

DELPHINUS: A Story of the Waves

The bay was glass-smooth, with just a hint of white breaking at the edge of the sand, when I went out to kayak that morning. I paused behind my car and zipped up my wetsuit. The yellow kayak rested on the roof rack, and I hoisted it down. The single shell was light enough for me to carry by myself, even though Tom laughed and called me Wonder Woman when I did.

I waded out into the still Pacific water and started paddling away from the beach. Catalina loomed steadily through the mist, as I aimed the shell across the twenty-six miles of open ocean.

When I was clear of the breakers, I paused, resting my paddle on my knees. The sun was cutting through the mist, filling the air with gold and rose tints, as though through a church window, only higher and filled with light. It was very still, and I felt briefly, foolishly, uneasy. No gulls cried overhead, no seals barked from the rocks of Catalina ahead of me. The world seemed to be waiting, holding its breath. Even the mist was quiet and undisturbed, except for rays of sunlight splintering the curtain.

I settled my feet into the kayak and began paddling out towards the rocky island. The hiss of my paddle, and my own breathing, sounded impossibly loud. Like my breathing this morning, before I left. I paddled into a thicker patch of mist, trying not to think of this morning. But it played itself out before me, like a movie camera aimed into the low fog.

“There goes Wonder Woman,” Tom sneered watching me pull on my bathing suit.

I tried to decide if he was hung over or still drunk from last night. “I don’t want to talk about it,” I replied.

“There goes Wonder Woman, out to save the world.”

Now I knew he was still drunk. I watched him stumble to the fridge and pull out another beer. “Why don’t you get off my case?”

“Why don’t you get off mine?” Tom swigged down half the can and belched. “Go on, get out. And don’t bother coming back if you can’t be civil.”

I hadn't been able to think of anything to say, so I just left, hating myself for my meekness. Now, sitting in the thinning fog, I thought of all the hateful things I could say, clever, flippant retorts that would go right over his Neanderthal head.

A squeaking sound startled me out of my unpleasant reverie. I looked to my left, and saw a large dolphin poke its head out of the water. It shook its head up and down, squeaking and whistling like a store full of toy trains.

"Hey there," I said. I held out my hand, warily, because a dolphin had once bitten my hand down to the bone. "Come to wish me a good morning?"

Sharp pointed teeth closed briefly over my wrist and tugged me forward. The dolphin whistled again, and I imagined it sounded anxious or worried. If dolphins ever had those emotions. I thought how nice it must be to be a dolphin. Roll around in the waves, dive for fish all day long, bask in the sun. And greet kayakers with passive-aggressive boyfriends.

The dolphin squeaked at me, then left, leaping high over me, shining in the sun. It vanished in a huge splash, and wide ripples spread over the smooth surface of the water. I saw it speed off towards Catalina. I picked up my paddle and followed.

I was tired and winded by the time I reached the outer shore of the island. On impulse, I shipped my paddle and rolled off the kayak. The icy Pacific water felt good on my aching arms and shoulders, and I rolled through the waves, cheerfully wondering what the dolphins would make of me, if they saw me. But I didn't see any of them, even the friendly one who had greeted me that morning.

Then I heard something strange. A deep hissing noise, a terrible sound that sent the gulls screaming up from the cliffs above me. And suddenly I was being dragged away from the sheltering cliffs, by water that was horribly, impossibly pulling away from the coast.

A tsunami. Dear God, and here I was, twenty miles from the safety of our hillside-built house. I made a grab for the kayak as the receding waves sucked it away from me, but all I managed to catch was the paddle. Wild with panic, I hung onto the paddle as though it was a life raft and began kicking away from Catalina, hoping to find deeper water where the tsunami would pass me by.

But I knew it was hopeless. I heard another sound, like a long, drawn-out sonic boom, and I saw a long, curling white line far away on the horizon. The tsunami would smash my body against the uncaring rocks of Catalina, and probably no one would know or care that I was gone. Certainly Tom wouldn't.

A flash of silver drew my eye down from the awful spectacle of the approaching wave. It was the dolphin again. He put his head out of the water and squealed anxiously at me. He caught my wrist again in his teeth, and began pulling me after him, faster than I could swim.

He must be taking me to safety. I couldn't imagine why I thought that. We were too close to the island, and the water was growing shallow. Surely, we would both die when the wave slammed home.

And then the first breaker caught us and tossed us high into roiling foam. I choked on salt water, struggling against the hold of the dolphin, as he drew me down into the curling center of the wave.

Then we were clear, and I gasped for air. But I had only one breath before the dolphin pulled me down again. Again, the wave broke over us; but we were nearer the shore now, and I wasn't sure which would be worse, to die against the rocks or die of drowning.

The third time he dragged me under, I must have taken a deeper breath. We went much deeper this time. The water was calmer farther down, and I was able to kick myself alongside the broad flanks of the dolphin.

He waited until the wave passed over, and then we shot skyward. As we leaped clear of the boiling sea, I was startled to realize that, although I'd leaped as high as the dolphin, he was no longer holding my wrist in his jaws. Then I realized that was because I no longer had hands, but two wide gray flippers extending from my torpedo-shaped body. As we breached, I saw the silver-gray length of my body ended in broad, flat flukes. I shouted aloud in joy, and the sound came from the blowhole atop my head.

The tsunami was ebbing. We rode the fourth wave far out to sea, where the other dolphins awaited us. They clustered around me, squeaking and shrilling excitedly, until the big dolphin shooed them away. Then all together, we leaped high and dove and swept out to sea.

Along the way, we passed my shattered kayak, pulled by the currents back towards the shore. Perhaps people would find it, or perhaps not; perhaps Tom would care, or perhaps not. I was with my people, the ones who cared, living my life on the open sea.