

Francesco D'Adamo

The crossing



il castoro



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La traversata

English translation by Brenda Porster

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Chapter one

That night Ezechiele woke up feeling strangely agitated, as though something dangerous had happened or he'd had a bad dream.

But there wasn't any danger – he was at home, in Scuglizzi, a small village where everyone knew everyone else and the front door could stay open all night long -- there was no need for locks, alarms or any of the contraptions people living in large towns used. He could hear the sound of the sea outside – the sea that had been his lifelong companion, for he'd always been a fisherman.

And it hadn't been a bad dream, either.

Ezechiele was very old and he'd had the same dream

for years: he was driving his red Guzzi motorcycle in the cool of the night along a curvy road that skirted the cliff. He was enjoying himself as much as he did when as a boy he'd bought the bike used from the pharmacist in Montescuro, a village perched on top of a mountain, paying a little every month because he didn't have a red cent.

Then every night at a certain point in the dream he wasn't on the cycle anymore. In fact, at that point his wife Caterina, who'd passed away four years before after a short illness, came into the dream.

In the dream Caterina wasn't the beautiful young girl he'd met at the fair in Saint Rosalia and had taken for a ride on the red bike on a night with were millions of stars in the sky. No, she was the way he remembered her in the last days of her life, an old woman with black hair just touched with white and a web of wrinkles around her eyes. He remembered her that way because he'd loved her until the very end.

In the dream Caterina squeezed his arm gently and said, "Get up, Ezechiele», just as she'd done for almost fifty years when she was alive.

Then Ezechiele woke up.

It was that strange hour when it's no longer night and not yet day, when the dark line of the sea blends with the sky and they can't be separated yet. But dawn

is near, and the sea birds can feel it and they start flying around and shrieking. Ezechiele had woken up at just that time all his life, because it's the hour when fishermen put their boats out to sea, calling out to each other in the dark from one prow to another. And maybe it was also the hour when the fish awake – supposing that fish do sleep, rocked deep down under the waves.

Even now that he was old and didn't go fishing any more Ezechiele had kept the same habit.

That night he sat down on the bed to look for his slippers in the dark.

But he was still troubled, because he had the impression that Caterina had woken him earlier than usual. This was very strange, because it had never happened before. For fifty years Caterina had never been wrong.

He got up and went into the kitchen, turned on the light and started to prepare the strong, dark coffee his wife had always made and that he'd had to learn to make for himself now. In the kitchen there was a big noisy alarm clock on the cupboard. He stared at it. It was true -- Caterina had woken him more than half an hour ahead of time.

Ezechiele drank his coffee, strong and very sweet the way he liked it, sitting at the old marble-topped table.

What did it all mean? It couldn't only be by chance.

Ezechiele's house overlooked the village beach, so there was always some sand on the floor. He didn't mind the sand, or the salty air that swelled the wooden window and door frames. Caterina, on the contrary, never stopped cleaning and complaining about it.

You could hear the sea thundering. It had started to grow the evening before and had continued to swell during the night, driven by the howling wind. A real storm was raging by now. The fishing boats wouldn't be able to go out that morning. The men would spend the day at home, with that lost expression and those big hands fishermen have on these occasions.

Ezechiele finished his coffee, got dressed, put on his oilskin jacket and went to the front door.

It really was too early. Even the lights of the Portside Café were still off.

The Portside Café was the first thing open in the morning, to let the fishermen have something strong and hot to drink while they chatted and exchanged the news before going out to sea. At that improbable hour it was the only light on in the whole village, like a lighthouse in the night, guiding the men coming out of their houses wearing oilskins and woollen caps, to follow the narrow lanes that led to the dock where the boats were tied up.

Ezechiele was still a bit worried. If Caterina had wo-

ken him up early it meant that something strange had happened.

He rushed out of the house.

The beach was almost covered by long waves that reached the boatyard where the smaller boats were tied. Then came the rubber dinghies and the canoes for the tourists who would start arriving in a few days.

Though it was June the air was still chilly. Ezechiele huddled into his oilskin, feeling the foam from the waves wrapping themselves around his feet.

Despite the dark, in the nearby harbour the mast-tops of moored fishing boats could be seen waving and banging violently, and you could hear the cables cracking in the wind. The *Esmeralda* was there with the others -- his boat, a mere shell he'd managed to buy after years of saving and scrimping. He'd gone fishing on it for forty years, but he no longer used it except for a short turn every once in a while, since he was too old now to go out to sea.

No, no one would go out that day, it was far too dangerous.

The rising sun shot its first rays on the narrow edge between the sky and the sea, and almost at the same instant the lights of the Portside Café went on. The sea was a black well striped with white foam.

Nothing could be seen yet.

Ezechiele listened hard. There was something wrong.

A noise. Besides the breaking waves, the hawsers banging against moored boats and the shrieking of seagulls, there was something else.

They were shouting.

You could hear them in the pause between one gust of wind and the next.

He listened harder.

There were people shouting in the sea. It sounded like a lot of people.

Ezechiele ran towards the moored boats where the great headlights used for emergencies were kept. He found one, turned it on and managed to roll it up onto its base. Pointing it towards the sea, he swept the ray of light over the surface, trying to see something. Nothing except black waves and foam.

Maybe he'd imagined it.

In fact, the wind was so strong he couldn't hear anything, and the gulls flying in circles never stopped shrieking.

But if Caterina had woken him early there had to be a reason, he repeated to himself.

The dawning light came up over the horizon, as it had always done since the beginning of time. It was yellow and orange.

The wind fell for an instant.

They were shouting – this time he was sure.

He pointed the light at the cliffs on the side of the bay where the waves broke, and there he saw something. It looked like a large boat, black against black, so it was hard to distinguish, and there were men on board. He swept the light over the sea again and saw the men waving their hands desperately.

The boat could run ashore, it could hit up against the cliff and sink. The cliff was twenty or thirty yards from the shore. A mere trifle. But not with that sea. And maybe the people on the boat couldn't swim. In any case, they were clearly panic-stricken.

Ezechiele walked back up the beach, feeling the sand slipping under his feet while he moved as fast as he could. It was horrible to be old, you become slow as a snail. He circled the moored boats and went back to the road, his heart beating full speed. He climbed onto the spur of the cliff that enclosed the bay on the side opposite the port, hurrying to reach the great bronze bell that always rang out to send signals to the men at sea and sound the alarm to those on land.

He grabbed the heavy clapper.

The light was spreading over the sea.

DONG!

DONG!!

Ezechiele beat the clapper against the bronze of the bell with all his might.

Wake up, for the love of God, wake up!

The first lights went on in the houses and a few windows opened.

What's going on?

DONG!

DONG!!

Hurry up!

The first men came running.

“Over there”, pointed Ezechiele.

The sun burst out of the dark shadows and aimed a finger of light at the shipwrecked men. Now they could be seen.

There it was: a large boat, a heap of wood that had crashed into the cliff and was threatening to sink from one minute to another under the force of the waves. There were people aboard. Their black faces blended into the dark stains that still covered the sea.

A group of people had gathered on the beach. Some were gesturing to the people on the boat, “Jump!”. If they stayed on board the waves would surely crush them against the rocks, whereas if they jumped into the water it was only twenty meters to the shore, even with that sea...

But they didn't move and kept on shouting.

The boat rocked harder with every wave.

«We'll have to go in», said Ezechiele.

Chapter two

There wasn't time to put a boat into the sea – with each new wave the big boat caught on the cliff was going to pieces under the fury of the sea. In a few minutes it would sink.

«Let's make a chain,» said the men on the beach. «It's the only way».

«The sea is too rough.»

«We have to try.»

The youngest of the men stepped into the sea. They held hands to form a human chain, trying to resist the waves sweeping over them and tossing them from side to side. The thick rope that was passed to them at once got soaked and very heavy. They pulled it as far as they could.

The Giarresi brothers had to swim the last few yards

to the boat. They were water polo champions – they'd even played in the B league one year and water was their natural element. Some said they were amphibians, more at home in the sea than on land.

Ezechiele watched them from the shore, feeling old and useless.

By now the whole village was awake and a small crowd had gathered at the top of the dock to watch the rescue. It was growing light but there were still dark patches, and every once in a while the two brothers disappeared from sight, covered by waves and shadows. They weren't going to make it -- it was too much even for them.

Then Sante Giarresi gripped the side of the trapped boat, which was tilting at a dangerous angle, and tried to tie the rope to the prow. The sharp black rocks were frighteningly close -- all it would take was a high wave or an instant of distraction.

Then Salvo, the elder brother, arrived. The soaked rope was banging and swinging like a whip.

«Did they make it?», asked someone on the shore.

«It's impossible to see.»

Sante gave a sign to the younger men forming the human chain to let them know they could go back to shore and tie up the rope.

The men on the trapped boat stared wide-eyed at the rope, while the waves coming in from the open sea grew higher and higher. The bottom of the boat was going to pieces under the fury of the sea. Then the two most courageous, or the most frantic, gripped the thick rope and jumped into the sea. At once they were engulfed by the sea and swallowed water. They resurfaced coughing up water and fear, and began moving towards the shore, still holding on to the rope.

These are not people of the sea, thought Ezechiele, none of them can swim.

Then the others jumped into the sea, one by one, and now a long line of men was slowly moving towards the beach, holding the rope as tightly as they could.

Quick! quick!

Everyone got belt-deep into the water to help pull them out, and while the first of the drowning men fell exhausted onto the sand, gasping and searching for air, the sound of wood breaking up was heard over the thunder of the waves. As the boat crashed against the cliff, the wooden boards of the planking could be seen flying into the air before disappearing into the sea.

Did they all make it in time?, Ezechiele asked himself. Was there still anyone on board?

Who could tell?

One at a time the other survivors reached the shore. By now there were about thirty bodies stretched out on the beach, gasping for breath. Last of all, the Giarresi brothers came out of the water, too, their faces marked by fatigue.

The sun finally dispersed all the shadows. The young men who had taken part in the rescue took off their T-shirts and wrung them out, and the women brought towels.

The rope, which had come loose from the boat, was whipping the water and hissing like a sea serpent. Then the waves carried it out to sea.

No one felt like talking. They all stayed there in silence, feeling the first rays of sun warm on their skin.

Then one of the survivors, his clothes soaked with water and sand, stood up painfully on trembling legs and looked around, stunned. His eyes shone in his dark face and never stopped moving.

He looked at the men who were still drying off, he looked at the women facing the dock, at the houses and the masts of the boats swaying in the port, at that unfamiliar sun and that unfamiliar sea. Then he picked up a small bundle he'd somehow managed to carry with him, clutching it to his chest as if it were a treasure.

He gave a shake to the others, one by one, gesturing

to them, “Get up! Get up!”, and they all got unsteadily to their feet, picked up the bundles that had survived the fury of the sea and ran towards the opposite end of the beach.

«Where are you going?», shouted Ezechiele. «Stop! You needn't be afraid!»

But by then they'd reached the top of the beach and climbed over the dunes, slipping on the sand, and taken to the road. From there on it was open country, and who knew where they'd wind up.

They left just like that, without saying a word, without even saying thank you.

One by one, the villagers all went home.

Ezechiele stayed on the beach. Nothing remained of that tragedy, the sea had swallowed it all. There were only some prints on the sand that would soon be erased by the strong wind, and a few poor things the survivors had abandoned in their hurry to escape.

A pair of flip flops.

A fake T-shirt with the name of an Italian designer that created a strange effect in that place.

A box of a medicine that Ezechiele had also taken once. He recognized the name, even if all the rest was written in the incomprehensible alphabet they use in

those countries on the other side of the sea. The man who'd lost it suffered from a painful inflammation, too. This made him feel close, and Ezechiele wondered what the man would do now that he'd lost the pills. Who knows how much he'd suffer.

And then there was a small colourful backpack, covered with pictures of characters from a Disney cartoon, what was it called?

It had to be a child's, for sure.

But was there a child in the group that had managed to reach the shore?

Ezechiele couldn't remember, it had all happened so quickly.

He picked up the backpack and went home, like the others. He felt tired, even if he hadn't really done anything.

Chapter three

Ezechiele hadn't gone to school for long. *I'm uneducated*, he said of himself, but it was important to him to keep up with the news. He watched TV, and at least a couple days a week he read the newspaper at the Portside Café while he drank his second cup of morning coffee.

He would put on his glasses – he could see well from far away, but small printed letters had become a problem, and he'd had to resign himself to the glasses –, start with the sports news and then move on to the rest, looking at the titles and photos and reading a few articles, forcing himself to understand even if sometimes he didn't.

So he knew very well who the men on the boat were: migrants from Africa trying to get into Italy, who were often abandoned at sea. They showed them on TV ev-

ery evening, the faces always seemed the same but they were always different people. There were women and children, too.

... Was there a child on the beach? Try and remember...

Even without reading the papers, the stories of boats left to drift on the Mediterranean and of half-sunk rubber dinghies waiting to be rescued from the waves were known to all the fishermen. Along with other stories they didn't tell, out of pity and a sense of decency.

Ezechiele had never understood if it was legal or not to arrive in Italy that way. There was a lot of talk about it. *But when you're fleeing from hunger, he thought, you're not going to bother with fine distinctions.* .

Ezechiele knew this well, because he had emigrated, too. You didn't earn much fishing, and there wasn't any other work. So, after a lot of talk in evenings spent around the marble-topped kitchen table, he and Caterina, young and married for just one year, had agreed to try their luck in the North, since they wanted a child and wanted it to have a life better than theirs. Loaded with suitcases and bundles, they'd got onto the train and took a journey that felt like it would never end – up and up, how long Italy is! It was the first time they'd left the village, and they arrived in Milan dead tired and with their bottoms squared – speaking with all due re-

spect. There they found people from their village who'd arrived before them and who helped them and found Ezechiele a job in a factory – sure wages, they told him, and you don't risk your life at sea every day.

If he was on the first shift, to get to the factory Ezechiele still had to wake up at that hour when it's neither night nor day, just like when he was a fisherman. Caterina would prepare a mess tin with his lunch --pasta that would get cold in the upper compartment, a main course with a vegetable and bread in the lower part. He would take the tram in the fog, watching the city go by with its streetlamps and all those houses. The factory was in a neighbourhood called Lambrate, where there were a lot of other factories. Against the grey of the sky hundreds of workers like him, maybe even thousands, stepped through the gates before the blast of the siren, because if you were late they fined you.

The wages were certain, true, but something was missing. The sea, the sun, of course, and something else they weren't able to express. In the village they'd been happy. There they were not.

They waited for that something for two years, and then they agreed that it wasn't a life for them. Too much nostalgia, too much disappointment, so many things.

And so they'd taken the train once more, this time

in the opposite direction – down and down, how long Italy is – and returned to Scuglizzi. Ezechiele took up fishing again. And there their son Vincenzo was born, and little by little things started to go better.

Ezechiele had purchased his boat and painted it blue like the sea, with a long green stripe all around it, and he'd called it *Esmeralda*...

That was why when he saw those men and women on the big boats he felt grieved and he understood them. And after all, they didn't seem so different from himself – they were black, true, but wasn't his skin darkened and burnt by the sun, like all fishermen? And then, so what? Hunger has no colour.

Twenty years later his son Vincenzo also emigrated, because it seems that certain things – darn it! -- never change.

Vincenzo had continued his studies and graduated from high school, to the great satisfaction of Ezechiele and Caterina, who told everyone, and had gone to look for work in a place even farther than Milan, a foreign country called Switzerland ...

... *Switzerland, papà, it's called Switzerland.*

... *How would I know, I'm ignorant ...*

and had taken a journey even longer than he and Caterina had.

Imagine how unhappy that made Caterina.

For a few years they deceived themselves that Vincenzo would return home.

Instead, Vincenzo remained in Switzerland to live. He'd found a good job, married a round-faced blond girl from there, and Tonino was born, his grandma's darling, the light of her eyes.

Ezechiele would have liked to have him there in the village, Tonino, he'd have liked to take him out in the boat, teach him to swim, get to know the sea – the way it changes colour, the way it ripples in the breeze –, have him learn the names of the birds and the winds and how to prepare the bait, let him ring *Esmeralda's* bell when a fog bank rolled in.

He'd have like to teach him the law of the sea, which is a very simple law that says that in the sea you always help anyone in danger, because in the sea we're all equal.

To Ezechiele this seemed like a good law, and one that should also be followed on land.

But he'd never been able to do these things, because Switzerland was too far away, and the years went by too quickly to be believed.

By now his grandson Tonino was a grown man.

Ezechiele grew melancholy and he felt chilled. Maybe he'd stood in the wind on the beach too long. He

thought about going to the Portside Café to be with other people, but he didn't want to talk about what had happened. He preferred to stay at home and make himself another cup of coffee with a drop of anisette in it.

To tell the truth, he didn't really want that, either. .

He drank it anyway. .

The backpack was in a corner of the kitchen, where it had formed a little puddle of water on the floor. The design on the tiles was a bit faded.

Nemo! That was the name of the cartoon.

It was the story of a fish, wasn't it?

He had this thought he couldn't get out of his head – was there or wasn't there a child who'd managed to get to the shore and had then run away with the others?

Was there or wasn't there?

He thought he could remember, it seemed to him that he'd seen a child with the group running up the dunes, but he couldn't be sure.

Concentrate, Ezechiele. It's important. All right, you haven't got the memory you used to, but you're not totally gaga, either.

It was all so confused, we were all so wrought up.

Ok, but force yourself, Ezechiele.

Because if the child wasn't with the others who managed to reach the shore, then

Chapter four

«Ask the neighbour women», Caterina told him that night in a dream, «the women in this village always know everything about everyone. They were on the dock, if there was a child, they'd have seen him for sure».

How could he not have thought of that!

As soon as it was light he drank his usual morning coffee and then started around all the lanes and alleys in the village, asking here and asking there.

A child? Yes, there was a child, poor thing, they'd pulled him out soaking wet, how could Ezechiele not have seen him?

What times are these, that a child has to risk his life like this?

Was he alone?

Who knows? But a child doesn't go travelling around the world alone.

«When he ran away, a man was holding his hand», said a woman standing on a balcony full of flowers.

«Are you sure?»

« I saw him with my own eyes.»

Ezechiele went back home feeling reassured -- the child was safe.

Of course, who knew where he was now, who knew what would happen to him, those people had a rough time of it.

Who knew where he slept, if he had enough to eat.

A child can't live like that, he needs a home, needs to go to school.

And that man with him, who was it? His father, an older brother, or just someone who'd helped him escape? Would he go on taking care of him? Because maybe the father or brother he'd travelled with hadn't reached the shore and ...

How could he find out?

And then, what could he do?

Nothing.

Ezechiele looked for something to do to keep himself busy, but it felt as though time never passed. For lunch he made himself a piece of toast with tomatoes and oregano.

Yummmm, the meals that Caterina cooked.

Pasta with sardines!

His mouth started to water.

He was a total loss at the stovetop.

He took a walk to the beach. The waves and wind had erased every trace of what had happened the day before. Even the boat was gone – the currents had pulled the wreck who knew where.

He stayed to warm himself in the sun and watch the sea as it gradually grew calm. Tomorrow it would be flat and green, and the air after the storm so clean and transparent you'd be able to make out the coast of Africa on the other side of the sea. Those strange countries weren't so far after all. On the contrary, they were so close that when the south wind was blowing it carried the fine red desert sand with it, and you found it on the windowsill, in the bedroom, everywhere.

In all the years he'd passed at sea, Ezechiele had never reached the coasts of Africa, but he'd come very close. He'd fished all over the channel of Sicily, staying out at sea for days at a time, eating octopus and ship's biscuits. He'd gone as far as the islands, but he'd never made the crossing.

He went back home and sat down at the kitchen table, picked up the damp backpack and opened it as carefully as he could with big, clumsy hands that showed all

the marks of fifty years of work. He was thinking, What right do I have to do this?

He felt like a busybody.

But he needed to have some idea of the child, he wanted to get to know him a little.

Woollen socks shrunk by the water, underpants, a small box of biscuits the same brand that he'd bought for Tonino when he'd come to visit all those years ago, a T-shirt, a pencil case with coloured pencils, the pencil sharpener, two ball-points and an exercise book with pages stuck together.

Ezechiele opened it, being careful not to tear the pages. They were all covered by very fine writing in that strange alphabet they use, impossible to understand. Once a well-informed person had explained to him that on the other side of the sea they read and write in the opposite direction from us, from right to left.

Well ... the world is interesting because it's various, thought Ezechiele.

But meanwhile he didn't understand anything that was written there.

On the other hand, the maths homework could be understood perfectly, because the numbers are the same as ours – there they were, addition, subtraction, multiplication.

In his mind Ezechiele did the sums in the notebook – they were all correct!

I knew it!, he thought, *he's a good boy who does all his homework every day, he's proud of it, and even on that desperate voyage he'd wanted to bring it with him.*

Ezechiele lined up everything on the table.

He'd have liked to know the boy's name. He was sure it must be somewhere in the exercise book, but how could he recognize it or read it?

At the bottom of the backpack he found a plastic envelope with a small treasure trove the child had brought with him inside.

Ezechiele opened it, his hands trembling with emotion.

Two green plastic monsters with strange armour from who knows what fantasy world; the photo of a famous football player; an old bone button; a red-veined bird feather; a penknife; a packet of wet matches; three sea-shells just like the ones you could find on the beach in front of Ezechiele's house – because the sea is always the same, on one shore or the other, isn't it? And then, what must have been the most precious object of all, a glass ball, one of those where thick snow flutters down when you turn it upside down, with a snowman inside wearing an old-fashioned top-hat and a carrot for a nose.

Who'd given him that gift? maybe a relative who'd been to Europe or ...

Snow! How wonderful! He'd never have seen it where he lived, and Ezechiele imagined him shaking the ball, watching the snowflakes and laughing, laughing.

Then in an inner pocket of the backpack he found a photograph in a waterproof envelope. It showed the boy, curly-headed with a mischievous expression, with his mum and dad next to him.

The sun was shining and they were smiling.

How old could he be? Ten?

Behind them you could make out a stretch of seaweed-stained pebbles and the sea. In the background there was a promontory with a strange shape, like the sharp beak of a bird of prey. There were two gulls pecking on the beach, and on one side was a wooden dog-house without the dog. On the bottom left of the photo there was the corner of a table with a wood lattice on it. You couldn't see it clearly, but Ezechiele was sure: they were drying figs in the sun.

They could have taken it here, thought Ezechiele.

He turned the photo around and on the back there was a message written in pencil.

He couldn't know, but he was sure it was by the boy's mother, the last words of a mother to a son who was

leaving. And she couldn't know when she'd see him again.

How long did Ezechiele stay there, looking at those objects and the photo and those lines written in a language he couldn't read?

It grew dark. Without even turning on the light, he drank a glass of warm milk before going to sleep.

The sea was calm now after yesterday's storm. He couldn't even hear the sound of the waves, only a gentle splash rocking him in the darkness of the kitchen.

You can't do anything about it, Ezechiele, no one can do anything.

They are things greater than us.

And then, you're an old man.

But he felt that he had to do something.

That night Caterina didn't come to him after his dream about the red Guzzi motorcycle, and Ezechiele knew why – the decision he had to make was his alone.

Chapter five

The boy's name is Omar, said Ezechiele to Caterina, that's right, Omar! Isn't it a nice name?

How do I know?

I asked Pippo.

You know, that Tunisian man who's lived here a long time and works on the tourist boats and who married Concetta's son, do you remember him? They call him Pippo because no one remembers his Arab name.

I saw him this morning.

At the Wisteria Tavern, he was there because he can't work these days, he cut his hand badly.

Just a glass of white wine.

It doesn't hurt. I never drink, you know. But it was hot and I was upset.

*Are you listening to me?
He found the name on the cover of the exercise book.
And then he translated the writing on the back of the
photo.
I wrote it down.
Where did I put the piece of paper? I can't find it.
It's not true that I'm always losing things. .
Here it is.*

Ezechiele took a small piece of crumpled paper out of the back pocket of his trousers and ironed it with the palm of his hand. He was sitting at the marble-topped kitchen table where all the conversations he'd had with Caterina in the long years of their marriage had taken place.

How many important decisions they'd made sitting on those straw-bottomed chairs, how many problems they'd faced, how many hopes and fears they'd shared! And also a few quarrels, to be frank.

Listen. Just a second, I'll get my glasses. Ok, here we are.

*My darling son,
I don't know where you'll arrive, in what country. I hope that in that new country they'll care for you and you'll go to school. Be a good boy. Go to*

school, work and come back soon, with the help of God. If you feel sad and lonely and lost in the evening, look at the stars in the sky. They're the same ones I'll be seeing. And sing a song for me. Every evening I'll sit by the sea and I'll hear you singing. It will be a little like being together, like stroking your hair.

I love you. I'll wait for you. .

Your mama

She wants a song, did you hear that?

Pippo also explained to me where the promontory you see in the photo is. It's called Vulture's Beak. I just have to go there, and with a bit of luck ...

Yes, I've decided to go and look for his mother, I thought I'd told you.

Of course I can get to the other side of the sea, I'm still in good form, do you doubt it?

What is that supposed to mean?

In top form, I am.

And the Esmeralda, yes.

She's like me, a bit run-down, ok, but she knows how to behave at sea, just like me. Do you think we've forgotten?

No, we won't finish up as fish bait.

No, I won't have a stroke.

*You always make problems.
What does it mean that I'm always stubborn as a mule?
What -- me, stubborn!?
You, instead ... that time that ... and that other time.
Why am I doing this?
You know why I'm doing it, Caterina, why do you ask?
You know as well as I do. .
I'm thinking about that mother waiting. That she starts
looking at the sea in the morning, just like me but on the
other side. And waits. Meanwhile, she does her chores, keeps
the house tidy, sweeps the sand off the kitchen floor, like us.
That's what they did for so many years, our women,
don't you remember, Caterina?
Dressed in black to wait for husbands and sons who had
emigrated.
Pippo told me I'm crazy and that I'll never find the
mother, but it doesn't make any difference. He told me that
the people who undertake this voyage have satellite mobiles
and that's a lucky thing, because that way they can stay in
touch with their families at home, so they'll have told that
woman, they'll have called her and said ...
And if they haven't called?
If she's there and waiting desperately?
I'm going to take her the schoolbag and tell her that
Omar arrived safe and sound.*

*I'm old and useless, but at least this is one thing I still
can do.
It should be the young ones that do it, you say?
That may be. But I feel this thing, Caterì, it's like a
duty, it's a thing eating at me, I didn't sleep last night for it.
And maybe the young ones don't, they don't feel it like this,
but what do we know, everyone is different.
So I'm going.
Yes, I'll be careful.
Yes, I'll take my heavy oilskin. The blood pressure pills?
But they're of no use at all, it's that pest of a doctor who says
...
Yes, yes, I promise you I'll take them, don't fuss, you
needn't worry.
I'll go and come back – no big deal. I've been at sea so
many other times, remember?
And you never worried like this.
Now help me get everything I'll need ready, you know
that every once in while I forget things. Not very often,
though.
My heavy sweater, for example, where did it get to?*

When dark fell, Ezechiele set out for the dock where the
Esmeralda was moored, carrying the old faded bag that
had always accompanied him on his fishing expeditions.

Inside were the heavy oilskin and the sweater, a loaf of bread, bait for the sardines he would catch and eat with a squeeze of lemon juice, half a form of cheese, a brown paper packet of sweet green olives, a large canteen of water and also those darned blood pressure pills that are totally useless, but that he'd promised Caterina he would take.

It was a warm, mild evening. There was a scent of orange blossoms and jasmine in the air, the sky was an enchantment of stars, a full white moon shone down on the houses of Scuglizzi and on the world. The sea swept out to the distant horizon, smooth and shining, with only an occasional wave that hardly rippled the surface.

Ezechiele took a deep breath and all that softness went into him.

It was hard to imagine a more perfect night for sailing. It was a night of peace.

He walked along the dock. The *Esmeralda* was softly rocking on the water, creaking on its moorings.

He looked at it with the same emotion as ever. It was old and needed attention, but he had always kept it scrupulously ready to sail, with emergency gear and a reserve of drinkable water on board and the nets clean and folded in the cockpit.

He climbed on board, put down his bag, and in the

moonlight saw Tonino waiting for him, sitting at the prow in short pants, his mop of hair uncombed and his legs swinging over the water.

«Where are we going, grandpa?», he asked.

«To the other side of the sea», answered Ezechiele, «we're going to make the crossing».

Chapter six

The stars pierced the immense vault of the heavens and the silver moon was a wonder, so large and close that you could see the craters and spots on its surface and its stony white plains. What a mystery!

Ezechiele hadn't seen the moon like that for a long time and, as always, when he saw that spectacle he felt an extraordinary sense of peace mingled with fear. The sea was sparkling, the water and the sky were one and the same thing and the *Esmeralda* slid over the waves as though it were singing.

The first thing he'd done was to take Tonino all around the boat. He'd showed him the small cabin that held the steering wheel, the compass and a small cord that sounded the siren when you pulled it, but – careful!

– you only did that if there was some danger, or to send a greeting to another boat advancing very slowly in the distance, because at sea you go slowly.

«Please, grandpa!», Tonino had begged, «let me ring it just once!».

And he'd let him do it, because he couldn't say no to Tonino

Weeeee-owww!!

Weeeee-owww!!

Tonino was thrilled.

And then he'd showed him the funnel that spits smoke into the night, and the bunk under cover where he could rest for a few hours when he was tired, and the pulley that was used to drop the fishing nets and the echo sounder. It was all new and magic and mysterious for Tonino, who'd never been on a boat and had never got to know the sea, poor boy, raised in that far-away country, Switzerland.

... It's called Switzerland, grandpa!

....Ok, ok ...

Tonino never stopped plying him with questions -- what's this, what's that?

Then Ezechiele had explained to him that there are dangers, that you have to be careful and pay attention, he'd shown him how to walk on a boat, how to keep

your balance, how to stay away from the sides of the boat, how to avoid getting tangled up in cords and cables.

But Tonino seemed to know instinctively how to move about, how to balance his body when a wave hit the boat, and he wasn't at all afraid.

Just like his grandfather!, Ezechiele had thought, with pride.

They'd almost finished the tour of the *Esmeralda* when the old man heard a strange noise coming from the cockpit where the nets were stowed. Like heavy breathing, like rasping, like an animal in distress.

Impossible.

He'd lifted the cockpit hatch and there inside, amidst a tangle of nets, hair and flees, was Spaghetti in hiding. At once he began yelping and wagging his stub of a tail in an attempt to gain sympathy, because he knew very well he'd done something very naughty.

«Out!», ordered Ezechiele.

Spaghetti jumped out and took refuge in Tonino's outspread arms.

«He can stay, can't he grandpa? He can stay with us, can't he? Spaghetti's a good dog, You'll see, he won't make any trouble», shouted Tonino, his words pouring out all jumbled together.

Spaghetti was a cloud of hair, one of those dogs whose

head you can never tell from the tail. Only after looking at him carefully was it possible finally to make out a big, wet nose on one side and a stump of tail on the other.

He was terribly spoiled and never left Tonino's side.

Spaghetti was the name that Tonino and his father Vincenzo had given him in memory of the far-away native land.

«Of course he can come with us», Ezechiele assured him, «but you have to look after him, a boat isn't a good place for dogs».

«I'll be careful!», promised Tonino, pleased as punch. «Spaghetti will be a great help, I'm sure.»

Help? That flea-bag?

Bah.

But how wonderful to see them sitting together at the prow, their noses splashed by water from the boat's wake, marvelling at the immensity all around them, the sea and the sky blending into a single fabric of stars.

Ezechiele's heart swelled with joy.

Ezechiele was a simple person, but he wasn't a fool: he knew very well that it wasn't possible for there to be an eleven-year-old Tonino with him on the *Esmeralda*.

His grandson was a grown man of thirty by now, who worked for an insurance firm in a city called Bern, and who called him regularly to find out how he was doing.

And Spaghetti couldn't be there, either. He'd met him that time he and Caterina had gone to Switzerland to visit their son, daughter-in-law and grandson.

Tonino's eyes had filled with tears in the few days left before they took the train to return home. They were sad when they got back, for the son who would never return to Scuglizzi and above all for that grandson they would see so little of and who would grow up without them.

Tonino had been about ten or eleven years old at the time, and Spaghetti was an irrepressible pup. After all that time he was certainly busy digging holes and making trouble in the gardens of Heaven by now. But both of them were there with him now.

What was it then. A hallucination? A dream?

Ezechiele didn't care – what he'd desired all his life had come true: he had his grandson next to him on the boat and could teach him all the things he knew.

That voyage together was a rare occasion being offered to him, a gift, and he would take advantage of it without asking too many questions.

He stood at the steering wheel, whistling.

The *Esmeralda* sped along, prow turned towards the coast on the other side of the sea.

Ah, Africa!

They'd told him there were deserts of red sand, and palms, and those funny animals with humps called camels. Ezechiele had seen little or nothing of the world, just Milan and that cold town in in Switzerland, where his son had emigrated.

And now he'd have the chance to see new and marvellous things. Think how much he'd have to tell Caterina!

He turned back to look at the distant coastline, just a dark shadow in the night by now, and at the lights of Scuglizzi disappearing one by one in the dark until at last they went out completely. Now they were in the open sea.

The crossing had begun.

Chapter seven

Ezechiele chose a small trawling net and let it down into the water. Then he pulled it up with the help of Tonino and of Spaghetti, who was convinced he was indispensable and was continually underfoot. It was full of fish.

He threw the fish too big to be eaten on board back into the sea, keeping only the sardines. He showed Tonino how to clean them with just one quick stroke of the thumb, discarding the entrails. Then he rinsed them in a pail of seawater, laid them in layers in a container he kept on board for that purpose and squeezed lots of lemon juice over them, leaving them to cook in their own liquid. How good they smelled!

«It's ready!», he announced after half an hour.

They had bread, sardines and green olives, except for Spaghetti, who couldn't eat olives because he didn't know how to spit out the pit.

«Grandpa, why are we crossing over to the other side?», Tonino wanted to know.

Ezechiele got up and went to get the schoolbag he'd stowed in the cockpit.

«We're taking this back to this little boy's mum», he explained, showing him the photo, «to let her know he arrived safe and sound».

Tonino opened the schoolbag with curiosity and examined the objects inside. He shook the ball of snowflakes, opened the damp, sticky exercise book, laughing at the funny writing inside, and then looked carefully at the photo.

«How old is this boy?»

«Your age, more or less. His name is Omar.»

«And where is he now?»

«I don't know», answered Ezechiele. «You see, Omar arrived on one of those boats from Africa...»

«And he was alone?»

«He was with his father, I think. But then they ran away.»

«Why?»

«Because they're in a foreign country, they don't

speak our language and they don't know where to go. And there are a lot of people who don't want them, so they were frightened.»

Tonino thought it over for a minute, his face very serious.

«That's why we have to take this schoolbag back?»

«Yes, to let his mum know he's arrived safe and sound», Ezechiele repeated.

«Why isn't his mum with him?», asked Tonino.

«It's a long, dangerous voyage», explained Ezechiele. «In general it's mainly men who take it.»

«And children, too?»

«Yes»

«When we see them on TV dad always says, «Poor people, what else can they do?»

«I think Omar's mother will be happy to have these things», replied Ezechiele, «but first we have to find her. And you have to help me. And Spaghetti, too. You keep the bag, I'm trusting it to you. Don't let it go for an instant. It's precious!».

«I promise!», exclaimed Tonino.

Spaghetti howled to confirm that they could count on him, too.

Ezechiele made Tonino put on an old anorak that was too big for him, because even if the night was starry

you could feel the damp coming from the sea. He left him to gaze at the horizon in the dark.

While he was in the cabin, he heard Tonino yell, «Grandpa, come and see! The sea is shining!».

Ezechiele came to watch from the prow alongside Tonino.

The moon was so enormous in the night sky that it seemed they were heading straight for it, as though all at once the *Esmeralda* had become a ship travelling deep into outer space.

Ezechiele imagined they might land in one of the craters that had been dry for millions of years. There the *Esmeralda* would remain, sunk in the eternal dust, with its chimney that had stopped belching out smoke and the fishing nets spread uselessly all around. Tonino, Spaghetti and himself, with the limpets clinging onto the keel and the crab tangled up in the stern, would be the first inhabitants of the Moon.

He shook himself out of his daydream. Tonino was right: the sea all around them was a phosphorescent gleam, sparkling and glimmering and changing colour. You could see into the depths as if by magic.

There were blues and purples and yellows, all the colours mingled as if the lights of Atlantis or another mysterious city buried down in the depths had suddenly

been turned on. The *Esmeralda* cut through that rainbow of water, leaving a shining wake behind.

«Look, grandpa», said Tonino, «the fish!».

Schools of fish were swimming to the surface all around the boat, and the flying fish started jumping from one side to the other, making perfect arches over the deck – some even did a somersault.

... *Plash! Plash!*...

you could hear the noise every time they fell back into the water, and Tonino clapped his hands with wonder. It was like the circus.

But Spaghetti was puzzled as he watched them, wondering whether he ought to try to grab one.

Then the dolphins came, lovely and majestic as only they could be, whistling a greeting and arranging themselves in a fan in front of the *Esmeralda* as if to guide it, occasionally jumping into the air to show their silvery backs. In all his years at sea, Ezechiele had never seen a sight like this.

It was almost as though the dolphins were escorting them on their voyage over a magic, enchanted sea. When they saw the seabirds arriving they could no longer be in doubt. First the seagulls came, screeching in their hoarse voices. Out of the darkness behind them had appeared a grey and white cloud that slowly became

larger and larger until it reached the fishing boat and surrounded it.

«And what are those, grandpa?»

«Cormorants!»

Then the coots arrived, and the frigate birds, the puffins, and all the others.

What were those birds doing all together in the midst of the sea? They'd been sailing now for hours, they were far from dry land, and Ezechiele knew that these birds didn't usually venture out as far as the open sea, they were coastal birds. Yet there they were.

The gulls kept on flying, floating on the wind with great wings like sails in the current, while the others landed on the *Esmeralda* to catch their breath. They bustled all over, into every nook and corner – on the deck, the roof of the cockpit, the bulkheads and the ropes, the life jackets.

Finding no other place to perch, a coot tried Spaghetti's head. The dog growled, but the bird wouldn't give up.

Two cormorants greedily gobbled down what was left of the dish of sardines.

The *Esmeralda* was swarming with feathers and beaks, shrieks and whistles, clucks and honks.

«Grandpa», asked Tonino, «what are they doing?».

Ezechiele pulled at his moustache, as he always did when he was thinking hard.

«I don't know», he responded, «but I think they know what we're going to do, and they want to help us».

«Are they part of the mission, too?»

«I really think they are.»

«Why?»

«Because the sea creatures know what is happening on those boats they see drifting in the sea. They see the same things that sailors do, no – a lot more. And they know it's wrong. But you, now», added Ezechiele, «should sleep a little. As soon as we arrive...».

But Tonino's eyes were full of the stars and the white of the moon and all the wonders he'd never seen in his life before, and the thought of sleeping never entered his head.

It was hard for Ezechiele to reach the cockpit amidst all those birds. When he did, he checked the boat's course and tried to correct it, but then he realized that the steering wheel was blocked.

The *Esmeralda* was sailing on its own, sliding along the phosphorescent current in the company of a parade of fish and birds and magic charms.

Someone – or something – was guiding it.

Chapter eight

They sailed like that for a few hours and at a certain point Tonino fell asleep on the deck, using Spaghetti as a pillow. The birds grew quiet, too, sleeping silently, some with their head under their wing, others balanced on one leg. Drawn by the mysterious force that controlled it, the *Esmeralda* continued its voyage, gliding over a smooth sea suspended between the stars and the moon. Now in the silence you could hear the splash of waves against the keel and the boat's old wooden boards creaking in the wind, rather like Ezechiele's bones when the weather was damp.

Though he couldn't steer the boat, the old fisherman wasn't worried. He thought that even if he didn't know the reason for what was happening, it was in any case

something good. He snoozed, too, with one eye open, waking with a start when he smelled the hot, dry smell of land in the breeze, accompanied by a vague impression of trees and fronds.

Impossible, he thought, *we can't be in sight of the coast already.*

He crossed over to the prow to inspect the horizon and found Tonino rubbing eyes still shiny with sleep.

«Look, grandpa!», he said, pointing his finger. «There's an island!»

But there was no island on that route from Sicily to Africa, Ezechiele was super sure of that, he didn't even need to consult the maps. Which were pretty old, ok, but islands didn't just pop up from one day to the next.

Yet what they could glimpse far off under the light of the moon was without doubt the profile of a coast looming dark and low against the horizon. The night was so clear and calm that it was impossible to mistake it. The Esmeralda was headed right there, and it was already so close that they'd be there in less than half an hour.

Ezechiele tried to get control of the steering wheel but it was still blocked.

Then he began to fear that the force which for some reason had at a certain point taken control of the fishing

boat might in fact be a negative force – he'd been foolish to cradle himself in the illusion to the contrary. Maybe it had reversed the boat's course and was simply carrying them back to where they'd departed from -- maybe it was someone who didn't want him to carry out his mission.

For what reason?

Possible that it was the coast of Scuglizzi there in front of them?

No, he decided, he'd have recognized it. The land they were heading for was dark, no city lights were to be seen, and it looked almost flat, just like an island.

But there weren't any islands in that part of the Mediterranean.

Ezechiele turned on the radio and picked up the mike.

He'd find someone who could give him an explanation.

He gave his code, repeated it a few times, then soon realized that it was useless.

The radio was silent.

He went back up to the deck. Now the birds were waking, too, puffing out their feathers. The dolphins that were still guiding the boat were leaping out of the waves and whistling.

We're here, thought Ezechiele, I've no idea what's waiting for us, but we're here.

He put his arm around Tonino's shoulder and they stood gazing at the island, watching it grow larger and closer. Now they could make out dark forest vegetation, the shape of a cliff, and a wide bay shining in the silver moonlight.

Then they began to hear the singing.

It came and went on the breeze, now sounding closer and now farther away. It was an achingly sweet, melancholy song, almost a lament. It seemed to speak of very ancient but never-forgotten things, things we hold inside us without knowing. It seemed like the crying of children, voices of women lonely in the dark of the night. It seemed possible to lose oneself forever in that melody.

Impossible!, Ezechiele thought once again, but by now what wasn't impossible about their voyage? He had the suspicion that the surprises weren't over yet.

«What is it, grandpa?», asked Tonino, who listened, enchanted, and beside him were Spaghetti and all the birds gathered on the deck.

«Listen carefully», Ezechiele said to him, «because there aren't many who've heard it. The fishermen say it's a very rare thing, like an enchantment that can come to

you once in a lifetime. But this is a magic night. Listen: this is the song of the sirens».

«Really?», said Tonino, his eyes growing wide.

«At least that's what they believed in ancient days», explained Ezechiele.

He didn't tell him that according to the ancients the sirens, who were half woman and half bird, bewitched sailors with their song, drawing them towards the rocks they sang on, leading them to sink and then devouring them. He'd have liked to narrate to Tonino the voyage of Ulysses as he'd heard it told so very many years before by a storyteller in the main square of Scuglizzi. What an impression it had made on him!

It was a wonderful story, full of adventure, which they'd told him was to be found in a very old book – no, in a very long poem! Ezechiele would have liked to read it one day.

Ulysses was a Greek sailor and so almost as nosy and meddling as a Sicilian sailor. To be able to hear the sirens' singing he'd made his crew tie him to the main mast of the ship while he plugged their ears with wax to keep them from falling victims to the spell.

«Row!», he'd ordered them. «And whatever happens, don't untie me!»

Ulysses was a sly one.

But there wasn't enough time.

The phosphorescent lights of the sea were gone, the dolphins had left with a departing whistle, and the birds that had accompanied them on their voyage left the boat, flying away all at the same moment, with one last call before turning to go back in the dark of the night towards Sicily, towards home, as though their mission had been accomplished.

Suddenly deserted and silent, the *Esmeralda* glided through the calm, transparent water of the bay shining white in the moonlight, drawn by the song floating up from the dark cliffs that surrounded the bay on both sides. In the dark they could make out some motionless figures perched on the rocks, blending into the shadow.

«Who are they, grandpa?», asked Tonino in a small voice.

«The sirens.»

«But they have no tail!»

A beam of moonlight shone down on the nearest cliff, which the *Esmeralda* was coasting to reach the bay. The singing grew louder.

«They're birds!», shouted Tonino.

«Ssssshhhh! They're called greater shearwaters», whispered Ezechiele, as if afraid to disturb them, «it was their mysterious singing that the ancients believed were

sirens. They're rarely heard because there are fewer and fewer of them nowadays. No one has ever seen so many all together».

«Are they here for us?»

«Maybe, but there's someone else here, too», said Ezechiele.

The *Esmeralda* glided into the harbour, approached the shore and stopped, afloat in crystalline blue water.

Ezechiele helped Tonino and Spaghetti get down from the boat onto a clean, white beach of fine sand. Behind it was a forest of trees and palms.

A man was waiting for them, standing in the middle of the beach, surrounded by children.

... *Was it them singing as we approached?*

... *Was it them crying?*

... *Or was it the sirens?*

... *Or was it those birds?*

Ezechiele didn't know what to think.

The island wasn't frightening and Tonino didn't seem worried, either. It seemed like a nice place, with its gentle breeze and cool trees. Only that there was a certain melancholy feeling, but he couldn't explain why.

The man and child who welcomed them under the moonlight were wearing torn, threadbare clothes as light as the leaves trembling in the breeze. They looked worn

out by the sea, and even their hair was strange, intertwined with seaweed and shells. There was a very beautiful little girl with them, who must have been about six years old. She had a headful of black curls with a red starfish in the middle, and around her neck, like a necklace, she wore a hermit crab shell.

They were smiling.

The man walked forward, took Ezechiele's hand and said, «Welcome».

The children also came up and greeted them.

«Where are we?», Ezechiele asked.

They all had large, smoky, dark eyes that gazed into the distance, the children even more than the man.

«Welcome, Ezechiele», said the man, «this is The Island that is Not. I am Lazaro. We've been waiting for you».

Chapter nine

The Island that is Not was very beautiful.

Lazaro and the children accompanied them beyond the sand dunes lining the beach and they entered a forest that smelled as sweet as a garden. There were flowers and trees of every kind, oranges and lemons and palm trees whose branches hung with large, juicy dates. There were trellises of berries, wild strawberries, blackberry brambles and tall banana trees with leaves so large they could be used as a shelter. Every imaginable good thing. .

One of the children, who was already chatting with Tonino, climbed to the top of a tree with incredible agility and came down loaded with a bunch of fruit that he handed out to everyone. Never before had bananas that nice and good been seen or tasted!

They crossed a stream with cool fresh water, then they left the forest and found themselves on top of a small hill from which they could see a good part of the island, which seemed long and narrow, like an arrow or a bridge.

To the left they saw a long beach with a lot of people and tent camps lit by torches and campfires that shone in the night. On the other side there was more forest and the shadow of hills fading into the distance.

No houses or towns or roads.

They walked towards the beach and Tonino ran in front with his new friends. Those children and Lazaro as well – Ezechiele had realized at once – were all foreigners, they all came from Beyond the Sea. What were they doing on that island?

«How many of you live here?», he asked Lazaro.

«Thousands», he answered, «you can't imagine how many of us there are. I was one of the first to arrive. I was tempted by the idea of adventure, the desire for change, because you can't always go on just squeezing out a living».

«I know», said Ezechiele.

«Yes. I tried the crossing. Since then it's been my job to count how many new people arrive every day, to welcome and comfort them because, you know, the first

days are the hardest for everyone. You have to learn to overcome your fear, your sorrow, your grief for what has happened».

«Why?», asked Ezechiele. «Where do they come from?»

«From Africa, mainly», replied Lazaro, «from desert lands but also from far-away Asian countries, there are people from all over the world here. There are leaf-roof huts in the forest on the other side of the island. That's where the new arrivals are put, and for days or weeks they'll yell and give voice to their fright. Then after the anger arrives the nostalgia, so strong that it clutches your heart. So they come to the beach and I put them in touch with relatives or friends, or at least with people from their city or village who'd arrived here before them and they hadn't heard from again. It's easier together. You talk, you tell your story. This here is the Beach of Stories. Oh, the stories you hear! And then I write down in a register the numbers of those who arrive every day and their names and the country they come from. I keep records of everything. By now I've filled hundreds of pages. Closely written. The Register is the most important thing on the island.»

Ezechiele didn't really understand, he was confused: «They arrive every day?», he asked.

«Every day: 2,133 last year, 3,612 the year before. It's all written down here, all registered.»

«But if there are always new arrivals...»

«The island grows», explained Lazaro, «each year it grows a bit more to hold the newcomers. One day, perhaps, if it keeps on growing it will be so long that it will join Africa to Europe -- it will become a bridge so that people can walk across the blue waters of the sea. That will be a blessed day. We'll all come. Without anger or rancour, because we'll have washed those feelings away like the salt crust on our skin. But we'll bring the Register with us, you can be certain, we'll turn it over page by page, we'll call everyone by name, one by one, and every person will step up and be recognized. They'll have to listen to us, for sure. This is The Island that is Not, Ezechiele, the island whose existence many people prefer to ignore, pretending we never existed. But we are here. The Register is our memory, it's all that remains of us».

Besides the objects on beaches, thought Ezechiele.

He was more and more confused, and also deeply moved.

Meanwhile they'd arrived on the beach where thousands of people were sitting on the sand around the bonfires – men, women and children chatting and eating fruit and exchanging greetings in the cool of the night.

They seemed to be at peace.

Ezechiele looked at Tonino playing with the other children at a complicated game they'd made up then and there. He looked at the little girl with the starfish in her curly hair. He looked at Spaghetti, who on the contrary seemed uncomfortable, almost scared, and stayed off to one side, his tail held low, he who was always playful and affectionate. But dogs feel certain things right away.

«But all of you, then ...», murmured Ezechiele, and he didn't know how to say it. He felt a weight on his heart, because of course you can't ask certain things. It was insensitive.

Around one of the bonfires someone was making music by blowing into a strange flute.

«Yes», said Lazaro, saving him from his embarrassment, «we all drowned. We attempted the crossing. And we didn't make it».

Ezechiele pulled at his moustache, looked at that multitude of people on the beach, and hesitated.

«That little boy», he asked after the pause, «Omar...».

«I can tell you that he isn't here», Lazaro reassured him, «and that no one with him on that boat has arrived here. You saved them all. But that's just why I can't tell you exactly where that little boy was from. I'm sorry not to be able to help you, you'll have to find him on your own.»

They walked along the beach, where the sand was still warm underfoot.

Ezechiele looked at that mass of bodies and faces, and he listened to those voices. Though they were speaking in many different languages, they could understand each other all the same, just as he and Lazaro understood each other, and Tonino and his new friends. From the small groups around the bonfires came greetings, and every once in a while someone got up to greet him personally.

«Why are they coming to say hello?», asked Ezechiele.
«How can they know me?»

«We all know about your mission», Lazaro explained to him. «Did you think you could keep it a secret? We're all with you! That's why we interrupted your voyage and had you come here. Go and find Omar's mum, give her that schoolbag. As long as you're at sea we'll help you. You see, by now we are one and the same as the sea. But once you've landed, to find the boy's house you'll have to trust your instinct. And Spaghetti's sense of smell!»

Chapter ten

«Do you see that man?», asked Lazaro as they continued their walk along the beach. «Yes, that one. He had a wife and children and a little stone house on the outskirts of Quetta. He lived his life. When they started to hear bombs exploding and the whistles of grenades hitting the eastern parts of the town, neither he nor his neighbours knew there was a war on in his country, and they didn't know who the two sides were. Nor even less what that the war was being fought for. Does that surprise you? The poor are never told certain things.

But every day the war came closer, eating up one neighbourhood after another, and then came the airplanes to drop bombs, columns of smoke burning in the sky.

“It was the Americans”, those who were better informed said.

No, it was the Russians”, others contradicted.

What difference did it make? Everyone who could, escaped. But our man, yes, that one there, told himself, “I was born here. And then, where could I go?”.

One morning the militia men arrived, dressed in camouflage and worn-out shoes. Even they didn't seem to know very well who were the sides fighting and why, but it didn't matter.

They were armed and bearded and they forced him to leave everything behind, his home and his family, to go and fight with them. They took all the men in the neighbourhood who were at home that morning, and then they rounded up the boys, too, even those still too young to shave.

“I don't want to fight”, he said.

But they enlisted him by force and gave him a camouflage jacket and an old rifle that he didn't know how to use. After months of smelling smoke and blood, he managed somehow to escape. He looked for his house but it didn't exist anymore, there was only the rubble of his bombed-out city. And so he took to the sea ... What choice did he have?»

Lazaro took Ezechiele's arm, almost yanking it, «And

that man? You see him?»), he went on telling the stories. «Yes, that big, tall guy. All black. He was a cobbler somewhere down in central Africa, I don't remember the name of his country. Who could be happier than he was?

He would put his work bench out in the street, in the shade of the wall of his brick house, whistling, greeting the elders with respect and watching the girls go by. How many girls passed by! They always seemed to find a new reason to get themselves admired. They passed and passed again, back and forth.

He always had a sticky jar of glue on his bench, a brush, a small hammer and a mouth full of thin little nails. First he would brush the sole hanging from the shoe, then with quick fingers he'd pick up a nail and tap tap tap, he'd bang it with his hammer.

When a pretty girl passed, he would take the nails out of his mouth to say hello. It was full of pretty girls passing by. So he had to be continually taking the nails out of his mouth and putting them back in. Sometimes it took him an hour to glue on a sole, and the customers waiting barefoot in the dust on the road protested that he should get a move on.

They said he was a lazybones.

There was one girl he greeted more often than the others, and so they decided to get married.

But what sort of job is being a cobbler in a town where almost no one wears shoes? How could you support a wife and a houseful of children? Because the girl had set as a condition for marrying him that they'd have a lot of children.

So he thought he'd try and make his fortune in another place, because a distant relation who knew everything had told him that there was a place called Europe where everybody – literally, everybody – wore shoes, and some even had two pairs, believe it or not! That was the right place for a cobbler who wanted to work.

So he entrusted his fiancée to his parents and said goodbye. She swore to wait for him. She's still waiting, and I think that by now she isn't even crying anymore.

Ezechiele didn't know in which direction to turn.

When he'd tell Caterina... but maybe he'd better not, it would be too painful for her. These stories were painful for him, too.

«Look at your dog», said Lazaro, «he's found a friend».

It was true -- Spaghetti was playing with another dog, much bigger than him, massive and black. They were chasing one another, pretending to fight and rolling about in the sand, as dogs do.

«That's Prince», explained Lazaro, «and that boy as thin as a rail – do you see him? – is his owner. They're

inseparable. They'd always shared everything, those two, food, travel and adventures. The boy decided to leave one morning in May, without even having his breakfast, just like that, like a sudden gust of wind, because at seventeen you can do without everything, but not without a dream for your life.

Where he lived there weren't any dreams. Only dust.

He took the dog with him. He couldn't leave him behind, who would take care of him? And then, he needed a travelling companion. They survived the desert – it took him six months to cross it -- he told me all about it.

When they arrived on the coast of Libya and it was time to sail, the people smugglers didn't want the dog on the boat and they made fun of him, looking at him scornfully, “What do you think you're doing?”, they said to him. “Leave that animal here!”

So the boy paid for Prince, too, as if he were a person, five hundred dollars that he'd folded up and put in his trainers to hide them from thieves and body searchers.

That was the only money he had left.

“Make room for him”, he told the others on the boat, and they had to move over, swearing, but since the dog had paid he had the right to climb aboard. And so they sailed off.

They sunk just when they thought they'd arrived. It

was dawn and the dry land was close enough to see. Then the rubber dinghy they'd been crammed onto started to deflate and take on water. Someone with a satellite phone launched the alarm.

They floated for another two hours, anxiously scrutinizing the sea.

“Someone will come”, they told themselves.

The rubber dinghy got flatter and flatter, until it was full of blue-black water. No one came to save them. In the end it slid away from under them. They all were spilled into the water. Only a few of them had a life jacket.

Prince is a grand swimmer, it's in his breed. The dry land wasn't really that far, maybe he'd have made it, who knows. But the boy could hardly stay afloat, and then, look at him – he's all skin and bones.

Prince held him up for hours, and when the sea grew rough he tried to drag him to land. He was exhausted, too. Finally, they both went under together.»

Ezechiele and Lazaro walked a bit further and then sat down on the warm sand. Some fruit was offered to Ezechiele, but he couldn't eat anything. He looked at the little girl with the starfish in her hair, who was playing with Tonino.

He didn't want to hear her story.

«We miss life», said Lazaro, «but what weighs heaviest on our hearts is the indifference. All those people who don't want to know, don't want to understand. But one day it will change, I'm sure, if enough people make important small gestures like the one you are making. That's why we wanted to meet you. Now rest, Ezechiele», he added, «before starting on your voyage again».

«It's late», he muttered.

«No. Here time doesn't exist, naturally. Day and night come and go, but for us there is no time. How could there be? You'll start your voyage again from the same moment you interrupted it to come here.»

«Then just a few minutes more», said Ezechiele.

Too many emotions, too much sorrow. He lay down on the warm sand under a palm-tree. Tired of playing, Tonino stretched out beside him. Spaghetti joined them, squeezed in between them, and dug out a bed in the sand.

He was yelping softly, which is a dog's way of crying. Maybe Prince had told him his story.

They fell asleep, cradled by a soft breeze and the lapping of the sea.