

## South of Providence

It was my dad's weekend — this was a year after the divorce when I was seven, and weekends meant staying over on his boat, which always made me wheeze because of the mold on the boat — but for some reason my older brother Stuart wasn't there so it was a real blessing for all of us. The wind pressed down the dune grass as my dad and I crept along the Atlantic City boardwalk on that muggy Friday evening, his bony legs struggling to prop-up his beer belly. Over the dunes I recall a dog chasing the scurrying white birds that fed along the iron-gray sea. An over stuffed-file-cabinet-of a wallet weighed down my dad's baggy shorts. His blue eyes were like mine, eyes that were soft, soft like jellyfish. That always fooled me because Stuart Harding had temper, but his temper only damaged a dish, a frame, a door, a wall . . . a car. On the walk he told me about the summer his dad brought him down to A.C with his older brothers and his Aunt Florence after his mom died, but I wasn't really listening because I kept thinking of the elephants and the lions and the glittering white angels on the silver trapeze. He had promised to take me to the circus. Anyway, I already knew about The Donkey Man.

When he was five my dad became friends with an older boy called Johnnie who told him about a crazy old man who took kids on donkey rides out by Providence Avenue. A Hilton now stands on the corner, I think. My dad had older brothers, but they only noticed his existence to extinguish any flicker of light, and so Johnnie made a difference because he was a super cool kid who liked my dad and never once punched him.

“The donkey man, yeah, Dad, I know, the donkey man,” I said again and again. “The donkey man's that pirate who lives on the moon, and he sails in his pirate ship, and he takes away kids from bad parents.”

My dad suggested I hide under the boardwalk since that was where he hid from the kid-

snatching old donkey man. But it was raining, the garbage was yucky, and then it really started raining, raining hard, and I was glad my mom wasn't there because she would be mad that I would catch a chill and die. My mother fancied a million ways we could die with our dad. She hated those weekends. I only hated the mildew. He wasn't careless or reckless; his imagination was just over-active, so the shell of a man held my hand at times while his spirit launched skyward to wander with the gulls.

Walking back in that rain, I asked him, "What was so important anyway about this donkey man?" He smiled and played with my long, blonde hair, gliding so high in ether he forgot my question. But later, grounded in the Camaro, he declared, "The donkey man said I was brave and gentle, the kindest words anyone has ever said to me. Mary Rose, that's the truth."

Strangers often know more about our souls than family, don't they?

On Saturday morning a man who owned a Bayliner from our pier woke us. "Stuart, you up?" he called. We knew him, but we didn't *know* him. He was tall and wore a big brown hat, like Indiana Jones. My dad was uncomfortable with the familiar stranger, as he didn't have friends that I remember. His boat did not look so nice inside, so maybe my dad was embarrassed. The guy was having a pier party on his boat later that day. Could we attend? My dad mentioned the circus at the Convention Center, and then the guy said he thought that left town last weekend. My dad replied a billboard on the Expressway read 'through this weekend.' The guy said that could be true, he could be wrong, but if they got a chance, to come down to his boat. He saw me and added, "I have a girl about your daughter's age."

Indiana Jones was correct. The circus left town. Posters, lots of posters . . . that was all that was left. I was upset, but I didn't want to look too upset, because 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 something without having all the facts, and then have it work out to nothing. He tore off a poster and was going to rip it to shreds, but he stopped and gave it to me . . . like some souvenir. He said something like, "I'm sorry baby doll."

I said it was no big deal. We sat on a bench on the boardwalk for the longest time. A staple from the poster pricked my finger. I'm not sure if it was really the greatest show on earth, but that's quite a billing for seven-year old to miss, isn't it?

"We should have come last week," he said.

I reminded him it wasn't his weekend. He stared at the sea for a long time. I learned to wait for his return. When he held my hand, I asked my dad 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 can tell you, but if it made him happy to believe that, like every parent, well, okay.

"We could go to that party, Mary Rose," he said reluctantly. "At least you can meet that other girl. You could have a friend."

Indiana Jones owned the Bayliner, black and white and new 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 fished off the pier, fishing all by herself. My dad, obviously nervous, was socially impossible, a radical element, an explosive element, and I felt like the only solution he mixed well with. While he disappeared onto the boat, I stayed 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 nonsense.

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

"No," I said.

“My dad’s entering the tuna tournament.”

I didn’t know about any tournament.

“Aren’t you from around here?”

“I’m here sometimes with my dad on his boat.”

“Which one is his?”

I pointed down the pier to H2.

“That boat?” he said. “That boat is a doo-doo boat.”

The boys giggled, and I just lowered my head and stared at the girl. Eventually the boys, the damage done, left, but I wanted them to linger so I could push them into the depths and have sharks devour them. I had seen the girl with her grandfather, 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.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Jillian.”

“I’m Mary Rose.”

She told me I was lucky to have two names.

“What do you have for bait?” I asked.

Jillian opened up a bucket, pulled out a huge shrimp, and baited the hook. She tossed the line into the water. Soon my dad came out, sipping a beer. 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 clown. He must have felt slighted.

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

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

“He was an old man who lived around here and he gave rides to kids 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 giggling.

As she fished in silence, my dad and I dangled our legs over the pier. He placed his beer next to a piling and forgot it existed. A splinter bothered my butt — or was it tar, but Jillian in a pink frock seemed comfortable on the edge of the dock, staring into the blue heavens, watching the gray squawking gulls fight for command of the ash-colored pilings. I wish my dad could have been more like them, fighting for his space. He was so accommodating. At least his fly bridge was his perch. My mom said it was always dangerous to be with him on the bridge. Once he took a tugboat wave the wrong way and the boat rolled way to the left. She was holding me on the gleaming white front deck and we almost pitched into the dark bay. My mom yelled that he did it on purpose, but why would he do that?

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, excited, and placed his arms around her and helped pull on the rod. Because my dad never taught me how to fish, my face flushed red with anger. “That’s great,” he said. “Keep going.”

The action soon caught the attention of the Bayliner party. A few hurried over. Indiana

Jones asked his daughter, “What’s going on dear?” My dad was reeling, feeling the line drag. Soon he held the fish above the water. That was 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, and I didn’t want to hear her brag, especially since my dad helped her.

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. “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 and to just calm down. “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. Indiana Jones stepped forward, seized the fish, took out the hook, and threw the fish back into the calm 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.

Humiliated, Dad led me by the hand back to our own little heaven.

On a humid Sunday morning, while the clouds had returned, with no call for rain, we

returned to the casinos, and walked straight through The Golden Nugget and went to the beach, south of Providence. A strange old man was 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 whitish beard, wasting his time searching for buried treasure, a strange hobby, of course, but maybe it was just something to avoid thinking about the great void.

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. Sometimes I forgot how much he lived in the past. He glanced at his wrist, but he forgot the watch on the boat. I waited for this usual "half past a freckle" line but he wasn't in the mood. The lab brought the dead gull to the old man.

The tide washed over our feet. The water was still cold. My dad jingled some coins in his pocket. That’s when he said the thing, so unusual for him, that will stay with me forever. “Mary Rose,” he said, “I don’t think your mother ever loved me. I was just a story to her. But I . . . loved her . . . I, well, I love her still. Someday you’ll know that too.”

His eyes were moist. He gave me a few coins. The cold coins made an imprint on my hand, I held them so tight. Like I said, everything makes an imprint on me. He told me to make a wish, and I wished for my mother to love my father, and that 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, one by one, I chucked the coins into 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, he found an empty green beer bottle underneath the boardwalk, filled the empty beer bottle with sand and water, thumb-plugged the

top, and rocked the preserved world back and forth. The ship in the bottle was the only thing missing. We sat on the wet sand. We did not move for a long, long, *long* time. Was he imagining the haze parting off the ocean to reveal the moon? Was he picturing that boy Johnnie? The way his mother looked in the coffin?

He then told me a missing piece of the Donkey Man story. Early in the morning he walked to the beach all by himself with a bag of clothes. He actually waited for the Donkey Man to take him away. Can you imagine that? Wanting to leave everything behind and placing all your chips on a smelly, old stranger? A cop found him and brought him back to Aunt Flo.

He died almost a year after that weekend in Atlantic City. Years later my brother once told me our father thought of committing suicide after the divorce. I wrote it all down in that dairy my mom gave me. It was during one of my brother's fights with my father, probably about the missing child support. Then my brother said the meanest thing that anyone could ever say, but he was only fifteen - as if that's really an excuse.

He said, "Would anyone even notice if you died?"

I remember hiding behind the pillar of my mother's leg as she asked him to leave. My asshole brother Stu stood beside her and yelled at him, "You heard her. She said get out!" That's when my dad smashed a hole through the coat closet. It stayed broken for the longest time. I guess my brother was just being pious, but my dad had to be kicked out with six legs.

As I see it now, my father was the softer one, the fragile one, the committed one. No one was more loyal than that guy. Perhaps it would've been better for me to follow the family tradition of busting stuff and believing in myths rather than allowing my anger to tear apart my innards and falling into awful relationships. When I think of him on that beach, looking up at the sky, staring across the Atlantic, I see him in that bottle, both preserved and dead. I was too young



to save him. But he didn't really have anyone else except a made-up saviour and a young boy named Johnnie from so long ago who gave him one great story that's not really so unusual. Stories help keep the lights on. I'm sure I didn't remember everything clearly, but it's the feeling that stays with us, right? I'm like clay too, I guess, a depositary full of impressions. Even a tear remembered leaves an indent.

I revisit that spot at Providence as if he's buried there. His tears embarrassed me then, but I was too young to serve as a therapist. I should have hugged him. But 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 he still wanted to depart to that other world of make-believe where there was no cruelty. Maybe that was why he drove off the road into that cornfield in Maryland on the way to his boat. Why couldn't he find another woman? Wasn't just having me good enough?