

The Guest

by Don Schaeffer

Joseph surprised his hostess by announcing he was going to spend the day walking. But she did not suggest she go with him.

The ocean, empty of people, was a blankness. The true earth was crowded with the familiar facial form: cartoon, real, sketched on concrete with chalk, carefully circled in crayon by children, scrolled on birthday cakes, captured by camera with teeth all whitened, portraited, imitated, formulated. We don't wake up until we see it. We even plaster it on birds or cats or pigs and laugh and laugh. How much these creatures imitate us, want to be us, replace us, take part with us. We don't put it on fishes, except maybe the friendliest kind. We resent the arthropod, the lobster, the spider, the insect that appear to spite us.

Sometimes Joseph just needed a little gift. Life in the sea of faces passed like a trip through mayonnaise. He got tired of it sometimes, the bits of effort, seeing the same outlines, profiles, configurations without relief. He needed something new. Joseph often found it on E-Bay. He still had remnants of hunger for particular manipulanda that he needed to toy with. He knew he could find them in the E-Bay open marketplace.

And it occurred to Joseph that he could sit by himself anywhere and let thoughts slip and slide through him. He could sit face to face anywhere with someone in silence. He could let manners and conformance decide for him what to say. He could cast casual glances across any table without piercing his silence. He could speak without breaking holes in his solitude, anywhere. He could float in the sea anywhere, watching for storms but not really caring.

Joseph was opposed to a belief in hell. He was one of those who entered the fray and drew the line there. But he was still afraid that God would hate him. It was very unpleasant to imagine this Old Man, Uncle Figure, Kindly Archetype hating you, turning His back, wanting to leave your house, sniffing at the impurities. The question is, could Joseph still avoid this. Was it too late?

Just look how Joseph lives, the judges would say when Joseph is judged sitting in a restaurant. He never touches. Conversation is abbreviated. One never gets into his soul although he thinks all the time about souls. No one near him feels they know him, scoffed and not admired, solitude and light praises, acts of presumption and expectations about invisible ghosts with bodies of distance and dream.

Along the shore, the beach provided a least a pathway. It was linear—back or forward. Joseph knew there would be landmarks along the water, places where people would gather or even places where people spent their lives. Joseph himself was only a

visitor to this ribbon land by the ocean.

A neighborhood like other neighborhoods it was. Many citizens spent their lives here. It was worthy of never leaving. The citizens met in public places and found each other, chatted about shared memories, old times, talked shop, shared new data about common acquaintances. Joseph would see them. He would look like a human being, appropriate, polite. His exchanges were never received with joy. His presence always required an investment beyond what citizens were willing to make.

He was here. It was a long day in Summer. Joseph decided to leave the beach and head out into the forest which surrounded the beach. The forest was broad and dark. But Long Island was a civilized place. And it was an Island, only so big and bound by the sea and the sound. If he walked through the woods he knew it would eventually end and he would emerge into a less camouflaged region.

He passed through the dense boundary region of the woods, pushing some vines and thorns aside. Then the trees made air space between them, columns in a medieval church. Like the sea, the forest lost its boundaries. He walked, with the sun blinking on and off over his head.

Then, suddenly, the land got complicated. A bank of rock and grass bordered a creek. The forest like a dream grew larger inside than it was outside. The land challenged and dared him.