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Retrospection

I cover my bare neck with a shaking hand as Keet and I walk away from the Camas Island airport terminal. The buzz of a plane taking to the sky draws my eyes upward, but distracted by memories, I don't see it. In my mind, the past year unspools like an old movie: jittery and smooth, dark and light.

When my now ex-husband told me he'd fallen in love with a man named Carlos, we'd divorced. The anger I felt at his betrayal was the first genuine emotion I'd had in the two decades of our colorless marriage. The only reason I hesitated leaving Texas was my daughter. But after months of debate, I sold our family home and moved to an island in the Pacific Northwest. I'd adopted two dogs and made peace with my ability to know what an animal is experiencing by the feelings in my body—a long-denied skill I no longer care to suppress.

I remove my hand from my neck, recalling the whirlwind love that had grown between Keet and me. I hear the echoes of his deep voice telling me he was Keykwin, one of the last of a dying race of beings who could live as both human and orca. He called them Blackfish. After surrendering to my feelings about him, feelings I thought were long dead, Keet was captured as orca. Weeks after his escape and finding his way home, he left me, saying he couldn't be human anymore. He changed into orca and swam away. Still knifing through my heart is the intensity of heartbreak that the gray and solitary winter did nothing to soothe. I remind myself that I'd spent twenty years being alone with a husband. Being in the company of dogs is easier.

Yanking open the car door, I'm as far from giving in to the memories of Keet as the plane high overhead. I throw myself into the driver's seat, jam the key into the ignition, and rev my old Honda's engine. On the passenger side, Keet barely shuts his door before I hit the gas and turn the wheel toward my cabin in Osprey Bay.

One

Keet stares out the window as I tell him about the solitary orca I saw in the bay near our homes.

“Are you sure it was a female orca? Alone?”

“Positive. I hope she’s still there when we get back.” I take my foot off the accelerator as we approach the pothole that yawns ahead, threatening, as it has all winter, to swallow my Honda whole. Sunlight reaching its long fingers through the trees’ new leaves casts spangles across the road’s surface. In another month, the forest floor on either side will be covered by the brighter greens of ferns. The month of April is a hesitant walk between winter and spring here on Camas Island.

“Tell me again what you saw.”

“Only her head, bobbing on the waves; she was spy hopping. Her eyepatch was thin and long. The strange thing is, she seemed to be looking at your house.”

“That doesn’t sound normal to me, either. Think she—or he—was sick?” He’s holding on to the grab bar, steadying himself against the rickety ride.

“I got the feeling she was watching. Even with the binoculars, I couldn’t see her saddle patch, but her dorsal fin was small and pointy, not rounded like yours. I believe we can assume she’s a she.”

“Huh.” Keet releases the grab bar and runs his hand over the dark stubble that covers his head like velvet. There’s more silver at his temples than I remember. Hell, I have gray in my hair, too.

“No saddle patch? No markings behind her dorsal fin at all?”

White-knuckling the steering wheel, I shake my head and swerve to miss another pothole. I loosen my grip as I breathe, hoping also to loosen the grip of my anxiety about Keet. The sound of his voice brings up memories, which I then shove down. He keeps talking, which makes it harder to shove.

“I was thinking she might be part of an offshore pod. But offshore orcas, as a rule, don’t come in this far, and their saddle patches are visible. And it might be a coincidence, but I haven’t seen the seal or the otter in several days. I wonder if she’s been hanging around and they’ve found somewhere safer?”

“Or she ate them.”

After checking to see that I have a smooth stretch of road, I throw him a look.

“Let’s not talk about death right away, shall we?” I feel my hands tightening around the steering wheel again, and my breath is stuck somewhere in my chest. I clear my throat, hoping the anger that’s whipping around me like a hurricane will thin out, at least long enough for him to get out of my car without me saying something I might regret.

Both his glance and his smile are quick and nervous. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to sound heartless. But she doesn’t sound like a Resident orca, and if she’s not a Resident, that means she may eat other mammals.”

I’m about to snap that I’ve already heard the spiel but swallow the words. The memory of my first whale watching trip on his sailboat flashes through my head, and the graceful arc of the black backs of the orcas through the waves we saw that day.

I clear my throat again. “They’ve kept me company. I don’t like to think of them being eaten. Especially when they seem to feel safe in the cove.” Keet’s profile is familiar but his presence, not so much. I take some more deep breaths, but the flames of my rage are searing me from the inside. Hoping to extinguish them, I continue to describe the mysterious orca.

“Besides her exhale, which wasn’t that loud, I couldn’t hear a thing. Not a click or a chirp. And I didn’t feel much either. She felt like a female to me, but other than that, it’s like she’s a ghost orca. No pictures in my head, none of the feelings I get when your pod is around.”

We make the turn down the hill, curving back toward our houses. I park in front of the A-frame cabin that’s been my home for a year. Not for much longer, though. I’m going to need to decide at some point: renew my lease or find somewhere else to live.

When I thought Keet was gone for good, it was hard for me to decide my next step. Figuring out what to do now that he’s back complicates things. That isn’t the source of my anger, however. As I park the car and open the door, I realize that I resent Keet for coming back and acting as though nothing had happened. My anger has been simmering for months, and his return is the spark that’s set it ablaze.

Above the clunk of the car doors, I hear Fae in the cabin, yipping with excitement. Wallace will be beside her, but in the two months I’ve had him, I have yet to hear him vocalize much. As I walk up the steps, I turn and see Keet still standing by the car.

“Wallace is leery of strangers. Don’t try to pet him and he’ll be okay.”

Keet nods. He can’t have missed the change in my tone of voice, and I notice he’s gazing at his house. Opening the door, I ask both dogs to wait. They sit side by side, tails wagging, Fae clicking her teeth in excitement; she sounds like an agitated rattlesnake.

“That’ll do, dogs.”

Released, they burst from the house, nails scabbling on the wooden deck before launching down the steps and into the cove in a flurry of white, red, cream, and tan. Almost as quickly, they emerge from the water and race down the crescent-shaped cove’s rocky beach.

Keet follows me inside, waiting as I set my backpack on the table and my keys on the hook. The glint of Keet’s house key fills my vision, and I take it off the hook.

“Fae’s not much bigger, is she?” he says.

I turn, and for the first time, notice that he looks lighter. His eyes are no longer murky—they’re clear and untroubled. In the seconds it takes for a feeling of buoyancy to flash through me, I realize that he now feels the same as a human as he does when he’s orca. This does nothing to douse my anger.

“Nolee?”

I give him his key. “Your other set of keys is on your kitchen table. I aired out the house and put sheets on the bed yesterday, but there isn’t any food.”

“Thank you for doing that. You didn’t have to.”

I shrug. “No problem. And you’re right ... Fae isn’t much bigger. Wallace makes up for it, though.” I look out the window at the dogs, who are both paddling again in the shallow, sunlit waters of the cove. Wallace, twice Fae’s size, will swim in almost any weather—sun or fog, smooth glassy water or turbulent waves. For the hundredth time, I think that Wallace is part seal; I can’t keep him out of the water.

As though he’s read my thoughts, Keet asks, “If his head were darker, he’d look like a seal. How did you end up with him?”

Turning, I walk outside to the rocky beach, and Keet follows me.

“I worked with him for a while at the shelter, and he was doing great. The volunteers could interact with him, and if they were quiet and didn’t make sudden movements, he was okay. He met Fae, and they played well together. In February, we tried adopting him out to a nice older couple. I thought they would get along.”

“Since he’s here, I guess it didn’t work out?”

“It didn’t. He hardly left his crate for days. The couple called the shelter, and we agreed to take him back. When I went to pick him up, he left the crate and sat by my car. He’s been mine since then.” I smile at the memory and feel my shoulders loosen. Listening to the breeze through the pines, watching the undulations of the water and the dogs playing also helps.

“Do you think it’s because he knows you can hear him? And he gets scared if that isn’t happening?”

I glance at him, not wanting to look into his eyes. Not wanting to throw my anger at him just yet, though I know I’ll have to tell him how I’m feeling at some point. “Maybe.”

After a long silence, he seems to realize that I’m not going to offer any personal insights. “I’ll go check on my house. Do you need anything from the market?”

I shake my head. “No, thanks.”

“Cereal?”

Despite trying to keep a firm grip on any show of affection, I catch myself smiling. “I have plenty.”

“Okay. Thanks for picking me up, Nolee.”

“You’re welcome.”

He waves and walks toward his house, and I watch him walk inside, leaving his door open. That’s the third thing I notice that’s different. Shaved head, a light in his eyes, an open door ... I feel as though I don’t know him, and yet I do. I want to know more. And I don’t want to get closer than I already am.

Climbing the steps up to his front door, Keet still feels warm from seeing Nolee again. He’s surprised by her short hair, and how it shows the pale slope of her neck. He had to stop himself from reaching out and touching her, warned off by her double expression of nervousness and anger. Her light auburn hair, with its strands of silver—like pale silk caught in the bark of red cedar trees—is also curlier than he’s ever seen it. He wants to tell her this, and to share everything that’s happened to him, everything he felt and saw and everything he now knows. He wants to hear everything she’s gone through. But mostly he just wants to hear her.

Keet thinks back to their hug at the airport; it was quick, her body stiff and unyielding. He knew he’d asked more questions than she was comfortable replying to on their trip back home. He wonders about the tension in her voice, certain this is how she used to sound when she was married to her first husband, Nate. His own nervousness had led to him blurting out the remark about the seal and otter being eaten. In his mind, in the milliseconds before thoughts became words, it was his practical observation; death and life are wedded, a marriage of absolutes.

Even after trying to draw her out, she’s contained, a fury without sound. Keet realizes that a storm’s coming, and he’s prepared to face it head on; her anger doesn’t scare him as much as her distance. He watches her join the dogs, then turns to enter his house for the first time since last year, when he was captured as an orca, while swimming with his family pod.

Pocketing the key, he looks around. He wonders if his house has always looked half-lived in, thinks about the years he spent here before Nolee moved in next door. Those memories are as vacant as the house feels. Opening windows, he moves through the kitchen, dining room, and then living room, shaking the curtains as he goes. He makes a mental note to give the local cleaning company a call and find out if they can stop by. He doesn’t mind cleaning, but he also needs to run to town for groceries and stain for the neglected deck. He spent so long convincing himself that

he'd have to give up being human that it had become a habit to ignore many things, including his house. Including himself.

Keet opens the bathroom windows, then goes into his bedroom, where he sees Nolee's drawn the curtains back to let in the warm afternoon light. The bed's made up with wrinkled sheets. Keet's heart sinks when he realizes Nolee chose the oldest set of sheets in his closet, instead of the newer sheets that he'd had on the bed when they spent their first night together. He shakes his head, refusing to be daunted by her choice of bedding.

Walking back to the living area, he looks through the doorway. Keet enjoys letting in the sea and sky. He no longer needs to close the door, keeping himself a prisoner in his own life. He lays his spare key on the table, where it makes a soft click as the metal greets the wood. *This key belongs to Lia*, he thinks, calling her by the name he hears in his heart. Her parents may have given her the name Magnolia, and the world may know her as Nolee, but Lia is the name he hopes to say to her out loud again one day. He looks out the window as she hurls a bright tennis ball into the sea, with Wallace in hot pursuit. The dogs are having a blast. Nolee, it seems, isn't. Keet picks up his car keys, closes the door behind him, and gets into his car, smiling as he thinks about the ways he can inhabit his life once more.

Fae pants beside me as I throw the ball into the cove for Wallace. The rev of Keet's 4Runner and the loud beat of drums and bagpipes from his sound system follow him as he drives away. I focus on the dogs, throwing the wet ball my dripping-wet dog has brought back for me.

"Last one, Wallace, and then it's time for lunch." Whipping my arm back, I fling the ball as far as it will go, hoping my anger will follow it. No such luck. If anything, it seems to grow.

Wallace swims out to the orange ball, snaps at the water until he grabs it, then paddles in a long, slow arc back to shore. Fae makes her way closer to the water, looking first at Wallace and then back at me. As Fae's white paws dance across the rocks, Wallace shakes the water from his coat with a loud jingle of his tags. After rinsing the ball under the spigot, I grab a towel and dry off the dogs on the porch. They both shake now, spraying water on the windows I need to wash. The windows, made hazy by a film of sea salt, match my own feeling of not being able to see clearly. I wish washing off the anger stampeding inside me was as easy as sponging off those windows will be.

No time like the present, as the sages say. Filling up a bucket with warm water, dish soap, and vinegar, I watch the bubbles, an impatience I can't understand bubbling just as rapidly inside me. I haven't been this angry at anyone since Nate, my ex-husband, said he was leaving me for a new love. For months after Keet left, I got up each day and did my best to remember how to breathe. I remind myself that my mantra every day was that I didn't need a man who couldn't—or wouldn't—find a way to fight for himself, or for us.

I run my hand over the short ponytail at the nape of my neck. Earlier in the year, in a fit of grief, I had my long braid cut off. I'd wanted to shave my head, but my stylist—and my daughter Abbie—were the voices of sanity and suggested going short first.

Warm spring air and sunshine flood through the open door as I attack the windows on the ground floor. While scrubbing, it occurs to me that if I'm not careful, I could break the glass. Wringing out the rag, I step away, put my hands on my hips, and tilt my head to a sky I can't see through the scrim of my tears.

"Shit."

