

It was 5 a.m. When I woke up to the sound of my beach-themed alarm, I hurried to turn it off, hoping I hadn't woken my sister, Amy, and my grandparents' goddaughter, Sara, who I shared a room with. We were staying in a large beach house in the Outer Banks of North Carolina for our family's traditional summer vacation. Everyone was there- my grandparents, my aunt, uncle, and their kids, my parents and siblings, and my grandparents' two godchildren. That morning, I had decided to go down to the beach to watch the sunrise. I groggily climbed out of the squeaky bunk-bed and headed for the bathroom to change and get ready. Then, I climbed the many flights of stairs to the upper level of the house where the kitchen was. Seeing the dark sky outside the windows made me want to crawl back into bed, but that wasn't an option for me. I was going to see this sunrise. So I poured myself a bowl of Special-K cereal with milk and strawberries and downed it as fast, but as quietly as I could, still being cautious about trying not to wake everyone. After gulping down the last bit of cereal, I clambered down the stairs, slipped on my teal Crocs, and whisked out the door. I realized I had taken too long eating breakfast when I saw the yellow tint of the sky, and I started racing toward the beach, as fast as my tired legs would take me. I took the stairs leading up to the beach two at a time. When I got to the top, light washed over me, making me squint. The sun had already started to peek over the horizon, but barely- I wasn't too late. I started taking pictures with my phone as I skipped down the steps. The sand was still cool under my feet as I walked toward the shoreline, taking in the breathtaking view. After taking some pictures, I decided to walk down the beach. As I walked, I watched the tumbling waves as they raced each other to the shore, reflecting the bright light of the warm sun. To my surprise, there were a lot more people there than I had expected there to be. I passed couples sitting in the sand and runners on their morning jogs. There was even a football player,

doing drills that early in the morning. It was a pleasant, peaceful stroll; I took some more pictures, relaxed in the sand for a while, and then headed back.

It was now 6 a.m. I had just finished taking my last pictures of the beautiful sunrise. I was walking up the wooden stairs that led off the beach to the main road with the many rows of houses, heading for ours, when I turned around to take one last look at the scenic view of the dawn-graced beach. There is no doubt it was one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen, but for some reason, it wasn't as enjoyable as I thought it would be. Thinking about the nearly 500 pictures I had taken and the short distance I had walked down the shore, basking in the sunlight, it should have made for a perfect morning. Yet, how can one truly enjoy a sunrise, if there's no one to enjoy it with?

Standing at the top of the stairs, I thought back to the previous night, when I, my sister, Amy, my cousins, Jillian and Maddie, my Uncle Max, and my grandparents' godchildren, Sara and Charles went for a walk down the beach, under the stars. I had never seen stars so bright. It was like the sky was a geode that had cracked open, revealing thousands of shimmering crystals, normally hidden. I recalled the feeling of the cool, soft sand under our bare feet as we left our shoes behind on the mound of sand under the orange, abandoned lifeguard stand. For some reason, sand always seems softer at night. We zig-zagged down the beach, sometimes walking through the water as the waves gently broke around our ankles, other times searching through the sand higher up on the beach looking for seashells. Pale white ghost crabs scrambled away from us as we walked, heading for the safety of their tiny holes and tunnels, disappearing when they stopped as they blended into the sand. A few times we just stopped, craning our necks to try to soak it all in: the bright stars, the sound of the crashing, rolling waves, the cool, salty breeze, the soft sand. But the thing that brought it all together was having people to enjoy it with.

I searched for seashells with Jillian, her artist hands delicately inspecting each shell, determining if it was worth bringing home to her friends.

“How about this one, Anna?” she asked, holding out a shell for me to see, her Kentucky accent as strong as ever.

“Oh, that’s a pretty one! Except it’s cracked. You don’t want to waste your packing space on broken shells. Here’s a good one...”

I ran through the water with Amy and Maddie as we splashed each other, tasting the salt of the ocean while filling the quiet night with our laughter. Simultaneously, I was singing along to Charles’ music with Sara, however poor his taste was. When I wasn’t searching, laughing, or singing, I was staring at the sky with Uncle Max, quietly contemplating and enjoying the peace.

“I’ve never seen the night sky like this before.” I reflected, thinking of the distant stars we see in Minnesota.

“Yeah, it’s beautiful. The only other times I’ve seen the stars like this is when Jill and I’ve gone canoeing.” he agreed, his Kentucky accent even stronger than Jill’s. We enjoyed the sight together without needing to say another word.

Walking down that beach- our beach- was like walking into a different world, away from the noise and bustle of everyday life. It was a world filled with stars and sand, but more importantly with the people I love, there to enjoy it with me. Maybe remembering that night was what made my feet walk a little faster that morning, hurrying to get home to my family, and start another memorable day with them.