

Beach Party
by
P. K. Pebbles

My name is Pebbles, though for much of my existence I was without a name. That was before the lady with the pink hat came along. I like the name. It suits me. It's something to aspire to. The P. K. stands for Pak Kok, a name of place rather than character.

I came into being 6,000 years ago, give or take. My "birth" was not so much a big bang, but a gradual shifting of forces molded by destiny. My mother sat 200 kilometres south of here at the edge of a vast plain until the sea levels rose and obscured her, allowing me to make an appearance on the world.

And here I am. Pretty cool, eh?

The first few thousand years were magnificent – a series of skies, seas and mountain vistas. Yet after so long looking at it, I found it a bit dull. Sure, there were some pretty amazing sunsets, squally weather that got me all of a quiver and some lovely bugs, birds and the occasional beastly to gaze upon, but not much else. I was spoilt. I didn't realize what I had - nature's canvass at its best laid out just for me.

Then one day, I saw something I never had before. Of course, I'd seen creatures leap out of the water or fly across the sky. My mum had witnessed some that after a few thousand years evolved and moved from their watery home onto the land. Pretty amazing that – growing some legs and learning to breathe in air instead of water! There were similar changes going on in front of me, I suppose, but at the time these made me yawn. It was soooo slow. Then suddenly I saw something new and exciting.

People.

Sure I'd heard about them – news travels on the tide, don't you know? At first I rejoiced to see the daily appearance of a fishing boat or two across my line of vision. It was fascinating to watch the people standing upright as they maneuvered oars much longer than themselves. Crouching, talking, fishing, moving - all those things I cannot do. I watched from a distance, getting to know their habits and characteristics and I was awestruck!

Looking back, it was a golden period. I was having the time of my life. I was undisturbed, yet occupied, watching the growing industry of human activity, not just on the water but on the hillside opposite too. On the far shore, hundreds upon hundreds of tiny boxes were being stacked one on top of the other. At night these sparkled like stars. Of course, I couldn't see the real stars so much anymore, and the vessels that I watched seemed to grow in number and size before me. There were, though, still times of peace when the moonlight shone on the water in front of me.

I should have been satisfied, but I wasn't. I was lonely.

Then one day, I heard a shout followed by squeals of delight. A man and a lady, both dressed in red robes gingerly worked their way over the big flat rock on my outer edge. Then more and more people appeared. They put down their belongings and took off their shoes and started walking all over me. Some sat down too and caressed me. It was lovely!

They stayed with me for hours laughing, singing, eating and drinking until at last when the sun was beginning to disappear, they returned the way they had come. It was the best day ever.

After that I opened my heart to people. I wanted to share more joy, to be part of their celebration. It had been good to watch the traffic, but better to experience people close up – to share their love and be loved. I breathed to my brothers and sisters everywhere, sending my message with the tide. And I heard back the most wonderful stories from all around the world, where people and nature were celebrating life together wherever the land met the sea.

But after that first party, there were no more celebrations for a while. Perhaps I was too remote? Or perhaps the weather was too inclement? Needless to say I was feeling pretty sorry for myself. I thought I had been forgotten. So, you can imagine my delight when one day, a fishing boat tossed something in my direction.

A gift.

A white box. Now what would I do with a white box? But, thank you very much, anyway. If it's from people, it must be good, right? Of course, I didn't want to appear rude, so I kept it. Didn't have much choice really. My lack of bodily form, particularly those close clever devices that you people have on the ends of your arms, prevented me from doing otherwise.

Then there were other things. Bottles, some of which broke into jagged pieces that were gradually made smooth by the sea. More white boxes, some of which got broken into millions of white beads, smothering me. More bottles made of a substance that never seemed to disappear.

People still came to visit me and sometimes they left things behind. Or perhaps they were giving me gifts too? But then they stopped coming near me. If they did stumble across me, the looks on their faces showed their disgust and they soon moved away from me. I couldn't blame them. I was starting to smell. But what could I do? I didn't ask for to be this way and you can't escape from yourself.

And then I realized. The gifts that you people were sending me were not gifts at all. It was trash.

How could this happen? I was so loved and now so loathsome. At the same time, something happened to my sky. The magic that I had so long taken for granted, now obscured by a murky haze. I began to desperately long for what I once had. Give me back my stars. Give me back my sky, my mountains and greenery. Stop trashing me. Give me back my soul.

My only respite was the wild, wild weather that thrashed me clean. But that relief was short lived. It all came back or, as I know, it was taken to my siblings on far off shores who were all suffering just like me. I even heard on the tide that trash was floating across the expanse of a great ocean, entangling and destroying so many creatures of the air and sea.

Then one day, the lady in a pink hat visited me. She made the same face as all the rest and the man she was with said, "Come on, love. We can't stay here with the kids." The lady looked sad and left, followed by her children. "But mummy," said the little girl. "Why can't we stay at the beach?"

Oh children, I wish you could.

Soon after that, the lady came back with other people. They started picking up the trash, sorting it into piles, counting it, putting it into bags, taking it away. I felt so much better, but the relief did not last. The trash came back. I began to feel desolate, but again, the lady in the pink hat came back, bring with her new people, children too, to help. And I was cleaned again.

Time after time, the lady in the pink hat returned, always bringing different people with her. I loved the children – the young boy counting plastic bottles and shaking his head saying, "This is so wrong." I also enjoyed the people in uniform. They were really good at getting rid of the nasty stuff. They had strong fingers and stronger stomachs. They removed a dead pig once, and a couple of rats. You know things are bad when even the rats can't stand it.

Again and again the lady in the pink hat came back, but the trash kept returning. Sometimes, in the time it took for the people to move the bags up to the road, a new line of debris was already at my shore.

Would it ever end? In one year alone, the lady in the pink hat and her friends collected 2,872 plastic bottles and hundreds of juice boxes. Remarkably, there was a small, but persistent flow of plastic bottles full of pee. Now, who would pee into a plastic bottle and throw it into the sea? And why? The lady in the pink hat and her friends also took away so many food wrappers, cups, lunch boxes, lighters, pens, plastic forks, spoons and straws. One day they decided to count the lighters. They collected 130 of them. I heard them call the lighters "disposable" – a term I simply cannot understand. They also picked up so much polystyrene – some in the form of boxes, some (I was to learn) fruit wrappers and some that had formed a kind of bead soup in all my most intimate cracks and crevices. It was good to get rid of that, I can tell you!

At different times, two enormous tyres washed up, as did a mattress, a computer monitor, several workman's helmets, oil drums, a punch bag, lighting tubes and bulbs, silicone tubes, lighter fuel canisters, an assorted array of beauty product containers, toothbrushes and every time, without fail, an astounding selection of shoes. Each time, there would be a point when the lady in the pink hat said, "I'll take that," and she would hold a needle and syringe between her thumb and finger, placing it carefully in a special container.

One day, the people gathered round a bag of mixed trash. They were laughing, but they didn't seem happy and they photographed the bag. One person helped translate the writing on the bag. It said, "Keep Clean. Hong Kong Marine Department. For enquiries call: 1823." I didn't see what was so funny about that.

Each time, the people would separate the plastic bottles and then the lady in the pink hat would sit with a clipboard, recording numbers as other people shouted out, "Vita," "Bonaqua," "Watson's," "Vita again," "Cool – it so not cool!" "What's this one?" "Hung Fook Tong," "Mr. Kon," "Robiff Oolong" "More Vita," "Bonaqua..."

I was so afraid that the lady in the pink hat would just give up. I sometimes glimpsed the look of despair on her face as she approached me, just a few short weeks from all her previous efforts. Then I saw her mouth fixed in determination and that's why I am happy, oh so happy, today.

Today, I am clean. Restored. A joy. Happy people are sitting on me. The children are doing what they should be doing on a beach. They are picking up shells and worn glass, and running excitedly to mummy and daddy to show the treasures that they have found. Nature's treasures. People are having a picnic. They are enjoying me, loving me, valuing me, celebrating me, and all that life has to offer.

The party's over. Now it is just me, the moon and the tide. The sparking lights over in those little boxes you people like to live in make me feel safe and content. They fill me with the warmth of your care.

But far away, and getting closer, a white box bobs, glinting in the moonlight. A hand reaches out from a small boat, snatching the box from the sea. Then, I sleep and wonder what tomorrow will bring.

The End.

“Beach Party” by Jo Wilson is based on a true story. Jo writes under the pseudonym, P. K. Pebbles, as she wanted to give the beach a voice. After years of clean up efforts and seeing the waste come back, Jo and her friends came upon a small beach at the north end of Lamma Island, facing Hong Kong Island. The number of plastic bottles found at Pebbles Beach, so named because of the pebbles there, were overwhelming. It was also noticeable that most of the trash was locally produced in Hong Kong.

Jo first cleaned Pebbles Beach as part of Ecovision’s Hong Kong Clean Up in October 2012. Nine hundred bottles were picked up on that occasion and it was over a few glasses of wine, that Jo and a friend, Vicky, were discussing how they could give meaning to the amount of trash that was collected. Once the waste is picked up and taken away, people don’t see it, and though the numbers are big and scary, they don’t seem to be inciting people to changing behaviour.

Jo was talking about whether brand recognition could be used, not to blame the brands so much, but to help people connect their behaviour to the trash. Jo said, “Brand,” Vicky said, “Beach” and Brand on the Beach was born. Jo is eternally grateful to Vicky and her partner Andre for putting together a short video of the first clean up in December 2012.

See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICUSZyZdZxY>

Jo would also like to thank Mick the archeologist for his brief history of the world that made Pebbles, Peggy from Canadian International School, Roz, Rachael and Charlie and all the other people who surprise her by rolling out of bed on a Sunday morning to help her clean Pebbles. Thanks also goes to all the people from FEHD, who have helped and give hope that some day Hong Kong government will sort itself out. Last, but not least, thank you Jack.

On Sunday, November 17th 2013, Jo and her team will have collected a whole year’s worth of data on what brands are washing up on Pebbles Beach. The winner’s will be announced on 15th December 2013 at the last clean up of the year to which Jo has invited all members of the Hong Kong government’s working group on clean shorelines to participate. Anyone reading this and wanting to help out, would also be most welcome.

This is Jo’s first attempt at story writing and it is dedicated to Max and Kate.