

Racing the Waves

A fictional story about stillness in a noisy world.

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The summer I turned 12, I went to visit my grandparents in Anchorage, Alaska. I was young, wild and sporadic. I remember the day I almost died; the cirrus clouds laced the cerulean sky. They looked the same way the dainty tablecloth felt as I fingered it while waiting for breakfast.

“Here you go Dear.” my Grandmother cooed, as she gently set down my plate, piled high with sunny scrambled eggs, plump berries picked fresh and a bagel smothered in tangy cream cheese. After inhaling my meal I pulled up my scratchy socks and laced my sturdy hiking boots while a million things flitted through my mind. Some were relevant, but others were far off concerns. As I filled my backpack I hummed. A snack, water bottle, bug spray, sunglasses, bandaids, camera. If only I had slowed down to realize feeling prepared is not the same as being prepared.

During the car ride to the trail head I called my best friend to chat about soccer camp, sleepovers and other frivolous activities. It felt like a mere second before my grandfather announced we had arrived, and I tumbled out of the car in a rush to embark on our hike. Fiona, my grandparent’s slobbery Bernese Mountain Dog, trotted ahead of me on the trail, her pink tongue swinging from where it hung out of her mouth. My hands held cool metal binoculars and I kept my mind alert and racing. Anytime I heard a birdsong they flew to my eyes. It was a game and I had to

win. Steller's Jay, check. Downy Woodpecker, check. Pine Siskin, check. Nearly every box on my list was filled out, except for one, the elusive double crested cormorant.

“We’re almost to the coastal part of the hike.” Grandfather’s raspy voice had broken my concentrated thoughts. We trekked a little farther until the rush of the waves was audible. For the first time in a while I focused on one present thing. My swirling thoughts stilled to watch the frothy, white, curls of salty, sea water. In and out they ebbed, racing and thrashing frantically to shore, only to be pulled slowly back to sea in defeat. In a way they reminded me a bit of myself.

“I feel sorry for them.” I hadn’t realized I had spoken aloud until my grandfather’s deep chuckle filled my ears.

“Who? The waves?” he wondered, following my gaze. Heat filled my face as I quickly explained myself.

“They are always moving but can never seem to reach their destination, it must be so frustrating.”

“Yes, but if the tide didn't pull them back they would just keep crawling until they reached the ocean once again. Right back where they started,” retorted my Grandfather.

I considered this as we continued walking along the grassy banks, a radiant smile spread across my face for no reason except for the pure satisfaction of the day. I could see the gleaming water now. It spread before me, mirroring the bright sky. My eyes drifted across the serene picture. Never before

had I really realized how small and insignificant I was compared to the world. Still content with the wonder I felt, we stopped for a rest break. The water I sipped felt cool and awakening against my throat -that and a granola bar refreshed me. Sticky oats clung to my teeth so I moved my tongue around my mouth to dislodge them. While I was distracted, the wind blew the granola bar wrapper out of my hand, almost like it was trying to throw me off course, like an iceberg to a ship. A panicky feeling filled my head and I locked in on that wrapper. What a terrible person I would be if I let that plastic get away. I sprinted down the bluff like a gazelle, completely ignoring my grandfather's frantic shouts of warning. If I had listened to him things would not have happened the way they did. I would have heard that the tide was low and the risk was high.

But I didn't listen, I ran and ran and ran, just like the waves. It's not that I wasn't thinking, but that I was thinking too much. Below me the terrain changed from grassy dirt to sandy mud, all while the wrapper tauntingly danced in the air ahead and hundreds of scenarios played through my mind. When I had almost caught up and took the final lunge towards the trash my foot didn't move, couldn't move. The billowing mud was enveloping my entire left boot, and a sickening feeling filled my gut. I looked around the beach for people but it was barren and I had dashed so far ahead of my grandfather that I was currently very alone. As I tried to move again the discovery that my other foot was stuck arose. I couldn't believe the twisted, dark irony when the shiny wrapper fluttered towards the earth and landed right in front of me. Nausea filled my body, and I reached out and picked up that stupid thing that I had been so careless to follow. Its crinkly edges disgusted me, and I let out a sob of frustration mixed with defeat and fear. The slimy muck only rose up more if I tried

to wiggle free, causing my anxious heart to beat so hard I thought it would break out of my chest like in some sort of alien movie.

Suddenly the screech of a double crested cormorant caught my attention and pulled me out of the rushing state, like when the waves are pulled back to the ocean. It manipulated the wind with skillful wings and glided high above, a dark shape doing acrobats in the sky. I just stood there, helpless, forced to stop, otherwise I would be swallowed. My thoughts slowed their searching and I just watched the cormorant and inhaled a full breath of potent sea air. Eventually my tears dried on my cheeks, and what I was now able to observe in my calm eased the panic. While standing still, I didn't sink any further, and the tide was gradually rolling lower. Surely I would be rescued before it came back in and the risk of drowning arose.

Not long after that revelation crossed my mind I heard a shout and spotted my grandfather standing on the bluffs. I exhaled a choppy sigh of relief. Soon, the rescue team he had called arrived and safely extracted me from the deadly mud flats. My fate had snapped something inside of me and spread, like when you break a glowstick and it can never go back to the way it was. I lived, and therefore learned how beneficial slowing down and stilling your mind can be. Before climbing into the truck I glanced back at the horizon.

"Goodbye." I whispered to the wind. The ebony feathered bird regarded me with beady blue eyes then dove to be swallowed by the foam below.