

## River Rats

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I grew up under the shadow of the Tacony-Palmyra Bridge, a green steel behemoth looming high above the Delaware. River rats, we called ourselves; lower-middle class kids from large, mostly-Irish Catholic families, most with working dads and stay-at-home moms. In contrast to my friends' moms, mine worked the graveyard shift. Mom admonished us to silence while she slept. Mom told us that if we woke her one of us had better be dead or at least have a limb hanging off, so we spent as much time as possible outside.

Unsupervised, we got into every manner of trouble. The river provided activities of dubious entertainment value. Fishing for catfish to trade with the whiskered old black men for quarts of beer was a favorite sunny day pastime. Some kids would dive off the industrial waste that passed for a shoreline, large grinding stones tossed toward the river by workers from the Disston Saw Company, into the deep black water, a feat I was never so brave, or drunk, or stupid, to try. Two of my friends ultimately died there, one disappearing into the inky swill, never returning to the surface – police divers found him impaled on an old iron fence also thrown into the river, having outlived its usefulness. Much to our and his mother's horror, his younger brother, my little sister's boyfriend, high on Quaaludes, repeated this feat a few short years later. We always scurried home before sundown, as the haphazard arrangement of those grinding stones created the perfect nesting spots for hoards of oversized greasy black river rats; some bigger than our neighbor's terrier – those nasty rats certainly had no fear of a bunch of scrawny kids.

Nighttime after dinner we would have marathon games of jailbreak under the glow of the streetlamps. The twenty or so of us from the block would yell, scream, and chase the moon up and down the block until our prospective curfews. My dad, trying like hell to resemble some sort of disciplinarian, insisted we young girls be in bed by nine, so my younger sister and I would lie in bed

listening to our friends playing until eleven when their mothers finally called them inside. My group consisted of the Berries, the Millers, P. J., the Hosters, and us; girls aged seven to eleven; eight girls all with siblings from four to twelve years older than us. Often in the charge of these older kids, we experienced many evils we would likely not have found on our own, quarts of beer at the river among the least of our problems. My oldest brother was a Boy Scout attaining Eagle status before doing an about face and becoming one of the neighborhood's first patchouli infused longhaired hippie freaks. Seriously, he went from scout uniform to crazy quilted dungarees in one summer.

That same summer, my other brothers and their friends discovered the freight trains parked along the tracks by the river at night. Train cars full of liquor and beer. They would cut jagged holes in the tops of the cars with saws lifted from my dad's machine shop and lower us little girls inside to pass up bottles of Schmirnoff's and Bud. We did as told, despite our Sunday school lessons about right and wrong, fearful of finding ourselves left behind in those cars, discovered in the morning by the railroad cops. Our morality was fear based; I at least was ever mindful of the punishment sure to come if I ratted on my brothers. I had to spend Monday through Saturday with them and Sunday school was part of a different world. Sunday mornings we would get dressed up, pile into the gold Vista Cruiser wagon, go to Sunday school and church, and then have supper at our grandparents' house, seemingly perfect little angels. I still marvel at the photographs of that stage of life; most are from Sundays at Nana and Granddad's house – we all are clean and well dressed, a far cry from our weekday barefoot in bathing suits and cutoffs attire. If you look closely, you can see our bloodshot eyes, earned smoking a shared joint while feeding peanuts to the squirrels in the park across the street before supper.

That we all turned out okay is a marvel. But then again, I guess it all depends on one's idea of okay. My brothers all still live in the house where we grew up, somehow paralyzed to finding their own ways in the world. One is a recovered crack addict, another disabled, unable to work, and on

psychoactive meds for life. The third addicted to pornography and yet never once in a relationship with a woman, keeps an eye on the others, an unenviable job for sure. My older sister, the oldest child, got out before Mom went to work and the mayhem ensued, but ultimately lost her only son to heroin addiction and a life spent largely in prison. My younger sister struggles with alcohol abuse and has babies every six or seven years so she can remain on the welfare rolls. I do not judge. I know where we come from, how few of the River Rats are still alive. I am acutely aware of having to do whatever it takes to survive; that my getting out when I did saved my life. Mine has been an uphill battle. I smoked cigarettes and pot at age seven, quit cigarettes at fifteen, hung in bars, drank, and used drugs into my twenties. Statistically, I probably should not be alive, certainly should not be thriving. That I have my beautiful healthy family, my career, and my future is surely a miracle for which I am grateful. Although mine was not an idyllic childhood, even then I was aware that it could have been worse. My parents were not alcoholics, just overworked, tired, and poor, and the only beatings I endured were from siblings, unlike so many of my friends. Beatings aside, those same siblings always encouraged me to recognize that my intelligence was my ticket out, and have celebrated my accomplishments. I would not wish what I went through on anyone, but I am acutely aware that my ability to accept people wherever they are, without judgment, is my greatest strength as a woman, friend, and nurse; that without my sordid past, this gift might have eluded me.