**Protecting the World Beneath the Waves**

Water has always been a defining part of my life. As a toddler, I played on the beach near my grandparents' cottage on Lake Erie, spending hours sifting through sand and rocks along the shoreline. One day, my hands closed around a metal cap from a glass bottle buried in the sand. I excitedly ran to my mother, shouting that I had discovered a "relic of an underwater city!" To me, the beach was a place of endless adventure and imagination. I didn't realize then that my favorite beach would one day be littered with bottles just like the one I found. Looking back, that childhood memory was my first glimpse into the impact people can have on the environments they treasure.

For my thirteenth birthday, I had the opportunity to return to my birthplace, George Town, Grand Cayman, during a spring break trip. My parents had lived and worked there for seven years, and I was eager to experience the island that had been part of my family's story. In preparation, I completed a PADI SCUBA certification course so I could explore the island's reefs. I looked forward to the trip, but I had no idea how profoundly it would shape my future.

My first dive changed everything. The moment I descended using my BCD (buoyancy control device), the world transformed. Vibrant corals and swaying marine plants covered the seafloor. Crustaceans tucked themselves into rocky crevices, while schools of fish surrounded my instructor and me. Nurse sharks and moray eels lingered in the shadows, and Christmas tree worms spiraled back into their shells. Sunlight filtered through the water above, creating shifting patterns of light across the reef. Every inch of the ecosystem teemed with life, and each organism seemed connected to the next in a delicate balance. It was the most beautiful thing I had ever witnessed.

As I swam above the reef, I felt a sense of wonder unlike anything I had experienced before. At the same time, I realized how fragile that environment was. At the time, tourism in the Cayman Islands had paused during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reefs appeared remarkably healthy. Yet small signs of human impact were already visible: bits of plastic scattered among the coral and debris caught in rocky outcrops. Seeing pollution affect such an extraordinary place was heartbreaking. That experience inspired me to protect marine environments and share their beauty with others so they, too, might recognize their value.

Back home in Bend, Oregon, I stay connected to the water through kayaking, surfing, and volunteering for river cleanups. These experiences have shown me that conservation begins with local action. During cleanups, I have seen firsthand how easily trash enters waterways and how much effort is required to restore even small sections of habitat. They have also taught me that meaningful environmental change depends on people who are willing to take responsibility for the places they care about.

This fall, I plan to study marine biology at the University of Oregon, where I can deepen my understanding of marine ecosystems and contribute to their conservation. Through scientific research, education, and advocacy, I hope to inspire others to care for the biodiversity that sustains us all. My goal is not only to study the underwater world but also to help ensure that future generations can experience the same sense of wonder that first inspired me beneath the waters of Grand Cayman.