

Captain John Paul Jellyfish Serialized



6.

The Beach

The world was hot and dry. Not the slightest breeze blew. Not the smallest wave splashed fore or aft. Captain John Paul Jellyfish lay on his side, his jelly sac covered with sandy grit, his tangled tentacles sprawled behind him.

He listened to far-off waves lap upon the shore. "I'm marooned on a beach," he concluded. "What a fine kettle of fish for a sea captain to find himself in."

From his careened position, John Paul had a sideways view of a short stretch of sand. Driftwood, plastic bottles, tangles of kelp, broken shells, and nylon rope tossed in like him by the storm littered the place.

Directly in front, a fiddler crab popped out of a hole. The crustacean gave the captain a quick once-over. Then, in his peculiar sidestepping fashion, he scampered over a dead fish and into a rusty can.

Toward the bottom of the picture lay a soggy mound of seaweed. Countless tiny sand fleas hopped about the green heap. Two of the more daring fleas leaped off the pile and onto John Paul's flattened jelly sac. They danced around his tender skin, giggling about something only a flea could find funny.

"I say, small gentlemen," said the captain. "Would you mind partaking in your merrymaking elsewhere? You are causing a terrible itch."

Unfortunately, this only encouraged the rowdy pair. The fleas frolicked twice as hard, and John Paul Jellyfish, unable to move whatsoever, was helpless to do a thing about it.

The captain's number one concern, however, was not the fleas, the sand, or even the two terns circling overhead. No, his main worry was the sun. Before the hot circle climbed much higher in the sky, it would shrivel his jelly bell like a deflated balloon.

"Bags," John Paul muttered. "What I would give for a splash of seawater across my bow."

As he spoke, a thin jet of water shot from the sand and splattered the captain's side. The sand shifted, and the white shell of a steamer clam appeared. A long, slimy foot, looking remarkably like the tongue of a bratty child, pushed the clam upward until it rested on the beach inches before the jellyfish.

"Good day," said John Paul, relishing the refreshing water drops trickling down his sac.

"Good day? Good day, did you say?" the clam replied. "I hate to say this, jellyfish, but this may be a good day for me, but I reckon it could hardly be worse for you. Yup, I reckon the scorching sun will fry you like an egg by noon."

The captain sighed. "I try looking on the bright side of things," he said.

"Well, I hate to say this, jellyfish," said the clam, "but your bright side is getting blistered."

At that instant, a second squirt of water shot out of the sand, hitting John Paul squarely. The sand shifted, and another steamer clam appeared next to the first.

Savoring the cool drops again, the captain said, "Good day."

"No offense, jellyfish," the new clam said. "No offense meant at all. But you're new to these parts, aren't you? A tourist, perhaps?"

"More than a tourist, an adventurer," the captain replied. "I'm on a mission. I'm in pursuit of some peril that's plaguing these shores. It's true, however, that I've been on this coast only a day."

"No offense, jellyfish," said the second clam. "But we get foreigners washed up on our shores after every storm. Many of them are quite undesirable. Most end up in trouble and ask us for help."

"So tell me, if you please, where is this beach precisely?" asked John Paul, who wanted to keep these clams talking in case they spat more water in his direction.

"*Where?*" answered the second clam. "No offense, jellyfish, but *we* hardly care *where* this beach is. We simply call it *Our Bed*. We were born here, raised here, and never intend to leave here. So, and no offense meant by this, jellyfish, why would we care *where* here is?"

No sooner had the captain become parched again than one more water jet shot from the sand and splashed his side. Soon, a third steamer clam sat with his mates.

"Good day," John Paul said.

The third clam started in like the others. "Take my advice, jellyfish. Avoid these three words--where, what, and why."

"Why?" asked the captain.

"Those words lead to trouble. Look at the mess they got you in. Take my advice-
-curiosity kills the jellyfish."

"But I sailed across a vast ocean," John Paul said.

"I reckon from our point of view it looks narrow," said the first clam. "We hardly care how others see it."

"And I discovered this new land, America," the captain said.

"No offense, jellyfish," said the second clam. "But the only land we care about is this strip of sand."

"But there is danger on this coast, and I made a pledge to wipe it out."

"Why do we care?" said the third clam.

"Yup, I reckon we're as happy as clams can be," declared the first clam.

"Happy just to stay in our beds all day," added the second.

"Now, take my advice, jellyfish, and clam up," said the third.

How could John Paul explain to these shallow creatures why he had left the safety and comfort of Plymouth Harbor? How could he explain his curiosity for new things, his thirst for adventure, or his devotion to duty? How he wished to tell these boring bivalves to shove off, but at the moment, survival was more important than pride.

As another soothing squirt of water splattered his bow, John Paul reminded himself, "It's a fact of life. At times, one must tolerate fools."

Suddenly, a dark shadow slid across the sand.

It stopped directly upon the captain. From above came a blood-curdling cry, "*Quark! Quark! Quark!*"

"Bye-bye! So long! Gotta go!" said the clam trio. And each one stuck out a slimy foot and dug beneath the sand.

"*Quark! Quark!*"

The captain knew too well what was making the racket above him. "Oh, bags," he swore. "A blasted seagull!"

