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Fishing on the Sea

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Kyle Barnett

Fishing on the Sea

We sat there eating our late lunch. The sea breeze kept the air from getting thick as we spoke in rapid and slurred Spanish. The table was covered with empty glasses of beer, *tapas*, small dishes of various foods—calamari, fried fish, sardines, olives, Serrano ham, *papas* (fried chunks of potatoes dusted with curry), cheeses, salad. We ate slowly and talked more than we ate. It was hot. We were keeping our eye on the sea, waiting for the winds to change direction so we could head out to fish. Finally, when nothing improved, we agreed to take naps and meet up later in the afternoon to reassess the situation.

The low-hung sun drenched the coast in yellow as we pulled the heavy boat down the sand and into the cool Mediterranean Sea. We navigated by using landmarks on the coast and the mountains. The two men I was with, Atenacio and José, steered our dinghy toward La Piedra, a massive rock pillar jutting out of the Mediterranean floor and coming within four meters of the surface. Although we were in the general area, it was hard to find La Piedra. We had to gauge by the color of the water, looking for a greenish-blue patch in an area the size of a soccer field. I found it unbelievable that these men had never considered buying a GPS locator. I mentioned it to them and they laughed off the idea, commenting on Americans' impatience and quick-fixes.

When we reached our fishing spot, we looped sardines to our hooks and cast the thick lines out. We chatted as we waited, trying not to get seasick just sitting there bobbing like a cork in the swells. I kept my eyes locked on the horizon (they say this helps prevent the nausea). The two other men were experienced fishermen, so I was surprised to hear one of them vomiting over the side of the boat. The smell of beer hit me before I turned my head. He threw up for five minutes straight, sticking his finger down his throat to get it all out. I waited till he was done and asked him if he was seasick. "Que va!" he scoffed. He explained to me that he had eaten so much at lunch that his stomach ached. I remembered the Romans' practice of gorging, vomiting, and gorging again. We moved on, from site to site, but never caught anything. Sometimes fishing is like that.

The next day, I went out again, this time with my host parents, Ignacio and Cheruca. My host mother is not cut out for fishing—she owns a Yorkshire terrier, a little yappie dog, which she totes around everywhere and frequently cooks meals for. But my host father convinced

her to come with us. We cast off the side of the boat and let our hooks down deep. We weren't using rods this time, just the line in our hands. The Mediterranean was a brilliant blue, iridescent, with millions of silver flashes on it as the sun shimmered over the choppy waves. We talked, joked with each other.

A tug. Another. I yanked the line hard so my hook would catch. Hand over hand, I reeled in my fish. Not much of a fighter, I joked to Ignacio—I could see why when I pulled it out of the water. It was only six inches long. Back in the sea.

As we were casting off the side of the boat, I heard some whining and moaning coming from my host mother behind me. She had snagged the plump, meaty part of the back of her hand with the hook. The hook was large, like one you might use to catch a small tuna. She wanted to tear the hook straight out; she didn't believe us that the best way to remove a hook is to snip the line and follow the rest of the hook through, threading it through the pierced skin. All that's left is two holes instead of a ragged fleshwound. The argument became heated between my host parents, so we headed back to shore. He drove her to the hospital. No catch, except for her hand.

We gave up on the hooks that weekend. If the fish weren't going to bite, then they'd entangle themselves in our net. We were determined to plunder the sea.

We set out that afternoon at dusk. In Spain, using nets without a commercial license is illegal, so there was a sense of urgency to place the net in the water before the Guardia Civil spotted us.

The net was piled high in the middle of the boat. It smelled of putrid fish, an odor so offensive that it literally stung my nose and throat. José told me it hadn't been properly cleaned and stored from the last time they had used it. We motored a kilometer offshore and began systematically dropping the net into the water as we drove. Anchored side first, attach milk jug every ten meters of net, hand under hand, keep dropping it, quick. Atenacio was maneuvering the dinghy into the current to avoid the net. The net was fifty meters long. We finished just as the sun dropped behind the barren mountains that ran along the coast. We sped back to the village. I looked back at the bobbing plastic jugs. In a few hours we'd return under cover of darkness.

Barnett

“Ready, Kyle?” José asked. It was near midnight. We heaved the boat down the sand, into the black water. We brought one flashlight, but José told me it was not to be used. All three of us climbed into the boat. Atenacio started the outboard and we took off into the darkness, speeding towards the net. The heavens started at the horizons—a bowl effect, like a planetarium. The stars were incredible from the sea. The perfect view, no light pollution, just crystal clear stars. I saw Scorpio and Taurus, constellations I’d never seen before. I was captivated, my neck craned upwards, like a country boy gazing at skyscrapers in a big city. My attention was brought back to earth when the dinghy slowed down. We were close.

Finding the buoys was guesswork. We were straining our eyes at the darkness. I asked them if we might accidentally drift into the net; they told me it was too deep to hit, but we did run a small chance of hitting the buoy lines. We whispered the whole time. Sound travels better over water than it does land, and we didn’t want to alert anyone on shore to our clandestine activities. Finally, José flicked the spotlight on and made two sweeping motions over the water. He caught a flash of white—the end buoy. He snapped the light off and we motored slowly towards the net.

We pulled up the anchor attached to the end of the net and placed it in the boat. José was in the front of the dinghy, hauling the heavy net out of the water and partly into the boat. I sat in the middle and pulled the net the rest of the way into the boat, piling it up at my bare feet. As we pulled it in, I became aware of the noises coming from the net. It was too dark to see anything, but I could hear fish flopping, things hissing and squirting, stuff writhing and moving. Something slimy brushed my ankle and I jerked my leg away so quickly that I banged my knee against the side of the boat. The dark pile of squirming, stinking net lay in between my legs, growing as we pulled in meter by meter of it. The Spanish guys were attempting to identify what was in the net by the sounds coming out of it. We continued to bring in the net for another few minutes until a pair of headlights came on from shore, pointing out at the sea in our general direction.

We were well out of their range, but it made us freeze nonetheless.

“Guardia Civil?” one whispered to another. No answer. We waited. “No.” We relaxed a little as the car pulled back onto the road and drove away. We joked about what would happen if a police boat came upon us. José said he’d be overboard and swimming to shore before they even spotted him. Atenacio, being short and fat, cursed José for his planned abandonment. They joked that since I didn’t speak Spanish well, the police would mistake me for an illegal immigrant and deport me to Morocco.

We finished reeling in the net and made our way back to El Pozo del Esparto, the small seaside village where we lived. There, on the pebbles and rocks, we tackled the tedious, smelly task of untangling each little creature from the long net. Squid, cuttlefish, fish of all shapes and sizes, a few crabs, more fish, three small electric rays (everybody made a big deal about these because they were dangerous). The fish large enough to eat went into one bucket, while everything else edible went into another bucket to later be made into a soup of some sort. Even the electric rays’ fins would be eaten. In the boat, there were three octopi trying to climb up the sides and escape. We had to keep an eye on them. I grabbed one, a fistful of gooey, jelly-like slipperiness. It slipped through my fingers every time I tried to pick it up. Ignacio, who was helping us with the net along with about ten other family members, told me to pick it up beneath the eyeballs. That, it turns out, is the only way to successfully hold an octopus without it slipping through your hands. It took forever to untangle the net, hose it down, and store it. We went to bed very late, smelling very fishy.

The next afternoon, we all gathered on the covered patio for lunch again. The fish had been fried up, and we ate most of them. Perspiration trickled down the beer glasses and kids played with the dogs. We talked and joked, men and women. A couple of us talked about the next time—what we’d do differently, how we’d do it. The late afternoon breeze kept us cool. No one was in a hurry. No one watched the clock. Time was measured in shades of daylight. Such is life when one is fishing on the Mediterranean.