

Time Passing Like the Tides

We only spend two weeks per summer at the woodland seaside of Mackerricher State Park, but watching years pass from the same slab of log in the center of the same circle of camp sites somehow makes us feel like locals who know the land better than the tattoos my cousins and I bluff about getting someday. Some years there can be upwards of seventy of us, the Kelly Clan, each one tied back to my great-grandfather who started this yearly camping reunion back when he was still alive, before even my mother was born. For these two weeks each year, my lungs are brimming with a marine fog and my ears are dense with the sounds of ravens, of waves crashing down on the black-sand shore, of barking dogs and cheering boys, of broken karaoke and domino tiles clacking. It doesn't matter that we sleep in tents and gotta pay for the showers, that the temperatures at night drop as low as winter, that raccoons and skunks will pillage our camp as we sleep, or that sunsets on the beach are often absorbed by the omnipresent colorless fog. Say "so long!" to any pictures you might have of a sunny southern Californian white beach vacation: I live for the often-dreary grasp of the NorCal coast.

My cousins and I, we know what it is to explore here, to go off-trail and walk over ice plant and horse manure, to roast marshmallows over the fire for fun as much as for staying warm, to let our dogs off leash and chase them down the never-ending coast, to pick blackberries and catch striped shore crabs from the tide pools with our bare hands, to go spearfishing in the rocky waters with wetsuits clasped around our bodies. We take night hikes here along the small boardwalk weaving through the cliffside grasslands, with the occasional star peaking through to guide us to the dead end overlooking the ocean. The oldest cousins will sip at a Busch Light, and we all keep an eye and stern grip on Buzz (the youngest at thirteen) to keep him from doing anything too stupid. Through the years we've sprained ankles, been stung by bees, lost teeth,

gained stitches, had hypothermia, fallen out of trees and fallen into patches of stinging nettle.

Ever since we were young, we would climb on that log in the middle of camp and yarn away the hours like we'd live forever. Even though the log isn't big enough for us all anymore, we still talk all the same. Sometimes I still need to bite my tongue.

We're seventeen now and feeling rebellious as Jessie, Andy and I climb into my aunt's blue truck to head to town for ice cream. Jessie drives—she's the only one with a license anyhow—and she sings along to the *Mamma Mia* soundtrack her brother Andy has synced to the truck's speakers. I don't know any of the words, but I smile and bop my head to the music before I turn my face out the window, watching the conifers zip past and lapping up the piney oceanic breeze like a dog. After spending far too long on parking the oversized truck at Cow Licks Creamery, we entertain the idea of trying new flavors, perhaps the strange mushroom ice cream that's somehow survived all this time, but of course we get the same order as every year. For me? It's always cookie dough. Best cookie dough ice cream you'll find anywhere, really. Waffle cones in hand, we strut down the familiar streets of tourist shops, from home decor to silly socks, dots of vanilla cream marking my nose like sunscreen. This year I walk with a slight limp, from falling out of the truck of all things, but it doesn't stop me from wandering through the stores with both the wonder of a child and the thrill of no parents in sight. The three of us look the epitome of "Californian beach kids," in our flip flops, jean shorts, and hoodies, sunglasses hiding our eyes or tucked in our frizzy blonde hair.

Sunsets are spent on the beach, even if there's no true wonder to be seen. The water here is far too cold for recreational swimming, and the rough, deep waves could sweep you up to take you home. We don't mind, filling our days with cornhole championships and climbing trees, with Banagrams and campfire songs. Here on our stretch of beach, we ignore the bleak skies as

the boys rough each other up playing football, the coarse sand infiltrating their clothes as they tackle each other into the ground. Jessie talks with a new girl, some barely-related-by-marriage cousin from Minnesota that I never even knew existed, and they pass Starbursts back 'n forth from their pockets. I half-listen to their stories from my perch on a log, absently plucking strings of my guitar to play John Denver and laughing when deemed appropriate.

It's like a dream, like reaching out for the seam sewn between the ocean and the sky. But you can never really grasp it in your hand, never hold that light close to your chest, the mists drifting tauntingly through your fingers like sand in a glass of time. See, moments like this feel so fleeting, so shallow and...one could almost say altogether chimeric, flickering between joy and uncertainty like the flames of our campfire in the night's breeze. I suppose it's always been that way. Even the finest of moments I spend with my cousins, many of them feel nearly artificial. Like there's nothing but the thin thread of a capillary to connect us, and if we weren't related we'd have nothing to do with each other. I've always been the odd one out, nothing like them at all most of the time. Hell, my guitar and I are playing a song from the 1960s while my cousins ask if I can play 2010s pop. They play competitive varsity sports and video games, I play with words. They practice every strange trending dance off Tik-Tok or whatever app is popular, while I barely glance up from my murder mystery novel and resist asking them to turn down the volume. They're fairly normal, picture perfect high school teens—and I'm anything but. She spent hours getting all dolled up in a dress for prom, and I took maybe forty minutes total to shower, brush my hair and throw on a blazer I got off a clearance rack. He's football MVP of the year, and I'm out of breath from climbing the stairs. She's been in the student government since freshman year, and I'm on my third high school. They cry when they get emotional. I'll shut myself away and pray no one finds me. They're still learning basic cooking habits, but I could

cook a three course meal for four by the time I was eight. Well, to be fair, I couldn't tie my shoes or ride a bike 'til I was at least twelve, both accomplishments they all had achieved long before me. They talk about their dating lives, I'm more than happy to not have one. I make a joking remark about being "too ace to understand," but of course they have no clue what I mean and my lame attempt at coming out leads to awkwardly confused stares. I thought they would be the perfect first option for people to come out to, the safest in my family, at least, but my neurodivergent brain forgot something: not everyone knows what I know, and my cousins, straight-laced Irish Catholic military-serving family we are, have no clue what asexual even means as an orientation, even less the shortened term "ace." Jessie asks me to explain, but the courage to tell them the truth slips down my throat until I can't reach it anymore and I'm left resorting to a fake smile and a casual "aw, nothing," while I look towards the ocean and hope no one notices the change in my now shaky breathing.

Now I watch them have their fun with a strange sort of distance between us, even though I'm just next to them. It's odd to feel so disconnected from someone you still talk to every five minutes, but it sometimes feels like the rest of them have their own world, and I'm just the audience looking in. The jokes I make don't land like I planned, I can't relate to their high-school drama, trends of the month, or music tastes, and my awkward attempt to come out as asexual just fell flatter than the apple pancakes our Nana makes only for these two weeks a year. It's almost desolate, the way my brain filters out their terrible recreation of rap verses in favor of the waves crashing and my own hums to the tune of "Leaving on a Jet Plane." It feels as though I could be the only person on the beach, like one of those times where me and my dog, JJ, are hunkering down on an angled slab of rubble from the collapsed bridge, her head on my feet as she rests after chasing a frisbee, and the rope of her leash in my fist even though I know she won't run

away. The serenity reminds me of the nights where it would be just Jessie and I, when we would talk about everything and nothing, showing each other the scars no one else could see. But JJ is back at our campsite, and Jessie's talking to someone else, and all I have is my slightly out-of-tune guitar and my black zip-up hoodie obscuring the sides of my face.

The football narrowly misses my head, snapping me back to attention. I laugh it off and throw it back at them, but my pitch is so crappy the ball falls short. They laugh, and my smile becomes just a little bit more fake. Really, none of that matters. I'll be happy so long as I'm next to the churning ocean.

My focus pitters back to those calming waves, my eyes settling on the horizon where I expect the sun would be about now, and I watch the water come up to trim the black sand in white foam. I hear Buzz cheer in success as he gets the football, only to be quickly decked by Andy the quarterback. The breeze picks off the ocean and carries a cold mist to my weathered cheeks, my eyes squinting. Jessie laughs at a joke and taps my shoulder to hand me a strawberry Starburst—of course she knows those are my favorite. I nod my thanks and look back to the vast never-ending view we have been gifted. My breathing syncs with the tides. In, and out. I am the daughter of that ever-changing line where the sea brushes up against the sand, and my soul rests below the waves, drifting somewhere out on the water.