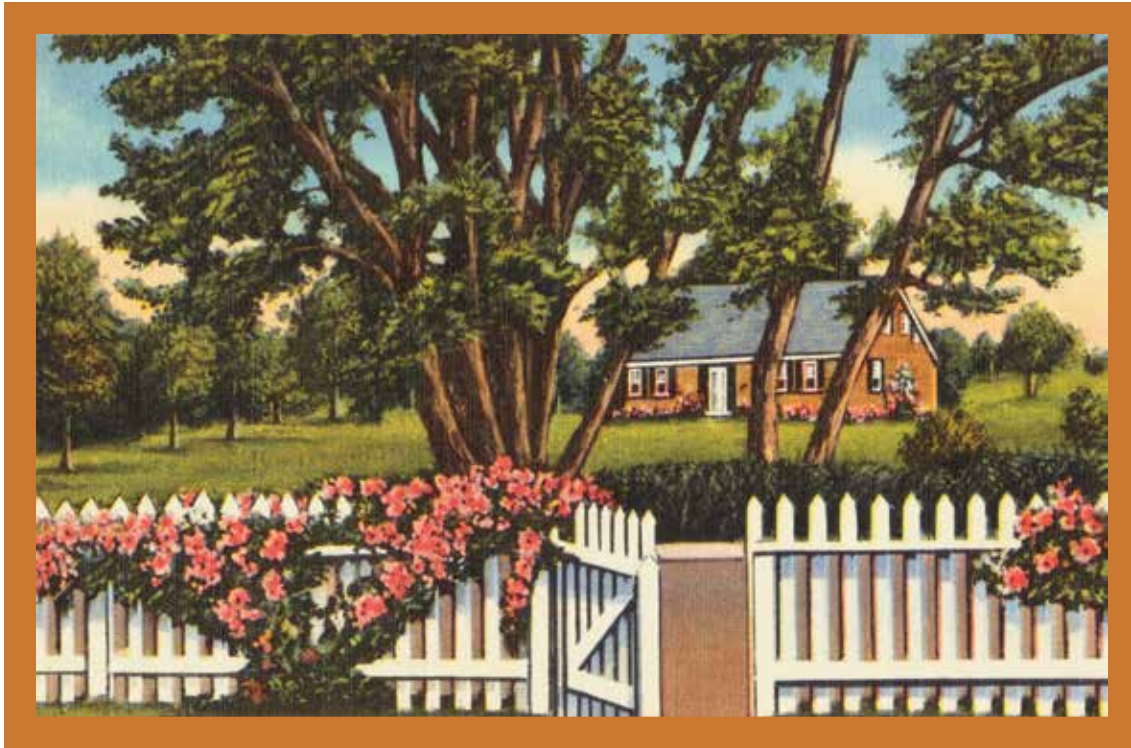


Familiar Shores

Grace Flaherty



A Beauty Spot, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1930–1945

“**T**HANK YOU FOR TODAY! Have a great vacation!” my head teacher jokes as I sling my tote over my shoulder and drag my feet across the alphabet carpet towards the door. Usually, she loves to debrief once the kids leave, but of course, not today.

“Thank you” is all I can muster before walking out the doorway. I’ve made it to a foot from my white Toyota

Venza in the lot when anxiety starts to swirl in my stomach. I reach forward and grasp the handle of the driver’s side door, the quick chirp of the locks prompting me to tug it open. Sliding into the leather seat blanketed from the sun with a towel, I just sit for a minute before starting the ignition and beginning to mentally map out my ride. If I stick to the slow lane, maybe exaggerate the traffic, I could stretch

the drive long enough to gain an extra thirty minutes of sanity.

Once I’ve plugged in directions to South Village Road, I cross the seatbelt over and click it into the slot resting by my hip. I flick on my blinker and take a right out of the parking lot. Traveling only about a half mile down the road, the dead-end signs guarding both sides of the road will force me to make another right turn. Ironical, I think. I may not have gone down that dead end, but I’d be arriving at another in no time.

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Our week in the Cape was bigger than Christmas. In the days leading up to our departure, the kitchen table was covered with cases of Coors Light, variety packs of FritoLay chips, and any sandy beach cooler found in our basement. My younger brother, rattled with excitement to see our cousins, had my mom cursing his name around the house. She’d start chanting his punishments for the vacation we hadn’t even left for yet, he’d begin to cry, and I’d laugh, knowing that her first glass of wine on the beach would wipe his slate clean in an instant.

My dad would be stationed away from the chaos in our driveway, patching holes in “Fun Island” through the fiery July heat. It was an annual effort to restore that raft, yet the scorching pavement probably melted the tape as he sat there, sweat

dripping down his long nose, trying to fix it. “Fun Island” was his number one complaint for years despite his efforts to revive the plasticized memories that came with it.

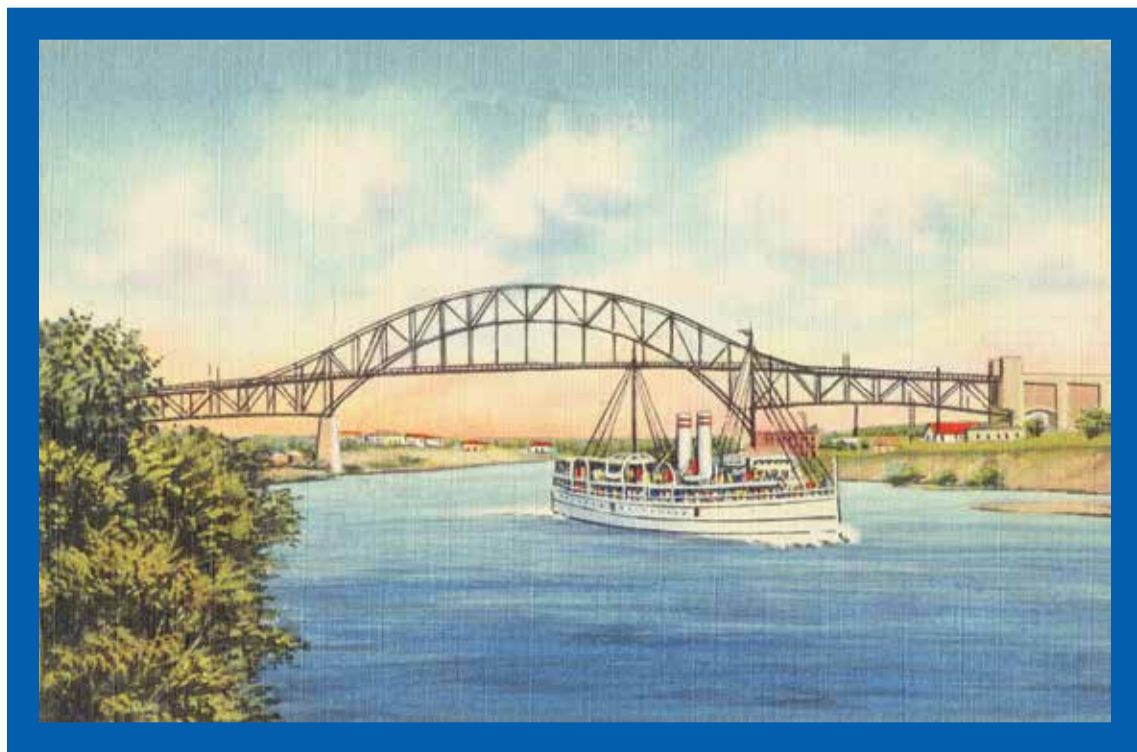
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Guilt washes over me as I merge onto the highway and adjust my grip on the steering wheel. There was once a time when my brother, my parents, and I shoved ourselves—and our suitcases—all together in a Toyota Sienna that gave out years ago now. I’d be a passenger in the back seat, a portable DVD player resting on my sunscreen-covered legs and the glow of Disney Channel reflected in my eyes.

I know I’m leaving the town I work in and nearing my hometown when the haze of trees gives way to a cluster of buildings in an outdoor shopping area. The familiar sight nearly tempts me to veer off the exit, driving straight to the comfort of my own bedroom—but I don’t. Instead, my mother’s voice echoes in my mind, a phrase I’ve heard more often with age: *Family is not a choice, Grace.*

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Shaking my head, I think back to Uncle Jeff singing along to Morrissey’s “Every Day Is Like Sunday.” I remember laughing uncontrollably every time he yelled at us to shovel another bite of macaroni into our mouths before the next round of the chorus.



New Sagamore Bridge, Cape Cod Canal, Massachusetts, 1930–1945

As we got older and finishing three big bites felt less like a chore and more like a treat, brunch was more of a ritual than the beach was on this vacation. Depending on the day, either Uncle Charlie or Dad would cook a feast of pancakes for us. Uncle Jeff never joined the cooking rotation, but that was okay for a while. Uncle Jeff always did his part, guiding us through years of Morrissey show productions as we ate. But when conservative politics and age pushed Jeff into a colder mindset, the affectionate uncle I once knew seemed to have dissipated completely. A lively show choir of kids singing with their dads and uncles quickly dwindled to a few teenagers sitting around Jeff,

who gnawed on breakfast meat while tossing out slurs like “faggot.”

My attention drifts to a somber place and so does the car. A truck horn blares me back to reality, and I jerk the wheel to the right, sliding back into the lane I’m supposed to be in. As I look up to the horizon, the man in the passenger seat rolls down his window and sticks his middle finger out at me.

“Yeah, okay! Fuck you too,” I yell to nobody but myself with one hand tossed in the air. My anger simmers and the signs overhead start to multiply, when I realize the Sagamore Bridge is about to peek out from the horizon. I drive about another mile down the road, and



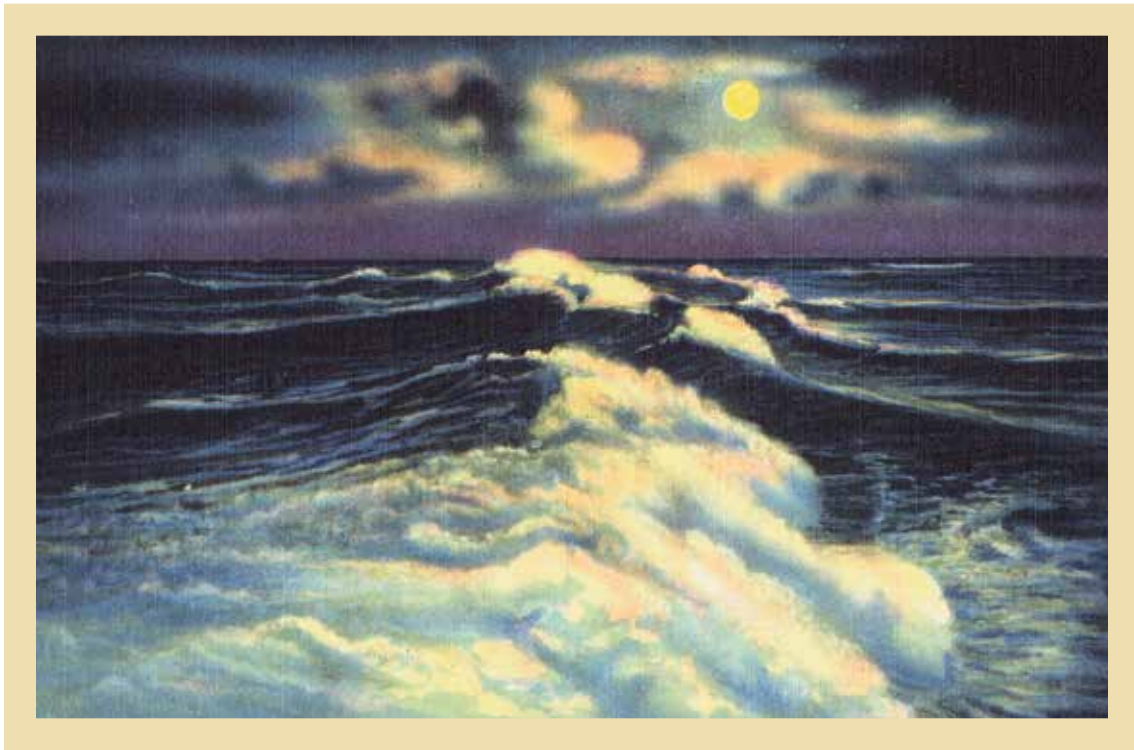
Bathing Beach, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1930–1945

the Welcome to Cape Cod sign sends me into a momentary panic.

As I approach the bridge, I bolt past a line of yellow guard rails funneling traffic into two narrowed lanes. Two stone pillars tower over the lanes of cars, lighting the bridge at night. Once I pass them, the outer stone barrier gives way to white metal fencing. The canal emerges into view, the sunlight dancing on its sapphire-blue waves. Metal beams form a lattice above me, rising higher and higher until the bridge’s arch swoops back down. After the arch fades, the white fencing continues until two more stone pillars interrupt the line. Stone walls guide me the rest of the way,

until I ease back down and spot the Market Basket Plaza I’ve stopped at many times before.

I get off the exit and travel down the road for less than a mile before entering the plaza. Putting the car into park after pulling in, I hop out of the car, lock my doors, and slam the door with the keys in my hand. I’d rather save my words for when I’ll need them most—thirty minutes from now—so I brush past the automatic doors and go straight to the self-checkout. I quickly grab a bag of Doritos off the shelf and am about to go wait my turn in line when the array of Trident gums catches my eye. Normally, I’d go for the classic mint bliss flavor, but when I draw a



Breaking Waves in the Moonlight, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1930–1945

closer look, I immediately reach for the cinnamon. After I contribute my five-dollar bill to the checkout machine, I scurry back to my car in the parking lot and get ready to resume my ride with a snack to eat. The Doritos bag squeaks when I tear it open, and I'm about to pick up a chip when I stop and decide to try my gum first, knowing exactly how I'm going to like it. I peel off the plastic coating on the package, slide out a single piece, and unravel the parchmentlike wrapper before popping it into my mouth.

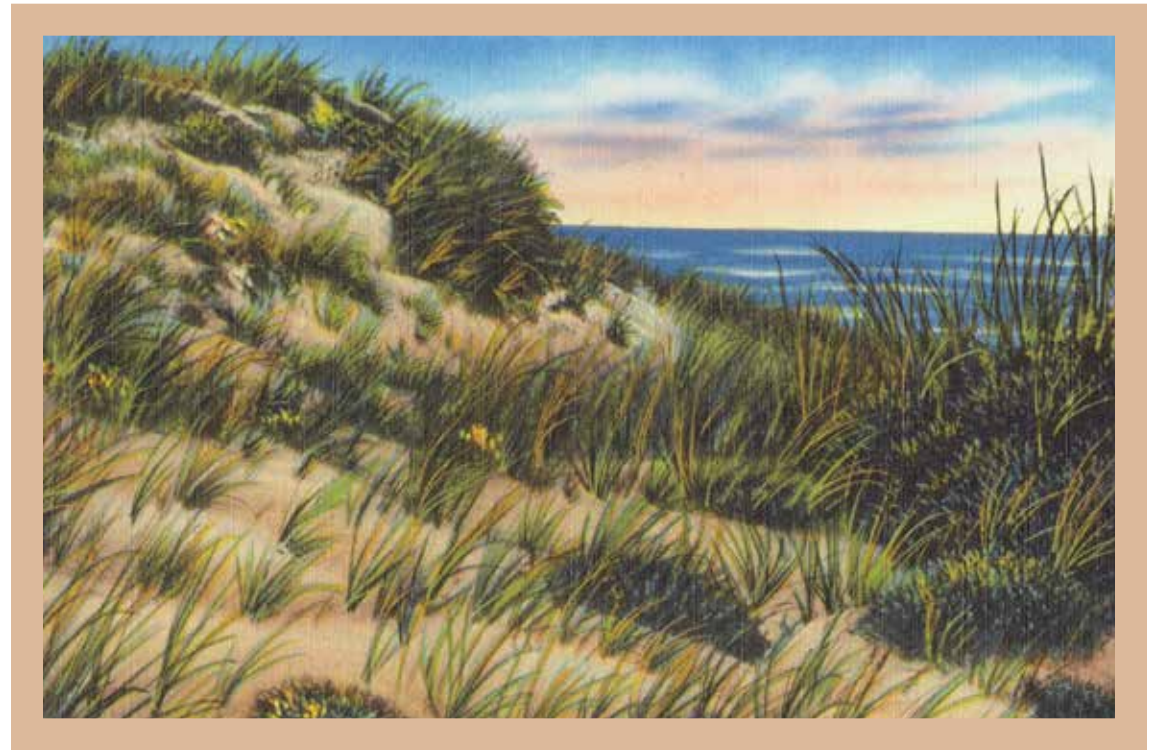
Disgusting. I spit it out almost immediately, sour my face, and chase it with a quick Dorito to have a little mercy on my tastebuds. I never

understood why Auntie Katie used to love her cinnamon gum so much. She always had a pack in her car, and I remember the first time she let me try it was on this very vacation, maybe ten or eleven years ago.



The walk to the beach from the house we stay in is less than half a mile, but it used to be routine to hitch a ride in Auntie Katie's car when she was the only one to agree to pay for a parking space.

Not only was Katie's car perfectly neat with a leathered interior, but she had a group of best friends that would leave their families to travel and follow



Beach Grasses, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1930–1945

P!nk on tour whenever and wherever she was playing at the time. For years, as long as Katie was there, our vacation house was filled with reruns of *Grease*, hot-pink painted nails, and nightly dance parties to the best female rage bangers of the 2000s.



I glance back over at the cinnamon gum that's sitting in the cup holder beside me. It's a shame that died when she did.

I turn the car back on, cross the seatbelt over my chest, and quit pondering so that I don't cry. Pulling out of the parking space and then the lot, I follow the main road to get back

on the highway. Trailing a few more exits in the speed lane, the number seventy-five plastered on a green sign warns me it's almost time to face my family. I flick on my right blinker, switch lanes, and then glide down the exit ramp in a swifter motion than I probably should have. Flying past a CITGO gas station, my brain signals that Marshall's is next on the drive by. I think about how nice it would be to stop for a quick retail therapy session, but I skip it today, knowing I'll need it another day this week. The green hue of the beach grass is muted under the overcast sky and the neutrality of the shingled houses. If you live in New England, you love the Cape. But

there are much better local places to vacation. Places where Marshall's isn't considered a haven.

I cross over the Bass River bridge and the sea stench swarms the already salty air, turning my nose up. Once the funkiness of the smell shifts into a scent of familiarity, I inhale the lingering trace of sun-bleached seaweed. As I keep driving down the road, savory aromas replace the beach odor. A blue hut with green plastic palm trees on either side of the door sits near a sign that reads: Paradise Pizza & Liquor Store.

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We've bought pizza from this shop at least twice a week on every annual trip. Usually, we'd call it in around 7:30, while still stationed on the beach in our swimsuits. By 9:00, depending on who won the race to the showers, we'd be dry and eating straight from the box. A speaker blared soundtracks from *The Greatest Showman* or *Oklahoma!*, the music harmonizing with our laughter and conversations. And later, a deck of cards would appear, and we'd gather to gamble, our last giggles of the night reserved for playful bluffs and bragging rights.

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"Continue onto Lower County Road for 0.6 miles," Siri barks. The words flip a switch in my brain, and barely a minute later, I see it—the crosswalk connecting the roads. I begin counting the times my sandy feet scrambled across those white lines. The walk to the beach felt miles too long as a kid, but now it always feels miles too short.

Glancing in my rearview mirror and seeing no one behind me, I slow down, creeping five in a fifteen. My heart sinks as I realize I'm almost out of road before the turn. I've been zoned out to the playlist on shuffle for the whole ride, but the sound of P!nk's "Family Portrait" sparks a solace in me from through the speakers.

I flick on my left blinker, swallowing my anxieties as I turn and see it looming ahead: a black "83" against a backslash of chipped white paint and a staircase to the deck that's as precarious as it looks. Against my will, I toss the blinker lever down and hear the crunch of my tires over the sea-shelled driveway.

Maybe one day I'll be free, I think.
Just not this year. ✱



Bath Houses and Beach at Craigville, Cape Cod, Massachusetts, 1930-1945