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OUR PERFECT SUMMER

One day, it seemed the right time to have a beach house all our own.

By David Sedaris



Photograph by Elliott Erwit / Magnum

My mother and I were at the dry cleaner's, standing behind a woman we had never seen. "A nice-looking woman," my mother would later say. "Well put together. Classy." The woman was dressed for the season in a light cotton shift patterned with oversize daisies. Her shoes matched the petals and her purse, which was black-and-yellow striped, hung over her shoulder, buzzing the flowers like a lazy bumblebee. She handed in her claim check, accepted her garments, and then expressed

gratitude for what she considered to be fast and efficient service. “You know,” she said, “people talk about Raleigh but it isn’t really true, is it?”

The Korean man nodded, the way you do when you’re a foreigner and understand that someone has finished a sentence. He wasn’t the owner, just a helper who’d stepped in from the back, and it was clear he had no idea what she was saying.

“My sister and I are visiting from out of town,” the woman said, a little louder now, and again the man nodded. “I’d love to stay awhile longer and explore, but my home, well, *one* of my homes is on the garden tour, so I’ve got to get back to Williamsburg.”

I was eleven years old, yet still the statement seemed strange to me. If she’d hoped to impress the Korean, the woman had obviously wasted her breath, so who was this information for?

“My home, well, *one* of my homes”; by the end of the day my mother and I had repeated this line no less than fifty times. The garden tour was unimportant, but the first part of her sentence brought us great pleasure. There was, as indicated by the comma, a pause between the words “home” and “well,” a brief moment in which she’d decided, *Oh, why not?* The following word— “one”—had blown from her mouth as if propelled by a gentle breeze, and this was the difficult part. You had to get it just right or else the sentence lost its power. Falling somewhere between a self-conscious laugh and a sigh of happy confusion, the “one” afforded her statement a double meaning. To her peers it meant, “Look at me, I catch myself coming and going!” and to the less fortunate it was a way of saying, “Don’t kid yourself, it’s a lot of work having more than one house.”

The first dozen times we tried it our voices sounded pinched and snobbish, but by midafternoon they had softened. We wanted what this woman had. Mocking her made it seem hopelessly unobtainable, and so we reverted to our natural selves.

“My home, well, one of my homes . . .” My mother said it in a rush, as if she were under pressure to be more specific. It was the same way she said, “My daughter, well, one of my daughters,” but a second home was more prestigious than a second daughter, and so it didn’t really work. I went in the opposite direction, exaggerating the word “one” in a way that was guaranteed to alienate my listener.

“Say it like that and people are going to be jealous,” my mother said.

“Well, isn’t that what we want?”

“Sort of,” she said. “But mainly we want them to be happy for us.”

“But why should you be happy for someone who has more than you do?”

“I guess it all depends on the person,” she said. “Anyway, I suppose it doesn’t matter. We’ll get it right eventually. When the day arrives I’m sure it’ll just come to us.”

And so we waited.

At some point in the mid- to late nineteen-sixties, North Carolina began referring to itself as “Variety Vacationland.” The words were stamped onto license plates, and a series of television commercials reminded us that, unlike certain of our neighbors, we had both the beach *and* the mountains. There were those who bounced back and forth between one and the other, but most people tended to choose a landscape and stick to it. We ourselves were Beach People, Emerald Isle People, but that was mainly my mother’s doing. I don’t think our father would have cared whether he took a vacation or not. Being away from home left him anxious and crabby, but our mother loved the ocean. She couldn’t swim, but enjoyed standing at the water’s edge with a pole in her hand. It wasn’t exactly what you’d call fishing, as she caught nothing and expressed neither hope nor disappointment in regard to her efforts. What she thought about while looking at the waves was a complete mystery, yet you could tell that these thoughts pleased her, and that she liked herself better while thinking them.

One year our father waited too late to make our reservations, and we were forced to take something on the sound. It wasn’t a cottage but a run-down house, the sort of place where poor people lived. The yard was enclosed by a chain-link fence and the air was thick with the flies and mosquitoes normally blown away by the ocean breezes. Midway through the vacation a hideous woolly caterpillar fell from a tree and bit my sister Amy on the cheek. Her face swelled and discolored, and within an hour, were it not for her arms and legs, it would have been difficult to recognize her as a human. My mother drove her to the hospital, and when they returned she employed my sister as Exhibit A, pointing as if this were not her daughter but some ugly stranger forced to

share our quarters. “*This* is what you get for waiting until the last minute,” she said to our father. “No dunes, no waves, just *this*.”

From that year on, our mother handled the reservations. We went to Emerald Isle for a week every September and were always oceanfront, a word that suggested a certain degree of entitlement. The oceanfront cottages were on stilts, which made them appear if not large, then at least imposing. Some were painted, some were sided, “Cape Cod style,” with wooden shingles, and all of them had names, the cleverest being “Loafer’s Paradise.” The owners had cut their sign in the shape of two moccasins resting side by side. The shoes were realistically painted and the letters were bloated and listless, loitering like drunks against the soft faux leather.

“Now *that’s* a sign,” our father would say, and we would agree. There was The Skinny Dipper, Pelican’s Perch, Lazy Daze, The Scotch Bonnet, Loony Dunes, the name of each house followed by the name and home town of the owner. “The Duncan Clan—Charlotte,” “The Graftons—Rocky Mount,” “Hal and Jean Starling of Pinehurst”: signs that essentially said, “My home, well, *one* of my homes.”

While at the beach, we sensed more than ever that our lives were governed by luck. When we had it—when it was sunny—my sisters and I felt as if we were somehow personally responsible. We were a fortunate family, and therefore everyone around us was allowed to swim and dig in the sand. When it rained, we were unlucky, and stayed indoors to search our souls. “It’ll clear after lunch,” our mother would say, and we would eat carefully, using the placemats that had brought us luck in the past. When that failed, we would move on to Plan B. “Oh, Mother, you work too hard,” we’d say. “Let us do the dishes. Let us sweep sand off the floor.” We spoke like children in a fairy tale, hoping our goodness might lure the sun from its hiding place. “You and Father have been so kind to us. Here, let us massage your shoulders.”

If by late afternoon it still hadn’t cleared, my sisters and I would drop the act and turn on one another, searching for the spoiler who had brought us this misfortune. Which of us seemed the least dissatisfied? Who had curled up on a mildewed bed with a book and a glass of chocolate milk, behaving as though the rain were not such a bad thing after all? We would find this person, most often my sister Gretchen, and then we would beat her.

The summer I was twelve, a tropical storm moved up the coast, leaving a sky the same mottled pewter as Gretchen's subsequent bruises, but the following year we started with luck. My father found a golf course that suited him, and for the first time in memory even he seemed to enjoy himself. Relaxing on the deck with a gin-and-tonic, surrounded by his toast-colored wife and children, he admitted that this really wasn't so bad. "I've been thinking, to hell with these rental cottages," he said. "What do you say we skip the middleman and just buy a place?"

He spoke in the same tone he used when promising ice cream. "Who's up for something sweet?" he'd ask, and we'd pile into the car, passing the Tastee-Freez and driving to the grocery store, where he'd buy a block of pus-colored ice milk reduced for quick sale. Experience had taught us not to trust him, but we wanted a beach house so badly it was impossible not to get caught up in the excitement. Even our mother fell for it.

"Do you really mean this?" she asked.

"Absolutely," he said.

The next day, they made an appointment with a real-estate agent in Morehead City. "We'll just be discussing the possibility," my mother said. "It's just a meeting, nothing more." We wanted to join them but they took only Paul, who was two years old and unfit to be left in our company. The morning meeting led to half a dozen viewings, and when they returned my mother's face was so impassive it seemed almost paralyzed. "It-was-fine," she said. "The-real-estate-agent-was-very-nice." We got the idea that she was under oath to keep something to herself, and the effort was causing her actual physical pain.

"It's all right," my father said. "You can tell them."

"Well, we saw this one place in particular," she told us. "Now, it's nothing to get worked up about, but . . ."

"But it's perfect," my father said. "A real beauty, just like your mother here." He came from behind and pinched her on the bottom. She laughed and swatted him with a towel and we witnessed what we would later come to recognize as the rejuvenating power of real estate. It's what fortunate couples turn to when their sex life has faded

and they're too pious for affairs. A second car might bring people together for a week or two, but a second home can revitalize a marriage for up to nine months after the closing.

"Oh, Lou," my mother said. "What am I going to do with you?"

"Whatever you want, Baby," he said. "Whatever you want."

It was queer when people repeated their sentences, but we were willing to overlook it in exchange for a beach house. My mother was too excited to cook that night, and so we ate dinner at the Sanitary Fish Market, in Morehead City. On taking our seats I expected my father to mention inadequate insulation or corroded pipes, the dark undersides of home ownership, but instead he discussed only the positive aspects. "I don't see why we couldn't spend our Thanksgivings here. Hell, we could even come for Christmas. Hang a few lights, get some ornaments, what do you think?"

A waitress passed the table and, without saying please, I demanded another Coke. She went to fetch it and I settled back in my chair, drunk with the power of a second home. When school began my classmates would court me, hoping I might invite them for a weekend, and I would make a game of pitting them against one another. This was what a person did when people liked him for all the wrong reasons, and I would grow to be very good at it.

"What do you think, David?" my father asked. I hadn't heard the question but said that it sounded good to me. "I like it," I said. "I like it."

The following afternoon our parents took us to see the house. "Now, I don't want you to get your hopes up too high," my mother said, but it was too late for that. It was a fifteen-minute drive from one end of the island to the other, and along the way we proposed names for what we had come to think of as our cottage. I'd already given it a good deal of thought but waited a few minutes before offering my suggestion. "Are you ready?" I said. "Our sign will be the silhouette of a ship."

Nobody said anything.

"Get it?" I said. "The shape of a ship. Our house will be called The Ship Shape."

“Well, you’d have to write that on the sign,” my father said. “Otherwise nobody will get it.”

“But if you write out the words you’ll ruin the joke.”

“What about The Nut Hut?” Amy said.

“Hey,” my father said. “Now, there’s an idea.” He laughed, not realizing, I guess, that there already was a Nut Hut. We’d passed it a thousand times.

“How about something with the word ‘sandpiper’ in it?” my mother said. “Everybody likes sandpipers, right?”

Normally I would have hated them for not recognizing my suggestion as the best, but this was clearly a special time and I didn’t want to ruin it with brooding. Each of us wanted to be the one who came up with the name, and inspiration could be hiding anywhere. When the interior of the car had been exhausted of ideas, we looked out the windows and searched the passing landscape.

Two thin girls braced themselves before crossing the busy road, hopping from foot to foot on the scalding pavement. “The Tar Heel,” Lisa called out. “No, The Wait ’n’ Sea. Get it? S-E-A.”

A car trailing a motorboat pulled up to a gas pump. “The Shell Station!” Gretchen shouted.

Everything we saw was offered as a possible name, and the resulting list of nominees confirmed that, once you left the shoreline, Emerald Isle was sorely lacking in natural beauty. “The TV Antenna,” my sister Tiffany said. “The Telephone Pole.” “The Toothless Black Man Selling Shrimp from the Back of His Van.”

“The Cement Mixer.” “The Overturned Grocery Cart.” “Gulls on a Garbage Can.” My mother inspired “The Cigarette Butt Thrown Out the Window” and suggested we look for ideas on the beach rather than on the highway. “I mean, my God, how depressing can you get?” She acted annoyed, but we could tell she was really enjoying it. “Give me something that suits us,” she said. “Give me something that will last.”

What would ultimately last were these fifteen minutes on the coastal highway, but we didn't know that then. When older, even the crankiest of us would accept them as proof that we were once a happy family: our mother young and healthy, our father the man who could snap his fingers and give us everything we wanted, the whole lot of us competing to name our good fortune.

The house was, as our parents had promised, perfect. This was an older cottage with pine-panelled walls that gave each room the thoughtful quality of a den. Light fell in strips from the louvred shutters and the furniture, which was included in the sale, reflected the tastes of a distinguished sea captain. Once we'd claimed bedrooms and laid awake all night, mentally rearranging the furniture, it would be our father who'd say, "Now hold on a minute, it's not ours yet." By the next afternoon, he had decided that the golf course wasn't so great after all. Then it rained for two straight days, and he announced that it might be wiser to buy some land, wait a few years, and think about building a place of our own. "I mean, let's be practical." Our mother put on her raincoat. She tied a plastic bag over her head and stood at the water's edge, and for the first time in our lives we knew exactly what she was thinking.

By our final day of vacation our father had decided that instead of building a place on Emerald Isle we should improve the home we already had. "Maybe add a pool," he said. "What do you kids think about that?" Nobody answered.

By the time he finished wheedling it down, the house at the beach had become a bar in the basement. It looked just like a real bar, with tall stools and nooks for wine. There was a sink for washing glasses and an assortment of cartoon napkins illustrating the lighter side of alcoholism. For a week or two my sisters and I tottered at the counter, pretending to be drunks, but then the novelty wore off and we forgot all about it.

On subsequent vacations, both with and without our parents, we would drive by the cottage we had once thought of as our own. Each of us referred to it by a different name, and over time qualifiers became necessary. ("You know, *our* house.") The summer after we didn't buy it, the new owners, or "those people," as we liked to call them, painted The Ship Shape yellow. In the late seventies, Amy noted that The Nut Hut had extended the carport and paved the driveway. Lisa was relieved when the Wait 'n' Sea returned to its original color and Tiffany was incensed when The Toothless Black Man Selling Shrimp from the Back of His Van sported a sign endorsing Jesse

Helms in the 1984 senatorial campaign. Five years later my mother called to report that The Sandpiper had been badly damaged by Hurricane Hugo. “It’s still there,” she said, “but barely.” Shortly thereafter, according to Gretchen, The Shell Station was torn down and sold as a vacant lot.

I know that such a story does not quite work to inspire sympathy. (“My home, well, *one* of my homes fell through.”) We had no legitimate claim to self-pity, were ineligible even to hold a grudge, but that didn’t stop us from complaining.

In the coming years, our father would continue to promise what he couldn’t deliver, and in time we grew to think of him as an actor auditioning for the role of a benevolent millionaire. He’d never get the part but liked the way that the words felt in his mouth. “What do you say to a new car?” he’d ask. “Who’s up for a cruise to the Greek isles?” In response he expected us to play the part of an enthusiastic family, but we were unwilling to resume our old roles. As if carried by a tide, our mother drifted further and further away, first to twin beds and then down the hall to a room decorated with seascapes and baskets of sun-bleached sand dollars. It would have been nice, a place at the beach, but we already had a home. A home with a bar. Besides, had things worked out you wouldn’t have been happy for us. We’re not that kind of people. ♦

David Sedaris contributes frequently to The New Yorker. He is the author of, most recently, “Theft by Finding: Diaries (1977-2002).” [Read more »](#)

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