

## EPIPHANY BEACH

By Steven R. Boyett

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THE CREATURE FROM THE Black Lagoon lies in his grotto reading a Jackie Collins novel. His dorsal ridge is comfortably folded along the rough length of his back. His head's propped on a smooth rock and he's smoking a Camel Light. The cigarettes are a recent acquisition, a fringe benefit from putting the heebie-jeebie into a smoker on the shore. They often leave a pack behind in their sand-kicking haste to get the hell away.

The Collins novel, however, is not new. The Creature has read it three times now. Or is it four? The thing is, his last novel was an old paperback copy of Harold Robbins' *The Betsy*, which got soaked on the way to the grotto when the baggie he'd placed it in somehow sprang a leak. The book never dried out properly in the moist air, and before long it fell to pieces. The Creature had threaded string through the separate pages and hung them in zigzags across the grotto. He would walk in the dark from page to page, reading. The Creature can see in the dark. Those huge, light-gathering eyes have seen fish that themselves have never seen light.

That Harold Robbins sure could write.

Now, though, all people ever bring to read on the beach are Stephen King and Danielle Steel and Jackie Collins. If anyone else out there is writing novels, the Creature hasn't read them. Oh, sometimes there are ads for other novels, in back of the books he scavenges, and he bubbles with curiosity about what they must be like. Sidney Sheldon, for instance. He sure has written a lot of books. He must be really good.

The tip of the Camel brightens as the Creature inhales. Blue smoke vents from his gills to curl out of the faint orange light in the still air of the grotto. The Creature turns a page and sees that this chapter ends on the page facing. Ought to time out with the end of the cigarette. How about that.

In the book, a man and a woman are in bed with their clothes off. They do that a lot in books, especially the Jackie Collins ones. It puzzles him. Oh, he knows what sex is: it's how people make eggs. But he isn't too clear what a bed is.

The Creature has learned a lot about people from Jackie Collins. Also from Stephen King, though those books scare the hell out of him. The monster usually gets it at the end. Sometimes it doesn't, and the Creature feels a little better, but mostly Stephen King writes tragedies.

The Jackie Collins people finish making eggs and light cigarettes. The Creature takes a last long drag from his nonfictional unfiltered one, blows smoke from his neck, and stubs the butt out against his plated thigh.

Time for a swim and a stroll on the beach.

THE WATER is fine and dark. The ocean is unusually warm for this time of year. The Creature moves through the water; the water flows 'round him. Swimming quickly, he extends his huge pale webbed hands ahead of him. The flowing water tickles the fleshy crests in his palms and along the backs of his thick wrists. He kicks with splayed feet, and cups his hands to feel them redirected by the water, feel them turning him in the water like rudders.

A fish swims into his open mouth. He bites and swallows.

Grunion.

Well, no one on the shore. No ooga-booga today. Just as well. Wanted to sun a little anyway.

Before he lies on the hard-packed sand, the Creature combs the beach. Always on the lookout for things to make life more pleasant in the grotto. Sometimes he finds useful objects. Or objects from which he can make useful objects. Coke cans and potato-chip bags have little practical value for him, though he likes the bright colors. Plastic he likes. Plastic lasts forever underwater. Even slime doesn't stick to it worth a damn.

Often the best things the Creature collects are the result of putting the heebie-jeebie into some unsuspecting tourist. He's pretty much got it down to a science by now. Make sure you're still wet and glistening; drape some seaweed here and there for effect, come up behind them, let your shadow fall across their beach blanket, give 'em lots of teeth and eyes.

Ooga-booga!

They leave all kinds of things behind. Novels, cigarettes. Towels, radios, food. He'd really got to liking that Kentucky Fried Chicken. Plus the occasional terrier. And those enormous radio/cassette-player things people had started bringing to beaches in the last ten years or so are great, much better than those scrawny, fuzzy-sounding things he used to find. Reception in the grotto is terrible, but over the years he's compiled enough wire to rig an antenna that pokes up into the air. Boats run across it sometimes, but it's easy enough to fix, when he's motivated. When he's not, he has Hotel California, by the Eagles, and Nasty as They Wanna Be, by something called 2 Live Crew.

Stuff he can haul to the grotto is great. Stuff he wants but has to leave behind is infuriating. One night the heebie-jeebie act netted him a Suzuki Samurai jeep, keys and all. What the hell good was that? He drove it around a little while, just to see what it was like, but the jeep had no doors and the wind made him dry around the

gills. The suspension was so tight he felt every bump in the road. He ended up salvaging some wiring and gas, the alternator, generator, battery, antenna, and a tool kit and patch kit (which he used to fix his inner-tube raft), and left the rest.

Today is slim pickings. Condoms, a flip-flop, a comb, some change. He tosses the coins one at a time over the flat black water, counting skips. One, two, three-four-five, and gone.

His record is twelve, with a silver half-dollar.

The final penny he saves for a hovering seagull, but his hands are not well designed for throwing and he has never hit a seagull yet. Or any other bird, for that matter.

The Creature is about to lie on the sand when something catches his eye. It's on the dunes past the beach, between him and the distant pier on the north end of the bay. Some kind of bright sign hanging from a wooden post driven into the dune. But it's not yet late enough in the day for the Creature to venture from the shore to investigate it. He doesn't move very fast on land (which is why it's good he looks so scary — if they came after him, he'd never run away in time), and he doesn't like to be far from the water in broad daylight. The sun dries him out, and if he's sighted by anyone with more presence of mind than those who holier and run, all kinds of unwanted attention will end up being paid to his aquatic home.

He lies on the wet sand near the water and shuts his eyes. Already he feels the light, the heat, drying him. He feels it deep in his seamed joints, an invisible presence against his closed eyes. His sensitive eyes, each pupil the size of a fingertip (cavern eyes, dead sea eyes), a thin membrane dividing sight from blackness. The sun dries the ridges of his scales, drains the canyon fissures of his joints, feathers the lettuce leaves of neck gills, parches the webbing spanning fingers and toes to brittle parchment.

And deeper than skin: as if his bone is bleached and marrow become porous chalk. In water he is buoyed, supported, a creature more of space than of earth, living in a three-dimensional world of shifting temperatures and currents rather than crawling the flat skin of land. On the beach, though, the light presses down on him, the heat presses him down. He feels connected to the ground.

It is a delicate balance he must maintain: he cannot breathe air, and can hold his water away from the lagoon only twenty or thirty minutes. If his skin dries it will crack and split, and he will weaken until he cannot drag himself back to the water to breathe, and he will die.

Ashore his sight is blurry because his eyes get so dry.

So offshore forays are few, and sunbasking is reserved for late in the day, in

the off-season, very near the water indeed.

The Creature opens his huge eyes and splashes water away from them. The sky ripples and clears. A private plane is a black T moving against white clouds. It pulls red letters along: TAN, DON'T BURN!

The Creature waves to the airplane and shuts his eyes again.

Fifteen minutes of this is more than enough. The Creature rolls out to sea, venting from his neck, feeling his body reawaken at the water's touch. Neck muscles pump autonomically, engorging as water begins to circulate again.

Feeling more awake, he stands and trudges toward the shore, toward the sign on the dune.

Oh, yeah?

The Creature curves his fingers and slashes furrows across the plywood sign. He frowns. Once more, for effect. He slashes again and splinters rip. One slides into the soft underside of a claw. The Creature removes it delicately with a thumb and forefinger, then puts the injured finger in his mouth.

He bats the sign with his free hand. The post cracks and the sign falls face-down to the dune. The Creature turns it over so that ragged claw marks face the sky.

Let them chew on that a while.

There is night in the ocean, though a very different kind. The swimming patterns of fish change; they become more passive, some even sleep—though their defenses do not. Bioluminescent plankton provide ambient ghost light. Fish are much more approachable in the small hours, and the Creature pops them into his naturally frowning mouth like fruit off the vine. There's no true difference in the water itself at night — more than a few feet below the surface the temperature is constant and currents run oblivious to surface weather -but the feel of the water is different somehow.

The Creature has a lot on his mind and cannot sleep. That sign, for one thing. And encounters with human beings have begun to occur too often to suit him.

This is not a cheering thought. If the humans begin building along the shore of this lagoon, he will have to leave for wetter climes. His ability to defend himself with his frightening appearance is in a way an invitation to invasion, and therefore self-defeating in the long run —because if his shadow falls across the wrong people, more will come looking for him.

The Creature doesn't want to leave. He likes it here, and over the years he's made a good and comfortable home in his grotto. The water is almost always cool (though certainly not as clean as it used to be); the sun is always warm (though the air is not as clear as it used to be); the local fish are delicious (though the ones to the north, where raw sewage is dumped, are not, and the ones to the south, near the San Onofre nuclear power plant, are just plain weird); and humans have not been too abundant along this stretch of coastline — unlike the areas to the north and south, which are positively crawling with them, not to mention their huge unregulated cargo tankers bleeding strange chemicals into the water.

— Hmm. The Creature has never made the connection before, but now he wonders if the badness and weirdness of fish to the north and south has anything to do with the abundance of humans there.

Well, anyway, here in Laguna Negra there are always interesting things to hunt up, and humans are, admittedly, endlessly fascinating (from a distance!), and when he's bored there's the continental shelf that plunges deep and dark away not a few miles offshore. There's always something new to be seen there, you betcha.

Besides which, nice stretches of shoreline to relocate to are becoming an endangered species in themselves. And there's the inconvenience of moving, of having to get settled in a new place and finding a suitable grotto and making it up to be his very own. And he'd miss those Jackie Collins novels.

What to do, what to do?

He swims. His world washes across his body.

It's more difficult to plant a DO NOT DISTURB sign on the ocean than it is to pound a luxury-resort sign in the sand. Because it flows, because it covers seven-eighths of the planet, and mostly because the humans do not live in it — yet — the oceans have not been parceled out and sectioned off and redefined the way the land has. There's a quaint and arrogant notion among humans that the oceans belong to everybody (every human, that is). Beyond the Twelve-Mile Limit begin International Waters, don't you know, so that sharks that swim eleven and a half miles off the California shore are American sharks, but half a mile later they are sharks of the world.

International indeed! They are non-national waters; if the entire surface of the ocean were covered with ships, it would still represent only a ten-thousandth of the ocean upon which they floated, and the teeming billions upon billions of fish and plants and crustaceans and mammals beneath wouldn't give a damn. The skin on a soup is not the soup.

Right now the Creature (currently an American Creature) is not thinking of any boundaries and identities larger than personal ones. True, he's a visitor here. But

when humans enter the ocean, they're visitors, too. Heck, when you think in terms of being alive, we're all visitors.

From the near distance the Creature hears a faint burbling followed by an oddly childlike siren note bending downward. He recognizes it and kicks off from the muddy sea bottom.

A few minutes later he senses the presence of the caller before he sees it: a massive, graceful, two-toned, two-tonned, twenty-two-feet-long, large-teethed, air-breathing mammal. A killer whale.

Even before he sees it floating on the surface at an odd angle and swimming weakly shoreward, the Creature knows the whale is in distress. There's a certain despondency in its ancient sad call, a kind of world-weary wisdom. The Creature has heard such calls before and he knows it is the sound of a whale in pain and straggling toward the shore to die.

The Creature breaks the surface near the lopsided mass of the whale. Moonlight fractures on the ocean's light chop, glistens mercurial on the whale's tapering bobbing body. The Creature kicks with splayed toes to keep himself afloat and upright. From the teeth-scars near its genitals the Creature knows that the whale is a female; raking teeth along the genitals is something males do as part of sexual play.

The Creature extends a hand and slowly, gently, lightly touches the sensitive slick skin of the whale. His claws slide delicately just behind the right lateral fin. The deep-pitched clicking halts as the whale senses the Creature's presence.

For a few minutes they bob there on the ocean like shipwrecked aliens.

The deep clicking resumes.

Why do they beach themselves, these whales, these dolphins, these brilliant alien minds in the ocean? Marine biologists always look helpless before local news cameras and speak vaguely of inner-ear parasites and infections fouling up the cetaceans' sense of direction. But normal behavior for cetaceans is to support injured or ill members of the herd on the surface so that they can breathe. There's even a name for this: epimeletic behavior. And entire herds have beached themselves. When returned to the sea by well-meaning humans they head straight back to the shore; no fouled-up navigation there.

The Creature knows what the whales and dolphins are doing. But he isn't sure why they are doing it. What he does know, which humans don't, is that even as recently as fifty years ago the ocean brimmed with whales and dolphins communicating across vast distances with their echoing cries by using the conducting medium of the sea and the ocean floor as a sounding board, and that

when their numbers began to dwindle and their great songs and messages were drowned in the drone of engines in the ocean, the whales and dolphins began to head shoreward to die.

There's a mist rising. The killer whale shudders, spouts from its blowhole, and strains on. The Creature knows that the whale will make the shore or die trying.

Gently he clasps the black lateral fin of the ailing whale and begins kicking landward, helping the fellow creature along its way.

HALF AN hour later there's a soft grating along the whale's belly. They've made the shore. The Creature plants his feet in the yielding sand and pushes the whale as hard as he can so that its body will lodge firmly on the sand and not get dragged back out to sea by the waves that never stop trying to reclaim the land. The whale makes a sound that only coincidentally resembles a moan and begins the long labor of suffocating under its own great weight.

The Creature lets go the whalefin and wades closer to shore. There's not much to see; the beach is nearly opaque with moonlit mist. The Creature is grateful for this; it's late, it's dark, it's foggy, and the whale will be left alone.

He lowers his fan-like hands and flings water onto the whale. Its sensitive silky skin will dry quickly in the open air, and the Creature knows from experience that this is painful. But though his hands are large the whale is very big indeed, and ladling water on it by hand is woefully lacking.

He touches the whale once more, then leaves.

He returns with a fifty-gallon iron trash can. With little effort he draws it across the surface of the water and in the same motion splashes the whale.

There's a huge hiss as the whale vents stale air from its blowhole. It draws an incredibly deep but painfully labored breath. The Creature sees that the tide is going out, which means he will not have to fight to keep the enormous animal beached. The mist is so thick the Creature can't see all the whale at once. It emerges from the fog impossibly large to be alive; it must be some kind of vessel. And it is, it is! It has traveled and explored and gathered; it has roamed the drowned lands and encountered creatures no air or starlight has ever touched, skirted mountains taller than Everest whose peaks have never broken the surface. A vessel with a cargo of memories, feelings, songs.

The Creature ladles water with the trash can a few more times, then wades up to the whale's head.

Beneath the slanted white oval of an eyebrow marking is a small black eye. It's ridiculously tiny for an animal so huge, but the whale relies on senses other and

deeper than sight. Set in a permanent knowing smile below and ahead of this eye shine the milky cones of teeth.

The Creature bends toward that tiny black eye. It's clouded and dull; it does not at all look like an organ of vision. The Creature splashes water into it and the eye clears. He wades around to the other eye and wets it also. He stares with a face incapable of any expression — of remorse or sadness or grief or joy or relief or worry — and wonders if the whale can see him, and what it must think if it can.

He can see the distorted silhouette of his gilled head in the whale's dark wet eye.

But no matter. He hasn't come to the shore for such wonderings.

The Creature retrieves the trash can and returns to his task of keeping the whale wet and comfortable in its final hours.

A few hours later a helicopter roars low overhead. Violent eddies tear across the mist. The Creature watches an ephemeral dancing dervish — a mist-devil, you'd have to call it. The helicopter shudders away; the air calms.

The whale trembles.

Near dawn the whale begins breathing in great strained gasps: ffff! ffff! ffff! ffff!

Holding the trash can the Creature hesitates.

Waves crash. Once, twice, a third surging powerful time.

A long hiss, like a sigh, like the sound you make when you finally get to sit down in your favorite chair after a long exhausting day, goes on and on and fades to blend with the sound of the surf.

The Creature sets down the trash can.

By now the tide is out and the front half of the whale lies fully on hard-packed sand. The Creature leaves huge duck-like footprints as he walks to the whale's head and bends to peer into its tiny eye.

Is...?

The Creature sets a hand flat against the white marking above the dull blank eye.

. . . yes.

He stands there a moment while waves crash behind the body of the whale. The mist has begun to dissipate in the half-light of false dawn. The Creature looks like a figure out of myth, an armored weary Odysseus returned at last to Ithaca, giving thanks and a final benediction to the battered hulk of a boat that has seen him safely home. Perhaps this is not far off the mark.

After a while the Creature lowers his hand and sees that the mountains are limned by the imminent sun.

Time to go.

The Creature turns without looking back and trudges toward the crashing waves. The night's events have made up his mind. His determination is firm as he strides away from the land. Salt water falls around him. The Creature cannot cry, but he lives in a world of tears.

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Steven R. Boyett's most recent novel (with Alan Aidridge), *The Gnole*, was published in England in 1991. "Epiphany Beach" is an excerpt from his upcoming novel *Green*. The story is about a familiar monster

"I was quite charmed by the armor-plated little guy." Steve writes, "and wanted to know more about him and to see him through his uneasy relationship with the periphery of our world. I felt kind of protective of him.... I like to think of him out there some deep where, maybe sitting in a chair with his feet on a table in an air pocket of the Titanic, reading a 90-year-old novel and content in his solitude. Poor guy — even the Titanic is turning into a tourist attraction."