

Critical Acclaim for The Red Album of Asbury Park

“It is simply an amazing work of fiction... a smart look inside the topsy-turvy world of the rock and roll lifestyle and the futility, hope, danger, love and mystery of survival in general. The Red Album of Asbury Park is a book you won't be able to put down.”—John Pfeiffer, Aquarian Magazine

“An affecting and honest work that rolls out like a pop song and resonates unforgettably, the way a great chorus should.”—Alex Green, Caught in the Carousel Magazine

“Strongly evocative of a time and place, of interest especially to those who hail from the “swamps of Jersey” but also to anyone who loves rock 'n' roll. Good book!”—Dave Williams, Journalist, former Books Editor, Asbury Park Press

“The Red Album of Asbury Park is a very gripping and thoughtful book; it is melancholy and sad at times but also brings a lot of hope with it. You are highly recommended to read it.” — Mirza Gazic, Blogcritics

“With its rich mix of New Jersey history, rock ‘n’ roll roman a clef, and mystery, The Red Album of Asbury Park will beguile, inform, and entertain you.” —Jim Testa, JerseyBeat.com

“Strongly evocative of a time and place, of interest especially to those who hail from the “swamps of Jersey” but also to anyone who loves rock 'n' roll. Good book!”—Dave Williams, Journalist, former Books Editor, Asbury Park Press

“A 10 out of 10!” —Frank Gogol, Editor-in-Chief, The Outlook, Monmouth University

Alex Austin's excellent Jersey Shore-centric book *The Red Album of Asbury Park* a rock n' roll noir that takes place in Springsteen's Jersey, Asbury Park . . . Jersey boardwalk attractions Mr. Peanut and the Diving Horse of Atlantic City figure prominently. The book makes for a decent Jersey cleanser after dealing with the guidos and the "garbage" from you know where—Thus Spake Drake

“. . .War shadows the young people — damaged veterans and hippies alike — and adds to the relentless tension in the background.” —Kelly-Jane Cotter, Entertainment Editor, Asbury Park Press.

“Asbury Park, ville cotière dans New Jersey, a toujours inspiré le Boss, mais aussi l’écrivain Alex Austin....A travers le rocker en herbe Sam Nesbitt, l’auteur offre une vision à la fois héroïque et charnelle de l’époque.“[... the author offers a vision of an era both heroic and carnal.]— Talia Soghomonian, Paris Metro

“It might be the perfect book to read on the beach in Asbury Park this summer.”—Joe Palazzolo, Jerseysmarts.com

The Red Album of Asbury Park

Asbury Out of Time

Alex Austin

Copyright © 2017 Alex Austin
All rights reserved.
ISBN: 9781549962820

Cover by BuddhaCandy

This book is a work of fiction. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

CHAPTER 1

Except for the girl who sat across the aisle in the reversed seat, the railroad car was empty. The other passengers had cleared out by Woodbridge, leaving their brown-wrapped beer cans and crushed cigarette packs doubled in the black glass above the wooden sills. In summer, businessmen filled the train, traveling to their summer houses on the shore to meet their families for the weekend. Servicemen would be heading home on leave, as I had done many times, getting off at Hazlet to hitch a ride to Port Beach. But now it was winter, with snow on the horizon, and little to see but the remnant Christmas lights that hung above the dark landscape like birds that forgot to fly south. I leaned back into the padded seat, barely feeling the rhythm of the train as the wheels took the separations between the rails.

“You dropped your postcard,” said the girl.

I scratched the card from the muddied floor, brushed off the dirt and set it back on my leg.

“Thanks,” I said, wasting a smile as she looked down the aisle at the empty seats, maybe noticing for the first time that we were alone.

“How far are you going?” I asked.

“Pretty far,” she said in a careless voice, barely glancing my way. She unbuttoned her military-issue peacoat, just like mine, and spread the sides. A white ribbed sweater revealed the swell of her breasts. Beneath the sweater a pair of faded, flared blue jeans clung tight to her thighs. She slumped down in her seat and put her face back in her book.

“Only goes to Bayhead.”

She looked up, her nose twitching as if for a bad smell. “What?”

“Bayhead is the end of the line.”

“Yeah?”

“There’s nothing to do there but turn around.”

“Well, I’m getting off way before that.” She lowered her head as the train rolled past an open stretch of meadow, above which the Manhattan skyline rose like a picture on a pinball machine.

She had long black hair, big brown eyes and smooth glowing skin. Her skin was a shade darker than mine and without a trace of freckle, which I'd always had plenty of myself. I didn't mind a few freckles on a girl, but they wouldn't have added anything to this one. Aside from the hair and skin, something else caught my interest as far back as Penn Station. Just off the center of her upper lip was a vertical scar, slightly swollen, that would be hard under a kiss. It may have been a birth defect, or what was left of one—maybe it was just an accident. Either way, I liked her lip better than if it had been perfect.

“Where you going?” I asked.

“Sorry, but I'm . . .” She waved the book.

Think I would talk your ear off, right? “Hey, keep reading.”

She curled closer to her book and sunk deeper into the seat. Now she regretted drawing my attention to the postcard. He's not in my league, she'd be thinking. Maybe not that exactly, but something like that. Something . . . I didn't care really. Once I would have taken it personally, sulkily. Things change when you get a future. I stretched my legs, breathed in the smoky air and returned to my mother's postcard.

In the glossy picture the letter U, like the other letters, was hollowed out like a stencil. Inside the U, paddleboats skimmed across the narrow curving lake that bounded the beachfront's rides and amusement complexes. At the lake's center, a plywood swan running on an underwater track drove its breast against the dark green water, its neck stretching high as a giraffe's. Five years ago in that swan I held a girl as pretty as the one across the aisle. I found her lips as the setting sun's rays flooded the Ferris wheel that rose from the roof of the big green arcade, and the darkening ocean clapped the shore. Children's laughter and cotton candy—all that romantic shit. With a penknife scooped by a miniature crane from a bed of prizes, I etched our initials in the swan's side, and figured we'd be two forever.

I turned the postcard over, took in my new address, and then for the tenth time read my mother's neat script, which told me that my friend Roy had been killed. I turned to the window and a flare-up of Christmas lights. A pocked Santa drove his team back toward Newark, toward that big neon American eagle.

I dug the beer that I bought at the station out of my peacoat pocket, popped it open, and drank lazily. The first one always smelled like straw. Finishing half, I stuck the can on the windowsill and checked my watch: 10:10 p.m. On the opposite seat, my seabag and guitar case

sat upright and slanted inward like a couple resting their heads against each other.

I pulled the guitar case over, opened it and took out the guitar, a black Les Paul Custom that cost me eight months' pay. I ran my cupped hand down the neck and then, my ear an inch from the ten-pound solid body, I tuned. With my eyes half-closed I strummed a few chords, and satisfied with the tuning, I played a song. There was no amplification

The train slowed for a station. Ahead, blue neon lights spelled out a diner's name and through the windows, a handful of customers ate alone at the counter. The train shuddered and stopped. A uniformed Marine in the diner turned his head toward the train and studied us. Roy had been a Marine, although I told him to forget the jarheads when we had our half-drunken talk about enlisting. He responded, "How will I fuck-up someone hand-to-hand, then?" Valves hissed and water vapors swirled at the windows, putting me in a movie. I plucked a string. When I lifted my head, she was looking at me.

"I'm Sam."

"Jillian." She leaned her chin on her fist as if giving some hard thought to me.

"What's your stop?"

"Asbury," Jillian said.

"Mine too. Sort of. I'm going to Ocean Grove."

"Oh?"

"My family used to live in Port Beach." I pointed east. "They moved while I was away."

"It's a good thing they told you."

I laughed at that, and liked her a little more. "I've been to Asbury a couple of times, but I've never set foot in Ocean Grove. What's it like?"

"Quaint, they say, but it's nice when you're stoned."

Yeah, she was all right. The train jerked forward a couple of times, found its traction, and rolled out of the station.

"So, play something," she said.

I played for a couple of minutes when she stood up and walked over, leaning on the opposite seat. Her eyes followed my fingers on the strings. She knew something, I thought. I slipped my gaze to her upper lip, taken again with its broken center.

"Stop staring," she snapped.

"I wasn't . . ."

“Oh, don’t lie. I’m used to it.”

She smiled self-consciously but her eyes laughed at my discomfort, which I exaggerated for her benefit.

“You get high?”

Grabbing her handbag, she drew out a misshapen joint and a lighter. She lit up, took a couple of soulful drags, and handed it to me. She shook off her coat, flung back her hair and pulled up her sleeves. Her arms were slender, wrists no wider than a boy’s belt, and the undersides lighter than her general coloring, like the meat of a ripe peach. We passed the joint back and forth, glancing out the window, clouding the glass with our exhalations and not saying more than a half-dozen words as we moved through the black night.

Jillian broke the silence when she laughed at nothing, reached over and touched my arm. A light broke through the trees, catching her teeth.

“You’re a pretty good guitarist,” she said.

“I want to get in a band.”

“Cool. Do you want a big band or a small band?”

If she was teasing, I didn’t care. “I don’t know. A small band, I guess. Three or four guys.”

“Not two guys?”

“No, three or four.”

“You want to be a star?” she asked, her voice plain, so that I still couldn’t tell if she was just putting me on.

“Just want to be in a band.”

“That’s easy.”

“Hope so.”

I didn’t smoke the weed all that much. Like my father, I liked my drugs in a brown bottle or in a bright can with mysterious symbols. After a few drinks I’d lose all self-doubt and inhibition. At best, marijuana slowed things down. I never felt more relaxed or aware, just stuck. Stuck in time and going nowhere—like Zeno’s arrow. But now I was stuck in time with Jillian, with whom I was happy to go nowhere or everywhere, to Bayhead or to anywhere else the Jersey Coastline Railroad might extend its franchise tonight.

She pushed her hands through her black hair and shook it. The movement drew me into

the mistake of leaning toward her. She snapped her face from me as if I had slapped her cheek. I wasn't too hurt.

The train blasted its horn. It was too soon for a station, I thought. The horn's pitch rose to a screech and the car vibrated violently as I floated toward Jillian, who sunk against her seat, her lips drawn back in a fierce smile. I landed atop her, my mouth an inch from hers and my right leg shoved deep between her thighs. Her heat radiated through our denim. But the terrific force that had thrown me forward, relented. Our crashed bodies came undone. From far away, I heard metal grinding metal, and felt the train slowing. When the thud came, it wasn't all that loud. The train slid a few more yards, shuddered, and stopped.

A few minutes later, with no one's permission, we climbed off the train. My guitar in one hand and Jillian holding the other, we walked down the sloped, gravel-topped embankment that bordered the tracks to the flat dirt path below. Though our breath blew milky white, it wasn't much colder than freezing, and gleaming plates of half-frozen water on the path cracked beneath our weight.

The train had stopped fifty yards short of a crossing, its warning lights flashing and bells clanging, while its gates rose and fell like the stammering hands of a broken clock. In front of the locomotive, a great brown leg kicked rapidly, each thrust accompanied by a snapping sound. It was a horse split at midsection, its entrails flung twenty feet down the ties. Vapor rose from the big chunks of pink flesh, bright as lipstick under the train's headlight. The horse's chest and front legs were intact, as was its neck, which was stretched over the silver rail. Its head was bent to the gravel, mouth open as if grazing. The moving leg extended to the flank, which was severed and drawn under the wheel. The leg bent and straightened, a hoof struck the air as if seeking solid ground. The air stunk of blood and shit.

Jillian stood still, fixed on the sight, and it wasn't until the cop cars and fire engines pulled up that she turned and walked back toward our car. "Do you think horses have souls?" she asked a step ahead of me.

"I'm not sure that people have souls."

"I didn't ask about people."

"Never been a horse."

"Don't be shallow."

I slowed down and let her walk ahead.

Shallow.

The train didn't move for another hour while the firemen cleaned away the horse. Then an official, accompanied by the conductor, strode through the cars inquiring about possible injuries to the passengers.

"That horse had a career," said the conductor, as the train finally got under way.

"Race horse?"

"Diving."

"Diving?"

"You never saw it? Atlantic City?"

But I had, and I remembered sitting with my aunt in the stands on the Steel Pier, watching the horse and rider climb the ramp to the six-story diving platform.

"How did it get here from Atlantic City?"

"Swam."

"Shit."

"There are horse farms all over Monmouth. This one got loose from an estate about a mile away. The police reported trouble there."

I had another question, but the conductor excused himself to attend other passengers.

I looked at Jillian, who had returned to her reversible seat and laid her head against the window, her eyes closed.

I tried to break through with, "You ever see the diving horse?" She didn't say a word.

It wasn't until the conductor announced Asbury Park that she looked in my direction, and even then I wasn't absolutely sure it was me that she was looking at. Her eyes didn't give you much. "I know somebody that may be looking for a guitarist. Give Peter a call." She handed me a slip of paper with a phone number. "Good luck with the music."

"Thanks," I said, looking at the number. "I was wondering . . ."

"Call Peter." She didn't look at me again, even as the train pulled into the Asbury Park station. She slung her bag over her shoulder and turned up her coat collar. As she stepped into the vestibule I called out, "I was wondering if you were a musician?"

She glanced back. “The Decisive Moment.”

“Excuse me?”

“The band’s name, you know? Like in photography.”

She cupped her left hand above her eye, raised her right to her cheek and snapped her forefinger down. “Good luck,” she said over her shoulder.

I waited a moment to make sure she didn’t think I was following her, grabbed my seabag and guitar and feeling that I just got my first lucky break, stepped off the train into the start of a shit storm.

CHAPTER 2

On the platform, an old black man in a beat up greatcoat greeted the handful of disembarking passengers.

“Spare a quarter?”

None did, but the old man blessed each as they hurried past. When he saw my guitar case he raised his left hand, bent his long fingers, and jerked his right hand across his stomach. “Love guitar,” he said. Rocking his shoulders, he offered to play something, drew a pint of whiskey from his coat and held it out to me. When I told him that my guitar had no strings, he winked and told me that his bottle had no booze, and took a hit. I set down my seabag and handed him a dollar. “Almost Johns,” he said.

“Almost?”

“That’s right. What’s yours?”

“Nearly Sam Nesbitt.”

“Don’t bother. I’ve heard it all.”

“Sam Nesbitt, then.”

“Pleasure.”

“You know your way around this area?”

“Sure do.”

I slipped my hand inside my peacoat’s coin pocket, fishing for the postcard with my mother’s address. The paper I drew out was the one Jillian gave me. I dug deeper, but came up empty. I searched my other pockets. Christ, could I have left it on the seat? I set down my guitar case and turned to the train, gliding out of the station. I started toward the last car, where the conductor stood solemnly on the steps, smoking a cigarette and punching holes in the ether. But I was too late.

“Forget something?” asked Almost.

“Embury,” I whispered as I turned around, trying to envision the postcard’s return address.

“What’s that?”

“Is there an Embury Street in Ocean Grove?”

“Embury Avenue. That where you going?”

“128? 821? 8211? Shit.” Did it have three or four digits? I searched my pocket again.
 “You know how many blocks Embury is?”

“About six or seven. Embury runs east-west.”

“How do I get there?”

“Well . . .”

I fished out another dollar.

“It’s coming to me . . .”

“Here,” I said, handing him four quarters. “That’s all I’ve got.”

“Hell, I’ll take you there.”

I followed Almost across the empty parking lot. Glad to be close to home, I hardly felt the weight of the seabag on my shoulder or the gentle swinging of my guitar case—a metronome for the notes playing in my head.

“I used to be head bellboy at the finest hotel in Asbury,” said Almost as we exited the lot. “Requires a lot of skills. Most people don’t realize that. For example, a head bellboy must be able to procure women.”

“Yeah, I can see that.”

“Carry them up the stairs if need be. You ever piggyback a lazy whore?”

“I don’t think so.”

“They’ll be biting your ear.”

“No shit?”

Almost tilted his head. “You see those white streaks? Whore bites. Eight floors of whore bites. You think the motherfucker tipped me? Gave me a stuffed panda. Now what the fuck I want with a stuffed panda?”

We had walked a half block on the other side of the intersection when Almost halted and pointed to a store window. “Best pair of shoes I ever wore. Buster Browns. You like that name Buster? I kind of do. If I had a child, I’d name him Buster.”

I laughed at that. He gave me a sour look. “You watch that guitar. Keep it close.”

I looked over my shoulder at the empty sidewalk and the empty street, everything still as a painting. Almost grabbed my arm. “Wait here,” he said, striding toward an alley.

“Where you going?”

“Old man’s got to piss.”

I set down the seabag. My stomach growled and I realized how hungry I was. I dug in my pocket, pulled out half an Almond Joy and took my time chewing. A plane droned overhead. The sound stayed at the same volume for a long time, as if the plane were flying in circles.

I was ready to head out on my own when Almost appeared. “Let’s go,” he said roughly, as if I had been the one who’d delayed. “What you eating?”

“Candy bar.”

“Got any more?”

“Nope.”

“That’s okay. What else you want to know?”

I shrugged.

“Whores and illegal substances,” said Almost, “that’s the coin of a head bellboy. I got this one gentleman . . .”

Generally, I steer clear of people who can’t handle a moment’s silence. But Almost, though pretty much a nonstop talker, kept me interested.

Stopping midway through his tale, Almost again clasped my arm, but instead of taking off, he pointed back to the traffic light. “Main Street. Say, ‘Main Street.’”

“Main Street.”

“First street you need to know in any town. Asbury’s Main Street ‘specially important. Parallels the railroad tracks for the length of the city. In Asbury, railroad tracks cleave white and black folks as cleanly as a knife. There’s no law that says so, but that’s the way it is and has been. My kin moved to Asbury in the ‘20s, worked in the hotels built after the big fire of 1917. Damn fire burned down whole blocks of hotels, houses and what-not, including the Boardwalk. After the fire, that’s when they built the Berkeley. The Convention Center and Casino, too. You know about them?”

“Not really.”

“The same guys who designed Grand Central Station designed the Casino and the Convention Center. Quite a place it was, like one of those European cities. Paris. Can you believe that? Paris. Of course, the people who owned all those beautiful places needed someone to work in them. That’s when the Blacks came. West of the tracks, they built developments for the black workers. Some nice little cottage developments. My family owned a fine little cottage. Some are still there, you know that?”

“No, I didn’t.”

Almost led me down Cookman Avenue, pointing out this and that landmark. “That’s the Asbury Park Press building. Put out a paper every goddamn day. Stand out back and you’ll get a free one. Steinbach’s Department Store. That’s real gold plate above the windows. Duke and Duchess of Windsor shopped there. Frank Sinatra, Elizabeth Taylor, JFK and Jackie. Manhattan? Shit. We got Steinbach’s.”

Mannequins posed in the darkness behind the plate-glass windows, elegant in their winter clothes, their features only visible when they seemed to turn their heads to the lights of a passing car, and unoffended at the inattention.

With the exception of a couple of bars, the businesses on the street were dark and shuttered as if they were not only closed for the night but not meant to be seen. More than a few were boarded up or stripped of all identification.

“What’s going on with all the closed stores?” I asked.

“You never been here in winter?”

“Couple times in summer.”

“Asbury’s a tree. September comes and the tree loses all its leaves. But they come back, don’t they, just like all the pretty girls. You just gotta have faith.”

We passed a darkened Greyhound Station, with a solitary bus parked at the curb out front, empty, lights off, going nowhere. In the window of the bus station hung a doormat-sized postcard, identical except in size to the one I’d left on the train. When I paused to look, Almost traced the letters with his finger and said, “Asbury Park. Named after Tom Asbury. You know who he was? Founder of the Methodist Church in America. That’s right. This town is built on a mighty rock.”

I knew of Tom Asbury from Sunday school at the Methodist Church at Port Beach, which my mother made us sporadically attend. I didn’t sleep though all the sermons, just like I didn’t take all the coins from the offering envelope to please the pinball gods.

“What most people don’t know is that Tom Asbury was a black man.”

“No kidding? I never heard . . . ”

“Oh yeah, Asbury’s a black man all right.” He clapped his hands. “You go down there,” said Almost, turning and pointing to the north, “you’ll be on Grand Avenue with churches that rival Parisian cathedrals. The founders wanted this town to be something special. When people

walked along that first boardwalk (they weren't nothing but creaky planks), they walked in the Glory of God." Almost caught his breath. "And the place you're going? Other side of that lake, Wesley Lake . . ." Almost faced south toward a still, narrow lake reflecting the streetlights that lined its perimeter. "Ocean Grove. A holy city, some would say. Under the grace and protection of blue law."

"Blue law, huh?"

Almost pointed to a low white bridge that crossed the lake. "You walk that over to the Grove. You keep going south until you hit Main Street. Two blocks past that is Embury. You don't know the number, huh?"

"It'll come to me. I'm lucky that way."

"I'll leave you here then. And watch out for that guitar. Don't be getting lulled into complacency."

I shifted my seabag on my shoulder, aching under the weight. "Hey, Almost. Where did you get that coat?"

"You dig it?"

"My old man had one just like it."

"So did mine," said Almost, walking away.

I crossed the Wesley Lake Bridge into Ocean Grove and followed Almost's directions toward Embury. My mother drove our family's old Plymouth, and surely the car would be parked in front of the house. Resisting the urge to toss the seabag behind a hedge, I tottered down the quiet street. I glanced across the porches, bare as winter trees and shyly lit, wondering at the uniformly darkened rooms, and listening to my own heavy breath. I thought of Jillian but a few more steps and another girl came out of the night.

Julie took my hand and with a soft laugh turned my face from Jillian. Julie's voice in my ear, I walked south several blocks, throwing out my right hip to bring the seabag closer to my center of gravity.

"What's the matter?"

"I think I've got a piece of sand in my eye."

Julie pulled down the corner of her eye. "I close my eyes underwater just so this won't happen."

"If you keep them open the water will wash it out."

"But then the salt burns my eyes. Would you get me a tissue?" She pointed to a box on the table. I pulled one out and handed it to her. She held her eye open, dabbing the tissue as she rolled her eye upward. "Take a look, huh?"

I stepped closer and smelled her freshly washed body, which still held the familiar scents of suntan lotion and bay salt. Drunk and courageous on her fumes, I looked down into her eye. She had green irises, the edges were jagged and pointed like a child's drawing of the sun, and within them green and splashes of gold.

"Do you see anything?" asked Julie.

"No, not yet," I said, not wanting to leave those colors, but shifting my gaze to the white of her eye. She moved and her wet top brushed my chest. Through the cloth I could feel the heat of her skin. A faint, warm breeze curled around me. I touched my left hand to her cheek. She flinched slightly at the touch. The warmth of her skin burned against my hand. I nudged down her lower eyelid, peeping inside her. "I think I see it," I said, spotting a single grain of sand, brown and glistening in the corner of her eye. She held out the tissue. I took it, twisted one corner and gently drew the tissue along the base of her eye. When I finished the pass, the grain was gone.

"I think I got it."

"Let me see."

I carefully held the tissue out, but the breeze caught it and snatched it from my hand, dropping it in a puddle beside the shower. I picked up the wet tissue.

"It feels better," said Julie.

"Want me to look again?"

She looked at me. "No. You got it. It felt big."

"Size of a marble."

A dog barked tentatively, confused, as if it were asleep and barking at another dog in its

dream. I had arrived at Main Street. It wasn't darker than the other streets, but it was grimmer and unsettling with its shadowed storefronts and broad empty sidewalks. I should have noticed the oddity then, but I continued south for two blocks and looked up at a street sign that read: Embury Avenue, 600 block. Good. Three digits. Now was it east or west? It was only after I made the decision to walk east that I finally noticed that the street—all the streets—were empty of cars. I lowered my seabag from my shoulder and let it fall to the sidewalk. Where were the cars?

I returned to Main Street, waiting around for someone to ask about this mystery, but after fifteen minutes of counting the bricks and encountering not a soul, I returned to Embury.

I walked the length of the street until I reached the oceanfront, then I turned around and walked back, hoping for a clue. An engine revved, followed by a thwack. Lights jumped out from the corner. I set down the seabag and guitar and sprinted into the street. The driver flashed his high beams. The tires shrieked, the hood nosed down and the car stopped. The driver stuck his head out the window. "Whatcha want, Mack?"

I walked up to the car. Rolled newspapers overflowed the backseat. "Hey, man. Where are all the cars?"

"Past midnight, buddy. Don't you know where you are?"

"Ocean Grove."

"Every car's gotta be off the street by 12 a.m. Sunday. Can't drive them back in until 12 a.m. Monday. Methodist law. Every frigging Chrysler, off the street."

"Except you."

"People gotta get their Sunday paper."

"You deliver to an Anne Nesbitt?"

"No customer of mine."

A second-story window in a nearby house slid up with a bang. Behind the window screen a head appeared. "Who is that?" a voice of unidentifiable gender demanded. "You're not supposed to have your car here."

"Newspaperman."

"No motor vehicles allowed! Who let you in?"

Ignoring the question, he whispered to me, "I gotta go. Blue law. Gotta keep moving."

"Who let you in?" the voice cawed.

“Good luck, buddy.”

“I demand to know!” the local shouted. But the newspaperman was gone.

I faced the open window. “Excuse me, do you know . . .”

“Who let you in?”

“No one,” I said, thinking of another time, driving through another place.

“Do you . . . ?”

“You don’t belong here!” The window slammed shut.

I returned to the Wesley Lake Bridge and stopped at the center to consider my options. Looking north over the lake, I saw the swan’s outline near the shore. I crossed the bridge and followed the path that bordered the lake. A neck muscle twitched violently. I hadn’t slept in forty-eight hours, and there was little prospect that I would end this night in a warm bed. I reached the dock at the end of which the swan floated, surrounded by a flock of miniature motorboats.

A breaker thundered over my shoulder, and I turned toward the sound. In Port Beach the bay would sometimes freeze in winter, extending from the shore a hundred yards, and thick enough to walk on the ice and feel the surge of the incoming tide. Shouldering the seabag and grabbing my guitar, I walked toward the ocean. A ramp that seemed to elevate with each step took me to the boardwalk, where I stopped and caught my breath. To my right, a massive structure spanned the walk. The Casino, I thought, glad of the memory. I stepped closer. Glass doors revealed a dimly lit interior with not much discernable, but inside of any sort looked good. I set down my baggage and tried a couple of unyielding doors, pressing my face to the cold glass, tasting my warm stale breath. Out of the murk, the globular eye of a carousel horse stumbled me back to the bloody tracks.

I loaded up and headed north on the smooth brown planks, watching the surf flash pale out of the formless sea. I walked past a stretch of boarded concession stands and a fenced-in miniature golf course, which was bordered by another ramp that ran back to the street. Beyond that, a hurricane fence sealed off a dozen dismembered and rusting kiddy rides. I dropped my seabag to the wood and sat. Nothing happened for ten minutes until a seagull alighted on Casey

Jones's locomotive, pecked around for some overlooked morsel and, coming up empty, squawked in my direction.

“Ain't got shit, bird,” I said, rising.

Canvas tarps covered the decks of the boats and the swan's hull. Setting the seabag and guitar on the dock, I untied the line that held one edge of the canvas tarp to the rail of the swan. Lifting the tarp, I folded it back. There were four seats and then a hollow under the breast of the swan. I sat on the rear seat and looked for the spot where I had carved my initials and Julie's. It wasn't that dark and I could see that they were gone. They must have been caulked and painted over. I envisioned the postcard, but in it now were the letters of her name, each one filled with memories of the brief time we spent together—stuff that I would take to the grave. I grabbed my seabag and hauled it into the hollow. I intended to leave the seabag while I searched out a diner. Instead I went back out to the dock, got my guitar case, stepped back into the swan and pulled the tarp back into place.

In the darkness I shoved the seabag into the hollow, set the guitar case at my feet, and settled my head on the canvas bag. A shaft of light from directly above penetrated the swan's neck like a silver arrow. I shut my eyes and waited for formless black—instead I got a shape and color.

Like an oyster when that grain of sand slips in, I ordered up those secretions that would finally smooth over the irritant. I may as well have demanded a wet dream. When I opened my eyes that shaft of light hadn't gone anywhere.

When I had something on my mind my brain resisted sleep with battlefield intensity. I was thinking of that obliterated heart, remembering Julie's breast against my back, her chin on my shoulder, her breath on my throat, as I leaned down and dug the penknife into the wood. It was foolish to imagine it would have remained, but all the same I expected it. If it was still there, time wouldn't have mattered at all. I should carve it again, I thought, deeper this time, indelible. I had a knife in the seabag and her name on my tongue. How stupid that would be, carving summer love on a winter night. I shut my eyes and waited again, but the image of myself doing it would not let me sleep. I opened my eyes and sat up, juices pooling in my throat, hungry,

realizing I hadn't eaten much at all since morning.

Sure, I'd carve a heart and there she would be. I undid the seabag's ties, dug through the clothes and found the pint of Four Roses. I'd drink, dull my memories and then sleep. I uncapped and took a gulp, holding it on my tongue until the burn jetted fire into my nostrils. I swallowed and swigged again. On an empty stomach the alcohol worked quickly and I was soon muttering a song about the good old days" and feeling all right about myself, but wide awake.

I bought the knife in a Boston pawnshop. It had a pearl handle, a spring action and a six-inch blade. Cost me twenty bucks. Although I had no immediate use for such a knife, I had wanted one since I saw a greaser out of juvenile hall flick out his blade faster than the eye could follow.

I removed the knife from the seabag and snapped it open a couple of times, happy with the mechanism. I took another sip of the whiskey, shoved the bottle back into the bag, and crawled into the swan's stern, folding back the canvas. The night was bleak, cold and silent. The condensation on the seat soaked through my jeans as I hunted again for the vanished heart. Here, I thought, rubbing the hull with my left hand as I flicked out the blade with my right. I pricked the wood with the knife. Five minutes to do the job, I thought. Envisioning the finished heart, I started at the center, where the two halves joined, working the knife upward to carve the left side, digging deeper as I reached the apex and drove down. The blade cut easily into the wood. I finished the left chamber and began the right, carefully drawing the knife through the wood until the two tapered halves joined, a heart four inches tall and three inches wide, good enough for a Hallmark card. The names required tighter work, "a sure hand," my father said, hovering over me as he judged. He was not one to be satisfied, ever. Get out of here old man, I thought, back to the grave. I started on the "J", focusing like some medieval priest copying script from the Bible, finishing the hook with a serif. I rubbed my finger across the letter, pleased with my work and thinking about another swig of the whiskey. No. Get it done. Get some sleep. I cut the "U" and the "L" and lifted the blade to dot the "T" just as headlights swept across the lake. I ducked and dragged the canvas over my head, thinking it was the hour of police patrols. What could they get me for? Trespassing? Malicious mischief? I heard a car pull to the curb. Its engine throbbed for thirty seconds and then died. Doors opened and closed.

Smoke stole under the canvas the way my father's cigarette smoke would flow from the kitchen and under my bedroom door, to tell me that it was time to get up for school. Cops would

be playing their flashlights over the swan, their handsets crackling. Maybe. I dropped lower, slowly extending my legs. I heard the stamp and scrape of a shoe grinding a cigarette into concrete, followed by the click of a lighter. Now they spoke in low, clipped voices, muffled further by the canvas, but clear enough to assure me they weren't cops but just a couple of men working out a problem that bore nothing to do with me. I settled in to wait them out, like I'd done a dozen times from hiding holes.

"You're an asshole, Mr. Peanut."

"Save it, huh?" said a second voice that I imagined was Mr. Peanut's.

"A dumb ass motherfucking retard. Lebetz takes sleeping pills, huh?"

"Every fucking night."

"Except . . . tonight."

"Get-the-shit-out-of-the-trunk," said a third man in a mechanical voice, like a bad ventriloquist trying not to move his lips.

I wanted to flatten myself against the hull so they wouldn't see my shape against the canvas. Perhaps the Four Roses had addled my brain. Maybe that's why I thought I could grasp the blade without consequences. I would have to slip off the seat, bracing myself with my right hand. You can hold the edge of a razor blade against your skin and if you don't apply pressure, it may as well be a playing card. It was a good knife, good steel, honed to perfection. As I unclenched my right hand, gently clasping the blade with my left, the swan pitched forward. I jerked back, my hand closing on the blade, which sunk into my fingers as smoothly as a surgeon's scalpel. I tried to reverse the movement and felt the cold like a handful of dry ice. I dropped the knife.

"What was that?" asked the third man.

Shit. Shit. Shit. I felt the warm blood spread across my palm, and I saw it as clearly as if my hand lay under a spotlight.

"Seagull," said Mr. Peanut.

"No. Something fell."

With my right hand I found the knife handle.

The dock creaked. The hull slapped. The swan shivered. Under cover of the motion, I crawled back into the swan's belly.

"Just a chain. There's a current in this lake. Didn't you know that, Mr. Peanut?" said the

first man.

“I grew up here.”

“That’s your fucking problem.”

A chain rattled. The dock squealed under departing footsteps. There was a click and the yawning sound of a car trunk opening.

“Take everything?” asked the first man.

“Everything but the jack and spare tire.”

“Oh, the gun?”

“Toss it.”

“Ten minutes to Shark River.”

“It’s OK.”

“What, ten feet deep?” asked the second man.

“Mud bottom. I grew up here,” said Mr. Peanut.

A grunt. Silence. A splash. Silence.

The doors slammed, the car engine turned over lazily and then roared. Tires scuffed the pavement. I waited a few minutes before crawling to the rear of the swan and pushing up the canvas.

Snow fell lazily over the swan and lake. Sideways snow. Moistureless snow. Forgetting my hand for a moment, I tracked the swirl around me, which retreated conical to a brilliant point of light atop the green-roofed building, where it drew into itself and disappeared.

I stepped out of the swan and crossed the dock to the sidewalk. Under the streetlight, I opened my hand. Blood pulsed from a wound that extended across four fingers, and filled my palm. But it didn’t spill over, which it would have if it were an artery. I walked to the lake, stretched out my arm and tilted my hand. The blood splashed on the dark water, which immediately roiled with baitfish. I folded the cloth, pressed it to my fingers, and walked back under the streetlight.

I shredded a T-shirt and wrapped the strips tightly around my hand. With my teeth, I tied a knot free-hand. Before pulling back the canvas, I followed the flight of a seagull along the length of the lake, rising finally as it continued toward the ocean. I pulled back the tarp and slid forward into my bed, wondering how much damage I had done to my hand and how many days it would take to heal. Above me, the shaft of light grew dimmer until it wasn’t there at all.

When I finally woke, in the residue of a dream, was the postcard with my mother's address. On the postcard's flipside, a horse's head replaced the swan's, and the hybrid floated on a blood-red sea.

CHAPTER 3

Under a low, gray winter sky that needed only a poke for the snow to fall, I located my mother's apartment. It was the second story of a narrow blue and white house with long windows and a steep roof and bordered by identical houses of similar colors. The porch, no larger than a beach blanket, chirped as I walked to the door. Layers of white paint half-buried a 317½ in metallic numbers. Nearby, church bells rang out and a pipe organ throbbed. I set down my guitar, leaving the seabag balanced on my shoulder, and clasped the door handle. Through the lace-curtain window of the bottom apartment, a wrinkled face peered out. Pale, blue watery eyes scanned me and then withdrew as I smiled and pointed to the second floor. I opened the door to the stairwell and adjusted the weight of my seabag (emptied of bloody dress blues and whites), hooked my thumb through the guitar case handle, and climbed the stairs.

A television played inside the apartment. I knocked on the door. Nothing. I knocked again.

"Mom, it's me. Sam."

Nothing. I knocked a third time. Zero. I waited until the television quieted. I hammered the door. "Mom, it's Sam."

The TV went silent. I heard the hesitant footsteps.

"Who is it?"

"Sam, mom."

"Oh."

A deadbolt slid back. A chain fell. A lock clicked.

The smell of burnt toast and oranges flooded the landing. Below me, a gray-haired woman with dark pouched eyes mirrored my wonderment. My mother looked twenty years older than the last time I saw her. The day she dug her heel into the fresh black dirt that slopped off my father's grave, and whispered to me that he was not my father at all.

"Oh, Sam," she said, grabbing me and stretching on her tiptoes to smother my neck and face with kisses. "You should have told me."

"I did. A month ago."

She stepped back, eyed the makeshift bandage wrapped around my left hand and cupped

her mouth.

To explain my hand, I made up a story: The blade was open in my seabag when I reached in for a pair of gloves “Stupid, huh, mom?” She led me to the kitchen sink, unwrapped the T-shirt strips, and washed away the blood to reveal a crimson line that ran horizontally across my fingers. Cleaning the wound thoroughly with warm water and honey-colored dishwashing soap, she spat generously upon it and spread the saliva over the length of the cut. Then finally, with a thoughtful pause, she bent down over the cabinet beneath the sink and drew out a brown bottle of Mercurochrome. She thumped the bottom until two drops fell from its mouth. I didn’t mention that I could not bend my index, middle and ring fingers, which still didn’t concern me all that much. She placed gauze on the wound and, coming up empty on surgical tape, finished my hand in Scotch tape. Satisfied with her treatment, she looked me over.

“You look thin. Haven’t you been eating?”

“Yeah, sure, Mom. Hey, where’s the red?” I reached for her hair, but she drew away.

“I can’t be bothered.”

“It looks nice. Dignified.”

“Oh, yes, dignified,” she said with a distrustful, down-turned smile. “Are you hungry?”

She cooked breakfast for me: watery, soft-boiled eggs on burnt toast spackled with the last drop of margarine she could coax out of a plastic container. She stuck the empty container back in the refrigerator. As I ate, she watched with a concerned, fearful expression.

“They buried him in Arlington.”

“What?”

“Your friend Roy. They ran his picture in the paper. His poor mother and father.”

“Where’s Tom?”

“I turn around and he’s gone. Comes in the middle of the night. Leaves when he pleases. Plays all day. Taking my car, too, though he’d never admit it. I hide the key, but he finds it

somehow. He's a devil, that one." She pursed her lips.

The egg white slid off the toast. I dabbed the toast on it until I got most of it, folded the bread in two and took a good bite.

"You'll have to sleep in your brother's room."

"That's OK."

"We'll have to get another bed. There's only one bed, a single. I bought it new. Cost me plenty."

"I'll sleep on the couch."

"The managers may say something. Having three here now."

"They're not going to say anything. How's the car running?"

"I need my car for work."

"Sure."

"It's not for joyriding."

I finished off the toast. When I asked her how my sister Meg was, she shook her head and mumbled, "Big boots. Dirty big boots." Meg lived with a biker on the Pine Barrens' northern edge. My mother was not fond of him and less of his motorcycle boots.

"What are you planning to do?"

"Collect unemployment."

"We'll use more water. More heat. I have to watch my money."

"I'll help out. You need something now?"

"No. I don't want to take your money."

"Take this." I held out a twenty. She ignored it and then took it.

"You can't just collect unemployment. That doesn't last long."

"I'm going to be in a band."

"Oh?"

"I've been writing songs. Maybe I'll play one for you later," I said, glancing at my hand.

"That would be nice," she said. "You can't play loud, though."

"Oh, come on."

"Oh, no, my son."

"Take it easy." I pointed to the guitar case. "I don't even have an amplifier."

"The managers don't like noise."

“You’re pretty nervous. You never used to be so nervous.”

“Don’t be fresh.”

“Where’s your phone, Mom?”

She made a fist, pressed it against her tightly closed lips and looked up at me through thin colorless eyelashes.

I picked up the phone.

My life begins, I thought. Whoever those men at the swan killed—and I was sure they killed somebody—it didn’t involve me. I wouldn’t let it involve me. You had to look the other way sometimes. Your share of heartache and trouble would show up soon enough.

Later, what would strike me as odd was that I didn’t even consider the damage to my hand. Everything healed, did it not? On the fifth ring, as I was about to set the phone back on the hook, someone picked up.

“Yeah?” a man said.

“Is this Peter?”

“Nah. Hold on.”

As I waited, I turned on my mother’s clock radio, flicking the switch to FM and dialing through the stations until I found something interesting. I listened for a minute . . .

“This is Peter.”

“Jillian said to call. Said you’re looking for a guitarist.”

“Who are you?”

“Sam Nesbitt.”

“Never heard of him,” Peter said. “What bands you play with?”

“No bands.”

“Shit.”

“No, really. I’ve never played in a band.”

“Where you from?” Peter asked

“Grew up on the bay. Just moved into Ocean Grove.”

“How you know Jillian?”

“We were on the train together.”

“She mentioned the horse.”

“Well, she told me to call. Is she around? You can ask her.”

“So who have you played with?”

“Nobody you’ve heard of.”

“Get your guitar,” he ordered.

“Excuse me?”

“Get your guitar. Play something for me.”

“Over the phone?”

“Yeah. Over the phone.”

I lifted my hand like a mirror in the dark. “I had an accident. Cut my hand.”

“What?”

“I . . .”

“No. Not you. Hold on,” said Peter.

As I waited, I slid my hand across the pink-satin comforter, which I bought for my mother two Christmases ago to cheer her up after Frank died. My taped hand picked up a long gray hair, stiffly extended like the uncut end of a newly strung guitar string.

“So, your hand?”

“It’s messed up.”

“So you can’t play?” he asked in a pissy voice, but I could see how my phone call might have seemed pointless. I searched for an exit strategy that wouldn’t leave me looking like the desperate asshole.

“Jillian said to call right away.”

He took it all right, or maybe he just wanted to get off the phone, asking me when I thought I might be able to play. “Midweek, end of the week at the latest.”

“Call me then,” Peter said, hanging up.

I waited a couple of minutes and dialed again.

“Yeah?”

“Hey, Peter. It’s Sam. Can I speak to Jillian?”

“Not here.”

“When will she be back?”

“What the fuck, man. Am I her secretary?”

“I’ll leave my number, okay”

“Sure. Go Ahead.”

I didn’t bother asking if he had a pencil and paper.

My hand wrapped in my mother’s shower cap, I stood under a drizzle of lukewarm water trying to adjust the temperature. The drops ra-ta-ta-ted off the opaque plastic. I thought of walking with Julie in the rain, her hip nudging mine, our breath visible in the cold under the umbrella, neither of us looking at the motel sign.

I ran the shower long enough to make sure it all went down the drain, scuffing my foot against the tile, making sure of the texture. Ten minutes later I left my mother watching television, just as I would always find her now, studying the images intently, waiting for something to happen, waiting for the whistle to blow.

I walked east on Main Street toward the ocean, passing heavily dressed old folks, plaid scarves wrapped to their pink chins. They smiled at me, tugged at their spaniels or waited patiently with plastic bags. A trashcan sat on every corner, and pedestrians would dash into the street to snatch a candy wrapper from the gutter. Church music floated above the rooftops. Handel, I thought, remembering Sundays in church staring at the hymnal, wanting God to whisk me away to a row of pinball machines, but confounded by the rush the music offered. Across the street, people streamed into a drug store, whose windows carried advertisements for beachwear and sunscreen. On my side of the street most of the action was taking place at a buffet restaurant. Behind the glass, girls in light green uniforms scurried around the floor. It was two p.m., the end of lunch, and most of the girls were clearing tables, piling the dishes and cups on bus trays, really stacking them up so that the muscles showed on their slender arms. One girl dropped clean silverware into steel receptacles, the rattle of metal like the crashing waves on rocks. The pale light bathed the place and softened everything, smoothing the wrinkles of the old people and giving life to the plastic plants and flowers. For a few seconds no one moved, and everything was just perfect, exactly the way it should be.

Crossing the bridge over Wesley Lake, I considered returning to the swan to finish the heart. I’d left the knife in Tom’s room—now my room too—but I had the apartment key. I passed a couple holding hands at the dock, the man’s foot grinding at the bottom rail. The

woman smiled at me, but the man cocked his head and ground harder. I glanced away to the dock where my spilled blood looked like nail heads against the drained wood. He's studying me, I thought as I looked back toward him, thinking that he was one of the killers from the lake. To my relief I saw the army uniform beneath the open collar of his trench coat. I kept walking, annoyed at my anxiety, annoyed at the soldier. Touching the wound, I assured myself that in a week when it healed, I'd scour my memory of the incident.

My memories of Asbury were stronger in the daylight, and I recognized the aquamarine-colored building in front of me as the Palace Amusements. Although it was the dead of winter, the Ferris wheel was turning, and the empty cars were rising from the roof. Without people it was just another machine, I thought; industrial, something for hauling minerals out of the ground and taking them to the surface. I waited by the lake for a while, staring up at the machine and thinking how I didn't much care anymore about pinball machines, wheels of fortune, and the shooting galleries—stuff that used to get me high. Eventually I followed some kids through the south entrance. The place still reeked of boiled hot dogs, cotton candy and sawdust—the latter piled high against the concession stands like a snowdrift. Neon pulsed, music played and machinery cranked, but slowly as if the gears were filled with winter sap. The place was nearly empty, and the kids that were there looked short on money and long on time. Half the rides were out of service, carelessly draped with canvas. I bought a hot pretzel from a man with a burr-sized black mole on his forehead and wished him a happy new year. I skipped the fun house and exited on the north side, standing on the sidewalk, looking up at the figure on the building's side.

The painted man with the doffed bowler sported a weird haircut, as if he'd cut his hair to make it look like a mustache. His eyes were bright, his nose was broad and his smile went from ear to ear, filled to capacity with one set of long fat teeth. His lips were fiery red and delicate. He wore a high collar, the kind men wore a half-century ago. He was a spooky fuck, and he was looking at me.

As I was staring up, an old man wandered by. He stopped and followed my gaze.

"Tillie," the old man said.

"Huh?"

"That's Tillie."

"Is he real? I mean, is he supposed to be somebody? Tom Asbury or something?"

The old man laughed. "Tom Asbury? No." He tapped his forehead, his fingertip dipping

into a half-inch wide, circular depression. “Tillie’s hot kiss.”

I looked from the indentation to the painted face. The old man cleared his throat and spit. “You see Tillie, you walk the other way.”

“I’ll remember that.”

The old man nodded, walking off himself.

I spent another half hour down the street in the Casino, watching the light stream in through the high windows and calculating the odds on a raffle ticket for a new Buick, which sat behind a velvet rope in the center of the floor. I exited on the south with a view of the pier, which stretched several hundred feet into the ocean. The sea was gray and flat, except at the pier’s tip where waves formed, rising three or four feet to crash against the pilings. Halfway out along the structure, two kids lay on surfboards paddling furiously into the waves. The temperature was maybe thirty degrees, and I imagined the water could not have been more than fifty-five, but the kids, one white and one black, were dressed only in spring wetsuits that came to their knees and elbows. Side by side they paddled, clawing their way up the waves before being carried back and then trying again. I leaned on the rail and watched them struggle. Both disappeared under a wave and appeared on the other side. They turned around and waited for the next wave to rise. Out of nowhere the sun broke through the slate sky, and light reflected off one boy’s matted blond hair. Tom, I thought, my heart racing. I jumped over the rail and scrambled across the smooth sands to the water’s edge.

“Tom! Tom!”

If he heard me, he gave no sign. His attention was focused entirely on the swell behind him. The swell rose a little, but not enough to catch. They floated up and dropped as the wave continued to the shore. I shouted again, but it was useless. He couldn’t hear. I waited fifteen minutes, and finally one of the swells tucked into itself and then rose. The two boys swam furiously. They sank a little into the wave but then, catching its heart, shot forward. Tom pushed up on his board an instant before the other boy and then they were both standing, rocketing forward down the wave. The wave rose up behind them, an enormous hand, angrily closing on them. Tom shot through, but the hand grabbed the other boy and threw him into the air, his board shooting up over the wave. Tom kept going on the collapsing blue arc, which broke up in a fury of white flames like a kicked-over fire. He dropped down and fell out of sight for a second in the surf.

“Tom!”

This time he saw me. He flicked back his hair, lay down on his board and yelled something to the kid behind him.

Holding his board on his head, Tom staggered out of the water, shaking and stumbling in the backwash.

“Hey, Sam!” said Tom, “Whaaaat the fuuuuck?!” Teeth chattering, lips blue as ink, my brother bobbed on the sands. The other boy came up. “Hey, Brandon, this is my brother Sam.”

“Cool.”

“I thought you were getting in last night,” Tom said.

“Planned it that way.”

“I gotta get dressed,” said the trembling Brandon, ramming his board into the sand and running up the beach toward the boardwalk.

“Come on,” said Tom, planting his board beside his friend’s and clapping his hand to my shoulder. It had been nearly two years since I’d seen Tom and the weight of his hand on my shoulder seemed that of a man’s. The adolescence had already left his voice. My kid brother was growing up.

In the crawl space under the boardwalk, a large cardboard box was sliced and spread open, like a filleted fish. They had their clothes there and one towel to share. I waited while Brandon and Tom fought over the towel. They stripped out of their wetsuits and changed into their street clothes. Tom was now as tall as I was, and maybe a little heavier than I was four years ago. He was sixteen, almost old enough to drive legally. Brandon was maybe six feet and probably weighed two hundred, though soft-looking around the middle.

Tom maintained that after you got in the water, it wasn’t so bad, although Brandon shook his head. Tom explained that he learned to surf from a soldier from Fort Monmouth. The soldier was from Southern California and he owned a couple of surfboards. Last summer, Tom went down daily and pestered him until he taught Tom how to get up on the board, even in the shit surf of Jersey. Tom learned fast. The soldier loaned a second board to Tom, along with an old spring wetsuit. They surfed every time the soldier got off work, mostly near the Casino or Fourth

Avenue, where he said there was a natural break. At the end of the summer the soldier got orders. He tried to sell the surfboards to Tom, but when Tom couldn't come up with any money, he loaned them to him. He would take them back when he returned from deployment. Only he wasn't coming back. He got blown up two weeks after he got there, another soldier who hung out on the beach told him. Tom felt bad about the guy, but he didn't have to worry about giving back the boards.

Tom dug out a pack of peanut-butter crackers, bit open the cellophane with his teeth, and offered me one.

“What about me?” asked Brandon.

“Eat shit,” said Tom. “Remember those Devil Dogs, huh?” Tom shoved an orange cracker in his mouth. Brandon sniffed. Salt streaked his forehead. Tom tossed a cracker to Brandon, who grinned and devoured it.

“What happened to your hand?” asked Tom.

I gave him the story that I'd given my mother. If I explained what really happened, things would have turned out different. But I'd always been protective of Tom, especially when my father was around, and I thought he'd be better off not knowing.

Tom took my hand then as if he might be about to do something. His fingers were cold, white and shrunken, but steady. “Can I look at it?” he asked. I nodded. Tom unwrapped the tape and lifted the gauze. “Looks deep.”

“It'll be all right. Mom spit on it.”

Tom laughed. “Hey Brandon, throw me your duct tape.”

“So you like it around here?” I asked.

“The Grove sucks,” said my brother, wrapping the tape around my hand. “Ain't that right, Brandon? They won't let Brandon in because he's black. Sign says ‘Welcome to Ocean Grove. No niggers allowed.’”

“Hey, come on, man. You shouldn't saying that shit,” I told my brother, but he just shrugged. The no big deal shrug.

“Shit. Who wants to get in the Grove?” said Brandon.

“Brandon rioted last year. Burned down half of Cookman by himself.”

“Shit. Could have.”

“Hid under his momma's bed. That's what he did.”

“Give me another cracker.”

“Who you calling cracker?”

Brandon snatched a cracker from the packet and Tom laughed. My eyes had adjusted to the dim light. There was a dead seagull a few feet away, its neck bare and pink. Beer cans, cigarette butts and candy wrappers had gathered neatly around the pilings, the way barnacles did in the water.

“Got any grass, Sam?”

“What’s that?”

“Sure. You know, Mary Jane?”

“You talking about a girl or what?”

“A girl!” exclaimed Brandon.

“Come on, I know you brought some.”

I shook my head. “How about Asbury?”

“It’s cool.”

“Yeah, it’s cool,” agreed Brandon.

“I’ll show you some stuff,” said Tom. Tom poked his head out from under the boardwalk. There wasn’t much light left, and the lights of the building built on the pier were coming on. “That’s the Casino. And over there’s the Palace.” Tom and Brandon looked at each other, each smiling at something that I wouldn’t learn. I could tell it wouldn’t do me any good to ask.

“You guys ever hear of the diving horse?” I asked.

Tom and Brandon gave each other that look again, but this time there were no smiles.

“Diving horse?” asked Tom.

“Atlantic City. Climbs up sixty feet. Rider gets on and it dives down into the ocean.”

“Oh, yeah, that horse.” Tom looked again at Brandon. “Sure, we heard of it. Why?”

“The train I was coming back on hit it.”

“You’re shitting me.”

“No, last night. Cut it right in half.”

Tom nodded solemnly, gazing out to the Atlantic. “That’s too bad . . . ”

“Only a horse,” said Brandon.

“Who’s Mr. Peanut?” I asked.

Tom brought his eyes back to me, wonderingly, measuring me a little. I’d never seen my

brother so serious.

Brandon laughed. "Shit, Mr. Peanut."

"You don't know Mr. Peanut?" said Tom.

"It's what Tom calls his cock," said Brandon, shifting back out of Tom's range. Tom swung wildly, catching sand. Brandon laughed hysterically as Tom scrambled on his knees after him. Brandon fell on his back and paddling backwards out of Tom's reach, disappeared into the shadows, repeating his joke between peals of laughter.

I told Tom that I knew what Mr. Peanut was, the guy who dressed up in a peanut costume and walked the boardwalk in fair weather advertising Planter's Peanuts. But I wanted to know who was in the costume.

Tom shrugged. "No idea. Why you want to know?"

"Nothing," I said, "it's not important."

Tom clasped my shoulder. "So now that you're out, what are you gonna do?"

"Start a band. Get famous."

"Cool."

By the time we left the beach the snow began to fall. The flakes melted on the sea and the wet sands beneath the tide line, and then disappeared into the wings of gulls. On the dry beach and boardwalk, the snow stuck. The snow was a half-inch thick on the ground when we left Brandon at Main and Revelations, carrying his ivory surfboard on his head, the white flakes adhering to it, its upturned fin steadying his flight down the slick sidewalk.