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Where the Waves Are

I sat on my bed and stared out the window. It was a hot summer day in August and the trees were as green as algae that washes up on sandy shores. I could hear birds chirping and a faint smell of sewage lingered from the neighboring treatment plant as a slow breeze blew in. It brushed my curtains to one side and revealed my glass bottles sitting on the windowsill. Each bottle contained sand from different beaches. I’d been to some, but others were gifts from friends and family brought back from their vacations; places I’d never seen. I looked at the glass that had the locations and years written with permanent black marker. That was where the sands’ homes were and when they were taken from them. I liked having a part of the beach in my room, but I felt a little selfish about stealing them from paradise.

“Honey, are you almost ready?” my mom said as she walked up the stairs and into my room.

I had to blink a few times to stop daydreaming. “Yeah,” I said, “almost.”

She looked around my room and crossed her arms. “You have to clean this first and make your bed too. Everything should be neat before we leave.”

“Okay I will.”

She walked back downstairs and I rolled my eyes. I hated making my bed. I threw the last remaining articles of clothing into my bag and held two corners of the sheets in my hands. I lifted the material and began to shake it out. Ripples were created and the image of watery waves moved in and out of my mind as the sheet flew back and forth.

I smoothed out the comforter and placed my open laptop on my pillow. The background was a picture I had taken a year before. This included a horizon view of a pathway surrounded by greenery and leading to a beach. The sun shone down from the blue sky. I would be there soon.

I moved towards the window to shut it. The sound of the birds’ chatter fell silent, but seagulls’ conversations continued in my head. The smell of the outdoors would soon be salty and fresh. The green of algae was all the green I needed to see. I zipped up my bag and looked at my laptop picture one more time. That scene would be in front of me soon, so I closed it to return to reality.

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The ocean is calm. The waves fold over each other in slow motion. The water is sky blue and the wind blows by. Seagulls stay far away. They fly high above the sand. Overhead there are flocks, following each other’s lead in the search for food, the search for anything they can get their beaks on. The sun shines bright as people lay out to tan and burn. Laughs can be heard in the distance as children run from waves as fast as they can. They build sandcastles before their parents tell them to come back to the blanket for another layer of sunscreen on their shoulders. Planes fly by, close to the surface of the sea with messages tied to their tails. There are no clouds in the sky.

My house is calm. I usually stay in my room and listen to music. I scroll through social media; going back and forth between pictures as if my finger controls the movement of the waves in my mind. I look at my arm and take in the intense paleness of my skin. I look as if I’ve never left my house. The darker color my skin changes to can only be witnessed during the summer months. There isn’t a huge change in pigment; but enough to pretend I’m living the beach life I wish I had. My family can usually be found in the living room scrolling through channels on the TV. This is a common way in which we pass the time.

I grew up and still live on a dead-end street. We only have a couple other houses for neighbors. There are almost always no sounds.

 The ocean is alive. The waves crash with a loud bang as the water roars over the sediments. It mixes and turns everything in its path and then it starts all over again.

*Whoosh, boom, whoosh, boom.*

The wind wisps through the air, through the water. It whistles as umbrellas are lifted out of the sand to be carried away and cracked in half. Floppy hats are blown off heads and thrown into the waves. Seagulls dive into the water and capture oblivious sea creatures. They dive at french-fry baskets held by children. They peck at each other to steal bits of bread. People scurry off the sand to return to shelter. The storm rolls in from the distance; closer than everyone thinks. Clouds move in and out, covering the sun’s rays.

 My college is alive. Assignments are thrown into the air with frustration. The deadlines scream loud on calendars as they approach. Professors call the names of students who have no idea what’s going on. People at parties squawk at one another in an attempt to make conversation with drinks in hand. Students scurry away from their desks and off to their next class. Summer freedom encases everyone’s minds as the Spring semester comes to a close.

 The beach is my happy place. The calmness and living can coexist from day to day. Whether I am at home or in class, my mind races with thoughts of my oasis.

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 I don’t remember the first time I stepped foot onto beach sand. I don’t remember what I thought the first time my eyes saw ocean waves. My first experience must have been a good one because each time I leave the ocean, I can’t wait to come back again.

 Hampton Beach in New Hampshire was the first ocean that I went to. My family and I would go with my grandma and uncle for one day. That meant we would leave bright and early in the morning. It was a three-hour drive there and back. As a kid, the car ride didn’t bother me. I was excited to feel the sand beneath my toes.

I wasn’t a huge fan of the water. The idea of sharks terrified me. I didn’t even like to think of fish swimming around my feet. I knew they weren’t dangerous, but that didn’t change my opinion of them being gross. I’d scream at the sight of one. The relationship I had with the water got as far as ankle deep as I jumped over small waves with my brother and sister. We would run towards the water as it rushed away from us. We were the chasers. These roles switched as soon as it grew bigger and started chasing us back. Back up the shore we would go as our little legs splashed the monster up in droplets from under us.

Before I knew it, the sun would start to descend and it would be time for us to make the journey back home. I always looked forward to this day of escape. It was my only ‘vacation’ over the summer; my only day of complete bliss.

One year, the forecast was calling for heavy rain on the very same day of our vacation. We left for New Hampshire anyway because my mom always told me that the weather is tricky. It changes all the time.

We arrived at the beach and the sun was out and shining as bright as my little smile. But on this day the weatherman was right. We were only there for about two hours before the rain arrived. My parents rushed to pack up our beach supplies as my siblings and I organized our sand buckets and toys. We eventually got everything in the car including ourselves.

My mom looked at me from the front seat as she asked, “Honey what’s wrong?”

The tears cascaded down my cheeks as fast as the rain fell from the now dark sky.

“This is the only day we see the beach though!” I whimpered.

It was the only time I had ever been sandy and sad. These two things don’t go together and haven’t since.

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The first time my family and I went to the beautiful Outer Banks (OBX) in North Carolina was when I was in high school. My uncle and his girlfriend had gone there for a vacation the summer before. They fell in love with the location and as a result, they invited my family to join them the next time.

We hadn’t gone to Hampton Beach in years. It had just fallen out of our summer plans as we grew older. I had been to other beaches since then, but none of them had compared to the experiences I had in New Hampshire as a kid.

In North Carolina, we stayed in a house in a town called Duck, in short walking distance of the beach. We went in August near the end of the summer and went to the ocean every day. The only thing that had stood in the way was an eleven-hour drive. I felt myself missing the short three-hour journey to Hampton more than a few times during this car ride.

My uncle, his girlfriend, and their dog drove separately in their own car. Their dog though, Finley, is a full-grown Rottweiler, so it was more like four bodies in one car, plus their luggage. I would bet that a whole bag was packed full of extra strength sunscreen for my uncle’s bald head. He often wore a hat while fishing which made his head invisible to the sun’s rays compared to the rest of his face. As a result, his head was as shiny as a freshly polished shoe. When he goes to the beach, the hat comes off and the sunscreen comes out.

There were five people in our vehicle; my mom, dad, brother, sister, and me. This of course didn’t include our luggage and our dog, Ginger. She is a medium sized mutt (part Pitbull, Rottweiler, hound, and a handful of other breeds) but she still took up a lot of much needed space.

Our luggage was stuffed in the very back of my mom’s green Honda Pilot along with Ginger and me. Yeah, I got stuck in the back. Additionally, we had a compartment that went on the top of the car to hold the rest of what we were bringing. We called this extra space, the turtle. This included beach chairs, a boogie board, umbrellas, and other beach necessities.

We were a family of five crammed in a once comfortable vehicle with a sprinkle of dog hair for good measure.

“What?” I yelled for the third time from the back of the car. I couldn’t hear the message that my mom was trying to send me. We were what seemed like miles apart.

I again only heard mumbles from the front. I was thankful she wasn’t taking her eyes off the road to face me, but the conversation was futile at this rate.

“Never mind!” she gave up. Between Ginger’s barking in my left ear and the music coming from all sides of the interior I never did get to ask her what she was trying to say. We left while it was still dark out in the middle of the night so we could arrive when the new day started.

One point for efficiency and one point for pure stupidity.

Everyone was supposed to sleep while someone drove, then we would switch drivers at every stop. But, I didn’t get any sleep in the clown car.

It was the longest ride of my life, but the destination was worth it.

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 Some say that ocean air is one of the best scents on Earth. I am one of those people. If there’s a hint of fish in the scent I’ve never noticed it. My nose refused to let me encounter any of the less desirable smells. Ocean air is amazing. It feels like life is in the air; it’s fresh. I can be in a town next door to the water and still feel it slightly on my face. The smell is always present. When I’m walking on the sand it is so close that I can feel tiny droplets of saltwater cascade down my sun kissed cheeks.

 Ocean air does something to my soul. I can’t be in a bad mood when this air is present. It puts a smile on my face and it feels like I’m home. It’s an alarm clock. I’m not an early bird, but when I’m waking up in a place with an ocean nearby, I can’t get out of bed fast enough.

 This wonderful air also does something to my hair. Beach hair is real and I’m a witness. It never fails; every time I’m on a beach for more than an hour my hair goes from thick and tame to wild, wavy, and out of control. It’s like a week in college. One minute everything is fine and I’m okay, and the next thing I know I feel like my life is falling apart and I can only sit back and watch it happen. People might think that this would be annoying but I’m not going to lie, I don’t hate my beach hair. I actually prefer it. I’ve always wanted natural waves for locks, and it turns out I just have to be close to ocean waves to have them.

 When I’m at the beach I let my hair free. It has a mind of its own and I’ve given up at trying to get in the way of what it wishes to do. I let my hair down and the waves appear just as fast as they do in the water. The freckles I mostly had as a child become visible once again on my face. They’re sprinkled over my nose and cheeks like splatters on a canvas. They’re my own kisses from the sun. I enjoy the breeze with my eyes closed and I am at peace with everything.

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 The moment I got out of the clown car my eyes stayed wide open and my mouth was agape as I gawked at our home for the next week. It was beautiful. It stood three stories high and was painted a beachy blue. The windows were white and the whole outside of it looked aged and somewhat withered. It was perfect.

Each house had its own name. We were located in a town called Duck, so our houses title, Duck Tape, was nothing but appropriate.

 “Oh my God, how did you all fit in there with all that stuff?” my uncle asked with a chuckle.

 “I wouldn’t call it fitting,” I said as I tried to focus on the bright side of things.

 “Must’ve felt like sardines,” he said.

 We laughed as we brought our bags into Duck Tape.

 When I walked in I would’ve dropped everything in that moment just to be able to live there for good. There were beach pictures framed and hung on every wall in every room. I had never seen a sign that said, ‘beach this way’ with an arrow that legitimately pointed to a beach. The couches were long and super cushiony, practically begging to be sat on. The fabric was the tan color of sand. The bedrooms were a constant reminder that we would be waking up with an ocean as our neighbor every day. It had porches and balconies on the outside of every floor. From the top floor, we could see the ocean in the distance, ready and waiting.

 The walk to the beach was only about five minutes long. It was the evening when we arrived but that didn’t stop us from taking the walk for the first time, just to get a glimpse of what we would be seeing the next morning.

 A wooden walkway lined on either side with seashells led the way. There were other houses on both sides of the path. Each one had its own look and unique name. I almost wished that the stroll was longer because of how beautiful it was.

 Then we reached the oasis. It was everything I dreamt it would be. No other beaches compared to this one. Others had wide and outstretched sand parts, so when you arrived, people would have to walk a while in order to reach the water. This would come in handy if the beach was holding a lot of people. The Outer Banks was different.

The sand was stretched out from side to side but there was hardly a long walk between the path and the water. The water and the sand’s relationship was more personal. There were no crowded, loud, or busy docks on the sand. There were only houses. This meant there would be less distraction in the background. There would be more opportunities to focus on the sound of the waves. I don’t come to a beach town for the carnivals, docks, or the food. I come for the sand and the ocean. I come for all my senses to embrace the paradise.

 I had only just arrived there for the first time, but I knew then that it would hold a special place in my heart.

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My mom loves the beach. Growing up, she would visit them often. Sometimes she would be with family and other times she would save up her money to go with friends during breaks from school. She still loves travelling to the ocean today, so we share that with each other. I had a feeling I got my obsession from her.

“Is that you?” I asked as we looked at pictures from my mom’s high school days.

“Yeah, me and my best friends. We went to Ft. Lauderdale, Florida for Spring break during our senior year of high school.”

I admired her determination at such a young age to save enough money to go on a trip with just her friends. I also found myself staring at her tanned skin in the picture. I always hoped that I would eventually have a darker skin tone like hers as I got older.

My dad doesn’t like the beach very much. He grew up in Long Island and just never really had the interest in the sand and sea life. I remember when I was growing up, he would just plop himself in a beach chair under an umbrella, take out the newspaper he brought with him, and stay just like that for the entirety of the day.

The chair he sat in could not be low near the sand. He hated sand with a passion. He was always under an umbrella because his skin was sensitive to the sun. Sunscreen would always be applied of course, but that wasn’t enough, he didn’t fully trust it. If he were to get sunburned it would be like the end of all the good in life, he couldn’t stand it. To this day, he can’t even look at me if I have a sunburn. His eyes squint and his lip quivers at the sight of it, as if he had taken a bite out of a lemon.

“Dad, please take that hat off,” said my sister.

“Seriously hon, it’s embarrassing,” said my mom.

I chuckled to myself as I looked at my dad. Sitting on top of his head was an old-school fishing hat that only people who don’t fish wear. It used to be a dark blue but it was now a light shade of gray from the years of wear, tare, and embarrassment; the years of sun the hat took on for him.

My dad wore a frown on his face. This was a yearly occurrence. The hat would come out and the complaints would follow.

My brother came out of the ocean after a while according to the slight tint of red on his shoulders. As he approached, my dad shielded his eyes from his skin. It was then that the squinted lemon face appeared. He placed his hat on the chair and got up to slowly walk to the water. I watched him jump in through a wave and come back up on the other side. His back reflected the sun’s rays into our eyes. He came back onto the shore and his arms reached up to wipe the water droplets from his face. He plopped himself back down in his chair, slapped the fisherman hat back on his damp head, and whipped his newspaper open in front of his face. That was enough excitement for the day.

My brother, Matt, is a fan of the beach just like I am, but he is a fan for a different reason. He loves beach volleyball. He would play it year-round if he could. Whether he’s at the beach, at a lake with sand, or at an outdoor volleyball tournament with sand courts, he is in his element.

I’ve always been jealous of his skill with the sport. He passes the ball with ease and almost never fails to keep it up in the air. His height is an advantage as he hits straight down. The sand explodes with the contact and flies into the breeze. When he doesn’t have another person who wants to play, he has to settle for a highly competitive game of paddleball instead. I participate in this game as we slap the ball back and forth with the movement and booming of the waves in the background. Our feet splash through the water as we rush to reach the ball. This was the extent of our exercise.

My sister, Grace, also enjoys the beach. She’s obsessed with boogie boards. Over the years, she has become a professional and she’ll never let me forget how bad my board skills are compared to hers.

“You’re kicking too slow! Go faster! Faster!” she yelled over the sound of the tide.

I tried kicking more even though I knew it was pointless. The wave I was trying to ride moved ahead of me and disappeared as fast as it had arrived. I laid on my stomach on the board like a seal sunbathing on a rock. I was defeated.

“I don’t know why I can’t do it!” I said.

She looked at me with a smile as she swam over to my floating rock.

She said, “I don’t know either,” and grabbed the board, escaping on the next wave that came in. I was left to fend for myself as the water rushed over my head. I resurfaced and spit saltwater out of my mouth as we both laughed.

When she’s not in the water, she often tries to create the biggest sand castle city. She’ll spend most of the day building, sculpting, and running back and forth from the water to the dry sand. She takes pictures of her creation when she’s done because she knows that when we return the next day, it will all be in ruins. I used to create small towers of sand as a child, but I lost interest and patience for the tedious task.

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 My favorite activity to do on the beach is to read. To some, that might sound extremely boring. It’s true that I could read anywhere. Usually, I like to read in a very quiet location. There can’t be any sounds or else I will get distracted. I would go in my room, close the door, shut the windows, and sit on my bed with only the words in front of me. That’s the only way I ever finish a book. I would never read during the school year because there was always too much going on. I had books to read for classes but that was all I allowed myself.

 When I’m at a beach I can read all day. I always bring at least two books with me when we go to North Carolina. I know that the chances of me finishing one or more are very high, so better safe than sorry.

 The background sounds of the ocean waves washing over the sand are all my ears need to stay focused on the story. It’s calming. It relaxes my mind as I complete each chapter. If I have a book in my hands, I’m perfectly content with sitting in one spot all day on the shore.

 When I’m not reading, I usually lounge on a blanket under the sun. My sunglasses sat perched on top of my head while my eyes closed and I embraced the sounds.

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 In the Outer Banks, a typical day for us is better than a typical day anywhere else. We wake up around eight o’clock, except my brother who usually ends up rolling out of bed around noon like a slug sliding off a wet leaf.

 We eat breakfast that everyone helps to prepare. It consists of eggs, potatoes, bacon, and bagels we buy from a local bakery in town. Coffee is also a necessity, although I personally don’t feel like I need that much help getting myself to wake up when I’m in my favorite place.

 Some of us take the dogs, Finley and Ginger, out for a walk around town. We walk by some of the other houses that are rented out for vacationing. Others are owned and lived in by people year-round.

I love reading the names of the houses. Glory Days, Flip Flop Inn, Dog Daze, Sea Haven, and Seas and Quakers are some of the highlights. Each one is unique. Everyone is friendly as we walk by except for one person we encountered.

“Can you keep your dogs away from my yard? I don’t need them scaring my cats.”

The man who said this was medium height and older than my parents. He wore a baseball cap and dark sunglasses as he stood with his hands on his hips. His gut poked out from the bottom of his t-shirt.

“Yeah, no problem,” my uncle said as he looked at my mom and slightly rolled his eyes.

“Good,” the man said. He turned around to walk back into his house. He probably lived there year-round. We weren’t letting our dogs walk on anyone’s yard, so I had no explanation for the rudeness.

 After the dog walk, we started getting ready to make our way to the ocean. We changed into bathing suits and beach clothes and lathered ourselves up with sunscreen. The one thing that would ruin a vacation for anyone is if they got burned, but it always ends up happening to someone, usually my brother.

 We pack up our needed items such as, portable speakers, sunglasses, books, chairs, and towels. The only reason I bring my phone with me is to take a couple pictures of the scenery and to know what time it is. Otherwise, I don’t touch the device. Texts, social media, and phone calls can all wait. All that stuff is unwanted and comes in second when the beach is visible. This is another reason why I love going there. It helps me unplug and focus on what’s right in front of me for a little while. Everything will still be on my phone when we go back to Duck Tape, so why miss out on the view.

 The dogs are left in the house while we go to the ocean for a few hours. Ginger isn’t a huge fan of the beach. She likes to lay in the sand but refuses to step foot or even go near the water. She tugged at the leash and plopped herself on the sand as she protested the thought of her paws getting damp.

Finley loves the water. She galloped over and under the waves as they covered the shore. We always had to take a few steps back when she emerged from the ocean to shake her coat. The sea flew off her fur and Ginger ran for shelter.

We usually bring both the dogs with us closer to the evening when a lot of the people have gone back to their houses. It’s a dog friendly beach so we took advantage of it.

 We walked to the shore, and lugged our possessions with us. We claim our spot for the day and put up out umbrellas for some shade. The relaxation began.

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When the time came to pack everything up and make the walk back to the house, I felt great. My body was full of sun, happiness, and the freshness of the ocean air. The walk back was different because by that time we were all very hot. My sunglasses slowly slid down my nose from the moisture of the sunscreen mixed with the heat we had encountered all day. It was the only time I didn’t mind feeling sticky.

I could feel my shirt and hair binding to my salty skin like duct tape on paper.

My smile never left my face when we returned to the house. I knew that the next day would be a repeat of this and it couldn’t come soon enough.

I don’t know when my obsession with the beach started, but I don’t think that it’ll ever end since I have the Outer Banks in my life. Every time I leave, I think about how much fun I had and how calm my mind was; I think about the next time we’ll return to the beautiful place.

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 I glanced back out my bedroom window one more time. The sound of cars seeped through the glass as a strong wind blew leaves gripping on branches. The bottles stood straight, holding the sediments that haven’t touched ocean conditions in so long. The permanent marker had proved to be bad at its job, I noticed some of the ink deteriorating from the oldest members of the collection.

 I was switching places with the sand again. They stayed in my room as a grabbed my bag, threw it over my shoulder, and left for paradise.