Cityside

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"You're new," she said, drawing me up and down with her eyes.

"Uh-huh," I replied.

"New today?"

"Just walked in the door."

She sucked something in her mouth, some kind of sweet maybe, and her cheeks sloped inwards like the arches of a cathedral. "I hope you're not just one of those guys."

"Which guys are those?"

"You know, those types that come in here looking to laugh at people, looking for a quick joke. I can't stand those pricks."

"Well," I said, spreading my arms. "That's not me."

"Alright. Why'd you come so?"

I shrugged. "I saw a big, blue neon whale above the door. It intrigued me."

"You haven't heard those things they say about us?"

"I have. I'm choosing to forget them."

She smiled and crunched down on the sweet in her mouth. I smiled back.

"Alright now guys, time to settle down." It was the man in the woolly jumper, with the glasses and the peninsular hairline. He'd greeted me at the door. The flyer I held folded lightly in one hand had come from him. For newcomers, apparently. I didn't really need it. I knew everything it said already. Most people did.

I let her go first, drifting away from me toward a seat at the table. I saw her greet friends. I chose my own seat not too far away.

"Right", said Woolly-Jumper. "Let's begin. First things first, we have a new face here today. Apologies I didn't catch the name?" He gestured toward me.

I smiled, graciously, held up a hand in greeting. "Fugard".

"Fugard?" he affected a curious frown. "That's French, right?"

"My father is Canadian".

"Ah, very good. Everyone, be sure to say hello to Mr Fugard."

I nodded to the smiling faces turned toward me at the table. She was one of them. She mouthed *Fugard*, and smiled. I shrugged.

"Ok then, if everyone could turn their eyes to the screen," continued Woolly-Jumper. "There are some new images circulating. I got them this morning, and I think we should all have a look."

He fiddled with a chunky computer in front of him, and in a few moments the projector hanging above the table was flickering like cold sunlight on the plain concrete wall before us. Grainy images slowly faded into higher definition until we were all gazing at the wash of blue.

It was the sea. I could tell by the little white specks flashing in and out of existence. White horses, they were called. I think. I hadn't ever been to the sea, but I'd read plenty of books about people who had.

Here it was now, on the wall of a basement in Cityside. Just like the real thing. Or not.

"I've slowed down the video so we can see better. Just look kinda toward the right hand side, you'll notice a significant darkening of the water. Just—right, here." He paused the video. "You see, a large shadow, just under the surface. Now, to me this seems like a very possible sighting, but we all know I'm an optimist so I'd like

to hear what everyone else thinks."

"Definitely not," croaked an old guy across the table from me. "Shape's all wrong. Too wide."

"The water distorts these things, Ben," replied a middle-aged woman closer to Woolly-Jumper. "I think it's promising."

So began a lively discussion on the merits and failings of this smudge of darker blue in the wider, lighter sea of blue. The image was made closer, refined, brought out further, its speed was analysed, potential course predicted. They even made it 3D for some reason. That didn't help but I had to admit I was impressed with the tech. Woolly-Jumper was pretty savvy with it. Apparently well practiced.

I stayed silent, mostly because I didn't really know what they were talking about, and also because I was waiting for her to speak first. To make the first move. Eventually she did.

"Could it be a shadow?" she asked, during a lull in the conversation. "From above?"

"The shadow of what?" Woolly-Jumper asked. "The helicopter that took the picture isn't in the correct position."

"It could be a cloud", she said.

"Maybe, but it must have been a pretty big one, and we can't be sure it was a sunny enough day to cast shadows like that. Who's to say that it wasn't overcast?"

"The sun is glinting on the water," I said, entering the fray. I pointed to a spot where I could see it. "There, that sheen, you can see it."

"He's right," came another croak from the old man.

"Possibly, possibly," said Woolly-Jumper, his face scrunched up, the blue light of the computer making his glasses opaque.

"How do you explain the disappearance, then?" This voice was

from a young punk-looking kid down a few seats from me on the right. “I mean if it was a cloud it wouldn’t just go away at the end like that would it?”

As if on cue, the darkness in the video faded away.

Some looked at me for an answer, I looked at her. She shook her head.

There was nothing more to the meeting, and it ended soon after. I tried to look for her, but in the sudden rush to clear away the table and chairs she disappeared.

This didn’t mean she’d forgotten about me. I was sure about that as I pulled my coat back on. She’d ignored me on purpose, I thought. Maybe as a challenge, maybe just for fun. A deliberate choice anyway. I grinned to myself thinking about it.

I attended another meeting a week later, in the same place, and again grainy images were discussed. She was there, although I didn’t speak to her because she came in late and only met my eyes for a brief moment before she took her seat.

In time, the meetings became a totemic part of my week. I was still working, of course, predicting the future with psychology tests and Purpose-Machines, but I grew distracted. I began to see her face in those of my client’s, began to rush appointments and stumble through mixed up words.

It wasn’t that I was in love with her—although such feelings were possible—it was rather that she stimulated me, and it gave me a thrill to be near her.

The setting hardly mattered. It was a grim journey to that part of Cityside. Through long and curving streets darkened and made damp by the overhanging motorways above. I usually walked it, with my collar turned up and my eyes cast to the floor. This time of year didn’t particularly help. On a good day it was sunny and crisp and my nose felt like it could fall off, and on the worst days

the rain turned to ice and my soul seemed to freeze under its relentless barrage.

Still, I did it gladly, just so I could see that glowing blue neon light. It was as comforting to me now as a sunrise, which was just as well because they were saying on the news that anyone living under ten stories might never see that sight again.

I found an opportunity to talk to her at most meetings, before the whale stuff began, but it was never more than five or seven minutes. Never enough.

Maybe a month and a half passed, and my view of the group began to change. When I was small I'd liked to watch for birds in the trees at a park near my parent's house, and even if I never saw any, I kept watching in the hope that I might. I couldn't see how these people were different.

Of course I'd seen the news bulletins, but I figured those were extremists. A separate branch.

But even despite my new perspective I was no closer to having the meaningful kind of conversation with this girl that I wanted to. Small talk became very small when it was all you got.

I'd always wait outside the door for a while before going in, and smoke if I had cigarettes that day. I never wanted to be the first one in, or the second or third. I preferred to be one of the last. That gave me a better chance of catching her on the way in.

One day, the Tuesday evening meeting I think it was, I found her waiting in my spot. Waiting for me.

"What are you doing out here" I asked, when I saw her.

"Oh nothing", she said, narrowing her eyes and smiling. "Just enjoying the fresh air". The air wasn't, of course, fresh. Just dry, and biting "Why do you keep coming to these meetings?" she continued, a plume of white breath following every word.

I thought for a moment, then shrugged. “It’s something different, I suppose, from the rest of life.”

“Sure,” she said. “But you’re not really interested though, are you? You’re not really —I don’t know—earnest when you talk, in there. You could be talking about anything, about the weather. Not something that matters.”

I was a little taken aback at the accusation. “I hardly think I’m uninterested,” I said. “I contribute, don’t I?”

“I know you do. But like I said, I don’t hear real concern in your voice.”

I laughed, nonplussed. “It’s whales, how invested can I be? Or *maybe* it’s whales. Could just—”

“They’re extinct. Did you know that?”

I paused, a response caught in my throat. “Every last one?”

“All of them. All gone away,” she came closer to me. “That’s why we’re looking so hard. We’re trying to find them again.”

“Wait. Hold on a second,” I said, “There’s *none* left? How the fuck did that happen?”

She chuckled. “No one noticed they were going. And then they were just gone. Come on, the meeting’s probably starting soon.”

She brushed past me, close enough that I caught her perfume, lingering in the air behind her.

I went into that meeting a little more grave. I considered those hazy blue pixels a little more closely. The idea that these people might find a whale suddenly seemed much more important to me.

Maybe I was just trying to live up to this standard she apparently had for me, but there was something else there too, because that feeling lingered, it bled into the next day. Then the next.

I found myself spending even less time than I had before on

all those previous commitments which had previously been so important. I did the bare minimum to reach my weekly quota at work, preferring instead to spend hours in the city library —a dilapidated and abandoned but nonetheless colossal structure in the hazy area between the Cityside and Uptown. I read histories on the whale until my eyes ached, I traced maps of seas marked with migration patterns, I gazed at drawings of the great beasts, and all the while I was thinking of her too.

It was hard to determine what exactly was the root of my sudden hyper-focus. I did feel real investment in the whales, but on the other hand I knew that if she dropped them and the meetings, then I probably would too.

So, it was an interesting time.

Eventually the thought of the blue whale became synonymous with the thought of this girl. The desire to see some real evidence of them was one and the same as the desire to see the smile it would bring to her face. It was a very strong desire, and it took me right to the edge.

"So, do you want in?" she asked me for the fifth time.

"Before I answer," I replied, "remind me how this helps the whales."

"Obviously not directly, dipshit," she said. "It's called *raising awareness*."

"Raising awareness usually means peaceful protest. No?"

"Placards and banners don't work anymore. You can't even see them in the smog sometimes. And you can't block off roads used by 'droids. They just keep driving over you until you're scraped off the cement by the cleaners in the morning. You gotta blow up something to get attention now."

"Right", I said. It made sense, so long as you twisted the logic into a knot.

I briefly wondered if this was a kind of exam. Her test of my dedication to the cause.

"Ok, I'm in. For the whales."

"For the whales," she echoed, the corner of her mouth curving into a small smile.

The whole thing was to take place on City Hall Street. We couldn't get near the building itself, for obvious reasons, but there was some mid-level administrative guy whose chauffeur parked the car out on the public road for some reason. He came out every day at the same time, and that's when we'd kill him, the driver, and any other poor cunt who was near enough. Simple explosives fixed under the car, the kind that sold for peanuts in the depths of Cityside.

Then we'd lob speakers in the air to float and proclaim our message—given on behalf of the blue whales—and then we'd split, into the alleys and up the airlifts, and no one would find us

The first part was alright. I had nothing to do. She didn't either. It was two, more senior, guys who planted the bomb. One of them, surprisingly enough, was Woolly-Jumper.

We waited while they moved in. Her, and I, and a few others. We were draped in cheap, blue-dyed, baggy clothes, like the kind the burnouts who live by the river would wear.

A moment passed in which, crouching there in a dim alley, with two heavy speakers in my hand and a homemade blue whale mask over my face, I nearly left because of the absurdity of it all. The muscles in my thighs were all tensed and ready to lift me up and away, only her hand grazed my knee, and I was stuck in place.

The bomb went off.

We charged out, delivered our packages, and then charged away again, all while bleary-eyed citizens reeled and stumbled away from the pluming fireball.

We lost the others and took an empty airlift straight up and across the platforms to Midway Station, suspended like a fat storm cloud above Cityside.

It was silent in that box of dirty glass, gliding—not without friction—along a central steel beam humming with energy and between periodical steel squares which gave us a little boost each time we passed through. I could feel her watching me. I watched the city glide by like a dirty ocean below us.

The next day they found something.

Because I only attended the publicly scheduled meetings, I was late to the party, and when I arrived the excited buzz that had grown over the three days since the discovery swept me up like a wave. I sat in my chair, sweaty-palmed, almost quavering with anticipation. My whole existence felt balanced on a point.

Absurd, I know, but that's just how it felt

Woolly-Jumper set the projector up, and someone else flicked off the lights.

The picture was dark as sin. Not the ocean surface, like I'd expected. The only illumination came weakly from whatever was recording the video. Just a few feet of light, in which little specks of things floated. Beyond that was vast blackness.

I sat forward, forgetting to breathe.

Then it came, a sound out of dreams. Beautiful and dreadful all at once. Harmonic and discordant and a thousand other things besides. It took hold of my mind and swept all else away. I was terrified by it, but if it had stopped, I would have wept.

Strange clicks, and whines and long melancholic wails came dancing out of that dark picture.

Distantly, I became aware of someone beside me. I knew it was her.

"Listen to it," she whispered into my ear. Her hand came sliding over my thigh, the other running through the hair on the back of my head.

Then, in the final few seconds of the footage, just for a moment as the song continued, in the blackness, something huge moved. Collective gasps ensued. Her nails dug into my leg.

It ended and the room erupted in cheers. I tried to lend my voice to it, because I felt ecstasy, but my throat was too dry. I could only stare at the projection, now static, hoping it would resume.

She'd left my side when it ended, but I found her outside on the street, in the gloom of evening. Somewhere distant, across innumerable streets and over countless rooftops, the siren of a police unit, or an ambulance, screamed. It seemed a pale imitation of what I'd just heard down in the basement.

"You realise now," she said, moving away from the wall to stand close to me, "what it is we're looking for?"

I didn't reply.

"You felt it, in there. When you heard them singing. I know you did, I could see it on your face. Something way down inside you that's been buried."

I knew what she was talking about. I had felt something, below my heart and my lungs. It lingered still.

"You feel it now too," she took my hand in hers.

Yes, I could. It lanced up across my chest, down my arms, and came the other way too, back into me, from her, where our skin touched. Then she kissed me, and I felt it even more.

She drew away an inch. "They're not just animals, you understand? They're gods. They're the Earth itself".

"We buried it," I said.

"We buried *her*. And we buried them too. For bright lights and

cheap shit." She scuffed the ground with her shoe. I heard a car backfire somewhere near.

All the while she gazed at me. She took my hand and held it against her breast, over her heart.

"What you feel, that's it."

"I know."

"*That's it.*"

"It is."

"We have to get it back. Before it's gone." She squeezed my hand under hers.

"We have to."

This time I kissed her.