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Home isn't the only place to run back to.

It's late September as I sit parked in my car in a familiar parking lot. It's around 5:00 in the afternoon, but for now, time becomes irrelevant. I look out the windshield in front of me, and breathe a heavy sigh of relief. There are no other cars around me, just a vacant snack bar, four sand covered paths, and a barrier of sand dunes blocking my direct view. I place my hand on the door handle, push, and feel the swift click beneath my hand. As I step out of the car, I feel the cool, pure scent of fresh air immediately rush into my lungs, relaxing every nerve in my body. Per routine, I have stripped myself of anxieties and have turned my attention to relishing in the sensations coursing through my body, signaling its upcoming release. In this parking lot, there is, and always has been, a distinct boundary between where my public persona is welcomed and where it simply ceases to exist. It is here, at the intersection of the cold pavement and the trickling, sweeping sand paths, that my façade drops.

As I step onto my sanded path, it only takes an instant for my feet to sink and mold around the new texture that has just welcomed them; it's soft, inviting, and comforting. As my head rises with a sly smile, I feel the familiar force of wind dart towards my face and take hold of my hair. Its force tosses my hair around in a senseless fashion, compelling it to join in its powerful dance. The dance imitates a freedom and buoyancy that is infectious in nature, and immediately encompasses me--along with my neighboring sand dunes running parallel to me on both sides of my path--into its choreography. This sanded path acts as my detoxification as I approach the entrance of my sanctuary. The unison in which I, the wind, and the sand dunes move is so gracious and liberating that I can't help but indulge in the euphoria into which it sends me. My feet have never forgotten their way down this acquainted path, and I let them guide me as my eyes close to capture this moment of exhilaration. Religiously, my steadfast feet stop once they have reached the point where the path widens to reveal my serenity in all its vastness and beauty. I open my eyes and there I stand before my friend, my protector, and my healer, once again. I am home. I am at the ocean.

Upon coming to the widening of the path, I stare wide-eyed and mystified at the beauty I have returned to. This landscape has been self-purified of its human contact through the changing of the tides and has now left itself once again vulnerable to humanity's imprint at low tide. The sun, inconspicuously to me, has been lowering itself ever so gradually behind me and now casts a twinkling gleam off the wet sand and water that lay before me. At this moment, I am completely and utterly alone here. The weight of the vastness presses on my soul and is calming at best and humbling at worst. As I make my way past the dried forgotten seaweed entangled amongst shells and stones, I come to a ledge formed from sand that has been coerced by the ocean in an upward motion only to be left to harden in its new miniature cliff-like form. I have found this ledge many a times and have come to see it as my hand-crafted seat by which the power and grace of my friend, the ocean, has created; for he knows the thoughts that I will silently confide in him there. My seat, as expected, welcomes me once more and my feet quickly begin to bury themselves deep beneath the sand's surface.

Here I sit, a little framed girl sitting upright with her back towards reality and her front faced towards the ocean. I don't move, but rather sit unnaturally still on my sand ledge while my hair swirls around my face and the sea breeze runs itself over my fragile body. It is here, the ocean, that I run to when life breaks me down. But it also the same place that reminds me of some of my most cherished memories. With one deep inhale, I close my eyes again and drift away to the soothing sounds of crashing waves breaking on the shore.

It is always during these silent meditations that the memories of my past at the beach come flooding back through my mind. My first cherished memory dances like a mirage behind my closed eyelids: the days I spent with my mom and siblings down at the beach in Dennis, Cape Cod. This memory consists of myself, along with my

sister and brother, all between the ages of 3 and 7, running and squealing in delight trying to beat the other into the ocean. Once in, the three of us would then begin our agreed-upon quest for hermit crabs. To this day, just imagining the sight of all three of us hunched over with our faces as closely pressed to the water's surface as possible, trying to find hermit crabs before an unsuspecting wave came to engulf our heads, makes me laugh. If that wasn't entertainment enough, Mitch would strive to find the sole hermit crab in the ocean that had taken too many steroids and without a doubt ruled the underground hermit crab kingdom, to chase my sister and me around with. Nevertheless, we would continue to shift through sand under the water for these hermit crabs until we were able to bring back a bucket full to show mom, who had been supervising at the water's edge. She has always had a fascination with these creatures herself and because of that proclivity, she was just as excited as we were when we showed her our buckets. To increase the fun, all four of us would then gather around, each holding a selected hermit crab from the bucket and just simply enjoy the sensation of its feet scurrying across our hand, tickling us as they went.

When the hermit crabs lost our interest, the quest then turned onto finding sand dollars for mom since those were her absolute favorite things to find during beach walks, apart from hermit crabs. What I will say is that the sand dollar quests were not as easy by any stretch of the imagination. Hermit crabs can physically move, which means locating one is just a matter of finding something scuttling across the ocean floor only to watch shrink instantly back up into its shell when fearful of another's close proximity. Sand dollars, however, are usually stationary unless the off chance they were caught in an underwater current that tosses them around at its mercy. Most, if not all, of these creatures are buried in the sand. This wouldn't have been a problem, but at the ages of 3 to 7, we struggled with being able to identify a sand dollar from a rock. When one of us did find a treasured sand dollar, however, the run back to mom was one of great, victorious pride—to us, we accomplished the nearly impossible. Reflecting back, the smiles and laughter shared by the four of us couldn't have been more bright and cheerful than they were during those hot summer days.

The years passed and the three of us grew up accordingly, but the beach remained constant. The next mirage to flutter past my eyelids was the memory of my siblings and I down at Hilton Head, South Carolina, at the beach riding beach pedal cars. Now at the ages of 8 to 12, the three of us were allowed by dad (but absolutely not by mom) to rent out beach pedal cars that we would use to drive ourselves around the wide open beach with during low tide. These cars were not designed efficiently in hindsight, and my brother only helped proved that fact. Mitch, yet again, was the nuisance of the group and would start at one end of the beach and pedal his hardest to try and collide with our pedal cars that were going in circles down the other end of the beach. Well, for an 8-year-old, Mitch sure could pedal. This little kid would ram into us with enough force that we would either experience jammed fingers, a rolled over pedal car with us still attached to it, or a three-way traffic jam that required each of us to evacuate our respective cars and drag them apart just to restart his terror once again. This is a memory we still yell at Mitch for today, and yet, is still very much his sense of humor.

The best part of my Hilton Head beach trips, however, were the long walks I would take with my mom and sister, Hayley. Mom was no fool. In order to secure some peace and quiet for herself, she would schedule these walks early in the morning to ensure Dad and Mitch would sleep through them. This strategy gave her peace of mind for a few hours, in addition to priceless mother-daughter bonding time. Another pro to her early morning walks was that the hours usually coincided with low tide, leaving the entirety of the ocean's sandbar exposed to walk along. The three of us would then proceed to walk in a horizontal line searching the beach for sand dollars, sea glass and beautiful shells. When we stood to communicate with each other after having our eyes fixated on the ground for so long, all three of our frames would be backlit by the gleam and glow of the early morning sun. A distinct part of this memory that I've never forgotten was how beautiful, radiant and young my mom looked in this light, but I surmise that was just her natural aura and that the sun just accentuated her simply elegant features. Nonetheless, these peaceful morning hours were purely filled with encouragement, love, advice, wisdom, and hope.

It was with that warming thought of my family that I awake from my meditation. Sitting on my ledge, I finally acknowledge to myself why I have brought and continue to bring myself to the ocean's edge. The ocean is the only place where I can be vulnerable without feeling exposed, lost without feeling I need a direction, and hopeful in the face of fear. I have grown up on these sands and in this water, and it was here that I first witnessed unconditional love by my family members. I believe I run back to the ocean's edge trying to find within myself those childhood roots of love, faith, and happiness that my family has given to me in ample amounts for the past 21 years. What I admit to the ocean, however, is that I sometimes struggle to accept those virtues when I feel as though I have failed myself or my family. It is only when I'm at the ocean that I find a little self-forgiveness and self-acceptance for my past mistakes.

With this said, showing vulnerability in a place of such immense beauty and strength makes these inferior thoughts seem ridiculous. As I stand up from my ledge and start my progression down towards the water's edge, I have to laugh at how minuscule I am in comparison to all that surrounds me. Analyzing the ocean before me, I notice how it moves with such grace, speed and precision in a routine motion, all while whispering its secrets across the shoreline only to retract and whisper them again once more. Its intense coloring is a remarkable dark blue offset by the deep foamy white crests of its waves. To me, this ocean looks flawless and would stun anyone in its presence. What no one stops and thinks about, however, is the potential imperfections that lie beneath its complexion; maybe there are barnacle covered rock piles, to offer one example. Why is it, then, that I can ignore the ocean's imperfections and declare it beautiful but sometimes refuse to do the same with myself? This is the other thought that continually finds me here and encourages me to grant myself forgiveness and self-acceptance. No one is perfect, and that is simply what makes each of us exceptionally beautiful.

Now, inches from the water, I gently dip my feet in and start to walk inward, feeling the ocean wrap its arms around my ankles, welcoming me home. The ocean's healing powers immediately lull my skin and mind as I gaze downward to view my reflection in the water. Viewing myself, I simply have to smile back. Despite having been tried, broken hearted, and completely lost, I have always remained happy, positive, and daring in my endeavors. With that said, despite all of my accomplishments, I still come back to the ocean in search of a direction. I have reached the point in my life where direction becomes key as I determine where I want to work and potentially relocate for a possible company. Seeing colleagues determine these things before me has put substantial pressure on me to figure it out, but all I know for sure is that I have a passion for writing. Choices and decisions are being pushed upon me faster than I can weigh their pros and cons, and all I am hearing is that the future will be so bright as long as you actively pursue it. Well, at the ocean, that overwhelming noise comes to a halt. Listening to the sounds of the seagulls, crashing waves, and the salty-aired wind that surrounds me, I come to the realization that I do not have all the answers, but I do have something better. I have today and the fleeting moments it allows me. To remind me of this, I just have to look back at my footprints that have begun to fade soon after being created. This is the ocean's unique way of reinforcing that every day is a gift, and that what is done with it will be my footprint left behind before tomorrow comes and wipes the slate back clean again. The ocean reminds me to enjoy myself and live in the moment, and it is with that thought that I turn and leave the sea.

On my way out of the water and up the wet sand, I notice another soul coming down the sanded path from above. He too stops to admire this place before beginning his trek down to the waterfront. We both continue walking our separate paths until we cross in the middle where I continue to progress up the beach, and he continues to progress down the beach. The exchange is brief with a polite smile and hello, but we both know that the other has come to confess secrets of the soul to the ocean. With a soft smile, I keep pace, moving up the beach until I am back at the mouth of the sanded path that will take me back to reality. Before I say goodbye to my sanctuary, I spin around to get one more glimpse of my safe haven. It is then, looking down the beach, that I see all the encouragement and confirmation I could need. As I gaze fixated on my footprints, I realize that they have remained intact as they followed me up to my point of stagnation. This small detail showed me, quite clearly, that the ocean felt my presence today. My footprints will continue to follow me back into reality and will leave their mark elsewhere, but their current imprints in the sand prove to me that they have already made an impact here. With a renewed sense of hope for today, and excitement instead of fear for tomorrow, I finally turn to head back down my sanded path to go home. *Thank you, my ocean. I'll see you again very soon.*

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