

# Sounding

By Elizabeth Bear

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Cully sees the fin whale as he's leaving Nantucket Harbor. A mother with calf; seventy-foot whale, and a forty-foot boat. She's gray as Wellington rubber, lined with long parallel lines. She rolls on her side to show him an eye big as his hand, dark and sweet. Dreaming.

Looking back at him. Her breath mists his face like a benediction.

"Put in a word for us, would you?" Cully says. "I'll pay you back. I'll pay for it somehow." He watches her a minute before turning away. The sun's half over the eastern horizon, gold ripples flat on green water, rolling along the rim of the world like a great golden wheel. The Brant Point light's gone dark with morning.

It's the quiet before the work. Morgan is drinking coffee in the galley. There's nothing between them and the Atlantic but an arrow-straight line.

Cully doesn't tell Morgan about the whales.

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Pen owns the *Sweet Katrina*—most of the *Sweet Katrina*—and stays on shore. Minority business owner, fifty-one percent. The government gives them a little boost, because of that, as if *Pen Cullen* was somehow different from *Allan Cullen*. As if she were somehow separate, not the same, flesh of one flesh. More worthy, somehow, than her husband.

Allan thinks she is. Fifteen years, three children, hard times, and hurricanes. Pen keeps her own counsel about who the worthy one is. She works nights at Nantucket Cottage Hospital. That gives them another little boost. Just enough, maybe, to stay afloat. So far.

They'll have to sell the house come winter, if the catch doesn't improve. Sell the house, or sell the boat.

There's really no option.

Pen shades her eyes with one hand, her gardening glove leaving a smudge over her eyebrows, and waves with her shears in the other. The children don't notice. They're pushing and giggling up the steps of a fat yellow schoolbus. The bus doors close; the bus wheels turn. She watches them out of sight, the way she never watches Allan anymore. She knows that if it's in his power, he is always coming home. Besides, there's no widow's walk on the little Cape Cod style cottage, and it wouldn't matter anyway.

It's a short sandy path down to the narrow, rocky beach, through bramble rose and salt scrub. She's never away from the sound of the sea.

Cully's at the wheel, and the sun is high. Salt air scours his face; he's grateful for the shade of the wheelhouse. Morgan is checking the lines, checking the gear, making ready. Cully will go out and help him in a minute, as soon as he gets his hat.

Everything on a boat is oil and paint and elbow grease and constant maintenance. The sea eats ships; it's an acid, an etchant. They sail through it, and it takes them apart, molecule by molecule.

They're cruising through the Sound, headed for deeper waters, cleaner waters, where the big fish swim.

Time was, a man could fish the Sound, could fish the Bay, hell. Time was a man could take all he needed in Wellfleet Harbor. Time was a man could make a living—even make a fortune—on the sea.

Time was, Nantucket was a whaling island, and the fin whale cruising beside them—vanishing, returning, playing with the wake of a boat half her size—would have been rightful prey.

Times are not what they were. Stripers are closed and the cod you bring in are half the size they should be, babies too young to breed. It wasn't like this fifty years ago; Cully knows his father's stories of sixteen, twenty cod to a hundred hooks. Even twenty years ago it was better than this.

He'll have no luck in the shoals of the Sound. He knows it in his bones, like he knows the rise and fall of the sea, the sound of Pen's breathing in the dark, the smell of his children's hair. He's going for bluefish; the quota's still wide open. Bluefish. Or maybe bluefin tuna. If he can find them.

He'll go as far as he has to, to find them.

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Pen grooms the early-autumn roses, cleans the house, naps for a few hours before the children come home. Allan's mother Cindy lives with them. She comes home from work at five and distracts the kids while Pen cooks dinner and gets things ready.

Pen doesn't know what they'll do when they have to sell the house. Rent something, maybe. They could leave the island, sell the boat. Save the lives of a few gulls, the ones who try to steal the bait and get caught on the hooks when the long lines go down.

She doesn't want to move the kids to Boston, to Fall River. She wants the path with the damasked roses, the sharp clean tang of the ocean air. She wants the sea for a back yard.

She doesn't want to watch Allan grow old in a factory. And then there's the kids, the money for college—only six years off for Allan Junior, only ten years off for John, and Mike in the middle. The *Sweet Katrina's* every breath of a future they've got.

She naps again, while Cindy goes over bills and fishing permits on the corner of the dining room table, and a little before eleven she leaves for work. The old Volvo station wagon is a masterwork of rust and clashing gears, as much a victim of the sea as everything else on Nantucket, but the wheels still crunch gravel, the old thing still goes. She doesn't think about the insurance on the boat, the life insurance Allan insists they keep paid up, the money for diesel, the money for lines. She wishes she'd stayed in school, got her nursing degree.

She could support her family, then.

Cully sleeps more soundly on the sea. The *Sweet Katrina* rocks him, the way Pen used to, when Pen didn't have to work nights. It's almost like not sleeping alone.

Morgan wakes him a little before sun-up, a tap on the door. There's burned coffee. Morgan can't cook, not even a little.

"How's it looking?" Cully asks. He holds the coffee under his nose and thinks about round hooks and half-round hooks and synthetic bait. He thinks about pulleys and propellers and watching things spin. Maybe he can turn the *Sweet Katrina* into a sport fishing boat, cater to the summer people. Maybe stars will grow on rosebushes, too.

The sky's silver off east; zodiacal light. Nothing between here and Europe but a hell of a lot of water, the competition—factory trawlers, he means—and all those sly, mysterious fish. And maybe a few dozen

nuclear submarines. Like the fish, though, and the independent boats, there's fewer of them than there used to be.

"Looks clear," Morgan says, with a shrug. September weather. Love it while you've got it. He's cleaning the rifle Cully keeps for sharks, or maybe pirates. Sometimes they *do* get sharks on the lines; maybe even the sharks are going hungry these days. He's never gotten a pirate. "Think we'll make our money back this trip?"

"Who the hell knows?" He hasn't seen a summer this bad since they closed George's Bank. Get a swordfish boycott, tuna boycott, women not supposed to eat fish because the mercury poisons their babies. Get people planning offshore windmill farms in the shoals, or dredging the sand for beach replenishment; summer people's McMansions are no good without a broad white-sand beach. Get fisheries closed to let the stock regenerate; they never needed closing before the factory fleets.

But there's always the chance, the one good trip that pays for three bad ones. He'll take hagfish if it's what he can get, it sells just fine to Korea.

But bluefin's worth its weight in ambergris.

The fin whale shows him her flukes, dead ahead, about a half a mile. He wonders if she's following or she's leading him, or they just happen to be going the same way. "All the way," he mutters. "As far as it takes."

Cully drinks his burned coffee as the sun comes up. He's got a good feeling in his bones.

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Pen comes home in time to get breakfast on the table and see her kids off again. Mike's sprained his thumb or something, he says gym class but Pen knows it was rough-housing. Boys will be boys. She pulls her gloves on over long fingers and picks up her shears. If Allan were home, he'd stop her before she got the second glove on, stop her and kiss her fingers and say, "At least one of us has soft hands."

Pen's roses grow in profusion around the little gray house. There's all sorts of things that won't grow on Nantucket; they don't like the sun and the sand and the harsh, salt air. They don't like the storms.

Roses grow fine, and the marigolds she plants in drifts around their bases to keep away the bugs. Gold and burgundy and brown, like a clown's button pompoms. She turns the dirt over and over with her trowel, working in the fertilizer—fish meal and bone—working the sand into the loam.

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Moonlight and they're getting in some fish, the winches spinning as they take up line. Dogfish, maybe five per hundred hooks, not bad but not enough. Cully wants bluefin. Bluefin pay for diesel. They switch bait and go looking.

They've picked up a pod of minke whales somewhere, and that fin whale's still playing off the starboard bow. Her calf can catch some pretty good air, comes down hard, *wham*, belly-flop. Cully thinks maybe there's a humpback out there too; he keeps catching glimpses of a blow in the moonlight, and it's not where the fin whales seem to be. He can't remember the last time he saw this many whales on one trip. Maybe he could charter whale-watches, make a living that way.

But he'd need a bigger boat.

The deck's all over slime, mica-flecked, scales sparking like sun on the ocean. Sunrise catches them still looking; they haven't broken even yet. There's no land in sight, and there's no goddamned tuna anywhere.

Maybe south of the Vineyard there'll be something. He thinks about heading that way, and shrugs. The

whale's still headed east, and he's got a mind to follow her, trailing opportunistic gulls like a screaming banner. If he's gonna go broke, he might as well go broke chasing a sleek gray shadow.

The minke whales have lit out for wetter pastures, but the fin whale's still sticking with the boat—within a mile or two, anyway—when the first glittering back breaks the water off to port. Bluefin churn out of the sea on perfect arcs, circles marked with a compasses. It's a school like Cully's never seen. He's heard legends, but this is the real deal—three-hundred-pound fish, and there are thousands of them. It's the most amazing thing ever, a sea alive with bluefin fifty miles from anywhere they *should* be, and he and Morgan stare at each other for a precious, unbelieving thirty seconds before they run out the lines, the bird-scare streamers snake-writhing as they uncoil into the water.

The fish in the refrigerated hold gleam like bars of silver. The whales sound, showing Cully their flukes side by side like a sentimental sculpture before slipping beneath the chop.

Cully can feel it like hitting a sandbar when the line snags. The *Sweet Katrina* lurches, skipping under his feet, and there's an unholy groan and a thin stream of white smoke as a big winch jams. Cully grabs the rail, and Morgan grabs Cully, and neither one of them quite goes off the boat, though it's a near thing and a couple of bruises.

"Shit," Morgan says, and leaps for the winch. The *Sweet Katrina*'s listing, pulling, dragging herself around. Half a second and the other line's going to get pulled into the jammed one. Cully scrambles for the wheelhouse, swings down the steps, hands slipping on the railings, slaps at the cutoff.

Morgan curses. There's a four-foot bluefin flopping under Morgan's feet. Morgan's standing on the damned fish to get to the winch.

He's not going to be fast enough. Cully can hear the tick of stressed fibers parting, nylon line *click click clicking* into oblivion one strand at a time. Cully charges from the wheelhouse, tackles his first mate, gets half a grip on him and swings him around, nails imprinting Morgan's wrist, and lands them both sprawling to the deck as the line fails—all for one, and one for all—snapped end like a scourge, a flail that could blind a man or flense him, flesh from bone.

A hundred thousand dollars in tuna and equipment goes gliding down into the Atlantic, wasted work and wasted death. Morgan sits up, still cursing. "What did we snag, a submarine?"

"Fuck," Cully answers. "And this was turning out to be such a nice day."

The whales rise beside the boat and wait there, breathing. Morgan struggles to his feet, wiping his hands on his coverall. All it does is spread the slime around. "Fucking whale," Morgan says. He stomps toward the wheelhouse, yanks open a locker, and pulls the rifle out. "Fucking thing could have killed us."

"Morgan," Cully says, "what the hell do you think you're doing?"

Pen does the grocery shopping on the way home from work, on Saturday. She loads up the back of the Volvo and notices the right rear tire is going flat. The gas station attendant finds a screw in it; he fixes it fast and charges her eight dollars, and she hurries home, worried that the milk is going bad. Cindy is fixing breakfast. The kids are watching cartoons on videotape and arguing over *Shrek* and *Finding Nemo*. Pen remembers when the cartoons were broadcast, and you watched whatever was on.

She shrugs and puts the milk away; Cindy takes it right back out of the little fridge and grins at her, pouring a dollop into a bowl of scrambled eggs. "This smells a little off," she says.

"Bad?"

"No, just off."

Pen shrugs. "It got left in the car for a bit. We'll just drink it fast."

Cindy points at the coffee pot. Pen fixes herself a cup and takes it outside to drink on the porch swing, smelling the sea air, looking at the roses. The leaves are turning. Allan should be home any day.

*Wherever you go, I will follow.*

Winter will be coming soon.

Morgan raises the rifle and points it at the fin whale. "It won't but sting her a little—"

Cully steps between, and puts his hand on the barrel of the gun. "Morgan," he says, so calmly, "would you look at yourself?"

Morgan pauses, gulls whirling behind him. Cully takes a deep breath; the whole world smells like rotting fish. And slowly, Morgan lowers the gun. "Fuck," he says. "I guess she didn't mean anything by it."

"I'm not sure it was the whale," Cully says.

"What the hell else could it have been?"

Cully shrugs and points over the railing. Another whale breaches in the distance—one, two, a pod of humpbacks. They're everywhere, now that Cully's looking for them. Gray whales slipping along the surface not so different from dappled wave-tops themselves. The great pleased grin of a blue whale as it lifts its head from the ocean, blowing plumes of vapor into the perfect sky. Dolphins leaping among the tuna, a softer shade of steel. "You see any hook-marks on her hide? Besides, it's a goddamned endangered species. Do *you* wanna pay the fine?"

"They can take it out of the tuna she ate," Morgan says, folding his arms over the rail, and Cully doesn't point out that fin whales don't eat tuna. "Besides, you want to talk about a goddamned endangered species? What the hell are we?"

Cully opens his mouth to answer. The tuna turn like steel wheels in the sunlight, iterations from hull to horizon. The hold is two-thirds full, the gleaming fish packed in like bullion. The trip is paid for, the diesel is bought.

If every trip could be like this—

He looks at the whale, who has rolled on her side again, her baby nosing along her belly, looking for the teat. She gazes at him with that wide, alert eye, her flipper upraised, gleaming wet in the sun. She cups it like a woman cupping a hand. She beckons.

She's listening.

"I reckon you're right," Cully says, and boosts himself over the rail. He crouches down, one foot in front of the other, dangling off the side as if trying to scoop something out of the water. The whale rolls, and her flipper brushes Cully's fingers. Cully laughs in wonder and cranes his head to look at Morgan, silhouetted by the sun. "Where do you think they go?" he asks.

"They?"

"When they go extinct. Or nearly so." He gestures at the whale, at the tuna, at himself.

"What, when they die?"

"Do they?" Cully asks. He pulls his hand back in, but stays squatting on the wrong side of the rail. "What do you think? Maybe they get to go home."

There's the hold full of tuna. There's Pen and the kids, and there's this place he and Morgan found, where there's tuna for the taking. Pen owns the boat. Most of the boat. And then there's the insurance money, and then there's those fish in the hold, and all the ones out there, where a factory fleet won't ever find them. The factory boats just aren't a dying breed.

The whale rolls again, water beading, streaming off her hide. She looks at him. Waiting. *Where do they go?*

"Hey Morgan, you think you can find this place again?"

"We charted it, didn't we?"

"Yeah," Cully says. He stands, hand on the rail for balance. He promised he would pay, and he'll never find his way back here if he doesn't settle his debt. "I guess we did. I guess you'll find it no problem. Christ, it's beautiful here."

He wants to pull off his wife's glove, and kiss her long brown hand. He wants to smell the roses on her skin, the salt sea in her hair. More than anything, he wants to go home.

The whale squirms, a long slick convulsion, and rights herself. She glides away from the *Sweet Katrina*, her breath and her baby's breath trailing behind them. She's done waiting for him to figure it out.

There's fish here for the taking, and Morgan knows how to find them, and Pen will keep him on. There'll be money for the boys for college, money for Pen and Cindy to retire on. They won't have to leave the island. They'll sell the boat to Morgan, eventually, and Cully's sons won't be fishers. They'll get city jobs. He won't see it, but they'll grow up fine, they'll be okay. On land.

He weighs it in his hand and hates it, while the whales turn like wheels in the ocean. *On land.*

"Cully—" Morgan says.

The whales are sounding. They show their flukes, monuments against a perfect sky. They're diving now.

Cully lets go of the rail. Paid in full. He goes under.

He goes on.

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