

It's been *decided* that I'll be separated from Dianne, my wife of forty-five years. She'll still be just one floor below me in the independent living section of Horizons, our retirement community, but I'm moving to the Memory Lane section. They said I'm beginning to wander the halls at night, something I'm not sure I do. But Dianne told me they're right, so I'll give it a try.

Andrea, my favorite nurse's aide, walked me to my new room. On the outside of my door hung this cool diorama introducing me to my new neighbors. Dianne's impressive handiwork featured two family photos, sheet music for *My Favorite Things*, two seashells, and a vial of pink sand. The caption read, "Leon Roth, A Beach Guy."

The walls and my dresser were covered in family pictures—Dianne's second love was photography. While I surveyed the photos, Andrea smiled. "Your wife and kids worked all morning to make this place your own." It hit me that I've had more than my quota of great memories, no matter what lies ahead. My window overlooked the community vegetable garden, a reassuring reminder of the cycle of life.

The garden is now bathed in golden twilight. How long have I been standing at the window? Years after losing my mother to Alzheimer's, one of my greatest fears may have finally caught up to me. My thoughts and distant memories are still clear, with few exceptions. My problems are mostly short-term and missing words. Nothing I can't cope with for now. I lay on my empty bed, anxious for the night to pass so I could have breakfast with Dianne.

I closed my eyes and heard it. There's nothing like the sound of waves breaking on the beach, an endless serenade to the soul. An inspiring balance of power and beauty. The water has a plan and a destiny: try to escape only to be driven home by gravity.

I dreamt of serene darkness, void of everything but the primordial beat of the sea. I was on my Ocean City condo's balcony four stories up, just like the photo in my room. I'm reminded that, like the sea, we all finally get driven back home.

The black gave way to a sky-painted reflection on the water as the seagulls welcomed the day. The first few beach jocks jogged by as the sand-cleaning tractors did their thing. A hundred yards out, a school of dolphins broke the water—not an unusual sight, but one that always roused my inner child.

Wait. that actually happened. It was the weekend of my sixtieth birthday. Dianne came out and joined me with two cups of coffee, leaving the sliding door open so Coltrane could perfuse us with "My Favorite Things." I held her hand and closed my eyes. My love, soulful jazz, and the ocean. All was good.

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Breakfast in the main dining room was far from quiet. Our table was full of old *yentas* gossiping and complaining about everything: the food, the temperature, the replacement food, and the snarky attitudes of those servers. Dianne and I held hands under the table and ignored them. We were rarely apart after working together in our tailor shop for twenty-five years. Then we lived together in Horizons for two years. Last night was the first time we'd slept apart in decades, and I

missed her badly. Today they were taking her out on a group shopping trip at lunchtime, but I'll see her again for dinner.

Back in my room, I rocked in my chair, looking at a browned photo of my mother standing by a baby carriage on the Atlantic City boardwalk. My first seashore trip flashed back. An endless procession of waves crashed in the distance. The bright sun faded, but a gentle breeze blew over my stroller, its soft whoosh stirring my blanket, reassuring me that all was well. Behind the wind's lullaby, I heard the faint laughter of kids splashing in the water. My mother hummed a lullaby and I felt safe, despite the roar of the sea.

My mother and I spent a month at the shore with my aunt and cousin, Issac. Dad and my Uncle Al drove two hours from Philadelphia to join us on the weekends. They'd push my carriage down the click-clacking boardwalk, past a stand where the big bands would perform—my first taste of live music.

Another photo of two skinny kids, sopping wet with their arms around each other, reminded me that the shore had become a yearly routine. By the time Issac and I were six, we were allowed to venture into the ocean up to our waists. Just a few yards further out, the relatively monstrous waves crested, crashed, and churned up white foam. My brother David was only two. He sat by my mother and watched us from the shore. In time he'd be my best beach buddy.

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It's been a few months since I moved upstairs, but it feels like years. They try to get me out of my room, but the community area down the hall is full of *guests* in much worse shape than me. They're arranged in a vast empty space where they can be easily monitored by two or three aides, a circle of wheelchair zombies that only depresses me more. Some are childlike, holding donated dolls. Others appear to be napping. Many have a strange vacant stare. I live for my daily visit from Dianne and hope I won't upset her.

My son gave me a gadget that holds thousands of songs and crammed my whole jazz collection into it. I spend hours rocking in my chair, lost in the music. Now, my room is not so lonely. Today, it must have been an accident, my kids' favorite Nirvana song, *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, came on. I hated that noise when they used to play it, but this time, its hook snagged me.

I stood at the dresser and picked up a picture of my little kids, Albert, Stefanie, and Jamie, walking with me down the beach in Longport, New Jersey. In the background, my brother and his kids played in the waves. I sank back into my rocker, took a deep breath, and closed my eyes. My old friend, the sea, welcomed my family.

Longport was our summer happy place. I played a game with each kid, recreating the excitement of my first wave encounter. I'd hold them around the waist and crouch down, bringing our heads level with the water as a swell approached. Then, I'd spring upward at the last moment and hold them above the spray. They loved it (I think). Each became a wave rider as they got older and grew comfortable with the timing.

My heart warmed as I remembered more. After a day of playing in the surf, we'd cover the boardwalk end-to-end, following the fragrance of our choice: pizza, caramel popcorn, cotton

candy, or fudge. We were in a club of parents trying to herd their sunburnt kids through the crowd. After dark, you couldn't see them, but the rhythm of the waves made their presence known. Standing by the railings overlooking the beach, an assortment of dead sea things stranded under the boardwalk added a malodorous element to the salty night air.

The kids would crash in the backseat on our drive home, unaware of the soft blues playing in the background. On the long drive home, I'd admire them in my rearview mirror, then glance at Dianne, who was dozing next to me. I was truly blessed.

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This morning they came to my room with a birthday cake. They said I was eighty, or was it eighty-eight? Who cares? I know it's getting worse, but I'm not sure what I look like to others. The smooth memories are broken with jagged arguments. I've even made Dianne cry. Before I can feel upset, the bad things are gone. To avoid them, I stick to the same simple script no matter who I'm talking to, the nurse, a hallmate, or Dianne. "I'm feeling—you know the ups and downs." "Getting older. Parts wear out." "What's the weather supposed to do today?"

I'm spending even more time in my room. I don't even bother turning off the music at bedtime. They lower the volume for me sometimes. Once, Nat King Cole's *Unforgettable* came on. I turned to face a picture of my father, and the memory snapped into place. That song played as Dad and I cruised down old Route One past Key Largo. He sang along to the radio, his baritone voice filling his Ford convertible while the water gently lapped at both sides of the road. A brief reprieve from my confusion.

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Today I missed lunch. They brought it to me with a surprise—a skinny version of Santa delivered it. Christmas already? I looked out my window for signs of it. It had snowed.

Christmas reminded me of my brother, David. A wave of sadness came over me. The holidays have never been the same since he passed. We were best friends for all our lives before his heart attack. He was way too young, just like my father and grandfather were. I guess I was lucky.

As kids, we loved the holiday season. Growing up a block away from the ocean in Miami Beach was a blast. We'd stay at the beach for hours on our Christmas break from school. His infatuation with cars started there. He let me bury him up to his chest in the sand, and I'd sculpt a car around him, so he could pretend he was in a race. Later in life, he became a crack auto mechanic and drove some actual race cars.

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Time has no meaning, and large pieces of me have disappeared. Yet, no matter how deep into the maze I go, the seashore still calls now and again. The names and faces have burrowed under the sand like a lost ring, but the feelings and haunting melodies remain.

I woke from a nap to pressure waves from heating vents in the big room down the hall. Through eyelid slits, I saw the rest of a large circle of blanket-wrapped zombies, sitting sedately in

wheelchairs, some nodding, some asleep. All are mentally elsewhere. My thoughts came and went, intermingled with sleep and those sweet, tangled strands of memories and shards of angry words.

Sometimes people came to visit, looking so familiar but just out of my mind's reach. The tip of my tongue led back to a crowded waiting room of words and faces hoping to be reunited with their meaning. Each visitor held my hand and dabbed their eyes when they thought I wasn't looking. Some wheeled me outside for fresh air and whispered stories I couldn't follow, but I was glad for the company. The ocean smells were replaced with pine trees and roses. Still, I felt all was well whenever the wind blew past my blanket.

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Tonight, the nurse helped me into bed and turned off the light. Somehow, she didn't see the kid in the wet bathing suit rocking in my chair. There was no mistaking his face. David wore a big mischievous smile. He came to my side, gazed upward, and extended his hand. In place of the ceiling was the beach in Atlantic City. My parents walked towards the sea.

In the silence, I felt him say. "They're waiting. I'll drive."