

Stray Visitor

There was once a bitter old Japanese man who lived alone at the outskirts of a small town named Green Leaves Ville. Every so often he'd think back to the days when he had one of only three houses in the entire countryside. He had chosen the area for its rolling hills, fertile soil and view of the lake which his porch now overlooked. He remembered past days when he and his wife would work in their garden, while his two sons would play and splash around in the lake.



The dirt road that he had cleared away sixty years ago was still there, only now he felt that it was overcrowded with the occasional traffic of kids on bikes and cars from the newly developed town. He would sneer and scowl behind his glasses and swear under his breath any time someone would ride past his property using his road. "Damn townies," he'd spit.

There was a time when he had a lucrative land surveying business and a loving family. However, that time had come and gone. His wife had passed away ten years earlier and his two sons had long since moved away and started their own families. They would send letters and call on holidays, which were gestures he mistook for pity. His eighty-fifth birthday passed without anybody noticing, but he didn't care.

Around the time of his birthday, his doctor diagnosed the old man with cancer. "Mr. Matsumoto," the doctor advised, "this cancer is common among WWII veterans, and I recommend that you come back for treatment."

"What you know about WW II, you quack!" He shouted as he left the doctor's office, never to return.

Days passed him by while he stuck faithfully to his old routine.

Mr. Matsumoto moaned in pain when he rolled out of bed at 7 A.M. every morning. He would eat oatmeal with raisins in it, mow his precious lawn, and then trim his flower garden. He spent each day under the sweltering sun, pulling out stubborn weeds and snipping all the imperfections away.



Although he tried to ignore it, the pain in his body grew increasingly worse. His joints and muscles began to ache with every move, yet he kept following his daily routine. He would curse under his breath as he discovered and rid every flaw he could find in his flower garden. After Mr. Matsumoto was satisfied with his day's work, he'd sip his homemade iced-tea and watch the afternoon waste away from his porch. He'd purse his tight lips and scowl over his glasses whenever people from town passed by.

One scorching August afternoon, a visitor slowly limped up the old dirt road, panting all the way. The old man was sitting on his porch rocking back and forth when a mangy dog strolled up his lawn and in front of his house. The thin brown dog stopped and stared at Mr. Matsumoto with two big brown eyes. The stray dog's ribs showed through its frail body and frame, which drooped to the ground.



"Get!" the old man yelled with all the strength he could muster.

He swiftly clapped his hands together, hoping to scare the dog away. "Get

outta here," he guffed. The dog's ears perked up and it licked its parched lips, but did not budge. His eyes were locked on the angry old man. Slowly, the weak dog hung his head to the lawn and sniffed the grass. The stray dog walked in two small circles then squatted. The dog's body tensed and convulsed as he squeezed out a spiraled surprise on the old man's flawless lawn. As soon as the man saw this, he pushed himself up out of his chair, yelling, "God damn mutt, get the hell out of here!" Mr. Matsumoto carefully guided himself down his porch steps as he ranted, "Get off my lawn."

He flailed his wrinkled hands in the air and shouted at the top of his lungs, but the dog would not budge.

"Oh, you a brave one, I see," the old man mocked as he slowly kneeled down and picked up one of the small stones which lined his garden. "Let's see how you like this!" He chucked the stone towards the dog, hitting him in his chest. The dog yelped and cowered away, all the while keeping its eyes on the man. The dog limped ten feet back then stopped and turned towards the old man again. "Get, you mangy mutt," the man yelled as he chucked another stone at-the dog, grazing its ear. Mr. Matsumoto

walked towards the dog as fast as he could, pretending to give chase.

"You'll pay for that," he yelled. The dog tucked its tail between its legs and limped down the dirt road as fast as it could.

A few days passed and Mr. Matsumoto was again working on his flower garden one morning. He was frantically spraying herbicide on the new weeds that had grown in the night before. Kneeling with his back away from the road, he suddenly felt a wet nudge on his arm. Startled, he fell back and braced himself on his elbows. Mr. Matsumoto was shocked to see a flash of matted brown mangy fur push towards him. His glasses fell to the ground as the stray dog quickly rubbed up against the old man and stood over him, licking Mr. Matsumoto's face and wagging its tail in a joyous excitement.

At this, Mr. Matsumoto sat up and swiftly threw a right hook punch, knocking the dog off of him. "God damn you!" he screamed. His blood boiled, veins popped out in his neck, and he pursed his lips as a shot of rage ran up through his body. The dog whimpered and slowly began limping away.



"Get over here!," said Mr. Matsumoto as he got to his knees and reached out his arm just in time to grab the dog's weak leg. The dog yelped as Mr. Matsumoto yanked the stray back to him and snatched him by his neck. Mr. Matsumoto stood up and dragged the stray dog over to his garage, swearing and mumbling profanities the entire time. "I told you'd pay for what you did... I told you."

The skinny old dog struggled as much as he could, but had no strength to escape from the old man's angry grip. Mr. Matsumoto grabbed a bundle of rope hanging from his garage wall and quickly looped it around the dog's neck. He tied a double knot and poked his boot against the dog's bony side. Without wasting any time, he led the dog across the dirt road and down to the lake's shore. The old man jerked the rope forward as the dog slowly limped behind.

"I hope you like water," he teased.

He turned over his son's old wooden dinghy which was now overrun with weeds and covered in leaves. Bugs scattered from underneath as he shoved the rotting dinghy halfway into the lake. Angrily, he pulled the stray dog up by its neck and threw him in the boat. The dog surrendered to Mr. Matsumoto and cowered on the floor of the boat.



Mr. Matsumoto had one leg in and one leg out of the boat when he suddenly got an idea. His eyes scanned the lake shore until he spotted a black stone about as big as a bowling ball. He stepped out of the dinghy and walked over to it. With all the strength he could gather, Mr. Matsumoto dragged the stone over to the boat, lifted it up, and placed it near the dog. With one push, he shoved off the shore and glided onto the calm lake. The dog shivered and whimpered as it desperately tried to get its footing in the rickety old dinghy.

"Oh, now look who's sorry," the old man mocked. "I warned you, I warned you," he said softly.

Water slowly dripped into the wooden dinghy through little cracks in the hull. It creaked as the old man paddled out towards the center of the glassy lake. He struggled to pull the wooden oars through the water, but slowly made his way to the center of the deep lake. Sweat poured from his brow as, overhead, the sun beat down and glared off the pristine blue water.

When he was satisfied with his distance from the shore he set down the oars and grabbed the other end of the rope. By this time a small

puddle of water had gathered on the floor of the dinghy and around Mr.

Matsumoto's boots. His heart raced as he deftly wrapped the rope around the stone and tied it off with a double knot. Mangy fur flew into the air as he lifted the dog up by its neck and dropped him in the lake.





Upon hitting the water, the dog immediately turned towards the boat and tried to paw its way back inside. Its weak paws scratched desperately at the sides of the little dinghy. The dog whined loudly as it frantically splashed and swam in circles along the side of the boat. Its big brown eyes shifted back and forth, searching for an escape.



The old man scoffed at the dog's futile attempts as he lifted and braced the stone onto the side of the boat. He looked into the dog's desperate eyes as he shoved the stone away with his knee. Kerplunk!

The stone was gone in a flash, followed by the rope which quickly unraveled as it slid out of the boat. As the last bit of rope was pulled underwater, the dog was violently yanked below the surface. Suddenly, everything was silent and still.

Mr. Matsumoto watched and followed the brown figure as it disappeared to the bottom of the lake. Bubbles rose up from where the dog had sunk, and Mr. Matsumoto gazed blankly into the water. A cold breeze whipped over the water's surface and shot up his spine. He was stunned. He leaned over the side of the dinghy and stared down into the dark abyss beneath him. Mr. Matsumoto could hear his heart pounding in between gasps to catch his own breath. After what felt like an eternity, he squinted his eyes and looked a little more carefully into the lake. Something else had caught his attention. His own reflection was shimmering in the waters surface.

Mr. Matsumoto peered down, shocked at what he saw. He did not recognize the withered, skinny old man that stared back at him. The reflection in the water mimicked him as he pulled his hands up to his pale face and ran them over his bony cheeks. Mr. Matsumoto examined his sunken eyes and splotchy skin as he let out a long sigh. Is this really me? Mr. Matsumoto thought to himself. He felt as if though his heart had

become dislodged from his chest and had dropped down to his empty stomach. Mr. Matsumoto stared forward in fear while the hot August sun beat down on his back. His breathing grew heavier and heavier as he kneeled down and slowly eased his old body back in the rickety dinghy. He leaned back and gently lay on the wet bottom of the old wooden boat which was now flooded about two inches up. Thoughts of what was to become of him raced through his mind.

Slowly, he crossed his arms and rested them on top of his heavy chest. He did not shut his eyes when the sun pierced against his withered face and he gazed up at the blue expanse above him. His eyes strained as he tried to search past the immense blue sky and behind enormous white clouds that passed overhead, but he could find nothing. He lay back and wondered when his time would come and where he'd go when it came.



The lazy sun made its way across the sky as the day turned to a purple evening. Crickets and toads sounded the approach of night from along the lakes shore, but paused when families in cars and children on

bikes rode by on Mr. Matsumoto's old dirt road. They passed by, barely noticing the lone dinghy bobbing up and down on the center of the lake.

The rickety old boat slowly drifted in circles, caught by the unpredictable winds which whipped over the water's surface.



Initiation to Paradise

Our hearts beat a little harder and our eyes opened a little wider a we looked out over ocean. We were three grown boys standing on the lor rock wall which was made to block homes from the east side shore line when the tide was high. Our surfboard leashes already attached to our ankles, we scanned the violent sea and watched the wind, currents, and breaking waves converge before us. Coconut trees swayed wildly above that the off shore winds ripped through our hair and threatened to tear our surfboards from our grip. Dressed in nothing but our board shorts, we watched the swells roll in from sea like an infantry of soldiers marching in battle under the sunny blue sky. The swells slowly made their way over the shallow coral reef where they were transformed into seven foot walls of water which quickly peaked only to peel and crash in an explosion of whit water.



"What do you think?" My friend Jason asked still focused on the water.

"The tide is super low. It's drilling out there." Ryan replied.

"Looks pretty hairy." He said with a crazy sort of sarcasm.

"So what are we waiting for?" Jason asked. "Where's your friend?"

I looked back to the sandy path which we had arrived on and tried to see her but she wasn't in sight.

"You guys go ahead" I said. "I'll see you out there"

"Just tell her to watch out for sharks" Jason warned.

"Yeah right" I said, laughingly.

Without hesitation Jason and Ryan leaped off the wall and landed in the warm sand four fee below. They slowly jogged towards the water

with their surfboards tucked under their arms. When they reached the hard packed wet sand their jog turned into a full sprint. They lay their boards in the water as they slid on to them and entered the sea.

They began paddling quickly with their heads stretched up as they looked at the oncoming storm of water. I watched them skillfully duck under walls of white water and desperately race their way around the breaking peaks of waves as they made their way out. Eventually they paddled out past the swells and out of sight. I looked back to the pathway again to find Sara running towards me.

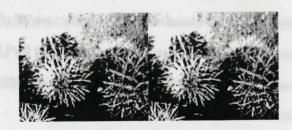


"Gordon, I can't get this leash on!" She handed me her leash str as she stepped up on the rock wall, her six foot tall surfboard dwarfing he body. Something about her looked awkward in the background of naupaka leaves and coconut trees. Her pale skin begged to be fried by the sun and she wore a black bikini top with neon green shorts. Her brown hair whipped wildly into her face although she tried to hold it back.

I grabbed her leash strap, bent down, and wrapped it around her ankle. "Looks kinda big today" I said cautiously as I secured her strap.

"So what! You think I'm scared?" she said with an irritated attitude.

I laughed to myself because I knew she wasn't scared, but I was scared for her. In the back of my mind I thought of the time in college when we were skateboarding down a steep hill together. All of the sudden she lost control. She ended up swerving off the road to avoid being nailed by an oncoming truck. She avoided the truck alright, but when she ran off her skateboard she tripped on the sidewalk curb and fell headfirst into a patch of cactus. When I ran to see if she was ok, I found her bloodied and scratched up with cactus needles stuck all over her arms and legs. She was laughing hysterically, although tears dripped from her eyes. It was then that I knew she was crazy.



I had met Sara seven months earlier when I left Hawaii and went away to Arizona for college. She lived two doors down from me on the second floor of our dorm. On the first weekend of school we shared a bottle of rum got drunk together. We strapped condoms on every door known in our building, banged on everyone's doors, and shook the dorm vending machine for free candy. We were friends instantly. We spent most of the year making jokes, laughing about life, and having fun in any way possible. She ended up transferring into my French class which was a bad idea. We laughed straight through it. We both failed and blamed each other, but even that was something to laugh about. "C'est la vie," we joked.



Sara and I also joined our college swim team together. It was the first year on a swim team for both of us and it showed. We were made to swim in the lane furthest from the "experienced" swimmers, but that didn't bother us. In fact, it worked out for the better sense we were out sight from the swim coach when we'd take a break and sit on the bottom of the pool while making funny faces at each other. We would hold are breath as long as we could and watch the exhausted swimmers race back and forth above us. We worked hard occasionally, but fun always seemed to have priority over work when we were together.

One day I lay on one of the swim teams kickboards and mimicked how I paddled on a surfboard. "Is it like this?" she said as she copied me.

Sara's dorm room walls were lined with pictures of beaches and surf, so it seemed natural when I brought her to my home in Hawaii for the summer. She had dreams of living and surfing in Hawaii and it made me smile just to see her living a dream, but I was still scared for her.



"Let me see your board," I asked. She had just bought it from Costco.

I ran my hands over the front of it and felt how slick it was. I scraped my fingers down my own board and gathered wax under my nails. then meticulously placed the scrapes of wax on her board and rubbed back and forth in till it stuck in the places where I knew she'd need good traction



"Wow, this is so beautiful" she commented as she looked out ove the water. "I can just feel the power."

"Ok. Were going to go out this way." I pointed and tried to guide her eyes to the place where the water looked most calm. "Do you see that reef sucking up over there, just stay clear of it, or else you're fucked. You don't want to get hung up over there. Ok?"

She nodded her head, barely even looking where I was pointing.

could tell she was already annoyed. Sara hated being told what to do.

If you get into trouble, or if we get separated just turn around and go to shore. I'll find you. Ok?"

"Ok, let's just go already, what am I your baby sister?"

The funny thing was that I almost thought of her as a sister, and I didn't want to be responsible for her drowning. We jumped off the rock wall and landed in the sand. I followed behind her as we slowly walked to the waters edge. A rush of water skimmed up the sand and wrapped around our feet. Sara's knees buckled and she fell back. I caught her and straightened her back up as the water resided.

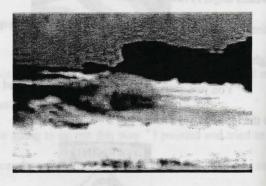
"You just gotta be careful out here!" I yelled so she would hear me over the loud roar of the sea.



"I know, I know!" She yelled back.

We walked all the way into the water until I was in chest deep. I could feel the strong current ripping under us and pulling us toward the exposed reef. Sara got on her board awkwardly and wrapped her legs around it as she tried to get centered. I anchored my feet in the sand and pointed her out to sea.

In the distance I could hear my friends shouting and yelling in joy behind the crash of the waves. "You just gotta go for it! Don't give up!" I shouted as I shoved her board forward. "Paddle," I yelled. "Paddle!"





I lay on my surfboard and began to paddle behind her. I watched as she frantically kicked and paddled, splashing everywhere. Ahead of her, a wall of white water was racing towards her. She had her head down and I knew she didn't know what was about to hit her.

"Paddle!" I yelled again, but it was too late. The crumbling white water swallowed her up in a flash. Her green board popped up and flew back and I could see her arms and feet flail around as she floated back towards me.

Her little head popped up right next to me. She was coughing and choking with her hair wrapped around her eyes. Sara pulled her hair back as she caught her breath.

"You're not supposed to swallow the water," I joked. "Are you ok?

I told you it was big today."

"I'm alright, just let me handle it!" she screamed. Her eyes were watery and she almost looked angry. I smiled knowing that she would never give up, that was just the kind of girl she was.

She paddled out again and it wasn't before long that the choppy water and strong current pulled her out of my sight. I paddle my way out, ducking

under swells, and following the current out to the break. I popped over a swell and saw Jason way in front of me.

He turned around in front of a swell and began to paddle. As the wave peaked and began to break he jumped up to his feet and stood on his "She'll be alright." I looked back again but couldn't see her. board. He skimmed down the wave's face and skillfully turned on the bottom. He maneuvered his body so that his board leaned against the face and cut back up towards the breaking lip. He jerked his body to the side ar slashed the lip of the wave, sending spray against my smiling face.



I scanned to the left and the right of me and tried to find Sara, bu she was no where to be seen. I sat up on my board and egg beat my legs until I was facing shore. With each new swell I tried to spot her green box but she was no where to be found.

I made my way out pass the breaking waves where the water was calm. Ryan was sitting on his board squirting water in between his fists.

"Your friend O.k.?" He asked as I paddle up to him.

"She'll be alright". She was on my swim team in college. She's strong." I spoke these words hoping that it would take my worry away.

"She seems cool" Ryan stated.

"Yeah, she's cool" I assured him.

"Did you hear about Blake's parents?"

"What about them?"

"You didn't hear? They're getting divorced."

"No way, there supposed to be the all American well rounded Christian family." We stared out at the ever changing motions of the sea and paddled with our hands once in awhile to avoid being carried off with the currents.

"I know. Isn't it fucked up?" Ryan said. I nodded in agreement. Before long, Jason paddled up and sat up on his board. "How was that last wave Jason?" I asked smiling.

"Insane" He grinned back.

"Jason, Can we party at your house tonight?" Ryan asked.

"No, not for awhile, my mom says you guys come over too much."

"What? I love your mom. I mean c'mon, that body....."

Everyone liked teasing Jason about his mom, especially me. She was hot.

"Asshole," Jason shook his head and we all laughed.





When the laugher stopped I heard splashing coming from behind me. turned around to see an exhausted Sara float right up next to me. She collapsed on her board and I grabbed on to it. "Holy shit that was hard," said in between deep breaths. "I got caught inside and had to go to shore and do it all over again."

"That's pretty amazing Sara, I wasn't sure you were gonna make out here. Good job," I congratulated her.

"Thanks Gordon," she said with a smile. "Its strange how it's so calm out here passed the break."

"Did you catch any waves Sara," Ryan asked.

"Getting out was hard enough."

"You'll get one next time," he encouraged her.

The sun was low and the sky was full of brilliant pinks and purples.

The wind seemed to slowly die down and the swells started to become few and far between. We stared forward, hypnotized by the oceans movement.

All of the sudden Ryan began to yell. "Shark! Shark! No body move. I'm serious I just saw a big fuckin shark. Don't move!"

"C'mon, don't joke like that" I said to Ryan.

"Are you fuckin serious? Sara yelled as she looked down into the empty blue beneath her.

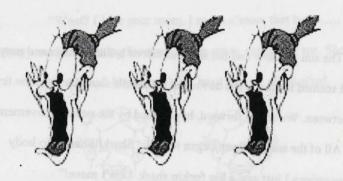
"Are you serious?" Her voice trembled. She was hysterical. I watched her as she splashed and paddled towards me.

"Don't paddle! Ryan shouted.

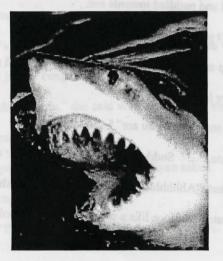
"Help me! Help me!" She frantically paddled my way, screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Just stay where you are" I shouted.

"Please....!" Suddenly her board tipped over and she was yanked down by her feet. "Ahhhhhhhhhh!" She screamed as she disappeared beneath the water's surface like a newly baptized catholic. She was gone



Right where she had gone under, Jason's moppy head popped up with a menacing grin on his face. He spit water through his teeth. Sara popped up next to him and stared forward, trying to catch her breath. We sat on our boards, treading water with our hands and staring right back at her.



"FUCK YOU GUYS," she slowly enunciated each word. She sat back up, centering herself back on her board and wiped her hair out of her face. I tried to hold it back but a smile broke through as I started to chuckle. My friends began to chuckle too and slowly her frightened and angry face turned into a smile. Sara snorted through her nose at first and eventually burst into all out laughter. We all looked at each others smiles which made us laugh more and more. The spray from the breaking waves sprinkled over us as we drifted further outside of the break. Ocean swells gently swayed the four of us up and down as we laughed. I smiled knowing that Sara was no longer in Hawaii for a summer visit, she was there to stay.



The After Party

Herman looked around the party as the loud roar of the crowd echoed in his ears. High school kids were packed into the small house from wall to wall. Lamps lay shattered on the living room floor and family pictures on the walls hung crooked. The carpet Herman stood on was covered in muddy foot prints and cigarette butts. Herman didn't know whose house it was, but it was trashed.

Once again, his friends had convinced Herman to go to another party even though he was sure he wouldn't enjoy it. Herman used to enjoy going to parties and drinking, and mingling with others, and laughing, and smoking, and laughing, and talking, but lately an inner voice spoke to him so loudly that he could hear nothing else.

Bits and pieces of separate conversations ran through his ears, but were quickly silenced by the voice which spoke to him from inside out.

"Who are you?" it whispered.

He tried his best to ignore the voice, but it was repeated over and over in his mind. A friend came and handed Herman a beer. Herman scanned the crowd of people and chugged on the bottle, hoping to silence the inner voice. He recognized familiar faces and saw nameless strangers, all of whom he quickly overlooked. He lifted his bottle of beer up to eye level to see how much was left, then surveyed the crowd again. "I don't know", he whispered to himself as he drank the remains of the bottle. He lifted it up again and looked through the green glass. It was as empty as he felt.



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He looked around the party, the sea of bodies, and imagined that a black whirlpool had formed beneath him. He felt as though he were slowly sinking away from the party, spinning in circles, turning faster and faster. He spun so quickly that all his surroundings turned into one dark blur. He

could not focus. He imagined that he spun and sunk until he was swallowed up by this whirlpool, disappearing without anyone noticing.

Again the voice spoke to him from his soul. "Walk away" it whispered. This time voice was so captivating and powerful that he followed without any hesitations.

Herman placed the empty bottle of Heineken on the coffee table, which was overcrowded with cigarette butts and beer cans, and began to walk. He pushed his way towards the back door of the small house and maneuvered through the crowd. Around him guys shouted, quiet corners smoked and choked, and girls tripped over high heels and painted more makeup on their faces. He walked through, pushing against the crowd and traffic going against him. He sidestepped and maneuvered his way out the back door as new faces poured into the packed house. Without looking back, he began to walk.

As he walked on, the roar of the party lessened and he was comforted by the silence of the empty streets. He walked by his friend's parked blue Honda which he had arrived in and walked right by it. Dogs sporadically barked from behind wooden fences as he walked on. The sounds of his shoe steps hitting the pavement grew louder and louder. The

streets were dark except for the dim moon light which guided his way. As he walked, he stared at his feet, putting one foot in front of the other. With each new step, he questioned what he was doing. What was he searching for? Where was he going? The voice whispered to him again, "Don't stop."



After many hours of walking, his legs grew tired and his feet began to cramp up. Suddenly he stopped and pivoted in a circle, exploring his surroundings. Where the hell am I? He thought to himself.

It was pitch black. Herman looked around and could only see silhouettes of hills and valleys in the distance. As his eyes adjusted to the darkness, he realized that he was alone in the middle of a big grassy field.

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Darker shadows lingered in the darkness. As he began to take another step, Herman was pulled back. He jerked his knee up, but he was

pulled down. His shoes were stuck in mud. He tried desperately to break loose, but to no avail. He quickly surrendered and kneeled to the ground to untie his shoes. He stood up and walked with no direction. Letting the direction choose him, he took one step after the other, his bare feet swiftly cut through the damp grass.



As he came to the border of the field, he noticed a jungle of tangled vines and branches. Herman slowly snaked his way up and over awkward branches, sidestepping and ducking around itchy vines and sharp weeds. Creatures hissed and croaked in the night as he pulled back and stepped through the vines. Herman's muscles grew tired and his stomach moaned. He moved very slowly but kept going deeper and deeper into the tangles of branches. Each hop and step through the branches was a new question of what he was doing. "Just keep going," the inner voice whispered.

He heard a soft rumble and felt the earth shiver as a cloud broke overhead. As he stopped pushing through the tangles, he looked up. A gentle drop of water landed on his forehead, followed by countless others. The drops grew heavier and exploded against leaves and branches. Puddles formed, and in no time the jungle was a concert of raindrops. He tilted his head back and opened his mouth as wide as he could. The rain drops splattered on his face and in his mouth. He gave a smile of gratitude.



After the shower had passed, he continued to push through the wet branches and vines, ducking under and crawling over each new obstacle. As he took another step, he heard a loud tear behind him. He peered over his shoulder to find that his shirt had been caught on a branch. Herman reached over his back and grabbed his shirt. He yanked on it and ripped himself free. His torn shirt fell to the damp ground. He walked on.

Herman began to grow very tired. What are you doing? He thought to himself. Where are you going? His body began to surrender to pain and fatigue. The night temperature had dropped and he began to shiver. He painfully lifted one knee after the other, falling forward, and balancing himself on the seemingly endless jungle.

Herman's pain and discomfort turned to thoughts of desperation.

What the hell am I doing? He thought. No one knows where I am.

He was contemplating turning back when suddenly he broke free from the jungle. He stepped out and over a branch and his bare foot landed on a white sandy beach. He stopped, kneeled down, and sat back, clenching his knees and shivering.



Herman surveyed the dark coastline and noticed the white crest of the waves gently pushing against dark shoreline. The ocean swayed

rhythmically on to the sand and slowly receded. He stared blankly at the horizon as light broke through the darkness. First a dim ray, then more and more, until the black sky turned purple and the dark ocean became green.

The great sun slowly climbed out from behind the ocean, shimmering and shining light on everything. He stared forward in awe as night gave way to day. Birds in the forest behind him celebrated in song as the sunlight pierced through hanging raindrops from the night before.



As the warmth of the sun beamed on him, he stretched out his legs and lay back against the warm sand. The loose sand pushed around him, and he sunk a few inches into it. He felt the sand envelop his body like a mother clinging to her newborn. With a big grin on his face, he shut his eyes and surrendered to the sun. "Thank you," he whispered as he dozed off.

Mrs. Little Bo Peep

A few days ago, I walked past the elementary school which is located three blocks away from my apartment in the town of Redlands. A cold December wind whipped through my rain jacket, and sent the conversations of the school children in my direction.

REDLANDS

I overheard a little black girl in a bright red dress talking about the time that she saw Mrs. Little Bo Peep. A small group of kids had circled around her and were listening attentively as she spoke. "I saw her pushing her carriage through Safeway," the little girl shared with enthusiasm. "She bought to gallons of chocolate milk. My dad says that she belongs in a nut house."

I walked by the circle of kids and smiled to myself. I was reminded of the time that I met Mrs. Little Bo Peep two years earlier, on the very same sidewalk which I now walked.

It was a beautiful spring day with clear blue skies. The hot California sun pierced through the canopy of treetops above me, and cast scattered shadows on the cracked sidewalk. I walked pass the suburban homes, all with freshly cut lawns. In every yard I passed, brightly colored flowers were blooming and the bees wouldn't leave them alone. They buzzed around every flower as if they were starving for the sweet nectar.



I was walking towards a soup kitchen downtown where I volunteered on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. I'd go down

there and help by scooping the side courses onto the trays of the homeless. I was supposed to be there at 4:30 and I knew I was a little late, but I didn't care. I just figured that if they "fired" me it wouldn't really matter because I was just a volunteer anyway. I figured it would be they're loss, so there was no need to rush.

We served the homeless people food on the same kind of trays that I used to eat off of in elementary school. We served yellow trays for the children and bigger blue trays for the adults, but I just scooped the same portion on each plate, even if it overflowed into the main course.



Originally, I had started doing it for community service credit, which I needed to graduate from high school, but after I got my sixty required hours, I never had the heart to quit. Actually, I liked how I felt after helping. It was a good feeling. Sure, there

were days when I didn't feel like going. There were days when I wanted to turn away and pinch my nose from the stench of the homeless as they walked by, but I always ended up coming back. The soup kitchen was only five blocks from my home, so I usually just walked if I couldn't catch a ride from a friend. Plus, I enjoyed the short walk.



Cars raced by me as I slowly made may way towards the soup kitchen. In the driveway of one home, a middle-aged man was washing his red Porsche. He scrubbed his car with a soapy rag and then sprayed each soapy section with his garden hose. He circled his car, searching for specks of dirt that he may have missed. The chrome rims and bumper of his Porsche glimmered in the sun light.



All the soapy water ran down his driveway and puddle at the edge of his lawn, creating a brown puddle full of soap bubbles. This puddle overflowed onto the sidewalk and down into the storm drain nearby. I carefully tiptoed around the brown puddle to avoid getting my white shoes dirty. I had just bought them.

The old man looked up and smiled at me when I walked by and I waved back. Birds chirped in the tree tops above and I whistled back to them. It seemed as if everything was as it should be.

I was beginning to cross the street when I first spotted her. I immediately stopped whistling. I couldn't believe my eyes. She walked along the sidewalk which ran to the right of me; my eyes were glued on this peculiar sight. I stared and watched her push her carriage along.

I'd heard talk of her before, but I'd never actually seen her in person. I remembered my friend Nick telling me about her.

"I heard she's a coke addict," Nick had informed me. "They call her Mrs. Little Bo Peep. She's a homeless prostitute, you know." to

I had laughed at the thought of her, but now she was walking down the sidewalk and coming towards me. All I could do was stare. I squinted my eyes to get a better look at Mrs. Little Bo Peep. She stuck out in the neighborhood like a thorn, a skinny blue thorn.

She pushed an old fashioned baby carriage that had a shiny brass handle which spiraled down. Her carriage was a strange sight all in itself. The sides of her carriage were lined with a baby blue lace which hung about two feet above the wheels. The top of the carriage was covered in a darker blue lace and plastic red rubies lined its edges and glimmered in the sun.

Mrs. Little Bo Peep wore a big blue bonnet, which curved at least two feet above her head and was held tightly with white lace tied in a bow under her chin. This blue bonnet perfectly matched her baby blue skirt, which puffed out in ruffles about three feet all around her waist and fell just above her knees. She wore long white leggings and to top it all off, a pair of Blue Nike cross-trainers. She was walking at a fast pace; her skinny legs taking short quick steps. Mrs. Little Bo Peep stared forward as she made her way in my direction. I'd never seen anything like her before.



Behind her, a short, stocky man followed; he took lazy heavy steps with long strides as if he was trying to keep up with Mrs. Little Bo Peep.

His face was red with exhaustion and sort of hung to the side as he walked.

He wore blue slacks and a plain white t-shirt which held in his protruding belly.

I could have slowed down and let them walk by, but she stole my attention. Her unusual appearance screamed out in a quiet town like Redlands. My eyes were glued and my curiosity set ablaze. I stumbled on a bump in the sidewalk, but my eyes stayed locked on Mrs. Little Bo Peep.

She pushed her carriage towards me and I sped up just so that I could get a closer look. I smiled in their direction as our paths converged.

Just then something amazing occurred. Her cart turned down my path and

we were now on parallel courses. She smiled as I stepped to the side to make space for her and her carriage. "Hello," I said, not breaking stride.

Her leathery face was full of wrinkles and looked like she had spent many days under the sun. Under her eyes lay a thick layer of purple eye shadow, which streaked down her wrinkled skin. She was wearing bright red lipstick and when she spoke I noticed red smudges on her teeth.



"Hello," she said in a cheery, upbeat tone. I quickly glanced under the roof of the baby carriage to find a big brown stuffed teddy bear with button eyes; it was tucked in under a blue silk blanket. I showed my smile to the man walking heavily behind her and he smiled back with a row of gold plated teeth.

All three of us walked down the sidewalk as cars whizzed by. I couldn't believe I was walking down the street with a coke feign prostitute. I struggled to think of something to say. Was that man her pimp? I thought

to myself as we walked on. Suddenly, I thought of something to say. I stared forward and said, "I like your outfit."

Mrs. Little Bo Peep turned to me and looked me in the eyes.

She had big glassy, blue eyes, enhanced by a massive amount of eyeliner. She had fake eyelashes that pointed straight up and I could see that her eye brows were penciled in.

"Thanks," she replied. We walked a little further, and then she turned to me again and said, "I'm not crazy, you know."

"What?" I asked, surprised at her comment and shocked at the concept. If this lady wasn't crazy then I must be crazy, I thought to myself.

"Yeah, I just like to dress up once in a while and go out."

She spoke quickly and it seemed her thin lips could barely keep up with her words. "Yeah, lots of people think I'm crazy, but I'm not, you know."

I couldn't get over the lipstick on her teeth and the make up caked on her face. There was a long silence as I searched for

something else to say to Mrs. Little Bo Peep. "I like that carriage of yours." It was all I could think of.

"Thank you! I found it at a thrift shop three years ago. It's really very vintage."

"Is that brass? I asked, pointing at her carriage handlebar.

Her nails were about an inch long; painted bright red.

"Sure is." She stroked her hand down the handlebar and patted the spiraled end. "Only cost me fifteen bucks," she bragged. "You can't find these anymore. Nope, can't find 'em. I wouldn't sell this for a million dollars." Again there was an awkward pause. We walked past a tall green hedge.

"I don't think you're crazy," I said with a guilty conscience.

"You're really not crazy?"

"Yeah, I just get a kick out of seeing everyone's reactions when they see me. People think I'm crazy. All they see is my

costume and they think I'm insane. They're the ones who are insane, not me."

"Are you serious?" I questioned. "You do it for fun?"

She nodded her head up and down, her big blue bonnet
nearly hitting my head. "Yeah, I get a kick out of it."

Behind us the stocky man began to chuckle. I looked back and smiled at him, only to watch him burst into an all out laughter. He had a strong, hardy laugh, but it didn't throw him off his slow heavy walk. His head remained tilted to the side. With his laugh, I smiled wider and wider until I began laughing along with him. I smiled at Mrs. Little Bo Peep. She giggled as she retucked the teddy bear in the blue silk blanket. We reached the end of another block and crossed the side street. I watched her push down on the brass handlebar until the front wheels of her carriage rose up and cleared the curb.



We had walked by all the suburban homes with flower gardens and were now in downtown Redlands. We passed liquor stores and torn down chain link fences. We walked by run down homes with rotted porches and dirt yards. It was a whole new world then where he had walked just ten minutes earlier. Mrs. Little Bo Peep shoved her carriage over the broken concrete sidewalk and we continued on.



"That is hilarious," I said to her, both of us smiling. "I think it's cool. It's kinda like... Have you ever been to Vegas?" I asked.

"Of course I have, a few times."

"What's the name of that casino shaped like a pyramid? The one with the big strobe light."

"Hmmm, I know the one you mean. Is it the Bellagio? No, that's not it. Hmmmmm..." We both thought out loud.

"The Luxor, it's the Luxor," The man behind us shouted out.

I looked back and smiled at him. "That's it, the Luxor. Well, I was down there last month and I remembered driving on the highway. It was strange seeing that pyramid in the middle of all those other hotels and casinos. It stuck out, you know. I remember wondering how it affects the people in Vegas who grow up seeing a pyramid on the horizon every day. It must change them somehow."



"Sure, it must," she encouraged my thoughts.

"It is probably a good thing."

"It is a good thing." Mrs. Little Bo Peep nodded her head; I leaned back to avoid her bonnet.

"So, you guys live around here? I questioned, now feeling very comfortable.

"Yeah, we live back on Clock Street. It's about ten blocks back."

"Really? A good friend of mine lives on that street."

"Yeah?" she said, giggling again. "This is my husband." I reached out and shook his hand.

"Bob's the name. Nice to meet ch ch'you." He stuttered his words and did not straighten his head. He shook my hand with an iron grip.

"Yeah, you too." I quickly pulled my hand away from his clammy palms.

"And my name is Betty." She extended her small fragile hand.

"Nice to meet you too, Betty." I was surprised at how cold she felt.

"Where are you headed?" she asked.

"Oh, I volunteer at the soup kitchen on Mondays and Wednesdays.

I'm probably late.

"Wow, that's good," she said. "There are a lot of homeless people downtown.

"Yeah, it's crazy. Every week, it seems like someone new shows up to eat."

"It's good you're helping."

"I guess so." I nodded. "I know all the transients in this town on a first name basis. It's alright." I pointed down the road to a raggedy looking man wearing a camouflaged jacket. "Like that guy turning down the street right there, his name is Jesus. He always eats there."

We walked on and I slowed down as a bit as we approached the street Jesus had turned down.

"Well, you guys take it easy," I said as I stopped and let them walk by.

"You too," she said, grinning.

Our paths broke and I walked towards the soup kitchen.

Some of the homeless people were lined up at the front door waiting to be let inside, and others sat on the curb outside of the building.

There seemed to be more than usual. I looked back and shouted to the couple, "Nice walking with you guys."

"Yeah, you too," she responded. The man smiled and waived as they walked on with the baby blue carriage rolling in front of them.

That was the last I ever saw of that so called crazy couple. I wouldn't call Mrs. Little Bo Peep crazy. She was just a little more eccentric than most people. She was nothing like I had imagined her to be when I first saw her three blocks back.

That night I scooped the side courses of mashed potatoes and canned peaches onto the plastic trays. Something had changed inside of me. I looked at the people as they slid their trays in front of me. I looked at each one of them right in they're eyes as I served them. Some of them looked down, some stared me right in the eye, and others simply smiled and said, "Thank you." I looked at their faces and wondered about each of their lives and how they ended up on the other side of the counter. I wondered how their life story would sound if they told it.

