

## The Day of the Sharks

by Kate Wilhelm

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Her tranquilizer is wearing off, Gary thinks, when Veronica begins to tell him about it again. He stops listening almost immediately, and watches the road.

"...that thin voice coming in my ears, hour after hour. You know, he doesn't dictate it like that. He pauses and goes out, has coffee, sees other patients, but day after day, having that box talk to me..."

The road is a glare, the sun straight ahead, centered in the dazzling whiteness of the concrete; the bay they are skirting is without a ripple, an endless mirror of eye-hurting brilliance. It will be beautiful when the sun is actually setting, he thinks, but now his eyes burn, and the damn air-conditioning in the rented car is malfunctioning, alternately shocking them with random cold blasts, or leaving them sweltering in the airless machine that smells of deodorizers and cleaning fluids.

"...and they weren't people. Not after a while. They were gall bladders and thyroids and kidney stones. I began to wonder if there were any people even connected to them. You know? Free-floating kidney stones."

A flight of birds catches his attention; they just clear the water, almost touching the surface with their broad wings that look tattered, old, as if they have been at war, are flak-torn.

"...system's supposed to help with the filing, for the computers, or something. Everything by number, not even parts of the anatomy any longer. Just numbers and prices. Case histories of numbers."

Her voice is getting high, tight, the way it does these days. Her posture has become rigid, her gaze fixed on a point straight ahead; she can stay this way for hours, unmoving, seeing what? He can't imagine what she sees. He grasps the steering wheel harder, wishes she would take another damn tranquilizer and be done with it. She will eventually. But she is afraid of them throughout the day until after dinner when it doesn't matter if she falls asleep. She took two at breakfast and dozed on the flight from Chicago to Tampa; it was a peaceful flight.

Ahead, a squat, ugly complex comes into view, black against the glaring sky, his next landmark. He slows to make the turn off the highway over a bridge onto a narrower road. Now, with the sun to his right, he can drive faster. The islands have nothing on them, a few palm trees, some dunes, scrub that looks like felled palm trees, more birds. Sea gulls, he thinks, with near triumph. At least he knows sea gulls. Six miles farther.

His thoughts turn to Bill Hendrix and his wife Shar. And then he is thinking only of Shar. For a time after she and Bill moved down here she pleaded with him to come visit. He could fake a business trip. He could meet her in Tallahassee, or Miami, or somewhere. Then no more begging, no more anything, until the call from Bill. "If you're going to the Bahamas, hell, man, you've got to come for the weekend, at least. You can fly on from Tampa on Monday."

"We should have gone straight on to Grand Bahama," Veronica mumbles, facing the arrowlike road that seems to plunge into the blue water in the distance. A low dense clump of green rises on the left. The greenery expands, becomes pine trees, motionless in the still, late afternoon. "Turn again just after the

piners," Bill's instructions went on. There is only one way to turn, left. They enter the subdivision under construction.

Unfinished houses are ugly, Gary thinks, obscenely ugly, naked, no illusions about them, the land around the buildings cluttered with junk that will be hidden away by the bulldozers, but there, always there. The landfill is dazzling white: sand, shells, the detritus dredged from the bay to create land, brought up long enough ago to have bleached to snow white.

"We should have gone straight on to Grand Bahama," Veronica says again, louder, still not looking at him.

"I told you, I have this business with Bill. We'll leave first thing Monday morning."

They wind through the subdivision, following instructions. A short causeway, to the end of the street, on to the point. There is Bill's house, with a yard fully landscaped, green and flowering. Gary's eyes narrow as he looks at it. The house is almost hidden from the street, but what shows is expensive, and the landscaping cost a fortune.

Bill said only three houses were finished, and that one is still vacant. The buyers will move in on the first of the month. They have not passed the other completed houses.

"I hardly even know them," Veronica says, not quite whining although a petulant tone has entered her voice. Gary doesn't know what that is supposed to mean. They were friends for more than five years. Gary wonders if she ever suspected Shar, if Bill ever did. He is almost certain no one did, but still, there is the possibility. Veronica knows there was someone. She always knows.

He parks in the driveway, but before they can get out of the car, they are suddenly chilled by a last effort of the air conditioner. He feels goose bumps rise; Veronica's skin takes on a bluish cast. Bill and Shar are coming out to meet them.

She has a beautiful tan, the same dark gold all over her legs, her arms, her face. Her hair is blonder than it was before; she might have been a little thinner before, but otherwise she looks exactly the same. There is a sheen on her skin, as if she has been polished. She is tall and strong, a Viking type, she calls herself. Nothing willowy about her, nothing fat or slack. She has long, smooth muscles in her legs; her stomach is as firm and flat as a boy's. She wears white briefs and a halter, and rubber thongs on her feet. Bill is a bit shorter than she is, thickly built, very powerful, with thick wrists and a thick neck. Size seventeen. They are both so tanned that Gary feels he and Veronica must both look like invalids.

"My God! Ghosts!" Shar cries, as Gary and Veronica get out of the car. She embraces them with too much enthusiasm and warmth, and Gary can sense Veronica's withdrawal. Next to Shar, Veronica appears used up, old. She is only thirty-one, but she looks ill, as she is, and she looks frightened and suspicious, and very tired. There are circles under her eyes; he feels guilty that he has not seen them before, that only now, contrasting her with Shar does he recognize the signs of illness, remember that this isn't simply a vacation.

"Hey, it's good to see you," Bill says, putting his arm across Gary's back. "Come on in. A drink is what you people need. And tomorrow we'll get out in the sun and put some color in your cheeks."

It should be warm and friendly, but it isn't. It is like walking into a scenario where every line has been rehearsed, the stage sets done by art majors; even the sky has been given an extra touch of the brush. It is gaudy now with sunset, the ambient light peach colored, and out back, visible through a wall of sliding glass doors, the bay is brilliant, touched with gold.

"Two hundred sixty-five thou," Bill says, waving his hand as they enter the house where the furniture is either white or sleek, shiny black. He goes to a bar and pours martinis already made up, and they sit down where they can watch the lights on the bay. Between them and the golden water are red and yellow flowering bushes, an Olympic-size swimming pool, a terrace with enough seating and tables to serve as a cafe. "Too much, isn't it?" Bill says, grinning. "Just too goddam much."

"Are you hungry?" Shar asks. "Dinner won't be until pretty late. We're having a little party, buffet about ten. How about a sandwich, something to tide you over?"

"Oh, Gary," Veronica says, stricken.

"No sweat," Bill says. "It's a business party. You know, people I owe. Just happened to coincide. Don't feel you're interrupting anything."

Still, Veronica looks at Gary as if pleading with him; he shrugs. "It'll be all right," he says, trying to make his impatience sound like patience. "She hasn't been feeling very well," he adds, glancing at Shar.

"It won't be too much of a drag, I hope," Shar says lightly. "Wind us up and watch us entertain. Isn't that right, Bill?"

He laughs and pours more drinks. "You'll fit right in, Gary. Just watch how their eyes gleam when I tell them you're an investment counselor." He laughs again.

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The party is little more than an excuse to get loud and drunk, Gary admits to himself later, wandering on the terrace with a drink in his hand, tired from the over-long day, bored with people he doesn't know, doesn't want to know. He knows their types, he thinks, watching a heavy-set man in a flowered shirt mock-push a nearly bare-breasted woman into the pool, laughing, leering, lusting. Shar touches his arm.

"Dance?"

They dance, his hand warmed by her golden back that is almost too smooth to be human. "Can I see you alone later?"

She smiles and doesn't answer.

He dances her to the end of the terrace, more discreetly lighted than the other areas, and kisses her. "Later?"

"Don't be an idiot. With your wife and my husband on the scene?"

"Veronica will be knocked out with tranquilizers, and Bill's on his way to passing out."

"What's wrong with Veronica?"

"Nerves, I guess. She flipped out at work. Tried to burn down the office or something."

"Good God! Did she really?"

"She says she was only burning the files, but the whole place would have gone up if it hadn't been caught when it was."

"What did they do to her?"

He is tired of talking about Veronica, tired of thinking about her. "Hospital. Two weeks. Now a vacation, and then into analysis, I guess. She's under a shrink's care."

"Poor Gary," Shar says, her voice amused.

He can't see her features, but can feel the warmth of her skin, smell the elusive scent that she wears, that she always wore. When he starts to kiss her again, she moves away and walks back toward the house. "Later," he says, this time not asking.

She smiles over her shoulder and stops to chat with a group of men standing at the sliding door to the Florida room.

Finally, Gary spots Veronica at a table by a man, clutching her glass tightly, her eyes glazed in the way they do when she drinks more than a glass of wine. He curses silently and turns to see Bill approaching with another man in tow. Bill is red faced, perspiring heavily, and the grace that he displays when sober is gone. He lumbers, stumbles into things, loses coordination in a way that seems to suggest that his limbs have different reaction times. He wards off a table before he is within reach, then hits it with his thigh, and belatedly clutches a chair to steady himself. Gary moves closer to Veronica and the unknown man; he doesn't want to talk to a drunken Bill.

"...density ratio so fouled up that no one knows what the hell they're going to do. Six hundred units per acre. Now I ask you, does that sound too terrible to you, a city girl? You know Chicago can handle that many people, what's the difference?"

Veronica shakes her head helplessly. "Units?"

"Yep. They're saying no more than two fifty per acre. Two hundred fifty! What kind of condo can you put up with only two fifty?"

Veronica looks almost desperate; relief relaxes her face when Gary draws near. "Have you eaten yet?" he asks.

She stands up, nods to the man, and takes Gary's arm. Her fingers dig in convulsively. "How long will this go on?" she whispers, as they walk toward the buffet.

She looks and sounds terrible; she should go to bed. Her tension is almost a palpable thing, electric. He feels that he could touch it, be burned by it.

Bill blocks their way, still with the tall man. "Gary, want you to meet Dwight Scanlon, president of the development company I was telling you about. My good friend, Gary Ingalls, and Veronica."

"Hear you're on your way to Grand Bahama," Dwight Scanlon says, taking Gary's

hand. "Lovely place. We've got a hotel over there, in fact. You have your rooms reserved? Look, cancel them, why don't you? I've got this suite, nobody in it, nobody scheduled for it until June. Yours for the taking."

Before Gary can refuse, Scanlon has turned to Veronica. "Have you seen the moon coming up over that bay yet? What a sight!" He offers his arm; she puts her hand on it tentatively, and they walk out together.

Bill downs his drink and runs his hand over his face. "Gotta turn on that air conditioner pretty soon."

The air conditioner is on, but the house is jammed with guests, and waiters and caterers. The sliding doors to the terrace have been open all evening. Gary wanders back outside where he sits down at a wrought-iron table. His head is buzzing, not unpleasantly, and there is a lightness in his legs and arms, also not unpleasant. He watches a sinuous woman work her way through a cluster of people to approach his table with evident purpose.

"I'm Audrey Scanlon," she says, and sits down after pulling a tiny chair very close to his. "You're Gary, aren't you?"

He nods.

"Perhaps you'd like to help us launch our boat Sunday," she says. She does not touch him, but he has the feeling that she is all over him.

"No way," Shar says coolly, suddenly at Gary's side. "He's ours until Monday morning; aren't you, Gary, darling?"

Audrey stands up. "Maybe we'll see you in Grand Bahama," she whispers and now she does touch him. Her hand lingers a moment on his arm, and when she moves away, she doesn't lift it, but lets her fingers trail over his skin very lightly.

"Bitch," Shar says, when she is gone.

"No doubt, they just happen to have this little company that they would love to have recommended to prospective buyers." He sounds bitter even to his ears. Shar pats his arm. Someone calls her and she leaves him.

Soon Veronica returns from the dock; her eyes are shining. "I've been propositioned, I think."

"Scanlon?"

She nods. She looks very happy.

"His wife just did the same with me. They must be fresh in from the swamps."

"Don't make it sound like that," Veronica cries. "Maybe he just found me attractive! Wouldn't it occur to you that someone else might still find me attractive?"

"He wants me to list his company," Gary says. "And he has as much finesse about it as a hippo humping a hippo."

"I wouldn't have done it." Her face twitches and settles into the newly familiar rigid lines. "I wouldn't have done anything," she says woodenly. "Why couldn't you let me have my little fantasy?"

"You should go to bed. You're so tired, you're ready to keel over."

She walks away unsteadily.

Someone falls into the pool; within minutes there are a number of rescuers in the water. After that it seems almost spontaneous, although it never really is, he knows, for others to begin shedding their clothes to jump in. Gary swims naked, as do Shar and Audrey, and a dozen others. All laughing and playing and then huddling in towels and drinking again.

Guests are leaving now, and presently there are only three or four remaining, drinking with Bill, nostalgic about old times, before the islands were bought. Veronica has vanished, possibly to go to bed. Gary takes Shar's hand and leads her to the terrace, beyond it to the velvet lawn where he spreads his towel and hers to make a bed. He lowers her to the ground; she doesn't resist.

Immediately afterward she draws away. "I have to go in," she murmurs. "I can't stay out here." She stands over him; he sits up and puts his arms around her hips, pulls her to him, presses his face into her pubic hair and bites softly. She moans and sways, but then pushes him away. "No more. Not now."

She runs, naked, gleaming in the patio lights briefly, then vanishes into one of the rooms that open to the terrace.

Gary swims again, but he knows he is too drunk to be in the water alone; he climbs out shivering, with exhaustion as much as from the cold. The guest room has an outside door, he remembers; he finds it and goes in to shower and dry himself and dress again. Veronica is not in the room. When he returns to the living room, all the guests are gone. Bill has brought out champagne that he, Veronica, and Shar are drinking.

They drink until dawn flames the sky and then they go to bed. It is eleven when Gary awakens with a pounding headache; Veronica is already up and out.

"Take this," Bill says when he enters the dining room. "Don't ask questions, just drink it." It is a juice drink, heavily spiked with bourbon. For a moment Gary feels his stomach churn, then it settles down again. The drink is very good.

Veronica looks awful; her eyes are red rimmed and bloodshot, sunken in her face. "Why don't you try to sleep some more?" he says, too miserable to care one way or the other.

From the kitchen come sounds of things being banged about. Bill winces. "Caterers' clean-up crew," he says. "Let's go out to the dock until they finish."

"I'll bring the cart," Shar says. "God knows we all need something to eat, and coffee, lots of coffee."

The sun is hot, but the breeze is refreshing. The bay is about a mile wide; there are no signs of civilization, as long as they face away from this subdivision. Now and again a jumping fish makes ripples that undulate in the water as the tide flows in like a river.

"Twelve feet deep here," Bill says. "It's shallow up in the fingers. Point's the place to be." His boat is thirty-five feet, two-forty horsepower Westinghouse...

Gary gazes at the gently moving water and doesn't listen to Bill cataloguing

his treasures. Objects and wielders, he thinks. They all were objects and wielders of objects last night. Changing roles as easily as they changed their clothes. Even his too-brief contact with Shar was object and wielder, and he does not know who played which part.

Suddenly he recalls the scene when he first visited Veronica in the hospital. She was stupefied from Thorazine, or something they gave her. Her voice was singsong. "I don't think there are any people, Gary. Nowhere. They're all gone, and I don't know where they went. I'm so afraid." She did not sound afraid, only dull and drug-stupid.

Later, Bill will make his pitch, Gary knows. \_Hit a little snag, old buddy. You know how it goes\_. He knows. He drinks the strong black coffee, thinking how distant his head has become, throbbing like drums not quite heard, but felt as pressure. Across the bay the land has not been developed yet and shows a low green, irregular skyline, a fitting place for the drums to originate from. He watches a boat sail up the channel, nearly all the way across the bay.

"We'll just rest up this afternoon," Bill says. "Take life easy, that's the motto down here. Not like your big city, eh?"

No one replies. Veronica is nibbling on a piece of toast; some color has come back to her face, but it is probably only the beginning of a sunburn. Shar's gaze meets Gary's and she lets her eyes close slightly, a very faint smile on her mouth.

"And tomorrow, bright and early, we'll take the boat out," Bill says. "Do a little fishing out in the gulf." He pours more coffee and lights a cigarette.

"What's that?" Veronica says suddenly, sitting upright. She points. "A shark, or something."

They all look as a dark form breaks the smooth surface of the water, arches up, and vanishes again. It is on their side of the channel, several hundred yards out.

"I'll be damned," Bill says. "One of those whales. I thought they all died." He watches and when it breaks the water again, he nods in satisfaction. "It's a false killer whale."

"Killer whale? Here?" Gary asks.

"\_False\_ killer whale. Harmless, just looks like the real thing. Listen, let me tell you what I saw a few weeks ago. Damnedest thing I ever saw in my life. Over near Fort Myers. I was driving along, heard this report on the car radio about whales beaching themselves. So I thought, what the hell, I'd go have a look. Beach was crowded with people by the time I got there, but nothing was happening. I keep binoculars in the car, you know? So I got them out, and watched. There was a line of those animals out there in the water, quarter of a mile offshore, just laying there in the water. Not moving a muscle. No surf, no wind, as calm as that bay is right now. I kept watching, beginning to get bored with the whole thing, you know? They weren't doing a damn thing. Just laying there. Then, by God, they started to move in. All at once, all together, like a goddam chorus line. And they kept coming, and kept coming until they were in water too shallow to swim in and they began to roll. People were jumping in from everywhere, yanking on them, trying to get them turned around, headed back out. Some people had rowboats, a couple of motorboats, people in the water up to their necks, just trying to get those things back out to sea. And while they're working with this bunch, another bunch was

starting in, the females and young. They'd been waiting half a mile offshore for some kind of a damn signal, or something, and now they were coming in. People kept getting the first ones turned around, and those whales would just sort of swerve a couple of feet to one side or the other and back they'd come in to shore. It went on for hours. Some of the boats towed a couple of the big males out to sea again, I guess hoping that the others would follow them. They didn't."

His voice is low, awed, his gaze following the movements of the whale in the bay. "They got a lot of them out to sea again, but a dozen of them made it in. They died on the beach. Mass suicide. The damndest thing I ever saw."

No one speaks for several moments, then Veronica says, "Why?" Her voice is tight and high. "Were they sick?"

"Marine biologists couldn't find anything wrong. No sharks in the water. No storms to mix them up, and it was too deliberate to think they just made a mistake, misjudged the depth of the water. No one knows why."

"That's crazy!" Veronica cries, jumping up. "There has to be a reason. There's always a reason!" The shrillness of her voice is startling. She clamps her lips and runs up the dock, back inside the house.

"God, I'm sorry," Bill says, his big face contrite. "I shouldn't have told that story. It... it haunts me."

"Forget it," Gary says. "What happened to the rest of the whales? You thought they all died?"

"That's the worst part," Bill says soberly. "The next day they found them down in the Keys. Beached on one of the islands down there."

Shar stands up. "I'll go do something about lunch. The caterers must be gone by now."

The whale continues to swim in great circles out in the bay, close in, then farther out again. Bill begins to tell Gary about the financial problems his company has encountered, through no fault of their own. Gary promises nothing. He will study the financial statements, the local restrictions, and so on. Bill understands. He lays his hand on Gary's arm and assures him that he understands.

Veronica doesn't come out for lunch, and after the others eat, Shar and Bill withdraw to nap. Gary puts on his trunks and swims in the pool, then stretches out under a cluster of palm trees, something Reclinatus, Bill said. You can transplant full-grown palm trees, instant garden, Gary thinks, listening to the wind in the fronds, a soothing rainlike sound. You dredge up the bay bottom, smooth it out, cover it with a carpet of sod, plants trees, flowers, shrubs, plant a house, plant people. Instant paradise. And there are no insects in the ground. Barren, pseudodirt. Not real.

Veronica said, after her hospitalization, "Sometimes I wonder, if I reach out to touch you when you're not looking, not thinking about me, not concentrating on being you, will my hand go through you?"

"Meaning?"

"I don't know. Nothing you do is real. You work with money -- bits of paper that have no meaning. You don't even see the money. It isn't real, just figures on paper, symbols in the computer. You don't make anything, or fix



anything. After you finish for the day, does the office lose its shape, melt down to nothing until you get back and give it a pseudoreality again?"

"Veronica! For heaven's sake!" He reached for her and she drew away sharply, in recoil almost.

"No! That isn't real either. A touch, a kiss, a fuck. Pseudoreal."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"You can tell if it's real. You can tell. If it's there years later. If you can go to it and find it years later." Her voice became a whisper, her gaze on something he could not see. "Money becomes figures on paper. Patients become organs that become numbers in the computer. Pseudoreal."

After she is well again, they will separate. He has already decided. She is young, pretty until she became ill. She will marry again, maybe even have children. She wants children; he said later, after we're established, a little money saved. Later. And he will find someone new, someone with gaiety in her laugh, who isn't sick. Someone who will bring fun into his life again.

He dozes in the shade and awakens to find that the sun is burning his legs. The distant throbbing has entered his head; it is his head, but there is another noise, screeching and screaming.

"Hey, old buddy, you want a gin and tonic?" Bill calls from the doorway.

"I sure as hell want something," Gary says. He feels worse than he did that morning.

Bill steps out to the terrace, shielding his eyes with his hand, looking at gulls screaming, diving, shrieking, just off the end of the dock. "Must be a school running," he says, and starts to walk toward the commotion.

Gary follows him slowly. They stop halfway up the dock. The whale is alongside the structure, the entire animal clearly visible in the quiet water. Blood is flowing from under it. The gulls wheel and scream overhead; now and then one of them dips to the surface of the water, darts up again.

"I will be God damned!" Bill says in wonder. "She's going to give birth. For Christ's sake!"

The whale pays no attention to the men on the dock. Now and then a long shudder passes through her, rippling from her great black head down to her tail. She is gleaming black, nine feet long, sleek; her blowhole opens and closes convulsively. She shudders; her body twists. She sinks, surfaces again.

"She's in trouble," Gary says.

Bill looks at him blankly.

"It shouldn't take more than a minute or so. I read that somewhere. And she's bleeding too much."

The stain rises in the water, spreads like a cloud. It seems to rise like smoke signals.

"There must be someone who knows what to do," Gary says, staring at the helpless animal. "The university?"

"It's after five, Saturday," Bill says. "The Coast Guard. I'll call them. Someone there will know."

Gary stands on the dock, his hands clenched, watching the animal and the distress signals dispersing through the water. He doesn't hear the others until Shar says, "Oh, my God!" He turns to see her and Veronica staring at the whale.

"They'll find someone to send," Bill says, hurrying across the yard. "It might take a while, though."

The animal doesn't have a while, Gary knows. He doesn't say it. They continue to watch in horrified fascination as the ripples that are pain reactions spread throughout the animal regularly.

Suddenly Shar draws her breath in. "Oh, no!" she cries. She is staring out at the bay. "Sharks!"

Gary sees them, two fins moving through the water almost leisurely, as if they know there is no need to hurry. Bill turns and runs to the house. He comes back moments later with a rifle. He puts a handful of shells on the dock and loads a clip.

"Where are they?" His voice is hoarse, the words slurred. Shar points. He doesn't raise the rifle. "Too far," he says in his strange voice.

It is excitement, Gary realizes; his own mouth is dry and he feels prickly with sweat and goose bumps, as if something loathsome has touched him.

"It won't do any good," Veronica says, and her voice is different, too, high and clear, but steady. "As soon as the baby is born, she'll want to go out to sea, won't she? They'll be waiting for her."

She is looking out at the channel. There are more fins. A pack then. They must have followed the trail of blood from out in the gulf. Veronica appears transfixed, as if in a trance.

"You'd better go inside," he says. She does not give any sign that she heard him. He touches her arm and she twitches with a convulsive shudder, like the whale's. She does not look at him. "Get inside, damn it!" His hand falls from her arm and he turns away. She wants to see the blood fest, he realizes, sickened. The near rapture on her face makes her look like a transcendent Joan at the moment when the torch touches the faggots. He takes a few long steps away from her, but then comes back; he can't leave, neither can he stand still and watch. He hunches his shoulders and paces back and forth, back and forth.

Suddenly the rifle goes off and the sound is a shock that hurts. It rolls over the water, echoing.

"You can't kill them from here!" Shar cries.

"Only wanted to nick one," Bill says, aiming again. "They'll turn on one that's wounded, maybe leave her alone." The sharks move in a great semicircle, not coming directly toward the dock. They are swimming faster. He fires again.

"The bastards! The bastards!" Bill says over and over, nearly sobbing. "The bastards!"

Without warning the false killer whale moves away from the dock. She swims for about ten feet and rolls to her side. A cloud of blood spreads over the water.

The gulls screech in a frenzy. They swoop down on the water, hiding the whale from view. She jerks and makes a great splash; they rise, screaming.

The baby is being expelled. Gary can see the body, the curled tail already straightening, and now the head is free. With what must have been an agony of effort the mother whale rolls suddenly, away from the infant, making a complete turn in the water in one swift, sharp movement. She has broken the cord. As she finishes the turn she comes up under the infant and nudges it to the surface. It rolls to one side and does not move. It is white underneath, three feet long, and it is dead. It starts to sink and again the mother whale nudges it to the surface of the water. And again. And again. Gary turns away.

He hears Shar being sick over the rail of the dock.

"They're coming!" Veronica screams.

Gary swings around in time to see Veronica snatch the rifle from Bill's limp hands; Bill is staring at the whale as if in a daze. Veronica points the rifle and begins to fire very fast, not at the sharks, but downward. The sleek black whale thrashes in the water, she tries to jump, but doesn't clear the surface, and then a paroxysm of jerks overtake her; finally she rolls over. The sharks begin to hit her.

Veronica turns toward the house; the rifle in her hands is pointed directly at Gary. He does not move. Her face is closed and hard, a stranger's face. She opens her hands and the rifle falls, clatters on the shells still on the dock. She walks past him without another glance at the sharks, at him, at anyone.

The water churns and froths; it is all red. Shar staggers away from the rail. She reaches for Gary's arm to steady herself and he jerks away involuntarily. Her hand would go through him, he thinks; she begins to run toward the house.

"She's afraid your wife will burn it down," Bill says in a thick, dull voice. For a moment his face is naked; he knows. "I might burn it down myself one day. Just might do that." He walks away, his shoulders bowed, his head lowered.

The frenzied gulls, the boiling water, the heat of the sun, all that's real, Gary thinks. Veronica firing the rifle, that was real. He remains on the dock until the Coast Guard cutter comes into sight, speeding toward the dock. The water is calm again; there is nothing for them to see, nothing for them to do. He doesn't even bother to wave to them. One of the men is standing in the boat scanning the water, and suddenly he points. The sharks are still in the channel. The boat veers, makes waves as it swings around and heads out away from the dock.

They didn't even see him, Gary knows. He is not surprised. Slowly he lifts his hands and looks at them, and then lets them drop to his sides. In his mind is an image of a raging inferno.

The End