

South of Providence

A voice thundering outside the boat that Saturday morning. Resonating “hello” with my dad knocking his head against the low berth, crying “shit” over the hum of the fan. I was contorted on the uneven dinette bed, stiff after a rocky night on the water. The boat had no curtains so the sun stabbed the cabin with daggers.

“Sure, sure,” shouting to the greeting, shielding his eyes. “What do you want?” He stumbled through the heat with the smell of morning, redirected the pitch of the fan, and reached through the pink blinds. Pulling the stubborn glass doors with both hands. The support bracket collapsing. My dad kicking the blinds to the side. It wasn’t the first time I heard that sound. From outside the man apologized.

“I didn’t know if anyone was on board,” the man said. “Hope I didn’t wake you! Did I wake you? I’m from H24.”

“You have the Viking,” my dad replied, fumbling blind with his shirt buttons. “Nice boat.” The man tipped his brown Stetson and said, “That’s right.” My dad pulled the line to draw the boat closer to the dock. The Viking Man vibrated the deck with a clonk. He was tall and wore a big brown hat, like Indiana Jones. The glare from the sun outlining his form, a halo around a movieboard advertisement.

“Some storm we had, huh? We got down early this morning to see how she held up.” Indiana Jones took off his hat and stepped into the shade. He had a mass of curly hair and stood well over six foot with a rich, smooth complexion, flawless skin, and just enough of a tan to appear healthy. His eyes washed in blue, topped with trimmed, thick eyebrows, creating an air of

friendliness that may have troubled my dad. “I know it's late,” he said, “but I’m having a few marina people over to the boat later this afternoon. Think you can hop by?”

My dad hesitating, stepping back, almost stepping on me, not knowing I was at his feet, listening and little me tugging on my daddy’s baggy shorts, through clenched teeth, whispering intensely, “Dad, the circus, Dad. You promised the circus.” My dad repeated his promise, and then the guy kicked me in the guts and said the circus left the Convention Center last weekend. My dad claiming a billboard on the AC Expressway read ‘through this weekend,’ and that could be true, the guy said. He could be wrong. But if they got a chance, “come all down to the boat.” Indiana Jones spotting me and smiling and inserting as an addendum: “I have a girl about your age. And just as pretty!”

“They . . . they must both come from good eggs,” my dad said.

“The storm . . . your boat hold up alright?” Indiana Jones asked.

My dad shrugged his shoulders. Indiana Jones said he would inspect the damage. My dad and I exchanged nervous looks as we heard him climb. We usually saw his family either arriving on Friday or leaving on Sunday afternoon. A daughter with a perfect blonde ponytail and an older son. One of those awkward, millisecond eye connections. Say hello or comment on the humidity or the green-head flies. Stepping aside, my dad, his face lowered, allowing Indiana Jones and family to pass. Cart full of rods and tackle and blankets and rations rapping ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, still, even now, along the pier. Water streaks revealing the tire treads. My dad just packed a cooler held tight with a bungee and a gym bag stuffed with wrinkled clothes. We belonged to the same marina in Atlantic City, but every neighborhood has that *one* house that gossips adore: weeds reaching to heaven in the cracked pavement, the crooked shutter, the maples growing in the gutter.

Indiana shook the deck again. The bridge cover had ripped in half. “A bridge cover’s easy to replace,” Indiana Jones said. “It’s flapping up there like a white flag, having a jolly old time.” The word “easy” must have fallen hard on my dad. After the divorce, nothing was easy.

“Listen, now, if this circus thing doesn’t pan out, don’t be a stranger,” the man said, calling back, his cologne lingering. “It’ll be a nice get-together for a rather nasty Saturday.”

My dad bent over and picked up the pink blinds. Scratching at the dried glue deposits and examining the screws for the holes. The screws too small for the holes. “Everything’s falling apart, Mary Rose,” he told me. “Maybe I can win me some repair money.”

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. The boat was a place to entertain his “lady friends,” and his place to be ‘Man, alone’ but over time the smell of the bilge, the mildew on the threadbare rugs, and the plates stacked in the sink were not conducive to romance, especially in that summer heat. He 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. 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. His mom and his sister died when he was young, and my mom left before he was thirty, and now there was just me and my messy blonde hair and my juice-stained lips. My mother imagined a rainbow of ways we could die with our dad on the boat, especially when he saved enough cash to splash in the tanks and risk the inlets and venture out close to shore when the ocean 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 elements, 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 hated the mildew.

Indiana Jones was correct. The circus left town. Posters, lots of posters, sun-bleached advertisements. . . that was all that was left. I was upset, but I didn't want to look too upset, because my dad was really upset about disappointing me. How could I hurt him more? That was like my father, though, leaping before looking, getting us so worked up for the excitement, without having all the facts, and then have it fizzle like a dud firework. He tore off a poster. Before ripping it, he stopped and gave it to me . . . like some souvenir. He said something like, "I'm sorry baby doll."

It was no big deal, right? Just smelly elephants and mounds of fly-crap and lameass clowns. My dad was talking but I wasn't listening because swooshing angels on silver trapezes colored my white-page fancies and lifted me off the bench into the heavens. A staple from the poster pricked my finger. I later threw out the poster. No way the greatest show on earth.

"We should have come last week," he said with those blue eyes like mine. Eyes soft as jelly fish. He stayed thin his whole life, except for that belly that rose and fell like the tides.

I reminded him it wasn't his weekend with us.

So on that Saturday afternoon he took me to the Golden Nugget, and he played the slots while I sat with my books on a chair just outside the gaming area. 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. I asked him if he won enough for the child support. "Stuart wanted me to ask you about

that,” I said. He tousled my hair and said he would talk to my mom about all that. Outside, the gaming finished, we sat on a bench on the boardwalk facing the iron-gray sea for the longest time. A dog chasing a few gulls. A black drainage pipe ran along the sand with the sign:

**Danger
Keep Out
Submerged Objects**

The wind pressing down the dune reeds. The ocean rough, chomping at the sand. Dad staring at the sea. For my entire life I’ve replayed this weekend. I’ve always wanted to invent a dream recorder: to watch dreams and memories and nightmares: electrodes attached to heads to record the fantasies that entertain and frighten. Perhaps it could help us sort out our issues, if dreams really work that way. We identify with stories and movies, but they’re not *our* movies and stories. Sometimes I felt my dad had all these daytime fantasies, like the story he always told of the Donkey Man. Life gets boring, I guess, and so we charm ourselves with stories, like when I was reprimanded in school for daydreaming and not being able to sit still in my seat for six hours. Adults forget what it’s like to want to move and work and ride the swells. I learned to wait for his return. When he held my hand, I asked why he wanted the Donkey Man to take him away. “I didn’t have such a good childhood,” he said. “Not like yours.”

My childhood was not spectacular, as any child of divorce knows, but if it made him happy to believe, like every parent, yeah, well, okay, sure.

Walked to the beach, I could see he was really down, and then he glanced up at a street sign: Providence. Whispering the name. On the beach a strange old man scouring the sand with a metal detector, his huge black lab playing with a dead gull. I looked hard at that old guy, bald with a charcoal beard, wasting his time searching for buried treasure, a strange hobby, of course,

but maybe it was just something to avoid thinking about things.

With his shoes off, my dad noticing a boat across the horizon. “Mary Rose, that looks like my dad’s old wooden boat,” he told me. “It 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.

The tide washing over our feet, the water cold, my dad jingling coins in his pocket, saying that strange thing that will stay with me forever: “Mary Rose,” in an anguish, “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.”

His eyes were moist. He gave me the coins to make wishes. The coins making an imprint on my hand, holding them so tight. With each coin tossed into the sea, I wished for my mother to love my father, and that the weight of love would force us all back to earth from those trips around the stars.

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

My dad nodded. “That’s the truth. I lost big all right.” Then, I chucked the last nickel into each wake of the Atlantic – unaware you can’t wish to change someone else’s heart.

“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 the empty beer bottle with sand and water, thumb-plugged the top, and rocked this preserved world back and forth. The ship in the bottle was the only thing missing. We sat on the sand. We did not move for a long, long, *long* time.

“We could go to that party, Mary Rose,” convincing himself what he knew would be a catastrophe, risking it all for me, “At least you can meet that other girl. You could have a friend.”

“What's his name?” I asked. “He looks like Indiana Jones.”

“You know, I couldn't tell you. He's just Viking guy.”

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

The last boat on H pier was the Viking. On the back deck with an electric grill, Indiana Jones waving a huge blackened hot dog. On the pier the girl wearing a sundress and fishing off the pier all by herself, a scene from Norman Rockwell. I just wore capris and a wrinkled green t-shirt. My dad, nervous, was socially impossible, a Noble gas, let's say, not so rare, but inert, and I felt like the only solution he mixed well with. I once overheard in the marina clubhouse an awful joke he told that women should all be required to have C-sections, because it was like screwing the Grand Canyon if they didn't.

“What kind of boat you got?” from some guy.

“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 boat. I lurked 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 bragging 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?” a voice loading the cannon, “That boat is crap.”

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

“He said he was tired,” the little 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 had two names for 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 bled the two as one: MaryRose, as in a rush.

I was curious what was in the blue slop bucket. Jillian opening up a bucket, pulling out a huge shrimp, dangling it in front of me, and baiting the hook. My dad appeared behind me, soon, sipping 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 had fallen. I never did ask him what happened, but my dad wore his emotions like a threatening sky.

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

The girl shook her head. I probably just rolled my eyes.

“He was an old man who lived around here, and he gave donkey rides to kids like you,” 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 your age. 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, dangled our legs over the pier. A hand painted sign, nailed on splintered timber, 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 frock seemed comfortable on the edge of the dock, staring into the blue heavens, watching the squawking gulls fight for command of the ash-colored pilings. I wished my dad could have been more like them, fighting for his peace. He was so accommodating: bowing, stepping aside, moving away, vanishing. At least the fly bridge was his peace, his perch, his pedestal. My mom said it was dangerous up there. Once he took the wake of a tugboat the wrong way and the boat rolled under to the left. She, holding me on the front deck, almost pitching into the Chesapeake. My mom yelling that he did it on purpose! Claiming, asserting, declaring that he did it on purpose! That he wanted us to dump into the water! With no facts, and yet her voice was nothing but fact. And why would he do that? The following fight ruining all those weekends.

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 jumping up, excited, placing his arms around her and helping pull on the rod. My dad never taught me how to fish. My face flushed red

with anger. “That’s great,” with a sense of wonder, “keep going, keep going!”

The action soon caught the attention of the Viking party. A few hurried over. Indiana Jones asked his daughter, “What’s going on dear?” My dad, reeling, feeling the line drag. Then he brought this thing out of the dark water. Just like that. Out from the deep came this thing. Soon he held the line with the hook snarled in the thing 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 hated that fish-thing, and I didn’t want to hear her brag.

A man laughed. He stood next to my dad. “Go ahead,” daring, taunting, “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 that watermelon aphrodisiac.” My dad’s hands, shaking. His heart racing. He bit his lower lip. He tried to grab the fish with his small hands, but the fish kept wriggling away. “I just never learned to fish, all right,” he stammered angrily. “What’s so funny about that?” Indiana Jones told him it was all right. “It’s nothing to be embarrassed about,” he said. The condolences seemed genuine, but slights were never slight with him, and every confrontation, real or imagined, was a fight he lost. Stepping forward, seizing the fish, taking out the hook, and throwing the fish back into the calm, dark water, as easy as a millionaire tipping the bellhop, Indiana Jones finishing the scene.

“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.

Humiliated, my dad led me, not by the hand, untethered, back to our mildewed heaven.

I revisit that spot at Providence as if he's buried there. 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, preserved now in story. I was too young to save him. But he didn’t really have anyone else except that one hokey story about The Donkey Man that kept the running lights aglow in the dark channels. Old enough not to believe in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, I still felt sad that he still wanted to depart to that other world of make-believe where there was no cruelty.

My brother told me, later, in comforting tones, that there were many happy times on the boat that I vaguely recall. 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. Why couldn’t he find another woman? Could just having me be good enough?

Years later, after the divorce, and after my dad drove off the side of the road and died, while on the way to his boat, 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. I wrote it all down in that diary my mom gave me for Christmas, an unusual gift because she had to recognize my budding interest in writing. It was during one of my brother’s fights with my

father, probably about the missing money for child support. Then my brother said the meanest thing that anyone could ever say, but he was only fifteen, and fifteen year olds say many mean things. He said, "Would anyone even notice if you died?"

The answer, now, is yes. Yes, yes very much.