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## A Whale of a Time

As babies, they were just vaguely aware of coming into the world; one of water, masses of it. In fact, except for the sky above, the sea was everything for them because they were whales. They were only young at the moment; but according to the adults they would grow up in time; and they would learn many things along the way. As it happened, that particular way was proving to be really, really long. It seemed to be taking an age to get to wherever they were supposed to be going. "Are we there yet, Grandma?" asked young Dipper. He was called that because he loved diving down in the water, more so than the other whales.

"Not yet, dear," said the old whale in answer to Dipper's question, one he kept on asking as they swam along following the coast. "Just be patient and keep going."

"But we're tired, Granny," complained Pearl. A rare white whale, she was Dipper's cousin.

"Which is why we are making this journey in stages," explained their Grandmother, "So that it's not too hard for you young ones. Soon you can rest and play for a while when we arrive at the next bay. It's lovely, as you will see."

"How come you know all these places, Grandma? Have you been to them before?" asked Rollo, the third whale calf in the family. He had been given his name because he couldn't quite get the hang of turning on his side to wave a flipper in the air. Much of the time, he completely rolled over.

"Oh, yes, my dear," she replied, "Many, many times: every year since I can remember."

"You must be very old, then," suggested Dipper.

Granny chuckled as only whales can. "Too old for many things now," she said, "Except for looking after you children. I like to think I do it quite well, and it allows your parents to get on with more important things. And before you ask," she put in quickly, "You will learn what those things are, bit by bit as you grow. Now, stay with me and don't wander off. We'll be there soon."

The pod of whales – that's what a group of whales like this one is called, by the way – they first sighted the bay as they rounded a headland. It truly was beautiful with dazzling blue water edged by a line of white sand. Pearl spotted something floating on the surface just out from the beach. "What's that, Granny?" she asked.

"I can't say for certain," the old whale started to explain. "We often see them from time to time as we swim past the coast."

"Is it a fish?" asked Dipper.

"I don't think so," said Grandma. "At least, they never seem to go under the sea, just sit on the top of it. And if you look carefully, you'll see little creatures moving about on it."

"Well, they can't be fish either," commented Rollo. "What are they doing here – just sitting?"

The peculiar thing that the whales didn't think to be a fish was, as you may already have guessed, a boat; and the little creatures moving about on it were people. At the moment they

were just sitting, as Rollo had observed; at least the boat was, but the people were standing, leaning against the rails, peering out to sea. And at last, the only reason they were there had arrived - the whales were here! "There they are!" called out an excited lady, "And look - one of the babies is white. That's so special. I really must get a photo of it."

Further out to sea, the whales experienced underwater noise and vibrations as the person driving the boat started its engine. "Ooh, that feels funny," said Dipper. "What is it, Grandma?"

"Something else I'm not sure about," sang the old whale. "What I do know is that when it is heard and felt, the floating thing begins to move. If this one is the same as some we've seen in the past, it may come towards us, perhaps for the creatures to have a closer look at us. Now, I don't believe they mean us any harm, and the creatures seem to like us waving to them; but we must keep our distance and stay well clear of their floating thing."

All of the whales put on a show for the people in the boat. The older ones turned on their sides and waved flippers, then would raise their tails in the air and bring them down to splash the surface. Pearl copied what the grown-ups were doing; and Rollo did try, not very successfully as usual. "Oh, my," exclaimed one of the people, "That baby one's turned right over. I hope it's alright..." Then: "Thank goodness - it's back up again." Someone else said: "One of the other calves went under and it seems to have been down far too long."

The calf the man was talking about was Dipper. He was curious to see what the floating thing looked like underneath, and he figured because he couldn't be seen on the surface no-one would know how close to the boat he was going. As he was nearing it, he paused and just hung in the water. What had caused him to stop was a reef, a ridge of craggy rocks running part-way across the mouth of the bay. The problem was: *he* could see it, but he suspected the creatures probably couldn't. At least it seemed so, and if their floating thing kept coming it would crash right into the rocks. He had to warn them!

Dipper zoomed up at such speed that he broke the surface and sailed into the air, coming down on his belly with a huge splash. Then he began waving his flippers and slapping his tail. Not that he could know, but it was the wrong thing to do. Instead of accepting it as a warning, the people on the boat thought it was just another whale display. "Isn't this great?" said a lady who was leaning out from the bow rail, camera in hand, frantically snapping photo after photo. Then she spotted Pearl a bit further out. "There's the white one, John," she called back to the driver as she pointed ahead. "Can you get me closer?"

It was a disaster in the making. John did as requested, totally unaware of the danger lurking beneath the surface. He picked up speed for a moment; but it didn't last long. Even the whales felt the grinding crunch as the bow of the boat ploughed into the reef. For the people on board it was total shock. There were gasps and cries; then a woman blurted out: "Barbara's gone! She must have fallen in, and she can't swim!" Panic ensued. Tony, one of the men kicked off his shoes and dived into the sea. It was a brave but thoughtless action. Barely below the surface, his head struck a rock. In moments, he was back up; floating face down in the water. John jumped in, swam over and grabbed a handful of shirt; then began pulling the unconscious Tony to the side of the boat where both of them were hauled on board. The woman, Natalie, began sobbing and whispered in desperation: "There's no sign of Barbara... We've lost her." Everyone on board fell silent as they stared gloomily at the sea.

If Dipper could have heard, he wouldn't have understood. As it was, he was beyond earshot, down below and heading for the creature which he had seen fall in and was now struggling frantically and blowing bubbles from its mouth. Clearly, it wasn't able to swim well; but it was obviously air-breathing and needed to surface before it drowned. Despite knowing he had been told not to go too close, Dipper couldn't just leave the creature floundering. So, he did the

only thing he could think of, the one thing he was good at. He dived under the creature, paused beneath it; then rose up until he felt it touching his back.

There was every chance she would veer away in fright; but when Barbara felt something solid under her, she didn't care what it was, just clung to it for dear life. Dipper started going up, slowly so that the creature didn't slide off his slippery back. It took only a few seconds to break the surface; but for the woman barely managing to hold her breath it seemed to take an age. Then she felt the breeze on her face and was able to take in a huge gulp of air.

The people on the boat were truly amazed. "I don't believe it," exclaimed John. "That whale's brought Barbara up. She can't swim to the boat, though. I'll go over and help her."

"You won't need to," said Natalie. "Barb's got her own helper."

Dipper stayed on the surface and coasted to the side of the floating thing where the creature on his back was pulled aboard. Just before it was, he felt a gentle stroke on his back and heard a strange sound. He didn't know what "Thank you" meant; but it didn't matter – he had saved the creature from drowning. Turning to give a final wave of his flipper, he headed back out to join his family. At first he thought Grandma would scold him for going too close to the floating thing; and she did sound a little stern: "That was very disobedient of you, young Dipper. But," she added in a softer tone: "It was also very brave and kind. I am proud of you..."

More vibrations and noise reached the pod of whales. "The floating thing is trying to move," commented Rollo, "But it seems to be stuck." They looked towards the boat which didn't seem to be going anywhere. Water was churning at the back end, but that was all.

On board the boat, John increased the engine speed as he tried to reverse clear of the rocks. "Everyone to the stern," he commanded. "That may help raise the bow a bit." But it didn't and the boat remained caught on the reef.

Dipper saw this from under the water where, surprisingly, he had been sent by his Grandmother to see what the problem was. On his return, he confirmed what they all imagined had happened. "It's still stuck," he reported, "The front looks a bit bent, but it doesn't seem to have any holes in it. Is there anything we can do, Grandma?"

The old whale thought for a moment, then announced: "I don't believe you children can – you're too small; but I'm much bigger and stronger. I'm going over there. You can come with me, but stay clear, just in case."

"In case of what, Granny?" asked Pearl.

After an extended pause, Granny merely repeated: "Just in case."

The three young ones followed their Grandmother to the floating thing. "Wait here," she said. So they did as they were told and watched. Slowly and carefully, the huge whale moved close until her nose was touching the front of the boat. The noise from the engine went quiet. The old whale started edging forward, pushing and nudging; and little by little, with a grinding scrape the thing began floating free.

Now there was noise again, and it was coming from the creatures which were clapping and cheering and laughing.

"Wow!" exclaimed Barbara. "Will we have some tales to tell when we get back home?"

"And we will," said Tony, "Get back home, that is. And all thanks to those amazing whales."

As they watched the floating thing head off out of the bay, the whales gave the creatures a final wave and a few tail splashes; and the truly grateful creatures waved back. Grandma formed her beaming whale smile. "Well, children," she said. "I think we've proved today that with a bit of kindness, all creatures can learn to live together in happiness. I doubt it gets much better than this." And the young whale calves agreed.