

# Souvenirs

*by* Michael Downing

It is a hot August night — the same kind you remember from that summer after high school graduation. A cool breeze blows in off the ocean, sweeping across the boardwalk just hard enough to dry the sweat on your skin through the open windows of the car. Up and down Ocean Avenue the street lights come on and break the dullness of the evening sky. The smell of salt water taffy and peanuts hangs heavy in the air. Couples stroll together, holding hands and sharing the kind of conversations and quiet laughter that intimacy creates. Girls are bunched together in tight groups along the corners, passing cigarettes back and forth and giggling at the boys who circle like sharks, trying to get past their defenses with a blend of youthful attitude and tough cool.

Every summer in high school you had been one of those guys. Searching for something, although you didn't know what it was. Trying to be someone you weren't. Hoping for attention. Alone.

Until Kelly came along and turned your world upside down.

From the moment you first saw her in a summer dress and flip flops you fell in love. She was everything you ever wanted — more than you could hope to attain. A South Philly girl who was summering at the Jersey Shore with her family, she had style, grace, and dignity, and just being around her made you a better person. She lived in a world far beyond your dreams and imagination, and you never thought someone like her would be interested in you; but in a funny world where opposites attract, Kelly saw something in you that made her want to be together. She laughed at your jokes, thought you were smarter than you pretended to be, and enjoyed the time spent with each other. Her smile cut like a knife blade and before you knew it, she had stolen your heart. You watched her turn into a woman that summer and in the coarse sand of the beach with the roar of the ocean around you late at night, she helped you ease

out of those awkward teenaged years and become someone more than you could have ever hoped to be.

You loved everything about her and the way she made you feel, and you swore it was forever. But when summer ended it disappeared and she was gone.

Each of you went your own separate ways — you were off to college in upstate New York and she wound up at a school in Maryland. At first there were letters and late night conversations from the dormitory pay phone, soulful promises made through tears that you would be together again — maybe at Thanksgiving or definitely by winter break. But the phone calls slowed before ending completely and the stream of letters trickled to a halt; then there was nothing. That following summer you thought you saw her alone on the boardwalk one evening but you were with someone and kept on going instead — the next night you went up and down the boardwalk, searching for hours but she was nowhere to be found. Years later you imagined that she had taken on a husband and kids, and moved to a small town in Vermont or maybe New Hampshire, but that was only your imagination filling the space between memory and longing.

Like so many things from summers past, Kelly has been lost to you forever.

You ease your car along Ocean Avenue, windows down, sun roof open to the night sky, with the radio cranked loud to a classic rock station. As you pull to a stop at a red light a young girl in a summer dress and flip flops at the intersection attracts your stare. There's an innocence in her expression. Eyes that grab you and don't let go. Heartbreakingly pretty. For a minute it is 1976 and you're back in school again, holding your breath as you feel your heart skip a beat.

She looks up and you catch her eye, offering a warm smile.

She turns her head away and walks on by.

Something tugs at you and doesn't let go. For just a moment you feel that heartache and a familiar pain from the past

that has been with you since the end of that summer you shared with Kelly.

As the traffic light turns green you ease your foot off the brake and drive away slowly, but that hurt stays with you for a long time.

