

Shark Encounter

by [Armando Simón](#) (May 2023)



Yellow Room, Diarmuid Delargy, 2019

Long before there were Terrors of the Deep, there were Shark Encounters.

When the Prime Movers of Sea World decided to expand the scary exhibit and add variations to the theme, they built additions onto Shark Encounters and renamed the overall transformation Terrors of the Deep. There were moray eels in their separate aquarium, for example, and also a spiny puffer fish exhibit, totally absurd because, apart from being poisonous if eaten, they are completely inoffensive (a barracuda section or a blue-ringed octopi aquarium would have been more appropriate).

At any rate, they could now advertise a new novelty in Orlando, which was used to Sea World always being there. Nonetheless, the original multimillion-dollar shark exhibit remained in place; the others were simply grafted onto it.

Melissa was inside the exhibit, with a microphone, waiting for the park guests to be seated along the rectangular room.

“Slide all the way to the left, please, slide all the way to the left. Don’t leave any gaps in between. There’s room for everyone and all the seats are equally good. Sit all the way to the left.” Usually, the ones who did not do so were foreigners who either did not understand English, or who, like the Brazilians and the French, were deliberately obtuse and rude and were despised by all the staff.

Melissa was young, attractive and intelligent. These attributes were almost a prerequisite for the job, which involved being out among the public, in various exhibits, lecturing and answering questions. There was definitely a hierarchy in the status of the jobs at Sea World, the most coveted being the Trainers, the ones who worked directly with dolphins, otters, seals and killer whales, and required a superb stamina. The lowest were the individuals who came out at night after the park closed down in order to pick up trash and overall clean up and straighten out. They were nicknamed The Morlochs by the rest of the staff.

However, at this point of time, Melissa was not in an appreciative mood despite the position that she held. She had done the Shark Encounters/Terrors of the Deep too many times and craved novelty, even though she was being constantly rotated among the exhibits. It was just that it seemed to her like all the interesting events happened to everyone else. For example, there had been that memorable incident in the tunnel. There was a long plexiglass tunnel through the shark aquarium, very, very impressive, where the guests could slowly walk through, with tons of water pressing down and dozens of sharks

to the right, left, and above them, swimming around in that lazy manner of theirs. Somebody, out of stupidity or malice—it was never determined which—had yelled, “There’s a crack in the glass!” and a mindless stampede had resulted, with numerous injuries. Then, there was the time when some Russian athletes had toured the park, shepherded by KGB killers, intent on not letting them defect. And then, there had been the unbelievable, yet true, mystery, when one of the staff, going early to work in the morning, and assigned to Shamu Stadium, had casually strolled over and found the killer whale outside its huge aquarium, unhurt, on the ground, calmly looking around at the empty seats. Imagine the reaction.

But nothing of the sort had ever happened to Melissa.

Then, again, she had only been on the job a little over a year.

Still, she craved novelty.

All the guests had finally sat down on the benches facing the screens. Melissa droned out her introductory remarks on the subject of the film that they were going to see across the multiple screens, on sharks, and which she knew by heart, having seen it countless times. She leaned against the wall, bored, waiting for the film to run its course. It ended, the lights came on, and Melissa began the lecture on sharks that she could recite in her sleep. As she did, the screens were slowly raised and there was a collective gasp from the audience. The screens had concealed dozens of killer sharks swimming behind plexiglass walls. Even a jaded Melissa appreciated the genius in such an effect, invariably evoking a gasp of shock. Regardless, she went on with her lecture, identifying the various types of sharks that could be seen slowly swimming in the salt water.

Although their movements were lazy, their appearance still evoked fear. Melissa identified the lemon shark (noting the

yellowish tint to its skin), the tiger shark, the brutish bull shark, the nurse shark with its misshapen mouth giving it a scary appearance while actually being the safest of all the sharks.

“And when you go through the tunnel, on your left, when the doors open, you’ll be able to see the nurse sharks resting, motionless, at the bottom. The nurse shark does not need to move constantly in order to be able to breathe.” Curiously, to date, no one had ever asked her why there were no hammerhead sharks. The doors opened and the crowd slowly exited towards the tunnel.

Melissa put up her microphone and was relieved by another lecturer. She went towards the back area and climbed some stairs and joined Mark, who was already waiting for her at the back area. The huge, open shark pen was at their feet, inches away from the walkway. They could see the sharks swimming around lazily beneath them.

“How are you and Adelia getting along these days?”

“Aww, we had a fight yesterday,” Mark answered.

Sea World was a sort of Peyton Place.

“Really? Again?”

“Yeah.”

“I’m sure you guys can work it out. You always do, you know. Hang on, I’m gonna suit up. By the time I finish cleaning, all the guests will be gone and you can tell me all about it at the cafeteria.”

Melissa went to a room to change into her skin diver’s outfit. Half an hour later, she came out with fins and mask in one hand.

“They gone?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ll lower the net.” Mark pressed a switch and a net, weighed down at the bottom, and extending from side to side, lowered from the ceiling into the tank, next to the end of the tank. It touched bottom. Mark next pressed another switch and the net began to slowly move lengthwise across the tank, slowly herding the sharks, still calmly swimming around, to the other half of the tank.

Melissa put on her mask and climbed down the stairs into the empty half of the tank and, once there, she put on her fins. Mark handed her a rough sponge and showed her the hollow pipe in his other hand. She swam downward and towards the first window/wall panel and began scrubbing off the thin film of algae which, if allowed to accumulate on the plexiglass, would obstruct vision and, so, had to be periodically scrubbed off. Mark kept watch above, in an indifferent mood.

They had done this countless times.

Half an hour into the job, Mark heard a voice behind him softly calling his name.

“Mark? Can we talk for a minute?” It was Adelia. “I’ve been thinking over what you said last night and you’re right, maybe I jumped to conclusions.”

Melissa finished the third panel and looked out below at where she had been standing an hour or so ago. She could make out the benches, the projection booth, the exit sign. She moved on to the next panel.

Halfway through, her blood froze as she heard the agitated beating of the pipe against the steps. Turning, she expected to see a shark near the net, only to see a lemon shark squeezing through the edge of the net and into her side. She turned to swim towards the latter only to see a massive bull shark already there.

She waited a few seconds until the bull shark lazily swam out

of the way, then she began to swim, calmly, steadily, towards the ladder, trying hard not to let her panic take over. Uncoordinated, frantic movements might automatically trigger an attack. The lemon shark was the worst. It was intensely disliked by everyone for its total unpredictability, even by those ichthyologists that were shark specialists.

Melissa now reached the ladder, but she could not possibly climb it with her long fins on. First, she took one off. She looked around to see what the sharks were doing. The bull was swimming around, unconcerned, possibly contented.

The lemon shark was looking at her.

She hurriedly took off her second fin.

Mark's hand was in the water, reaching for the fins. Melissa swung the fins upwards towards the hand when the lemon shark struck. She was knocked over and downwards by the attack as it swam past her with some part of her in its mouth. She laid in the bottom, stunned momentarily, and she quickly looked over both her arms, hands. Then, her legs and feet.

She was still intact!

She looked up and she could actually see Mark and Adelia's faces looking down at her with eyes bugged out in alarm.

She also saw the ladder.

With a spring, Melissa went up the ladder like a Polaris missile coming out of a submarine and breaking the surface. In a flash, she was out of the water.

All three looked down at the lemon shark who seemed to have Melissa's fins stuck in its teeth.

Melissa's arm began to shake uncontrollably as she stared at it.

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