

A Documentary About Sharks

by Gavin Broom

As I lean over the chrome rail and look at the floor on the street level of the mall, I ask myself a question. If I was to fall, I wonder if it would be better to land and lie there with my eyes open or closed. Closed, I decide, would make me look like I was at peace, open would freak the shit out of people and one eye open and one eye closed would just look stupid. I'm left in no doubt that if I did fall, it'd be the last one -- the fucking goofball expression -- that I'd be stuck with forever and that would be the one photographed on a hundred cell phones and bluetoothed around high school. That would be the picture sitting on Brit Hume's shoulder on Fox News.

"See anyone interesting, Mackenzie?" Carter asks as he shuffles back to me from Ben & Jerry's. He has an XL tub of Chunky Monkey in one hand and a plastic spoon in the other.

"I thought I saw your mom while you were waiting in line," I say, "but it turned out to be a tramp."

He doesn't laugh and starts scooping into his tub. "Funny," he says with a full mouth, his bottom lip and tongue smeared with ice cream, making him look rabid.

So we stand at the railing and watch the crowd buzz around below us while Carter noisily works his way into the tub.

"They're like sharks, aren't they?" he says, interrupting me as I try to decide if falling face down or up would be better; if I would rather see the ground rushing towards me or the skylight pulling away.

“What's like sharks?”

“All of them.” He indicates by waving his spoon around the empty space on the other side of the rail. A small bomb of melted ice cream falls two stories, misses some chick's HMV bag by an inch and lands, unnoticed, on the mall floor. “Look at the way they move, the way they hunt. Jesus, give them a fucking dorsal fin and they'll be all set.”

I sigh and turn so I'm facing Ben & Jerry's and Subway and all the other units that make up the food hall. Each has a queue waiting at the counters, mostly of people who don't look in the least bit hungry. “That's a pretty weak metaphor, dude.”

“You think?”

“Yeah, I think. I mean, they don't swim. They don't go around killing people or destroying boats or chewing through power cables or eating dolphins or shit like that.”

Carson laughs and shakes his head. “Mackenzie, do you even know what a shark is? First, they don't eat each other, okay? They're not cannibals. Second, it's dolphins who attack sharks, not the other way round. And third, there are, like, 300 species of shark in the world. Did I say anything about great whites? Did I?”

“No.”

“No, I said they looked like sharks. General. Unspecific.” He leans forward on to the rail. “Take my word for it. There are many colours in the shark rainbow, my friend, and pretty much every single one of them is on view down in the pool there.”

I go back to the position I was in when I was thinking about my eyes

being open or closed. "Okay, smartguy," I say. "Point out the nurse sharks for me."

"Nurse sharks?" He shrugs and pops another spoonful in his mouth. "No problem."

Holding the spoon between his teeth like it's a cigar, he points to a bunch of emo kids. They're sitting on the low, marble wall around a fake tree, in the shadows under the stairs, near the Information board.

"The nurse shark spends its days hanging around in inactive groups, giving the impression that it isn't socially retarded. At night, however, it reverts to form, becomes a solitary animal and spends its time jacking off in its bedroom to Panic! At The Disco videos."

"You're making this shit up."

"What? No. I swear to God. I saw it on Discovery. Well, everything except the jacking off stuff."

I can't tell if he really has committed a bunch of shark facts to memory or not. Either way, I have to let it go as I need all my brain power to think up another species that isn't a great white.

"How about ... a bull shark?" I try.

He laughs. "You're not even trying, are you? I'm pretty sure even you could pick out the fucking bull shark."

It takes less than five seconds to spot a bull shark and as it turns out, it's someone I know. Derek Brown is in my year and he's about as wide as he is tall. He's got a brow you could ski down and a chin that would give a decent right angle to any Math kid who'd forgotten their protractor. He's a regular Johnny Fucking Football Hero and he

knows it. For around thirty seconds or so, I follow his progress through the mall towards a small group of preppy girls hanging around outside Abercrombie & Fitch. During this short trip, he gives an iron shoulder to two shoppers who have the nerve to walk through his airspace. The only thing that breaks his stride is when he must sense my eyes on the back of his head and he stops, sneers up at me and then flips me the finger.

“Okay,” I concede. “Bad choice.”

But Carter seems to have grown tired of the discussion and is wandering back towards the food hall, his head lowered as he continues to dig at his ice cream.

“So I'm thinking we start off here,” he says when he sees me walking towards him. He doesn't try to keep his voice down, even with people passing so close by. No one pays us a second glance. We're just two guys, hanging out in the mall, talking shit.

“In the food hall?”

“In the food hall. It's cornered. People are sitting down. There's no easy means of escape.”

“There's the escalators. They go down as well as up, you know?”

“True, but it's a total bottleneck. The bastards'll be falling over themselves to get away. Think about it. Think about trying to run down the up escalator when there's a guy pointing an M16 at your back. Or taking a spill along with fifty other assholes and landing in a mess of bones and blood. Or saying, fuck it and taking your chances along the mezzanine while I strafe your ass. Two words: fucking chaos.”

The idea of falling down an escalator makes me wince. It sounds a

far too painful way to go.

"All good points," I say, while my thoughts stray back to Derek Brown and the look on his face as he flipped the bird at me, "but to do any of that, they need to get by us and the only way they can get by us is to rush us. It just takes one bull shark and we're screwed."

Carter scratches his head and sizes up the area around us, looking like he's doing nothing more adventurous than searching for a garbage can.

"Yeah, the world's full of fucking heroes."

"Plus," I continue, "there are tables to hide behind, counters to dive over and I guess every one of these places has a kitchen or something at the back. And besides all that, how are you planning on getting an M16s in here anyway? I thought you were going for something more compact, like me. I thought you were going with the Glock."

He shakes his head. "My old man would notice if the Glock went missing. He keeps the M16 locked up in a cupboard, out of view. It could be gone for weeks before he'd have any cause to realize it's gone."

"But if it's locked --"

"There's no point locking a cupboard if you're dumb enough to keep the key on a chain in the garage. I got a copy cut last week."

"And we get the rifle in here how?"

Carter winks at me. "Your stupidly oversized Adidas bag, Mackenzie, my friend. It was bound to come in useful for something sooner or later."

The Adidas bag is legendary. Aunt Sylvie gave me it when I started High School, thinking I needed to lug an entire library around with me each day. Seriously, I'm five ten and I can sit in it like it's a goddamn kayak. I stopped taking it to school when I started getting beat up about it and it now collects dust in the corner of my room where it's home for a ton of old sneakers and a couple of pornos.

Carter and I eyeball each other for a few seconds, not saying a word, not even breathing it seems, and I realize he's deadly serious about all this. He's serious about the guns, the bag, the food hall, everything. I mean, I guess at no point did I think he was joking, but now, just from looking into his eyes and seeing the intensity, I'm certain. My old man's eyes do the same thing, just before he kicks the shit out of my mom. Carter's there in front of me and he's conscious and living, but part of him -- a fucking important part of him -- is a million miles away thinking about stuff the rest of the world won't comprehend. Maybe he's talking to God.

"Now," Carter says out of nothing and then he walks past me to the escalators. "Security."

I follow him. "Security."

We take the escalator down to the second floor. Carter sticks his spoon into what's left of his ice cream, like a gravedigger taking a break.

"At least two guards on each floor," he says as we glide down a level towards Wal-Mart. "One in the north mall, one in the south and they're not the fastest movers in the world. That time Ricky got caught shoplifting and he freaked out with the knife, it took them five minutes to get enough bodies over there to get him to the ground and they had to keep him pinned for another twenty before the cops showed up."

I remember hearing that about Ricky. I also remember hearing that he was a month in hospital afterwards and three months in plaster and then six in jail. As I think about this, we pass two guys from school on the up escalator. One of them calls us faggots while the other spits on Carter's back before both of them erupt in scalding laughter.

Unperturbed, Carter goes on, "So I don't think we'll be interrupted until we get down here. Here, we'll get resistance. No doubt. There's always a guard near Wal-Mart, sometimes more."

Today, the guard is a black guy who looks in his forties or fifties but still looks like he can take care of himself. A gray cap displays a gold badge and sits squarely on his bald head and the crease line in his shirt and pants is perfect. His eyes have a similar distance to what I saw in Carter's and my old man's, but it's from a totally different place. The storm is swirling around this guy. He's the calm in the center. Everything about him suggests ex-military. I imagine my brains and skull and blood splattered on Wal-Mart's window, looking like an obscene Sale sticker.

"He could break me in two," I mutter, never so sure of anything in my life.

If Carter hears me, he ignores me. "This is going to sound fucking controversial, but if we get this far, and I think we will, and if we set foot on the second floor, I say we go into Wal-Mart. Now, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking we should keep to the concourse. But that's what everyone else will be thinking. We'll survive longer if we're in the store. I'm sure of it."

We wander through the store. Carter soaks up the layout, I just follow quietly at the back. Before we leave, he buys a pink Cherry Coke trucker hat for ten bucks. While we're being served, he

whispers to me that the cameras will be picking this up and then, at a regular volume, he says to the assistant, "They called me a faggot. This'll show 'em."

The assistant, maybe twenty, bored, forces a smile and doesn't tell either of us to have a nice day. On the way out, Carter puts on the hat and the price tag dangles down against his temple. He tells me that he might add this to his official uniform, then he makes noises towards random shoppers that I'm sure are supposed to be shotgun blasts.

Boom! Chick-chick!

Only one person, a hot woman, looks at him and when she does so, it's only for a moment and her eyes widen before they drop to the floor as if to say, what an asshole. She's right. When she's passed us, I turn and watch her ass as it chews its way along the aisle. There are many truly beautiful things in this world and sometimes that's easy to forget.

We go down another escalator on to street level where the emos are still hanging around under the stairs but Derek Brown and the preppies have disappeared.

"So we're good for tomorrow, yeah?" Carter asks as we move towards the exit. "We cut last class, get ourselves set up, we're good to go?"

I don't say anything because I don't like thinking about it. I don't like thinking about next week's South Park or my birthday next month or seeing Jennifer Colbecki wearing that blue and white hooped sweater one more time. It's not that I haven't accepted these things, it's just that I don't like dwelling on it too much. Carter, though, seems to interpret my silence as second thoughts.

“This is the thing you've got to remember about sharks, Mackenzie. They've got this badass reputation. People think they're killers, that they're ruthless and I guess some of them are. Mostly, though, they're all teeth and fins and fuck all else. There is no great white in here. The great white is a lie. But if it did exist, it'd be us. And Discovery will say so.”

“I know, dude. I'm cool.”

He looks at me, his eyes now searching into me and his face taught and serious. “I need to know I can rely on you.”

“You can, Carter. I told you. I'm cool.”

His face softens into a wide smile and his slaps me on the back. “Tomorrow, we have some fun.”

He dunks his empty ice cream tub in a garbage can and we walk through the automatic doors, leaving all the sharks for one more day and the last thought that goes through my mind before the sun hits my eyes is that I'm probably going to take Carter out first.

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