

## SEARCHING FOR CHRISTMAS

- Calm, at last! – exclaimed Xosé in a hoarse voice as he rolled a cigarette with all the parsimony he was capable of.

- It looks like it is going to leave us today! – I shouted at him as I grabbed the gear from the back of our old Land Rover, inseparable companion of so many days and fatigues.

We had been waiting for several days for the storm to abate. No, the waves were not calm, only the swell had dropped a little. At that corner the waves used to break with greater force and bravery, which in turn meant that good specimens could be found there, those that were more highly valued at the fish market.

We had arrived well in advance. We were only allowed to fish during low tide hours, three hours a day. It was the third time we were going to collect barnacles in that month of December. Anyway, we had to wait. Time passed slowly, tediously, it seemed that moment would never come. That day nobody was there. On the one hand, that gave us a good feeling but, on the other hand, it made us wonder, although none of us said anything about it. We put on our wetsuits and slip-resistant shoes.

At nine o'clock in the morning we fastened the ropes in the off-road vehicle, tied ourselves to them around our waists and climbed down the vertical wall towards the rocks where the sea was pounding incessantly, each of us with our forks on our backs and our sachet hanging from our belts.

We had left the two little ones at home in the care of Antón, the eldest. He wanted to come with us. He was thirteen years old and was very fond of the sea. His grandparents were also barnacle collectors. My father died from a heavy blow from the sea. They worked in very bad conditions then, without appropriate clothes or shoes, wet all the time and freezing cold. I was a child, but I can remember it as if it were today. His body was brought by his companions. In this work there has always been much solidarity among us, although there are also some who go their own way and don't care about anyone else. Back then, there were no mortuaries and the wake was held at home. In short, it was very sad. From then on, my mother was not the same and a few years later she also died, I think of depression. They had been dating for three years and married for thirty. They had had to marry and six months later my sister Xuana, the eldest, was born. They had married very young, they had been together for so many years...

Christmas celebrations and the children's Epiphany presents were at stake. It all depended on the amount of pieces we were able to accumulate during that month.

We percebeiros know that at any moment the sea can betray us. Halfway to the task the waves were gradually becoming more furious. I told Xosé that we had better leave it, that things were getting complicated. He did not answer me, he carefully kept tearing away from the rocks, not harming them, the little animals that, for decades, had been the mainstay of the family's economy. I shouted and shouted but he turned a deaf ear, all his will was focused on collecting such magnificent manna. He went like a madman, clinging to the rope, from rock to rock, it seemed as if he had no time to breathe.

My mother used to tell my father that money was not everything. That's what I was trying to shout at my partner in the midst of that stressful, anxiety-filled situation. And, unfortunately, what had to happen, happened. Lost glances, crying, screams at the funeral and loneliness, a great loneliness that suddenly invaded our home.

In the restaurants of the capital it is a luxury to savour these specimens of a great size, no matter the price to pay. On the Galician coast we close our eyes because we cannot live with our backs to the sea. Antón is now twenty and follows the family tradition.

What I miss the most is that, when midday came, he would have met Xosé and me hugging each other, jumping with excitement. But life has to be accepted as it comes and there is no turning back.

**“Stories without Mufflers” (2006 - )**