

A Day at the Beach, Ruined
Inspired by "Beached Kaiju" by NathanRosario



Chalise was the first who saw the creature to go mad.

Her morning routine was one grounded in simplicity and familiarity: Wake up at 5:30am, set the kettle to boil, give Scruffles a good scritch beneath his slender chin, and perform her morning constitutional. That lasted until the tea screeched; then, after enjoying a single piece of toast with her Earl Gray, she would slip into her workout clothes, tie up her shoes, and set off down Wave Way. Ten minutes later--and 6:00am exactly--she would arrive at the beach.

Getting down to the tide-soaked sand was always a touch tricky; the rocky path that led from the residential streets down to the beach itself was difficult to navigate, particularly in the winter-hued light that accompanied her at six in the morning. Despite how strict her routine was--she didn't miss the run for anything save her birthday, the Fourth of July, and if she were out of town--it didn't make it any easier. The path was steep, abrupt, and weed-choked. Add to that the tourists who passed through, particularly during the summer season, and the path seemed to change almost as often as the tide.

Because of this anomaly, Chalise wasn't paying close attention to the beach itself until she actually arrived at it. That was why she hadn't spotted it earlier, from the superior vantage point of the slight bluff that overlooked the beach itself. Besides, it was dark, with only the palest fingers of a reluctant dawn drawing aside the horizon's curtain. Everything was monochromatic and indistinct, with the pale rocks somehow whiter than when seen in the daylight and the ocean somehow darker than when starlight spangled the waves.

It wasn't her fault she didn't see the creature earlier. Not really.

She was, however, the first person to see it. On land, at least. That much was abundantly clear, even in the blue-gray hue of the early morning. Then again, as she stumbled onward, her mind denying what her eyes were trying to tell it, perhaps the sailors hadn't been able to see what was slicing through the water beneath them before it was too late. Chalise fancied that the sailors who were dozing in their bunks suddenly sprawled to the floor as a teeth-jarring *clang* reverberated through the iron ribs of the ship, the greasy electric bulbs flickering as the boat lurched about as if stuck inside an unexpected Charybdis. She even imagined, as her feet slowly left the softer sand for the high-water mark, that someone--a rugged seaman wearing a ribbed, turtleneck sweater beneath his shiny jumpsuit--had whispered something like, "Mother of God, keep us safe," his voice as gravely as a shoal and his eyes as unrelentingly gray as the sea.

Or maybe none of that happened when the creature had somehow caught the fishing boat in its fins.

Fins? Was that the best word for them? Chalise didn't know. The creature was enormous--far beyond the stupefying size of a blue whale, which Chalise remembered from her elementary-school days as being the largest animal in history (take that, stupid dinosaurs)--and shaped in a way that seemed as logical as it was impossible. Whatever those were, they were large enough to have pierced the hull of the ship, wearing the vehicle like a toy left inside a particularly unattractive haircut. From here, in fact, it *looked* like a toy, no larger than her hand when held out in front of her.

Some of it she recognized: Those were spines, for example, like that of a pufferfish...provided a pufferfish could stretch from endzone to endzone and still find its pillow in the bleachers of a football stadium. And it had...protuberances that grew at bizarre angles, almost like the latticework of a snowflake approximately the size of a freeway sign.

In the mushy light of the incipient morning, Chalise could barely make out any sort of coloration, but what she saw didn't make sense. Unlike the natural gradients of, say, a shark's body--going from teeth-white to deathly gray with some No Man's Land in between that blurred the colors--there were hard and sharp lines. While her mind tried to reassure her with familiar comparisons--*See, Chalise? They're like a tiger's stripes or a leopard's spots*--she refused to believe that rationalization. They divided in sudden and mindless ways, looking more like a toddler-completed puzzle than something she'd see in a National Geographic documentary.

Fear had only crept about the fringes of her mind, as curiosity, fueled by an innate revulsion, propelled (or perhaps it was *compelled*) her forward. Soft sand sliding beneath each step, Chalise walked ever nearer as she tried to comprehend what she was looking at. Never good at judging distances, she could only guess that the creature that now lay on the beach in front of her was, from the ground to its topmost...part...almost a hundred feet high. Seaweed clung to it like tiny threads, or hair caught in her fingers before it could find its way down the drain. Seeing the seaweed streaming off the body of this monstrosity helped her, in an odd way: It showed her that it was, indeed, real. It may lay on its side like, well, a beached whale, but it was interacting with the world,

too.

As she got closer, the smell began to affect her. The original shock at what she was seeing now faded, she began to notice the stench. If she had to define it, the best she would be able to consider was *evil*. It was an evil smell, one that brought to mind not just the roadkill or the cesspool or the dozens of other mundane-yet-disgusting stinks that a person might think of, but of darker purposes, malicious intents, and unholy actions.

"Smells don't have morals," she could just imagine her mother saying to her, but she knew that was impossible because her mother had died--she'd died six months ago, in the heatwave. Her A/C had gone out and, the gauzy veil of Alzheimer's as impenetrable as ever, she had pattered about her small apartment without knowing why she was so uncomfortable. Chalise had been out of town--not doing her running routine, that much was certain--and had found both excuses and forgetfulness as reasons enough not to call and check up on her. The smell of her mother's apartment when Chalise did finally come to visit again was a portion of what she smelled now, thick with a rotten pungency and loaded with guilt and sorrow.

"You ought to feel guilty," said her mother, stepping from behind what could generously be described as a flipper.

"Mom?" Chalise asked, though her words were choked from the unwholesome air. Far away, the waves lapped against the shore and the immense spine of the nameless creature next to her. She swallowed thickly, as much against the eye-watering stench as at the fact that her mother was standing here, apparently alive and...young. Not as she was before she died, but as Chalise remembered her from her childhood. Brown hair bobbed to one side, brown eyes flashing with judgment. She hadn't been a bad mother, not by any means. Quick to point out flaws, however, eager to correct even the slightest misstep. Her death had given Chalise a generous helping of what can only be described as deep confliction: No child should feel so relieved to lose a parent, particularly when the grief was so emotionally depleting.

"You did it again, didn't you?" asked Mom, her lips tight and her arms folded across her chest. She wore the sensible skirt-and-blouse combo that she'd favored--Mom had never been keen on pants--and the large hoop earrings that Chalise had always thought looked stupid.

The wind tugged strings of Chalise's hair into her eyes. Pushing them behind her ear with an irritated grunt, she tried to understand not only what she was seeing but also what she was hearing. "Did what?" she asked, that familiar frustration that she hadn't felt in six months returning. "I've failed you again, haven't I? In some asinine, I-didn't-even-know-I-was-being-judged way, right?"

Mother shook her head in that slow, disappointed motion that parents innately seemed to possess. Having never wanted kids--Scruffles was enough homelife responsibility for her, thank you very much--Chalise hadn't had to gain that particular skill. Her cat never seemed to care whether he had Chalise's approbation, desiring only food and chin scratches on his whims. Now that Chalise thought about it, though, because of her mother's mental decline, she hadn't really seen that disappointed

expression on Mom's face in at least three years. Before the Alzheimer's really set in, Chalise would only stop by the nursing home a couple of times a month. She'd gotten that look then, however, though Mom never bothered to explain what, precisely, Chalise had done wrong. Probably the kids thing again.

"If you were a better daughter, you would know what was wrong," said Mom, her posture as tight as her lips.

"God, Mom! What the hell does that even mean?" Chalise threw her hands in the air in frustration. She was standing next to some alien creature--the largest animal ever to grace the world, it seemed--and rather than doing something about *that*, she was doing what she'd done for the past fifteen years: Arguing with her mother. "You shouldn't even be here," said Chalise.

"No, you made sure of that, didn't you?"

"What?"

"You dropped me in that nasty hole and left me there." Mom glared at her with the kind of furious glower that, despite being forty-three years old herself, Chalise still cringed to see.

However, righteous indignation proved a useful shield. "'Nasty hole'? Are you talking about your *grave*? You died, Mom. You're dead. *That's* what's wrong here. *That's* why you shouldn't even be here!"

"You think that's an excuse?" Mother dropped her hands to her hips, shifting her weight to one foot. Like the maraca-sound of a rattlesnake or the arched back of a cat warned of imminent danger, this was Mom's last-warning posture. "Do you think I'd believe that claptrap?"

Chalise looked around, desperate for someone to help her argue with what could only be described as her mother's ghost, making petty arguments next to a beached creature hitherto unknown to science. What was even going on? Chalise felt like she might be going insane. Nothing made sense. The entire thing was absurd, top to bottom, and the *stink*...

...if she weren't already a couple of steps toward insanity, that smell would send her down the path. It strengthened as her mother started into a tirade that Chalise recognized from a Thanksgiving dinner in the mid-aughts. Chalise closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. This wasn't happening. It was dream. It had all the logic of a dream, all the impossibilities that were nevertheless there. That was the only explanation.

Except...

Except for the smell. It was so sharp, so pervasive, so...*evil* that she couldn't believe that her mind could conjure something as depraved and disgusting as what currently curled inside her nostrils and shoved aside all other thoughts.

The wind stirred the blonde-brown strands free of her ear and back into her face, falling into the corners of her mouth and tickling her nose. With a snort, she shook them free and opened her eyes. Mother was closer, now, her hair longer than before, her clothes the same. Neither moved as a stiff wind blew in from the ocean.

Another chunk of her sanity crumbled. Why wasn't the wind affecting Mom?

A quiet part of her mind, perhaps that one section that always had a rational answer to every obvious question, the soft-spoken one that emotion could overrule without an effort, said, *Ghosts aren't affected by the wind.*

She found herself agreeing with that thought as though it made complete sense and she had simply forgotten the rules that governed ghosts, like how she sometimes could not remember where she'd seen an actor before and only IMDb could help her feel like she wasn't going insane.

Behind her, in an incredulous voice, a man said, "Debbie? Debbie, is that you?"

Chalise turned to see Carl Lincoln, a widower who lived a few doors down from Chalise. He stood in his pajamas, sneakers pulled over bare feet and left untied, his eyes filled with tears and a disbelieving joy clear on his face.

"Deb. I've missed you so much," he said, his voice choked as he stumbled forward, toward the beached creature.

Chalise glanced around. Save for Mom, there wasn't anyone else on the beach.

"Carl," she started to say, only for Mother to interrupt.

"You can't leave well enough alone, can you?"

"What do you mean?"

"He doesn't want to talk to you!"

"Deb's not here, Mom. He's talking to a hallucination or something. He's not in his right mind!"

Her mom snorted. Nose in the air, Mom turned and began to progress across the damp sand, her sensible shoes leaving no print behind.

"Mom!" Chalise took a step forward, her hand out. "Mom, where are you going?"

"I just have one question for you," said Mother as she rounded the far edge of the creature. Her words faded as she walked, forcing Chalise to come after her. Just one question? What question could her mom possibly ask that would make a difference? There wasn't any reason to follow. If anything, the responsible thing to do would be to pull out her phone and call the police--or animal control...or the zoo. She should shoot some video and post it online before anyone else did, that way she'd get the credit and the fame and maybe even the opportunity to name the creature. She'd call it *Bitchicus totallis* after her mother, and she'd be on morning talk shows and who even cared if she wasn't technically the first to see it since the sailors on that boat were long since dead and no one would mourn them the way that she had mourned her lost mother who was now, even now, walking farther away and into the surf, the waves pushing through instead of around her as every step took her deeper into the iron sea.

"What is it? What is it, Mom? What do you want to ask?" Chalise began to run. She ran every day except her birthday and the Fourth of July and if she were out of town, so she knew how to run.

So she did. She ran. Ran after her mother, away from the creature, without even noticing the icy fingers of the ocean sluicing through her shoes, up her leggings, embracing her hips and stomach. The cold should have punched the air out of her, but she was too focused on shouting after her mother, who was almost entirely submerged beneath the waves that rolled toward her. "What question?"

A mouthful of seawater stung as it rolled down Chalise's throat. When had she gone in deeply enough to have to swim? Her shoes, heavy with their drink, kept her legs from scissoring the water well enough to keep her head above water. The inexorable tug of the tide reeled her deeper. Her eyes ached, her throat burned.

None of this was enough: She had to *know*.

At last, her mother, also beneath the waves, asked, her voice clear and condescending, "What makes you think *you* are in your right mind?"

As the final bubble of air slipped out of Chalise's lungs, formed in the murk, and wobbled its way to the surface, Carl found the surf. He walked forward without hesitation, desperation in how he held his arms out, hope in the way he sobbed. Behind him, the gradually awakening community saw the Great One on the beach and came out to see and to smell. It didn't take long before each person who came close to the corpse to wander into the waves.

Chalise was the first to go mad; she was not the last.