

ARRIVAL

SAILORS

The sky over the harbor was rolling shades of gray in the late afternoon. The dockworkers stood in their boots in the drizzle and stared futilely into the fog. Pacing the shoreline, they had hours ago run out of small talk; now they hid their thoughts hard and dry within. And stared as time moved slower and slower.

Then the dark mass filled in behind the fog, looming fast, and broke through. The dockworkers' yells choked in their throats when they saw the tattered sails and charred mast. Was this the ship, the only ship that ever came and went?

A shout from the maintop jolted them back to life. The crew emerged, red faces filling the decks, capped against the rain as they brought the ship to shore. The stevedores, dazed with embarrassed relief, rushed to meet them as they lowered the anchor.

The sailors let down the gangplank and began a tide of unloading. Duty stabilized. They passed off crates of books and tools, fabric and shoes, machine parts and hardware, until word came from the captain: "Leave the rest. Up the hill! Go home!"

It was a race. Laughing, pushing each other in the scramble across the wet bridges, stumbling against the ground that did not rock with the waves. Jovenesa and Paolo battled to keep the lead, hand in hand, but bigger and stronger men and women passed them and scrambled up the steep, winding path into town, thundered through the damp narrow streets between stone buildings. Jovenesa and Paolo stopped and stood aside for a second, a breathtaking moment of postponement, to let themselves be hit by the rush from their colleagues, shipmates, their brothers and sisters now. Above them the paths were strung with blue lights, or yellow, red, green, all flowing downhill in gratitude to the hydroelectric plant in the harbor.

Uphill, the rain festival had never been so ecstatic as the moment the sailors burst into the *plça*. Jovenesa and Paolo slid into the huge bright circle of singers and dancers around the fountain, falling to their knees and lifting their arms to the sky. Rain fell on their faces and onto their tongues, and family and friends collapsed upon them like puppies. Feel the warm, smooth stones, the joy of lying on the ground. The circle of dancers, now twice as large, rose one at a time in a ripple of motion, swinging hands high, breaking their clasp and turning palms up to pull the heavens down upon them.

The whole island was there, dancing or drinking under the huge *café* awnings. An old gardener still strong in crisp white shirt and green pants; his dark-haired son grinning at him, parrotlike in yellow and red; teenage girls at once solemn and merry in purple and blue. The shipbuilding family, the hotelkeeper, the masons, the teachers, the grocers.

This pit of color was surrounded by buildings of stone three or four stories high, open only to the sky and watched over by the peak rising to the south. And in the middle of the *plça*, a triangle of whales formed the base of a fountain that surged and sparkled under the colored lights, the rain racing to join it, cascading over a lacy tower of jumping fish and tiny nudes who reached high to the sky, just like the dancers.

Paolo was dragged off by his parents, who were thoroughly, happily soaked, and drunk to boot, and couldn't stop embracing him and kissing his black-haired head. That charming ducking motion—that's where he got it. "How we prayed," his mother said. Jovenesa's parents—the doctors Prado and Quiereles—pulled her into the café to drink wine and feast on fried potatoes and olive bread and tomatoes, strawberries and pastry, while children hollered and chased each other in between tables and chairs.

And then there was one who was not part of this. He stood, not colorful, outside the shining lights and wetness, in a dark alley, dry. He stood, vertiginous with memory, held back by the bubble of safety and belief that seemed to rise sky-high over the *plça*.