

The Old Man and the Sea

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He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. It made the boy sad to see the old man come in each day with his skiff empty and he always went down to help him carry either the coiled lines or the gaff and harpoon and the sail that was furled around the mast. The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat.

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.

Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.

"Santiago," the boy said to him as they climbed the bank from where the skiff was hauled up. "I could go with you again. We've made some money."

The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him.

"No," the old man said. "You're with a lucky boat. Stay with them."

"But remember how you went eighty-seven days without fish and then we caught big ones every day for three weeks."

"I remember," the old man said. "I know you did not leave me because you doubted."

"It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him."

"I know," the old man said. "It is quite normal."

"He hasn't much faith."

"No," the old man said. "But we have. Haven't we?"

"Yes," the boy said. "Can I offer you a beer on the Terrace and then we'll take the stuff home."

"Why not?" the old man said. "Between fishermen."

They sat on the Terrace and many of the fishermen made fun of the old man and he was not angry. Others, of the older fishermen, looked at him and were sad. But they did not show it and they spoke politely about the current and the depths they had drifted their lines at and the steady good weather and of what they had seen.

The successful fishermen of that day were already in and had butchered their marlin out and carried them laid full length across two planks, with two men staggering at the end of each plank, to the fish house where they waited for the ice truck to carry them to the market in Havana. Those who had caught sharks had taken them to the shark factory on the other side of the cove where they were hoisted on blocks; their livers removed, their fins cut off and their hides skinned out and their flesh cut into strips for salting.

When the wind was in the east a smell came across the harbour from the shark factory; but today there was only the faint edge of the odour because the wind had backed into the north and then dropped off and it was pleasant and sunny on the Terrace.

"They [the sharks] are all going to the deep well" the old man said. "It is easier to carry them there than drag them all the way to the village."

"Is it not a shame to kill such fish and sell them and eat them?" he thought of his own hands and the disregarded limits of his life. "But when I think of it, I wonder if he has a notion that the fish are as large as he is and as old as he is?" "They have no feeling," he thought. "They are cold and smooth like the sea floor. They are moving as the tide moves, over the hidden

He settled lightly against the wood and heaved on the line, raising the fish inch by inch. The shivering increased as he pulled her out of the water and onto the planking of the skiff. She was eighteen feet from nose to tail and she floated in a seemingly endless pool of her own blood.

The old man wiped the blade of his knife and laid her alongside the other fish on the planking. Then he started the engine and headed for home.

On the way in, the old man thought about Joe DiMaggio, who he had seen play baseball in Havana. He wished the boy were there to see him. He decided he must ask the boy to come with him the next time he went to the matches.

They passed the harbour mouth and where the roadstead began they took in the sail, and the old man soaked his hands in the salt water and tried to get the fish blood off. The boy handed him a lemon to rub on his hands.

"Que bueno el limón," he said. "Siempre me haces bien."

At the head of the harbour, the old man turned the boat and sailed slowly out to sea. He passed the end of the land and saw nothing but the endless blue. Ahead of him, the ocean was still dark and mysterious, full of all kinds of strange creatures. The old man knew he would fish again.

The end