

TechnoOcean Academy:

The Ocean Avengers 2020

by Cathy Gale

Prologue: May 1, 2000 - Oil, Oil Everywhere

Pilar Ramos and Mariposa Rodriguez stood at their bus stop.

“So, did you study for the test today?” Mariposa asked her friend.

Pilar shrugged. “I meant to. But Luis called and we ended up going to the mall. He bought me a CD.”

“Nice of him,” said Mariposa. “Well, I didn’t study either. Just wasn’t in the mood. Oh well, who cares?”

“Yeah.” said Pilar, rather guiltily. “Who cares?”

“I don’t see why we have to go to keep going to school at all,” Mariposa said. It was a subject she’d been harping on a lot, lately. “I’m going to get married and stay home taking care of my kids. I’m not going to go to college, why should I have to keep going to school?”

“You’ll have to be able to help your kids with their schoolwork,” Pilar said.

“Why? That’s what teachers are for.”

Pilar grinned. “You don’t see anything ironic in that statement, do you?”

Mariposa blinked. “What?”

“Never mind.”

“Anyway, I’ve also been thinking I might cut hair...you know, if I needed to have a job. I’d love to do that. Think up new hair styles for

people. Spend all day talking to them and helping them look as attractive as possible. The pay might be lousy, but you get pretty good tips.”

“That’s a good idea, Mariposa,” Pilar said, and meant it. “You’d be good at that.”

Mariposa nodded. “I think I would. I’m thinking more and more I’d like to do that. So I need to go to hair-dressing school. Why should I have to wait two more years? Why shouldn’t I be able to start going to hairdressing school now?”

“‘You’re only sixteen.’” said Pilar. “That’s what my mother keeps saying. ‘You’re only sixteen. You need to get an education.’”

“But I know all I need to know to start learning how to cut hair!”

The bus came and they climbed aboard. Mariposa pulled out a

magazine and paged through it, pointing out hair styles and what they did, or did not do, for the ladies who possessed them.

Pilar kept half her attention on the magazine, and the other half on her own problems. She'd wanted to go to college once, long ago. She'd wanted to be a veterinarian. But then she'd met Luis and he'd started taking up all of her time. He loved her so much and he didn't want to be apart from her for a second! So she didn't have time to study anymore.

So she wasn't going to be a veterinarian. With her grades she wouldn't even be able to get into college. Well, too bad. She could still do something with animals. She could get a job in a pet store. Or maybe follow Mariposa's lead and learn how to do dog grooming. Pilar grinned to herself. Her doggie clients would probably pay more attention to her conversation than Mariposa did.

The bell for first hour rang, and Pilar and Mariposa found their seats. Their teacher, Mr. Veidt, held up his hand for quiet.

“Class, as most of you know, I’m sure, an oil spill was discovered off the bay a couple of days ago. Well, now we’re getting birds and animals washed up on the beaches covered in oil. The local Rescue Society is asking for help for the cleanup. They’ve cleared it with Principal Walters. Any students who’d like to help will receive permission to be absent from classes today. Protective gear will be supplied to you, and a free lunch. Would any of you like to volunteer?”

Pilar and Mariposa looked at each other, and then their hands shot up simultaneously.

Pilar came home feeling exhausted physically and emotionally drained. It hadn’t been the few lifeless bodies she’d picked up throughout the day...small, defenseless bodies of animals who hadn’t known what was wrong with them, and wouldn’t have been able to do anything to save themselves if they had known...but the ones who’d been still alive...covered with that horrible black liquid.. And

what was worse, she'd overheard Mr. Veidt talking with Miss Jacobsen. The percentage of birds and fish they'd seen washed ashore was so tiny. Somewhere out there that bright blue water was no more. Instead the water was covered with black sludge and birds, animals and fish were wallowing in it helplessly, suffering. You couldn't rescue a tenth of them...



Rescuing the animals piecemeal wasn't the answer, Pilar had thought. Something had to be done with the oil. Someone should invent something, some kind of...something...that could be poured on the oil and just make it all go away instantly. That'd be the way to do it.

“They’re trying to invent something like that, I’m sure.” Mr. Veidt had told her when she’d mentioned it to him. “At least, I’d hope so. But it’s the type of thing that’d take years and years to invent and in the meantime animals keep dying and shorelines keep getting polluted...there’s not enough scientists working on it, Pilar, that’s the long and the short of it. The “theys” of this world have other things they want to spend their time on.”

Pilar had been thinking about those words, ever since.

After soaking in a hot tub for a half hour, thinking, she had made a decision.

Luis came for her an hour later.

“I’ve decided we’ll go see the new Depp movie,” he told her.

“Sorry, Luis, I can’t go out tonight,” Pilar told him.

Luis stared at her. “What are you talking about? You’re not saying you’re tired after all that work today on the beaches? That’s okay, baby, just lean against me.” He reached for her.

“No, Luis. It’s just...I’ve got a test to study for.”

“Study for it later. Come *on*, Pilar.”

“No, Luis. I’ve kind of had an...epiphany, I guess. I haven’t been doing well in school and I’ve decided I want to do better. The only way I’m going to be able to do that is to start studying. So I won’t be going out except on weekends.”

“You’ll go out when I tell you,” Luis said angrily. “I’m not going to wait around for you until the weekends, for god’s sake.”

“Luis, this is important to me. I want to do better in school.”

“Pilar, I’m telling you. *I* want to go to the movies. If you don’t come with me, I’ll find another girl who will. It won’t be hard, ya know. Mary’s been trying to get me into her panties for months.”

“And you actually resisted? I’m glad to hear that!”

“Yes, I *did*, because I love you. But if you think studying for some stupid test is more important than going out with me, that doesn’t say much for how much *you* love *me*.”

“It’s not the same thing, Luis! I want to go out with you - you know I do. I’m just asking you to wait until the weekend. Is that too much to ask?”

“Yes, it is. But if that’s the way you want it, baby, then that’s the way you’ll get it. I’ll see you in school tomorrow. With Mary hanging on my arm. Mary will treat me right.”

Luis spun on his heel and walked out.

Pilar stood stock still, her eyes burning, a cold feeling in the pit of her stomach.

So that was it, was it? He loved her, as long as *she* treated *him* right? Which meant doing everything he wanted to do and nothing she wanted to do?

And if she didn't, he'd replace her without a second's thought. That wasn't love! Was she going to put up with a guy who 'loved' like that?

Hell, no.

Guys had been hitting on her since she'd "blossomed" at the age of fourteen. Luis had just been the first to tell her he loved her, and she'd believed him. But there were hundreds of other guys out there. Hell - there were *millions* of other guys out there. She'd be able to replace Luis easily. Not as quickly as he'd be able to replace her, obviously, but she didn't care about that right now. She had other things to do.

Her mom came out of the kitchen. "You're not going out with Luis?"

"No, mom," Pilar said quietly. "I wonder if we can talk. I've decided I want to try to get into college, and I need some advice."

"Oh, Pilar."

Pilar was surprised at the emotion in her mom's face, and more so when her mom hugged her. "I'm so proud of you. Whatever you need, baby. Guidance counselor, tutors, whatever you need."

“Thanks, mom. You’re the best.”

It wasn’t going to be easy, Pilar knew. She *did* have brains. But she hadn’t exercised them in a while. So she had a lot of education to catch up on. Hopefully her friends would be more supportive than Luis had been. But even if they weren’t, she was going to do this.

The world needed more scientists. Well, she was going to be one. And figuring out how to destroy that all-encompassing oil would be her speciality.

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