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MYSTERIES OF THE DEEP





LAST WORD

By Terry Runté

• You know what ocean animal is endangered? Krill, the tiny, defenseless plankton that whales eat. When was the last time you saw a 'Save the Krill' bumper sticker? •

Sitting there, bound to a crude wooden chair by leather straps, I began to question the career choice I had made so many years before. As an environmental activist I had dedicated my life to saving whales from extinction. I was convinced they were as intelligent as people. Now it looked as though I was going to be tortured and killed for that belief.

But the man before me didn't seem menacing at all. His forehead was wrought with permanent lines of sincerity. His face was weathered and worn. His nose was large. He was . . . Jacques Cousteau.

"I used to be like you, you know," Jacques said. "I was one of zee original Save Zee Whalers back in '53. I used to hold fund-raisers. I used to marché. I was very big in zee whale movement."

His laugh was reassuring. His voice lulled and spoiled me. He offered me some Brie.

"Then one day I was kidnapped by zees organization and was brought to zees room. I sat in zat very chair." He shrugged. "Now I am, *comme on dit*, a whale hater."

Suddenly, I realized the reason why I had been brought here. Jacques was going to try to deprogram me. I braced myself for the worst.

Jacques began to pace the room. "A'lors, I knqw what you are thinking. You are thinking I am crazee. You think whales are an endangered species. Practically extinct. Right?"

I nodded my head.

"Think for a moment. Have you ever seen a whale handbag? Have you ever eaten at a restaurant that served whale? I have never seen a label saying CONTAINS WHALE. Have you?"

I admitted that I had not.

"What do they use whale for anyway? Unless you know people who light their houses wiz whale-oil lamps, I am stumped."

"You know what ocean animal ees endangered right now?" he asked. "The tiny, defenseless plankton zat whales eat. When was zee last time you saw a SAVE THE KRILL bumper sticker?"

"And let me ask you something," he continued. "Did you ever wonder about zee *Titanic*? Just think—zee world's greatest ocean liner on a maiden voyage and its experienced captain bashes into an iceberg? Does zat seem logical to you? That zee captain would decide to play zee chicken with a piece of ice zee size of Delaware? Does not make sense, does eet?"

Jacques drummed his fingers on the chair in front of him. "I want you to consider zee possibility zat maybe—just maybe—zat iceberg was pooshed."

I felt a chill. For the first time, I felt a twinge of doubt. Jacques walked over to the computer bank that covered the far wall and threw a switch. A reel-to-reel tape recorder began to spin, and the room filled with the agonizingly beautiful song of the humpback whale. Even

Cousteau was momentarily transfixed.

"Eet's very beautiful, is eet not?" he said. I smiled and nodded in agreement. In the old days, when I was with operation Greenpeace, we used to sit around and listen to the tapes of whales and wonder what simple ciphers they were exchanging: a cry for help? an alert to danger? a lover's serenade? Surely these were divine creatures.

Jacques turned off the whale songs and threw another switch. Now the air was filled with a dazzling array of clicks and beeps. "Digital encoding," he explained. "When we transfer zeez sounds to a digital master, all sorts of patterns start to emerge. Far more complex zan even French." He paused to let that sink in.

"But if you've already encoded their voices digitally," I blurted, "it should be a simple matter to translate it all into human language! To actually know what whales are saying! To learn from their vast storehouse of knowledge! To share in the purity of their wisdom!" The straps on my chair could barely contain me.

Jacques turned off the clicking and paused before the third and final switch. "Are you sure you want to hear zees?" he asked. I begged him to turn it on.

He smiled, sadly this time. "Remember, zees ees for your own good." Then he turned on the machine.

All I remember is that one of the voices sounded like Tony Danza.

"So, uh, hey! Whadaya wanna do?"

"Gee, I dunno. Whadaya wanna do?"

"I dunno. Ja watch *Wheel of Fortune*?"

"Are ya kiddin'? Every time I plugged in my Trinitron I got a horrible shock."

My mind was reeling. These whales were as intelligent as people. They were idiots. I strained at my straps in absolute horror while they exchanged their crude comments.

"She had fins like you wouldn't believe. I mean, we are talkin' dorsal city. . . ."

Jacques turned off the tape, cutting off the whales in mid-sentence. "Have you had enough, or would you like to hear the tape where they talk about astrology?" I didn't answer. I had blacked out.

I've been with the organization for a year now, fighting to expose the "dolts of the deep" for what they really are. As for the whales, well, they're getting what they deserve. Overpopulation, for one thing. And they're running out of krill.

I guess we should all be grateful that whales live in their own watery world and cannot invade ours, ruining our cocktail parties and crowding us out of theater openings. And we should always remember the motto of the I.W.H.O. (International Whale Haters Organization): "They crawled into the ocean on their own. It's up to you to keep them there." ☐

Terry Runté's views on whales are based on scientific research and have nothing to do with his recent jilting by a whale from Manhattan.