

The feeling that I am about to be eaten by an undiscovered sea creature consumes my thoughts as I paddle deeper into the frigid saltwater. I am not supposed to be going this far out. My eyes burn, my toes are numb, and my rash guard rides up to the point of futility. The ocean heaves and growls. I am waiting for the right wave. After a few minutes, it approaches. I paddle as fast as I can. I'm nearly up to its lip. But it's too strong. It tackles me. Pins me down like an enraged wrestler. I twist in the water's tumultuous rage. Oh, no. My bodyboard leash is around my ankle—something my dad has warned me not to do, a trillion times over—the board now an anchor bringing me down. Every attempt I make to break the surface is combated by the ocean's persistent swallowing. After much effort, my head springs up and I drink air. I consider heading back to shore, but the thought is fleeting. I reattach the leash to my wrist. Then paddle out again. The next time the wave comes, I am ready. It crashes and I ride it all the way to shore. Perfect timing. I get up laughing, ecstatic at my success. But the smile fades when I make eye contact with my parents.

My mom has dug a hole in the sand where she discards sunflower and pistachio shells. My two little sisters are reading Harry Potter and eating *takhrathi*—Chaldean meat pies—and my dad was already advancing towards me, his scarlett skin proving the sixteen layers of sunscreen he'd put on earlier ineffectual. He reminds me of our rules, that they exist to protect me from the monstrosities of the world. I figure now is not the right moment to ask if I could take on surfing. Surely, my parents would say no, on account of sharks. Or whales.

The way I think has always made my traditional parents nervous. My curiosity has invariably overcome my reservations, and it often overcomes my sensibility. My mother grew up in war-torn Iraq, a place where liberty was obsolete and safety was all that mattered. In her eyes, the beach is just a place full of different ways for me to get hurt. She much prefers me back in my bedroom workstation, amongst my charcoal and kneaded erasers.

Sitting on a boogie board in the ocean, I feel boundless freedom, the opportunity to explore beyond any confines, the escape that inspires my art. I want to know about the immune system of a seagull and the lung capacity of the average surfer and the pH of the salty seawater. Most of all, I want to know the point of it all. My purpose. Is breaking barriers just about navigating uncharted waters through all setbacks and successes? Is it about our connection to the world or is it more so about our connection to the people within it? Or is it both?

I want my life to be about something bigger than me. Something that people take from my life and use in their own. Something that allows me to trade pieces of my soul for pieces of theirs. Whether that is through striking a conversation with a Meals on Wheels recipient or making new friends at a neuroscience camp, people grow when they impact others. We become more than just our small selves—we become a compilation of all of the people we encounter.

There might be an alternate reality out there where I don't venture too deep. Somewhere safer. Somewhere within sight. But in this world, the promise of knowledge and adventure is too significant to stop at what is right in front of us. So I go deep. I swim far. I face the misplaced bodyboard leashes and violent ups and downs of the oceans in favor of something greater.