

THE CONCEPTUAL SHARK

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Rich Larson is currently living in Prague. He recently sold a French-language collection of his work that will contain twenty-eight stories—five of which were first published in *Asimov's*. His surreal new tale dives into the dangers of . . .

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Adam is washing his hands when it happens again. First the water pouring out of the faucet becomes icy cold seafoam. Then the porcelain bottom of the sink dissolves, making him flinch backward.

The bathroom's tiled floor is intact; the mirrored medicine cabinet is still fixed to the wall across from him, showing his anxious doppelganger. But when he peers into the sink itself, he sees the metal drain cap spiraling down into the depths of the ocean. The ceiling's fluorescent fixture plays on the water, light and shadow oscillating like spectrograms across the shifting surface. A school of orange-red fish darts and scatters below.

Adam takes a deep breath and grips the cool curve of the sink in both hands. He knows what he's seeing is impossible, but everything about it feels real. He stares down into the sea through the tiny porthole of his bathroom sink and inhales salty air.

His heart starts to beat double-time. Far below, in the depths, a familiar shape is moving. Sweat crawls from under his arms and trickles down his ribcage. The silhouette is all triangles: threshing tail, sharp dorsal, streamlined snout. He can't gauge its distance, but he feels the size of it, and worse, he feels its intent. The shark knows he is there.

Maybe it smelled the traces of hemoglobin leaking from his neck where he nicked himself shaving; maybe it sensed the electricity jumping through his nervous system, a prey-shaped disturbance in its magnetic mind's eye. It knows, and it's coming. He watches the animal angle itself upward, moving slowly, patiently, inexorably.

Adam's feet are welded to the floor. His hands grip the edges of the sink so hard his fingers turn bloodless white. The shark builds speed. He can imagine its teeth tearing into him, its fleshy pink gullet swallowing him in chunks. The shark surges upward.

Finally he rips himself away from the sink and runs out of the bathroom, out of his apartment, out into the dark snowy street in a city nowhere near the sea.

He pulls out his phone, hand shaking as he thumbs his therapist's number. Again.

* * *

“Do you have any ideas as to why the conceptual shark might be hunting you? You specifically?”

“It’s a real shark. And I really don’t.”

Adam is sitting in the therapist’s office, slouched back in a bulbous leather chair. It’s been three days since the sink incident, and he’s avoided the bathroom ever since. He worries he’s starting to stink from not showering. His hair feels greasy and his stubble is overgrown and his left eye is twitching again, like someone has their finger under the lid and is flicking it back and forth.

“Do you remember how you were feeling before it happened? How your day was going?”

“Fine, I think. I mean, I was just trying to pee.”

Nora nods and gives him a warm smile, the signal for him to keep talking even though there’s nothing else to say about it.

“I’ve never even seen a real shark,” Adam says. “Only on *Blue Planet*. So it’s not like this is a repressed memory thing. It’s not like I have shark attack PTSD.”

“Do you have any kind of interest in sharks?”

“I don’t know. Thinking back. Thinking back, I really liked them as a kid. I remember doing this report on bluntnose sixgill sharks. They’re as big as a Great White, but not as famous.”

“What did you like about them?”

“I don’t know.” Adam rubs his forehead. “I guess people venerate sharks as this kind of, I don’t know, this kind of prototypical predator-slash-survivor. This ultimate organism. Because it’s been around for millions of years without changing. It’s like evolution rolled sixes on its first try. I thought that was really cool, when I was a kid.”

The therapist is silent for a long time. “How about this,” she says. “The next time you see the shark, don’t run away. Welcome it. Tell it how much you admired it when you were a kid.”

“Sharks don’t talk, Nora.”

Nora raises her eyebrows. “Sharks don’t live in bathroom plumbing.”

* * *

On his way out of the building, Adam runs into a man wearing black jeans and a thick cable-knit sweater the color of puke. They are forced into the hallway shimmy. “Sorry,” the man says, going left.

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They try right, left, right. The man grimaces and laughs, and Adam realizes he has seen him here before, often clutching a Tupperware of food or else a take-out box, once in the driver’s seat of his therapist’s car when she arrived late. He has a morose sort of face with very alert eyes. His hair sticks up in the back.

“Good session?” the man asks. “I don’t think I’m supposed to ask that.”

“You’re Nora’s boyfriend, right?” Adam asks, to be polite.

“Bastian.” Bastian looks slightly pleased and slightly worried. “She talks about me? Cool.”

Bastian’s sleeves are pushed up to the elbow, and Adam notices his windburned left forearm is tattooed with a school of fish. Six of them, six tiny blue pictograms. He imagines one of them swelling into a shark and leaping off of Bastian’s skin. His eyes flick to the other arm and find a smooth, shiny gray prosthetic.

He quickly averts his gaze. “No,” he says. “She doesn’t. Nice meeting you.”

“And you,” Bastian says.

Adam heads for the icy parking lot.

* * *

The next day he decides it’s time to shower—he’s starting to smell himself. He

prepares with some deep breathing exercises that Nora gave him, then strips down, counts to ten, and throws open the bathroom door. The sink is a normal sink. The toilet is a normal toilet. The shower is a normal shower. He steps warily into the stall and turns the water on. It snarls its way through cold pipes; he takes the showerhead off its mount and points it to the farthest corner of the stall while it warms up.

His original plan was to be in and out in a minute, but he forgot how much he loves hot showers in wintertime. He moves the knob in minuscule increments until the water is nearly scalding and the ceiling is wreathed in steam. Washing away a week's worth of sweat and dead skin in one go is rapturous. Grime and sock lint swirl down the drain; he slathers his crotch and armpits with shower gel and anoints his head with argan oil shampoo.

Then, through the hygienic perfume, he smells something that doesn't belong: brine. He has no time to brace himself before the bottom of the shower falls out and he plunges into the ocean.

The cold shocks the breath out of him; water invades his mouth and nose and eyes. His hand is still wrapped around the showerhead and now the twisty metallic coil is his lifeline. He kicks hard, breaks the surface, comes up coughing and sputtering. His heart pounds his pericardium. Through his stinging eyes he sees he is still in his bathroom. The edge of the shower stall is only a foot away, and past it he sees the toilet and sink.

He bobs there, still clutching the showerhead, and tries to collect himself. He's in his shower, but also in the ocean. And if he's in the ocean, it means the shark is coming.

"Not real," he gasps. "Not real, Adam. Some buried bit of your psyche is trying to say hi. So, hi. Hi, Mister Shark." His teeth are chattering from cold or fear or both. "I think we should be friends. I, uh, I used to love sharks when I was a kid." He spits out a mouthful of seawater. "I think maybe this is all a big misunderstanding."

A wave crashes over him and yanks the showerhead out of his hand. He struggles his way vertical again, treading the choppy water, but not before he catches an upside-down glimpse of a dark shape below him. The sight sends a surge of chemical terror through his whole body; he feels a tiny warm cloud against his thigh before the current whisks it away.

Adam knows that people do die in the shower—they slip, they fall, they break their necks. It's almost definitely more common than dying in a shark attack. He doesn't think there are statistics for shower deaths by shark attack.

His outflung fingers touch the plastic-coated edge of the stall just as another wave hits. He tumbles backward, nearly bangs his head on the opposite wall. The fear ratchets up to frenzy. He can feel the size of the shark circling below him, the water displaced by its powerful slicing tail.

Something nudges against his right arm. Retreats. Terror is paralyzing him in place; he can feel his limbs locking up. In a second he'll sink like a stone whether the shark eats him or not. Sandpaper skin rasps against his other forearm. He pictures the blunt nose of the shark, pictures its maw opening up. It triggers another cascade of chemicals in his nervous system, and this time flight beats freeze.

He throws himself at the edge of the stall, seizes it with both hands. He hauls himself out of the shower and flops onto the dirty bathroom floor just as the shark breaches. Over his shoulder he sees its massive head breaking the surface in a spray of foam, sees row on row of razor teeth, sees one dull black eye staring back at him. The showerhead is sheared off its mount, dangling from the shark's mouth like a bit of dental floss.

Adam can feel its implacability. It doesn't matter to the shark if it eats him today or tomorrow or in a decade. The shark has survived multiple extinction events. It has nothing but time.

He scrambles away on all fours. The shark's nictitating eyelid flickers once before the animal descends.

* * *

After that, Adam's problem only gets worse. On Tuesday he sees the tip of the shark's dorsal fin rising scythe-like from the toilet bowl, and that's reason enough for him to fully barricade the bathroom door. He feels a little safer until he goes to the lower level to do laundry on Wednesday and the shark is thumping its snout against the glass of the washing machine.

And it's not confined to the apartment complex, either. The shark's dull black eye watches him from the stacked gallon bottles in the grocery store on Thursday; on Friday when he tries the drinking fountain in the mall he gets a mouthful of saltwater. He's sure it's only a matter of time until there's another real attack.

At night he imagines the pipes under the kitchen sink bursting and flooding his whole apartment, giving the shark full license. He even has a dream where he's walking past the fountain in the metro station and it leaps out, fully airborne like that photoshopped picture that used to drift around the internet, and eats him in a single bite.

He recounted the shower incident to his therapist over Skype, and she listened, but he can tell she still thinks it's a delusion. He wonders if she'll have a prescription waiting for him at their Sunday appointment. Maybe that's for the best. Maybe it'll keep him nice and calm while he gets devoured.

* * *

When Adam knocks on the door to Nora's office, her reply is muffled. He knocks again. There's a shuffling noise, then a thump and a grunt.

"Hello?" he calls.

"Hey, come on in," says a voice that is definitely not his therapist's.

"Okay. Coming in."

Adam cracks the door on a scene he has no way to make sense of. His therapist's boyfriend, Bastian, is kneeling with his lips to the nozzle of an inflatable blue kiddie pool decorated with daisies. The leather chair has been pushed against the bookshelf to make room for several five-liter drums of water. Nora herself is wriggling on the floor, half-mummified by duct tape. A shiny strip of it seals her mouth shut.

He is about to slam the door and dial the police when he realizes Bastian is pointing a gun at him.

"Shut the door behind you, please," Bastian says. "And toss me your phone as well." He gives him a tired grin. "Thought it might be you. Got a bit of a vibe off you in the hallway."

Adam steps slowly inside and closes the door behind him. He has no idea what's going on, but the gaily colored kiddie pool frightens him almost as much as the gun. He pulls his phone out of his pocket.

"Nora? Are you all right?" he asks shakily.

The therapist gives a constricted shrug, and Adam supposes it is hard to be all right in the same room as an armed maniac. He lobs his phone. Bastian fumbles it with his prosthetic hand and it falls into the kiddie pool. There is no splash, which gives Adam a temporary sense of relief.

"Don't worry," Bastian says. "All three of us are going to walk out of here alive. I promise." He aims his gun toward the bulgy leather chair. "How about you sit down while I explain?"

Adam feels a little guilty about taking the chair when Nora is stuck with the floor, but he obeys the gun. He crosses the carpet, sits down, and looks at the water drums. This is not about Bastian snapping and trying to kidnap or murder his girlfriend. Adam knows it in his gut, but it's still too silly to say aloud: this is about the shark.

"This is about the shark," Bastian says. "You're not the only one with a shark problem, Adam. You're just the latest."

The therapist groans.

"She told you?" Adam asks. His voice is weak and flaking.

"The mics told me," Bastian says. "I bug a lot of therapists' offices. Lurk on a lot of odd forums. It's not easy, finding a real chum."

"Uh." Adam swallows. "You want to be chums?"

"Not really, man." Bastian works while he talks, setting down the gun so he can twist the cap off the first water drum. "I meant chum in the fisherman's sense. In the sense of bait." He tips the drum over into the kiddie pool. The glugging noise raises goosebumps on Adam's neck. "Nora, I really did enjoy all our lunches together. I hope you know that."

Nora's eyes narrow.

"Cool, right, so you're not the first," Bastian says. "Personally, I think this has been happening ever since the idea of the shark entered our collective consciousness. Can you imagine what the first human to ever encounter a shark thought of it? My God." He tips a second drum over the bouncy lip of the kiddie pool. "So I figure it's been happening as long as human civilization has been around. The conceptual shark—I like Nora's name for it. Worse in certain cultures. Upticks whenever there's a surfer attacked, or when a film comes out. *Jaws* has a lot to answer for. More recently, *Shark Week*. But the shark only appears to certain individuals."

Adam watches as the water chugs out of the drum, slowly filling the pool. "You see it?"

"It's not a matter of seeing it or not seeing it," Bastian says. "It's real. When it shows up, anyone can see it. It's just a matter of who it hunts. Unlike normal sharks, it's got a thing for humans. Often targets lonely ones, people who aren't all there. People who can't communicate what's going on. It's a bastard like that."

"I'm not that lonely," Adam lies.

"Esther Ellington was," Bastian says. "And she had dementia. But she was still lucid enough to phone her son twice about it, about a shark in her bathtub. He thought it was just her really weird way of projecting her fear of slipping in the bath." Bastian looks over at Nora, as if to get her professional opinion, but she ignores him. "Then one day she was gone, and the tub was all scratched up, and there was a big bite-mark taken right out of the floorboard. It was her grandson who found it. Just a little boy, six years old, wondering where his grandma had disappeared to. And that little boy . . ."

"That little boy was you, yes, got it," Adam says.

Bastian goes red. "Yeah, it was me. I used to think a bear did it, but no bear has jaws like that. Then, eventually, when my dad was drunk he told me about her phone calls. Her talking about a shark. And I've been looking for it ever since. It's very Moby Dick." He raises his prosthetic hand. "Nearly had it in '09."

"Okay," Adam says. "Okay. And what happened to the, uh, the chum? In '09?"

"I was young and inexperienced," Bastian says. "Look. I've got a harpoon gun now." He pulls it out of his green duffel bag with a flourish. It's already loaded, and the barbs shine wickedly sharp. "You're going to be fine, Adam." His eyes are shining with purpose. "We're going to deal with this thing once and for all. All you have to do is get in the pool. Please."

Adam takes stock of the situation again. It is a Sunday afternoon, and he is in his therapist's office, being offered the chance to rid himself of the conceptual shark forever by a man with a harpoon gun while his therapist wrestles her duct-tape bonds. No more being terrified by water coolers or showers or collected moisture.

"Okay," he says. "But let Nora go."

Bastian nods. “Cool,” he says.

* * *

The water in the kiddie pool reaches about halfway up Adam’s shins, making his leg hairs swirl around like little cilia. He’s wearing only his boxer shorts and a life jacket now, and the air-conditioned office is chilly enough to make him shiver. Bastian bundled Nora out of the room and barricaded the door behind her, but Adam suspects it won’t take her long to get the tape off her mouth and call the police. They don’t have much time. Which is unfortunate, because the shark doesn’t seem to be coming.

“Maybe it doesn’t work if someone’s watching,” Adam says. “Like at the urinal.”

“It’ll come,” Bastian says. “Prick yourself.”

Adam grits his teeth, then jabs the straightened paperclip into his thumb. A fat red drop of blood oozes out. It plops into the kiddie pool and disseminates. He watches the remnants swirl around his refracted feet. Still no ocean.

“Patience,” Bastian says.

Adam looks up. “You know, they make these big cages, these shark cages? For scuba divers?”

“Looked into it,” Bastian says. “Too difficult to transport. Don’t worry, Adam. I’ll get you out before I take the shot.” He’s perched on top of Nora’s desk, holding the other end of the rope that loops through Adam’s life jacket. The harpoon gun is resting beside him. “Prick yourself again, maybe.”

Adam raises the paperclip, and it happens. He crashes down into cold seawater, going under for a second and seeing nothing through a vortex of bubbles. When he bobs back up, helped by the life jacket, he sees the familiar environ of his therapist’s office. The kiddie pool is now an open porthole to the vast depths of the ocean.

“Cool,” Bastian shouts. “You’re doing really well, Adam.”

The shark is on its way. Adam focuses on treading water. The office lighting’s no good; he can’t make out anything from the murk below him. He splashes in one stroke to the edge of the inflatable pool, splaying one hand over the cartoon daisies. He slips.

“Help me out!” he shouts.

Bastian starts pulling on the rope, and in that moment the shark erupts from nowhere, a missile. Its smooth gray body flashes into the air; Adam’s eyes widen, and his body goes petrified numb even as he realizes he’s not the shark’s target. The animal flops up against Nora’s wooden desk and its jaws crunch shut on Bastian’s flailing leg. He howls, scrabbling for the harpoon gun.

Adam remembers how in the shower the shark nudged his left arm, then his right, then retreated. Bastian has been hunting for the conceptual shark, and the conceptual shark has been hunting for Bastian, and Adam realizes now that he was nothing but chum to the both of them. There’s a pneumatic *chunk* as the harpoon gun fires. A barbed spear drives through gray cartilage; blood sprays the water.

The shark has Bastian half in its mouth, and they are thrashing back and forth like a single bizarre creature. Adam tries to help, battering the shark’s back with his fists, but he knows it’s no good. Bastian seizes another harpoon, and as he fumbles to load it into the gun the shark drags him off the desk, into the kiddie pool. The motion sends its tail smashing into Adam’s head. He goes under again, tumbling upside down. Water gushes into his nostrils.

He comes back up just in time to see the harpoon’s barb shred through the side of the kiddie pool. Instead of retreating, the ocean invades: suddenly seawater is flooding the office, foaming across the carpet, sweeping over bookshelves and chairs. Bastian is screaming, pushing the tip of the harpoon into the shark’s fleshy snout with both hands. The shark makes no sound, but it writhes, agonized.

Adam shuts his eyes and clutches his life jacket and waits for the shredding

sounds of the animal tearing Bastian limb from limb, waits for its greedy jaws to turn on him next. His pulse is pounding in his ears. His heart is hammering in his ribcage. A wave slams into him, curls him under, and rips him away.

He surfaces gasping, and when he twists himself around he sees that the struggle is over. Bastian and the shark are both dead, now a single floating flesh-shape, shrouded in diluting blood. Bastian's prosthetic is glinting, raised stiffly as if in victory. Adam's throat tightens.

A bitten-off chunk of Nora's desk drifts past him. He seizes it on instinct, scrambling half onto the wood. He splays there as his breathing slowly subsides. The stucco ceiling has become open sky. Sunlight warms his face. Seagulls are screeching in the distance. He looks in every direction, and in every direction there is only horizon, and he realizes that he is alone and adrift in the vast expanse of the conceptual ocean.