

La Pincoya

Mariana Bastías

La Pincoya is an omen. A dancing beauty from the sea, la Pincoya can bring prosperity just as she can proclaim misery on our little island of Chiloé.

The first time I remember learning about her, I was five or six years old—old enough to ask, too old to question the answer. I was in the kitchen with my mother as she peeled potatoes for lunch and I colored drawings next to her. My father burst through the door, dramatic and loud, proudly exclaiming:

“¡La Pincoya nos ha bendecido!”¹ He raised a full plastic bag, waiving it and showering us with salt water.

“¡Julio!” my mother scolded him, using the same tone she’d scold me. “¡Estás chorreando por todas partes!”²

Where I would have cowered, my father simply laughed and walked towards her. The following scene was one I saw often: my father setting the bag with the morning’s catch in the sink, leaning in to kiss the side of my mother’s head, her pulling away with a frown pretending to be grossed by his dirty appearance and him pulling her in closer and nuzzling her neck until her stern expression breaks

into a smile. And then, he walks over to me and sits by my side. I can still picture how he looked that day: beard needing trimming, brown hair just like mine peaking from his beanie, freckles sprinkled across his nose and cheeks from days under the sun and the smell of the Pacific that clung to him. He was meant for the ocean. He still had sand stuck to his beard and wool sweater—navy with white stripes that my mom commissioned from the lady down the street.

“¿Qué es una Pincoya?”³ I asked him. He picked up one of my pencils and began coloring with me as he explained.

“La Pincoya es una sirena con piernas humanas y pelo tan rubio que brilla,” he explains. “Por la madrugada, baila en la costa, y si mira al horizonte, nosotros los pescadores tendremos trabajo de sobra, pero si baila mirando hacia la cordillera, no tendremos qué pescar por el resto de la temporada. A veces se demora años en que los peces vuelvan.”⁴

“¿Por qué?”⁵ I asked.

“Porque protege el mar y todos sus habitantes,”⁶ he said.

“Incluyendo a nuestros pescadores,”⁷ my mother added.

1 La Pincoya has blessed us!

2 You’re dripping everywhere!

3 What is a Pincoya?

4 Pincoya is a siren with human legs and hair so blonde it glows. In the early hours of dawn, she dances along the coast, and if she looks towards the horizon, us fishermen will have plenty of work, but if she dances looking towards the mountains, we won’t have anything to fish for the rest of the season. Sometimes it takes years for fish to return.

5 Why?

6 Because she protects the sea and her inhabitants.

7 Including our fishermen.

“¿Por qué?” I asked again.

“Porque ese es su propósito, su trabajo, por eso queremos que esté contenta,”⁹ he said.

“¿Y cómo se hace eso?”¹⁰ I asked.

“Cantando”¹¹, he said with a grin. He put down the pencil and started to whistle. It was melodic and fluid tune, reminiscent of the waves that sway boats and crash on the sand. I tried to mimic him, but I’d just learned how to whistle so I struggled, and he laughed. My father used to have all the answers. For most of my life, I trusted what he said, believing he was never wrong. But he was. He was wrong about her, because singing and whistling didn’t make her happy. Because the fish disappeared and she didn’t protect my father, she didn’t bring him home. As I grew, I understood what she was: a myth. She’s nothing more than a story to tell little boys over the kitchen table.

As a little boy, I believed in her. As a man, I know better now.

I usually see the stars when I leave the house each morning. This morning, though, is cloudy. A thick blanket covers the sky and the only light in my path is that of the occasional lamppost I walk by on my way to the dock. Cold air nips at my skin, so I pull my beanie lower on my head, covering my ears and eyebrows, and I rub my hands together.

My footsteps echo as I walk past each boat until I reach my green and yellow *Esperanza*—named after my mother. She was my father’s, but now she’s mine.

“Buenos días, Andrés”¹², I greet my partner as I jump in.

“Buenos días, Martín”¹³, he says, nodding at me

as he buttons his orange overalls. I pick up mine from where they lay on the bench, drying from the day before.

“Sandra nos hizo café,”¹⁴ he says, pointing at the thermos.

“Ay, bendita sea Sandrita,”¹⁵ I say, rushing through the rest of my buttons and pouring myself a cup. Hot and bitter, it washes the rest of my sleep away.

Slowly the doc starts filling up as other fishermen arrive and prepare for this morning. Pleasantries and chatter are soon drowned out by the rumbling engines breaking through the water.

“¿Crees que la veremos?”¹⁶ Andrés asks me. Every morning, without fail, he’ll lean over the edge of the boat and stare towards the shore. Every morning, he’ll tell me that Claudio saw her the day before, and I remind him that Claudio’s full of shit, but that doesn’t stop him from looking. Then, when we’re too far from shore, he’ll start whistling and prepare the nets while I navigate.

The waves are bigger today. More water splashes onto the deck that what normally does, and every wave hits harder against *Esperanza*. We hit a bigger wave, so hard it shifts the spotlight, turning it sideways. With one hand, I reach above my head to try to fix it while steering. It flickers a couple of times before completely turning off.

“¿Qué chucha hiciste?”¹⁷ Andrés yells at me.

“¡Dáme un segundo!”¹⁸ I call out. Using the tips of my fingers, I push the cable into the spotlight, trying to reconnect it. But every time I touch it, a wave hits and throws me off balance.

“¡Martín!” Andrés yells, frustrated and

8 Why?

9 Because that is her purpose, her work, that’s why we want her to be happy.

10 And how do we do that?

11 Singing.

12 Good morning, Andrés.

13 Good morning, Martín.

14 Sandra made us coffee.

15 Oh, bless you, Sandrita.

16 Do you think we’ll see her?

17 What the hell did you do?

18 Give me a second!

impatient.

“¡Estoy tratando, weón!¹⁹” I tell him, more annoyed than he is.

I try to steer us, but all I see are vague shapes ahead of us and faraway lights from the other boats. It’s clear we’ve fallen behind, and if we don’t catch up, it’ll be worse than if we didn’t come at all.

“¡Listo!²⁰” I yell once I get the light turned back on and facing forward, but the joy is short-lived. We’ve turned sideways and all I see is a giant wave coming for us.

“¡Afirmáte!²¹” I yell as I grip the wheel with both hands and lock my legs, bracing. We’re rocked to the side and drenched in salt water. All I see of Andrés is a flash of orange out of the corner of my eye.

“¡Andrés!” I call out. Another wave hits us and *Esperanza* spins. I can’t see him when the water comes down. I call out again. And again. We’re hit by another wave and we sway.

“¡Andrés!” I call out again.

Thoughtless, reckless, I let go of the helm. I can barely hold my footing. Another wave rocks us. The spotlight flickers and spins. I keep calling out his name. The next wave hits us stronger than the last. It catches me mid-step. The world tilts. The back of my knees hit the bench and water pushes me over.

My back breaks the surface and I’m engulfed in the frigid sea. The thick wool of my sweater was made to keep me warm, but it weighs me down like two anchors tied to my arms. Waves crash into each other and I’m caught by a down current, pulling me deeper, farther from the surface. I flail my arms, fighting against the ache in my bones and the weight of the Pacific, but I’m losing. The water plays with me like a ragdoll. I can see flashes of light, *Esperanza*’s spotlight getting smaller and smaller until it’s a thin line in the sky too far out of reach.

Is this how my father felt? Weak and powerless?

Did he think of us?

I think of my mother, how she must still be asleep. How, in a couple of hours, she’ll rise and wrap herself in her shawl and go into the kitchen. How she’ll fill the kettle and toast some bread. How, once her toast has been buttered and the kettle screeches, she’ll make herself a cup of coffee in my father’s favorite mug and sit at the table. How she’ll look out the window, out towards the sea, and wait for me, just as she waited for my father. How long until she realizes history is repeating? Will she be preparing lunch when she gets that knock on her door? Who will tell her?

Ángel de la guarda, mi dulce compañía, I pray as I kick my legs. *No me desampares ni de noche ni de día.* Ángel de la guarda, mi dulce compañía²². My chest squeezes, begging for a breath. *No me desampares ni de noche ni de día. Ángel de la guarda, mi dulce compañía, no me desampares ni de noche ni de día. Ángel de la guarda, mi dulce compañía.* Desperation turns my prayer into a chant. Ángel de la guarda, mi dulce compañía, *no me desampares ni de noche ni de día. Ángel de la guarda, mi dulce compañía, no me desampares ni de noche ni de día.* The chant turns into a plea from an angel to a legend. *No me desampares, por favor, ni de noche ni de día.*

My elbows ache. My shoulders are sore. The salt burns my eyes, but I don’t want to close them. Everything is heavy and everything hurts. *Esperanza*’s light is so far away now, it looks like a shooting star. Is this how my father felt? Was this the moment he realized he wouldn’t be coming back home? I stop fighting, overcome with tiredness. The cold doesn’t hurt anymore.

Then, a streak of golden flashes across my vision. So quick I think I imagine it, but it crosses again. Flowing like seaweed, but seaweed is dark, almost black in this water. More golden flashes cross my vision, closer now, swaying slowly in the

19 I’m trying, asshole!

20 Done!

21 Hang on!

22 Guardian angel, my sweet company, don’t abandon me, not by day, not by night.

water. Warmth follows, starting at my shoulders and spreading to my torso and pressing against my back. It feels like my mother's embrace—how she would hug me after picking me up from the ground, before cleaning my scraped knees. More golden rays. They touch me, tickling my neck, as I am pulled. Upwards this time. With as much strength as I can, I keep my eyes open and staring above.

The surface comes nearer as the warmth around my chest tightens. It squeezes tight and then suddenly lets go, leaving me alone to break the surface. I gasp, desperate and hungry for air. My hot breath turns into mist as I look up at the sky, still covered in thick clouds. Towards the horizon, I see frantic spotlights. There's a ringing in my ear that makes way for muffled yells. That's when I realize the others aren't fishing. They're searching.

I raise my arm above my head, waving, and with as much strength I can muster, I yell:

“¡Aquí estoy!²³”

²³ I'm here!