

Doug, Dolphin & Dog

Doug, Williams

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Thursday night, first week of May; weather is looking good for Friday and I needed to do the garden at Phillip Island. It doesn't stop growing just because I'm in isolation in Bayswater. Back around Easter the Chief Health Officer publicly stated that if you drove your own car point to point to your holiday house and isolated yourself there, that would be okay. No problems. I could do that.

After tea I jumped into Maxx, complete with whipper-snipper, and slipped into the darkness. An hour and a bit later I was unpacked and living alone. There are permanent neighbours in the house diagonally opposite and on our side of the street it's two house blocks one way and three the other before you suspect the presence of other humans. Garden tomorrow and be home for tea.

Friday morning I went for a swim. I always do if it's not raining. I was still obeying the rules. Walking alone for exercise is allowed and I knew the beach would be empty at this time of the year. It's as busy as Bourke Street in summer, well twenty people on three kilometres of glistening sand makes it seem that way, but not in the depths of Autumn. When I exited the fire access track and crested the little dune that drops to the beach I knew this was going to be special. It was the most glorious morning. Crystal calm, cloudless, breathless, glittering sun low in the northeast highlighting the sandy bottom, no fishing boats and no one else within three kilometres. When heaven needs a health resort, this is surely where the angels come.

I scanned the bay. I always do. Not because I am master of all I survey, but because I know I am not. The ocean rules. 180 degrees of total isolation. Oops wrong. What's that dark stick at the furthest extent of my right side vision. Bother! A person, but way too far off to be concerning. Solitude is one of the benefits of isolation.

One more sweep to the left and ... oops a fin.

I always swim parallel to the shore and to the left first. The fin was exactly where I always float before returning to my towel, which by now was on the sand at my feet on top of my track suit, sneakers - the left one always cossets my glasses - and cap.

In the calm, the triangle shape stood in crisp silhouette as clearly as a meat cleaver in a chopping block. Just gliding and banking as smoothly as ice-cream dribbling down the back of your hand in summer. Not even the hint of a bow wave. No swimming today.

Then the triangle arched, a whispered snort shot across the fifty metres or so between us and the little fountain of exhaled sea water was irradiated. A dolphin. No problem. I'm not going to bother it, and it isn't going to bother me. Probably be back in the deeper channel long before I Aussie Crawl myself that far.

My float that morning was blissful. So very gently lapped, my tummy and chest so warm in contrast to the chilling experience of my back. Eyes open to a gallery of uniform blue. Eyes closed bringing a sense of rotation. Perhaps I was feeling the earth moving.

But the garden is waiting so back we go.

Halfway towards my towel I became aware of yelling and gesticulating from the beach. The dark stick had become a long haired lady with a dog and the dog had a something in its mouth. Were they just playing throw the stick? No she was trying to attract my attention. "Sorry. What? I missed that. What are you saying??"

"A dolphin is swimming with you!!!"



It was. Right behind me. And it wasn't observing social distancing. I stopped moving and stood waist deep. It swam around me. I started pivoting. It swam around me the other way. I reverse pivoted. I offered the back of my hand, as you do to a dog. I don't know why. It seemed a friendly thing to do. It didn't swim away. It just hung about. I left my hand out and it parked itself in front of me well inside 1.5 metres.

Woody, the lady's dog, was quizzical. He was in the water tummy deep. So was the human. Got that, but what's the other thing? He didn't take his eyes off us, nor did he bark or scamper. He was thinking, assessing.



The dolphin was arm's length away. I wanted to say hello. It wasn't in my world, so I went into it's. I put my face under the water and we looked at each other. I don't know what memory it will pass on to its pod, but I am telling you that I saw its right eye nestled in the graceful, smooth curve of its forehead which continues to become the top jaw of its beak. It's mouth was open; I could see the rows

of small teeth top and bottom. Further back along its body the two pectoral fins were pointing down, like stabilisers on a boat. It was perfectly still in the water; just looking at me with kindness.

I ran out of breath, stood up for more, gulped and returned. Face to face we appreciated each other again and it spoke to me. That high frequency sing-song language you've heard on nature shows. I don't know where the sound came from. It's mouth wasn't moving. The voice just came quietly through the water and found my ears. Just one, perhaps two, dolphin sentences, but on this perfect morning this dolphin was talking to me.

I had to tell the lady. As I stood, I realised Woody had come further into the water and brought a stick. He was well outside social distance and his eyes were fixed on us. Was he bringing it to me to throw? He paddled a little further, dropped it on the water and turned back. Yep I was supposed to go over, pick it up and throw it.

No way. I was busy with a new friend.

My new friend thought differently. It glided towards the stick. Woody turned and, somewhat dumbfounded, watched as the creature gripped the stick in its beak, drifted a little further towards

the dog and dropped it on the surface. Woody didn't know what to do. He certainly didn't seem anxious to get much closer and the stick was too far away to grab and run. The dolphin took the lead. Eyes on Woody, it slipped up to the stick again, picked it up and with a vertical upward movement of its head, tossed the stick across the surface to land closer to Woody - just half a metre at the most, but very deliberate. Woody grabbed the stick and left the water. The dolphin returned to me.

We swam the remaining distance to the towel together and kept company for another minute or two as Woody and the lady caught up. The garden was calling, but more pressing was the need to get warm. I had spent too long half in and half out of the water in the Autumn air and I could feel a chill coming on. Saying goodbye was hard. Not emotionally. It was just that neither of us had the other's language. I tried, but in the end I used hand signals, pointing to its direction and mine and walking out of the water, Woody at my heels.

As I stooped to pick up my towel I could see that same silent, silhouetted dorsal fin turn towards the channel. An arch, a small snorting spout and ... it was time for breakfast.

May 2020

Epilogue

- The stick that became a person was Tracey, Woody's owner.
- She was the only other person on the beach and her walk had brought her to this point at this moment.
- She had her phone/camera with her.

To me her being there to record this experience with photo and video was at least as remarkable as the dolphin being present.

- Tracey asked me write my email address in the sand and she photographed it.
- She promised to send me the images and the video.
- She sent the photos the same day. The video was too large to email.
- Two weeks later, while on my next visit to our holiday house, I received an email with a link to a site from which I could download the video.
- The next morning, when I went for my first swim for this visit, Tracey and Woody happened along as I was drying off.
- I was able to thank her personally.
- Since that morning I have never seen Tracey or Woody on the beach, or anywhere else.

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