

another pSecret pSociety pshort pstory



CAROLINA BEACHED

It was a sign of the times: before, now and ever-after.

by Mike Bozart (Agent 33) | June 2014 (rev. Aug. 2015)

A cold, windy, fabulously forlorn, thought-inducing winter day in late January of 1986. Canal Drive, Carolina Beach. As reviewer/critic Scott Homewood would later say: “You could roll a bowling ball all the way down that street and not hit a single person or thing.” Nothing, except for the Hotel Astor at the end, some 1.3 miles away.

It was now dusk. A chillier, eerier dusk. Otherworldly clouds were moving in from the north, flying low and scraping rooftops. A sense of foreboding infused the chilly air.

The old four-story inn, the Hotel Astor, with its iconic sign on the roof, transfixed our gaze. The sign consisted of individual block letters on a welded metal frame. The red letters slowly pulsed (seemingly in sync with our baked brains).

We – my 20-year-old brother Joe (future agent number unknown), Frank von Peck (future Agent 107), age 21, and I (future Agent 33), age 21 – were standing in their just-rented, stilted bungalow’s concrete driveway, mesmerized by that sign. (It had been a green brownie kind of day, kidding yew in knots.)

I finally spoke out a passing thought, hoping that my mouth could satisfactorily announce the English syllables coherently.

“Ah, the old Hotel Astor. That place sure has some history.”

“I wonder when it was built,” Joe said.

Frank then chimed in. “Probably in the ‘50s.”

Now I could show off my newly acquired locale knowledge. “Guys, it was actually built in 1936, and the original name was Hotel Royal Palm. In 1983 it became Hotel Astor. Notice how the lower support bar for the word ASTOR is too long. This is because it originally supported two words: ROYAL PALM.”

“Where did you find that out?” Joe asked.

“I’ll tell you later, in a safer place,” I replied, chuckled, and then continued. “Over the decades, numerous people have fallen inside and outside that hotel. In fact, on this day in 1945, the hotel manager, a fellow named James Hayes, fell down the elevator shaft.”

“Who told you this, Mr. Arty Smarty?” Frank asked.

“Ok, ok ... I admit that I did some crack research on Carolina Beach before I left Charlotte,” I told them.

Joe then added an anecdote. “I know some dudes and chicks who have partied on that roof, right next to that sign.”

“Damn, that’s some risky shite!” I interjected.

Joe continued. “They rented rooms on the fourth floor and climbed out the windows and onto the roof.”

“Did they get busted?” Frank asked.

“I don’t think so,” Joe said. “They got away with it, I believe. And they said that the sign is not silent; it is actually quite noisy with electric sounds - humming and clicking.”

“Then, a-humming and a-clicking we shall go!” Frank announced.

“Where?” I asked, fearing what he was going to say.

“To the Hotel Astor!” Franked enthusiastically blasted.

“Have you lost your mind?!” I asked.

“What? Don’t be a wimp.” Frank was really wanting to go. I could see it in his crazed eyes. “Are we just going to stare at a sign all night? C’mon, dudes; let’s have some adventure. Mike, you’re acting like an old man.”

I thought up a retort. “You guys just got this killer three-bedroom beach house with a nice sound view. Do you really want to spend \$80 on a hotel room, just to have access to the roof on a cold-ass winter night?”

Joe remembered the rear of the hotel. Then he suggested his plan of attack. “We don’t have to rent a room at the hotel. The fire escape ladder runs down the backside of the building, and is only eight feet above the ground. We could go in my work van. I can park it under the ladder. Once on top of the van, it’s a very easy climb to the roof.”

“But, what about the cops?” I asked out of utmost legal concern. “Isn’t the CBPD station down there?”

Joe had that prefigured into his ascending equation. “It is, but their limited off-season staff is just focused on the boardwalk bars. We’ll just wear dark clothing. We should be fine. Trust me.” *Oh, boy.*

Frank then turned and looked at me. “Looks like it’s two to one in my favor, dude. Don’t wuss out on us.”

“Ok, Frank; I’ll play along. But, if we should get caught ...”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know the drill; it will all be my idea, all my fault. Sure, you can pin it all on me.”

We went back in the house and changed into our darkest clothes and coats. A Pink Floyd CD was still playing in the living room. I think it was *Wish You Were Here*. Strange, the little details one remembers.

We quickly ate some snack food and slugged down a final beer. Well, my brother and I had one last brew. Frank, never much for alcohol of any formulation, elected for a glass of chocolate milk. He was already thoroughly weed-woven, which meant he was on his A game (A for astonishing).

“Ok, you guys ready to do this?” Frank asked. He was now ready to roll. *Hope this crazy stunt goes off without a hitch – a police hitch.*

Joe gulped down his Old Milwaukee and chucked the aluminum can towards the kitchen trash can. It bounced off the dark wood paneling and we all laughed (for some reason). He looked at Frank. “Sure, I’m ready. Just one second. Let me get my keys.”

Joe soon returned from his bedroom with his keys and we were out the door. Frank took the shotgun position in the van. The engine started and Joe carefully backed up, making sure that his mirrors didn’t get clipped by the house-support pilings.

Joe slid a Bad Company CD in the slot and carefully observed the 25 MPH speed limit as we slowly neared our hotel destination, looming and pulsating up ahead. It was so strangely quiet outside.

“How long do you plan on staying up there on the roof?” I asked Frank.

“Until we feel cold.” *We?*

And with that remark, the in-transit conversation ceased. Everyone was pensive. I spied the moon for a few seconds, but then the white-gray clouds quickly covered it back up.

Joe cautiously passed the Hotel Astor and made a right turn onto Raleigh Avenue. That’s when I saw the rusty, faded off-yellow, narrow fire-escape ladder that he was talking about. *So, that’s our way to the roof. Sure hope there are no rusted-out rungs. A forty-foot fall would truly suck.*

No one was on the street. There was just a lone green sedan behind the hotel. And no one appeared to be in the car.

Joe calmly backed up his Dodge Tradesman 100 van under the old fire escape. Then he cut the engine off. We looked at each other, gauging our resolve to this crazy idea. *I guess we’re going to do this. So far, so good. Hope the cops don’t see us.*

“Well, we’re here,” Joe finally said. “Now, who wants to go up first?”

I looked at Frank. “Frank, I think that’s your cue.”

Frank looked around. The coast was clear. "I'm going for it, dudes."

And out the door Frank went, vanishing behind the van. He used the rear bumper to slither up to the van's roof. With an easy 14-inch step up, he was on the first rung of the old fire-escape ladder, and he wasn't waiting for us. *Wow, there he goes with no hesitation.*

Frank stormed up the rust-flaked, but still structurally solid, ladder like a commando, and was almost at the top when a police cruiser passed by and looked at the van. *Oh, crapola! This aint good. Think fast, Mike.*

"I'll take care of this, Joe."

I quickly got out of the van and looked at the right front tire (as a diversion). My brother picked up on what I was doing, and walked over to examine the tire with me.

The police cruiser backed up as Frank made it to the roof and out of sight of anyone on the ground. The CBPD car stopped right in front of our van, blocking us, and the white, rotund, slack-jowled, 50-something cop got out.

"Having some tire trouble, are we?" he asked. His face reflected thirty-five hard years on the beach-town force.

I quickly thought of a ruse. Then I spoke to the police officer, trying to sound like an innocent, dopy tourist. "Oh, I heard a bottle shatter under this tire, officer. We were just making sure that no shards of glass had punctured it."

The veteran CBPD officer shined his black flashlight on the tire. "Looks fine to me. Go ahead and drive it around and see if it loses any air. You can't leave it here."

"Ok, sure, sir," Joe said.

"Thanks," I added.

And with that, we – my brother and I – were gone, leaving Frank on the hotel roof. As we began to go back down Canal Drive, my brother spoke up.

"Hey, what about Frank? We can't leave him on the roof."

"We can't go back there, Joe; if we do, the cops will know something is up. Frank will be ok. He probably saw the whole episode."

"Yeah, you're right. It's only a little over a mile to our house. Frank can walk that far, even if he has to chain-smoke his way back over the course of an hour."

"Yeah, he'll huff and puff his way back, Joe. He'll wait until it's all clear."

We continued tooting north on Canal Drive. It was still very quiet outside – so unlike six months prior. Many bungalows and condos appeared to be unoccupied.

A couple of minutes later, and Joe was parking his van under the bungalow. We went inside. It was 8:35 PM. We popped a beer and talked about our lucky close call.

"You don't think that Frank could fall off the roof in his stupor?" I asked my brother.

“Stupor? He’s not in a stupor; he’s in a *super*.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. He seems to get more agile on weed, where as I – and most people – get accident-prone.”

“Mike, he could scale that hotel like Spiderman right now. Well, maybe not quite that agile, but more so than most.”

“Yeah, no doubt; I agree.”

At 9:17 PM there was a loud knock on the door.

“I think that’s our man,” I said.

Joe opened the door. It was a shivering Frank.

“Get me to some hot-ass heat and pronto. It’s cold as hell out here!” Frank was very white in the face. “Oh, and thanks for leaving me up on that roof.”

“I guess you saw what happened to us down below,” I ventured.

“Yep, I saw the whole dilemma unfold.”

“Frank, we couldn’t go back,” Joe said.

“How was it up there?” I asked out of curiosity.

“A nice, frozen view, even with the low clouds. And, yes, the sign is way noisy.”

“Any spatial distortions?” I asked.

“That was Wrightsville Beach, dude. Get on the right beach.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry, my bad.”

“Hey dudes, I did read some strange graffiti on the sign support frame.”

“Let me guess ... notes of a rooftop romp, or some amorous announcement?” I suggested.

“No, not the usual relationship graffiti – a one-liner that stopped me dead in my shingle-scaling tracks.”

I looked at Frank. “Ok, enough with the suspense, Frank. What did the graffiti say?”

“The penknife engraving read: ‘I will burn this place down in 2005, signed JPS.’ Is that whacked or what? Announcing your arson 19 years in advance to rooftop parties.”

“Yeah, that’s majorly whacked, Frank,” I said.

“I don’t know anyone with those initials,” my brother said.

“Maybe it stands for a phrase,” I said. “You know, like FTW means Fuck The World.”

“Just Puke Silently,” Joe submitted.

We laughed.

“Well, we’ll have something to talk about someday.”

And with that we all puffed the dragon and crashed.

> Note: *JULY 18, 2006 from WECT in Wilmington (NC):*

The man who burned down an historic Carolina Beach hotel is on his way to prison.

John Patrick Shannon pleaded guilty Tuesday to attempted first-degree arson. A judge sentenced him to three years behind bars.

Shannon apparently set fire to the Astor Hotel (aka Hotel Astor) in Carolina Beach last year. Dozens of witnesses told police they saw Shannon around the hotel at the time of the fire. The blaze started when a couch on the front porch was ignited.

The hotel was later bulldozed to the ground.