
C HANGING TIDES

SYDNEY SHUGRUE

2005

Every summer since I was born, my family and I have spent a few weeks during the summer at my grandparents' house in Avalon, New Jersey. It never truly feels like summer until we arrive down the shore and I feel the salty breeze rustle my hair. This summer is no different, and the moment we arrive I rush up the stairs and into the bedroom, quickly throwing on my bathing suit. I run back outside where my mother spends 10 minutes covering every inch of my body with sunscreen. After she has completed her thorough job, my cousins and I hop on our bikes and speed down the street to the sandy path that will lead us to the promised land: the beach.

After we drop our bikes, we carefully select the perfect spot on the beach: not too far back, but not too close to the ocean that our things will get wet during high tide. We then take off towards the water, making a game out of who will dive into the freezing ocean first. After we are all completely soaked and have adjusted to the cold water, my grandpa decides to join us in the ocean. He slowly wades in, attempting to jump over the waves pretending they are monsters that will eat his feet. We all burst into laughter and run back to the shore to join him in his game. Once we have successfully avoided all the monsters, we float out a bit deeper, my grandpa keeping a constant eye on us. While my cousins and brother body surf the waves, I stand with my grandpa. I watch him as the warm sun reflects off the blue ocean, illuminating his face. He looks so young, energy and life glistening in his eyes. When he sees me looking at him, he grabs a piece of seaweed from the ocean and pretends to eat it.

"It is full of protein and super delicious! Here, you should try a piece!" my grandpa says, laughing and hand-

ing me another piece of seaweed.

I laugh the way most children do, a laugh that comes from deep down, a laugh so hard it makes my stomach hurt. Regardless, I continue to laugh, smiling up at my grandfather.

2010

Another year, another summer down at the shore. Since we are older now, we aren't spending as many weeks at my grandparents' house, but I am happy with any amount of time I can get in my favorite place on earth. We pull up into the driveway, the rocks crunching underneath our tires. My grandma opens the door and stands on the landing, smiling down at us as we hop out of the car. As I always do, I rush up the stairs and into the house, stopping to take in the smell of fresh linen and lavender. Instead of heading straight to the beach, I make my way upstairs to say hello to my grandpa. He sits in his old grey reclining chair, watching golf on the television. He doesn't hear me come up the stairs, and he only notices me after I have called for him a third time. I bend down and give him a hug and a kiss on the cheek. He is thinner than the last time I saw him and his face is more wrinkled. I ask him if he is going to come to the beach with us, and he says yes.

After an hour, I have fully unpacked all my summer clothes and have put on my new bathing suit. This time I have put on my own sunscreen, using quite a bit less than my mother would like; that way I can get a good tan. I run upstairs to see if my grandpa is ready to go.

"Hey grandpa, are you ready?"

"Ready for what?" He asks, looking puzzled.

"Ready to go to the beach, remember? You said you were going to come with,"

"Oh, okay," he replies, less enthusiastically.

He then goes to stand up, bracing his arms on the sides of the chair to push himself up. The first time he tries to stand, his arms give out and he plops back down into his chair. The second time, he is able to get up, but it takes a bit more effort. After he has changed, we make our way to the beach, I on my bike, and my grandpa being driven to the entrance by my grandma. We finally arrive on the warm sand, seashells poking up here and there. My grandpa sets up his chair while I throw my things on the ground and prepare to take off towards the ocean. I wait for my grandpa to join, but when I look back, he has sat down in his chair and pulled out a newspaper.

2015

This year we only get to spend one week down at the shore because my grandparents have decided to start renting the beach house. It makes sense they would want to make some money off of the house, but it still makes me sad that I only get to spend one week in Avalon. We arrive at the house and neither of my grandparents come out to greet us. Instead, they only know we have arrived when we walk up the stairs and into the living room. Both my grandparents are seated in their respective chairs, golf playing softly in the background. My grandpa has thinned out yet again and looks as though he is 85, not 75. I give him a quick kiss on the cheek, and he shakily lifts his arms to give me a soft hug. He goes to stand out of his chair to hug my mother, his daughter, putting his hands on the chair's arms and trying to push himself up. He falls back into his chair, and when he tries a second time, he is still unable to get up.

"Here grandpa, let me help you, these chairs can be difficult to get out of," I say, looping my arm underneath his and slowly pulling him up.

He mumbles a thank you and shuffles over to give my mom a hug and kiss on the cheek. I know there is no way he can get to the beach anymore, let alone walk on the unstable sand, so I go downstairs, put my bathing suit on, and head to the beach alone.

Dinner time rolls around and we all gather at the table to eat. My cousin Ryan, being a pain as usual, decides it would be funny to drink from his glass by tipping it sideways into his mouth. My cousins and I think it is hilarious, and my aunt rolls her eyes. My grandpa, however, is not amused. Out of nowhere, he slams his fist onto the table and says,

"Stop that right now. This is my house and I will not have you behaving that way."

This is the first time I have ever really heard my grandfather yell. When I look at him, his face is red and his hands are quivering. My aunt responds by shouting back at him, and the evening descends into harsh words and more yelling. I excuse myself from the table and make my way to my mom's room, where I find her sitting on the edge of her bed, with tears in her eyes.

"He never used to be like that" she says, wiping away a tear. I pull her into a hug, and we both try to ignore the commotion upstairs.

2018

We are going to the shore again this year, perhaps the last time we will be here for a while. It is harder to make time to go to Avalon during the summer between all our jobs and school. This year we arrive before my grandparents do, so we get the house to ourselves for a little while. I find myself being happy that we have some time in the house before my grandparents get here, because once they arrive it will be a lot more stressful.

Eventually, my grandparents arrive at the house and my brother and I help carry their luggage into the house. We all make our way upstairs, my grandpa being the last one to come up. On the last step, he loses his footing and falls, making a hard thud on the hardwood floor. My brother runs over and helps lift my grandpa to his feet. He quietly thanks my brother, and then shuffles over to his chair as if nothing happened. My mother and grandmother leave the room, probably going to talk about how my grandpa needs more help than my grandma can provide. My brother retreats downstairs, probably to go play video games. I want to follow

him, because I no longer know what to talk to my grandpa about. Most of the stories he tells are figments of his imagination, remnants of a life he wishes he had. We sit in silence for a few minutes until my grandpa finally says,

“So, when am I going to get to see my grandkids again?”

“Which grandkids?” I ask.

“Your children,” he says, looking puzzled.

“Grandpa, I am Sydney, your granddaughter. My mom

is your daughter, Liz, remember?”

“Oh, right,” he says, and turns his gaze back towards to window.

I look at him, sitting in his chair, the warm outside light highlighting his frail body. His face is wrinkled and he looks tired and worn down by life. His hands rest in his lap, and I can see them shaking. After a little while, he turns his face and looks at me. His eyes are empty and lack the light that used to shine within. He turns his attention back to the golf, and I close my eyes, trying to remember how his smile could once light up an entire room.

A T HOME

She died peacefully at home. These are words we use so often when talking about death. They offer comfort, something positive to lean into when the pain is immediate and the loss incomprehensible. To know that our loved one was at home, surrounded by the familiar smell their own room, in their favorite pajamas, and in the company of those they held closest provides a small, yet anchoring, sense of peace as we face the challenge of saying a final good-bye.

When a brain tumor began bleeding uncontrollably, there was only one thing remaining to do: to go home. My mom's journey with cancer was beginning to seem hopeful. While we knew that there was no cure for advanced melanoma, a new treatment promised more time. She was walking and reading again, and plans for the holidays and family vacations replaced conversations about infusions and physical therapy. It seemed like we were just learning how to live again, despite terminal illness. But the journey came to a halt a mere four months after her diagnosis. A headache sent her to the hospital, where scans revealed the problematic bleeding. Over the next 24 hours, her responsiveness diminished rapidly. By the time I got off the plane and to the hospital, she could no longer talk or open her eyes. Arm raises turned to hand squeezes, then small muscle twitches, then nothing.

The decision was obvious. We knew what she wanted. There would be no ventilators or feeding tubes. No futile efforts of emergency surgery or full-brain radiation. After the obligatory meeting with the on-call physician and social worker in the Oncology ICU, the paper-work was finalized and hospice care was arranged. When my dad leaned over and whispered in her ear, “Sweetie, I'm taking you home,” she lifted her arm for a final time to hug him around the neck. Our decision was affirmed and we knew

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it was time. Led by a medical transport van, we all headed home.

Nobody ever tells you what exactly is required to die peacefully at home. There was no warning that a hospital bed may not fit through the interior doorways of our house, or that the hospice nurse would only visit once a day. I had no idea how difficult it would be to administer medicine to someone who was unable to swallow or that a two-hour medication schedule meant I would not sleep for days.

When we arrived home, the transport service situated my mother while I met with the hospice nurse assigned to oversee my mom's care. In 20 minutes, I received a crash-course in nursing. She explained the uses of and dosages of 13 different medications that I was to administer as needed and made me acutely aware that any confusion or mistake could lead to a lethal dose. My only objective was to minimize any pain. But how would I know if she was in pain? There were no words, no movements, no hints. When I asked, the nurse ominously raised an eyebrow and said, “You'll know.”

I wanted to run. I had walked through the necessary motions and held it together all day, but this was too much. I frantically tried to absorb every word the nurse said, but the sudden understanding that my family would never look the same again devoured my processing capabilities. She threw out a cloud of cold, clinical symptoms. Terminal fever. Terminal agitation. Dyspnea. Skin mottling. My throat tightened in a mix of anger and panic. To her, the woman in the next room was one of many patients. Another person of no consequence that she was to watch die over the next few days. But that was my mother. I wanted the nurse out of our home immediately but was also completely terrified for the moment she would leave.