



## Looking for independence on Independence Day

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**W**e found the prodigious piece of driftwood on the shore, bleached bone white and tumbled smooth, once a stout tree of more than 6 feet, now our proud possession. "We can burn it at the Fourth of July fireworks party," said Jessie.

Jessie lived in Little Compton and I lived in Newport, 45 minutes away, and we had just completed the ninth grade. We'd known each other since the fifth grade when Jessie started taking the bus into Newport to attend the same grade school as I did, St. Michael's.

She was quiet and shy and my height. She had long, dark hair and hazel eyes, and when she opened her mouth she always said something worth listening to, in my opinion. Even my sarcastic older brother gave her the thumbs up.

"Still waters run deep," he said knowingly.

She was the only girl I'd ever kissed on the lips, with intent, and she had been my girlfriend ever since.

My mother approved of Jessie, which was rare, because my mother didn't approve of any girls, especially Irish girls who lived in the Fifth Ward. She thought the Irish were big boozers and back then, the Fifth Ward in Newport was a poor section of town and my mother felt superior, even though she was the daughter of Portuguese immigrants and had grown up on a farm.

Jessie was half-Irish, but she didn't live in the Fifth Ward and her family was old and prominent in Rhode Island.

To visit Jessie, I took the bus to Portsmouth and got off before it veered toward the Mount Hope Bridge and Bristol. Her mother picked me up, Jessie waving from the passenger seat of their blue and white Ford station wagon. The three of us packed in tight on the bench seat listened to the radio that was hopefully playing a good song (Beatles, Rolling Stones, etc.), and sang along with it.

Way out on West Main Road in Little Compton, we stopped at Walker's vegetable stand for some fresh-picked strawberries and then continued out to Jessie's big shingled house on Sakonnet Point. On Sunday, we went to church together, but it was Episcopalian and not nearly as repressive as going to a Catholic church.

On the Fourth, we played catch on the broad front lawn in front of Jessie's house, then we bicycled down along the edge of Round Pond ringed with grasses and cattails, and up the narrow road between the honeysuckle and wild roses and *rosa rugosa*, coasting down the packed gravel hill to Tappen's Beach.

We checked to make sure our log was okay, then we walked down to Warren's Point where we went behind our favorite rock and made out for a while. As usual, I started coughing.

"Your Catholic guilt cough" said Jessie. "Do you think you're going to Hell when we finally have sex?"

"Probably," I laughed. "Unless we're married."

"I really hope you don't believe that," she said.

I smiled, as if to say of course I didn't. But the truth was that my brain was a tangle of my parents' fears and the thought control-power madness of the Catholic Church, corkscrewed into me from early childhood.

After dunking, we gathered smaller sticks and pieces of driftwood to put under the log, which we encircled with big stones.

We climbed up on a lifeguard stand and the light turned rosy on Jessie's face. We held hands and our hands glowed. I kissed her hand upon which she wore a ring that matched mine.

A flotilla of brown ducks bobbed in the light surf near the shore. Some of them were just ducklings the size of little rubber ducks.

"Are they trying to make a beachhead?" I asked. "Or do you think they are feeding? Or training the babies?"

"Look at the little one that's behind. Here comes the mama to bring it back in line," said Jess.

Families began showing up and some of our friends. Picnic food and drinks were put out on folding tables and barbecues were set up. We lit the fire under the log. I wished my parents were here, but the truth was, it would be less fun. My father couldn't relax. He was forever critical of too much noise and running around and people not doing things correctly, and my mother wanted to know where I was all the time. Honestly, Jessie's parents didn't ride herd on her at all. They just let her be.

Our driftwood log burned impressively, snapping and sparkling and we stood with others, silhouettes in the wavering orange light of its flames.

In the shorelit darkness, we drifted up into the dunes. Lying down we looked up at a skyful of stars. I wondered if God was watching us, when suddenly there was a long hissing whistle followed by a loud *boom!* Red and then white and then blue fireworks began exploding and lighting up the sky.

I felt Jessie's hand. "Happy Independence Day," she whispered.