

Shark Week

By Mya DeStefano

We were at Cocoa Beach Inlet. Which might not mean much to some, but to me, it meant shark bite capital of the world.

Sharks were kind of magical, in a morbid sort of way. There's a reason why Shark Week has become this unusual phenomenon among people in Kansas who have never seen the ocean before, let alone a shark. Sharks are what we all aspire to be beautiful, terrifying, and seemingly unaffected by the corner of the world we've carved for ourselves.

Sharks skim the shallows, gliding by with the work of their back fins—no attention given to the coral or the pinfish skirting away in terror.

Sharks have no interest in you. Until they do. Then the shark jolts at a nearby tuna that had subconsciously begun to feel safe in the presence of the calm shark. Yet what the tuna doesn't know is that while the shark is calm, it's also always being careful. The shark is thinking, strategizing its way to its next meal. The shark might seem at peace, but it is always on edge.

Something unusual and something I admire about sharks is the way they go into a sort of trance when upside down. It's called tonic immobility, and I think everyone, especially me, could use some of that. I find it fascinating that the feared kings of the ocean can find a place of zen on their backs, floating on the waves.

When I was younger, I wrestled between the fluctuating delusional desire of a child that's not yet afraid to dream, to go pro, like my father would've if it weren't for me. As I grew, my time on the board ceased, and my hatred for humid, salty car rides with my burnt thighs permanently attached to blazing leather interior won out. Even though my father still brought my discarded board on

every beach trip, I sat fully dressed under an umbrella, trying to avoid too much glare on my Kindle.

On this one particular excursion, my father dragged his dripping wet suit-clad body from the caress of his one true love, and the look in the eyes told me what was coming.

My mouth gaped, poised for refusal, but he looked so overjoyed by the prospect. “Just let me push you into a few waves,” he encouraged.

“I’ll take pictures,” my dad’s girlfriend Mia promised. His hat engulfing her head as she peered from behind the lens.

My dad waited, wading in the cerulean blue water beside the board, surprisingly clear for a mushy winter beach day. He waited, his muscles untensed in the way only the comfort of the ocean could ever provide him.

My father wanted to be a shark. He exists on this edge of stress and strategy, pretending to be carefree. Yet, he’s inebriated by his anxiety, except when he’s on a board, half a mile from land. Amongst the waves, he’s in a trance.

When he swiveled my board around and pushed me on the path to the beach, I wasn’t ready. I’m never ready for that moment when the wave comes, and he senses that this wave is the one for me, my soulmate. I’m not ready when he uses his toes on the shelled floor to barrel me forward.

I’m most definitely not ready when I see a shark glide beneath my board as I glide above it and past it towards safety.

I had never felt so helpless as I looked over my shoulder, completely forgetting my imperative to balance, and watched the stiff fin carve its way towards my wading father.

The board's nose hits the spot where the tide meets Mia, and I'm thrown. Scuttling to get my footing on dry land, I screamed for my dad. For him to come back, for him to stay put. I didn't know whether it was better to scream to God that he'd walk back and somehow, somehow avoid the beast moving in his direction, or if should stay put. Should I throw my board back in the water and hope my lacking paddle would be a source of rescue?

I really didn't think at all, to be honest.

Mostly I flailed in the sand, screaming like I was mid shark bite myself as Mia tried to figure out why I was crying and dry-heaving.

My Dad walked slowly, confidently back from his spot in the water, and why wouldn't he? He's in the ocean, his trance. Nothing can stop him there. Except the freaking shark that would surely take his leg. I screamed for him to stop, incoherent mumbles that couldn't be deciphered. Especially around the sound of waves breaking and children chattering.

In that moment, I knew that I was my father's daughter. Then I passed out.