

Prophet by the Sea

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ONE LATE AFTERNOON JUST BEFORE SUNSET, the Prophet with white hair like the mane of a lion was walking by the sea with his friend, Fernando. They walked and talked about many things as the water rushed to the soles of their shoes and rushed away carrying anything it could.

"My wife," said Fernando to the Prophet, his head and shoulders curving in discouragement. "*Mi Elena*. She will not repent. *Mi Elena hermosa*." He shook his head in sorrow as the wind tangled his bead black hair.

"What has she done?" the Prophet asked, stopping to watch a sand crab scuttle after the receding water and toward the falling sun.

"She insists, my dear *Profeta*, that she speaks not only with God, but God's wife. God is one, not divided into man and wife. God is everything together. And besides," Fernando's words tumbled faster, "that is your job to do the speaking. You are God's mouth on earth."

"Do you love each other?" the Prophet asked as he looked up to watch the sea gull swooping over their heads, its webbed feet posed for landing, its wings swept back by the wind.

"Of course, dear *Profeta*. We live to give each other comfort, but her words pierce me like arrows." He closed his eyes and thumped his chest with his fingertips.

The Prophet put his arms around Fernando's shoulders. "She may want comfort. How can anyone know God who is always unfolding, even me?"

Fernando turned his cheek against the stiff breeze. "I listen to her and I weep, *mi Profeta*. I want to be with her in the afterlife. She's straying from the path." At that moment, Fernando's long, sad, and beautifully sculpted face reflected the bright orange that tintured the bottoms of the massive gray clouds. His eyes searched, as if for the finger of God to write an answer across the sky fast filling with the varying ripenesses of peach and gray.

"Your ears are turned inside out, Fernando," the Prophet said, as if knowing the wind would carry his words in the opposite direction from

Fernando. He bent to scoop sand into both hands and let it trickle like fine salt to the beach. He rested on his haunches; his white hair seemed like a shaded lamp at dusk, the way it glowed, even as the greater light diminished. Finally, he sat down, untied his shoelaces, removed his socks, and folded them into his simple brown shoes. He rolled up the pant legs of his Sunday suit, loosened his tie, and wriggled his toes in the cool gray sand.

Fernando returned from his consideration of the clouds. "Did you say something, *mi amigo*?" he said, trying to outspoke the wind.

"Sit by my side." The Prophet patted the beach with his hands. "Let's build a castle together. I haven't done that for years."

"Me neither." Fernando stood stiffly in his suit and tie and Sunday best cologne. "But sand castles, my dear *Profeta*?" "Why not, Fernando?" he said, scooping more sand into both hands and tossing it in the air. "Think how very old and wise this sand must be because of all the shoes and feet that have crushed it so fine."

"I can't think of anything except there is so much to do." Fernando paced back and forth on the beach, asserting his finger in the air with each thought. "So many people and my wife to save."

"Come build a castle with me. We can dig a moat and maybe add a tower before sunset."

"There is so little time, *mi Profeta*." And Fernando drove his fingers through his bounteous hair and bowed his head against the palms of his hands. "The sword of justice. It hangs over the people. *Y mi Elena*."

"I feel your anguish, my brother." His eyes lifted to Fernando's and spoke much more with their silence.

Fernando stopped pacing and thrust his hands into his pockets. He squinted at the sun's furnace burning up the last of the daylight and burnishing his black hair with red streaks. "Don't distract me with those eyes, *mi Profeta*. If a man repenteth not," he held up one fist, "he shrinks from the presence of the Lord and his pain and anguish is like an unquenchable fire, not unlike that fiery ball of sun balancing on the horizon this very moment."

"Fernando, you are such a fierce lion. So sure of your territory." The Prophet patted the sand again. "But for one moment, sit by my side."

Fernando smiled, uncovering his straight, narrow teeth. "*Leon de Dio*." He lifted his chin to the West, and his chiseled face, strong cheekbones and bristled eyebrows were indeed leonine against the blunt slant of light.

"Look!" Suddenly, the Prophet was on his feet, brushing sand from the seat of his pants and keening his head toward the water. Something dark and slow and triangular was rising out of the surf. Something amorphous, a creature of the twilight silhouetted in the shade between dark and light.

Fernando and the Prophet watched speechlessly as the creature pulled itself slowly onto the beach, water rolling off its sides, water swirling at its

feet, part dragon, dragging its belly, lumbering from side to side until it collapsed onto the beach—its head in the damp sand, its back and sides caressed by fingers of tide.

"*Por Dios!*" yelled Fernando over the sound of the wind and the waves as he struggled to run across the beach in his black patent lace-up shoes that quickly filled with sand. As he ran, the ball of sun suddenly dropped into the ocean, leaving a fan of gold light flecked with fish-scale clouds. And as Fernando finally reached the creature on the beach, the wrist of God snapped the fan closed, and it, too, dropped into the void and pulled the day behind it.

The Prophet walked calmly behind Fernando, not as young and quick as his friend. As he pulled each footstep from the sucking sand, the night began to claim the sky. In this half light, the Prophet's white hair glowed even brighter—a flame on a candle in a large window. A thin, luminous mist surrounded his body. Dark sticks of driftwood reached out of the sand like arms asking to be held, but the Prophet walked steadily toward the fallen creature. "*Es leon del mar,*" Fernando shouted over the sound of the waves pulling pebbles back to sea. "*Leon marino.*"

"A sea lion, Fernando?"

"*Si. El toro grande.*"

"He's bigger than two of us together, Fernando."

The massive animal's breathing was labored, its sides heaving in starts. It rested its head and wrinkled neck in a shallow bowl of beach and glared sideways at the Prophet as he knelt by its side. But the bull was too weak to frighten any man or even another sea lion from its territory. Its silky black eyes seemed more liquid than substance.

Fernando placed his hands on his hips, tried to kick the sand from the cuffs of his trousers, and leaned forward to peer at the animal. "*El Profeta.*" His yellow knit tie dangled above the sea lion's head like a twisted rag. "He's hurt, badly. His neck is torn."

The Prophet stroked the exposed side of the bull's head, running his finger down the length of the blunt nose and over the arch of its eye and down to its small flap of an ear. The sea lion tried to grunt, but the sound was only a weak gesture.

"This is the way of nature," said Fernando, squatting onto his heels and looking into the Prophet's face. "He was probably fighting for his territory."

"All the kingdom for territory, then?" the Prophet said as he felt the slowly heaving sides of the sea lion beneath his hands. "How human."

"I can't stand to see *el muerta* anytime." Fernando turned his head to watch a wave disperse its foam on the beach. "Even if it is a part of life."

"Death is only a moment, Fernando. You mustn't be afraid."

"But I am afraid, *El Profeta*. This sea lion reminds me the end is close."

There's so little time to accomplish what God has asked of me."

"Death is only a door, Fernando. And time is bigger than a clock. There's enough of it to do what you need to do, to accomplish what you're here to accomplish. Trust, my friend. Don't be afraid."

The Prophet rubbed the loose wrinkles on the bull's neck that looked like hills and tight valleys. Lightly, he tracked his finger across the broad gash at the side of its neck and down the length of one quivering whisker. Then he put both hands on the bull's head, closed his eyes, and lifted his face to the sky. For a while, he was silent, his white hair blowing in wisps, tangling, dancing with the brisk breeze. His eyes still shut, he inhaled the ancient smell of the sea. He lifted his head even higher, stretched his neck, and his breath slowed and moved with the tide.

"In the name of the holy priesthood, bless my brother, dear God. Bless this creature of the deep water. Bless its body, its eyes, its heart. Give it strength, in the name of Jesus Christ."

"*Jésus. Por favor.*" Fernando placed his hands in prayer at the center of his chest.

Pushed and pulled by the magnets of heaven, the water came and went from the shore. The men were still like a painting, their heads bowed over the animal, the Prophet's hands gentle on its head. Underneath the upside down bowl of sky where the first star was appearing, his fingers trembled like arrows from the quiver of God. The waves repeated themselves, as if they were the earth's breath. Exhalation, inhalation, the great constancy. This passed through the Prophet and into his hands to the great sea lion.

Very slowly, the breath of the waves became the breath of the animal. In and out. The huge bull turned its head, rolled back to its stomach, and struggled to lift onto its front flippers. It lifted its body out of the sand, out of the bowl of beach, until its neck was once again a massive triangle beneath its whiskers, its nose pointed to the heavens, and its head proud and strong. Then the sea lion barked crisply before turning to the water's edge and the black stones washed smooth and round like beetles' backs. Waddling from one flipper to the other, it pulled itself over the slippery rocks and wet oozing sand toward the water.

"Now," said the Prophet, sitting back down in the sand as the dark shape of the sea lion sank into the sea. "Before it's completely dark, will you build a castle with me, Fernando?"

Fernando balanced on one leg and bent to untie his shoe. When the first black-patent shoe dropped into the sand in the twilight, it seemed a small boat cutting across an endless sea.