

International Imitation Hemingway Competition

Finalist – 1986

The Old Man and the Seal By Mark Silber

He was an old man who fished alone when he fished by himself. For 358 days now he had been fishless. Maybe if I used bait, he thought. And a hook. The last fish he caught was still in his pants pocket, forgotten.

“*Qué stencho*,” the old man said. “No wonder I fish alone. But bad smell does not matter to a man, though this smell is very bad.”

To the old man, the world had only two smells, the smell of the fish and the smell of the sea.

And the smell of no fish. Three smells.

He remembered the boy, who cooked *guazzetto* at Harry’s Bar in Havana. The boy cared for the old man the way a woman would, though he was only a *boymano*, which is what people say in Spanish when someone is no longer a boy but not yet a man. He squeezed the shiny red ball the boy had given him.

“I am an old *bagowindo*,” he reminded himself, “and I talk to myself. But maybe the great DiMaggio talks to himself too.” The old man wondered if the great DiMaggio’s conversations were as interminable as his own.

Then he saw the Big Fish.

Fish, you are my brother the old man thought. At least, you have the same moustache. He watched it swim in little loops, barking playfully. It jumped through the air, its black fur shining like the coat of a seal.

In fact, it was a seal.

“Now I know why the boy made me bring the ball,” the old man said, tossing it overboard. “Fish, this is for you.” While the seal was distracted, the old man slipped a rusty handcuff around its flipper.

“Fish, now we are truly linked.” He laughed and wheezed and coughed.

The stayed handcuffed for a week. Then the seal began to tease the old man. It bounced the shiny red ball off the old man’s old fisherman’s nose, dry and callused from centuries of fishing.

“A man can be destroyed but not defeated,” the old man said to the seal. Yes, that was the point of the story. “Or was it the other way around? The boy told me, but I forgot. *Qué dolto*.”

While the old man was rambling, the seal climbed aboard and tossed him into the sea. It slipped out of the handcuffs and threw them to the old man.

“Great weight does not matter to a man,” the old man gurgled, “but I wish these cuffs were made of Styrofoam.”

“*Sayonara*,” said the seal, which is what people say in Spanish when they mean “good-bye.” Then it sailed back to Harry’s Bar, got tight, and became best friends with the boy.