

## 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 supper.

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 the 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 tail, 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 that 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 big 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,  
into 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.

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It gave out a huge sigh,  
like wind off the ocean.  
The sign smelled like seaweed,  
like lobsters in Dad's traps,  
like gutted fish on the pier.  
and then it was gone, just like that.  
I wondered how that whale—so big when it was alive—could  
suddenly seem so much smaller, now that it was dead.  
Didn't make any sense, but there it was.

I held Josh's hand all the way home,  
or maybe he held mine.  
Martin trotted ahead of us, to let Ma know  
we were coming, why we were late.

Ma was mad because supper had gone stone cold,  
so mad she was crying and couldn't catch her breath.  
Papa could have whipped us for staying out so late.  
But he didn't, just put his arms around us, saying,  
"It's all right, kids, it's all right."  
His clothes were damp from being out all day in his boat,  
and he smelled like the sea.

And then, the Coast Guard man came by.  
He gave Josh, Martin, and me each a brown medal  
with a picture of a whale on one side,  
ocean waves on the other.

"You never covered the blowhole," he said,  
as if he thought it was the highest praise.

But why would we have done that?  
Last year Grandpa died trying to catch his breath,  
and suddenly I remember him telling me once  
that a whale's just a man writ large.

I sure wouldn't have covered Grandpa's nose,  
his blowhole he used to call it as a joke.

So, the whale died and we were heroes.  
Yet somehow I was still mad.  
I put my medal in the drawer  
and never took it out again.

I'd have given that old medal back  
in a Portland instant  
just to see old Leviathan alive again,  
swimming joyously out to sea,  
spouting through its blowhole,  
tail slapping against the water,  
black eyes shining.  
I'd give that medal back for good  
if I could see it one more time  
heading out to deep water,  
lifting its tail, and diving deep,  
and free.