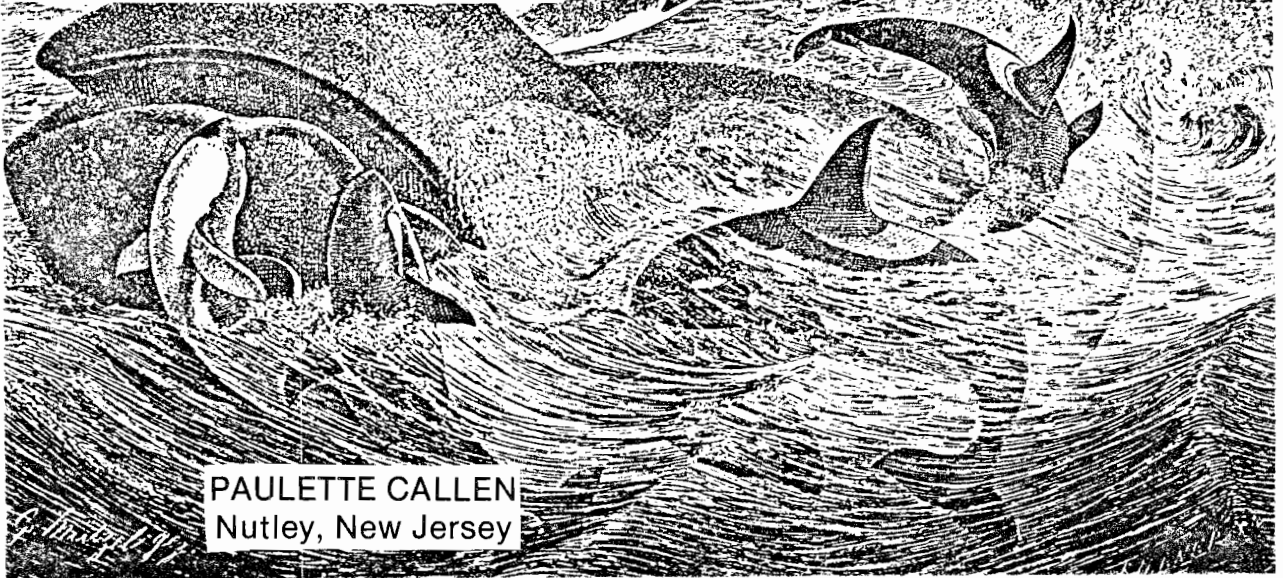


THE BALLAD OF THE SAD YOUNG MAN



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(BASED ON A TRUE STORY TOLD
BY A FORMER ORCA TRAINER)

I was out of a job, at loose ends, and had time to kill, so I went in to see the show. Dolphins flying through hoops in rhythm and sync. Rainbowed splashes. Children squealing. Handclaps and tail flips and a trainer with a mike in his hand: Thank you. Thank you very much and Flipper thanks you too. Paper wrappers snapping. People munching peanuts and popcorn and sucking caramel off their teeth. Sun hats adjusted. Dark glasses pushed up sweaty noses. A murmur like a wave washes over the audience. Then, the silence of anticipation. Ladies and Gentlemen--ORCA!! The Killer Whale!! A gate is lowered. A giant shape, ebony and alabaster, glides in soundlessly, dives deep and leaps gleaming, pure in his whiteness, absolute in his blackness, a yin yang of no-color and form. The crowd, awed, cannot clap at once. Rose-cheeked children stare, mouths agape, eyes wide and fearless.

After the show I made my way back stage and asked for a job, sure they wouldn't hire me. I had no experience. Could I swim? Yes. They hired me. On the spot. Because

the trainer who was no trainer but an out-of-work actor who would do anything to be in front of a crowd with a mike in his hand wanted to take his tan to New York but couldn't because of a contract. I made it possible for him to break and run. So, there I was, an Orca trainer. "Don't worry. You'll learn the routine. Nothing to it," said the actor. "Watch him though," he said, pointing to the Orca who's sharp dorsal fin sliced the water as he swam broodingly round and round his holding tank. So I walked over to have a closer look, and Orca looked at me and I felt his gaze like a flow of electricity reaching down through my guts to the soles of my feet and up again right through the top of my skull and tears came--from where?--to my eyes, for I had not been prepared for this and I will never be the same again.



FICTION

It wasn't part of my job, but I spent as many hours with Orca as I could because he was captive and alone and I couldn't help him except to keep him company. Every evening I went to his tank to say good night. Once as I was leaving him I turned and saw him watching me, his great liquid eye framed in the glass window of the tank--watching me as I walked away, free.

Most mornings were given to training the dolphins and general maintenance of the performance pool. Audiences were not allowed in until 1:30 for the afternoon shows. On this morning I was watching Orca swimming quietly in the performance pool where I left him as long as I could every day because it was roomier than his holding tank. We had just finished our play session. (We never "trained"--there was nothing I could teach Orca. He made up new routines to relieve his boredom, and I had only to be sharp enough to catch on to them.) Enter my least favorite colleague, a cocky young man in love with commanding cetaceans. The dolphins didn't seem to mind him, but Orca didn't like him and he especially didn't like Orca, which must have been the reason I didn't like him since he had never been anything but friendly to me.

The cocky young man, in a hurry to get through his training session with the dolphins, jogged out onto the high diving board that extended over the performance pool to regale us all with directions of opening the gate to the Orca tank and bringing the dolphins in pronto. The board was slick, and he was careless. He slipped and fell feet first into the pool. With cetacean prescience, or perhaps just hopefulness, Orca was poised at the bottom of the pool just below the diving board.

In the time it took for the young man to feel the jaws closing upon him under water and holding him there, to the moment he felt himself finally lifted into the air, breathing at last but still immobilized, it was obvious that he had acquired the incontrovertible knowledge that Orca held his life in his will; that nothing he could do and nothing any of us--the trainers, divers, and caretakers--who looked on could do could save him; that one hairsbreadth miscalculation of a muscle in leviathan's jaws and his ribs would crack like a finch's egg; that he was human and it was humans who held Orca prison-

er, made him perform mindless tricks for bits of fish in front of a population of popcorn crunchers, stole his dignity and his freedom--he who had been king in the oceans. And Orca let him go.

As the young man, without even a bruise, scrambled pale and breathless out of the water, it was as if we were surrounded by shards of crystal suspended in the air all around us, luminous and tingling. I can destroy you but I do not. Because I am an ethical being. We knew in that shimmering clangor of revelation that we stood in the presence of one with the mind to comprehend his awful and endless predicament and the grace to live without revenge.

I tried everything I could to alleviate Orca's loneliness and boredom, but I was a pathetic substitute for the open seas and the fellowship of his own kind. I tried to justify working for the marina by the knowledge that I cared for Orca, and that I was helping to educate the public to save other members of his species even if I couldn't save Orca himself. This last myth was dispelled the day a man came backstage after a show and wanted to inspect the "device" that animated our model killer whale. Even after I introduced him to Orca he would not believe he was not seeing a very clever and life-like model, akin to "Bruce," the shark model used in the movie Jaws. He walked away angry that we were so uncooperative. I wondered too what kind of education we gave children. "Come see the creatures that have no rights of their own, else how are we justified in keeping them captives for your pleasure?" This wasn't the kind of education I could be part of.

Night after night I ached and tried to explain to Orca and to myself why I couldn't stay and watch him die in captivity while I had no resources to free him. I work now with free dolphins. I wait hours in the sun for them to appear, and I swim with them when they let me, and I think of Orca and feel his eyes still following me. I still ache. I can never explain.

