

Whale Song

by

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(A small attic. Grey light smears through a filthy window. The place is full of bric-a-brac, items from a hundred lost childhoods. A **Man** and a **Woman** exist in the attic and it is obvious that they have been there a long, long time. Wind alternately whispers and howls outside. There are also other sounds, guttural, sharp, and dangerous. Throughout the play, both the Man and the Woman should be arranging, examining, remembering various items that are strewn around them. Everything, from a ripped magazine to a dirt-soiled and fraying teddy bear, is potent.)

MAN

I remember on the day the sun died I was watching a family across the street falling down the steps of their stoop. A Brooklyn day, clear, sharp. Was it fall? I think it was. The impact was thousands of miles away, the newscasters looked half dead at the desks. Lightning shook the sky. The old woman in the apartment above was crying for her dead son and a car was blasting Don McLean's "American Pie." I was strangely calm. Focused. Like I had been waiting all my life for the world to end. I remember, you were too young, the sounds of air raid sirens. This was in Maryland, right outside of DC in the Seventies, and the strange peace that would thrill through my eight year old body as they broke the air with such a sad urgency, as if crying out in elegy. When the sky fell and the sun died, I made green tea and couldn't help but smile and think of the whales and their lost lives, opposable thumbs reclaimed within flippers. I understood, or thought I understood, why they returned to the ocean, went back under the waves. Shame. Shame and guilt. Those millions of years ago. I saw, suddenly, brightly: a species lost, a species dying of good intentions. They had stared into the sky, mapped its intricacies through their songs: composing hymns to the stars. Hymns of complex harmonies and subtle melodies. When the sky fell on them, they were dumbfounded. Forsaken. A religion of song crumbling to dust under an asteroid impact. Cousin species lay dying at their feet, eyes wide, bleeding and with only a dim understanding of what death meant. Guardians of life, the whales had sung odes to the stars, saw themselves reflected in the majestic play of auroras, knew with certainty that they were masters of the world, life, and glorious song. Even the universe itself. Then the world died as it, you know, does now and again. The whale song, prayers forged from the quantum flux and foam of the universe . . . Failed. The sky fell. The sun died and billions perished, suffocating on the black dust that covered the world like sin. Many kept singing, despite the dirt that filled their lungs. Kept singing despite the frozen air slicing their throats. Other shut themselves up, closed their throats, stopped their songs. These were the ones that survived. I saw this all as I sipped my tea and the sky fell around me. You see, the universe doesn't give a damn about the moral obligation of survival. So they returned, under the waves, learned to sing a different song, more complex by far than prayer. A song of survival. A song of mourning. A song of clear, focused loss. Cities built of songs, giants walking the earth.

(A long pause. The wind moans. The
Man goes to the dirty window, wipes
at it with a dirty sleeve and stares
intently out at the world beyond.)

THE WOMAN

The old comforter: thick and worn, was her mother's and her grandmother's and it smelled safely old. Of cider, of being held close to her grandmother's sweetly, cinnamon smell. Of strange, important secrets, shared between half guilty and startled cousins and then the embarrassed giggling and dreaming of Tom Cruise. Planning their escape to Hollywood, where they would be Blond, and their budding breasts would be Voluptuous. They had heard one of the older girls use that word: voluptuous and didn't know exactly what it meant, but the sound of it started their blood. In hushed seriousness, they spoke of being Stars. The next Marilyn. International. They would, huddling close beneath that old, time-beaten comforter, speak of that ultimate, elusive desire: Glamour.

(Pause.)

THE WOMAN

But today, she is wearing a simple dress. Patterned with light blue flowers, like tiny pieces of the sky—like the sky was once ago—tiny pieces of the sky once ago interrupted by a few darker, blotting purples. All cast down on a white cotton. One strap is falling down over her shoulder, and the dress reaches to just below her knees. She is barefoot, and treading carefully along the place where the water and the sand try desperately to hold one another. She is careful because some of the rocks are toothy and sharp. She can remember, as a child, ignoring them, sometimes completely surprised when she found herself bleeding as she walked up the beach to her home. Her distressing mother would wash the sand and grit from the wounds—not untenderly—while all the time snapping her pink chewing gum and saying, "you always forget. Don't forget." And then she would go out the next day, to where the water and the sand try desperately to hold one another. And forget.

(Pause. The Woman joins The Man at the window and they stare out at a darkening world. The light coming from the window is fading, turning a greasy black. The wind sounds lonely, like it wants the couple to come out and play. Together, they move into the clutter of stuff and begin to make a building out of old books, toys, broken furniture, picture frames, etc.)

THE WOMAN

One day, it may have been summer, her grandmother took a small, stolid box from the big, brass-handled dresser which sentinel stood in the hallway, by the door to her grandmother's room. Bent and vaguely unreal, her grandmother went downstairs. It was funny how the stairs seemed to creak out a bit more respectfully to that dignified, blue-veined woman. Her grandmother sat down on the deep lavender sofa, almost swallowed by it and looked at that old, old box with watery eyes. She sat down as well, and, when the box was shakily opened, she thought she heard, if for just the quickest of seconds, a soft, masculine voice sigh from the brass hinges. What is in there, she asked, her voice sounding brassy and brash in the funeral silence of that living room. Shh. Your grandfather's ghost. And she was almost afraid as her grandmother picked up something from inside the box, imagining a tiny, white, tormented figure to leap out, thirsty for her smooth, young blood. But no. It was only a small, silver and red fishing lure, hanging, somewhat disappointingly, from her grandmother's trembling, leathern hand. Sparkling and spinning and hypnotic. She felt uncomfortable. She had never seen her grandmother cry, and she didn't know what to do, so she kissed her grandmother's dusty cheek, and went outside to play.

(The building falls. The Man weeps softly, the Woman holds him.)

THE WOMAN

Rotting apples reflected in her eyes and the smell of tired, wetgold leaves under the gray shawl of an autumn mist. She shivers, half-heartedly, as the air, snakelike, slides along the aching whiteness of her skin. She hugs her arms around her, turning--

(Long pause. A distant sound like a kitten mewing rides on the wind.)

THE MAN

I would have liked to have known her.

(Pause.)

THE WOMAN

I. I do not know if she would have liked to have known you. Then, there. That time.

(She opens up a tackle box, begins to play with a number of bright, silver lures. The Man lights several candles to combat the deepening gloom. Slowly, the Woman slides a hook under her skin.)

(Not deeply, there is no blood, but
the lure is fastened enough to stay,
hanging from her finger when she
holds out her hand. The Man watches,
closely. She repeats this process
until she has a fishing lure hanging
from each of the fingers on her
left hand. She jangles them, lightly.
They sparkle in the candlelight.
She smiles.)

THE MAN

Stories broken in my mind, the edges dull but slippery. Never
the time, never the mind. Memory, they say, is like a drug.
Or. No, that's not it.

(Pause)

THE MAN

Does that hurt?

THE WOMAN

No. Not really.

THE MAN

I used to bang my head against my locker in high school.
That didn't hurt either.

(Pause)

THE MAN

But it looked like it did. Made a noise like it did.

THE WOMAN

See. No blood. If there's no blood . . .

(Pause)

THE MAN

Are you hungry?

THE WOMAN

I was. Once. Not now.

THE MAN

That's good.

(Pause)

THE MAN

We don't have any more food.

THE WOMAN

So. Yes, that's good.

THE MAN

Can I.

(Pause)

THE MAN

Hold your hand? Your other hand?

THE WOMAN

Yes.

THE MAN

Thank you.

(They hold hands for several moments.
Still. Breathing deeply. The wind
sings. The lures jangle. Their
breathing synchronizes.)

THE MAN

His pale blue eyes looking down on me. Seven or eight. Maybe nine. So utterly safe and warm. Reading to me from the Tales of Roland. His voice . . . I can't remember his voice. I mean, I can remember his voice, but not how it sounded when reading to me, a child. But I miss the sound of it. He read: They breathed softly; they dream of war and victory. And at a marble table in the middle of the hall Charlemagne sits: his head reclines upon his breast; his countenance beams with the fire of youth; his hair and beard fall in long white waves to the ground. Long time has he waited there with his comrades. Often times the dawning of their new life seems at hand, and a hum of joy runs through the halls. Then all the warriors rise to their feet: they seize their lances and their swords; but suddenly their joy is quenched, and again their eyes are closed in slumber. Only the king remains awake for a while; and he cries out, until the sound is echoed through the mountains, "ye dwarfs who guard my dwelling, what year is this?" The dwarfs answer; and the shadows settle again upon his features. "Sleep on, comrades," he says, "the hour has not yet come." With a dull sound, each warrior falls prone upon the earth: they sleep, and await the hour when the spell shall be broken. The king, with his long white beard, and his flowing hair, and his countenance glowing with youth, sits again at the marble table.

THE WOMAN

He was arrogant. Cruel sometimes. His eyes were like the dark root-cellar in my grandmother's house, storing jars of pickles, bags of potatoes, rhubarb jam. My stomach always fluttered, a little scared, when I had to go down in that place. But once down, I felt . . . peaceful. The cool earth smell like a moment of certainty, rough and large yet protecting. I was still a girl in many ways, though not as naive as I appeared. He was a boy, though I thought him to be a man. No one ever told me I was beautiful. Except my grandmother. He never said it. But the painting . . . the fact that he created something so beautiful *from me* . . . The painting meant . . . meant I was beautiful.

(Pause)

THE WOMAN

I dreamt away a whole year, once. Woke up and was thirty-eight. Or forty-two. Or twenty-seven. But that. That was a long time ago. I think. The dust settled everywhere and I watched my cat die slowly of it, coughing out thick fur-balls of tar and black. Like the world. We were all choking on a giant lump that broke our air, fouled our sea. Stole our sun.

(Pause)

THE WOMAN

And I am very, very glad now that I do not have a child.

THE MAN

But still.

THE WOMAN

Perhaps.

(Pause)

THE WOMAN

Perhaps.

THE MAN

Are you?

THE WOMAN

Yes.

THE MAN

Tired?

THE WOMAN

Yes.

(She removes the fishing lures from her hand.)

THE WOMAN

There is no blood. There is never any blood.

THE MAN

Sleep soon?

THE WOMAN

Yes. I. Yes.

(Together, they blow out the candles. A dull green glow comes in from the window. There is the snuffling sound of a great beast prowling, hungry. She picks up a small music box from the floor. They go to the window. Hold hands.)

THE MAN

It's good. That we are here. For each other, I mean. Not alone.

THE WOMAN

Yes. Mostly.

THE MAN

Do you think we will dream?

THE WOMAN

No.

THE MAN

Oh.

(Pause)

THE WOMAN

We will become dream.

THE MAN

Ah.

(She opens the music box. A small tune plays, tiny and fragile compared to the wind and the noise of the beast, but still managing to play high and clear. Darkness fills the attic until we are left with nothing but the music box's final notes echoing. Then: nothing.)