

*Cape May*



# *Cape May*



Chip Cheek



CELADON  
BOOKS  
NEW YORK

This is a work of fiction. All of the characters, organizations, and events portrayed in this novel are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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For information, address Celadon Books,  
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010.

[www.celadonbooks.com](http://www.celadonbooks.com)

Library of Congress Control Number: 201861341

ISBN 978-1-250-29715-0 (hardcover)  
ISBN 978-1-250-23110-9 (international, sold outside  
the U.S., subject to rights availability)  
ISBN 978-1-250-29716-7 (ebook)

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First Edition: April 2019  
First International Edition: April 2019

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For Katie*



*From the time that their love is avowed, neither sees  
the other but in a mask; and the cheat is often  
managed on both sides with so much art, and  
discovered afterwards with so much abruptness, that  
each has reason to suspect that some transformation  
has happened on the wedding-night, and that by a  
strange imposture, as in the case of Jacob, one has  
been courted and another married.*

—DR. SAMUEL JOHNSON, *THE RAMBLER*, NO. 45





## One



*The beaches were empty, the stores were closed, and after sunset, all the houses on New Hampshire Avenue stood dark. For months, Effie had been telling him about this place and the many things they would do here, but she had only known it in the summer, and this was the end of September. She had not understood what “off-season” meant. They had come up from Georgia on the overnight train. They were supposed to spend two weeks here, for their honeymoon.*

“I love it,” Henry said their first evening. “It’s like we got the whole place to ourselves.”

Effie laughed at that. A minute later, she began to cry.

“It’s nothing,” she said. “It’s nothing, really—don’t coo over me. I’m just tired, that’s all.” She smiled at him. “I’m glad you like it. We’re going to have a wonderful time.”

Before this trip Henry had never been north of Atlanta, and he had never seen the ocean. He and Effie had grown up in the little town of Signal Creek, half an hour east of Macon, and in the spring they had graduated from high school: Thomas E. Cobb, Class of

1957. He was twenty—like many people from the country, he had started school late—and she was eighteen. They both, as far as Henry knew, had been virgins.

In the taxicab from the depot they'd come out beside a harbor teeming with masts, and the sea beyond it was roiling, immense, speckled with whitecaps. From the harbor they turned into a residential area shaded with elm trees, and here were the grand Victorian houses Effie had told him about: bright colors, slate gables and conical towers, widows' walks with wrought-iron railings, porches trimmed in elaborate woodwork, trellises opening onto the sidewalks, chrysanthemums in bloom. On New Hampshire Avenue the houses were more plain—one- and two-story cottages that wouldn't have looked out of place in Signal Creek, aside from the colors. Aunt Lizzie's place was one of these: pale pink, two stories, with a deep front porch above a dead flower garden. It was disappointing. But when he stepped out of the cab and heard the ocean three blocks away, a hushed, deep roar, it seemed to him that his true life was just beginning, and that every possible door was open to him now. He scooped Effie up into his arms—she shrieked and laughed—and carried her across the threshold.

The house looked different, she said when he set her down. She hadn't seen it in three years, since the summer before her aunt Lizzie passed away. The wicker furniture was new. The gas stove, the refrigerator and freezer: none of these conveniences had existed. They seemed to trouble her. There were four bedrooms on the second floor—these looked different too—but Effie insisted they sleep in the attic room, where she had slept as a child. At the top of the stairs she slid a heavy glass door open and they stepped inside. This room, happily, had not changed a bit. The walls slanted sharply, bare wooden beams. A single bed stood in the middle of the room, a chest of drawers, a dusty vanity table and mirror. In a corner stood a small, dead Christmas tree, threads of tinsel still caught in the branches. That

had been there too. She knelt down to the floor-level windows and cracked them open. From here you could see the ocean over the houses across the street; Henry crouched down for a look.

"I know it's a little peculiar," Effie said, "but you can humor me, can't you? Just for a night?"

He could humor her for the rest of her life, he wanted to say, but Effie laughed at expressions of deep feeling; she had been on the verge of laughing all through their wedding ceremony. He kissed her instead, and put his hand on her thigh, his body humming. All these months of anticipation, and here they were. They had known each other since they were children, from church and from school, though for most of that time they had not thought much of each other. He could see her standing at the blackboard in Mrs. Mobley's fourth-grade classroom, in her Mary Janes and white stockings, copying out a line from the Psalms: Mayor Tarleton's snotty little daughter. And he, one of the boys from *out there*, beyond the town line. Now they were here, together and alone. In New Jersey, of all places.

She laid her hand over his. "Let me take a bath first," she said.

It happened not in the attic room, which was too full of memories, but in one of the redecorated bedrooms on the second floor. They chose the one with the rose-patterned wallpaper. He drew the curtains closed. She'd just taken her bath, and while she stood still he undid the loose belt at her waist and slipped her robe off her shoulders. Until now, what little they had done had come in stolen moments back home: an afternoon at the bend in the creek, when he'd pulled the straps of her bathing suit down and seen her breasts for the first time; the night, shortly after they got engaged, in the backseat of her Buick, when he'd reached up her dress and she'd let him—the soft skin above her stockings, the elastic of her underwear, the scent that had lingered on his fingers—and every detail was burned into his memory but at the same time unreal, as if he'd dreamt it. Now, in this dim room, early on a Sunday afternoon, when they

would normally be in their church clothes having dinner with their families, Effie lay naked on the rose-patterned duvet. She looked away while he unbuckled his trousers and let them fall to the floor, and after hesitating a moment, he pulled down his BVDs and got into the bed beside her. They kissed for a minute, skin against skin, smooth and cool and then warm, before he got on top of her, where he couldn't quite see what he was doing. He hovered over her, fumbling between her legs, until she looked down, took his penis lightly between her fingertips, set it in the right spot—and there she was: their intimacy deepened in an instant. His breath caught. She lay still. In a few seconds, it was over.

Afterward they lay beside each other looking at the ceiling tiles. He wondered whether he felt irreversibly changed.

“Well,” Effie said. “I guess we’ve done it, then.”

Later, as they walked down to the beach in the early evening, they held hands and had little to say to each other. What was there to say? They knew each other now, in the biblical sense. He smiled at her; she smiled back. The dress she was wearing was one she’d worn often to school, before the thought of dating her had ever entered his mind, and the familiar sight of it made her strange: she was both the girl he knew then, in the hallways of Thomas E. Cobb, and the girl he knew now, far more intimately, in Cape May, New Jersey. His wife. With whom he had already shared an indignity: they’d made a mess on the rose-patterned duvet. But Effie, bless her, had been sporting enough to laugh about it, and asked him to run and fetch her a towel. He was grateful for her.

Down at the promenade they stood for a while and looked at the sea. The waves curled over and crashed, one after another, an endless succession. All that water: it was a wonder it didn’t swallow them up. The day was overcast and the wind had a bite to it. Seagulls hovered overhead, shrieking.

“It’s so weird,” Effie said. “In the summer this place is *teeming*.”

She pointed to a pier that jutted out from the promenade, at the end of which stood an arcade where there had been games and music, she said, where she and her friends would spend entire afternoons, until the lights came on. Acrobats and strongmen performed on the promenade, there were stands of cotton candy and saltwater taffy, and boys surfed in the waves.

"We'll just have to come back in the summer, then," Henry said.

She took his hand again and they continued on down the promenade toward town. All along Beach Avenue, to their right, the shops were shuttered and dark, signs posted in the windows: CLOSED FOR THE SEASON. SEE YOU IN MAY!

At last they found a diner that was open and sat at a booth by the window. Their waiter was a boy with the kind of accent Henry had only ever heard on the radio. He wondered if he could tell that they'd recently had sex.

"If you're from all the way down there," the boy said, "why didn't you just go to Florida?"

"Because it's beautiful *here*," Effie said.

Henry ordered the meat loaf, she ordered the fish and chips, and as the boy slipped his notepad into his back pocket he said, "Well, if you came to get away from it all, you came to the right place."

They ate in silence. "I'm so glad to be here," Henry said.

That evening, they called it an early night and went up to the attic room. It was not quite eight o'clock.

She prayed the way his grandmother did: on her knees beside the bed, hands clasped, muttering to herself. Henry looked away. She wore a nightgown and her breasts were loose inside of it, but after her praying, a pious aura surrounded her that stunted his arousal. She kissed him and said, "Is it all right if we just go to sleep now?" The look of pity on her face was annoying.

"Yes," he said. "That's all I want to do too."

In the dark he clasped his hands over his chest and prayed silently.

He thanked God for the day. He prayed for their happiness and future. He prayed that he would be a good husband. Then he lay rigid on his side of the bed, listening to the wind and the waves through the open windows—feeling gassy, worrying he'd pass it in the night, wishing he could be alone for a little while.

The next day was better. It was raining, but they were starving and there was no food in the house, so they had to go outside. They were soaked by the time they found the grocer's in town.

There was life here, as it turned out. Weathered men in pea coats—fishermen, maybe. A group of Coast Guard cadets, from the training station north of town. A few men and women running errands under umbrellas. They passed a grammar school, and at least one of the windows was lighted, though they didn't see any children anywhere. In the central part of town, several blocks inland, a candy shop was open, a dry goods store, the grocer's on Washington Street, and beside it a hardware store and a liquor store. The old clerk at the grocer's seemed as happy to see them as they were to see him, and Effie called out orders as if she were preparing for a banquet: a pork loin, a pound of haddock, a loaf of bread, a pound of butter, sliced ham and cheese, potatoes, eggs, peach preserves, plums, apples, strawberries—she would fill the kitchen with abundance. On the way back to the cottage the rain became a downpour and they started running, each of them hugging a bag of groceries, the paper turning soft and dark in their arms. They arrived winded, doubling over with laughter. They put the groceries away and then, up in the attic room, peeled their wet clothes off and made love, memories be damned, over a beach towel spread under them on the bed.

Afterward she lay naked against him—so casual, like it was nothing already. "I'm sorry I was so gloomy yesterday," she said.

"You weren't, Eff," he said. His penis lay tipped against her thigh. He liked how it looked there. "You were tired. We're settled in now."

She nodded, her head moving against his shoulder. He couldn't see her face. "It just feels so weird to be back here. It's not like I remember it."

He kissed the top of her head—her hair was still damp—and gave her bare behind a squeeze. "Hey, so what. We're making new memories now."

She looked up at him and smiled. "You're such a sweet boy, Henry." She kissed him soft and slow, and in a minute he was up again, and though she resisted, playfully—"I *told* you, Henry, I'm *starving*"—with a nudge she got on top of him and they found each other without trying.

After lunch they sat out on the front porch and watched the rain, which was cool and fragrant, and she pointed out houses on the street and told him about the people who had lived in them during the summers. There were the Woods, in the cottage across from them, whose daughter, Betsy, used to babysit her sometimes. Next door to the Woods, in the large house with the barn-shaped roof, lived her friend Vivian Healy, whose older brother, Charles, had died in Korea. A few houses down, on this side of the street, in the big purple Victorian, lived an older couple who always kept to themselves. She never knew their names. "You'd just see them walking hand in hand down the sidewalk, and they'd smile at you and say hello, but that was all. There was never anyone else there, no children or grandchildren. Just the two of them."

"That'll be us someday," Henry said.

Effie laughed. "Don't say that. It's too sad."

"How is it sad? It sounds sweet to me."

She shook her head. "No," she said. "You and me—there'll be no peace for us, I'm afraid. We're going to have us a *roost*."

"God help me," Henry said. She'd made it clear to him that she wanted five children at least, all boys if she had her way, that she wanted a house that never rested, that she and Henry, into old age, would be at the center of a maelstrom of life (she wanted dogs too), and though he didn't care one way or another about children, or dogs—in fact her idea of the future had alarmed him when he really thought about it, in the weeks before their marriage—now it made him feel light and for a brief moment radiantly happy. They were going to be all right.

"What are you smiling at?" she said.

"You," he said.

"Quit it," she said, and she kissed him before he could say anything more.

They drank some of Uncle George's brandy. In the house instructions he'd left for them on the dining room table he told them they could help themselves to his liquor cabinet, but if they drank more than half of any bottle he expected them to replace it, and he provided them with the address of the liquor store on Washington Street. "We should leave exactly half of every bottle," Henry said, and Effie laughed. This Uncle George, Aunt Lizzie's widower, lived in Philadelphia and wasn't a blood relation. Effie had never had much to say about him, aside from the logistics of the trip and when the cottage would be available. Henry had the sense she didn't like him very much.

She made the haddock for supper—it stuck to the pan and crumbled to pieces, but it was good—and afterward they turned the radio on, found a hits station that wasn't too fuzzy with static, and danced in the den to "Chances Are." They played a game of checkers, which Effie won handily. They passed the halfway mark on the bottle of brandy.

"What's he going to do, bill us?" Henry said.

"To hell with King George," Effie said. "Bottoms up."



On Tuesday the sun came out and the streets and squares in town were spangled with light. They walked out to see the lighthouse, which stood near the point, on the other side of a wetland. This spot, according to Henry's understanding of the town, marked the southernmost tip of New Jersey. Ahead of them lay open ocean, to the left of them lay open ocean, and off to the right somewhere, on the other side of the peninsula, lay Delaware Bay. Now that the sun was out, the sea was royal blue. "Just think," he said, pointing to the horizon ahead, "about ten thousand miles down that way is Antarctica, or South Africa, or something. We could just swim and swim and never see the end of all that water."

When she didn't answer he looked at her and saw that she was frowning. She'd been grumpy that morning. They'd both had too much to drink. "That's not right," she said. "That way's west."

He felt a prick of annoyance. He'd only been trying to put a little wonder into things. "How is that way west? It's ocean as far as you can see."

"No, it's Delaware," she said. "You can see it with binoculars—I'll show you a map when we get back to the house." She pointed off to the left of where they were standing. "*That* way's south. If you swam *that* way, you'd run into Antarctica or South Africa or what-have-you. Actually, I think you'd run into Venezuela first."

Never mind. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "Fine, Rand McNally, south is west and east is north," and she pushed him away, smiling.

They made love every morning, before they got out of bed, and again in the late afternoon. They were gentle and considerate with each other. He caressed her between her legs, shy of looking too closely at it. He kissed her breasts, her soft, plump belly, her impressive nest of pubic hair, which smelled of linen, but he went no further, afraid of

offending her, afraid that she would recoil or laugh or call him a pervert. How could he ask what she wanted? How could he tell her what he wanted? Sometimes she held his penis lightly and he lifted his hips to encourage her—he wanted her to hold it more firmly (but not too firmly), he wanted her, in his dreams, to put it into her mouth—but she shied away, afraid of hurting it, or else wary of it, or revolted. He didn't know. But they made love, no words necessary, and it seemed to go a little more naturally each time. He took it slow and easy, holding back the tide for as long as possible. The headboard tapped the wall. She breathed close to his ear, her fingers in his hair.

Later, while they ate breakfast or tried a new route through the town, her expression would grow distant, and they might go half an hour without saying a word. He had to remind himself that these silences weren't necessarily awkward, that in fact it was a sign of intimacy that they didn't have to be speaking all the time. But even so, he couldn't help thinking that if he'd been a brighter person, less quiet and inward—more funny and gregarious like his best friend, Hoke, whom Effie adored—then maybe she would be happier.

The days were long. There was little to do. She took naps in the afternoons, and Henry coveted the time alone. He'd been constipated since before their wedding, and only when she was asleep did he feel comfortable enough to try to go to the bathroom—far away from her, in the lavatory off the kitchen. The results were always unsatisfying. Afterward, feeling bloated, he'd sit in the den with the windows open or out on the back porch, where the birch trees made a calming sound.

He was reading Boswell's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, which his uncle Carswall had given him as a wedding present. Carswall had read it when he was a young man, and it had been a good guide to him, he said. "You're always going to be at work on yourself, son, and it's always going to be a struggle. But it's the struggle that'll make you a good man." Henry liked the ideas; he had a vision of the kind

of man he wanted to be—virtuous, humble, strong, and bold, full of good cheer but in healthy moderation—and he was eager to learn. But the book, so far, was a thumping bore, and he couldn't read more than a few sentences before his mind began to wander.

Thursday morning they walked out to the marina to look at the boats. At the end of a pier stood an octagonal building with large windows on all sides. Effie thought she remembered going to parties there. The entrance was padlocked, but beside it a fresh-looking poster of a jack-o'-lantern in a sailor's cap advertised a dance for Friday, October 11. "Is that tomorrow?" Henry asked, but Effie said no, that was next Friday.

"Hey," he said, "that's our last night here." He took her hand. "Our last night, there's going to be a *dance* here. How about that?"

She didn't seem to share his excitement. She touched her fingertips to the poster. "My God," she said. "I can't believe we're going to be here that long."

They went down to the beach and walked along the edge of the surf with their shoes in their hands.

"You know," she said after a long silence, "we don't have to stay the whole two weeks. We could take the train out on Sunday and be home by Monday morning."

"You want to leave?" he asked.

"Maybe?" she said.

From here Cape May really was beautiful. The edge of the ocean stretched off into the distance ahead of them, on one side the beach and the tall grasses and, farther off, the big Victorian hotels, the columns and striped awnings. Signal Creek seemed so dreary in comparison. Pine woods, fields of cotton and peanuts, the Courthouse Square, the toffee-colored creek itself. Carswall and Henry's mother were having an annex of the house—what they grandly called "the

Old Wing”—remodeled for them. A living room with a potbelly stove, a bedroom, a lavatory, a tiny hopeful room for the future baby. The thought of settling into their lives there—so soon, anyway—depressed him. “I don’t want to leave,” he said. “I could stay here forever.”

Effie smiled at him. “I’m glad you feel that way.” She stopped to pick up a shell from the flat, wet sand at their feet and turned it over in her hand. “It just feels so sad here, Henry. Sad and—I don’t know.” She looked past him. “Dull, I guess.”

It stung, and he opened his mouth to speak, but she kept on, oblivious: “Aunt Lizzie’s dead and gone. None of my old friends are here. Uncle George . . . Did you know he wanted to charge us for the cottage, and Mama had to talk him out of it? She had to remind him we were still technically his family. She was so embarrassed.” Henry didn’t see what that had to do with anything, but he said nothing. “I don’t know what I was thinking. That boy at the diner was right: we should have gone to Florida.”

“Eff,” he said, collecting himself, “we can’t go home early.”

“Oh, Henry . . .”

“No, listen,” he said, but he wasn’t sure how to say what he wanted to say. How humiliating it would be. How everyone would detect failure, even if it wasn’t really there: they would think it and it would burrow in and eventually become true. “Think of your mama,” he said. “My mama. What are they going to say?”

It seemed to have an effect on her. She nodded, and tossed the shell away. They continued walking, and Henry thought he had won the point, although what good was it if she was just going to be sad and bored the rest of the time? But after a few minutes she said, “I don’t care what people say, Henry. I just want to go home.”

So they would leave Sunday afternoon. At least they would have the weekend. Henry felt hurt and angry at first—it was rotten of her to

be sad, to say things were dull after what they had shared—but soon he felt as though a pall had risen from them, now that their honeymoon was ruined. After supper—the pork loin, which was delicious—they opened Uncle George’s brandy again and the evening took on a valedictory air. They took the bottle out to the front porch and watched the light fade from the elm trees. They told stories. How Betty Moody wanted Maynard Givens’s babies. How Suzie Blanchard could let the farts rip when it was just the girls. The time Hoke had tried to jump Lord’s Gully on his bike. Henry loved the rare occasions when he could make Effie laugh, when she briefly lost her cool and the whole top half of her body bounced. “Stop it, stop it,” she said, “you’re going to make me wet myself.” They finished the brandy and opened a bottle of scotch. They couldn’t pronounce the name. “I bet it’s expensive,” he said, and they said cheers and clinked their glasses. It was dark out now, and they’d turned the radio on, and soft, airy music was coming out to them on the front porch. They were in a lull—a comfortable silence this time, drunk and content—when Henry noticed the lights down at the end of the street.

He stood up and went to the railing to get a better look. There were lights in the windows of the house on the corner—three houses down, on the other side of the street, where New Hampshire Avenue intersected with Madison Avenue. He called Effie over to see.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” she said.

They weren’t alone anymore.

“You never said anything about that house,” he said. “Do you remember who lived there?”

She thought about it. “I don’t know,” she said. “It’s been so long.”

With their drinks in hand they walked down the sidewalk until they stood directly across from the house. Most of it was invisible in the dark, but the downstairs windows were bright. They watched and listened for signs of life, but nothing moved behind the curtains, and all they could hear was the surf and the wind in the trees.

"Should we go say hello?" Henry said.

Effie reached up to pat her hair. "No—Lord, no. It's late." She held up her drink. "We'd look like a couple of drunks, wouldn't we?"

"Maybe tomorrow, then."

She nodded. They stood watching a few minutes longer, until Effie pointed out that they were acting like creeps, and they turned back to the cottage.

The next morning, on their way down to the beach—it was a balmy day, finally, and Effie thought they might be able to get into the water—they passed the house on the corner and saw three automobiles crowded in the driveway: a little red sports car, a baby-blue Cadillac convertible, and what looked to Henry like a Rolls-Royce, though he'd never seen one in real life. They were rich, these people. Except that the lawn, more than the others on the street, was overgrown with weeds, and the house, set back in the gloom of the trees, had a condemned look to it.

The water was too rough for swimming, so they climbed up onto one of the tall lifeguards' chairs and looked out over the surf. Effie was trying to remember who had lived at the house. She held the wide brim of her hat with both hands so it wouldn't fly off. "It could have been the Richardses, I guess. They had a daughter, Mattie, who was a few years older than me—but they might have lived over on Maryland Avenue, I don't know. It's probably no one. A lot of these places turn over."

When they passed the house again on their way back, two more cars had parked along the curb—a long, shiny Buick and another Cadillac. "It must be a party," Henry said.

"Or a family thing. It might be rude to crash it."

"Who said anything about crashing? We can just say hello."

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They decided they would do it at five, which was early enough, Effie thought, that they wouldn't interrupt the newcomers' supper. "We'll just stop by," she said. "If they invite us in, fine. If not—well, we'll just see if there's any life in this town on a Friday."

They were nervous, for some reason; he could tell that she was too. Maybe it was the Rolls-Royce in the driveway. Maybe, absurdly, it was that they were expecting some kind of rescue and didn't want to bungle it. Henry wore his good trousers and shoes and a gray blazer. Effie wore her navy-blue dress with the white collar and white belt cinched tightly around her waist. She'd bundled her hair up and looked pretty, especially in the late-afternoon light, but not as though she'd dressed up for a party, which might come off as presumptuous.

Another car had parked by the curb. That made six in all. They walked up the gravel drive and found the path, almost completely obscured by weeds, that led to the front door.

The front door was open, and through the screen door they could see to the back windows, but they couldn't see anyone inside. Effie pulled a rope hanging by the door and a bell clanged inside. They waited. After a minute she pulled the rope again, and finally a voice came from deep within the house—"Coming!"—and soon a handsome woman with blond, elegantly coiffed hair and a white halter-top dress pushed the screen door open. "Hello!" she cried, looking at Henry, whose eyes dropped involuntarily to her breasts. "You must be . . ." And she seemed to search for the right name, ready to be utterly delighted, whoever it was.

"We're just staying down the street," Effie said. "We were on our way to supper and saw the cars down here and figured we'd introduce ourselves. We don't want to bother you."

While Effie spoke, the delight in the woman's face faded, and she leaned forward to get a closer look. "No," she said. "No, it can't be—it just *can't* be. Is that my little belle?"

Effie glanced at Henry, as if he would know the answer.

"My God!" the woman cried. "It *is* you. You're the little Southern girl from down the street! My God—I could faint!" The woman wrapped her arms around Effie and squeezed her, and Effie tipped her head up as if for air. She seemed alarmed. Finally the woman let her go and said, "Don't you remember me? You're going to break my heart if you don't remember me."

And now something seemed to dawn on Effie. "Clara?" she said. "Clara Strauss?"

"Yes!" the woman cried, clapping her hands together.

And though Effie was smiling broadly, Henry knew her well enough to know better: she was sorry they had come.