

"The Whale in the Basement" by Beilin Brower
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THE WHALE IN THE BASEMENT

By Beilin Brower

The night my mother becomes pregnant, a pipe bursts and the basement floods.

"Well," my father says, turning to my mother. They're both peering down the stairs at the water, still dressed in their night clothes. "I guess we were successful."

My mother smiles down at her stomach, cradling it with her arms. It's still flat. Without the flooding, no one would be able to tell that one of my father's sperm had made it to one of my mother's eggs, even with the most sophisticated of medical equipment.

"Yes," my mother smiles. "I suppose we were."

My parents tell me the basement has flooded and forbid me from going downstairs. I don't really think anything of it. At least, not until a couple weeks have passed and it doesn't seem like there are any plans to fix it.

"Oh, it's not that important," my father grins at me over the dinner table when I ask him about it. "It's not too serious, so there's really no need to rush. Pass the salad, would you? Otherwise your mom's going to nag me about my cholesterol levels again."

I pass the salad. My mother lectures my father anyways. When I look at the door to the basement again, it's been locked.

My parents also make constant trips down to the basement, a minimum of two a day. They carefully watch over a small silver light in the water for the next three months. It isn't until my mother's first trimester passes that the light finally begins to take shape and the safety of the pregnancy is confirmed by a doctor.

The morning after the trip to the doctor, I come down for breakfast, only to find my parents waiting to ambush me at the table. This is when they finally decide to tell me the news that they have been keeping secret so far.

"We need to talk," my mother tells me, her expression serious. My father is her silent pillar of support sitting next to her. He doesn't really say anything in these types of conversations, as he's not really comfortable with them. He just sort of sits there, avoiding eye contact, and occasionally voicing agreement with my mother.

"...Alright," I say, cautiously sitting down and trying not to make any sudden, suspicious movements. "Did something happen?"

I don't remember doing anything I wasn't supposed to lately. That doesn't mean I'm not prepared to *deny, deny, deny*.

My parents exchange a look.

"Something good happened," my mother says. "I'm pregnant."

She beams brightly at me. With her white teeth, golden brown hair, and subtle tan, it's sort of like staring straight into the sun. Blinding and painful.

I look to my father instead. He's much safer to look at in comparison, with his average brown hair and stormy blue eyes. He gives me a sheepish nod.

"Oh," I say, stunned.

I ambush my best friend with the news immediately afterwards.

"My mother's pregnant," I say as I walk through the front door of his house, which is just down the street from my own.

He's my age, with short black hair and sort of squinty eyes that make him look constantly suspicious of the world and other people choose not to talk to him. Similarly, I constantly forget to get my hair cut, making my dark bangs shadow my stormy eyes. That, combined with my perpetually grumpy expression, makes most other people avoid me as well, so the two of us belong together in our own weird way.

He gives me a bland look over his breakfast cereal, still dressed in his completely black pajamas. "Sure," he says. "Come on in. Hello, nice to see you, too. How have you been? I've been well."

"Be serious," I hiss, sitting down across the dining table from him. "My mother's pregnant!"

He sighs and sets down his spoon. It hits the edge of his bowl with a small *clink*. The leftover milk and cereal bob a bit in the bowl.

"How do you know?" he asks.

"The basement flooded," I tell him.

"Oh?" He actually looks interested at that. "Interesting. When I was conceived, a tree smashed through the entire west wall of the attic."

I blush. "The heater exploded and set the couch on fire for me."

"What were you, then?" My friend asks. "I was a hummingbird."

"...A fire salamander," I mutter.

"And now the basement's flooded," he muses. "Your new sibling is going to be water aligned. That should be interesting."

"You know I don't buy into that crap," I said. Alignments, which were personality and fortune predictions based on the element a person's spirit animal was associated with, were about as truthful as horoscopes, in my opinion.

"Has the spirit been confirmed?" he asked me, changing the subject before I could start on a rant.

"Yeah, my mom's passed her first trimester, the animal should become identifiable soon." I groan. "I don't even want a sibling! They're probably going to be a brat!"

"You're being a brat," he says. "Your parents have been trying for another child for months now. I thought you got over this already. You haven't even met them yet."

"I don't need to," I say.

"You know, this is why the unborn spirits visit," my best friend tells me. "To make sure their family will love them when they're born."

"I won't love it," I declare.

My friend snorts. "You say that now, but you'll probably change your mind after actually meeting them."

I glower down at the table. He waits for me to say something. When I don't, he starts eating again. He even makes sure to *slurp* the milk extra loudly just to annoy me the way best friends always seem to.

"Did you even eat breakfast before storming down the street to my house?" He asks me.

I grumble incoherently, still glowering.

“Well, you know where the milk and cereal are,” he says.

My best friend kicks me out of his house when afternoon arrives.

My mother is waiting by the front door for me when I head back home. I walk past her, up to my room, and lay face-down on my bed. I hear her follow me up the stairs and feel her gaze on me as she leans against my bedroom’s doorframe.

“Do you want to meet your sibling?” My mother asks.

“What is it?” I ask, trying to sound disinterested.

“A calf,” my mother tells me. “Well, a baby whale. But baby whales are apparently called calves, isn’t that funny? Your father looked it up before he had to leave to talk to the insurance company.”

My sibling has the water spirit of a baby whale.

“They’re beautiful,” my mother tries to coax me. “Your spirit was beautiful too.”

I know. I learned about them in school. Spirits are supposed to look like threads of bright light woven into the shape of their animal. Only the immediate family unit could see them. Midwives were the only exception, being born with some sort of mutation that allowed them to see all unborn spirits, which was why insurance companies and hospitals often hired them. You could touch the spirits, and they could touch you, but the feeling is faint. They’re supposed to be beautiful, to make the family want to protect them when they’re born.

It’s nothing but a manipulation.

I don’t say anything to my mother.

Eventually, I hear her sigh, and I feel her gently thread her fingers through my hair.

“We’re not replacing you,” my mother says. “We love you. Having a sibling just means there will be one more person around to love and be loved by.”

Then, my mother leaves, closing the bedroom door behind her.

I grab my pillow and wrap my arms around it, stuffing it against my face. I want to scream. I go to sleep instead.

When my father shakes me awake, the sky outside my window is a dark indigo.

“C’mon, little vampire,” my father says. “It’s time for dinner. Go wash your hands and come downstairs.”

When I sit at my place at the dining table, absently wiping my still damp hands on my pants, my father says Grace before digging in. I don’t blame him; I’m following suit. My mother’s cooking is the best. Tonight, there’s a feast of chicken, potatoes, green beans, gravy, and sparkling juice.

“What did the insurance company say?” My mother asks my father.

“Oh, they’ll come fix the water damage and everything after the nine months are up,” my father replies. “Our insurance covers it, since we’ve made it past the first trimester and the midwife was able to see that the spirit has an identifiable shape. It looks bad, but it should be easily fixed since the damage isn’t really natural. An evaluator will come by next week to look at the place.”

“Good, good,” my mother says.

“Plus, I think it’s pretty cool,” my father admits. “I mean, it’s like our own miniature aquarium down there!”

I shovel my mouth full with food. I make sure I’m chewing food every time I think the conversation will turn in my direction. That’s my excuse for not talking at dinner. I leave the table with an aching stomach.

After that, I spend a lot of my time trying to avoid my parents by locking myself in my room. I'm not very successful.

"Good morning," my mother chirps cheerfully at me one morning.

"...Morning," I mutter, not looking at her, glaring at the plate of pancakes that she is definitely holding hostage.

"Hungry?" she asks.

My stomach betrays me and grumbles.

"I have some pancakes here," my mother smiles. "Why don't we eat them together? We could get your father and eat them in the basement. Have a family breakfast, all of us together."

She keeps smiling. It's a pretty smile. It's a dangerous smile. I may have inherited most of my looks from my father, but I definitely developed my skill at ruining other people's days from my mother.

"No thanks," I force myself to say. "I just wanted a glass of water. See you later."

I fill a glass with water at the sink, making sure to avoid all eye and body contact, before slinking back into my room.

It isn't until my mother fails at forcing me to interact with her several times that she calls in reinforcements. Namely, my father.

"Hey," my father says, standing awkwardly in the doorway to my bedroom. "Um, what's up?"

I stare at my father in disbelief. "I'm doing fine," I manage to say, setting my *Iron Man* comic down on my chest. "How are you?"

"Fine, I'm fine," my father says, running a hand through his hair. "Listen, your mother is getting a bit concerned. About you always being in your room."

I wait for him to continue, but he doesn't.

"Alright," I finally say. "I'll come out of my room more often. Wouldn't want to worry her."

My father grins. "Awesome! Great. Really, that's great!"

And just like that, my father leaves.

Like I said, I leave my room right after. I leave my bedroom, walk out of my house, and promptly invade my best friend's house instead.

"Really?" he mutters from his desk where he's playing a video game on his laptop when I steal his bed so I can continue to read my comics.

"Shut up," I grumble.

He rolls his eyes so hard, it's a miracle they don't pop out of his skull.

A pattern soon develops over the next couple of weeks. When I'm not hiding in my room, doing my best to avoid my parents, I'm hiding in my best friend's house, still doing my best to avoid my parents.

In the end, I think my parents just sort of give up trying to force me into spending time with my sibling's unborn spirit. Instead, they start giving me sad looks whenever they see me in-between their own constant visits to the basement.

One day, while I'm sneaking a snack from the kitchen, I hear my mother crying from the living room. I peer around the corner to see her and my father. My mother does her best to hide her engorged stomach with her arms, folding herself against my father. He wraps his arms around her like he's the only thing keeping her together.

"What if something happens?" I hear her whisper.

“It’ll be fine,” my father replies. “Shhh. It’ll all be alright. The first trimester has been over for a while now, there isn’t as much risk. Our little calf will be fine.” He rubs a hand on her back.

“Promise?” my mother sobs.

“Promise,” my father says.

I pretend that I didn’t see or hear anything, sneaking back up to my room.

A couple nights afterwards, my mother snaps.

“Enough,” she snarls suddenly at the dinner table. My father and I immediately freeze, him with a forkful of salad halfway to his mouth and me in the middle of drinking my glass of Dr. Pepper. “I’ve had it.”

Those are never good words to hear my mother say.

It’s even worse when she turns her blue eyes straight on me.

“You need to visit your sibling,” she orders me.

I glare back at her. “I don’t want to,” I tell her.

My father slowly puts his fork back down on his plate, carefully looking between us.

“I don’t care,” my mother declares. “This isn’t about you, it’s about this family.”

“That I’m a part of,” I add. “Therefore, I should have a say.”

“You can have a say when you start contributing money,” my mother replies.

I wisely do not mention that since she is technically on maternity leave at the moment, she isn’t exactly bringing in money right now either. But I don’t have a death wish. No, I’m just stupid for going up against her in the first place. There’s no doubt in my mind that if she wasn’t distracted by the baby and the whale and her hormones, she’d have already locked me in the basement despite my father’s wishes.

My father is such a saint for living with us both.

“You can’t make me,” I tell her.

Her eyes narrow. My father pales.

“We’ll see,” she says.

I then decide to make a strategic retreat and basically flee to my room. I even put my chair by the door, underneath the door handle, so it can’t be easily pulled open, just in case.

The following screaming matches between us are so loud, I’m sure the entire neighborhood can hear us. But that doesn’t stop either of us at all.

In the end, I’m grounded for an entire week, unable to leave my room and without any electronic devices whatsoever. I promptly slam my bedroom door in her face and settle down to play a game of Solitaire.

So many games of Solitaire...

When my mother’s been pregnant for twenty weeks, the doctor offers to try and identify the sexual organs of the baby through an ultrasound. My mother refuses. She wants it to be a surprise. She says she did the same thing for me.

However, she does ask for pictures of the ultrasound. The baby looks more like an alien than a human in them, with its unnaturally large head and shriveled looking body.

After the visit, my father practically drags my mother into the basement. I’m curious to see what’s happening, so I peer around the corner to see. My father has pictures of the ultrasound in his hand. He’s waving them around, showing them off to the whale.

“You’re so cute,” my father coos at it. “Look!”

My mother sighs, looking exasperated as she stands next to him, but the corner of her lips are turned up, making her overall expression a fond one. I don’t think the whale understands

what's going on, but my father's excitement seems to be contagious because it starts twirling around him, a whirlwind of bright color and light in comparison to my father's more pastel form.

I leave before anyone notices me.

My mother and I have one last screaming match before she suddenly, right in the middle of lecturing me about the meaning of responsibility, sags into a nearby couch, puts her face in her hands, and just sighs. She doesn't say anything else to me when I get bored and decide to leave.

After that, all my mother gives me is disappointed looks. My father just always looks like a kicked puppy begging for treats.

In the house, lists of baby names appear everywhere. I find the papers in-between books, on counters, near chairs, on tables, and fluttering through the air. *Laurel, Rebecca, Miriam... James, Alexander, Montgomery...*

I read the lists surreptitiously, curious despite my best efforts. My mind obsesses on the names in my dreams, trying to attach them to the image of that stupid whale turning through the water.

"What would you name them?" my father asks me once.

"Spud," I tell him.

He stares at me, disbelieving. "Spud?"

"Like a potato," I nod.

"Why?"

"I'm hungry and craving French fries," I say before walking out of the house to go steal some from my best friend. I'm sure he has them somewhere in his house. Plus, I just love the way his squinty eyes narrow even further before he promptly tries to commit homicide against me.

When my parents are gone, at work or running errands, I find myself wandering around the empty house. Sometimes, I find myself staring at all the safety features that have slowly appeared. Pieces of plastic soften every sharp corner. Door knobs are hidden behind loose coverings that require a tight grip to twist the doors open.

Those door knob things quickly become the bane of my existence. I know they're supposed to be child-proof, but I am not a child. Yet it still takes me a minimum of three attempts before I can open any door in the house. I never put off going to the bathroom anymore, thanks to one particularly close call near the beginning when they first appeared.

When my mother is six months pregnant, my father begins to paint the room next to mine. It used to be his study, situated right next to my parents' bedroom. He asks if I want to help, but I shake my head. He paints it by himself.

The walls become a soft yellow, the color of warm sunlight, with simple white trim. A cheerful and unisex color. Bookshelves appear, filled with stuffed animals and neon bright toys and picture books. A changing station materializes, covered in spare diapers, wipes, and baby powder. The crib is assembled and placed in my parents' bedroom, but it'll only stay there temporarily before being placed back into the baby's room.

"Hey," my father says.

It's the afternoon, and I'm lying on my stomach on my bed.

"Mind running an errand with me?" my father asks me. "I hardly ever see you anymore."

"Sure," I say, feeling sick all of a sudden. "Just let me put on my shoes."

I meet him in the garage. I call shotgun out loud even though I don't have to, it's just him and me in the car. After he's subtly checked to make sure I'm wearing my seatbelt, he backs out.

“Where are we going?” I ask him. I probably should have asked that before the car started taking me to a destination unknown.

“To the toy store,” he tells me.

“Don’t we already have enough toys?” I ask, remembering the last time I visited the baby’s room and got nailed in the face with a stuffed green turtle that squeaked out *I love you!* when I tripped on a nearby Lego box and stumbled into one of the shelves.

“This is a special toy,” my father says.

“A special toy,” I repeat in disbelief.

“You could say it’s the most important toy,” my father agrees.

The most important toy? I can’t think of anything like that.

We pull into a parking lot. I follow my father into the mall, trailing a couple steps behind him as he strides confidently forwards. He knows where we’re going; he has a plan.

We end up going to a store I’ve never been in before called *Happy Baby Customs*. It’s a large store, but it isn’t filled with products. Instead, it’s filled with multiple tables and chairs, where several people are already sitting and talking with workers. There pictures of stuffed animals on the walls.

A worker comes over to us. She’s wearing an apron with the store name written in large bubble letters across the chest and several large pockets around the waist.

“Hello,” she says cheerfully to us. “How may I help you?”

“Hello,” my father smiles back at her. “I’m here to design and order a toy.”

“Wonderful! Here, follow me,” the worker exclaims, leading us to an empty table and sitting down, gesturing for us to copy her. We both sit down. “Have you been here before, or is this your first time with us?”

“I’ve been here once before, for this one,” my father says, giving my shoulder a brief squeeze. I fidget uncomfortably under the sudden attention.

I know what’s going on now. It’s a tradition to get a custom made stuffed animal for new babies in the shape of their spirit animals. This store is probably one of the places that makes them. When my father pulls out a slightly crumpled sketch of a whale from his pocket, my thoughts are confirmed.

I immediately ignore what my father and the worker, who has pulled out a iPad and pen to make notes on, are talking about. Instead, I stare out one of the store’s windows and try to read one of the huge mall maps instead. I squint as I try to distinguish the letters on the list of what I assume are store names.

A sudden shake of my shoulder pulls my attention back.

“Hey,” my father says. “Did you hear me?”

I shake my head.

“What kind of features do you think we should add to the toy?” he repeats.

“I don’t know,” I shrug. “Make sure it’s soft? Babies are supposed to like soft things.”

My dad grins. He looks triumphant. “Yes,” he agrees. “As soft as possible!”

The worker nods and makes another mark on the pad. “Got it. We offer several options for materials. The softest we have is angora, however...”

I zone out again. The next half hour follows similarly, as my father decides all sorts of things like the toy’s size, color, stuffing, if it should have an embedded scent, etc. I wanted to leave the moment we stepped into the store. I can’t wait to go back home.

Much too late for my emotional balance, my father wraps everything up and we leave the shop. Back in the car, I slouch in my seat.

“You said you were there once before, for me,” I suddenly say.

My father nods. “Yes, that’s where we got Missy Red from.”

Missy Red is a crimson salamander stuffed toy I’ve had since I was a baby. It’s currently sitting somewhere in my closet, probably in one of the storage bins that my mother uses to collect all sorts of useless things like my old grade reports from elementary school and old Halloween photos.

When we get back home, I go to my closet and look through all the bins. I find Missy Red sitting between an old multiplication tables test I scored an A+ on and a Ziploc bag full of dried out orange slime.

She’s old and soft, with patches of her fur discolored, especially around its arms where I probably carried it around, and the area around her snout sticking out in clumps. I’m embarrassed to realize that’s probably because of how many times I put her face into my mouth to chew on when I was little.

Still, I’m too old for stuffed animals. So I put Missy Red back into the bin, cover her back up again, and close my closet doors. Then, I leave my room to go bother my best friend, who greets me with an insult to my intelligence and an offer to kill video game zombies. He throws a pillow at me when I beat his high score, but that’s alright. I throw another back at him, and mine actually connects.

That night, I sneak down to the basement for the first time. My parents are fast asleep in their room, both of them heavy sleepers. I don’t make any noise as I creep down into the basement. I already know which stairs to avoid since they creak.

The whale is still there, glimmering brightly in the dark water like starlight as it swims around. The moment it sees me, it swerves in the water and approaches me, large eyes curious as they regard me.

It really is beautiful. The whale is small, but cute. The silvery light that makes it up is gentle, like moonlight, giving it an ethereal and unworldly glow. It swims gracefully through the water, each movement smooth.

I stop myself from reaching out and touching it.

“You’re not that impressive,” I tell the whale instead.

It stares silently at me.

“I don’t like you,” I continue. “My parents might, but I don’t. You’re not needed in this household.”

Its body twists in the water. Back and forth, back and forth. I probably upset it.

“Just stay in the basement, alright?” I say to it. “Just stay here.”

I turn around and walk back up the stairs, leaving the basement and going back to my room. I tell myself I won’t return to the basement ever again.

It doesn’t work.

The next night, I’m back and glaring at it once again.

“You’re stupid,” I tell it. “Do you even know what’s going on? How much trouble you are already? I bet you don’t. I really don’t like you.”

The whale just peers at me, its expression as sad and pleading as my parents, so I continue my pattern of avoiding those looks by going back upstairs.

I keep returning to the basement. I visit the whale every night. Soon, the whale starts to expect me. If I come later than usual, making sure my parents are asleep before going down, it gives me a chiding look. Still, it always greets me enthusiastically when it sees me, twirling and flipping in the dark water.

“Just because you can be trained to recognize me doesn’t mean I’m impressed with you,” I declare.

Sometimes, I just watch it swim around in silence. Other times, I talk to it. Random stories just to break up the quiet. How I fell out of a tree and broke my arm. How I met my best friend when he accidentally ran his bicycle into my family’s mailbox.

“He’s an idiot, but he’s my best friend,” sums it all up pretty well.

My parents don’t know I visit the whale. They keep sending me sad, pleading looks. I do my best to ignore them. We’re in a stalemate, each of us unwilling to start a fight.

Weeks pass that way. Calmly. Slowly.

On the day of the baby shower, I can hear the event’s white noise through the door to my room. None of the guests are midwives, so none of them can see the spirit. Yet the guests still exclaim excitedly as they shuffle up and down the stairs, still peer curiously into the dark waters that have flooded the basement.

I eventually come out of my room and lurk in the corner. I watch them the way I watched those mandatory animal documentaries in school. I’m detached, disconnected. What I’m seeing aren’t people like me, they’re something else. I listen to them coo and congratulate while the edges of my skin tingle with emptiness.

After the party has ended, my mother calls me over. I help her clean up the house, gathering up the ripped wrapping paper and snipped ribbons and throwing them into the trash. I pile the presents into stacks that I can carry up to the baby’s room and place them next to the crib.

Downstairs, my mother’s cheeks are flushed with happiness. Her eyes shimmer with emotion. For the first time, I realize she’s basically glowing. Not in her usual blinding way, but gentler, like how I’ve heard others say pregnant woman are supposed to.

“I’m so happy,” my mother whispers in my ear, suddenly embracing me with a hug. “I love you.”

Then, before I can react, she lets me go and lumbers away to sit on the couch and admire a set of small, black baby shoes. It’s sort of ridiculous, watching her walk, since her stomach is so large, she looks more like a waddling penguin than anything else. But her expression is so gentle when she looks at those shoes, it makes me stand there, still, for what feels like a lifetime. Then I turn away from the maternal vision and look at the floor instead, where small dots of colored paper lie. I pick them up, mash them into a ball with my hands, and toss it into the trash.

That night, I don’t slip down to the basement. Instead, I stare at the ceiling on my bed. When I finally close my eyes to go to sleep, I can almost see the whale’s mournful eyes, like it’s missing me. Unlike those people at the baby shower who couldn’t see it, but still tried to, I can see it, but I choose not to.

My visits to the basement every night stop. My mood plummets as my sibling’s recommended birth date approaches.

My traitorous best friend seems to have cemented his alliance with my parents, too.

“The date’s coming up,” he tells me.

“I know,” I grumble back. “Got any sevens?”

“Go Fish,” he replies. “You still haven’t bothered meeting them yet?”

“No, and I never will, so stop asking about it,” I hiss.

“Got any kings?”

I begrudgingly hand one over. I hate playing Go Fish, but the two of us aren’t allowed to play Poker ever since that one Halloween his parents caught us betting candy. They said that we

could gamble when we were older, but only then. And since his parents were currently busy watching Judge Judy a room away, the two of us decided to err on the side of caution.

My best friend opens his mouth again.

“Please, just drop it,” I say. “I’m getting enough of this from my parents.”

He grimaces. “Just this once. Brat.”

“Thanks,” I sigh in relief.

“Whatever. Got any aces?”

“I hope you die in a fire.”

Needless to say, I lose that game.

As time passes, my parents become a bit more agitated in their own ways.

My mother seems to suddenly calm down, content with just sitting around and waiting. It’s weird to not see her storming around the house as best she can, muttering darkly about sit-ups and push-ups and recovery.

My father, on the other hand, suddenly seems to realize that yes, my mother is pregnant, and the baby’s supposed to be born soon. He promptly loses his mind.

“Do you think we have enough things for the baby?” I hear him say at least once a day now.

My mother and I share a look. The baby’s room is already overflowing with everything it could possibly need.

“I’m pretty sure we have everything,” my mother says.

I quickly leave, not wanting to get involved in one of my father’s freak outs. They’re just really super embarrassing for everyone involved. Sometimes, I really wonder what made my mother marry him.

Later, when I’m hiding at my best friend’s house, he speaks up again.

“The baby’s supposed to be born in two weeks,” he says.

I look over to him in disbelief. Is he trying to start a fight with me or something? Because I’ve told him multiple times that I do not want to talk about the whale during my visits with him, no matter what my parents have promised him for his treachery.

“...I know,” I finally say.

“You still haven’t accepted your sibling’s spirit,” he continues.

I shrug. I’m not going to share my midnight escapades to the basement with him.

“You need to,” he says. “Soon. Otherwise there might be complications with the pregnancy.”

I grit my teeth. I know.

It’s a survival technique. Unborn spirits won’t allow themselves to be naturally born until the entire immediate family unit accepts them. If they’re never accepted, then a caesarian section is usually used to remove the child from the womb. It can remain in the womb indefinitely, in a state of stasis, but it stresses the body of the mother. However, once removed, the baby’s physical body will be comatose, and the spirit will remain, technically unborn, until acceptance is achieved. Only then will the spirit disappear and enter the physical body, becoming conscious.

“Your mom could be hurt,” my best friend continues.

I grit my teeth. I know that. I do. It’s just...

“Your mom could be hurt,” he repeats himself.

“So you’ve told me,” I mutter darkly.

“It’s true,” he scowls. “You know it, too. Are you really willing to hurt your own mother over this?”

“Of course not,” I scowl.

“Then why haven’t you accepted that whale yet?” he demands.

“It’s not that simple, alright?” I say, hunching my shoulders defensively.

“Oh, for the love of— Stop being a brat!” My best friend shouts. I jump in shock. His face is angry and twisted. “The world doesn’t revolve around you, you selfish bastard! Stop being so *stupid!*”

“Stay out of my business,” I snap back. “You don’t understand a thing!”

“Oh, I don’t understand anything?” he snarls. “I understand you do nothing these days but angst around unnecessarily.”

“Just leave me alone,” I say.

“No,” he says. “Your bratty behavior effects more than just you!”

“I’m leaving,” I say. I stand up to leave, but so does he, blocking the door.

“Are you even listening to me?” he practically screams into my face.

“I said *leave me alone!*” I shove him out of my way.

I run out of his house. I can hear him cursing and shouting from inside, but he doesn’t chase me. I wander around the neighborhood for the rest of the day before returning home. His words echo in my mind the entire time.

That night, at dinner, I speak up.

“I want to go down to the basement,” I tell my parents.

My mother gasps, expression hopeful. “Really?” she asks.

I nod.

“Can we come too?” She gestures to herself and my father as she speaks.

“I guess,” I say, giving a shrug with forced nonchalance.

There’s unspoken pressure on me as I walk down the basement stairs after dinner. My parents ate quickly and decided to do the dishes later, simply dumping them by the sink. They follow me, and though I can’t see them, I can feel their every breath on the back of my neck.

The whale doesn’t swim up to me immediately like it used to. It hangs back, watching me carefully. Its light shines brightly, flickering like candlelight in the darkness.

“Hey,” I say.

The whale just looks at me. It can’t say anything, after all.

I clear my throat. “Look, I just wanted to say, that…” I sigh, feeling my cheeks burn bright red. My mother makes a cooing sound in the background, but my father quickly hushes her.

“…I accept you into the family, alright?” I finally manage to say.

The whale freezes, then swims right up to me. It seems disbelieving.

“I’m not saying it twice!” I practically shout at it.

The whale performs a twirl.

“Ugh,” I mutter, looking away from it. “Don’t think I like you, or anything. It’s just that having a little sibling isn’t the worst thing in the world. So don’t cause our mother any trouble or anything like that.”

My mother makes a choked sound.

“This was a mistake,” I groan. “Let’s just forget about this, and—”

There’s a splashing sound.

But the whale is a spirit. It can’t touch anything.

“My water just broke,” my mother says.

My father and I pale. He grabs my mother in his arms and begins running up the stairs. I look around wildly, but the whale is gone. I follow my father out of the house and into the car. He and I sit in the front while my mother lies in the back, panting and wheezing.

Everything rushes together into a jumbled mess.

The whale had disappeared. That's all I can think about.

In the hospital, my heart beats in time with the clock. *Ba-bump. Tick. Ba-bump. Tock.*

I pull out my cell phone and call my best friend.

"What do you want?" I hear him grumble.

"The baby's being born," I tell him.

He curses, and I hear a crash, like he's dropped his video game controller or kicked some furniture by accident.

"What hospital are you at?" he asks me. "My mom should be back home from the grocery store any minute."

"Saint Rosaline," I say. "But you don't have to come," I add, only saying the words because I feel like I should.

"Idiot," my best friend mutters. Then, he hangs up.

Ba-bump. Tick. Ba-bump. Tock.

My best friend crashes into me, and it feels like his arms elongate to wrap around me several times.

"Oh," I say. "You're here."

His eyes are an inch away from mine. They stare intensely into me, little ice picks trying to chip away my thoughts.

"How are you?" he asks me.

I say something incomprehensible, a jumble of mismatched mumbles. He nods like he understands.

"It's not your fault," he tells me.

"A baby is born when the family accepts it," I say. "I accepted the whale right before mom's water broke."

"Being born two weeks early shouldn't hurt it," he tries to reassure me.

"I'm not worried," I lie. "They can die for all I care."

He grabs my hands into his. The small crescent nail marks on the palms of my hands sting and make me hiss.

Ba-bump. Tick. Ba-bump. Tock.

There's so much screaming. Then silence.

"You can come in," the nurse tells me through an open door.

I don't move.

"Go," my best friend prods me forwards.

I stumble into the white room. My nose fills with iron rust blood and burns from strong sterile scents. My mother lies in bed. My father stands next to her.

I stare at the wrinkled, red blob in my mother's arms. It looks ugly. It looks nothing like the beautiful spirit that lived in the basement.

"Come on," my mother says. She's smiling. So is my father. "Come hold them. Come say hello to your newborn sibling."

My parents are smiling. The doctors are smiling. I don't know what expression I'm making.

I stare at the baby.

It shifts. Its eyes open. They're exactly the same as the whale's eyes.

THE END.