The Last Whale

CHRIS VICK



ZEPHYR

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Head of Zeus Ltd
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The Whales

Abi runs to the house, kneels by Tig's bed and whispers loudly.

'Tig, they're coming!'

Tig opens one eye, then jumps straight out of bed. Together, the sisters thunder down the stairs and out of the house.

Abi looks to the cloud-filling sky, to the horizon. Nothing yet.

'Best get jumpers and jackets. Weather's changing. We could be a while.'

'Shall we tell the others?' Tig says.

'No, by the time they get up it will be over. This is for us.'

They grab what they need and head to the rocks, where Moonlight waits.

'The whales will soon be both audible and visible to you. They will pass the island within five minutes.'

'How close will they come?' Tig asks, breathlessly.

'Between one and two hundred metres, if their trajectory does not change.'

'How close is that?'

'Close enough,' Abi says.

The sisters watch the sea, hungry for the first sighting.

'There!' Tig shouts. A spout of misted seawater shoots into the air: whale breath. Then another and another. A back arches; a dark, distant island emerges before vanishing in the choppy sea. Then there are two islands. Three. Then many. Fluke fins rise in the sky and sink gracefully into the surge. As though they are waving.

The whales are to the south, heading north. They are not close yet, but they will be. They move at great speed. And what seems at first like a random pattern of surfacing, breaching, spouting and diving, gradually reveals a rhythm, as each whale rises to breathe, disappears into the blue, then breaches again.

'How many?' Abi says.

'Twenty or more,' Moonlight replies.

Abi notes the direction and the speed of the whales. They will pass quickly. It will be – already *is* – amazing.

But then the whales change course. As one they dive, and when they surface are facing away. It's balletic. The pod curves towards the sea, as though to circle the island, not to get too close.

'They're moving away,' Tig cries with savage disappointment.

'We'll get binocs, that way you can…' Abi looks at the whales, to the expanse of windblown sea they are heading for, then to the rowing boat. Swiftly, she estimates time and distance, effort and possible outcome.

'We can do better than binocs, if we're quick.'

She stands, picks up Moonlight and runs to the boat with Tig following.

'Come on, Tig. You want to see whales? We'll record them too.'

Abi puts Moonlight in the middle of the boat, unties the mooring rope, and sets to heaving the boat into the shallows.

'What about Mum and Dad – shouldn't we tell?' Tig says.

'No time, we have to hurry. Help me!'

'There's only one lifejacket.'

Only Abi's lifejacket has been left in the boat. It's big for Tig, but Abi will adjust the straps. Once they're out there. Once they're on their way.

'Get in, Tig!'

Tig stands, hesitating, feet on the shingle. So Abi comes and picks her up – 'Whoa, you're heavy,' and tips her sister into the boat, then climbs aboard.

'It would be wise to put the lifejacket on immediately, Abi. Sea conditions have changed. I calculate a—'

'Stop, Moonlight.'

Abi pauses to put the lifejacket on Tig, as if she's helping dress her for school, and with fumbling, shaking fingers begins undoing, adjusting and tightening straps.

She looks over her shoulder. The whales are moving rapidly. She pulls the stomach strap across Tig's belly and fastens the clip. But the lifejacket is loose. 'That'll have to do.' Then she's putting locks in their holes, and oars in the locks, and she's rowing.

She's practised now, knows every part of the inlet, and keeps her direction true. Yet when they reach open water, the water troughs and peaks, pushes and pulls in new ways. It's a different element and place to the calm sea she is used to.

But she's stronger, more experienced, and she handles the oars with confidence and strength.

'What is your plan, Abi?' Moonlight says. *'What do you want me to do?'*

'We're going right in their path. I'm going to tie you to the rope and drop you over the side. You will record and film.'

'Okay, Abi. Are you confident you can navigate the complexities of this mission? The whales are fast. The sea and weather conditions are changing, becoming erratic, less predictable.'

'Yes.'

Tig sits aft, facing Abi, and points her arm to the right, then to the left. A human compass guiding the boat. Abi watches her sister's face: the excitement, and – as a wave hits the boat, showering them with spray – the fear. Over Tig's shoulder the island is small and getting smaller. She looks over her own shoulder: the whales are larger, nearer, faster.

'Won't it be scary?' asks Tig.

'It'll be fine,' Abi says, wrestling the oars through current and waves.

'I'm frightened, Abs.'

'I said it'll be fine!' Abi snaps. And instantly regrets it. But they are almost there and Tig will be amazed.

The islands are far away now, they are in open sea. And she's handling it.

A few more pulls and they'll be directly in the whales' path. The lead whale breaches and breathes. Abi gasps, the fountain fissure of steam must be four metres high. The back of the whale curves over and over and keeps on coming. The length of several buses. It's gigantic, colossal. Monstrous.

A bellowing, trombone bass call thrums through the water. The boat shakes and vibrates.

'The boat is not stable, Abi,' Moonlight says. *'Is your plan viable?'*

Moonlight has asked a good question. Is this even a good idea? The boat is so puny. And now she's stopped rowing, it sways and rocks wildly.

Abi works with clumsy fingers. The rope has to be secure, she cannot risk losing the AI.

She criss-crosses the rope as if she's tying up a gift.

'Ready, Moonlight?'

'Yes, Abi. Beneath the surface the recordings will be uncontaminated by other noises.'

Abi lowers the device into the water. When it's sunk several fathoms she winds the rope around the rowlock

and offers it to Tig, who is low in the boat, holding on to the gunnel with tight white knuckles. There is no need to give it her, the rope is secure, but it gives Tig something to do.

The boat rocks and spins; the toy of ever stronger wind and currents.

'You'll have to hold this, while I steady the boat with the oars.'

'What about Tiger?'

'Tiger will be fine in the hold, just put him on the bottom of the boat for now.'

'He'll get wet.'

'He can dry later.' Again, Abi winces at her quick anger.

She grabs the toy and places the rope in the hand that held it. She puts Tiger on the floor of the hull, then refits the oars and tries to settle the boat.

Then the whales come.

Abi sees the leader, its grey and white markings rising out of the blue. A ghost, becoming an animal, becoming a moving mountain.

The water froths, bubbles erupt, filled with minuscule fish, and a chasm of a mouth opens wide. It is feeding.

Another whale rises. More bubbles and a great gaping jaw.

The same thing happens all around them. Here, there. There, then there. Too many to count.

'Whale soup!' Tig shouts.

Another comes. Its nose pierces the surface, its head

rears, sending metre-high waves in all directions. And for a second, they see an eye. Not human, not animal.

It passes barely ten metres ahead.

Abi's whole body shakes. The whale-wave hits the boat and Tig screams. Fear becomes awe, becomes something else. Abi is stripped to the core of herself. It's raw and terrifying.

'Wow,' she says, through trembling lips. 'Wow!' But…

This is not safe. Abi heaves the oars. This is too close. Better at a distance. Not here, not in the eye of this storm of whales and wind and waves.

She pulls at the too-heavy, sluggish oars, but is stopped by Tig's scream and pointing.

Abi drops the oars, looks all around.

They are in the thick of whales. There is no escape, only a wish, a prayer that the moving mountains will pass quickly.

But they don't. The whales slow, pausing in their pathway. A traffic jam in this ocean highway.

Are they aware of the boat? Of the puny humans inside?

As though to answer, another ghost of swirling, white pattern appears below.

A shape; shadows merging and morphing. Disorienting the seascape, changing it.

A young whale, only a few metres, a slow torpedo. Even though it is only a calf it dwarfs the boat.

It nudges alongside, breaks the surface, rolls on its side and stares.

Its pectoral fin slaps the water like an arm.

In this moment, Abi knows, it is as curious about them as they are about it. Its eye looks from Abi to Tig to Abi.

They are the ones being studied. She and Tig.

Tig leans forward and in a voice breaking with both joy and fear, shouts, 'Hello, whale!'

The young whale sinks under the waves. A great groaning yawn fills the air. The boat shakes. The whale is gone.

Tig looks back at Abi. Her fear has vanished. Her grin is so wide. The sheer awe on her face. It's a thousand Christmases at once.

'Did you see, Abs? Did you see!'

Abi is thrilled. This moment. Its magic, its mind-numbing, heart-stopping, skin-tingling, bone-shaking wonder. It's the purest, strongest feeling she has ever felt. She can't help crying.

'Did you see, Abs?' Tig insists.

All Abi can do is nod.

The waves are rough and getting rougher by the minute. But worth it. For this.

Then, as though time paused and now begins again, the whales move forward.

They pass on both sides. Two go under the boat. They don't hit, but it's more than unnerving. The boat wobbles and rocks, and Abi has to fight furiously just to keep an even keel.

The whales have almost passed. As soon as they are free, she will haul up Moonlight, and row them home as fast as she can.

She's been so focused on the whales, on navigating the waves hitting the boat, that she hasn't looked wide and far, hasn't seen how much the morning has changed; how big the waves on the horizon are, how the clouds race across the sky.

She sees now, though. Her stomach clenches.

There's no time to wait. She pulls the left oar till they have turned 180 degrees. She wrenches the oars in, grabs the rope and – hand over hand – brings Moonlight to the surface. Then…

It happens in the blink of an eye.

A whale launches some ten metres in front of them. A slow-motion rocket suspended in the air. Abi and Tig hold their breath. The moment freezes.

The whale tips sideways, like a felled redwood crashing into the water.

The splash makes a wave that smashes the boat, tipping it.

The gunnel slips beneath the surface. Water rushes in.

The boat tries to bob upright. But a cruel hand of water holds the port side. And drags the boat down.

'Tig!' Abi screams. She reaches out. But icy water swallows her. Possesses her.