

Just One Slip

July 16th, 2015, 6:30 AM

It was, as many people would call it, a perfect morning. The air was cool, yet not overly so, and a light breeze swept through the trees. The sky was still dark, yet a few rays of the Sun pierced the darkness, slowly turning the sky into a shade of cool orange. The sea was calm, its surface smooth as glass. Every now and then, a splash of a fish leaping out of the water, or the occasional bark of a hungry dog will ring through the air, but other than that, the small village by the coast of Florida remained undisturbed.

The sound of footsteps broke the silence. It was fast and rhythmic, the sound of running shoes against the sidewalk. It came closer and closer, and was accompanied by the sound of heavy breathing.

The jogger came into view. He was well built, wearing his workout attire, and was bathed in perspiration. He kept up a steady pace, running alongside the ocean, and turning his head occasionally to watch the sun rise up from the horizon, turning the sky gold.

Finally, he stopped, and leaned against the railing, right by the coast. He let out a heavy breath, and wiped some sweat from his forehead.

What he needed now, he decided, was a cool drink. Luckily, he was always prepared for that.

He lifted the small water bottle that he carried, still icy cold from being in the cooler.

Unscrewing the cap, the jogger tipped his head back and poured the icy liquid down his throat.

The cooling sensation felt miraculous, spreading through every inch of his body. He continued to drink it down until the bottle was completely empty. He let out a content sigh, screwing the cap back on. Time to go back home.

As he turned to run back to his house, where he'll make some breakfast, his eyes caught sight of a trash can standing a few meters away. He tossed the bottle at the trash can, turned on his heels, and started to run again.

Unfortunately, this guy was obviously not a basketball player, because the bottle missed the opening of the trash can. Rather, it bounced off the rim, then hit the railing. For a moment, it balanced precariously on the edge, the trash can on one side, the ocean, ten meters below on the other side.

And then it tipped over, plummeting down, down - and plunged into the cold waters of the ocean below.

July 18th, 2015, 12:45 PM

It had been two days since the jogger made his slip with the bottle. Back then, it had been floating next to Florida. Now, however, the bottle was bobbing up and down several kilometers off the coast of Georgia, glistening with salty water.

To the uninitiated, two days may not seem like a lot of time for a plastic water bottle to travel. However, they could not be more wrong. Despite looking tranquil on the surface, the ocean is always moving, always flowing to a destination. And right now, it was carrying the bottle in its mighty current, into the unknown.

It was not the only passenger of the current, however. Several other bottles floated next to it, sports drinks, soda, or juices. All had different stories to tell. Some, like the water bottle, had been cast into the ocean by joggers who had horrible aim. Others were thrown by careless children, who had been tossing an empty bottle amongst themselves. One of them had come into the ocean right out of a car, because of some careless driver. Regardless of how they ended up there, however, the plastics were all on the same boat - or current.

Bottles were not the only plastics there, either. underneath the surface, wrinkled plastic bags drifted aimlessly, helpless against the current. Plastic holders were numerous, sweeping through the water like a great white net. Popped balloons, some of them carrying words like *HAPPY BIRTHDAY!* were also drifting, a multicolored mess of material.

They didn't have to be there, of course. In fact, this was not where they were supposed to be. They would have been driven off to an incinerator, where they would have been burned to ash. They would have been brought to a recycling plant in order to be born again. They would have been taken back to their owners to be used for some other use, such as pencil holders.

But that was not to be, and now the once useful appliances, now dubbed "trash", were drifting aimlessly around the ocean.

One of the plastic bags were floating much deeper than usual. It was slightly shredded in some parts, and water had seeped into the few air pockets it had left. As a result, instead of bobbing near the surface, this plastic bag was swimming with the fishes.

And also with a *Dermochelys coriacea*, or leatherback turtle. Their diet is usually composed of soft bodied animals, like salps, pyrosomes - or jellyfish.

Now, humans have excellent eyesight, backed up with some common sense. They can tell the difference between a real jellyfish and a discarded product made out of semi-synthetic organics.

But turtles, as intelligent as they might seem, do not realize that a plastic bag is not a delicious marine animal. Such is the case when it comes to a certain leatherback turtle. It caught sight of the rippling jellylike shape floating right in its path. The turtle swam towards the shape, it began to see it more clearly. tentacles that were, for some reason, connected to each other, some tears along its main body, and the words *THANK YOU* written on bold red letters along its side.

That should have been a red flag for anyone else. But turtles cannot read.

It swam right up to it, and opened its mouth for a bite.

July 21th, 2015, 8:07 PM

White silhouettes drifted through the otherwise clear blue waters of the Atlantic. Shapeless, billowing, the sight could have been easily mistaken for a swarm of jellyfish.

Until you take a closer look.

Then you see the handles. You see the squared edges. You see the smiley faces and *THANK YOUs* written on the sides. You see the plastic bag, a silent imposter among the ocean life.

And worse still, where there is one plastic bag, there are hundreds.

Actually, more than hundreds. Over 380 billion plastic bags, equivalent to 12 million barrels of oil, are used up every year. And some of them are bound to end up being thrown away into someplace they shouldn't be put in. Rivers, ponds, lakes.....and they all eventually lead to the ocean.

It isn't as bad as the Pacific Ocean, where the Great Pacific Garbage Patch extends over an area the size of Texas, but there is still plenty of bags in the Atlantic to fill up a dump truck. Maybe two.

Beneath the swarm of plastic jellyfish mimics, something was lying on the ocean floor. It was lying sideways, its flippers bent beneath its body. Its eyes were closed, except for a tiny gap where a bit of the shining black could be seen. But there was no life in those eyes now. They were simply empty, like a bottomless pit.

Plastic doesn't mix well with the digestive system. After it got swallowed up by the turtle, it was only a matter of time before it clogged up an important part of the turtle's anatomy. Now it lay in the depths of the ocean, still and silent as a toy.

Some of the other victims of plastic bags get swept up on beaches or get caught on fishing nets. Not so much for this one. It will decompose, other marine creatures swimming in to get a piece, until there is nothing left but the plastic bag. The bag, however, will not degrade, and will outlast the turtle by a long shot.

Often, inorganic outlasts the organic.

July 23rd, 2015, 3:00

It was a beautiful day to be at the beach. The sky was the brightest blue, with a few white wisps of condensation drifting aimlessly. The sun was blazing hot, its rays beating down on the world below. The sands were as soft as flour, and of the purest white, which contrasted beautifully with the aquamarine waters.

Under such conditions, the beach should have been filled to the brim with people in swimsuits, swimming, splashing, or lying spread-eagled on the sand.

But the actual scenery couldn't have been any more different. There was absolutely no one there, whether in the water or on the beach. There was no screams of delight from children, no splashes from the swimmers, there was nothing except for the sand and the water.

And also the pile of trash that littered the sands.

Torn-up shopping bags, bottle caps, plastic bottles half-filled with seawater were scattered all over the beach. They jumbled together, some glistening due to the seawater, and some coated in white sand. They gave the beach a mottled, stained look, dirty scars on what once was a beautiful work of nature.

Every second, another wave would thunder towards the beach. It carried, not only water, but more garbage to fill up the sands as well. More plastic bottles and coke holders tumbled onto the beach. They bumped against an ever-growing pile of garbage.

Human byproducts had replaced humans at the beach. Humans threw them out, but they had come back, and were driving humans out of their favorite vacation spots now.

It was not only this beach that was suffering from the onslaught of plastic. More and more trash, carried to all over the world thanks to the currents, were piling up on beaches. Tourists came to the beach, dressed in swimsuits and holding towels, were taking in the drastically altered scenery, wrinkling their noses in disgust, and were leaving.

People who had been living in that area remembered when the beach had been clean, completely devoid of any waste. When the sands had been undisturbed except by energetic children, digging and piling up sand, or by swimmers, running in excitement towards the water.

But that was long before. Now the beach had been altered to the point of disgust.

People were trying to restore their beautiful sands, picking up garbage, tossing them into bags, and throwing them away where it wouldn't end up on the beach. But it wasn't enough. It was never enough. Most people just walked by in ignorance, the concept of taking action against pollution long gone.

Another wave came towards the beach, the clear waters churning with a fresh group of trash. However, this one carried a special passenger.

Glimpses of mottled green scales could be seen as it tumbled through the waters. As it came closer and closer to the beach, more and more of it was revealed. A hard shell shining with seawater. The pointed tip of a fin. And above all, an eye, shining black, empty, like a bottomless pit.

The wave coughed up its passengers violently. Bottles tumbled onto the beach, some were swept back into the water, which spat them back out, trying to get as much filth as they can out of their system.

Among them all, a body of a young sea turtle lay still and unmoving.

Its mouth was slightly open, with the remains of its last meal spilling outside. The torn edge of a plastic shopping bag could be seen, trailing out of the turtle's mouth.

The turtle's indigestion wasn't a special case by any means. It was just one more casualty among the hundreds that had lost their lives to the inorganic predators. Fish caught in plastic bottle holders, turtles choking on plastic bags, other marine animals getting tangled up in the wrong crowd...the list of victims goes on and on.

No one noticed the carcass that had arrived. The people were too busy, or too repulsed by the sight of the garbage pile that the beach had become to go in and take a closer look.

If they had looked, maybe they would have seen the turtle.

If they had looked, maybe they would have seen the countless other sea creatures that had died because of the humans' byproduct.

If they had looked, maybe they would have felt compassion stirring inside them.

If they had looked, maybe they would have felt sorry for all of the dead creatures.

If they had looked, maybe they would have done something about it.

One day they might look, and will be sorry for the dead. They would realize that they can't stand around, indulging in their wealth while ignoring the "collateral damage" they had cooked up.

They would go on to clean the oceans and beaches, remove the silent predator from the ecosystem forever.

But until that day comes, the inorganic menace would live on.

Will the day of enlightenment ever come? No one knows, but in the meantime, it wouldn't hurt to take a closer look at what we had taken for granted.

It is amazing how careless we can be with our trash. A plastic bottle. A shopping bag. An empty candy bar wrapper. I have seen them countless times lying around on sidewalks, in the midst of grass, or floating in the middle of a river. And I admit, sometimes I was the culprit of those trash. But where do they all end up? Why should we care? How does it matter to us in the grand scheme of things? Those were the questions I asked myself as I began this essay. I wanted to show that one careless move could lead to a gigantic garbage patch in the middle of the ocean. I wanted to show that we would never really be free of the trash we've thrown away. I wanted to show that we couldn't stand by and watch while the rest of life around the world suffers the consequences of our actions.