

Sand and Salt Water

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BLUE-GREEN, white-capped ocean stretched to meet the horizon. The wind dried my lips; and coarse, golden sand burned my bare feet. “I must remember this exactly as it is—the taste of salt, the color of the sky—the richness of it, the haze where it meets the ocean,” I thought. “This last swim must be perfect.”

I stood still, letting the sun burn hot across my shoulders—the warmth was good. Slowly I relaxed. Perhaps I could forget for a little while that this was a goodbye; everything could be just as it should. I walked into the surf and sat down. The waves pounded my legs and ate away the sand beneath them. Absently I paddled my hands against the wet sand and listened to the sigh of each wave as it slid back into the blue-green.

Almost a mile away, the sand bar glistened, a pale streak in the dark water. Unconsciously, I planned my two hours; two hours that had to be right for memory. I would swim out to the bar and let the tide bring me back to shore—it would be coming in fast by then. A sand flea wriggled out of my fingers, a large piece of yellow sea-weed clung to my toes and tickled—I laughed.

I got up, pulled off my sweat shirt, and threw it on the sand. Leaping through the surf, I let waves trip me and floundered in their grasp. My skin tingled as I splashed in the cool water. A

huge breaker ducked me and as I sank, I felt my hair streaming across my back—felt every muscle moving relaxed against the soft resistance of the green water. Pushing to the surface, I swam evenly and straight toward the bar, catching each breath with a laugh, grinning to myself, as my arms and legs moved of their own accord to pull my body farther. The sun sent its beams skipping before me as it lowered itself inch by inch toward the west.

Rolling waves ducked me. I gulped air and swam on the bottom. As my eyes became used to the sting of salt water, I watched the shifting sand below. A small fish darted by, gazing at me with questioning eyes, and once, a Man-of-War, floating proudly, in full blue sail, reached down at me with his thread-like stingers. I swam deeper and was not stung. My lungs were burning and I swallowed a mouthful of pale, salt water as I pushed to the surface for air.

Half floating in the shoulder deep water, I walked up the slanting embankment into the shallows. I sat on top of the bar—low breakers slapped my back and the wind whipped my wet hair against my face. I was tired and gasping. Every muscle had wilted and the firm slope of the sand bar beneath my body was comforting.

On the crest of a wave, I floated off the bar into deep water again. My body was limp and resting; my mind was racing with the wind. As I looked at the sun's slanting patterns on the crest of each wave, my heart pounded in premature homesickness. "This is the last—this soft coolness of green velvet against my body—this relaxation to the will of the sea. I must remember it this way—I must not forget."

The tide had turned and was coming in fast. As I floated it carried me closer and closer to the shore. Each wave held me on its crest, and finally one tossed me high on the hot sand. I lay and looked about me. Already the sand bar was shifting—tomorrow the tide would pile it farther out. The sun was tipping palms along the shore with green-gold, and the shore grass cast distorted shadows across the dry sand.

It was a large part of my life that I did not want to leave. A strange stillness descended upon the laughing surf, the rustling palms softened their chatter to sighs. Quietly I cried.