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## On the Raft

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Nancy lived in a squat, dumpy house, which had the same color and gentle menace as a gingerbread house. Her mother never locked the door, because that would give the impression of being unneighborly. In Nancy's mother's opinion, unneighborly was one of the worst things you could be. It led to being antisocial, the *absolute* worst thing you could be.

In order to avoid being antisocial, Nancy made three friends in one Herculean effort. The group was very neat. It contained two boys and two girls, and of each, one was quiet and one was loud. Nancy was fond of categorizing people. It made them easier to understand and easier to like.

Nancy was quiet, but an intense, intelligent kind of quiet, the sort that suggests competency and hidden depths. She was thoughtlessly pretty and had a talent for making up stories. Viola was loud and red-haired, possessing an ostentatious beauty and inability to take social cues that, taken together, caused those around her to suffer regularly from the stricken, breathless feeling of a marathon runner. Everything she wore looked like a costume, not by its own virtue, but because of the otherworldly quality with which she wore it. Seymour was loud in compensation; each of his facial features and each aspect of his personality was individually unpleasant, but, compiled, created a rather lovely person. Otto was quiet, the sort of quiet that necessitates always coming last and being forgotten. He spoke rarely, but when he did it was to say something mysteriously, penetratingly helpful.

This arrangement allowed for very even subdivisions; sometimes the girls and the boys paired up, sometimes the louds and the quiet. Sometimes Nancy and Seymour wandered off together, which was when bad things happened. Viola was too aimless and Otto too silent to curb their combined chaotic enthusiasm, the unholy meeting of Seymour's boundless energy and Nancy's dreamy thoughtfulness. It was this disastrous meeting of minds that formulated the ideas of shaving a cat to see what it looked like, staging a revolutionary overthrow of the downtown library in order to challenge the rule that only five books could be checked out at a time, and, on the day in question, building a pirate ship.

There were several problems with this idea. The first was that neither had a boating license, and the second that it was illegal to boat, jet-ski, or fish in the lake behind Seymour's house without written permission from the city. With impossible optimism, Seymour failed to acquaint Nancy with this fact and prayed she would not find out. If legal authorities found out, the punishment would eventually end, but Nancy's would not.

After a discussion that made no mention of these issues or any others, they located Viola and Otto, who inevitably played cards in comfortable silence when left alone together. When reunited with Viola, Nancy wasted no time in thinking of problems.

"What would we build it out of?" she asked.

"Wood," said Seymour.

"And where would we get the wood?" said Nancy, using her interrogation voice. Nancy sometimes seemed to like Seymour less when they were around other people.

"Where do people normally get wood from?" he said hopelessly.

"We just got a new freezer," said Viola, "And it came in a wood box."

After more discussion, during which Viola clarified that she was not suggesting that they set sail in the box itself, but repurpose the wood, they retrieved the box and dragged it down to an area between Seymour's house and the lake that he and Viola called a valley and Nancy and Otto called a ditch. The box was transported with much difficulty; Seymour was the tallest and felt obligated to do the most work because of it, despite his utter lack of any physical ability. Viola was the strongest, but couldn't get a good grip anywhere because she was so small. Nancy had the same problem but refused to admit it, and Otto had the job of making sure they didn't walk into anything

while their vision was obstructed by the box. They determined, once they had taken a good look, to remove the sides of the box and use the bottom as a sort of raft, a plan that everyone thought was ridiculous but, as no one could think of a better one, was quickly undertaken. It became embarrassing to refer to the raft as a pirate ship, so they stopped. The raft was small enough for Seymour and Viola to carry to the lake by themselves. This fact was the only piece of good luck that anyone would have for the rest of the day.

The lake was perhaps too large to be accurately called a lake, and involved a confusing amount of twists. To float all the way down it would, by the best estimations, take at least two hours. Everyone took off their shoes and socks and left them on a large rock, except for Viola, who was afraid of stepping on a nail.

They had been travelling for a little while when Seymour decided to slip off the side of the raft and see how long it would take for someone to notice he was gone. This was the sort of terrible planning that he was notorious for. He swam over to a cluster of cat-tails and hid there. His absence was noted after a few minutes, more quickly than he had expected, but still a very long time when you were watching from cat-tails, fully dressed and submerged in water. They called for him, first laughing, then panicked, then angry, then panicked again. Nancy got off the raft and began to dive. She threatened immense physical pain, they looked around saying loudly, "It isn't funny! Seymour! It isn't funny!" Eventually she resorted to shouting, "Sea! Sea! Sea!", which she only called him when she was afraid. During this process, Otto had secured the raft by holding onto a low-hanging branch, but when Nancy reached this point, he said, "He's messing around. Get back on the raft. We'll leave him." It was impossible to argue with Otto, so Nancy climbed back on, spitting out water, bleeding from her knees where she had been cut by small rocks, and crying discreetly. She took off her sweater and lay in her undershirt, which was a pearly grey, with her head in Viola's lap. Viola comfortingly spouted abuse of Seymour. Her red hair, which was long enough to sit on, had been braided into a heavy rope which resembled seaweed after she had dampened it by lying on her stomach and leaning off the raft, calling for Seymour. Confronted with Viola's righteous anger, Nancy became even angrier and joined in the abuse. Seymour swam slowly after the raft, keeping to the cat-tails, sometimes ducking underwater.

"I *hate* him," said Nancy. "Do you think he was planning this when he suggested building the boat?"

"No," said Viola, combing seaweed out of Nancy's hair with her fingers. "He doesn't have that kind of foresight. When has he ever thought about anything in advance?"

"Never," Nancy said emphatically. She glared pointedly at her own feet.

"Did you step on a nail?" Viola asked, concerned.

"Underwater?" Nancy said incredulously. She leaned back and looked at Viola's face, which was small and heart-shaped, covered with golden freckles of varying sizes. It had gone very pale; Viola feared nothing except tetanus. Recognizing genuine terror, Nancy said, "No, I'm just angry." She pulled at her shorts, which she'd made with Viola's assistance at the beginning of the summer by cutting a pair of jeans so short that the insides of the pockets showed. Her mother said this was not ladylike; she spoke the word 'lady' over Nancy like a spell, one that guaranteed success if she combed her hair, wrote neatly, and crossed her legs at the ankles when she wore a skirt.

"At Seymour?" said Viola. Viola was decidedly unladylike; her understanding of social matters was minimal and she could not conceive of retaining an emotion for more than five minutes at a time, but she collected friends like couch cushions collected small coins. They fell into her and, though she treated most of them with total apathy, they were unable to escape.

"Yes," said Nancy. "It's just ridiculous." 'Ridiculous' was her mother's favorite condemnation. "He knows we'll either have to go on and worry about him the whole time or stop to look for him and waste time."

"That's why he does it, isn't it?" said Otto.

"Why?" said Nancy.

"To waste your time, right?" said Viola, doing her best impression of someone following the conversation. In private discussion, Otto and Seymour speculated that Viola had early-onset Alzheimer's. She was clever and could remember names and dates in history, anatomies of exotic animals in science and complicated operations in math; she could take apart mechanisms and put them back together with no apparent effort, but she could not remember what had been said to her moments before. Otto was almost entirely responsible for this theory; when encouraged, he was prone to psychoanalysis.

"So that you'll worry about him," he said now, and Seymour began to feel the sinking feeling of one being psychoanalyzed accurately without his permission. He debated emerging from the cat-tails at that moment and accepting the consequences, but then another feeling joined the first: the sudden, penetrating, and undeniable realization that he'd made a mistake. This feeling was familiar to him, as was the one that came directly after. This feeling said, "As a plan, that was bad, but as a spontaneous action accompanied by no logical thought, it was even worse." It became clear to Seymour that he could not come out of the cat-tails, so he resigned himself to what he was about to hear.

"Why would anyone want someone to worry about them?" said Nancy.

"For attention, possibly," Otto said diplomatically.

"Because you're probably his only friend and he can't get any more because he does things like this, so he really needs you to care about him," said Viola, who did not believe in diplomacy and instead employed disarming, slightly rude honesty.

"He's got at least two other friends," said Nancy dismissively.

"It's different," said Otto.

"Different how?"

"You don't like people," said Viola. "So when you're friends with someone, it really matters. It's like being chosen for a prize. Everyone wants it."

"That's not true," Nancy laughed.

"It is," said Otto.

"Oh," said Nancy. If Otto said it, it was true. She picked uncomfortably at the hem of Viola's shirt, pulling free lime green threads and winding them around her fingertips until they turned purple. She put her bare feet on Otto's knees; the size of the raft was such that this required a heroic stretch. Otto never wore shorts. To see his legs would be like breaking open an egg that disgorged a live chicken; one faintly knew that it was there, but had long ago decided that it should never be seen in that form. Nancy's feet left wet spots on his pants. "But that's not any excuse," she said petulantly, "To behave like a child."

"Well, not an *excuse*," said Viola, "But an explanation." She swatted Nancy's hand away from her shirt. "Stop that."

"You touch people when you're nervous," said Otto. Sometimes when one person was being criticized, the effect boiled over and spread, ending in a free-for-all inspection of everyone's habits and negative attributes and enabling all participants to share in the humiliation. Nancy moved her feet, embarrassed, but he caught them and put them back. "It's all right," he said.

It would be easy to define Otto only in relation to his friends, but Nancy, who knew how to categorize people with the maternal precision of a lepidopterist cataloging a butterfly, knew that people were often defined by what they most feared being. Nancy herself feared being boring; it was impossible for her to be bored, but she lived in horror of being in the middle of a sentence and having the person she was talking to fall asleep. It had never happened and likely never would, because she had taken great pains to be intuitive, creative, and, above all, strange. Viola feared being weak and cowardly, and Seymour feared being alone and unloved. Otto feared being useless. He was small but, like a Saint Bernard puppy, had disproportionately large hands and feet that indicated his future size. He knew how to do a great many things. He knew how to disinfect a wound, pitch a tent, and find his way by the moon. He knew how to prevent Viola from doing reckless things, how to prevent Nancy from becoming hyperfixated on a concept, and how to maintain Seymour's precarious mental stability. He knew how everyone fit together, that Nancy loved Seymour but didn't like him, cared about Viola but didn't respect her, and understood Otto but sometimes wished he'd act differently. He knew that Viola tried to protect Nancy up until something actually happened, at which point she looked to Nancy for protection. He knew that when Seymour emerged from the cat-tails, Viola would shout and Nancy would cry, then Nancy would shout and Seymour would cry and Viola would become indifferent, then Nancy would make incomprehensible grouchy noises about the delay and Seymour would hug her and make exaggerated grouchy noises about getting wet, and she would forgive him because otherwise everything would be uneven.