Merci Beaucoup, Mercy Barracuda

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Merci Beaucoq, Mercy Barracuda

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For Emil, Harrison and Helen Dow
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Chapter 1. Who is Ms. Mercy Barracuda?

You’ve heard about vicious barracudas, but probably never about a friendly one like Ms. Mercy Barracuda. She’s not scary but always well-meaning and good-hearted. Sure she can move like lightening underwater, but not to snap up smaller fish. She would rather scare away bigger bullies so her piscine (fish-like) neighbors can play in peace under the crystal clear Caribbean, where Mercy was born and grew to almost six feet long. Or, perhaps, I should say six feet high, for she was often seen standing on her tail fins on the sandy bottom of the sea teaching schools of young fish. You must understand that Mercy was not a typical fish but worked hard to become a gentlewoman and a well-informed scholar.
Her good parents taught Mercy to ponder and understand her Caribbean Sea surrounding. And she was raised to be both intelligent and thoughtful of her friends and neighbors. She, not only, developed considerable knowledge from listening to her parents, she, also, liked to listen to humans in their boats and ships. She taught herself English by listening and imitating the voices of people talking in the boats and ships that anchored off the islands. She listened carefully to their interesting conversations about life on land.

Humans sometimes talked of what they called science. With her acute ears pressed against the hulls of boats she learned biology, physics, chemistry, economics, medicine, astronomy and diverse philosophies as well as literature. She spent long hours practicing thinking about each of these subjects in terms of all the others, and by this means was able to begin generating her own original thinking. She became
adept at combining two thoughts she had already learned (and whatever Mercy learned she never forgot) into a compound or hybrid idea that added something new to the world. She was proud of herself for becoming creative.

Sometimes, far out at sea with her head above the water and no shore lights to distract her, she considered the myriad of stars in their clusters, which is what she called what we see as constellations. Her clusters were not identical to our constellations, for she saw different figures among the stars than we think we see. She could see that the stars rotated slowly in the same direction, so she learned how to tell time by checking the position of star clusters that moved constantly throughout the night.

Telling time this way was very similar to observing the position of the sun, when it was visible, in its daily journey from east to west. And even when clouds hid the sun from
view, she could estimate the passing of time when she was close
to shore by noticing the changing in and out tides. For more
precise measurements of time, since she had no clock or watch,
Mercy became very good at counting her heart beats to
compare the duration of one brief event with another.

Mercy had learned from human conversation that, what
seemed as though the stars and sun were moving around the
sea was actually due to our planet rotating daily. Our sea, after
all, was not the center of the universe, which, of course most
sea creatures still believed, if they ever even considered it.
Many times in her learning, Mercy discovered that what
seemed simple and obvious was sometimes much more complex
and needed rethinking.

Ever since she became aware of pollution causing climate
change, Mercy decided to do whatever she could to avoid
harming her environment (the surrounding ocean and beach)
and other animals in it. Unlike most barracudas, who are predators, Mercy did not hunt, attack or devour smaller fish when hungry. Instead, she learned to eat human left-overs, nutritious garbage that passing ships threw overboard as waste. In this way, she fed herself and at the same time cleaned up what could pollute her ocean home.

By feeding on left-overs, Mercy Barracuda became almost un-predatory, but not quite. Even though it always bothered her conscience, Mercy, once a month or so, scoured the sea floor for a big fat lobster which she crunched up, shell and all, in her powerful jaws. An occasional lobster was her favorite treat.

As her closest friends, Mercy chose funny, happy dolphins. They loved to play and tried to communicate with her, as friends do, with their clicks and buzzes. The playfulness they shared with her really didn’t need further
communication. Sea otters also liked to play and welcomed her friendship. Two of her very best friends were an octopus named Stella and a sea turtle called Bobby. Mercy also loved teaching schools of young fish. She came to the aid of any creatures who seemed to need help. Mercy chased bullies who pestered smaller and weaker sea creatures.

Dear reader, I am writing fiction, so I am free to let my imagination roam, and to invent a one-of-a-kind character like Mercy. I am thinking outside the usual barracuda stereotype. A stereotype is when we assume that all members of a certain group share the same traits or behavior. However, if you find yourself in the water with a real barracuda, it would be wise not to try to pet it and to get out of the water as soon as possible, for most barracudas are not as friendly as the Mercy in my story.
Chapter 2. The Dow Family in Danger

One blustery day on the Atlantic side of the Bahamas, Mercy was lazily swimming past a sturdy little cruiser. It was owned by John Dow with his family of five, who were boating on their summer vacation. Mercy soon learned the family’s names by looking and listening beside their boat. John was the captain and Miranda was his pretty wife and mother of their three children: Two tall boys, Emil and Harrison, and their lovely sister, Helen. The children all seemed about the same age of nine, which was somewhat unusual in human families. Mercy decided they must be triplets.

Mercy pressed close to the hull of the boat and listened. She heard its motor stop and John trying over and over to get it started again. No luck! The engine’s battery sounded weaker and weaker and the boat slowly drifted, pushed by the wind
and waves toward the open sea. As Mercy listened to the
family’s conversation, she noticed that these three kids were
not like other children she heard on boats passing the islands.

Human children were often mean to each other and threw
things at her when she raised her head above water in a
friendly greeting. However, these three children seemed as
intelligent and well–informed as they seemed playful and good-
hearted. “They seem just like friendly dolphins,” thought
Mercy. She was fascinated with the Dow children because, like
her, they were not typical of their kind but had improved
themselves so they could no longer be stereotyped.

The Dow triplets understood and loved animals—all
creatures large and small. Mercy decided to raise her head
above the waves to attract their attention. And the children
waved to her as she hoped they might. Yet their parents,
Miranda and John, did not seem as happy to see her, as did their children. “Why was that?” she wondered.

She swam to the leeward side of the boat (the side away from the wind) and listened against the hull. Miranda was trying to get the radio working but the weak battery was making that difficult. Miranda and Mercy could hear a weather report about a storm coming. Mercy stuck her head above water once more to gage wind velocity. John, she could see, was a big, strong man who was apparently about to jump into the water with a rope to tug the boat closer to shore against the wind, to move it closer to the island that was slowly vanishing in the distance. But, after seeing a barracuda only a few feet from their boat, Miranda was telling him, “no way am I letting you get into that water.”

Mercy was always thoughtful and understanding of other people’s point of view, and she realized now why the adults
 behaved differently than the children. Miranda didn’t know any barracudas personally, thought Mercy, so she could only rely on what she had heard and read about the behavior of that species. She probably knew that barracudas could swim at astounding speed and that they were carnivores (ate meat) with a mouthful of fiercely sharp teeth. And so, neither she nor John was glad to see a large barracuda watching them from deep water.

Mercy realized she was a stereotype to Miranda and John, yet she knew the whole family needed her help to get out of danger. The children seemed not yet aware of their peril. If the boat drifted farther out into the ocean with the engine, battery and radio not working, and with a storm approaching, their boat might be overturned or crushed by waves that were growing higher. At times, waves hid the small craft from sight of shore. It was late afternoon and the dark night would soon make their plight even more serious.
Chapter 3. Mercy and Friends to the Rescue

Mercy assessed (sized-up) the situation, then acted quickly. She called to nearby Caribb neighbors, some of whom had been her pupils and several of her dolphin friends came to help when called. One who came to help was a large grouper named Oscar, a pair of her dolphin friends named Jane and Jerry. Bobby the sea turtle called-to and brought with him several other giant turtles of his acquaintance. As Mercy directed them by her example, they all swam to the leeward side of the craft and used their weight and strong swimming ability to push the boat against the wind toward land.

When John and Miranda saw what Mercy was attempting, they quickly reconsidered their stereotype and tried to think of ways to help Mercy and her friendly companions. John cast out a rope from in front and Mercy quickly took the knotted end in her teeth and began to tug the
boat against the wind. John threw out more ropes attached to the bow (front) of his boat and the grouper, Oscar, grabbed one of the ropes in his big jaws and pulled. Jane and Jerry, too, added their strength to the tugging. Bobby led his turtle friends to push at the stern (rear) of the boat.

With Bobby and his team at the stern of the boat pushing, and Mercy and her friends pulling, the boat now moved more swiftly toward the shore. Before sunset the boat was safely near the beach no longer in danger of the storm or the waves of the open ocean. John hooked up another battery to the radio and Miranda contacted the Coast Guard who sent a rescue craft to tow their boat to the main dock and safety.

When the Dow’s all debarked from their boat, they thanked the Coast Guard crew for their help and walked to the end of the dock to thank Mercy for her assistance.
“Merci beaucoup!” called Miranda, waving to Mercy Barracuda.

“You are very welcome,” answered Mercy bobbing head and shoulders above the water just offshore and waving her side fin.

“Thank you, and please, also, thank your friends for their help,” called John.

“Wont you come visit us when we get back to Hyannis Massachusetts?” called Harrison.

“We’ll be back there three weeks from now,” said Emil.

“Please come to the end of the beach before the long rock peer and the Kennedy Compound,” shouted Helen.
“Yes, I would love to visit,” said Mercy, and Harrison, Emil and Helen all cheered as Mercy vanished underwater.
Chapter 4. Cruising up the Atlantic Coast

The storm intensified and brought darkness to the ocean earlier than usual. The Dow family spent the night on shore in a local hotel. But the very next day was bright and sunny. John soon got the batteries charged and the engine fixed. Now the radio was also working again, so on the following day John decided to take the family to a nearby island for a picnic. All five Dow’s were enchanted with the music of steel bands and calypso and reggae singers and people colorfully dressed in the main street. At a street market stand, they bought fresh fruit, and then found a flowered park in which to picnic on sandwiches made by Miranda earlier in the day and the fruit just purchased.

Some days later, the Dow family boat was docked at Key West for dinner on the way up the Atlantic coast for the long cruise back home. The Dow’s usually ate breakfast and lunch
on their boat so they could keep cruising all day. In late
afternoon they often docked at busy and colorful sea ports to
dine on the local delicacies. In the calmest weather they
anchored in the mouths of fresh-water rivers to watch the
magnificent red sunset and enjoy a quiet night. They slept well
on board their boat during the starlit nights and were off to an
early start each morning.

After a week or so they passed the islands off the
Carolinas. Often, while cruising, the children caught a fish or
two for a delicious dinner at anchor in the evening. In several
more days, they passed the very wide mouth of the Potomac
that led to Washington D.C., and days later, passed under tall
bridges between Manhattan and Long Island for a waters-eye
view of the United Nations Building and New York City. After
that they cruised east hugging the Connecticut and Rhode
Island shores through a long day, and spent a night anchored
in Block Island harbor. In the bright early morning they
crossed the wind-shifting waters of Buzzards Bay. They sailed
due east along the southern coast of Cape Cod, past Woods
Hole and Falmouth. and finally began to pass familiar towns
like Osterville and then Hyannis and home.

Soon after tying their boat to its mooring just off the
beach only a couple of hundred feet from their summer house
on Harbor Road in Hyannis, they walked up the beach
carrying their clothes and gear. Since they were tired-out, they
slept soundly all night. They hoped to see Mercy during their
long voyage up the Atlantic coast, but with no luck. What an
adventure they had all shared!
Chapter 5. Mercy Visits Hyannis

One morning toward the end of August, as the triplets played with Miranda and one another on the Beach, they heard splashing in the calm water. They recognized Mercy’s head above the surface. They waved and shouted greetings, and Mercy waved a side fin back at them. Mercy was feeling playful, so she swam to shore in a rush. As she reached the sandy beach she tipped upright and hopped on her tailfins over among the triplets who with joy hugged their barracuda friend.

After this warm greeting, Mercy explained that since she couldn’t extract (obtain) oxygen from the air the way her human friends could, she needed water passing through her gills in order to have a comfortable visit. So she hopped into the water and lay down, and the triplets all bounded into the shallow water to sit or kneel beside Mercy.
Before Miranda went back to the house to prepare pizza for lunch, she asked Mercy whether she could eat pizza. Mercy, who felt a little too embarrassed to explain that she was used to eating human garbage, answered simply, ”Yes, thank you, I would be pleased to eat whatever you eat.”

Miranda felt that the children would be safe in Mercy’s care and walked to her house to make pizza. The Dow triplets settled down for a chat with the friend who a few weeks ago saved them from a nasty situation. The children asked Mercy about her home in the sea, and she asked them about their life in Hyannis and how they lived when they attended school in Concord in fall and winter.

She could hardly believe that what the children called snow sometimes covered their yard more than two feet thick. The children explained to Mercy how sometimes after a big snow storm school would be cancelled and they would walk
into the snow to fill cups with it. Then they would take their snow cups inside so Miranda could pour some syrup from maple trees into the snow-filled cups. How fresh and sweet that tasted!

Mercy was fascinated “Isn’t water wonderful,” she observed, “that it can take so many different forms: from liquid to fog to snow and ice” Mercy asked them about their grade school in Concord and their teachers, what they learned last year, and what they would be studying this fall.
Chapter 6. Discussing Sea creatures

Helen, very curious about the sea creatures that were Mercy’s neighbors, asked, “How does an octopus make ink and do squid and cuttlefish make ink, also? We use ink for writing but what do they use it for? Of course I know they don’t write letters and essays.”

“Well,” answered Mercy, “even though they don’t use ink to write letters, octopus’s (or octopi, to use the Latin plural) are very smart indeed, smarter than a dog, almost as smart as a monkey. Although they are sea creatures and use their intelligence in somewhat different ways from creatures of the land.”

“An octopus uses dark colored melanin to produce a thick gooey substance in special organs called ink glands. After
this inky mucus is made, it is stored in ink sacs connected to the end of their intestine. Most cephalopods, such as the octopus, squid, and cuttlefish, can produce ink constantly, so that whenever they need to get away from a predator they can squirt ink under pressure out of their sacks through a sort of funnel-like tube that enables them to suddenly spurt off in an unexpected direction in a cloud of ink that confuses a would-be predator.”

Mercy continued, “the octopus produces black ink, the squid’s ink is always navy blue, while cuttlefish’s ink is brown. But they all use their ink for the same purposes: for jet-propulsion to swiftly change directions and at the same time create dark-colored foggy water which makes it difficult for a predator to see where they went.”
“I think it’s so interesting that three members of the cephalopod family make ink of different colors, said Helen. “Thank you for telling us about them, Mercy.”

“I’m curious about how and where dolphins sleep,” said Harrison.

“It’s interesting that you should be interested in that,” said Mercy, “because dolphins have such an unusual way of sleeping. It is called ‘unihemispheric sleep,’ which means they rest one side of their brain at a time while closing one eye and keeping the other open to become aware of any approaching predator. They half-sleep for about eight hours at a time alternating sleep from one hemisphere of their brain to the other every two hours.”

“Dolphins usually sleep during the night. Most of the time they half-sleep while swimming. Sometimes they sleep in
groups (because that is safer) on the bottom of a shallow part of the sea, but they can also half-sleep near the surface. You need to remember that dolphins are not fish but mammals and need to breathe oxygen from air above the surface about every half hour, otherwise they will drown, just as fish would die if we had no water from which to get our oxygen. Does that answer your question, Harrison?”

“Oh yes! Thank you,” said Harrison.

Emil asks Mercy, “why do dolphins sometimes get stranded on beaches?”

“Before I answer your question, Emil,” said Mercy, “I want to point out that sometimes, to understand other animals, you must learn to think the way they do, which can be very different from the way you yourself are used to thinking. It’s
clear to me from the very intelligent questions you ask that you three are interested in understanding different kinds of animals from the animals’ points of view.”

“The answer as to why dolphins sometimes beach themselves on shore depends on your understanding that whales’ brains are organized differently from yours. Their brains are centrally focused on sound rather than vision. They can see well, just as you can hear well, but they are much more sensitive to sound than you, for they must communicate, navigate, and locate food with sound. Also sound is amplified underwater and a humpback whale song, for example, can carry from one ocean to another across hundreds of miles.”

“So you will understand, now, that a loud sound in the water made by the shrill beeps of a naval ship or submarine hunting other submarines, by echo locating with their sonar, might send whales and dolphins into a panic. Can you imagine
how terrifying the sounds of a naval exercise with 25 or so vessels all using sonar at the same time might be to dolphins and whales nearby. And add to that fear the possibility that these piercing sonar pulses might be mistaken for a group of giant orcas (killer whales) that could attack them. Might this not be enough to panic dolphins to escape by beaching themselves on shore away from frightening sounds in the water?”

Naval exercises coincide with mass beaching of dolphins that often ends in the death of some animals who become stranded beyond help. All whales stop feeding and swim away from the sounds of sonar, even the giant blue whales. But the smaller beaked whales, such as dolphins, are the shyest creatures so they are particularly terrified by sonar and suffer the worst damage during naval exercises.”
“Thank you, Mercy,” said Emil. “I hope the Navy realizes what it is doing to whales and takes more care not to hurt them.”

“I hope so, too, Emil,” said Mercy.

“Not only dolphins but most creatures of the sea think differently from land animals.”

“What do you mean by that, Mercy” asked Helen.

“Well, I mean that the forces acting in the sea are different than those acting on land.”

“Can you give me an example?” asks Harrison.

“Yes, for instance, land creatures don’t have to worry about tides and different currents, temperatures, and
pressures at different depths in the ocean as do fish and sea mammals.”

“But maybe fishermen, as well as fish, have to know the sea and the habits of the kinds of fish they want to capture,” interjected Emil.

“Yes, that’s very true,” admitted Mercy. “Another difference between sea creatures and land dwellers,” continued Mercy, for she loved to teach, “is that we sea animals do not worry about storms the way most of you land and surface creatures must, because we can simply go deep enough under water so that the wind blowing up huge waves on the surface hardly disturb us down deep. Fish, as well as you, need oxygen to live. Your lungs are made to extract oxygen from the air, while fish gills are built to extract oxygen from water. Both water and air are part oxygen.”
“And, even if you do get rained on in a storm, fish don’t mind getting wet,” laughed Helen.

“Have you noticed that most fish are dark colored on their backs and light colored on their belly?” asked Mercy, “Can you tell me why?”

“Sure,” said Harrison, “so that when they are swimming near the bottom which is usually a dark background, and even darker the deeper you go, a predator moving over them can’t easily spot them against the background.”

“And when they’re swimming near the surface,“ said Emil, “which, during the day tends to be much lighter, they wont be as easily recognized by a predator moving under them.”
“Good thinking!” exclaimed Mercy. The children noticed at that moment what a sleek and beautiful fish Mercy was with a dark gray-blue coat over a pearl-grey underside. She looked just as if she were always in formal attire ready for a ball.

“We Fish always find humans kind of weird because you’re the same color, front as well as back. Instead of black people and white people, we think you would look more normal,” teased Mercy, “if you all had a dark back and a pale belly.”

“Good joke, Mercy. So at least, then,” quipped Helen with a grin, “we could avoid discriminating against people whose skin color is different from our own.”
Chapter 7. More Play, Gifts and Goodbye

Just then Miranda returned with the pizzas for lunch.

After lunch, during which Mercy was careful to take little, dainty bites of the pizza to hide her large, sharp teeth, so as not to alarm the children. They spent that lovely late summer afternoon telling stories and laughing with Mercy. John came home from work and joined the conversation.

Two neighbors from across Harbor Road arrived at the beach to join the Dows. They were amazed to see a large barracuda playing splash, laughing and talking with the children in the water while Miranda sat relaxed with perfect confidence that Mercy would guard them from any harm.

Miranda introduced Jimmy and Natalie to Mercy. “I would like you to meet Mercy Barracuda. I told you how she saved us from danger off the Bahamas.”
“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” said Natalie, while Jimmy shook Mercy’s side fin. More neighbors, Dick and Ev, came over and were introduced to Mercy. Dick, especially, was astonished by Mercy’s knowledge of the sea, to say nothing of her ability to talk with them about it.

“Mom, Mercy said she would pull our yellow skiff with all three aboard, if that would be OK with you,” said Emil.

“Please, please say it’s OK, Mom,” pleaded Harrison.

Miranda and John said yes, as long as they wore life preservers and stayed in the shallow water along the beach. The children climbed into their little yellow plastic boat and Mercy took the rope in front into her mouth and began pulling the triplets along shore from one end of the beach to the other. Children playing along the beach with their families watching were amazed at the sight of the skiff with the Dow triplets
zooming past them without any motor. It seemed to them both miraculous and mysterious.

Children swimming or playing in the water had a closer view and saw that something under the water was towing the skiff. That made the triplets merry ride seem even more magical. The children on the beach or in the water waved to the triplets as they shot past and the triplets joyously waved back. Sometimes Mercy would swim extra fast or make a sharp turn and one of the Dow children fell out of the boat. Mercy would stop pulling to let her or him get back into the skiff so the ride could continue.

By late afternoon they had all spent a hilarious hour with Mercy pulling the skiff. Miranda could see that Mercy looked tired so she said to her children, “I think Mercy has spoiled you enough for the day.”
“Mercy, please will you spoil us more?” begged Helen.

“Yes, please!” echoed the boys.

“I’d love to continue, but I’ve a long swim ahead of me and must leave for home very soon.” An hour or so later, Mercy explained that she would need to leave so she could be back in the Caribbean to teach several schools of fish starting the Fall Semester. “I wonder, though, if I could borrow your yellow boat for a half hour or so? I’d like to bring each of you a gift from the sea.”

The children gladly gave permission to borrow their skiff to carry back the gifts. With the bow-line in her teeth Mercy headed out into the bay. In deeper water she dove to the bottom to find one after another large fat lobsters for their dinner. She placed each inside the shallow skiff. After there were nine in the skiff, she dove for the tenth time just for
herself. She crunched-up a big one, shell and all. “Oh my! How tasty is New England lobster,” thought Mercy, with a sharp little pang of conscience, because even though she occasionally hunts and eats only one species of her fellow creatures it makes her feel guilty, but only a little bit. Then she towed the skiff behind her, back to the Dow’s and friends who remained talking on the beach.

Mercy towed the skiff close to shore to show them their large lobsters, two for Ev and Dick, two for Natalie and Jimmy, and Five for the Dow’s, then said goodbye and promised she would visit again next summer.
“Maybe we’ll be visiting the Caribbean again next summer,” said John.

The gorgeous red sun was setting now, and the children were looking forward to Mercy’s delicious lobster treat for dinner. All waved goodbye as the Dow family with their friends chanted, “Merci Beaucoup, Mercy Barracuda.”