

DOLPHIN SKY

By Ginny Rorby

FOREWORD

The original Dolphin Sky (published in 1996 by G.P. Putnam) was written by hand on breaks from cooking meals for hundreds of passengers on my DC10 flights to London. I was in graduate school at the time, and it was my master's thesis, and my first published novel. I started Dolphin Sky in 1985, when I'd been writing for all of three years - certainly not long enough to know what I was doing. Like any art form, to be good at it takes years of practice. DS was published in 1996, and for all the years since its publication, I've wished I'd known enough to do a better job. I thought it was an important book then and it is, unfortunately, even more so now.

In the 27 years since I first conceived this book, and in the 16 years since it was first published, little has changed. Dolphins by the thousands are still held in captivity. The Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 was meant to afford them protection from being kept in cheesy roadside tourist attractions on which the Stevens Everglade Eden was modeled, but there is a loophole in the act that permits the taking of dolphins for education and research. Hotels in Las Vegas have dolphins in a swim program. Tricks have been relabeled

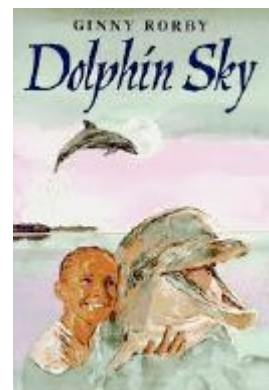
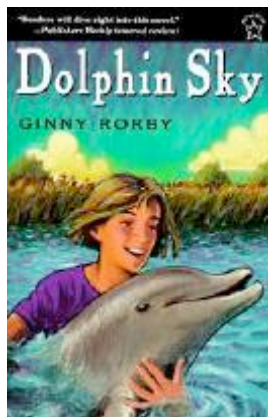
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as "behaviors," jumping through hoops is still included in shows.

In Denmark, dolphins are killed by the hundreds on a day of sport, and in Japan dolphins are rounded up annually during their migration. Some are captured for aquariums and dolphin shows worldwide, the rest-thousands-are slaughtered to "protect" their fishing industry, and for food. Additionally, hundreds die in fishing nets during the capture of tuna, and by suffocating in draglines. (Dolphins don't drown in these nets, they suffocate. Dolphins can and do commit suicide by holding their breaths. They can do this because, unlike us, they don't breathe automatically, they consciously take each breath. When one is caught in a net, it can't breathe, and suffocates.

The 10 Academy Award winning documentary, 'The Cove', was just the push I needed to try my hand at this again.

Changes to the originally published version have been made - I hope for the better.

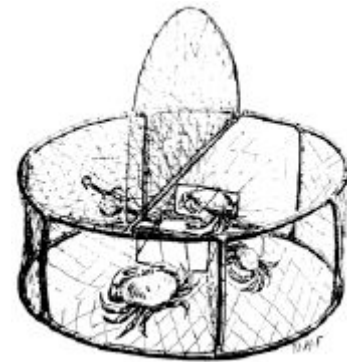


Chapter 1

September 29, 1968

One of the fishing boats is leaving for the day, and its wake leaves the others to struggle against their mooring lines. Her dad stands on the sea wall holding a sixty-five pound stone crab trap, his brown back glistening with sweat, waiting for his boat to settle.

It's only eight-thirty, but Buddy Martin has been standing at the window for a while now, watching him transfer his traps from the shed in their backyard to his truck, which he then backs down to the sea wall to unload on to his boat.



©K&B Co. Dangerous crab trap. Illustration by G. H. Fox Jr.

She shuts off the water, which has created a mountain of suds, and leans over the sink to look at the thermometer nailed to the gumbo limbo tree outside the window. Eighty-nine degrees.

He'll be hot and cranky by the time they have to leave, and since she's pretty sure he doesn't want to be saddled with her in the first place, he'll be tired and cross, too.

Doing anything with her father makes Buddy nervous. She feels watched and graded, always poorly. I wish we liked each other better, she's thinking just as the kitchen door bangs open. Even though she sees her dad stacking traps,

and knows it can only be her grandfather, her heart leaps in her chest.

"Morning Admiral." She turns and smiles.



"Hi honey. Are you excited?" He wheels in, rolling his wheelchair to his end of the kitchen table, backs up, then forward again, to get himself centered.

Two pieces of bread are in the toaster. Buddy pushes the lever down. "I wish you were coming with us. It's not going to be a real birthday without you."

"Me, too, sweetie, but there's not really enough room in the truck for the three of us, and there are still traps to be mended. You should do more things with your dad. It's good for him to be reminded he has a daughter once in awhile."

"It don't make us get along any better. May make it worse."

"I know, but one of these days he's gonna figure out what's important and what ain't. You just hang in there 'til he does, okay?"

"Yes, sir." Buddy carries his toast to him, and kisses his whiskery cheek.

"Thanks, baby." He pats her back where her shoulder blades push against her T-shirt. He does that to remind her to stand up straight, especially around her father whom he blames for her poor posture. She heard them arguing about it once, and remembers her grandfather shouting, "The way you're always criticizing her, no wonder she looks like a walking apology." She pulls her shoulders back, and lifts her chin. He nods and smiles-a sad-eyed smile. "I guess you ain't a baby anymore, are you? How does thirteen feel?"

"Bout the same as twelve."

She kisses him again, and goes to get his cereal from the cupboard. "We got any of Iris Smallwood's sea grape jelly left?"

"Nope, but there's store-bought guava."

"That'll have to do. Next time you see Iris, maybe you could tell her how fond I am of that jelly of hers."



"You about ready?" Her dad comes into the kitchen toweling his wet hair.

"Yes, sir." She wipes toast crumbs off the counter, and rinses the sponge.

When her dad asked her what she wanted for her birthday, she said to see the dolphins. O.B. Stevens, a friend of his,

keeps a few at his airboat-ride place up on Highway 41, and that's where they are going. "Did you eat breakfast?"

"Hours ago." He says it, as if by nine-thirty the day is already blown. "Did you feed your grandfather?" He makes it sound like the Admiral's a pet turtle.

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Maybe that'll give him the energy to mend a few more of those traps while we're gone."

Ten miles north of their island home of Chokoloskee, her father turns onto Highway 41, which is also known as the Tamiami Trail because it connects Tampa to Miami. About a mile east a large billboard comes into view. It shows an airboat full of laughing people whizzing past an alligator sunning on a mudflat. Buddy grins to herself.

She's excited, or she would never ask her dad, "What's the third word on that sign say? The one after Everglade."

He sighs. "Eden, Buddy. Eden."

"Thank you." She isn't going to let him hurt her feelings today.

"What does Eden mean?"

"Paradise-a perfect place."

"Stevens Everglade Eden, five miles," she reads aloud, slowly.

"Is it?"

"Is it what?"

"A paradise?"

"I doubt it."

An arrow between Stevens and Everglade directs the eye to the more recent addition of "World Famous."

"Can you read the rest of it?" he asks.

"Airboat and P . . . P-"



"Swamp," he says. "Where do you see anything that starts with a p?"

She shrugs, and glances self-consciously at her dad. He's looking at her, his dark brows pulled down in a vee.

"Longer words is easier for me to read," she says. "I . . ."

"Are easier," he corrects. "And sit back. If I have to stop quickly, you'll hit your head on the dash."

She pushes back in the seat. The inside of the truck cabin is suddenly stifling. She rolls her window down, then with her big toe, she hooks a strap of the sandals, which he insisted she wear. Without looking at him, she slips them off, and wiggles her freed toes. The hot wind blows her hair. She puts her hand out the window and moves it up and down through the air like a dolphin swimming.

Chapter 2

All her life she's seen dolphins feeding in the channel in front of Smallwood's, Chokoloskee's general store, a two-minute walk from her house. Even at night when all she can hear is the whoosh of their blows, Buddy loves knowing they are there. But earlier this summer, after the Admiral badgered him, her dad took her fishing. Since then she's been obsessed with seeing them close enough to touch.



That day, which was only the second time her dad had invited her to go fishing, except maybe the times she was too young to remember-the haul was good and so was his mood. He'd even said yes when she asked if she could help pull the net in. It was hard work, but she'd done it until her arms ached. And when they were done, he'd smiled and patted her shoulder as if he were pleased. Then, though he knew directions confused her, he asked her to take the wheel for their ride home.

While her father cleaned some trout they'd hauled in with the mullet, she concentrated on what she would do if she saw another boat approaching or came up on someone's crab trapline. In her mind, she practiced right and left, starboard and port turns.

Her dad was hanging over the gunnel using a bucket to scoop up seawater to wash the fish blood off the deck when Buddy saw the first fin cutting toward them through the water. The dolphins she'd seen always at a distance and only from shore-surfaced, expelled air, arched over, exposing a dorsal fin, then went under again. When she saw the fin cutting through the water toward her dad, as he washed the blood overboard, she thought shark. When a second and a third joined the first, she screamed a warning, but he was leaning over near the engine and didn't hear her.

He'd warned her not to let go of the wheel for any reason, so she hesitated a second before she thought to twist the wheel back and forth to rock the boat. He straightened instantly, and looked at her. She pointed to the fins slicing through the water toward them.



"Dolphins," he shouted, then made a throttle-pushing motion. "Give it more gas."

She was disappointed. She didn't want to get away from them, but she did as she was told and pushed the throttle forward, slowly at first, then fully open when he punched the air with his fist.



One of the dolphins shot beneath the speeding boat.

"Daddy," she screamed and squeezed her eyes shut. He

glanced over the side, then turned and made his way toward her.

"Go up to the bow. Hurry." He took the wheel.

Buddy stepped up on the starboard gunnel, held tight to the roof of the trunk cabin, and inched forward against the wind. When she reached the bow, she flopped down on her stomach and wrapped her fingers around the anchor rope. One fin, then another, cut through the bow wake just a few feet from her face. A fourth, then a fifth dolphin joined in-five sleek, gray missiles streaking along beside them. They were racing at exactly the speed of the boat, as close and fast as if they were attached. One whizzed ahead suddenly, then dropped back into their wake. Buddy whooped and pulled herself farther out over the water. With the bow pressed against her sternum, she let go of the anchor rope and held her arms out like she was flying with them. The dolphin on the port side dropped back for a moment, then shot forward and straight into the air. Buddy laughed and glanced back to see if her dad saw it, too. He grinned at her, and in that moment, with her father's eyes warm and twinkling, Buddy felt as if her heart had filled with splinters-pain, joy, love, hope. She turned away so he wouldn't see the tears in her eyes. She wished, almost more than anything that every day with her father could be like this one instead of the way they were.