

CRISTINA SAYERS

Kings of Summer, 2015

Acrylic, ink, and found paper collage, 20 x 24 in



COURTESY: THE ARTIST

JASON WAKE SMITH

Guest of the Great White

A Surfer's Account of Living with the Shark Mystique

Sharks don't scare me. They terrify me. They cruise through my nightmares, plump with evil portent, jaws like jack-o-lanterns—caudal fins swishing behind them, propelling their orbit beneath my bed. When my comforter morphs into the sea surface, I stand on the pillows, which make worthless rafts, expecting at any second an eruption of gills and teeth and wishing I'd sprung for the extra thread count.

The dreams recur, sometimes every few days during the late summer and early fall, when sightings of great white sharks along California's coast, and occasionally an attack, splash across the news. Because I'm a surfer, the headlines always say the same thing to me: "They're back."

It was discovered in the 1990s that the great white (*Carcharodon carcharias*), assumed responsible for 100 percent of the documented fatal attacks on humans in California, resides in the Red Triangle, the wedge of ocean from Big Sur out to the Farallon Islands and north to Bodega Bay, late summer through midwinter. They then fin south to an area between Hawaii and Mexico, diving deep (as far down as 3,500 feet) to do nobody-knows-what in an eerie place with a cheery name: "The White Shark Cafe." The annual exodus provides cold comfort, however, to surfers, divers, and those whose galeophobia is so bad they won't enter public swimming pools.

I stop short at making the sign of the cross at hot tubs, myself. But the specter of that spiny maw and those space-black eyes at the business end of a shark double the length of my Prius visits me often, even when I'm awake. I take refuge in a fortress of denial built on all the scientific and statistical factoids I can find to prop up my mantra that it really won't happen to me. More people die from soda machines falling on them every year than are killed by sharks, I tell myself. Falling coconuts, champagne corks, cows, being left-handed! All of these raise your mathematical likelihood of imminent death by a larger percentage than sharks. But sharks are what we dream about.

Especially after the first time you see one.

There was no dorsal fin, no "duh-dum." It was just one of a thousand golden, sunset-hour surf sessions I've had along California's Central Coast in October. Except for the twelve-foot-long shark that burst from the water about fifty yards seaward, breaching like a whale and bisecting the sunset with a gray and white streak. This is how they attack,

according to the scientists who study them—at thirty miles per hour, from below and behind, projecting through their prey, sometimes beyond the surface of the water.

Yes, I paddled for shore, and stood there shivering and watching for any sign of the shark from the safety of the sand. But I never saw it again.

That sighting, in 2014, was my first. For three decades I'd surfed the worst the Red Triangle had to offer: breaks where the water roiled with life—sea lions, harbor seals, pelicans, gulls, and bait fish swirling around me in a noisy maelstrom, where I was literally encircled by the cycle of life and death. I'd bobbed in murky waters adjacent to elephant seal rookeries, at the mouths of rivers in the northwest where sharks were known to lie in wait for seals feeding on migrating salmon, and at the edge of the Monterey Canyon, a submarine trench that plunges to a depth of 11,800 feet just a short distance from shore off Moss Landing Harbor.

Why, you ask? It's the waves. Stretches of the California coast offer adventurous surfers rides of the highest caliber, in complete solitude, if they are willing to drive and walk farther than others to share the wild ocean with all of its inhabitants. The Red Triangle, with its stretches of undeveloped, difficult-to-access shoreline, holds a high allure for that type. I hunt for places like that.

But my first sighting, when I felt like the hunted, spooked me badly. I chose places to surf timidly afterward, the rumors about resident sharks at my favorite out-of-the-way spots spreading rapidly. I stayed closer to home, at a beach in Aptos known as "Platforms," where playful, soft, and slow waves are enjoyed by the masses for little other reason than that there is a large parking lot right in front of them.

As I sat elbow to elbow with the less expeditionary of my brethren, I wondered: why 2014? Why this year, perhaps thanks to stress or the fragile mind of middle age, had my shark dreams been unrelenting? There were great whites under my lawn, in my office, under the floorboards of my wife's minivan! They stalked me beneath the tile floor in my bathroom as I stood on the toilet, threatening them with a plunger.

I searched the Internet for solace, once again seeking reassurance from science. It turns out that a lot of the so-called "attacks" recorded in California are attacks only in

name—a name assigned them by the news media. Most of the bites perpetrated by great whites are likely investigative. Sharks don't have hands (except for some of the ones in my dreams), so when they want to pick something up to check it out, they use their mouths. The problem is, when they put you down, you are usually bleeding to death, and this has led to the fear of shark attack pervading the general public to this day.

Professional mariners have always worried about sharks, but the history of public terror over the possibility of a shark attack at local beaches is really only about a hundred years old. During one hot July in New Jersey in 1916, four people were killed by sharks, including two who were bathing inland up a river. News of the attacks circled the world, and shark phobia was born. Then the movie *Jaws*, based on the book by Peter Benchley, which the author modeled after the New Jersey events, lunged at us in 1975. Then came the Summer of the Shark in 2001, when the news media milked a single (nonfatal) attack on an eight-year-old Mississippi boy to the point of absurdity during a slow news cycle. The spectacle of sensationalism and fearmongering was only stopped by 9/11. And, of course, who misses *Shark Week* on the Discovery Channel these days? Late in life, Benchley shed crocodile tears over his demonization of a creature he had come to immensely admire. He published an apologia called *Shark Trouble* in 2003 to right the wrong he had done to the white shark's reputation.

My research did everything but get me to stop chewing my nails over sharks. I learned that, thanks to a spike in pinniped populations, since around 2002 California has experienced a rising swell of great white activity. Prior to that, appearances and attacks by whites were rare at worst in Southern California. But breaching, dorsal fins, and even "bites" in previously placid places like Solana Beach, Manhattan Beach, and Avila Beach now seem to be the new normal. The Red Triangle is no longer the sole seasonal home of the most feared predator in the sea.

Similar to Benchley, sometime in early February, 2015, I had a change of heart regarding the fish who shared the surf with me. It was their home, after all; not mine. And besides, despite sporadic sightings at the Seacliff Pier, popular with surf fishermen, two miles north of Platforms, there had never been a sighting or attack where I typically

surfing. Naively, I took this as an unspoken treaty between me and every single great white shark in the Pacific Ocean.

My son and daughter both surf with me now. On February 26, 2015, my wife and our two little grunions enjoyed a splendid day splashing around out at Platforms. We rode the gentle, easy waves, basked in the friendly weather, and cheered each other on. We rejoiced in the splendor of our natural world and our place in it.

That night, I dreamed of marshmallows.

Two days later, a helicopter tour operation offering whale-watching tours in the Monterey Bay posted a video on its Facebook page. It was a clip they had taken that morning. There they were: not one, but two great white sharks—one about eight feet long, the other every inch of fifteen feet, tooth to tail—nosing around in the clear, shallow water exactly where my family and I had so blissfully communed with nature.

I was afraid to go to sleep that night. But not as afraid as I was to surf anywhere, ever again. Let alone with my family.

White sharks were once thought to be loners. But biologists suggested the two spotted at Platforms may have been related and cruising the coast together. The preponderance of sightings in California are of juvenile great whites, and it is now theorized that their mothers "drop them off" at beaches like Platforms to feed on tuna and other fish (they don't eat pinnipeds until maturity). The adult females go off to feed in the deep water, then come back to pick the kids up. I knew Platforms was family friendly, but I was *not* reassured to learn that great white sharks treat my local beach like the play area in the food court at the mall.

Mourning the loss of my sanctuary, I got as far away from Platforms as I could without moving inland. But not five days later, a few miles to the south, there it was again: a shuttle launch at Cape Carnivore. Casually checking the surf at a benign little break that I thought was too far away for sharks to swim to in a week (actually, great whites often swim fifty miles in one day), I saw my second breaching in a single season. But this one was closer, only thirty yards away, and thus more terrifying. It made me stand up instantly from a sitting position. Suddenly the surf at that location went from looking decent to dreadful.

Three days later, another one. This time at Moss Land-

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ing. I arrived to find the water empty and a group of surfers standing on the beach in their wetsuits, holding their boards and scanning the water. When I asked what was up, they said a large shark had swum by and cleared them all to the beach five minutes prior. Then I saw it—its jagged silhouette hung in the face of a rising swell, a slight bronze color on top near its nose, and that upside-down sickle of a smile. When the wave had passed, so had the shark. It was just gone. But we knew it wasn't.

No pillow raft or toilet seat would save me that night. Up through my covers it came: projecting through me at full speed, eyes rolled back and mouth open, rows of triangular teeth jutting outward.

I was practically born a surfer. Both of my parents were hippie surf bums from Santa Barbara (when hippie surf bums could still afford to live there). The sport and the interaction with nature have enriched my life on countless levels, probably even saved it a few times. I can't *not* surf. But the sighting at Moss Landing felt like three strikes, like there was no longer anywhere I could go without risking an encounter with great whites, and that seemed unacceptable.

Until my first sighting, in October on the Central Coast, white sharks were my favorite conversational icebreaker. Knowing about the latest sightings and attacks was

“There is nothing truly magical that does not have a terrifying quality.”

my claim to fame among friends. I even told shark jokes! It was therapy, in a way. It’s a gift that human beings who so dread death can also laugh at it. Even make a plaything of it. My wife and I gave our son a five-foot-long plush great white for his birthday last year. Seeing his glee opening the present, I snickered at the irony of my five-year-old future surfer blithely snuggling “Whitey,” while its kin was in his father’s bed, devouring him.

A month after I saw the shark at Moss Landing, I met some friends for drinks at a bar in Rio Del Mar, a mile’s walk along the beach south from Seacliff Pier. I was told that Marina State Beach was closed that morning after an eighteen-foot white shark was spotted cruising twenty yards from shore. It was March 9, the latest sighting in the calendar year that anyone could remember in our area. We all worried about the implications of the sharks not being gone by then, off to the White Shark Cafe. Was this *our* new normal? The group looked to me for context or maybe some comic relief. Because, you know, I was the shark guy. In the past I might have said there were “sharknadoes” in the forecast.

This time, I said nothing.

When I think about sharks and surfing, I often remember something the American painter N.C. Wyeth once said: “There is nothing truly magical that does not have a terrifying quality.” The word “magical” certainly describes many of the days I’ve enjoyed surfing in the Red Triangle. Early mornings alone on the coast, after a long walk had delivered me into a new dimension. Where the sun shone on my face, perfect waves invited, and mine were the sole footprints in the sand. Where the offshore breeze blew up the crest of every wave and soaked me in spindrift showers.

I decided to test Wyeth’s theory. To see if fear really was a gateway to magic. So I went back out at Platforms.

Hugging my surfboard in the same water where the two sharks had been filmed by the helicopter crew two weeks before, I faced a cold truth. The truth was, every year great white sharks are spotted along the coast that I love, the coast from which I draw much of my health and happiness. Sometimes those sharks hurt people, even if accidentally. Rarely, however, are those interactions fatal. In fact, there have been only eight fatal attacks in all of the United States (including Hawaii) in the last ten years. The truth is, even being a surfer in the Red Triangle, I have a better chance of winning the California Lottery than of getting killed by a great white shark while surfing.

In the water at Platforms, I saw a dorsal fin. *The* icon of marine terror. It was big, a foot tall, gunmetal gray, and rigid as it cut the water like a warship less than twenty yards away and headed towards me. Oddly, I didn’t move. I stared at the blank, blue ocean surface between me and the point at which the fin went underwater. My heart thumped. When it resurfaced, attached to the body of a bottlenose dolphin, I lost muscle control in my lips. They cracked involuntarily into a smile.

Magical, indeed. Because, at least for the moment, seeing that dolphin made my fear of sharks disappear.

Jason Wake Smith is a former contributing editor to *Surfer* and *Surfing* magazines, former associate editor of *Snowboarder Magazine*, and former recreation editor of the *Los Angeles Times* website. He is a screenwriter and nonfiction author, but dreams of a career writing haiku campaign slogans. His work has won no awards, but he often mentions awkwardly to strangers that he was voted “Class Flirt” in eighth grade. For information about Jason’s current book projects, visit his website at www.jasonwakesmith.com.

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Wave of Insomnia, 2015
Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 16



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