Not only were the laws of the land abandoned, but the law of gravity and the laws of motion as well.

They reeled, whirled, swiveled, flounced, capered, gamboled, and spun.

They leaped like deer on the moon.

The studio ceiling was thirty feet high, but each leap brought the dancers nearer to it.

It became their obvious intention to kiss the ceiling.

They kissed it.

And then, neutralizing gravity with love and pure will, they remained suspended in air inches below the ceiling, and they kissed each other for a long, long time.

It was then that Diana Moon Glampers, the Handicapper General, came into the studio with a double-barreled ten-gauge shotgun. She fired twice, and the Emperor and the Empress were dead before they hit the floor.

Diana Moon Glampers loaded the gun again. She aimed it at the musicians and told them they had ten seconds to get their handicaps back on.

It was then that the Bergerons' television tube burned out.

Hazel turned to comment about the blackout to George. But George had gone out into the kitchen for a can of beer.

George came back in with the beer, paused while a handicap signal shook him up. And then he sat down again. "You been crying?" he said to Hazel.

"Yup," she said.

"What about?" he said.

"I forget," she said. "Something real sad on television."

"What was it?" he said.

"It's all kind of mixed up in my mind," said Hazel.

"Forget sad things," said George.

"I always do," said Hazel.

"That's my girl," said George. He winced. There was the sound of a riveting-gun in his head.

"Gee—I could tell that one was a doozy," said Hazel.

"You can say that again," said George.

"Gee—" said Hazel, "I could tell that one was a doozy."

The Colomber

Dino Buzzati

Translated by Lawrence Venuti

WHEN Stefano Roi was twelve years old, he asked his father, a sea captain and the owner of a fine sailing ship, to take him on board as his birthday gift. "When I am grown up," the boy said, "I want to go to sea with you. And I shall command ships even more beautiful and bigger than yours."

"God bless you, my son," the father answered. And since his vessel had to leave that very day, he took the boy with him.

It was a splendid sunny day, and the sea was calm. Stefano, who had never been on a ship, happily wandered around on deck, admiring the complicated maneuvers of the sails. He asked the sailors about this and that, and they gladly explained everything to him.

When the boy had gone astern, he stopped, his curiosity aroused, to observe something that intermittently rose to the surface at a distance of two or three hundred meters, in line with the ship's wake.

Although the ship was indeed moving fast, carried by a great quarter wind, that thing always maintained the same distance. And though the boy did not make out what it was, there was some indefinable air about it, which attracted him intensely.

No longer seeing Stefano on deck, the father came down from the bridge, after having shouted his name in vain, and went to look for him.

"Stefano, what are you doing there, standing so still?" the captain asked his son, finally perceiving him on the stern as he stared at the waves.

"Papa, come here and see."

The father came, and he too looked in the direction indicated by the boy, but he could not see anything.

"There's a dark thing that rises in the wake every so often," Stefano said, "and it follows behind us."

"Despite my forty years," said the father, "I believe I still have good eyesight. But I see absolutely nothing."

After the boy insisted, the father went to get a telescope, and he scrutinized the surface of the sea, in line with the wake. Stefano saw him turn pale.

"What is it? Why do you make that face?"

"Oh, I wish I had never listened to you," the captain exclaimed. "Now I'm worried about you. What you see rising from the water and following us is not some object. That is a colomber. It's the fish that sailors fear above all others, in every sea in the world. It is a tremendous, mysterious shark, more clever than man. For reasons that perhaps no one will ever know, it chooses its victim, and when it has chosen, it pursues him for years and years, for his entire life, until it has succeeded in devouring him. And the strange thing is this: No one can see the colomber except the victim himself and his blood relations."

"It's not a story?"

"No. I have never seen it. But from descriptions I have heard many times, I immediately recognized it. That bisonlike muzzle, that mouth continually opening and closing, those terrible teeth. Stefano, there's no doubt, the colomber has ominously chosen you, and as long as you go to sea, it will give you no peace. Listen to me: We are going back to land now, immediately; you will go ashore and never leave it again, not for any reason whatsoever. You must promise me you won't. Seafaring is not for you, my son. You must resign yourself. After all, you will be able to make your fortune on land too."

Having said this, he immediately reversed his course, reentered the port, and on the pretext of a sudden illness, he put his son ashore. Then he left again without him.

Deeply troubled, the boy remained on the shore until the last tip of the masts sank behind the horizon. Beyond the pier that bounded the port, the sea was completely deserted. But looking carefully, Stefano could perceive a small black point which intermittently surfaced on the water: It was "his" colomber, slowly moving back and forth, obstinately waiting for him.

From then on, with every expedient the boy was dissuaded from his desire to go to sea. His father sent him to study at an inland city, hundreds of kilometers away. And for some time, distracted by his new surroundings, Stefano no longer thought about the sea monster. Still, he returned home for summer vacations, and the first thing he did, as soon as he had some free time, was hurry to the end of the pier for a kind of verification, although he fundamentally considered it unnecessary. After so many years, even supposing that all the stories his father told him were true, the colomber had certainly given up its siege.

But Stefano stood there, astonished, his heart pounding. At a distance of two to three hundred meters from the pier, in the open sea, the sinister fish was moving back and forth, slowly, raising its muzzle from the water every now and then and turning toward land, as if it anxiously watched for whether Stefano was coming at last.

So the idea of that hostile creature waiting for him day and night became a secret obsession for Stefano. And even in the distant city it cropped up to wake him with worry in the middle of the night. He was safe, of course; hundreds of kilometers separated him from the colomber. And yet he knew that beyond the mountains, beyond the forests and the plains, the shark was waiting for him. He might have moved even to the most remote continent, and still the colomber would have appeared in the mirror of the nearest sea, with the inexorable obstinacy of a fatal instrument.

Stefano, who was a serious and eager boy, profitably continued his studies, and as soon as he was a man, he found a dignified and well-paying position at a store in that inland city. Meanwhile, his father died through illness, his magnificent ship was sold by his widow, and his son found himself the heir to a modest fortune. Work, friends, diversions, first love affairs—Stefano's life was now well under way, but the thought of the colomber nonetheless tormented him like a mirage that was fatal and fascinating at the same time; and as the days passed, rather than disappear, it seemed to become more insistent.

Great are the satisfactions of an industrious, well-to-do, and quiet life, but greater still is the attraction of the abyss. Stefano was hardly twenty-two years old when, having said goodbye to his inland friends and resigned from his job, he returned to his native city and told his mother of his firm intention to follow his father's trade. The woman, to whom Stefano had never mentioned the mysterious shark, joyfully welcomed his decision. To have her son abandon the sea for the city had always seemed to her, in her heart, a betrayal of the family's tradition.

Stefano began to sail, giving proof of his seaworthiness, his resistance to fatigue, and his intrepid spirit. He sailed and sailed, and in the wake of his ship, day and night, in good weather and in storms, the colomber trudged along. He knew that this was his curse and his penalty, and precisely for this reason, perhaps, he did not find the strength to sever himself from it. And no one on board, except him, perceived the monster.

"Don't you see anything over there?" he asked his companions from time to time, pointing at the wake.

"No, we don't see anything at all. Why?"

"I don't know. It seemed to me . . ."

"You didn't see a colomber, by any chance, did you?" the sailors asked, laughing and touching wood.

"Why are you laughing? Why are you touching wood?"

"Because the colomber is an animal that spares no one. And if it has begun to follow this ship, it means that one of us is doomed."

But Stefano did not slacken. The uninterrupted threat that followed on his heels seemed in fact to strengthen his will, his passion for the sea, his courage in times of strife and danger.

When he felt that he was master of his trade, he used his modest inheritance to acquire a small steam freighter with a partner; then he became the sole proprietor of it, and thanks to a series of successful shipments, he could subsequently buy a true merchantman, setting out with always more-ambitious aims. But the successes, and the millions, were unable to remove that continual torment from his soul; nor did he ever try, on the other hand, to sell the ship and retire to undertake different enterprises on land.

To sail and sail was his only thought. Just as soon as he set foot on land in some port after a long journey, the impatience to depart again immediately pricked him. He knew that outside the colomber was waiting for him and that the colomber was synonymous with ruin. With nothingness. An indomitable impulse dragged him without rest, from one ocean to another.

Until, one day, Stefano suddenly realized that he had grown old, very old; and no one around him could explain why, rich as he was, he did not finally leave the cursed life of the sea. He was old, and bitterly unhappy, because his entire existence had been spent in that mad flight across the seas, to escape his enemy. But the temptation of the abyss had always been greater for him than the joys of a prosperous and quiet life.

One evening, while his magnificent ship was anchored offshore at the port where he was born, he felt close to death. He then called his second officer, in whom he had great trust, and ordered him not to oppose what he was about to do. The other man promised, on his honor.

Having gotten his assurance, Stefano revealed to the second

officer the story of the colomber that had continued to pursue him uselessly for nearly fifty years. The officer listened to him, frightened.

"It has escorted me from one end of the world to the other," Stefano said, "with a faithfulness that not even the noblest friend could have shown. Now I am about to die. The colomber too will be terribly old and weary by now. I cannot betray it."

Having said this, he took his leave of the crew, ordered a small boat to be lowered into the sea, and boarded it, after he made them give him a harpoon.

"Now I am going to meet it," he announced. "It isn't right to disappoint it. But I shall struggle, with all my might."

With a few weary strokes of the oars, he drew away from the side of the ship. Officers and sailors saw him disappear down below, on the placid sea, shrouded in the nocturnal shadows. In the sky was a crescent moon.

He did not have to work very hard. Suddenly the colomber's horrible snout emerged at the side of the boat.

"Here I am with you, finally," Stefano said. "Now it's just the two of us." And gathering his remaining strength, he raised the harpoon to strike.

"Uh," the colomber groaned, imploringly, "what a long journey it's taken to find you. I too am wasted with fatigue. How much you made me swim. And you kept on fleeing. You never understood at all."

"What?" asked Stefano, with the point of his harpoon over the colomber's heart.

"I have not pursued you around the world to devour you, as you thought. I was charged by the King of the Sea only to deliver this to you."

And the shark stuck out its tongue, offering the old captain a small phosphorescent sphere.

Stefano picked it up and examined it. It was a pearl of unusual size. And he recognized it as the famous *Perla del Mare,* which brought luck, power, love, and peace of mind to whoever possessed it. But now it was too late.

"Alas!" said the captain, shaking his head sadly. "How wrong it all is. I managed to condemn myself, and I have ruined your life."

"Goodbye, poor man," answered the colomber. And it sank into the black waters forever.

Two months later, pushed by an undertow, a small boat came

alongside an abrupt reef. It was sighted by several fishermen, who drew near, curious. In the boat, still seated, was a sun-bleached skeleton; between the little bones of its fingers it grasped a small round stone.

The colomber is a huge fish, frightening to behold and extremely rare. Depending on the sea and the people who live by its shores, the fish is also called the kolombrey, kahloubrha, kalonga, kalu-balu, chalunggra. Naturalists strangely ignore it. Some even maintain that it does not exist.

The Wife's Story

Ursula K. Le Guin

HE was a good husband, a good father. I don't understand it. I don't believe in it. I don't believe that it happened. I saw it happen but it isn't true. It can't be. He was always gentle. If you'd have seen him playing with the children, anybody who saw him with the children would have known that there wasn't any bad in him, not one mean bone. When I first met him he was still living with his mother, over near Spring Lake, and I used to see them together, the mother and the sons, and think that any young fellow that was that nice with his family must be one worth knowing. Then one time when I was walking in the woods I met him by himself coming back from a hunting trip. He hadn't got any game at all, not so much as a field mouse, but he wasn't cast down about it. He was just larking along enjoying the morning air. That's one of the things I first loved about him. He didn't take things hard, he didn't grouch and whine when things didn't go his way. So we got to talking that day. And I guess things moved right along after that, because pretty soon he was over here pretty near all the time. And my sister said—see, my parents had moved out the year before and gone south, leaving us the place—my sister said, kind of teasing but serious, "Well! If he's going to be here every day and half the night, I guess there isn't room for me!" And she moved out—just down the way. We've always been real close, her and me. That's the sort of thing doesn't every change. I couldn't ever have got through this bad time without my sis.

Well, so he come to live here. And all I can say is, it was the happy year of my life. He was just purely good to me. A hard worker and never lazy, and so big and fine-looking. Everybody looked up to him, you know, young as he was. Lodge Meeting nights, more and more often they had him to lead the singing. He had such a beautiful voice, and he'd lead off strong, and the others following and joining in, high voices and low. It brings the shivers on me now to think of it, hearing it, nights when I'd stayed home from meeting when the children was babies—the singing coming up through the trees there, and the moonlight, summer nights, the full moon shining. I'll never hear anything so beautiful. I'll never know a joy like that again.