

Tattoos on the Left

Lawrence Chin

I was sitting in a pub to finish up a story which was way over the deadline when I caught a man staring in my direction. He raised his whiskey glass and nodded. I raised my glass in return and smiled. First mistake.

He smiled as he continued to stare. Somehow his sparkling eyes intrigued me. Based on his looks I'd say he was in his 40's – but then again, he could be in his late 30's, you know how white men look older than their real age.

Before I could make sense of his stare, he jumped off his seat and was on his feet. He was walking towards me. Shit! I covered my face and stole a few glances at this stranger. He looked British, I wondered if he had a British accent.

“Good God! What the fuck is wrong with me? Ignore him!” I had to remind myself to get back to my work.

And then, I heard a strong, deep voice saying “Hi.”

He introduced himself as David and asked if he could sit next to me.

I should have told him to get the fuck away – but instead, I ended up forcing a smile – not a friendly smile, just a polite one.

David sat down and began scanning me – my arms, my legs. OMG. Perhaps I should tell him that I have a girlfriend and that I am not – you know – I don't go THAT WAY. I mean I can understand his attraction to me, but this got to stop. I feel violated.

But before I could respond to his stare and set things straight, he said the four words that were music to my ears: "I like your tattoos."

Oh! He came over because he liked my tattoos. Now, we're talking.

David had his eyes glued to the whale tattoo on my forearm and was intrigued to know the story behind it.

All of a sudden, I felt waves of emotions crashing over me. The truth is, I had never told anyone about the story of the whale on my left arm. To share it with a total stranger... it just feels...off, you know. But maybe it is the right thing to do. I mean we don't know each other, and we might never meet ever again. I could tell him everything and it could offer me a sense of relief...

I asked David if he has heard of the 52-hertz whale. (Asks audience) "Have you? No, seriously, have you heard of the 52-hertz whale?"

Well, the 52-hertz whale is the loneliest animal in the world. You see, whales are social creatures who live in groups. They use a variety of noises to communicate and find each other. These noises are sometimes called songs or calls.

Typically whale calls range from 10 to 40 hertz – but for one particular species of whale, it is at 52 hertz. This simply means that the rest of the whale will not be able to hear the call of this particular whale.

It's like this whale could be swimming and calling in the deep blue sea, and have its sound travel across the ocean – but no matter how far the call goes, no other whale could hear it.

Imagine existing in this big world, and having only a handful of people who may be able to hear your lonely cry, or none at all...

(Short pause, reminiscing)

When my parents were alive, they used to tell me I had a way of communicating, so honest and forward – so much so that I would often confuse people. Mum said I should be utterly honest when I am around family, because they will never judge me; but once I am out there in the world, I have to be careful. People don't always give others the benefit of doubt, she said. They may twist my words and take me for granted.

I never understood what she meant until it was too late.

You see, I spent so many years growing into adulthood while planning to set up my own company. Once the company was formed, I trusted my closest friends with company matters. Unfortunately, they ended up betraying me. They claimed my forwardness and brutal honesty was too hard to handle. They made a pact with the other partners to throw me out of my own company.

All my hard work, gone just like that. My heart at the time could not accept the betrayal. I felt alone. I felt misunderstood. I was depressed.

I mean, how could a young man build himself to become the man he is supposed to be when there is no safe space for him to be true to himself? Why do I need to behave any differently in order to be accepted by others?

No one around me understood why I was so frustrated. Most people were too quick to point fingers at me, blaming me for not being smart enough. I should have known better, they said.

Right.

I lost many friends the same way. They just did not get me. I felt I had to filter myself all the time just so that people weren't offended with my honesty. It was tiring but I thought it was fine because I still had my family who understood me and accepted me just the way I am.

But then... I lost both my parents. And my world crashed.

There I was. Alone. I was the 52-hertz whale. No one could hear my calls.

Pathetic right?

David did not think so. He gave out a loud sigh and sank deeper into his chair, as if he was defeated listening to my story. I was drawn closer to him just by noticing his reaction.

He reached out for my left arm and brushed his thumb across my tattoo. He said both the image and the meaning behind it were beautiful.

I froze. The coldness on his hand sent chills down my spine. I could no longer think or react. Oh God, what have I gotten myself into? Perhaps this is why children of the world have been reminded for generations not to speak with strangers. Clearly to avoid scenarios like this.

So to balance out this melodramatic moment, I burst out to say something completely unnecessary, “You know David, after this tattoo I also had my left chest tattooed. I will tell you the pain was sweet, but no. A friendly reminder though, never tattoo your nipples!”

David cracked a laugh. He then leaned forward and kissed my forehead. He thanked me for sharing my story. David then took out a pen and wrote his number on a coaster, and left.

Maybe the universe had its own plan in bringing us together. Maybe David and I, we’re just two lonely and defeated souls who had been calling out and hoping someone would somehow hear us. And halfway across the world, in a noisy pub in Penang, we found each other.

I still have the coaster with his number. I just don’t know what to do with it.

I have been this 52-hertz whale for a very long time now. Perhaps that’s the only way I know how to be. It has been peaceful but awfully lonely.

So what should I do? Do I call him? And what happens then?

The question is, what if David wants something that I could never give him?

Or worse, what if I want to give him everything that he needs?

And what happens then?

I don’t know... I really don’t...

[END]

A Short Interview with Lawrence Chin

What led you to write this piece?

I did not want to write this story. I wanted to write about the cancer journey my parents were on. But someone was already writing that. So, I had no choice but to change. Then, I decided to write something that means something to me. Something I wanted to say, but for once in a more light hearted way. I thought to myself what *His Story* meant to me, hmmm... about me, us, men. What kind of story do I want to tell about men? Then I figured, I wanted to tell a story of a man who did not fit so easily into the definition of a man. I needed him to be vulnerable, to not need to have everything under control, to be okay to may have been attracted to another man and no one needed to give an explanation to this attraction. He had a girlfriend, but he needed someone at that moment, and that connection just happened.

How much of the text changed in the course of the performance?

I was not there, so I cannot answer this question.

What is your main takeaway from this whole experience?

I like writing. I like telling stories. And, no matter how tough the journey is, I just need to continue to remind myself the reason I started a story, then stay with that reason until the very end. Write first, edit later.

Do you think you will continue writing plays?

Yes, I will. I can't imagine the day I have to stop writing.