



FLOYD SKLOOT

ECHO LARK

I serve two bowls of oatmeal and sit beside my wife. We go through our usual preparations, passing roasted walnut pieces, raisins, and cinnamon back and forth. Beverly adds soy milk to hers. After my first taste, I lean back, smack the table with a fist and grunt, in the eloquent tones of a cave-man, *GOOOOOD!* Used to this breakfast ritual after twelve years of marriage, Beverly no longer looks at me as though I'm a fool. She just nods, and we talk about the day ahead while we eat.

I can date the onset of this behavior precisely. In the summer of 1970, when I was twenty-three, I worked as the baseball counselor at a boys' camp in the Pocono Mountains of Pennsylvania. I lived in a bunk with a dozen boys who were fifteen years old and crazed by lust, aggression, confusion, and Crosby, Stills & Nash. They started each morning, as soon as reveille blew, by blasting "Suite: Judy Blue Eyes" and "Marrakesh Express" on a record player whose speakers were strung through the bunk's rafters, and they started each breakfast with the smacked table and grunted chorus of *GOOOOOD!* Apparently, their method of showing appreciation for a satisfying hot breakfast has endured in me, their leader and mentor.

The boys had grown up together through their summers at Camp Echo Lark. Wherever each might live during the rest of the year, Manhattan or Long Island or Yonkers, they spent each July and August as a group in one of the cramped bunks that formed a semi-circle around the lake. Moving steadily toward the seniors' honored end-of-the-line location, they'd now reached their final summer as campers.

I was the only newcomer. I was also smaller than all but one of them. On their first afternoon at camp, they invited me to the basketball court for a quick scrimmage. I knew this was a test, a way of finding out something about my



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athletic ability and toughness by competing against me in a sport that was not my best, not the one I was there to teach. They knew each other so well that they could play as an efficient unit, signaling with their eyes when the time came to take me under the basket for the biggest among them to deliver an elbow to my head. There's still a scar, thirty-five years later, above my right eyebrow. It was a kind of initiation, a hazing, and it implied that their acceptance of me was at least as important for our summer harmony as my acceptance of them.

Besides knowing each other like siblings, they knew the camp's routines so well that I was superfluous to the daily operation. I didn't have to tell them it was time to clean the bunk or to stay inside for the post-lunch rest hour. I didn't have to tell them where to go when it rained, or what to do after "Taps" blew, or that they really ought to mind their manners at our long table in the mess hall. But I did have to move them, somehow, to do what they knew they should. To avoid making their cooperation be about my authority, I would have to reach them, and influence them, in ways that had little to do with command, structure, direction. As with good poetry, I would have to evoke and suggest, not dictate and moralize.

The idea of being a summer camp counselor had come a half-year earlier from my new friend, Bob Randolph. In September 1969, I'd arrived at Southern Illinois University in Carbondale to begin graduate work in literature, teach composition, and study with the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella. Bob, a few years ahead of me, was also a grad student, a poet, a fellow teaching assistant, and interested in studying with Kinsella. Before the month's end, I was eating chili with Bob and his wife, Barb, and staying at their house long after dinner ended to read poems aloud. Bob liked the Black Mountain poets, the Projectivists; I liked traditional formal work and the Confessional poets. For the first time in my life, I talked about writing as though I were part of it. I might have been little more than an associate-junior-apprentice-neophyte-trial member of the great association, but my opinions passed themselves off as those of an experienced practitioner.

Bob and I spent autumn afternoons stalking a friend's farm,





shooting arrows at targets pinned to hay bales or taking turns driving his motorcycle over the rough terrain. He taught me to fence, supplying foils and masks, serving simultaneously as opponent and judge. When his foil nicked my chest, he would stand back, remove his mask and declaim, *What do I seeeee?* To which I'd have to admit, *You see a wounded man.* We sent our poems out to magazines and read each other the notes from editors, celebrating an occasional acceptance with glasses of Gallo's Hearty Burgundy. When the editor of the *Carleton Miscellany* took one of Bob's poems and praised its "fine rightness," the phrase became part of our everyday life. *Your sweater has a fine rightness.*

In October, we drove together from Carbondale to the small town of Grand Tower, on the banks of the Mississippi River. I have two photos taken by Barb Randolph that day. One shows me walking on a log perched across a small ravine, balancing with the help of a long oak branch. In the other, I squat on a bluff above the river. These are the last photos ever taken that show me clean-shaven. There's no beard, no mustache, just hideously long sideburns and haphazardly parted hair that hangs down across my brow. I hardly recognize myself.

As 1969 turned into 1970, Bob pointed out that my contract did not include summer school classes, which shows how worldly I was. It had never occurred to me that I'd have to find something to do during the upcoming summer months. The Randolphs were talking about getting away for July and August, avoiding the southern Illinois heat, earning some money. They'd found an announcement about a camp in northeastern Pennsylvania and were hired right away; Bob would be the archery and fencing counselor, Barb would be the dramatics counselor, and as a married couple they wouldn't have to live in bunks with the kids. They urged me to come along. *The place has a fine rightness.* As a boy, I'd gone to camps in the Poconos for ten years, and knew many of Echo Lark's rivals. I'd played baseball in college and offered my services to the camp's owner, a man named Ace, who was happy to have me as the baseball counselor. All he wanted was to see a photo before making things official. I sent along the one of me crouched above the Mississippi like a batter waiting in the on-deck circle, and was hired.





In the spring of 1970, I played third base for the English department baseball team, thinking to prepare myself for the summer ahead. We beat the athletic department team in the season's second game, stirred to break a tie score by our pitcher's sixth-inning pep talk, adapted from *Henry V: Old men forget; but we'll remember with advantages what feats we do today*. I wondered how well Shakespearean military exhortations would galvanize my teenaged campers.

In early May, student riots broke out on campus in response to the murder of four students by the National Guard at Kent State University. At Jackson State College eleven days later, two more students were killed, this time by city and Mississippi state police officers. Protests against these murders, and against the war in Vietnam and its escalation into Cambodia, brought the National Guard to Carbondale. I saw students beaten on the town's main street. Women placed flowers in the barrels of guardsmen's rifles and chanted at them. When I taught my usual Wednesday night class, we were tear-gassed in our room because we constituted a gathering of more than four people, a violation of restrictions that hadn't been meant to ban class meetings. Within a week, the campus was shut down for the remainder of the term.

I lingered in Carbondale for a month. During late May and early June, with our baseball schedule canceled, I kept my throwing arm loose playing catch with my Shakespeare-spouting teammate. I also planned the summer's dark reading, packing Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook*, by which I intended to gain insight into the female psyche; *A Fable*, the only novel by William Faulkner that I had not yet read; Jean-Paul Sartre's *Nausea*, to sharpen my existentialism; Walker Percy's *Moviegoer*, a novel I read as an undergraduate religion minor and wanted to reread as an aspiring fiction writer; and a few volumes of Irish poetry borrowed from Kinsella for the summer. Clearly, my reading plans assumed the kind of blissfully undistracted time that a senior counselor's life would never offer, which I should have known from my own years as a camper. At least I bought a bound notebook in which to write my poems, thinking that my customary method of composing on loose sheets of paper wouldn't be practical.





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As June drew to an end, I took a long walk through the campus woods, wondering how it would be when I returned to the Poconos, where so many of my childhood's best memories were centered. Our country's cultural mood was turning from idealistic to cynical before my eyes; I hoped that world of summer camp I once knew, like so many other idealized places, wouldn't be rendered suddenly absurd.

1970 was the year of music group breakups. The Beatles disbanded. So did the Dave Clark Five; the Monkees; the Turtles; Simon and Garfunkel; Peter, Paul and Mary. Diana Ross left the Supremes, Tommy James left the Shondells, Eric Clapton left Blind Faith, Peter Green left Fleetwood Mac. It wasn't just music: Four pals out together on the river in James Dickey's best-selling novel *Deliverance* have their friendships, lives, and notions of harmony shattered; the tight family in Irwin Shaw's novel *Rich Man, Poor Man* is shattered; Oliver Barrett IV and his beloved Jenny were sundered by leukemia in *Love Story*, the top-grossing film of 1970. The nice, cozy togetherness of friendship in the theater world turned into a back-stabbing free-for-all in the best Broadway musical of the year, *Applause*, which I saw during a brief visit home to New York on my way to the Poconos.

The message seemed to be that group harmony—the spirit of the sixties—was finished. The new decade was going to be about solo acts. It was also going to be about hidden messages, black lights revealing phosphorescent communiqués on bedroom walls and in psychedelic posters, songs with lyrics discernible when the record was played backward, tarot cards, Deep Throat revealing secrets to reporters in an underground garage. Through the seventies, disrespect for authority would turn into contempt after Watergate, and then into deep malaise during the Carter administration.

In the summer of 1970, I arrived at Echo Lark as a solo act, seeing myself as the poet honing his craft in the woods of northern Pennsylvania, and seeing my time with the kids as a price to be paid for that. I was all about hidden messages, too: Lessing's feminist fiction, Faulkner's overwrought symbolism, the existential manifesto and the quest for authenticity all placed where they could be seen beside my bed—the group leader wanting nothing so much as to be left alone.





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When it came to respect for authority, I was hardly a figure to inspire it among my group of kids at Camp Echo Lark. Certainly not at first sight, all five feet four and 148 pounds of me, with a face newly shaven and pale because, before the boys had arrived, the camp's owner had greeted me by saying, *Shave or leave*. He'd run to his car and returned with my file, the photo of my clean-shaven face stapled to its cover. He held it up for me to study, repeated, *Shave or leave*, and returned to his car.

So I looked peculiar to the boys and to myself, and did my cause little good by gathering them on the bunk's porch before the summer's first dinner and explaining my rules for their conduct. With a fresh butterfly bandage holding together the seeping wound above my eye, and as instructed by the head counselor during our orientation the day before, I told my fifteen-year-old boys about everything from daily housekeeping chores and respecting each other's private property to proper decorum during social events with the girls' camp and silence after lights-out at night.

The speech did not go over well. I needed to focus on amity instead of authority, hoping one might flow from the other, because these boys were not open to being told what to do. On the baseball field, I offered instruction for the younger boys, but simply organized afternoon games for the older ones and played alongside them. I refereed their morning basketball games. I went to the lake with them for swimming or boating, to the volleyball court, to a flat acre where we ran relay races. Once a week, we walked to the far fields to meet Bob Randolph for archery and had the occasional fencing demonstration. They loved when Bob stopped, stood back, removed his mask, and declaimed, *What do I seeeeee?* We'd both look at the boys, who would say in chorus, *You see a wounded man!* A couple of them, drawn to fencing, became Bob's protégés, choosing to fence during their free time instead of lie around the bunk listening to "Wooden Ships."

The central concern of each day, despite all the athletics and competitions, was to find ways of seeing the girls from Echo Lark's sister camp, housed on a separate campus beyond the woods. There were socials at the canteen several nights a week, but that wasn't enough for the boys in my





bunk. I asked the head to allow coed hikes through the woods, which I'd lead. He agreed, but warned me not even to blink while I was out there with them. He also agreed to a weekly coed volleyball meet, which he canceled after watching part of one game. Too much jumping around, he said.

After a while, as a sign of gradual acceptance, the boys in my bunk began calling me Wally. They couldn't or wouldn't explain why, saying only that I looked like a Wally. I didn't know if it was an insult or a compliment, but Bob said the name had a fine rightness. After three weeks, one of the boys mentioned that he'd never seen me make a fielding error at third base, a compliment that let me know they were monitoring me closely for false pretenses. I guess my being a Wally, who shut up and just showed them how to play ball, was preferable to my being a Floyd, who yakked about rules at the start of camp.

The days had rigid structure, like sonnets, but allowed for ample variation. After reveille, everyone had to appear on the bunk's porch for the head to see as he studied the campus from his shack. The boys were endlessly inventive in their means of fooling him. One would stumble out carrying another's sleeping bag with a pillow protruding from the top, and prop it up beside him on the bench. Another would shift positions behind a lineup of bunkmates and pretend to be his own cousin, still asleep inside. Before breakfast, all campers—now dressed and washed—would line up in front of their bunks for group leaders to inspect. Since I was senior group leader, I would walk past all four bunks under my jurisdiction and look at palms, fingernails, faces, saying, *How are ya?* until it became meaningless, a greeting that evolved into *How's yer how are ya?* Meals with my boys and their caveman behavior became a wild sort of pleasure, food constantly in motion across the table or into mouths, the noise level astounding. They may have had to eat at specified times and without a choice of menu items, but they occupied their table freely, spontaneously. There were organized sports activities three times a day, and evening activities that sometimes included trips into nearby towns for coed movies. Boys paired off with girls, broke up, took up with other girls. Nights, after the boys were finally in their beds, I could sometimes hear sobs of heartbreak amid the crude jokes and fake farts.





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As a group leader, I spent every third night on duty in the head's shack. That meant I had to watch the campus to be sure no one left his bunk and no trouble developed. Junior counselors were deployed to sit on bunk porches, one counselor to every two bunks, and at ten o'clock I would deliver a sandwich to each of them. These were quiet nights, when I could read or work on my poems. It seems as though I spent the entire summer trying to write a poem about my father's death that was somehow connected to a line from James Joyce's *Ulysses*, which referred to "the heaventree of stars hung with humid nightblue fruit." I was finding myself too busy, too tired, or too engaged with my boys and their problems to get much reading or writing done in the bunk. None of the books I'd brought to read could hold my attention.

Except for my shack duty nights, I was off every evening from "Taps" at nine till midnight. I drove into Poyntelle and met the Randolphs at a bar where we'd drink Rolling Rock beer, share an order of steamed clams, throw darts, play pool. Bob and I seldom talked about writing that summer. Poetry had gone underground, where it belonged at that moment in my life, like the winter streams of the Poconos in summer's drought.

A couple of weeks into the summer, the head picked seven counselors to be on Echo Lark's basketball team for games against counselors from neighboring camps. This was, apparently, a long-standing tradition, a weekly competition taken seriously by the head. I was selected because I'd pass the ball and play defense, things none of the other players would do. Given the limitations of my shooting and rebounding skills, of course, these were the only positive contributions I could make to the team.

Within my bunk, within the structure of my counselor duties, as part of the basketball team, I was happy to be part of Echo Lark's group spirit. I made friends with a fellow counselor named Royce, from England, who played soccer and read Elizabethan poetry. The feeling of satisfaction within a community was something I hadn't thought about before arriving there, and hadn't remembered about my distant summers as a camper, always wanting to win, to lead. A small antidote to what was happening in the larger world, something I'd been missing without knowing it.





During the summer's fourth week, I found one of my boys alone in the woods beyond the archery range. Richie was always moody, but in the last few days, after his mother had appeared on campus during the summer's sole visiting weekend, he'd been almost silent. His bunkmates, used to his melancholy swings, left him alone. His good looks, I saw, came from his mother, and I imagined his father as contributing the dark hair and height. Richie and I walked the perimeter of the campus and he told me that his parents' divorce was about to become final. He hadn't wanted to come to camp this summer—wanted to stay home and work. Earn some money and, it became evident, see if he could bring his parents back together. If that failed, he felt he should be at home with her because she was unstable on her own. I'd never been through a divorce, but I told Richie that when my father died, I was fourteen and felt both abandoned and burdened with responsibility for my mother, who had never worked and seemed incapable of functioning solo. In the silence that followed, I realized that I hadn't said that about myself before, hadn't quite put together my father's sudden death and my mother's dependence. She had always been so explosive and demanding that she seemed in complete command, a volatile dictator.

Later that week, as though having passed the summer's midpoint permitted all pent-up emotion to erupt, another of my boys returned to the bunk one afternoon, flung open the door, and collapsed on his bed in tears. Jax was the tallest of the kids, maybe six feet three, but awkward in his body, the bones apparent, the layers of muscle and flesh inadequate for what was beneath them. He kept repeating the same thing, *That's it. I'm dead.* I figured this was about another failed romance, but then remembered that Jax didn't have a girlfriend. When he calmed down enough, he told me that he'd had a fight with his brother, who was three years younger and living in a junior bunk. *He killed me. I'm dead.* Jax's humiliation stunned me. As I tried to calm him, I remembered the moment when power shifted in my relationship with my older and much larger brother, Phillip, after a fistfight in our living room. His anger was sudden, convulsive and wild, directed outward; mine was quiet, grim, and determined,





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directed inward. He was stronger, I was faster, and only our mother's hysteria stopped us. The wounds of that fight still hadn't healed, something I didn't want to happen for Jax and his brother.

At that point, rehearsals were beginning for the coed senior play. Barb Randolph wanted to put on *West Side Story* and asked if I thought the boys in my group would be willing to do a love story and work hard enough on the dancing and singing. I sure wanted them to; I'd appeared as A-Rab in a summer camp production of it in 1962, had continued acting in college, and in grad school had been acting for student-directors at Southern Illinois University who were staging plays as part of their degree work. I thought the work of preparing *West Side Story* would satisfy my boys' desire to be with the girls as much as they could, would tap into their long-standing sense of being a team, would give them a handy emotional outlet, and would be enough fun to overcome any hesitation about being in a love story, dancing, or singing.

They agreed with a minimum of eye rolling and adolescent grunting. Barb was a splendid director, someone the boys loved being around, and they surprised me by knowing most of the songs, even though they hadn't been sung by Crosby, Stills & Nash. Handsome, moody Richie had a fine singing voice and was cast as Tony; battered Jax played Ice and led the Jets into their rumble with the Sharks. I sat on the bleachers and offered advice when asked by Barb. Richie and I had a long talk about why Tony would feel so positive and upbeat at the play's beginning, when he sang "Something's Coming," though he was no longer part of the Jets and was working at a dead-end job. Sometimes the boys would talk about their roles as they lay on their bunks in the evening or practice their lines together. I loved seeing them and the production cohere.

But I never got to see the play in performance. At the start of the fifth week, I stopped shaving and began growing back my beard. I thought it was something I had to do, for a number of stupid and selfish reasons. I didn't want to go back to Carbondale without the beard I'd worn there, grown in emulation of Thomas Kinsella, as though the beard were somehow vital to being a poet. My girlfriend back there knew me as a man with a beard and had said she liked it. It was, I felt,





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essential to how I was known by my colleagues and teachers. And, I think, I wanted to make a statement to Echo Lark's owner, now that things had gone well in my bunk, about what I saw as his egregious misuse of authority. Damn it, my beard had a fine rightness, and it was time to reclaim it.

It only took two days for the head and then Ace himself to notice. The kids whose hands and face I would examine at every morning's inspection told me my face looked dirty, told me to clean up my act, answered my *How's yer how are ya?* with a saucy *Neater than yours*. Ace again said, *Shave or leave*, and so I left.

I still can't believe I did that to my boys, though they'd said they were proud of me. *Stand up to the Man!* They serenaded me throughout my last dinner there with a chorus of caveman hoots and grunts of *BEARD! GOOOOOD!* But I've long felt that I abandoned them, that my justifications were essentially bogus. I was teaching them a short-sighted lesson in choosing between naive, rigid principles and the needs of the group. I'm sure I was easy enough to replace, but I should have been there for the last two weeks, for *West Side Story* and for the last moments of their last summer together as campers.

The road back to Carbondale, Illinois, took me through Carbondale, Pennsylvania, a town of abandoned coal-mining fields that had been replaced by now-abandoned silk mills. I felt dislocated enough to find this symbolic and significant, but I couldn't imagine what it symbolized or signified. I pulled over and wrote a few ideas in my notebook, fancying myself as getting back to my work as a writer. I did realize, sitting in my car across from a ramshackle bar, that my past and present had overlapped in the Poconos, the child who was a camper still active within the young man who'd been a counselor, influencing decisions, spreading satisfaction and frustration, trying to find balance.

The boys had reminded me of the lovely feeling, counter to all that was happening in the world around me, of group harmony, of community solidarity. Now I'd left them, left that, and was going solo, going back to the Midwest to be a Lonely Poet.

As I drove all those miles through Pennsylvania and Ohio and Indiana and Illinois, I kept hearing the same songs over





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and over: Mungo Jerry's "In the Summertime" and the Kinks' "Lola," Tom Jones's "I (Who Have Nothing)" and Elvis's "Wonder of You." Nothing I heard stirred me until, flicking along the dial, I heard Crosby, Stills & Nash singing their now-familiar "You Don't Have to Cry." I pulled over because I did.

Through the end of 1970, I exchanged a few letters with Richie and Jax, and with Royce, but the connection didn't survive long. When the Randolphs returned from Echo Lark in September, we spent one evening talking about the summer, the play, the camp experience, and then let it go. They never spoke about my decision to leave, which is really what growing my beard meant, or about who took over in my bunk for the last two weeks of camp.

It was thirty-five years later, long after we'd fallen out of touch and found each other again by mail, that Bob sent me a short letter. Tucked inside was the photo taken on the day we drove to Grand Tower, on the Mississippi, and I walked on a log perched across a small ravine, balancing with the help of a long oak branch. I look simultaneously serious and foolish, posed there in apparent isolation beneath a sky filling with thunderclouds, clean shaven, ready to take the next teetering step.