

Providence Revised

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Ms. Holton
English IV Honors
1st Person Narrative: 200 Points
9/23/1993

Prompt: Discuss a significant experience in your life and its meaning

We spent most weekends on the boat when my mom and dad were married. It was calm on the Delaware and Chesapeake Canal. We would moor at nights at Beezy Cove. That was a funny name, like there were bees in the breeze. Daddy would let me throw the anchor overboard, and I still hear that hollow sound of thrurrrpp as I got splashed. That was fun. He would row mommy and me to the shore for a campfire. My brother Stu would jump from the bridge and swim to the beach. I was always jealous of that. We would play cards in the evening. The rain at night was like a million long-tipped fingernails tapping glass. My mom would comb my hair before bed. The kitchen table folded down to a bed. It was heaven for me.

After the divorce, Dad moved his boat to Atlantic City. Sitting with my book by the casino entrance, I would watch Daddy play from a distance. My brother hated waiting for Dad to lose, especially since my brother bothered him about the child support. I didn't mind.

My dad was short with bony legs and a beer belly. He usually wore brown pants with solid color shirts, mostly blue, I recall. His teeth were straight and white because his mother told him to brush three times a day. His mother died when he was young, and he said I looked like

her. I loved his eyes, blue eyes like mine, eyes that were soft, almost too soft. That always fooled me because he had a temper, but his temper only hurt a wall or a door or a picture frame.

The time I want to write about is about this one weekend. It was a year or so before he died. I wanted to be a writer and a detective. So my mom gave me a pink journal for my birthday. Mom read Nancy Drew to me. I loved the journal, except for the color. My brother and his anger wasn't there that weekend. Maybe that's why it was so special – he usually got on my nerves and read my personal stuff. This time with my daddy was like time sealed away in a bottle, and I know that's a cliché, but that's what I remember writing then: there was no one to ruin it or read it.

It was getting stormy with the wind pressing down the dune grass. My hair was damp with mist. A man smoking a cigarette approached us and said we were all nuts for being out in that weather. Daddy didn't know about the storm coming up the coast. A boy in a yellow rain coat pushed a casino cart. I wanted a ride, but the walking was good for my growing bones, he said. One cart stood out because a man and a woman were inside that cart kissing. Dad pointed out a black pipe ran along the sand into the sea. "Can you read that sign, Mary Rose?"

I probably squinted and read "Danger" and "Keep Out" and "submerged objects" and then he told me what that word meant. He wasn't much of a teacher, but then he wanted to show me a special place of his. We walked a ways, and then he stopped and pointed to a street sign. It was another word he taught me: Providence. Said he at least remembered one thing in CCD as a kid. "It means under the protective care of God." And I remembered he said it seriously. When we learned about William Bradford and the Pilgrims years later, I raised my hand to tell Mrs. Redkin I knew all about Providence. On the beach he then told me all about the summer in

Atlantic City the summer after his mother died. He became friends with an older boy called Johnnie who told him all about the crazy old donkey man who took kids on donkey rides. “The donkey man, he lives on the moon and sails in his pirate ship, and he takes away kids from bad parents.”

“Was your dad bad?” I asked.

I don't remember what he said. I have no memory of my grandfather – only the canvas of my father. He died before I was born, but my brother Stu said she always smoked a pipe and had a crazy amount of yellow hair and he looked like Heat Miser from that Christmas special. My dad told me to go under the boardwalk. That was where he hid from the crazy old donkey man. But I was afraid because it was dark, it was raining, and there was so much garbage under there. Then it really started raining. Raining hard. And I was glad my mom wasn't there because she would be mad I was getting really wet.

On Friday night we slept over on the boat. Storms are so much more personal on a boat. Some strange man woke us up. His voice was deep and loud. Dad tripped through the cabin and reached through the pink blinds, pulling at the glass doors with both hands. The blinds fell like a twisted fan. We had to be careful with those blinds because they kept falling down. I don't know how many times I knocked them down by accident, and he always got mad, threw the blinds, and said “goddamn.”

“I'm sorry,” the man said from the dock. “I'm from H24. I have the Bayliner.”

The man was tall and wore a big brown hat – like the hat that Indiana Jones wears in those movies. I also think my dad was uncomfortable. He didn't have any male friends that I remember. The boat did not look so nice inside, so maybe he was embarrassed. I'm not sure what

they talked about, but afterwards my dad said how would I like to go to a party later that afternoon. I asked if there were any kids there, and he said, “Sure, he says he has a daughter a little older than you.”

On Saturday I stayed inside the boat coloring, playing with Barbies, or reading. My dad was most likely cleaning the boat with the horrible smelling green wax. He also worked on fixing the front hatch, but I don't think it was ever really fixed. I loved when Dad helped me climb the ladder to the bridge, and I would watch the seagulls each claim a piling. I wondered if each one had his piling and whether they fought each other for a piling. That was like Dad, now that I think of it, always fighting for his space – and his fly bridge was his perch. My mom said it was dangerous to be with him on the bridge. Once he took a tugboat wave the wrong way. The boat rolled way to the left. She was holding me on the front deck and we almost pitched into the water. My mom yelled that he did it on purpose, but how could she prove that?

The salty winds that morning were cool and soothing. It was one the reasons I wanted to write about this day. It's still so clear – and this is not what the journal touches: the why and the how why of it all, and I know now that's the most important thing in an essay for English, but maybe I'll figure it out by the time I'm finished. I wanted to take the boat for a ride, but Dad didn't want to run the inlet without my brother.

“I'm big enough,” I said.

“I need someone who can handle the lines and read the depth finder.”

Instead of cruising he said he would take me to the casinos for the sounds and the bright lights and some ice cream. But he lost money, and we didn't get ice cream. I don't know if he had an addiction. I just think gambling gave him something to do. Walking to the car along the

pier, we saw an old man and a young girl stocking a small boat. They both wore orange life vests with white straps and black buckles. I don't recall exactly what was said but maybe it was something like:

“Will we catch something, grandpa?”

“Hopefully something more than a cold.”

The old man tucked a Phillies cap over her long blonde hair. “Now keep your hands inside the boat,” the man said. “We don't want you falling into the water.”

“And I don't want the sharks to get me.”

“Sharks?”

“Some boy told me that sharks like girl meat.”

The old man kissed her and lowered her into the boat. The girl smiled. I remember liking that. I guess I liked it then because the old man was so nice, and they were actually taking a ride and having fun. Maybe I just imagined the sharks. Or even the whole conversation. I wouldn't have been able to express my fears to my dad at all. I was scared at night when my mom went to work and my brother had to watch me, and he wasn't patient. I tried crying loud enough, but he couldn't hear over the Zeppelin, and I couldn't sleep either because of the music. I mean my brother was only a teenager.

“Now don't worry,” the old man said. “You're with grandpa.” Then he saw us, and he asked: “You planning on coming to the party?”

“Sure. You must be proud of your son. That's one heck of a boat,” my daddy said.

“A little too big for my taste, but it's his money.”

Then the little girl asked us, “Will you be there?”

“Yeah, sure,” he said. “I'll be there later.”

That afternoon he lost money at the slots. He wasn't happy. I was just glad my brother wasn't there because he would've said, "Great, now we can't afford decent sneakers."

Back at the boat my dad cleaned the boat more before the party.

The guy with the Stetson owned the Bayliner, a black and white beauty – and clean. On the back deck with an electric grill, he waved a huge blackened hot dog. On the pier his little girl in a pink sundress watered flowers, maybe white flowers that didn't do so well because white flowers needed shade. Now that I think about it, maybe I was a white flower, you know? There was no shade there. The boat had mini crowds about the boat. Then the guy called, "Great, you brought your girl!"

"She's the only girl I have," my dad replied.

"You want a beer?" My dad wasn't a big drinker, but he never said no to a free beer. "Been here at the marina long?" he asked my dad, placing a hot dog on a roll.

"Last year was my first."

Soon other guys joined us on the deck. His wife started talking about the fishing tournament. The conversation turned into weakfish, blackfish, sea bass, porgies, sand tigers, grass shrimp, and hammerheads.

"You do any fishing with your dad?" she asked me.

"No," I said.

"We do, a little," he corrected. "Don't you remember?"

Her husband grabbed my dad's shoulders. The guy was unsteady. He slurred his speech. "You look like you could wrestle a marlin."

"What do you go after?" the woman asked.

“Nothing much,” my dad replied. “Whatever bites.”

The men laughed. “You entering the tournament?”

My dad didn’t know anything the tournament. “I’m not really into fishing,” he confessed.

“What? What else is a boat used for?”

“I just like cruising.”

“Well, we all like that,” one said, “but then you need to settle down and get to business.”

Both of the men nodded and then walked away. Perhaps my dad was intimidated around people with money – he had to work so hard for everything he had. Now he didn’t have near as much as he used to. He was always behind on the child support, but at least he paid.

We went inside. The little girl was outside. The boat was gorgeous, all fresh white leather and white cabinets with no leaky air conditioner on the floor. There was no mildewed old sofa. There were no coffee stains on the counter or rust stains around the sink. Someone gave my dad another drink, and he scooped up some watermelon and somewhere in the conversation he swirled the watermelon juice in the white plastic bowl. “Do you know watermelon juice is a liquid aphrodisiac?” he said. One of the women gagged and returned her sip politely to her glass. Another man said he didn’t know this. “Did you read that somewhere?” he asked. And my dad said he didn’t have to read it to know it. Some laughed uncomfortably, as if not to hurt his feelings, but my daddy laughed as I picked at the potato chips. He found yet another beer and overheard a conversation about wives being pregnant. He must not have known I could’ve heard, but I did hear it, even though I didn’t understand it. He said that it was better that women get caesarian sections. “Hell if it isn’t like fucking the Grand Canyon if they don’t,” he said.

One of the men turned to look at me. “Hey, listen, your daughter’s here,” the guy said.

“I didn’t see her there,” my dad replied.

The man's wife returned, pulled at his arm that spilled his milky drink, and told him to leave the poor man alone. My dad took me by the hand. He didn't say anything. Once outside I saw the little girl at the end of the pier fiddling alone with a fishing rod. I didn't know where the old grandfather went. We hadn't seen him. "Where did your grandpa go?" my dad asked.

"He said he was tired," the little girl replied. "He doesn't really like these people."

"What's your name?" my dad asked.

"Jillian."

"My daughter is about your age," my dad said. "This is Mary Rose."

She told me I was lucky to have two names.

"You have any bait for me?" I asked.

Jillian opened up a bucket and pulled out a huge shrimp. Jillian baited the hook. My dad sipped his beer while Jillian tossed the line into the water. He didn't know the rules of fishing in the marina, but it was a little girl fishing after all. And rules didn't matter to young girls. Anyway, he was just watching. The girl knew more about fishing than he did.

"Did you ever hear the story about the Donkey Man?"

The girl shook her head.

"He was an old man who lived around here and he gave rides to girls like you," my dad said. "But some say he was a pirate who lived on the moon and he kidnapped kids who were unhappy."

"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 laughing.

As she fished in silence, my dad and I dangled our legs over the pier. A splinter bothered my butt, but Jillian was comfortable on the edge of the dock, staring into the blue sky, watching the squawking gulls fight for command of the pilings. Perhaps she smelled of suntan lotion. Jillian said she usually liked fishing for schoolie bass. Just then her line pulled. It was a strong pull; she stopped herself with a solid right foot. My dad jumped up, excited, and placed his arms around her and helped pull on the rod. In all his years with me, he never fished with me. But he knew enough about being a father to encourage Jillian to reel the sucker in while he helped her hold the rod. "That's great," he said. "Keep going."

The action soon caught the attention of the Bayliner party. A few hurried down. The Bayliner Man asked, "What's going on dear?" My dad didn't hear, but soon he was reeling as well, feeling the line drag. Within seconds he held the fish above the water. The little girl said that was the biggest fish she ever caught. He didn't know how many pounds, but it was heavy and dark brown with a greenish color. It squirmed and wrestled and swished.

One of the men from the party laughed. He stood next to my dad. "Go ahead," he said, "Do something with it."

"Like what?" my dad asked.

"Get it off the line," the man suggested. "It's only a fish." Now everyone was laughing. My dad's hands were shaking. His heart must have been racing. He bit his lower lip. He tried to grab the fish with his small hands, but the fish kept wriggling away. All he wanted to do was to cut the line. "I just never learned to fish, all right," he stammered. "What's so funny about that?" The Bayliner Man told him it was all right and to just calm down. "It's nothing to be embarrassed about." The condolences seemed genuine, but not to my dad. The Bayliner Man

stepped forward, seized the fish, took out the hook, and threw the fish back into the water, as easy as breathing.

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

“Another time, my love.”

“What type of fish was that Daddy?”

“A weakfish, but it was too small.”

“That fish wasn’t weak at all, daddy!” Everyone laughed.

Humiliation led me by the hand back to our boat.

It was early Sunday morning, before the crowds. The clouds had returned. There was no call for rain. It was a humid day. We returned to the casinos, but walked straight through and went to the beach, back to Providence. An old man was scouring the sand with a metal detector, his dog circling him, barking at the seagulls. If the dog caught one of them, the dog would silence them for good. I looked hard at that old guy, wasting his time looking for junk on the beach. Maybe he wasn’t wasting time. Maybe it was just something for him to do too. It seemed like a strange hobby.

With his shoes off, my dad noticed a boat across the horizon. “Mary Rose, that looks like my dad’s old wooden boat,” he told me. He glanced at his wrist, but the watch remained on the boat. The old man’s dog ran over and sniffed him. The tide washed over his numb feet. The water was freezing. He must have jingled the coins in his pocket. That’s when he said the thing that made me really sad. He said: “Mary Rose, I don’t think your mother ever loved me. I was just a story to her, a ticket to ride. But I still love her.” His eyes were moist. The cold coins made

an imprint on his hand. He told me to make a wish, and I wished for my mother to love my father, and that I was real and not just a character in a story.

“You look like you jus’ lost big,” the old man with the metal detector said.

“One hundred and thirty bucks,” my dad said.

“That’s big to some people.”

“Well, I’m some people,” he said sharply.

Then, one by one, I chucked the coins into the Atlantic – unaware you can’t wish to change someone else’s heart.

“Girl, hasn’t you dad lost enough?” the old man said. “Why don’t ‘cha jus’ toss ‘em on the beach fer me?”

My dad filled the empty beer bottle with sand and water, thumb-plugged the top, and rocked the preserved world back and forth. It’s where I go now when I think of him. Call me crazy, but I still have that bottle. We sat on the wet sand, and we did not move for a long time. It must be awful, really awful, and awful isn’t even strong enough to do justice to the feeling of being told to leave by the person you most love. How would I have felt if my mommy told me, “I don’t love you anymore. You need to leave the house and find yourself another mother.”

“Of course you don’t believe in the donkey man,” he said to me. Perhaps if two believed in something crazy then maybe it wasn’t so crazy, right? His khakis were wet on the bottom. He must have imagined the haze parting to reveal the moon.

Oh, Daddy. I didn’t want to believe the donkey man’s ship, even though your tears embarrassed me. I was too young to be a guidance counselor. I should have hugged you. But I didn’t. I just wanted to get home. I was old enough not to believe in Santa Claus or the Tooth

Fairy, but I felt sad that my you still wanted to leave, to depart to that other world where there was no cruelty. Maybe that was why you drove off the road into that cornfield. Why couldn't you find another woman? Wasn't just having me good enough? Oh, daddy. I look for you know. When I think of you on that beach, looking up at the sky, staring across the endless sea, I see you in that bottle, both preserved and dead, and I was too young to save you. And I feel sad too that providence wasn't there for you either.