

## Beluga Border

March 25<sup>th</sup>, 2020

*Sweet sixteen.*

Well, close enough. I'm actually seventeen, because...

IT'S MY BIRTHDAY!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

Which kinda bums me out. Because, well, argh! Seventeen is not *officially* allowed to be a "sweet seventeen." And it has been my plan *my entire conscious life* to see the beluga whales along the St. Lawrence River somewhere east of Montreal *when I turned that sweet, mean, feel-like-a-queen sixteen.*

And exactly one year ago...

I didn't go.

Because I was sick! Life is so unfair!!

I made my mom *promise* that we would go east THE DAY I TURNED SIXTEEN when I was, like, six, and ever since then, the only thing I've written on my birthday list every year is *to turn sixteen, already!!*

But the day before *the day* rolled around, I came down with the *worst* stomach flu *ever!* Seriously, I was out of school for more than a week. I almost missed the band concert. My birthday fell on a Monday last year, so *at least* I'd been able to have my birthday party the Saturday before, but maybe *not so fortunately* because it *must* have been the ice cream cake that did it! I have not been able to pass a Dairy Queen without gagging since. And trust me, lesser presents like iTunes money, and seeing your friends and stuff, does not make up for not seeing beluga whales.

Iconic dramatic sigh.

But then I thought, pros and cons.

Cons: Everything I have mentioned so far.

Pros: This year, *I can drive myself.*

But when March rolled around this year and I was more excited *than ever* to leave behind the couldn't-be-less-beluga-y Brandon, Manitoba for the splashy-fab shores *du Québec*, this new thing happened called: The Globally Inconvenient Pandemic.

*By golly gosh darn dang blasted freaking nammit!*

Censored version.

Last year, I couldn't go because *I* was sick. This year, I might not be able to go because *the entire world* is sick?!

Whatever. I had a COVID-19 test on Friday and got my results over the weekend, which I printed off and stuffed into the glove compartment. My mom remained convinced

until the moment the front door closed behind me that I would be back in about eight hours, turned away at the border.

I remained convinced that I wouldn't, and so did Vido, my pet beluga stuffy and only the greatest road trip passenger a girl could ask for.

Until about ten minutes ago, when "Border Closed" signs began popping up everywhere.

I ignored the first two or three or six. But this last one I just passed was, well...convincing.

*They're going to have to turn me away themselves. I want to hear it straight from an Ontarian's mouth.*

I also wanted to see an Ontarian. I was so disappointed when I learned a few years ago (fewer than I care to admit at the present time) that the time zone didn't just *instantly* change at the border. But I still *really wanna* film a Tik Tok of me going back and forth over the spot where the time changes—like I've got the power of time travel! I'll totally put a cool filter on it to make it look like it's more daylight in CDT and practically night "where the Ontarians live." Those wild ruffians.

But first, I have to get *through* the border.

And this guy doesn't look like he's going to let me.

And neither does that road closure.

I'm doomed.

He's approaching in his fancy official uniform, and I'm reaching for my COVID-19 test. And my licence. And the registration. And my letter of recommendation from my English teacher. And a few French pamphlets of beluga whale tourism, and Vido, for good measure. I cuddle him into my chest as I rehearse my prepared speech, the order in which I will present my evidence, how I will beg and plead my case. Then roll down my window slowly.

It's a crank window.

"Y...yes, Officer?" I say in my most unshaky voice. I flash him a toothily innocent smile.

"The border's closed," he says without ceremony. "You can't go any further this way."

I open my mouth, but my prepared speech seems to be jammed like a piece of paper in my dad's ancient Xerox.

I hit the reset button.

Nothing.

I unplug the thing and plug it back in.

*Error. Paper jam. Please remove front, side, back, underside, top, gears, labels, ink, and logo and remove the jammed paper.*

I freeze.

*By golly gosh...*

He stares at me.

"Oh...oh-kay," I choke out.

He walks away.

I toss my pamphlets over the dash and furrow my eyebrows so deeply, I think I could probably reach them with my tongue.

I burst into tears.

A whole minute later, the officer looks up at me from his post, as if realizing for the first time that I'm still there.

I hold Vido up and speak straight into that white, stuffed face.

"We're going home, Vido. I'm sorry I couldn't find your brothers and sisters. You'll come with me when I do, right?"

He nods.

I put him back in his seat, reverse, and head back to the road, due west.

*Mom was right.* I frown again. *Well, I think, there's always next year.*

Or the year after that.

Vido gives me strength.