

The Eyes of the Owl

Twenty six years since he'd stood on this dock, and still that same dazzle of sunlight off the water, same piney edge to the air. Though it was only May, with over a month before the start of the official camping season, Peter could almost hear the shouts and splashes, the hollow bang of oars, the tick-tock of Ping-Pong and discord of Chop Sticks echoing from the woods.

"You see the boys?" Dorie was calling from the little beach down at the foot of the dock.

He pointed toward the first of the tent platforms just visible among the trees. "Up there, aren't they?"

"Better check."

He better check, that is. His camp. But couldn't she give nostalgia a little slack? Showing PD the summer camp had been her idea, and yet there she squatted, picking through stones at the lake's edge. After those heart-shaped ones, no doubt.

Peter walked back down the dock, then up the weedy slope to the tent line paralleling the shore. The square, weathered platforms, not yet rigged with their canvas tops, stretched away through the pine grove like giant stepping-stones. Fourth one down had been his. Or was it that next one, beside the King-of-the-Mountain boulder? Anyway, no PD or Tommy anywhere to be seen. He bent down and squinted into the shadows beneath the near platforms: not hiding there, either, the way he and his tent mates used to, confounding their counselor. After a last survey, he walked back through the grove until he emerged in the field used for parking. Their car was still

the only one, and sure enough, there were the boys, huddled on the back seat. Peter opened the back door.

“Hey, guys, thought we were checking out the camp.”

“Bugs,” PD muttered, fixed on the iPad on his lap.

“Not that bad. Black flies are gone by summer. Come on, show you around. Waterfront, dining hall....” He pointed into the woods: “Up there’s where you shoot bow and arrow and....”

After a few more game moves PD inched sideways across the seat toward the door.

“No you don’t,” Peter said, pointing at the device still in his hands. “Leave that here.”

And then, leaning in, “You coming, Tommy?”

He obviously wasn’t, his eye on what his big brother had left behind.

“Don’t you mess it up,” PD snapped as he stepped out.

“C’mon. He’s not going to hurt anything.”

And it really was okay if Tommy stayed in the car. At age seven, he was still too young for overnight camp two hundred miles from home; plus, his prosthesis could make clambering around such rough terrain risky. No, this trip up from Springfield was all about PD, trying to get him out of his virtual worlds for a summer, at least, back into the tangible one of nature and flesh-and-blood human beings. Or at least that was Dorie’s theory.

She was still at her collecting when they got down to the dock. Not that interested in his old camp after all. Or was she just trying to facilitate that male role model thing of hers?

“Join us?” he called, part invitation, part challenge.

“Where’s Tommy?”

“Car.”

“You left him in the car?”

Should have known. But what could happen to a kid in a car with nobody around for miles? That's the way she was with Tommy, though. Producing a boy without a lower leg hadn't been his fault, any more than it had been hers, but thinking so empowered her.

From the end of the dock, Peter outlined the swimming area to his son, the limits, soon to be marked by floats, you mustn't go beyond until you'd passed certain swimming tests. He'd done that his first week—five laps, five-minute tread, breath holding—though some kids never managed to do it for a whole summer. He pointed out the racks where the kayaks and canoes, including the big war canoe, would be kept, where the Sunfish fleet would be moored. If it hadn't been for camp, he told PD, he never would have learned how to right a canoe, use a compass, handle a bow and a rifle. Oh, he knew how silly that all must sound to kids of the digital age, but you never know when such knowledge might come in handy.

Up at the tent line, Peter showed how the cots would be arranged around the edge of the platforms. He told how he would go to sleep listening to the calls of owls and loons, to the stories the counselors tried to scare them with, lantern light flickering off the tent flaps, off the ring of faces. Then there was the short sheeting, the time they'd carried one kid—Josh, he just remembered—out to the end of the dock on his cot, still sleeping, and left him there to step off into the lake come morning. Oh, he had made some great friends that summer, all right, though for some reason, he'd never kept in touch afterwards. But then you don't when you're young. You move on. School. Get a good job. Family. Those memories stay, though. Never lose those memories.

Beyond the tent platforms, they passed the water pipe, where you washed up morning and bedtime, and the latrines, then carried on up a path through the woods past the net-less tennis courts, their clay surfaces littered now with twigs and leaves, their tapes awry. Finally they

reached an open acre of field. That was where, Peter explained, the Reds and the Grays played baseball and Capture the Flag, volley ball and Frisbee, the victors winning a truck ride into town for ice cream and candy, singing “Ninety nine bottles of beer on the wall” till they were hoarse.

“Once we got down to twenty and the counselor pulls over? ‘Shut up or get out!’ he yells. So I did. Got us all out on the side of the road. You should have seen the look on his face.”

Further on yet, there were the riflery shelter and archery range where, Peter said, he’d gotten all his marksman badges, his Golden Arrow. Still had them in a drawer. “Pretty nifty, really—the awards you win.”

“There’s a path to the fire tower through there,” he said, pointing to an opening in the trees, as they turned back. “See forever. But I want to show you the Wiggie—Wigwam—just a lodge, really, where you hang out? It’s got these sheepskins, too, they make at the end of the summer, listing, you know, best camper at this or that. They’re all hanging from the rafters. Way up there.”

He pointed up to the imagined spectacle, but PD said nothing. In fact had said nothing throughout the tour, had asked not one question. Was that normal for a twelve-year-old, or did it mean the boy really did lack what Dorie called social skills? Might he even have that syndrome she talked about? She was right in a way, though. He and PD didn’t communicate all that much. The boy had simply disappeared into his games these past two years, while he himself had had his hands full trying to keep up with the market, his cold-call lists. Plus tend to Tommy. Dorie, being a nurse, did most of that, of course—the latest prosthesis, the adjustments, those layers of hi-tech padding, therapy at the Y. She always said she could handle it herself, though; that Peter ought to spend any free time he had with PD, crippled in his own way, she suggested, by his brother’s handicap.

Handicap. Boy, she and her handicaps. And what was it he was supposed to be doing with PD? Video games?

As they passed the parking lot, Peter checked on the car. Empty. No Tommy, no Dorie. No iPad, even.

“If he drops it in the lake...,” PD whined.

“Must be down with your mother. Wiggle’s just through there, though. Check it out first.”

They angled down through the main pine grove, its spongy, needle-strewn floor already deep in shade. Just beyond the dining hall and nurse’s cabin they came to a rambling, three-story log structure. It looked smaller than Peter remembered, but with the same ribbon of low windows below the eaves, the same wrap-around veranda, same over-sized stone chimney they’d rock-climbed when the counselors weren’t around. Though the door was bolted, one of the windows along the veranda was open and he climbed in. Gradually the log furniture of those long-ago days emerged from the darkness, then the green of the Ping-Pong table, the eyes of the stuffed owl scowling down from the mantle of the walk-in fireplace. And high overhead, dangling from the rafters rank upon rank like pennants in some Arthurian hall, the testimonial skins.

“How about your phone, Dad?” PD called from somewhere.

“Huh?” he grunted, straining to focus into the high gloom. When he had been here as a camper, he had taken little notice of the skins, having no interest in history at the time, or thought for the day when he would become part of it.

“No reception here,” he went on, the question finally registering. “Just trying to...”

From where Peter was standing, the only dates he could make out were recent ones. Slowly he edged forward across the rough flooring and as he did, earlier dates began to come into view, the inscriptions increasingly faded as their years regressed.

Now his neck was beginning to cramp. He eased his head down to level, cocked it, cracking, from side to side.

“Okay,” he said, “maybe we should go find them.”

They detoured past the parking area—the car was still empty—then up and back along the tent line. No one on the dock or beach either, nor up on the ball field.

Had Dorie gone back to the car, found it empty, and gone looking for Tommy? Had she found him there, or somewhere, and taken him to check out the camp on their own? Look for the two of them? She should have stayed put. First rule of the outdoors. Good nurse, maybe, but way out of her element in the wild.

“There’s that app,” PD said, “to find the Pad.”

“Damn it! I told you—no bars. You can’t always....”

The boy shrank down and headed off across the field.

“Stay here, okay?” Peter called after him. “Going to check out the fire tower. Could be up there.”

The path up the mountain was steep and rocky, more overgrown than before, he was sure. Good thing he wasn’t dragging PD with him. That whole generation were about as fit as....

As he slipped on the smooth boulders and loose scree, stumbled over tripwire roots, he had to grab at branches for support. It was a real struggle, and before long he realized he was actually gasping for breath. He’d always taken fitness for granted: was there something wrong with him now? Might have to get checked, start working out. He stopped for a breather.

Would Dorie have taken Tommy over such uneven ground? Tommy taken himself? Typical seven-year-old, he did wander sometimes. Had to eliminate that possibility, for sure, then work his way back down. Systematic. That was the ticket.

“Tommy! Dorie!” he called on his next break. “Where are you? Hello!”

Finally the sky opened: he’d reached the summit. The fire tower soared above him on its unlikely legs. As he stared up at the tiny cab, it began to wheel against the clouds, staggering him backwards. His foot caught; he fell. Lying there dazed on the stony ground, he looked about, glad for the moment he saw no one. After a quick check for injuries he got back up on his feet and set off on a circuit of the clearing. Every few yards he stopped and called out, but there were no answers. There were no signs of life anywhere. And no one was up in that cab either: the ladder, he now noticed, was raised and chained.

Beyond the tower, the sun had already dropped close to the distant mountain tops. Dorie couldn’t actually get herself lost could she? She’d notice the time, know how to get back to the car, at least. If Tommy was with her they’d wait there. If he wasn’t, she’d wait, too, figuring he was with his father. And when he and PD arrived she’d take him with her in the car to call for help, while he kept up the search. Though was it even safe to search alone in these woods with darkness coming on? Bear country, definitely. Maybe wolves. That wasn’t just make-believe in the lantern light.

The way down was easier, though the footing was tricky. That’s all he needed—broken ankle. They’d taught them about that, about applying pressure, splinting with branches and belts, the fireman’s carry. All the survival skills. For pretend, though. No idea at that age you could actually break an ankle. No idea you could actually lack one.

When he got to the ball field, PD wasn't there. He called in all directions, anger amping his voice. It was only when he had given up and was heading back down that he thought he heard something.

"PD! That you?"

"Up here!"

He ran toward the sound, toward the archery range it was, and there they were, at the foot of the berm where the targets used to be set up: PD waving the iPad, Tommy lying motionless at his brother's feet.

"What happened?"

"My leg," Tommy whimpered, pointing to the hardware protruding from his shorts.

"Really hurts."

Peter knelt down, worked the prosthesis off, rolled down the layered sleeves one at a time. The last were bloody, increasingly stuck to the end of the stump. He didn't dare pull them away.

"What were you doing?"

"Climbing around." And then, after a sniff, "Look what I found." He held out a fistful of broken arrows. "They were back there. Can we do bow and arrow?"

"C'mon, Tommy. Get you outta here."

Peter and PD helped him to stand on his good leg, and then into position for piggyback. Slowly, Peter carrying Tommy, PD the prosthesis and the iPad, they made their way down the path.

"How'd you find him, anyway?" Peter asked the older boy when they stopped to rest.

"Came out of the woods."

“And you brought him here?”

“He likes my game, where you shoot the arrows? And you said about archery. So I...”

“You what?”

“I thought he’d...”

“Jesus, BD! You can’t...”

But what you can’t was way too much for Peter just then. He set off again and the three continued on downhill in wordless stages until they reached the parking field.

“Where in the world...?” Dorie called as she stepped out from behind the car.

Peter eased Tommy down and explained how the boys had gone to the archery range. Something about some computer game. “Too much for the new leg,” he added. “Not the right padding or something.”

They both helped Tommy into the back seat of the car. Dorie got her water bottle from the front, moistened the bloody sleeves until she could work them free, rinsed the abrasions, then wrapped the stump in her scarf.

“There’s a clinic place in Sheldon,” she said.

“Give me a sec, okay?” Peter replied. “Just got to show PD something.”

“Peter! We need to...”

“Five minutes. C’mon, PD.”

Peter led the way back to the Wiggie, back in through the open window. The big room was even darker now than before, the barn board walls, the rustic furnishings and deep corners sapping what little light still filtered down from the clerestory. Staring up at a new area, he came to dates on yet older, duskier skins. His era it was he was coming to: 1983, 1985, 1987. Wasn’t that his year? ’87? Yes, would have been twelve, just PD’s age. Impossible.

“There it is! Where I’m pointing? 1987? You’ve got good eyes. Read it?”

But the boy didn’t answer: he’d wandered over by the fireplace where he was reaching on tiptoe for the owl. Peter stared back up, his neck beginning to burn again as he strained to make out the listed skills—SAILING, ARCHERY, something, TENNIS, RIFLERY, SURVIVAL.... And after each one the BEST CAMPER, the RUNNER UP, and, third in line, HONORABLE MENTION. He couldn’t remember now exactly what he had been best at, and even, after all these years, whose names those were. And then, just as he was about to give up on 1987, there it was, second from the bottom: PETER MORTON. How alien the letters looked at that remove, yet instantly familiar. A virtual self drifting with the dust motes through the last rays of light.

As he struggled to read more, the letters began to swim. He had to look down, grab a chair for support. When he slowly tipped his head back again, he was able to make out the start of his line—CAMP CRAFT—and then his place on it—HONORABLE MENTION.

“Find it?”

He jumped. PD was standing right beside him, as if he’d never left.

“Uh, no. Not really.” He rubbed the back of his neck for a moment, then reached down to tousle his son’s hair. “We better get back, though. Your mother’ll be freakin’ out. And we know what that can be like, don’t we?”