

Paolo Piccirillo

The name of the sea

Today it is a beach but years ago where the umbrellas are now used to be full of wooden boats, with a few straw huts.

In one of these huts there lived a man. He was a fisherman because that was what his father and grandfather had been.

One day at the fish market he met a woman and fell in love.

But not all the loves on this earth live time without end and that love lasted less than one night, because the man went out fishing before sunrise. Although the sea was calm a bank of grey clouds threatened the sky. The man hardly had time to cast his nets before the appearance of the sea changed, turning rough. A wave capsized the boat and the man drowned. As the water filled his lungs he thought back to his night of love. As they had kissed he had been afraid of falling. The woman's mouth had seemed like an empty ravine. Trembling all over he had held her tight and abandoned himself. It had only been when he relaxed that he had noticed the moon on her face – it lit her up in the way a lighthouse sheds its saving light on the sea.

The man had said in her ear: "You are the light of the sea".

The day after the funeral, the woman sat on the sand, stared at the empty sea of her love and began to weep. And from then on there was nothing but tears. Years of tears, as she sat there where the boat house had once been. But one day, an old woman by now, she saw the glimmer of a wave begin to dance. It is him, she thought. And she stopped crying.

Beneath the sand of the sea a woman is about to be killed because she is happy, because she has stopped crying.

She hangs her head low over the bath empty of tears.

Two men in black uniforms call her. She stands up, aware of what awaits her. She smiles.

“Say goodbye to her”, shouts the black uniform to all the others, each with their head bowed over their own bath. There is a general low murmur of reply: “Goodbye”. Except for one man who says ciao in a low voice, without removing his eyes or tears from the bath.

“Goodbye is what you must say”, yells the uniform.

The man shuts up and thinks of crying. Passing by, she caresses his head.

Beneath the sand of the sea is a castle. The owner of the castle is a sad King.

There are hundreds of rooms in the castle, all of which are large and sweet-smelling. The beds in the castle have soft water mattresses and in the water float rose petals.

It is said that whoever sleeps at least once on one of these mattresses will wake up the next morning remembering the most beautiful dream of their whole life.

In the dining rooms the tables are very long rocks and when you pass by you can smell the salt.

In the King's castle there are long transparent aquariums instead of walls.

It is like being right in the sea.

Indeed when one of the King's guests asks for a dentex or a grouper the waiters get their spear guns, plunge them into one of the aquariums and fire. They cook it right away, which is why it tastes so much of the sea.

There are only two rooms without aquariums: the room of the baths and

the Penitence room.

The room of the baths smells of strawberry and the ocean. Here it is never either too hot nor too cold and there are always happy seagulls and violin music. It is boundless, as big as from here to the sky.

The room is full of baths, those old ones with lion's feet. Bending over the baths are men and women, crying. Thousands of people, thousands of baths.

If there were aquariums here rather than walls, if this room too were like the others, the groupers, dentexes and all the sea creatures would see an expanse of people bent over crying; tears and tears filling the baths, and once full the tears, which have become litres of tears, vanish down a coloured pipe and become part of the sea.

This is how the King creates the sea. All seas wash the world.

But nobody can know this. Because there are no aquariums here. Here the walls are the whitest of white. A white interrupted only by latest generation televisions showing scenes of men and women who love one another, children smiling and saying their first words, first kisses or even last ones between two old people who have loved each other all their lives.

There are men and women called by their proper names. Marco, Elena, Filippo, Claudio, Vittoria, or tender nicknames. They are happy.

The smell of strawberries, the seagulls that cannot be seen, the love only on the screens, the perfection makes everybody cry, because the people crying over the baths no longer have a name, they are nothing but tears necessary to the world, to the sea. They cry.

One day a man leaning over a bath realizes he has no more tears.

He looks at the screens, thinks of where he would like to be, thinks of the places he will not see again, of denied embraces, denied love, but there

is not so much as the taste of tears in his throat.

So he drinks from his large water bottle. He hydrates himself and hopes the men in uniform do not notice. This distraction has gained him time but now there is only one last resort left to him. Billow out his cheeks and squeeze his eyes shut and convince himself his eyes do not exist to anybody else.

At least ten metres separate one bath from the next. Occasionally, at the end of a shift, it happens that someone passes near the others' baths. Just as he is blowing out his cheeks like a puffer fish, a woman passes by, concentrating on the next day's tears.

The woman notices the man but the guard is hot on her heels. She cannot smile even though she would like to, but she says to herself: "Puffer". She feels like shouting it out but lacks the courage.

He hears though. He turns, watches her back as she walks away. He would like to look her in the face.

Another guard notices that the man has stopped crying and walks up to him.

The woman is far away by now. The man knows he will never be able to have her, never talk to her, and here come the tears. The guard relaxes.

Puffer cries and thinks of himself with his new name, and of her.

A few days later the man sees the woman again. She is about to start her shift.

He raises his head and observes her. A few tears drop outside the bath.

Not so much as a second goes by and she is crying too.

He stares at her determinedly. They are at least twenty metres apart.

There are men in uniform ready to kill, there are fake seagulls, televisions

full of kisses, the smell of strawberries, the tears to be cried, and the music of the violins is punctuated by bouts of sorrowful coughing and the occasional stifled lament.

And yet she has noticed him looking at her. They cry, look at each other, are drawn to one another, do not take their eyes off each other. The tears drop on the ground. Lost.

The man notes how the woman grinds her teeth and her lips as she performs her duty as a weeper. Her veins stand out. She seems like a frog. When his shift ends he passes by her and whispers: "Frog".

She smiles and the tears stop for a few moments. Luckily nobody notices. The next day the man is unable to cry. All he thinks about is looking for his Frog among the expanse of baths.

She is no longer a woman crying. She is Frog.

He does not shed a tear the next day or the day after that.

A whole week goes by without him crying.

The same happens to her. She looks for him among the men, just spots him ten or twelve baths away. She thinks of the name she has given him and smiles rather than cries. The CCTV cameras record it all.

Two weeks go by and neither of them has shed a single tear. The King's law speaks clearly: in the event of love between two weepers, the woman is to be executed first. The man may even be saved if he starts to cry again. There is no trial. There is no appeal against the King's law.

The woman does not seem worried, she is not afraid of dying. She is happy. It is the law.

Instead, the man wants to cry these very different tears, but he holds back.

The day the guards in the black uniform come and call the woman over to

them nobody, in the room of the baths, feels like crying. The sea seems affected, although not unduly.

The guards shout to everybody: "Say goodbye to her". She smiles at Puffer to cheer him up.

Instead of saying goodbye, though, he bursts out crying just as he has, after all, done his entire life.

One of the guards dressed in black takes the woman away. But suddenly the man gets up, dropping all his tears to the ground, and runs towards her.

Another group of guards immobilizes him.

Calmly the man says: "I must talk to you. You are making a mistake. She can cry much more than I can".

The next day the man is not there anymore. The weepers in the room of the baths realize the King has made an exception. The woman does not cry in the way he had promised the guards, though.

She restrains herself, clenches her teeth and squeezes her eyes shut.

She knows she is soon to die but before she does she decides to shout something out to the man a few baths along. He is the chubby type and he seems uncomfortable in that position. She shouts: "Seagull", because when he weeps, his cries of pain are like the sound of seagulls.

Pleased to be Seagull, he calls the woman Sky because of her blue eyes.

He can see them distinctly even from afar. He is in love.

The woman is executed on the spot. The exception had been causing discontent among the guards.

In the throes of pain Seagull fills two baths in a single day, but the following day the force of his tears weakens along with the memory of the woman.

A week later, order seems to have been restored. The man has started to cry again and the guards are calmer.

All of a sudden, though, it so happens that Seagull stops crying and gets carried away watching a woman who often ends up near him. He has never noticed how her hair is like rose petals. He finds her beautiful and calls her Rosa. He knows he is about to fall in love, that he will not cry anymore and that he will be killed, or that if she falls in love with him it is she who will be killed, but he does not care. He shouts to her: "Rosa".

Rosa then calls a dark-skinned man Bruno. Bruno gives the name Tree to a man he has fallen in love with and who weeps like a bent willow.

Time passed and there were no more bent men or women leaning over the baths. What happens to rocks dried by the sun happened to them too. The baths became dry and full of dead salt.

The King fired the guards and locked the room of the baths. He no longer even wished to see the aquariums. He retired to the Penitence room, the only room in the castle with walls of salt and a long porthole that overlooks the only sliver of sky visible from down there.

The King remembered the words, "You are the light of the sea", and decided it was time to go out of the castle and embrace his woman.

But the castle is underwater and going out means drowning in a sea of tears.