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JUST LIKE THE MOVIES

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JUST LIKE THE MOVIES

Rachel Hope Allan



As I looked in my rear vision mirror, I could see cars tumbling towards me, the other motorists swerving to avoid the debris, and then the carnage as they got caught by the ice. Just like the movies, I thought. One by one they hit each other; then the concrete median. Torn car parts and car tyres littered the freeway. Then came the sirens. Numb, I pull over in a truck-stop. As I inhale my last Black Russian cigarette, a stranger wearing blue jeans and a fur hat approaches, clapping. "Great driving skills, girl!" He emphasises the "girl!" "It's a rental," I quip back, hands shaking. With my stomach still located somewhere between my throat and my front teeth, I know that I have to turn back onto the frozen highway if I want to make it to the border before dark. Closer to Kodak, closer to the eighth wonder of the world. The home of payday loans, cheap liquor, burnt-out forests and honeymooners.

Pulled from my archive, Niagara exists for me both as an episodic memory and as a construction. It occurs somewhere between a choke artist's wet dream and a pilgrimage to an orca.¹ My Niagara is emblematic of the raw power and the sometime unsubtle delicacy of nature. It is born from a story retold, a story passed down and a story rewatched. My black-and-white images pull focus to my incomplete recollections and expand on the long-believed notion that photographs have the ability to obstruct authentic memories. Mind and computer now offer a do-over of sorts. As the real and the simulated collide, I swim laps. I remember the bitter cold, the camera that went to the moon and the SkyWheel ride from hell.² I remember the lipstick on my cigarette butt, the vodka and coke. I remember the snow underfoot, the sound of the falls and the reflection in the glass.



There are two sides to Niagara Falls: The 'Rust Belt' New York Niagara Falls that became a casualty of corruption,³ with its chemical plants and a crime rate that was almost double the US average;⁴ and Niagara Falls, Ontario: a town of heart-shaped baths and stacked pancakes, where the only real danger is escaped animals from roadside zoos,⁵ or falling on one of the many slippery unmaintained paths.⁶

There is something otherworldly about Niagara Falls. You can feel the rumbling underground before you can see it. In 1751 it was reported that you could hear it 15 leagues (45 km) away. It is one of the most iconic natural landmarks on the planet, with millions of vacationers flocking to the region each year to witness its stunning beauty. Everyone knows it's a tourist trap, but they come anyway. They "Journey behind the Falls" and sail on *The Maid of the Mist*. They visit Marineland and do the "White Water Walk."

I went to Niagara for three reasons: Kiska, a man named Eastman and Marilyn Monroe.

Niagara is a 1953 American film-noir thriller directed by Henry Hathaway. The film centres on a honeymooning couple: George and Rose Loomis. George (played by Joseph Cotton) is a brooding war veteran, while Rose (played by Marilyn Monroe) is a flirtatious and troubled femme fatale. The film delves into themes of betrayal, jealousy and obsession, as well as the contrast between the beauty of nature and the darkness of humanity. It is a technicolour feast of adultery and murder gone wrong, of broken promises, wet stairs and damaged handrails. It is a damp film with a slippage in reality for both the viewer and the participants. In *Niagara*, the murderer gets murdered and the husband plays his song on the bells.



Marineland, located on Portage Road, Niagara Falls, Ontario, opened in 1961. Along with belugas, bottlenose dolphins, sea lions, walruses, bears, deer, alligators and many other creatures, the park has housed 26 orcas, one of them being Kiska. Kiska was an Icelandic killer whale who was captured off the coast of Ingolfshofdi in 1978. She was three years old when sentenced to a life of performing tricks in a concrete chlorinated tank, 4,371 km away from her pod. Kiska was often referred to as the loneliest orca in the world. All her tank-mates died or were traded. All five of her calves died when they were young: Athena, Hudson, Nova, Kanuck and one who didn't survive long enough to be named. In total, 21 orcas have died at Marineland. Research shows that orcas feel deep, complex emotions and visibly show grief.⁷ Kiska was a vocal orca. She used to call out, chirping and clicking, but in 2011 she went silent when she lost her last companion, Ikaika, son of the Blackfish.⁸ Ikaika was returned to Seaworld after four years because he would constantly taunt and tease Kiska. He was over 6.4 metres long and incredibly agile for his size. He would take bites out of her and chase her around the tank – a tank that would take only ten seconds to cross, end to end. For the next 12 years Kiska was kept in solitary confinement, where she repeatedly bashed her head against the walls of her tank. It was snowing as I sat in the gutter outside Marineland, metres away from where she floated listlessly. My butt was cold and I sobbed. I cried for Rose and for the Big Fish.



In 1801 the first recorded couple honeymooned at Niagara. It wasn't always heart-shaped tubs and champagne towers, but Niagara Falls has been the honeymoon capital of the world for over 215 years.⁹ There must be something about the crashing water and misty spray enveloping the landscape that makes the visible corruption and flying saucer restaurants fade into the background. It's just so fucking majestic.

But Niagara is different in the winter. There are piles of grey snow in the carparks and most of the motels are shut up for the off season. The 'tourist tax' still exists but the town feels a little less seedy, a little less plastic.¹⁰ The significance of Niagara extends far beyond its nostalgic aesthetic appeal. 'Niagara' is a derivative of the Iroquoian word 'Onguiaahra,' which translates as 'thundering water' or 'neck,' depending on the interpretation. The Iroquoian people have many legends and stories associated with Niagara Falls and it has been a significant site for them for generations. The falls were considered a powerful, sacred place.

The Iroquois believed that the waters were controlled by a great spirit named Hah-nu-nah,¹¹ who lived in a cave behind the Falls. I never ventured behind the falls or boarded *The Maid of the Mist*. The ice was so unmanageable that year. It was too dangerous to do water-based activities, so I went to Rochester. I drove 145 km in a blizzard to visit the camera that went to the moon and the Kalart Synchronized Range Finder from Iwo Jima. To hold cameras that belonged to Eadweard Muybridge, Alfred Stieglitz, Edward Steichen, Edward Weston, Ansel Adams and Diane Arbus. To sit in George Eastman's chair and nonchalantly loiter outside the EE Boynton House.¹²

In 2019, Canada banned whales, dolphins and porpoises from being bred or held in captivity, with an exemption for the marine mammals already acquired. In 2021, the S-241 Bill, known as The Jane Goodall Act, had its first reading.¹³ In the bill's preamble it spoke of the urgency regarding Kiska. It suggested that "the Ontario Government had jurisdiction to grant civil standing to Kiska ... that would allow for a court order in her best interests by her own right, such as relocation to the whale sanctuary planned at Port Hilford, Nova Scotia."

Kiska never got to Nova Scotia. She died this year (on my birthday).¹⁴ She was the last killer whale in Canada. Kiska was 47 years old. She had spent 45 of those years in captivity, 12 of those in isolation.

Marineland currently has dolphins, four species of sea lions and 51 beluga whales.¹⁵ Their 'touch and feed show' is currently "under review."¹⁷



My Niagara is as much about photography's complex relationship to memory as it is to my complicated relationship to what was and wasn't photographed. I could hear Kiska in her prison. But I photographed the empty hotels and Taco Bells, while stories from my grandmother and my near-death experience collided in my head. My Niagara is underground and disorientating. She is wet and confronting. She is the itchy scratchy series that just wouldn't let me be. She is all-encompassing. She is beauty, she is brutal, she is violent. The truth can be found floating somewhere in the middle.

As of April 2023, there are 54 known orca in captivity.

Marineland is currently looking for a new owner!¹⁷

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- 1 Niagra [sic] Falls: When a male receives fellatio and, immediately prior to ejaculation, rams his penis into the giver's throat causing them to gag up the semen and have it drip and flow out of their nose. *Urban Dictionary*, <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Niagra%20Falls&page=2> (accessed 27 June 2023).
- 2 The Niagara SkyWheel is a 175-foot tall Ferris wheel that offers a bird's-eye-view of the falls and the surrounding area. I have never really been afraid of heights. I would jump off anything into water. That was until I went on the SkyWheel at Niagara Falls. I am not sure if it was because it was my 40th birthday or because of the high winds and the realisation in said death-trap that you can't sue in Canada.
- 3 In 2015, a former NRP Constable was convicted of smuggling wheels of mozzarella and chicken wings into Canada. Brad Hunter; "Niagara Blues: NRP Has History of Corruption, Brutality," *Toronto Sun*, 30 November 2018, <https://torontosun.com/news/provincial/niagara-blues-nrp-has-history-of-corruption-brutality>. "Former Head of Niagara Falls Housing Authority Pleads Guilty to Stealing Government Funds: Son and Daughter-in-Law Also Convicted," *State Comptroller*, 7 December 2017, <https://www.osc.state.ny.us/press/releases/2017/12/former-head-niagara-falls-housing-authority-pleads-guilty-stealing-government-funds-son-and-daughter>; "7 held in Corruption Linked to Federal Contracts," *New York Times*, 21 November 1985, <https://www.nytimes.com/1985/11/21/nyregion/7-held-in-corruption-linked-to-federal-contracts.html>.
- 4 "Crime Rate in Niagara Falls, New York (NY): Murders, Rapes, Robberies, Assaults, Burglaries, Thefts, Auto Thefts, Arson, Law Enforcement Employees, Police Officers, Crime Map," *City-Data.com*, <https://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-Niagara-Falls-New-York.html> (accessed 20 March 2023).
- 5 Chad Derrick (producer), "Secretly Recorded Footage Exposes Conditions at Ontario's Roadside Zoos," *CTV News*, 6 November 2022, updated 9 November 2022, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/w5/secretly-recorded-footage-exposes-conditions-at-ontario-s-roadside-zoos-1.6139694>.
- 6 According to [travelsafeabroad.com](https://www.travelsafeabroad.com), it is "one of the safest ... cities in the world." Although this fits with my narrative perfectly, it would be remiss of me not to state that I am not sure how reputable this site is or where they get their statistics from. In fact, their claim that "Niagara Falls is completely free of scammers" makes me wonder if the site is actually a scam. "How Safe is Niagara Falls for Travel?," <https://www.travelsafe-abroad.com/canada/niagara-falls/> (accessed 27 June 2023).
- 7 Michael Mountain, "A Mother Orca's Grief – In the Ocean and in Captivity," *The Whale Sanctuary Project*, 3 August 2018, <https://whalesanctuaryproject.org/a-mother-orcass-grief-in-the-ocean-and-in-captivity/>.
- 8 Ikaika was Tilikum's son. Tilikum of Blackfish: the one that degloved his trainer; the one on valium, dubbed a "serial killer" but still forced to perform.
- 9 "Niagara Falls Honeymoons," <https://www.niagarafallsstatepark.com/plan-your-trip/honeymoons> (accessed 27 June 2023).
- 10 Kimia Afshar Mehrabi, "There's a Major Issue with Hidden Fees Being Charged to Tourists at Niagara Falls," *DH Canada*, 11 February 2023, <https://dailyhive.com/canada/major-issue-hidden-fees-charged-tourists-niagara-falls>.
- 11 "The Iroquois Creation Story," *Native Languages of the Americas*, <http://www.native-languages.org/iroquoisstory.htm> (accessed 27 June 2023).
- 12 6 East Blvd, Rochester, NY 14610, United States. The Edward E Boynton House is a private residence designed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1908, in the Prairie School style. "E.E. Boynton House," *Frank Lloyd Wright Foundation*, <https://franklloydwright.org/site/e-e-boynton-house/> (accessed 27 June 2023).
- 13 Parliament of Canada, "Bill S-241, An Act to amend the Criminal Code and the Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act (great apes, elephants and certain other animals)," first reading 22 March 2022, The Honourable Senator Kyln, <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/44-1/bill/S-241/first-reading> (accessed 2 April 2023).
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- 15 "Belugas at Marineland," *The Whale Sanctuary Project*, <https://whalesanctuaryproject.org/whales/belugas-at-marineland/> (accessed 27 June 2023).
- 16 "Discover our Attractions: Arctic Cove," *Marineland*, <https://www.marineland.ca/plan-a-visit/plan/visitor-information/attractions/arctic-cove/> (accessed 10 April 2023).
- 17 John Law, "Marineland Seeks New Owner to 'Evolve, Develop and Grow' the Park," *Niagara Falls Review*, 26 January 2023, <https://www.niagarafallsreview.ca/business/2023/01/26/marineland-seeks-new-owner-to-evolve-develop-and-grow-the-park.html>.