

A meeting with King Melchizedek of Salem.*

I have dreamed my whole life of sailing round the world and doing something back for nature. My plan had always been to work until I was in my 40s, and then to embark on the trip. So in 1994 I bought the yacht the *Morgan*, giving myself about 10 years to gradually restore her and make her ready for the trip. In the winter of 2002 she was almost ready when a series of setbacks put paid to my plans and I decided to postpone my trip. I would either have to wait for a number of years or perhaps not go at all. I took the decision to wait for eight years, to sell the *Morgan*, and when the time would be right again, to buy a new yacht and then go. It was a difficult decision, but it was taken.

Then the unexpected happened. One afternoon, I was going through the books at the office, when the phone rang. It was Rob van Engelen, the harbour master of the Waterkant Yacht Marina in Dinteloord, a town on a canal miles inland, where I was living. 'There's a porpoise or a dolphin in the harbour' he told me. My first reaction was that it was impossible. The dolphin would have had to go through three locks to reach this far inland. Nevertheless, I packed up and rushed to the harbour as quickly as possible. Once there, I pulled on my drysuit and jumped in the water. It was a dolphin and he came straight to me. As though he could sense that I was nervous, he approached me very slowly and lay next to me. He was a Bottlenose Dolphin, and he was very big!



This was our first meeting. As it began to get dark, I bade him farewell, left the water, and went home to my boat. That evening he swam near my boat for a while, and in the night went through the three locks back to the sea. It looked like he knew exactly what he was doing.

The next day, 14 December, I put my rib in the water and went to find the dolphin. And yes, my new friend had returned. We greeted each other outside the last lock. We spent almost the whole day together in the water. Towards the end of the day the Waterkant Marina had become a tourist attraction, so Rob informed me. And that it had become such a circus that for his own safety and health, the dolphin would have to be brought back to sea. This is when my life's trip to sea really began.



Despite the dark, I jumped back into the water and the dolphin came straight to me again and I realised that it was me who had to bring him back to sea. Getting into the rib, I wanted to see if he would follow me. And yes, he stayed next to me, jumping gently. I can still hear the sound of his breathing as he came up for air.

We followed a salvage vessel, the *Hellegat*, and its captain, Reinier van der Zee, who would go ahead of us and keep the authorities updated about our progress, and ensure that the locks would be open.

* A character from the book 'De Alchemist' by Paulo Coelho. Published by De Arbeiderspers, 1994. ISBN-90 295 0898 1

With complete trust, the dolphin followed me into the first lock. And once there, he turned on his back for me to rub his belly. It was a wonderful feeling – and I don't mean that it felt good for my hands.

By now, it was really dark, and Reinier had arranged for the KNRM (the Koninklijke Nederlandse Reddings Maatschappij – the Dutch rescue service) to meet us at an island, 10 Gemeenten, halfway down the Haringvliet river. After an hour of gently motoring in the dark with the bobbing dolphin next to me, his breathing was already familiar. Why was I feeling such a connection with this wild creature? Is there a natural understanding between man and dolphin?

We finally saw the KNRM's boat, filled with enthusiastic rescuers. Were they there for my benefit or the dolphin's? The plan was that the KNRM would 'take over' the dolphin, bringing him to sea, so that the *Hellegat* and I could return to the harbour. No sooner said than done. I attached my rib to the *Hellegat* and started to climb aboard. But before I could get very far, Reinier came to tell me that the KNRM had lost the dolphin. Back down into the rib, making it loose from the *Hellegat*. Before I had even started the engine, the dolphin popped up next to me and looked me in the eyes. It was as if he was saying 'I want *you* to bring me back to sea.'

This time I followed the KNRM boat, and we passed through the next lock, the dolphin bobbing along next to us. Just before the last lock of the Haringvliet, we arranged that the KNRM boat would pass through the lock first with the dolphin and would depart on its sea side, while I would remain in the lock and make my way back to Dinteloord the way we came. The lock keeper would quickly close the gates of the lock, shutting the dolphin out and closing me in. This worked. The dolphin passed through the lock gates and, after swimming around for a while, headed for open sea. He was not seen again in Dinteloord.

The trip to sea took five hours, and was the turning point in my life. Just before my friend chose for the open sea, I jumped into the water for the last time. I told him that I understood what I was to do, and that I would follow him shortly on a voyage on the world's oceans.

So many people have experiences with dolphins that are not only magical but life changing. If you think about all the stories where dolphins – or orcas or whales – bring skippers to safe waters, this story is an apt example.



And to the dolphin, my King Melchizedek, I hope that I may meet you again.