

## Beyond the Reef – Matilda, Year 5, NSW

My eyes shot open as panic flooded through my body. I took large gulps of air and tried to control my heavy breath. Images raced through my mind like a small piece of wood getting swallowed by a raging river, then to appear again. I buried my face in my hands, resisting the urge to let out a blood-curdling scream. Beads of sweat rolled down my already drenched body as I writhed in the plane seat. I lifted my hot face just an inch to take in my surroundings. The plane, the jet plane that was taking me to the whale sharks. That was taking me to the ocean. To Ningaloo reef.

The stars shone in darkness. The sky was pitch black as we hauled bags into the bulky car we had hired. My arms ached from the many tons of luggage we had carried through the airport. As we sank into the seats of the car Grace asked how long the drive was.

“About 12 hours,” Dad replied.

A mournful groan escaped my mouth.

“Don’t worry,” Dad said, “It’s 10 now, as long as you sleep through the night we’ll be there by morning.”

The car let out a small whine as it started. As I stared into the night, my eyes started to droop. All was silent and the sound of soft snores reverberated through the car.

Our car grumbled to a stop. I almost toppled out of the car as I saw the awe on Grace's pale face. My sister was gazing at the ocean, her eyes fixed on the alluring beauty of the water.

“Let’s go in the water! Let’s go, let’s go!” she squealed, her voice at the level of a scream.

Dad smiled, warmth emanating from the loving look he wore.

“I’ll take our stuff inside,” he said, nudging his head towards the elegant glamping tent that stood, patiently waiting for us. “Evie, why don’t you and Grace go for a quick swim. I’ll get your cosies.”

My feet tingled in the sand as I strolled closer to the water, my swimmers clinging to my body. Grace was already swimming, her body a blur as she swam through the turquoise water. I took a deep breath and dived in. The cold seeping through my cossies.

As I plunged into the water my eyes expanded in shock. Millions of fish bustled through the water as though the school bell had just rung. I reached out to stroke one. The fish sprinted away to reveal coral. A vast expanse of diverse, colourful coral. A large amount of bubbles sprang out of my open mouth and I floated up to the surface for air. I ran out, my legs tearing through the water. Dad was waiting for me, smiling on the shore.

“Not too bad, eh?” he said, grinning at me.

I smiled, my face was full of mixed emotions.

“The ocean isn’t that scary... you just need to give it a chance,” Dad said, beaming.

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Orange and violet were sewn across the star-strewn sky, black ebbed between them. Dark had nearly fallen and soon all colour would vanish.

“Big day tomorrow,” Dad was saying as we slurped spaghetti into our open mouths. Grace was going pop with excitement as she sat there babbling about whale sharks. The chatter died as we finished up our meal and sat on the sand, our eyes transfixed on the dying sunset.

“I’m going to hop into bed,” I said after minutes of passing silence.

“Alright,” Dad said, “Make sure to wash your dish though.”

I grumbled as I lifted my body weight off the ground, although a small laugh escaped my mouth. I scraped my plate clean into the bin and ran some water over my plate. I headed into the tent and sank into my bed. As I closed my wary eyes, sleep came to me.

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My eyes shot open. The sun beamed down at me through the tent. I rolled over to check my watch. 6:30. I groaned, Grace and Dad were already up, eating breakfast. I lifted my weight off the bed. I pulled on a green top and some black shorts and headed outside. I poured muesli into a bowl and shovelled my breakfast into my mouth.

“Everyone ready?” Dad said as I finished my breakfast and brushed my teeth. I nodded. “Right then,” Dad replied, “Hop in the car.”

As I settled myself into the seat, with a rumble of the vehicle, we drove to the jetty.

As I stepped out of the car, the boat meekly sat waiting for us. 15 or so people stood on the jetty with us. The boat that sat, floating on the top of the water, was white and sleek. It was a modest sized boat; just big enough for all of us.

“Alright...if everyone could just hop on the boat,” our guide said in a booming voice.

Once everyone had shuffled onto the boat we started moving. The boat gave a grumble as I settled myself on the uneven floor.

“We’re at our first stop,” our tour guide boomed.

As I pulled on my swimmers and snorkelling gear I took a deep breath and closed my eyes. I snapped my eyes open, brow furrowed, readying myself to face the sea of turquoise. We clambered down the rusted ladder of the boat, dipping the edge of our flippers into the warm water. I fumbled with my snorkel, adjusting it to be just right, then I set off into the vast labyrinth of coral, my heart pounding in my chest.

Dots of brightly coloured coral were dotted along the reef, fish sprinting in and out of them. A large, spotted fish swam past me so fast my body gave a little jerk. Colossal amounts of fish swam by. A school of neon blue blurs, a family of large, silver beauties. A tried to steady my heavy breath as a figure swam by. A turtle. A large turtle, gliding through the water, its shell glistening. A small shadow followed. A hatchling, wading its flippers through the water, in sync with its mother. A smile flickered in the corner of my mouth, as I swam into the near distance to follow. I swam right beside the turtles now, in harmony. I stretched out my hand and brushed the mother's shell. Slimy. I retracted slightly as a soft voice, though slightly muffled due to bubbles, whispered in my ear, "Time to get back to the boat... for lunch."

I devoured a sausage roll, the succulent meat melting in my mouth. We were headed out. Into the distance, to the open waters beyond the reef. They had used planes to track the whale sharks, flying over the vast Ningaloo ocean.

The boat sped across the water for what seemed like hours, though it had barely been one. The boat finally grumbled to a stop, facing a sea of whale sharks.

A family of whale sharks. Their 20ft bodies looming over the minuscule dots, that represented the rest of my tour. I took a shaky breath before plunging into the water. Butterflies fluttered in my churning stomach. My heart was pounding in my chest and I could taste vomit. A school bus sized whale shark waded through the water, passing me. I exhaled, shaking uncontrollably. My father's hand lay on my shoulder, as an attempt to calm me down. I tried to breathe, it was nerve-racking, though a feeling of exhilaration poked through. My breath slowed; I closed my eyes. *I'm fine, I'm fine*, I repeated in my head over and over.

My eyes flickered open, the butterflies flying out of my now settled stomach. I glided through the water, my feet dancing in the flippers. My breath was now steady, as I swam through the clear water. Among an ocean of intimidating, though charming whale sharks. Among the spotted beauty of the sea. Among a wonder of nature.

"Hello, Jeff," I whispered softly, as I swam by a particularly large whale shark. "You're such a big fish."

A grin cracked on my face, I imagined Jeff with the same grin, I knew he was wearing it, he just couldn't show it. I slowly drifted away from Jeff, admiring the alluring beauty of the ocean. Admiring the beauty of the whale sharks. Admiring nature. The immeasurable beauty that nature had always offered. The immeasurable beauty that before now had been hidden in the shadow of my fears.