



“Oliver! *Oliver!* Come look at this!”

Eagerly, Oliver popped the mussel he’d been cracking open into his mouth, tucked his favorite rock safely under his armpit, and sped up to the surface. His friend Lulu was swimming in circles, occasionally poking her head into the water to urge him on. Pearl and Sammy, two other otter pups who were about a month younger than Oliver, were already there.

Oliver broke the surface and squinted in the bright sunlight. Land was visible in the distance to his left and right, but in front of him, the sea stretched out endlessly.

“What is it?” Oliver asked excitedly, swimming over to Lulu and the others. In response, Lulu pointed behind him. Oliver turned around and gasped.

This strait was pretty wide, but as it grew closer to land—the *big* land, as the otters called it—the waterways grew more and more narrow. At least, that was what Oliver had been told. His mother, Olympia, would never let him swim far enough to see it for himself.

But now, Oliver couldn’t see the big land at all. Because a gigantic flatboat was practically taking up the whole strait.

“What is that?” Oliver asked in wonder. “I mean, I know it’s a boat, but I’ve never seen one like *that* before!”

“It’s so big!” Pearl exclaimed.

“It’s so flat!” Sammy added.

“It’s called a tanker,” Lulu said importantly. “My momma told me. And this is a small one! Momma brought me way out in the ocean once and we saw one *three times* that size!”

“Wow,” Oliver said. As usual, he couldn’t help feeling a little jealous. Lulu’s mother was always taking Lulu close to land and farther afield to show her interesting things. Whenever he asked Olympia if they could join them, Olympia tsked and shook her head. “It’s too risky!” she would say.

“I want to see it up close!” Sammy cried, flapping his tail and splashing the others. “Who’s with me?”

Oliver’s stomach sank.

“Me, me, me!” Pearl exclaimed. “Let’s go!”

“It’s really close to the big land now,” Lulu said, gazing at the tanker. “Maybe too far for you two.”

“Nuh-uh!” Sammy said. “Our momma took us on land already! That island right over there!”

“We played on the beach,” Pearl said smugly.

Oliver’s mouth fell open. “You did?”

“Sure! You have, too, right, Oliver?”

“Come on, Pearl,” Sammy said, giggling. “You know his momma won’t let him do anything.”

Oliver flushed with embarrassment. “That’s not true!”

But it was true. Oliver was a whole month older than Pearl and Sammy, but he'd never been on land. Every time he asked, Olympia had the same response. "Not yet, Ollie. Wait till you're just a little bit older."

"You mean you did it?" Lulu asked, her eyes wide as she gazed at Oliver. "Why didn't you tell me? Which island? What'd you do? What'd you see?"

"I—um—well—" Oliver stuttered. Why had he said that? He was a terrible liar!

Pearl and Sammy started to snicker.

"See? He still hasn't been on land!"

"Aw, Ollie, really?"

"It's not his fault! He's a momma otter's boy!"

"Okay, okay," Lulu said, giving Oliver a sympathetic look. "Oliver will go on land when he's ready."

But her pity made Oliver feel even worse. "I am ready," he said, slapping his paws on the water for emphasis. "I'm *more* than ready. I . . ."

He paused, gazing out at the tanker. It was already almost out of sight, disappearing behind one of the

islands across from the big land. Oliver knew where it was headed. All the boats that came from the sea and sailed through the strait went to the same place.

“I’m going to swim to Puget Sound!”

Pearl and Sammy gasped. Lulu’s eyes widened. Sea otters never ventured into the Sound. It was a big, complicated system of straits and waterways and basins with lots of islands and *so* many boats and Jet Skis and water skis and swimmers—way too dangerous for otters to try and navigate.

But Oliver couldn’t back down now.

“Watch me!” he said, then he dove back underwater and began to swim.

He kicked his back legs and enjoyed the feel of speeding through the water. After a few minutes, he could see the dark, murky shadow of the tanker way up ahead. Oliver grinned to himself, imagining the looks on his friends’ faces when he returned. Maybe he’d even bring back a souvenir from the Sound.

“Oliver!”

A white, furry face with black eyes popped up in

front of Oliver so suddenly, he had to do a backflip to avoid crashing into her.

“Momma?!”

“What in the great wide sea do you think you’re doing?” Olympia cried, her whiskers twitching. Her voice quivered with worry, and Oliver felt a twinge of guilt.

“I was just swimming, Momma.”

“Swimming *where*, exactly?”

“Um . . .” Oliver blinked several times. “Nowhere special.”

Sighing, Olympia pulled Oliver up to the surface. They both shook the water out of their eyes. Distant giggling reached Oliver’s ears, and he glanced behind him to see Lulu, Sammy, and Pearl poking their heads out of the water. He looked away, ashamed.

They were right. He *was* a momma otter’s boy.

“Oliver, tell the truth. Where were you going?”

“I . . .” Oliver swallowed hard. “Just . . . that island over there.”

“Oliver!”

“Pearl and Sammy went and played on the beach!” Oliver cried. “They said it was fun and not dangerous at all!”

“We’ve had this discussion, sweetie,” Olympia said with a sigh. “I’ll take you to the beach when you’re old enough.”

“But Pearl and Sammy are younger than me!” Oliver crossed his arms. “And Lulu got to go under that tanker with her momma.”

Olympia looked horrified. “Under a *tanker*? Good gracious.”

“But nothing bad happened!” Oliver pointed out. “Just like nothing bad happened to Pearl and Sammy on the beach! Can’t I just—”

“Oliver, listen.” Olympia rose up a few inches out of the water, and Oliver fell silent. “You have to trust me, sweetie. I know what’s best for you. And I’ll take you to the beach when you’re ready. Okay?”

Oliver knew there was no point in arguing. “Okay,” he mumbled.

“Good.” Olympia pulled Oliver close. He hugged

her back, even though he was still a little bit upset, and a *lot* bit embarrassed. “Now you float right here, and I’ll finish fetching our lunch.”

She planted a big, wet kiss on his furry cheek, then dove back into the water. Oliver floated on his back and stared up at the sky. He tried to relax, but he could still hear his friends giggling in the distance.

“That does it.” Oliver straightened up and stared straight ahead. The tanker was out of sight now, and he could see the big land spread out before him, bright green and beautiful. All he had to do was swim for the big land, then take a right, and he’d be in the Sound. How hard could it be?

Without giving himself a chance to overthink it, Oliver plunged deep into the water and began to swim as fast as his legs could paddle.