

The Day the Boats Did Not Return

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The first thing you notice on a quiet island morning is the sound of the ocean.

Not loud.

Not dramatic.

Just a steady breathing against the reef.

When I first moved to the Marshall Islands, I thought the ocean was simply beautiful.

Blue water stretching forever.

Gentle waves touching the shore.

The kind of view people travel thousands of miles to photograph.

But people who grow up on islands do not look at the ocean the way tourists do.

They look at it the way farmers look at land.

They look at it and ask one question:

Will it provide?

One afternoon I sat outside my small house watching the lagoon when Lijon passed by.

Everyone in the neighborhood called her *Jemōk*—in Marshallese, grandmother.

She was small, slow in her steps, but her eyes were sharp, like someone who had spent a lifetime reading the ocean.

She noticed me watching the horizon.

“You are looking for the boats,” she said.

I smiled.

“I didn’t realize it was that obvious.”

She sat beside me without asking.

“When the boats come back,” she said, “you know the island will eat tonight.”

The sun was beginning to fall behind the water.

The sky turned the soft orange that only islands seem to have.

“Where I come from,” I told her, “we also wait for boats.”

“Philippines?”

I nodded.

“My father used to wake before dawn to buy fish at the market,” I said.

“The fishermen would come back when the sky was still dark.”

For a moment the lagoon in front of me became another shoreline in my mind.

I could almost smell the salt and diesel from the small fishing boats in my hometown.

Wet wooden tables. Vendors shouting prices across the market.

My father choosing fish carefully while my mother calculated how long it had to last for the week.

Fish were never just food.

They were school lunches.

They were electricity bills.

They were the quiet math families solved every week just to survive.

Lijon smiled slowly.

“Then you understand.”

For a moment we just watched the water.

In the distance, small silhouettes began to appear. Fishing boats returning home from the open Pacific, where tuna moved beneath the waves like living silver.

“Before,” she said quietly, “there were many more.”

Her voice carried the weight of memory.

“When I was young, the lagoon was always busy. Boats everywhere. Nets heavy with fish.”

“What changed?” I asked.

She looked at the horizon again.

“The world became hungry.”

I didn't fully understand what she meant until I began learning more about tuna.

The Pacific Ocean holds some of the most valuable tuna fisheries in the world.

Nations depend on them.

Economies depend on them.

Even countries far away depend on fish caught in these waters.

But something valuable is always at risk.

Too many boats.

Too much demand.

Too little patience.

Grandmother Lijon tapped her walking stick softly against the ground.

“The ocean is generous,” she said.

“But it is not endless.”

She paused, then spoke again in Marshallese.

“Jined ilo ettoñ.”

I must have looked confused, because she smiled gently.

“It means the ocean is our mother,” she explained.

“And mothers can only keep giving if their children remember to care for them.”

The first boat reached the shore.

Men began unloading their catch.

Silver bodies of tuna flashed in the fading sunlight.

Children ran toward the dock. Mothers waited with buckets.

The island moved with quiet excitement.

Dinner was arriving.

My daughter suddenly appeared beside me, barefoot and curious.

“Mama,” she said, pointing toward the boats, “are those the fish for tonight?”

“Yes,” I told her.

She watched as the fishermen lifted the heavy tuna from the hull.

“They look like pieces of the moon,” she whispered, watching the silver tuna shine in the fading light.

I smiled at that.

“When my daughter grows up,” I said slowly to Lijon, “I want her to see this.”

Lijon turned toward me.

“The boats?”

I nodded.

“Yes. The boats coming home. The ocean still feeding people.”

She studied my face for a moment.

“Then people must protect it.”

Her words were simple.

But they carried the weight of something bigger than policy or economics.

They carried the voice of someone who had lived long enough to see the ocean change.

Night began to settle over the lagoon.

Lights flickered on in small homes across the island.

Smoke rose from cooking fires.

The fishermen laughed as they carried their catch ashore.

Life continued.

But as I watched the last boat tie its rope to the dock, a thought passed through my mind like a quiet shadow.

What if one day the boats stopped coming?

What if the horizon stayed empty?

No silver fish flashing in the sunlight.

No fishermen returning home.

No children running toward the docks.

Just silence.

I looked at Lijon.

“Grandmother,” I asked softly, “what happens if the fish disappear?”

She didn’t answer immediately.

The ocean moved slowly under the darkening sky.

Finally, she said something I have never forgotten.

“If the fish disappear,” she said, “it means we forgot something important.”

“What?”

She looked out across the water.

“That the ocean feeds us today only if we protect tomorrow.”

The next morning, my daughter and I walked along the lagoon.

The sky was the same soft orange.

The reef breathed the same quiet rhythm against the shore.

But the horizon was empty.

No boats.

No silhouettes returning from the open Pacific.

The dock was quiet.

Buckets rested upside down in the sand.

My daughter squeezed my hand.

“Mama,” she asked softly, “where are the fish?”

I looked out at the water, remembering Grandmother Lijon’s words.

The ocean feeds us today only if we protect tomorrow.

I held my daughter’s hand and watched the empty horizon.

And in that silence, I understood something deeply.

Islands do not survive on fish alone.

They survive on memory.

On respect.

On the promise that the next generation will care for the ocean that cared for us.

Far out beyond the reef, the Pacific stretched endlessly.

Somewhere beneath that blue water, tuna still moved through ancient currents.

And I hoped—

for my daughter,

for this island,

for every boat that waits for the ocean's generosity—

that we would remember in time.