

Excerpt from "The Narwhal," originally published in my collection

*Sooner or Later Everything Falls Into the Sea* (Small Beer Press, 2019)

One week after she was hired for what had to be her best Oddjobz gig yet, a whale arrived at Lynette's door.

So many things could go wrong answering Oddjobz ads. Lynette had taken enough sketchy jobs that she'd learned how to protect herself. She arranged to meet Dahlia at a crowded hipster coffee shop, with her best friend, Paula, hiding in plain sight in case the stranger turned out unbearably creepy. Paula enjoyed the subterfuge, positioning herself spy-thriller style behind the Baltimore Sun, front page headline blaring STUPENDOUS SUPERS SAVE NEW YORK AGAIN. She'd bought an actual print newspaper just for the purpose.

Dahlia had not set off any alarm bells. She arrived looking friendly and sad, fitting for the circumstances, a fiftyish white woman with an air of freelance life coach/yoga instructor. She had laid out her plan to drive her recently deceased mother's car to her home in Sacramento, talking up the route highlights, which were the main selling points for Lynette, and the eight days they'd have to make the drive. She'd pay for a hotel room for Lynette every night. When Lynette accepted the gig, Dahlia bought the one-way air ticket from Sacramento back to Baltimore on the spot, to prove she was serious.

A week later, at 9 AM sharp, Dahlia texted from the street:

*Outside*

*Not leaving car*

*Surrounded by children*

*Time to go*

Lynette opened her front door to a double-parked whale. The neighborhood kids had been drawn across the street from the playground, but they weren't surrounding it so much as clumping a few feet in front, staring. Who wouldn't stare? She took a moment herself.

The whale's blue-silver body looked like fiberglass. It seemed to have been built on a station wagon's chassis, the tail arcing up off the wide back end. The only art cars she'd seen, at festivals and fairs, had looked like they were happier standing still than moving; this one looked ready to dive into the road. One painted eye gazed back at her beatifically from above the passenger window.

"You riding in that, Miss Lynette?" asked Case, her neighbor's oldest, inching closer. He wore a T-shirt emblazoned with a photo of Astounding Man's perfect face, and his slogan, "Another day, another city saved."

"I guess I am," she said, trying to sound casual, then abandoning that idea. "All the way across the country."

The kids looked suitably impressed.

The interior resembled a station wagon interior; she'd half been expecting a ribcage. She tossed her bags into the back seat beside Dahlia's bags and boxes, then slid into the front passenger seat. The dashboard had the usual buttons and dials and levers you'd expect someone's mother's station wagon to have, and then a whole bunch of mystery buttons.

"If you don't know what it is, don't touch it," Dahlia said. "I have no clue what any of these do."

Lynette was about to protest that she wasn't going to touch anything, but then decided not to start a long drive on the defensive. "I've always liked whales," she said instead. "You didn't say the car was a whale. This is awesome."

"We should get moving. We've got a tight schedule to keep if I'm going to be back at work on Tuesday."

Lynette didn't know how to respond to that either, so she stayed silent as Dahlia pulled away from the curb. The kids followed. Their wonder reminded Lynette of when the circus used to parade their animals down Lombard from the arena to the train yards on their way out of Baltimore. She and her friends would be playing on the stoop and suddenly an elephant would come into view. It had always been unexpected and magical. The circus didn't come anymore.

Like her, none of these kids had ever been anywhere. The farthest she'd ever travelled was to DC, on one class trip to the Capitol. On that trip, she'd bought a commemorative coin which she still kept in her pocket: a lucky charm and a promise to herself that she'd someday be the kind of person who collected spoons or coins or magnets to show all the great places she'd been.

People in movies were always heading out on epic road trips, but they seemed to have more money and time than she did, not to mention cars. This whole trip, with its benefactor, its employment factor, was as much of a miracle as a whale appearing at her door or an elephant walking west on Lombard.

The junkie teenagers panhandling on the corner of MLK missed a whole light cycle watching them idle at the red. As the whale merged onto the highway, other cars honked and

waved. A strange celebrity; it would get old if cars honked at them for three thousand miles, but for a little while it would be fun.

“Does this always happen?” she asked.

Dahlia looked over, giving her full attention to Lynette, even as the whale plunged forward. “No clue. This is the first time I’ve ever driven this thing.”

“Oh! You said it was your mother’s. I figured you grew up with it.”

Dahlia laughed. “It’s a funny picture, isn’t it? My mother running her errands in this? I don’t know if I would’ve been proud or mortified.”

*Watch the road, please,* Lynette didn’t say.

“As far as I knew, she drove a maroon Camry, but she left that to charity. This is the one thing she left me in her will. She said ‘I don’t have money and you don’t need money, so I thought I’d give you the only thing I ever made that mattered.’ I figured I’d take it home with me and then figure out why she gave it to me and what to do with it. I had to trek halfway to Delaware to find the garage where she kept it, too. It might be our old family station wagon underneath but I’m not sure.”

Dahlia returned her attention to the road, and Lynette made a mental note not to ask any more questions unless they reached a straightaway. She busied herself downloading an app that showed all the tourist highlights along the route, setting up notifications for everything she hoped to see.

Ten miles before they reached the spot where her app told her the Appalachian Trail footbridge crossed over the highway, Lynette asked Dahlia if they could pull over to take a picture with the marker.

"It's just a sign." Dahlia picked a hair off her sweater, lowered her window a few inches, and flicked it out.

"But a cool sign! I've always wanted to hike the Appalachian Trail," Lynette said. "People walk it, and it's almost as far as we're going to be driving, and even the drive takes a week. I'd love to document that I made it this far. Twenty seconds. That's all."

Dahlia again shifted her entire body around in the driver's seat to address Lynette. "I'd really rather not stop this early since I don't want to drive this car after dark. I have no idea how well it's been maintained, and I don't feel like getting stranded. Let's just get to Ohio today then we can talk about places to stop."

I-70 banked and climbed, and the car juddered as two wheels met the shoulder. Lynette, watching the road from the passenger seat while the driver watched her, gave up.

"Sorry. Never mind." She tried to take a picture with her phone as they passed, but it came out blurry.

In that moment, Lynette started thinking of Dahlia as "Boss" instead of her name, to remind herself that this woman was paying her to help with the drive, not sightsee. Lynette didn't have a vote. They weren't friends. Maybe Dahlia'd be less tense once they were farther along.

But, no. Even when Lynette drove, the Boss's schedule ruled. She knew exactly where and when she wanted to stop for meals and sleep. She left a little leeway for bathrooms, but not much. Over the next two days, they zoomed past Fallingwater, a giant coffee pot, the John & Annie Glenn house, and dozens of assorted parks and museums. Lynette spotted Vandalia's

water tower from the highway, but not the Kaskaskia Dragon somewhere below it, waiting for her to drop a coin in the slot and make it breathe fire.

On the first night, at a roadside motel in Ohio, eating takeout burger and fries on her bed, Lynette had still held out a little hope. She'd taken tourist brochures from the lobby and spread them in front of her, mapping them on her phone as she ate. Nothing within walking distance. The Boss would never let her use the car to go sightseeing, and no place would be open by nightfall in any case.

Anything Lynette wanted to see, she had to see through the car window. Maybe it had been her own fault for assuming "see the country" meant "stop along the way through the country" and not to watch it all stream by the windows. Maybe it was her fault for not questioning why someone wouldn't have a friend willing to make the journey with her. She knew all the things she'd clarify if she were ever offered this opportunity again.

"There's got to be something you want to stop for," Lynette said as they passed signs for the Model T Museum. She was behind the wheel, but she knew better than to pull over. "A waterfall. A tourist trap. The Grand Canyon."

"A big hole in the ground."

"Something else, then?"

"It's not a tourist thing."

"What, then?" This was the first time Dahlia had mentioned interest in anything at all. Lynette tried not to get her hopes again.