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My Uncle Wrestled Sharks

My uncle wrestled sharks. He wrestled them all of the time, from the Baja Peninsula to the Bahamas. He once told us that you have to wrestle a shark in chest-deep water. “You gotta even the playing field,” he said. “What do you think, that I’m loco, that I wrestle them in the deep? No, there’s no leverage.”

My uncle was the only adult at our family’s big Fourth of July get-together who drank out of a long can. He took a hearty swallow and set the can down in the grass next to his thick, bare feet where he sat. “You go chest deep!” he said, humorously beating his soft chest with two quick slaps, cementing the moment solidly into my memory forever. “First you gotta fish them in from the shore, just for sport. Then you gotta wrestle them for ART. That’s the poetry in motion, little *sobrinos*.”

A few months later he missed my eighth birthday. As it turned out, he had gotten into the fight of his life with a mako in Sydney, Australia. This was farther than he had ever traveled. It was important, he explained, that the sharks knew who he was down there too. He called from “the land down under” to tell my brothers and I all about what he referred to as the Battle in the Reefs.

That year I had a brand new bicycle sitting in the living room. It was my first mountain bike, a ten speed, and I didn’t even take it out until the next day. I was too young to understand that my father had worked hard to buy me that bicycle for my birthday, with money we couldn’t afford to spend. He was reluctant to put my uncle on speaker phone, but my brothers and I begged and pleaded.

We went wild, jumping on the bed and rolling into each other, when he said he had to finally jam his fingers, knuckle deep, into the shark’s nostrils. He did this for control, of course. Then he acted like it was no big deal. There was a temporary silence on the phone. We crowded in closer, shushing one another, as we waited to hear of what our courageous uncle had done next. I glanced over to my dad, who stood quietly in the corner with his arms crossed. He looked up and forced a closed-mouth smile for me on my birthday.

“It was just a baby mako,” my uncle continued, “only seven feet. I wore it down enough to get some teeth, though.” That’s what he would always tell us, because you see, that’s when it was really beat. When he could pull out his special pliers and extract a few teeth for us, that was a successful wrestling match. We exploded in cheer for his victory.

Shark teeth cost next to nothing at hokey little shops, but these were different. The ones in my collection were priceless, ripped from the

mouths of sharks that my uncle had wrestled in my honor. *Lo hizo en mi honor*. Eight teeth came in the mail with a birthday card five weeks later.

On Christmas Eve my uncle wasn't feeling well after he fell on the back porch at my grandmother's house. He was taken to one of the bedrooms by the men of our family. There was an argument over him. He was later helped outside to the backseat of the car to take him home. We chased after him with our hands out, and although he was very sick, our hands soon became filled with a multitude of various shark teeth that he gave us from his pockets.

With each tooth, I imagined a different wrestling match. With each tooth, we created different stories as to how they came to be in my uncle's possession. We traded our stories like old Indian mystics with the addition of my uncle's gusto. I didn't know it then, but this was the day I became a writer, though I believe I was learning all along.

The winter and spring had come and gone without a word from our uncle. He did not appear at any of the family gatherings. We had come to rely on his stories. So as each of my brothers' and cousins' birthdays passed by without the phone ringing, we continued to imagine one epic scenario after another. He would come back, we told ourselves. He had to come back. We understood what he was doing. After all, the world was a big place, and my uncle had a lot of coastline to conquer. He would have more to tell than ever before. That was the way we looked at it.

Then the dreams started. Anybody who says people don't dream in color is wrong. The exotic images of my uncle with the sharks were some of the most pleasant I've ever seen. Some of them horrified me, though, and woke me out of my sleep. With these dreams came the visions of death struggles between my uncle and the emotionless creatures. He would come up out of the ocean at dusk, breaking the surface with a great white thrashing in his arms. Then they would slam sideways back into the water together with a hard smack! They would do this repeatedly, for what seemed like all night, as I slept. They would rise up, his wrists locked around the shark's waist, his chin buried into the slick gray skin of its back. He hit the water hard and grew weaker each time. The shark was too strong. I felt what he felt, the loss of leverage as he took the water in through his mouth and nose.

I would sit up in the darkness trying to catch my breath for a moment as my brothers snoozed all around me, consumed by their own dreams. I would quietly pull out my box of shark teeth, examine them under the moonlight coming in through my window, and feel comfort in knowing that no shark could beat my uncle. Another year passed like this.

July Fourth arrived again, and this time, so did my uncle. He pulled up into the driveway on a little old motorcycle, and we all ran out to meet

him. He wore a leather jacket even though it was 85 degrees. He was somehow shorter and little fatter, and he wore black boots and oversized sunglasses, but to us he was the coolest thing we had ever seen. He was silent as he got down from the bike and stood it up. There were at least a dozen of us boys, my brothers and all of my cousins, surrounded around him. Then he took the big, rose tinted glasses off, held out his arms, and yelled, “¡Mi sobrinos!” and the wall that had been built up by nearly two years of his absence had disintegrated at once. This was how strong he was.

We all screamed, pawing at him and hugging him. Like a mob through the streets of jubilee, we followed him through to the back yard where he greeted everybody. Some of them didn’t have very much to say, so he nodded and kept walking. He constantly ruffled our hair and made us laugh. The kids were easy to please.

He filled up a plate at the long table of food. “The trick is to always load your plate with everything, and always make it look like you emptied your plate. It makes every lady in our family happy.” Then he whispered out of the side of his mouth some advice just for me, “And hey kiddo, if you don’t like it, feed it to one of your grandma’s dogs. Unless it’s your Aunt Rosie’s cooking, they won’t eat it.”

My uncle was the only adult at our family’s big Fourth of July get-together who poured liquid from a flat bottle in his pocket into a soda pop can. “Where were you? Where did you go?” we begged of him as he drank and licked barbecue sauce off his fingers.

He leaned forward. “I’ll tell you where I was. I was everywhere—Brazil, Ireland, South Africa, and even Japan—just to name a few. A tribe of cannibals tried to eat me in Papua New Guinea, kept me captive in a little hut. They were gonna roast me like a pig, but they let me go when I showed them how to take care of their tiger shark problem. I was out to the Hawaiian Islands too. There I wrestled the greatest killer of them all, the great white.”

I was shocked. Were my dreams real, I wondered?

“I’ve been building up to this one for some time now—training my muscles, my mind, my heart.” He gestured to each as he said them. “That’s why I’ve been gone so long.” He slowly crossed his eyes in solemn recognition of those memories. We were all deeply impressed. “It was a long battle, a match I thought would never end. I outlasted him, though, and finally did him in with a full nelson. His fins will be so sore he won’t swim straight for a week.”

He took another drink and a few more bites from his plate. Then he suddenly winced, killing the vibe at once. “Yikes! I can handle a great white shark, but I still can’t handle your Aunt Rosie’s cooking. I should

have been training for that.” We exploded with laughter. “Hey, where are those ugly little dogs your *abuela* keeps around?” We all laughed together, and he winked at me.

My birthday arrived. I blew out ten candles, made one wish, and like a miracle it came true. My father’s cell phone suddenly rang, and without his permission I ran and picked it up. I was surprised to hear a robotic voice. “This is a call from a correctional facility and is subject to monitoring and recording. Thank you for using TeleLink.”

“Hey, where’s my little nephew at?” came my uncle’s enthusiastic voice. “I have to make this one quick. I don’t have a lot of money on the account.”

“No uncle, it’s me!” I shrieked.

There was a long silence. Then he burst through the line as if he were right there in front of me. “This morning, guess where I was, nephew?”

I listened to the story without a word. His voice faded as I began to grow numb. The more I thought about it, the more I began to know the truth. A correctional facility? That’s jail.

As it turned out, my uncle had never even set foot on a beach or seen the ocean in his entire life. My uncle had a lot of problems and missed a lot of birthdays. My uncle wrestled with demons. Though he called them something else. My uncle wrestled sharks.