

The Beach Ballet

James B. McMurray

Amid the suburban bustle known as Orange County, California, exist a handful of places of great urban character. This may come as some surprise to those who think of Orange County only as a monotonous sea of subdivisions and strip malls, but it is home to some of our Country's most renowned beachfronts—Huntington, Newport, and Laguna—which also happen to be places with a vibrant, urban atmosphere. While I have visited many of California's beaches, I enjoyed a number of vacations to Newport Beach with my family, usually in the fall months when the crowds and summer heat were mostly gone. Of course, by "beach" I do not only mean the sandy strip along of the Pacific Ocean (that would be The Beach); I also include Newport's boardwalk, pier, plaza, beach houses, and shops that all seem to celebrate The Beach's irresistible attraction.

Life at the beach is simply slower and more measured than in most places, and this I think is a major part of its appeal. That's not to say there isn't activity, because there is. By sunrise, people are already passing through the main plaza. Many of these are the locals on their way to catch some decent surfing before the day's demands beckon and the novices show up and get in the way. In addition to the waves being caught, the fresh fish market is already bustling with its own catch, preparing and processing the fish for local restaurants. Perhaps the most visible group in the early morning is the local fitness fanatics getting in their morning run. They are easy to spot because of their high tech outfits (since when could a t-shirt be high tech?) and their sophisticated sensory enhancing/altering headphones and sunglasses. These boardwalk warriors navigate seemingly without effort or obstacle, at least until some tourist wandering back from the donut shop unwittingly interrupts the fantasy.

As the grey morning gradually gives way to "another day in paradise," the earnestness of the locals gives way to the carefree ramblings of the visitors. Surfboards become sand pails and umbrellas, running shoes are replaced by tandem bikes and rollerblades (or no shoes at all), and The Beach takes center stage. Kids of all ages scramble along the boardwalk, on the sand, and in the water. Inevitably, most who tempt the tide end up wetter than they'd hoped—only bare feet and pant cuffs were offered to the licking surf, but the sudden and disorienting rush predictably results in more than a few soggy backsides. Those fortunate enough to have close access to a bathroom and change of clothes avoid the punishment reserved for the unprepared, who will enjoy becoming the proud owners of a wet and sandy car. While the Beach becomes the primary focus of the day's activities, the storefronts beckon the less adventurous. Most storefronts cater strictly to out-of-towners, but somehow the area has resisted becoming an entirely kitschy "tourists only" sort of place.

Eventually, the day winds down, the sand castles and surfers have come and gone and the rhythmic surf of the beach's silhouette is all that remains. Without artificial lights to make the beach accessible, the action returns inland to the city, though a few contemplative types can be seen strolling on the sand. Predictably, a second wave of health nuts takes to the boardwalk, but the shops stay open, and some new faces appear as well. The 21 Ocean Restaurant, prominently situated at the boardwalk and plaza, springs to life with a steady stream of patrons. A street performer, artist, or even preacher goes to work on the plaza, giving those passing by an excuse to linger and watch.

But above all, the night belongs to the pier fishermen. Perhaps the only thing this group shares in common besides their fishing poles is that few (if any) of them claim English as their first language. They sometimes fish alone, but more often than not this group of mostly Latinos and Southeast Asians bring their friends, siblings, or even children. I have sometimes wondered if dinner for these fishermen literally rests on their ability to catch it that night (in stark contrast to the restaurant goers just across the boardwalk). But perhaps it's simply a form of recreation, just as with the early morning surfers.

Regardless, it is fascinating to watch as the fishermen (and fisherwomen) seem to follow some unspoken code of conduct as they make room for one another, prepare their lines, and clean their catch on the spot. The most mesmerizing moments, however, come at the instant the lines are cast. To compensate for the darkness, glow-sticks are attached to the fishing lines, and as the lines launch into the air and sail into the water the effect is reminiscent of fireworks. The sticks bob gently and eerily in the water, as hopeful onlookers watch the fishermen reel the line back in—sometimes, something tugs back.

It is from the end of the pier that the observer can look from the edge of humanity into the deep vastness of the ocean. Behind, the lights and vitality of Southern California stretch for miles. The eventual return to the plaza brings with it the realization that at this point there exists an intersection between many worlds—land and sea, man and nature, privilege and poverty. Who said a California beach vacation had to be superficial after all?