

Shiny and Delaney

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It was a dark and chilly night. Delaney snuggled up closer to his brothers and sisters. His mother was near, but the others were nestled in against her, and Delaney was too small to push them away. His ears and nose were warm, but he couldn't feel the tip of his tail. It was like an icicle, no longer a part of him. He tried to wriggle in closer, but the others were pressing on either side, and instead of moving forward he felt himself being squeezed slowly out of the cluster. The cold was creeping up his back. He could feel his precious body heat leaking away. With one final heave, the pack shut him out. The other puppies were so busy warming themselves, they didn't even notice he was gone. He was shivering and alone.

Delaney walked a few steps away, then turned and looked back. His big, brown eyes were full of sorrow. The scent of his mother came to him, and he took a deep breath. Delaney crouched, then sprang. He charged up and over the soft bodies, trampling ears and tails and noses, and with a final leap he landed on his mother's back, bounced, and slid down to wedge himself at her side. Her warmth glowed against him.

“Right. That's it.”

His mother stood and shook herself, sending puppies sprawling in every direction.

“Children, the time has come. I've raised you until you're big enough to look after yourselves. Now you must go out and make your own place in the world. It's hard work, but there's food and shelter out there. Your job is to find it.”

The puppies stared at their mother in shock.

“Go on. This day comes in the life of every child. Mine came years ago. Now it's your turn.”

There was a hard look in their mother's eyes. She was not joking. Unbelievable as it was, she meant what she said. Ears drooped and tails curled in between legs. One by one they shuffled away, and every one turned to send a last hard look at Delaney.

“It's not my fault,” said Delaney. “It's not my fault, is it Mum?”

“No, Delaney, it's not your fault,” said his mother. “It's the way of the world.”

“Can I stay a little longer, Mum? I only just got warm.”

“I’m sorry, Delaney. You have to go.”

“Now?”

“Now. Same as the others. No turning back.”

Delaney walked away. He turned back. His mother bared her teeth, and growled. He cringed, and a shiver went through him from head to toe. He went. As his mother watched his small form disappear into the darkness, her dark eyes shone, and a whimper caught in her throat.

Delaney looked out into the darkness. He sniffed. It smelt of earth, and rot, and old things nobody wanted. The broken crate behind him was the only home he had ever known. He had been born there, and grown up there. All he wanted to do was turn around and go back inside, but he couldn't. He could never return.

All around him were more broken things. Old refrigerators with the doors taken off, rusting, dented cars, tins of congealed paint, offcuts of wood and iron and plaster, plastic bits of things that would never be whole again. He padded along, nose to the ground, until he found a small opening between two sheets of tin. It smelt warm in there. He wriggled inside.

“Who's that?” It was his brother Mark.

“It's Delaney.”

“There's no room, Delaney. You can't come in.”

“But I'm small. I don't take up much space.”

“There's six of us in here already.”

Delaney could feel that it was true. The little space was jammed with puppies. There wasn't even room to turn around. He backed out.

Delaney kept on looking. He found an old washing machine, but when he tried to climb in there was a terrible snarling and hissing and a sharp whiff of cat, and a painful stinging at the end of his nose. When he came to himself he was running away quickly, with no clear idea of where he was going.

All that long, cold night, he slunk from one hole to another, but always there was something already there, a bad smell or a scary creature, or a sense of terrible danger. As the sky grew pale he realised that the soil under his paws was damp and sandy, and he smelt a salty tang in the air. The roaring in his ears was the waves as they fell wearily on the shore.

It was a grey, bleak dawn. The sun didn't have the strength to give any colour to the world. Delaney was cold all the way to the core of his bones. He walked to the edge of the ocean. It was endless. There was sure to be room for him there.

Delaney began to swim. At first it was very cold, but then he stopped feeling it. He fixed his eyes on the watery yellow light at the horizon, and paddled towards it. At last he was getting somewhere. He was very tired, but soon he could sleep. He began to sink, down into the soft embrace of the sea. There was no need to struggle anymore.

His eyes weren't made for seeing underwater, so he couldn't really make out what was coming towards him. It was a big, sparkling fish, but it had the head of a girl, and its hands were a girl's hands. They caught hold of him, and hugged him close. And with a great heaving of his chest, he took a breath. How could he be breathing? He was still deep under the sea, but it was not the same sea. It was as if he were returning to a home he had left long, long ago.

“Just what did you think you were doing?”

He heard the girl's voice, somewhere inside his head.

“I was just going for a swim.”

“Swimming isn't your best thing. And I haven't seen you around here before. Where do you live?”

“I used to live in a pile of junk on the edge of the sea.”

“The edge of the sea? What are you talking about? The sea goes on forever.”

“No it doesn't.”

“Does too!”

“Does not!”

The fish-girl held him away from her and looked into his eyes. He could see her clearly now. His eyes had changed as well. She stared gravely at him for a whole minute, then nodded.

“You're telling the truth.”

Something about the way she said it made Delaney feel special. He wasn't just a smelly old junk yard stray. He was a being from the edge of the sea.

“I'm Delaney,” he said.

“I'm Shiny. Pleased to meet you.”

Shiny's face went very still and beautiful. She was thinking hard.

“Take me to the edge of the sea,” she said at last.

“We have to swim away from the sun,” said Delaney. Their heads were just above the surface, and he could see the grey, overcast sky and the oily, metallic swell of the ocean.

“What sun?” said Shiny.

“There, see?” said Delaney. “It's brighter. That's the sun. That's where all the light comes from.”

“No it doesn't,” said Shiny.

“Yes it does,” said Delaney.

“It comes from greeny-gold glow,” said Shiny. “The sea glows all by itself. Especially down deep.”

“Trust me,” said Delaney. “It all comes from the sun.” He began to paddle.

“Call that swimming?” said Shiny. She grabbed him and flipped her tail like a dolphin. They were rushing through the water, bubbles swirling behind them. Delaney had never moved so fast in his life.

Soon they could see the beach.

“Yuk,” said Shiny. “This water smells terrible. We always stay away from stinky water.”

They were in shallow water right near the shore, where the waves were breaking. Delaney swam a little then found he could stand up. He turned back to Shiny.

“It's probably from the junk,” said Delaney. “Well, this is it. The edge of the sea.”

“I thought it would smell better.”

“It is what it is,” said Delaney. “It's not perfect, but it's where I come from.”

Shiny was thinking hard again. Then she stood up. Where her tail had been there were two legs. She looked like a normal girl, if you could call a girl normal who was dressed in fish skin and seaweed.

“Where do you live?” she said. “Take me there.”

“I told you,” said Delaney. “I don't live anywhere. Everywhere is taken.”

“Who says?” said Shiny.

“Everyone says. And sometimes they don't talk, they scratch.”

“Ever seen a hermit crab?” said Shiny.

“No.”

“Hermit crabs live wherever they like. They just find something and make it their home. Come on.”

Delaney followed Shiny as she strode into the dump.

“This looks like a good place,” said Shiny. She began to throw things aside, and pull things around. Delaney saw what she was doing. He sniffed about, found some bits of timber, and dragged them over in his teeth. Shiny had found old broken bricks, and was paving a floor. Delaney rushed around happily, fetching all the wood and tin he could find. There was an old broken window frame. He dragged it to Shiny. Her hands were strong and quick. She tied things together to make frames for walls. A little house was taking shape. Delaney went to look for more tin sheeting for the roof.

They worked all day. As the sky darkened, they finished lashing down the roof. They stood back in the last of the evening light, and looked at what they had made.

“It's beautiful,” said Delaney.

“Come on inside, Delaney,” said Shiny. “It's starting to get cold.”