

## Beach Drive

Maureen and I were sprawled across the hood of the car as Uli drove on the hard packed sand at the edge of the Gulf of Mexico, somewhere north of Tampico. We were hanging on precariously, laughing in the sun, our hair whipping in the tropical wind and the salt spray dampening our clothes and upturned faces. As we flew along at the water's edge, life seemed to hold nothing but adventure. And then, out of nowhere, a large wave came rolling in, breaking around the little Volvo and rocking it so we were almost dumped off onto the sand. Uli slowed, and the engine died.

We slid off the hood, and I walked around to the driver's window. The sound of Uli cranking the starter drove the gulls away from the front of the car, but the engine didn't catch.

"Must have gotten wet under the hood," muttered Uli, his German accent giving a odd sound to the word "hood," almost rhyming it with "mood."

When he got out and opened the engine compartment, the wiring was dripping salt water. I looked around at the broad expanse of picturesque beach, two or three miles of gently curving sand with no visible structure or sign of human habitation. The beach was bordered by a dense green wall of tropical vegetation, palm trees and flowering vines. The only sounds were the wind, the surf, and the calls of the seabirds.

As I looked at the waves, crests of white foam riding on rolls of turquoise as far out as I could see, I noticed something that gave me a chill. The tide seemed to be coming in. With each breaking wave the water surged a little higher on the beach, and now, it was just beginning to lap at the Volvo's tires.

Looking behind me I saw that piles of driftwood and seaweed marked the high water line at least 20 feet above where the car sat. At high tide the Volvo would be mostly

under water. Even as I watched, the foam of the next incoming wave rose a couple of inches up the sidewall of the tires.

“Uli,” I called, starting to feel panic. “We have to move the car.”

He looked at me, but only for a second. He had opened the trunk and pulled out the tool kit.

“The tide,” I said. “It’s coming in.”

Uli didn’t answer. He was now at the front of the car, methodically taking out each spark plug, drying it with his ubiquitous handkerchief, then replacing it in the engine block and tightening it with the wrench from the toolkit. His deliberate, methodical drying while the tide rose around us made me want to shake him. Could he not see that time was running out?

Watching him work, I thought of how often I had seen Uli pull out his voluminous handkerchief to pat his neck or blow his nose. I had always found his habit of carrying a handkerchief ridiculously old fashioned, but it also had a kind of old world charm that went along with Uli’s unique blend of American and European sensibilities. It was like his accented English, easy and fluent but flavored with something foreign and vaguely formal.

After meeting Uli and Maureen the year before through mutual friends, I began spending as much time in their dingy third floor walk up apartment as in my own, a few blocks away. Maureen was thin and pale and loved to talk, absently twisting her long brown hair with one hand and gesturing with the other as she spoke. She and Uli had met during the year he was at Queens College, one of the several years he had spent trying out different schools around the U.S. They had moved in together, supporting themselves by making handmade earrings which they sold on college campuses in the New York area. When they weren’t out on the road as traveling earring gypsies, they held court in their

## Beach Drive

Lower East Side apartment, twisting silver wire, stringing beads and passing joints to a steady stream of visitors, while the Grateful Dead provided the soundtrack on the stereo. Over the past year, Uli and Maureen's circle of friends had become my circle. We thought of ourselves as explorers of the new psychedelic landscape. We were not just young and alive in New York; we were part of a Movement. We ventured out on expeditions into the city around us, and into our own minds, with an exhilarating sense of being able to remake the rules. That June, in the grip of a fantasy that had somehow turned into a real life plan, we took off in the Volvo for Venezuela.

Actually, Venezuela had been Uli's fantasy, and I think the destination of our journey in that 1968 summer might just as well have been Oz or Brigadoon. We had all contributed our enthusiasm and resources to the enterprise, which included, in my case, the use of my car for the journey. Now here we were, halfway there and about to lose our means of going on, or going anywhere, as the car was being swallowed by the warm waters of the Gulf of Mexico.

By the time Uli had dried and replaced all four spark plugs the water had risen to the bottom of the hubcaps. He got into the driver's seat and cranked the motor again, and this time it coughed and roared to life. Maureen and I began cheering as he let out the clutch and the wheels started turning. Then our cheers turned into strangled cries of frustration as the wheels spun in the wet sand and immediately dug themselves into water filled holes. As Uli gunned the engine, Maureen and I frantically heaved and pushed with all our might at the rear of the car. But the car didn't move at all, and the water now came up almost to the passenger door.

I looked frantically up and down the beach but there was no one we could call to for help. A wave of remorse passed through me. Only a few months ago this car had been

my graduation gift. I pictured myself calling my father in New York, saying “Hi, Dad. What’s new? Well, I just lost the Volvo in the Gulf of Mexico.”

Maureen and I started unloading the car’s trunk as fast as we could, bringing the backpacks and bags that held all our gear up to the dry sand above the high tide line, then running back for another load. By the time the trunk was empty the car floor was under an inch of water.

“We’ve lost the car,” I began wailing. “We’ve lost the fucking car in the fucking Gulf of Mexico.”

“Hey, stop that,” Uli barked. “We have not lost anything yet. You two run and get that driftwood. Bring it here as fast as you can.” He pointed up the beach to the pieces of wood tangled with seaweed at the high water line.

“Driftwood? What for?” I asked. I had no idea why Uli would want driftwood.

He shook his head. “If you want to get the car out of here just DO it.” He was rummaging in the trunk under the spare tire. Thinking about how this trip had been Uli’s idea to begin with, I decided I that must have been insane to go off to Venezuela with a guy who always went out of his way to ignore the rules, and could turn anything, even a drive on the beach, into a desperate adventure.

Still wailing about losing the car, I scrambled up the beach, gathered an armload of driftwood, and stumbled back through the sand to dump it behind the car. Maureen did the same. Uli had meanwhile pulled the jack from the trunk. Setting down a flat piece of driftwood under the rear bumper, he rested the foot of the jack on the wood. Then he began cranking the arm of the jack, and the rear of the car slowly rose until the wheels were up in the air, hovering over the water filled holes in the sand.

Then Uli took the rest of the driftwood we had found and placed it under the rear

## Beach Drive

wheels to make a few feet of wooden track on each side. Cranking down the jack so the wheels now rested on the driftwood, he jumped back into the driver's seat and again let out the clutch. This time when the wheels turned the car actually moved forward a few feet, until the rear wheels came off the driftwood tracks and sank again into the wet sand.

Jumping out again and returning to the rear of the car, Uli replaced the driftwood under the bumper, jacked up the car, and again made another few feet of road leading up the beach and away from the water. I had been standing there, wringing my hands and rehearsing my explanation of how I had actually managed to lose the car in the ocean, but now that I understood what Uli was doing I sprang forward to help. After another few rounds of jacking and driving, the car finally rested on dry sand above the water line. The three of us leaned against it, panting from our exertion, laughing with relief.

"You are a genius," I told Uli, grabbing him by the shoulders and shaking him. "I can't believe you thought of that. I had completely given up. You're amazing."

Maureen put her arms around his neck. "He's our hero," she said, beaming at me for confirmation while I nodded vigorously.

Uli shrugged off our compliments. I had the feeling he was actually annoyed at how little use we had been in the crisis. Our relief, however, made us too giddy to care. Maureen and I jabbered to each other about what had just happened, shaking our heads as if we couldn't believe it ourselves, while Uli busied himself bailing the water out of the passenger compartment. Then, as Maureen and I re-loaded the trunk with all our possessions, he returned to the driver's seat and waited impatiently until we dusted the sand off our feet and got into the Volvo with him.

It wasn't long before we found a paved road leading away from the coast, and the incident on the beach was soon replaced by a series of new adventures, becoming in the

end just one of the stories we told as part of the saga of our Mexico travels. “Did I ever tell you about the time we almost lost the car in the Gulf of Mexico?”

But that summer, as we traveled on, I came to appreciate the way Uli combined his reckless penchant for paying little or no attention to the rules with an amazing ability to solve the problems that ignoring the rules often created. And I realized that the adventures we had together in solving those “problems” turned out to be the parts of our journey that meant the most to us in the end.

I’d also like to think that over the time we traveled together I wound up catching some of Uli’s adventurous spirit. I’d like to think that now, when I find myself stranded with the tide coming in, panic beginning to rise, I know how to start looking around me for the driftwood.