

Building Magical Connections Under the Sun

By Rebecca VAUGHN



There she was, about 50 yards away from our camp, near her big blue umbrella in the warm sun. She was seated in her low-to-the-ground beach chair with her solitary green bucket nearby. She loved to watch the ocean birds, the seagulls, the packs of quick-footed sandpeckers racing back and forth while poking at the wet sand on the shoreline. She was a local during the summer, showing up day after day at the same beach spot with an umbrella already firmly planted in the sand by the lifeguards. A simple white tag was attached to it that read: “April.” This was her reserved spot, and she had been there for many, many summers—decades, I would later find out.

At 84 years old, she had been a witness to many gradual changes, and she had a deep appreciation for the

inhabitants that depended on the ocean, especially its fine-feathered friends.

A few summers ago, an eight-year-old autistic boy named Brady crossed over the row of flat large rocks that separated the public beach (where Brady’s family set up their camp) and the private side where lifeguards unloaded and set up dozens of identical bright blue umbrellas promptly at 10 a.m. every morning, including Ms. April’s. Hers was the one on the end, closest to the rock divider. Red danger flags flew on both sides of these rocks that lead straight into the ocean to mark the ‘no-swim’ zone.

The rock divider was a place of curiosity for Brady; he would wander over from his camp with his purple bucket in hand. There he would discover and gather shells of various colors and forms. Running out a

short way into the ocean, he would quickly dowse them to remove the sand. He would also sit on the dry flat rocks only 10 feet from Ms. April's camp and play with ocean twigs, seaweed bundles, and other items he had collected from his morning pursuit.

Brady loved the sensory aspect of the ocean and its treasure trove of creatures. The waves delighted him as they exerted calming pressure on his young body. To dive under the waves was lovely and to be swept up in one that brought him to shore was sensational.

When he was a young toddler, Brady didn't speak more than a few words, and they weren't clearly enunciated. At the age of two, Brady was diagnosed with "developmental delays," and his family lived with the uncertainty of just how disabled he would be as time slowly marched on. Even as a baby, he was terrified of strangers, crying if they dared to make eye contact and approach his mother while he was swaddled very tightly across her chest.

His autistic brain experienced the world with heightened sensory abilities that caused meltdowns and undue stress on his family. Although body pressure felt soothing, he was anxious and often afraid of people, sounds, and sudden changes.

And yet, one sunny day, Brady crossed over the rocks to show Ms. April some findings in his bucket. What led him to her, I do not know. She did not give off the ambiance of a woman who wished to be approached—sitting in the hot sun, smoking occasionally on her thin cigarettes, watching the birds or reading her book, even napping for bits of time all sun-exposed—never once under her umbrella.

But she was the one closest to Brady's daily exploration site, the large beach rocks on the shore that separated the two beaches.

"Look! See what this is? It's a crab!" Brady exclaimed.

"What?" she asked, forced to peek into his bucket.

"It's dead. Go toss it," she responded practically.

Brady sat down at her feet, examining the other items he had found.

"Do you like this shell?" Brady asked. "It's broken."

Ms. April responded: "Oh but look at that purple streak that runs through it. It's gorgeous."



"Here, you have it. I'm keeping the crab," Brady put his hand out, and Ms. April tucked it into her cream bag.

She pointed to a nearby seagull.

"Look at that seagull, son. He comes here every day. His name is George."

She continued, "I feed him, and now he's very comfortable around me, but you **must** be **STILL**. Be still because I'm going to give him one of my boiled eggs."

Brady went to visit Ms. April's camp every day she was there. She taught him to be still. She gave George small bits of egg, and then just sat back and observed.

"See how he has his beak open? He's claiming his territory, Brady. There are other seagulls around. Keep a look out!"

"What happened to his foot?" Brady asked one day, noticing the left claw was completely turned under.

"That's how I've always known it's George. Who knows what happened, Brady! He can fly; he's been my friend for about five summers now. He's a special bird who even rests under my umbrella in the afternoon when it's so hot."

She paused and looked over at Brady.

"Now, just LOOK at YOU! You are a SANDY MESS, Brady! You ROLL around in it, and it even gets on your eyebrows." Ms. April chuckled. "Go wash your filthy self in the ocean."

Brady got up and went mid-body into the ocean, on the safe side of the danger flags, and returned right at her feet.

"Look at this," Brady said and opened his hand to reveal a wet sand crab.

"Oh, Brady! They need water, which is why they burrow into the sand. Quick! Grab my green bucket here and get some water for him so we can have a better look."

She was crispy dark and spoke her mind. He was inquisitive and soaked up the observant attention she lavished upon him.

Some days, he would fill her green bucket with water, place it at her feet, add some sand, and make intricate drippy sandcastles near her chair.

"I do like the feathers, Brady, but add some more sticks."

As Brady's mother, I would watch from afar, seeing his neon yellow beach shirt and wondering if perhaps he had been over there for too long and if she desired her solitude back. Therefore, I'd walk over to see what they had been chatting about and judge whether she had had enough.

"Hello! I see he's with you again. I'm sorry. He's become so social this year. He loves to walk the beach and share his treasures," I said tentatively but looking her in the eyes.

She looked up at me, smiled, and said firmly: "Let him come. He's one of the most observant, wondrous people I've ever met." Then, before I could say more, she spoke more adamantly and added: "He's a COMPLETE JOY."

I let a small smile spread across my lips, took a deep breath, and said: "Well, if you'd like to nap or read your book, please just tell him that you need him to return to his camp for a while. He loves water time with his siblings."

"Yes, I do tell him. He's such a sweet kid, Mom," she replied. "I know he's different, but I find him charming."

As the summer days passed, more of my four children would go off to spend bits of time with Ms. April. They'd sit at her feet and chat, occasionally laughing with her. True to her word, she would send them back, and they'd head out into the ocean together to jump waves.

Whenever one would ask, "Can I go see Ms. April, Mom?" I would say, "Sure." I know that her company

is as meaningful to them as theirs is to her, and some days I can't help but walk over there myself and have some 'Ms. April time' too. Her wisdom and candor are cathartic.

Thank you, Brady, for befriending an old lady whose seagull sits under her big blue umbrella while she sits under the sun and takes in the beauty of the ocean, as well as my dear children.

"I'm coming, Ms. April!" – Brady as he runs down the beach to greet her.

"I'm here, my old woman!"

Rebecca Vaughn is mother to four young children, including one who has autism and ADHD. She has learned to embrace the mysterious gifts of having an atypical child. He has opened her eyes to the beauty of differences on a much deeper level. Every day, she aims to guide her children and increase their understanding of true kindness and compassion for all human beings, and especially for those with special needs.



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