Bourne toWrite...
creative writing workshops

A Sea Dog Story

by Mikey Young

Stumbles was a three-legged rescue who had come into our lives when we were in our early teens. You could see his life's vicissitudes at a glance and it broke your heart. He had milky eyes and a grey beard. He was only small. A couple of his teeth were broken and yellow. No one knew his age. He had an incongruous soul to his beaten body. He was full of alacrity, war stories and a lust for life.

These were our years, where my brothers and I became questions and riddles. Teenage hormones will do that. The one thing that grounded and rounded us was our anchor, Stumbles.

He had come from Barcelona, on a boat, a stowaway. We would try to use simple Spanish words with him, Aqui meaning here, Hoy meaning there, but he never came. Maybe he wasn't bilingual, but when we took him to the sea. He barked as if he knew all the sea shanties and he could only have learnt them in Spain.

We brought him a neckerchief. It was black with a skull and crossbones on it. He wore it as if it were a badge of honour. He would often chew short lumpy sticks that would resemble pipes. In the winter his breath would look like he was smoking, deep in thought. Another war he'd won, overcome - with adversity. A short stick could do that to a fellow. He would stumble when walking as much as he would do through life.

When we would take him to the vets with Dad, and they would list his endless illnesses. All of us would leave there in a sad silence. Not Stumbles. He had squirrels to chase, shanties to sing, sticks to smoke. The silence wouldn't last long with him around. And then, just like Stumbles did, we would forget them. Sometimes in those years we needed to be brave. There were exams to take, hearts would break and dreams to make.

Stumbles was brave. He once took on a badger. He didn't back down. We all went into panic mode. Not Stumbles, his pearly eyes would dance like fire as he sang at the creature. The badger made a sullen retreat back to his burrow. That day he passed his own exam, broke the badger's fortitude and fulfilled his own dreams. He showed us true strength. We were taught an important lesson that day.

We would come home from school some afternoons and see our tanned Spaniards face poking out from our fence. We had to make that hole for him, for he was forever curious. He couldn't sell a story if he didn't have a person to tell it to. And what stories they were. He would get more animated the longer the story got. Some days they were so long he had to rest his single back leg.

He could never live forever, our Stumbles and in the end Dad decided to give him the send-off he deserved. A flaming Viking ship, a raft out to sea. With gold coins on his eyes and a drink for the ocean, as he drifted to the horizon.

The following year we went down to the sea. We took his urn. In some ways part of our wish had been granted. We let the wind take him. We'd pour some rum Dad gave us into the channel and sing sea shanties and he'd sing them back.