South of Providence

My dad had promised to take me to the circus, but the man I remembered looking like Indiana Jones said the circus left the Convention Center a week ago. The man twirled his brown hat around his finger and stepped into the shade. He was inviting those who "survived the storm" to his boat for a little party. "If you can make it," he said, "that would be awesome. Just want to be neighborly." He had curly hair and stood well over six foot with a rich, smooth face, perfect skin, and a tan. His eyes were washed in blue, topped with trimmed, thick eyebrows. He was from our marina in Atlantic City. It was early in the spring. I recalled the storm being bad. It came during the night.

I don't remember what my dad said to Indiana Jones. He was usually uncomfortable with people. He just combed his thin brown hair to the side with his fingers and gazed at his bare feet. He stepped back on the fiberglass deck, almost tripping over me. The man claimed our bridge covered had ripped in the winds. "But that's easy enough to replace," he said.

After the divorce, nothing was easy for my dad.

"You know," the man said, locking eyes with mine. "I have a daughter the same exact age as you! Don't be strangers!"

With his invitation still floating there, I guess Indiana Jones collected his whip, scooped up his hat and departed. His cologne lingered. My dad sat down and cleaned his glasses with the end of his white shirt. He picked up the pink blinds that had fallen when he opened the sliding glass doors. Indiana Jones had called from the pier. My dad suddenly felt dizzy. He had something called vertigo. Something to do with crystals in the inner ear. But the feeling eventually subsided. Scratching at the dried glue, he examined the screws to the brackets. They

were too small for the holes. “Everything’s falling apart, Mary Rose,” he told me. “Maybe I can win me some repair money at the casinos. You know, for the bridge cover.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I asked. “I can get the medicine.”

“I’m okay for now,” he said, holding my hand. “Just keep the bottle with you, okay?”

If my mom knew how frequently the episodes swept over him, in the car and on the boat, I’m not sure she would have allowed us to visit, and so we kept it quiet, my dad and I, and we didn’t even tell Stu, my brother, because that was just as bad as telling my mom. But Stu wasn’t there that weekend. Would it have made a difference? While he rested, I asked him to tell me more stories about that donkey man who used to give him rides when he was young like me during his stays at the Jersey shore. It was always my favorite at bedtime. It seemed like he needed that story.

My dad used his boat as a “weekend bachelor pad.” After the divorce, he had a one-bedroom apartment in Pennsylvania, close to work. He took us every other weekend, and when it was warm, the weekends meant the boat. On kid-free weekends, the boat was a place to “entertain my lady friends,” or his place to be ‘Man, alone’ as my brother said, but over time the smell of the toilet, the mildew on the ratty rugs, and the plates stacked in the sink were not, according to my brother, “especially conducive to romance,” especially in that summer heat. My brother loved to use big words. But my dad was never good alone. The head, what my dad called the toilet, didn’t work for #2, so I had to use a port-a-potty on the deck at night and dump my business elsewhere. It didn’t work for #1 either, and so the smell got bad. I just squatted on the deck in a bucket. It was also my job to run with buckets for hot water. My brother Stuart hated the weekends, but I loved the time because my dad was always more comfortable with girls. I

was the last in his life. When he was young, his mom and his sister died. My mom left before he was even old, at thirty. There was just me and my messy blonde hair and my juice-stained lips. My mother imagined a rainbow of ways we could have died with our dad on the boat, especially when he saved enough cash to splash in the tanks and risk Townsend Inlet. He would venture out close to shore when the Atlantic or the Barnegat Bay wasn't rough. When Stuart wasn't there my dad didn't take the boat out, so I think he was sore that weekend because he was happiest on his fly bridge with the wind in his hair, alone in the sky and in the wind, like flying. I wasn't old enough to handle the ropes or act as first mate. And oh, how my mom worried on those weekends, but I just tolerated the mildew.

"I'm sorry, baby doll, about the circus," he said. "We should have come last week." His eyes were soft and watery. He stayed thin his whole life, except for that belly that rose and fell like the tides. I reminded him it wasn't our weekend together.

So on that Saturday afternoon he took me to the Golden Nugget. While I sat with my early readers on a chair just outside the gaming area, he played the slots. He would order a drink, turn to me, occasionally, flash a thumbs up, and I would return the thumb. I don't know how long he played. Did he win enough money for the child support? "Stuart wanted me to ask you about that," I said. He played with my hair, rough-like, like my mom drying my hair after a bath, and he said he would talk to my mom about all that. Once outside in the cool breeze, he said he needed to sit, and so we sat on a bench on the boardwalk facing a gray sea for a long time. A dog ran after a few gulls. A black pipe ran along the sand with the sign:

Danger
Keep Out
Submerged Objects

The wind pressed down the dune reeds. The ocean was rough**,** chomping at the sand. The

sea that weekend had carved a ledge in the sand. We stared at the sea. Sometimes I felt my dad had all these daytime fantasies, like the story about the Donkey Man, a man from his childhood who gave kids donkey rides at the shore. I asked why he wanted the Donkey Man to take him away when he was young. “I didn’t have such a good childhood,” he said. “Not like yours.”

“Are you still feeling dizzy?’ I asked.

“Now, not so bad.”

While walking to the beach, I could see he was down. He glanced up at a street sign: Providence. Did he whisper the name? Did he repeat the name more than once? On the beach an old man combed the sand with a metal detector. His black lab played with a dead gull. The old man wore headphones. I looked hard at that old guy, bald with a charcoal beard, wasting time listening for treasure. It was a strange hobby, of course, but maybe it was just something to avoid thinking about things.

My dad pointed to a boat crossing the horizon. “Mary Rose, that looks like my pop’s old wooden boat,” he told me. “How far out do you think he is? My pop’s boat was called Katrina, after my mom.” He glanced at his wrist, but he forgot the watch on the boat. I waited for this usual "half past a freckle" line but this was an unusual moment.

The lab brought the dead gull to the old man, who kicked it to the side. The tide washed over our feet, the water cold. My dad jingled coins in his pocket, muttering strange things that will forever stay with me: “Mary Rose, I don’t think your mother ever loved me. I was just . . . I don’t know. But I . . . loved her . . . I, well, I love her still. Someday you’ll know that too.”

I didn’t know what to say so I told him about one of my crazy ideas for an invention. I wanted a VHS recorder for my dreams. “That way, I can watch my dreams and my memories and my nightmares,” I said. He chuckled. “I would attached wires to by head, and when I went to

sleep, the tape would record everything, and I would have tapes stacked up to the ceiling at home. It would be all my own movies. You take me to the movies, but they're not *my* movies." He just rustled my hair and said I was crazy, full of imagination. I was often reprimanded in school for daydreaming. What adult can sit still for six hours? Adults forget what it's like to want to move and work and ride the swells.

I wanted to keep talking because his eyes became moist. He gave me coins to make wishes. With each coin tossed into the sea, I wished for my mother to love my father. Perhaps the weight of love would force us all back to earth from those trips around the stars, searching the universe for what was always the closest.

The old man pulled his headphones around his neck. "You look like you jus' lost big," he said, leaning against the metal detector.

My dad nodded. "That's the truth. I lost big all right."

I chucked the last nickel into the Atlantic, along with my last wish.

"Why don't 'cha jus' toss 'em on the beach fer me?" the old man asked.

My dad didn't acknowledge the old man. Instead, my dad found an empty green beer bottle underneath the boardwalk, filled it with sand and water, thumb-plugged the top, and rocked this preserved world back and forth. The ship was the only thing missing. We sat on the sand. The treasure hunting old man moved on, and then reached down for something. He stuffed the thing into his pocket. We did not move for a long, long, *long* time.

"We could go to that party, Mary Rose," he said. "At least you can meet that other girl. You could have a friend. I had a friend long time ago while I was kid down here. His name was Johnnie. He was older than me, like a big brother."

"What's his name?" I asked. "The man with the Viking? He looks like Indiana Jones."

"You know, I couldn't tell you. He's just the Viking guy."

"Well then, we'll just call him Indiana Jones."

"Why would he invite us?" I asked.

"Some people are just friendly, I guess."

The last boat on H pier was the Viking. On the back deck with an electric grill, Indiana Jones was waving a huge blackened hot dog. On the pier his girl wore a sundress and fished off the pier all by herself. "It's a scene from Norman Rockwell," my dad said. (It may have been the only painter he knew. We had Rockwell prints in our bathroom.) I just wore capris and a wrinkled green t-shirt. My dad seemed nervous. I once overheard in the marina clubhouse an awful joke he told that women should all be required to have C-sections, because "damn it wasn't like screwing the Grand Canyon if they didn't." I didn't understand until my brother said he wished I never understood such a thing. My brother was mad. He acted like my father, except when he teased me.

"What kind of boat you got?" some guy asked my dad.

"It's a Concorde."

"Ah. I've never heard of that."

"It's an old model," my dad replied.

I worried about him as he disappeared into the Viking. I waited outside with the girl as other kids came out too because it wasn't much fun for kids when parents were drinking and carrying on and yapping about fish and boats and other such *adult* things.

"You do any fishing?" a boy asked me.

"No," I said.

“Well, my dad’s entering the tuna tournament.”

I didn’t know about any tournament.

“Aren’t you from around here?”

“I’m sometimes here with my dad.”

“Which one is his?”

I pointed down the pier to H2.

“That boat?’ he said. “That boat is crap."

The boys giggled. I just lowered my head. Eventually the boys left, but I wanted them to stay so I could push them into the bay and have the sharks eat them. I had seen the girl with the father of Indiana Jones on a small rowboat many times before, fishing. “Is your grandpa here?” I asked her.

“He said he was tired,” the girl replied. “He told me he doesn’t really like these people. He left with my brother ‘for some peace.’ That’s what he said anyway.”

“What’s your name?’ I asked.

“Jillian.”

“I’m Mary Rose.”

I was lucky to have two names, she said. She was right.

I was curious what was in the blue slop bucket. Jillian, opening up a bucket, pulled out a huge shrimp and dangling it in front of me, baited the hook. My dad magically appeared behind me, drinking a beer with Jillian tossing the line into the water. Something must have happened in the ten minutes he was inside that boat because his face was different. I never did ask him what happened, but my dad’s face showed every emotion he felt.

“Did you ever hear the story about the Donkey Man?” my dad asked Jillian.

The girl shook her head.

"He was an old man who lived around here, and he gave donkey rides to kids like you," he said in a sense of wonder and reverence. "But some say he was a pirate who lived on the moon, and he kidnapped kids who were unhappy. I met the Donkey Man when I was . . . younger than you girls. Right here in AC."

"Well, that's just a silly story," Jillian said. "Anyway, that old donkey man wouldn't want me. I'm happy here."

"You're lucky then."

"Living on the moon doesn't seem so lucky either," Jillian said giggling.

As she fished in silence, my dad and I hung our legs over the pier. A hand painted sign, nailed on splintered wood, in splattered white paint read: No Wake! He placed his beer next to a piling and forgot the beer existed. A splinter bothered my butt — or tar, but Jillian in that pink outfit seemed comfortable on the edge of the dock, staring into the blue heavens, watching the loud gulls fight for command of the ash-colored pilings. I wished my dad could have been more like them, fighting for his peace. He would step aside, move away, vanish. At least the fly bridge was his place, like a bird in his perch, like the word I learned in school: a pedestal. My mom said it was dangerous up there. Once, near St. Michael's, he took the wake of a tugboat the wrong way. The boat rolled under to the left. She almost fell into the Chesapeake, with me in her arms. My mom yelled that he did it on purpose! That he did it on purpose! Did it on *purpose*? That he wanted us to dump into the water! She had no facts, and yet her voice was nothing but fact.

Just as Jillian said she usually liked fishing for schoolie bass, her line pulled. A strong pull; with a solid right foot, she planted herself. My dad jumped up and placed his arms around her, helping to pull on the rod. My dad never taught me how to fish. "That's great!" he said.

“Keep going, keep going!”

The Viking party noticed the commotion. “What’s going on dear?” Indiana Jones asked his daughter. My dad was still reeling, his glasses slipping off his nose; he pulled on the line, feeling the line drag, his fingers mixing with his new girl. Then he brought this thing out of the dark water. Just like that. Out from the deep came this *thing*. It dangled above the water. The biggest fish she ever caught, the little girl said: heavy and dark brown with a greenish color. It squirmed and wrestled and swished. I recalled hating that fish, and I didn’t want to hear her brag.

A man laughed. He stood next to my dad. “Go ahead! Do something with it!”

“Like what?” my dad asked.

“Get it off the line,” was the suggestion. “It’s not Jaws.” Everyone was laughing. “And after you deal with the fish, perhaps you can tell another joke, like the one you said about how watermelon is an aphrodisiac.” My dad’s hands were shaking. His heart must have been racing. He seemed unsteady. He bit his lip. He tried to grab the fish, but the fish kept wriggling away. “I just never learned to fish! All right?” he said. “What’s so funny about that?” Indiana Jones told him it was all right. My dad’s glasses slipped off, and Indiana Jones picked them up for him. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” he said. The words seemed genuine, but every fight was a fight my dad lost. Stepping forward, grabbing the fish, taking out the hook, and throwing the fish back into the calm, dark water, as easy as a rich dude tipping the bellhop, Indiana Jones finished the fish scene and wiped his hands.

“Daddy, I wanted to keep that fish,” Jillian said. “It was huge.”

“Another time, my love.” He stooped down and scooped her up in his arms.

“What type of fish was that Daddy?”

“A weakfish, but it was too small.”

"That fish wasn't weak at all, Daddy!" Everyone laughed.

My dad said on the way back that his vertigo seemed to be acting up. I led him back to the boat, to our our heaven and our mildew, and I gave him his medicine. He collapsed on the floor in the galley. I sat and placed his head on my lap. It was hot, so I used water and paper towels to cool his face. He had taught me how to roll his head to the side, to move the crystals. I wondered why crystals would be in his ear. I pictured pieces of rock candy, like he used to buy for me at the Chestnut Neck store on the Mullica River. In a little while he was fine, having fallen asleep. I just played with his hair, noticing not a single gray hair. I thought: was I lucky for having two names? Perhaps it indicated the two lives I lived: my dad always called me Mary Rose with two distinct syllables with a breath of God in between. My mother always married the two as one: MaryRose, as in a rush.

My brother told me, later, that there were many happy times on the boat. Dropping anchor at Beezy Cove. Rowing the family ashore in the blue twilight for a campfire. Jumping half crazed from the black-rimmed flybridge. Playing 500 Rummy in the evenings. Lapping water lulling us to pleasant dreams as we slept on the dinette sleeper. Water as calm as lullabies. "Mom must have grown tired of being first mate, boatswain, steward, first chef, cabin boy, and swabbie," my brother said.

It was soon after that weekend on the boat that my dad drove off the side of the road and died. He was on his way to the boat on the AC Expressway. Afterwards, my brother once told me our father thought of committing suicide. 'Sometimes, it gets so lonely," my brother said, paraphrasing our dad, "that you just don't want to live anymore. But he didn't do it on purpose. It was an accident. He was tired." My brother also spoke as fact. But the two: the words and the deed are tied as one, and I can't untie them. He didn't know about the vertigo. Perhaps it was the

vertigo.

I wrote this all down in a diary my mom gave me for Christmas, an unusual gift because she had to recognize my budding interest in writing. When I think of him on that beach, looking up at the sky, staring across the Atlantic, I see him in that bottle, riding the swells. He didn't really have anyone else except that one childish story about The Donkey Man that kept the navigation lights running red and green in the dark channels.