South of Providence

The voice served as our alarm clock.

My dad knocked his head against the low berth, grunting “shit” over the hum of the fan. “Sure, sure,” my dad mumbled to the voice from outside the boat. “What do you want?”

I was curled up on the uneven dinette bed, stiff after a rocky night. With no curtains, the boat was hot and bright like a greenhouse. He walked through the heat of the cabin, pushing his wire-framed glasses up his crooked nose. Looking unsteady with eyes half-closed, he moved the direction of the fan, which altered the sound, a softer hum, and reached through the pink blinds. With both hands he pulled the glass doors. The support bracket for the blinds fell, and my dad kicked the blinds to the side.

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

“You have the Viking,” my dad replied, messing with his shirt buttons. “Nice boat.” The man tipped his brown Stetson and said, “That’s right.” The Viking Man reached down and pulled the line to draw the boat closer to the dock and jumped on board. He was tall and wore a big brown hat, like Indiana Jones. The glare from the sun outlined his body, like the stained-glass angels I saw in church when my mom took me that one time. “Some storm we had, huh?” he said. “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 clump of 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. “I know it's late,” he said, “but I’m having a few people over to the boat later this afternoon. Think you two can make it?”

My dad did not say anything. He just combed his thin brown hair to the side with his fingers and gazed at his bare feet. He stepped back, almost stepping on me, not knowing I was at his feet, the perfect spy. Little me, then, tugged on my daddy's baggy shorts. Through clenched teeth, I whispered intensely, "Dad, the circus, Dad. You promised the circus." My dad repeated his promise, and then the guy confirmed the circus left the Convention Center last weekend. My dad claimed a billboard on the AC Expressway read 'through this weekend,' and that could be true, the guy said. He could be wrong. But if we got the chance, "come all down to the boat." Indiana Jones spotted me and smiled. "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. Indiana Jones said he would inspect the damage. My dad and I looked at each other 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. Say hello or comment on the humidity or the green-head flies. Stepping aside, my dad, his face lowered, had allowed Indiana Jones and family to pass: cart-full of rods and tackle and boating stuff, going ba-dump, ba-dump, ba-dump, still, even now, along the pier. Water streaks revealed the tires. My dad just packed a cooler held tight with one of those stretchy cords my brother zapped me with and a gym bag stuffed with wrinkled clothes. We belonged to the same marina in Atlantic City, but every marina has that *one* boat that everyone laughs about, a rusted radio antenna reaching to heaven, a broken railing, a front hatch held open with a screwdriver.

Indiana shook the deck again with an enthusiastic leap. The bridge cover had ripped in half. "A bridge cover's easy enough 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 sat down and cleaned his glasses with the end of his white shirt. He picked up the pink blinds and told me he felt a little dizzy. He had something called vertigo, and it had to do with crystals in the inner ear. But the feeling eventually subsided. Scratching at the dried glue, he examined the screws. 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."

"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, with us in the car and on the boat, I'm not sure she would have allowed us to visit, and so we kept it quiet, and we didn't even tell Stu, my brother, because that was just as bad as telling my mom.

My dad used his boat as a "weekend bachelor pad." That was what he called it. 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 meant as 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, especially to be cruel. 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 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 and go 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 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.

Indiana Jones was correct. The circus left town. Posters, lots of posters, faded 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 angels on trapezes lifted me off the bench into the heavens. A staple from the poster pricked my finger. No way could it be the greatest show on earth!

"We should have come last week," he said with those blue eyes like mine. His eyes were

soft and liquid like jelly fish. He stayed thin his whole life, except for that belly that rose and fell like the tides.

Sucking on my wound, 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 picture books and early readers 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 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. Outside, the gaming finished, 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**,** I recall, chomping at the sand. The sea that weekend had carved a ledge in the sand for us to sit. We stared at the sea. Sometimes I felt my dad had all these daytime fantasies, like the story he always told of 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.

"Not so bad now."

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

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. “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. There was no time for humor. 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, saying those strange things that will stay with me forever: “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.”

His eyes were moist. He gave me the coins to make wishes. The coins made an imprint on my hand, so tight I held them. 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, 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,” the old man said, leaning against the metal detector.

My dad nodded. “That’s the truth. I lost big all right.” Then, I chucked the last nickel 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, 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. 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.”

“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.”

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 the 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 explained. My brother was mad about that. He acted like my dad, 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 boat. 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 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 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. I probably just rolled my eyes.

"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 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 fell into the Chesapeake. 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!"

His shouts acted as an alarm. The Viking party hurried over. Indiana Jones asked his daughter, "What's going on dear?" My dad was still reeling, his glasses slipping off his nose, pulling 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 recall 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 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 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 he 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."

"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. So I led him back to the boat, to our our heaven and our mildew, and I gave him his medicine, and 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.

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 bleeded the two as one: MaryRose, as in a rush.

It has been many years since that weekend. Now that I can drive, I revisit that spot 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. I was old enough, then, not to believe in Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy, but it saddened me that he still wanted to cross into that other world of make-believe.

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. 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.

My brother told me, later, 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, stewart, first chef, cabin boy, and swabbie," my brother said.

Why couldn't he find another woman? Why couldn't just having me be good enough?

It was soon after that weekend on the boat that my dad drove off the side of the road and died. 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. My mom said it was a good thing we weren't with him. "You think he got the vertigo?" I asked. He said he didn't know. "Could have lead to the accident," he said. I saw what it did to him: so dizzy like he was stoned drunk but sober, in knowing there was nothing he could do but wait to balance himself. It eventually subsided, especially with the meds. I wrote this all down in that diary my mom gave me for Christmas, an unusual gift because she had to recognize my budding interest in writing. During one of my brother's fights with my father, probably about the missing money for child support, my brother said the meanest thing that anyone could ever say, but he was only fifteen, and fifteen year olds tending the ropes as a child referee in an adult tug-of-war say many mean things. He said, "Would anyone even notice if you died?"

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