

# MANATEE'S BEST FRIEND

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# 1

The bus ba-bumps over the root-crumbled corner of our street. One more minute and I can escape the other kids chatting and shouting and me trying to be invisible and wondering why I'm not like everyone else. For them, the chance to hang out with friends is one of the best parts of the day, but for me, it's the worst. I never have anyone to talk to, not that I'm brave enough to talk anyway.

At the sight of my house, my body relaxes for the first time since school let out. I'm only moments away from my favorite place in the world, the river by our backyard.

As I hop off the bus, the warm breeze hits me with the sweet scent of yellow jessamines. I take in a deep breath, but my heart revs up when I remember—Missy!

A green anole darts out of my way as I run up the grassy

driveway, drop my backpack by the stairs to our house on stilts, and dash out to the back. I weave past the moss-draped old oaks and head to the river.

Missy's been gone for almost three weeks. Every day after school I come to the water, hoping this will be the day she shows up again.

Missy is a manatee—the gentlest creature, with her round body and stubby snout, always so sweet and trusting. If you didn't know better, you'd think she was just like every other manatee in Florida, but she always comes to eat the eelgrass by our dock, so we've become best friends. Missy is the only one I can talk to about everything—how weird and alone I feel and how I'm constantly terrified of being embarrassed in front of everyone. I never freeze up or have the blood rush to my face or get that sweaty feeling in my palms with her. She doesn't push me to speak up like Mom and Dad do. She's more like Grandma with her Zen-like calm. I'm hopeless at making friends with kids my age, but if I'm only going to have one friend in the whole world, Missy is a pretty good choice.

It's late February, so most manatees are still hanging out in the warm springs upriver, but Missy's been coming by our

dock most of the winter. I used to feed her cabbage heads until I found out it isn't a good idea to feed wild manatees. She still visits me anyway. I'm pretty sure that means she loves me like I love her.

I hurry to the end of our dock. An egret startles away like a pale ghost. I'm on the lookout for the white Y-shaped scar on Missy's back, my eyes almost hurting from the strain. It's awful how manatees are recognized by the scars they get from being hit by boats. This is a terrible fact I happen to know because I'll be a manatee scientist one day.

Peering out over the water, I pull out my phone and turn on the video. "Becca Wong Walker, world-famous marine biologist, reporting: It's day twenty of Missy Watch and still no sighting of her." It's for my private online channel where I record my manatee observations, and since I'm the only one who sees it, I don't clam up like I do in front of my class. Normally, this is fun, but now my stomach clenches. Where could she be? I have to keep it together even though my mind is clogged with worry. I say the first thing that pops into my mind. "Manatees can get hit by boats because they're too slow to avoid them. Lately, a lot more boats pass by because new

houses are going up along the shore.” I scan the water for ripples. “I really hope Missy’s okay.”

I stop recording and lower my phone. What am I thinking? I’ll never have the courage to have my own wildlife show. That would involve talking to actual people, and the thought of that makes my heart speed up and my palms grow clammy.

I sigh. Mom is probably wondering where I am. I should pop back to the house to let her know I’m home. At least there’s a bologna sandwich in my near future. Dad gets on my case for eating the same thing every day, but I’m not about to apologize for loving squidgy bread with thin, salty bologna. When I find something I like, I stick with it. Dad also says loyalty is one of the best traits a person can have. I’m very loyal to bologna sandwiches.

A final glance at the water—and I see them.

In the middle of the river, telltale circles ripple one after another across the surface of the water—the sign of a manatee swimming, also known as manatee footprints. I turn the video back on to capture its arrival. “Here comes a manatee,” I say. “It’s too far away to see any identifying marks.”

*VVVVRRROOOOM.*

A motorboat rounds the bend and zooms straight at the ripples. My throat goes dry, and my body stiffens. I want to scream, *Slow down! You're about to hit one of the best creatures on earth!* But no words come out—they're stuck somewhere between my ribs and stomach. The one and only time I tried to yell at a boat to slow down was a couple of months ago, and when I did, grown men laughed at me. Even thinking about it makes me want to shrivel up and disappear.

The boat continues on, motoring way too fast. I pace back and forth in little zigzags on my dock. My heart pounds. What if it's Missy? *Please don't hit her.*

The ripples have disappeared. The boat zooms away.

My video is still going, so I say, "I hope that manatee's okay."

Finally, the ripples reappear, farther away, on the other side of the river.

I let out a shaky breath. "That was too close. I can't believe those tourists, who just don't care. Or maybe they're locals, who aren't much better." I turn off the video. If I had superpowers, I would've flown off the dock, sped across the water, and punched out the motor. But I don't have superpowers.

I don't even have normal kid abilities, like being able to warn strangers about to hit a manatee.

A few moments pass. I stand up and—

Another set of circles ripple across the water, blooming their way toward me. My heart speeds up again, rat-a-tat-tatting.

Could it be Missy? If Missy were back, I'd have a friend again, instead of always being lonely. I really miss her.

I wish I had my polarized sunglasses. With them on, I could see the manatee's pear-like shape much more easily. I pay special attention for a manatee's nose poking out as it breathes. A large rotund shape slowly swims over.

With a Y-shaped scar on its back.

It's her!

It's Missy.

I slump with relief. She's back, and she's okay.

And next to her is a small shape, like an oval beach ball—a mini Missy! I don't want to scare them away so I clamp a hand over my mouth and squelch the urge to run up and down the dock squealing at the top of my lungs. My grin is so wide my face hurts.

It's a baby manatee.

Oh. Oh. I fumble with my phone and center Missy and her calf in the frame. Missy nibbles at the seagrass, and her baby sticks close by, swimming like a pro. The baby has a small wrinkly face, and its flippers are comically large compared with its body. What a champ, already so self-sufficient.

I narrate in a quiet voice, “Missy’s back, and she had a baby! I’ve never seen a more adorable sight in my twelve years of living on this planet. Look at that cute little bundle of a manatee.” I search my memory for more manatee facts.

“Did you know manatees are a threatened species? They only have babies every two to five years. After it’s born, a baby manatee sticks with its mama for one or two years. Oh. Oh!” The excited hitch in my voice isn’t up to professional standards, but I can’t help it. “This little manatee calf will be my friend for at least a whole year!”

Turning off the video and crouching down, I watch Missy’s baby swim so earnestly, flapping its stubby flippers to keep up with its mom. “I’ve missed you so much and was so worried,” I tell Missy. “I thought you might’ve been hit by a boat, but I bet you found a safe place to have your baby. That was really smart of you.”

Missy bobs up and down, like she's listening, so I continue. "Let me catch you up on what you missed. School is as awful as usual. I thought middle school might get better now that it's early in the spring semester, and at least I'd have someone to eat lunch with, but no, not at all. I'm still the weird, quiet kid no one speaks to. I feel so invisible."

Missy chomps on the eelgrass.

"Yes, you're right, Missy. I do want to make friends, but it's hard if I can't even say hi to anyone." I sit and dangle my feet in the water. Mom and Dad think I'm silly for having one-sided conversations with Missy, but they don't get it. Missy listens, and I can hear in my mind what she would say.

Missy slowly swims close to the dock, her flat tail moving up and down, and her rounded flippers flapping slowly. Her calf sticks close to her, nuzzling her. Seeing this adorable new life makes me forget my school problems. "I wonder what your name is," I say. "Once I have a better idea of your personality, I'll come up with the perfect name."

VVVVROOOM. Another motorboat zooms along. These tourists are the worst. They blast by on their way to the springs to see the manatees, not caring if they hit one on the way.