

The Girl and the Manatee



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Sofia loved the ocean more than anything. She wore her bright yellow rain jacket everywhere, even when the sun was shining. Her curly black hair bounced in two puffy buns as she skipped along the boardwalk. Today was special. She was visiting the coastal nature center with her canvas tote bag, ready to learn about sea creatures.



At the nature center, a tall woman with round glasses and a khaki ranger uniform greeted her. "Welcome, Sofia! I'm Ms. Carter," she said with a warm smile. Her manatee-shaped ID tag swung from her lanyard. Sofia's dark brown eyes grew wide with excitement. "I can't wait to see the manatees!" she said, her gap-toothed smile beaming.



Ms. Carter led Sofia to a big pool with clear, warm water. Inside, a large grey manatee glided slowly. Her wrinkled skin had pale scars on her back. She had a whiskered snout and a wide, flat paddle tail. "This is Mabel," said Ms. Carter. "She's gentle and curious." Sofia pressed her hands to the glass, and Mabel swam right up to her.



Mabel rolled over and showed her belly. Sofia giggled. "She's so round and slow!" she said. Ms. Carter nodded. "Manatees move slowly, which makes them easy to hurt," she explained. "Boats can hit them, and pollution can make them sick." Sofia's smile faded. She looked at Mabel's scars and felt a tug at her heart.



"Why do boats hit them?" Sofia asked. Ms. Carter pointed to a map on the wall. "Boats go fast in shallow water where manatees eat sea grass," she said. "And trash in the water can tangle them or make them sick." Sofia thought about the ocean she loved. She didn't want anything bad to happen to Mabel or her friends.



Sofia watched Mabel nibble on lettuce. The manatee's small dark eyes blinked slowly. "She's so friendly," Sofia said. "I wish everyone knew how special she is." Ms. Carter smiled. "That's why we teach people," she said. "But sometimes we need new ways to spread the word." Sofia's mind started to spin with ideas.



That afternoon, Sofia sat on a bench outside the center. She watched boats zip across the bay. Some went very fast, leaving white wakes behind them. She imagined Mabel swimming right in their path and shivered. "Boats should slow down," she said to herself. "And people should keep the water clean." She opened her tote bag and pulled out her notebook.



Sofia sketched a manatee with a whiskered snout and a paddle tail. She drew a boat with a big red circle around it and a line through it. Then she drew a water bottle and a plastic bag with a line through them too. But something was missing. The poster needed to be bright and friendly, not scary.



She ran back inside to find Ms. Carter. "I want to make a poster that tells people how to help manatees," Sofia said. "But I don't want it to look mean." Ms. Carter's hazel eyes twinkled. "That's a wonderful idea," she said. "What if you use bright colors and a happy manatee?" Sofia nodded. She knew exactly what to do.



Sofia spread her paper on a table. She painted a big blue ocean and a smiling manatee with a whiskered snout. She drew a boat going slowly with a green check mark. "Slow down for manatees!" she wrote in big yellow letters. Then she added a picture of clean water with fish swimming happily. "Keep our water clean!" she wrote.



Ms. Carter looked at the poster. "This is perfect, Sofia!" she said. "You've shown people how to be kind to manatees." Sofia's round cheeks turned pink. "Do you think we can put it up?" she asked. Ms. Carter nodded. "We'll hang it right by the boat ramp where everyone can see it." They walked together to the ramp, Sofia carrying her colorful poster.



At the boat ramp, a family was getting ready to launch their boat. "Look at that poster!" said a boy. "It says to slow down for manatees." His dad read the sign and nodded. "We can do that," he said. He slowed his engine as they pulled away. Sofia watched and smiled. Her poster was already working.



Back at the pool, Mabel swam up to Sofia again. The manatee's whiskered snout wiggled, and her small dark eyes seemed to say thank you. Sofia pressed her hand to the glass. "I'll keep helping you," she whispered. Ms. Carter put a hand on Sofia's shoulder. "You've made a real difference today," she said. "Kindness and a good poster can change minds."



On the drive home, Sofia thought about Mabel's scars and her gentle ways. She thought about the boats and the trash. But she also thought about the boy at the ramp and his dad. "Protecting habitats protects animals," she said out loud. Her mom smiled in the rearview mirror. "That's right, sweetie," she said. Sofia felt proud and happy.



The next week, Ms. Carter sent Sofia a picture. The poster hung at the boat ramp, bright and colorful. Next to it was a new sign: "Manatee Zone: Go Slow." Sofia taped the picture to her wall. She looked at her manatee sticker on her tote bag and smiled. She knew she would visit Mabel again soon.



Sofia learned that even a small girl with a big smile can help. She learned that manatees need clean water and careful boaters. And she learned that kindness, shared with others, can spread like ripples in the ocean. "I'll always protect the manatees," she said. And she did.