

El Nino Malo

by Sue Maywood

The old man pulled his boat onto the sandy shore and tied the line to the dock. He stared down into the empty vessel, then shuffled toward his hut, his shoulders and back hunched with weariness.

His wife was standing in the doorway, watching him come. She walked back into the kitchen and set the bowl of beans and plate of fresh *tortillas* in the middle of the table.

“*Mi esposa*, I come home with no fish again today. I don’t know where they have all gone, but we will be eating our usual meal. Praise God that you make the best *tortillas* in Baja California.” The old man sat down at the table.

“You don’t need to praise God for that. It was *mi mama* who taught me how to make *tortillas*.”

She sat across from him, and they bowed their heads while Pablo said grace.

“Elena will be coming over tomorrow to help me pick and store the dried beans,” Camila said.

Pablo smiled. “Ah, it will be wonderful to see our dear *nieta* again.”

He finished his meal and stood up. “I need to get back to the boat.”

The old man walked down to the beach. As he neared his boat, he looked up and stopped. Walking out of the surf was a human figure, tall and slender, with ghostly white skin, strands of seaweed and kelp wrapped around his torso and dripping from his forearms. He strode confidently, as if he owned the ocean. He stopped in front of Pablo.

“Well, old man, I see you’ve not caught any fish again today.”

“Who are you?”

“Your people call me ‘*El Nino*’ or ‘*El Nino Jesus*.’ Ha! You have me confused with another boy, because I appear when you celebrate his birth, but I am nothing like him. I move your ocean waters around, making hot places cold, and wet places dry. Because of me, your fish move away to water more to their liking; I come every few years, and there is nothing you can do to stop me.”

“But we are hungry and poor. Why do you get pleasure from making our lives even harder?”

“Well, what can you give me to make it worth changing the currents back?” *El Nino* looked around at the beach, the small boat, and the adobe hut up the hill. “No. You have nothing worth wanting. Too bad.” He turned his back and walked into the waves.

The next morning, Elena, the old couple’s beloved granddaughter, came to help Camila harvest the beans. Her slender body moved carefully among the scrawny plants, and her agile hands made fast work of picking the beans.

“*Mi abuela*, your plants are not happy this year. Why not?”

“I don’t know. The rain falls, so they’re not thirsty. But they barely stay alive and have no energy to make flowers or fruit.”

“Well, at least you have some beans, and corn is inexpensive,” Elena said.

“We’ve worked long enough for now. It is time for lunch. Can you please go down to the dock and see if your *abuelo* is ready to eat?”

Elena walked down to the shore. She could see from a distance that her grandfather was straightening gear in his boat, but it was tied up at the dock.

“*Mi abuelo*, it is lunch-time!” she called.

“I am coming, *mi nina*,” he answered.

What the old man didn’t see was the tall figure rise up out of the water. The boy stood in the surf, transfixed by the sight of the beautiful young girl on the shore.

The old man also didn’t hear him say, “Aha, you *do* have something worth wanting, after all.” The ghost-boy bounded through the waves to Elena’s side, swept her into his seaweed-covered arms and carried her, screaming, into the surf and out to sea before the old man even knew what had happened.

“Elena! No! Not my beautiful Elena!” he cried.

Even from the house, Camila could hear her husband’s voice. Her heart pounded as her old legs carried her down to the water.

Pablo took the boat out, calling “Elena!” over and over. Camila wandered along the shoreline looking for some sign of the girl. But, as night fell, the old couple returned to their hut, too weary to talk or eat.

The next morning, Pablo went out in his boat again. He let the boat drift along as he stared at the horizon. His heart was broken, and he began to cry. His

tears fell into the ocean, each one like a pearl, each making a tiny plopping sound as it hit the calm surface of the water.

Pablo wiped his eyes and looked down into the sea. Wherever a tear had fallen, there was a fish with the colors of a rainbow down its sides. He picked up his net and scooped two of the fish into his boat. Then he headed home.

Camila was surprised when Pablo brought in the fish. She cleaned and fried them. They were grateful for the food, but they ate in silence.

After lunch, Pablo went to the doorway. It was raining heavily. He heard a sound from his wife's garden, which was next to the house. Raindrops fell like pearls onto the plants. Pablo called to his wife, and she came to the door. As they watched, wherever the raindrops landed, the plants raised their crooked backs and stood up straight. Tiny flowers appeared on the tomato and pepper plants, and on the melon and squash vines. Camila saw her garden transform, in a matter of minutes, into the lushest garden she had ever seen.

Every day Pablo went out, netted two fish, and brought them home to Camila. The old woman picked the ripe vegetables from her garden. The meals that she lay on the table nourished their bodies, but they still ate in silence.

One morning about three months later, Pablo went to his boat as he did every morning. As he was preparing his fishing gear, he heard an odd clicking noise. He turned to look in the direction of the sound and saw *El Nino* rise up out of the surf, holding the arm of a young woman. It was Elena; her hair was still black, but her skin was the ghostly white of the boy. She wore a white gown, with bits of seaweed hanging from it, and the bodice was entirely covered with pearls. They were making the clicking sound that Pablo had heard.

Pablo cried out, "Elena! You have returned!" He jumped out of the boat and into the water.

"Stop, old man," *El Nino* warned. "You cannot come to us and live."

Camila heard her husband's voice, and she rushed down to the beach, her arms out-stretched when she saw the young couple.

This time Elena spoke. “Do not come closer, *mi abuela*. It is too late for me to come back to live with you. My home, whether I want it or not, is in the sea.”

El Nino explained, “The girl cried so much when I took her away, I thought she would never stop. The ‘rain’ that fell on your garden, old woman, was but a small number of her tears. The others fell on the gardens of your neighbors, and they now have more food on their tables than ever in their lives. There is one thing that I can do to comfort you for your loss. On the night of every full moon, I will bring *La Nina*, your granddaughter, the queen of my heart to spend the night here with you. For the rest of the month, she must be with me under the waves.”

The boy kept his word. On the next night with a full moon, the grandparents stood at the waterline. They didn’t have to wait long. When *El Nino* and Elena rose, arm-in-arm, from the water, the moonlight shone on their white skin with a phosphorescence that took away the breath of the old ones.

It became their custom for Elena and her grandparents to sit on the dock and talk, while the tall boy paced up and down the sandy stretch. Pablo and Camila asked Elena many questions about life under the sea, and she rewarded them with tales of giant, flat, transparent fish and carnivorous plants.

As morning neared and the moon hovered just above the horizon, *El Nino* came to Elena, held out his hand to her, and she stood up. The old people sadly watched their beloved one wade calmly into the in-coming tide with her escort, and then they headed for home, marveling at her stories of life under the sea.

