

At the Beach
October 2021

It was a considerable distance back then. From the top of the line of dunes, all adorned with shocks of sea grass, to the spot where the waves, after their final crash, spread upward on the sand, forming a wavy necklace of bubbly foam. My lungs full of a whoop of freedom and joy, I ran out of the house, charged across the road, and plummeted down the high sandy slope toward the water's edge. The sand stretched so far that I, in my teenage years, ran out of breath before my bare feet slapped on the waterlogged sand that formed a stretch of the Chesapeake Bay's beach.

Here, on the beach at Kitty Hawk, it is not that far at all. On the single day that I, now a woman of many years, will walk this unfamiliar beach of the Outer Banks, I awkwardly climb the enormous dune, its base only a few feet from the house my friend and I will call home for several days. In hurricanes, the wild sea easily drowns the narrow beach, hurls itself over the dunes, and plunges through the high space created by sturdy stilts built to protect this house from flooding.

When I was a teenager, not even the hurricane waves could cover the wide expanse from tide lines to dunes. They were not a threat to the dunes which rose just several hundred yards from our house. "We're safe this far up," my ever-confident mother said when I worried aloud about drowning.

At the top of this dune in Kitty Hawk, where I peer to the Atlantic Ocean's horizon, I recognize that this Outer Banks beach is far narrower than it probably was in my teenage days. Decades have provided the ocean ample time to chew its way inland. Even close to the shore, the sea is dark. The waves churn angrily, melding dark sand in their troughs. "Is it ever calm?" I ask the horizon. "It seems always angry, always high tide."

As a teenager, I floated face up on high tide's eventual calm surface, then dog paddled lazily to watch massive cargo ships and Naval vessels chug toward port on the placid waters of the Hampton Roads channel.

The new world still new, pirates ruled the ocean to the east and the sounds to the west of the Outer Banks. Shipwrecks were frequent. On our first night in Kitty Hawk, the moon is full, lighting a glittery path over the waters from far out to sea to just beyond the restaurant where we dine. My friend says there is wreckage below the water and ghosts above. I wonder if the alligators of the Outer Banks creep in the night.

Someday the waters off Virginia Beach and its bays will drown the cities and roads. Someday there will be no Outer Banks. But on the single day that I walk the beach, my thoughts are not gloomy. I plod through the unstable sand of the beach side of the dune and make my way to the spot where the waves dissolve into bubbly foam. I step further, wait for a wave, and squat, letting the water run over my splayed hands and feet. It is warm, as is the breeze. Those establishing territory with tents and chairs and umbrellas wrestle with this breeze. I'm used to it; I'm from Wyoming. I let the breeze tangle my hair, and I walk. Gulls and terns, pipers and plovers keep pace with me and clearly see no reason to keep their distance. They leave me only

to snag the occasional bit of food: clam or crumb left by humans. I don't know if they eat fiddler crabs; the tiny bulgy-eyed, side strutting crustaceans shoot into their holes when our entourage approaches. I stop often to watch children and dogs play at the edge of the surf. Quite abruptly, I forget the sea's anger, the ghosts and wreckage of the deep. With a surge of elation in my heart, I am home again, a teenager running wild on the beach. By the time I get back to the beach house, though, the feeling has left me. I am a woman of many years, and the thin strip of land, this outer bank, seems unsettling, unstable.

In a few days, my friend and I leave the Outer Banks, our destination northern Virginia, her home. On the way, somewhere between North Carolina's palms and long-needle pine trees, the car radio features a song by Toby Keith. The twang of his voice and the desolation of the lyrics tell me he is cowboy western. I am immediately homesick for the vast prairie and mountain peaks of Wyoming. Simultaneously, I am homesick for the Outer Banks. At the ocean, I had not missed the West. I assume that, once home, I will not miss the heavy smell of beach plants and animals. Yet, in this moment, on a highway headed north out of North Carolina, I miss both.

We drive close enough to Virginia Beach that the names on the road signs draw me back to a time decades earlier. Tidewater Drive, Military Highway, and my favorite, still a tiny sign just before a bridge: Willoughby Spit. A detour on these roads could carry me to the home where the dunes adorned in sea grass sat well apart from the waves. My friend and I choose to drive on, northward. I take a deep breath and watch my teenage years retreat in the rearview side mirror.