

**Counter Culture**  
by Sandy Rea

Each year, on the day after Labor Day, a very formal ritual takes place on the beach in Seaside. You have to be there to actually notice it at all, but it occurs, like clockwork. There is no name for it, however, it is difficult not to think of it in terms of some sort of reclamation of turf, of boundaries.

The earliest I have been down there was about 7:00 a.m. Others must come before that. It goes on all day, a slow, deliberate procession of locals, many with their dogs, walking along the shore for the first time in 3 or more months. They tip their hats or nod at each other as they pass, reserving this cordiality for September, or those who live here. There is an air of solemn respect for both the participants and the magnificent stretch of sand and water we honor in our promenade. Most are older people, having retired next to a beach they fell in love with years ago. Many of them are long-time locals, some born here. All are ageless as they walk this day. We are as one, and there is tremendous strength in that. This is the true essence of Seaside, not those stupid races or gigantic inflatable beer bottles on the beach.

Walking my dogs, Maggie and Chappie, down there is the greatest pleasure I know (with apologies to See's candy). Yet, those of us who live here know that it is a bad idea, if not downright dangerous, to do so during tourist season. For some unfathomable reason, certain visitors choose to bring with them large, vicious, totally untrained dobermans, rottweilers, pit bulls, etc., turning them loose on the beach to maim or kill whatever other animals they can find. Their owners appear to be amused, and seem genuinely shocked when Rambo or Terminator don't respond to their feeble attempts to call them back to their sides. R. and T. are too interested in the fresh red meat they have discovered, and have no desire to go back and be leashed. So, I don't take my pals down, for months at a time. I'm not sure who is more disappointed by that--they or I.

When we are there, I stroll (bum knee), pick up bits of shell that shine like jewels from Ali Baba's cave in the moment the water on them catches the sun's reflection. It is impossible not to take in huge breaths of the clean and healing salt air, to just stare out at the horizon and wonder about the people who have done this exact same thing before you, through the decades. Maggie and Chappie explore every inch of sand, paying particular attention to those things that amaze dogs, like seagull carcasses and large driftwood logs. Maggie finds it necessary to Chase The Birdies, a game that involves her crouching low while staring at a batch of shorebirds, wiggling her golden lab-mix butt back and forth, then tearing out after them as though her life depended on it. She will chase them, hard running, into the surf until they fly over her head as she swims, never giving up, only waiting for the next chance at this. The birds are quite safe--it's the chase she prizes. Chappie, a corgi mix, on the other hand, checks the dunes for lost sandwiches, then will run back to the shoreline to join us, his speed considerably slower than when we first moved here. He walks close to me, feigning loyalty, when, in fact, he is too pooped to run with the younger Maggie. He's mine. I'll get him down here if I have to carry him, and he knows it.

On the day after Labor Day, the dogs come back to the beach, with their people. Because it is finally safe again, one sees the little guys--pekes, poodles, yorkies--on or off their leashes, prancing proudly alongside their beloved owners, taking part in the long-awaited march on wet sand. These dogs, whether chihuahua or akita, shepherd or shitzu, don't fight. They sniff, perk up ears and tails, and begin racing in circles with each other. Their joy, like their movement, is unbounded. They celebrate, with their owners, the return of the mutual respect that has been missing from this beach for the summer months.

We walk, we nod, we tip our hats and smile at each other. It will be the same until spring.

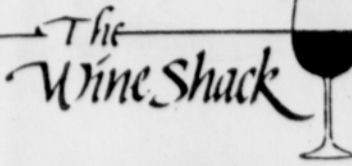


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