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It's a little after 6 a.m., and the sun is just breaking over the Oregon Coast Range, spreading fingers of soft light across the rugged hills, through the sleeping town, and all the way down to the sea, where it pushes gently at the early morning mists that hug the coastline.

Within hours, this famous shore will swarm with people — a happy throng of summer frolickers — but now, in the stolen moments of a brand new day, it plays host to just a few.

As if drawn by magnetic force, we have converged here from different directions, coaxed to the water's edge wearing mismatched fleece and flyaway hair, our pant legs thrust haphazardly into rubber boots — all signs of having dressed in the dark. We are in a hurry. We can't be late. It is low tide in the Marine Garden at Haystack Rock, and as we all know, it never waits.

Before I actually see the tide pools, I smell them. That soft tanginess floats in on the breeze — a mix of clean salt and sweet decay — and on its back is the childhood memory of mornings spent just like this, chasing the edge of the Pacific at sunrise, head bowed, eyes peering curiously into shallows, a trusted friend and teacher by my side.