

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.

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