

Gurganus, Alan.

"Nags Head, North Carolina, June 1st, 1906, 73 Degrees."

Aperture.

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## NAGS HEAD, NORTH CAROLINA, JUNE 1ST, 1956, 73 DEGREES

by Allan Gurganus

**PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOEL STERNFELD**

*Once upon a time gray-green and oceanic*, brochures found nothing better to call such look-out land than "beach-front property, real real desirable." Is this the best we humans can do! But Father was content, leasing one such seaside place for two whole weeks per year, 1950–69.

He now sped us there, the Country Squire station-wagon full of sons and bourbon. "It's sea-salt always makes you kids so hungry. Take a breath, I hear your little stomachs growl back there. That's why we had Ardelia bring extra peanut butter and those bananas that smelled good at first. On adults, sea-salt works in different ways, boys. Makes big fellows like me feel . . . salty, right, hon? Makes me notice your mother's beauty even more'n I do . . . daily. Makes grownups need to eat shrimp and try . . ." Dad, at sixty-nine mph, attempted touching Mom's pale nearest shoulder, freckled nearly pink. ". . . adult activities, right, honey?"

"You have my permission to start on your own, anytime." He laughed this into seeming a flirtation. But Mom sat stiff-necked, acting judged by our ample churchly Ardelia stuck in back between my brothers and me. Delia's purse rested open before us, filled with one huge black Bible. (Inland, Delia's Book seemed potent. But as we neared the beach, it lost so much radioactivity it resembled a flat tire.)

Every year we leased a different cottage at Nags Head or Wrightsville Beach. Our family would arrive with Styro-foam coolers, decent tablecloths, new Samsonite, pyramided atop the car. This season we'd rented The Castle. Kids called it that first. A mess of porches, it had enough maids' room so the maids could bring their own. Two upstairs balconies were built so small, just one chair could fit. This place was shingled the gray of hornets' nest, its turrets rounded, seeming wished or chewed into being. By now it'd aged into seeming less a place, more a geologic fact. —The many white sandcastles folks built daily before it aspired to be what it already was, but in miniature, its eggs.

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All photographs Nags Head, North Carolina, July–August, 1975.  
Photographs courtesy Luhring Augustine Gallery, New York



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**"All right, beachcombers back there.** How'd Nags Head get its name? Since I majored in History at UNC, I love asking you-all this every year. You whiz-kids haven't failed me yet."

"Pirates!" our three-year-old jumped first.

"Pirates' attempting what?", Dad was a lawyer.

"Pirates," our second oldest ventured, "who liked to make ships wreck and then they'd steal all the good stuff after the people in those drowned. But to get it *onto* rocks, they'd tie a lamp around the neck of some broken-down horse onshore. —At night!" His voice squeaked, uncertain.

Ardelia (child-care, food-prep, general companion, prayer before meals) now touched my upper back. Elected, I'd been born the bossy eldest, "On midnights without a moon, the swinging of the lantern (not a 'lamp') made one old nag look like another ship at sea, see? And," I added something new, inspired perhaps by sea-salt, "the worse that darn nag moved, the more its lantern went all up and down and sideways, the more foreign captains figured it must be another boat. But it was just the light around a . . ."

"Nag's Head!" brothers cashed in on my subtlety.

"Ex-cellent," Dad sped up. "Can't you guys practically smell our place already?" His left hand held the wheel; his right disappeared, trying something.

"Ric-hard, no! Thank God we live inland. Richard, I am warning you. Stop, or nothing Adult all vacation. Nothing for you later but . . ."

"Peanut butter and bananas!" My youngest brother got a laugh. We weren't usually so talkative, high-spirited. The beach did that. Even before you saw water. "Entering Nags Head." Came its first timid jutting, our Atlantic, birthright. You'd catch it, pale-green triangles inset like tiles between white white cottages. Then one lopsided rectangle held there, all to itself, a simple mural of one wave vast beside our car. Whitecaps unfurled till a hotel hogged the whole sight for its paying guests. You could soon hear and smell Ocean all over your body. —Why did we not live right here fulltime?

**It was after we got our car unpacked.** Was only after our parents poured themselves little Kentucky toasts from new bottles. Only after Ardelia chose the most spotted bananas to go first between our spongy Wonder bread. It was after the hour's nap required post-lunch to prevent kids' drowning our first day here. It was only then. "Shall we, my sun-loving fun-loving pets?" Our father

was a charmer two whole weeks a year. (The rest of the time he could act bitter, fisted, inward, pallid, earning us all this.)

"The Castle" smelled musty as last year's rental, maybe mustier, being older. Its oriental rugs had been as sand-worn as see-through as fish-fins. Its painted kitchen cabinets either wouldn't close or proved stuck shut. Its halls were hotel-wide and showed browned group-photos of the family that'd built this Castle in the 1880s. They posed wearing long swim-suits, hands upon each others' shoulders, not wanting to be caught smiling, though you sensed their undertow happiness. Styles—even of smiles—change. Whether to or not. (Nowadays, in our varnish-colored Kodachromes, you *had* to smile, though that hid things, too.)

Only when beach umbrellas had been placed at rifle-angles across larger sons' shoulders, only when Ardelia had trudged forth first carrying stacked towels and her Bible like first-aid, only then could we wander as one toward our hard-earned ocean. An appointment perfectly kept.

**The month of June was spread here on our beach like** something edible upon a silver tray. In just the way our rented kitchen's stove was briefly fully ours, all the blue-green water clear to Spain was, too.

Usually the only folks you saw were families from this same week last year. Such tribes mostly owned; we were the temps, cowbirds wedging into nests of those too old or broke to use their castles full-season. Cottages near ours were named "Lancelot" and other knightly titles; such monikers hinted at evenings spent by old-timey people reading poems aloud on porches lit by wind-tested lamplight a century and a half ago.

But today, six strangers nearly naked blocked our path. Dad did not look pleased at finding the Marines had landed. And right before a Castle that cost retail. "Semper fi," one greeted us, clearly plotzed. But Mom, touching Father's arm, hinted he should relax; these adolescents so outweighed him, they could kill him as a joke; and whereas *they* would be gone by sundown, we were here for good (two full weeks, noon checkout.)

We waved at other families from last year, folks also busy ignoring the intruders. ("Cheatham? come away from there, child. You are bothering the young men, Cheatham.") My brothers ran over to find last summer's best pals, grown some.

I instead studied raw new guests clogging our Atlantic access. They sprawled among comic-book beachtowels. Beer

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sweated in two brown bags. Instead of hating this sight, I found myself glad the intruders were at least undraped. Their being mostly naked made them pitiful yet wondrous. The Marines were far bigger than Dad and yet seemed younger than myself.

Stripped for swimming, spread-eagle across towels and camouflage, their young bodies rested vexed opened like my jack-knife.

On our beach, we usually saw just kids my boney age or grown-ups lumpy and assumed as my thirty-year-old parents. But these new ones were young tigers, tattooed with young tigers whose claws left red blood scoring big notched arms. Girls swarmed busy all around them and yet, under two-piece-suits, looked chicken-pot-pie heavy. Gals' earlier sundresses had left white lines printed into redness like sketches for some bridge un-built.

I, aged ten—my own gut moiling with sudden peanut-banana paste—squinted down at one beach-towel sleeper. He snored. A huge young man face-up, head resting square upon the springy tummy of one highly bacon-colored bikinied girl. Only now did I feel Dad's sea-salt of adulthood set to work in me. I stepped around these sun-burned sleepers reeking of Schlitz, coconut-oiled white skin crystallized with sand still whiter. And just as salt had started snapping in my father like movie-popcorn thirty miles from shore, something airborne, pesky, mischievous, now jerked to work within my lower body.

Behind us, a rental castle, the envy of all who might've seen us stride from there; before us, the license of an ocean said to be un-owned and everybody's.

Around us, the frisky grab-assing of young Ohio corporals on furloughs with cheap girls who had agreed to share motels for whole weekends with such crew-cut ruffians. What did *girls* get out of it? For a second, I guessed.

Soldiers' necks and hands seemed cooked cork-dark as cigarette filtertips, while all the rest shone white as candles. (Male nipples did look comically pink as store-bought rosebuds.) Squealing girls wore brazen 'aqua' or hot-raspberry pink. Their bathing caps, like the Jolly Green Giant's hair, seemed made of peapods dyed cheap sherbet tones.

And on all sides, pretending not to notice or act irked, other families like ours; book-ended by favorite black nurses supported by good Coleman green coolers (full of deviled eggs, lemonade, cold white wine) on tartan plaid blankets under high-end umbrellas shading transistor-radios and hard-back books.

The world we'd sought to leave ashore had followed us. Marines were land-pirates here to wreck seaside vacations. An army uninvited upstaged our Atlantic. Marines and their molls kept boiling at our feet like sea monsters in the corners of old maps. And all on towels too small.

We were people whose nurses sat heavy in the middle of our blankets, blotting daylight into their vast and dignifying blackness, women reading black Genesis while keeping one eye on pale youngsters prancing into foam.

That should surely have protected us. From too much uncooked life. But even here, on this entitled beach, we lived with wreckage, our very township named for the ghosts of crimes admitted. Once upon a midnight overcast, one old horse, one new lantern, terrible results. We now rested in sight of where bad earlier folks had taken such advantage of night-sailing good ones. Treasure lured illegally ashore. I squinted down at the bright romplings and nuzzlings of gals and their Marines ("Hey, Junie, get that cute tired can back over here, babe, and bring me a cold can of Schlitz too, will you's?") I saw my own father—eyes shut, resting sunny-side-up—place his haired hand squarely on one thigh, ice-tray-white, of my young mom. And I knew that land was not safe either.

This under us was all still reef. Hidden wrecking rocks. The air itself was basic sea-salt, a little breathing-room between hard grains. But I felt strangely calm, as with the certainty of a prediction guaranteed. The sea appeared not water now but some suave and costly oil. And—a cool breeze rubbing all my ribs and finding the tipfront of my navy-blue Jantzen suit—I felt danger. Looking down at one Marine kissing his plump girl's pink ankle, I became it. I felt a white-hot lantern fasten, permanent, around my neck.

Sexiness. Wreckage. You could not make omelets without busting many eggs. Sand now burned my soles. And I knew this: I adored being an as-yet unrecognized danger to the world. Fully sixty-seven pounds of that.

This was such a good beach at noon because, come midnight, gainful losses were encouraged here. Hot-pink bikini-tops got left to slosh all morning to and fro in surf, crushed by the interest of the sun, bleached white by nosy salt. Treasure coaxed, then treasure freely given.

And, even at age ten, criminal sensualist, I knew it in advance:

*I live here. I own this already. I love my life. ♡*



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*no. 18c aperture /*



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