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The Impact of Wilderness

 The teenage years are years filled with questions. Where people’s beliefs, ideals, thoughts, ideas of the future, ideas of ourselves, are all challenged. It is a time of open-mindedness, and at the same time it is a time of close-mindedness. It is a time of learning. But most of all, it is a time of tears and a time of laughter.

Happiness. Happiness defines us, just like sadness and memories both define us. But what things make us happy? Is it what you see in the mirror hanging above your sink? Your looks? Is it that feeling of cameras snapping at your face? Fame? Is it the feel of money underneath your fingers? Fortune? Is it the dominance you exert over others? Power? No, I don’t think it is any of that. A person can have all those things and still be unhappy. In the end, it’s love that really makes happiness. Whether that love is for a person, or friends, or a lifestyle, or a simple smile, or a place.

 When I was eight years old, I discovered a slightly hidden patch of beach near my neighborhood. I knew that I was not the only one who knew about it. It wouldn’t be logical if I were the only person who knew of that small piece of land. And yet, I would like to delude myself into thinking that. It was an escape, a small puzzle piece of paradise. It was untouched, except for my footprints that sank into the sand. For all the times that I went there, just for a second to inhale the salty air, I always felt like the only person who was there. And in that way, I developed a love for this small little place. For a young girl, a place like that is a dream come true. In hidden places, fairytales can exist. Make believe becomes reality. Even when I was thirteen and claimed to be too old for such things, that strip of land was an escape for me. When stress bore down on me too hard, when pressure had built up too much, that beach was my hideaway, my haven.

 I didn’t notice it at first. But slowly the water began to eat away at the sand and slowly my safe haven was falling apart. There was nothing I could do to stop it. How could I? In essence, I am only a child. A child cannot stand up to a force a million times stronger than her. In a few years, the beach will become smaller, and then a strip, and then into nothingness, sinking beneath the waves. It may be too late for my beach, but for the rest of the world filled with places that seem untouched, it isn’t.

People underestimate the impact of nature upon a person. In places where trees have been replaced by skyscrapers and grass has been replaced by cement, people who live there don’t understand it. They might never experience the love of a wild place. They might never find a place that is so tied to your very being, so molded into your heart, that clings to the very last piece of wilderness on this Earth. They might never find a wild haven, a haven that seems to be theirs, and theirs alone. Wild places are escapes from reality. When you are there, the troubles melt away. You are entering a different world. You are entering nature. And by entering nature, a bit of you changes. Your eyes notice more green, notice the beauty of the weeds climbing between the cement cracks. Your heart becomes more compassionate to the trees whose trunks are being sawed. Those trees are being deprived of their home, just like you are being deprived of an experience, of a place, of a love.

In a few years, my beach might be nothing. In a few years, thousands of memories will float among the murky waves of the Elizabeth River. But the impact of that place? The impact of being able to experience a wild place? The impact stays. It doesn’t go away.