

Where There's Seals

Gina Faldetta

Yesterday, a man was attacked by a shark while swimming at a beach in Truro, on the Cape Cod National Seashore. He was standing in the water 30 yards from the shore when it happened. According to bystanders, his leg and torso were mangled and bloody, but there was no cell phone service on the beach, so someone had to run up to a house to make the 911 call. The man, whom news coverage identified as being from Scarsdale, New York, was flown to a hospital in Boston.

Ever since my parents moved to the Cape, I've wondered what would happen if I were ever attacked by a shark. I think about it sometimes when I'm in the water. How would I react? Would I survive? I have no way of knowing, but now this man from Scarsdale does. He can tell all his friends and family exactly what it's like, if he's not too traumatized. When terrible things happen, it usually makes for a good story.

For all this recent excitement, I love the ocean: the way it flows towards you like fluid glass, the way it sparkles underneath the sun. Swimming in the ocean can feel a little like being in love. Where it gets deep, your body floats and your legs dangle helplessly, but the water holds you buoyantly suspended. The waves lift you up so quickly, surprisingly, like someone sweeping you off your feet. And then they rush forward so fast, in a perpetual state of impatience, just to crash loudly on the beach, throwing white foam exuberantly up into the air.

Its saltiness tastes clean and fresh, and fills me with a vigor I keep forgetting I have. I have this notion that saltwater heals anything, especially cuts and insect bites. It doesn't, but I really like being someone who thinks it does. I used to float in the pond by our house for hours, looking up at the sky and the dark green trees at the edges, struck by how romantic it all was. Now the saltless taste of pond water makes me uneasy.

“Not many people walk the beaches of Cape Cod with metal detectors like they do in Florida,” my mother observes. I’ve been with my parents for almost a month since I left my job in New York, and like most days, we’re at the beach.

“It’s because there were never any pirates here,” I reply. “There’s no promise of buried treasure.”

Earlier this summer, at a dog bar in Williamsburg, a man I had just met told me about pirates. He was reading a book about pirates and masculinity as research for a film. Apparently they became a symbol of heterosexual masculinity through the way they were characterized in 19th century novels, when they were never really that heterosexual to begin with. I knew about this bar through my college boyfriend, who had met me there last summer for a drink he insisted wasn’t a date. I made him pay anyway, and when he walked me to the subway after, we held hands.

As much as I love swimming in the ocean, I have no instinct for it. I am one of those people who is always almost drowning. When faced with a large wave coming suddenly my way, I just don’t know what to do. This has always embarrassed me; it’s the same quality that has made me, since childhood, the person most likely to be injured doing anything dangerous or physically exciting. Recently I bruised and cut my knee just stepping through a door onto someone’s roof in New York. I’ve longed to be adventurous since I was young-- instead I’ve been cautious.

“You’ve never been grimy. I’ve always appreciated that,” my mother says to me on the beach.

“I kind of like grime, though,” I reply.

“Grime is for animals,” she chides.

In the summer, the sun bleaches all of the body hair on my arms, stomach, and lower back. It’s lucky, I know, to have the sun turn my brown hair to blond. Better than that, though, it makes me feel like an animal, a thing of nature. I want to be grimy if that means being a creature of the earth, in tune with the ocean and the wind and the sky. The more animal-like I can be, the freer, and the less likely I am to drown.

The local radio plays “Mack The Knife,” which is funny and in rather poor taste since that man is definitely still in the hospital. My father and I listen to it on the way to get fish for tonight’s dinner. It’s fun to go to the fish market with him because for some reason we always make fun of everyone there. A teenage boy leaps to open the door for me as we leave and in the car I tell my dad, “He opened it with such vigor!” He laughs. “Vigor.”

We watch *Jaws* after dinner, which is in just as poor taste. The first time I watched it, as a teenager, I laughed my head off at the way the fisherman garbled all his lines. This time, I can understand almost everything he says and the movie is much scarier. Well, not scary, but suspenseful. I had forgotten everything that happened in it.

The movie was filmed on the Cape so the scenery is all familiar. The faces are familiar, too. Every man looked like another man I’ve known. I’m often drawn to strangers who look like people I know, which is a terrible way to be. Nothing good can come of false associations;

doppelgängers are bad luck for a reason. *My goal should be to look for new faces from now on*, I think.

I wish the lifeguards at the beach we go to were better looking. I can't believe I've spent so many summers here without having even one flirtation with a lifeguard. I'd rather date a fisherman, though. Everyone always points out how stupid that is because fishermen are never around, but I've wanted to date one ever since I was sixteen and went with my cousins to the fishing pier to look at the seals. People go there to watch the fishing boats unload and watch the seals swim all around the pier, attracted by the boats' discarded fish. My baby cousin's sandal fell below, to the loading dock, and I asked a young fisherman with golden curls to throw it up to me. He obliged with a smile. We still go there to look at the seals, but I never saw a fisherman like him again. When I go with my mother, she tells me the Korean word for seal is *mool-gae*. Translated, it means "water dog."

I've known people who bodysurfed, namely the same ex who introduced me to the dog bar. I tried to learn once, when we were still together, but I inhaled too much water and nearly died. Although it's the same ocean, the water on the New Jersey shore was different from the waters I'm used to on the Cape. The waves were massive, intimidating. People surfed on them for real. But as a houseguest I was an incredible sport, up for anything and willing to try. My then-boyfriend's mother told me, with no small amount of pride, he had been bodysurfing since he was a child. Naturally, I gave it a shot.

I should have known by the near-paralyzing fear that shot through me with the very first wave that this wasn't going to work. But foolishly I tried it anyway, mostly because I'd said I

would, and I wanted to impress. Confusion overtook me as I tried to ride the next wave, and I quickly tumbled, terrified, thrown forcefully down by the undercurrents. I wondered when it would end, not understanding the flow of the ocean enough to know if I would ever escape. When I finally surfaced, water stinging cruelly in my nose and salty mucus dripping down my throat, I was alone. All that to impress my host, to keep my word, and he hadn't even noticed I'd almost drowned instead. I had no time to dwell, though; the next wave was already approaching.

At the dog bar, I got along great with the people, but with the dogs it was a little different. I'm awkward around pets because I always think they're going to attack me. When I was a small child, my mother and I were attacked by our neighbor's one-hundred-pound Rottweiler. My mother leapt to action, blocking my body with her arm, and still has the scars to show for it. I didn't know back then that dogs of that size could kill small children. That particular dog ended up biting several people and had to be put down.

It's easy to understand why the man from that bar would choose pirates as the subject of his film. In stories, pirates are characterized as villains but they aren't really. They pillage, they plunder, they terrorize, but how can anyone blame them? It's impossible not to love them for their swashbuckling, their bravado, their sense of adventure. They know that danger is always under foot and live like robbers anyway.

For most of the season, we've been going to the beach in the afternoon whenever it's nice out. We make a day of it, bringing towels, chairs, an umbrella, and a cooler. On this particular day, I walk out by myself to the water's edge, over abandoned sandcastles and broken shells and

clumps of seaweed. Summer's almost over. The waves are bigger, the ocean made choppy by a wind that feels too much like fall. It splashes against my ankles, knees, and eventually my stomach. *If I go into the water now I'm going to be freezing when I come out*, I think. I feel a vague sense of dread, a fear of things ending and ceasing to exist, but the sun is still bright as I stand waist-deep, weighing my options and scanning the horizon. Something dark and fleeting catches my eye out where the ocean is glimmering just under the sun. Is that -- or is it just a trick of the light on the waves? I squint and look harder, but the brightness presses shadows into my vision. It might not be what I think it is, but I've snapped to attention either way, all my vague concerns cast aside. Something pulls at me, and before I have time to think, I'm engulfed by the ocean.

We've known about the sharks in the waters of the Cape for a long time. Everyone has. There are great whites that come here every year. A few weeks ago my family went to the National Seashore and we saw all these seals swimming near the shore. Only half the swimmers got out of the water. I guess not everyone knows what I generally consider to be common knowledge: where there's seals, there's sharks.