

Cappy and the Whale

Written by Kateryna Babkina, illustrated by Julia Pilipchatina

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Target age group: 6+

Genre: Chapter book

About: An eight-year-old boy nicknamed Cappy is fighting leukaemia. The boy, living with his Mom and Grandma, can't do lots of fun things, but he doesn't despair. One day he spots a mysterious whale hovering over the park outside his window. This cheeky whale becomes his friend, and the story gets started. This beautifully illustrated story told by a thoughtful, cheerful boy is full of touching, simple-hearted dialogues between Cappy and the whale. Issues of illness, anxiety, and life with divorced parents are skilfully handled against the backdrop of boy's daydreams and philosophical ideas sprinkled with unconditional love, optimism, and sincerity. More info on the book can be accessed [here](#).

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Hanna Leliv is a freelance literary translator based in Lviv, Ukraine. In 2017–2018, she was a Fulbright fellow at the University of Iowa's MFA in Literary Translation. Her translations of contemporary Ukrainian literature into English have appeared in Asymptote, Washington Square Review, The Adirondack Review, The Puritan, and Apofenie. She can be contacted at hanna.leliv@gmail.com or on [Facebook](#).

SAMPLE TRANSLATION

Cappy and the Whale

by Kateryna Babkina

translated from the Ukrainian by Hanna Leliv

The Whale Who Eats My Pills

One morning I glanced out the window and saw a whale floating in the sky. The whale was blue and gray, large and clumsy, yet he was just rolling along and gliding on the warm sunny breeze with surprising grace.

I grabbed Mom's phone from her desk to take a picture, but the whale arched his back and dove into the treetops, through the early spring leaves. Small birds fluttered up, chirping angrily.

While I was in the hospital, I read every book in the world about animals. Well, not really *every* book—twenty-three, actually, but that's still a lot. I read about this fish that crawls on land during droughts, about the platypus that digs a burrow underwater, and about the monster living at the bottom of Loch Ness in Scotland. And about the fifty-two types of flying fish with fins big enough for them to speed up and leap out of the water and glide over the waves. But none of these books mentioned a whale drifting in the air, high up above the park, in the late-afternoon.

In the evening, Grandma took me out for a walk. I looked and looked into the green dusk, tangled up in the rustling bushes, until I felt dizzy. Grandma got scared—she thought I'd grown weak again and fallen asleep standing up. But I just couldn't help staring up at the treetops, since there was a huge whale there, moving around, hiding, breathing in and out.

Back home, Grandma tried to take my clothes off to check my body for new bruises, but I hate that—I'm not a little boy anymore. Before I went to the hospital last year, I broke my swimming coach's nose when he tried to help me hurry up and change into my swimming trunks by pulling off my underpants. He kept laughing at me and looking at me all through class, as he wiped away the blood. I was in no laughing mood, though, because I couldn't stop thinking about what Mom was going to say. When the coach told her what had happened, she listened carefully, and then, after a long, silent drive home, she said: "Adults should never take off your clothes or touch you in a way that feels uncomfortable to you. But if they do it sometimes—like Grandpa pinching your nose—there's no need to punch them. In fact, you shouldn't punch *anyone*." Thinking a bit more about it, she added: "But you know, you did everything right."

I felt totally lost and confused.

The coach and I had a talk, man-to-man. We agreed that he would never touch my underpants again and that I wouldn't touch his nose. He gave me a small hourglass to keep in my locker. It measured time: I had exactly three minutes to change into my swimming trunks.

Every time Mom took me to the locker room, she'd see the hourglass and remember the time with the broken nose, and laugh. Later, my coach brought me that hourglass while I was in the hospital, but that time Mom burst into tears. There's nothing scarier than seeing Mom cry, when blue-black tears run down her face. But I'm not scared of them because I know it's just makeup. I get scared when she cries because she seems to shrink when she's crying; she grows smaller than me, she becomes so tiny and fragile I don't know what to do with her or how to protect her. I'm okay when Mom gets angry, though, because she grows big then—big and angry and strong. I'm glad that Mom didn't cry or yell at me when I punched my coach. I think he liked her. I'm sad I stopped going to the pool.

So I went to the bathroom alone and took off everything except my underpants, and looked at my arms, my shins, my bottom, and my back in the mirror. I didn't see any bruises. When you get bruises, you don't feel good. You can barely keep your eyes open, and it seems like if you hold your breath and blow all the air out and squint slowly, you'll become so light you can just fly right up off the ground. It never happened to me, though. I always fell down: once back in kindergarten and that one time in the locker room at the swimming pool. That was when the coach saw all my bruises.

Grandma was waiting for me behind the door. I told her I was all right and that I wanted to be alone, so she went back to the kitchen, and I plugged the drain and filled the bathtub. I had to think over all the things that had happened today. The bathtub quickly filled up with water, chilly but not freezing cold like in winter—the pipes in the apartment block had warmed up. And the water inside the pipes, too. Could a real whale in some ocean somewhere get so hot in springtime that he would jump out of the water and just float up into the air, carefree? Or maybe it was something to do with global warming, like the bright yellow waves in my atlas? Would those waves get bigger and bigger, hotter and hotter, brighter and brighter? And then would all the whales and dolphins and sea mammals feel too hot and start to live up in the open air, floating around in cities like shiny blimps? That would be so neat!

But how come that the whale didn't fall down? I knew that the beluga whale is smallest whale in the world. It weighs two tons! Dad's Toyota weighs only one ton: it takes the power of 135 horses just to start moving, so it would take many more to make it go up in the air—that's why our car can't fly, Dad explained. How much horsepower does a flying whale need? It was not a beluga, either, so it's not even small. Where did he get all that horsepower? I was pretty sure the whale didn't have an engine or propeller. Could a whale be

hollow—just a superlight shell kept up in the air by warm winds like kites and birds with big wings? But I knew that a whale couldn't just be empty. People used to hunt them for what they had inside, and so many whales were killed. So maybe it was a ghost whale? I didn't believe in ghosts, but I had to consider all the possibilities.