

Fire Island—First Island:

Coming of Age, One Experience at a Time

by Rachel Zients

I came to Fire Island for the first time when I was nine. At that time directions to the arcade, quarters for Ms. Pacman and a place on the stoop outside Rachel's were all I really need.

But as I grew, so did all my needs: boys, drink...boys, and Fire Island much obliged.

The first of my Fire Island frisks was a long cigarette protruding from the sand near the swings in the playground. I don't remember if it was filter side up or yellow side down, and I can't recall the name of the girl embarking on the adventure with me, but we both knew what it was, and we both knew today was the day. Though she claimed that this would not be a first for her (she did seem rather capable with the matches, now that I think about it). We hurried along Cottage, way down by the ocean side, to avoid the watchful eyes of townfolk and a possible parent stroll. I don't really recall the taste or the burn, just the fear. The fear that the glow of the red burning tip just inches from my fingers, that actually thrilled me to have placed there, could be spotted from Midway, that alarms would sound and people would stare. We ducked in and out of walks convinced the OB militia would be arriving at any minute until one lone thing was done.

I am safer playing Space Invaders. Happier too. So back to the arcade I head. It does not become a habit. But I never play in the playground quite the same way.

What does become a habit is being a big city kid allowed to live in a small town existence a few months out of the year.

How thrilling to say hello to people as they pass, to read of your neighbor's garage infractions, to know exactly when the ballfield sprinklers go off every night; that extraordinary fun of throwing gum on the ground and then watching through fits of hysterical laughter all

the barefeet that fall victim to our game.

Lovely. Childish. Terribly silly. And above all wonderfully safe.

I graduated from weekends to a full summer stay at age 16. My step-sister, her friend and I were left to tend the house Monday-Friday.

It was then when I got my first job, scooping ice cream at Ice Cream Brothers, smack dab in the middle of town. We may have been smaller than Sprinkles, but we got the ferry rush thank you very much. And I quickly learned how to handle crowds, make a malted and check the day's receipts. I even got my very first raise (and a second one too I may add) while learning to make the perfect waffle cone.

I clung to my job and my new friends. I had not been a Youth Group kid therefore I did not know a lot of people. Suddenly I did.

It was later that summer, one night near 3 a.m., when my sister and her friend barely noticed and actually didn't seem to mind that I was along for the fun of jobster races in the kitchen, of really bad wine, of frolicking in the moonlight down at the beach. But I noticed. I was included in the freedom of the night. I watched the horses over by the shack enjoy the same evening air and I felt one with the Island.

I felt home. It was a first.

"Ya got a dollar?"

"Why?"

"Cause I wanna buy you a shot."

"Why?"

"Cause I wanna get you drunk."

"Why?"

"Cause I wanna take you to the beach."

"Why?"

Now he was puzzled.

I guess I asked one too many 'whys.' Because he quickly abandoned his well thought out plan. Needless to say, his ploy did not work on me. I cannot say the same

for others' efforts. Welcome to my teenage years.

It was all my sister's fault really. I had mentioned in front of them that a boy was cute. Huge mistake. I was about 13. So was he. They tickled me non-stop until I called him. Until I made a plan with him. Until I...kissed him (my first non-spin-the-bottle experience). But then I had to, like, see him around town, on the ferry, on the train, at the store. Oh this boy thing was going to be a real-to-do.

There was the boy who pushed me off the swings, the one who claimed to be a J.Crew model (we called him Spacebeam—I don't remember why, but it was very clever I'm sure), the one we went to visit down in Point-O-Woods (but they wouldn't let us in), the one my father thought was too old for me, the cute dock boy we would stare at as we bussed tables at Matthew's...and then there was my first real boyfriend.

We met when I was sixteen, when I was working at Ice Cream Brothers. I remember it quite clearly. He was with two girls. One was named Sarah. He claims he doesn't remember sitting over by the pizza place all together. So when I re-met him two years later, I made sure to be memorable.

Soon we are writing letters during the winter, I am wearing his jeans, his friends are my protectors. We do more than kiss.

He is also my first experience of the confusing realization when things don't work out of "I'm upset. You're the one I talk to when I'm upset. But you're the one making me upset." My first real breakup. I still get a ping when I walk by his house.

He is married now. Our children will play at Youth Group together I'm sure. Another small town problem. One I don't mind.

I realize now that I live far away (way out there in California) that

when I get homesick, it is not the hustle and bustle of Manhattan that I miss. Rather, it is that stretch of land, that barrier beach in The Great South Bay. I miss our house, the one with the address I don't know; past the ballfield, first real left, three in from the beach. I miss voguing at the Ice Palace, the joy I felt when I was included in the Matthew's collage, wondering if I'd ever be old enough to get into the Alligator, of being late for work and knowing that I had to finish my bagel before I reached Surf Road or else I'd be a brazen felon, of tiring late nights when the loud, busy weekends become a necessary distraction to make it to the next week's solace. Of first jobs, first loves, first Long Island Iced Teas....

So now when I visit the Island twenty years later from when I first arrived, I look around and see that not much has changed. The shops and restaurants are mostly the same, if not for their names. It's more crowded. You can eat on the street. I hear there's more crime. The scream of wagons for hire still comes from the ferry dock. The essence of first experience oozes from Kismet and Davis Park.

I stand on my front porch holding my little nephew (the first baby for our family) and realize I had never stood for this long out here. It was just an entrance. He smiles with the delight as we wave at passersby and I think, "How lovely: I hope he has as much fun as I did." I open the door and head back inside toward my family, at once nostalgic for where I've been and anxious for what's to come. Because, I realize as I hold him there for the first time, each time has been better than the last.