

HARRIET DOERR

Low Tide at Four

What I remember of those summers at the beach is that every afternoon there was a low tide at four.

I am wrong, of course. Memory has outstripped reality. But before me as I write, in all its original colors, is a scene I painted and framed and now, almost fifty years later, bring to light.

Here, then, is a California beach in summer, with children, surfers, fishermen, and gulls. The children are seven and three. We are on the sand, a whole family—father, mother, a boy and a girl. The year is 1939. It is noon. There will be a low tide at four.

Days at the beach are all the same. It is hard to tell one from another. We walk down from our house on the side of the hill and stop on the bluff to count the fishermen (five) on the pier and the surfers (three), riding the swells, waiting for

their waves. We turn into Mrs. Tustin's pergola restaurant for hamburgers. Though we recognize them as the best in the world, we never eat them under the matted honeysuckle of the pergola. Instead, we carry them, along with towels, buckets, shovels, books, and an umbrella, down the perilous, tilting wooden stairs to the beach. Later we go back to the pergola for chocolate and vanilla cones.

"Ice cream special, cherry mint ripple," says Mrs. Tustin on this particular day, and we watch a fat man lick a scoop of it from his cone. We wait for him to say, "Not bad," or "I'll try anything once," but he has no comment. A long freight train rattles by on the tracks behind the pergola. As we turn away, Mrs. Tustin says, "The world's in big trouble," and the fat man says, "You can say that again. How about that paper-hanger, Adolf?" But it's hard to hear because of the train.

Back on the beach, our heads under the umbrella, we lie at compass points like a four-pointed star. The sun hangs hot and high. Small gusts of wind lift the children's corn-straw hair. We taste salt. Face down, arms wide, we cling to the revolving earth.

Now Mr. Bray, the station agent, a middle-aged Mercury in a shiny suit, crosses the dry sand in his brown oxford shoes. He is delivering a telegram. Everyone listens while I read the message from our best and oldest friends. Sorry, they can't come next weekend after all. Good, we say to ourselves, without shame.

I invite Mr. Bray to join us under the umbrella. "Can't you stay on the beach for a while?" He pauses with sand sifting into his shoes. Oh, no, he has to get back to his trains. He left his wife in charge, and the new diesel streamliner will be coming through.

At this moment a single-seated fighter plane from the navy base north of us bursts into sight along the shore, flying

so low it has to climb to miss the pier. The children jump into the air and wave. The pilot, who looks too young for his job, waves back.

"Look at that," says Mr. Bray. "He could get himself killed."

Time and the afternoon are running out. A fisherman reels in a corbina. Three gulls ride the swells under the pier. The children, streaked with wet sand, dig a series of parallel and intersecting trenches into the ebb tide. Their father walks to the end of the pier, dives into a swell, rides in on a wave, and walks out to the end of the pier again. I swim and come back to my towel to read. I swim and read again.

Winesburg, Ohio; Sister Carrie; Absalom, Absalom; Ethan Frome; The Magic Mountain; Studs Lonigan; A Handful of Dust; A Room with a View. There are never books enough or days enough to read them.

I look up from my page. Here is old Mrs. Winfield's car being parked at the top of the bluff. It must be almost four. Her combination driver, gardener, and general manager, Tom Yoshimura, helps her into a canvas chair he has set up in front of the view. His wife, Hatsu, new from Japan, is stringing beans for dinner in Mrs. Winfield's shingled house on the hill. Hatsu can't speak English. She bows good morning and good afternoon.

Mrs. Winfield has survived everything: her husband's death and the death of a child, earthquakes, floods, and fires, surgical operations and dental work, the accidents and occasional arrests of her grandchildren. All these, as well as intervals of a joy so intense it can no longer be remembered. I watch Tom Yoshimura bring her an ice cream cone from the pergola.

It is four o'clock. We are standing in shallow water at low tide. The children dig with their toes and let the waves wash in and

out over their feet. They are sinking deeper and deeper. During the summer, their skins have turned every shade of honey: wildflower, orange, buckwheat, clover. Now they are sage. I look into my husband's face. He reaches over their heads to touch my arm.

At this time on this August day in 1939, I call up my interior reserves and gather strength from my blood and bones. Exerting the full force of my will, I command the earth to leave off circling long enough to hold up the sun, hold back the wave. Long enough for me to paint and frame low tide.

MARJORIE SANDOR

Rhapsody in Green

A few years ago, when I was married and living uneasily in Florida, I believed that there was, in a town twelve miles away, a little restaurant with green upholstery—a certain green—that served the best breakfast. This restaurant, which I thought existed at a bend in the road near some railroad tracks, had that sheerly impossible quality we sometimes ascribe to material things—often to restaurants, sometimes to whole cities we can't seem to get back to. If we could only get there again, we think, our lives would be saved, or a deep, nagging mystery solved at last. Surely you've heard people go on this way, rhapsodically, about an armchair they sat in once on a Thursday when they were twelve, or about the smell of sausage in an English pub on a rainy day in March 1957. Some apparently trivial things appear to contain the sublime, and there's no explaining