

Arlene sat alone at the metal table on the outside upper deck of the ferry, drinking vodka from a little bottle with a hand sanitizer label.

Her legs were shaking from the cold and two hours sitting in the car with Frank waiting for some space to have a drink.

Arlene loved the calafacent sensation of vodka in her throat and esophagus. She called it “lava trickling back in the volcano” to like-minded friends, but hated the judgment or sadness most others showed when she did, almost as much.

Frank was quiet for the most part, stoic even, which was good for Arlene, for the most part. He knew when she wanted to go up on the deck and why she wanted to but went regardless.

Frank sat silently with her long enough to seem like he cared, before he went down to the car deck to check on their dog. Arlene almost wished that he didn’t know what he knew.

The ferry was passing a spot where they often saw whales and Arlene shivered, unsure if it was from anticipation or the cold or two hours in the car with Frank.

She finished off the little bottle and was pulling another from her purse when a young woman with a child sat down at an adjacent table.

Suddenly, the woman pointed to the spot Arlene had been watching.

“Whales, baby! Look, look, right there!”.

The child squealed with unbridled joy - as only children can - pointing at the huge creatures breaching the surface like secrets being unearthed.

He turned to Arlene with eyes full of love and wonder, pointing at the whales and warbling in a language Arlene had long forgotten.

“He wants you to see them too”, the mother said with a proud smile. “You like to share everything, don’t you baby?”.

Arlene felt herself wanting to jump in the water and swim with the whales; perhaps prompt the child to squeal with unbridled joy when he saw her rising like truth from the frigid water.

She smiled back at the boy and his mother. “They’re beautiful, just like your son. Are you going home or just visiting?”.

The woman said they were headed to Saltspring Island to visit her parents for Thanksgiving. “They haven’t met him yet. What about you?”.

Arlene nodded towards an island in the near distance. “Galliano”.

The woman asked if she had family there. She tousled the boy’s hair and said, “you look like a mother too”, and smiled more warmly than vodka.

Arlene looked at the little boy, glowing with joy and wonder and remembered her own little boy’s eyes when he first saw the whales.

Eyes with the same love, wanting to share every joyful moment with her. Eyes that now only looked at her with sadness or judgment, or worse, couldn’t look at her at all.

The whales were long out of sight now, much as Arlene felt she had somehow become. Someone who’d once made a little boy glow with love, now only a distant memory.

“I am”, she said. “He’s just like your boy, but much older”.

She looked out on the water where the whales had been and thought again about what it felt like to make a child's heart fill with wonder.

Arlene put the little bottle back in her purse, stood up and smiled. "I'm Arlene", she said, "may I join you?".