

LEAN SEASON

by

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Though it was the height of tourist season, the beaches were closed. The canted umbrellas of seasons past with their gay colors and lounging owners were gone, leaving only bottles and cans and a few forgotten sand buckets, which poked up here and there from the smothered shore like broken, scattered tombstones. The billboards along the promenade had long since fallen into disrepair; now they appeared stripped and worn down in the withering sun, their images of soft drinks and gyros peeling. Even "Shady the Sea-monster" seemed to frown, as if the greedy black tide and the oily spray had finally killed what the skeptics couldn't—his ability to feed the imagination.

Before the oil spill the residents had relied on natural means to purge the beaches of waste. After all, for the ambitious scavenger, food could be found there. But since the disaster the number of visiting sea birds had dropped steadily, until, at last, the squawking throngs had all but vanished.

Only the Cathode Ray Cafe, the dingy backside of which extended onto the pier ("As if it were taking a shit in the ocean, someone had once said), and its "Wor1d Famous" clams remained. Though the smoky aromas wafting from its vents now were of pig fat and lard, not clams. And those had to compete with the stench of crude oil.

Still, Wen Tsui smiled as he flipped rows of bacon with quick twists of his wrist. The Seattle Mariners were scheduled to play the Boston Red Sox this morning, and his was the only watering-hole in town with a projection TV. Business would be good. Cold beer and cash would flow like white water, and his American Dream would survive another day. Already five orders of hash-browns, crisp bacon, and poached eggs sat in the window, steaming.

"Order up, Sian!" he called.

A barely pubescent girl appeared at the opposite side, gathering up three of the plates. She delivered them to a group in the corner, all men, woolly and rough-looking. Hunters one might have assumed, had it been hunting season. The men were watching *The War of the Worlds* on Wen's projection TV. They were chuckling as a spindly-necked Martian War Machine fired upon two yokels, reducing them to smoking pork rinds with its Death Ray.

"Holy mother of Christ," muttered one of the men, the youngest. "Martian fuckin' War Machine. That's what time it is."

"Lonny, shut the fuck up."

The girl twisted sideways as she sat the plates down. She wore a Mandarin Red miniskirt—rules of the house—short enough to cause a stir whenever she wiped tables. Her child's face was made-up Geisha-style. As she turned from the booth, one of the men pinched her buttocks.

The man had dark stupid eyes and a handlebar mustache, parts of which drooped into his mouth like Whore's Hair Moss in swamp water. Sian didn't say anything, just kept walking. The man laughed.

Wen watched his daughter. *Business will be good*, he told himself.

There was an enormous crash out back. Steel against wood, as if a boat had collided with the pier. He went to the back door and swung it open.

He saw the massive, filthy-yellow city dumpster first, sprawled upon its side at the edge of the dock. It lay just within the building's shadow, shitting green-brown garbage into the already polluted water.

A cool breeze blew in from the Pacific, causing the sweat along his forehead to chill. He turned away, peering over the low roof, toward the East. The summer sky was azure, draped in frilly clouds. In it the sun climbed its great bell curve, tracing those clouds in gold. He squinted in the glare.

A breeze, yes. But a wind, a superstorm magnitude gale capable of knocking his dumpster over? Hardly.

He turned back toward the dock, the pilings of which pretty much supported the cafe, and peered into the shadows.

There was something else. Assimilation came grudgingly. He realized the dumpster and the sea were *joined* as if by a ribbon. It was huge, this ribbon, curving up from the water's surface to vanish into the container. It shifted, lolling, sunlight glittering along its length. It was painted in Alaskan crude. It was big, whatever it was, and *alive*.

Wen squinted, suppressing a shudder. He inched forward, his corduroy slippers brushing over the planks, and wrinkled his nose. It wasn't the pungent musk of rotted fish or withered greens which assailed him; he was familiar with those. Nor was it the gaseous stench of oil. It was something else, something new. He came to suspect the thing was some sort of eel, albeit a huge one. But after he'd drawn close enough almost to touch it, he knew it was no such thing, and his heart nearly stopped.

Trembling, he peered around the dumpster's rim.

The creature spun upon him, dropping a limp cod from its mouth. It hissed, opening like a black rosebud, showing spiny teeth and a white palate, which flashed toward his face.

He felt its hot breath on his cheeks for an instant and leapt back. The thing's snout collided with the bin's wall. The little man fled flailing and scrambling back into the building.

Crouched inside the entrance, holding the door ajar, Wen peered through the tiny gap. He watched the dumpster scoot this way and that. His heart knocked in his chest, a worn piston in an enduring engine. The thing foraged, ignoring him.

He shut the door.

The man stood, wavering. He reached out a questing, trembling hand and found the dicing table, propped himself against it.

He had never believed in the fabled sea-monster of the Sound—so-called "Shady." Had always thought it a simple ploy to draw tourists—which it had, by the thousands, before the spill. He'd never jumped on the bandwagon, hadn't needed to, because his clams were well-known.

Were. The spill had virtually wiped out his tourist trade. He froze. The serpent's flashing teeth still stung his retinas. Its horrid smell still lingered in his nostrils. But he was beginning to smell something more, as well. Opportunity.

He began shouting—in Chinese, for fear of alarming his customers. His boy, Chin, was first to respond, leaning from the walk-in freezer, empty cardboard box dangling from his hand. His wife, Sui-Ki, and Sian followed, bursting into the room, metal doors flapping behind.

The kitchen became a bilingual bush-blaze, the mania of which could be heard from the dining room.

"These gooks, fucking crazy," said the man with the handlebar mustache. His name was Ben Lewis, but everyone just called him "Handlebar."

Back in the kitchen, Sui-Ki retrieved her husband's camera. He took it from her, returning to the back door. He eased it open as the others crowded behind him.

The dumpster had moved, *was* moving. It was closer to the building and was being nudged still closer. The Tsuis shuffled back—then forward again. The boy moved to speak, was waved to silence. Sweat beaded along Wen's forehead. He glared at the dumpster. It was crawling at them like a huge, yellow bug.

He fondled the camera, his jittery fingers tracing its surface. That he might botch the shot was too much to bear. He spun the camera in his hands: checking focus, adjusting the aperture, removing the lens cap. Suddenly it was no longer in his grip, he was clutching dead air.

The animal reared its head as the Nikon hit the deck. It lifted it just past the top of the bin, jerking to one side as if looking away.

Nobody moved. For an instant Wen wondered why the creature hadn't seen them. Then he realized it did see them, indeed, *was* seeing them. It was watching them right now. Like a snake or a whale, it would have little if any binocular vision. He could just make out its little black lens peeking at him over the dumpster's lid, unblinking.

Wen Tsui reached for the camera slowly.

The serpent snapped face-forward, hissing, and reared up. Everyone shuffled back. From this view its head seemed flatter, more menacing, the narrow snout widening into a broad, mighty-jawed skull. It rose, barring shark-like teeth—up and up like a cobra. At the same time the polluted quay convulsed, black brine splashed, and a huge flipper, tall as a man, broke surface; sunlight danced along its crude contour as it rolled like a log in the water, and was gone.

The thing barked at the sky like a loon. The sun dipped behind a cloud.

Sian screamed.

Again, the hunter-types heard it from the dining room.

"Some service," someone said. "My coffee's getting cold."

"Sounds like a fuckin' *COPS* episode back there," said Handlebar.

"Maybe you shouldn't have pinched his daughter's ass," said someone else.

Outside, the black serpent hovered. Watching.

Wen watched, too, peering at it from inside the doorway. The blood raced through his veins. Only a few feet away his camera lay ... gleaming at him. He took a deep breath.

Daunted but still obsessed, he inched forward again. Sul-Ki rattled on in worried Chinese, groping at his slender arm. He mumbled something in reply and pulled away from her, continued toward the camera.

Again the sea-beast turned an eye on him, grunted. Wen paused, wavering. He glanced from his camera to the creature.

The thing opened its mouth and a thin hiss escaped. It began swaying from side to side, little head bobbing.

Wen lunged for the camera.

Handlebar said: "He shouldn't dress her like that, and maybe I wouldn't."

There was a hissing and a whistling of wind. The monster's head flashed forward and down—a blurred, black arrow. Wen snatched up the camera, spun on his heels, and dove into the arms of his family. The serpent's jaws snapped shut at his back.

They pulled him into the building, dragging him—as he fought furiously—into the kitchen. "No!" he shouted. He tore away from them.

He scrambled to the door. Stepping outside, he leveled the camera at the beast.

It rocked back as if to strike, hissed. His wife began screaming, "Wen! *Wen!*"

He snapped the picture.

For a nanosecond the shadows lit up with blue-white light. He saw a dark eye twinkle, the head rear back, and heard the water break as an enormous tail swung up. It impacted against a light pole, breaking the mounts, causing it to sway. The lines attached to it snapped taught. A pole near the cafe toppled, twisting.

The serpent shrieked.

The window beside the hunter-types shattered as the top of the pole fell through it and crashed upon the table in a shower of sparks. The men dove from their chairs. They covered their heads as glass skipped and plinked from the sill, plopping into coffee, landing in egg yolks.

"Son of a *bitch!*" someone cursed. He swished the food around in his mouth. "What the hell was *that?*"

"Fuckin' A," said Handlebar. He spoke around his mustache. "I'm gonna find out."

He swallowed and stood up.

Bells chimed as they headed out the front door, slapped on their ball caps. They walked out into the lot.

Screeeeee! Wump—wump—wump. Ymrrrrrrr ...

They turned and saw the supple neck and little head looming behind the cafe. It peered at them over the roof, or so it seemed, tall as the slanting street lamps. Its wide, flat head moved from side to side, slowly, deliberately.

Young Lonny Namen swallowed. "Holy mother of Christ," he said.

Nobody told him to shut the fuck up.

The thing shrieked again, languidly. A trickle of saliva dribbled from its maw. Then it was gone. It had dropped behind the cafe, out of site.

"That—that was Shady," stammered Carl. "He's fucking real."

"Real, and pissed off," said Stanley.

"We gotta call someone," said Ned.

"It looked sick, whatever it was," said Frank. The retired taxidermist was the oldest of the group and the soberest. "What do you think, Handlebar?"

Handlebar stared at where the thing had been. It was the stare of an idiot, a poor man's Jack Palance, with none of the charm or humor of the real McCoy. "The guns," he said. "Get the guns."

"Fuckin' A, right!" exclaimed Carl. He hurried off.

Frank frowned. "Is that a good idea? There's sure to be someone with a badge show up."

Handlebar spat. "There's sure to be someone dead if we don't stop that thing." He slapped Lonny's back, massaged his neck. "Besides, we promised Lonny here his own trophy."

Lonny hesitated. "I Dunno, Handlebar." He glanced at the taxidermist. "Old Frank's been right before."

"Old Frank don't own that seven tine rack you admire so much." He tweaked the kid's nose.

The kid seemed to think about it.

Frank laughed, he couldn't help it. "Handlebar, *it isn't hunting season*. Now what do you think a game warden's gonna say when he sees us outfitted like brigands?"

Handlebar stared at him. He was huge on staring. "Don't worry about it, Frank." He headed for his truck.

Frank took a step after him. "We're poaching, for god's sake!"

Handlebar ignored him, kept walking. Lonny hesitated. He shifted from foot to foot.

"They're scarin' up their own trouble, boy," said Frank. "Let 'em go."

But Lonny ran after them.

They gathered where the trucks were parked—Handlebar's at an absurd angle, on a dirt berm, grill pointed skyward like a missile—and callused hands wrapped around black steel. Shells spilled over eager palms and firing pins were rammed into position, often with the obligatory "Get in there, bitch."

Moments later they returned: hooting, hollering, a jangling parade of gun-powder and sweat. Frank watched disbelieving as the younger men passed. Custer and company were going to war. The only thing missing was a bugle boy.

"Let's go, let's go, let's go," said Lonny.

Bells rang again as the group piled into the cafe and burst into the kitchen. Sian screamed. Wen began shouting and waving his arms. "No gun! No gun!"

He grabbed Handlebar's rifle, dropping his camera, and tried to wrest the weapon away. The larger man shook him off as the camera hit the floor and shattered. It was kicked aside as the gunmen passed. They burst through the back door and out onto the dock, to where the big, yellow dumpster lay on its side. The beast had begun submerging. It was retreating.

They opened fire, anyway.

Bullets punched through blubber and the creature's blood sprayed in all directions.

Screeeeee! Screeeeee! Screeeeee!

Spent shells dropped like hailstones upon the dock. Gun barrels spat fire, smoked, spat fire again. And again. And again. The thing turned on them at last, howling. Blood bubbled from its throat and spilled from its mouth. It shrieked, but the sound was little more than a choked gargle.

"She's a-huff'n an' a-puff'n," said Handlebar. He ejected his clip and slapped in another. He pumped, chambering a round. "Let's bring her home."

The barrage continued.

"Get some!" belted Handlebar. "Get some, get some, get some!" His hand was a blur as it worked the pump-action. The gun bucked like a jackhammer.

The beast's head darted at them, propelled, still, on the shattering neck. An eye was blown out by shotgun fire. The animal's wail split the air. Blood bubbled and frothed and spurted and sprayed and traced exquisite trajectories in the dawn's early light.

The sea-beast threw back its head, rising up and up. It gasped for breath, spitting blood, and barked at the sky—once, twice. Then it fell. Its head thumped against the deck; the serpentine neck slumped. Blood poured out beneath it, spreading over the boards—it rolled round the men's boots and flowed between the planks.

Lonny Namen was the first to step forward.

He looked at the thing through the drifting smoke, and its remaining eye seemed to look right back. The animal exhaled, causing the breathing holes at the top of its head and behind its eyes to bubble. He waited for it to inhale, gazing at the eye. He could see himself there, as well as the others. Could see the sky also and the scattering clouds. The whole world seemed trapped in that moist little ball.

The eye rolled round white as he watched; it shrunk, drying out. Then the thing's neck constricted, and it died.

Handlebar slapped his back, massaged his neck. "How's it feel, little buddy?"

Lonny just stared. He stared at the eye, now white. "It—it feels good. Yeah, I'm good." He looked around at the others. "Holy shit! We got it."

Handlebar took off his hat, wiped his forehead. He pulled a snuff-tin from his back pocket and packed it. "Fellas," he said, taking a pinch, "I think we just bagged ourselves a dinosaur."

"It's not a dinosaur."

They all turned around.

Chin Tsui was walking toward them, his face white. Wen and his family had gathered again in the doorway. They stood there now in shocked silence, watching the smoke clear. Wen's daughter's head was buried in his chest. He stroked her hair.

Chin moved between the poachers and stepped over the thing's bleeding neck. He looked into the water. The creature's body, roughly the size of the Toyota Celica he drove to the University of Puget Sound on Thursdays, hovered just below the surface, huge flippers splayed. It floated there in silence, an oil-smothered island in a sea of tar and blood.

"Plesiosaur family," he said to no one in particular. "Elasmosaur, I think." He turned to the poachers, pushing up his glasses. "Hard to say now that you blow it all to shit."

Handlebar took a step toward him. Chin didn't budge. They glared at each other.

"*Chin!*" Wen waved his arm from the doorway. He was whiter even than his son and his shallow cheeks were tracked with tears. His voice cracked as he shouted, "You come inside! Crime has been committed here! This crime scene!"

The young man scowled at the poacher, sizing him up through his little round glasses. He turned and headed back.

Handlebar called after him: "We're gonna want a round of—what? Beck's? Weinhard's?"

"Beck's," said Carl.

"Beck's! And hot wings."

Something *moved*. Something brushed against the dock and the water splashed. Before anyone could react the unstable light pole toppled and the lines connecting it to the cafe snapped tight and broke.

"Chin!" shrieked Sui-Ki.

He looked up, saw the pole and cables rushing down—jumped clear as they crashed to the deck. The pole fell crosswise, blocking his return.

The power lines curled and undulated like black adders, spitting sparks. He looked at his family on the other side and waved. "I'm all right," he said.

A few yards away, the red-black water bubbled.

"What's that?" asked Lonny. He stepped to the edge.

The bubbles moved closer. Everyone watched as the pockets of air bobbed to the surface and burst.

"Is that another one?" asked Stanley.

"Could be," said Carl. "What do ya say, Handlebar? Bag another?"

Handlebar spat brown slime, like a grasshopper. He pumped his shotgun. "Do gooks eat cat-meat?"

The crowd went wild.

They fired blind into the water and plumes of froth spat skyward. Chin cuffed Handlebar across the mouth, drew blood. He grabbed the man's gun and tried to wrest it away—the others dropped their weapons, piled on top of him. They forced him to the deck, *hard*.

Lonny moved away. He looked at the water. The bubbles had disappeared.

"Wanna die, little man?" said Carl. He had Chin in a half-nelson and was bearing down upon him with all his weight. "Huh? Do you?"

"Blow yourself, you fat piece of shit! *Bai-guei!*"

Carl thumped his head on the boards. "What? What was that? I'm a what?" Chin gasped for breath, struggled. His forehead bled; his glasses were ruined.

"What am I, Chinkerbell? Hey, Handlebar! Chinkerbell thinks—"

"Shut up," said Handlebar. He wiped his lip. Listen."

The floorboards were shifting beneath their feet.

Carl looked around. "What is it?"

"Is it under the dock?" said Ned.

Handlebar ignored them, listening. The planks of the pier flexed and fell like piano keys.

Lonny retreated still further. "Maybe we should get back inside."

"You gonna swim for it?" said Stanley. "We're cut off."

Lonny looked at the cedar pole laying across the deck, and the downed lines which popped and frizzled. His lower lip started to tremble.

Suddenly, starting at the apex of the dock, the floorboards *jumped*—rifling and breaking and splintering in a line. The men clambered off Chin, scattering as something split the dock up the middle, like a torpedo. Chin turned, saw a wave of busting boards rushing at him. He scrambled to his feet and dove out of the way, landed at the edge where he saw a dark shape sweep past just below the surface. A *tail*—long as the first creature's entire body.

Everything stopped, and there was a silence.

"Stay alert," shouted Chin. He scrambled away from the edge. "It hasn't gone. It's still under the dock."

Everyone looked at each other as wood creaked and water lapped. Even Handlebar seemed frightened and disheveled.

"Screw this shit, man," said Lonny. He backed toward the cafe, toward the spitting electrical cables. His eyes were bugged out and his flesh had gone white as bird shit. He dropped his rifle.

Handlebar stared at his own boots, which were soaked in blood. He seemed to be having some sort of internal crisis. He reached up with a trembling hand and twisted his mustache repeatedly. He came out of it suddenly and looked at Lonny.

"Hey. Kid. Listen." He walked toward him, changing clips. "You're taking all this too seriously. It's toying with us, that's all."

He held out his shotgun to him. "Here. The goo—*Chin*—he's right. It's still beneath the dock. Probably scared. Why don't you do the honors?"

Lonny hesitated, trembling. "Y-you mean it's just trying to scare us?"

Handlebar tweaked his nose. "That's right."

The fire returned to the young man's eyes—almost. He looked around the shattered dock, at the riddled corpse and the oily, bloody water, at the spitting power lines and the dead lights, the peeling boardwalk on the shore.

He shook his head. "No, it's not. It—it doesn't pretend, like you. It's gonna kill us, that's all." He stepped closer. "Can't you see that? You posing hillbilly? The spill's given it a—a *lean season*. It's sick, and it's hungry, and ..."

He glanced at the corpse. "We probably just killed its mate."

Handlebar could only look at him, speechless. It was the first time the kid had ever challenged him; the first time *anyone* in the group had challenged him, except Frank.

"You know he might be right," said Ned. "We don't really know what's down there. It may be something completely different. Might be a bloody orca, for all we know."

Handlebar looked crosswise at him from under the bill of his cap, eyes in shadow. *Mutiny a'foot*, he might have thought. *Watch it*.

He pumped his shotgun. "It's playing with us, I tell you. Get outta the way ..." He pointed the shotgun at a tear in the planks. Everyone moved back.

Blam! Shattered wood and wild water exploded from the hole, rained down upon their shoulders. Blood began bubbling from the opening.

"See?" He pumped again. "It bleeds. Just like the other one."

The dock began rising.

"Jesus Christ!" someone shouted.

Wood *cracked!*—groaning under their feet, buckling. The planks split apart as the center of the dock bulged upward, like a lava-dome. Everyone tumbled into the water. A massive head broke through the wreckage, twice the size of the first, rising upon a muscular neck until it loomed over what was left of the jetty. Its snout poked this way and that, acquiring prey.

There were many targets. It opened wide, revealing rows of teeth which splayed outward like daggers, and wailed at the sky. Then, amidst a tumult of cracking timbers and splattering water, the entire pier lurched—and collapsed into the spray.

The Cathode Ray leaned toward the water, its dilapidated framework groaning. The cluttered utility pole on the south side of the structure keeled, but held. Freed of the dock's entrapment, the leviathan splashed out into the bay. Its dark head froze, as though locking onto something, then dove beneath the waves.

Lonny Namen broke surface, pumping his arms, coughing up oil-water. All was confusion: the entire world consisted of rollicking surf and too much sky. A chunk of the dock wobbled past. A soaked ball cap swirled nearby. He could hear

the others cursing, splashing, but couldn't see them. He swam for the boardwalk with powerful strokes, oil clinging to his limbs .

He became aware of two figures swimming parallel to him, Stanley and Carl, he thought. Looking around he saw others: the Oriental guy, and ahead of him, Ned. Handlebar was nowhere to be seen.

Someone shouted, "It's behind you!"

He craned his neck as he swam, saw a dark hump break behind them—*way* behind. He made eye contact with Stanley; Stanley seemed to grin, as if to say, *Plenty of time.*

And then he was yanked below the surface.

Lonny stopped kicking—he couldn't help it. His heart thudded in his chest as he looked around. There was a commotion to his left— Handlebar dog-paddling toward him, struggling. Shell casings bobbed on the water as he came.

Handlebar couldn't swim.

"Don't look at the hump!" someone cried, someone on the boardwalk. Frank. "Doesn't mean noth'n! The neck's too long!"

Stanley surfaced a few yards away, gasped. He retched oil-water—no, something else. He tried to swim but failed; his arms were severed from the elbows. He called out, choking.

The serpent broke surface, neck coiling. Its jaws closed about his head. It rose, pulling him from the water, shaking him. His arms and legs flailed like a ragdoll's. A boot flew into the air.

His headless body followed, flung into the sun almost playfully. It trailed a ribbon of blood which sparkled. The serpent pointed its snout straight up, swallowing .

There was a lump in its neck.

Lonny screamed until his throat went raw. The beast, eyeing him, screamed, too. Their cries became entwined and rose skyward together. Then it submerged.

"Swim, Lonny!"

He looked toward the boardwalk, saw Frank Garstole and the cook gesturing. Ned Freeman was there, and the busboy had only meters to go.

"Lonny! Lonny, help me!"

He turned. Handlebar was starting to flounder, he was starting to drown. Lonny tread water, gripped by a kind of paralysis. He couldn't just *leave* him, could he? Could he?

*Holy mother of Christ. Martian fuckin' War Machine. That's what time it is.
Lonny, shut the fuck up.*

He heard a splash, saw the dark hump surface about fifty feet away, heard Frank yelling, "*Swim*, goddammit!" He looked at Handlebar.

"It's gone, Lonny! Jesus, give me a fucking hand!"

Don't look at the hump. Doesn't mean noth'n.

"Swim for it, Lonny!" Frank again.

Lonny scanned the water, searching for one of the planks. He saw one just a few yards away, swam for it. He grabbed hold of the board and kicked his way back to Handlebar.

"Put your arms over it. Come on."

Handlebar put his arms over it.

"Now come on, kick!" He turned in the water, started to swim ...

Everyone on the boardwalk was jumping up and down, yelling, waving their arms. He saw old Frank Garstole, about to give himself a stroke. He saw the little cook and his little wife, their little daughter in her little skirt. And he saw the great big sun in a great big sky, and couldn't believe how beautiful it all was.

He heard the sea-beast's cry and craned, squinting, in the glare—found it hovering high above him. That was beautiful, too. Backlit Martian War Machine, rimmed in solar fire.

The head bore down, opening wide. Its jaws clamped about his throat. He was pushed below the surface, groping, choking. Blood erupted from his mouth, clouding his vision.

He tasted air, gulped—was above water again. He saw a black orb, its eye. Saw a pallid, screaming face, his own, mirrored there. The eye rolled around white as he spewed blood, gargled—was slammed back down. Blurry bubbles obscured everything.

He died.

Chin Tsui had reached the boardwalk at last. Exhausted, he climbed the nearest piling, using the ropes wound around it for hand and foot holds—found his father already there, reaching for him. Other hands joined in; Frank's, Ned's, his sister's, and they pulled him over the edge. They laid him on the dry planks where Sui-Ki covered him with a blanket. She kissed him all over his face.

The men still in the water weren't so lucky.

It went after Carl first. The flabby steel-worker dove, boots disappearing, as the elasmosaur struck at him. Handlebar continued pumping for the boardwalk. The beast ignored him, and, exactly like a swan, dipped its head forward and down, vanishing from view.

It surfaced an instant later, jaws clasped about Carl's boots. He was screaming, trying, absurdly, to pull loose the laces to shirk himself free. As those ashore looked on the thing began jerking its head up and down, forward and back, again and again, like a bullwhip.

The sound of flesh smacking against water and Carl's occasionally garbled screaming went on for some time, until Wen turned away and vomited over the boardwalk's edge. The animal, meanwhile, gnawed off the steel-worker's legs from the knees and left him to bleed in the depths.

Handlebar didn't make it, either.

In an instant it was over. The thing had surged forward and caught him just before he'd reached shore. Frank and Ned were at the edge of the boardwalk, arms outstretched, when its jaws closed about Handlebar's skull and ripped everything above his mustache away. All that remained was a gaping mouth—and a geyser of blood.

They all scrambled for the door as the serpent swallowed its meat, pulled it shut behind them.

Outside, rifles floated to the bottom of the bay. A new shade of red spread wandering over the water. And bloody baseball hats washed ashore.

The big elasmosaur lowered its beautiful head to that of the smaller one and held it there, sniffing and nudging with its blood-streaked snout.

Wump-wump-wump. Ymrrrrrr ...

Inside the tilted cafe, the Tsui family and the surviving poachers looked at each other. There was a heavy splash behind the building. And then there was silence. Only silence. Wen went to the window and looked out. The corpse, too, was gone. Its mate had taken it back.

"I'll fix some coffee," Sian almost whispered, and turned away. But there was no power to fix anything.

Outside a cool breeze blew, and sirens wailed like far-off loons.

The End