

Excerpt from *The Equilibrium of Sharks* by Caterina Bonvicini
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It's 2:30 in the afternoon, a cold light faithfully silhouettes the mountains. They all rise to meet me as I enter the city. I let the ring road carry me along and I think, So Torino loves me, just look at this reception.

On certain days I feel something akin to an ache of happiness.

I feel like I have a wide-angle lens in my eye: I can see Mont Blanc, Mount Rose, Monviso, maybe even the Dolomites. It's so crystalline, that sky.

In any case, today is a beautiful day in February, it's 2:30, and I have just obtained my divorce. To shed some tension, I decided to take a long drive. Just to enjoy the alpine range. I have a close relationship with these mountains: I've been looking at them for thirty years. They know everything about me. They know that my marriage was not a happy one, for instance.

What's more, no one had forewarned me. Nicola was a cheerful young man, full of life, given to acting impulsively. His eyes were always smiling. He was a bit odd, I agree, but nothing that would make you predict the worst. We met, we fell in love, we got married. It all happened quickly, with the burning urgency of two twenty year olds.

Just as quickly I was forced to deal with his first manic-depressive crisis. When his mother got here, she phoned me and gave me the number of his psychiatrist. Coldly, almost perfunctorily.

"You call him."

"Me?"

"Well, you're his wife."

I had never associated so much responsibility with that word. I had married young, there are other things on your mind.

"Didn't he ever tell you about these disorders?" It sounded like a reproach, as if my being only twenty had inhibited him. "Strange, he's suffered from them since he was a teenager."

"No. Never."

Maybe it was the brevity of my reply that moved her, who knows. I expected something like There, I knew it and a whole subtle strategy to make me feel guilty. Instead I noticed a restraint not unlike pity:

"Maybe he was afraid."

I too was afraid, however. This mother-in-law of mine hadn't counted on that. That's how my mother died. One afternoon she jumped off the balcony. I was six years old.

"What if something happens?"

"Nothing will happen. You just have to check to make sure he takes his medication, that's all. Then it goes away. You'll get used to it."

In fact, I got used to it.

Nicola often came looking for me at the university, interrupting the class. The caretaker would knock, three discreet taps, then stick his head in the door:

"Sofia Ballarò? Is Sofia Ballarò here?"

"Here I am" I stood up.

You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone was watching me. I felt too many eyes staring at me, so I tried to hide my face by bowing my head and letting my hair fall forward.

"Someone is looking for you. It's urgent."

"Thank you."

I left the classroom and found Nicola standing stock-still in the hallway, his coat buttoned the wrong way and a small suitcase in his hand.

“Sofia,” he would tell me, “I wanted to say goodbye. I’m going.”

“Where?”

“To kill myself.”

“Okay, ciao.” And I would go back to class.

Sometimes I fell for it though. When he locked all the mahogany doors in our apartment, for example. The one between the entry and the hall, the one between the hall and the two bedrooms, and the one to the bedroom. Our house was a labyrinth of doors. I kicked them all open. Then I looked down at my legs, at the rounded toes of my boots, amazed, Wow, what strength. I turned to the splintered frames, the wooden slats lying on the floor or twisted forward, the locks unhinged.

Usually I found him in bed, crying. The bottles of barbiturates, five or six of them, assembled on the night table, all of them empty.

“Did you take them?” I shook him.

“I poured them down the sink,” came a weary voice. Quite unlike his own, as if even just taking them in his mind had drained him.

So I gathered up the bottles and thought Tomorrow I’ll have to call a carpenter. And I went and marked it on the kitchen calendar: Phone carpenter.

Then the paranoid delusions started. Once, to protect me, he locked me in the house for ten days. The door knobs removed with a screwdriver.

“The phone is being tapped,” he said, “we have to be careful.”

With great urgency, he even burned my cell phone in the fireplace.

Nicola had started working as an intern at a law firm and was dealing with a sensitive case: it all started from there. From a grain of truth. At first I even believed him: he told me about threats from a client connected with the Camorra. Nothing strange about that in the world of a criminal attorney, I thought. I would sooner imagine serious trouble than yet another stay in the hospital with him. When he dragged in the U.S. secret intelligence, I began to realize, but it was too late, by then I was sequestered. And I remained so for ten days. He caressed me with gloves on. He never took them off, so as not to leave any fingerprints around. They were black leather gloves belonging to his mother. Because he had small hands, with thin, tapering fingers. One night, as Nicola slept, I took the fire extinguisher he had hidden in the bathroom (“If they try to set fire to the house, you’ll find it in here, remember that Sofia, between the towels”), used it to break the window that he had sealed with silicone, and jumped down. It was only the first floor, we were living in a small house. I was a little fearful of jumping. If I hurt myself, rather than call an ambulance he’ll let me bleed to death. But I preferred to take a chance. The fall went well, I only twisted my ankle a bit. But I ran nonetheless, and quickly too.

I found a pharmacy that stayed open all night. I raced in at lightning speed and sat down on a stool, under a display of condoms. I couldn’t speak. Not because I was crying: I wasn’t crying at all. Because I was having a coughing fit. They gave me a sedative, I explained some, between one bout and the next.

The pharmacist took charge of the situation.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take care of it.”

“You can’t send ambulances and police there,” I said, “God knows what terrible conspiracy he’ll imagine.”

But the pharmacist was adamant: “We can’t possibly leave him there, Miss.”

They loaded me into a police car. The ambulance was waiting in front of the gate. On the lawn three policemen were shouting into a megaphone:

“Come out, please.”

Behind them was a psychiatrist ready to give him a shot. Nicola was barricaded.

“Come out, we won’t hurt you.”

They forced their way in, immobilized him in no time, the doctor jabbed the needle in his vein, thrusting his arm forward as if stabbing a horse. Nicola screamed and screamed.

After a quarter of an hour, he was calmer. He paced around the ambulance. But he refused to get in. Two emergency medical volunteers tried to persuade him, their manner very courteous:

“Go on, come with us.”

Nicola shook his head and glanced at me out of the corner of his eye:

“Traitor,” he said quietly. “Traitor.”

I was sitting on the steps, in front of the front door, elbows on my knees and chin propped on my hands. He did not approach me, just walked up and down a few yards away.

“You of all people.”

Then, all of a sudden, he climbed into the ambulance.

“You of all people, a traitor.”

Actually it was all quite easy. After the hospitalization and subsequent convalescence, Nicola regained full possession of his humanity, truly wonderful.

“Now you’re free to go, Sofia.”

“Go kill myself?” I laughed like an idiot.

Luckily he too was laughing. To make me feel less foolish, I know. And also less alone.

“Go wherever you want.”

It was hard to do, at that point. I felt so entitled to be happy that I was no longer able to grasp happiness. In the confusion, the desire to make love with him even came back.

We looked at each other like in the beginning, before any of it had happened. And the sudden return of that feeling just as it had been, before the illness wrecked him, filled us with both joy and sadness.

“Go, Sofia. Go now, quickly. Now, while I’m myself and have the courage not to be selfish. Run. Don’t think about what’s practical. Grab the chance, quickly.”

I was stunned. I couldn’t tell if this was some new form of blackmail or an old display of generosity.

“But where would I run to?” I couldn’t help saying. Maybe because at that moment I wasn’t capable of running away.

“Oh come on, Sofia. You’re an intelligent person, aren’t you?”

I shook my head, bewildered.

“Aren’t you capable of coming up with an excuse? Do I have to give you one? A vacation, anything. To Sicily, given that you’re obsessed with it. Don’t make me have to book a flight for you. I’m lucid, that’s true, but don’t take advantage of it. It would be asking too much of me.”

I wept. As if he were throwing me out of the house. I was even small-minded enough to turn on him. But Nicola, that night, really wanted to help me. So he didn’t bat an eye. He let me go on indulging myself, choosing the path that was easiest for me.

“Oh really? So you’re telling me to pack my bags? Me? After I was there to help you all those times... Who was in that lousy hospital with you, huh? Who? Your mother? Of course not. Okay, okay, I’ll get out of your hair.” Then I quickly spun around. And, sincerely offended: “Are you sure you want to kick me out?”

Nicola looked at me with infinite sadness:

“I’m sure.”

I slammed the door, haughtily even. But the door, after so many visits by the firefighters, didn’t shut anymore. Though I persisted doggedly, tugging to no avail, it made a sinister sound and got stuck, warped at the lock.

“Shit, shit, somebody has to call the carpenter!” I yelled.

Then, feeling suddenly free, without even turning to look back, I took the stairs.

My father is a calm, tranquil man. You can tell by the type of wrinkles he has: they are marks left by the sun, not by anguish. He’s found an external demon. He pets it, he holds it by the fin, he hypnotizes it by resting a hand on its nose.

He says it’s an elegant creature, not at all monstrous. He says it is crucial for the equilibrium of the sea and that it must be protected. He says it is by no means a demon.

Once a week he sends me a report. That is, a short video filmed underwater. This is how we communicate. I write him e-mails and he replies with a video. He edits the shots, adds a musical soundtrack and speaks to me offscreen, in a voice-over.

The video is an attachment. I open it. A superimposed title appears: Cape Town, February 9, 2004. I see a sparkling expanse of blue and a sky streaked with orange. Then a bare, rocky island, teeming with sea lions.

An albatross wheels overhead, its wings outspread. Its beak opens and closes, as if lip syncing to a playback recording: Ne me quitte pas... I burst out laughing. Papa adores Jacques Brel and plays his songs to the tortoises, the sea lions, the crabs.

The music ends and he appears. He's sitting on the edge of the boat, a stripe of white lotion on his nose.

"Ciao sweetheart, can you believe this sunset? Now look closely. You'll see a huge brute that weighs a ton leap out of the water with its entire body, like a flying fish. In South Africa white sharks have a tendency to do this. They're willing to perform dolphin-like acrobatic feats to catch a sea lion".

He shows me a polystyrene model:

"This is the bait. We fabricated a fake seal. Now we'll attach it to the motorboat and make it water-ski."

He points to the tail of the seal-shaped float:

"Here we inserted a small underwater telecamera. You'll see the mouth of the great white shark so closeup you'll think you're inside it".

Then he smiles:

"This morning, at dawn, a spectacular 13-foot long female took the bait. She leaped completely out of the water and did a pirouette in the air with all the grace of an Olympic diver".

He leans over and picks up that morning's bait. He shows me the polystyrene form butchered by her teeth.

"She quickly realized her mistake and released her hold right after sinking her teeth into it. Poor darling, she must have been disappointed."

He turns and points to the sea, a dark shadow is circling the boat:

"But in the afternoon she came back and we were able to make up for it. We threw her a tuna, she appreciated it. She deserved it after that ballet routine. She's still a little jumpy, earlier she gnawed a piece of the diving platform. She's sociable though. I gave her the second tuna with my hands. While I was at it, I patted her a few times. Watch".

The bow of the motorboat rises partly out of the water and the bait begins to slap against the waves like a surfboard. After a while something moves just below the surface of the water, keeping pace with the boat. The great white shark leaps out of the sea, does an overhead turn and lands on its back, displacing a huge amount of water.

Papa applauds, the boat slows down and then stops. Ricky, his assistant, coils the rope and pulls up the fake sea lion. Papa examines the bait and with two fingers picks out a sharp, triangular tooth:

"She left us a little gift. Do you like it, Sofia? It's for you. In a few days you'll receive a stunning pendant. I'll go thank her".

I see Papa go down the platform, with his feet almost submerged in the water, one arm held out and a tuna in his hand. Suddenly the shark leaps up and grabs the morsel. But she's left that way, mouth gaping and snout above water, because at the last minute Papa snatches the meal away and lays a hand on her nose. The shark is motionless, as if hypnotized. Papa turns toward the telecamera:

"If you touch a shark's nose, it falls into a trance. Now I can pet her snout".

I watch my father's fingers slide gently along the white surface.

"Why are you afraid, Sofia? It's a magnificent creature".

Jacques Brel starts singing and I see my father swimming on the back of a white shark, holding it by the fin. Quand on n'a que l'amour, Brel croons.

Few have the courage to free dive with white sharks but my father doesn't act like a hotshot. He keeps both feet on the ground, or often in water.

"I'm too old to be reckless. I dive without a cage only if the conditions are right. The sea must be calm and the water can't be cloudy: I always have to be able to see where he is, and most importantly whether others show up. That's the real danger, that a second shark might appear unexpectedly.

Then too I observe the animal for a long time first. I have to get to know him. They have different temperaments, like dogs and cats. Some are aggressive, some shy, others sociable and curious.

Believe me, I only enter the water when I'm sure the fish is really relaxed. And, most of all, I keep an eye on myself. If I haven't slept well, if I'm feeling edgy, sad or particularly vulnerable, you can be sure I'll stay on the boat. See, it's a question of respect and awareness: of the sea, the shark and ourselves. In a word, it's a question of equilibrium, Sofia".

The video ends, a gray line dissolves it. My father turns to the underwater camera and waves to me, moving off with the shark.

“Papa, I met an interesting man. His name is Arturo, he’s forty-five years old. He’s tall, blond, has long, skinny legs and a bit of a pot-belly. He doesn’t talk much. He has an uneven smile, a row of crooked teeth that I find very sexy. He only wears shirts that are perfectly ironed, though he’s capable of showing up with a three-day’s growth of beard. He’s obsessed with elegance yet he wears sleeveless undershirts. Often, under his polished loafers, his socks have holes in them. I think I’ve fallen in love. I catch myself smiling to myself as I go up the stairs. I’ve even become prettier, I walk along lost in thought and people turn to look at me. I emanate a kind of involuntary sensuality: it’s the sensuality of contentment, I know”.

It was September 2004 and autumn had not yet come to Torino. A mild, still pleasant glow warmed the somewhat cold elegance of the facades.

A video from Australia soon arrived in response. The soundtrack was quite ironic: Jacques Brel’s *La chanson des vieux amants*. My father had spliced together, like in a trailer, a series of clips on the subject taken from the archives. I saw all kinds of sharks mating. White fins and black fins, gray sharks or spotted ones, all busy screwing each other, crossing tails and rubbing gills, supple and lithe as serpents, their intertwining even a little pathetic, like the dance *lacci d’amore*, their snouts facing the sandy bottom or the cone of light that penetrates the depths.

“Unfortunately I’ve never managed to observe two white sharks making love. Who knows at what depth it takes place. But females who have mated recently are immediately recognizable because they have a scar on their body. The male, to hold his companion still, bites her. That is, he plants his three thousand teeth in her flesh. Those triangular teeth that you are familiar with, almost 3 inches long like the pendant you wear. It’s no accident that nature gave the females a thicker skin. For them love must be quite a painful experience. But don’t be afraid, Sofia. After all, nature gave you a thicker skin too”.

We were still in each other’s arms, under the sheets. Arturo was nervously stroking my temples. Every so often he would tap his finger on my forehead, like a percussion hammer. It seemed like a tic.

“Sofia, there’s something you should know.”

I raised my head:

“Is there someone else?”

“No, no. It’s... you see, I suffer from depression.”

I burst out laughing. He was hurt.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to. It’s that... No, I know it’s not a laughing matter. Not at all. It’s just that, that.” But I kept laughing. I couldn’t stop.

“Is it that funny?” Rigid.

“No, far from it.” I rubbed my eyes. I took a deep breath. “It was a nervous laugh. Maybe it’s my fault.”

“Your fault? My depression?” Now he was laughing.

“This sequentiality.”

I told him about my past. But in an abrupt, succinct way, almost as if to underscore the stark repetition.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know about your mother.”

“That’s how she died.”

“And your husband, how is he now?”

“I haven’t seen him in a number of years.”

“If you don’t feel you want to. I mean, look, I understand.”

I bolted upright:

“Don’t feel I want to what?”

“Start a relationship with me. It’s taxing to be with a... Well.”

“What are you saying?”

The fact remains that at the beginning he didn’t seem at all depressed. Quite the opposite. He was in constant fibrillation, as if the relationship with me had revitalized him.

We were at a restaurant and there he was, sitting across from me, enthusiastically sampling the sauces of a *fondue Bourguignonne*, dipping one piece of meat after another into the oil. He was quite cheerful, in a talkative mood, not at all withdrawn, if anything slow to get to the point, what with so many digressions.

At a certain point I interrupted him:
“You're not a man who's depressed.”
Arturo looked me straight in the eye: “Just wait.”
His tone, suddenly icy, silenced me.
“You know, it comes in waves” he had already softened.

Nevertheless, he was right: just wait. In a short time Arturo's second persona emerged. Gone was the libertine, the pleasure-seeker, the bon vivant, replaced by a lethargic idler, a snail clinging to its shell, a man bored by everything. No more weekend jaunts, no more restaurants. He was always sleepy.
“I'm tired. Come to my place?”

I went, I cooked. I even did the shopping first, since his fridge was always empty, even though there was a supermarket just down the street. He didn't make the slightest effort to entertain me anymore. He filled his glass with wine and sat staring at the wall. We didn't yet have enough familiarity to endure long silences:

“Is something wrong?”

Arturo shrugged faintly:

“It's back. The medicines are useless, I've been like this for five years. All I want to do is sleep.”

Often he came to my place and we didn't even speak. We made love and then we both fell asleep. We would go to sleep in the afternoon. We met to go to sleep.

All in all, they were moments of extreme intimacy. We lay there, mouth to mouth, exchanging the heavy breath of sleep. Once we went straight on sleeping until the next morning, we slept from four in the afternoon until dawn the following day.

After a winter like that, I started not feeling so well myself. Maybe it was the power of suggestion, or empathy, I don't know. The fact is that, in a few months, I began to exhibit the same symptoms, as if depression were contagious.

I like Torino when it's empty. It seems more real when it's silent.

In any case I fill it up: with sharks. Right, because in my photographs Torino becomes an underwater city. Swimming among the buildings are white sharks, tiger sharks, bull sharks, gray reef sharks, black fins and white fins, hammerheads. I use my father's material, I spend hours and hours at the computer assembling and editing the images. Paradoxically, in the end, it's not the fish that stands out, but the baroque façade. The one we pass by every day, without really seeing it.

My father remarried but had no luck even the second time. For that matter he's much more interested in sharks than women.

“Claudia left. She made a big scene and took the first plane back to Italy. It was all because of a mako.” I remember that video perfectly, it was the summer of 2003.

Papa is in Louisiana, on the Mississippi Delta. The camera frames him down to the waist, he's sitting on the edge of the boat, ready to dive in. In the background is a dark blue sea and an iron tower.

“The structure you see behind me is an oil rig. Tons of fish gather below here. The sea is very deep at this point, almost 1,000 feet. To lure the makos to the surface we had to harpoon heaps of tuna.

The mako is a rather aggressive shark, very swift, capable of swimming more than 18 miles per hour. It often leaps and is capable of jumping into a boat. It can be recognized by its conical snout and thin teeth shaped like fish-hooks. It's a magnificent creature, Sofia. I swam with him and had him eat from my own hands, in the water.”

He smiles with his eyes, he doesn't seem all that distressed by Claudia's departure. He has already forgotten to tell me what happened, absorbed as he is by his fish.

“I had a knife with me, to be safe. But you know me: I would never harm a shark. It was just a precaution, I don't know makos well enough. It's the first time I've been to this area.”

I see my father slowly moving his flippers and holding a piece of fish. Then a silvery silhouette, aerodynamic like a submarine, leaps up in a flash. The shark's pointed nose moves toward him, the sharp, thin teeth appear

and grab the morsel. The mako squirms around but my father keeps a tight hold on the bait. “He was shaking me this way and that. But I couldn’t let go. The rule is this: always have food available, otherwise I’m in danger of being sampled myself. The roles must be clear: I feed him breakfast, I’m not his breakfast.” Then I see the shark’s nose move closer and closer to the screen. The image wobbles, bubbles appear. From off screen, in the voiceover, Papa says: “Nothing happened. The mako only took Ricky’s camera in his mouth. But, as you know, he has nerves of steel: he didn’t let him take it.”

Here’s my father on the boat again, still sitting on the edge, but stripped to the waist this time, the wetsuit rolled around his stomach. Ricky reaches his arm over the lens and waves hello with his hand. He’s the cameraman, the one responsible for all the videos Papa sends me.

“Claudia was a diving enthusiast, I just never imagined such a reaction. She climbed back into the boat with her heart pounding under her wetsuit and said: ‘Oh no, I’m sorry, I’m not ready to let myself be devoured for you. That’s it’.”

I met Marcello at the casino in Venice. It was April 1, 2005. A date that should have made me stop and think. Your April fool, Sofia. The April shark. Watch your back!

We had ended up there by chance, dragged along by others. My friends took to the Black Jack table and I retreated to the room with the slot machines, pulling the lever to pass the time. Marcello was also wandering around, kind of lost, hands in his pocket.

And so we found ourselves side by side, stool to stool, grumbling as we inserted one coin after another. We took a liking to one another, neither of us too wrapped up in the game.

“Sofia, my dear, today I feel truly ecstatic. I swam with a school of dolphins. Do you know they can speak? In a number of ways, moreover. They use a series of sounds that correspond to precise meanings: we have discovered thirty of them, but who knows how large their vocabulary is. Then they have a second language, indecipherable for us, composed of ultrasounds. But the most touching thing is that they communicate with their body, like us. They touch each other and every gesture means something. They brush fins the way we hold hands. They rub against one another the way we embrace. They are as much in need of physical contact as human beings.”

“He swims with sharks?”

“Now don’t go imagining God knows what. Basically Papa leads a very ordinary life. Dull even, like everybody else. He may spend weeks in the boat without sighting a single fish. Sleeping accommodations are uncomfortable, the food is awful, he watches TV in a language he doesn’t understand. Then too he’s seen so many sharks that he doesn’t even get excited anymore. He observes them as if they were cats.

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“Have you ever swum with sharks?”

“God forbid! I only dream about them, they’re my recurring nightmare.”

Marcello hugged a pillow to his stomach. With his toes he was fussing with the edge of the sheet. He wouldn’t look at me anymore. “There’s something too unreal about all this” he told me, staring at the darkened television.

“Take a look, I’m very real“ I replied.

“I meant the sharks“ he corrected himself.

“They’re fish made of flesh and bones. Or actually, no, they don’t have bones. They’re flesh and cartilage. Does that meet the requirement, cartilage?”

“I’m afraid I won’t be good enough, Sofia.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m afraid of disappointing you, really. I’m always afraid of disappointing everyone, I don’t know why. It’s my greatest fear.”

And I was afraid he was trying to prepare me for the worst.

It was all very simple. I was tired. One day I was more tired than all the other days. I wanted to sleep. Nothing complicated, I just wanted to sleep. Nothing special happened that day.

I hadn't read any of my mother's letters. I hadn't checked to see if there were any messages from my father. I hadn't listened to the answer machine.

I was just sleepy. It was an indecent sleep.

One day I counted the drops up to a hundred. Then two hundred, then three hundred. Then I stopped counting. I set the glass on the table and looked at it. Unfeelingly, it was just a glass.

I was only afraid of one thing: that it wouldn't be enough. But I was so calm, so amazingly calm, that not even that doubt troubled me much.

"I am only thirty. / And like the cat I have nine times to die." For me it was the First, I even had a certain margin. "Dying / Is an art, like everything else." And I was an artist, used to getting it wrong, accustomed to try and try again.

[Top of Page](#)