

## WEANLINGS

*Suphil Lee Park*

It's early in the afternoon that Alex's father pulls into the shoulder of a national road for a pit stop. They have been driving for a few hours along the West Coast, all windows open to let in what little wind there is. Travel-sick and damp in the armpits, Alex bolts out of the car as soon as it comes to a halt.

Her mother says, "Don't go too far," closing the door behind her.

Alex takes a large gulp of the salty air. There are several cars parked nearby. From the edge of the road she can see a small ring of crowd down the beach. That little stretch of beach juts out unexpectedly, as if the sea forgot to tuck it in before withdrawing from an eroded stone staircase. On top of the staircase sits a boy about her age slurping away at a popsicle, facing the crowd. Alex runs past him down the stairs.

Alex walks around the crowd until she finds a gap between two women. And soon enough, she's peeking at what looks like a large, white barrel. Only after the barrel faintly swells does she realize that it is a live animal.

"I didn't know a whale could breathe on shore," says a woman above Alex's head. Another woman answers, "That's a dolphin, dear."

The animal has a round, lipless mouth, instead of a dolphin's characteristic nostrum. It is a whale, not older than a yearling from how big it is, about the size of a MINI Cooper. But what takes Alex aback is its seamless whiteness, save for the rim of its mouth and belly that have a sallow tint of milk going bad. Its skin has such an unrealistic smoothness to it that anyone would think from a distance that it's part of the beach, a huge white boulder. Alex imagines that the whale, which blends with the beach to near invisibility, must come from where the ghosts belong. Something about that otherworldliness sets her feet in motion.

She shoulders through the crowd with indifference, as does a young kid used to getting away with sheer rudeness. It is not yet in her knowledge that things like that won't last, and it won't last much longer now that she's only a year shy of teenage. But she's still smaller than most kids her age, so small that her cheeks brush against the women's waists as she pushes past them, unaware of her indifference. And with the same kind of indifference, Alex suddenly stops. She's now standing in the middle of the ring. There's a cigarette sticking out the whale's mouth.

The cigarette is not unlit. Alex's head jolts up to look around, as if to find out who put it in that dying animal's mouth. Some pairs of eyes

glitter with anticipation as she scans through, or so she thinks, and when Alex looks back to the whale, this time she does in the direction of its eye, expecting a sign of fury, reproach. The whale does not look back. It is staring off into the distance, not towards the ocean, but someplace far beyond. Alex crouches and looks closer, harder. The whale's eye yields nothing but a distant, patient look. Alex holds her breath, and without processing the urge, kicks it hard at the side.

At the ferocious kick in the whale's flank, the cigarette falls to the ground. Alex stumbles back a few steps, feeling as if she's just kicked at a water tank, and plops down, sand thumping up around her. A few people in the crowd smirk—Alex knows this without seeing, as the smirking transforms the crowd the way a lick of breeze does a still lake. She manages to get back to her feet before the smirk turns into an audible laugh. A man says a little too loud, "That thing's kicking back without even trying."

The kick has left a lingering numbness in her leg. Alex is massaging her knee when the man again taunts her, "Kicked the kid right back with *no* legs."

An odd sensation of pride overtakes her. It is only when she again looks to the whale that a twinge of conscience replaces the pride. The whale's eye is directed at Alex on square. Amidst the pallid smoothness of its skin, the black eye is one tiny hole cracked open by accident, through which Alex now discerns the dark, dense matter filling the whale's entire volume. A line of cigarette ash runs down from its mouth, like an old gash. Alex staggers back. All of a sudden, the small beach seems to have shrunk into an even smaller, pulsing thing, in which the crowd encircles the whale tighter, the man standing closer, and a smell emanating from him stronger. With a jerk, Alex turns around to find a cigarette lodged between the man's fingers, before he jeers above other voices: "Now that kid's afraid."

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"What, are you afraid?" said the boy at the hilltop.

Alex answered, "You bet I'm not," and climbed onto her bike.

But she avoided thinking about the sharp drop ahead; it was the steepest hill in the village, notorious among kids. Once she gave the bike a push, she wouldn't have enough time to think how fast she was riding, and how heedless.

During the past months, they had dared each other to climb a magnolia tree, stand on the outer window ledge of their second-floor classroom, and touch down on the midpoint of a road and hold the place for three seconds.

But none of the dares made her tremble as she now was. And trembling seemed to be all that she was able to do, as she willed herself to look ahead, as far as the eye could see, feeling no control over the lifeless bike.

The boy urged, "What are you waiting for?"

The village was fading into a shade of light indigo, evening mist creeping up from the seashore in the west. The road ahead would mean a drop into the shroud of fog. Alex gripped the handlebars tighter, and kicked off.

Her ears briefly went deaf as on a plane that just soared above the weather. Then she knew she was not riding the bike, but the bike was rolling downhill with her straddling it—out of control. It was before she reached level ground that the bike slipped out of her grasp and sent her flying off the saddle, flailing in vain. For a second there was nothing but the shock of the landing, air punched out of her lungs, then quickly followed the bitter taste of sand in her mouth. She coughed it out, her palms burning with abrasions. Alex rolled over and lay still on her back, waiting for the first surge of pain to subside. The boy took down the hill on a run, yelling. As he helped her up, blood trickled down from her knee. She dug out a piece of stone stuck in the scar. The pain felt good, liberating.

The boy said, "You're a mess," short of breath.

Without saying anything, Alex limped to where the bike lay. Its wheels were slowly spinning from the ride. She began to walk uphill, pulling the bike along. The boy followed. Out of the tail of his eye, he watched Alex comb grains of sand from under her hair. Her nails smelled of blood. In the wind was an imminent threat of heavy rain.

He asked, "What are you doing?"

She said, "Doing it one more time," before starting to laugh.



Judith watches the tip of her daughter's head disappear down the stairs, and represses the familiar urge to call her back up, to keep her in sight, to deter her willing departure somehow, at all costs. Taking out a basket from the trunk, she decides it is different from the anger that she feels, though rarely, towards the person who has taken most of her and doesn't care to know its significance. Ever since Alex started to totter on her own, Judith has found herself aching, as with undulant fevers, to put her daughter to an unending sleep. The mere thought of it sends a shiver down her spine, but also gives a brutal satisfaction. How content she would be, if she could keep Alex in the cradle safe and sound all the time.

The basket's heavier than she thought, so Judith removes some foiled

lumps of food from it. Then she totes the basket round the car towards the front where she can use the bonnet as a table. Her pregnancy barely shows on her, mostly for her loose-fitting dress, yet she feels the need to rest before finishing the short trip, exhausted by the loads she's carrying. She lays the basket on the ground and looks about for her husband. He's already out of sight.

Judith strolls to the staircase, one hand over her sweaty forehead, and stands there, squinting down the stairs. Shards of broken bottles all over the beach catch her attention first, then the boy sitting on the top step. He's licking at the popsicle carelessly clutched in his fist. Judith stares back over her shoulder, stretching her neck without turning. She does instinctively, not quite certain what she's looking for, like a herbivore, yet still brooding over the urge that does not belong to a prey. When Judith realizes she is looking for the boy's mother, an unexpected fear transfixes her. *Does his mother feel the same way, though?* The need to hold her child captive. Her eyes rest on the crown of the boy's head, and a chillness courses through her body as she tries to fathom how much of the urge really is possessiveness. Judith eyes the boy's hands—sticky, neon pink—and blurts out: "Do you need some tissue, honey?"

The boy throws a quick glance in Judith's way, still eating, then goes back to staring ahead as if he's heard nothing. His freckled face remains blank of any emotion. After a while Judith returns to where she left the basket, her face as blank as his. She lifts the basket into her arms and starts towards the front of the car. As Judith moves, the pressure in her pelvis reminds her of her first pregnancy, during which she claimed Alex, without doubt, as hers, and hers only.

Judith places the basket on the bonnet and peers inside. The bananas have already started to look black in patches, so she snaps one off and begins to eat, standing on the edge of the road. She does not look in the boy's direction. Without anything between her and the afternoon sun, Judith keeps squinting down the stairs, her jaw moving constantly, predatorily.

Now Alex is shoving her way into the crowd. Her small figure wedges into the ring of much taller spectators, leaving in tow a crevice that they quickly seal up. Judith frowns for a moment. But her daughter's forwardness soon brings a smile to her lips. Suddenly, for the first time in many years, she feels beautiful—powerful.

The urge ebbs away at once, so completely, and Judith begins to walk towards the car and the basket and her husband who's just returned, and walking towards them all, she decides it's one of those things that a mother should never reveal to her child, a woman to her man.

She asks, "Do you want something to eat?" and opens the basket.