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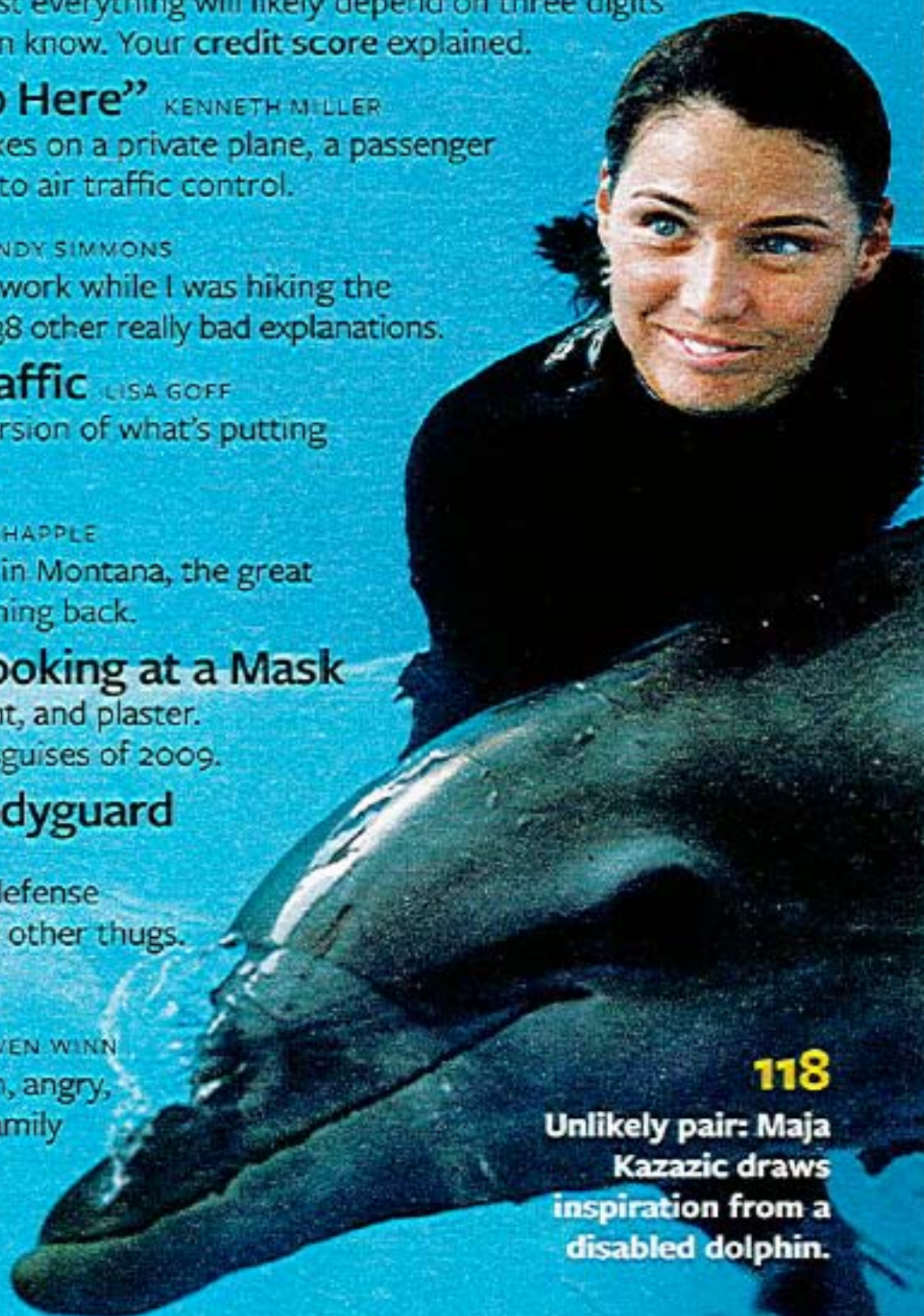
OCTOBER 2009

LIFE WELL SHARED

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ON THE COVER: (FISH) STEVE LAWRENCE/FIRST LIGHT/GETTY IMAGES; (HAMM) LARSEN & TALBERT/ICON INTERNATIONAL



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Unlikely pair: Maja
Kazazic draws
inspiration from a
disabled dolphin.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RON HAVIV

MAJA'S

DREAM

Before taking the plunge with Winter, "I got goose bumps," Kazazic says. "It was very scary because even though dolphins look cute, they're still wild animals."

After losing her leg in a brutal war, Maja Kazazic thought she'd never walk without pain again. Then she saw the dolphin with an artificial tail, and her

life changed once more.

BY JENNIFER RAWLINGS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY RON HAVIV

On a recent morning in Clearwater, Florida, Maja Kazazic peered down into a 73,000-gallon aquarium. For two years, she'd been watching the injured bottlenose dolphin named Winter swim around the tank. From a distance, the dolphin seemed approachable enough. Still, as Kazazic prepared to take the plunge, a little panic crept into her excitement.

The young woman eased herself into the pool. Despite her fear, she felt strong wearing her new leg. She was ready to make good on a pledge from long ago.

In second grade in Mostar, Yugoslavia (now part of Bosnia and Her-

zegovina), Kazazic lost her five-year-old cousin, Jasmina, to leukemia. After Jasmina's death, Kazazic vowed she would honor the little girl by swimming with a dolphin, an animal that both girls adored. "Jasmina never got the chance [to do it]," says Kazazic, 32, "so I decided that someday I'd do it for her."

In high school, sports—soccer, basketball, tennis—were Kazazic's passion. She planned to become a professional athlete. Then in 1993,



As a girl, Kazazic reveled in sports and nature. Right: She visited the site of the explosion in Mostar, Bosnia, 15 years after a Croatian mortar shell maimed her.



COURTESY MAJA KAZAZIC



At home, Kazazic puts on her prosthetic leg, which uses the same groundbreaking technology designed for Winter's artificial tail.



"These are the moments I live for," says Kazazic. "I am aware of everything. I can see my parents sitting there. I can still feel my little cousin's hair on my cheek."

Without a tail, Winter "swam more like a shrimp than a dolphin. I identified with her."

during the Bosnian civil war, a mortar shell fired by Croat separatists exploded in the courtyard of her building. The six friends she'd been chatting with were killed; 16-year-old Kazazic was badly injured. Shrapnel riddled her left arm and both of her legs.

At a makeshift hospital, her left leg was deemed beyond repair and amputated just below the knee. "There was no anesthesia," she recalls. "They tied me down and put a piece of rubber in my mouth to bite on. I could feel everything." Her leg wound became infected; without antibiotics, she drifted in and out of consciousness. For weeks, her parents kept vigil by her bed. British activist Sally Becker, who evacuated many children during the war, arranged to bring Kazazic to the United States for treatment.

Kazazic spent nearly two years in a hospital in Cumberland, Maryland, watched over by volunteers from Veterans for Peace. (Her father had been injured in another shelling, and her mother stayed in Bosnia to care for him and Kazazic's ten-year-old brother.) A few months in, Kazazic received her first artificial leg. Because there was so little bone left, the prosthesis was hard to fit, and with her right leg also damaged, walking was intensely painful. Nonetheless, she managed to graduate from a local high school. At 18, she left the hospital and moved into an apartment with a fellow refugee.

Her parents finally joined her in

Maryland, but Kazazic was already fiercely independent. After receiving a BA in psychology at Saint Francis University in Pennsylvania, she moved to Florida's Gulf Coast, landing a job at an insurance firm and eventually launching her own website development company. After dozens of surgeries, she was able to play the occasional round of golf or set of tennis. But she still hobbled on an imperfect prosthesis, and each activity left her in agony for days.

To unwind, she'd watch the dolphins play at Clearwater Marine Aquarium, near her home in Palm Harbor. A young dolphin, Winter, who had lost her tail in a crab trap, caught Kazazic's eye: "She swam more like a shrimp than a dolphin. I identified with her."

After one doctor's visit, Kazazic showed up at the aquarium feeling morose. Trainers were fitting Winter with a high-tech tail—a flexible steel joint covered in silicone plastic, with a gel lining designed to protect a dolphin's delicate skin. When they were done, Winter streaked off through the water.

Kazazic was mesmerized. If she can do this, there's no way I can't, she thought. She approached the trainers, who put her in touch with the inventors, Hanger Prosthetics & Orthotics in Bethesda, Maryland. Within ten days, she had a new leg. With its soft liner and built-in microprocessor that adjusts the fit for different activities and terrains, "for the first time in almost 16 years, I was pain-free."

Her mother wept at Kazazic's triumph. "When Maja says she is going to do something, she always does it."

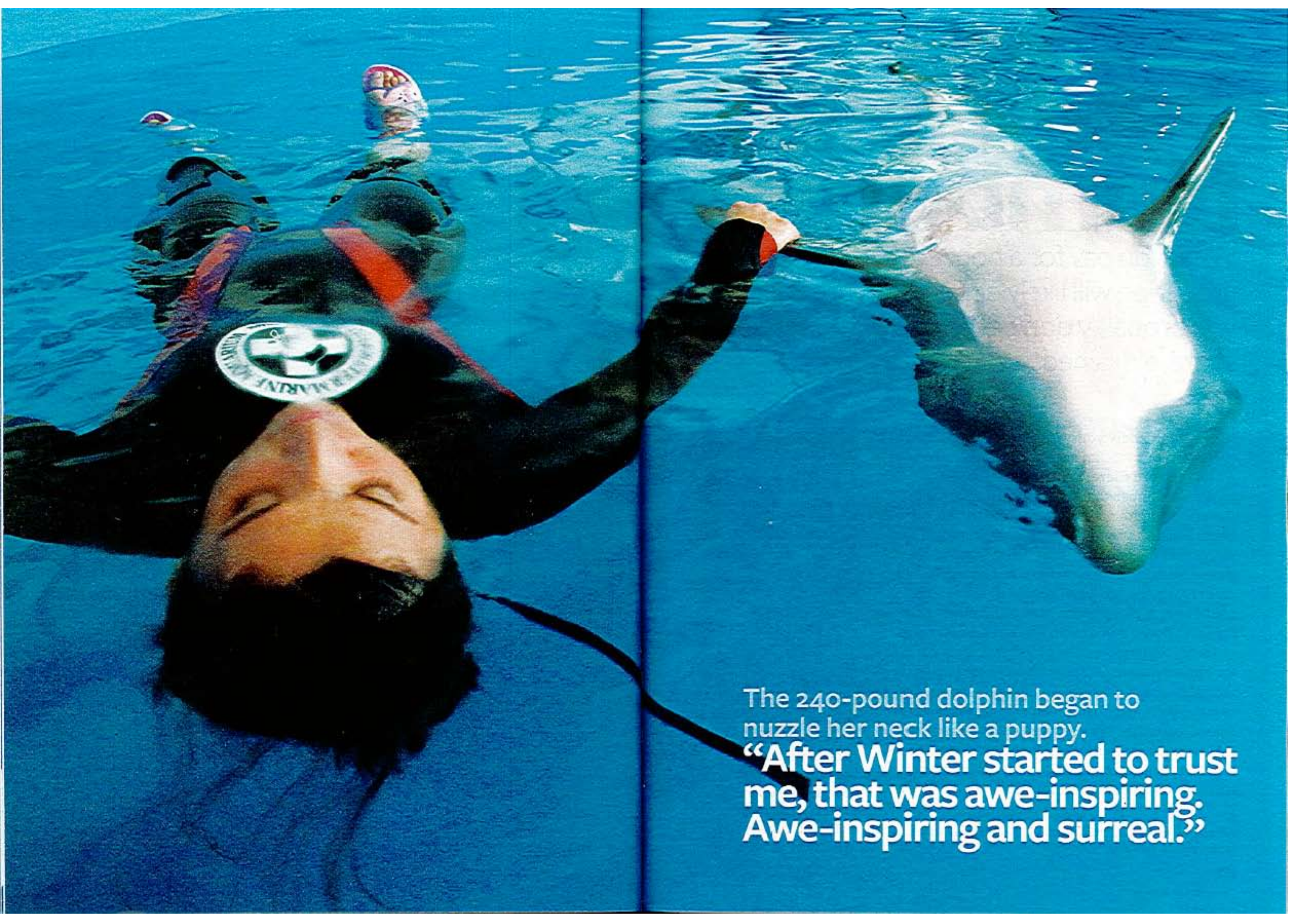
Eight months later, Kazazic was ready to keep the promise she had made in honor of Jasmina. Her mother, Azra, and father, Mugdim, accompanied her to the aquarium. "After being in a war zone, this should be a piece of cake," Kazazic said as she lowered herself into the tank. She held out a hand to Winter, who approached cautiously, then glided away. After a few minutes, the dolphin let Kazazic stroke her back. Finally, Winter nuzzled up to her shoulder. Then the two embarked on an hour-long swim around the pool.

Her mother began to cry. "When Maja says she is going to do something, she always does it," she said. When Kazazic climbed out, her parents embraced her.

She would have shouted with joy had she not been aware of dolphins' sensitivity to noise. Instead she quietly said, "I feel like I owed somebody something, and now I've paid my debt." Out in the parking lot, she got into her car and whooped till she was hoarse.



Kazazic owns three versions of her prosthesis. The one here, for daily use, "feels like you're running on marshmallows."



The 240-pound dolphin began to nuzzle her neck like a puppy.
“After Winter started to trust me, that was awe-inspiring. Awe-inspiring and surreal.”