

Who Stole Asbury Park?

In the halcyon days of 1964, when simple love songs played on pocket radios and boys turn their thoughts to girls and their first kiss, Tony was in the hullabaloo on the Asbury Park boardwalk, with the other eleven year old boys, watching the girls dance to the sounds of The Beatles, Beach Boys and The Four Seasons. Every so often a girl would come over and take a boy by the hand onto the dance floor while the rest of them tapped their feet, nodded to each other and wondered when some girl would rescue them from the wall. It was too risky to ask a girl to dance, but if they took the initiative, you were safe in the eyes of your buddies and there might even be a slow dance, a chance to hold a girl close to you.

“There goes David, with Becky Johnson,” said Tony. Becky had short, blonde hair, saddle shoes, knee socks and a plaid skirt. “She’s a good dancer.”

Tony’s friend Bobby agreed. “Yeah, if you like dancing.”

Tony nudged Bobby. “Yeah, if you like dancing.”

Tony was hoping some girl would ask him to dance, but couldn’t let on to his friend. “The music’s good though” as they bounced with the beat.

“Yeah” said the other boys.

The girls, completely smitten with Beatles music, were dancing, mostly with each other while others talked and checked out the boys on the wall. As Tony and Bobby watched the girls dance, another girl walked over to them from the left. “Would you like to dance?” said a pretty Italian girl in bell-bottom jeans and a red Danskin top.

“Me,” said Tony, not sure if she was talking to him or Bobby.

“Yes, my name is Angela.”

“Sure I guess so. I’m Tony” and he walked out to the dance floor with Angela as *Twist and Shout* played from the speakers. She turned to him and smiled, then started to twist, the main dance style at the time and the only dance adolescent boys could do. Tony watched Angela and tried to match her while maintaining a serious expression. Angela could tell how nervous he was.

“That’s good Tony” trying to coach a smile out of him. He relaxed his facial muscles a bit.

“I’m not a good dancer, sorry” as his sneakers squeaked on the wooden floor.

Angela smiled. “It’s ok.” Her movements were much more graceful and pretty. Tony noticed her long hair and bangs bobbing with the beat. The DJ smoothly changed the song to *A Hard Days Night*.

As Tony looked at Angela, his thoughts raced and before he knew it, a slow song came on; *Because* by The Dave Clark Five, another group from the British invasion. He wasn’t prepared for this. Tony looked at Angela and she looked back. He clumsily tried to slow dance, but it didn’t matter. They were close. Tony held Angela’s chest close to his but left just enough space below the waist to hide his newly found excitement. He wondered if this would scare her away. His anxiety was answered after the song.

Angela took Tony's hand and walked toward the exit. Tony followed obediently, his heart quickening. He could feel that Angela was nervous too, her hand moist. As they were about to leave, Angela turned to Tony. "Can we go for a walk?"

"Sure" he said, trying to hide his own nervousness. "Where are we going?"

"Down the boardwalk. I like seeing the rides at night."

"Yeah, they're neat. Hey, would you like an ice cream?"

"OK, a twist please." Tony ordered two cones and the couple continued walking. Eating the ice cream replaced a lot of conversation, as both of them were entering a new part of their young lives. When they were finished, Tony took a napkin and wiped some ice cream from Angela's lip, then she closed her eyes. With all the confidence he could muster, he leaned in and kissed her. Angela put her arms around Tony and they kissed again.

"Do you want to walk on the beach?" she said.

"Sure" both of them smiling now.

They left their shoes under the boardwalk and walked barefoot near the water, Angela holding his hand tightly. Tony could smell her hair; it had a fruity scent, he wanted to tell her without sounding dumb.

"Your hair smells nice." Tony was starting to relax.

"Thanks. It's my shampoo. Strawberries."

"Neat. You dress nice too." Tony couldn't help glancing at her small breasts, curving through the top. He was thinking about kissing Angela again and hoped she was too.

"Thanks. I like your turtleneck." They walked up and down the beach, and then returned to get their shoes.

Angela gave Tony a look that he understood. They lay down in the sand under the boardwalk and spent the next hour kissing and holding each other closely. It was Tony's first make out session and probably Angela's too. These were the memories that last a lifetime, the first, awkward steps into love.

It was the summer of 2012 when Tony and his California wife Barbara, in town for a wedding, drove to Asbury Park, her first time on the Jersey shore and his visit reminding him of that magical night in 1964. He was surprised to find parking close to the beach. As they walked up the stairs onto the boardwalk, he noticed something odd. It was deserted; only a few people on the beach and the buildings that once held a carousel, stadium and dance hall were rusty, disintegrated and empty as if they had been bombed. Tony's dream memory fell flat.

"What the hell happened here?" he said.

"The beach is beautiful. Why isn't anyone here?"

“I don’t know. This was such a great place when I was a kid. Let’s get back in the car and go somewhere else.”

As Tony drove, Barbara did some research on her phone. “I have it. The town went bankrupt back in the 90s and the city can’t afford to bring back business. But they still charge \$5 to go on the beach.”

“Only in New Jersey could you have a beautiful beach and boardwalk and not make money. No one is on the beach because there aren’t any bathrooms, food stands or anything else. We’re not leaving until you see the real Jersey shore.”

They drove up to Seaside Heights and parked. Walking up the steps to the boardwalk, they saw what Tony had been hoping for. “This is the real thing, Barbara.” Thousands of young people filled the beach, boardwalk and restaurants. There were hundreds of painted, wooden buildings with all sorts of food, games and shops with cheap souvenirs. Barbara’s eyes lit up when she heard music.

“Hey, look over here. There’s a dance floor.” She took Tony’s hand and rushed them over to the music. *Can’t Buy Me Love* came on. Tony and Barbara twisted like it was 1964. Tony thought of Angela as he danced with his wife.