



Readers Write

THE BEACH

DURING MY SENIOR YEAR IN COLLEGE my girlfriend dumped me, and I turned to Bob from my men's group for support. A librarian in his sixties, he had a soft voice and a caring disposition. I figured he'd be able to lift my spirits.

Bob lived in a cozy cabin by the shore, where I arrived expecting a cup of tea and a sympathetic ear. Instead he said, "We're going to the beach."

As we wove our way through the beach pines and madrone trees growing on the dunes, I started talking about how miserable I felt, but Bob just pointed into the understorey, rattling off facts about the nesting habits of wrens and what warblers eat. He would stop to listen for croaking frogs and skittering chickadees, instruct me on the migration pattern of butterflies, and extol the flavors of the wild mushrooms that popped up after fall rains.

Finally we reached the water, and I confided to Bob how badly I missed my ex. He listened for a few minutes, then started talking about the tides: spring tides, neap tides, slack tides. He went on and on about the damn tides! Wasn't I supposed to be doing the talking?

As we left the beach, Bob spoke about the beauty of shifting sand dunes, especially during big weather events. Though I was tired of his monologues, my mood had improved thanks to our walk.

A few months later I met a beautiful woman, and for our third date I took her to the beach. As we hiked across the dunes, I found myself telling her about the plants and critters.

That woman is now my wife. She says one of the things that set me apart from other men she dated was how I knew the songs of the birds and the movement of the tides.

*Paul Grafton
Morro Bay, California*

EVERY OTHER SATURDAY DURING summer vacation my parents would pack up me, my younger sister and brother, a cousin or three, the grill, and way too much food, and we'd drive a little over an hour to Sandy Point Beach on Chesapeake Bay. We'd find a good spot a little back from the beach, and Daddy would grill hot dogs, hamburgers stuffed with onions and green peppers, and foil-wrapped sweet corn while he sipped a beer.

After lunch, our bellies sloshing with grape soda, we'd toss a Frisbee, play tag, and whine to be allowed in the ocean. When an hour had passed, we'd sprint in our cut-off jeans across the burning sand and leap into the pewter-colored water. None of us could swim, but we wouldn't go far out. My sister would lie in the surf, frantically kicking her legs and getting

absolutely nowhere.

Going to the restroom meant less time on the beach, so we'd pee in the water and giggle while wading away from the warm spot. Sometimes jellyfish bobbed in the waves. If we saw one, we'd yell, "Jellyfish!" — the way white people in movies screamed, "Shark!" — then scoop up the gelatinous threat in a bucket and toss it onto the hot sand.

At least once every summer one of us kids would cut his or her foot on a broken bottle under the water. (I always thought someone purposely threw it there to hurt us.) We'd attend to the injured, remember where the glass was, then dive back in and resume playing, letting nothing deter us from our game of "black Aquaman."

As the sun slowly sank on the horizon, we would comb the beach, inspecting withered seaweed, dead starfish, iridescent seashells, smooth sticks, algae-filled styrofoam cups, and plastic six-pack rings. When Momma called, we'd trudge back to the car, brush off the dry sand — which made us look ashy and covered with powdered sugar — and sleep the entire way home.

Eight years ago an inmate from my part of Maryland was transferred to the prison where I'm incarcerated, and I asked him about Sandy Point.

"Man," he said, "if you go in that cruddy-ass water and then go see your parole officer, you're gonna get a violation for a dirty urine test."

I've lost count of how many ways the outside world has changed since my conviction, but in my memories Sandy Point will remain a paradise.

Greg Goodman
Lawrenceville, Virginia

IN THE MIDSIXTIES, WHEN I WAS twelve, my family moved from a small town in Ontario, Canada, to the Caribbean island of Trinidad. Our dad worked for an oil company and had been transferred. Mom was a registered nurse and had no problem finding work. My siblings and I easily acclimated.

On Sundays we went to the beach. Our favorite was Maracas Bay on the rugged north coast, about ten miles down a narrow, winding mountain road from

our house. The beach was wide and long, with pink-white quartz sand as fine as salt. Coconut trees lined the edge, and on the far end was a small fishing village where my dad and his friends bought fresh fish off the incoming boats. The water was a deep blue-green and crystal clear.

During the rainy season the ocean got very rough, with a vicious undertow that could take you out to sea. The most dangerous areas were marked with red flags. There were orange, yellow, and white flags too. A white flag was the safest. And the beach was segregated: the white-flag areas were always whites-only, whereas black and East Indian bathers were confined to the rougher spots.

One rainy afternoon as my family and I returned to the car to head home, we passed the nonwhite portion of the beach, where the undertow was strong. We saw a crowd of people standing around a lifeguard who was pumping the chest of an unconscious black man. The man's mother was pleading with the crowd, "Is

there a doctor here? Please help save my son!"

I turned to my mom and said, "Mom, you're a nurse. You can help him."

My dad locked eyes with her, then grabbed my arm and pulled me to our car.

Whether my mom could have saved that man's life, I'll never know. He died right there, I later found out, and my parents never spoke of the incident again.

I've been back to Maracas Bay a few times since then. It's still one of the most beautiful beaches I've ever seen. In the rainy season the different-colored flags still fly to warn swimmers. But now people of all colors share the safest parts of the beach.

S.R.C.
Sacramento, California

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