

The Swimmer

Before The Swimmer became a swimmer he was known as The Clock Boy. It was his job to keep all the clocks in Toledo running on time. Each month, he rode the 05.21 train to Madrid, stood wide eyed in the Puerta del Sol, and set his grandfather's pocket watch to Perfect Madrid Time. He would then rush back and sell the time to all the churches and town halls and watch keepers in the City.

With the rise of the wireless radio, The Clock Boy moved to Reus and made the best Vermouth in the world. He became known as Little Cinnamon because it was his job to flavour the fortified wine and his fingers were stained brown like cinnamon sticks.

On his 33rd Birthday, Cinnamon decided to do something he had never done before, to go on holiday. He got a bus ticket going East and he treated himself to an ice cream in the town of Cambrils.

Pointing out to sea he said, "What is that?"

"You're joking aren't you?" said the man. "That's the sea."

"The sea."

"You've never seen the sea?"

"No, no I haven't".

"Well, what do you think?"

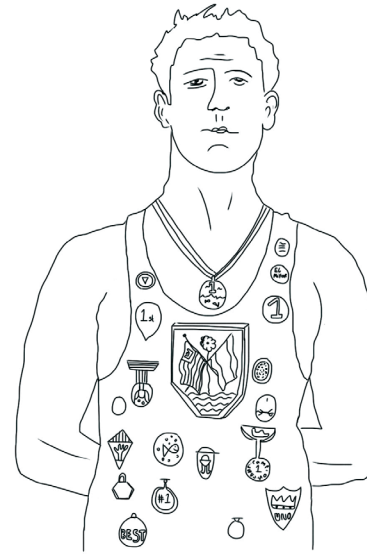
"It is beautiful. It's like La Macha. But very blue."

Little Cinnamon never returned to make Vermouth. Instead, he vowed to learn all there was to know about the sea so took a ferry to Mallorca and learned to swim. His teacher was the great Carles Bolver, long distance swimming extraordinaire, who lived on a boat and ate nothing but double yoker eggs, and with his guidance won every swimming medal there was to win and wore them so proudly he sank every time he entered the water.

One night, drinking with Carles in the Bodega de Bellver, The Swimmer (for that was now his name) decided what he wanted to do. "I will be the first man to swim from Mallorca to Formentera!"

Everyone had laughed. "It will take weeks, it will take forever! You will need a boat. You will surely drown!" Nevertheless, the same excited crowd followed The Swimmer to the coast of Cala Brava and cheered as he disappeared silently into the sea. "I knew that man," they all cheered. "The greatest swimmer of our generation! He

will make it! He will make it! Surely he will make it!"



And he did make it. And nobody quite knew how. But that did not stop the bars from gossiping. Señora María Ramírez at Bar Gost claimed he had used an old trick of the gypsies; filling his belly with fizzy drinks to help him float. The drunken men in Bar Luxor all agreed he must have ridden on the backs of helpful dolphins and Señor Marqués, a regular at Luxor, would add with great excitement that, "this is possible for I myself have done it!"

In Café Al Vent, the owner in

the doorway would whisper that he had covered his entire body in goose fat to protect him from the cold. And a passing sailor, the appropriately named Nelson Hausmann, who possessed a lion's heart and drank a herb liqueur from a dried out pumpkin, said that he had seen The Swimmer and mistaken him for a drowning man.

"I grabbed him by the belly," he later recounted in a grubby bar, "like this I did. And pulled the man from the water like a giant mackerel fish. And what did he do to thank me? He whacked me on the head, he did, and jumped back into the sea!"

For The Swimmer it did not matter. He knew what he had done. And before planting both feet on the dry land of Formentera, he sat out at sea, upon a rock, and surveyed his prize under a setting sun. He saw the sugar cube houses in La Sabina; Illete's slender finger of sand that stroked the blue sea; the distant cliff of La Mola in the shape of a terracotta whale tail; and the zebra striped lighthouse of En Pou, forgotten and astray on the Island of the Pigs.