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Somewhere Between Black and White

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. The threat of Covid potentially impacting my family encouraged me to stay home as much as possible. Still, nothing seemed out of the ordinary in my dream state until I felt something. It was that feeling you get when someone is watching you, following you, stalking you. I looked around but saw no one, just shelves lined with canned vegetables and displays of obviously faux flowers stacked on a dingy green carpet. However, the goosebumps texturing the skin on my upper arms let me know I was wrong.

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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 reserved, but still eager to learn whatever my teachers wanted to teach me. When it came time for parent-teacher conferences, both parties were baffled by 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, and she brought it up to my mom and I at one of those parent-teacher conferences. She had noticed that 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.

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

Without warning, a sling begins to rise beneath the calf and then it surrounds them. A primal fear awakens and they cry out to their mother. She calls back, but the young orca can't see her because whatever they're wrapped in won't allow them to turn their head. Their fins are trapped by their sides as they feel themselves rising with their prison. The sun, which usually feels so pleasant when they leap out of the water, burns their back and tail, and once again, the baby pleads for someone to help. The mothers call back, begging for their children to be set free, but no one wants to listen. Panic has fully set in for the younglings as they are loaded onto the boats, but there's nothing they can do to stop it. They can only watch as they are ferried away.

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The counselor called it anxiety. Such a small word with so many implications, most of which I had yet to learn. My first impression of her was that she was super tall, much taller than anyone else I'd ever met, and yet her height didn't feel imposing at all. I met with her a few times a week in the beginning. For half an hour, she would continuously put on and remove her glasses, which were conveniently attached to an eyeglass chain, while we talked about what was going on. We also played a lot of board games. My go-to game was Mouse Trap, which I liked because of the building element, but I always found the end to be a bit stressful. You spend roughly half the game anticipating the final piece, a red basket, dropping down on your mouse while you run in circles underneath it. No matter who wins or loses, nothing beats the feeling of relief when that basket finally falls and the game is over.

If I'm being honest, I don't think my counselor actually helped that much with my anxiety, but I did enjoy her company. I ended up 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.

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As quickly as the uneasiness of being watched 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. I leaned over the handles of my empty shopping cart, resting my body weight on my elbows, and strolled through more aisles. I put on a brave face, but my mind toyed with the possibility that I wouldn't be safe forever.

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By the time I got to middle school, my anxiety seemed to be a thing of the past. 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 was 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. I knew one day that I'd be confident enough to share my new skill with anyone who wanted to hear it, and that with more practice, I could develop a singing voice all my own. 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 allowed myself to get lost in a piece, 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 decent amount of stigma around mental health that I was ashamed to correct anyone. Even in my group of friends, at 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.

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When a captured orca arrives at a training facility, their skin is dry and cracking after being bound for an indefinite amount of time with little water. At sea, at least they knew day from night because of the moon, whose stark white surface shines against the backdrop of a glimmering midnight blue. They cling to a shred of hope, that this is all a dream, and for a second, they think they may be right as they slide into a body of water, but something is wrong. This place is too small, too bright, too artificial. They lash out in frustration, their mournful calls echoing off concrete walls as they thrash about in their containment. *I guess that's why they call 'em killer whales*, their captors joke from the edge of the pool. The orca's thinking, *I'm not going to kill you; I'm not even a whale!*, but despite

protesting, the humans continue to jeer. *You better watch out if you get in the tank with that one*, another one suggests. The animal's spirit shrivels.

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*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. **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 relieved because I didn't feel ready to face it. My heart pounded as I grabbed onto my cart. 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.***

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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. After several months of week-long hospital stays, followed by more weeks of watching my dad wither away, the doctors were finally able to stabilize his condition. Over the next year, he slowly returned to his usual self, albeit thinner, with a few more scars, and a few more daily medications. Throughout this ordeal, I refused to give in to my anxiety, pushing it as far away as I could because I felt like I needed to be strong for everyone. When I reflect on those months where he was laid up, I can't help but despise that I wouldn't let myself feel.

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As years pass by, the orca's days in a grey tank are all the same. They wake up every day in a tiny, dark storage container only to be released into a barely larger pool. They endlessly follow commands, knowing that if they don't oblige, they'll be antagonized and tortured. There are often periods where the captors refuse to feed them if they fail to put on a show, or they'll be attacked by another orca who has been turned against them. Every day is a forced performance.

Deep down, they know this will all be over soon. An animal whose life should revolve around family can only live in solitude and sadness for so long before they perish out of exhaustion. In the orca's last few days, the dream about their 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 a mother would nudge their baby along if they started to fall behind. Are they still out there waiting in denial or have they moved on? The water washes them away.

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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-

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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 College, 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 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. For the first time in what seemed like forever, I felt like I was finally on the right path and I was at peace with myself. The inner turmoil had subsided and I could breathe again. I haven't had a panic attack since.

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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 eyes, I knew that she felt the same familiarity that I was feeling.