

GHIE'S ISLAND

My name is Ghie and I live on one of a group of tropical islands in the middle of the western Pacific Ocean about 150 miles from the Philippines. For as long as the elders of my family can remember, people have lived on these islands.



I live with my family in a small village of wooden, thatch-roofed houses at one end of a long narrow beach of white sand. A crescent



encloses a small lagoon of clear, blue water. The weather is warm and gentle; there is no real winter. There are no mountains on the island, only lush tropical forest and sand. The highest point on land is only a few feet above the level of the sea. Hurricanes come to the island at certain times of the year, and while they are very frightening, my people have learned to live with them over many generations. They know how and where to construct safe shelters to protect them from high winds, giant waves and floods, and how to quickly repair any damage.



As I grew up on the island, I was taught many things to help me survive: how to collect coconuts and bananas from the trees along the beach, how to gather special plants from the forest further inland for eating and making medicines, how to plant vegetables in



the fields next to the village and how to hunt for fish in

and around the lagoon and the reef. One of my daily jobs is to collect drinking water from a freshwater pond near the village. I enjoy this job because here I see many water birds and different kinds of frogs, fish and tortoises.



There is a small school in my village. We have no desks or chairs and very few supplies. All students sit in the one room. Each day, I go there to learn about the history of the island from the old people, how to get food, clothes and houses. The lagoon, the reef, the beach and the tropical forest are my playground and my classroom.

After school, sometimes I earn money by running errands for the tourists who stay in the big huts at the far end of the beach. Several island families own these huts and they use the money from them to buy things that they cannot make themselves. These things-like sewing machines and refrigerators- come from stores in big cities on a main island, many miles away. I learn many things from the tourists and the one television in the village- about places where there are high mountains, huge buildings, something called "freeways" with cars bumper to bumper, bright lights, hamburger stands and air pollution. Hearing about all these things is very exciting, but it also makes me feel scared and very small.



One night, a hurricane hit the island, worse than



anyone can remember. Huge waves crashed over the reef and the sand bank, and swept away the lower part of the village. Three people are killed and many more injured.



Several families are left homeless and have to be taken in by their neighbors. The season's crops are destroyed and some of the biggest coconut and banana trees along the beach are knocked down. Salt water has swept into the fresh water pool, making the drinking water too salty to drink for weeks. Barrels of fresh water have to be brought in by canoe from a nearby island.



Over the next several months the damages are repaired and life slowly gets back to normal. Unfortunately, many of the people are worried about the possibility of other storms and their effect on the island. There have been strange reports on the T.V. about something called the "greenhouse effect," the temperature of the world increasing, the ice caps melting and the level of the ocean rising. The news reporter says that people driving cars and burning coal and oil in countries far away cause it. Some of the scientists predict that there may even be more intense storms as well as other harmful events on ocean islands in the future, like freshwater pools, are being contaminated by the rising seawater.

One night after watching the T.V. report, I had a really bad dream. In my dream the scientists' predictions came true- there are many more bad storms, more houses are destroyed and more people are killed. The beach is washed away and the sand is deposited on top of the coral reef, covering up the food for the fish.



As the trees along the shoreline die off, the sand dunes at the top of the beach start to erode. When the protection the dunes provided for the plants that grew behind the beach is gone, the plants turn brown and die, and the shoreline erodes even more.



In my dream all the things that the village has depended on for its survival for many generations are also destroyed. The lower part of the vegetable garden is covered by salt water, killing all the plants. The freshwater pool that we used to drink from

is saltier than ever, whether there are storms or not, and many of the plants that we used to collect for food, clothes and medicine have disappeared. Even some of the birds and other animals that I looked forward to seeing do not appear on the island any more.



Tourists do not come anymore and there is no money to buy spare parts for the sewing machine and the refrigerator, or even to buy new tools for working in the garden. In my dream, a number of my friends have grown older and there is no work or food to support them. One by one, they leave the island and move to the big island in the north with other

people who are no longer able to feed or clothe themselves and their children on our island. After they leave, we hardly ever hear about them any more; communication with our own people is cut off and it's as if they get lost in the hugeness of the cities. People argue about why things are so different and some of the old people say it is because the spirits of the island are angry with humans for something they have done. Some of the old people say they would rather die than leave the island for someplace they don't know.

As my dream continued, it became time for me to leave. In my sleep I feel sad and angry for the things that I will miss here: the celebrations for a good season, the friends I might have known and the family I might have had. None of that is possible now. I pack my



belongings, load them into a canoe, kiss my family goodbye and take one last look at the beach. I paddle out past the reef where I have spent my life playing, learning and gathering food, and head for a nearby island which has an airport and the plane that will take me to a big city in the north.

Suddenly, I wake up and.....