

First and Lasting Love

Life Experience

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I fell head-over-heels in love the summer I was thirteen. One short week in a magical environment was all it took to be in love with a narrow stretch of land called the Outer Banks. The salt water, sunshine, and sandy beach helped me shake off unpleasant memories of the previous school year.

Our family had moved in the middle of the year from New Concord, Ohio, to Lynchburg, Virginia. Leaving close friends was difficult enough, but being the new kid in sixth grade was harder than I expected. Lynchburg was a bastion of Southern heritage, and I was labeled on the first day in my new school as a Yankee outsider. The memory of mean classmates diminished once I saw the Atlantic Ocean.

I saw it for the first time when I arrived at a small oceanfront cottage in Kitty Hawk. Dad's co-worker owned the cottage and charged a modest weekly fee to friends when his family wasn't using it. The day after Dad paid the week's rent and received the key, we were on our way. My anticipation of the upcoming adventure made our 1962 road trip to the Outer Banks seem to take forever.

Dad drove us east from Lynchburg on Rt. 460 through many small towns including Crewe, Blackstone, and Windsor. Close to Suffolk, we veered off 460 onto roads that meandered through the Dismal Swamp, Elizabeth City, and finally reached Rt.158 to take us directly to our destination.

In those days there were only a few places to stop along the way. The Virginia Diner in Wakefield was a bright spot along our route. It marked the halfway point in

the trip and offered country ham biscuits and peanuts. Another convenient stop was a roadside store/restaurant on our path through the swamp. After six-plus hours, we reached the two-lane bridge connecting the mainland to the Outer Banks.

The Wright Memorial Bridge ushered me into an unknown world of sand and water. Through the open car windows I heard insistent shrieks of seagulls and breathed in aromas of salt air, fish, and car fumes. I delighted in the gulls gliding and swooping down toward the bridge as if they were kites attached to the railings.

After crossing into Kitty Hawk, Dad continued driving toward the ocean to meet Rt. 12 running parallel to the beach. He turned south, and I saw on our left the beach and a vast body of water. Small cottages lined both sides of the narrow road. After a few miles, we reached a gray-shingled cottage. Dad pulled into the short sand-covered driveway and parked with our car bumper barely off the road.

My sister and I jumped out of the car and ran along the wooden walkway to the ocean side of the modest bungalow. We scurried up the four steps to the screened-in porch that wrapped around to its south side. There we found a makeshift room barely larger than the single bed it contained. She and I immediately started squabbling over which one of us would have the privilege of sleeping in the open-air space. As the oldest, I won, at least for the first night. We continued to explore the rest of the cottage.

The entrance door opened from the east side of the porch into a small living/dining room. The interior was a match for the worn exterior. A narrow kitchen and a bedroom were at the center of the home with a bathroom and a smaller

bedroom at the back, closest to the road. The old vinyl floor was peeling up at the seams. The living room's sagging sofa and upholstered chair were covered in faded, threadbare fabrics. They were arranged in front of a cabinet-style television. The kitchen appliances had spots of rust and a few dents. There was no air conditioning. We discovered that TV and radio signals were weak to non-existent. The homely cottage was perfect for a carefree week of fresh air and sunshine.

From the front porch, I could see sand stretching down to the water. Close to the cottage was an uneven boundary of tangled black grass, fishing line, and bits of trash I soon learned marked the highest tide of the day. The ocean welcomed me with sparkling blue-green color and lazy waves meeting the shore. I couldn't wait to change into my bathing suit.

Standing in water no higher than my ankles, I felt a back and forth tugging of the relentless tide that threatened my balance. Sand, shells, and pebbles swirled around my feet. I was mesmerized by the rhythmic whooshing in and out of the waves. When the waves receded, tiny creatures quickly dug into the wet sand leaving small holes. Smooth pebbles, bits of seashells, small pieces of tumbled glass, and ocean detritus were left behind. Long-legged sandpipers played a game of gathering bits of food from the wet sand and trying to outrun incoming waves. Seagulls flew around looking for fish and begging for crumbs. They frequently tussled with each other over a tasty dead fish washed up on the sand. There was no end to the interesting sights.

During the week, oceangoing vessels were sometimes visible on the horizon, and small fishing vessels rode by closer to the shore. Dolphins, traveling the coastal waters, could be seen surfing and playing in the waves.

I spent most daylight hours on the beach gathering whatever treasures I could find. The best were at the tide lines and in the water of the outgoing waves. I found attached pairs of coquina and mussel shells. Chipped scallop shells were plentiful. Devil's purses and horseshoe crab exoskeletons were dotted here and there. My favorite prizes the first summer were intact shells with live creatures inside. But an increasingly unpleasant smell on the trip home cured me of collecting those.

Evening hours were spent eating fresh seafood at local restaurants, lounging on the screened-in porch or chasing ghost crabs into their holes. My parents seemed to relish the simplicity of our seaside stay and to be as enchanted as I was with the surroundings.

Mom and Dad had always lived inland and were unfamiliar with the ways of the ocean. My sister and I were only novice swimmers. Dad didn't swim and was fearful of us going too far out into the waves. During all my visits, I never swam out to stand on sandbars or learned to body surf. Calm waters barely to my knees were sufficient to keep me entertained.

I admired surfers who waited on the sandbar in front of the cottage for good waves to come along. My family stayed in the same location so many years that my sister and I began to consider the beach front as ours alone. There were no adjacent beach cottages and we rarely saw beach walkers. When surfers occasionally came to

shore we considered them to be trespassers. It was fun to watch them on the water, but we didn't want them on 'our' sand. Thankfully, they usually stayed in the water when we were on the beach. A few times our family left the cottage to shop, eat, or see area attractions.

Our activities that first year became the basis for a must-do list on our yearly visits. This included shopping at Winks, a small grocery and beach store in Kitty Hawk. We visited Newman's Shell Shop in Nags Head and the nearby drugstore. We walked on the huge sand dune called Jockey's Ridge, across from the beach in Nags Head, and enjoyed Dowdy Amusement Park. We ate at Fisherman's Wharf in Wanchese, browsed the Christmas Shop in Manteo, and walked on Avalon pier to check out the daily fish catch. Most exciting, though, were the hours spent investigating sea and sand.

The Outer Banks claimed my heart in 1962. Watching the ocean with its gliding sea gulls and wave-riding dolphins gave me a sense of freedom I hadn't felt at home or school. That first visit was a balm that soothed the wounds from trying to fit into a new community in Virginia.

I didn't want the vacation to end, but knew there would be a return visit. In the coming years there were many. I introduced the Outer Banks to my first husband and our sons, who appreciated it as much as I did. Through decades of vacations, the Outer Banks remained my special love and became my permanent home in 1993.