

# Requiem ShArk

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*To Dave Roblewsky,  
who drove around looking for us*



# People I Would Like to Thank

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# Sunset Surf

The surfer lay on his board north of the jetty and eighty yards off shore, letting the murky swells rock him as they slid underneath on their way to dissolve in a dingy froth on the beach. The sun was well down over the estuary, casting the few bathers still in the water in silhouette as its thin yellow light glanced off the rounded tops of the swells.

The man on the board almost slept, letting the motion and the dying heat work on joints and muscles too old even for the waist-high curls from a Category 4 storm churning north in the Atlantic, keeping a polite distance from land. For three days it had shoved waves, big by Florida standards, against the coast. The surfing had been about as good as his aging carcass could handle, but it had tapered off. Now he was the last board in the water. Even the groms cutting class in early September to catch the waves had called it a day. He hadn't paddled ashore with them because there wasn't much reason to paddle ashore. A couple of Coronas at the little rat-shack bar three miles up Route 1, if he had the gas to drive it. Maybe a hit on a joint by some bonfire on the beach, if he could find one where they weren't too young to be comfortable with his grizzled beard and stringy frame, and where they'd share their weed in return for some tall tales of Duranbah and the Sunset Rip.

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Then the sweat-clammy sleeping bag in the back of the van as he dreamed fitful dreams of Waimea and Mavericks and the big waves he couldn't ride anymore. And the chill of the early morning hours when he would wake up shivering and thinking that some wave, somewhere, was the last one he'd ever ride, drift back into fitful sleep imagining what it would be like to paddle out and offer himself up to some North Shore monster rolling down out of the Pacific. But he wasn't at the North Shore. He was in Florida, where he had come because it was warm and he could live in the van and things were cheap.

The onshore breeze stiffened, and there was a chill lurking in it that made him shiver. He slithered forward on the chipped and scarred Greg Noll gun and dipped his arms into the water and started to paddle, riding the forward slope of a lazy swell. In front of him, the surface of the water suddenly fractured and dimpled, a fine spray frosting the air above it. It was a panicked school of mullet, and the surfer stopped paddling and hastily withdrew his arms from the water, putting his hands flat on the board and pushing himself as high as he could, searching the surface of the water with eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun that fell with increasing velocity toward a brassy sunset over the narrow strip of land that separated the Indian River from the Atlantic. He scanned in an expanding spiral, the water closest to him first, twisting to look over his shoulder into the blind zone in his wake. He saw nothing. The surface of the swell was like pale jade glass, broken only by flecks of kelp and little patches of foam. The mullet were gone.

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Between him and the shore, where the water was a little more than waist deep, he saw a boy and a girl facing one another in the surf. The two forms, black cutouts against the sheen of the sun on the water, merged and clung and then pulled apart, the girl leaning back at an angle that suggested to the surfer that she wasn't standing on the bottom, but had her legs around the boy's waist. He wondered if they were doing it, and there was a vague stirring in his groin, and he thought *dirty old pervert*. He was lowering himself to start paddling again when he saw the fin, a dark blade thrust out of the surface of the water, off to the right of the line between him and the couple, leaving a V in the surface of the water. It was in sight for only a heartbeat, and then sank back into the swell. The surfer dropped flat on the board and began to paddle again—hard, deep strokes that drove him toward the kids in the surf. It took him less than twenty seconds to reach them where they stood oblivious to his approach, clinging now in a kiss so carnal that they seemed to be devouring one another. As he swung the board parallel to the beach between them and the open sea, he saw the shark glide past on the seaward side, looking nearly black under the murky water, its thick body and long pectoral fins marking it as a bull shark, a big bitch, too long by half to be a male.

He slid off the board and at the splash the two came apart and turned toward him, mouths gaping and startled eyes wide. "Get out of the water," he said. "There's a shark." They just stood there staring, teenagers, tan, good looking, careless, dumbfounded by the apparition of an old man

with tangled hair suddenly materializing in the midst of their lovemaking. He cursed at them and slung his arm as if to backhand them toward the beach. "Go!" he snarled. "Go now. It's right here." He turned his back on them and upended the board, thrusting the tail of it down against the sand so that it stood as a comically inadequate barrier between him and the shark and the open sea beyond. The swell that had carried him in was receding now, and the undertow pulled the sand from underneath the board and it started to rotate in his grasp. He fought it, manhandling it upright, forcing the tail against the bottom again. Behind him he could hear the couple splashing toward the beach, the boy's voice urging the girl on. He looked for the fin, or the shadow of the shark under the water, and then he felt a swell of pressure that defied the retreating current, pressing the upright board against his palms, parting around the board and swirling against his thighs—a mass of water pushed ahead of a massive body. The board was brushed aside as casually as a hand sweeps breadcrumbs from a table, and he felt something thrust against his leg, blunt, hard, abrasive. Almost before he had time to realize that the shark had touched him, he felt its mouth close on his leg at the knee, a moment of searing pain as the teeth broke the skin and sank into the muscle and tendon, and then a numbing, vice-like pressure.

He raised the board and stabbed down with it, panic lending great strength to the blow. It struck the hard back of the animal with such force that his grip was jarred loose, and the board toppled sideways into the water. He felt

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himself drawn seaward by the giant fist that clutched his knee, and then the shark rolled, the dingy pale underside of its pectoral fin rising out of the water in front of him, unbelievably long, the scarred and mottled gray of its flank roiling to the surface, and he was wrenched sideways, head and arms going under. The pressure on his leg released suddenly, and he thrashed his arms, trying to orient himself in the too-dark water, find the bottom and the surface. He got one foot under him against the bottom and thrust upright, gasping and coughing, and saw his board floating five feet away. He took a step toward it and suddenly found himself underwater again, as if he had stepped in a hole. He floundered back to the surface, tried to step toward the board again, and realized that he hadn't stepped in anything: his leg was gone, and his blood was welling up around him in a spreading circle. A bizarre image came into his head: an Australian they had called Skizzy, into his seventh beer and inventing a wetsuit with built-in tourniquets. *Focus, you asshole*, he thought.

He threw himself forward in the water and swam for the board with his arms, getting one over it and his hand on the opposite edge. He pulled it against him and was trying to roll up on it when he felt the water surge against him again, saw the fin break the surface and the blunt snout rise out of the water, and saw the jaws close on his side between his rib cage and his hip. The pressure drove the air from his lungs, and he felt himself ripped from the board and borne beneath the surface, and he thought *there's no tourniquet for this*. Lyrics from a song ran through his mind: *Joy to the*

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*fishes in the deep blue sea.* As water darkened with his own blood closed over him, he saw the sapphire face of Pe‘ahi rising up in front of him, the foam on its crest white as angels’ wings.

The girl was almost out of the water when she heard the splash and turned around. She saw the shark roll, and the surfer’s arms pulled down into the forward face of the wave, fingers clawed as if to cling to the air and the light. And she saw the red froth that rode on the surface where the shark and the man had disappeared.

Eric was tugging at her hand, saying something with urgency that didn’t register. Without thinking, she yanked her hand free and started back down the slope of the beach, and she felt the boy throw his arms around her from behind. “What the fuck are you doing?” he said, and tried to haul her back. He was strong, varsity football strong, but she had two years as a lifeguard and knew how to break a panic clutch, twisting in his slippery grasp with a wrenching shrug that sent an elbow into his side just below his ribs. She heard him grunt as she broke free. She took three high, running steps into the surf and launched into a low, hard dive, swimming toward the already dissipating stain on the surface of the water. She heard the words *you idiot*—maybe Eric or maybe in her own head—took a deep breath and dove, her eyes instinctively closing against the sand and salt in the water, so that she had to force them open. It was much darker under the water than it was above, the sun coming from behind her at such a low angle that most

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of the light glanced off the surface. The water around her was a gray-green fog, only slightly lighter above than below. She could see the shape of the surfboard on the surface, black and hard edged, but everything below was indistinct of outline, as if the boundaries separating the water and the things in it were tenuous, less than absolute. Below her and in front of her, she saw a shape darker than the water around it, and for a disoriented moment thought she was looking at an octopus, tendrils snaking out from a dark central mass, and then she saw the shape of a hand and realized it was the surfer, and the tendrils were blood, and something more solid than blood that looped and curled in the current. She propelled herself downward with a breaststroke and felt her shoulder bump against the man's head. She snaked her left arm under his and across his chest, and used her stronger arm and her legs to climb back to the surface. She felt something warm and slippery brush against her calf, and the image of the great dark shape rolling on the surface filled her mind, causing such a surge of adrenaline that she broke through the surface like a breaching porpoise. She saw Eric running toward her through the surf, cursing, and then she felt her kicking feet strike the bottom, and she stood up in water not quite to her waist.

She looked back out into the waves, looking for the shark, and saw nothing. She looked down at the man, floating face up on the surface, unseeing pale eyes looking directly into hers. His side closest to her was a ragged tear, and she saw what it was that had brushed against her, loops and coils of bluish viscera spilling out through the

rent, floating in a tangle just under the surface. Something clutched her arm and she started violently, and realized that Eric was beside her, pulling her toward the beach again.

"Help me with him," she said.

"Let him go and get out of the damned water," he said, and threw his weight back toward the beach, pulling her with him while her other hand, still clutching the surfer's arm, pulled him after them. Then suddenly the direction reversed, as if the man were resisting their efforts, and she saw the coils of flesh straightening, running seaward, pulling more like them out of the man's ravaged side. She felt herself being pulled rapidly back into the surf, and Eric being pulled with her, their weight and their efforts to dig their feet into the bottom barely slowing them down. Eric sobbed, "Let him go, let him go!" Their feet were off the bottom, and the motion felt like being pulled by a ski boat just before it picked up enough speed to stand you up on your skis. "Let go!" Eric yelled again, his own grip on her wrist never slackening. And then something gave, a springy, snapping release, and they were going back in the other direction, borne toward the beach by another swell.

"Let go and swim," she said. "I've got him."

"Leave him, damn it. Can't you see he's dead?"

"Just swim," she said, getting her arm across the man's chest again, and starting for shore. "We can't leave him."

They swam without urgency, side by side. Somehow they both knew that the shark was gone and wouldn't be back. The old surfer floated between them, trailing a dwindling smear of blood in their wake.