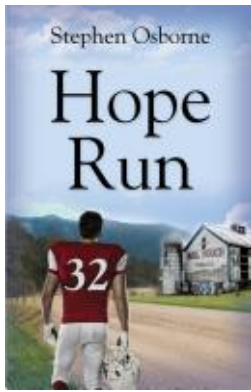


Stephen Osborne

Hope Run





In Rural southern Ohio, Mike Harrison and Mary Bryant are high school seniors looking to escape; he from a distant and resentful father, and she from a family legacy of dropping out, getting married and making babies. The arrival of transfer students, Tony Duvardo, Mike's rival on the football field, and Norma West, a hot-blooded vixen, complicates their lives and leads to betrayal, murder and Mike's quest for redemption...

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HOPE RUN

STEPHEN OSBORNE

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First Edition

failed or moved out. The population of Scioto County suffered a similar decline as many residents headed north to Columbus, Cleveland, and to automobile plants in Michigan.

Monday, May 28, 1962
Ocean Beach, California—near San Diego

Mike Harrison sat in the sand, watching a surfer in a wetsuit try in vain to get up on his board. The beach was nearly deserted. School was still in session in California.

Maybe I'll take up surfing.

After watching for several minutes, and deciding that surfing looked too difficult—and dangerous, he got up and roamed the beach, stepping around seaweed, and dodging the cold water as it repeatedly rushed at him and then receded. As he considered going back to Whittier, grabbing Norma West, and heading back south—maybe to Mexico, or even farther, his attention was drawn to the music—Aker Bilk's instrumental, 'Stranger on the Shore'.

How appropriate.

The music was coming from a large transistor radio sitting in the sand beside a beach chair occupied by a woman with long red hair, wearing large sunglasses and reading a book. He watched her put the paperback in her lap, take a sip from a can of beer, briefly stare out at the ocean, and then return to her book.

He stopped ten feet in front of her, seeing that she was tall, thin, attractive, and somewhat older; definitely not a

teenager. Maybe mid-twenties; maybe thirty. She didn't look up.

When he stepped closer, she glanced up briefly, and then re-focused on her book. He turned left, walked ten paces north, turned around, and walked past her, counting ten paces to the south. Finally, mustering the courage, he turned again, walked back to her and stopped. Raising her sunglasses to her forehead, she looked at him, revealing a splash of freckles across her nose and cheeks.

"Move along, sonny," she said, firmly.

He turned north again, counted ten paces, pivoted, and returned. Her somewhat conservative, one piece, royal blue swimsuit didn't cover her freckled, shoulders, which were turning pink.

Standing in front of her, he said, "I've been told that light skinned people shouldn't spend a lot of time in the sun."

She placed her sunglasses atop her thick, auburn hair. Her eyes smiled, though her face didn't. "Haven't you also been told that children should be seen, not heard?"

"Actually, I have." After a slight bow, he turned and walked ten paces south. Returning, he stood in front of her again.

She lifted her sunglasses again. "What?"

He said nothing.

"Now you're getting creepy."

"I just wanted to be seen, not heard."

She stifled a laugh. "You're blocking my sun."

Taking that as an invitation, he plopped down in the sand beside her and looked out at the water. She continued pretending to read.

“My name’s Mike—Mike Harrison,” he ventured, looking up at her.

She put down her book and, after a ‘Lord, help me’ look toward the sky, extended her hand. “Debbie Blanco.”

“You don’t look Italian.” He didn’t let go of her hand.

She showed him her left hand. “I’m not, but my husband is.”

He dropped her hand and looked around. “Is he here?”

“No.” She pointed at the ocean and smiled. “He’s about five thousand miles that-a-way.”

“Where’s that?”

“Okinawa. Third Marine Division. His name is Frank Blanco. Gunnery Sergeant Francis Blanco, lifer, USMC.” The smile disappeared as she saluted the ocean. “Semper Fi.”

“You don’t sound happy about being married to a Marine.”

“Probably be more so if he was ever home.” She looked down at him. “Do you have a story, or are you just a stalker?”

“It’s a long story—and I’m not a stalker.”

“I’m sure all stalkers say that. How old are you, eighteen—nineteen?”

“Eighteen.”

“Where are you from? Alabama? Tennessee?”

“Ohio.”

“Your accent sounds...southern.”

“Well, I’m from *southern* Ohio. We don’t say ‘y’all’; we say ‘you’uns’.”

She laughed. “Does your mommy know you’re here?”

“Don’t have one.”

"I'm sorry." She studied his face, looked out at the ocean, and then back at him. "Listen, I'm having a party tonight. Wanna come?"

"Sure. Where and when?"

She turned and pointed. "See that tall pine and the shorter one next to it with the dead branches?"

"Yeah."

"See the house in between?"

"Green roof?"

"Yep. That's where I live." She tore a page from her paperback and scribbled down an address. "Seven or so." She returned to her book.

It was nearly seven-thirty when he arrived at her small ranch-style house and parked on the street. He noticed a '58 Oldsmobile under the carport but saw no other vehicles near the property. After re-checking the address, he knocked.

She greeted him in a thin, green, cotton dress that stopped a few inches above her knees. Large, white buttons adorned the front, top to bottom, which led him to recall a conversation he'd had with his friends, John and Tim. They had come up with the theory that going on a date with a girl who was wearing a dress that buttoned down the front significantly improved your chance of scoring. Mike had never had the opportunity to test the theory.

"Am I early?" he asked, noticing that the dress matched her eyes.

She grinned. "Right on time. Something to drink?"

"Uh...beer, I guess."

"Come on. You're just in time to watch the sunset."

She opened two bottles of Schaefer and handed him one, saying, "The one beer to have when you're having more than one." Seeing that he was puzzled, she said, "That's their slogan—and jingle." She sang it to him and laughed. "I could be arrested for contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

On her back patio, she indicated a high-backed wooden bench, and said, "Sit." He sat; she sat next to him. They sipped their beers, occasionally glancing at each other, but not talking. The sun sank into the ocean two beers later.

He looked around. "Your other guests...?"

She shook her head and snapped her fingers. "Shucks, I forgot to invite anybody else. You disappointed?"

He shrugged but didn't reply.

"Ready for another beer?"

Confused, he drained his bottle and handed it to her.

When she came back, she sat closer to him. "Getting chilly," she said. "I should get a sweater." Without waiting for a response, she leaned in and kissed him on the lips.

He kissed her back, but feeling himself respond, pulled away. "That's not what I came here for."

She stood up and, hands on hips, glared down at him. "Just what the hell did you come here for?"

"Uh...companionship, I guess. Maybe I should leave." He stood up.

She shook her head and laughed, waving him back to the bench. "You a twink?"

'A what?"

"You know—homo...gay...queer?"

"No. Just the opposite, I guess. My life would probably be simpler if I was."

“So, what’s your story?”

“It’s a long one.”

“So, I decide to cheat on my husband—for the first time ever, believe it or not—and I get picked up by an eighteen-year-old what—virgin who wants to stay pure?”

He stared at a crack in the concrete floor. “Not a virgin; far from pure.”

She smiled, mussed his hair, and sat back down.

“Should I leave?” he asked.

“Of course not. Now you have me intrigued, and I want to hear your long story since I apparently have all night. Let me get my sweater.”

Four more beers each later, she held up her hand. “Enough. We’ll have to take this up in the morning. I’m too buzzed to concentrate, and your story is starting to confuse me.”

Too drunk to argue, he gazed at her through glassy eyes. “I can stay, then?”

“Of course you can stay. In fact, I insist on it, since you’re not of legal drinking age in California, and you’re plastered.”

“Thank you,” he slurred.

Tuesday, May 29

A headache woke him up at six AM, and seemed to be getting worse by the minute. At six-thirty, he gave up and eased himself out of bed. That vodka hangover from last summer was nothing compared to this.

“Why not?”

“Because you’re an asshole. And if we were brothers, I’d probably be an asshole, too. Either that or I’d be kicking your ass on a regular basis.”

“Maybe I wouldn’t be an asshole if I had a brother to fight with. And you know what? Maybe the poor whites in the South just didn’t want the Yankees telling them how to live.”

“Didn’t want to be told they couldn’t treat dark skinned people like farm animals—or worse?”

Tony didn’t answer.

“You’re a Catholic, right,” Mike asked.

“Yeah.”

“So, when you go to confession, do you confess to being an asshole? How many Hail Marys is that?”

There was no more giggling.

At some point, Mike fell asleep; at some point, Tony left. Mike woke up alone in the middle of the 11:00 news, not feeling good about himself. *Must have been the marijuana.*

He shrugged and hobbled off to bed.

Tuesday, May 29, 1962

Ocean Beach

Debbie spoke up. “I took a class at San Diego State on the Civil War a couple of years ago.”

“Oh, yeah. Why?”

“Boredom, mostly. I’ve taken several classes, there. Anyway, aside from the fact that many of them were

drafted, there are several reasons why poor Southerners fought in the Civil War. But I think a major one was fear of what four million freed slaves would do to them after all those years of mistreatment. In some states, the slaves outnumbered the white people. And...of course, they *really* didn't want the Yankees telling them how to live. Probably should have been two separate countries, to begin with.

"Also...Tony had a point about the marijuana. It makes most people mellow out, but it has a different effect on different people. It does make some people paranoid. But I think the reason you acted the way you did was because Tony scared you."

"What do you mean—scared?"

"Not physically."

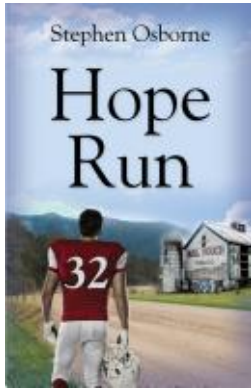
Wednesday, October 4, 1961

Scioto County

Game one of the World Series.

The TV was on in the school cafeteria. Mike, John, and Tim sat at the nearest table watching the pregame show from a packed Yankee Stadium. The controversy over Maris, who had hit his 61st home run on the last day of the season still lingered.

Looking around the room, Mike saw about thirty students—mostly seniors—there to watch the game, along with half a dozen teachers.



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