

# WHITE WHALE<sup>1</sup>

Katrina Kell<sup>2</sup>

Joel loved to call her the Great White Whale. ‘Look! Over there! It’s the Great White Whale!’ Her kids laughed at his joke as they wrestled in the sand. The teasing made Maddy smile. She’d given birth to two sons, but still had the figure to turn a few heads.

‘Thar, she blows! Bum up, basking in the sun!’ Maddy gave Joel a kick in the shin, and jumping up from her towel, brushed the sand from her fair-skinned body. Slipping both hands behind her back, she untied her red bikini top, and twirling the cups in circles, sent them sailing into the shallows.

‘For God’s sake, woman, put some clothes on.’ Joel sprinted down to the shore, searching in the waves for her costume. ‘You’re too much, Mads, now you’re shaming our kids.’

Maddy laughed. A loud, earthy laugh. The kids didn’t care, they were too busy chasing seagulls. Breaking free from Joel’s grip on her arm, she raced into the swirling surf, screaming with delight when the icy shock of the ocean hit her.

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‘Mads,’ Joel whispered, his hand gently cupping her breast. ‘Your boob, it feels a bit different.’ Maddy burrowed her buttocks into the warmth of his belly. She craved this time of day, waking with her husband folded around her; lazy unhurried sex in the quiet hour before the kids woke up.

‘It doesn’t feel right, Mads. Something’s a bit too hard in there.’ She pulled away from his embrace and rolled onto her stomach.

‘You’re a kill joy, Joel, a real passion killer. Bringing up the breast thing again?’ She buried her face in her pillow, waiting for Joel to answer, but as the silence stretched out between them, she lifted her head and turned to him.

‘Try not to worry. Look, I read an article online, I’m sure it’s just a cyst. And you know what they say, a woman’s intuition is never wrong.’

‘Yeah, well what about my intuition? Doesn’t what I feel count for anything? I’m scared, Mads, I reckon you should speak to Jacinta. Promise?’ he pleaded, weaving long fingers through her tangled hair. ‘Go see Jacinta, and I won’t say another word.’

Later, as Maddy poured cereal into plastic breakfast bowls, she was still thinking about the lump. Why did Joel keep going on at her? Wasn’t she healthy and well? She had never been seriously ill. Her breasts always felt like bowling balls before her period started. She turned on the kitchen tap and filled the kettle with water, unaware her husband was creeping up behind her.

‘Sorry,’ he whispered, nuzzling her neck, ‘but I’m not letting up. I can drop the boys off today. You make an appointment to see Jacinta.’

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‘Jac, it’s probably just a gland. My breasts feel lumpy when I’m premenstrual.’

Jacinta and Maddy went back a long way. They’d studied at the same university. Were much more than friends in the year they flatted together. But when Maddy began seeing Joel their relationship changed inexorably, and after a few see-sawing months, their friendship became strictly platonic. So, when the time inevitably came, it had seemed only natural for Jacinta to deliver Maddy’s babies.

‘Missed any periods?’ Jacinta was straight to the point as usual.

‘No, regular as clockwork.’ Maddy paused in thought for a moment. ‘There’s been other stuff . . . a bit unusual. Nothing to do with breast lumps though.’

‘Other stuff?’ Jacinta glanced at Maddy over the top of her glasses. Her friend had always been complicated. A bit prone to talking in riddles, leaving her listeners in a state of flux as they linked sketchy clues together.

‘It’s hard to explain. Just lately, all I seem to think about is sex. Isn’t it supposed to be, *you know* . . .? a male obsession? Spending every waking moment....’

Jacinta laughed. How could she stay professional with a patient she’d known as

intimately as Maddy? ‘Well,’ she said, raising one eyebrow, ‘we both know that’s utter nonsense.’

‘It’s just the older I get, the more I seem to want it.’ Maddy longed to say more. To tell Jacinta she was driving Joel crazy. How lately, when his lovemaking wasn’t enough, she was left climbing the walls in frustration.

Jacinta waited for more, curious where this confession was leading.

‘I guess I sound stupid.’ Maddy looked embarrassed. ‘Some nights I could tear off my clothes, howl at the moon, go find someone, anyone . . . I’m sure you’d rather not hear anymore. But I’ve been thinking about the lump. Wondering if there’s a connection? Maybe my hormones are overactive?’

‘It’s quite possible,’ Jacinta agreed, ‘let me run some tests to check your levels. But first, if you feel comfortable, why don’t you slip off your blouse. I can take a look at the lump that’s bothering you.’

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Light-headed and nauseous, she hurried from the oncology clinic. She unlocked her car and collapsed into the driver’s seat. The hot interior of the vehicle engulfed her, yet still, she couldn’t stop shivering. She was relieved Joel hadn’t gone with her. More time to think things through. Telling the boys was going to be hardest. *But how much to tell? Wouldn’t it be kinder if they didn’t know?* Maddy wound her window down, drove away from the carpark and turned onto the busy highway. She pulled up at the lights,

and stared at the truck idling directly in front of her— its ugly cargo of blood-stained ribcages, livestock tendons and organs, a mountain of slaughterhouse waste destined for the fertiliser plant. She was not a vegan, or an animal activist, but she loved all manner of animals. Respected their spirit, their strength, their wildness. She stared at the carcasses, so carelessly exposed, and inhaled the whiff of decay drifting through her open window. Thumping the heel of her fist on the horn, she blared at the truck in anger. Why didn't they cover it up, what was left of those poor dead creatures? She felt the acidic sting of bile rising from her stomach, and the instant the lights turned green, she swung her car into the outer lane, leaving the truckload of death behind her.

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‘Joel, try to see the funny side. You won't need to call me the Great White Whale. After my double mastectomy, you can call me the Boobless Beluga!’ Maddy cracked up. She knew it was wrong, but black humour was her default way of coping.

‘You're a crazy bitch, Mads. Your husband's worried out of his brain, and you decide to tell him whale jokes.’

But in the months following her surgery, Maddy's sense of humour would often desert her. She deeply mourned the loss of her breasts, and her lush brown hair, and she suffered terribly with the side effects of her chemotherapy treatments. She literally felt like her body was being stolen right from under her.

‘Love, it's okay, I just want to hold you.’ Joel's urgent need for intimacy was only making things harder. How could she let her husband touch her? She couldn't even

look at herself in the mirror. ‘You’ll get used to the prostheses . . . might take a while before they feel comfortable . . . and I bought you that wig,’ Joel reminded her, ‘it cost me a small fortune, Mads, you promised you would wear . . .’

‘Fuck you, Joel! I’ll be damned if I’ll wear that thing.’

‘Please, Maddy, don’t swear. The boys might hear . . .’

‘It’s ugly and it looks ridiculous. It’s too hot, it makes my head itchy. Why did you pick that stupid colour? My hair is brown, not blond, just in case you’ve forgotten already.’

‘So, you’d rather look like a freak from a Sci-Fi movie?’ The words were out before he could stop them. ‘Mads, forgive me, I’m so sorry, love. You know I didn’t mean that.’

‘Don’t pretend, Joel. It’s far easier when you’re honest. Go on, take a good look.’ Maddy lifted her blouse, revealing the horizontal scars on her chest, ‘and now . . . now I have to deal with this,’ she patted her hairless scalp, ‘I look like a bloody alien.’

Leaving her husband alone with his thoughts, she went to check on her boys. The last months had been so hard for them. She and Joel had both tried, in simple language, to explain her diagnosis. But had the boys really understood? How could you possibly tell? Some days, when she was feeling okay, she made an extra effort to keep things normal. She’d snuggle up on the couch with her sons, inhaling the scent of their freshly washed hair as they poured over whale books together. It was one of their special rituals. Billy, her red-headed three-year-old, loved to point at his favourite picture. ‘Look, Mummy, I really like this one!’ It was a beautiful white beluga.

Maddy slipped quietly into their room and drew back the curtains. As she lifted Jason's doona, she found a crumpled piece of paper. She unfolded the paper carefully, and studied her young son's drawing. He'd made a new sketch of Maddy. Her bald head resembled a bowling ball. She stifled her instinct to laugh. It was hard not to see the funny side.

'So, that's what I look like now?'

Jason yawned and stretched his arms. He blinked at his mother with sleepy eyes. 'No', he mumbled, 'that's just a silly scribble.' Fighting back tears, he buried his face in the covers.

'Hey, you, move over.' Maddy climbed into his bed beside him. 'Your picture is really clever and you haven't hurt my feelings. But I reckon we both could use a good cuddle.'

'Cancer sucks, don't it, Mum.'

'Sure does,' Maddy agreed, cradling her son in her arms, 'but my doctors are very smart, they're doing everything they can to make me better.'

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Maddy stood, her head tipped forward, as Jacinta's icy cold fingers inspected the images she had carved on her scalp. Raising her head, she turned and confronted her friend, willing Jacinta to scold her, to say something that would hurt her. Words that allowed Maddy to vent her rage, all the fury and pain locked up inside her. But when

Jacinta met her eyes, she didn't say anything. She quietly lifted her bag and placed it on the bedside table.

‘Joel told you, didn't he?’

‘Yes, Joel told me. Now I know why he's so worried. Come on, Mads what's up? It's not in your nature to self-harm, to hurt yourself.’

‘*What's up?* Surely, you're joking? I've been neutered, cut to pieces, injected with hideous drugs, and yes, I know, it was all for my own good, but fuck, Jacinta, don't preach to me about hurt.’

‘You've been mutilating yourself, and I'm sure the oncologist warned you. Chemo makes you more vulnerable to infection.’

Maddy forced herself to smile. ‘Mutilating myself? No, that was never my intention. My images were carved as a form of release . . . I'm creating something beautiful. Turning my head into living art . . . always been a frustrated artist.’

‘But what about your boys? Do you really think this is good for them? Watching their beloved mother harm herself?’

‘Billy thinks my scalp looks pretty. Especially the picture I carved just for him. It's the whale, the one that's healed up nicely. It shines like silver in the sun.’

Jacinta shuddered. ‘So, your scalp is a work-in-progress?’

‘Yes,’ said Maddy, staring at her friend defiantly. ‘The cancer has gone right through me. I have six months left at the most.’ She reached for Jacinta's hand. ‘Joel doesn't know yet, but I discussed it with my oncologist, and he supports my decision to quit the chemo.’

‘Oh, Mads, you should have told me . . . I’m so, so sorry. But are you sure about the choice you’re making?’

‘I’m certain. I want these last few months to be really special.’ Maddy flopped onto her bed and Jacinta lay down beside her.

‘Mads, you know I won’t let you down. I’ll make sure Joel and your boys are safe and happy.’

As sunlight flickered on the beaded-talisman on the wall above their heads, Maddy imagined her dream-catcher laughing behind his web of silk and feathers. For the first time in many months, she allowed herself to cry. *Wasn’t he was supposed to catch her nightmares before they could escape and hurt her?*