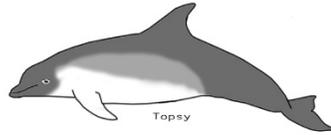


Chapter Four

Topsy



Her name was Topsy and she had spent many years jumping in the dolphin show at Neptune's Ocean Adventure, until one day she got tired of it all and bit her trainer. The Neptune's people decided she was too dangerous to keep in the show and Topsy was unceremoniously thrown into the harbor. She now hung out near the breakwater in San Diego, talking to anyone who happened to swim by. After all the attention she got at Neptune's, she was now on her own and she was lonely. When she saw Sharkface, she immediately swam up alongside him and didn't stop talking for a second.

She told him about her time at Neptune's and about the other performing dolphins and Shamús and his clique of killer whales, but most importantly of all, she taught Sharkface how to understand human talk.

Humans talk to dolphins all the time and after a while they begin to think dolphins can understand them, but this is mostly a fantasy. Topsy knew of one other bottlenose dolphin at Neptune's who understood a word or two of human speech but most of them just wanted to get their daily meal of fish and squid and chat among themselves.

Topsy learned to speak human in Long Beach when she was a part of a dolphin gang called the Mighty Gangsta TT's. Her teacher was a drunken sailor named Mike, who hung around the dock in the gang's territory, and thought Topsy was his long-dead wife, Vicki. Mike talked for hours and often repeated his mutterings over and over. Eventually Topsy began to pick up a sound here and there. At first

they were rather squeaky, but eventually she found she could make them easily, although they were a bit slurred. After weeks of listening to Mike, Topsy began to answer him back with a few words of her own and he was convinced Vicki had been reborn as a dolphin.

Topsy and Mike continued their strange dialog for a couple of years until she could hold her own in human conversation. In the meantime, she used her newfound ability to distract fishermen while her fellow gang members robbed their nets.

When Topsy was at Neptune's, she could understand everything the trainers said and could even talk back to them in her high, squeaky dolphin voice, but she chose not to do so very often. There was one trainer she occasionally chatted with but when he told his friends he was talking with a dolphin, who answered him back in human speech, they just laughed and bought him another beer. She eventually stopped talking and just listened; soon she knew everything that was going on at Neptune's.

She heard about the killer whale star, Shamús and how he was getting more and more full of himself every day. When he first saw his likeness as a stuffed doll, he wanted more squid for his dinner and when he saw the crowds lined up for one of his shows, he refused to perform one day out of every week. He was becoming a real pain, when one day another killer whale named Winston came to Neptune's. Although he was a newcomer, Winston was a hard worker and he knew how to get the crowd up on its feet. From the very beginning he could jump higher than Shamús and he mastered the double twist in half the time.

Soon Winston began to steal the show. Instead of the one day off a week that Shamús had demanded, he now found himself with two or three days off. The trainers even began calling Winston, "Shamús" during the show. Needless to say, Shamús was not very fond of Winston. One day when they were in the same show,

Winston showed him up by jumping all the way over the “Hoop of Fire”. The next day Shamús took a bite out of Winston’s tail and, since Neptune’s Ocean Adventure was not interested in a damaged killer whale, no matter how high he could jump, Winston’s career was over. The next week Shamús was on a flight to Orlando and Winston was flown to Tokyo, and yet another killer whale became the famous star, “Shamús of Neptune’s Ocean Adventure”.

Topsy had her problems with the Neptune’s experience too. She performed the same show three times a day, the same monotonous leaps, twirls and splashes. She had to jump out of the water and lie on the hard concrete next to the pool in every show and look like she was begging for a dead fish. To add to this indignity, the other bottlenose dolphins in the show were all prima donnas from Florida while Topsy had grown up in the gritty waters off Long Beach. They did not get along very well at all. Topsy didn’t care if her jumps were just right or if she appeared warm and friendly to the crowds. All she wanted to do was to get the shows over with, get her daily allocation of god-awful frozen squid and listen to all the human gossip.

One day, she had had just about enough of her boring life and, instead of jumping in the air with the other “Florida pretties,” she splashed the crowd at the other end of the tank and made a little boy cry. When she didn’t get her frozen squid that night she knew it was all over. The next day, when a trainer was giving her a limp herring, she gave him a good nip and the next day she was swimming in the harbor.

Another reason they got rid of Topsy so fast was that she knew just about everything that was going on at Neptune’s, and this made everyone uncomfortable. She knew where all the trainers went after the shows and who going to which party with whom. She knew the night watchman was usually drunk and the kitchen staff was stealing hot dogs and so everyone was glad to see her go.

For hours, Sharkface listened to Topsy's stories about the goings on at Neptune's, without getting a word in, while what he really wanted to know was how to talk to humans.

"I think this could really come in handy some time," he thought to himself.

In one of the few times when Topsy stopped for a break, Sharkface convinced her to tell her tales both in dolphin – which he could understand – and in human.

For days Topsy regaled him with stories about her days off Long Beach with the Gangsta TTs and about some of the pranks she pulled on the other dolphins at Neptune's, and eventually Sharkface began to learn the human language. He would tell Topsy's stories back to her and she would correct his pronunciation. After two weeks, he could both understand and speak human quite well.

They spent another few days together and Sharkface told Topsy how he swam with the snakes in Costa Rica and about his visits to Alaska, and she told him more tales about her gangster days. They compared their scars and told long, elaborate stories about how they had gotten each one. They both enjoyed their time floating together on the sunny sea near San Diego. As far as Topsy was concerned, Sharkface could spend the rest of his days lolling about listening to her stories and, once in a while, telling one of his own.

He told her about his plans to swim around the frozen top of the world to the other ocean and visit his cousins on an island far to the south. He talked about the new creatures he hoped to meet and some friends he was going to visit and quickly, before Topsy could start another story, he said that he had to be on his way.

Sharkface wanted to give Topsy a gift for teaching him how to talk to humans, so he told her about one of his favorite places near the Coronado Islands where

there were large schools of tasty shrimp. They said their good-byes one more time and vowed to meet again at his home on Guadalupe Island when he returned from his adventures.

Finally, after three weeks in San Diego, Sharkface headed north, up the coast of California and Topsy swam off in the direction of the Coronados, looking for a great feast...and someone else to talk to.

