



# THE LEGEND OF PHYSTY

BY IRENE VIRAG

He swam to us, sick and foundering, out of the deepest deeps and for one shining moment he called to what is good in all of us. We named him after the Latin for his species, *Physeter macrocephalus*, the largest of the toothed whales.

Physty for short.

The story of Physty is a whale of a tale suited for this place called Paumonok. Long Island is after all an island and it deserves a great fish story. And even if whales are red-blooded mammals, they rule the sea and so what better story than the saga of the 12-ton sperm whale that visited our shores for nine days in April of 1981. A saga that was part soap opera, part deathwatch, part rescue mission.



The story's ending is still at sea. But it began when a 6-year-old sperm whale fell behind his pod somewhere in the Atlantic. According to the best guesses of experts who know about such things, Physty swam through polluted waters and contracted bacteria that turned into a form of pneumonia. The currents pulled him into Fire Island Inlet. Soon after, on the morning of April 16, a motorist driving on Oak Beach Road spotted a slate-colored mound offshore and thought it was a sinking boat. Instead, he found a stranded 25-foot-long whale struggling in water 3 feet deep.

Marine biologist Sam Sadove, founder and then director of the Okeanos Ocean Research Foundation, was among the first to be called. "I was told it was a dead 10 to 12-foot whale," Sadove recalls. "I figured it was a pilot whale and I could pick it up in my truck. When I got there, I realized it wasn't a pilot whale and it wasn't dead."

But before Physty swam into legend, he had to be towed a mile and a half east to the deeper waters of Captree Boat Basin, where tens of thousands of humans came together for a close encounter. They watched from the dock and the beach as a 12-ton E.T. struggled to survive on the edge of suburbia. Faith healers came with holy water and state officials - with little faith - made funeral plans. Children offered chicken soup and Easter eggs and divers carried squid laced with antibiotics.

As marine scientists turned the 500-foot-wide basin into a giant marine E.R., a kinship grew between creatures great and small. And Physty got his name. "The name," says Sam Sadove, "was a play on words based on the Latin *Physeter* and on "feisty," which, at the risk of anthropomorphizing, this whale definitely was."

From the beginning the key was to get antibiotics into the cetacean. At first, scientists tried unsuccessfully to pry open his jaws with a two-by-four and pump antibiotic tablets down his throat with a hose. But like an obstinate child, or perhaps a suspicious stranger, Physty refused to open his mouth. Rescuers feared he wouldn't make it through the night.

The significance of what finally happened in the boat basin is perhaps best measured by the humans who touched the great whale - and in turn, were touched by him. One of them was Michael Sandlofer, a Vietnam veteran who learned to dive in the Navy and had just opened a marine museum on City Island in the Bronx. On a chilly spring night, Sandlofer, a member of the rescue team, dove into the choppy basin and called to the wild.

"I made a sound, a whale sound," he recalls. "I'd stop, move, stop, move. His eye followed my movements. I could see he wanted a human encounter. I took off my gloves as a sign of respect and rubbed my hands together for warmth.

"I moved toward him with my hands outstretched. My mind kept saying, 'Get out of here,' but my heart said, 'Come to me, Physty.' He swam toward me. I was petrified. I swam under him, he opened his mouth like a giant Castro convertible and I fed him a squid."

Now there was a way to make the medicine go down. The next night, the squid were laced with hundreds of 500-mg. tablets of an antibiotic. The diver hand-fed Physty nightly until more than five pounds of antibiotics were in the whale's system.

"I'm the person who put my hand in Physty's mouth," says Sandlofer, whose museum features an exhibit and video that tells the whale's story. "I know that whale trusted me and I trusted him. I was touched by a whale and I'll never forget it." Physty left Long Island 17 years ago, at 1:45 p.m. on the 25th of April, 1981, as thou-

sands of humans cheered from the dock. "Go Physty, go. Go," they yelled, lost in the group dynamic of the first successful effort in the United States to nurse a stranded whale back to health and send it out to sea.

Physty was herded out of the basin by a flotilla of ships that included three Coast Guard vessels and an inflatable skiff. He stopped three times and flicked his tail. When he was about 100 feet from the basin, Physty rolled over and gave three strong calls and blew spray from his blowhole.

"Whale gone bye-bye," a 3-year-old watching from his father's shoulders cried out. And Physty swam home.

It would be nice to think that Physty spread his own legend among his species - the story of a fish-shaped island of two-legged mammals who cared. It is a romantic thought, and it has not been lost on Sam Sadove, whose very calling - the saving of aquatic creatures - is a measure of how far we have come from the days when Long Islanders went into the sea to kill whales. Normally, the down-to-sea scientist does not like to attribute human characteristics to wildlife, but it seems different when it comes to Physty.

"It's hard to say if Physty has a memory of his time on Long Island," he says. "He was a young whale and maybe like with humans, memory from youth is thin. Is it possible that Physty has that ability to remember? There's no real way of knowing. But I can tell you this. When you look into the eye of a sperm whale, you get a sense that there's something going on in there. Does Physty remember? Even if it's just a fanciful thought, it's a nice thought."

Two years after Physty left our shores, Sam Sadove was on a sea-life survey flight over the Atlantic when he saw a group of sperm whales. One of them had the telltale marks left on Physty's tail by the nylon rope used to tow him into Captree Basin.

"Physty was seen alive," Sam Sadove says. "Exactly when and where I won't answer. It was a significant amount of time after the stranding for me to be sure he recovered. I saw the scar on the tail flukes - and I knew it was Physty. He'll have those scars for as long as he lives. And a sperm whale can live for more than 70 years.

"I'd like to think Physty's still out there," says Sadove.

As would we all. It is nice to think that Physty is surging through the ocean, sounding in the deepest deeps and remembering the kindness of strangers. And if we believe in Physty, we can trust that our own tomorrow is out there, too, waiting on the far horizon.