

“There is nothing truly magical that does not have a terrifying quality.”

my claim to fame among friends. I even told shark jokes! It was therapy, in a way. It’s a gift that human beings who so dread death can also laugh at it. Even make a plaything of it. My wife and I gave our son a five-foot-long plush great white for his birthday last year. Seeing his glee opening the present, I snickered at the irony of my five-year-old future surfer blithely snuggling “Whitey,” while its kin was in his father’s bed, devouring him.

A month after I saw the shark at Moss Landing, I met some friends for drinks at a bar in Rio Del Mar, a mile’s walk along the beach south from Seacliff Pier. I was told that Marina State Beach was closed that morning after an eighteen-foot white shark was spotted cruising twenty yards from shore. It was March 9, the latest sighting in the calendar year that anyone could remember in our area. We all worried about the implications of the sharks not being gone by then, off to the White Shark Cafe. Was this *our* new normal? The group looked to me for context or maybe some comic relief. Because, you know, I was the shark guy. In the past I might have said there were “sharknadoes” in the forecast.

This time, I said nothing.

When I think about sharks and surfing, I often remember something the American painter N.C. Wyeth once said: “There is nothing truly magical that does not have a terrifying quality.” The word “magical” certainly describes many of the days I’ve enjoyed surfing in the Red Triangle. Early mornings alone on the coast, after a long walk had delivered me into a new dimension. Where the sun shone on my face, perfect waves invited, and mine were the sole footprints in the sand. Where the offshore breeze blew up the crest of every wave and soaked me in spindrift showers.

I decided to test Wyeth’s theory. To see if fear really was a gateway to magic. So I went back out at Platforms.

Hugging my surfboard in the same water where the two sharks had been filmed by the helicopter crew two weeks before, I faced a cold truth. The truth was, every year great white sharks are spotted along the coast that I love, the coast from which I draw much of my health and happiness. Sometimes those sharks hurt people, even if accidentally. Rarely, however, are those interactions fatal. In fact, there have been only eight fatal attacks in all of the United States (including Hawaii) in the last ten years. The truth is, even being a surfer in the Red Triangle, I have a better chance of winning the California Lottery than of getting killed by a great white shark while surfing.

In the water at Platforms, I saw a dorsal fin. *The* icon of marine terror. It was big, a foot tall, gunmetal gray, and rigid as it cut the water like a warship less than twenty yards away and headed towards me. Oddly, I didn’t move. I stared at the blank, blue ocean surface between me and the point at which the fin went underwater. My heart thumped. When it resurfaced, attached to the body of a bottlenose dolphin, I lost muscle control in my lips. They cracked involuntarily into a smile.

Magical, indeed. Because, at least for the moment, seeing that dolphin made my fear of sharks disappear.

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CRISTINA SAYERS

Wave of Insomnia, 2015
Acrylic on canvas, 16 x 16



COURTESY: THE ARTIST