

Special Childhood Place

When I was a small boy of about three or four and my dad was about forty pounds lighter, my dad and I started a tradition of playing beach soccer every day of summer at sunset when we visited my grandparents in Sea Isle City, New Jersey. We used our shoes as makeshift goalposts, and he always let me win. My grandfather would join us from time to time, sitting in his yellow chair, opting to play referee while sipping a beer.

For a few years it was just the three of us, playing soccer on a secluded beach with nothing but the occasional dog walker, the beach patrol rescue boat pulled up to the mouth of the dunes, and the sound of the crashing waves. The sun would fall into the dunes and the shore house, painting the sky with shades of red, purple, and orange. The three of us walked back and washed our feet with the hose. It was always this way.

But as all things do, our little tradition came to an end in middle school as my dad's work became essentially around the clock and my grandfather couldn't make the short walk to the beach anymore. Sometimes I would go down to the beach by myself to juggle the soccer ball or sit in the empty beach patrol boat, watching the sunset and remembering our soccer games.

My solitary, self-reflective sunset walks continued until midway through high school, when my dad asked me to join him and a couple beers on the beach for the sunset. Despite having summer homework, I immediately said yes. Even though there was no soccer ball kicked, returning to the beach with my dad was everything I could've asked for. We once again stared at the Atlantic Ocean, this time with our backs to the colors of the sky. Sometimes, to include my grandfather, we would sit on the back deck instead. It was almost exactly how it had been years ago.

In summer of 2019, my grandfather fell at the beach house down a small flight of stairs. We knew he would survive the broken ribs and punctured lung; he had already beaten cancer twice. He wasn't the same when he returned, and he was diagnosed with bone cancer soon afterwards.

After a long battle with cancer that had my dad drive up and back to Philadelphia from D.C. countless times during the COVID pandemic, my grandfather passed peacefully in his sleep in June of this year, marking the first time in 50 years that his larger-than-life spirit had not occupied the halls of the shore house.

This summer was very hard on my dad, so each night if the weather would permit, we would bring down a six pack of beer and sit and talk. Sometimes we would just sit and say nothing. Sometimes the conversation brought out tears. Sometimes there would be a small child playing catch or flying a kite with his dad. Sometimes it was nothing but sand and sky as far as the eye could see. The only thing that would stay the same was the roaring of the surf and the afterglow of the sun.

And now, as I look out my apartment window at the sun falling over Los Angeles, tears well up in my eyes. My dad probably watched this same sunset just three hours earlier, alone in his beach chair, staring at the waves in Sea Isle. During this stressful first week at USC, I would give anything to sit with a six pack and my dad, taking in the serenity of the beach.

This Labor Day Weekend will be the first time that the three of us won't share an end-of-summer evening on the beach together, but I know the sunset and the waves will still be there. And that's all I could ask for.