
Beached

by Toni Houston

Through the turrets of his sandcastle, the little boy sees them come in.

At first he thinks they are small submarines, charging in from the deep. But as their metallic bodies pound down on the sand, causing their breath to exhale sharply, the little boy realizes what they are.

The spectacle of their arrival causes him to freeze. There must be a hundred or more. They are surfing in on the waves, propelling into the air, and casting themselves as far as they can onto dry sand. One or two have launched on to the rocks instead, tearing open their sides. Mothers are arriving too, followed by tiny trusting babies. Once landed, they all whistle loudly, encouraging the next ones to join them. More and more jettison through the air, nose-diving past the high tide mark, belly-flopping down, displacing seaweed and driftwood, coming to rest on their stomachs, earthbound.

Finally, the ocean is empty and the beach is full, and the little boy peers over his sand castle, frightened. His gaze moves across the writhing bodies, and comes to rest on the largest dolphin, lying in the middle of his pod.

"Help us, please, help us," calls a deep bubbling voice. "Have mercy."

The little boy hesitates. The feather flag on his castle flutters. He waits to hear more, but there's only the roll and crash of waves. Taking a deep breath, the little boy steps over his hand-dug moat, and walks towards the dolphin. For a moment he hovers nearby, thin and hawk-like, before cautiously crouching down beside the huge silver head.

"Did you say something?" The little boy whispers.

The dolphin looks up to see a child haloed in sun. "Please," he repeats slowly, "have mercy on us."

The little boy straightens, steps back. He turns and looks up at the grand white house on the top of the dunes, the square eyes of its windows glinting blindingly.

"I can't help you," he says to the dolphin. "Daddy will be mad if he sees you here. This is our beach. Daddy owns it. And he doesn't like trespassers. You need to leave. Please."

The dolphin blows out, and bubbles of blood trickle down his cheek. "We cannot," he begins, "we have nowhere else to go..."

The little boy stares, barely listening. He's looking at the blisters on the dolphin's back and the weeping ulcers across the tail. The perpetual upturned smile is there, but this isn't happy Flipper. This isn't the Hollywood kind of dolphin that the little boy has come to know, balancing balls and clapping fins. This one is sad. And it's dying on Daddy's beach.

"You better go," the little boy says. Then he turns and runs as fast as he can, up to the grand white house on the dunes.

Daddy carries a big gun down to the beach. Following him are his friends, clutching champagne glasses and gambling cards. Giggling, the women hesitate where the garden meets sand, their heels sticking like pins in the green pincushion lawn, whilst their menfolk stumble further, following Daddy, down the dunes, grinding shells underfoot, burping.

Daddy stops and scowls, his gaze sweeping over his beach and all the bodies. Most of the dolphins are silent and still now, half buried in their sandy beds. Those still alive are rocking on their bellies and digging their fins into the sand, desperately trying to push themselves even further from the ocean.

"See Daddy?" says the little boy, with a hint of nervous pride.
"Of course I see," the father retorts, cocking his gun.

The little boy looks up at his father, and his father's face is red. Sweat is gathering on his eyebrows and lining his moustache and stinging his eyes. The father blinks sharply, and wipes his sleeve over his forehead.

"Who's in charge here?" Daddy bellows. The big old dolphin raises his tail and slaps it down. Daddy plucks his way through the dying family, and rests one boot on the dolphin's head, just behind the blowhole.

"What do you think you're doing on my property?" Daddy says, his voice thick.
"I beg you, sir, oh-fortunate-one-who-owns-this-beach," the big dolphin says, the words and whistles catching in his throat, "please save us."
"Save yourself," Daddy snaps. "Get your vagabond group of criminals off my territory and back to where you belong."
"We will die," the old dolphin says hoarsely.
"How ridiculous!" Daddy laughs, turning to his friends like a conductor to an orchestra, inciting them to pick up the tune. Perfectly cued, laughter ripples from them all. The little boy holds his breath, willing the laughter to stop.

"How ridiculous!" Daddy repeats. "You, old chap, belong out THERE," he yells excitedly, waving his gun barrel across the ocean, towards the horizon. "And we," he says, jerking his chin to his grand white house on the dunes, "belong HERE."
"No," says the dolphin firmly. "The sea is no longer our home. We cannot go back there."

"And why the hell not?"

"Look at us," the dolphin says calmly. Daddy runs his eyes over the old dolphin's skin. Like the little boy, he sees the ulcers, blisters and boils.

"Too much sun, 'ey?" he sneers.

"Poisons, sir," says the dolphin, looking bravely into Daddy's eyes. "It is still **SIR**, isn't it?"

Daddy takes in a sharp, cigar-roughened breath. For a moment Daddy doesn't move. Then, very slowly, he bends over at the waist, and inspects the dolphin. His cool blue eyes travel over the animal's body, and come to rest on the neck. There, under the blistered skin, is a scar. It's roughened by time and faint in places, but as distinctive as a tattoo.

"You..." he starts to say.

"Yes sir," the old dolphin replies smartly, with a gentle trace of humour.

The little boy sees his father change, and is frightened. Daddy's face has lost its colour and his eyes are round and unblinking and his lips are trembling and catching on his teeth and he's clenching his gun so tightly that his knuckles are white and his veins are blue.

The little boy doesn't like seeing Daddy like this. He prefers Daddy in those photos at home, with his shoulders back and his smile wide and his medals gleaming around his neck.

"You blasted deserter," Daddy mumbles.

"Yes sir," the dolphin replies, "with good reason."

Daddy's boot is still on the dolphin's head. The little boy can see the metal edges of the sole glinting in the sun, and is sure Daddy is going to hurt the dolphin. But instead Daddy lifts his boot, puts aside his gun, and gets down on his knees beside the dying animal. Daddy then does something really strange. He puts his hand on the dolphin's head, and strokes it.

The little boy has seen this tenderness only once before. In black and white. In a photo. Framed in gold. In Daddy's office.

"My moment of triumph, son," Daddy always said about that picture.

It was taken when Daddy was at war, doing heroic deeds. The little boy delighted in hearing about those deeds, and Daddy delighted in retelling them. Tales of fossils and fuels and fighting for what's rightfully yours. Tales of wayward cultures and naughty countries brought into line. And – of particular note – tales of foreign oceans full of explosives that Daddy's navy managed to defuse, and conquer.

They did this with very special help. Long before the war began, a top secret program was underway, and Daddy was boss. He told the little boy that he worked in an aquarium, but when the little boy begged to go, Daddy said no.

Daddy said it wasn't a normal aquarium, with clapping seals and ladies riding killer whales. No, Daddy's aquarium was surrounded by tall wire and guarded by men in towers. Daddy couldn't even talk about his work until after the war, until after he received his medals. It was only then that the little boy finally found out what Daddy did, and why Daddy was a hero.

Daddy trained dolphins to do dangerous things instead of men.

"And this dolphin," Daddy always boasted, photo in hand, "was our star. It was him, and him alone, that located and disabled the underwater mines, that let our ships through, that won us the war."

Daddy said it was a war that secured lots of good stuff, like oil for our cars. Daddy has five cars. The little boy's teacher said that cars make pollution that is now poisoning the sea, but Daddy got really mad when the little boy questioned him about that. "You show some goddamned respect," he said, "and your teacher too."

After that, he wouldn't let the little boy hold the dolphin photo. And he didn't talk again about his heroic deeds.

Standing on the beach now, looking at his Daddy patting the dying dolphin, the little boy knows with surety that this is the star dolphin from Daddy's war.

The little boy relaxes a little, believing Daddy must be happy in this moment. It's a reunion that Daddy always seemed to yearn for.

"After the war ended," Daddy once told the little boy, "there were other battles to fight and other important tasks to master. National security had to be maintained, and our enemies kept in check. A new training program began with our cetacean unit. But the dolphin - yes, my star dolphin - started to rebel. Then, inexplicably, he refused to cooperate altogether."

Shortly afterwards, during a practice operation in the bay, the dolphin escaped. Around his head was a lethal necklace of immeasurable value, still in testing phase, almost perfected. Its loss was reported to the top levels of government, and the navy insisted that Daddy retrieve it before it fell into enemy hands. But Daddy's star dolphin evaded capture, and was never seen again.

"Unforgiveable," Daddy always said.

Daddy's hand stops patting the dolphin. His fingers come to rest over the scar on the neck, where the machine had once been.

"Please sir," says the dolphin, "forgive me."

"My beach...the sea..." Daddy begins, quietly.

"The sea is dying," the dolphin says. "And most of the problem is oil...all that oil that I helped you get."

Daddy remains silent, so the dolphin continues.

"You've drilled the ocean floor for it, you've bled it from the earth's core, you've pumped it into the air, you've spilt it into the sea." The dolphin sucks in a gurgling breath. "So please sir, I beg you a final time, have pity on us. Let us lie for a moment on your beach. Welcome us. Embrace us. Then, please sir, take us to somewhere safe. We don't care where. An aquarium. A zoo. A marine park. A circus. Anywhere but home."

Daddy looks over the bodies of the dolphins, and his face is blank. The little boy has seen this expression before, when Daddy is reading the newspaper or watching the television or cleaning the swimming pool or waiting in the bank line. It's a face with a CLOSED sign across it, windows drawn, door locked. It's a private look, where TRESPASSERS WILL BE PROSECUTED.

"Right," he says, standing up briskly.

"Daddy?" the little boy says, worried.

"I'm making some calls," he yells to his friends, "come on."

Daddy grabs the little boy by the hand, and marches up the beach to his grand white house on the dunes. His leather shoes sound wet and soft like sponges on the corridor tiles, but he doesn't stop to take them off. He releases the little boy without a word, strides into his office, and slams the door.

The tractors arrive shortly afterwards. The little boy knows they are from Daddy's military base because of their funny camouflage colours. Men and women in uniform spill out of them, and work quickly, placing straps under the dolphins' bodies. The little boy's heart quickens as he watches, wondering where the dolphins' new home will be. It's hard to imagine these majestic creatures living out their lives in a big pool in the middle of a city somewhere, but the little boy thinks that maybe some good will come of it, maybe he can visit them on his weekends and watch them do tricks.

Their wounds will heal. And they'll be kept safe.

"Ok, move it, move it! Let's get the first lot going!" Daddy yells from the top of the dunes. The tractors start up, and the little boy watches them drag the dolphins across the sand. But this can't be right. Daddy has his hands on his hips, and the tractors are moving towards the sea. Men and women are in the ocean too, up to their waists in water, unlocking the harnesses and pushing the animals into the deep.

The last one left on the beach is the big old dolphin. He's flipping and writhing with the last of his strength, shaking off the people trying to hold him in position and loop the harness around his belly. Daddy suddenly gets really impatient, and leaps off the dune like a bird of prey.

"Feed it through here you idiot, here! Under and over! Quickly!" he's yelling, and the little boy can see everyone trying extra hard, until the harness is finally in

position. As the tractor drags the dolphin into the sea, Daddy's right there, controlling everything, yelling "Slowly now!" or "To the right a bit" as he makes sure that his old friend is pushed as far as possible into the waves.

The sight of his father wading into the ocean makes the little boy suddenly remember the last part of Daddy's story. "Daddy, Daddy, get out!!!" he starts screaming, but Daddy's too busy to hear him.

Before Daddy got mad with the little boy about his teacher and the criticisms of cars and oil – when Daddy still liked sharing exciting stories about elite people and special forces and top secrets and heroic deeds – the little boy pressed Daddy to tell him more about the dolphin's escape.

"What were you training him to do?" he asked.

Daddy had hesitated. "This isn't something to share with a small kid," he said, and told the little boy to go to dinner.

"Please Daddy," the little boy begged, "I'm a man now, just like you."

Daddy had laughed, and his laugh was hot/cold like a faulty faucet, and he said "Well, maybe you are." Then Daddy walked to the door, looked down the corridor left and right, closed the door, and sat down on the bed beside his son. He gave the little boy the cherished photo, and talked to him with his man-to-man voice that made the little boy swell with pride and dream again of following Daddy's footsteps, wherever they took him.

"Well son, that dolphin was a hero," he began, "The best mine clearer the navy had ever seen. Trained by yours truly."

He stopped and waited for the little boy to smile, which he did. Quickly. Then Daddy's face fell, and his voice deepened.

"Once he'd mastered those skills, he was moved on to other duties."

"What?" the little boy asked.

"Killing enemies."

"Men?"

"Enemies."

"Enemies in the water?"

"Yes," Daddy said solemnly, his shoulders pulled back, his chin lifted. "Enemy divers. Enemies lost at sea. Enemies fallen overboard. Basically any man infiltrating or trespassing our territorial waters."

"Wow," the little boy said, his voice breaking. "How did the dolphin kill them?"

Daddy didn't answer. He got up, took the photo, and opened the door. "That's enough information, son," he said. "Now off you go to dinner."

"Daddy!!! Get out!!!" the little boy yells now. Daddy has waded out of his depth, and is now treading water with his heavy clothing fanning around him, and the wind has come up and the sea is building.

The little boy watches as the big dolphin flicks free of his binding, and faces the incoming wave. The dolphin cuts easily through the wall of water, and the little

boy loses sight of him in the spray and plume. A white crest crashes down on Daddy's head, churning angrily and sucking the man down. It feels like forever before the little boy sees Daddy again, and when he does Daddy is clawing at the surface of the sea like a wild cat, and he's yelling "help, help!" but all his military friends are scrambling out of the water and dragging themselves up the beach.

Then the little boy sees the big old dolphin with the poisoned skin turn and charge towards Daddy, his fin slicing the water like a silver knife. The little boy is too scared to yell anymore, so he just stands there and watches, his mouth open and his voice gone.

Just before impact, the dolphin stops. He raises his head, and looks at Daddy, and expels a deep sigh of air. Daddy frantically backpedals, trying to stay away.

The dolphin dives under. And Daddy's body lifts into the air.

Then the little boy sees Daddy lying across the dolphin's back, and the dolphin is gently catching the next wave to shore. In waist high water, Daddy scrambles off and runs out of the sea.

For a moment the dolphin is beached again.

But this time he flips his fins and arches his back, and swivels around. With three powerful strokes of the tail, he's buoyant again. For a short while the little boy can trace his shape in the waves, before the dolphin is swallowed completely by the darkening sea.

"Take me home," Daddy orders the little boy, a waterlogged arm draped around his son's neck. Without looking back, the pair struggle up their beach, and into the safety of their grand white house on the dunes.

Post script:

This story was inspired by a full page advertisement in the local newspaper of my small coastal Australian town. The advertisement was placed in August 2013, just before the Federal election, and was authorized by the Australian Government.
It read:

**IF YOU COME HERE BY BOAT WITHOUT A VISA
YOU WON'T BE SETTLED IN AUSTRALIA.**

This story is therefore dedicated to all the desperate refugees on our planet, who no longer have a place they call home.

In time, it could be any one of us.
