

Never Been Better

As the sea devoured me, its troubled tide churning and heaving as if trying to shake off a painful memory, I wondered how something so wild and wrathful could have ever brought me peace. I could not understand how, as a child, I had dangled my legs over the pier by the Monterey shore and had all my worries vanish as I thought of nothing but the ripples and patterns my toes made as they grazed the water. I could not believe that the ocean's serenity had inspired me to want to *change*: to not be the high-strung, anxious little girl I had always been but to be someone calmer, someone with self-composure, someone who could look upon the sea's dormant strength and see that same tranquility reflected in myself. Pitted against the raging waters, overwhelmed with that familiar sense of panic, I was fighting a battle with a seemingly inevitable outcome.

Bean Hollow State Beach was drenched in the honey-hued haze of dawn, and the California sea was almost metallic, awash with gleaming light that pierced through the clouds. The golden sand was pristine, unmarked by footprints, for my campmates and I had decided to take a trip to the beach in the early hours of the morning, when the rest of the world was asleep. Even the red plastic lifeguard chair was empty, and its vacancy filled my teenage companions with a communal sense of liberation and mischief. But I did not care to take part in my friends' antics, not only because I was always anxious when it came to possible ways of causing trouble but because I had agreed to come to the beach for one reason only: to calm myself with the ocean, my greatest remedy. As of recent, my life had been extremely hectic, so I was even more nervous than usual. And the sea—with its mesmerizing, murmuring waves—had always soothed me. So when my summer camp friends proposed an excursion to the San Mateo County coast, I was elated to have the opportunity to come back to the beach.

I watched the waves for a while, lulled by their metronomic symphony, completely oblivious to the raucous cheers of my companions as they engaged in a boisterous game of beach volleyball. My friends were city kids, but I had always felt the ocean in my blood, and in that moment, it was calling to me. I descended into the shallows, shivering as the icy morning water prickled my skin. As I waded farther and farther away from the safety of the shore, more and more warmth escaped from my body, consumed by the ravenous sea. Time passed, and I waited for my muscles to relax, for my mind to stop racing- but the calm I had always felt around the sea had been replaced by a familiar sense of welling anxiety, intensifying with every passing moment.

When I finally turned around to return to the beach, I could not move forward. The tide slammed against my chest, wrenching the air from my lungs as the current dragged me farther away from the shore, from safety. Panic surged through my veins and fear clutched at my throat as I struggled to keep myself afloat, but the more I fought against the sea, the more unforgiving it became. All of my senses were inflamed- I could feel the fire in my limbs as I grappled against the relentless waves, I could taste every grain of salt in the water that sealed my throat and stifled my screams, and I could hear the rush of my blood in one ear and the rush of the current in the other. A combination of frantic tears and seawater blurred my vision and I shut my eyes, my terrified imagination leading me to visualize all the dark and dangerous creatures that I was certain were lurking beneath me. I could not fathom how I could love the cold and ruthless ocean, how it could ever bring me peace and calm. *Calm. Calm.* In spite of my chaotic thoughts and the turmoil around me, I had enough control over my reason to understand that, to prevent my situation from worsening, I needed to remain calm. I stopped resisting and allowed the raging current to knock me onto my back, enabling my body to float and move in harmony with the sea instead of against it. I concentrated on the palpitations of the waves that carried me and quieted

the panicking voice in my head by aligning my breaths with the ocean's pulses. My heart rate slowed and my vision cleared. In that moment, I felt the same way I did when I would dangle my feet over the edge of the pier- just me, the sea, and calm. I lifted my head and realized that my friends on shore were mere specks in the distance, beyond the current that was still driving me backwards. The person I had been two minutes before would have been hysterical, but the person I had become was unruffled. Calm and self-composed, I registered a half-moon of land nearby to my right, where the oceanside bent towards the sea and the waves dribbled onto the sand. I drifted sideways, and was faced with no resistance. Hope revitalized every muscle in my body and I swam towards the scythe of shore, leaving the rip current behind.

When I finally staggered onto the sand, I collapsed-- not due to exhaustion, but because I wanted to savor the earth and bask in its warmth. Now, the seashore was not golden, nor was it pristine- it was grey and moist, dampened by the lazy waves of the shallows, but as I pressed my cheek against the sand, I had never felt so warm, relieved, and tranquil. My campmates came to surround me, worried and distraught, expressing the sense of anxiety that had been such an integral part of my character just moments before, but that I felt no longer. I expected these reactions from others, but it was my own that surprised me. Not only was I more collected than I had been in years, but I was beaming with pride, thrilled that the ocean was no longer the only remedy for my anxiety and delighted in my newly mastered ability to maintain composure by finding the peace within myself. And so when one of my friends asked me if I was all right, if I felt okay, I met her frenzied eyes and smiled. "Calm down," I told her. "I've never been better."