

28 Plays Later – Challenge #9

Today we're going dark. But I leave it to you to decide what sort of darkness is right for you.

You can either go into the dark deep blue sea for a bit of animal research, in which case - follow this link:

[BLUE WHALE](#)

Or you can go into the dark side of humanity. Trigger warning - note that the link below contains material of suicide - do not go in here if you're not ready for the mental darkness.

[BLUE WHALE](#)

(I would also encourage you, if you're up for this challenge, to search more information about the actual content of this game)

Bonus points for combining the two seamlessly - the pastoral with the existential...

Take a deep breath, and dive in!

WHALE WISHES

By Melissa A. Bartell

CHARACTERS:

Pablo/Paul - rich college kid who blew off school to pilot a whale-watching panga in Baja Sur, Mexico.

Frank Wheatland – American tourist, in Baja as a memorial to his teenage daughter, who recently died.

Joanne Wheatland – Frank's wife.

Tina Wheatland (V/O only) – Frank and Joanne's teenaged daughter. Recently died.

Rosa – Restaurant owner. Speaks perfect English, with a Baja accent.

ACT I: Scene 1

TIME: Mid-March, 2017

PLACE: A restaurant in Puerto Lopez Mateo, Baja Sur, Mexico There's a bar across one wall, and a few tables scattered around the main room. Images of whales and fish and mermaids are painted on the walls. It's nothing fancy, but it's got quiet charm.

PABLO (Paul) is sandy-haired, tan, and wearing a short-sleeve navy-blue rash guard (probably Speedo) and khaki shorts, with Teva sandals. He's also wearing a peace symbol on a black cord around his neck. He's a little scruffy, but not in a disreputable way. He's in his early 20's. He's sitting at the bar, nursing a beer (Negra Modelo – he has taste.)

FRANK (mid-fifties, balding, paunchy) and his wife JOANNE (mid-forties, soccer-mom type, highlighted blonde hair) enter together looking a bit lost.

TINA (V/O): Blue whales are the largest animals ever known to exist on earth. They can grow to be 100 feet long, and weigh 200 tons. Just their tongues can be as heavy as a fully-grown elephant.

ROSA (eyeing the Wheatlands and recognizing that they're gringos): Hello! Welcome!

FRANK (loudly, the way Americans often address foreigners): Buenas tardes. We're looking for Pablo the Whale Guy.

JOANNE (embarrassed): Frank. She's not deaf, and she speaks English. (to Rosa). I'm sorry. Frank forgets most people in tourist towns speak English.

ROSA (shrugging): It's alright. Tourists are same-same, you know? (to Pablo) Oye, Pablo! You got visitors! (to the Wheatlands) If you're hungry, we're still serving lunch. Have a seat. Pablo will be with you when he's with you.

JOANNE: Thank you. (to Frank). Let's get a table. I'm craving sea food.

FRANK: I could eat. (beat) I could go for a beer.

(They sit at one of the tables. JOANNE picks up a menu and glances over it. ROSA waits a moment to see if PABLO is going to move, and then goes to the WHEATLANDS.)

ROSA: Can I get you something to drink?

FRANK: A beer. That Tecate in the red can.

ROSA: Okay, and for you? (she addresses Joanne) Tecate also? Something else?

JOANNE: Do you have that sparkling lemonade that's so popular down here?

ROSA: Limonada mineral? Yes. Do you want a glass or a jarr – er – carafe? A carafe is about two and a half glasses.

JOANNE (smiling): Yes, that. That sounds perfect. Thank you.

ROSA (smiling back) No problem. (to PABLO as she passes by him) They're waiting. And get him his beer.

(PABLO drains his beer bottle and sets it down. He steps behind the bar, and gets another, and also a can of Tecate for FRANK, then joins the WHEATLANDS at their table.)

PABLO: Mind if I join you? (sits before either can answer) Here. (passes beer to FRANK who wipes it off with a napkin before opening it. (to JOANNE) The limonada is made fresh in the kitchen. Rosa will bring it. (pause) So, you're the folks who emailed about a private whale trip?

FRANK (sipping beer): Ahhh, that's the stuff. (to PABLO) Our daughter, Tina, is – *was* – a big whale fan. We promised her we'd go whale watching.

PABLO: But it's just the two of you.

JOANNE (softly): She's not with us... anymore.

PABLO (understanding): Oh. (beat) I'm sorry.

(ROSA returns, bringing JOANNE's limonada.)

ROSA: Have you decided what you want?

PABLO: Bring a round of fish tacos and an order of chips and guacamole. They'll like that. (pause, then, mostly to himself) They all like that. (louder) It's on me.

FRANK: You don't have to do that.

JOANNE (overlapping him): Really, that's not necessary.

PABLO: You remind me of my parents. (grins) Besides, a private whale trip is gonna cost you. So, the best time to go at this time of year is late morning, when the surface of the water has warmed up a little. We usually stay out for two-three hours. I'll provide the boat, life jackets, and water. You should bring a camera with you if you want pictures. Where are you staying? At the Iguana?

JOANNE: No, we're staying at La Sirena. Tina loves – *loved* – mermaids. So...

FRANK: It's not dangerous or anything, is it?

PABLO: La Sirena? Naah, it's good. It's fine. The Iguana's got an espresso bar in the lobby, is all. So, I'll meet you in your hotel lobby at nine. Dress warm. Wear flat shoes with good soles. Sneakers. Walking sandals. No flip-flops. No heels.

(ROSA returns at that point with the fish tacos, and the conversation fades out as people start to eat.)

FRANK (as the lights fade to black): So do we pay you in pesos or dollars?

PABLO: Either's fine. I also take Visa, Mastercard, and American Express.

Scene 2:

TIME: Same day, evening.

PLACE: The pool deck at La Sirena.

The WHEATLANDS are sitting in side by side lounge chairs watching the water, which we can hear, but not see. A lantern is glowing on a low table between them.

TINA (V/O): Female blue whales give birth about once every three years, after being pregnant for a year. Whale calves nurse for the first year of their lives, during which they can gain up to 240 pounds a day. The average calf is around 24 feet long and weighs 3 tons. They can live up to 90 years.

FRANK: Tina would love this place.

JOANNE: Would have. Loved. She *would have loved* this place. (teary). Our daughter is gone, and we're sitting here in paradise about to go whale watching *without* her.

FRANK: No, we're going whale watching *for* her.

JOANNE: You didn't ask him about the ashes.

FRANK: I'll ask him when we're out on the water. I'm sure we can work something out.

JOANNE (calmer): I want to go down to the water... walk with me?

FRANK: Yes, dear.

Lights fade out as they get up and walk offstage.

Scene 3

TIME: The next day, mid-morning.

PLACE: A panga (that's a boat with an outboard motor and a narrow beam, designed to roll pretty far to port or starboard without capsizing; they typically have three or four benches across a sunken deck) in the middle of Bahia Magdalena (Magdalena Bay), Baja Sur, Mexico.

PABLO, FRANK, and JOANNE are all there wearing life vests. PABLO is dressed much as he was the day before, though he's got a fleece tied around his waist. The WHEATLANDS are in designer jeans and expensive hoodies with brand-new top-siders. FRANK has a digital camera on a strap around his neck. JOANNE has a tote bag that she's clutching to herself. A projection screen has video of the water, and we hear lapping water and the outboard motor. The video will change to match the dialogue.

TINA (V/O): The scientific name of the blue whale is *Balaenoptera musculus*. Like all members of Balaenoptera, it's a baleen whale, which means it's a filter-feeder, straining its food out of the water with plates called *baleen*. They eat small fish and zooplankton known as *krill*. No one's sure exactly how much they eat, but it's likely that, during times when food is plentiful, they eat about four tons a day. It's said they dive as deep as 300 feet in order to find food, and can remain submerged for twenty to thirty minutes at a time.

PABLO: You all set? We're going to motor further from shore, where the water's deeper. Blue whales are big, and they don't always come close in. We can't guarantee any whales, ever, but the grays have been really present this year, and the blues are usually in the same areas.

FRANK: Pablo, how long have you been doing this?

PABLO: Three years. I came down here after my sophomore year at Princeton and couldn't leave. I mean, I'm just so *chill* here, so *zen*.

JOANNE: Princeton? You're American?

PABLO: Yeah. But my grandparents retired here because their social security goes farther here than it does back home in the States, so I had a place to stay. They had friends who helped me get the right visa to open a business, and now I'm on the water almost every day... mostly tour groups, though.

(FRANK is leaning on the side of the boat, watching the water. He seems content to let JOANNE speak with PABLO.)

JOANNE: I get the sense there's more to the story.

PABLO (reluctantly): Yeah... kind of... I had a sister... Kelly. She was a lot younger than me, barely in high school when I started college. Smart as a whip, mind like a steel trap, but not so great at the social stuff. She basically lived her life on the 'net, but the real world was horrible for her. She got involved with this game... some... some stupid game where kids are given these tasks... get up at specific time and watch a horror video... take a razor blade and cut arm... send pictures to the person giving you the tasks.

JOANNE (gasping, and holding her tote bag even closer): Dear god...

PABLO: The last task was to commit suicide. She jumped off the roof of my dorm when she came to visit.

FRANK (joining the conversation): You're him, aren't you? Paul Rochester. Everyone thought your sister was targeted because of your father's business dealings. And you're saying it was a stupid game.

PABLO: Yes. To both. My sister is dead because of a stupid game. And I am Paul Rochester. Well... I was. Now I'm Pablo the Whale Guy.

JOANNE (touching PABLO on the shoulder in a maternal gesture): I'm so sorry.

PABLO: Thank you. (beat) You said you lost your daughter... ?

JOANNE: Tina. She's... well, she would have been sixteen today. It was a car crash. She was a cheerleader, we let her ride home with some of her friends from the squad. The boys in the other car had been drinking.

PABLO (quietly): I'm sorry for your loss.

FRANK: We meant to ask... Tina loved the whales. This trip was her wish. She wanted to be a marine biologist. She was always urging us to refuse straws because they hurt sea life, and she would take the rings from six-packs – the things that hold beer and soda cans? – and snip them so birds or turtles wouldn't get caught in them. But the whales... we took her to the Monterey Bay Aquarium when she was ten, and she knew more than some of the docents.

PABLO: You wanted to ask something?

JOANNE: I brought her ashes. Not all of them, just a small amount. It would mean everything to her... to us... if we could... if we could leave them here.

FRANK: In the water, she means. With the whales.

PABLO (smiles): I won't tell anyone if y – look over there! (With one hand, he points downstage; with the other he cuts the engine) See that pattern in the water... watch very carefully, and...

(A spout of water blasts up from below the upstage side of the boat, splattering all three humans.)

JOANNE: Oh! Oh! That was...

FRANK: Snot. Right, from the blowhole?

JOANNE (unfazed): But it's *whale* snot. (to PABLO) was that a blue or a gray?

PABLO: I'm not sure yet. Keep watching. (lifts outboard engine out of the 'water') I'm going to let us drift.

(There is a ripple in the water on the video and PABLO and the WHEATLANDS rush to the side of their boat to watch the water. This time the spout comes from the downstage side. A blue whale floats to the surface. It's about the same length as the panga.)

FRANK (fighting back tears): It's... it's massive. It's beautiful.

JOANNE (awestruck): It's... huge!

PABLO: It's a blue. And believe it or not, it's a calf. (points beyond the edge of the stage as a spout occurs on the video) Look. There's mom. Blue whales don't typically interact with humans, but if they're anything like the grays, they'll be as curious about us as we are about them.

(Conversation ceases for a long while as ripples and spouts continue. The three humans gasp and make other expressions of awe, however. Finally, there's a bigger ripple and all is quiet on the water.)

JOANNE (whispering): I feel like they knew...

PABLO: Maybe they did. If you want to release her ashes now, I'll give you a moment.

(PABLO places the engine back in the water, and stands aside, giving the WHEATLANDS the space to make this final goodbye to their daughter. JOANNE takes the blue bottle full of ashes out of her tote bag, and, with FRANK's arm around her, lets the contents fall into the sea. The couple remains there for a full minute of silence. Then they return to their seats on the benches that span the boat.)

FRANK: Thank you, Pablo. Thank you so much.

JOANNE (to the water): Goodbye, sweetheart. Mommy loves you.

Fade to black.

Scene 4

TIME: A few days later.

PLACE: Rosa's restaurant.

PABLO is once again at the bar, but this time he's drinking Mexican Coca-Cola from a glass bottle and typing on a laptop.

TINA (V/O): Blue whales have long been the target of human hunters, but that's changed with recent laws banning the hunting of marine mammals. Classified as an endangered species, it's thought that there are between ten- and twenty-five thousand blue whales living in our oceans. The greatest concentration is found along the coast of California, and in the Gulf of California, also known as the Sea of Cortez.

PABLO (speaking as he types): Dear Mom and Dad. I know it's been a while since I've sent you more than a postcard, but I wanted to tell you about this couple who contracted with me for a private trip out to see the whales. Their daughter died last year, and apparently visiting Baja was her dream, and they were trying to fulfill her last wish.

(As he speaks/writes the sound of waves lapping, the sounds of whales spouting, and the sounds of humpback (and other) whales 'singing' comes from speakers.)

I went out on the water alone today. None of the other pangas were out yet. There were no tourists. And a grey whale calf came to visit my boat. I reached over the side to touch her, and she rolled to look at me, and my eyes met hers – well, one of hers – and it was like our souls touched. It was so magical, and so healing... I finally let my grief and guilt over what happened with Kelly fall away.

The calf and her mother followed me for a while, and I couldn't help remember something John Steinbeck wrote in *The Log from the Sea of Cortez*: "Whatever it is that makes one aware that men are about is not there. Thus, in spite of the noises of waves and fishes, one has a feeling of... quietness."

I know you don't understand why I gave up a 4.0 GPA and a full ride at Princeton to come to Baja. But I know now, that it was to find that quietness.

(The whalesong and ocean sounds swell)

BLACKOUT.