

## BAYWALK RONDO

My parents introduced me to this beach. I don't know how old I was, but they had lived in our house a few blocks away from the water for thirteen years before my birth. My older cousins would escort me here, and eventually I introduced my sister's children to the uniqueness of this playground. They are closer to my age than my sister is. They would beg me to go to this beach where the good shells and pebbles were, with the candy store across the street, and we would go with my dog Bambi tagging along. He didn't like the water, but he loved to run on the sand and sniff the smells of creatures attractive to dogs: horseshoe crabs, jellyfish, mussels, and oysters.

Now as an adult with some mileage under her belt, I go to the bay to clear my head—troubles and stresses evaporate here—and I enjoy the unspoiled naturalness of this place. Money can't buy a therapy as effective as this. Countless thoughts enter my head as I walk the Delaware Bay beach in North Cape May. I've been coming here all my life because I love the sparkling sand, the small crashing waves, the low-tide sandbars, and the memories of all the people with whom I have shared this place.

My family arrived here in 1950, but settlers inhabited these shores three hundred years before that. Whalers from Long Island and New England settled in Townbank around 1640, less than a mile north of our spot. Unlike Melville's Ahab, these whalers hunted from the shore, watching for whales and then rowing out to them. After the kill, the whale was towed to shore where the valuable oil and baleen was harvested. The oil burned cleaner than other oils and was used mainly for lamps. Baleen, the fingernail-like substance some whales have instead of teeth, was mistakenly called whalebone. This was most famously used for ladies' corsets. There was a lot

of whalebone walking around Cape May's streets in years to come as it became America's Oldest Seashore Resort in the Victorian years for which Cape May is famous.

As I got older, I would bring friends along to our house by the bay. It's a great place for long walks, flying kites, and picnics. I understood this was a distinctive place, and it made me unique to my friends. Years later, they still remember me sharing the bay experience. Some of us walked, and some of us flew kites. I always keep an assortment of kites at our house. Some kites are easy to fly, but some require wind speeds of fifteen mph or more. I learned all about the Beaufort Scale when I taught myself to fly kites: you can tell approximately how fast the wind is by how the leaves and branches on the trees are moving and how stiffly flags are flying. It took months for me to get my box kite in the air. It required stronger wind than any other kite I had owned. I remember the exhilarating feeling when it finally went up, and although it was a bitter cold day and my fingers were freezing holding that line, I flew that kite and even managed to take some pictures of it in flight.

As I started writing, I found many topics here at the beach. I love to share this information, and I found my most successful stories and articles were about these sites and their history. Most people like to know about the history of a place along with the mundane information about where to eat. Luckily for me, I like to research the history and then write about it. For instance, I now know much about World War II in this area, just before my family's arrival, was an critical time here. Navy dive bomber pilots were trained not too far away at our county airport, then known as Naval Air Station Wildwood. The current Coast Guard base in Cape May, where all Coast Guard recruits were trained, was then a naval base. There was a bunker at Cape May Point guarding the bay along with its companion on a beach across the bay in Delaware. Remnants of both bunkers still exist, eerily guarding their beaches. Guarding the bay was crucial since the

important ports of Camden and Philadelphia lie just north of the bay on the Delaware River. The canal here, the terminus of my walk, was built during World War II to provide a way for mosquito boats to scoot across the bottom of the state without going into the ocean if there was a problem. And there were problems: German U-boats (in my mind the very vessel and the same actors in the 1981 German film, *Das Boot*) came close to the Cape May shore, and some were even sunk. I try to imagine the terrifying excitement I would have experienced if I had lived here during those anxious times.

Today this is a quiet, peaceful place. Instead of enemy vessels, there are shorebirds to watch. Laughing gulls, herring gulls, and softly chirping red knots, sandpipers and plovers scurry by the water's edge year 'round. Occasionally, the attentive birdwatcher will be rewarded with a loon or tern sighting. These shorebirds, along with the egrets, ospreys, and hawks found slightly further inland, make Cape May a world-class location for bird watching. I used to think birding was the most boring hobby imaginable, but as I nestle into middle age, I find myself fascinated by the different species of birds and why they love my Cape May so much. I look for distinctive species now everywhere I go, but my baywalks are my favorite birding excursions still.

Seagulls flock to the intersection of the bay and canal, the terminus of my walks, because this is where the ferries dock. Where there are ferries, there are seagull-feeding people. In warmer months, thousands of people ride the ferry between Cape May, New Jersey, and Lewes, Delaware. The ferry connects New Jersey's Garden State Parkway with Routes 9 and then 13 in Delaware. These highways bring the traveler through Delaware and Maryland to the Chesapeake Bay Bridge and Tunnel and into Virginia. This makes for a scenic and pleasant ride along a good part of the eastern coast. I can only imagine what changes the ferry brought to the Cape May region when it began running in 1964. Suddenly these secluded beach towns were playing host to

tourists passing through the area along with those for whom Cape May was a destination. As a pointy peninsula, Cape May had never experienced this kind of temporary population before. It was great for businesses and bored teenagers like my sister, but it had a big impact on those folks who had come to live here because of the seclusion. The ferry is a big part of my experience here. I enjoy cruising over the bay to explore Lewes which used to be so mysterious to me as a child. Lewes has a fascinating nautical history similar to Cape May's, plus shops and stores, a sprawling state park, and popular beaches and boardwalks. All of this is similar to mine on the Jersey side, but different, too. It's not mine. The ferry offers special occasion cruises, too. One of these is the fireworks cruise on the Fourth of July. The ferry cruises further north on the bay to allow its reveling passengers a good view of the fireworks set off from a barge on the bay. It seems like a festive voyage, and we can hear the music from our chairs on the shore.

The bay will be here after I'm gone. I enjoy all the things I do at the bay—the walks, the kite flying, the picnics, and the bird watching. I enjoy sunbathing on the hot summer days and the freezing walks in the winter. One thing remains constant, though: my imaginings of this peaceful place throughout history, and what it will be like when I'm gone. The shoreline may change, and bird species will evolve, but this place will be here forever, or as long as there is a forever. This concept is more than my imagination can hold. It's bigger than me, and someday, somehow, it will remember me, too.