

"SHARK YEARS" FINAL

a. *Anaconda* (1997)

b. *Bats* (1999)

c. *Magic in the Water* (1995)

d. *Deep Blue Sea* (1999)

TRAILERS

28 mins

III. Shark Years

You are making a movie. You're making a movie of a certain type that hasn't been made before, and it's got everyone around you nervous. The year is 1974, and *Blazing Saddles* is the year's highest-grossing picture to date. You could've made a comedy.

The summer day is hot and stifling. It's July, and the movie's supposed to be finished by Christmas. Less than a quarter of it is shot, let alone cut or finessed. It seems an impossible task. Christmas is the moviegoing season, when the majority of box office dollars are spent, so that's the way it has to be. An executive from the studio has flown in from Los Angeles, a six hour flight, to monitor your progress and report any serious problems on set. You and several others are gathered at the dock, watching the approach of the long black limousine, its windows opaque, impenetrable. Behind you, the Vineyard Sound, then the island, beyond that the limitless ocean. Who knows what today's visit will bring?

Already there have been problems that may have derailed a movie of lesser importance to the studio. New camera rigging and equipment has been necessary to achieve certain shots and camera angles your brain, in its wheeling boyhood flight, pictured all too easily. Many warned you that you'd have to be a fool to shoot on the open water, and they were right: you are a fool, or something very close to it. Your sneakers haven't been fully dry in over two months.

The creature itself is one problem. The heaviness of it. The first one sank straight to the bottom, the ocean floor leering hundreds of feet below, yawning up to catch it. You can't even remember if they fished it out. But then there was another, and another, and in the prototypes you began to see something: the possibility of terror. The taut, gray flesh catching the sunlight, the water rippling above it. The mouth that can stay closed only for so long. Once or twice you've noticed a crewperson stop and double take, eyeing the twenty-five-foot monster in its stillness, the cameras paused. It's not real, he can't be real. But for so many he will be. Affectionately you call him "Bruce".

The limousine has pulled to a stop directly in front of you. You remove your sunglasses and perch them on your ballcap, apprehensive, as a suited man slides out from the passenger door. You notice he doesn't wait for the driver to come around.

“Alright, Steven,” the executive says, grimacing. “Show me your *Jaws*.”

—

A Elsewhere in space and time, It's July 29, 1999, a Thursday afternoon. An 11-year-old boy is cramped in the backseat of his family's minivan, surrounded by luggage, Starburst and Slim Jim wrappers squeezed in every crack. His feet aren't even touching the floor of the van, but his raised knees serve as a nice surface for the brand new hardcover he has propped open inches away from his face, the smell of BJ's still lingering on its pages. He's reading *The Trench*, Steve Alten's first sequel to *The Meg*, released just months earlier in May. He finishes one chapter, and just in time. As he bookmarks the page, The Old Mill and Keye's Pancake House pass through the corner of his eye. They've arrived.

↓

The rest comes flooding back, almost all at once. He can't even tell you what he saw first — Slickers, as yellow as the sun, or the Kilimanjaro, as tall as the sun. But he can tell you what he remembers the most: the marquee on the Strand. Letters spelling out *Runaway Bride*, *The Blair Witch Project*, *The Haunting* and *Inspector Gadget* welcome him on one side, and as his family passes the theater towards the Waters Edge Inn, he turns around to catch one last glimpse of the theatre through the back window. For a moment, he can read the opposite side of the marquee, receding behind the hill. It displays one title only: *Deep Blue Sea*.

His family is insistent they take a boat tour first thing, so they have more time at Enchanted Forest tomorrow, their last day before check out. As they depart from the shore behind the Water's Edge Inn, he can still see the title *Deep Blue Sea* staring back at him from The Strand marquee, disappearing into pine and escaping him once again. Would he get his chance to see it, or would it disappear from both cinemas and the Top 10 as silently as *Lake Placid*? He knows this was a possibility, and slumps over the boat railing. That's when he sees it: a shark fin gracing the surface of the lake, trailing the boat from behind. He thinks about warning the captain, about saving his family, but there's a better opportunity at hand: a movie... his own movie.

The guide tells them they're approaching The Hollywood Hills Hotel, developed in the 1930s by the wealthy developer Joseph Young Jr. The guide continues, almost solemn now, adding that Young died two weeks before the Hotel opened. The boy knows how long two weeks can feel. It was just two weeks ago that *Lake Placid* had left theaters, and since he never got the chance to see it, those two weeks felt like forever, at least until *Deep Blue Sea* opened.

As the boat inches past the Hollywood Hills Hotel, a shiver runs up the boy's neck. Is it Young's ghost, or the shark lurking around in his imagination? Or is it something else — a strange energy dislocated from its original time and setting, having wandered astray from across the United States, on another coast, in another Hollywood Hills...



—

In early November the studio, 20th Century Fox, makes a radical decision. Due to unforeseen production delays, *Jaws* will not be released at Christmas, but the following summer, in June. By this point you are back in Los Angeles, editing the raw footage. Among the Hollywood elite the film is already notorious for going a full 100 days over schedule in principal filming, the first time in history, and its new release date appears to be a death knell. Everyone knows the summer is a graveyard for movies.

It's the end of a long dinner party in LA's infamous Hollywood Hills. The moment when the plates have not quite been cleared, as conversation creeps to a finish. Your host, a successful producer, clears his throat, glancing down at a half-eaten filet of sole. One hundred days over schedule. Images of serrated teeth, an impossible form tearing beneath the hull of a fishing boat occupy you. Palm trees shift against the windowpanes. The unseen is always moving, in your Pacific state of unrest. There's a scream from outside, where the producer's young daughter has been frolicking past her bedtime. The pool, everyone thinks at once.

You follow the party quickly outside, where the danger is quickly gone: just a father comforting the shape of his seven-year-old daughter, at the lip of a kidney-shaped pool. Just a mild scare. Something small receding into the bushes, footfalls slippery on wet concrete. There is a ripple in the pool, nothing, anything, where the water is creature-less water. You look beyond them, father and daughter, smiling now amongst friends, gathering and drifting back into the house in the triumph of being alive, look beyond them into the pool, where you imagine the concrete floor dropping away, revealing endless dark.

Sometime after, Steven Spielberg finishes *Jaws*.

And on June 19, 1975, Mike Flynn pulls into the parking lot outside his summer job at a movie theater in Syracuse, New York. He loves working the closing shift on Thursdays. He and his two best friends, Paul and Mark, have a tradition of staying late at the theater on Thursday nights to preview whatever the weekend's new release is. There's no studio protocol to prevent them from doing so, no locked files. The prints arrive several days in advance, heavy and bandaged with packing tape, piled suspensefully in the back room. Tonight there's something called *Jaws*. They've invited a couple girls to come hang out and watch with them. The supply of stale popcorn is seemingly endless, like another ocean. There might be a couple beers to pass around, too. Not that you heard it from me.

The next day is June 20th, *Jaws*' official opening day. A middle-aged woman named Mary French arrives early at the theater. It's her day off from waiting tables across the street. The first showtime is set for 12:15pm. She doesn't know what to expect from *Jaws*; she just liked the title. In the summertime she thinks of the air-conditioned theater as her private, darkened pool, something to slip into and luxuriate in, to find clarity in being underwater. She finds her seat

inside, one of just a few unsuspecting patrons there. A beer bottle rolls out from beneath her, sloshing out one last, warm sip of Bud.

"Kids," she thinks, a wry smile forming. The movie is about to begin.

—



Following the boat ride in Old Forge, the boy stands on the hotel balcony facing Enchanted Forest, his eyes tracing the water slides until he becomes dizzy. His focus shifts to Calypso's Cove, and notices the shark fin illustrated over the logo on its signage. He isn't sure if he's dizzy, sleepy or just plain hopeful, but the shark fin suddenly becomes disembodied from the sign, floating away — no, swimming away — into the night. Towards him. Towards all the unexpected guests and locals in Old Forge. While everyone lies still asleep in their beds or cots, this shark isn't stopping for anything, or anyone.

Naturally, he wakes up the next day feeling funny, like he's already plummeting down the Kilimanjaro. His family packs their towels and cross the street to Enchanted Forest Water Safari. He skips the dry park today, and goes straight for the water. Something in his heart leads him there. His first plunge is down a windy blue water slide. Another boy his age standing behind him in line taps him on the shoulder. "Hey, I saw you on the boat tour earlier," he says. "You were staring really intently at the water. You see something?" He shrugs and before he responds, the lifeguard ushers him forward, down the slide. He emerges at the other end into the pool and watches the boy behind him push off into the slide. He waits for him to emerge at the end, but he never does. He waits to be sure, but there's no sign of the boy, as if the slide swallowed him whole. The day is getting stranger and stranger, but he has to move on. The lazy river is waiting. He feels better floating gently on his single tube, and even closes his eyes for a while. Behind him on the river are three older girls, who he thinks he recognizes from the *Lake Placid* trailer. He blushes a little. They're goofing off, splashing each other and yelling about some drink they had at Slickers the night before. Then, out of nowhere, the furthest girl gets sucked through her tube, and then the middle girl too. There's a split second where the third girl looks back, confused, wondering where her friends went, and *floop*, she gets pulled down with them. The boy gets out of the river immediately.

A little later on, he gathers back some courage and wades out deep into the wave pool, to where his feet no longer touch the bottom. It's calm, but everyone's on edge — finding their footing, bracing themselves for impending clash of waves. "Where did it go?" someone from across the pool shouts. He's not sure what they're referring to. Maybe the waves. Maybe something else. Then the waves hit. He's trying to keep his head above water. Everyone's a blur. Somebody's tube bumps him in the side of the head. He hears a scream, not a fun scream. His nerves flare up, and he turns to face the shore of the pool, hoping to find some semblance of order on land. But instead all he sees is more chaos, and in the far distance, in the dry section of the park, he watches the giant Paul Bunyan limp through a patch of pine trees, getting caught in some wires and pulling the entire ski lift ride out of the ground. He notices Paul

Bunyan's shirt is soaked red, the wet sleeve clinging to his arm. In fact, it doesn't even look like there's an arm there anymore. He looks around him, water on all sides. It's stained red now, or had it been the whole time?

Did he imagine this nightmare into existence, at the expense of all these innocent vacationers? He can't help but feel to blame, but there's no time for guilt...

That's when he feels it. The sharp sting on his foot, and then a tug. Then another, more prolonged sting. And everything goes black.

—

Fully-sized, the Great White Shark ranges from 1,500 to 2,400 pounds, with females reaching lengths of over twenty feet. Surprisingly little about them is known, but they are estimated to live as long as seventy years.

Meaning a shark born the same year as *Jaws* is still alive. What has she seen? One of the things everyone does seem to know about sharks is they need to remain in constant motion, even while resting. Like the box office, she never gets the day off.

When *Jaws* opened to \$7 million dollars in the summer of 1975, a shark was swimming. As it ascended, week by week, deeper and deeper into the public psyche on its way to a staggering \$260 million, she continued, unfazed. *Jaws* spawned three sequels, each somehow furthering the myth but declining at the box office, dissolving into the pedestrian. Along the way there were imitations — *Orca*, *Piranha*. *Alligator*. By the time of *Jaws: The Revenge* — the first *Jaws* film to take place over the Christmas holiday — the genre had been tapped out. It was 1987. Sharks were not to be seen on the big screen in such a way again until *Deep Blue Sea*.

On July 30th, 1999.

And still she swam.

Swimming past and through *Deep Blue Sea*, and *Open Water*, *The Shallows*, *Shark Night*. Even *Shark Tale*. The return, and quick demise, of *Piranha*. The ocean turning into plastic. *Sharknado*. Keeps swimming, blood in the water, red turning from blood-red into Netflix red.

No longer a child. Perhaps a mother. Still she swims.

—

Back in the wavepool, the boy sees a hand pierce the water from above, reaching for him. He grasps at the hand, finally taking hold of it, and he's pulled up to surface. It's his mom, protective but calm. "Is everyone okay? Are you okay?" he asks frantically. "What are you talking about?"

she replies. He gives her a perplexed look. "Come on," she continues. "We've gotta dry off. We'll be late for the movie."

At the box office window, his mom buys them two tickets. "For *Deep Blue Sea*," she says and gives her son a wink. His fear recedes, and he smiles back. The owner of the theatre steps out from the box office. "You like sharks?" he asks the boy. "Yeah," the boy responds. "Yeah, I think I do." The theatre owner goes behind the concession stand and brings back a small reel of film. "You can have this then. Keep it safe." It's the trailer for *Deep Blue Sea*.

In the auditorium, he scans the audience, which is packed but for a few empty seats in front. He sees the boy from the water slide, also with his mom, and they nod at each other. The other boy's excited, too. In another row, he sees the three older girls from the lazy river sitting side by side, holding hands even. As he and his mom near their seats in the front, he looks back at the crowd and spots Paul Bunyan crouching in the far back corner, his head grazing the ceiling, chuckling and scarfing down popcorn. He takes a seat next to his Mom, the room goes dark. A blue Warner Bros logo fades in from black, rippling over water.

That boy is in this audience tonight. He's any of you: the brave, curious moviegoer. He's not afraid to dream, to have fun. He's not afraid of the water, or where it might take him. He's also not afraid of fear. Because he knows that what might scare him — or bite him — at any given moment is something to celebrate. It means you're alive, for now.

—

Jaws opened on 464 screens in North America, a very wide release for the time. It singlehandedly created the idea of the summer blockbuster, transforming the movie release calendar and film history at large, grossing an astonishing \$260 million dollars. What gives a movie the power to forever change the way we look at water? So many people think something, anything belongs to them. Sharks remind us otherwise. The water is theirs. Today, forty-three years later, *The Meg* opens on 3900 screens, eight times *Jaws*' original number. With your help, how high will it go? **MUSIC STOPS**

How do we make sense of the numbers, the years? If we counted the creatures—not just the sharks, but bats, too, anacondas, piranhas, bees, feral cats and rabid dogs, all the lions, tigers and bears—if we counted them all, what would we find?

At the end of *Lake Placid*, as Bill Pullman and Bridget Fonda ride off into the sunset together, the killer crocodile vanquished, Bill Pullman pauses wistfully and says, "I already miss the crocodile."

Do you?

In a recent interview about *The Meg*, when asked how audiences might feel about its own water monster, director Jon Turteltaub clarified, "I want people to fear The Meg, but I don't want them to hate it."

And that's where we want to leave you. Don't hate The Meg. Fear The Meg. For shark years, she has been swimming, making her way to you tonight on the big screen.

Sometimes for us to love someone we first have to fear them. For us, it's time to fear *The Meg*.

IV. *The Meg* (2018)

113 mins.

V. Darkness to come: *The Nun* (2018) teaser

1 min.