



Sunset Cliffs
Photo by Justin Brown

CASE: GSAF 1994.04.16.R

DATE: Saturday April 16, 1994

LOCATION: The incident took place in the Pacific Ocean at Sunset Cliffs, San Diego, California, USA.

NAME: Michelle Von Emster

DESCRIPTION: She was a 25-year-old female.

INJURY: Her body was recovered April 16, 1994. Autopsy revealed that her death was *not* caused by a shark.

SPECIES: Bites by blue sharks were post-mortem.

SOURCES: Ralph Collier, Global Shark Attack File
Alex MacCormick, page 147

BuzzFeed Videos, January 27, 2017
https://www.buzzfeed.com/ryanbergara/the-mysterious-death-of-michelle-vom-emster?utm_term=.nqQ3Aew4Q#.paV56a824

CALIFORNIA, USA, 1994

A young woman whose body was found floating off a San Diego beach is believed to have been the victim of a shark attack, lifeguard officials said.

“Large pieces of flesh were missing and we don’t know what else could have caused that type of wound,” said Lieutenant Brant Bass of the San Diego Lifeguard Service. He said the right leg, most of the left leg and pieces of muscle tissue were missing from the victim’s body.

The victim, who was unidentified, is described as white, between eighteen and twenty-four years of age, with brown hair, brown eyes and a butterfly tattoo on her right shoulder. The body was found in an area known as Sunset Cliffs on Friday afternoon by a surfer who had seen a seagull standing on an object in the water and had paddled out to find the mangled corpse.

The area is not generally frequented by swimmers, but its small sandy coves are sometimes used by sunbathers.

Bass said a shark expert called to the scene believed that a great white shark may have attacked the young woman. He said shark attacks were rare in the area, but suggested that those venturing into the waters should be “good swimmers.”

Reuters World Service, 16 April 1994

In the spring of 1994, I fell in love with an extraordinary woman. She worked in a local coffeehouse owned by the owner of the bar where I worked at the time. The two venues, Winston's Beach Club and Rumors Café, were adjacent, connected by a shared backroom door.

Michelle had brains, beauty, gusto and grace. She had Newcastle hair and coffee-bean eyes. She also had leukemia, though it had been in remission for two years.

Michelle Von Emster



Before each bartending shift, I used to come through the backroom door into the coffeehouse and request her special triple mocha mint masterpiece and revel in those short moments of her enlightened, enthusiastic conversation. My heart fluttered from espresso and infatuation.

Finally, after a month of courting, she agreed to come over to my side of the door for drinks. To the drone of a lame-ass Wednesday-night band, we sat at a table and chatted. She told me about her war against the cancer and how it had focused her on the important things in life. She said she might be moving to San Francisco to be near her family. She said she loved to surf naked at twilight and told me about the butterfly that was tattooed on her shoulder blade and how she might show me later-if I was lucky.

I bought another round and returned, of course, to find an enormous, swaggering, intoxicated oaf in a wifebeater hovering at the table appraising Michelle as though she were a peach tree and he was Paul Bunyan. "Let's get out of here," blurted Michelle, wide-eyed.

We guzzled our drinks, warned Tom, the newly hired doorman, about the lumbering, lovesick lumberjack and began the long walk home. We walked and talked and held hands and, just a few blocks from my lair, er, I mean, house, Tom the doorman pulled up in his pickup truck. He was distraught.

Apparently, just after we left the bar, Paul Bunyan flew into a rage and ripped the front door off its hinges. After the melee, Bill, the owner of Winston's, fired Tom for doing nothing to stop him.

"I need to talk," moaned Tom. Greeeeeat, I thought. I can't wait to listen to some guy I don't even know mewl over his problems when I'm trying to make love to the enchanting Princess Papillon. Was it not clear to Tom that Michelle and I were about to unravel the quintessence of the cosmos? Couldn't he see that he was about to become the biggest, bulgingest, squeakiest, annoyingest third wheel of all time?

Tom stared at us from the window of his truck. He looked like he was going to cry. I invited him over. Once home, we made ourselves comfortable. I sat on the far left of the couch and Michelle sat next to me. Tom, instead of taking the vacant, super-doooper reclining armchair, plopped his fat ass on the sofa next to Michelle!

So there we three were on the couch. Tom groused about his miserable existence, scratched his fat belly and swiftly dispatched four beers while Michelle and I stole fleeting gropes and kisses. The truth was that I didn't care about the firing, or about Paul Bunyan and the front door. It all seemed pretty clear cut to me-a doorman needs to protect the door, pretty much by definition. I cared only about the ticking clock. There was much loving to yet lavish, many toes to very massage, two nipples to much lather.

Just when it seemed things couldn't get any worse, they did. Tom's head tipped back, his mouth dropped open and he began snoring as though his lungs were gasping the last few droplets of the world's air supply. I shook him repeatedly until his eyes slowly opened. "Tom, it's very late. You should be going, huh?"

"Yeah," he said, and fell back to sleep. I woke him three times. Three times he fell asleep. I wanted to kill.

Defeated, Michelle and I crawled into each other's arms. We sweet-talked, kissed and fondled to the soundtrack of Tom's baritone snores. She unbuttoned her shirt (though her bewitching black bra remained intact) and showed me the infamous butterfly: a masterpiece of ink, muscle tone and femininity. But I needed more than that butterfly-I needed the cocoon. But, while the snoring beast contaminated the air, she would take things no further.

At 5 a.m., my sweet Lady Papillon re-buttoned her clothing, scribbled my number on a matchbook and climbed into a cab. She said she would call me the next night.

But she didn't. One... two... three days passed and no call. Had I done something wrong? Was our love not meant to be? Was the great snoring beast to blame?

On the fourth day it was official. Our love was not to be. I sat dejectedly in my living room, watching the news. The coroner was hauling an apparent shark-attack victim out of the water in Ocean Beach. The victim — a woman in her 20s-was naked and unidentifiable, except for one distinguishing physical characteristic: a tattoo on her shoulder blade of a radiant Monarch butterfly. Later, a friend confirmed the horrible truth: Michelle had gone late-night surfing and encountered, unbelievably, a Great White shark.

There's a moral in there somewhere. Perhaps it's "Just when you beat the cancer, they send in the sharks." Maybe it's something else.

I don't work at Winston's anymore. And Rumors Café has been replaced by Starbucks. But somewhere under the layers of that crisp, contemporary Starbucks paint job is the smell of Michelle's mint mocha masterpiece, which I still miss to this day.

In warm memory of Michelle Von Emster.

Sincerely,
[Edwin Decker](http://www.edwindecker.com/), <http://www.edwindecker.com/>

SOURCE: http://www.jawshark.com/great_white_shark_news_articles_us.html

The Mysterious Death Of Michelle Vom Emster

What happened on Sunset Cliffs?

This week on Unsolved, we're doing a deep dive into the death of Michelle Von Emster, a woman whose body was mysteriously found on Sunset Cliffs in San Diego.

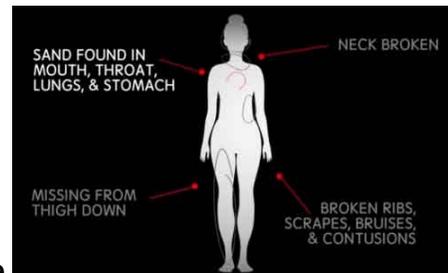
Michelle was found naked by two surfers; the only notable items on her body were a brass bracelet, two rings, and a butterfly tattoo. She was taken to the lifeguard station and examined by medical examiner, Robert Engel.



Engel did not cite a cause of death in the report, but said that her body could not have been in the water long. The consensus at the time was that this was most likely a shark attack.

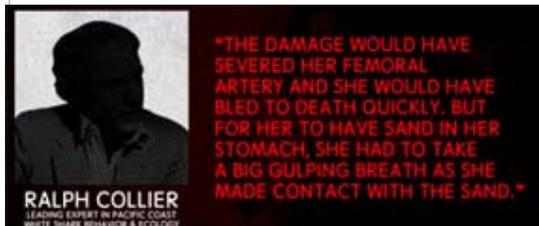
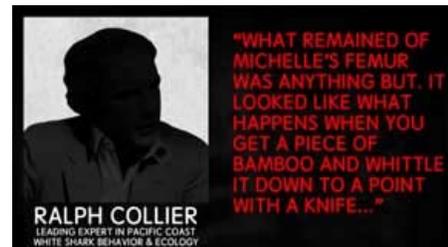


One day later, a formal autopsy was performed by Brian Blackbourne. Blackbourne determined that Von Emster was alive when the injuries were inflicted, but agreed that it was likely a shark attack.



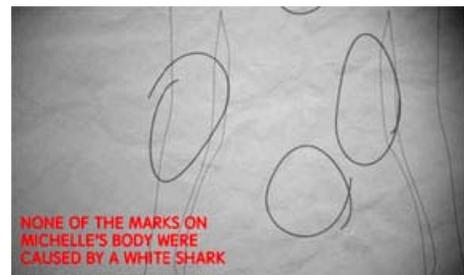
So case closed, right? Not quite. There were a couple sketchy factors that came into play. Though Blackbourne determined her death was a result of a shark attack, he had never seen an actual death caused by a shark before for reference.

Ralph Collier, a great white shark specialist, said the break on Michelle's leg was not consistent with that of a shark attack. He said if it was a great white shark, the break would have been clean and Michelle's bone was almost whittled to a point.



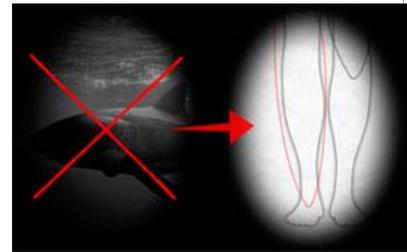
Another thing that didn't add up was how much sand entered Michelle's lungs. If her leg had been torn off, she would have bled to death quickly and been unable to take a big breath and inhale sand on the ocean floor. Overall, Collier felt there were too many things in the case that were inconsistent with white shark behavior.

Richard Rosenblatt, an oceanologist from the Scripps Institute who originally consulted with Blackbourne (the medical examiner), said when given more information about the size of Michelle's wounds, they could not have been caused by a great white shark





Other experts hypothesized that she may have died first, and sharks could have scavenged her body afterwards.

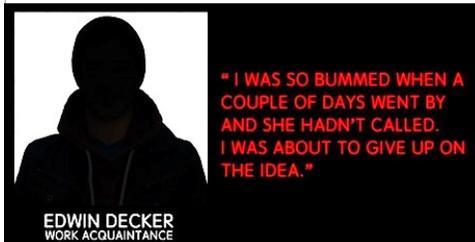


However, experts already ruled out a great white shark as her attacker... and a great white shark was the only shark that had the strength to remove her leg in such a way.

So how else could Michelle have died? One theory said she was swimming naked at night and



drowned. However, this seems unlikely since the water was a cool 59 degrees.



Another theory said Michelle might have fallen from the cliffs.

When we visited the scene, it seemed pretty likely that the fall could kill her, but unlikely it would rip off her limb.

The third theory was that Michelle was murdered.



One of the unofficial suspects was her acquaintance, Edwin Decker. Decker originally told police that Michelle liked to surf naked, which could be true, or he could be trying to cover his tracks for why her body was found naked.

Another sketchy part about Decker was that he claimed to have feelings for Michelle that he was unsure if she returned. Decker also reported having contact with her the day of her death.



And it gets worse. When Michelle died, Decker wrote this, um, interesting poem:

"The reports said there was a tattoo
A butterfly on her shoulder
which I remembered that night
on my couch when I
Like the shark
Chewed on her lips and took off her shirt."

However, Decker was actually one of the people who asked Michelle's case be re-examined. So, creepy? Definitely. A murderer? Unclear.

The second suspect was a stalker Michelle had reported following her at work. Michelle even left one of her jobs to avoid the man.

Michelle's former boss at an office supply store, Denise, said that a man came in the day of her death and made several copies of her autopsy. The kicker? The man who made those copies rode a motorcycle... just like Michelle's stalker.

So, what happened to Michelle?

1. It was def the creepy stalker.
2. Did you read Decker's poetry? He's guilty of **SOMETHING**.
3. She was taking a naked dip, the waves got rough, and sharks scavenged her body.
4. **IT WAS A GREAT WHITE SHARK.**
5. Aliens?

SOURCE: BuzzFeed Videos, January 27, 2017
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