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Lily Swanson

PERFECT CIRCLE

A week after Grandmother expires on the big wicker chaise of the screened-in porch I paid for, I fly to Central America to film *In the Jaws of Love*. Nobody wants another shark attack movie, but they already built the animatronic, so the producers reworked the script into a kind of love story between the shark and I. I'm to play a marine biologist who uses megalodon DNA to create a mutant Great White, but instead of escaping into the ocean and killing off the scientists sent to recover him one by one, he stays docile in his tank while an enemy of the laboratory frames him for eating one of his handlers. I'm to be his only ally in the ensuing police investigation.

An endangered species committee in Pasadena caught wind, created a fair bit of buzz, and brought in a French director. Sharks have a bad reputation for chewing off people's limbs, which isn't really fair because they only do that sometimes. The movie will be good for their public image. And mine. My manager keeps pushing me to get off slasher flicks and do some arthouse stuff. Isn't my fault the slasher roles come so easy and pay so well. I'm good at running in my underwear.

The first day on set, we shoot the last moments of the film, where I help the shark (my love) escape into the Gulf of Mexico after the court sentences him to electrocution. It's going to be a tear-jerking goodbye scene, and Etienne, the director, wants to make sure the animatronic is in the best condition possible. We take speed boats out from the coast in the early morning chill. The crew shivers. I'm grateful for my wetsuit. Across the way, on another speedboat, Etienne stands

stroking Robo-Shark under his canvas tarp. He refuses to ride with anyone else.

“Je suis le requin. Le requin c’est moi,” he says.

“He needs to connect with his subject before he can direct,” the script supervisor translates.

We finally arrive at the proper coordinates for shooting. I lie down on the deck with my eyes closed while they get the special underwater cameras set up and then finally they call me over. Robo-shark gets going under the rolling waves. His muscular dorsal fin turns perfect circles. I suppose that’s why he’s getting top billing.

They give me a little earpiece for directions. I jump in for the first take: let Robo-Shark circle me a bit, cling to his dorsal fin like a jealous lover.

When I surface, Etienne is whispering.

“He says it’s missing something,” the script supervisor says.

More whispering.

“He says you should be naked.”

So I strip and we give it another go. The range of movement I gain allows me to dance around a bit. I feel like a ballerina. When I surface, the cold has blanched my hands and feet. Someone hands me a towel. Etienne is whispering again.

“Yes, yes, that’s brilliant!” The script supervisor claps his hands. They face me. Etienne smiles.

They decide the shark will eat me. It will be a more romantic ending.

The crew gives me an oxygen pack, but it’s impossible to squeeze between Robo-Shark’s teeth with it on, so I’ll just have to hold my breath. I beat on Robo-Shark’s snout gently, with a subtle acceptance, until I realize my hair is tangled around his teeth. I scissor my legs, dig my fist in his electric eye socket.

“Careful! You’ll break him!” comes the assistant director’s voice through the earpiece. I scream, stupid with panic. Saltwater floods my lungs. Frozen, mid machine-motion,

the full weight of Robo-Shark bears down on me and we sink. The bottom of boats and underwater cameras are bleak shapes, beyond my darkening vision.

All at once: the jaw comes loose and a sharp undercurrent swallows me down and away where the diving crews couldn't find me even if they tried. Even if they weren't preoccupied rescuing Robo-Shark.

My skin turns black. Boils in summer water. Skin sloughs away and my belly swells full of itself.

A tiger-striped crab (I name him Carlos) snips at my lips with his pincers. He is pinching because he wants to know what is under the lips. Maybe food. Sometimes a current comes and scoops him away, but he always scuttles back and keeps right on pinching. Carlos has a hard life down here. So many big-mouthed fish with their walls of teeth sliding by. He narrowly escapes the tentacles of a choking octopus.

Carlos is an archeologist. He moves the was. My lips are immaterial as pyramids, he wants to see what's underneath.

He hasn't got much time. I'm rising to the surface. My belly first, then chest. Flooded lungs, hungry for air they cannot have.

Carlos pinches down tight to the flag of skin he's pulled off. Upwards. Surface. My arms are cresting still towards the bottom. Carlos is heavier now than the speed with which I'm rising, his pincers tear my skin from lips to ear.

There. He sees it now. Teeth and salt without the plump flesh to brighten it. Disappointed, he falls away. I am not embarrassed.

I get my big break at thirteen as the final girl in a b-movie called *Prombies*. Grandmother celebrates with one of her "spa nights".

"This is good," she says, scrubbing. "Real good."

I turn so she can start on the other knee. "Is it?" I ask. "It's a *horror* movie."

"The bacon's in the movies, pumpkin." She shifts a little on the linoleum to get a good angle with the pumice. "You're rough like a construction worker. Your skin needs to *breathe*, girl."

"I prefer magazines. You don't have to be under the lights for half as long."

Grandmother sighs, brushing away some dead skin that has fallen onto the tile. "There aren't going to be any more magazines."

"Why not?"

She stands as quickly as her knees will allow after a youth dancing with a ballet company that chewed her up and spit her out an arthritic thirty-year-old. She leads me to the mirror by my shoulders and traces her fingers across the perimeter of my reflection, collarbone to thighs.

"You're a circle," she says. "The designers these days, they're very into squares. Circles just aren't going to look good standing next to a square."

"Oh." I start to cry.

"Hush." Grandmother takes my chin in her hand. "I didn't mean any harm, pumpkin. I knew all along you were going to be a circle. I'm a circle, your mom was a circle, your daughters will be circles too."

"But I don't want to be a circle," I say.

"Well buck up," Grandmother says. "More people watch movies than read magazines. When do you start shooting?" she asks, guiding me back to the side of the tub.

"Next Saturday. Will you run lines with me?"

"Save it for Friday," she says. "Spoils you to know everything ahead of time."

Are they looking for me? Now that I am surfaced, buffeting cleanly on waves?

Surely, someone sees. At night, the sky is full of eyes. Polaris. Alien stars. Jupiter, the great avenger. Titan is even better. Orion's belt but he could not run. The scorpion Apollo

sent.

Ursa Major.

Ursa General.

I'm not fighting in this war. I don't like their numbers.

But day is a relief, its spiral seabirds that dive and tear me up to fill their bellies. I could be a bird mother. I could give them this. I am *delicious*. Salt-pocked and buzzing with oxygen.

If only they would tear *faster*. But a mother knows patience. She controls her temper, even when night eyes provoke. Soon, I will sink again.

No one is looking.

I'm eleven and a catalog swimsuit model. I haven't gotten my period and we haven't moved out of the apartment yet. At this age, Grandmother doesn't mind if I sleep with her whenever there's a thunderstorm. I bury my face in her armpit. Rain pitters on the scaffolding across the street, but it's not the weather I'm afraid of. Grandmother tells me to spit it out.

So here it is: Waiting for the bus this morning, a builder stuck his tongue out and rubbed his crotch at me.

"Are you certain he was looking at you?" Grandmother whispers.

"He was looking at my legs," I whisper back. But it feels wrong. They're not *my* legs. They're his legs. I have no legs, he took them from me.

I put Grandmother's hand to the new lumps growing under my shirt, firm and tender.

"Am I dying?"

"It's natural," she promises. "They'll come in handy with boys when you're older."

"How much older? Will they take these from me too?"

"You're a little charmer. You draw people in."

But I didn't draw anything. My legs did. I'll drive crayons through them, so they can *really* draw.

Wherever I go, eyes follow. The builders. The magazine

people. Grandmother most of all. They're windows: I see hunger. My eyes could be windows too.

If I give them my thighs and butt and breasts and everything else, will they look inside? Or will they tear on through the nucleus of me, ancient and fundamental as water, and find there was never anything there to begin with?

Back on the seafloor, I wonder if there was a moment when I could've said no. On the road between shooting days? I could've jumped off the trailer and run away to technical college. Built fighter jets and wind turbines. I could've been really happy I think, filling the world with gigantic metal bodies, if I had just said no.

But I always said yes. To Grandmother. To directors. To sharks. I always gave. And now I don't even have a speck of flesh left.

Next time, I'll get it right. I'll have so many daughters, raise them wild, like horses. We'll never brush our hair, and Grandmother, hot and dead on her porch, won't need us at all.

A silvery school of fish washes by in the current. Just like that there's Grandmother in her wicker chaise. She rocks back and forth in the sand.

"Are you proud?" I ask her, "I finally lost that extra weight."

"Look at us, girl," Grandmother says. "Don't we make a pretty pile of bones?"