

THE OLD MAN

He was an old man who fished alone in his motor boat all through the archipelago and for the past two months hadn't caught a single fish worth mentioning - all the hot summer long, all summer without a drop of rain, with the sea unnaturally warm, with its short but still damaging flood of tourists, this summer of El Niño. El Niño had stretched its frog legs halfway around the world and, in passing, had cast its spell on the little island with its archipelago scattered over the sea - a larger neighboring island and several smaller ones, with the Sea's Navel in their midst. The whole island chain cooked in the sea's hot soup. The fish retreated into cooler depths, while the people, their heart rates and blood pressure rising, sweated in kitchens and taverns with the shutters closed, or sought shelter in the shade of the pines and the Mediterranean scrub. Unsuccessfully, for the most part. It was hot everywhere, the air so stifling and close that the bevanda in people's glasses would become undrinkable within seconds and had to be drunk fast and in quantity. A number of thin-skinned tourists came unstuck from it. Two of them had to be taken by motor boat to a hospital on the mainland, and one was taken off on the white launch - a death. The sun had stopped his aging heart. The seething ball of gas in the midst of the sky had shut off his arteries.

The white launch would also come for locals who had died, because the island had no cemetery. It took them off to St. Mikula in Muster, on the island of Issa.

Sometimes the old man was joined by a young boy, little Piazzun, the grandson of a local couple from the village. But recently his grandma and grandpa had been discouraging that. They thought it was silly to waste time with somebody who

couldn't catch anything. They started giving him other tasks around the house: he had to feed the rabbits and collect eggs from under the bushes where the hens dropped them, he had to take water to the lambs on the other side of the bay, where he'd find them bleating in a pen, and in the evenings they took him out to sea to help them set, pull in and empty the net. Žiko Fiamengo and his wife Nives (born Martini) had piloted through their seventy years. They had a son, Piazzun's father, working in a shipyard on the mainland, another son in the army, and yet a third on a boat that sailed the world. Piazzun's mother kept a store on the mainland, and in the hot summer months she would leave the boy on the island so he could grow strong amidst the sun and the sea.

"Sebald can't catch anything anymore," said Fiamengo on his terrace, which like a ship looked out over the entire bay. "Not with a rod and not with his spear gun."

"Oh, he's too old for that spear gun," Nives said. "But he did catch a lot of mackerel this spring."

"Mackerel's no fish," Fiamengo said. "And Sebald's a mainlander."

"Was a mainlander," Nives corrected him, "but he hasn't been one for a long time. And mackerel are fish if that's all there is."

"Once a mainlander, always a mainlander," Fiamengo said. "If you weren't born on the island, you're not an islander." Fiamengo always had his share of criticisms for Sebald, but in fact he liked him quite a bit, and had for so many years now that no one was counting them anymore.

"Maybe so, but he'll die on it," Nives said as she picked through green beans.

"Oh, but then he'll be a dead islander and that won't be much help to him."

"Then he won't need any help," Nives said after a short silence.

"Oh, but he will. They'll have to send the boat for him, to take him across."

"*Scempio*," Nives laid into him. "Why do you harp at that? They'll be here with the boat for us sooner than they are for him. We're older than he is."

Fiamengo poured himself wine out of one bottle and water out of another. In his glass they mixed into red bevanda.

“A couple of years,” he said in a way that implied the difference was inconsequential.

“‘Val Sebald,’ it will say on his tombstone at St. Mikula’s in Muster,” Nives said with her eyes half-shut, as she watched her fantasy unfold.

“Do you think his people won’t come get him?” Fiamengo asked.

“I don’t know if he still has anyone,” Nives said.

“You know he had someone.”

“Everyone has somebody somewhere. But as enough time goes by, the distance between them grows. Though surely when he dies somebody will come get him. They always come then.”

Fiamengo looked up from his glass, in which a ray of sunlight had pierced the dark wine, and looked at his wife. Wrinkles formed around his nose, which became like a round mushroom. That’s what his laughter looked like.

“*Asti dio*, you’re smart!” he said. “You picked that up from him.”

“From who, *smantuno*?”

“From Sebald.”

“Piazzun! Piazzun!” Nives suddenly called out, and then said more quietly, to herself, “Where has he gotten off to now?” As though the entire conversation between them had been carried off by the wind.

Or by time. The time that was running out, but hadn’t quite yet. The time that hovered over the island like a cloud. At times the wind would blow it away, at others the bonazza would bring it to a halt, and at still others it would accumulate and thicken, or thin out completely. Who says that time flows evenly? Time accelerates and time stands still, time glides and time races, time creeps by and time lurches, just as it will. So let’s leave time to its own devices.

The old man, Val Sebald, who had been the subject of conversation on Fiamengo’s terrace, was a thin, but not frail man, old, but not yet elderly in the ultimate sense of the word, whose skin had just recently, practically overnight, begun to hang from his bones, whose ears and nostrils had more or less overnight sprouted gray bristles, and on whose face wrinkles had scattered overnight in all directions, like iron filings beneath a magnet. Overnight, and a night is no time at all. And

all those days in between. His bulbous nose with faint signs of possible skin cancer went before him like a flag bearer. Grains of salt and rays of sunlight had etched fine lines into his skin, as though he'd been tattooed by some hack in Copenhagen's Nyhavn – which he had been, but decades ago, when he was still young. It was just a picture of a fish on his upper arm, where anchors and mermaids normally go. The fingers on his hands were like rusty hooks, the knuckles swollen with arthritis that he'd been fighting, like the fish, since his youth. But even after you'd looked at him for a while – which I did, for a while and then some – you couldn't have said just how old he really was. His eyes, when they looked out to sea, engaged its blueness youthfully. Blue against blue. As if to signal, who will whip whom?

In this he resembled Santiago.

THE BOY

Little Piazzun, on the other hand, the grandson of Fiamengo and Nives, resembled the Boy. Skinny but lithe, he climbed up the stone steps to the terrace and looked into the Cellar. Sebald was sitting inside on a chair, sharpening his Harpoon. The steel, three-pronged Greek Harpoon that went with his gun. Sunlight fell into the cellar through the door only, and all of the nooks at the back of cellar lay in darkness. But the objects inside of it were visible. In one corner was the bed, an old couch, sagging and sheetless. Sebald had no sheets, and once a month Nives would change the blanket, which this month was canvas. On a chair not right next to the couch, but a little farther away, in the dark, sat grandma. It wasn't a real grandma, just a grandma doll that Fiamengo had made when Piazzun was still little and slept in this cellar. Since nobody had time to come sit and put him to sleep in the evenings, he had made this grandma to sit at his bedside. Only Piazzun knew what she told him. Now she sat next to Sebald's couch. Not right next to it, but close. Still visible, still here, still full of things to say if that's what was needed. But also quiet, if that was preferred. A grandma for all times. A grandma in the dark. In one of the darknesses that lived in the cellar. The darknesses had different shades, different intensities and

different meanings. Some of them didn't mean anything, just like lots of things don't mean anything. Others barely meant anything, while still others meant a lot more. Images hid in them. They would shift through the cellar like iridescences underwater. They kept the old man company, but they also frightened him. But Sebald had grown used to these frights. They were his, so he tended to them like his memories, symbols and fixed ideas, which he selected and collected and swept under his bed.

"Are you going fishing with the harpoon?" Piazzun asked him. He sat down on the doorstep, on the transition between light and darkness, as if on the border crossing between one and the other, between this and that. Because he was sitting, he cast no shadow on Sebald and his Harpoon.

"Maybe," Sebald said.

"You don't go fishing much with the gun," Piazzun said.

"Not much?" Sebald said. "Not at all, not for a long time. But I will soon. You know I can't catch anything on a hook and line anymore."

"Remember how you caught white bream and black umber when I went out in the boat with you?"

The old man held the harpoon up to the light and squinted. He was checking to see if it was sharp and even enough.

"You were still really little then," he said after a bit.

"But I could already talk," Piazzun said.

"Of course you could," Sebald said, "and I remember what you said the first time you saw me."

"What was that?"

"I had docked the boat and thrown a bag of fish up onto the pier. Then I tied the boat to the ring."

"And what did I say?"

"You said, 'You can't throw fish like that.'"

"But it's true. You can't throw fish. You have to set them down."

"And since then I've always been careful to do that," Sebald said and with his blue eyes cast a not at all elderly glance at Piazzun. "I've learned a lot from you. You're my Little Prince," he added.

"Who's the Little Prince?" Piazzun asked.

"A boy like you who lived alone on his asteroid. Like you live on this island."

"I'm not alone. I've got grandpa and grandma and my cousins Dalton at the bar, and Mico Finta and Dina and Miloš and the lambs and chickens and rabbits... And you."

"The little prince wasn't completely alone, either. He had a rose with four thorns, three volcanoes – two of them active and one extinct – and then he had a little lamb with a box that Antoine de Saint-Exupery gave to him."

"No fish?"

"No, there aren't any fish in space. And no sea, either," Sebald smiled, "and even when he came to Earth, he couldn't find the sea, just a desert."

"He made a bad landing," Piazzun said. "Better the sea than a desert."

"True, but he met a pilot whose plane had crashed, and together they looked for a well, and found one. Even the desert is beautiful, because somewhere there's a well hidden in it."

"Like a sunken island in the sea," Piazzun said.

"You could say that," Sebald smiled.

"And now you can't throw fish on the dock, and you can't set it there, either," Piazzun said and laughed.

"That's just a temporary crisis," Sebald said. "This will pass. Look at this Harpoon. This is the kind of Harpoon that you have to write with a capital letter H. And I'm going to use it to catch a big fish."

All this time Sebald kept filing and then held the Harpoon up again and the light blue of the steel reflected the darker blue of his gaze. This was no cheap Italian harpoon. It was a Greek one, of steel, with long, tight points and powerful barbs from which no fish, once firmly caught, could ever escape.

"We caught a lot of fish with hooks," Piazzun said.

"Bass and amberjack," Sebald said, "on the longline."

"Conger eels and scorpion fish with the rod and reel."

"But more often painted comber and black seabream," Sebald laughed. "But we'll go fishing again soon. There are too many boats here in the summer. But soon we'll have our peace back. Fishing will be like it was."

"Tonight I have to go catch squid with grandpa and grandma," Piazzun said. "They've started bringing them up. Shall I bring you a squid, if I catch one?"

"I still have some in the freezer," Sebald said. "But if you catch a lot, you can bring me a fresh one. Then I won't have to go out in the boat to catch them myself."

“I want to go with you when you take the speargun. I can guard your boat.”

“Don’t worry,” Sebald said. “We’ll go fishing again. When you get a little, and I mean just a little bigger, you’ll be able to do whatever you want.”

“Grandma won’t sit by my bed anymore,” Piazzun said and got up. He stood in the doorway, drenched in sun, while Sebald sat in the hut, covered in darkness. He was still holding the Harpoon up to the light. He saw the boy amid the Harpoon’s spear points, as through a viewfinder.

“Now she’s sitting by mine,” Sebald said.

THE SEA

Sebald stepped out of his cellar into the daylight. Beforehand he set the harpoon, together with the file and oil, onto a small crate set next to his chair. The square of light that penetrated the doorway fell on this small grouping of Things – the chair, the can, the file, harpoon. Everything else was darkness. But not impenetrable darkness. A darkness out of which things emerged. Objects crouched against the walls, in the corners, even on the floor of the room. There were bags of sugar, a donkey saddle, a boat hook, anchors, fish traps, heaps of folded nets, harpoons on long poles, crates and catch boxes, toolboxes and goldfinch cages. Just inside the door rain slicks for the boat, old trousers and towels hung on hooks. A rope was stretched across the length of the room, with a neoprene diving suit on a hanger hanging from it (so the *rattone* couldn’t reach it). At the head of the bed there was a basket with underwater arrows, whose shafts jutted out of their quiver like a bunch of flowers in a vase. Against one wall there was an ice-box. The other wall had a fireplace built into it with a flue that led out through the roof in the form of a stone chimney. On shelves hanging from the wall at the back, where it was darkest, there were books. Hanging next to them was a map of the oceans. And after we’ve circled the room, leaving out quite a few things – since lots of all kinds of things had slowly accumulated over the years – we come to grandma again. In her long black dress, a shock of gray hair falling from under her black kerchief onto her forehead, grandma sat, slightly

slumped, on a chair that was just now celebrating its hundredth birthday – not that it was aware of the fact. But Sebald knew that grandma was part gray donkey mane. He had known the donkey when it was still alive. When it was thirty years old, Fiamengo turned it over to Mico Finta from Ryeland, who took it to a camp for retired animals at Gatula where, one day, behind the barbed wire, it died. It lay down on a rock beneath the gentle sky and gave itself up to the buzzards and crows. Only bones were left behind. Over time the winds scattered the bones and the rains washed them away. Well, here or there you might still find a rib, a fibula, a hoof, or his grinning jawbone with its yellow teeth if you scratched around beneath the stones.

But without a doubt the scruff of his mane still played the role of hair on grandma's head, both today and tonight, as Sebald stands outside the door and for whatever reason looks back inside – and tonight, after he comes home from the Dalton Pescecanos' terrace and the open-air concert and looks outside.

Sebald turned his back to the hut and faced the bay. At this point Piazzun was nowhere in sight. This was not while Piazzun was still visiting him. This was a little later, or possibly even some other day. The days were leaping like knights' horses on a chess board, each day, each moment vanishing around some acute angle. Each day would eat the previous one, or the previous one would swallow it.

Sebald smiled and set out on the path downhill. His house and its cellar – which had no second story – stood on a hillside over the bay and the village of Confin. Not high up, but higher than the house where Fiamengo and Nives lived. He had to walk past their terrace. Their terrace was a veritable captain's bridge of the bay. Fiamengo kept an eye on the sea from it. Everything that happened there was spread out before him as on the salty, open palm of his hand. He had become attached to this terrace years ago, when he stopped being a fisherman, and before that a baker, and before that a soldier.

He was sitting on a bench at his long table on the terrace when Sebald came by.

“How are you, Sebald? Still alive?” he said.

Sebald stopped.

“Got everything under control,” he answered. “And you?”

“Not bad from the waist up,” Fiamengo said. “From the waist down no good.”

“Can’t be a stud your whole life,” Sebald said with a wave of his hand and went past, as though he were walking down the gangway of a boat.

As he walked past the sheep pen, the sheep and goats bleated and glared at him with their devilish pale blue eyes. The lambs ran alongside him to the end of the pen, hoping he would give them salt to lick. But he had no salt, aside from what had long been etched into his skin. He gave them some of that, reaching both hands through the mesh so the little lambs could lick them.

“You can have my salt,” he told them, “if I can have your blood tripe.”

Blood tripe is sheep or goat intestines filled with their blood, a dish he liked as much as he liked fish.

“Goodbye, sacrificial lambs,” he said as he retreated.

On the waterfront he walked among the boats that had been pulled up onto blocks on the shore, where they masticated air. Plastic boats and wooden ones. His was among them. A white, plastic launch with a cabin and an inboard motor, altogether seventeen feet of boat. As he walked past it he patted its prow and said, “Soon. Maybe tomorrow.”

“Where to?” asked the boat.

“Squidding,” Sebald said. “Then to the Sea’s Navel for a day and some bigger fish.”

The boat squeaked faintly as Sebald moved on.

He climbed a shaggy slope following a path that bisected the spit. From the top of it there was a view out in three directions—two bays and the open sea. He pushed open a door made of wire and boards behind which a donkey once lived and found a spot next to a dilapidated donkey stall. He took his member out of his trousers and started to piss with a view out toward the Sea’s Navel.

It seemed far, far off to him.

The second after that, very close up.

In fact it took two hours to get there with his seven horsepower Yanmar.

A white cumulous cloud like the cotton cap on a swabbing stick squatted overhead.

He put his member back in his trousers and made peace with the three drops that fell into his underdrawers afterward.

He headed downhill on the far side and made his way along the sandy beach toward the terrace of the Dalton Pescecanos' Inn. He walked right next to the sea, but had to give it a wider berth wherever it stuck its tongues out farther onto the gently sloping sand. Suddenly he stopped and observed the uneven border between the sea and the land.

"That's a good question," he said, "just where does the sea end?"

"Where the land begins," Piazzun said. Piazzun was always showing up, his constant partner in conversation.

"It's not that simple," Sebald said. "Look at how the border between them twists and turns. No wonder it baffled Professor Bartleboom."

"Who's Professor Bartleboom?" Piazzun asked.

"Oh, somebody from some book," Sebald said. "A book called *Ocean Sea*."

"Do you have that book?" Piazzun asked.

"I think I do," Sebald said, "if I haven't loaned it out to someone. Books are like women. They leave you, and if they ever do come back, they're the worse for wear. But you always have room to take back a real book. There's always something new to read there. There are some books you could read over and over. And some that never end."

"What else does that book write about?" Piazzun asked curiously. Women didn't yet interest him, and he didn't have a clue about books, because there weren't any in his house. His house was full of all kinds of junk, but none of it was anything you could live without. Sebald's house was different. He kept Books the way he kept Harpoons.

Sebald softened at the recollection of the book in which Bartleboom sought the far ends of the sea. It was like that whenever he walked through the sea's sandy shallows.

"It also tells about a painter who wanted to paint the sea with the sea."

"How can that be?"

"Simple – he would dip his brush into the sea and transfer it onto his canvas. When he would start, he would be standing up to his knees in it, and when he would finish, he was usually soaked up to his waist. That's when some boy would come for him in a boat."

"But what was on the canvas?" Piazzun asked.

“What do you mean, what? The sea, of course.”

And when he stopped again and looked toward the inn, the house and terrace and the sign and poles and awning, he added:

“There was also an inn, Almayer’s. Almost like this one here. It was also in a nook looking out on a bay. Actually, it was a hotel, too, with seven rooms. A strange woman named Ann Deveria lived in it. She was beautiful. She was hiding from her husband and waiting for her lover. Death was all that came. There was always a boy sitting in Bartleboom’s window, dangling his legs out. He came with the room.”

“Now I think you’re going a bit too far,” Piazzun said.

“Maybe so. But I have my own inn, too. Actually, it’s more of a tavern, kind of similar, but different, too.”

“Where’s that from?”

“From my dreams. The tavern’s name is the Kokovyija.”

“Kokovyija?” Piazzun repeated.

“That’s right. Spelled *y, i, j*. A little strange, but that’s how it was. The name was on a shingle over the door, attached to the red brick. The same name was inside in neon lights.”

ROGAČICA

Foka the ferry captain, his first mate and some young fishermen were sitting on the terrace at the Dalton Pescecanos’. There were three Dalton Pescecanos – three boys, three golden boys who were no longer as young as they’d once been. Two of them had been here their whole lives, while the third had ventured out around the world, eventually landing back here on this terrace.

Tourists were sitting at some of the tables. They drank beer and bevanda, some ate fish, and the children licked ice cream cones. The tourist season was drawing to its close. The season is short here and ends before the summer is over. In a short while the island would become all its own again, floating in its hot sea soup and waiting for the days, weeks and months to come. The years, the decades, the centuries. An island in the sea, a star in the cosmos, a light in the window, a spot on the sun. With the locals swarming over it like little flies.

Two sailboats and a hydrofoil stood at anchor in the bay. At high season there had been thirty of them altogether. More than that couldn't fit in the bay, and when there were thirty, or even just fifteen, they would drift around their anchor chains and threaten each other. The summertime captains would shout at each other and the women would either shriek or look away in disinterest. There would be plenty of nerves and panic and horribly hot days. Once, in the middle of the night, a strong garbino came out of nowhere. It caused two sailboats to collide, shoved another up against the rocks, and beached three hydrofoils. Because the owners of the hydrofoils had started their engines just seconds before, they drew sand into their cooling systems and ruined their motors. The locals were worried about their boats, too, and they all assembled to help, Sebald among them. Then, as so many times before, he saw that the sea refused to admit any limits, and that it was steadily claiming the shore until, one day, it would own it. And at that point each of us would be left on his own little rock, far from all others, as if each were on his own asteroid. If only the sea would leave us a few rocks, Sebald thought. Maybe it will leave some small thing for each of us. Instead of a rose with three thorns, an anemone on a crabshell. Instead of a lamb, a tentacled blenny, maybe a sea urchin, a sponge and a sea star. But Bartleboom, if he were here, would finally get his answer about the end of the sea. The sea ends in the same place as a circle.

Three small fishing boats rested with their prows tied to the pilings and rings of the dock below the inn. All of their signal masts bristled with pennants made from the black plastic bags that each had on board.

On a long bench sat several young, bearded fishermen, leaning with their backs against the wall, from which hung a net and an old goatskin wine bag.

Sebald greeted them all and then sat down at his table near them and ordered beer.

The fishermen were talking about the fish that were missing, and the lobsters that were not growing to legal size for catching. All season they'd been saved by blotched picarel, the only fish of which there were plenty. There were other fish, too, so you couldn't say there was nothing, but there was just too little of everything. Sure, there had been several big

swordfish. The Dalton Pescecanos served them once a week. The denticulated sword that had been sawed off of one of the fish still stood in the corner between the wall and the bar, waiting for three weeks already to get hung up on the wall next to the net and the winebag, because that's what the owners had said. But now it didn't much matter anymore, it had gotten so late. We'll hang it up before next season, Gudej Dalton had said.

"There are no dentex. Not a one," one of the fishermen said. "But I did catch two fish I've never seen before."

"What were they like?" one of the others asked.

"They had knobby heads like dolphins and, though they were blue, they glistened gold. They had little spots all over their bodies."

"Those were dolphinfish you caught," said Foka, the captain of the ferry line.

"Dorados or gold mackerels," the other said.

"Lampugas," the third said.

"But where were they before? Where have they come from?"

Sebald turned to face the young man.

"You haven't seen them before because you're too young. But there's a book from 1953 that has drawings of them. They still lived in this sea then. You don't see them in recent books because they've disappeared."

"They'll be in the newest books," one of the fishermen said.

"It's because the sea is too warm," a rumped, dark-haired fisherman said, the shaggiest of them all.

"It's El Niño's fault," somebody said.

"They catch those fish in the Caribbean," another said. "I've seen it on television.

They chase after them in boats and harpoon them."

"El Niño is turning our sea tropical, too," Frane Dalton said. "That's why we're seeing tropical fish."

"The sea is getting warmer and the sea level is rising," said one.

"Some islands are disappearing," another said.

"Where?" the third asked.

"In the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. Soon twelve hundred of the Marshall Islands are going to be submerged. In the

Kiribati chain Tebua Tarawa, Abunuea and Tuvalu are already gone. They had to move the inhabitants to other islands.”

“*Asti dio*, what don’t you know!” the shaggy dark-haired one said, a gold chain glinting on his chest.

“I read about it,” the fisherman answered.

“Our sea level is rising, too,” Foka said. “In a hundred years it will be three feet higher.”

“The sea will be three feet deeper,” Sebald added.

“This terrace will still be above sea level,” Gruj Dalton said.

“A hundred years from now we’ll all be six feet underground,” Frane Dalton said.

“Or three hundred feet under the sea,” the dark-haired one with the chain said, looking like a native from Papua.

“You’ve got the best chance of that,” the fisherman they called Bevanda said, “because you dive with weights on.”

“If the lampugas were here in 1953, and they’re even in a book, then that means this was a tropical sea back then. But there was no El Niño.”

That was a more challenging question. The Mediterranean is not a tropical sea. There was no El Niño in 1953. (But Cousteau had already written *The Silent World*, Sebald thought.)

“Seals lived here back then,” Gudej Dalton said. “They didn’t need a tropical sea.”

“Seals are Arctic animals,” somebody said. “So why were they here?”

“Because this was an Arctic sea back then,” Bevanda said.

“First it’s tropical, then it’s Arctic, blah, blah, blah,” Foka said. “Idiot! *Smantuno!* These were Mediterranean seals, not tropical, not Arctic – Mediterranean. And they were in the right place at the right time according to the laws of nature and geography, until people wiped them out. Do you even know what Mediterranean means?”

“Mediterranean? That’s us,” one of them said.

Sebald smiled and the short, gray stubble around his mouth bristled. Foka ordered him a second beer. The fellows blabbered on. At five o’clock Foka got up, went down to his ship and blew the horn. Tourists flocked around him from the beach and the terrace like sheep following a shepherd. His first mate pulled the ropes off both bollards, threw them up

onto the deck and jumped after them. The tourists sat on the roof of the central cabin and looked back while the little ship drew a semi-circle over the bay and headed out. The two sailboats and hydrofoil started to rock. The ferry went out through the gate and then turned right just before the horizon. It vanished into the maw of the spit, which was already in shadow.

Whenever the ferry left, Sebald felt that life became simpler. The ferry leaves, taking with it people who don't belong here. The island is left alone with its own. The next thought was less immediate and went through his head like some twisting smoke: this is how various people had left him, on the ferry that took them away, each time leaving him alone with whatever was left. And what was left? The cellar, Piazzun, the terrace, the fish, the sea. Wine, the boat, books. The bonazza, the winter north wind, the summer south wind. My little island, my little freedom. My little freedom, my little prison. My little prison, my garden of paradise....

He drank two more beers, for a total of four, and then a carob brandy, a rogačica, for the road. The Dalton Pescecanos stood him that one. Foka had stood him one beer. That left three beers to pay for.

"Put them on my tab," Sebald said. "I don't have anything on me."

"No problem," Gruj Dalton said.

Fiamengo was on his terrace watching the sun slide into the horizon.

"Still alive?" he asked as Sebald came back up the hill.

"Got it all under control," Sebald said and stopped. He looked out at the sea which was darkening but still shone silver, and in an instant he felt like drinking another bevanda with Fiamengo instead of going back to the cellar just yet.

"Did you have any rogačica?" Fiamengo said, his nose turning into a mushroom.

"I had one."

"Then you won't mind drinking another bevanda."

Sebald sat down on a chair across the table from him. Everything was already there: the jug of wine, cold water in a pitcher, and a glass. He poured it out half and half.

"You know what?" Fiamengo said. "I feel like I'm celebrating something today. How would you feel about some music?"

“Sure!” Sebald almost shouted out. He knew what that meant.

Fiamengo got up and squeezed his way out between the bench and the table, bent over and holding one hand to his back. It had been giving him pain for the past twenty years, and lately he rarely ever straightened up completely. The doctors had said his vertebrae were settling and that he should start thinking about getting a wheelchair. But how was he supposed to manage the steps, docks, trails and steep inclines of the island in a wheelchair?

In the kitchen he had a television and a radio receiver and transmitter with its own antenna, so he could monitor local traffic and talk with the whole world, but what he brought out to the terrace was a record player from 1953 and a stack of little forty-fives. He set the record player down on the table, plugged the cord into an outlet beneath a glass case with photographs, and set a record down on the rubbery turntable. He pressed the switch, which responded with a very old-fashioned CLICK, and the scratching and singing began.

Long after Nives and Piazzun had gone to bed, both men remained sitting on the terrace, smoking, emptying their glasses, and listening to simple music from the distant past, while the universe rotated above them and the sea lived its life below.

SAN PEDRO

The cellar that Sebald had lived in for the past few years was not a basement in our sense of the word, since it was neither underground nor carved into the rock. What’s more, there was no continuation of a house above it, for instance a first floor, although sometimes he could hear steps overhead, furniture being moved around, and sometimes indistinct words and laughter, as though there were another story. It was an invisible story and he didn’t let himself get bothered by it anymore. On the contrary, he knew precisely what the room on that story was like. It had a fireplace, a double bed with a canopy, a long rug stretching from the door to the back wall, on which a mirror hung, a bathroom and a candlestick on a cast-iron stove. The candlestick held three candles and sometimes they