

# A Day in June

Sylvia Plath (1949)

There is one day you can never forget, no matter how hard you try. You always remember when summer comes again, and it's warm enough to go canoeing. When the first blue June day comes, there is the memory, vivid, crystal, as if seen through tears. . . .

You and Linda are going canoeing on the lake for the first time this season. You walk down to the boathouse . . . to the wharf of rotting planks that slants into the water . . . to the empty canoes along the dock, waiting, like shallow green peapods afloat. You step shakily into the bow of one while Linda takes the stern, and all the time the light boat prances and bounces beneath you, impatient to be off. It's one of those perfect days in June you try to describe but never quite can. Take the smell of fresh washed linen; of sweet grass drying after a rain; take the checkered twinkle of sunlight in a meadow; the taste of mint leaves cool on the tongue; the clear-cut brightness of tulips in a garden; green shadows, thinning to yellow, thickening to blue . . . the dazzle . . . the hot touch of sun on your skin . . . blinding arrows of sunlight glancing off the deep glassed blue of the water . . . the exhilaration . . . bubbles rising, bursting . . . the gliding motion . . . the liquid singing of water past the bow . . . shifting specks of color dancing; all this to love, to cherish. Never again such a day!!

You paddle to a cove . . . you drift . . . you lie back and close your eyes against the sunlight, hot upon the lids . . . you squint into the sunlight and there are webs of rainbows on your lashes. Lulled by the rhythmic lapping of waves against the prow, the rocking . . . the gliding . . . you drift near shore.

Suddenly you hear voices . . . unmistakable . . . boys' voices. There is a tremor of excitement in your veins, a sudden tenseness. You and

Linda are at once alert. Adventure is in the offing. You smooth your hair and look slyly about. Sure enough . . . another canoe is skirting the shore behind you . . . two boys. . . . How to delay? How to pause accidentally? The steep bank toward which you are drifting is covered with rhododendrons . . . tempting clusters of scarlet and white blossoms hang over the lake and cast dark reflections on the water. Linda says in a tremulous voice, 'Let's pick some flowers.' That's all . . . four words . . . and you two understand each other completely. You stand up in the canoe, teetering perilously and laughing as you reach out and tear the blossoms off . . . snapping the stems recklessly . . . all the time you laugh . . . a little too excitedly perhaps, but you laugh, picking the flowers and aching to look over your shoulder, but not quite daring. All the time there is a delicious excitement tingling inside you. The voices grow louder. You hear one say, 'Let's go over and see the girls. . . .' You pick the rhododendrons more carefully now, with a conscious attempt at grace and nonchalance. 'Hello there!' exclaims a warm masculine voice behind you. You both turn abruptly with feigned surprise. 'Oh, hello . . .' you manage breathlessly, nearly tipping over the canoe as you sit down. And the rest? You wonder nervously what happens now? But the rest comes along of its own accord. You look at Linda, giggling with nervous gaiety and tossing her blonde hair back from her eyes. You look at the two boys . . . not so handsome close to . . . but nice. The two canoes bob side by side and you exchange a steady stream of meaningless patter. You think back and can't quite remember what you've said. But you laugh . . . knowing that they think you're cute . . . knowing that they think you're nice. You tease the boys . . . which one can paddle faster? They look at each other, laughing. Let's race, you suggest. Oh, no, that wouldn't be fair. One of them will paddle you. You protest gaily. They insist. You hope secretly that the darkhaired fellow will come with you. . . . He steps easily into your canoe and takes the stern. Buck, his name is. The other boy, Don, lets out a mock groan. 'I can't paddle alone.' He looks at Linda. Flattered, she pretends to hesitate and says, 'Should I?' But she steps over, too, and everything is perfect. You lean back on the pillows, facing the boys, and you and Linda exchange secret looks of satisfied pride. Nothing like this has ever happened to

you before. None of the boys at school have ever been this nice to you. You concentrate on Buck. He is thin and pale, with dark eyes and stringy black hair, but you don't notice his uncombed hair, his pallor; you look always at his eyes. Here is a boy . . . paddling you in a canoe . . . he likes you. Immediately Buck is enveloped in a dreamy haze. Minute by minute he grows more appealing. You push aside the nagging thought, 'What ever would people say?' You laugh always, being mysterious, and, you think, coquettish.

The sun's rays are getting cooler now. You can't push back the twilight. The boathouse looms in the distance. The unspoken question rises between all four of you simultaneously . . . how to pay? You have an uncomfortable notion that you should trade canoes again and go in alone, but an absurd perverse part of you rebels. Why not prove your power? Why not? 'How much'll your canoe cost you?' Buck asks laconically. Again you and Linda exchange glances and understand. 'Cost ?' you falter innocently. 'Do you have to pay?' It takes a while to persuade the boys that you have no money, but you conceal your wallets in your pockets and play the game. Buck paddles ahead and asks you, his eyes hard and burning, 'Just what were you planning to do if we hadn't come along?' You look at him, churning inside, heat pounding at your temples. This is getting a bit too uncomfortable. Tears of embarrassed anger blur your eyes, hot and wet, stinging with salt. Miraculously his face softens. 'Aw, heck, don't cry. I'll pay for us. I just don't want them to know I've got money.' You feel queer inside, very small and mean in the face of such generosity. You want to say, 'I'm sorry, it's all a lie,' but the words just won't come out. He trusts you now. His face is friendly and you can't . . . you won't . . . change that by telling him the truth. 'Oh, Buck,' you stammer, choked by emotion. 'Help me out when we get there, like you were an old friend, so the man will think we've known each other all along.'

'Sure, sure,' he says. The canoe glides into the dock, and the man is there waiting. You can't look at him. Head averted you get out on the dock, hardly realizing that Buck has helped you up, has paid the man. You start away, ashamed, hating yourself. He calls to you. Linda and Don have just come up together. You walk beside her and the boys follow along the wooded road in the green shade and the long

cool shadows. You talk in low tones. What can you do now, you wonder. How to make up for being so mean? You walk faster. 'Don't try to get away,' Buck says quietly behind you. Your legs wobble with unreasoning panic. 'I'm going to tell them,' Linda whispers to you.

'No,' you hiss back vehemently. How can you explain to her how things are . . . how Buck trusts you? Everything will be spoiled . . . ruined. But Linda has turned to them. You all stop. The afternoon is heavy with waiting. You want to scream, to drown out her repentant voice as she says to Buck and Don, 'We were only kidding. We had the money all along, but just to prove we're not mean clear through we'll pay you now.' The silence is sickening. There's no looking at Buck now, no telling Linda what she has done. How can she go on? But she does. 'If we give you the money will you leave us alone?' Buck's voice is dangerously even. He says to you, to you alone, 'So that was all an act in the canoe then?' Your eyes stare down at the road. There is a strange high singing in your ears. You nod, wordlessly. The afternoon shatters around you into a million glassy fragments. Malicious, dancing slivers of green and blue and yellow light rise and whirl about you . . . suffocating, smothering flakes of color. You are aware that the boys have taken the money, have turned and are getting smaller and smaller down the road. You and Linda stand there a while, watching. There is something so final about someone disappearing down a road, not turning, not looking back. Linda sighs with satisfaction. She has done that which was necessary, and she dismisses the incident accordingly. But you, you walk slowly beside her, not talking. How can you ever explain how it was? How can you ever explain that you betrayed with more than just money? There's something so desolate, so final about an empty road. You walk on, not talking.

Plath, Sylvia, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, London, Faber and Faber, 1979, pp. 247-250.