

FORTIFYING FABLES: WALLY THE WHALE

On priorities

"Thar she blows!" The cry rang out from a passing ship's crow's nest.

"Dive, Wally! This is no time to be showing off your breaching and spouting. That's not a passenger ship."

Wally the whale, who had been enjoying his childlike cavorting and ocean acrobatics, grumblingly joined the rest of his "school" mates in the pod who were on a hunt for food.

"Sorry, Mother," he said.

"And ye'd better lie low and hold yer breath for a while," said his father as a harpoon shot through the water from a rowboat overhead. "Unless ye want to end up as soap 'n' candles, 'n' bone fer a fancy woman's corset afore yer time. In fact, it'd be wise for us all to lie low."

"But I can just flip the boat over with my tail, right, Dad?"

"Not this time, Wally. Ain't necessary. Take a little spyhop. See? They've already given up and are heading back to ship."

"Your father's flipped a few over in his time when it came to a crisis," said Wally's mother. "But he's learned that discretion is the better part of valor. Haven't you, Herman?"

"Aye, Hermione. And I got them ol' harpoon scars to prove it. Coulda saved meself a lot o' pain if I'd kept my

eyes on the bigger picture. Some o' me mates, like Dick, weren't so lucky."

"Any-currents," said Hermione, "we are all hungry and I do believe dinner's in sight."

There below, and quite a few yards ahead of them, an enormous shoal of herring was wending its way through the abundant plankton and coral. Seeing the whales approaching, the fish picked up speed, except for one female herring that inexplicably dropped back from being at the head of the shoal until she was fluttering in the water alongside Wally. Her eyes were mocking.

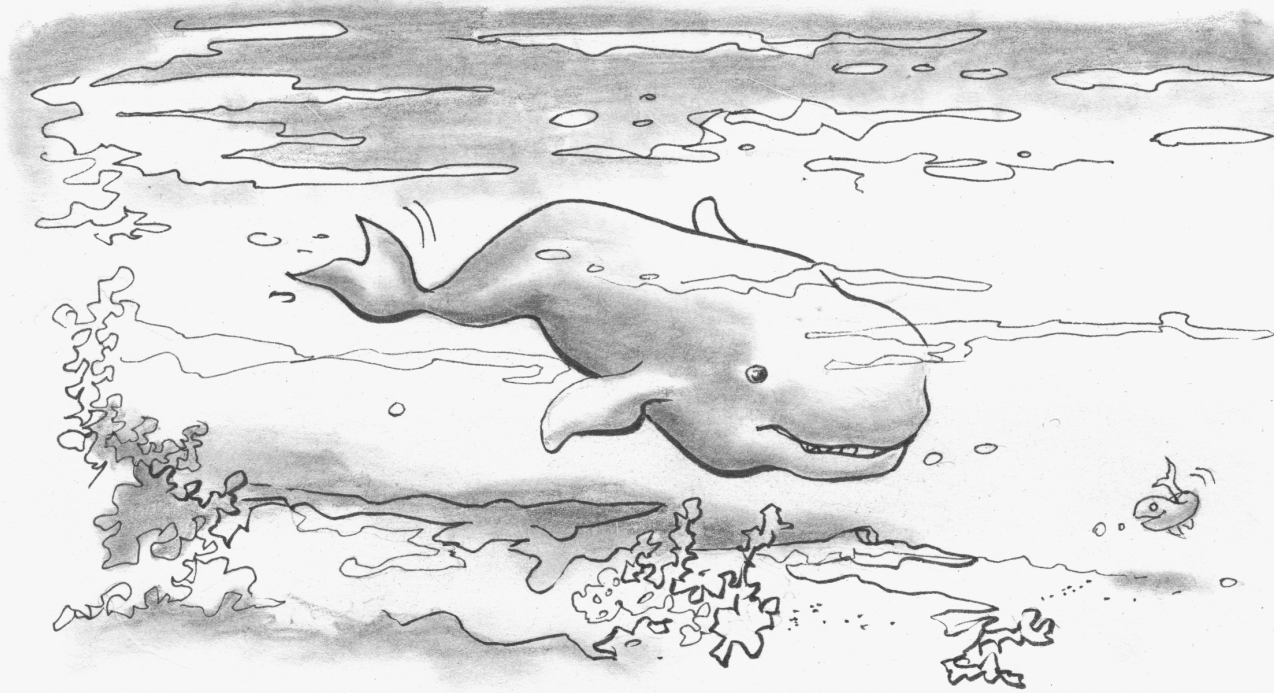
"Think you're pretty cool, don't you, big boy?"

"What do you mean?"

"Saw you showing off back there. But it takes a bit more than a breach and a spout to impress me."

Angrily, Wally snapped his jaws at the giggling little fish, which deftly darted out of his way.

"Wally! Get back in the pod," said Melville, one of his younger brothers, seeing him lagging behind the group. "She's not worth it. Up ahead there's a whole shoal from where she comes."



"Plenty more fish in the sea, huh?" said the herring. "But look at big, brave Wally—can't even catch one of us!"

Infuriated, Wally, with Melville's cries of caution fading behind him, took off after the little herring who was now zipping her way through the plankton and leading the confused young whale in all directions as he bumped his head and scraped himself on the jagged coral.

Wally was starting to get exhausted when he saw a sandbank looming ahead of him. The water was becoming shallower, yet he hadn't lost sight of the herring which, strangely enough, acted as if she didn't want him to. There she was, heading for the sandbank and still merrily giggling as Wally chased her.

Suddenly, Wally came to a grinding halt in the sodden seabed. He flapped his flukes and pushed with all his might, which drove him further forward until his head jutted out of the water and his hulk of a body was embedded in the sand. He looked around and realized to his dismay that he was almost at shore.

"Mission accomplished!" Wally heard the little herring chirp. Looking down into the water, he saw her flit off into the ocean's depths.

Wally struggled and gasped, but he could not move.

"I'm beached," he said to himself. "I've heard about this happening to other whales, but I never thought it would happen to me."

The sun was setting and, sadly pondering his fate, Wally finally fell asleep.

"Look, Grandpa, it's a whale!"

Wally awoke early the next morning to the sight of a barefoot little girl running across the beach toward him.

"Is he dead?" she asked.

"No. He's jes' marooned," replied an old fisherman who hobbled behind her, dragging a net and leaning on his cane. "But if we don't get him back into the ocean soon, he will be. The tide's gone out, and it's a long haul to the sea. He won't make it till this evenin'."

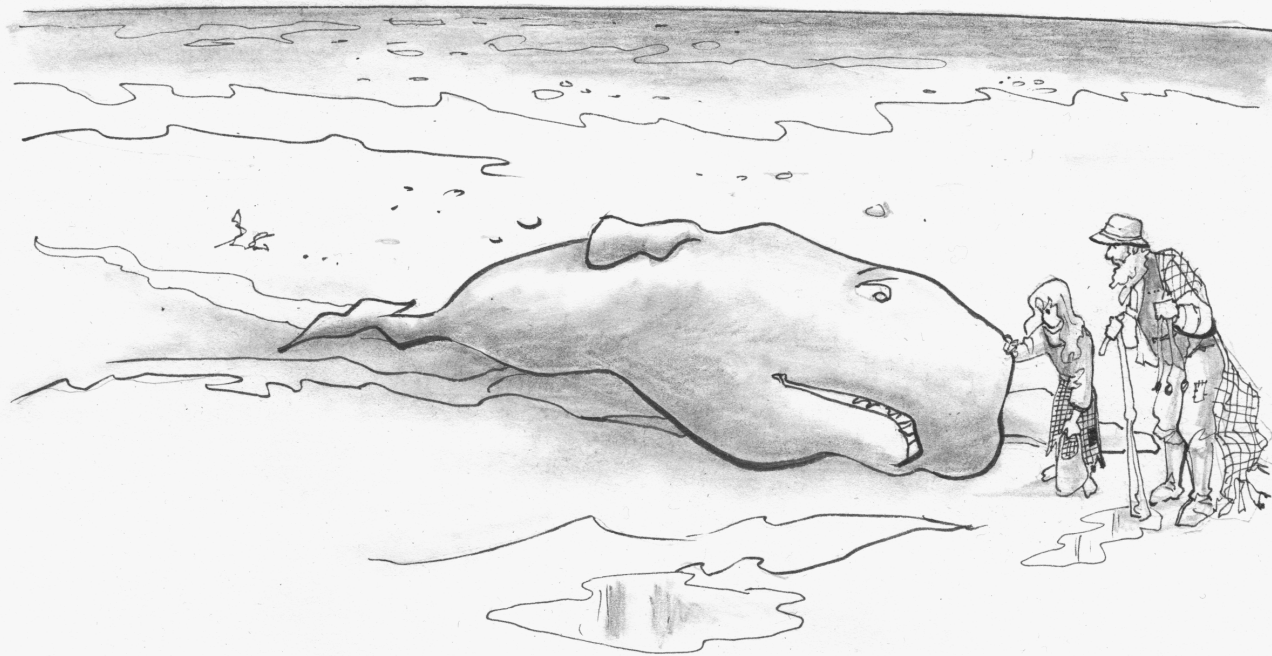
The little girl burst into tears. "But what are we going to do, Grandpa?"

"Go and call the villagers. Run up and down them there streets, tell 'em to bring ropes and a couple o' rowboats quick, afore the sand gets too dry. Good thing he's a young'un, otherwise it would be impossible."

"Dear God," said the little girl, "please help this poor whale to get safely back out to sea."

Wally closed his eyes and smiled; he had been worried until he heard the little girl's prayer. She left him with a comforting pat on his head and scampered off.

About an hour and a half later, with heavy ropes tied around him, helpless yet thankful, Wally was being dragged toward the ocean. It took three rowboats, with six rowers in each, to inch him along the sand until at last he felt himself slide deep enough into the sea, where once the fishermen had freed him from the ropes, he managed to flip his flukes and take off. Taking a quick spyhop, he saw the little girl waving happily from the shore, and Wally delighted her with a vigorous breach and a twirl.



But what about Father, Mother, and the rest of my family? he wondered after swimming aimlessly for a while in the vast open sea with not a soul in sight above or beneath it. Remembering the little girl's prayer, he decided to pray himself.

"Dear God, please help me find my family and pod, or for them to find me. ..."

The prayer had barely ascended from his thoughts when he heard Melville's voice.

"He's over here, Mother!"

Wally turned, and to his delight, he saw his mother, father, and the whole pod approaching him with relieved smiles.

"How did you find me?"

"You can thank that little female herring," said Herman. "She told us that she had led you to a sandbank. She didn't know exactly where but that it was due east."

"That was kind of her," said Wally.

"It was not exactly without motive," said Hermione.

"The shoal had sent her to lure away one of the more ... how shall I put it, *vulnerable* ones, knowing that once the

rest of us had realized that you were missing, we would leave off chasing them and search for you instead."

"And we did," said Herman. "Searched all night."

"And went hungry in the bargain," said Melville.

"Haven't eaten since."

"But a lesson learned," said Herman. "We hope."

"Can you guess what the lesson is, Wally?" Hermione asked.

Wally bashfully twisted and turned in the water before answering.

"I-I suppose it is to not be distracted by something petty."

"Aye, son," said Herman. "Keep yer eyes on the bigger picture, or ye can cause not only yerself but many others to lose the main goal. In this case, ye allowed yer wounded pride or whatever to prevent your family and the whole pod from being fed last night."

"Your father's right," said Hermione. "And we are all hungry, but I do believe dinner's in sight."

The End