

Sun Chasers

D. K. McCutchen

In their way they saw many whales sporting in the ocean and in wantonness fuzzing up the water through their pipes and vents, which nature has placed on their shoulders.

— Sir T. Herbert's Voyages into Asia and Africa. From *Moby-Dick*.

We sailed north and west. Halfway between Tahiti and Kiribati, we found the mothers. For three days, the South Pacific stayed flat as a frog pond, but clear and miles deep. I can't remember now who heard them. At first it seemed we had a group of four, but by dawn there were twenty-six. When the sun came fully up, we could see sperm whale mothers and calves blowing misty exhalations across our entire horizon. I wondered if the big male we'd been following for a week had found the mothers too. I hoped so. The clanging of one whale's voice had sounded lonely in all that cold and deep: a little boy banging pots together in an empty room.

Our second calm, hot day out with the whales, we scared a juvenile, slid too close and sent a ripple of anxiety through the water with our boat's shadow. The young sperm whale rolled and presented her pale side, then jackknifed down, thrashing her tail as she descended, regurgitating a huge piece of squid at the same time. At the bow, the First Mate, Nathalie, grumbled, irritated that we'd drifted so close to the little whale. Simon, the Kiwi crew, leaned dangerously out over the rail with his net and called for help. I scrambled forward and between the three of us we managed to pull aboard the enormous hunk of squid, as thick as all my fingers spread and big enough around to cover the skylight over the Mate's forepeak cabin. The chunk created a manhole cover of tough, clear jelly, with a harder, reddish weave of fibers on top like the newly hardening shell of a lobster after molting.

It had been weeks since we'd had meat, so I wasn't joking when I offered to cook it up, an only slightly digested gift of whales. The young sperm whale had brought it up from the deep trenches below us and, from the thickness, our Captain said it was possible the squid had been as long as our forty-foot sailboat. I really did want to try it. No one took me up on the offer to cook it. Later, our French/Swiss Mate confessed that most of the large squid were "ammoniacal" and would have tasted "dis-guzzing."

So after measuring and sampling, and sticking our fingers into the jelly to see what it felt like, we heaved the squid back over the side; just another bit of organic matter filtering down into the high peaks of inverted Himalayas. The Captain's charts told us the trenches below us were about four miles deep. Nathalie's study on whale food showed the Pacific Ocean to be empty here, arid, in a sense. A desert of ocean. These deep-diving sperm whales were possibly the only beings able to recycle matter to the surface from the great height and depth of the ocean canyons.

The sun angled westward in the sky and our twenty-six mothers and calves began to converge. Feeding groups of two, three and five, scattered at first over several miles, gathered into a single pod. As they assembled, we followed. The whales formed the V of migrating geese, and we sailed into the broad base of the triangle. The sun became large in the sky, and the whales turned, together, and chased its light toward the west, following the broad bands of gold and yellow. The sun glared off the water with such intensity I had to hold my hand in front of my eyes and peek between my fingers to see their silhouettes against the light. By early evening, Nathalie was at the wheel, and the Captain was now the one at the bow with his long-lensed camera, a wild-haired Ahab urging his ship westward, yearning after the whales, hoping to catch just one more identifiable tail fluke despite the blinding light. Like chorus dancers, the whales obliged, twenty-six females and their young, fluking up in formation, one after the other in an orderly cascade of motion as they went into their deep dives. Our Captain shot each one when she fluked, with a camera instead of a harpoon, yet still intense as the moment he had waited for finally occurred. His aim, always, was to get perfect, identifying shots of each perpendicular tailfluke.

He could barely keep up with the chorus line showing off their sea legs. His camera clicked away, and the Kiwi, Mate and I dipped our nets and harvested the confetti each dancer scattered, pale tissue-paper skin floating up from the whales' hides in strips and dots—the naughty dancers' dresses—left behind as they skipped away laughing. Down below, the submerged hydrophones rattled out the whale's songs while they chased the light, clicking and clanging, rattling and buzzing, a double-dozen young mothers clucking their tongues at a handsome male.

The watch shifted, and the Kiwi and I went below so he could show me how to preserve the skin samples for testing back at the lab, the Who's Who on the genetic family tree. Simon scratched idly at an old peel of sunburn as he sat in a fugue state, resting from the long, hot day. The top skin on his arm rucked up and he stared at it for a minute, then peeled away an immensely long strip of dead skin.

"This is how it's done, Yank," he giggled and stuck his own skin in a film container full of buffer fluid. "Be sure you don't touch anything or you'll contaminate the sample, right?"

The sample marked and labeled, he put it in the carrier addressed to the lab in Canada we used for DNA analysis.

"Great White Whale," I read over his shoulder.

"A bloody good control, I reckon," he laughed.

"What if you find out you're related after all?"

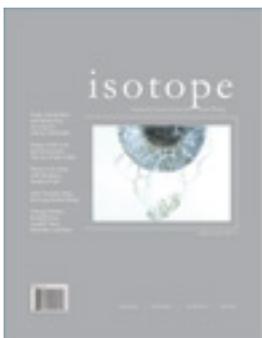
"Well, me mum's adopted," he said. "You just never know."

Alone on watch that night, I turn the directional hydrophone obsessively, following the whales with our sailboat's small motor, but shutting it off every ten minutes to listen for clicks. Then all sound stops. The busy clicking—a chattering of birds—is lost in the hiss of water against the 'phones, and I panic for a moment, thinking I've lost the pod. I spin the wheel of the hydrophone, listening to every quadrant of the compass. I've been writing a letter to my mother under the spotlight of the moon, telling her not to worry, I won't be doing this forever, this wandering. I'm waiting, I tell her, to know what to do next, how to order my life. We all—except the Captain—long for land, but hardly know why. I'll miss this night sky.

When it is time again, I spin the wheel, listening for clicks. There is only silence in every direction. No cheerful chatter. I picture the deep cold, dark beneath me, devoid of life. The heavy water seems to sit in my stomach. I can feel myself chilled and weighty, pressing against the wrinkled hides of the others, needing to hold warm life to myself in the presence of all that darkness. Nothing makes me turn my head, but I look up and a huge shadow is blocking the stars. There are no clouds. An eye, set in a mountain of water-cooled flesh, is looking down on me from the dark. A Gothic mailbox the size of a pickup truck has risen out of the water. The whale is peering over the railing of our boat as if the ocean herself has decided to see who is riding on her back, spinning our wheels. The ocean looks at me. I look at the ocean, and her deep eye blinks. She is curious. I am breathless. The giant's eye is less than two meters away from mine. The head sinks down silently, and I continue to sit and listen, wondering if I dream. In the dark anything is possible. I spin the wheel.

After a moment, the chattering begins again. I didn't lose them, they've doubled back, come to see what's been crisscrossing over their heads on the water's thin night skin. We are right on top of them. I spin my wheel and listen to whale talk. We sway with the waves and wait for the first light of morning.

*D.K. McCutchen spent over a decade sailing with biologists. She has degrees in wildlife management and in writing. Her first book, **The Whale Road**, is forthcoming from Random House New Zealand.*



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