

There was something else on the far wall, hanging a couple feet above the waterline. Some kind of mold-encrusted basket. Beyond it was an open space where the two walls should have joined.

Toby took a step towards it and saw stairs, ascending out of the water to a closed door. He splashed forward, not caring how much noise he made. And stopped abruptly.

There was movement at the foot of the stairs. The water swirled, as if the surface was boiling...

A dark shape rose out of the water. It seemed to stand, but also somehow *unfurl*.

It reached its full height and stood, immobile. *It's taller than a human...* Toby was dimly aware he was throwing out random thoughts like anchors to keep his mind from spinning away. Was it standing on legs or something else? There was darkness where its face should be.

The figure moved toward him.

Toby stepped back and splashed as he almost lost his balance. The shape before him, on the other hand, didn't disturb the surface of the water, so it was hard to tell if it was moving. But the gap behind it and the stairs was widening ...

A small white light appeared above it.

It did nothing to illuminate its face, if it had one. It just floated there. Actually, it seemed to dance, like fireflies at the Fourth of July picnic in the RV

Park the Joneses had called home, the one right off the ocean, years ago. Where had that been?

*I'm not afraid anymore*, Toby thought, vaguely surprised. He was, in fact, feeling good, better than he had since fishing in the ICW that morning, where he could jump in the water when it got too hot. Where nothing had to matter. Not mom, definitely not dead-eyed Jake.

He observed, lazily, the creature now standing over him, still a huge inkpot under that merry, marvelous light. Something heavy and clammy settled on both his shoulders, but he did not pull away.

A wet, tangy smell, more pungent than saltwater, filled his nostrils, and it evoked awareness of something ancient and foreign. And deep. Depths beyond thought, beyond conception...