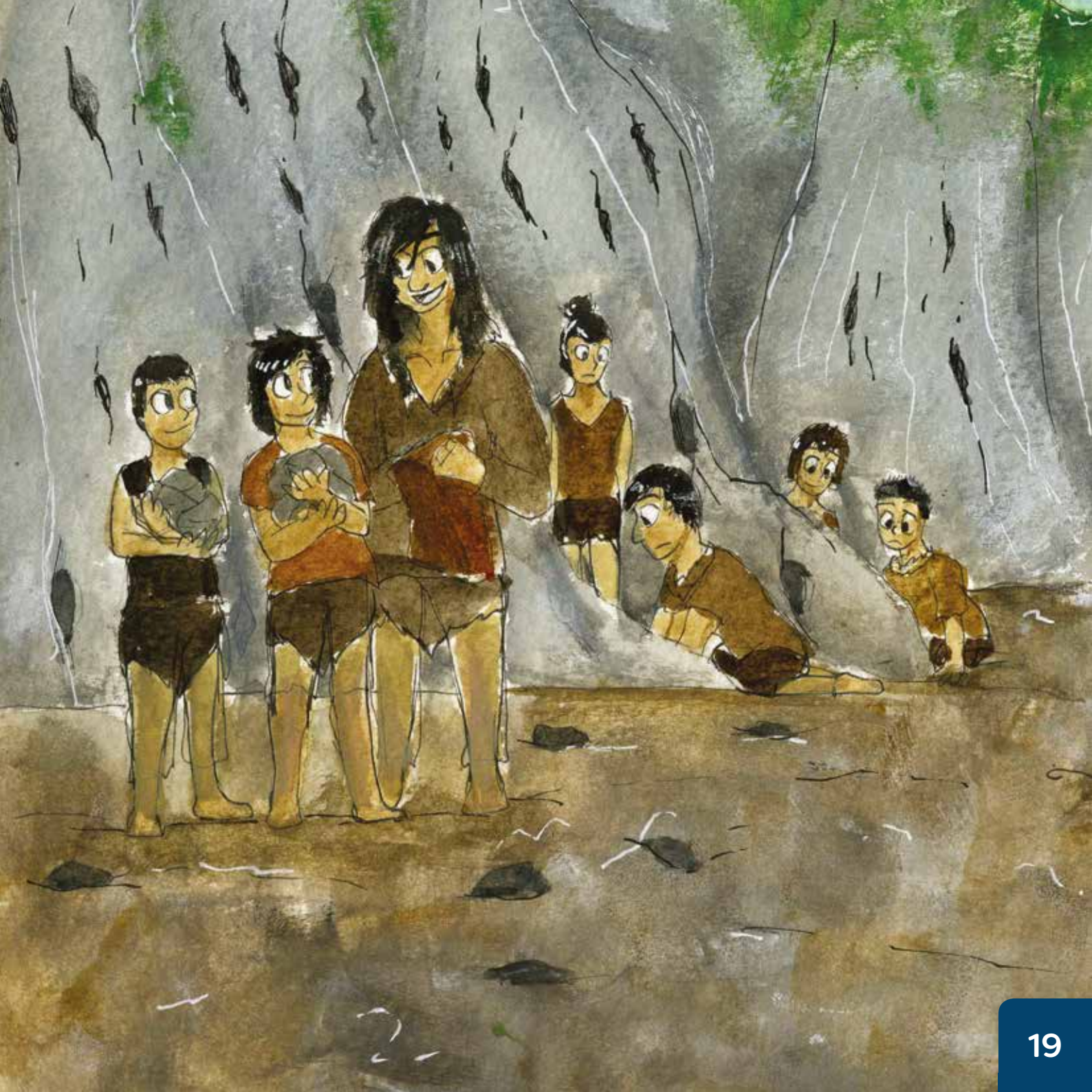




Faha's purpose in bringing the people to the Hill was to decide and organise the activities to be carried out during these last days of summer and the coming autumn. Soon the ripened hazelnuts had to be picked by the women and children and stored for winter. Before long the eels would choke the Bann on their race to the sea and baskets and traps needed to be set or repaired. All the arrangements for these jobs were discussed. Shagan's father and all the other men decided the most urgent need was to go to the coastal cliffs to get more flint, as nearly all their stocks were exhausted after the trading during the Gathering. It was agreed that all the families would walk to the sea within the next few days and spend two weeks there.

The people left early in the morning for the short journey to the coast. They walked along the narrow path through the hazel and birch woods and over the low hills to the shore. The children were excited and ran on ahead. By midday they could smell the sea nearby. As they rushed to the shore Shagan was first to get his feet in the water.

Next morning work started in earnest. As they had for generations, the men and boys began to gather flint nodules at the base of the Whiterocks. Sometimes the men would climb the cliff and knock out the larger flint nodules. It seemed as if there was a never-ending supply. The nodules were placed in baskets which were then carried on the men's backs to be dumped in a heap on the level ground below the cave. After a few hours, Shagan and some of the boys were sent to collect flint pebbles further along the shore.



While the men and boys were at flint work, the women, girls and smaller children gathered shellfish from the rocks and pools along the shore. Brekin's mother got a huge crab in a pool but poor Brekin hurt her hand knocking a limpet off a rock with a stone. After a few hours they had filled many baskets. Some of the shellfish could be eaten in the evening and some would be used as bait for fishing. They ate well that evening.

The following day Faha gave instruction for the preparation of a large store of salt that was needed to preserve the meat and fish for the long winter. A lot of seaweed had to be collected for making the salt. At low tide the group spread out along the shore to gather the fronds the men had cut with their flint blades. These were dragged, with the other seaweed, to a grassy bank above the beach to dry. Three days later it was ready for the fire.

In order to extract the salt, it was spread little by little on a flat stone and burned. After a large amount had been reduced to ashes it was allowed to cool and then placed in baskets lined with leaves.



As the time approached to go back to the camp on the Bann, the men started preparing the flint nodules before the journey. They first reduced the nodules in size and weight using hard hammer-stones from the shore. Then they broke up the pieces and expertly knocked off the thick white chalk coating to reveal the shining grey flint below. Soon all the large nodules were transformed into cone shaped cores.

Since he was a small boy Shagan had been taught how to do this, but in spite of years of trying, he was still far behind the skill and speed of his father and the other men. He consoled himself that he had become very good at woodwork and his father had praised some of the arrows and spears he had made.







Towards the end of their stay on the shore, Faha had a special project which he outlined to the men. Many years before, a great whale had been stranded on the shore to the west. For several months the stench from its rotting carcass was smelt over a considerable distance inland and now its huge white skeleton formed a prominent feature on the shore. Faha had the wonderful idea of extracting some of the larger bones and taking them back to the Hill to erect a monument to the Salmon God. As they walked along the beach towards the bones, a strange magical noise was heard which caused some alarm. Coming closer, however, it was realised that it was only the sea breeze blowing through the ribs of the great skeleton. They broke four ribs off the spine and the men carried them back to the Whiterocks.

Next day it was time to return to the Hill. A heavily laden procession of men, women and children formed for the journey back to their camp on the Bann. They walked mostly in single file with the flint, salt ashes, shells and many other findings from the shore in baskets on their backs.

At the head of the procession were the men with the great curving ribs of the whale. Faha beamed with satisfaction.

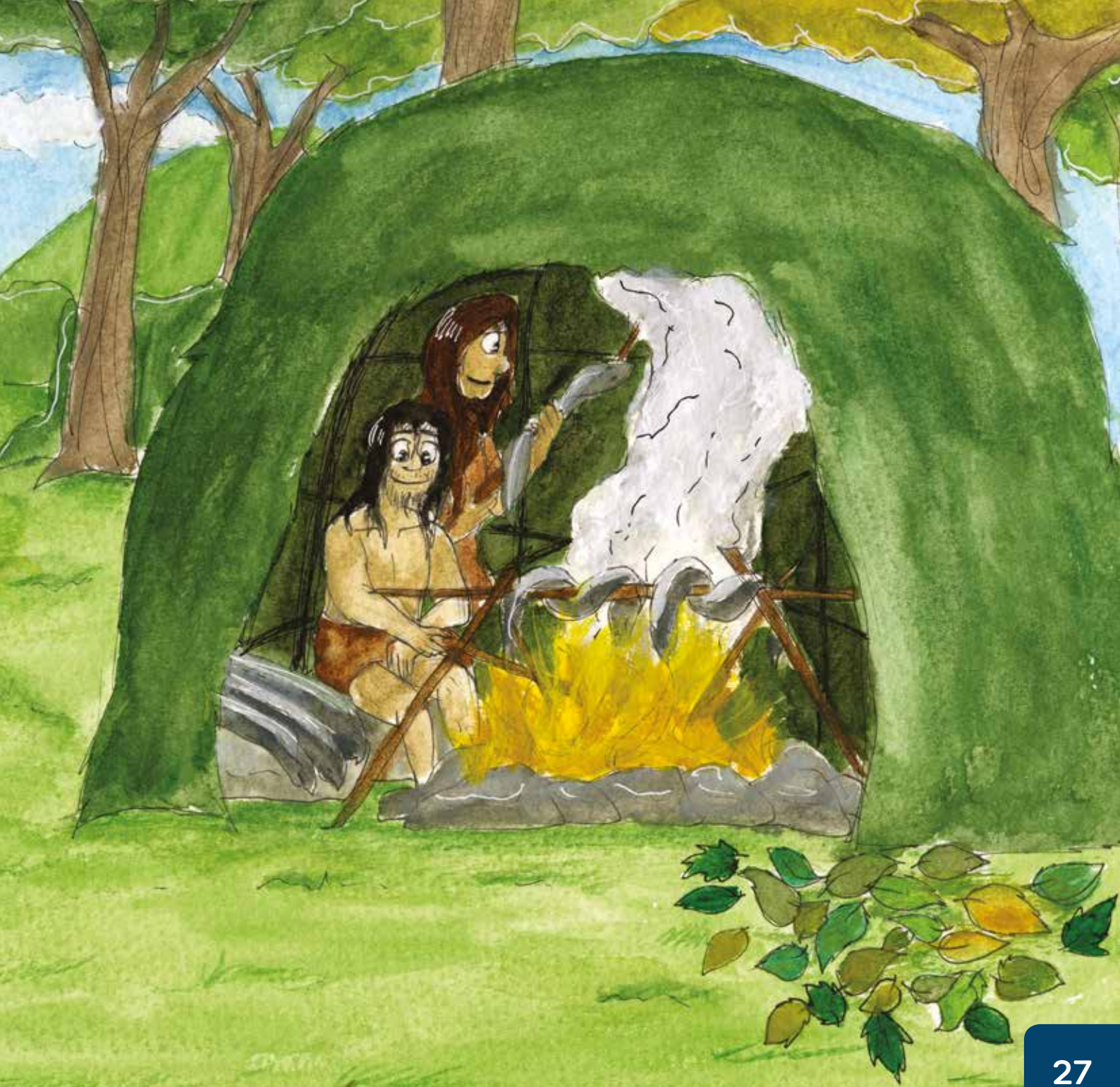
Once back on the Hill the time of the eels' run was approaching. Faha had calculated that in a few days' time there would be a new moon and if this was accompanied with a dark overcast and wet night the silver eels would try to flee to the sea. But the Salmon people knew their ways and were ready for the flashing stream of thousands of silvery eels. Down at the ford they placed long conical baskets in the narrow shallow channel and waited until nightfall. The boys were scolded for talking too loudly as the noise would frighten the eels and they would stay upstream so they talked in low voices about the mysterious Eel God who lived in the moon. Occasionally the submerged baskets could be seen shaking as the eels were being trapped, then quite suddenly the baskets began to twist and turn just like the wriggling eels. They knew quick action was needed to loosen the traps from the poles that fixed them to the river bed and drag them to the bank before they broke loose. Failing that all would be lost. With frantic effort they got them out of the water and the mouths of the traps tied tightly so the eels could not escape. The trapped eels were left on the bank until morning.

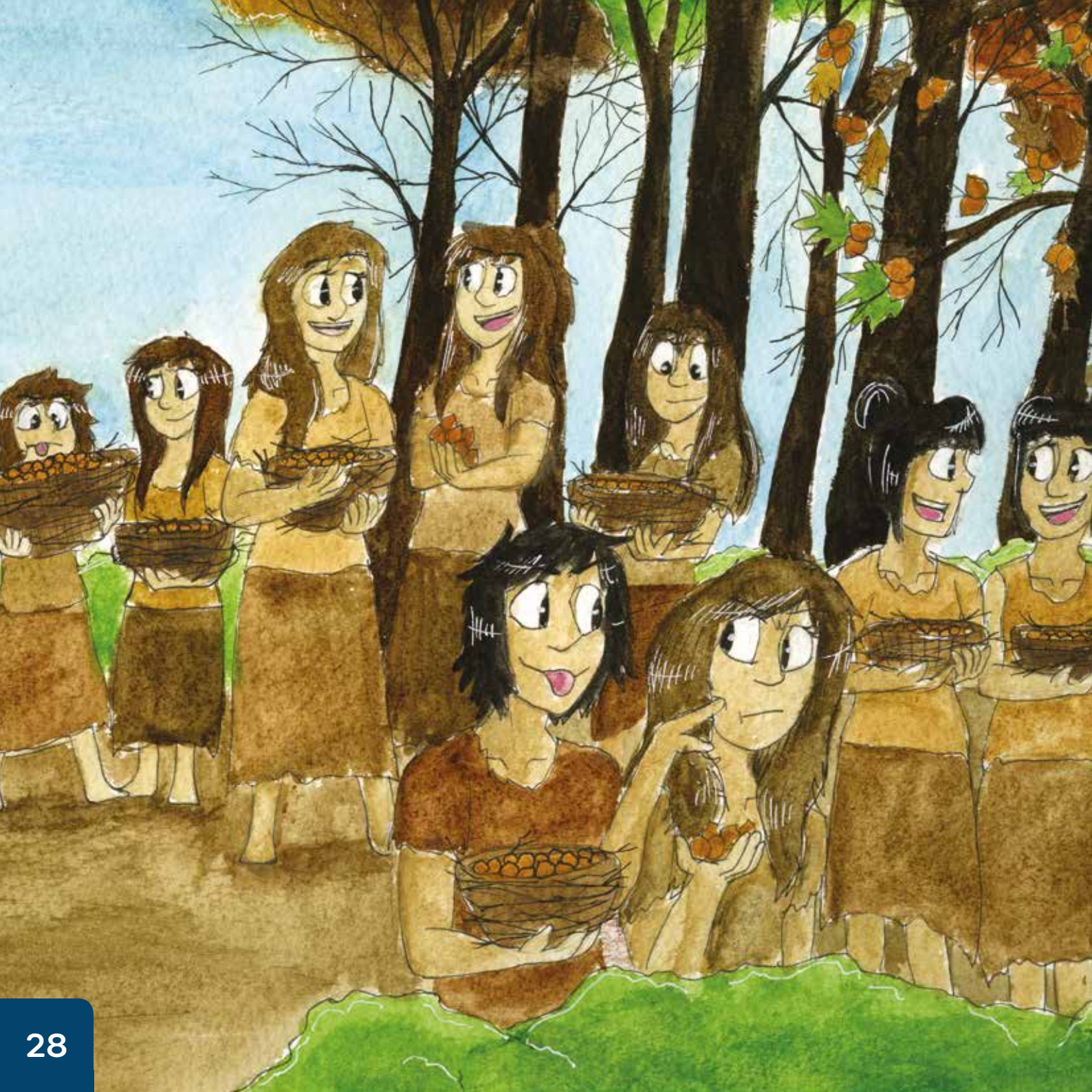
Early next day everyone, except Brekin whose injured hand still hurt, went down to the ford to skin the eels, many of which were still alive, and their heads were swiftly cut off with the flint knives. All around the bank, seagulls gathered and fought over the strewn heads. The eel skins were quickly peeled back and removed. These valuable skins would be dried for making ropes and binding sticks. Suddenly a cheeky otter ran out and grabbed a mouthful of eels.

The smoke hut was prepared to preserve the great catch for winter food. The fire was lit and when it was burning brightly, damp leaves were placed on it. The eels were hung on racks above the fire. Dense smoke filled the hut and the eels started to slowly turn a dark brown. The children were busy running backwards and forwards from the trees with armfuls of leaves and before long a sizable heap had been built up outside the smoke hut. For three nights a few of the men stayed up to feed the fire with leaves. Then the smoked and sooty eels were taken off the racks and distributed evenly around the huts where they were suspended from the roof. More freshly trapped eels were placed in the smoke hut and this went on until the eel run to the sea ceased.

During the smoking process Faha took time out to take Brekin down to the healing stone below the Hill. Her hand started to heal quickly and she was soon back helping with her various tasks.







Autumn

The leaves had started to yellow. This signalled one of the most important times of the year when the great harvesting of the hazelnuts took place. This source of food would help feed them in the coming months.

All the preparations had been made. Many baskets had been freshly made from willow and hazel rods by the women and girls. Pits had been dug around the camp by the men to store the precious nuts. Women and children gathered the nuts.

The little group of women and children headed out of the camp with their baskets on their backs, singing the special song dedicated to the nut harvest. It was one of many songs they would sing in the coming days as their hands groped through the branches pulling away the nuts and tossing them into their baskets. The work started on the hazel bushes growing on the slopes down to the Bann, to the south of the camp. They moved together through the woods systematically stripping the bushes. Children were placed on shoulders to reach the higher branches. The singing was loud and harmonious and echoed through the trees. It could be heard by the men, busy with their flint work, in the camp above. After a few days they had progressed far to the south along the river.

Normally Shagan enjoyed nut picking time, but now he was almost a man, he greatly resented being made to go to the woods with the women and children. Reluctantly he joined them but was still determined to outdo all the other gatherers and soon stopped sulking. No matter how fast his fingers moved along the branches, the older women filled their baskets much faster than him. After a few days he became bored and started to distract Brekin by playing around. Now and then he would sneak up and jump out from behind the tree she was picking. He even managed to persuade her to get on his shoulders to reach near the top of a tree as if she were a small child. At other times when she reached up to pull a bunch of nuts he would tickle her under the arms. Once he caused Brekin to spill her whole basket of nuts on the ground. This fooling around was too much for the mothers who had been watching him. They reprimanded him severely. He was sent back to the camp and told not to return. His father was both ashamed and annoyed at his son's bad behaviour. As a punishment he was sent to the north of the camp to gather berries on his own.

Early one morning a little girl standing in the middle of the huts looked up to the sky and saw a flock of geese flying south. They were quite low in the sky. Full of excitement she shouted out repeatedly, 'They're back, they're back'. The people rushed out to see what the fuss was about and quickly realized that there was a flock of geese overhead. Someone shouted to go to the Hill and everyone hurried there. The first flock had passed over, but coming down the Bann and passing over the Leap was another, followed by yet another. It was a truly awesome sight. Never had so many been seen on one day.



Shagan suppressed tears of emotion at the wondrous sight. His eyes were focused on the lead goose in each of the V formations and he hoped he could become a leader like it. Shagan's mother stood behind him and let her tears flow freely. She was from the Oyster people and measured her year not from Gathering to Gathering, but the return of the geese from the sea to her people's marshes around their great lough, beyond the mountain to the west.

Winter

Shagan was excited, but also a little bit afraid when the time came for the pig hunt. It was only his second. The women watched with worry as the men and older boys went off. Faha accompanied the men and all sang the chant for a successful hunt and a safe return. Shagan was full of memories of his best friend, Coan, who did not come back with them the previous year. It had been the first time their fathers had taken them on the hunt. The boys were told to stay well behind the hunters and watch and learn. The hunters had closed in on a group of young pigs and Shagan and Coan crouched down in excitement to observe the kill when suddenly, from the undergrowth in front of them, a huge boar with fierce tusks had rushed towards them. In a flash it impaled Coan driving its tusks deep into his belly. Coan's mouth opened wide but no sound emerged. The boar jerked his head violently and tossed him in the air and his body dropped to the ground. Shagan's screams had brought the men running back. Coan's father sunk to the ground beside the lifeless boy and went into hysterical grief. Coan was his only son and he would never have another. They carried his body home. Shagan stayed beside his funeral pyre all night and into the next morning when the ashes were gathered.

Fortunately, all went well this year and they encountered three herds of young pigs and killed many. There was great rejoicing and feasting when they returned. Shagan felt he was a man already and wished he didn't have to wait to the next Gathering to be declared one.





Shortly after the pig hunt Shagan's grandmother died. It had snowed for seven days, the first time in several years, and was extremely cold. They all huddled together in one hut to keep warm. The old woman lay struggling for life for a couple of days. Faha performed the ceremony for the dying and everyone in the hut sang the chant. After her last breath Faha stated she was the oldest woman who had ever lived among the Salmon people. All those who lived when she came as a young girl from the Flint people were dead. Some felt she could have seen near 40 summers. Her ashes were put in the little cylindrical basket she had woven. The basket was suspended from the roof of the hut where it would remain until it was time to send the ashes down the river to the sea at the Gathering.

One evening, after the leaves had fallen, the stars shone brightly. The sky was moonless and not a cloud was to be seen. It had been a long time since Shagan had seen them so bright even though the sun had barely set beneath the mountain to the west. He reckoned that come midnight the whole sky would be lit up with shining stars. Since he had been a little boy he had observed the stars and their movements closely and eagerly learned all Faha could teach him about them.

From an early age he learnt each star was the campsite fire of the dead, formed when their ashes flowed out to sea and were sucked up to the sky. These fires were the speckles on the back of the Salmon God who swam slowly across the sky every night. He knew as well the great band of tiny lights made up the Sparkling Path and these helped the recent dead on their journey to find the ancestral camps of their people. Since the death of Coan last winter, Shagan thought frequently about Coan's journey to find the home camp of the Salmon people.

On cold winter nights all the ancestors made big fires to keep warm, which was why the stars shone so brightly on clear cold nights like this.





A plan suddenly came into Shagan's mind. He thought how exciting it would be to be alone on the hill with Brekin on a night such as this. He whispered to her just before she entered her hut for the night, that she should secretly sneak out after all had gone to sleep and meet him at the edge of the camp. She didn't answer. Later when all was quiet in his hut, he crept out and silently waited among the bushes beside the huts. Just as he was about to go back to his hut, thinking she was not coming, she appeared. Excitedly he gestured her to be very quiet and took her hand as they walked up the hill. They sat down on the damp grass, and in a loud whisper, he told her to look up to the sky and help him find Coan's star among the thousands in the Sparkling Path. As they searched the stars he dared to put his arm around her. Suddenly they jumped up with fright when the booming and angry voice of Faha shouted at them to go back to their huts immediately and announced they were in big trouble. Faha had come out to the hill to address the stars on this cloudless night and suddenly realised he was not alone.

Early the next morning Faha called at both huts to tell the parents what had happened the night before. Brekin's mother was furious and her father struggled to control his anger. Brekin was afraid but defiant as she could not understand what was so wrong. Her father told her not to move and he went to find Faha. He asked him to come back to explain to the young girl why her behaviour broke with the customs of all the bands. Faha readily agreed and called all the families in the camp together and told them about last night's episode. He loudly stated that the children should never forget one of the most important rules of their people, that they cannot have a life partner from their own band. They must be matched with someone from afar. It was ordered that Brekin and Shagan should never be alone together from that day onwards.



Spring

One fine morning, the first geese flying north to the sea were spotted over the Bann. Faha ordered everyone to assemble on the Hill as the departure of the geese signalled the time for the ceremony that marked the coming of spring. About an hour later another formation was seen coming up the Bann. All the people formed themselves into a circle and performed the dance of the coming of the warm days. Faha led the chant which addressed the departing geese imploring them to come back in the autumn.

It was time for Shagan's brother's baby to be born. As was the custom, all men and boys, except Faha, had to distance themselves until after the birth. It was traditional that they spent the waiting hours fishing. They didn't go far, just down to the bank of the Bann below the Hill, out of earshot. Outside the birth hut Faha performed the birthing rituals, and repeated them throughout the day. Late in the evening, Brekin was chosen to go down to tell the men the good news. A baby girl had been born. The next day more geese were seen flying north above the Bann and because of this it was decided to call the baby Gosling.

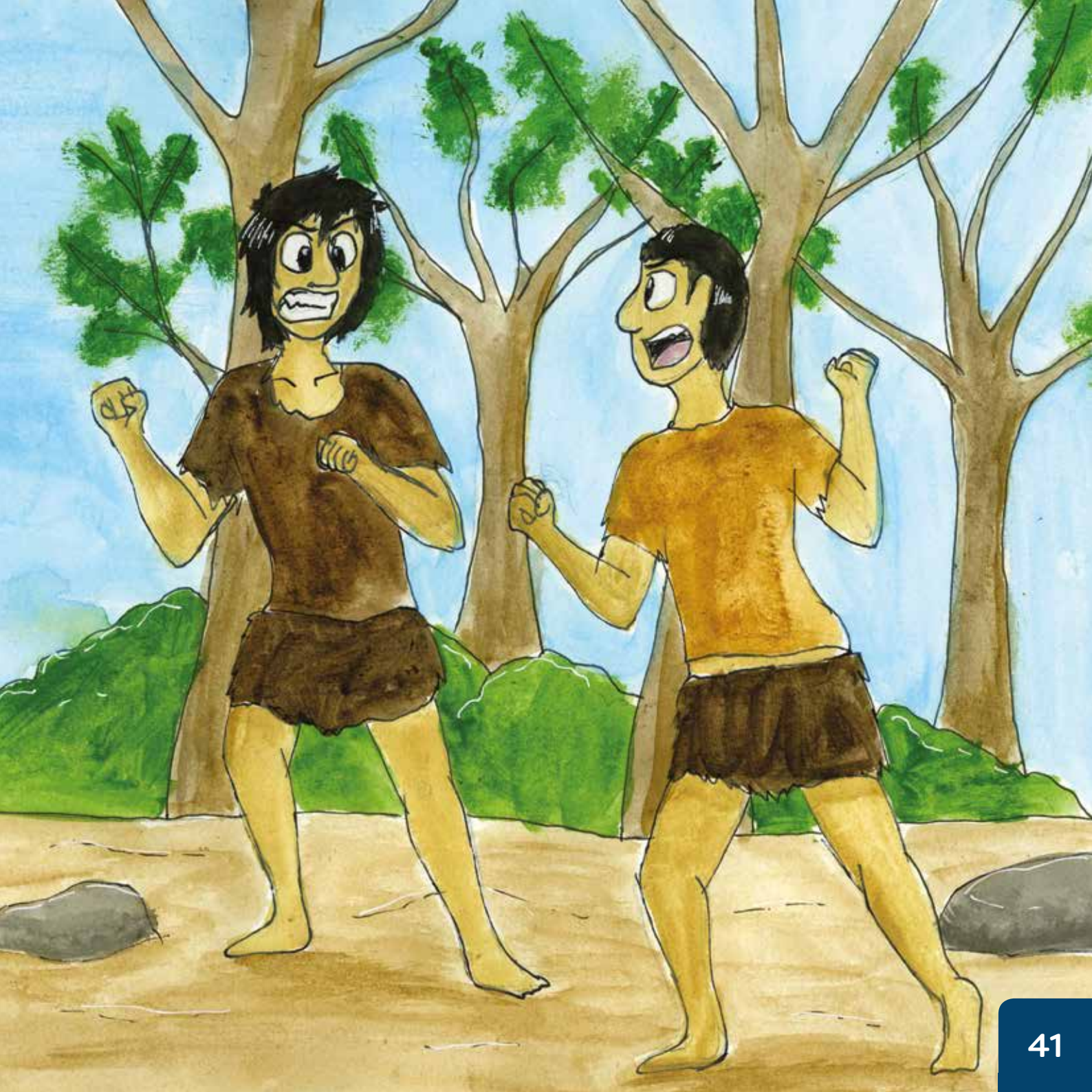
At about the same time, Brekin started the process of becoming a woman but she would not be officially recognised as one until the Gathering.

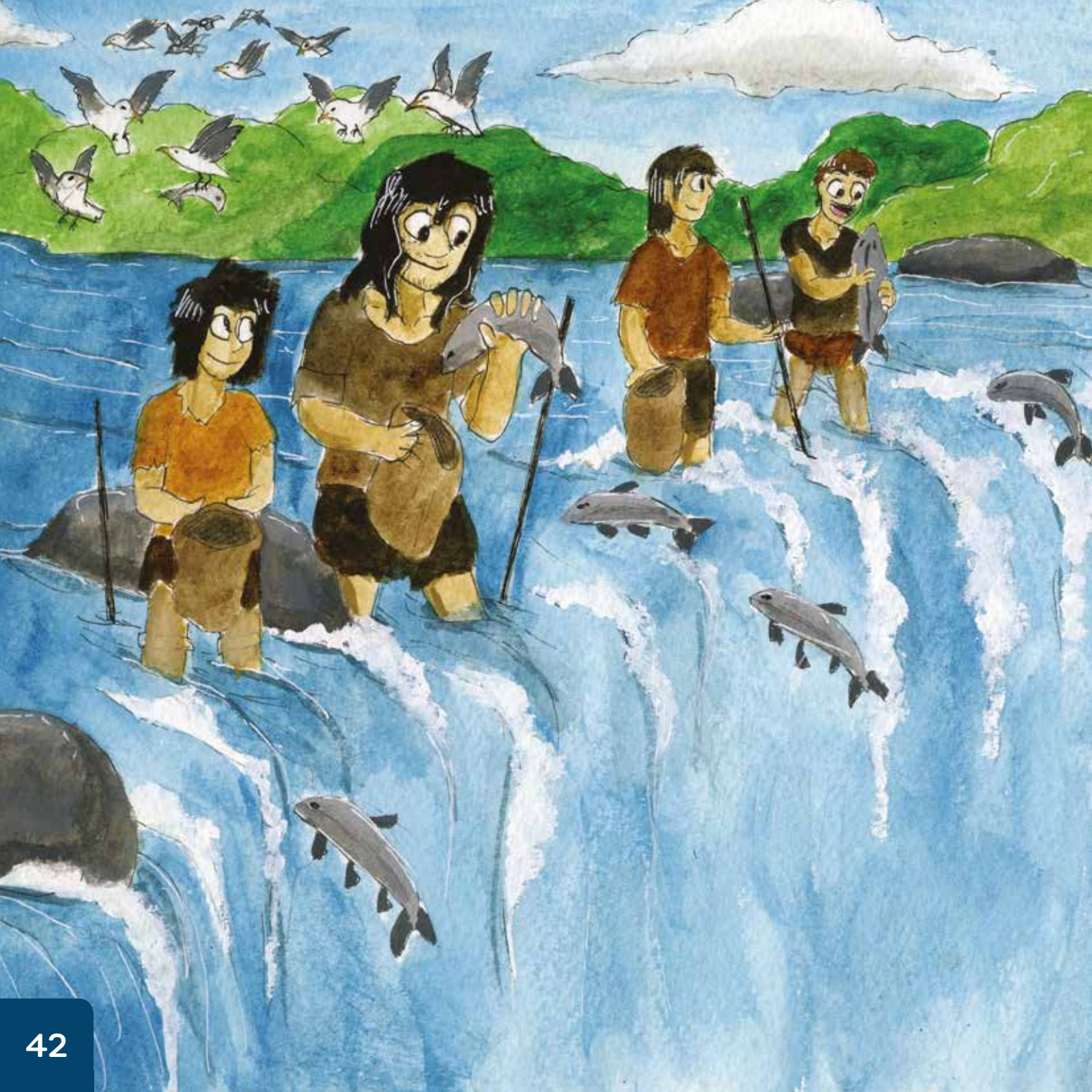
One day, to great surprise, a father and son of the Eel people arrived at the camp. They explained that their stocks of good flint were running low and would not last until the Gathering. They wished to trade for two baskets of good cores. The boy was tall and strong, and Brekin thought he had lovely teeth. At the next Gathering he would become a man. Around the fire that evening, Brekin listened attentively as the father talked about the land down the Bann and the great lough, full of fish, into which many rivers flowed. The boy was called Cala and, like his father, he spoke of how great the land of the Eel people was. This annoyed Shagan as no country could possibly be better than that of the Salmon people. The visitors stayed overnight and slept in Brekin's hut. She felt uncomfortable as the boy kept watching her and had a very restless sleep.

The next morning when the men were talking, Brekin took Cala for a walk on the Hill. Shagan watched them go and followed behind, but kept hidden. On their way back, he suddenly appeared. He was rude and told Cala that the Eel people were a very poor sort as they had no flint of their own, and all their girls were ugly and had teeth like pigs. Cala went for him and fists flew. They tumbled down the slope of the Hill with Brekin screaming at them to stop. They got up and Shagan's nose was bleeding. They headed back to the camp in silence. Shagan told his mother he had slipped down the Hill. Cala and his father left with their stock of flint.

The men had been knapping flint all winter, but now pressure was on to prepare tools for fishing and hunting during the coming months. They also had many tools to make to trade with the other bands at the Gathering. The men sat around in a circle chipping away. Some were making simple narrow blades which had multiple uses. The boys were making the very small flint parts for fish hooks, arrows and spears.









Their work was constantly inspected by the men, and much of it tossed aside as being below standard. Shagan's father was shaping a large axe from a core. As instructed, Shagan was watching his hand movement for the thousandth time. Then it was his turn to produce one. His father watched him closely which made him nervous. At last he decided the tool was finished and handed it over. Silently his father looked at it from every angle. Then he said, 'Well done son, almost as good as mine'. Shagan beamed with pride.

The first of the salmon had started appearing back from the sea. The men and boys spent their days down by the Bann and the Salmon Leap spearing the fish as they attempted to leap the waterfall to swim upstream. It was a busy and exciting time for all the people. The daily shoals got bigger and bigger. Overhead squalling gulls competed with the men to catch salmon. Shagan knew the time of the Gathering was getting close, as it coincided with the return of these large salmon shoals. This was the time when the Salmon God returned to the river.

The Gathering

Faha supervised the extensive preparation for the Gathering. One pressing concern for him was the erection of the great bones of the whale they carried from the coast last autumn. This was to be a monument to the Salmon God on the highest part of the Hill. He had an image in his head how it should look. The four ribs were placed to form an arch and the people found it hugely impressive, but Faha, though pleased, was not quite satisfied.



As the time approached the people started the process of elaborate grooming. New tattoos and piercings were painfully made on their bodies.

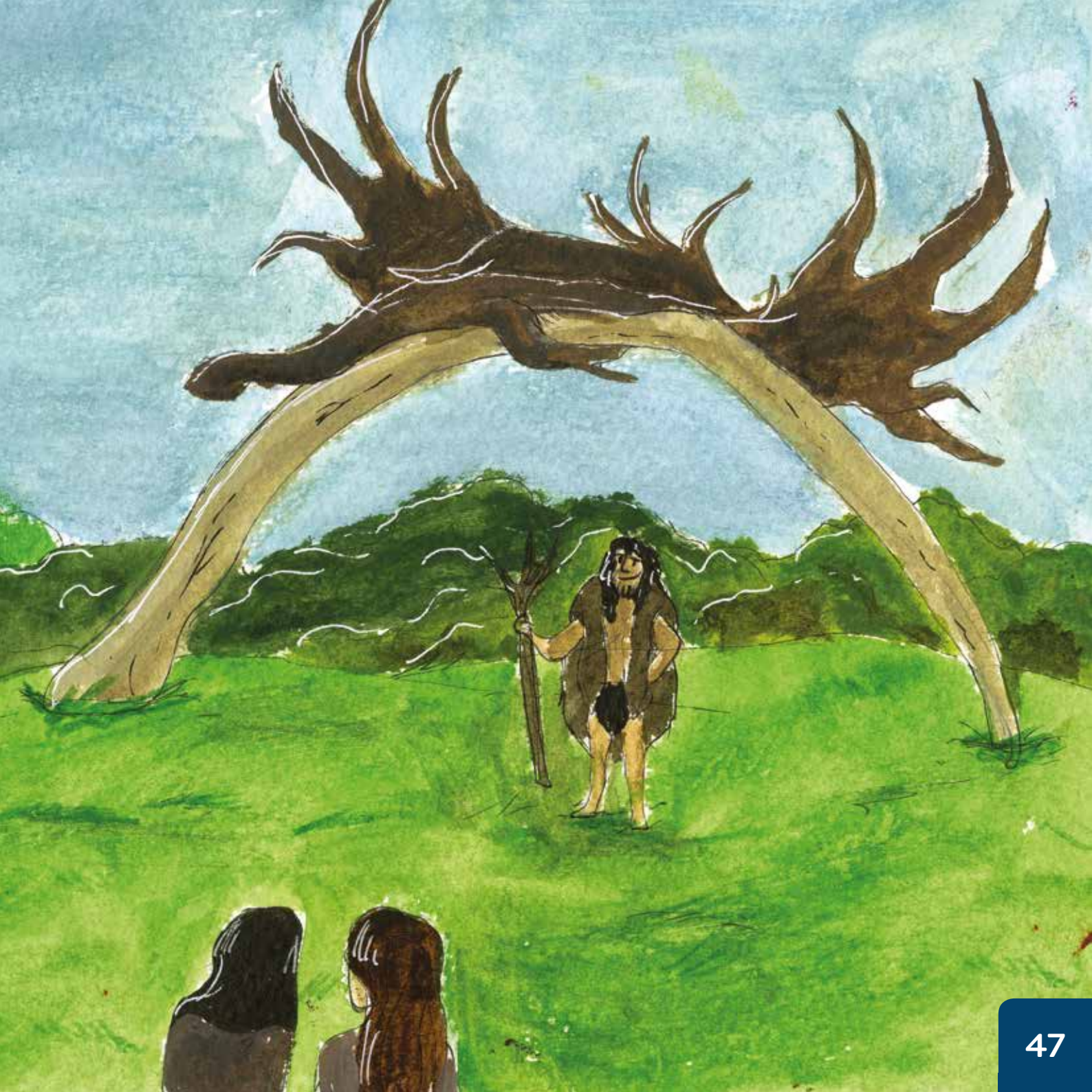
The first to arrive were the Eel people. They arrived unexpectedly early and approached from the east side of the river, not their customary route on the west bank. Shagan, who was on the Hill, was the first to see them and ran to the camp to spread the news. Everyone rushed to the Hill and commenced the screams of welcome. Soon all the Eel people had emerged out of the wood below. At their head were men who carried two huge branch-like objects that puzzled those on the Hill.

Soon they were all on the top of the Hill and Faha, standing under the whale bone arch, pronounced the official speech of welcome. The Eel people looked magnificent. Their faces and arms were decorated with their full ceremonial paint. Many wore elaborate feather headdresses or had oiled their hair until it shone. Their surprise early arrival meant that the Salmon people were not yet fully prepared and looked dull and drab in comparison. Then Brekin spotted Cala, who was smiling over at her. She blushed bright red and felt very flustered. She thought he looked quite handsome, the sides of his head were cleanly shaven and the hair on the top was oiled to stand up and he wore a cape of goose feathers over his shoulders. His face was painted in red stripes radiating out from his mouth. His big white teeth beamed towards Brekin. Shagan had also spotted Cala and glared at him.

The holy man of the Eel people replied to Faha's welcome, and presented their offering to the Salmon God of the two mysterious objects each of which was about the length of a man. He explained their history. A few months ago, after the great flood some of the Eel men were repairing a fish trap, which had been damaged, when they noticed something strange sticking out of the eroded river bank. They dug around it and were astounded with what they found. It looked like the gigantic horn of some large beast far bigger than a boar. Then they saw the point of another one sticking out of the bank. All agreed that such a magical pair of horns should be offered to the Salmon God at the Gathering. Faha was overjoyed, he felt that the Salmon God had directed the discovery and ordained it should be brought to the Hill. Ever since the erection of the Bone Arch he had the feeling that, remarkable as it was, something was lacking. Immediately he could visualise that the giant horns would make the perfect top for the arch. He ordered work to start immediately, and within a very short time the arch was crowned with the great horns.

That night around the fire, both Faha and the Eel holy man recalled stories from their youth that when their ancestors had come from the sea, they had hunted a huge beast with horns like the branches of a tree which had long disappeared from the island.

Shagan scanned his eyes over all the Eel people. His eyes stopped abruptly at a shapely young girl. Her bright hair shone and was interwoven with feathers. Around her neck she wore an elaborate necklace of coloured shells. Her brows and lips were painted red. She was laughing with the girl beside her and he noticed her big white teeth. His eyes followed her as she moved around but she only gave him a fleeting sideward glance. He found out that her name was Hela.



Two days later, in late afternoon, the Oyster people appeared on the west side of the ford and the people assembled on the Hill to welcome them. They waded across the water at the ford and started to walk up the slope to the Hill. Brekin spotted her sister Dola. She was walking proudly with a baby on her back. Brekin, crying with joy, rushed down the slope and into her arms.

The Flint people were the last to appear. Faha was very relieved when they arrived at the camp, entering it from the path through the woods from the north east. Although they lived close to the Salmon people, and indeed were closely linked in blood, relationships in recent years had not been good. A few years past the Flint people had tried to stop the Salmon people taking flint from the shore at the Whiterocks. They wanted to control all the flint sources for themselves. Faha thought peace had been made at the last Gathering when the Flint people had agreed to leave the Salmon people in ownership of the Whiterocks if they did not take flint from further east. He was afraid that they were going to renege on their agreement and not come to the Gathering. Faha recalled, with concern, that the people of the eastern shore, and those of the great sea loughs to the south east, had stopped honouring the Salmon God a long time past. Thus, when the large and proud Flint band appeared out of the wood his heart leapt with joy.

The first major ceremony of the Gathering was the casting of the ashes of the dead into the river below the Leap at high tide. The Eel people had lost three members since the last Gathering: an old man, an old woman and a young mother who had died in childbirth. One by one their ashes were sprinkled from the little baskets. Then followed the Flint people who had lost two of their people. Similarly, two had gone from the Oyster people.

The only ashes from the Salmon people were those of Shagan's grandmother and he was chosen to scatter them into the current. As the ashes flowed out slowly on the turning tide, the people chanted the words that the stream would take their spirits gently out to sea and then the wind would lift them up to the sky to find the camps of their ancestors. Faha said it would take many weeks, perhaps longer, before one would see their fires in the Sparkling Path above.



The next day, the boys who were to become men were initiated. This was a profoundly secret ceremony. Shagan and Cala, and five other boys, were taken to a hidden place in the forest to the east at daybreak, with seven men of mature age. They returned at nightfall fully transformed into men.

They were under a lifelong binding oath never to reveal what happened during the ceremony and no one was permitted to ask them. Cala and Shagan had now become firm friends and he discovered that the girl Hela was Cala's sister.

Over the days of the Gathering the different bands exchanged items. The Oyster people had brought beautiful shells from the shores of their great sea lough to the west. The Eel people brought white and red powder for paint. The Flint people brought a large store of flint cores. The host and the senior band, the Salmon people, had an array of finely crafted flint and wooden tools. The trading was brisk.

Among the most important activities of the Gathering were the ceremonies to honour the Salmon God and the matching of the boys and girls. Seven boys and six girls had reached maturity at this Gathering. A young woman, whose man had drowned while fishing, made up the numbers and no boy would be left without a partner.

The matching ritual began when the parents of the boys and girls spent the day observing them to help decide on a possible partner. An offer was then made to the parents of the girl they wanted to match with their son. Faha supervised the process of selection and ensured no closely related persons were matched and acted as mediator between the parents. It was up to the girl's parents to make the final decision who to accept.

The relationship between Brekin and Shagan had slowly started to change since their enforced distance after their secret meeting on the Hill. Brekin was confused about the strange feeling and longing she had for the Eel boy Cala who had visited with his father. She still felt very close to Shagan but there was no excitement in her feelings, and now he was like the brother she never had.

Shagan's feelings faded more slowly. Indeed it wasn't until he saw Hela on the Hill that his longing for Brekin was replaced by a desire for this exciting Eel girl.







On the last day of the gathering, the swimming ceremony of the matched boys and girls took place. The custom had been ritualised generations ago as a symbol of the joint journey they would make as they struggled through life together and was rigidly observed. Brekin had thought of this day since she was a little girl and now it had come. But it was not Shagan who stood beside her by the river bank down at the ford but Cala.

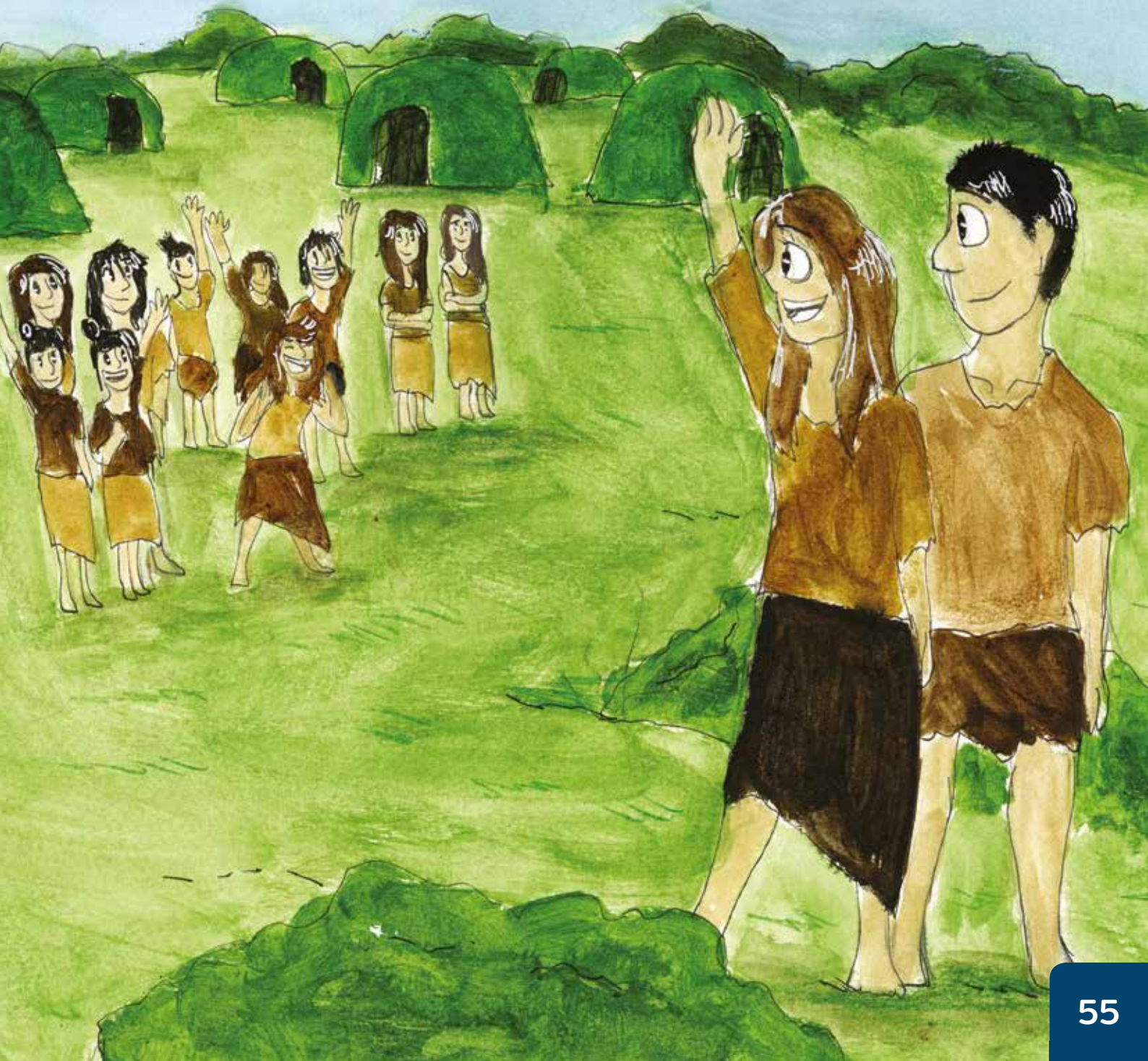
When he judged the high springtide was in full flow, Faha gave the order to the first couple to jump into the channel and start the swim together to the Leap. Shagan and Hela were the first to go. Hela was a strong swimmer and was able to keep up with Shagan who never had to slow down for her. Five of the other couples went after them at short intervals. The last to go were Brekin and Cala. With hands joined they plunged into the river. When they surfaced, Brekin glanced over at Cala and laughed at how his face paint was smudged over his face, and his hair had collapsed. He laughed back at her and they began to swim. Brekin was not a strong swimmer and Cala held back so she could keep up with him.

Before the last couple had left the ford the first couple had swum to the bottom of the Leap. The people had assembled on both side of the waterfall to witness this final ceremony of the Gathering. A great cheer went up when Shagan and Hela emerged from the stream and started to struggle up the slippery rocks of the Leap against the strong current of water. The crowd laughed and jeered as the couple fell and tumbled down the boulders and had to start the climb anew. After much struggle they got to the top and embraced. The crowd roared and clapped in congratulations.

The Gathering would end when the last couple reached the Leap. This great honour went to Brekin and Cala. On arriving at the bottom of the rocks, Cala put his arm firmly around Brekin and pulled her up with him as he made the climb. He got to the top almost effortlessly. The people applauded this great show of strength and determination. Brekin's father smiled contentedly, satisfied he had chosen well for his daughter.

The time had come for the Oyster, Eel and Flint people to go home and the Salmon people to sing the farewell chant. Brekin and Cala walked off south with the Eel people. In her excitement she almost forgot to look back but when she did, she saw Shagan and Hela waving from the Hill. She would see all her people again at the next Gathering.

And that was it for another year.



Glossary

Animals

There was a very small range of animals on the island of Ireland 10,000 years ago. The only sizable meat animal was the wild boar or pig. This made fish, and fishing, of great importance and the Mesolithic people at Mountsandel would have been expert fishermen, especially for salmon and eels.

Artefact

This is an archaeological term for any object which is made, or fashioned, by the hand of man.

Bear

The brown bear is known in Ireland from Late Glacial times and down through the Mesolithic. It is still unclear when it became extinct on the island.

Climate

The climate in Ireland, 10,000 years ago, was a little warmer and dryer than today.

Core

A core is the archaeological term for the artefact produced when a nodule of flint has been reduced in size by chipping (knapping) flint blades and flakes from it. By its shape and scar patterns it is possible to understand much about the technical skill and culture of the people who produced it.

Eel People

The Eel people are based on a social group who lived inland along the Lower Bann, especially around Lough Beg and Lough Neagh. This part of the Bann contains some of the best places for trapping eels.

Fish Smoking

The summer runs of salmon and autumn runs of eels produced a glut of food which would not be available at other times of the year. One of the main methods used in the past for preserving the fish for use at times when food was short, was smoking above a fire.

Flint

Flint is a hard-grey rock which is found in chalk. In Ireland, one of the main areas where it is found is along the County Antrim coast. When chipped it produces fragments with very sharp edges, making it ideal for the manufacture of many types of essential tools.

Flint People

The Flint people are based on Mesolithic people who lived along the North shore to the east of the Bann. Their country contained some of the best outcrops of white limestone containing flint on the island of Ireland and thus may have provided them with power and status.

Great Irish Elk

The 'horns' brought to the Gathering by the Eel people were most likely the antlers of the Great Irish Elk. This was a giant member of the deer family which stood over 2m tall and had antlers with a span of up to 3.66m. It appears to have become extinct about 11,000 years ago, but many well preserved antlers continue to be found in Ireland in the banks of rivers, at the bottom of lakes and elsewhere.

Holy man

Many early communities had a figure who acted as their spiritual leader and preserver of their laws and traditions. Among the First Peoples of North America he was called a shaman and this term has been adopted by archaeologists and anthropologists to designate those in other societies who play a similar role. Faha is portrayed here as the shaman of the Salmon People.

Hunter-gatherers

Mesolithic people did NOT grow crops or keep domestic animals. Instead they got their food from hunting animals, fishing and gathering nuts, seeds and berries.

Landscape

The Early Mesolithic landscape was very different from that of today. It was largely dominated by a cover of hazel and birch woodland.

Marriage

Like many early people, the Salmon people practised 'marrying out' of their own social group where possible to avoid genetic deficiencies.

Mesolithic

The Mesolithic period in Ireland dated from about 10,000 to 6,000 before present (7,800-3,800 BC). It is conventionally divided on the island into the Early Mesolithic (10,000-8,000 BP) with flint made in the Narrow Blade tradition and the Later Mesolithic (8,000 to 6,000 before present) with a Broad Blade tradition. Mountsandel belongs to the Early Mesolithic.

Microliths

These are the diagnostic flint artefact of the earliest part of the Mesolithic age. They are very small objects hence their name, and were used to create composite tools for hunting

and fishing. About 1100 of them were found during the excavations at Mountsandel.

Mobility

Evidence suggests that Mesolithic groups moved around the landscape for short periods at different times of the year but always had a base camp to return to. The site at Mountsandel is a base camp.

Nodule

A nodule is an unworked flint pebble, or stone, which forms the natural raw material from which a flint tool is fashioned. The process of working on a nodule is called knapping. During the first stage of knapping some of the exterior of the nodule is knocked off to form a core. Further skilled knapping is needed to make a finished tool like an axe or microlith.

Oyster People

The Oyster people are envisaged as Mesolithic settlers living to the west of Mountsandel on the other side of the Sperrin Mountains. Their landscape included a large shallow sea lough with rich oyster beds which provided a reliable source of food. Conditions

for oyster beds occur at only a few places along the North Coast, mainly Lough Foyle, so they are portrayed as adopting the oyster as the symbol of their identity.

Postholes

When a post rots or when it is removed it leaves the hole which gradually fills with soil of a darker colour, or of a different nature, than the surrounding earth. This allows the archaeologist to detect it.

Radio-carbon dating

A scientific dating method, also called C14 dating, based on carbonised organic material. It is based on the half-life of an isotope of carbon named C14. This decays at a predictable rate and from this it is possible to calculate the date when the organic material died and thereby also date the context it was from. Mountsandel was dated from hazelnut shells to about 7,700 BC. This indicates it dates to around 10,000 years ago.

Salmon People

The Salmon people are based on the Mesolithic settlers who lived at

Mountsandel, above the great natural fish trap provided by the Salmon Leap. The Bann was formerly among the great salmon rivers of Europe, and fish provided a tremendous source of food to those who lived along its banks.

Sea level

Sea level was lower at this period, so the coastline was further out than it is today. This means that some of the land on the coast occupied by early man is now under the sea.

The Sparkling Path

The Milky Way - 10,000 years ago there was almost zero light pollution on cloudless nights and the stars shone brilliantly.



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