

*Due to a family health scare, I spent way too much time last week in hospital rooms and not nearly enough at my computer. I'm grateful to report that we came through the crisis and all is well with the Evans clan. But unfortunately, there was no time for column writing. (Believe it or not, it can take days to achieve that "just thinkin' out loud" effect!) So I've gone through my archives and come up with a piece from last summer that, while not exactly a "timeless classic," seems fairly recyclable. An acquaintance of mine who doesn't like my politics but does like my writing told me, at a recent cocktail party, that it's one of her favorites. So this is for her, and for everyone else who ever took a family beach trip. By the way, I'm off on mine – much needed! – even as you read this...*

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It's a long weekend in June, and I've traveled with my immediate family to join my extended one in North Myrtle Beach for our annual family get-together. I call it a "get-together" because "reunion" sounds a bit grandiose for a gathering of twenty. There are three generations here, all from my dad's side; we range in age from four months to 67 years. My sister Libba has lost some weight and gained a boyfriend. My cousin Ginny has a new baby. Otherwise, things are much as we left them when we bid each other farewell last year...

There's something about the annual family get-together. If you do it long enough – every year, same time, same place, same family – history starts to fold in on itself; the past and present blur together in ways that are startling, amusing, and sometimes a little heartbreaking.

My cousin Tommy is horsing around on the beach with his young nephews, Greg and Thomas. He reminds me so much of his dad, my Uncle Tom – the same sweet, playful nature and funny, high-pitched laugh – it's almost eerie. In the midday glare, he might actually be Uncle Tom... if Uncle Tom weren't sitting next to me in his beach chair, drinking a beer. And three-year-old Thomas, my cousin Ginny's boy, has the same high spirit and mischievous look in his eye. Like his uncle Tommy and grandfather Tom before him, Thomas will surely be the beach clown and keeper-of-the-cooler when this annual trip is handed down to the next generation.

My father is in the ocean, trying his luck on the boogie board. From beneath her wide-brimmed hat, my sister Noel (named after my mom Noel, and so like her, but not) mentions how much Dad looks like our late grandfather, Dabba, out there. The white hair, the farmer's tan (okay, it's a lawyer's tan, but they're strangely similar)... I see what she means, and it's uncanny. But what's really uncanny is that I also see a young, strong, dark-haired man in the water, and it's the same man. Suddenly, I'm five years old, and Dad is 30, and he's holding me tight in waves up to his chest. I am jubilant and invincible and poignantly unaware that a few seconds later, a tremendous wave will knock me from my father's arms and grind me, face first, into the gritty ocean floor, thus establishing a lifelong fear of swimming in the sea that will annoy

my husband on this same beach trip several decades later.

At happy hour, we sit around the pool downstairs, drinking gin & tonics and talking about American Idol. My aunt and uncle were addicted, too. Could it be in the genes? Aunt Lib is a little blonder this year, and her lipstick's a little brighter. But otherwise, she looks like she did when I was her flower girl, 35 years ago. This is always a comfort. There's good music coming from an outdoor speaker – Bob Dylan singing 'I was so much older then, I'm younger than that, now...'

My cousin Adam sits across the table from me. He's 19 years old and not drinking in front of the grown-ups, of which I am one. (When did that happen?) His dad, my Uncle Bob, married late, and didn't stay married long, and we never knew Adam as a child. He grew up in Denver, NC, a vaguely mysterious question mark to us, his Alabama cousins. Now here he sits, in the flesh, unbelievably handsome, with the same see-through, gold-green eyes as my sister Noel and my daughter Amelia. He looks like pictures of my dad at that age. He's a basketball player, also like my dad. But Adam is a rap artist and a poet, too, which is where his resemblance to my father abruptly ends. (My cousin, the rap artist. Five words I never expected to say.) Adam smiles at me sweetly – he seems shy for a rapper – and my heart swells with love for this boy I barely know, my first cousin.

His father, Uncle Bob, was a suave, pipe-smoking bachelor when we were children, with a massive stereo and lots of leather furniture. Always a little unknowable, but deeply witty and surprisingly kind, today Uncle Bob is retired from the textiles industry and spends most of his time listening to talk radio on his iPod. He and my husband Jeff enjoy discussing the stock market. It keeps them from discussing politics, which might get them into trouble. At night, my mom and Uncle Bob sit up late watching Fox News. My cousin Ginny named her new son Robert. We call him Bobby. Baby Bobby.

And always, always, there are the ghosts of Virginia and Ed – Grandmama and Dabba, as we children called them. Grandmama, with her floral-print dresses, her powdery smell and her backhanded compliments ("That extra weight looks good on you!"). And Dabba, who was born old, with his gentle way and his homemade guitars, his black-socks-with-shorts and his un-scary ghost stories. I feel them here, even though they've both been gone for years, and I wonder what they think of us. We toast them at dinner on our last night in town. We have come, en masse, to a fancy restaurant, and everyone glows in the candlelight, with our tans and our sun-kissed hair and our giddy togetherness. This is our family and we are beautiful.

Grandmama and Dabba are gone. Mom and Dad, Aunt Lib and Uncle Tom – they are the grandparents now, and we are the parents. But it doesn't feel that way. I still feel like one of the children, even as my own child climbs into bed with me on the fold-out sofa in the living room of our high rise condominium. She snuggles under my chin, smelling of chlorine and saltwater and shampoo, and I read my paperback in the dim lamplight. When I was her age, we slept on cots in rambling beach cottages, with sagging front porches, outdoor showers and no air-conditioning. This sofa-bed feels a lot like one of those cots. I close my eyes and I am six years old again, or eight, or eleven, on a lumpy bed with a sunburn and a belly full of shrimp, wonderfully exhausted, drifting off beneath the whir of a ceiling fan...

I hear the waves come and go outside my window. It's a sound that never changes. Maybe nothing really does. Not that much, anyway.