

## The Shark

The sun beat down on my already rosy shoulders on our fifth day at the beach. A wave washed ashore and eased my feet deeper into the wet sand as I watched my little cousin. She scooped up a handful of dripping sand and searched through it. She recovered, pinched between two fingers, a tiny mollusk. A coquina. It rested in her palm for a moment, the pale purple shell on her pale pink hand.

She was tiny like the coquina, short, skinny, with eyes as blue and as deep as the sea that framed her. A wave rushed by us, splashing her thin legs. When it rolled back she gently laid the coquina back in the shimmering sand. We watched it burrow into the sand, leaving only bubbles where the delicate purple creature had once been. Who could know there was life there, in the wet sand, beside the murky ocean?

If anyone could, it was my little cousin. Martina. She was named her for her grandmother. Her name was a complete coincidence. But perhaps it was not a coincidence: perhaps God swept down to Earth to whisper the name Martina into her mother's ear as she held her baby for the first time. Mar: the Latin word for sea. Some would say that the name Martina is actually derived from the name of the Roman god Mars. But I know Martina, and I know that Martina means sea.

At first we all thought she was just doing it for attention. I don't know how it started. All I know is that a few months before we left for the beach my cousin was telling me all about whale migrations, and giant squid-- as if she had never considered the possibility that things existed that did not breathe air. As if she had never seen the beta fish on my kitchen counter, which I named Rainbow, even though he was only blue.

Her parents had declared it 'just a phase' by the next time I saw Martina. No one knew where her obsession originated. It quickly consumed her. My cousin developed the wide-eyed look of Pandora. She was watching evil spiral away from the open box in her lap. For a ten year old, she wasn't much of a reader. But when I went up to Martina's room, it seemed as though my cousin had checked out every remotely ocean-related book the library had to offer. It ranged from picture books to encyclopedias. She had taken down all the decoration from her room and plastered the walls with posters. Orca whales, bull sharks, people surfing, baby seals, albino lobsters-- they all stared down at me. Someone made the mistake of buying her with a t-shirt with a shark on it. From then on it was all she wore.

Oh, the sharks! It was the sharks that did it. She was fascinated with them. Their smoothness and speed, teeth the size of your finger, a stomach big enough to hold your whole body-- it all mesmerized her. Martina couldn't help herself. I knew it wasn't a phase. There was something of the ocean in her that longed to be pulled out to sea with children's buckets, to burrow into the sand with the coquinas.

And so she begged her parents, and so we made this pilgrimage to the beach. By day we looked for wildlife, or at least signs of wildlife, collected shells, swam, body-boarded, and were burnt by the sun. By night we traded swimsuits for pajamas and lay in our beds, feeling the interminable rhythm of the ocean gently rock us to sleep, and its sound bless our slumber. She loved every moment of it. Her blue eyes were constantly lit with fun and excitement.

A sudden commotion interrupted my reverie. Down the beach, something was happening. There was much screaming and splashing as people stumbled from the water. At first I thought they were frolicking in the waves, but their movements seemed a little more

desperate, a little more real. Sunbathers were sitting on their towels, all pointing to the same place. Children surrendered their sand castles to the oncoming tide and ran to their parents. The whole beach seemed to have fallen out of the rituals we had observed and followed for the past five days. I shaded my eyes from the blinding glare of the ocean. Then I saw it: a shiny black fin protruding from the side of a wave rolling to shore. It disappeared for a moment, lost in a swell. For a minute I believed it had slunk back down to the depths, but there it was again, and it seemed closer to shore.

“A shark!” Martina yelled. She leapt up and sprinted down the beach towards it. Sand flew behind her. I stood up, ready to follow her.

I noticed a vital detail. A thin string was cutting through the water. It led from the shark to the shore. Attached to the shore was a man. Attached to the man was a fishing pole. Curious people were gathering around him, shading their eyes against the brilliant glare that coated the ocean. A few were yelling, “Reel him in!” Martina seemed to notice too. She stopped halfway to the fisherman. Her arms hung limp. I sped to her side and took her hand. She turned to look at me. Her blue eyes seemed to be deeper than usual, deep as a well. We held hands as we watched the fin disappear and reappear with each passing wave. More people were gathering around the fisherman until they formed a crowd, all cheering for the exposure of the strange creature they had only seen during “Shark Week”.

The shark was closer to shore now, near where the waves were breaking. It was resisting, winding from side to side, fighting to remain in safety. The people cheered louder. I, too, wanted to cheer, but something in the way Martina was looking at the fisherman stopped

me. I am only curious, I kept repeating to myself. I am deeply curious and that is all. I tried not to think about what my curiosity and the others' curiosity would cost this creature.

The shark was in very shallow water now, perhaps only a foot. It was becoming desperate; it sloshed water around as it whipped its sleek body back and forth. When I could see not only its black fin but the top of its back too, a wave rolled out and left the shark completely exposed. The fisherman and another man ran forward and grabbed its tail. Martina drew a shuddering gasp as it was, at last, pulled from obscurity by its tail. It thrashed in the men's grip, opening its jaw threateningly. And there it lay, writhing, the fantastic beast, the object of Martina's fantasies.

And it was fantastic. It seemed pretty big, to me, about four feet. As big as Martina. Its back was the smoothest, softest, and deepest shade of gray possible. I didn't think that a color so soft could exist. Its gills fluttered madly in the empty air. Its jaw was open, showing the spectators bright pink gums and a row of crooked white teeth, sharp as the fangs of a poisonous snake. What we could see of its belly was as white as its teeth. Its aqueous eyes were a deep, deep black.

The crowd was applauding. What a feat, they must have thought it was, to have pulled such a creature out of the murk! I, too, thought it impressive, but I said nothing. I watched the shark flop around, kicking up sand. I realized that it truly was a giant fish. I remembered when I was Martina's age, my grandfather would sometimes take me fishing. It had amazed me then that things were living in the funny smelling, artificially green lake behind his house. If I ever managed to catch something, usually just a wimpy little thing, my eyes would get wet as it wrestled with the empty air, flopping around on the bottom of the boat. When it was time to

put them in the cooler and take them up to the house, I would cry in earnest until my grandfather let them go, grumbling all the while.

A chubby little boy in American flag swimming trunks sprinted from the crowd and slapped the shark's tail, then ran back to the laughter of his friends. The fish seemed to be giving up. It didn't move as one of the men crouched next to it and picked up its tail, holding it in his lap. The other man crouched next to him and clutched the shark's fin. They were both sporting multi-colored Hawaiian shirts. A flash told me someone had taken a picture. Martina seemed close to tears. I could see her biting her lip. A couple pretended to look terrified as they posed for their friend's camera. And then more flashes: the rest of the crowd, they were taking pictures too, what a story to tell their friends back home! They saw a shark, the real, fantastic killing machine! But the shark didn't seem too fantastic as it lay in the dry sand.

More pictures. How long could a fish survive without water? I didn't know. A few people began to yell "Put it back!" The fishermen were trying to pull the string from the shark's mouth. After a few minutes, they seemed to decide they couldn't do it without losing a hand, and simply cut the string with some scissors. I tried not to think of the hook embedded in its poor throat. They lugged the shark back to the water's edge. It wasn't struggling anymore. Sand was pushed out of its way on either side as its cumbrous body was dragged. A trickle of blood ran from its mouth. Then, finally, they shoved the beast back into the water. A wave rushed by and on return took the shark with it, pulling it back into obscurity.

The fisherman looked our way, then hastily away again. I wondered why he was so expressionless. You would think he would have the wide-eyed look of Pandora. He was watching evil spiral away from the open box in his lap. I wanted to snap the box shut, but could

there be any hope left, after Martina had just witnessed such a majestic creature, her most innocent and child-like fantasy be treated like a lifeless object, an interesting spectacle, and nothing more?

The shark's fin was still visible. It was very still. "Don't worry, it's only stunned," I said to my little cousin. "It'll swim off in a few minutes." But Martina was no longer at my side. She was taking strong and rapid steps towards the two men. Something seemed have come over her. She was trembling. In one fluid motion, she bent down, grabbed two tiny fistfuls of sand, and threw it in the men's faces.

"Do you realize?" Martina screamed. Her face was very red. The men stared at her, bewildered. The crowd, a moment ago boisterous, was silent. She seemed unable to say anything more. There was an awkward pause as she continued to glare at them with pure hostility, while the men stared wide-eyed back. She opened her mouth quite suddenly. "I . . ." she choked. She swallowed hard. "You hurt that shark," she blurted out, "and that was wrong." She gave them one last fiery glare before turning on a heel and marching off in the same strong and choppy walk with which she had come. This lasted only a few steps. At that point Martina began to run.

"Martina!" I called, and ran after her. She was running flat-out. She was sobbing. I could hear her. I could see her skinny body shaking. She stopped quite suddenly. I almost ran into her. She turned away from me, away from the ocean. She was violently shaking, like I had seen no one shake before. I wasn't sure what to do. Would she allow me to comfort her?

And before I knew it she was running back to the ocean. She collapsed onto her knees roughly in the hard, wet sand. She thrust her hands into the sand and dug like a dog. "Julie!"

she cried desperately. "The coquinas, they're gone, I can't find any!" Tears were still streaming down her face. I knelt down beside her and, noticing the indicative bubbles, scooped up some sand. I recovered, pinched between two fingers, the tiny mollusk. I laid it in her palm. We stared at it. The pale purple was beautiful on her pale pink hand. With her other hand, she wiped a few tears off her face. The sun beat down on our shoulders.

In about five minutes, the crowd dispersed. In an hour or two, they were back in the water.