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## **Blinks in a Seascape**

By Elisabeth Nadin. This article first appeared in 41°N: A Publication of the Rhode Island Sea Grant and Land Grant Programs, Fall 2001.

### *Editor's note:*

*The sea town Elisabeth Nadin writes about is partly fictional, partly real: Readers may nod with recognition as the town emerges in glimpses of seasonal indulgence and daily endurance, but they can't go find it. Like many coastal communities, this one struggles to reconcile the traditional ideal of seaside living and the lure of tourism and development.*

*In often harsh snapshots of "summer colony" life, Nadin illustrates the theme issue of this edition of 41°N—resource scarcity, a concept that extends to coastal living space.*

*"Blinks in a Seascape" won first prize in the 1998 Rumowicz Maritime Essay Contest. The annual competition showcases the works of University of Rhode Island (URI) undergraduates whose writings explore various aspects of the sea. The contest is an outgrowth of the URI Literature and Sea lecture and seminar series endowed by Edmund S. and Nathalie Rumowicz.*

*Nadin, a 1999 geology and geological oceanography graduate, is now studying geology at the California Institute of Technology.*

Dave screwed his face up at me and pumped his loose fist up and down in jerk-off motion. He likes to make me laugh, and he knows the customer climbing into his shiny black jeep with the Connecticut plates is typical of many I see every year. Summers I work in an antique shop down the shore, a bike ride away from my house. It's open, like a lot of the places here, weekends starting in May, then all week long from Memorial Day through Labor Day, and then weekends again till the weather gets cold and even the straggling weekend visitors don't think the trip is worth it. It's like there's a breachway leading from the inside of the state to its shore borders, and in summer the barriers fall away and we flood.

We sell antiques like commodities, catering to these whims that seem to spring up and die out almost instantaneously, attacking only the rich. It's mostly women who come here to look around, and they stop by at regular intervals throughout the summer, spending the time to search in corners, as if we hid the most special pieces away from them. Maybe they enjoy the thrill that is like looking for hidden treasures that must, by nature, be hardest to find. "Just wanted to see what new things are out." What they're doing is buying other people's private memories aired out.

A big sign in the corner reads, "Please do not inquire here of real estate." Despite the straightforwardness of the sign and its refusal to apologize for itself, people inquire anyway. "I noticed there are a lot more For Sale signs up this year. Ya know why?" Because the people who grew up here, whose families were here for generations, can't

afford to live here anymore. Because people with more money from neighboring states come here to build their own houses, not buy them, and property taxes go up and then they're the only ones who want to pay it. Because some people don't see the sea as a summer paradise; they're just trying to raise their families the way they know how, and maybe get a little bit ahead. "No, I don't."

Summer people are called "skukes." I think it's a word some kids created back in grade school, or a word heard and forgotten and remembered in a perverted version. Skukes are birds that move into other birds' nests, shit all over them, and leave. We've seen diapers floating in the water down at the town beach where families park their trailers for the summer. We still pick trash from the sand, years after garbage cans were placed all along the shore. Of course, the wealthy summer vacationers don't go to the town beach. There are four beaches in our town, one of which is for "Residents Only," and it's a rocky shore. Of the three sandy beaches, two are private beach clubs, where only paying members are allowed access from 9 to 5.

"Private Beach. Members Only." All beaches are public access out to the high-water mark. It's getting to the high-water mark that's tricky: All land around it has been bought up. If we really wanted to go to the private beaches, we could swim or sail in from neighboring water. Or wait till 5 p.m., when the attendants and guards and members have gone home. We jump off the high rocks into the water, watching the empty beach spin by, feeling the coolness after the heat of the day. When the summer nights get warmer, we go late and in the darkness we strip quickly and jump in naked, watching the bioluminescent creatures sparking the dark water, disturbed by the plunge.

There are no streetlights in our town, although plans are discussed to have some put in. I don't think we need them. The sky is bright with stars even when the moon is new. I used to sneak out of my house at night before my parents allowed me to stay out late. I'd walk down to the end of our road, climb over the fence that reads "Private Property. No Trespassing," walk over the grass to the shore, and climb onto the big rock that stands in the water with waves crashing themselves against it. The lot that ends at the high-water mark belongs to the owners of the house across the road from it, and during summer days the man sits on his porch, watching to see if anyone will climb over the fence. The rock is public property, and if you walk down the road some more you can climb the rocky beach face back to the rock if you really want to sit on it. Or you can just wait till Labor Day when the man and his family leave and walk down the path leading straight to the rock.

The sky is so beautiful late, late at night, when people go to bed and their automatic floodlights shut off. They keep their houses on display like stores, like movie stars. "*This belongs to me.*" Some lights shine out far and block out the sky and the trees and the water and everything but the house. I want to cry at how little and ugly people can be in the face of something so big and beautiful.

Our population doubles in the summer. We give up some of what we know, some of what belongs to us for the rest of the year. The speed of traffic slows to a numbing crawl, despite the constancy of the scenery of passing days. There are car accidents at the farm stands, where people pull in and out without looking to see that they're not alone in a private paradise. They must think accidents don't happen when they are on vacation. Or maybe they don't realize local service doesn't extend to keeping the roads clear and private parking spaces everywhere for them.

A few summers ago a kid was killed by a drunk driver on his way home from a cocktail party. The best-paying job I ever had was serving at one of those. People dress up just to show they can and crowd around the bar. It starts out slow. Then suddenly everyone is drunk and eating the bacon-wrapped scallops they'd never dare look at during the day, and the women are mean, and the men are disgusting. They stay till the bar is almost dry, and then they drive home, the men sitting rich at the wheel and the women sitting rich, pinched, brown, and still unsatisfied beside them.

We clean up. Winter moves in. I hear the same question every summer, "What do you do here in the winter?" As if justified existence ends when summer is over and there are no more vacationers to serve. Winters here are hard. The wind blows so strong that the trees that can live here are bent and gnarled. The shore turns rocky with whatever the sea can spit up. The water turns grey and angry and the sky turns grey and angry, I'm not sure which first. The nights are long and in protest the days become shorter, and it's damn, damn lonely.

Despite the winter weather and the apparent lack of sense of it, men still wake up at 3 a.m. and are on their boats and out of the harbor by 4:30 and hauling fish around 5 and returning at 7 p.m. or later, depending on how lucky they were. You make more money working on someone else's boat than owning your own, but nobody wants to work for someone else for their whole lives. Especially not if they want to get married and have children. If you own your boat, you hire men to take it out for you, but if you don't, you're one of the men on the boat taking it out at 4 a.m. on a cold winter morning.

We have a bank, a post office, a town hall, a few churches, a grade school, a police department, a library, a pizza place, a town store. Farm stands close in the winter, but the farms still have to be run. Restaurants close, but their bars stay open. There's a liquor store. Real estate offices close in the winter. The art gallery closes. Half the town's houses stand empty, but the whole town is here.

The kids who grow up here don't want to stay here. They leave as soon as they have the chance because they know if they don't, they never will. There's a dissatisfaction in the lonely winter air. Maybe it's the constant battering of the sea, the way the trees are all bent the same way by the wind, the annual bleaching of mildew off the walls only to have it come again the next year, the watching of people swarming in and swarming out with the coming and going of one season. There must be some place better to go.

In a way, the sea represents poverty, because it shows us how rich people can be. No one who lives here is special. But suddenly we are when we've left, because we're from the sea. And yet we don't feel like this is our place until we have left, and we realize how much less we know of other people and how much more we know the sea.

It is not a place for the weak. It is not a place for the young. Many of the people who grew up here and left when they could will never be back. But there are some who, after trying for 10 or 20 years, find they just can't be anywhere else, and they will return to the welcome and comfort of people who knew them when. There comes a time when you don't want to be known but unloved anymore, and the bigness of the outside world is not so big anymore. Then you long to be unknown but loved, and the smallness of a town on the edge of the world has a face so huge it consumes you.

When we are alone in the winter I walk down to the shore and lay myself flat in the

dunes. The sky is an eerie winter grey and the wind howls, but when I'm flat on the ground I don't feel it as much. The water is winter grey, too, so there is no distinction between where the water ends and where the sky begins. A little girl asked me once, "Where does the ocean end?" From my reference point, I guess where the land begins. When I look out to the furthest point on the horizon I can distinguish, I get sucked into the infinity of it. I'll always come back to this place. The sea doesn't care what we do here, on its shore. I lie here and I know, if it wanted to it could wash all of this away.

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