From as far back as I can remember, violence at home was part of life. Even when my parents weren't fighting or screaming at each other, the air inside the house felt charged, as if ready to spark at any moment. I genuinely thought my parents hated each other and could never understand why they stayed together. No one was happy.

I was born in England. I grew up in a lovely whitewashed cottage in Cornwall with my parents, brother and two older sisters. I escaped to the pebble beach at the end of our street or a cosy nook in our overgrown garden. I lost myself in books about lions, witches, wardrobes, magical talking cats and mad hatters.

When I was eight, my parents announced they, my brother and I were moving to Australia. My sisters didn't want to go and stayed in the UK. While I was heartbroken leaving my protective sisters behind, I hoped the new start would fix my family and that maybe we'd finally live in peace. I was wrong.

After relocating to Adelaide, the fighting between my parents started again and escalated. I often intervened and sometimes got hurt in the process. Police were regular visitors at our home. They always brokered an uneasy peace. I was grateful for that. During one fight I became a contributor to the violence rather than trying to prevent it. After that, something inside of me fractured. I found myself waking at night with a hammering heart and a desire to run. My mother called them "night terrors". I wanted to escape into the world of my books and away from the hostility and rage.

One day, after a particularly nasty fight, I told my mother we had to leave, someone was going to get killed. We left, but my father started terrorising us. This culminated in a vicious attack on my mother with an unlikely weapon. He went to jail. My mother moved in with a new friend and I fended for myself. My father eventually took his own life.

I often felt adrift, alone, and somehow damaged, but I kept these feelings hidden. I struggled to understand the darkness which frequently enveloped my heart and suffocated any belief in myself. After trying to lose myself in partying, I realised the only way I could change my life was by continuing my education.

And so it was through this new start – through studying – that I met the "love of my life" – the Port River dolphin called Jock. Shortly after starting university, I became a research assistant for one of my lecturers, Dr Mike Bossley. He talked about the importance of people reconnecting with nature and described his studies of the resident dolphin population in Adelaide's Port River. I was intrigued and joined him as one of his volunteers.

On my first trip on the river on his research vessel, I saw a disfigured fin circling a small boat moored in a channel. The fin didn't look real, it was so mangled. It was attached to a dolphin which seemed intent on just looping around the boat. He seemed so alone. I knew dolphins were social creatures but this one looked isolated, an outcast. Like me, this dolphin seemed disconnected, scarred and lost.

Melody turned to education in an attempt to change her life, becoming a research assistant in Adelaide's Port River

She began volunteering as part of her studies and came across an isolated dolphin, Jock, who she befriended.

Melody's love of dolphins led her to co-found a charity to raise awareness about conservation.

I wondered if he'd been abandoned, orphaned, or shunned by his peers. I immediately felt a connection, one which, in time, would help me explore my own scars and heal from them.

I later learnt that this dolphin, Jock, had been tangled up in discarded fishing line multiple times. The entanglements had cut deep into his flesh, disfiguring his fin.

A short time later, I plunged into the murky depths of the river with Jock. I was both exhilarated and immediately at peace. His skin felt like rich silk under my hand. He allowed me to stroke his snout, I noticed lumps of scar tissue around his mouth – the result of fishing hooks lodged in his gums. I felt overcome with compassion for his wounds caused by humans, yet he completely accepted me without coercion. Although he was a wild creature, I knew instinctively he would never hurt me. The feeling of unconditional acceptance was foreign, yet liberating.

Over the next two-and-a-half years Jock became my best friend. I also grew to know and love the other resident dolphins. Somehow, watching their lives helped me reflect and understand my own. They helped me rediscover joy and the importance of living in the moment.

It may sound incredible, but the bond I felt I forged with him seemed to help obliterate the walls I'd built around my heart. He brought light and joy into my life. I realised I could trust and love. I learned to acknowledge my own scars and focus on something extraordinary and precious.

Connecting with nature also helped me understand my place in the world and its interconnectedness. This realisation helped me put my own sad past into perspective and confirmed that I wasn't a powerless victim.

My love of dolphins and concern about their environment eventually led me to co-found a charity to raise awareness and help fund Dr Bossley's important work. The foundation generated great community support and eventually led me to a career in TV news. I had the opportunity to produce an hour-long documentary about Jock and his world. I presented the documentary nationally and globally on CNN, one of my proudest achievements. Along with lobbying, and a surge in community concern, it pushed the SA government to declare parts of the Port River Australia's first dolphin sanctuary.

Years on, the Port River dolphins are still at risk and their numbers have dwindled. Most dolphins have adapted to living with human activities but too many have fallen victim to pollution, boat strikes, entanglement, disease, and even deliberate attack. Thankfully, new calves are being born, so there is hope the population will bounce back.

Although we have learnt a lot since I swam with Jock and people are now discouraged from interacting with wild dolphins for their own protection, they still hold a special place in the hearts of many people around the world. Their grace, beauty and joyfulness is a delight to behold. •

A Dolphin Called Jock (Allen & Unwin) by Melody Horrill is out now. Lifeline: 13 11 14.