

ALL ABOUT THE WHALES

"Hi there!"

The sudden chirp of the little boy's voice startled the old man. Up until that moment, he had been sitting alone on a park bench with his nose buried in the morning newspaper, enjoying the quiet solitude of a crisp spring morning. Now, he suddenly found himself wanting to be anywhere else in the world than where he was.

He squinted at the boy from behind his homemade facemask. The boy mimicked his expression, squinting back at him as he rubbed the tip of his snot-covered nose with the cuff of his jacket sleeve.

"I'm 7 years old. How old are you?"

"Isn't it proper manners to ask a stranger for their name first?" the old man replied.

"Do you want to tell me your name?" the little boy asked.

"Not particularly, no."

"Okay then." The little boy nodded as if an important question had been settled. "So... how old are you?"

The old man sighed as he folded his newspaper. It wasn't that he didn't like children. In fact, he had raised two of his own. Sure, they were both in their early 30's and he didn't talk much to either of them since they moved away and had kids of their own. But that didn't exactly mean he disliked young people, either. And while he was fairly confident in saying that there was no animosity between him and his two adult children, he couldn't exactly say they were ever close, either. It was nobody's fault, he always told himself. It was just the way things were. Their mother, Gladys, had always been better at that family stuff, anyway.

No, it wasn't the fact that it was a child that interrupted his routine. It was the fact that anybody had been in the park to interrupt it at all. He had to admit, he had grown used to (and even spoiled by) the solitude. He would never admit it to anyone but himself, but in a lot of ways the pandemic was one of the best things that ever happened to the old man. Ever since the social distancing guidelines and the stay-at-home orders were put in place, the world had been his oyster. For the first time in a really long time, his time was truly his: sometimes he fed the ducks at the pond, while other times he would simply sit on a park bench and catch up on his reading. The threat of illness had never bothered the old man much, anyway; he was relatively healthy for his age, and it wasn't as if there was anyone left to risk bringing the disease back home to. But most importantly, it was quiet. There was nobody there to make imaginary demands of him anymore. Until now.

"You look sad," the little boy said, interrupting the old man's train of thought.

"I look what?"

"You look sad. Are you sad?"

The old man composed himself as he reopened his paper.

"Shouldn't you be in school, young man?"

"I am in school," the young boy replied. "Well, I'm kinda in school. We're doing school on the computer now. Mom said it's going to be for another month or two, but Kayla said it was going to be forever. Kayla is in 3rd grade so she's really smart. I'm only in second, so she thinks she knows more than me, except one time Kayla told me that whales were just really big fish, but I knew better because they're my favorite mammal. Did you know that sometimes whales make unique sounds if they're scared, or if they're sad or if they're lonely or—"

"Your mom," the old man interrupted. "Where is your mom? Is she here?"

"Oh yeah," the boy replied. "She's right over there."

The boy pointed to a young woman standing on the other side of the playground, talking to someone on her phone. Somewhere in the stream of the little boy's words, the old man found purchase on his mother's face. He was particularly drawn to the shape of her mouth as she spoke. He was too far away to hear exactly what she was saying, but there was something familiar in the syllables she used, conjuring to life words like "how" and "what are we going to do" and "I just can't take this anymore". She had the look of a person who was trying their best to handle something that was much bigger than themselves, and that was a language that the old man understood all too well.

The old man put down his paper and looked at the little boy beside him. "Well Kayla sounds like a good friend," he said. "You must miss her an awful lot."

"I do." The little boy looked at the ground as he made circles in the dirt underneath the bench with his feet. "I miss all of my friends. Mom says I'll be able to see them again soon, but

I'm not so sure. Sometimes it feels like I'll never see them again, ever. Do you ever miss anybody?"

"I do." The old man smiled. "All the time."

"Oh God, I'm so sorry," the mother exclaimed, rushing over to the bench with an apologetic look on her face. "He can be such a talker. We didn't think anybody else would be here this early." She hastily produced two facemasks from her handbag, fumbling with the ear loops as she struggled to put one of them on her son's face. "I just wanted to get Cody out of the house to get some fresh air for a change and--"

"It's quite alright ma'am," the old man interrupted, holding up his hand to stop her apology. "I was just getting to know my new friend here. He was teaching me all about the whales." Cody smiled proudly at the mention of his favorite mammal. "Did you know that they sometimes make unique sounds when they're feeling lonely? Why I had no idea until Cody here told me."

"Well, that's nice." The mother smiled politely as she reached out for her son's hand. "Come along, Cody. We've got a lot to do today before your father gets home."

Cody bounced up off of the bench. He turned around and beamed at the old man while holding out his hand. "Well, it was nice to meet you, mister."

"Jacob," the old man replied as he took Cody's hand. "My name is Jacob. And it was nice to meet you too, Cody. Maybe I'll see you here again sometime."

Cody smiled as he took his mother's hand. He turned to wave to his new friend one last time as he and his mother made their way to their car. Jacob waved back. He picked up the

newspaper but he didn't open it. Instead, he took a moment to let himself enjoy his surroundings. The bright white sun hung high in the mid-morning sky. The crisp spring air was cool and clean and felt good in his lungs, even through the fabric of his facemask. Patches of grass had started to sprout up and blanket the ground in a patchwork quilt of bright green squares. It was peaceful, a kind of peace that Jacob hadn't known in a good long while. And most importantly, it was a little less quiet.