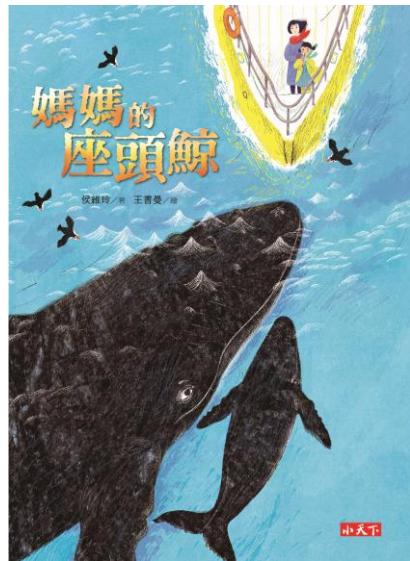


MOTHER'S HUMPBACK WHALE

媽媽的座頭鯨

This book presents three heart-warming stories of youth: "The Stained-Glass Ocean," "Mother's Humpback Whale," and "19 Letters from Flushing." The narrative, which is masterfully paced for both children and young adults, depicts environments like New York City and the Maine coast in breathtaking detail, just as the illustrations do with graceful lines and vivid color. Told from a child's perspective, these stories celebrate the warmth and undying strength of family love, even as they wade into the deeper, colder waters of sickness and loss.

Mother's Humpback Whale is the kind of book a child can read once and remember for the rest of her life.



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MOTHER'S HUMPBACK WHALE

Text by Elaine Hou, illustrated by Amann Wang. Translated by Howard Lu.

It was early June, and spring had just ended in New England.
Mian came with her mother and father
all the way from Taiwan to this coastal town
in Maine, in search of the humpback whale
they saw there thirteen years ago...

Day 1

"I want to see that humpback whale again." Mian's mother made this wish as the first rains of spring were falling. The doctor had given her only one more year to live. This was the second of her final wishes.

By the last day of May, the summer breezes had begun to blow in from every coast of Taiwan Island, and people in Taipei were wearing light, short-sleeved clothes. Before Mian had a chance to breathe that hot and humid air, she and her parents had arrived in Acadia National Park on the coast of Maine.

Father had packed the inner and outer pockets of their luggage with many days' worth of medicines, mostly painkillers prescribed by the doctor to help Mother enjoy the trip.

Acadia National Park is located in Mount Desert Island. The granite peninsula resembles a strange rock skull stretching from northern coastal Maine into the azure Atlantic Ocean. Rocky cliffs, evergreen forests, sand and surf surround the park in concentric rings. Day and night, the sounds of wind, waves, and birds chirping fill every corner of the island.

Mian's family had made reservation at the Shore Path Cottage in Bar Harbor. It was a two-story wooden house with a blue roof and white walls. The owners were a middle-aged couple. Their children had reached adulthood and left home, so they converted their house into a small hotel, hosting tourists who'd come to enjoy Acadia.

The hostess ushered them out of the reception room, through a small porch, past a white screen door, and eventually up a narrow but clean wooden staircase. At the end of the stairs was the white wooden door to their suite: a baby blue master bedroom, a blue-and-white-striped bathroom, a pink single room, and a corridor carpeted in baby blue. Beside the hallway window were a few chairs and a table, on which a bunch of blooming wildflowers were arranged in a glass vase. Mian couldn't help being reminded of the green farmhouse in *Anne of Green Gables*.

After more than ten hours of flying, Mother looked weary. The golden sunlight reflecting off Dad's face made her cheeks look even paler.

Mian's mother walked quietly into the blue master bedroom. Father, trying to stay cheerful, smiled at Mian: "Let's get some rest, it's past midnight in Taiwan now, you know."

Mian lay on the blue floral-patterned linens of her bed in the pink room, feeling heavy and dizzy. She felt as if she was floating on the sea far, far away, not knowing where she was, nor in which

direction she was drifting. As the thought of Mother's pallid face arose in her mind, a tear snuck out of the corner of her eye...

"Mian, Mian." Father was sitting at her bedside, shaking her gently. She rubbed her eyes and sprang out of bed. There was Mother, standing on the porch in the sun, and smiling. She pointed out the window and made a jogging gesture.

Mian couldn't help but laugh. For as long as she could remember, that jogging movement had been their own little signal: it's lovely outside, let's go for a walk!

Mother, Father, and Mian strolled around under the Maine summer sun, holding hands, patting one another on the shoulder, laughing, or chatting about a passerby or a house or a cat they just saw. They acted just like any other family out on a walk.

The difference lay within them: Mian was wishing she could lock the memories of every moment the family were together for every second of every day, with her eyes, and her ears, and her heart. Father, who appeared to be the most cheerful was turning over old memories in the depths of his heart – that spring fifteen years ago, that library with the maroon carpet where he first saw Mian's mother, as rain spattered the window panes...

Walking down the streets of Bar Harbor, fully immersed in its sun and air, even the world's unhappiest people can forget their worries. Even the shadows on the ground looked brightly blue and purple instead of black and dark gray. Mother seemed pleasantly surprised and excited; she walked briskly and pointed her finger here and there. Mother's laughter cheered Mian and Father considerably; it meant they could enjoy the place like tourists, not as professional nurses.

Main Street was, appropriately, the busiest avenue in town, its sides lined with cafés and restaurants, grocery stores, craft shops, and galleries. The sunny outdoor seats of the cafés were full of customers chatting and often gesticulating energetically. The sidewalks were full of pedestrians in sunglasses, looking like a flying swarm of inky black butterflies, their faces turned upward to let the Bar Harbor sun glow on their happy smiles.

At dusk, Mian, Mother, and Father strolled along Main Street to the harbor, where the whale watching boat had just returned from its last cruise; the disembarking tourists inundated the dim and dusky harbor like tidewater.

Buildings near the harbor were mostly unremarkable gray cement houses. Yet the aroma of freshly caught and cooked lobsters, delicious and ready to serve, permeated the air.

Sitting inside Pier Restaurant, which was built out over the water, Mian and her parents rolled creamy lobster pasta around silver forks, and started eating. It was so warm and tasty that it immediately expelled the chill of summer evenings in the North.

By candlelight, Mian imagined Mother and Father when they were just married thirteen years ago. Everyone around them had believed they would live happily ever after, like a fairy-tale prince and princess. Mian herself had thought she would grow up to see her parents become a happy old couple...

As the night deepened, the sea breeze also turned chillier. After dinner, Dad urged everyone to get back to the hotel. Perhaps it was the jet lag that made Mian's eyelids droop; she fell asleep the moment she crawled beneath her blue floral blanket.

Waking unexpectedly in the middle of the night, Mian found herself surrounded in a cream orange luster, the pink walls tinted with yellow by the light on the bedside cabinet. Since her arrival, Mian had not yet had a chance to look carefully around this room. Now she noticed the walls were hung with several photographs, each one featuring the same blonde little girl. Looking at them one by one, Mian found that the little girl grew older, from a baby sucking on a rubber bottle, to a toddler holding a puppy, then to a girl making funny faces, and dancing on the lawn. Could she be the hotel owner's daughter?

Perhaps this had been her room before she left home?

Mian heaved a sigh and turned over. She thought to herself, "The hostess here is a happy woman. She was healthy enough to see her children grow up, and to give her blessing when they left home as adults. The girl in the photos is blessed too; she could always feel safe in the knowledge that her mother was always thinking of her, always there for her, waiting for her to come home."

Day 2

Mian awoke to the sound of a shower going in the bathroom. Mother and Father were up.

Father's behavior while on vacation was very different from the usual. Normally, he would constantly push her to be ready quickly. But today Mian could take all the time she wanted to brush her teeth, take a shower, and pick out the clothes and socks she wanted to wear for the day. As Mian stepped out of her bedroom, Father even smiled at her, showing no sign of impatience.

Mother had already gone downstairs to take in fresh air on the porch.

On the flower terrace by the porch, next to a scattering of starfish and shells, the kind hostess had left a pot of hot coffee, a stack of paper cups, sugar packets, a box of milk, and a handful of stirring rods. Mian was elated; she shoved the white screen door open and ran out. Mother had just brewed a fragrant cup of coffee for Father, which he took with a smile and knowing nod to his wife.

Mian had no idea that Mother had had to rely on painkillers and the sound of Father's voice to fall asleep the night before.

After breakfast in a restaurant on Main Street, the family bought three tickets for a twelve-thirty whale watching cruise at a blue ticket kiosk. Since there still had hours to spare, Mother proposed that they take a stroll on the beach boardwalk.

They walked along a trail that passed Shore Path Cottage and would eventually end at the beach, where benches anchored in the sand invited anyone all comers to relax and stare out at the ocean.

The trail was narrow and gravel-lined, winding down the coastline like a long snake. Rows of dwarf hedges grew alongside it; flowers and foliage protruded from its crevices.

Mother asked Mian to take a deep breath. How comfortable the breeze was here, with the air so clean and fresh, mingled with the odors of the sea, the flowers, and the leaves.

Father took three exaggerated breaths. "Air this nice ought to be sealed up in cans!" Mother laughed out loud; Mian nodded. Yet she also felt sad: if only Mother's good health could be sealed up too...

They never made it to the trail's end; Mother seemed to be breathing too hard. Father insisted they go back, but Mother didn't want to waste time resting in the hotel. So they chose to sit on a bench, sometimes chatting cheerfully, other times staring quietly at the sea, or closing their eyes to enjoy the sun.

Father knew Mother wasn't feeling well, so he made up an excuse to run to Main Street. He said he was going to buy some fresh-squeezed juice; instead, he went back to the ticket kiosk to change the date and time on the tickets. He wouldn't allow Mother to go to sea in her current condition.

Mother stared quietly at the changed tickets.

"You need to talk to me beforehand next time. Don't make decisions for me." Mother's voice was soft but firm.

After some discussion, the family decided to drive the rental car around Acadia, and find a good spot to picnic.

In a grocery store nearby, they bought mineral water, fruit juice, bread, cheesecake, canned ham,

apples and bananas, as well as a wicker basket and a big square of red gingham cloth from a craft shop to hold the food. Then they set off for Acadia's Park Loop Road.

The Park Loop Road was dotted with all kinds of attractions, like Otter Cliff, which has an extensive ocean view; Thunder Hole, which turns the sound of the sea waves into the rumble of thunder; and Sand Beach, whose surf is always icy cold. At times Father would pull over so they could walk around. They took photos, and enjoyed the fragrance of the wildflowers.

Near Otter Cliff, they found a broad, rocky embankment with a flat boulder that served perfectly as both a sun bed and table. Father laid out the gingham cloth, placing stones at its four corners. Mother took out the food and drinks from the wicker basket and arranged them in a scene that could have been a painted still-life. Mian noticed seabirds circling above them, their gazes fixed on the bread.

"Time goes by so fast," said Father. "Your mother and I were here riding bikes thirteen years ago." Taking a bite of his apple, Father continued: "That summer, Mother and I went on the whale-watch in shorts and T-shirts. The tides were high, and the wind was so cold, we thought we'd freeze to death. Not to mention the seasickness. We had to wrap ourselves up in a blanket we'd brought on board. We crouched in the cabin seats shivering. Goodness, that was miserable; even with the dizziness and nausea, I wanted to swim back to shore!"

Mother laughed out loud, covering her face with one hand. Mian thought: "If it's so miserable, should we not go? We might as well return the tickets."

"Nevertheless," said Mother, her face red with mirth, "as soon as we saw the whale blow, then jump out of the water and dive again, we forgot our seasickness at once. Everyone in the cabin was running around in whatever direction the captain pointed, looking for the whales. It was fun, but I felt so dizzy I had to go sit down and lean on the railing. 'It's too crowded anyway,' I told myself: 'forget it, the whales are too far away to see anyway.'

"And then, dear Lord, one humpback whale swam towards me. Everyone else was busy watching another one on the other side, and even the captain didn't see this one coming.

"It was my first time being that close to a humpback whale. Her body was very long, when she dove she swam like a dragon." Mother continued, "Well, I never got to see her eyes, but I noticed a spot on her fluke the shape of a white heart! The books say every humpback whale has a unique white marking on the underside of its fluke, like a fingerprint, or an ID.

"It came closer and closer to our boat. When the captain found out, he quickly started the engine and steamed away. We can never predict what a whale will do, and a mean-tempered whale might actually hit the boat.

"But I believe she was a good humpback, because she had a heart shape on her tail. From then on, thinking of her made me happy. So I've got to see her again no matter what. It's been thirteen years. I wonder if she's still alive..."

Mother gazed toward the sea, and silence fell on the embankment, with only the sounds of the waves splashing and the birds fluttering. When they returned to Shore Path Cottage, Mother went back to her room to gather her strength for the next day's whale watch, while Father took Mian to Main Street and showed her around Bar Harbor.

Near a restaurant by the waterfront was a lovely store called "Song of the Sea," which sold all kinds of hand-made musical instruments, such as harps, whistles, flutes, xylophones, guitars, along with others Mian didn't recognize.

Mian had always gotten high marks on the flute in music class, and she picked out a wooden flute. It was the first time she'd seen such a beautifully-made instrument; the flutes they played in class were shoddy plastic. The good-natured shop owner explained to her that new flutes needed to be warmed up

first. Start by playing fifteen minutes a day, and gradually play longer after six weeks...

In spite of the language barrier, Mian made an effort to remember every word Father translated for her: "To warm the flute means to give it new life. If the flute is treated carelessly, it will no longer be able to play beautiful music."

That night, Mian went to bed early. In her dream she found herself diving in the blue ocean, amidst the ceaseless sound of waves. She was a humpback whale with a white heart on her fluke.

Day 3

Mother's illness seemed completely cured. She nagged Mian and Father to get up early. Mumbling to herself, Mother rummaged through the suitcases, preparing coats, gloves, and scarves to bring on the boat. She also asked the kitchen staff to prepare scrambled eggs, hash browns, toast, bacon and a large pot of juice, which she put in front of Father and Mian.

At half past twelve, Mian, Mother, and Father boarded the boat. They slowly sailed out of the harbor as a mild sea breeze gently caressed Mian's hair.

Once in open water, the boat began to seed up, riding the wind and waves, like a whale breaching the water surface. Mian was excited; she stood at the bow, hands gripping the boat's railing, and felt the wind pull her hair and the hems of her clothes. Every push through a wave made her head nod sharply.

Thirteen years ago, Mother had also stood at the same railing, soaking in salt and sunlight.

Suddenly, the noise of the engine died down, and the captain's voice came over the loudspeaker. The boat stopped some distance from an island lighthouse. Many little black spots could be seen spread across the island and in the sea surrounding – a flock of adorable puffins!

The puffins, with their big orange beaks embedded in cute little faces, looked very much like dwarf penguins that could fly. They actually flew very fast; a few curious puffins darted around the boat so quickly, Mian couldn't even see them clearly.

After a few minutes' pause, the boat slowly turned away from the puffin-guarded island, and struck out for waters where humpback whales gathered. As the wind and waves became rougher, the boat began to lurch heavily. Mian's stomach churned with nausea, and she staggered away from the bow, not knowing whether to sit or stand. The temperature was dropping, too, so Mian hurried into the cabin to take shelter with several seasick tourists slumped in chairs.

Similar discomfort never caught up with Mother.

Mother brought over a cup of steaming soup for Mian, wrapped her in a scarf and windbreaker, and put an arm around her. Father fetched them a few warm blankets, and suggested they sit on the upper deck.

Sitting in the upper deck, Mian leaned feebly into her seat. But the vast sea, the cool air, and her mother's attentive care calmed her stomach and cleared her head.

Suddenly, faint cheers rose from the deck: a humpback whale breached the surface!