

The following is an English translation of the Spanish-language original, *El retorn del vellmarí*, which appeared in *Esquix* (<http://www.esquix.cat/>), the quarterly magazine for teenagers, in 2006. For further information on rights and usage for educational purposes, as well as accompanying illustrations, please check out the news item Splash in TMG 9(2) November 2006: <http://www.monachus-guardian.org/mguard18/1816mednew.htm#Splash>

The return of the seal

Miquel Rayó

The short run of the kids from school, amid dust clouds and stumbles, ended at the pebble beach just beside the little harbour. Their parents were fishermen, and some of them, smugglers.

And... what was on the beach?

“A really unheard of presence: an individual monk seal, *Monachus monachus*.”

So the teacher, a very short-sighted thin man, told the mayor.

“A what’s what?” said the man, ignorantly.

“A monk seal.”

“That’s impossible!” protested the mayor, very upset. “The last one was killed near here more than fifty years ago!”

The teacher had already explained in biology class what a monk seal was: its aquatic life, its discreet behaviour, its breeding in marine caves.

“Does that mean that if she is a female she will breed in a cave?” John, one of the leading students asked the teacher.

“She will not succeed if she is alone,” the teacher told the kids.

All eyes turned to Mike and Martina. Because all of them were aware that they were in love like lovebirds. Ashamed, they both stuck their tongues out at everyone.

“Kids! This is an endangered species! This animal has travelled all the way here, perhaps due to lack of rest on the coast she comes from. Who knows if she comes from Morocco or Algeria!”

“Will she find rest here?” John kept asking...

Every afternoon the kids went running to the beach. The seal, like one of the kids, waited for the others, swimming. Then the most courageous among the boys and girls dived, and the seal, playful, was tickling them with her whiskers and softly bit their feet with her big, sharp claws without hurting them.

“She will hurt you!” a scared mother screamed. “Get out from the water! Can you hear me?”

The old fishermen, sunbathing on the big rocks of the dock, noticed them:

“Be careful... if she gets you...!”

“If she bites you...”

“If she...”

When Mike and Martina were undressing on the beach, all their friends exchanged glances again. And they stuck their tongues out again.

Some fishermen muttered. First in the bar. Later in the streets. Finally in the mayor's office.

"We should put an end to it! She takes our fish and lobsters! She destroyed my trammel nets! We don't want any monk seals in this village!"

But there were also some people who were not fearing the seal nor wishing her any harm.

"She will leave the same way she came..."

"Who knows... perhaps the tourists will like her..."

The village soon became divided in two groups. There were arguments and even some fights. And one night, a group of fishermen decided to go and hunt the seal in secret.

They boarded the boat in the dark. They were half a dozen, and carried a hidden rifle. They rowed silently to where they knew the seal slept at night, in a marine cave, not far from the village. One of them had seen her lying, sleepy, on the small beach at the end of the cave.

"Here we are! Prepare the rifle!"

They readied the weapon and slowly entered the cave, rowing carefully. The sea was as calm as oil on a plate. Only the deep echo of the sea inside the cave was heard. Everything was dark.

"Light the lantern," said the leader of the group in a low voice.

And when they lit the lantern... what was the scene? Wrapped in blankets, there they were: the teacher, John, Mike, Martina and all the boys and girls from the school, huddled together on the small beach of the cave, curled-up and smiling.

The fishermen didn't know what to say: "But... What are you doing here? How have you arrived here? And you, teacher... What do you think are you doing here? Where's the seal?"

"She's gone, tonight. The kids heard in your houses that you were about to do an act of madness and... what did they do? They rowed here like you. And don't think about punishments, because I will stand up here to prevent them!" The teacher, illuminated by the lantern, looked like a fearless knight surrounded by small, brave and loyal squires.

In a corner of the cave floated a small craft anchored to the bottom and firmly moored to a rock.

The day after, the seal waited again for the kids, who rushed amid dust clouds and stumbles to the beach.

"Some day she will bite one of you with those teeth!!"

Mike and Martina stuck their tongue out at everyone while all were undressing to swim. The teacher and the mayor, sitting on the dock, were talking with the fishermen, old and young, revisiting the lesson learnt...

"If our kids love her... what else can we do?"