

Shark Week

When you eat in bars a lot, you get used to the din of professional sports emanating from every available speaker. In a restaurant I draw attention as a solitary dinner, but the pub food I prefer is inevitably accompanied by some sort of competitive game. Life, it seems, is always about compromise.

The Lakers or Kings are fine as the backdrop for a party, and I can make it through a game at Dodger Stadium as long as the beer stands don't run dry, but I couldn't give a fuck less about the Raiders or Chargers or any other team operating under the banner of "football" when in fact 95% of their game is played with their hands. But since no one in any sports bar on the planet cares what I think, I keep my head down, eat my fish and chips or Philly cheesesteak, and silently judge those around me who put more effort into their fantasy leagues than they do their own goddamned lives.

Such is my dietary toil, but in July comes a brief reprieve. Midway through the throes of baseball season, but just before the merciless onslaught of football, basketball and hockey seasons, blooms the divergent glory of Shark Week. And while I wouldn't call myself a fan of Discovery Channel's ratings juggernaut, it is nice to see people excited about carnage outside of a sports arena.

Tonight, I'm diving into a plate of ultimate nachos while the final installment of *Fins of Fury* reaches its forgone conclusion, i.e. sharks are indeed enraged killers with dorsal appendages. Far more entertaining, however, is the conversation happening two barstools down.

"Why do we fear sharks more than, like, bears?" Ponders a guy in a pistachio-colored polo.

“Yeah,” says a guy clad in a similar shirt in a pale orange hue, “a bear is way more likely to be picked up by a tornado.”

Their conversation drifts into a spirited debate over who would make the cooler mascot for the Kings, the extinct Megalodon or the ever-elusive Mega Shark. Old sports habits die hard and apparently cannot be snuffed out even by a 50-ton predator.

The pair is drawn out of their reverie by a TV baritone announcing the wonders yet to come, “Next up, the premiere of *Man Eating Shark!*”

Pistachio polo scoffs, “All sharks eat men.”

“Yeah, how can that even be a show?” Affirms sherbert polo.

Clearly they have distinguishing tastes when it comes to their pseudoscience TV.

“Can you imagine being the dude in the water filming that though?” Continues sherbert polo. “That’d be some freaky shit.”

“Yeah,” laughs pistachio polo. “Who the hell decides to do *that* with their life?”

It doesn’t happen often in my pub dining experience, but for once I know the answer to a question posed by another patron.

All-time leader in assists for the Lakers? No idea.

How many World Series did the Dodgers win in the 50s? I got nothing.

But what kind of idiot gets his rocks off by forfeiting his place on the food chain? Turns out I have some experience with that.

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A couple years after I graduated high school with honors, my brother Gus met a guy at a party in Huntington Beach. They bonded over some mutual ex-girlfriend and were totally simpatico the whole night. When their conversation flowed to future travel

plans, Gus said he'd like to go to Barcelona or Madrid, or anywhere hot enough that girls would be topless.

And the other guy, Pete, said he'd go to India "because of all the culture and shit."

It was a party, alcohol was involved.

So my brother tells Pete that I'm in India, which was true at the time.

I fled the continent after two years at UCLA. India was far enough away that my parents couldn't keep tabs on me and could brag to their HOA friends that I was studying abroad. India was an ideal location because opiates are cheaper and there are fewer regulations for using. Also, great curry.

You see, even though my GPA had been off the charts, I wasn't smart enough to avoid the heroin scene trending through local schools. My parents weren't wealthy—my education had been made possible by scholarship—but they loved me and had pinned their hopes on me enough to look the other way when the microwave vanished or dad's golf clubs went missing.

So as I looked for a way to maintain my habit but not make a habit of breaking my parents' hearts, I stumbled on an exchange program for Bangalore University. And since Bangalore was an educational hotbed for everything from aeronautics to mental health, it seemed a good match for the biotech degree I was pursuing in my free time from narcotics.

When I arrived in Bangalore, I went straight to a part of the city known for its traffic, and I don't mean rush hour. The first dealer to sell me smack was also helpful enough to direct me to a slumlord who specialized in rentals for degenerate dropouts.

So Gus, my brother, tells Pete, his new party pal, the neighborhood and building I'm staying in so Pete can stop by on his far-flung travels. Of course, Gus never imagined that Pete would actually follow through.

But he did. Pete knocked on the door of the shithole in Bangalore one day and asked for me. Told me he was "good friends" with my brother. It took him two months to admit he only met Gus one time, at a party, wasted. But the two months were good months. Pete did his part around our little commune. He even cooked, which none of us did. There was too much cheap food everywhere to bother with groceries and such trivia. It was nice to wake up to a hot breakfast though, so we really didn't care why he was there. We didn't ask that a lot anyway.

In the midst of a hodgepodge of addicts, Pete was a rare bird. And he kept birds—wild birds he found injured. Always telling us, "I'm good with animals. They love me." And he really wasn't. And they didn't.

The birds didn't like him. The rats, even the dogs and cats he kept, none of them really liked him. You can tell when a feral cat is unhappy. They're very vocal about it. It was like living with prisoners of war. There was always something howling in the night or clawing frantically in a box in a corner somewhere. These animals were hostile about their digs.

So we had a lot of conversations about how we'd actually been trying to keep animals out of the house. We had mousetraps and everything. But that's one of the ways Pete added to his menagerie. No pied piper bit or romancing them. The mice weren't happy either.

We put up with a lot of shit in our shithole—hypodermics and domestic violence—but Pete’s animal bondage schtick got old. Fast. Before he could wear out the welcome none of us had extended, he ended up falling for one of the girls in the house. Naima was one of the only native residents and a chemist developing polymers for a local toy manufacturer marketing 12 varieties of Goo! to first world children.

Naima actually thought she was going to be working from the house, cashing in on low rent made possible by a clever collaboration of housemates who alternated work and leisure. What this meant in practice was that you had a week of using, followed by a week of stealing and dealing, with using being part of that equation, but you were responsible for decreasing your habit to the point you could climb through a window or haggle with teenagers over a decent price for hashish.

But instead of making a new Goo! breakthrough, Naima ended up getting hooked on opium like everybody else. Then, in the crescendo of her shitty house experience, she got wasted and had a fling with Pete. She immediately regretted it when she sobered up to both Pete and an ailing chicken in her bed.

Brutally dismissed, Pete started looking for a way to drown his sorrows. He was actually the only person in the house who didn’t use, so he had to get creative. He wanted to get drunk. Not the most novel idea, but a novelty for me at the time. We planned a night out with another roommate named Chen along for the ride. Chen was a wayward programmer mourning the loss of a significant chunk of his youth to the house. He was a solid decade older than the rest of us and kept mostly to himself. He paid his share of the rent, could pick any lock that crossed his path, and was the only guy who ever put the toilet seat down, so he was all right in my book.

Chen befriended Pete when he helped him identify a slender loris, a small, saucer-eyed primate whose sloth-like movements made it easy prey for an interloping conservationist like Pete. In the interest of speed, Pete's loris was left behind for the night, and the three of us made for the city outskirts. Pete wanted to see the countryside. Bangalore is so dense you're in layers most of the time. Cement, glass and steel layers. Apartment buildings, skyscrapers, offices, bridges, overpasses. Always layers.

You can get out of the layers, but not out of the people. Step off the pavement and the dirt is covered by a sea of shanties and tents. Yeah, there are still people living in tents in the world. Old school Indians.

We went to a slum that was close enough to the city to provide an illiterate, inexpensive workforce, but just far enough to keep the smell of open sewers and burning trash away from those who could afford running water. Our life in the city was modern, but the slum was practically medieval.

We bought Thati Kallu, palm wine, which will definitely get you drunk, but spiked with methanol also kills enough brain cells to get you high whippet-style. The three of us were falling down drunk, high, fucked up, with Chen leading us down the footpaths to what he'd heard was the best Pachisi den within 10 miles of the city.

We were cracking each other up, slurring "Pachisi" into the Anglicized "Parcheesi", when we stumbled over our own feet and tumbled into the nearest tent. Inside the tent was a guy who just happened to be charming a cobra. For show, of course. Guys in India don't just sit in their living rooms with a pungli and a snake. You want to get paid for that shit. We just came into the show the back way.

The charmer was gracious enough. He motioned for us to join his audience that consisted of two Indian men, but Pete was already hypnotized by the snake—very human/animal role reversal. Mr. I'm-good-with-animals clambered to his feet and said, "Watch this."

Pete got about a foot from the cobra—which yes, was in a basket—and the snake shot up in the air, at least 4 feet high. Straight up like a freaking jack-in-the-box. It bit Pete. Right on the face. It slammed into his cheek with enough force to knock him off balance and send them both back to the ground.

This all happened in about 10 seconds. We were walking, laughing, then tumbling into a tent, and suddenly Pete's been bit in the face by a cobra. It took the party to a whole other level. Even the snake charmer lost his shit for a minute.

There were screams, most of them mine, but a guy in the audience did like a backward somersault getting out of the melee. And there was that knowledge, like a communal consciousness: someone was going to die very soon.

There was more shouting, the charmer took the machete by his side and chopped the head off the snake before I could even get off the ground. Then there was a writhing snake body gushing blood beside Pete, who was clutching his face in the dirt. I wouldn't say Pete was surprised or even fearful. He didn't have the good sense to realize he'd fucked up, but he also didn't have the time. The pain was that quick.

The screams were his from then on. High-pitched, tear-your-throat-out screams. After a bit, maybe two minutes, Pete's throat closed and the screaming stopped, but that was a very long two minutes. His face swelled up. He started foaming at the mouth, the kind of foam made from liquid saturating your tissue, drowning you in your own fluids.

Chen took off, sent on a mission to get antivenom. I should have known he wouldn't come back. We'd had enough money to buy palm wine but not enough for antivenom. I was too drunk to realize that no hospital would send an ambulance to the slums to retrieve a man who would not be able to afford his treatment or his death. That's if Chen even bothered to find a hospital. No one I know ever saw him again. Setting Chen free from the house was probably the only decent thing Pete ever did.

Pretty soon it was just Pete, the charmer, and me. The audience members had seen enough to be sure they didn't want to see anymore. The charmer was very attentive. He proceeded as though it was his duty to care for Pete just as he had acted as if it were his duty to kill the snake. And the snake's life was probably worth more on paper.

He cut a slit at the base of Pete's neck and inserted what looked like a small pipe. It bled like hell, but Pete kept breathing. Then the charmer put a paste on the bite and did some sort of healing chant. I speak some Hindi but he was speaking Urdu, which means I could understand parts. Like Spanish to Italian, the languages share some core words, but have a lot of significant differences.

I made out "if it is your will," and "if it please you" but also "protect" and something like "care for his soul." It was surreal. I cried and threw up a few times, which helped sober me up but did nothing for the ambience in the tent.

Pete's eye over the bite swelled shut and kept swelling until the lid cracked open again and the eye bulged out of the socket. I assumed a special effects style puss explosion would be the natural conclusion, but it never popped. The charmer held Pete's head on his lap and poured small sips of liquid from a bowl into his mouth. Minutes

turned into hours. Moments dragged into sequences that morphed into early dawn. And Pete got better. At least he stopped getting worse.

It all seemed like a bad acid trip. I just wanted it to go away. With no access to opiates I had to settle for unconsciousness. I passed out sometime before daybreak and waded back to consciousness in the afternoon.

I woke to Pete and the charmer sipping coffee around a firepit. The swelling had gone down and the pipe trach had been removed, but Pete still looked like hell. He was balled up in blankets, but smiling, nodding. The charmer spoke softly at intervals. Pete couldn't understand anything he said but knew enough to be giddy he was still alive and on his way back from yet another animal adventure.

We spent another night in the tent until Pete could walk out on his own. When we got back to the house it was business as usual—half open doors with strange odors emanating, music playing too loud down the hallways, and the occasional derelict slumped against a wall, lifting his head to see who might be passing.

"What happened to Pete's face?"

I didn't have the words. I felt traumatized, changed.

Pete was all the rock star.

"It's nothing, just got bit by a cobra. Hey, is that a field mouse?"

I started to rally people in the house. I bullied a handful of burnouts into a room and we held an impromptu intervention for Pete. It went something like, "Dude, you got bit by a cobra. On the face. Maybe it's time to slow down with the animals. Have you tried heroin?"

I left the house not long after.

It was a couple years later before Pete found me again. I never left a forwarding address, but he was clever enough to track down my brother and ask about me. He told Gus that he and I had become "real close" after our time in India—concrete evidence he was still a clueless ass.

By that time I was stateside working my way toward a normal existence. I had cleaned up through the agonizing repetition of rehab, financed by seemingly endless cocktail party fundraisers courtesy of my parents' HOA. My high school test scores had actually been high enough that the whole community was banking on me proving myself one day.

I agreed to meet Pete out for a drink one night, ready to assess him again through sober eyes. After a brief exchange of niceties, Pete asked where I was living. I warily told him I had my own place and was quick to add I was through with roommates. Given the cost of living in L.A., Pete took this as a sign I was doing well and proceeded to ask for a loan. Of course I told him to eat shit, but he was always very persistent.

I asked what he wanted the money for and he gave me a totally contrived presentation, illustrated with bar napkins, about his great ambition to film wildlife documentaries.

"Cause you know, I'm really good with animals."

I can't tell him to fuck off enough. Stupid bastard won't take a hint though, so I have to try a more rational approach. I start peppering him with logistics. Camera crew? Who do you hire, what do you pay them, does that include dental insurance? Writing? Is it scripted, does Morgan Freeman do the voice over, is there a soundtrack?

That seemed to buy me some time, but Pete found me again about a year later and the next go round his shit was a little more together. He had a proposal. Cardstock paper and everything, like it would literally hold more weight. And it actually wasn't bad. He'd clearly spent some time thinking about location, crew, equipment, even housing while shooting.

This time it was the subject matter that bothered me. Pete explained that he wanted to film his encounters with sharks. Yeah, no chance that would end badly. I probed to see if he even had a working knowledge of the species. Turns out, he had it locked down. Countershading camouflage; electroreceptors that enable them to detect electric fields put off by moving animals; survival stats in captivity. Pete even had his own well-backed theory on how the great white's bite force had been underestimated in the latest research.

I had no idea he was so knowledgeable on any subject, let alone articulate. I realized our dialog had never really gone beyond, "get that goddamn parakeet out of my face" and "would you like butter on your toast." But reading every National Geographic article and wiki entry on sharks doesn't mean you're ready to get in the water and make nice with them. Pete sheepishly told me he didn't even know how to swim.

One more time for the cheap seats: Fuck Off.

Another year passed and my new biotech business had taken off. I had successfully engineered a safer and more effective opioid receptor antagonist, which is a fancy way of saying a rehab drug that takes all the fun out of using. Previous drugs had only blocked the euphoric effect of dope without blocking the cravings for it, which is

akin to making coffee ineffective at waking your ass up while still leaving you desperate for your morning fix—essentially pharmaceutical waterboarding.

My new drug ended the cravings as well as the high. A bummer, I know, but people really shouldn't rely on narcotics to escape reality. That's what TV is for. So I was making money hand over fist and throwing a fair share of it at local non-profits and research start-ups as pennies in the karma bank, and of course, as a tax shelter.

I had a meeting with the head of a local wildlife charity who I'd worked with on a few occasions. She has the unprecedented good sense to forgo Birkenstocks for designer vegan sandals, but still falls fairly close to tree hugger on the activist spectrum. Most days her affections lean toward marine reptiles, but this particular day she was besotted with a new boyfriend who she'd invited to join us.

She had asked me out for coffee to discuss funding for a loggerhead turtle migration study, but instead she couldn't shut up about how smart, ambitious, and capable her new beau was. I was imagining a young Steve Jobs with flippers coming through the door.

When her eyes lit up signaling he'd arrived, I followed her gaze to see if he was in fact mammalian. As he approached the table I could see he had a head of hair on Jobs. It was dark, a little shaggy for my taste, but it matched his lean, lanky build. There was something familiar about his loping gait.

The air shattered as Turtle Hugger squealed, "Peeeeete!"

My eyes widened. What. The. Ever-loving. Fuck.

He smiled at her, the scar rising on his cheek as he did.

Turtle Hugger dragged Pete down into a chair between us, her eyes as fixed to his face as her hands were to his bicep. This kept her from noticing the fury eclipsing disbelief across my face. Finally she made an effort to acknowledge my contemptuous third wheeled-ness.

“Pete said you’d be surprised to see him.”

You don’t say.

Turtle Hugger took my continued silence as an opportunity to order Pete a double mocha espresso and then quickly launched into their meet-cute story.

While attempting to teach himself to swim at a completely inappropriate protected seashore, Pete floundered in the frigid water—wetsuits being more for people who have a fucking clue what they’re doing. He was mistaken for floating refuse and whisked from the water by Turtle Hugger. One romantic and hypothermia-averting bonfire later, they’re a couple.

Of course. This made sense. Who could possibly be more in need of rescue from his own animal-inclined devices, and who could be more apt to intervene on the part of an unyieldingly clueless creature. I could only hope one of them was barren.

Turtle Hugger forged ahead. “So Pete tells me you’re helping him launch his documentary series.” I decided on the spot to render Pete barren, but Turtle Hugger persisted. “I’ve got several marine biologists from the center lined up, and the filmmaker who shoots our annual give back campaign is on board to start next week.” There was a long pause and Turtle Hugger gently prompted, “So you’ll bankroll the project?”

I had no words. None. Okay, I had a few. But most of them would not have been welcome there at The Friendly Bean.

For the first time since he walked in, Pete spoke up. “Let me catch you up. Do you remember that time I got bit by a cobra?” He’d apparently grown immune to my go-fuck-yourself stares and continued, “I never told you what happened that morning while you were passed out. Raj cooked part of the snake for me.”

Blank stare.

“The snake charmer. Great guy. Still sends me birthday cards. He cooked some of the meat from the cobra and we ate it.”

And?

“Don’t you see the metaphor? Consume what hasn’t consumed you. It’s frickin’ beautiful.”

And?

“And that’s my idea for the show. We’ll track down these huge predators, get in the water to interact with them, then eat their kin.”

This had to be the stupidest thing I’d ever heard. Why was Turtle Hugger not losing her mind? The zealot-like grin across her face told me this may have already happened.

Pete continued, “It actually makes sense from a conservation standpoint. There’s all this shark-finning going on for the sake of a few fins that get tossed into soup. It’s so wasteful. The rest of the shark just gets dumped back in the water. It’s really tragic no one is eating that part as well.”

Resume blank stare.

“So a couple of buddies of mine started working with fishermen to collect the unused bodies. They opened a sushi joint in Huntington Beach and could really use the

publicity. It's a win-win. Shark fishing will transform into an industry focused on sustainable breeding to meet consumer demand, and it will be so cool to like, punch a shark in the nose, then eat some raw shark flesh.”

My head was swimming, but he pressed on in a more gentle tone.

“You know how committed I've always been to animal activism. And sharks, well, they're just the pinnacle of that dream.”

I felt myself drifting toward violence and cut him off before the term “spirit animal” could be trotted out. Finally able to gather my thoughts into an appropriate indignant tirade, I let Pete know how ridiculous his plan was. Conservatism is about teaching people to understand animals. What Pete would be doing would only add testosterone-laden fuel to the notion that sharks existed to be conquered.

Surely Turtle Hugger had my back? At the very least she had to be concerned with the object of her misplaced affection risking his life as a prereq for dinner. When I asked as much she shrugged and said, “YOLO.” Like it was an actual goddamned word in the dictionary to be used for ending arguments.

I made the only concession that would liberate me from that coffee house asylum. I gave Turtle Hugger a grant to film sharks. If Pete wanted to dive in, he could be my guest, but I certainly wasn't going to watch. I then proceeded to go about my regular, lunatic-free life pedaling socially acceptable drugs to addicts.

Months passed before I received a large envelope in the mail. On the front of the envelope was a shark drawn in black sharpie, its mouth open toward a small stick figure. When I tore open the package I found a DVD inside. On the DVD was a similar

sharpie-drawn image of a stick figure seated at a table, fork and knife in hand. On the table was a bowl with a fin protruding over the edge as if a shark were swimming in it.

That was six months ago. Right now my nachos are dwindling and my beer could use a refill. The Shark Week barstool philosophers have started critiquing the next show, *Man Eating Shark*.

In the first fifteen minutes no less than three sharks have been punched, one has been duped into chasing its tail which had chum lassoed to it, and four rolls of shark sushi have been consumed, two while submerged in a shark cage.

“Holy shit, this guy is crazy!” says the guy in the pistachio polo.

Sherbet polo chimes in, “I love him! Who the hell is he?”

“His name is Pete,” I call over to them, “and he’s an asshole.”

END