

Whale Fall

written by Guest Contributor | October 4, 2016



Three weeks after the whale washed ashore, the mayor of Orange Beach called a press conference to discuss the crisis. She had a scientist at her side, a broad fellow with thick glasses and a pronounced tendency to elongate his o's, who told the waiting crowd of reporters and townsfolk that the dead whale on the beach was in danger of imminent catastrophic expansion.

"English," muttered the mayor out of the corner of her mouth.

The scientist turned red and said, "There's a slight possibility that it might explode."

The crowd burst into excited murmurs, looking over their shoulders in the direction of the shore. Mayor Jessica Washington spoke loudly over the din, advising them to avoid the beach until they found a way to dispose of the body. It might take a while, she warned. It was, after all, quite a large whale. Privately, she thought it would be easier for all involved, especially herself, if the whale *did* explode and thus save her the trouble of deciding what to do with the two hundred tons of slowly rotting blue whale.

"We will keep you updated on our progress while we search for a disposal method," she said before taking questions. She fielded inquiries about the effects on tourism; about the ecological impact; about the smell, which was noticeable even from the city center; and if the explosion would be seen from space.

"No, Selina," Jessica told the thirteen year-old who had asked the last question. "If the whale explodes, I highly doubt it will be seen from space."

When the press conference was over, Jessica retreated to her office and poured two fingers of whiskey into her coffee. Nothing had prepared her for this kind of catastrophe when she had won the election last fall. Earthquakes, she could handle. Storms, she had weathered. But crisis management in the face of a beached blue whale wasn't covered in Poli Sci 101.

From her fourth floor window, she could see out to where the whale sat, looming ominously against the white sand. The vantage point gave her a clear view of several people, the thirteen year-old Selina among them, heading

toward the beach despite her explicit instructions to stay away. Jessica added a third finger of whiskey and canceled her meetings for the day.

The whale had arrived in the middle of a June thunderstorm that had knocked out most of the power in Orange Beach. Families had held candlelit picnics in their living rooms, and teenagers called their friends to complain about how bored they were, or at least they did until the cell service went out. Guests at the Seahorse Inn held a singalong around the fireplace, and Veronique Robillard, who owned the surf rental shop by the Strand, went from house to house carrying a box of candles and matches for those who didn't have any. Jessica Washington, ever pragmatic, spent the night alone in her childhood home, her parents having relocated to Florida for their retirement, and read memos by flashlight as she ate the steadily melting ice cream from her freezer.

In the morning, when they emerged from their homes, they found the town refreshed, washed clean. The sky was clear, the clouds having emptied their cargoes, and the streets sparkled anew. There were downsides, of course. The local park, which was bowl-shaped and deep, had filled to the brim with rain. The high school had to cancel summer sessions until they drained the water from their science classrooms.

And there was, of course, the whale.

The early morning surfers were the first to see it, pulling up short as they approached the shore and exchanging startled looks before creeping closer to investigate. It was not the first time the ocean had spit out a gift onto their beach; but usually it was jellyfish or kelp or, on a few rare occasions, a small nurse or tiger shark. Nothing at all like this.

Veronique Robillard was the one to call it in. Through the window of her surf shop, she gazed out at the majestic curve of the whale's back, black against the lightening sky, her palm flattened against the glass as she told the police—she hadn't known who to call—that yes, it was a whale, and no, she didn't know what kind. Yes, she would stay on the line.

Once the police promised they would pass on the news, though in truth they were as baffled by who to call as she, Veronique left her shop to join the surfers, tiptoeing across the sand and inhaling the sour smell of the sea and fish, salty and sharp. The surfers made room for her so she might see the unfortunate creature. It had been a blue whale in life, small for its kind but impossibly large to those standing on the beach. Its skin was still damp, gilded by the sunrise. The surfers had gathered close to the whale's tail, talking quietly as they gazed at its mass. It was at least twice as tall as the largest of them, maybe seventy or eighty feet long, as large as a sixteen-wheeler.

Though Veronique had not grown up in Orange Beach, she had been born near the sea and spent much of her childhood out on the water with her French Creole father. But she had never seen anything like this. None of them had. In late summer and fall, they sometimes saw pods migrating south, far out beyond the edge of the pier, their spouts spraying high into the air, and all of them

had seen whales in captivity before. None of that had prepared them for its sheer enormity, the overwhelming majesty of its bulk. Veronique slipped her hands into the pockets of her board shorts and had to swallow back an unaccountable moment of grief. It must have been truly magnificent in life.

Jessica Washington arrived precisely half an hour later, already dressed in a navy blue suit and carrying her heels in one hand. People greeted her, but she only nodded back tersely, eyes narrowed as she took in the scene. Veronique waved her over, as though Jessica might not be able to see the whale herself

“Good Lord,” Jessica said as she came to stand beside Veronique. “You weren’t kidding.”

“No,” Veronique said. “Good morning, Madame Mayor.”

“Thank you,” Jessica said, distracted. “Could everyone please step away from the whale?”

Veronique obediently stepped back as Jessica turned aside. There were several city council members behind her, and the fire and police chiefs too. They conferred in hushed whispers, looking frequently back at the whale, hoping it would miraculously vanish and leave the beach unsullied once more. What were they to do? What could they do?

“Perhaps,” one city council member suggested after they had argued themselves in a complete circle, “we can just leave it.”

When a whale is left to rot on the shore, it grows grey and lifeless. The sun leeches the color from its back. The birds desecrate its smooth skin. The heat and buildup of gas from the bacteria inside swell its body to grotesque proportions. It begins to stink of rotten fish, musky and salty and foul. There is no dignity in a death like that, no glory.

It took two weeks for the smell to begin driving tourists away. Natalie Groves, owner of the Seahorse Inn, saw her bookings drop from full capacity to less than half within a week and declared enough was enough. With the support of her fellow local business owners, she found a marine biologist at the nearest accredited university and brought him to the mayor to advise her on removal plans.

“It isn’t that easy,” Jessica Washington said in exasperation when Natalie cornered her the day of her press conference. “We have a few options, but it’s a huge whale. We can’t just throw it back in the ocean or give it to the aquarium like we did with that shark two years ago.”

“I don’t see how it’s that complicated,” Natalie said, crossing her arms and attempting to intimidate her as she once had when they were in high school together. “Just get a crane, Jess, that’ll take care of it.”

“You try moving two hundred tons of whale, then,” Jessica said, and she stalked off to consult with city council and answer a call from the *Times*.

Natalie's daughter Selina, a stocky thirteen year-old with wildly curly hair, didn't care much about her mother's frustrations or the mayor's warnings about going near the beach. Who cared if it was dangerous? It was *cool*, and if she could be there when it exploded, she would tell everyone about it for *years*.

Selina and her friends named the whale Jonah like in the story, not caring that Jonah had been *swallowed* by the whale. When they grew bored with playing tag and climbing trees in the now-drained park, they made up stories about where he had been. Nick T. insisted the scar on the whale's left fin had come from a tangle with a great white, and that the whale had eaten the shark whole. Selina told him he was an idiot. Everyone knew blue whales didn't eat sharks. He didn't speak to her for three hours, scowling every time she tried to apologize.

The day of the mayor's press conference, she and her gang of friends snuck down to the shore to play a game of chicken: who was brave enough to touch the whale's side? They stood in a circle, arguing who should go first, until Selina grew annoyed. She planted her bare feet in the sand, crouched into a runner's lunge, and sprinted off toward the whale, shouting to the others to look out. They watched in breathless anticipating as she ran past the sprawled fin, into the shadow of the whale's swollen belly. She flashed her friends a smug smile and put both hands on the pale skin. It was hot like her forehead when she had a fever, and she fancied she could feel a rumbling inside, a seismic event that sent her stumbling back. When the whale's side failed to rupture, she beamed triumphantly.

"See?" she called as she jogged back. "It didn't explode."

"But it *could* have," protested Nick T., and they devolved into bickering as she knelt in the sand to wipe her hands clean. Later, when she went home, she imagined she could still smell the sea on her palms.

The *Times* reporter showed up three days after Jessica Washington's press conference to write a "human interest piece." When he asked Jessica for a quote, she said, "Isn't it more of a whale interest piece?" which she immediately wished she could take back.

The quote, and the story, caught on. The floodgates opened and the streets of Orange Beach grew crowded with news vans. The Seahorse Inn was soon filled to capacity with reporters from all across the South Bay. Jessica Washington had to hold her second press conference of the week to deal with them, and when she took questions, she was besieged with suggestions for how to get the whale off their hands, varying from using cranes, as Natalie Groves had suggested, to "just bury it, it's already lying on the sand, isn't it?"

"It weighs about two hundred tons and it's nearly eighty feet long," Jessica said in exasperation. "And we're supposed to just somehow bury the thing in the sand?"

"What about donating it to science?" asked a reporter from the local hippie e-newsletter.

"If you can find a place that would take it, we would love to consider it as an option," Jessica said.

A *WHALE OF A PROBLEM*, was the headline the *Times* ran a week after that first press conference, alongside a picture of Jessica Washington scowling at the camera. Tourists began returning to Orange Beach, among them thrill seekers who wanted pictures with the whale, curious rubbernecks, and animal rights activists campaigning for humane disposal, though none of them could agree what that would entail.

Truth be told, it was the most exciting thing to happen to Orange Beach since a pirate movie had blocked off most of the shore to film an elaborate shipwreck scene. Their proximity to Hollywood notwithstanding, they were not a significant town, or an important one. Now they were known; they were remembered; they were, if nothing else, the last resting place of Jonah the Whale, the dearly departed.

As the days went on, no one could go near the beach without seeing people waving signs reading *SAVE JONAH!* and *ANIMALS DESERVE PROPER BURIAL TOO!* The *Times* ran a political cartoon of a whale funeral: five mourning whales surrounding a huge casket, the whale's wife blowing her nose on a piece of kelp.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Jessica said when Veronique brought a copy of the paper by her office. "Where are they getting this stuff from?"

"I think it's rather sweet," Veronique said. "Mind if I show you something?"

"I have a meeting to go to," Jessica said, checking her watch. "Can it wait?"

"I'll send you an email," Veronique said. She smiled, rested her hand atop Jessica's for a moment, and stood. "Have a good day, Madame Mayor."

Jessica waved goodbye, already distracted by her phone ringing. When she looked up again, Veronique had gone.

When a whale dies at sea, it sinks to the floor, deep down where no light can penetrate. Its body starts to decompose. The creatures of the deep flock to the rich, fertile remains. They've found new species living in the bodies of whales. They've found whole new genera. Down on the ocean floor, a whale is more than a mere inconvenience to a small town. It's a home. It teems with life and color, even without light, even when nothing is left but the bones. It's peaceful at the bottom of the ocean. No sounds, no light, nothing. Only endless water, and the occasional anglerfish. There's something miraculous in a whale fall, the way life can spring from death.

Veronique sent Jessica a video of a whale fall, writing, *Dear Madame Mayor, I thought this might inspire a solution*, and left her phone number, too.

Jessica watched the video while she was meant to be writing another press statement about their search for an institute that would take the whale's body. Her coffee went cold in her hand as on screen tiny, impossibly bright and colorful creatures fed on the whale's body. She had never seen anything so beautiful, not ever, and she thought of Jonah on the shore, where he was

left to rot, nothing more than a nuisance. Something so large, so majestic deserved better than that.

She drained the remains of her cold coffee once and wondered if there might be a way to return Jonah to the sea. It seemed only right, didn't it, to lay him to rest in the place he had called home. Nothing else would fit.

It took a few calls, and more meetings than she was happy with, but on the Tuesday five weeks after the whale washed ashore, Jessica Washington found a solution. "There's an institute that studies whale falls," she explained in her tenth press conference of the month. She was getting pretty good at them. "They've agreed to buy the whale's body from us so they can study its decomposition."

When asked, she confirmed that yes, the plan involved cranes, several of them, and animal transport team that was admittedly more accustomed to dealing with live sharks than dead whales but who were willing to give it a try. They would be moving him on Friday, and until then, people were advised to stay clear of the beach. Please, Jessica added, knowing that they were unlikely to listen.

"Where did you get this idea from?" the *Times* reporter asked towards the end of the press conference.

"A friend sent me a video of a whale fall," Jessica said. Veronique was standing at the back of the crowd. Jessica could just make out her smile. "It seemed like the best solution."

"I'm glad I helped," Veronique said to Jessica when the press conference had ended. She held out her hand and said, "Job well done, Madame Mayor."

"It's all thanks to you," Jessica said, shaking Veronique's hand. "And you should call me Jessica."

And Veronique beamed, as bright as the brilliant creatures swarming a whale fall.

The night before Jonah was taken away, Jessica Washington went to the beach a little after sunset. She was not the only one compelled to say a last goodbye. Much of the town had assembled just beyond the police tape around Jonah's body. Some carried candles. The animal rights activists had brought a bouquet of roses to lay, beside a sign that said *Rest in Peace, Jonah*. Earlier in the week, Jessica might have thought them ridiculous sentimentalists, but as she approached, a wave of sorrow crashed over, as unaccountable as it was sudden.

It was the first time she had been to the beach since the day Jonah had arrived, and she was startled again by just how large he was. In the early dusk dimness, he seemed like a slumbering giant from a fairytale, waiting to be woken. As she stood there, she saw Natalie and Selina, standing a little ways off. She saw the marine biologist, and the *Times* reporter, and, at the edge of the crowd, Veronique. In the morning Jonah would be gone, and as strange as it would have seemed a month ago, they had all grown used to him.

He was as part of their town as Jessica herself now. This was his last night in Orange Beach, and they had all come to bear witness.

Jessica ducked beneath the police tape and came into the shadow of his belly to kneel in the sand beside him, breathing in the rich stench. She closed her eyes and flattened her palm to his side. His skin was roughened, dried out from long days in the sun. Out at sea, he had been untouchable. Was he missed? Perhaps there was a whale out there calling for him, wondering where he had gone. Or perhaps he had always been alone and had found his way to California to escape the vast emptiness of the sea.

She pictured Jonah out in the ocean, maybe a friend at his side, swimming silently. Little conversation passed between them. There was no need for it. The ocean was vast, but to them it would seem natural and right. They had never known anything else. The fish and the sharks were no more than tiny annoyances to brush past. Ships were small points of darkness interrupting the sunlight streaming through the water. Humans weren't even worth noticing.

Ahead was land. The water was getting shallower, not noticeably, but enough that Jonah turned back. Out to the west, dark clouds were gathering, but he couldn't know that. He knew only the water. Jonah swam toward the surface. He reached toward the light. He surfaced into the air. He sucked in a breath. And then he dived once more, down into the unknown depths.



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