

When she first received the flyer for the school's annual art showcase, excitement rushed in on waves of possibility, but now, two months later, she stared upon the worn and crumpled piece of paper in her hands fearing she was drowning under the tsunami of her creativity. The art showcase was in two days. How could she have wasted so much time? She sat, as she usually did on her way home from school, at the end of a short wooden pier. The low sun bounced between the receding tide and the dark mangroves, flashing shards of sharp brilliance into her disappointment.

Stirred from her day-mare, she spied thousands of illuminated jewels beneath the glossy shallows. Perhaps she could make a sculpture from this bedazzled flotsam and jetsam? Inspired, she punched the mirrored surface and grabbed at the booty. Soon, several treasure piles amassed upon the wooden planks; piles of broken glass, of aluminium cans, of transparent plastic. But it was not one of these hordes that in the end captured her imagination; it was the mound of mud she had scooped up with the rubbish. She balled and shaped the wet red clay, squeezing from it the saltwater between her fingers. Before the sun touched the sea, she had a sculpture in her hands. A perfect, little dolphin. Her mud dolphin. Wiping herself with the tattered flyer, she beamed into the scintillating sea-light, and in its amber glow, a face with a peculiar smile beamed back.

She slowed to the realisation that it was a dolphin. Extending her arm, she showed the creature her creation. It swam to her and she could see in its cheerful and inquisitive eyes that it was so pleased with what she made. It shimmied closer and then it stopped. It was stuck in the shallows. She scrambled forward and shoved the dolphin back. It swam away into the deep, along with her mud dolphin that, during the panic, she had dropped into the water.

With the debris of her mud dolphin the evening before still floating around her mind, she headed to the pier before school. Though the tide was weak, she had no time to collect the

mud as she had planned. Just off the end of the pier was the dolphin back again, and again stuck. She rushed off the edge of the planks and sloshed into the low water. The dolphin was not far and when she reached it she saw in it the same cheerful and inquisitive eyes. Like yesterday, she pushed the mammal, but unlike before, she could not get it unstuck. Its skin was drying. It needed protection from the emerging sun. She quickly lathered its entirety with mud.

She spent the day at school picking off the clay that had dried and hardened on her clothes and adorned her hair. She told everyone that she had fallen into the water while collecting seashells and watching baby stingrays. They were not surprised. However, she'd surprised herself by not telling anyone about the dolphin. She agonised over the fate of it, but convinced herself the tide had already come in and freed the poor animal. After the afternoon bell, she stopped by the auditorium. The walls and tables were festooned with banners and posters in anticipation of tomorrow's fete. She fretted about her mud dolphin; would she be able to sculpt again such a lovely thing?

Even before the pier she could see it, grey and white and dead. The sun had taken the red completely out of it. The dolphin lay rigid at the high tide line where the grass doesn't die from the saltwater, and she was sad at the sight of it. She looked to its eyes and found none. Scared with guilt to touch it until she did, the dolphin was much lighter than before; as if the weight of its life was removed in death. When she discovered that she could pick it up, she discovered there was no actual dolphin inside. All that remained was a shell, a mud mould the dolphin had slipped off before swimming away. She held up this gift and saw in the sun-hardened clay that familiar, peculiar smile.

In the morning light, mesmerised by the magnificently grotesque sculpture in her arms and by the daydream that it would win today's top prize, she paid no mind to the pier and almost completely missed seeing the dolphin. Almost. But there it was, again. Stuck in

the mud. Again. That stupid dolphin. Today was her day and she wasn't going to stop for anything, not even for it! But stop, she did. Angrily, she placed the sculpture on the pier and hopped down into the muck. As she slogged forth, she found herself sinking into the wet earth until, just within reach of the stranded cetacean, she was stopped...stuck.

Struggling to pull a leg out, she fell back exhausted. Terror and the morning bell drifted on the breeze. She imagined everyone bringing in their artwork for the showcase. She sobbed, and between her knees little streams of ocean found the sea. The sun loomed evenly upon her, smothering her in shadeless heat. Against this onslaught, she covered herself in mud. She gazed at the pitiful dolphin and saw the exact moment when its cheerful and inquisitive eyes dulled. Trapped in a hardened pose of defeat, she baked within her clay as thousands of crabs and mudskippers made a great feast of the beast before her.

The sun dove. Little rivulets of ocean returned from the sea, picked up the carcass and bobbed the banquet away. The strong tide found her, but would not lift her. She fought desperately. The water rose and filled in her shape. She heaved in vain. It was only when the saltwater covered her eyes that the sculpture finally failed, and she cracked her clay. She swam for the pier. And on it the mud dolphin gazed back at her with its peculiar smile.