

The Old Man Home from the Sea

(with the greatest respect to Ernest Hemingway)

There was a call from the nursing home. The old man was dying. The voice of the night nurse was quiet but firm, controlled but with poorly hidden emotion. It held a sense of urgency and a sense of doom. The woman quickly dressed and woke her daughter. It was late - very late but there was no hesitation. They must go.

The old man, (everybody called him the old man - short for 'the old man from the sea' - apparently he used to be a fisherman), was fading fast.

The staff at the nursing home liked him; he was no trouble. He never smiled but was always quiet, respectful and introspective. He spent many hours on the front verandah, gazing out to sea.

He knew his time was near. His breathing was laboured and shallow - he seemed to be rambling; something about a whale - a particular whale.

He had previously told them that if they thought he would not last a night, to call the girl. He called her simply, '*the girl*'. He wasn't sure of her name. She brought him a dandelion or whatever flower she could find on the way and she liked to listen to his stories- stories he wouldn't share with anyone else. He was clean and shaven (his sea captain's beard had long gone) - and didn't smell of old age - just soapy. He had no other visitors - just the little one and her mother who would leave her to sit with him while she talked seriously and secretly to the nurse.

Apparently he had been the captain of a whaling ship.

The mother parked the car as the girl ran inside. She had grabbed a handful of leaves from the plants at the gate - there were no flowers but she felt she had to take something to him.

She raced to his bedside and grasped a finger of his hand - that great weathered, scarred hand that was gripped by the spasms of arthritis.

He seemed to sense her presence and he struggled to speak. She leaned forwards so that her ear was close to his mouth.

His voice was weak but clear; he had obviously rehearsed what he was about to say.

'Listen girl I want to tell you a final story - it is important and it is true'. She never knew if his stories about amazing places and sea creatures were fact or fiction. It didn't matter. She liked him and she liked to listen. But she knew this story was different.

'I was young, very young and immature - but sure of myself; foolishly so. I worked hard and took risks and soon I was promoted to First Mate and eventually to Captain of my own whaling ship'.

'We sailed the seas in search of the great whales. Their hide, blubber and bones were valued and we could make a lot of money when we returned to port'.

'I became quite wealthy and I married. I had a son - Daniel, (named for my Irish mother) and many years later, a daughter, Maria, (The Spanish form. I chose it because of the famous Spanish explorers and armadas - and an old map I carried in the pocket of my sea coat).

I wanted Dan to learn the trade - the skills of sailing and hunting the great whales but he was a sensitive boy. He didn't want to learn; his heart was not in it. He could tie the knots and read the winds but he could not kill the whales. The sight of the blood-soaked harpoons on the foredeck revolted him. He watched them and listened to their songs; he even seemed to understand their language.

On our final voyage I spent weeks searching for the whales but found none. I could hear Dan on the foredeck and at the portholes making strange calls. I think he was warning them to stay away. We had a massive argument. I said he was no son of mine. I locked him in the forehead sail locker.

There was great storm - the most fierce winds and waves I have ever seen. There was an onshore wind. We could not see ahead and the noise was so loud that we could not even hear the crash of the surf over rocks and shallows. We tried to find a safe haven but the rain and wind were merciless.

Then a great whale rose out of the water in front of us. I thought we were being attacked and I panicked. I took the helm to violently turn the craft. I loosened sail and came about. We missed the whale but scraped the hull on a sharp rocky shoal. The keel was torn out of the boat but, in missing the whale, we also avoided certain death. I was able to steer the ship to the shallow, sheltered waters here at the mouth of the river: I knew the area well.

I ran the ship aground on the beach. The crew abandoned ship. Dan was missing.

The ship was broken and came apart in the crashing surf. Then one of the crew called out that there was a boy hanging onto a spar that was being washed in by the waves. The boy was tired, bloodied and near death. I carried him to the fire that had been lit on the beach and laid him on a blanket. He was shivering and turning blue. His skin was pallid.

He opened his eyes slightly. He said, 'Dad, I mean, Captain, Sir, did you see the whale - she was warning us to turn away from the rocks. I could hear her warning calls through the hull. I tried to warn you but the noise was too great.'

Dan coughed not only sea water, but dark blood. He asked where we were and I showed him my ancient Spanish sea chart which I always carried for luck. It showed the local coastline - it was one of those old charts embellished with symbols of sea dragons, waterholes and flying fish. At our location, it showed a spouting whale with the word 'ballena'. The word meant 'whale'.

He smiled at me and said weakly, 'I am safe here- it's Ballena - the place of the whales'. He died in my arms.

'He is buried here - in the cemetery. I could not leave him and I never returned to my wife and daughter. They thought I was dead. I never went back to the sea and I could never hunt the whales again. I felt I was cursed by the whales. I lost direction in my life. I found odd jobs to do and changed my name. Then I felt I should put something back into the community. I put my heart into my work and became quite successful. (A sea captain learns to be resourceful)'

'Your mum came to work as my housekeeper. Sometimes she would bring you with her. You brought joy to my life - your cheerful little smile, stories and your handfuls of flowers. I came to love you'

'When I was alone, I watched the crashing surf and, on some days, I could see the whales as they passed up the coast'

His eyes were now hollow but I saw tears form. His breath was dry and rattling. I gave him a sip of water but he couldn't drink it. I wiped his mouth. I could feel the expectant silence of the room and the sound of the surf in the distance. I am sure I heard a sound like a wild animal calling from the sea. *'Tell your mother, she once had a brother'*, he said. The old man had died.

I felt strangely sad although I had hardly known him. Then I realised why he had told me the story - my mother was always known as Mary - but her real name was Maria.

Postscript:

Ballena, the place of the whales, has become Ballina. It remains and always will remain, a safe haven for the whales.

And the little girl? Her name was Pilar (Pili). It's a Spanish name. She lives here still. She's grown up now but still she takes dandelions to the old man - who is home from the sea; and to another grave, simply inscribed with the name, 'Daniel'.

Ballena - Spanish - Whale

Baleine - French - Whale

Balaena - Latin - Whale