



broken toys

i know you think you saw him first, but I'm pretty sure it was me – he was over there by the underpass, feeling his way along the graffiti-covered wall, and I said, "Look, there's something you don't see every day."

Well, we'd certainly seen crazy people before – "shell-shocked by life" as you once put it. But something pretty strange must have happened to this guy to make him decide to wander about in a spacesuit on a dead-quiet public holiday. We hid behind a postbox to get a better look. Up close it was even more perplexing: the spacesuit was covered in barnacles and sea stuff, and dripping wet in spite of the fierce summer heat.

"It's not a spacesuit, stupid," you whispered. "It's that old-fashioned diving gear, from the pearlers up north. You know, in the olden days, when they got the *bends* because they didn't know about decompressification and how it turns your blood into lemonade." You sighed loudly at my blank look and said, "Never mind."

But, as we stealthily followed our crazy person, I could tell you were right, because of the helmet and the long air-hose dragging behind.



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He shuffled aimlessly across the empty football oval, past the petrol station, and up and down people's driveways. He plodded around the edge of the closed corner deli, feeling along walls and windows as if sleepwalking, leaving big wet glove prints that dried to ghostly patches of salt.

You said, "I'll give you *ten bucks* to go and say hello."

I said, "No way."

"We'll both go then."

"Okay."

We crept closer. The smell was weird, like the ocean, I suppose, but with some other sweet odor that was hard to identify. Red dust had collected in the creases of the suit, as though he had been through a desert as well as an ocean.

We were strategically planning our opening remarks when the dull, scratched faceplate turned toward us and said something we couldn't make out. The diver moved forward, creaking, babbling. We backed off.

"Crazy talk," I said.

But you listened carefully and shook your head. "Nah, I think it's . . . *Japanese*."

He was saying the same sentence over and over – ending with something like "tasoo-ke-te, tasoo-ke-te." And he was holding out one hand to show us a little wooden horse, which might once have been golden and shiny, but was now cracked and sun bleached, held together with string.

"Maybe we should take him to Mrs. Bad News," you suggested, meaning old Mrs. Katayama, the only Japanese person we knew in our neighborhood.

"No way," I said, and my raised eyebrows referred to our all-too-recent confrontation over the back fence, best described as a barrage of incomprehensible abuse followed by the return of our model airplane sliced neatly in half – a further addition to our box of stray toys that had fallen into the old crone's backyard and come back dissected. These were the only times we ever saw her, hence, "Mrs. Bad News."

Your raised eyebrows referred to exactly the same thing, but also signaled the flash of a brilliant idea. Why not lead a crazy man in a diving suit to Mrs. Katayama's front yard and lock him in? Nothing more needed to be said. We did the Special Handshake of Unbreakable Agreement.

You reached out to take the diver's enormous gloved hand, then suddenly recoiled – "It was so weird and slimy," you explained later – yet our guy understood enough to follow, shuffling along footpaths, across roads, and down back-alley shortcuts. His long, wheezy breathing grew louder each time we stopped to let him catch up. He plodded behind us as if every joint ached, with that big hose dragging behind, trickling a seemingly endless supply of water from its frayed end. It gave me the creeps.

Finally we arrived at the dreaded house with the overgrown cherry trees. We ushered our guest through the front gate, which we had long ago figured out how to unlock. The weathered steps creaked under his weight. You rattled the flyscreen door, and then we both got the hell out of there. We snapped the gate shut behind us, barely able to suppress our giggles, and ran behind the phone booth on the other side of the road to behold the unfolding drama.

We waited and waited.

And waited.

"This sucks," you eventually admitted, remembering that Mrs. Bad News never opened her door, even though she was always home. We had often joked that the door was painted onto the front wall. We had tried knocking once before, and she had just yelled, "Who Is There?" and then "Go Away!" Such was the experience of our diver friend on this occasion. But he did not move, perhaps because he did not understand, so there was still hope for entertainment.

Suddenly the diver reached up, removed his heavy helmet, and let it slip from his hands to the wooden boards with a loud bang that made us jump. Even from behind, we could see he was a young man with neatly combed hair, shiny black. A far more surprising sight was the front door opening, and the frail silhouette of Mrs. Bad News peeking through.

The diver said those Japanese words again and held out the toy horse. He was blocking our view so we couldn't see much, except Mrs. Bad News covering her mouth with both hands. She looked like she was about to faint from terror. We couldn't believe our luck.

"Hang on a sec," you said, squinting, "I think she's . . . crying!" And indeed she was – standing in her doorway, sobbing uncontrollably.

Had we gone too far?

We actually started feeling *bad* for her . . . But then her pale matchstick arms flew out and wrapped around the wet, barnacled figure on her doorstep. We didn't see what happened next because we were too busy comparing our raised eyebrows of disbelief. Then the flyscreen door slapped shut, and there was only the dark rectangle of the doorway, with the diving helmet sitting in a puddle of water.

We waited a long time, but nothing else happened.

"I guess she knew him," I said as we walked home around the corner.

We never found out who the diver was, or what happened to him. But we had started hearing old-style jazz wafting over the back fence late in the evenings, and we noticed funny cooking smells and soft-spoken voices in animated conversation. And we stopped hating Mrs. Katayama after that, because she would come all the way around to our front door with a quiet nod and a quick smile, returning our stray toys just as we had lost them – all in one piece.

