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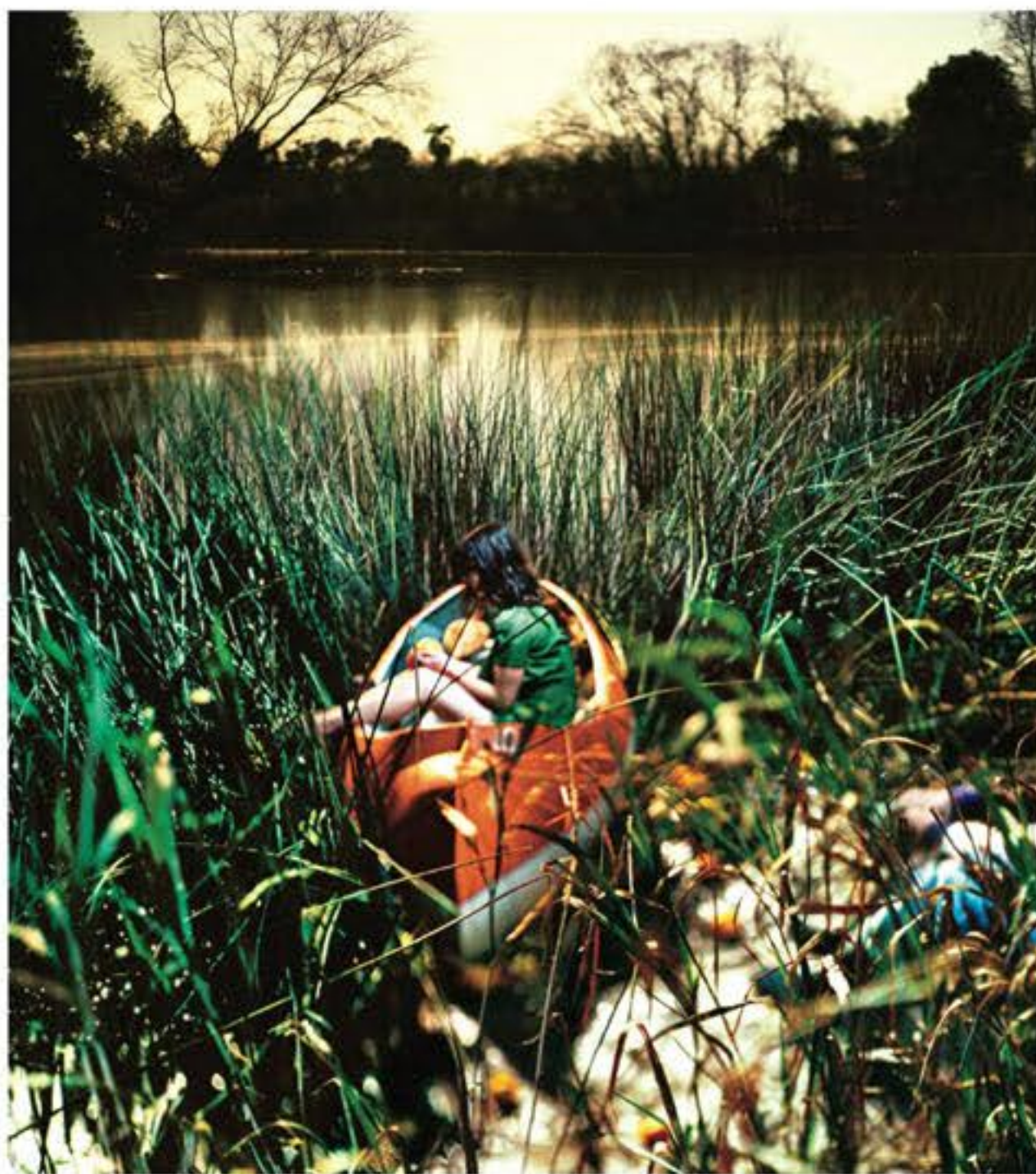
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Saturday, just after two, the sun a hot compress on her shoulders and scalp, the shrieks and catcalls of the children as they splash in the shallows a kind of symphony of the usual. Behind her, the sharp *thwook* of the dense black rubber ball as it rockets from the paddle and slaps the wall, regular as a heartbeat till one of the men miscalculates and it freezes in cardiac arrest on the tail of a stifled curse. One beat, two, and here it comes again: *thwook*. She's thinking that she should have brought her straw hat with her to the beach—she wouldn't want a thin red line of sunburn etched into the parting of her hair—but she'll worry about that later, or maybe not at all. She hasn't worn her hat in a week or more now—she hates hats, hats are a thing of her mother's day—and her tan is deep, even at her hairline. She's wearing a pair of oversized sunglasses, new from the drugstore yesterday, and last year's black one-piece, which is maybe a little tight around the hips and waist, but so what? She's not on display here. This is her beach, her community, her lake. These are her friends and neighbors gathered in their beach chairs and sprawled across their fluffed-up towels and beach blankets, with their paperbacks and newspapers and Hebrew National winners. This is the peace at the center of life. This, this Saturday in July, as her mind runs free and her only worry is to shift the straps on her shoulders and gloss her lips to keep them from drying out.

In the house, which she could see if she craned her neck to look back past the concession stand and the paddleball courts and the big open grassy field, where teen-age couples are strolling hand in hand, is the refrigerator, new three years ago and as cluttered as if it had been there a century. In its cool dark depths are the steaks in a covered dish of honey-ginger marinade, the potato salad and coleslaw she put up after breakfast, and the Rose's lime juice and vodka for the gimlets. All is well. And so what if the warm shifting sand beneath her feet has to be trucked in every other year at the expense of the Kitchawank Colony Association, its hundreds of billions of individual grains disappearing into the high grass, washing into the lake, adhering to toes and arches

and tanned sinewy ankles only to wind up on bathroom tiles and beneath the kitchen sink? It's as essential as air, as the water itself: how could you have a beach without it?

When she next opens her eyes it's to the quick cold shock of Susan, her youngest, smugly grinning in beside her, everything wet suddenly, as if a whole basket of fish had been upended in her lap. She feels the bunched knees poking at her, the shuddering rib cage and chattering teeth, hears her own voice jump up: "Get off, honey, you're all wet!" And Susan, freckled, stick-limbed, ten years old, snuggling tighter. "I'm cold, Mommy." She reaches behind her for the beach bag and the towel, and then she's wrapping her daughter and holding her close till the shivering stops and Susan springs loose to chase half a dozen other kids to the concession stand. She lifts her sunglasses for a moment to watch her go, and here are the Solloways, the Greens, the Goldsteins, settling in around her in a wash of greeting and banter and sheer high spirits. Marsha Goldstein, her legs silken and her lips fluttering around her smile, offers a cigarette, but she prefers her own and they both light up and let the tobacco lift them, until in unison, as if they'd rehearsed it, they throw back their heads and exhale in long twin plumes of blue. "What time did you want us tonight?" Marsha asks. "Five-ish?"

"Yes," she says, "yes, that'll be perfect," and she glances over her shoulder, past the courts and the chain-link fence and the screen of trees to where her house sits tranquilly on its own little rise—the only house, of the two hundred or more in the Colony, that looks directly onto the lake, a fact of which she tries not to be too sinfully proud. And it's funny, because with the way the light comes off the lake and the big picture window stands in shadow she can see into her own kitchen and the table there, already set for dinner, the clock on the yellow wall, time ticking by, and it's almost as if she were in two places at once.

[Forgive me for stepping in here but I do want to get this right—the fact is I may have been there that day. The threads of the past are so snarled that, thirty-five years on, I've lost the ability to separate them with any clarity. But if I was there I would have been on the paddleball court, playing in a fiercely

competitive and very physical foursome with Miriam's husband, Sid, and her two sons—Alan, who was twenty-six, and Lester, my best friend, who was then twenty-two, like me. And I would have entered the next scene, too, the dinner scene, preceded by cocktails and the long unwinding of a muggy Saturday afternoon, the corded muscles of my legs gone limp in the afterglow of exercise and the slow seep of alcohol.]

She's got both fans going, the one at the kitchen window and the big lazy ceiling fan revolving in a slow slippage of optical illusion over the table, but she's still dripping. Marsha's with her, their drinks perspiring on the counter while they stand elbow to elbow at the cutting board, slicing long squared-off strips of carrot and wafer-thin slivers of Vidalia onion for the salad, dicing cucumbers and halving cherry tomatoes still warm from the garden, Marsha, who was the maid of honor at her wedding just as she was the maid of honor when Marsha married David in a time when there were only the four of them. Now the boys are in their twenties, Susan's ten, and Marsha's daughter, Seldy, is sixteen, or no, seventeen.

From the living room comes the sound of the men, their voices rich and pleased as they call down the questions of the day, revile Nixon, trade quips with the boys. Les has begun to wear his hair long and dress in bell-bottoms and spangled shirts, in confraternity with his friend T., who looks so satisfied he could be flying across the room on his own magic-carpet ride. She's had her moments of worry—or not worry, really, just concern—over whether the boys have been experimenting with tea or grass or whatever they call it these days, but she's never said anything. And won't. She doesn't want to harp.

They're just sitting down to dinner—to the artichokes, one per plate, the grill out on the deck sending up smoke under the steaks—when Seldy, in a yellow sundress that shows off the figure she's been growing into over the past year, drifts into the room, late as usual. Her mother says, "It's about time," and her father makes a quip about how she must've got lost on the gruelling four-minute drive from their house, but Sid and the three boys are dumbstruck for one thunderous instant. This is the face of beauty, and though they're all family here, though

Seldy's like a daughter to Sid and a sister to the boys—Miriam's boys, anyway—none of that matters. Sid's the first to break the spell, his voice rising to emphasize the joke: "Well, Jesus Christ, we thought we were going to wilt away and starve waiting for you." And then the boys are falling all over themselves to wave and grin and ante up the wit, and Seldy, flushing, slides into the empty seat between Alan and Les, letting the steam from the artichoke rise gently about her face and the long trailing ends of her hair slip from her shoulders to sway gracefully over her plate.



It is then, just as Sid rises to check on the steaks (nobody here wants anything but rare and rarer, and he'd be offended if they did), that the first eruption of thunder rolls across the lake to shake the house and rattle the ice cubes in the drinks that Miriam has just freshened. The sky goes instantly dark, as if a shade had been drawn over the day. She's wondering if she should go and rummage through the kitchen drawer for the candles left over from Hanukkah when the storm chases a cool breeze through the screens, and Marsha waves her napkin in front of her face, letting out a sigh of relief. "Thank God," she says. "Oh, yes, bring it on."

The first raindrops, big and slow and widely dispersed, begin to thump at the shingles, and there's Sid, with his muscled arms and bald head, out on the deck, hustling the lid off the grill and flipping the steaks, the worn boards spotted all around him. "Better hurry, Sid!" David calls, and then it's really coming down, the original deluge, and this is funny, deeply, infectiously funny—Sid flipping steaks and wet through in an instant—because there's no harm done, no harm at all. They'll have candles, they'll eat, and the evening, with its rising fertile smell of grass and the earth at the edge of the woods, will settle in around them, as cool and sweet as if the whole neighborhood were air-conditioned.

[I see I've written myself into the scene after all, a refugee from my own fractured family, at peace in the moment. Fair enough. But peace neither lasts nor suffices, and the fact was that Lester and I pursued the available pharmacopoeia far more assiduously than Miriam could ever have imagined. We were stoned at that very moment, I'm sure of it, and not on anything as innocuous as

marijuana—stoned, and feeling blessed. Feeling, in the midst of all that radiant love and tranquility, that we were getting away with something.]

Time jumps and jumps again, the maples struck with color, the lake giving up a thin sheet of wrinkled ice along the shore, and then there's the paucity of winter with its skeletal trees and the dead fringe of reeds stuck like an old man's beard in the gray jaws of the ice. The months spin out until the pointer stops on a day in March, gray as death, Susan working against the chill in the unheated basement with the girls from the Explorers' Club at school, building a canoe from a kit shipped in all the way from Minnesota, while Miriam tiptoes around upstairs, arranging warm-from-the-oven oatmeal cookies on a platter and pouring hot cocoa from the thermos into six porcelain teacups, each with its own marshmallow afloat in the center like a white spongy island.

When she opens the basement door, there's an overpowering smell of epoxy and the distilled vinegar that Sid got for cleanup, and she worries about that, about the fumes, but the girls seem oblivious. They cluster around her in a greedy, jostling pack, hands snatching at the cookies and the too-hot cups. Susan already has three cookies clenched in her hand, privilege of the house, as she stabs her tongue at the marshmallow in her cup, a mustache of chocolate sketching itself in above her upper lip.

"Shouldn't you girls have some ventilation in here?" Miriam says, just to hear herself, but they're fine, they assure her, and it's going great, it really is.

The canoe, lying overturned on a pair of sawhorses, has been a long winter's project, Sid doing the lion's share of the work on weekends, though the girls have been fairly diligent about the hand-sanding, the cutting and fitting of the fiberglass cloth, and the slow smoothing of the epoxy over it. It's just that they're at an age when gathering for any purpose outside of school is a lark, and they can't help frittering away their time gossiping, spinning records, dancing to the latest beat or craze or whatever it is, their thin arms flailing, hair in motion, legs going like pogo sticks. They make fast work of

the cookies and chocolate. And now, sated, they watch her warily, wondering why she's lingering when it's clear that her motherly duties have been dispensed with, and so she gathers up the cups, sets them on the tray, and starts back up the stairs.

Thanks to Sid, who is a father like no other, despite the fact that he has to drag himself home every night after a stifling commute and the kind of hard physical labor on one job site after another that would prostrate a man half his age, the canoe is ready for its maiden voyage by the time the ice shrinks back from the shore and the sun makes its first evanescent return. Miriam sits stiffly on the bench by the playground, Marsha beside her, while the girls divide themselves democratically into two groups of three, roll up their jeans in the icy shallows, and see the first group off in a mad frantic windmilling of forearms and paddles. "Be careful, now!" she calls, and she's pleased to see that her daughter has been gracious or, at least, patient enough to wait her turn in the second group. As Susan leans forward to push the canoe off, her ankles chapped with the cold, her face long and grave and bursting with expectation, it's too much for Miriam, and she has to look away to where the paddles flash in the pale depleted sunlight and the canoe cuts back and forth across the black surface like the blades of her pinkish shears.

Marsha, who has come to lend moral support, lights a second cigarette off the end of her first and flicks the still smoldering butt into the dun grass at their feet, exhaling with a long complicated sigh. "Too cute by half," she says.

Miriam's on her feet—she wants to let go but just can't help herself—listening to her own voice skitter over the water and ricochet back again: "Don't get too far out! Girls! Girls?"

"I heard from Seldy last night," Marsha's saying as Miriam eases back down on the bench. Seldy's at Stony Brook. A junior. On scholarship and majoring in math, she's that smart.

"And how is she?"
A pause. The canoe, far out now—halfway to the other shore and its dense dead accumulation of shoulder-high weeds—makes a wobbly, long-stemmed turn and starts back, the girls paddling in unison, finally getting it. "Terrible.