

Our Secret Beach
By Rhea Swanston
Iowa City High School

*Winner of the 2024 Glory of the Senses: Paul Engle Essay Contest
from the Iowa City UNESCO City of Literature*

I'm eleven years old, it's summer, and COVID-19 is making it feel endless. My sister Didi and I are constantly trying to find new ways to busy ourselves, whether it is by playing with our beloved dolls, running through the backyard sprinklers, or going on long car rides in our white minivan. But this stifling August day, we are feeling bored out of our minds. Sitting on the faded leather couch with our grandma as she watches her usual news show, I listen to the monotonous voices of the TV anchors, a fitting soundtrack for this dull day. What Didi and I crave the most is a true summer adventure, but because of the pandemic, we have limited options. My grandma, tired of our incessant complaining that there's nothing to do, offers to walk us to the nearby Hickory Hill woods. I'm not so crazy about the idea because it is so humid and the sun is scorching, but desperate for something to do, I reluctantly agree.

I slip on a pink tank top with embossed flowers, wiggle into white cotton shorts, and weave strands of my auburn hair into two neat little braids. I walk across the sticky, hot floors and into the laundry room, which is loudly spinning our laundry. I grab my pink, still-shiny sandals and shut the door firmly behind me. Even the handle feels warm. I brace myself for the outdoors.

My first breath outside is met with unbearable heat. A timid breeze drifts by and I feel myself starting to sweat. The street looks eerily empty as I squint in the bright sun. I glance across our neighbor's front yard and spot Ryan, one of our cul-de-sac friends. Despite the heat, he is wearing a full camouflage outfit and helmet and is rolling around in the dry grass, clutching his Nerf gun close to his chest. In the noon sun, the Nerf gun looks even brighter, its vivid orange and blue colors standing out against Ryan's earthy uniform.

"Where are you guys going?" he yells across the street. "Hickory Hill!" says Didi.

Ryan looks a bit disappointed. He is usually the leader in our little adventures, but we have been unable to hang out for months. As we cross the street to enter the woods, his little silhouette blends with the faded grass.

"Ryan is so funny," says Didi. "I miss playing with him,"

"I know." I want to tell Didi that we will play with him soon, but I don't know when that will be. For now, it's just her, me, and our grandma struggling to keep up. It's dead quiet outside except for our sandals hitting the gravel road.

"You girls go ahead, I'm gonna sit on this bench," our grandma calls from behind us. "Don't get in trouble."

We wave goodbye to her and keep walking.

Before we know it, we are surrounded by trees. Sunlight is filtering through a dense canopy of green, tinting everything in a dreamlike glow. Unlike our neighborhood, life is pouring out of every corner. A delicate carpet of ferns ushers us along. I can hear birds chirping melodiously and leaves rustling with movement. The air is thick with pine and cedar. We hop over a fallen tree covered in mushrooms, their musty smell rising up warm and sweet. Didi picks up a stick and notices moss growing on it.

“Look,” she says. “I think we’ve entered fairyland. Fairies use moss for their homes.”

Even though by now I know fairies don’t exist, her excitement is contagious, and just for a little while, I decide to go with it.

“I wonder if we’ll see any,” I say. Her face brightens with hope as she runs ahead. “Hurry up!” she says. “Let’s look for water fairies!”

I know exactly where she’s headed. There’s a weathered wooden bridge a few yards ahead arching over a little creek. Didi likes to stand there to spot fairies. We’ve been watching Tinkerbell all summer, and the water fairies are her favorite.

“I have an idea,” I say as I look at the tiny trickle of water. “Let’s get down there. The fairies are so tiny, you can’t really see them unless you’re close.” I reach my hand out for Didi, and with the other, I brush a cluster of tall, overgrown grass as I trek through it. The grass swishes back up loudly as soon as I slide through it, making Didi stumble behind me as she tries to keep up the pace.

“Slow down, you’re going too fast,” she says.

I begrudgingly slow down and her squishy hand relaxes in mine. Soon, the overgrown plants are thinning out, and we reach the end of a grassy patch. My feet are suddenly welcomed by warm sand. Right before us lies a sandy shore sloping down to a pristine pooling of clear water.

“Whoa,” Didi says. “I think we found a beach.”

“Oh my gosh,” I gasp. By instinct, I run towards the transparent water and run my fingers through it, feeling the cold stream sending shivers up my arms. I look down and see my warped, glassy reflection staring back at me. Didi turns her head towards me and smiles.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asks with a mischievous look on her face. At the same time, we trek into the inviting water, carefully pulling up our shorts as we enter it. She playfully splashes me and pretty soon, we’re both drenched, our colorful tank tops clinging to us like a cool embrace.

Didi squeals with delight, her lively voice filling the summer air.

“This is so fun, I never want to leave,” Didi says. Then, another thought quickly passes through her, changing her expression into pure excitement. “We should tell the neighborhood kids! This can be our secret beach. Maybe we can bring our bathing suits next time.”

I consider this thought and imagine my mother’s disapproving expression when we tell her we want to swim in the Hickory Hill creek. The creek will have to be a secret only shared with trusted friends.

I can't recall how long Didi and I spent rolling around in that little basin. We walked around it barefoot, our toes sinking in the clay sand, kicking behind us a swirling cloud of sediment. We collected rocks, smooth and shiny, from time spent nestled at the bottom of the creek.

Didi spotted a tiny frog that blended seamlessly with the green-brown bank. It hopped away as soon as we got close. Even though bugs were landing on us, neither Didi nor I were particularly bothered, gently swatting them away as we became engrossed in the wonders of the creek. Time melted away and we were firmly transported to that place where adventure, joy, and nature weave memories, crystallized forever in our young minds.

At some point, I heard my grandmother calling us, and we were shaken back into reality. A quick look at our condition and I realize we will have some explaining to do. I grab Didi by the hand and decide I will do the talking. Our grandmother is waiting for us at the top of the bridge with a worried and confused look on her face, her arms resting expectedly on her hips. Before I get a word out, Didi runs ahead of me.

"Nana, we found a beach!" she says. "A real beach, with sand and everything. The water is so clear, you should come swim with us!"

"Didi, there are no beaches here," says my grandmother with a hint of a smile. Then, quickly assessing the situation, she adds, "Oh my goodness, look at both of you! It's time to go home and get you cleaned up!"

As we make our way to our neighborhood, Ryan spots us from far away. His little brothers, Luke and Owen, are with him, shooting hoops in their driveway. Waves of heat create a hazy aura around their feet. Ryan runs to us, struggling to stop before getting too close. His eyes are big and his mouth gapes open.

"What happened?" he says. "You guys are muddy."

"Ryan, we found a beach!" I say. "It's so pretty, you guys should go there."

"It's really big," says Didi. "And there are creatures in it! I bet you can even go fishing," "Where is it?" Ryan asks, unconvinced. "I haven't seen a beach at Hickory Hill. We went there yesterday."

"It's more like a creek," I say. "Right by that bridge on the first trail."

"That creek is dried up dude," Ryan says. "Maybe you fell in a sewer." He is clearly enjoying teasing us and wants us to know he knows everything about the great outdoors. If there is one thing Ryan is, it's a daring outdoorsman. He even has binoculars slung around his neck.

"No, there's a nice pool of water around the dry bed," I say. I know he doesn't believe me but will regret it soon enough. The beach is real. What he needs is proof. Before I offer some concrete evidence, Didi jumps in.

"We'll draw you a map!" she says.

"But you have to keep it a secret," I follow up. Ryan smiles at us, a glimmer of promise in his eye, and we quickly run inside the house. We leave our soggy shoes at the door and peel off our filthy clothes. Mud streaked and dripping, we take in the marks of our adventure.

“Ok Didi,” I say. “Quick shower and meet me at the dining room table with markers in five. Ryan will not believe his eyes.”

Didi smiles proudly, and we both know we have earned our title as true explorers today. The forest, the bridge, the beach, and even this COVID summer all belong to us now. Our secret is ours to share.