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Orca whales, dreams, and anxiety

She came to me in a dream.

At first, I was unaware of her ethereal form. Looking back, I doubt she was even there when it began, but then again, how did she manage to find me? My task in this fantasy world was innocent enough, so innocent that I thought my experience was reality. I was simply running errands in the stores that I missed frequenting in my waking life, at times running into old friends and high school classmates. I hadn't seen them since graduation almost a year ago, but it feels like it's been forever. Still, nothing seemed out of the ordinary until I felt something. It was that feeling you get when someone is watching you, following you, stalking you. I looked around and saw no one, just shelves lined with canned goods, and displays of obviously faux flowers, but the goosebumps texturing the skin on my upper arms let me know I was wrong.

When I was in elementary school, I had two personas. At home, I was a loud weirdo, who could be overly emotional at times, but was generally content with anything that came my way. At school, though, I was painfully shy and completely reserved, but still one hundred percent eager to learn whatever my teachers wanted to teach me. When it came time for parent-teacher conferences, both parties were utterly baffled at how different I was in and out of school. My teachers would always say *She's a pleasure to have in class, but I wish she would talk more and*

my mom would quickly rebut *You should see her at home. I can't get her to shut up!* And the cycle went on and on...

My kindergarten teacher knew something was off about me even before I did. I was prone to emotional breakdowns in response to any last-minute change in routine, like impromptu movies or school-wide assemblies, both of which would conveniently occur right before dismissal time. All at once, I would be overwhelmed by stress. My breathing became rapid and shallow (my lungs didn't want to fill with air) and the feeling of impending doom made it impossible to fight off tears. The thing I remember most, though, was the wave of heat that would radiate off my face and body. I was the freaking sun and I hated it. To this day, I'm not fond of summertime because I'll often feel suffocated by the hot, humid air that surrounds me like a cocoon.

As an orca, you can only exist in the ocean for so long before your freedom is stripped from you. You'll be soaring through the icy cool waters of the north, exploring a vast world full of color and life. For a time, you are blissfully unaware of anything above the surf, content to spend your days frolicking with others in your pod. Then one day, the humans come with their boats and nets and corrals. The adults know what's happening, so as the herd tries to escape, the mothers quietly lead their babies to safety while the males lead the boats in the opposite direction. Unfortunately, this tactic isn't enough to trick the humans and they find you anyway. They ride their boats around the perimeter, dropping large nets as they go to keep everyone inside. Then they separate you from your mother; they only want the babies.

Without warning, you feel something rising underneath you and then it starts to surround you. A primal fear awakens inside you and you cry out to your mother. She calls back, but you

can't see her because whatever you're wrapped inside won't allow you to turn your head. Your fins are trapped by your sides as you feel yourself rising with your prison. The sun, which usually feels so pleasant when you leap out of the water, burns on your back and tail, and once again, you plead for someone to help. The mothers refuse to leave even though they were released hours ago, but still no one can reach you. Panic has fully set in when the humans load you onto their boats, but there's nothing you can do to stop it. You can only watch as you are ferried away.

My mom was distraught by this development, as any mother would be, thinking that she had done something wrong. My dad, who acts as the voice of reason in these situations, assured her that everything was going to be fine. My teacher recommended that I see the school counselor. At first, I was offended, or at least as offended as a six year old can be, because I didn't see the problem. Sure, I was on the verge of tears whenever fun activities spontaneously appeared on the daily docket, but I thought *who isn't*? It was only after my mom explained that this was not typical behavior for a child, that I decided maybe seeing the counselor was for the best.

The counselor called it anxiety. Such a small word with so many implications, most of which I was yet to learn. I met with her a few times a week in the beginning. For half an hour, we usually just played board games (my favorite was Mouse Trap) and talked about what was going well and what I needed to work on. If I'm being honest, I don't think she actually helped that much with my anxiety, but I did enjoy her company. I ended up just teaching myself how to cope with the emotional discomfort of change, albeit in a not-so-healthy way: escapism. For five years, kindergarten through fourth grade, whenever I felt like a routine change was too much for

me to handle, I would simply tell my teacher I wasn't feeling well and my grandmother would pick me up from the nurse. If I wasn't able to cope this way, I would be reduced to a sobbing mess, entirely incapable of functioning properly.

As quickly as the uneasiness settled upon me, it dissipated, leaving me wondering why I was so paranoid in the first place. I continued about my business, choosing to ignore the previous discomfort. After all, I was probably imagining it and frankly, I didn't care to look like a crazy person searching for something that wasn't there.

By the time I got to middle school, my anxiety seemed to be gone. I was accustomed to a constantly changing schedule and I knew that if I wasn't able to catch my regular bus home, I would just hang around and wait for the next one. It also helped that I got my first phone in sixth grade, so if I needed to, I could call home without having to make up any excuses. Everything seemed to be working out for me: I had a great group of friends, most of which I kept going into high school, I got myself a boyfriend at one point that lasted an entire school year, and best of all, I was emotionally stable.

That last part is due largely to the fact that I picked up chorus as an elective, and found that music and singing are much more effective as coping mechanisms than faking a stomach ache. Oh, how I must've wailed when I started singing, letting most of my screechy notes be contained by my bedroom walls. Still, I was so shy at first when I had to sing around other people, especially at school. I was so afraid that if I sang too loud, my emotions would creep into the lyrics, and everyone would find out and tease me about them. I already had to deal with people thinking I was strange for crying all the time in elementary school, and I'd be damned if

that judgement was dragged into my middle school experience as well. Of course, they had no idea what I was really going through; there was still a bit of stigma around mental health that I was ashamed to correct anyone. Even in my group of friends, there were times I felt like I was a book that people would pick up for a second, only to decide that the story was too complicated to keep their interest.

You arrive at a facility, your skin dry and cracking after being bound for an indefinite amount of time with little water. At sea, you at least knew day from night because of the moon, whose stark white surface shone against the backdrop of a glimmering midnight blue. You cling to a shred of hope, praying that this is all a dream, and for a second, you think you may be right as you slide into a body of water, but something is wrong. This place is too small, too bright, too artificial. You lash out in frustration. *I guess that's why they call them killer whales*, you hear a human joke from the edge of the pool. You think, *I'm not going to kill you; I'm not even a whale!*, but despite your protests, the humans continue to jeer at you. *You better watch out if you get in the tank with that one*, another one suggests. Your spirit shrivels.

As I'm walking down yet another aisle, that familiar feeling unnerves me again. I can feel the hairs standing up on my neck and my hands feel unsteady. This time, I decide to say something. *Hello?* I ask, trying to stay calm, but my voice is shaky. I hear something in the next aisle, but it's not the sound of movement. It's more like a whirring noise mixed with a quiet chiming, like what I'd imagine a box fan at full speed blowing on wind chimes would sound like. I work up the courage to look through the shelves into the next aisle, but all I see is blackness. That's odd because I was just in that aisle and everything looked normal. That's when I saw the

blackness move, and suddenly it wasn't just black, it was white too, and it wasn't moving, but rather floating.

I fell back against my cart, shocked and astounded by what I'd seen. When I looked through the shelves again, whatever was there a second ago was gone now. I was a bit relieved because I didn't feel ready to face it. My heart was pounding as I grabbed onto my cart to proceed with my perusing. I couldn't shake the feeling that the being I saw was simply waiting for an opportunity to strike when I wasn't paying attention. As I rounded the corner in front of the coolers to walk around the outskirts of the store, I noticed a faint mist coming from the aisle farthest from me. I couldn't tell if it was dark blue or black, so I approached it out of curiosity. I wasn't far from the aisle when the mist became a dense fog that drifted out in front of me. I squinted my eyes to see if I could make out what was inside. *Orcinus orca*.

It came back when I was a freshman. My dad, a man who was almost always healthy, caught pneumonia the summer before I went to high school. His health deteriorated so fast that my mom, who doesn't usually fight with him about his health, forced him to go to the emergency room. You're probably thinking this is what caused my anxiety to come back, but you would be wrong. Because my dad almost never went to the doctor, he hadn't had a physical since before I was born, and since they already had to admit him for pneumonia, they decided to give him a full check-up to make sure nothing else was wrong. In his blood work and on his scans, they noticed his gallbladder didn't look right. They weren't all that concerned, but they did say he should think about getting it removed, so when my dad left the emergency room, my mom made sure to schedule an appointment to get it checked out.

This would be the start to several months where my dad was in and out of Massachusetts General Hospital because the condition of his gallbladder was exponentially worse than what they originally thought. When he had it removed (which was only the start of this medical drama) the doctor had no idea how my dad managed to walk into the hospital by himself that day. During this time, my family was fueled by each other's worry and stress, and since my mom, my two sisters, and I all struggled with anxiety, there was a lot for us to deal with. I lost about twenty pounds that winter, and that's including all of my holiday dessert binging. There were times where we didn't know if he was going to make it, but I refused to give in to my anxiety. When I reflect on those few months, I despise that I wouldn't let myself feel.

Your days in this grey tank have all been the same. You wake up every day in your tiny, dark storage container only to be released into your barely larger pool. You endlessly follow commands, knowing that if you don't, you would be antagonized and tortured. There were often periods where your captors refused to feed you when you failed to put on a show or you were attacked by another of your kind who had been turned against you. Every day was a forced performance.

You know deep down that this will all be over soon. You can only live in solitude and sadness for so long before you perish out of exhaustion. In your last few days, all you can think about is your family: their effortless movement through the cool ocean waves; the mournful sound of their songs, like a beautiful dance you can only hear; the way your mother used to nudge you along if you started to fall behind. You wonder if they're still out there waiting for you in denial or if they've moved on. The water washes you away.

The orca in her darkened cloud inched towards me, slow enough that I hardly noticed at first. When she picked up speed, I felt my sympathetic nervous system switch on and I knew flight would be my reaction. I turned around and started running, ducking in and out of the aisles, trying to escape her. She was close behind though, and it seemed like she knew my movements before I did. My heart pounded faster than it ever had before and I thought it might explode. While I ran, I wondered how my simple shopping dream turned into a nightmare. I thought I had almost lost her, and I might be able to walk up before I was caught. I was gasping for air when I tripped-

I didn't start having full blown panic attacks until I was a senior in high school. The first one I can remember was in my AP Psychology class during a Socratic seminar on death and dying. My grandfather's health started to diminish that year, so after what happened with my dad, I was terrified. That seminar brought back all of my past emotions, mixed it with my current worries, and turned me into a cold, vibrating ball of stress. My hands were trembling for an hour after I left school that day, and I was terrified I would get into an accident on the drive home.

The worst attack, though, was actually a series of them that happened a week before I was scheduled to leave for college. I had every intention of going to Saint Joseph's, and on surface level it seemed like a perfect fit. I knew this wasn't true though, because in the days leading up to my departure, my anxiety was so bad that anything would trigger a panic response (at one point I think I broke down in tears over my mom asking what I wanted for lunch). I talked it over with pretty much everyone I knew, and while they didn't want me to torture myself, they also didn't want me to give up before I had even tried. For the first time in my life, I

was truly lost and alone because I didn't have an answer. I was back in elementary school, a scared and helpless kid trying to figure out what was wrong with me.

I applied and was accepted to the University of New England just a few days later. That weekend, which was move-in weekend for everyone else, I still wasn't sure if I'd made the right choice. I went to orientation, and I felt fine, but I was afraid it was my mind giving me false hope. When I got to campus that Wednesday for class, my gut told me this is where I belonged. I haven't had a panic attack since.

I landed on my hands and knees, but before I knew what was happening, I flipped over onto my back, propped up on my elbows. I tried to catch my breath as quietly as I could, but she had found me anyway. We were at opposite ends of an aisle, just staring at each other, waiting for the other to react. It felt like we were in a western movie, engaged in a high-noon standoff. She began to approach me while I was still on the ground, but all I could do was watch. Even in my state of panic, she was still the most beautiful and majestic creature I had ever seen.

She was only a few feet away from me when I noticed something. While I was clearly afraid of this experience, I had never actually been afraid of her. Her energy was not threatening in the slightest, and if anything it was cautionary. She was as frightened as I was, but she was willing to confront this fear. I decided to give it a shot, so I stood up to face her. She stopped about a foot from my face at eye level, pausing to let me adjust. I reached my hand up to touch her skin, making sure to move slowly so as not to startle her. My fingers landed softly on her rostrum and the dark mist surrounding her lightened to a gentle blue. The fear that had manifested in my body disappeared. As we peered into each other's faces, I knew that she felt the same familiarity that I was feeling.