A gasp of shockingly cold air hits my body via my mouth, everything else is buried under layers of fleece and nylon. It startles me into absolute awareness. The ultimate wake-up call. Breathing soon becomes easier, mechanical, thoughtless, echoing the rhythmic sound of waves on rocky sand, and a few steps bring me out onto the sunburned expanse, devoid of any manmade prints. The sky is bright, blindingly so, even through the haze of gray fog and, even though my outmost extremities have become numb, an energy pulses through my body to the tips of my fingers and toes and suddenly converts itself, spark-like, into movement.

When I run, I forget everything else. Nothing exists outside my bubble, which includes me, the beach, and the ocean as far as I can see. And I think of nothing but what I see around me. I run about a mile in the sand, which is certainly not equivalent to a mile on a track or on the tread mill. A mile in sand leaves me completely winded, sweaty even in the icy wind, my calves aching from the effort to keep my ankles from twisting in the deep sand. I’m not even a “real” runner; I run at home for exercise but certainly not for fun. It’s a different story at the beach, where every breath is invigorating and presses me to a physical and emotional limit that can’t be reached in an artificially lit, muscle-filled gym. I collapse in a pile of exhaustion, laughter, and often tears.

While I push myself speed-wise on the way down, my walk back is slow and deliberate. I’m numbed by the exertion, yet all my senses are sharpened and my thoughts are clear and consistent. I picture this tan stretch of sand five months from now, at the sweltering peak of summer, checkered with multicolored towels on which the bodies of similarly multi-colored people are displayed. On this future beach I am lost in a bronzed sea of skin, crowded by the music blaring from a hot pink boom box. A particularly violent gust of wind brings me back to my wintry surroundings, relieved. This “empty” coastline gives me a sense of perspective, a reality check that causes the stressful minutiae of daily life to appear as they truly are, trivial. All the bottled-up thoughts that have been worrying or threatening me bubble to the top of my psyche, overflow, and evaporate; and I’m left with a mind as fresh as the wave-lapped sand I walk over.

Usually, I have the beach to myself. The sunbathers tend not to lay out their towels until the wind-chill factor climbs above zero, and on cloudy days, or snowy ones, there’s a good chance that even the most adventurous dog walkers will abandon their jaunt for a cup of hot chocolate. Although solitude is one of the main attractions the wintry coast holds for me, I find it interesting when I do come across someone, simply because it isn’t often. They appear as the only other colorful, animate object in the area, walking and clearly in a state of contemplation and inward reflection similar to my own. We pass each other like momentary blips on the other’s screen of consciousness, a smile or nod that registers briefly and is quickly devoured by thoughts, or the absence thereof. I never recognize them.

The ocean in the winter has become a panacea of sorts for me, despite my mother’s claims that I’ll catch a cold in such exposure. I’ve never been content with being indoors constantly. There’s only so much fluorescent lighting, rampant viruses,
and faulty heating a person can handle, and when it starts getting dark at 4 o’clock in the afternoon, claustrophobia sets in. A sort of itching, restless feeling emerges and I need to get out. This psychological suffocation, as though the beach contains a unique type of oxygen found nowhere else, reveals itself in withdrawal-like irritability and aggravation. Early Saturday morning I’ll get up and go where my thoughts are coherent and I can come to terms with myself.