



There is no right way to tell a story. The stories we live through, and the tales we tell, rarely begin with “once upon a time” and end with “happily ever after”. There is rarely pure evil or righteousness. Justice may not be served, and sins may not be punished. This particular story is no different. It has all the grand aspects you may expect action, mystery, conflicts, conspiracy, courage, hope, and love. It is also built up by the most trivial daily matters. Stepping into this world, every single person you meet may tell you a different version of the story. Some might sigh and tell you it is all so complicated, and some may say there is no simpler thing in the world. But just like lots of stories, it all begins in a quiet little town.

# 1

**S**an Felipe, 1958, was the first time that the Vaquitas were scientifically described, and it was also the year I was born. For all these years, I have always believed that it was destiny that pushed me to study in the field of Vaquita conservation. Back in the days, when I was a student, I chose to study harbor porpoises, among other species that are closely related to Vaquitas. It didn't take me very long before I was accepted to graduate school to continue my research on these amazing marine mammals. Everything seemed to be on track for my life. Well, at least until that day.

Life in the lab had its ups and downs. I spent the past couple of weeks heading out to the open water looking for harbor porpoises. I woke up every day to the golden glare on the ocean surface, that sweet west wind, and the slightly salty smell of the ocean breeze. Yet now, here I was in my office looking at a hundred dorsal fin ID photos. After I finish, there will be tons of acoustic files to go over. Wouldn't it be wonderful if doing biology research was all fieldwork and no office hours? What was I thinking? Life as a biologist is not like one of those movies. Our research is not always going out for adventures, experimenting on genetic modifications, saving the world, or things like that. What those films don't show, is the part of our lives spent in front of a desk. We need to go through hundreds of dorsal fins



photos and acoustic materials to keep track of different groups of wild animals. It is no fun, but nonetheless equally important than gathering primary field data.

Just when I wanted to take a break and decide on whether or not to grab a warm chocolate chip cookie, I heard the door open. Who else would come to the lab on a Saturday afternoon? I slip my chair out to see Emily rushing to her desk.

“Saturday afternoon. Really?”

Emily glimpsed towards my direction looking a bit surprised. “I want to ask you the same thing Andy. But I don’t have much time now. I have a plane to catch. I’m just here to grab some stuff, and then I will leave you alone.”

I don't remember her saying anything about heading out for fieldwork, at least not in this past month. "So where are you going anyways?"

Emily was already carrying a handful of things while trying to pop the door open with her elbow. There are just times like this that I don't understand how a person who knows how to perform necropsy on a dolphin has trouble opening a door. I stood up and pushed the door open for her. She rushed out and almost dropped her notebook.

"Mexico. I will tell you everything when I come back!"

What's in Mexico now? It's not whale-shark migration season yet. What can it be that makes Emily fly over on such a short notice? I watched her disappear at the end of the corridor and stepped back to my desk. After a quick google search nothing really popped up, at least nothing biology related. It is frustrating to see her run off like that with no answers to what was going on. I guess I'll just have to wait until she's back.

## 2

**I**t's getting warmer and warmer in San Felipe. Every day I come back from my Panga I feel the heat coming up from the beach. I don't know, there is still heat hitting me after sunset. I need to remember to tell my wife not to buy me that sweater she has been promising me. No weather for sweater for a long time.

"Hey Manuel, the truck is coming. Come give me a hand."

My friend Carlos is pointing into the evening fog. I can hardly tell but there is a truck on the beach heading towards our direction. My eyesight is worse by the day. I stand up and grab the rope for Carlos. As our Panga sails towards the beach I can see Julio waving at me. We jump off the Panga and hook our Panga onto Julio's red pickup truck.

"Rough day uh?"

"It almost is never easy to fish these days. Mackerels and Croakers are not as easy to catch as before. But we still have lots of bass so that's good. Either way, at least we have the Sea of Cortez. We will figure things out."

Carlos is always the optimistic one. He always says that we will figure things out.

Something along the line of everything will eventually be ok. I don't know how he can



manage to find that silver lining in these foggy days. I appreciate a friend like him. We all need someone to cheer us up.

The truck starts to drag us onto the beach so we can park our Panga and call it a day. We don't normally leave our Panga in the water, because on land where we can put it still is a safer option. I'm glad that Julio offers his pickup truck to get us into the water every morning way earlier than he is supposed to get up. He hardly ever complains about anything that is going on in his life. He doesn't even talk much. He just does things. He goes to work; he helps his friends; he spends time with his family and puts up lots of family drama. He doesn't complain. But all he says is, what family doesn't have drama? Who

doesn't have to work hard to live? How can I say no when my friends need me? He has always been a great man and a precious friend.

After locking up the boat and taking our bags with us, we go separate ways. Julio will bring the fish in his truck to the buyers, and Carlos insists on bringing me to a bar.

"Come on we've been working hard all day long. You need to come to a bar with me. I need a couple of drinks before calling it a day."

"Carlos you know I need to go home. Or at least I have to go home first. My girls have been waiting for me."

Carlos rolls his eyes. "Right family man. We go back to your place first. I'll come with you, so you are not going anywhere afterwards. I'm telling you; we are hitting a bar today."

If Carlos says something, he generally means it. He hops into my car and follows me to my house. My house is not big or fancy, but it is just enough for the two of us and our two girls. We have our rooms and the two girls are sharing theirs. We are not the richest of people but there is really nothing I can complain about my life. As we park the car in front of our house, my two girls dash towards me in their roller skates.

"Papa! Let me show you this new move we just learned today!"

"Papa I'm telling you Jo just fell over. She did not learn that move yet."

It does feel wonderful being back among the chatter of my girls again. They are growing out of their clothes sooner than I ever expected. I hope those roller skates will last a bit longer than their dresses.

“Gloria, Josefina, come back in. It is getting dark outside!” Maria’s voice is loud as usual. She is probably busy in the kitchen again watching over the boiling pots. Otherwise she would have stepped out herself to get the kids to go inside. Maria makes the best beef stew. She always says that she has a secret recipe that comes with the perfect ratio between tomato and beef, and that there are certain spices that people don’t normally put in the stew. I sometimes ask her what the recipe is, but she never seems to want to tell me. She always says that I am too busy to cook anyway. She will teach the girls someday when they grow some interest in entering the kitchen. Right now the girls have no intention in even entering the house.

“Gloria, Jo, come here. How about Jo hold on to my shirt, and Gloria you hold on to your sister. Let’s make a little train and drive inside.”

“Yes! A train! Hoot-hoot.” Gloria skates towards me smoothly. Jo is a bit clumsy on the other hand. I remember when Jo asks me if she could also learn to roller skate because she didn’t want Gloria to be the only person knowing how to skate and constantly show off what she can do.

“Jo, come on! You are too slow!”

“Be patient with your sister. She just started this.”

It takes Jo a while to scooch over and finally grab onto the tip of my shirt. After making sure both of them are holding on tight, I start to walk towards the house. I can see smoke coming out from the kitchen window and hear my girls laugh behind me. I don’t know what else I can ever ask for.

“Oh, Guapo you are back. And Carlos what brings you here tonight?” Maria is just putting her apron away when we walk in.

“Mama! Papa just gave us a train ride home! We were hoot-hoot-hoot!”

Maria looks utterly confused. She looks at me and gently shakes her head with a smile on her face. She asks the girls to wash up and get ready for dinner.

“Maria you see, Manuel has been working with us all day and...”

“So, you are taking him to a bar again?” Maria puts her arms across and stares at Carlos.

“We uh.... We have some business to discuss. Right. Business. The whole expansion and fishing and all.” Carlos is a horrible liar, and everybody can tell.

“Business expansion. So, Manuel you know about this?”

Carlos looks at me and nods like a chicken picking up rice on the ground. I laugh and head over to give Maria a kiss on the forehead. “I won’t be back too late. I promise.”

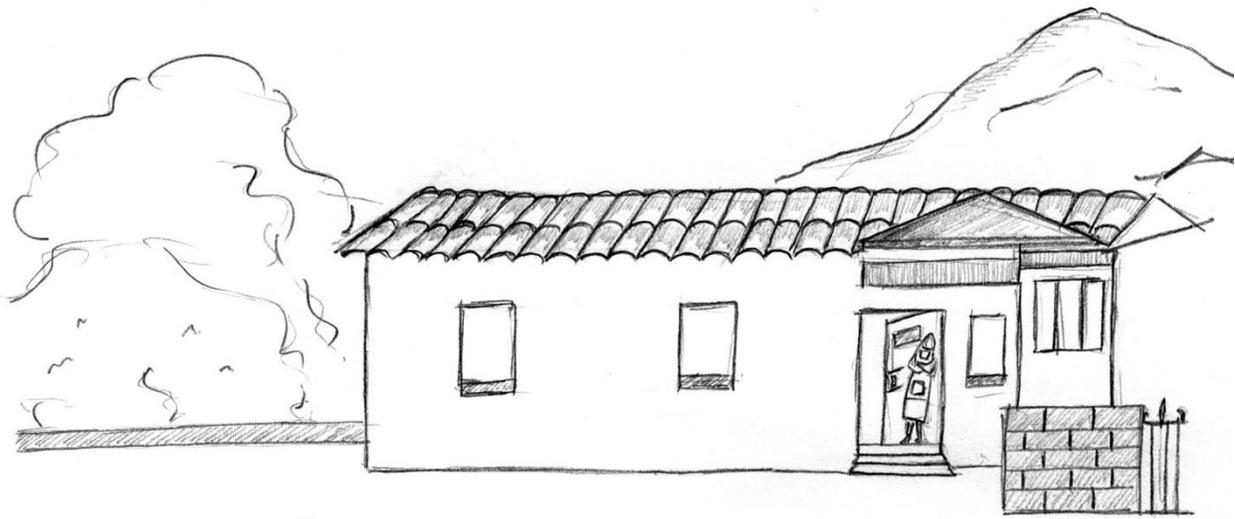
“Wait papa are you leaving?” Jo pops her head out of the bedroom door. I have a feeling that she knows a lot more of what is going on than we mean to tell her. She is the vigilant one.

Who knows how many of our conversations she has been listening in?

“I will be back soon pumpkin. Back before your bedtime.”

I grab a coat and head out with Carlos.

The bar is not busy at all during weekdays. We don’t have many people in this town, and a good amount of people only come back during weekends. Most of the time it’s just us among some other fishermen that come here for a drink to wash off the day’s work.



“Hey Roberto, give us two shots.” Carols jumps onto a bar stool and waves at the bar tender. He is around in the town way more often than anyone I know. It seems like he knows everybody.

“No, I am not doing shots today. Just a beer will do.” Roberto puts away a shot glass and cracks open a beer for me.

“Manuel you are too tense. You should loosen up and have some fun. We are not going out tomorrow anyways. The wind is too much.”

“I promised Maria and the girls to go back early tonight. I can’t really go back half drunk, can I?”

“Right, right, you family man.” Carlos is busy stuffing his mouth with free chips and salsa to argue with me right now. Not long after we sit down it starts to rain outside. I guess we are definitely not going out there tomorrow.

“So, you and Maria. How long has it been?” There is really nothing Carlos can’t gossip about. He wants to know everything about everyone. And so far, he is doing quite good.

“You mean us being together? 8 years.”

“Wow eight years already? I can’t see myself being with someone for that long.”

“I don’t see you having any sort of life planning anyways.”

“I am fine with living with myself. I get decent pay going out fishing every day, and I don’t have to worry about supporting anybody else.”

“You don’t have a family to go back to?” Carlos does seem to always hang out with his friends until very late, and then he goes back to his place alone.

“I send money back to my parents. But you know, they have other kids and it’s not like they are counting on me to support them anyways. What about you? How’s your family doing?”

I love my family and we have always wanted to have two kids, or maybe even three. But that means that I need to work extra hard to raise them. I mean we can manage without having to make a lot of money, but I have two girls. I want them to be worryless and spoiled. I don’t know if spoiling them is a good thing, but they are my princesses, and I love to see the smile on their faces when we are together.

“They are doing well. Maria is setting everything in place and the girls are happy.”

“How old are the girls? The older one looks like she should be in school.”

“Yes, she should. The older one is Josefina and she is seven. The younger one is Gloria and she is about to turn 6. Jo is about the age to go to school. I am thinking about finishing this summer season and send her to school.”

“School takes a lot of money uh?”

“I just want them to go to a decent school and to have a nice education. I know they don’t have to, but I want them to be able to do something when they grow up. You know, travel out of San Felipe and do what they want to do in their life.”

Carlos sighs and shakes his head. “You see, that’s something I can’t do. I work just enough so that I can support myself, and then I am done working. I can’t be like you, working hard everything towards a, what do you call that, a purpose.”

“Carlos you will see someday. It’s not like you are going to be all by yourself forever.”

“Oh, is it not? I guess we will see.” Carlos finishes his second shot and cracks an ice-cold beer open.

I am just about to check and leave when the door opens. The breeze is chilly, and I can feel my goosebumps coming out. Maybe I should reconsider on that sweater. Carlos apparently knows the person who just walked in. He is holding his beer and waving at him.

“Yo, Martin! I don’t see you in here often. Did the storm wind blow you here?”

Martin shakes the raindrops off of his Jacket and walks towards the bar. I have never seen Martin before, but he doesn’t look like he is having a really good day.

“Martin! What is with the long face. This is Manuel, and we go out fishing together.”

Martin nods at me and almost crushes on the bar stool. He orders a shot and some tacos.

Carlos seems very surprised. “Since when are you starting to drink shots Martin? What is going on?”

Martin drinks the entire shot and asks: “How much do you know about Vaquitas?”

# 3

“**A**nd this is your bed. You can relax for bit and come to meet us at the dining booth. Let me know if you need anything else!”

So, this is it. I am officially a part of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society. I can't believe this is really happening. I landed in the Mexicali airport not so long ago. It was a bumpy drive down here to San Felipe port. I was a bit worried that I could not find the two ships, but I then realized that there was absolutely no need to worry about that. I couldn't miss those two vessels for the world. There I was, standing in front of the ship that I have been watching for so long on YouTube: the Farley Mowat and the Sharpie. The coloration of the ships is beautiful. It is a white and blue kind of camo color. Just when I was about to take out my phone and snap a photo, someone called my name. I didn't really know anybody here. I looked around and saw a vague shadow of a man waving at me.

“You must be Anthony, our new volunteer. My name is Eric, and I am going to pick you up and show you around the ship.” Eric walked over and shook my hand. His handshake was firm and powerful.

“Yes, I am Anthony. But how....”

“We don't have a person we don't know carrying a suitcase at the harbor every day.”

“Oh, right that makes sense.” I tried to keep up with him, but he was walking way faster than I do. I don’t want to leave him with a first impression of being slow or can’t keep up with what is going on. I had to run a bit to keep up with his steps.

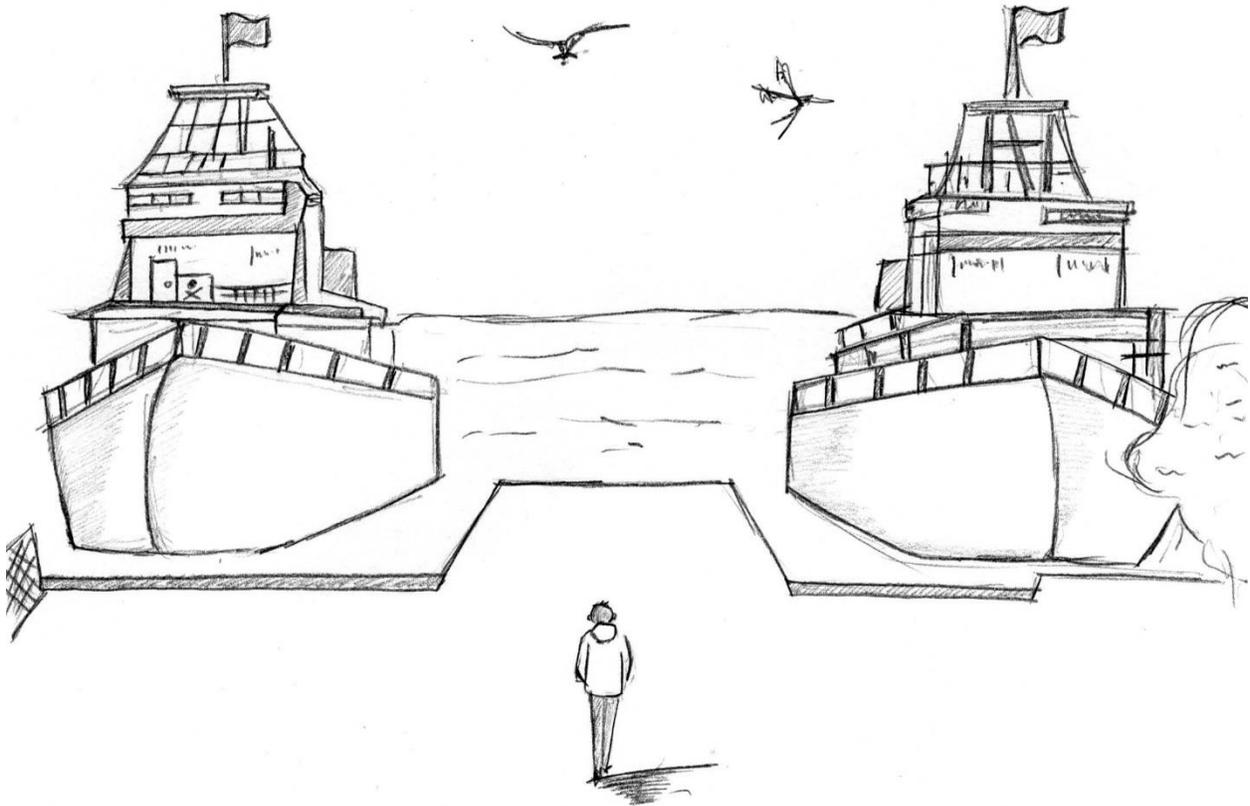
“Eric has anybody told you that you walk a little bit too fast?” A girl on the deck bent over and yelled at Eric.

Eric looked a little embarrassed and turned around to wait for me. He scratched his head and apologized: “I am so sorry. People say that I walk too fast all the time. I just can’t seem to change, especially when it’s busy times.”

“Oh, no, it is totally ok. I will try to keep up.”

“You really don’t have to. You travelled a long way. Just let me know if you want me to slow down. Let me actually help you with your backpack.”

Despite how big this ship looks; it is very cramped inside. Some hallways are so narrow that only one person can pass at a time. Eric dropped me off at my room and then left me to unpack. So, this is where I am going to spend my year, or maybe even longer. I will have plenty of time to unpack, and I am too excited to meet everyone to care about my luggage right now. I slip on a Sea Shepherd Operation Milagro T-shirt and head down to the dining room. As per Eric’s description the dining room is downstairs so if I walk to the middle of the ship there is supposed to be a narrow staircase. On the ceiling of the staircase there are drawings of the Vaquitas.



The narrow staircase is not hard to find. But the trip down is not as pleasant as I thought it would be. I've been travelling for way too long today, and I think my blood sugar has dropped throughout the day. I feel a bit dizzy while heading down the stairs, and I almost miss a step and fall over. But fortunately, nothing happens. The dining room is filled with Vaquita graffities. It is quite dark, and the walls are dark blue, just like the color of the deep ocean. Everybody is there, and I can smell the food and hear the sound of cookware clicking.

"Hey, so you are the new guy. I'm Annie, the biologist here." Annie jumps up when she sees me. She is the one that was on the deck earlier telling Eric to slow down. Her red hair is

unmistakable. She talks quite fast, and her voice is blissful. “Let me introduce you to the crowd.” She looks at Eric while talking to me. “Which is supposed to be your job, Eric.”

Eric shrugs and says “You didn’t really give me a choice, did you? You jumped up like a Christmas reindeer when you saw him walk in.”

Annie laughs and walks to the middle of the room. “So, you’ve met Eric. Here is Herald and then Fernando, they are our engineers. And then there is Stephen, our photographer. And then we have Susie, Raul, and Jason. Over there in the kitchen is our chef, Dave.”

“Chef is overrated. I just cook and bake for you guys.” Dave waves at me while still facing the pots where the amazing smell comes from.

“That’s bull. You are amazing,” says Annie. “We have more people in Operation Milagro that you will meet in time. You will see Captain Antonio tomorrow morning.”

This is overwhelming, and I know that I will definitely call people by the wrong names for a very long time. But I guess here are the people that I will be living and working with every single day. I don’t know what lies in front of me, but I do know that this is what I have been waiting for. I left home for this, and my family, to be completely honest, do not seem to be very happy about my choice. They never said anything disapprovingly, but I know they expected more of me. I didn’t graduate long ago, and I know that they want me to have a reliable job with steady pay and have my life figured out. But I can’t just settle down without having seen the world and done something to make the world at least a little bit better. I was afraid before I came because I didn’t know what this was going to be like and how well I would be hanging out and working with this group of people. I just thought that

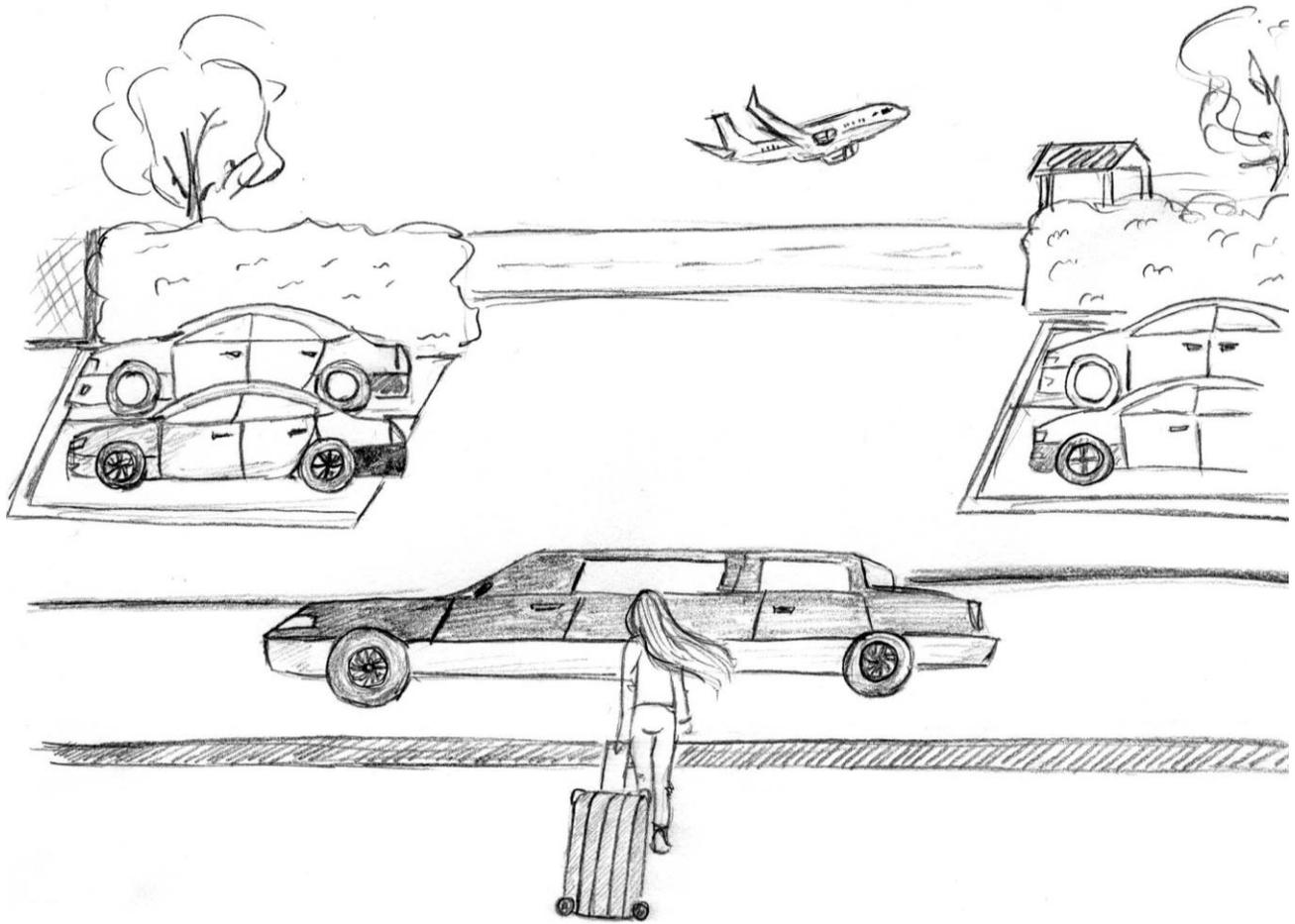
I wanted to do this but never really gave it a thorough thought about every aspect that I would encounter. But now that I have seen everyone, I am not that afraid anymore. They all seem like very nice people and know what they are doing. That certainly makes me feel better. We are heading out tomorrow morning with the tide. We'll see what the ocean brings to us. And who knows, maybe one day after a day's hard work, we can see a Vaquita family jumping out of the water. The silhouette of the Vaquitas will then slip into the shadow and disappear in front of the horizon where the sun meets the sea. Everything will turn into a warm, golden color. If I could ever see that sight in my life, that would be enough.

# 4

**A**h, I forgot to bring my notebook. Grab a muffin for me? I'll meet you in class.

When will Julia learn to bring her stuff with her when she needs to? Good thing that we are at the marine lab, and we have a small campus. I love my roommate Julia, but I will love her even more if she can put her life together a little bit more. I met her a week ago when I moved into my summer dorm room at the marine lab. The lab is nowhere near the closest airport. It's not worth it to rent a car for half a summer so I decided to reserve a cab. Travelling is exhausting enough, and all I want when I am standing in front of the baggage wheel is to lie down. Anywhere will do. Just when I am busy imaging how amazing it will be to be by the seaside again, someone taps me on the shoulder. I am not supposed to know anybody here. I turn around and there is this guy dressed in black. It takes me a good minute to remember that he is my driver.

I am not at all interested in spending another hour on the road. But when I walk out of the airport the only thing in front of me is a black limo. How in the world am I going to afford a limo? And also, when did I put a limo down for reservation anyways? The driver sees all the concern and confusion on my face and laughs.



“Don’t you worry you don’t have to pay for the limo. There have been some issues at our company and the only thing we have for tonight are limos. I guess you will just have to make do.” Oh, of course. This will definitely do.

It is almost midnight when I arrive. Nobody is out and almost all the lights are out. I can hardly see anything, but I can smell the sea the moment I jump out of the car. That familiar smell of salty water is gold. I start to drag my suitcase on the sandy pavement looking for my dorm room. All the dorm cabins are like ancient relics. It doesn’t take very long for me to find cabin 2. My room is right at the door on the left. To be completely honest, despite the fact that the building is very old, and the ventilation system doesn’t seem to fully

function, these cabins are very cozy, not even mentioning the fantastic ocean view through the window. I put everything down and carefully push the door open, fearing that I will wake my roommate. God knows when the last time I slept in a bunk bed. I actually kind of miss it. My roommate is sound asleep in the bed on the top. Maybe it's not the best idea to start unpacking at this moment. I drag my pajamas out of my backpack and move onto the bed. After a whole day's work and travel, lying down is just what I need. I don't remember how long it took for me to fall asleep. But I do remember that it was the best sleep I've had in a long while.

"Morning. I hope you didn't mind me taking the upper bunk." Coming back from the shower, I bump into Julia finishing up her morning jog.

"Oh, no, it's fine. I like the lower bunk anyway."

"Are you heading to breakfast? I heard they have the best pancakes."

"I am. Do you want to come with?"

Julia nods and picks up her water bottle from the ground. I see people gradually coming out from their cabins to head over to the dining hall. The morning ocean breeze is a bit chilly for my short sleeve T shirt. I just realize that I forgot to ask my roommate's name.

"Hey what is... wait, what?"

When I turn around, she is not there anymore. I see a blond ponytail disappearing on the other side of the cabin door.

"I am so sorry I forgot my student ID. I will meet you in the dining hall!"

That is just the first of a million times that I hear this sentence from Julia. And now here I am, sitting in the classroom with a chocolate chip muffin in my hand. It's two minutes before class, and I really wonder if she is going to make it this time. Just when I am about to text her, I hear a loud noise coming from the door.

"Well, I guess she made it."

Julia rushes into the classroom and almost trips herself over. She lands on the seat next to me and grabs the muffin from my hand.

"Oh my god, thank you, I am so hungry."

"There is this thing in the world called lunch. Maybe you should try it some time. It's supposed to be good for your physical well-being."



“Right, sure, mom.”

“You don’t have to run over. The professor is not here yet.”

Julia is busy stuffing that giant muffin in her mouth. “I know. I saw him walking out of his office on my way over. That’s why I rushed over, so I can be here before he does.”

“Before whom does?” Andy, our professor appears next to our table, holding a cup of coffee.

“Andy! Blah, no, Dr. Hudson. I didn’t see you there.” Julia almost drops her muffin.

“Maybe. But I did see you flying past my office building a moment ago. Miss lunch again?”

“Nothing really escapes your eyes, does it?”

Dr. Hudson sets up his slides on projection: “There are plenty of things in this world that I don’t know. But how I wish I could know.”

I’ve been staying at marine lab for almost a month now. One of the classes I enrolled in is marine mammals. I have to say that this class is way more amazing than I have ever expected. Throughout these four weeks we learned knowledge and facts about all types of marine mammals and quite frankly speaking, it takes a lot of time and effort to remember everything. Putting all the school aside, we also get to learn about whales, reenact predator and prey experiments, go out to the open water to search for dolphins, and so much more. Today is supposed to be the last lecture of the summer semester.

“As some of you might know, today we are going to talk about Vaquitas.”













































# 5

**E**mily has been away for two weeks. She barely replies to my email, but she barely replies to emails when she is working, regardless where she is. But right now, my own research on harbor porpoises is coming together. Despite the fact that I am extremely curious about Emily's Mexico trip, I am mostly too busy to think about it. Time goes by fast when today looks the same as the day before, and the days before that.

"When will life become more interesting anyways." I am starting to talk to myself. I'm not sure if it is a good sign or a bad one. Either way, I have a whole day ahead of me. To my surprise, the lab is not locked. I was pretty sure that I locked up yesterday, and I don't know who would suddenly decide to come this early. When I open the door, to my surprise, I see Emily battling with a pot of instant coffee at her table.

"Wait... When were you back?"

"Last night. Thank god you are here. Can you check what is going on with that coffee machine? It's never working when I need a hot cup of coffee." Emily seems to be in one of those morning anxieties due to the lack of coffee.

"Have you checked the filter?"

“Oh, right, the filter! I knew you could figure these things out.” Emily dashes to the cabinet and pulls out a new packet of coffee machine filters.

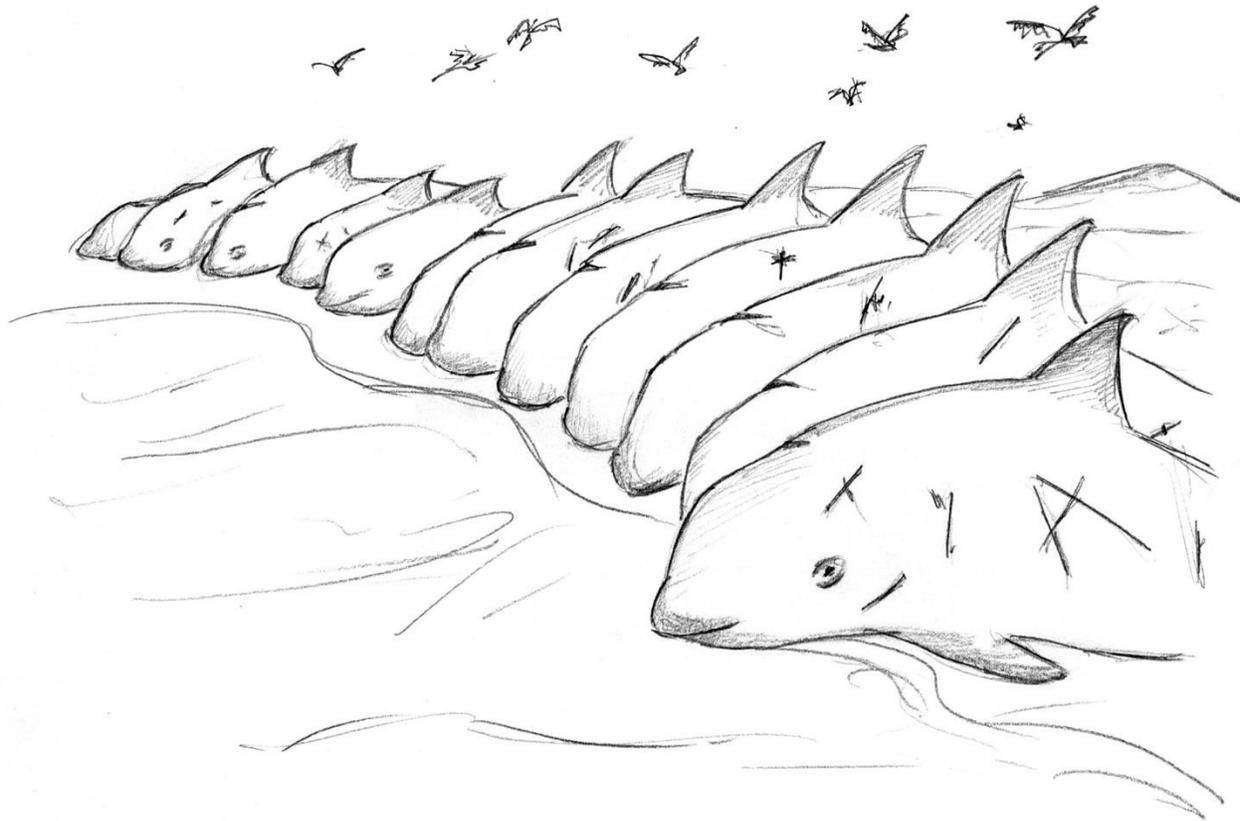
“After you finish your precious coffee, can you tell me what is going on in Mexico? You left like your life depended on it or something.” After weeks of primary data and diagrams, I could use some fieldwork stories for a change.

“Right! I promised to tell you about Mexico when I come back. Actually, I have something to ask you as well.” Emily seems satisfied as she watches hot coffee dripping out from the coffee machine. But what does she mean by, “she needs to ask me something?”

“So, Andy, tell me.” Emily is finally back to her normal self after her morning coffee. “How much do you know about Vaquitas?”

Vaquitas? So that is what this is all about. I remember Emily talked about those animals before. She used to say: “Fun fact! The year you were born was also the year that Vaquitas were first described.” But I have never really looked into the Vaquitas before. I know that they are closely related to the harbor porpoises that I am currently researching, but nothing too specific about them.

“Everybody has this idea that the Vaquita is this rare, mystic animal that lives in this interesting place that nobody knows anything about. I told you about them being scientifically described back in 1958, but there was actually no population estimation back then. In the 1990s, there was the first estimation of the Vaquita population, and the number was around 567.”



“Acoustic tracking?” Having such a precise population estimation is not going to be based on counting I assume.

“Yes acoustics. I was also surprised when I heard about this oddly precise number. I think you can probably guess that the reason I went back to Mexico this time was about these Vaquitas.”

It is true that 567 as the estimated abundance of a species is not a healthy number. But it is not necessarily alarming enough for Emily to fly over on such a short notice.

“I knew I promised to tell you about my latest Mexico trip when I came back. So, you have to know that the main reason why Vaquitas are killed is due to bycatch. And the fish that

they are trying to harvest is called Totoaba. A couple of weeks ago there was an experiment going on in the Sea of Cortez about gill nets used for an assessment of the totoaba population. However, what the Mexican government didn't anticipate, was that the experiment killed 13 Vaquitas instead."

Thirteen Vaquitas were killed? Exactly how many gill nets did they put in the water? "But in this case, if the initial population estimation was correct and assuming the number of Vaquitas have not changed in the past couple of years, this experiment killed..."

"Yes, you are right. That was 2% of the entire population. That was why I rushed over there. I couldn't do anything to save the lives of those Vaquitas, but at least I could do necropsies so we could learn more about the species. I did a scientific description of the external appearance of Vaquitas. I will also later publish materials about this trip."

2% of the remaining population is no joke. I have to say that it is a tragic event. "But what does it have to do with me?"

"You specialize in harbor porpoises, right?"

"Yes."

"Harbor porpoises are closely related to Vaquitas, right?"

I don't see what she is getting at, but she is right. Vaquita is also a species of porpoise.

"I am wondering if you are interested in some potential research topics about the scientific study and conservation about Vaquitas. Vaquitas have already been listed as endangered, and I am just wondering if you are interested in looking more into this matter."

That is quite a sudden question. I thought maybe she wanted my advice on certain research aspects, but not this. "I mean it's not like I can just leave my harbor porpoise research halfway through. But after I graduate, and if you still need me on the Vaquita situation, then I will definitely be interested."

Emily reaches her hand out. "Then I will hold you to your words."

I reach out my hand and shake hers. "Deal."

# 6

Carlos is definitely drunk. I can't just leave him at his place. He simply had too much to drink, and I feel obligated to bring him home with me to make sure that he is ok. I ask Martin to help me move Carlos to my car. He seems concerned as well.

"I shouldn't have told you guys this. Carlos is not taking this rationally."

"Martin it's ok. I'm sure he will be better in time. He is Carlos. He is always the happy one. Plus, I think it is better hearing it from you than reading it from some random newspaper or public notices. Give us some time ahead to figure out what to do next."

Martin shakes his head. "I just told you what I currently know. Nothing is final, and I also have no idea what will eventually happen." He put Carlos into my car and fasten the seatbelt for him. "Take care of Carlos, will you? He has always been the kid among us. I know he must have felt horrible."

"I will. Don't worry." I get in the car and watch Martin waving goodbye. I can't think about anything right now. I need to get home first before I can process anything else in my head. Luckily home is not far.

"What is going on with Carlos?" Maria comes out and helps me to bring Carlos inside. "I know you are not going out tomorrow morning, but it doesn't mean that he can get this

drunk. And you. I can smell alcohol in your mouth. I thought you promised to come back early and be with the girls tonight.”

I don't know if Carlos is sleep talking or if he is awake again. “Monetary compensation my ass. What are we supposed to do? Die?” He mumbles while we are carrying him to the living room.

“Shut up Carlos. The girls are asleep.” I put him on the sofa and Maria finds a blanket to cover him for the night. He rolls to face the other side of the sofa and falls back asleep. It doesn't take long before we can hear snoring coming from the sofa.

“What is he talking about?” Maria finally finds the time to ask me what is going on. She seems concerned and slightly upset.

“Let's go outside. The girls are asleep.” I grab a stool for Maria and take her outside. I had a couple of beers, but the late-spring chilly breeze sobers me up faster than I expect. I sit on the stairs and put the stool next to me. Maria sits down next to me, asking me to explain what is going on.

“So, Carlos got drunk.”

“I am not stupid. I can see that he is wasted. What is going on? Why are you back this late, and why did you bring Carlos to our place?”

I don't know how to start this conversation with Maria. What Martin told us could change everything in this town for a very long time.

Maria seems to notice something. “Manuel, you can tell me. Whatever happens, we will think of something together.”

Maria has always been the gentle one. She barely gets very upset or emotional. She has been supporting me through all these years. I know she is right. I know that we can figure something out together. But I don't want to put that burden on her. She always looks strong and capable, but I know she is more vulnerable than she lets people see. I can see the tiredness in her eyes. I can also see her changing from a frown to a smile within half a second. I wish I could settle everything by myself. I look into her eyes, and I see the same light I see every day. She deserves to know. Regardless of what happens in the end, she shouldn't be left out of this situation.

"When we were at the bar, we met a guy named Martin. He works in the office."

"That's rare. You never mentioned meeting someone from the offices in the bar."

"No, I haven't. He looked stressed and troubled. Carlos offered to buy him a drink and after two shots he told us about something he heard about today."

"I can't think of anything that can make Carlos so upset."

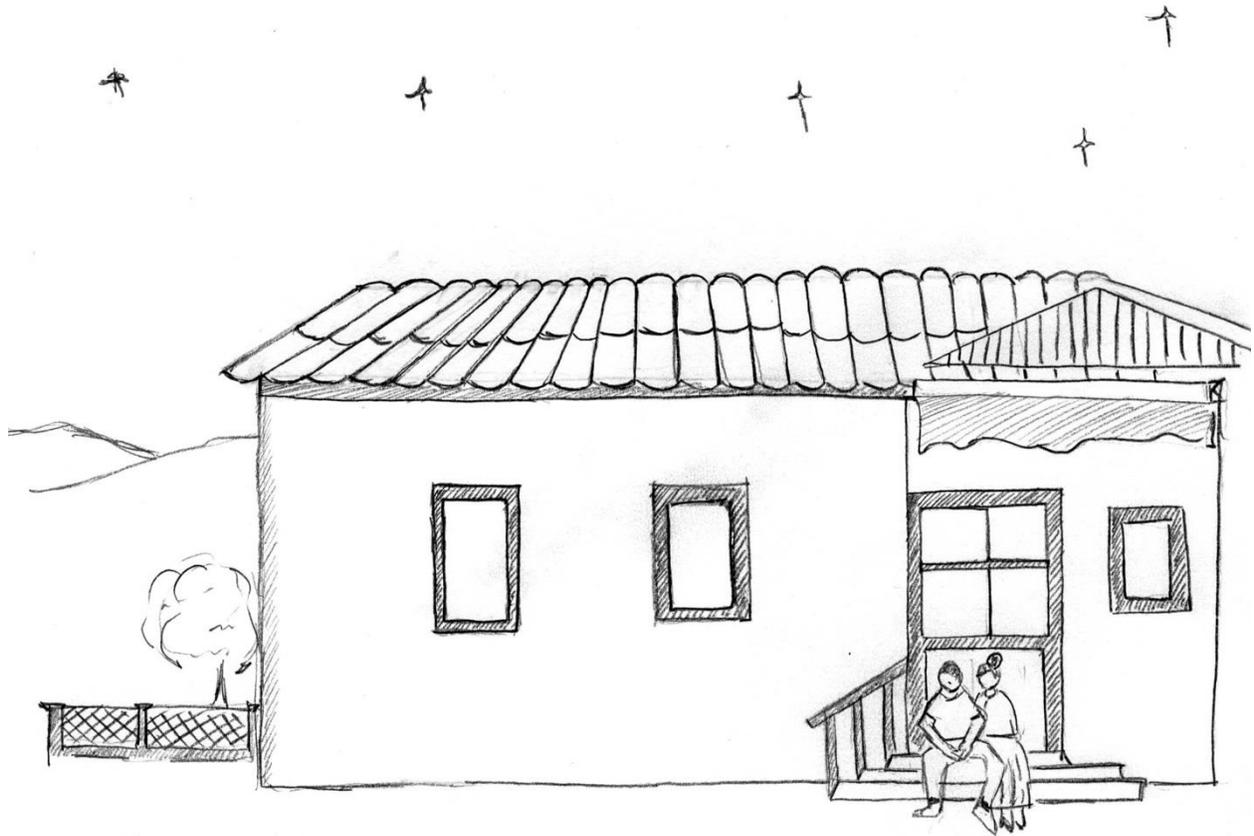
"Maria, how much do you know about Vaquita?"

"Vaquita? Like the little cow?" Marie is more confused than before.

"No. Vaquita, the dolphin-like thing. In the Sea of Cortez."

"I have never heard about them. Why? Are they important?"

"A bit too important. Some time ago the government did some kind of a fish net test not so far from the shore here. The fish nets were for Totoaba fish. We don't normally fish for



those things, so I haven't told you about them. But somehow that test killed 13 of the Vaquitas."

"That is unfortunate. So, Carlos loves the Vaquitas?"

"You know him a bit better than that. Since when he gets upset because of some random fish"

"Then why is that important?"

"The problem is that there are not a lot of Vaquitas left in this world. Apparently when the government killed 13 Vaquitas it made the world very upset. Many people and

organizations and countries said that they need to save the Vaquitas because it was important for animals to not go extinct. Or something like that.”

“I still don’t know what exactly are Vaquitas. But what does that have to do with us?”

“The scientists believe that Vaquitas die because of fish nets. And if they want to save the Vaquitas, there cannot be fishnets in the water anymore.”

Maria stays silent for a while. To be honest, if she starts to question, to complain, to doubt, I would be less concerned. But that would not be Maria after all. She just sits there looking at the distance. It is a particularly quiet night. No crickets, no birds, no nothing. We sit in the silence for a long while before Maria starts to talk again.

“For how long?”

“As long as it takes.”

“What about the fishermen?”

“Martin says that there will be some sort of a constant government compensation. Don’t know how much yet. But apparently Carlos doesn’t believe that the money will be as much as we earn as fishermen.”

“It’s better than nothing,” Maria sighs. After all these years we have been together, I know she is trying to figure something out in her mind. She has that special look when she does that. A lot of the times I wish that she could tell me what is going around in her head so we can try to figure things out together.

“Let’s send the girls to school.”

“But Maria I might not be able to go out to fish anymore.”

Maria looks up and looks at me. I can see her eyes turns a bit red. “I know, but the girls need to go to school sooner or later. We will send them to school, and I will see if there is anyone’s shop that needs help. I can go out looking for work.”

“But I don’t want you to have to....”

“It’s ok. Afterall, we are really not in a position of having a lot of options, are we?”

Indeed, we are not. I have no idea what will happen in the future. Maria is tired enough with the housework and the children. I don’t want to put extra weight on her shoulders. But we need to live. The girls need to go to school. Everything needs to work out.

Maria can always manage to see right through me. “Don’t worry. I won’t tire out. Everything will be fine in the end.” She puts her hand on my hand. There is nothing warmer and calmer than that. Carlos used to say that if life sucks, you just need to find a beacon of light to keep going. Maria is my beacon of light. She is my hope. And if we are all together, there is nothing that we can’t figure out.

One of the reasons I love San Felipe is that it is so easy to see the stars. There is no block between us and the stars that are scattered around the entire sky. It is beautiful.

# 7

“How’s vegan life suiting you?” Annie comes over and sit down next to me.

**H**I have been on this ship for a month now. We travel on and off the shore to look for fishnets to pull out. One of the things I am concerned about, which is quite stupid now that I think about it, is that I am not going to adjust well to the vegan life at Sea Shepherd. This is a vegan society, and I have never really tried that lifestyle before. But I have to say that Dave is a pretty amazing cook. He can rock lots of different cooking, from American to Mexican. Not to mention his amazing afternoon muffins.

“To be honest, it’s better than I thought, Annie.”

“Well good for you. Hurry up and finish your plate. We’ve got work to do.”

“Wait, what?”

Annie rolls her eyes at me. “Haven’t you heard? We found a fishnet.”

Before I came here, I knew this was going to be a tough job, but I never thought it would be like this. The Sea of Cortez is not a big place. How many fishnets can there be? Turns out, I am naïve after all. We used to cruise in the Vaquita conservation area with a hook of some sort underneath the ship. The hook would catch the nets so we could bring them up. Now we have equipment to scan the sea floor and spot any net that comes our way. The nets

generally look like a giant mushroom. It's pretty hard to miss since the rest of the sea floor is pretty much flat.

I finish my fajita quickly, wash my dishes, and come up to the deck. It is summertime, but the ocean wind can be chilly from time to time.

"Where are my pair of gloves?"

"Come on, just grab one from the cabinet. They are relatively the same sizes."

"Ok, let's see where this baby is." Eric comes on the deck with a black and white striped rod in his hand. That rod is for pointing in the direction of the fishnet, so that the bridge can figure out where to go. Eric keeps adjusting the position of the pointing rod and makes hand gestures to the bridge. After a couple of tries he finally puts a thumb up, signaling the bridge to stop moving. After the ship stops, he throws a buoy on the water to mark the net.

I can hear Herald's steps a long distance away. He is always the one that has all the gears. He has a hook in his hand, and he is wearing his old waterproof body suit with a pair of giant rain boots. He walks towards me and hands me the hook.

"Do you want to try it this time?"

In order for us to pull the nets out, someone needs to throw the hook towards the fishnet so that the net can be hooked and prepared to be pulled up. Whenever the crew does that, it looks so cool. It's like a cowboy throwing a lasso.

"Can I? Yes, please."

I have had this moment drawn out in my head many times. In my mind I grab the hook and aim at the buoy, then I throw out the hook like a boss, and it lands perfectly on the net. Everyone applauds and tells me how amazing I am to be able to get it in one try the very first time.

Real life is hardly ever the same as my imagination. I take the hook and try to aim. It's true that the buoy is not far away, yet I can't physically see the net. I count to three in my mind and throw the hook out. Not surprisingly, it hits nothing.

"It's ok, you will figure it out. You just need to give it a couple more tries." Eric tries to encourage me because he probably sees the defeat on my face.

Turns out this job is way harder than it looks. It seems easy when they do it, but it's probably because they have done it, god knows, how many times. It's about skill and about luck, if you ask me. During the third try I finally get it. Annie taps on my shoulder and says: "It is actually not bad. Somebody tried six or seven times when he first started."

"That was just bad luck, all right? Bad luck!" Eric rolls his eyes.

"Right. You can keep telling yourself that." Annie prepares the emergency medical station for the situations when there are animals entangled in the net. She puts a stretcher out and then gets a bucket of sea water for hydration, just in case.

When everything is ready, it's pulling time. It is pure physical labor. We just need to pull and pull and pull until we see an animal, then we do whatever Annie asks us to do. She, as a biologist, can have total control of the action on board. Gill nets are way bigger than I thought, and a lot heavier as well.

Just when I am pulling, I hear Eric calls out. "Wait a second, I think there is something there."

Annie runs over and asks us to pull up slowly to determine what is there. As we pull up, she suddenly shouts out. "Sharks. I see sharks."

I have only been on board for a month, but I have never seen sharks tangled in nets before. I have a bad feeling about this, but there is no time for hunches right now. We need to do exactly what Annie tells us to do.

"Ok, these sharks are small, so we probably don't need to use a lifeboat to go down there. I need you guys to gradually pull up. Fernando get me a hose. I will need running sea water in a bit. "

As we pull the nets up, I can see sharks. They are indeed small, around half an arm's length. Annie and Fernando are already waiting next to us with scissors in their hands. The moment a shark is on board, Fernando cuts the entire section of net down with the shark, and then hands it over to Annie. Annie then cuts the rest of the net and checks if the shark is alive.

"I think this one might actually make it. Where is my hose?"

Fernando grabs the hose and puts one end in the bucket of sea water and the other end in Annie's hand. Annie pours the running water onto the shark while soaking it in another bucket of sea water.

"Please, please, please make it. Please."



Miracles fail to happen. The shark is dead. Annie shakes her head and takes a deep breath because she needs to be ready for the next one.

“Here is a fish. I think it is alive!” Herald shouts.

Annie rushes over and cuts the fish out of the net. She soaks the fish in the water and it immediately starts to swim around. Annie makes a happy whistle and throws the fish back in the sea. We can see the fish quickly disappear in the water. At least this one gets to live a bit longer.

This gill net is loaded. I lose count of how many small sharks are hanging on the net. At least a dozen, I think. We don’t have to count or to think, we are just reacting to the situation. After doing it for a very long time, everything we need to do becomes muscle

memory. We see a fish or shark, we stop, and Annie or Fernando come over to cut it out. Then we keep pulling. This feels like the longest net I have ever seen.

When the net is finally completely out of the water, I look back on the deck for the first time. I am shocked by what I see. There is a little mountain of shark bodies on the stretcher. There is blood on the deck, and a giant gill net spread out waiting to be measured. Annie is checking on the last fish to make sure that it is ready to go back into the water.

“There! Be free!” Annie throws the last fish back to the water and watches it swim away. Then she turns back and looks at the mountain of sharks. I can see the frown on her face. She is more than just upset. When she is upset, she stops speaking and just does what she needs to do. I watch her picking each shark up and arranging them on the deck. She counts the bodies and measures each one to log into her list of rescued and dead animals. Throughout the entire duration of this, she does not say a single word, and nobody goes to talk to her either. We want her to finish her job, and her grief, by herself.

“Fifty-seven. Fifty-seven sharks in the net, and every single one of them is dead.”

After a long time, Annie finally stands up and talks. I never expected any of the sharks to survive, to be honest. But I also have never expected such a number to be caught in the fish net. Fifty-seven sharks. Fifty-seven lives. Sharks are not like normal fish. Sharks do not have gill plates, so they have to swim to survive. The moment they stop swimming, is when they die.

This one gill net. We saved about 10 animals, but we lost 57 sharks. I hear that they’ve had hammerhead sharks and great white sharks that are dead in gill nets here as well. There is

really no way of saving sharks due to their unique nature. But we will keep saving what we can save, even if it is just a small fish.

After logging in all the sharks, we throw them back in the ocean, hoping that the circle of life will take care of itself. I don't know how many more times I will witness tragical events like this in the future. Who knows, maybe I will see another one later today. But I know we will keep looking day after day, hoping that we will provide the Vaquitas with at least a little more chance to live.

# 8

“So, here is the thing about Vaquitas.” Dr. Hudson has been digressing for way too long before he actually gets to Vaquitas. “The primary reason to cause the vast decrease in Vaquita population is bycatch. Who can explain bycatch for us? I expect you to know this by now.”

“Trying to catch one thing but in the end catch another?” Someone at the back says.

“That is a short version of the answer, but you are right. Vaquitas are mainly killed by gill nets, which are illegal right now in the Sea of Cortez. The gill nets are not supposed to harvest Vaquitas. They are for another fish called Totoaba. Fishermen harvest Totoaba for their bladders which are considered to have medical benefits.”

“Is that actually true?” Julia is still chewing on her muffin. It is surprising how long it will take both of us to finish a muffin that is too sweet.

“Well as far as I know they don’t work at all. They simply do not. Yet it is not so much of a mystery why they became so valuable. It has value because it’s rare. It all started way back. So initially we were getting towards the grey areas of, to my understanding, the initial origin of the fishery, there was the Bahaba, the Chinese counterpart of the totoaba. Swim bladders were taken from the Bahaba and those bladders supplied the Chinese market. And our understanding is that it was for traditional Chinese medicine. It was believed that those



medicines had anti-cancer benefits. And over time, when the Bahaba became rare, those bladders became valuable just because they were rare. So, somebody would give you a bladder and rather than using it in a dish of soup you would hold on to it because you knew it was valuable and you might be able to sell it if you ever needed the money. And later the Totoaba bladders replaced the Bahaba bladders and people now just buy them and hold on to them as an investment because they are only going to get rarer and so the value of that bladder can only increase over time. It is like buying gold. It is the same thing. If you buy a brick of gold, what are you going to do with it? You are not going to cash it because it is going to have value. So, if you think about it, it is crazy that Totoaba bladders have value

just because they are scarce. One of the really interesting things, I think, is humans valuing scarcity. We value things that are scarce. For example, we see leaves on the ground. Nobody is going to pick up those leaves on the ground and say they are valuable. But if the leaf is from one tree that exists only here, people may think they have value just because they are rare.”

I don’t understand this relationship. Resources are rare so they are expensive. But endangered animals are also rare. What takes away the value in that; I know someone is wondering the same thing because there is a voice coming from the other side of the room, “But the Vaquitas are also rare.”

“You are right. They are even rarer than Totoaba bladders if you do the math. But there is no developed market for the Vaquitas. But the fact that we can sit down and talk about the Vaquitas, the fact that there are international recovery teams for the Vaquitas, and that people care about the Vaquita, shows you that they have value. They might not have commercial value, but it has value in the fact that people like me are willing to spend time, energy, and their careers working on the recovery of Vaquitas. So, we care about them. They have value.

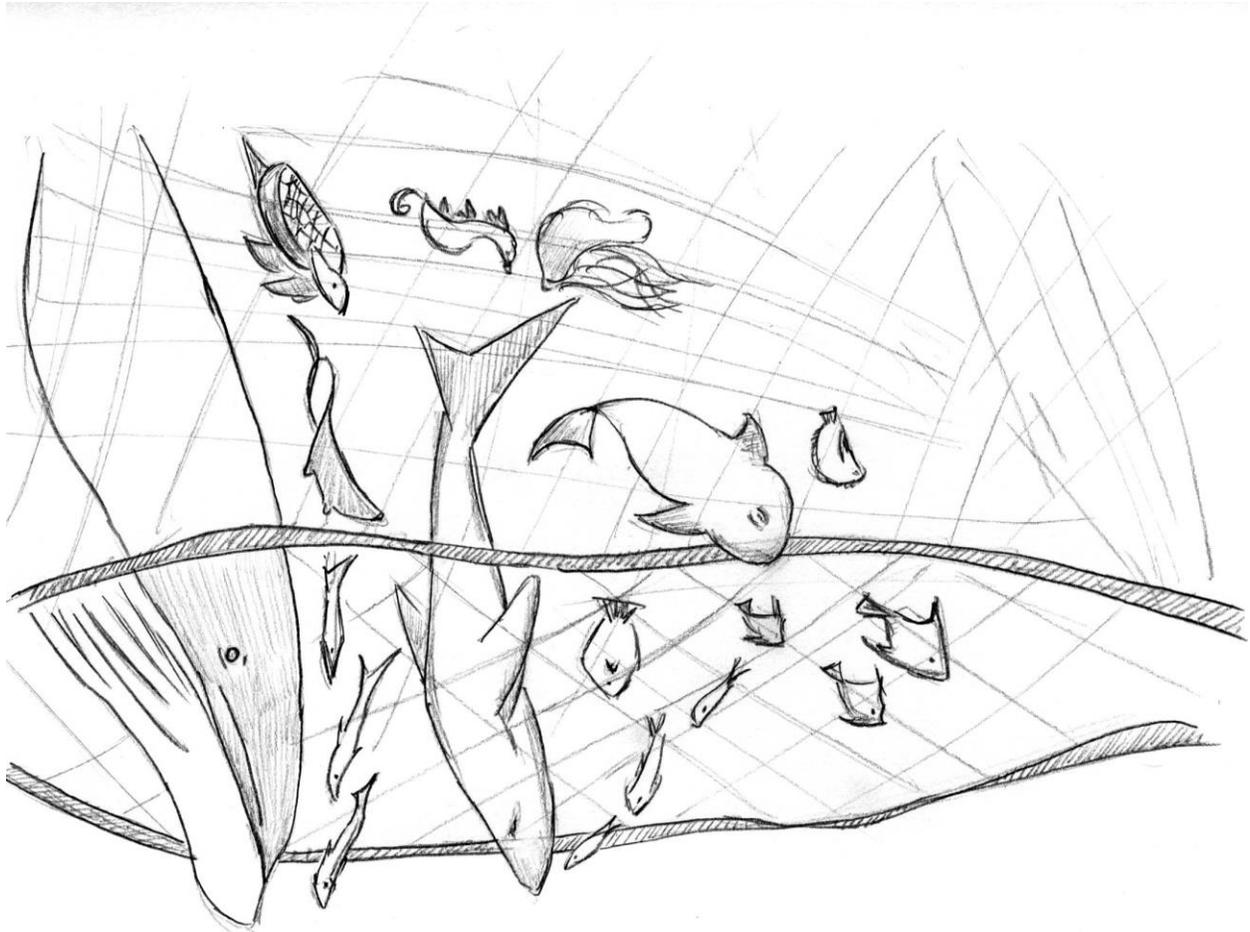
So, in an ideal world, there will hopefully be a way to exchange commercial value and conservational value, so that the commercial values that come from conservational activities can be more lucrative than the commercial value on its own, from selling animal parts. But right now, how are we supposed to do that? So, let’s take a moment to think about Pandas. Think about the Pandas in China. Think about the revenue that the Chinese government generates from Panda conservation, doing things like loaning out Pandas. So,

there is a really good case study where you have something that can generate revenue and value from non-consumptive perspectives. The problem with the Vaquitas, is that they live in a difficult part of the world to get to, they are hard to see, and it is not like you can loan out a marine mammal as easily as you can loan out a Panda. And Pandas are also more resilient than Vaquitas. And there is also an aspect of the marketing when it comes to the conservation of Pandas. China markets the Panda to be the “national animal”. And the Panda can become a symbol. There are so many commercial products connected to the Panda. So, imagine that we have been successful in the conservation of Vaquitas, in capturing and maintaining Vaquitas in human care. If we had done that 20 years ago, and we had Vaquitas in aquariums all over the world, that is the Mexican Panda. And if Vaquitas are resilient like the Pandas, you could just ship them everywhere. And all of a sudden, Mexico would have the beautiful symbol of their conservation success.”

So here it is. “We saved the Mexican desert porpoise.” This whole market and value are short-sighted, if you ask me. It sounds cliché to talk about how conservation success can benefit biodiversity and further, the life of future generations. But why care about the future generations if people can earn a lot of money right now? “The future generations can figure things out by themselves.” But will they? Is it going to be true or is it selfishness talking?

I think there has to be another way. A way to fish for Totoaba that causes no harm to the Vaquitas. “Dr. Hudson you mention that the gill nets are killing the Vaquitas as bycatch products. But are there other ways to fish for Totoabas? I mean I’m sure that there is more

than one method to catch a fish, right? I remember you talking about turtle-friendly shrimp nets.”



“One of the problems is that they never take the nets out. They just continue to fish. They catch something, say a turtle, and the fishermen don’t care so they leave the turtle in the net. And then that decomposes and attracts small fish and then those small fish attract bigger fish. So, they are essentially creating an ecosystem in these nets and then you will get animals like Vaquitas that will come around and feed on those fish. And then they will get stuck. All these are actually not necessary, but the other marine animals just don’t have much value to the fishermen. A lot of points are just to increase the commercial value of conservation in the sense of conservation instead of in the sense of selling animal parts.”

I can hear whispers from different parts of the classroom. I know that my classmates are just like me. We don't understand why the conservation situation got stuck and the Vaquitas keep dying. We have seen so many successful conservation stories we just cannot believe how all the greatest minds working on this issue being stuck in a narrow alley and can do almost nothing but to watch the Vaquitas die.

"Then we just need to add commercial value to the Vaquitas, right? Commercial values that do not include selling Vaquita parts, of course." I can hear the excitement in Julia's voice. "In Alaska there are some really expensive tours to go and see wild animals. Those are some examples of eco-tourisms. Can we develop tours like that in the Sea of Cortez so that the fishermen can have another source of income?"

Dr. Hudson shakes his head again. "This is a really good idea. But it is really hard to develop that kind of commercial system in San Felipe. It is too dangerous and if you see half a Vaquita dorsal fin then that is all you can see. It is not like seeing a grizzly bear or getting pictures of a brown bear. A very good contrast to Vaquitas is the orca, or killer whale, as people tend to call them. I have a friend, Bob, who has worked on the Vaquita issues before. He is one of the best naturalists in the world working with marine mammals. He was contacted by a very rich individual, who was going to the Antarctic to see orcas. This individual asked him to go out in the open water and show them orcas. And Bob asked him to fund a chartered boat so that they could go to the middle of the Drake Passage to see some marine animals. Bob just thought the guy would say no, but the guy said yes and gave him a ton of money to do that. That was because he really wanted his family to have the experience with orcas and with Bob. So, you know, that is commercialization that works,

and helps with the conservation. But in the case of Vaquitas, we can't quite make it work. They are small; they are shy. They are not like dolphins that can just come to the boat. If we have a pretty day in San Felipe, I can take you out on a Panga, we have a decent chance of seeing Vaquitas, but it is not the same as whales or dolphins. They do not behave the same. It can be a totally different experience. Personally, I have never seen a Vaquita jump. Another issue is that they only live in a small section of the gulf near San Felipe. The water there is not clear and on a bad day when there are white caps, you cannot see anything at all. We don't really know why they only live in that area. One hypothesis is that they like to be there because the water is not clear so that bottlenose dolphins cannot find them. Because we know sometimes bottlenose dolphins will hunt and kill porpoises. With all of those issues combined, it might not be the "wildlife viewing experience" that people would like to pay for."

I have heard about the concept of a "wicked conservation problem" before, but I had no idea how conflicting it was until now. It's like every time we have a brand-new idea that we think will work, reality comes in and knocks us back into square one. It is like the battle between creativity, hope, and the harsh reality. It all depends on who caves in first. And it is also about how long the hope will last. How long can we fight, to figure out more ideas and try them out. It is not an easy thing. We are so defeated and frustrated just in a theoretical class, let alone the real world.

"Well I know this is not the most encouraging class in the world, but your assignment for your final presentation is going to be a brief report, listing a couple of conservation

solutions you come with for the current Vaquita situation. Don't get limited by details like budgets and execution. Go nuts. That's when great ideas come to mind."

The bell rings, and class is over. One of our classmates sees a group of dolphin cruising outside our window. Everyone runs over to see those dolphins. It's like what just happened is just a lecture. We had a lecture and an assignment and that's it. Everything happening at the Sea of Cortez seems so far away from us; too far to seem to be real.













































# 9

**I**t's been years since Emily made that offer to me, asking me to join the Vaquita conservation group after graduation. Over the years the Vaquita population kept declining in a speed that was almost completely out of control. I am planning a rescue mission called Vaquita CPR. But before that happens, let me fill you in with what has been going on in the world of Vaquita conservation throughout these years.

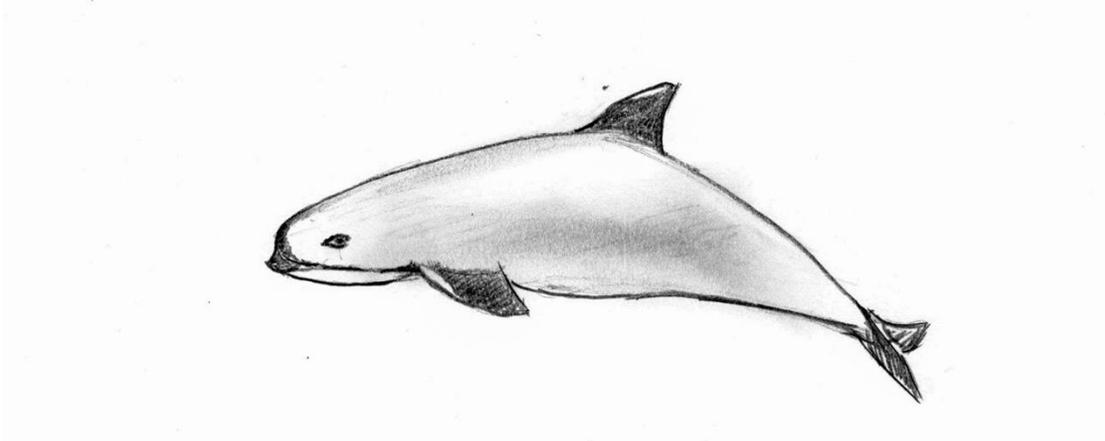
It was back then in 1995 I think, I started to work on the international team for the recovery of Vaquita, and that's been my primary source of engagement ever since. I try to formulate advice for the government trying to prevent the extinction of the Vaquita. From my perspective, I have a long history of engagement of the species. I feel personally bonded with the Vaquitas, and I will be very sad when we lose them. But I am also interested because I think they are an example of the kind of conservation issues we are going to have to deal with. It is a section, subsection, of the issues we have to deal with. Things like trafficking ivory, trafficking rhino horns, animal parts, pangolins, and all different kinds of things. So, we just need to figure out how to deal with those kinds of conservation issues. As we go forward, the resources get scarcer, and rare things become more valuable.

As for the Vaquitas, the population has decreased significantly over the past decades. There used to be around 567 Vaquitas, and now the population has dropped to less than 30. It is

not just bad, it is catastrophic. And one of the things that I think, as I look back now, is that the International Calvary team didn't realize that the Totoaba fishery was developing as quickly as it was. By the time we realized how big it was, it was too late for us to really engage in the actions. It just all happened very quickly.

I know people argue: "Why are we trying so hard to save the animals that cannot even thrive on their own?" But even that, it doesn't mean that they are not worth saving. And I will also counter that argument by saying, there are a lot of ways to fish for Totoaba without killing the Vaquitas. One of the problems is that they never take the nets out. They just continue to fish. They catch something, say a turtle, and the fishermen don't care so they leave the turtle in the net. And then that decomposes and that attracts small fish and then the small fish attract the bigger fish. So, they are essentially creating an ecosystem in these nets and then you will get animals like Vaquitas that will come around and feed on those fish. And then they will get stuck. All these are actually not necessary, but the other marine animals just don't have much value to the fishermen.

The interesting thing about Vaquita conservation is that when it comes to Totoaba fishery, it is this big transnational circle that goes across continents from North America to Asia.

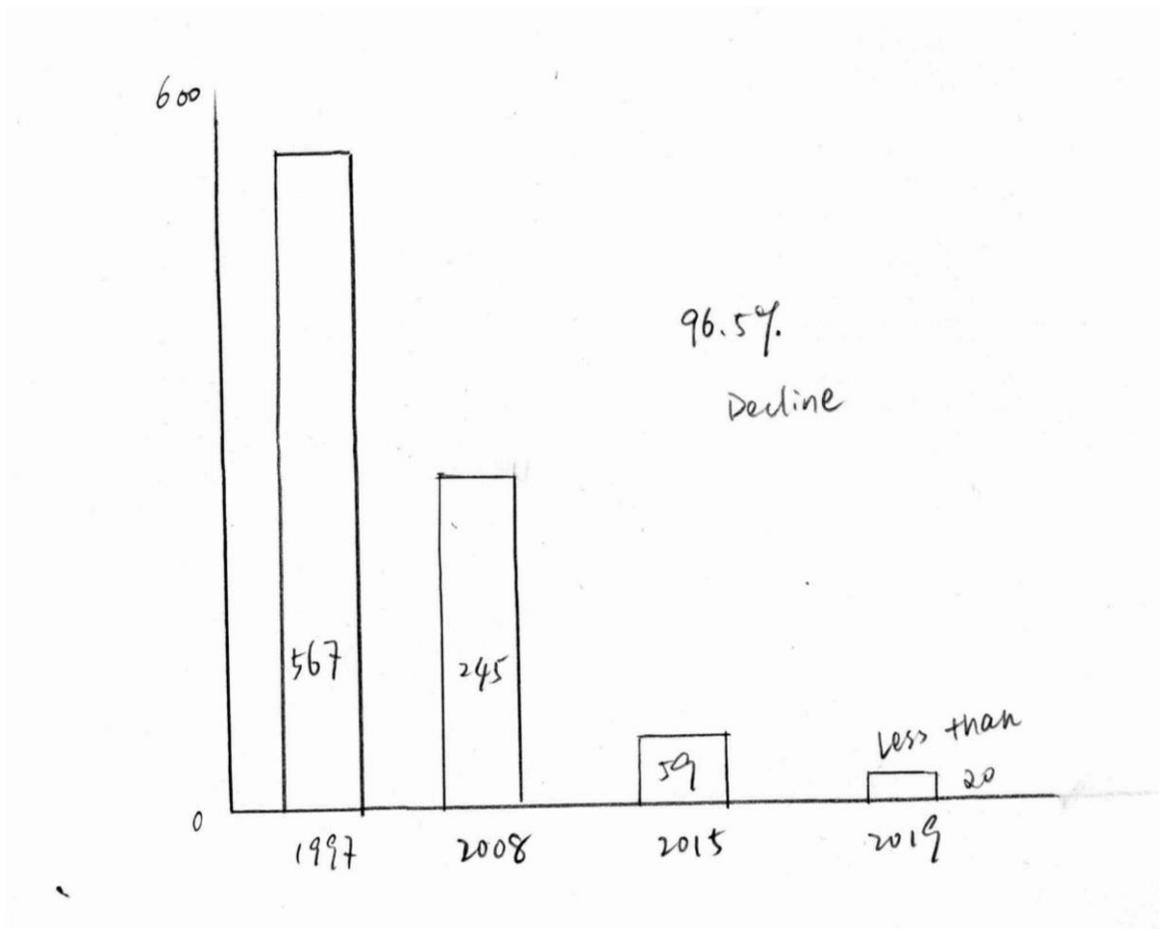


When it comes to the conservation of Vaquitas, the circle becomes small. Everybody somehow knows each other. There are conflicts of interest within the conservation circles. Different parties should be working together, but that is not necessarily the case. You've got protected areas, you've got fisheries, and you've got fisherman management. For example, the fisheries people should be helping develop alternative methods in fishing, but they undercut that every time they possibly can, for a couple of reasons. One is that there has been this long-standing conflict between the U.S. and Mexico when it comes to fishing going back to the days of the Tuna. It is also widely believed that some senior members of those organizations have been bought off by the cartels. And they don't want to develop alternative fishing because they want fishermen to be fishing for Totoabas because that is generating money for the cartels. So, it is very complicated. I would imagine that government officials and fishermen and some journalists can draw a more accurate diagram of how those organizations actually work together not on paper. But there aren't a lot of people who can do that.

We have a visiting scholar at the lab, she and I have been working on writing a paper together on how Mexican fishery policies work in practice, and how it is supposed to work. So, we talk about this alternative reality. You can go to a day-long meeting and talk about the conservation of the Vaquitas. The Mexican Navy says that they are going to protect them, they are going to find all these poachers, arrest them. And everybody can have the conversation for the whole day, and it is fine. And then you go out to the waters the next day, and all the poachers are working, and the Navy is sitting there, not doing anything. There is just this weird disconnect, presumably because the people in the Navy, who are

supposed to be doing what they said they were going to do, have been bought off. So, corruption.

If you think about the intensive pressure the Vaquitas have been under for the past years, almost all the Vaquitas have died; 567 to less than 30. So, the ones who haven't died are very smart. Vaquitas have a 10-month gestation period, and most of the births occur in April or May. The calves are with their moms for 6 to 8 months, and then the females will get pregnant again. A female can give birth every year. The female will take care of the baby, and she will get pregnant during that period. We don't have a lot of data on Vaquitas because there are only a few Vaquitas left. But it looks like what happens now is that the female gets pregnant, having a gestation period for 10 months, gives birth, and nurses her calf for 8 months. Shortly after she gives birth to a calf, she gets pregnant again. So, she is simultaneously pregnant and lactating. And as soon as a new calf is born, the old one will leave the mother to live on its own. Having this reproductive system requires a lot of food, but due to the fact that there are not a lot of Vaquitas left, there are a lot of things for them to eat, and so they are in good condition. One of the things we have been thinking about is that the old Vaquitas are the smart ones but think about their offspring. They are born and they are with their moms for 8 months, and then they are all by themselves. They don't know anything about nets apart from what they have learned from their moms in that short 8-month period of time. So, they will probably get hammered in those nets. And most other porpoises and dolphins make all kinds of bad decisions and mistakes in their juvenile state. So, the worst-case scenario is that the young Vaquitas get killed by gill nets and the old Vaquitas die of old age. No, actually, the worst-case scenario is that all Vaquitas are killed by nets. But either case is equally bad, and unfortunate. We have one or two well



marked females that we know very well, and I haven't heard from our team to see if they are alive. But eventually they will either get caught or die of old age. And then that would be it. Now we have around a dozen Vaquitas left, but we don't know how many are male and how many are female. We know there are definitely males because the females keep giving birth. Right now, even if we can successfully help with the recovery of Vaquitas there will still be a lack of genetic diversity within the population. We are only building the population off of a couple of individuals, just like the elephant seals and monk seals. They have no genetic diversity. Let's say we have 24 individuals and there are 12 males and 12 females. And say, in an ideal world, they have equal opportunity to mate, which is less likely to be the case. That is still just 12 males. And in the real world, if you look at elephant

seals and monk seals, there is a chance that only one male does all the work. That means that the population will have no genetic diversity. If there is some kind of disease, then they will not have any sort of mechanism to live through that.

To put it simple, this is a very luck-oriented mission. This is where nobody wants to get to in conservation. We are at the very end of the line. We don't have much room for mistakes. We don't want the media to come in with a title of "scientists kill one of the last Vaquitas on the planet" type of thing. The whole thing is tragic. When there were 500 left, we didn't do anything. I think if we had tried then people would have said: "No, this is too risky because there are only 500 left." So, I first started suggesting Vaquita CPR when there were 60-100 left, about 5 years ago, and people told me that I couldn't do that because it was too risky. And so, we waited until there were only 30. It is a very human nature thing to do. That is one of the things I keep talking about. Don't wait until it is too late. If you have 1400 animals and you kill one, it is a tragic thing, but it is not the end of the world. And you don't have to stop. But if we have 30 animals and we kill one then we are done. What we do also touches the nerve of a lot of animal protection societies. It was very difficult for us to deal with the opposition from animal welfare. You would assume that an animal protection society would support what conservation biologists do, but that is not necessarily the case. The two do not line up perfectly, and it is somehow counterintuitive. Conservation is not necessarily keeping every single animal alive; it is to keep the species lasting. There are a lot of people in the animal welfare community that told us very directly that they would rather see the Vaquitas extinct than to only see them in captivity. But I would rather take my chance in that, than just give up. If they are in captivity, there might be a chance for them to go back into the wild again. But if they go extinct, then there are no chances at all.

Even in an ideal world I wouldn't imagine being able to save every single animal and also save the entire species. Humans are complicated creatures.

Tough as it is, now there are only 30 Vaquitas left. We are going to go through the Vaquita CPR program. If we kill one, we are done. We don't want to take any chances, but I really hope that this is going to work. We are running out of options, and we are running out of time. Luck is not on our side.

# 10

Carlos has been upset and grumpy for quite some time now. After we met Martin in that bar, we went out again to fish for a couple of times before the government's word came out saying that we were no longer allowed to fish in the Vaquita protection area. We tried to go further out to fish, but it was just too far away. It would take us 4 hours to go to the fishing ground and the round trip was 7-8 hours. It was just too far. Too far. We eventually gave up after a month, and I was staying at home waiting for the government compensations to arrive. I tried to drive my pickup truck around to see if there were any jobs out there. I was not lucky enough to find one. In a town that has a 90% population of fishermen, who would need a jobless fisherman.

After a month I tried to go further than just San Felipe. I wondered if there were any luck in Mexicali or even Ensenada. I did find something in Ensenada, but the job was a lot of working hours, and I couldn't find a single chance to drive 3 hours to go home during my week at the job. If I kept working here, I wouldn't be able to go home for who knows how long. I couldn't leave Maria and the girls at home without me for that long. The girls were going to school now, and there were more things to worry about than before. I had to quit the Ensenada job and head home again.

To my surprise, when I came home, Maria told me that she found a job in town. I don't know how she managed to find a job, but she does have a lot more talents than I do. She can cook, crochet, and weave. She can also carve some wooden toys from time to time, and she can paint. Now that I think about it, I was a bit ashamed. The only thing I was good at was fishing. In times like this I needed Maria to hold the family up. I asked her what the job was, and she said that I needn't worry. It was a decent and nice job. She asked me to stay at home and take care of the house for her.

And there I was, becoming a househusband, while Maria was away working. I cooked for the girls and sent them to school every day. Then I picked them up and cooked for Maria so she could have a nice hot meal when she came back. I felt bad letting Maria work alone. I still went out every now and then, looking for a job. But I got no luck.

Today is no different than any other day. I sent the girls to school and prepared to go out to see if there were any jobs I could take. Even temporary ones. Then Carlos walked up to the door.

"Carlos? I haven't seen you in a while."

Carlos looks different. He is not the cheerful and hopeful Carlos anymore. I can see the deep dark circles under his eyes. He is panting. Maybe he is running all the way to my house.

"Manuel, do you want a job?"

That is direct of him. I haven't seen him in forever, and now he has a job to offer me. That is not like the Carlos I know at all.

“Wait up Carlos. How come you have a job? I’ve been looking for a job for months, and I have never heard about a job opening around. I went to Ensenada to look for a job!”

“Manuel calm down. I know. Could we go inside and talk?”

That is when I realize that I’ve been talking to him at the door for all this time.

“Sure, Carlos come on in.”

Carlos walks in and takes a look around the house. “I can see that you are cleaning the house now, right?”

“I am in no mood for jokes now Carlos.”

“It’s not a joke. Just an observation.”

That does not sound like the Carlos I know at all. In the past he would make a joke and laugh about it, telling me that I didn’t have to be serious. I wonder what is going on with Carlos now.

“So, this job you are talking about...”

“Ever heard of Totoaba?”

“Yeah, I vaguely remember. It’s the fish that somehow affects Vaquitas, right?”

“I can’t care less about the Vaquitas now. But Totoabas, let me tell you, are pieces of gold.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know how much you know about this, but there is a big market for Totoabas in China right now. They want the bladders of the Totoaba. One piece of bladder, just one

piece, can sell for the price of gold. If we work together, we can sneak in the closed areas of the Sea of Cortez and then.....”

“Wait a minute Carlos. Are you talking about illegal fishing? You do know that the area is closed and there is not supposed to be any trespassing.”

“So, what if is not legal? They take away our livelihood and expect us just sit in our houses waiting for that shameful compensation? Don’t you think the government is running out of money to compensate us for being jobless? I live alone but you have a family to feed. How long are you going to wait until you do something? Let me tell you this. The protection of Vaquitas has cost the federal government hundreds of millions of pesos. And how much do you think that are used for compensation for us? There are 41 million monthly pesos that scatter the federal government month by month to compensate fishermen. They close up the Gulf for so long and what happened? Nothing. Did they save the Vaquitas? Are they thriving and growing back to a lot of them? No. But the ban on fishing is going to screw us up. It’s been almost a year. How long will it take for them to open up the gulf again?”

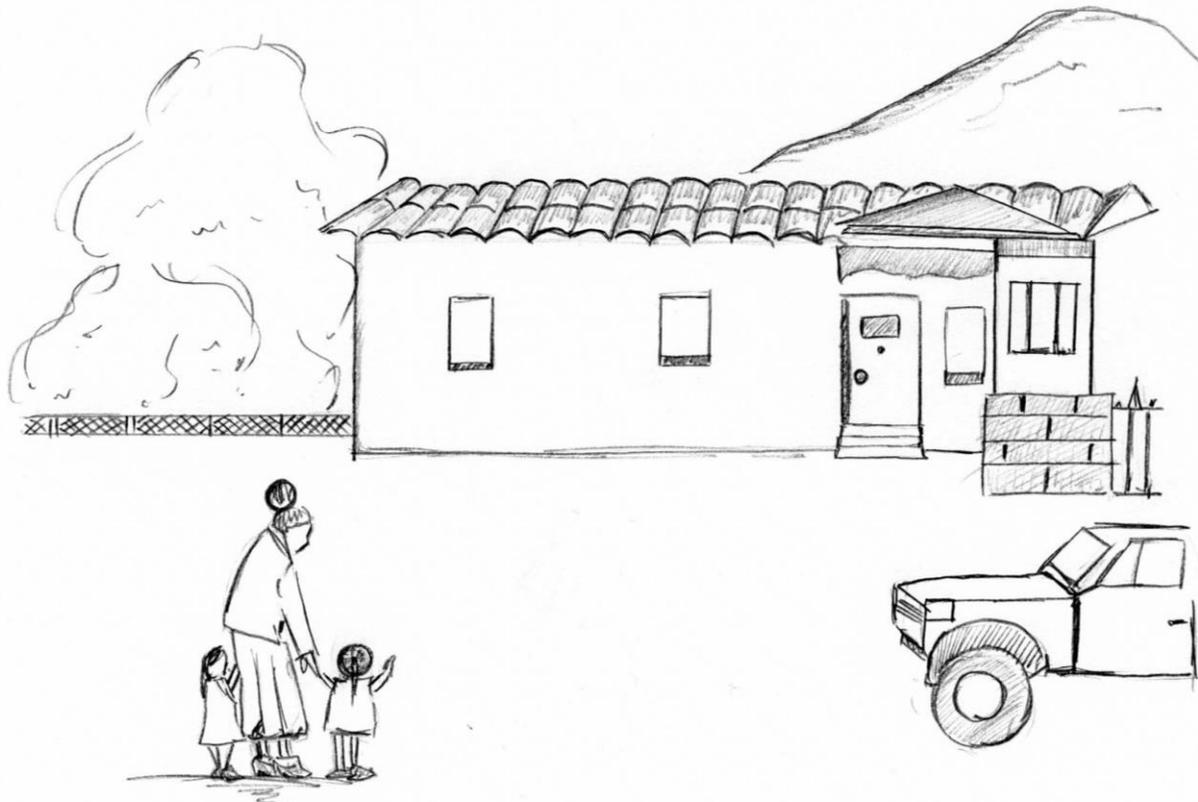
“Carlos you need to calm down a bit. I know you are upset. But we can figure something out. You don’t want to do anything illegal now, do you?”

“It is not illegal if the government doesn’t care, right?”

“What do you mean?”

“Nobody will say no to an offer that will get everybody rich.” Carlos makes a gesture of counting money. It doesn’t take long for me to realize that there has been bribing going on.

“Carlos what have you done? This is not you.”



“You are right. This is not me. I am not the one who set this up. I am merely someone that knows which side to join.”

“Carlos it’s not about joining sides. I never thought you would be someone that breaks the law!”

“Someone who breaks the law.” Carlos makes a horrible impression of my voice. “You are the one to talk. Don’t stand on that high moral ground and judge me. Look at yourself. Do you have a single peso to earn right now? Maria is working her ass off every day and you are just telling me that you don’t care? You are judging me right now, but don’t you want to think about Maria? What about your kids?”

“Hold on. What about Maria?”

“You don’t know uh? You really have no idea.”

“She told me that she had a job in town, and everything was fine.”

“She didn’t tell you what her job was?”

“No.” Now that I think about it, Maria only told me that she had a decent job in town, and everything would be fine. She never really told me what the job was. “What does she do now?”

Carlos signs. “Come with me, let me show you.”

It is a 10-minute drive to town. Carlos pulls over on the beach boulevard.

“What’s going on? We are not getting out of the car?”

“No need.” Carlos rolls down the window and points to the outdoor seating of a restaurant.

“Look over there.”

I look towards the direction he points, and there I see her, Maria. She is carrying a huge board and a case. There are sunglasses on the board, and some hats and kid’s toys in the case. It is summer and the sun is in the middle of the sky. I can barely stand the heat sometimes, and Maria is carrying all that stuff by herself, trying to sell them to the tourists. I see her trying hard to persuade people to buy her sunglasses and toys. I know her English and it is nowhere near good and fluent. I can see the tourists waving and asking her to leave. When she wants to try again, they will seem annoyed. I am sitting in the car,

watching as she carries all that stuff, travelling from one restaurant to another. I want to get out of the car and bring her home when Carlos stops me.

“Manual don’t. Don’t you know why she doesn’t want to let you know what she is doing? When I first saw her down here, I thought that she probably didn’t tell you what she has been doing, or otherwise you would never let her come out to work like this. She is just trying to support the home. Don’t go out there and let her know that you see this. She will be embarrassed.”

Carlos is right. Maria doesn’t want to make me worried and that is why she doesn’t tell me about this job. But I can’t just do what I do now, knowing that Maria is suffering like this to support the family.

“Carlos, tell me more about the Totoaba job.”

Carlos rolls the window back up. “I will take you back home and we will talk about this.”

Carlos doesn’t say a word while driving me back home. He probably knows that I don’t want to talk right now. We park the car at my front porch and head inside. Carlos sees me being upset; he takes the liberty of pouring himself a cup of water.

“Are you sure you want in?” Carlos wants to do one last check with me.

If I have the chance, I hope that I would never do anything illegal in my entire life. I want to have a good life with my good wife and my loving daughters. I want everything to be peaceful and serene. We will be happy if we have just enough money to have a normal life. But I can’t let Maria go out in the dead heat everyday selling sunglasses and little toys just so I can stop worrying about providing for the family.

“I’m in.”

“Ok so here is going to be how it works. We can go out together in our panga. I have contacts that will loan us the gill nets that we need. All we need to do is to go out, secretly plant the gill nets and then harvest Totoaba. We only need the bladders. You can bring the rest of the fish home if you want but the only valuable part is the bladder of Totoaba. We get the fish and then pack the Totoaba bladders so that I can deliver them to my contact.”

“Then what will happen next?”

“They will dry and repack the bladders so that they are easy to carry and less messy. They will hand the bladders over to a Chinese contact in San Felipe and then the contact will figure out a way to ship them back to China. San Felipe is not so far away from Mexicali, which is right at the border, they can bring the bladders and travel across the border by car. Some of them go to the U.S. and travel by air, some go directly by air from Mexico to China, some go through shipping containers, and some of them go to weird intermediate places. Those are not important. You just need to know that there are many channels, and this is legit stuff.”

This is such an intricate plan. It requires so many strings pulled and so many people involved.

“I don’t understand. It’s not even a year since we can’t go out and fish anymore. How can anybody manage to pull this off this soon?”

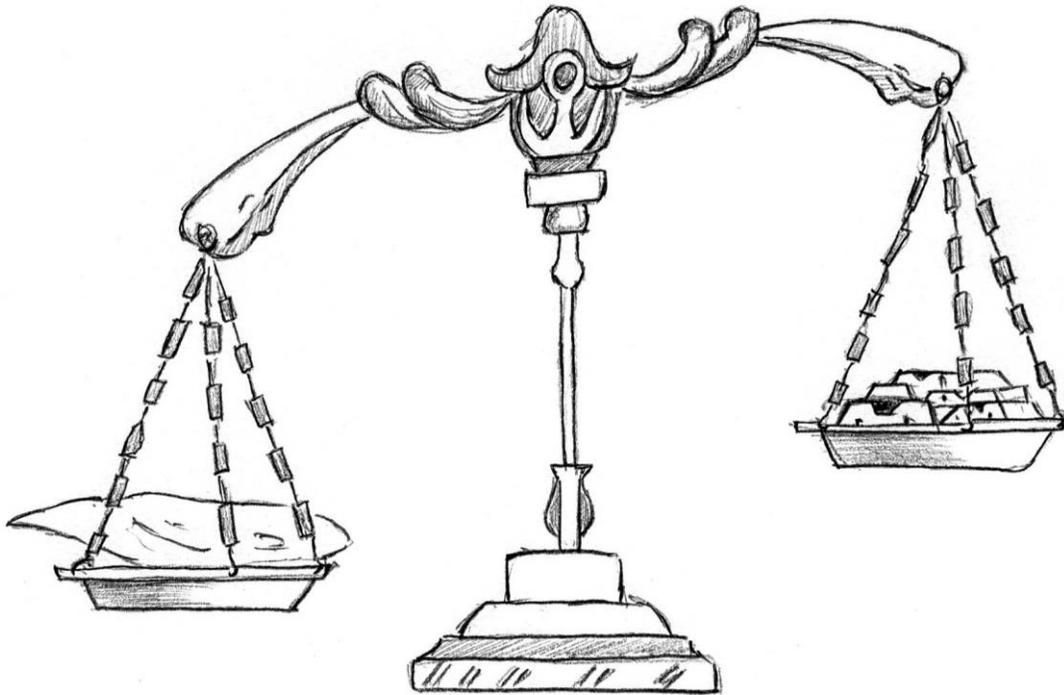
“You see, Manuel, in San Felipe, there were certain things that were already in existence. I want to be honest with you, San Felipe was first settled by people who were taking alcohol

across the border from Mexico to the U.S. during the times of prohibition. And then people, and then drugs, and now people, and drugs. If you ask me, shipping Totoaba through this network should not be hard at all. I even wondered why nobody had thought of this earlier. So, just between you and me, with this network and the fact that there is a market in China, a very lucrative one, and the fact that people who know about the Totoaba bladders set up everything perfectly. Plus, people are already bought off, and so all the things we need of that whole system, you know, fishing, shipment, markets in China, were already set up nicely.”

“But if we do this together, what if we can’t always get the bladders? Will there be any consequences?”

Carlos can see that I am worried about my family. “Don’t worry. Just do what we can do. Nobody expects a perfect yield. That is just impossible. If you think about it, it is just like drugs. So, people smuggling drugs expect to lose 30% to 40% of it and that is what they build in their business plan. It is the same thing with the Totoaba bladders. Not all of it gets there, but even if they lose 30% of it, it doesn't matter because the bladders are so valuable when they get to their destination. Don’t stress too much about it. Totoaba is like gold. One piece and we can pay off lots of things. I know you Manuel. You are a good fisherman. You and me, we can totally do it. When we are done, we will be so rich.”

I don’t want to be rich. I have no interest in that whatsoever. I just want my family not to suffer. If there has to be a consequence, then I will take it. As long as Maria can have her old happy days back and the girls can afford a good education and nice things, that is all I have ever wanted for them.



There is a glimpse of concern from Carlos' face. I can see it.

"What is it, Carlos?"

"Manuel before you say yes, you have to know something. It is true that if we can have a 30% yield or something like that, we can pay back everything and more. But if we are having bad days, just you have to remember that we are still loaning from drug cartels. You don't have to let me tell you what will happen if we don't have any totoaba at all, right?"

"I see what you say."

"Don't be too stressed. I ask you because I know that you and me, we are the best team. If we can't get those fuckers, I don't know who else can."

It is risky. Carlos is right. After all we are loaning money from the drug cartels, and they don't like losing money. But I cannot watch Maria go out there to work like that anymore. She is not in her best health condition and I don't want to see her getting hurt.

"I will take the job. Let me know the specifics."

Carlos shows a subtle smile. "I will let them know. Don't worry Manuel. We will get those Totoabas."

Carlos leaves in a hurry. Maria comes back not too long after that. She looks confused.

"Is that Carlos? Haven't seen him in a while. What brings him over?"

I take Maria's handbag and take her to the couch. She looks really tired. I haven't realized how tired she looks until today. She can't go on like this.

"Maria, I found a job."

"Oh! Is that why Carlos is here?"

"Yes. He told me that there was an aquatic farm around that wanted my experience as a fisherman. I thought it was a good opportunity, so I took it. It was a bit tiring, but it was good pay."

I can see the relief on Maria's face. She gives me her warm smile. "That is great news. I will come home earlier every day to take care of the girls then."

"No, you don't have to work if you don't want to. It is good pay. You don't have to worry about supporting the family anymore."

“Are you sure?” Maria clearly can’t believe that I finally found a great job so suddenly. But she has more joy than suspicion in her voice.

“I am sure. And I haven’t had your delicious beef stew for a long time. The girls have been complaining about my cooking for a very long time. They will be so happy to have you back.”

“And they don’t have to stay late after school to wait for you to pick them up anymore.”

“They don’t, indeed.”

Maria puts her head on my chest and closes her eyes. She is exhausted. I hold her in my arms and pat on her head. She opens her eyes and looks at me.

“Everything will be alright, right?”

I give her a kiss on her forehead. “Everything will be just fine.”

# 11

I used to think my volunteering on a Sea Shepherd boat was just temporary. But it turns out to be a long-term dedication. I have been on Sea Shepherd's Operation Milagro for 3 years. Our original crew now comes down to me, Annie, Eric, and Captain Antonio.

Volunteers come and go. Our job is getting harder by the day. We now have the assistance of the Mexican Navy, which is a relief, because the local fishermen are being more hostile towards us. We used to be able to go to the town for a change in environment, but not anymore. We know that what we do causes a huge inconvenience to the fishermen, and we just decided not to go bother them by cruising in front of their porches.

Life on the ship is still nice. Everybody is considerate and capable, regardless of how long they have been working with us. We find more and more nets in the water by the day.

There was one time we found 15 nets in under 25 hours. And sometimes we can see fishermen putting down gill nets when we patrol with our drones. Then one of our ship needs to move over immediately and get the nets out. We are in constant battle and it is hard to have a whole-night's sleep.

The Sea of Cortez looks as peaceful as usual. It looks as if nothing is going on. Peaceful like a paradise. We are doing our normal cruising when I hear Timothy yelling from the bridge.

"I see a Panga! I think they are coming towards us."

A Panga towards us? I mean there have been Pangas coming towards us to check on us for absolutely no reason. Nothing really happened before, but we still need to be vigilant.

I go to the bridge and grab a pair of binoculars. Timothy is right. The Panga is approaching us. They have something onboard. I can't tell if they are Totoabas or something else.

"Timothy, let everybody know that there are poachers coming. I don't yet know what they are after, but it is always good to pay attention and be prepared."

Timothy nods and runs downstairs. I am concerned. The Panga is following our ship. We have never seen anything like this before. Just when I am wondering what is going on, I see more Pangas coming. Then I hear a giant sound.

"Rocks! They are throwing rocks at us!" I hear someone in the cabin shout.

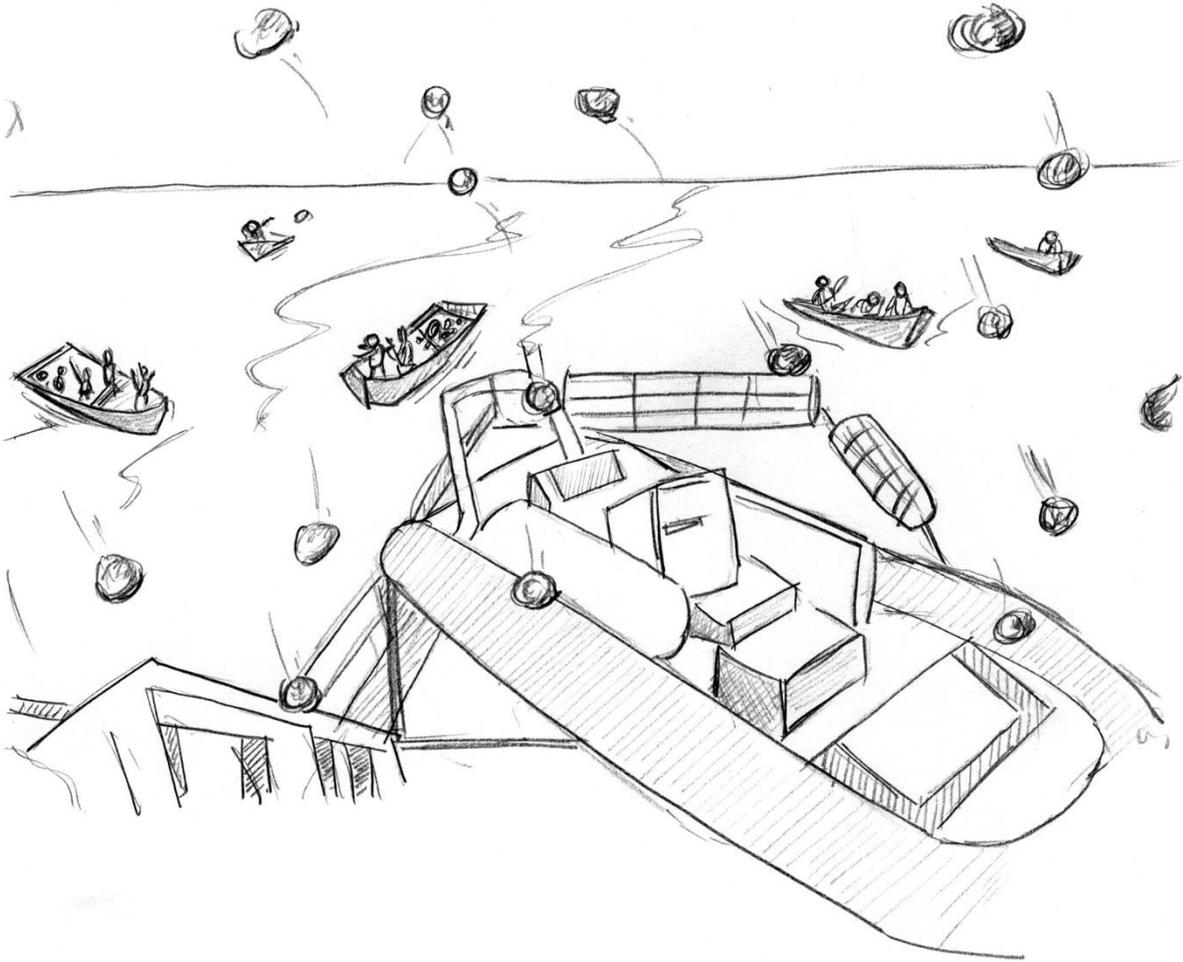
The poachers are attacking us. I can see about a dozen Pangas approaching our ship. I can now see what they have onboard. Each Panga is filled with big rocks. They are here to attack us.

"Fern get the hoses. Now!" I cannot afford to panic. The Navy we have onboard are not allowed to fire or defend. We need to figure out how to drive them away by ourselves.

"Jose, go after Fern. Help her with the hoses and connect them to our fire hydrant. We need to shoot water at the Pangas."

"Got it." Jose quickly runs after Fern to the storage room.

Annie runs up to the bridge. She seems concerned and a bit frightened. We sign up for protecting a species, but nobody wants to put themselves in a Dangerous place.



“Anthony, what are we going to do now?”

Just when I want to comfort her, I hear a giant smashing sound on the bridge. The poachers smash the window of the bridge and a big piece of rock is lying on the floor in the room with shattered glasses everywhere.

“Everybody, get your helmets on!” I shout through the public channel. I exchange a glance with Annie, and she nods and runs away. Annie and I have been working together for so long and sometimes our minds are incredibly synced. While she is getting helmets out for everyone, I need to figure out what to do next.

The poachers are gathering. Everyone is on the post with full protection. They have their helmets on and they are using the hoses to shoot water towards the Pangas.

“Luis, grab wood boards from the storage. Fast!”

We have a broken window on the bridge. The stones are running through the window into the room. We need something to block the window so we will be safe inside. When Luis brings up the board, we set the board against the window so that there will be a temporary shelter. There are still stones banging on the board. I don't know how long the board is going to stand.

“Everybody, get down!” It is safer to stay lower to the ground right now. We don't have any protection.

Luis suddenly gets up. He grabs an iron board and runs outside.

“Luis what are you doing? Get back in here...”

Before I can finish my sentence, Luis is already outside. He stands next to Fern and holds the iron board in front of her. He is afraid that Fern is going to get hurt by the stones. She cannot protect herself while holding the hose. He knows that he needs to protect her.

He is right. I start to look for something that can be used as a shield, but all I can find is the extra wood board. Wood boards will barely do anything, but it's not the time to consider that. I take the wood board and shield it over Jose's shoulder. In the bridge, Captain Antonio is trying hard to control the ship and send a distress signal through the radio.

“Farley Mowat is under attack. Sharpie, how far are you? We need assistance.”

After a while I can hardly hear Captain Antonio. I am using everything I have to hold that wood board so that we won't get hurt. I can't tell how many Pangas are there. I feel so alone and fearless at the same time. I know as long as this amazing crew sticks together, there is nothing we can't fight. But it is us against all those Pangas out there. I don't know what to do next.

Then I see the Sharpie. There it is, the other Sea Shepherd boat. They come over and join us with their water guns. The Pangas see another ship coming and they back off. They don't have enough stones left anyway.

Good thing is that we only lost a couple of windows. Our major equipment is not damaged and there is no serious injury. In this it is a win for us. It is almost sunset. Timothy goes back to his kitchen and starts to prepare dinner. After this everybody needs time to recover. We decide to call it a day.

Dinner is quiet. We are all too tired to discuss anything. I am still concerned about the attack. I don't know what they have on their minds next. I really want to have a good night's sleep, but I need to make sure that everything is ok.

"You are thinking about taking the drones out tonight?" Annie always knows what I plan to do.

"I just need to make sure. Just a normal patrol, nothing more."

"Let me go with you. Just in case."

I can't say no to her. And after all this time, it would be better if nobody goes out in the open deck by themselves, especially at night.

After our evening patrol I bring the drone out to the deck. Annie brings me a jacket out. I check the memory card and the battery of the drone and everything is good to go.

Drones are loud. But in the strong ocean wind in the winter, it is not as audible. I just want to make sure that the surrounding area is safe, and I also don't want to dwell on the deck for too long.

"Everything is fine. I guess they also want to call it a night." I decide to recall the drone.

"Wait, hold on." Annie sees something. She points at a little white dot on the screen. She is right. There is something there. I control the drone to fly closer, and I can clearly see a



Panga. There are two fishermen on the Panga trying to set a gill net in the water. I want to check the GPS of the location when they look up and find the drone.

“Maybe the drone will scare them away.” I tell Annie, as I try to locate the panga. Annie suddenly seems really afraid and whispers.

“Oh shit.”

I look at the screen and I see one of the fishermen holding a shot gun. He is pointing the gun at our drone. Then he pulls the trigger. Everything goes dark.

“Shit. Shit.”

I collapse on the deck, trying to process what just happened. Someone shot our drone down, with a shot gun. Annie reacts faster than me. She gets her walkie talkie out and asks for assistance. The Navy sends out a boat after the poachers, but when they arrive the poachers are long gone.

I can't believe what I just witnessed today. We never thought that this could level up to such aggressive and violent events. Annie seems like she wants to check on me, but I don't want to talk about anything. I pat on her hand and go back to my room.

I can't sleep. Of course, I can't. How can anybody go to sleep after all this? For some reason I really want to shout as loud as I can. It's all the fear and negativity in my heart trying to get out at the same time. I bang my fist on the table. I need to calm down. It doesn't matter how hard today was, we always need to be ready for tomorrow.

After a long time of struggle, I turn my laptop on. Sometimes I find typing to be soothing. I like the sound of my mechanical keyboard. It calms me down. This is the kind of night when

I miss home. I miss everything about home, from the old curtain smell to the freshly baked apple pie by my mom and my grandma. I email them all the time, but I don't want to bother them with the difficulties that come with the job. There are so many times that I want to tell them everything and ask my dad what I'm supposed to do. But I can't do that. I am far away from home and the last thing I want is for them to worry, knowing that there is nothing they can do to help. I sometimes write my thoughts down. Everything that I can't tell my parents. Tonight, is definitely a big stroke on the pages.

Dear Dad,

I am afraid. I have been afraid before but not like this, not like today. I don't know how to describe how I feel, besides fear. I think my feelings are more complicated than fear, but I just can't find the words for it.

All of this for Vaquitas. Vaquitas, "little cow" in Spanish, has nothing to do with a cow.

Sometimes they are called the "Panda of the sea" thanks to a dark ring surrounding their eyes. That dark ring combined with patches on their lips and a line extends from their dorsal fins to their mouth. I would say that they are rather cute. Innocent, in a way. I never find them intimidating. I guess it's because they are not insanely huge. Unlike blue whales that can happily swallow Pinocchio with their gigantic mouth, vaquitas are smaller than an average person. The ladies, who are generally larger, can only get to about 1.4 meters in length. More or less like the height of a kid.

More or less like a kid.

I guess that's what I left home for. For those kids that desperately need protection. For those souls that disappear like bubbles every day. They are not meant to be killed.

Fishermen put gill nets in the Sea of Cortez trying to harvest another fish called Totoaba.

The swim bladder of those fish can be sold as expensive as gold. And the Vaquitas, are merely collateral damage. That is not fair. That is not right. I cannot sit back and watch the last Vaquita die. I need to fight. For once in my life I want to do the right thing and never stray from this path that I have chosen. I may not be a scientist. All I do is pull nets out of the water whenever we spot one. Fishermen plant the nets, and we pull them out. This wheel will just never cease turning.

So, pulling out gill nets. I probably make it sound easy right? As though we only have this one job. But I can assure you that this is no easy job. By the time you read this story there are probably fewer than 10 Vaquitas left in the world. And when I say 10, I am being damn positive. God knows if there are still any left out there. I know I haven't seen one in ages, dead or alive. Every day, scanning the water, pulling out nets, saving some small marine lives along the way. Not once, in a very long time, have I seen a Vaquita. I keep telling myself that's a good thing. It means that they are getting smarter and swifter. It means evolution has finally taken the wheel and the fittest get to pass down their knowledge and gill nets are no longer a big threat. That's good news. Or so I keep telling myself. But deep down, somehow, I'm scared. I fear that I am being too optimistic. What if there are no Vaquitas left anymore? What if not seeing any Vaquitas means that's it, time's up? This thought hovers above me like a ghost. You know about those nasty ghosts. You don't see a trace of them when there is broad daylight, you are hanging out with your friends, and everything is fine. But when the moonshines and you are alone in your cabin being taken over by your thoughts, those ghosts rush to you like an avalanche in a valley. You can't run and you can't hide. That's how I feel when I am alone at night. I can't get the thought of maybe there are no Vaquitas left in this world out of my head. It haunts me. It makes me ask myself why am I even doing this now? I go out on a good day and I go out on a bad day. I go out when the navy is touring the deck with guns, and I go out when it's so dark that I can't even see where my finger is. Fishermen chase our ship down and throw big rocks at us. Glasses broke. Noises everywhere. Our drones got shot down at night by guns. Yes, I have seen a lot. I am tough and I am confident. But I am still afraid of uncertainty and of injury and death. But what are all these sacrifices for if there are no Vaquitas left to save? I

need proof. I need hard evidence to tell me that what I risk my life to do has a purpose. Well nobody can give me that. All I have to hold on to is a thread of hope. But isn't hope what this is all about? I'm no superhero. I can't change the world with my bare hands. Hell, I can't even organize a net nicely on a bad day. That hope is all I have. Isn't that true for all those people working hard to save the planet, the species, and the world we promised to give our children some day? When that sweet west wind blows away the saltwater on my face, I am suddenly surer than ever, that everything will be better. If not now, then someday. That thread of hope is not much, but it's all we need to keep going forward.

I love you. Hope everything is going well at home.

Best,

Anthony

# 12

“**A**re you guys ready for the final presentation?” Andy walks into the classroom without his laptop and class notes. It looks like he is just preparing to sit back and watch the presentations.

I am doing the presentation with Julia. We have been talking about this Vaquita situation for a very long time. A lot of our focus is on how to prevent fishermen from fishing or putting gill nets in the water all together. We are so cynical about this entire fisherman situation, which after a couple of years, has been proven wrong and naïve. Through time I started to gradually understand why so many people call this a wicked conservation problem. There are lights and shadows, conflicts of interests. I used to think there were heroes and villains, that this situation is black and white. But I couldn't be more wrong. There is no good or bad. Everybody has their own story. There is always a story of the Wicked behind the Wizard of Oz. But I failed to know that until years later. Right now, we believe that if fishermen can get out of the water then the Vaquitas can heal themselves, which is also later proven not true. But we are college kids. We don't quite understand the world. We are idealist about a lot of aspects that are supposed to be complicated. But it does feel good to see that Julia and I share similar ideas through the creativity we generate.

“Gillian do you want to go first?” Julia nudges me. Both of us are the kind of people that want to go first and get the thing over with. I certainly have no problem with that proposition.

“I don’t mind. Let’s go.”

We are very proud of our PowerPoint slide show. We photoshop a top hat on every Vaquita photo we have in the presentation.

## Conservation Strategies, July 2016

### **Floating barriers**

Plan: Use floating barriers around protected areas, such as the Vaquita Refuge.

Rationale:

- Limits boat access, prevents illegal fishing.
- No underwater nets (free access to marine mammals)

Logistics:

- Gate for researcher and government access only
- Gate closed at night prevents illegal totoaba and gillnet fishing
- Include surveillance cameras to prevent break-ins.

Uncertainties:

- Costs
- Disruption to local subsistence fisheries

PC:

[http://www.marinebuzz.com/marinebuzzuploads/SurfaceBarriers\\_14F42/floating\\_security\\_barrier\\_midlantic\\_2.Nickg](http://www.marinebuzz.com/marinebuzzuploads/SurfaceBarriers_14F42/floating_security_barrier_midlantic_2.Nickg)

[http://whisprwave.com/wp-content/gallery/enhanced-veb/enhanced-vessel-exclusion-barrier\\_middle-east-2.Nickg](http://whisprwave.com/wp-content/gallery/enhanced-veb/enhanced-vessel-exclusion-barrier_middle-east-2.Nickg)

## **Captivity: In-situ Breeding/Open Ocean Pens**

### **In-situ:**

Plan: Catch and breed

Rationale: Prevents entanglement in nets, human interaction

Logistics:

- Look into successful case studies

Uncertainties:

- Animals reaction to capture
- Possibility of capture

### **Open Ocean Pen:**

Plan:

- Place vaquita in open-ocean pens for monitoring and breeding.

Rational:

- Open-ocean pens would be as close to their natural environment as possible in a captivity situation.

Logistics:

- Ideal location
- Technology for keeping animals within the area

Uncertainties:

-How to handle other animals that could be in the pens with the vaquitas

-Weather catastrophes

This method was implemented later in the operation called Vaquita CPR. The mission is to capture Vaquitas and put them in a natural enclosure in the middle of their natural habitat, so they don't feel very stressed by an environment that is drastically different from their natural living environment. The goal is to raise and breed Vaquitas in captivity and eventually allow the Vaquitas to go back in the wild for a population recovery. However, due to the stress that the Vaquitas have after being captured, scientists had to release the first Vaquita that they captured within a short period of time. And the second Vaquita they captured died in captivity very soon due to high stress level and disadvantages of old age, with the Vaquita being 23 years old. Hence the Vaquita CPR program was shut down.

## **Drone Monitoring**

Plan: Use heat-sensing drones for night-time monitoring during totoaba season

Rationale:

- Cheap
- Unmanned
- New models can fly up to 40 hours
- Can be used to monitor vaquita activity as well

Logistics:

- Drones can alert in case of body detection

Uncertainties:

- Prone to weather damage
- Air-space regulations
- Prone to hacking/attack
- Response time

This method was later used by Sea Shephard. They have drones out and scan the Vaquita conservation area. The drone will carry a video camera and the video is monitored live by the pilot. When the pilot sees fishermen setting or retrieving illegal gill nets, they will notify the captain and go to that specific area to remove the nest or send marine to hopefully arrest illegal fishermen. However in 2018, there have been incidents when fishermen shot the drone down with a shot gun.

## **Counter Surveillance**

Plan: using counter surveillance devices on drones to detect GPS signals on illegal totoaba gill nets and remove them asap

Rationale:

-GPS trackers

-Remove illegal gill nets

Logistics:

-Drones can sweep a large amount of -regions in the Gulf area

Uncertainties:

-The range is still quite small

-Pricy

PC: <https://www.spycatcheronline.co.uk/media/wysiwyg/Counter-Surveillance-Sweeps.png>

## **Reduce Fishing**

Plan:

- Complete ban on gill nets (achieved)
- Promote Aquaculture and commercial fishing in fishing villages

Rationale:

- No boats in the water
- = No excuse to deploy fishing equipment

Logistics:

- Campaigning and educating

Uncertainties:

- Success/Popularity
- Food security for subsistence fisheries

Right now, the complete zero tolerance area is decreased to a small rectangular area called the Vaquita conservation zone. That is the area that Sea Shephard patrol every day to remove illegal gill nets. But the removal process is not as fast as the speed of fishermen setting the nets. There are still Vaquitas getting caught in those nets even there are not a lot of them left. Nets are especially dangerous for the young cubs that have almost no practical knowledge as far as how to avoid being caught in the nets.

## **The Totoaba Approach**

Plan:

-Flood the black market with fake "Totoaba" swim-bladders from other fish.

-Another approach would be to develop an aquaculture field for totoaba.

Rational:

-If the Totoaba become more abundant then their value goes down as well as illegal fishing.

Logistics:

-Setting up aqua cultural facilities and finding proper locations as well as get funding and establishing markets.

Uncertainties:

-Will the Totoaba survive?

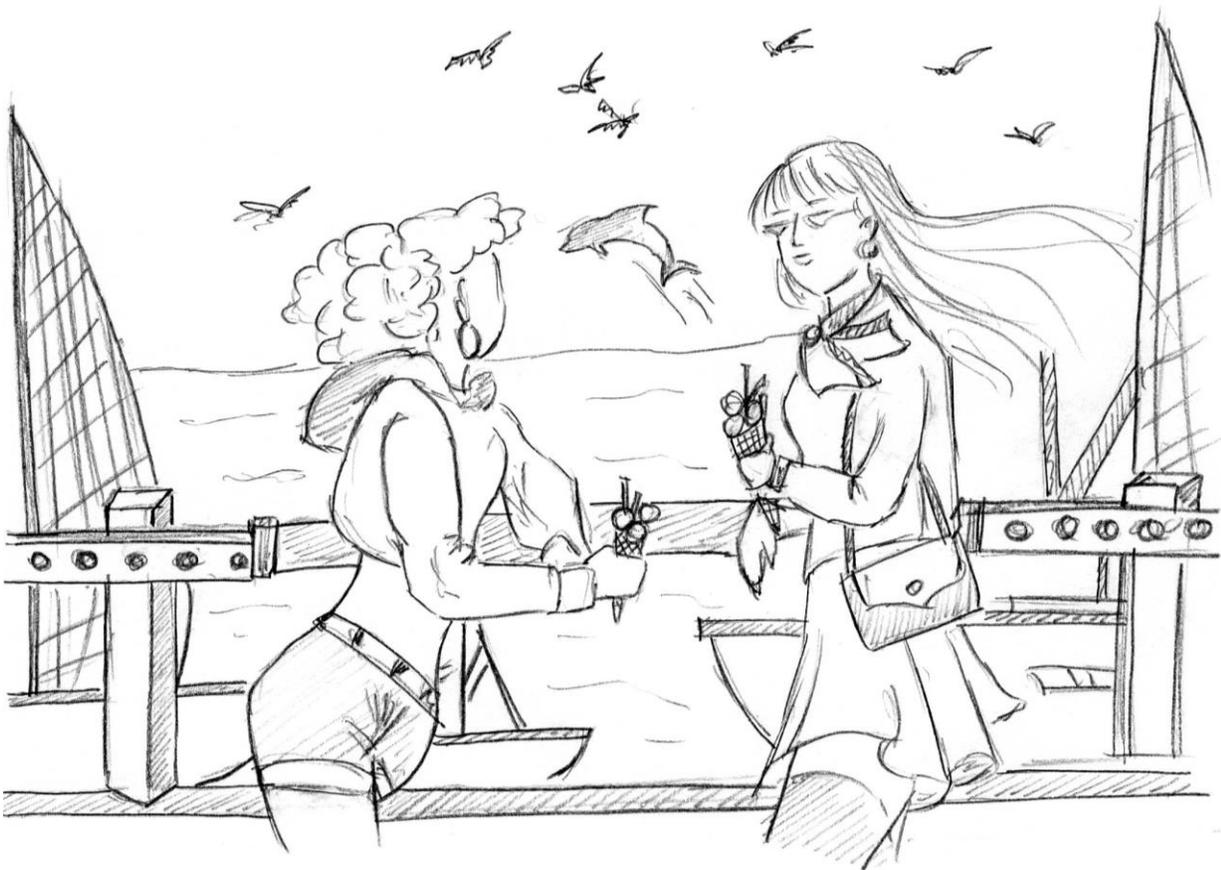
-Will swim-bladders pass as Totoaba?

The question remains, is it ethical to flood the market with fake Totoaba swim bladders? And how long will that last before people can tell what are the real ones and what are not?

Well there it is. Our grand plan. We are so proud of ourselves after giving the presentation. It is the kind of feeling that if we are into Vaquita conservation right now, we would have solved all the problems. Little do we know, the real world out there and what is waiting for us.

“Well we are officially done!” Julia stretches her arms and starts packing her bag.

“We are. All the classes are done, and we can have a couple of days off at the lab to tour around.”



“I heard there will be a pirate festival in town. We should go and check that out. It’s going to be exciting!” Julia loves pirate stories. She once seriously asked me to go on the cemetery ghost tour with her, which was an absolute NO on my end.

“Sure. Let’s go into town and see what’s going on.” After these last couple of days, I am going back to my school, and Julia is going back to hers. I don’t know when we will meet again or hang out again. I am sure that I will miss her. I hope that we can spend more time as roommates together, but time is a thief.

There is indeed a pirate festival in town. The town looks livelier than it used to be. There are kids on the boulevard eating ice cream, and friends on the patio for a cup of beer. The heat in August is less suffocating than midsummer. It is not hot enough to stay indoors and watch a movie marathon, but it is hot enough to stuff ice cream in our mouths. Summer is amazing. We can wear a life vest upside down and drink root beer floats at the swimming deck. We can make a dolphin out of sand. We can have an evening soccer game on the quad. We can see dolphins jumping around while travelling on a paddle board. Right now, at the pirate festival, everyone is grasping the last moments of the summer and having fun before heading back to school and heading back to work. All the stories, the thoughts, the ideas, and the emotions will eventually become a page in our book. When we think about it later, we will tell others the story that begins with “I remember that particular summer.”

I remember that particular summer, when a group of friends had their adventure on a little island. I remember that particular summer, when we were proud of our naïve yet ambitious ideas. I remember that particular summer, when we had so much ice cream that our stomach hurt. I remember that particular summer, when we made a sand dolphin and

were quite upset when the tide washed it away. I remember that particular summer, when we laid on the grass at 3am looking at shooting stars across the sky. I remember that particular summer, when I met awesome people and made great friends.

And then, that's it. We stroll on a seaside boulevard sharing a giant portion of snowball. We look at the ocean one last time before we go separate ways. Life will go back as it was before. There is nothing poetic about it. Everything will go on, and we will grow up. We will be stronger and more determined in following what we believe is the right way to go.

We finish up our ice cream and lean on the rail next to the sea. Julia looks at the distance and sighs. "Summer is ending, isn't it?"

"Yes, it is."























































**SEA  
SHEPHERD  
CREW**







# 13

**I**t is the count down for the Vaquitas. It's been some time since I was told that the artificial habitat for captured Vaquitas is ready for Vaquita CPR. I will finish up my work and fly to San Felipe as soon as I can. Most of the scientists that are in this operation have already arrived. We need to work together to figure out how to successfully capture a few of the last remaining Vaquitas and raise them in captivity. It is no easy task. And there have been no previous cases for marine mammals born in captivity that have been successfully released back into the wild. We can worry about that later. Right now, what we need is to save the species. We need to keep them alive.

"Dr. Hudson, this is Dr. Moore. She is the head vet for this operation."

I have exchanged some emails with her, but we have never met. She is an exceptional biologist and she will be in charge of the wellbeing of our Vaquitas, if we manage to capture one.

"Hi Dr. Hudson. You can call me Rose." Dr. Moore comes over and shakes my hand. "I was just about to go and look at the habitat for the Vaquitas. Do you want to head over together?"

"Sure. And you can call me Andy."

The habitat is not like an aquarium that is built on land. We section out a big area in the middle of Sea of Cortez and build a round enclosure that closely resemble the nature environment. We hope that the Vaquitas can get used to this environment and thrive under human care. But it all remains a mystery until we go out there and see if we can find any Vaquitas.

Our operation starts on the following day. We get on separate ships to spread out and look for the Vaquitas. Each boat has a couple of experienced biologists who are good at searching for wild animals in a marine setting. We hope that when they spot a Vaquita, we will use our specially made nets to capture them and bring them on the boat. After that we will bring them back to the habitat. If everything goes smoothly then we will decide on what to do next.

“I think I see one! Vaquita! Over there,” Ben suddenly shouts. I grab my binoculars and look towards the direction that Ben is pointing. He is right. That is a Vaquita. Even though we have narrowed down the area that the last Vaquitas are living in, I still never expected to find one on the first day.

“It is a Vaquita. Quickly, get the nets out!”

We have specially designed net that will hold the Vaquitas in without hurting or tangling them. We spread out the net between our two boats and hopefully we can block Vaquita’s way. In the best-case scenario, we will be in the way and the Vaquita will swim directly into the nets.

“Ok are the nets secure?”

“All good to go!”

We slowly follow the Vaquita and circles around it, trying to get it to swim into the center of the net. Vaquitas are no competition to our boats and it doesn't take us very long to get really close to it. We don't want to startle the Vaquita, so we try to communicate through gesture and slowly closing up the net.

“Wait what is going on?”

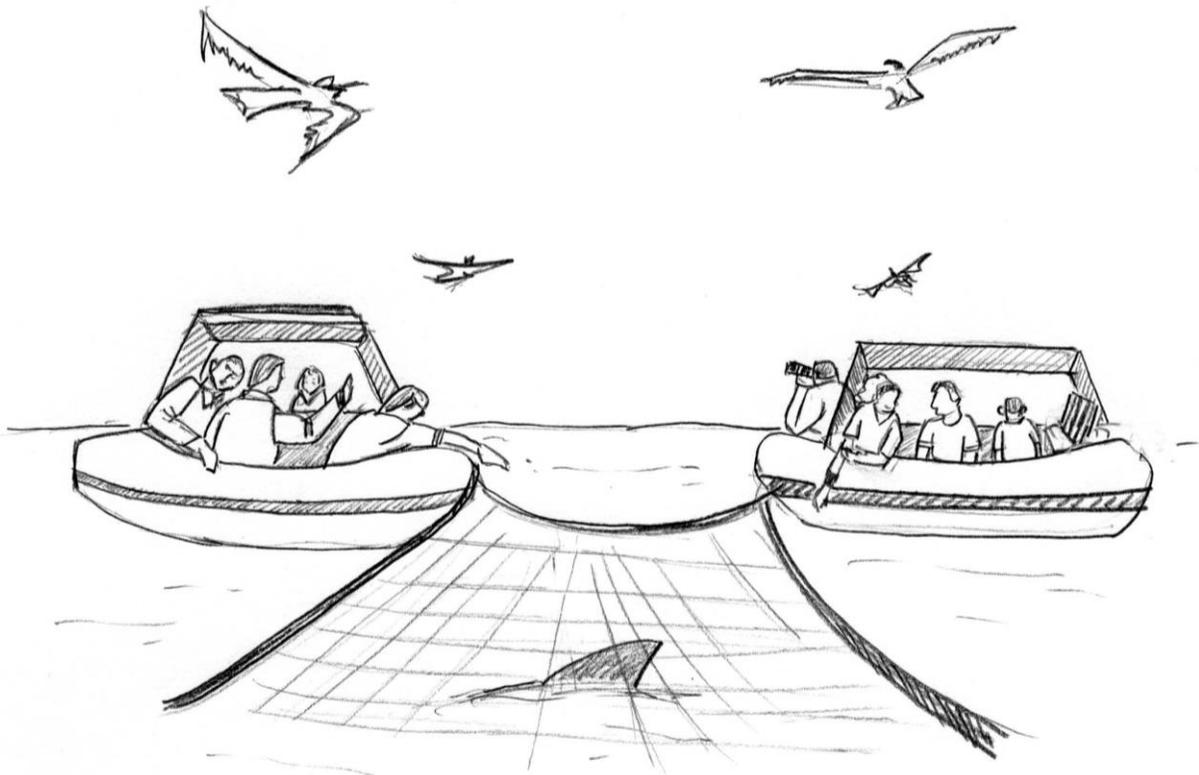
Something is not right. We can see the Vaquita travelling up and down at the edge of the net. Then suddenly it disappears.

“Take down the time, Ben. Maybe the Vaquita is just under there. He will need to come up for air soon.”

And then we wait quietly. I don't know exactly where it is, but I assume that it is somewhere between the nets. We just need to wait for it to come back up for air and then try to narrow the net.

Nothing is going on. It doesn't seem like the Vaquita is below the surface. The water in Sea of Cortez is not clear at all. We think that it is good for Vaquitas to hide so that dolphins, one of their predators, cannot find them and eat them. But it is not to our advantage when we are trying to locate a Vaquita. I can't see anything through the water.

“Is that the one?” Cheng, one of our team members, points towards a tiny dorsal fin in the distance. It is very hard to tell from the distance, but I am almost certain that it is a Vaquita. So, either the one we have escaped, or there is a new Vaquita right next to us.



“Pull the net up. I don’t think we have our Vaquita anymore.” I highly doubt that there will be two Vaquitas in such close proximity if they are not mother and cub. But if they are mother and cub then they shouldn’t be this far apart.

As we gradually pull the net up, it is empty. That confirms that the Vaquita that we saw far away is the same one that we almost captured. This is both good and bad news. Well, not really bad news, but we don’t yet have a Vaquita ready for human care. Good thing is that we now know that at least some Vaquitas have developed the ability to avoid and escape from nets. It means that the possibility of poachers getting Vaquitas as bycatch product is lower. This is wonderful news. But it means that we still have a heavy couple of days ahead

of us. If they know how to avoid nets, then we need to put a lot more effort into catching them.

It is summer and the days are long, but the long day does not give us any advantages. We pack up early to head back to the lab. We need to try our luck again tomorrow since the Vaquitas are more skillful.

It is not until the third day that we see a Vaquita again. It looks like a cub. The size of it does not look like it's fully grown. We want to look for the mom because if the cub is wandering around alone, the mom has to be somewhere close.

"Close the net! This is a young one. shouldn't be too hard to catch." Rose is giving orders to the assistants, while keeping an eye on the water just in case the mother shows up. The cub does not know how to escape the net and it doesn't take long before we secure it on the boat. We don't want to bring the cub with us by itself. We want the Vaquitas to feel comfortable in the artificial habitat. We want the entire experience of the Vaquitas in captivity to be as close to a natural environment as possible.

But the mother doesn't show up.

We don't know if the mother is watching from afar or if the mother has already been killed in one of those illegal gill nets. There is no way to tell, and we don't want to take any chances.

"We should let it go." I want to see what Rose thinks as well.

Rose seems a bit hesitant, but she knows that we can't risk separating the mother and the cub. If the mother is watching from afar then it would be a horrible act to take her cub from

her. And the cub will not last long in human care due to the degree of stress it might have when the mother is no longer with it.

We open up the net and the Vaquita quickly disappears into the cloudy water.

“Do you think it will go back to the mother?” Rose asks me.

“Let’s hope so. It is tough out there just by itself.” I truly hope that it will survive. And eventually maybe become old and cunning enough to avoid the gill nets. I guess we will see.

It turns out that fortune is indeed in our favor today. It is a gorgeous day and the ocean surface is so clear. We can see birds diving down to the sea from afar. Out of everybody’s expectation, we soon discover another black dorsal fin not far away.

“There! Over there! It’s another Vaquita!” Apparently, I am not the only one to spot the dorsal fin. I cannot believe our luck. Two Vaquitas in one day.

Just like the last time, we set the nets and start to slowly get closer to the Vaquita. This one is not swimming as fast and swiftly as the one we had before. Maybe it is due to old age. We can’t tell until we manage to capture it.

We are trying to approach the Vaquita as quietly as possible. It doesn’t seem like it is stressed or running away from us. We set the position of the boat so that we are surrounding the Vaquita and close the net down.

“We did it! I think it is trapped.” Cheng signals us that the Vaquita is contained.

“Don’t get too excited. We need to secure it on the boat and get it back to the facility.” Rose is the calm one. She directs the people on her boat to put the Vaquita on the stretcher. We

have a temporary tank for the Vaquita to be in so that it can be fully hydrated and less stressed. The last thing we want is for the Vaquita to stress out and suffocate.

As we carefully put the Vaquita down in the narrow tank, Rose is able to do a quick examination.

“She is a girl! I can’t believe it. We have ourselves a female Vaquita!”

There is no time to dwell. We need to call it a day and get the Vaquita to the facility as fast as possible. It is good that we are not too far away from the enclosure. We need to settle this one down, before we try to go out again.

Our enclosure is in the middle of the Sea of Cortez. It doesn’t take us long to get there from where we captured the Vaquita. Everybody gets off the boats so that we can carry the Vaquita to her pool, nice and steady. We decide to put her in the pool at the side so that the environment would not be too different from when the Vaquita is in the wild.

I cannot begin to say how proud I am to see our first captured Vaquita swimming around in her enclosure. Everything seems to be alright. But we still need to monitor her condition to see if everything remains in optimal condition, to see that if we can proceed and go back out there for more Vaquitas.

Nothing seems to be out of normal until night falls. I am just having dinner when Rose calls me.

“Andy you need to come over to the Vaquita. Something is not right.”

I can tell that Rose is very stressful if she gives me call like this. Something must have gone terribly wrong.

I rush over to the enclosure, and I see people running around. Cheng sees me and asks me to follow her. When I am at the Vaquita enclosure I find the condition of the Vaquita critical. Rose is in the water with the Vaquita, trying to calm her down. Rose sees me and swims over to the side.

“She is not doing well. She refuses to breathe.

“How long?”

“At least 15 minutes.”

That is not a good sign. If she keeps being nervous like this, she might not be able to leave. We cannot afford to lose another Vaquita. Not under our watch.

“We need to let her go.”

“But there is no time to get her back to where we found her.” Rose is concerned that the Vaquita is not going to hold on long enough for us to bring her to where she was captured. We typically release the Vaquitas back where we capture them. In this case, they will be returned to a familiar environment and have a lower chance to stress out.

“We don’t have the time anymore. We need to let her go now.”

Rose looks at me and understands that there is no other option. The vitals of the Vaquita are fainting. She is leaving us, one way or another.

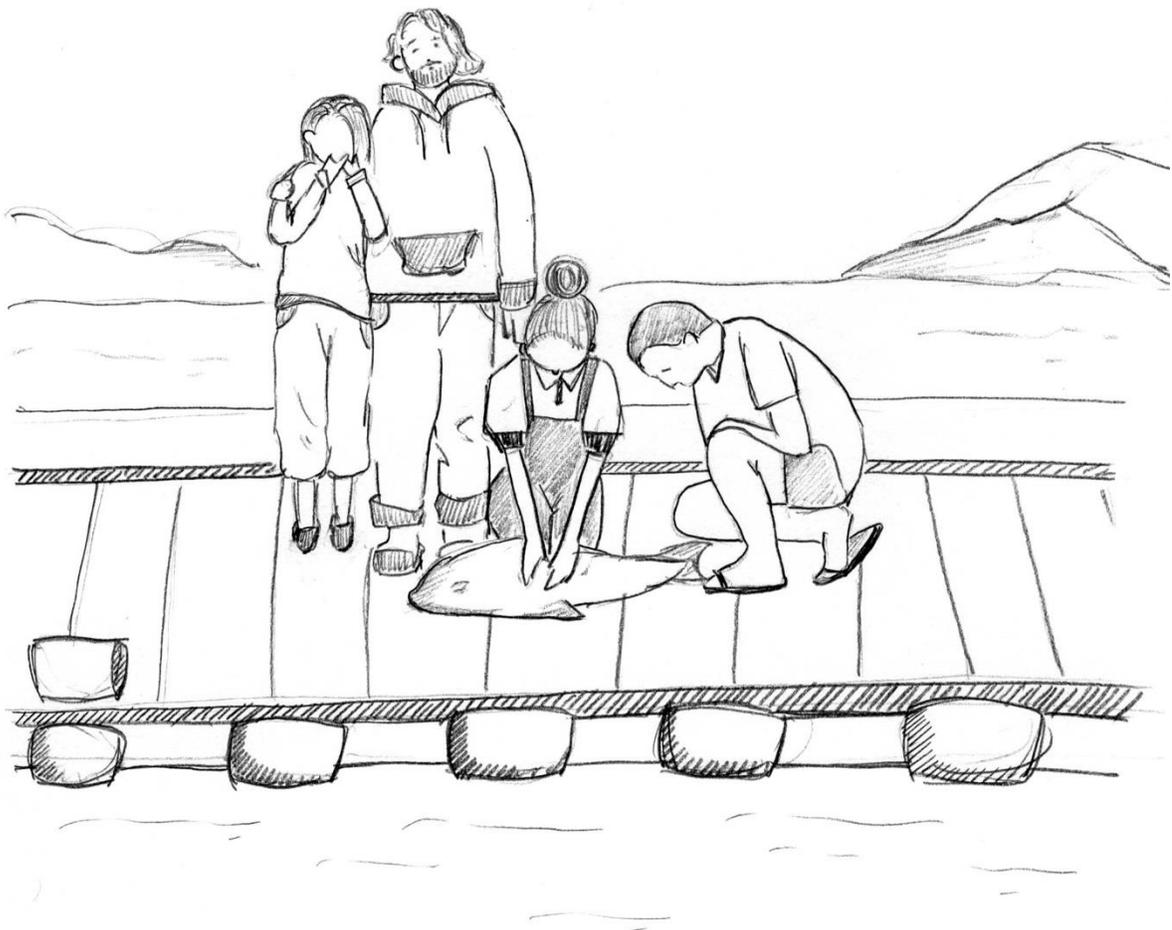
We don’t have time to fetch the container. It is good that she is in the section next to the open water.

“Ben, go get the stretcher!” Using a stretcher is the fastest way I can think of to take the Vaquita back in the sea. It is just a couple of steps away. I think we can make it.

We bring the Vaquita to the side of the enclosure and carefully put her on the stretcher. She is very weak.

“Ok, I will count to three and we’ll lift her up.”

“One, two, three.”



We lift her up in the air and run towards the sea. We put her in the water as soon as we reach the water. We pray that she can survive this.

She seems to hesitate a bit, and then starts to swim away. I can see Rose's hand crossing and the smile on her face. It is true that we were not successful in capturing a Vaquita for the CPR program, but it is still a win. At least the Vaquita lives.

I soon realize that I might have been too optimistic. The Vaquita suddenly turns around and starts to dash back. It comes back directly to the enclosure. We try to get her to go back to the open water, but nothing seems to work.

"You have to leave. You need to live. Go! Go!" It doesn't matter how Rose asks her to go away, she still lingers at our side. She is getting weaker and weaker. It's been too long since she took her last breath. Soon she is not responding to our action. Her life is fading.

Rose jumps into the water and starts to make her last attempt at CPR.

"Please, please don't go. You need to be alive. everybody needs you to be alive." Rose starts to mumble when doing CPR for the Vaquita. "Come on girl, stay with me, please, you can do this. Stay with me. Everything will be alright."

But it doesn't get better. I can't hear the heartbeat anymore. Rose is still making her last attempt, but it is too late. We are too late. We let one of the last 25 Vaquitas die in our care. Nobody wants that, but it is the hard truth.

Rose continues to do CPR until she realizes that there is nothing we can do. She is gone.

Rose climbs up on the floating sidewalk and sighs. Cheng is quietly crying, and Ben starts to walk around mumbling something I can't quite hear.

After a long pause of silence, Rose starts to speak. "Let's get her to the lab. We need to perform a necropsy on her." She is always the calm and strong one. She knows that mourning for the dead is of no use now. We need to understand more about them if we still want to save them. It is the right thing to do. We all know that.

There it is, the Vaquita, lying down on the surgery table. It is amazing how small it is. 100 pounds and that's it. We finish the necropsy quickly and quietly. It is a routine necropsy. We section her teeth and find out that she was about 23 years old and was at her last days regardless. We note down how many fats are in the blubber and how much blubber the Vaquita had. She is in pretty good physical condition. Stomach content is normal. Her diet consists of small fish, croakers, basically a whole bunch of small fish. Finally, we take a look at her reproductive hormones and tissues to see the stress levels. The result is not surprising. She was very stressed. That is what caused her suffocation.

This marks the end of this Vaquita, and probably the entire operation of the Vaquita CPR. We know that we probably need to shut this down. We cannot afford to lose any more Vaquitas, especially in scientific research settings. This is not the most mature operation because we do not have enough information on Vaquitas to have a thorough plan. All we did was perform necropsy on dead Vaquitas that were delivered to us. But that would only give us physiological features instead of behavioral features. There are just so many things we don't know about Vaquitas and each piece of information is critical in the conservation of this particular species.

I don't know what is waiting for us ahead. But I do know that I am not giving up yet. I am not done trying. As long as there is even the slightest thread of hope to recover the species,

I will grab it. We all will. The battle is not done yet, and even though there is not much time left for us, we are far from giving up.

# 14

“**M**anuel you need to tell me the truth.” Maria seems to be very upset after coming back from town. I haven’t seen her this mad for a very long time. I don’t understand what happened when she was out with her friends, but it’s something really bad.

“What is going on? Sit down and don’t be so mad at me.”

“There is no aqua farming company, is there?”

She knows. After all this time. I’ve been wanting to tell her, but I always think that it is not the right time. Maybe next time. I will tell her later. But now she knows, and not from me. I can’t begin to imagine how disappointed she must be. I promised her that everything would be alright, but now she has found out that I am not doing a legal job.

“I can explain...”

“How can you explain this? Do you know how in shock I am when I heard my friends telling me that you, my husband, is doing something...” She suddenly looks around and lowers her voice, “illegal?”

“I can explain. Listen.”

Maria stops me from saying anything further. “How long”

“A year after the fishing ban.”

“And it never occurred you to tell me about this? Have you thought about the girls? Have you thought about how they will think about you when they know that you are doing illegal fishing for the drug cartel?”

“I don’t have a choice.”

“You don’t have a choice? I was working back then. You could have kept looking for a job. Didn’t you tell me that everything will be alright, and we will figure it out? This is your solution?”

“I saw you at the beach boulevard.”

Maria suddenly stops speaking. She sits there and looks at me, she doesn’t know how to react to this. I know she also never meant for me to find out about that.

“But that’s different.” She finally starts to speak again. “My work was not ideal, but at least I was doing something legal.”

“Maria don’t be upset. Let me explain it all to you.”

I bring Maria over to the living room and settle her down on the couch. She seems to calm down a bit and is not as mad as when she walked into the room.

“Carlos told me about this job.”

“Oh, so that’s what he’s been doing all those times that we can’t find him.”

“Not exactly. He was not a part of setting it up. He just asked around and came to this chance. He asked me to join him, but I didn’t want to.”

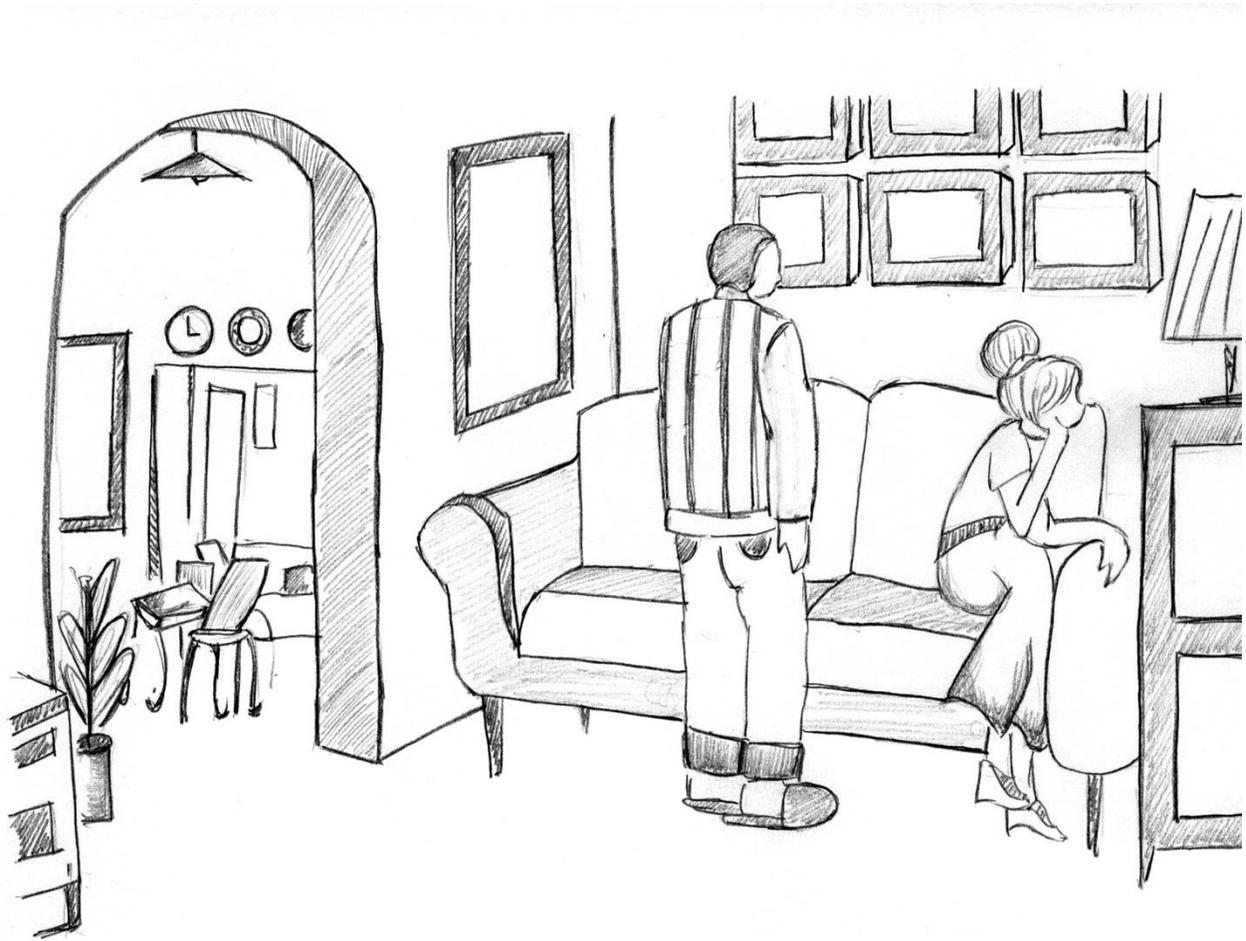
“You shouldn’t. You put everyone at risk when you did that. Have you ever considered us when you signed up for this?”

“Carlos showed me where you worked. And I could never bare to see you working in that kind of environment. You didn’t belong there. I needed to get you out of there and start to provide for the family again. And the girls are in school now. We will need more money than selling sunglasses and toys to afford their education.”

“But what if you are caught? Then who will take care of the girls?”

“I won’t.”

Maria clearly doesn't believe that. "How can you be so sure?"



"Because it is a win-win business. The government will not say no to a win-win business. This network is way larger than we think. Trust me, I won't get caught. As long as I keep going out there and keep catching some Totoaba fish, I will be able to pay off the loan for the gill net and earn some extra income in-between."

Maria still seems skeptical. She doesn't understand the connection within this entire network. She seems lost and confused. She gradually shakes her head and leans back on the couch. I slowly massage her head and ask her to trust me, nothing will fall apart.

“I promised you that everything will be alright. And it will. I never break a promise with you, right?”

Maria hesitantly nods. “I don’t have a choice but to trust you, do I? You are already so deeply in it.”

“We will be fine. We will make it through. As soon as I save enough money for our daughters, I will pay off the loan and stop. I promise.”

Maria puts her head in my arms and closes her eyes. “We are in this together. Even if something is going on, you will have us.”

I put my forehead on hers. “I know. I love you.”

“I love you, too. Don’t worry. I know what I am doing. Or to be more honest, we know what we are doing.”

“I know. I just hope that I can know more about everything. It is just a bit hard for me to have faith in everything when I hardly know anything.”

“I understand. I cannot ask for a better and a more understanding wife. Actually, come with me this afternoon. There will be a fisherman’s march. Carlos is organizing it and we will have some police officers there. It is a legit event. Everybody will be there.”

Maria stands up and walks to the kitchen to grab her apron. “I will stay at home now. The girls want to eat my beef stew.”

I know she needs time to process everything. Cooking calms her down and makes her feel better. Hopefully by the time the girls and I come home she will feel a bit better.

The fisherman's march will start at the entrance of San Felipe and end at the beach boulevard. Carlos organized the march and wants to make a stand for the fishermen at San Felipe to fight for the rights for us to have our livelihoods back. That sounds like Carlos. He doesn't hold back. When there is something going on, he will stand up and fight. He sometimes says that the reason behind this is the fact that he doesn't have a family. He is all by himself. Even if there are consequences due to his actions, he will not drag anybody down with him. I don't quite believe him when he says that. I think it is just in his spirit. He wants to fight for what is his. He wants to stand out to be the hero, not just for everybody else, but for himself as well. He used to say, when he was little, he was bullied and had to figure out how to survive by himself. His parents rarely asked what was going on with his life. He was the third and the youngest kid in the family, and he could never get the attention his brother and sister did. Maybe that was where it came from. He knew that nobody would fight for him if he didn't do it himself. He knew that it was important to hold his fate in his own hands. I admire him for being like that, but I don't think I would ever be like that. That being said, I can only show up for him and support him. After all, he is not just fighting for himself, but also for us.

Carlos rarely shows up early in events like this. He enjoys the sense of a grand entrance when everybody is already there. People are gradually arriving. Five minutes before the march starts, Carlos arrives in his pickup truck. He is wearing an orange shirt and his working pants. He comes over to me and pats me on my shoulder.

"I heard about Maria. Did she snap?"

"She understands. We will figure it out."

He nods, and then turns around toward the stairs. He walks to the top of the plaza slowly and steadily. I can see there are media and news reporters among the fishermen. I don't know where they are from or which side they are on.

"San Felipe sends you an S.O.S." Carlos has a very loud voice. We blame that for the clubbing, but in situations like this, his voice does sound very powerful.

"We can no longer survive like this anymore. We are also part of Baja California. Don't forget about us."

"For the reporters down there, all I can tell you is that I am a fisherman. I'm not going to give you a name or a face so that you can pin everything on me as if I am the bad guy that kills your precious little Vaquitas. Journalists keep taking out photos to raise controversy. You know there are dolphins and whales out there and people are killing them legally. Who is going to save them? Is Sea Shepard going to save them? Is CPR going to save them? And yet you all come here, to this small town to disturb our lives. We are fishermen. We fish for a living. We used to be able to feed our family with our own hard-earned money. And now what? We are no longer allowed to fish in our own backyard. And you blame us for standing up to fight. I think not.

Let me tell you this. The protection of the Vaquitas has cost the federal government hundreds of millions of pesos. That forced thousands of fishermen out of their normal fishing grounds, and if they can't afford to go out and catch fish, they are only receiving compensations from government. And how much would that be? There are 41 million monthly pesos that scatter the federal government month by month to compensate fishermen. And that was in 2017. They close up the Gulf for so long and what happened?



Nothing. Did they save the Vaquitas? Are they thriving and growing back to a lot of them? No, but the ban on fishing is going to screw us up. We are talking about thousands of families. And the little thing you are trying to save cannot even live on their own. We

sacrificed so much, and somehow; we are the bad guys again? How long are we going to keep sucking it up?

I'm going to give you a history lesson. There is this organization, CITES. Something about International Trade in Endangered Animals. So basically Mexico, America, and China are supposed to work together to stop Totoaba fishing and selling. So, they are going to take our gill nets out of the Gulf. Again. They are setting up zones, taking out our nets, and protecting the people that are doing that. Fishermen get arrested and prosecuted for what? Trying to feed their families. And this CITES thing. It asks our government to report to them every half a year. They are praising our government for making big commitments. Well they have all right. It's too much for us, and "insufficient" for the rest of the world. People say that the Mexican government might face international sanctions if the Vaquitas keep dying. Well, it's not all our fault that they die. They can't even recover by themselves without us touching them. Listen to this, I read this a bit ago: "If these new efforts don't roll out fast enough, or if the Vaquita continue to die, Mexico could conceivably face international sanctions that would prevent it from exporting some of its most profitable native plants or animals, specifically those species currently listed on what's known as CITES Appendix II. Blocking Mexico from legally exporting its Appendix II species—a step advocated for by several conservation organizations in the lead-up to CITES—is actually a pretty significant threat. More than 2,300 Mexican plants and animals appear on CITES Appendix II, including some coveted species and products such as bighorn sheep hunting trophies, mahogany wood, and shark fins." See how these small animals can do? It's like a huge wheel. What you call a ripple effect. And honestly this doesn't make much sense to me. The value of human lives and those porpoises. We made great sacrifice so that these

Vaquitas can live. And we are somehow the bad guys according to the media, filmmakers, and I guess, the rest of the world.

We stand up and fight, and you take photos and make movies about us. Making us the villains in the story. But who cares about our lives? You don't get to walk in and destroy our lives and call us the bad guys. I call it unfair. And we are asking for understanding. We demand change.”

Carlos raises his hand up high into a fist. I still don't quite know whether we are doing the right thing or not. I am just doing this for my livelihood. Maybe that is selfish thinking, but I have a family to think about. I appreciate Carlos for what he does, and I believe that I can speak for most of the fishermen that are in this march. We can't afford to think about right or wrong at this point. Our lives depend on it. This will be only one of the many fisherman's marches Carlos hosts. I know he won't stop until he thinks that justice is served. I am not an advocate like him, but I need to be here to support him. He is my friend, and he deserves to have a solid wall behind him that never falls.

# 15

“Anthony, wake up! Wake up!”

I can hear Annie banging on my door. I roll over and look at the time. It's 2 am. It is something important. I grab a random pair of pants to put on and open the door. I see a very impatient Annie looking at me.

“Took you long enough. Meet us at the deck.” She runs away and her voice hovers over the hallway.” Bring a jacket Anthony. It is a bit chilly. And your gloves!”

They must have found a net. When Annie is this unsettling, I know there are animals in it, live ones.

When I run over to the deck, most of the crew are there. Jose sees me arriving and then comes over to me.

“What's going on Jose?”

Jose points to where the spotlight is. “We found a gill net. There are Totoabas, many of them.”

“Still alive?”

“Yes. But our time is running out.” Annie suddenly comes out of nowhere and intercepts our conversation. She has buckets and stretchers in her hand. She is ready.



“Ok, we don’t have any time to waste. Let’s gradually drag the nets on board and cut the Totoabas free, one by one.”

“Got it.” The crew is getting into position. Jose runs over to take the lead in dragging the nets on board. They need to be careful to do it quickly, but also not harm the Totoabas.

“Anthony, I need your help to cut the Totoabas off the net.” Annie turns to me as I am preparing sea water for hydration for the Totoabas. I carry the last bucket of sea water on board and take a pair of scissors. In the meantime, there is a decent amount of net on board. I can see the tip of a Totoaba coming up.

“Here is one!” Jose yells, and I immediately run over. I help Jose carry the Totoaba and put it on the deck. Jose dashes back to help with pulling the net after the fish is placed on the deck. As Annie and I cut the net off, we can see the Totoaba moving more and more. It even has the strength to jump. We want to make sure that the nets are all gone, so Annie does a final round of checking while I pour sea water on the Totoaba to hydrate it. The Totoaba is jumping out of control.

“Stretchers! Put it on the stretcher!”

I’ve never really felt the size of the Totoabas. Totoabas are heavy. I roll the fish on to the stretcher, and Annie grabs the stretcher and runs to the edge of the boat. She throws the Totoaba overboard and watches it swim away.

“Woooooooooo!” Annie bursts out her signature sound for excitement. I look at her and remember why I am always amazed by the strength she has when it comes to saving an animal’s life.

Then there comes the second one, then the third one. We can’t tell how many Totoabas there are. All we see is a long line of gill net with Totoabas caught in it.

“Anthony, grab its tail! I am not done cutting yet.”

Annie is struggling with probably the biggest Totoaba we have seen in this batch. It is a fighter alright. I need to hold its tail still while Annie tries to get rid of the last piece of net from its mouth.

“Oh my god don’t move! It’s just a little bit more!” Annie seems really frustrated. “There! I got it! You are free to go.”

When Annie lets it go to grab the stretcher, the Totoaba starts to move rapidly. I need to hold it in my arms so that it doesn’t bump into anything else to injure itself.

“Annie there is no time for a stretcher!” I stand up with the fish in my arms while fighting its tail. I can’t hold it any longer. I run to the side of the ship as fast as I can and throw the Totoaba overboard.

“Yesssssss!”

“Well, I guess we will do without the stretcher from now on.” Annie winks at me while getting ready for the next fish.

“Right. Now Anthony is our official ‘Totoaba carrier’.”

“Right, right. These guys are heavy if you ask me.” Now that I am at the rail, I might as well fill those buckets with sea water again. “This job doesn’t get any better than this.”

I don’t quite know how long we have been working. Everything happened so fast. With every scream of victory, a Totoaba is back in the water. Before we know it, we save 25 Totoabas in this one single net. I am almost burnt out of my midnight oil when Fern says: “That’s it! We are done!”

The entire net is on board and all 25 Totoaba are alive and kicking as we toss them overboard. Everyone starts to scream, whistle, and hug each other. Captain Antonio gives a celebratory honk for us. I finally get the time to check the time and it is almost 4am.

Annie finally catches her breath.

“Well, that is conservation in action, right there!”



She can rarely get happier than this. Her smile, when we manage to save some animals, even if it is just a jelly fish, is like the brightest I have ever seen.

“Good job Annie. Don’t know what we are going to do without you.” Jose is busy cleaning up the deck and organizing the gill nets for storage. “Now that we have saved probably a considerable percentage of the entire species, we need to celebrate!”

“By going to sleep you mean.” Annie yawns and starts to head back. “I can feel so hyped when I am in the middle of a rescue mission, but the sleepiness always catches up to me.”

This is just another day in the life at Operation Milagro. Ever since the day we began, we have taken around 900 nets out of the ocean, 1200 kilometers out from the Vaquita habitat, and that amount of net is worth around 1 million dollars. We saved around 3600 animals along the way and witnessed countless deaths. The number of Vaquitas is declining, and I know that we are not in a good place. Not long-ago Sea Shepherd paired with scientists from CONNAP for a quest to find the last remaining Vaquitas. I didn’t get to go there, but I did see the footage they brought back. They have acoustics and visuals proving that the Vaquitas are still out there, and they deserve to be saved. I am just a speck of dust in the universe that surrounds the life and death of Vaquitas. There are so many efforts going on at the same time. I know that the Vaquitas are not in a great place right now, and they are not as resilient as many other species like elephant seals and such. But that is precisely why they need us to help them survive.

Captain Antonio told me that there will be different documentarians on board throughout the next fishing season. I promised Captain Antonio that I would help them as much as I could. I think it is important for people like them, including our own photographers and videographers that have been helping us in the campaign. The world needs to know about the Sea of Cortez and the amazing animals that call it home. Vaquitas shouldn’t be the

mystical animal anymore. They exist and they deserve our attention. As long as there are Vaquitas breathing out there, there is hope, and this thread of hope is what we are here fighting for.

It is almost dawn. The sun will rise, and a new day will start. I don't know how many dawns away before we can finally see Vaquitas roaming the Sea of Cortez freely and happily. What I do know is that before that day happens, I will be here on this ship, fighting for the right for Vaquitas to live and thrive. That little thread of hope is good enough for me to get up every day and get to work. I am telling you, that day will come. Just you wait.



























































# 16

I landed in the Mexicali airport late in the evening. It was dark outside. The plane was not connected to the terminal, so we had to walk downstairs from the plane and walk to the terminal. I had a heavy suitcase with my camera, tripod, and three lenses carefully packed. It was not an easy journey carrying that suitcase all the way down the plane into the terminal. Good thing there weren't a lot of people at the airport. There was a cute golden retriever at the baggage claim that brightened my day after the long flight.

We rented a small Volkswagen and went on our way. We should have rented an SUV or something of that kind. Hell, we should have rented a tank if that was an option. The two-hour drive to the Airbnb was a rough one. There was only one road so there was really no way to get lost. But the road outside the airport was a long, dark, dirt road. And it was a bumpy one. I used to be able to sleep pretty nicely on a car, but that drive was no ordinary drive. It took only a minute or two for me to bump my head somewhere in that car.

Repeatedly. After a good while we arrived at a toll collecting station and then we were gladly driving on a highway.

Being in Mexico for the first time we didn't know there was such a thing called military check point. You don't see that on Trip Advisor. "One of the local attractions between Mexicali and San Felipe is the military check point. In there you will have a chance to

experience the most authentic Spanish conversation and see a selection of military guns.” No. There is no such thing like that anywhere. It is extra hard when the only Spanish word we knew how to say was “Si”. I remembered the face of that military personal when he opened my suitcase and all he saw was cameras and gears. I guess he didn’t know why a young couple would take a load of camera gear and drive to San Felipe in the middle of the night. But all was well. We only stopped briefly at the military check point and was back on our way.

There were no cars on the road. Not at all. We were used to the North Carolina traffic and even if it is in the middle of the night there would still always be some cars on the road, lighten the road up with their front lights. But over there, it was pitch dark. I remembered seeing silhouette of gigantic mountains in between my brief naps. It was beautiful. I was so tired and almost didn’t get a single minute of sleep on the flight. I was too tired to even think about what to expect for the next week in San Felipe. I was in between dosing off and waking up for the entire two-hour drive. Then I saw a little locked gate with a faint flashlight next to it. The gate looked old and rusted. When the gatekeeper opened up the gate to let us in, I could hear the cracking sound from the apparently not lubricated gate. We drove down a narrow sandy road and saw our bungalow by the sea. It is such a small house. There are RVs all over the place. I was so ready to finally stretch my legs after a whole day of travelling. I opened the door and moved myself to the ground. I could smell the sea. It was my absolute favorite smell. It smelled like home. I knew everything will go well. Or at least I know regardless what happened, I would figure it out.





Remember about a page ago I said something about smelling the ocean and everything seemed would be alright?

That's some bull shit. That is a romantic imagination and an absolute lie. It was not going well.

I've been in contact with the Sea Shepherd members of Operation Milagro V for a couple of months before I arrived in Mexico. The deal was that a ship would pick me up every morning, send me on the boat and drop me off every evening. I could be on the ship for multiple days to finish a documentary film about their conservation operation. Sea Shepherd has always been my favorite conservation organization. My first-time hearing about Sea Shepard was a month before I started school at the Marine Lab. I met a guy in Berlin, someone I really liked. He taught me how to use my first DSLR camera. One sunny afternoon we bought a beer and lied on our backs on a grassy hill. He told me that one day he wanted to become a photographer for Sea Shepherd and sail across continents. It was such a romantic thought. I was deeply intrigued. Everything about them was mysterious and cool. I remembered at summer in Marine Lab one of my friend had a T-shirt with Operation Milagro V logo on it. She said she used to be a volunteer for that operation which was all about saving the Vaquitas. That romantic thought combined with those amazing stories made me really looking forward to my couple of days on that ship.

So, the morning after my arrival, I woke up way before my alarm clock. I was probably early enough for a beautiful beach sun rise. I started to take my gears out and check each of them to see if everything is fully charged and ready to go. I revisited some questions that I wanted to ask them and contemplated whether or not those were actually some good

questions to ask. It felt like forever when I finally decided that it was “late” enough to text Nick, my contact in San Felipe, to ask about the details regarding this collaboration. I carefully selected the words to text him so it would be polite, and it wouldn’t sound like I was rushing him or something. After reading through that text for like a couple hundred times I pressed “Send”. I waited for that reply text like I waited for a boy I like to text me back. And what I got was a breakup text. I was told that I might not be able to get on the boat at all. There was no guarantee, but he could try to get me on there for a day, if schedule permitted.

Hell, I was mad. This was supposed to be my thesis. THESIS. It was basically defined as something I needed to do in order to graduate. And I had been looking forward to doing this project before I even applied for graduate school. I bought some expensive tickets, flew all the way from east coast to Baja California, and all I got was this?

I tried to reason with him about what we agreed on before.

“Well you just need to learn to adjust to the situation.”

Excuse me?

I didn’t come all this way to “adjust to the situation”. But regardless what I say, there was nothing much I could do.

I put my phone down and did some random yoga breathing thing. It was supposed to have calming effect. Well it wasn’t really working. But I needed to calm down and figure out what to do. I couldn’t just give up on my thesis. I needed to figure out another way. Because what I wanted was to investigate the wicked conservation problem of the Vaquitas. It didn’t

have to be a film. It also didn't have to be all about Sea Shepherd. To be honest, I was desperate. All I knew was that I needed to do every possible thing I could to save this project. And who knows, maybe I would find something else that was incredible throughout my week here in San Felipe.

With that in mind I asked Nick if there was any event that were related to Vaquitas that I could photograph, and if there was anyone that knew Vaquitas I could talk to. Nick has been extremely helpful with that. He pointed me to exactly where I should go and who I should talk to. It was, to be very optimistic, a beam of light that was very much needed.

I spent quite a while trying to convince myself to look at the bright side of this. To believe that there would be unexpected gifts along the way. In the meantime, I booked a whale-watching trip because why not? Now that I was there, I planned to utilize all the resources I could and to find Vaquitas with my own way. That random confidence came out of absolutely nowhere, but I think my past self would be really glad to know, that we made it work eventually. And it worked unexpectedly well.

I have to say, the sea at San Felipe is awfully nice. I can never say no to a nice ocean breeze. Me and David decided to go out for a stroll. There was a nice little street by the sea with restaurants and merchants side by side. The restaurants were pretty much empty. There were some occasional tourists that decided to sit down and have some local delicacy, but most of the time there were more waitresses than guests. Maybe it was because we were not there at their peak season. It was February and the weather were still chilly. The water was too cold for almost anyone to swim in and there was certainly no chance for anyone to get a perfect tan line yet. But I like the quiet. Being able to escape the noisy and rude urban life is not bad at all.

We sat down at a restaurant. Lots of restaurants on that street do not have gates or walls. The entire establishment is open so people can walk in whenever they want to without have to find an entrance or a door. This design also allows people to have a perfect view of the street and the ocean. It is like a win-win architectural design. David and I were attracted by the photos on their menu. Octopus, shrimp, grilled fish and many dishes that we have never seen. After we sat down our first obstacle appeared. We were sitting there, holding two menus that were completely written in Spanish. There is a reason behind the existence of menus that have pictures of food in them. Now would be a good time to have one of those. I don't how long we eventually take to figure that menu out, but we are almost finishing our chips and salsa. When our dishes come up, I have to say, I know that all the google translate is worth it. I got a beef stew and David got a fish. We are in Mexico, but the food somehow really reminds us of home in China. It is interesting and surprising how dishes in different cultures can be similar sometimes. But they are all satisfying food. Nothing really beats a warm stew on a chilly day.

After a satisfying meal we started to wander around looking for things to do and to photograph. It is surprising how many merchants there are comparing to how many tourists are on the street. Honestly, I think we are the only “tourists” on the street that day. Now that I am not really doing anything according to my plan, we might as well do some sightseeing and tour the town for a couple of hours. Between people carrying buckets of sunglasses, children’s toys, and jewelries to sell, we spot a person selling handmade bracelets with wools. He asks me if I want a bracelet and he can weave words on the bracelet as well. It will have a rainbow color and it will be pretty. It’s not like we are actually planning to do anything. We agree and start to watch him work. It is remarkable really, seeing him navigating himself between the colorful wools. It doesn’t take him long before I see my dog’s name Hazel appearing on the bracelet. I try my best to figure out how he manages to make a pattern like this so quickly, but I am lost after a couple of minutes. Before I get to catch up again, he is already done. He looks very proud when he hands the bracelet over to me. He is right. It does have the color of rainbow and it is very pretty. He carries everything he needs to make bracelets with a backpack, and he has a folding board with him that displays dozens and dozens of bracelets that he has made as templates. That folding board looks absolutely stunning. In winter seasons like this there are rarely any tourists. When he doesn’t have businesses, he would just sit by the ocean, weaving a rainbow bracelet to put on the folding board. After watching him work I think calling him merchant is quite an understatement. I would call him a craftsman. It is amazing how far you can go when you dedicate a good part of your life doing one craft. It might look trivial, but it takes more than a lot of people are willing to offer. Everything moves fast and there are more things unknown and sometimes it might seem like a good idea to go out to the

world and learn about everything that is going on because we have the resources and the technology. But when we are busy chasing the vast amount of knowledge and skills, we lose the ability to really sit down and finish a simple task that requires vast amount of focus and dedication.

“You know what David? Now that we are wandering around in San Felipe, we might as well go see cactuses!”

“I did find that there is a giant cactus park closer to where we live.”

“So, did I. That’s why I propose in the first place.”

There we are, venturing into the land of sand and mountain and cactus. I have never seen cactuses this big before, at least not in person. They are the size as if in one of those Japanese anime shows that can provide a roof for those who are having an adventure in the desert.

“David look over here! I have to get close to this one!” I see a gigantic cactus around 50 meters away from the road. I ask David to park the car and starts to head over.

“Gillian there might be snakes!” David seems hesitant to go in with me, and apparently, he thinks that it is not the best idea for me to go in.

“Don’t worry! No snake can really get to me yet!”

David goes back to the car and murmurs. “After you say that you will definitely be fucked up by snakes someday.”

He will realize that he is right in about 4 months. But that is a story for another day.

After a messy journey I finally reach that cactus. I can see the setting sun streaming in through the gaps within the cactus. It casts a giant shadow behind me. I am constantly amazed by how mother nature can create wonders like this and looking at this cactus is one of those moments.

David seems very concerned when he sees me walking back.

“You look horrible.” He comments as he looks up and down.

That is when I realize how messy I am. I have leaves attached on my shirt and shoes. My pants have thorns on them and there is a little bug in my hair.

“Well I guess that is the cost of seeing cactuses!”

That is not the real cost at all.

When David and I are finally driving out of the park, we suddenly discover that our car is not moving.

David asks me to stay in the car while he gets off and sees what is going on.

“Shit.”

That is the single word I get from him. I quickly put my camera away and gets down on his side. There is it. Our wheel is stuck in a sand pit, a pretty deep sand pit.

“Do you think we should push?”

It turns out to be a bad idea. We basically try everything we can do. We push, we try to put stones under the wheel so that we can drive out, we try everything we can think of. But all of the effort just makes the car goes a bit deeper in the sand pit.

“Should I call the police?” I ask David.

“But you don’t speak Spanish.”

“It is the police station. Someone bounds to speak English.”

How naïve I am.

“#\$%^Y\$#GBTHU^\$%\$#TG”

“I am sorry do you speak English?”

“^&^&UTE#^\$%^\$%&%^TW#%Y”

“I am so sorry, but I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Wait.”

And then there is this long pause for a couple of minutes.

“Hello how can I help you.”

Finally! “Hello. We are tourists and our car got stuck in a sand pit in Valle De los Gigantes in San Felipe. We need some help.”

The person on the other side of the phone clearly does not understand what I just said. “San Felipe?”

“Yes. Valle De los Gigantes in San Felipe.”

“Ok wait there. We will send someone.”

Wait that’s it? I am impressed. I happily get off the car and tell David the news.

“I guess we just have to wait.”

Then we watch the beautiful sunset together. Then another 30 minutes pass. There is no sign of help.

“We can’t just sit here and wait anymore. I remember that where we are is not that far away from the door. I will run over and see if anyone is there.”

“Ok be careful.”

David is gone for a very long time. I can’t reach him because his phone has no signal. Who would have thought a brand-new iPhone cannot connect to anything while my old one can?

Just when I am complaining about this phone condition, I receive a phone call.

“Hello, this is the police department. Did you just call?”

“Yes, I did. I am still here waiting for someone to help me.”

“Can you tell me where you are again?”

“Yes. I am at Valle De los Gigantes. I don’t think I am far away from the entrance.”

“San Felipe?”

“Yes, I am sure that I am in San Felipe.”

I am pretty sure that they still don’t understand half of what I say because it is the same thing with me.

After around 20 minutes I finally see David running towards me with help. I am so glad that we are finally going to get out of this place until I see the help David brings. David, my

dearest boyfriend, brings back one person with a shovel. I have a feeling that we are going to spend the night here.

Out help does not speak English, either. But David, miraculously, seems to know what he is doing.

“#%#^%YHSTH^&U^Y%^TFDG”

“Ok sure.”

“HTY%^&#%\$^\$ET#\$&&(\*^(&^W\$%(&\*)POYE”

“Gillian, he asks you to try to hit the gas.”

Ok. Just how the F does David knows what that means? To my knowledge he doesn't speak Spanish at all. Is that what we call magic?

My phone rings again. It's the police again. They seem like they are lost, and I just decide to let someone else explain the situation. With that thought in mind I hand the phone over to the gatekeeper.

“%^\$&%\$^&%^W\$%&”

“%^%^RT&J\*%^&W#TSTY^Y\*I^&”

After a short conversation he gives my phone back. He tries to explain what is going on.

“#%\$%Y^&^%&. Different San Felipe. \$%#%^WSRGSRY\$%&^RY”

There is a different San Felipe? How am I supposed to know that?

Well I guess the police is not coming any time soon. Now we have three people and a shovel. Sounds like a golden team right there.

The gatekeeper sudden seems like he thinks of something. He quickly says something to David and then runs off. I am in shock when David explains to me what he said.

“He said that there was a phone in his room, and he could contact the local people and they had a pickup truck.”

“Just how in the hell can you understand what he said?”

“Gestures.” David always makes everything looks super easy to do. How he does it is beyond me.

“Well I guess now we wait.” I roll down the window and we can clearly see a sky full of stars. It going to be damn romantic if we are not currently stuck in a sand pit.

Luckily cavalry comes fast. We see a dim light beam coming from afar. When it gets closer, we can tell that it is from a red pickup truck.

“Hello I am Julio. We will get you out of here.”

He pulls out some ropes and a gigantic hook out. I might be wrong, but it looks like one of those pickup truck that drag pangas on shore. He secures the hook on our car and asks me to go into the driver’s seat.

“Wait I can’t do it! I don’t know how to do this. I might hurt someone. “

David comes by the window and tried to calm me down. “It’s going to be fine. All you need to do is to press the gas when we ask you to. You got this.”

Ok. Just the gas. I'm a decent driver. I can do it.

"Ok one, two, three, pull!"

"Gillian, the gas!"

I press the gas gently and hopefully it will work. The wheel is turning but far from enough.

"Gillian, the gas. All the way down!"

All the way down? I really don't want to hurt anybody because I can see the sand flying everywhere when I pressed the gas last time.

"You know what, fuck it. Here it comes."

I press the gas all the way down and I can see a sandstorm forming at the back of the car.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

I am counting in my heart because I am nervous. Just when I count to four, the car starts to move. Before we know it, the car is completely out. I jump off the car and can barely believe that we made it. Julio gets the hook off our car and double checks if everything is alright.

"Don't fall off again friends!"

Oh no we are not falling in the pit again. On our way back, we see a police pickup truck coming at our way and rushes towards where we came from.

“You know David, it would be fun if that car is for us.”

“Yeah. Don’t think it would be such a coincidence.”

“Yeah, me neither.”

Just when I am about to play some music, my phone rings.

“Shit, no way.”

“It’s can’t be.” I put the phone on speaker. “Hello?”

“@#%TGE^\*%T&KW\$%HY\*I&\*”

“I am sorry, but I don’t speak Spanish.”

“Hello, we are the Police. We are here to get you?”

I can see David trying to hold back his laugh. I pinch his leg to stop him.

“Thank you so much for coming but we just found help and we are out now.”

“Oh ok. Have a good night. Bye.”

When I put away the phone, David and I look at each other for a good second then start laughing. We can’t believe that just happened.

“This is so movie scene. I can’t believe that the car is really for us.”

“We should keep driving. Kind of don’t want to meet that police car again.”

It would seem that we haven’t been stuck in that sand pit for as long as we think we have.

When we arrive at a bar it is not yet 9 pm. The bar is not busy at all. Including us there are maybe three occupied tables. We have been to a decent amount of San Felipe restaurants

and I have to say that I enjoy every single dish I have ever had. The food over here is the reason why I come to the seaside boulevard all the time.

“Hey Gillian, look over there.” David points to the direction of the San Felipe plaza just when we walk out of the restaurant. It is really loud over there. There are a couple of different bands and karaoke playing at the same time. Young people are drinking and dancing with the music. Before I can pull out my camera, I see someone grabbing David.

“Come and dance together man!”

The guy is clearly drunk. Maybe 9:30 is the time to get drunk here in San Felipe. This is probably the noisiest time San Felipe has ever been since David and I arrived. It is amazing seeing the town come alive when all these young and energetic souls gather around and dance to a street band. There is nothing more vibrant than getting drunk and dance like nobody is watching. It is nothing grand. All of the spirits, and energy, the joy, lie in the trivial matters of seemingly uneventful life.





Waking up, not knowing what to do and what to photograph, Nick texted me saying that he knew a person that has seen probably more vaquitas than any other person in the world. He thought maybe I should talk to that person. Honestly, I have been waiting for an introduction like this. I have always wanted to talk to someone who has actually seen Vaquitas from their rise to fall. And if there are videos and photos of vaquitas that would be just amazing. Nick gave me Martin's contact and asked me to directly go ahead and contact him. I was both happy and excited but when I have that sort of emotions, I also could become impatient. I texted him in the morning, telling myself that I shouldn't be expecting too much. He was not going to text me right back, because after all, he was a very busy person according to Nick.

Having that in mind I tried to persuade myself not to make a fuss about it and have some patience for the guy to reply. However, I just could not sit there and patiently wait for his text. I had to do something to distract myself from thinking about it all the time. I opened the blind of our little house and saw the ocean. It was low tide and the water was so far away from me. I remembered when I was little, I used to wake up very very early for the low tide, and then went out with my cousin and grandma to look for little crabs or shells. I missed those days when I could do that. I asked David to go out with me for a stroll and he wanted to try out our drone as well. So, we took our shoes off and headed out.

It was chilly, the normal February weather I assume. The wind was a bit too cold and too strong for anyone to go for a swim. The beach was almost empty. We started to walk towards the shoreline looking for interesting things on the beach. I picked up a couple of shells but almost all of them were alive. They were stranded because of the low tide. I

brought them to a nearby shallow water hole and from that point on they were on their own. If they made it back to the ocean after the tide rose, then great. If they were not lucky enough and became the food for a bird, then it was the circle of life. The life of a shell was not something I could control. After walking a bit, I found a dead fish. I didn't know how that fish died. It looked like it has been dead for a while and no bird wanted to take it as food.

David decided to walk back and test out the drone. He was very excited about the drone and has been wanting to try it out for some time. We walked back towards the house to look for a smooth surface for the drone to take off and land. David started the engine of the drone. It was really loud. The drone went up in the sky really fast. David was holding the remote like he was playing with a remote-controlled car as a kid. We took some cliché selfies and looked around the town. It was different from up there. Those drone photos gave me a better perspective of the town. Just when I was enjoying the fancy drone photos I took, Martin texted back. Finally. He asked if I had time right now to meet with him. He was in his office.

Ok I have been waiting for almost a day for him to reply and I already made peace with the fact that I needed to reschedule to meet with him another day. And he wanted to meet at that moment. I was on the beach, bare feet and half of my pants were wet. And he wanted to meet with me now. My brain was blank for a brief moment and then I started to rush back to our house like Captain Anthony Sparrow being chased by an army on a beach in Pirates of the Caribbean. If you ever try to run fast on a beach, you will look like that. There is no elegance in that.

Good thing it didn't take me long to get changed and Martin's office was not super far away. I soon arrived at a parking lot in the middle of nowhere. I wanted to ask Martin where exactly he was because there was no sign and nobody to talk to. Martin, very conveniently, stopped texting me back. There I was, by myself, in an empty parking lot in front a building that looked like it was going to be teared down real soon. I was confused and texted Nick, asking him what was going on and where was this person. Good thing Nick texted back quickly. He told me he totally understood what I was looking at and yes that was the building I was looking for. It looked sketchy which was exactly what I was looking for. I didn't know if that was reassuring or terrifying, but I guess that was the place.

How do I describe Martin? I honestly don't remember much. I do remember the space though. His office. I stood in the middle of an empty parking place in front of a seemingly abandoned building. There is a little restaurant next to that building. And that's it. No sign of office. I was quite confused and had to starting text around only to receive messages saying that I am, indeed, at the right place.

So, where am I? I couldn't be the only one that cannot see an office out of this abandoned building. Maybe I just need to get in there and take a look. It was dark. No light, no furniture, and concrete walls. It looks haunted. It started to feel even more so when I heard voices. So even ghosts speak Spanish here. But it was no ghost. As I started to walk even further in, I saw a beam of dim light and glass doors. There is his office. A tiny tiny office. Martin is most welcoming. His voice is powerful and delightful. The way he talks about Vaquitas make me feel like myself holding a dinosaur toy when I was little. Excitement,

love, and sadness. If you ever go visit him and want to talk about Vaquitas, he will pull out a chair for you in front of his computer and tell you some amazing stories.

Stories like this.

I remember seeing my first Vaquita in 2005. I was astonished by these little creatures cruising around the boat. I started taking photos and videos of them in 2007. I wish I could show you some of my photos. I don't remember where I took half of the photos, but I have a photo bucket of the Vaquitas. I think there are times that the Vaquitas are only less than 4 meters away from my boat. They can come very close. I remember taking a video in September 2011 of two Vaquitas. They were mom and a cub. It was at the San Felipe border. They were beautiful.

I remembered before this whole Totoaba mess, fishermen used to go to fish other stuff like shrimp, sharks, Spanish mackerel, yellow croaker, and bass. Many bass. But now the fisheries are for totoaba. The smugglers in Mexicali paid fishermen to come here and catch totoaba only for bladder. In this moment it's a little camp for fish fraud. Very many people send me the Vaquita. Vaquitas die on the beach. Very close to the harbor south of San Felipe.

Vaquitas are quite small. The tall Vaquita is one-meter point five. One half meter. People can easily hold them. The female is more tall and the male is more small. The last Vaquita I saw I'd say in 2013.

I remember going to the harbor one day when one Vaquita died. I went with my camera. That was in 2008 and it was a female Vaquita. It dies very close to us and it was floating in

the sea. This is Vaquitas disappearing from the world. And then later there was a young female died in the same area.

September 2011, I saw 9 Vaquitas on the same day together. They swam around near the Panga and some towards me. I got clear pictures without having a professional camera. It was in San Felipe. It was very close. 2 meters from us. Maybe. It was a unique experience with Vaquitas.

In many moments we encountered Vaquitas. These are amazing experiences. I have been seeing them during long long years and when I see them, I feel joy. This is very magical. Many occasions you can see one sea lion and harbor porpoises and you wonder if they are Vaquita, but they are different. Those sea lions are around Konsag island. Sometimes people see a minke whale and think it is a Vaquita. It is no Vaquita. It is too big. And then there is fin whale. They can swim to very close to San Felipe. In San Felipe we also have sperm whales stranded near the harbor. And also, common dolphins. They are no Vaquitas. The busiest animal is bottlenose dolphins. They come to the Panga but the Vaquitas don't. They curve and go all the way to very far. The Vaquitas are very quiet. The swim is very quiet. You can hear the dolphins and whales but not Vaquitas. They are very quiet. This is action for Vaquita CPR. It's probably November 2017? They caught 2 Vaquitas. The first Vaquita is young female. The people staying with Vaquita for two hours. Then they release it in the sea where they found it. The next Vaquita is an old female. It died. It was a Thursday, there were two Vaquitas jumped. The CPR ship is around. It was a mother and a calf. They caught the calf and think the mom is going to be close. They think come baby will come mother. The calf was in the boat and then they release the calf. Sometimes Vaquitas

can get very close to the boats and the nets. Many Vaquitas are intelligent. In the CPR program many Vaquitas can disperse. Some of them can free themselves from the nets. It's the old Vaquitas of age or the young Vaquitas without experience that cannot get out of the net. The others can swim around the net. The problem is the net for Totoaba is very large. Unlike the traditional net for shrimp that are small. And that for Spanish mackerel and yellow croaker is also small. For the Vaquitas with no previous experience can get stuck in the nets. There are methods to change the nets so that big animals can pass the net freely like the sea turtle-friendly nets for some fisheries. But those do not work with Vaquitas. The tall nets for Shrimps and small fish can have that passage but not the gill nets for Vaquitas. my father and my brother use the small nets for the Panga. Those nets are excellent for all other animals like Vaquitas, sting rays, sharks, dolphins. But the problem is that those are not the nets used to catch totoabas.

For me it is no good having a Vaquita mistakenly swim in gill nets. They got scared. I also think there is no need to catch the Vaquita. They need protection. That's the idea. It's perfect. No catching totoaba out there. It is no good. People go out with their Pangas use gill nets to catch the shrimps. All the helicopters, the boats, the Pangas in the marina, this is no good. There is a big problem of corruption here right now.

I saw maybe ten more Vaquitas after that. Mother and cub. The moment that you see one Vaquita, maybe it's a male. The male is solitary.

There are photos of fishermen with the Vaquitas. Around San Felipe you can see groups of Vaquitas. Once there was a group of 5 Vaquitas. You can see their dorsal fin up and down in the water. I like taking pictures of them. The photos are very colorful. Sometimes you can

see one roll of fish and then the Vaquita next to them. My father says the Vaquitas are like a clue word. He helped make a film. They film the Vaquitas and you see them swimming it's like a U.

You know in 2015 I saw two Vaquitas. on a single trip out, I saw two. I took my cameras and took photos. It was amazing. I kept all my pictures. I think it is helpful to help people to know about the Vaquita, to help people know San Felipe. And about the totoaba trafficking. My brother told me, Martin, the Vaquita swim like a dolphin or like a people to surf. That grace. There was one moment I saw Vaquita surfing in the wave. A fisherman sent me the video and said Martin, this video is for you. I saw that unique video of a Vaquita swimming and playing around a Panga with fishermen on it. It was amazing.

It was indeed amazing.

When I finally walked out of that building it was dusk. We drove around the town looking for that lighthouse that we wanted to visit for a while. The light house was underwhelming to be honest. It was not tall, standing behind fences next to the shore. The light was dim yet can still penetrate the light fog at twilight. Next to the lighthouse on a small hill there was a house that looked like a chapel. The gate was locked, and I couldn't go up there and take a look.

Circling back to the main street next to the beach, there was a mural that had two vaquitas on it. I was surprised to see so many vaquita references in this town. I didn't know if that was a symbol of love and curiosity or has vaquitas became merely a symbol and a myth. Either way seeing vaquitas around in this town was something I hardly expected when I first decided to come here. I came here to look for the truth. I came here to abandon the

influence of some sensational news to listen to everybody's stories. I believed that every decision happened for a reason. If conservationists decided to do what they do there had to be a reason behind, and if the fishermen decided to do what they do same thing applied. I didn't believe that there were true villains in the world that were born to do something questionable. And I didn't believe that in the conservation of Vaquitas fishermen needed to be labelled as the bad guys that purposely hinder the course of vaquita conservation. At the same time, it was also not true that gillnets were the only thing preventing vaquitas from recovering. It was true that a lot of vaquitas were killed by illegal gill nets, but fishermen couldn't take all the blame. I knew I couldn't tell the story from every aspect because after all, I am just an individual. I am just one single person. I knew I did not have the time or energy or access to tell the whole story. I was also in the story. I knew being a part of this story, having all sort of live connection and emotional connection, it was not realistic or fair for me to be impartial when talking about the vaquitas. God, I hope they could thrive and truly became the pandas of Mexico. I wish I could see them gliding next to a boat and learn how to escape nets and traps. That was why I could only speak about my side of the story authentically. As to the story from the perspectives of other people that were related to this situation, I would let them talk. I knew I didn't have to agree with them, but I wanted to listen to them talk. I wanted to let people listen to them talk. It might be an ambitious goal and unrealistic hope, but I believed that my job was to listen to their stories and pass them on to others. I couldn't possibly tell you everything. But I was doing the best I could. But isn't that what we get to do in life? We make our own choices at the moment, not knowing if it would be a good one or a bad one. We can't ask for knowing where our decisions would lead us to. All I could do is to try my best to do what I think is right so even if I regretted

what I did, I could at least say that I was true to myself when I chose to do it. And I would accept the regret I have in my heart. I guess that was why I wanted to learn about the vaquitas in the first place. It didn't matter what kind of project I did. It could be a film; it could be photos or whatever. As long as it is about the story of vaquitas, I wouldn't ask for more. For me vaquitas have always been a myth, until now.

And there I was, back in the restaurant area. People were setting everything up for a carnival that weekend. It was honestly kind of creepy. Carnival rides with vibrant colors but locked up and nobody was playing with them. It reminded me of some sort of thriller movies or one of those detectives' TV series. Maybe I was just watching way too many TV than I should. Everything was going to be wonderful in two days when all the kids came back in town.



















Nick finally texted me saying that I could board a Sea Shepherd ship. They were coming back to dock and I could join them early in the morning. I was beyond excited. The night before I checked probably a hundred times if I had fully charged batteries and my memory card. I just needed to make sure I would make the most of this day. Nick said he was trying to negotiate so I could be on the ship for two days. But honestly, I had a feeling that I wouldn't be getting another day. Being here for a while I started to learn about the routine of Sea Shepherd. They had a huge area to carry and it would take them hours to even reach a point to drop me off. I also wouldn't want them to travel that far just to drop me off. So, I knew this was probably my only chance to witness the actions of Sea Shepherd. I could not risk letting it go.

It was hella early in the morning. David dropped me off at the dock and it was not hard to spot the two Sea Shepherd ships. They were big and beautiful. I saw people walking up and down seemingly very busy, but I had no idea who I was looking for. And then I saw Anthony. He seemed like he has been expecting me. He walked over and asked if I was the photographer that would board today. After a confirmation he turned around and started to walk back onto the ship.

“Welcome to Operation Milagro”

Am I walking into a movie scene or something? I had this feeling that right after he said this there would be a scene change of a drone footage of the ship and the Sea of Cortez along with some sort of grand theme music playing at the background. But what was I thinking? Maybe I did watch too much TV.

The ships were way bigger than I thought. I was on one of the ships called Farley Mowat, and then there was the Sharpie that went out in the open water with us. I was taken to the bridge first to sign some release forms and familiarize myself with some safety issues. On the bridge I met captain Octavio. Everybody on that ship seemed to be really busy to prepare for the ship to sail on time. They needed to catch the tide and look for that perfect timing window. Leaving the dock was not as smooth as it was supposed to be. Somehow the signal and WIFI onboard was not as ideal as it used to be. After doing some digging Anthony found out that there was somehow a beehive on their signal tower that hindered their modem performance. I have personally never heard of the formation of an offshore beehive. Apparently neither did him. But the idea of a conservation organization having a beehive on their modem somehow didn't seem off at all.

Being on the bridge was fun but I wanted to explore the ship before any interesting action happened. I wandered on the deck and found volunteers of Sea Shepherd hanging out with the military personnel. That was probably what Nick told me about. I heard that Sea Shepherd has been working with Mexican Navy, but I was still somehow nervous when I actually saw them on board. They all seemed friendly and chill. If I had to figure out why I was nervous, I would say that if I was in a situation or environment without having the ability to communicate properly then I would be more nervous than I needed to be. This entire journey I have been dealing with people that did not share the same language as I did. But that was not something I could change at that point. What I could do I guess was to do my job and experience a day as a pirate on the Sea of Cortez.

As I toured the ship, I noticed black nets covering most of the ship. I thought it was some sort of protection to prevent cargo from falling off. But it was actually protection for the ship against attacks from fishermen. Right before I was there, an incident where Sea Shepherd ships were attacked by fishermen with rocks. Glasses were broken. The nets were there so that if similar incidents happened again, the stones would stop at the nets and not hard the ship itself. The Navy were not allowed to hurt the fishermen and Sea Shepherd had no intention to do so either. Right after I boarded the ship, I was told that they understood that the fishermen would be upset because how could anyone be happy if their livelihood were restricted and taken? Sea Shepherd never intended to make a villain out of the fishermen. They only wanted to protect themselves and be safe. People did what they thought to be the right thing and stood up for themselves. No one could judge that, and no one could change that. The best action at this moment was to do what they could to keep themselves safe.

Their job mainly was to cruise the entire vaquita conservation area. The area was set because according to acoustic data and human sighting, the remaining 20 vaquitas were living within that small area. The area that Sea Shepherd covered was zero tolerance area and not a single gill net was allowed to be in the water. While cruising, there was a screen on the bridge that showed a scan of the ocean floor. Whenever they spot a gill net they would stop and drag the net out of the water, saving any live animals that were trapped along the way. It didn't take too long for them to find the first net on the screen. The image of a net looked like a giant mushroom or a giant jellyfish. It was hard to see if anything was trapped in it merely from the image, unless it was some very big marine animals like a whale of the sort.

When Octavio spotted the net, they would circle back to pinpoint the net. One person used a rod to point at the net so that the bridge could see the direction and adjust the ship accordingly. After the ship was adjusted to a relatively ideal position, they threw a hook at the net to secure it for pulling. It was no easy task. Sometimes it took a couple of times to get the hook on the net. At the same time, the biologist would get a bucket of sea water just in case if there were living animals that needed rescue. After all the preparation were done, there came the heavy-duty part. They needed to work together to get that net out of the water. Gill nets were very big and very heavy. It could take 4 or more people to drag out one net. While dragging the net out, the onboard biology would monitor the net to see if there were any living animals and if so, they needed to prioritize on saving the animal. For small animals they were brought onboard carefully and hydrate. After checking the health condition and logging in animal data, the crew would carefully put the animal back in the water. If there were a case of a bigger marine animal caught in the net, the crew would lower a small boat to figure out a rescue plan down at the sea surface. But luckily, our first net came out empty. It was hard to pull it up but after it being pulled up, the cleaning up was relatively easy.

Pulling nets up was no easy task. I did not have a hand-on experience on the process, but I could tell how draining it was. Good thing there was this amazing cook David on board.

Lunch was delicious. It was a peaceful period of time when everybody came to the dining room and chat. On Sea of Cortez everybody tended to be very busy. Lunch was a rare moment when the crew could get off their post and relax for a short period of time. While having lunch I've been talking to the other photographer on board. He was a Sea Shepherd volunteer and a wildlife photographer. He surely knew how to track down a whale on the

open water, something I've been dying to learn. He was the kind of person I wanted to be. A person and a camera travelling the world looking for wildlife in their natural habitat. The kind of photographer that tries to go to the end of the world to bring back a good story or to learn about an endangered species.

Conversation didn't last long before a second net was spotted. The same old drill was carried out. But this time there was something different. The net was not empty. The first thing that was seen was a dead totoaba fish. then there was a dead ray. After the net was gradually dragged out, we found a ray that was alive. When there was an animal that was alive, all priority and commend went to the biologist and everybody needed to follow her order to save the ray. The net was carefully cut so the ray was not trapped anymore. She put the ray on a white hammock and hydrated the ray with the bucket of sea water. The ray was very much alive and kicking, which was a very good sign. There was no time to waste. The crew lowered the hammock down to the ocean and let the little one go. It was just a small ray, but the entire rescue process was strict and effective. There was no big or small when it came to a life. Every life needed to be respected and be treated in an equally serious way.

After the ray was taken care of, the net was completely out of the water. The dead ray was thrown back to the ocean to fulfill its role in the circle of life. The dead totoaba needed special treatment. Totoaba was the prey that the fishermen were looking for. Its value lied in the swim bladder. People believed that the swim bladders of totoaba could treat some severe diseases like cancer. It was completely bull. There was no magic like this in the world. But as long as there are people believe in that lie, totoaba will still be hunted and

vaquitas will suffer with it. The totoaba we found was probably dead in that net for a week or so. The smell of that rotten fish was so bad that I started to feel weird. And I have cut open a dolphin and organized its intestine right after eating breakfast. It was that bad. The fish was completely destroyed. According to protocol, the biologist needed to extract the swim bladder of the totoaba and destroy it on camera, even for a fish as bad as the one we have. She cut the swim bladder to pieces and threw the pieces one by one in the ocean.

After this whole mission the deck was filled with random drag marks, dirt water and blood. I had to stand on a poll with my camera so the crew could clean the deck with a water hose. Everything came from the ocean and eventually had to go back to the ocean. As I stepped down back to the deck I looked up at the bridge. I saw the young captain apprentice looking at me, smiling. I picked up my camera and took a photo of him. To me, that smile was what hope looked like.

After the deck was cleaned, everyone went back to finish their own portion of the clean-up duty. Nets were spread out and organized. The entire deck was filled with gill nets and that were only two of them. Those were the kind of nets that were big enough to trap a whale. After hitting the port these nets would be disposed collectively. This was their job, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, and 365 days a week. This was a full-time job. The nets were kept entering the water and they kept pulling them out. What surprised me was not how busy this one day was. What surprised me was that they were having this kind of day every single day. There were no public holidays or weekends. As long as they were on this water, they were responsible for at least trying to pull every single net out and save the vaquitas.

Good thing was that after some hard work there were muffins waiting in the kitchen. I thought the crew were going to sit down and celebrate a small moment of their day, but I was wrong. It was a recap meeting. To me, they were extremely organized, and the entire mission was effective. But clearly not to them. They could always see flaws and tried to improve next time. Who needed to hurry up a bit more, who needed to be in absolute charge in what kind of situation. There were so many things to remember and so many skills to learn. Just listening to their recap meeting I was overwhelmed. I never thought being a part of Sea Shepherd would be easy. But this was definitely beyond my imagination. I used to think they were so cool, doing probably one of the coolest jobs in the world. But it was way more than just having a cool job to be righteous pirates. The hard work and rising spirit were something I could never imagine until I was here with them. They were no superheroes. They were just people, but the amazing ones

It was almost time for me to go and the ship started to head back towards to shore. I thought that was it and they were calling it a day. But there was, apparently, no such thing as “calling it a day” on the ship. On our way back we found the third net. It was almost sunset, and everybody was tired. Dinner was not ready yet, so the crew found some chips to recover some energy for the third net. This net caught lots of jellyfish. The crew needed to be extra careful when handling the jellyfish because before the net got pulled out entirely, it was hard to determine what kind of jellyfish they were, especially under that kind of dusk lighting. The crew needed to look out for jellyfish sting. I guess that was what they would like to call an occupational hazard. They are trying to save the animals, but it was hard to convince the animals that they didn't mean any harm. It was risky but luckily nothing bad happened. Jellyfish were easier to clean up than a bloody rotten fish. This net

came with a big iron anchor to pin it to place for the fishermen to retrieve. The anchor was thrown back into the ocean and maybe it would later become a little marine animal habitat. That would probably be the best-case scenario. Something I learned throughout the years was that not every single man-made structure in the wild setting was a bad thing.

And no, the adventure didn't seem to cease. As we were closer to the shore the crew spot a panga. It was an alert signal for the crew because they were looking out for fishermen on their pangas to prevent or prepare for another attack. But that panga looked a bit abnormal. There was a drone accompanying the panga. As the panga approached Anthony took a better look at it. Instead of a group of fishermen it looked like a film crew of some sort. I was not the only person that was confused. We didn't know who would hire a panga to come out there and film a Sea Shepherd ship. And secondly, the panga couldn't really catch up with the ship, and it was clear that the drone pilot has been having an extremely hard time landing his drone. Now I didn't know much about drones, but I did know that a drone required a smooth, stable surface to land. A panga was probably one of the worst places I could think of to land a drone safely, especially when the panga was not so far away from our big ship. The closer they got the wavier the panga was. We watched the panga drifting away gradually, still having no idea who they were and why they were there. But it didn't seem to matter because there was no harm done.

The ship could not directly drop me off at the dock. The tide was not right, and they needed to head back to the conservation area immediately to meet the other ship for the night. They lowered a lifeboat so that Anthony could give me a ride to the land. It was almost completely dark. I could only see the silhouette of Farley Mowat fading into the distance

where the setting sun and the ocean met. It didn't take too long for the sky went dark. Anthony helped me to hop on land and tied the boat. He walked me up the dock and handed me over to David. He said he needed to make sure that I was safe. Then he turned around and walked back down the dock. I had a feeling that this would be the last time I saw Anthony. My feeling that I would not able to get on board again for the second day grew stronger. I witnessed how busy and tired they were every day. They barely had time to accommodate me and I wouldn't ask them to do that. What they do would definitely come before what I do, at any time. I could come back on land and carry on with my life and so would they. They will have many magical encounters on this water, and hopefully one day, they would see vaquitas jumping out of the water freely again. Wouldn't that be wonderful.

I was almost at the end of my journey and I have never seen a vaquita. But I've seen what hope looked like. I've seen what dedication looked like. If you ask me, I will say that we still got a chance, and we should never give up until the end. I knew they wouldn't give up. So, I won't.



























It is hard to write some sort of conclusion when nothing is coming to an end anytime soon.

It is hard to write some sort of conclusion knowing that people are still risking everything to fight for what they believe is right.

It is hard to write some sort of conclusion when the battle is still on.

Looking at what had happened in the past decade, everything seems familiar, but nothing is the same anymore. I am not the Gillian that believed that the world was perfectly divided into black and white, right and wrong. I am not the Gillian that blamed certain behaviors based on my personal preferences and values. I have seen much, not just in the Vaquita story but also in my life. We are all tiny individuals struggling up and down in our lives. It doesn't matter if it is fisherman, Sea Shepherd, biologist, student, or anyone else. We make decisions because our lives tell us so. Each story we have been through, each person we have spoken to, makes our ideas and decisions a little bit different. But it is the difference that makes us distinct individuals.

The fight around Vaquitas are far from over, and a lot have happened since my trip to San Felipe. There are less than 20 Vaquitas left in the world and that is an optimistic number. There are more gill nets in the water than before, and Sea Shepherd is working harder to remove the nets from the water. Vaquitas reproduce and at the mean time are killed by gill nets. It would seem like this entire situation is now at a cruel and delicate balance. The last straw is holding up so that it will not collapse with the extinction of Vaquitas. It's been a year since I was in San Felipe and the fight is nowhere near stopping. Maybe the fight will keep going for another couple of years to come. There are different paths that the future holds, and nobody can see the end before it comes.

This is the end of my story for now, but it is nowhere near the conclusion. We are walking into the second decade in the millennium and the year is not off to a smooth start. Vaquita, just like every other soul that is struggling to survive, might be no different from us, the tiny individuals living in this whole wide world, the speck of dust in the universe full of stars. We are fighting to live just like the Vaquitas are fighting to survive. There is no winning or losing, just whether or not it is worth it to fight for what you think is right, and more importantly, for survival.

After all, it is all in the game.