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ON RECKLESSNESS AS A VIRTUE: A JERSEY SHORE MEMOIR


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“Me. Me. Me. Me.” Literary Narcissism: An Introduction to “On Recklessness as a Virtue: A  
Jersey Shore Memoir”

Since the term creative nonfiction has been coined, it has sparked numerous controversies one of them being the considerable emphasis on the “I” voice in literature. Once upon a time, a person had to have a prolific life or be famous to write a memoir, but times have changed. Memoirs have become a huge hit since the eighties and the popularity keeps growing. The genre has made it possible for even mediocre people like me to write and share stories. Most memoirists have taken simple family life and made it into stories, the way that I have done in “On Recklessness as a Virtue: A Jersey Shore Memoir.” Mary Karr’s *The Liars’ Club* is a domestic tale with rough edges. Ander Monson’s *Vanishing Point: Not a Memoir*, on the other hand, proves that entertaining nonfiction essays can be written about the flavor of Doritos. My life falls in the middle, brilliantly mediocre.

Memoir is appealing because it gives meaning to otherwise meaningless memories. The memoir allows some writers, like me, to access a more realistic voice. There are a million stories in the world that can be embellished with language, plot and story line. Each person has limitless access to memories. These memories need to be shaped like clay to create a story similar to fiction. Writing memoir allowed me to access a narcissistic part of myself that was otherwise hidden before. In “The Androgynous Vision” from *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf writes, “...the dominance of the letter ‘I’ and the aridity, which, like the giant beech tree, it

casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there” (608). Although she was talking about the man’s voice, the first person perspective has become an overwhelming component of creative nonfiction. I needed that “I” in “On Recklessness as a Virtue.” The first person perspective was my umbrella casting shade on a sunny day, not an umbrella that inhibited growth.

After reading a memoir like Karr’s *Liars’ Club*, I started to doubt my voice. She had a crumbling relationship with both of her parents. Her mother was an alcoholic and her father was aggressive and gambled most nights. Karr lived what seemed like a wild life, because her and her sister did not have to follow many rules. Karr wrote brilliant scenes about tragic events from her childhood. In this following example Karr’s mother, in a drunken stupor grabs a gun and threatens to shoot anyone in sight. The children do not doubt their mother’s willingness to kill them because of the many times before she has pulled out a gun, sometimes on her own children. Karr writes, “Sure enough, Mother had shifted into her ghost self, holding that very real gun with a hand so pale you could practically see through it” (Karr 253). In this scene, Mary and her mother switch roles, and she claims she needs to find an adult to stop her mother. The mother, acting more like a child, was “green eyed drunk” (Karr 248), and angry. My life was the opposite.

My mother was a stay-at-home mom for years before she decided to go back to school to be a nutritionist. Our healthy lifestyle lasted a year before she was offered a job at Little Flower Catholic Church as the Director of Religious education. My mother’s answer for everything is, “Ask God.” The healthiest year of my life is pertinent to me and I remember eating nuts, couscous and quinoa on a daily basis. We baked cookies with whole-wheat flour. We barely used butter and never ate white bread. My father would go to the grocery store and hide white bread, Fruit Loops and Doritos. He hid the groceries in the bathroom cabinets, my closet and

under the couch. I was scared of my father, but our relationship was never bad. He watched me like a hawk, and I was the first-born, held to his highest standards. Until I went away to college in Philadelphia, I felt like a robot, unable to make my own decisions, always fearing what he would say next. Then I realized that I did not have to listen to him.

“On Recklessness as a Virtue” is my solipsist tribute to the shore and my relationship with my family. Monson defines Solipsism as, “Being the theory that the self is the only thing that can be known and verified” (91). Writers cannot escape inherent narcissism. Monson’s chapter, “Solipsism,” in starts with the repetition of “me” for a page and a half. He admits that no one will probably read each “me.” However, by repeating the word, he gets the solipsism out of the way so he can continue his chapter and talk about other topics instead of himself. After the page and a half of “me,” he transitions into an essay about typewriters and how long it took him to write his school-board apology in form of “I will not write ‘me’ in a formal paper,” “I will not write ‘me’ in a formal paper.” The essay transitions to Monson bragging about how easy it was for me to write all the “Me’s” on previous pages:

For me now it took less than thirty seconds to compose that text. I typed “Me. Me. Me.” On my Titanium 15” PowerBook keyboard, which isn’t all that comfortable, really, though I’ve gotten used to it because of the ease it otherwise affords, and then Highlighted in Dreamweaver, copy-and-pasted a few times until I had a few lines, and came up with a solid page of text, all text about me with a capital M in front trailed by a period and space. It’s almost nothing. I didn’t have to think about it, the *Me*. or the actual Me much.

The repetition of “me” was easy and mechanical. Other types of writing are not so easy.

It took me a long time to like myself, so I think I have deserved my myriad of “me’s.” Therefore, I am proud to admit that I might be slightly narcissistic. I want my life to mean something and maybe my memoir is my solipsist, childhood fantasy that it does. I can hear my father’s voice saying, “The world *does not* revolve around you.” I used to think, “Then who *does* it revolve around?” Although some authors have bragged about how little they used “I” in a memoir, others such as Monson, in his anti-memoir have argued for the re-admission of “me.” He writes, “I am putting the *me* back in *memoir* here for you” (98). The tone is sarcastic, but I cannot see my story without a strong “I” voice. In my memoir, I am the main character and it is my voice that makes the story interesting, funny and appealing.

In Juxtaposition to Karr’s extravagance, Monson proves that Doritos can be an interesting topic for a nonfiction essay. In his chapter, “Transubstantiation,” Monson outlines his quest to name the Doritos flavor. Transubstantiation means the changing of one substance to another. Monson argues that chemically altered Doritos are more rewarding than truth in memoirs. Monson argues for a good story, even though his “non-memoir” has many qualities of a true and entertaining memoir. Transubstantiation refers to how to make Doritos flavors, but it can also refer to transferring memoirs to paper. A memoir, for Monson, does not necessarily need to be “true,” but it has to be an interesting story. For “On Recklessness as a Virtue,” I started with a simple plot. Paulie was injured in a jet skiing accident. The story grew from there as I realized I had to create the scene surrounding him. I failed to recognize, as a native to New Jersey, that people might not know what the Jersey Shore is like. I took pieces from my immediate past and from my five-year-old past to put together a total view of the Jersey Shore. By doing this, I also incorporated many different “I” voices. The older “I” voice can now look back and evaluate my younger, more pathetic and ignorant “I.”

Monson, an expert on writing about minute details gives memoirists the permission to explore minor events. Monson writes, "There is no such thing as an unnoticed event, a trivial subject. Our lives are made up mostly of an accumulation of small incidents" (125). Thank you, Monson for giving me permission to feel accomplished with my Jersey Shore memoir. These small incidents make up life and create a total story. In "On Recklessness as a Virtue," I have combined many different events to give an overview of my life down the shore. The shore is a big part of my life and I have been going there for at least twenty-five years, and I have many more stories to tell. The little moments there have allowed me to understand myself and my life better.

My writing is an attempt to make something matter. What I have tried to do in "On Recklessness as a Virtue" is admit that I am a narcissist. I admit that I think I am funny and that I think I am a good character for my stories, even though my life is mediocre. In my story, I created myself the way I thought someone would want to read me, or, the same as the way that I really am. I have taken advantage of all the "I" voices to create a round and total picture of what my life was like at this particular moment and what I have learned from that moment.

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## On Recklessness as a Virtue: A Jersey Shore Memoir

### I.

Each summer since I was three, my family rented a beach house in a town where most of the houses were sophisticated Victorians in Lavallette, New Jersey. Our home stood out like a rock in a basket of oranges—all the other houses were pastel like watercolor paintings—light blues, pinks and yellows. The lawn of our house was a hybrid of rocks and grass, and bit at bare feet like crocodile teeth. The other houses' lawns were lined with elegant stones that looked like round smooth massage tools; the houses without stone lawns had grass like velvet with white picket fences and lawn swings. The imperfect condition of our house—the doors that wouldn't close, the objects that the fans blew around, and the bugs crawling up the walls made us believe for years that it was haunted.

Inside, a carpet that was once cream-colored cast a shade like wet sand on everything. Even though the carpets were covered in gunk, we sat on them to play games like Uno or Jenga. The furniture didn't match. It was anything that had been recycled or grown out of at an inland house. There was a grid in the middle of the floor for heat. It left square imprints on feet like a waffle maker. We ate outside because the table inside was too small and there weren't enough seats. If inside, someone had to eat dinner on the couch with the plate balanced on his lap. Our shore house could fit eight people, two per bed, but people filled every inch of useable space, sleeping on couches in the living room and on the porch, and sometimes sleeping on the floor.

The dilapidation of the house made it affordable. My father was a hard working blue-collar man and had come from a blue-collar family. He had hands like sandpaper that never healed. He drove a Snap-on Tools truck and only took one week off work a year, the week of the fourth of July. He kept spare change in an empty water cooler jug—one time, the jug weighed

one hundred and sixty pounds, and then broke the scale. Each June we dragged the jug from the office to the living room and sat stacking coins; the process made our fingers black with smut. My father used this money to pay for our vacation. It seemed like he paid for our whole vacation with nickels and dimes. The spare change, he saved for pinball games.

We would go to the Seaside Heights boardwalk in midafternoon, when it was quiet. He parked at the northernmost end at a meter. The coins traveled with us in a Shoprite version of a Ziploc Freezer bag. At the parking meter he would always ask, "Does this thing take dimes?" He did not want to give up the quarters, our boardwalk gold. The hungry slot swallowed the shiny coins and we heard them ting together. We walked down the boardwalk, surveying all the arcades, Lucky Leo's, Coin Castle, and Amusement Arcade. My father was looking for something specific, pinball machines. He wanted the arcade with the most and the best pinball machines. Even though we had been here so many times, each summer he scouted the wooden mile like a lion stalking prey, keeping an eye out for any new pinball machines. After we all ate a sausage sandwich from Midway Steaks overflowing with peppers and onions, my father picked his arcade. He gave my sister, brother and I a pile of quarters small enough to fit in our outstretched palms. The metal would make my hands sweaty as I felt the smooth ridges, rotating the coins between my fingers. I would carefully plan where I wanted to spend my money, and my father stood hunched over a pinball machine in a dark, "retro" arcade where the pinball machines lit up like Christmas trees.

Down the shore, we were never lonely. There were even more cousins in a second house a couple roads and a bridge away in Tom's River, and while other houses in Lavallette had decks overlooking the ocean we had a deck with two fully stocked coolers, one for liquor and beer and the other with mixers, a word I didn't know at the time. When I came back from the beach, I

could feel the burn of salt in the back of my throat from swimming in the ocean all day; the soda or ice tea felt like aloe as I swallowed. The people at the Tom's River house spent a majority of their time at our house—in addition to the coolers, we always had a fridge stuffed with cold cuts, left over Taylor Ham from the morning, pork loins, yogurts, and fruit. We were also closer to the beach even though we were on the bayside of Magee Avenue.

During the first years at the Jersey Shore house, the world was safe. The house felt like home. Although the carpets were shaggy and the chairs all lived in and miss-matched, although the beds and pillows were either too saggy or too hard, although for some years there was no TV and for even more years there was no AC, I felt safe there. I knew I could hide there. I knew I could be happy there, even with sacrifices. The kids, including myself, didn't mind sleeping in the foyer on a couch that looked like came from the set of Psycho because it was once white, but now over taken with stains. We didn't mind showering outside in stall made of black wood that was continually slimy from snail grease and water. We were too young to be embarrassed by its condition. We were too young to care about sleeping in beds. Magee Avenue is in the middle of Lavallette, nestled between Seaside Heights and Point Pleasant on the Barnegat peninsula. Ever since the nineties, MTV has been exploiting Seaside heights, and so teenagers flock there. At night, the boardwalk is crowded with people; the more rebellious ones stand out—those with facial piercings, shiny toys hanging from browned faces. Others are covered in tattoos, Giants logos, snakes, tribal armbands. Some wear bright colored bra-tops with shorts, bellies overflowing and butt cheeks dangling below shreds of denim. Point Pleasant, known for Martell's Tiki Bar and usually appeals to an older crowd who come for the cover bands that play sixties rock or those who come to take their children on the kiddie-themed rides. Lavallette is the middle ground. It has some bars and a collection of Italian restaurants, like Lenny's Pizzeria

and The Brick Oven. It is neither too rowdy nor too calm. Most importantly, though, it was benign, which allowed the adults to trust the children to roam around freely on most days. I hardly remember being supervised. We knew that there would be an adult, if needed, at any one of the three central locations—the house, the beach or the Quick Check. Even though we were unsupervised, I knew to obey two simple rules, go to church on Sunday (my mother's rule) and be home for dinner (family rule).

The children all understood the most important, if not the only, rule: meet back at the house for dinner. Life at the shore house revolved around meals; we always ate breakfast and dinner together. I remember having crabs and mashed potatoes at every meal; I hated crabs, except if they were drenched in melted butter; I remember the meat being salty and molten; I treated the mashed potatoes the same way, drenched in butter or sometimes gravy, the thick plainness of the mound was satisfying and heavy after a day in the sun.

Breakfast was important too. The adults were up early in the morning, cracking eggs, adding milk and cheese and whipping the elixir in a stockpot; the smell of bacon and sizzling Taylor Ham always woke the children, and they walked to the kitchen rubbing their eyes. The smell of Taylor Ham lingered in the house well into the afternoon when it subsided into the smell of salt and dirty feet. The adults in the Jersey Shore house had the perfect control and reward system, at the end of the day there was always a feast for dinner and then a walk to Ice Burg Ice Cream where we ordered ice cream piled high with sprinkles and chocolate sauce.

In the daytime, the youth were barely reprimanded, mostly left with our devices while the women sipped *exotic berry* flavored wine coolers and the men drank cans of diet Pepsi, Seagram's 7 or bottles of Heineken. There were four adults my mother, Lisa, my father, Frank and my cousins Michael and Michele.

Sometimes the kids were forgotten, one time, Michael was left at church, and he had to run home in the rain. Holly was my parent's friend's daughter who was blonde with an attitude. When she was left at the beach, she forgot how to get home and she stayed there for hours until her mother called her for a bath, when Holly didn't respond, her mother promised to punish her until we realized she was not at the house. The five remaining adults searched the town, and found her a block down from the beach at the intersection of Magee and 35 North aka Grand Central Avenue; she was looking left and right wondering what way to walk. There were only a few choices and the island was a simple grid—even I knew that.

Without TV, we had to make our own fun. For years, my cousin and I made up theories about the grimy house. We were convinced. One night, Michael, my cousin, and I decided to make a list in a green hand-held top-flip notebook proving that the house was haunted. I was thirteen, he was nine; he had eager blue eyes.

“The door creaks,” I started the list.

“Yeah, and swings open on its own.”

“The floor is always squeaking, like something lives inside.”

“The curtains blow, even when there is no wind.”

“I hear voices.”

There were always voices. The noises lasted all day and night. People whispered late at night, yelled at over dinner, “Pass the crabs,” was always “PASS THE CRABS!” Even when everyone was asleep, the unairconditioned house was always alive with the roaring sounds of the window fans. The nearby highway also provided blasts of sound as a group of teenagers drove by in an open top Jeep blasting whatever techno song was cool that summer. There would be an occasional hiccup to the roar of engines when someone was pulled over for going too fast and

the cop lights would flash through our windows. The sounds blended into our dreams and we needed them to sleep.

“The house in the back is creepy, and those people spy on us through the windows,” Michael repeated, as he bounced from one bed to the other, both the hue of rotten seaweed. This was one of the kids’ rooms, there were two beds, but they were pushed together, sleeping up to three—each night the beds would move apart and leave the sleepers strangers—the two mirrors in the room were smeared and not reflective, like an old cookie tray. Michael poked my shoulder and repeated his statement about the oversized dollhouse.

For us, anything old or gross was haunted. We were fascinated by the unknown nature of the house. Even the adults were curious about what was inside the reformatted garage. We would try to peek through the windows, but they were smoky. Sometimes we caught glimpses through the cracks in the doorway of neon orange buoys, rusted bike parts, fishing line and piles of paper. Over the years we watched closely as its two inhabitants, Joe and Christine entered and exited. Joe and Christine were always creeping around, coming in and out of the main hose, feeding ducks, and fooling around at night with flashlights—Joe’s stringy hair hung around his face and if someone embedded a circle of seeds at the top of his head but left the center unplanted for a either a fountain or a bench, but forgot the object and left a bulls-eye; Christine’s hair was the color of sand and had the temperament of an octopus, she tried to contain it back in an old fashioned hair tie, but it escaped and circled her face. They both drove blood red cars. They shared our driveway, our shore house and our backyard.

They were there for over ten years when they were kicked out. I don’t know the whole story, something about lying to relatives and unpaid rent—it turns out they never owned the house, and their backyard apartment was illegal.

Once the house was abandoned, it became even eerier and the urge to go inside was overwhelming; for years, we ached to know what was inside—and then one day, there it was. Like gravity, we all gathered around the molded, uninviting front door with the greasy metallic doorknob. I reached out, and to my surprise, the knob turned. Inside, it looked like nothing had been touched in years, not just the few months it had been abandoned; the pile of things I could peak at through the front door—the buoys, the fishing rods and lines, and piles of papers were covered in dust. Where the bed used to be was concrete floor and empty space except for a rusty bike with its hinges rusted out, unable to hold its weight. A smell hung in the air like the bed was still there soaking wet with seawater. Past the bedroom was a petite kitchen area. The eating arena was a picnic table with an inch of dust on top. Someone dragged her finger across. Someone else said, “Don’t do that, they’ll know we were here.” Although, we didn’t know who “they” were. In the fridge with green mold around its edges, and auto grease like stains on its exterior, we found a turkey. A plastic wrapped turkey, good enough for Thanksgiving dinner. I guess if you have to leave a place in a rush you only take what is important, or easy to carry.

## II.

I always thought my father was the scariest man in the world. However, when we were down the shore, Nick was the most formidable. Nick lived in the house in Tom’s River and he was the ringleader. Nick’s shoulders seemed to be four feet wide and he was a prison guard who worked the night shift. At its largest point, his shadow was the size of a grizzly bear. He had coal black hair and eyes that were so dark and deep they made him look like someone had stuck his face with a pitchfork. Nick did not speak, he ordered.

“We need a soda machine,” and within a week someone had bought an old soda vending machine.

“We need a bar,” he said like a God of the spirit world. The next summer they built an outdoor bar complete with a wine fridge and bar signs that had sayings like, “No shoes, no shirt, no problem.” The bar and the soda machine worked in tandem, a penny for a sweet, sticky coke to mix with smooth Bacardi or the bubbly fresh taste of 7-Up to mix with Seagram’s—I would take sips of abandoned Solo cups.

“We need a pool for the kids, the lagoon is too dangerous,” Nick said. That summer they starting building the in-ground pool.

Nick always spoke above the roar of the other voices in the house and the jet engine like fans that blew air around the house in lieu of air condition. Nick was also a restless misogynist. He could not sit still, and to overcome his boredom, he would announce ridiculous ideas that purposely excluded women.

“We are going deep sea fishing today,” he said.

“We are going to catch crabs with our hands today.”

“Today, we will go jet skiing.”

The system was set up so that the men had to say yes to Nick’s proposed plan or they would be made fun of and called “sissy,” “coward,” or worst of all, “girl.” Nick was the king of the divide between men and women down the shore.

The men, including the boys, were driven wild by the summer heat and the hormones. The males were gridlocked in a who-can-be-manlier battle. Once, for instance, a foot race ended when the loser was taken away in an ambulance. Another time, a bet involved jumping and diving off the dock into shallow water. Then there was a game of t-ball that broke three



windows in a stranger's house. Whenever they went for ice cream it turned into ice-cream football and each player would use his spoon to fling his ice cream the furthest. Bonus points were awarded for hitting pedestrians. My brother, Peter, won the dirtiest feet competition after five consecutive days without a shower. At the point of victory, his feet were dirtier than the floor.

I was concerned about my role in the family, I considered myself an adult but I still had to eat at the kids' table that was plastic, red, yellow, purple and blue colored (what a child would call "rainbow colored") and closer to the ground and even though I was shorter than my younger sister I still had to crunch my legs up like I was stuffing myself into a suitcase. I was held captive by my birth order. I never cherished girlie rituals like nail painting and magazine reading, and this left me on the outside of the great divide. My sister was a verified tomboy; she could beat any of the boys at sports; she was tough and I was a sissy. I tried to punch her in the face one time when we were younger and she ducked and my father laughed.

For the most part, the girls were subdued and tranquilized in the summer heat. We ranged in age from nine to sixteen. I was sixteen. Morgan, who was Michael's sister and Michele's daughter, was nine. My sister was two years younger than I was; she was fourteen—and the three of us made up the "girls" of the house. The females, women and girls included, would rather lay on the beach and read gossip mags than talk to each other—the summer rendered them mellow compared to times during the year when they would fight over what TV show to watch. Each day for the younger girls went similarly, they would go to the Quick Check on the corner, pick up a girlie magazine they hadn't read yet—they wouldn't swap with each other because they wanted to rip out the pictures of Backstreet Boys and Ryan Gosling and have the posters for themselves—they would then lay on the beach until noon, go home for a

sandwich, on the way back to the beach buy an iced coffee or a lollipop depending on her age and then sit on the beach until the lifeguards whistled and waved.

The women lived their lives similarly, but they would pick up magazines like *Good Housekeeping* or *Redbook* and read sex tips from the experts. I knew this because sometimes I would sneak a peek at these magazines and gawk at the wonders of pleasure. The women and girls would lie on the shore baking; I hardly wore sunscreen, turning deep brown. Occasionally we would swim, but for the most part, we were chronically relaxing. Nights, the girls would spend time lazily doing each other's make up or braiding hair as the women prepared the mixed drinks, sides and salads; the men cooked the meat.

After Nick's jet skiing order, all the men said yes, but Nick was not prepared for who else would agree: my sister and I. When we told my father that we wanted to go, he nodded. It was obvious that my father wanted a son and he eventually got one seven years after I was born, and who was still at this point too young to jet ski. He tried to squeeze me into a mold that I did not want to fit into and that I could not fit into. He pressured me to play softball. I was horrible. I would stand in the outfield daydreaming. The ball would always fly by me; I had no desire to be good at this sport, but Stephanie loved sports. She played soccer as a kid and into her adult life. I was different; I hit the ball maybe two times in the seven years that I forced to play but my father would still take me to The Sports Authority and buy me \$100 Louisville Sluggers, a catching glove, batting gloves and special soft-ball socks. I was thrilled when I did not make the middle school traveling team. However, instead of accepting the fact that I hated sports and that I was horrible at them my father was ecstatic every time I wanted to do something "sporty," especially if he could participate, because he would have to wait another 5 years until my brother

was old enough to do anything “cool.” So when my sister and I told my father that we wanted to jet ski, my father was elated and this also meant that he could go jet skiing with us.

Instead of asking Nick, my father advised us to get dressed, and then we would tell him the same way he told us things, as a statement. We marched downstairs with our board shorts and rash guards. I was wearing a black skin-tight semi sheer shirt with white, “O’Neil” printed on the front in script, and my sister was wearing a similar shirt in pink.

“We are going too,” I said, as the older ambassador. Nick lifted his iridescent sunglasses and revealed his glaring eyes.

“Fine,” he replied, but it felt like, “Fine, you can come but I know you’ll either chicken out, or drive like a girl.” I was notorious for “chickening” out. I was terrified of roller coasters, amusement rides or anything remotely adventurous. I wanted to prove that I was braver than my former self.

I also wanted to spend time with Paulie; he was my cousin’s friend of choice that year. Most years we would get to bring friends with us down the shore. At this moment in my life, I was the opposite of cool. I was recovering from a childhood in a town where most people were white collar, and the moms were trophy wives with blow-dried hair and Louis Vuitton bags. My clothes were from Sears or Caldor. I grew up nerdy, and each Christmas instead of making a list that contained things like Tiffany’s Jewelry or a The North Face Jacket, like my sister, I made a list of books I wanted like *Salem’s Lot*, my mom bought me only because I do not think she knew what it was about, and *The Bell Jar*; my mother refused to buy.

When I first met Paulie, we were at a party for my cousin’s birthday and I was preoccupied with reading *Salem’s Lot*. The rivalry between the men was not isolated to the shore because these family celebrations would erupt into fights among the men, but this one had

the usual murmur of revelry and chatter: the women inside cooking, scooping and heating food, and sipping wine coolers, the men outside drinking beer, throwing a football and talking loudly. Paulie threw around the football with the men—he was good at any sport but he chose to play hockey in high school—but he was not loud like the other men. He did not yell when someone dropped the ball or didn't throw a perfect spiral.

I was ignored at this party (or any party) and sat in my usual position, near the action but far enough away to assert my aloofness from the rabble—on the front yard grass reading. Paulie was the type of guy who would never talk to me or date me. He was strong with a battle scar from playing hockey that tore from his cheekbone to his chin like a toughness emblem. Paulie was beautiful: he had stone black eyes and an earring in one ear; he had a shaved head and was muscular. Paulie's best quality was that he was *cool*. He wore an oversized Roca-Wear hoodie and Adidas sweat pants with shiny buttons down the sides. He was so much cooler than I was and when he looked at me, I felt the electricity rise inside of me and I knew that I had to impress him.

When I found out Paulie was a hockey player, I was even more invested in liking him. At my first job in a bakery a woman once said to me, "there are two types of women in the world, those who like rock stars and those who like hockey players." Hockey players are the firefighters of professional sports athletes. I like hockey players; they are tough. Did I mention I liked tough guys? Paulie made me shake—men made me shake.

I was awkward and immature for my age, since everyone else in the kids category was younger than I was. I had no clue what to do with or about men. Being the first born in my family I always felt like my friends knew more than I did and had more life experiences than I did because they had older siblings to show them the ways of life and teach them dirty words and

share their promiscuous activities. Everyone else changed and I stayed the same; I had no clue how to grow up, and maybe Paulie was my first step. I felt like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, everyone was divided into virgin and non-virgin, I related to Esther ponderings, "I saw the world divided into people who had slept with somebody and people who hadn't..." I wasn't a real person, I thought with only one real kiss under my belt. I was lame, I had no cell phone (I borrowed my mom's to pretend it was mine), and no designer clothes. I thought losing my virginity would make me a changed person. Being accepted by the opposite sex would eliminate all these pre-drawn lines and it would not matter what clothes I was wearing or what my hair looked like. What would matter was knowledge and knowing that I was wanted. I was sick of 2-D men like the cutouts in the magazine. Being a virgin, to me, was the uncoolest thing I could think of—worse than wearing hand-me-downs or shirts that cost \$1.99. Jet skiing would help me to be less uncool.

The jet ski rental company is on a road that connects Lavallette to Seaside Heights and Toms River so we had frequently drove by but when we pulled up there were no people and the sign makes the place look more like a fast food shack than a jet ski rental company, because the wording was in mustard yellow and ketchup red. Seaside Wave Runners had a substantial parking lot, surrounded by a few houses nested on the bay, and boats in a lot—like a boat-parking garage. We looked around, confused as to where we could actually rent the jet skis, and followed yellow arrows on red background through gravel-like sand, letting our feet sink down—the place was surrounded by boats, some in the parking lot, some bobbing in the water all melting into the pastel background. Then we saw a small shack that looked like an outhouse; it was like a speck of sand on a slice of shore. Above the one-room, business was a sign labeling the place as Seaside Wave Runners. There was a man inside with skin like a raisin, dark and

wrinkled. A plaque on the wall gave the rental options for the day. Nick stepped up to purchase tickets for us all.

The man in the shack pointed at my sister, "How old?"

"Fourteen" she said.

"Too young. She has to ride with someone," he stated.

She looked around, and then pointed at me and said, "Great, I have to ride with you."

The dark man loaded us into a boat that brought us to a dock in the middle of the where we could launch our jet skis.

"When you return, leave your jet ski here. Do not ride jet ski to shore," he said.

The man delegated life vests and jet skis and I was clenching my hands in fists, my palms were starting to sweat and my face was starting to get hot not just because of the sun. I felt eyes on me. Especially my father's probably recalling the time he took me out in a speed boat on a lake in Point Sebago, Maine. I cried the whole time, loud obnoxious sobs.

The night before jet skiing, Paulie and I had spent some time after dusk on a swing set by the bay. I hid the shaking of my knees by rocking back and forth.

"So, you have a cellphone now?" Paulie asked as he looked into my hands and saw the black brick with numbers that was my mom's cell phone.

"Yes," I lied. I did not have one a few months ago when I met Paulie at the family party. He had a gray Nokia with pillowy buttons, the coolest phone at the time.

"So I can text you now?"

"Yes," and then it was official. We were in a relationship. After we became official, we sat on the swings. Back and forth back and forth. I had not yet understood the power of silence

and Paulie's quietness made me uneasy. I didn't care if he responded; I just knew that I had to say something.

"Why do you seem so apathetic about us?"

"Huh?"

"Apathetic, why are you so apathetic?"

"What?"

I scrapped my toes against the sand digging past the dry white sand to the dark and damp brown sand picking up piles with my toes and moving them.

I understood that riding the jet ski wouldn't be enough to impress Paulie, Nick or my sister. I knew that I had to drive like an adult, like someone who was not afraid, in other words, like a man. I swung my legs over the machinery and felt the powerful mound of metal vibrating beneath me. I barely gave my sister the chance to secure herself to my back like an infant chimpanzee before I squeezed my hands around the handle. I flew out of the dock recklessly. I knew that if I hesitated I could be the target for ridicule. The men were left in the wake behind me. We were not an us, Stephanie, an afterthought, had her nails dug into my sides as we weaved into the water. I didn't look back. We cut through the water like renegades, behind us, the water knived.

"Slow down," she squeaked. I had never seen my sister afraid.

My hands controlled the power of the jet ski, with the gas in my right hand and only the resistance of the water to slow us down—there are no breaks on a jet ski. Because I had to go faster in order to turn, I got that feeling in the pit of my stomach like being a roller coaster as I leaned close to the water, feeling like we were going to topple downward. I squeezed the handle to turn at top speed. I made figure eights in the water. Stephanie clawed into my side as I made

turn after turn feeling my heart pound and drop, feeling the control in my hand, squeezing the trigger.

Paulie caught up to us while the other men scurried about at the far end of the bay.

“He’s trying to impress you,” Stephanie said in my ear. She could sense his feelings for me more than I could. Our two jet skis were in a dance of sorts. He neared me, and I sped away. Stephanie stopped screaming and started to laugh, “Go left, go right, go right, go right,” she said, caught up in the game. Paulie and I twisted around each other like figure skaters. Stephanie egged us on. The water sprayed up around us as we each tried to make the sharpest turn; we couldn’t see each other’s faces. Stephanie loosened her grip on my sides and we were both in hysterics. Paulie and I kept turning. Somewhere in the distance, observing us, Nick drew back a moment, watching us in our play, and, according to someone who was nearby, said that I drove a jet ski “better than most of the men.” The water sprayed down from the waterfalls shot up by our jet skis and landed in our mouths, and deep saltiness was satisfying. Soon I could barely control the machine anymore because Stephanie and I were laughing. We faced Paulie as we finished one last turn to mock him.

Simple turns were no longer dangerous enough for Paulie; he was a hockey player; he was used to taking risks, even risks that ended in scars. He started to stand on the jet ski, first one leg straight. Now his knees were shaking.

“Fine, you win,” Stephanie called out, and I’m lucky because at this point I had to admit how chicken shit I was. We turned to plow away in the other direction. He had both legs up, but hands still secured on the jet ski. “Come on dude, you win,” Stephanie shouted, unheard, like most things at the shore house.



All noises blended into each other, making the jet skiing arena much like the dinner table arena at the house.

I controlled my jet ski down to a slow speed; we were veering in the other direction. My sister and I were both soaked, our hair plastered to our faces—I think I had given Stephanie the opposite of the ride she feared she was going to get, something slow and cheesy, like the way my mom drove go-karts. Stephanie and I struggled to turn our heads with the life vests on, but when we managed to look back, Paulie had let go of the handlebars, his jet ski was now disembodied, moving without his control. The wave runner rolled from side to side as Paulie leaned.

The motor roared, one sound my sister and I had to pay attention to like a lion's one last wish. Then, we heard gurgling like someone was choking—more sounds we could not ignore. Paulie's jet ski idled, bobbing. Paulie vanished in the spray of the crash.

I changed the direction of the jet ski to race back to where Paulie was supposed to be. I remember bubbles, a whirlpool of bubbles and an idling jet ski. Paulie had yet to return to the surface. A red sider web spread through the water. Paulie's limb body floated to the surface but all I could see was red and orange, the orange of the life vest and his face was red. What we didn't know was that he had tumbled forward off the jet ski, hit his head on the machine, split his face. Usually, the sight of blood made me nauseous, that's why I read books like *Salem's Lot*, trying to overcome my fears. At that moment, I wasn't afraid, I somehow knew that he couldn't be dead, unaware of how dead he could have been.

My instincts kicked in; I raced toward the dock, remembering the strict instructions not to ride to shore. It would tear up the seaweed, or cause a wake, or some other catastrophic shit. The young employees of the jet ski rental company passed around a cigarette. Smoke circled around their heads. I had no words; all I could do was point.

“There, out there,” I managed to say.

“Where man? Out where?”

“We need help!” I raced my jet ski to shore, and the dock attendants then stood up and started to shake their fingers at me in reprimand.

When we got to the shore, Stephanie jumped off the jet ski and ran.

“We need an ambulance,” she exhaled, out of breath. We were the only two doing anything in full rescue mode. The men were still on the other side of the bay, oblivious. The man in the rental booth was moving in slow-summer-it’s-too-hot-and-it’s-July-motion. He lifted up a phone like a fifty-pound dumbbell. In the meantime, Nick had pulled Paulie from the water and had him slumped over his shoulder. All I could see was his body. His face was blood, the skin ripped open from forehead to chin. I knew it would just become another battle scar. Nick stood in front of the rental booth, his body blocking out the sun.

The man said, “Would you like a refund?” and Nick held Paulie’s body and answered, “No, we just want an ambulance.”

When the ambulance came, Nick lifted Paulie’s body inside and my sister, father and I followed behind in our Mini Van. When we got the hospital, I asked for my father’s cell phone. I told him I was going to call the women who were probably still relaxing on the beach. Nick swatted the phone from my hands and he said that they did not need to know yet. He said that there was no need to make them feel worried now. They were, after all, relaxing on the beach having a lovely pastel-colored vacation with not a worry in the world and what they did not know could not interrupt their hair braiding and magazine reading.