

# **FRONT RANGE REVIEW**



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MYRA BELLIN

### TANKED

The doors of the freight elevator open, and we step into the shark wing. Tim, the aquarium staffer in charge of volunteer divers, is taking me and a few other new recruits on a behind the scenes tour. He is eager to show us the shark tank. We are on the third level, one floor above the exhibits. The area is noticeably colder than the rest of the building, and the lights are dim. Our voices sound hollow in the cavernous space, bouncing off the walls and the water surface.

"You'd be surprised," Tim tells us as we walk toward a waist-high railing, "at the way some new volunteers react to this tank." His mouth twitches into a smile that, in spite of all efforts, he can't quite suppress. Tim is a serious fellow—so serious that he borders on humorless. My biggest surprise is that Tim can actually smile, not that someone might balk at jumping into the shark tank.

I stand by the railing that follows the irregular tank circumference and watch fins slicing the surface. They move in every direction like bumper cars. I think they need a traffic cop with a loud whistle to impose order. Each dull gray or brown shark body is between six and ten feet long, between 100 – 350 pounds. Half a million gallons sounds like a lot of water. But when twenty-seven fully grown sandbar and sand tiger sharks occupy a tank slightly larger, along with smaller creatures like tangs and boxfish, it still looks like an overpopulated fishbowl. Only supersized.

The moving fins are eerie though, and a cold silence falls over our little group. While I have occasionally glimpsed sharks underwater on scuba expeditions—sleepy nurse sharks, an occasional hammerhead in the distance, and once an entire school of white-tipped reef sharks cruising in a strong current—I have never before seen a shark at the water's surface. Its curved fin arcs above the water with a slight wake marking its path. The sight evokes a visceral response that signals not just danger, but malignant evil. It is far more powerful than the combination of excitement and caution I feel when I am underwater and see sharks.

As my fellow volunteers and I watch the sharks, Tim watches us—searching, I believe, for signs of panic.

"I've had these big macho guys volunteer," he continues. "They

act like they're not afraid of anything. They think they're so tough." Tim is medium height with a pear-shaped body and an everything-strictly-by-the-book demeanor. The kind of dorky guy that tough, swaggering divers might ridicule. "But as soon as they have to jump into the shark tank, they turn green. Some of them become paralyzed and just can't do it." His smile becomes more difficult to suppress.

The tank, twenty-feet deep, is set into the floor, and its surface is another three or four steps down from the railing where we are standing. The water column drops into the second level of the building, with sections framed there as floor to ceiling exhibits. Visitors wander and stop at different windows to watch the sharks. A banquet facility is under construction on the left side of the tank—one of its entire walls will be a view of sharks.

Tim points to a fake rock that juts a bit into the water. "That's the entry point," he tells us, "the spot where you go to jump in."

*Jump into the shark tank.* Was I really going to jump into that oversized bathtub with all of the sharks swimming in it? He must have mentioned it in the initial interview two months prior to this orientation tour; I probably blocked it out. I remember sitting in a large room filled with desks. Tim sat behind one that was cluttered with papers in the middle of the room and motioned me to sit in a chair opposite him. He was all business, no small talk. It was a Saturday so no one else was working except for a lone staff marine scientist, who busied himself at a desk in the corner but whose mission, I suspect, was to function as another set of ears, as Tim conducted the initial screening of volunteers.

He asked how I felt about keeping wild animals in captivity. I told him that if I were an animal, I'd prefer taking my chances in the wild. But when I climb back into human skin, I can see an educational value to zoos and aquaria because they broaden the fan base of exotic creatures like giraffes and octopi, and that can only help conservation efforts. He asked why I wanted to volunteer. I told him that I'm fascinated with marine life, and it would be fun to spend time underwater with rays and turtles and tangs, especially in an environment where I could learn more about them.

Maybe I have become paranoid as I stand watching the sharks swim around, but I could have sworn that Tim is staring at me when he speaks about volunteers who couldn't summon enough courage to dive in the shark tank. I'm not a big tough macho guy—I'm actually a fairly mild-mannered woman whom you might mistake for a golfer rather than a scuba diver. Perhaps that's why he is staring at me—he is waiting for me to faint.

rows of sharp white teeth chomp into the fish, tearing it from the pole. The teeth are impressive, jagged white peaks neatly lining the jaws. I am close enough to see that there are three rows of them.

The fish breaks apart in the water and its blood and guts summon other sharks to share the bounty. The predators are fast now—a rapid cinema of open jaws and splashing water. If a diver were to be bitten and the emergency button pressed, I wonder if there would be much left of her by the time help arrived. Once the sharks sense blood their cruising stops, and they target the food. Teeth flash and bodies dart in a nanosecond; havoc reigns until only flecks of blood and fragments of entrails float on the surface. A feeding frenzy.

I'm amazed that the young woman with the notebook can tell the sharks apart and wonder if they have names. Close enough to peer into her book, I see a column on the left where she writes a string of numbers each time a fish is ripped from the pole. I assume that these numbers are the means for identifying the sharks. Maybe it's inappropriate to name them. Their faces seem frozen in perpetual menace; their eyes are flat and soulless. What can you name a shark anyway? Jaws? Too trite. Killer, perhaps. How about Stalker? Or maybe Cuddles.

When there is a break in the action I turn my head to watch the Cownose rays in a shallow pool nestled in a curve of the tank's perimeter off to my right. Cownose rays are a small type of eagle ray; their brownish backs are speckled and their undersides are light. Most looked about 18 to 24 inches wide. Many are leaping vertically, three, four, even five feet out of the water, their flat undersides closely parallel to the outer wall of the tank. I'm not sure why they are leaping into the air. Maybe it is noisy underwater, and leaping out is their response. Maybe the wall acts as a loofah on their undersides. What it really looks like, though, is an escape attempt, an effort to literally go "over the wall."

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About a week after our observation of feeding time, Tim summons us to one of the Aquarium's small conference rooms to brief us about the specific protocols for diving in the shark tank. First, he covers a bazillion record-keeping/bureaucratic procedures—we must soak in freshwater between dives in the ocean tank and dives in the shark tank to diminish the possibility of transferring anything deleterious between tanks; we must sign in and sign out of the shark tank noting date and time of dive and length of dive; we must wear special BCDs (Buoyancy Compensation

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Devices): gloves, masks and fins, weight belts, and weights reserved for shark tank use; and rinse same in freshwater, take inventory, and make certain the gear is stored and the equipment room cleaned before leaving. He warns us to double check that all cleaning supplies, like the stiff bristled brushes for scouring the walls, are secured to our bodies when we dive because anything that floats loose is liable to be eaten by the sharks and has the potential of making them sick.

Finally comes the part we are all waiting for, instructions for entering, swimming through, and exiting the tank. Tim moves to a diagram on the chalkboard for this part: It shows a cross section of the tank with various critters at various depths. The sharks are located in the water column 6 to 8 feet beneath the surface. This is the depth, Tim tells us, where they usually hang out. Divers need to remain below the sharks. In order to be absolutely certain that we sink when we enter, and sink quickly, Tim instructs us to increase the weights we strap on our weight belts by about fifty percent. No lollygagging about on the surface clearing a scuba mask or equalizing ears.

Until now we haven't paid much attention to the two, green sawfish that also live in the tank. Each one is between twelve and fourteen feet long—about one-third of that length is a long nostrum with 23 pairs of razor-like teeth evenly distributed on each side. In other words, the sawfish is a shark-like animal with a four-foot, double-edged saw attached to its snout. These creatures are not sharks though. They are rays and not aggressive toward divers. However, the nostrums do not bend and will lacerate objects they contact. Tim strongly advises us to give these animals a wide berth. The sawfish hang out beneath the shark tunnel, and he instructs us to stop and locate them before swimming under the tube. I find the sawfish more worrisome than the sharks.

Entering the shark tank is a two person job—for each diver there is a lookout. The lookout stands by the railing while the diver goes to the designated entry point and looks for an opening in the shark traffic. As soon as there is a large enough gap between shark fins, the lookout yells, "Go" or "Now" and, ideally, the diver immediately jumps in and sinks to the bottom.

This strikes me as an extremely low-tech procedure for jumping into a space whose location is constantly changing. What if the lookout doesn't have a good sense of timing? The openings in the traffic are sporadic and minimal, and I wonder what happens if a diver accidentally jumps into or even onto a shark.

Divers move in sets of two or three around the tank. Once on the bottom we need to meet with the others before swimming our rounds. We are permitted to pocket any shark teeth we find on the gravel bottom. Sharks lose their teeth easily and often because they lodge in the gums with no roots in the jaw; collecting shark teeth is one of the perks of diving in the shark tank. They are not always easy to spot though, blending into the white gravel.

After swimming under the tunnel to the other side of the tank, it is time to begin scrubbing the tunnel wall. Tim reminds us to stop every once in a while to wave at the visitors.

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A few days later, I drag my body, now encumbered with an extra 40 to 50 pounds, considering the weight belt and scuba gear, to the faux rock for my first dive in the shark tank. Bob, a fellow volunteer stays at the railing as my lookout.

I stand on the rock watching the sharks moving around the tank, and there is no opening in sight. So many fins.

"Go," Bob finally screams, but I hesitate and lose the moment. Loaded with so much gear I have trouble balancing on the rock; the amount of weight puts enormous strain on my lower back, and I am eager to get into the water, where I will be weightless. It feels like an eternity but is probably only a minute at most until I finally hear a sharp cry. "Now." I don't stop to second guess my lookout. I jump into the tank holding my mask in place and will myself to the bottom quickly. I sink, take a deep breath, and, per my instructions, wait on the bottom for Tim, who wants to accompany each new diver on his first shark dive.

As I kneel on the gravel, a shark approaches and circles me about three feet away. *What are you doing here?* I silently question. *I thought you were supposed to hang out much higher. And stop swimming around me in circles. It makes me nervous.* Our eyes meet. Rather, his left eye meets both of mine since shark eyes are laterally placed on the sides of the head, and as he circles me I can only see one eye at a time. It is a drab orb planted in a narrow slit, colorless, suspicious. I pivot slowly, keeping pace with the shark because I don't want to turn my back on him.

As our circle dance continues I begin to relax. He doesn't seem to have any desire to hurt me, and I gradually discount his evil grimace and beady eyes. It dawns on me that he might be curious and has descended to check me out. This thought upsets me because, I reason, an animal that is

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capable of curiosity may also be capable of boredom. And nothing could be more boring than swimming around and around and around in that tank day after day after day. I actually begin to feel sorry for the shark. I am having a "Free Willy" moment.

I know that the aquarium employs a number of professionals who monitor the water conditions and the health of the animals and that aquaria have trade organizations and conferences that focus on animal well-being. The staff members I have met seem to truly care about the animals. Still, no matter how large and well-monitored, a tank is not the open ocean. I wonder how confinement impacts an animal genetically engineered for open water. I wonder how the tank affects his keen sense of smell and if it is stressful for his well-developed ability to sense electromagnetic fields. I wonder if a shark ever feels a need for solitude. I wonder if his predatory instincts grow dull from lack of use.

I also wonder what is taking Tim so long. It is one of the few times I am eager to see him. When he finally descends to the bottom, he motions me to follow him. We swim about three feet from the gravel until we approach the shark tunnel. Tim's raised right hand signals me to stop, and we both wait on the bottom of the tank. A green sawfish is about fifteen feet away from us, and its mate is swimming toward it, parallel to the tunnel, low to the bottom. Tim gestures me under the tunnel first, and I keep my head turned to make sure the sharp teeth sprouting from the nostrum remain far away. It's a tight squeeze with a tank on my back, and I am glad to reach the other side.

I slowly rise a few feet next to the tunnel wall and can see visitors walking through, pointing at the sharks swimming above, below, and alongside of them. A little girl begins tugging at her mother's elbow and pointing, mouth agape, not at a shark, but at me. I smile and wave and soon a small circle of her friends are smiling and waving back. This, I think, is the closest I will ever come to the experience of being a rock star. The kids are so excited that they are jumping up and down as if they can hardly believe their eyes. Is it my imagination or do they also look perplexed? If sharks are so dangerous, what is a real live person doing in there swimming with them?

Tim instructs me to take the lead when we have to go back under the tunnel. I stop on the bottom and look right and left as if I am a little kid crossing a street. The sawfish are both off to my left about ten feet away, and with a wave of my hand I motion Tim under the tunnel.

I have a good view of the construction area adjacent to the tank once I reach the other side. A dark cloth drapes the outside portion of the tank wall that will eventually be a window on the sharks, and this arrangement creates a reflective surface. A large blue tang hangs motionless a few feet from the draped wall and appears to be studying its own reflection. Can a fish actually be watching its own image in a mirrored surface? What is he thinking? Can he even approximate thinking?

When I return to the entry point near the faux rock, Tim clenches his right hand into a fist and with his right thumb pointing upward, a hand signal for me to exit the tank. He remains on the bottom to escort another new recruit who will enter after I leave.

I review the exit procedure in my mind. Without a lookout, I am responsible for checking the shark traffic above me and determining the right moment to cut through it. Once I reach the surface I am to quickly hoist myself completely out of the water onto the rock; anything left dangling on the surface, like feet, could easily be mistaken for a midmorning snack. I am a bit worried about lifting myself onto the rock given all the extra weight I am carrying, but I know that Bob will be waiting to help me if I have any difficulty.

Kneeling on the white gravel bottom, I tilt my head upward, searching for an opening between the swimming sharks. I watch their light underbellies move above me, across and around the tank in every direction, gaps in traffic filling almost as soon as they form. I feel like I am 16 years old with a new learner's permit, waiting on the entrance ramp of an expressway at rush hour to squeeze into the line of moving traffic.

I listen to the soft hum of my regulator as it converts the condensed air in the tank on my back to air I can safely breathe. I watch the bubbles of my breath float upward and enter the chaotic mass of sharks. And I wait patiently for the exact right moment to follow them.