

Vo Workshop

Poolside, Marni sat back on her haunches and teased a dried scale on the Telecue with a chipped nail. The cable of the Telecue snaked between her feet, through the puddles of saltwater left by the whales, and into the trainer's control unit, which turned the button presses into underwater sounds. Every sound corresponded to a trained behavior. During showtime, the whales knew to listen at the speaker. They'd crowd around the little hole, waiting for their assignments as they came through digitally-clipped squeaks.

The drumbeats started, and Marni stood up. The sun was warm against the thick layers of her wetsuit. She could feel it most between her shoulder blades, where her muscles hurt the most. Nearly every stadium seat was filled this afternoon. The children were up in front, ponchos trampled under their feet. The adults sat further up in the stadium, under the sunshade with their two-buck mimosas and a scattering of digital cameras.

From behind came the clank of a bolt-lock as the main pool gates swung open. A black shadow slipped through the gates, pushing a bulge of water that spewed over the tank lip. Marni saw a flash of white as the animal rolled towards her. From the freckles on the belly and the stretch of the white near the eye, Marni knew that it was certainly Anda, the matriarch of the whales here.

Without looking down, Marni pressed D4 on the Telecue. A long tone sounded from underwater. Anda stiffened, and she dove swiftly until only her tail was visible from ground level.

Wiping the fog off the quartz panes of the tank, Marni counted the fluke strokes of Anda. It took two strokes to slow down, one to turn around, and seven powerful pounds to travel the thirty-five feet to the surface, where Anda's whole body came out of the water, as rigid as a javelin.

There was a moment, right at the peak of Anda's jump, where the whale hung motionless, so it seemed, and the water sloughing off her body gleamed like icicles. The light came from everywhere, the sky, the water, and Marni could almost forget about the Send-Off, with the growling flatbed trucks already waiting backstage, filled with tie-downs and an empty sling.

After Koko's death, the team asked supervisor Marni to lead the noontime show. She was the one who had dealt with whale death before, they said. She was the one who could go on stage and speak to the crowd in her usual lilting way.

Anda came down in a tremendous splash, and the water spilled a thick, clear sheet over the tank wall, crashing into Marni. It pounded against her face, and when she gasped for breath, she tasted the salt. Deep salt, different than the grains from a shaker, as anyone who has licked the ocean would know. It was salt that wrapped around the tongue, coated the mouth with a singular taste.

Marni realized that she hadn't spoken a singular word throughout the whole show. Much was prerecorded anyways: the conservation messages, the reminders to divest from Big Oil, the tropical music. For the past twenty minutes, Marni was focused on the

Telecue. She pressed button after button, and the whales came out in practiced sequence. The team did their rides on the whales, although Marni didn't cue any of the better acrobatics that required a focused mind.

Late that afternoon, the crane arrived through the access road that Animal Care typically used for fish delivery. The crane truck was thickly built, with four wheels on each side. The workers extended foot-like stabilizers that scratched grooves into the concrete floor.

Researchers from a nearby lab had come to supervise the extraction process, as they wanted to preserve some factor of anatomical stability that Marni didn't really understand. The head vet had come from his office to watch. Even the park lawyer was here, although Marni thought it was more out of morbid curiosity, as very little could be gained from an attorney watching the body of an animal being loaded onto a flatbed truck.

The fish house opened, and Roxy stepped out, into the crowd of people by the medical pool. They were fastening the canvas sling to the hook of the crane, which was dipping lazily into the water. Marni was standing at an adjacent pool, where three whales were swimming.

Roxy touched Marni's shoulder. She looked, and turned back to the whales, but she knew that Roxy would stay right there. She had been Marni's mentee for all of Roxy's three years here as an associate trainer.

Marni pointed to the one head poking out the water. "See Anda? She's swimming stiff." She kept looking at the whale, who bobbed her head, sending ripples in the pool. Koko was Anda's first daughter. She died this morning of an unknown condition that had attracted the researchers for a detailed necropsy.

They were quiet for a moment, and then Marni heard Anda's moan. The moan was low and watery and almost metallic sounding, as if ported through a steel pipe. Very little was known about the killer whale dialect. The trainer's manual recommended against the referencing of whale sounds as an actual language. Marni had heard Anda cry like this before. It had always been a sound of desire. She moaned for a half-barrel toy laying just out of her reach, a spray from the garden hose, a thick hunk of gelatin. There was no sound in human language that had as simple of a meaning.

Roxy shook her head. "The purest grief."

From behind came the whine of the hydraulic winch and the rise of voices giving instructions. There came a sound of dripping, and Marni turned around to see the rising of a sling with a limp flipper poking out from both sides.

"Roxy—" she said, and stopped, fixated on the moving sling. The workers pulled the truck into position, and the crane lowered its load onto the metal slats. "Roxy, I'm sorry that this was your last day."

Roxy slung her arms around Marni and pulled her close and tight. Marni could feel the muscles on her body, the rise and fall of her chest, even the tapping of a slow, athletic heart in her neck. There was a quiver in her body, and Marni knew, from the times that she had held her in this exact same way, that this was the closest Roxy got to crying.

At 3:30 the next morning, Marni's cellphone rang. She had tried calling Roxy last night to check in, but it went to voicemail and she fell asleep with the phone on full ringer

next to her face. Her husband Mark woke first, and he gently shook Marni until she sat up. She stared at the number on the phone, not understanding the string of numbers.

“Ugh, fuck off,” she said to the glowing screen.

Mark looked over her shoulder. “Marn,” he said. “That’s the police department.”

“Shit,” she said. She remembered the time, years ago, when a few punkers pried open the gate of whale stadium to steal the two large video cameras they used during the shows.

She accepted the call and put it on speaker. “Hello?” she said, and there was a long pause.

“Marina.”

Marni thought the voice sounded hoarse. “Yes, I’m here,” she said.

“Marina, this is Sergeant Horwitz. We need you to come to whale stadium right now.”

“Now?”

“Yes, right now.”

She wanted to ask if this could wait until morning. All of her arm and leg muscles were hurting, and as she gained consciousness, the thought of Koko rose, and then her mom Anda. But the Sergeant seemed non-negotiable, and she just hung up the phone.

Marni took the HOV lane to the park. It was so early in the morning that everything felt legal. She parked next to Roxy’s car in the employee lot. It was actually Marni’s old car, a Toyota Camry that Roxy had bought for a few thousand dollars. She hadn’t removed the old UCSD sticker, nor the stick-on decals of jumping whales and dolphins that crept across the trunk and rear glass.

After changing into her wetsuit, Marni walked across the games area of the park to the little entrance for the backstage of whale stadium. In front of the door stood a man with a flashlight. For a second Marni thought it was the night watchman, but she saw the gleam of his badge in the moonlight and the massive cowboy hat that hid his face in shadow.

“Marina?” he asked when Marni got close enough.

Marni nodded. “What’s going on?”

Instead of answering, Sergeant Horwitz opened the door. When Marni didn’t move, she swore that he rolled his eyes. “That means come in,” he said.

Marni walked into the corridor, which was painted blue to match the show theme, even though nobody could see this part of backstage. Along the walls, racks of theatrical wetsuits were still drying from last night’s show. Their drips left dark puddles on the concrete, and some of them were turned inside-out. The night lights left a soft glow on the ground and corridor. They got fainter as they approached the pools, the Sergeant in the front, sweeping the ground with his brilliant torch, and Marni trailed in the back.

There had been times when Marni drove home from work and saw a police officer pressing a handcuffed man to the hood of a car, and as the scene rushed behind her, she felt an urge to stay and stare. These officers seemed like men who leaned too heavily on their shiny guns and tasers. It was a sense of control that nearly every whale trainer experienced on the first few days on the job. Wave a finger, and a whale jumped for you. The buttons on the Telecue made the animals feel like machines. The whales could sense that, she knew. When Roxy went through that phase, she tried requesting three hard behaviors on Koko. She waited until Roxy was right in front of her, and then she regurgitated a couple gallons of half-dissolved fish onto her chest.

Right before they got to the pool, Horwitz turned around. He was a head taller than Marni, and broad. If he took off his hat and slipped into a wetsuit, he could pass easily as a head trainer.

“Can you move an animal?” he asked.

“You don’t move an animal,” said Marni, folding her arms. “The animal moves itself. You can ask it nicely to move.”

Marni looked around for Roxy. Her car had been in the lot, but Roxy had a large dumpster in her own driveway from the move-out. She may have been storing her car at work to save space. A bus line ran from the park directly to the suburbs.

Horwitz cleared his throat. “I’m not here for the fluff about positive reinforcement,” he said. He pointed to the darkness outside the corridor. “There’s a whale in the larger pool. Can you move it?”

“To where?” Marni visualized the sleeping charts from last night, and she remembered giving the largest pool to Anda.

“Just get it out of that pool.”

“Why?”

A twitch went through the Horwitz’s face, distorting a scar that ran along his cheek. It was a decision process, thought Marni. There were times after a behavior had been requested, when the animals rolled sideways until one of their eyes could perceive the requester. In that pause came a silent conflict resolution. After two seconds, the whale would decide how they would fulfill the request, if at all.

“There is a deceased person at the bottom of that pool,” he said, and he rubbed the back of his neck. “A recovery team and coroner are coming in the next twenty minutes. All you need is to get the whale away from that pool.”

Marni thought at once to the conical teeth inside Anda’s mouth, how she could press them down with enough force to warp metal bars. Killer whales had torturous hunting techniques in the wild, but they were remarkably docile around humans. When asked why, a trainer was supposed to say, “I don’t know.”

At the sight of her old trainer—or perhaps the sound—Anda pushed her body halfway into the air, like she always did in the mornings for Marni. It was recorded in the trainer’s handbook as one of Anda’s key traits.

The whale put her head on the pool edge, as close to Marni as she could. On the ground was a few long poles used for target training. This pool was used as a teaching pool for the whales. Marni and the team called it the Classroom. There were drainage grates for excess water, and coolers that could be filled with fish during a training session.

Marni wrapped her arms around the taper of Anda’s jaws and squeezed as hard as she could, the way that Anda liked her hugs. She stood there for thirty seconds, maybe a minute. Sergeant Horwitz pulled out a digital camera and pointed at a fish cooler with a lid that had fallen to the ground. The flash lit up the whole pool deck in an eerie white, and for the briefest of moments, Marni saw the whale’s shadow stretch long across the concrete. The light left a burst of color in her eyes, and the whale made a sound like a question.

“The man’s taking some pictures,” she said to Anda in a falsetto that she used around the animals. “We like our pictures, don’t we Sergeant?”

Horwitz stared at Marni, the camera tight in his hands. “No flippin’ way,” he said. “No flippin’ way did you ladies get a whale to understand English.”

“We didn’t.”

The corners of Horwitz’s mouth curled into a smile. “Crazy people.” He went back to the camera.

Rolled close to the pool were two MediLights that Marni couldn’t remember bringing out. Their battery bases tapered into long fiberglass poles, which ended in a cluster of lights pointed at the water. The lights were off, and by the red blinking indicator on the batteries, Marni knew that they had drained.

Only the top few inches of the water caught the low moon in the sky, casting silver puddles across the surface. The water tapped against the pool walls and the drainage grate with a slow, slapping sound. Deeper down, the water faded completely to darkness, giving an appearance of infinite depth. It was an optical illusion, the same illusion that all aquarium designers used to give their exhibits a sense of endlessness.

Marni went to the electrical panel at the far end of the Classroom. She activated the in-pool and deck lights. Instantly, the whole backstage became flushed in color. In the moonlight, she had only been seeing monochrome. Now, the familiar blueness of the buildings came back. There was a half-open purple backpack on the ground, and a lanyard crumpled next to it. The sergeant walked towards it, taking a trail of pictures. The sergeant had pink socks.

As she looked back over the edge of the pool, Marni saw a distorted shadow on the bottom. There was very little else she could make out. It could have easily been a large toy, an old wetsuit, a clump of whale shit.

Anda rose from a dive, and she rested her chin in front of Marni again. She opened Anda’s mouth and patted her tongue. There were strips of neoprene hanging like ribbons from some of her teeth. They were blue and pink. She was about to ask the whale about what these were, but the Sergeant brushed behind her, still clicking his camera at various pieces of equipment, and Marni kept quiet.

Marni’s son was going through a phase where he’d draw messy spirals on pieces of butcher paper and explain how this one was a giraffe, and this one was robot. He spoke with such confidence in his craft, but to Marni, they were both spirals. She didn’t know who was wrong. Maybe the spirals had, tucked into their many twirls, the eyes and neck and patches of a giraffe. Or maybe they were identically barren of life.

She pulled the ribbons from around Anda’s teeth, one by one, and flicked them into the drainage grate.

Horwitz walked closer to Marni, but he stopped behind the vertical pole of an umbrella. “What did you just pull out of her mouth?”

“Plastic.”

“From where?”

“I don’t know.” Anda liked the feeling of old wetsuits in her mouth, and although it was not the safest decision, Marni would occasionally find a suit beyond repair, ball it up with a zip-tie, and play catch with Anda.

“I need that as evidence, Marina,” he said.

“Come here, then.”

He rocked back and forth in his boots, hands in his uniform pockets. “Marina, I’ve done many hostile animal calls. We had .375 Magnum rifles and Kevlar suits. You’re

playing with fire.”

“Playing with fire?” Marni put her whole arm into Anda’s mouth and closed her jaw with a brush of a finger. “Now I’m playing with fire.”

“Holy shit.” Horwitz took off his cowboy hat.

She opened Anda’s mouth again and pulled out her arm. “Come here,” she said.

Horwitz shuffled around the pole and towards Marni and the whale, but he came haltingly, every step seeming like a decision. Marni couldn’t help but see in the Sergeant the trembling body of an abused animal, perking with the promise of food from an open hand, but shrinking with the memories of what the hand could also do. She saw these animals everywhere—the rabbit cages of her redneck neighbor, the man down the street with the golden retriever chained to a stake.

“Hands out,” she said. “Hands out, no jewelry.”

He twisted off his wedding ring and slid it into one of the many pockets of his uniform. Up close, the animal had a kelpy smell, which came from her breath. Her shiny skin became criss-crossed with thin scratches and tiny wrinkles.

Horwitz let his hands go limp. “You want me to touch it? I don’t see how this is relevant.”

The front desk charged 350 dollars for a whale meet-and-greet, which included around ten seconds of stroking a whale. The people would come, rich people from the city, and they’d speak openly about Marni with reverence and jealousy. “What a life,” a man said once. “She’d paid to play with the whales all day.”

Anda made a soft squeak and shifted her body to face Sergeant Horwitz head-on. There was a mildness in her eyes. She slitted them nearly shut.

Marni looked at Horwitz, who had backed up a few steps. “She wants you.”

“What does that mean?”

“Just touch her.”

As he reached out his bare left hand, Anda moved forward to meet it. He stroked the dome of her head, the part that was all black and stiffened by a sack of oil for echolocation. He lingered for a moment, and retracted his hand.

From the trainer’s control unit, Marni pressed in the sequence of keys to open the lock on the Classroom gate to a smaller side pool. It was like solving a puzzle. The six other whales at the stadium were spread out among the other pools. She wanted to clear a way for Anda without opening up the Classroom for the other whales to come barreling through. She had solved these problems so many times, sometimes in the heat of a show when a redirection was necessary.

As seen from the control unit, the body was thrown into even more relief against the pool lights. Marni thought should see its individual fingers, but when the curled knuckles disappeared, she knew that it was a trick of the water distortion and the moon, which was starting to set.

The grid of dials on the control panel seemed endless in their permutation. Every dial could move a six-thousand pound animal, if it was willing. Marni had to visualize every gate passage like she did many years ago, when she first started working the controls.

Finally, she gave the signal for Anda to swim through the open gate. Anda rolled to one side, looked at Marni through her left eye, and turned away. She swam over to the

dark shadow and dipped her head down. Marni gave the signal again, but Anda didn't even acknowledge her this time. The whale seemed to circle the body like a massive log caught in a whirlpool.

She turned to Sergeant Horwitz, who stood on the far edge of the Classroom. He had finished taking his pictures and was writing on a clipboard pushed against his belly.

"Doesn't want to move," she said.

"Coroner will be here in ten minutes." Sergeant Horwitz turned the page over and kept writing.

Marni started looking for Roxy again. In the corridor, an open door cast a cone of light against the opposing wall. She remembered passing that break room while following Horwitz, looking inside, and seeing nothing. Only the light was on.

A few paces away was the open backpack. A towel was balled inside, also a woman's swimsuit, and a load of other provisions hidden out of sight. As Marni got closer, she saw that the lanyard was looped around a shoulder strap. The cloth strip was embroidered with purple chrysanthemum flowers, and she remembered the day when Roxy showed her this lanyard. Roxy loved Chrysanthemum flowers and Chrysanthemum tea too, with the Goji berries, ice sugar.

"Marina," said Horwitz, who had stepped closer to the backpack. "That's evidence. Step away."

Marni stood up. "You want the body? I can dive."

"The whale's still in the pool."

She pulled her arms together in a streamline and jumped.

The water hit Marni like it did every morning on her first dive. Before the wetsuit developed its insulating layer of warm water, everything was chokingly cold, to the point where hyperventilation was almost a reflex. It had taken three months in a free-diving class to remove that reflex.

With her eyes open underwater, everything took on a blurry cast, and as Marni breaststroked her way to the bottom, there was a blissful increase in uncertainty. The body could have been a toy again, or an old grate rattled loose from the filtration system. Even as she got up close and saw the outline of a chest and head, it could have been any thrillseeker who had tried to swim with a killer whale.

But when Marni started sliding her arms around the body in search for a handhold, she knew immediately that it was Roxy. Her fingers first brushed the silver whistle bridge that was the mark of a trainer. And as she wrapped an arm under Roxy's own arms, the shape of her flesh was so familiar.

Marni could imagine the steps that Roxy had taken, the wet footprints on the concrete. She saw the MediLights tucked under each arm as Roxy dragged them from the vet's shed. She saw the little cake of gelatin that Roxy had been making in the afternoon. The backpack by her side, lanyard to bypass the security alarm. And in the white beams of the MediLights, Anda still swimming stiff, calling to her daughter Koko. In her last moments, Roxy may have made one final realization: an animal may misread human emotion, human compassion. Agitation was agitation, and Roxy was in the way. Her colors would have shone in the lights. Pink and blue, the sweet-tart suits, as Marni called them.

Marni adjusted her grip on Roxy, and from above, she saw the whale arch her body

and drift down, until she felt Anda's rostrum brush against her shoulder. She recoiled, and then wondered why she did. Out of all the whales, Anda was the least prone to aggression. Yet as Marni ran her hand over Roxy's body, she could feel the indentations where Anda's conical teeth had sank in. They were on her chest, her thighs, her belly.

She put her hand on the groove of Anda's jaw, and they floated, not quite on the bottom, but far from the surface of silver water. *Did you do this?* She wanted to ask, as she did many times before, when a toy got mangled in the Classroom, or a dead Heron was found, torn to shreds. *Naughty, naughty girl*, she would say in falsetto, and Anda would find it quite amusing.

Marni wondered what would happen to Anda. By midday, the killing would probably be national news. By week's end, there would probably be a federal investigation. In the next thirty minutes, she would have to make a phone call to Roxy's husband, somehow. When all was over, Marni would probably not be a whale rider anymore. Nobody would be a whale rider, and the safety binders would become another volume thicker.

Anda made a sound that Marni recognized immediately. Right here in the park, researchers had once made a discovery. While the whale dialect was far from the complexities of human speech, they found that Anda had consistent sounds associated with living things. This sound was a key to the researcher's discovery. It was highly correlated with Marni's presence. They called it her name.

Marni had raised Anda from a calf. She watched the floppy, wrinkled *thing* slide out of her mom in a billow of crimson. As the calf grew, Marni saw her fat expand to fill the nascent wrinkles in her skin. Anda developed a bacterial infection just a few months after she'd been weaned, and it carved a lesion down her left lung. At the worst of the infection, when the antibiotics were being flown from a laboratory in Europe, Marni had stayed up for two days and two nights, keeping the calf's head above water.

The whale rolled to one side, exposing the bulge of flesh that housed her eye. Everything was blurry, but Marni knew that Anda's irises were the darkest blue. Marni's own eyes were Pacific-blue. She felt the heft of Roxy in her arms, the gentle pressure of Anda on her shoulder. Marni imagined that their irises were concentric circles, rings of blue, one encapsulating the other.

When Marni came to the surface, Sergeant Horwitz took hold of Roxy's body and moved it far away from the edge. She gestured to a pile of tarps that the trainers used for additional shade on the hotter summer days. "Cover her," she said. "I can't—I can't look."

"Do you know her?" asked Sergeant Horwitz.

Marni nodded, and said nothing more. She walked out of the Classroom and over the bridge that led to the platform where the trainers would mount the whales, straddling them like horses or standing on their pectoral flippers like a pogo stick. She had a little blurb prepared for the shows, right after they finished the acrobatics. When you're on a whale, she would say, the past slips below the surface, and the future is shattered by torpedo-body of a whale. There is nothing but the present.

Right next to Marni hung the Telecue, with all the buttons mapping to every behavior. Row E were the rides, all ten of them. Some were very easy. A trainer just needed to sit behind the dorsal fin and hold it like a safety rail. Others were tremendously hard, like the rocket hop, where the full force of the whale passed through the clasped hands of a trainer as they shot twenty feet out of the water.

The control unit was powered down, so the Telecue was inactive. Marni found

herself pressing all the buttons on row E. They were soft silicone, like large keyboard letters. She kneaded the buttons between her fingers, as they indented and sprung back with soft noises. A dark blue had begun to ring the horizon. Astronomical twilight. That's what it was called. Marni loved the term; it seemed so expansive for no good reason. The moment in every night when the darkness decided to recede.

Marni had watched three whales pass in her time, but only Koko had passed in front of her. It was last morning, right before breakfast. Koko had come up to Marni and Roxy in the Classroom. She was a large whale, almost as large as her mom. Her dorsal fin had a notch around halfway. She had rested her head on the pool edge like Anda had done just now. She took a final breath and slipped from the wall, down to the bottom and never moved again. Roxy kept saying that the body was moving.

Over the radio, Sergeant Horwitz gave directions to the coroner and the homicide investigator. When they came down the long corridor, they looked at the shape under the aquamarine tarp, the wet spots on the concrete.

"When you think you've seen it all—" began the coroner, but the Sergeant Horwitz just shook his head and he stopped speaking.

From the front stage came Marni. She was dressed in a plain black wetsuit. Her ponytail was wet and stuck to her shoulder. In her hands she carried a silver bucket. At the sound of the metal, Anda stiffened and swam through the open gate to the medical pool.

"Yeah, you want brecky? Want brecky?"

From the silver bucket, Marni grabbed the largest handful of fish that she could carry. With a plop, she dropped it into the whale's hungry mouth.