

THE SILENT SHIP

Guilherme Pacheco woke up at five-thirty as if an internal alarm clock had told him it was time to get up. He looked to the side of the bed where his wife was still sleeping, making certain that his movements would not awaken her. Almost instinctively, he pushed his feet from under the covers, placing them on the cold, wooden floor. He put on his slippers before reaching for his flannel robe which he had laid carefully on the bedside chair the previous evening. Protected against the humid, morning air, he walked towards the corridor connecting the master bedroom to the bathroom in the back of the house. At the end of the corridor, the morning light was breaking through the glass-enclosed porch overlooking the small garden that sloped to the rocky seashore several meters below.

From across the bay, anyone looking towards the city from the artificial, incomplete breakwater, and using the shore as a focal point, got the impression that the house, along with all other buildings on the south side of Roberto Ivens Square, were quite high when compared to other houses further to the east. The slope of the land created that optical illusion, while simultaneously an uninterrupted view of the harbor all the way from its western end, at the old, scenic castle, to that point on the southeast, where the island's southern mountain range seemed to fall and disappear into the sea. Actually, Pacheco's house was just one storey. He had inherited it from his parents, who, in turn, had inherited it from theirs. He had lived there for all of his forty years, long enough to remember when the stormy North Atlantic would pound the shore so ferociously that sometimes it would reach the porch, taking whatever it could find along the way as its waves and tides retreated. He was amongst those, therefore, who rejoiced when the central government started to augment the city harbor by contracting German engineers to build the breakwater that extended like a dark, gray line into the ocean. He would face it every morning almost ritually and would watch its progress until, with the advent of the war in Europe, it suddenly came to an unexpected end. In spite of its unfinished status, however, the breakwater was used successfully from its first day, both as a shore protector, and as a dock where ships would pick up, or leave, goods to, or from, foreign shores. In time, to Pacheco and all others who saw it daily, the breakwater became not only part of their scenery, but a symbol of their connection to whatever lay beyond their isolation. Like a mother extending her arms to her young, the breakwater would protect the ships that put into the harbor. Some ships, however, either for a lack of docking space, or for other reasons, would never seek its protection. They would stop just beyond its limits, in the open sea, discharging or receiving cargo directly into, or from, large barges that would then be tugged into the harbor.

Pacheco, therefore, was not surprised when he saw a large, gray ship anchored to the east of the unfinished breakwater, lying still as if it were another of the many islets surrounding his island. Nothing unusual. He had been looking at ships anchored almost directly in front of his porch all his life. Sometimes he felt as if he could throw a stone and hit them. On the other hand, he couldn't help noticing that, unlike other ships, nowhere did the newcomer identify its nationality. Ships from neutral countries generally had their national flags painted large on their sides. The others always raised their flags whenever they stopped near the harbor. Sometimes, even ships that passed without stopping would still show their flags, or blast their horns in a coded way that would permit the local authorities to identify them and grant

them safe passage. The large ship, however, seemed to violate all those norms. It sat quietly in the ocean, floating gently in the morning mist. Two guns at each of its ends pointed in different directions. There was no sign of human movement anywhere on deck. "Strange," Pacheco murmured to himself.

Guilherme Pacheco owned the Royal Cafe, a small bar and restaurant by the passenger pier, across from the Customs House, and adjoining the landing quay where the sea, since the building of the breakwater almost a mile away to the south, seemed totally unaffected by the tides. He would walk to work and get there, rain or shine, by six-thirty. Once inside, he would turn on the electricity and check the old refrigerator, assuring himself that the inside light was on. He would then touch whatever was in the large white box, and satisfied that it was still cold from the night before, close the door. By seven the establishment was still deserted, although Pacheco knew that soon Fanim, the sanitation worker, would stop by to pick up whatever trash had been left from the previous evening. He turned on the electricity on the espresso machine and checked the cups and saucers that he would be using to serve his morning customers.

Fanim came in, his uniform still clean. "Sr. Guilherme," he said. "How about a beer for later? It's bound to get warm today, and I may just get thirsty." Pacheco reached under the counter where he kept his beer bottles and handed him one. He then picked up an accounts book from the shelf next to his cash box and, on the page reserved for credit clients, entered the purchase, date, and cost. Fanim normally paid monthly, when he got paid by the municipality. The bakery delivery boy came in at seven-thirty and, as usual, left a burlap bag from which emanated the aroma of freshly-baked rolls. He entered and departed without saying more than his customary "good morning" and "until tomorrow". Pacheco waved to him after putting the new delivery away and handing him the bag from the previous day.

By eight, the customs agents started showing up for morning coffee. They were followed by the insurance company employees from the tall corner building, who, in turn, were followed by a variety of men who had long made it a ritual to stop at the Royal before heading for their offices and shops. Some carried the morning papers, reserving them for reading later in the day. Others stood at the bar reading and occasionally commenting on news that, generally, most already knew, but which the government censors had now confirmed officially. By eight-thirty Pacheco turned on the radio, hoping that the morning's Portuguese short-wave broadcast from the BBC would come in clearly. Sometimes, if he had nothing else to do after BBC had signed off, he would search over the dial for any kind of noise from any other points on earth. The local station broadcast only twice a day, a total of three evening hours interrupted by one hour between the first and second broadcasts. One morning he accidentally discovered a station broadcasting clearly in Portuguese and strongly denouncing Salazar's colonial policies. He shut it off quickly and from that day on never again bothered to search for any other station after BBC had gone off and the local station came on in the evening. One could never be too careful with the Salazar government, particularly when one knew that not all government employees across the street were customs agents. Some, reputedly, also worked for the secret police.

By eleven, Leonardo came in to help prepare for the lunch trade and for his afternoon shift. He cut the morning rolls in horizontal halves and stuffed them with whatever cuts of roast pork, beef, or cheese were available in the refrigerator. He then opened a large can of tuna, the contents of which he mixed with onions diced the previous day and parsley, and placed the mixture under a large, domed glass-covered dish on the counter. Later in the day he would serve it as the main course, accompanied by freshly boiled white potatoes cooked in their skin, almost floating in wine vinegar and olive oil, and garnished by a pickled finger pepper, whole or in paste, according to the client's wishes. There was always something for Leonardo to do at the Royal, including washing dishes and serving a few straggling customers, who'd come in for coffee after lunch prior to returning to their jobs. For his part, once the lunch customers had been served, Pacheco would walk home, where he would eat his main meal and take an afternoon nap. He would return at five. Leonardo would leave at seven.

There was no talk at the Royal that morning about the gray ship.

Most of the conversation, in fact, centered on the proposed new soccer field which the municipality planned to replace the provisional one where no matches had been played for over a year. The people were hungry for the sport, even though they could regularly watch games between the Portuguese military units occupying the island. The players with Iberian accents, however, although generally superior to the local athletes, would someday go home and be forgotten. The local teams would remain, keeping history and tradition alive and giving valid reasons for the Monday morning arguments that would often last until the following Sunday. That evening, however, a member of a foursome who for years had stopped at the Royal for drinks and a nightly game of dominoes was heard to comment that the ship was German. He had heard it from a local fisherman whose boat had passed close to the strange vessel, although he was quick to say that the fisherman had not seen, or heard, anyone on board. "Wonder why they don't show the flag," the domino player inquired. "After all, she's in neutral waters."

"Today," another player added almost in disagreement, "there's no such thing as neutral waters. There's only what the powerful say there is."

The rest of the players went on with their game, saying nothing. As they prepared to leave, each paid his bill for whatever he had consumed. It was approximately nine-thirty, early enough for Pacheco to clean up the establishment, prepare it for the following day, and still close at ten, as he had done for several years.

Before going to bed, however, Pacheco felt he had to take one last look at the ocean. The night was clear and, although he could not distinguish its features, the blackish shadow directly south of him told that the ship was still anchored close by, hiding in the quiet of the night. He tried to focus on it and let his mind wonder on what had brought the strange visitor to the island's shore without any sign of what its destiny would be. He knew that no ship ever stays in one place permanently unless it is eventually relegated to the rusty heaps of a wreck or the curiosity of monuments. Ships, he had always felt, were living beings that flowed like the blood in one's veins. He had often seen them in his childhood sail towards the horizon until disappearing altogether as if they had fallen off the blue rim far, far away, where the sky met the sea and the world came to an end. Then, as if by miracle, he would see them return weeks later, sounding as if they were

singing gleefully for seeing him once again. The fantasies of his youth, however, were no longer his reality. He now knew that, in a world at war, many were the ships that would leave and never return. Instead, their flotsam and spilled cargoes would often wash ashore, providing the local people with added sources of speculation and additional opportunities to augment their meager incomes by whatever they could gather and sell.

The plastic salt shakers and butter dishes at the Royal, for example, had been bought from a fisherman who, while dragging a net, pulled up a box full of strange items that he assumed had some value, either as goods that could be exchanged for food, clothing, or, with luck, cash. Although Portuguese-made toothpaste could be bought in any of the island's pharmacies, Pacheco had a shelf at home where he stored several cartons of a toothpaste with a strange name, Colgate. He had bought it from a villager from the island's north coast who would come into the restaurant occasionally during his visits to the city. Pacheco never asked where the item had come from, although he knew that it had been found in some floating container that had seen its last days somewhere in one of the island's rocky coves.

He fell asleep on an armchair while still looking towards the ocean. He didn't wake up until his customary time. The ship was still in the same place, unmoved, as if the tides had not affected it, or as if the night breezes had not forced it to adjust direction. He cursed himself for not having gone to bed. He rose and walked towards the bathroom, repeating the routine of the previous day.

Another day began. He opened the main door to the cafe as the clock in the nearby church tower rang six-thirty. He had heard the sound for years and had welcomed it as if it were a work companion at that early morning hour. This time, however, he found a visitor entering the cafe even before the last ring had sounded. Pacheco had never seen him before, but, as was his custom whenever a customer came in, he greeted him with the usual "good morning". The man did not reply. Instead, he just looked for one of the more remote parts of the cafe, where he found a table and chair and sat down. Pacheco approached him and inquired if there was something he could do. The man just looked at him with a blank expression, not giving any clue that he had understood the question. Pacheco left him alone and returned to his work.

Fanim came in as usual. "Did you notice it?" He asked after his customary greeting.

"Notice what?"

"The motorboat. There's a German motorboat tied to one of the columns on the passageway, just outside your rear window, where your building meets the water. You know. Where the steps lead from the quay to the street. You can see it from your gallery. Just look down."

Pacheco did not reply. Instead, he looked towards the stranger, who was now quietly smoking and staring into space. Fanim, in the meantime, was already heading out the door with his trash load.

Pacheco approached the man once again. "I'm sorry," he said. "But I don't speak German."

"Kaffe. Bitte," the man answered pointing to the coffee machine. "Kaffe."

Pacheco understood. "You'll have to wait," he said. "I've not yet connected the current. Understand?"

He pointed to the machine to stress his point and then, shaking his hand slightly back and forth in what seemed an expressive way for two different languages to penetrate one another, he indicated that all was well. "Five minutes," he said, his fingers spread apart. "Five minutes," he repeated.

The man shook his head approvingly and took another puff from his cigarette. Pacheco walked behind the counter and reached for the electric cable that connected the coffee machine to the outlet. After plugging it in, he grabbed a lever that seemed to unscrew a cup-like metal container. Once he had separated it from the machine, he banged it on the sink to assure himself that there was no residue from the previous evening, and filled it with fresh coffee. He then attached the container to the machine once again and waited for the next two minutes, somewhat unable to attend to his customary work. He reached for a cup and placed it under the container. Suddenly, as if by instinct, he then turned a knob and the black liquid came steaming out directly into the waiting vessel. That done, he placed the cup on a saucer and brought them to the man's table. The visitor nodded as if to thank him. He then pointed to one of the shelves towards some bottles of brandy. "Cognac," he said. He gestured as if he wanted an entire bottle.

Pacheco picked up a still-unopened bottle of Macieira. He had bought a few bottles from a local distributor and kept them on the shelf almost as an adornment. The local people, when they drank brandy, stuck to the locally produced variety, a colorless liquid which they normally called fire water, or vermin killer.

With his index finger he asked the man if that was what he wanted. The latter moved his head affirmatively. Pacheco reached for a glass hanging from the overhead rack and brought it to the table along with the bottle. The man gestured indicating he needed a corkscrew. Pacheco brought him one. The man smiled sadly. He sipped slowly from his coffee cup, and resumed staring into space. Once he was done with the coffee, he poured himself a glass of cognac and, as he had done with the coffee, continued to drink slowly in almost measured sips.

After approximately a half hour, he signaled for Pacheco to bring him another coffee. He drank it, following it once again with another cognac. When Pacheco tried to take the old cup and saucer away, the man stopped him, signaling to the bar owner that he wanted the china to stay. He would look at it as he drank, unaware of the clients who entered, did their business, and left. He even seemed not to notice Leonardo, to whom Pacheco explained who the man was. The helper looked at the stranger in a somewhat puzzled and quizzical way. He then walked towards the glass-enclosed gallery at the end of the dining area and looked down towards the foot of the columns that held the building over

the quay.

"Nice boat," he said. "One doesn't see many of those around ."

As the noon trade started coming in for lunch, some of the customers commented on the German motorboat, wondering how it had gotten there. "Strange that, unattended as it is, someone has not taken it and gone for a ride," one commented. Upon seeing Pacheco's eyes turn towards the stranger, however, the man stopped briefly and then continued. "Oh, well," he said. "The port authority must know the boat is there. What am I saying? No one would dare a jail term just for a ride." The man at the table continued his ritual. By now he had accumulated ten cups and saucers, all piled neatly atop one another in columns of two cups and two saucers each.

When Pacheco left for home in the afternoon, Leonardo had already seen enough to be able to understand what the man wanted whenever he'd look towards him and motioned. Coffee. At one time, however, as Leonardo was about to start another cup, the man shouted something as if he had been wounded. "Nein! Nein!" Leonardo stopped and noticed the man pointing to the empty bottle. "Cognac," he finally said, as he caught the bartender's attention. Leonardo brought him another bottle. As he had done with Pacheco, the man signaled for a corkscrew.

By the evening, when the domino players arrived for their regular game, it seemed as if the whole city already knew about the man at the Royal. People who had not been anywhere near the establishment for months suddenly started to appear, one by one taking a look at the stranger who had now started to accumulate his cups and saucers in sets of three. The five columns that some had seen at lunch had grown to seven. No one said much. In fact, although some of the customers must have associated the man, the motorboat, and the ship outside the harbor as belonging to one another, no one seemed to comment on that fact. Only when Francisco Carreiro, the Portuguese Consular Aide at the British Consulate, whose office was less than fifty meters from the Royal, came in for a chat did someone ask him why he thought the German legation on Castilho Street hadn't done anything about the man.

Carreiro did not answer directly. Instead, he gave a vague face-saving reason that could only indicate he did not know. Carreiro generally did not drink at the Royal.

It started to rain. The men in the bar began to leave. Even the domino game broke up earlier than usual. Leonardo, who had decided to stay beyond his normal time, eventually left. Pacheco was now alone with the solitary stranger. He approached him and offered him a plate with the sandwiches that remained in the old refrigerator. The man took them and, once again, seemed to thank him. The rain got heavier, furiously pelting the Royal's windows and the glass-enclosed gallery that overlooked the quay below. The wind, which had begun blowing hard as the rain got heavier, seemed to carry the water away from the bar's open front door.

The stranger looked out on to the wet cobble stone street, where the street gutters along the sidewalk, which were angled to carry their waters towards the quay, resembled a fast-moving brook on a suicide run. The running rainwaters seemed to create a music all their own,

while all around thunder shook the air and all it touched.

"Some storm, eh?" Pacheco commented.

The man did not reply. Instead, he walked to the counter and, while opening his wallet with one hand, with the other he indicated he wanted to pay. Pacheco looked at the table and counted. There were twelve columns of cup and saucers, each three combinations high, and two empty Macieira bottles.

Pacheco reached for a piece of paper and started figuring the bill. He handed the written total to the man for verification. The latter did not look at it. Instead, he just gave Pacheco all the money he had and waved, indicating that all was well. He then walked towards the door and out into the stormy street. When he turned to the right in the direction of the rushing gutter waters, however, it suddenly dawned on Pacheco that the man probably did not know what he was doing. He ran after the stranger who by now was approaching the steps leading to the quay below. "You can't do that," Pacheco shouted as he grabbed him. "You'll be killed if you get into that boat and take it out of the harbor."

The man tried to break away, saying something in a language that Pacheco could not recognize as either German, or the sound of drunkenness. "Damn it," Pacheco pleaded. "Don't go, please. You can sleep at my house. The ship will still be there in the morning."

The man continued to struggle and eventually broke away from the cafe owner. He headed down the steps. When he reached the bottom he jumped in the boat. He then grabbed the ropes which held it to the concrete and brick column and untied them. He pulled the ignition cord and, as the motor coughed prior to transforming itself into a purr, he waved to Pacheco once again. The boat moved away from the building and made a small semi circle before heading out of the quay into the larger harbor. Suddenly its sound was there no longer as Pacheco saw the boat's only light move rapidly away a few meters around and beyond the plaza where the street ended. At that point the harbor was still relatively calm, thanks to the distant breakwater. The motorboat, however, was headed towards the open sea.

"My God," Pacheco shouted as lightning flashed, transforming the storm's darkness into a world of brilliance. "What have You done?" The question was followed by several flashes of lightning and a roar of thunder that seemed not to end. The rain continued more furiously than ever. He tried to run to the end of the plaza, hoping he would still have time to warn the man. He slipped, lost his balance, and fell. Suddenly the clock on the bell tower rang. It was ten o'clock - time to go home, as always. He got up and headed away from the quay. As he passed the Royal, he did not even bother to go in and prepare for the next morning. He just reached for the door and closed it. He suddenly felt cold, alone, and silent for the first time that day.

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