

Beyond Margaritaville

Little Gulf Stories for Adults and Children

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To Readers:

On Pensacola Beach on Santa Rosa Island in Florida, Jimmy Buffet bought a half-completed hotel in 2010. After the Deep Water Horizon Oil Spill, tourism - the region's main economy - went into a tailspin. Purchasing the hotel was Buffet's gift of support to people of the Florida Panhandle he loved.



Beyond the Margaritaville Hotel lies the Gulf Islands National Seashore—seven miles of white sand beaches, swaying golden sea oats and translucent-green ocean. Way out on the tip end is Fort Pickens, one our country's oldest coastal defense fortifications. The National Seashore is a place where sea turtles return to lay their eggs and sea birds migrate to raise their young, and where schools of fish, spotted eagle rays, and pods of dolphins hunt, mate, and play. People swim and snorkel in the warm gentle waves and sunbathe on white sand made of quartz crystals carried by rivers from the Appalachian Mountains into the Gulf.

Still other beach goers wear feathers and strut around on long, skinny legs, or beat the waves with a broad tail. Some soar above or dive into the waves for lunch or dinner. *Beyond Margaritaville* people, animals, beach and ocean all live and play together.

These are some of their stories. Some are for kids and all are for the “kid in you.” Read them together or alone to learn more about the lives of the people and animals that live in one of Earth’s most beautiful places. When you know about it, you’ll want to keep it for all to come.

Emerald Green Gulf of Mexico Waters

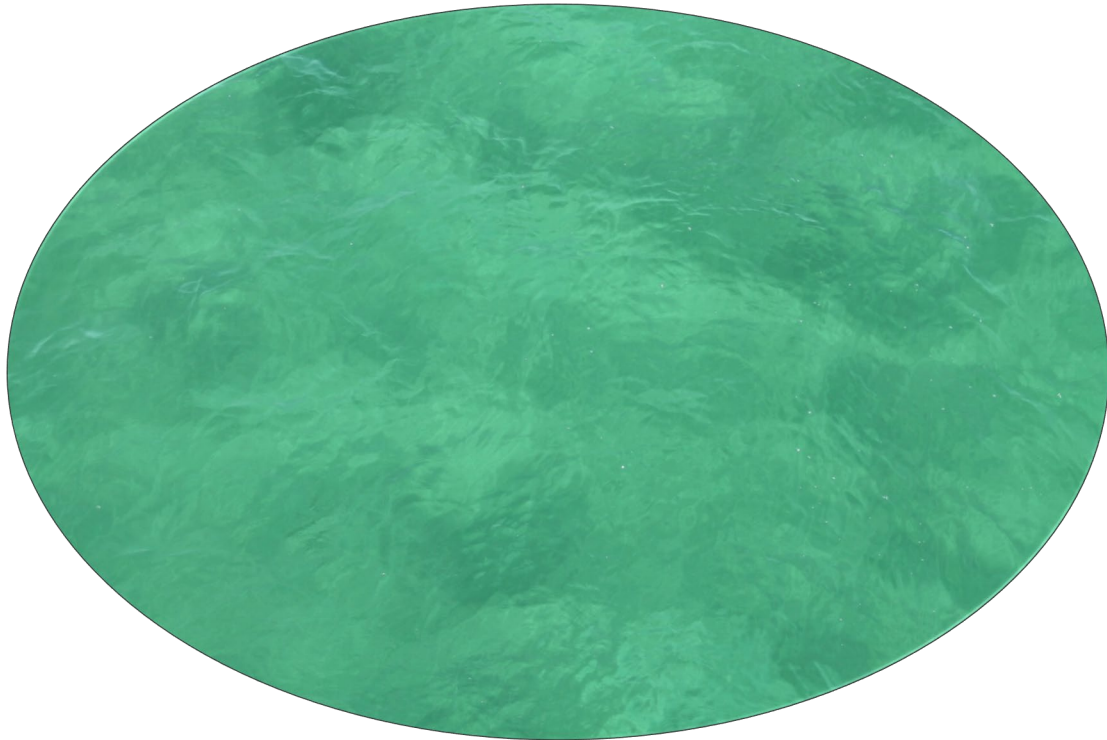


Photo by Susan Feathers from the Pensacola Beach Fishing Pier

For Parents

“To understand the life of the shore it is not enough to pick up an empty shell and say, ‘This is a murex’, or ‘this is an angel wing.’ True understanding demands intuitive comprehension of the whole of life of the creature that once inhabited this empty shell: how it survived amid surf and storms, what were its enemies, how it found food and reproduced its kind, what were its relations to the particular sea world in which it lived.”

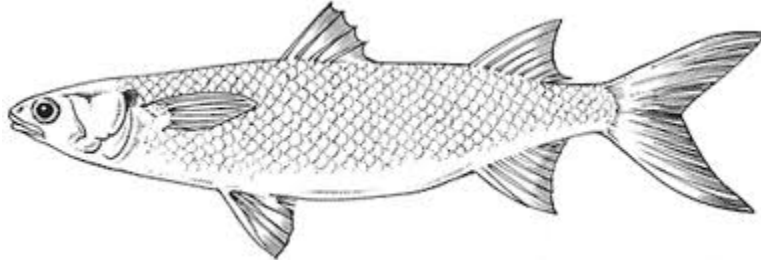
~ From Rachel Carson, Introduction, *Edge of the Sea*



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Mugil the Mullet



Mugil cephalus (sucking head)

Mugil drifted with the current, tossed by glassy, green waves. His tiny body grew by leaps and bounds with each passing hour. He peered out into the vast world into which his mother shed him and a million other brothers and sisters, each tucked away inside a tiny clear egg bubble. He was unaware that most of them were being eaten by a host of predators sharing his ocean world. Mugil broke free from his egg bubble on the second day of his life. He had already grown into a larva about this long: _____.

Following Old Pal Instinct, Mugil swam toward land with thousands of other small fry. They were hunted by every other kind of fish right from the start. He and his mullet family learned to stick together. They swam as one, turning together, darting away in one big cloud to escape the hunters. Then finally, Mugil understood that the world he would inhabit was one in which he would need to be ever alert, swift and clever. It made him feel alive and excited! He was three days old.

But Mugil was also a hunter. He greedily ate the plankton that filled the ocean waves. These were the tiniest creatures of the sea, so small they could not be seen by human eyes or

fishes' eyes either.



But when Mugil let the salty sea water pour into his gullet he tasted them, crunched their tasty clear bodies with his jaws. He and his mullet family fed greedily as they made their way closer to shore, growing every hour until he reached the mighty length of 3 inches:

_____!

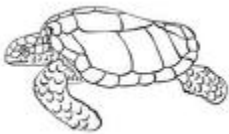
Mugil drifted with the current, tossed by emerald green waves. His tiny body was developing at a rapid pace since his mother had shed her roe into the misty depths of the ocean. Millions of his brothers and sisters joined the transparent hordes of the plankton world encapsulated in an egg the size of a pencil dot on a page. Unaware that most of them would be eaten by a host of predators or crushed by giant waves, Mugil broke free of his egg casing on the second day of his life, emerging as a small larva about 15 mm long. Mugil instinctively snapped at passing zooplankton to fuel his growth and with his miniscule tail he followed the crowd up from the murky depths of the ocean toward the sunlight where the Gulf of Mexico food chain begins.

Sparkling microscopic phytoplankton were busy changing the sun's energy into the food of life inside their diamond bodies. The diatoms, dinoflagellates, coccolithophores, and algae start out as drifters—prey to tiny copepods, crab and shrimp larvae - on up the tree of life to baleen whales that scooped them up by the billions. Mugil gobbled up the crunchy food as fast as he could manage. No human eye could see the teeming hosts of tiny ocean life struggling for

existence at the base of a food web, yet all these tiny creatures were supporting humans, whales, dolphins, sailfish, and sharks.

Instinctively Mugil headed toward land with thousands of mullet-fry (only one out of a thousand would live on to become a full-grown, frisky mullet.) As small as he was, it would be months before he found the bays and bayous of Pensacola where he would spend at least half of his life. Meantime it was a struggle for life in the sparkling waters of the Gulf. He grew by leaps and bounds changing from a larva to a true fish about three inches long with a torpedo-shaped body and strong forked tail fin. But those advantages also made him more visible to the eyes of a spotted sea trout or a sea turtle with strong jaws.

He
in unison across



swam with his kind in a sleek cloud that moved the lightening sands, moving away from the deep blue of the open ocean into the aquamarine waters of the shoreline. He was growing all the

way and now he needed a lot more food. Diving down to crystalline white sands he and his horde ate algae, sand fleas, worms – whatever they could find. Along the shore line Mugil detected the sweet scent and taste of fresh water mingling with the bitterness of the salt-laden sea. Mugil was entering the Pensacola Bay. Its bottoms and shorelines, bases of the bridge pilings, docks, old sea wrecks and reefs provided more and more good food for the mullet hordes. Mugil stuck his blunted head into the soft brown detritus on the bottom—a teeming microcosm of life on its surfaces. He ate it all indiscriminately. And he grew.

Lurking in the depths, a water snake spotted Mugil and lunged at him out of the shadows where the tiny fish and his family were feeding. Mugil caught the movement out of his round eye and with a jerk of his strong tailfin he barely managed to avert the jaws of the slithering beast.

But sadly, one of his cousins became its prey. There were no guarantees in life. Mugil learned the hard way that the laws of nature spared no living creature. Every living thing was prey to something else.

Mugil and the other mullet glided into the bay exploring along its shores where tall tribes of salt marsh cord grass stood still and tall in the gentle waves. Ducks, herons, and other fish found refuge, food, and shelter in the marsh which drew the mullet families from the ocean to its teeming life and sweeter waters. The salt marsh protected hundreds of birds, fish, amphibians, and mammals.

It was wintertime and the grass had turned brown and rotted below the surface of the water where bacteria and other microscopic life turned the dead stuff into food for many forms of life. Mugil's round head and low mouth were perfect for sucking-up this delicious army of microbes. He gulped down the little snails and worms that got caught in the draft as he grazed along the stems of the marsh grasses. Hmmm, hmmm, hmmm—this was good eating!

The mullet school swam vigorously toward the south end of Pensacola Bay Bridge where lay a slither of land named Deadman's Island. It was surrounded by reefs and marshes that would provide Mugil and his family another great feast. Long before on a fatal night, a British sloop wrecked upon the reefs of this island in a violent storm. It sank to the bottom two hundred years before and gradually disappeared below the sandy bottom as waves swept sand over it.

Mugil watched with great interest as divers snorkeled and dove around the wreck to map its contours and recover sunken treasures. Mugil thought the divers were funny so he joined the crew, snorting around the places where they dug or measured, eating little tidbits of algae that grew on the old ship's anchor and masts. His mullet friends joined him to sail by the rotting barrel wells and shoot like bullets as they played chase past the masks of the divers. However,

sharks and dolphins joined the scouting party, the mullet gang headed for safer marshlands inshore.



It was on the way inshore that Mugil had his first real encounter with death. High above him and the mullet school there flew an osprey—a bird of prey. Its keen eyes spotted a moving shadow – the backs of hundreds of mullet swimming as one below. It turned its small head downward with its sharp curved beak ready to rip and tear flesh, its talons ready to grab a juicy fish for lunch. The bird folded its wings back and plunged from the sky at record speed right into the middle of the mullet where Mugil swam happily along unsuspecting of danger from above.

When the osprey hit him he was stunned and left helpless in the strong talons of the giant bird. He felt himself lifted from the waters into dry air. Through one big eye he saw his tribe disappearing toward the reef and through the other he glimpsed the terrible form of his killer. Mugil’s gills flailed up and down for water and the sweet release of oxygen when suddenly he felt himself let go from the tearing grip of the bird. He plummeted down, down, tail over head into the sparkling ocean that was his home.

Smack! Wow – that hurt!

Mugil lay motionless just below the surface until the return of oxygen to his brain and body allowed him to move his fins and right himself. He sped toward the shoreline unaware of the battle for the skies above him.

It took some time for Mugil to catch up with his schoolmates but eventually he found them among the tall marsh grasses gobbling up the brown gooey detritus on which their bodies thrived. Mugil was growing every minute of the day as were his kind all over the bays. They

were this year's new generation of mullet. Though born in the deeper, colder ocean the mullet young headed inshore following the greatest concentration of food they could find. Because they were bottom feeders, the best supermarket for them was inland, where all the grasses in the marshlands filtered the waters and the runoff from the land. The rich sources of food drew tiny microbes that fed off the rotting plants, nitrates from fertilizers and waste. These little creatures by the millions were the food on which Mugil and his clans dined. In this cycle of nutrients the toxins of the land were filtered by the salt marshes and in turn supported hundreds of species of animals that lived and fed from their roots and stems.

Mugil was a frisky little fish who loved to swim at torpedo speed and then jump high above the water and look around before plunging back into the middle of the mullet kingdom swimming in unison through the bay to the bayous. Learning to jump high was a good survival skill for many dangers lurked for small fish like Mugil. His only defense was speed, cunning, and remaining with the horde. When a thousand mullet move together, it's not easy to single out one fish to eat. The trick was to change places with his friends as often as possible to be on the outside only a second or two as the whole school moved swiftly through the light-filled waters over white sandy bottoms.

Once safely in the marshes there were new threats to life. One morning Mugil was exploring among the roots of tall cord grass for a tasty breakfast when he realized this plant felt and tasted a little different than most he's encountered. He happened to look up when a shadow crossed the water's surface just above his head only to gaze at the sharp, spear-like beak of a Great Blue Heron staring intently at him! He jumped out of the water just



in time to miss the lethal stab of the foot-long beak! That cord grass was the scrawny legs of the giant bird! Mugil would not make that mistake again.

After a few weeks near Deadman's Island the mullet hordes moved east and passed under the Pensacola Bay Bridge. Dangling through the waters were fishing lines of hundreds of fishermen hanging patiently over the stone bridgework watching with keen eyes as the mullet plume advanced underneath. Luckily for Mugil and his kind, the humans had laws that protected small fry like this new generation. They could not be caught and kept until at least 8" long or young adult size. It would be another year before Mugil grew to be that big. Meantime, there was a lot of living, eating, and jumping to be done!

Sometimes things got very strange. Mullet had many natural predators like dolphins, sea trout, turtles, big birds, and humans. But Mugil has never seen a boat propeller until one day a giant shadow with body-numbing noise sped across his path! He plunged down as fast as he could but sadly many of his friends got churned up by the sharp blades. Mugil watched from below as gulls and pelicans descended to pick the pieces of mullet flesh from the water left in the wake of the big boat. This was another reason to head toward the inland waters which provided a lot of safety from ocean-going vessels. When Mugil started to swim away he realized his body was at a tilt! Then he knew that he'd not escaped the blades entirely—his dorsal fin had been clipped off!

They entered the Bayou Texar where the water tasted even sweeter due to the marshes and the fresh water from the Escambia River flowing south and mixing with the saltier water in the bay. Mugil enjoyed the trip. Small boats with shallow motors hummed by and even the fishermen seemed friendly as Mugil and his small mullet friends passed right through the fishermen's gillnets. It seemed like a game they were playing with him since he could easily

escape through the open spaces. But, Mugil noticed larger fish getting caught as he sped away and he made a mental note that the nets might one day catch him, too, when he had grown much larger.

There were many plants along the shoreline, houses, docks, restaurants, and cars that sped across the small bridges, connecting parts of the human settlement. Swimming with the mullet young were schools of immature flounder, also born at sea but headed for the marshes and rivers until they were old enough to return to the sea. Small freshwater turtles basked on logs under the giant oaks with mossy hair hanging to the water's edge. When Mugil jumped for sheer joy, he could hear birdsong among the trees and the tall swaying reeds along the shore. What a glorious world he'd been born into! He would make full use of it, he told himself, giving another strong swish of his tall tailfin and a little head nod to plunge to the bottom and scoop up the delicious mud. This time he came up with a wriggling red worm and gulped it right down without a second thought. Bonus!

Time passed, the waters grew warmer with springtime and more so when later the long, humid summer set in. Mosquito larvae became an occasional tidbit to add to the mullet menu. The food supply grew even bigger as the warmth of the sun promoted decomposition of the past season's plants that covered the bottom of the shoreline. Mugil and the mullet young grew and helped to recycle all that dead material, raining new detritus to the bottom feeders, the microbial hordes, the suckers and sweepers. The Earth knew how to make it all work for thousands of different kinds of living things. It was a beautiful thing to witness.

Mugil grew longer and wiser and soon he felt the shift of the seasons once more. With the cold of the fall, the shifting tidal rhythms that pulled less or tugged more with each new or full moon brought changes in the patterns of life that changed as well. Birds migrated to warmer

clines or hunkered down for the cold. Turtles buried themselves in the soft brown mud. And so it was that Mugil began to feel a strange pull toward the saltier realms again. He was not very hungry, and his travels seemed more purposeful. Mugil noticed the females of his kind were much larger now than he and his male companions. He felt protective and on a day he remembers she came into his view and he followed her all the way to the open sea.

She had a beautiful silver belly - swollen and round - that shone in the soft winter sunrays as she careened easily through the waves. Her eyelids hung heavy over beautiful shining orbs. Together, in a large run of hundreds of mullet, they delighted the peoples along the beach with their dark forms shooting through the translucent waves near shore. They body surfed downward then shot back into the run just in time to miss stranding on a crystalline shoal. Mugil rocketed through the wave curl, as great as any surf king and rejoiced in the beauty and sheer thrill of being alive— alive on the Good Earth!

The mature mullet entered the open ocean where the waters grew cooler and saltier and sailboats skipped along the waves, close-hauled to the wind. Out there it took guts to bear the forces of nature and what might lurk below the thick dark waves. This was dolphin, red snapper and swordfish territory. And they all had one thing in mind: mullet for lunch!

Mugil felt the need to release the sperm that had grown in his own body even as the eggs in her body had grown as each of them had reached sexual maturity. All the mullet males were releasing sperm into the waters while the females released batch after batch of tiny eggs which the sperm fertilized. The little egg cases drifted on the oceans' surface in large mats until about two days later when billions of small mullet larvae were released into the giant ocean basin - free to grow, to be eaten, to be crashed into pieces. Only fate would tell which eggs would become

full grown mullet like Mugil and his love— already swimming back toward the bays where they grew up.

Mugil did not look back but if he had he would observe large fishing vessels scooping up the roe— the fish eggs—that some humans considered a delicacy. It was nature’s way to let the abundance of one species provide the sustenance of many others. One species was the predator and the prey of other predators. It was the grand food chain, the interlinking of lives, loves, fortunes and fates that made this experience called Life go on.

Mugil understood that now he was a mature fish of the sea. As he swam with his much larger and sleeker schoolmates, Mugil found they could roam farther faster. It was not long before they had passed under the Pensacola Bay Bridge and headed north into Escambia Bay and the huge watershed that drained above it. He would spend nearly the whole of his second and third year of life in the inlets and coves on the Escambia River, leaving only to fertilize the next crop of eggs lain in the open ocean by his female compatriots. His first mate, adolescent love, had been fished from his clutches on their return to Pensacola Bay, flopping madly at the end of a gaff hook on which a clever fisherman had dangled a clump of delicious algae that concealed the sharp hook. Mugil could do nothing but keep swimming with the mullet hordes yet he was saddened and sobered to the realities of mullet vulnerability at every waking moment of his short life. Mullet, he finally realized, fed everything. Fishermen, nations, dolphins, all the big billfish, even turtles got their taste of them.

On one return trip from a late winter spawning – when Mugil had reached his fifth year of life - he and his tribe swam westward with a strong current on a stormy sea. After the waters calmed, the mullet school swam near Perdido Key, west of Pensacola (on the border between Florida and Alabama.) They entered Bayou St. John where tall waving marsh grasses like those

that sheltered Mugil when he was so tiny - a little bit of muscle inching its ways through the vastness of the sea. Now he was a full grown mullet about 20” long, sleek and only a little beat up from his many adventures in the bays and bayous of Northwest Florida.

As the mullet school swam toward the shoreline Mugil noticed a fleet of small boats. The boats were birddogs with their motors far aft (toward the front) and the fishermen on the stern (the back) where they draped long gill nets over the side to trail them along in the water. Fishermen designed the boats to specially to catch mullet.



The boats dragged slowly along the edges of the marshlands where hundreds of large mullet were returning from the winter’s spawning. They were exhausted fish and less able to struggle for survival. Mugil did his best to avoid the nets, swimming in unison with his school, jumping when he felt even the slightest touch on his sensitive skin. He did well until he was nearly past the fishermen’s regatta. Then, he felt the water move abruptly on his belly, making him jump clear of the water. In the air he flipped over and he saw on his descent that he was headed right into the middle of a teaming mass of mullet all caught up in the closing gillnet. He realized this was it—the end of his life. Mugil flopped down onto the wriggling mass of his friends as they were hauled by two strong men over the gunnels of the boat and released onto the bottom where in a few minutes they would all be still.

Mugil felt glad to be on top of the heap where he could just barely see the blue sky and white clouds of the world he had loved and played in for five years. As his life passed before him he felt he had been a very lucky fish. He died.

The fishermen were so happy with the big catch that would bring them a good income at the market and feed their families for the week. Mullet fishing was not easy in 2010. With the

large boats from Asian countries taking so much of the roe (fish eggs) to sell in their markets, and more fishermen successfully netting mullet, their tribe had grown much smaller in the Gulf of Mexico. Yet, they were still a fish that fed people, other species of the sea itself, and served as bait for the big sport fish that drew millions of adventurers to the Gulf Coast each year. Mullet were loved and sought after by many.

It so happened that Mugil's clipped dorsal fin led to his rejection at the market where his body was tossed into a special basket that would be sent to a famous place on Perdido Key – Flora-Bama. No one can be sure if Mugil would have approved of The Mullet Toss, an annual contest on the white sands of the Key accompanied by casks of beer and rivers of other libations. But as his old body was heaved into the air by a gorgeous beach bunny intent on winning a prize, maybe – just maybe – the old mullet might have liked that one last leap into the air.

For sure, the mullet tribe must have had some knowledge of how much their kind were savored by the human hordes as they were fished from the waters to be fried, poached, filleted, and broiled on the beach that last year of Mugil's fine life.

If the predator paid forward as much appreciation for the mullet then it might be considered a good trade by the millions of tiny mullet coming up behind Mugil and making their way into the bays and bayous of Northwest Florida to keep the cycle of life going.

Let's hope so.

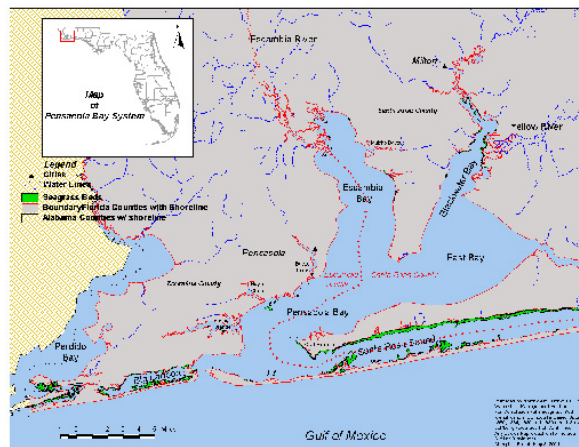


More Information about Mugil and Mullet

Mugil the mullet is part of a group of animals that scientists classify by seven characteristics:

Scientific Classification	
Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Class	Actinopterygii
Order	Mugiliformes
Family	Mugilidae
Genus	Mugil
Species	cephalus
Common names: Striped mullet, black mullet, sea mullet, flathead mullet, gray mullet.	

Mugil's home is the Gulf of Mexico and nearby Santa Rosa Island, Escambia Bay and River, and the marshlands of Bayou Texar:



Delphina P. Dolphin and Friends

Chapter 1

Delphina P. Dolphin lives in a beautiful blue ocean near Pensacola, Florida. She is a young bottlenose dolphin. Scientists named her kind by the shape of the beak which resembles a long, slender bottle.

Delphina has rows of sharp teeth, a tall, curved dorsal fin (top fin), two flippers to balance and turn, and powerful tail flukes that propel her through the water.

She breathes air through an opening on top of her head called a blowhole. Every two or three minutes she swims to the surface of the ocean, opens her blowhole to exhale and breathe in fresh air.

Delphina's family and friends stick together in a *pod*. She stays close to her mother to learn all the things she needs to know because she is still a young dolphin. Her mother and grandmother show her how to catch fish or squid, the signs of danger, and dolphin behavior.

Dolphins eat a lot. They eat mullet, jacks, pompano, Bonita, grouper, red fish, blue fish, snapper, snooks, grunts and amberjacks but their favorite seafood is squid. Delphina weighs about 500 pounds. That is small for a dolphin. Her uncle weighs almost a ton!

Delphina is a great swimmer! She can move at high speeds, jump twenty feet in the air, roll and pitch, and dive deep to the bottom but she always must come up for air.

Bottlenose dolphins appear to be smiling because their mouth curves upward naturally. People regard dolphins as happy and playful creatures.

Dolphins communicate with their own special language of squeaks and clicks. Sound travels through the water and bounces off objects sending a signal back that dolphins understand. It is called echolocation – finding something by an echo.

Dolphins communicate with each other as they work, play, and travel places together. Dolphin pods are friendly societies. Dolphins from one pod might join another one.

Last year Delphina’s pod adopted a very young dolphin whose mother was drowned when she got caught in a fishing-net. Delphina named him “Scout” because he was very curious and always swimming up ahead of his elders. Delphina helped educate Scout about the ways of the pod, the ways of the ocean.

Delphina always has a new friend to meet and get to know. She is six years old. It won’t be long before she will leave her mother’s side to join the older dolphins. Her mother has taught her all she needs to know.

This is the story about how Delphina got her human name and became the first dolphin ever to work for park rangers on an island in the Gulf of Mexico. It all started the day Delphina met a boy who could talk to her.



Marshall lives on the end of Santa Rosa Island in a small house owned by the National Park Service.

The tip of the island sticks out into the Gulf of Mexico where Delphina’s pod likes to fish and play. There is a boat dock where Marshall’s father keeps his park service boat and which other boaters use when they make a trip out to the island.

On the island is old Fort Pickens built by the navy to protect people living nearby whenever there was a war or emergency. Thousands of visitors come to see the fort. They climb

near its rusting canons and walk in the cool, dark tunnels underneath the bunkers where soldiers worked and slept in safety a long ago.

When Marshall's father tells stories about the battles and life at the fort, people imagine they can hear the canons booming over the water toward enemy ships trying to enter the bay. They imagine the soldiers cleaning guns, sleeping on bunks, or playing ball when their chores are done.

Marshall dreams about the day when he might wear the uniform and hat of a park ranger. He thinks it is the best job in the world. Being outside, caring for wildlife, land and sea in a place he calls home—what's not to like?

Marshall swims and snorkels off shore where reefs team with fish, clams and barnacles, jellyfish, and sea grass. He didn't know it, but the University of the Sea was teaching him about marine life.

On his summer vacations he explores the island, and fishes from the dinghy that his parents gave him on his tenth birthday. Marshall rows the dinghy out to where the birds and dolphins dive into the water to catch schools of fish.

Marshall is at home on the ocean. His parents taught him to swim when he was only four years old. He knows when a high or low tide changes the beach, and about the rip tide that can pull him way out to sea. His father showed him how to ride it out and get back to shore.

On rainy days Marshall reads about the wildlife and history of the island. He owns a small lap top with wireless service thanks to his mother, the writer, who needs to be online to write her books.

As the clouds pour buckets of rainwater on his house out on the island, Marshall travels all over the world on the Internet learning about oceans across the world.

He makes sketches in a little journal and keeps a record of wildlife he sees each week. He knows a lot about many kinds of fish, jellyfishes, crabs, birds, and mammals that live on or near Santa Rosa Island—Marsh’s island.

With all that time in nature Marshall has a special talent—a way of sending his thoughts to the animals. No one knows about his special gift. He hasn’t even told his parents.

Marsh remembers the first day he “heard” a creature talking. He was sitting on the end of the dock early in the morning when the new rising sun turns the sky pink and the waves shine with golden light.

A gray dolphin’s head popped up out of the water and looked right at him. He jumped at first, it was such a surprise. But then, he saw the happy face of a young dolphin and it made him laugh with delight.

“What’s so funny?” squeaked the dolphin.

Marshall started to reply when he realized the dolphin had “talked” to him! He thought maybe he was hearing things, so he tried an experiment.

“Your long nose!” Marshall thought.

“Well, what about those skinny legs,” the dolphin replied.

Marshall stood up, astonished, but the dolphin had disappeared with a splash.

Marshall just stood there looking into the water where Delphina had been just a moment before. His mouth hung open so wide he could have caught a fly.

“I must be going nuts,” Marshall thought.

He sat down again and waited for the dolphin to reappear, but it was gone and after some time, Marshall decided to get his snorkeling gear and swim out to where the dolphin had suddenly appeared.

There were clouds gathering over the gulf. High dark clouds full of rain rose into the dome of the sky, ready to unleash a summer storm with lightening and strong winds that whip up the waves.

“And just where do you think you are going?” Marshall’s mother said. “This is no time to be in the water.”

Marshall knew she was right, so he reluctantly put his mask and flippers back on the porch. He considered telling her about the dolphin. She wrote children’s books. She just might understand.

But Marshall decided to keep it a secret. Even his mother would probably think it far-fetched – like the imaginary stories she wrote for kids.

But one thing was sure: that dolphin talked to him! That was six months ago. Nobody would believe they had even become friends.



Marshall gave the dolphin a special name: Delphina P. Dolphin.

Delphina thinks it’s great. *It’s like a song*, she tells Marshall. She never thinks about names quite like her human friend.

Marshall’s father taught him how scientists put all living things into groups. Each animal or plant belongs to seven groups. Delphina’s seven groups are:

Kingdom	Animalia	Description
Phylum	Chordata	(Animal with a backbone)
Class	Mammalia	Produces Milk for Its Young and Warm-Blooded
Order	Cetacia	Marine Mammal

Family	Delphinidae	All kinds of dolphins
Genus	Turciops	A certain kind of dolphin
Species	truncata	A bottlenose dolphin

“Delphina” is derived from the scientific name. The P. is an abbreviation for “porpoise.” Fishermen sometimes use that name for dolphins. Marshall thought it sounded cute. Marshall nicknamed his new friend “Delphina P. Dolphin” one sunny afternoon.

Humans amuse Delphina. They talk as much as dolphins do and their language is hilarious to her. Every time she hears “bot-tle-nose-dol-phin” she flips-out. Her pod makes squeaks and whistles, a kind of code that lets each other know what is going on. But her friend, the boy, seemed to read her thoughts and she could read his. It was a mystery.

Humans like to play as much as dolphins, and that’s how Delphina and Marshall became friends.

A few days after Marshall and Delphina first met, he was snorkeling offshore on a calm ocean day. Suddenly Delphina swam right up to him and touched him gently with her nose.

He spun around worried it might be a shark. But there was that same dolphin. Marshall recognized her by a scar that ran down her nose. She said, “Catch me if you can!” and turned away with a big downward thrust of her powerful tail flukes.

Marshall took-off like a bullet. He surfaced to get a big gulp of air and then plunged in after her using his flippers to propel through the water. But he was no match for Delphina. She swam circles around him. This was *her* world after all.

When they both went up for air, Delphina swam under Marshall so her dorsal fin was right in front of him, and thought, “Hold on for the ride of your life!”

Marshall grabbed hold of Delphina's rubbery fin and held on for his life. They plunged under the water.

That was the first time Marshall entered the world of dolphins. A few of Delphina's pod came to swim alongside them. They clicked and squealed but Marshall could only understand Delphina - another mystery.

They swam over reefs and right through schools of mullet like a moving silver curtain of fish, and far below Marshall glimpsed a shipwreck partially covered by shifting sand.

Delphina seemed to know just when Marshall needed air and took him up to the surface.

On the swim back to the dock Marshall could see that a crowd of people had gathered. In the middle of them was Marshall's father looking through a pair of binoculars right at them. Marshall's heart sank.



“They're wild animals, son. Just because they look like they are smiling doesn't mean they are friendly.”

“Dad, dad. This dolphin is friendly. She brought me up for air just when I needed to breathe.”

Marshall's father looked across the room at his wife and shook his head in disbelief. His tan face was contorted in worry.

“Can you believe this, Linda?”

Marshall's mother could hardly contain her smile. She deeply loved her son and appreciated his sense of adventure and love for animals.

“Warren,” she told her husband, “maybe we should listen to the story of how these two met. Marshall seems to be just fine and this is truly a miracle.”

She rose and crossed the room to sit on the couch next to Marshall. “Tell us the whole story from the beginning.”

Marshall looked over at this father who was glaring at his wife. Marshall knew his dad worried that his son might be harmed.

Even Marshall was a little worried. That dolphin ride took him far from shore where tides could carry him out to sea if left alone.

Marshall thought about telling his parents how he could understand and communicate with Delphina. But, it was a big risk. He might lose his father’s respect.

Warren Johnson was not a man who read fairy tales. He stuck to the facts and what he could touch and see in front of him. That made him a great naturalist and ranger.

Marshall’s mother was different: she lived in her imagination and believed in miracles. That made her a good writer. Kids and parents loved her adventure books. But, for now Marshall kept his secret.



Delphina watched her boy disappear into the crowd of humans. She wondered if he would come back to her.

It was fun pulling him along through the waves with her pod mates. She could feel his excitement in his heart beating against her back.

Delphina liked him. But her pod had troubles with humans. Their boats, jet skis, fishing nets, and stuff they tossed into the ocean made life challenging and dangerous for dolphins and other sea life.

The ocean was home to Delphina's relatives and other animals and plants. Her friend Caretta, the loggerhead sea turtle, got caught in fishing nets and had drowned last summer when she could not get air.

Delphina thought maybe her boy could help.



Delphina's pod had formed a big circle and blew a wall of bubbles around a thrashing school of pompano.

The silvery fish panicked, swimming this way and that, trapped in the bubble walls. Delphina's mother and her friends were jumping into the thrashing fish, taking turns snatching a wiggling fish in her sharp rows of teeth, and then swallowing it in one big gulp.

When everyone was full, they let the rest of the pompano swim away. It was the rule of the ocean that each species takes what they needed to survive. That way each group of animals was kept just the right size: not too many, not too few.

Delphina's pod headed eastward along the shores of Santa Rosa Island, past Pensacola Beach and on out to Navarre where the waters were clearer, and a new reef had formed near the old broken fishing pier.

The Big Storm broke the pier. No humans had come there for a long time. The reef grew back with colorful sponges, and sea grass, then barnacles, oysters and crabs.

Many species got their start in life when they were tiny creatures by hiding in the safety of the reefs rocks and caves. Marshall's dad called the reef a nursery for ocean life.

Delphina's pod liked the new reef. The little creatures on the reef attracted bigger fish and they in turn attracted even bigger fish.

Marshall's dad called it an "ocean food chain."

Delphina didn't know scientific language. The new reef community was filled with life and that meant it was good hunting for her pod. She knew that lots of different kinds of life signaled that everything was working just right.

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Marshall pushed the broom across the front porch. He was mad and worried. His father had grounded him. No ocean for two weeks. He had to stay inland and help with work at home and at the fort. Didn't his dad know that the ocean was like breathing air to his son? Out on the beach he felt at home. The birds and fish, the dolphins and turtles were as much a part of Marshall's family as his mom and dad.

Marshall felt he had done nothing wrong. Late that night Marshall laid in bed with his window open listening to the sound of the distant waves just over the dunes. He wondered about Delphina. Would she go away? What was her life like anyway? He knew so little he realized. All his book knowledge told him nothing about the real life of a dolphin.

Suddenly he didn't care what his father might think. He, Marshall Johnson, had a special gift and he could learn so much if only he had a chance to spend time with his dolphin friend. He crept out of the house and made his way out to the beach.

The moon was full, and the golden light lit his way over the dunes and onto the beach. Marshall sat near the waves watching the light shimmer across them. All else was blackness. He found the Big Dipper in the stars above when suddenly he became aware of Delphina. She was off shore swimming on her tail with just her head out of the water.

How did she know I was here? Marshall wondered.

Delphina sent a long message of click's as she swam on her tail high up above the waves.

*I have been waiting here a long time,* Delphina communicated.

Marshall stood up and concentrated. He imagined his father then he pictured himself sweeping the porch. After a while Delphina plunged below the waves.

Marshall stayed on the shore for a while wondering if she would come back but she did not.

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Marshall returned home, climbed over the windowsill and slithered back under the sheets. He lay awake for a long time listening to the distant waves crashing on the beach and thinking about the dolphin.

Did Delphina understand him? Or, did she think he was not coming back?

Marshall hardly slept that night. When his mother woke him, it was already daylight.

“Sleepyhead wake up. Breakfast is on the table.”

Marshall dragged himself to the kitchen. His father was shoveling down eggs and grits and his mother was frying more bacon. Marshall had no appetite. The phone rang. It was Marshall’s Uncle Jim.

“Well, I’ll let you talk to him...he’s sitting right here.” His mother handed him the phone.

“Hi, sport,” Jim said. “Want to go trawling with us tomorrow?”

Marshall’s heart leapt. Uncle Jim owned a commercial fishing boat and sometimes he got to tag along and help the fishermen.

“Yes!” he shouted into the phone.

His Uncle would pick him up in the afternoon. They would be rising well before dawn. Marshall would spend the night at his Uncle and Aunt’s place in Gulf Breeze.

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All day long Marshall thought of ways he might find Delphina while he was out trawling the deep sea with Uncle Jim and his men.

## Chapter 7

The pod moved through warm waters along the coastline. Scout was jumping and playing up ahead. Delphina chased him. He was coming along in his knowledge of the sea and pod life.

Scout was very curious and quick to investigate a new situation – too quick. Once he chased a stingray along the ocean floor and came face to face with a lemon shark!

It was July and the fishing had become more difficult along the Gulf shores. In fact it had been harder for the pod to find food lately.

The elders in the pod decided to join a group hunt farther out to sea. Larger fish swam there in abundance.

This would be Scout's first experience in deeper waters away from the shallow waters where he was born. Delphina's mother signaled to Scout to stay near her.

Delphina loved deep water fishing. The colder water made her feel more energetic. She would need all her energy to dive deeply and then swim to surface for air repeatedly.

As days passed, more and more pods joined together until there was a dolphin herd. Together they swam away from shore over the Continental Shelf. The flat sandy bottom under the water along the coastline disappeared as the pod swam out over the deep canyons of the sea. Using echolocation the herd found a huge school of red snapper which would provide good protein for hungry dolphins.

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The pod members worked together to surround the fish, like a big net. Then each dolphin plunged into the middle of the snapper to grab a fat fish. The red snapper had rows of sharp teeth

like saws. They were powerful predators and fast swimmers which made the hunt more fun. Oh, how great that snapper tasted!

Delphina kept calling Scout to stay with her. She had seen a bull shark feeding among the snapper. Bull sharks were known to sometimes take a bite out of dolphins, too.

A swirling fury of predators churned the water: sharks, dolphins, and red snappers were swimming at full speed. The snappers panicked. But size was on the shark's and the dolphins' side. The red snapper were on the menu that day!

Delphina had to catch up with Scout. The little dolphin was so excited about the hunt that he forgot to be cautious.

Delphina's mother was calling to her. There was danger, she said. It seemed another predator was fishing the snapper – a predator more feared than the shark.

And Scout was heading right toward it.

Chapter 8

Marshall kept the boat headed as instructed by his uncle. He read the electronic chart in front of him that showed him where to steer.

He sat high above the deck where a dozen brawny men hauled a heavy net overboard, hand over hand, with the help of a wench. Slowly the big dripping net rose into the sunlight.

The weight of the catch pulled the net down toward thrashing waters where the fish tried to escape. Marshall paid little attention to the activity below him on the deck. He kept the boat on course.

Suddenly he heard Delphina! She was telling him there was Big Danger in the nets. Marshall saw a small dolphin struggling among the fish. Its fluke was caught in the net and it was above the water now.

Marshall yelled to his Uncle and the crew, but the noise of the engine and wench was too loud. They did not hear Marshall. What could he do?

Marshall frantically read cockpit controls. He saw “Idle” which he knew from his father’s park boat. He took a deep breath and moved the handle into that gear. The big boat jerked and stopped moving forward. The big engines throttled back to a low roar from under the water.



Uncle Jim and the men all looked at Marshall in surprise.

“What are you doing?” Uncle Jim shouted.

“Look!” Marshall shouted and pointed to the small dolphin. He noticed the little animal had stopped struggling and was hanging limp by its tail fluke.

Uncle Jim and the men pulled the net to where they could reach the dolphin. They had to cut it out of the net and when they did a great many red snapper fell from the net back into the sea!

The men laid the dolphin on deck. Marshall could see there was a big tear in its fluke. The dolphin was very small. Marshall’s scrambled to the deck to help.

“What should we do Uncle Jim?” Marshall asked.

Uncle Jim lifted his soiled cap and scratched his head.

“I’m afraid to throw it back because it’s so badly injured,” Jim said as he knelt to examine the torn fluke.

“Marshall, while we haul in the nets, you keep this dolphin’s skin wet” Uncle Jim said.



On the way back to the marina Marshall watched the blowhole of the dolphin open and close. Its breathing was slower now, its eyes closed. Was it feeling pain?

Marshall wondered how Delphina knew he was on the boat. Could she see him so far above the water? This little dolphin must be part of her pod.

Uncle Jim had called the Marine Mammal Rescue Squad to meet them at the marina on the bay.

Marshall sat by the dolphin pouring buckets of sea water over its smooth skin and patting it, talking in a low voice. The sun was setting in the west. It was a big red ball of light.

Uncle Jim switched on the ship’s lights. The choppy waves smacked up against the boat as it plunged toward shore. A group of dolphins were riding the bow wave. Among them was Delphina.

When the big fishing boat pulled into its slip, Marshall noticed the dolphins had followed them into the busy waters of the marina!

“Delphina!” Marshall yelled. “Go back!”

Uncle Jim came to look over the rail with Marshall.

“Who are you talking to?” he said.

“See that dolphin there?” Delphina was standing on her tail with both her flippers on the wave tops. She was sending out clicks and squeaks.

Marshall hesitated. Then he didn't care anymore who knew about his ability to talk to Delphina.

"I can understand her...and she can understand me."

Uncle Jim looked at Delphina, then at Marshall, then back at Delphina. He didn't say anything.

"Delphina told me about the dolphin caught in the net," Marshall said as he guessed what his uncle might be thinking.

"But Marshall, how could you possibly hear the dolphin from so far up and with all the noise?"

"Uncle Jim, I don't know how. All I know is that she sends me thoughts and I can picture something in my mind and she understands...Uncle Jim its true."

Jim was quiet. His brother, Marshall's dad, had told him about Marshall riding the back of a dolphin. Now he wondered about his nephew.

Marshall grew up by the sea. So it was natural he would have sensitivity toward animals that were as much part of his world as his friends and family.

"Can you tell Delphina that the little dolphin we caught will be helped?"

Marshall closed his eyes and imagined the baby dolphin being cared for at the clinic. Delphina dove under the waves and swam in a circle and jumped high above the water.

Marshall thought about the scientists releasing the little dolphin into the ocean when it was well again.

Delphina settled down and was swimming back to her companions. They jumped and swam back together to the side of Uncle Jim's boat.

Marshall leaned over and thought “go now.” He pointed them out of the harbor.

Delphina stayed. Her companions turned back to sea and disappeared.

A busy marina was no place for a dolphin. All those spinning propeller blades under the water were deadly.

Uncle Jim wondered if Marshall really could communicate. That dolphin did not leave.

Marshall looked down at Delphina. He realized she was not leaving until the small dolphin was returned to the sea.



“What’s going on down there,” Becky said. She was one of the mammal rescue team.

Before Uncle Jim or Marshall could answer she said, “Whoa, that dolphin can’t stay in these busy waters.”

Becky was tanned with freckles on her nose and cheeks. She was dressed in jean shorts and a yellow tee-shirt, sunglasses and a Marine Mammal Rescue cap squashed on her head.

Marshall liked her right away. Uncle Jim introduced them.

“So you’re Warren Johnson’s kid? Nice to meet you,” she shook Marshall’s hand vigorously.

“How do you know my dad?” Marshall asked.

“Everybody knows your dad, Marshall! He’s the Ranger-in-the-Know around here.”

Marshall felt pride and surprise.

“What can we do about Delphina?”

“Who?”

Marshall caught himself. “I mean that dolphin down there.”

Uncle Jim said, “Marshall and the dolphin have a special relationship.”



Becky was looking down at Delphina who swimming was around and around in a circle below.

“We’ll have to get a small craft and see if we can get her to follow us out of the harbor. When she sees her pod, hopefully she’ll return to them.”

Becky turned to face Marshall with her hands on her hips. “Guess we better take you with us. You can tell me all about this relationship while we coax ... what did you call her... Delphina?”

Marshall grinned and sighed. Finally, someone who doesn’t think I’m nuts.



The rescue team took Scout to a special clinic for marine life where they put Scout to sleep, cleaned up the wound, and then stitched his torn fluke back together.

All the while the team was bathing her in buckets of seawater. The doctor looked Scout over from head to toe.

“He couldn’t be more than a few months old. Besides that tail fluke, he’s in great shape.”

They moved Scout to a special tank of seawater where he could wake up and recover a little. The team planned to return him to the bay the next day if all was right.



Becky and Marshall left Uncle Jim on the dock where his men were unloading the red snapper catch. It was still a good catch even with the fish they lost. Uncle Jim was glad because they got paid by the size of the catch.

Fishermen and owners of fishing boats like Jim were having a hard time making a living. Marshall’s family had been in the commercial fishing business for four generations in Pensacola.

Uncle Jim might be the last one in the family to fish these waters because the big catches that made the family a good living for 100 years were not very big anymore. Uncle Jim told Marshall the Gulf of Mexico was over-fished.

Uncle Jim watched Becky and Marshall as they came around the stern of his large boat and carefully approached Delphina.

Marshall brought a picture into his mind of Delphina following Becky's boat out of the bay and joining with his pod mates.

Delphina circled and swam back fast, jumping high out of the water and then flipped her tail up and plunged into the water.

All the people on boats around them gasped and clapped. They didn't realize like Marshall did that she was mad and showing it.

I can't leave, Delphina told Marshall.

"What are you communicating?" Becky said. She watched Marshall concentrate and then saw that the dolphin jumped.

"I'm trying to tell her to go with us out of the bay."

Becky suggested Marshall visualize a boat propeller with sharp blades to communicate danger nearby. Marshall tried that. Delphina became even more upset.

"Can you tell her to come back tomorrow?"

"I can try," Marshall said.

He closed his eyes and imagined the red ball of the sun going down over the horizon. Then he imagined it coming up at dawn. Finally, he imagined the little dolphin in a boat going out into the bay and the rescue squad lowering it into the water.

Delphina stopped circling. She was looking up at Marshall and she whistled. Then before they knew it, Delphina swam out of the marina into the bay.

“If I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes I wouldn’t believe it,” Becky was saying to Marshall with an astonished look on her face.

“I know...I can hardly believe it myself!” Marshall said.

Becky pushed the throttle forward and gently turned her boat back toward the dock as Marshall leaned over the stern looking through Becky’s binoculars at Delphina coming up for air every two or three minutes as she returned to her pod.

When they got to shore it was about 9 o’clock. Uncle Jim was at the pier coffee shop waiting to take Marshall back home. He had already called his brother to tell him about the whole adventure.

“Come on sport,” Uncle Jim put his arm around Marshall. “We’ve got a whole lot of explaining to do.”



The pod left the great red snapper feast hours after Delphina and her friends left to follow the boat inshore. She found her pod far offshore but heading in her direction. Delphina joined her mother. They were all tired and many were logging—floating close to the surface.

Delphina knew she needed to rest, too. So she also became a floating log. In her half-awake state, she could still breathe occasionally. Half her brain was asleep and half was awake. This is how she could sleep but keep watch for troublesome creatures like hungry sharks.

While Delphina slept with her pod, Scout floated in the tank at the clinic. His fluke hurt, and he was scared. He didn’t understand this strange world where the humans took him. It was too bright and had strange smells. He was lonely for Delphina and the pod.

But more than anything, Scout was hungry!



Marshall's mother greeted him with a big hug on the lit porch of their house on the island. His Dad grinned at him. He put his hand on Marshall's shoulder and said, "I 'm proud of you son. Uncle Jim and Becky Moon told me about everything. I know you're tired," Marshall's dad said as they walked into the kitchen, "... and well, it looks like your mother has cooked your favorite meal!"

Sure enough, Penny Johnson had made spaghetti and meatballs. Marshall and Uncle Jim were famished. They sat down gratefully and let Penny shovel heaps of pasta and sauce on their plates.

Marshall's mother and father sat down and watched the two sunburned gobblers. They refilled their glasses of iced tea, brought more garlic bread dripping with butter and finally, a big bowl of Rocky Road ice cream – Marshall's all time favorite.

Uncle Jim laughed at Marshall with his mouth full of ice cream. "Kid, we should get into trouble more often!"

They all laughed together. While Penny and Jim cleared the table, Warren Johnson pulled his chair closer to Marshall and said, "Tell me what happened."

Marshall started from the beginning when he first met Delphina and discovered they could exchange thoughts.

As his son talked about Delphina, and about the young dolphin Uncle Jim helped rescue from the trawling net, Warren realized he had not listened carefully to Marshall.

Warren Johnson was a naturalist. That meant he studied the lives and habitats of animals and plants. He read about people who could communicate with animals.

Warren thought that Marshall must be one of these people. And as he listened, Warren began to think about Delphina, the dolphin who also understood his son.

Maybe Delphina could help him and other rangers learn more about ocean life and the beaches they tried to protect.

Warren chuckled out loud as he thought of Delphina as an official Ranger-at-Sea.

Uncle Jim stared at his brother and said, “Look out. I know that laugh. It means he’s cookin’ up a crazy plan!”

After the dishes were cleared and Marshall finished his story, everyone was very sleepy. Uncle Jim left for home.

Marshall almost fell asleep brushing his teeth. Penny followed her son to his bedroom and turned down the sheets for him.

As Marshall crawled into bed, the last thing he remembered was his mother standing over him. Then he slipped into a peaceful deep sleep knowing Scout would be returned to his pod. He dreamed about Delphina P. Dolphin - his new friend for life.

THE END FOR NOW



Preparing to Dive!

Photo by Susan L. Feathers, Pensacola Fish House Restaurant

Pelé the Pelican

Pelicanus occidentalis



Pelé (pronounced *paylay*) bobbed in the salty waves of the Gulf of Mexico feeling full and satisfied. She preened her fine feathers with her long bill. She was born last year on Dauphin Island with thousands of other baby brown pelicans. When she hatched from a large white egg, baby Pelé was all pink skin and no feathers. Pelé's silvery feathers would grow in over the first three months of her life.

Mother and father pelicans come to Dauphin Island to lay their eggs in nests of marsh grass. Parents take turns gently warming the eggs under the skin webs between their long toes. Inside each egg a little pelican is forming. Scientists say Dauphin Island is a pelican rookery—a nursery for pelicans. It has been home to baby pelicans for at least 200 years.

Pelicans have BIG APPETITES! Mother and father pelicans work very hard every day to catch, chew, and feed their babies lots of fish to keep them growing strong – about 150 pounds of fish for each baby during their first year, to be exact.

Pelican babies do not fly until they are about 3 months old. Pelé and her brother and two sisters learned to fly by observing how their parents cruised close to the wave tops looking for fish or flying high above them to spot a big school of fish. Pelicans are the only birds that can dive from very high without damaging their wings and head. Special pouches fill with billowy air as they fall downward, cushioning their bodies like little pillows when they smack down below the waves to snatch fish.

With her eagle's eyesight and dashing dive, Pelé learned to plunge from 60 feet high straight down into the waves to scoop up fish or shrimp by surprise. Pelé has a big throat pouch like a rubbery net that holds up to 3 gallons of fish at a time. Each time she bags fish in her pouch, she swims to the surface where she bobs high above the waves because of her air pouches. She leans forward to drain the water out of her very long beak then throws back her head and –GULP - down they slid into her long throat into her stomach.

Pelé dines on hundreds of small fish called menhaden. When menhaden swim in schools of thousands their silvery flanks reflect the shining sun. Pelé sees the flashes of light while cruising above the waves. She folds her huge wings back close to her body, twists and tucks in

her long neck to the left, and turns her beak straight down to plunge head first from the sky like an arrow!

Pelicans look just like the Navy's Blue Angels when they fly together.

Pelé's wings are big. When she holds them out straight her wings span eight feet across, Her feathered wingtips are like flaps that fold down to hold a cushion of air so Pelé can skim low over the waves, almost touching them, to glimpse flashes of darting fish or thick clouds of plankton with lots of krill (tiny crustaceans).



Pelé is perfectly adapted to the ocean life she was born to live.



On a fine November day, Pelé spent the morning hours dining on a run of plump mullet. She didn't even need to fly above the clear green waves. All Pelé had to do was open her big bill and shovel in mullet by the dozen as she bobbed about in the calm ocean swells.

Today is a good day for pelicans, thought Pelé, and for terns, gulls, osprey, and mergansers and all the hunters of the sea.

Only dolphins had not appeared. That disappointed Pelé because the dolphins were supreme hunters and she enjoyed their company. They herded the fish into a big swirling pool. All Pelé and the other pelicans had to do was dive head first into the middle of the teeming fish and fill up.

Pelé often thought about mullet. They were plump, oily fish that provided many birds and animals with a good meal. *Why were there so many mullet, she wondered. It must be Mother Ocean's way of providing enough for everyone.*

Pelé was a very thoughtful bird. She had many questions but few answers.

Caretta caretta

No. It's Not a Song, It's a Symphony

It's a fair-weather day on a Florida barrier island in the Gulf of Mexico.

A battalion of brown pelicans coast overhead on dark arched wings. Children build sand castles and bob in the surf, and shorebirds rest in warm dunes—a feast of beauty and abundance.



Santa Rosa Island was named in homage to Isabel Flores de Oliva – the “Rose of Lima.” She was canonized by the Catholic Church in 1671 as Saint Rose. She was born in Lima, Peru in 1586.

Florida is rich in such stories.

Take the story of *Caretta caretta* for example. She doesn't even know we've tagged her with a dichotomous name to set her species apart from others. Her only inclination is to find a darkened shoreline and lay her burden down.

Buoyed by thick ocean waves she paddles with strong legs through the currents. Through heavy lid, she looks toward shore and vaguely remembers its smell and warm, gritty touch. The moonlit shore is quiet as she takes purchase on the shifting sand below her.



She looks from just under the water along the beach head where bright lights in hotels and restaurants, homes and gas stations could make her decide to turn away. She looks for a darkened beach, lit only by the silver moonlight. It's instinctual.

Every May through September along the Gulf shores, female loggerhead turtles (*Caretta caretta*) return to lay leathery eggs in the dunes of their birth.

Kemp's Ridley, Atlantic green turtles and sometimes leatherbacks also use these crystal white beaches as a nursery. It's been so for thousands of years.

Caretta caretta has spent her youth in the Sargasso Sea, a body of water created from currents in the North Atlantic and where Sargassum seaweed covers over its surface. It is believed the loggerhead turtle feeds and grows in this protective cover.

When she comes of age, dozens of eggs grow within her as she heads back to the same beach where as a hatchling she was just the size of a quarter and prize catch of shorebirds, crabs, and other beachside predators. She is one of the few lucky infant turtles that managed to survive to adulthood.

Now she returns to lay down the next generation. And, should she come ashore, will she struggle to navigate beach chairs, plastic inner tubes, or sandcastles?

What will happen to her offspring? Baby sea turtles are attracted to bright lights, an instinct that should turn them toward a moonlit sea. Will they head toward the hotel lights

instead? Rangers report scores of tiny turtles destroyed by cars or desiccated in the hot sun among buildings.

In today's world, with the human built environment, it takes countless volunteers to tend turtle nests, redirecting the young toward the ocean. Because of this, can we say that these species are self-sustaining?

There are seven species of sea turtles in the world today. Four of them lay their eggs here. That constitutes a biological treasure for this region, a remaining strand of a once diverse web of life just off these shores.

What if *Caretta caretta* disappears due to human interference in this annual ritual that replenishes her kind? Should we really care?

Reach back 100 years in Florida's natural history to an ocean teeming with life. Fish would be larger and more plentiful, and you could scoop up shrimp in the bay with your hands. There would be hundreds more dunes with waving sea oats, both habitat and nursery to many species.

The loggerhead turtle is part of an ocean web that supports our fishing industry. The biodiversity of our beautiful islands is the basis of tourism, a principal industry. Somehow we have to learn to maintain this natural treasure while going about our business.



We are working that out now. There has got to be a way. Floridians have never been short on ingenuity.

For *Caretta caretta* we can turn down the lights, sit out on our decks and listen to the oncoming waves. We'll save money by reducing energy consumption and get a better view of the heavens. Let's face it: life would be dismal without the beauty of nature.

When we see a dolphin breach the waves, white terns dive and soar, or listen to ocean breezes, we are renewed and encouraged that all is right on this exquisite planet we are so fortunate to share with other species.

Caretta caretta...no, it's not a song. It's a symphony.

What you can do list:


If you live on or near the shoreline between May and September, turn off as many lights as you can during the evening hours. Remove chairs, umbrellas, and other beach paraphernalia to give turtles an unobstructed path.

If you discover a nest, report it to a Park Ranger. Keep the location to yourself.

Dona Coquina

Donax virsitilis



The green waves of the Gulf of Mexico gently rocks a million babies in its warm waters. Dona Coquina is one of these tiny babies. You cannot see her with your eyes alone because she is the size of a pencil dot (.) and her body is see-through like glass. 

This is where Dona Coquina begins her life, pushed along by waves and by the deep rivers of ocean water we call currents. If she is very lucky, Dona Coquina will grow quickly, munching on the even tinier plants of the ocean called phytoplankton (“fight-o-plank-ton”).

As a baby Dona Coquina is one of the ocean’s animal life called zooplankton (‘zo-plank-ton’). She gets hungry because her body grows super fast. She spends her first few days gobbling up everything that floats or swims her way.

Dona Coquina belongs to a group of animals called mollusks (“mull-us-k”). People call her a clam. When she is about 10 days old, her outer layer of skin begins to form a hard shell that will protect her very soft body from harm. The shell will be her house but it’s no ordinary house. It grows along with her body! When you pick up a Dona Coquina shell on the beach, you can see and feel the growth rings of the mollusk that once occupied the shell.

Dona Coquina’s shell grows a top and a bottom that can open and close like a door. She can shut it tight if a bird or a crab tries to eat her soft body for lunch or dinner. That’s right. Lots of other animals like to eat the soft-bodied mollusks. When you find empty shells on a beach, it probably means the little creature inside helped fill the tummy of another ocean creature. This is

called a food chain. Just like Dona Coquina ate the phytoplankton, something else may eat her. That's one reason she grows a hard shell that can shut tight. Each plant or animal is given survival gear like big sharp teeth, legs that can run fast, or a tail to swing in the trees. They play in the Game of Life and its every creature for herself!

Soon Dona Coquina's shell grows so heavy she begins to fall down through the ocean waves, deeper and deeper, and on a very special day she lands on the soft white sand of the Gulf shoreline where she will spend the rest of her life. She has grown one slender foot, but it doesn't look like your foot. It is more like your tongue. Stick your tongue out and move it up and down. See how powerful your tongue is? It's a muscle. Dona Coquina's foot is a muscle, too. As she grows into a full grown clam she learns how to use her foot to hold onto a rock or a plant growing on the bottom of the ocean or bay. But the best thing she can do with her foot is dig! She digs a tunnel in the sand to escape the jaws and claws of predators (animals that want to eat her). She is the favorite food of birds, fish, and even people.

Living inside a shell house, Dona Coquina must find a way to get food for her growing body. She has a little tube called a siphon ("s-eye-fun") to suck ocean water into her body and filter out the tiny algae (plants) from the salty water - like a straw! She has another tube to spit out the ocean water!

Coquinas live at Pensacola Beach. They are busy growing and eating and trying not to be eaten. Ghost crabs dart from their tunnels in the dunes. Dona Coquina senses their presence and makes a mad dash down into the hole she digs with her strong foot. If you watch at the edge of the sea you can see her shell twirling down beneath the sand to escape the jaws of a crab or a sharp beaked bird. Look right where the water is pulling back out to sea. Sometimes all you can see are tiny holes.



People love Coquinas of all colors, and beachcombers collect their empty shells. Sometimes they make necklaces from a string of yellow, pink, lavender, or coral-colored coquina shells.

After a long, long time, piles of coquina shells pile up on the ocean floor from all the little creatures whose lives are over. When enough time passes, the shells form rocks. People like to build with them because they are strong but lightweight. You may have coquina shells in your sidewalk or outdoor walls. Ask your parents if you do.



Port Panzacola

One

Once there was a boy who lived by the Gulf shores, and he, like the town where he lived, changed hands many times. After his only parent died, Marshall lived in foster homes before Uncle Albert surfaced to take him in when he was ten years old.

His uncle lived in a shotgun house, so straight and narrow, as the saying goes, that you could shoot a bullet from the front door right on through to the back door. The house sat with hunched shoulders and faded yellow paint on a spotty yard. It had been in the family for three generations without any love or caring.

Albert worked as a solid waste engineer—code for garbage collector—with the county. He had never married. He was a nighttime alcoholic who somehow managed to sober up and go to work the next morning. He rarely kept food in the refrigerator except when the social worker stopped by to check on Marshall. Marshall had to fend for himself. Getting out of the foster care

system was the only good thing about living with Uncle Albert, and learning bits and pieces about the father Marshall never knew.

Unlike his ebony-skinned guardian, Marsh was neither white nor black but what adults called blended. His mother said he was the color of nutmeg. She was the color of milk. Apparently, his father was Polynesian. Later Marsh concluded that blending was only skin-deep. Inside he existed as neither white nor black not belonging anywhere or to anyone.

After he landed in Albert's sorry shack, Marshall made a habit of gazing at the golden moon through the long tresses of Spanish moss that swayed with the breeze outside his bedroom window. On summer nights legions of frogs bleated and croaked an odd symphony in the moist subtropical underbrush. In the mystic of the South, he cried himself to sleep, scared and more alone with Uncle Albert than after his mother died.

Alcohol was his Uncle's only companion. Even so, unconsciously Marshall fell into covering up Albert's inebriation and violent outbursts because the alternative foster system was, for him, far worse. Consistent neglect seemed somehow better than inconsistent. Years later, on the brink of his teenage years, he would become his own man. Until then, he led a quiet life in the shadows of Port Panzacola, staying below the radar of foster care. tolerating Uncle Albert and keeping his sights on independence at age 18.



"Ain't got no work for a kid," Mr. Baker said, unloading boxes of Alabama sweet potatoes from an old green truck.

"I ain't a kid. I'm ten years old and I can work circles around the best you have," Marshall said blowing himself up as tall as he could.

Something about this little kid's spunk made old man Baker laugh inside. But the boy was under age and he couldn't take on any more risks than he already had with his fresh market. Still he wished he had just one kid in his own family with as much ambition as this little guy.

"I'll work for food...and I won't tell a soul that I am working here."

Marsh was desperate, and the man could hear that but didn't let on. For the first year Marsh took home a box of produce, dozen eggs and a carton of milk each Saturday. Many of the laborers were from the same neighborhood as Marsh and knew his uncle to be a bum. They played the game, too, and sometimes they invited the boy to their homes for a meal or to join their congregation on a Sunday morning when the church held a potluck. The second year old man Baker put a ten dollar bill in the box of produce with a don't-you-dare-tell look.

At home Uncle Albert, who spent most of his money on booze, raided his nephew's hard earned store without any remorse. Yet the boy remained grateful that his otherwise disgusting uncle kept social service at bay. Thus he formed a tentative alliance with Albert.

School offered its own challenges. There Marsh faced the true reality of his life: he didn't belong anywhere. He was too brown to be accepted by the lily-white crowd who no matter the rhetoric still considered blacks second-class citizens. And, he was not black enough, nor did he know the ways of black folks on his side of town. His mother had a good job and he'd lived in a middle-class white neighborhood in a more tolerant town before he landed in Port Panzacola.

But there was one girl who Marshall felt particularly drawn to: Shaundra Williams. She was a military brat, tall and willowy, with a great smile and ready laugh.

"I'm a chameleon!" she said once. "I blend perfectly with any environment."

Marsh laughed, too. He understood the skill, and its underbelly. A person survives by suppressing her true self. Blending in meant never being authentic. The trade off was always about survival. Together they formed a friendship that became the group to which each belonged.



Marsh lucked into other relationships that would sustain him more than he could realize at the time. He survived the first year at Uncle Albert's with a cobbled strategy whose purpose was to mask his uncle's incompetence while keeping himself alive. He was not eligible for free breakfast and lunch at school due to Uncle Albert's salary being above poverty income. But one thing old Al did right was teach him to fish. There was plenty of old fishing tackle and poles in the storage shed. On his recycled bike Marsh met up with the trolley out to Casino Beach and the pier. With his market cash he bought an annual pass and bait when needed.

At first his attempts at fishing from the high dock into the Gulf were fruitless. But being a good study he noticed a veteran fisherman and copied his techniques. After the muscled man pulled in a big red drum – enough steaks for Marsh and his uncle for weeks - the boy ventured to talk to him directly.

Vern was impressed from the first moment he met the tanned, green-eyed boy with the golden cap of tightly curled hair. The boy exuded an air of assurance. It made him curious.

“What you need is a Gotcha! Lure.”

He held out the shiny lure with a cubicle head.

“Here, try it,” he said.

Marshall detected a slight smile under Vern's bushy silver handlebar mustache. The boy removed the old lure and tied on the new one as Vern watched. He immediately drew the pole to the side and back in a big arch and let it fly far out into the strong green surf.

“Capital!” Vern shouted. He couldn’t believe how the boy had learned to do that so quickly. He showed the boy how to move the bait through the water so that it “swam” in spurts on the waves.

“If you want to pull in the big guys, you’ll need different gear. But for now, this will attract mackerel and Pompano just fine.”

With that Marshall felt the tug and his line went down. He pulled back strong then reeled in the line. Released then pulled, and as he wound up his catch, he was surrounded by a fellowship of men and women and kids at the ready to celebrate the young fisherman’s victory. He yanked a sparkling Spanish mackerel out of the Gulf’s aquamarine waters.

That was how Marshall and Vern met. It had been like that from the beginning...good things always happened when they were together. Vern kept a regular pattern of fishing every Sunday morning, rain or shine. It was the same rise-early-regimen he’d kept for 30 years in the Navy. After retiring, he took up fishing and tinkering in his garage and lived in utter contentment in a little beachside cottage on Santa Rosa Island. He had a son who was a biologist in California and a wife named Shirley who, by looking at Vern’s gut, Marsh thought must be a terrific cook.

Vern was curious about the boy. He talked often about Marshall as the unlikely friendship deepened over time. Neither Vern nor Marshall ventured to extend the relationship beyond the pier. It was as if they implicitly understood that was the only location where the friendship, with its unique rules and boundaries cast by the Gulf around it, could work as it did. It was very much a man to man deal.



Port Panzacola was blessed and cursed—blessed by its location at a place where, over eons, crumbling crystals of quartz from the Appalachian Mountains rolled down rivers to the sea

to become the sparking barrier islands along the shore. Between the island and the shore sprawled a bay. It was protected by the barrier islands from the Gulf's occasional but vengeful storms, and it was naturally deep - deep enough for large ships. Since the European explorers discovered it, and a nation had grown up around it, the town had been Spanish, then French, then British, Spanish again, and finally Union or Confederate, depending on whose hands it fell to next. After the age of exploration and nation building passed, corporations came and went, fishing out its stock, cutting down its pine forests, and using its streams and bayous—leaving toxic plumes in their wake. Its bounty became its curse.

The modern city was dubbed The City of Five Flags and every year there was a big celebration and reenactments of its history. Marshall participated at a distance, an observer usually, unless his school participated as they would one year when the King and Queen of Spain visited Port Panzacola to dedicate a square to DeLuna, the first Spanish explorer to set foot on these shores. The explorer's expedition, so filled with promise and dreams of conquest and glory, was wrecked asunder by what must have been a Category 5 hurricane that sunk all but two of his ships and devastated their food and medical supplies. That should have been a clue to the wily nature of the port and the place. The King and Queen seemed an anachronism to Marshall. The Gulf of Mexico went on as itself while all who schemed about taming her to their own purpose fell silently into history, most down into the depths of its green waters.

The Gulf has its natural rhythms among which are regular hurricanes that sweep across its expanse and mow down human habitation like roller balls sent by the gods from somewhere southeast of Cuba. This deadly pulse keeps the people along the shorelines in a perpetual state of readiness and indecision. You build your house and hope it lasts through the storms. You say, "If there is another one like such and such, I'm moving out of here!" But you stay anyway.

So, the people in the towns along the Gulf developed grit, spunk, and selective memory – not unlike that of Marshall Kelly. He made up his own history and was determined to make his own future in spite of the storms that enveloped him from time to time.

You can finish the story. How do you think Marsh will break free to live his own life. How will the Gulf shores and all its wildlife and human communities help him find his way?



Mrs. Hemmingway

One

Toby Hemmingway lived her life as she instructed her students. Adverbs and adjectives found no easy berth in her writing class where her students loved or hated her with equal voracity.

She lived on the Gulf of Mexico in a house on a white sand bluff. It stood there like a beacon for 50 years and was lived in by only two families. When Toby and her late husband Ron sailed into the bay they could see their house standing as a beacon, and the magnolia and pines that shaded it. The dock below it had been replaced a dozen times after each hurricane but the house was buffeted by a line of high dunes and sea oats whose roots held it together through Gulf storms protecting it from destruction.

Each morning Toby took a mug of coffee to a point on the bluff to watch the rising sun fill the horizon with pink and cast the sea platinum. She sat in one of two wooden chairs in which she and Ron reigned over their kingdom for three decades. Toby held no expectations the empty chair would be filled by someone else being a stoic individual whose pen more often left a period than a comma.

She stayed there until the sea turned teal and the sky cerulean.

Retirement brought little change in her daily routine but after three years of it, Toby felt a subtle shift in flow. The days waxed organic as the clock, which had dominated her life as a teacher, faded from her consciousness.

It was her habit to sail as often as the winds allowed. She'd sold the 42' craft that had taken their family to ports south into the Caribbean or east to explore Florida's barrier islands

and on up the Atlantic to the Outer Banks. Ron was the consummate sailor while Toby and their sons the crew. Now Toby sailed as captain of a slender 26' craft she christened The Clean Line. She sailed close-hauled to the wind, her long legs buttressed against the gunnels in defiance of prescribed behavior for people of her age and gender. Toby had never heeded those prescriptive behaviors of her generation.

Toby often wondered about her famous namesake to whom she was not related but somehow ended up in his line of work. Ernest's works exerted an influence on her choice to teach writing, but she had none of his talent nor did she see the world as he had. Perhaps the closest thing they shared was a love of fishing on the Gulf of Mexico. She held him and his ilk responsible for the comparatively small size and population of the present overfished species. But this was pure jealousy on her part. Ernest Hemmingway battled 15-foot swordfish worthy of a novel. Toby knew she would have been out on a rising swell dragging a heavy line had she been alive when The Stream was at the pinnacle of its productivity.

Toby longed to see her sons more often than they managed. Global trade pulled them to Beijing and Honolulu. Their reunions were few but long. Usually they sailed and fished whether in Pensacola or ports of call. Toby particularly enjoyed sailing in the Hawaiian Islands where she encountered humped backed whales. In their massiveness her sense of importance shrank to its proper importance.

The "boys" were *six-foot and counting* muscular men who dated but had yet to marry. Toby longed for grandchildren hoping that some of Ron may come through to prolong her physical relationship with the only man who commanded her heart and soul.

"There aren't any women like *you*, Mom," Robert, the oldest, teased. But they both knew the boys looked for softer women than she had been in her days rearing the boys. Toby had rules,

Ron metaphors. Her own mother made lists by the hour until the day she died. Toby found one in her office written that day she toppled as a felled tree...dead but still in motion.

It was a different time. Couples often never married but lived together or apart sampling life like a long buffet in a half real half virtual universe. Toby was envious. Life delivered a lunch counter with a limited menu to girls of the 50's. She remembers the extreme angst of adolescence that made her will taut and her compass true. In that sense she was grateful. Without struggle would her boys be ready for disappointment and those periods when life is nothing but a dried banana chip? Robert and Sam sailed through unscathed till now. Toby felt compunction to deepen their awareness of life's underbelly where she plied her art for more than 30 years in public schools with underprivileged children. Her generation raised kids to expect joy and abundance without the struggle to obtain either. But she came to realize that the inner fiber she developed was of a different nature in her son's generation. Their strength was not tenacious individualism that characterized previous generations of Americans. This fact was not apparent to Toby until she found herself quite alone one day.

"I want it out immediately."

"Whoa, slow down. There's a process."

"That's just it, Jack. I don't get processed. I want it out and then I'll be on my way, thank you!"

Jack sat back. He observed Toby. She had no husband now and her sons were at least a day's flight away. He was not going to let her bulldoze her way through this. He watched the news working its way around her body. Jack had been Ron and Toby's physician for over two decades. During that time he'd learned to read their emotions as well as their bodies. He watched

the boys grow up and walked with them through Ron's struggle to keep his heart healthy but his genes won out in the end.

"Don't you want to at least know more about the tumor...what you can expect?"

"Nope, the less I hear from you the better. When can you schedule the surgery?"

He sighed and chuckled. "Okay. I'll call you at home after I talk to the surgeon I want for you. She's in surgery right now."

Toby walked the long corridors and took the spacious elevator to the lobby carefully not looking at patients in their gowns and medical paraphernalia. She felt nauseous. It must be what a tree experiences with the first blow of the axe—the integument is still intact but a gap opens into which the winds of doubt, fear and shock enter as whispers and rise to a howl. Oh, God!

On a comic level it was no more than waking from the dream of invincibility and long life which every living creature is endowed at conception...with the exception of insects perhaps. The announcement – the axe – was nothing more than delivery of the date of departure.

At home she took a long shower after which she stood in front of a mirror applying body cream. As she rubbed it over her breasts she wondered how looking at the diagonal sutures and a flat chest on one side might make her feel. She'd never seen her mother's scars nor did she ever discuss it with her. Back then even women's surgery was in the closet like some indiscretion on their part. Then the surgery was a complete mastectomy and stripping of the lymph nodes in the arm pit. It left women without 100% use of their arm. Today breast surgery was as cosmetic as prescriptive, so Toby didn't worry too much. She was more inconvenienced by the whole affair.

She guessed she should let the boys know but she'd rather not. Why make them worry? They'd come running and there was simply nothing they could do to help. She'd rather be with them later on when they could plan a visit and spend time sailing or snorkeling.

Toby called Barbara, her friend for life, compatriot, fellow social cynic and champion of kids. No one could muster a laugh from Toby like Barb. She agreed to be handmaiden to Toby's rite of passage into the clan of one-breasted women. They made jokes about designing a one-cup bra called the Sling Shot. But after she hung up, Barbara wept for her friend and soul mate. The rate of breast cancer in Pensacola was way above the national average and Barbara couldn't help but think that it was their chemically polluted waters, legacy of a hundred years of industry and lax oversight by local government.

Two

The surgeon took only the tumor at Toby's request. She did not agree with her patient's decision to skip chemo therapy. Because Toby was in such overall good health Dr. Lily Wong believed the chemo was not only recommended cancer treatment protocol but might reduce the probability of its return on average with most American women's risk of breast cancer. The tumor was the least dangerous type, self-contained and easy to remove. But Toby would not subject her healthy cells and organs to the devastation of cancer-killing drugs. It was a risk but it was her body.

"Then I want to see you every four month," Wong insisted.

"Deal," Toby said as she stood to leave. "Thank you."

Wong nodded watching the remarkable woman disappear down the long corridor of the Breast Center.



Time passed quietly and Toby returned to her routine. She'd never got around to telling her sons about her cancer and the surgery. Barbara and her husband Dan were furious at her.

They'd discussed whether they should alert Robert and Steven but decided it was too much of an invasion of their friend's privacy. It didn't seem relevant to a woman like Toby who took shocks like a piston on an eighteen wheeler. She just kept moving on. It was an admirable trait for maintaining a full life but it had its downside. Deep within a seed took root, a seed of fear. She'd glimpsed the end. While not fully conscious of it, her body held that knowledge that eventually would cause Toby to choose an unusual path.

The Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill began with a massive explosion that took 11 lives. April 2010. For months, crude oil gushed into the Gulf riding the currents along the shoreline. No one guessed it would take nearly five months to stop the flow. The American public, held by mega corporations like BP to be idiots, watched as the company threw everything but the kitchen sink down the well and the U.S. EPA agreed to pouring Corexit into sensitive ecological waters, reefs, and marshes, to emulsify and break up the oil, dispersing it over a much larger area. Anyone with a few brain cells could see that they not only did not know what to do but also were willing to risk human and marine community health to "clean up" the mess. Even while the families of the 11 dead were learning what happened, the drum beat about economic impact on tourism began.

Toby and Ron had been struck with a kind of slow rising rage in the very center of their bodies. A sickness born in the face of entrenched power and complexity that threatened local communities from Texas to Apalachicola. Local citizens were shocked to learn that the Gulf of Mexico contained over 4,000 oil wells which all leaked to a certain extent. Even the Gulf seafloor itself leaked oil as part of its natural cycle as earth moves and shifts. Under the seabed vast layers of oil lay between layers of shale, the millennial end of a long cycle of decomposition

under pressure and heat. All this the public learned from scientists called to testify about the impact of the oil on sensitive communities of life and on human health.

Meanwhile seabirds, dolphins, schools of Gulf fish, oysters, clams, and all the small creatures that inhabit the marshlands—America’s ecological water filtration system and nursery for hundreds of Gulf species—washed up on the shore or died outright. Humans could not see the deep flow of the oil mixing in the prevailing deep water currents. It was nearly a mile in depth to the wellhead. It is still a mystery where the majority of the oil settled...except when it washes onshore in the form of tar balls, or dead sea life coated with plaques of hardened oil, ulcers or, later on, deformities.

Three

It was Toby’s habit to sail into Pensacola Bay in May, drop sail and fish for Spanish mackerel and trout. She took Marsha, a fellow member of The Fishing Chix, Pensacola’s female fishing divas. The two women were hauling them in with minnows. Toby would grill them tonight for a bunch of ‘the girls’ and their hubbies or guy friends. This was a regular event during the summer. Ron’s grill and patio gig was great; Toby just kept on the tradition.

They were quiet, watching the gentle swells, a beer buzz and sunshine haze on them, when Marsha suddenly stood and pointed. Toby turned toward to see a dolphin pushing something toward the shore. She was no in a pod and the object rolled back and forth in the currents. Toby turned on the inboard and moved slowly toward the dolphin, close enough to see what she was pushing.

It was a stillborn dolphin calf.

Toby cut the motor and she and Marsha watched silently for a minute or two. Marsha reached for Toby and held her hand her eyes brimming with tears.

Toby called the Marine Mammal Rescue. They put away their fishing gear and remained near the mother dolphin until the rescue arrived. By then they were close to shore. It was clear that was where the mother was pushing her baby. Did she seek human help? The mother gave one last big shove and appeared to watch as the infant dolphin rolled into the onshore chop and current. The mother dolphin turned and swam toward the bay entrance. There were people on shore who saw the dolphin as it washed onto the sand. Toby directed the rescue unit to Navarre Beach. Toby and Marsha motored back to the marina in silence.

On the following Monday Toby found herself traveling to Emerald Coast Wildlife Refuge in nearby Ft. Walton Beach. A biologist there agreed to meet with her. His research on bottlenose dolphins encompassed the Pensacola Bay area east to the Choctawhatchee Basin.

Toby learned about a coordinated effort among many agencies and University of Central Florida to study the population, feeding habits, and prey of bottlenose dolphins in the area as a baseline for measuring future impacts from the oil spill. She wanted to know about the dolphin calf that was picked up by the Wildlife Refuge. Had they learned anything yet?

Steve explained that the analysis of tissue samples was still in progress and tests sometimes took months to complete. While Hadley was reluctant to blame the deaths on the oil spill he said that dolphins mate February to March. So the spill which occurred in April would have impacted fetuses in their early stages of development if the oil was a cause of the dolphin deaths. Many of the dead calves rolling up across the Gulf state shorelines were stillborn Toby learned.

“What can I do to help?” She was not content to just look into what other people were learning, she wanted to do something herself.

Steve was thoughtful for a moment. “Get involved with us. You can report activity of dolphin pods to the Institute of Marine Mammal Studies in Gulfport, Mississippi. They have a citizen science program. They take your information through an online database. We, the Refuge that is, are part of the NOAA marine mammal stranding network. You can find an emergency number on our website to report standings like the one you witnessed.”

Toby was taking notes furiously on her smartphone; she would get The Fishing Chix and the local yacht club involved...members were on the water all the time.

“How come I haven’t heard more about this problem?” Toby said more to herself than to Steve but he answered that the interest in the impact of the spill was suppressed by municipalities’ push to convince travelers who support the Gulf Coast’s billion dollar tourism industry that everything was fine with the water and the wildlife.

“You mean the problem has been suppressed in the local media?”

His look said it all. He was being careful not to be quoted and Toby could see that the forces that keep the economic engines running had already exerted enough influence that it reached to the Refuge itself. She’d seen it many times before.

They exchanged contact information and Toby left his office and wandered around the facility.

On the drive home she called her son, Sam, a marine biologist in Hawaii, wondering again about the time difference. She had a terrible knack of calling her kids at the worst time of the day, or so they told her. How many hours earlier was it? 2 or 3 hours?

After a number of rings a very foggy male voice answered, “Mom...mom, its 5 am here.”

A long sigh.

“Oh, Gee, Sam, I’m awful sorry. I can’t believe its 5 hours difference. I can never remember.”

Long silence. Toby thought she could hear a soft snore.

Sam worked primarily on reef ecology but she wanted to engage his network in helping her locate the experts that were most likely outside of the local governmental and political influences that were keeping the public from locating the research about the oil spill impacts.

“Call me later, son. I witnessed a dolphin stranding and just left the refuge where I talked to one of their leading dolphin researchers. I want to pick your brain about who I could talk to that is not from the Gulf region. Call me later, Okay?”

“Okay, Mom. Sorry to be so grumpy.”

Toby sat on her couch taking in the scene. All her girlfriends has responded to her invitation to brunch and to learn more about hers and Marsha’s encounter with the mother dolphin and her dead calf. She loved them all: fisherwomen, sailors, fashion models, mothers and wives, and retired teachers—a formidable, comedic, colorful army of capable women. The story touched their hearts like it had Toby’s. There is nothing more tragic than the loss of a child. Somehow when young die it is a terrible contradiction to what we know and expect from being alive...generative, renewing, freshly made – all the vigor and hope in a youngster – makes us all feel more alive and grateful to be alive.

“So tell us what you learned at the refuge, Toby.”

Penny was a tall slim brunette with Lauren Bacall eyebrows and luring eyes. The green and rose colored sari, bangles and bare feet made her look Tahitian rather than her native

Bengali. They'd met as members of Impact 100, a charity in which each woman gave \$1,000 toward a goal. That year they'd raised over \$140,000 to give out in grants to the community.

“There are actually a lot of scientists all along the Gulf coast that are monitoring dolphins. So far there have been nearly 100 dolphin deaths and these are just the ones that wash ashore. I talked to Steve Hadley at the refuge...he is cautious about drawing conclusions, but I could tell he is concerned.”

The room went quiet. Marsha asked if they had any idea what happened to the calf they'd seen.

“The test can take months, but Steve said it was a stillborn calf and that many of the dead babies they'd rescued were stillborn.”

Toby explained what she'd learned about the timing of the mating and gestation period in the bottlenose dolphin populations in the Gulf and the Deepwater Horizon Oil Spill.

Chatter erupted as each woman began to comprehend the implications. Not only were they concerned for the dolphins, but each realized that whatever was affecting them could be affecting humans and their own family's health as well. The fact that Toby and Marsha encountered a mother and her baby drove home the implications more deeply. Every woman - whether she's born children or not - feels the deep connection with the earth mother, the procreative center in her womb. It's her core.

The discussion went into the late evening with a plan to spread the word to friends and networks they each kept. Toby told them all to go to her blog where she'd put some information and links. They agreed to meet again in a month and bring back ideas about how they might help and also what they'd each learned from their own investigations. Several friends were active members of large faith congregations. They had committees that address environment and people

from a faith tradition. Toby and Marsha could feel a real united spirit begin to sprout among them.

“Keep your eyes peeled,” Barbara had said as they were gathering their purses to leave.

“I think that’s our new mantra!” Penny said and bowed to the woman’s circle.

They all bowed to her, leaving the house where so many of them had gathered over the years. After hugs and offers to help clean up, a thoroughly female affair ended, and Toby slept deeply in the ensuing silence.

Three

Toby swam with a pod of dolphins with faces that resembled women, maybe women she knew but couldn’t be sure. They rocketed through the waves with big strokes of their powerful flukes, churning the water. The direction was straight out over the Continental Shelf. Once there the herd slowed and played, leaping high above the surface, chasing one another. Toby felt a certain release of worry. There was something new: a feeling of no separation among them, of being a whole something. She’d never known that before.

She awoke feeling happy, rested. For a brief few minutes she took in the room and the scene of a silver crested ocean and pink dawn that filled the big window across from her bed. The large painting by Sharon Reed that she and Ron bought together, reminded her of him. How he fell in love with the artist’s rendering of rainbow colored fish in a glass green sea. Her heart filled with sorrow then. How she missed his encircling arms, his quirky smile, the scent of him...

As quickly as she let herself feel her sadness Toby snapped back into denial. If only to survive, she thought, I have to figure out how to go on now, without Ron, with the big C looming...on the downwind leg of my journey. No?

Four

Toby Hemmingway was a pint-sized woman who had become an institution in the local school system. For thirty years she toiled at her craft teaching middle school kids how to write a decent essay. Most mistakenly took her to be a push-over. It only took Mrs. Hemmingway a few weeks to reign supreme over her classroom. Because of her there were business men and women, scientists, writers and scholars, and citizens who learned the art of expressing a clear thought on paper and in word. She put in long hours and weekends grading papers, exclaiming aloud to Ron, the cat, the boys – whoever would listen – she couldn't believe people walked the face of the Earth who wrote so poorly. Yet she treated each of them with firm kindness like every great parent nurtures their child within constraints to grow them straight and capable.

During her career in the school system she had made many life-long friends. Some of them were in the Fishin'Chix and there were others she saw for a meal occasionally, one or two still teaching. When they asked about retirement, Toby laughed out loud. She was busier than ever. But they were part of Toby's life...who she had become. So it wasn't really surprising when the idea to start a writer's community that would take on communicating what was happening in their environment. Not just about the Oil Spill, although a very timely and important impact that needed examination by citizens and written about, it was more about how the community itself, this beautiful small town on the Gulf, had allowed environmental pollution to cloud the bay waters.

She remembered when she and Ron would go out in their little dinghy, reach down in the water to pull up shrimp for bait. She could see the bottom of the bay 35 years ago, but today it was just a dark mass of water with unknown conditions below. There was a time in Pensacola

when the harvest of Red Snapper hordes that plied their way through the ocean had been enormous, millions of pounds of snapper had been hauled out of Pensacola on a regular basis. But that was true of many marine species, a good number now extinct. Some citizens were trying to recover the oyster beds off Bay Shore Drive, but it was a very small operation compared to what had been before.

Pensacola's story was not unique. Many places had been endowed with abundant resources and high biodiversity such as Toby's town and the region. Northwest Florida's long-leaf pine forests constituted a long-term supply of lumber and later paper production along the Gulf of Mexico. With the discovery of unlimited oil reserves below the ocean floor, the coastal communities became highly desired sites where super wealth targeted land purchases or set up operations, attracting local municipalities by offering to employ local workers.

The City of Five Flags (Spain, France, Great Britain, Confederacy, and the United States of American) began its 500 year history with the exploration of the bay and subsequent wars to gain a foot hold on the continent for colonization, defenses, and resource extraction.

In the 1800's the old city was a prime international center of trade. The longleaf forests were stripped and bled for turpentine and later logged. Replanted forests of slash pine became America's telephone poles, soaked in creosote and dumped into the bay to load on barges. The creosote and turpentine, and run off from denuded land, collected on the bottom of bays and bayous. Once rich plains of marshes that thickly lines the shoreline gradually died back. These being the nurseries of ocean species of fish and crustaceans, the biodiversity of the town and its surroundings declined, unnoticed by all but the working crews on fishing boats, and small businesses that depended on the fresh water and marshes for abundant seafood.

PCBs, dioxin, phosphates and nitrogenous compounds laced the waters. After one company came and went cancer clusters and whole neighborhoods located near pollution sites became ill with specific types of cancer. By 1990 a grand jury investigation found malfeasance among the agencies responsible for managing natural resources. Over its history Pensacola distinguished itself with seven superfund sites.

None of these incidences fazed its leaders who believed it a necessary evil to achieve economic gain. The fact that the residents most affected were poor black neighborhoods next to Monsanto's dioxin wasteland, made it a matter of less consequence. They were not equipped to fight city hall. And so repeated a story found all across the United States that eventually led to the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and established the Environmental Protection Agency.

This denial that permeated the City of Pensacola emanated from greed, ignorance, and among its people, a sense of powerlessness. Residents could not tolerate its profound implication longer than a few minutes, long enough to read a newspaper article and then forget it. They were caught up in the day to day, busy earning a living, raising their kids, and so on. Implicit in their denial was an underlying assumption that government would take care of it. The problems under the surface of the bays and bayous were so fundamentally about a way of life unexamined by most Americans that it would take the action of many to mount enough energy to even gain the attention of citizens in the hope of making permanent, transformative change

Toby mulled it over. Maybe even her cancer could be from eating seafood from the bays and bayous over four decades. She would never know. It was almost impossible to trace and that is how the forces against healthy ecosystems could stay in power. If you couldn't prove it, then you could not be heard. The dead dolphin calf was a perfect example. "A dozen conditions could

have caused the fetuses malformations.” Toby could hear the voices of opponents, the deniers that sought to keep the status quo.

“Whatever happened to caution?” she thought as she threw on shorts and a tee and packed up her cell phone, I.D.s and money in a waterproof bag. She brushed her unruly hair Ron likened to a mane and threw the brush down when she could affect little change. She settled for an old ball cap which she pulled down over her forehead and then globed on sunscreen. Her freckles got lost in peeling skin from her long hours on the water or beach. She looked like an overgrown kid.

On the Clean Line she stowed away her gear and tied down the cooler in which she packed sandwiches, fruit, soda and plenty of water. She tested the wind with her fingers and consulted the local NOAA station for conditions on the Gulf. Today there would be a reasonable SW breeze and with the normal near shore current that runs west along coastal communities from Port St. Joe to New Orleans Toby knew she would be close-hauled going and tacking her way back which would double the return time. She mentally estimated the times and figured she could make it to the Institute for Marine Mammal Research in Gulf Shores, MS by Wednesday, stay over and then get home by Sunday, barring any changes in the weather. She could have driven in a few hours but preferred to sail and survey the Gulf and inshore areas. She needed the meditative time that using her body and being in silence would bring.

She checked the engine, mainsail, and released the jib, ready to lift out of its waterproof bag; lights, radio, lifejackets, etc. Stowed on board was a dry box with sleeping bag, foam liner and blankets, rain gear, and a first aid kit and flares. She felt prepared.

Toby was an old hand at sailing. But she spent most of that glorious time with Ron by her side. They’d signed up for sailing lessons with Lanier Sailing Company out of Pensacola and

advanced over the years to large boat certification. In 1990 they bought their first 33-foot craft and sailed to the Bahamas, the Caribbean, and finally they ventured into the Atlantic, exploring Florida's east coast as far as North Carolina's Outer Banks.

Toby had been taking longer on the Gulf to harden up her courage and to make sure she could handle the lines and sheets in strong winds or inclement weather. But until today, she'd never ventured this far from her home port. Yet it just happened without much thought from the minute she learned that the Institute was the main organization keeping track of the bottlenose dolphins.

Five

As The Clean Line entered Pensacola Bay pass, a few young dolphins swam alongside for a few minutes before rejoining their pod heading into the bay. Toby loved their spirit of play, and sheer exuberance as they coursed through the bow waves. Then as they left her jaw set in her characteristic stubbornness which she turned to defending them and every living thing and all the kids and people she knew from sheer negligence of governing agencies and the nation's greed. How could we ruin what we loved so much?

The winds were not particularly strong, but it was hard to tell when running before the wind. She hoped she was making good time. The sun beat down; she lathered up with sunscreen and entered a state of alert meditation. On a run a sailor worries about jibing. With the sails full out and jib and mainsail wing on wing, it was also difficult to see ahead when alone. She studied the coastal waterway map at her side to make sure she did not get into shallows.

Alone, in silence, on a sparkling translucent green ocean, Toby studied the landscape, white sand beaches lined by oak forests, the little bayous and inlets, and then the horizon on the

tranquil Gulf which rounded like a globe, navy blue against an azure sky. Tears lined her face as they always did when she was full of gratitude for living in paradise, whatever that meant.

Paradise does not really exist per se, she thought to herself. It comes in moments like this when all the elements of place, heart, and circumstance converge to a perfect moment. Then it was gone, just like that, the gods teasing mortals with a brief taste of Heaven.

Her stomach rumbled reminding her that it was hours since the banana and coffee she's downed nearly six hours ago. She brought in the mainsail and turned into the wind. Down below she made a couple of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches returning to sit upside. She noticed an excursion boat with tourists careening back to haul in a good sized catch. Was it drum? She got her binoculars from below. It was a fighting Wahoo!

The crew stood by with a net and a hook. The fisherman finally hauled the careening catch aboard. She could hear their shouts spanning over the surface of the ocean. In her mind she imagined the Wahoo with its rows of sharp teeth and spines on its back, its blue and gold scales and big bifurcated tail. Pensacola named its baseball team The Wahoo's capitalizing on the species' tenacious spirit.

Toby visited the head below, cleaned up and brought up a big thermos of water. She tightened the jib a little and let out the mainsail, turning downwind to resume her long sail.



It was dark when she arrived at a dock on a small inlet in Mobile, Alabama. She motored in slowly and tied up near the Banana Docks Café, famous for its Cajun cuisine and one of Toby and Ron's haunts. She would stay overnight in the small hotel on the harbor, then resume her trip at dawn. After a dish of blackened grouper finished off with bread pudding and praline sauce, she slept like a baby. Before she dove into bed, she called Barbara to let her know her location.

Her dear friend had insisted when she learned of Toby solo sail to Gulf Shores. At that point in her trip it still seemed like a good idea

