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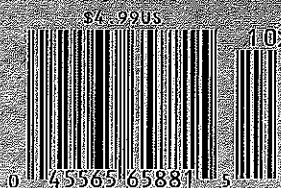
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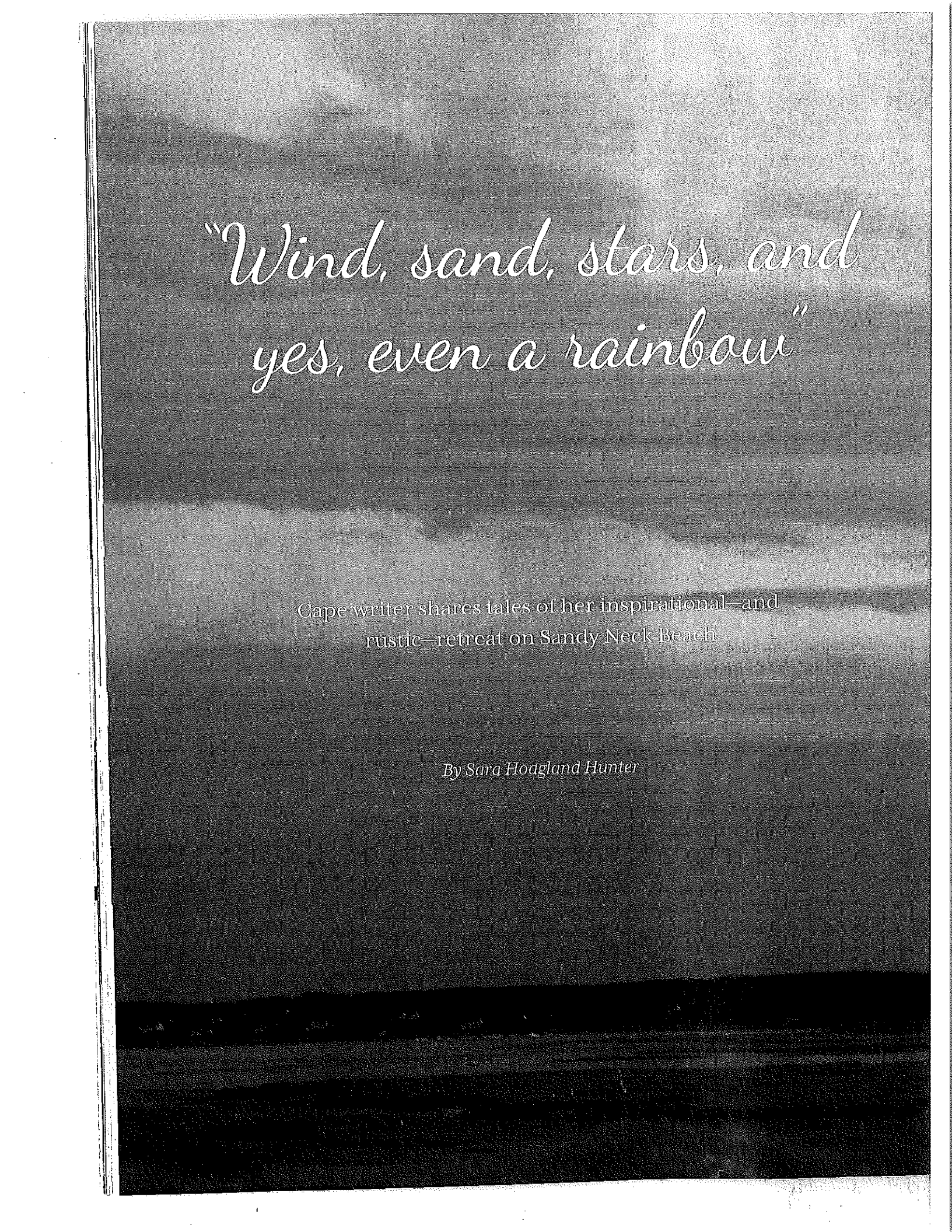
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*"Wind, sand, stars, and  
yes, even a rainbow"*

Cape writer shares tales of her inspirational—and  
rustic—retreat on Sandy Neck Beach

*By Sara Hoagland Hunter*

SARAH COLVIN NELSON

VIEWS OF THE GREAT MARSH, ABOVE AND ON THE OPPOSITE PAGE.



METTY HOAGLAND

The Cape is a land of hidden gems and buried treasure. As a child, I scoured the mud for air bubbles at low tide—signs of juicy “steamer clams” lurking below the surface. The tide also left a trail of undiscovered jewels for anyone willing to comb through seaweed for the perfect conch shell, or a piece of turquoise sea glass. For me, the joy of uncovering Cape Cod’s secrets has never dimmed, but these days I am more apt to be digging for stories that feed the soul than roaming an off-season beach with a metal detector.

One gem that surfaced recently was a remote cabin nestled in the dunes of Sandy Neck—a majestic sand spit stretching from the marshlands of Sandwich to Barnstable Harbor, with six miles of beach exposed to Cape Cod Bay. Known as the Halfway House for its position on this precious expanse of barrier beach, marsh trails, and dunes, the cabin is open to scientists and artists by application. Built in the late 1800s for cranberry storage, expanded in the early 1900s, and gifted to the town of Barnstable in the 1960s, the cabin is listed on the National Registry of Historic Places. For many years, the

three-room structure served as a destination for high-school science trips and scouting expeditions until it fell into disrepair. In recent years, the cabin was rebuilt by a group of volunteers, led by Rich French, chairman of the Town of Barnstable’s Sandy Neck Board.

Due to the unusual range of ecosystems in this unspoiled setting—from forest, to tidal flats, to sand dunes—the cabin is frequented often by environmentalists and university researchers. Thanks to local cultural organizations—and Nina Coleman, a longtime ranger at Sandy Neck Park—the Halfway House has also been made available recently for artist retreats.

The retreats are the brainchild of Barnstable’s Arts and Culture Coordinator, Melissa Hersh Chartrand, who was inspired by the well-known artists’ retreat, Twenty-One in Truro, to create a similar opportunity for artists

SARAH COLVIN NELSON



on the Mid-Cape, where they could share ideas and be rejuvenated in a spectacular setting. With support from Coleman and Roberta Miller, the executive director of the Cape Cod Art Association, the program was opened for Barnstable artists of all disciplines—painters, musicians, and writers—in 2011.

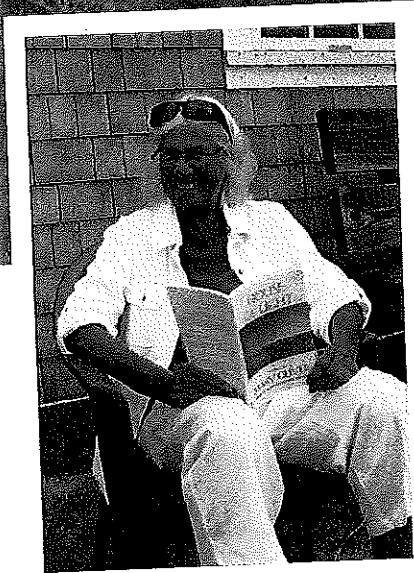
Last September, I was fortunate enough to be part of the third wave of artists to enjoy one night and two days in a ‘dunescape’ of natural wonder—a creative stimulation of wind, sand, stars, and, yes, even a rainbow. The chance to commune with a Cape as unspoiled as it must have appeared to the Pilgrims and at the same time forming unexpected and lasting bonds with fellow artists made this the perfect artistic retreat.

Once my application to retreat to the dunes to write was accepted—along with my donation to help preserve the Halfway House—I reached out to a few of my artistic soul mates with an invitation to join me. Weren’t they always moaning and groaning for time to create on a desert is-

land? When all the responses were tallied, the demands of time, family, and obligations deterred some; others, as it turned out, dreamed of a desert island that includes bathrooms, electricity, and wi-fi.

In the end, two stalwarts accepted: Martha Powers, a birder, journaler, and the book-loving manager of Osterville’s Books-by-the-Sea; and Netty Hoagland, a gifted photographer and esteemed step-mother. We three were joined for a morning by Linda LaCroix and Maureen Grandmont, two painters from the Cape Cod Art Association. In addition, two media representatives—artists in their own right—also accepted the invitation to spend time in the wilds of Sandy Neck. They are writer Melanie Lauwers, who has inspired readers around the Cape and beyond as a reviewer and editor of Cape Cod Times’ “Book” section; and Sarah Colvin Nelson, the news coordinator of Barnstable’s cable channel 18, who is also a nature lover and a talented photographer.

SARAH COLVIN NELSON



MARTHA POWERS, ABOVE, READS SOME POETRY TO THE GROUP AT THE BEGINNING OF THE RETREAT.

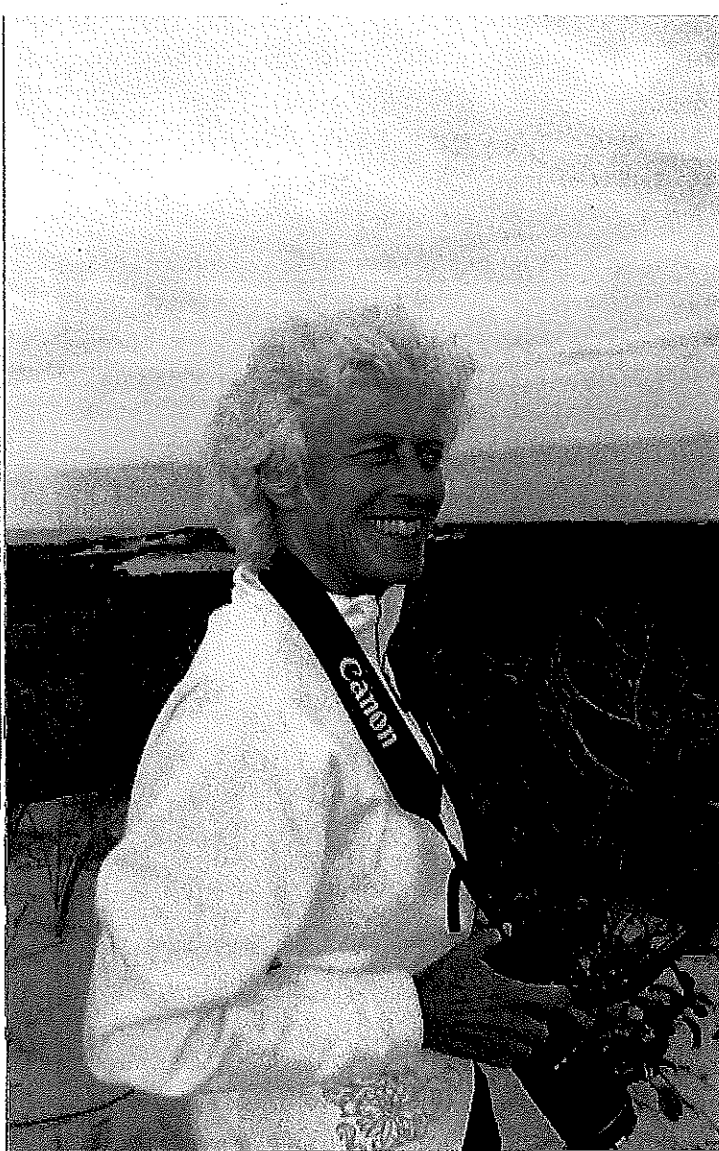
PHOTOGRAPHER SARAH COLVIN NELSON, AT RIGHT, FINDS INSPIRATION AT SUNSET.

As our designated group leader, I was required to attend a training session, and one morning last August I found myself lurching up the side of a dune—about a week before our group retreat. It was the duty of Chris Nappi, assistant Sandy Neck Park ranger to train me on site. His knowledge of every inch of Sandy Neck and its varied inhabitants became quickly apparent. We were bouncing along a rutted trail when the truck suddenly screeched to a halt. Chris stared with concern at the path ahead; I saw absolutely nothing. He jumped from the truck and returned with his hand mysteriously cupped around something he had delicately picked from the sand. He opened his hand, revealing a tiny, gray-brown creature, which hopped onto the seat. "Spadefoot toad," Chris said, explaining that this was just one of several endangered plant and animal species preserved in the park.

After gently returning the toad to its habitat, Chris navigated the Marshland Trail, which is flanked by miles of green-gold wetlands on one side and pristine white dunes on the other. Across from the expanse of the Great Marsh and nestled just beyond the highest dune, we arrived at Halfway House, a gray shingled cabin bordered by dune grass and adorned with the most heavily laden beach plum tree I have ever seen. The interior was more rustic than expected, and I vowed not to send cellphone photos of the triple-decker bunks with scant cushioning to my fellow artists lest they prematurely retreat from our retreat!

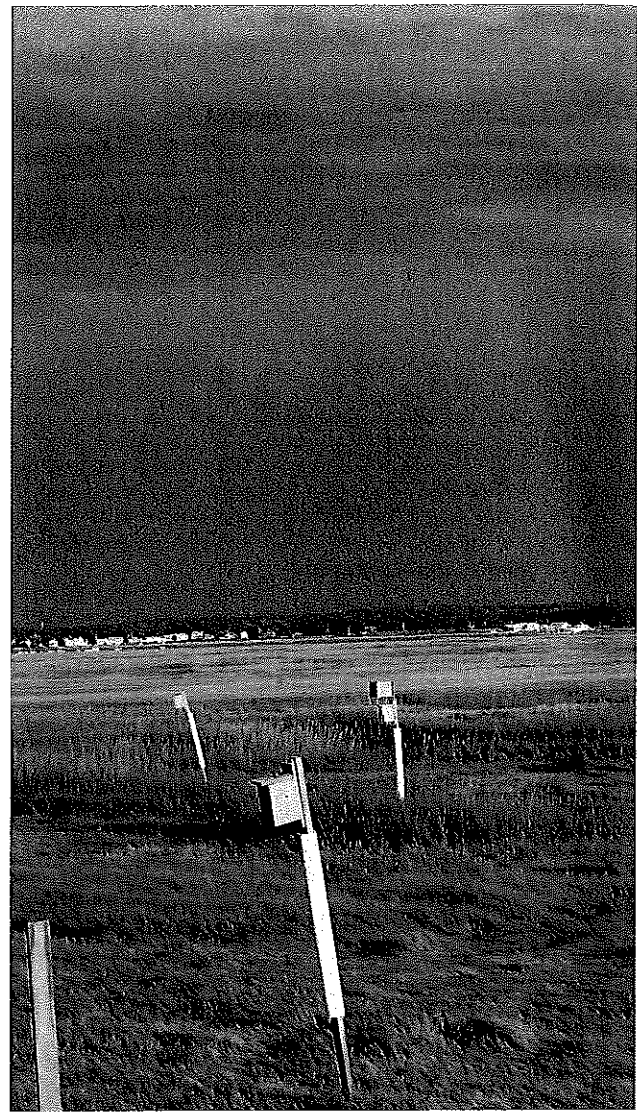
My training session with Chris consisted of finding the outhouse, gas grill, solar powered lights, and woodstove. The park crew would leave us plenty of water in tanks by the sink. I did not mention to the ranger the three things that scared me most: swarms of mosquitos, whether we would succeed at making coffee on the gas grill, and the list of animals Chris said were roaming Great Marsh.





A week later, our group departure day dawned rainy and gray as I yanked from the closet a frayed sleeping bag—a pitiful remnant from one of our kids’ summer camp experiences. I couldn’t remember the last time I had slept in a sleeping bag and wasn’t necessarily looking forward to it.

Next stop: provisions! I hoped my fellow artists weren’t picturing some rural treat as I had stopped off at Fancy’s in Osterville for chicken salad sandwiches and California wraps. I needn’t have worried. After once again creeping over the dunes in a ranger’s truck, this time with Netty beside me marveling at the views, we finally arrived at Halfway House to meet our fellow artists. A lunch spread that rendered my “provisions” positively unsophisticated, awaited us—courtesy of Martha Powers. From her modest luggage, Martha had somehow produced smoked salmon, cream cheese,



crackers, olives, a fresh baguette, and a tablecloth. Roughing it with these women was not going to be so bad. The two painters, who had been working since early morning, departed in the vehicle that had dropped us off. We remaining five settled into beach chairs to begin our sweet adventure together.

From her enchanted and seemingly bottomless bag, Martha then retrieved a glorious book of poetry, “House of Light,” by Mary Oliver. The cover had caught her eye at a bookstore with its turquoise sea and lone cabin—a portent, perhaps, of our Sandy Neck adventure. Long after we returned, Melanie remembered this as our group’s bonding moment, reminiscing, “It made a big impression that she had planned for it . . . that she said, ‘I’m going to read poetry to you.’ When was the last time someone said that to you?”

GREAT OUTDOORS

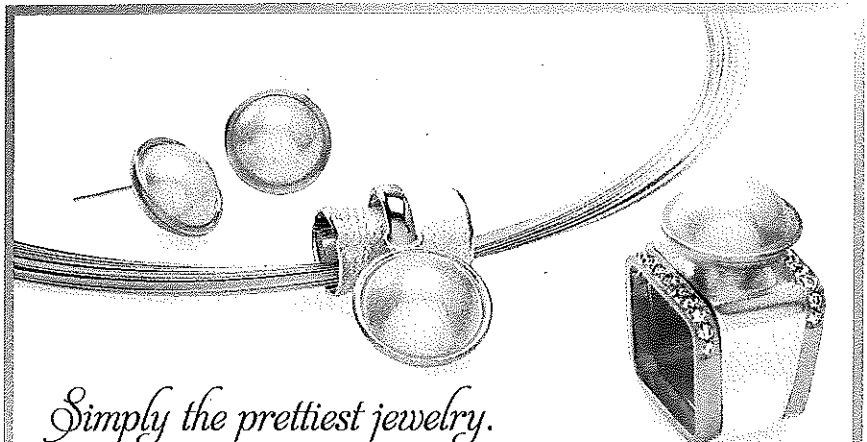


SARAH GOWIN NELSON

A RAINBOW ADDS COLOR TO THE MARSH, ABOVE; AT LEFT, NETTY HOAGLAND ENJOYS THE SANDY NECK SCENERY.

Martha's selection, "The Summer Day," resonated deeply. As she read the last line, "Tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?," a quiet descended on the group as each pondered the question. The fact that we had all seized this time in this majestic and remote place gave a hint to the answer. In fact, I made a pact with myself to return each year to this wild and precious place to honor my need for space to create.

Fueled by lunch and poetry, four of us decided to hike towards the picturesque lighthouse at the tip of Sandy Neck. Our goal was not



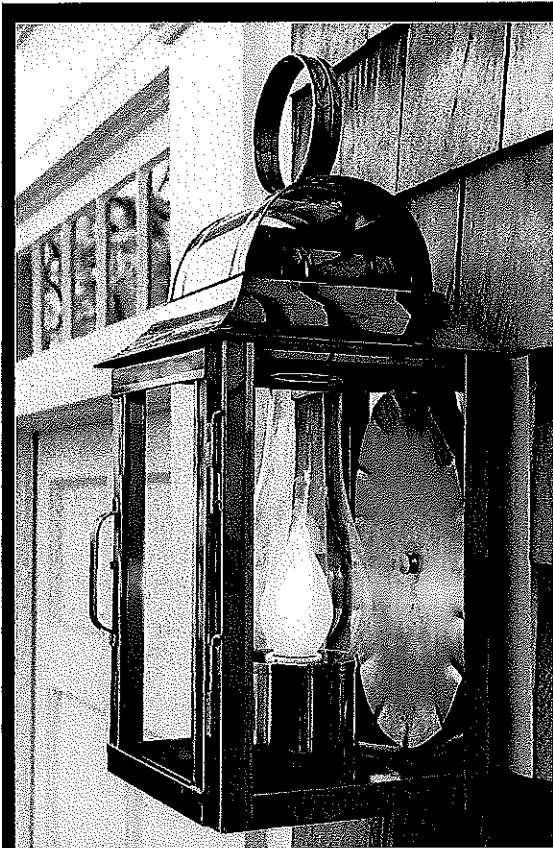
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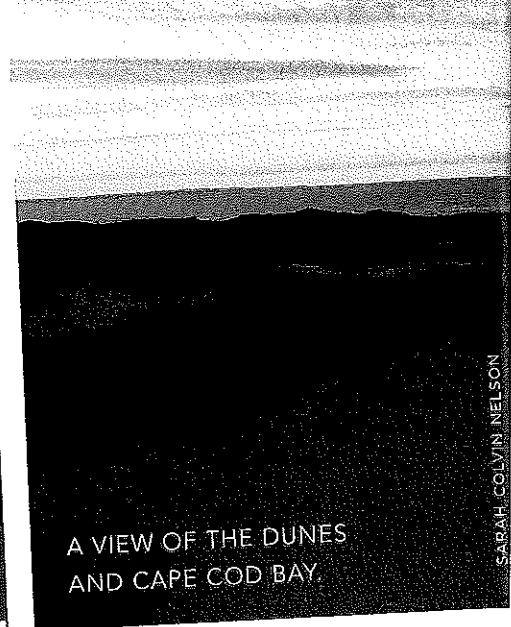
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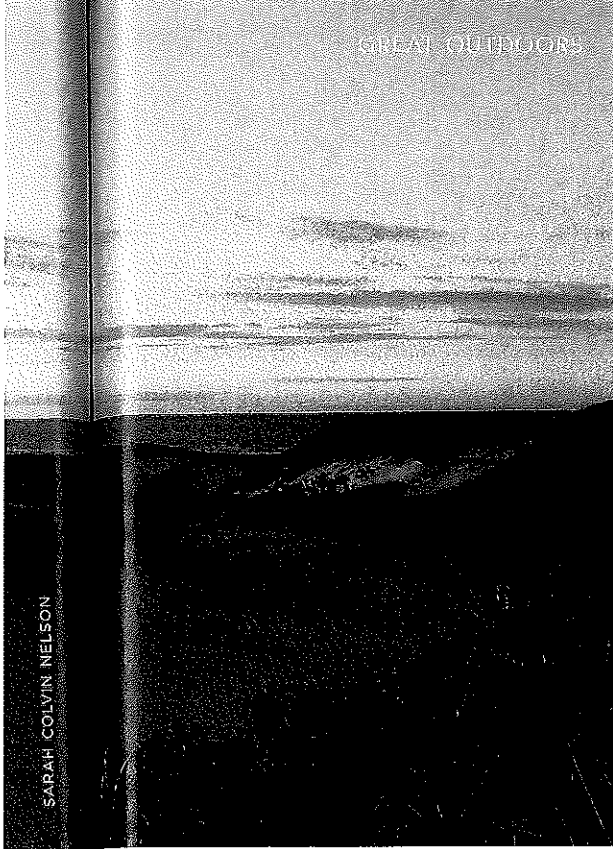
A VIEW OF THE DUNES  
 AND CAPE COD BAY.

SARAH COLVIN NELSON

reaching the tower itself, but to get within telephoto-lens proximity of a festival of migrating birds resting on the sandbars of Cape Cod Bay. Martha, who craved solitary time, traversed the dunes to the beach and took up her post watching for wildlife. "I liked sitting by myself," Martha said. "It is rare to feel safe in a wild place, with sounds, not conversation."

Our three-mile journey along the inland trails left our group not only speechless, but breathless. A magnificent array of plant and animal life, Indian ruins, cranberry bogs, ocean views, woods, and wildflowers dot the well-mapped trail system. When at last we ascended the Horse Trail from a sea level tangle of shrubbery to the wild dune-top view of ocean, rivers, lighthouse, and a cottage colony, we were exhilarated. "There was nothing around but nature and 360 degrees of light,"

SARAH COLVIN NELSON



Sarah recalls of the views atop Sandy Neck. "That will always stay with me."

Park Ranger Nina Coleman, who has spent 14 years working at—and caring for—the park, describes it as one of the last remaining large tracts of contiguous dune land on the Cape. "Within the interior," she says, "are stunted, maritime forests and vast open sand areas that make you feel like you are on the moon."

Our return hike across flat, open beach allowed each of us to fall into our own rhythm, path, and pace. Netty studied the shorebirds, patiently awaiting their graceful acceleration to flight. Melanie and Sarah eased into conversation, then diverged to choose polished rocks and dip toes at the shoreline.

Upon our return to the cabin, we settled contentedly into deck chairs, projects, and peaceful

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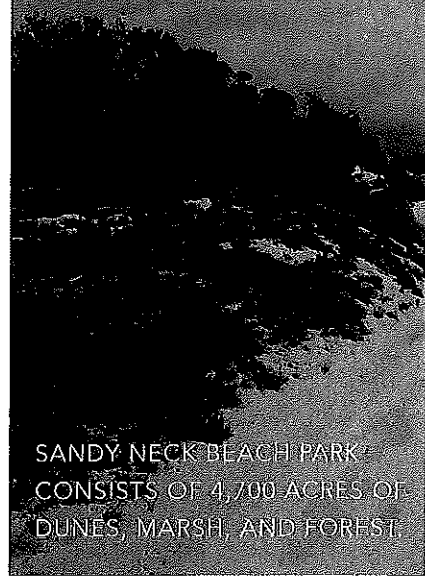
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contemplation—the two birders marveling at the hawks, great blue herons, and egrets alighting and taking off in the windswept marsh grass. “The habitat draws so many birds!,” Netty said of the experience. “We were there as specks. It is their territory.”

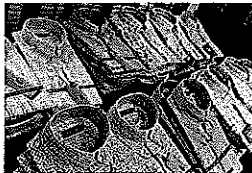
As if on cue, the darkening sky then yielded a rainbow in dramatic display. We had now seen it all: storm, sun, and fog—all of it beautiful on this thin stretch of sand so removed from our daily, indoor life. It was time for day-trippers Melanie and Martha to depart; only three of us would brave the unpadded bunks and Great Marsh creatures by spending the night.

Lured by the rosy streaks across the sky, Sarah, Netty, and I climbed the dune behind our cabin. We reached the summit as the white cliffs of Plymouth lit up with streaks of orange, pink, yellow, and gold. Netty turned her camera towards



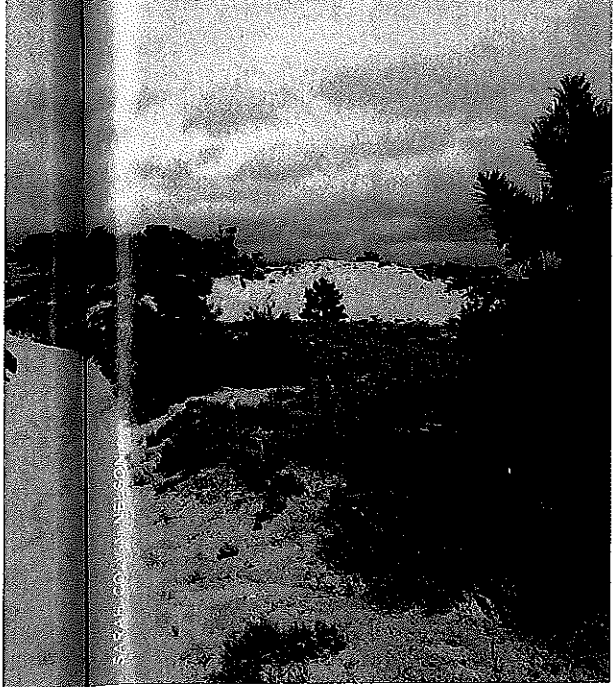
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the marsh with its exquisite pinks reflected in the meandering waters while a golden light bathed the marsh grass. Sarah nested in a dune indentation, surveying the painted panorama from beach to bridge to bay.

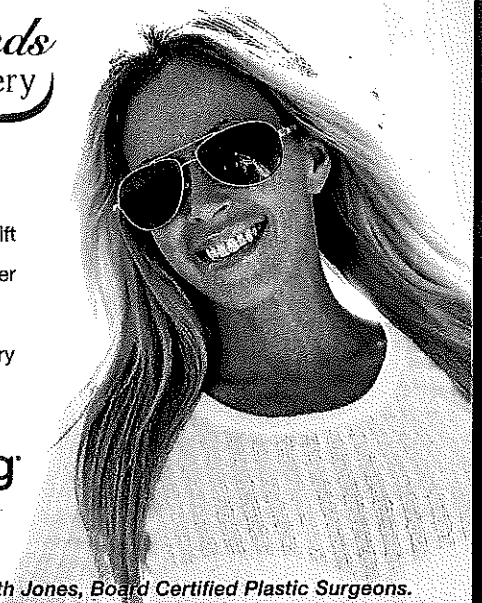
Our descent in the twilight was quiet—reverent. We stopped one last time to check on the cages protecting the turtles soon to hatch in the sand.

Bedtime came early—about 9 o'clock—but sleep was harder to come by for some of us. As Sarah nodded off in a single bed against the cabin wall, Netty and I felt each spring protrude into our backs. At a point when I might have just drifted into sleep, the gnawing of something definitely larger than a mouse startled me into an upright position. When I called to Netty, she was already seeking the sound's source with a flashlight. "I'm seeing if it's on the inside or outside," she whispered—words which did anything but console me.

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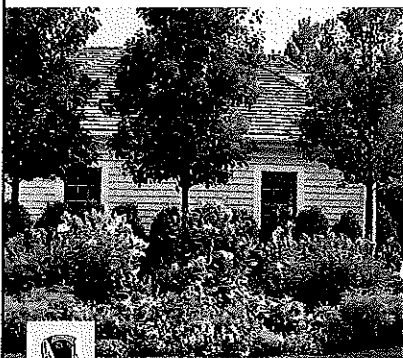
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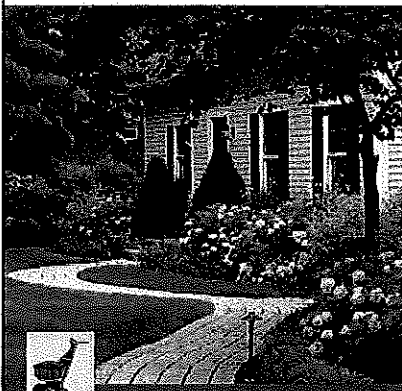
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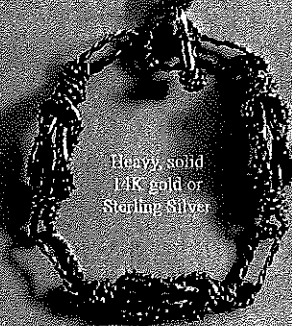
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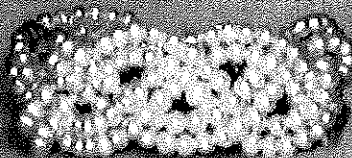
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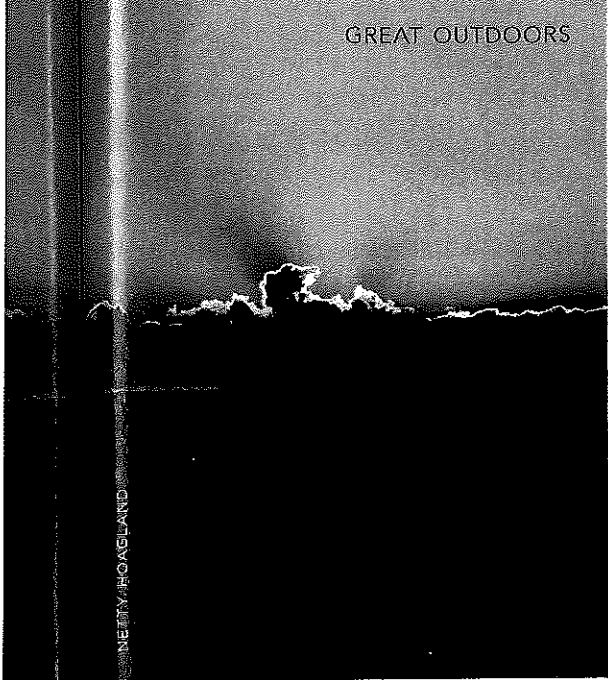
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SUNRISE OVER SANDY NECK.

Flummoxed where to run if it was determined the noise emanated from within, I was relieved when Netty called to say the critter was outside. I am sure the night I spent envisioning the creature that could chew so long and hard on a wooden cabin corner, was character building, but I was just as glad when it was over.

The sunrise the following morning was worth 1,000 chewing critters from the Great Marsh. This was a sunrise that made you sing Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus from a dune and make you swear that angels do come down from heaven. The clouds in the eastern sky exploded in magnificent light; I will never forget it.

With water boiled and coffee successfully 'grilled', we proceeded with our morning. Departure would come all too soon, and Netty and I had gallons of beach plums to collect, while Sarah had photos still to shoot. The pleasure of beach plums cannot be overstated, especially when the Mid-Cape's thick clusters seem to have all but disappeared. We filled



SARAH HOAGLAND

our berry buckets; we filled our duffels; we filled our sleeping bags and reveled in visions of vats of jelly bubbling atop our stoves.

For our final hour at the retreat, I returned to the panoramic dune views of a sparkling Cape Cod Bay. Although I had yet to write a word on the retreat, I was sure the sights and sounds of this precious place would resurface someday in my work. It might be a pirate tale for children or a reminiscence of an unspoiled Cape of long ago. But sure as the rocks that are plunged, polished, and brought again to the surface on Sandy Neck's beaches, the friendships and inspiration gained here would remain my treasures forever.

For more information on the artists' retreats, visit [artsbarnstable.com](http://artsbarnstable.com). To apply to stay at the cabins, send an email to [melissa.hersh@town.barnstable.ma.us](mailto:melissa.hersh@town.barnstable.ma.us).

*Centerville resident Sara Hoagland Hunter is an author and a frequent writer for Cape Cod LIFE magazine.*

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