

Under the Surface

By Emily O'Malley

Size is complicated. Humans have never been good at understanding scale.

Take, for example, whales. The blue whale is the largest of any living thing that is—or was—on Earth. Somewhere in the human imagination, the wires got crossed; people often incorrectly believe that dinosaurs were the largest creatures on the planet. The blue whale and many others, however, are larger. And the misnamed killer whale, or orca, is actually the largest dolphin.

Or take the massive hodge-podge wad of explosive chemicals robbed from Roman candles and firecrackers that my friends and I lit on the Yokota Air Base golf course. I waited by the car and watched as Michael and Austin set the fuse. Michael jogged back to stare at the ball of light with me from behind an open car door; disappointingly, the ball did not grow, spark, or burst.

Still, we drove faster than the 30-kilometer speed limit when we realized Security Forces were coming.

With the planned explosion being a bust, our group of amateur pyros settled for an evening around the firepit in Austin's backyard. Michael's biceps strained as he took his turn chopping wood; the fire flickered in my vision as I tried to make it less obvious that I was watching him work from across the pit.

Only a few months earlier, in December, the 148 passengers of the *National Geographic Explorer* were called to the deck. The ship, returning to South America from Antarctica, had stumbled upon a pod of orcas—but not your average Shamu. These were type D killer whales.

"Can you believe they got it on video?" I asked. "There was a camera underwater. It's the *first* underwater footage of them. Ever."

Michael set down his axe, looking back at me for the first time all evening. The heat of the fire masked my blushing; as an outsider in the group, I didn't talk much. Either for my sake or for his, everyone politely ignored the simple truth: I was only there for Michael.

The type D orca is a mystery. In 1955, a pod washed ashore in New Zealand. Nobody knew at the time what to make of these strange black-and-white dolphins, with more bulbous heads, sharper dorsal fins, and smaller white eye patches than any killer whale spotted before. Not even Robert Pitman, one of the world's most well-recognized experts on type D orcas, has seen them in person before. Expeditions that set out specifically to find them rarely do; they live in deep, stormy waters.

Michael and I talked about type D killer whales again later that evening—this time, in my car. I turned off the engine and we sat in the black night, staring across the fence at an older Japanese home, the only one lit up by a spotlight.

"Isn't it beautiful? To think that all this time, they've been hiding underwater, waiting to be found?"

"They didn't *want* to be found, that far away from civilization. And it was just dumb luck that they were caught on camera, anyway."

We sat in silence for a moment. Then, he placed his hand on my forearm, drawing me closer to him. I clambered over my gear stick, planting my knees on either side of his thighs. We pressed our lips together, breathing heavy.

Existing research suggests that type D killer whales are a completely different species; they might not be orcas at all. In an interview with Erica Tennenhouse, Robert Pitman said, “If this is a new species, it could very well be the largest undescribed animal left on the planet.”

The magnitude of that. Something so large, yet so hidden. Unknown and, until a year later, when a research team was able to use crossbows to get new tissue for biopsies to continue that research, unknowable.

As Michael and I kissed, hidden from Security Forces in that empty parking lot, I thought about killer whales. I wonder, sometimes, what he thought about. We rarely talked about anything that mattered. His idea of a high school relationship was “dinner and a blowjob,” while mine was an ill-timed confession of love in a military airport, mere minutes before I left Japan. He never returned the sentiment, nor did we discuss it. His thoughts—unknown, and unknowable.

Scientists say the killer whale biopsies were harmless, but crossbow darts launched from the *Australis* in 2019 sank into the flesh of those orcas three times. Their secrets, long kept hidden, were pried from their bodies.