

## A Coastal Story

Somewhere in the moonlit water, creatures swarmed, dancing in and out of view in their underwater galaxy. My cousin and I slipped out of our sandy flip-flops and scrambled onto the seats of the white and burgundy boat bobbing at the dock, eager to get a closer look at the source of the splashes, plops, and flips. Peering over the edge, I flicked on my flashlight, x-raying the water. Thousands of silver fish popped in and out of the surface like heated kernels. A crab scuttled up the edge of the canal, clinging to the years-old slime and seaweed on the metal walls. Two swans floated downstream past us, toward the canal's end as it opened into Shinnecock Bay and, further, the ocean that bumps into Long Island's south shore.

My aunt's Shinnecock Shores neighborhood has six aptly-named streets—Barracuda, Dolphin, Marlin, Bonita, Whiting, and Tarpon—which stretch like fingers into Shinnecock Bay. Homes line docks and canals, supporting the community's unique claim of being both walkable *and* swimmable. “They don't build like this anymore,” my aunt once told me with a soft smile. She had pointed to where her grassy lawn blends into a bank of sand, meets a boardwalk, and finally dips into the canal. One summer night on Dolphin Road, after circling my aunt's backyard to light a small army of citronella candles, I rested on the wooden dock, my stomach full of fresh-caught salmon and sweet Long Island corn. My hair was still damp from the outdoor shower, my skin softened by a scrub of sand and saltwater. Before the fish swarmed in, the stillness had been punctuated only by the rhythmic slapping of the canal water against the dock.

One October prior—and a three-and-a-half-hour drive away in Wallingford, Connecticut—the night was far less tranquil. My family and I had slept on air mattresses downstairs between our den's antique desk and drawers. My dad feared the incoming storm's winds might knock our neighbor's teetering pine tree onto our little cape. He argued that the thick power lines out front would serve as our *first* line of defense—propping the trunk up, if we were lucky—but that sleeping downstairs was our second.

Superstorm Sandy, the weathermen had called her. She worked through the night, unapologetically loud. Huddled under my blankets, I dozed on and off to the snaps and groans of the almost-hurricane. The house creaked. In the haze of the storm, flashlights, extra batteries, and tea light candles cast silhouettes on side tables and counters. Raindrops pelted the window screens, which snapped back and forth in the wind like wings. For a few hours, at least, all I could do was listen as Sandy swept through the night.

I peered outside with the cloudy dawn to find our half-acre littered with broken tree limbs and flooded patches. Birdbaths were clogged with debris. The wooden fence that my dad had built by hand years before had darkened with dampness overnight. Like haphazardly arranged flowers in a vase, bundles of leaves stuck in its slats. A fallen trunk left a small crater in the road, and power lines sizzled next to it. My dad and I drove around town that morning on whispering streets slick with mist and saturated leaves, awed that a single night could empty roads, gas stations, and grocery store shelves. Given little choice, the hasty world seemed to pause and mull

over the chaos of Sandy: the records it set, the power outages, the storm surge levels. For a moment, Sandy had suspended everyone's plans. There was a staggering need for community recovery, in our town and many others. I feared how Long Island had fared, knowing its vulnerability to the sea. In the days and weeks after, Wallingford and the rest of the Northeast slowly crept back to life, and the memory of that stormy night retreated. The news reports subsided.

But, a summer later, Shinnecock Shores was still filled with artifacts from that windy October night: my favorite beach on Peconic Bay now half the size it used to be, sand dunes leveled, homes boarded-up, beachfront plots emptied, quiet neighborhoods with orange safety notices tacked to the doors, my aunt's house raised six feet off the ground. In the wake of Sandy, there was the striking promise of other even more catastrophic storms. I knew there were things lost slowly, with creeping sea levels, and things lost quickly, in tropical stormy nights. That night on the dock, among leaping fish and scurrying crabs and fortified homes, I understood: there is still so much to lose.

Upon hearing that I am an environmentalist, my friends and family typically express their gratitude, saying that the world needs people like me. I smile and am touched that they think what I'm doing is valuable, but I'm a little troubled by this, too. They place me within a special, separate tribe—those of us taking care of things so that the average citizen can worry a little less. I suppose, in a sense, this is true—in my work I'll dive deeper into the nuances of our planet than they likely ever will, and I'll spend a great majority of my time thinking about ways to better our relationship to it, about preparing for and recovering from the next Sandy. But the crucial difference is that trained environmentalists are not the only ones who can, and will, make an impact. Their words and actions alone cannot carry all of us past this crisis.

We are all people “like me;” we are all human and all weighted with this beautiful and frightening responsibility to our Earth and to each other. Listen to the work being done, take inspiration from it—and then act upon it. Open your eyes. See your stake in the game. Too often we forget that climate change is slow change *and* fast change. It's snapshots of Shinnecock Shores over the years, one summer's memories rippling into the next as we connect how the landscape changed while we were away from this place we love so dearly. It's the shore shuffling a bit closer to the beach house each summer. And it's the nights when the superstorms come, when you sleep on an air mattress deep in your house with your most treasured things camped out next to you, waiting.

You're in this with us. We need people like *you*.