

Pepperland

Mark Delaney



Published by
PEACHTREE PUBLISHERS
1700 Chattahoochee Avenue
Atlanta, Georgia 30318-2112

www.peachtree-online.com

Text © 2004 by Mark Delaney
Cover illustration © 2004 by Richard C. Keep

First trade paperback edition published in April 2007

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Cover design by Loraine Joyner
Book design by Melanie McMahan Ives

Manufactured in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 (hardcover)
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 (trade paperback)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Delaney, Mark.

Pepperland / written by Mark Delaney.-- 1st ed.
p. cm.

Summary: Struggling to come to terms with the death of her mother in 1980, sixteen-year-old Beatles fan Star Cochran hopes to find closure by delivering to John Lennon a letter her mother wrote to him in 1964 but never sent.

ISBN 978-1-56145-317-7 (hardcover)

ISBN 978-1-56145-402-0 (trade paperback)

[1. Mothers and daughters--Fiction. 2. Grief--Fiction. 3. Beatles--Fiction. 4. Lennon, John, 1940-1980--Fiction. 5. Guitar--Fiction.] I. Title.

PZ7.D373185Pe 2004

[Fic]--dc22

2004005435

Contents

Chapter 1: Things We Said Today.....	1
Chapter 2: Two of Us	14
Chapter 3: And Your Bird Can Sing	25
Chapter 4: A Day in the Life	43
Chapter 5: When I Get Home.....	55
Chapter 6: Instant Karma	70
Chapter 7: Fixing a Hole	85
Chapter 8: The Ballad of John and Yoko.....	98
Chapter 9: Ticket to Ride.....	110
Chapter 10: I'm Looking Through You	126
Chapter 11: This Boy	140
Chapter 12: Within You Without You.....	157
Chapter 13: Golden Slumbers.....	161
Chapter 14: While My Guitar Gently Weeps	177
Chapter 15: Nowhere Man.....	187
Chapter 16: Imagine.....	201
Chapter 17: (Just Like) Starting Over.....	218
Afterword: Getting It Wrong to Get It Right.....	227

1

Things We Said Today

I told the shrink that my mother named me Pamela Jean because she had to.

Mom always loved the Beatles. When she was just seventeen, she swiped a dollar from her boyfriend's jacket and used it to buy a 45 rpm single of "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "I Saw Her Standing There." From that instant the Fab Four were her life. She loved the chiming harmonies in *Meet the Beatles!*, the sadness in *Beatles '65*, the freaky experimentation in *Rubber Soul* and *Revolver*. I have vague memories of dancing with her to *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, even though I was only three when the album hit the stores. Later she told me that in 1970, when she first heard the *Let it Be* album, she cried because she knew it was the end. She never said the end of what, but I understood she meant more than just the breakup of a band.

When she was pregnant with me, Mom would play Beatles records stacked five high on a plastic phonograph, and she would feel me roll and kick,

Pepperland

almost always in time to the music. Mom loved the music and that whole sixties thing. She wanted to name me Star or River or Moonbeam, one of those corny names that went out of style with lava lamps and sitar music. Her parents threw a fit, though, and Mom relented. She named me Pamela after her mother and Jean after her father—whose name is Eugene.

Now, for the record, my name is Star. Only Star.

The shrink's name is Dr. Leslie Artaud. Two months ago, when I first saw her name stenciled on the door to her office, I thought it was pronounced Ahr-TODD. I got it wrong three or four times before she finally corrected me. She said it was Ahr-TOH. She even swept up her pinky to chalk that little accent mark over the second syllable. Ahr-TOH. She says the French pronunciation is a little unusual, and that it's okay if I call her Leslie. I don't. It seems phony, and I don't need a big sister.

I'm sitting on the floor of her office. The first day we met she said I should make myself comfortable, so I went straight to the floor and crossed my legs. That little move made her eyebrow shoot up, but she didn't say anything. Now I sit on the floor every time we meet—each Thursday from 4:00 to 4:50—while Dr. Ahr-TOH and I have our little chats.

Today I have my electric guitar with me. I hold it in my lap, and my head tilts down as I stare at the fingerboard. Angling my head this way makes my hair fall across my face so that it covers one eye

Things We Said Today

completely and forms a sort of veil over the other. Through it I can just see Dr. Artaud sitting in her leather office chair. She swivels slowly back and forth, placing the eraser end of a pencil against her chin and twirling it as she studies me. She's not happy. She knows I don't have to look at my fingers when I play. I can close my eyes, or look at the person sitting across from me, or even lean over and take a sip of Coke from a straw without so much as letting a finger slip. She's already figured that I'm staring down and letting my hair cover me because it's the only way I can be alone between 4:00 and 4:50 on a Thursday afternoon.

"Pamela," she says. "Pamela Jean?" I move my head to the music I'm playing, making a show out of refusing to answer. Dr. Artaud stops swiveling and sets the pencil down. "Very well. Star?"

My head comes up. I'm in the middle of a blues riff, something I picked up off of one of Syke's Clapton records, and I want to let it finish. My fingers form a minor diminished chord and let it travel from the fifth fret down to the first, finally resolving into an E major. Without an amplifier, the strings on the electric sound tinny, as though I'm strumming loose wires.

"Nice," Dr. Artaud says. She takes this very deep breath before speaking again, and already I'm on guard. If she needs this much time to choose her words, it's a fair guess I'm going to hate what she's about to say. I run my fingers through my hair,

Pepperland

combing it back so she can see that I'm ready for it, that I'm looking her in the eye.

"Star," she begins, "when I gave you permission to bring the guitar to our session, it was with the understanding that you were not going to use it to avoid the issues we need to work on. Remember?"

I love the words she chooses. I'm sixteen, my mom died three months ago, and that's an *issue*? I have news for her. What I'm going to wear to school tomorrow is an issue. Whether or not to change the strings on my guitar is an issue.

"Now, don't misunderstand," she continues. She's using that tone I hate—that steady, walking-on-eggs tone that says she's worried my head might explode if she says the wrong thing. "I believe your interest in music is healthy. But as with anything else, you should perhaps consider a little moderation." She pauses. "I'm thinking specifically of your academic performance. Your father tells me you're failing your classes."

My head drops again, and my fingers slip into some power chords. If I were plugged in, the walls would be vibrating.

"Star," she says, a little sharply. It's as much anger as I've ever seen from her. Dr. Artaud is a smallish woman, with tight auburn curls cut close to her head and a noticeable hunch in her shoulders. She usually speaks very quietly, her hand drawing slow circles in the air while she conjures up the words she wants. This raising of the voice is

Things We Said Today

out of character, and it catches my attention. My fingers wrap around the guitar's neck, muting the strings. "Is that true?" she asks. "Are you failing your classes?"

Clearly there's no ducking the question, so I slip the leather strap from around my neck and lay the guitar back into the open case. I slap down the latches and look up at Dr. Artaud. "Yeah," I say. "Yeah, I guess I am."

"Are you going to tutoring, as we agreed?"

I start to say yes, figuring it's not exactly a lie, but it's the "as we agreed" part that catches me. I'm supposed to go to tutoring twice a week. I've gone maybe three times in the last month. Hidden behind my knee, the fingers of my left hand stretch and play silently, searching for a guitar I'm no longer holding.

"I see," says Dr. Artaud. I hear nothing accusatory or judgmental in the way she says it, but the words still rankle. She joins her hands together, fingertips touching, and raises them to her mouth. This is another one of her many thinking gestures, just like the screwing-the-pencil-into-the-chin trick. She nods to herself, and the hands bob up and down with the motion of her head. "Star," she finally says, "I know your music means a lot to you." She's drawing the circles now, consulting her notes as she does, and I sense we're about to revisit old territory. "We've discussed this on a number of occasions, but have you considered writing a song for your mother?"

Pepperland

I'm glad I'm sitting when she says it. I feel my knees turn to water. I look away from her, and my hands feel sweaty. I rub my palms back and forth against the legs of my jeans, again and again, until they warm from the friction.

"Star?"

"No," I say. "I mean, I'm not sure I'm there yet."

She nods, pretending to have a clue. "You might want to look at it another way, Star. You're saying that writing a song for your mother is something that can only happen after you've worked through all the grief and anger. In a sense, the song is a kind of destination. I'm suggesting the reverse, that you might write a song as a *means* of getting there. It doesn't have to be the destination; it can be the path."

I say nothing. I've tried countless times to write a song for my mother. When I was four or five, Mom would bring me to the park, and I would chase after the flock of pigeons that gathered around the picnic area. They'd take off in what seemed like a million different directions, this rustling, gray-black cloud, with me running after them, my fingers outstretched and my hands empty. That's what happens when I try to write a song about my mother. My thoughts scatter. My fingers can't find the guitar strings. My hands are empty.

"I'll think about it," I tell the doctor. And I will. I really will.

"That's all I'm asking." She looks at me then as if

Things We Said Today

she's expecting me to say more. I think she's thinking that something terribly important has just passed between us, like maybe we've reached some sort of breakthrough moment or something. If so, I've missed it. When she finally realizes I have nothing more to say, she seems disappointed. She glances at a tiny gold watch on her wrist. "I guess that's all for today then," she says. "I'll see you again next week."

I scoop up my guitar case and hug it against me as I leave.



John Lennon wrote a couple of songs about his mother. The first was called "Julia." That was his mother's name—Julia. My mother's name was Catherine. She was taller than me, and prettier I think, and she had a bit of an Irish rhythm in her voice that she got from her grandfather. Julia died when Lennon was seventeen years old. She stepped into the street and was run over by a drunk driver. My mom died of breast cancer. In a way, I guess I'm luckier than John Lennon was. He was raised mostly by his aunt Mimi and didn't really get to know Julia until just a few short months before she died. I had my mom for sixteen years, so, as I said, I guess luck is sort of relative.

I'm making a mental note: Lennon wrote another song for Julia. It came later, long after the Beatles

Pepperland

broke up. I wish now that I could remember the name of it.



The case that holds my guitar is great. It's ancient—leather wrapped over solid wood. I could drop the whole thing, guitar included, down a flight of stairs and not have to worry about dinging my ax. The downside, though, is that my particular ax, a vintage 1952 Fender Telecaster, happens to weigh a ton as electric guitars go, so handling all the weight can be a real pain. It sometimes feels like my right arm is two inches longer than my left, stretched out like an old piece of elastic from carrying the guitar for so long.

I set the case down on the floor and wait for the elevator doors to swish open. The receptionist in Dr. Artaud's building waggles a finger at me to say good-bye, but I pretend not to see it. I'm not in the mood to chat about nail polish, and that seems to be her favorite subject. Besides, I clip my fingernails down to the quick—better for guitar playing—so I'm not really interested in having hands that look like they belong on the cover of *Seventeen*.

By the time I make it halfway through the parking lot, the muscles in my arm are cramping. I shift the case from my right hand to my left and wait for those muscles to complain. The medical building behind me is a glassy black tower, and the sun hitting it

Things We Said Today

reflects into golden ripples on the blacktop in front of me. A hundred yards ahead is the highway, the cars little more than a shifting blur of colors. Their engines make a vague, general hum that keens upward as they approach and then bends down, like a blues note, as they speed away. I like the sound and file it away in my head. Can I do that in a song? Can my fingers find it on the guitar neck? Maybe—or maybe that sound is like everything else that catches you by surprise and makes you smile. You hold onto it, you struggle to recreate it, but you can't make it work.

I'll try it, I tell myself. And just to make sure I'm listening, I think it again: *I'll try it*.

At the corner is a wood-slat bench with sides and legs of black iron. Surrounding it is a huge, boxy rain shelter made of some kind of amber plastic. My bus stop. I set the guitar down, sit, and wait. Slipped in a frame to my right is a movie poster—Robert De Niro, with sweaty face and blackened eyes, staring at me. Below the image, red block letters scream the title, *Raging Bull*.

Syke's leather jacket is way too big for me, but I like it that way. I roll the sleeves and tug the collar up around my neck.



My favorite stretch of beach is only twenty minutes from the shrink's office, and I take the bus there

Pepperland

after every session. I hate the beach on a summer morning, when the bodies are lined up on the sand like hot dogs on an outdoor grill, but I love it on a fall evening. The day is cool, the sun is low in the sky, and sometimes I'm the only one here. I smile when the bus doors hiss open and I see only three cars in the parking lot. The sun is huge, a giant orange fireball hanging just above the horizon, and little trails of light wiggle off of it. The trails of light are reflections on the surface of the water. I just stand there a moment, taking it all in. I'm maybe 200 yards from where the breakers are washing against the sand, and the water is roaring in my ears. The sound is all around me. Sometimes I think I can taste it in the air—the sound, I mean—but then I figure I'm just getting all romantic about salt spray.

My mother used to bring me here. Before I was old enough to go to school, she would pack lunch in one of those old-fashioned wicker baskets: peanut butter and honey sandwiches, granola bars, soft drinks, some carrot sticks for her, an orange for me. Sometimes we would have the beach all to ourselves. Mom had this giant yellow towel that she used so often and kept for so long, the beach sand would sift through it. We'd lie down and feel the grains pressing warm and gritty against our backs. When the sun grew too hot, she'd jump up and sprint toward the water. Just before she hit it, her arms would flail in the air and she would shriek in anticipation of the cold and wet—then splash, she

Things We Said Today

was gone. A moment later her head would break the surface, and she'd let her body ride in with the next wave. I'd grin and wait for her, feeling sand and sticky honey on my fingers and face. A moment later she'd sit next to me, dripping, her skin stark white and prickled with goose bumps.

When I'm ready, a few steps take me off the blacktop and onto the beach, where I tug off my shoes. The sand feels cool, and I like the way it squidges between my toes when I walk.

My destination lies just ahead: lifeguard stand number twelve. The Powers That Be do not allow beach guests to sit on the lifeguard stands. A sign appears on each one, right alongside the flimsy ladder you have to climb to get up top. The problem the Powers That Be face, of course, is that lifeguards won't be hired until June, seven months from now, and no one around here really cares one way or the other if I plant myself up there. The city does have a beach patrol, and the patrolmen do wear badges and guns, but I've learned they're more worried about drugs and alcohol than they are about some skinny kid sitting up on the lifeguard stand to watch the sun set. One of them sees me up there all the time, and he just waves to me as he goes zipping by on his dune buggy.

I huff my way to the base of the stand and start to climb the six rungs to the top. Once I'm there, the guitar case slips to the wood floor, Syke's leather jacket lands at my feet, and I suddenly feel like

Pepperland

stretching. My arms reach out to the sun, and I'm standing on tiptoe. The muscles in my arms, shoulders, and legs tense up, then relax. After a moment I just let my legs fold at the knees so that I'm sitting.

I pop the latches and grab my guitar. The case has a little storage box on the inside for accessories, and I open this as well. My fingers dig into it and pull out my Pick Pocket, a flat leather pouch containing a half a dozen or so of my favorite tortoise-shell guitar picks. I don't worry about an amp. After all the time I've spent up here, I've gotten used to the twangy, wiry sound of an unamplified electric guitar. Good thing, too. My new attitude has saved me from a million arguments with Syke over which gets to be louder, my guitar or his television.

I start to play, but then I hesitate and look again across the ocean. I need another few minutes with the surf: the rush of the water, the cawing of the gulls, the sun like a warm wet towel against my face and arms, the air full of fish and salt and warm seaweed. I set the guitar down and draw my knees up, hugging them against my body.

A few moments later the guitar is in my lap again. A tingle of anger is always there inside me, though it had dimmed for a while as I looked out on the water. Now it comes back. The Telecaster gives me a bright, clean sound, but I imagine I'm plugged in, that the clean sound tears through my amp as a fuzzy scream of distortion. I love it, because I can hide behind that noise like it's a wall. I play a classic riff,

Things We Said Today

one that pounds to the steady, machine-gun rhythm of punk. I'm not a big fan of punk, but it's angry music, and of course that's what I'm feeling. The only problem with playing unplugged is that I hear the music in my ears, but not in my bones. If I were playing through my little thirty-watt Pignose, or, even better, through the hundred-watt Marshall I keep in the garage to blow out the neighbors, the music would be slamming me in the chest right about now. Sometimes the music has to be that way, so loud it just pounds everything else out of you.

My eyes are closed, but I can still feel the sun, hear the surf, and taste the air. I slow down my playing a bit. My finger pulls up on the B string, bending the note into something cool and bluesy. I nod in time with the line I'm playing. I can hear a chord progression in my head, the foundation of a song I haven't yet written, and I'm vamping a solo over it. Thoughts of my mom slide away like the tide. As I play, I open my eyes and see that the bottom curve of that huge sun is just now touching the water. I watch it slip further, the Telecaster chiming in my ears, my fingers gently picking the sun down.