

Mr. Benson Lives by the Sea

by Brian Honeycutt

Mr. Benson let out a profoundly long sigh. It was a sound that reminded him of the roaring of the ocean inside a shell, the cold metallic air rolling out from his mouth into the still air of his achingly quiet room. Outside he could hear the cries of distant gulls circling the sea. He often wondered what they thought and felt.

He imagined this one - his name was Roger - having a generally cheerful demeanor. He got on great with all the other gulls, especially the females. Roger took on what Mr. Benson imagined was the demeanor and personality of a slick, handsome 1950s businessman.

“Hey there, Carl, how ya doing today? How’s the little lady?” or “Well, hello Bethanne, looking delightful as always!”, Roger would say as he strolled down the aisles of the office/waddled through the flock gathered on a bright morning.

Yet behind the slick veneer and charming personality lay a desperate and mean spirited bird. At least that’s what came out when Roger was denied what he wanted the most. It could be a promotion, the tastiest morsel for himself first, or to copulate with one of the attractive young gulls in the flock. When Roger didn’t get what he wanted, things turned nasty...

It was winter, and Mr. Benson was tired. He lay in his bed, trying not to worry about things. How the day would go, what he needed to do. People he had interacted with or not and what he should or shouldn’t say to them. His health.

He closed his eyes and sighed again.

Guess I'd better get up and see what there is to see. He thought.

So he pushed his tired old body up with stiff arms and joints that issued complaints as they whinged.

God. He sighed.

Mr. Benson made his way to the bathroom and proceeded to undertake his morning preparation ritual.

Remove waste. Move limbs skyward. Bend downward. Assess functioning of physical frame. Blink away the night.

Mr. Benson liked to eat Crunchy Wheat Flakes and milk for breakfast. He didn't need to do this, really, but he liked to think of himself as someone who ate breakfast cereal. He also liked wearing a tie and a slightly battered fedora. It was just who he was.

He would have read the paper, but no one did that anymore.

Mr. Benson clicked on the TV. He liked to watch TV as he munched his cereal. Soap ads, a soccer game, a show he thought was written for women but kind of liked anyway, and the news (*terrible stuff, what else is new*) filtered through his mind.

Click. Silence. A beautiful silence. Paired with soft, bright light from outside that gently swam across his painted white walls and filled his house with a cold, pristine radiance. It was like living inside a hallowed dream.

Yet a wash of immense sadness permeated everything. Sadness that lurked just below the surface of things. Mr. Benson always knew it was there. Waiting. Humming in the background and sometimes bursting out in flashes of stifled screams in his peripheral vision. Or in the mirror.

Things were always hard in the mirror. Such a shiny gleaming surface devoid of any warmth. The stark reality of his howling emptiness staring back at him.

Mr. Benson adjusted his tie as the gentle rolling sounds of the waves flowed softly around him.

Piercing sunlight brought Mr. Benson closer to the realm of the awake and living as he stepped outside.

Another beautiful day.

Mr. Benson made his way over to his favorite bench. It overlooked the sea, sat directly in the sun, and was fortunately generally free of gull shit.

He eased his tired body onto the bench. It felt like he was dragging all the eons of the past behind him like some sort of leviathan of time.

Having placed himself upon his seat of comfort and power for the day, he took in the sights and sounds around him. The sun beat down with merciless joy overhead, while the waves continued their gentle wash of sound unabated. Wonderfully deep blues blended together in a liquid merging with lighter shades of azure that reminded Mr. Benson of the Caribbean.

Mr. Benson loved the sea. He loved the idea of living in some foreign locale. Somewhere tropical maybe, though he wasn't sure he could handle the humidity, as he'd heard his mother recite her distaste for such climates repeatedly throughout his childhood.

A surge of long managed bitterness rose up within Mr. Benson. His mind offhandedly made its way, turning like a river into a well worn groove, to scenes of

intense hatred and sorrow, of long ago battles with his mother. Of nursing silent raging pains with thoughts of revenge.

But all that was mostly background for Mr. Benson, who was soon startled from his unconscious reverie by the curious look of a gull that had come to join him on the ground near his bench.

“Huh, well, hello there friend,” Mr. Benson grunted. “Hmmm. Hungry, eh? I’ve got just the ticket,”

Mr. Benson creaked his way towards his side, where he had a bag he had brought. He knew he wasn’t supposed to be doing this, but it was one of his guilty pleasures.

Mr. Benson reached into the bag and retrieved a clenched metallic fist holding a wad of bread. He creaked his arm towards the gull and began crumbling the bread onto the ground.

Soon he had many more feathered visitors join him around his wooden perch. Mr. Benson was delighted. His lips even slowly formed themselves into an upturned half-circle, something Mr. Benson was given to understand denoted a sense of happiness or pleasure.

He didn’t even mind when some of the gulls landed on him. Though he took pains to shoo them away should they seemed poised to defecate on top of him.

“Wow! Mommy, look at all the seagulls!” a small voice cried.

Mr. Benson turned his head. It appeared he had a new visitor.

A larger human - female, probably the mother, Mr. Benson assumed, replied “Yes, dear, there’s quite a lot of them aren’t there?”

Mr. Benson wasn't sure if he should be worried or not. He didn't need anyone reporting him or passing judgmental comments against him. He also was afraid, though he wouldn't admit it, of the child (*yes, that's what they are called...*) stealing his flock away from him. After all, he was younger, more vibrant, surely of more interest to his capricious gull friends.

But I have loyalty! And a steady stream of bread! Mr. Benson thought.

Mr Benson fiercely clutched his bread, causing crumbs to cascade to the pavement. He gazed intently at the young boy, his eyes two narrow slats of smoldering suspicion.

The young boy didn't seem to notice. He was focused upon the gulls. He happily waddled over to the birds, a wide, beaming smile stretched across his face. Some of the birds flew away in fear, but most stayed. The promise of food was too strong.

The boy let out a laugh, a merry sound that caused Mr. Benson to cringe inwardly in tension ever so slightly. The boy tried chasing the gulls a bit, his chubby young hands inevitably clutching only air. Yet this did not seem to impinge upon his seeming delight.

Mr. Benson thought about the strangeness of this for a time. What did it mean? How could one be so happy with defeat?

Mr. Benson was snapped suddenly from his reverie when he noticed the boy staring up at him and smiling.

"He'lo!" The boy chimed.

"Er, hello." Mr. Benson replied. He was unsure of this newfound intrusion upon his otherwise orderly life.

"Whatcha doin'?" the boy asked.

“Feeding gulls.” Mr. Benson answered.

“Hmmm. Birdies!” The boy happily exclaimed.

Mr. Benson wasn't sure what to say. Yet the silence seemed awkward and to beg for some kind of response.

Mr. Benson nodded slowly.

“Yes. Birds.” he replied.

“Tommy, let's let the man feed his birds,” said the mother.

“Mmm, but I wan' feed them too!” Tommy cried.

Tommy's mother smiled nervously and took her son's hand.

“Well, let's see if this nice man will let us use some of his bread, OK?” the mother replied. “How bout it, sir, may we have a little of your bread to feed the gulls?”

Mr. Benson froze. He stared at the mother and her son. Then he looked at the bread clutched in his hand. Back and forth he went. He thought. *Hard*. This was something unexpected, a dilemma. He didn't like those. He just wanted to feed the birds. It was something he counted on every day. He stared at the bread and continued to think hard, difficult thoughts.

Noticing his consternation, the mother said, “Welllll, maybe we had better let the man be, Tommy.”

“Oh. OK.” Tommy said, lowering his head as well as the pitch and volume of his voice. After a passing instant the boy's head sprung up and he smiled at Mr. Benson.

“Bye, bye, Mister!”

Mr. Benson stared at them for a moment in silence before they left. When they had gone he turned again to stare with unfocused intensity at the bread slowly being crushed in the vice like grip of his hand.

Bread.....Birds.....Give up my bread??? Why? Mmmm I don't like this feeling. I'm glad they are gone. But somehow I feel...something..sad? Hmmm..I feel...

Mr. Benson wasn't sure what to call this feeling. It felt somehow expansive and empty, like a giant hollow metal sphere floating all by itself in space. Eternal, powerfully beautiful. Strangely coated in numb misery and stifled joy. A disconnected sphere of isolation.

Mr. Benson didn't know what to make of such thoughts. Such images. They passed through him like a half-remembered dream passes through a dreamer upon waking.

He stared once more at the sea and sky, mindlessly feeding the gulls as he did so.

Soon the sun was sinking into the sea. Fantastic pinks and oranges melded together in the sky with the shimmering light of the dying sun.

Mr. Benson was tired and out of bread. In any case, his batteries needed charging, so it was time to go home.

At home, Mr. Benson got ready for bed. He splashed water on his face, another unnecessary ritual he enjoyed, and stared into the mirror. The roar of the sea and a strange rumbling buzz coursed through his mind. Water droplets slowly dripped down his face while he stared. He thought about the boy and his mother. That shining,

beaming smile that so pained and enlivened him. The shock of their meeting. The beautiful azure blue of the sea. The strangely sad parting.

As he slipped into bed, Mr. Benson again thought of his feelings, of space and time stretching out in infinite waves in all directions. Of the sphere in giant isolated space. Suddenly Mr. Benson knew what he had felt then.

He felt alone.

Day Two

In other news...

The TV buzzed its soft crackling noise of the day's events as Mr. Benson crunched on his cereal. Stray, almost imperceptibly small pieces of wheat flakes occasionally drifted slowly in a gentle downward spiral onto the floor or into the cracks of the couch, to be lost forever, witnessed by no one as they decayed and vanished.

Mr. Benson let out a deep and heavy sigh.

So much happening in the world....

But inside Mr. Benson felt cold, bored. One could say sad, but it was as if the sadness was screaming behind a padded wall.

Mr. Benson clicked off the TV and proceeded directly to the bathroom to clean himself and get ready for the day.

Once outside, the sunlight shone relentlessly into his eyes, forcing him to squint. The light brown of his tie and weathered hat was illuminated in such a way as to evoke a sense of a well worn, comfortable chair and a home filled with love and longing. Of

time passed and distant memories and unexplored lands stretched out throughout one's mind.

Mr. Benson eased onto his bench and stared at the sea. He opened his bag of bread and began to aimlessly feed the gulls. The same azure blue from yesterday was there, again reminding him of the tropics or the Caribbean.

Rosie...

He thought back to times when he held her hand and smiled as their eyes met. He felt somehow sheepish with so much intimacy even after 23 years of marriage, but he also felt emboldened and safe in her loving presence.

He remembered how they had eaten at that little café and eaten a local type of sandwich and drank coffee. His insides buzzed with the stuff, the vast open feeling of the world around them, and the steady pulse of being connected to Rosie.

Rosie...how I miss you...

Afterward they strolled languidly along the shore. Somehow it felt like they had managed to escape from all the worries and noise of modern life out there. Like entering a different dimension almost. Locals pedaled past on their bicycles, or chatted animatedly amongst themselves, while tourists basked in the peaceful glory of the first throes of sunset or played with their children.

"He'lo 'gain!" a happy voice chimed.

Mr. Benson slowly roused himself from his memories.

Huh? Oh. You again...sigh... I just want to have a peaceful day...

"Oh, um, hello, sir." said the mother. "I hope we're not disturbing you."

"Er..." Mr. Benson replied.

“Birdies!” Tommy shouted.

Mr. Benson was unsure of himself but he decided to hazard a response, if for no other reason than to avoid the horrid agony of prolonged silence.

“Er...yes. Birds.”

“They hungee...” Tommy burbled.

Mr. Benson stared at the boy. Such brightness. He reminded him of the sun. It hurt almost as much to look at him. This made Mr. Benson feel like his insides were sinking, like a wet sand castle slowly crumbling to the shore.

Tommy waddled towards the birds, then jumped. He smiled at his game.

Mr. Benson became nervous. He was afraid the birds would fly away or be upset. He imagined Roger giving the boy a talking to.

“Now see here, boy. You can’t just go around doing whatever you please. Stirring up trouble and the like. Why if I did everything I had a mind to do - ho, ho! - let me tell you, boy. There would be consequences. Dire consequences, indeed! In fact-”

“You look sad,” the little boy said.

Mr. Benson swiveled his head to meet the boy’s gaze. He felt uncomfortable. He wanted to escape, back to that time with Rosie, to his TV, anywhere. It felt like his insides were wriggling.

He sighed.

“Sad...” he said.

The gulls continued to peck at the bread in Mr. Benson’s now motionless hand. Some even tried to get at the bread inside the enclosed bag sitting next to him.

“Tommy, it’s not nice to say things like that,” his mother said. “Excuse my son, please, sir. Come on, Tommy.”

“Bu’, Mommy! I wan feed the birdies!” Tommy whined, tugging at his mother’s hand.

Something about this small creature’s pathetic attempts to free itself from the clutches of his larger keeper awoke something inside Mr. Benson. It reminded him of himself somehow.

“Bread,” said Mr. Benson. His arm creaked as he slowly stuck it out, offering the doughy lump of squished bread to the boy.

Tommy, now released, came hurriedly towards his new found benefactor. He took a small bit of bread and showered it clumsily across the pavement. A piece or two even hit a bird in the head, but they didn’t seem to mind.

Tommy giggled profusely.

“Well, what do you say, Tommy?” his mother prompted.

“Tank-oo!” Tommy exclaimed with delight.

Mr. Benson felt strange, as if he had crossed some previously unseen threshold. He quivered with the first inklings of feelings that were seemingly swelling up inside him. Somehow he thought Rosie would be proud of him.

Mr. Benson noticed that his mouth was doing that half-circle thing again. Only this time, he hadn’t planned it. This brought a dim memory back to him. Of swaying palm trees and twinkling eyes, of feeling safe and secure next to Rosie in bed at night. Times that felt distinctly not sad. Something more. Something warm and glowing. Something precious that made him want to be alive forever.

"I'm Theresa, by the way."

Mr. Benson was quicker this time.

"Benson," he replied.

"Well, nice to meet you, Benson," the woman said.

"Benson!" shouted Tommy.

After a while the bread was gone and the birds began to look elsewhere for their food. The woman and her boy had told Mr. Benson they were here on vacation, that they had heard the sea was wonderful this time of year. Mr. Benson didn't say much but nodded in what he thought was a polite way at these personal revelations.

"Well, I think it's about time for us to get some lunch of our own, kiddo."

Tommy, still smiling, replied, "OK. Time for lunch."

"Thanks again, Benson. Maybe we'll see you around," Theresa said.

"Yes. Around."

"Bye bye, Benson!" Tommy exclaimed with an energetic wave.

"Yes. Goodbye."

When he was alone again, Mr. Benson took in the quiet of his surroundings. He inhaled the salty air of the sea and looked longingly out at the horizon.

After a time he was filled with a sense of peacefulness. This in turn eventually gave way to the first hints of his solitariness as a slightly chilly wind crossed his body.

Time to go home.

Mr. Benson carried with him the fullness of his day. The peacefulness and warm glow from before still emanated within him, and he recalled why he had wanted to live

by the sea in the first place. Memories washed in the back of his awareness like soft waves caressing his soul.

Inside, Mr. Benson took off his hat and tie as the sun turned orange-red and was swallowed up by the sea.

It had been an interesting day. He was still not quite sure what to make of it.

As night fell, Mr. Benson, having already finished his dinner and evening program, sat on the edge of his bed. He thought about the sea. About the boy and his mother. He did not miss his bread. He was glad he had shared.

For some reason Mr. Benson then decided to go to his dresser. He opened the top right drawer. Inside was an old, beaten postcard. He picked it up and looked at the palm trees and small beached boat on its face. A smiling woman in a bathing suit with curly brown hair waved with relaxed excitement.

He turned the card over and read.

What memories! I'm so happy I got to spend this time with you, my dear. I'll always remember this chapter of our lives. Here's to many more adventures! Love, Rosie.

Mr. Benson closed his eyes and breathed in deeply. The sound of the ocean outside mingled with the echoes of his past inside him. He seemed to feel content for a moment. Then he thought of Rosie, and his heart broke.

A small stream of tears came flowing down his cheeks. Soon other memories came flooding back to join them. Images of Rosie packing her bag. Of her telling him it wasn't him, that she still loved him.

“I just need to find myself, Benson. To try something new. There’s just so much to see in this world.”

He had said he could join her, that he wanted to join her, but she had said as gently as she could that she needed this chapter to be hers and hers alone.

He remembered the day she left, her car pulling out of the driveway. A sad smile drawn across her face. The dull ache and bewilderment of the reality of her leaving him forever.

He would sometimes wake in the night wanting to scream. He would toss and turn and wake with a start, shaking in a pain and grief he couldn’t put words to. He sometimes dreamt of her.

Sometimes he managed to muster up all his powers of imagination and hope and convince some part of himself that she might come back one day. But deep down he knew this to be a lie.

Mr. Benson continued to weep softly to himself as he slipped into bed. It had been a wondrously strange day. His insides hurt and his metal frame seemed even more stiff than usual. He only hoped he could fall asleep.

Though possessed by momentary fear and swirling anguish, Mr. Benson’s wish was ultimately granted as he fell asleep to the memory of the distant cry of gulls and the wash of bittersweet happiness in the waves of the moonlit sea.

Day Three

Mr. Benson awoke the next morning feeling incredibly sluggish and infinitely sad. His insides felt like a piece of discarded bruised fruit. He had known for sometime that he was very unhappy, yet he had always managed to keep the bulk of these feelings at bay with a steady diet of routine and activity.

Now, with the recent thoughts of Rosie, he felt horrid. It was already 11:24. Far past the usual time for him to get out of bed.

The gulls must be wondering where I am.

Mr. Benson let out a tiny, tired sigh. He felt so *heavy* today. He couldn't seem to think of a good reason to get out of bed, even though he was a bit panicked by the late hour of his awakening and the fact that he might miss out on feeding the gulls if he didn't leave the house.

Would it even matter?

Why do I even bother?

Surely they can fend for themselves...it's not like they'd miss me.

Then deeper still, a quiet, soft voice that Mr. Benson almost didn't notice.

It's not like I matter...

So he lay there for a while. Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen. Soon an hour had passed and still he lay there mired in the depths of his depression.

The world seemed a terrifying and lonely place to him somehow. Where did it all go wrong? He had been happy once. Couldn't he find that happiness again?

He had tried. There were other women, a smattering of friends. He had tried various hobbies. Painting. Woodwork. Even tennis.

Eventually he had given up on all these things. He saw them for what they were, passing interests and curious movements in his life that did little to nothing to touch the base feelings inside him. He felt almost like a ghost in his own life, acting and doing without anything really changing or possessing much meaning.

How was this possible? How had this become his life? Mr. Benson had always considered himself an optimist of sorts, one who would throw himself into the world with gusto with the underlying assumption that there would be a wonderful series of events, a wonderful world filled with wonderful people that would catch him and support him as he jumped into the marvelous fray of life.

When this didn't seem to happen even a year or more after Rosie left he began to worry. Another year and he began to feel the onset of dismay, a rumbling of doubt that began to shake the foundations of his faith. Five years and he had begun to lose hope. He began to turn bitter, to curse whatever fateful force had abandoned him to this shell of a life. He had never wanted this, and he was getting older.

True, he still had years left if all went well. He was designed to last for many years more. But it's not as if he would last forever, and he felt fraught with concern that the best years of his life were passing him by.

Ten years and more had gone by since she had left him, and still he was alone. He wondered what he had done wrong. Or was life just broken, at least for him. Could one really not count on anything? It seems he was being asked to learn the painful lesson that life can very well indeed be filled with sorrow and hardship despite one's very best intentions and kindness of heart.

Some took this as an opportunity to learn something. Mr. Benson found it very difficult to see things this way. Why couldn't life be happy? Why did that which he loved have to be snatched from his hands so cruelly? Where was the love and mercy in the world in such acts?

How could his every action lead him to no more than hollow victories? To checking off boxes on a list of things to try and do.

Friend. Check. Hobby. Check. Self Improvement. Check.

Yet inside lay a barren wasteland, and in the center he saw himself stuck next to a dwindling oasis in the center of it all, afraid to leave lest he die of thirst.

For Mr. Benson had eventually shut the door on his hope. Had let go of trying. Now his life was filled with achingly familiar, pre-planned routines designed to shut out the world of the living. To deaden his broken heart.

He didn't see it that way consciously, of course. No. He simply acted in the way that most made sense to him as he went about his life and all the sandcastles of his hopes were eroded or smashed by the indifferent sea of life.

Now something had awakened his feeling once more. It *hurt*.

It hurt just to *be*. He still couldn't believe how *heavy* he felt. Like the weight of time and forgotten innocence.

Mr. Benson sighed again and rubbed his salt encrusted eyes. He didn't like himself like this. He felt ashamed. He thought it was time to at least attempt to move. Maybe the gulls would still come to him after all.

So, summoning what effort he could, he began to push himself upwards and out of bed. The white cotton sheet dragged slowly over his body as he did so, making a soft shushing sound.

Sitting at the edge of the bed, Mr. Benson supported himself with his weak, sleep-heavy arms. His head hung downward, following the trajectory of his thoughts.

He thought he might cry again, but it was only the barest of whimpers. A small shudder of sadness that came and went without note in the empty chamber of his bedroom.

Like my life...

But Mr. Benson was nothing if not perseverant, so he eventually managed to shuffle his way into the bathroom, then into the kitchen. He stared into the refrigerator. He gazed blankly at the milk. Somehow it made him sad.

Soon he was on the couch, eating his cereal. The same crunchy, tasty, pleasing, completely unfulfilling breakfast cereal he ate every day.

He was about to click on the TV, but he stopped himself. He tossed the remote back onto the couch.

Instead he just sat there in silence. Dull murmurs of thoughts slowly grew within himself. He breathed in and out, a cold, metallic, quiet hiss.

What the hell am I doing here?

As expected, no answer came.

Mr. Benson still felt slightly panicky about the gulls. He felt somehow it was important to get out and feed them like he always does.

Quick you fool! Before daylight dies!

Yet he seemed unable to muster the requisite strength to do so. Perhaps he had reached his breaking point. Perhaps he had finally been defeated by life, eternal champion over hapless mortals with illusions of reality and its promises.

You win I guess...

But Mr. Benson was also a bit of a fighter. He possessed a stubborn streak of sorts, or at least he had in many times throughout his life. For he had cared very deeply about a great many things, and he had been filled with hope and purpose once.

So with a wave of violent defiance he roused himself to stand on shaky legs. He shuffled once more to the bedroom to retrieve his hat and tie. Though it was but a few feet the strength that had surged within him was already dissipating and the bitterness and sorrow underneath came to visit him once more.

God he felt tired. So tired and old. Worn out. Beaten down. He hung his head and placed his hands on his hips to steady himself as he stood on the carpeted floor of his bedroom. He breathed heavily, the emotions of sorrow coursing through him, making it hard to move.

Rosie....

Mr. Benson squeezed his eyes shut and thought of her face. Of looking into her eyes and feeling love. His heart broke just a little more to think of it.

Rosie...How could this happen? Where are you?

The image of her waving sadly to him as she drove away played over and over in his mind, mixing with images of gazing up into her loving eyes. Mr. Benson felt like he was falling slowly in a dream.

Stark reality came back to him as he listened to the lonely sounds of his breathing in an empty room. Slowly he raised his head and scanned the room. Sunlight was still filtering in through the window and the curtains were blowing lightly in the breeze.

Soon Mr. Benson's eyes came to rest on his old weathered hat hanging from his hat rack. He stared at it. For some reason it always made him unbearably sad to do so. He pictured himself smiling and young, relatively tall and thin as he was, making his way out of the house and into the world. He imagined himself being gone from this world. He thought of the sadness and struggle that had so permeated his existence so often. It made some part of his soul weep to look at his hat and think of the loving person that came with it. Of his life filled with hope and despair and shattered promises and dreams. Of his innocent loving heart ripped to shreds by a world he had so trusted.

Yet onward he must go. So he grabbed his hat, put on his tie, and stepped outside into the light of the afternoon sun, clutching his daily bag of bread for the gulls.

Mr. Benson walked with a feeling of vulnerability, like a scared and lost child, on his way to his bench. His sad eyes held fast by creases worn from worry and distress were turned downward, his shoulders slumped. His usual steadfast way of being had been dissolved now that it was revealed for the numb defensive mask it was.

As he walked, the plastic bag of bread swayed delicately with his movements. It dangled from his tightly clenched fist like the inverse of a child holding a balloon. Pitiful and falling instead of joyous and surging towards the sky.

The gulls. They might cheer me up.

In an instant this weak hope too was ripped from his infirm clutches as a bounding dog exuberantly tore the bag from his grasp. Mr. Benson fell to the concrete stunned and in shock. He tried to get up slowly but only managed to turn himself onto his hands and knees, rising just enough so that he could see the dog pitilessly destroying the promise of feeding his feathered friends.

My bread!

Soon the dog's owner came to shame and restrain the dog. But the damage had been done.

"I'm so sorry, sir," the man said as he helped Mr. Benson to his feet. "He just got away from me. Are you OK? Is there anything I can do to repay you?"

"Huh? Wha-? Oh, no. No, that's alright. Just some bread..." Mr. Benson quietly replied.

The man, who wore glasses, a light blue polo shirt, and light khaki shorts held tightly with a brown belt answered, "Well, again, I am sorry. I hope you have a good rest of your day."

The nasally tone of the man's voice drifted quickly away to be replaced by his fading footsteps and soon by the whooshing babble of strangers walking past and the ever flowing rush of the sea.

Mr. Benson slumped even further in a moment of self pity. Then he began to be concerned and feel exposed as a slight wind swept across him. He wrung his hands as he thought about what to do.

In the end he decided he couldn't bear to go back home. He may as well go and sit on his bench anyway. What else could he do?

Why'd he have to take my bread?

Why does everything always turn out like this?

Why me?

Sitting on the bench, he stared out at the sea. A gull or two came to stand next to him in curiosity, but it wasn't the same. Without the bread he was quickly revealed to be the useless object he was.

Mr. Benson realized the foolishness of his previous fantasies then. Of course they only came for the bread.

Yet it was nice to pretend for a while. To imagine himself the center of a small universe populated by cheerful and lively creatures. It was a fantasy filled with warmth and childlike jubilation.

Stripped bare, the illusion torn asunder, Mr. Benson sat and grimly chuckled to himself.

Old fool.

He sat there for a while, saying nothing. The waves came in and went out, the cries of the gulls now colored in mourning and mockery.

Mr. Benson wondered what he would do now. He hadn't thought about any sort of change in so long, he felt at sea with the notion. What did he even *want*? What *could* he do?

Soon the timid tendrils of searching for some kind of purchase with which to base a new life were scared away into the darkness by the sudden crashing of a voice bursting into the silence.

"H'lo, Mr. Benson!"

Mr. Benson's head creaked as he slowly turned to look down at Tommy. The young boy's face was beaming with youthful joy. His innocent smile almost pained Mr. Benson to look at still, yet now the pain was sweet, like the beauty and aroma of a rose after the prick of the thorn.

"Hello, Mr. Benson, it's nice to see you again, isn't it, Tommy?" Theresa said.

"Yeah! Benson!" Tommy replied cheerfully.

Mr. Benson felt on the verge of tears. But he thought that his salt encrusted eyes had seen enough wear and tear for one day, so he tried to keep them in. Still, he felt the waters rising within his heart.

"It's nice to see you both too," Mr. Benson started, "Very nice indeed."

After a very brief interlude filled with a chorus of met smiles, Tommy asked, "Wan' feed the birdies, Mr. Benson?"

Mr. Benson couldn't hold it in any longer. The delight and joy he felt filled his heart past the brim, and a tear or two rolled slowly down his metal cheek.

"Yes, Tommy. I'd like that very much."

So he went to reach for his bread, and that's when he remembered. Horror and sorrow rudely intruded upon his happy world then.

He turned to Tommy and said, "I- I'm so, so sorry, Tommy. But I don't have any-."

"Bread!" Tommy shouted, proudly producing a small bag that waved like a flag in the breeze from his fist.

"Oh, Tommy! Thank you!" Mr. Benson cried.

Tommy laughed, and together they began an afternoon filled with delight.

That afternoon, they continued to feed the gulls until the sun's red rays stretched far across the sea. By the day's end all were overcome by the pleasant and tired contentedness that comes from a day well spent in the company of friends.

When the time came for goodbyes, all were sad. But their lives had all been subtly changed for the better.

"We're sure going to miss you, Mr. Benson." Teresa said.

"Benson!" Tommy ran up to Mr. Benson and squeezed him mightily. The old robot bent down and gently embraced the young boy.

"I'm very glad to have met you both." Mr. Benson replied. "What will you do now?"

"Oh, we're back home for a while after this. Back to school and work and all of that. It's been so lovely here, but I guess it's time for us to go." Teresa answered.

Mr. Benson nodded his melancholy understanding.

"How about yourself? What does Mr. Benson do when he's not feeding the seagulls?" asked Teresa.

Mr. Benson breathed deeply and thought. He had no idea what he would do next. He barely knew what he was doing with himself right now!

"Oh maybe a bit of this, a bit of that." He answered.

Teresa smiled politely. Tommy announced his charge with another rousing shout of "Benson!" before rushing in for another fierce goodbye hug.

When they had said their final goodbyes and the two travelers had vanished from sight, Mr. Benson felt a ping of sadness. Once again he felt the cool air from the sea swirl around him, reminding him he was alone.

Yet something new had come to join the familiar. A sense of embodied purpose, power, and peace glowed within him. Something had changed for Mr. Benson. He no longer felt so alone and disconnected. Yes, he was more aware of his pain than before, but he also finally felt alive again.

Alive again...

Mr. Benson shuddered as he thought about how he could have spent his entire life being numb, more or less dead to the world and all who dwell in it. Even dead to himself.

As he prepared for sleep that night, he turned these thoughts and feelings over many times within himself. Things would be different now. He didn't know what life had in store for him, but he knew somehow that many adventures awaited. The unexpected now intrigued and delighted him. After all, Teresa and Tommy were a breath of fresh air, and something he could never have planned on.

Mr. Benson was still alone. He still felt quite sad, and he knew he wouldn't always be happy. But now he had something to look forward to. He had risen from the depths of his slumber to embrace the mysterious forces of life once more. He would always miss Rosie, and he might not find that kind of joy again for a very long time.

But that was alright. Mr. Benson had been designed to last many, many years. He had time.

THE END