

Gerald Alexander "Chip" Gunderloy

OCEAN CITY

(September)

"No one on the road / no one on the beach / a feelin in the air / that summer's out of reach." – Don Henley

"Way down below the ocean / where I wanna be, she may be."
-Donovan

I get a few days off work and make for Ocean City, Maryland because the off-season rates are cheap and the water sounds better than another pukey 48 hours in half-ass Baltimore. A girl's been bothering me, and people keep observing that my sickly pallor is greener than usual.

The ride takes three hours. Ocean City's Greyhound Station is a tiny shack just a few blocks off the main bridge, towards the south end of the boardwalk. This resort town was always very special to me, and I'm here to find out if there's any trace of that wonder left, two and a half decades later. Ocean City is stretched across a narrow strip of land that runs parallel to Maryland's Eastern Shore, separated by a mile wide channel. The three mile boardwalk has the occasional eyesore worth investigating, and like any east coast boardwalk, there is a rugged quality informed by the changing seasons and the spookiness of so much land's end history. Ocean City was founded about 150 years ago, I'm told. Physically, it bears more resemblance to a decidedly rural area like Nantucket than to closer towns such as Atlantic City or Ocean City, New Jersey. Ocean City, Maryland has no casinos, no legal ones, anyway. Whitewashed concrete, sandstone, and weather-beaten pine staircases adorn the exteriors of over a hundred seedy motels and cottages...run down seasonal apartments and smaller vacation rental units. So excited was I by these sights, and particularly, the overpowering smell of



boardwalk creosote mixed with the pungent Atlantic salt winds, that during family trips the drive from Harrisburg was always downright interminable for me. But when the smell hit me, my first eyeful of the shoreline was never far away...and that would be the true beginning of my rendezvous with the greatest of secret lovers, the ocean. Upon complete submergence in the warm, mildly stagnant smelling east coast waters, the entire world would vanish, regardless of the crowded beach. My parents always screamed themselves hoarse in their attempts to get me closer to shore, but I felt an inner peace, a voice that could not be 'heard' in any normal sense, but which flooded your insides, and nourished your sense of aloneness, of completeness. For me, leaving the beach has always been a miserable and heartbreaking thing, but especially when I was younger, leaving Ocean City. Every second spent in those waters was tainted with dread, the dread of not being able to stop time, to forget time, to indeed submerge all the way.

The family's preferred route took us through Delaware, a stretch of 50 or 70 miles during which the small car would take in the ripe scent of pig shit from the surrounding fields. This was Mushroom Country, after all, and somewhere out there on that stretch of Delaware highway there was a diner where, my mother assured me, the best fried mushrooms in the world were served.

The four of us: mother, father, brother, me.

Creosote.

Dead algae and prehistoric gases.

Pig shit.

Twenty five years ago.

When the bus pulls in, I close my disintegrating copy of *The Executioner's Song*, and marvel at the nearly incapacitating wallop of nostalgia and of banality which has risen up and crashed down, at the concentrated, almost other-worldly melancholy I feel to be back here again. It almost appears as though I'm more interested in giving myself over to self pity, or in being willfully disoriented. I'm looking at the other passengers creeping out to the main drag of OC, some crossing the six lane highway, headed directly towards the boardwalk. Another surge of discomfort. It's an effort to start walking. Why am I not running towards the horizon, to the boardwalk, for my cherished first glimpse of the Atlantic Ocean the way I would have if I were seven and this were nineteen eighty three? But I can already see the hint of open sky over water, and the tip of a sand dune or two, a tiny sliver of boardwalk and some boardwalk strollers, still visible between the hotels and motels today, just as it was back then. If my parents were standing next to me today, on the main drag, at noon on a Monday, they would want to go somewhere and sit down. Perhaps they would not expect me to run for the green water in the same way I always had. When I reach the boardwalk, and

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see the ocean for the first time in two decades, it is with a vague uncertainty, almost with fear, and then weariness. What was I expecting? There it is. The ocean. Hello ocean.

My feet hurt and I want to go sit down somewhere.

It is around midnight when she startles me from my reading: the most beautiful girl I have seen in several hours of wandering the boardwalk, and observing the strolling vacationers from breezy tavern patios. I am in an underground dive bar called Pepper's Tavern, considering the right time to have my historic return to the Atlantic depths. I've been here since seven, and I've been writing fevered juicehead nonsense on napkins. I've been alternating between my juicehead nonsense and surface talk with strangers on either side of me, talking about *Exile on Main Street* and the Sex Pistols, about the tavern and about Ocean City. People are more sociable and more inebriated while on vacation. I'm no exception. When I find myself alone, I return either to scribbling or to the disintegrating book, Norman Mailer's Pulitzer winning tale of Gary Gilmore's blues. The motel built above our heads is the Sea Scape, one of the cheapest boardwalk-side tourist dives in OC. I remember it well. My mother checked us into a room here on at least four or five occasions. We always seemed to get the same room, I think it was number 19, on the first floor. My mother would gripe about the squalid rooms, she would gripe about being poor. The Sea Scape was never too shabby for my father, and I much preferred it over the three star places we sometimes stayed in. It wasn't the jaundiced old wino flavor of its economy digs that won me over, I was too young to enjoy that, but the speediness of check-in and check-out, the narrow hallways, the lack of bellhops and serving trays. In a ritzy place like the Holiday Inn, there were a million things to get caught on between your room and the water. The Sea Scape always gave me the thought that it might as well have been built right in the drink. The Sea Scape was a joke to my family, but today, I love it more than ever. Their logo is the same in two thousand seven, and so are the rooms.

The more that I think about it, nothing has changed at all...except us.

A lot can happen to a family over so much time...especially a family like mine.

Same logo.

Same rooms.

Same ocean.

In two thousand seven, I have checked in alone, to room number

twenty six.

My bag is stashed in there, with my untouched swim shorts.
When I put them on, it will be different than before.



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My legs were so pudgy as a kid. I had such fat little legs.
And my hair was more than blonde; in the sun it would go dead
white.

The girl leans there to my left and stares at me. The barman comes over, she asks for a vodka cranberry. He asks for I.D. When she speaks, turning on the charm because she hasn't got I.D., I hear a soft girlish voice but with a very hard Russian accent. "State law," the man says. "I'm sorry." With that, he's off to the other end of the bar.

But this Russian girl remains in place, and begins her stare once again.

"You can help me?"

"Me? Can I...no, I'm really sorry. I don't have any I.D. either."

"But they serve you drink? Why they do not ask for card?"

"I don't know."

"How old you are?"

"30. Nearly 31 actually."

"Ah! You do not look *theyr-tee!*"

She grows silent. When I look back up, I expect her to be gone, but she isn't. Her short black hair contrasts harshly against her skin, which is as pale as mine. I'd guess her age somewhere between 17 and 22, but it's hard to tell in the bar lighting. Her complexion is a little spotty round the cheeks, reinforcing my suspicion that she is underage, but a beautiful little thing all the same. She's wearing a raspberry colored mini-skirt and a Mexican-style jacket that only goes halfway to her hips.

"You have girlfriend?"

I nearly choked on my beer. "No, do you have *boyfriend?*"

"I have friend who is a boy, but I do not have *boyfriend.*"

Just then, the bar man returned. "I hate to interrupt man, but she can't stay here without I.D. State law."

"Okay, I go." The girl glared at the large, barrel chested man and then gave me a similar look. "What is your name?"

"Gene."

"I am Dolly. In room *theyr-tee seeks*, maybe you come?"

Before I could begin stammering, she was gone. Her purse smacked me on the shoulder on her split second exit-whirl.

"Not bad." The barkeep grinned, and shook his head. "Be careful with those Russian girls. She's probably got a boyfriend waiting for you up there with a stun gun, or a taser or some shit."