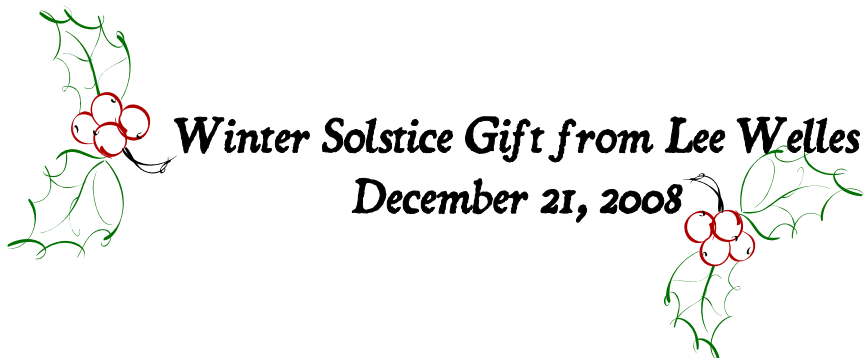


WHALE RIDER

A deleted scene from Gaia Girls Way of Water



Shinju and her mother kept close to Miho, no matter who pulled her. Notch whizzed by and sent her a sound-picture of the hug she had given him yesterday. It made her want to laugh, but being twenty-feet underwater meant she had to keep her mouth closed and her mind on her travel.

Soon they slowed and the group began to circle around her. They bombed pictures at her: pictures of her being towed, being pulled up into a leap, being towed down into a coral reef. Miho understood. They wanted to know what she wanted to do. She closed her eyes and fixed firmly in her mind something she had seen and had always secretly wanted to do—bow ride.

Many times in her life, when she had been out on a boat, Miho had seen dolphins of all sorts: Common, Bottlenose, Spotted, Dall's porpoises and once, Risso's dolphins, being borne along on the boat's bow wave. It looked like amazing fun.

As a boat pushes ahead through the water, dolphins sometimes choose to ride that push, often leaping clear of the water to maximize their speed. They peel off, drop back and let someone else take a turn at the free ride. Miho knew how to bodysurf ocean waves that came to shore; but often thought bow riding would be twice as fun because it was twice as fast and there was no crashing wave to send you into the washing machine!

She fixed that image in her mind: prow pushing through the sea, dolphins riding, leaping, and sporting out ahead. She set that image and sent it out through the water. The dolphins reacted immediately and Miho had to struggle to keep up with this kind of conversation.

They shot images back and forth, images of people leaning over the rails of boats, of nets, of spinning propeller blades. Star, Shinju's mother, sent Miho back her bow

riding picture, but it was a picture that was dissolving. “No,” Star seemed to be saying. “It’s too dangerous.”

Miho was disappointed, but found no time to pout about it. A new image began zipping around the group. A dorsal fin was thrust into her hand and off they went at lightning speed. Miho had no idea where to, or why for. Sonar pings went out and images continue to pass through the group. They were looking for something.

The pod turned west and sped up. Miho had never gone this fast before! To maximize their speed, the Lags began to leap from the water to take their breath. Miho ceased rolling to her back and simply allowed herself to be pulled into the air. She pulled herself in tight to the body of the dolphin she rode with and kept her chin tucked to make the dive back into the water smoother. She understood now, more than ever, why dolphins and porpoises were shaped the way they were shaped. She, with all her sticking out parts and big, round head, was like a bulky weight they had to drag through the sea with them.

Soon, an image began to fly through the group. A whale! Miho couldn’t see the image very well; but she knew it was one of the great whales, a large rorqual. These were the whales that most fascinated her mother. And her father.

“They say the sea is cold, but the sea contains the hottest blood of all!” he would boom out; quoting the poet, D. H. Lawrence.

The pod slowed and a tremendous wave of sound swept over them all. The whale had seen them and was rising to the surface. Miho held her breath. She could feel the thousands of gallons of water the great creature displaced as it rose. When the whale’s

blow hit the air, it was like canon fire. The air filled with the heat of its great living force.

All the dolphins buzzed it, scanned it, so Miho did the same. She could see the massive lungs swelling with needed breath. She saw the huge heart, big as a VW Beetle, boom out once and go still. She knew the huge heart only had to beat 8 or 10 times per minute, unlike her own little one, that had to beat at 60 or 70 times each minute to send her blood around her body.

Curly, Larry and Moe, the three young males who had chased off the shark, rushed toward the head end of the leviathan, streaking out images and squeals and clicks that Miho didn't understand. But the fin whale did.

Its tail, larger than a sofa, began to beat hard against the water and the sea began to churn! The great bulk of the whale surged forward and the dolphins let out a dolphin cheer. Star pushed her own dorsal into Miho's hand and tugged her to the head of the whale. Miho could feel the pressure wave swell up behind them.

Miho couldn't believe it. They were bow riding the whale! The push that moved them possessed mind-boggling quiet energy—no high-pitched outboard motor, no clattering diesel engine. The only sound was the clamor of, "My turn!" coming from the dolphins behind them.

Miho let go of Star and flattened her body into the pressure wave, just as she had so many times in Baja, riding the wave. But this was like no other wave she had ever ridden. She turned and dropped out, as did Star. Miho clasped her dorsal again and they swam along the fin whale's flank, watching little Shinju leap out of the bow wave over and over, thrilling in the ride.

It's like a carnival ride for dolphins! Miho thought. At that moment, she understood that all great minds like to be pushed beyond their own capabilities; to go faster, higher, deeper. She signaled to Star that she wanted to go again.

After a second, exhilarating ride, the whale began to slow. Miho gave it a scan and could tell its heart was beating three times faster than it had been when they had found it. It had been a sprint for the large creature—something a baleen whale didn't have to do very often. Miho wished she knew dolphese for, “thank you”.

She thought about the Shodo she had done that morning and conjured the image of her little heart next to the fin whale's giant one. Holding that image in her mind, she paddled toward its head and stopped by the fin's huge, round brown eye.

Miho could see her own face reflected in the large iris and could sense the whale was looking at her as intently as she was looking at it. She gathered up her heart-to-heart image and did her best to send it out. Thank you, after all, is simply a very small nugget of love.

The whale closed its large, dark eye and then issued into the sea a low groan that steadily climbed until it sounded like a creaky door. The water around them shook with the strength of the sound. Miho decided that this must be fin-whale-ese for, “You're welcome”.

The whale took four, deep breaths and then arched its grand bulk and dove. The wide tail rained seawater—each drop like a drop of gold against the blue sky. Miho laughed out loud and clapped her hands above the water and then wiped a tear from each eye. It was, by far, the coolest thing that had ever happened to her.

Notch pulled up beside her and she sent him a picture of her mermaid cove. She needed to get back if she were to meet Ojisan at the ferry. He sent her the quick click she now knew meant, “Hai”. They set off, carefully staying clear of boats and sharks and a school of stinging jellyfish.

