

INDEPENDENCE DAY

A body drifts, caught in the yellow-green, slime-dark weeds that hang in the depths, waving with the passing currents. No more the wild movements of panicked struggle; now the currents nudge at pale flesh, and the blurring eyes don't record the rippling of the weeds, water, warmth and cold slipping past. A shifting, slippery curl of lakeweed snags at a thin ankle.

That's how it happens: a last cry swallowed as water fills the throat. Struggle ceases, the heart stops, thoughts fade, the dry world above drifts away, sound leaches from unreceptive ears. The swirl of lazy moving water enters and fills the breath's cavern. There's nothing to cling to. Nothing to cling with. Water, sand, sky. Moments pass, unnoticed in a long history of unrecorded time, the daily passage of sun and moonlight, ripples and waves, creatures that come and go, a swish of a tail, a snap of a beak, the seasons of surge and curdle, swell and recede.

A final breath bubbles to the surface and disperses in the air.

JULY 4 – TWIN LAKES BEACH

Iris stretches and sighs and soaks in July sun on a beach towel spread in the sand. A perfect happiness, a holiday, a day off work, away from the city. A luscious day to spend with Tad, joined by her roommate Liz and Tad's friend Zup at the beach: the Fourth of July, Independence Day.

It's been Independence Year for Iris –on her own in the city. She's quit school, come to Chicago and moved into a small Near North apartment with Liz, who'd been her college roommate. They'd all dropped out of college– Liz, Iris, Tad – except for Zup who'd stayed in

Chicago, and whose parents hadn't pressed for higher education, though it meant he was now likely to be drafted. He was working in the factory where his dad worked, hoping the war would end before the draft notice came.

Today, Independence Day, the four have squeezed into Tad's small turquoise Corvair with picnic baskets and coolers of beer in the trunk, balls, bats and mitts in their laps for the drive to Wisconsin.

Now, after throwing around a baseball in the meadow and cooking burgers for lunch on the park grill, after slipping behind the campground showerhouse to pass a joint, they go out onto the beach.

Iris lounges, lathering up her pale skin with baby oil, and Liz, in floppy hat and a gauzy beach coverup over her black swimsuit, hunches over a hefty-looking book.

"Aren't you girls going to swim?" Tad asks.

"Not now, I'm working on my tan," says Iris. "That's my goal for today." Stretching out her legs to examine them, she pokes the skin with a tentative finger. "Look how pale. Like cold fish."

"It's not," says Tad. "You're perfectly cooked already. Come swimming. You coming, Liz?" Liz waves a hand, not looking up from the book she's brought.

Tad pouts dramatically and Iris laughs. He's always making her laugh. "Race you there," he says to Zup, pulling off his t-shirt with one practiced swoop. Zup scrambles to unbutton his shirt and both dash toward the water, sand spraying at their feet as they go.

A few minutes later Tad is back again, wet and enthusiastic.

"Come on. Swim with us." Tad shakes his longish hair over Iris' belly, bare between the top and bottom of her swimsuit.

She rubs the drips and shivers. “I just want sunshine. You go.” She never swims, but Tad hasn’t figured this out. Even after all the lessons her mother signed her up for at the Y, she’s never been able to jump off the diving board, breathe while swimming a crawl stroke, do anything but dog paddle and tread water. She lets everyone think she’s prim and doesn’t want to mess up her hair or get her new swimsuit wet.

Deep water, especially lake water, terrifies her. It’s the stuff of her childhood nightmares, strong currents and undertows, murkiness, things hidden underwater that drag her down. She reaches for the baby oil again. She’s not meant to be underwater. She is a creature of sunshine and air and dry land.

“How about it, Liz?”

Liz looks up this time, one finger in the closed book to hold her place. “Tad, give up already. We’re not waterbabies like you.”

The two young men whoop when they hit the water, and splash like kids through the shallows, then race with energetic strokes through the deeper water to join the crowd of real swimmers on the floating dock. Iris watches Tad, admiring his smooth command of the water, how his thin but strong arms stroke and his muscular legs flutter-kick through his favored element with power, grace and style.

Iris leans on an elbow, smiling, as he pulls himself onto the dock and leans in to share some joke with Zup that she can’t hear from this far away. She considers dreamily how much there is to love about Tad, and happy she is. He’s cute and funny, handsome but not in the usual way. He’s a little too long and thin for that, and his face is a funny face, not classically handsome.

That face drew her to him when she first saw him in the Ravine Room – the all-night lounge space between the men’s and women’s dorms. That breezeway room, overlooking a steep ravine

with a stream running through the bottom of it, was the only place on campus open for all night gathering. From across the room, he was the focus point of a table full of students, and his face changed itself moment by moment with a range of dramatic and silly expressions that spilled over into his body as he gestured. He was telling a story, and the group was rapt. She wanted to be around that face, that natural light.

He played in school and community theater, and this winter she saw him in a local musical production, not playing the romantic lead, as she thought would be the case, but a bent old man whistling through his teeth, singing with a crackled voice to mimic age. He can do anything, become anyone, and still be his own true self.

She loves his body and the way he uses it. He's slim and a bit sunken-chested, but "I'm wiry," he has told her, in practiced Cockney accent, flexing his minimal biceps like a he-man. And she loves to trace with her fingers the twin scars just below his shoulder blades, from some childhood surgery he's never elaborated on, even to her. She thinks of them as the site of lost wings, or incipient ones, though this is fantastical.

Most of all she's happy because of the way he makes her feel loved. It's never happened for her before – he's so attentive – she's longed for that. And with Tad, sex is open and full of sunlight. So much of it has happened in the daytime, and on a blanket in the forest preserve, not in the darkness or closed rooms. His ways of pleasing her make her blush now to think of them – she puts her hands over her face suddenly as if her thoughts are visible – such intimacy she's never experienced in her smattering of college sexual encounters. Her motion causes Liz to look up.

“What are you thinking about?” Liz asks, a little tease in her voice, as if she’s read Iris’ thoughts. She has a way of doing that. “You look a little red. Maybe you need to get out of the sun. Want to go splash around for a bit?”

“No,” says Iris, reaching for the baby oil again.

Out on the lake, Tad dives from the raft, and Zup follows, his dive a little less graceful. Then Tad climbs up again to the raft and waves to Iris, and does an absolute belly flop, perfectly planned and comical.

“Look at them,” she says, and Liz sets her book down to watch as well. She reaches into the cooler for a soda bottle. Along her upper lip, a line of delicate drops of perspiration. “Show offs! A typical demonstration of male competitiveness,” but she says this with an indulgent smile. Iris knows she likes Tad – she’s the one who introduced them -- though she doesn’t know Zup well.

“What will Tad do about the draft if he’s not in school?”

“Maybe they won’t catch up with him right away – he’s still enrolled for fall, but we’re not going back. Maybe he won’t get drafted...”

“Yeah, right. Maybe the Nixon will turn into a dove and ...”

Before Liz can start a passionate political rant, Iris glances up, laughs and says, “Look at that idiot!” Zup stands at the very edge of the raft, beating his chest like Tarzan. He does a pose, just for them, Iris supposes, and Tad tips him into the water like a falling statue.

“Such an ape-man,” Liz says.

“You’re so high-minded! I think he’s cute. Don’t you think he’s cute?”

“Iris, men beating their chests are not cute.” She crinkles her nose. “You like him, don’t you?”

“Me? Zup? No!”

“You’ve never gotten over him since that time you and Tad broke up last year.”

“Shut up!” she says. Zup had been a comfort, a friend. Then more. She ducks her head now, remembering with hot embarrassment their first, open-eyed kiss. “He does have deep eyes.”

“He has bedroom eyes. You are a sucker for bedroom eyes.”

“Well, that’s true. But don’t you like Zup a little? Wouldn’t you go out with him?”

“Wow! He’s not my type.” She slams the book shut for emphasis. The cover jacket white with emphatic black lettering: *Sexual Politics*. This week’s reading – it could have been the I Ching, Tarot or astrology, or a 19th century novel.

“What’s your type anyway?”

“Dahling, I don’t have a type,” says Liz in her best Marlene Dietrich imitation.

But Iris likes everyone to be coupled up. She wants Liz to have someone to really appreciate how beautiful she is. Truthfully, though, Zup likes his girls pretty and sweet and old-fashioned. Liz is studiously not sweet. Iris doesn’t mean to be sweet and resists docility, but the training is ingrained.

Liz smiles, the ends of her smile turned down in her lightly freckled face, and lifts her long curling hair with golden red glints off of her neck. She’s not a skinny twig like Iris -- and Iris’ look is popular just now. Liz is voluptuous, that’s Iris’ word. Liz says she’s “Rubenesque.” Zup might call this “chubby,” Iris reflects.

“I’m probably not his type either,” says Liz philosophically, a hint of disapproval in her voice, a little emphasis on “his.”

“What do you mean by that? He’s not a dummy because works in a factory.”

“No, but he’s stuck in a pattern he doesn’t know to get out of.”

“Well, that’s deep as shit,” says Iris.

“No, I mean, look at him. He’s the kind who’ll marry and have two kids and just barely make it in the South side of Chicago for the rest of his life, and retire from that same factory his dad worked in all his life. Or he’ll end up in Vietnam. He doesn’t have it in him to break away from the pattern. Do what your parents did, do what the government tells you. Don’t think for yourself.”

“Well, that’s unfair. He’s a good guy. And he’s been a good friend to me and Tad since we got back together.”

“Oh, Iris, you can’t see beyond the bedroom eyes!” but she’s teasing now. “You always end up diving into bedroom eyes. Love and marriage are good for men, but hell on women.”

She says defensively, “Don’t you think you can have love and still be free?”

“Maybe you and Tad can do that together. But a woman can lose herself if she’s not vigilant.” Her smile turns down at the edges again – an appealing trait that makes her opinions less abrasive. “I’m glad I introduced you two.” She takes full credit for them getting together. “I’ll miss you guys.”

Their lease would be up in a month and Liz was moving away.

“I’ll miss you too,” Iris says. She and Tad haven’t decided what to do in the fall, but Iris wants a change. And Tad, no longer in school, will lose his draft deferment. She frowns. “Maybe we’ll be going to Canada.” Her job in the city is temporary – she won’t sell her soul forever, just enough to get her going, on with the freewheeling life the 60s have bequeathed her.

Liz goes back to her book, and Iris goes back to watching Tad. Her mood has clouded over. Seeing him so confident and so spontaneously and unabashedly who he is out there on the raft, she remembers the disagreement that mushroomed up recently, and feels a desire to punish him a little, with a bit of coldness or a small strategic withdrawal.

It's not about the far future. It's not about marriage. They don't need "a piece of paper from the city hall." That's too traditional and settled – too old-fashioned for Iris and Tad. It's the 1970s, they are free. They can live like hippies in the moment and make the world they want to live in. They've agreed on this by the way they are together, even if they've never really talked about it.

The argument is about the nature of their next adventure, their travels together when they've saved enough to quit their jobs and leave the Midwest in the Corvair's dust to be the free souls they are meant to be.

It had started a few days before, when they were fooling around and listening to Joni Mitchell's version of "Woodstock" and Iris, snagged by a line of the lyrics, said, "We've got to get ourselves back to the garden."

"What?"

"We should quit our jobs and not worry about how much money we have saved, and go out into the wilderness together and let life happen." She fully expected him to leap at this suggestion's wild promise.

Out of the blue, he said as if looking back over a very long life, "I've always wanted to go to sea." He said he'd been thinking about joining the merchant marine (there is such a thing? she wonders) to sail to far off places while she works and cools her jets in Chicago.

"Wait for you? What is this, the 1940s? You don't think that's a little chauvinistic? No."

The argument reminded her of her mother, always second place to her dad's ideas and opinions, serving him dinners and carrying him cups of coffee and waiting on him in so many ways. And of Tad's mother, a demanding and unsatisfied woman who despises her husband, as

far as she can see. Neither of them are happy or fulfilled, neither of them free. She doesn't plan to live like that.

"It's chauvinistic?" he said.

"Sexist. As in men get to do what they want and women have to wait on their pleasure."

"It would just be for a little while."

"A little while is too long to be apart."

"Life is long," Tad says. "Look at my dad." When Iris quit school and followed him to Chicago, Tad had taken her to his father's shoe repair shop downtown, a rustic workshop amid the shiny, high class stores. A sweet, mild-mannered man, he'd taken Iris' hand in his callused fingers and bestowed a Tad-like mischievous smile on her. She knows he's embroiled in a bitter divorce with Tad's mother, and has a girlfriend on the side.

Tad says, "He came from Poland and has never gotten farther than a basement on Michigan avenue. My mother hates him for it. I don't want that to be me. I need to follow my dreams."

"It won't be you," says Iris. "I'd never hate you." She'd never be as bitchy or as bitter as his mother. "But you can't go off on your own." It scared her that he'd think of leaving her, but she can't show him this. She slapped at his arm. "I won't let you."

"Ow!" he says, dramatically, and they drop the subject to wrestle on Iris' daybed.

She shakes off the memory now and lets sun and breeze fill her. They'd made up that morning without coming to a resolution, and after her tears and Tad's mugging endearments and sun-pouring-in-the-window sex, there's still no agreement on the next phase of Iris and Tad meet the brave new world. But here it is, a perfect day, and they are a perfect couple, aren't they? A little disagreement is nothing when they are so attuned physically and spiritually. She can feel their bond, stretching and pulling, playing like gentle waves, even when he is far out at the raft and

she is on the beach, with a whole lake between them. It's like a spider's web between them, a silver cord, a freedom and essential connection. They are not like those couples who have to be in each other's pockets all the time. But Tad out on the ocean for months or years – no, that's farther and longer than she wants him to be gone from her. With him, she's safe and free to be who she wants to be. Without him, she can't imagine who she is. The sun unmoors her thoughts, and she drifts into sleep, more pleased than not with the drift of their lives.

From far out on the lake, shouts disturb her dreaming and pull her out of sleep.

She drags herself up. Liz is sitting up straight now, looking out over the water, her freckled arm shielding her eyes from the sun. An agonized call reaches them from out on the dock. "We can't find him!" Iris grabs Liz' arm.

"Where are Zup and Tad?" she asks urgently.

But they can see Zup running towards them across the sand. He stops at their feet, slicking his wet hair out of his eyes with his hand, lake water dripping onto their toes with the sharpness of ice crystals. His eyes leak panic. Iris and Liz leap up.

Iris is dizzy with dread. "Where's Tad?"

Zup doesn't look at her. "We can't find him."

Iris grabs his arms. "What do you mean?" He's covered in goosebumps, shivering.

"He dived and didn't come up. No one noticed right way." He looks at the ground. She shakes him a little and he looks at her. "I didn't notice right away. They're calling for the rescue truck." He looks quickly back toward the concession stand and her eyes follow his. The manager has the payphone to one ear, and a hand over the other so he can hear better.

Iris stands stiff, her eyes searching the water and the beach for a sign of Tad coming towards, them, to prove Zup wrong. He can't be missing in the lake. He's a great swimmer. "Tad!" she hollers.

Liz puts her arm around Iris' waist and hugs her. With the end of the towel wrapped around her shoulders, she rubs lakewater from Zup's face. Zup pulls them both in for a sagging hug, then releases them. Liz strokes his shoulder, but he's looking at Iris.

Iris shivers and reaches again for Zup's arm, her fingers digging into the skin. "He'll be ok, right. You'll find him?"

"Iris," he begins "I—"

"Go back now," say Liz. "You've got to get him out while there's still time."

"The rescue truck will be here soon," he says in a strangled voice that unsettles Iris. Zup gives her a quick, fierce hug. Liz is taking off her glasses, shrugging off her towel as if she's readying to enter the water.

"You stay here with Iris," says Zup. "Please." He searches Iris' eyes and then looks away, composing himself. He squeezes her shoulder, wipes his eyes, then runs back through the sand and swims back out to join the others in the search.

Iris yells again, "Tad!" He'd hear her, know she needs him to come back. He'd know she needed him to splash up through the shallow water and crow about the joke he'd played on them. Liz grabs her hand. "We can go out there and help," she says.

Iris shakes her head, miserable. "I can't swim."

If only she could. She's ashamed – she should be leaping to the water to rescue Tad. She should have sensed that he was in trouble. She should have felt it even in her sleep. She imagines a self that is not so small and weak and incomplete, that is better than she is in skill and strength

and courage, stroking out to the floating dock, diving to find Tad. Pulling him to the surface, kissing his face as he laughs and warbles in a chirpy falsetto, “My hero!” But the shameful truth is, in all of her nineteen years, she has never overcome her fear of water; she’s never learned to swim.

“It’ll be okay,” Liz says. “Help is coming.”

Iris and Liz watch from as close as they can get on the beach, straining to see what’s happening on the swimming dock far out on the lake. Iris can barely breathe. She reaches for Liz’ hand and holds it until her knuckles ache. After a while, Liz gently extracts her hand and puts her arm around Iris’ shoulder. They move closer to the edge of the lake, where the chilly water laps up on their toes. After agonizingly long minutes the rescue truck arrives, siren blaring, and divers, moving too slowly for Iris’ panic, strap on air tanks and methodically move towards the water.

Finally, words are passed back through the standing watchers on the beach. “They’ve found him.” Iris holds her breath, waiting, while the divers surface and pull Tad like a wet weed onto the dock. A huddle of paramedics close in around him, curtaining whatever is happening, and again Iris can’t see anything.

“Breathe! Please, breathe!” Iris keeps praying, out loud or in her head. She waits for a shout of triumph and to see him sit up and make that silly face he makes to get her to laugh, a flourish and a bow at his performance, but it doesn’t happen.

Finally, a gurney is carried into the ambulance on the beach. The team loads equipment into the truck and a woman in police uniform huddles with Zup and Liz and others who were on the raft, scribbling notes into a little black notebook. No one speaks to Iris. She pushes through the crowd and tries to get inside the ambulance with Tad, but the paramedic stops her. Another

white-uniformed man shuts the door with a decisive click and the ambulance drives off across the sand and onto the road, no lights flashing, no sirens sounding.

These things that should have been a sign do not sink into her mind.

The sand cools under her bare feet with the sinking sun. She pulls her towel closer around her shoulders. She whispers to no one, “I just need to know he’s all right.”

A woman, holding her hands to her chest, turns her concerned gaze on Iris. “Oh, honey,” she says.

By these words, Iris understands. Tad’s gone. Taken. The bond that joined them has broken like a huge springing rubber band. Alone and separate, she’s dangled and danced over sun-glittered darkness.