

Looking for Audrey

Written by Carter Swart
Saturday, 01 July 2006 00:00

Shifting breezes cooled the air, and a gentle surf kissed the shoreline. The sea was indigo in color, its flat surface occasionally breached by the conical spouts from a migrating whale pod. From a wooded island just offshore came the strident barking of sea lions.

Sitting alone on the wet sand was eight-year-old Audrey Trimble, dressed in a navy blue swimsuit. The cool water lapped gently at her feet, while a benevolent sun lay warm on her shoulders. It was Saturday, her favorite day, yet she was discontented, bored, and restless. Her mother and Aunt Stacy were lost in a lengthy reverie of old times and old heartaches, ignoring her completely. It made her mad. And so, deciding to take advantage of their inattention, she jumped up, grabbed her orange pail and shovel, and stalked down the beach, exercising her well-known streak of Trimble independence.

A young man in a Shit Happens T-shirt and chinos idly watched the girl from the rocky breakwater that fronted the highway. His hooded green eyes were calculating and cold, his dirty-blond hair long and shaggy. And when Audrey trotted down the beach, he quickly climbed to his feet and trailed after her, anticipation sharpening his feral features.

Audrey, steadily marching beyond the curve of the bay, soon approached a large pile of rocks that jutted down to the shoreline. They formed a giant U-shaped fortress some eighty feet across at the open end. The beach here was very steep, slanting sharply into deep water. Audrey looked around, realizing with satisfaction that she was completely alone, hidden from the world inside her newly-found rocky embrasure. She glanced up the hill and saw a man watching her from high above. He was an elderly gentleman with pure white hair, dressed in tiny red swim trunks. He waved at Audrey, and she waved back. Crooked wooden steps led to his house on the bluff. He waved again then disappeared.

A nice man, thought Audrey, but she was glad to see him go. She liked this private place. Sitting at the water's edge she began to build a sand castle, hoping the old man would not come down the stairs.

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In the house high up on the cliff, the white-haired gentleman entered his living room, carefully parted the drapes, and peered down at the little girl from his big picture window. So lovely. He got out his binoculars and licked his dry lips.

Audrey began filling her pail with sand. Just then a smiling young man in a naughty T-Shirt came round the corner and spoke to her. "Hi sweetie," he murmured, crouching down as if preparing to join her.

"No way!" she snapped, jumping to her feet. "This is my place. You go find your own place."

The youth with the long hair frowned, then quickly glanced up toward the house on the cliff. He saw something glitter in the window. Someone was watching them with glasses. He looked down at the frowning girl, then up at the house again, then back to the girl. He was filled with uncertainty.

Twenty minutes later Audrey's mother and aunt finally ran out of talk and noticed, with mild alarm, the girl's absence. They asked people around them if they knew where she'd gone. One older man pointed south along the shore. He said a long-haired boy in a foul-mouthed T-shirt had followed her. Panicked, the women ran in tandem along the hard sand, frantically looking for Audrey.

When they reached the stone fortress, known as Castle Rocks, they stopped short and gasped in horror at the sight of Audrey's flattened pail lying half-buried in the sand. The mother immediately began to wail like a banshee. This drew a small crowd, which soon fanned out in a desperate search for the missing girl.

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The following morning Coomb's Cay Police Chief, Able Mateer, studied the new missing person's file--the one on Audrey Trimble. There wasn't much in it. All they had was a flat pail, a bent shovel, and a missing kid.

He took a Pall Mall from his crumpled pack and lit up, savouring the taste and bite of the tobacco.

Detective Sergeants Paul Chenoweth and Mort Rounds slouched through the door and shut it firmly behind them.

"Hey Chief, what do we call this Trimble thing?" asked Chenoweth, a squat, balding newcomer to the Coomb's Cay PD.

Able immediately frowned. One-half Navajo Indian, he wasn't wild about being hailed as "Chief." Too many ways to take it wrong, resented as he was in this department. "A missing person to begin with," he muttered. "If we're lucky, it'll turn out to be a family matter. Parents are separated. There's bad blood, too. We're checking out the father.

"Or it could be a drowning," he continued, pushing a stack of messages around on his desk. "I doubt it, though. She wasn't a swimmer, according to her mother."

"She coulda been pushed, or maybe she went wading," ventured Mort. "Steep there."

"No," we'd a found her already," opined Paul, idly picking his teeth. "Be a floater by now."

Oh! callous youth, thought Able, shaking his head.

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"How about that punk who followed the kid?" asked Mort, a tall man with muscular arms, sallow complexion, and a drinking problem. Feeling around in his shirt pocket for a cigar, he slumped uninvited into a chair, wearing on his sleeve a keen resentment of all things Able.

"Got an APB out on him," murmured Able.

Paul looked dubious. "A kidnap? In Coomb's Cay? That's a stretch isn't it?"

Mort yawned. "Maybe not. Had one like this a few years ago. A couple before that. Never found `em." He lit his cigar, immediately wreathing the small office in a shroud of noxious fumes.

Able managed to hide his irritation.

They talked it over for awhile, then Able issued orders for the men to continue their full scale search for the girl. After they left, he studied the mother's agonized statement again. It was grim reading--all that hysteria and guilt in black and white. He sighed, went over to the coffee machine and poured himself a cup of steaming brew, carrying it back to his cluttered desk. Dealing with family was always hard in a situation like this.

He gazed out the window at the sparse traffic, feeling uncomfortable, sensing his ongoing vulnerability in this job, in this town. He was the New Boy in a prejudicial rural community, an anomaly because of his race, the only Native American on the force. He was well aware, too, that the City Council had hired him on a narrow three-to-two vote, hardly a reason to feel secure. He also knew that Mort--the Older Cop--bitterly resented him for getting the job, a job Mort had long coveted, had long been promised. On top of this, the mayor had been on the phone all morning screaming, wanting the girl found this instant.

Able wearily rubbed his forehead and speculated on the fate of Audrey Trimble, hoping the poor kid was all right, but fearing the worst. Had she drowned, her body caught in some deep

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crevice offshore? Rip tides and a strong undertow were common in the area where her pail was found. Or had the long-haired maggot snatched her? Or had somebody else? Or had she been careless and waded out too far? He leaned back in his chair, brooding over the paucity of information: one flattened beach pail and just the one elusive suspect.

And then there was the problem of old man Dangerfield, sitting up there on the bluff in his Spanish-styled aerie, in a perfect spot to have seen something. But he was not answering his doorbell. So where was he? So many loose ends. Able felt double his thirty years.

The long day passed without a breakthrough, and Able knew that each moment of non-discovery meant a distinct lessening of hope. With nothing else to do, he pulled the files on the previously missing kids. Unfortunately they didn't seem connected to Audrey.

Sunday night he ate a solitary meal at the Clam House then walked along the shore to just below the Dangerfield house. His thoughts were teeming with boyhood memories of the reservation, and of his uncles' obsession with the metaphysical, their profound belief in a spirit world. They were shamans of the tribe—pursuing the ancient rites and customs dating back to the beginning of tribal existence. They'd convinced Able that the dead can speak with the living—and vice versa. And even after he'd left the reservation and gone off to college, Able had retained many of his uncles' abiding beliefs in the supernatural.

Squatting down in the sand, near the spot where they'd found Audrey's pail, he let the damp, gloomy night roll over him. Fine-tuning his senses, he harkened to the moan of the wind and the sibilant sigh of the foaming surf. He squeezed down his eyelids and focused all his psychic energy into one intense outreach, sending it thither in search of the girl's spiritual essence, just the way he'd been taught.

Almost immediately a chill, malevolent wind blew up from the sea, whipping Able's long dark hair into a furious tangle. Concurrently, a sense of dread gripped him, followed quickly by a crushing, suffocating sensation. It vanished in a heartbeat, leaving him weak and gasping for breath. He wiped sweat from his brow and took deep breaths to steady his shredded nerves. What the hell had just happened? Had he reached the disembodied girl? Had he relived her final agonies?

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He shook it off and raised his glance to Dangerfield's house. No lights shone. It stood silent and alone, as useless as an abandoned lighthouse, its dark windows looking like shadowed sockets in a whitewashed skull. He shivered. Later he stumbled back along the beach and crept into his car, badly shaken. He lay awake the entire night.

Monday morning he intensified the search, personally driving over to Dangerfield's and rapping on the door. No one answered. He went around the house, peering into the windows, but saw nothing. He finally left, feeling that the key to the girl's disappearance could be traced here, to this old house on the cliff.

In the afternoon, dribbles of information filtered in, but little of it helped. There was closure on Audrey's father; he was not involved, he'd been out of town. So now they were down to just the one suspect, an elusive swine in a dirty T-shirt.

Mort dropped in around three, looking hassled, glum, and tired. "Got nothing to report, Able. Been all over creation. My corns are killing me."

Able frowned. "You check the Dangerfield place again?"

"Sure, sure. Nobody home. But why lean on the old man? You can't suspect him. I've known that old coot for thirty years. He wouldn't harm a flea." Mort's tone bristled with indignation, it showed in the pinched corners of his mouth and festered in his deep-set gimlet eyes. "Hell, Able, he used to be an Anglican priest."

Able shrugged. "So I heard. He could have seen something, though. And—there's more."

"Oh?" Mort's sour expression mirrored his discontent.

Able rustled the papers on his desk. "Yeah. I just ran your Saint Dangerfield through JDS. Interesting. He had some trouble once. Peeping Tom allegations. Naturally the Church is

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mum on it."

Mort paled. "Why, that's plain bullshit, Able."

Able lifted his glance and frowned. "No it isn't."

Mort stubbornly shook his head. "You're really desperate if you think that old man had anything to do with this." He deliberately sat on the edge of Able's desk.

Able's temper stirred. "Get your butt off my desk, Mort, and get out of here and do your job."

Able watched a host of rash thoughts flicker across Mort's flushed countenance. But the older man finally shrugged, got up, and stalked from the office, mumbling obscenities to himself.

"Great," murmured Able, shaking his head, and sipping his coffee—gone cold

and bitter by now. Mort was going to be difficult. And he wasn't the only one. Able had

three strikes against him: he was young, an outsider, and worse, he was the politically

correct appointment. Departmental resentment ran deep.

Edith Swanson, Able's gray-haired secretary, brought in a new pot of coffee.

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She was a frumpy old woman, but Able liked her. She was efficient and dependable,

and she kept her own counsel.

"What was that all about?" she asked.

He shrugged.

She refilled his cup, then said something that warmed him. "Don't let `em get to you." Her mummified face broke into an encouraging smile. "He'll cool off. He's resentful, like a kid who didn't get what he wanted for Christmas. But it won't last long. Trust me."

Able nodded, intensely grateful for her kindness and understanding, yet somehow unable to express it.

She left the room.

Just before five Chenoweth triumphantly dragged in the missing youth, the one in the T-shirt. "Meet Gordie Frune, Able," grunted Paul, shoving the lanky youth hard into a chair. "Our boy on the beach, no less."

"Where'd yuh find him?"

"Eureka."

Able stared with keen interest at Gordie. "You read him?" he asked Paul.

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Paul nodded and took a seat next to the hard-faced youth. "Eureka police had him in custody, Able. Drunk and disorderly. Released him to us. He's been a naughty boy."

Gordie was dressed in jeans, tennis shoes, and a stained blue work shirt. He showed a three-day growth of beard and red-rimmed, bleary eyes. His teeth were bad and he had tattoos all over his arms. He smelled of sour vomit and stale beer. Crossing his arms he glared at Able. "What is this shit, Tonto?"

Able winced, but otherwise ignored the slur. "You eyeballed a little girl on the beach the other day. That's not nice."

"So? Big deal. Is there a law against eying broads?"

"She was only eight-years-old!" snapped Able. "But there's more to it, now. The kid's missing."

A look of caution creased the boy's narrow face. He slouched lower in his chair and looked away. "Do I need a lawyer, here?"

"You know any?" grunted Able sarcastically.

Gordie frowned and inspected his shoes. "No."

"Well, then, why not tell us what happened?"

"Nothing happened."

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Paul cuffed him hard on the ear. "Don't give us that bullshit!"

Gordie covered up. "Hey!"

Able leaned across the desk and grabbed the front of Gordie's shirt, hauling him halfway across the desk. "You followed her. We got witnesses. You're the last person to see her alive. Know what that means?"

"Jeez," gasped Gordie, "give me a break. I never touched her." He abruptly sat up straight, his casual bravado gone with the wind.

Able bore in. "We have people who saw you following the girl—after she left her mother."

"So what?"

Able slammed his fist on the desk. "So what? So you're suspect Numero uno, that's what."

Gordie bowed his head and immediately sought inner counsel. After awhile he crossed his arms defiantly, taking shelter in the con's age-old defense—silence. "I ain't saying nothin' else without a lawyer."

Paul hissed, "Gordie, you are a real cretin."

Gordie said nothing, his face stiffly set in bas relief.

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Able shrugged and sighed. "All right. We won't talk about the girl. You got a rap sheet, Gordie?"

Gordie ignored the question, snuffled some, and wiped his wet nose with a tattooed wrist.

"I'm sure you got a sheet, Gordie. Any crimes against children on it?" pressed Able. With a feral punk like this, anything was possible.

"Hell no."

"You lie," snapped Paul, squeezing the boy's thin shoulder until he shrieked.

"That's enough, Paul," grunted Able. To Gordie he said: "We're going to run your sheet, anyway. You're lying to me, I'm gonna let Paul take you out back. You don't want that, do you?"

Gordie looked at Paul, and shook his head.

"Now I'll ask you again. Any crimes against children, any molesting, rape, anything like that?"

The boy sagged in the chair. "Well—maybe. When I was just a kid. It was nothing. Probably expunged long ago."

"Oh? Well—we'll see." Able grinned. "Paul, run him back to the cell."

"What are you chargin' me with?" yelled Gordie, as Paul yanked him into the air and dragged

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him out.

"Suspicion," mumbled Able.

"Of what?" shrieked Gordie, struggling in Paul's grasp.

"I'll think of something."

The intercom buzzed.

"Yeah."

It was Mary Stern on the switchboard. "Chief, man wants to talk to you."

"Who is it?"

"Some professor from Cal or something."

"Professor? Just what I need. Tell him I'm out."

Able left the office and walked to the courthouse, determined to seek a warrant to enter Dangerfield's house. The old man's continued absence was suspicious. But Able was soon smartly rebuffed by the judge. "Dangerfield could be on a trip or visiting relatives," Judge Carlyle argued. "There's no probable cause to suspect him of a crime—so, no dice." Able slunk off, pestered by thoughts of Dangerfield and the girl.

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The next morning Milo Bischoff, the cadaverous public defender, met with Gordie in his cell and told him not to worry. He told the boy that Mateer had nothing on him, just lot of unfocused suspicion. Scapegoating is how Bischoff later put it to Able. Able shrugged, secretly half in agreement with him. But Mort and Paul were less convinced, demanding a session with Bischoff and Frune. For the moment, Able demurred, earning himself even further disapprobation.

That afternoon, Mary being absent, Able irritably picked up the receiver on the tenth ring. "Mateer."

"Chief, my name's Bennett. I called yesterday. I teach a class at Cal. About your missing girl, I've got something that might interest you."

Oh sure. "Go ahead."

There was a pause. "Look, Chief. May I come up there? I've been doing some research on Coomb's Cay. The Chronicle picked up your story from AP. I have a theory."

Able sighed. "So, tell me."

"Not on the phone. I've got stuff to show you. I can be up there late tomorrow morning."

Well, why not? "Okay. How about noon? Meet me at the Sea Chant. You like chowder?"

"You bet." Bennett hung up.

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That evening Able made up his mind and trotted down the beach to a spot below the Dangerfield place, troubled yet determined. He nimbly climbed the steps, took out his piece, stumbled across a dried overgrown lawn, and quietly approached the back door. He stopped and listened. The freshening breeze sighed in the eaves and soft music drifted from the house—classical music. There were no lights.

Able knocked softly and waited. Then he picked the lock, knowing that any evidence he might find here would be inadmissible in court. Yet he had to know. The door creaked opened. The first thing to hit him was the smell—the sickening stench of decay and death. He put a hankie over his nose and moved forward, breathing shallowly. He took out his penlight and flashed it around. Slipping through the kitchen and dining room, he entered the large living room. The bay window drapes were parted slightly in the middle, allowing moonlight to illuminate a sliver of carpet. In here the odor was overpowering. Able's eyes began to water and bile crept up his throat. A pair of binoculars lay near the window. He flashed his light around. In the far recesses of the room he saw a man lying on the floor next to a recliner, wreathed in a cloud of flies. Dangerfield?

He put away his revolver and reluctantly approached the corpse. It was the old man. He was lying on his side, one arm outstretched—for the telephone? It looked as though he'd been dead for several days, flies were everywhere. There were no signs of violence.

Suddenly Able had to get out of there. He ran for the door and rushed outside, dragging in the fresh night air in great greedy gulps. Afterward he sat on the lawn for over twenty minutes just trying to keep from throwing up.

Scratch off Dangerfield.

The following afternoon he strolled into the Sea Chant. He checked his appearance in the wall mirror: mahogany skin, moon face, crisp uniform, black hair nearly down to the eyebrows, and ebony shoe-button eyes. He looked over the diner and decided there wasn't a professor-type in the room. But then a bearded blond-haired man in his fifties, dressed in a faded blue chambray shirt and Levis, motioned to him from a nearby booth. Able walked over and slumped into the red leatherette upholstery.

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"I'm Bennett," the man said with a broad smile. He looked like one of those reconstituted sixties hippies—a radical turned reasonable. He had a black attache case

sitting next to his glass of water.

"Able Mateer."

They shook hands and ordered coffee and chowder.

"Well, let's hear it," murmured Able after Penny, the waitress, poured the coffee and left.

Bennett cleared his throat. "My interest is in marine history, especially shark

attack along the Pacific Coast."

"And?"

Bennett opened the case and took out a thin sheaf of photocopies of newspaper articles. "I want you to look at these." He passed them over.

Able began reading. It was chilling material. Dating from the late 19th century, there had been eleven documented cases of children having disappeared from beach areas along the northern California coast, an even half-dozen near Castle Rocks. The headlines varied, but the essentials in each piece were remarkably similar. The lost children had been between the ages of six and ten, equally boys and girls, all of them disappearing without a trace. Able finished reading, then tossed the copies back just as the chowder came. "Let's eat," he grunted.

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The men ate the steaming chowder and crunchy freshly- baked sourdough bread without breaking the silence.

"This is very good," murmured Bennett, wiping his bowl clean with a chunk of bread.

Able said nothing. He was digesting more than the chowder. Those kids, he thought, poor little guys.

Bennett finished his meal, gathered up the exhibits and put them back in his case. "Before you say anything, I have something else. Local tribal histories dating back a century make frequent illusion to vanished coastal children. So you see, I believe this has been going on for years.

Able lit a cigarette. "Interesting. But I don't see how it affects what we got here. This kid was pretty savvy and definitely not a swimmer. Ergo, she was not shark bait. Besides, I don't see how these missing kids from antiquity could possibly impact my case."

Bennett sipped his coffee. "You had a girl vanish just a couple of years ago, a boy too, back in '78."

Able nodded. "True."

"Look, Chief. Just think about it. It's November. You've got a sea lion colony just a few thousand yards off shore. They attract marine predators. For example, you've got a whale migration going on right now."

Able looked sceptical. "So? Whales eat plankton, that sort of stuff. Right?"

"Not necessarily."

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"Well, what then?"

"Let me show you a film clip. I've got it set-up in my room. Motel's down the street. Picture's worth a thousand words. Just take a few minutes."

Able shrugged. "Why not?"

They paid the check and adjourned to Bennett's motel room. He had an eight millimetre projector set up and a portable screen. "Would you please hit the lights,

chief?"

"Call me Able." He turned off the lights and took a seat on the side of the bed.

The screen brightened and a distant view of ocean and beach came on. A seal pup played on the beach. As it gambolled along the shore, and without warning, a shiny

black monster stormed out of the surf, slid up the beach, grabbed the pup, backed away, and vanished into the indigo sea. It took just a matter of seconds.

Bennett turned off the projector and they sat in silence.

"Killer whale?" asked Able finally.

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"An Orca. You have the ideal geological situation here: deepwater drop off, a trench leading up to the beach, and an isolated area. Very similar to the Argentine coast where my film was shot.

"Also, every one of those disappearances I referred to occurred in spring or fall, at the peak time of whale migration. The victims were all small children, probably dark-skinned or clad in dark material."

"You're saying that orcas mistook these kids for seal pups?"

"Sure. Just like sharks mistake surfers' wet suits for seal lions."

Able scratched his chin. "That's a stretch. Look, I admit we've got white sharks and killer whales around here, no question. But, it's still a stretch."

"Consider this, Able. You're a cop. You know at least some of those kids should have turned up by now—dead or alive."

"I don't know that. Lots of missing kids these days."

"Sure, I'll grant you. But back in those days? No."

"Hmm. Couldn't be the same orca, though."

"No. We're talking a span of more than 150 years. These are incidents of opportunity—million to one shots. Bad luck."

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Able shuddered, crushed out his smoke, and lit another. "But with all those missing children down through the years, nobody makes a connection? How come?"

"Because it happens years apart. Time passes. People forget."

Able chewed his thumbnail.

"Well—what'ya say, Able."

"I guess it's a remote possibility."

Bennett brightened. "Can you get me a team of divers?"

"Sure, but I already had `em out looking for the kid's body."

"How far out?"

"Not far, a hundred feet maybe."

"No good. Look, will you show me the place where she disappeared. I need to see it."

"Sure. Let's cut a trail." They drove down to the beach, exited the car, and plodded along the beach to Castle Rocks.

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"Did you screen this sand well?" asked the professor when they arrived at the spot beneath Dangerfield's place.

"Yeah, tossed it thoroughly. No luck. The tide was already coming in by the time we got here. Just found her pail—flat as a pancake."

"Yes, it would be. An orca can weigh many tons."

Able shivered, not wanting to accept this. The wind picked up, driving a damp, early evening fog before it. The sea was choppy, a dark blue in color. Ominous. Both men unconsciously moved higher up the beach.

Bennett squatted on his haunches. "The way I figure it, the girl is sitting—there. Maybe she's building a sand castle. The orca drifts up the trench, spies her, slides up on the beach, grabs her, and takes her into deep water. That would be how the pail got flattened. Wouldn't take more than twenty seconds."

"Good God!" Able moved even higher, almost touching the cliff behind him.

"I've checked the charts," continued Bennett coolly. "This trench here, it goes out over two thousand yards. It's made to order for mischief."

"I'd hardly call it mischief." Able recalled the horrifying sensation he'd experienced that bleak night he'd stood here. "Would there be anything left of her? Any proof?" asked Able, desperately hoping Bennett was wrong.

"Possibly. Shall we find out?"

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The next morning, surviving an ugly session with his two highly skeptical investigators, Able ordered Gordie Frune released, concurrent with sending two teams of scuba divers to search a wide area off Castle Rocks. But after an exhaustive eight-hour ordeal, the divers came up empty. Mort could hardly contain his glee, and he and Able almost came to blows.

The following morning, however, divers found Audrey's watch—still attached to her severed lower left arm. They also found pieces of her shredded swim suit floating in the surf half a mile away. These items were summarily sent off to the forensics lab in Eureka.

It was over—no more looking for Audrey.

Afterward, Able wondered if he should post warning signs. Bennett was noncommittal, feeling that such an occurrence at Castle Rocks might not happen again for years, if ever, though, like a major earthquake, it could occur tomorrow.

Able put up the sign.

One night he donned his slicker and walked through a light rain to just below the Dangerfield house. A heavy surf pounded the shoreline. The roiled sky was a ghastly green, the air charged with negative ions. He looked into the darkness, thinking of the girl, of the lethal rush of the orca—and the horror that came after. He closed his eyes and let his spirit go forth again, seeking the girl's ghostly essence. But this time nothing happened; there was only the patter of raindrops on his slicker and the timeless murmur of the sea. Audrey Trimble was gone for evermore.

Six months later Able's warning sign was covered with smut and graffiti and was soon forgotten. And by the end of the following year, dissatisfied and restless, Able resigned his position and returned to the reservation.

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A year went by. Then another. And another.

Shifting breezes cool the air, and a gentle surf kisses the shoreline. The sea is indigo in color, its flat surface occasionally breached by the conical spouts from a migrating whale pod. From a wooded island just offshore comes the strident barking of sea lions.

A little girl begins to dig a sand pit beneath the benevolent gaze of Castle Rocks. The water laps gently at her feet. .