

Shark

by Gary Moshimer

Violet goes with her mother to the home, delivering cookies to old folks. She's getting to hate how she goes along with everything her mother asks. Some of her friends are rebelling already, and Violet feels something under her skin. It's still just a dark shape, lurking patiently, but she has hope. She lacks the confidence of the other girls to make things happen, mainly because of the way she looks, her frizzy hair and her cheeks with their annoying red glow.

As they arrange the cookies on a long table, curious silver heads pop from doorways. Slippers shuffle and walkers roll. One geezer zooms, wheelchair silent as a stealth weapon. He scoops two plates. Old ladies part with surprising quickness. They giggle. Violet notices the man has no legs. Flesh colored stockings tied in knots peek from the legs of his shorts. Speeding away, painted on the back of his wheelchair, is the image of a shark, leaping from blue water, jaws wide, smiling with giant bloody triangle teeth, one eye winking. "The Shark," whisper the old ladies.

Violet learns that the man, named Martin Ball, is a celebrity of sorts, a soldier from WWII with legs bitten off after his ship went down. He calls himself The Shark, and gets a few of the friskier old girls into his lap to go parking in linen closets when he can.

Violet wanders until she sees him in his room. The plates are on his bed, cookies untouched. He's parked by his window, staring out. Violet is startled to see the plastic legs standing by themselves, dressed in socks and sneakers. His walls are covered with framed photos. On the dresser is a picture of three young soldiers posing on a boat, cigarettes hanging from their cocky grins, arms slung around each another. Violet recognizes Martin Ball by the shape of his ears. She supposes that back in that world of black and white he would have been considered handsome.

At that moment Martin Ball pivots his chair and looks at her. "You're a young one," he says, stroking the stubble on his chin.

Violet opens her mouth, but nothing comes out. He rolls toward her. Finally she says, "I'm twelve."

"Huh. I had a twelve-year-old daughter once. Her picture's on the wall here. They tell me her name was Elizabeth."

Violet approaches the photos, barely avoiding the sweep of Martin's strange spotted hand. Each frame has a label. She finds the one that says, ELIZABETH. AGE 12. It's yellowed, a swimsuit girl standing in the ocean. Violet can't make out her face. Elizabeth is squinting into the sun, looking frightened.

"What do you mean, they tell you?"

"That's why everything is labeled, see? I don't remember any of it." He holds up his hands and somehow spins in circles. Quite the trick, considering he has no legs. Maybe a hidden motor.

Violet runs her finger over the glass. "What happened to her?"

"She stayed twelve."

"I'm sorry."

"*That* one stayed twelve. Now there's an older woman comes around saying she's her. I have to believe her, right?"

Violet scans the photos. "Looks like she was all these different ages, too. So she's okay."

"Apparently."

Violet lifts the one from the dresser.

"Marines. That's the only stuff I remember," says Martin. "The sharks taking my legs. It's who I am."

Violet squeezes past Martin, over to the fake legs. Her own legs quiver. She runs a hand over the smooth plastic and gets goose bumps. "Can you tell me about it?"

Martin's eyes glaze. His voice changes, whispery and full of pain.

"Dirty Japs sunk us. We floated a few hours before the sharks came. First they just circled. Then they started bumping me — a strange feeling. Then they — or maybe it was just one — starting tugging me under and letting go. Ever go fishing? I was a bobber. That was me. Bob. Ha-ha. Ever hear that joke? But I still had legs. The sharks left me to the darkness. Far off I could hear guys

screaming. Not me. I stayed quiet and just floated, not to call attention."

Violet moves between the legs and uses them to hold herself up.

"The next day I started seeing things. A cruise ship went by, people waving at me. (Martin waves his hands) They said thanks for fighting the war and keeping them safe. Then these cracks appeared in the clouds and angels came from the gold light. (He flaps his hands like wings) When the sharks came back, my legs were numb. They started tugging again, violently this time. (He yanks the ends of his stockings) Can you believe I stayed quiet? I let them do whatever they were doing. When they left I saw the blood around me, and I just went to sleep. Finally I could sleep. I was pissed when that pesky angel woke me. She was flitting and changing my blood to something glittery the sharks wouldn't touch. She said to go back to sleep. Later I woke on a ship, looking down where my legs used to be."

He grasps the knots and Violet swoons, waiting for it. But his hands go limp. His chin falls to his chest and stays there. He's asleep or dead or very dramatic. Violet waits. Somewhere a clock ticks, and she thinks of time passing and being old herself, surrounded by pictures to illustrate her life.

When Martin finally lifts his head, he says, "You look like that angel."

Violet sees herself in the mirror, golden hair puffed wild, cheeks burning. The mysterious shape stirs inside her, nearing the surface. It frightens her, but she welcomes it. "I *am* her," she says, not believing she's capable of this. But in the world there's always prey. She can't stop. Her blood mobilizes.

Martin cries, tears following the jagged lines of his face "What do you want from me? Is it time? I'm ready."

"I'm back for your legs," she says.

"Of course. They're of no use anymore."

She finds a blanket on the cart in the hall. She wraps the legs. On his dresser she spots an extra pair of the stockings and snatches them as well.

“Well, goodbye,” she says. “Eat your cookies.”

She puts the legs in the trunk of the car. As she's heading back to find her mother, a car rolls up next to her. The passenger door swings open. A man stretches over the seat. “Miss?”

Violet should know better, but she leans in to see what he wants. His arm shoots out, hand pinching her wrist. His face is like dough, the mouth an evil hanging slice. His eyes are dark buttons. Violet strikes the area between the eyes with her sharp knuckles. His skin is moist and disgusting. She thinks of how Martin should have punched the sharks. Making contact, her arm is stiff and straight, with all the force she's made of, desperate shark-killing force. She sees the gash open. The man cries out and holds his face. He hits the gas and peels away, door swinging.

Violet looks around. The only one she sees is Martin, watching from his window. He gives her thumbs up.

Her knuckles are split. She tastes the blood and smiles. Her thin arms tremble, but feel strong. She rips a piece of her pink shirt — it's so girly, anyway — and wraps her hand. Her mother finds her sitting in the car, blood on her lip and fingers.

“Violet? Honey?”

Violet smiles at her. “Hundreds died,” she says. “Eaten by sharks.”

She declines a ride to school, which gives her mother something more to worry about. Her mother thinks Violet isn't herself lately, which is true. Violet is someone else in another place. She's mentally preparing for her history presentation. Miss Marsden let her pick her own topic, because Violet is one of her prize students and she trusts her. Violet chose “An Event in WWII.” Miss Marsden was a bit hesitant over certain details, but in the end agreed. Violet did not mention her plans with the fake blood. Violet did not mention a few other things, like how she didn't research dates or the name of the ship or anything required for a history project. This will be more like something for an acting class. People will talk about this.

She finds the badminton set in the basement, empties the long canvas bag and puts the legs in. On top of them she folds a pair of

angel wings from an old school play. Last night her brother made the baggies of fake blood from corn syrup and dye. This will be the best presentation ever.

When her turn comes, she borrows a wheelchair from the health room. She zooms down the hall and into class like Martin would. She spins in front, for a moment bringing life to some of the bored faces. She opens the bag and stands the legs in front of her. "My name is Martin Ball, and a shark ate my legs." She hears Tom Sheehan say, "Awesome," and Mary Jane Pitt say, "Gross."

She looks at Miss Marsden, who is waiting for the introduction, the what-when-where-and why. But there will be none of that. Violet throws her head back, throat swelling as she channels the voice of Martin Ball, broken with pain. "The dirty Japs."

"Violet."

She hears the giggles. She slams the arm of the chair with her hand, the knuckles reopen. She holds up the bloody hand. "You think it's funny?" The laughter subsides. "A torpedo. Shrapnel." The trickle reaches her elbow, drips to her jeans.

"Violet." Miss Marsden takes a step towards her.

"Stop! The more you move, the faster they'll come." She has the attention of the class. She whispers. "Just float. Don't move your legs. They're down there, waiting."

Something goes terribly wrong with her plan. The angel stuff comes way too early, halos appearing around the lights and kids' heads, yellow and orange and blue auras. Then her legs twitch on their own, her body jerks to one side. Her teeth chatter like she's in the freezing water. The eyes in her audience grow wide, but she wants to yell that this is not it, not how it's supposed to go. Her hands spasm and twist and her forearms batter her thighs. The blood packets burst, red seeping through her pants. Someone screams and someone says, "Cool." The last thing she remembers is Miss Marsden hovering over her. For some reason she's wearing Violet's angel wings. She says, "Someone get the nurse."

She wakes up in a hospital bed, surrounded by four women, one of them holding her hand. Violet pulls away. "Who are you?"

"Honey, it's me. Mom."

Violet doesn't recognize her, or the ones claiming to be the school nurse and teacher. The one in a lab coat, the doctor, shines a light into Violet's eyes.

"Do you know your name?" the doctor asks.

"Elizabeth," says Violet.

The doctor speaks to the mother. "Has she had seizures before?"

"Just as a baby. Because of a high fever." The mother purses her lips in thought, a gesture that seems vaguely familiar to Violet. "She has an aunt with epilepsy."

The mother cries. The doctor assures her that Violet will remember everything soon. All will be back to normal, but she'll need some medication.

Violet closes her eyes, but then sits up quickly and whips the sheet off to look. "My legs," she says.

"That was fake blood," the teacher says. She laughs. "That was really something."

"Just rest now," the doctor says, easing Violet back.

Violet has a dream. She's at the beach, waist deep in the tide. She squints into the sun, looking for her father. She's afraid of the ocean, but he has left her there, hoping to make her brave. She's paralyzed with fear, because something has just brushed her leg. She calls for him, her voice rising over the rhythm of the waves. At last she sees him running in the sand. "Elizabeth, I'm right here." She marvels at his speed, the way his legs work effortlessly, the sand kicking up behind and glittering in the sun.

