



# RAFT IN WATER, FLOATING

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She is lying on a raft in water. Floating. Every day when she comes home from school, she puts on her bikini and lies in the pool—it stops her from snacking.

“Appearances are everything,” she tells him when he comes crashing through the foliage, arriving at the edge of the yard in his combat pants, thorns stuck to his shirt.

“Next time they change the code to the service gate, remember to tell me,” he says. “I had to come in through the Eisenstadts’ and under the wire.”

He blots his face with the sleeve of his shirt. “There’s some sort of warning—I can’t remember if it’s heat or air.”

“I might evaporate,” she says, then pauses. “I might spontaneously combust. Do you ever worry about things like that?”

“You can’t explode in water,” he says.

Her raft drifts to the edge.

He sits by the side of the pool, leaning over, his nose pressed into her belly, sniffing. “You smell like swimming. You smell clean, you smell white, like bleach. When I smell you, my nostrils dilate, my eyes open.”

“Take off your shirt,” she says.

“I’m not wearing any sunblock,” he says.

“Take off your shirt.”

He does, pulling it over his head, flashing twin woolly birds’ nests under his arms.

He rocks her raft. His combat pants tent. He puts one hand inside her bathing suit and the other down his pants.

She stares at him.

He closes his eyes, his lashes flicker. When he’s done, he dips his hand in the pool, splashing it back and forth as

though checking the water, taking the temperature. He wipes it on his pants.

“Do you like me for who I am?” she asks.

“Do you want something to eat?” he replies.

“Help yourself.”

He gets cookies for himself and a bowl of baby carrots from the fridge for her. The bowl is cold, clear glass, filled with orange stumps. “Butt plugs,” he calls them.

The raft is a silver tray, a reflective surface—it holds the heat.

“Do you have any idea what’s eating me?”

“You’re eating yourself,” he says.

A chunk of a Chips Ahoy! falls into the water. It sinks.

She pulls on her snorkel and mask and stares at the sky. The sound of her breath through the tube is amplified, a

raspy, watery gurgle. "Mallory, my malady, you are my Mallomar, my favorite cookie," he intones. "Chocolate-dipped, squishy . . . You were made for me."

She flips off the raft and into the water. She swims.

"I'm going," she hears him say. "Going, going, gone."

At twilight an odd electrical surge causes the doorbells all up and down the block to ring. An intercom chorus of faceless voices sings a round of "Hi, hello. Can I help you? Is anybody out there?"

She climbs out of the pool, wet feet padding across the flagstone. Behind her is a Japanese rock garden, a retaining wall holding the earth in place like a restraining order. She sits on the warm stones. Dripping. Watering the rocks. In school, when she was little, she was given a can of water and a paintbrush—she remembers painting the playground fence, watching it turn dark and then light again as the water evaporated.

She watches her footprints disappear.

The dog comes out of the house. He puts his nose in her crotch. "Exactly who do you think you are?" she asks, pushing him away.

There is the outline of hills in the

distance; they are perched on a cliff, always in danger of falling, breaking away, sliding.

Inside, there is a noise, a flash of light.

"Shit!" her mother yells.

She gets up. She opens the sliding glass door. "What happened?"

"I flicked the switch and the bulb blew."

She steps inside—cool white, goose bumps.

"I dropped the plant," her mother says. She has dropped an African violet on its head. "I couldn't see where I was going." She has a blue gel pack strapped to her face. "Headache."

There is dark soil on the carpet. She goes to get the Dustbuster. The television in the kitchen is on, even though no one is watching: "People often have the feeling there is something wrong, that they are not where they should be. . . ."

The dirt is in a small heap, a tiny hill on the powder-blue carpet. In her white crocheted bathing suit, she gets down on her hands and knees and sucks it up. Her mother watches. And then her mother gets down and brushes the carpet back and forth. "Did you get it?" she asks. "Did you get it all?"

"All gone," she says.

"I dropped it on its head," her mother says. "I can't bear it. I need to be reminded of beauty," she says. "Beauty is a comfort, a reminder that good things are possible. And I killed it."

"It's not dead," she says. "It's just upside down." Her mother is tall, like a long thin line, like a root going down.

**I**n the front yard they hear men speaking Spanish, the sound of hedge trimmers and weed whackers, frantic scratching, a thousand long fingernails clawing to get in.

There is the feeling of a great divide: us and them. They rely on the cleaning lady and her son to bring them things—her mother claims to have forgotten how to grocery-shop. All they can do is open the refrigerator door and hope there is something inside. They live on the surface in some strange state of siege.

They are standing in the hallway outside her sister's bedroom door.

"You don't own me," her sister says.

"Believe me, I wouldn't want to," a male voice says.

"And why not, aren't I good enough?" her sister says.

"Is she fighting with him again?"

"On speakerphone," her mother says. "I can't tell which one is which, they all sound the same." She knocks on the door. "Did you take your medication, Susie?"

"You are in my way," her sister says, talking louder now.

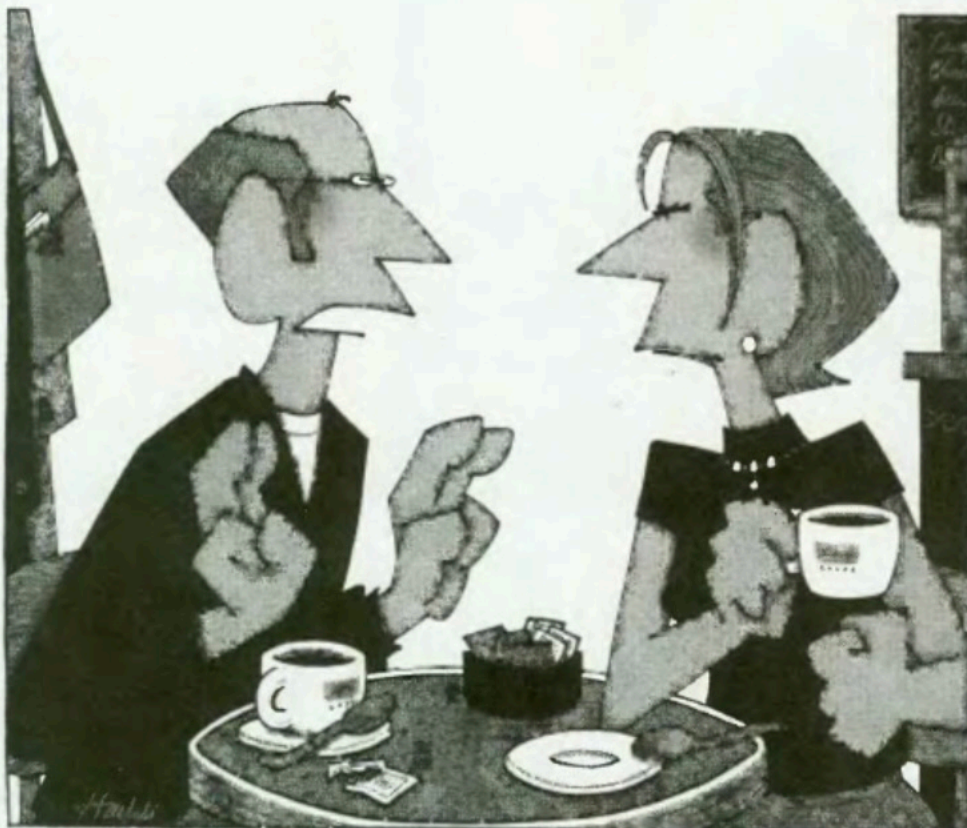
"What do you want to do about dinner?" her mother asks. "Your father is late—can you wait?"

"I had carrots."

She goes into her parents' room and checks herself in the bathroom mirror—still there. Her eyes are green, her lips are chapped pink. Her skin is dry from the chlorine, a little irritated. She turns around and looks over her shoulder—she is pruny in the back, from lying on the wet raft.

She opens the cabinet—jars, tubes, throat cream and thigh cream, lotion, potion, bronze-stick, coverup, pancake, base. She piles it on.

"Make sure you get enough water—it's hot today," her mother says. Her parents have one of those beds where each half does a different thing; right now her father's side is up, bent in two places. They both want what



*"Why is it that every time I say something in quotation marks you respond in italics?"*

they want, they need what they need. Her mother is lying flat on her face.

She goes back out to the pool. She dives in with a splash. Her mother's potions run off, forming an oil slick around her.

Her father comes home. Through the glass she sees the front door open. She sees him moving from room to room. "Is the air filter on?" His voice is muffled. "Is the air on?" he repeats. "I'm having it again—the not breathing."

He turns on the bedroom light. It throws her parents into relief; the sliding glass doors are lit like a movie screen. Imax Mom and Dad. She watches him unbutton his shirt. "I'm sweating," she hears him say. Even from where she is, she can see that he is wet. Her father calls his sweat "proof of his suffering." Under his shirt, a silk T-shirt is plastered to his body, the dark mat of the hair on his back showing through. There is something obscene about it—like an ape trying to look human. There is something embarrassing about it as well—it looks like lingerie, it makes him look more than naked. She feels as if she were seeing something she shouldn't, something too personal.

Her mother rolls over and sits up.

"Something is not right," he says.

"It's the season," she says.

"Unseasonable," he says. "Ben got a call in the middle of the afternoon. They said his house was going downhill fast. He had to leave early."

"It's an unpredictable place," her mother says.

"It's not the same as it was, that's the thing," her father says, putting on a dry shirt. "Now it's a place where everybody thinks he's somebody and nobody wants to be left out."

She gets out of the pool and goes to the door, pressing her face against the glass. They don't notice her. Finally, she knocks. Her father opens the sliding glass door. "I didn't see you out there," he says.

"I'm invisible," she says. "Welcome home."

She is back in the pool. Floating. The night is moist. Vaporous. It's hard to know if it's been raining or if the sprinkler system is acting up. The sky is charcoal, powdery black. Everything is a little fuzzy around the edges but sharp and clear in the center.

There is a coyote at the edge of the grass. She feels it staring at her. "What?" she says.

It lowers its head and pushes its neck forward, red eyes like red lights.

"What do you want?"

The coyote's legs grow long, its fur turns into an overcoat, it stands, its muzzle melts into a face—an old woman, smiling.

"Who are you?" the girl asks. "Are you friends with my sister?"

"Watch me," the old woman says. She throws off the coyote coat—she is taller, she is younger, she is naked, and then she is a man.

She hears her mother and father in the house. Shouting.

"What am I to you?" her mother says.

"It's the same thing, always the same thing, blah, blah, blah," her father says.

"Have you got anything to eat?" the coyote asks.

"Would you like a carrot?"

"I was thinking of something more like a sandwich or a slice of cheese pizza."

"There are probably some waffles in the freezer. No one ever eats the waffles. Would you like me to make you one?"

"With butter and syrup?" he asks.

The girl nods.

He licks his lips, he turns his head and licks his shoulder and then his coyote paws. He begins grooming himself.

"Be right back," she says. She goes into the kitchen, opens the freezer, and pulls out the box of waffles.

"I thought you were on a diet," her mother says.

"I am," the girl says, putting the waffles in the toaster, getting the butter, slicing a few strawberries.

"What's this called, breakfast for dinner?"

"Never mind," the girl says, pouring syrup.

"That's all you ever say."

She goes back outside. A naked young woman sits by the edge of the pool.

"Is it still you?" the girl asks.

"Yes," the coyote says.

She hands the coyote the plate. "Usually we have better choices, but the housekeeper is on vacation."

"Yum, Eggos. Want a bite?"

The girl shakes her head. "I'm on a diet," she says, getting back onto her raft.

The coyote eats. When she's finished she licks the plate. Her tongue is incredibly long, it stretches out and out and out, lizardly licking.

"Delish," she says.

The girl watches, eyes bulging at the sight of the tongue—hot pink. The coyote starts to change again, to shift. Her skin goes dark, it goes tan, deep like honey and then crisper brown, as if it is burning, and then darker still, toward black. Downy feathers start to appear, and then longer feathers, like quills. Her feet turn orange, fold in, and web. A duck, a big black duck, like a dog, but a duck. The duck jumps into the pool, and paddles toward the girl, splashing noisily.

"These feet," she says. "They're the opposite of high heels and still they're so hard to control."

They float in silence.

She sees her sister come out of her room. She watches the three of them, her mother, father, and sister, through the glass.

She floats on the raft.

Relaxed, the duck extends her neck, her feathers bleach white, and she turns into a swan, circling gracefully.

Suddenly, she lifts her head, as if alerted. She pumps her wings. She is heavy, too heavy to be a swan. Her body is changing again, she is trading her feathers for fur, a black mask appears around her eyes, her bill becomes a snout. She is out of the water, standing on the flagstone, a raccoon with orange webbed feet. She waddles off into the night.

Below ground there is a shift, a fissure, a crack that ricochets. A tremor. The house lights flicker. The alarm goes off. In the pool the water rolls, a small domestic tidal wave sweeps from one end to the other, splashing onto the stones.

The sliding glass door opens, her father steps out, flashlight circling the water. He finds her holding onto the ladder.

"You all right?" he asks.

"Fine," she says.

"Come on out now," he says. "It's enough for one day. You're a growing girl—you need your beauty sleep."

She climbs out of the pool.

Her father hands her a towel. "It's a wonder you don't just shrivel up and disappear." ♦