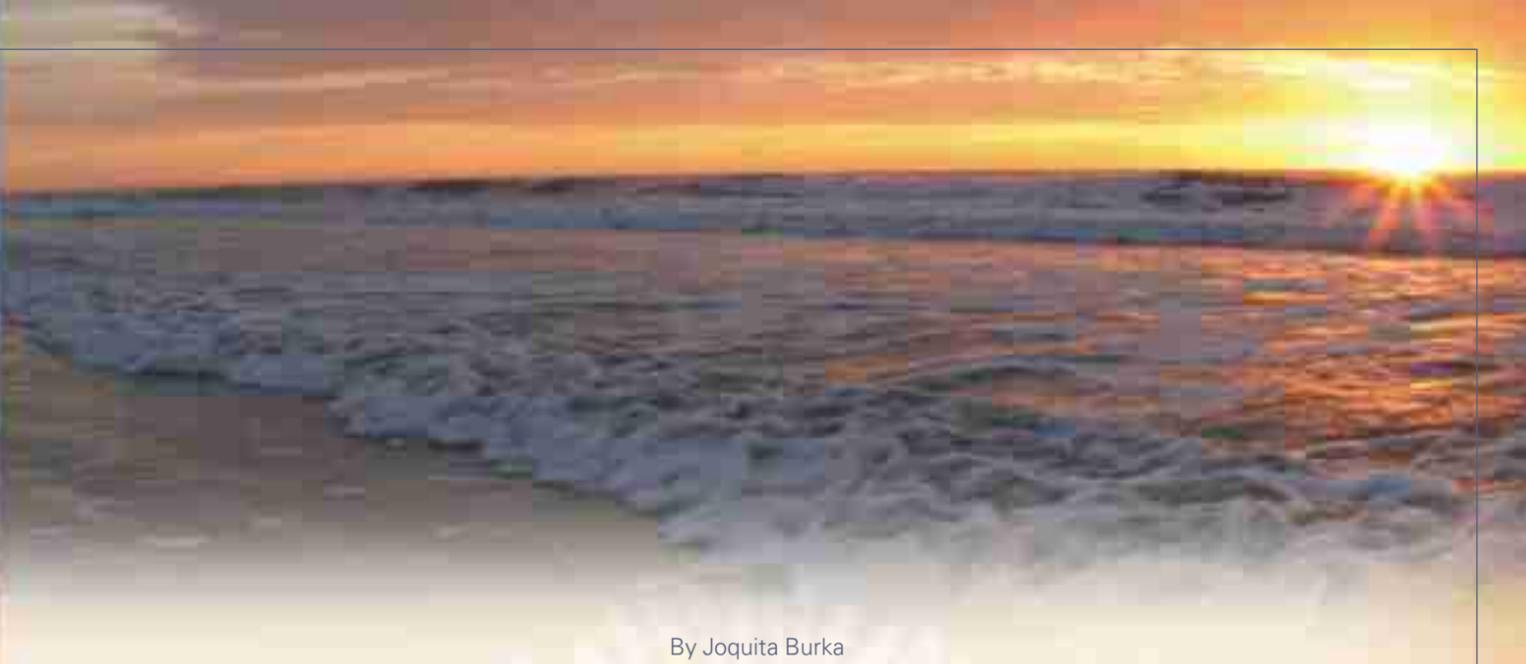


Worth getting up for.



By Joquita Burka

Pull on a pair of salt-crusteds shorts, a softly wrinkled T-shirt and leave them sleeping. A quiet escape through the door, a walk across dewy grass and you are there.
The beach at sunrise.

It feels other-worldly. The sand is as smooth as freshly poured cement. Fresh and smooth — no footprints, left over sandcastles or splashing kids to mar the canvas.

Everything is new again and the sky and water are both a steely gray. You can hear the waves, but not really make out the individual whitecaps as they break against the sand. A steady, cool wind blows against your face and stings your eyes.

You find a nice, soft spot near the dunes and wait.

Around you, the air becomes a lighter, cooler gray and the ocean begins to take its definition. Slowly, so slowly that it is almost imperceptible, it begins to change. A small arc of yellow drifts up the horizon. As if it is being lifted from off-stage, the curve becomes a full ball of gold then lights itself from within, shining on and defining water, sand, sea oats and others who have, in fact, shared the early morning drama. You stand, dust the sand from your shorts, applaud the spectacle and walk toward the house to linger over a cup of coffee and the memory of a few moments when all was absolute peace.

Worth staying up for.

It's all in the timing. Check the local paper or TV for the time then plan to be near the marsh at just the right time to watch the sun splash the landscape with color, flash and then fade.

Now if you aren't lucky enough to have lived your life near a saltmarsh, you may need to learn to love this unique-smelling, busy ecosystem. At first whiff, you'll think, "This stinks." But that's just the scent of all that makes up the ecosystem at work: decaying microorganisms, salt water, Spartina grass and packed pluff mud. After awhile you'll come to think of it like many Lowcountry lovers as the scent of coming home.

And then there are those sunsets.

With the time and the tides, the marsh will display a color-wheel of changes right before your eyes. It begins with the bright gold of the daylight and the dazzling umber of the waving grasses. Slowly the landscape turns bronze then ash before settling into the dark grays of evening. But sunset over the marsh is a richly multi-sensational experience, so tune in all your senses. The air will cool against your face and the evening will be filled with the sounds of the marsh inhabitants. Close listeners may hear the bellows of the 'gators, the squawk of snowy egrets, the splash of a swimming muskrat or the quiet scratching of crabs digging their way out of sight.

By the time the marsh begins to disappear into the darkness and you can discern only the lights along the shore, you will begin to think of that scent as, if not the scent of home, at least the aroma of a very wonderful place to be.