

Fiction By Cari Scribner

THE PLACE WHERE LOW TIDE MEETS THE SKY

We check the tide chart in the tourist's brochure with lobsters on the cover. It's the first thing we do when we get to Maine after the terrible ten-hour drive during which the children fidget, fight and complain.

There is a rest stop at the 7-hour mark with non-scary bathrooms and a vending machine with blue Gatorade. A few years back, they put up a funny sign showing a man bending sideways, with the message: "Stretching Feels Good." Our kids, Kate, Henry and James, took turns waving their arms and moving their shoulders up and down in front of the sign while we took pics for Facebook.

We arrive at last to memorize the schedule for high and low tides, the epicenter of our 6-day vacation. Later, we will read the weather forecasts, scan the fried clam dinner specials, study the map of the trail for bike rentals we never find time to do.

We don't visit the Maritime Museum or the award-winning aquarium or day trip to see the lighthouses and eat chowder. We spend every day at the beach. The children, all three of them, have to be there at low tide. They feel very tall as they wade out past the small spitting waves, to a place that almost feels like the spot where the water meets the sky. Their father will warn them about the sudden drop-off in the sand beneath their feet as they wade out at low tide. They inch like snails, feeling with their toes for the place where the sand sinks away.

We stake our claim to a square of sand delineated by our blanket, held down at the corners with pails and shovels and our flip-flops. Their father digs a deep hole for the umbrella with the Pepsi logo, then a smaller hole for the purple pinwheel Kate loves to watch spin. I pack a Styrofoam

cooler with too much ice and juice boxes and a jar of peanut butter and Ritz crackers and slices of cheese that will become mushy despite the abundant ice.

Their father and I will have the same discussion about how often to re-apply sunscreen. I will quote new research stats on melanoma. He will ignore my advice and, by evening, when the seagulls circle and dive, he will have blisteringly red shoulders and calves. The kids stay blessedly burn-free, thanks to SPF100, re-applied at 3 p.m.

When the children were little, we carted along portable playpens, jars of strained peaches, baby sunglasses, wipes, teething rings. We chased them when they began to crawl and toddle, took turns holding them in the water while they kicked at us with chubby legs. James, our youngest, was a runner. He would take off down the beach so fast only Kate, with her gazelle-like long legs, stood a chance of catching him. Each of them, at different times, got knocked over by waves, coming up gasping and sand-scraped and vowing to never go back in. Henry still says he lost partial hearing from a crashing wave, something never confirmed by a doctor.

Kate and the boys all had their hair lightened to near white by the sun. The fuzz on the back of their arms turned gold and transparent. In later years, Kate will be a lifeguard at the town pool, and the chlorine will bleach the color out of the ends of her long hair, an effect she will say is artsy and cool.

As soon as the kids were big enough to safely navigate the Maine beach, we walk at low tide to a cluster of black rocks, covered with barnacles. Henry and James like to dig with their knuckles in the salty puddles for spidery crabs, tiny and quick. If they find a big one, they carry it back to the blanket in a pail of water that turns murky warm in the sun, waiting until the crab shows signs of distress to return it to the tide.

Then we walk in the other direction to an inlet so deep all manner of sea life collects there: fast fish, clumps of foamy seaweed feared by Kate, they once saw an eel brush by your leg, or so the children say. Every single year in Maine, one of us found a perfect sand dollar there, the star clearly etched, the fragile sides unbroken. That person was meant to have good luck all year, we decreed.

James made a tradition out of taste-testing the ocean water and declaring it salty as pretzels.

The kites come out as the sun sets on the beach, whipping around their tattered tails, swooping low, dipping and crashing into the water. When people try to reel them in like fishing line, the unreliable twine breaks and the kites sink.

Their father says not to, but I buy the kids popsicles from the ice cream truck on the beach, pushed by a tired-looking college girl who looks so hot, I want to offer to watch the truck while she dives into the sea to cool off. The red popsicles drip all over the beach blanket and their father scolds me for being so lenient with the children. It seems I am always wrong when it comes to my kids.

A small engine plane flies over the beach, pulling a banner advertising Coors Light, or \$9.99 hoodies or free pizza delivery. One year, the banner had a wedding proposal from someone named Richard to his beloved Megan, and my first thought was, “think twice.”

At night, when it's so dark we can't see where the sand ends and the water begins, we take the children with their rolled-up cuffs out to the edge of the tide to howl at the inky sky. It's part primal, part contest as they try to out holler each other. Later, with their scratchy throats from sun, sand and screaming, they will drink the rest of the juice boxes and wake up all night to pee.

When the gaudy, bright lights of the boardwalk come alive, the fluorescent green, purple and orange on the rides that turn kids upside down and backwards, we walk the pier to the midway.

You can buy any souvenir imaginable along the boardwalk: seashell-encrusted jewelry boxes, baseball caps airbrushed with your nickname, small fragile-looking glass bottles with authentic sand inside, surf board salt and pepper shakers.

Kate begs for a hermit crab with a pink mermaid painted on its shell. When I let her get one when she was 6, back at our house, the crab found its way out of the round cage with the coconut shell roof, never to be seen or heard from again.

Kate and I will get intricate Henna tattoos painted with a tiny brush on the backs of our hands, swirling strokes like waves as they crest. They will wash off in the salt water the next day. We get blue and turquoise beads braided into our hair, but Kate will forget they are there and pull them out when she combs her hair the next day.

Every summer on the midway we will have a family Skee-ball tournament and let the children win. Henry winds up like a pitcher and throws his dirty wooden Skeeballs so hard and fast they bounce into another lane. He cries and mopes, but by the next year, he will beat all of us and claim a seahorse skeleton glued in a wicker frame as his prize.

But most of our time is spent at the beach, waiting for low tide so we can wade in. At dusk after the lifeguards pack up their life preservers and backboards and go home, the boys clamber up the ladder of their lookouts, flexing their small muscles while I snap photos and their father tells them to get down. The air turns hazy and James says it looks like the Sahara in a sandstorm. The sky is pink-orange as far as we can see in all directions, making me feel very small and lost.

Soon, there is grit in our scalps, between our toes and in our bedsheets. When we eat, there's a constant crunch of sand in our teeth. No one wants the peanut butter or cheese after the first day. But we never grow tired of low tide.

When we drive home, we stop again at the sign to stretch. Henry and James sleep most of the trip. I take pictures of them, wondering how it is they still look like toddlers in their puffy-cheeked slumber.

Six years later, we will take the kids to the beach separately, their father and I, his and hers vacations. We will still be together, that is, co-habiting, limping along, bruised and embattled.

We will tell ourselves that, like the Maine vacations, we are doing the best we can for the kids. But we are killing ourselves. Our arguments, over so much more than sunscreen and popsicles and letting the boys climb a lifeguard stand, form relentless, deep grooves that can't be repaired, even if we tried our hardest. We can feel the black birds circling overhead.

It will be sunny all the days the kids are at the beach with their father. Hard rain will drench everything, even break the spokes on our umbrellas, during my weekend there with the kids.

Kate, who is 12 by then, will have her own ink kit to paint Henna designs on the backs of our hands. She will lean her head towards me, concentrating, holding my hand in hers. It will be the first close touch I've felt in months.

The last night of our trip, I will dole out money to the kids who want to go to the boardwalk by themselves. They travel in a pack; I will be grateful for this.

I will take off my sandals and walk the beach past abandoned plastic toys and a collapsing sand sculpture of a mermaid's tail.

I will not wade into the ocean, salty pretzel water. I won't be lured in by low tide. I will feel afraid of falling to my knees when the slope drops off deliberately, no longer something beautiful and safe. I will walk past the black rocks and scrape my feet on the barnacle shells. I will go to the inlet and find a single sand dollar with the imprint worn off and all of the edges chipped. I will wail at the ocean. I will wait for an answer.

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