



*This Is What I Remember*

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EACH MORNING THE SUN enters before I have finished dreaming, beckoning me to the land of the waking. The birds have been up for hours and already taken their breakfast. Their chorus punctuates my dreams as I rise and fall from the depths of my subconscious; the little whoops of cardinals, robin tweets, piercing shrieks from the blue jays, occasional trills from a woodpecker are joined by the clicks of squirrels. And then the mournful hoots of the doves issue their faint reminders that all of this will someday end.

There is no time to waste. The quiet, cool hours are short during this season,

so I'm up and out the door swiftly to seize the day, crunching my feet into the crushed shells that fill the driveway. Max, a graying black Labrador who lives a few cottages down, is just returning from his early morning walk with his mom, contentedly tired out. I follow in their footsteps towards the water where heat is already rising off the grasses glowing in the sunrise, and warmth bursts out of the bright-pink rosehip blossoms that flank the beaches, offering their sweet fragrance to the sea.

These are the waters that delivered my ancestors to this land a few centuries ago, though they arrived at

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the end of autumn in more troubled waters with only harsher weather ahead. They had a very difficult first year. I often think about them during my walks and wonder what life would have been like for them—what history itself would have been like—if the pilgrims had arrived on this shore during summer’s glory when perfect day after perfect day rolls by and humans can shapeshift into water beings.

I visit the water daily, sometimes twice, as it pulls me like a magnetic force. All other activities are planned around these pauses to visit grandmother ocean, whose waters are finally warm enough for swimming. Some people don’t mind colder water. I once met a long, gray-haired, willowy beauty on the North Shore who said she was off to swim during October. “I’m a mermaid,” she confessed, and I understood and secretly wished I could have what she has. To withstand that cold would grant me more time in these healing waters. But by September’s end, it’s a wrap for me and my delicate constitution until next season.

So this time is short and incredibly sweet, and I take my steps slowly in the frothing, glittering surf with the hope that I can bottle this feeling away for the dark days ahead. “Summer Magic” is what I’d call the elixir, and it would contain all the effervescent joy of these mornings when the day itself stretches out

before me like the endlessly stunning coastline. And anything is possible. Energized by the refreshing water lapping at my feet that generously pulls away anything, everything I no longer need with each receding wave, I feel myself slip into the greater rhythm of life pulsating around me, heart swelling, parades of ducks skimming by, sea bird piercing the surface, and shells revealed.



Many, many moons ago, I played on the beach just a few miles down the peninsula tip, closer to the “end of the earth,” as I often call it. For that’s how it feels being on this tiny strip of land jutting out into the great Atlantic where civilization slows down to a trickle most of the year. My family, along with my mom’s best friend, always visited in the peak of the summer back in the eighties and nineties when it was not a popular place for people with children.

Since then the land where our motel once stood was sold and developed into multimillion-dollar homes, so only a privileged few walk those sands, making my memories all the more precious. Memories of pulling the slider door open each morning, stepping straight onto the sand, eager for another beach day. Giant, all-consuming hugs and mountainous piles of seaweed. The smell of warm bagels, for we smuggled a toaster oven into our motel rooms. My mother swaddled it with a blanket

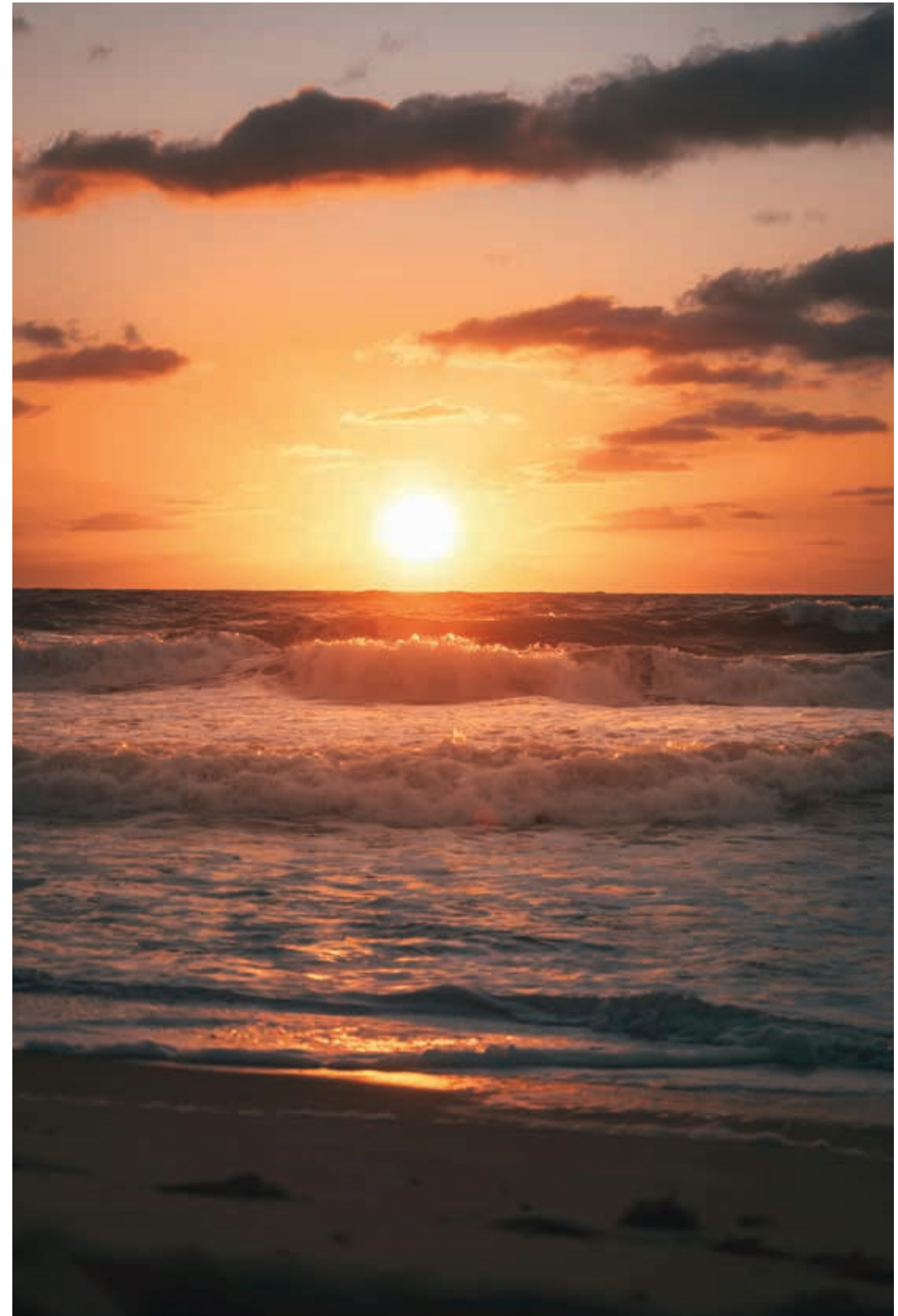


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and carried it outside for hiding while the maid cleaned our rooms.

The best part was always at night. The constant sound of waves crashing in the darkness and an avalanche of stars upon us. Once I started living on the Outer Cape, I recognized that you can see the entire Milky Way, every night, snaking across the sky.

“Do you ever wonder where all the trash goes?” I asked mom’s friend one night as we stared at the sky with the sand under our toes.

White wine in hand, I could feel her shake her head next to me. “I don’t even wanna think about it,” she admitted in her overwhelm—not to me, but to the sky.

But I kept thinking about it. That question was only the beginning of a lifelong dedication to Mother Earth. Now I often depart the beach with my hands full of bottle caps, pierced balloons, and fragments of plastic in a variety of thicknesses, from flimsy wrappers to hunks of something now broken.



Most people come here as tourists for the day, weekend, or week, like I did as a kid. Many others own property but only enjoy it for the summer, and in my off-season walks, I observe how the sunlight filters into their empty homes, witnessing stories these people will never know—like the tales of autumn as she sips summer away like a savory,

delicately spiced soup. Autumn ages bitterly, from golden and breathtaking to gray and seemingly lifeless, and this gray dominates winter and spring for months on end, when the sea, sky, and land seem to merge into the same dull palette. The rare event of snow ushers in a spectacle of whiteness to break up the monotony. But that is even more rare than summer.

I used to always love fall and winter, and still do. But ever since moving to the ocean, I have a different relationship with the seasons. I feel their passing more intensely. The rugged sea air permeates the skin, infiltrates my organs and joints. It settles within me most comfortably in summertime, when that salty, rough wind is a balm for the blasting sun. In all other seasons, it’s a harsh place to live for it’s almost always windy. Wind carries the salt to my door and plays the wind chimes day and night. There are fewer trees on these sandy final stretches of earth, so we’re all exposed to its whims, and I feel I am becoming this wind, moving through life at a lighter, faster, unpredictable pace.

As Father Sun traverses the sky, I’m often caught in a fit of inspiration to go, now, and rush the beach in my crusade to witness the sunrise or sunset. I never know which robe the sun will don for the spectacle, for each performance is different. I’m always left in awe. Like that morning he broke day across the horizon roaring



like a lion onto the pink savannah. Or that night someone lit a bonfire in the sky and it looked like the world was ending, so the angels showed up with champagne. Concluding with a brazen goodbye, the lion's roar reverberated into the dusk.

Sun worship is something I learned here at the edge of the earth where the stage is set twice daily, and I always have a front row seat. Often, though, I am also the theater cleanup crew, clearing garbage so the beach can look just perfect for the show.

Strangely, I feel a tug at my heart now when the sun dips below the horizon. As the embers burn down, I often think of all those I have loved and lost so far in this lifetime. And I think about them like the sun as I watch him set, thinking about how I'll see him, and them, on the other side. It's a bittersweet feeling as the sun goes down, especially as the days grow shorter. The winds change. My morning bird chorus has dwindled, and the notes of the dove are a lot more pronounced. And the trips to the beach in the evening occur at earlier and earlier times each day until I realize that I'm no longer in my bathing suit and stretching in the shallows. The tourists have left, though I'm still cleaning up their trash.

"This is what I remember," I caption an Instagram photo of the ocean from a majestic July day as the reality sinks in that summer is gone—

#byenow is one of my hashtags. A friend who hates fall except for boots and pumpkin spice lattes comments with a heartbreak emoji.

Except . . . I realize as I write this many suns later . . . summer isn't gone. Summer is in my skin and my organs—every last drop of the elixir I didn't need to bottle up, after all. For I am the bottle. I'm the vessel for all the elements that form our sacred strip of land. I'm filled with summer salt, seaweed, and sand. With the roses from my altar, the butterflies and ladybugs, even minutely safe traces of the poisonous foxglove rising to heaven from the garden party in June and the cubed cheese and grapes I ate there.

The word "remember" curiously includes the noun "member," whose French origins in the fourteenth century refer to a part of the body—a reminder that memory is visceral. Somewhere in my flesh, the wild creatures of the upland meadow roam—the partridge family and caterpillars, coyotes and rabbits, poison ivy and mosquitoes. Our waters and blood, skin and air have mingled for weeks as we all breathe in the same tides and moon rays. And their howls traveled deep into my bones where my memories mingle with those of my ancestors, and we revel together in the splendor of summers for centuries.

One day the sea may reclaim this strip of land, but its summer magic is alive inside of me. Always. ☼

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