

WHALE WATCHING

By Jessica Manchester

When Tim Holland's basset hound Nelly didn't wake up one December morning Tim wasn't surprised. The dog was 15 years old. Neither was he surprised by how his wife Candy got on the telephone to inform everyone they knew that the family dog had passed. His wife loved to talk. She called the children first. Then she called her six sisters, one by one. Eight hours later she told Tim that she would get to everyone else the next day.

"Rose would not shut up," she informed him, twirling a golden lock of hair around her ring finger. "She goes on and on telling me about how the butcher didn't order her a goose like she asked him to. She has a Martha Stewart recipe she wants to try for her Charles Dickens caroling group. You know how she dresses in Victorian clothes and goes caroling with her friends? Well, she wants to serve them goose for Christmas dinner. Don't you think that's weird? I think it's weird but then Rose has always marched to the beat of her own drum. She asked me shouldn't have Nelly died a long time ago? I mean, honestly, what is wrong with her?" Candy often complained about her youngest sister, Rose.

She continued to drone on but Tim finished his glass of scotch and announced he was going to bed. He didn't think she heard him. He could hear her on the phone, saying the name Susan from time to time. She was talking to her best friend now. He drifted off and slept soundly. When he awoke he could see Candy was already up. Her side of the bed was rumpled but she woke before him.

He could hear her on the phone, "Thank you Father Kinkaid. See you Sunday," she said. Their son Bo showed up that afternoon. He helped Tim dig a deep, wide hole in the back yard, under the magnolia tree. They performed the job without saying much. They each shed a few tears when they lowered Nellie's heavy, lifeless body into the hole. After they had covered her with dirt they shared a beer, sitting in the porch swing, swaying back and forth. They were quiet, each remembering the good times.

Candy came outside with a plate of cookies, disturbing the peace. "You put Nellie under the magnolia tree? Why under the magnolia tree? Why not under the pecan tree? That part of the yard is higher up. You get a prettier view of everything."

"I didn't want nuts to fall on her, Candy," Tim said gruffly.

"Nuts? Is that what you were thinking of? How silly. Nuts? Father Kinkaid sends his condolences and your cousin Joey too. Your sister, God bless her, said she's going to get you a puppy for Christmas. She says she knows you can't live without a dog. She started telling me all about when you were twelve and your cocker spaniel Kermit died. She said you missed three days of school you were so distraught. So what kind of puppy do you want? She says you always wanted a cocker spaniel."

“Could you please stop?” Tim whispered. “I don’t want a puppy.” He got up to go inside. Bo stayed behind, knowing his mom would want to talk to him.

Tim was an insurance adjuster. Next door to his office there was a travel agency. They had recently put a new poster in their window that displayed the magnificent tail of a humpback whale. Every day when he pulled into his parking spot he was captivated by the poster. On a whim he stopped in one day during his lunch break to inquire about the whale watching trip.

He had always wanted to visit Alaska. Now that they wouldn’t have to board the dog and the kids were grown and out of the house, it was the perfect time to go. They weren’t yet grandparents. He knew that once they were they would never indulge themselves. He took a brochure so he could persuade Candy that they should schedule a trip.

She looked over the literature after dinner. Tim loaded the dishwasher as she looked over the glossy pages. Alaska looked beautiful. The water was so blue. She babbled on and on about how wonderful an idea he had. “Yes, let’s go to Alaska this spring,” she agreed.

“Okay,” Tim said.

Candy giggled. “You are so enthusiastic, calm down, would you? Don’t worry, I’ll take care of the arrangements,” she said.

Tim nodded his head. True to her word Candy handled every detail. On the day they left for Hobby airport in Houston she explained to Tim that they had a short layover at the airport in Denver and from there they would fly on to Seattle. Candy was excited. She had never been west of Abilene where her sister Margaret lived. Tim was an air force veteran but he hadn’t left Houston since he came home from Zaragoza, Spain in 1971. His basic training had been in Illinois. The four years he served had been the only time he didn’t share his life with a dog. Candy loved how her husband wouldn’t refer to himself as a dog owner.

A friend of hers had once said to Tim, “I think it’s great how you adopt shelter dogs. It’s nice of you to be a dog owner.”

Shaking his head he said, “You can’t own any living creature. It’s against God’s will, I think. I share my life with a dog.”

Candy’s friend’s jaw slackened. Tim wasn’t a big talker but wow, when he had something to say he really said it.

Once in Seattle Candy let Tim choose which sedan he liked best at the rental counter. He didn’t have a preference. She knew he wouldn’t but she didn’t want to appear bossy to the rental agent who couldn’t have cared less. Candy chose a white Cadillac sedan Deville. She shrieked with glee once behind the wheel. “This is living,” Candy proclaimed.

Suddenly the Oldsmobile back home seemed a rust bucket. It was seven years old and Tim had kept it well maintained but he had a nagging feeling that by Easter a new car would be in their driveway. Candy scheduled the one week vacation for the second week of March. Easter was on April third this year. She said the whale watching trip would give them something

to talk about with the kids. Tim remembered a time Candy discussed with the kids an artist she had seen on television who used dryer lint to recreate a picture of DaVinci's Last Supper. She could converse about dryer lint for God's sake. His wife had no trouble thinking of things to talk about. She always had plenty to say.

They went to the Warren G. Magnuson Park to see totem poles. Candy said it would be fascinating. Tim shrugged. He felt himself blushing when Candy struck up a conversation with a heavyset woman who wore her dark hair in two braids. The woman nodded along as Candy related how when she was a child she was afraid of cannibalistic headhunters because of the television show Gilligan's Island. The totem pole faces reminded her of the cannibals. The heavyset woman narrowed her eyes. "If you've seen one Indian, you've seen them all. Am I right?" Candy asked. The woman shook her head no.

"The south pacific has nothing to do with this," the woman said pointing at the totem pole. "Cannibals did not create this."

Candy tilted her head and gazed at the 60 foot totem pole in front of her. "Tell me about it. I'm all ears," Candy said.

The woman who wore her hair in braids explained their history and meaning. She said that every family had a totem pole in front of their home to send a message to their neighbors about who they were. In their culture every person is assigned seven animal spirit guides at birth. Different animal guides, also known as spirit guides, come in and out of our lives depending on the direction we are headed and the tasks we need to complete along our journey. These animals show up at pivotal moments in life and if you listen very closely, they offer guidance. There will be struggles, of course, but you are never alone to suffer. Totem poles offered an explanation about the kind of person who dwelled within the home. Occasionally Candy would ask a question and the woman would go deeper into her explanation. Each animal had its own special qualities; a bear was a protective guardian. A beaver represented being industrious. An eagle was free. A wolf symbolized leadership skills while a badger's appearance meant a person must be ready to fight and stand up for themselves. "Even you have spirit guides. Has a certain animal always popped into your life?" The woman asked.

"A dog," Tim said, riveted by the notion of protective animals offering guidance.

"You must be very loyal and friendly," the lady said.

"He's very loyal," Candy said, "But I'm the friendly one."

The woman nodded, looking at Tim. "A dog is his guide and has chosen for him a mate who makes friends and keeps loneliness at bay."

Tim grinned. She was completely correct in her assessment of their marriage he thought.

Candy chuckled, "I must have come off as an ignorant redneck. I am truly sorry for being so crass. Sometimes my mouth gets ahead of me. I mean no harm. I'm very curious, that's all."

The woman, who they now knew was named Margo Little Bear, hugged Candy. She had that effect on people. For years to come Margo Little Bear and Candy exchanged Christmas cards and caught up with each other on the phone.

Next she wanted to see an installation in the park called soundgarden. “You know, like the band Wesley is nuts for,” Candy exclaimed.

Tim didn’t know about a band called Soundgarden. He knew Wesley liked that grunge music coming out of Seattle. Wesley let his hair grow long and he rarely shampooed his blonde locks anymore. He also wore Tim’s gas station attendant uniform shirt that had hung in the back of the closet for decades. Tim had worked at a filling station before he joined the Air Force. He couldn’t get rid of a shirt that was perfectly good and wore it whenever he washed the car. Even though the shirt had an embroidered patch which read Tim, Wesley wore it now, strutting around like he felt good about the way he looked. He didn’t work at a filling station. He was a clerk in a video rental shop.

Tim looked out at Lake Washington and listened to the whooshing sound of the metal sculptures. He didn’t get it. He thought maybe he was supposed to be impressed but the noise could not compete with the beauty surrounding him. Noise to him, was just that. He preferred silence. You couldn’t hear yourself think when it was noisy. Candy returned, showing him a stack of post cards she had bought. “Wesley is going to think we are too school for cool,” she giggled. Tim nodded. He was eager to go.

That night at the hotel Tim watched as Candy undressed. They had been married 22 years now. He’d seen her in various stages of undress countless times. Lately though, he found himself in bed long before she joined him. He surveyed the curve of her back and swell of her breasts. Sitting at the dressing table she brushed her long blonde hair, taking slow deliberate strokes. He sighed, dreamily.

“You’re a beautiful woman, Candace,” he said.

“Why, thank you, Timothy.” Her eyes twinkled.

When they boarded the cruise ship in the morning Candy held his hand. They hadn’t held hands in such a long time. He inhaled the wisteria scent of her perfume and grinned. Their lovemaking the previous night had been spontaneous and exhilarating. He surprised himself when he kissed the back of her neck and things escalated from there. “You’re a tiger, Tim,” she had exclaimed.

From their cabin they had a view of snow covered mountains. Tim watched as an eagle soared by. Eagles represented risk taking, Margo had said. As an insurance man he didn’t like to take risks. Taking this trip he surprised himself. Perhaps the eagle was one of his seven spirit guides. Maybe he should take more chances. Tim wondered if the eagle was a sign. He saw a raccoon in the far distance and remembered Margo said the raccoon was a trickster, a joker. Maybe his spirit guide was suggesting he was supposed to lighten up.

He took a deep breath and a funny thought entered his mind. Candy had bought a \$30 candle at Christmas time. The candle said it was ozone scented. Tim had been annoyed declaring the candle a waste of money and ozone wasn't even a scent he claimed. Here in Alaska the air was fresh and pure. Alaska smelled like the ozone candle. He chuckled.

It was the last day of the trip. They had not yet seen a whale. The tour guide said sometimes they were shy and to be patient. When they stepped on deck Candy saw a woman she had met the previous night when they had been in line at the buffet. Candy and the woman had gone to the same college and had performed in the drill team. The woman named Julie had been a senior when Candy was a freshman. They were carrying on, reminiscing about the good old days. Tim turned around when the women joined arms and began to high kick. He could hear them giggling. "Go bobcats!" They cheered. That was when the spray of water splashed him.

He was amazed as the whale emerged from the water. Its size was astronomical. His jaw dropped in wonder. He could see intelligence in the creature's enormous eye. Tim knew that he was witnessing the single most amazing event of his life and he had witnessed the births of his three children. He would never tell Candy that the sighting of a whale had been more magnificent. She would never understand how humbling the whale sighting had been. As the whale dived underwater and all that remained was the fan of its tail he crossed himself like when he'd been an altar boy. He turned to ask Candy if she had seen the whale but he could tell from the way she and Julie carried on that she had missed it.

At dinner that night Candy asked if he had been among those who saw the whale. Tim nodded yes. "Well, how was it?" She asked, eagerly.

"Awesome," he replied.

"That's it?" Candy narrowed her eyes. "Care to elaborate?"

Tim thought. He tried to think of the words that could describe what he experienced. "I felt very small all of a sudden."

He became the punchline to her story about how she missed seeing the whale because she was talking. "He said he felt very small all of a sudden," she would guffaw and her friends would join in, laughing. "You know I married him because he's a good listener. I'm the conversationalist."

Everyone knew that about them. Candy didn't need to explain. Tim had come to realize that marriage is like the nautical ropes he saw on the ship. The fibers intertwine until their tensile strength is nearly unbreakable. Marriage fibers are the experiences a couple endure together, the births of children, the fevers and scraped knees of early childhood and as the children grow older and their hurts become more emotional you tend to those pains. You listen about failed relationships, you offer acne treatments, and help with math homework. The fibers are formed with every trauma and win you experience together. Candy took the kids shopping and helped with prom arrangements and Tim just smiled and nodded, offering the A-MEX if Candy requested it which she rarely did. She had her own card. She had her own career as a speech therapist. Marriage was paying the bills and keeping the gas tank filled. It was being

ready for whatever came their way. They would face any challenge together. They each offered strengths in their own way. Where one was weak the other thrived. Alone, a single fiber can't do much, but intertwined they can carry a huge load.

Tim didn't care if Candy liked to laugh at him. Truth be told he thought she was something to laugh at too. Let her talk. He would take Redd, the long haired miniature dachshund he had adopted from the pound for a walk and remember the time he saw a whale. Occasionally he would tell Redd, "I saw a whale once. You never saw anything in your life so big." The dog would tilt his head, looking curious, wanting to hear more. "It was awesome."

The End

Jessica Manchester lives in Houston with her family. She studied journalism at Texas State University. She worked as an editorial assistant at a newspaper in Harlingen, Texas where she wrote obituaries and filled in for the bird watching column. She was first published in Cricket Magazine at age 7.
