



"We must always have old memories and young hopes." ~Message from a Fortune Cookie

My Wildwood Was Theirs

By JOSH KINNEY

Ever since I was a young boy, Wildwood has held a special place in my heart. It's a place of summer's anticipation, peace, excitement, priceless memories and genuine fun. The whole scene is captivating, the feelings exquisite, from the drive down until you hear the rumble of the car's tires against the metal grate of the Rio Grande Bridge. Curving off Exit 4b onto the straight stretch of Rt. 47 I can see a giant glimmering Ferris wheel on the horizon and the neon lights of a retro Wawa coming up on the right. Wildwood is an island that I can claim, a place I know inside and out, a little blessing next to an enormous sea. At night, when I'm curled up on the porch under the awning, listening to the distant music from the adjacent Beach Creek Restaurant with the potent odor of a low tide bay across the street, I feel something I can't feel anywhere else. Looking over the railing I can see lights from the Uries restaurant sign and a few cars passing over the bridge, but for now I'm on the side that's by the sea.

I wasn't the only one taken by the Wildwoods though, no, the island had a rich history with my family that went back to my great grandparents. They too felt the same way I did, just in a different era. Wildwood was in their hearts as it was passed down to mine and as I will pass on to my children and hopefully theirs. Of course times have changed, people have changed, places have changed, but the island is the same, the streets are still there, the same ocean crashes on the same beach against the same sand along the same boardwalk. The same smell of a low tide bay settles over the same neighborhoods. There's nothing like what is yours, and the island has that feeling that in some way, although shared by thousands, it is mine too.

In the late 1930's my Grandmother, Elizabeth splashed by the sea with other children and a Wildwood lifeguard at the end of Montgomery Avenue. Little did that small Italian baby know that her kids and grandkids would occupy the very same beaches. They

were from E Street in the Kensington section of Philadelphia, and every summer their whole street would rent the same places together along the bay in West Wildwood. To them, vacation was their neighborhood collectively, picked up and planted in a new setting: the Wildwoods. The strong sense of community is something to be admired by the generations of today. My Grandmom spent her summers growing up on the island, fishing with her brother Anthony on an old lifeguard boat that came with the cottage they rented, swimming in the ocean and walking up to the boardwalk arcades at Hunt's Pier to see Laffing Sal, an automated character that produced a raucous laugh, frightening some small children and annoyed adults. Today such a character would be considered creepy, and the perfect entity for a horror film, but back then my Grandmother thought it was the funniest thing in the world.

One summer during the 1950's, after a strong rain storm, a flood swept through West Wildwood and my Grandmother and her brother took their small boat to the neighbor's houses and to the market at the end of the street. "It was one of my favorite and most distinct childhood memories," she said, "My father almost lost his swimming trunks." She recalls being with her neighbors, taking the boats to get around. "It was just fun, it was crazy, but it was really fun too." Years later, when she was in her twenties, she danced the night away at the firehouses on New Jersey Avenue with her husband, the legend, my loving grandfather James Dunn. Their five kids grew up to love the Wildwoods too, and the same treasure has been passed on to me. There's a sense of security about being next to the ocean. A consistent faithfulness that's never changing, and always beautiful. The waves will never stop crashing and the wind will never stop blowing and the vastness will always be vast. My family's heritage and memories reside on this island, and what I know and treasure as my Wildwood by the sea, was theirs just as well.

