

The Beached Whale

**The Beached Whale**  
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The morning joggers see it first.

The looming 80-foot long cetacean, flopped on the sand, the waves lapping weakly against its glistening skin as though paying obeisance to a fallen lord.

For a few surreal moments, it seems to them they've entered a different eon, that some ancient leviathan has emerged from the sea. Then, gathering their wits, they approach it slowly, uncertainly.

It doesn't take long from there. Phones and cameras. OB vans and television crews.

Click...click...click...click. In a world that's ever on the lookout for the next high, the next novelty, the next diversion, the next social media update, the next viral video, the stranded whale ticks all the boxes. By the time the conservationists arrive, the whale is already trending on social media. Selfies float around of people touching, stroking the whale, some even straddling it like it were a hunting trophy. Never mind that it is still alive.

Sathasivan wakes in the middle of the night, his throat dry and itchy. The ceiling fan has stopped; it's the absence of white noise that has awoken him. Yet another of the crippling power cuts that have plagued the city all summer. He swats ineffectually at the buzzing near his right ear. He left the windows open, but all they seem to have let in are the mosquitoes; there is no hint of a breeze. With a groan, he sits up, swings his feet slowly to the ground. His head feels heavy. He takes a drink of water from the bottle on the bedside stand.

Stepping out onto the balcony, he looks down upon the parched city. Even at this time of night, the air settles upon it like a hot, heavy blanket. Far below, water tankers scurry surreptitiously down the streets like little dung beetles hauling their dubious, precious cargo. Illegal, every last one of them. They come into the city at night, side-stepping the law, bearing water from farm-wells, irrigation canals, agricultural ponds, bore wells, sucking the countryside dry to slake the thirst of the city. Ten floors below his feet, he can see a tanker filling the bowels of his own apartment

building. Tomorrow there will be water. Maybe even for an hour, if they're lucky. The monsoon, having failed for three consecutive years, is late in arriving this year too. The first year or two, the city remained aloof of the crisis, barely glancing at intermittent reports that slipped in through gaps in the coverage of more important news. Incidents of wild animals straying into human territory. A leopard killing cattle. A herd of elephants wreaking havoc in villages and fields. Children being swallowed up by abandoned bore wells, young children small enough to slip through its narrow gullet – a four-year-old left unattended by his farm labourer parents, a six-year-old playing catch with friends, a three-year-old straying away from her hut. Nobody asked why there were so many bore wells being abandoned. Nobody asked what had brought the animals out from the safety of their homes. As long as the images – those ubiquitous, almost clichéd, ages of women walking miles with pots balanced on their heads, of children missing school to forage for water, of farmers lamenting their failed crops, of cattle sold at throwaway prices for lack of fodder and water, of villages lying abandoned and desolate, emptied of the people they can no longer support – remained safely on the other side of television screen, this was a faraway problem of some distant "others". The city imagined itself an oasis, even if its surroundings were turning into a desert.

But, slowly, steadily, the crisis spread its tentacles. The scarcity of water flowed out of forests and villages towards the towns; reservoirs hit dead storage, hydro-electric power projects failed, power outages hit industries. It seeped into the city through the neighbourhoods of the poor; long lines of pots and pans formed at hand pumps. Its rising tide submerged everything in its way; quarrels at communal water taps spread to residents' Whatsapp groups in apartment complexes as 24x7 water supply dwindled to six hours, then two each in the morning and evening, then two in all, then one, then half an hour, and high-end real estate shriveled in value like the crops in drought-hit fields.

In its fourth year, the crisis has by now conquered the high walls of ivory towers, breached the levee of the television screen and poured into the living rooms of the privileged.

In river deltas, migratory birds arrive, travelling thousands of miles, bound by habit and instinct, only to find their nesting grounds parched and bare. They perch atop straggly trees, dazed and

befuddled, unequipped by nature to cope with this eventuality. And in high-rise buildings across the city, people perch in their dried-up apartments, similarly encumbered, unable to decide where to go, unable to understand how their gated community have failed to keep out the crisis, unable to comprehend how the problem of those "others" has come to be their own.

Despite the heat, Sathasivan shivers. The heaviness in his head is a sure sign of a fever coming on. That's the last thing he needs right now. He rummages in the medicine cabinet. The blister pack of Crocin has only one tablet left. He swallows it down with a glassful of water, making a mental note to get a fresh strip from the pharmacy the next day. Returning to bed, he glances at the bedside clock. 3:30 a.m. The water, when they manage to get enough tankers, is released at seven in the morning. Three and a half hours to go. His phone blinks in the dark. Out of habit, he picks it up and peers at the screen. Just a notification from a news app. Yet another report on the whale. He first saw the story the previous day and clicked on a few related links. By now, some user analytics algorithm somewhere has locked onto his fleeting interest and his newsfeed is full of updates about it. He lies back in bed and idly flips through the news report.

"Speculation is still rife about what could have caused this adult blue whale to strand itself," it reads. The accompanying picture shows the whale now left fully exposed on the sand by the low tide. Rescuers pour buckets of water over its body even as the crowds in the background jostle for a better look. "The use of sonar in the recent naval training exercises may be a likely cause—".

He touches a link and the words give way to a map with the whale's location pinpointed by a red marker. His own city lies hundreds of miles to the right, but a mere pinch and swipe away on the smart phone screen. In the satellite image from far above, the city's face looks as ordinary as that of any other. Zoom in, though, and the wrinkles come into focus, then the ugly blemishes, the scarred, blistered skin, and finally the cancerous cells.

There is no marker on the map here, yet it is another leviathan, this city, battered by the sun, cooking in its own juices, craving water.

Sathasivan wakes to the insistent sound of drilling. He sits up with a start and a sharp pain shoots through his temple. His forehead is hot to the touch, his body stiff. Groaning, he glances at the time. 10' o'clock. All thoughts of discomfort vanish from his mind as he rushes to the kitchen and turns

on the tap. The thin trickle dries up in seconds. He has missed the water.

By late afternoon, Sathasivan has a raging fever and a splitting headache. He has shut all the windows against the swirling dust, and the television is on, yet, it feels like the drilling bit outside is boring a hole right through his brain. Bore well drilling rigs, like the one stationed beside his building, are all over the city. Like incompetent nurses, they jab at the earth, looking for that elusive vein of water to tap into. 500 feet, 800 feet, 1200 feet they go, and still come up dry.

On the television, a debate rages with six talking heads shouting over one another.

"...It's a disgrace. Water is a basic necessity..."

"...so-called global city..."

"...right to life..."

"...maybe, in the next elections we should elect the rain-gods to power..."

"...at this rate...will have to be evacuated..."

Sathasivan picks up the remote and surfs channels. With the windows closed, the air in the room is stifling. The only drinking water in the house is filled in two plastic water bottles lined up on the coffee-table. He feels a wave of dizziness wash over him. He should have gone out for the tablets in the morning, instead he allowed the noise and dust and the searing heat to discourage him from stepping outside. Perhaps, later in the evening when the temperatures drop a bit.

He pauses at an international news channel.

"The attempt to re-float the whale and lead it into deeper waters, I'm told, will begin in a short while. Time, as we know, is of the essence for any chance of survival—"

The power goes off and the television screen sputters out. Sighing, he lies back on the cushion and closes his eyes, letting his thoughts wander.

A fish out of water. An idiom literally translated to reality. But this stranded whale is no fish flapping weakly on the deck of a fishing boat, fighting for oxygen as it slowly asphyxiates to death. If there is one thing the whale does not lack, it is oxygen.

"The whale is a mammal whose ancestors once walked on land. When it made the water its home, it carried with it some of its ancient traits. The need for air, for one. Like a human swimmer, a whale has to surface once in a while for air. Hard to believe, but, without air, this majestic creature of the sea can drown in water just like you and me."

The memory transports him back to his younger self in the village school and Sathasivan smiles, thinking of Ramdas Sir. High-spirited, ever-curious, indomitable Ramdas Sir. Despite the crusty principal who was always upbraiding him for teaching things that were "out of syllabus," he had persisted in bringing dinosaurs and mammoths, galaxies and black holes into his classes and seen them come alive in the minds of his students.

And today, long after the contents of his school textbooks have been wiped clean from Sathasivan's memory, it's those very "extraneous" things that Ramdas Sir had spoken about, the bits and pieces of trivia he'd hoarded, the stories he'd told in a sunny classroom six decades ago, that remain fresh as ever.

And with them come other memories – the school house, the green paddy fields surrounding it, the long dirt track down which his friends and he raced each other to the river, his home with the courtyard shaded by the mango trees, the papaya, the neem, the jackfruit....

"This is where all the opportunity is," he had told Lata, when he had brought her to the city after their marriage. "The city is the future." They had exchanged the open fields for this 1800-sq.ft unit, ten floors above the ground, squeezed in amongst a thousand other units like itself, traded generations' worth of friendships for neighbours who were strangers.

Why did the whale approach land? Was it heeding a vaguely-remembered call from its ancient ancestry? Did it think it was coming home? But sides can't be changed on a whim. By now the sea has already staked its claim on the creature, left its indelible mark on its anatomy. It is not the oxygen in the water that the whale needs, but the water itself – the buoyancy of seawater to bear its weight. On land, it is its own enemy; with every passing minute its organs are slowly crushed under its own weight....

It begins to get dark. Sathasivan finds himself getting drowsy. Water, he remembers with a start. He is down to the last bottle. He has to get water. And tablets too. A little later, he tells himself, feeling too weak to get up. When he feels a little better....

A whale rests by shutting down only one hemisphere of its brain at a time, he recalls vaguely as he drifts off to sleep, the other remains alert to remind it to come up for breath, to keep it from drowning in its sleep....

It is well past midnight when he wakes. Struggling past layers of fevered haze, he finally breaks the surface of consciousness. His head is in a vice of pain and it's an effort to sit up. The power is back on, but he has no strength to get up and turn on the lights. The light from the television casts an eerie, flickering glow across the walls.

"...failed attempt to re-float the stranded whale..."

He takes a drink of water. Only half a bottle remains.

"...released in deep water, it returned to the shore of its own volition..."

He should call someone, ask for help. Perhaps one of the neighbours could lend him some water. But whom can he call at this hour? He doesn't know many people in the building. Lata would have known whom to call. But Lata is gone now. He is all alone.

"...cannot last another day on land. The kinder thing to do, rescuers say, is to put it out of its misery..."

He lies back on the couch, overcome by exhaustion. Ramdas Sir once read a story in class – about a solitary sea monster that is attracted to the sound of the fog horn from a distant lighthouse. It emerges from the depths in hope and longing only to find a cold brick structure, unresponsive to its fervent overtures.

Perhaps the whale stranding is no accident after all. Perhaps it's an act of mourning, a willful act of suicide, a sentient decision of a being who has had enough. Whales are known to do such things. Entire pods will strand themselves just so they can be with a single stricken member, together in life and death. Why not, then, this solitary one, unable to come to terms with a life of loneliness?

He tosses on the couch, drifting in and out of fever-ravaged sleep. Sometimes there are voices from the television whispering in comforting companionship, sometimes there is only silence. Are they minutes that crawl past? Or hours? Or days? He has lost all track of time.

He dreams of the city slowly getting crushed to death under its own weight. He dreams of skimming pebbles across the waters of the river in his village, jumping from moss-covered rock to rock. He can hear the splashes, taste them on his lips, feel his childhood enter his body. Tears flow down his cheeks, but when he feels his eyes, they are dry. The last bottle is empty. He should seek help. But he feels a strange solidarity with the doomed whale. How is a whale killed? With a bullet to the head? An injection? He doesn't know. Whatever it is, it will be a mercy all the same. An easier way to go. The voices lull him back to sleep.

When he wakes up again, he is drenched in sweat. He doesn't know how long he has been lying there, but miraculously, the fever seems to have broken. His throat is parched and his lips cracked. He pulls himself weakly to his feet. Supporting himself against the wall, he goes to the kitchen. He turns on the tap and, again, a miracle – water emerges in a copious flow. He drinks greedily from the tap. Ravenous, he hunts about in the kitchen cabinets and finds a packet of glucose biscuits. He eats, taking gulps of water in between. A semblance of strength returns. Enough to gather his wits and connect the pipe from the tap to the steel drum under the sink.

Joy wells up in him as the drum fills slowly with water.

Back in the living room, a somber-faced news anchor is saying that the El Nino effect may affect the monsoon this time around too.

Sathasivan pays no attention. He stands leaning against the sink, one hand on the tap feeling the vibration of water coming through. When the drum is three-fourths full, the water stops. It doesn't matter. For now, this is enough. This water in the drum is enough.

The whale is no longer on the news. On a faraway beach, it lies on the beach as officials figure out what to do with its carcass. It is ignored by the joggers now, no longer a novelty. As it lies rotting in the sun, gases are building up within, collecting, accumulating, looking for an outlet. Eventually, when a sanitation worker tries to insert a hook into its belly to haul the carcass away for disposal, its belly will suddenly, unexpectedly, explode, spewing blood and rotting flesh all over the sand in a final mark of protest.

Meanwhile, the city bakes under the summer sun and waits for the monsoon.