

SILVINA OCAMPO

The Sea

Translated from Spanish by Suzanne Jill Levine and Katie Lateef-Jan

IT WAS IN A FISHERMEN'S VILLAGE close to the port. The hamlet of gray tin was gleaming in the afternoon when a woman with her hand placed like a visor over her eyes, to shield them from the sun, looked out over the empty stretch of beach. The beach in that place resembled the sea itself; it was wavy and reflected the changing sky with the clarity of water. The tamarisk shrubs were moving perpetually toward the sea like slow processions of hairy green caterpillars.

The woman was biting her chapped lips. The beach, as far as her eye could see, was deserted. The cowbell chimed as the dairy cows crossed the road; the white one was wearing the bell. The woman stopped biting her lip. Two tiny black dots appeared on the horizon and were slowly getting bigger: two men were arriving on foot.

The woman knew who those men were, she knew how they were dressed, she knew by heart which button was missing from her brother's shirt and the patch on her husband's pants. She watched them arrive from very far away, the color of their scarves blowing like flames behind them, like small flags in the wind. After tilting her head from side to side two or three times, as if that movement would ensure the return of the two men, she went back into the house.

That house stood out in the hamlet because it had a very small garden with flowerbeds surrounded by stones and snails and a swing hanging between two thick wooden posts.

All the children from the neighboring houses would swing in that garden and for that reason they called it "The House of the Swings."

The kitchen was filled with smoke, the walls dripping with black coal residue, but everything was perfectly in order like a recently scrubbed room while the woman was cooking.

On the dirt road the two men were getting closer. The taller one had a darker complexion and asymmetrical eyes, the other had very deep-set gray eyes; the sun had obscured one and illuminated the other like a wheat field. The door was still open and they walked right into the kitchen. The table was set. After taking off their jackets they

sat at the table. The woman was coming and going: she took the pot off the fire and searched for salt on the shelves until everything was ready and she brought the dish to the table and sat down between the two men. No one spoke. The only sounds were utensils against plates, and jaws and teeth chewing in silence.

After a while the darker man spoke. He spoke of fishing boats, and the names of silver fish flashed across the table. The woman protested that they never brought anything back—not one hake, not one sea bass—but sold it all and always threw the leftover fish back into the sea. The blond man was laughing: fish was food for cats, and if it were up to him he would starve to death before trying calamari or lobster. The other man spit on the floor: it was all the same to him, pheasant or *pejerrey*, cow or horsemeat. The silence returned; they opened the door and saw that it was a moonless night. They surveyed the darkness from sky to ground and closed the door.

After washing the dishes, the woman, exhausted, sat on the bed to undress and the men watched without seeing her through the crack in the door. In and out of dreams she heard the men's voices, carrying her down a very long road, at the end of which, rocking her son's cradle, she fell asleep.

The two men were still sitting in the kitchen. It was barely one o'clock in the morning when they left the house; they took a gun, a lantern, and a bunch of keys. They had chosen the house they were going to rob a month earlier. They roamed the neighborhoods for many days, watching to see what time the lights went out and what the locks were like. They tried to befriend the dogs, and asked the gardener several times for permission to drink water from the faucet. Stealthily they chose the darkest night.

The two men put on their jackets. That night they only walked along the roads in the hills that were far from the sea. They had to walk more than fifty blocks. The houses were dark on that windless night, and the men walked slowly. They hiked through bushes, clearing a path as they went. It took them more than an hour to arrive, through weeds rising in big waves that broke at the height of their knees. Every now and then they lit the lantern. When they were about seventy-five feet away, the dog began to bark and they hopped the fence. The dog kept barking as they approached, until it recognized them and quieted down, nestled against them, stretching out and wagging its tail. It was a big house. They checked the shutters on the front porch windows:

they were all closed. There were no porches on the sides of the house; the two men slid, pressed against the outside wall, until they saw that one of the shutters was open: a small light was shining through the curtain and the window was also wide open. They climbed slowly onto a rainwater tank, where they could peek into the room. The light was on. In front of a mirror a woman was trying on a bathing suit. She moved closer, stepped back, and moved closer again to the mirror as if performing a mysterious dance. She looked at herself head on and from the side. One of the men shut his eyes.

The woman took off the suit, grabbed the nightgown that was laid out on the bed and put it on. Then she folded the bathing suit and left it on the chair by the window. The two men held their breath. They didn't move for what felt like a half hour until the woman fell asleep.

Then one of the men, intensifying the silence, extended his arm and snatched the bathing suit and a cardboard box that was on the chair. They took off running; they'd heard a knock on a door. They walked for a long time in the hills, retracing paths, feeling cheated by that robbery which didn't require a skeleton key or the lantern, in which they hadn't penetrated the dining room to comb through the silver, with their revolver pointed at the doors. The two sensed the perfume emanating from the bathing suit as they pulled leaves from the hedges until they arrived at the house.

Knocking on the doors, they entered and suddenly saw, for the first time, the woman sleeping in the next room, a bare shoulder visible over the sheet.

The birds were singing when they went to sleep.

The next day, when the woman returned from the dairy farm they showed her the bathing suit and a light blue dress they had found in the cardboard box. The woman threw her arms in the air: this is what you left at one o'clock in the morning for—what I lost a night's sleep for! She examined the fabric of the dress, shaking her head: it wasn't even enough to make a pair of underpants for the little boy, though the bathing suit's fabric was a bit thicker. The men replied that she had to put the suit on, since they had brought it for her, they would take her to the beach so she could swim. They always swam on very hot days—why didn't she swim too? The woman shook her head again: the sea had never been a source of pleasure for her but instead a device of endless torture. The neighbor was always encouraging her to go for a swim; when her neighbor had the morning free she would go to

the beach in an old black silk bathing suit, swim near the shore, and come back covered in small seashells and pebbles, with algae tangled between her toes. She would say that it was good for your bones.

The men insisted until the woman agreed, thinking that they had both gone mad. She left dressed as she was with her head scarf on. The men were on either side of her, walking hurriedly. The morning was very quiet; it was Sunday. They arrived at the beach, and the woman after thinking it over for a long time undressed beside the boat. Those men who never brought her with them, who never paid her any mind except to ask for food or something else, what was going on with them now?

The woman forgot the shame she felt in the bathing suit and her fear of the waves: an overpowering joy pulled her toward the sea. She wet her feet first, slowly, while the men reached out their hands so she wouldn't fall. That woman who was so strong grew flimsy cotton legs in the water as they watched her, amazed. That woman who had never put on a bathing suit looked so much like the swimmer in front of the mirror. She felt the sea for the first time against her breasts and leapt into water that from afar had frightened her with its big waves, its small waves and its groundswell crashing over the breakwater, making ships sink. She felt that she would never be afraid again, now that she was no longer afraid of the sea.

When they returned, from far away the little boy's crying was awaiting them; the woman cradled him in her arms. The men didn't leave the house that day. Oblique arguments took over; an obscure hatred began to invade them, growing, rising gradually like high tide. They lived inside a bundle of gestures, words, and mysterious silences.

AFTER SOME TIME had passed, it was believed that dark spirits had taken hold of "The House of the Swings." The swings rocked back and forth on their own. One night the neighbors heard screams and thuds; after a long silence, they believed they saw the shadow of a woman running with a small child and a bunch of clothes in her arms. She was never heard from again. At daybreak the next day, as usual, the two men left with a fishing net. They walked one behind the other, one behind the other, without saying a word.

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