Last beach day

The A train over the water, no lifeguards, and the coldest ten seconds of my year.

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5 MIN READ

Saturday was supposed to be seventy-eight degrees and sunny, which in late September in New York is basically a gift. So I decided it was the last beach day of the year. Officially. I made it a whole thing in my head.

I texted Tyler to see if he wanted to come. He said "it's almost October, are you okay." I said that's a no then. He said that's a no. So I went alone, which honestly I kind of wanted anyway.

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Getting to Rockaway from my place is a journey. You take the L from Bedford all the way out to Broadway Junction, then switch to the A. The L part is just the L. Same as always. But the A is where it gets good.

There's a point after Howard Beach where the train comes up out of the ground and crosses Jamaica Bay, and suddenly there's water on both sides of you. Like, the train is just running across the water. Planes coming in low over the bay to JFK. Every time I take it I forget it's going to happen, and every time I end up with my face basically on the window like a kid.

There was a little girl across from me doing the same thing, with her hands flat on the glass. Her dad was asleep. We looked at each other once, both kind of caught, and she pointed at a heron out there. I nodded. That was our whole conversation. It was a good one.

At Broad Channel I switched to the shuttle, the little S train that goes down the peninsula, and got off at Beach 98th. Took about an hour

and a half total. Which sounds like a lot, but you're kind of on vacation from the second you see the water.

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The beach was almost empty. The boardwalk had people on it, joggers, a couple older guys on bikes with speakers playing salsa, but down on the sand it was maybe twenty people spread out along like a mile.

There are no lifeguards after Labor Day. So technically you're not supposed to swim. There were signs. I want to say that for the record.

I put my towel down near the jetty and just lay there for a while. The sun was warm but the wind off the water had that edge to it, like summer was still there but packing its bags. The sand was cold an inch down when I dug my fingers in. Seagulls doing their thing. Somebody flying a kite shaped like an octopus, which kept nosediving into the sand and then coming back up. I watched it for a long time. I was rooting for it.

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Then I went in the water. Kind of.

I want to describe this accurately. I walked in up to my ankles and it was cold. Then up to my knees and it was very cold. Then a wave came out of nowhere and hit me right in the stomach, and I made a sound I've never made before. Like a door hinge. A woman walking her shoes in her hand down the shoreline looked over at me, concerned.

So at that point I was already wet, and I figured I might as well. I went under. Fully. For maybe ten seconds. And it was so cold my whole head went empty. Like a reset button. I came up and I couldn't think of a single thing I'd been worried about all week. Not one email. Not one thing.

Then I ran out of the water as fast as I could and lay face down on my towel and shook for a while. The woman with the shoes gave me a thumbs up as she passed. I gave one back without lifting my face.

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Around two I got hungry and walked up to the boardwalk to see what was still open. Most of the concession stands were already closed for the season, metal shutters down, signs saying "thanks for a great summer, see you in May."

But down past 97th there was this one tiny stand still open. Like, really tiny. A wooden shack with a hand-painted sign that said FISH TACOS + LEMONADE and a guy inside with a bandana and a little flat-top grill. I think his name was Joe, because there was a Joe's on the sign and he answered to Joe when a lady called it.

He told me it was his last weekend for the year. He said he'd been doing this stand for nine summers and he always stays open one weekend longer than everyone else, just for the people who come out late. "The real ones," he said. I don't think I'm a real one, but I appreciated it.

The tacos were incredible. Crispy fish, cabbage, some kind of lime sauce, a little too much hot sauce because he put it on before I could stop him. I ate two standing at the railing and got sauce on my shirt.

Then I ordered a third one and a lemonade and sat on the bench and ate it slower. The lemonade was the kind with real lemon pieces floating in it, so cold my teeth hurt.

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I stayed until the light got low and gold and everything turned that color you only get at the beach in the fall. The kite person had left. A couple was doing photos down by the water, her in a white dress, him in a suit with his pants rolled up. The photographer kept yelling "walk toward me, but casually." They did not look casual. They looked happy though.

I sat there with sand in everything, salt drying on my skin so my arms felt tight, and I didn't want to leave. I know it's just a beach. It's like an hour and a half from my apartment and I'll be back in June. But it felt like closing a door on something.

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Train home was quiet. The A going back over the bay at sunset is maybe even better than going out. The water turned pink and the city showed up in the distance, tiny and far away, like a model of itself.

I fell asleep somewhere around Euclid and woke up at Broadway Junction with my head on the window and a dried salt line on my forehead.

At home I took a shower and found sand in my ear at like midnight. I found more in my sneakers on Tuesday. I think there'll be some in my bag until spring. I don't mind. Kind of like a receipt.

– Shay

Thanks for reading. There are more of these on my site, one every couple of weeks.