Simple Happiness

The water sways below me as a boat putters by, fracturing the reflected trees stretching above my head. A cumulus cloud sits just above my right ear, like a small creature waiting to say hi to me. I swish my feet through the water and watch it part gently around my ankles, the splintering wood of the dock digs into my legs. I meet eyes with a man across the pier. He reminds me of my grandfather in his younger days. With crinkled eyes, his face shows signs of days on the water, and his white hair shimmers in the sunlight. He smiles as he walks past where I sit, a large net perched over his shoulder.

A child shrieks gleefully from somewhere down the dock. Another waddles toward me, his pudgy face squished up against his life jacket. I smile, thinking of the memories they will make today on the glistening waters beneath an endless blue sky.

A small sculpin swims between my feet, reminding me of the days I spent trying to catch them from atop the dock with my sisters, when our eyes were bright blue with a simple happiness—bluer still in the reflection of the ocean and the glow of the sun. Our sunkissed faces beamed on those summer days. Days we spent among our family, our parents, and our grandparents. Sailing trips from Crescent Harbor, camping at Kanga Bay, fishing for Sculpin off rocky shores, kayaking through pollen-filled sounds. Summers are different now. They haven’t been the same since I left home for school two summers ago.

When I was eight, my family boated to Pirate’s Cove, a beach about five miles southwest of Sitka. The waves were choppy, but the ocean breeze blew all the stress from my face. I had no fear of the water that day. My mind focused on the old fishing net strung with care in the trees of Pirate’s Cove—a child’s paradise—weathered and lost to the years that stretch between my childhood and now.

As my back was just beginning to sore from the tireless waves, we stopped suddenly. A quarter of a mile away, mist drifted slowly above the water, a humpback whale. Its spout framed by the
stratovolcano fifteen miles away, Mt. Edgecumbe. We steered closer, keeping a respectable distance until the humpback decided to investigate the strange metal object in the water. Its spout shot above my head as the water's surface broke and a foul, fishy stench rose to my nose. The sun shone through the cloud of water, forming a rainbow. Just beneath lay a solid black shadow extending past the bow of our boat and behind the stern.

I could’ve reached out and touched it if I wanted to. Something about this mysterious being was enticing. There was an energy radiating from it that I couldn’t comprehend, a language I couldn’t understand. Tears came to my eyes. Out of fear or awe, I didn’t quite know. This whale held so much power. I began to sob, and the moment was captured by my mom, forever commemorated on her Facebook—the magenta puffer coat, the giant yellow life jacket, my puffy red face, and the misty air reflected in my bulky sunglasses. Mom is part of a lot of the good memories.

A few years ago, I found her holding my great-grandfather's old spyglass from his days on the U.S.S Blackfin. The thing was heavy and a pain to use, and yet my mom used it every chance she could.

“The whales are out, honey.”

“They’re always out Mom it’s summer.”

“But they’re so gorgeous, take a look,” she said, beckoning me over.

I lifted the spyglass to my eye, balancing it carefully against the window to alleviate some of the weight.

“Where are they?”

“Behind that buoy–there–do you see the blow?”

Sure enough, just beyond the navigation buoy, a small plume of water floated in the air. I moved the spyglass to the left a tad, anticipating the movement of the whale; it spouted again. The mist shimmered in its ascent and dissipated as it began to fall.
“Oh yeah, I see it now.” Its sharp black tail flipped against the horizon as the whale swam into the bay's depths.

I often wonder if my Great Grandfather saw whales aboard the U.S.S. Blackfin Submarine. He traveled to ports everywhere—California, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Taiwan, Australia, American Samoa, Mexico, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua. He had to have seen whales, but I wonder if he even gave a second thought to them, if he realized their significance, if he understood what they would mean to his great-grandchildren years into the future.

I never met my Papa. But I still feel his influence. My dad didn’t grow up on the coast, but he chose to join the Coast Guard when he turned 18. I assume he was influenced by the military background that my Papa had. As a member of the Coast Guard, my dad spent hours on boats. When I was young, he was deployed on buoy tenders, and I desired to grow up to be just like him. Nothing sounded better to my young self than living and working on the ocean. I’ve since changed my mind, but this connection to the ocean through the military is the culprit of my fascination.

A small strip of the ocean is visible behind the breakwater cocooning the harbor. I wonder how many whales hid in its darkness right now, beneath the sun, beneath the boats, and beneath the laughing children. A sailboat floats into its slip three spots down from where I sit. It reminds me of the sailboat my grandparents lived on when I was young. We used to spend days in their home, sprawled on the carpet in front of the small TV. A ringing filled the small room every time it turned on. They had to lift us to the hatch to get into the boat—we weren’t quite tall enough to crawl in ourselves.

When they decided to move into a home in town, they bought a smaller sailboat so that they could still enjoy days on the water. They had grown accustomed to the ocean. Coming from the East Coast, they didn’t grow up with the same access to the seas as I did. More than anything else, they wanted us to grow up with an appreciation for the natural world.

The wind in Sitka was uncooperative most of the time. But on the days it blew, we sailed strongly around the bays. “Coming about! Hold on and watch your heads girls!” My
grandmother called from the stern of the boat. We shrieked as the boat tacked. My feet gently skimed the surface of the water, the boat heeling with the strength of the wind. I laughed in glee, wondering how the boat could tip so far sideways and still come up for air. My grandparents rushed around pulling lines, pushing the jib—the craft astounded me—I still wish I had learned how it all worked.

I miss the days when I would hang over the edge of the sailboat, my life jacket digging into the bottom of my chin. My sisters and I found delight in the soft, rolling, white waves trailing from the sides of the hull. The glow of the sun on the water bounced back up to our faces. It was blinding. The water was cold, but we loved watching our fingers trail through its glassy surface.

We tied our toy skiffs to strings and grasped them tightly in our little hands. The strings rolled up onto sticks—our versions of a kite. We watched as they jumped the small sailboat waves, flipped over on the rougher waves, and hopped across the surface of the water like a skipping rock. It was a simple game, a simple happiness.

Often, on these boating adventures, we would spot whales outside the harbors. Their spouts were magnificent in the glowing sun. Our eyes crinkled as we shouted “WHALE” to the stern of the boat. Our grandparents would smile at our innocent happiness, and at the pure joy on our faces.

They sold the sailboat a few years later, and we took our adventures on a family boat instead. The Stripper we called it, due to the analogous Stryper brand name across its fiberglass hull. We replaced it with a 2021 Boulton power boat recently. The distinct smell of fuel that wafts forward from the 115 Horsepower Honda engine lingers everywhere I go; from cars, boats, and trucks my mind always wanders back to the ocean.

I had been gone for 2 school years—the longest I’d ever been away from home, from my family, from the ocean, from the lovely breeze, and sweet-smelling air. I learned that some people had never seen the ocean, that some people couldn’t fathom catching a fish, couldn’t imagine hiking a mountain in 10 feet of snow. I grew to realize that my childhood had been unique and that I needed to remember to appreciate it.
Summers are different now. I go back for a few months at a time. I work constantly and I have a different life than I did growing up. A box of my memories sits in a tote on the top shelf in the garage—coated in a thin layer of dust. The blue plastic echoes the blue of the ocean—photos of which lie inside. I go on fewer adventures, I experience the wilderness less, and yet part of me appreciates it even more. I miss the green trees. I miss the blue ocean, the cool summer days, and the people that hold the same memories as me.