

That Summer · *Maxine Chernoff*

THAT SUMMER ALL AMY could picture were drowning men, men drowning. On postcards they appeared, small and hopeless on the horizon, falling beneath her sight. In museum catalogues the hulls of ships filled with them, and God, all the awful poems she found, always drowning men, compared to withering jade plants, to fingers to paper. No, there couldn't be so much drowning. It must be something else, maybe bad art, maybe the end of civilization, Amy wasn't sure.

That summer there was Raymond, who prided himself on living through the darkest hours in Raymond's history. Raymond of private schools for disturbed adolescents, of washroom wastebasket fires. Raymond of the insect eyes that never closed, who loved to dance and call celebrities by their first names. On a *Saturday Night Live* rerun John Belushi imitated Joe Cocker, rocking spastically, like a fat wind-up child, self-indulgent, sneering, as beer poured out of his puckered mouth, wetting his shoulder. "You fucked up, John," Raymond said. Of course John didn't answer. When Amy said "Turn it off. I don't want to see a dead man imitating a living man," Raymond thought it too funny, laughed until his knees ached and his eyes finally closed. Famous among Amy's friends for never blinking, Raymond washed out to sea, Amy explained on her better days.

The Sunday Raymond drowned Amy had a cold. They were supposed to go to the lake for a beginning-of-the-summer picnic. Amy was an art major, fond of small, busy prints on luxurious fabrics. She would design bedspreads and sheets some day, she told her father's friends, corporate lawyers, who thought Amy so lovely that they really cared what she said about raw silk. Amy's mother was usually away, a career woman before the fashion, radio advertising trouble-shooter, jetting between Omaha and Akron, charting slumps and trends in bold red marker. When Amy was little, she'd take the marker and draw intricate maps of imaginary neighborhoods, naming them Red Rod Village and Triangle Square. Such humor also was found in Amy's designs, and Amy was sure it was humor that attracted her to Raymond. Tall, sweaty, uncompromising, Raymond was considered by others a pain and a tease and a bully. Still, he was brilliant, a fellowship student, the son of a Nobel Prize winner. So what if his father had lobbied for the prize, calling Stockholm frequently as others call the weather, a real pusher like his son. Still,

Dr. Ricks had found the cure for a rare enzyme deficiency with four names.

Amy remembered a night at an art opening. The show contained erotic ceramic mugs, modeled into breasts and penises and testicles and vagina. Raymond spent the evening pretending to appreciate the work by holding it in a subtly suggestive manner. That was the charm of Raymond, Amy thought. While he was most certainly caressing the breasts on a mug, one couldn't be certain. Raymond was the lewdest man she'd ever dated, but half the time she imagined that he was innocent, couldn't be doing what he plainly was. Raymond became Amy's own worst idea of men blended with the suspicion of his ingenuousness. "You're irony embodied," Amy told him at another picnic, in front of his English major friends who would appreciate the comment. Raymond quickly mimed a scene from Oedipus, of course the one in which Oedipus puts out his eyes. The picnic dissolved into hoots and laughter, since Raymond's prominent eyes would not cooperate. Even when closed, as then, playing the blinded king, they animated his face.

Amy had all the symptoms of a classic summer cold, too boring to mention, plus a terrible taste in her mouth, as if she'd eaten some green, acrylic paint, she told her mother, who laughed without looking at her. She called Raymond to tell him that she couldn't go to the picnic, but to wish all of his fellow Joyce scholars well. She liked her role in the group as the non-verbal artist. It kept the pressure off. Secretly, some thought her inarticulate and maybe not too bright. They didn't know her habit of reading and had she told them, they still wouldn't have taken her seriously. Once Lois, a stalky Ph.D. candidate, finishing her dissertation on point-of-view in Hardy, remarked that Amy's eyes looked subterranean, opaque, absent. Lois was a master of the triple entendre and Amy hadn't known what to reply. "Thank you," was her final decision, and so the subject was dropped.

"I'm sick, Ray," Amy told him on the phone.

"Shit," Ray said. "And I had a surprise for you."

"Can it wait?" Amy asked.

"Not really. See, it's a demonstration. Remember last summer when I couldn't swim?"

The picnic last summer had been a disaster. Not only did Raymond not know how to swim, but the others, by force of Raymond's neurotic, child-like pleas not to leave him on the shore rotting like a piece of driftwood, were constrained from swimming. By the end of the after-

noon, everyone was sick of Raymond, vowing to forget his phone number. Only Amy had felt sorry for him. She remembered times when she was little and her mother was away. She had interesting plans made for her in advance and money to spend on movies or ice cream. Listless, she'd sit on her bed, counting the spots on the butterflies' wings of her wallpaper, or half-sleeping, day and night. How can you move when you're all alone with no one to notice that you're moving, she wondered. Amy loved Raymond because he couldn't bear to be alone either, would never leave her, was perfectly needy and understood the threat of total, endless separation. Amy would lie in her bed as a child imagining the most terrible deaths for her mother. "Because you hate her for leaving you so often," a therapist once told her. "Because people die and children are left motherless," Amy countered in her clear, eight-year-old mind.

So now Raymond could swim, but no one would really care. Amy wished she felt better. "Ray?" she asked. "Why don't you come over instead? We can watch TV or sit in the yard or see my father's slides of Tahiti." It didn't sound like much fun to her either.

"Gee, uh, thanks anyway," Raymond teased. "I'll see you this evening."

"Okay," Amy said meekly. "I have some letters to write," though she knew they wouldn't get written. "See you tonight, and remember," she added, "to close your eyes when you swim." She pictured Raymond torpedoing through the water, open-eyed, not having the sense to know that water is dirty. Amy sometimes exaggerated his lack of sense, giving orders like "Don't run holding that beer bottle." She realized why she mothered him, in contrast to her mother's own style of non-involvement, and usually Raymond didn't object. Only once he had angrily said, "Gee, until I met you, I never remembered to zip my pants. Thanks for keeping me out of the halfway house."

"Iron lungs," Amy thought. She was lying on her floor listening to the Plantagenets. The record cover showed four men dressed like royalty from the neck up, ruffles, pointy beards, crowns. From the shoulders down they were Punk. "Death," Amy thought, and pictured an exhibit she had admired once in London, Ann Boleyn's Wardrobe. She pictured the silk, three centuries old and the intricate, woven fastenings. Amy hated zippers, hated when Raymond teased her. Once Raymond had told her of a fourth grade teacher who loved to embarrass him. Once

she'd screamed, "You ran my nylon!" when he approached to show her a drawing. Another time, when he had stomach flu and needed permission to use the washroom, Miss Burch had shrieked, "You could have thrown up on me!" She was probably frigid, Amy had remarked in bed with Raymond. She loved long summers home from college when her parents were away and she had the luxury of making love in her own, comfortable bed, in her room with the same butterfly wallpaper, so worn and irrelevant. She could live without food, she thought, and picnics, for that matter, and fall and winter and spring, but summers in her parents' house were necessary. Sometimes she hoped that both parents would die and leave her, the only child, with the house, where she'd never change anything and use her room for decades of love. The Plantagenets were singing, "I'm slip-slip-slipping into the abyss-byss-byss." Downstairs she could hear the insect-throb of a lawnmower. Her mother was asleep in another bedroom, resting on a stopover from travel. Tomorrow she was to "problem-solve" for a Latino rock station in San Antonio.

Once when Amy was eight, she'd gone with her mother on a business trip to New York. Her father had the mumps, caught from Amy, a situation that her mother found incredibly funny. While her mother made her rounds to stations, Amy spent her time with a droll babysitter, provided by the hotel, a pre-med student name Greta, who left her textbooks on a table with lion-claw legs. First the claws interested Amy, but as the week wore on, the medical texts became her entertainment. Amy read about iron lungs and saw skin diseases in such vibrant colors that they burst before her eyes like Disney fireworks. When her mother got her home, there were long weeks of seeing Dr. Pimm, a cherubic British psychiatrist, trained in treating children. No one seemed to believe the truth, that Amy's vivid nightmares were inspired by the medical texts. It had to be more. Like the good businesswoman that she was, Amy's mother was determined to find out the real cause. Twice a week Amy spoke to Dr. Pimm, cautiously accepted a cup of tea with cream, staged listless dramas between his non-descript puppets. Finally, bored by Amy's lack of progress, her mother terminated the relationship. Then Amy's mother cut down her trips to once a month, Amy's father finally taught Amy how to ride her bike, and a new era of family harmony was launched. There were picnics and tours of museums and even a family vacation to Disneyland. Amy remembered sitting in a little teacup that suddenly spun into a tunnel, catching her by surprise,

cracking a front tooth. The broken tooth ended the era. School began again and Amy went dully back while her mother reactivated her full schedule and her father spent most of his time at the office. As Amy circled the block on her red "Super-Tube" bicycle, she thought, "At least I can ride," and felt grateful to Dr. Pimm.

Amy thought of Raymond's naked body, his muscular legs. She always pictured him standing. To imagine him horizontal, suspended in water, was impossible. Raymond was so quick and energized. He snapped through rooms and changed the air behind him. He danced like a dynamo. He was Amy's way of releasing herself, being real, she thought. The record was still playing, "X is not Y, no Y is not X." True, Amy thought, but not very interesting. She closed her eyes but found that she couldn't breathe with one pillow. She rearranged the bed, propped herself four pillows high and tried to sleep. This fall would be her last semester in college. She was to spend the summer testing prints that she would transfer onto cloth in the cold art studio smelling of sawdust. She pictured swirling colors, holiday reds and greens, cool blues melting into gray, swimming colors, some dangerous, others light as a glance. She travelled down long corridors of designs so intricate that she'd never be able to print them. Once she'd seen a movie in which a dying woman met all her friends down a deep, tunneling hallway. When Amy died, she wouldn't see people, though Raymond might be there, a voice, a laugh, an amorphous good mood; mainly there'd be colors and designs so intricate she'd never get them right, never fuse them. Y is not Y, no, though purple can dissolve into blue and red or lose its shyness and burst into fire. Amy slept long and deep through the colors and the lawnmower and her mother's rousing Beethoven (always the "1812 Overture") and her own gentle snoring.

It was about three o'clock when Raymond entered the water. He'd drunk a good part of a bottle of Chianti and smoked some really good grass. "Eye-closing dope," he had called it. It felt good to be in the water. It felt endless. He closed his eyes. He relaxed. He surfaced and reopened them. Why had he waited until he was twenty-three to learn to swim? Why hadn't someone told him how cold water felt, how much distance he could cover? Of course people had told him. His father wanted him to be well-rounded, a swimmer, a man. After all, hadn't he, a first generation American, won a Nobel Prize? Couldn't he, jaw jutting, shoot a round of golf in the high seventies? Raymond felt the sun pour

on his head. Swimming was like an amusement park ride. You wanted to shout. You wanted people to know you were in there because you loved it. You never wanted to get out. Raymond thought of Amy, how she'd wave to him from her Indian-woven blanket, or, better yet, curl over his back like Esther Williams as he propelled them through the water. He thought of her parents, so deadly proper and aching for something. Once Amy's dad had actually said to him, "We think you're very liberating for Amy." Right from the movies, a B-script. He wanted to tell Mr. Herbst to be quiet and watch a small plane overhead with its obscene banner: "Buy Kratowski Sausage" and say, "You're like that plane. Foolish." Instead he had smiled like a boy scout with a badge in psychology. He felt mature for showing restraint, like a grown-up, he later told Amy.

Now the afternoon was dimming, the wind had changed and the skyline was dropping. The Hancock Building was shrouded in clouds or smoke or fog, Raymond wasn't sure, and cinematic blue people were gesturing from shore, looking past him, he thought. He had swum out too far, too far, could never get back, he realized, and the water was feeling cold, like the air in a tent he once shared with his brother in the North Woods. His father hated camping, but camping was something else that was good for him. *Nature*, his father had said with too much emotion, *is our source*. It sounded pretty hokey but his father had gotten the Prize. He must know about nature, Raymond conceded. So far out it was easier to feel objective, forgiving. It was like being in a plane so distant from earth that you feel compassion for people, so small, so diminished, whole cities the size of auditoriums, invisible houses, the idea of dinner tables, of couples in bed, of open books on nightstands. Now he was shaking, his legs had disappeared, his head was filling with sounds, with nothing really helpful. *Swim or kick or dummy*, he kept saying but couldn't obey, and all he could see was water and it really didn't matter. It didn't feel so bad. His arms were missing now and all that was left was a heart, a heart in the water beating so abstractly that it wasn't Raymond, it wasn't Raymond.

At five the phone rang. Amy stirred, sat straight up, blew her nose and felt her forehead, probably a fever. "You're boiling," her mother would say. "Is Amy sick?" her father would ask, all the right, self-evident reassurances. "Mom?" Amy called. "Mom?" But instead of her mother her father came into the room looking grave and distracted, like

a bad boy sent to the principal's office. He was still wearing his mowing clothes, old shiny pants, a pink golf shirt and the old workboots that were usually banished to the downstairs utility room. So Mother was softening in her old age, declaring new rules. Amy thought it odd that a woman who logged hundreds of thousands of air-miles a year could care so much about seven hundred square feet of beige carpet. Her father was saying, "Amy, Amy." And instantly Amy knew something was wrong. Once she'd heard that tone when Aunt Emily had her first stroke, mild Aunt Emily, who'd brought Amy miniature cuckoo clocks from Switzerland and the sweetest, darkest chocolate on earth. Amy noticed her mother standing in her bedroom doorway, looking small and wet, like Mrs. Robinson in *The Graduate* after Benjamin takes up with Elaine, Raymond's all-time favorite movie scene. "Amy," her father said again, and Amy felt a chunk of wood in her mouth so real she could chew it. And her mother was crying and urging her father on: "Tell her, Frank. Please, Frank. Tell." And Amy seemed to miss all the connections but heard "Raymond" and "swimming" and "sorry" and "tragic," and saw her wallpaper raining and streaking. Instead of primary colors there were grays and browns and no color, no color at all in the room. And her own hands were beige and her fingers were gray. And maybe, she thought, she was dying, though her parents told her she had just fainted, a normal reaction to grief.

At the funeral which Amy couldn't attend, too upset, friends said that Raymond's father delivered a eulogy. "Raymond loved nature," he said sincerely and people had wept. And Lois, the Hardy scholar, read something about the maiden voyage of the Titanic, very gripping and gray and inappropriate, Amy's father reported. Amy received polite calls from many of Raymond's friends. No one knew what to say, and Amy was unable to connect much of what was spoken.

That fall, designing the pattern for her senior project, a design so subtle it depended on texture, not color, so different, her professor remarked, from her less mature work, words came back to her, buoyant and tangible. In the uncertain light of early November afternoons when Amy worked alone in the studio, words said came back to her, unencumbered, discrete and visible: "serene," "later," "maybe," trees in a forest falling, falling, and only Amy to hear them.