

Fish Tale

“Doctor are you sure”, came the penetrating question from Mom? “Yes, Mrs. Stevenson, we have done a thorough examination and we can tell you with an 82% degree of confidence that your daughter does not have gills or any other physical characteristics common to those of a fish.” Mom was visibly relieved and snatched little Michelle up into her arms. “You are mine after all. It doesn’t matter what anyone else says. You’re not a fish. You hear me? You are not a fish.”

Several years ago our family went to a family reunion in Monterey, California. It was a wonderful time. But on this same wonderful reunion Michelle had an experience so bizarre that relating it to family or anyone else borders on the edge of the unbelievable. So unbelievable that because of what we say (and what we know to be the truth) many will accuse us of being insane or totally unfit to be parents. Nevertheless the truth must come forward.

Prior to this West Coast trip, Michelle was as normal as any other child in America when it came to aquatic behavior. She would swim just like the rest of the kids. She wasn’t the best swimmer and she wasn’t the worst. She started with a life jacket when she was just getting use to the water and then eventually graduated to water wings like most of her brothers and sisters did. She was perfectly normal – no unusual behavior whatsoever.

On morning during the reunion we went to the world famous Monterey Aquarium. There were several of us on this excursion and it was difficult to keep track of everyone. Each child was told to look around but to be back at the lobby in 30 minutes. They dashed away like sunlight hitting a nest of cockroaches. There was so much to see – the sharks, listening to the high pitch shrieking of the Dolphins, the colorful tropical fish, the sea rays...fish everywhere.

Unbeknownst to her parents, cousins or even the facility staff Michelle had wandered to the upper level of the aquarium. This was the opening to the aquarium to feed the various fish, allow natural sunlight in and to maintain the water quality of the aquarium. Needless to say, it was a dangerous place to be for one so young as little Michelle. She was intrigued with the crystal clear water and the different fish swimming below her. She maneuvered around the deck. Then the unthinkable happened. As quick as a Barracuda attack on an unsuspecting Mackerel, Michelle slipped on the slippery surface and plunged deep into the aquarium water.

You can imagine the surprise of her parents, aunts, uncles and cousins as they saw this poor helpless girl flailing in the water. There were immediate yells for help. I stood there paralyzed with fear. Mom dropped to her knees in total disbelief. Alarms went off and it seemed like pure pandemonium from that point on. Not only was the reality of drowning a legitimate concern, but, before that ever happened a Tiger Shark could rip her to shreds in the matter of seconds.

What took place next is probably the most incredible event I will ever witness in my life. From the far end of the aquarium a twelve-foot Tiger Shark noticed the agitation in the water from Michelle's wild and panic-driven movements. The shark knew only one thing – lunch was being served. He mounted his attack with strong, powerful thrusts of his tail. His eyes were cold and unmerciful. His gills moved in and out. His mouth and razor sharp teeth were poised to engulf its prey in one single bite. The screams! Oh, how I will never forget the screams. Certain doom was literally seconds away.

As the shark came within a split second of devouring our little Mookie, a dolphin came racing from underneath and rammed the shark just below the dorsal fin. The shark went reeling from its course of destruction. However, he was not to be denied his meal. He swung around and started another approach toward Michelle. Once again, this time a different dolphin, slammed into his under belly. It came with such great force the shark rolled several times to its side and eventually floated to the top of the water – dead.

While this amazing battle took place an equally amazing miracle was transpiring near and around Michelle. Two dolphins hovered around her as if to protect her. One appeared to place its mouth over Michelle's mouth. There is no doubt in my mind that Michelle received mouth to mouth resuscitation from a sensitive, caring and thoughtful mother dolphin who's natural instincts were to help a little one in distress. Michelle inhaled deep breathes of life-saving air from this beautiful creature. Once she recovered, the family of Dolphins assisted her safely to the top of the water. I was there to meet her.

Just before we pulled her from the water I could hear her say, "Yes, Mother, I love you and will never forget what you have told me. I am now one of you. The Dolphin is my brother and my sister. I love you. I will never forget you." I held her tightly in my arms. Strangely, she was just fine. She was not afraid. She seemed as normal as if she came right out of the family swimming pool. She resisted any medical attention from the paramedics. With a warm and almost dreamy smile, she insisted, "everything is fine, just fine".

To this day it is difficult to keep Michelle out of the water. At girl's camp she is called "The Fish". On family vacations to Vail she owns the swimming pool. She would sleep in a pool if it were possible. She endlessly jumps out of the water like a dolphin playing in the ocean. She effortlessly swims under water with the speed and the agility of a dolphin. If one did not know better, one would think she was a Dolphin. Now, we all know that is impossible, but, I really wonder when I pass by her room at night and hear her making the exact same shrieking sounds you would hear from the Dolphins playfully romping through their underwater playground at the Monterey Aquarium.