

## One night in March

The waves were breaking smoothly upon the shore, whispering to the star-studded night. They awoke the silence by rocking it into the enchanting swish of the backwash. Along the blurred edges of the beach spilled over the crescent of the moon, lighting up the shapes concealed in the dark.

Narrowing her eyes, Alessia peered at the rod tips<sup>1</sup>. Just one strike had animated them so far and it seemed as if the cold had frozen any motion. Deep in the sand, her wellies breathed over its frosty ripples, sliding gently at the first sign of sleep. She had twice yielded to the fleeting enticements of dreams, waiting for something to arouse her attention – a sudden bite, the firm shifting of a glow stick<sup>2</sup>, the exciting vibrations on a spinning reel. Instead, the fishing lines kept standing upright like bayonets. It required perseverance, quite a lot of patience, and the ability to turn a long wait into a sweet, timeless pleasure. Maybe this was not the right night – the rough sea, the seaweeds, and the sinkers that slowly got washed ashore. Anyway, on other occasions, apparently dull scripts had later on changed into frothy comedies.

«I'll put a grip wire on» she muttered with determination. After retrieving the sinker, she adorned it with a couple of small

<sup>1</sup> Top sections of a fishing rod.

<sup>2</sup> A small translucent tube, attached to the rod tip, signalling fish bites.

wire arms. Having connected a *muriddu*<sup>3</sup>, she then seized the rod, casting it slowly backwards. With a quick flick, she bent its upper end and thrust the lure forwards. The hissing of the line had swished for a while before soon disappearing in a faraway, indistinct splash.

She had long been cultivating her passion for angling – strangely enough, as she knew no girls around who practised surf-casting<sup>4</sup>. She usually went on fishing trips with her male friends, but when they too failed to join in, she took along Greta, her stout-bodied, vivacious female *rottweiler*.

It was Ferdinando who had passed on to her his passion as well as the basics. How many trips to lonely beaches, at night, in the cold, rigged out in their rubber waders, inside which they would brave the surfing waves. What a silence, how many emotions, sunsets and words since he had suddenly turned up again in her life. She had missed him so badly that, so as to avoid suffering, she had thoroughly repressed any recollection. And so, at his unexpected reappearance, she had shown him the door. Despite everything, still now it seemed to her that had been the only reaction possible. It was understandable, since all she could remember about him was a shadow, a voice lost in time, which had abruptly left her house. She did not even know who that man really was – a hope, a ghost, an image whose importance was gradually growing dim, maybe a changing shape just like the breeze which was now reddening her face.

Those violent rings had been pounding on her mind, racked by the search for a reason. And so she had slowly erased his memory, along with the idea that he could possibly ever have existed, until his return had made a breach in her heart. That year,

<sup>3</sup> A marine worm used as a bait.

<sup>4</sup> A type of shore fishing performed by casting into a rough sea, usually at night.

so intensely spent, had increased her uncertainty, yet still her love. With her wounds dripping with doubts, she bravely got on with her life, looking ahead without ever thinking of the past. This bond was the only light that shone on her face.

So yearned for and unexpected, his return scared her though. The fear that fate should take him away again filled her with such oppressive anxiety that she sometimes got to the point of rejecting happiness by shielding herself behind a thick curtain of indifference. In the light of what the future might hold in store for her, that mask would soothe her pains. Now, for the first time, she found herself on a beach, at night, coping with the cold, the breeze and her memories.

A trickle of regret came down her brow while she was slowly heading for the small lantern to discharge more gas power. Darkness dissolved for a while revealing the shapes of the numerous tools. With a tired expression, she looked at her watch, deciding that if the next hour passed away fruitlessly, she would call it a night. It was nearly two o'clock and things might not change for the better. On instinct she rubbed her hands, numbed by the wind, and after having blown on them over and over again, she stuck them into her pockets. It was getting very cold now.

«Time to get up» she said in a low voice, raising herself from the fishing chair. After seizing the reels slowly, she pulled the lines tight and then walked quietly along the water's edge, scarring it with several footprints. For a long time, she stood staring at the sea while its surfs soothed her ears. It was a sweet melody that managed to give her peace. In those moments she would have wanted to stay there forever. Greta's eyes were following her and, no sooner had she seen her moving away, she sprang up and rushed over to her. Alessia kept stroking her as they paddled in the water. For a little while they walked side by side, getting

lost in the magic of the night. The light of the gas lantern soon began to fade in the distance while the last brush stroke of the moon was disappearing, eagerly nibbled at by the darkness. That was the realm of deep shadows and only the lights of the distant town could separate the sea from the coast. For over a quarter of an hour she let her imagination feed her thoughts until Greta's barking abruptly brought her back to reality.

«What the hell has got into you?» she blurted out with irritation. She instinctively moved her eyes at the sight of a faint, faraway light floating in the dark. She quickly started to run along the beach and as soon as she got to the rods she heard the bite alarms<sup>5</sup> start buzzing.

«They have bitten!» she exclaimed radiantly. In a flash the drowsiness that had benumbed her seemed to vanish at the rushing flow of adrenalin. She flung herself towards one of the rods and raised it from its holder. After a sharp hookset<sup>6</sup>, she gently tightened the line, assessing the weight of the prey. Suddenly she felt a tug and instinctively screwed the clutch up tight. The spool began to unwind, allowing the fish to head offshore. Thrilled, she cast a quick glance at the second rod, forecasting another bite. Greta was running about, sharing the same emotions.

«Damn it» she burst out in a huff «did you both have to bite just at the same time?» Resigned, she left the second rod to its fate and, focusing her attention, she placed the handle of the former against her belly, starting to gain the line back on the reel. It was a critical step, for impatience, tiredness or an unexpected tug might allow the fish to unhook itself. For a few long moments she managed to pull it in through gradual movements of

<sup>5</sup> An electronic device attached to the reel.

<sup>6</sup> A sharp motion with a fishing rod in order to impale a fish hook into the mouth of a fish.

her trunk, then she felt another jerk and so let the fish move away.

«You must be quite big!» she murmured, trying not to get distracted. With the line still taut and the reel in her hand, she was disengaging the anti-reverse function when another pull made the rod vibrate. Immediately she realized that it was going to be tough work.

«It's just us two» she burst out defiantly. Hearing no signals for a while, she instinctively put a hand on the rod. The breeze had strengthened and sweat started spilling over her waders. It was just then that she feared the fish might have got off the hook, but the dull buzzing of the bite alarm made her tremble again. While she was slowly reeling in more line, she suddenly felt an obstruction. Pensively she grabbed the reel, straightening the line again.

«What the hell is going on?» she snorted disappointingly. With her arm already tired, she thrust the handle into the sand, trying to recover her strength. With her left hand she switched on the torch she was wearing on her forehead, watching the spool carefully. The line was wound up around it, filling it almost completely. Suddenly she spun round towards the water, scanning it through for the prey. She kept trying to make it out by lighting up the line, which was disappearing into the sea, but to no avail – surely it was somewhere nearby out there. She slowly tried to force the reel but the rod was so taut that the risk of breakage was too high.

«I can't possibly lose concentration» she murmured to herself, feeling the weight of her tiredness. The night was watching her in silence, an indifferent witness to the fight in progress. For over a quarter of an hour there had been neither bites nor strikes and time seemed to be dragging on endlessly.

«I know you're somewhere out there» she said aloud. «You're just not going to make a fool of me.» She was sure the fish had bitten the bait but still could not make out its moves.

Exhausted, she stepped back ashore, and after releasing the clutch, she set the rod back in its rest. With her eyes blurred, she tried to clear her mind. Soon her thoughts raced back to Ferdinando. If he had been with her, he would have known what to do. So, for a moment, she pictured his face, which enabled her to regain some strength. The image lasted for a short time, a mirage choked with darkness, and then she soon found herself back in the night, sick and shipwrecked after that umpteenth desertion. A sob went through her throat, along with a bitter, painful regurgitation. With her mind exhausted, she took her eyes off the majestic stillness of the cosmos and, worn out, she slumped down into the fishing chair.

«You'll have to move, bastard, or you'll be choked to death» she said looking at the tense rod. The hope that the prey would break cover helped her overcome the effort, hiding it behind the recollection of past catches. The images of fish-laden baskets, the merry barbecues with friends, and the disappointed looks brought about by fruitless, empty nights were feeding her mind, bewildering it with the glorious colours of the past. She once again drifted into sleep, unawares, till when, with numb limbs, she rose from the fishing chair, resuming control over the rod. The line was taut and the tip of the rod was clearly bending towards the water.

As she suddenly looked at her watch, tension began to spread. After one hour of waiting, the fish was still out there, entrenched in that astute, nerve-racking defence.

Overwhelmed by tiredness, she started swearing aloud, cursing that unusual passion of hers as much as her weakness, wo-

manhood, and her own innate fragility. Those thoughts seemed to make her efforts feel heavier and, anxiously, she began rummaging through her tools. Quickly she picked up a gaff<sup>7</sup> and slowly stepped towards the water.

«Now I'll show you» she shouted brandishing it nervously. With a crazy look, she started wriggling as the sea cooled off her waders, climbing slowly up her body. With the water at knee-level, still she could not make out the leader<sup>8</sup>. Determined to cut it out, she kept on advancing, following the line with one hand.

When the first surf broke against her, splashes of water slid everywhere. She could barely keep her balance as the seabed crumbled under her feet. The fish was at hand – she could tell from the different colour of the fishing leader – just a few yards, and she would be able to see it. She went on making her way tentatively across the sand. The water had already reached her waist. She knew the seabed would soon slope down.

«Alessia, stop it. It's just a fish» Ferdinando would have warned her if he had been there.

«Why the hell did you leave?»

«I got my just deserts for my mistakes.»

«Of course, but I wasn't prepared for your farewell.»

«I'm sorry you suffered because of it.»

«Damn it, just now that we've met again.»

«Don't try to get your revenge. It's just a fish, remember» he concluded, vanishing from her thoughts.

Confused, she started looking around as another wave hit her body. In buckets, water seeped through the waders, thickening her boots. So as not to fall, she propped herself up on the gaff,

risking getting badly injured. The current was pushing her forth. With her waders thoroughly drenched in water, her movements were slowing down.

Dismayed, she trudged her way through the surf, a little by floating, a little by placing her feet on the seabed. When the first drops slid down her throat, she widened her eyes in terror. Driven by despair, she kept on struggling hard, stealing inches from the sea. Behind, Greta supported her by barking nervously at the night.

Determined not to give up, she consumed all her remaining strength in a wild fight with the surges until, drenched in water and fear, she finally reached the water's edge and slumped down to the ground, swamping herself in the prickly hugs of sand. Greta soon came over licking her face over and over again. They long remained huddled together, their breath broken from lack of air.

As soon as the sound of their breathing had become gentler, she crawled over to her large bag in search of the thermos flask of espresso. With her trembling hand, she twisted off the tap and poured out some coffee. A sigh of relief flowed over her lungs – it was still hot enough to soothe her shivering. For a while she stood watching the moths dancing around the lantern. She would have wanted to run away, but tiredness and the cold prevented her from getting up. So she let her imagination run away, but her escape shattered before the dull echoing of those last moments. Those images shook her mind, blocking any escape route. She had run a big risk – a single stronger wave and the sea would have clutched her inexorably.

Desponded, she dragged herself wearily towards the rods. She was slowly disengaging the first one when, all at once, there was a sudden screech, then a succession of jerks on the second rod,

<sup>7</sup> A sharp metal hook used for harpooning a fish in order to make its landing easier.

<sup>8</sup> The final length of a fishing line, preceding the hook, which usually comes in various colours and sizes

and finally the line began to unwind.

«I knew it» she shouted at the top of her voice, holding the rod tight. With renewed strength, she cranked the reel handle, coming up against scant resistance. Now the tugging was becoming less frequent, meaning that the fish was drained of energy. She went on reeling in more line quickly and, when the leader began yellowing the reel, she rushed to the gaff and stopped at the edge of the seashore. She was quietly retrieving the leader when suddenly she noticed a shape approaching across the water.

«What the hell...» she burst out, puzzled, staring at an extraordinarily huge ray. Its broad winged arms were gliding gently on the surface in a dance of death and defeat. Having overcome her astonishment, she pulled back the last yards of line. As soon as she reached the fish, instead of gaffing it, she dragged it to the shore. It was an exceptional prey, proud, huge and, despite being beaten, was shaking its tail dangerously. Intrigued, Alessia watched it. All of a sudden, she rushed to the tools in feverish search of the camera. Trembling, she thrust the rod holder – which she had just pulled out – back into the sand, and after positioning the camera upon it, she operated the self-timer. In a couple of leaps she was back to the ray and warily raised it by the mouth. A grimace of exertion stood out on her face. Judging by the effort involved, it must have weighed ten kilos at least. Impatiently, she waited for the flash to be discharged. It was already five in the morning. She repeated the operation and raced back to the prey, setting it free cautiously from the hook. It was full of sand and kept on opening its mouth wide. She carried it carefully to the shoreline, pushing it gently into the water. For a few long moments the ray stood still, then, with a stroke of its tail, it started dancing on the surface. It kept floating for a while, almost incredulous that it had been given its freedom back.

Alessia followed it with the torch until she saw it vanish. All around the night was about to fade away at the faint glimmer of dawn.

Without hesitating, she took a deep breath, inhaling eagerly those last moments of peace. For a while she kept on looking around and, as darkness was hinting at the coming day, she turned her mind to Ferdinando one last time. All that night had been oozing with the recollections of him – his face hidden behind the timid shadows of the moon, his voice cleared by the sweet whispers of the wind. A smile made its way on her face and then she realized that, despite the ditch that death frantically strove to dig, her father would always be by her side. Then, satisfied, she tidied up the fishing tackle. Finally she turned off the small lantern, ambling back towards the car.

On a night of angling and stars, from an enchanted secluded shore, a girl was going back home with her dog and a memory, her mind drenched with life.