

Beauty's Keeper

By J.P. Ideker

Radiant colors splashed across the horizon like a Matisse painting. A rich orange, a soft red, and a light blue swirled across the deep purple sky like the complex insides of the cat's-eye marbles with which I used to spend hours playing as a child. The tide continually moved closer to my perch and then quickly receded, leaving behind a small number of shells and leaves. The silhouettes of two frigate birds restlessly skimmed the water in search of food. Night came. I had never seen so many stars in my life. The night sky was brilliantly dotted with infinitesimal bursts of light like the spontaneous explosions of a thousand fireworks on a Texas Fourth of July. The moon illuminated a single stretch of water leading up to the beach, a bright white like the stark marble aisles of La Compañía de Jesus. I faded in and out of an intangible yet profoundly concrete recognition of beauty in its purest form. Awestruck. This fleeting moment, this permanent memory, had to be preserved. But how? How could something like this ever be articulated, retold, rediscovered, experienced ever again? Something that pulled so persistently, but all-too gently, at my deepest emotions, my deepest wants, my deepest fears. An earthly breeze startled me out of my ethereal slumber as I fought not to lose this precious moment. It couldn't be. I wouldn't let it. Panicked, I fought off the cruel distractions of campfire smoke singeing the inside of my nose, of my name being called. Dinner was served. And so really began my travels, my journey in searching for this inexplicably elusive beauty again.

Beauty, true beauty, seemed ephemeral at best. But where was I looking? In nature, in family, in friends? I caught glimpses of it over the years since that night on that Galapagos beach: in the comforting laugh of friends, in love given and received, and in experiencing the wonders of simple existence.

September 6th, 2012. I walked into a classroom-sized, tidy, well-lit room called "The Lewis Place." As part of a revitalization project in the Lewis Neighborhood of St. Louis, the St. Louis Residential Housing Authority set aside a "homework room" for kids from the surrounding school district to be tutored after school let out. Not knowing what to expect, I sat down, waiting for the K-8th graders to run into the room. I first met a girl named Brianna.¹ A fourth-grader with a wide smile and big, brown eyes, Brianna immediately sat down next to me and said "I need help with this." Introductions were forsaken for the moment as I read over her math assignment, startled by her boldness. "I'm JP, what's your name?"

Over the course of the next several weeks, I got to know Brianna a little better, which was just as rewarding as it was heartbreaking. Every Thursday it seemed, Brianna told a new story. One day she pointed at someone in the room and said "you see that girl? Her cousin's daddy got shot in the face yesterday" as she held up an imaginary gun to my cheek, repeating with heartrending apathy the resounding "POW, POW, POW!" of the handgun. It was at that moment that I realized how different our childhoods were. Every gunshot, every violent image, tore through her naïveté with hopeless persistency. Where was this beauty, this unadulterated happiness to be found?

I began to tutor the kids reluctantly, demoralized upon the realization that I would not be able to give these kids their childhoods back, helpless upon the realization that I would not be able to do much to make a difference in their lives. The same panic from the beach swept over me as I fought to rid myself of these feelings. And all of a sudden, I became angry with myself. "I've tutored kids before, I've made a real difference. What am I doing wrong?" These feelings of failure and angst continued for some time before my redemption came.

¹ To protect the identity of the students at Lewis Place, all names have been changed.

January 17th, 2013. My redemption came in the form of Leah, of Mia, of Drew, James, Isaac, Alyssa, Rachel, Jared, and Damian. After coming back from a long Christmas break, I walked into the Lewis Place right as the kids got off the bus and ran through the doors. Javon's curious eyes sparked with a wonderful mixture of happiness and confusion as I greeted him, surprised that I kept my promise and came back after all. Isaac greeted me with the firm, confident handshake I taught him a month earlier. Brianna ran up and hugged me, and Leah said hi with our ritual fist bump and a count of how many A's she received that week. Alyssa shyly laughed, pointing out that "the tall clown is back!" And that's when it hit me. An involuntary smile, almost as big as Brianna's, broke out on my face. This was the happiest I had been in a long time. I was filled with a familiar feeling of content, both soothing and exhilarating. But where had I experienced this before?

Just like that, it all came to me. Jared and Brianna were like the two frigate birds, restlessly searching not for food but for undivided attention, interest, and love. A sunset of laughter, smiles, and questions broke out as the coming night sky was dotted with the kindling fires of their hearts. Their dreams, fears, and vulnerabilities suddenly shot forth like fireworks. True beauty was here. Every time I sat down with the kids with the same undivided attention I gave that night on the beach, true beauty came nearer and nearer like the tide, leaving behind this time not leaves or shells, but smiles and laughs. And it was no longer about *where* I went looking for this fleeting beauty. It was about *how* I went looking for it. The recognition of the simple tie of our humanity, of a relationship built, of undivided attention and love given, summoned this beauty once again. It was no longer about *how* I could make a *difference*, but about *what* I could see *differently*. It is a dauntingly simple task to approach everyone we meet with a genuine sense of awe and curiosity. By recognizing our common humanity with others, we experience true beauty. If we could keep this awareness, what a wonderful place this world could be!

