

# Shark

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*Tom Ensey*

It was night. The damp air held the smell of salt and rotting fish. Mike sat on the dock, drunk, holding a bottle. Across the bay, lights appeared as somebody lit gas lanterns and hung them off a pier. The lights turned into yellow globes as fog rolled down the inlet. People laughed.

Music played loud, distorted in the fog. Mike shivered and took another drink. There was still an inch of booze in the bottle, but Mike was done. He stood and threw the bottle as far as he could. The bottle whistled into the fog, splashed somewhere far out in the bay.

He weaved toward the house. The fog was thick. As he walked, he felt he was disappearing into the fog. He could not be sure if he was walking, or dreaming of walking.

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Mike's father was standing over him, shaking Mike's shoulder and offering a Bloody Mary.

"Come watch something."

Mike got out of bed. He went to the closet and put on a white denim shirt and a pair of jeans. He pulled on his boots and walked out onto the deck. Mike eased himself into the wooden adirondack chair, but his foot slipped and his head hit the back of the chair. The sudden pain closed his eyes. He fought the urge to run to the rail and throw up into the sea oats. He opened his eyes. The morning light hurt his head. He focused on a pair of sunglasses snarled in the rope hammock. Old wraparounds. God knows where they came from. Probably somebody left them from a party last summer.

Mike leaned unsteadily toward the hammock, fumbled the glasses loose, his fingers numb, and put them on. Mike held his head very still and he tipped his chin up, to keep the sun out of his eyes. The glasses and the tilt of his head made him look like Ray Charles, he thought.

His father banged through the screen door and set a tray on the table, under the umbrella. A pitcher of Bloody Marys and two glasses. The umbrella popped in the wind.

"You look like a coyote ate you and shit you over a cliff," said Mike's father.

"It's bad," said Mike. "That's a fact."

Mike drank his bloody mary carefully. His father downed three pretty fast, then went back to the kitchen and came back with a second pitcher and a pair of Nikon binoculars.

"I put more vodka in these."

"What are we waiting for?"

"Patience. Enjoy the morning."

The sky was white and Mike could hear the soft drone of the surf. He drank half his drink then stared at the glass, a tall one with nautical flags. They were supposed to mean things, those flags: hurricane, man overboard, mayday. He didn't have a clue which meant what. The tomato juice left red gritty streaks on the sides of the glass. It looked bad. But he didn't feel sick anymore. His hangover was lifting. He was getting drunk again.

It wouldn't take much after last night. The Christmas Eve party at the country club. Sweet drinks at first. Whiskey sours? Then something brown and thick with whipped cream in it. He wound up on a yacht with the divorced granddaughter of the former Governor of Alabama. They drank tequila.

"How did I get home last night?" Mike asked.

"You called me from a pay phone at the marina and I came and got you in the Lincoln," said Mike's father. "When I got there, you were dozing against a piling and she was sitting on the end of the dock, crying. She had placed several dozen little votive candles around her, and she was throwing the lighted candles in the water, one by one."

"Oh, no," said Mike. "What did I say?"

"I don't know," said Mike's father.

"She seemed okay at the party," said Mike. "What's her name? Denison?"

"Right. Family name. Jacob Denison, her ancestor, was in Jefferson Davis's cabinet. Secretary of . . . something. The treasury?"

"Probably. I bet that's it. The secretary of the Confederate treasury. Eleven dollars, tops."

The wind popped in the umbrella. Mike looked across the bay at a pier. Gas lanterns. He remembered something.

"She was okay before we got to the boat," said Mike. "I was okay before we got to the boat. Then we got in her car and drove to a big boat. She lives on a boat."

"She's pretty. I kissed her at a stoplight. Then we got to this boat and went inside. We sat on a little sofa and kissed some more. Then she got up to get something to drink, and you could feel the boat rock when she walked.

"I didn't like that. I said I didn't like the boat rocking like that. So she said, let's go outside. We sat on the dock. She went in and got all these candles. She lit the candles and set them all around us. She made drinks and we drank them, and we kissed some more.

"I got this real warm feeling, like I maybe trusted her. So I told her about things. The things that are killing me.

"Then she said, 'We're all God. Life is full of miracles,' she said. 'What happens,' she said, 'is because we make it happen.'

"Daddy, I just couldn't take that shit right then. I got ugly. For some reason, I went back inside and she followed me. One thing led to another, and I picked up her coffee table and carried it outside. I don't know why.

"We had this big argument out on the dock, me holding her coffee table and she kept shaking her finger at me. I couldn't stand that. Her shaking her finger at me. So I threw her coffee table into the bay."

"You threw her coffee table into the bay?" Mike's father laughed.

"Yes, I did," said Mike. "That brought our conversation to a close." He filled his glass again.

"Her Daddy doesn't know what to do with her," said Mike's father. "She teaches French at the junior college up in Foley. She lives on his boat, as you say. His yacht.

"She's been married three or four times. After her last divorce, she went to all the bars around here and slept around a lot. She met some little guy at some bar and ended up living with him for a while. He was a shrimper. Real trash. Didn't own the boat or anything. Just some little guy who worked on a shrimp boat. I reckon he thought he had it made. Living on a yacht with the granddaughter of a former governor."

"She's good-looking," said Mike.

"Yeah, she is," said Mike's father. "She brought the poor little bastard to a few parties at the country club. I felt sorry for him. He was a fish out of water."

"So what happened?" Mike asked.

"It went on like that for a while. By and by, he beat her, of course. But just a little, around the eyes. She wore dark glasses all the time." His father reached over and tapped Mike's Ray Charles glasses on the bridge of the nose.

"Sad story, Daddy," said Mike.

"Sad, sad. So now, she's in a spiritual phase. Trying to come to terms with things, I guess."

Mike pressed his fingers into his temples and made circles.

"Well, bless her heart," said Mike. "I'm sorry. Maybe I should call and try to apologize. She read me her poetry."

"Maybe she should apologize to you," said Mike's father. "Last Christmas, she made a tape of herself, reading her poetry, and gave it to people on the island. I think I still have my copy. It had wind chimes and a cello in the background."

The wind popped in the umbrella.

"That was some bad poetry," said Mike's father, pouring another drink. "That tape probably cost a bundle to produce."

"Where'd she get the money?"

"Her family. How do you think she lives on a yacht? It's the family yacht. Her daddy's too old to sail anymore, so he lets her live there."

"How do you know so much about her?" Mike asked.

"They're friends of mine," Mike's father said. "It's a small town."

Mike's father pointed into the white sky, "Look. There it is."

He handed Mike the binoculars. Red, white and blue parachutes drifted out of the sky. The jumpers had devices strapped to their feet that trailed red and green smoke. They weaved back and forth, leaving intertwining smoky trails. They landed in the parking lot of the bar next to the condo across the bay. People were standing in the parking lot.

The jumpers gathered up their chutes. The people scattered when a helicopter landed, an Army Huey, the jet engine whined high and the blades made a *whop, whop, whop* noise. The smoke coiled tight under the blades, then blew away into nothing when the craft touched down. The jumpers unloaded boxes from the chopper and handed them to children in the lot.

"What is this?" said Mike, never taking the binoculars from his eyes.

"It's a Christmas tradition here," said Mike's father. "Christmas morning, the bar there serves free beer in the parking lot and then the presents for the poor children are airdropped in. They send buses out into the county to pick up the kids and their families. The skydivers are dressed as Santa and his helpers. They're soldiers from the Army base, on the mainland."

"Don't alcoholics show up and get blasted on the free beer?" Mike said.

"Sure, but they're the people who paid for the buses and the presents in the first place," said Mike's father. "A few of the parents get a little loopy. But the cops are everywhere. All the cops come and bring their families. It's a family thing."

"My God," said Mike. "An exclusive, help-the-needy, free beer party. This is a decadent little town, Daddy. The poor children probably grow up worshipping helicopters. Little cargo cultists."

"You're a cynic shit." Mike's father blinked his old, gray eyes and tried to smile.

Mike picked up the binoculars and looked across the bay. Gray-haired men in bright sweaters stood in groups. They had big, white styrofoam cups in their hands. The paratrooper playing Santa Claus was young and muscular under his red suit. The poor children jumped up and down. They clapped their hands. Then Mike's eyes burned and it all went blurry.

Mike lowered the binoculars, reached behind the sunglasses with a finger and wiped his eyes.

"What time is it, Daddy?"

His father looked at his watch. "Ten thirty."

"How much vodka do we have left?"

"Merry Christmas, son," said Mike's father. They shook hands.

"I'll go get the vodka," said Mike.

"You're drinking too much, son."

"I know, Daddy."

"I don't guess you feel like going over there?" said Mike's father. "I usually put in an appearance."

"There are children," said Mike.

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Mike's father walked down to the dock and got in the boat. Mike felt bad, watching him go like that. His father still moved with a hurried walk, but his knees were stiff from arthritis, and though he was still a big man, he had actually shrunk — maybe three inches in the last couple of years. Mike's father was dying. He had cancer. He was receiving treatment three times a week that would give him a 50-50 chance of living five more years.

His father's head was big but his neck had gotten thin and stuck out of the bulky green Irish fisherman's sweater he always wore in winter. Mike's mother made it and gave it to Mike's father the last Christmas she was alive. Leaning into the wind, Mike's father looked like any old man at the beach.

Mike felt a sudden fear: breathlessness and a flutter in his chest.

When Mike was a little boy, his father's company had a baseball team that played on Saturdays in Birmingham's corporate league. They were playing another steel mill's team at a crappy old ball field in the back of his father's factory yard. Scrap metal and rusted truck motors in the outfield. The smell of molten metal and orange smoke in the sky.

Mike wasn't paying attention to the game. He was watching some children playing in the bleachers when the batter lined a foul that hit him in the face.

Watching his father clamber over the dock and into the boat, Mike felt exactly as he had when the baseball hit him, in the instant before he lost consciousness. Something bad was happening, but what? What was this pain?

When Mike woke up in the hospital, his father stood over him. There was dried blood on his white Brook's Brothers polo shirt, and on his face. Also, blood was all over Mike.

"You remember getting hit?" said Mike's father.

"Yes, Daddy. You're all bloody."

"I picked you up and ran here."

"Ran here?"

"There was traffic and the car was blocked in the parking lot."

It was over a mile.

The boat pulled away. It was a Stouderbilt. Made in Mobile by Mr. Stouder and his sons specifically for the shallow bays and bayous of South Alabama. It rode on top of the water like a cork, and Mike's father did not look back as he gave it the gas and the boat shot across the water.

Mike's breath came in short gasps, and it was a minute before he realized he was sobbing.

He went inside, dumped the ice in his glass into the sink, and filled the glass with straight vodka. He took off the sunglasses, dropped them on the kitchen floor and ground them slowly under the heel of his boot.

It was the first time he had been alone in the house since he came there after his divorce. Two weeks. It seemed longer.

Mike went into the living room, sat on the sofa. Some of his mother's paperback books were still on the coffee table. Mike's mother had loved any book with a pirate on the cover. A pirate embracing a beautiful girl in a falling-off dress. A pirate stabbing another pirate on the deck of a burning ship. An unfinished sweater was still on the mantle. Yellow and black yarn, two big needles sticking up out of it. Right where she'd left it. She was working on it when she died. How long was it? Two years?

He picked up the portable phone, pulled out the antenna with his teeth and dialed.

"Hello?"

"Steve? That you?"

"Yes."

"This is Mike."

A long pause.

"Merry Christmas, Stever, old man."

"Merry Christmas, Mike."

"Is your lovely sister-in-law and my former spouse, Marilyn there?"

Mike lit a cigarette, then flicked the lighter on and off, closing one eye and watching the flame.

"No, Mike. She's not."

"Where is she?"

Mike held the lighter up to his ear and touched the gas release tab, listening to the hiss of the escaping gas.

"She and Doris have gone to the cemetery."

"Oh?" Mike flicked the lighter on and held the flame close to his eye. "To visit the grave?"

"Mary's grave. Yeah."

"Decorating it, I bet."

"Yes. They bought some flowers. Some Christmas things. You know."

"Yes. She got me to drive out there with her earlier this year. On Halloween. We put a bunch of plastic pumpkins and stuff on the grave. I didn't do very well, Steve. Maybe it was too soon after it happened. I told her I didn't want to go, but she pouted and all, and guilt-tripped me. So I went. Steve, the grave was sinking. All graves sink, the dirt settles and stuff. But little kids' graves sink real badly, because the vault's very small, you understand? There's more room for the dirt to go down . . . to pack down into . . . You follow?"

"Yeah, I follow."

"Well...I lost it a little bit. I left poor old Marilyn there at the cemetery and I drove to the hardware store and bought a shovel. And I came back and started shovelling up half the cemetery to try to fill up the holes over Mary's grave. Marilyn was saying, 'Stop it! stop it!'"

"It was crazy, I know. And I was sober as a judge, man, I swear. But damn it, Steve, what would you do?"

"I don't know, Mike. I don't know what I'd do in a situation like that."

"Well, I guess I fucked that up, too. Like I fuck up everything else."

Mike lit another cigarette.

"You there?" Mike said.

"I'm listening," said Steve.

"Well, I just don't understand all that," Mike said. "Rituals of grief. I went with her to put plastic pumpkins on Mary's grave, even though I didn't want to. That ought to count for something. But when we got there, the grave was all fucked up. You'd think she could have cut me some slack when I bought a shovel and started filling up holes. She was trying to deal with it, and I was trying to deal with it. Oh, well. Whatever. I guess I just don't get it."

Mike put his feet on the coffee table and knocked some books and magazines on the floor. He leaned forward and tried to straighten things while he talked. "But it's good what they're doing. If it makes them feel better."

"Mike, are you all right?"

"No, Stever. I'm a long fucking way from all right. I'm not well. Very unwell, as a matter of fact. But I wanted to call and say Merry Christmas... We're at the beach, Daddy and I. The house at the beach?"



"Yes, I remember."

"Yeah, y'all came here once. Right after Mama died and Daddy sold the big house in Birmingham and moved in down here. Summer, a couple of years ago. You and Doris, me and Marilyn. All the way from Philadelphia. We left the kids with Doris and Marilyn's folks? Remember?"

"I remember," said Steve.

"You remember the first night? How you and Daddy and Marilyn got drunk and went to bed, and me and Doris went out on the boat and got lost and didn't make it back until the next day? Jesus, I thought we'd never make it back. How's old Doris and the kids?"

"Doris and the kids are fine."

"That whole trip turned into a fucking nightmare. Another family trauma. Marilyn got all pissy over the boat thing and you and Doris didn't have a real good time. Daddy and I stayed drunk, and that pissed Marilyn off, but I think she never understood that's what we do at the beach. And of course, I said some things that pissed everybody off, as is my habit. We needed Mama here to chill everybody out, our great ambassador, the bridge between reason and unreason. But poor old Mama was dead. She couldn't help being dead. I'm sure she wouldn't have died if she had known all the problems it would cause."

"Mike."

"Right, no use bringing up all that old shit. Doris is good people, Stever boy. So are you. I always liked you, back in college. Nobody else did, but I did. You were this smart, beer drinking, pre-med fucker who never got laid. I liked you."

"Mike, you're fucked up."

"I was born fucked up, doctor. Screw you." Mike lit another cigarette. He took a big swallow of vodka and it made him feel mean.

"Tell me, Steve. Old Doris doesn't look a thing like her sister, my ex, do you think? Doris is better-looking."

"What's that supposed to mean, Mike?"

"Nothing, nothing. Doris isn't as smart as Marilyn, but she's definitely better-looking. Especially in a swimsuit. She has bigger titties, Doris does. Big old titties. And her nose is straighter. And how about that tatoo? You wouldn't think she's the kind of girl who'd get a tatoo there. I knew Doris before I knew Marilyn, you know? I knew her before I knew you. Doris was my fraternity's sweetheart when I introduced you two. I got her elected."

"Mike, for Christ's sake."

"Right! Steve, the weather!" said Mike. "Let me tell you about the weather, Steve. It's brisk but not too cold. Kind of cloudy. But it's nice. The beach is nice in the winter, Steve. The ocean is gray and boily, waves tipped with dirty foam. And the sea birds hardly shit at all."



"Where's your father, Mike? Can I speak to him?"

"No. He's gone to a charity thing across the bay. Some parachutes landed. I'm here alone. I'm doing nothing. I thought I'd call. Is this okay? You aren't saying much."

"You're drunk."

"Right."

"Are you drinking all the time?"

"Pretty much."

"That's why Marilyn left, Mike."

"Wrong! Wrong, Steve! Marilyn left because there was no fucking reason in the world for us to be together after Mary died." Mike snapped his cigarette across the room, missing the fireplace. The cigarette sparked against the wall, smoldered on the rug.

"Mike, you can't believe that. Marilyn doesn't believe that, either. But she doesn't know what she thinks, any more than you know what you think. Get some help, Mike. You both need help. There are ways to get help."

"Brother-in-law," said Mike. "No, excuse me. Ex-brother-in-law. You are so right. You are always right. Physician to the stars. What a wise man you are. What a natural-born healer. We need help. We need your help, Great Healer. Let me tell you what you can do to help, Steve."

Mike took a big swallow of vodka. "Get a hammer. There used to be one in the tool box in the basement. Go down to the basement and get that hammer. When Marilyn comes back from placing ornaments on the grave of our departed child, wait until she has gone to sleep. Then creep into her bedroom and hit her one time, hard, between the eyes, so it won't hurt."

"Then, get on a fucking plane. I will give you my credit card number. Get a fucking ticket, Steve, but bring the hammer. That's important. Promise you'll bring the hammer. Fly here. Rent a car. Use the card number to rent the fucking car. My treat. Drive to the beach house. Remember how to get here? I will wait here for you. When you arrive, take the hammer and hit me between the eyes with everything you've got. One time. That would help, Steve. That would help a lot."

"Mike, I don't know what to say to you, anymore."

"There's nothing more for you to say, Steve. But I have something to say to you. I am a way you'll never be. I'm in a place you will never go, and I have learned something here. So I know something you don't know, and I must tell it to you."

"Mike . . ."

"Steve. Listen. There's a certain freedom that comes only with the knowledge that you are totally fucked. A terrible freedom. Whoa! My drink is empty."

Silence.

"Look, Steve, I'm sorry," Mike said. "I'm okay, now. I'm okay. You're a good guy. I mean it. I miss you and I miss Marilyn. I miss Doris. She's a good girl. I miss your kids . . . I miss Mary."

Mike's voice cracked.

"You probably don't understand, but I miss all of you. I'm sorry . . . I regret the way things turned out...Forgive me."

Silence.

"We're down here at the beach, and I just wanted to call and say Merry Christmas. I'll let you go now. Please tell Marilyn I called and I said hello."

"Mike..."

"Steve. One last favor. Don't tell her any of the other shit I said."

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Mike got up a little too fast and had to stand still until he felt straight again. Then he walked across the hardwood floor, conscious of his boot heels echoing in the empty house, and found his wallet on his bedroom floor. He found his keys. He put his wallet in his hip pocket. He fumbled with the keys until he found the keys to the Lincoln. He put the ignition key in his mouth, so he could find it easily. The key to his father's big, black, fifteen-year-old Lincoln, with the V-8 engine. It was as big as a house, that Lincoln, and it would haul ass. It was like doing 120 miles an hour sitting in your living room. But it had authority. The cops left it alone. The perfect car for DUI.

He found his leather jacket on the back of a chair, put it on. He walked to the kitchen. He put the vodka bottle in his jacket pocket. Soon, he would have to find the marina.

But first, he would need a gift. It was Christmas morning. There would be no stores open. Any gift would have to come from right here. He looked around the room. He got one of his mother's pirate books and put it in his jacket pocket. On the floor by the fireplace, there was a flashlight. A good one. A big, black, metal flashlight. About three feet long. Ideal for hurricanes when the lights went out, but also large and heavy and suitable for swinging as a club. He wedged the flashlight into the back pocket of his jeans.

But this was not enough. This was inadequate recompense for the Christmas pain he had inflicted the night before on a confused but kind young woman who had perhaps at some point in the evening considered fucking him.

The coffee table. Here was a coffee table of great quality. His mother had bought it years ago. His mother knew good furniture. This coffee table was mahogany or cherry or something good and very expensive. His mother never bought cheap furniture. Certainly anyone who had recently had their own

coffee table thrown into the bay would appreciate such a first rate replacement. It was the perfect Christmas gift, coupled with a pirate novel and a flashlight.

So Mike picked up the coffee table and shook it, scattering magazines and ashtrays on the floor. The coffee table weighed a ton. He carried it out the front door to the Lincoln, put it in the back seat.

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The marina wasn't far. Just over the bridge. A long, high bridge. The clouds had cleared, and it was a blue and sparkling Christmas afternoon. He stretched the Lincoln out. It would fly. There was no traffic, so he used all four lanes. As he raced toward the top of the bridge, Mike momentarily considered turning the wheel and soaring into the bay. But there was a concrete abutment that even the Lincoln couldn't have blasted through. And he had a debt to pay.

Mike parked the Lincoln at the marina. There were only a few boats docked at this time of year. He spotted Denison's yacht without much trouble. Hers was the only one with twinkling red Christmas lights draped across the bow.

He rearranged the flashlight and the pirate book into pockets. He wrestled the coffee table out of the back seat, then he stumbled down the dock to her door, carrying the coffee table. He kicked the door.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he said. "Merry Christmas!"

He kicked the door.

A short young man opened the door.

"Well, hello," said Mike. "Is Denison here? Merry Christmas, my friend."

"Who are you?" said the short man.

"I am Mike, bearer of coffee tables and other fine things. Is Denison here? I would like to see her. And what is your name? Merry Christmas, fucker."

Mike leaned in close. He bumped the coffee table against the short man's chest. Denison appeared in the door behind the short man.

"Let him in," she said.

"Thank you," said Mike. He walked carefully, weaving the coffee table through the narrow door. The boat rocked when he stepped inside.

"Y'all catchin' a lotta them shrimp?" Mike pushed the coffee table into the short man's chest. "Please move. I would like to speak to our mutual friend without you between us."

The short man stepped to one side.

"Denison," he said. "I have brought for you on Christmas Day a coffee table."

Mike set the table on the floor.

"This is to replace the one I pitched into the bay last night. I am sure you will agree, this is a far superior coffee table to the one that now sleeps with the fishes. In addition, I have brought other fine things. But first, I must know the name of this fine fellow."

"John," said the short man.

"John," said Mike, shaking John's hand. John's hand was hard and dry and calloused. "Pleased to meet you."

John squeezed Mike's hand as hard as he could. Mike smiled.

"Well, down to business," said Mike. Still holding John's hand and squeezing back, hard. "This coffee table is yours, now, Denison. You will need it. You will certainly need it more than I ever will. When I have left your life forever, Denison, evaluate this coffee table at your leisure and remember me with kindness. I am sure you will conclude that it is a coffee table of surpassing quality," he dropped John's hand. "Merry Christmas, Denison and John. Do you have any booze?"

"You don't need any booze," said Denison.

"That's where you're wrong," said Mike. "Nevertheless, I like you, Denison. I appreciate all you tried to do for me. And because of that, Denison, here is a pirate novel, just for you. It was enjoyed at one time by my dead mother," he took the book out of his pocket and dropped it on the coffee table.

"She liked this sorta shit. There is no accounting for her dubious literary taste. I can't explain it, and refuse to try to do so."

"Mike," said Denison.

"Look, man," said John. "Cut it out."

"John," said Mike. "Don't fuck with me. It's Christmas." Mike put his hand on John's shoulder and squeezed, hard.

"Denison, dear, it's you I'm speaking to," said Mike. He turned loose of John's shoulder. "Please inform John that he is of no consequence in this exchange."

Mike took the flashlight out of his back pocket and held it like a club.

"Finally, Denison, here is a large and very heavy flashlight. A five cell maglight. The best made. You ever seen one of these, John boy?"

John glared at Mike.

"Alabama State Troopers favor this flashlight. Because it's highly functional in two ways very important to their profession and to all of mankind if you ask me. You can use it to see the way, or you can knock fuckers' brains out with it."

Mike turned the flashlight on, shined it in John's face. Then he punched John in the stomach with it. Then he handed the flashlight to John. "Merry Christmas, John," said Mike. "This is for you."

"I think you'd better leave," said John.

"John, you little pussy," said Mike. "Would you like to hit me with that flashlight? Go ahead."

Mike put his hands behind his back and closed his eyes.

"Take your best shot," Mike said.

Five seconds passed . . . ten . . . fifteen. . . . Mike opened his eyes.

"I didn't think so," Mike smiled sadly at John and shook his head.

"Denison, pal. I'm sorry to put you through this. It was not my intention when I came here. But I'm all right now. Really, I'm okay. I'm calm. I better leave. Merry Christmas...I gotta go."

Mike took off his leather jacket.

"Here, John, you can have this. You like it?"

Mike held out the jacket. John held the flashlight.

"It's kinda big. But I think it's you." Mike tossed the jacket onto the sofa.

"Forgive me. Enjoy your coffee table, Denison. And remember, baby. We're all God. Everything that happens is because we made it happen.

"Isn't that right, John?"

John held the flashlight. Mike touched his fingers to his lips and blew a kiss.

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Mike roared down the beach road in the Lincoln, drinking the rest of the vodka. The day began to fade. The dotted line rolled under the Lincoln. He rolled down the window. A green road sign. Mike threw the bottle at the sign.

The sky was purple. He parked in front of the public pier. It extended a quarter mile out into the Gulf of Mexico. He stumbled through the shell and sand parking lot. He sat down in the sand and took off his boots. He took off his socks and put them into the tops of his boots. He picked up the boots and socks and carried them down the pier. He stopped and dropped them over the railing, they disappeared into the darkness and he heard a splash. He walked down the pier, barefooted, toward a glow.

At the end of the pier, there was a big man. He stood with his back to Mike, fishing. The man had on a plaid shirt, a ball cap and a pair of jeans. He worked a long rod with a reel the size of a ham. There was a white leather belt around his waist and two straps crossed behind his back and went over his shoulders, like suspenders. He looked like a Mexican soldier. Behind him, a fire burned in a 55-gallon drum, throwing red light and dancing shadow on the man's big back. The butt of the rod fitted into a holster on his stomach. He cranked the reel, and it whirred.

"Hello," Mike said. "I saw your fire. What up?"

"Hey," said the man. He worked the reel. "I'm fishing for sharks."

"Well," said Mike. "That's something different to do on Christmas night."

"Ain't it, though?"

"What's the deal?" said Mike. "How's it work? Got any whiskey?"

"Got some beer in the cooler," said the man. "Get you one."

"Thanks," said Mike. He opened the cooler and got a beer. "Nice fire." He warmed himself.

"I like to keep a good fire," the man said. "You never know what might stumble up. Do you?"

"No," said Mike. "So show me the deal with the fishing stuff." He suddenly felt very drunk.

"Here's how it works," said the man. "You tie an empty gallon milk jug onto your line. You put the top on it, and tie the line through the handle. That's like a bobber. You follow?"

"Yeah," said Mike, drinking the man's beer.

"But first," said the man. "You drive around neighborhoods until you catch a cat. Or even better, one of them little dogs. What you call 'em?"

"Dogs?"

"Little bitty dogs," said the man. "Trembling dogs. Skinny. No hair. They bite a lot."

"Chihuahuas?" said Mike.

"That's it," said the man. "Chihuahuas. I got lucky and got one tonight. Look at this."

The man showed his right hand. It was scabbed over with fresh, red scars.

"Damn," said Mike.

"They're some biting little bastards, those Chihuahuas," the man said.

"What you do with 'em?" said Mike.

"Well, I hope you're not squeamish. What's your name?"

"Mike. What's yours?"

"Buddy. Call me Buddy." Buddy's face seemed to be scarred in the red flicker of the fire, like a healed over burn. The left eye pinned Mike while the other wandered off.

"Kay, Buddy. Whatcha do with the dogs?" Mike finished his beer.

"Have another one," said Buddy. "Well, then you need a number thirty one bronze hook with a barb. Ever seen a number thirty-one bronze hook?"

Mike shook his head.

"It's about yay big," Buddy held his hands a foot apart.

"Big ass hook," said Mike.

"Oh, yeah," said Buddy, working the reel, twitching the rod, cranking the reel, looking out to sea. "Well, you slip that hook real easy through the skin behind the dog's neck."

"Oh, Jesus," said Mike.

"Thought you said you wasn't squeamish."

"I wasn't ready for that."

"Hand me a beer," said Buddy. "Thanks. If you chum up the water good, they don't suffer long. That gallon milk jug helps 'em stay afloat. They paddle like little sonsabitches. like a top-water jig. You ever been bass fishing?"

"Yeah," said Mike.

"Same thing."

The line began to sing out of the reel. Buddy flipped on the drag. The rod bent double.

"Big 'un," said Buddy. "Want to take it?"

Mike put down his beer. "Yeah."

"Get ready," said Buddy. "He'll pull you in."

"I'm ready," said Mike.

Buddy handed Mike the rod and reel. The first jerk almost pulled Mike's shoulders out of the sockets.

"Keep you elbows in," said Buddy. "It's all technique."

Mike pulled his elbows into his sides.

"Turn the crank every chance you get," said Buddy, sitting down next to the cooler. "Let the drag wear him out. But if he gives you the least bit of slack, kick his ass. That's how you do it."

The rod almost jumped out of Mike's hands and the line whirred out of the reel so fast it smoked. But then the line went slack. Mike pulled his elbows in and reeled madly.

"You got it," said Buddy. "That's the way."

The shark made another run and almost pulled Mike off the pier.

"Careful, now," said Buddy. "You fall in, I ain't comin' in after you. All his buddies is down there. They'll eat him first, 'cause he's bleeding from the hook. Then they'll eat you. That's why you need to get him in quick. Once he gets to bleeding, the other ones smell it and eat him. They can't help it. It's instinct."

Buddy cranked the reel.

Mike needed Buddy's help to get the shark up onto the pier. The shark was six or seven feet long. Two hundred pounds. A hammerhead. It thrashed around, the great jaws snapped.

"Careful," said Buddy. "They bite out of the water as good as in. Put your foot on the back of his neck. Put all your weight on him. He's big, but if you pin him just right, it'll paralyze him."



Mike put his bare foot on the back of the shark's neck. The shark's skin was cold and rough, like wet sandpaper. The shark struggled. Mike put all his weight on the shark's neck.

"What now?" said Mike.

"Lemme show you what now," said Buddy.

Buddy pulled a snub nosed .38 calibre revolver out of his jeans' pocket. He handed the gun to Mike. The firelight glinted red off the cylinder and Mike's hand.

"You caught him," Buddy said. "Now shoot him. Right between the eyes. His brain's about the size of a walnut. You got to hit him right there or it'll just piss him off."

Mike looked at the gun, red and heavy in his hand.

"Don't fuck around," said Buddy, firing the empty bottle into the sea, opening the cooler, getting another.

Buddy twisted off the top of the beer, took a drink.

"Kill his ass, Mike."

The shark bucked against Mike's heel.

Mike leaned down quickly and put the barrel of the gun between the shark's eyes. He pulled the trigger. Shark blood exploded everywhere. The shark twitched and lay still.

Mike wiped his face. His eyes were full of shark blood.

"Damn. I forgot to warn you about the splatter factor," said Buddy.

Mike wiped his hair back. His hair was plastered to his head with shark blood. Mike wiped his face with his hand. He couldn't open his eyes, so he unbuttoned his shirt and took it off. He wiped his face and wiped the blood out of his eyes with his shirt. Then put his shirt back on, buttoned it and opened his eyes. He rubbed his eyes.

"Buddy, you bastard." Mike said. "That shit stings."

"Well," said Buddy. "You did good. Want another beer?"

"Yeah," said Mike. He sat down. Buddy opened the cooler and tossed him a beer.

They drank their beer and looked at the dead shark. The blood pooled around the big, broken head, reflecting black and silver. The blood looked terrible and familiar.

"You want him?" said Buddy.

"What the fuck am I going to do with him?" said Mike.

"Eat him?"

"Nah," said Mike. "I don't want him."

"Kay," said Buddy, "Give me a hand."

He stood up and grabbed the shark by the tail.

"Well?"

TOM ENSEY

Mike stood up and grabbed the shark behind the gills. They wrestled him to the end of the pier, threw him into the water. The water began to boil.

"Let's drink all the beer," said Buddy.

"Good idea," said Mike.

\* \* \*

It was morning. Mike woke up on the pier. He opened his eyes and pain lanced through his brain. He tried to swallow but his mouth was sticky and tasted of blood. His wallet and keys were gone. So were the cooler and the fire drum. But there was one hot, unopened beer standing beside his head. He opened it and took a mouthful. He spat black and orange foam onto the dock. Then he threw up into the ocean. He threw up for a long time. He stood and walked unsteadily to the parking lot. The Lincoln was gone.

He stumbled down the beach road toward a yellow sign shaped like a shell. The roadside was covered with broken shells and sharp stones and his feet were bleeding when he walked onto the convenience store parking lot. He saw a blue payphone sign beside the door. Okay, he thought. Okay. His hair and shirt were plastered down with dried, black shark blood and he left red, bloody footprints on the linoleum as he walked up to the cash register and leaned against the counter. The girl at the counter looked on, terrified. She was eighteen, if that.

"Can I borrow a quarter?" Mike said. "I need to get home. I think I'm very sick." ♦