The Shark Killer

James Witham*

*Iowa State University

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JUAN sat in the open window of his father's tenement. The night air was cooler there, but sweat still covered his brown chest and arms. He put a cigarette to his mouth, inhaled a little, and blew the smoke out. Sometimes he drank from a can of beer, but he did this less often because it was his only one.

Nothing to do and it is so goddamn hot! He finished the cigarette and flipped it up and out and watched it fall slowly down the five stories onto the sweaty, dark street. He lit another cigarette—Last one!—balancing the can on his knee, then put the crumpled pack into his tight pants pocket.

Suddenly he heard footsteps on the stairs below. He stiffened. He had missed whoever it was coming in the front door. Goddammit, got to keep watch! The footsteps came up another flight. He listened, ready. They stopped on the floor below, then went down the hall and through a door. Juan sighed heavily. He leaned back against the window casing and nervously fingered the scar on his face. God, I'm jumpy. He won't be back till late. But there was always a chance he might come early—he had once.
There was someone on the stairs again. The footsteps were light and quick though, someone running. Juan smiled. *Must be one of the guys. Probably came in the back way.* He waited for the two knocks, pause, then another knock to be sure, then smugly went to the door and opened it. It was José.

"Juan, you got to . . . hey." José grinned, breathing heavily. "Give me a swig." Juan gave the can to José and pulled it away after the swallow. "Ahh!"

Juan turned and went into the room. "What you run so fast for on such a hot night?"

"Manuel told me to come get you. We got a Shark at the warehouse."

Juan whipped around. "Where? How did you get him there?"

"I'm not sure. I guess he was just walking around in our territory and someone knew he was a Shark. I was not there when they grabbed him."

"Who is it, do you know?"

"No, just a punk. But, man, he's a Shark! Manuel knew you'd want to be there."

"Sure he did. Wait. I'll get a shirt on and be with you."

José started for the door. "You'll take too long. I don't want to miss any of the fun." He ran out of the door and down the stairs. Juan swore. He was angry that José had not waited, but now he had to hurry. He poured the last of the beer down the sink and buried the can deep in the garbage sack. He went to the bedroom he shared with his father and put on a wrinkled shirt, socks, and a pair of high-topped black shoes.

In the dimly-lit bathroom he stopped. He leaned close to the mirror and ran his forefinger over the deep red scar that formed the crude outline of a shark across the bridge of his nose. Two months! He had been waiting that long for this chance. He had almost given up hope, but tonight was it! Tonight he would get even with those bastard Sharks for cutting up his face. He put a comb through his thick black hair, then hurried out of the room and down the steps. Four
long flights. At the sidewalk he turned south. *Not too fast. Don’t look suspicious. Just like you’re out for a walk.*

He turned the corner with only half a block to go and saw José standing in front of the warehouse. When José saw him he ran toward him. “They took him to the storm sewer—in case it got noisy. Let’s hurry, man!”

They went through alleys, avoiding streets where cops might be. The sewer was a long way, but it was a better place, and Manuel had promised to wait.

There was a flashlight hidden at the tunnel’s large entrance. They went straight into the labyrinth until the third side tunnel, then turned. At the fourth smaller branch a boy let them by to the password. Manuel and the others were a hundred feet inside this opening. Several flashlights lit the area.

Two boys held a boy Juan had never seen before against the wall. The boy’s hands were tied behind his back and a dirty rag covered his mouth.

Manuel stood grinning at Juan. He was older than Juan by two years and taller by several inches. Juan was afraid of him, but he did not think Manuel knew it.

“We been waiting for you, Juan. We figured maybe you chickened out. We were starting to think all that talk you been doing for two months was just that—talk.”

“I came as fast as I could.”

“That’s good, ’cause you know what happens to guys that are chicken.” His grin spread a little wider.

Juan turned to the prisoner. He was smaller than the two boys holding him and he was frightened; his eyes were wide and bugged-out. “You sure he’s a Shark?”

“Sure I’m sure.”

Juan bent down and took a slender black object from inside his shoe. He pressed a button and a long silver blade snapped out. The prisoner’s eyes widened further and he started to thrash and kick at Juan.

“A couple more guys help hold him,” Manuel commanded, and two boys came from behind Juan and grabbed the boy’s legs. Juan went closer to the struggling figure, but
Manuel stopped him. "Wait a minute, Juan. What are you going to do?"

"Carve his face, what do you think?" He turned again toward the boy.

"I said hold it!" Manuel almost shouted this time and Juan looked at him puzzled. "You been doing a lot of talking for two months. What you been saying?"

"I've been saying I'm going to get even with the Sharks for cutting up my face."

"Sure, but how you say you going to do it?"

"Huh?"

Manuel smiled. "José, what did he say he was going to do?"

José came forward into the light. "You heard him, Manuel. He said he was going to carve the face of any Shark he got hold of."

"Sure, I heard him. But that's not all. What else did he say?"

José stammered, afraid to say it. "Well . . . he said . . . you know what he said, Manuel."

"I know, but it looks like he forgot."

Juan was frightened now too; he had talked too much and Manuel was going to call him on it.

Manuel looked at José. "Tell him what he said!"

"Well . . . he said if he caught a Shark he was going to carve his face, then . . . kill him."

Juan's knife dropped to the damp floor. "That was only talk, Manuel . . . I . . . I didn't mean it."

Manuel turned to Juan, still grinning. "You been talking a lot lately, haven't you, Juan?" He bent down to pick up the knife and when he straightened up the grin was gone. "I've been getting sick of all your talk! Now I want to see you do some of the things you've been talking about."

"I'm not going to kill him, Manuel. I'll carve on his face, but I'm not going to kill him." Sweat was running off his face now.

Manuel grinned again. "Sure, Juan." He handed Juan the knife, but as Juan turned Manuel shoved him from behind. "Goddamn talk is all you do!"
Juan stumbled and fell on the boy. He heard the knife go in and the muffled scream from the boy, and he felt something wet and sticky on his hand. The boys who were holding the prisoner let him go and he slid slowly down the wall to his haunches, then fell over on his side.

Everyone was frightened now, and suddenly they were all running in dark, tripping over each other, falling, and getting up to run again. Finally, they were out of the tunnel and running as fast as they could.

Juan ran straight until he could jump up and catch the top of the wall and pull himself up. He went into an alley and ran. He ran for a long time, and finally he was tired and stopped. His shirt was soaked with sweat. Where to hide? I got to hide! His breathing was heavy. He looked around. The old school. Only a block away. No one will look there.

He went slowly, making sure no one saw him. He found a broken window and went through it into the empty building. He sank down on the floor, leaning against the wall. He did not want to think—he was afraid to think, but he could not help himself. What was he going to do? It was Manuel's fault. If he had not pushed me, I would not have fallen. Manuel is to blame. He killed . . . No! . . . What if they do not find him—the Shark? Then Manuel could say he killed him. The cops won't find him, not way back in the storm sewer. No one ever goes there. It was my knife and my hand. . . . He remembered the blood and looked down at his hand, but it was too dark to see. He felt it with his other hand, hard now and only a little sticky. The blood is on my hand, not Manuel's. I killed him, not Manuel. I've been saying all along that I'd kill the first Shark I got my hands on, and I did.

He held his hand up in front of himself and smiled. He remembered how it had felt—the knife going into the boy's stomach. He could tell the others how it had felt. None of them had ever killed anyone. He was the only one. Manuel had never killed anyone; why should he be afraid of Manuel?

They would all be at the warehouse when they got their nerve back and stopped running. Manuel would be there too. He could tell them all how it felt—what it was like to kill
someone. He stood up in the dark and made his way to the broken window. He would have to make sure no one saw him on the way. He could show them the blood on his hand. Manuel can't take the credit for killing him. I killed him, not Manuel. . . . He wished he had a cigarette.

Companion

by Jane Johnson

English, Sr.

Sad I sat alone
until I felt a finger brush across my brow.
As I looked up
a breath of wind blew my hair
and then dissolved.
Back it came to play with me,
like a ballet dancer that writhes, whirls then vanishes—
so was the wind in my hair.

Suddenly smiling,
I tilted my head to touch noses with the wind.
My hair tumbled back,
I felt my friend's prevailing presence
as my moist lips firmed.
I rose—
My cheeks felt a fragile hand brush over them.
The wind covered my face softly
like a warm human breath,
fulfilling my waiting wish.