

People Can Only Swim Forwards

I watch waves chip paint off my dinghy. I watch flecks of enamel float on the water. I watch my reflection. Out here, atop the ocean, I have a lot of time to think.

I'm hunting a shark. One of them crept into the bay about a month back. She staked out the territory, and now thinks it's hers. The butcher's kid was first to spot her. Little redhead boy. He was out on an evening swim. Went further than he should've. Ducked his head under the water and saw a flash of grey hide. Beelined back to the shore, mouth wide open, trying to scream, but with nothing coming out. Went into shock, the poor kid.

We've seen her a few times since then. Government won't do nothing about it. "Shark hasn't killed anyone yet," they say. Just wait, we. But this means fixing it has been left to us.

That's why I'm out here tonight. Watching the waves. Sitting under a moon that's just about exploding onto the ocean. The night is a black purple; dark, shimmering, but with a hint of some royal kind of colour. The paint on my sad old boat keeps peeling off into the ocean. Something sad and lonely comes over me; wanting to busy my mind, I open a beer. Fzzt. It froths against my cold hands. I check the bait-line, fitted to a hunk of the butcher's cheapest cuts. Nothing yet. I take my first sip of the new beer and stare at my gun. For whatever reason, I think of Emma.

I never liked her at school. Funny how that happens. For years fate brought us together: we'd see each other accidentally, at parties, at the shops, that kind of thing. But no warm feelings. And then out of nowhere, on a surf trip with some friends, I realised I fancied her. We'd been talking at a party the week before, not about anything really, but I found myself reliving the memory, playing it again and again. I wished I was with her instead of my friends, those same-old people I knew too well. She had become a different person. Not the irritating, awkward girl of my school years, but a woman for whom I felt love. Like waking up from a dream, the prejudices and assumptions of an old me tossed aside, the windshield scraped clean.

She never said please or thank you. That was what first grated me once I properly got to know her. She wasn't necessarily impolite. She just didn't have those words in her vocab. I think I realised about a year into our relationship. Again, the windshield was wiped clean, and her complete lack of manners became all I saw.

I'm getting cold waiting for this shark. I take a sip of beer and try to imagine what Emma's up to. Would she pick-up my call? No, probably not; we didn't end well. Still, I want her to know how I feel. I think about my friend Jacques, and my brother Vinnie. On a lonely night like this, I want to let them all know how I feel. But they'd just be suspicious; they'd miss the point. Emma would think I want sex. Jacques would want to set-up a night out. Vinnie would reckon I'm trying to score some easy money off him. Maybe they'd be right. It's funny, you always think you have the best intentions, and then later – maybe years later – you look back and realise just how selfish you were being. The more time passes, the less freewill it seems like you ever had. Sometimes I find it hard not to feel like I was just a rat in a maze. But still, in the present you're good at kidding yourself that you aren't. That your actions have no context. That you are deciding things honestly, independently. With good intention.

That thought calls for a long sip. Long enough to finish the beer. Time for another can. Still no shark.

Despite the drinking, my feeling remains. That lonely sadness, that wishing to check in on my loved ones. I'm overcome with an urge to talk to them, to assure each one that I love them. But no words would do this feeling justice. Words would poison it. I'd try to express love or gratitude or whatever, and the words would turn those expressions into cold stone. That's the way it always is. But I feel so much sometimes, and it hurts not to be able to tell it all. That there's something inside me no one will ever see. They'll just see me. They won't see the burning, the beauty underneath.

Still no shark.

My hands are freezing. The bones hurt. The government ought to be doing this. Save me sitting out here, for no reason, wasting all this time thinking. The government's incompetent. People have better things to do than wasting their nights hunting shark. Maybe I should talk to someone about this, figure out some way to get the government to do more boring work like this. I get so angry sometimes. Other people go through life scot-free. Emma never liked my complaining. "Always blaming the government," she'd say. "Looking for bad guys." Well, look who's out here spending the night hunting shark. Not her, and certainly not the government.

There's a thunderclap. Damn. It wasn't meant to rain tonight. White lightning tears through the sky. A minute later there's more thunder. I stare straight up at the sky above me, expecting rain. But it never comes. The hairs on my neck tingle. My hands shake. I can't take my eyes off the sky. My gaze is trapped.

For a second, I think I'm staring at God. The sky defeats me with its greatness. I am it, and it is me, and I see my life for what it truly is. Then a wave smacks the boat into the air and I fall into the water.

Green ocean burns my eyes; I try to swim but can't. I'm frozen in place. It's the sky – that infinite beauty – it has paralysed me. I sink further into the freezing sea.

I see a flash of grey flesh.

Dead black eyes swim beside my falling body. A heavy tail beats against my legs, tossing me sideways. I pray to the sky, pray for it to spare my life. But it won't, and I realise a beautiful, sad truth. That right now I am living a powerful, dramatic moment. That my soul is experiencing something special – a terrible fear, but also a great profundity. I realise that there will never be anything quite so commanding as that sky and nothing as visceral or real as the terror in my body. And that this is the most beautiful thing in the world, something I wish I could communicate to everyone I've ever known. But I also realise that by tomorrow this feeling will have faded, and the beautiful, sad truth will instead be that a man on the news was eaten by a shark.

It swims by me again. I feel I know her as well as my own brother.