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The only family along on the Inland Passage trip last month was a mother/dad/grandmother combination and two children from Mexico. Delightful people, friendly and in full control of the vigorous eight and 10 year-old kids.

The grandmother, grayed to a regal black-eyed beauty, was careful to trace the family's origin to the Basque of Northern Spain. Her son, a tour representative for Linblad Expeditions in La Paz, Mexico, became an ally early on the trip. He recognized my ranch orientation from my Texas drawl and Northern Mexico Spanish. Our final bond tied when he said in privacy, "I understand your secrecy; ranching today is nearly as unpopular as bull fighting."

I had told the other ship's passengers that I was involved in hunting buffaloes and smuggling flax on the Mexican border in exchange for duty-free burros and authentic adobe bricks. One chap wanted to know how long it took to skin a buffalo bull.

"Takes four experienced men 45 minutes with sharp knives," was my reply, "plus time to salt the hide. You wanna buy one?"

My friend warned me to tone down the smuggling stories, as the ship still had to pass through U.S. Customs from Canadian waters in the San Juan Islands. I had an open

tube of Canadian toothpaste and 30 blank postcards to declare against the \$5000 cash limit. I needed to make \$4960 in U.S. currency in the next three hours taking orders on buffalo hides to reach par. Had the agents searched my billfold, they'd have thought it was a leather case to press flower petals or collect silk thread.

After sailing into U.S. waters, the crew lowered zodiacs to search for whales. Only the naturalists were allowed to go on the hunt. Guide books say Orcas are the same as killer whales. The Orcas are the wolves of the ocean, killing gray whales, seals or big sharks for no reason. After reading the restrictions on swimming, I read further proof favoring the warning that killer whales fancy the tongues of gray whales, leaving the rest of the carcass for carrion.

The fellow who asked about skinning buffalo found a pod of whales. (You who work crossword puzzles know a school of whales is a pod.) By the time he returned, we sighted 20 or 25 black and white Orcas swimming, backs arched and triangular fins exposed the way porpoise swim close to the surface. Smooth skimming motions cut the water without visible ripples. Then came an explosive "spy hop" above the surface, a white belly and broad black stripe arising to plunge back and breach the sea with a big

splash, setting off camera shutters by all on deck. The drama of an eight-ton sea mammal pitching straight up from the sea can't be described, or why the beast so performs.

At dinner, the naturalist who discovered the whales startled me by bringing up buffalo hunting again. He asked if all buffalo hunters wore red bandannas and crushed safari hats over white whiskers. I explained that hunters wear red bandannas to mark and claim the kills in a racing herd of hairy beasts, throwing dirt clods in the riders' faces in a death-defying ride to enact the slaughter.

Still puzzled, he continued, "But why do you wear bandannas at sea?"

"Because I come from timid country stock. Being prodigies of the soil and prisoners of a provincial background, doctors say, manifests itself in bright if not absurd costumes."

A lady I barely knew to my right gave me a stiff elbow blow to the ribs befitting a 300 pound Japanese wrestler. The only sounds at the table were crab claws cracking and napkins dabbing away the residue from the crab dinner.

The occasion was the Captain's dinner. "Why," I thought, "won't old Cap speak?" Not since Miss Green Gross' retirement speech at the end of my sixth semester in the fifth grade had guilt cut such a deep wound. All around at

other tables, glasses clinked and diners' merriment pitched to a higher peak over the succulent steamed crab meat, buttered corn on the cob, and fine French vintages. At my table, the sounds of napkins threading through a ring were loud as an anchor rope dropped at sea.

Out on deck in near darkness, I strained to understand why I couldn't tell city folks I was a herder and behave like a normal person. Remembered how ashamed Mother was when the third grade teacher told her of my report that a blue-eyed albino rattlesnake had chased me to school, causing my homework to fly from my book satchel.

Feeling the presence of my friend who knows me well, I recovered and wondered if Old Cap had seen blue-eyed albino rattlesnakes in his school days in Georgetown, Texas. Vowed the next morning to ask the naturalist if he'd like to organize a whaling adventure to set sail for the San Juan Islands.