

For most of my life, I have hated the beach. In middle school, my dad moved away to a town near the ocean. Whenever my siblings and I visited, they always made me go with them on their walks. When the topic of soccer inevitably came up, I refused. Instead, I found a rock and sat.

Usually, somewhere near me, there was an old man. He sat with his easel and painted the view. He stayed for hours, watching the world around him, perfectly content. I aspired to be like him. From that point on, rather than watching everyone around me, envying their liveliness, I brought my sketchbook and attempted to capture their joy.

As I got older, my health worsened. I stopped going out and making art. Eventually, I was diagnosed with Ehlers-Danlos syndrome, a connective tissue disorder with no cure or treatment. Instead of going to the beach with my family, I stayed home. That old man was no longer a sign of hope but a reminder of a life I would never have the privilege of living.

During my junior year, I caught both COVID and RSV. For about two weeks, I could hardly breathe and needed several hours a day of treatment. Stuck in my room and unable to sleep, I did what any teenager in my position would do and watched TV. Within the first few days I watched the entire *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. I found great comfort in the elaborate world of Tolkien and the lovable characters he created.

For the rest of that first week, I rewatched the series more times than I could count. And as I watched, I drew. I paused on all my favorite scenes and attempted to capture the beauty of this other world. I was no longer a sick kid stuck in their room, but a traveler of middle-earth. I walked thousands of miles through Rivendale and the mines of Moria alongside Frodo.

Once I had recovered, I returned to the real world. To gain my strength, I took daily walks to the park. Despite the aches and pains these caused me, I was once again starting to notice the beauty around me. I brought my sketchbook with me everywhere. I drew the trees and the birds and collected strange leaves and flowers to press between the pages.

Since my brother left for college, I now consider him a friend. After every visit, he asks me to take a piece of my art with him. As he moved into his new apartment, he sent me a photo. His walls were bare, except for my paintings. "I have a lot of empty space for more."

As I continued creating art, my sketchbook became a collection of all of my most cherished memories. Like the old man, I no longer let my lack of movement hinder my enjoyment of life. Instead, I learned to tell stories through my art. Everything that has ever brought me happiness I documented: the kids from my days as a camp counselor, movie nights with my best friends, and getting crushed in Monopoly by my big brother.

Joy and love were no longer just from books and movies—they finally became real in my life. And while the hurt may never leave me, it will never overtake my ability to sit with it and soak up the beauty around me.