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**Opening Extract from...**

# Gone Again

Written by Doug Johnstone

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# Gone Again

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# 1

Mark struggled to keep himself steady. Sharp gusts of wind were nudging his camera all over the place and the spray coming off the sea was probably eating away at the lens casing. He should change to a longer lens for this shot but he didn't want to risk getting salt into the electronics.

He looked out to sea. Rough grey swells were chopping up the firth, where a coastguard speedboat was zipping and turning, trying to guide the whales towards open water. Black fins darted and dipped, too many to count properly, but at least forty. The pilot whales circled and crossed each other in a strange movement that might've been mesmerising if Mark wasn't on a deadline.

He flicked back through the shots he'd already taken. There were a few that the paper could use, but he wanted something better. He checked his watch. Five minutes to deadline but he probably had a bit longer, the picture desk was always hustling him.

He adjusted the feet of the tripod in the sand. A surge of wind made him spread his weight to steady himself and the equipment. Up to 70 mph they said on the news this morning, and this was supposed to be spring, almost summer.

He looked through the viewfinder. He needed to get a picture of the whales spyhopping, that was the money shot. He'd

listened to a marine biologist being interviewed on the beach earlier. Apparently it was very common behaviour for pilot whales. Sticking their heads above the water like meerkats and having a nosy around, especially at nearby boats. He could do with one of them taking a peek right now. But all he could see was a mess of fins rising and sinking, the occasional tail flick, but nothing spectacular, nothing that would make the front page.

The biologist had said the potential stranding might have to do with the wind somehow messing with their navigation. Either that or pollutants, or magnetic fields, or sonar. The guy had no clue, basically. One thing he did say was that pilot whales were always doing this, and the strong social bond meant if one beached, they all did. Mass suicide.

He began uploading the shots to the picture desk through his phone, his eye back to the viewfinder, legs spread and feet planted in the sand.

'Come on, spyhop, you sods.'

Nothing. It was as if the whales didn't want to be front-page news. He clicked away anyway, getting the best action shots he could. Got a well-framed picture of the coastguard boat with a guy at the prow and a couple of dorsal fins nearby, spray from the waves adding depth. He took a couple of quick shots of a seagull hovering above an emerging back. But no spyhopping.

The pictures had uploaded. He raised his head to look around. Worth getting a few background snaps, you never know.

A small group of people hugged the shoreline of Portobello Beach, huddled in against the ferocious wind, all peering at the whales a hundred feet out to sea. Sand lifted off the surface of

the beach and swirled into everyone's faces. Mark dreaded to think what it was doing to his Canon. He took a few pics of the crowd, they might get used if the story ran long, but probably not. He was on shift anyway so it didn't matter, he got paid his pittance either way, but it was always nice to get your work in print, even if it was only the *Edinburgh Evening Standard*.

A couple of people in the crowd were pointing at the firth. He turned to see a whale with its whole head clearly out the water looking straight at the shore. He spun the camera back and snapped, but by the time he got it focused the whale had disappeared back into the churning wash.

'Shit.'

His phone went. It would be Fletcher on the picture desk getting on his back for better shots. He kept his eye at the viewfinder and his finger on the shutter release as he answered the phone.

'That's all I've managed to get so far,' he said.

'I'm sorry?' It was a woman's voice.

He straightened up. 'Hello?'

'Is that Mr Douglas?'

'Yes.'

'Nathan's dad?'

His stomach lurched. 'Yeah, that's right. What is it, is Nathan OK?'

'He's fine. This is Mrs Hignet from the office at Towerbank. It's just to say that no one has come to pick Nathan up from school, that's all, and we were wondering if there was a problem of some kind.'

'I'm sorry, my wife was supposed to pick him up today, I'm working.'

A shudder of wind rocked him as he gazed out to sea.

'I see. Well, Nathan's mum hasn't shown up,' Hignet said. 'Could you come and get him, please? This sort of thing isn't really acceptable, you know.'

'Of course.' Mark looked at his watch. His deadline was past now anyway. He turned and looked along Porty Prom. He could see the school from here, it wouldn't take long to pack up and hoof it over, ten minutes tops. 'I'll come and get him straight away. I'll be there in five minutes.'

'Very good.' Hignet sounded like a real old battleaxe. 'But Mr Douglas, please don't let this happen again.'

Mark raised his eyebrows but kept his voice level. 'Of course not. Sorry.'

He hung up and began packing his gear away, trying to make sure there was no sand anywhere. Pointless in this wind. Camera into the case, lenses packed away, tripod folded and telescoped.

As he crouched over the camera case, he spotted something. Amongst the scattering of stones and shells on the sand there was a small piece of something opaque. Sea glass. He picked it up and stroked the edge of it with his finger. It was the size of a fifty-pence piece and pear-shaped, light blue-green, one of the more common colours. Not that sea glass was common on this beach. Nathan's collection only ran to five pieces so far, that was in six years of beach walking. Mark turned it in his hand, feeling the smoothness against his skin, the glass tumbled and worn by sand and waves, wearing its experience on its surface for all to see. This would make a nice addition to Nathan's collection, and Mark smiled at the thought. He slipped the glass into his pocket.

He heard a noise from the small crowd at the water's edge and looked up. They were pointing at the sea again. He sighed and turned. Two pilot whales, heads held stationary above the waves, looking inquisitively around. Front-page material. Shit.

He got his phone out and made a call. Straight onto voicemail. Maybe she was in the car on her way to school. Stuck in tramworks traffic, most likely.

'Hey, honey, it's me. Where are you? I just got a call from the school saying you haven't picked up Nathan. I'm working at the beach anyway snapping these whales, so I'll head along the prom to get him, OK? See you back at the house.'

He began the heavy trudge through the sand up to the prom, heading for Towerbank, lugging all his gear like a packhorse.

## 2

Towerbank was a crumbly Victorian block with clanky plumbing, poky windows and not enough rooms. Mark headed for Nathan's classroom, hoping he might still be in there with Miss Kennedy. Better to face her than the old matrons in the office. He passed a large mural on the way to 2B, all about the wonders of the sea. Maybe they'd be painting in dozens of beached pilot whales soon.

He knocked on the door and went in. Miss Kennedy was sitting with a pile of marking, Nathan clicking the mouse at a computer. The forgotten son with the irresponsible parents.

Miss Kennedy looked up. She always made Mark feel so old. Late twenties, black bob, short skirt, cute smile. Jesus. He tried to remember his own primary teachers, pictured a string of ancient, stocky madams with industrial bosoms.

'I'm really sorry,' he said.

Miss Kennedy gave a sparkly laugh. 'No problem.' She turned to Nathan. 'We've just been chilling out, haven't we?'

Nathan kept his eyes on the computer screen and his hand on the mouse.

'Yeah,' he said.

Mark looked at him and felt all the usual parental craziness in a brief rush – pride, worry, love, heartbreak and pain. He went over and tousled the boy's mess of fair hair. Nathan's skin

was pallid against the garish red uniform, his green eyes so much like Lauren's. He was playing a platform game to do with healthy eating, collecting fruit and dodging burgers and sweets.

'Come on, Big Guy, let's get you home,' Mark said. 'Get out Miss Kennedy's hair.'

'Awww,' Nathan said, but he dragged himself from the computer willingly enough.

Mark ushered him towards the door and turned back. 'I'm so sorry, it won't happen again.'

Miss Kennedy waved this away.

'My wife was supposed to pick him up, I don't know where she's got to.'

'It's fine.'

Outside the door, Mark helped Nathan on with his coat, zipping it up for him to save time. 'It's blowing a gale out there.'

'Where's Mummy?' Nathan said.

'Good question.'

Mark got out his phone and called again. Voicemail. He didn't leave a message.

'Daddy?'

Mark held the school door open and they were hit by a wall of wind and noise.

'What is it, Big Guy?'

'Can I play on my DS when we get home?'

Mark braced himself for heading into the storm.

'Sure.'

They couldn't speak on the walk home, the wind whipping words away from their mouths when they tried. Nathan was having trouble even walking into the strongest gusts. This was ridiculous.

Mark looked at the sea. The whales were closer to the shore than before, bad news for them. The crowd had partly dispersed, no doubt fed up with the conditions out there.

Mark tapped Nathan on the shoulder and pointed out the whales. Nathan nodded and smiled. The whales were big news at school with the kids.

Mark and Nathan struggled round the bandstand and up Marlborough Street, past the detached houses to the flats at the top. Number 12, red door. Mark looked for Lauren's car, but it wasn't there. He got his keys out and opened the door. The silence in the stairwell was shocking after the roar of the wind.