



Seadogs and Death Leaps

Whales, dying men, and the final acts that define us

Far from home. Isolation getting the better of me, so I'm doing my usual lone-wolf routine. The assignment that brought me here has been forgotten somewhere between here and the drive down.

There is socialising available, but I prefer avoiding proximity without intimacy, so I've opted out of the team meal. Told them I was tired. Easiest lie of the day.

In this port town, the air is thick with salt. A fresh and welcoming change from other work stops.

I've always enjoyed drinking alone - especially by the sea. Not because I dislike company, but because bars like these collect better stories than the ones I've just avoided. Conversations with strangers can feel more intimate than those you share in the nine-to-five, and this bar reeked of old storytellers.

I swill my whiskey tumbler. Ice crackles like lightning as rain and sea foam lash the windows. The wind howls through the timbers. I take a deep sip, letting the burn make me feel less like a displaced ghost.

I exhale, glance down at the bar, close my eyes - then reopen them. He's sitting beside me.

The storyteller.

His skin was pale and clammy, with a sickly glint. Eyes slightly yellowing, lips cracked and dry, pocked with slits like papercuts. Pinpoint pupils flickering like stars in sunken black sockets. His head is topped with a sailor's cap - tattered and worn - hiding a bald scalp, with a shaggy grey beard.

"Whiskey," he says to the barmaid with a rasped whisper, "the usual..."

She nods and gives him an affectionate, sympathetic smile.

I sit up on my stool, intercepting him as he reaches for his wallet.

"Put it on my tab." I say.

The purple-flecked lips part into a thin grin, as our eyes meet.

"Thank you, but why so kind?"

"Don't be mistaken friend, it's not kindness, it's a trade."

The smile fades for a moment as his eyes squint with caution.

"A trade, eh? For what?" he queries.

"Your story..."

Raucous laughter bellows out of him, before he breaks into a fit of coughing. Through the wheeze and splutter, he nods and lets out a very thin, "Deal."

The bartender tops up my glass.

"There is one thing I have to ask though..." the Seadog begins...

"Do dying men bother you?"

I didn't pause on the question.

"Of course not," I gesture at the room with wide open arms, "This room's full of them... We're all dying... This world's just one big hospice with fresh air."

Silence. One that feels awkward for but a second before we both start chuckling.

"First I've heard that one, but I suppose you'd be right..."

His name he assured me was unimportant. Especially when I had led with telling him I was a journalist. It was clear that he wanted whatever tales he was about to tell me wrapped in enigmatic shadow. This man has clearly given thought to how he wants to be seen in bars. An old seafarer, weaving myths over a glass of bourbon. Everlasting impressions before being retired to the annals of history.

We start off by discussing his health.

"I'll apologies for all the coughing... but I've got lung cancer."

"I'm sorry to hear that... pretty rough deal... Are you undertaking any treatment?" I don't consciously catch myself glancing at his head.

"No... I've been bald for years..." he chuckles, placing his hand delicately on top of his head.

"No point in treatment... I'm terminal... All it would do is make my last moments on this Earth miserable..." he stares across the bar and makes eye contact with his own reflection.

"hmpf... probably only have a few months of drinking whiskey left in me..."

"I suppose that's why you're here then? Whiskey and pity?"

He laughs.

"Of course... can always count on someone to buy me a drink here... if it ain't the age that draws 'em in, it's the sitting by myself looking sorry for myself... works every time..."

It's at this moment I realise that I have been grifted. Just another mark - someone dumb enough to sit around and humour him by hearing his stories.

"You got me... well played old man..." I laugh, and raise my glass to clink a cheers with his.

He tells me he's been a fisherman his whole life - heading out on deep sea voyages to catch fresh delicacies for the local mongers.

"Had a shop for a short while, but I realised trying to run it, and getting out sailing were too much of a conflict, so I sold it and just spent time where I was most happy..."

"You have any family?" I ask.

"None that are alive... Never had time to build one of my own either... no wife, no kids..."

He bows his head and stares through the bottom of his glass with what I can only describe as a distant longing.

"Just me... All alone... No one to witness my death leap..."

Death leap? I was unfamiliar with the term.

"What's a death leap?"

He drank deeply, emptying his glass, before signalling to the bar maid for another - she looks at me quizzically. I nod a signal for it too to be added to my tab.

"It's a term that has been gifted to us by the sea... from the whales..." he points out the window to the waves, battering the shore.

"Just before they pass on, they breach one last time. A violent burst of energy, launching their monstrous bodies skyward before the end takes 'em..."

I remain silent, nursing my bourbon.

"There's something about it... you can sense it. I can't quite put my finger on the feeling, but you know that it's a goodbye."

He looks at himself in the mirror again, with a wry smile.

I know enough about whales to know that breaches have been observed for centuries, and studied just as long. From indigenous maritime cultures and ancient whalers, to modern marine biologists.

Modern biologists categorize breaching as a form of communication, a way to remove parasites, part of courtship, play, a signal of aggression and lastly, navigational signalling. The act of breaching is an incredibly exhausting experience, especially for aged whales.

There's no real scientific consensus that whales perform deliberate "final breaches" before death, though there are papers that do explore Cetacean behaviour - in particular during moments of interacting with death, and there are findings that do show whales carrying dead calves, escorting dying individuals. They also during the death of another show signs of distress.

All of this strongly suggests that these magnificent creatures possess more complex social awareness around the topic of mortality than we would have first believed.

The image of this mythical final breach from a Whale could perhaps force us to confront our own relationship with death. We certainly all have ideas of what we would like our final moments to look like.

That last drive into the sunset.

Writing that final letter to sign off, and guide those we leave behind.

Or, perhaps our final act is as simple as ensuring that the last song played at our funeral, is the perfect one we envision accompanying our end credits. A melody that signs off a life hopefully well lived and seized. One last goodbye whilst imparting some comfort to our loved ones as they watch the final curtain close.

"So, do you have an idea of what your final act will be?" I ask.

"I've never really thought too much about it... life has this way of making you feel like death is happening over there somewhere, and that for you it's going to be years down the line... so, you reside yourself to not think too much about it... and then, you arrive to it rather abruptly..."

He smirks.

"I always had visions that I'd go down with my ship. I still might... Take her out and steer her into the next big storm... To be smashed around helplessly by the gods... Thunder billowing. Sky alive with lightning... A big wave coming to swallow me whole, so that I can join the whales that had their final moment of blasting out from the big blue..."

He's animated now. The whiskey clearly taking its toll on his aged and sickly body. I watch with admiration. Here is a man who knows he is about to die, and instead of whimpering about it, he does what humans tend to do more oft than not - stare in the face of it, and think about how they can embrace the inevitable on their terms.

The death leap becomes real in that moment. No scientific facts I feel would sway him otherwise. Nor should they.

"What about you?" he asks. "You ever think about your last moments?"

"Sure... I think about death more often than I suppose I should.. but when it comes to a final act, I always thought of it to be something explosive... especially being an ex-servicemen. Figured I'd probably go out in a blaze of glory, being a hero by doing something foolish - lay on a grenade or something. Either that or some bold adventure that takes me out and turns me into folklore... As a father and a husband now, I suppose I would much rather it be a die of old age type thing..."

He laughs.

"Sounds a tad boring if you ask me..." he teases.

"Shit, you're probably right... but I just hope if I go before they do, I don't go out in a way that gives them something to wrestle with... I have thought a lot about my funeral though... so I suppose if I have a death leap, that will probably be it..."

"Oh, and what's your funeral going to look like then?" He takes a sip.

"Well, a standard funeral I suppose... But following that, I do have a request that once I'm cremated my ashes are loaded into some of the biggest fucking Chinese rockets you can find, and are launched skyward so I get blasted into the cosmos with colour..."

He bursts out a spluttering and phlegm laden roar, bourbon wasted in the spittle.

"Now that sounds one big fuck you to the universe..." he chuckles...

We were both drunk now - giggling at our obvious calm attitudes towards our inevitable deaths. His perhaps sooner

than mine. We spared moments too, just to mock all of those in the West who still struggle to admit to themselves that one day, that they too shall end.

"They can run all they want... **hic** kick... **hic**... scream... ha! Destiny will find them all the same... and we're all destined to meet it... That banshee will scream for us all in the end..."

We parted ways, hugging and exchanging no details. I offered them, but he declined, saying that some meetings can just be what they are. A small wrinkle in time, becoming a story to share with others, rather than to keep revisiting. I mentioned that I'd be writing about him, but that didn't sway him either...

"I struggle enough just listening to myself... I don't think I want to see it written down... besides, who's going to care what I have to say? I'm just an old dying seadog..."

I lay awake that night, pondering my existence as I watched whales breach and soar above me. My bed floating in a sea of tombstones. The room quietly spinning around me as the wind howled, and the waves continued to misbehave.

The death leap is real. But it's not seen as obviously in the whales as it is in humans. It's us who have that final breach before we end. As if denial of the end gets washed away with the tide, leaving behind nothing but acceptance.

This final act becomes an announcement and proclamation to the world that we truly lived. Not a surrender to death, but instead a mark of our authorship.

Despite all the control we can have over our lives, we rarely have control over how it ends, but we can at least choose how we meet the horizon.

I wonder... what will be mine, and others', death leap be? A celebration, or perhaps an act of defiance?

For me, I feel it will be less violent than a younger version of me would have expected. I hope mine is looking into my daughter's eyes, smiling - telling her I'm proud and that I'll still be somewhere nearby.

Before I leap into my next ocean.

Doc

EDITORS NOTE:

As this piece was being written, life intervened and stripped its subject of abstraction.

What began as an exploration of mortality through story and myth became something more immediate: a close friend's diagnosis.

This note is dedicated to that person, and to anyone who meets the end earlier than expected.

Not all departures arrive on time. Some simply arrive, without warning.

But perhaps we can choose its shape.

One defiant leap is on the horizon. One final cry, like the song of a Whale.

Melancholic.

Defiant.

Eternal.

An echo before the silence.