

The Stranded Whale by Jane Yolen

September 1971

We were walking home from school,
Hurrying along the top of the dunes
Because ma always hates when we're late for super.

Martin had basketball practice. Josh had stayed after school for
extra help in math. Long division is hard, he says.

I say it's easy
I needed to use the encyclopedia for a project about our state
The last bus had already gone, so we had to walk,
But since there were three of us it wasn't too bad.

Even hurrying, Josh took time to joke about how short I am.
He thinks because he's a minute older than me
He can talk that way.

We came to the big bend where you can see across the inlet to the
roof of our house and our boat beyond-
Meaning that Dad was already heading home from fishing.
The tide was going out, so he'd be hurrying, too.

The boys began running around me in circles,
Singsonging my name, "Sally, Sally, in the alley..."
So I was other only one looking forward and the first to see it.

Ahead on the beach was this big gray thing, humped up on the
drying sand.
This being Maine, the beach was full of boulders,
But that was no rock.

"Look!" I cried, pointing.

Both the boys turned at once, seeing what I saw:
A stranded whale lying on its side.

with the outgoing tide too far behind it-
so it couldn't get back to the water on its own.

Running, slipping down the dune,
I stripped off my shoes, book bag, sweater,
Leaving the bag and shoes on the sand.
As I ran toward the ocean,
It must have looked like I was chasing the water,
Which was fast heading out to the east.
I ran past beached starfish,
Past little transparent jellyfish
Breathing in and out on the sand,
Past busy little crabs going
From tide pool to tide pool.
When I got to the water at last,
I plunged the sweater in
Till it was completely soaked.
The water was a shock, so cold.
I could smell the brine.

I ran to the whale.
It stank of fear and deep water,
I wrung the sweater out on the whale's side,
Then placed the wet bulk under its eye.

The boys chased off to the ocean as well,
Dipped their sweaters in, ran back,
To place them on the whale's tale, on its fins.

The whale's eye, the size of a bicycle tire,
Turned toward us.
It looked like it was weeping.

We had a whole ocean of water,

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But I was afraid that it wouldn't be enough.

"We need help," I said.

Josh raced off, to an emergency phone

Halfway along the beach,

Maybe half a mile away.

The policeman who answered

Said he'd call the Coast Guard,

Though it took them twenty minutes

To get to us,

So we kept wetting down the whale,

one sweater, two sweaters at a time.

Help arrived in a big blue camper bus
with swirls and slogans painted on its side,
followed by three pickup trucks.

The moon was just starting
to climb over the horizon.

Nine men and a woman named Eve\

Leaped out of the bus and trucks

Like clowns from the circus.

"Good job, kids," one man called,

Though we hadn't done all that much.

Then the men rocked and pushed the whale back and forth toward
the outgoing tide

Martin and Josh tried to help.

Eve shook her head and said to me,

"That's Leviathan, the great whale in the Bible.

They won't be moving it very far."

She was right. They hardly moved it an inch.

And by the time they quit rocking,

The ocean was even farther away.

And the whale even more tired than the men.

Josh came back and stood by me.

He had tears in his eyes.

Not me, I was too mad to cry.

Mad at the unforgiving ocean,

Rushing away from the shore.

Mad at our short arms

And the whale's long body.

Mad that we didn't have a boat, a winch,

Long ropes to pull it into the sea.

Mad at everything.

The grown-ups hauled more water

In beg steel buckets from the Coast Guard truck,

And pots and pans from the camper.

None of it was enough.

Eve drove the camper into town

And came back with sandwiches and soda pop.

A bunch more cars followed after her,

All come to help, or so they said.

Everyone ate and drank like it was a party,

Standing or squatting right next to the whale's flukes or tail

All the while soaking it with water.

I had a sip of Josh's pop,

Then went back to talk to the whale,

to the eye like it was an ear,

Telling the whale how it was beautiful and strong,

How we would miss it, whatever happened next.

At last, though just as the sun was setting,

The whale shut its great eye.