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CURRENT AFFAIRS

FOUR TIBETAN MONKS work patiently around an ornate circle of colored sand they are gradually forming on an elevated platform in the Los Angeles Natural History Museum. They are small men, and though they are not young there is something youthful about their faces. Each of them looks as if he's remembering the punch line to a joke he heard earlier in the day, a very funny joke.

It would be hard to guess how old the monks are. Three of them have close-cropped black hair. The fourth is totally bald, not even any eyebrows, and has ears like the handle of a jug.

In their bright orange robes the monks meticulously sift tiny amounts of fine-crushed limestone onto the platform, then mold and paint it into patterns on an intricate circle seven feet wide. They are creating a mandala, a patterned, circular symbol that represents the wholeness of nature and the universe. When it is finished, this mandala will represent the Kalachakra--the Wheel of Time.

There's a crowd of onlookers behind a low barricade here in the Mammal Hall of the museum. The Kalachakra demonstration was delayed a week because of a mild earthquake centered in Sylmar that caused minor damage even to stilt houses high up in the Hollywood Hills. But now the museum has been inspected and declared safe, and the monks and their ceremony have been the Thing to See this month.

The monks don't ignore the crowd, instead, they seem to regard it as part of their work, stopping every once in a while to point at someone and nod and grin and point at the illuminations and fine-lined designs and whorls taking shape on the platform.

For its part, the crowd finds the monks themselves as fascinating as the mandala. The small Tibetan men seem to take great delight in their work. Though precise and particular, they smile constantly, and even when they don't they look like children acting serious in the midst of some joyous game.

A museum guide standing beside the platform tells the crowd that these monks, who are from the Dalai Lama's Namgyai Monastery in India, are beginning a demonstration of a 2,500-year-old religious ceremony of spiritual empowerment and tranquility said to have been originated by Buddha himself in 600 B.C.

"Every morning," he tells the spectators, "these men start work on the Kalachakra by saying a prayer of purification to the spirits they believe live inside the mandala. They believe that these deities are constantly beckoning them to finish it."

Orange robes rustle, colored sand sifts.

Tibet, the guide says, is now a part of China, and the monks are forbidden to practice this ceremony in the country of their birth. They're touring the United States to demonstrate their beloved ritual and show what their art is like, and to provide unfamiliar Westerners with a sense of their philosophy and how they apply it through their daily lives.

A man wearing shorts and thongs and a Cartier watch asks how long will it take to finish the whatchamacallit, the Wheel?

"Six weeks," says the guide.

The crowd murmurs. That's a lot of work.

"What will they do with it when they're done?" a woman asks. "It looks like it's going to be beautiful when it's finished. Will it go into the museum?"

The guide smiles. "No, ma'am. It'll go into the ocean." He even blushes a little as he points to four small whiskbrooms waiting in one corner of the platform. "They keep those here as a reminder."

The woman looks perplexed. "You mean they...?" And suddenly horrified. "How awful!" she says.

There's a kind of nervous, disbelieving laughter.

The smiling monks sift the fine-grained limestone, shape it, paint it.

Suddenly one of the monks, the jug-eared one, covers his mouth and nose -- and turns away from the mandala to sneeze violently: Ba-shoooo!

He vigorously wipes his palms on his bright robe and turns back to the delicate sand painting. He's grinning sheepishly as he sniffs and picks up another handful of colored crushed limestone. But he cannot resume his work because the other monks are laughing, laughing just as hard as they can.

The Creature from the Black Lagoon is liberating lobsters on the ocean floor. A grand gesture, a political action, really. Shame he can't just shred their trap and watch them flee, but to be their champion he has to pull them out one at a time and push them away. They drift downward, legs scrabbling nothing until they hit bottom.

Half the time they pinch hell out of him. Ingrates. He ought to let them stay in their trap, they're really too stupid to be useful as anything but food. But the Creature figures it's the principle of the thing.

The lobster trap is set upon a large concrete container. Inside the container is illegally dumped toxic waste. The Creature knows where there are many more just like it -- there are a lot of them up and down the coastline, containing toxic waste, petroleum by-products from offshore drilling, military and industrial

garbage, munitions, medical refuse, radioactive materials, you name it. There are also tremendous dump fields of slowly corroding metal drums containing toxins, contaminants, pesticides, radioactive garbage. Government and private industry understand the enormous potential of the ocean as a garbage can for things that can't be recycled or sold to the Third World. To the Creature, though, the containers are simply convenient landmarks, as they are for the lobster trappers who wonder what's inside them, but never bother to report their existence.

The Creature looks up at a splash from on high. He feels it more than hears it. Wonders who just dropped in.

A repatriated lobster clamps onto the Creature's finger. He shakes it loose and jumps up. Tall buildings in a single bound? That's nothing down here.

Deirdre Mulligan descends the dune fandango. Her notes and spec reports are stained by her sweaty hand; a pen is mounted above her ear like a Sidewinder missile in a Huey gunship. She's dressed in worn jeans, a sleeveless T-shirt, and black L.A. Gear sneakers with fluorescent yellow laces. Her exposed skin is slathered with the strongest possible sunblock.

She stops near the beach and surveys the area. The sand is flat and shines like slate. Gradient gray in the air, but it's overcast, not smog. She hopes, anyway. Gulls grate overhead. The waves are powerful tall and loud. Two boys in bright Body Glove bathing suits paddle surfboards out among the troughs. Normally they'd be wearing wetsuits, but this season the water's ten degrees warmer than usual. No one knows why. It's caused some pretty exotic finds, such as South American Humboldt squid and the *Tamaria obstipa*, a starfish native to coastal waters off Peru. An influx of South American creatures, muses Deirdre. Maybe they brought the weather with 'em. Whatever, the Environmental Impact Report she's supervising will have to take this into account.

Laguna Negra Beach is simply beautiful. The place seems somehow primal, ancient and still forming. The beach is smooth and dun, the sand fine and hard-packed. The south end of the crescent that is Laguna Negra is formed by the raw rock of the San Onofre mountain range meeting the waves. The surf here is usually mild-but the surfers like it because the waves break obliquely across half the bay. The obstruction of mountain into breaking waves, however, makes it one of the few points in Southern California where water intermittently slams rock to make huge sprays. To the north is a large wooden pier, the only manmade structure that really intrudes on the beach or into the bay.

Standing here, amid the booming surf and the unlittered sand and the spray jetting from the clash of water and rock to the misted south, Deirdre can easily imagine some old, ungainly, top-heavy, square-rigged ship tacking up the coast, for this is one of the few such areas in this region that seem untouched by time.

From a real-estate broker's point of view, this place is Nirvana.

Shit.

Deirdre Mulligan belongs to a fairly rare species: Californium indigenous, the native Californian. She was born in Northridge when there were still orange groves there, and educated in several schools as her father, an assistant principal, kept getting transferred in accordance with the lifestyle decree that insists no Southern Californian can remain in one spot longer than three years. After satisfying her carefree adolescent desires for recreational pharmaceuticals (well, all right: after whetting them), Deirdre attended UC San Diego and walked away with a BS in Marine Biology. Then a year of post-grad at Scripps and a certificate in Environmental Sciences from Berkeley.

Deirdre could have kept collecting initials after her name, but that seemed too much like hiding to her. Instead she hired out to fledgling environmental watchdog groups for a pittance, limped along on public funding and the occasional government grant, and in general tried to stick by her private agenda. An agenda not for herself but for the world. Despite a wealth of training and scientific terminology at her command, Deirdre's desires could be expressed in simple colors make the land green again, the oceans blue, the skies clear.

Times were tough for idealistic but practical environmental activists. Openings in Deirdre's field were plentiful -- if you wanted to tell multinational conglomerates where to dump their toxic waste, how to store processed uranium, how to present development proposals so that it won't look like a thousand acres of arable land weren't being forevermore eradicated. Indications were that someone was about to renege on that nifty-cool and sparkling 21st-Century Techno-Eden Deirdre was promised as she rode the slidewalks through Disneyland.

Her job at Eco/Logic, Inc., is her compromise. There she can conduct honest Environmental Impact Reports, and half the time she can restrict developers who don't have the environment's best interests at heart when they set to pillaging. Stopping development is an absurd notion, of course. But at least Deirdre gets to make sure that what gets built doesn't mess anything up (too badly, at least), and what will, doesn't get built.

Deirdre's calves tighten as her feet push into the softer sand above the tide line. It feels like those dreams where you try to run and don't get anywhere. She has the beach to herself this fine late-summer afternoon. Funny how people flock away from the beach toward sundown. Dark is when she likes the beach best.

Seagrapes pop beneath the sole of one shoe. Deirdre thinks of the Portuguese man o' wars that ride the Gulfstream currents. Innocent little gasbag jellyfish; they look like little laundry bags. Once, on Florida's Gulf Coast, she had seen a barefoot boy stomp one, pop, before she could yell for him to stop. His foot had swelled to melon size within minutes. None of that here, she thinks. And if there was anything like that here-- anything threatening, anything to reduce the comfort of this spot for human occupation -- why, it'd just have to be removed, now wouldn't it. To make this Kodak Picture Spot more perfect, more natural.

On a trip to Disney World with Grant she had noticed those signs telling tourists where to take their pictures: Kodak Picture Spot. Grant had told her he imagined a guy with a big semi truck full of those signs, driving across the country looking for picturesque locales. "Grand Canyon?" Grant had said, 'and mimed hammering. "Wham-wham-wham. Kodak Picture Spot! Yellowstone National Park? Need a couple dozen trucks there. Wham wham wham!" And Deirdre had laughed at the image of a landscape crowded with vying signs, Kodak Picture Spot signs as far as the eye could see.

Only now it doesn't seem so funny.

Still The proposed hundred-million-dollar Laguna Negra Resort will have to meet local, state, and federal clean-water, clean-air, and waste-dumping standards. Not only that, but before any development or construction can begin, it must also satisfy the California Environmental Quality Act-- which means it can't impair its neighbors' view or appreciably lower adjoining property values. Land grading and drainage must be taken into account. And most important, the development and construction of the resort must in no way endanger any specialized or rare flora or fauna.

Deirdre looks out to the Pacific Ocean where the two boys in bright colors are mounting their surfboards to catch a wave. One boy wears lime green and black trunks, the other neon orange and black. They're having a great time eavesdropping on the eternal conversation between the ocean and the shore.

Deirdre turns back to look at the beach, at the sand and acres of undeveloped land behind it. She sighs. Undeveloped. Like its potential is achingly unrealized. Bring us your yearning, your huddled parcels of land crying out for development.

From the north she hears a dull pok! pok! pok! The sound is flattened by the broad beach. Someone's putting the resort development sign back up.

If I could find one thing, she thinks. One thing to keep them from mining yet another stretch of beach forever.

A line from an old song comes to her mind. Something about the sea raging like a man, and the land giving like a woman. She realizes that she does think of the developers as men, and the land as a woman.

She laughs humorlessly. But just because it's a terrible sexual metaphor doesn't make it any less true. Or terrible.

ELOISE POST FROWNS down at the scarred sign on the dune. Why, this is vandalism. Sheer wanton vandalism. Disrespectful children running around destroying property. Honestly, don't their parents teach them anything?

She squats to examine the sign. Someone really did a job on it. Looks like they beat it with a crowbar or a claw hammer or something. She's just going to have to put up a new one. Yep, I went to college so's I could swing a hammer. You

bet.

She sighs, thinking about the remainder of her day. She knows she's mostly puttering around right now, wasting time, putting off having to go to Roger's to pick up Jennifer. The beach ought to provide a few hours of freedom from such thoughts, but it's hard for Eloise to allow herself emotional vacations, however brief. Especially since Laguna Negra Beach itself contains memories for her. Remembrances of her and Roger together in happier' times.

Frowns come easily to Eloise's face, as if it had been made ready-to-frown, with prefolded lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes. How many times must you frown to wear a groove in something as soft and pliant as skin?

Eloise looks up from the ruined sign to see the water turning metal-bright in the lowing sun. A sun that sets on the beach is still a novelty to her. Studying her face, you wonder at the forces at work in her core that have revealed themselves on the surface, much like continents sliding through the millennia across the skin of the Earth that, with time and pressure, form mountain ridges and plains. What lies in the mantle beneath Eloise's young-old face to have caused such tectonic erosion? In the way that a geologist can look at a groove in the land and sense the passage of glaciers, we can look at the riverbed tridents at the corners of Eloise's eyes, the sinkhole depression of parentheses bracketing her mouth, and see the Ice Age that was her marriage, the chronic flooding of her Marketing Relations position, the greenhouse effect of her father's overbearing attention, the firmly buried fossil stratum of her mother's early death.

Eloise surveys the shore. Looks like the beach is mine, she thinks. She squints. No -- somebody else down there, near the other side of the bay. Redheaded woman, looks like.

Eloise gets a brief, absurd image of herself in a cowboy outfit a `stridin' toward the stranger on the sand. This beach ain't big enough for the two of us. It shouldn't irritate her, but it does. If the shore were crowded it would be one thing, but to almost have it to yourself

She sighs. Obviously nothing's going to satisfy her today.

She's thinking about the wreckage of her marriage as she turns back to the shredded resort sign. Pointless vandalism, she thinks again.

What's that, Weezy! whispers a part of her mind she'd pay dearly to have amputated. Your marriage?

Eloise's face gets all pinched, looking. "The sign," she says out loud, and then feels herself turning red. She glances around. No-one to hear her.

You let a community know that someone's come along to beautify the area and up their real-estate values, she thinks, forcing her train of thought onto a different set of rails, .and they bash your sign and file petitions to stop you.

And the community happily signs the petitions because, after all, you are a developer.

The cries of gulls carry over the waves' crashing.

Eloise's position at Villa Nova Development is one of three in the Marketing Department. Basically, she makes development proposals look attractive and attends meetings and assuages homeowners and tries to argue politely and rationally with 150K young execs who think of themselves as environmentalists and have the L.L. Bean shirts and spotless Jeep Cherokees to prove it.

Now, Eloise is not naive. Villa Nova isn't developing from any altruistic desire for civic improvement. They want money, lots of it, and they spend a lot to make even more. But Eloise thinks of herself as a kind of lawyer she's paid to go to bat for the people who are paying her. She doesn't have to believe in the company's aims, as long as she doesn't disbelieve them, and as long as she benefits from them. Like any good remora, Eloise is along for the ride.

Eloise looks at the papers in her hand: Villa Nova's resort proposal and Eco/Logic's prospectus describing the parameters and scope of the Environmental Impact Report.

The right to build Laguna Negra Resort is not at all established yet in fact, a clear ownership of the real-estate parcel will not be official until that right is secured. It all hinges on the Environmental Impact Report and the county's approval of it.

Eloise kicks ineffectually at the vandalized resort sign. Here comes the Big Bad Developer.

One of Eloise's duties is to anticipate that EIR for which her company is paying a cool million, and prepare an assessment of her own that preempts it, and, if necessary, negates it. It helps that L.A. County allows developers to hire whoever the hell they want to conduct the EIR, and no law says that they can't hire someone else if they don't like the results. Technically the EIR is a public document, but when completed it will be sent to the lawyer who negotiated the deal between Eco/Logic and Villa Nova, so that it's protected as a privileged lawyer-client communication.

She begins trudging inland. Got to get a new sign out of the car and drag it back here. Won't that be fun?

Recent environmental legislation has made the issue of coastal development quite a hot potato, one that gets tossed from committee to committee until it's hard to figure where it will land. And the California Coastal Commission may sound like an important body of experts with large important offices in large important government buildings, but basically it's a dozen overworked, underpaid people in an office without air conditioning in Sacramento, including exactly one field manager for the entire Southland.

As she fishes her car keys from her purse (carrying a purse on the beach! in tennis shoes and a dress! in, this heat!), Eloise thinks of ways to work this situation in her favor -- fully aware that everyone else involved can, too.

It's frustrating enough to make King Solomon take up finger-painting, and complicated enough to make you wonder that anything ever gets built at all.

But things do. Time after time after time.

THE CREATURE HEADS toward shore toting a heavy metal drum on his plated back. It's the drum that made the splash that distracted him while he was liberating the lobsters. Not a diver, just another boat using his living room for a garbage can.

If the Creature hadn't been environmentally sensitive because of his (admittedly small) act of rebellion, he might have been inclined to let this invasion slide. But that drum had come barreling down the water to land smack on top of a lobster the Creature had freed not three minutes before. It smashed the lobster flatter than a leper joke and twice as tasteless. It kicked up a smoky cloud of bottom mud like a detonating depth charge, and when it settled the Creature could see the paint-stenciled letters on the side of the drum. HAZARDOUS MATERIALS, it read.

The Creature got hopping mad. On the outside, hopping mad for the Creature is pretty mild: he folded his scaled arms and opened his mouth to feel the pulse of the current, and he just stood there, letting lobsters scurry away, ignoring the few that remained in the trap. But inside the Creature was a slow burn. It was your basic core meltdown, where the outside looks fine while the inside collapses and heats up, and nothing shows on the outside until the inside explodes past it.

The Creature looks at that HAZARDOUS MATERIALS stencil, and he wonders how many drumfuls of hazardous materials you have to have before you need a stencil to label them all. A lot, he figures. Twenty or thirty, maybe as much as a hundred.

The Creature doesn't like this.

Which is why he's toting that drum back toward shore with the intent to leave it in plain sight for someone to find and properly dispose of on land. If these are their HAZARDOUS MATERIALS, then they should keep them.

He leaves the drum in the shallows forty or fifty feet offshore, figuring to let the tide do the rest of the work. The drum will be a lot heavier out of the water, and the Creature just doesn't feel like lugging it around. Besides which, these days he's trying to keep his shoreline appearances to a minimum, and then only at night. It's starting to get a bit too crowded around here for his taste. He's cut the sensitive soles of his otherwise armored feet on more broken glass and can lids than he can remember; motorboat drones keep him awake in the grotto (which he tries to sleep in by day, good goddamn luck); and he's been hit in the head by surfboards not once, not twice, but three times.

The Creature doesn't like the thought of leaving though. The grotto is nice, and he's invested a lot of time turning it into a place he likes spending time in. Like most of us, the Creature wants little more than to lead his life undisturbed, to keep his head above water, so to speak.

He kicks off from the drum and swims shoreward to take a quick look at likely places for the drum to appear.

The Creature surfaces. Immediately he feels the sun pressing down on him like a hot fabric. Yowza. His scaly plated skin begins to tighten like drying leather -- which, in a way, it is. His vision blurs as his eyes dehydrate. He slaps water into them and gazes toward shore.

Pok! pok! pok!

The Creature has no eyelids, and he hates noises that make him want to blink.

Pok! pok! pok!

You just don't know how much Eloise hates this. Pounding signs into the sand is hardly in her job description. One of the Mexicans hired by Villa Nova should be out here in his pickup truck to take care of this sort of thing. But Smith Webber asked her to do it as long as she was out here, "to keep our presence felt and keep our name in front of those people."

Eloise swings the hammer again, pok! She hates that sound. It makes her blink. Every time she strikes, she tries to will her eyes from blinking.

At her feet are the Resort Proposal and Eco/Logic's EIR prospectus.

Pok! Eloise blinks. It becomes a matter of proving her will not to blink.

She's probably going to pull a triceps muscle. Eloise is secretly proud to know the names of muscles. She learned them in aerobics classes, which she took up in order to regain her slim figure after Jennifer was born. Pok! She'd wanted to look appealing again for Roger. Fat lot of good that had done her. Pok! Get it? Fat lot of good

Oh, never mind.

Eloise is thinking about how to take the wind out of Eco/Logic's sails should the EIR turn out unfavorable--

--when a shadow falls across her newly erected sign.

The Creature looks from the running woman to the papers lying beside the mallet she dropped on the sand. A spiral-bound report and a stapled sheaf of paper. He bends to pick them up. Yow: bad backs run in his family. Too much time on land causes curvature of the spine. Across the top margin of the notepad is

scribbled, Laguna Negra Prelim Assmnt Notes. Wonder what that could mean? The page is filled with hard-to-read scrawls. The Creature tries to puzzle them out, but it's no use. He's been out of the water way too long and his vision's blurry. It'll be nice to have something to read back at the grotto, though; that Jackie Collins novel -- while really good -- was getting kind of moldy.

Really, though, the ooga booga had been foolish this time out. Whatever that human woman had been, she was no unsuspecting beach type. She was costumed differently, and was obviously perturbed about the sign he'd destroyed in a fit of pique, because she'd been putting up a new one.

And suddenly the Creature wants to know what this writing in his hand is all about.

He's lost in thought, trying to come up with a way to get these papers back to the grotto --

-- when a shadow falls across the page.

Deirdre Mulligan stares in stunned wonder across the corrugated ocean. Lowing sunlight sparks diamond from wave caps.

She has just seen a rare and amazing thing. Deirdre Mulligan quivers exalted, sublime, like an Old Testament citizen sharing a drink at a well with an angel. Privileged. She feels an astonishing calm inside.

It hadn't frightened her. Oh, her heart is yammering, her hands are shaking; she feels the kind of apprehensive thrill Pasteur must have felt when he held up the petri dish and saw that the bread mold had vanquished the disease. But she is not frightened.

The Scientist part of her mind objects. Hoax/it cries. Piltdown Man/ Hollywood monster movie, decorated diving suit, publicity stunt mirage mass hysteria sunspots!

And as a scientist she responds: the thing had had unseamed joints; she could see the skeletal motion of ball-in-socket and hinge joints at knee and elbow, see the supportive understructure of ribs, metacarpals, metatarsals, phalanges. And the unidirectional flanging of the gills and cup-shaped spread of hands, the elongated and widened feet, the delta-gouge of mouth in a head designed to pivot up and lead the rest of the body -- all spoke of a design evolved for horizontal travel underwater. The skin was skin, not latex: textured, iridescent from secretions, patched with algae, draped with seagrape, scaled and plated, flexible and contouring.

Whatever it was, it wasn't a guy in a costume. It had moved too fluidly, too naturally -- though not very quickly. It looked too real.

And it had gone into the water, and not come back up.

No, it was real, a real, living creature.

But -- what was it? Where had it come from? Why had it left no evolutionary record?

"It lives in the water, stupid," Deirdre says aloud. Ahh. And how much of that fossil record has been played on the turntable of Science?

Top Forty only.

And what if its bones aren't bones at all, but cartilage./ Rapid decomposition, no fossilization. Cartilage delende est.

In the same way a comparative morphologist, a zoologist -- any member of a score of sciences -- can look at a seal and see a dog that fetched an evolutionary stick fifty million years ago on the Darwinian shore and never returned, can see the horse in the hippo, the elephant in the manatee, the monkey in the man -- in that way, Deirdre looked at the creature and saw a human being that had changed its naturally selective mind however many million years ago and returned to the protean aquatic womb.

A dolphin is a distant cousin. This is a brother.

And it's living off her beach.

She's standing in calf-high water with her jeans rolled past her knees. The unusually warm water feels good against her legs. Looking down at the foam sliding past, Deirdre has the sensation that she is moving and the water is stationary --- a feeling she remembers from being on the beach as a child. Funny how a sensation, an aroma, a quick play of light, can be a pipeline back to childhood, how all of it can rush back right there in front of you as if no time has passed.

And suddenly inside her is a deep rushing echo of that outer sensation. She looks out to sea again, at an imagined place where her creature (her creature!) swims unseen. And realizes she's found her EIR's ace in the hole.

Deirdre hoots. Deirdre hollers. She kicks a spray of salt water and digs a trough in the malleable wet sand.

Something exposed there gleams green. Some kind of stone? Deirdre bends, touches its smooth surface. Surf roils round her legs. She hooks fingers beneath the object and pries it loose, swirls it in the water to wash away the sand. Holds it up to the sun.

It's the most amazing color green. Not jade, not emerald. Its edges are rounded and polished by the lapidary ocean. It is, she realizes, a fragment of a soft-drink bottle. For years it has been softened and burnished by the tides and the sand, until the ocean has turned it into something neither glass nor stone nor jewel. There's a name for it, what is it....?

Driftglass.

She looks out to sea. And looks at the ethereal green lozenge in her hand.

All right, Deirdre-m'darlin'. Let's say you turn in an EIR that says you can't build a mammoth resort because there's a bona fide green gill man living off Laguna Negra beach. And let's say you can prove it before they lock you somewhere that doesn't have any edges. What then? No resort, no siree. And maybe Mr. Gills ends up on some laboratory's meat slicer. Or on Leno. Which amounts to the same thing.

"Aw" She can't think of an expletive that quite describes her feelings.

She's still turning the glass about in her hands, watching the play of gold California sunlight across its slick surface, when a commotion behind her makes her turn.

Four Tibetan monks in orange robes are walking toward the water. One of them carries a glass vase filled with colored sands. They are grinning at the ocean like kids contemplating some really great prank. Behind them is a crowd of spectators and news reporters.

For a moment Deirdre thinks the newspeople are there because of the Creature; they've already been notified and Deirdre's precious knowledge of the Creature's existence is aching over. Then she sees the Buddhist monks and thinks that, no, the Creature wasn't a creature at all but a fake, some kind of PR deal, a movie promo, and here's the rest of it.

Then she watches the monks themselves.

The wind whips at their orange robes as they stride without hesitation into the water, unmindful of the cold and not bothering to hitch up their hems. The one holding the vase raises it high, and cameras begin to click. The monks start chanting prayers.

They are perhaps twenty feet away from Deirdre now.

They pray, smiling throughout, then bow -- to the vase, to the ocean, to one another. The one holding the vase is completely bald, not even any eyebrows, and his ears stick out like jug handles. Happily he lowers the vase, and the other three monks laugh and say "Ahh!" when he upends it and scatters multicolored sand into the ocean.

Some in the crowd applaud. Some seem startled. The monks pay no heed. They gleefully bend to the water and begin sloshing it everywhere, laughing as they mix the sand with the seawater, splashing each other and talking a mile a minute in their singsong language. Then they bow to one another again, and to the ocean, and turn away.

One of them, the bald one with the jug-handle ears, sees Deirdre staring in startled wonder there in the water. He looks at the gleaming green thing in her hand, and he grins and nods as if he knows what it is, and even as if he knows what it means to her. He bows to Deirdre, nothing solemn about it at all, and Deirdre finds herself bowing back.

And then they are gone, clapping each other on the back, kicking back little trails of sand from their sandals, bright orange robes flapping like sails, and the crowd leaves with them.

Deirdre looks at the water where they scattered the colored sand. It has blended in; there's no sign it was ever there at all. Just grayish green, the way the water always looks.

She looks at the driftglass in her hand. Suddenly happy and sad at the same time, she brings her arm back and throws it, throws it just as far as she can.