

Swimming Where the Whales Live
by Justin McGonigle

I never went to college. I graduated from High School in 1987. I was accepted into Art School after all the dust had settled after going to rehab and AA meetings the year after graduation, but I didn't go because I was told there was no money. Seems like a small reason looking back on it now, over 30 years later.

Instead, I traveled around the country, by bus, living in the Pacific Northwest and in the center of the country where the mountains are high and where the air is thin. I had a series of low level jobs and I did my best to build a life for myself. I did that for almost 2 years.

I was now tired of the road and back at home, seeing my umpteenth therapist, taking an anti-depressant, and riding back and forth on my bike from the big city to our family's cottage by the beach about 20 miles away. I was tan, in shape and high as a kite on youth and vigor. But I was alone, with no direction.

One day my Mother let me know about this opportunity about a tall ship, The Crusher, looking for a crew to help it sail to Africa.

I jumped at the chance. I had been sailing since I could crawl around on my Grandfather's boat up on the beach and jumping off of it into the water. I needed to come up with an idea of how I could stand out during the interview. I remembered reading about Photographers and Artists onboard expeditions to record their surroundings. Because I was always good at art, I told them that I'd be happy to record the trip on The Crusher with drawings, watercolors, etc.. They loved the idea and said yes!

We set sail, after making ready for a month in port, and after getting delayed and having the project temporarily fall through, full of excitement. We were headed for the Azores, off of the coast of Africa, for The Crusher's 100th Anniversary of bringing the Portuguese immigrants to the big city where I lived.

At one point, we were 2 weeks out to sea. We were halfway to the Azores. Someone suggested we swim. Someone watched for sharks while others jumped from the rigging into the water.

I jumped in. I could see forever in every direction except down, which was as black as tar.

Under the water, the color was aqua blue and the sun broke through the surface of the water making it look like stained glass. The water was not cold and I did it several times.

One night, not long after, I was in my bunk for my 4 hours of sleep after my watch, when I began to hear whales. They made clicking sounds and they sang to each other. It seemed like at one point one was feet away from me and my bunk. My bunk was below the water line. It felt like I could touch the whale. It sang to me and I fell asleep.

My time on The Crusher was brief. A combination of a large storm (later known as 'The Perfect Storm') and almost getting into a fist fight with some of the crew (they pooped in the sink and put a boot in the stew!), we were pushed down to Puerto Rico and I was asked to leave. They asked where I'd like to be flown to, I said to be with my sister, who was living in the southern part of the U.S.. I called her ahead of time to make sure it was OK. It was.

And so began my journey living in the South. Where the people melt your heart and the sun bakes your brain.