

My childhood is enshrouded in a fog that is sheer in some parts and opaque in others. Some images and sequences of images are so vivid that they run effortlessly across the screen of memory. Others are so creased and stained that details are hard to make out, let alone the context. And then there are some images whose authenticity I have to question: do I actually recall essentially these experiences, or have I simply recreated them through the repeated viewing of home movies.

I really don't recall too many getaways during the first ten or twelve years of my life. Sure, there was the exhilarating trip to Freedom Land somewhere in the Bronx and then



Freedom Land



Freedom Land

the visit to the stunning New York World Fair sometime in 1964. And I'm sure there were several excursions to public parks in and around the Philadelphia area, such as Valley Green. There is, however, one large set of memories that I can still recall without effort and with no small degree of pleasure, possibly due to their regularity and sameness: the summer day-trips to the Jersey shore. We'd often go to Ventnor or Ocean City, rarely to Wildwood (since it is so far south), but most frequently to Atlantic City.



Valley Green's Waterfall



Moish and Carriage at Valley Green



Dad and Kids at Valley Green

Most of these occurred on Saturdays in June and July when my father closed his store for the weekends. We probably left home by mid-morning, driving for two hours from our home in Northwest Philadelphia to the Jersey shore in a blue 1953 Chevy. The car had natural air-conditioning—just roll down all windows—but I don't recall any discomfort during the long ride in cramped quarters. As I reflect on our trips to the shore, I can't figure out how we all fit into that 1953 Chevy. I assume all the adults sat on the bench seat up front, and the kids slept up against each other on the back seat. At any rate, we must have been crammed together. I also do not recall much chatting during the trip, save for a few brief exchanges between my Mom and Dad. I vividly recall WFIL or WIP coming through on the car radio: the signal would weaken, crackle and hiss ever more frequently and persistently as we traversed the barren Jersey landscape. I could always tell we were within ten minutes of our final destination when the static was more audible than the broadcast. And as the static increased, the air outside the car became heavier, thicker, saltier. The air seemed to stick to our skin; we definitely could taste it.

We would arrive shortly before noon, roam the streets for several blocks until my father or mother spied a parking space from which the boardwalk could be seen with the naked eye. And then my father would reprise the role of Moses and prepare his family for the half-mile trek to the Promised Land: carrying two umbrellas and a vinyl tote bag full of food and drink, he would lead his towel-and-toys-toting wife and three boys over the hot asphalt of the noon-time streets, up the splintery ramp to the boardwalk, across the splintery boardwalk, down the splintery ramp to the beach where thick, hot sand awaited our tender feet, and through which we trudged for ages before reaching a location near the shoreline that appealed to Dad's critical eye. And there he would set up base, smoothing out sand with his feet, coaxing the venerable blue-and-orange umbrella into the sand with the strength of his slender arms and then pounding it further down with the sole of his shoe. Mom and Nan would unfold their lawn chairs, constantly changing their position so that they were not disturbed by sun rays. While we frolicked on the beach, they would read the newspaper and gab for hours.

From this base we would run back and forth into the blueish-green, salty waters of the Atlantic Ocean, smelling of brine and saturated with seaweed. We would towel down and squirt some Sea and Ski lotion on our already reddening skin, and then eat with our Sea-and-Ski-greasy hands the bologna sandwiches that my mother had carefully prepared at home, wrapped tightly in wax paper—sandwiches that always managed to include sand as a most unwelcome condiment.



In the late afternoon we would rest at the base, digging holes in the sand and erecting sand castles, waiting for the ice-cream man to walk briskly, seemingly aimlessly through the myriad bases that had sprouted up all over the beach, waiting for his calls of “Fudgie Wudgie! Get yer Fudgie Wudgie here!” to break through the thick shore air, the din of the sun-loving families, the roar of the cresting and breaking waves against the non-too-distant shoreline. And we’d wolf down our Fudgie-Wudgie and use the chocolate-stained sticks to fashion a narrow fence around our puny sandcastle

Sometime in the very late afternoon we’d pack everything up and begin the long trek back to the car, tired legs trudging once again through the thick, hot sand. Once we stuffed ourselves and everything else into the car, Dad would drive away and seek out some shaded and quiet street where we would drape old Army-surplus blankets over our legs and quickly change out of our wet bathing suits and into our dry clothes for the evening. Usually this street was located somewhere in the north part of Atlantic City, not too far removed from the entertainment and dining mecca, Captain Starns restaurant.

Captain Starns was a popular family restaurant in the 1950s and 1960s. I assume that the food was reasonably priced because there always seemed to be a long line of families waiting to get into the main restaurant. It was possible to eat outside: one simply placed the order at a window and tried to find a table during the five or ten minute wait until the food was prepared. I don’t recall much about the food aside from the huge ketchup bottles and the greasy, but tasty French fries. But then again the food was not why Bob, Neil, and I liked going to Starns.

The biggest attraction was the outdoor “aquarium” where one could see and feed fish, dolphin, and turtles swimming in make-shift ponds. The air was always saturated by a thick briny and fishy smell, a smell that stayed with one for quite some time after one finally left Captain Starns.



After filling our stomachs with good seafood we'd begin the best part of the excursion: a stroll down the boardwalk. One specialty shop after another in a carnival atmosphere, a little kid's paradise: comic book stores, candy stores, toy stores, games of skill and luck, photo booths, rides, rides, and more rides. And the noise, the lights, the throngs of people, the diversity of languages! It was exciting. It was dangerous (we had to hold hands as we walked through the throngs of people). It was exhilarating. It was taxing. It was seemingly all the planet Earth had to offer in a few miles along the Atlantic shoreline.



I liked going on merry-go-rounds and rides like the whip and the mixer. Mom would usually take me on such rides; Dad was more interested in technical marvels like the Ferris wheel



at Steel Pier. I, however, was terrified of it. One night he persuaded Bob and me to share a gondola and enjoy the sights to be seen from a hundred miles up in the sky. It was truly amazing to see all the people and buildings recede from our vision, getting ever smaller and smaller. Everything ran smoothly until the wheel suddenly came to a stop. Our gondola was stuck for what seemed to be an eternity at the top of its Ferris wheel. For whatever reason it began to quiver, and I started to freak out. Bob was enjoying every second of this experience and tried to calm me down; I feared that the wheel had broken and we were going to spend the night stuck in a most precarious position. It didn't help matters when I looked timidly behind us. The Atlantic Ocean was shrouded in darkness. I couldn't see anything; this pitch-blackness contrasted starkly with the garish lights beaming up from the pier. I don't think I had said so many prayers so quickly in my life! All of a sudden there was a metallic creaking noise; our gondola moved down a bit, bringing us closer to the unfathomable ocean. Another minute or so, another creaking noise, another few feet. My prayers were being answered ... although not as swiftly as I would have liked! I was so relieved then my feet finally stood on terra firma again. I resolved never to ride a Ferris wheel again. And I never have.



My favorite store on the boardwalk was Planter's Peanuts. At the main entrance there was a huge statue of Mr Peanut—and often a man in a Mr Peanuts suit—where you could have your picture taken with the internationally renowned legume. And in the back of the colossal store were aisle after aisle of toys and trinkets that all kids gravitated towards and that all

parents tried to distract their kids from. But before one got to this toy utopia one had to get somehow by the alluring food center that sent the seductive smells of fudge, chocolate, and peanuts wafting in every direction. There was no resisting: you just had to buy a box of something to nibble on as you worked your way up and down the boardwalk.

My grandmother was notorious for her sweet tooth. She had a particular weakness for cinnamon buns. But saltwater taffy was another one of her guilty pleasures; she could never decide whether James' or Fralinger's taffy was better. While Bob, Neil, and I would be admiring all the toys and games on display, Nan would wander up and down the food aisles, hunting for the tastiest goodies that would satisfy her palate. We would usually leave Planter's with a box of saltwater taffies, a box of multi-flavored jellies, a bag of assorted nuts, and three small toys or games that my brothers and I pleaded Mom and Dad to buy. The ones I remember most were a bag of small, green soldiers that Bob coveted, and a card set that showed a "film" of a baseball player running and sliding into a base by quickly fanning the cards from 1 to 52.

The night on the boardwalk would not be complete if we didn't indulge Nan's sweet tooth one more time. Before heading to the car each of us would get a frozen custard, a treat we would have to eat quickly or else it would melt all over our hands and clothes.

It must have been about 10 PM when we all got into the car and began the journey back to Germantown. I don't remember much about those return trips. Most likely I fell asleep, physically drained by all the activities we had engaged in over the previous ten hours, oblivious to the sunburn that I inevitably had to contend over the next few days.

I think that we went to the shore more frequently between 1958 and 1965 than we did between 1965 and 1975—the year when I finally left home. I think the reason for these infrequent visits was Cindy. The logistics of getting Cindy into the car, out of the car, and then moved via wheel chair through thick, hot sand to the beach must have been daunting. And yet there were several occasions in the 1970s—after I had met Berta—

where Mom, Dad, Nan, Steve, Berta, and I would head out to Atlantic City with Cindy for a day trip (I'm not sure whether Bob and Neil came along or not). Pushing the wheelchair through the sand was arduous; keeping Cindy out of direct sunlight required at least two umbrellas. Aside from that, things remained the same: changing our clothes in the car; eating bologna-and-sand sandwiches on the beach; having dinner at Captain Starns; going on rides that did not boast a colossal wheel; visiting the Planter's Peanuts store. Curiously, there were very few photos taken during these excursions, even though both Dad and I had fairly good-quality cameras. The photos below were taken in 1977. Notice that Cindy is bundled up with layered clothing, facing away from the camera, sitting in a shaded spot. Mom, as usual, is wearing casual clothing, not beachwear!

