

The Whale

New England Review

The boat Rita Baird was riding with her husband, Ray, had been cruising off the coast of Gloucester for four hours, and now the voice of the captain came over the loudspeaker to announce that they were heading for home.

Earlier in the day they saw dolphins, with wide open mouths as if laughing, just like on tv. They saw a Toyota carrier ship full of cars glinting madly in the sun, and two Coast Guard boats—drug chasers, someone said—zipping off in the distance like small, fast sharks. They saw three other whale-watching boats, and a far-off shape that might have been a yacht from a James Bond movie; but they had not seen a whale. Many of the passengers, going slowly into the cabin from the cold air on deck, gazed up at the captain's voice with hurt and resentment, as if everything that had ever gone wrong in their lives was his fault.

The sky was white and hazy. The horizon was a thin wavy line, like a crack at the edge of sea and sky. Rita started thinking about how easy it must have been in the old days, when people thought the earth was as flat as a table. It must have been as simple as if, one day, when it was time to stop living, you could walk to the edge and drop, straight down, through a gauzy fog, into the whiteness and smoothness of infinity.

Infinity was where, when you've run out of places to go to, you can still keep on going.

“I am not too disappointed,” Rita said to herself. “I am not, I am not, I am not. This is *not* the most badly disappointed I ever was.”

She was the last one back inside. The snack bar was open. The cabin smelled like steamed hot dogs, steamed bread, beer, and the sea. When Rita licked her lips, they tasted salty.

Ray wore a dark green windbreaker, size double-extra-large and two sizes too big for him, with an enormous hood that went halfway down his back. It said "Boss" on the front in small yellow letters. On the back, partially covered by the hood, it said, "D.P.W." Ray had been head of their town's road crew for twenty-three years. He had joined at the bottom on part-time plowing when he was still in high school. This was the first time he wore the jacket. He had thought it was waterproof. He said, "This cheap thing is leaking all over me. I told them, buy us football jackets like the goddamn football team, they'll last forever."

"Maybe you should have been a coach, honey," said Rita.

"What took you so long?"

"I was out on the deck." When she leaned over him and shook her head, drops of water fell from her hair onto his, and he complained as if she had soaked him.

He said, "I really need to have something next to me that isn't moving."

"Did you throw up?" said Rita.

"I'm not telling you."

Rita sat down beside him on the bench. "I'll be quiet," she promised.

The engines picked up. Gulls flew away in every direction with startled cries. Perhaps they had thought of the boat as an island. This wasn't the farthest from home Ray and Rita had ever been, but it was the farthest they'd ever been from land. For a while now, it had felt as if their marriage were a long, long road, which they were tired of walking on. In their hands all along, they'd been carrying heavy bundles, which they wanted very much to put down. Sometimes they were like two old bad-tempered lobsters in a pail, each scrambling to get out, and each only managing to tangle itself, in a locked embrace, with the other lobster. They'd been married for thirty years.

Rita said, "Do you think it's all right we didn't see any whales, even for all that money?"

"I think it's the greatest thing ever," Ray said.

"How much were the tickets?"

"I'm not saying."

"I hope you got them on my discount. But how they kept it a secret from me, I wouldn't know," said Rita. She meant the agents at the travel counter at Sears, which regularly sold tickets to these kinds of things. The automotive sales section of Rita's department, the Auto Center, which she was manager of, was next door to Travel. She was always going over there to take her breaks, for the relative peace and quiet.

But all of that was on the other side of the ocean now. It felt good to be away from the noise of the pit, and the endless cars and trucks, and the wisecracking mechanics, and the sense of always running about in tiny circles, and then, when you managed to somehow break free, you hit a wall, or you tripped on a tire iron that someone had left in your way, probably on purpose, or you slipped on a puddle of engine oil.

"I didn't think of getting tickets like that. I just looked it up in the phone book when I thought of it, and then I called the boat place," Ray said. He had told Rita last night to fix lunches, dress for wet, bad weather, and wear sneakers. All along, on the long ride from town to the sea, Rita thought that they were going to one of those John Deere discount outlets to look at bulldozers. Ray had, at home, a purchase order for two, and had been looking at catalogs all week. The ocean was a big surprise.

The rest of the passengers settled down in the cabin, staring out the windows with tired expressions. Across from Ray and Rita, a woman of about thirty was reading to her small son, who lay on the seat with his head in her lap. She was reading to him from *Green Eggs and Ham*.

The boy mouthed along some of the words. When he nodded off to sleep, the woman stopped reading, but then he lifted his head and butted it sideways against her chest, as if her breasts were made of pillows. She started reading again. Ray caught the boy's eye and winked at him. "Smart kid," Ray said to the woman, and she answered, "You call that smart?" The boy tried to wink back at Ray, couldn't do it, and placed a hand on one eye and started blinking.

"Yeah, I do," said Ray. Rita whispered, "Every time you see a kid without a father, you think you have to play the part."

"I do not. If we should've had kids, we would've had them."

Rita reached up and cupped her hand at the side of Ray's face and turned him so he was looking at her instead of the child. She reached inside his damp, baggy windbreaker, then inside his damp sweater. She imagined herself adrift with Ray, just the two of them, on a sea that had no end. She slid her hand up Ray's back and rubbed him and he did not push her away, embarrassed that she was touching him in public.

Then he whispered, "Well, Rita, all I can say is, you finally got your boat ride."

Finally? Rita noticed the way his expression turned flat and disappointed: this was how he always looked at her when she didn't know at once, in the shorthand of married people, what he was talking about. "New York City," Ray whispered. "New York. When you went to the hairdressers."

The boat rocked and slid forward on the waves. Rita thought, New York City!

It was only that once. It was all so unnerving to her, as if the reason it existed was to unnerve you. Even the people who lived there must have also sometimes felt that this was true.

It was spring. Ray and Rita had come by bus for a weekend in a hotel not far from Times Square. They arrived on a Friday at sunset, having crossed over bridges that swung in the wind,

with loops and arcs that were higher than anything they'd seen before--and this was before they saw the skyscrapers. But Rita felt a little better at the hotel, with a door of their own to shut and lock. It was embarrassing when she discovered that the hotel provided fluffy big bath towels. She and Ray had brought their own, in an extra suitcase.

On Saturday morning after breakfast they took a taxi to Elizabeth Arden's, Fifth Avenue. Rita had an appointment to have her hair done. Ray--and this was the first and only time in his life he won a contest--had won both the trip and the appointment in a raffle he'd entered, in Rita's name, at a fancy new jeweler's at the mall where Rita worked. They had been married at this time for a little over a year. When Ray said, "This is the first time I ever won something," Rita waited for him to add, "Not counting my wife." She tried not to hold it against him when he didn't.

He startled her by doing unexpected things, like knowing how to tip. He enjoyed stepping by her off curbs, and holding up his arm for taxis with confidence, in stiff, upward salutes, like he'd been doing it all his life. In less than ten minutes, from the moment they had crossed the last bridge, it was clear to Rita that she had married the wrong person. How could she have a good time in New York? The prices of meals were so shocking, she could hardly bring herself to order: a grilled cheese sandwich cost more here than steak and onions at home.

They'd planned a side trip to see the Statue of Liberty by boat, which they were forced to cancel. Ray had thought to call Elizabeth Arden's ahead of time from the hotel: the woman who answered had told him that Rita's appointment would last four or five hours, not the hour or so like at home. And there would not be time for a boat ride to see the Statue on Sunday; their bus was leaving nearly at dawn. "Are you very disappointed?" said Ray, and Rita said, "Yes." But there was nothing to be done about it.

Then Ray lay back on one of the beds in their hotel room and watched Rita, as she tried to decide what to wear to Elizabeth Arden's. On the other bed, Rita had spread out the three dresses she'd brought--all three were brand new, and had come from the same place where Rita bought everything she wore--a shop at the mall called "World of Petites."

She held up each dress in front of the mirror. She could not believe how ugly and shabby these new clothes looked in the strong white light; she had never seen her body look so awful.

Ray just lay there with his hands behind his head, grinning and staring at her and looking foolish, like a drunkard, although he hadn't had anything to drink. It didn't bother him that there could rise at the backs of your eyes, in the city, a sort of storm, all swirling and crazy, of shapes and colors and noise, like a tornado cloud, which had somehow gotten inside you. Outside the windows of the hotel room, the buildings seemed to reach for each other high up, leaning over the streets, like sticks at the top of a tepee. If you tumbled from your window here, Rita thought, you would die.

"Maybe we should move here, honey," said Ray.

"We just bought a house. No one owns a house in the city."

"We could sell it. You know how many road guys they must need? One million. In the winter, just on snowplows, and I bet it's lots of time and a half, one hundred thousand, easy."

He looked at his wife's reflection in the enormous hotel mirror. He said, "I bet you acted like this when you were a kid, when you were getting ready to go to some party."

It did not cross his mind that, if skin could be removed, if you could unzip your skin, and step out of it, and walk away from yourself, Rita would do so; she would have done it already. She felt prickly and overexposed. She had a rash inside her thighs, like a heat rash, from pantyhose that she'd bought too small. There was also a rash on her arms from sheer nervousness. "I bet you half

a dollar that you hummed and sang little songs, when you were getting ready to go to some kid's birthday party, honey,” Ray said.

It was always hard to explain to Ray that whatever emotion was bubbling inside him, it might not have bubbled equally in her. It never stopped astonishing him that waves of thought, between two married people, could not automatically become simply transferred, the way signals leave a tower, and appear one second later in your television set.

“I wasn't humming,” Rita explained. “I was groaning.”

“I bet when you were a kid, you got invited to parties all the time.”

“Ray!” Rita cried. She gripped the dress she was holding at the neckline, and felt ready to tear it apart. “Stop talking about what I was like when I was little! You weren't there!”

“I wish I was!” cried Ray.

Then finally, they were riding along Fifth Avenue. Rita took out the gift certificate from her purse. The name of the jeweler had been typed on the front of the envelope with the words, “Compliments of Elizabeth Arden's.”

The sunlight between buildings was slanted and dusty. Many windows, high up, turned bronze with morning light; many of the buildings were mirrored. Rita looked up at rolling waves of light, rising and falling and rising. In this terrible absence of anything keeping still, she felt barely able to breathe. She vowed to herself that as soon as she was back in the Auto Center, she would rush to the first car she saw in the pit, and she would throw out her arms on the hood and hug it; she'd press her cheeks to its solid cool steel.

Ray said, “If I was a bird, and I lived here, guess what I would do.”

“You would migrate,” said Rita.

“I would fly through the shafts between these buildings, up and down, all day long, just like diving, but in the air.” Ray reached for Rita's hand. He said, “Look at all the people!” He didn't notice that, beside him, Rita had the feeling inside that her bones were as heavy as bricks.

Then they stood near the awning that stretched to the curb in front of Elizabeth Arden's. A doorman in a heavy embroidered jacket was by the door, staring straight ahead with a blank expression. “I'll wait for you in that coffee shop we went by last night,” Ray said. He pointed down the street vaguely. “But you already ate,” said Rita. Wasn't there a lobby inside, or a waiting room?

It had not occurred to Rita that he was planning all along to abandon her. She could see that her mind—her real self—was as alien to the mind of her husband as if she'd encased it in cement.

“All that perfume in there, it'll make me gag,” said Ray. “And I know for a fact, they don't like to have men around.” He said this as if, everything that went on in New York City, including all the inner workings of things, he knew about.

Rita began to imagine that the commotion all around them was caused by a rolling of the sidewalks and street. Everything seemed to be moving on a long, flat sort of escalator. All around Rita and Ray, horns were blaring, people were rushing by, brakes were screeching, the city was roaring, and the streets kept stretching away, without end. There were beggars in stinking clothes everywhere, walking this way and that among people who looked so rich, they seemed to have walked off the set of a movie.

“What's the matter?” said Ray.

“I don't know who to tell them to make me look like,” Rita said.

“Well, just look like yourself.”

“They'll give me magazines to look at. I won't know.”

“Tell them to cut it and set it, like at home. Then you’re supposed to sit back and let them do their thing, like you’re the Queen of Sheba.”

“They’ll think I’m a hick from the sticks.”

“They won’t think that,” said Ray.

The dress she’d finally chosen was a pink and green striped one with a wide skirt. She had picked it because, once she was through trying on clothes, this was the one least wrinkled. She could still taste the fried eggs she had eaten for breakfast in the hotel restaurant. Six dollars, and there’d been more grease than yolks. Ray, who knew to do everything correctly, had ordered his eggs poached.

She watched him cross at the Walk sign to the other side of Fifth Avenue. She saw him faraway through the double streams of traffic and people. Then he was standing there, on the edge of the sidewalk, watching her.

Rita approached the doorman. Inside Elizabeth Arden’s, would there be other women from out of town? Would there be anyone else with a gift certificate? Rita held up the gift certificate. She smiled at the doorman. Nothing happened. She looked at the envelope. She had checked it a hundred times, and so had Ray, but she might have taken out the wrong one. She might have mistakenly carried their bus tickets, or the envelope that contained a crisp new fifty-dollar bill, which Ray had made her take, in case the people at Elizabeth Arden’s nailed her with hidden charges.

But she had the right one. She waved it practically right under the nose of the doorman, who seemed asleep on his feet with his eyes wide open. Was he blind? But that wouldn’t have made sense, even in New York City. She did not know what else to do. Should she explain that the appointment was something her husband had won in a contest? Her hands were shaking as she

began to open the envelope. Maybe you had to show the doorman the slip of paper inside.

When he spoke to her, she almost jumped. “I beg your pardon,” he said. It was the same as hearing a robot. He was holding his hand near his face, as if Rita were a fly or mosquito.

Then suddenly, unmistakably, like a miracle, there rose in Rita's ears the sound of her husband's voice. She heard him so clearly, it felt that he was talking to her from inside herself, but she could hear him at the same time as if the words were coming to her like a broadcast on an invisible radio, through the crowds and the noise and the traffic. Rita heard him in stereo, sending this message: “He's not like a butler at some rich people's house. Walk past him. Don't show him a thing, because he's only there to open the door.”

It didn't feel to Rita that Ray was making fun of her when he told her this. It didn't feel like a weird, unnatural, extrasensory perception thing, either. Had he also felt how nervous she was, and how embarrassed, as if these things crept up his own skin and burned him like a sunburn?

Rita put the gift certificate back into her purse. She threw the doorman such a haughty look, she hoped it chilled his blood and made him shiver. No way was she going into that building. On Sunday night, back at home, she would set her own hair, in her own curlers, even if it made her sleep badly; on Monday morning she'd tell everyone at work that this had been done by Elizabeth Arden's. She would describe the city to all her co-workers and friends. She'd describe the gold handles of the doors along Fifth Avenue, and the fashions and the beggars and the bridges and skyscrapers, and the noise, and the hotel, and her and Ray's room—but not, of course, what had started stirring inside her. She would keep to herself how she'd come all this way, to strangeness and noise, with everything swirling, with everything in concrete and steel, to feel as sure of herself in her body as an animal. The hotel room! She couldn't wait to get back to the hotel!

Rita set off across Fifth Avenue to her husband. She liked the way his face looked puzzled. She liked the way, as he watched her progression toward him, he was fearing the worst, not the best. When she reached him, she said, "Get a taxi, because we have to get back to our room, really quick."

It took Ray a moment to look at her carefully, before understanding her meaning.

But it was a very short moment. They kissed in the taxi, hard, fiercely, like teenagers; they almost forgot to pay for the ride. They zipped through the lobby, and rubbed against each other in the elevator, even though other people were watching.

Now Rita looked out the window at white sky, at ash-colored water.

The line at the end of the world kept rising and falling. There was a steady, humming throb from the engines. She watched the gulls. They were circling intently, with low heads, as if lines of vision had emerged from their eyes, and were shooting down into the ocean, like fishing lines. They were flying against the wind.

Rita saw what they were doing. A keen, sharp excitement rose inside her like a flash, like a spark: she had guessed the thoughts of birds. "Ray, there's a whale out there," she whispered.

"There's not. They would've announced it."

"I think there is. The gulls are up there fishing for whatever the whale stirs up."

Ray said, "You're only imagining it, because you're so disappointed, even if you won't admit it."

But the loudspeaker came on again with a buzz of static. The captain said, in a voice that started calmly, "This may be another false alarm, folks. But starboard, we might have a little activity. Oh! Two o'clock! Humpback! Humpback!"

Rita started to get up. Other passengers were rising, too, and hurrying out to the deck. But Ray wouldn't let go of her. "Cut it out, Ray," said Rita. He'd taken hold of both her wrists. He probably wasn't saying to himself, "I think I'll prevent my wife from seeing that whale." He was probably saying, "I hate this boat, I threw up five times, I feel I am going to die, and you acted like you didn't know what I was talking about when I was talking about New York, and now you're walking away?" When he let go of her, she nearly fell backward.

She left the cabin. The bow was filled with people. Was starboard the right-hand side? It was. Everyone was pushing closer to the rails. The boy Ray winked at was wide awake. He waved his arms and looked up, as if he'd been brought here to look at fireworks. "Look at the water," his mother said, and the boy said, "I already did." A teenage girl near the front said, "I am not having a good time," to no one in particular, just to the air. The boat had come to a stop. It rocked gently.

"One o'clock," said the captain. "There's our guy. You can tell he's a real old-timer, because the younger ones, they don't stay up this long. He's got a cut in his fluke, so we call him Jag. We think he had some trouble with a motorboat."

At the back of the hush that came over the boat, there was a great long sigh of deflation. The whale was enormous, but it was too far away. There was nothing to see. There was water, there was sky, there were dipping, cawing birds. Far away, there was a shape like a rocky-looking gray island. After a moment, it sank out of sight.

People with cameras held them in their hands and looked ready to cry. "Now we haven't got an excuse to ask for our money back," said a man next to Rita. He was talking to his wife. They were about the same age as Ray and Rita. The woman said to Rita, "This is the first time we ever saw an ocean, never mind were on one. We're tourists. We're from Illinois."

The captain cried, "WAY TO GO! TWO O'CLOCK! HE-EEEE'S BACK!"

The whale was just below the surface of the water, maybe two hundred yards away. It seemed to be as long as the boat. There was an oily gleam on its skin; there was a silent, amazing bigness. There was a crusty look of barnacles. There was a sense now, falling over the boat, that it was hard to tell who had come out here to see whom. Some people giggled as they realized this, and some were very quiet.

Rita stared at the whale as if she were paralyzed. She felt that something peculiar was happening to her. She felt that her eyes had opened up a little wider, as if sight itself is a lens, and hers had just spanned out, somehow, to take in the whole whale, all at once. The whale dipped, went under. It left a dark, smooth shape along the surface of the water. When it rose again, a bit farther away, everyone knew at once that it would leap.

And it did. It came out of the water head first, straight up, exactly the color of the sea, with an immense, fishy vaulting, with the arms of its flippers waving, with a spray in the air of foam and water and movement.

“HE'S JUMPING! WE CALL THAT, BREACHING!” cried the captain, and the man from Illinois shouted back, “We know! Shut up!”

Then the whale was diving. There was a heaving of the fluke on top of the waves. There was a slow disappearance. The fluke left a gray-colored mark on the water, as obvious and clear as a footprint. Rita imagined the force of its dive. She imagined watery depths. She imagined the whale submerged, and began to miss it. Rita wished that the captain had not called the whale “our guy.” She wished that the name they gave the whale wasn't “Jag.” Why belittle a whale? She wondered what a whale might do, in response, if this were something a whale could understand. Perhaps the wound in the fluke of this whale had come from the engine of a boat because the whale

had gotten under it, on purpose, to tip it over. On the other hand, why should a whale care what people called it?

The captain said, “An hour and fifty minutes back to land now, folks.”

Rita stayed on deck. She found the window where her husband was. He was the only one who had stayed in the cabin besides an elderly woman in a dark coat and hat who had fallen asleep as soon as they boarded. He was huddled at the end of the seat, near the aisle, with his hood up.

Rita’s body rocked this way and that, or maybe it was the only the boat. It had picked up speed, but she didn’t mind it that the watery wind was as loud in her ears as jackhammers, or that waves were spraying everywhere and soaking her. She wiped spray off the window with her sleeve. It wasn’t glass; it was plexiglass, so she felt all right about thumping it.

When Ray finally looked at her, she didn't need to be a reader of minds to understand that he wasn't exactly in a hurry to say, “I'm sorry I ganged up on you and grabbed you by the wrists.” It was more that he was saying, “Sit somewhere else, Rita.”

She pressed her face to the window so that he saw her all smooshed, and he moved across the seat, not to be closer to her, but to block from people in the cabin the sight of her face, strange and blubbery and doughy-looking. Probably, this was the way a parent of a retarded child felt in public sometimes when the child was acting odd, again, and the parent couldn't bear it. But she wasn't feeling sympathy for Ray. She was sending him a message. “Ray, the first hotel we see, as soon as we get off this boat, we're going in there.”

A whale! Rita felt that the word, by itself, was like the lid of a box, which starting right now, she could open. Everything she saw would be inside: she could look at it all, whenever she wanted. She could see it as a one-dimensional picture, at first, and then the picture would come to life. Coming back to her, all over again, would be the feel of the boat and the smell of salty water,

and the look of a gray, rolling sea when there is no land in sight, and the circling, screeching gulls, whose thoughts she had known, and the crossover line just a few miles off, straight ahead at the edge of the world. Then clearly at the backs of her eyes, the whale would be leaping, just like the first time, in sprays of bright water, with its eyes looking up at the sun.

Rita added a last bit to the message. "It's all right if it's expensive. If they look us funny for being wet, and for not having suitcases, we can say, so what, or we can say we need a hotel room to just get dry." She couldn't see Ray's expression. It was partially obscured. He had pulled down the hood of his windbreaker so that it covered most of his face. She wasn't sure she was reaching him, but then he tipped his head to one side, the way an animal or bird becomes alert, and goes absolutely still, having heard something humans can't get.