

## THE OLD MAN AND THE CAT

by Harvey Mendez

Rain beat like a slave ship's battle drum on the small shack's thatched roof near the sandy beach's tree line. The old man and his cat perked up. They had seen many storms over the years but each new onslaught quickened their heart rates. The cat crept onto the ragged pillow, nuzzled its nose next to the old man's scraggly beard. He stroked the cat behind its ears. The purring grew like a thunderstorm. The wind blew harder, smashed palm fronds against the hut's walls.

The old man blinked, pulled himself up on his elbows. The saggy bed, matching his weathered face, belched with the movement. Spitting out part of his afternoon binge, he rubbed an arm across his reddened eyes and listened to the turbulent Pacific. He smelled the sea in the muggy air mixed with the warm rain and wiped sweat off his forehead with a callused hand. The cat stopped purring, flicked its tail into an alcoholic-smelling half coconut the old man had finished off before his nap.

"Cat . . ." He peered out the small, open window at the black rain clouds. ". . . This is gonna be a big one." He liked that cat. It was old, too.

The cat purred again, snuggled closer to the old man's hollow stomach. He patted the cat's head, pulled its tail out of the coconut, and tipped the shell to his cracked lips. Several drops of the bad-tasting booze spilled out. Running his dry tongue over his rough lips, he pushed the cat away and reached for another coconut on the bedside table. His hand tightened around the coconut and he slugged down more of the fermented juice.

Wind and rain shot through cracks in the hut. He bolted up straight. Many hurricanes had hit the island during his thirty years on it. Would this be his last bout with a raging tempest?

The cat hopped back on the bed, stuck its nose into the coconut juice.

"Get outta here, Cat." He playfully shoved it off the bed again. "You had enough this afternoon."

The cat scampered around the floor from one spot to another. It found an old dresser with open drawers and after rummaging through it, dragged a lavender, silk pareau onto the mat.

The old man glanced down. "What's that you got, Cat?"

Lashing wind whipped rain across his face. He wiped the water away, stared at the garment. Such a long time ago, but now she seemed so close . . . .

That rainy night in Brisbane when he had first met her in the crowded bar. Laughter had risen above music playing on a timeworn jukebox. Drinks went down fast. He watched her weave through the crowd to the stool next to him. He eased backward, stared at her. She was young, her face wet and fresh from the storm. She seemed out of place in the simple shift covering her firm brown skin. Her long, black hair was straight and soft, her eyes shiny and dark. Her smile matched the brightness of morning sun.

He bent to her closeness, unable to ignore the warmth of her presence. Her wild beauty coursed his entire body. "Here." He fumbled for the blue scarf around his neck. "Dry off a little."

"Thanks." She patted her delicately carved face. "It sure is raining."

He would never forget her voice and that's how it started. His insides stirred for the first time in years. He shifted his stool closer to hers. Outside the bar, the rain bore down harder. They did not notice. They were mesmerized by each other. His awareness of her mastered his reserve. He had to see her again. And he did . . . .

They spent the next two weeks together, walking in lush parks blanketed with ferns and calla lilies, dining late into the evening after a concert, and wandering through treasure-stuffed museums. Each night, leaving her proved harder and more difficult to tolerate. The walk, alone, to his sailboat became slower and longer.

When it came time for his return to the island he kept putting off the departure. He asked her to lunch at the bar where they first met. After eating, they wandered through the city, oblivious to their surroundings. He bought her a lavender, silk pareau, and then they walked along the bank of the Brisbane River that cut through the city. When they neared his boat, he stopped. "I'm going to cook you a feast tonight."

"That sounds great." She stepped on board. "Can I help?"

"No, this one's on me. You just get comfortable, watch the sunset." He ducked into the galley.

An hour later, he poked his head out of the companionway. "Okay, everything's ready." He took her hand, led her down the steps into the candle-lit cabin.

"This is nice."

He pulled out a chair from the neatly set table. "Mademoiselle."

"Why, thank you, sir." She lifted her eyes to him and smiled.

With a white napkin folded over his left forearm, he bowed and served the wine, a salad of pear and watercress, and toasted olive bread.

"Delicious," she said.

"Yes, you are."

She felt her face flush, lowered her eyes.

Now, he reddened. "Was that too corny?"

"It was fine." She touched his hand.

He leaned backward for a moment, savored the warmth. After the surging fire within subsided, he served the entrée, a terrine of summer vegetables in tomato jelly, followed by the main course of tiny, sweet freshwater prawns cooked in wine and served in the shells. Dessert was fresh raspberries and a caramel cookie.

"That was wonderful." She looked at him in amazement. "I can't believe you prepared all this."

"I wanted our last dinner to be special."

"Last dinner?"

"I've got to get back to my island. I'm leaving in the morning."

"Tomorrow?"

"Yes, I will miss you terribly."

She squeezed his hand. "Me too; these last two weeks have been more than special."

"Yeah, everyday—new and bright. Even that picnic in the rain. Back at the boat, you were warm. I kissed you."

"You wanted me—but you stopped."

"I wasn't sure . . ."

"I did want you," she said. ". . . I do now."

He brushed across her coral pink lips like she was a fragile rose petal, then took her in his arms. "It's been such a long time . . ."

They made love for the first time, tender, passionate, tender again, and fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms. Their last words, "I love you," echoed in the darkness.

The next morning, she awoke first, nudged him. "I want to go with you."

“Are you sure?” He rubbed his eyes.

“Yes, I’m part of you now. This is what I want.”

He sat up, wide-awake. “That’s what I wanted to hear.” He took her in his arms again.

Each day was a new adventure as they settled into island life. In the early mornings, he fished, gathered fresh papayas, bananas, and cut fallen coconuts under the shack. After chores, they swam in the warm, turquoise lagoon in front of the hut. Making love in the ocean, a first experience for them, peaked their passion.

She knew how to swim, but he taught her to dive deep and examine the wondrous spectrum-colored coral in the lagoon’s reef.

“I thought I was a good swimmer,” she said, “but I’ve never dived that far before.”

“You’re doing great,” he said. “But—don’t overdo it and never dive alone. Sometimes, sharks poke their big noses into our waters.”

“I’ll remember.”

As time passed, she dived deeper, became more proficient.

“You’re really getting there,” he said.

She sat on the sand. “I love it—such a feeling, suspended in a watery kingdom, all alone.”

He jerked up. “Wait a minute, we don’t dive alone, ever—remember.”

“I know.” She gazed deep into his eyes. “I do love you.”

He reached out to her. “I can’t find enough words to say how much I care.”

“You don’t have to say anything. I can see it in your eyes, how you hold me, how I feel when we touch.”

One morning, he awoke later than usual and rolled over. He reached for her, but she was not there. Yawning, he slipped out of bed and walked into the other room. The shack was empty. He leaned out the door, scanned the beach. She was not on the sand or in the water. He pulled back inside, noticed the spear gun and float were gone. “Oh, God!”

Grabbing a pair of shorts, he ran out the door and down the beach. He raced from one cove to another, dove into the water, and swam in circles until his arms would not move anymore. Then he rested and yelled until his voice was but a whisper.

Returning to the water, he dived until his tortured lungs could take no more. After a brief rest, he became a shark prowling a reef, but found no trace of her. Exhausted, he collapsed on a rock and searched the water until the sun faded below the horizon. Burning in their sockets, his glassy marbles reflected the overwhelming sadness piercing his heart.

Darkness captured the island. He stared at the water. Shivers crept over him. He could not hold back the tears that flooded his eyes. Dropping his head into cut and callused hands, he cried until his whole body vibrated.

He woke up the next morning, half in, half out of the water. His eyes swollen, his mouth dry, he brushed the wet sand off his face, out of his hair. Up and down the beach his strained eyes searched for her. "She can't be gone . . ."

In the weeks and months that followed, he toyed with his food, not wanting anything that reminded him of their meals together. He lost weight. Only sugar and water kept him alive, but his hands shook so much he spilled most of the sugar through the floor cracks. Endlessly, he wandered around the island, searching and hoping. Every time the wind blew a frond against the hut or its bamboo walls squeaked or when a coconut fell from a palm tree, he leaped with anticipation. Every time, it was only the empty wind.

The long days passed slowly. Emptiness painted his face. Each day, he sat in the sand, stared at the ocean. Sometimes he thought he saw her, but when he ran to the water's edge, she disappeared. When they had been together, it seemed the days raced by. Now, the sun took forever to move across the sky. He turned into a crinkly old man. Bags developed under his blood-shot eyes. His taut muscles grew looser. His gray beard grew long and scraggly and his skin darkened and thickened from the sun's searing rays. All hope had disappeared from his hammered heart.

After many years alone on the island, he still sat on the beach everyday, stared out to sea. One day, a small, gray cat with one white paw wandered onto the sand and rubbed against the old man's bare back. He flinched, turned around. "Well I'll be, where the hell did you come from?"

The skinny cat followed him to the shack. He fed it some scraps. The cat purred and stayed close. It chased around the hut, followed

the old man everywhere on the island. Huddled together, they survived the storms that pounced on the island.

One afternoon, the cat happened upon a half coconut and lapped up the milk. When the old man returned to the shack, the cat was staggering around the room.

“Hey, Cat, whatta you been doin’? You sure are acting drunk.” He picked up the cat, smelled the alcohol. “Now, where did you get alcohol?”

The next day, the old man watched the cat chase a sand crab under the hut. When it came out, the cat staggered again. “I’m gonna see what’s going on here.” He crawled past the shack’s stilts and found several coconuts with alcoholic odors. He stuck his finger into the milk and tasted the liquid. “I don’t believe it—they fermented. Guess some of that sugar I spilled got in there.” He gathered the coconuts, put them on the table inside the hut. The cat jumped on the table.

“You get away now, Cat. We’ve got to ration this until I make some more.”

From that time on, they had whiled away each day on a prolonged binge . . . .

The cat played with the lavender pareau on the hut’s floor. The old man stirred out of his trance, glanced around the wind-blown room. He cleared his dry throat. “You dumb cat, you made me think of her.” He tossed a pillow at the cat.

The cat jumped from underneath the pillow, arched its back, and hissed.

The old man laughed. “Don’t you hiss at me, you old fool.” He staggered out of bed, limped to the window. The monstrous wind and slashing rain hit him in the face. He pivoted, slammed his back against the wall. The thin bamboo blinds ripped down, crashed to the floor. Part of the battered roof fell in. The old man stood frozen, heard a distant roar. The door flew open. He rubbed a hand across his eyes, peered at the swelling ocean. He heard the roar again. Straining, he searched the darkness. There—there in the nebulous distance—once again, her silken face . . . his dented heart pounded once more. “It’s her!”

The cat jumped, dug its claws into his leg. The towering wave smashed through the fragile walls like a bursting dam.

The next day, the cat was discovered floating on a broken bedpost. The old man was never found.

THE END

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