

52 Hertz Whale

You sit with your hand propped on your chin. You try to pretend your mind is wandering.

It's not. Your thoughts, as if conscious effort had tossed an anchor, petulantly defy your pleas to drift away. You are painfully aware of every laugh, every shared glance, every exchanged smile in this room. You bow your head a little lower into your desk, and wish you could sink into the ground. You try hard to hide the fact that you were staring.

There's a hollow feeling in your chest, like a hole has opened up where your heart was supposed to be. A dull throb that works its way into your lungs, until every intake of air leaves a sharp cramp in your chest.

Your lungs expand as you inhale, but you cannot seem to draw enough air.



In 1989, a whale was discovered in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. At 52 Hertz, its call was too high to be perceived by either the blue whale at 10 Hertz or the fin whale at 20. Pitched more than twice as high as others of its species, it wanders the water primarily on its own.

There was nothing inherently wrong with it, other than the fact that — whether it was due to genetic mutation or hybridization— it had been unlucky the moment it was born.



You are your own closest companion. People say, “distance makes the heart grow fonder”, and you agree, because that must have meant the reverse was true as well. The silence around you makes your own presence more apparent, and you find the very idea of it revolting.

If you ever learned to be comfortable in your own skin, you might settle. A desperation flares in the pit of your stomach, and you think with a vehement determination that this can never be allowed to happen.

In the hallways, you smile at faces you recognize. They seem to stare right through you. Your half-hearted waves are not returned. Your friends make plans in front of you, as if you wholly consisted of nothing else but carpet tiles and wallpaper. They speak of group chats and jokes you are not privy to.

You watch until it becomes awkward, then you look away. There's a chill beneath your skin that stays no matter how many layers you tug over your shoulders. Your smile feels strained these days.

You knew, at some point, you must have made a mistake. Was it five years ago, when you refused one invitation too many? You recall the look of anticipation on their faces, and the way you turned them down with weak excuses. People learn, and so the invites eventually stopped coming.

Or was it freshman year, when the guise of your academic competence was stripped away like a bad paint job, as you missed homework deadlines and assignment due dates alike?

It hardly mattered that you had meant to keep that resolution, to work harder and build a better character. Because progress is slow, and failure has always been your path of least resistance. Eventually, you stopped believing your own words, because your sentences tasted like a lie the moment they left your throat.

You watch in real time as the expectant smiles of potential new friends fell into something uncomfortable, and you watch until they avoid your gaze altogether.

Something in your chest sours.

However, you also understand that people are not shallow. Was it the way you spoke, then? Was something about you so off-putting that it diverted interactions altogether, long before conversation could even be attempted?



As such, scientists dubbed it “the world’s loneliest whale.”

Online, recordings of its song are shrill and eerie. It sounds like the wailing of a hurricane siren muffled under water.



You wished desperately for someone to hold a mirror up to you, to lay out in impartial and dispassionate terms precisely what was wrong with you. You were tired of arguing with the voice inside your head that sounded like you, but loathed you too much to actually be you.

Was it the way you dressed? Was it your grades? Could it be that you simply had nothing likable about you?

You grow out your hair, you change the way you dress. You fix your posture and speak in a louder voice. For a time, it worked. But like all bandage solutions, the wound grows, and tears, and the placeholder falls off.



Regardless, the creature calls out endlessly into the water as researchers track its migration alone through treacherous waters. For 12 years, it has received no answer.



That summer, you go back home to your family. The ocean glitters on the skyline as the car travels down the road, and you squint against the sun's glare.

At the shore, the wind tousles through your hair with an affectionate hand, cupping cold fingers on your cheeks. Seawater is brushed away from your damp forehead, and it slides down your chin before rejoining the swirling foam below.

As the tide rises and ebbs, the sand around your toes is lifted until the silt blocks your view of what lies beneath the surface. The grains brushing against your legs leave your calves rubbed raw.

It reminds you of a stone tumbler, of when plain, rough-edged rock is tumbled until its polish glows underneath the light. You stand very still, feeling yourself sink into the coastline. The boardwalk rises out of the tides in the distance, drawing a peculiar line near the horizon in the spot where the sky tentatively approaches the sea.

Your feet are buried up to your ankles. The next wave rises on the horizon and approaches you like a promise.

Unhurried, you tug yourself free and splash towards shore. The gale carrying the oncoming storm whisks past your ears like a sigh.



Those who hear about the whale's story seem to find solace in its existence despite its tragedy. As the whale moves through the water, it carries those sentiments with it.

For the time being, that will have to be enough.