

THE BOAT

The boat was unbelievably small. I stared at it, pulled onto the stones, as vulnerable as a seal pup. Its white hull was just out of the reach of the waves that crashed into the tiny cove. Everything seemed small except the waves; small boat, small cove, small catch and small man. I watched as the fisherman stretched into his boat and pulled out a few crabs. Was that all? I could not believe that this man had risked his life at sea for so little reward.

He turned away from the boat and stumbled up the steep beach towards me. He was old and lined but not stooped. He lifted his eyes to me and smiled with them—piercingly bright and sharp but tired, rimmed with red from the wind and the salt and from age. I wasn't sure whether I should speak but some sympathy for his disappointment had to be expressed.

“Not much,” I said.

The man stopped and drew breath as if to speak but thought better of it.

After a pause he said, “Capricious, she is,” and he sat down next to me. Not the kind of word I’d expected from him. “I’d never heard that word until a few years back,” he continued. “A lady stood where we are and used it to describe the weather. One minute it had been sunny and warm and then driving hail hit us hard. I knew then it was the word for the sea out there.”

“It’s certainly wild now. I was thinking how small your boat is. You’re a brave man.”

“Or foolish. She nearly got me this time.”

“How come?”

“This cove is the safest on the whole coast in every wind bar one.”

“What’s that?”

“South-east. They are rare here, very rare fortunately. But when they hit, nothing can go out. And if you try to come back in, the wind can drive you onto those rocks. The wind had been whipping up from the south-west when I went out and it was a bit nasty but I’ve been in worse. Coming back in I was just entering the shelter of that there headland,” he waved his clutch of crabs towards the cliffs, “when it changed instantly. I was so nearly on them rocks. Capricious, eh?”

“Why do you do it?”

“No choice. It’s in the blood. Take fishing out of me and you take my life. Father, grandfather, his father and beyond. All did it. Sardines then. I’ve seen them like silver treasure filling boats so full you’d think they’ve got to sink. Now all we’re allowed is crabs and a few bits.”

“Anyone to take on the family tradition?”

“No. One son, he sits at a computer all day. The other drives a bus. When I stop, that boat stops.”

“Sell it?”

“No. She was built in 1922 for Grandfather. Had it built in Meva. Dad had some work done on it when he took it on and I’ve had it ... Well, doesn’t warrant talking about. If it can’t stay in the family, I’ll give it to the sea.”

The old man stood up and looked long and hard at the waves. As he turned to go, he threw a crab onto my lap. “Present from the old lady,” he said. I didn’t know if he meant the sea or his boat. It was his biggest crab. He’d given me his best.

Two years later, I went back to the cove. The sea was flat calm and the cliffs were gold in the early evening sun. Something was missing. No boat. I wondered if the fisherman was out fishing in safety; I hoped he was getting a good catch this time. Or perhaps he’d already given his boat to the sea.

There was only one cottage just above the beach and I stopped to talk with the lady who stood in her porch. I asked her about the fisherman.

“He did what he always said he would. Gave his boat to the sea.”

“And him?”

“Delivered it personal, he did.”

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