

PERSPECTIVES

My Life, Love and Garbage

BY KELLY KIRSHTNER

For lack of better explanation, we decided to attribute the random occurrences around our house to some sort of poltergeist. Necessary household items had begun to vanish inexplicably only to surface later covered with sand. Every towel in the house would disappear at once, prompting us to perfect the guerrilla-like laundry recovery techniques that are among the many strategies that large-family living tends to incite. A gritty cluster of coffee-spotted mugs and crusty forks appeared, springing from the front lawn like an inglorious fairy ring. My mom walked outside to pick up the morning paper, only to rush back into the house with a handful of cups and the news that, “the mugs are back!” “Weird ghost,” we thought. These occurrences seemed to follow loosely the pattern of the moon, but soon became apparent that they really followed the patterns of my brother, the surfer. My brother is an equal-opportunity poltergeist, giving our can opener, coffee mugs, and even our garbage can new careers as surf accessories.

Like the missing appliances, my brother also reappears - covered with sand-at unpredictable intervals. Surfing is his life; it is what makes him happy, soothes and refreshes him. It might be interrupted by 40 hours of work, but never pales by comparison to anything except perhaps his girlfriend, who also surfs. Also close to his heart is the preservation of Hammond’s Meadow, a place memorable for surfers since long before our time. In pursuit of this goal, my brother has picked up trash at Hammond’s Beach for almost nine years, helped at

times by friends, but often doing it alone. He has in the past collected old tires, rusty cans, and mattresses carried to the beach by one storm or another, but more often it is a mix of plastic bags, soda cans, cigarette butts, disposable diapers, broken bottles, and crushed Styrofoam and paper cups. Until about six months ago, he cleaned away as much as nine whole trash cans a week, bringing it home to us along with his lament about people's treatment of the beach.

The seemingly supernatural disappearance of our garbage can one day had instead a much tamer explanation - my brother had taken it to the beach for a week of experimentation with human nature. He and his friends watched many people walk out of their way to put their trash in the can; others ignored it, but overall the initial results looked promising. After he removed the can, however, the usual garbage reappeared like the rising tide. Apparently some people need a visual cue to jog their memories, so after a while my brother and several of his friends chipped in to buy a permanent garbage can for the beach. The tide ebbed, but as it turned out you can't always trust the preliminary results of a test such as this. A few weeks later, he stopped on his way out of the water to ask a group of people if they would put their trash in the garbage can before they left. They asked him to mind his own business, then left their trash next to the garbage can, proof of their stated ability to "leave trash wherever we darn well feel like leaving it." My brother was pretty discouraged by this revelation of freedom.

It seems that some people are reluctant to accept the impact that the by - products of our lives have upon the ecosystems in which we live. Humans are very creative when it comes to the methods of convenient garbage disposal, but even in these modern times we can recycle it at best; more often we bury it, burn it, compact it, drown it, leave it, ignore it, and try to hide it – but our trash loves us, and sometimes comes back to visit through our air, food, or water supplies. Even Hammond's Meadow has been reshaped by a modern agenda.

The driftwood hut that had become an institution at the beach has been torn down by sources unknown. A new house is being built in the meadow right next to the sand, promising nothing but the presence of heavy machinery for a while. Simple and inspirational, my brother's gesture toward Hammond's gave us all two gifts: a garbage can and a pardon, a chance to make up for some other piece of our lives left on another beach or somewhere else along the way. His efforts have made a visible difference in our community and on beaches in Australia, where he recently spent six months surfing – but at the average rate of four personal pounds of trash generated per day, there's a lot more picking up to do than he can handle on his own. Most of us can afford the time to extend our efforts beyond our homes, by picking up a piece of trash left by someone else. Do it for yourself, or the future, because they'll know us best by the ghosts we leave today.

Kelly Kirshtner, a free-lance writer who grew up in Santa Barbara, is a rock climber in her spare time.