

THE FAMLET

MONTHLY



Dear Family,

The worst thing about spending a week in Ocean Isle Beach, North Carolina, is having to drive through Virginia to get there from here. The second-worst thing is having to explain to people where it is.

In many people's minds, the sets representing "North Carolina beaches" and "the Outer Banks" are not just overlapping but equal. This makes conversations in which I attempt to describe the location of Ocean Isle Beach, which is part of the first set but not the second, inordinately frustrating. Every conversation goes more or less like this:

Highly Intelligent but Geographically Challenged Friend: So, you guys are going to North Carolina. The Outer Banks?

Me: No, a tiny town called Ocean Isle Beach. You've probably never heard of it.

Friend: That's on the Outer Banks, right?

Me: No, south of there. It's way down – closer to South Carolina than to the Outer Banks.

Friend: So, like Emerald Isle?

Me: Not far from Emerald Isle.

Ocean Isle Beach is "not far" from Emerald Isle in the same sense that Seattle is "not far" from Portland or the planet Mercury is "not far" from the sun. Not really all that close, but perhaps closer than any place you've heard of and as close as this conversation is going to peg it without having to



The Patriarch and Matriarch of the Willis Family Reunion

Ocean Isle Beach, N.C., 11 Aug 2019

retrieve my phone from my pocket, pull up a map of North Carolina, and demonstrate visually that, although Emerald Isle is about as far south as you can go *on the Outer Banks*, it is nevertheless possible to drive two and a half hours southwest of there and still find yourself on a beach in North Carolina. (More precisely, you'd find yourself in Ocean Isle Beach.)

It's probably easier to just say that Ocean Isle Beach is about an hour north of Myrtle Beach—a place most of my acquaintances are familiar with. But Myrtle is in *South* Carolina, which introduces a whole new dimension of confusion, and at any rate, my experience with fellow humans has taught me that people who ask where I'm going on vacation aren't usually interested in the precise coordinates.

Ocean Isle Beach is tiny by almost any measure. Its ratio of miniature golf courses (2) to population (600) puts it slightly ahead of Myrtle Beach (25 putt-putt courses, pop. 32,000) and roughly on par with Ocean City, Md. (12 putt-putts, pop. 7,000), and Rehoboth Beach, Del. (4 putt-putts, pop. 1,500). But with no boardwalk, seemingly as many bicycles as cars, and more putt-putt courses than traffic lights, Ocean Isle Beach does not really resemble those better-known seaside communities at all.

We opted to make the seven-hour drive (or eight hours, depending on the number of female bladders in the car) down to Ocean Isle Beach because it happens to contain the only oceanfront rental property in the known universe (within reasonable driving distance of Washington, D.C.) that is both 1) within our price range, and 2) large enough to comfortably house all 30 attendees of the biennial Willis family reunion.

I'm the kind of person who complains about virtually everything (anyone who has ever sat within a two-pew radius of me at church can attest to this) but everything about this family reunion made me happy. The 12-bedroom, 6-bath duplex that was built in 1984 (and looks like it) is the perfect place for us. We stayed there in 2015 and were pleasantly surprised to find it available (and affordable) again this year. Sure, a lot of the furniture is old, broken and uncomfortable. Sure, the kitchen appliances are dated (and electric—the horror—I honestly have no idea from where people summon the patience to cook over an electric stove). Sure, the Brady Bunch-style bathrooms (with two doors leading to separate bedrooms) meant that I was at times competing for the sink, shower, and john with a wife and three teenage nieces (and always a little bit afraid to open



Top: Grace & Sophie
Middle: Four daughters and a son-in-law
Bottom: Will someone please just take this damn picture?

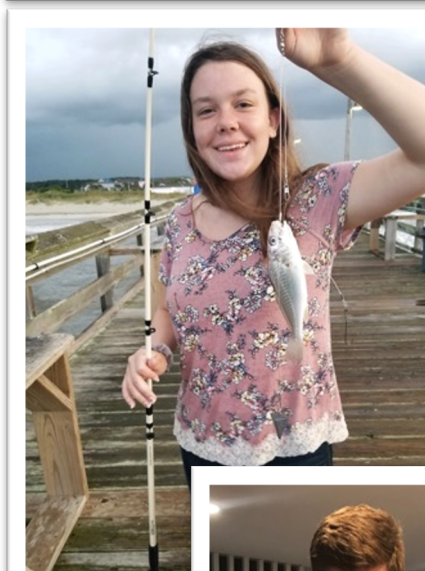
the door). Sure, we had to call the maintenance guy almost daily to fix broken sinks, clogged toilets, and I don't remember what else. But the beds were comfortable, the a/c worked reliably, the common areas were sufficiently spacious, and *it's right on the beach*.

I thoroughly enjoyed swimming, biking, golfing, eating, and lounging with my brothers and their families. I enjoyed the beach. I enjoyed all the unstructured time during the day and the slightly more formal evening gatherings that included learning about how all the married people met (including Mom and Dad, whose engagement began 50 summers ago). I enjoyed eavesdropping on the continuous Dungeons & Dragons game in one half of the duplex and whatever other nerdy fantasy/adventure game Hannah and JT were leading in the other half. I enjoyed descending on unsuspecting eateries for lunch and watching the waitstaff scramble to push enough tables together to accommodate a party of 30. I never got tired of hearing someone ask, "Is Monopoly money okay?" *every single time* a server asked whether Pepsi was okay in response to a Diet Coke order. I don't know when the whole family went and became a bunch of Diet Coke addicts, but every day's grocery store run seemed to bring back multiple cases of it, and it still felt like we were always down to our last few cans. It didn't used to be this way. My Willis grandparents would be appalled. My Henrichsen grandparents would be delighted.

I enjoyed FaceTiming with Sister Abbigail Willis in Calgary. (You should read [her weekly letters](#), which are better than anything I write.) It will be a long time before we have another reunion without an absent missionary from the third generation. It's nice that we're allowed to talk to them now.

Abby's absence was counterbalanced by the addition of JT. It made me happy that Hannah and JT were willing to travel back from Provo to join us. It must be hard integrating into a family as large and loud as ours, but JT gave it his best shot. You really have to project if you want to be heard at a Willis gathering, and one of the great paradoxes is that the louder we get, the more difficult it becomes for Dad to hear anything. I'm pretty sure this irritates him (it would irritate me if I were old and deaf) but he's a good sport about it.

Trying to be heard amid the din reminded me of the counsel I received as a high school senior from Virginia Southgate, my organ teacher. She taught me



Top: Andrew and I bike across state lines

Middle: Grace catches a fish

Bottom: JT celebrates his 23rd birthday at the Willis Family Reunion

that when playing prelude music, I should not try to compete with the irreverent talkers filtering into the chapel. If the music can't be heard over the racket, this should be rectified by the people shutting up (my words, not hers) rather than by the organist ratcheting up the volume. Sometimes, when I'm particularly annoyed by the noise in the chapel, I try to combat it by playing even more quietly. This doesn't usually work, but sometimes it seems to. It makes me wonder whether someone could manage to succeed at being heard at Willis gatherings by speaking softly. I kind of doubt it, but we'll probably never know. (Sister Southgate also taught me that when it comes to congregational hymns, if I can't hear the people singing, then I'm playing too loudly. This counsel I have largely ignored throughout my life.) It's all moot now of course, since I've been displaced by Sophie and am seldom asked to play the organ anymore.

School starts next week for everyone:

Hannah is beginning her final year of BYU's Bachelor of Science in Nursing program. She plans to continue working full time as an LPN at Provo Rehabilitation and Nursing while completing her degree. I'm not sure where she will find the time to eat, sleep and study, but I've recently learned she drinks a lot of caffeine.

Lucy is beginning Montgomery College's nine-month Veterinary Assistant Training Program. Her new kitten, Sam Meow, which spent its first two months here cloistered in Lucy's bedroom, now runs free throughout the house and has settled into a guarded, one-way relationship with Ceres the Goldendoodle. The dog, which used to follow people all over the house, now seems content to tail the cat everywhere and gets annoyed whenever it goes under a bed, behind a sofa, or any other place inaccessible to her. I continue to find the dog predictably dumb and lovable, while the cat remains distant and mysterious to me. It's occurred to me to wonder whether the 37-year-old version of me, who never would have consented to animals living in his house, would recognize the 47-year-old version. I mostly like the 47-year-old version better. He's still curmudgeonly, but he tries to be less of a jackass about it.

Sophie is a senior at Northwood High School but will be taking most of her classes this year at Montgomery College in Rockville. She seems also to have inherited whatever gene it is that drives Hannah to overschedule herself.

Grace, a freshman at Northwood, does not appear to be afflicted by the Hannah/Sophie perpetual motion gene. That notwithstanding, Grace's final middle school report card indicated that she had completed 73 of the 75 Student Service Learning (SSL) hours required for high school graduation. According to the same report card, this leaves her with just 1 SSL hour to complete in the next four years (see accompanying photo). This would ordinarily prompt me to wonder aloud why "the school district can't find room in its \$2.7 billion operating budget for..." [fill in the blank—this time with "...a competent database administrator"] but I don't actually care. I would, however, be genuinely curious to see the structure of a database capable of creating a report with an error like that.

Sophie and Grace are both auditioning for Northwood's fall musical, *Into the Woods*, a show I hate. (It's a dumb story and Sondheim music makes my head hurt.) But I hope they get the roles they want, and I'll probably even go. Being the 47-year-old version of myself, I might not even complain very much about it.

Love, Tim, *et al*

Top: Math is hard

Bottom: Hannah and Sparks

