

**Dominica Phetteplace is a 2007 Clarion West alum who graduated from UC Berkeley with a BA in Mathematics. She works as a math tutor and lives in Berkeley with her husband, Tom, and her cat, Dominicat. Her first sale is a bittersweet story about . . .**

# **THE CULT OF WHALE WORSHIP**

**Dominica Phetteplace**

The problem with handling diseased animals is that you might catch what they have. Since the rats were infected with the suicide bug three months ago, Tetsuo was sure he had traded his brain for a ticking time bomb. In addition to severe headaches, he found himself lingering a little too long on bridges and tall balconies.

*This is not because my love for you is unrequited*, the first draft of his departing note read, *This is for the whales*.

It was addressed to Aoi, a fellow researcher at the lab. She understood about whales. Her brother was the one who had poisoned the whale meat at the Tsukiji market. Kaito had decided that the problem of whaling could only be solved by rational self-interest. He wasn't a trained scientist, like Tetsuo, nor did he have Tetsuo's access to sophisticated superbugs. Instead, he burgled a dermatologist's office and infected the dead whale meat with Botox.

Kaito wanted people to believe that the whales themselves had become diseased, their tasty flesh turned to poison. But laboratory tests easily identified the neurotoxin, thus exposing the act of terrorism for what it was and nothing more. Thirteen people were sickened.

He had escaped to Australia without becoming a suspect because Japanese authorities were convinced that the act was committed by a Westerner, perhaps one of the many tourists who visit the market.

Aoi had only seen Kaito twice in the five years since he left. They used to be very close. Together they would hand out pamphlets at restaurants that served whale sashimi. Most people that passed on the street would refuse the pamphlets and refuse eye contact. Inevitably, the police would come by and ask the siblings to please stop disturbing the peace, please.

Aoi didn't love Tetsuo, but that didn't mean they couldn't be friends. She knew she could trust him. She once confessed a wish to improve upon Kaito's plans, which Tetsuo listened to very carefully in case he might be able to grant it. She wanted to design a parasite that could live commensally within a whale, but was toxic to humans. A tall order, but if you could be successful, you could fabricate a

similar one that would poison shark fins and rhinoceros horns. You could save the tigers.

Tetsuo thought about Aoi's dream parasite as he ate dinner one night. He was at Junsaya, eating raw chicken skewers. Salmonella wasn't a concern, but even if it was, he would just start eating his chicken cooked. So it would go with any designer parasite or virus you could put into a live whale. There might be an easy way to disinfect it for human consumption, your triumph of science and possible dissertation denatured merely by changing the preparation method.

That wasn't the only problem. The idea of infecting whales with something, even something benign, bothered him. Was it even ethical?

Think of it as a vaccine for whales, he told himself.

No, it's humans that are diseased. And we are the ones that need to be inoculated, he thought again. And not even all of us, just the ones who think it's okay to eat endangered species. They are impure, there are only two cures: cleansing or mind control.

Tetsuo knew more about the second than the first on account of the fact that he was working in a lab that was researching the mind-altering parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*, variant III. It was a subspecies of *T. gondii* that the lab was in the process of reverse engineering. They were making rats sick to one day make humans well.

The parasite could cause suicide, dementia, and schizophrenia in all mammals, but variant III in particular was associated with increased feelings of religious devotion. It wasn't designed that way, but that's how it ended up.

*T. gondii* needed a predator-prey partnership to complete its life cycle, most commonly cats and rats. The bradyzoites would cause lesions in the rat's amygdala that made it sexually attracted to cat urine, something that a rat is normally frightened of. That made the rat more likely to be eaten by a cat, which would transfer *T. gondii* to the cat's stomach and enable the protozoan to finish its life cycle. Post-digestion, *T. gondii* would be excreted by the cat and would infect any mammal that came in physical contact with the contaminated cat feces.

In the paper *Impact of Secreted Protein K+a on T. gondii v.III Reproduction*, the authors locked infected rats into cages with cats. Mostly the rats got eaten, but there were some cats who didn't understand the rats as food. These cats were advanced to the next stage of the experiment, where they lived with the rats in richer and more complex environments. The rats would congregate around the cat urine, so the researchers became prompt about changing the cat's box. In the absence of easy access to the compound in the urine that was elevating the level of dopamine in the rat's infected brains, the rats began to exhibit what was observed to be worshipful behavior.

Tetsuo decided to replicate the experiment in his own apartment, just so he could be sure. He brought a cat home from the pet shop to interact with the rats. When it killed and ate two of the experimental subjects, he euthanized it. He did this twice more until he found Yojimbo, a pudgy and gentle orange tabby. Yojimbo ignored the rats, showing no interest either in prey-killing or friend-making.

Yojimbo's aloofness was steadfast, despite the fact that the rats would huddle to be near him, piling on top of him like possum babies. The rats would take breaks from cuddling only for vital functions (though one rat did starve from forgetting to eat). The rats would eat quickly, drink quickly, pee quickly and then return to Yojimbo with a mouth full of unchewed food, to be deposited in the offering pile in front of him.

Yojimbo always reacted the same to this, lifting his nostrils in interest, then squinting his eyes in disgust. He never touched his offering pile. Sometimes he would shift, under the bulk of a dozen rats (which kept him warm, he did like that), so that he wouldn't have to face the pile of slobbered-on rat food, but that would mean a new pile would form right in front of him.

The engineered *T. gondii* variant III that the lab rats were infected with was evolved to be less deadly than the usual one, which made it easier to treat, but more pernicious in another way. A deadly parasite would kill the host and the brain it was meant to control. A less deadly parasite would let the host live, so it could spread to many more individuals. Tetsuo was engineering an even gentler strain for the rats at home that would infect the brain without eating away at it too much. He wondered if cat pheromones would trigger a similar reaction in infected humans as in infected rats. Tetsuo didn't feel worshipful towards Yojimbo, though he was grateful to the cat for helping his work proceed. He liked the way the cat would purr when he heard the can opener, and soon Tetsuo was feeding his pet six or seven cans of gravy a day.

Tetsuo emerged from his apartment only for work and to buy cat food. Tonight was different, however. He was going to have dinner with Aoi and Kaito, who had just yesterday returned from a stint at Sea Shepherd, as a crew member aboard a whale protection ship.

They were going to have chicken sukiyaki at Botan. Beef-free sukiyaki was hard to come by, but Kaito's almost-vegetarianism was formed along a hierarchy of intelligence that permitted chicken but not cows. Dumb fish like salmon fell on the edible side of the dividing line, but the collapse of global fish stocks and looming onset of the desert ocean made seafood unpalatable. To eat fish right now was to steal from sharks and swordfish.

It was a long walk to the restaurant from Tetsuo's apartment, but he thought it best to avoid the train, for fear he might suddenly decide to throw himself on the tracks. Of course he might also throw himself into traffic as he walked, but that was less of a sure thing. The cars might stop, or you might survive but incur painful and debilitating injuries. The uncertainty and banality made it an unattractive way to go.

As he crossed a bridge that spanned the Kanda River, he stopped to stare down into the water. It was eleven days ago that he had seen a killer whale in this river.

It glistened in the moonlight and radiated wisdom. It raised its head out of the water and stared at Tetsuo with knowing eyes. Then it winked and departed before Tetsuo had the chance to wink back. At that moment all Tetsuo wanted was to jump in and be devoured alive by the whale. He could imagine each sensation, the free fall followed by the splash of cold water followed by the snapping of his bones and the warmth of the whale's stomach. This is how he wanted to die, he was sure of it. It was only his work that kept him alive.

It wasn't until later that he realized he could not die this way, not ever, because he might infect the orca with his disease. The realization that he could not depart in this most perfect manner made him weep.

*DO NOT FEED MY BODY TO THE WHALES. DO NOT SCATTER MY ASHES,* he wrote in his parting note.

He had visited the bridge every day since the sighting. He enjoyed temptation, a function of his enormous willpower, he supposed. Tonight, he stared down at the darkness for a full ten minutes, drying out his eyes. Did he even blink? He did not know. But he did not see a whale. Impossible things do not happen twice.

Kaito made his announcement during dinner.

"I wish to strike again," he whispered.

Tetsuo shook his head. He did not want Kaito to repeat his crime and its tragic outcome. *There is a better way,* he wanted to say. *You don't have to kill your enemies, you just have to change their minds.*

"Can't you help us?" asked Aoi.

"Yes. I am working on it. You will know soon," said Tetsuo. He was making a synthetic and extra-powerful cat pheromone for Aoi to wear. It would inspire devotion,

but of an unknown kind. Would the new converts be like zombies? Would they try to eat her brain?

On the way back from the restaurant, Tetsuo abandoned self-control. He jumped from the bridge, determined to find the whale.

He landed in the water twenty feet below, and sprained his ankle when his feet hit the concrete bottom of the river. It was much too shallow to support a fully grown orca. Maybe he had seen a baby. Maybe it was separated from its mother and needed his help.

He stayed in as long as possible, waiting for the baby whale. He had named her Kayoko, sensing intuitively that it was a she. He had to be fished out because he wouldn't leave the water on his own.

He showed up for work the next morning a little later than usual due to his bum ankle. Dr. Sato summoned him for a meeting right away, uttering those deadly words, "We need to talk."

"You have been acting strange lately," said Sato, and Tetsuo nodded in agreement as he braced himself for the worst.

"You have recently become a disappointment to me," Sato continued. "I have not seen you in the evenings lately, nor on the weekends. Your work-ethic leaves much to be desired."

Tetsuo squirmed against the maniacal laugh that was struggling to escape from his intestines. He fought it by blinking his eyes hard.

"And then there is the matter of your suicide attempt."

Tetsuo didn't feel like arguing the point right then. He didn't feel like saying: *Actually, no, I just wanted to say hi to the baby whale that lives in the river, and while I am going to kill myself soon, very soon, that was not it.*

He was given a warning and a mental-health leave from work. That gave him time to finish his at-home research or come as close to finishing as he could. He doubted his results, but he was meticulous in the execution of his plan, regardless.

His dead body would be a bio-hazard, and he needed to be responsible in containing it so as not to afflict the innocent. This would be a most ethical plague.

He wanted to dissolve in a streak of violence. He wanted a high-impact death, to be done in by momentum. But such things were messy, so instead he prepared a cyanide capsule.

Those hardworking mitochondria. How diligently they produced ATP by forcing protons across membranes. The cyanide would disrupt the membranes by poking holes in them, making ATP synthesis impossible. The body would starve without this fuel, but it would be a very quick starvation, about thirty seconds or so. Tetsuo pitied his organelles, but not his organs, strangely enough.

The suicide pill made him feel like a spy. He stared at it and hoped that death would feel like something. He picked a day in his calendar and circled it in red.

It had to be Aoi that would discover the corpse. The cult had only three members, soon to be two, and Kaito was the less qualified sibling for this particular job. Years of killing rats had hardened Aoi to gruesomeness.

Tetsuo had commissioned a local jeweler to make something special for Aoi. It was a pendant in the shape of a whale tail, in blackened silver with white sapphires. The stones were placed in such a way as to replicate the markings of a humpback whale. The markings of each humpback tail were unique, and so could be used to track the whales. Tetsuo carefully pored over the photos in the whale tail registry before deciding on Joie, female, age 32 (estimated), known mother of at least four other whales in the registry, last seen in the spring off the coast of Baja California. Joie's markings were the prettiest; they reminded Tetsuo of sheet music.

The pendant was hollow on the inside, to accommodate a vial of cat pheromones, synthetic because Tetsuo had killed enough cats already. He had already prepared several vials of pheromones and several more of *T. gondii* variant IV, along with instructions on how to make more. Aoi would be in charge of the lab work, while it would fall to Kaito to poison whale meat at various fish markets and restaurants. Both of them would leaflet restaurants together, in the hope that her scent would attract the afflicted.

"Join us," she would say.

Yes, they would nod, not even fully sure of what they were agreeing to.

On the day marked in red, Tetsuo changed his plans. He would poison the meat himself. As long as he had a cyanide pill in his pocket, he might as well cause a little mischief.

At the market, the whale flesh was cut into rectangles and placed on ice. Pink and white and red, bloody, but not bleeding. Tetsuo did not gag as he stared at it. The small plastic sign named the price, 3000 yen a pound. He adjusted the sign and a thin stream of liquid microbes fell from a vial taped to his wrist onto meat for sale. The act went unnoticed. He would survive the day and return tomorrow. Today was not the day in red. The day in red would be the day he got caught.

He would pop that pill before being placed in handcuffs. So long, suckers! He wouldn't know if he had done more harm than good in this lifetime until he reached the next. He feared returning to earth as a lab rat, though there would be a certain justice to that. The goal was to reincarnate as a whale. Minke or fin or blue or killer. Happy and free and safe from the Institute of Cetacean "Research." Worshipped by all, but especially Aoi. ○

Copyright © 2011 by Dominica Phetteplace