

Zaee Shah

Grade 7

Bowditch Middle School

Reflections; Heroes Around Me

It All Begins With One

Some people think it's best at night, when the bay's rippling surface reflects a silvery moon in all its glory. Others say evening, when the reeds sway in the gentle breeze, and you can barely see the bridges covered in fog on either horizon. And still others prefer noon, almost blinded by the light as it glints off the water.

But for her?

She favors it at dawn. The deep golden color emitting from the sun combines with the rosy hues of the sky to paint an utterly breathtaking sight.

Every morning, whenever she gets the chance, she gets up at daybreak to take a jog on the levee. Later in the day, families and children and couples would come, and laugh and chatter and enjoy the views. But the morning belongs to just her, the fragile silence unbroken save for the slight pant of her breath and occasional chirp of birds.

Today, though, it is different.

She jogs, just like any other day. The fresh air pumping in her lungs, the swish of her ponytail, and the steady thump-thump of her shoes hitting the ground all blend together in the rhythm that she has come to love. But today, though, that harmony is somehow spoilt. For this time, the path by the water doesn't just contain her and a couple of reeds.

It also has an empty bottle. Plastic bags. Candy wrappers. Straws. Styrofoam Cups.

Trash.

She doesn't know why she didn't realize it sooner. Sure, it probably registered a couple of weeks, or even months ago. But today is the first time the knowledge of the sheer amount actually hits her.

And it scares her.

It's like that for a week. She tries to enjoy her runs, but it's impossible. So much plastic, so much trash, she is suffocating.

Then one day, there isn't anything.

For about an eighth of a mile, it is beautiful, and everything is like it used to be. The rubbish comes soon afterward, of course. But for some inexplicable reason, the first part was clear.

The next day, another eighth, and then another. After half a month, almost two miles are as good as new, maybe even better.

The fifteenth day is a Sunday. No school. She takes her morning run, as per the routine. But this time, she doesn't leave. She sits on a bench, hidden in the trees. Reads a book. Checks her phone. Listens to music.

Watches. Waits.

It is near dusk when she sees something. A movement catches the corner of her eye.

A man - and an old one, at that. He is wearing baggy pants and a wooly sweater. His hair is white. He is carrying a plastic trash bag, half full. As she watches, he picks up a dirty, tattered straw and puts it into the bag. He continues in this fashion down the path.

She can tell that he starts off strong, but grows wearier as time passes. Still, he persists, and soon, the entire section is devoid of garbage.

She walks home thinking. She had never seen him before. He probably barely walked on the pathway, so it was really no good for his own pleasure. He was old, too. His back must ache from the ceaseless bending, his limbs must be sore from the onerous labor.

The next evening, she goes there, too. With a trash bag. She sees him there, toiling tirelessly. She steps toward the pathway and snatches up a candy wrapper off of the ground.

The old man looks up, and they stare at each other. Some sort of silent understanding seems to run through his eyes. Without a word, he continues his work, and together they both clear the pathway until the moon has reached its peak.

This goes on for about two months. They slowly start to talk. Chat. Laugh. Becoming good friends.

Then, one evening, a boy comes. Jeans, shaggy hair, white sneakers. Trash bag in hand. They each nod at him, and continue with their work. He joins them.

Later, a woman in her thirties. A man with two children. An elderly couple, a group of teenage friends. All with trash bags.

It's surprising how fast word gets around in small towns. More and more people come. It spreads, and it soon isn't just along the pathway. We soon clear it and move on to the rest of the community. Of course, most have jobs and projects and other things to do. But, once committed, it is surprisingly easy to find time at least once a week.

Soon, not only the pathway by the bay is clean, but so is the rest of the city

Her morning jogs start expanding, too. She doesn't just do the path by the bay. Now she goes downtown, where the smell of the cafes tantalize her. She goes to the parks, the grass wet with dew from the night before. The elementary schools, where it is too early for even the custodian to have arrived. Not one piece of godforsaken junk is anywhere. The town is dazzling.

Then, after about six months, something changes. The old man doesn't come.

At first, she is not that worried. He has never missed a day before, but why not today? He is fine. He must be fine.

He doesn't show up the next day either. Or the next. After a week, she gets a letter in the mail. An invitation. His family is holding an event for him.

A funeral.

She cries herself to sleep.

It is only three days later when she finally has the courage to read the entire thing. Apparently, she is - no she was one his few good friends, one of the people who knew him pretty well.

They want her to speak. To say a few words. To talk about what he was, who he was. He was the kind of person who sacrifices his own needs for others. The kind of person who works relentlessly to make sure other people can be happy. The kind of person we need more of in this world.

It takes her a long time before the right word that encompass it all finally dawns upon her.

He was the kind of person that we call a hero.