

How to Save a Turtle – Zia, Year 6, VIC

Mia woke early in the morning. The dawn light crept through the tattered curtains and shone on her face. She blinked quickly, willing the light to shine elsewhere until the sun passed her window and left the room dark again. Her body seemed colder than usual and she leaned to the side and pulled the blanket over her head. The crash of the waves on the shore called to her, and she tiptoed out of the room. Her mum was asleep, softly snoring under the blanket, the other side of the bed was empty.

Mia headed back to her room, stopping the questions about her father collecting up inside her before they even started. She pulled a light pink hoodie on, and before even having breakfast she swiftly left the house.

The small beach shack that they lived in was white. Her mother, quite the collector, hung shells and stones from the veranda. They jingled and swayed in the gentle breeze. She set down the sandy path, weaved with bushes and spinifex.

As she got to the start of the stairs, she paused. She didn't need to look at a clock to know that it was early in the day, the heat only just rolling across the dry landscape. She trudged down the steps and walked onto the sand. Halfway through she stopped.

There was something in the sand.

It was a shell. Greenish brown with pretty patterns. Suddenly she realised. It was a turtle shell! It started digging through the sand awkwardly with its large flippers. She studied it carefully until it flopped over, revealing a trickle of red blood coming from a large wound in its stomach.

"Hi little one," she said, begging it to respond or move.

"Why don't I take you home?" she said as she picked the lifeless turtle up. It jerked a little. Mia bit her lip.

She knew her mum would object to keeping the poor creature. How could she save it? She knew nothing about turtles. She found her way to the bedroom, and quietly placed it down on a towel. Almost immediately, the surface around the turtle was red. Blood red. It made her skin crawl. How could she do this?

What do turtles need to survive? she thought to herself. A thought popped into her head. Water. The turtle would die without water!

She wrapped it carefully in a towel and tip-toed downstairs to the bathroom. She quickly put it in the sink and went to the kitchen to get bandages. But there was a shadow. A tall shadow standing at the bench. Mia's mother turned around.

"What do you think you're doing?" she said quite calmly. "What were you carrying down the stairs?"

"Nothing," she began to respond, but her mother cut her off, her gaze as angry as ever.

“Show me, Mia,” her mother said before hurrying to the bathroom. She tried to get past but her mother held out a hand. The turtle was sitting in the sink.

“Is that a turtle? Mia, I told you, you can't go to the beach like that!”

“Yes,” Mia responded, “but it's dying, we have to save it!”

“We can't keep it. Put it back in the ocean where it belongs,” retorted her mother.

“But mom--”

“I don't want to hear it,” her mother said, staring solemnly into the distance.

“Please,” said Mia, tears springing to her eyes.

“Why are you always like this?” Suddenly her mother stopped. She gazed sadly into the distance.

“Mom?”

“Alright, fine. But don't kill the poor thing will you. Turtles need the right temperature to survive.”

“Wait, are you seriously agreeing with me?” said Mia breathlessly.

Her mother scowled. Mia smiled. She always thought her mother had a heart of stone. Maybe she had a soft spot for sea creatures, thought Mia.

“But -why?” said Mia.

“It's what your father would have wanted.”

Suddenly the room went silent. She rarely brought up Mia's father, and whenever she did the room went quiet. Mia braced for the follow up , but it never came.

“What are you doing just standing there, get me some bandages!” instructed her mother bossily.

“Okay okay okay,” she said smiling. Maybe her mother would open up about what really happened soon. *Don't get your hopes up, she* told herself as she grabbed the medical kit.

Mia cursed under her breath as she tried to bandage the unruly turtle. It kept on squirming and it was hard to wrap it in the bandage.

“Mom can you help me, she wont stop moving?” said Mia sulkily.

“It's a he,” said her mother.

“How do you know?” Mia responded, not taking her eye off the turtle in fear it would fall off the vanity.

“Ah, I used to love the sea,” said her mom looking up as if there was something in the sky.

“Really?” Mia said, but her mom wouldn't respond. Once the turtle was wrapped in bandages and the bleeding had stopped, Mia paced it gently in the water. He swam around weakly in the tub.

“I'm going to my room, I have heaps of homework to do,” said Mia, yawning.

Her mother nodded.

“I'll watch him for a little longer,” said her mother plainly, but Mia could see the glint in her eye as her mother watched the turtle.

The next two weeks flew by. Mia and her mother checked on the turtle every day. Her mum said that it was a green sea turtle. Every morning she fed him, and every afternoon he waited for her to come home and play. She checked his wound every day. It was slowly getting better, and Mia dreaded the day they would have to set him free. She sighed.

“You can go back to your home soon,” she said, but she couldn't imagine not seeing him every day.

“Should I ask my mother about him?” she asked the turtle one evening. She knew the small turtle couldn't talk. But something about the way he looked at her made her believe he understood her. It looked up, surprised at the question. He looked seriously at her for a second, then returned to swimming.

“I'll take that as a yes,” she said with a chuckle and went to her mother's room. She knocked gently. Her mother looked up from the book she was reading.

“Mum, I'm going on a walk to catch the sunset, want to come with me?”

“Ok honey,” she said softly, as she set down her book and flipped off some sandals.

They walked on the soft sand silently as the blue sky got painted with streaks of orange, purple, pink and yellow. Mia stopped to admire the beautiful sunset.

“Mum,” she said softly. “What did my father look like?”

The question slipped out of her mouth, and a wave of quiet washed over them. It was softer than ever on the beach and her mother stopped. Instead of yelling, she stopped herself and took a deep breath.

“He had straight, light brown hair like you.” Her mother sighed. “Mia- I'm sorry.”

“Mom it's-”

“No, it's not ok!” She sighed, “I'm sorry I haven't told you about him. I just don't want you to think we didn't love you. He did. He also loved the ocean, just like you. After he left us, well, I couldn't look at the water the same.”

Her mother sighed. "When I first met him, he had a friend, I can't remember her name. He loved me but-" she rested her head on her hand. Mia sat her mother down on a rock. "They fell in love, and two weeks after you were born he left. A couple weeks later they went on a fishing trip together, and he got killed by a white shark. I never wanted you to fall in love with the ocean like him, but I guess you can't delay the inevitable." She looked up, expression full of sorrow.

Mia nodded. For the first time in forever she understood her mother.

The next day they set the turtle free. Mia had simply walked in, and knew it was time. They went to the beach at sunset again, drinking in the colours of the sky and admiring the chilly blue waves.

Mia set the turtle down in the water gently, her mother next to her smiling sadly.

The wind blew and Mia wrapped her jumper tight as they walked across the sand. At first the turtle looked at his brave owners for the last time, and then silently swam out to the ocean.

"What do you think we should name him?" asked her mother gently as they watched the waves crash on the shore.

Mia paused.

"Can I ask you one last question?" she said carefully.

"Yes," her mother responded.

"What was my dad's name?"

"Alex," her mother responded, and Mia nodded along.

"Let's name it Alex then." said Mia, and they sat there admiring the sunset until the darkness enveloped them.