

FLEYDO ENGLISH SCHOOL

Story Material

The Whale Watchers

A compelling story set in the Azores about a teenager from a former whaling family who works with a marine biologist to protect sperm whales from ocean noise pollution.

Level: B1

Skill: Reading

Duration: ~45 min

Age: Teens (11-16)

Topic: Environment

Pages: 12

The Story

Chapter I— The Islands in— the Middle of Nowhere

The Azores rose from the Atlantic Ocean like the knuckles of a giant's fist — nine **volcanic** islands, green and steep, scattered across six hundred kilometres of open water roughly halfway between Portugal and North America. There were no neighbouring landmasses. The nearest continent was fifteen hundred kilometres away. The ocean floor beneath the islands dropped to over three thousand metres. It was, by any measure, the middle of nowhere. And Tomas Ferreira, who was fifteen and had lived on the island of Faial his entire life, would not have traded it for anywhere on Earth.

Faial was small — barely twenty kilometres across — with a population of fifteen thousand people, a volcanic crater you could hike around in two hours, and a harbour town called Horta that was famous for two things: a marina where transatlantic sailors stopped to paint murals on the harbour wall, and some of the best whale watching in the world. The deep waters around the Azores were a crossroads for **marine** life: sperm whales, blue whales, fin whales, sei whales, beaked whales, pilot whales, dolphins of six different **species**, sea turtles, manta rays, and — in the deep canyons where the ocean floor split along the Mid-Atlantic Ridge — creatures that science had not yet named.

Tomas came from a whaling family. His grandfather, Avo Manuel, had been one of the last **harpooners** on Faial — a man who had hunted sperm whales from open boats in the 1970s, before Portugal banned commercial whaling in 1984. Avo Manuel was eighty-one now, still strong, still sharp, and still conflicted about the past. "We did what we knew," he told Tomas once, sitting on the harbour wall, watching a whale-watching boat head out to sea. "The whales fed our families. The oil lit our lamps. We did not know they were intelligent. We did not know they talked to each other. We did not know they grieved for their dead." He paused. "Now we know. And knowing changes everything."

Tomas wanted to understand. Not just the whales — the ocean itself. How it worked, how it was changing, and how the tiny islands where his family had lived for five generations fit into a system that stretched from the Arctic to the Antarctic. He spent every free hour at the harbour, watching the research boats, reading marine biology textbooks, and persuading anyone who would listen to take him out on the water. His mother, Ana, who ran a guesthouse and worried about everything, called it "an obsession." His father, Jorge, who captained a whale-watching boat, called it "a calling." Avo Manuel called it "the sea choosing its own."

Chapter II— The Researcher

Chapter III— The Deep

Dr. Marta Carvalho arrived on Faial in April, at the beginning of whale season. She was a **marine** biologist from the University of Lisbon, specialising in cetacean **acoustics** — the study of whale and dolphin communication. Her research project involved deploying

underwater microphones — hydrophones — around the Azores to record the sounds that sperm whales made: clicks, codas, and slow, rhythmic patterns that scientists believed were a form of complex communication. "Sperm whales have the largest brains of any animal that has ever lived," she told Tomas when they met at the harbour. "They live in family groups led by matriarchs. They babysit each other's calves. They have regional dialects — whales from the Azores click differently from whales in the Caribbean. They are, in every meaningful sense, a civilisation. And we are only just beginning to understand them."

Dr. Carvalho needed local help — someone who knew the waters, the weather, and the whales. Jorge offered his boat. Avo Manuel offered his knowledge: sixty years of observing whale behaviour, learned from a time when understanding whales was a matter of survival. And Tomas offered himself — eager, knowledgeable, and willing to do anything from carrying equipment to cleaning hydrophones. Dr. Carvalho accepted all three. "Traditional knowledge and scientific data are not opposites," she said. "They are two languages describing the same ocean. We need both."

The first **expedition** lasted twelve hours. They motored out to a canyon east of Faial where the ocean floor dropped from two hundred to three thousand metres in less than a kilometre — a submarine cliff that created upwellings of nutrient-rich water, attracting squid, which attracted sperm whales, which attracted Tomas. They deployed three hydrophones at different depths and waited. The sea was calm, the sky enormous, and the silence — above water — was complete.

Below the surface, it was anything but silent. When Dr. Carvalho connected the hydrophone feed to the onboard speakers, the boat filled with sound: clicks, creaks, groans, and a deep, rhythmic pulsing that Tomas felt in his chest. "That is a sperm whale," Dr. Carvalho said, adjusting her headphones. "About eight hundred metres down, hunting squid. The clicks are **echolocation** — she is using sound to see in the dark. Each click bounces off the squid and comes back, telling her exactly where it is, how big it is, and how fast it is moving." Tomas listened, mesmerised. The whale was painting a picture of the deep ocean using nothing but sound. It was, he thought, the most extraordinary thing he had ever heard.

Chapter IV— The Threat

The problem emerged from the data. Over three months of recording, Dr. Carvalho's hydrophones captured not just whale sounds but ship sounds — the constant, low-frequency rumble of commercial vessels passing through Azorean waters. The noise was getting worse. A proposal from the European Maritime Authority would reroute a major transatlantic shipping lane directly through the canyon where the sperm whales fed. The lane would bring an estimated four hundred additional cargo ships per year through the area — each one generating **sonar** pulses and engine noise that could disrupt whale communication over distances of fifty kilometres.

"Imagine trying to have a conversation in a nightclub," Dr. Carvalho explained to Tomas. "Now imagine that the nightclub never closes, and the music gets louder every year. That is what ship noise does to whales. It masks their communication, disrupts their **echolocation**, increases their stress levels, and forces them to change their behaviour — diving deeper,

feeding less, moving away from their preferred **habitat**. In extreme cases, military sonar has caused mass strandings."

Avo Manuel listened to the data presentation with his arms folded. When it was finished, he said: "I hunted whales for twenty years. I killed them with a **harpoon** from an open boat. I am not proud of it. But I respected them. I understood them. What you are describing — drowning them in noise so they cannot speak to each other, cannot find food, cannot protect their young — that is worse than hunting. That is cruelty without a purpose."

Tomas felt the same cold determination that had driven him to the harbour every morning since he was twelve. The whales needed a voice. The ocean needed an **advocate**. And the Azores — nine tiny islands in the middle of an enormous ocean — needed to prove that small places could make big decisions. He opened his laptop and began writing. The **petition** was titled: "Protect the Whale Highway: Reroute the Shipping Lane Around the Azores Marine Corridor." Within a month, it had fifty thousand signatures from forty-seven countries.

Chapter V— Island Life

Through the campaign, life on Faial continued with its particular island rhythm. The days were shaped by weather and water. Mornings began with Jorge checking the sea conditions and deciding whether the whale-watching boats could go out. Good days — calm seas, clear visibility — meant full boats and happy tourists. Bad days — Atlantic storms that sent waves crashing over the harbour wall — meant repair work, net mending, and long games of cards at the cafe on the marina.

The food was simple and superb: grilled limpets with garlic butter, fresh tuna steaks, caldo verde — the thick green soup made with potatoes and kale that was eaten at every meal. Faial's famous cheese — Queijo da Ilha — was made from the milk of cows that grazed on volcanic pastures so rich in minerals that the cheese had a flavour unlike anything produced on the mainland. Ana's guesthouse served breakfast on a terrace overlooking the harbour: fresh bread, local honey, fruit from the garden, and coffee so strong it could wake the dead.

The landscape was dramatic and otherworldly. The Capelinhos volcano, on the western tip of Faial, had erupted in 1957-58, adding an entire square kilometre of new land to the island. The eruption site was now a lunar landscape of grey ash and bare rock, slowly being colonised by mosses and wildflowers. The contrast with the rest of the island — green, lush, covered in hydrangea hedges that turned the roads into blue corridors in summer — was extraordinary. "The Azores teach you that the Earth is alive," Dr. Carvalho said, standing on the rim of Faial's central crater, looking down into a lake that filled a **volcanic** bowl a kilometre wide. "The ground under your feet was ocean floor a million years ago. The islands rose from the sea, and one day they will return to it. Everything is temporary. The question is what we protect while we are here."

Tomas thought about the whales — creatures that had been swimming these waters for millions of years, long before the islands existed. They had watched the volcanoes rise from the sea. They had survived ice ages, predators, and human hunting. Now they faced a new

threat: noise. And a fifteen-year-old boy on a tiny island was trying to help them. It felt impossible. It felt necessary. It felt, Tomas thought, exactly like something a Ferreira would do.

Chapter VI— The Symposium

The international **symposium** was held in Horta in September. Marine biologists, oceanographers, shipping industry representatives, and government officials from twelve countries gathered in the cultural centre overlooking the harbour. Dr. Carvalho presented her acoustic data: recordings that demonstrated, with scientific precision, the impact of ship noise on whale communication. Avo Manuel gave **testimony** about the whales he had known — their behaviours, their patterns, their intelligence — knowledge accumulated over sixty years of intimate observation.

Tomas spoke last. He stood at the podium — a fifteen-year-old in a clean shirt, facing a room of adults with degrees and titles — and played a recording. First, the sound of a sperm whale family communicating in clear water: clicks, codas, a rhythmic dialogue between mother and calf. Then the same recording with simulated ship noise overlaid: the whale sounds barely audible, buried beneath the mechanical roar. "This is what we are doing to them," he said. "We are taking away their voices. The same voices my grandfather heard from his whaling boat sixty years ago. The same voices that Dr. Carvalho has spent her career trying to understand. We cannot claim to care about the ocean and then drown it in noise."

The **symposium** concluded with a formal recommendation: the proposed shipping lane should be rerouted around the Azores **marine** corridor, maintaining a minimum distance of thirty kilometres from known whale **habitat**. Additionally, the committee recommended the creation of a **marine sanctuary** — a protected zone where commercial activities would be regulated to minimise disturbance to cetacean populations. The recommendation would go to the European Maritime Authority for final decision.

It was not a victory — not yet. Recommendations were not laws. But it was a beginning. The whales had a voice now — not just their own, carried through three thousand metres of dark water, but human voices too: scientists, fishermen, teenagers, and an eighty-one-year-old former harpooner who had decided that knowing changes everything. Tomas stood on the harbour wall that evening, watching the sun set over the Atlantic, and listened. Somewhere out there, in the deep water beyond the islands, a whale was clicking. Speaking. Being heard. He smiled, and the ocean stretched on, vast and alive and full of conversations he was only beginning to understand.

Key Vocabulary

| Term | Definition |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Migration | The regular movement of animals from one region to another with the seasons |
| Marine | Relating to the sea or ocean |
| Species | A group of living organisms that can breed with each other |
| Conservation | The protection and management of wildlife and natural habitats |
| Sonar | A system using sound waves to detect objects underwater |
| Echolocation | Using sound echoes to locate objects, as dolphins and bats do |
| Habitat | The natural home or environment of an animal or plant |
| Biodiversity | The variety of different species of plants and animals in an area |
| Expedition | A journey undertaken for a specific scientific or exploratory purpose |
| Volcanic | Relating to or produced by a volcano |
| Fishery | An area of water where fish are caught commercially |
| Sustainable | Able to continue without depleting resources or causing damage |
| Harpoon | A spear-like weapon formerly used for hunting whales |
| Sanctuary | A place of safety and protection, especially for wildlife |
| Acoustic | Relating to sound, especially in water or natural environments |
| Specimen | An individual example of an animal or plant used for study |
| Petition | A formal written request signed by many people |
| Symposium | A formal meeting where experts discuss a particular subject |
| Resilience | The ability of an ecosystem or species to recover from damage |
| Legacy | Something meaningful left behind for future generations |

Comprehension Quiz

1. Where are the Azores located?

- A) In the Caribbean Sea
- B) In the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, about 1,500 km west of Portugal
- C) Off the coast of Africa
- D) In the Mediterranean Sea

2. What was special about Tomas's family history?

- A) They were famous sailors
- B) His grandfather had been one of the last whale hunters, and now Tomas studied whale conservation
- C) They owned a chain of restaurants
- D) They had discovered the Azores

3. What did Dr. Carvalho's research focus on?

- A) Studying volcanic eruptions
- B) Tracking sperm whale populations using acoustic monitoring to understand their migration patterns
- C) Breeding whales in captivity
- D) Developing new fishing equipment

4. Why was the proposed shipping lane dangerous for whales?

- A) Ships would deliberately hunt whales
- B) Increased ship traffic and sonar would disrupt whale communication, feeding, and migration
- C) Ships would pollute the water with oil
- D) Ships would block the sunlight

5. How did Tomas contribute to the research?

- A) He drove the research boat
- B) He used his family's traditional whale-spotting knowledge to locate pods that technology missed
- C) He funded the research with his savings
- D) He caught fish for the scientists

6. What did the acoustic recordings reveal?

- A) That whales could speak human languages
- B) That whale communication patterns were disrupted by ship noise, affecting their ability to feed and navigate
- C) That the ocean was completely silent
- D) That dolphins were attacking whales

7. What was the outcome of the international symposium?

- A) Nothing changed
- B) A recommendation to create a marine sanctuary and reroute shipping lanes around the whale habitat
- C) The Azores were closed to all visitors
- D) All fishing was permanently banned

8. How had the Azores' relationship with whales changed over time?

- A) It had not changed at all
- B) From hunting with harpoons to protecting through science and whale-watching tourism
- C) They had always protected whales
- D) They had stopped caring about whales entirely

9. Why was whale-watching tourism important for the islands?

- A) It was not important
- B) It provided sustainable income that made whale conservation economically beneficial for the community
- C) It was the only source of income
- D) Tourists did not enjoy whale watching

10. What is the main message of the story?

- A) That whales are dangerous and should be avoided
- B) That understanding and protecting the ocean requires combining traditional knowledge, modern science, and community commitment
- C) That fishing should be completely banned worldwide
- D) That islands are boring places to live

Answer Key

| # | Ans | Question |
|----|-----|-----------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1 | B | Where are the Azores located? |
| 2 | B | What was special about Tomas's family history? |
| 3 | B | What did Dr. Carvalho's research focus on? |
| 4 | B | Why was the proposed shipping lane dangerous for whales? |
| 5 | B | How did Tomas contribute to the research? |
| 6 | B | What did the acoustic recordings reveal? |
| 7 | B | What was the outcome of the international symposium? |
| 8 | B | How had the Azores' relationship with whales changed over time? |
| 9 | B | Why was whale-watching tourism important for the islands? |
| 10 | B | What is the main message of the story? |

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