

Chunky Monkey

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I'd always thought Alex looked just like his brother. His brother was three years older than us, but the only physical difference in the two was his Alex's hair turned light in the summer, like his mom's. Looking into the rear-view mirror, I could see his eyes beginning to open beneath his sun-stained hair, blinking for several seconds until he finally saw me, too. It took approximately half a second for my little cousins, who bordered him on both sides, to realize that he had awakened, and then another quarter of a second for them to begin the hitting, hair-pulling, and tickling charade. Laughing from the front seat, my aunt and I scanned the sides of the road, looking for the sign for Bethany Beach. Every few seconds I glanced in the mirror, making eye contact with Alex for a moment, before he was sucked back into the tornado of sticky toddler fingers and flying nerf bullets.

The sun was still low in the sky, just beginning to peak over the sand dunes that lined Highway 50, the sea grass growing higher and higher as we approached the coast. Bethany Beach had a small population of just over 1,000 during the winter months, but during the summer the tenant count swelled to nearly 15,000. Despite the overwhelming number of tourists, Bethany never felt crowded to me. The pastel colored shops that lined the boardwalk were never filled with cheesy trinkets or light-up keychains with popular names like Sara and Zach; instead there were used-book shops, pet stores with litters of Labradoodles and Jack Russels, and, my favorite, an authentic Ben and Jerry's ice cream parlor.

That was the first place Alex and I went after we helped unpack the minivan. We raced each other to the counter, calling out that whoever got there last had to pay. He didn't let me win, the way most boys would, he elbowed me in the ribs and jutted his knee out, trying to trip me as we hurtled through the sand. We both slapped our palms against the cool linoleum counter at the same time, startling the girl working behind it. Taking a moment to catch his breath, Alex ordered two ice cream cones, one Peach Melba and one Chunky Monkey with chocolate sprinkles. A game of rock-paper-scissors and it was decided – Alex would pay. He dropped the change into the tip jar beside the cash register, handed me my Chunky Monkey, and together Alex and I continued down the boardwalk towards a pair of rocking chairs.

He reached out, linking his fingers in mine as we walked, using his thumb to draw shapes on my wrist. This was a sensation I had felt hundreds of times, his hand on mine, the sight of his dimples whenever he smiled. Alex and I had known each other since we were 11, when he caught me

during Capture the Flag in gym class. It had been four years since then, but I still got the same fluttery feeling in my chest every time he looked at me. Taking our place side-by-side in the rocking chairs, we ate our sugary breakfasts in silence, taking in the salty breeze and watching three Maltese puppies as they chased one another around the pen that sat in front of Joey's Pet Supplies. By the time I had finished the top of my ice cream and had begun to gnaw at the cone, a group of girls who appeared to be my age walked by. There were four of them – they had on sparkly bikini tops and denim Daisy Duke shorts, and none of them held an ice cream cone. Self-consciously I glanced down at my blue lacrosse T-shirt and Nike running shorts, spotted with milky brown stains where my ice cream had dripped. I felt a hand brush my blonde, ramen-noodle-esque hair behind my ear. Looking up, I saw Alex smiling at me, a drop of Peach Melba clinging to the tip of his nose. I smiled back at him, placing my hand over his.

Alex had always been good-looking – his shaggy blonde hair, tan skin that freckled after a few hours in the sun, and bright blue eyes had set him far above the other pre-pubescent boys in middle school. Over the last year, our freshman year of high school, he had grown 3 inches, and, being the only boy in our grade to make varsity lacrosse, a lot of girls had begun to take interest in him. Despite all this, despite the fact that I was still the lanky, curly-haired girl he had known since seventh grade, Alex and I remained inseparable. For years we had lived in our own little world, content with each other's company. Up until six months before the trip to Bethany Beach, when I had moved hundreds of miles

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away from Alex and the place I grew up, he and I had spent every day together, playing lacrosse, making the most complicated recipes we could find, or watching sea documentaries. It wasn't a question that we would stay together after I left – we barely even talked about it. Both of our parents had free air miles from their constant business trips, so for the last few months he and I had flown back and forth, staying in each other's guest bedrooms for the weekend before flying back on a Sunday night or Monday morning to make it to school. In June I had flown back to my hometown to stay with family for the entire summer, meaning he and I had three whole months to pretend that I didn't have to leave again when school started. It was the end of August now, and my flight left in less than 24 hours. Maybe that's why he held my hand so tightly as we left the boardwalk and sprinted to the water, shedding our t-shirts and shorts so we were nothing but two Lycra-clad bodies, linked together in the hope that if we held on for one more day, we wouldn't ever have to let go.

That was the last day I ever spent with Alex. Reality caught up with us after the beginning of our sophomore year, when our lives got busy and it became too hard to fly out and see each other anymore. I saw a picture of him at his brother's wedding, their matching grins and black tuxes taking up the center of the frame as his brother hugged his new bride, and Alex linked his hand with the hand of a petite brunette. She's a beautiful girl. They both smiled so wide, and I wondered what shape his thumb was making on the inside of her wrist. The thing is, goodbye is never easy, and it was naïve of us to believe that anything could stay the same, but I am so thankful that our goodbye was on that beautiful August day in Bethany Beach, running to the ocean and believing we would last forever.)



"Low Tides" by Samantha Vanderwalker