

HUGO and the SEAL

by Nora Nickum

Hugo landed on the floor outside the cafeteria with a hard thud, his backpack heavy on top of him.

“Oh, my deepest apologies, Hugo,” said Marcus, retracting his foot. “I didn’t see you, as usual.”

Marcus’s friends Ned and Oliver laughed. Hugo brushed off his jeans and gave a crooked smile. He tried to pretend he thought it was funny, too. But it wasn’t.

His best friend Jasper used to have some good comebacks when Marcus and his friends hassled them like that. But Jasper had moved away last month. Now Hugo was on his own.

The Next Morning was Saturday, a welcome reprieve. Hugo ran to the beach like he used to do with Jasper.

He went past all the picnickers, around the kids digging moats in the wet sand, and looked for a place to be alone.

At the far end of the beach, by the rocks, he spotted a baby seal.

“Are you hiding from everyone, too?” Hugo asked. “Where is your mom?”

The seal watched him with big wet eyes and shifted in the sand.

“I’m sure she’ll be back soon.”

He backed far away until the seal pup put its head back down.

Hugo scanned the waves. There was no mother seal in sight. He sat down on a piece of driftwood and tried to think of things that would be fun to do without Jasper.

Illustrated by Becca Santo

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A REPRIEVE IS A RELIEF
FROM PUNISHMENT.



The pup looked like it was asleep. Hugo wondered what seals dreamed about.

Loud panting and clattering pebbles broke the silence. An enormous dog ran down the beach, right toward the baby seal.

That dog could tear the seal to pieces!

“Stop!” Hugo shouted.

The dog came to a halt, panting and drooling, and looked at him expectantly. Hugo was not sure what to do next.

The dog turned away and trotted toward the seal.



Hugo looked around frantically. He grabbed a stick. “Here! Play with this!” Hugo threw the stick as far from the seal as he could. The dog bounded after it. Hugo let out his breath.

The dog started to bring the stick back for another throw, but then a voice down the beach called. The dog disappeared.

Hugo looked back at the seal pup. It stretched out in the sun. I should probably make sure the dog doesn’t come back, Hugo thought.

He built a driftwood fort to wait in. He could not lift the boards for a roof without Jasper, but there was still some shade. Maybe I can stay here and never go back to school, he thought.

An eagle landed on a branch close to the seal. Too close. Hugo came out and waved his arms. “Go away!” he shouted.

The eagle looked startled. Then it flew off, up to the top of a fir tree at the other end of the beach.

“Don’t worry,” Hugo told the seal. “I’m looking out for you, even if nobody else is.”

He settled back into the fort. It was almost lunchtime. He wished he had a friend who could watch the seal for him, so he could get a sandwich. Turkey and cheese. Or maybe peanut butter and banana.

Some tiny figures emerged from the crowds down the beach. As they approached, they grew bigger and louder. Hugo made out the shapes of Marcus, Ned, and Oliver. They were yelling and laughing and throwing big rocks in the water.



Hugo wanted to hide. He shrank back further into his fort. But he couldn't let them see the seal. What if they hurt it?

When they came close, he leapt out, trying to look confident.

"Hey guys, check out my fort!"

"Looks weak," Ned said.

Marcus laughed. "Forts are for little kids," he said, and gave Ned a fist bump.

Hugo jammed his hands in his pockets and tried to keep his face from turning red. "Why hang around here, then?"

"We have something important we have to do," said Marcus, nudging Ned. They lunged over and shoved the driftwood. The fort crashed down.

A falling log landed on Hugo's toe. His eyes stung but he kept quiet. Oliver was watching him closely, and Hugo didn't want

him to see that he was hurting. He would never hear the end of it.

"That was easy," Marcus said. "Maybe when you grow up, you'll be strong enough to lift something bigger than these little sticks." Ned snickered.

"Let's get out of here," said Oliver. He turned toward the parking lot. "I want to see if the vending machine is working. I'm starving."

Their shouts finally disappeared into the wind.

Hugo picked up a big rock and watched three tiny crabs scuttle away. He went to throw the rock in the water but then remembered the seal pup. He figured it deserved some peace and quiet.

He sat down. "Still waiting, huh?" he said. "Your mom is taking her time. Maybe she's finding you some good food. Are you hungry, too?"

He picked up a stick and started making pictures in the sand. He drew stick figures—Ned and Marcus and Oliver—and put them in a prison at the top of a mountain, surrounded by a tornado. The tornado whirled them off to another planet, leaving just a pile of sand.

He and the seal pup waited and waited.

Then, far out in the water, a slick head bobbed. Hugo held his breath. The mother seal flopped up on the sand.



"I knew it would be OK," he whispered. He turned to head home. There was Oliver, not far away. He crunched a potato chip. "Hey," said Oliver. "Hey," said Hugo, cautiously. It was quiet, except for Oliver's crunching. They watched the seals swim away. Oliver offered Hugo the chips. Hugo felt like he could eat ten bags of chips, but he took just one and gave the bag back. "Did you know the seal was there?" asked Hugo. "Yeah," said Oliver. "I was worried Marcus and Ned would mess with it if they saw it. My dad told me seals need to be able to warm up in the sun, and if they are moved

their mothers might not be able to find them."

Hugo nodded. "That makes sense, I guess."

"You were trying to protect it, too?"

"Yeah. Since this morning," said Hugo. He did not mention the dog or the eagle. Maybe Oliver wouldn't believe him. Maybe he'd make fun of him.

"We should give the seal a name," said Oliver. "Like Tubby. Or Rocky."

"Jasper," Hugo whispered.

Oliver shrugged. "OK. Hey, that was a pretty cool fort, actually."

"Oh," Hugo said. "Thanks."

"Want to build it again?"

"Sure." Hugo forgot he was hungry.

"Even bigger this time?"

Hugo grinned. "I know where we can get some great pieces for a roof." 🐜

Author's Note Seals and their pups spend hours on shore resting and warming up in the sun. Baby harbor seals that are alone on the beach are just waiting for their mothers to come back to feed them. The mother seal will not return if people or dogs are too close. Hugo did a good job giving the baby seal space and making sure that other people and the unleashed dog also stayed away.

If you see a seal on the shore, stay at least one hundred yards away (the length of a football field). You can call the Marine Mammal Stranding Network if you are concerned that a seal or other marine mammal is in fact injured or stranded.