



1. Executive Summary

Larry was always telling me that my writing needed to be more concise, that I shouldn't go on so much, that I ought to learn to bullet point information. *We're living in a time of accumulating information, he'd say, nobody has time to sift through everything—* so that's why I'm just going to tell you straight out what happened, without messing you around. A gang of us from work went fishing for shark, and I killed him, I killed Larry.

How's that for getting to the point?

*

It is the morning of the last Sunday in July, 2000. I am leaning over the side of the *Maeldun*, an old trawler turned charter-fishing boat out of Castletownbere, watching the sea slice itself open on the bow of the boat. The bisected waves sloop under the hull, and I count them as they lift and drop and lift and drop us again, one two three, four five six. I count to ward off the nausea I am feeling, but it isn't doing anything for me. I had also, as we'd cleared the harbour, inserted a swab of cotton into my left ear canal and fixed my attention on the horizon that opened out before us, south-south-west between the headlands of Bantry Bay. I gather that this will preserve my body's equilibrium, but it isn't working either: each up and down and up and down again and up and down and up and down again motion of the boat is matched by a contraction and loosening of the muscles of my stomach, as if an invisible hand is squeezing it steadily.

I lose my count and begin again, one two three, better than doing nothing, four five six, trying to match my breathing with the rhythm of the rollers, in and out and in again, trying to keep my body distracted from the queasiness, seven eight nine.

The excursion is Larry's idea. It's not the first time I've been on a trip like this with him. Since joining Aisling Ltd I've had to endure a lot of different kinds of Boys' Own shite: hill-walking, orienteering, mountain-biking, kayaking, those corporate team-building exercises in which you have to build a raft from a few planks, a length of rope and some leaky barrels—all that kind of stuff. Today's excursion is thankfully more of a perk than a team-building exercise. The gossip in the guest-house last night was that Larry had read in one of his CEO magazines that shark-

fishing was *the* new executive activity and that's why, to celebrate the signing of the Ninth Wave deal, he had brought the Project Team away to the Beara for the weekend, with the optional extra of a day's fishing on the Sunday.

I look to where he stands not far from me, leaning casually against the gunwale. He is wearing a Breton fisherman's hat and brand new oilers, which reach to his midriff and are held up at the waist by two braces that loop from behind each shoulder to form parallel lines down the front of his spotless white Aran sweater. He seems too much the part—Larry the Fisherman, with a big fat fucking capital-F—but then he always manages to arrogate the Proper Noun for whatever activity he engages in—Larry the Hill-Walker, Larry the Rock-Climber, Larry the Canoeist—as if a pioneer in everything he does.

He catches me appraising him.

'Isn't this just the business?' he shouts, throwing the words to me over the grinding clatter of the engine.

'It would be,' I shout back, 'if I didn't feel so sick.'

'Fix your eyes on the horizon, like James told you.'

'I have. I am. It doesn't seem to work.'

'How can you be sick on such a beautiful day?' he asks. 'Just breathe that air!' He extends his arms before him like a sorcerer invoking the elements, snorting the wind into his lungs. 'Wonderful. Just fucking wonderful. Better than any drug.'

It is not the first time that I've heard Larry employ the Anglo-Saxon, so it can't be shock that causes the delicate balance I have achieved to tip over, but tip it does. My stomach heaves. I drain into the sea a spume of vomit that's tossed up into a foaming cluster of bubbles. It reminds me of cuckoo-spit.

'Bit early for the rubby dubby, mate,' says James from the wheelhouse. James is our skipper. He's Australian.

'Rubby dubby?' I ask, wiping my mouth with the cuff of my old fleece sweater.

'Chum,' replies James. 'Burley. Bait.'

'For the sharks?'

'Of course for the sharks. They're not goin to come visiting for the company, are they mate? We have to make sure that we give em a decent feed!'

'What's in it?'

'I don't think I should tell you if you're feelin a bit dodge.'

'Fish?' asks Larry.

'Ground up fish,' says James with relish. 'Blood, guts, bones, scales—the whole fuckin jar of Marmite.'

'Don't,' I plead, but my stomach heaves again; all that is dredged up this time is a slick of bile that coats the back of my throat with an acidic tang.

'When will we be laying out?' asks Larry. I suppose 'laying out' is a technical term and wonder where he picked it up.

'Soon, mate,' says James. 'A few more miles and we'll be right.'

'And then what happens?'

'Then we fish.'

'For blue shark?'

'Yes, for blue shark.'

'How many are we likely to catch?'

'Jesus, mate, I don't know. On a good day we might get ten or twenty of the buggers. On a bad day we might get none.'

'And will this be a good day?'

'I can't guarantee anything, mate.'

'Not even for the money we're paying?'

'It's in the contract you signed, mate: there are absolutely no guarantees on the ocean, no matter how much money you have. First law of the sea.'

*

A few minutes later James cuts the engine and releases the anchor. We have strayed out of sight of land and are enclosed now all around by a diadem of horizon. Eastwards the horizon is clear, but a herd of clouds waddles towards us from the west; they trail thick, dark columns of rain.

James casts his eyes in the direction of the rain and stands considering it. Larry notices.

'Is that bad news?'

'The weather forecast said we should be right,' says James. He claps his hands together and rubs his palms. 'Okay, time to put somethin in the water that the sharks will appreciate.' He moves back into the wheelhouse and emerges a few moments later with a battered catering-sized container, which might once have contained coffee, cradled in his arms. He hands it to Brendan, head of the Ninth Wave Project Team. Brendan's new to Aisling, a business analyst who joined the company after Tom Drover's mutiny. I hardly know him. He has just stood up from being sick over the side of the boat. 'Here, hold this.'

Brendan takes the tin. James strides back into the wheelhouse.

Brendan hefts the tin up and down in his arms. 'Cold,' he says.

'That's cause it's just out of the fridge,' says James, treading back onto the deck. He holds a hammer and a large flathead screwdriver, and carries a small plastic crate under his left arm. He gets Brendan to set the tin down onto the deck and then pries the lid off the container with the flathead. An aroma is released that smells of rancid cod liver oil, loam turned during a dirty spring, the inside of a freezer in need of a defrost, damp corn

flakes, and the most distant intimation of freeze-dried caffeine.

'Is that the rubby dubby?' asks Larry.

'Sure is.'

'Did you make it yourself?'

James laughs. 'Shit, mate,' he says, 'I'd love to tell you that this is my own secret recipe but, nah, I buy it from the bait shop in Castletown. Makin this stuff yourself can really stink up your house and the missus wouldn't be too happy with that.'

He has jammed the crate over the lidless end of the tin, and is now securing the two together with bungee cords. 'Got this idea off the Web,' he explains. 'Before, I used to just put the chum tin into a nylon diver's bag and hang that over the end of the boat, but the tin would always sink and sometimes a shark would get entangled in the mesh of the bag and I'd have to drag it on board, try to untangle it and get it back into the water before it bit my bloody fingers off.'

'I remember that,' says Basking.

'Remember what, Paddy?' asks James. He is attaching rigid plastic floats to the crate.

'I remember when that happened.'

'It happened more than once, Paddy, but yeah, you were there when it happened one time.'

Padraig 'Basking' Finn is Aisling Ltd's CFO. His input into the Ninth Wave project had been minimal, but he owned a holiday home in the area and knew James and had gotten us a special rate. I hadn't known that he'd been out with James before, though.

'Well it was my first time out with you,' says Basking, graciously accepting James's mild rebuke, 'and it was very memorable.'

'They're all a blur to me,' says James. He attaches a nylon line to the crate and dumps it over the stern. It bobs woozily in

the water, like an inflatable punch bag struggling to regain its stability after being slugged.

'Should it be doing that?' asks Larry.

'Doin what?'

'Just bobbing there. Shouldn't it be going further out behind us?'

'The line will extend itself once we start driftin.'

'Drifting?'

'Sure, Larry,' says Basking, cutting in before James, who has begun to sound bored with Larry's questions, can answer. 'As soon as James has set up the rods, he'll raise the anchor, and we'll start drifting back to shore.'

'I see,' says Larry.

James begins to assemble the rods and the lines. The others are not interested. They look out to sea, or hang over the side of the boat to get sick. Basking reads a newspaper. Larry watches what James does and I watch with him.

James is aware of Larry's interest and seems resigned to explaining to us what he's doing. But Larry is not a good listener. He keeps interrupting to ask questions. Why three rods? he enquires. What kind of rods are these? What are you using for bait? How deep will the lines go? What's this? What's that?

James manages to work despite Larry's queries. Soon three large black rods stand in holders on the stern gunwale, angled out over the water, their lines intersecting the swell at different distances from the boat. James pops into the wheelhouse again, and then quickly pops back out. I hear the grinding of the anchor being raised. The boat begins to move slowly, and the lines stiffen.

'What now?' asks Larry.

'Now we wait,' says James, 'and drink tea.'

*

Draughts of tepid tea and coffee are dispensed from two large flasks into enamelled mugs gnarled by years of use.

'Is there no drink on this boat?' asks Basking.

'Not a chance,' says James. 'If one of you fools got drunk and fell overboard I'd be sued for so much my grandchildren would still be payin off the debt.'

Basking reaches inside his jacket and pulls out a small, slim, silver-plated flask. 'What if one of us fools had brought the drink on board himself?'

'Christ, Paddy, you'll put me out of business.'

'Relax, James, it's just a wee drop. Warm the cockles, you know; take the nip out of the air.' He passes among the group, pouring a dram of piss-gold liquid into all our cups, including mine (which surprises me, though I notice that I am given less than the others). He comes to James. 'You want some?'

'What the fuck,' he says. 'No cops out here to breathalyse me.'

'That's the spirit.' Basking holds up the flask and shakes it from side to side. 'You fancy a tot, Larry?'

'I'm not a big fan of spirits; you know that, Padraig.'

'I think you should make an exception for this: it's a very special single still malt from the Whisky Club in Edinburgh.'

'That's OK, Padraig.'

'Suit yourself,' says Basking as he tips the dregs of the whisky in the flask into his cup. 'Anyone know any sea shanties?'

No one says anything.

'James?'

James shakes his head.

'Jesus. What kind of sailors are we if we don't know any songs of the sea?'

'No one sings shanties any more, Paddy,' says James. 'Or if they do they sing them in Cantonese or Bangladeshi, not English.'

'Another lost tradition.' Basking sighs with mock despair. He clears his throat. 'Here's one I think everyone will know,' he says and begins to sing in an out-of-tune bass:

Oh show me the way to go home

Brendan laughs and joins in:

I'm tired and I wanna go to bed

We all sing along now, except Larry:

*I had a little drink about an hour ago
And it's gone right to my head*

'I don't get it,' says Larry, when we stop to draw breath before the next verse.

'It's from *Jaws*,' I explain. 'From the scene when the three guys are on the boat at night, waiting for the shark to attack.'

'Just before the shark attacks the boat for the first time,' says Brian, a systems architect and technical consultant to the Ninth Wave Project Team.

'I've never seen *Jaws*,' says Larry.

'How can you never have seen *Jaws*?' asks Basking. 'It's on television the whole fucking time.'

'I don't watch much television.'

'There's no chance of a shark attacking us out here, is there?' asks Brendan.

'None whatsoever, mate,' says James. 'There isn't a shark large enough or pissed off enough in the Atlantic to attack a boat.'

'A boat this size,' interjects Basking.

'Well, sure,' says James. 'If you were in a life-raft or a rowin

boat you might have some cause for concern.'

I turn away from the conversation. Taking the whisky in my tea was perhaps a bad idea: my nauseated stomach, which had calmed itself when the boat was at anchor, has begun to slosh around inside me again and caustic bubbles of air burst in my throat. I turn my gaze to the horizon to steady myself. Something moves in my peripheral vision.

'Hey,' I say, 'I think one of the rods just twitched.'

Everyone turns to stare with me at the rods. A party balloon is attached to the line of each rod at the point where it sinks into the water. The balloon on the line farthest out is bobbing up and down like a child's bath toy. The rod twitches again, the tip bending towards the water in supplication.

'The term is "pulled",' says James quietly.

'Do we have a shark?' asks Larry.

The balloon pops and the rod bends sharply.

'We sure do,' says James, who is grinning broadly. 'That was bloody quick.'

'Auspicious day,' I suggest.

'What?'

'Perhaps it's an auspicious day for shark fishing,' says Larry slowly, as if he is speaking to someone who doesn't really understand English.

'Please yourself, mate,' says James, lifting the butt of the rod from its holder and placing it into the butt-guard attached to the harness he has strapped on. 'Now, auspicious day or not, this is how this is gonna work. I'll take the first shift and stonk this bastard out. Then whoever wants to have a go can take it in turns to reel him in. Or one person can do it all on their own. I don't care. Decide among yourselves. Now pay attention to what I'm doin. It's called pumpin.'

He explains pumping, demonstrating how one lowers and raises the rod in order to reel in the catch. I zone out his words to follow with my eyes the taut of the line as it stretches from the tip of the rod to the point where it submerges. It is not static: it moves from side to side.

'What size do you think he is, James?' asks Larry.

'Five, six feet maybe; ninety to a hundred pounds.'

'Is that big?'

'It's about average.'

'What's the biggest fish you've ever caught?'

'The biggest fish I ever landed was a marlin I snagged in the Caribbean,' he replies, then winces as he drops the rod. 'But one time I hooked this Mako on a boat out of Nantucket. Biggest fuckin fish I've ever seen.'

'Mako?'

'A short-fin Mako shark, mate. Not as famous as the Great White but a whole fuckin continent meaner. This one was easily twelve feet from snout to tail; a fully grown adult female.'

'What happened?'

'She fuckin snapped the line, didn't she? Two fuckin hours and she just snaps the hook and swims off. I think maybe she was havin some sport with me; that I was the one being played, not her. Best date I ever had, though.'

Larry acts as if he is listening, but I can tell from his expression that he already has his next question queued and has merely been waiting for a pause before asking it.

'How long do you think it will take to reel this shark in?'

It takes James a few moments to respond and when he does it's to say, 'Sorry, mate, miles away. What did you ask me?'

'I asked how long it will take to reel in this shark.'

'That depends on how much fight he has in him. I reckon

this one's a good sport, though. He'll give you your money's worth.'

'Will we each get a go on the rod?'

'If we do it right. You feel up to it now?'

'Sure,' says Larry. 'Absolutely.'

James spreads his legs so that his feet are shoulder-width apart, and angles his bum as if perching himself on an imaginary stool.

'Stand right beside me,' he instructs. Larry steps up beside him so that James is to his right. 'Stand like how I'm standin.' Larry mirrors James's body position. Now James lifts the rod out of his butt-guard and slides it into the guard strapped to Larry's waist. Larry places his hands on the rod.

'Good,' says James. 'Little higher up.'

Larry slides his hands up the rod.

'You got it?'

Larry nods.

'You sure?'

'Yes,' says Larry impatiently.

James releases his hold on the rod and steps away. Larry just stands there. 'Pump,' says James. 'Remember to pump the rod.'

Larry dips the rod, but when he tries to pull it back it seems stuck.

'Reel out a bit of line,' says James. He steps up behind Larry and guides him through the motion a couple of times, then backs off.

'How does that feel?' he asks when Larry has had unaided control of the rod for a minute or two, lifting and dropping the rod with a look of pure, childish concentration. At James's question, though, he smiles.

'Primal,' he says; 'it feels primal.'

'Of course it bloody does, mate: you've got a monster at the end of that line.'

Larry repeats the word *monster* in a whisper.

James continues to talk: 'We're doin for sport, you know, what our ancestors did for survival. Too bloody right it feels primal.'

'Our ancestors didn't have graphite rods and boats equipped with state-of-the-art GPS,' says Basking, who has moved to the stern and now stands to Larry's left.

James shrugs. 'They also didn't have to pay back a mortgage on their boats, so we're even.'

Basking doesn't offer a response and the conversation lulls. No one else speaks. We are all looking at Larry. He seems to be working hard. He grimaces each time he pulls back on the rod.

'You OK there, mate?' asks James after Larry grunts loudly following the completion of a long, hard pull-back.

'I'm fine,' he says, though his voice sounds strained.

'There's no point in stonkin yourself out, mate. We could be at this all day. There'll be plenty of fish yet.'

Larry nods, then jerks his head around to look at James. 'Something's wrong. I don't feel anything on the line anymore.'

James takes the rod from him. 'I think we've lost him,' he says. 'Must have slipped the hook.'

'What happened? What did I do wrong?'

'You did nothin wrong. These things happen. We'll rebait the line—'

'Wait,' says Basking, 'I think it's taken the second hook.'

The second rod, whose line is maybe twenty or twenty-five feet closer in to the boat, twitches. Basking takes the rod and slots it into his butt-guard. He handles the rig more confidently than Larry, makes the process look less labour-intensive.

'How's he runnin, Paddy?' asks James.

'I think he's fucking surfacing,' says Basking, yanking his gaze along the trajectory of the line to where it pierces the water and intersects with a fly-black silhouette that grows larger as it nears the surface. Maybe fifteen metres out a fin appears. I had thought that the fin of a shark would sever the waves hard and sharp, but this fin flops instead from side to side like a stubby column of jelly being dragged behind a speedboat.

'Jesus,' says James, 'this one is bloody eager.'

'Does this happen often?' asks Larry, trying not to sound disappointed, and almost succeeding.

'Not often,' says James. 'But sometimes one of them will practically jump onto the deck, almost like it wants to be caught.'

'Suicidal sharks,' suggests Larry.

'Maybe.' James does not sound convinced. But he is not giving his attention to Larry. His cocked head is aimed along the sight of Basking's line. Basking drops the rod and plays out a length of line, then lifts and reels it back in, then does this again, and again, jerking the shark a little closer with each repetition, as if he isn't fishing so much as bringing an unruly dog to heel.

Ten metres from the boat. The shark does not want to come any further. It regains its fight. It swims against the hook, its fin smacking loudly against the water, desperate, its tail thrashing behind it, slapping up spray and spume. Basking stumbles forward and almost drops the rod. James skips up behind him and grabs his harness.

'What the fuck are you doing?' asks Basking.

'Just a reflex,' says James.

'Let go of me and don't stand so fucking close.'

Five metres from the boat. James has stepped away from Basking and now stands ready with a gaff at the gate in the

stern. Four three two metres. I turn away and look at Larry, who stands to Basking's left, his eyes flicking between Basking and the shark. He looks worried.

Probably a metre now.

Then Larry's expression changes. In the moment before I turn in reaction to simultaneous grunts of satisfaction from James and Basking, I read resentment in his face. Enough information for me to surmise that they have landed the shark. And, yes, when I turn, James is dragging the fish through the open stern gate while Basking is replacing the rod in its holder and stands with his arms folded, looking content but not smug.

James works efficiently to retrieve the hook, measure the long, lean, tapering body, tag it, photograph it cradled in Basking's arms and release it back into the sea as quickly as possible. I wonder how it is feeling and fancy that its blank black eye catches my own. No, not blank: don't want to suggest that it is lifeless: not that. And so delicate looking. The eye is like a bubble of oil or a dark egg yolk that might burst if you touched it. Indifferent, perhaps, but alive, very much alive, and strangely fragile despite its ferocious profile. And not even indifferent, no. For want of a better word. Uncomprehending, maybe. And incomprehensible. A different order of life certainly. Apart from us, completely removed from the human sphere.

When it is released I watch it flick away. Its head dives and the eyes with it. Its silhouette darts, darkens and disappears.

Then Larry speaks, asking, 'Will there be more sharks for us to catch?'

'Sure,' says James. 'There'll be plenty more sharks.'

*

While we wait for another shark to attack the lines, the clouds I had seen earlier come hobbling over us, dragging with them a lash of grim, insistent rain. We sit in silence with the hoods of our oilers and raincoats pulled forward over our brows. I watch the moisture gather on my brim in drops that linger, then detach and fall gravely one by one to the deck.

Everything is quiet; the world is muted. The gulls that had flown in our wake, following the chum slick, are gone. The waves are pulling their punches against the *Maeldun's* hull. No one's really talking. And I've gone inwards, not thinking, not even really day-dreaming, just attending to the emotion that had appeared—that I'd become aware of—when Larry had asked his question of James: *Will there be more sharks for us to catch?* The yearning in his voice affected a physical reaction in me, and my consciousness is beginning at last to comprehend the changes being wrought in my body, the tightened muscles, the pulsing, pumping blood-flow in my head, the constrictions in my stomach, the prickling skin.

Hate. The feeling that has overcome me (overcome me again, I should say) is hate. Hate leading to resolution. To a resolution.

*

The rain passes. Hours pass. We have by now hooked and released six sharks, all small- to medium-sized. Clouds are accumulating once again in the west and the waves—relatively docile until now—have frothed up, a strong breeze driving them into whitecaps that rock the boat from right to left. We have drifted back into sight of land, and another shark has taken the hook.

It's a big one, nine or ten feet long, easily the largest bluey

James has ever seen in Irish waters—or so he claims; he could be having us on—and he insists we strap into the fighting chair at the stern before 'running the mother'. Brendan and Brian have both had their turns at reeling in the shark, and I am now persuaded to have my go. I strap myself in. I place my hands on the rod and as soon as James releases his hold, I feel a weight at the end of the line, a strong, vivid weight, swimming backwards and forwards in a loop, switching hard against the limits of the line like a caged panther.

I am struck by the emptiness of the endeavour. We have, like magicians, summoned this creature from another reality, from its realm, in order to bind it to ours. And for what purpose? We are not going to consume it. At least, not physically; we won't eat its meat, or its viscera, but I suppose we will ingest what it represents, its symbolic essence, in order to fuel our egos, and the thought that Larry of all people should be not only encouraging but participating in this fantasy ... it only confirms me in what I intend to do.

James senses my distraction and asks if I have had enough. I tell him yes, let him take the rod, and release myself from the chair. I stand up, feeling displaced. Another rush of hate—for myself, for those with me on the boat. For Larry. He has taken the rod after me but is refusing to bind himself into the chair. James is trying to pry the rod from him; Basking is mediating.

'Listen, James,' he says, 'you'll be well paid for this. We'll make sure you get a large bonus. Just let Larry do what he wants.'

'Spare me the bullshit, Paddy,' says James. 'If your mate here gets pulled over, that's me finished. I'll never be able to get insurance on the boat again.'

'We won't sue.'

'Everyone fuckin' sues.'

'We won't sue,' insists Larry, struggling to maintain his balance as he pumps the rod.

James releases his hold on the rod, his arms flaying in exasperation. 'There's always some cunt who thinks he's Ernest-fuckin'-Hemingway,' he shouts. 'It'll serve you right if you go over, you stupid bloody Mick.'

Larry does not seem to register the insult. He totters towards the stern gunwale, rigid tendons stretching the skin in his neck. But he shrugs off Basking's hands when the bigger man tries to balance him.

'This one's mine, Pdraig,' he says.

Basking stands back, hands held up.

Yes, I hate Larry: especially Larry. And even though I would love to tell you that I hate him for some terribly profound reason—for some tragic Shakespearian flaw for which the cosmos has sanctioned death, or for his actions: for what he did to Tom, for how he treated Fergus, for what happened between Deirdre and me only two days before—there really is no reason, no good reason anyway. Yet I nonetheless find myself inching across the deck towards him. I find myself putting out my hands. I find myself, as Larry is tugged forward on his toes, placing them on his back at shoulder and hip height.

I find myself pushing.

Larry flails forward. His body pivots around the gunwale at the thighs and disappears into the water.

'Blueys are not man-eaters,' James had reassured us before we'd left port, 'but they have been known to take chunks out of people in the water so make sure you don't fall in.'

James had also mentioned that the favourite colour of blue sharks is life-jacket orange and although Larry isn't wearing a

life-jacket his oilers are banana-skin yellow and that's close enough I hope.

The shark is coming for Larry, who's sinking. He's splashing and kicking to stay afloat, but he's sinking. And the shark is nearly on him. It is big. Seems easily a third the length of the *Maeldun*. We can all see its cobalt-blue body bearing down on Larry, the line still hooked in its mouth, the rod dragging along behind it.

Larry can see it too, can see it steering for him, and he screams. That's right you bastard, I think: scream. Scream.