

RICH SHAPERO

# THESE BALMY DAYS

A NOVEL



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TOOFAR MEDIA

TooFar Media  
500 Stone Pine Road, Box 3169  
Half Moon Bay, CA 94019

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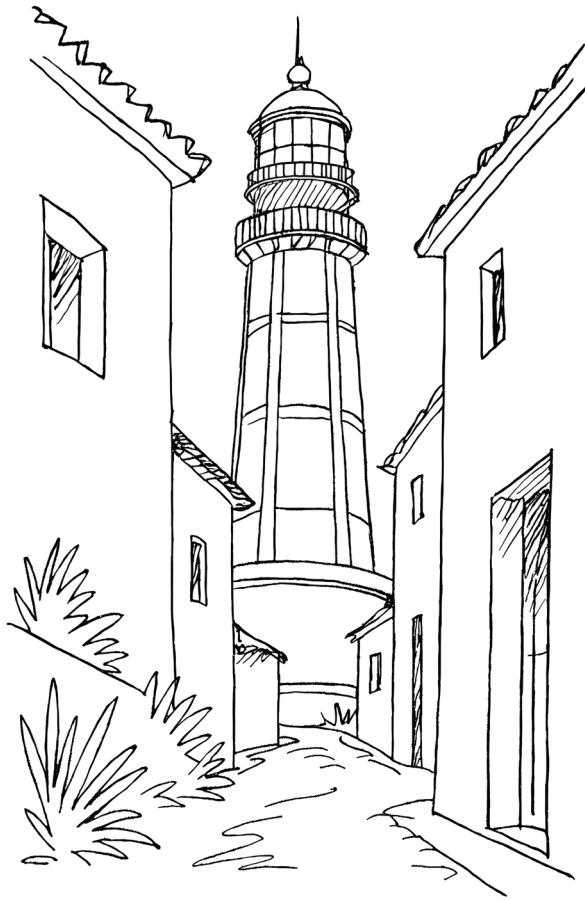
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1





## *Smile and Wave*

**W**e stand here hand in hand, an old man and young girl, at the top of the lighthouse, gazing landward. The circumstances were unexpected that delivered us to this foreign place, so far from our native home and the people we know.

It is almost as if, in the darkest hour, the giant lens at our rear had condensed us to a pencil of light, touched this strip of Portuguese coast and left us here to glimmer together for a while.

I'm blessed to have a loving granddaughter, and doubly blessed that we're able to spend this time together.

What a wonderful reply! Thank you, Tenina.

I know, I know— But it's a gift to hear it from your own lips. I love you too. There is no one I would rather be with, nothing I would rather do.

You, the child of my loins one step removed. You who know me by heart, by instinct, by blood. You with an unfettered mind, and willing—

No, more than willing. Eager, excited to wander this ragged seaside with me, to find our way to places and moments

like this.

Where are we? I've written it down on my notepad.

*Cabo de Santa Maria*. On an island. Across the water, on the mainland, are two small cities. I'm not sure of their names.

What a clamor there was back in the States when your grampa retreated. When I gave up the field, when I called an end to the struggle life had become. I carry the scars from so many conflicts. I'm not proud of the victories or humbled by the defeats. I'd rather imagine that none of it happened. I'd rather just feel the good fortune of having escaped. Being here together is heaven to me. A foretaste of heaven, that is. I'm in no hurry!

Your mother's circumstance worked out well for us. As occupied as she was with her new job, a holiday with Grampa made perfect sense. You're mature for five years. We've always had a special connection. The time we shared in the States was always so joyful. An adventure together in a foreign land? How exciting!

For your grampa, my dear— It's been a gift.

A precious one.

When I arrived in Lisbon, I felt so alone. The last vestiges of my dubious life had been stripped away. All I had left were doubts and dark speculations.

In these few weeks, I've come to rely on you. When my sorrow sharpens, you blunt it with an eager request. When thoughts take me into the future, you roll your eyes and shake your head. If I'm overly introspective, you tug my hand, as you're doing now, to bring me back.

The wind's mussing your blond bangs, lifting your pig-tails. Look over your shoulder, Teni. We're sharing this red-railed crow's nest with strangers. Vacationers, beach lollers, retirees— They're staring at us. Murmuring to each other. What are they saying? Do they think we're so peculiar?

You're laughing now, and I'm laughing too.

It's not you they're whispering about.

It's me, with my theatrical gestures and garish laugh. They mark with puzzled expressions this grizzled jaw, these striped pants and white suspenders, the flaps of my long-point collar, fluttering like the wings of a panicked hatchling. Shall I doff my flat-brimmed Portuguese hat and flash my thinning crown at them? Shall I hail them with the collapsed umbrella I use as a cane?

*He's batty*, they whisper. *Would you leave your child with someone like that?*

They understand nothing of the fondness and cheer, the sensitive parlance we share.

Don't be ruffled. Maintain the fiction.

Just smile and wave.

## *Every Day is Sunday*

**W**e returned to the mainland on one of the ferries. Didn't we? Perhaps we begged a ride from a willing fisherman or rode in a boat for hire. This charming town we're entering now— It looks familiar.

You spread your arms to embrace it, lifting your face, gazing at me through your round-lens glasses. They brighten your face with their yellow frames.

The town's name circles my mind like a damselfly. Is it Olhão or Fusetas or Luz? There are shops and cafes. And a pastelaria, my dear. Shall we stop for a treat?

I thought so!

We don't mind standing in line. We like mingling with tourists. They arrived last week and are scheduled to depart tomorrow.

Hello Miss. And you Sir. Enjoying your visit? We've come from the lighthouse. Have you been? The one on the island. I'm not recalling its name. I've written it down. Oh, it certainly was: a magnificent view. This is my granddaughter, Tenina.

Yes, my dear. It's our turn now. Time to choose.

Inside the glass case, the treasures are arrayed on trays.

What shall it be? A creamy *bola de berlim*? The spongy *pão de ló*? Of course, I should have known. *Torta de laranja!*

The nice lady is fetching one for us. Show the prize to Miss and Mister behind us. Ho, look at this, look at this! Alright, we must pay for the treat.

Bite into the sweet piece of heaven— You first, now me. Mmm. The soaked cake, the citrus custard, the gooey half-circle of candied orange—

We exit the bakery, savoring the tastes, raising our faces. The sun is bright, the sky is blue. Another day without a cloud. Not even one.

We stroll through the cobbled streets, immersed in our *torta*, charmed by the foot traffic, the colors and pointless chatter, making our way down the tree-lined avenida to the bus stop and a breezy ride back. The old buggy will follow the shore, and we'll open the window and smell the spray.

We're already thinking of home. Our home together, here on the coast.

How comfortable we are, Tenina. How quickly we've adapted to our little village. We amble the square, we climb the steps to the *castelo*, we stroll through the arcade by city hall. We pass the shops lining the narrow streets and you flatten your nose against the glass; we visit the mercado, buy a few groceries and jabber with Raul. It's as if we've lived our whole lives here.

Do you know— There are times when I imagine I've seen all these places before, long ago. It's true! I imagine our little town has no existence of its own, that it's only a jumble of

memories I've puzzled together.

The streetlights here are slender and green with lanterns of pebbled glass, like those on the street I grew up on in West LA. The bandstand we visit in the public *jardim* was moved from a Minnesota park. The apartments across the Rio Gilão have their boots underwater, as they do in Venice. The cobbles came from Bath, the beachside boardwalks from old Hong Kong, and the sandy shore from Maui's west coast.

You're remembering the odd encounter in the cafe last week, when I mistook a stranger for someone I'd known in my previous life. I was eager to introduce you to her. I thought she'd been one of my dearest friends!

I am, it seems, everywhere I have ever been; and at the same time, in a place without an identity. And whenever I hear a ship bell ring, I pull out my phone!

You're untroubled by any of this, and your comfort is salutary.

It's a holiday, you say. This is the land of weekends, Grampa. Every day is Sunday.

Perhaps Monday will never come.



## Raul the Grocer

We stop by the mercado on our way home. Near the entrance to the large building, Raul has his corral of tables. He stands inside it, herding his fruits and vegetables, meats and cheeses, boxes and bottles.

As we approach, he's shaking a package of cashews, addressing a young man in board shorts. It's odd for Raul to be giving advice on nuts as he lives on yogurt and has no teeth. His voice is shrill and hoarse, and it whistles through his gums as he speaks.

He sees us, passes the cashews to the young man and raises his arms in welcome.

*"O que precisais?"* What do you need?

You answer him, and he's instantly reaching for this and that. His hands are hairy, like giant spiders. They grip the goods with fierce authority.

What an unusual fellow he is. He has an excellent memory. There's some detail you've mentioned about yourself that you think he's forgotten. Then, at an odd moment, he recalls it perfectly. How connected he is to the life around him. This little grocery is the center of gravity for our world. Raul is

holding it all together.

He calls his favorite clientele *os fiéis*—those who are loyal and buy their groceries from him. And we're two of his faithful. If we're under the weather, Raul has his delivery boy stop by to see if there's something we need. And when one of the faithful dies— Remember the old woman? Raul was doleful. His toothless jaw sagged, his spidery hands lay on the bananas, palms up. And then— He showed such grace in his acceptance, recalling the moments of cheer she'd brought into his life.

He's bagging our groceries now, grinning like a stuffed Pulcinella. His chin almost touches his nose. Has he forgotten? Of course not.

"Surf cheese," he announces, "and tinned cod." His throat murmurs with echoes, like an old well.

A woman in a print dress is beside us now, examining things. She looks at the apples, then at the breads, reaches for plums, stops to consider tomatoes, turning her head again and again. Don't be afraid! Trust the grocer. Everything will be fine.

Raul lowers the small bag to you with his big hairy hands. In his eyes, there's a tenderness for someone distant he loves, or someone he loved long ago, or someone he wished existed but never did.

## *Casa da Inez*

**S**enhora Inez has a small house a short walk from the public market. The *casa* has a pleasing look on the street, white with yellow trim around the windows and the front door. The belief, she says, is that the bright trim keeps bad spirits from entering. So far, so good!

Inez was born in Spain. She and her daughter, Dosey, an accountant at a local bank, occupy the first floor. The Senhora has rented us the space upstairs, which includes our two small bedrooms, a sitting area and kitchenette, and the terrace overlooking the street.

As we approach, you point at the terrace, and we think of our golden mornings and the times we've sat there together since your arrival and watched the sun set over the town.

You open the front door, which is green, and we cross the threshold.

Inez, kind woman, is in her chair darning one of your socks.

She opens her arms and you hurry to her for a hug. Like the rolls she bakes, the Senhora is warm and round. How sweet she is. It's as if we've been living with her for years. Over

your shoulder, she shows me her mischievous grin, her downy mustache and the daring eyes of a dancing girl.

Dosey is at the dining table with her phone, talking to one of her many *solteiros*. Young men seek her attention. They appear, pick her up and take her out. Sometimes Dosey stays overnight with them.

Inez is alone more than she likes. She's happy we've returned. I wink at her and she titters. You're amused, understanding it's all in fun.

"We've brought you something," you say. A scallop shell from the beach. It's purple. Its rough exterior has rays like a rising sun. Its inside is pearly. You hand it to her and show her how to feel the pearly inside with her thumb.

Inez thanks you, draws you close again and gives you a kiss. And for me, another look. Not playful this time. This one is full of longing.

When she was young, Inez was as trim as her daughter. She's showed us photos from many years back. Inez was a magnet for men, and she threw herself into the arms of one. He gave her Dosey, then he fell in love with a Sevillian lady, crossed the border with her and never returned.

Inez sees the sympathy in my eyes and she stands, the scallop shell in her hand.

I let her longing touch mine.

"Angelo," she whispers, remembering the paramours from her youth.

It's a sharing much like the shell you've given her.

We are blessed to dwell with Inez. She knows how much

you care for her. And she knows I value her spirit, and her wisdom too—the mournful wisdom that comes with age.

We must be happy with what life leaves us.



## Names

**I**t's a question to ponder. What is your real name? The name that truly describes you. The name the Creator might have given you if the selection had been His.

You're Tenina to me. Often Teni or Sweetheart.

I call myself Angelo because I wish to imagine I'll start a fresh life following the one I'm completing on earth. But that's speculative!

I've nearly forgotten the name my parents gave me.

I love being called Grampa, of course.

On the way to Republic Square, we pass the schoolyard. The boys are often there, kicking a ball. Sometimes when they see us, they come to the fence. They laugh and push each other around. And they call to us.

They use names that are unfamiliar. It's a game for them, but their attitude can be scornful and the names derogatory. In the interests of learning the language, we commit their words to memory and we look them up.

A couple of weeks ago, the boys called me *Sem-Abrigo*, which isn't correct. We have a home. So we took it upon

ourselves to correct them. Not angrily, of course. I raised my Portuguese hat to them. “*Tenho casa,*” I explained. You were less polite!

After that, they used other names. *Estrangeiro*, they called me. Foreigner. Or *Marciano*. Martian. They persisted in seeing us as unfortunates and called me *Vagabundo*. Bum.

Then one of the older boys took charge. He convinced the younger ones that he had special knowledge. He settled on a new name, and they all picked it up. I don’t like it and neither do you. But we can’t be too harsh. They’re just boys and we’re visitors here.

*Terminado*. That’s what they call me now, and they sing the name out together in chorus when we pass. It means finished. Goner.

*Terminado*, they cry, shaking their forefingers, scolding me as one of their schoolteachers might. *Terminado, Terminado*.

I can’t argue with the concept.

But I prefer Angelo.

## *Surf Cheese and Tinned Cod*

Sustenance is important. We take great pleasure in eating together. We're not pretentious about it. No, we're perfectly humble, content with our casual settings and our modest fare.

You like the cheese Raul favors. It comes in wedges, and the blue label has a picture of breaking waves. We call it "surf cheese" because of the picture and because the cheese has holes like bubbles of foam.

Surf cheese is soft and it sticks to our fingers. It's Raul's pick because it doesn't take teeth to chew. We like that it's gooey, and we like the taste too. It's creamy and sour. Once you start eating, you can't stop.

Surf cheese isn't for connoisseurs. One afternoon, we saw that the stone masons working on the castle restoration were eating it. They cut it with a blackened knife and passed gooey pieces around. We shouted and waved. Their English was poor, and we couldn't make sense of their Portuguese, so they had no idea what had provoked our greeting. But we enjoyed seeing them eating the cheese we prize.

No one can live on cheese alone, so we often share a tin of

cod. We enjoy it because it's rubbery. You can work your jaws for as long as you like, and it never gets mushy. It's like gum.

Sometimes we eat at home in our sitting room or out on the terrace. Inez prefers fresh fish, but she likes to join us. She enjoys our company. Often we take our cheese and tinned cod and sit on the marble blocks by the Republic Square fountain. You hold the sun umbrella over my head while I open the tin.

People like watching us peel back the rind of the surf cheese and stick our fingers in. And they share our amusement as we work at the rubbery cod. We chomp and chomp, laughing and shaking our heads. Cod is so unwilling to be consumed!

Sometimes we take a little bottle of piri piri along and sprinkle sauce on the fish. That burns our tongues. We stare at each other as we grind and the passersby laugh. Some are carrying things they've bought at the stores. Others are walking their dogs.

Afterward, we kneel beside the pool and wash our hands.

## *Graveyard for Anchors*

**T**he week you arrived, Raul told us about the Graveyard. He thought we'd enjoy it.

From the casa, a short bus ride and a leisurely walk took us to the place where beachgoers file across the white bridge that spans the lagoon. How the wind blew! You clasped my hand. I held on to my hat. On the far side was the depot for the old tuna train.

We mixed with people in shorts and swimming suits, lugging their beach bags and folding chairs. Down the tracks, we spotted the miniature train backing toward us.

The ride was a fine amusement. The passengers were from many lands. We heard German and English, French and Chinese. And a slushy tongue, from Eastern Europe perhaps. They all had sun and the beach in mind.

When the train reached the lagoon's far shore, you pointed at the muddy banks and the armies of crabbies marching alongside us. Possessed by some urgent purpose, they scurried back and forth like those in the world Grampa left behind. Then the mud gave way to sand dunes dotted with umbrella pines: trees that looked like a child had drawn them.

When the train reached the end of the line, the vacationers filed off, heading down a wooden walkway toward the shore. We joined them, uncertain where the Graveyard was. The old fishing village, now a resort and cafe, appeared on our left. You pulled at my hand and when I turned, I saw them: ranks of giant anchors on an abutment overlooking the sea.

The beachgoers found spots on the sand to plant their chairs and towels. We passed them, moving with mounting curiosity toward the Graveyard. A barrier of ropes and wooden posts cordoned it off. Within the confined area were scores of anchors with their picks dug in and their shanks to the sea.

We stopped a lifeguard and pestered him for information.

We didn't learn much. Just that the anchors had belonged to tuna fishermen who had worked this coast years before. The miniature train had been built to deliver supplies to the families who'd lived there and to haul the fishermen's catch from the beach.

We walked beside the roped-off area until we reached a spot that was hidden from view. Then we slid under the rope and wandered among the anchors. They were huge, rusted and dark, and the space between was tufted with seagrass.

I'm not a fisherman, but I know: fishing is hard work. And having done hard work myself, I know that determined labor leaves an indelible impression. As does the day when you realize your work has reached its end.

We decided to count the anchors, and we did that as we rambled through their ranks. Two hundred and three, every one of them chipped and battered.

When the count was done, we gazed at the group and wondered. Did the tuna go elsewhere? Were the waters fished out? Had a new way of fishing obsoleted the men and their fleet? Or was it competition? Had the markets been stocked by harvests from other waters?

There was no one to tell us the story. Only the anchors with their points dug in. They were a mute declaration for all who might come upon them. A vow from the stoic seamen: our labors are over, and the safety provided by anchors will nevermore be the watchword of life.

Imagining that pledge, hearing it in my head—

A vacant moment possessed me. A gap, a lapse of thought. And then—

The meaning of the Graveyard emerged. The meaning for me.

“This is my place,” I said.

You turned and stared at me through your lemon-frame glasses.

“Tenina,” I said. “I too will bury my anchor, and I will bury it here. Right now.”

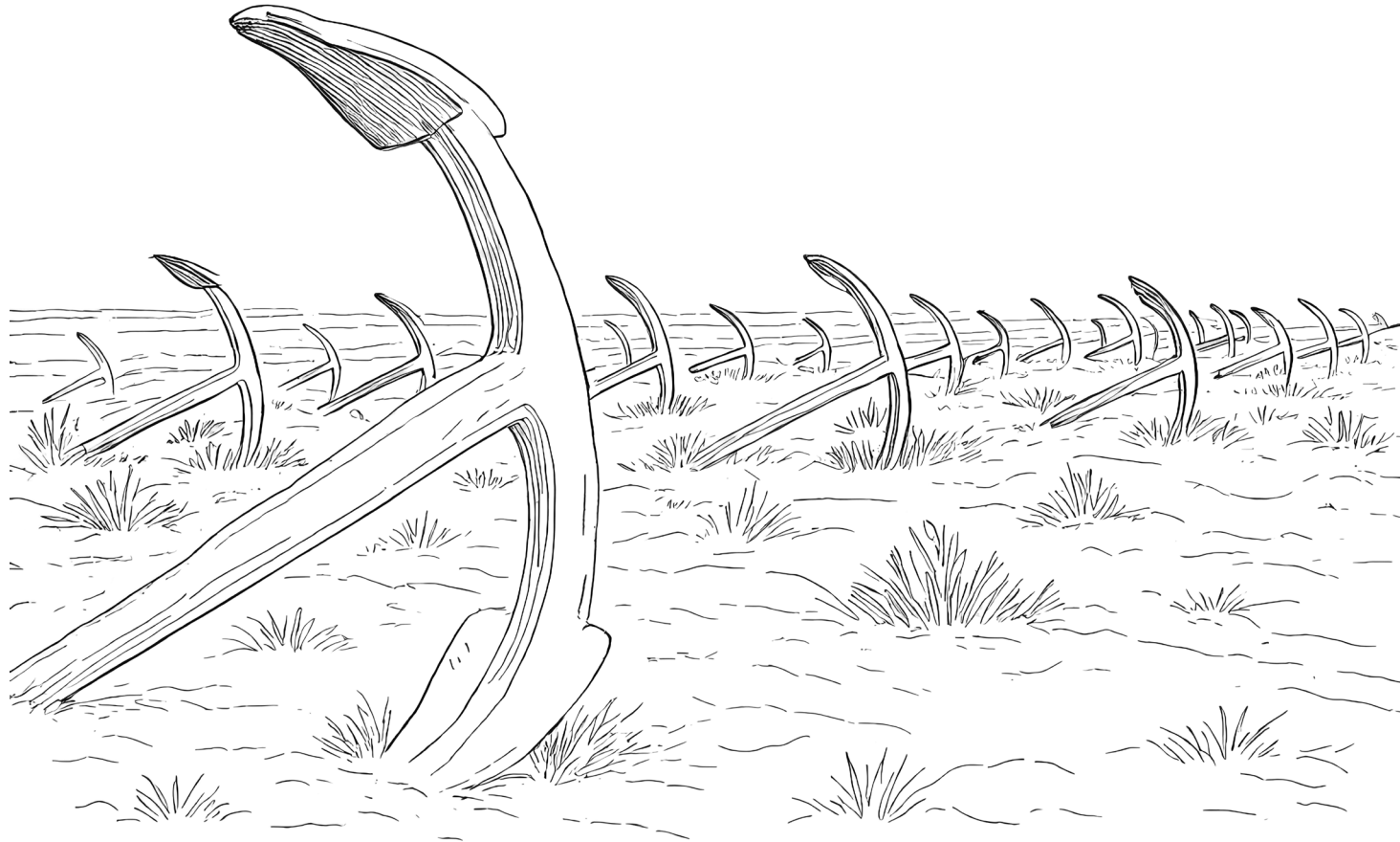
And I did.

I went down on my knees. How surprised you were!

I went down on my knees and pledged— With you, with you— I would henceforward be spontaneous, untethered— Joyful. And mournful too. Adrift in the past and present. Enriched by both.

No hesitations, no exemptions. No monitions, no chains, no lines, no nets.

I let go of my moorings— For good.  
And with that resolve, I was free to join you.  
Like this, without notice, vital things are revealed to us.  
Aren't they, sweetheart.





## *The Poverty of Expertise*

**I** know you're concerned about starting school in the fall, when our holiday ends.

Others may dismiss your fears, Tenina, but I cannot.

School is a threshold. Beyond it, adults are waiting.

Your life will be very different.

Don't ever lose the little girl.

The child inside your grampa was always trying to take charge. I should have let him. There were times when others considered me an authority, but I never wanted to be one. I cared nothing about being certified fit for this or that. Perhaps my objection to official status was a sign of my hatred for responsibility!

Whatever judgment may be passed on me, good or ill, in my life with you I am proud of being an amateur.

This, I believe, is the secret of secrets.

To be ignorant always, always—

To hold it as the highest human state, unvarying, permanent.

To not know.

To be wrong. To make mistakes.

To be always at the beginning and never at the end.  
To refuse to surrender to the poverty of expertise.  
Amateurs always. Always! Sample and learn. See, hear,  
smell and feel.

No protection. No cover for fear or regrettable error. You  
were born a fool, and nothing has changed. Stick your neck  
out!

Pardon your grampa for getting worked-up.

One of the privileges of aging is choosing among the great  
many things you can squawk about.

But I now feel—passionately, my dear—that being igno-  
rant is best, no matter who you are or how long you live. Keep  
the discoveries coming until they overwhelm you.

After a lifetime of struggling for prominence, that's Ange-  
lo's wisdom.

You, my dear, because you're a child— Because you're a  
born amateur—

You don't have to change.

## *The Seal Stamp*

*y*ou found it on our first visit to the curio shop. You grasped the wooden handle and brought it forward through the dim light. “What is it?” you asked.

“A seal stamp,” I explained. “You melt wax and drip the wax on an envelope flap. Then you press the metal end of the stamp into the wax. People used to write letters to each other.”

The idea intrigued you.

You turned the stamp over. There was a letter T carved in the brass head.

You laughed, and so did I.

So we bought it.

But we had no wax and no letters to send. What would we stamp?

Fruit chews, you said.

What an idea.

But when I considered your suggestion carefully, I realized: it might work. When a chew is in your mouth and you’re mashing it between your teeth, it gets warm and soft. Wherever you set it, the chew will cool once it’s stamped.

So we paid a visit to the mercado and bought a bag of

chews from Raul. At home, we spilled the fruit chews out on the floor. It was a scramble to unwrap them all, and a lot of jawing to make them soft. But before long the chews were all embossed. *T, T and T* again.

We invited Inez and Dosey to join us, and we sat on the terrace together. You explained how we'd personalized the chews and you passed them around.

Dosey wrinkled her nose, but Inez didn't care. So the three of us began. What a treat that was! So sweet— Berry and cherry, lime and orange, with your ardent spirit pressed into each.

The three of us chewed and chewed until there were only four left.

Then Dosey surrendered and we finished the four together.

When the last chew was gone, Inez gave me that look, longing, lonely. And the dear lady began to cry. Dosey was embarrassed, but I grasped Inez's hand and held it firmly. And I began to cry with her. Then you, my dear child— You felt the depth of the moment you'd orchestrated, and tears descended from beneath your lemon glasses.

Finally Dosey broke and she joined us, sobbing along, understanding the sorrow welling from her poor mother's breast.

A circle of pliable hearts, my dear, gathered on the terrace. The stamp of your innocence had embossed itself on us all.

## Poetry

**I** like writing verse and so do you. Writing together pleases us greatly. For that purpose, my notepad and pencil are always ready.

Fashioning a poem is a playful act, and the results often surprise us. Like making a necklace: the words are colored beads; we pick ones we like and slide them onto the string, unsure what the effect will be until the last bead is chosen.

We haven't written enough poems to fill a book, but that pleases us too. We like our incapacity. For us, a poem is a moment that came and went, a moment we shared in our clumsy, inconclusive way.

In my previous life, I assigned myself tasks, and I worked to complete them. I'm over that now. Writing poems with you is part of my redemption. We're always spontaneous, and it's no work at all.

We cherish our goofs. If we don't get a perfect rhyme, if there aren't enough syllables to fill out a line or if there are too many, we laugh at the faults and leave them alone.

Poetry can be serious. We like that breathless feeling when

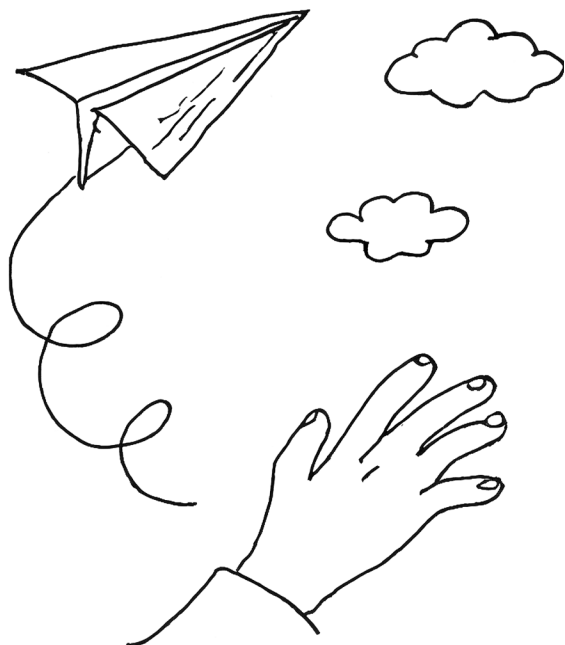
we light on a special thought. But we're not so attached to life's gravity that we force our little lines to conform. We're happy for them if they lurch along and have no value beyond the pleasure they share with us at the moment they're born.

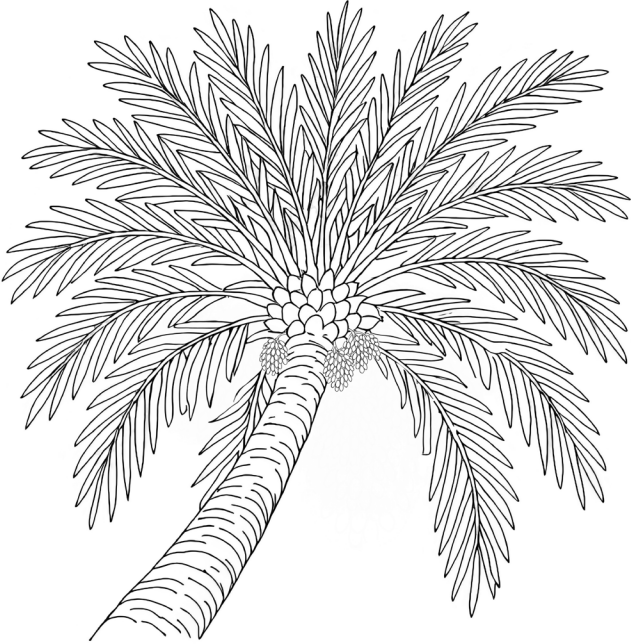
Often we set them free. We make a glider of a page and fly it into the wind. We make a boat and give it to the undertow at the beach. Or we fold it and hide it in a book on the shelf or under some clothing in a dresser drawer, imagining we will rediscover it at a future time.

From our terrace, we can see the three giant palms rooted in the park at the end of the street. We admire them daily. They're arranged like the ace of clubs, their great heads high above the rooftops, fronds arcing in every direction, sparkling with light. They're a century old, the park trimmer says, and their forebears came from the Canary Islands.

The dates on the palms have been ripening all summer long. The giants are releasing them now. We want to be with them for that.

And, of course, we'll take our notepad and pencil along.





## *Dates Are Falling (Tenina says)*

What's that tapping around you and me?  
It's not fog dripping from frond or leaf.  
The sky is clear, the sun's above.  
Dates are falling. Palm tree love.

I so like being out of doors.  
It's heaven with my hand in yours.  
Your craning head, your lifted eyes.  
You don't expect my sweet surprise:

Oh dear Grampa, you're my world.  
Take these words from a little girl.  
Your gentle fingers my small lips kiss.  
I want every day to be like this.

Together, together we see and touch.  
I like that, Grampa, very much.  
Why do you stand there so amazed?  
Is something wrong? Your eyes are glazed.

The moments pass, quick as thought,  
Tapping still as the little bombs drop.  
That's what they do, you surely know.  
Why should the dates trouble you so?



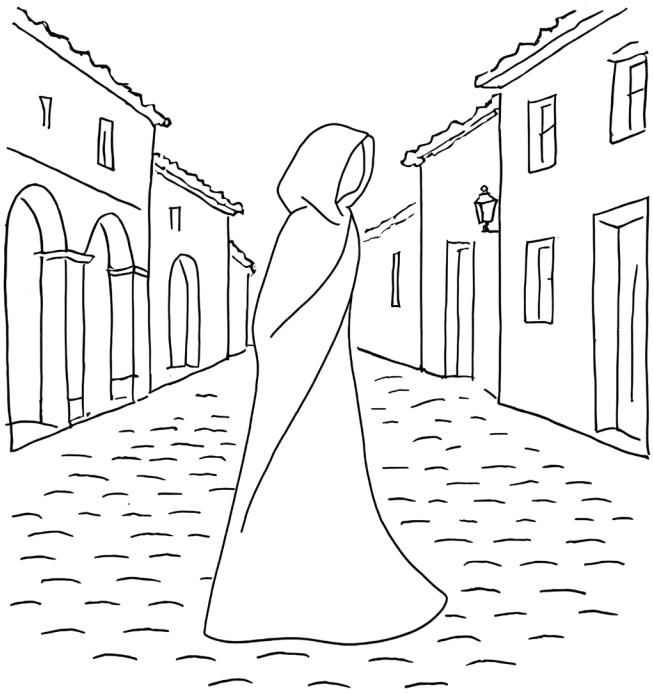
## *Dates Are Falling (Angelo replies)*

These shiny dates that fall so free  
Are fine and rare— Gems to me.  
With all my years and lurching round,  
More precious things I've never found.

I'm the candle, you're the flame.  
Maybe the palm trees feel the same.  
All the love in trunk and root  
Summed and centered in a little fruit.

Sunny days and jolts of bliss.  
The future won't always be like this.  
Soon the season will turn around,  
And all our shinies on the ground.

Put those troubles far away.  
Nothing matters but today.  
Outside, old man. Leave your keys.  
Dates are falling from the trees.



## *The Woman in Black*

**W**ho is she, Tenina? The locals must know. The first time we saw her, she was passing beneath the café umbrellas that border Republic Square. A few days later, we saw her turn into the alley that runs between the pharmacy and the jewelry store.

Chance sightings, we thought. She couldn't be following us. What reason would she have to do that?

We asked Raul. He's never seen the Woman and has no idea who she is. The same for Inez. There's no cause to be suspicious, but I wouldn't mind hearing that she has an identity and some business here.

She was wearing a cloak both times we saw her. It was black and the fabric looked coarse, burlap or wool. Did the wind wrap it around her? Perhaps she was turning away. A loop of the cloak hooded her head, while the hem spiraled about her feet.

I'm assuming she's older, but who's to say? Her hands weren't visible. They grasped the rough fabric from inside, holding it close. On the first occasion, I got a glimpse of her brow when she looked over her shoulder. Then she bowed her

head and hurried away. Thankfully, you weren't frightened. "Can we get a gelato?" you asked, as if nothing had happened.

The Woman's appearance seems ominous. Does her presence pose some kind of threat? To the village? To us?

Her skulking violates the town's joyful spirit. And her cloak makes no sense, as hot as it is at midday. She must feel like a sardine wrapped in leaves and set on the coals.

This afternoon, we're strolling down the cobbled promenade, passing through the public gardens beside the river.

I notice her behind us, on our right.

Reading my alarm, you turn and look.

Her cowl lifts.

Give me your hand, Tenina. We're going to hurry forward past the red benches, bending our course to skirt the concrete planters on the left. We'll circle the bandstand up ahead. Quickly, my dear.

The Woman in Black is stirring my fears.

She's not from around here.

She's recently arrived from a distant country. Or another world. A doomful world. A world of woe. In her eyes, the vacationers here are fools. And the residents are blind. There's a tragedy brewing, and none of them know about it.

Has she changed direction? No, she's still approaching us.

Veer to the left, Teni. Alongside the grillwork that circles the bandstand's moat. In the water, turtles are bobbing, but we aren't going to stop and observe them as we normally would. We draw our faculties in, like turtles ourselves, and continue with hurried steps beneath the pink blooms of the

large oleander.

She's passed the bandstand. Headed toward us.

The Woman is following us. No mistaking that.

Perhaps she's come to warn us, to prevent a calamity. Or maybe she's here to trigger one, to set some misfortune in motion.

Maybe her presence is purely symbolic. She's a creature of omen. She comes and goes, and she doesn't stay long—a few hours, that's all. She wanders the streets, then—poof—she's gone.

Is she still behind us? Don't turn, sweetheart.

We're at the end of the promenade, climbing the incline beside the amphitheater, weaving through the throng of travelers by the terminus of the Roman Bridge. And now we're hurrying across it, passing the lutist, weaving through foot traffic.

No, no, not yet. Don't look, don't look.

We continue moving until we're midway. And now with the Rio Gilão below, we pause by a seating niche and turn.

There's no trace of her. Not on the bridge or the praça below.

The Woman has vanished.

I'm relieved. Greatly relieved.

But she's rattled me, Teni.

Doesn't anyone know who she is or why she's here?

## *Such a Fool*

**T**wo gray days. On the third, the sun is visible, but it's only a blur.

We venture outside, wary, watchful. We circle our block, then wander farther. No sign of the Woman in Black. She seems to have vanished, returned to her world of woe. But I'm still a bit muddled.

Age shakes our surety, sweetheart. And the truth is—

Grampa's little boat has been unsteady for years. It lost its rudder just after you were born.

I'm speaking of your grandmother.

My blessing, my wife.

I know. I've spoken of her before. Whenever I'm discomposed, the memories return. I remember her firmness when anything threatened. I remember her care, her tenderness. I see her before me: the smile that filled her cheeks; the gaze that was so expansive, I could never find its edge.

Unlike myself, she was highborn. But she loved my striving, and she ennobled it. She believed in me, *Teni*. She made me feel that I belonged to the future. It's easy to imagine she's still here, that I'll see her in the *mercado* talking to *Raul* or

walking on the beach with the wind in her hair.

Every day I'm in her debt. Every day I follow her words or an example she set. "Seek the truth," she said, "and speak it to everyone. What's right and wrong is inside us. Don't let fear rule your mind."

For me, she's still alive. I have conversations with her. She asks me questions and I answer her. I unload my heart and she understands. Just as if you and I are talking.

Dear Tenina—

If I could have any wish fulfilled, I would have her time on earth extended—long enough for you to get to know her. If you could feel her spirit. If you could hear her wisdom and look into those fathomless eyes.

What a night! The night I realized who she was.

Moments like that— You never forget.

The dark forest. Thunder and rain. Leaves flying. Her voice was in my ear. Birds in swarms, circling, crying— There was water in my boots, Teni. Lightning clapped, the earth shook. Then all at once the sky cleared, and through the branches I could see the moon.

Dear girl, forgive me. I'm such a fool.

## *A Ferry Ride*

**W**e've talked about riding the ferry down the Rio Gilão to Tavira Island. I've recovered my equanimity and my confidence, so this morning we're going to do it.

We thread the streets as the sun is rising. The whitewashed walls glow. The iron-red roof tiles are varnished with dew.

We buy our tickets at the dockside kiosk, but we don't leave on the first ferry. We wait for the older one, the blue and white one with red rails.

When our ferry is ready, we board and climb the stair to the top deck.

There's no one up here but us and a young man in a blue parka.

His hair is blond, combed over his crown, and he has a ring in one ear. He's facing the river's mouth and he has a pair of binoculars around his neck.

The ferry rumbles to life and pulls away from the wharf, passing moored skiffs on either side. We're motoring beneath the vehicular bridge, its concrete pediment crusted with mussels—

“Tern,” the man with binoculars shouts.

A white bird closes its wings and falls out of the sky, splashing into the river. You let go of my hand and step toward the bow.

I follow.

The white bird emerges from the water. You follow it with your finger as it rises into the air.

“Little tern,” the man says, “on its way south.”

He’s speaking to you. You glance at me and I nod.

“Like human travelers,” the man says, “they come and they go. They’re here for a while and then they leave.”

Another white tern folds its wings and plunges into the river.

“Little terns,” the man says. “Sandwich terns and caspians too. They’ll cross the sea and winter off the coast of Africa. The ones that make it.”

His nose is sharp and his lips are red.

“I’m Nunez,” he addresses us both. “Enn’ to friends.”

A line of larger birds appears, crossing the river’s mouth.

“Spoonbills,” Enn says. “Have a look.” He removes his binoculars from around his neck.

You cock your glasses onto your brow, take the binoculars and raise them.

“A second string’s right behind the first,” he says. “Can you see how many?”

You follow the string, counting under your breath.

“Nine,” you say.

“You noticed their spoons?”

You nod, smiling, handing the binoculars back. Enn is

familiar in a pleasing way. It's as if he knew we'd be here and had chosen to join us. Beyond the river's mouth, a labyrinth of tidal marshes appears.

He's scanning the shallows. "There are waders in these lagoons," he says. "Dunlin, whimbrel, black-bellied plovers—"

As the ferry rumbles past an inlet, four small birds scare from the scrub.

"Yellow wagtails," he says.

The ferry coughs. Then its rumble mounts, and it's shimmying to the right. We're slowing, approaching the island.

On the littoral, a man is stooping beside a bucket, digging for clams.

We bump the dock and the engine dies.

Enn turns to me. "Shall we see the surf together?"

I nod. "We'd like that."

The crew secures the ferry and the passengers begin filing off, lugging their beach gear toward a concrete walkway.

We follow Enn down the gangway to the lower deck, trailing the group. The concrete path is flanked by umbrella pines, crowns perfectly round. Large black and white birds are flying between them, birds with long tails.

"They're going south too?" I ask.

"No," Enn says. "The magpies live here."

As the walkway tops a rise, the ocean comes into view, stippled and gleaming beneath the sun. The beachgoers are spreading out.

"Look," Enn says.

He's motioning to a spot on the shore where a group of

small birds are following the surf line. He starts toward them. You and I follow.

Speckled gray and white, there are dozens of them, pecking the bubbles.

“Sanderlings,” Enn says.

The birds move as one, like mechanical toys, hurrying upslope as the tide rolls in, running after the surf as it retreats.

“Brave creatures,” Enn says.

The birds poke and pivot like an army of sewing machines, needling the froth as if they’re trying to stitch the tide to the shore beneath.

“Far from home,” Enn says.

Like us, Tenina.

As if he’d heard my thought, Enn adds, “They won’t be here long.”

The sanderlings run with the waves. The white flash of their wings mirrors the sparkle of sun on the wavelets.

Who is this stranger? Does he have some purpose?

“Migration’s a dance,” Enn says, turning to me. “The season leads, and the birds must follow. A dangerous dance, even for the strongest.”

He kneels, smiling at you.

“There are birds we call swifts. Have you ever seen one?”

You shake your head.

Enn looks at me.

“No,” I answer.

“They’re the aces,” Enn says. “Masters of migration.”

Why is he telling us this?

“They cross the sea,” Enn says, “the mountains, the Sahara Desert. They fly from here to South Africa. Without stopping.”  
The strange fellow lifts his chin as if challenging me.  
“A group are gathered on the cliffs near Carvoeiro.”



2



## Curios

This morning the sky is blue and the sun is bright. You polish your lemon-frame glasses. I grab my flat-brimmed hat and the sun umbrella I use as a cane.

“Curios,” you say.

I laugh. That’s exactly what I was thinking.

We’ve been to the shop once, when we found the seal stamp. There are other things, no doubt, awaiting discovery. It’s on— What’s the name of the street?

*Rua Ten Couto.* What a memory you have!

Beside the auto repair. A short walk and a pleasant one.

So, minutes later, we’re there.

The sign by the entrance reads *Curiosidades.*

A bell rings as we open the door, and through the dimness, the proprietor appears, chortling and flaring his blood-shot eyes. He remembers us.

“Henrique,” he reintroduces himself, patting his oversize belly. And he begins to boast about the treasures he’s found since our last visit.

He gestures toward the shop’s interior. You step forward and I follow, gazing to either side. Railroad spikes. A holiday

wreath. A stuffed mouse reading a magazine. Military patches. An antique chorizo roaster. A painting of a frog on a flying flamingo.

“Your name, sir?” he asks.

“Angelo,” I answer, inspecting an upright butter stick holder. In addition to novelties, there are items that have important utility, once you’ve thought it over.

Henrique pauses and crooks an arthritic finger.

He has something he thinks we need.

He motions to us, then leads the way down a dusty aisle. Halfway along he stops, lifts an item from a shelf with one hand, takes my umbrella from me with the other, and passes the object to me.

A tube of brass, a foot long.

It needs some examining, but I discover one end has a cap, and when I remove it and tip up the tube, an odd device slides into my palm: a rail with a glass housing on top.

“A bubble level,” Henrique explains. “A rare antique.”

I can see the bubble in the fluid inside the glass.

There’s no mistaking its years of use. The instrument had been leveling things for a long while. I wait, expecting an explanation. Henrique just nods.

I raise the level so a window’s behind it, and I tilt it back and forth, watching the bubble slide, reaching my free hand to an overturned pot to secure my balance.

And Henrique’s idea strikes me.

I laugh and laugh, and our new friend laughs with me.

Well, my dear. What do you think?

Henrique can see I'm a bit infirm, so he's offered a solution.

Wherever we go, I will take the bubble level along, and whenever I feel unsteady, I will use the device to determine exactly where level is.

What an idea. With tools like this, a man can live forever!

"And the young miss?" Henrique asks. "What's your name?"

"Tenina."

"For Tenina—" Henrique raises his finger again.

He leads us down the aisle and crosses into another. Atop a stack of old magazines is a book. Henrique hands it to you.

It's a children's book. The story of Magellan, in English.

"Angelo will read it to you," Henrique says. "It's about a great embarking."

An odd subject for a little girl.

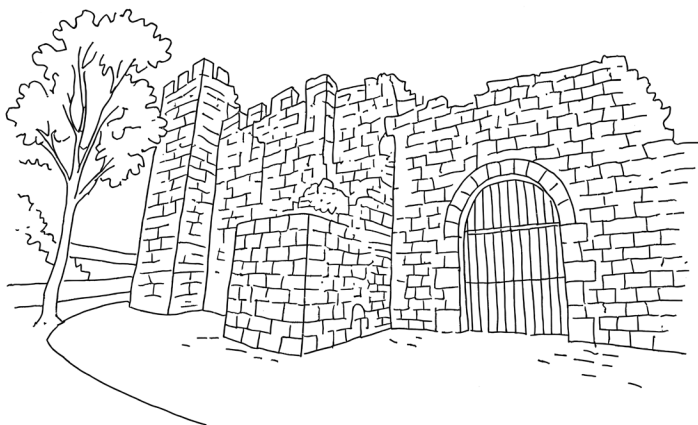
"This goes with it." Henrique hands you a Portuguese coin with an old ship on it—one with square sails. "It's the ship Magellan captained."

You're admiring the coin and the book.

So we buy them, along with the level.

"We like your shop," you say.

"*Você é linda,*" Henrique replies.



## The Castle

**H**enrique's shop is near one of our favorite pastelarias. We're both thinking about a treat, and there's not a long line.

The glass cases have three shelves with golden trays on each. What fragrances, what heavenly sights! To merchants, I tip my hat. To bakers, I remove it.

It's *rolo de figo*, sweetheart. Earthy brown, damp and mysterious. *Torta de mel e canel*, two trays of *jesuitas* and a pile of *dom rodrigos*, each wrapped in colored foil—too sweet, even for us!

I lift you so you can see the higher shelves.

Crunchy *palmieres*, creamy *parras*— And there, waiting

quietly on a tray, is the pinnacle of the bakers' art: *torta de laranja*. You put your finger on the glass.

I see them, Teni, I see. Each is topped with sticky threads and a candied orange, and custard seeps out of the rolled middle. For so many things in life, confusion rules; but on this we are sure.

It's our turn, and the girl behind the counter is smiling.

"*Torta de laranja*," you say. "*Duas*."

On the street, I kneel on the cobblestones. We face each other, and the drama begins. A *laranja* can be ambushed in stages: the soaked cake, the dribbling custard, the gooey threads and the candied orange. Or you can open your mouth as wide as you can—as we do now—and, with a giant bite, mix all the textures and flavors together.

Bliss, my dear—

We chew in unison, squinting and savoring, imagining every forward moment in life will be just like this.

The bliss persists until only the bakery paper remains, then we drink from the bottle of water we've brought.

I rise, wary momentarily, scanning the storefronts and corners for the Woman in Black. Thankfully there's no sign of her.

"Let's go to the castle," you say.

A wonderful idea.

We dispose of the paper remains, clasp hands and begin our amble up the narrow street toward higher ground. The castelo has become one of our favorite places.

The original structure, Raul says, was a Moorish kasbah.

In centuries past, it was reduced to foundation stones and a few stub walls. The castelo we know, its turrets and merlons, was mounted in recent times by a misguided dictatorship to resemble a fortress in Northern Europe. It's entirely pretend, which suits us perfectly.

We reach the top of the hill, breathing hard, admiring the castelo's high walls, with the crowns of trees peeking over them. Through the entrance arch we can see: the tourist traffic is light.

Together we enter the sanctuary, and in a heartbeat we feel its calm: the cheer of its flower beds, the serenity of its gravel walkways and vine-covered arbors. Bougainvillea climbs the interior walls. Tall jacarandas rise from the colorful plantings, arboring the entire space with their graceful sprays and lavender blooms.

A place of peace and reflection.

You lead the way through the garden to the stone steps at the castelo's rear.

It's a steep climb and I need both hands, so I pass you the sun umbrella.

"The level," you say.

Will it work? I remove my pack, open it and find the device. I slide the level from its tube, tilt and tip it, watching the bubble move. Then I'm climbing, setting my feet on the stone treads, and— Hah! It works, Tenina. It really does!

With one hand on the wall, I'm following you up the steps.

We reach the ramparts, and you lead the way past its castellations, with the boughs of the jacarandas waving over us.

The turret's before us now. We cross it and peer through a gap in the merlons, seeing the street below. From here, the town seems strangely distant. The lavender blooms bob over our heads. The gardens' bright geometries carpet the castelo's interior. The refuge is all around us.

“Grampa?”

“Yes?”

You seat yourself on a bench and pat the space beside you.

“Will you read the first chapter?”

Of course, sweetheart.

## *Lawless Winds*

**I** remove the storybook from my pack. Together we admire the man in sixteenth century garb on its cover. Then I open the book and turn the first page, recalling Henrique's words.

A great embarking.

Magellan, we learn, grew up on a farm in northern Portugal. There were animals on the first floor. He slept upstairs with his parents. He was a hardworking boy, and he did his chores without complaint.

A young couple approaches, arm in arm. They pause, enjoying the view and a bit of our story. Then they smile and move away.

Magellan's father had connections, so Ferdinand was sent to Lisbon to work as a page in the royal court. He was schooled there. He learned about hunting and armed combat, and about exploration at sea, which was all the rage in Portugal at the time. Columbus had returned from the New World, and every starry-eyed kid dreamt of being like him: braving the unknown and returning with revelations that would shock and amaze.

Ferdinand wanted to attend navigation school. He distinguished himself as a page, so his wish was granted. He was sent to a place on the southern sea coast. *Escola de Sagres*.

“Where is that?” you ask.

“Sagres? Not far. We could take the bus.”

“Is the school still there?”

“Probably not.”

“More,” you nod.

I continue reading.

At the school in Sagres, boys were taught by experienced seamen. They learned ship construction, how to make maps, how to steer by the stars. His teachers gave Ferdinand words of encouragement, words that challenged his daring and stirred his hopes.

“That’s how great embarkings begin,” I say.

At one point or another, many of us are like Magellan.

There are things we aspire to, things we feel we must do. Desperately. No matter the cost. There’s a ship we must board. We must feel lawless winds in our sails. We want to be borne to a distant place that no one on earth has ever seen.

These aren’t only dreams of youth. If anything—

“Grampa?”

“I’m sorry, Teni.”

I find my place on the page, wondering for a moment which of us Henrique intended the story for.

## *The Loose Tooth*

**I**t's bothering me again. It kept me awake half the night. It aches, and there's a sharp pain in the root. The same as before. My tongue isn't strong enough, but I can wiggle it with my fingers.

I'm not sure, sweetheart.

It's been with me for a long time. I'm grateful to it and I'm sad that it's losing its mooring. I don't want to be rid of it. Despite its weakness, it's still working. But— Is there a way, I wonder, to distance myself from its decline? I would prefer to separate its fate from my own.

The challenge is one of discoordination.

The concept is hard for a child to grasp. It's hard for me as well!

We don't fail all at once. Most of the apparatus is perfectly fine, ready to continue operating for years into the future. But a tooth is loose. Or somewhere, out of view, a more vital cog in the mysterious machine is about to fail. And all the other components, so happily working and eager to continue, must pause and take account.

Questions must be asked. If there are answers, they must

be found.

All the participants in the careful design must accept the reality: one cracked stone might bring the whole edifice down.

What a misfortune that would be.

You've grabbed my hand and you're shaking it, trying to lead me away from these troubling thoughts.

You're right, my dear. I'm a fool to dwell on things like this.

We have no control over time and the limits on life.

A tooth is loose. So let it be loose.

## *A Childhood Friend*

**I** set down my phone. You hear me sigh and you sense my sadness.

“What is it, Grampa?”

“We try, my dear. We try, we succeed, we fail.”

Shall I share a sensitive matter?

I’ve been thinking about old friends. Childhood friends.

This started with the fire.

The fire that consumed my home and the community I grew up in, before I found my way here. The calamity led to thoughts about events in my life that I could never relive, about friends I’d lost years before.

I reached out to one of them a while ago. When we were boys, we were very close. We’d shared our hopes and our fears.

It was easy to imagine he’d remember our bond as I do. I thought he might have the enthusiasm, after the passage of so many years, to renew our friendship. I imagined the fire might have affected him in the same way it affected me. So I found a way to reach him online.

I just got a return message. Shall I read it?

The message is brief.

Curt. Professional. Dismissing.

*Thanks, he writes. What an idea. Let me consider it. I've been busy with so many things.*

Well— This is disappointing.

My old friend is speaking to me in another language. Not English and not Portuguese. They are words from the language of loss. Not a thick stream of them. Just a trickle.

I should have known better. But fool that I am—

Someday you will long for old friends.

And you will accept—as Grampa must—that what divides us, one from the other, isn't time or distance. Each has his or her role in life, built from necessity and compromised dreams. That role, and the thoughts that sustain it, open a divide.

Yes, my dear. I am.

Very sad.

And as you know, when I'm sad, I'm inclined to verse!

I'm prepared. I have our notepad and pencil.

Shall we?

We'll sit on the terrace, side by side.

You can hold the sun umbrella while Grampa scribes.

When we put sorrow in verse, is the sting any less? I think not. A poem usually makes things worse! But let's do what we are able.

Here's our progression: we'll recapture the memory, then confess our longing. Finally, in the last stanza, we'll give voice to the understanding, painful as it is.

## *Sea of Thoughts*

When my mind yearned to stretch,  
Another shared the thrill.  
And every thought that I set free,  
He set one freer still.

Then growing freed us both,  
And different partners we chose.  
I spoke to cohorts in commerce, he to strangers  
On a million pocket phones.

Thoughts can never replace a friend.  
They only explain the loss.  
A sea of thoughts divides us now.  
And there is no way across.



## The Swifts

We aren't surprised by Enn's visit this afternoon. I'd shared our address with him. He's taken with you; and he enjoys my company too, or sees in me some challenge that interests him.

"The swifts," are the first words he speaks when we greet him on the threshold.

You laugh, reach for his hand and lead him inside. I clap his back, remembering the passion he has for his birds. Enn reminds me of my younger self.

Inez has spent the day preparing *cozido*. She invites him to join us for an early dinner. While we eat, Enn tells us about the swifts.

“There are twenty-eight of them,” he explains, “preparing for departure. They’ll fly from here to the south of Africa.”

“How long will it take them?” Inez asks.

“A couple of weeks.”

“They don’t stop,” you explain to Inez.

She laughs.

“Tenina’s right,” Enn says. “It’s a single flight, the whole way. They’re able to disconnect parts of their brain and rest on the wing.”

“That’s hard to imagine,” I say.

Enn checks the time. “We might see them at sundown,” he says, “when they return to the cliffs.”

Your eyes are wide. “Tonight?”

“Where is this?” I ask.

“*Praia da Marinha*,” Enn says.

The three of us help Inez clean up. Then we bid her goodbye, and you and I join Enn on the front seat of his beat-up truck. Without a word, he starts the engine and heads for the cliffs.

By the time we arrive, the sun is low in the sky.

The rocky walls are sheer and orange, glowing with reflected light. In places they’re pitted. Far below, the sea beats against them.

Enn points at pockets and caves. “They nested here this summer. The breeding’s over, but they’re still hanging around. Preparing to leave.”

He makes a chattering sound with his tongue. “You’ll hear them before you see them.” Enn looks up. “They’ll be flying above us, over the cliffs, over the sea.”

He removes his binoculars from his neck and hands them to me. He opens his pack and finds a smaller pair he's brought for you.

Then we wait. Listening. Watching.

After what seems a long while, we hear a shrill, frenzied sound vibrating in the sky above us.

Enn points. We peer through our binoculars.

"I see them!" you cry.

And so do I. They're whirling above us, turning, swooping, slicing the air with sickle-shaped wings. I try to imagine them crossing the sea.

"When they churn like this," Enn says, "it's hard to make sense of their flight. Then all at once they're streaming together, so fast you can't keep them in view. They're incredibly strong, unbelievably agile."

"They don't settle to rest," I mutter.

"No. You don't see them perched on rocks. When they return to their nests, they don't pause at the entrance. They fly at the cliff full speed, close their wings and they're gone."

We stand there for minutes, craning our necks, following the swifts with Enn's help. Then it ends as he described: the whirling ceases, the birds arrow at the orange walls and vanish into them.

We lower the binoculars.

"When will they leave?" you wonder.

"It won't be long," Enn says. "They're measuring their strength. Sensing the weather. Will it be clear? For how many days?"

“You think they understand the challenge?” I ask.

“In an instinctive way,” he nods.

“They’ll decide when to go,” you say.

“That’s right,” Enn replies.

He points at a rocky prominence down the coast. “For a week now, I’ve seen two ospreys on that point. Eating fish they’ve caught. Taking exploratory flights. Considering what direction they’ll go to make the crossing.”

Enn turns and eyes me directly.

“The birds have different ways,” he says, “of facing the challenge. But there’s no negotiating with the cold. They have to leave.”

“We’re going to Sagres,” you volunteer. “To see the fortress. Where Magellan learned to sail.”

“Exciting,” Enn says. “That’s near Cabo de São Vicente, the place they call ‘The End of the Earth.’ A special location for migrating birds. When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow morning,” you reply.

## *Ghosts in the Grove*

**B**y bus, it's a full day's journey to Sagres and back. Having never been, I spoke to Henrique about it and got advice from Raul.

We board the bus first thing in the morning. Lemon-framed glasses, Portuguese hat, surf cheese and cod, my bubble level and sun umbrella, and our Magellan storybook.

At the rest stop in Olhão, the driver suggests we visit the tipuana grove by the water where retired fishermen sit and talk. He gives us directions.

From the depot, we walk to the avenida and follow the cobbled median. The houses visible on either side are white cubes with flat roofs and third-floor lookouts facing the sea. A bell tolls the hour from a nearby steeple.

At the waterfront, we skirt the public market and enter the park. The trees are large here, with long leaf sprays that snake in the breeze. The shadows cast on the benches beneath are like a rippling current.

The slats are still damp.

There's a pair of elderly men a dozen feet away. You wander over, brave as a mariner, raising your hand to hail them.



Their muttering stops. They turn toward you. Then they notice me.

Silent. Staring.

I approach, lifting the crook of my umbrella in greeting.

Neither responds.

One wears a mariner's hat with a rumpled brim and tarnished braid. His lips are thin and straight, and he's squinting at me. Dismissing me. Who am I? What do I know?

His companion is severe as well. His grizzled jaw is clenched. His eyes are hooded and harsh.

"Fishermen," I say with respect.

You step beside me and grasp my thigh.

The hatted one scowls. The grizzled one glares.

"What did you catch?" I say. "May I ask?"

"Tuna," the hatted one answers.

"We saw the Graveyard," I tell them. "What happened?"

"The fish betrayed us," the grizzled one says.

"They found other waters," the hatted one adds.

"And the anchors?"

The hatted one is suspicious. Why do I want to know?

"Where are your boats?" I ask.

"They were here," the hatted one looks around them.

"There was water and a dock."

"The work you did—" I say. "It was hard to give up."

"Hard?" the grizzled one laughs.

His gaze has shifted. He's peering through the trees at the sea beyond. Suddenly I think: he didn't retire. He rolled his ship in a storm. The grizzled captain was lost at sea, and so

was his crew.

I can feel you, Teni, hugging my leg. Nervous now, sharing my fear.

These two old men have already passed.

We're talking to ghosts.

High above us, the crown of a tipuana shifts. The leaves flutter, murmuring in a language we don't understand.

The captains' departure wasn't graceful. They left with resentment in their hearts.

You don't want that for me, I know. And I don't want that for myself, you can be sure! I don't want to open my eyes and find myself here in this grove.

Well—

Time means nothing when you're a ghost. But for you and me, time still matters. We don't want the driver to leave without us.

Give me your hand and we'll hurry back to the bus.

## Pretty Fish

Our bus arrives in Faro, where we'll transfer to another headed for Portimão and points west. It departs in fifty minutes, so we have time to explore.

We emerge from the depot, pass the ticket office and head for city center.

Faro is a modern town. There are tall buildings and shops that sell things no one needs: tuxedos and lingerie, ornate jewelry, luxury items for pets. "Is that Dosey?" I wonder, seeing a woman passing a luggage store on the arm of a man. Dosey visits Faro from time to time with her paramours.

A shop on our right has a large TV in the window. The screen is watery blue and fish are darting across it. You giggle and stop, and I stop too.

I saw a video like this once, in a dentist's waiting room.

"No," you say. "It's not a video, Grampa. The fish are real."

Can it be?

We enter the shop.

On either side, there are blue screens with electronic fish darting back and forth. Then— I realize you're right.

They're real fish. What look like screens are, in fact,

aquariums.

A young man with a startled look and cropped hair approaches.

“*Posso ajudar?*” he says.

“We like your fish,” I say. “*Falas Inglês?*”

The young man’s command of English is good. He introduces himself and escorts us from tank to tank, identifying fish as we go. Sharp-nosed angels, spiny lions, blennies and clowns, damsels with stripes and spots, butterflies in a riot of colors.

Your eyes are wide. You raise your hand and point.

“That’s a wrasse,” he says.

The fish is fluorescent.

“Amazing.” I kneel, aligning my vision with yours, seeing the fish as you do. Appreciating the miraculous creatures for the first time.

You’ve fixed on one that’s silvery blue.

“A chromis,” the young man says. He’s kneeling with us.

“Golden angels,” he says, following your finger. “And pearly ones.”

You laugh and your finger touches my nose. Then it returns to the glass.

“A firefish,” the young man says. It’s small, eeling, electric purple.

“Hard to believe—” I’m whispering now.

To believe what? That life, ephemeral as it is, can be as wondrous as this.

“Where are they from?” I ask.

“The Philippines,” the young man says.

“Never been,” I confess.

“Neither have I,” he replies. “It’s the home of pretty fish.”

You give me a curious look.

I’m amused. “Our bus doesn’t go that far.”

On the way back to the depot, we pass Faro’s mercado. Thinking of a bakery treat, we enter the building. On either side there are steel tables bedded with ice, covered with fish. The morning catch, *Teni*. Each pile is tagged. *Robalo*, sea bass I believe. *Dorado*, bream, rays, hake. And *roncador*—they’re called “grunts” in the States. Silver sardines, mackerel, sole. There’s a tag that says *tamboril* and fish lying upside down with their livers exposed.

I see trouble in your eyes.

“The fish here are bigger,” I say. “Good for eating.”

An old man’s rationalization.

“They’re not as pretty,” you say.

“No, they’re not.”

I sigh and give you a bit of philosophy: “We live with mundane fish, but we dream of the pretty ones halfway around the world.”

You stop and regard me through your lemon frames.

You’re remembering the magical creatures, fragments of beauty cut like gems, bright and fluorescent, darting before us.

“I like the pretty fish better,” you say.

And I nod. “So do I.”



## *The Fountain*

**W**hen we reach Portimão, our bus frees us again for a short while. The sun is high and the air is warm, so we follow the esplanade beside the marina. There's a small gathering, people formally dressed.

They're leaving the marina together. Shall we follow?

They cross a boulevard and enter a garden.

I touch the elbow of a man in a suit.

"Pardon me. Do you speak English? Where are we?"

He points at a bright yellow building. "The municipal theater," he says.

The group is headed into the building. We slow and stop at the garden's border beside a small fountain. There's a pedestal at its center, and a white curbstone around it. The water is turquoise and the spout is whispering.

A fountain, *Teni*. Fate, I suppose.

As you know, I have a special affection for them.

Our fountain in Republic Square is a short walk from the casa. There's the fountain in front of the palace in *Estói*. And there's the little one with three shelves at the villa in— Where is it? *Moncarapacho*?

We reach the curbstone, and we stand together, hands clasped, listening.

The spout glitters in the sun. The pedestal's platter collects what it can, and the rest falls to the pool.

For so many of the troubles that life brings, fountains offer relief.

Why am I drawn to them? What is the message Grampa hears?

Before a fountain like this, I think of my newborn daughter—your mother—and the revelation that was granted to me during her first month of life.

I've never shared this, but it's right you should know.

Because of my difficult upbringing—my absent father, my resentful mother—I entered adulthood thinking of children as a burden. Your great-grandmother—who, thank heaven, you never met—would often harry my sister and me about all the things she might have done if we hadn't cursed her with the job of keeping a roof over our heads.

Your grandma Camila changed all that. Having children was vital to her. I mounted a strong resistance, but she laid down the law: it was children or else! I couldn't live without her, so I closed my eyes and hoped for the best.

And with that surrender came a new understanding. It emerged in a moment, an indelible one. Your mother was not yet a month old.

Camila had wrapped her in a small blanket, and there were other women—two aunts, neighborhood friends—all gathered around. You could call it friendly competition, but

the conflict was in earnest. I could see that. The women were competing for the infant's attention.

And all at once, I realized why.

In the infant's gladness, there was such a welling of gratitude and cheer that the most doubting of skeptics would have found belief.

The infant was a fountain of joy, and the women pressing around her longed for a drink.

And so, my doubts dissolved.

"You were meant to do this," Camila said. And she was right.

A woman's love was a necessity for Angelo. But nothing can compare with the love of a child.

## Lagos

Our bus pulls in beside others at the Lagos depot. It's before noon, so we have time to see the bay and the cliffs before the 2:30 departure for Sagres and the fortress where Magellan attended navigation school. We are close, sweetheart.

"Just cross the street and follow the river," the driver tells us.

His guidance puts us on a wide promenade with a busy crowd. There are young people here, dressed casually. Tank tops, t-shirts, shorts and sandals. Bicyclers pass. The sun's intense, so I open our umbrella.

Look. Moored to the wharf across the river.

"Magellan's ship," you exclaim, removing the coin from your pocket.

Indeed, the craft looks just like the one on the circular silver Henrique gave us. We're close to Ferdinand's haunts, and the spirit of discovery is all around us!

I nod and smile at strangers as we pass. They're feeling the spirit too. I know a few of them. That young fellow in the striped shirt—I met him in the mercado before you arrived.

And the girl in the purple swimsuit: she gave me a pear from her garden back in the States. Is Grampa imagining things? Ha! It's fun to pretend.

Your laces are loose. Stop. Hold the umbrella and I'll retie them. Are you noticing? This crowd has a different kind of intensity. Every sentence we hear is in a foreign language.

Alright. Let's hurry along.

There. Can you see it up ahead?

The river's mouth. We're reaching the coast.

We head to the right, past an old stone fortress. Over our shoulders we can see a large bay. That must be what Henrique called "Meia Praia," the place where the fleet was anchored. It was Henrique's namesake, Henry the Navigator, who governed this outpost, sponsored the shipbuilding and spurred the mariners' dreams.

There's the sign, Teni. The cliff walk starts here.

## *On the Ponta Trail*

**W**e follow the foot traffic down a concrete stair. Three bare-chested boys trade barbs meant for the passing girls in bikinis. The boys laugh and signal each other, but the girls act as if they aren't there.

Below, a beach comes into view with the sea foaming onto it. The cliffs bordering the beach are scarped and calved. People are swimming or lying on the sands; others are emerging from tunnels in the rock or vanishing into them. The cliffs are amber and orange, riddled with holes, like open eyes or mouths speaking.

What is the rock saying? What has it seen?

Sea stacks near shore have created quiet pools. There's a man on his back in one, with a child on his chest. Like us, Tenina, floating together. In the rock above them, light is trapped in an eroded well.

The turquoise water draws back and returns, frothing into tunnels and holes. Bathers crowd the caverns and climb the slabs. It has a special beauty, this crumbling place. And a special fascination. There's a line of perforations higher up, a loose area no one has the nerve to explore.

We follow visitors like ourselves, continuing along the path beneath the shade of trees. I've collapsed the umbrella. Will you hold it, Teni? A sign points toward Praia do Pinhão, but another warns of rockfall and collapsing stairs. A few minutes farther, the walkway climbs toward a pair of modern resorts, and as we top a rise, the view up the coast appears.

This is the Ponta. Steep walls and sheer ones, falling to the sea; stacks and islets with minarets and slides, all apricot and fawn, invaded by the turquoise tide and its front of foam. A grand sight, as Raul promised. But—I confess—a troubling one.

What is happening to the earth, my dear? The sweet land these innocents call home— The beach far below is ranked with lounge chairs and crowded with lolling bodies. Complacent, it seems. Curious perhaps, but accepting.

Farther along, the walkway descends between masonry walls, hiding the view. Then a smaller beach comes into view below, along with a steep stair descending to it. Here the cliff walls rise abruptly, looming over us. A man waves, and a woman nods and follows. Let them pass, Tenina. Grampa is removing his pack, finding the bubble level. I'm dizzy and the level will help.

The sheer rock is bedded, showing its age.

There's a sea stack in the bay far below. Some boys are climbing it. A dozen gulls perched on the stack take flight together. One boy has reached the top. He jumps feetfirst and disappears in the water. Will he surface? People on the beach are watching.

I'm sorry, sweetheart. The height, the risk— It's a bit much for me.

I know. It's entertainment for them, and for you, as well. Yes, I see. The boy's surfaced. He's fine. But Grampa is—

Feeling dizzy. And insecure. I'm afraid I've come too far.

Just a moment. A pause. Let me draw a few breaths.

The bubble level is steadying me.

Let's not follow the crowd. I don't want to descend the steep stair to the beach. We'll continue along the wooden walkway. Eye on the bubble, slowly. Manage these weak legs and this woozy brain!

There's some wisdom in my years, Tenina. This coast isn't granite. It's limestone, crumbling and broken. A chaos of fragile sediments. How are you doing? Ah, it's easy for you. We're crossing the top of the Ponta cliffs now, safe on our walkway, feeling the breeze. Below us, fissures and caves, slides and chutes— An eroding world with few secure places. Weak cliffs and a weaker old man. We're both crumbling, but I'm in the lead!

Our goal is the Ponta beacon, and we can see its gridwork now, rising from a promontory ahead. Far below, an inflatable passes through an apricot arch, leaving its foaming track on the turquoise beneath. Kayaks emerge from a network of caverns, led by a man on a paddleboard.

A sprinkling of skiffs, some in the glow beneath holes, some threading shadowy passages, one beached before a heaped collapse. Not as incurious as I'd imagined. There are people on foot. You can see them through that eroded

gap: exploring ledges and chambers, crawling through holes,  
appearing at windows and mouths in the rock.

Like a colony of ants trying to make sense of a skull.

The earth's edge is crumbling.

Our world, our life— There's an edge to that too.

What can be understood? We puzzle in darkness, peering  
out of our vacant sockets at the limitless sea.

You've hurried ahead.

I'm turning, doing my best to catch up—

Steady, steady— A twisted bough catches my pantleg.

Teni? What's happened? Where are the planks and rails?  
The wooden walkway has vanished.

We're on a path now, a mere goat trail. And the gravel is  
loose.

There's no one around us, no one visible on the slopes  
below.

## *Beneath a Pine*

*M*y guts tighten. Somehow, somehow—  
We've strayed, Tenina.  
The fall on our left is precipitous. Stay clear of the  
edge. The narrow path rises ahead, climbing a lone bluff. The  
scrub is huddled and windblown.

Slowly, my dear.

Stop. Don't move.

Tenina—

Do you see what I see?

Straight ahead, on the mount beneath the stunted pine.  
Overlooking the deep.

The Woman in Black.

Silent. Motionless. Rising from the ground like a coil of  
smoke.

Has she been waiting for us? Did she know which branch  
in the path we'd take?

How, Tenina? How could she know?

The cowl's shadow obscures her face.

She wasn't on the bus. Was she?

I'm fearful. Give me your hand.

She's not here by chance. The Woman's been following us.  
Is the wind lifting her? Her cloak is no longer touching  
the ground.

It's almost as if—

She's leaving the bluff. Drifting toward us.

A chill wind reaches out. My collar flutters.

Hold tight, Teni. There's no time to flee.

My legs are wobbling. My vision is cloudy. I can feel her  
vaporous presence approaching. It's turning my head, grazing  
my cheek. It's pierced my clothing. Her chill invades my side,  
touching my innards.

Stay close. Don't let go.

Her cowl shifts. I can see her purple lips. She's raising a  
hand with fingers like worms. Wet and cold—

The Woman touches my chin, opens my mouth, pushes a  
scorched almond between my lips.

I spit it out! I swing my arm and the bubble level passes  
through her!

I clasp you and turn away— Hurry, hurry!

Back down the path!

Over my shoulder, I see: she's following us, but her move-  
ments are slow. The Woman glides as if she's a creature from  
dream.

You're racing ahead. As weak as I am, I'm faster than she  
is.

Back, back—

There's the wooden walkway! And people are on it!

Run, my dear. Run for our lives!

Breathless, distracted, confused— The walkway ends at the Ponta beacon, remember?



## To Sagres

When we reach the beacon, we're relieved to find people and a crowded car park. I retrieve my phone, but my hands are shaking.

I hand it to you and ask you to call for a ride.

"It's the black one, Teni. Touch it."

We make a request for a car to take us back to the depot. From there, I'm eager to return home. But you're not as spooked as I am. You're much calmer. And to my surprise, you've not given up on Sagres.

"Magellan," you remind me.

"The Woman," I worry.

Who is she? What does she want?

"Grampa—"

I shake my head. "I'm afraid she'll reappear."

"We've come all this way," you pout.

The bitter taste of the almond is still on my tongue.

We may have missed our connection, Teni.

I check the time, but it appears that we're still on schedule.

"The Woman," I mutter. Is she a material creature, a physical being from earth or beyond? Or is she more subtle than

that? A symptom of my decline, my doubtful lucidity.

You're shaking your head. "I don't care about her."

Tenina— I wish I had your confidence.

"She's just trying to frighten us," you say.

You might be right. It's true—she's done no real harm.

And she's as slow as a prophet's camel.

Alright, sweetheart. I'm nervous, but we'll continue.

When our ride appears, we return to the depot in Lagos.

The bus is waiting for us in the lot. When we step aboard, I worry the Woman will be in one of the seats. But she isn't.

We settle at the back. I watch the door open and close, hoping she won't appear at the last moment. And she doesn't. How relieved I am when the driver starts the engine and pulls into traffic!

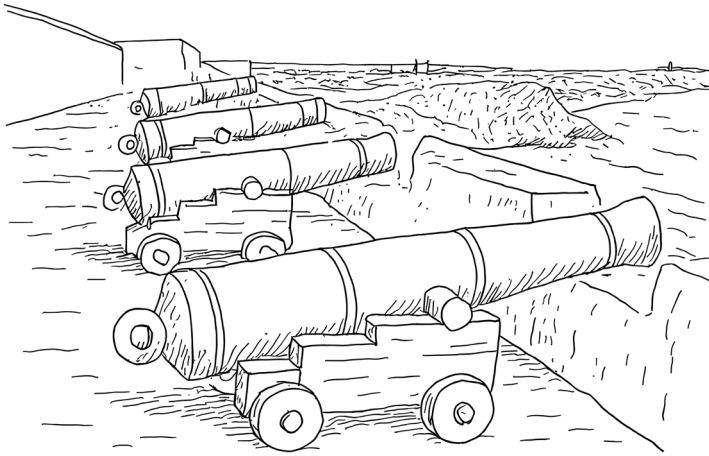
The bus passes through three small towns and enters Sagres quietly, halting beside a bus stop with a metal hood and a single bench.

Across the way is a small park. There's a statue of a man wearing a cape, gazing out to sea. "That's Henri," the bus driver says, and he points down the street. "You can follow the path to his fortress."

"Magellan went to school there," you explain.

The driver laughs and pats your cheek.

I sigh, shaking my head at myself. The threats have vanished. The world is right again. It's the adventure we planned. We clasp hands, descend to the street and start toward the fortress together.



## *The Fortress*

**T**he pathway leads by a shuttered restaurant and into an alley between apartments. The dwellings give way to fields of cane. Then, straight ahead, the sand-colored wall of the fortress appears, long and low, spanning the finger of land jutting into the sea.

Our walkway leads directly to the arched entrance. The water is on either side of us, glittering to the far horizon.

We're here, Tenina.

You quiver and clasp my hand, and we pick up our pace.

The fortress ramparts are notched with cannon bays. According to Henrique, a moat once protected the entrance, and a drawbridge was raised from inside. No trace of that

now. Just a tall wooden door with rusted rivets. It's open wide, awaiting our arrival.

The massive walls are stained and battered. Beyond the visitors' check-in, a courtyard opens.

"The Compass," I point and we hurry toward it.

Henrique spoke of the giant earthwork they call the "Mariner's Compass." Forty-eight lines radiate from its hub. We circle the Compass in silence, knowing Ferdinand walked here, reciting calculations, reviewing his lessons, dreaming of the day he would put them to work.

When we've made the full circuit, we stop and turn together, imagining. Few structures are still standing, but there was once a dormitory where Magellan slept. The academy where classes were held was a place of inspiration, no doubt. Mathematicians, engineers, scientists and astronomers traded ideas, developing the methods Ferdinand would use to circle the world.

We climb the ramp to a cannon battery, humbled by the place. Do the stony walls remember him? The cannons are rusted and silent. The wind huffs through the embrasures, as if they would speak. Of course they remember.

"The Point, Grampa."

The Point, yes. That's why we've come.

We cross the gravels, headed toward a path on our right. Beyond the fortress, the finger of land juts into the sea. And at the finger's tip, clouds are boiling: golden clouds, struck by the sun, brighter than the battlements behind us, with their own castellations and glowing parapets. When other students were

sporting, Magellan would follow this path—the one we're on now. He'd see the sun-struck clouds, the heavenly fortress towering over the earthly one; he'd scan the restless sea below; and he'd feel the winds of liberation blowing between.

But the wind isn't blowing right now.

"It's calm," you say.

An elderly couple is approaching, and a silver-haired lady turns with a smile. "A storm last month," she tells us, "raised waves a hundred feet high. Higher than the ground we're on." Her partner nods.

A large bird wings over our heads, and you follow it with your finger toward the Point's end. "They're leaving," you say.

"An osprey," the elderly partner says. "Did you see its black elbows?"

"You know Enn," you guess.

"I don't think we do," the lady replies, and the couple disappears behind us.

The strange calm persists, but the blasted ground attests to the harshness of weather. The exposed rock is pale and barren, the growths low and windswept, huddled in crevices. And as we approach the Point, mats of ice plant appear as if summoned from my past. The upright fingers, green and maroon, covered the beach dunes where I grew up.

Magellan trod these same mats, crushed these same gravels—to reach this same Point. The blue sky is gone. It's pearly now. Overcast.

"Look," Tenina points to the west.

Through the fog, we can see a dark silhouette, long and low.

“It’s the Cape,” I guess. “The End of the Earth.”

Magellan would have seen it too, standing here as we do now with the smell of the sea in our noses and the cliffs beneath draped in mist; the invisible rafts of seabirds floating below; and the flocks of winged migrants hovering in the fog, all waiting for the signal to leave. Imagining the future that awaited them.

We’ve reached the Point, my dear.

That low wall of concrete at the cliff’s edge.

Below the Point, the rock falls sheer to the sea.

Here we can lower ourselves and sit with our backs to the battery. I’ll remove my pack, take our book from it and resume Magellan’s story.

The visitors have thinned. There’s only a small group a few yards away.

As they depart, the tour leader turns and says to his charges, “In the sixteenth century, the village of Sagres didn’t exist. The fortress was built for show. There was never a navigation school here.”

The statement is a shock to us both.

“He’s a fool, my dear,” I pat the storybook. “We have it in black and white.”

Huddle close and we’ll learn more.

## *Alone at Dusk*

*A*t the school in Sagres, Magellan was a sensation. He was recognized by his instructors and fellow students and graduated at the top of his class. He returned to Lisbon hoping to get an assignment on a sailing vessel. But his family lacked the connections, and he ended up with a clerk's job in a government office. This was a humiliation, but he refused to accept defeat. In anticipation of a future at sea, he continued to learn about the maritime craft.

Years passed.

Finally at the age of twenty-five he got his chance.

He was allowed to sign on to an expedition that sailed south, around the Cape of Good Hope and across the Indian Ocean. The intent was to establish harbors and trading stations for the Portuguese crown. The mission was dangerous. Storms, shipwrecks and battles with the locals took many lives. Being young and idealistic, Magellan worked without pay, for glory and the honor of serving the King.

In his fourth year overseas, he was wounded in battle. When he recovered, he joined an even more dangerous expedition and sailed still farther east. He engaged in desperate

battles and barely escaped with his life. He showed courage in combat and such seagoing skill that he was given a ship of his own to captain.

What a grand thing that must have been! While I now discredit ambition, it's hard not to cheer for the young man's achievement.

Well—

Magellan remained in foreign lands for seven years. During that time he fought in many battles, and in one unlucky encounter in Morocco, he took a spear in his knee. He'd earned much respect with his countrymen overseas, but he returned to Lisbon a cripple with an empty wallet.

He found the capital city much changed. The streets were crowded with travelers. The country's new wealth was visible wherever he looked. His exploits had helped forge a prosperous Portugal. But he was galled by his poverty and the absence of public credit he felt was his due.

And his dream of being an explorer—the first to set eyes on a place that no one on earth had ever seen—was stronger than ever.

At night, in his private hours, Ferdinand remembered his time at the school in Sagres and his walks to the Point. He'd lingered alone at dusk on this very spot where we are now.

Listen, Tenina.

Is that *crack* the sound of a vacant breeze?

Or have we caught the wind in our sails?

It's easy to imagine, isn't it.

The fateful hour, the ship leaving its mooring, headed for

waters no mortal eyes have seen.

The dangerous crossing is underway.

Look there, sweetheart. A red dot through the fog. And  
it's pulsing.

That must be the lighthouse at The End of the Earth.

3



## Shaving

**W**e are back at our casa, and you're rising from a restful sleep.

Are you hungry? I hear Inez in the kitchen below.

Do you smell? She's using the *pastel* dough we bought before leaving Lagos.

Breakfast and confections, then we'll go out.

Well—

To be truthful, Teni, it took me a while to nod off. I was troubled.

Yes. About the Woman in Black. Imagining who she might be and when I'll see her again.

Her appearance on the cliff may have been a lesson for Grampa.

She could have ruined our trip to Sagres. But she didn't.

Our time here together, sweetheart, means so much to me. I'm not going to let the Woman deface it. I can't keep worrying about her. I can't be upset if she reappears.

These are my thoughts this sunny morning. At each stage in life, there are unpleasant things we must endure. For me, right now— It's her.

If she vanishes, good riddance!

If she doesn't— I'll just have to get used to her.

Ha! Is it really that bad?

I deserve the teasing, I'm sure. My grooming habits are abysmal. I don't put much effort into tidying myself.

This morning will be different.

I'm going to shave!

How long has it been? Do you recall?

As old as I am, you'd think my beard would stop growing. Or at least slow down. But like the rest of me, it keeps on despite discouragements. Above my ears, there's silver; and on top, it's thinner than ever. But on these cheeks and chin, the matting's still thick. There can be no argument. A shave is in order.

Yes, your help will be appreciated.

I can't see what I'm doing without using the mirror Inez gave us. If you'll hold it, I'll put the metal basin beneath.

We'll fill it with water.

Now— Where is the soap and towel? And the disposable razor I've grown to like.

Alright, we're ready.

That's it. Lift the glass. A little higher, dear.

Perfect.

Now. I slap some water on my fur. Lather the soap and rub it in.

Razor in hand, I find my cheek in the mirror . . . and begin scraping.

Look at that. It's coming right off. You remember the

night I tried to shave myself with a toothbrush? It's easier with a blade!

Higher, dear. A little higher. That's right.

The one side is almost done. What do you think? How does it look?

I see you in the mirror, nodding.

Well now, it won't be long.

Once I rinse, you can put your fingers on Grampa's smooth chin.

## *Our Likeness*

**T**he shaven Angelo is better, mmm?  
Look at the two of us in the mirror, Tenina. What a pair  
we are.

An innocent treasure and a lost one.

It wasn't always this way.

I was once like you.

The steady eyes that find their grounding so simply. That  
confident smile, never tentative or doubtful. Your gravity, your  
mirth— The curiosity that greets every new truth like a long-  
awaited reunion.

As a child, I was as daring and direct as you are.

And as a young man, I was a bounty for feminine eyes.

Don't laugh!

This gray pate, this lined brow, this stooped frame—  
Imagine instead: an arresting fellow with jet black hair, four  
inches taller. Strong, muscular, with an acid wit and a surefire  
smile. Women craved my attention.

They did! If I had photos, you could see for yourself.  
Unfortunately, in my bitter retreat, I left all reminders of the  
past behind. But—

I'm not playing with you, my dear.

Many admired your grampa.

And I was no fool. I saw my chance. From the desiring hopefuls, I selected one like no other. A beautiful creature with a natural wisdom and a giant heart.

She bore your mother, a wonderful infant; but—as the child ripened—a complex creature whom beauty and brilliance ignored.

What a gift it was when you entered the world.

Your birth didn't honor your mother or father. No—

Fate had a wiler purpose.

This may sound odd; and arrogant, no doubt—

But we imagined we saw in you a reincarnation of Grampa.

My boldness, my delving nature, my reflective spirit, my mournful soul. Before she died, Camila even recognized me in your hands: exploring, assured, precise.

We all wish to discover, in the generations that follow us, the replication of our better qualities. In this, I've been especially blessed.

In you, Tenina, are preserved the things I most value in my own nature.

When I contemplate the end, I remind myself that, in a way, I'm not going to die.

In our harmony, our likeness—

I will live on.

## *Fresh from the Oven*

*H*and in hand, we descend the stair.  
The scent of fresh-baked pastels greets us.  
Creamy custard. Crisp rims and doughy cups, filled to the brim.

The aromas are billowing clouds, warm and thick.

Are you sharing this feeling? Oh, you are. Behind your lemon-frame glasses, your eyes are closed. We're no longer conscious that we're descending. Our feet might be on the treads, but our spirits are rising.

Can pastry be a deliverance?

It seems that it can.

Has Dosey opened the oven door?

Is Inez sliding the baking tray out?

Is the tray ranked with steaming pastels, custards scorched?

Are their voices raised, crying for a sugary rain?

The sacrament is waiting for us. We will approach the altar together, Teni, extend our tongues and receive the treat. I wonder: has Inez added bits of candied orange to the custard, as she's done before?

At the bottom of the stair we turn together, arms extended

before us like somnambulists, making our way to the kitchen door and passing through it.

We halt. We raise our heads. Our lips part.

There's joy in our hearts, sure now the blessing will be fulfilled.

The sacrament touches our lips and our souls sink into the prize, lost in creamy richness while our liberated selves crush the rim and begin the luxurious chew.

We've lost our connection to the physical world.

We're creatures of the ether.

You're a cherub and I am Angelo: buoyant, euphoric, delirious—

The warm confection is no symbol, my dear.

The pastel, simple and small, is salvation itself.



## *The Carefree Way*

**W**e're strolling down the street together, admiring the sun's display through a veil of cloud. Hoops of pink and purple circle a bowl of glowing gold.

What are you thinking?

Ah yes. The pretty fish.

I can see them swimming in the pool of color the sun has poured out. We haven't forgotten them. And they haven't forgotten us.

Where are we headed? I have no idea.

Our best days are the aimless ones.

Look at the vacationers waiting in line to dine at the open-air cafe. Chatty, oblivious, letting time pass. Beside the river, boys race their scooters back and forth, going nowhere and happy about it. On the breeze we hear the cascading phrases of a Renaissance lute: the player has returned to his niche on the bridge. Two elderly women stroll past the shops, jabbering. "I like that swimsuit. Where is my coin purse? Your nose needs sunscreen. My god— Look at that wobbly old man and that cute little girl." Across the avenida, a couple in love speak to a phone, shooting a video no one will watch.

All those years when my time was jealously guarded—  
There was love, a great quantity of it. But too much gravity.  
The lightness was lost. Here with you, in our foreign remove,  
that's all in the past. It pleases me to be irresponsible, and I  
intend to maintain that loose standard as long as you're here!

Sadly, for Grampa, the carefree way was often out of  
reach. My instincts undermined me at every turn. Like a dog  
scattering gulls, I had to chase my hard-bitten thoughts into  
the air. Now my energy's flagging and that helps. And my  
eroding surety—that helps too.

But most importantly, there is you.

Tenina, the little prankster. You're my ally in all of this.

When my focus narrows, you blunt it with an impulsive  
request.

When thoughts take me into the future, you roll your eyes  
and shake your head.

If I'm worrying about something, you tickle my middle.

And when I'm overly introspective, you tug my hand, as  
you're doing now, and bring me back.

Do you remember our *fado* moment?

We were on our way home, passing a club with gloomy  
lighting. Through an open window we heard a woman singing  
over two guitars. Being a guest in this land, and eager to be  
generous, I lowered my brow and nodded in time. The singer  
was artful and delivered her sorrowful verses with feeling.

"What do you think?" I asked when the song ended.

"It sounds like a lot of complaining," you said.

I laughed. Your opinion was harsh.

But then— I realized you were right.

When something bitter touches your tongue, you don't sample it. You don't grind it with your teeth and swallow it down. You spit it out!

Your rogue spirit, your impish festivity, has freed me to be the carefree child I have always wanted to be.

## *They Must Fly*

**O**ur friend Enn again. Our new friend. Why is the strange fellow drawn to us? He loves your wonder, as I do. You're so happy to see him, it fills his heart with joy. Perhaps he's stirred by concern for you. Or pity for me.

His birds—

There are more he wants us to see.

Early this morning, with Inez half dressed and Dosey asleep, we slide onto the seat of his truck and hurry to the Olhão coast.

On the edge of the Ria, among the sand dunes, there's an abandoned building. Its stucco is crumbling, its windows are cracked, and the air around it is swarming with birds.

"House martins and swallows," he says, as we pile out, "bankies and barnies and red-rumps too." He hands you the spare binoculars. He removes his from his neck and gives them to me.

The birds are small and frenzied. They surround the house, weaving past walls, circling the roof like a cloud of gnats. To the right, scores are perched on derelict wires.

“What are they doing?” you ask.

“Catching insects,” Enn says.

“They live here?” I wonder.

“No, my friend,” Enn says. “They’re all going south.”

He’s staring at me.

Then he sighs, bowing his head, and steps through the grass.

We follow and a pond appears behind the house. The martins, he says, are fluttering above it with their stubby wings. The swallows, he points, are wheeling and gliding beneath, skimming the dark water.

“They understand what’s ahead?” I ask.

“I’m sure they do,” Enn says softly. “The crossing takes courage.”

He’s trying to go easy on me, but Enn has a message.

He smiles at you. “Now,” he motions us back to the truck, “we’re going to the salt pans. You’re going to see something few people have seen.”

Five minutes on paved roads, ten on dirt ones through scrub and tall grass. A walk on trails beside stagnant lagoons, and finally Enn stops and turns, finger to his lips to silence us. The next steps are quiet and slow.

The trail turns and a large lagoon appears. Its surface is covered with birds—larger birds, dark gray, motionless with their wings folded. Hundreds of them.

“Black-tailed godwits,” Enn whispers. Standing in water a few inches deep. All facing the same direction.

“Going south?” you whisper.

“Yes,” Enn nods.

“When?” you wonder.

“Soon,” he murmurs. “Very soon.”

Scanning the raft of birds through Enn’s binoculars, I feel their fixedness of purpose. The heat of summer is dying. They sense the impending cold. The decision to leave wasn’t made all at once. It settled into them gradually. They’d uprooted themselves, but the flights had been testing ones. They were lingering now, nostalgic, remembering.

My dear Tenina— Grampa understands.

The days are passing. The end is in view.

They’ve resigned themselves, knowing the flight can’t be put off. A long winter is coming, and the world they found so comfortable can no longer be their home. They must fly to another land. A distant land.

And with that knowledge, the uncertainties of the flight and the destination loom before them. The future is threatening. But they aren’t complaining.

“When will they go?” you ask.

“When the conditions are right,” Enn whispers. “It’s been blowy this week. They feel the imperative, the mental commitment. One afternoon they will hear a voice: ‘It’s time to go, it’s time, it’s time.’ They’ll leave at day’s end and fly at night.”

He faces us both. “Most will be bold, impulsive, courageous. Some will falter at the last moment. Some will remain here and starve.”

Oh Teni— My heart goes out to them.

Do you understand?

It's not easy to lose your home. It's not easy to bid farewell to the world you know. It's not easy to hurry your wings—and your spirit—into another world, an invisible one, imponderably distant.

“Many that leave,” Enn says, “never come back.”

For them, we will say a compassionate prayer.

They must embrace an unthinkable future, spread their wings and fly with hope and determination. And no reassurance whatever.

In the truck on the way back, the three of us share the silence.

As we approach the casa, you say, “They’ll make it.”

Enn laughs. “Many do. And sometimes we help. If they run into headwinds, they fall out of the sky and land on trawlers and cargo ships. I’ve seen tankers covered with birds.”

Before parting, Enn finds a foldout ID card in his pack. He presents the card to you, along with his spare binoculars, as gifts. The ID card has pictures of birds and their names in English.

## *An Innocent Gift*

**B**efore we left the salt pans, on the way back to Enn's truck, you spotted some white flowers among the parched grass.

We were both surprised.

"They're sea daffodils," Enn said.

It was late in the season for wildflowers, but there they were.

You picked three, and when we returned to the casa, I held the ID card Enn gave us, and you had the fragrant beauties in your hand.

I turned the key in the lock and we crossed the threshold.

Through the pane of glass in the kitchen door, Inez was beating dough with her fists, a curl of hair shaking beside her ear. Dosey was in the front room, seated at the table with her phone, staring at nothing with those dark, mystical eyes.

You wanted to give the daffodils to her.

We approached her together quietly.

I touched your shoulder, thinking "That's fine, sweetheart. Go ahead."

You cleared your voice to get her attention, then you

offered her the flowers.

She batted her lashes at us. Then she smirked and turned away.

“*Piegas*,” she said with her cold little voice.

I know *piegas* from Raul. It means pathetic or sappy.

I’m so sorry she hurt you. She didn’t mean to, sweetheart.

Dosey wasn’t angry with us. She’s been bruised by love. Her stiff frame, the taut lines of her face— In her harshness, she’s thoroughly modern; but her eyes are out of a Mannerist painting. Such depth, such doubt, such frail suspension— Those eyes were born in a dark forest, not in this land of sand and sun.

Inez barged through the kitchen door, wiping her hands on a towel.

You turned and embraced her, apron and all, getting flour on your cheeks.

When you stepped back and handed the daffodils to her, Inez melted.

Dosey shrieked, stood and whirled, headed toward her bedroom, as mercurial as a school of sardines.

It’s no wonder young men are attracted to her.

## Attraction

I know how Dosey's disdain hurt you, Teni. I wasn't sure why she reacted like that. I spoke to Inez last night, and I have a better idea what happened. I'm going to do my best to explain.

Being a child is life's great blessing. Being a grownup is hard. It's so complicated. There's so much indirection, so many conflicting motives at work, so much that's invisible—

Only a few are blessed like your grandma and me. Many adults are unlucky in love. Sometimes I wonder if growing up is worth the bother!

Well now—

It's a beautiful morning, and we're strolling through the arcade beside city hall. There's a young woman walking on the cobbles in front of us.

Are you curious why she's dressed like that?

It's not the weather. The poor girl is burning up!

She's trying to be *attractive*.

Grownups want to make themselves appealing as romantic partners. A man or woman who wishes to *attract* others will do things to themselves to enhance the effect.

The woman's heels tap as she moves. That catches our attention. When we look at the source of the tapping, we see her ankles and how trim they are. We notice her shoes and the tapered heels that are making the sound.

Our eye is naturally drawn up the back of her legs. She's wearing tights despite the heat. Her calves are muscular, and the arpeggio of heel taps shakes her rear end. It's more visible than yours or mine, as the fabric's as thin as a stocking.

Right you are! It's as if she's wearing nothing at all.

The woman's middle looks cinched, suggesting compression. Her back and shoulders are covered by a shawl and her hair is loose, so there's not much disclosure above the waist. But her efforts below are enough to stir those with an interest.

She's a seductress, Teni. In an earlier time, she would have worn a silk mask and painted her arms.

I'm being humorous. But the serious point is that Dosey's emotion yesterday was the result of a blowup with a young man in Albufeira.

You're not old enough for me to share the details, but—

Albufeira is a place where men and women go to share their *attractions*.

A young man took Dosey there. They partied all night in strip clubs and discos, and slept in a cheap hotel. And now Dosey's upset. Very upset.

Don't repeat what I've shared with you.

Promise, sweetheart.

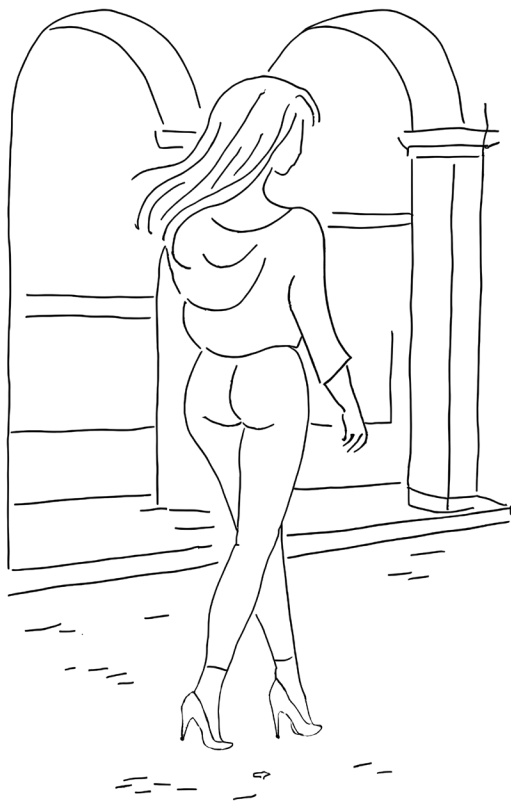
No, my dear. Not anymore.

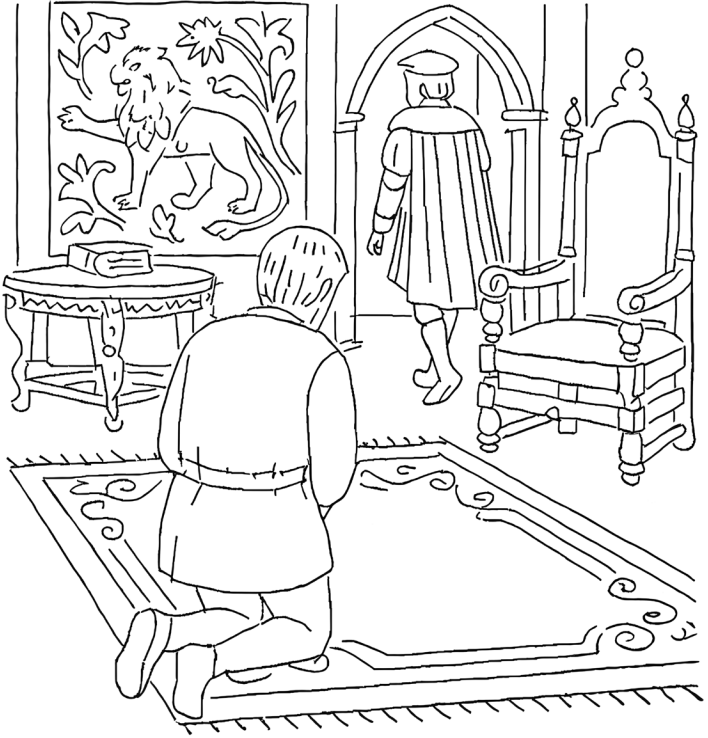
There was a time when Grampa was drawn to sights like

the woman in tights and heels. But attraction like that doesn't go very deep or last very long.

True communion speaks to the heart.

It's the privilege of the very young and the very old to understand this.





## *A Junior Squire*

*A*re we longing for more Magellan?  
The book is in my pack. We could visit the castle and read a chapter there. Or we can descend the riverbank here and sit in the grass.

I agree. There's a perfect spot by the base of that tree.

I'll open the sun umbrella and you can hold it. We'll have warmth and brightness on every side and our own little circle of shade.

Alright—

Are we comfortable now? Let me find the page.

Here we are.

Magellan has returned to Portugal. His wallet is empty and he's lame in one leg. Worst of all, the court in Lisbon has a low opinion of him. Despite his years of service, he's still listed as a "junior squire." They don't think of him as a captain and navigator, and his heroics in battle mean nothing.

Life as a grownup can be like that. Poor Ferdinand's in eclipse. Courtiers say his manner is arrogant and his limp is feigned. But Magellan's determined. He gets an audience with the King to defend himself and explain his aspirations. He

visits the King three times, showing the monarch his maps and routes, asserting his qualifications and sharing his dream, seeking royal sponsorship for the great voyage.

The King has no interest, and at their final meeting, when the seaman kneels to kiss his ring, the King turns his back and walks away.

I had no idea poor Ferd carried that burden. But I'm not surprised.

Nothing fires a grownup's determination as much as contempt.

It's sad, so sad. But true.

When you're older, if there's something you burn to achieve, the skepticism of others stirs your doubts; and to quell them, you muster your firmest resolve, your most enduring commitment.

I confess, sweetheart: I'm puzzled. What was Henrique thinking?

This is no story for children.

Embittered, Magellan decamped to Spain. He was so estranged from his homeland and the Portuguese King that he married a lady with connections to the Spanish court.

Well, yes—

I suppose he was attracted to her. But I doubt she wore tights and spiked heels. It appears he was attracted for other reasons.

My laugh, sweetheart, isn't for you. It's an expression of cynicism.

As I tried to explain, things are complicated for grownups.

## Little Things

What a wonderful morning it's been. We happened upon the woman in tights, explained Dosey's ferment and travelled with Magellan to Spain. We strolled the streets on the east side of the Roman Bridge and visited Raul and Henrique.

Then we wandered the sands at *Praia do Barril*, picking up shells. Ribbed cockles, a blue jingle, littlenecks lemon and orange, razors chalky and tawny— We prefer shells that are whole, but at times a broken one has an irresistible pattern or hue.

We reached a fishing village in the late afternoon. Bougainvillea was everywhere: at the base of a wall, choking an alley, mounting a balcony, woven through iron gridwork. Magenta bracts littered the white cobbles.

And now—

We're roaming the docks. Fishermen come and go. The names of their boats are painted on prows: *Bem Amado*, *Você Pode*, *Para Sempre*. Wire traps are piled on the wharf. A man is stacking them eight feet high in the stern of his boat. Another wheels a crate of octopus past. He stops so you can run your

fingers over the suckers. Another sits on a buoy using his knife to scrape the scales off a fish the size of his shoe. The blade glints, the silver fish flashes, the scales fly on the breeze.

The wind picks up, thrumming the mooring ropes like fingers playing a lute with giant strings. There's a melody. Can you hear it?

In the water beside the dock, mullets are swarming. The green surface ripples like the skin of a large animal lolling in the sun.

A seagull lands on a nearby pier, folds its wings and mews like a cat.

All these little things add up to nothing.

For us, it's enough.

## *The Surf Line*

*A*s the sun descends in the west, we return to the beach and the sea. The light is no longer blinding. The sand is sharing the warmth it gathered throughout the day.

On the dunes, a breeze trembles the beach grass. Ripples pattern the sand. Gulls cry, winging over the tide.

We descend to the shore and follow the water's edge, watching the line of foam and the translucent skim of sea behind it. In places, the line scallops and the scallops cross over each other. The undertow makes a hissing sound, but the surf line reaches its apogee in silence. Beyond the skim of translucent water, the sand disappears beneath the turquoise, and by the time it's reached the horizon, the sea is a deep blue—deeper and denser than the verging sky.

It's a big ocean, *Teni*. Endless from a human perspective.

Let's remove our shoes. There's something to do here that we've not done before.

Kick off your sandals. We'll leave our umbrella and knapsack here.

Take my hand. We're going down to the surf line.

You'll see, you'll see—

Alright. Here it is.

We stand barefoot together, with our toes across the surf line and our heels in dry sand.

As the tide folds over, we feel the spray. We watch the foaming and bubbling, and we listen to the gurgle and hiss as the surf sweeps toward us.

Closer, closer—

The furled edge is almost upon us.

And now: its cold foam fizzes our toes and tickles our insteps.

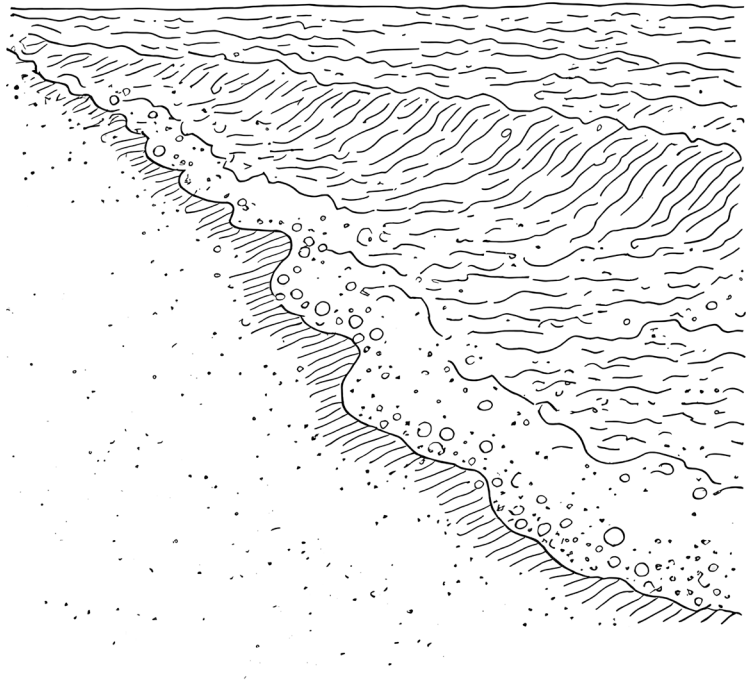
The tide retracts. The sea draws the surf back in, swallows it down—

And then offers it to us again. Here it comes, here it comes—

How like life and our covert desires the noisy foam is. We regard its advance with eagerness and apprehension. There's no hurrying or delaying it. It will reach us in its own time, with its own brashness or hesitation and without announcing its state.

And when it retracts, the feeling of absence will mount. We sigh, we listen, we watch. We don't lift our feet, we dare not move from this spot but must wait—patiently!—for its return.

Who, standing at the surf line like this, can fail to feel the ocean's power? And who can make the decision to leave?



## Recalling

**I**nez, bless her soul, fed us *cataplana* for dinner, and our bellies are full. We're on the terrace now, and the day is ending.

The sun in its final descent is as blond as your hair. The fog that it's sinking into is as pearly as your smile.

Do you hear the song emerging from the open door of the cafe across the way? A woman is singing a mournful melody. A bit of *fado* perhaps. She's wistful, recalling.

A long time ago, when I was the same age as you are now, I would sit on the front steps of my childhood home and make up songs. They weren't plaintive. Not that I remember. They were exuberant songs, full of energy.

Later, I became a musician. I wrote complex pieces and performed them on stages to large crowds. But—

Why am I laughing?

Well— Becoming a musician was an aspiration I had. It never matured into something real. Instead, I studied medicine. I wanted to do important research, to discover a cure for a life-threatening disease. It was a boon I would give to humanity. But—

Well, my dear. That never happened either. The remembrance must have been triggered by the pharmacy I can see at the end of the street.

I'm thinking more carefully now. Authentic memories are surfacing.

An image of the war memorial before city hall stirs a vivid recollection.

I fought for my country in a foreign land. It wasn't a war that seemed necessary, but I was compelled. I had friends who did the same. They came home in body bags.

No, no— It wasn't like that at all! I refused to fight on the basis of conscience. Instead, I—

What did I do?

I became a painter. My canvases were exhibited in prestigious galleries. They inspired wrenching introspections in all who viewed them. The ideas they evoked were so powerful, that—

Another fantasy. Ha. I never bought a tube of paint!

What I really did—the mission that Angelo devoted himself to—was in industry. I engineered innovations, I built products that improved people's lives. Products like—

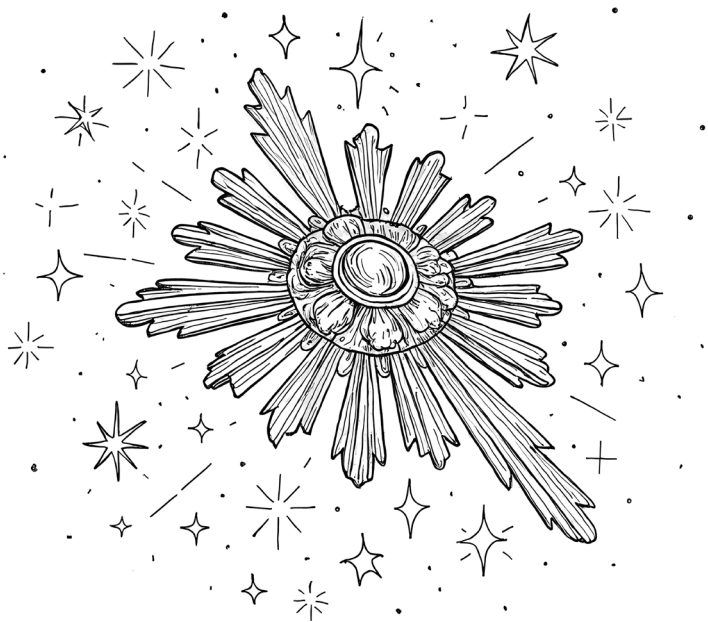
I'm struggling to remember what they were.

Maybe I ran for public office.

You're giggling now, slapping my hand.

You don't care what I did.

And neither do I.



## *The Gentle One*

**I**t's dark on the terrace. A full moon is rising behind the chimneys.

Grampa kneels and slides his arms under you.

I lift you and carry you to your room, careful not to wake you.

I set you down on your bed. Straighten your pigtails. Remove your shoes. And draw the blanket over you.

A moment of silent regard.

Such curiosity. Such camaraderie. Such peace.

Your mental state is so different than mine. I'm doing all I can to live up to your perfect example.

I back out of your room and close the door quietly. A sigh, then I enter my own, step toward my bed and turn down the sheet.

Above the pillow is the santos halo I hung there at your direction.

I'm remembering the moment in Henrique's shop when you found it.

You reached and pointed. I opened the cabinet and pulled it out.

The size of a hand, with rays of antique silver beaming from the hub. And a glowing garnet at its center. Beautiful, we thought. But what is it? When we asked our voluble friend, Henrique squinted and raised his crooked finger.

“A santos halo,” he said, explaining with gestures and broken English that the object had been used on a church altar, placed over the head of a figurine saint.

It was delicate and so finely crafted.

I was returning it to the cabinet, when your enthusiasm stopped me. To please you, I paid for the halo. And at your suggestion, I mounted it on the wall over my pillow.

Here it is now on the threshold of sleep, waiting for me.

My dear girl—

Since your arrival, I’ve changed. Haven’t I?

You are my beacon.

It is through your eyes that I see myself.

No longer do I wish for strength or command. I dodder, I stumble, I weave when I walk. With my creaking back, my uncertain legs and my declining virility, I have entered a new dimension.

After all these years, I am the gentle one.

And who would have thought—

I measure myself by the standard you found for me in the curio shop.

I am trying to earn my halo.

## *Who Are You?*

**T**he night grows larger and larger, darker and darker, deeper and deeper.

Am I still asleep? Am I dreaming?

I can hear the door hinges squeak. Someone is entering my room.

Is it you, Tenina? Who else could it be.

It's dark, too dark to see.

I listen for steps. There is only silence. But—

Someone's approaching. I don't have to raise my head. I can sense a presence.

Tenina?

A weight is descending on the mattress at the foot of the bed.

Not a child's weight.

I turn onto my shoulder.

I raise myself on one hand, craning my neck, trying to see.

The Woman in Black—

She's seated at my feet, motionless, her cowl over her head.

Is she going to speak?

The room is suddenly cold. My breath fogs the air. I lie

back and close my eyes. My legs are shaking, my arms, my chest—

“Do I know you?” I whisper.

Declare yourself, I think, insisting. Who are you? Why are you here?

The Woman doesn't answer.

I can't sleep with you sitting there.

Silence.

How long will this last? I ask. If you've come to stay—

I seal my lips, freezing my thoughts before they go any farther.

I will wait for her to leave.

In the darkness, I wait.

And wait and wait.

## Asking Too Much

**I**t's morning. We've come to the mercado for groceries, but Raul can see how upset I am.

"*Que há de errado,*" he says. "What's wrong?"

You have hold of my hand. You're pulling at it, urging me to speak.

"I'm worried," I tell him.

"About what?"

I shake my head. "Ghosts. Threatening dreams."

"Poor Grampa," you say.

"I'm an old man," I sigh, as if that explains it.

"We need help," you tell Raul.

He looks from you to me. "I need more information."

"The Woman in Black," I explain, recalling for him the discussions we've had about the mysterious stranger. "I'd resigned myself to her presence, but— Not in the casa. Not when we're asleep."

"She was in the casa?" Raul says.

I bow my head. "She knows how weak I am. How vulnerable."

Raul turns to you. "Have you seen her?"

A moment of silence.

“No,” you reply.

“Only Grampa,” Raul says.

“That’s right.”

“My friend—” Raul grabs my shoulders with his hairy hands. “It seems—”

I know what he’s going to say.

“Please,” I shake my head.

“It seems,” Raul starts again, “you’re afraid of dying.”

I shudder. Your lips are trembling.

“You’re frightening Teni,” I say.

“It’s you who are frightening her,” Raul says harshly. “Teni must learn. We don’t live with fear. *Dia a dia. Como os porcos.*”

“*Porcos?*”

“Pigs,” he says. “Pigs, pigs.”

“What do pigs have to do with it?”

“They live from day to day,” Raul answers. “*Dia a dia.* It’s enough for them. They don’t worry about dying. When it’s over, they become *presunto.*” He points at the cured legs hanging from the wire over his head.

“They’re ignorant,” I protest.

“They don’t harbor fear,” he says.

And then:

“Angelo— *Você está pedindo demais da vida.*”

“In English. Please.”

Raul regards me with his sad eyes. “You are asking too much of life.”

“What can we do?” you say to Raul.

He squeezes my shoulders with his spidery hands. “My friend Tiago— He will show you.”



Rich Shapero's novels dare readers with giant metaphors, magnificent obsessions and potent ideas. His casts of idealistic lovers and rebellious artists all rate ideas as paramount, more important than life itself. They traverse wild landscapes and visionary realms, imagining gods who in turn imagine them. Their thoughts are warped toward a place and state that is different than the one we're born into—an astonishing place, where the truths of our practical world are unraveled and revealed to be the illusions they are. Like the seekers themselves, readers grapple with surprising discoveries about human potential. *These Balmy Days* and his previous fifteen titles are available in hardcover and as ebooks. They also combine music, visual art, animation and video in the TooFar Media app. Shapero spins provocative stories for the eyes, ears, and imagination.