

SECOND PLACE

2022 RICK DE MARINIS SHORT STORY PRIZE

THE WHALE

Julie Trimmingham

Call me crazy, but I'm comfortable with not being able to explain and measure everything under the sun. What happened was real, even though Mark, committed as he is to a certain fastidious logic and warped by his rage, tries to convince me that something has gone wrong in my brain, maybe a minor stroke, early onset dementia, menopause, and/or quitting the anxiety meds that kept me plump and tame. I can hear him convincing himself as he speaks, as if saying it aloud will make it true. He pities me, he says, his voice snaking into what must sound like pity to him. If I stay, he says, he will take care of me, see that I get the treatment I need. If I leave him, he softly explains, he will go *scorched earth*, as if he were some kind of fire-breathing dragon.

It's an old trick, calling a woman crazy. Ancient Greeks eavesdropping on Cassandra thought she was nuts, but people who knew the whole story knew that she was being punished for the crime of rejecting a man (who also happened to be a god). Scorned and bitter, Apollo used his superpowers to jumble the words — the true prophecies — that fell from her tongue so that nobody would ever believe her. Mark is a man (who happens to be just a man) and I plan to get my words out as straight as I can.

He blames the whale, and in a way he's not wrong. If anyone here is a god, she is.

We were in Miami for Mark's work. Some millionaire had seen one of Mark's houses in a magazine and had hired Mark's firm. I like it when Mark goes away, I like keeping my own schedule, but he likes it when I accompany him. I make sure he has good coffee in the morning, I affirm his wardrobe choices, listen to him monologue about his work, I'll tell him funny little stories when he needs distracting. And also: sex. I have been, and am, a comfort to him.

"She's down there, you know," he'd said when he was booking tickets. "Babe. At the water park."

"AquaWorld," I corrected.

Mark enjoyed being mildly scandalized about how much money I gave to various efforts to bring Babe out of captivity. He liked indulging me, and also chiding me about how the money could be more effectively spent on, for instance, the election of local officials who might legislate better environmental policy. Ever since I'd first heard about Babe, I'd felt a tug towards her. I went to a few events dedicated to her on the islands and in Seattle, but I never showed up in an orca onesie, or chanted, or cried. I always felt like the dry-eyed bitch in the crowd. At any rate, Mark knew Babe was surefire bait. Of course I'd go to Miami.

If ever you look up into the night sky and see a whale there, that's *Cetus*, so named by ancient Greeks. And if you see the star shining brightest there, that's *Mira*. Me.

I was named after a grandmother, not a star, but still, when I learned this a few years back it did seem like a sign from the universe. I'd been a remarkably fat baby and a somewhat fat child. I'd get teased with nicknames like *Blubber* and *Whale*, bullying that may have contributed to my teenage anorexia though it may have also caused the dreams that started in middle school, dreams about whales, dreams that — mercifully — have never stopped.

The first morning I woke up in Miami, I wanted to swim in the ocean. Mark was already off meeting his client, who'd helicoptered in from Jupiter Island. I'd overslept, almost missed the breakfast buffet. Coffee, and eggs, or the rubbery scrambled protein that passed for such. I'd once had to explain to Eyepatch that eggs came out of chickens. She'd been only five at the time, but stubborn. She argued with me that eggs came from the grocery store until I showed her a video of a farmer collecting eggs from underneath broody hens. They come out of her hole? she'd asked, horrified. Afterwards, she started calling eggs chickenshit and would refuse to eat them.

The hotel concierge handed me a map and told me not to walk to Miami Beach, but rather cab or take the Metromover, a small sky-train. On the map, the beach looked close to the hotel, a short walk through a park and along the water's edge. I set off, feeling fresh. A construction detour soon forced me inland, the only sidewalk available ran next to a four-lane urban highway. The air was hot and noisy and stank of diesel; my skin became a film of sweat and dust. My sandals had been comfortable enough when I was sitting at breakfast, but now that I was walking, I remembered that the sandals were new and had

yet to be broken in. I could feel blisters blooming on my soles and bunions. Dancing had made my feet ugly, if strong. I was limping by the time I got to Venetian Causeway, a long and narrow strip of bridge and land from which mansions hung.

The salt water teased from below the Causeway I walked on. There was no escape from the sun. I wanted to swim and my want kept me moving. I was ready, wearing a bikini under my sundress. Mark says not bearing a child is why my stomach is still so taut, my breasts so firm and full. His ex got what she called a *Mommy job* right after she divorced Mark. I was pregnant once, briefly. I wouldn't have minded a few stretch marks or a little sag, but I've cared for EyePatch as I imagine I'd care for a child that sprang from my own belly. Recently, she and I had taken to playing a video game called *Sea of Thieves*, which was a natural choice for her given that our avatars were stereotypical one-eyed pirates. I liked the mermaids in the game, and though EyePatch said they were *dumbasses* and *goofy*, I could tell she liked them too.

The causeway eventually gave way to more land, and shops began to appear. I went into the first cafe I saw, ordered an iced latte and asked about a drugstore. I wanted to buy bandaids for my feet but the barista misunderstood my request and offered to sell me some coke, or at least that's what I think he was offering. He had a thick accent, maybe Slavic, and I could feel him appraising me, not sexually, but financially. Like he knew how much I'd paid for my purse, my diamond earrings. Mark is one for understated extravagance.

Blocks and blocks and blocks, then a stretch where the street was checkered in black and white, no cars or bikes allowed. I felt like a crippled queen moving through the tourist throng, hellbent for the edge of the board.

The sidewalk ended. The sand came right up to the city. There was a short wooden boardwalk over the first stretch of sand, and then that ended, too. I bared my feet and stepped onto the fine and pale sand. It burned my blisters. The Little Mermaid, in the original telling, always feels like she's walking on sharp knives once she's traded her tail for feet. I felt sharply knived as I ran toward the water, vaguely aware of people clustered under umbrellas, and, further away, of white tents whose walls fluttered in the breeze, and waiters bearing drinks to the people in the tents.

On shore, there were no beach grasses, nor wrack. No Turkish towel or witch's hair or kelp. No tidal pools. No driftwood. No pebbles. Only an expanse of sand the color of dried bone. In the air there, were

no seagulls or eagles or cormorants or herons. No birds, which I took to mean no fish. The water was as plain as the sand. A relentless turquoise from here to eternity. None of the variable, pulsating beauty possessed by the sea back home where the randy Pacific fingers the land, coaxing from her a pleasure of islands and fertile estuary, green-gray waters stippled with heartbreaking blue. Here there was no ruffling of the wind upon the water, no currents and rips and clashing tides. Here, the waves crashed uniformly.

In the water, a dad with a small child jumped the waves. Some teens pretended to drown each other. I waded into the dead Atlantic, hoping for some kind of relief or transport. Back home on the island, I'd often waded into the sea, we lived not far from Dead Man Bay. Whales often passed by. There is something about standing in the in-between, being both wet and dry, that feel like the edge between the self and the greater-than. The power of a threshold. And so I stood in this other ocean, the one that flowed into Babe's tank. I closed my eyes and tilted my face toward the sun.

The waves wrapped around my calves, knees, thighs. The water ebbed, I felt something graze my skin. A little jellyfish. Life! Tiny, cobalt blue. An unnatural animal color. I bent over to get a closer look. The small blue round was fringed at the edges. Were they tentacles? Would they sting? I've read that the warming oceans will someday be home to only jellyfish, algae, various squishy things, as acidification and warmth kills all the vertebrates and crustaceans. The blue circle floated but had no motion of its own. A spent condom, not alive at all. I jumped out of the water and cabbed back to the hotel, desperate to wash the idea of semen from my skin.

Sperm whales were so called because the white liquid in their heads looked like semen to the men who plundered whale bodies for oil, blubber, and other riches. Whale fat lit up our lives for a while; the fossil fuels that are killing us all now probably saved the whales. Killer whales, being fast and lean, were less frequently hunted but more frequently murdered, shot by fishermen who viewed them as competition or monsters. These were men who could not see the person inside the whale (those who could, never shot them). That's the thing that struck me about Babe when I first learned about her, I couldn't stop thinking about her as someone. Not exactly a woman, but maybe like a woman and something more.

I took a long shower. Though the Miami air was hot, the hotel was

artificially and overly cold. I welcomed the warm water. There was an oxide stain around the drain. I bandaged my feet; years of ballet had made me expert. I took a nap, woke, then put on my favorite blue sundress, it felt like wearing a wave, the way it flowed around me.

Down in the hotel lobby, I ordered a mojito. Mark wanted to meet for lunch. After, I'd go to Babe's show, I'd already bought a ticket online.

Barely past noon and the bar was already crowded, the hotel seemed to be hosting various conferences. There was only one empty seat at the bar, and it was beside me. Soon it was filled by a man. I heard him ask the bartender if they had Clamato juice. The bartender said no, so the man ordered a virgin Bloody Mary. He had a nice voice, a little dusky. And soft. The harried bartender set the man's drink in front of me.

As I slid the drink to its proper place in front of the man, the glass caught on a coaster and toppled over, the tomato juice pooling on the bar. The man swiftly righted the glass and laughed.

"Looks like a crime scene," he said of the white napkins turning red. He ordered a replacement for himself and, before I could protest, another drink for me.

He had full lips, dark hair that hung in loose curls around his face. Dark circles under dark eyes. He was a Canadian photographer down for a shoot. He quickly got my story out of me, or at least the part about how I was in Miami for Babe, how she was part of the family of killer whales that I loved back home, how she'd been captured as a child and sold to AquaWorld. I told him I was a dancer, and that I was thinking about choreographing a killer whale piece, an idea that hadn't occurred to me until that moment, an idea that Mark would've dismissed immediately, but Guy seemed intrigued.

"Why Babe?" He asked about the whale's name. "After the pig in the movie? Because she's fat?"

"The owner wanted to breed her, pimp her out, and he thought she was a total babe. For a killer whale," I said.

"You're kidding."

"Not even. They called her *nubile* and *curvy*."

He recoiled theatrically, "Nubile? But she's old now, right?"

"Are you implying that she's no longer sexy?"

"We should totally go to her show," he said.

"Brilliant," I said, imagining what this guy, whose actual name was Guy, would be like in bed. Mark and I had sex often. It was always quick and efficient. In my mind, sex with Guy would be some-

thing luxurious, maybe even pleasurable.

That's when Mark, the husband I hadn't mentioned to Guy, showed up. Looking at Guy, he leaned in to kiss my head, laying claim.

"Sorry I'm late," he said. "Looks like the party's already started."

"Nice chatting with you," Guy said to me as he upped and left. I sucked the last bits of rum from the minty ice cubes as Mark slid into the seat still warm from Guy's backside.

"Let me get you another," Mark said.

"No, no, thanks, I've already had two."

"Sweet." He liked it when I was a little boozy. He felt it smoothed the edges, as if alcohol were sandpaper and I were a stubborn plank, splintery. He started out as a builder before he became an architect, and still has a keen sense of wood.

"Your client behave?" I asked.

"I wish. Now he wants all the doors, which have already been built, to be three inches wider because of something his astrologer said." Mark hates astrology. He's an Aries and thinks that he is the sole agent of change in his life.

"So you're designing doors this afternoon?"

"Nah, I thought we'd check out some museums," he said. I hate museums as much as he hates astrology.

"But I told you, I've got a ticket to her show."

"What show?"

I could see him answering his own question.

"Okay, so I guess we're going whale watching," he said.

During the cab ride from the hotel to AquaWorld, I scrolled through the news on my phone. Mark said, *What's new* so I reported what I was reading: that a movie star had been accused of licking his wife's wounds. If she sliced her thumb while cutting a bagel, he would suck the blood from her thumb. He also tried to persuade her to surgically remove a couple of her ribs so he could cook them and eat the meat off them.

Mark looked at me in disgust, "Why are you even reading that? What is wrong with you?"

"I think it's the movie star that has something wrong?" I said.

"But whatever."

The only killer whales who have ever killed people have been those

held in captivity. Cetus was different, though, the whale in the sky, the whale of the ancient ocean. She was free and always hungry, always hunting. One day as she was about to eat a princess tied to rock, a hero flew in and killed Cetus, saved the princess. We define hero in relation to the princess, what about the whale who just wanted breakfast?

Mark liked to joke that we saved each other. We'd met when we were both lonely and desperate, that we fell into each other, at once falling object and abyss. We lived high on a bluff overlooking the water, in a house that Mark had designed and built before we met. The house had many rooms, few things, and had been featured in architectural magazines. As we were on an acreage some miles out of town, I could go for days without seeing anyone but Mark and Eye-patch, on the days we had her. She was eleven now and chunky, as I had been, which worried Mark but not me. She and I made snickerdoodles and cinnamon toast, we'd go to the beach and skip rocks. I'd coached her when she choreographed a solo routine to Alicia Keys's *This Girl is on Fire*. She interpreted the lyrics literally and set the song during the Salem witch trials, wearing a red leotard under a skirt we made from strips of yellow and orange fabric. *Tongues of flame*, she explained to me. Mark and I and our elderly neighbor, a woman who fed apple slices to the the local deer, were her audience. As Eyepatch lip-synched the final lines of the song, she'd stood against the flagpole in the front yard with her hands behind her back as if she were shackled there, burning alive.

I could tell Mark was oddly entranced by AquaWorld and its retro-futurism science fair vibes. The low-rise bright blue buildings curved in unexpected ways, there were tunnels and dead ends and lots of grottos. Cracked concrete, peeling paint, signs of disrepair and the passage of time everywhere. It seemed somehow the still-active ruins of an ancient, mid-twentieth century civilization. The air was loud with schoolchildren and chlorine.

The BabeArena was open to the sky, the sun screaming down on Babe and Mark and myself and the several hundred other people squished onto the concrete amphitheater seating. Mark had his arm draped around my shoulder in a way that could be read as protective. Babe was zipping around her little tank. Her trainers, dressed in black and white wetsuits, chirped non-stop into their wireless mics. They talked about how sweet Babe was, how horrible the conditions were for her family back home, how polluted the sea was, how clean and

safe and fabulous her tiny tank was. How she was so much older than the killer whales in the wild, essentially, how captivity was a luxury.

"This is stupid," Mark said.

"Totally fucked up," I agreed. Really, what kind of species are we, caging everyone we want to own or control?

"I was talking about us being here," said Mark.

Experience had taught me that saying something like Nobody dragged you would only lead to quiet misery. So, instead, I patted his thigh, as if in thanks.

I watched Babe speed through more laps, more tricks. I wondered how her fishbowl-shaped pool would compare to the lap pool I had long fantasized about. The strait was too cold for regular swims, and there wasn't a good public pool on the island. I'd mentioned this pool to Mark, and he had designed one for me. Like all his work, its casual grace belied its technical complexity. Mine was to be an elegantly proportioned rectangle enclosed in a glass longhouse, the walls of which could be opened in summer. In the animated 3-D tour of the pool on Mark's computer, I could open the glass doors, walk around the pool, admire the potted lemon trees, I could even dive into the water. In real life, we had yet to break ground and there were no immediate plans to do so. I came to understand the pool as a promise, or a prize. I imagined Babe in my imaginary pool, which would barely contain her. I imagined her doing as another captive killer whale had done, banging her head against the concrete wall, trying to escape, dying of a brain bleed.

The furrows and dips, the wrinkled topography of killer whale brains make ours look smooth, simple. Their vast brains have parts that ours don't have, so we can only guess what these brain parts do, and our guess is that they have something to do with empathy. Killer whales are bonded to one another so deeply that our notion of love pales in comparison, and they communicate with each other in ways that, to our impoverished human selves, are mysterious. There are anecdotes from researchers and military personnel that describe instances of what we can only call telepathy.

Though I rarely checked in on the various social media groups dedicated to Babe, I saw enough to know that most posts were filled, if not with outrage about her captivity, then with dreams and prayers, stories of connection and correspondence. Sometimes there would be a visit to AquaWorld, Babe would swim to the person standing at the edge of her tank, she would meet their gaze, and then the human

heart would feel full and the human mind would perceive a warm and gentle voice that reminded them of a lullaby. Babe would tell them that she was scared, that she wanted to go home, or that she was okay, or that she loved them. I was always caught between incredulity and belief when reading these accounts. It's sometime hard to tell prophet from pretender, charlatan from saint. That voice in your head right now, is it there or is it only you—desperately, beautifully, earnestly—wanting the voice to be there?

There really weren't all that many tricks. When the trainer threw a chunk of dead fish into the air, Babe would spring from the water and catch it. The trainer gestured and Babe poked her head above water and looked around at the audience. Another hand cue and she showed us her tail. She swam by on her side, splashing the water with her pectoral fin, the water droplets arced through the air and rained on the first few rows of audience. Mark and I were too far away to get wet.

Apparently this splash was the grand finale. The trainers started to clap, and then the audience started to clap, and then people started to drift away, Mark with them, expecting me to be right behind. Instead, I went to the side of Babe's tank, there were others there, too. We all had our phones out, recording video, and we were calling to her, vying for her attention. I noticed a guy with an old-school camera, zoom lens and all, held up to his face. Lanky body, loose dark curls. Guy. I felt a flush of possibility, a tiny thrill, like maybe he'd come because he knew I'd be here. I hadn't flirted, even glancingly, in so long. I could almost taste the mojito from hours before, the feeling of laughter in my mouth. Then he lowered his camera. Not Guy at all. A distraction.

I wanted to get closer to Babe, I hadn't come all this way to get a few wide angle shots. I felt if I could get a little higher, I could lean in. The wall around the tank was about chest level, and there were some chinks in it. My left foot slid easily into a crack about two-thirds of the way up. I shifted my weight onto and then straightened my left leg, raising myself.

One thing I can do is balance, I know how to cantilever my body in various gravity-defying ways. I haven't gone to a proper studio for years, but I have a barre at home and practice regularly with the Danish National Ballet online classes. Instinctively, I stretched my right leg back in arabesque, arched my spine, and lowered my chest toward the water. A deep penché, standing splits. As I did so, Babe

swam right to me, spy-hopped, as if she were standing straight up in the water. Our faces were inches apart. We looked into one another's eyes.

Witnesses later told me that the sunlight caught in my hair, which is long and blond and was pulled back in a ponytail. Unlike her relatives in the sea who spend most all of their time playing underwater in the amber light streaming through kelp forests, hunting salmon whose scales flash in the sunlight, diving into the cool darkness of the deep, Babe's entire life is focused above the surface, on her trainers, on the audience. There's nothing to see below the surface in her tank, the water is clear and shallow, the concrete walls are a faded blue. She's hungry for excitement, for stimulation. Some people believe that Babe was attracted to my ponytail because it was a novelty, that maybe she thought it was a shiny new toy.

I'm not sure what happened next. I was hovering above Babe, I felt like we were about to connect, that she was about to say something to me. And then I felt Mark grab my supporting leg, my thigh. My body knows his hands. I didn't have time to think, I simply reacted. It's almost chemical, or maybe magnetic at a certain point.

Mark once had told me that he was *repulsed* by me. Lying in bed the night of Eyepatch's burning dance, he asked me why I had *done something like that* to his daughter. I told him that it was all her idea, I'd just taped the fire skirt panels to her leotard and showed her how to balancé and pas-de-bouurrée in her impassioned yet dignified approach to the stake. So, *repulsion*. The opposite of attraction, a reaction as described by physics. Mark might as well have pushed me.

Time got wet, it splashed around. I remember falling and falling and falling, I could see Babe's open mouth getting bigger and bigger, her massive pink tongue, I could hear her calling in a language I didn't understand, clicks and squeals. I squeezed tight my eyes. Somehow I landed softly.

A feeling of home washed over me. I was in the sea, coming up from a deep dive, swimming towards the sun. Or I was a child again, I'd fallen asleep and my mother was carrying me, I was safe. Or I was playing, leaping and twisting and moving through air as if I could fly, every cell of myself exuberant. I could hear the ha-há ha-há call of seagulls, and feel the slick ribbons of bull kelp slide against me. I couldn't tell what skin I was in, woman or whale, and I didn't care. I belonged to myself. I was free.

And then I blinked my eyes open, saw the pink human faces

looking down at me, squawks and shrieks coming out of their holes. The burden of performance, of being watched, was a heaviness upon me. But it was also a habit, one that kept me in motion, kept me from sinking right down to the bottom of the pool.

AquaWorld insisted on an ambulance. Mark rode with me. I tried to tell him what it had been like with Babe, though my words were a scramble. Or rather, words were inadequate, it was an experience that did not fit into language. I could see Mark reacting to the story, backing away from the wildness of it and strategizing on how best to contain or domesticate it.

Hours later, after I'd been released from the hospital –I had no injuries– Mark and I returned the hotel room. I took a hot bath. As I was wrapping myself up in a plush white hotel robe, AquaWorld's press secretary called. The official explanation for my topple was that Mark came to haul me off the edge, to save me. The story is that his grip on my thigh slipped.

Mark took the phone from me so that he could speak directly to AquaWorld. I heard him grunting in agreement, then insisting that they use my maiden name, and call him "the husband." This was not the kind of publicity he wanted.

"I was fine," I said, after he hung up. "I wouldn't have fallen."

"Oh, Mira," he said. "You're concussed."

Babe and I made the late news that night. A tourist who'd been in the audience swore that Babe lunged at me, that she grabbed my ponytail and pulled me into the pool, but one of Babe's trainer's countered that Babe had seemingly positioned herself to catch me. None of the video footage showed the fall or aftermath clearly, the frame was shaky, the lens: splashed. You can hear gasps and cries and AquaWorld staff trying to herd the tourists out from the BabeArena as they realize what has happened.

Once upon a time a man fell into a killer whale tank and was killed. Once upon a time a captive killer whale dragged his trainer down to the bottom of the pool and drowned her. The people who'd gathered around Babe's tank expected that something similarly exciting might happen to me, you could hear the frustrated bloodlust in their voices as they described the event to the television reporter. *Sure she was dinner*, was one remark.

Instead of eating me, mauling me, or drowning me, Babe had carried me on her nose to the side of her pool. A scientist explained

how killer whale mothers will carry their dead infants in such a way. So did Babe think the woman was dead? the reporter asked.

Even when the news replayed the video in slow motion, the fall and postlapsarian ride took only about seven seconds. Blink and it's over, whereas being with her felt, and still feels, like an ongoing present-tense, something that's like blood, a fluid part of me. This feeling is not a discreet memory object, not a video clip that flashes by like a little fish.

In the water with Babe feels like dreamtime, but my memories of what happened next are quite crisp, dry, precise. After Babe nudged me onto the pool's shallow ledge, a couple of Security beefs materialized and led me away —not gently— to Mark and handed me over. The tourists were gone and press had not arrived, so there is no recording of Mark barking at Security, threatening to sue AquaWorld. I remember somebody talking about making the wall around the tank higher so that cameras, babies, women, whatever, wouldn't fall in.

I looked over at the pool, the water now calm. Babe had swum up onto the same ledge she'd set me upon and was lying there obediently while a staff member plunged a huge syringe into her fluke. Someone said something about a sedative. I don't remember being cold, but I started shivering uncontrollably. The bright sun stung my eyes.

By the side of the whale tank, I sat down and wept.

Mark came and sat beside me, his hands resting on his thighs, his back ramrod straight. He didn't look at me as he said, "I wasn't going to lose you to a fucking whale."