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**Connecting**Cathryn Ramin

**Waiting in Asbury Park
summer nights for Bruce**

I T HAPPENED long ago, at the New Jersey shore, before we knew that Bruce Springsteen was going to be famous. He played all the dives in Asbury Park, places like the Stone Pony and the Upstage. At 14, we were still too young to get in, but that didn't stop us from trying. It was part of an evening's sport.

When Bruce wasn't playing, people said that he hung out in a cafe called the Ink Well. We waited. We sat there for hours and slugged down blueberry pie with whipped cream. He never came in. Sometimes we thought we saw him at the Dairy Queen, where we sat on cars in the parking lot and licked frozen custard dipped in slick, black chocolate. We imagined that he was in line at the Windmill, where we ordered burgers and fries two hours after dinner.

We were at a strange age, a society of teen-agers who had nothing in common except that we spent all our summers together. In the winters, we returned to the city and saw each other rarely. We went back to school and acted responsibly, so that we could get into college. In June, we arrived at the shore and instantly grew dissolute. We planned our days around what we would do when the sun went down.

OUR PARENTS put us on a long leash, remembering, perhaps, the summers they had spent at the beach.

Four or five nights a week during those summers, we gathered after dinner, after a dozen phone calls back and forth between houses, and assembled our plan of attack. We'd convince a parent to drive us down Ocean Avenue to Asbury Park for some innocent fun. Then we'd check the newspaper to see who was playing where, and decide which bars we were going to try to penetrate.

After we were turned away, we would head for the boardwalk. We'd walk up and down, sometimes in bare feet, for the feel of the smooth, damp wood and the occasional wad of gum. We'd eat cotton candy and salt water taffy like we were starving. We'd watch large-bellied men in ripped T-shirts walk with fat women in flowered dresses and wonder why they, so old, so ugly, were on the boardwalk. Two blocks away, in houses that might have stood beside some Southern railroad track, denizens of the city were preparing to riot. But we didn't know it, or we didn't care.

WE'D BUY TICKETS for the roller coaster and the Tilt-A-Whirl, a ride that spun so fast you ended up sitting on top of the person next to you. That was the whole idea. We'd known each other too long to have thoughts that were truly romantic, but biology was biology, and who could tell the difference? At least once a week, one of us would overdo it and get sick on a ride. You just hoped that when your number came up, you weren't sitting thigh to thigh with a current object of passion.

On the Fourth of July, we'd behave well at whatever backyard picnic was being held at home, and then gather like geese to flee to the boardwalk. On the Fourth, the crowds were always enormous and drunk. We clung to each other, afraid of accidentally stepping on the foot of some guy with gold chains around his neck and the right muscles for his muscle shirt.

There was music pouring from Convention Hall, a tattered old house that played host to second-string bands. We never had the money to pay for these concerts — we'd spent it all on taffy and tickets — so we sat outside on the beach, pretending not to notice that parts of ourselves were touching parts of each other. We listened and watched fireworks explode up and down the coast, rising above the water and falling, shattered, into the silhouettes of beach-side apartment buildings.

We listened, and a powerful sound emerged, a sound that spoke to me of summer, and still does. It was Bruce. He was inside, playing. And we were outside, in the sand, soaking it all up. ■

Cathryn Ramin's column appears on Mondays and Thursdays.