

# The Catch

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## Rosie Wallace is a Seal

Robin Orm Hansen

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## Rosie Wallace is a Seal

### Cover Page Footnote

Warning notice concerning sea mammal entanglements is from National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

### *Rosie Wallace is a Seal/Robin Hansen*

“Rosie Wallace is a seal,” Josiah Eldredge’s cousin Sam said as they walked up the road from the wharf. It was three weeks after school let out. Sam was fishing full time, and Josy was his stern man, filling bait bags and banding lobster claws.

They’d just sold 80 pounds of lobster at Clint’s, mostly one to one-and-a-half-pound shedders, the soft-shell lobsters the summer visitors liked. It was a record day for the Lily Mae. Sam had hauled traps, emptied them, and sent them flying off the stern of Lily Mae all morning. Josiah had filled bait bags with chopped pogies and banded lobsters until his arms felt like he couldn’t lift one more full bait bag and his hands could barely squeeze the banding jig. He was pretty wrung out and looked forward to eating dinner and lazing for an hour or so.

Out on the water that morning, they’d seen a little harp seal on a rock with its tail in the air, the way seals set out on the rocks, and they’d started talking about seals. And seal people. Selkies.

When Josy first saw it, Sam joked, “Maybe it’s a selkie.” Josy thought he’d said, “Cell key,” and asked if he meant a password and didn’t understand how a little seal could be a password.

When Sam explained, Josy didn’t know what to think. Sam said selkies were seals who landed on beaches in Newfoundland and Labrador and took off their seal skins and became people, who danced in a circle on the beach. If a fisherman liked one of the women, he could steal her seal skin. Then she’d have to marry him and stay with him. Unless she found her seal skin, put it on, and returned to the sea as a seal. “You mean you never heard of *selkies? Seal people?*” Sam said. “What do you *do* in winter? Watch TV?”

“No-oh,” Josy drawled and stuffed pogie chunks into a bait bag.

“Don’t your part of the family get together to tell tales and all?” Sam asked.

Josy shrugged and put some more fish into another bait bag. “ ‘Course we do,” he said. “Just never heard about seal people, that’s all.” He pulled the drawstring on the last bait bag and tied it firmly. “Not sure I believe in it anyways.”

They stopped talking about seals then, because Sam had an idea to put traps in a new spot near the harbor. When they reached the spot, they found out their uncle had beat them there with traps of his own. His white and black buoys dotted the water around the point.

“Shouldn'a mentioned it out loud,” Sam grumbled and gunned Lily Mae's engine off toward the Ledge.

But coming up from the wharf later, Sam had said that: “Rosie Wallace is a seal. You know that, right?”

“Aunt Rosie?” Josy was astonished. Rosie was his Uncle Elmon Wallace's wife and wasn't from Ice Harbor. She was from way up north but she talked close to right, like Ice Harbor people. Uncle Elmon always said he picked her off a rock near Newfoundland. Josy had always imagined her standing there in her dress and apron, kind of like she might be when he was coming in from fishing, and waving to Elmon, maybe calling to lure him in. But now Sam said she was a seal. So she had probably been naked, since where would a seal get clothes? Probably not from Walmart™.

“Yup. Uncle Elmon stole her sealskin, so she couldn't go back to being a seal, and he loved her and brought her home. They got married in Canada, on account of her being a seal, she couldn't get married in the church in Ice Harbor. Because seals ain't Christian. That's why his parents hate her.”

“They hate her? Because she's a seal?” Josy said, amazed again. He knew there was something different about Aunt Rosie. She didn't look like everyone else with her straight black hair that she wore in a knob on top of her head. Sort of like an Indian, but not. But that was how she had always looked. Josy had never given it a thought.

— 2 —

At supper, he asked his mother. “Sam says Aunt Rosie Wallace is a seal. A *selkie*,” he said.

“That's what I heard, too,” his mother said and scooped some more fish hash onto his plate.

“Does that mean she’s not normal? That she can change back into a seal and swim away? Back to Newfoundland? What about her kids? Can they do that too?”

“I don't know, Josy. Their two older kids are from Elmon's first wife, but Elise looks a lot like her mother. The way the story goes is that Elmon hid her sealskin away, and if she found it she'd put it on and become a seal again. And swim away. That's the story anyhow. But she knows where her sealskin is. I think Rosie likes living in Ice Harbor with Elmon and raising his children. Once she showed me her sealskin. She keeps it in a big, plastic trash bag in her closet. It's a real seal skin and she knows where it is, but she stays here. I think she loves Elmon as much as he loves her.”

Josy chewed on fish hash and that idea. *Maybe she can change any time she wants*, he thought. *Maybe that little seal out there on the rocks was really Aunt Rosie Wallace in her sealskin. No, it was way too small....*

“Why don't you ask her yourself?” his mother asked.

Josy shrugged.

“She likes to bake cookies for you kids,” his mother added. “I don't think she'd mind telling you about her people.”

Josy flushed hot and shook his head hard. He wouldn't dare ask Aunt Rosie about her being naked on the rocks off Newfoundland.

— 3 —

Another day, Josy took his clam rake and walked down to the mud flats at low tide, thinking to dig a mess of clams for their supper.

Aunt Rosie's daughter Elise was already there. She had a pail brimming full and was working on a second.

“Hi, Josy. How are ya?” she greeted him. “You digging?”

“Yup.”

“Clams or worms?”— although she could tell easy enough if she looked at his rake, which had longer tines than a worm rake and a shorter handle than a quahog rake.

“Clams,” Josy mumbled, looking sideways at Elise. *Why’d Sam have to go and start something like that, about seals?* Now he couldn’t even dig clams with Elise without wondering if she had a seal skin tucked away somewhere, or if she had something about her that was seal-like. Maybe flippers instead of feet. Or whiskers around her upper lip. She was two grades ahead of him in school, so he never really looked at her closely. Maybe she could—

“It’s all dug out where you are.” She broke in on his thoughts. “Come on over here, and there’s quahogs and clams. Razor clams, too.”

Now that he looked at the mud instead of at Elise, he could see that it was dug out. But he felt stupid doing what a girl told him to do, so he drove his rake into the mud where he was, and tipped it back, driving one tine through an undersized clam and turning up a scattering of baby clams, tiny as grains of rice.

She said, “I know your mom — ”

Josy looked up sharply. What did she know about his mom? Would she witch his mom? What could selkies do to you? They must have magic powers. If her mother was a seal, then she was half seal. If that stuff was true. Which it couldn’t be.

“— she likes razor clams for chowder. Come on over here. There’s nothing over there.”

As she spoke, a razor clam in her clam bucket jumped a good foot into the air and landed in the mud about three feet away.

“Losing your razor clams,” Josy said. He splashed over and grabbed the long shell before the clam could burrow into the mud. “You’re going to dig razor clams, you need a lid on your clam bucket.” He said, dropping the clam on top of the others in her bucket.

Since he was there already, he thought it would be all right now to dig some clams. Now that it wouldn’t look like he was doing what she told him to.

And she was right. There were lots of razor clams, with their slit-like breathing holes. His mom *would* like them for a chowder. Of course, now he

wondered: *Does she know about this spot because she's part seal? Or because she digs clams a lot?*

He tried to figure out how to ask her about being a seal and what it felt like to have a mother who could turn into a seal. Or if all that was true at all. He finally thought he would say, "Have you ever tried on your mom's seal skin?" so it wouldn't sound like he was accusing her of anything, but then maybe she would talk about it a little bit.

When he looked up to say that, she was climbing the path up the cliff with her two buckets of clams. "See ya!" she called down and waved, her reddish dark hair flinging around her shoulders as she turned away.

— 4 —

Sam didn't seem to care that Elise might be something magical, something other than a girl in eighth grade. It was about a week later that Sam and Elise were walking down to the wharf together when Josy caught up with them, carrying his dinner pail with a lobster sandwich and a thermos of leftover razor clam chowder.

Sam joked, "Well, lookahere. Looks like little Josy didn't sleep in after all. Guess you can't stern for me today, Libs."

Josy went hot in the face and looked at the clock on the general store. He wasn't late.

"He's just messing with you, Josy," Elise said. "Sam invited me to come along today."

"You're going out with us?" Josy asked, astonished.

Sam was looking a little goofy and acting even stranger. Josy figured it was something that he wasn't sure he wanted to deal with. So he didn't. Though he sure couldn't figure out why Sam would act out in front of Elise.

Well, maybe it would be helpful to have a seal on board if they ran into trouble. Maybe she would ...

He glanced at her sideways: She didn't even have a dinner pail, so she couldn't possibly have her seal skin with her. If she even had one. Yeah, the whole thing was all foolishness.

When Josy got in the dory, Sam took the sculling oar and set it in the notch in the transom. “I’ll get us out there today,” Sam said.

“But I’m — ” Josy started, but Sam interrupted him.

“You sit up in the bow to balance her.” By her, he meant the dory, not Elise, who was seated firmly on the bench at midships.

Sam always sat on the midships bench and watched while Josy sculled out to the mooring where Lily Mae lay in the morning calm. Josy knew then that he’d been looking forward to being the oarsman, showing off a little to Elise that he could handle a sculling oar even though he was only in fifth grade.

That was how the morning went. Sam showed Elise how the hydraulic winch worked to haul up the traps — like her father wasn’t a lobster fisherman, which he was.— and how to set them on the side deck.

Elise kept smiling and nodding and saying, “Mm, hm. Yup,” softly, over and over. “Oh, yeah? Mm, hm. Really?” But Sam didn’t get it and kept on telling her things she probably already knew.

Sam stood proud as he gunned the engine and yet another trap flew off the stern to splash in the wake of the boat. .

Sam showed her how to measure the lobster’s carapace to decide whether to keep it or throw it back. “From behind the eye to the back of the shell,” he told her. Smaller than the short side of the gauge was too little — a “short” — and went back to grow up. Longer than the long side it went back too.

Like she’d never sterned for her father. Which she had.

“And if it’s got eggs all over her like this — ” Sam turned a female lobster over and spread the tail so Elise could see the green-black eggs it held there — “you can’t take her. We’re supposed to notch her tail, so the next fisherman who pulls her up can tell she’s a female.” Sam took out his knife and cut a little notch in the she-lobster’s tail, pushing Josy out of the way a little to use his work table.

Josy noticed Elise’s lips were moving as Sam spoke. She was saying the same thing at the same time as Sam. She knew all about lobsters. “Really? I’ll be careful then. Of the Mama lobsters,” she said. She smiled and looked at Sam all googly-eyed.



When Sam set a couple of lobsters on the tray for Josy to band, he said to Elise, "Josy can show you how to band the claws. Josy, show her. Let her band a couple."

Josy wished he could head home right now and forget today. Trouble was, he wasn't the skipper and didn't get to decide.

Elise rescued him. "It's okay, Josy. I know how to band lobsters." But then she made it worse. "Want me to give you a hand?"

Josy was already hot in the face in spite of the brisk breeze out of the north. He was so hot he felt like his eyes were about to pop out. "No," he muttered.

Then, louder: "No. Thanks. I'm good, 'Lise. But thanks for asking."

Elise was fine with that and stepped back, watched lazily as Sam hauled in the second in a string of traps.

"Thought Clyde Wallace asked you to check his gill nets. Since he's sick," she said, just soft enough that she could be heard over the scream of the winch.

"Yeah. When I get a minute," Sam said, settling the trap on Lily Mae's sidedeck and opening its kitchen door. He tossed out a sea cucumber and a six-inch-long tinker mackerel, then fished a lobster out.

— 5 —

"Sam?" The concern in Elise's voice made Josy look up. "There's something floating in the water over there." She pointed out to the south of the Ledge. "It's — it's huge. It's covered in barnacles. Maybe somebody's boat keeled over." Elise was pointing off to where Clyde's gill net was supposed to be. She bounced on her toes. "Sammy! It's swimming! It's a whale. I think it's a whale."

"Little close in for a whale." Sam measured and put the lobster on Josy's table. "You sure?" He looked where she was pointing. "Gory. It is. It's a whale. A huge one. And where's Clyde's gill net? It should be right there. Do you see his buoys?"

Josy looked up too, wanting to see the whale, but what he saw was the top of a whale, lying still in the water. It wasn't huge. What he could see was about the size of his father's pick-up. And it wasn't moving. "Looks dead," he said.

Elise saw the small whale too. "There's a baby!"

"The other one must be its mom," Sam said, and shook his head. "The little one must have got tangled in Clyde's nets and drowned. Tough."

A great "whoosh," came from beyond the small whale, and Josy saw a V-shaped spout of steam shoot up. It was the other whale, closer and bigger than any animal he had ever seen. It was like a submarine.

On the tail of the "whoosh" came another smaller "whoosh," from the whale Josy had seen first.

Elise laughed. "It's alive! The baby's alive."

"Probably not for long," Sam said.

"One of Clyde's buoys is under the little one," Elise announced. "The baby's all tangled in the net. Can you get closer, Sam? I think I can see the other buoy, up by its head."

Sam was edging Lily Mae up to the little whale. "Don't want to get tangled in his nets, too" he muttered. "That must be its mother, over there. Minding her calf. She's going to be mad if we get in too close to her calf. Clyde's going to be hopping mad, it messing up his gill net like this."

"My mom can fix his nets, no problem," Elise said. "But can we help the baby get untangled?"

Sam shrugged. "I bet Clyde'll want to shoot it. Drag it in, butcher it, and freeze the meat." Sam said. "It's against the law, but he'll figure it'll pay for his nets."

"No-oh! Sam!" Elise cried.

Josy had seen whales before, from a distance at sea, but also in their science book at school. He could see the look of it now. "Look at the shape of it. It's all head. It's one of them migrates outside the islands. It's a right whale. They're endangered. There's only 485.5 left in the world. He can't kill it."

Sam snorted. "You dork. How can there be a .5 whale?"

"I don't know. Sounded good. 485.5. Like a real number. A statistic. Maybe it's only 485. I don't know."

But Sam was thinking. "So it's a right whale. Which means it's a wrong whale. The wrong whale to kill, anyways."

"Please, Sam! You wouldn't kill it? It's a baby. With its mother right there, watching?" Elise begged. "Let's go get my mom. She'll know what to do. She can talk to whales. And she can fix the nets afterwards."

A thrill ran up Josy's back and he thought: *Aunt Rosie's going to turn into a seal and go untangle the nets. She's going to do it! I'll be able to see it happen.* He felt like he had when he first saw his compass mittens light up in the fog to show them the way home. To see a selkie change from a human back into a seal! That would be something to tell. Forever. "Yeah, Sam. Let's go get Aunt Rosie."

Sam fiddled with the engine control, gunning it in little growls, then began to back the boat away. "Could be dead before we get back," he said flatly, then looked at Elise and smiled. "We can try though."

— 6 —

Josy hadn't seen Aunt Rosie since he heard she was a seal, a selkie. When they got to her door, she was mopping down the kitchen floor and listening to the radio.

But when Elise told her about the trapped baby whale and its frightened mother, she turned off the radio quick enough.

"Oh boy, oh boy-o," Aunt Rosie said. It was something she said when she was worried. She shook her head.

"Momma, can you help them? Can you do something? Can you talk to the mother whale? and get the baby untangled?"

"Oh boyohboy," Aunt Rosie said again. "My father and my uncle hunt whales. And they sings to them to tell them that we honors them. I don't know the songs outright. And they does other things too, the day before, to honor the whale. I haven't been home in years. I wouldn't know how — "

“Maybe if you dress in your sealskins and sing them a song telling them to be calm and you’ll help them, they’ll recognize who you are and let us cut the baby free,” Elise pursued. “Nobody else can do it, Momma.”

“Seems like I heard of a lobster boat leading a whale out to sea playing music,” Sam said. “That whale liked classical music best, they said. Mozart.”

Aunt Rosie nodded. “Yup. ’Twas right here in Lowell’s Cove. But you say there’s a baby. And it’s fetched up in Clyde’s gill nets.” She emptied her cleaning bucket into the sink. “So that’s different. ’Lise can probably get the little one out of the gill nets if he’ll stay quiet for me. Don’t tell Clyde, though, till it’s done, or he’ll have my skin.”

Josy thought, She must mean Clyde Wallace would want her *seal* skin. Then she would be his, like she was Elmon’s now. So it must be true. “We won’t tell anyone, Aunt Rosie,” he said. “Can you do it?”

She was already pulling a black plastic trash bag out of the bedroom she shared with Uncle Elmon. “Oh, boyohboy. Sure and I’ll give it try. Long as that momma don’t get upset. We uses your dory, Sam? You tows it out there with your boat and turns it loose. We doesn’t want to use an engine any more than we gots to. Then I gets in close to the little fellow. If I can talk to the momma.”

Aunt Rosie in her sealskin parka looked like an Eskimo, more than Josy had ever noticed. He wondered when she was going to change into a seal, but didn’t dare say anything. He also noticed that she had her skirt and shirt and her shoes and stockings on underneath and wondered how that would work. Would her clothes disappear?

They piled into Elmon’s pickup, Elise and Josy and Aunt Rosie in the cab and Sam in the truck bed. Aunt Rosie drove them back to the wharf. She frowned at the road ahead.

Josy finally dared, squished in between Aunt Rosie and Elise, who were both pretty solid people. “Can you really talk to whales, Aunt Rosie?”

“Anybody can talk to them, Josy. Question is: Does they listen? Does they answer? My uncle and my grandpa and the angakok talks to Whale Man and the whale does what Whale Man says. They say that’s true.” She laughed and nodded. “That *is* true! And they sings to the whale when they hunts it so it

will give itself to them. But this is different. Maybe I can be polite and tell Momma Whale not to worry.” She laughed gently. “If we’re not too late,” she added and nodded again. “Oh boy.”

— 7 —

They were not too late.

The baby spouted as soon as they came in sight of the mother.

Sam motored up to the whales as quietly as possible, directed by Aunt Rosie from the dory. Elise and Josy were in the dory with her.

Elise said, “She’s getting nervous, Sam. Don’t get too close. No closer.”

Sam cut Lily Mae’s engine until it was idling, like when he hauled traps.

The big whale went under, then came up beside the lobster boat, so close that Sam reached out to touch it, but couldn’t quite.

“It’s okay, Mom,” he said softly. “Go talk to Aunt Rosie.”

Instead, the whale bumped against the lobster boat, nearly knocking Sam down. It slid underwater again.

Aunt Rosie suddenly started talking. Talking loud. And what she was saying sounded different from anything Josy had ever heard, soft and rolling and clicking.

At first he thought he’d somehow lost his place in her words, but then he realized he didn’t recognize a single word of what she was saying. Then he caught an “Oh boy” in the middle of Aunt Rosie’s speech. She might be talking seal-ish or whale-ish, but she still said, “Oh boy.”

Elise was grinning her face off. “Way to go. Momma!” she said.

“What’s she saying?” Josy asked.

Elise grinned some more. “She says, hello, Momma *Arviq*. Hello! I know you and you know me. I’m one of the seal people. She’s saying that her people honor the right whale, *arviq*, and that her people and the right whale have lived and died together since time began. That when they’re hunting, the men call the right whale *taklaingiq*. That means ‘He who must not be named,’ because it’s bad luck to say the name of the animal they’re hunting, but today

nobody's hunting and we're here to help, so she calls her Honored Mother Arviq.

"She's saying that she's a mother too, and she knows that Mother Whale — Mother *Arviq* — is scared for her baby. She says — " She cocked her head. "— the boats are here to help her baby, and that if she'll be careful and calm and not hurt the boats or the people, we have hands that can use a knife to cut her baby free from the terrible net that's trapped it. And she should tell her baby to be calm too. That we won't hurt it."

Aunt Rosie turned to Elise. "Stop your jawing, darling. Put on your snorkel mask. Get out of them clothes. Get ready." She nodded as Elise started peeling off her shorts. "Sam! Turn us loose. And move your boat away. Careful-like."

Josie lifted the sculling oar and took a stance in the aft end of the dory. He dropped the oar into its notch in the stern as the dory's painter line, tossed from Sam's boat, landed in the bow.

Aunt Rosie pushed back the hood of her sealskin parka. "Too awful hot!" she murmured, and continued talking in that same Seal language, calmly and steadily. Josy could feel the calmness pouring off her, as if she was talking to a little kid who had just skun his knee and was screaming with fear.

She didn't seem to be changing into anything but herself, but the mother whale surfaced again a little farther away and sent up a V-spout of steam that rained into the dory and all over him.

An awful smell like filthy people flooded the air, and he gagged.

"Gross!" he croaked as the wind carried the smell away. "Whale boogers!"

"Work in close to the baby, Josy-boy. The momma's moving off a tad. It's a little boy calf."

He could see the whole length of the baby now. He wouldn't have called it a little boy. It was longer and slimmer than his dad's pickup, but that was huge for a baby. It was dark reddish brown all over.

Elise pulled on her snorkeling facemask and reached out for Josy's bait knife. He leaned toward her with it, still hanging onto the oar.

Something slammed the bottom of the dory. The boat jerked heavily sideways.

He grabbed for the gunnels.

Missed.

He was in the water, struggling.

His boots didn't let his legs swim.

His jacket didn't let his arms swim.

He couldn't swim.

*Go under!* He remembered from swim lessons at school. *Get rid of your clothes.*

He ducked his head under and opened his eyes. The water was cloudy, but he was right beside the baby whale. Baby Arviq. It loomed in all directions and the sunlight through the water dappled its reddish skin and his own brown hands. He could see Clyde's gill net wrapped right around its body, pinning its flippers close to its sides. Clyde's orange buoy was under its wing, so to speak.

He wiggled out of one boot, lifted his head, gasped air, and kicked with his free foot.

And tangled it in something fine, like long grass. He tried to kick free, but whatever it was only tightened around his ankle.

It began pulling at him.

He began to slide down through the water.

...Down...

...Down...

... Fumbling for whatever had caught around his foot.

*And then my slicker,* he thought. *Get...it...off.* Everything was slowing down. The water glowed green in the sunlight. He had to breathe!

Something moved up under him. He grabbed for it.

It was an animal of some sort, under him, lifting him up. A seal. A big gray seal, pushing up under him. *Aunt Rosie!* he thought. Then: *I missed it happening.*

He tried to muckle onto it, but his hands slipped over the surface. Dimly, beside him, he saw a little naked boy come corkscrewing through the water like a seal, but it was a boy.

The little kid's hand gripped Josy's own bait knife. He grabbed at the netting around the baby whale with one hand and began cutting through the nylon meshes.

The kid's nostrils were closed like a seal's.

The seal kid turned and with a swing of the bait knife, sliced the netting around Josy's foot and freed him. Then, still in the water, it laughed with a rising, repeated song, "Hwee! Hwee! Hwee!" over and over and over.

— 8 —

Josy coughed, and spit up water. Sam was thumping him on the chest and crying, and Elise was kissing him on the mouth. It was embarrassing. He choked, and spit more water, and pushed at Elise's face.

"I think he's okay, now," Elise said above him, pulling away.

He was flat on his back on the deck of Lily Mae.

"Aunt Rosie," he said.

"She's right here."

Josy struggled up. "My boot—"

"Got it. Elise dove for it." Sam looked him over. "You alive now? I guess your mother won't kill me after all: me, letting you handle the dory right next to a freaking, live whale. Don't know what I was thinking."

"Aunt Rosie," Josy began again. "She saved me. She turned into a big seal and saved me."

Sam gave a snort. "The whale saved you. She come up under you and lifted you out of the water on her back."

"There was a little selkie boy. He swam like a seal. I was fetched up in the gill net, and he cut me loose."



Sam shook his head and looked at Elise. “You see any seals down there when you was cuttin the baby loose?”

Elise shook her head. “Not a one. Just me.” She raised her eyes, and following her look, Josy saw that Aunt Rosie was right there above him. She was still the Aunt Rosie he had always known. “Did you call seals, Momma?” Elise asked.

“Nope. I was talking to the momma whale. She thought of rescuing Josy on her own. I thinks the little one bumped your dory.”

Josy wasn't hearing them. Aunt Rosie was still Aunt Rosie. The animal underneath him had been the whale. “You're not a seal?” he asked her.

Rosie looked down at him. “No, goodness, boy! I'm your Aunt Rosie.”

“But you have a seal skin.”

“I has a sealskin parka. To wear in the winter. It ain't never cold enough to wear it down here.

“But — you talked to the whale.”

“I did. You can talk to her too.”

“But I don't know the seal language.”

“That's *Inuktitut*. That's Inuit language. That's the language I growed up with, Josy boy. It's just words, like French or English. Oh, boy, oh boy! What'd you thinks? You believes all that stuffing that Elmon hands out?”

“I didn't. But—”

“Elmon's just messing with you with that foolishness about picking me off a rock by Newfoundland. We met in the craft co-op in Saint John's. He was buying some mittens.”

“But — ”

There was a huge splashing crash off to the south. Josy saw the whale splash down, then rise half out of the water, splash down again.

Then a smaller splash alongside her as the baby whale also breached. And the mother breached again. And the baby whale, again.

“They's saying ‘thank you.’ ” Aunt Rosie said. “You should tell the whale momma ‘thank you’ too. She saved your life, like we saved her baby.”

“She did. The mother whale, Arviq, lifted me up.”

“Yes, she did. Now you tell her ‘thank you,’ too. For fishing you out the bay,” Aunt Rosie repeated.

Josy wondered how to do that. “How do you say it? In Seal language?”

“You can just say it in English. Call it out so she hears you.”

“But she likes your language.”

“Then you can say, ‘Qujannamiik.’ That means, ‘thank you.’”

“Who-yanna-mick,” Josy repeated.

Aunt Rosie smiled. “That’ll be just fine. You might toss a plain ‘thank you’ in there, in case she don’t understand your Inuktitut.” She laughed, and her face was all kind laughter wrinkles and smiles.

“Qoo-yan-na-mee-ick,” Elise said carefully and Josy repeated it again. Better.

He would remember the selkie boy who had laughed at him: “Hwee! Hwee! Hwee!” and cut him free with a single slice of his own bait knife. Or maybe he had dreamed the selkie, and that laugh had been the whales talking. But with his own eyes he had seen the little boy with nostrils that closed like a seal’s. Whatever.

“Qoo-yan-na-mee-ick, Whale Momma!” he called out, loud and clear, as both the whales breached again. “Thank you!”

— END —

NOTE and CAUTION: If you see an entangled whale or seal, DON'T approach it!

Call 877-767-9425 (877-SOS-WHALE) or hail the U.S. Coast Guard at VHF Channel 16. Entangled sea mammals are unpredictable and potentially dangerous for would-be rescuers and themselves.

Stay a minimum of 100 yards away. Prompt reporting of injured, entangled and ship-struck whales is the best way to help the distressed animal.

If you are able to safely do so, stay near the animal until trained help arrives.

— National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration