

**Dóra Gimesi**

# **Emma's Quiet**

**Illustrated by Mari Takács**



*For Ágnes Kuthy*

**Dóra Gimesi**

# Emma's Quiet



**Illustrated by Mari Takács**





**whale**



**walrus**



**great white shark**



**dolphin**



**octopus**



**crab**

**sea sponge**



**narwhal**



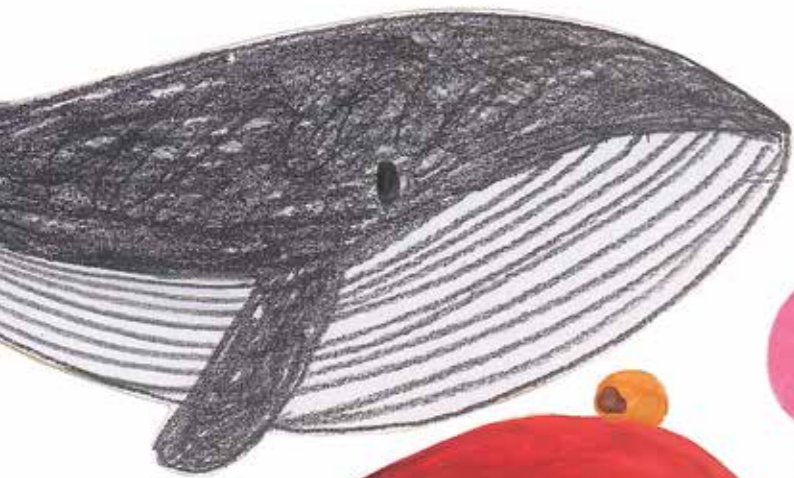
**manatee**



**starfish**

I understand fish.

Plus whales, dolphins, manatees, walruses, narwhals, crabs, sea sponges, and starfish. I know that the great white shark is the top of the food chain, that octopuses have three hearts and eight arms, and that jellyfish travel in groups. I've seen crabs that cover themselves in sea anemone and coral to blend in to their environment. I've seen a narwhal, the unicorn of the ocean, and a manatee who spends all day snoozing.



7 2 17  
10 9 13

My name is Emma. I'm 7 years, 2 months, and 17 days old, and when I'm a grown-up I want to be a marine biologist just like my mom and dad. Too bad that's such a long way away. 10 years, 9 months, and 13 days away, to be exact.

When I'm underwater I lose all track of time. There are no hours, minutes, or seconds, just the quiet. And sometimes the slow singing of whales.

Mom says I was swimming before I was walking. I can hold my breath for so long that when I was a baby, they said I must have gills instead of lungs. That's silly, of course, people can't have gills. Too bad.



I've been going to school for 2 weeks, 3 days, and 10 minutes. And for 2 weeks, 3 days, and 10 minutes, I've been imagining the world is a great big aquarium. The city's an aquarium too. The school is also an aquarium.

And I'm just a tiny little sea cucumber at the bottom of the aquarium. Sea cucumbers don't bother anybody. Sea cucumbers are invisible.



Ever since I've been invisible, I've noticed the following things:

Felix is the loudest in my class. He's always looking to pick a fight with someone and likes to take snacks from the kids who are smaller than him. He's the best at shouting real loud, so whenever he starts something, the other boys are there beside him in no time.

Except for Oliver, who spends all day with his head on his desk, asleep and snoring.

And Adam, who's always on his phone. He likes to play shooting games, and he always turns the volume up real high.

Annamarie is the queen bee of the girls. She's the one who says what to play during recess, which pencil pouch is cool and which one is so not cool. The chalk screeches and scrapes when she writes on the board, just like the sound of it screeches and scrapes down my spine.

Lili and Rosy do everything together. They wear different colored hair clips and things so you can tell them apart, because otherwise they're completely identical. They always say the same thing at the same time, and it's never anything interesting.

Maryann doesn't get along with the other girls. She always hovers around Felix during recess and squeals too loudly at his jokes. She sounds more like a horse whinnying than a girl laughing.

Back in kindergarten everyone said I was a huge crybaby. But I wasn't! It's just that I had to cry, everything was so loud. Deafeningly loud. The teachers and the other kids. The creaking swing set. That sound when metal buttons on jeans scrape down the slide. The fluttering of scissors cutting through paper. The trams as they rounded the corner. I couldn't tell which sound in the whole mess of sounds was the important one. A lot of times I still can't tell. That's why on my first day of real school Mom got me headphones where I could always hear the booming of the ocean. Whenever I put them on, the shouting, snoring, beeping, screeching, giggling, and whinnying all disappear. Almost like I've gone underwater.

"Hey, Emma!"

When you're underwater you don't hear if someone is shouting at you from dry land.

"Emma! I'm talking to you! Say something already. Are you deaf, or just dumb?"

Not even if they shout as loud as they can and their face is red as a beet.

"Guys, Emma's dumb as a stump! Dumb as a stump, dumb as a stump!"

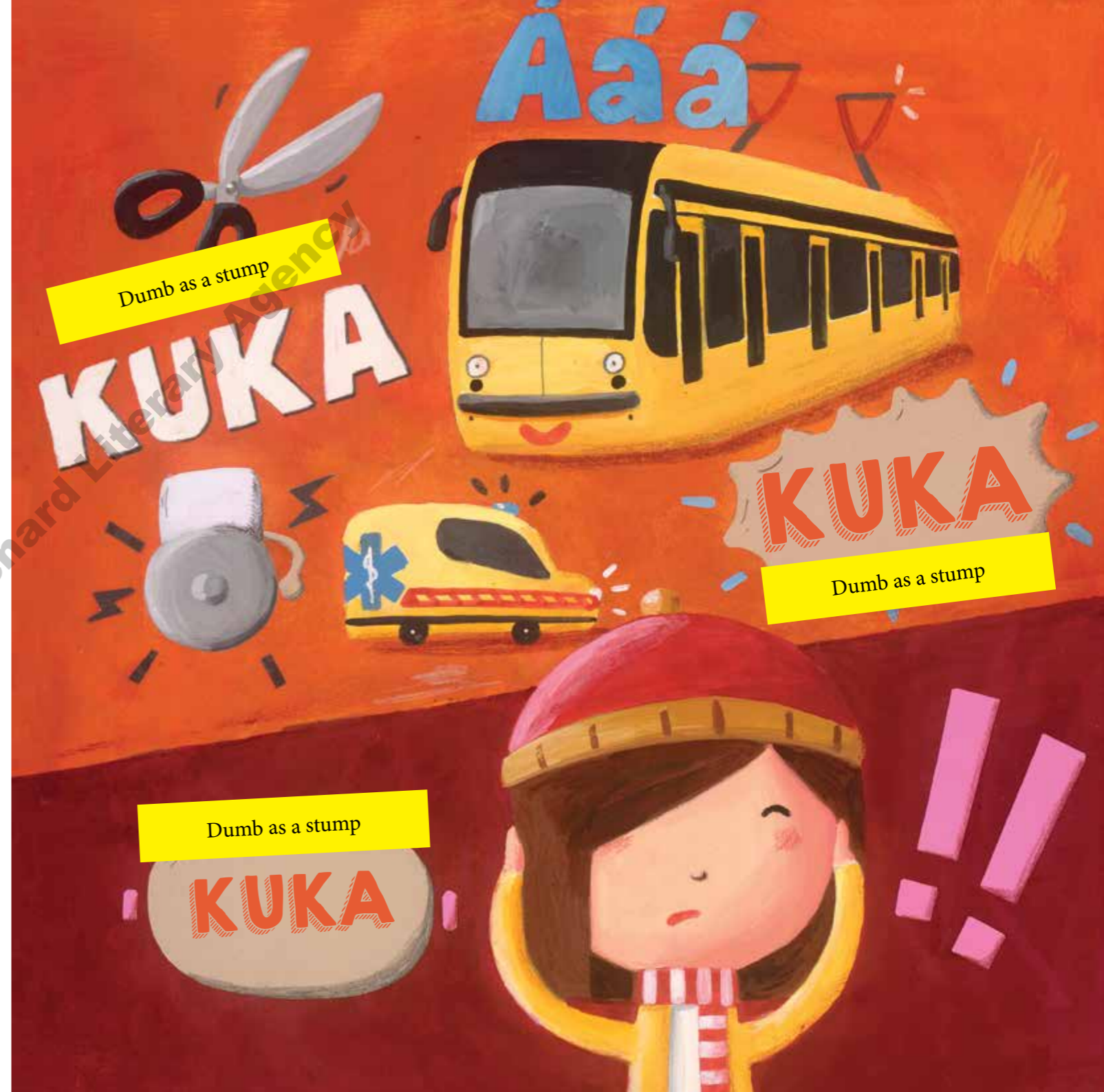
Then Felix sneaks up behind me and snatches the headphones right off my head.

The noises flood in: the boys' whooping, the girls' giggling, the shooting game's pew-pewing, the snoring, the whinnying, the chalk screeching on the board, the tram clattering on the corner. Too many noises.

"Dumb as a stump!" Felix was shouting.

"Dumb as a stump! Dumb as a stump! Dumb as a stump!" the whole class was shouting.

I have to get my ocean back, so I launch myself at Felix and wrestle him to the ground. He must be surprised at how strong I am, because he hardly puts up a fight.





I'm sitting in front of the principal's office, rush of the ocean in my ears. The floor is covered in hexagon tiles with plant tendrils coiling all over them. Each tile has its own little swoop, and only when they're laid side-by-side do they make a flower. Like some kind of labyrinth.

"Emma, what have you done this time?" Mom asks me when she comes out of Mrs. Principal's office.

She likes asking me things she already knows the answer to.

"Emma, look at me. That boy had to get two stitches in his forehead. This is very serious."

I want to say something, but Mom's eyes are so sad they make a big, prickly sea urchin stick in my throat, and I can't make a single sound.





It was still just 10:42 in the morning, so I go with Mom to where she works. I think I already said that my mom and dad work with sea creatures. So it makes sense that they work at the

## GREAT BLUE

### AQUARIUM AND MARINE BIOLOGY RESEARCH INSTITUTE

I know everybody in the old blue and white building. While Mom and Dad are working, I wander amongst the aquariums. I run my fingers along the glass to greet the sharks, rays, jellyfish, sea horses, and starfish. The Pacific blue tang fish and I stare at each other until I snort with laughter, and that helps the sea urchin in my throat shrink a little bit.

My favorite wing is the one with the animal hospital. That's where all my best friends live.

Maven the octopus, with her eight arms and three hearts.

Pepe the manatee, also known as a sea cow.

Brainy the manta ray, who has the biggest brain in the pool.

Inez the hammerhead shark, with her T-shaped head.

And of course there's Ivan.

Ivan is a great white shark and my best friend. He has an ugly injury on his back from when he got caught up by boat propeller. He's been scared of the open ocean ever since.

"I am not afraid! Whoever says I'm afraid, I'll bite them right in two!" Ivan likes to talk tough, but I know he really is afraid. The others know too.

"Your mom gave him a check-up today," Inez whispers to me as Ivan swims away. "She says his back is healing and he can go back to the ocean soon."

Ivan whirls around so quickly that the aquarium water around him swirls and bubbles. He bares his teeth and snaps at Inez.

"I am not getting better!" he shouts. "And I am not going back there! Ever!"



Luckily, right at that moment, they bring Maven back from the operating room. She's still a little groggy as two handlers help her climb back into the water. The animals all rush to the glass of their tanks and look on with bated breath. At first the elderly octopus begins to sink, unable to move. But her strength slowly begins to return and she swims over to her glass. She moves her arms very slowly and nods wearily to the others.

"Alright now dearies, calm down, I'm just fine."

The others all heave a great big sigh of relief. Inez and Ivan high five with their fins, Brainy does a big lap around the tank, and the little crabs throw their conch shells up in joy. Pepe the manatee gives a sleepy flip of his tail, seeing as he's used to spending the whole day sleeping. Everybody loves Maven.

"And did the operation go well?" Brainy asks.

"I didn't quite understand what the doctor lady said, but apparently all those little thingamajiggies floating around the ocean are what made me sick," the octopus shrugged all eight of her arms.

Brainy the manta ray puffs himself up importantly, which means he's about to start saying something smart.

"They're not thingamajiggies, they're micro-plastics," he explains. "Not long ago they had to cleanse a full kilogram of them from inside me as well."

"But Brainy, if you're so smart, why do you eat plastic?" one of the starfish asks.

"Because I can't filter them out from the water!" Brainy snaps. "They're tiny invisible bits of plastic. Get it?"

The starfish doesn't get it, but then again, starfish aren't exactly the sharpest tools in the shed.

I head over to Maven's tank and press my palm against the glass. Maven touches her suction cups to the glass as well, as if she were giving me a big eight-armed hug.



“So tell us Emma, how is school?”

“Loud.”

“Oh dear. You don’t like that at all,” Maven sighs. “But they’re not bullying you, right?”

I shrug. I’m a little bit ashamed about what happened this morning, even if it was completely unavoidable.

“I accidently knocked a boy down on the ground,” I say quietly.

Since they’re all egging me on, I tell them the whole story, from the overwhelming sounds all the way up to Felix calling me dumb as a stump.

“I told you they’d bully her!” Ivan bursts out. “Emma is too sensitive, she has no business being a place as dangerous as school.”

“Mom says I have to go to school,” I sigh. “But now I can’t go for a couple of days because of the fight.”

The animals jump for joy at the news that I’ll be spending more time with them for a while. All the hullabaloo even gets Pepe to open an eye.

“Oh, Emma, when did you get here?” he yawns. “I didn’t even notice you.”

“Hi Pepe.” I smile at the sleepy manatee.

“So tell us, how’s school?”

Everyone in the aquarium bursts out with bubbles of laughter.





**- Humans have long been the top of the food chain, didn't you know?**

A few days later I'm at the aquarium watching Ivan. He's swimming better and better and you can hardly see his injury anymore, but he doesn't want to hear one single word about the ocean.

"The ocean is horrible," he says to me, and only me. "You'll never understand the dangers that are lying in wait for you."

"But Ivan, you're the top of the food chain," I argue back.

"You're dead wrong, Emma," Ivan grumbles. "Humans have long been the top of the food chain, didn't you know?"

I think this over. I want to say something smart to Ivan, something about how not all humans are evil and irresponsible, that there are people like my mom and dad, or me for example – but suddenly the warning alarm starts blaring.



The warning alarm means there's a sea creature in trouble somewhere. I snatch my yellow windbreaker and run out of the building. Dad is already at the wheel of his animal ambulance. He nods at me to jump in next to him, and just like that we're off and zooming south along the coast.

"We got a call from the beach," he explains. "There's an orca whale stranded on the shore."

I'm so excited that I completely forget about all the shrill noises surrounding us on the highway. We've never had an orca in our hospital before! Obviously I've seen them in real life, even petted them before, but our very own orca who's going to live with us? Now that's something else!



We arrive soon, stopping on a secluded stretch of beach surrounded by big old boulders. Dad examines the orca and starts carefully cutting away the net it had gotten itself all tangled up in. When the tourists lean over and start taking photos, he politely asks them to let him work.


“But we were the ones who found him!” says a shrill-voiced woman was indignant.

“We practically saved him,” the portly man beside her nodded his agreement. “If we wouldn’t have posted that photo to Insta, you lot wouldn’t even have known to come here.”

“Let’s snap one more selfie and then get outta here,” the woman suggests.

She takes a loud gulp from her soda, then crumples up the can and tosses it behind the rocks.

When I was younger, if I saw something like that happen I would pick up the garbage and fling it right back at whoever had littered. Once an old lady even chased after me, shouting “Stop right there you antisocial little beast!” That was when I first learned that word: beast. When Dad realizes I’m about to head over to the rocks, he waves me over to help with getting the net off instead.



The orca's skin is smooth and cool to the touch, its back glossy and black. Dad says it's still just a calf – that's what baby orcas are called – but it's still way bigger than me.

“He's very weak. We need to get him to the hospital right away,” Dad says to the handlers, who are already loading the sick calf onto the stretcher. “We'll be releasing Ivan tomorrow anyway.”

This sentence freezes me in my tracks. I stare at Dad in horror.

“What the matter Emma?”

I'm silent for a long time, but eventually I pull myself together.

“Ivan doesn't want to go back,” I whisper.

“Why? He's already completely recovered.”

“He's afraid of running into another propeller.”

“And how do you know that?”

I shrug. Dad smiles and gives me one of his big bear hugs. He smells like cherry tobacco smoke and salt water.

“Alright then, we'll figure something out. But for now we need to hurry.”

We name the orca Philip. Mom and Dad examine him for days: luckily he isn't sick, just very weak and completely worn out.

"No matter what anyone says, I doubt he'll last long," Brainy explains.

"How can you say such a thing?" Maven fumes at him.

"Well, he clearly didn't end up on the shore by accident," Inez considers.

"In New Zealand, they recently found 80 orcas washed up on the shore," Brainy continues. "And how many do you think survived?"

"Fifty?" Inez guesses.

"Seventy?" Pepe yawns.

An air of superiority ripples through the manta ray before he lets us in on the answer.

"Twenty-six," he finally says. "Twenty-six out of eighty."

Maven buries her face in her eight arms.

"Just dreadful."

"How do you know about this stuff?" one of the starfish asks Brainy.

"Because I have the biggest brain in this aquarium."

"And yet you still can't filter those plastic thing-a-ma-bobs."

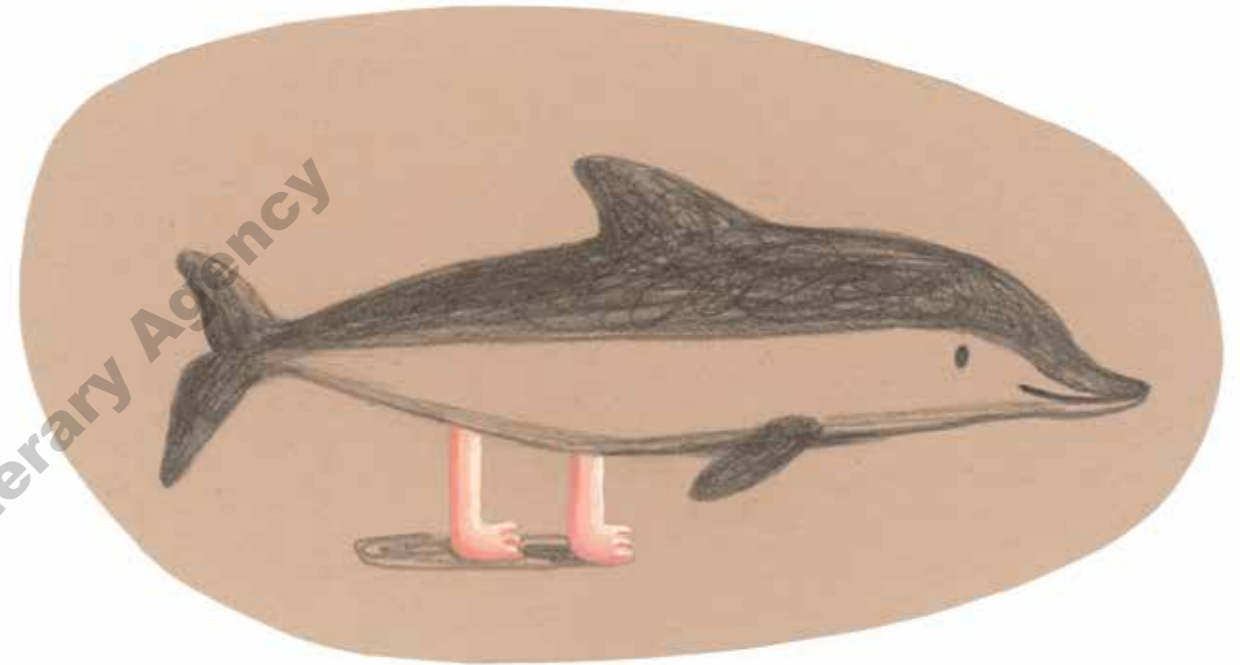
Manta rays don't usually feed on starfish, but I think this time Brainy is seriously considering making an exception.

"Ivan, do you think the new guy will survive?" Inez asks, turning to the great white.

Ivan casts a dark glance at the others and flashes his teeth.

"Doesn't matter. I'll chomp him in half if he does. The moment he sets foot in my water."

"But orcas don't have feet. Or do they?" the starfish ponders.





The conversation is brought to an end by Dad's arrival: with the help of two nurses and a big handy winch, he gently lowers Philip into the aquarium. As soon as they remove the harness, the orca frantically darts away, smashing face-first into the aquarium glass at full speed.

"Easy, my boy, you'll break your nose doing things like that!" Maven tries to calm Philip from the other tank. "I know this is all new for you, but there's nothing to be afraid of, everything will be alright. You're safe now."

Without a word, Philip turns around and swims off in the other direction. The animals all look at one another helplessly.

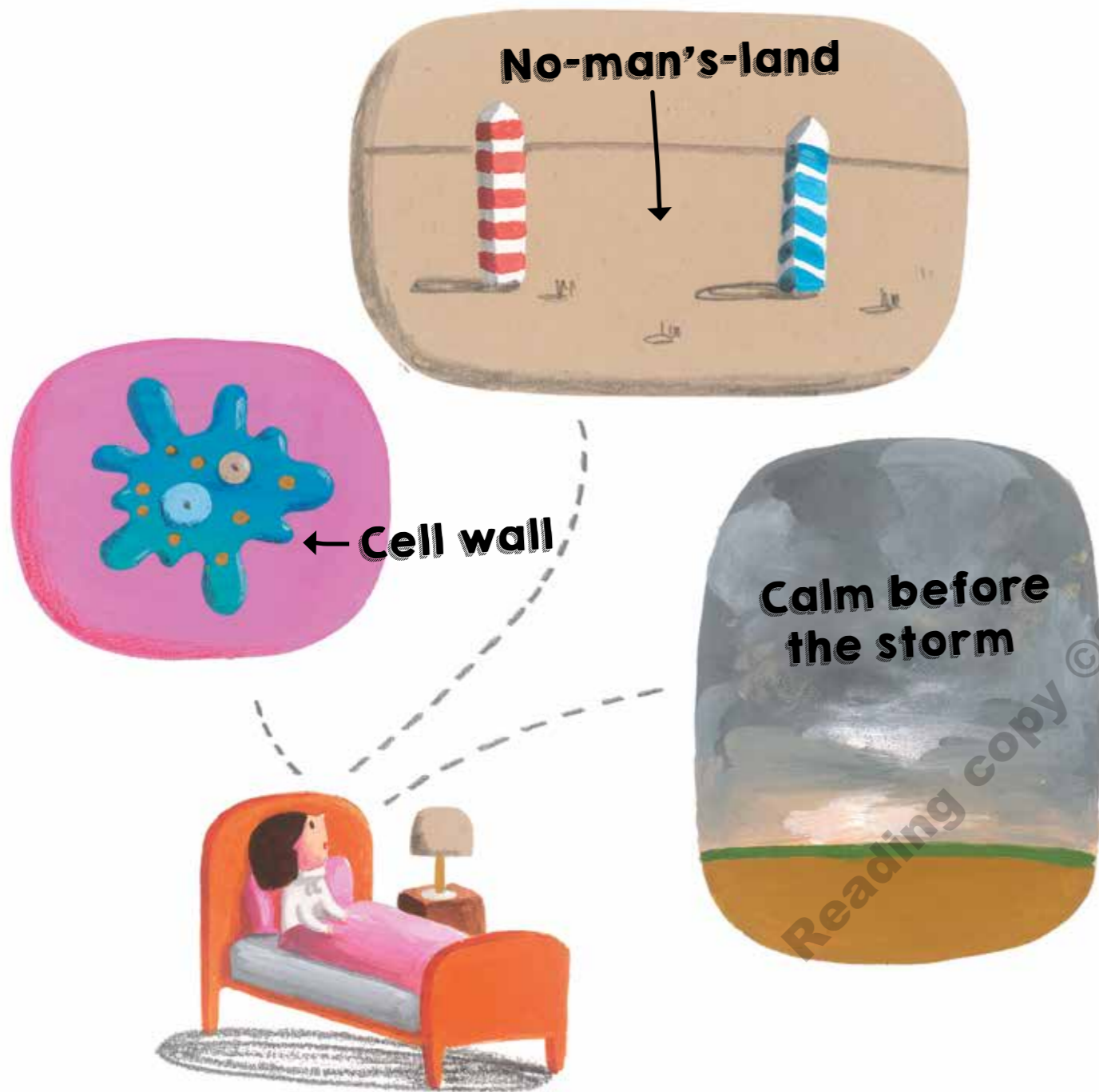
"What an idiot!" Ivan spits. "Just you wait, I'll teach him some manners."

Ivan gets into an aggressive stance, his whole body tensed like a bow and arrow. I rush over to him and press my palms to the glass.

"Ivan, listen to me for a second."

"In a minute, first I just need to gobble up this blotchy little punk!" the great white says with an evil grin.





“Please, don’t hurt him. I talked to Dad, you don’t have to go back to the ocean,” I stammer.

Ivan stares at me.

“Ever?” he asks, his eyes wide.

“For now,” I say. “Just like how I don’t have to go back to school. For now.”

The great white hmpfs and does a few quick laps in the water, which means he’s considering the offer.

“Alright then. But if he makes one move to take my food, he’s going to be seeing my teeth,” he finally grumbles.

Everyone in the aquarium can breathe a little easier.

## FOR NOW.

‘For now’ is such an uncertain phrase: It means not yet, maybe later, but it can also mean soon. And it’s impossible to know when it means later and when it means sooner. Like the no-man’s-land between two countries. Like an amoeba’s cell wall under a microscope. Like the calm before a storm.

For 1 week, 2 days, and 12 hours I don’t go to school. Mom asks every night whether or not we’re going tomorrow, and sometimes I really do want to, but by morning I’ve always come down with something. Either my stomach hurts, or my throat, or my head. And so we don’t go. For now.

I spend the no-man’s-days watching Philip. He’s still weak, and he keeps behaving more and more strangely. I throw him fish but he doesn’t seem to care, he doesn’t respond when I speak to him, and if I try to pet him he gets scared and swims away. He doesn’t talk to the other animals in the aquarium, and if he comes face-to-face with anyone in his tank, for a moment he acts like he wants to fight, but then he suddenly takes off in the opposite direction.

“The head veterinarian is coming today to look him over,” Mom explains. “If he doesn’t find anything wrong with Philip either, then we have to release him back to the ocean. A healthy animal can’t stay in the clinic.” word since he’s arrived.

“He’s behaving so strangely,” Dad says thoughtfully. “It would be good to give him a full check-up.”

“I know,” Mom nods. “But there isn’t much space and there are a lot of sick animals. We don’t have room to take in so much as a paramecium.”

I’m only half paying attention to the grown-up conversation. I’m puzzling over why Philip is behaving so strangely. Maybe he’s not sick and he’s just afraid of the others? Or maybe he doesn’t understand what they want from him?

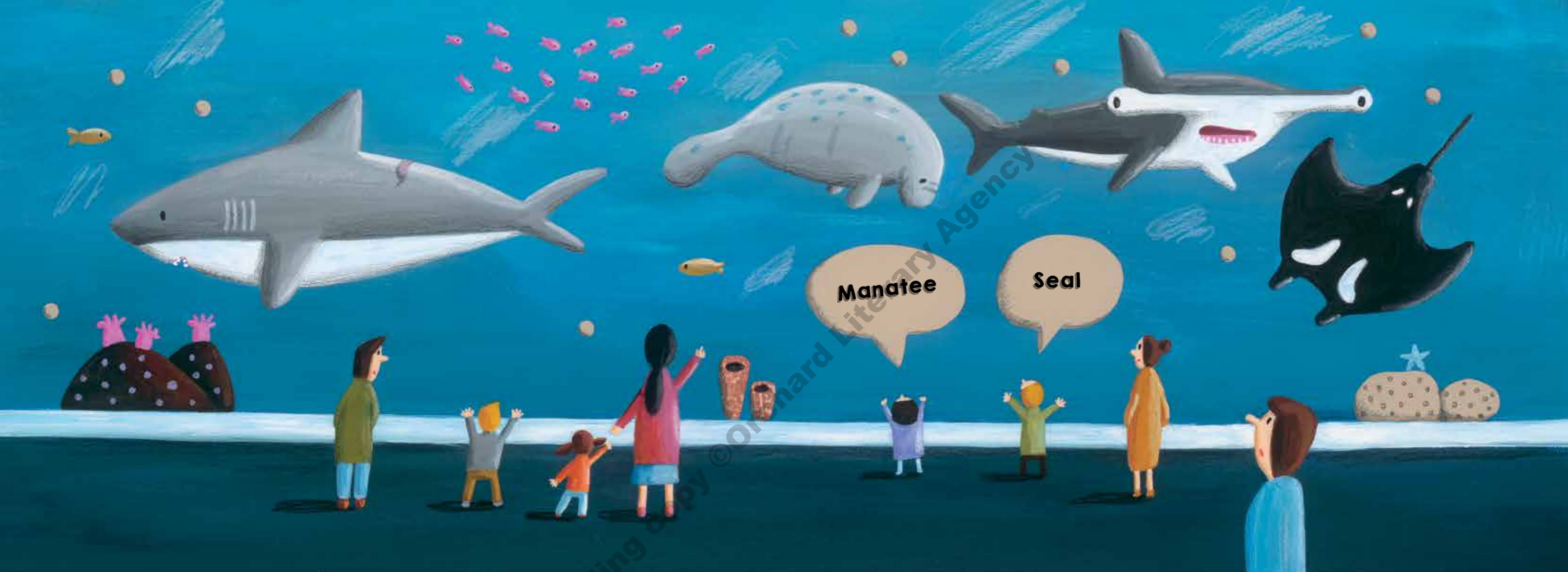
“I’m telling you, it’s no accident he ended up on that beach,” Brainsy pontificates.

“Poor hopeless thing,” Inez chimes in.

“In any case, it’s truly odd that he won’t speak with anyone,” Maven thinks out loud. “He hasn’t uttered a single word since he’s arrived.”

**He hasn’t uttered  
a single word since  
he’s arrived.**





This makes me think about how I didn't start speaking until I was four years old. I didn't say a single word. Not mommy, not daddy. I knew those were their names, I just figured they knew their own names, so why bother saying them? I don't understand why we have to gab on and on about things we already know.

My first word was manatee. I had to say it out loud because some stupid kid had called Pepe a seal. I corrected him with a forceful 'manatee.' That night, Mom and Dad popped a bottle of champagne, laughing and laughing, unable to stop saying 'manatee.' I just went over to Pepe's pool. I had no clue what was so funny.

Suddenly an idea pops into my head. I sit on the edge of the pool and try to call Philip to me. I'm very gentle, but even so, Philip is still scared when I try to pet his back. He spins around, instantly getting into attack mode. Just like me when Felix snuck up behind me and snatched the headphones off my head.

I think I understand now. I let Philip see my hand, then slowly reach out to pet him. This time he doesn't pull away.

"The others are worried about you," I tell him. "Everybody worries about me too. Why I don't play with the other kids. Why I don't have any friends. Seriously, adults can be so clueless sometimes."

Philip gazes at me and finally accepts the fish from my hand.

The head veterinarian arrives in the afternoon. He's Mom and Dad's boss, and I've been afraid of him for as long as I can remember. He has strict eyes and always smells like horrible lavender soap, so I retreat to the back of the aquarium. He spends a long time examining Philip, mumbling fancy Latin words all the while.

"Well? What does the head vet think?" Inez asks.

"He says there's nothing wrong with Philip and he can go back to the ocean," I inform them quietly.

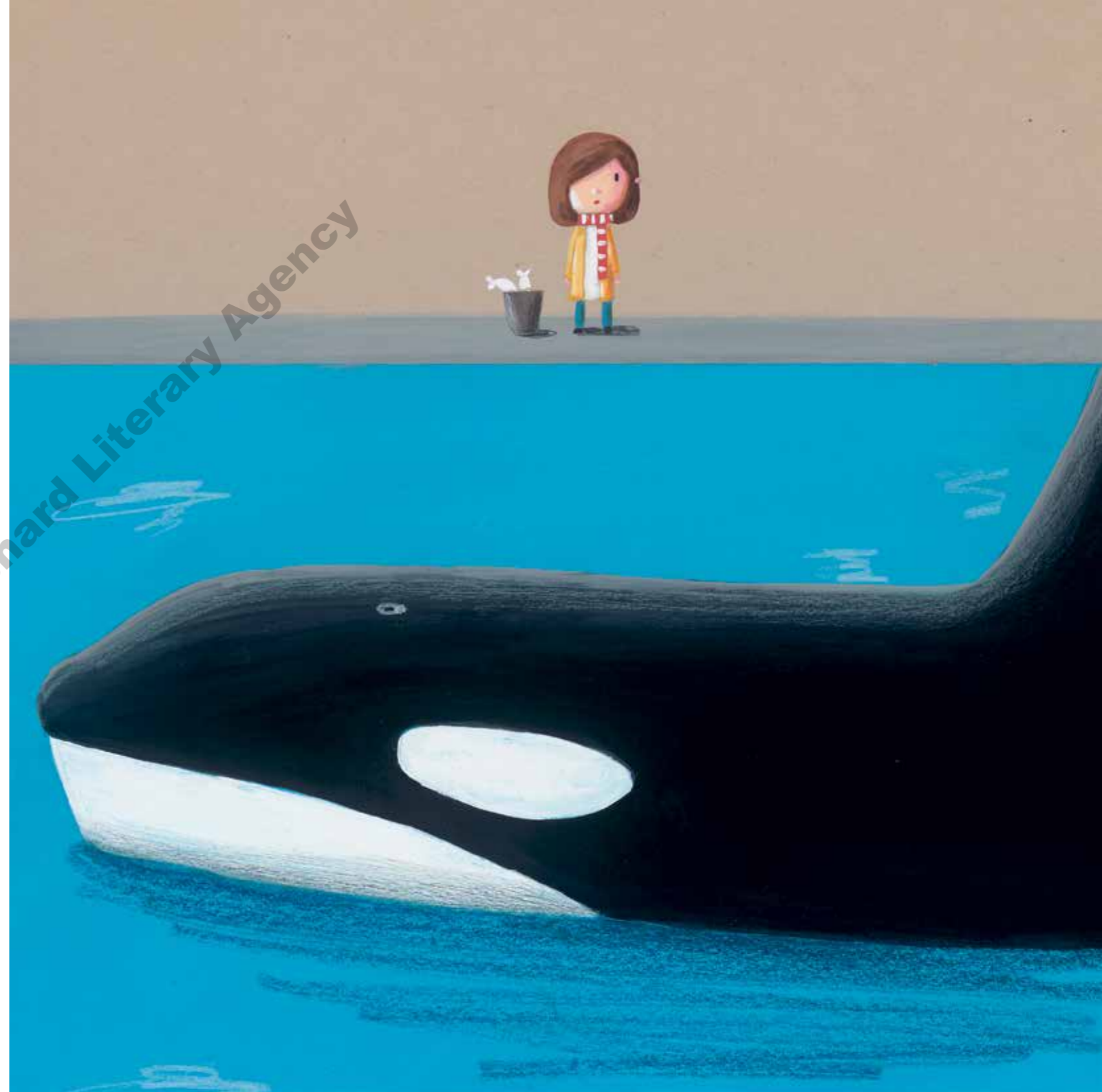
"Yesss! I couldn't stand that loser, he's dumb as a stump!" Ivan spins around happily.

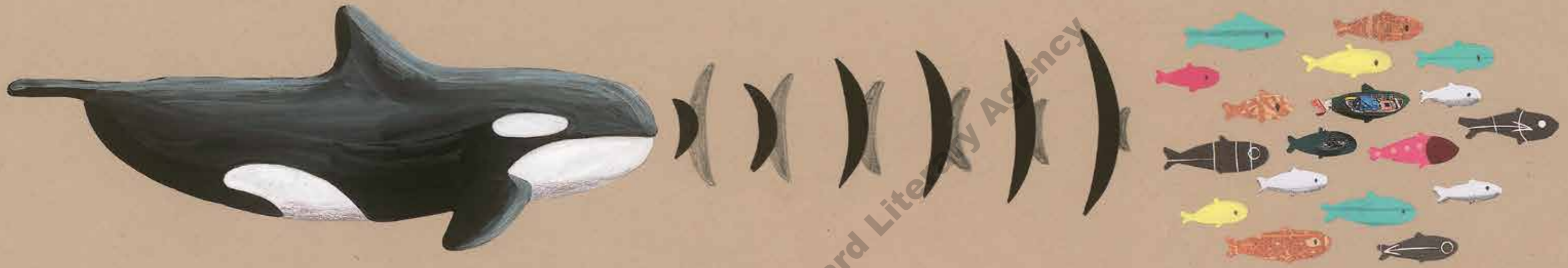
I feel my throat tighten.

"He's not dumb," I finally say. The words are difficult to get out. "And he does have a problem, the head veterinarian just doesn't understand. It's the same problem I have, just in reverse."

"What do you mean?" Maven asks.

"For me, everything is too loud," I explain. "But I don't think Philip can hear at all."





“Well of course he can’t heal, he’s not a doctor!” the starfish blurts out. “Even I know that.”

“What makes you think he can’t hear?” Pepe looks at me.

“He always jumps when I reach for him and he can’t see where I am.”

“But hearing is an orca’s most important sense,” Brainy chimes in. “They send out a sound, and when it’s reflected back they know what’s in front of them. Food, or another animal, or – ”

“A propeller,” Ivan whispers, and involuntarily rolls over onto his back.

“So if he goes back to the ocean he’ll be completely defenseless!” Maven cuts in. “He’ll die!”

While we were talking, the head vet had finished his examination and was giving instructions to Mom and Dad.

“Because the individual is not sick, he must immediately be released back into his natural habitat,” he says, his no-nonsense voice leaving no room for debate. “This hospital is overwhelmed as it is. There’s simply no room for him.”

“Emma, you have to tell him what’s wrong with Philip,” Maven splutters.

I know she’s right, but it’s like my stomach, head, and throat all clench at the same time. My feet are rooted to the ground, and my heart is heavy as a stone in my chest.

“It won’t work,” I shake my head. “I can’t talk to them like that.”

“But you speak with us,” Pepe cuts in.

“That’s different. I understand all of you.”

“You don’t need to understand them,” Inez adds. “They need to understand you.”

“Mom and Dad will figure something out,” I try. “They’re the adults.”

And I’m just a little sea cucumber, there’s nothing I can do, I think to myself.

Brainy gives me a long look, then slumps his body in defeat.

“You’re right. According to the head vet, there’s no room for Philip here. There’s no way he can stay.”

**You’re right.  
According to the head  
vet, there’s no room for  
Philip here. There’s no  
way he can stay.**



The aquarium waters fill with sadness. Pepe sighs heavily, Inez shakes her T-shaped head in sorrow, Maven comforts some starfish with her many-armed hug. In that moment, Ivan suddenly tenses and begins swimming at an alarming speed. He reaches the edge of the pool, turns around and comes back, and keeps going back and forth, faster and faster. Finally he screeches to a halt and looks directly at me.

“Philip can stay,” he says.

“What do you mean he can stay?” Inez lifts her head.

Maven sighs, comprehension dawning on her face.

“I know what he means.”

Ivan is still looking straight at me.

“Tell them my back is healed and I can return to the ocean. I would tell them, but they can’t hear me.”

“But Ivan, you’re afraid of the ocean,” Inez blurts out. “You always talk about how dangerous and terrifying it is!”

“I’m a great white shark, I’m not afraid of anything!” Ivan roars.

He quickly chases Inez away, then turns back to me.

“Hurry up, go and tell them before I change my mind!”

The head vet is just then shaking hands with Papa as I reach them in the parking lot. A strong wind is blowing in from the ocean, and I have to shout to get them to hear what I have to say.

“Please, wait! It’s important! A matter of life and death!”

The head vet stares at me. His eyes are piercing and his lavender-scented soap turns my stomach. The sea urchin in my throat grows to epic proportions. I want to be a little sea cucumber, a tiny little invisible sea cucumber.

“What’s wrong Emma?” Papa asks as he turns to me.

I focus on his gaze and take a deep breath.

“Philip can’t hear anything. We can’t release him back into the ocean, he’ll die there,” I stammer. “But Ivan offered to go back in Philip’s place.”

The head vet’s eyebrows shot up.

“What’s this now? The great white offered...? What’s this nonsense?”

Papa squats down and looks into my eyes.

“Why do you think Philip can’t hear anything?”

I shrug my shoulders.

“I watched him.”

The head vet looks at me like I’m crazy, but turns back and heads toward the aquarium all the same.



What's this nonsense?

RES



They spend the next few days putting Philip through a series of tests, and it turns out I was right, there really is a problem with his hearing. Which for him means that in open water, he isn't able to eat or hunt or get around properly. It's also probably why he got separated from his family and got tangled up in that net.

"You know that you saved his life, don't you?" Mama smiles and plants a big kiss on my forehead.

It's kind of slobbery, but I don't wipe it away. I bury myself in her arms and give her what feels like a never-ending hug.

One week later Philip moves into a special pool, and Ivan says goodbye to the group.

"Dear fellow patients!" he begins ceremoniously. "Good company ensures a quick recovery. I apologize if I was a bit boorish at times. Inez, I'm sorry I always ate your food."

"My food is your food," Inez whispers, clearly moved, and would likely be blushing if hammerhead sharks could, in fact, blush.





“I will miss all of you very much,” Ivan continues, and flicks his tail-fin to say goodbye.

The animals all press to the glass and wave goodbye.

We release Ivan in a quiet little cove. He slides gently into the water, which has an entirely different smell compared to the aquarium. He swims a few timid laps, then turns back to me.

“Thank you for being my friend, Emma.”

I lay down flat on a rock and hold my hand on the water’s surface.

Ivan swims underneath so I can pet him. I can still feel the knobby trace of the healed-over scar from the boat propeller.

“Are you afraid?” I ask quietly, not with words, just with my palm so nobody else will hear.

“A little,” Ivan admits. “The ocean is deep and scary and impenetrable. But that’s exactly what makes it exciting too!”

And with that, he gathers momentum, finds a good current, and disappears amongst the waves. I just barely hear him as he gives a triumphant shout. “Look out, ocean! Here I come!”

On Monday morning I pick up my backpack and say I'm ready to go to school. Mama holds my hand all the way there. We don't say anything to each other, speaking instead through our hands. If a tram rattles by or a car honks its horn, her hand says "I'm here, I'll take care of you, don't be afraid." We're still holding hands when we arrive at the school.

When I step into the classroom, all the sounds hit me at once. Felix is shouting, Oliver is snoring, Adam is pew-pewing, Mariann is whinnying, Annamari's chalk is screeching, the girls are giggling. I watch them all from the door for a moment. I imagine the school as an aquarium, and I'm just a tiny little sea cucumber at the bottom.

Then I gather my strength and step up to Felix. He has a Darth Vader band-aid on his forehead.

"Sorry about the other day," I say, barely audible.

He stares at me in surprise.

"Well, uhh..." he mumbles. "I'm sorry too. I guess. Where have you been for two weeks?"

"Well..." I say.

Everything is suddenly quiet and I feel like every eye is on me. I'm no longer invisible. I think about Ivan out in the open ocean and about Philip in the aquarium. About how their voices can't be heard from dry land. I have to speak for them: for the fish, the dolphins, the whales, the octopuses, the manatees, the starfish. For the great white sharks who should be catching their prey, not fearing boat propellers. For the manta rays who eat plankton, not little plastic bits. For the whales who can't tell the difference between plastic bags and jellyfish. Even though I really really really hate talking, especially about something that's obvious. And even though I'd rather be a tiny little sea cucumber at the bottom of an aquarium.

I slowly count to three in my head.

I take a deep breath.

And I begin telling my story.



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