

The Whale

I had seen other whales before, but I had only ever seen one so prostrate and alone on the beach like this. It was when I was a child, many years before my father lost his hand dynamiting for tuna.

That whale had been enormous. It was a monstrous Sperm bull and had washed in overnight and I remember going down to the beach in the morning and seeing it on the sand, its immense body blotting out the thin line of roiling white that should have topped the blue line of the horizon. It was lying on its side, the colour of rubbed granite, stomach a little paler, and its elongated head was scribbled with the pale writings of some huge squid it had been hunting out beyond where the reef-shelf plunged down to the colossal depths of the ocean trench. It must have been dead in the sea a time already as there were pittings and pock-marks in the tongue and around the slit of its eye where fish had begun to eat into the blubber. Its mouth was wide open, the almost comically thin lower jaw jutting out at the angle of an obscene wishbone, and I had run my hand along the length of its mandible, circling each horn of tooth with my index finger before tracing along a wide gap of bluish gum to the next. I walked its length, engulfed by the leeward shadow of the underbelly before at last emerging around its split-wedged conclusion and into the sun. Then I walked back up to dorsal – blowhole – snout - taking so many steps I could not believe something so big could have lived let alone could have ever died.

But the spell was broken when my father descended from the village with the other men, all carrying long-handled billhooks and machetes. He picked me up with his two good hands, as easily as a whale might, and set me down some way back on a fallen palm trunk telling his little girl to stay put. I watched the men circle the carcass, prodding it and chattering in low but excited tones, before one of them took up a long-handled blade and, ushering the others back with a pushing of his palm, scored along the huge length of the belly. Nothing happened and he prodded it again, his head leaned back as far as possible. And then, with a vomitus roar, the entirety of the whale's internal organs exploded out. Litres and litres of intestines and blood and viscous offal splattered along the length of the beach, propelled so forcefully by what my father would tell me later was the gases built up inside.

A loud cheer went up and then the men fell to, hacking the blubber and peeling it away in rolls to uncover the blue-pink meat underneath. They heaped the huge slops of fat into wooden carts and dragged them off to the rusting bronze vats behind the storage sheds to be melted down for oil. Next they gathered up the offal and washed it in the sea before storing it in the silver bait canisters that hung from the side of the skiffs and, once exposed, the dark meat was cut into thick cubes and wrapped in parcels of banana leaves which were stacked on the blood-blackened

sand. When the meat was at last scoured, each thick rope of ligament was cut and then the glistening skeleton broken down to dry in the sun. Most of the bones were too large and curved to be of real use, though some would be scrimshawed and sold at the market. The jaw however was prized. That would be first polished and then re-polished and etched before being hung over the heavy door of the church. I remember how I watched the men work all day, the brown knottings of their backs rippling under the weight of their exertions. How I filled and ferried their water canisters, each one my small drop to lubricate such intimate butchery.

The whole village ate together that night, the wooden tables drowning under the weight of the roasted whale meat. When dinner was done my father had caught me under the arms and hoisted me high onto his shoulders; *the sea is bounteous* we had sung as the adults clanked their bottles and I had watched our voices drift long into the night.

But the whale I'm watching rot on the beach today is different. It is not a large whale. It is an adolescent Minke, only six metres long - but could still have fed the village had they not opted to let it rot instead. And it is not grey. It was something close to grey when I lashed it to my skiff using a repeating series of trucker's hitches to pull the line taught enough that it might survive the journey back over the reef. But now it has been cooked an ochre black from its time festering in the sun, the colour of taro when cut too thin for the pan.

But the biggest difference between the whale rotting before me now and that huge Sperm bull is that, for near on three days, I have watched the village ignore it. Day after day I have watched the men return from the sea and drag their empty nets straight past its meaty carcass to the store houses without giving it a glance. On the first afternoon I shouted at them from my seat under the trees but they did not hear me. *It must have been a hard day at sea I thought, they must be tired. They are going home to rest and will surely butcher it tomorrow, when they are fresh.*

Now, after three days in the sun, the gases building up inside have bloated the whale out to almost twice its original size and a cloying, oily stench fills the beach; a smell that carries on the breeze so that a wretching congregates in every hut and outhouse, sticks to every drying shirt and bed sheet. Pockets of blubber have now liquefied under the combined assault of sun and blowflies, who attend in clouds so thick that their buzzing can be heard even beyond the line of palms that flanks the beach. Rivulets of its gelatinous filth have now pooled on the sand and the stray dogs come to lap it. The whale rots as the village starves. And it will keep rotting until I leave. I understand now that even though it fouls every corner of the damned village no one will dare acknowledge it, not until I pack my stuff and go.

I first saw it from the cliff, the unmistakable circling and splashing of the pod just beyond the lines of foam marking where the breakers were crashing on the distant coral. I had rung the bell - five of six sharp tugs on the on the knotted rope and the clapper striking the lip of the barrel so its shrieking bounded off down the rocks. I had pictured the men sprinting up the stones and letting out wild whoops before rushing back down the path to gather their gaffs and barbs. I had waited, and no one had come.

At last Manololo had crested the path. When he saw it was me he'd stopped and leaned on his stave. He said nothing, his grey hair whipped over and back by the wind.

"Whales," I said, pointing out to the horizon and I made to start down the cliff trail.

Manololo stopped me with a hand on my shoulder. "Tomorrow," he said.

"They'll be gone tomorrow."

"If that is God's will."

Not a haul worth mentioning landed in months and the pious old fool would still let them pass?

"God's will is that I saw them today."

Manololo shook his head. "It is the men who will go out, and tomorrow. Tradition forbids a hunt on Sunday."

I could see them more clearly now, closer to the reef. I watched tails arching and falling, slapping on the waves. I counted at least twelve. Even one would feed us for weeks, provide meat and tallow to sell at the market so people could begin to replenish their stores. Families down to the last of their rice, their chickens all but slaughtered, and still he would not launch the skiffs? Was he really such a slave to custom?

"Is it now tradition to let the village starve?" I asked him.

Manololo stared at me, his grey hair still lashing back and forth on each vicious flicker of the breeze. "Let me tell you about tradition," he said, his voice gathering flint. "Tradition forbids fathers dynamiting for fish in the dead of night so that their daughter does not grow up hungry when they blow their hand off." Here he fixed me with an even more thunderous glare. "It's more tradition we need, not less of it. And we do not hunt on Sunday."

I stared at him defiant but he rapped the butt of his stave on the rock. "I would have curbed this in you when you were a girl, would have kept you back with the women instead of always letting you run loose under the men's feet while they worked."

He rapped the butt of his stave again.

"Now you are naïve and impetuous just like your father. And how did that work out for him?" He rapped the butt of his stave a third time and fell silent, staring at me until I turned and slunk back down the rocks like a dog he'd mannered with a cane. That was that. He was done.

But I was not.

When I got to the bottom of the rocks I turned left, away from the village. I skirted along the fringe of palms until I drew level with the tethered skiffs, bobbing on the rolling surf, and then dashed the width of the beach to tear a bowlegged dance through the knee-high waves. Pulling myself up by the oar lock of the first skiff I flopped into the bay between the seats, still not daring to look back. It had just a net and a tub full of small baiting hooks but was missing the larger tackles and lines and gaffs. I jumped to the next skiff and, satisfying myself all I needed was there, untethered it from its sister boats before I started up the rusting Yamaha motor. The first two bent-elbowed pulls of the cord came up short but on the third the motor began to cough and splutter. It made to die again, but I opened the choke and pulled the starting cord hard and it roared into life with a belch of blue diesel fume. Off I took toward the reef - *man's work* I thought, *I will show them man's work.*

My plan was very simple - to find the smallest whale and sink a line into it. I would attach the empty drums and fenders to stop the whale diving and then cut the engine and wait for the whale to tire. Once it had given up I'd lash it to the skiff and use the motor to take us home. This plan was, of course, ridiculous. Any number of things could go wrong; it might dive before I had tethered any of the floats and so capsize me, or I could be split from bow to stern by a belt of its tail or I could get an ankle caught in a rope be dragged down in the somnolent blue, where my last memory would be the dreamscapes of light probing down into the alien depths. Any number of things could go wrong. But nothing did.

I will not tell you of the agonies of thrashing, the hours of tortured fight that whale put up before it succumbed - this is my story and the creatures of the deep have enough of their own. But many, many hours later, and far from shore under the slow pivot of a serrated milky way, I started the motor again. This time it pattered awake on the first pull, and I began the long journey back.

Dawn had broken when I reached the beach and I gunned the motor, trying for enough speed that I might slide as far up the sand as possible. At the last minute I yanked the tiller to present the whale parallel the shore and let it run aground, its stomach protruding lower than the bottom of the skiff, and jumped into the thigh deep water. I untied the orange polyprop bindings and, once I had freed the skiff from its cargo, I pushed it across the surf and moored it back with the others and then lay down under the line of palms. Triangles of bright blue were visible through the overlapping fronds and, high above and drifting on their own secret current, were clouds - flat but lined as if they had been skimmed by a trowel. The wind was soft and, save the surf and the rustling fronds, the morning was silent. I listened to the sound of each passing second as it set itself, of the tightening coil of that moment preparing to move against the world and the shaking of the fronds lulled me off to sleep.

As I slept, I dreamed of the men arriving to see the whale lying exposed by the retreating tide. I dreamed of them smiling, of them singing as they worked to stack the meat and blubber and how they would slap my father on his back once more. I dreamed of how the whole village would feast late into the night again, how they would hoist me onto their shoulders while singing out my name.