



Wellfleet

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LAST NIGHT I DREAMED I went to Wellfleet again. In my dream, I pull into the parking lot at Newcomb Hollow Beach, which sits atop a solidified sand dune. I can't see the ocean yet, but I can smell its brine in the air; I can hear the waves rush boldly in, then slide gently back out to sea. I make my way from the car, my steps tentative because the dune is so steep that, until I get my first glimpse of the beach, I fear I will drop off into space when I come to the edge. When the sand and the water come into view, I gasp—just as thrilled as I was the first time I saw this breathtaking stretch of beach far below, the ebb and flow of the great Atlantic washing its shore. This is what brought me back all those years. This is what I dream about now. If Aladdin's genie granted me just one wish to go back in time, this is where I would go.

Wellfleet is a laid-back beach town on Cape Cod, just south of the land's end that is Provincetown and far from the madding crowds of Hyannis. Its casual lifestyle is a

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perfect fit for those who come to relax and revive in the sea and sand. We vacationed there when our children were at an age when you wish time would stand still and they would always be as safe and happy as they were then. Maybe that's the reason I yearn to be there again. We were at a good time in our lives, our cocoon of safety not yet threatened by the outside world.

To get to the beach, we had to scramble down the dune, one arm loaded with chairs and towels, the other grasping the hand of a toddler. If I could go back today, I probably would no longer be able to descend

that dune, and I know for certain that I could not make the steep climb back up. But I dream of the times I could, the times when we spread our blanket in the sand and secured its corners against the ocean's breeze with the sneakers we had kicked off; when the children helped unfold our chairs and pop open the umbrella for Dad, no sun worshiper he, then scoured the shore for treasures that had washed in with the tide.

"Look, Mommy," five-year-old Amy says, showing me a shell with jewellike sparkles on it. "I found a magic shell. I'll take it home." She drops it into the pail we brought for such finds.

Bobby, three, is more likely to carry home the sun-bleached shell of a sand crab, which I will meet again snuggled into his sock drawer on a bleak winter day and sigh with yearning for the beach it once crawled on. I sit at water's edge, taking deep breaths of the exhilarating air and exhaling my anxieties as my husband and children run along the edge of a dune, flying their kites above me.

On the way home from the beach, we stop at the Lobster Hut, a seafood shack at Wellfleet Harbor, home to a picturesque fleet of fishing boats where the day's catch is sold to vacationers waiting on the docks for their ship to come in. I am introduced to the lobster roll here, another enduring love I owe to Wellfleet. Glistening chunks of lobster bathed in butter are stuffed into a traditional New England roll that's been split open on top and grilled. We line up at an outside window and place our order, adding corn-on-the-cob to the rolls—and a hot dog, always a hot dog for Amy. We take our seats inside at one of the long community tables covered in red and white plastic and wait for our number to be called. I've had lobster rolls in many places since then, but none compare with those I had in Wellfleet, eaten in a still-wet bathing suit and bare feet.

When the children were grown, my husband and I continued to go to Wellfleet, sometimes just for a

weekend in the fall, by then our favorite season on the Cape. The summer vacationers were gone; the beach was ours for solitary walks along the shore, between breaking waves on one side and soaring sand dunes on the other. Whenever we returned, whether it was months or years between visits, the beach, the ocean, the dunes were in place, just as they were when I first fell in love with them. I am a strong believer in returning to the places I love.

One fall, the day before we were to drive to Massachusetts, a hurricane alert for the eastern seaboard predicted the coming storm would be one of the worst in years. The New England beach towns were directly in its path. We decided to go in spite of the warnings. When we reached our inn, we found the windows boarded. The outdoor furniture was being dragged into the barn by wind-beaten staff. The maples that lined the path to the door shuddered, their leaves, just yesterday the vibrant yellow of the season, curled inward.

"Good to have you back," the desk clerk greeted us. "The worst of the storm is still ahead. Just stay away from the beach and you'll be safe."

We dropped our bags in our room and headed for the beach. We were relieved to see a few cars in the parking area when we arrived; we weren't the only ones throwing caution to the hurricane winds. The

ocean's roar was threatening. We pushed open the doors of our car and moved slowly toward the edge of the dune, fighting a fierce wind that pushed us back. Clinging to each other, we made our descent to the beach and joined the others who had ignored all warnings to have this once-in-a-lifetime experience. I had never been at the mercy of an ocean so angry, never been tossed by a wind so violent. It seemed that both wind and water were testing their might and our resolve. But we stood firm at the shoreline—our band of adventurous strangers, feet dug deep in the sand, arms tightly entwined—and held our ground. Finally, spent, we climbed the dune back to safety.

We ate chili by candlelight at the inn that night. It was the only item on the menu, cooked before the storm knocked out the utilities. It was a night we would always remember—the hot chili, the cozy glow, the pride we felt in having defied Nature's wrath and survived.

I dream of being on Cape Cod again, though I know I never will be. I now live thousands of miles away from this place I love. I am no longer a young wife, a young mother. I am no longer young. There is much to enjoy in my life here and now, and I am content. But in my dreams, I walk the beach at Wellfleet again. ●



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