

Excerpt from *Escape: Of Whales and Men*, by Jocelyn Reekie

The Hunt

Before sunrise, in the bow of the *Yellow Dawn*, a woman puts on a Buoyancy Control Device, wiggles to settle the two tanks attached to it against the back of her wetsuit, and checks to make sure she can reach the inflation and deflation controls for the vest easily. Proper buoyancy is everything to getting clear shots underwater.

When she came to this area to retrace the route of the Spanish expedition of 1792 and get some underwater shots of places others have not already photographed, she did not expect this opportunity. No one expects a super pod of transient Orcas to appear anywhere around Vancouver Island in this day and age. “In the old days,” a ninety-seven-year-old First Nations man she met some time ago told her, “you could walk across these straits on the whales’ backs when they came through. But no one’s seen anything like that for a long time, eh—not since my father was a boy.”

But here they are. Where did they come from; when did the super pod take shape? She won’t likely learn the answer to those questions, she knows. But one thing is sure—when the spotters for whale watching tours and other groups become aware this group of whales is here, they’ll swamp the area with boats, and any chance to get the footage she wants will be gone.

She bends and lifts a weight belt from the deck, wraps it round her waist, clasps the buckle shut. While she gets ready, she keeps an eye on the dark shapes that lie a hundred meters away, bobbing in the chop. Sleeping or resting, she doesn’t know which. It’s impossible to count them even though they’re staying in one place, more or less. She thinks there are more than fifty.

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These whales are commonly called Killers, so-named by men who believed they attacked people and killed and ate them just as readily as they eat seals. In North America, they lost their ‘killer’ status in the 1980s, after biologist Michael Bigg started studying them in the wild. Now they’re labelled ‘gentle’, by some. *But they aren’t that*, she thinks. In the oceans, they’re top of the chain, no predators except man. Calm such as these animals possess comes from power, not from gentleness. Then there are the recent deaths at two different aquariums—two trainers trapped in the pools and held underwater by Orcas.

The *Yellow Dawn's* wheel-man drops a hydrophone over the stern. Transients don't usually vocalize much, but if they've gathered to socialize there might be whistles to catch. Waves slap against the hull; the boat rocks and drifts. The woman raises a camera with waterproof housing and fiddles with the settings; she pans the black bodies in the night-dark sea, and then the cliffs, which to the naked eye are also black against a moonless sky. Night vision illuminates what she's aiming at, but outside its range the blackness seems to intensify. A feeling of being observed by something she can't see gives her a momentary shake.