

The Eye of the Orca,

BC July 1987

Summer of ninth grade was one of the most maladroit summers of my life; gangly, unsure of myself, wishing I was a cool kid. I was 14 years old, out of all-girls private school for the summer. I recall I had a handful of book reports to do that summer and I think I had already begged Earls to give me a job. Indeed, I might already have been in the process of becoming a bus person and a hostess at Earls. This was something I was proud of. I had a whole other world going at my weekend job, separate from my family and separate from the dark, boring halls of all-girls, which to this day, cause me a degree of veritable discomfort in remembrance.

I was all set to go on a large schooner run out of Victoria, BC by a boat-oriented family for a week. This vessel still runs and educates young people about schooner life on the ocean. It's called S.A.L.T.S. and was recommended by my early-on-in-ninth-grade first boyfriend ever who is now an esteemed lawyer. He dumped me after about 2 months of dating, which had meant bussing to Richmond to hang out on Friday nights in his basement and walk around aimlessly in the dark cold with silver flats on and a jean jacket and pants that hung very low so we called them poo-catchers. I was crushed for about 27 days. Cathy Waite, a real sweetheart from North Van was good about letting me feel awful and writing me encouraging notes that made me laugh. I always remember I liked her a lot and then she got to leave the Hell we were in and go to public school and wear button fly Levi's and mukluks and die her hair.

I ended up dealing sort of well with the break up for a 14-year-old. He and I became friends as I coped with what it feels like to hold hands and make out with someone and then have him make out with some other blonde girl in high school. I thought that the blonde girl was my friend. It was an education in betrayal and reconciliation. Being a girl, the other girl became not really a strong friend; conversely, I refused to find fault in this young man. Once boy-energy entered, the politics really began. In a system deprived of anything male, amplification and then analysis of all things male is inevitable. Strangely, there would be a recurrent lifelong pattern with attractive blonde young ladies getting involved with men I had adored.

So, 'he', this ex, was going on the S.A.L.T.S. vessel, and I went as well because we had booked me to go on months ahead and though we were not a 'thing' any more, the boat was still launching. I got over myself and took a deep breath, put a scrunchie in my hair and packed my bag. A bunch of my friends went. There we were, learning how to do boats. I didn't care to do the written part of knot-tying. I wanted to avoid all things scholastic after the drone of all-girls. My main thing was that I wanted to be on midnight watch. That seemed like it would be truly exciting.

I asked if I could be on midnight watch under the full moon. Everyone else had dinner and went to bed. The person who had been on midnight watch before

me came to get me. He wrapped his shift up at midnight. I had midnight to 4 am before I got someone else to do 4 am to 8 am and then we all reconvened for breakfast and did knots, only I had hysterical giggles because that summer I would go into giggles for almost any reason at all.

The boat was anchored in Desolation Sound. I sat on the prow of the boat. This was easily possible; the S.A.L.T.S. schooner is massive and I was 14. I felt insignificant on the big quiet ocean. The only sounds were the water and my breathing. I was away from getting in trouble at school. Away from my pregnant mother. Away from my dad who shaved and put a suit on and went to work every day at the exact same time and came home for dinner and always seemed calm. Away from my brother who won awards and did well in school and was expected to come first in class and then did frequently. Away from track meets and choir. Away from the smell of fries at McDonald's in Kerrisdale and away from the Jody Watley, George Michael, Bruce Springsteen radio medley of that summer.

Just this tiny young person, on the verge of everything crazy the late 80's brought to Vancouver, on the on the verge of gaining curves and putting Sun-In in my bangs, which I cut and spiked up a little mall-style myself. This, in spite of my mother saying bangs, which she referred to as 'a fringe' because she ups her Britishness whenever she feels the situation warrants someone uppity were hideous and bourgeois.

I was breathing and thinking and it was this incredibly happy moment. I looked up at the moon. I didn't take my watch, a Timex digital, up on deck with me. I wanted to be there in my hoody and jean shorts by myself with the big moon and the water.

The moon was a silver dollar; the sky was clear and calm, the way the sky often is in BC on the water in July. It was a rich moment. Life was there. I was breathing and noticing, calm and happy at 14 with such little life in my sheltered world. And then it happened. Not 10 feet from the prow, the orca surfaced. I saw the eye; first the white splotch and then the actual eye with the pupil. We looked right at each other. The eye was almost human. The creature felt human. There was a true connection. I wondered if it might tip the deck or if I needed to be scared. I didn't feel scared. I felt safe. That orca didn't come back again, but it had sensed a life up on the prow under the full moon full of teenage feelings and wonder. It had come up for air.