

## **DRIVEN**

Beginning the cross-country drive, I quizzed my parents about our new lives in San Diego. Of the many answers I received, I remember only one: there are no trees in California. Weeks later, as our stale van wound its way along the scenic route that meanders through Sequoia National Park, I felt confused and betrayed. There were definitely trees in California. Mile after nauseating mile, I questioned everything my parents ever told me.

Driving south restored my faith. The road straightened. My stomach settled. Forests gave way to deserts, which would themselves someday give way to strip malls. In this barren land, SeaWorld was a watery oasis we visited often. Even then the sea lions were my favorite. Time and again I watched Clyde and Seamore discover that their dear, departed Uncle Smedley was not only alive, he was a walrus. While Shamu was certainly spectacular, remorse tempered my excitement as I watched the orcas swim slow, somber circles around their tank after the show.

I returned to SeaWorld decades later, delivering a wayward loggerhead turtle for rehabilitation. During my eight years volunteering with the Marine Mammal Center, I handled hundreds of animals. Squealing otter pups, cackling elephant seals, barking sea lions, silent cetaceans – I drove them all. This turtle, my first, was unnervingly still. I was relieved when, all too infrequently, he craned his neck slowly upward to take a breath of air.

During the seven-hour drive south, again in a stale van, I realized this journey actually began with Clyde, Seamore, Smedley, and Shamu. Simultaneously inspiring and appalling, SeaWorld stirred my passion for these extraordinary animals. Now, granted access behind the curtain, I understood that by working only with their wild counterparts, I let myself off easy. Backstage I walked past tanks holding bored juvenile male dolphins, too frustrated for display. In the tank

next door, expectant mothers waited to give birth to a new generation of reluctant jesters. Familiar feelings of regret returned.

My rescue experiences had already set me on the path to law school. Vaguely familiar with the Marine Mammal Protection Act, I struggled to comprehend how seal bombs were considered benign deterrents when they frequently exploded in the mouths of curious sea lions. I suspected, but could not prove, that agricultural runoff was responsible for the increasing frequency of the harmful algal blooms that introduced neurotoxins into the food chain. These dolphins reminded me of one more battle I needed to fight. I resolved to end the exploitation of captive cetaceans.

I spent my time in school wisely. I answered these questions and asked many more. I forged connections with the oldest and most influential non-profits in my adopted home state. I attended conferences and competitions. I researched extensively, discovering a cause of action that might ultimately free Lolita from the tiniest orca tank in North America. Realizing that I may actually become one of a handful of lawyers working full-time in animal law makes every nauseating mile worthwhile.