The sun had come up but still hung low over the homes on Bearskin Neck, the spit of land jutting out into the Atlantic across the bay in Rockport, Massachusetts. I walked up the concrete ramp from the beach, leaving a trail of watery footprints to my car, and set down my tank. As I did, a pair of joggers rounded the corner, exhalations trailing behind them in the cold air.

They slowed to a stop. On what should have been an empty street on New Year's morning, cars were parked from one end to the other. White smoke from barbecues rose up between them, while crowds of people milled about in various stages of undress. The pair then looked at me and the puddle forming around my feet.

"Happy New Year," I said.

The two looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Did you just come out of the ocean?" the woman asked.

"I did."

She stared at me, flabbergasted. "How cold is the water?"

"It's about forty degrees."

"Forty degrees!"

"That's actually not bad," I said.

"Not bad!"

Clearly, she was a repeater.

"What do you consider bad?" she asked.

"Well, when it gets down into the mid-thirties, that's when you start to feel it."

"The mid-thirties!" She raised her hands as if to grab me by the chest and shake me. She didn't though. "That suit keeps you warm?"

"It does," I said. "I was just in for an hour."

"That's crazy," her partner said, shaking his head.

"And all of these people," she motioned up the street, "they were diving, too?"

I looked over my shoulder. About 20 people were gearing up, with another 20 helping. "I don't think any of them have been in yet but they will be soon. It's a good way to start off the year."

She turned to her friend. "And people think we're crazy for *running* in the winter."

He laughed and nodded and she looked back at me. She seemed at a loss for words. "Well," she finally said, "Happy New Year."

They broke back into their jog. But while the man stared at the divers they were about to run through, the woman looked to her left, out over the beach and the blue water just beyond.

She stopped and turned back to me. "So what did you see down there?"

A seagull overhead let out a shriek as it flew off with a piece of barbecue. So what did I see down there? A

little backstory first. I bought my first dive mask when I was five years old. I put two quarters down on the counter of the boathouse on Lake Mamanasco and was given a box with a white plastic mask inside. My life hasn't been the same since. I don't really remember what happened in the next few minutes but the odds are good that I put on the mask, walked into the lake, stuck my head underwater, and when I came up, someone on the beach yelled, "So what did you see down there?"

Back in Rockport, a scrum of cawing seagulls gave chase to the one with the barbecue.

So what did I see down there?

In all the years I've been diving, as I've stood by the water gearing up or gearing down, I've probably been asked that question a thousand times.

And the answer should be easy. There's nowhere in the world you can get closer to wildlife than you can underwater. But how do you tell someone about the seal that appeared out of nowhere to play with your fins, or the giant mola mola lolling about on the surface, or the massive school of pollock that swirled around you, all within a stone's throw of the beach? How do you tell someone how it *feels* to be surrounded by the ocean and the life within it?

You can't. There isn't enough time.

So instead of answering, I'm left saying things like, "Oh, it's amazing down there," or, "It's pretty incredible."

If there's a child in tow, there might be a follow-up question, usually about sharks or sea turtles. One little girl asked if I had ever seen a nudibranch. That one impressed me. I try to answer these more conscientiously. But even then, there's usually a parent with places to go, people to

see, pulling the child in the opposite direction.

My point is that in all of those times that I've been asked what I see down there, never have I had the chance to truly answer. Not once.

Until now.